Don't Pity Me

by InterNutter

Summary

WARNING: DARKFIC.

Kurt encounters someone from his past who is most *definitely* unwelcome. Lots of nasty stuff herein. Reader, beware.
Fracture One: The Scent of a Predator.

Today was the day that they'd be getting a permanent sports coach again. Kurt sighed. Not that he disliked gym, per se, it was just that, sooner or later, he'd forget himself and pull a few acrobatic tricks. It was so ingrained that he often didn't realise he was doing it. Then whoever was the sports coach would try to draft him into the school's gymnastics team. And he'd have to explain that he was just a humble tumbler, bla bla bla bla bla...

Kurt *hated* breaking in new gym teachers, and he'd been doing it for *months*.

At least *this* time, he'd get it over and done with. Until something *else* went wrong and there was yet another vacancy in the Bayville High staff.

That sort of thing happened a lot, for some reason.

The door slammed open and the class sat to attention. She was late, but she moved with a precision and speed that demanded respect.

"Morning," she said in crisp, businesslike tones. "I am Frau Rosafarben. If that is difficult to pronounce, I will accept Frau Rosa. I do not accept chitchat, or other forms of communication in my class. If you have something to say, you say it to the whole class. Ja?" She indicated the raised hand.

"Ja, I am from Germany. Is Kurt in this class?"

"Jawohl, meine Dame," Kurt intoned, putting his hand up. "I'm here."

"You're with the exchange program?"

"Nein, I'm with a scholarship," he grinned. "You have to put up with me for a lot longer."

Everyone giggled except Rosafarben.

"We are doing basic gymnastics equipment today," she announced.

Kurt barely stifled a groan.

"Herr Wagner, since you are so active this morning, you can show the others what you can do on the uneven bars."

_Oh *great*..._ He stood and trod towards them with the air of a man headed for a thankless and unpleasant task. On the way, he caught whiff of Rosafarben's perfume. He hadn't smelled anything
of that sort since - the Bad Times. Kurt quelled his trepidation as he chalked his hands. Thousands of women probably wore that scent. He could ignore it.

He leaped into a routine, focusing only on the movement, the performance, and the music that played in his head. The audience, such as it was, would do what came naturally.

The Perfectionist, woken by the scent, whispered all his faults and flaws in the back of his head. Kurt was able to ignore him. The Perfectionist, should he ever take over, would obsessively keep starting again at the slightest hint of something awry.

Kurt dismounted. _Off by three forty-eighths of a second._ the Perfectionist whispered. _Left arm needs attention. Sloppy sloppy sloppy. No dinner for naughty boys who don't do things right..._ Kurt sighed as he walked off the floor, flexing his left wrist. "I'm going to *have* to talk to the Professor about getting a proper rig," he said. "I'm getting rusty."

The entire class' mouths hung open.

Damn. He'd done it again.

"Rusty, Herr Wagner?" Rosafarben enquired.

Again, the Perfectionist spilled over. "Ja. My left wrist's getting weak, the same elbow's behind by a forty-eighth of a second. My timing's out by *three*... I suck." He sat down, still flexing his traitorous wrist.

"Objections aside, that is A+ material. The rest of you, I'm sure, will be glad to know that I will not be grading on Herr Wagner's personal standards. He's had years of practice. You haven't."

Kurt tore his mind off his wrist to try and meditate the Perfectionist down into a mere subliminalised annoyance. Amazing how one sniff of a familiar perfume could tear into his control like that. He had to do better. Especially since he had to appear awake and watchful during the rest of the class.

At last, it was time for lunch. Kurt made to bolt away with the rest of the class, only to have Rosafarben call him back for 'a word'.

He walked back towards her under a cloud of doom. "I'm not joining the gymnastics team, so please don't ask," he said. "Amongst other things, I have a pathological aversion to showering with twenty other guys in the same room."

"Nein, it isn't that, Herr Wagner," she cooed. "I was wondering if we knew each other."

The way her voice gentled triggered another little crack. He *knew* that voice... from the Bad Times. "I - don't think so..." he allowed.

"I'm sure I know your name," she said.

"Ha. There are dozens of Kurt Wagners in Germany. There were *three* in my home village of Heirelgart." Just then, he realised that his nervous tendency to babble had just trapped him.

"Heirelgart, you say. Now this does get interesting. The Kurt Wagner *I* knew was also from Heirelgart. You have some of his features..." She reached out to touch his face.

Kurt instinctively backed away.

Rosafarben smiled. "And his mannerisms." She advanced, forcing him to back further and further away from the door. From escape. "You're very much like him, you know."

The eyes. The teeth. She'd changed her face, but he'd never forget those *eyes*... "Hess..." he whispered.

"Now *there's* a name I've not heard in a long, *long* time. They were good times, ja? And you kept your people from starving into the bargain..."

Kurt bumped into a wall. _Oh, for Kitty's phasing power..._ She didn't know about his power. The Bad Times were over before that ever happened.

"Seems we've both changed our faces, ja? But you, I think, are hiding behind a mask of light," Rosafarben touched his face.

Kurt flinched.

"Yes," she whispered. "I knew you were mein flockiger Damon. And you know me, now."

Kurt was hyperventilating. It was the Bad Times. All over again. She'd followed him. Just like she'd said. She'd followed him until he was alone and his nose was filling with her scent and the Masks were all demanding to help.
Her body pressed against his. Her lips found his.
And Kurt fled, deep inside himself, letting another deal with the situation.
RagDoll. He wouldn't hurt anyone.

"...so then I'm like, 'nuh-*uh*', and he's all like, 'yah' and I'm like, 'bu-bye, loser' and he goes - he goes..." Kitty trailed off. "Isn't that like, the new gym teacher? What's she like, doing with Kurt?"

Scott looked, and gasped. "She's dragging him around by his neck... he looks kinda out of it."
"He *is* out of it," said Jean. "I can't even pick up one thought from him."
"I was in that class. He was *fine* when I left..." Evan stood up and rushed over to the new Gym teacher.

She threw Kurt at him and screamed something in German before she stormed back indoors. Kurt had fallen down as if he were unconscious. His eyes were open, but unseeing. Evan, pinned under him, was trying to get him off. Jean and Scott, the first to get there, helped. The rest of the X-men, including the new mutants, crowded around.

"What did she say?" said Kitty.
"I have no idea. It went something like, 'Bilden Sie ihn richtig, Schwarzeschmutz aus, oder ich jage Ihren vollständigen Stamm unten'. Sounded pretty ferocious."
"Er," said Amara. "I know what 'Schwarzeschmutz' means. It isn't exactly - politically correct."
"N-word?" Evan guessed.
Amara nodded.

Kitty knelt beside Kurt, tidying his mussed hair, stroking his cheek and calling his name. There was no response. He just stared off into infinity. Once in a great while, he would blink, but there was no other hint of life in his eyes.

They all piled towards the infirmary the second they got home. Anxious for news, appalled that they had to spend the rest of the day in school, and hopeful that the Elf had recovered.

Logan blocked the way. All he had to do was stand in the vicinity of the door and glare at them, and the kids would just stop. They were scared of him, he knew it. Sometimes, he even liked it that way. He was tough and he didn't need anyone. At least, not the kids. "Prof's still working on him," Logan summarised. "Says he can't find a trace of thought, but he gets the impression that Kurt might be trapped underneath. I don't get it, but that's what he said."

"Did his Mom or Dad--?"

Logan held up a hand. "Already tried 'em. They said the kid used to have spells like that when he was younger. They thought he'd got over 'em. Obviously they were wrong." Logan sighed. "He'll eat when he's told to. That's about it. All his folks had to say was 'make him feel safe'. Dunno how we can do that, either."
"Can we like, go in?"

*Now* it hurt. "No. Don't know what set him off. Can't risk it happening twice. He might go deeper. Prof. and I'll look after 'im."
"Is he gonna be okay?"
"Don't you have homework to do?"

They watched Kurt's flexing left hand. Every attempt to get him to sleep, so far, had failed. It was if he was missing something that should have been there.

The Professor was the one to reach into the third bedside draw and find Kurt's 'mascot'. He placed it within Kurt's grasp and waited.

The grasping hand found the doll, and tucked it in close to his body. His golden eyes drifted shut. For the first time in hours, Kurt's face showed emotion in a hint of a smile.

"We've done all we can," Xavier whispered. He sounded exhausted.
"Go get some sleep, Chuck," Logan advised. "I'll watch 'im. You'll know the instant I know. Promise."
RagDoll let him pass into the open, let him out again. It was safe. The Bad Times were over. 
Kurt sighed and opened his eyes. Morning light filtered through his curtains. It was early. Logan was there. Watching. 
"You all right, Elf?" he asked. 
"Ja. Now." 
"So can you tell me what happened?" 
"Uh..." He couldn't tell the truth. At least, not the whole truth. Already, the Archivist was wiping away the unpleasantness that triggered the release of RagDoll. Finally, he settled for, "I smelled a predator."
"Blue! There you are," Tabitha leaped on him and gave him an exuberant hug. "I heard what happened yesterday. You sure you're up for school?"
_Not really._ "The Professor said it should be okay. I have a pass to get out of gym." He patted his pocket, where the familiar crinkle was. Such a reassuring sound of bending paper.
"Cool. So what are you planning to do with all that freedom?"
Kurt shrugged. "Well... uh. Probably find somewhere quiet and a nice book."
Tabitha snorted. "Blue, darling? You are in serious need of my help. Meet me at the dumpsters and I'll take care of *everything*. Make you feel better in nothing flat."
Her body was soft and warm against him. Her lips were sweet. The way she ran her finger along his jawline made him forget all about the times that she just took from him. She made him feel *good*, and he needed that.
And she called him 'darling'. And 'cutie'. And any *number* of affectionate nicknames. Like she meant it.
Kurt never knew if Tabitha really felt anything for him, but at this stage in the game, he'd settle for whatever felt real enough.
Tabitha was certainly real.

Kurt's nervousness was paved over by a breezy, "Hey, *relax*. Nobody's gonna notice a thing. We'll only be gone a few minutes." And a rather stunning french kiss.
Now all he could do was go along for the ride, grin, and think, _Her mouth tastes like applesauce..._ 
Tabitha was always fun.
He'd probably pay later for the ride she was taking him on towards and beyond the Bayville city limits. Kurt didn't care. The moment was enough. Life was, when one thought about it, too short to stress about consequences. Tabitha said he was there to relax.
So what if it was more than a few minutes?
So what if they were messing up Lance's car a little?
So what if his friends would be wondering where he was?
Tabitha tasted like applesauce.

He was still laughing when she bought him back to Bayville. Around sunset. The time had flown. He'd enjoyed it. He felt wonderful.
Her kisses were sweet and went straight to his head.
"Hey," he said through giggles. "This is your place. What about the guys?"
"Aw, come on. You can just pop me up to my room. It's on the second floor. 'Sides. There's something up there I gotta show you."
Kurt opened his night senses, closing his eyes and inhaling through his nose. At once, he got the 'feel' of the entire area. He grabbed hold of Tabitha and concentrated on a clear space.
{Bamf!}
They reappeared about a foot above the huge bed. Kurt felt impelled to bounce on the thing.
"Whoah! I thought Kitty said that the boarding house was a dump..."
"Most of it is," said Tabitha. She'd jumped off the bed to dump their stuff near the door. "This is your Mom's old room."
There were two chandalliers. This was something of an open invitation. "I must say, she certainly knew how to look after herself," he said, doing a simple triple somersault between the now-swinging light fixtures.
"*Blue*..." Tabitha laughed. "Quit swingin' on my lights. Come on down. I found them."
Kurt leaped to the floor. "Found what?"
Tabitha presented him with two framed photographs. One was clearly Mystique with a baby that looked a lot like Rogue. The other...

It was him, aged about six. He knew the photograph. He remembered it being taken. But the woman behind him was not the lady he'd been with at the time.
Instead of Mrs Nesbit holding him in her lap, there was Mystique.
It wasn't a Gmix. It was real.
Kurt could feel his heart breaking. Played for a fool. So easily. All it took was a few words.
He put the photo of Rogue down. He could deal with that, later.
"I remember this," he whispered, all the happiness of the day drained out of him. "Only it wasn't Mystique when *I* saw her."

Flashback...

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," the words came out in one breath, and they came out in the dark, but beyond that, this was no true confession. There was no priest between him and God. Just the comforting dark of a little space under two adjoining trailers. "It's been twenty-four hours since my last confession. In that time, I -- in that time..." he couldn't make himself remember the things that had been done to him, yesterday. "You saw what happened in that time. You know what people do to me. You know they pay for it. And I feel - I want to make myself die."

Harsh words for someone who was barely six years old.
"Help me," Kurt whispered, continuing the prayer. "Show me that life is going to be okay? That I can be loved by others apart from my family without - without money being involved? I know this is one of your Tests, Father, but -- can it be over, soon? Please? I just want to stop hurting..." he broke down into sobs. God would be able to hear his 'Amen', even though nobody else, had they been listening, would have been able to decipher it.

But nobody was listening. Kurt Wagner was a quiet child when he was in pain. He never liked to cause a fuss. Mama and Papa were plenty worried about him already, what with the nightmares he wouldn't talk about, and the way their adopted son ran off to be alone at the strangest times. They were reassured by the smiles and enjoyment he got out of the circus tour, every Summer, and they trusted all the Romani in the troupe to watch out for him.

But there were bad Romani, just as there were good Romani.
The people from Statleindorf weren't *all* bad. Just the ones who were intentedly interested in him. The ones who casually nodded away his unusualness were safe. The ones who stared with a calculating smile were not.

Someone found him, and dragged him into the cruel daylight. It was one of the unsafe ones. The ones who rented him out to strangers. The ones who didn't see him as a child, but an opportunity.
"Today's your lucky day, Herr Flockig," said the unsafe one. "We've got you another job."
"Here he is, Frau," the man juggled Kurt in his arms. "The blue wonder. Die Fleidertuefel. Yours for a mere five hundred marks a night."
He was talking to her in English. Not that it mattered. Kurt spoke four languages. Two of which were actually useful in the world Outside.
"Does he have a name?" the rich old lady - they were mostly rich old ladies - reached out and petted his fur.
"His parents call him Kurt, but he'll answer to anything, won't you, Herr Flockig?"
Kurt sighed. "Jawohl, mein Herr." He could be thankful it wasn't a rich old man. They sometimes hurt him. As long as the marks didn't show, his price remained unchanged. It cost a lot to come up with an excuse for marks.
The old lady took him into her arms. She actually held him as if he were a child, and not a bag of chaff. She focussed on his face and watched his eyes. "Do you speak English, Kurt?"
"Ja," he said, and added, "I do speak some English." _Careful. Play dumb. They like dumb._
She kissed him on the forehead and asked, "How much for twenty-four hours?"
The unsafe one didn't even pause. "That's a thousand marks. Up front."
_This is *weird*..._ Kurt watched as she took out the money and handed it over. The unsafe one
was treating him like a thing. Kurt was used to that. But the lady was treating him like a person. It
was like walking on shaky ground.
He didn't know what she wanted from him.
She took him away from the troupe, towards an expensive car. There was a child seat in the back,
which she buckled him into.
They'd all just let him roam around the back, before.
"Comfortable?" she asked.
Kurt put his tail along his right leg. "Ja. I'm okay..." He was nervous. He knew it, but he was sure
that the lady wouldn't know what his tail wrapping around things would mean.
"My name is Mrs Nesbit," she said. "Did they tell you why I wanted you?"
Kurt shook his head.
"I suppose they have the same story, but mine's true. I had a little boy once. He was a lot like you. I
- lost him. Soon after he was born." A tear trailed down her face. "I still miss him."
The car started, and drove away from the carnival grounds. Kurt didn't watch the troupe fade into
the scenery, this time. This time, he was fascinated by Mrs Nesbit.
"He would have been six years old," she said. "I've been looking that long, for another special little
boy. Just to hold him. Treat him as my son. Just for one day."
Kurt thought about his birth mother. The mother who'd put him on the Wagner's back doorstep
about six years ago, and knocked, and ran away, into the unknown. Did she miss him? Did she
know where he was? Did she blow a kiss out a window every night for God to take to him, like he
did for her? Was she even looking?
"Did he have a name?" Kurt asked.
Mrs Nesbit seemed surprised that he spoke. "I - he was too young. I hadn't come up with a name
that fit him." She hid her face in her hands, and cried.
"I'm sorry, Frau. I didn't mean to make you cry..." emboldened, he reached out and patted her arm.
"I'd been thinking of Michael," she said, chasing water from her eyes. "But - Michael wasn't
*right*."
"I'm adopted," Kurt blurted. "I don't know who my real mother is. Maybe - maybe I could pretend
like *you're* my mother?"
She smiled. "Would you? Just for one day?"
"Ja, I would. You seem real nice and everything. Er. What do I call you, Frau?"
"Just 'Mom' will do."
"Mowm," he said, trying to get the American accent right.
"Mom," she corrected, laughing.
"Mowm," Kurt giggled. It turned into a game.
"It'd been a wonderful day," Kurt whispered, caressing the photo. He remembered the games, the
fun, the endless treats and stories she'd read to him. "At the end of it, she sat me on her lap and got
her friend to take a photo. This photo. I never knew that she was lying to me."
"Oh, Blue," Tabitha whispered, hugging him from behind.
There was something different about this embrace. He looked. Tabitha had taken her top off. She
was just wearing her bra and jeans.
"*Tabitha*?"
The photos went onto the bedside table. Tabitha wriggled her way into his embrace, and kissed
him. Once again, applesauce overpowered his higher brain functions.
"Today's the day for *good* times, Blue," she purred, helping him out of his top, his holowatch,
and starting on his pants. "You need to forget the bad times."
Kurt started to purr, and didn't care that she heard. He loved every minute of the times that Tabitha
payed attention to him. He was going to love every minute of *this*. Regret was for another time.
Downstairs, the rest of the Brotherhood started hearing noises. As one mutant, they stood to attention and saluted.


"Please," said Lance. "I do *not* need that mental image. I mean, I got to see fuzz-butt in a singlet, and that was way too much blue fur for me, if you get my drift."

"Still," speculated Pietro. "We'll get to find out for sure if his butt *is* fuzzy."

"*EW!*" Fred screwed up his face. "That does it. I'm outta here."

The others watched him go, listening to the ruckus upstairs. At one point, Lance's face dropped.

"Urgh," he said. "She's stopped faking it."

There was a mutual shudder.

"Yo, you turned me off my food, fool."

"Likewise," said Pietro.

"I can *not* hang around here," Lance decided. "I don't care how many credit cards the Freakshow's got. I can't listen to that."

There was a chorus of, "Me neither"s from Todd and Pietro.
Fracture Three: Girls Can Rape Guys

Kurt murmured in pleasure as he woke up. His whole body was tingling. He didn't really care if the Perfectionist and Hure had both got out to play. They'd had more than enough fun for all four of them, by the feel of things. He stretched and opened his eyes. He was still at the Brotherhood place, and it was late morning.

_I'm in trouble. *Big* trouble..._ He made to get up.

A solid {clink} and the sensation of metal on his wrist alerted him to the handcuffs. Tabby - she *insisted* on him calling her 'Tabby' - had evidently tied him down.

She'd written something on the mirror in lipstick.

"Decided to keep you. Will bring you food if you're a good boy." It was punctuated by kiss-marks. Kurt was out of the handcuffs in a record number of seconds. Good old Uncle Wolf. Teaching him escapology like that. Amongst other 'survival' skills that made Uncle Wolf the least reputable member of Kurt's adopted family.

A quick search of the room revealed that his things were gone. All of his things. There weren't even underpants.

Kurt tried the enormous wardrobe. Nothing that had even a hope of fitting. Both his mother and Tabby were petite women. He raced to other doors, finding a kitchenette and a luxurious bathroom. There was another lipstick note on the mirror there.

"Told you I decided to keep you! No food for the naughty blue boy!" and a picture of a Gut Bomb burger with wings.

Kurt began to hyperventillate. Flight was awake and screaming in his head to run, *now*, and not care who saw him indecently attired. Or as a fuzzy blue devil. He got Fight to wrestle the panicking mask back down for him.

Think. Proof. He raced back to the bed and siezed the photos. Two mother-and-child pictures.

He was starving. He had barely enough energy for a long 'port, even if he *did* have clothes on. This was going to wreck him. His room was *just* in range.

"I'm not your property," he whispered to the empty air, and concentrated on his room.

{Bamf!}

He landed wrong, tumbling onto the floor and out of sight of the door. Then he blacked out.

It was early afternoon when he woke up. Nobody had come in, because if they had, he'd have woken up in the hospital wing.

So weak.

Had to get up. Had to fix things. Food would come later, not that he felt that hungry. He felt sick. He made it to his wardrobe, and siezed the only garment in there that he could reach from the floor. The same thing that hid him on his first trip to America. To cover his sin.

A bit of concentrated meditation gave him enough energy to crawl to his dresser and extract the papers associated with his cards.

There was a phone down the hall. He could make it. He had to.

All the aches and pains of the previous night were visited on him threefold, because of the teleport. It had been a rough trip.

Kitty picked up the 'phone and started dialing Lance's number. She put it to her ear and heard syrupy hold music. "Okay, who's like, using the 'phone?"

"K-katzchen?" He sounded *horrible*. "Kurt? What are you like, *doing*?"

"Please, Katzchen. I need to use the 'phone for a while," it was almost whispered. "I'll try not to be long. I only have a dozen left."

"A dozen what?"
"Please, Katzchen... please..."
Where was he *calling* from? His room didn't have a 'phone. Kitty peeked out of her room, and almost missed looking right at him. She hung up and tossed her extension back into her room.
Kurt was huddled up under the telephone stand like he was hurt. There were two stacks of papers in front of him and he clutched at the 'phone like it was a life preserver.
She rushed up to him. "Where have you *been*?"
"Shhhh..." A pause. "Ja. I was pre-approved for a card with you. I want to report it stolen. Sometime last night. I can't be more accurate. I was - distracted. Ja. Last time I remember using that card was - two weeks ago. I finished paying it off. Ja, you can cancel the account. Danke." He moved one piece of paper from the small pile to the big pile, hung up, picked up, and started dialing again. "Eleven more."
His sleeve fell down.
Kitty stared at what she saw there. It looked like - paint... She made to take his hood down.
He blocked her and muttered, "Katzchen... please..." he feebly waved her off. There was more paint on his other arm. "Ja. Hello. My name ist Kurt Wagner; W-A-G-N-E-R. I was pre-approved for a card with you?"
Kitty guessed he'd been at it for a while. How many people had passed him by and not noticed he was there?
_Jean? Something's up with Kurt. It looks like he was like, robbed or something._
_Jurt? You *found* him?_
_Don't tell the Professor. Not yet. He looks like he's in pretty bad shape. Just like, get the girls._
_Why?_
_I've seen victims of rape before, Jean._ Kitty thought at her. _Kurt's like, acting exactly the same way._ She knelt beside him and put an arm around his shoulder, not knowing if he knew she was there.
Listening to the litany of pre-approved credit cards.

He ate nonstop for an hour, as if he were starving. All they could see of him were glimpses covered in cloth.
He'd been attacked by someone who knew him, otherwise they wouldn't have painted his fur.
He was silent the whole time. Not crying, not talking, just eating. They let him, since he'd only said one word once he got off the 'phone. It'd been 'food', spoken in a tone of hopeful inquiry to the girls who had come to surround him.
Once he was done, he just sat there panting for a little while. Nobody said a word, but Kitty petted his least-drawn-on hand.
"Rogue has to know," he said. His voice was scratchy from not using it.
"Know what?"
When Rogue came back with the frames, she looked shocky and a little withdrawn herself. "There was paint on the carpet," she said. "I could tell where he fell. He must'a dropped these before he passed out."
She put down the frames. One was Kurt, age sixish, clearly unaware that his own mother was holding him on her lap. The other was Mystique - and a baby with red hair and a white forelock.
"I was older than that when Irene adopted me. I'm practically newborn in this picture..."
"I'd denied it before. Buried it under the realisation that she was Principal Darkholme," Rogue wiped away tears. "But it's true. She's my Mom. She's *our* Mom..."
Jubes risked, "Did Mystique -- hurt you?"
"Nein. She's sick, but she's not that sick."
"This one," Rogue picked up the portrait of Kurt. "She told Magneto she'd do *anythin'*... fer just
one day with her son."
"At least that was true," Kurt murmured. Then he broke down.
"Who *was* it?" Kitty wondered.

"Exactly how many female mutants do we know?" Rahne said. "Daftie. 'Tis *obvious*..."
"Boom Boom." Jean growled. "I aught to give that little -- *RRRR*! I aught to give her a taste of her own medicine!"
"Nein. Don't."
They stared at him.
"What? You're not going to *do* anything?" Kitty demanded. "You were like, raped."
"Girls can rape guys?" said Jubes. She was instantly shushed.
"It's harder to define, for guys," Kurt said. "I didn't even know until after. When she'd stolen all my things. And left that *note*... She said she wanted to *keep* me. Chained me up like an *animal*. But I'm not. I'm not. Not an animal..."
"So this is where all the girls went," said Scott as he entered the kitchen. "What's... up..."
They threw him out by force of their mutual glare.
"It's going to come out, now," Jean sighed. "Everyone's going to know, soon. Do you think you're ready to show us - what she did?"
Kurt looked at her. "I didn't even look..." he said. "I was hiding because I was ashamed of myself."
He pulled the hood down and uncovered one arm and shoulder.
Everyone flinched.
Kitty could see half a rude word shaved into the fur on his chest. There was paint *everywhere*.
Spots. Patterns. Drawings. All in neon colours. All over him.
"Ach. At least she was creative..." He pulled himself back into the coat.
"Uh," said Jubes. "When you said she took *all* your things..."
"That included clothes, ja. This is all I could grab."
"OmyGod," whispered Kitty.
"It's just fur, Katzchen," he said. "It'll wash out and grow out. I'll be back to normal in no time. Good as new."
He was shaking like a leaf, everyone could see it.
"You still need to get looked at. Like, make sure you're like, not injured."
"And counselling."
"Nein. I just need time. I'll be okay," He repeated those last three words until he fell into something below a whisper.
Only Rogue heard him when he said, "It was the nicest rape I've ever had."
She knew her brother didn't want that information out, so she buried it, right along with all her other unpleasant memories. The Professor had taught her how.

Kurt went out for a walk around the estate at the earliest opportunity. He was thoroughly sick of people trying to be understanding when all he wanted to be left alone. He was fed, warm, clothed and washed, now. That was all that should have mattered. He even had a holowatch to cover up the painted fur.
People kept wanting him to talk about it. They were *everywhere*. In his room, in the kitchen, in the theatre... He just wanted them to go away. He just wanted to be left alone.
But since they couldn't see that, he sought solitude himself.
The west wood was a little patch that people avoided. Most people, that is. He liked in there. It was the one place in America that he could pretend he was at home in Heirelgart.
There was even a big rock he could perch on, think, and sometimes, talk to God. He liked being close to nature when he talked to God. And it helped keep the Monsters down.
On days like this, he could feel the Monsters scrabbling at the barriers in his mind.
He needed peace.
Trouble was, he wasn't going to find it.
Yes, the squirrels he'd befriended were there, searching his person for treats before scurrying into the trees. But there was more to the scene than the chattering of squirrels and the harmonies of the
birds. Someone was crying. Crying in distress and fear, and telling someone to stop, please, it hurt.

He knew that sound, and was frozen by it.

The memories of Hess bombarded him.

Kurt only got the barest glimpse of the scene inside his little patch of holy ground, but in that
glimpse, he saw more than he ever needed to. More than he never wanted to.

Kitty was pinned to the stone by the weight of her quasi-boyfriend, Lance. He, in turn, was
thrusting against her in the final throes of lust. He exhausted himself against her, and laid his body
against hers with a self-satisfied hum.

Kitty was still crying.

Kurt could smell blood.

Their pants were crumpled around their ankles. Kitty's top was scrunched up to her neck. One side
of her bra was blatantly askew.

If he'd only been quicker, coming here, he could have stopped it. He could have saved her.

_My church is a temple, now._ Kurt thought as he ran away from reality. _It's just had a virgin
sacrifice._

And the Wild One leaped into the wood, away from the Bad Man before he could hurt *him*, too.
Fracture Four: Other Pains

Kitty had had to tell Lance, and he'd come right over. Of course, if anyone else from the Institute had known about this, they would have both got the third degree. So they met clandestinely at a secret breach in the fence on the west side of the estate. Kitty took him to a clearing in the woods that she knew about.

One of the secret places that she and Kurt knew about. She needed that proxy-contact with Kurt, because she was doing this on his behalf. She needed a guy's-eye-view on this whole deal, and none of the other guys she knew were talking.

His first words, beyond the usual platitudes and that silly rhyming nickname, were, "The Freakshow was *what*?"

"Do I have to like, spell it out?" Kitty curled up on herself. The rock was warmed by the sun and clean, but she still felt dirty and cold.

"He was like, raped and robbed. I wanna like, know how that can *happen*. I mean, guys are like, *strong*. How can you like, let things like that happen?"

Lance plunked himself beside her. "Guys are easy," he said. "Even though we might not like someone doing something, you know... we can't help but - react - sometimes. There's a point of no return in there, somewhere. A guy's gotta - youknow - keep - *going*? You feel ashamed and filthy afterwards, and as guilty as all hell because part of you enjoyed it at the time. It's - wonderful-awful. Hell and heaven in the same instant."

"Kitty's heart sank. "It happened to you, too. Didn't it?"

"Taking the easy..." he'd undone her cardigan and pulled up her top and was kissing his way into her bra. "You can't get pregnant the first time. Just relax. Please, Kitty, I need you. I'm gonna die if I don't...

And he was fumbling with her pants while he held her arms and his hips were moving in a motion she'd only ever seen on screens, before. And then he was taking down his pants and Oh, God... she couldn't look.

Kitty squeezed her eyes tight shut as the cool air met her naked bottom. As something hot and hard pressed against her. And into her. And Oh, God... it hurt. It hurt bad. And Lance's hand was over her mouth and he was still saying 'please' even though his mouth was full of her left breast and it *HURT* and she just wanted it to stop and she was just so scared and she couldn't stop crying. She was full-out sobbing by the time he was done. It hurt like someone had punched her 'up there'.

And he was still on top of her and he was *sleeping*. How could he *sleep*?
How could she have let it happen? She could have phased away at any minute. But she was scared, and she kind-of loved him... Not so much, any more...

Now she knew why Kurt didn't want to punish Tabitha. He was ashamed of himself. He could have gotten away at any moment, but he wasn't thinking like that at the time.

Lance took his weight off her, and Kitty curled up into a foetal ball. She couldn't make her hands work. All she could do was watch as Lance tidied himself up.

"Thanks, Pretty-Kitty," he said. "I really needed that, you know. Look, I'm sorry if I hurt ya, okay? You were real sweet. You'll get over it. It's okay. You'll see. Tomorrow, you'll feel all right. You'll feel better than all right."

All she could do was cry and hold herself tight.

"Fine. Whatever. See you Monday, huh?"

And he walked away.

Just like that, he walked away.

Her mouth tasted like ash and she could still *smell* him and it *HURT* inside and he just like, *left*.

Kitty cried like a small child, her wails lost to the infinite sky.

Wild One had to come back to the holy place, to see if Sweet-Innocent was okay. She wasn't. Sweet-Innocent was hurt. Crying and alone in the dark. No-one should be left to cry alone in the cold night air.

Wild One crept closer, smelling stale blood and even staler cigarettes. The Bad Man had left his mark on her. Poor Sweet-Innocent.

Someone whispered _Katzchen,_ in the back of his head, but Wild One never needed names. He never needed anything or anyone.

But he felt drawn to Sweet-Innocent.

In the dark, he could see the attempt she'd made to cover herself. It hadn't worked because she couldn't get herself out of the huddle she was in. The place that was hurt the most was still exposed to the uncaring night.

"Who's there?" she trembled. "Mr Logan? Mr McCoy? Scott?"

Wild One didn't have words. He only had action. He crept closer. Poor Sweet-Innocent. She was cold.

He had Civilised-Things. Things he didn't really need. They just made his fur all ruffled. Wild One took two off. The easiest two that didn't have button-things or zippers or anything fiddly and difficult to use. Just the things from his top.

Sweet-Innocent was crying, but she was half-asleep. Still calling for help.

Wild One put his Civilised-Things over her exposed flesh, and the voice that whispered, _Katzchen,_ seemed satisfied.

Sweet-Innocent was terrible thin. And wounded inside by a Bad Man. She needed comfort.

Wild One knew one comfort he could get. Food. Everyone felt better with food. He leaped away from Sweet-Innocent and gathered good things for her to eat, leaving them in a little hollow on the rock near where she rested.

When she woke, she would eat, and she would feel better, and she would groom herself and be good again. And then, only then, would Wild One allow himself and Fight to hunt down the Bad Man and make him hurt twice as much as Sweet-Innocent had hurt.

Bright lights pierced the darkness.

Hunters!

Wild One fled them without thinking. The Hunters would find Sweet-Innocent. She couldn't run. But Sweet-Innocent looked more like Hunters than Wild One did. Maybe they would take her in as one of their own.

Wild One watched, hidden and fearful, as the Hunters found her. He watched them scoop her up.
Watched her embrace them. Watched them groom her and help her fix up. Watched as one of them took a few of his offerings and puzzle over them. Only the best for Sweet-Innocent. Only the best would make her feel better. Satisfied that she would be all right with the Hunters, Wild One ran away.

Logan sniffed the air. "Elf was here, but he didn't do it."
Hank had bundled Kitty inside a blanket and was shushing her. One of her hands was pulling at his fur as she cried.
"Alvers. I should have known that little scumsucker'd do something like this. Elf musta tried to help, after. Why didn't he come to us?"
A pair of golden orbs in the night blinked, and there was a retreating scuttling in the night.
"I think that was him," said Hank. "I think something else may have gone wrong."
Logan sighed. "Look after the kid. I'll get the Elf." He picked up the freshest scent, taking a short-cut across the four-dimensional world of the scent trail. There was something off about his scent. Something he couldn't define. Something wild.
Stalking carefully, he followed the trail.

There was a hunter after him. He was a cautious one. A tricky one. Almost as wild as Wild One was. Wild One had to pause a little because of that thought. Were there allies? Friends beyond the family he knew? There was Sweet-Innocent...

One of the Civilised Others knew her, and had to filter her through Wild One's understanding. He found a good place to hide, and asked the Others. There was Sweet-Innocent. There was Friend-Fighter. A number of faces had more complicated ideas. Wild-One couldn't take them all at once.
This one, the Others had said, was a Hunter. And a friend. And - hostile. And all sorts of things. Was he trustworthy?
The Hunter had found him! Wild One retreated deeper into his hole, watching the figure in the night. He stopped, then knelt on the ground, and closed his eyes.
One of the Others had seen him doing this. Quiet sitting for inner peace. The Other had tried, but inner peace was hard to attain with so many other voices.
What was he *doing*? He could be attacked by anything...
A squirrel crept up to the Hunter. Investigating him for food, no doubt. Squirrels liked people. Chittering, it hopped up onto the Hunter's lap, then climbed an arm and investigated the tunnels made by his clothes.
The Hunter didn't twitch.
Wild One risked emerging a little from his bolt-hole. There was only one exit, anyway. He kept his eyes on the Hunter. The Hunter didn't move. Not a muscle.
The squirrel, bored with the Hunter, hopped away into the night.
Wild One crept closer, checking out the Hunter's scent. An Other knew that scent. Not a Hunter. A Teacher. But was he *safe*?
"That's it," whispered the Teacher. "Ain't gonna hurt ya. Just wanna take ya home. It's warm in there. 'Ro's cookin' a big ol' turkey..."
Wild One's stomach growled. It had been sunset when he'd come forward for the Other. It was well into night, now. All that time on fear and no food wasn't good for the body.
The Teacher held out a hand. "Friend," he said. "See?"
Wild One sniffed. Touched it with a forelimb.
And in one quick motion, the Teacher-Hunter had him. Fingers closed around him. Another hand reached up to his neck and then the body wouldn't work any more.
All Wild One could do was howl. Caught. He was *caught*.
The Bad Times came if he was ever caught.
They *fed* him. Put warm things on him. Gave him a soft, warm place to sleep. They were quiet, and gentle, and tried to put him at ease.
But there were lots of closed doors. He couldn't get out.
But there was warm food. Comfortable things. Worried faces.
And one face covered in blue fur.
That one was a Proper-Teacher, if the Others could be believed any more. He didn't smell like kin, but he fascinated Wild One all the same. Blue fur. Just like Wild One. And they gave *him* the freedom of the Civilised Place.
Wild One was scared. Civilised Places like this one were full of Bad Times. Bad Times *had* to happen. That was the way things *worked*. Wild One was there to protect the Others from Bad Times.
There was a Teacher on Wheels. The loudest Other said that this was a friend. This one was help.
That Other had said that the Hunter that caught him was a Teacher. Wild One didn't trust that Other so easily, any more. He growled at the teacher on wheels, retreating into a corner.

He was an animal, inside his head. There was limited understanding and sentience, but he was still an animal.
Xavier sent calm at him, soothing his ferociousness. Verbally, he added, "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm a friend. You're safe. You're among friends."
The low growl toned down by degrees. The watchful eyes never wavered.
Xavier would have to have a little word to Logan about his methods. Using a nerve pinch wasn't exactly the best way to gain someone's trust, to say the least. *This* may just be an uphill battle as a direct result.
"It's all right," Xavier soothed. "It's going to be all right. You're among friends. Relax. Relax."
The growling finally stopped. Kurt's face clearly showed confusion, but it was still the confusion of an animal.
Xavier entered his mind. And was almost lost in the stream of babble. So many voices... some hostile, some quiet. One hurt.
_Professor?_ the wounded one recognised him. _You should get out, while you still can. It's dangerous._
_Kurt, we're worried about you. What *is* this? What's happening to you?_*
_I just lost a little control. The Masks think the Bad Times are back. I'll be okay. I just need to talk Wild One down. I'll be okay._
Xavier helped Kurt's mental self up. _You're a long way from okay, Kurt. There are other people living in your head._
_I know. I needed them. Is Katzchen okay?_*
_Kitty's down in the infirmary. Most of the damage was psychological, _Xavier realised what he was doing. _That's not going to work. We need to talk. What *are* the Bad Times?_*
_They're *SECRET*! _ another persona practically shoved him away. _Nobody should know!_*
_Archivist, calm down, _ Kurt said. _He's trying to help us. Leave him alone._
_He isn't like us. We've never *had* a norm in our heads. This is a dangerous Mask._ Archivist aimed pure hate at Xavier. _Go away. We don't need *you*.*
_He isn't one of us. He's from outside. He's just trying to get answers._
A flicker of memories. _Oh. *Him*.*
_Come out, Kurt. We need to *talk*.*
_Ja. You need to get out before you get lost._
Xavier emerged. The relative peace and quiet of his own head was a relief. How did Kurt manage
with so many voices?
Kurt's first question, once he was himself, so to speak, was, "Did I hurt anyone?"

Kitty had nearly stopped crying when Kurt came in. He lurked near the doorway and did
everything to appear as inoffensive as possible.
"I'm sorry I couldn't stop it," he said. "I came by too late. And there were some - other problems."
"You tried to cover me up," she said. "Why didn't you like, get help?"
"You... could say I was - confused. I didn't believe there *was* any help - at the time."
"For what it's worth? It was like, probably my fault," Kitty confessed. "Part of me like, wanted it."
"It's never your fault," Kurt said. "They want to make you believe that it is, but it isn't. If you didn't
want it to happen, if you said 'no', then it's not your fault."
Kitty reached for yet another tissue. "I wanted it in the beginning, 'cause was like, in love with him
and like, junk... but it *hurt*, and I just wanted it to stop."
A half-step inside. "I could - hold you. If you want me to?"
She realised why she was being cautious. "Oh, Kurt... you can like, come in. You're okay. I'm not
like, afraid of you. You're like, totally *safe*."
He entered with a sigh and held her tight and half the nightmares fled the room.
Kitty snuggled into him. Kurt always smelled of shampoo and some kind of spicy musk. He never
smelled like a week-old ashtray. _Ew. Gross-o-rama..._ Where Lance was firm, Kurt was slightly
soft, his fur acting like a cushion.
"Ich bin Ihr flockiges Pluschspielzeug, Liebe. Ich halte die Alpträume weg..." Kurt murmured,
kissing her forehead.
Whatever he said, Kitty felt reassured.

_Safe, am I?_ Kurt wondered. _You can't know about the monsters in my head. The ones that want
to hurt people, go wild, and be everything I'm not._
He still held her, because she needed it, patted her shoulder and let her snuggle against him. Just
like she snuggled up to Lockheed, before she went to bed.
"[I'll be your fuzzy plush toy, love. I'll keep the nightmares away...]" he promised. Love, however it
came to him, even affection, wouldn't be turned away.
Though he dearly loved her, and wanted to make right what Lance made wrong, he'd accept just a
hug, as though he were a living doll. Because something like him had to take whatever he could get.
He kissed her like a father would kiss a daughter, all the time wishing he could taste her lips. He
kept his motions chaste, even though he desperately wanted to feel her skin against his fur, to caress
her every hurt away with everything he knew.
He wanted to show her all he knew of the Tantra. Take her to places she may have only dreamed
about.
But now was not the right time. Because she was wounded, and scared, and she needed someone
who was safe.
He'd be safe for her. For as long as he could hold out.
Tomorrow was Sunday. He could go to his little patch of holy ground and get His help to keep the
masks at bay. Or he could teach Katzchen to use a mask so she could face school...
_No. I won't make her like me. The mask was just supposed to be a way of facing an audience if I
get scared. I corrupted it into the crowd in my head. Katzchen doesn't need that._
Tough love, indeed. She *could* cope, and still be whole. Kurt, on the other hand, was broken up
inside, and couldn't easily undo the damage. He refused to encourage Kitty to damage herself.
"It helps if you can get angry at him," he said, keeping his voice low and gentle. "It helps to say 'no'
and keep saying 'no' until he gets it. If you want him to go away, that is."
"I don't know what I want."
"You have all of tomorrow to sort it out, liebe," he kissed her forehead again. Her skin was so soft.
Were her lips sweet? He'd probably never know. "But you have to know what you want, and what
that will do to you."
Kitty stared up at him. Her lips looked like rose petals. "Just tomorrow? Can't I like, stay home?"

"You're stronger than that, Katzchen," he said. "What happened - well... It's something like an act of terrorism. If you're afraid to go on and pick your life up again, then he's won. He has you scared. Then he can control you." He decided not to mention that the really *accomplished* ones could still hurt a person if they put a mind to it. Then he remembered that he was going to have to face Hess.

He could run. He could pretend deafness. An appointment. An assignment. Study group. Anything. He could avoid Hess, and Hess would have a hard time tracking him down. She had a job. He had his power. He could be smarter than her. Faster than her. More cunning and creative than her brutal and twisted mind could ever be.

_Don't be scared. Be better._ Pity he couldn't give Kitty that advice. It had taken three of his Masks, including a Monster, to convince Hess not to seek him out again, last time.

So far, none of his Masks had actually killed.

So far.

_Don't be scared. Be better._
Fracture Six: Back to School

_I can do this,_ Kurt chanted inside his head. _I can do this, and I don't need anyone else to do it for me. I don't need to make anyone new, either. I can do this by myself._

Saturday had seen a phone call to the school, explaining that Kurt had finally come home and giving Principal Kelly a satisfactory cover story; that he'd been abducted, beaten, robbed and left by the roadside with next to nothing on. The story had gotten him out of detention, but it would also be all over the school.

He could keep the lie. Better than the truth, that someone he thought had loved him had, instead, used seduction to rob and humiliate him.

_I'm swearing off applesauce for life,_ he promised. _Think of it as the taste of a predator._

That meant he had two predators to avoid. Wonderful.

He could keep clear of Tabby by sticking close to an escort of sorts between classes. All he had to do was walk to class with a friend. He usually did that anyway. No-one would be any the wiser about how afraid he was. As for Hess... It was only one class. A little bit of spontaneous deafness would see him safely away from her. As long as there were other people around, he was safe from the both of them.

He hoped.

Someone had blown up his locker, and several others surrounding it had payed the price, too. One of them belonged to Duncan Matthews.

_Oh great._

Someone cracked his knuckles behind him.

Kurt knew that sound through long association of avoiding a regular pounding by the School's prize jock. "Hello, Duncan," he sighed. "I just got here. What happened to our lockers? Do you know?"

"Very funny, WAGner," Matthews hauled him around by his shirtfront. "I *know* you're responsible for this one. Admit it, and I'll only break *one* bone."

Like he broke any bones, anyway. Everyone knew that breaking someone's bones got you in jail, no matter *how* many goals you scored.

"Leave me alone, will you?" Kurt pleaded "I've been having a bad week."

"It's only Monday."

"My point."

"I *still* say you're responsible for this mess, and I'm gonna--"

"You're going to what, mister Matthews?"

Kurt cheerily waved at the newcomer in the conversation, "Guten Tag, Herr Kelly. Nice day!"

Belatedly, Matthews put Kurt down and straightened his shirt a little. "Er. We were just -er- we were just--"

"Discussing the break-in," Kurt invented. "Were there any other lockers trashed?"

Principal Kelly glared at Matthews. "No. Just these ones. Yours appears to be at the centre of the blast, mister Wagner. Know anyone with the skills and a good reason to do this?"

Kurt shrugged. "I know a *few* people who are good with an M-80... and revenge is a clever game, ja?"

Kelly was still glaring at Matthews. "Quite. I don't want to see any more disturbances about this. Understood?"

They nodded, and he left.

"That was close," Matthews said. "Temporary reprieve, Wagner, 'cause you got me off. Don't think this is over."

Kurt waited until he was well out of earshot before he imitated Matthews with a sneer. "...mi mi mi mimi..." he muttered.
Jocks! Did they have to spend the entirety of their waking lives trying to *prove* what everyone knew already?
Kurt snorted and made his way to his first class. At least he didn't have to worry about locker time.
Nope. He had to worry about lugging his books around all day.
Faboo.

Kitty's heart was hammering in her throat. She hadn't even noticed she was on her own until it was too late, and screaming for help - either aloud or mentally - wasn't exactly the brave, strong thing Kurt thought she could do.
Kurt was safe. Someone she could hang on to when she was feeling weak, and borrow his strength. He'd been through whatever with Tabitha and his primary concern was her.
Okay, so there was something else going on. It didn't take a genius to work that out... But whatever *was* going on, Kurt was able to work through it in record time.
There was a note in her locker. Kitty steeled herself and opened it.
"Had a wonderful time, Saturday. Why didn't you call? L."
_OmyGod... he thought it was just like, sex._ Kitty felt sick. She took a few deep breaths, crumpled up the note, and tossed it at the trash. It still hurt inside, and she had to be somewhat careful when sitting down, but no-one could tell that just by looking at her. All the hurt was on the inside.
"Hi, Pretty-Kitty," he said, spontaneously appearing from the crowd. "Left you a love note."
Kitty summoned all of her strength, all of her hurt, and channeled it out of her mouth. "Fuck off, loser!" and then she gave him a black eye.
_OWell. If that didn't like, make the message clear, I don't like, know what *will*..._ She ran to class, bolting for her seat, and let herself hide her shakes behind her textbook. _OmyGod, I can't believe I like, *did* that..._ Kitty stifled a giggle. She had to keep a handle on hysteria. _Kurt would be like, so proud._
She never for a moment doubted that Kurt wasn't coping with his problems.
Tabby was wearing his shirt. Parading around in it like it was a prize trophy. She saw him watching her and grinned. "*There* you are. Naughty boy... We had a *marvellous* time, Friday night, and you just ran out on me." She'd crossed the distance between them and embraced him. Then kissed him.
She still tasted like applesauce, but it had lost all of its allure. "I would have bought you food anyway, you know. Sex machine like yourself needs *all* the energy he can get."
Kurt growled at her and seized her/his shirt by its neck. A little twist. A little turn. A little pressure on the collarbone and he had her pinned against the lockers and choking. He stomped Fight down to a moderate level of civility and spoke in the eerily calm tones that put solid fear into the spines of the wise.
"The next time you decide to chain me up like an animal," he said. "You'd better shoot me. Right *here*," He tapped the centre of his forehead. "Because I will get out. I *will* hunt you down. And then I will kill you. Do we have an understanding?"
Tabitha nodded, frantic to get down.
He dropped her like the rotten offal she was. "Good*bye*, Tabitha." He snorted as he stalked away. Fight wanted to rip her apart. But then, fight remembered a few things about Friday night that were obscure to Kurt.
_One of these days, I'm going to have to have a little talk to the Archivist. He may want to protect me, but there *are* things I want to know._
Fight still lurked under the surface as he settled down to class.

The cigarette was out of his hands before he knew what was happening. "Thanks, mudslide. I needed that," Tabby exhaled smoke in his direction.
"Get your own cigarettes, Tabby," Lance automatically reached for another and lit it. "I can't let you keep bumming *mine*."
"I don't smoke that much," she said, and took a long draw. "Can you believe Blue? After a marvellous night doing the horizontal tango--"

"*PLEASE* don't keep mentioning that..."

Tabby continued, unperturbed. "--he just goes *ballistic* on me. Like it wasn't special or anything. I mean," another long drag, "he went totally *ape*-shit."

"Yeah, I can't believe Kitty, either. I make a woman out of her and she gives me *this*," he pointed to his black eye. "Calls me a *loser*... I mean - Geez... What did I *say*?"

Tabby was glaring at him, now.

"*What*?"

"You made a woman out of her..." she said. "What the *fuck* is that supposed to mean, anyway? That we're not 'mature' until some guy's got his prong in? Jesus H, Lance. Grow the fuck up."

"Fuck you."

"You wish." Tabby absently tipped ash on his bag. She blew a couple of smoke rings. "I swear, it's like he's two different people or something. I mean, ten *thousand* and one naughty things you can do with handcuffs at night, but in the morning, it's all, 'You beddah shoot me or I vill keel you'."

"*Ew*. *Tabby*..."

"How the hell'd he get out of those things, anyway? He didn't even dent the varnish on the bedposts. Just left them there like he was never in 'em to begin with."

"Shut the fuck up about the freakshow, okay?" He took a really long drag. He needed it to settle his nerves. "I do *not* want to think about him and *anyone*..."

"You're just jealous 'cause he's bigger than you are."

Part of Lance's brain imploded. That just about explained everything... "Yeah. Right. Him and Kitty probably got together and got X-freaky while *both* our backs were turned."

Tabby snorted out smoke. "You been lacing these with something, tremor-boy?"

"Come off it. Everyone *knows* that after a girl gets some, she can't stop. I got her so hot she had to jump the next thing that came along. Poor girl."

"Lance-baby. If you don't keep your sexist little ideas to yourself, I'm going to pop you one in your *other* eye." She put the cigarette she'd stolen out on his vest. "Capiche?"

Lance watched her go, stunned. _Women..._

Tabby automatically fished in her pockets and got out a handful of Apple Chus(tm) and started munching on them. Chasing the smoke out of her mouth with essence of applesauce. She'd never do it with him. Hell, no. She was into freaks.

Maybe Kitty could be converted back into the throng of sex-with-normals. It was his solemn duty as a man to get her in the sack a second time and show her everything he had. Show her that normal was just as good as freaky. Even better.

Just two more meters. Only two more meters. Through a crowd. Going the other way. Just your typical, everyday game of don't-touch-the-norms. He did it between every class. No big deal.

"Herr Wagner. I've been looking for you."

_Oh no..._

Hess blocked his way and made a little island in the stream of flowing humanity. "Frau," he said. "I have to get to class."

"Not this class. I've already told your teacher I need to have a word with you."

_Oh no.__

"You are coming with me."

Her grip around his arm was like a vice. Kurt looked around desperately for someone. *Anyone* he knew. _Jean! Get help!_ Jean didn't appear to be 'listening', and the Professor had left strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed, today.

Why did his plans have to go wrong at the worst possible time?

His heart-rate climbed as she took him out of the school building, and towards the teacher's parking lot. _No no no no no no..._ He could struggle. He could scream for help. But his lips were already busy forming his safe-word between gasps for air.
Hess threw him in the back of her car. A reconditioned police car. There were no door handles on the inside. The cage was still intact.

"I told you I was going to keep you, mein Damon," she said as she started the car. "I meant it."
Fracture Seven: Get out!

Flight had control, but that didn't mean he had *brains*. He ricocheted off the doors, the walls of the cage and the seat while Hess laughed at him. He scrabbled at the back window as the school and all hints of safety vanished from view.

"You can try anything you like, Herr Flockig," she said. "I mean to keep you, and none of your filthy gypsy tribe are going to stop me."

Oh, for Andrei's metal shoes, right now...

Flight landed elbow-first on a window. It cracked.

Egress!

He repeated his action, and the window shattered. He was halfway out before he realised that they were in a moving car, and that car was moving along the Bayville Expressway. He scrambled up to the top of the car and looked about for a means of escape. Any sort of escape. Except, of course, death.

There! A car travelling at roughly the same speed he was.

He jumped without thinking, ran over it and leaped for another car. Going for a stationary object, right now, was suicide. But he *could* get further and further away from Hess. He just had to keep moving, get away. hop from car to car to car to - truck.

He landed on the grill and hauled himself upwards.

It had to happen eventually. Something like one in twenty vehicles on an autobahn were trucks. The odds couldn't constantly be in his favour.

The driver took one look at him and stood on the brakes, fishtailing across the expressway and throwing Kurt off the front of the truck.

At least he knew how to land.

Flight picked himself up as soon as he'd rolled to a halt. There were strangers coming at him. He ran away from them, only to encounter another group of strangers coming at him from the other direction.

Desperate times.

He built up speed and leaped.

Right over the gap between incoming and outgoing lanes of the Bayville Expressway.

The traffic on the other side didn't stop. Good. He hunkered down near the barrier, on the thin strip of tarmac between him and the speeding vehicles, and prayed for a friend.

This wasn't Heirelgart. Flight didn't know how to get home from here, even though one of the other voices whispered something about another home. In Bayville.

But which way was that?

His tumble from the truck had shaken him up. Got him turned around. And it was midday, which meant he couldn't even use his night senses to seek out the compass points.

Had Hess known about that when she took him? Get him lost, so that he couldn't find his way home?

"...storm front is expected to continue moving eastwards. Tomorrow--"

"Sorry to interrupt, Hal, but we've just got some breaking news on an event on the Bayville Expressway. We're going to cross live to our camera crews on the site."

Xavier could already sense that one of his students was involved. _Please let them be all right._

A chopper was monitoring the cleaning up of a traffic jam involving a truck and a congestion of pedestrians. The camera, though, kept the truck on the *edge* of the screen, because of a small figure hunkering on the other side of the highway.

"Twenty miles outside of Bayville, witnesses say this teenager broke *out* of a car and started leaping from vehicle to vehicle." The camera zoomed on on the huddled figure. His face wasn't
visible, but Xavier knew that shade of indigo-blue hair anywhere.

Kurt.

At least he still had his holo on.

"He finished on the front of the truck now blocking the other side of the Expressway," the camera indicated the truck, "which slammed on the brakes, blocking three lanes of traffic. The unknown teenager then got up and ran *away* from concerned citizens who were trying to help him. A subsequent attempt to catch him resulted in him jumping the gap," the camera zoomed onto the gap, "over to where he is now. That's a jump of nearly *ten* feet. Over a twenty-foot fall onto nothing but solid concrete. Yes, I think we're going to cross to our ground crew, now. We're going to see what some witnesses have to say."

"Ah saw him. He up an' outta that car like the *devil* were in there. He jus' le'p on mah car, up and over it, and on ta th' nex' one afore Ah could *blink*," said Sandy, Witness. "'Ah 'member watchin' th' boy afore he went an' done it. He were jumpin' aroun' in there like a *mad*man. Ah tell you whut. You jes' gotta be plumb crazy t' wanna le'p outta a car like that."

Jeff, Truckdriver, was on next. "I saw th' boy some ten car lengths ahead of me. All the time he was comin' closer, I was thinkin' - 'Don't you jump on my rig, you crazy sonofabitch. Don't you *dare* jump on my rig.' So o' course he *did*. I saw his eyes when he pulled hisself up. I never wanna see eyes like that again. If I hadn't've stepped onna brake? I think he'd've climbed up right on over me an' my load, and just tried for another car. He could'a *killed* hisself an' he jus' didn't *care*. I tell you, that boy was *desperate* to get away from something. *Desperate*.

Richard, Police Officer, was nursing a styrofoam mug of coffee. "I was proceeding on my rounds when the truck came to an emergency stop in front of me. I could see the individual tumble to a halt through the gap underneath the truck. Of course, I immediately dismounted my bike in order to attempt aid." He paused for a sip of coffee. "I've never seen anything like it. He should have had broken bones. Abrasions and contusions. But he just got up and *ran*. I've never seen anyone so afraid..." Sip. "I thought we could catch him, so I yelled to the people who'd stopped up the road to try and box him in. That was when he did a running jump over there."

Again, the camera focussed on Kurt. He was crouched in a foetal position.

"The mystery teenager is, thankfully, refusing to move, but he remains *inches* from speeding traffic. All attempts at communication with him have so far been unsuccessful. Our sound crew are currently putting together a twelve-foot-long boom to see if this boy is, in fact, actually saying anything." The camera went off Judi Bloom, Reporter, to focus on a bunch of techs doing things with cables, broom handles, and gaffa tape. The camera went back to Judi. "We've theorised that he *may* actually be responding, but that he's too terrified to speak at an audible volume. We're going to have to be careful, because this boy is obviously not thinking clearly."

_You've got that right._ By now, he'd summoned Hank, Ororo and Logan. They were watching the news as it unfolded with concern plain on their faces.

"Looks like the Elf flipped out again," said Logan. "I'll fetch him."

"Yes. Next to me, he's known you the longest. Be cautious. We don't want anyone hurt."

"Right."

On the screen the boom was being inched towards Kurt. He shuffled a little bit away, but seemed satisfied that it wasn't a weapon. Officer Richard held up a megaphone and said, "Hello. Can you hear us?"

The boom picked up something that sounded like, "..ei..ar..

They moved it closer. "Heirelgart. Heirelgart. Heirelgart..."

The media, thankfully, couldn't make sense out of what he was saying. Xavier, on the other hand, was wincing. "It's his home village," he explained. "He needed a safe word. *Why* he felt he needed a safe word was something he hadn't been able to glean from his time in Kurt's mind.

All that he could be certain of, was that Kurt was in peril.

Xavier sent his mind out, and found yet another persona in charge.

This one called itself Flight. His primary goal was to get the body out of danger. Again, safety was the trigger back. Again, he couldn't quite remember what had brought him out into the open.
Xavier returned to the inside of his own head. It was difficult, at this distance, to focus on so many people at once. Even though they were technically one.
He had to be closer to get to Kurt.
Which meant that all he could really do was watch the news and hope.
On the screen, Judi was talking while the helicopter camera watched police seal off a lane on the Expressway.

"So far, he hasn't said anything else but this strange word. We don't know what language he speaks. He could be a foreigner who was abducted into this country, and is trying to escape back home. We don't know for certain, but this seems to be the most logical assumption. As this drama plays out, a police spokesperson has said that they're bringing in a multilingual counsellor to try and talk to the boy, and -- hold on. There's something happening..."

The camera switched to the helicopter, which clearly showed that the assembled media were blocking a lane, on the opposite side to where Kurt was huddled. Quite a few news crews had improvised long booms to catch the sound on the other side.
Logan pulled up at the police cordon and said a few words while Judi narrated it.

"Someone has pulled up at the barrier and is talking to the police, there. We can't hear what they're saying, but it doesn't seem to be an argument. The person is now walking towards the mystery teen..."

Logan approached slowly, stopping completely when Kurt started to shuffle away from him. Logan dropped into a crouch.

A dozen improvised booms edged towards him.

"Hey, kiddo. It's me. Logan. You remember?"
Kurt kept whispering, "Heirelgart," over and over again.

"Look. Kurt. Whatever you've been through, it ain't gonna get better sittin' here. Right? I can take ya home. Where it's safe. Don'tcha wanna go home? Don'tcha wanna be safe?"

Kurt stopped saying, "Heirelgart." He looked up. A dozen cameras could be heard snapping stills.
Logan stretched forward a hand. "C'mon. I'll take ya home."

Kurt was visibly shaking as he tentatively crept towards Logan.

The media followed them all the way to the Institute. They demanded an interview. They howled to know what had caused the 'Expressway Incident'. They popped flashes in broad daylight and refused to listen, rather preferring to holler questions at the top of their lungs.

"Professor!"
"Professor!"
"Professor!"

"Do you know why he did it?"
"Is he psychologically unbalanced?"
"What was he saying on the Expressway?"
"Why was he so scared?"

"Was he attacked by a mutant?"
Xavier ignored them all, helping Logan and Ororo guide Kurt inside the mansion.

"They're not going to give up without some kind of statement," Logan said, peaking out of the curtains. "And the Elf's gone quiet."

"That may work in our favour..." Xavier looked over to Kurt, who was nursing a hot chocolate. He was himself again, but intensely withdrawn. Xavier sighed. "I'll prepare a statement for the media, and select a station with a modicum of restraint. The rest of them will have to cut a deal."
They'd set up in the downstairs study, with Kurt huddled in a wing chair with yet another mug of hot chocolate.

Judi Bloom was intensely patient, jotting down questions while the crew set up cameras.

"I'd appreciate it if you went gently with Kurt," Xavier said. "He's already been through too much."

"Professor, Xavier, I may be a member of the media, but I *am* capable of being understanding."


"We're here inside the Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters with an exclusive interview with Professor Xavier, and later, we'll try to get a few words from the expressway teenager himself, Kurt. Now, Professor, what do we *know* about this event?"

"I believe Kurt may have been abducted from school by someone from his past. Someone he identifies as a threat. I've been in contact with some of my students at Bayville High School, and as a result, I also believe that the abductor was a person in a position of trust. I cannot, unfortunately, reveal this person at this time."

"There are rumours of a mutant attack. How accurate are these reports?"

"Once again, the National Enquirer has its facts wrong. No mutants have attacked anything. What we're looking at is simple *human* depravity. Nothing more."

"What about reports that this is a Bayville *schoolteacher*?"

"Once again, I can neither confirm nor deny the identity of Kurt's attacker. He refuses to identify them."

"You don't even know the *gender* of his attacker?"

"No. I'm afraid not. We're faced with a genuine mystery, and very few pieces in the puzzle. We're doing what we can, but most of it is up to Kurt."

"Has he spoken of his ordeal?"

"Xavier shook his head. "One of the reasons why we're so stymied is that Kurt is more inclined to be silent when troubled. It takes a great deal to prise him out of his shell, so to speak. It seems that every time we make some headway, events occur that drive him back to where we started.""

"This must be exhausting for you."

"Yes. Exhausting, and vexing."

"Thank you, Professor Xavier. Back to you at the studio. We'll be taping Kurt's interview for our news bulletin, tonight."

Xavier watched over them as they set up for Kurt. He'd already made sure that no-one would attempt to touch him, and had double-checked his holowatch before he let anyone in.

Even though Kurt was in charge, he looked almost like 'RagDoll' was at the helm, so to speak. If it wasn't for him occasionally sipping at his chocolate, Xavier would have thought RagDoll was 'out'.

"Rolling."

"Okay. I'm attempting to talk to the central figure in the Expressway Incident, Kurt. His last name has been withheld by request. A request that we honour. Now Kurt, can you tell me what it was like, leaping from car to car like that?"

"I didn't - notice," Kurt said at length. His voice was a low murmur.

"I just had to get away. I only used what was there."

"What did you have to get away from?"

Kurt started shivering. "Predator."

"Is this 'predator' a person?"

Nod.

"Do you know them?"
Nod. Harder shaking.
"Can you tell us who they are?"
He was shaking violently, now. "No. No. No. Please? No."
"Okay. It's okay. I won't make you. It's all right." Judi cleared her throat. "How did they get you away from the school?"
"Car."
"Nobody tried to stop them?"
"Just me. It was time for class."
"Do you think there's a danger to any other students from this person? This predator?"
A long silence. "I - don't know." His voice was almost a whisper. "Said... just wanted me."
"What does this predator want?"
Now he did whisper. "Good times."
"This is *chilling*," said Judi. "You were taken away in *broad* *daylight*, nobody stopped this Predator, asked them where they were going with you. Nothing. Why didn't anyone *do* anything?"
"Ich bin ihre Liebling Laune..." Kurt murmured. "Please? No more?"
Judi backed off, positioned herself for a tag shot, and recited,
"Chilling words about a chilling event, but questions remain unanswered. Just *who* is this 'Predator' Kurt spoke of? Are they stalking other children? How can our children be protected when the only witness so far is too scared to identify his attacker? The only answer to the Predator and their actions is constant vigilance, as well as awareness that the Predator and others like them *are* out there, and they are looking at our children. Judi Bloom. Bayville News."
Logan escorted them off the grounds, then got the X-van out to collect the other kids. Preserve them from the media feeding-frenzy.
Xavier shuddered at Kurt's last words aloud. He'd said he was the Predator's 'favourite freak'. Were there others she 'collected'? Were there others who were hurt, possibly worse than Kurt?

He had no appetite. A dangerous thing for someone with his metabolism, where one day without food was enough to put him into starvation territory. He would force himself to eat, he decided, make him take his usual three platefuls at dinner.
What he couldn't bring himself to do was go through his usual snacking habits. Not yet. His stomach was like a lead lump inside him. Iron, maybe, galvinised by adrenaline and fear.
Wait... wasn't iron deadly to elves?
_They only *call* you 'Elf', dummkopf. Don't you *dare* start psyching yourself sick. We can't afford it._ He could feel Fight roaming around inside his head. Hunting for Monsters.
Kurt sucked on the remains of a pink marshmallow that had been in his hot chocolate and thought calming thoughts. It was only a matter of time before everyone came home and he wouldn't be allowed to be alone.
Everyone was so afraid that he'd hurt himself. They didn't know that *his* horror was one of the Monsters getting out and hurting *them*, they couldn't know. If they knew...
If they knew, he'd certainly be left alone.
Kurt wanted his lonliness to be voluntary. With optional company when he was sure he wanted it. When he was sure he was safe.
"I'm telling you, it's like, totally *weird*. Like, why has like, camp OJ moved to like, in front of the Institute?"
"Search *me*. I just go here."
"Where did Kurt go, anyway?"
"Hey! Kurt!" Kitty raced up to him. "You should have seen it, I was like, totally brave, I like -- Kurt? OmyGod... What happened?"
"Predator," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Katzchen. Spoiled your day. Sorry."
"And all I had to like, do was like, punch Lance's lights out."
Kurt grinned. "You punched Lance out? Man, I would have payed to see that. I think I was
bouncing off cars at the time...

"You were doing *what*?"
Kurt pointed at the TV. "It's on the news."
They gathered around to watch. Most were in a stunned silence.

"*COOL*!" said Jamie.
Kurt watched the amateur video footage dispassionately. His left elbow was still behind. His timing was good enough to survive, but perfection required those three forty-eighths of a second to be eliminated.

_Pipe *down*_..._ Kurt told the Perfectionist._ _It wasn't a show, it was survival. I'm sick of you. Clappe._

_Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. You're always wrong. How can you expect people to like you if you don't get things right? Naughty boy._
Kurt seriously considered getting one of the Monsters to attack him. The Perfectist had his useful moments, sure; but he was ninety-nine percent annoyance.
Jean was looking at him funny.
"What?"
_You should get help, Kurt._ she thought at him. _Lots of help._
_I'll be fine. All I have to do is steer clear of predators._

Jean's secret vice was head-hopping. The Professor said it was dangerous, so she made sure not to dip into anyone's mind for longer than a few seconds at a time. She usually made a point to stay clear of friend's minds, but Kurt was just so *quiet*. It was eerie.

Kurt, apart from his first day at Bayville, when he was still learning the rules, was not a quiet kid.
Jean had assumed he was, judging him on first impressions, and thought him the quiet, wallflower type. But then, the day after, his jet-lag and inhibitions had worn off and he was literally bouncing off the walls.
Thus had begun the now-tradition of the five AM wake-up call. Also known in the vernacular as, "I'm going to F-ing *kill* him."

Seeing Kurt this quiet and motionless was just - wrong.

So she'd dipped into his head, telling herself that she was just skimming for a few clues.

What she got was a roar of babble. She had to strain not to react, or risk the suspicion of others. So many voices in his *head*... She pulled back instinctively.

He was in serious trouble and he didn't even know it. Fractured personalities, capable of merging when they wanted to, that were also becoming increasingly hostile towards their 'host' and vice versa. The ranks - no - *masks*. He called them masks. The masks were beginning to suspect him of disinformation. If he wasn't careful they were going to rebel.

_I should have suspected it, the way he changes how he acts, depending on who he's with. He's Scott's Loyal Lieutenant. Evan's Partner in Crime. Kitty's Wannabe Sweetheart..._ It just went on and on. Which one was real?

He was watching her watch him. "What?" he said aloud.
Best not to answer aloud. _You should get help, Kurt,_ she thought at him. _Lots of help._
_I'll be fine. All I have to do is steer clear of predators._

That word, again. Predator. It had another layer of meaning for him, something beyond the traditional dictionary definitions.
Her friend was broken, and he wasn't going to get better.
Because someone out there was repeatedly hitting his soul with a metaphorical hammer.
Kurt's exclusive interview had subtitles, owing to both the volume of his voice and the accent. Even though Kurt was right there with them, they watched, hypnotised, as his words appeared on the screen.

The last subtitle read, "[In German] I am their favourite mood."
The reaction to that was pretty much unanimous.
"The hell?"
"Kurt did you really say-- hey. Where'd he go?"
Kitty ventured a look out the window, and saw him heading for the west wood. Maybe it was habit or something. Maybe something bad was going to happen when he remembered that that was where she and Lance--
No. Where *Lance* had refused to listen to her telling him to stop. It was Lance, not her, that had started and finished it.
"There's a place he goes," she said. "Whenever he like, needs to be at peace. I'll just - check there. 'Kay?"
They seemed to think she could manage without an honour guard - kinda like guarding the picket line after the horses were stolen, but their hearts were in the right place - and let her go.

When she got there, he was singing. A gentle song she couldn't understand a word of, but it was sad and sweet and lonely. Kitty just sat next to him and waited until he was done.
"Need to be alone?" she asked.
"Nein. I needed to be away from reminders. They were getting noisy."
"Uh. 'They'?"
"Herr Professor didn't tell you?"
"Nobody's been telling me like, anything. I even checked with Jubes about what was up with you but like, the word is *not* out."
"He should have warned you, at the least."
"Warned me? Like, about *what*?"
"Katzchen, I - I'm not as safe as you think. I could be dangerous."
"Don't be like, silly. You're like, the gentlest person I like, know. You'd never hurt anyone."
He sighed. "I come here to - reset, as it were. I talk to God for His help at keeping them down. Keeping them calm. And it works... meine kleine Kirche..."
Kitty had no clue what 'they' were, but she guessed it was something along the lines of personal demons. Before Lance, she'd always felt safe, here. At peace.
Now, she wasn't so sure. And the guy sitting right next to her, the one she'd been relying on for borrowed strength, was telling her that he was totally *un*safe. He was probably afraid he might hurt her.
Lance was never afraid of things like that. He just went and did things, and to heck with the consequences.
Her stomach roiled at the thought of 'consequences'. Had he lied about that too? And would Kurt, who blushed at *pantyhose*, be able to tell her?
She hadn't talked to anyone about that sort of thing. She hadn't dared.
Well, she'd find out in a couple of weeks, anyway. If she missed her period, Lance had lied. If she didn't, he was telling the truth. *Or* she was phenomenally lucky.
One of the two.
"Lance didn't like, warn me or anything," she said. "But he still like, hurt me." Kitty watched a lone ant wander near her fingers. Usually, she was all-out against anything with more than four legs, but she decided to let this ant go home. "You at least like, gave me a warning. That makes you like,
*less* dangerous."
Kurt stared at her in stunned disbelief. "How?"
"Well, now that I'm like, warned, I can like, be on my guard. If anything like, weird starts going on with you? I can like, call for Jean to like, get help."
"You'd better yell. I tried calling for her when the predator came. She wasn't listening."
*Scary*. "You didn't like, call the Professor?"
"He asked me not to," said Kurt. "Today was Important Business. I probably screwed that up, too."
"The Professor's not like, worried about it, so I like, wouldn't either."
"Mmm."
"From the sound of things, you've got like, too much to worry about already."
"Ja."
"Is it someone at school?"
Kurt huddled up on himself. "If I tell... all those I hold dear will be hurt. I'll be made to watch."
"Oh, geez..." Kitty put her arm around him for a half-hug. "I'm like, so sorry. I was just tryin' to like, help. Somehow."
His tail snugged itself around her waist and gave her a little squeeze. It struck Kitty as strange that something so pliable could be so strong. It was just one long mass of muscle. He could probably lift weights with it or something.
He was the most *un*dangerous male she'd ever sat next to.
"If you could quietly spread the word about the threat that the predator poses, I'd be very thankful."
"Just the predator?"
Kurt smiled. "I'm only dangerous if I can't get to Holy Ground, liege. You don't have to worry, now. They've gone quiet."
There was that 'they' again. "Are 'they' the ones that are like, dangerous?"
"Only if you piss them off," Kurt was smiling again, turning into the breeze and letting it play with his hair. "Some are nice. A lot are wild. You only have to worry about the Monsters. I can control them, here."
"Just here?"
"Any old church will do. Or temple. Or mosque. Anywhere that's a house of God."
"So what's this? Like, a camp-out?"
Kurt laughed. "It's a house. See the walls?" he pointed to the trees. "The roof," he indicated the sky. "The floor," they looked at the grass. "And even the furniture," he patted the rock they both sat on. "Sure, it's a little spartain, but it's economical. Look, there's even caretakers."
Kitty followed his pointing finger and had to restrain a gasp.
There was a doe, nibbling at the grass in the clearing, like nothing evil had, nor ever would happen in this spot. Kitty did her best to stay perfectly still and clung to Kurt as she watched the animal.
"There's a whole family living in these woods," Kurt murmured. "They haven't let me feed them, yet, but they tolerate my presence. I don't think they'd mind you, either. You'd smell like a fellow herbivore."
Kitty had to giggle. "That's vegetarian, you silly Elf."
The doe leaped back into the woods at the sound of her voice.
"Awww... I spooked her."
"Katzchen..."
Kitty turned. Her head was very close to his, now. He'd unhuddled and was just kind of resting his hand on her shoulder. He wasn't leaning on her or anything. Just touching her. That touch froze every muscle she had.
"Kurt?"
He leaned towards her, eyes gone sort of trance-like. He was staring at her mouth. "Katzchen," he whispered. "Wie kann ein Teufel einen Engel wie Sie lieben?"
"What?"
"Are you brave enough? For one kiss?"
He sounded so afraid. He looked like he was fighting himself to stop doing something. The only thing Lance had fought was her.
Kitty made up her mind, and pressed her lips against his.
It was a chaste kiss, gentle and cautious. Almost tentative. He didn't seek to possess her mouth, or taste what she had on her back teeth. He just wanted to know what her lips felt like against his.
His fur didn't even tickle.
It was just as soft and gentle as he was.
Just like that, the kiss broke. He had both hands on her shoulders, now, but they were holding her away.
"No," he said. "You don't need this. You're still healing. You don't need confusion. I shouldn't have... Oh, Katzchen, I'm sorry. Forgive me... I don't know what came over me... I - I should go."
And he left.
Just like that, he was gone, melting into the wood like the doe had.
Kitty raised her hand to her mouth. He was so *warm*.
_Duh, Pryde. He's covered in *fur*. You like, expected Mr Freeze, maybe?_
He'd made her stomach do a somersault, and the near-constant ache of pain Lance had left her with subsided into a muted hum. How could he do that with just his lips?
He *was* right, though. She did *not* need these levels of confusion, just *days* after the attack.

And in the dark of the wood, hidden in the hollow of a tree, there was a low murmuring in German.
"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been one day since my last confession..." Kurt Wagner broke down into sobs. He could truly feel the filth invading his soul. All the other times, others had stained him, but he sought this blot himself. "In that time - in that time, I have had lustful thoughts for a wounded woman. I desired her by body as well as by heart. I - kissed her. I chose the worst possible time to do so. I wanted to have her for myself. I kissed her when she was still confused about love and where she was going, and if she even *wanted* to be brave, yet."
He felt so bad. He felt so *ill*. Poor Katzchen. He'd just screwed up her entire psyche. With one kiss.
"The worst thing, Father. I wanted more. I wanted to be everything I could be for her. I wanted to show her that sex doesn't have to be bad, and we weren't even engaged. "Help me, Father. Help me. I feel so bad. Make it go away. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."
He was just as bad as the predators. Just as bad as Hess. She'd probably started with one wrong kiss. One wrong touch. The only difference between them was that Kurt felt ashamed. He'd barely been able to stop.
"I dearly want her to be with me. In all honour. Right and proper, married in both our churches... I want her to stand beside me for all of our days. I'm afraid that won't happen, now. I took her lips. I *stole* them. I sinned. Against her and against You... Help me. What must I do to make things right? How can I set things straight with her? How can feel free of this sin? Forgive me. Forgive me, please."

Kitty shifted her position to her other hip. She hadn't been able to sit normally since Saturday. She didn't quite want to go in yet, not while the ghost of Kurt's kiss lingered on her lips. She didn't think she could erase the stupid grin on her face for a while, anyway. As for the blush, she didn't want to think about it.
Why had she wasted her time with ashtray-breath?
When *he* kissed her, his tongue was in her mouth and threatening to gag her. He felt like he never brushed his teeth and he was *always* sour, even if he'd been eating mints.
Kurt, as well she knew from the people yelling at him while he hogged the bathroom, had to stay clean.
Kurt's tongue hadn't even left his mouth, but Kitty found herself wanting to know what it tasted like.
"Hey, Pretty-Kitty. Missed ya."
Kitty felt a chill possess her body. They were both back at the scene of the crime. Kurt had gone away. Were Jean or the Professor listening?
Would it matter?
Kitty automatically scooched away from him. "What do *you* want?"
"I wanna show you you don't have to settle for scoring with the freakshow. I mean, sure, he's enough to satisfy *Tabby*, but she's a bit of a whore. You're better than wanting *that*, you know?"

"Are you like, demented or *what*? What are you like, *talking* about?"

He lit a cigarette. "Come on, Kitty. I'm not dumb. I worked it out, you know. After I showed you what it was like to be a woman, you had to get more. I shouldn't have left, 'cause all you were left with was that blue-furred freak... I'm real sorry about that."

He *was* demented. "You're *nuts*!" Kitty retreated all the way up to the top of the rock. "You like, *raped* me! Get *lost*!" _Jean... Professor? Like, intruder alert..._

"I made you a *woman*,” he said, getting closer. "That means we share something *special*.”

"You *hurt* me, you *jerk*! Get *LOST*!"

Kurt's eyes snapped open the second he heard Kitty's voice. She needed help. He was well capable for that, at least. "Help me help her. Amen,” left his mouth before he ran towards his church at full speed.

He would *not* fail her a second time.

He came up to the clearing, saw Lance, and all logic flew out of his head.

A predator was after his beloved.

In a blink, Kurt gave the field to Fight. Fight knew how to handle predators. How to make them go away.

"DRECKSAU!" Fight screamed, ploughing into Lance. Immediately, he bought one of the Monsters forward.

Predators only understood one thing.

Savagery.

Kitty could only scream as Kurt and Lance sailed right over the top of her and off the high edge of the rock she sat on. She could actually *see* the change. It was in the eyes. One instant, he was the safe, reliable Kurt she knew. The next, he was something wild and dangerous, something prepared to kill.

He growled like a feral beast.

They bounced to a halt, tumbling and struggling against each other. Lance was fighting for his life. Kurt, or whatever was using his body at the moment, was fighting to kill.

She had to stop it.

_PROFESSOR! JEAN! HELP!_ She jumped to the ground, landing badly, but not spraining anything at least. The only way to stop them hurting each other was to phase one of them and keep them phased.

Kitty made her choice. "Kurt! Stop it!" She siezed his waist and concentrated.

She actually saw his fangs go through Lance's jugular. Kitty used his frenzied motion to help propel them away in a weird sort of floating bounce. He thrashed in her arms and bayed a howl that made her want to shrink away and hide somewhere safe. Kitty still held tight and kept her concentration up.

Lance, still whole, scooted away. He'd gone very, very pale.

"Kurt. Kurt. This isn't you. This is *not* you. You're not like this. Just stop. Please. Stop.”

He slowed down, and eventually came panting to a halt, just as the others burst in on the scene.

{Snikt} "You ain't welcome here no more, boy," Logan growled. "Take a hint an' take a hike before I finish what the Elf started."

Lance was covered in minor cuts and abrasions. He held his throat and nodded.
He'd wet his pants.
Kurt, meanwhile, had started shaking. He was looking at his hands and moaning.
"Are you okay, now? You're not gonna like, go nuts on me if I like, let go?"
"Oh, Gott... nein... nein... Ich fast beendete. Ich bin nicht sicher, gleichmassig auf heiligem Boden..."
"Kurt?"
"Let me go. Please."
Kitty unphased, and released him. Lance had disappeared so fast that he must have borrowed Quicksilver's power in order to escape.
The others started coming in, worried, concerned.
Kurt was staring at his hands. Hands covered in blood.
"Please. Don't come near me. I'm not safe. I have to get to the Professor. He - He'll know. There'll be a way. He can make me safe. Just - stay away until I am?"
Kitty still approached. "Kurt... What's like, going on?"
"Katzchen. Please. Keep back. One of the Monsters got out."

They followed at a distance, murmuring to themselves about monsters and what the heck was going on with Kurt. There were all sorts of whispers. That Kurt was cracking. That he'd already cracked. That he was afraid of what he would do. That he'd already done it, and would do it again.
Kurt was silent, looking worried and defeated. Not letting anyone get close.
Everyone was afraid, except maybe Logan, who just got angry.
Xavier was merely worried, and bid Kurt sit in the same wing chair he'd been interviewed in before. Gentle hands stilled his head.
"I'm just going to talk to the others," he said. "You'll remain in control."
"Sehr gut..." Kurt closed his eyes and relaxed.

There were no barriers, so Xavier tread cautiously. Eight personas were scurrying around like ants inside Kurt's mind. Cleaning up the damage. Sorting out which bits went where.
Xavier automatically picked up the child and comforted him. Four years old, the younger version of Kurt was scared and crying. None of the others had the time to comfort him, so Xavier did it for them.
_There, now._ he soothed. _It's all over now. The -er- predator has gone._
_I know._ sobbed the child. _But a *Monster* got out. He could've hurt someone. He nearly *killed* someone. Fight shouldn't've picked that Monster... That was *bad*._
_Eh? You mean Fight *let* the Monster out?_
_He did it for help to make the predator go away, the child shuddered. He shouldn't have done it. This was a baby predator. He was - new._
_Why do you remember this?_
_We all remember, until the Archivist comes and takes the bad memories away. The Archivist wants to protect us. He gives Fight the bad memories so that he's mad enough to fight the predators when the time comes._
_I think Fight may have gone a little too far, too._ Xavier gently comforted the child.
_Kurt keeps telling us we should never hurt anyone. Not permanently, anyway. And he says we should never kill._
_Kurt's quite right._ Xavier said. _Hurting people's wrong._
_Fight wants to make all the predators stay away. He says they only understand violence because its all they want._
_I'm going to have to have a little talk with Fight, later._ Xavier promised. _Now, can you tell me about the Monsters?_
_I don't like the Monsters._ said the child. _Other people made them for their pleasure. They're all the things that Kurt isn't - but they're all the things that we look like._
_Oh dear. I can see why Kurt's so afraid of them._
Kurt's just afraid that they'll hurt people. He tries to look after them. He says they're the real survivors of the Bad Times. The rest of us? We're just here to help him look after them.

Kurt made you?

Kurt made all of us masks. He needed me to be the innocent. He needed Archivist to take the bad memories. It goes on and on. It's the Monsters that belong to the predators. And the Bad Times.

I see...

"He's been in an awful long time," Scott said, his voice was barely a murmur. "He'd call for help if he got lost," said Jean.

"How can someone like, get lost?" Kitty asked.

Jean bit her lip. She took a deep breath. "Kurt has something called Multiple Personality Disorder. He's been under control of his other - personas - until very recently. His mind's been a chaos of other voices."

Kitty covered her mouth. "Are some of them - dangerous?"

"Not the ones I heard." She had to smile, in spite of herself. "One's four years old. He's unbearably cute. You'd like him."

Someone had to ask it. "How many people *is* he?"

"The functioning entities, his masks, make eight. I don't know how many others he's restraining. His parents don't know. This is a result of some - things that happened out of their sight."

"That was why they referred to them as 'spells'," said Hank. "They thought it was just a phase he was going through."

"Who *did* this to him?" Kitty demanded. Jean shook her head. "I don't know. All I got was 'predators'."

"It's gotta be someone at school," said Evan.

They stared at him.

"What? It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. Both times he had an 'episode', he was at school before it happened."

"But what about Tabby?"

"Tabby doesn't count."

"*I'll* say she doesn't like, count," murmured Kitty. "She doesn't count for *anything*."

"Woo. Bitter much?"

"Shut up, Jubie."

"Okay. So we can work with this," Scott glazed over the bickering amongst them. "Everyone's got a class with or near Kurt, right? We just keep an eye out. Watch him. Watch anyone who comes in contact with him. Easy."

Xavier, meanwhile, was deep in negotiations with the Archivist. It was tricky going, because Fight would keep popping up to try and push him away.

The Archivist had eventually restrained Fight with the mental equivalent of a short leash. That did not mean that either of them were willing to surrender a thing.

I need to know, he persisted. I want to help.

No-one needs to know. This is a secret between the predator, the monsters and I. We will not hurt you with it. It's wrong.

In order to know what can restrain the monsters, I need to know what made them. I must see. No-one should see. It will wound you. You shouldn't be wounded.

I understand the difference between Kurt's memories and mine, offered Xavier. I can separate them.

Kurt doesn't remember these. He's safe from them. Remembering would make more fractures in us. There would be a host, instead of a collection of masks. No-one should remember this.

If I know what made the monsters, he offered, I can help calm them down so that they won't hurt anyone.

The Archivist thought about this.
_Yes. We want peace._

And without further warning, he was tossed headlong into a flood of memory.
Kurti had no reason to fear anyone from the troupe. They were all Romani together. One fire was pretty much the same as another and there was a passing chance that someone might have a new story. To his mind, there was no difference between the Heirelgart Romani, and the Statleindorf Romani.

Even though one group welcomed Centaurs amongst them, and the other did not.

Thus Kurti, age four, walked hand in hand with a complete stranger into the path of harm.

The old lady, said Jakob, was very lonely, and wanted somebody to help her keep her bed warm and make her happy. Kurti could understand that. His two baby sisters always loved to hug up against him in the winter. But it was summer. He'd said as much to Jakob.

"Lonliness can make you as cold as winter," he'd said. "So does age. Your bones suck in heat and give nothing back. Even in summer, you can shiver."

Kurti felt sorry for the old lady who wanted to borrow him for the night. Then he saw her.

That face would eventually etch itself into his brain and strike fear into his heart, but this was the first time he saw her. She wasn't that old, really. Certainly not much older than Mama or Papa. Definitely younger than Jakob.

Her smile wasn't quite nice. There was something about it that was a little bit wrong. Just like Jakob's smile. It wasn't quite - warm.

"Here he is Frau. Die Fleidertuefel. Yours for one night."

The Lady handed Jakob a bundle of Marks.

"*Whoah!*" Kurti blurted. "That's a lot of money!"

Jakob knelt and put an arm around his shoulder. "That's right, lad. You just keep this lady happy for one night, and *all* this money gets to help feed the whole tribe."

Kurti thought. It was a lot of money for one night. But then, they were both pretty large tribes. And it *had* been a hard winter... "I'll do my best," he said. "I promise."

"*Good* boy. And you know to keep this our little secret, eh? You might get into trouble because your parents think you ran off on them, yes?"

Everyone knew that Kurti would never run away from his family. He was lucky to have one at all. "I - guess..." he allowed. "I'll keep it a secret anyway." He stood as straight as he could, and saluted the Lady. "Good day, Frau. I guess I'm ready. What do I call you?"

The Lady smiled as she picked him up. That funny wrong-smile again. "You can call me 'Frau Hess', my demon."

Kurti, unaware of the danger she represented, cuddled up to her. "Am I warm enough for you, Frau Hess?"

She laughed and stroked his fur. "Oh yes, dear. Plenty warm."

It was going to be the night that changed his mind about people. This was the first predator he had met.

The more time he spent with Frau Hess, the more wrong things got. He tried to be nice, and friendly, but that wasn't what Frau Hess wanted; the nicer he was, the more she frowned.

"Come now, little devil," she cooed as she took his shirt off for him. "There's no need for lies. You can be yourself with me."

He was starting to feel very wrong about the way she was touching him, but he sat still like a good boy and let her smooth his fur down. "But I *am* being myself, Frau. I don't know any other way to be."

"Haven't you ever wanted to do things that your parents said were bad?" she asked. "Haven't you ever wanted to be naughty?"
They were sitting on the edge of a big bed, almost as big as his room at home in Heirelgart. Kurti tried to think. "Do you mean like taking cookies before dinnertime? Or jumping on the bed?"

Hess' eyes narrowed a little. "Something like jumping on the bed, perhaps..." She took off her own shirt and Kurti got to see the underthings he'd only ever seen on their entirety on washing lines, before.

"Oh," he whispered. "That's what they're for."

Hess grinned. "You can touch, if you want to. Don't be afraid. Explore what you see, love. Be curious."

There was something wrong about this, too. Kurti couldn't put his finger on it, but the Lady said it was all right. And Jakob had said all he had to do was make her happy...

He reached forward and fiddled with the straps. "Mama's have little clips here," he said conversationally. "She makes it come apart to feed the baby."

"Yeah?" That very wrong smile again. "Would you show me?"

"On you? Like --" he swallowed, fighting a blush. "-- I'm a baby?"

Hess nodded. She took the shoulder strap down her arm and freed her breast. "It would make me very happy," she said.

Kurt felt the blush heating his face. This was wrong in so many ways, but his tribe was depending on him. All he had to do was make the Lady happy.

He hoped it would end soon.

It didn't.

He did, eventually, keep her warm that night. His bare back pressed against her naked front, and her arm pinning him against her.

He was so scared.

Too scared to really sleep.

Kurti had tried, really tried, but he was so afraid of what Hess would want him for next, or where he'd have to touch, or where she'd touch him. Some of it felt kind of nice, if only for a little while, but Kurti knew that it was wrong.

If something like this never happened again, Kurti would be a very happy boy.

Afraid to accidentally wake Hess, Kurti dared not make a single noise, so he wept with both hands pressed over his mouth, and tried to keep his shivering to a minimum.

He wanted to go home.

He wanted Mama.

Morning was stranger than the evening. She washed him, dried him, brushed him, even fed him until his tummy threatened to pop. But what she said while she was being so nice to him disturbed him more than anything she'd done before.

Good boys didn't tell lies. Especially lies about how she'd treated him last night. And if she found out that he told one little thing about her, then she would find him, and make him watch everything and everyone he ever loved going up in smoke.

Kurti shuddered, and didn't doubt her for an instant.

She neglected him on the way back to the circus, for which Kurti was preternaturally glad. He didn't think he could stand Hess touching him, any more.

She gave him back to Jakob, who instantly dropped Kurti to the ground as if he were a bag of chaff. Then she went weird again.

"Here, love. A little present for last night. You read it, and learn from it, and we'll have better fun, next time."

"Er," said Kurti. "Thank you?"

"Unwrap it when you're alone."

"Okay."

"Run along."
Kurt bolted for his family's trailer, the present clutched tight in his arms. He didn't stop until he was safely underneath. Only then, did the usual childhood avarice surface and Kurti investigated his gift. Bright wrapping paper tore to reveal a picture book. It was full of people doing things that Hess had wanted him to do last night.

There were words on the cover, that he'd learn to read later on, when Hess had been preying on him for a little over a year.

Karma Sutra.

"There you are! We were so worried!"

"Papa..." Kurti ran to him, and clung to a leg like a limpet. Mama knelt to brush his hair. "Ach, my poor little boy. Did you get lost?"

Kurti thought about that. He'd certainly *felt* lost... He nodded.

"Were you scared?"

More vigorous nodding.

"Did you find someone who looked after you?"

Another technical yes. Looked after, sure. Cared for, no. "Well, it's all right now, love. Mama and Papa are right here. Katja and Anja missed you. Want to say 'hello' to them again?"

Kurti smiled and transferred his death-grip hug to Mama.

"Ach! You *did* miss me... It's all right. The big scare's over with, sweetie. We're here for you now."

And they carried him inside and put him on his bunk bed - right on top of the book's hiding place - and put his baby sisters in with him and everything started feeling *right* again.

Hess was just a bad dream. And it was all over.

Or so he thought at the time.

There was worse to come. By the time he was six, he *knew* Tantric Yoga. He was also thoroughly fractured. There were other predators, but most of them only rented him for a few nights. Hess was a regular predator, and every time, she wanted more.

Every time, it got worse.

Hess was the one that wanted the Monsters, that made them into twisted, sorrowful creatures made of nothing but hate and spite. And the Monsters usually didn't live for long, either.

Hess was Death.

Hess was pain.

And in the end, something made them fight back. To make her go away. All Kurt could remember was a bathroom tile and the smell of bad blood... A fragment of something so *evil* that the Archivist kept it away from everyone.

_You will not see that, sir,_ the Archivist told Xavier. _That secret is mine, and mine alone._

_Why?_ Xavier whispered.

_It is the one memory I had to take away *during* the Bad Times. I had to. To stop them from Killing._
Fracture Twelve: Guarding Broken Treasure

Kurt picked at his dinner and tried to ignore the fact that his friends had thrown up an invisible wall around him. So Fight had released the Monster on purpose. That was something of a relief. He could have a quiet word to Fight about maintaining control and not killing people, even predators.

Even if they *were* going to hurt someone.

If he, the Archivist, and the Perfectionist ganged up on him, he might relent. Maybe he could get das Kinder to help, too. Fight was soft on kids.

It was strange. When they didn't know what his trouble was, and he thought himself unsafe, his friends couldn't keep away from him. Now that both situations were reversed, they gave him a wide berth.

They were afraid of him.

Damn it.

He'd known this would happen. If anyone knew about the masks, they wouldn't accept and move on. They'd fear, and move away. Well, at least they didn't throw him out. Heirelgart's many charms included the fact that the whole village knew him and wouldn't let a predator come within miles of the place.

On the cons side, if he stayed in Heirelgart, he had nothing to look forward to but being a humble tumbler. Bla bla bla bla bla...

Professor Xavier didn't seem to notice, he was walking through the plan to keep Kurt protected from predators 24/7.

The last time Hess had abducted him, just before the abrupt end of the Bad Times, Kurt had been almost eight. She'd come at him from behind while he was fetching water, and pressed a cloth soaked in ether into his face. She'd said she meant to keep him, when he'd come round. After that, Kurt didn't remember much but the pattern of a tile and the stink of blood gone wrong, somehow.

Then, he was running through the woods on all fours, desperate to get *home*, or the nearest thing to it. It was summer, so the touring circus was home. Only the circus wasn't there any more. There was only one trailer left on the camping ground.

His family's.

Mama had been waiting on the doorstep. She'd taken one look and screamed, then ran towards him, voice hoarse, crying his name.

He'd been gone for two weeks, they'd said. They'd extended their tour at that stop for as long as they could, but the rest of the circus had had to move on before rental of the grounds chewed into their profit margin.

The Wagners had begged to stay. Mama had given the nearby town her wedding band as collateral to let them stay as long as they needed. Papa had sighed, hugged Mama, and taken his off, too. He said that his son was worth everything he had.

That was when the landlord had given the rings back and said they could stay for free.

Kurt was shocky and covered in a mixture of old and new blood. He couldn't remember what had happened, and asked his family not to make him. Mama saw more of his wounds than anyone else, and backed him up. She reasoned that if he didn't remember, then he shouldn't be made to remember.

"Some predator got to him," she announced. "A big predator, like a cat. That's all there is to it."

His family never left him out of their sight for longer than a few seconds. Kurt was glad of the protection, even if it *did* come from the likes of his youngest sister, Erika. The predators never struck within view of his family.

Only when they were home, at the end of the tour, did Kurt find out there was a hidden meaning behind Mama's words. His books - the books Hess had given him about Tantric Yoga - were slightly misaligned in their hiding place. Mama had found them, looked at them, and put them carefully back.
She knew, and as far as Kurt was aware, had never said a word.

_Mama loves me just the same,_ he thought, trying to reassure himself. It didn't quite work. Mama
never knew about the Masks. She just knew about the horror. She'd offered to listen, but Kurt had
chosen not to speak. He knew what would happen if he did.

Now that others knew, his theory was proven right.

His friends - the people who *used* to be his friends - would only protect him out of loyalty to
Professor Xavier. Out of fear that one of his Masks would forget about the image enducer and
expose mutantkind to the world. Certainly not out of any desire to see him safe.

Kurt realised that tears were falling down his face. He carefully wiped them away with a napkin.

His half-sister was staring at him. Kurt stared back, challenging her with his eyes while he ate.

They shared a mother. Blood. But very little else.

Rogue's gaze softened into a look he'd abhorred.

Right next to fear, the thing he hated to see most in other people's eyes was pity.

"Don't you *dare* pity me!"

Great. Now the whole table would think that he'd snapped. They were clearly afraid that yet
another person was at the helm.

"I don't need it," he said, speaking in more normal tones. "I never have and I never will. I'm lucky
to be *alive*. I have family. Friends - at least until recently... These things that are happening are
just because of ignorance. You should be pitying the predators. They don't know any other way to
act. *We* do." Kurt went back to his plate and focussed on eating everything he should.

His appetite might be back by tomorrow. It never stayed away long.

"Kurt's totally got a point, you guys."

He looked up. Katzchen. Beloved Katzchen. He'd taken from her, and now she was standing up for
him.

_Gut Gott... Was Hess' entire point to make me like *her*? Turn me into another predator?_
_Dummkopf, _chided Fight. _You never stuck up for the Fotze. You just kept your fool mouth
shut._

_Then - why --?_

_Ever thought that *maybe* she just might *like* you? Dummer Junge..._

_But I *stole* from her._

_Do us all a favour, eh? Shut the hell up._

"Everything this like, predator has done is because they like, just look at the surface. They're like,
punishing Kurt because of how he like, looks. Not how he *is*.

"But he *is* a psychotic *wreck*," said Amara.

"Shut up, Princess," said Rogue. "Unless you're lookin' fo' some whup-ass."

"Yeah," said Evan. "Kurt was *fine* before this 'Predator' showed up. Once the idiot's gone,
everything will be back to how it used to be, right, K-man?"

Kurt had brightened considerably during this exchange. He was smiling. So, he did have friends,
anyway. "Of course it will," he said. "For the longest time, I thought that if people knew about my
Masks, they'd be afraid of me. They wouldn't like me any more. Obviously, I was wrong."

"Damn straight you were, bro.'"

"Danke, meine schwester."

Their plan was virtually unchanged from the one his family had concocted. Keep Kurt in view and
in company at all times. Kitty was under similar protection, but only to help Lance keep his addle-
headed distance until he got a clue.

So it was guarding the museum after the vandals had gone; so what? The point was that they
wouldn't be able to come back and do more damage. _And speaking of damage..._ Kurt sat up and
payed attention to a lecture on how to handle the media still circling for blood outside the Institute
gates.

Outside activities were severely curtailed, especially for the new recruits, who had yet to learn the
meaning of the word, 'restraint'. All training was to be undergone in the Danger Room, or severe
punishments would be handed out. All until further notice, or the last media van camped out on their
doorstep gave up and sought out other prey. Whichever came first.

They formed quite a knot when they returned to school. Kurt, who'd used his power to have his burger and eat it too, was denied his routine top-up at Gut Bomb. Scott promised a conciliatory one at the end of the school day, instead. And maybe a side-trip to Baskin-Robbins as well. *If* things went right for a change.

Kitty held Kurt's hand. Whether for moral support or genuine feeling, Kurt couldn't tell. They hadn't talked about the events before Lance's guest appearance. There hadn't been time.

Kurt knew they should. He dearly loved her and didn't want her hurt, by accident *or* by design. He had to talk out his mistake, and soon; yet preferably out of the hearing of others.

The last thing he needed - next to Hess in his face - was his teammates cracking jokes about his attempts to pitch woo at Kitty.

But then, she was still healing. Rebound love was the worst. It bought up all sorts of doubts and confusion.

Come lunchtime, he'd talk to her.

If everything went well.

Scott never felt more like the Terminator in his life. Back when he was still in hospital, after the plane crash that separated him from everything he knew, he'd seen _Terminator_ on the television and wanted to be cool like Arnold Schwartzeneger. Though perhaps with less of the stupid accent.

After Xavier rescued him, and they discovered the secret of restraining his power - ruby quartz - he'd thought it was cool to have Terminator-Vision, and had run around the mansion for weeks muttering choice phrases from the movie.

That is, until Jean showed up and told him he was being bloody stupid. He'd ditched the leather at light speed. And the wise-cracks. And the lines. All for her.

Now, though, he was sizing up everyone he looked at. Just like in the movie.


Tarren. Cutie. Babe-a-licious, but not safe to flirt with because of the whole undercover thing. Besides, he was sworn to Jean. Definitely not a suspect, but damn cute to look at. Move on.

Principal Kelly. Slightly Harrassed because of the media furfural. Trying to maintain a good image. Abduction is *not* his style. Move on.

The Brotherhood. Criminals and neer-do-wells. More likely to pound their victims away from crowds. Not sophisticated enough to do the whole abduction thing. Prefers to bring it on wherever. Not suspects, but he would have *loved* to have a quiet chat with Alvers that also involved a baseball bat, some rusty shears and at least one toilet. Move on.

Mrs Crankshaw. Rumoured to be undercover nun. Get *real*. Move on.

Frau Rosa. German hard-ass. Looks pissed. Do not make eye contact or she'd have him doing laps quicker than she could scream something complicatedly abusive in German. Move on. NOW!

Risty Wilde. Cute but young. British. Rogue's friend. Rumoured to have a 'thing' for Kurt. He *must* avoid her at all costs, because he has fur, and she's a norm. More the notes-in-lockers type than the abduct-and-hurt variety. Move on.

Graydon Creed. B-minus jerk. One of Duncan's cronies. Bigoted SOB, but more likely to get Matthews to pummel his adversaries than to do anything involving fine motor control. Or sentience. Move on.

Kurt carried on as if it were perfectly normal to be travelling in the middle of a group who were trying not to act like bodyguards. He neither looked at anyone outside of the group nor reacted to their presence. If there was a 'predator' within range, he showed no sign.

This was going to be a *long* day.
Jean had put herself on casual scan mode. She could deal with the subsequent headache later. People's safety was at stake. Most of what she got was the sussurations of several hundred teenage minds overloading on hormones.

She narrowed her range to about eight feet. Just to save her head from overloading on variations of, "Why doesn't X notice me?"

It was still a cacophony.

She filtered out her teammates to emergency-screams only.

Ah. Better.

Duncan passed by, waving a cheery 'hello' and pausing only to say, "Hey Jean. Got any plans for tonight?" His brain, however, was far less civil. *God she's hot. I sure hope I can get some of that poon tang *tonight*... I'm starting to think that Red's a cold fish._

It was all she could do to stop raising an eyebrow. _'Poon tang'? 'Cold fish'? Where did he pick *up* the lingo?_ "Sorry. Can't. We've got orders to keep an eye on Mr. Fifteen-seconds-of-fame, here." She gestured at Kurt, who ignored them.

"Okay, I'll take a rain check, then." He walked off thinking, _Jesus H. Christ on a fucking *bicycle*... If she doesn't put out soon, I'm gonna threaten to go with that blonde Smith chick. Now *there's* an easy lay. Hell, I heard she did it with *WAG*ner..._

That was far more than she ever needed to know about Duncan Matthews... Jean shook it off and filtered the rest of the babble through her head.

_Omy*God*... *Ow!* I never thought a zit under a bra strap would *hurt* so much..._

...so if I study on *Thursday*, and take the train to New York, I can be back by Monday for the pop quiz..._

...*nerve* of that little devil. Look at him, daring to pretend he's human. I'll have him as soon as their guard's down. Then I'll have a matched set._

...believe he dumped me like that. Maybe if I lost a couple *more* pounds, he'd like me again..._

Jean looked, trying to focus on the origin of the predatory thought, but found only teenage babble.

The voice had been harsh, maybe female, but beyond that, she couldn't match the mind to the thinker.

_A predator just passed by._ Jean thought, a chill invading her spine as she looked around for them.

_Talk about ships that pass in the night._

Evan was compiling the list inside his head. It was all the people who could (a) drive, (b) drag Kurt out of school/class without anyone suspecting much and (c) not be suspected for such a deed.

Okay, so it had to be a teacher. Students had to have notes and passes in order to grab other students. Forget Mr Tenniy. He rode a bike and thought cars were evil.

Principal Kelly had aspirations of senatordom and maybe even a presidency one day. The guy was kinda cool, and he was definitely not the sort to do anything as splashy and politically lethal as abducting one of his own schoolkids. If there was a scandal associated with Kelly, it was probably something involving quiet basement bondage with discreet associates.

Now, if anyone was the you'd-never-suspect-them type, it was Mrs Crankshaw. All she needed was the wimple and the head-cloth to complete the image of a perfect nun. Kurt had even joked that she was a prime candidate for the nickname of 'The Holy Terror' - which every religious boarding school had one of. She was on the list on the basis of Expect The Unexpected.

Ms Gambezi was out. She blushed if you said 'titmouse'.

Mr Frenetti was as suspicious as all hell. He *was* awfully fond of patting guys' backsides after games.
Frau Rosa? Nah. She was about as sexual as a plank. Okay, so maybe she knew someone with Kurt's name or that. And she *was* German. Okay. Put her on the 'maybe' pile.

Mr Bunkewytz? Maybe. He *could* do more with his patented Glare Of Doom and a raised eyebrow than anyone else could do with three week's detention. Evan could just imagine the terror of having to spend *time* with the guy.

Mr H. was cool. He'd loaned evan the digital camera for his current events assignment. Okay, so *he* was clear...

Lunchtime at *last*. The one time of day when everyone could let their guard down because there was nowhere to go that wasn't within the line-of-sight of at least a dozen witnesses. Kurt bolted his lunch as usual and sidled a little towards Kitty so he could murmur to her.

"Do you think I could have a quiet word with you? Away from the others?"

"Sure," she smiled. He'd walk through Hell itself for that smile. "We can like, take a walk."

She took his hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Kurt didn't know how she could stand it. He had no illusions about how he felt. Sure, his fur was soft, but his hands were unnaturally shaped and even *Scott* had shrunk away, the first time he felt them.

He waited until they were out of earshot, heading towards the little grove of trees where Rogue usually hung out.

"I'm not sorry I kissed you," he confessed. "I *am* sorry about my timing. It's shocking. You're still healing from the attack, and you need time."

"Kurt? Are you like, trying to break up with me?"

_Gott, nein..._ "*No*! I didn't even know we were an item... Nein, liebe. I just - need to tell you that you need to take things slowly, that's all. You need a little time to heal and work out which path you want to take in life."

"That one's easy. Like, anywhere that's like, away from *him*..."

"Ja? You're so sure? What if he made you pregnant?"

"You don't get pregnant the first time," Kitty said, repeating something she'd heard as if to reassure herself.

Kurt snorted and rolled his eyes. "Mein Vater owes his life to *that* little lie. Both he and Grossmutter were lucky mein Grossvater was an honourable man. As soon as he realised that *he'd* been lied to as well, he proposed."

Kitty had gone very pale.

"Katzchen? Do you want to sit down?"

She nodded.

Kurt picked a nice tree for them to lean against and sat with her in its shade. Her forehead was still warm, so she wasn't in shock. "If you want to talk, I'll listen."

"He lied to me," she said. "On top of like, everything else... he *lied* to me."

"Perhaps he was lied to, too." Kurt gave her a hug. He could feel her ribs. "It can happen, you know." _Poor Katzchen. So thin... You'll never have to be thin for me, liebe. I'll love you no matter what shape your body is._ "You didn't know. You can't know if he believed the lie himself."

Kitty started crying.

"Shhh... It's all right, liebe. It's okay. Perhaps you'll be lucky. You never know."

She clung to him and wept, babbling about lies and men and how she still hurt, sometimes.

Kurt instantly took off his overshirt and folded it up. "Here," he said. "It's not much, but it can serve as a pillow."

Kitty sniffed and smiled as she took it. "Thanks," Another sniff as she wiped her face. "You know what? I'm not sorry you like, kissed me either."

Kurt couldn't help but grin. In his head, a choir of Angels sang hosannas and hallelujahs. "That's wonderful," he sighed, feeling warm all the way through. Even the Monsters were purring in the back of his head. "I have to warn you, though. If I get to holding you, I'm going to have extreme difficulty letting go."

"I kinda guessed." Kitty was smiling and blushing. "Do you think *you're* brave enough? For one
kiss? 
Each of them reached for the other's chins, barely touching. Each afraid of something shattering the moment, hurting the other. Their lips met in a soft, chaste touch, yet quickly hungered for more.
Tongues flickered out to taste the other, so tentatively. 
Ever so gently, they pulled each other closer. 
She was warm. So warm. And soft, even where her poor bones poked through her skin. Her scent was subtle. Warm flesh and the barest hint of a sweet, floral perfume. Her mouth was sweet, yet slightly tart, with a lingering hint of that morning's toothpaste. 
He could taste her forever. 
When they finally broke apart, Kurt could feel wetness spilling from his eyes. 
Kitty brushed it from his face. So gentle. "It's okay, you silly elf. I just like, needed to come up for like, air."
"You're so beautiful," he whispered. "I can't stay away from you. I want to hold you close and feed you properly, and call you liebchen until the end of my days."
They hugged. Kitty leaning some of her weight on Kurt, even though he was the one now clinging to her. "Was that like, a proposal?"
"More a confession. What you do with it is up to you. It's your life. Your choice. Always."
"I don't think I'm like, ready for any like, huge decisions, okay? I'm still like, on hiatus for a week and a half to see if - youknow."
"You have to wait that long?"
"Yeah. If I'm Late, then I got *another* decision to like, make."
Kurt caught the capital. He remembered that from when Mama found out she was going to have Erika. Papa had got a big, proud grin at the news and joked 'Oops'. Kurt personally doubted that Lance would be proud, but he'd give the boy a chance.
"We'll cross that bridge when it comes to us, eh?" His tail wrapped itself around her waist. "No sense worrying until the opportunity presents itself, ja? You'll only make yourself feel worse."
"You're right. I'll just have to like, have a great time to spite him."
"Does that mean I can sniff your neck, Schatz?" Kurt waggled his eyebrows at her in a suggestive way. 
Kitty giggled. "Like, knock yourself out."
She squealed delightfully when he did a vampire-lunge, and giggled when he nuzzled into her. Ah, her heady aroma. The smell of paradise. 
It started to become laced with _Nacht in der Blute_. Kurt froze, looking up from Kitty in slow dread. 
Hess! 
Kitty untwisted from their clinch, which was a little bit difficult, because of the death-grip he had on her sweater. 
"Oh. Hey Ms Rosa. There's like, no need to worry or anything. Like, PDA's aren't like, illegal or anything."
"P, D, A?"
"Like, Public Displays of Affection. It's like, totally okay to like, kiss and hug and junk."
Hess glared at him. "Sie gehoren mir, kleiner Damon. Erinnern Sie sich an das."
Fight wanted to let all the monsters out at her. _Not in a public place. Stay down. I can handle this._
"I don't think so. You remember what happened the last time you tried."
Hess' lips went into a thin line. Then she left. 
Kurt was trembling.
The minute Ms Rosa was out of earshot, Kitty voiced her thoughts. "Okay, that was like, *weird*... What'd she say to you, Kurt?"

Kurt was still hanging on to her sweater like a drowning man clutching at straws. He was shaking like a leaf and trying to control rapid breathing while staring straight ahead.

_"Oh crud._ He was looking mighty unstable, like a bunch of his Masks were fighting over who was going to be in charge. _*JEAN*!_

Kitty hugged him, smoothing his hair for him as she cooed at him. "It's okay. It's okay. Calm down. It's okay. Whatever it is, it's like, over, okay. We're here. The predator's gone."

He forced himself to let go of her clothing, and stammered out, "Th- th-that-t-t-t-t w-w-w-w-as c-c-c-c-clos-s-s-s-se..." just as the rest of the team wandered over there, looking natural.

"That still you, Kurt?" Kitty asked. "Nobody else coming out?"

"I'm okay. I'm still me. They're going *nuts* in here, though." Kurt pushed himself upright with the help of the tree. He clung to it for support. "I think we should go back to the table now, Katzchen. I think it would be wise."

Kitty stood up and shook the dirt off his overshirt. When she handed it to him, he put it on and had to fight not to try and hide himself in it.

"Flight's pretty vocal," he murmured. "He's screaming the place down to get out of here before the predator comes back."

They formed a knot around him and took him back to the table that they shared. Kurt looked extremely shaken up. His holographic skin had gone rather pale.

"What *happened*?" said Evan, who'd been filching milk and missed the whole thing.

"We just like, had a predator fly-by." "Great, so who do we have to handle, now?" Rogue asked.

"I'm still me," Kurt whispered. "Just - shaken up."

"Did you see who it was?"

"I don't like, get it," said Kitty. "The only persen who was like, close was like, Ms Rosa."

"*Frau* Rosa?" Evan asked. "The German task-mistress?"

Kurt's mouth was moving, but no sound came out. Kitty watched as he mouthed the word, 'Rosafarben'. Then he curled up into a shuddering ball. "...hess..."

"No. *Way*", said Evan. "*Her*?"

"She said I was still hers," Kurt managed. "I'm not her property. I'm not *anyone's* animal. Never." His voice was a whisper, but it was a ferocious hiss.

"Great," Scott muttered. "We can't report her, or she'll blow the whole undercover thing to a billion pieces. If she abducts Kurt *again*, she could blow the whole undercover thing. Our single greatest threat is a *Gym* teacher who's into --" He stopped himself.

Kurt just raised an eyebrow. "Ja?"


"I'm used to it," Kurt sighed. "Besides, you're clinically correct. Verdammt."

Kitty gave him a hug, the memory of their kiss still echoing on her lips. In all technicality, Kurt was right; but in their hearts, at least, he was also wrong.

"So what do we *do*?" she asked. "What *can* we do?"

Scott just shrugged. "I don't know. Stick to the game plan, I guess. She won't strike while there's witnesses around. Anywhere Kurt goes, at least one of us follows."

"Anywhere?" Kurt echoed. His face was turning red.

"Sorry, dude. *Anywhere*."

"Fracture Fourteen: Stimulus and Response"
At least they could make it look natural. Jean could keep tabs on him at all times, with just a little effort and a slightly embarrassing session at the Institute where she got to meet the Masks. Hure tried to feel her up within five seconds of coming forward.

The Archivist's emotionlessness scared her a little, especially in combination with the memories he possessed.

RagDoll only surfaced for a little while. It didn't take much to get to know a catatonic persona. The Perfectionist was the worst for her; criticising everything with demands for impossible flawlessness. He ticked off everything wrong with everyone, and ticked off Jean faster than Hure had.

Kurt made up for that by bringing out das Kinder, whose first words were, "This is a lot like the bad places. Kurt said there were friends here, so I guess it's okay..." And then he proceeded to fidget with everything within reach.

Kitty took to das Kinder in a few minutes and earned his eternal friendship by revealing a supply of lollipops hidden in one of her pockets.

"Jean was right, you *are* unbearably cute."

Das Kinder giggled, grinning around his candy. "Kurt likes you," he said. "He wants to *marry* you..."

Kitty blushed. "That's nice," she said. "But Kurt and I like, need a little time to sort a few things out, okay?"

"I know. But I don't think he told you right."

"He will, sweetie. Give him time."

"Tomorrow?"

Kitty rolled her eyes in that universal way that said, _Kids..._ "Maybe," she giggled. "Aaaaawwwww... Can't I stay a little longer?"

"No, sweetheart. Go on back."

"Five more minutes?"

"No."

"Three more minutes?"

"No."

"One more minute?"

"No."

"Can I hug Kitty g'bye?"

Jean sighed. "Okay. Go on."

Das Kinder wrapped himself around Kitty and murmured in her ear, "*I* like you, too. A lot," before he went back under.

Kurt surfaced and took the opportunity that her neck presented. A deep sniff, a little kiss, and he was busted.

"*Ku-u-uurt!*"

"Vas?" Kurt broke away, cheeky grin plastered all over his face. "How did you know it was me?"

"Let me like, count the ways. Fight's not the cuddly type. Neither's Flight. You keep the Monsters locked up for their own like, protection. Wild One would've like, started grooming me..."

Kurt blushed at that. Wild One was certainly - more outdoorsy than any of his other Masks. And *way* less civilised.

"The Archivist is like, totally neutered. Just like RagDoll," Kitty continued. "The Perfectionist just *wouldn't* - he doesn't like, like *anything*. Hure would've like, grabbed my butt in nothing flat; and das Kinder was just told to go home. That leaves you." She grinned. "Besides, you're like, *obsessed* with my neck."

"Do you mind?"

Now it was her turn to blush. "Like, not *really*..."

"E-eee-easy, stomach," Logan said. "When you two've *quite* finished makin' everyone *sick*..."

Kurt took the hint and put his hands in his pockets with a grin. "That's just about everyone. Except
the Monsters. They're not as indoor- friendly as Wild One was."
Ororo eyed the torn curtains with an expression of surprise. "*Really*?"
"The last one that got out completely trashed a predator's house," said Kurt. "Even got into the attic. It was spectacular."
"I'll *bet* it was," said Evan.
Jean was frowning. "I touched a few of them when RagDoll was out. They didn't seem too violent, then."
"Predators stir them up," Kurt said. "Likewise, anything predator- esque. This place - the Monsters don't like opulence."
Kitty shuddered.
"It's all right, liebe. You actually help them calm down."

All their precautions seemed to work. Hess stayed in the background and fumed to herself as Kurt blithely went through his life - forever accompanied by a friend. Kurt started to relax, and his Masks began to calm down.

Just in time for another upheaval.
Kurt found Kitty crying in his Church. He forgot about his quest for ripe crab-apples and immediately came to her side. "Was ist der Stoff?" he asked.
"I - I (sniff) Oh, God... (gasp) Kurt... I'm Late..."
He had her in a hug before she could blink. "It's all right, liebe. I'm here for you. Cry yourself out. Get rid of the pain. There..." He rocked her gently, holding her close and holding her up at the same time. He waited until she'd come to a stop before he spoke again. "There's lots of things you can do, liebechen. You can tell Lance, and give him a chance to redeem himself. You can keep it a secret from him, and do what you will about the baby. If there is one."
Sniff. "Whaddaya mean 'if'?"
"Ladies can skip, sometimes. Especially if their condition is -er- poor."
"But I'm like, the perfect size and everything. I like, do a special diet to stay that way. I'm like, fine."
Kurt took her hand and guided it to her ribs. "Do you feel your bones?" he asked.
Kitty nodded.
He took her hand to her collarbone. "See how it juts out?"
Nod.
"It shouldn't. Likewise, your ribs shouldn't be seen making a toast rack out of your chest. Your diet's taking you one way, but your genes are working in another. You need to *eat*, liebe. You haven't grown up yet."
"But I'm like a size *eight*. I don' wanna go to size *ten*... I'll be *huge*."
"Katzchen. Kathryn. You don't have to be anything you're not with me. Whatever size you're *supposed* to be - I won't care. As long as you're all *you*, I love you."
Kitty sighed and leaned against his shoulder. "I guess I *am* kinda being like, silly," she acknowledged. "I might be pregnant. If I wanna like, have the kid, I'll like, get huge anyway."
"Enormous," Kurt supplied. "Just ask your Mom and Dad."

"I've like, seen photos. Mom was as big as a barge."
"Scared?"
"Hell yeah."
"Then let's go shopping," Kurt offered her a hand up. "And while we're there, we can get you something to help confront those fears."
"Do I got to?" Kitty cringed. "I'm not sure I wanna know."
"Whatever happens, liebe, you have my support. Always."
Kitty sighed. "Okay. Let's go."
It was, as Kurt kept singing, a magical mystery tour. He got her fabulous-looking clothes that were a size too large on purpose, telling her that she'd better work on growing into them. They stopped by the bookstore, and Kurt purchased something textbook-sized and pink while she was seeking a new Star Trek novel.

They deliberately cruised by Baskin-Robbins and Kurt 'accidentally' ordered her a waffle-cone of Death-by-Chocolate.

He let her have a salad for lunch, but only if she promised to eat both the cheese and the dressing. *And* if she had herself a milkshake to drink.

Kitty had to smile. It did kind of feel good to be pampered like that, and Kurt was determined to see her healthy. She wondered how long it'd be before he convinced her to quit vegetarianism.

Just when her thoughts were going into the calm land of future-with-Kurt, she was reminded of her past-with-Lance by the distinct whiff of eau de Toad.

"Like. Ew." Kitty looked around. "OmyGod. They're *all* here."

Kurt followed her gaze. "Oh. Do you want to tell him?"

Kitty sighed. "Guess I gotta."

"If you want me to piss off..." he offered.

"No, you can like, come with. It like, makes me feel safer."

Kurt grinned. "As you wish, liebchen."

He stayed within her line of sight, yet was able to give her just enough distance at the same time. How he managed to always know what she needed, Kitty didn't know, but she was glad of the ability.

"Lance? We like, need to talk."

"Great," he said. "Let me know when it's real and we can make a date."

The rest of the Brotherhood laughed, except for Tabitha, who kicked Lance in the shins.

"OW! *What*..."

"She *needs* to *talk*," Tabitha snarled. She turned on all her charm in a picosecond and aimed it at Kurt. "*Hi*..."

Kurt was rigidly formal. "Fraulein."

"Fine. Be that way."

"Lance, can we like, talk away from the guys?"

"Ah, whatever you gotta say, you can say it in front of them. My love life's an open fuckin' book anyway..."

Tabitha suckled on the tip of her little finger in a suggestive manner while the rest laughed.

Kurt's holographic image went bright red around his cheeks.

Kitty sighed. She'd get a translation later. "Fine. Whatever. I'm Late, okay?"

Lance looked at her. "Yeah?"

"You didn't get that, did you?" Kitty asked. "I am *Late*. Get it?"

"What, you trying to catch a movie or something?"

Tabitha kicked him again. "You fucking *moron*! She's skipped a fucking *period*, dumbass!"

"Maybe you'd like to borrow the PA," Kurt sarcasmmed. "I'm pretty sure the entire shopping centre didn't quite hear that..."

"Fuck you."

"You wish."

"Okay," said Lance. "So how is this *my* fault? We only did it once. Go after the freakshow, over
there. Everyone knows you and he are doing the wild thing."
Kurt snorted. "News to *me*.*" He stepped forward. "Listen closely, Arschloch; you raped her. She hasn't gone past 'second base' since. It's your fault, so grow up and at least *pretend* you can be responsible for your actions, ja?"
"Bite me, freakboy."
In a flash, Kurt had picked him up by his shirtfront. Kitty could see Fight flickering in and out behind Kurt's eyes. "Try me," he whispered. "I might *like* to." He threw Lance back into his chair.
"*Dude*..." said Todd.
"Awright, awright, awright... *OKAY*... *Fine*. I'll do the right thing. Just meet up with me here in an hour. 'Kay?"
"Fine," said Kitty.
"Fine," said Tabitha.
"*Fine*," said Kurt.
"*FINE*," Lance turned on his heels and stalked off.
Kitty watched the Brotherhood tag on after him. He didn't seem overly concerned about maybe being a father. "You okay, now, Kurt?"
"Ja, I'm keeping Fight on a short leash. I just wanted to scare him a little."
"Good. Last thing we want is like, an emergency bail-out in a *mall*..." she sighed. "So like, what the heck do we *do* for like, a whole *hour*?"
"We could find a chemist's."
"What? Like a drugstore?"
"Ja. Whatever. We still don't know for sure, liebe. I'll buy a test for you."
"Dude..." said Todd.
"Awright, awright, awright... *OKAY*... *Fine*. I'll do the right thing. Just meet up with me here in an hour. 'Kay?"
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"We could find a chemist's."
"What? Like a drugstore?"
"Ja. Whatever. We still don't know for sure, liebe. I'll buy a test for you."
Kitty felt a whole flock of butterflies in her stomach about knowing for certain. "But - it'll look like you --"
"Did the deed? I don't mind. It's for your peace of mind."
Kitty hugged his arm as they wandered drugstore-wards. "Why do you want to like, keep looking after *me*?"
"Isn't it obvious, liebe?"
"I just wanted to like, ask."
"Ah, meine liebe... I love you so much, all that matters is your happiness."
Kitty felt heat filling her face. "You're like, *so* totally sweet."
"Danke."
"So what was Tabitha like, *doing*, anyway."
Kurt cleared his throat. "Um. She was -er- implying that Lance - wasn't that well endowed... I think the vernacular is - 'pindick'."
Kitty had to use both hands to stop her shrieking laughter. "Like, Omy*God*... I can't believe she like, *did* that... In *public*...
"Tabitha's very - earthy," Kurt allowed. "I'm starting to think she's had a lot of -er- experience."
Kitty went quiet. He was talking about his own rapist so darn *casually*... When he had his hologram off, one could still see the remnants of her paint job on him. Most of it had faded, and it was starting to fall out, but the marks lingered.
_All marks linger, I guess_ she thought. _Even the ones no-one can see._
Kitty remembered her own aches and pains south of the equator. She was able to sit normally at last, but if she hit the wrong angle it would spark off the throbbing anew. Lingering marks indeed. Would it hurt forever? Or would she eventually be able to forget?
Kurt bought her his selection for a snack.
"Seafood niblets? *Kurt*..."
"Relax. It's textured vegetable protein. The nearest these things have been to a fish is in the deep fryer."
Kitty giggled and gingerly ate one. "Mmm... Fake..."
"Do you want to catch a movie, later?" he offered "I hear _Monsters Inc_ is still showing. They
have a pretty cool opening short before the show..."
"So how do *you* know that?"
"I - might have seen it a few dozen times..."
"For your little friend, right?" she meant das Kinder.
"Eh. Not exactly. Es ist a good movie."
A paper bag landed in front of her. Kitty looked in it, her face knotting in perplexity.
"Lance, like what--?"
"It's for my half of the abortion. Later." He walked off, trailed by the rest of the Brotherhood. Kurt was sure he heard Lance mutter, "Skanky-assed ho'...
Kurt kept his growl down to subliminal levels. So much for Lance's one chance. He was no gentleman. No gentleman at all.
Poor Kitty was devastated. He scooted up beside her and rested an arm about her shoulders. The paper bag was full of dollar bills of various denominations. How he got it, Kurt figured he was better off trying not to guess. He just packed it up and concealed it in one of the many shopping bags they had with them.
"How could he like, *do* that? In front of *everyone*..."
Kurt sighed. Picking up the pieces again. "It's all right, love. Shhh... He's just an asshole. Leave him and his nastyness behind you. He doesn't matter."
"...guess..." Kitty whimpered. "I'm just like, totally embarrassed."
"You can be strong, liebe. You can forget all about him. As soon as you start feeling better, we can catch a film and forget *all* about the asshole."
"Sounds good to me," Kitty sighed. "An' tomorrow I'll do the test and like, make a decision then."

Lance lit up the second he was out of the mall and found a nice spot to lean against the wall while he settled his nerves. The nerve of them. Demanding he act responsible. Ha!
Well, he showed them. They could just go and do whatever they liked, now. He had nothing more to do with it.
"Got a light, Herr Alvers?"
Lance nearly shit his pants. Rosa!
She was leaning on a corner and holding a cigarette in a little 'ok' sign in her hands. "I know you must have something, ja? Or shall I light mine from yours?"
He handed her his lighter. "Didn't know you smoked, Miz Rosa."
"It's not a common thing," she said. She handed the lighter back. "I only smoke to settle mein nerves on bad days."
"I get *that*," he said. Lately, he'd been having a whole heap of bad days. Tabby was brewing up a thunderstorm's worth of bad news to fling his way. Again. And he didn't have a clue what he'd said *this* time.
"I saw your little altercations in the food court," said Rosa. "You know Fuzzy Blue, ja?"
"You know about him?"
"He and I are old - friends..." Rosa blew a chain of smoke rings. "I was wondering, since you know him, if you know of a place where he goes to be alone."
"What you want him alone for?"
Rosa grinned, smoke leaking from her nose. "Herr Alvers, shall we make a deal?"

Kitty put the cap back on the end of the test wand. It was so nice of Kurt to pick a test that was easy to do. A nice long wand with simple instructions - pee on the felt bit under the cap for five seconds first thing in the morning, then await results. She didn't even have to worry about getting her fingers wet.
Ew. That was like, a totally gross thought.
She handled the wand with TP anyway until she was certain it was dry. Sure, if she wanted to be a Mom, she'd have to handle a lot more than her own pee. She'd cross that bridge when it came to her.
With Kurt at her side, no matter what.
Kitty took the test with her and went out seeking Kurt. She couldn't wait fifteen minutes for the
results to turn up on her own.
Once again, he'd left the mansion, seeking relative solitude. That was okay. She knew where he
hung out. And they could be the first to know. Together.
"Twongngngng..." said Kurt, making rubber-band-flicking motions with his hands. Kitty was already helpless with laughter. "Stopit... You fuzzy sadist... Oh, my ribs... like, *owww*... I'm dying..."

Kurt laughed, also reliving the funniest, most sadistic short he'd ever seen on the screen. It was worth it to see her laughing again. She was so tense about the pregnancy test thing. Still, the longer the thing took, the more accurate it was.

This one was guaranteed to be as accurate as all heck.

Ten more minutes, and maybe they'd know.

In a couple of {Bamf!}s, Kurt 'ported to an apple tree, found an apple, and 'ported back. "Laughter not your thing, liebe? How about an apple?"

"No way, those things are like, tart."

Kurt took a bite. "Tastes pretty sweet to me. And *juicy*..." He held out the apple.

"Deal? What sort of deal?" In order to appear uninterested, Lance inhaled a deep drag.

"You want the little stick of a fraulein. I want Fuzzy Blue. You tell me where he goes to be alone, and I get her for you." She too, took a deep puff. She blew more smoke rings. "You get to be her hero. In a few days, of course. I need time to make her receptive for you."

"Receptive, huh? What makes you think you can do it?"

"I have my methods."

"So how are you gonna get Kitty?"

"They've been spending a lot of time together, ja? It makes sense that they should be together... I'll just get them both. And in a few days, your girl will do *anything* for the man who rescues her."

"Anything, huh?"

"Oh, ja. She will be greatful for the rest of her life. Yours for the rest of her life."

"A few days, huh?"

"Three or four. I will contact you again when she's ready."

"You got a piece of paper?" Lance grinned. "I need to draw a map."

Hess tossed some foodstuffs down into the basement then, wiping her hands clean, made doubly sure she had what she needed to get her demon and the little stick.

Silent shoes. Check.
Odour-eating suit. Check.
Two twenty-foot lengths of rope. Check.
Sacks. Check.
Gags. Check.
Ether. Check.
Map. Check.

She could leave the implements of torture at home. Business first. Fun later.

Hess dumped her stuff in the passenger seat of the van she'd 'liberated' from a dry cleaning company. She'd dump it later under a bridge, making the whole thing look like a joyride, and leaving no clues for the demon's alleged friends as to where he went or who with.

If they would even bother themselves looking for him.

He *was* going to find out, and learn forever, that he belonged to her. She'd *made* him. He was *hers*.

Neither his bodyguards nor that little stick of a girl would be able to stop her. She'd have him once and for all. And maybe have a little fun with the girl, too.
From what she'd heard, the little stick may be having a bud. For all she knew, there was another tiny demon in the bargain.

_Now that,_ she thought as she started the van, _Is what I call a complete set._

Kitty took a deep breath and sighed. The tame squirrel that was raiding Kurt's pockets twitched at her, then scurried away. Kitty reached for Kurt's wrist and stared at the watch.

"Damn it. Like, time's supposed to like, *fly* when you're like, having fun."

"Ah, but not when you're waiting for something important," said Kurt. "Things are getting a little bit desperate. I'm actually thinking of doing some cloud-watching."

Another squirrel darted from the underbrush, picked up an applecore, glared at them, and darted away.

"That was Spot," said Kurt. "He's the skeptic of the tribe."

She schooled herself to stay still. So *tempting* to just bag the demon and get away. Just grab what was hers.

But she'd made a deal, and she would see it through.

There. *There* was the little stick. Once again, Hess was amazed that the walking twig treated the demon like another human. He must hate it, her not acknowledging his true power like that.

Hess would show her, she decided. Show her everything about her fuzzy demon. That little spot where his tail began to depart from his back - the one that turned his knees to jelly every single time.

The hold on his tail that turned him into a wild thing in bed.

The ticklish spot under his dewclaw-toe. Essential in foreplay.

According to what had been said, she didn't know about his athleticism in the sack, either. Hess grinned to herself. That was all her work.

When she'd met him, he had no idea of his true potential, and wept like a child when introduced to his glory. She'd shown him how marvellous his demon's body could feel, and he wept. *Wept*! But he must have changed his mind. He took the book she gave him.

She knew he read it, because the next time they met, he was asking her a hundred questions about its contents. Even though he sounded appalled, she knew he was fascinated. He even spoke of other ladies who 'rented' him for evening play.

What he didn't know - or pretended not to know, was that every time she 'rented' him, she was paying for him on the installment plan.

He was hers.

And after she made her last payment, she took possession of him. It was stunningly easy. One sniff of ether and he went down like a dream. He *wanted* to be with her. That was proof.

And soon, very soon, they would be together again.

Their neat little family.

"Oh look, it's the idiot," drawled Tabby. "What are *you* so happy about?"

"Not that we wanna *know*, or anything," said Todd. "You got a diseased mind, yo."

Lance kept on grinning. "Turns out I might just be getting me a pet Kitty-cat," he bragged.

"Practically for free. It's being set up as we speak."

"If he's talking about what I *think* he's talking about," said Fred. "Those X-geeks are gonna *whomp* ya."

"No they ain't. 'Cause I* get to be the *hero*.*"

"It's official. He's insane," said Pietro.

Lance ignored them, thinking about the exchange, and Rosa's last words.

_Dankeshoen, mein friuend,_ she'd said. _And if I catch you smoking on school grounds, I will pick a body part and extinguish the cigarette on it. We have an understanding?_

Lance decided it'd be safer playing hooky while he had a smoke from now on.
"I can't do it!"
"Of course you can, liebchen."
"I *can't* do it..."
"If mein baby schwester can do it, you can do it."
"I'm like, ambisinister or something. I can't."
"Just leave the words up to me, ja? Concentrate on the hands."

Kitty giggled.
"Slow motion, ja?" Kurt smiled at her. He held out his hands. "One."

Kitty got into position. Their hands met.
"Two."
A different position. Still hardly clapping at all.
"Three."
Yet again. Kitty dared make a little noise this time. It was more of a 'cl' with Kurt's fur.
"Four."
That one was easy. Kitty's hands met in a resounding clap.

Kitty laughed. She hadn't tried to do this sort of thing since she was ten. She hadn't been very good at it then, but somehow, Kurt made it possible. Soon, they were going at warp speed.
"And now the rhyme." Kurt took a breath and played at trying to remember. "My mother, your mother, playing in the yard..."

Kitty burst out laughing and lost it completely. "Du Scheisse!"
"You're learning German!" Kurt beamed. "Gluckwunsche!"
"All I know is how to like, swear at you. Silly Elf."
"It's a start," he said. "Everything has to start somewhere."

{pipip. pipip. pipip. pipip. pipip}
"That thing has an alarm clock?" Kitty asked. She was surprised there was room.
"Oh ja. It even tells the time," He picked up the pregnancy test wand that had lain between them all this time.
"Ew. *Kurt*... I like, *peed* on that."
"I've had three baby sisters, liebe. Pee is the least of mein worries." He looked at the little windows and hummed. "Is it one line or two?"
"One for out, two for in," said Kitty. She didn't want to look.
"Ah. Then it's definitely --mph!"

And there was a cloth over her face. It smelled funny. She gasped, which turned out to be the wrong thing to do. She tried to scream, which wasn't effective. She looked at Kurt. He was already out.

Ohyeah. High metabolism.
Kitty tried to phase free, but that didn't seem to work either. Her concentration kept slipping away. So sleepy. The sound of cicadas filled her ears as darkness enveloped her.

___professor?___
Darkness.
Monsters restless. Feel sick.


Kurt moaned. His mouth felt like it had been shrink-wrapped. Ether. Someone had put him down with Ether. They hadn't been gentle about it.

"Katzchen?" he risked. "Can you hear?"

Kitty moaned too. She blinked, then took stock. "What the--? *Kurt*? Why're we like, tied up?"


"OmyGod. She shorted out our powers!"

"Relax. 'S the ether. Screws up your ability to think right. Gotta wait 'till it wears off."

"Ruhe, bitte..." whimpered the little figure in the corner. "Mistress ist wutend an Ihnen."

"Katzchen, shhh... Your scaring the kind."

"She's got a *kid* down here? Ew."

"She started on *me* when I was *four*," Kurt sighed. "Why should anything be different now?"

Kitty shuddered. "I feel like, totally sick... We have *got* to get outta here."

"Not a problem, fraulein. Did I ever tell you about mein Onkel Wolf?"

"Only about a billion times," Kitty rolled her eyes.

"Okay," she drawled. "Tell me about Uncle Wolf."

Kurt tested his bonds. Once again, his captor had forgotten about the tail. "Onkel Wolfgang's quite a character. Has a very liberated view on what's legal and what isn't. He always said to me, 'Kurt, my lad, anything on the other side of a lock has *got* to be worth getting to'. Of course this lead him into a few disputes with others, so he learned to get out of *er*- any situation he got himself into."

Kitty raised an eyebrow. "This is the same Uncle Wolf who like, tried to lift an entire village's like, food supply, right?"

"You got him. Fortunately we caught him before they did, but dear Onkel Wolf taught me a great many bad habits. To this day, I choose not to play cards, for example." His tail finished working on his wrist shackles. Kurt instantly started on the collar of his neck. Not that it was attached to his harness, he just wanted to get rid of the thing. He sat up. "And of course, Onkel Wolf passed down his skills at escapology. Strictly as a life-saving technique, of course."

"Of course," said Kitty. "Like, hooray for Uncle Wolf."

Kurt hopped down from the table and found the mechanism to lower Kitty. "This is the same Uncle Wolf who like, tried to lift an entire village's like, food supply, right?"

"I know," he said, working on her various buckles. "Have you ever tried to get honey in this town? Ugh."

Kitty bit her lip and shook. "*Damn* you for making me laugh..." Then she started blushing. "Um. Kurt? She like, took our clothes."

"Ja, I kinda noticed. Getting out has priority, I think. Aus Ihnen kommen Sie." He turned away, towards the kid in the corner. She was as naked as they were, and he could see a glint of chain
in the shadows. She was huddled up in a ball and whimpering.

Kitty sat on the table and tried not to feel exposed. It helped that Kurt acted as if everyone had their clothes on, but not by much. She shivered and held herself.

"There now, Madchen... It's okay. You don't have to be afraid. Kitty won't hurt you."

"*I* won't hurt her? *What*?"

"Mistress ist wutend an Ihnen..." she murmured. "Falsche Monsters erhalten nicht eingezogen..."

"I don't see any bad monsters," Kurt said. "Kitty's rather nice when you get used to her. But I can understand. She's terribly ugly, ja?"

"*Ku-urt*!"

The kid giggled a little. Kitty could see her arms move to hide her mouth. This kid had been in for the long haul.

"Now *there's* a beautiful smile," he cooed. "You'll be beating the men off with a stick when you grow up. Friends, now?"

A little nod. "Ja..."

Kurt reached out and stroked her hair. "There's a good little girl. It's all right. I won't touch you anywhere that feels wrong. My name's Kurt. That's Kitty. Do you have a name?"

"Ich bin ein Tuefel," she whispered.

"I see," said Kurt. "We'll just have to give you a name, ja? Would you like a name?"

Shrug.

"We'll work on it together. How old are you, liebe? Seven? Eight?"

"Sev'n an' a half..."

Kitty sorta guessed she spoke English. She certainly understood it.

"Seven and a *half*... Yes. It fits. Gruss Gott, it all fits... Ich bin taurig, meine arme Tochter... I didn't know you were here."

"Tochter?" Kitty quoted.

Kurt took her up in a hug.

Now she could see. Little digigrade legs with two toes. Little tridactyl hands clinging at Kurt's fur. Little pointed ears poking up from indigo curls. A little tail, curling itself around his.

"Oh, my God..." Kitty whispered. _Seven and a half... plus nine months... Take that from sixteen and --_ "You had sex when you were like, *Seven*?"

"It doesn't matter, Katzchen. What matters is that I have to get my daughter *out* of here. No-one should be left for the predators." Cradling the girl in his arms, he took her over to Kitty. "Just start with her hair. She has beautiful hair."

Kitty did. It was soft and beautiful to touch. Long and loose. Kitty would have killed to get hair like that.

"There, you see? Kitty can be gentle. You can trust her."

The girl turned to look at Kitty. She had the most amazing gem-green eyes. Like emeralds. They were frightened and full of tears.

"It's okay, little blue," she whispered. "I'd never hurt you."

Kurt discreetly threw away the collar and leash that the kid had been wearing.

"Now, then, kleine Madchen... Do you know where - 'Mistress' puts the clothes?"

Nod. "Not allowed to go there."

"It's all right. All you have to do is show us where it is. 'Mistress' wouldn't be upset about that. I know her."

The kid hopped down, not at all nervous about being naked with two older kids. Kitty followed after Kurt, still using her arms and hands to guard certain areas and trying not to peek at anyone else's.

There was a closet full of kid's clothes. Hers and Kurt's were at the top of the pile in a hodgepodge. They both looked solidly at the floor while they got dressed.

Kurt picked out a little pink dress for the girl, and ripped a hole in a little pair of panties for her tail.
"There," he said, helping her wriggle into the garments in question. "That should hold you until we get somewhere safe, eh?"

She was feeling the dress and grinning. "Schones hubsches," she giggled.

Kitty, drawn by morbid curiosity, raked her hand through the chaos of clothing. There was stuff for kids of all ages and both genders in there. Even - she picked up a tiny jumpsuit - babies.

"Like, how sick *was* she?"

Kurt snatched the garment from her fingers and sniffed it. He was looking unstable again. *Mighty* unstable.

"Kurt?"

"Madchen? Where's the baby?"

Only then did Kitty realise that someone had cut a hole in the rear of the jumpsuit. For a tail. How many more little Kurts *were* there?

The little girl took Kurt's hand and lead them through the house to another closet. It was locked. Kitty couldn't hear anything from inside. This was getting frightening.

Kurt, still hanging on to the jumpsuit, made short work of the lock, thanks again to Uncle Wolf, and opened the door. He looked like he wanted to be sick. "How long has the baby been here, Madchen?"

Shrug. "Always." She looked into the closet with a sort of weird detachment. "Mistress says he's my big brother. But he's little."

Kitty steeled herself and took a peek over the door. She instantly ran to the bathroom to be sick. Hess had put her own son in a jar and pickled him.

Kurt's son.

[AN: Yes! It's a short chapter! I love the cliffhanger/surprise here ^_^- You're gonna have to review to get more >:) ]
When Kitty came back, Kurt was kneeling on the floor and rocking back and forth with the jar in his arms. He was singing a lullaby in German and crying.

This was scary.

"Kurt?"

"I didn't know. He was born and died and I didn't know."

"Kurt, you're creeping me out, here. You're scaring little Blue."

"Blue's a terrible name. Should call her 'Belle'. It's French for 'beautiful'."

Kitty sighed. "Okay. Fine. You're like, scaring Bluebelle, okay? Can we like, move now?"

Kurt froze. So did Bluebelle.

"Okay, so what's like, up?"

"Hess..."

"*Mistress*..."

Before Kitty could blink, Kurt siezed Bluebelle's arm. "Don't move. Don't make a sound. We can hide up here, and when she goes downstairs, we can move out of here. Come." Kurt moved into the closet with Bluebelle and the jar.

Kitty balked. "Like, no *way*. I am *not* getting in a closet with you and like, a *corpse*.

"...eeeewww..."

Kurt looked into her eyes. "You can be brave, liebe. It's either this, or get found by Hess. Choose."

Kitty manoeuvred herself so that Bluebelle was sitting on her lap, and between her and the dead baby.

"Breathe slowly," Kurt whispered. He was still cradling the jar as if it were a live baby. "She won't hear us, then."

Kitty did her best. She could hear the alcohol in the jar sloshing about. She could feel the dead eyes looking at her. She gripped a broom and focussed on phasing through it.

Outside, Hess was stomping around the house, going about her everyday business, it seemed.

Bluebelle trembled in Kitty's arms.

"Kurt," Kitty hissed. "I can like, phase us downstairs when you need us to."

"Wunderbar," he hissed back. "Now shhh..."

Hess clomped upstairs. Right past their closet.

Hanging on to Bluebelle with one arm, Kitty grabbed hold of Kurt with the other, and concentrated.

They fell gently through the floor/ceiling, and bolted as quietly as they could towards the coat closet near the door.

It was then that Kitty realised the flaw in Kurt's logic.

"Uh. I think I like, saw the remains of your holowatch out there," she whispered. "How the heck are we gonna like, hide three elves?"

Kurt liberated a canvas backpack from a shelf and slid the jar into it. The little jumpsuit followed.

"I'm taking all my children out of here," he whispered. "Even if it *is* to be buried. She will own *nothing* of me." He took down two voluminous coats and dressed Bluebelle in one. "Here. We're going to use these to hide from 'Mistress', okay? It's going to be hot, but don't take it off until Kitty or I say it's safe. Can you do that?"

Bluebelle nodded.

"Sehr gut." He helped her put the backpack on. "You be careful with your brother, okay? Don't lose him or drop him."

"I won't."
Kurt wrapped himself in the other one, and motioned for everyone to be quiet again.
Hess passed by. She opened the cellar door and started down the stairs.
"Now."
Kitty phased them both, and Kurt teleported blind.
They started running, lead by Kurt, and wound up tumbling down a wooded hill, through trees and rocks until they came to a bewildered halt just short of a body of water.
Kurt inhaled, and pointed. "This way. There's a bridge and a walkway. There might be a phone."
"Might be?"
"It feels wrong."
Oh, that was like, *way* helpful. Not.

Kurt huddled under the bridge with Bluebelle while Kitty inspected the phone. He almost cheered when she picked up the receiver.
His heart fell again when he saw the cable come away from the phone.
Kitty hung up, kicked the booth, and frowned at the phone. Apart from the receiver, it looked to be in perfect working order.
He could see she was thinking about something. He watched and held his children close.
Kitty picked up the receiver and dialled the toll-free emergency number. She waited a little while, enough for the phone to connect and start ringing, then hit two numbers repeatedly in a specific pattern. 5, 7, 5, 5, 7, 5.
"Of *course*," he murmured. "The numbers are letters, too. SOS, gescheites Madchen... I knew there was a good reason I love her."
"What's going to happen?" asked Bluebelle.
"Well, liebe, with luck, someone at the Institute's already picked up, and they're working out what Katzchen's saying. Then, they'll contact us and send help. We'll be going to a nice place where no-one *ever* hurts anyone else on purpose. There'll be food there, and pretty clothes for you. And peace for your brother, at last."
"Why is he important?" Bluebelle asked. "He doesn't *do* anything."
"It's because he's dead, and I never knew him... and Hess had him pickled in a jar for eight *years*. Eight years of my worst nightmare. While I knew nothing."
Bluebelle took this all in with an, "Oh."
Kurt had closed his eyes in order to activate his night senses. It was nearing noon. Bad time for Hess to find them.
_Relax, Kurt,_ said Jean's voice in his head. _The Professor and I are scanning. We're on our way._
Kitty hung up from the phone and bolted for the space under the bridge where Kurt and Bluebelle huddled. She tucked herself into a little gap that put something between herself and his tiny son.
"It's all right, liebchen. There's no need to be afraid."
"But it's like, *gross*..." she whimpered. "It's *sick*.
"What Hess did is sick. What I'm doing is rescue."
"It's still like, sick."
Kurt sighed. She'd have to get over it on her own. "He needs a name. He was old enough to have one, but Hess didn't think he was a person, did she? A nice, classical name." His mouth twitched. Oh yes. He had it. "Michael. Yes. He's Michael Wagner." He gave Bluebelle a hug. "Just like you're Bluebelle Wagner."
"Do I have to be dead, too?"
"Nein, liebe. You're special enough on your own. All because you survived. Keep surviving, eh? It's a way to get back at her."
Bluebelle nodded and moved into a hug with her father.
Kurt let his eyes close again. Teleporting three people two miles was a heck of a strain. It'd been a rough jaunt for him. Just a little rest would help. All he had to do was conserve his energy until someone came for them.
So tired.
He held the two most important girls in his life in his arms and drifted into sleep.

Gone. They were gone.
No markings. No trace. Just discarded harnesses.
For all she knew, the little devils were still in the house, hoping that she'd go out hunting for them and they could slip away. Not this time.
They'd been through her mementos. The little thieves. And they'd taken the baby. She should have guessed. They'd take anything.
She found the lingering stink of sulphur and brimstone in the hall closet, where coats were routinely hung to dry in wet weather. Some coats were missing.
So. They thought they could escape.
She was faster than they were. She could find them again, even if they'd gone straight to Hell.
Hess started her car. When she found them, she'd teach them all.
She headed straight for the nearest bridge across the bay. If they were hiding anywhere, they'd be hiding there. Waiting for the night to come and hide them.
When she found them, she'd teach them the true meaning of her mercy. She'd have them *begging* for ether to knock them out. To take the pain away.
Hess found a park, sniffing the air. No sulphur. Maybe they didn't go directly here... maybe they could only travel a limited distance, and that only once. She took the walkway down to the footpath under the bridge. Perhaps Herr Flockig was thinking he was a Troll, today...

Kitty had to stifle a whimper. Ms Rosa. Hess. Whatever her name was. Kurt was sound asleep, and looked like he had a minor nosebleed. Kitty daren't jostle him awake.
Bluebelle had frozen and sorta scooched herself behind Kurt at the same time. Kitty followed suit, not caring about the mud she was getting on her clothes.
Mud, to paraphrase Kurt, was the least of her worries.
She smeared a few lines of the stuff across her face, camouflage style, just in case.
_That's right, you old bat. Keep walking..._
As if in defiance of Kitty's thoughts, she turned. Looked *right* at them.
It was a paralysing moment. Neither Jean nor the Professor had been able to pick her up. Why?
Hess frowned, staring at them, then moved on.
_PROFESSOR!_ Kitty mentally screamed. _Hurry!_
_I didn't see her... Why didn't I see her?_
_Just like, lay on the gas, okay?_ Kitty thought at him. _She went by once. She mightn't go by again..._
_Hang on. We're nearly there. Don't move a muscle._
Easier said than done. Something icky was crawling up her leg. She had to do it, though. Or they'd be right back where they started, and in a heap of extra trouble, besides. Hess wasn't exactly the forgive and forget type.
Oh God... it was going up her pants...
Logan found the scent trail and followed it under the bridge. His nose said the Elf, Half-pint and someone else were there, but his eyes said different. The plant life around the path made an ideal patch of darkness where bridge met earth. He'd have to wait until the bint from hades had gone away, though, before he investigated further.

He picked a relatively comfortable spot and sat himself down, watching the bitch.

She glared at him. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Lookin' fer a coupl'a students that went missing. Said they'd meet me here."

"Obviously, they are playing games with you."

"Don't think so. These are good kids. I'll wait. What're you doing?"

"Looking for missing property."

Logan smirked. A palpable lie for a palpable lie. On any other day, he'd enjoy fencing, but the kids, according to Chuck and Red, were next to panic. "All I see is a dented shoppin' cart, darlin'," he said. "Less that's what'cher missin', I suggest you move on. Try another bridge."

Bitch-lady stalked off. Logan waited until her car departed the scene and he was sure she was gone. He turned back to the dark spot under the bridge and focussed. Elf was notoriously hard to spot in the dark, he knew that. But usually, even Logan could find the dark outline and work from there.

This time, there wasn't even an outline.

*Smelled* like the Elf was right there, but all Logan could see was mud and brickwork. He smelled fresh blood. Logan growled. If the Elf was hurt...

"Waitasecond. The mud just blinked."

Frightened blue eyes stared at him.

"Is she gone?"

"Yeah, she's gone." The brickwork was breathing. Logan squinted. Just here and there, he could see faint outlines of the Elf. "Neat trick he's got. Does he know he's doing it?"

"Um. Kurt's like, out of it. I can only like, feel him, y'know? It like, totally freaked me out when he like, started."

A pair of green, glowing gems were staring at him from the dark. Much like the Elf's eyes, in that they glowed in the dark. All he could really see at this point was a dark shape. "Who's the kid?"

"That's kinda a long story," Kitty allowed. "Can you like, help us? Kurt's like, totally heavy and something like, hairy and creepy wants to like, make friends with my thigh..."

Logan dragged the Elf downhill a little. The half-light made him more visible the instant it touched him. "Don't move a muscle, Half-pint."

Kitty nodded.

He lined up his arm with strict precision. He had to make it quick. This was a once-only thing. {Snikt}. Both Kitty's jeans and the tarantula inside them were instantly sliced.

"Mm!" The little shadow tried to back into the wall.

Logan retracted his claws and backed away in a traditional _I'm harmless_ posture.

Frightened emerald eyes watched him from the dark.

"Hey. Hey. It's okay, Bluebelle. Like, Mr Logan's like, totally friendly. He just like, had to kill that -um- thing that went up my pants."

"Tarantula," Logan supplied, keeping his voice soft and meek. "If I hadn't a killed it, it would've killed her."

Kitty shuddered and looked like she was going to be sick. "Like, *eeewwwww*... Can we go home now?"

"Sure thing. Van's up top. You handle the kid. I've got the Elf."

Kitty nodded. "Right." She sighed. "Soon as we get home, I'm like, *totally* going to collapse in
like, a screaming heap."

Logan scooped up the Elf. Judging by the heft of the boy, he'd been overdoing things again. Probably teleported too far with too many passengers.

Ororo was driving the X-van, while Jean and the Professor nursed what looked to be killer headaches in the back. Which meant that the only other person Kitty could cling to was *Logan*, and he didn't 'do' clinging.

She personally didn't want to go *near* Bluebelle, because of the contents of her backpack. Logan divested Kurt of his coat, then strapped him in. "Okay, kid. You next."

"It's okay, Bluebelle," Kitty said as she buckled herself into her seat. "These people are friends."

Bluebelle nodded and undid the coat. It snagged on the backpack. She then, very carefully, took the backpack off and did a quick calculation, and must have come up with exactly what Kitty was thinking: _Give it to Logan._

She offered it forward. "Hold brother Michael?"

Logan took it with a shocked, "There's a *kid* in this?"

Kitty was too busy shivering to try and tell him. It was all she could do to try and say the word, "don't".

Logan sliced the buckle holding the knapsack closed and flipped it open. His eyes bugged practically out of his skull. Then he did something he'd never done before.

"Sweet mother of God..." he whispered. He put the top back over it and then strapped the whole thing into the seat next to Kurt. Then he spent about a solid minute staring at Bluebelle. "Elf's been a busy boy," he finally said. Then he strapped Bluebelle into the seat next to Kitty.

Kitty finally got a word out. "Go," she said.

Bluebelle fingered the harness nervously as she stared at everyone. She was getting awful squirelly about so many people around, and Kurt being out for the count. She practically jumped out of her skin when the Professor spoke.

"I'm sorry I couldn't warn you about Frau Rosafarben," he said. "It wasn't until Logan was there that I could actually get a handle on her."

"She's a very sick person," Jean managed. She sounded tired. "She's also -er- fractured."

"Like Kurt?" Kitty managed, hugging Bluebelle to help her calm down.

"Not at all like Kurt," said the Professor. "Kurt developed his personas as a survival mechanism, along with an advanced code of ethics about using them. Rosafarben - Hess - whatever she chooses to call herself... she has no such code. Once she makes up her mind about someone, that's it."

Kitty shuddered. "So - why kids? I mean, I can *guess* why she picked on Kurt... and it's like, *sick*.

"She was drawn to the idea of shaping them. Making them into something - 'magnificent'. Her words. Not mine." Everyone was looking slightly green around the gills, except for Bluebelle, who was staring out the front of the van in wonder, flinching a little at each passing car.

Logan spoke, once they were past the halfway point of the bridge. His voice was low and quiet, but it spoke volumes. "It ain't Kurt who's got monsters," he said. "He's just been preyed on by one."

Bluebelle actually spoke. "Are *you* a monster?"

Logan grinned. "No, darlin'. Not at all. I eat monsters for breakfast."

Rogue welcomed Kitty back with the all-but-forgotten pregnancy test wand, and looked like she was glad she wore gloves 24/7. "Ya dropped this. Congrats."

_Congrats?_ Kitty flipped it over and stared at the little indicator windows. Then she started laughing.

Bluebelle, already flighty and scared of everything, hid behind a couch and peeked out at her. Kitty laughed at her, too.

"It's okay, sweetheart. Come on. I'm like, not gonna hurt you. It's okay. It's just... I guess I'm relieved." Slowly, she walked over to where Bluebelle was hiding and showed her the test result. One line. Not two. She didn't have to fret about whether or not she wanted to have Lance's baby.
"See this? It's saying that I'm *not* going to have a baby."
"Is that good?" Bluebelle asked. "Are babies bad?"
"Babies aren't bad," said Kitty. "It's just that I didn't really want to be carrying one that was put there by - a bad man."
"Does that happen?"
"Sometimes."
"How?"
_Oh God..._ "I am like, *not* having like, *that* talk with a kid that's like, hiding behind the couch, okay? You're gonna have to like, come out of hiding for an answer."

Bluebelle crawled over the back of the couch and hunkered next to her. So like her father it was eerie. She was officially Paying Attention.
"You've probably like, seen your Mom and boys -er- doing stuff, right?"
She nodded.

Kitty tried to think through this. She wasn't completely naive, but she'd seen some things that Kitty didn't exactly want to think about. How the hell did one explain the birds and the bees to a Seven-year-old who'd been sexually abused? "You might like, want to talk to some of the grown-ups about this, too. I'm like, not too good at like, explaining things. And it's like, complicated. In your case it's like, *really* complicated. It sorta goes like this..."

What was really unnerving, besides Bluebelle's rapt stare, was that she kept interrupting with the proper names of the parts. That, and Evan dropping by every five seconds to make wise-assed comments.

Kitty got even with him by asking *him* to explain it. He promptly turned as red as a beet and remembered a skating appointment across town.

When she got to the any questions part, Bluebelle didn't seem concerned over the whole making babies thing at all.
"Is Kurt going to go dead?"
"Die," Kitty corrected. "No. He's just really tired, and probably like, starving. He'll be okay soon."
"Did he really put me inside Mistress like you said?"
"Yeah. He did. She made him do it."
"Did he want me to happen?"
_Oh *God*..._ "You'll have to ask him when he wakes up. I don't know. We only like, met you today. I know he's like, really sorry he couldn't rescue you any earlier."
"What's rescue?"

Kitty was relieved to be on a different subject. "It's taking someone out of a bad place and bringing them to a good place."

"Oh." Bluebelle closed her eyes and sniffed deep, her head turning automatically towards the kitchen.
_If she's like, anything like her *Dad*..._ "You want to like, see what's cooking? I can like, show you where the kitchen is, and if we're like, good, I'll bet we can get you a cookie." She stood up and offered her hand.

"What's a cookie?"
Kitty had to grin. "Come on. You're in for a treat."
Kurt was halfway out of bed before his eyes opened to see where the food was.
"*Told* you he'd like, do that," said Kitty.
Bluebelle hid a giggle behind two hands.
He was back in his room. In the Institute. Safe and sound. With a brand-new family. "Liebchen! Schatz! Am I glad to see you... And the food."
"A gigantic economy-size portion of calorie sludge," Kitty pretended to look nauseated. "Like, just what the doctor ordered."
Kurt practically leaped at the tray on his dresser. "Has Bluebelle had any?"
She nodded. "I had some and it was *hot*. Kitty showed me how to blow on it so that I wouldn't burn my tongue. It was *good*! Mistress only ever gave me cold things."
"Mistress isn't here. We are." He picked up a generous spoonful and ate. "Mmmm... wunderbar. You'll find that things are very different here. It's okay to be scared, you know. You don't have to be, but it's okay if you are."
Bluebelle perched herself on the edge of his stool and helped herself to a piece of bread, then laced it with some of the soup.
"Still hungry, ja?"
"*Ja*."
"One thing you have to learn, liebling. It's nice to ask permission, first. For example, you say, 'may I share your soup?'"
"May I share your soup, Kurt?"
"Of course you may. On one condition. You call me 'Papa', or 'Daddy', or 'Dad'. Whichever you like. I'll even let you get away with 'Vater' if you want to be formal."
"I like 'Daddy'," she said. "Does that mean you want me?"
"As a daughter, yes. Not for the things Hess - Mistress - made you do."
"Sehr gut," said Bluebelle, eating her dunked bread.

Dinner was an education. Logan was uptight about two Elves at the table even before anyone sat down. Hank was looking grim, since he'd recently finished up from making Michael 'comfortable' in the Institute's tiny morgue.
Charles had to frown at the thought of what had been going on between Hess and Kurt. Ironic that, of the two, Kurt was far more a responsible adult than Hess was.
Michael had been born weak, since Kurt was far too young at the time to father a healthy child, and mercifully died a little over a month later from the lack of proper medical care. In fact, Hank had found that Bluebelle only survived through a minor miracle or three. She had diminished lung capacity, and was at high risk from 'flus, bronchitis and asthma.
They were going to have to talk about a series of innoculations, and soon. Bluebelle had only survived this far through social isolation. She could catch *anything*, now.
At least Kitty was pleased that the whole thing between her and Lance was over. Charles could feel the palpable relief washing through her like a clear stream. It was worrying that she was ignoring the trouble with Hess until an undefined 'later'.
_Give her time,_ he told himself. _They all need time, right now, to pick up the pieces._
He watched with a smile as Kurt showed his daughter how to use cutlery, and threw mock-scowls at Jamie, who was trying to flirt with her. Bluebelle was nervous around new people, on her guard and almost terminally shy. That was to be expected. She was in a new place with strangers and apparently no rules; as well as being afraid to try and see what the rules were by trial and error.
Then there was what to do about Hess. Charles sipped water in an effort to keep his stomach settled. Kitty's memories had been very clear about what she'd seen, even if she wasn't too sure about what it implied. The children who had been originally wearing those clothes would not have left Hess while they were alive.

He'd counsel the three of them. Kurt, Kitty and Bluebelle. Later. Perhaps tomorrow, while they were discussing the proper arrangements for Michael.

Bluebelle watched the needle go into Daddy's arm with wide eyes as she clung to Kitty. She watched with slightly more horror as Doctor Hank squeezed the liquid in.

"Does it hurt?" she asked. It looked like it hurt.

"Pretty much," said Daddy. "You get used to it as you get older. I'll tell you something, though; I'd much rather get stuck in the arm than die of something nasty but preventable."

Bluebelle nodded. That made sense, and fit right in with what Doctor Hank had been saying about viruses. And the things she'd seen on the video they said they had to show her.

Most of it was yuck.

"I'm afraid I have a rather lot of needles for you, my dear," said Doctor Hank. "And a polio vaccine - it's disgusting."

"Polio's worse," said Kitty. "Like, trust us on this."

The disgusting vaccine came as a droplet on a spoon and was worse than advertised. While Bluebelle was busy making faces at the taste, Doctor Hank put some stuff on her arm and then stuck a needle in.

It *did* hurt, but not that much. Mistress had hurt her worse. Bluebelle couldn't see why everyone had been so uptight about it and everything.

"Brave girl," Daddy cooed.

Kitty finished fishing in her pocket. "Here, this ought to like, help get rid of the taste."

Bluebelle stared at it. It was a circle on a stick, and the circle was multicoloured and covered with a square of plastic. "Vas?"

Daddy liberated one from Kitty's pocket. "You eat them. Like this." He pulled the plastic off and shoved it in his mouth. The stick poked out of his mouth. "Mmm. Sweet."

"Hey!" Kitty glared at Daddy. "I thought we were like, teaching manners."

"Sorry, Schatz. I'll buy you a box when we go shopping, tomorrow."

Bluebelle peeled the thing and followed suit. She grinned around the stick and almost didn't notice the second needle. "Sehr gut."

Doctor Hank mumbled something along the lines of, "Takes after her father..."

Bluebelle poked the dish Kitty had prepared with a fork. "It's green," she said. She risked touching it with her finger. "It's cold."

"It's *salad*," said Kitty, sitting down to a similar one in her place setting. "It's like, *good* for you."

Kurt had to smile. He, too, had an innate distrust of salads. He feigned innocence and gently pushed a bowl of grated cheese in between the two girls.

Kitty glared at him and sighed.

Kurt produced a bottle of salad dressing with the aid of a little prestidigititation. "Remember your new diet, liebe."

Bluebelle applauded.

"*Why* do I have to keep doing this?" Kitty complained. "I'm gonna get *fat*..."

Kurt slapped his forehead. "Ach! I plain forgot... I bought you something. Be right back. Eat the cheese." {Bamf!} He was in his room in a blink and a thought, seeking out the gift he'd got her during that all-too-memorable shopping trip.

He'd left it there, waiting for good news or bad - which Hess, being Hess, had to interrupt.

Kurt took the gift-wrapped package from its hiding place and immediately {Bamf!}ed back
downstairs to find Kitty scattering her salad with cheese and dressing, as ordered.

Bluebelle seemed vastly amused.

"Here, mein geliebtes, a little feel-better present that's long overdue."

"Present?" Bluebelle's eyes were wide.

Of course. She'd never seen anything like this. "Watch, liebchen. Watch and learn..."

Kitty tore at the wrapping paper at one end and eased the gift out. She instantly smiled. "Aha. The return of the pink textbook..." she turned it over. "_Real Gorgeous_ by Kaz Cooke?"

"Read it in good health," said Kurt. "You can skip the chapter on elementary genetics if you think it's too young for you."

Bluebelle absently loaded her fork with cheesy, dressing-dripped salad bits and ate it while Kitty flipped through the book. The look on her face was loaded with suspicion.

"This woman is like, demented," Kitty announced. "Funny, but demented. Like, thanks."

"Sie sind willkommen," Kurt purred. He leaned across the table and sprinkled her plate with cheese and dressing. "Now eat up. It's good for you."

Kitty sighed and tried to pull doe-eyes at him. "I swear, you're like, trying to turn me into some kind of like -- some kind of - of..." she flailed for a word.

"You?" Kurt supplied, attempting to be helpful.

"I was like, thinking of 'blimp'," she said. "But you like, might have a point."

Kurt turned to his staring daughter, "Katzchen has a few image problems bought on by bad society. When you can, it might be an idea for you to read her book, too, ja?"

"What's read?"

"Oh boy," said Kitty. "Your Mom wasn't up to much, was she?"

Bluebelle just looked confused.

"We'll teach you, liebe," Kurt promised. "*After* Katzchen finishes her salad."
Fracture Twenty-One: Damage Control

"Good," said Kitty. "That's it."
"Good *girl*," Kitty gave her a hug. "Did you hear that, Kurt?"
"Yes, I heard," Kurt was grinning, too. "I have the cleverest little girl in the whole world. Unfortunately, I have to call Mama and Papa and play good-news-bad-news." He had the phone to his ear in the traditional attitude of all people waiting for calls to connect. "Ah! It's ringing. I hope I don't wake them up..."
Kitty stared at the sunset's colours in confusion. Waitasecond. *Germany!* Night in Bayville was sometime around dawn in Heirelgart.
"Guten Morgen, Mama! Weckte ich Sie auf? Nein? Wunderbar..." He sat down and immediately tangled himself in the phone cord. "Mama... You remember that summer before I turned eight? When you said a predator got to me? Ja. The 'big cat'... I know you know about the books, Mama. Ja. It was bad business. Well. The thing ist... It turns out I'm responsible for a couple of 'kittens'..." He winced and bit his lip. "Ja. I'm still here. I just thought -- Nein, of course you're not angry. I should have known. Mama? The oldest one died when he was still a baby. He - he was born about a year before his schwester. 'He smiled and breathed a sigh of pure relief. 'Of course you're coming over. Herr Professor has already paid for the tickets. All you have to do is show up at the airport and identify yourself. Ja, ja... He also paid for meine schwesters, too. Es ist ein family crisis. Nein, we're handling arrangements here. You don't need to bring Vater Heigl. I *know* he'd love to baptise them, but you don't have to -- *okay*! You can argue mit the Professor. I'm sure he's already listening in." A big grin. "Hello mein Herr! Isn't this fun? Mama wants Vater Heigl to come."
Somehow, Kurt untangled himself and sat near Kitty and Bluebelle. "But before I let you two argue it out, do you want to talk to Ihre Grossartigtochter? Ja, she's right here. We've been learning to read. Here," He put the 'phone in Bluebelle's hand and helped her hold it to her ear.
"Oma?" she risked. She jumped when the voice on the other end responded. "Magic!" she said.
"Wer sind Sie? Wo sind Sie?" She listened, then said, "Ja, I want to see you. But - nobody can fit through these little holes..."

Bluebelle tried not to scratch at the mask over her face. It was difficult to do. Daddy said there was still a risk she could catch something, since she hadn't had all of her shots, yet. What she did have was just one dress that was in need of a bath, and a pair of panties that were fast threatening to unravel completely.
And she'd only *had* clothes for a day or two.
Ms Munroe had tried to give her a big, ugly T-shirt to wear while her beautiful-pretty dress was 'being washed'. Bluebelle had practically cried the mansion down, convinced that she'd never see it again. Mistress *always* took good things away.
But that was then, as Daddy kept saying. This was now.
Now, she still had her dress on, as well as a brand-new image-thingy just like Daddy's, that made her not scary to people. She still had to be careful, Daddy said, because the image thingy only made her *look* like an ordinary little girl. She still felt like she'd always felt. Fuzzy and soft and very, very different.
It was bad for people to find out she or Daddy were different.
This new place, that Kitty called a 'mall', was fascinating and frightening at the same time. There were so many *strangers*...
Strangers in Mistress' house was bad news. One way or another. Either she had to avoid them at all costs, or they would wind up as another toy in Mistress' basement. For her 'good times'.

Bluebelle clung tight to Daddy, practically climbing his arm every time a stranger came too near. She was so scared.

But Daddy said they had to go here. He said she had to have more clothes, and she didn't like anything that was available.

Kitty was picking out an amazing selection of clothes. Bluebelle hadn't ever seen so many clothes. Not even Mistress had this many.

Mistress collected clothes from her toys.

"Daddy?" Bluebelle risked. "Where did these clothes come from?"

He looked at her and went all sad for a couple of seconds, and then he was back to being all kind and happy. "People make them, liebe. There are factories - places where people go to work - where people make clothes out of big bolts of fabric. They work for money, that *they* use to buy other things for their families."

Bluebelle nodded. Kitty had sort of explained money and shopping at length on the way to the mall. She felt safer knowing that the clothes had never been worn and taken.

She couldn't think of a predator big enough to take that many children.

Mistress was always afraid of getting noticed. She was always careful about her toys. Obsessively careful.

Someone who could take *that* many clothes would have been a - what was Daddy's word? A monster.

But there weren't any monsters here. Just people working to help something called the economy.

"Okay, I think that's like, just about one of everything," Kitty announced. "C'mon Bluebelle. Let's like, try some of this stuff on."

"The pants won't fit until they're adjusted in the back," said Daddy. "Just try the waistband up against her. If it reaches past halfway around, it should fit."

"Like, thanks for the tip. C'mon Bluebelle, let go of your Dad and like, come with me. He can't like, go into the girls' changing rooms."

"Ja," said Daddy. "Es ist illegal."

Bluebelle transferred her death grip to Kitty's arm.

Daddy mouthed, "Very scared," and Kitty nodded.

This was unknown territory, now. Here there be dragons. Bluebelle couldn't help but remember all of Mistress' various houses, where bad and scary things happened in little rooms. This place was full of little rooms. So they were closed with curtains instead of doors with locks. It didn't matter. They were still little rooms.

She was shaking and whimpering by the time Kitty took her into one. Her eyes were starting to tear up.

So frightened...

Kitty put the clothes down and gave her a hug. "Hey. Hey. Shhh... It's okay, 'Belle. Come on. This is just a place where people try out clothes and see if they look good, okay? Nothing bad happens here. It's *fun*. You remember like, playing with some of *my* stuff, right? This is better because most of it'll fit."

Bluebelle took deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

Kitty gently dried her face. "There, now. It's okay to be scared. You just gotta remember that Mistress is like, *not* here, okay?"

Bluebelle nodded.

"Now, in order to try the new stuff *on*, we've got to like, take your dress off, okay?"

"Please don't take it away?"

Kitty frowned. "I'm not gonna take it. You'll get it back. It's just like, easier to see if anything like, fits this way. It's okay."

Her beautiful-pretty dress was folded neatly in a corner away from the curtain, where Bluebelle could watch it at all times.
Of course, her panic about losing things turned out to be pointless, but it took her a few minutes to work that out for herself. She should have accepted it when Kitty told her, but trust didn't come easily.

She'd had seven and a half years of Mistress.
She'd only had a few days of Daddy's world.

Claire couldn't help but intensely examine every girl who looked about ten. Even though this wasn't New York, she had to look. She couldn't give up. It'd been three years and she didn't want to think of her daughter as dead and cold. Neglected in the ground.
Sherrie had to be alive.
Had to be.
Even though Lucien was giving up hope, Claire refused to. This was her baby girl. She couldn't give up on her baby girl.
Even though it was torture to go through the children's department, she had to look, to scour the area for any hint. Any sign. Anything. A whisper here, a word there. All made her eyes dart to the source.
She almost overlooked the trio at the accessories, but the little girl playing with hats caught her attention and made her do a double-take. Made her look hard and stare.
That was Sherrie's dress.
The dress Claire had made for her.
Her favourite dress.
The one she was last seen in.
Oh God.
Her brain turned off and she leaped forward. "SHERRIE!" Claire siezed the little girl and turned her around. "*Sherrie*?"
Frightened green eyes instead of brown.
Dark, almost indigo hair, in curls, instead of sandy-blond hair that hung down straight.

And a very, very pale face. She wore a surgical mask over her nose and mouth.
She wasn't Sherrie.
"Where did you get that dress?"
The girl's jaw moved, but no sound came out.
Claire shook her. "Where did you get that dress!"
She started to cry.
There was a teenage girl. Brunette. Ponytail. She made Claire let the little stranger go with an angry, "Is there a *problem*?"
The girl went to a teenage boy with blue hair in an instant and wept into his shoulder.
"You *scared* her," he said. His accent marked him as German, and he said the words as if it was the worst crime in the world to scare a little girl. "*Why*?"
"That's my daughter's dress," said Claire. "I haven't seen her in three years."
The German boy looked shocked, and clung to the girl all the tighter. He looked close to tears, himself.
The ponytailed girl's face fell. "Oh, no..." she said.
In that instant, Claire knew. It was bad news. "Please?" she begged. "Not Sherrie..."
"Fraulein... Perhaps we should find somewhere quiet to sit together and talk."
Fracture Twenty-Two: Discoveries

Nobody ever went to the ironically misnamed "Good Eatin'" for the food. They went for the high-walled booths that guaranteed privacy and relative solitude from the world outside. 
Regulars knew not to go near the ribs.
Earl had seen just about everything happen in those booths. Wierd, pale writer types who came to nurse a plate of chips and a drink over a bothersome manuscript. Covert, spy-like meetings between two parties plotting against a third for reasons that covered everything from birthday parties to revenge and everything in between. 
Hell, he'd even had real spies, who had the sense not to be obvious about it. 
He'd even found a couple who *definitely* didn't come for the food, if you caught his drift. He had to charge them for staining the upholstry. They came back a year later with a baby, and Earl could do the necessary math. 
This lot, Earl would brag later, was the strangest party that ever came by. 
"I was there," he'd say. "I was there when it started."

Claire had to note how they sat, opposite her in the booth. The pony-tailed valley girl - Kitty - on the inside corner. The little masked stranger - Bluebelle - in the middle. And the blue-haired German boy - Kurt - on the outside. 
A defensive group. 
Claire could understand. She huddled into a corner and let Lucien guard her. She felt so unstable, right now. She needed to feel protected. 
"Stay away from the ribs," Kurt advised. "I made the mistake of ordering them once."
"And I thought you'd eat like, *anything*," said Kitty. 
Bluebelle tried to hide herself behind Kurt whilst sitting down. 
Claire felt like crying. "I'm sorry, sweetie," she said. "I just miss my daughter."
"Do I not know you?" Lucien's French accent still radiated puzzlement. "I have seen you before, non?"
"Probably on the Bayville Expressway."
"Ah! The Highway Boy. Oui. That was some nasty business."
Kurt nodded. 
Hi-my-name-is-Trish turned up at that exact moment to take their orders and chew gum. Everyone stayed away from the ribs. They waited until Hi-my-name-is-Trish was gone before they spoke again. 
"I've had more than my fair share of nasty business, Herr--?"
"Chagny."
"Herr Chagny. There is - a predator - living in Bayville. She may have lived elsewhere when your daughter was taken."
"*She*?" Claire echoed. "This person's a *woman*?"
Kurt more hung his head than nodded. "She started on me when I was four. I don't think I was her first, either." He took a few steadying breaths. "I was her work of art."
"Oh my God..." Claire breathed. 
"Bluebelle is my daughter. I only found her a few days ago. She'd never had clothes before that day."
Lucien hugged her. Claire leaned her head on his shoulder as a 'thank you'. 
He fell silent as Hi-my-name-is-Trish returned with their orders, made sure everything was okay, and then went back to hang on the short-order window and murmur things to Earl. 
"I dressed her from the predator's trophy collection. I just grabbed something that looked like it
"Is my daughter--?" Claire couldn't finish, yet she had to know.
"I don't know. If you have a photo - maybe Bluebelle could recognise her."
Lucien had his wallet open and the photo out in a finger-snap. "Here, petite; do you know this girl?"
"That's my dress," said Bluebelle. Then she nodded. "Mistress had her. Five houses ago. Mistress - played - with her for... a long time. Four months. And then she was gone."
"Did she die?"
Bluebelle shook her head. "She was crying when Mistress took her away. We were friends." She put the photo down and slid it back towards them across the table. "Mistress doesn't like me liking things."
"There's still hope," Kurt said. His voice was low and quiet. "She liked to dump me miles from anywhere and see if I could find my way home. It was a game of hers."
"Merde..."
Kurt helped Bluebelle with her mask, and included a large number of cautions about breathing through her still-covered nose.
Of course. She'd been locked in a basement for seven and a half years... She was probably still being inoculated.
For Sixteen, Kurt was an amazingly responsible father.
"We have to press charges. Report her. Do *something*." Kurt was shaking his head. "Nein. Nein. Please... You have no idea what she can do..."
Kitty put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Somebody has to stop her, Kurt. Someone has to do something."
He was shivering, looking bleak. "I can't. I'd have to face her in court. I can't. She'll hunt me down. She's done it before. She'll do it again. She'll destroy everything I hold dear. Everything. Everyone. Ashes... my fault... my fault..."
Bluebelle hugged him, and he clung to her as if he were drowning.
His shuddering slowed, but he took his sweet time about it.
"Sir," said Lucien. "You have your daughter. You know where she is. You still worry about her, even though you *know* she is alive and well... We do not know where our Sherrie is. We do not know if she is alive. We have not known for three years."
"She's evil," said Kurt.
"That's why we have to stop her," said Claire. "As long as she's free to do whatever she wants - more children are going to be hurt."
Kitty blinked, her eyes jerking open at the phrase. Her movement revealed the little pendant that had been hiding under her shirt. A star of David.
Some phrases just got around.
Kurt siezed a napkin and filched a pen from Kitty. He had the awkwardest grip on a writing implement that she'd ever seen. "Here's my address. And the 'phone number. Ring before you come. I need to speak to mein guardian about this. How to handle - things. There's a lot that my daughter and I - saw. You might not want to hear about it."
"It's also like, difficult to talk about," said Kitty.
"If you don't mind; I'd like to take my daughter home, now."
"So would we," said Claire.
"Shones hubches..." Bluebelle did little pirouettes in the dark. Even though her ensemble was bright, she was still difficult to see in the dark. The only light was from the television, which played something innocuous and ignorable.
Kitty sat with them in the dark. After so much that happened in broad daylight.
Kurt sat sewing up holes in various pants, and looking very domestic and pleased with himself. At least, the bits that the light fell on. The bits of him eclipsed by his own shadow were completely
incredible. Kitty could see the couch through his head.

"Could you like, not *do* that?" she asked.

"Do what?" asked Kurt. "You've not been bothered by mein sewing before..." He bit a thread off and added another pair of pants to the 'done' pile.

"You're going invisible," said Kitty. "I can like, see through half of your head and it's like, creeping me *out*.

"What do you mean 'again'? I've never gone invisible. Es ist impossible."

"Like, just look at yourself, okay? Everywhere it's like, dark? You're like, not *there*."

Kurt half-turned and put his arm into a pool of shadow. It instantly vanished. "*COOL*!"

Obviously, he was unaware of that power.

"Why didn't this happen in Winzeldorf, when I *really* needed it?"

"Uh. Dare I like, *ask* what happened in like, Winzeldorf?"

"Nothing Hessy. I was just nearly burned at the stake."

"That does it," said Kitty. "I'm like, *so* not asking you any questions like that any more. Now can you like, *stop* that?"

Kurt stopped playing now-you-see-it with his hand. "Stop vanishing? I don't know if I can, geliebt. I don't feel any different when I do it... I'll try, though. Let me know if anything happens, okay?"

Kitty watched him close his eyes and concentrate. Absolutely nothing happened. It continued to not happen for minutes on end.

Kurt gave up with a sigh. "I guess I'm stuck like this," he shrugged. "Sorry, Katzchen."

"Great. That's like, one more thing we have to like, worry about."

Kurt turned his hologram on. "Does this still work?"

"Yeah, but like, I like you as you."

"But you *don't* like me vanishing."

"I can like, work on getting used to it."

Kurt turned his hologram off with a grin. "I want you to tell me something..." he turned the TV off and the room was almost completely dark. "How much do you see of me, now?"

"Like, your eyes and your teeth," said Kitty. "It's like having a big blue Cheshire cat in the room."

"Coo-ool..." His grin went even wider. "I can't wait to show the guys *this*..." he laughed an evil laugh.

Kitty reminded herself to try and sell tickets.
Fracture Twenty-Three: The Ties That Bind

[AN: I'm not up to date on the DareDevil, aka Matthew Murdock, so I made his current assistant up out of whole cloth ^_^ Forgive me, fanboys! And gals...]

The blind man turned to face them as they entered the room. Which was odd, because neither Kurt nor Bluebelle made a sound with their fur-padded feet.

"Hello," he said. "You must be Kurt and Bluebelle."

Xavier smiled that ace-up-his-sleeve half-grin he got when revealing another mutant. "This is Matthew Murdock. A lawyer friend of mine. He has what we call an 'invisible' power."

"No-one can tell I'm using it," Mr Murdock translated. "I just appear to be an incredibly uncanny blind man." He held out his hand for Kurt to shake, with unerring aim.

"How do you *do* that?" Kurt asked. He took the hand. Mr Murdock still didn't flinch.

"Hm. Fur. I didn't pick up on that... I have what I call 'radar'. I can feel where a person is. How tall they are, what shape they are. I can even hear heartbeats. You've both got an interesting rhythm to you."

"Er. Thanks. I think..."

Mr Murdock laughed. "It's okay. It's not exactly the most normal of conversations subjects. And it's hell trying to get someone to get their heart checked, I can tell you."

"Try *giving* the heart attacks sometime," said Kurt, settling himself on a chair. "I -uh- look human to everyone else, right now. So does Bluebelle."

"Ah. I *thought* I heard a hologram humming."

"Two holograms," said Bluebelle. She tucked herself into a little ball right beside Kurt and clung to his arm.

Mr Murdock tilted his head. "Heh. Sharon's briefing the Chagnys in the foyer. 'Don't let Mr Murdock's disability unnerve you. It hardly bothers him' Bla blabla blabla bla bla... I have to go through this with every new client."

"Maybe you should print an FAQ," said Kurt. "I think there may be more clients coming into this case."

"Hm! Might be a good idea. Watch this..." He held a finger up to his lips with a smile.

Sharon entered with the Chagnys.

"Hello Sharon. Mr and Mrs Chagny. Have a seat."

"Cut it out, Matt," said Sharon. "They're already spooked. They've seen what one of the kids had for a dog."

"I'll have to have a word with Rahne," said the Professor. "She promised that he'd be tied up, today."

Sharon left the room again and returned with a box full of dolls.

"Right. Now that we're all here, I'd like to get as many details as we can about our -er- predator and her habits. These dolls are for disassociative play, to help Bluebelle explain what happened."

"I guess I should begin," said Kurt. "I've known her longer."

"Take your time," sat Mr Murdock.

Sharon flexed her fingers over the stenograph.

"I knew her as Hess. Here, she calls herself Rosafarben. I'm sure she has other names..."
"Uh. You're family's like, here. They just like, got in. Jamie's showing them around, which should take like, ten minutes at least. They'll like, want something approaching a story pretty soon. Where's Belle gone?"

Kurt closed his eyes and pointed, then mimed sleeping on his free hand.

"So you like, *both* explained to Mr Murdock?"

Nod.

"Ow. You poor sweetie... You can like, relax. I'll like, talk for you."

Kurt smiled. He leaned back and sighed.

"Ah, *there* he is hiding," said Mr Wagner. "Looks like you've had a bad day."

The rest of the troupe followed. Mrs Wagner and their three daughters, Katja, Anja and Erika, all three just about a year apart.

"Yeah," said Kitty, going for a Kurt-esque crack. "And it isn't even like, lunchtime."

Mrs Wagner instantly crouched and stared into Kurt's eyes. "Just remembering the predator is that bad for you?"

Nod.

"Ach... I'm so sorry," she pulled Kurt into a hug. "I never knew it was so bad. I kept waiting for you to talk to me..."

"I'm sorry," Kurt breathed. "I was ashamed."

"And this is Herr and Frau Chagny," Kurt finished. "Their daughter was caught by Hess."

Bluebelle had been listening to Vater Heigl tell bible stories ever since she'd woken up from her nap. She instantly ran into Kurt's arms and began explaining her new knowledge in her usual hushed half-whisper of a speaking voice.

"Johannes," said Papa. "And mein wife is Astrid."

"Lucien," said Mr Chagny. "And this is Claire."

They shook hands. Mama embraced Mrs Chagny with a, "One way or another, we will find her."

Mrs Chagny started crying again.

"...and brother Michael's safe with God already, up in a place called Heaven. Nothing bad *ever* happens there. It sounds so nice and I want to visit, but Vater Heigl laughed at me."

Kurt had to chuckle.

"Now *you're* laughing at me..."

"Bluebelle. Liebchen... It's just that you're so funny. I couldn't help it. Nobody visits Heaven. They go there to stay."

"Oh." Bluebelle thought about this. "That's why people cry. Because they miss them."

"Kluges Kind... That's exactly right."

The children's baptisms were two quiet ceremonies in which both children got a middle name. Kurt had put a lot of thought into Bluebelle's, trying to think of an appropriate saint or biblical figure for her.

Which was why he was smiling so widely as he held her hand and watched Vater Heigl bless her.

"And the name of the child?"

"Bluebelle Madelein Wagner," said Kurt. Madelein was a variant of Magdalen, from Mary Magdalen. Perfect, considering Bluebelle's history, and her hopeful future.

She was more confused than anything else, and couldn't see how water on her head could make God see her more clearly. Or, for that matter, why Michael needed it at all.

Kurt took her aside and told her, "*I* need it. It's a symbolic thing, so I *know* that God will recognise him as one of His children. Baptising mein children is very important to me."

"But Vater Heigl said that *all* innocents go to Heaven - and brother Michael didn't *do* anything, so he has to be innocent..."

"Ja, liebe. I know. Like I said, this is more for me than for him."

Bluebelle shrugged at that, doubtless thinking that the older one got, the stranger one got as well. Michael got his middle name, too; George. His ceremony was a lot quieter than Bluebelle's.
Kurt was more than relieved to see that Michael looked like he was just sleeping. It had been more than disturbing for him to see him in a jar. Like a specimen. Now, he was just a tiny version of Kurt. Laid out and waiting his final resting place.

He was buried that afternoon at Kurt's 'church', near the giant stone Kurt liked to sit on. Holy ground, indeed. It had been officially blessed for the occasion. Later, they would install a little plaque to mark the spot; but for now, flowers and a tiny pinwheel would suffice.

It was a sad thing that all he could offer his son was peace.

But after Hess, peace was the greatest gift of all.

"A friend took the photo," said Kurt. "The drawing is from memory."

Judi looked at it. It was almost photographic quality. That was a face that had etched itself into his mind.

The face of a predator was remarkably pleasant, in both cases. If Judi passed her by on the street, she wouldn't have had a second thought about her. She felt cold at that thought. She'd seen the videotape of Kurt's confession and his daughter Bluebelle's explanation-play.

Chilling stuff. Sickening stuff, especially how the little girl represented herself with a velociraptor figurine.

Judi knew she couldn't broadcast much of it, even *with* a warning about disturbing content. The rest would have to be an appeal to witnesses, and perhaps a linkup through CNN and Interpol to see if there were any other survivors.

The Chagnys leaped at the chance to appeal for help. Their own daughter had been missing for three years.

It was a story people were going to talk about for *years*. This was Puletzer prize stuff; and it had to be handled delicately.
Coffee dripped off of Principal Kelly's TV screen.
"Oh, *GOD*, no!" He knelt in front of it, where his newly-hired Gym teacher's face was being broadcast, nationwide, under the label of 'child abuser'. And she'd seemed so *nice*... So -*normal*... "I'm *ruined*! *Ruined*! God, why does this have to happen to meeeeee... I'm not a bad man... Why? Why?"
He dissolved into hysterics when he found out that one of his students had a seven-year-old daughter by her.

"Scheisse..." Time to change her face, again. Time to move. Hess packed one suitcase of her essentials and left everything else for the police. She knew someone who could help with a new identity. She just had to move quickly.
Such a pity she had to leave her trophies behind.
She'd just have to get new ones.

"What is it? What's wrong?"
"I don't know. We were watching the news and she just started screaming. It's okay, honey. It's just television."
"Make her go away! Make her go away, Daddy..."

There were people hugging her from either side. Oma on her left. Daddy on her right. Bluebelle was grateful for the embrace.
She *knew* it was just a picture, but she was still scared of it.
Mistress had many more faces, but those eyes never changed.
Her eyes, and her cruelty.

"Nightmare, Mommy. Nightmare!"
Mrs Haldsman looked at the woman on the screen and held her six-year-old close. "That's the woman that left you on the highway?"
Toby nodded. "Her face's changed, but I know those eyes. That's Nightmare."
There was a number on the screen. Mrs Haldsman started dialling it.

And in a state orphanage, a little girl who'd never made a noise before started shrieking the place down, pointing at a woman on the TV screen.

"...mmmm... MMmmm!"
Gerald looked over at his wife. He knew something had happened to her as a child, and he knew she didn't like to talk about it. "Francine?"
"Her. It's her... OmyGod, it's *her*!"
"I thought we thought she was dead."
Francine shook her head. "She just went away. She said she'd find me again. She'd hunt me down..."
Gerald picked up the phone and offered it to her. "There's a number you can call to help stop her. Put her away for good."
"C-c-c-c-could you d-d-dial for me? I'm-mm-mm sh-shaking..."

"Yeah, I just saw this woman on TV? I know her. She had a different face, but those eyes just get
"Thank you for calling," said the understanding person on the other end of the line, "It's a very brave thing to do. Do you wish to testify?"
"Is she gonna get the death penalty? Or locked away so deep she's never going to get out?"
"We'll do our best."
"Then hell, yeah. I've been running scared for too long."
"That's also very brave of you. We'll need a few details for our database."
"Sure. Go for it."

"And the number of your party?"
"Er. Current numbers are in the late thousands. That's going to increase."
"Is this for a convention?"
"No. A trial. So far, Eight thousand, nine hundred and twenty people have come forward. That number includes members of the victims' immediate family who want to come along for support." Darrel whistled. "And there's still people ringing the hotline, right? Wow. I saw that on the news. She got to *that* many people?"
"I'm afraid so."
"Have they caught her, yet?"
"I'm not permitted to say."
"Damn. There won't be a hole deep enough to hide her *now*..."

"Hey, is that --"
"Holy *shit*... It's her! That's the sick chick from TV!"
"Get her!"
Hess started to run. _Scheisse! _When she was done finding her new face and name, she was going to *dissect* that little demon. Alive. And his little twig, too.

"And this is the last one for today, Bluebelle," Hank readied the needle.
Bluebelle was pointing at the television. "Mistress," she said. 
Hank looked up. Hess was leading a car chase across the countryside.

"She's ten years old and she matches your daughter's description. Police found her almost three years ago, walking naked along route 66. Apart from her hysteria at seeing this Rosafarben woman, she hasn't said a word in all that time."
Claire nodded. It was hard not to get her hopes up. So far, this was the fifth child that matched Sherrie's description.
The hospital orderly opened the door.
_OmyGod..._ "Sherrie?"
Her eyes were wide and shell-shocked. They looked years older than the rest of her. Like a survivor of the Holocaust. "M-m-mom?" Her voice was so soft. She used to be a loud kid. "D-d-d-daddy?"

"That's the house."
"You're sure."
Kurt nodded. He *knew* this place. He'd felt it when he 'ported out of it. "Jawohl, mein Herr. This is the place." He was glad Bluebelle was at home with the rest of his family. He was glad Kitty was along with him. He needed her near, right now.
They clung tightly to each other as they entered the empty house. It was abandoned.
The TV was still on, following the news of Hess' own capture. A cigarette smouldered a hole in the table. Half a plate of something was swarming with flies.
Everything looked like Hess cleared out in a hurry.
Kurt found the remains of his holowatch, pounded to fragments with a hammer.
The police picked them up and bagged them, after photographing them. Just like they did with the
cigarette butt.
Kurt lead them upstairs, pointing out both the closet with the clothes and the closet where Hess had hidden his son. Photographs were taken, items catalogued and bagged. Rooms explored.
Hess had other prizes. Locks of hair. Milk teeth. Pickled body parts and half-developed, aborted children floating in jars. The collection sent Kurt's masks reeling, screaming to be let out to handle the dangerous situation.
Sparks of memory plagued him. The tile. Blood. Pressure, rotating against a certain spot on his spine, just where his tail began to depart from his back. Hess' laughter. Hure screaming in terror.
He had to go outside to sit down.
Kitty held onto him. "It's okay to be scared," she soothed. "I'm like, terrified and I didn't even like, get anything like, *done* to me."
"Hank did a paternity test," Kurt heard himself say. Anything to change the subject. Flight could be subtle sometimes... "Just in case there's some other mutant out there with blue fur and a tail. Both Michael and Bluebelle are mine. There's no doubt at all."
"As if the physiognomy wasn't like, a dead giveaway," said Kitty. "Like, I could *see* they were yours."
"Ja, I know. But someone was going to ask for proof eventually."
"Idiots," said Kitty.
"I'd rather a bunch of lines than parading around without the hologram, liebe. Wouldn't you?"
"Okay, you like, totally have a point," Kitty leaned over and kissed him near his ear. "I'm sorry."
"I don't know if I'm strong enough, geliebt... Just seeing those things, just now... I almost lost it. The Monsters are still howling. I don't know if I can take the stand and face her."
"I'm gonna do it," said Kitty. "She like, terrifies me, but if it like, helps put her away, I'm gonna like, face her down."
"If you can do it, I can do it, ja? Hank found a good story for my hands. The only trouble ist I can't pronounce it. We've given the name of my 'condition' to Herr Murdock. He should be able to handle it." Kurt sighed. "Ach, I'm so tired, and it hasn't even begun..."
"We'll get through it, sweetie. One day at a time."

The media swarmed. Hess stood proud.
"Frau Hess!"
"Frau Rosafarben!"
"What's your real name?"
"How many children have you abused?"
"Do you know what you've done to these people?"
"How many children have you had by *other* children?"
"Is it true about the collection of body parts?"
"Frau Hess!"
"Frau Hess!"
She struck a pose before the door between her and imprisonment and said. "You will never understand me. Not me, nor mein *art*."
Fracture Twenty-Five: Survivors

Hess had been attacking children for fifteen years. Apparently, Kurt was somewhere in the middle. "Gruss Gott..."

Bluebelle clung to him like a limpet, half-hiding from all the strangers. She, Kitty and Kurt all wore a little tag that marked them as survivors.

There were lots of tags in the crowd.

"I guess it *is* a convention," said Kitty. "Look, there's even booths."

They were full of evidence, one way or another. One set of booths was a series of maps, delineating Hess' strike zones. Kurt could see a cluster of little flags delineating the troupe's tour and the years that Hess stole him.

There were other flags in the surrounding areas for other children, but the same years. Hess liked to have overlapping victims. That was how she managed to get so many.

And this was just those who came forward.

There were photographs of reconstructed faces, waiting for identification. Where one could describe what happened to the child, another could supply a name, either first or last. Some could provide both.

So many people...

He even recognised a few, from the fragments of memory the Archivist let him keep.

More than a few recognised him.

"Is that--?"

"It's him."

"Die Fleidertuefel."

"I remember..."

He gathered a crowd, which frightened Bluebelle. "Please," he said, holding up a hand. "I'm not doing matinee performances any more. Please. Could you give us some room?"

The crowd parted, but followed him into one of the many group conference rooms. Some were older than Kurt, and very few were younger. All were staring at Kurt as if they were trying to figure out something puzzling.

"You've changed," said one.

Kurt made sure the door was shut before he turned off his hologram. Nobody flinched. "It's just an illusion. I'm still my sweet blue fuzzy self."

"So, what's the story for the Outsiders?" asked another.

Kitty raised an eyebrow. She didn't know Kurt had generated a counterculture. All these people knew him, and were prepared to risk perjury to defend him from people less likely to understand.

A motherly type a mere five years Kurt's senior settled herself beside Kitty and took her hand.

"Did she starve you, dear?"

Kitty had to frown. "Is this like, a German thing or what? Why does everyone like, think I'm too thin?"

"Maybe because you are?" suggested the motherly type, whose tag identified her as Marlene. "Us survivors are almost obsessed with maintaining a healthy weight. Hess used to starve us. Kurt's more effected because of his metabolism. Poor boy." She patted Kitty's hand. "We like to feed people."

"Eating's good, too," said Bluebelle in a whisper.

Marlene's attention instantly switched to the girl. "Well, hello... I almost didn't see you hiding there. Did Hess take you away from your Mama und Papa?"

"Mistress *is* my Mutter..." said Bluebelle. Her announcement silenced the entire room. "But Daddy rescued me."
"That's me," said Kurt helpfully. "Apart from the curly hair, she's almost exactly like me."
"Of course she takes after her father," said another survivor. "No-one on this Earth would want to
take after *her*.'"
There was a chorus of agreeing growls.
"Well, perhaps with an axe, ja?"
Another chorus, "Oh, *ja*..." and a round of wicked laughter.
Kurt turned his hologram back on and they went out in search of sandwiches and coffeeklatch-
esque talk.
That was when Kitty, tagging along behind what she thought of as the Heirelgart clique, noticed
something about the survivors.
They all had something 'wrong' with them.
Some walked with a limp. More than a few wore thick glasses. At least five wore a hearing aid.
Some had visible birthmarks.
Anything that made a person stare, or quickly look away, or both... these people had the lot.
One even had an artificial leg.
According to Marlene, Hess had 'noticed' Kurt when he was just beginning as a tumbler and high-
wire acrobat, at age three. It had taken her a year to track down someone with enough of a lack of
moral to 'sell' him to her.
Marlene had been introduced to him shortly after he'd begun to fracture, when Hess claimed he'd
been 'broken in' and quickly found the kind, gentle boy under the demonic skin. In fact, he'd been
responsible for more escapes than any of the other survivors alone.
No-one mentioned what happened when they got caught.
Quite a few people had scars.

Kitty listened to them chatter about this or that in the mountains of the Schwarzwald. Sometimes in
German, sometimes in English. She ate whatever Kurt put in front of her and shared whatever
Bluebelle looked interested in.
Inside, her head was whirling.
Hess picked on the visibly different.
Hess picked on her as well as Kurt.
Did that mean that *she* looked like a freak?
All because she tried to stay a size ten?
Kitty shuddered and stared at her hands. She heard Kurt's voice in her head. _Do you see your poor
bones? Your lovely skin is stretched so tight... Eat a little more, Liebling. It won't hurt you._
She picked up the dollop of cream she'd put aside with her fork and surrupticiously ate it. Though
she couldn't feel it going immediately to her hips, she couldn't feel it hurting her, either.
_Maybe I could like, start eating meat_... she thought. _As long as it's like, kosher._
She'd only gone vegetarian in the beginning to avoid the whole 'kosher' thing; where people either
refused to stock kosher meals or looked at her funny for suggesting them in the first place.
Vegetarian was just easier. Then she'd started receiving compliments about how 'fantastic' she was
looking, and how she could be a supermodel one day, and it all went to her head.
And Vegetarianism was way more popular than Judaeism as a lifestyle choice.
It had become 'thin equals love'. Mom worried about her. Dad got incredibly more protective. Her
friends squealed about how she looked and demanded to know her secret.
There was only one guy who ever wanted to feed her.
Kurt.
He was the one who loved her, and he wanted her to be fat. No. He wanted her to be *healthy*.
Everything he'd ever given her was nutritious *and* tempting, even if it did contain fats of one kind
or another.
Kurt seemed to think she needed fats, but he did provide an otherwise balanced diet. Including an
amazing array of meat substitutes.
Kitty stole a glance at him and smiled in return to his pleased grin and lovesick gaze.
_What the hell. I can like, work on fitting into my new wardrobe for him._

Every residence had its clique. A few overlapped here and there, but largely, Hess had a different set of victims for every move.
They never spoke about what they’d been through to each other. It was difficult to talk about. But they shared it anyway.
The kids got over their shyness and eventually played amongst themselves. All the younger, newer survivors simply shrugged off Bluebelle's hologram as something else that happened but people didn't talk about. They remembered her as a scary blue monster-girl, but also accepted her more human illusion.

Kurt watched with a smile as they played a variant of peekaboo amongst the furniture.

All the kids were hiding, peeking out periodically to see if anyone was looking for them. If two kids 'found' each other, they'd dive back with little shrieks before scurrying towards another hiding place and starting again.

Giggling abounded.

Kurt felt warm. It was immensely calming to watch them play. To watch Bluebelle being accepted. He remembered a similar game between himself and the other children of the village; his favourite way of making friends as soon as he realised he was different.

He used to hide-and-peek, too. Being obvious about it so that others would become curious enough to come close. Then he'd pretend to be scared of *them*, so that they didn't have to be frightened of him. They were amused, instead. But laughter was always better than screaming.

Bluebelle zipped behind him and, laughing behind a free hand, used him as a hiding place. That little gesture would stay with her for a long time. A lingering non-scar of Hess' years of torture.

At least she was playing.
The pre-trial had demanded that only the survivors come to court. There were still people standing in the aisles, and crowding the rails of the upper gallery.

They all stared at Hess.

Lengthy research revealed that Hess was her true name. She used it, on and off, at various places where no-one had heard of her. She had a dozen other identities, at least. Both her nomadic nature and her personal habits ensured that everyone knew who she was.

Kitty, knowing that the bailiffs would keep her in her seat, watched Mr Murdock. She knew he had a mutant power to see without seeing, so his peculiar gavotte was for appearance's sake only.

After being lead to the desk, he set up his papers with precision usually reserved for people with OCD. Then he got up and, stick in hand, felt out the dimensions of the court.

_The things we do to look normal..._

There was a solid barrier of adults between Hess and any children, four rows deep. The first row was made up almost entirely of men.

Hess just sat in her place and smiled.

There was a lot of formal blather about who did what to whom before the defence moved to rule Hess incompetant to face trial. On the grounds of insanity. Her lawyer claimed that Hess, too, had MPD.

The court filled with a roar of outrage.

It took ten minutes to get everyone to calm down enough for the court to be heard.

Mr Murdock stood up. "Your honour, I'd like to provide a small demonstration, if you will."

"Proceed," said the Judge.

"How many survivors present currently have Multiple Personality Disorder?"

A forest of hands went up. Kurt's was amongst the multitude.

"Keep your hand raised if you are perfectly capable of acting as responsible as any other member of society."

No hands went down.

"Just out of interest, your honour, how many hands are raised?"

"Let the record show that at least three hundred people afflicted with MPD here in this court consider themselves responsible for their own actions."

"I think that's pretty much blown Frau Hess' argument out of the water," said Mr Murdock.

The next argument in the case was that Hess was arrested under a mistaken identity, which was also blown to bits by some thousand-odd depositions from her victims about who, exactly, she was.

Thirdly, the defence tried to move that the survivors were too mentally unstable to stand questioning at trial, let alone with nothing between them and Hess but a few pieces of furniture. Mr Murdock kindly pointed out that all of the survivors were currently in the court, and only a few of the youngest ones were actively crying.

He couldn't tell that Bluebelle was shaking like a leaf.

Nevertheless, he requested that those who didn't feel brave enough to withstand personal testimony submit one by video.

The defence knuckled under and a date was set.

Evidence was still being gathered from her numerous homes. Bodies being identified, and so forth; so Hess wouldn't be facing trial for a while.

That gave everyone plenty of time to make up their minds.

Hess gave an interview to the media. It was not as exclusive as Kurt's, but it was certainly insane. She claimed she was an artist, taking the unworthy from the world and showing them their true
nature. Those who passed her tests were allowed to survive. Those who failed her - well, there were more than enough bones in her past homes, as well as her trophies - to testify to what happened to the 'failures'.

She repeatedly referred to Kurt and Bluebelle as her 'pets' or her 'property'. Once, she called Bluebelle a 'whelp' that he 'sired'.

Kurt turned her and her ranting off. No-one objected.

Jamie looked up from his book and saw the little face vanish behind the doorway again. He had to smile. Bluebelle *was* kinda cute, despite the fact that she was both a girl and only seven years old. He wanted to take her out for ice cream. Maybe even a movie.

He ducked behind his chair before she peeked again, leaving his book on the arm.

She was a lot scared of people in general and him in particular. As far as he understood things, his new-found non-hatred of girls as a species had caused a couple of his clones to try something. Details were unspecified, but after Kurt, Scott, Ray, Roberto, the Professor *and* Logan had come by to tell him to keep his duplicates "under control" he got the idea that one or a couple of him had kinda scared her.

More than a bit.

Jamie risked a peek. Bluebelle was peeking back from behind a potted Aspidistra, her eyes sparkling. He instantly hid and he heard Bluebelle giggle. He had to stifle a snicker himself.

It was working. She was getting more confident.

He peeked again, and found her looking back over the edge of a couch. This time, they both giggled as they hid again.

Three potplants and a wing chair later, she was crouched on his chair and staring at the pages of his book with a confused and worried frown on her holographic face.

"Hello," he risked, voice barely above a whisper.

The effect was electric. Bluebelle jumped back with a squeak, dropped the book, and bolted clear across the room for the safety of an ottoman for cover.

Jamie felt like tearing out his hair. _Stupid, stupid, *STUPID*! How dumb can I *get*? I should have waited until she saw me..._ Only his stupid lame mutant alleged 'power' stopped people beating up on him for being such a dumbass. It still didn't stop Ray playing 'dunk the squirt' in the boys' bathroom if Jamie 'got annoying', and he got it worse if he tattled.

Jamie sighed. What was he going to do *now*?

He risked a peek. He could see the edge of Bluebelle's foot. Still behind the ottoman. He hid and counted silently to twenty. He had an idea.

He risked a little peek out from behind the other side of his chair, through the foliage of another potplant. She was watching his chair. Slowly, carefully, he crept out from behind his usual side and reached for the book. Then he 'noticed' Bluebelle watching and retreated behind his chair with a whimper.

Jamie started counting to twenty again. He got up to fifteen before her face emerged around the edge of the chair. He shrank away. "You're not gonna hurt me, are you?" he asked.

Her hand hid a smile. "No," she giggled.

"You're sure?"

This time, it was a little chuckle. "Yes..."

"It's only 'cause you're awful pretty," he said. "Dad always said pretty girls'd only hurt me."

Actually, that was a lie. Dad never said much, even when he was sober. When he *did* say something, it was usually to give him so many chores that Jamie often wished there was more of him.

On the day it finally came true, Dad went kind of nuts, and Professor Xavier and Ms Munroe had picked him and a dozen of his clones up from the roadside, where they were huddled together for warmth. He'd really picked up most of his wisdom from television and movies, and made up a Pretend Dad who was wise and gentle and kind and gave good advice. It helped keep the nightmares away, sometimes.

Bluebelle covered her mouth with both hands and shrank back to where she'd come from.
Jamie risked a peek. She was sorta curled up and trying not to giggle, her holographic face was pink. Her eyes found him and she made a kind of mask over her mouth with both hands.

"If I come out," he hazarded, "are you gonna run away?"

Bluebelle stared at him. Her face dropped, and then her hands did. She looked confused.

"Only - nobody wants to play with me, here. I'm kinda lonely...

Her voice was real quiet and soft, like she was scared of making any kind of noise. "I won't run away."

"Promise?"

"Well..." Bluebelle scratched her arm. "I can *try*..."

That was good enough for him. Jamie grinned. He emerged by degrees. "I'm sorry about my duplicates. Despite what everyone thinks, we don't share thoughts or anything. I have no idea what they're doing if I can't see them."

"Oh," Bluebelle was looking at the book again. "How can you *read* this? There's no pictures. You can't see what's happening."

"You sorta imagine what's happening," Jamie said. "Like a TV inside your head."

Bluebelle was frowning. "Show me?"

Kurt relaxed the instant he heard Bluebelle laughing. She was safe. Someone was reading to her. Jamie. But he thought Bluebelle was *frightened* of Jamie after a tickle-fight with about thirteen of him... He listened, creeping closer.

Bluebelle seemed to be laughing at the voices he was doing than the actual story.

"...it's such a big bag," said Malicia calmly, pulling herself through the trapdoor and dusting herself off.

"Kieth sighed. 'How much did you give them?'"

Kurt grinned. Okay, he was kinda funny when he did voices.

"'Lots. But they should be all right if they don't take too much of the antidote.'"

"'What did you give them for the antidote?'"

"'Cascara.'"

Bluebelle fell into fits of laughter as Kurt rounded the doorway. He could see her on the carpet, both hands hiding her mouth, and squirming with delight.

"Get a room," said Kurt. He grinned.

"Daddy!" Bluebelle ran into his arms.

Jamie just kind of cringed.

"Ororo sent me to get to you two. Dinner's on."

"Whew," said Jamie.
Fracture Twenty-Seven: Making Friends

"When'll you come back?"
"Well, if I can stay out of detention, around four."
"But that's for*ever*..."
Daddy dropped into a crouch. "It's okay, liebe. You still have all the grown-ups to talk to."
Bluebelle whimpered. "But you'll be *gone*," she protested. "You mightn't come back."
"That won't happen. Not with your Oma and Opa around. They'd stomp on anyone who tried."
Bluebelle bit her lip.
"Something wrong?"
"Oma and Opa talk, sometimes, but whenever I go to listen, they stop... Is it because of Mistress?"
"I think it's because of Mistress and I. There's been - a long time without speaking. I guess I got
used to staying quiet." He kissed her on the forehead. "Talk to them, eh? See if you can make them
feel better."
"I'll try," she said. She was new to the concept of family, let alone an extended family with aunts
and grandparents. She kept wondering what they'd do if she upset them. But she had to try, because
maybe they were nice like Daddy.

"And you didn't tell me."
"Johannes, he needed to *heal*. I thought he'd talk with us when he felt he was safe enough."
Astrid held her hands to her eyes. "Dear God, I thought it was just a few times. I *swear* I didn't
know that Jakob Weiss was - was - *renting* him..."
Johannes held her tight while she sobbed, rocking her gently. Three years, nearly four. This
monster had a hold on their son for three years... And he'd known nothing.
But then, Astrid hadn't known anything until the last days. He should have suspected when he
found her weeping after she'd freshened up his bed. He'd just thought she was upset that he was
missing, and gone out to search the woods for any sign of him.
Nothing was said, because they felt guilty.
And he felt guilty, too.
Because he'd *let* a monster get near their beautiful boy.
Their little boy who had a dead son and daughter who was almost half his age.
He should have found a nice girl. He should have had dates. He should have gone courting,
proposed, and got married before he had any children. Yet he'd accepted two little bastards bred by
rape, and loved them.
__I knew he was special the minute I picked him up,__ Johannes thought all the way back to the day
he'd found Kurt floating down the stream. He'd thought someone would have had to be insane to
abandon a baby to the elements. Then he saw the blue fur. He and Astrid had been praying for a
child of their own, and they got one. When he saw Kurt's tiny tridactyl hand he *knew*, no-one
would try to take him from them.
No, he'd *assumed* no-one would take him, because of how he looked. In the end, it all came
down to judging him by his appearance, the same way everyone else did. The only difference was
that they loved him.
Because they loved him, they lied, telling him for years that he'd been abandoned on their back
doorstep. It was a kinder thing than the truth, that some cruel soul had thrown him into the water with
nothing on but a piece of oilcloth.
He'd found out - Lord knew how, but sometime after Christmas, he'd just sat down and said, "I
know you lied to me about how I was found. And I know why. I know some of the truth, but - I
wish I didn't." And no more was said.
Kurt always *was* quiet about the things that hurt him. The most he and Astrid could do was comfort him until he felt well enough to talk. And if he wasn't cut, or nursing a wound, no-one would ever know he was hurt. He'd only ever answer a direct yes-or-no question.

"...excuse me..."

Johannes looked at the source of the little voice. Kurt's daughter. His granddaughter. She held a very familiar-looking paper bundle. Astrid stared at her, looking bleak.

"Ja?" Johannes prompted. "Something we can help you with?"

"Daddy forgot to brush me down, this morning," she murmured. Belle always murmured, or whispered. Speaking at normal volume was her equivalent of a shout. "I can't get my back. Will you help?"

He could tell at once that she was lying. Kurt wouldn't forget something so calming on a day that he had to upset her by leaving her behind. Johannes could guess why she was doing it, though. Because He and Astrid had kept their distance from her, and she was scared of her aunts. She had to start somewhere, and this was what she came up with.

Bluebelle offered the package and Astrid accepted it.

"Ha," Astrid unfolded the paper surrounding it. "Papa's brushes."

"Nein," corrected Bluebelle, "*Opa's* brushes." She backed off half a pace, then quickly returned. She'd expected to be hit.

Johannes made a space between them and patted the empty spot in invitation. "Gekommen, Liebe. Sit. We'll brush you."

"Brings back old days," Astrid smiled. She uncoupled the brushes and felt them.

Bluebelle skinned out of her dress and perched in the empty spot. "Daddy always lets me brush the bits inside my underwear," she said. "He says he doesn't want to make me feel bad."

It was easy to hate what had made her; easy to feel anger because of what had happened. It was harder to aim it at her. She was a beautiful little girl.

She had such a gentle touch, as if she were afraid of hurting the world, yet she clung to people and things for protection.

Astrid took up the soft brush and started 'working up a polish', just like her father had.

Johannes could almost see Bluebelle shinning from the inside out, just like Kurt had.

Surprise grandchildren weren't *too* bad, he decided. Kurt had certainly given them more than enough grey hairs to look the part.

Snuggled into Astrid's arms, Bluebelle began to purr.

She'd almost fallen asleep when Oma and Opa helped her back into her dress. This 'polishing' stuff felt so nice. So comfortable.

And, to top things off, Oma and Opa were talking to her at last, telling her stories from the time when Daddy was a little boy, and the things he got up to. They were funny stories.

"There," Oma announced, running the soft brush one last time across Bluebelle's face. "Shiny as a new coin."

That could happen?

She leaped off the chair with a jubilant, "I wanna see!"

"Ooops," said Opa. "You moved. You went and shook the shine off."

Bluebelle froze. "I did?"

Oma was smiling. "Ja, you did."

"Is that bad?"

Oma and Opa laughed. "Nein, liebe. Not at all."

She leaped back into their arms. "Shine me again? So I look nice for Daddy?"

Kurt made it all the way through the day without getting a detention, either by accident or the designs of others. He was back to temporary teachers in Gym, and had to do the 'humble tumbler' bit. Blah blah blah, phooey.

Principal Kelly was nearing another psychological breakdown, according to rumours. Which meant
that the Brotherhood had to fill his car with live chickens again. One of the baby ones had imprinted
on him and decided to follow him around for the rest of the day.
Kitty thought it was cute and called it Mr Peeper.
Scott said he'd make them walk if it messed in his car.
They solved that problem by improvising a nest/carrier out of a paper bag and a bunch of napkins.
Mr Peeper hadn't liked losing sight of its 'Mom'.
Kurt let the little chick out as soon as he was inside. It followed him, merrily chirping all the way,
happy that 'Mom' was back.
"Elf," sighed Logan. "There *is* a 'no pets' rule, ya know."
"Sorry Logan," Scott sighed. "It thinks he's it's Mom."
Rogue started sniggering.
"They were going to hand them out as part of Sex Ed in biology, tomorrow, anyway," said Kurt.
"You know, responsible parenting and all that?"
"Like *you* need the practice..." Logan rumbled.
Kurt turned his hologram off. Mr Peeper seemed completely unaffected. "I guess birds don't see
holograms," he said. "Where's Bluebelle? I should have been flying-tackled by now..."
"She's in the Library with your folks." Logan glared at the floor. Apparently, Mr Peeper had done
what came naturally to all small creatures in general and birds in particular. "You're cleanin' that up."
Kurt already had the tissue out of his pocket. "Jawohl."
He found them in the Library, still. Mama and Papa talking, Bluebelle lying across them and being
very, very still.
"What's happening here?" he asked.
"I'm trying not to shake the shine off," said Bluebelle.
Kurt nodded. "Aha." He dearly hoped she wouldn't be upset when she found out it was a myth. "I
should have known. You can move, now, liebe. I've seen how shiny you are."
Bluebelle instantly ran towards him and hugged the stuffing out of him. Then she saw Mr Peeper.
"What's *that*?"
Kurt sighed. He was never going to live this down. "That is a baby chicken. Kitty's started calling it
Mr Peeper. It thinks I'm it's Mama."
There was a chorus of giggles. Not only from Bluebelle and Mama, but all four of his sisters.
They'd followed him for the spectacle.
"Wunderbar," Kurt sarcasted.
"Ach! This is turning into a soap opera..." said Papa.
"I can understand the confusion," Kurt grinned a little. "The *how* I found out is even more confusing than the *what* I found out." He gave Kitty a squeeze, and smiled when he didn't instantly find a bone. She was starting to fill out at long last. Kurt surrendered to temptation and sampled her neck with a little purr.

Kitty squealed and giggled. "*Ku-u-urt*..."

Mama raised an eyebrow. "I trust you're not working on any *more* grandchildren for us?"

"*Mama*..." Kurt blushed. "Katzchen's still healing from Lance."

"There goes the soap opera again," said Papa.

"*Jo*hannes..." chided Mama. "Perhaps it would be better if you started from the beginning. Put it in chronological order for us, ja?"

Kurt sighed. "It started when I was four years old..."

His audience had gone pale. Mr Peeper had fallen asleep in its shoebox nest. Bluebelle and Kitty clung to him, both for different reasons. Katja and Anja bracketed Erika in a protective embrace. Rogue sat huddled into a little ball on the floor.

"I don't always remember everything that she did," he said. "The Archivist does that. He tries to protect me from the Bad Times. It was never your fault. I tried to make it that way. Besides, Hess promised me - if I told... she'd destroy everything I loved. I didn't want her to hurt you as well."

Mama and Papa held each other tight. Mama was crying again.

"Mein armer Junge... Mein armes Baby..." Mama murmured.

Kurt held Kitty and Bluebelle close. There was still more. "Also, I - I guess I didn't want you to pity me. You were the only people in my entire life who didn't pity me. I don't need - I never wanted--" his voice stopped working, clogged up with emotion.

He hated pity.

He hated it when people felt sorry for him. Included him out of a sense of guilt. It was just as bad as despising him because of how he looked. He could deal with hate.

Pity burned.

"I never pitied you," said Papa. "I'm not going to start now."

"Me neither," said Mama. She and Papa crossed the room to embrace him. "Wir lieben Sie."

Kurt began to purr. Family group hugs were the best.

"Any other little surprises, liebe?" Mama asked.

Well... it *was* dark out. "Turn off the lights," he grinned.

"Holy crap!"

Evan started running. That shriek had been Rogue's. Aunty O and the Professor would go *nuts* if he let anything happen to her. He was her back-up.

"What's up?" he asked as soon as he hit the scene. All of K-man's family was there, and Kitty, but the K-man was nowhere to be seen.

Rogue was pointing at a patch of empty air. "K-k-k-kurt..."

"Ja?" said the patch of empty air. "Was ist der Stoff?"

"Evans's jaw fell open. "K-man?"

"Right here," said his disembodied voice.

Now that he could focus, he could pick out two glowing yellow lights without any visible means of support. They were around Kurt's eye-line, and, yes, they blinked.

Kitty's voice dripped sarcasm. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the amazing Nightcrawler. The
only guy in the world who can like, show off when he's like, invisible."
"COOL!"
"That's what *I* said," said Kurt. "It only works in the dark. I can't help it."
Jamie appeared from the other end of the corridor. "What's cool?"
"Check it out," said Evan. "K-man can go invisible."
"Whoah!" Jamie was there in a second. "Where is he?"
Evan found the light switch. {click} "Now you see him," {click} "Now you don't."
"*WOW!*"
Ray found his way down the hall, too. "What's up with you, retard? Brain finally shrink to match
the rest of ya?"
"Kurt's *invisible*."
"Yeah, right. *Sure*. You asking for a dunking or what?"
"Cool it, Ray," said Evan. "Jamie's telling the truth. See for yourself."
Ray evidently decided to humour them. "If this is just some dumb trick," he began, "don't think I
can't whup *both* your asses into--" He looked in the library. "Awright, where is he?"
This time, Kurt flicked the switch. {click} "Boo."
"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" Ray backpedalled so fast he knocked over
some statuary before falling flat on his ass. Unfortunately, he also fired an energy bolt that knocked
out the lights.
Kurt, now invisible again, sighed. "Ach. *Wunderbar*. I can just see us trying to explain this to
Logan."
"Explain *what* to Logan?" said Logan. "Where's the Elf?"
"Itwasanaccident!" Chorused Jamie and Ray.
"I'm right here," said Kurt. "See the eyes near the Aspidestra? Das ist me."
"You're being cute, ain't ya?" said Logan. "Knock it off."
"Sorry. Can't. I'm stuck like this in the dark."
"Joy," Logan stalked off.
"Damn," said Evan. "*Nothing* fazes him..."
"*I'll* say," said Ray.

The girl who looked like Risty Wilde quietly shut the door to her home, then slid down to the floor
and wept. Feigning ignorance today had been the worst, with the news all over the school. A
thousand and one versions of The Psycho Gym Teacher.
Risty Wilde never watched the news.
Mystique, on the other hand, soaked up every second of it.
It was torture listening to urban myth, rumour and truth turn into a fantastic hodgepodge of even
more incredible lies. First, Kurt had a daughter. Then she'd died. No, she was alive, but disfigured by
Hess herself. No, she was hideously deformed. That's why nobody saw her. But someone *else* had
said that she just wasn't allowed out until her innoculations were done, and they'd even seen her on
the Institute grounds.
What had they seen? A little figure in a pink dress running around after a pair of twins.
Mystique had taken up her guise, ostensibly to monitor Brotherhood activity, but in reality to watch
over her children. She'd had to abandon them both. First Marie, known as Rogue; left in the arms of
a friend because of the news of her mutation. Then her son. Her special son. Altered somehow by
Magneto, she'd dropped him. Failed him. And when she secretly chased after him, she found him in
the arms of norms.
She'd wanted to scream when that man picked him up; but he'd *smiled*. He called his wife over
with a joyous voice and they'd both held him close.
Like one of their own.
The last she'd seen of her son, he was feeding greedily at the woman's breast. Something Raven
hadn't been able to do.
She left him there, assuming he'd be safe and loved. Knowing that she wasn't much of a mother.
And now she found out that her son was one among many victims of this woman Hess. A woman who tried to *buy* him. She probably had a bill of sale somewhere. She'd thought he was safe. She was wrong. Again. Some mother. How the bottle came to be in her hand, she didn't know, but the kiss of her old friend Mr Liquor was a very soothing balm for her heart. He made all the pain go away.

Kurt sighed and feigned wounded dignity while Mama and Papa told Baby Kurt stories to the entire dinner table. He secretly loved it, because they were all stories about how much the worried about him. How much they cared. How much he was accepted.
"...poor little dear," Mama was saying. "Too tired to cry, and too hungry to sleep. We were all lucky that I'd just finished helping out with the Jarelmann twins. I used to work as a wetnurse."
"We have an intense distrust of your American powders in Heirelgart," supplied Papa.
"Once he knew what I had for him, he wouldn't let go," said Mama. "Not even to swap sides. I had to fight him."
"*Ma*ma..." blushed Kurt.
Kitty hugged him. "It's okay, fuzzy. Just wait 'till you like, hear my Mom go on about how long she was in labour with me."
"So you're going to introduce me to your parents?"
"I'm not like, promising it'll like, go famously well..."
Kurt had to laugh. "Ja, I can see that, meine geliebt. 'Mom. Dad. This is Kurt. He looks like a demon but I like him. Ohyeah. And he's got a seven-year-old daughter.' Your Vater will go nuclear."
"Relax. I'll like, tell him about Lance first. He'll be like *that* glad I dumped him he won't like *care* about your like, personal history."
"Be sure to tell him I'm Romani before you tell him I'm German, ja?" Kurt cautioned. "Your people don't always like Germans, but my people and your people get along like *that*." He crossed his fingers.
"Oh yeah," said Kitty. "You got it."
Bluebelle was getting bored. Oma, Opa and the rest of the family had had to go home. All the crying in the world couldn't make them stay, not that she hadn't tried. She'd cried so hard she'd made herself ill for a whole day.

Doctor Hank gave her a yucky drink so her head wouldn't hurt, but he also gave her hugs, so that was okay.

But there was still nobody here but a bunch of adults. Doing adult things and telling her to play. But there was no-one to play with.

Everyone had gone to school.

Except the adults, who were all busy.

Bluebelle found her surgical mask and put it on. Then she put on her hologram. She could see the school where Daddy went from the top of the Institute. All she had to do was keep going in that direction and she could find Daddy.

He always talked about which classes he kept falling asleep in. So school had to be boring. But he was never bored with her around.

Bluebelle climbed the fence and, making sure no-one saw her, clambered down the other side. That way was the school.

She set off.

It was a long walk in the sun.

Bluebelle kept to the shady side of the street and kept going. Daddy would be proud of her, she was sure. It was a brave thing to go out all by herself. And even braver to go to a place full of strangers.

Of course, it sort of helped knowing that Mistress was all locked up by the Law. The hearing had said no parole. That meant that she'd be locked up all the time.

Bluebelle felt a whole lot safer knowing that Mistress couldn't come hunting her.

That, and the little dolly Oma had made helped a lot. It was just like her, and Daddy told her to leave it at home if she ever went out. Bluebelle called her Hubches.

She stopped at a light, staring at the school across the way. There weren't any crossing guards, but there were buttons. She inspected them. One had an arrow pointing her way and the words "press to walk" on it. Bluebelle shrugged and pressed it.

Nothing happened.

She tried again. And again. And again. And finally the lights changed and they told her she could walk.

Bluebelle skipped. She'd made it work. All by herself.

Daddy would be pleased.

"Now that's gotta be a new one, yo," said Todd.

"What?" asked Tabby.

"First time I ever saw a kid sneakin' into school." She followed his pointing digit to the little kid in the "HEY, I'M VISIBLE" ensemble.

"Who dressed her?" asked Pietro. "The Maquis de Sade or Ray Charles?"

"Who?" said Lance.

Todd rolled his eyes. "The blind guy in _Blues Brothers_, yo. Don't you ever study the classics, man?"

"Wanna say 'hello'?" Fred suggested.

"Meh," Tabby shrugged. "I ain't got nothin' better to do. Let's hit it."
So many strangers.
Bluebelle's heart pounded, and she sought the relative security of some trees. This place was *big*.
Daddy had never said it was *big*... he just said it was boring.
She couldn't see a single person she knew. Not even Jamie, and there were always a few of him around *somewhere*.
Bluebelle dodged from tree to tree, desperately seeking someone familiar. Maybe she should go back. Go home.
This place was scary.
"Hey there, cutie," said someone right behind her.
Bluebelle turned with a little shriek. Strangers! She backed right up against the tree.
There was a blonde girl. A big one, a green one, a thin one and one that smelled bad. Like those burned-up wormy things left in the gutters. Like Mistress in a bad mood.
Tree bark pressed into her spine.
"No need to be scared, sweet stuff," said the blonde. "We don't bite."
"Not out of the sack, anyway," said the bad-smelling one.
Bluebelle's eyes bugged. He talked just like Mistress did about people!
"*LA*-ance!" The blonde hit bad-smell. "Shut *up*.
The big one dropped into a crouch. "Don't mind them," he said. "They were just born rude. My name's Fred. What's yours?"
All Bluebelle could manage was a frightened whimper.
"By the way," said the thin one. "Who picked your clothes for you? Stevie Wonder?"
"Yo, shut it, Quickie," said the green one. "You're scarin' her. Ooo... butterfly..."
{Snap!} it was gone, and the green one was chewing and licking his lips.
"Mmmm, mmm. *Love* those butterflies..."
They were *mean*!
Her vision blurred and another whimper escaped her throat and she tried to back through the tree.
"You shouldn'a done that, *Toad*," growled the big one. "If you make her cry, I'm gonna *pound* ya."
"Wuh oh..." the green one ducked behind a tree. "I didn't mean nothin', yo. I just can't help myself, ya."
The blonde was getting closer. So was the thin one and bad-smell.
"Shh, shh," whispered the blonde. "It's okay. The butterfly just went to heaven, see?"
"You lost?" said bad-smell. "You lookin' for someone? A big brother?"
Bluebelle tried to edge away from them, but they were all around her. She raised her arms instinctively to stop herself from getting hit. Her first tear slid down her face.
"Hey," soothed the thin one. "Hey. You don't have to do that... We're okay." He moved his hand towards her wrist.
She couldn't let him touch her! That was as dangerous as Mistress!
Bluebelle did the bravest thing she'd ever done in her whole life. She took a deep breath and screamed at the top of her lungs.

"DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

The Brotherhood, as one mutant, had all found trees to hide behind.
"Jesus H. Christ," said Tabby.
"*Whoah*," said Todd.
"Kid's got some pipes," said Fred.
"Fucking *shit*," said Lance.
"It's *always* the quiet ones," said Pietro. "My sister was just like that. All whispers one minute and the next - nuclear."
The little kid had crumpled to the ground and was crying her eyes out, occasionally managing to
repeat, "I wan' my Daddy..." in between sobs.

The rest of the campus was galvanised. Everyone had frozen in the middle of whatever they were doing. The only things still moving were the chickens given out last week for Sex Ed.

Mrs Crankshaw hadn't given any of them one on the grounds that they'd try to eat it, or use it in some prank. She was probably right. So instead of a chicken, they had to keep a journal on the care and maintenance of Todd.

As far as they could tell, he was enjoying the attention.

"All right," said the one person who'd decided to move, A-class jerk, Duncan Matthews. "Which one of you assholes hurt the kid?"

"Ididntdoanything," said Todd, who was halfway up his tree of choice. "I was just mindin' my business, yo. It's *Pietro* who decided to touch her."

"I didn't even touch her," said Pietro. "I was trying to be nice and she just *screamed*. Honest!"

"I'll pound you later," said Matthews. He knelt on the ground near the girl. His voice instantly gentled. "Hey, there, sweetheart... It's okay now. Those bad people won't hurt you. It's okay."

{gasp gasp} "...i wan' my daddy..."

"It's okay, now, sweetheart. We'll find your Daddy. Is he here?"

Nod. More crying.

"Is he one of the teachers?"

No response.

"Sweetheart? You okay?" He reached out a hand to touch her shoulder.

All the Brotherhood started waving frantically. "Nononono, don'ttouchher!"

"DADDEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!" Matthews would have broken the world's record for climbing halfway up a tree if it wasn't for the fact that he was flying-tackled, thrown up against another one, and then promptly choked with the help of his own shirt.

"What did you do to her?" Kurt demanded. "What did you *do* to her?"

His wrath was slightly spoiled by the chicken that had followed him all the way to his current spot. After a few loud {Peep!}'s at the scenery change, it settled down to investigate the food quality of the dirt at Kurt's feet.

"Nuthin' I sweartoGod! It was those other scuzzos, I swear! They made her scream first."

Kurt turned to face them and growled.

The chicken decided to have a dust bath.

"Wedidnttouchher! Wedidnttouchher!" The Brotherhood did the frantic hand-waving thing again. Hologram or not, Kurt looked pissed off enough to take them all on and win.

"...daddy?"
Kurt dropped Matthews on the ground. He turned and embraced the little girl. "It's okay, liebe. I'm here. Shhh... shhh... Did they hurt you?"
She shook her head.
"Scare you?"
Nod.
"It's okay, now, Bluebelle. I'm here."
His chicken, having exhausted the food properties of Duncan Matthews' head, decided to use him for a toilet.
"Damn, that's one finely-trained bird, yo," said Todd.
"*Gooood* Mr Peeper," cooed Tabitha. "*Nice* Mr Peeper... Do doody again..."
"Woahwoahwoah, waitasecond, waitasecond..." Lance held up a hand. "*You* are *that* kid's Daddy?"
"What, bein' a Mom weren't enough for ya?" said Fred.
Kurt sighed. "You remember Frau Rosafarben?" he said. "I'm part of the reason why she's now in jail."
"*Damn*," said Lance. "You *dog*..."
Kurt glared at him. "It wasn't sexual conquest, it was rape, du Scheissekopf. Hess had her locked in a basement all her life." He picked her up and she buried her face in his shoulder.
Tabby's face fell. "Oh shit," she breathed. "Oh Blue, I'm so sorry. I didn't know..."
"Leave my daughter alone," he said and, chicken trailing after him, he left.
"Guys?" suggested Pietro. "I -uh- *think* it might be wise to get outta here before Matthews comes around."
"Why?" said Fred.
"Because blue-boy's bird also shat on his shirt, yo," said Todd.
Scott took one look at Kurt and summed up the entire situation. "Uh oh."
Everyone else looked. He was carrying Bluebelle and looking ticked off at the world at large. The effect was spoiled by Mr Peeper flapping in an effort to keep up. When he got closer, they could hear the little girl crying.
"Okay, what happened?" asked Evan.
"Just a scare, thank Gott," Kurt sat, and placed Bluebelle between himself and Kitty. "See, liebe? You're among friends, now. No need to cry, ja?"
"Ohboy," Jean pointed. "Looks like we've got some unwanted attention."
Kitty turned on her force ten smile. "Like, hi Principal Kelly!"
He was not in a good mood. "Why is it," he wondered, "that whenever something bizarre happens, I find you Institute kids, or those boarding house kids *right* in the thick of it?"
"Fate?" suggested Kurt.
"Karma?" Kitty grinned.
"Bad luck?" said Evan.
"Co-incidence?" hinted Scott.
"Cosmic disharmony?" said Rogue.
"Enough of the comedy," said Principal Kelly. "You and your--" he shuddered, "--daughter; come to my office."
"Can we stop at the cafeteria and get her something to eat, mein Herr?" Kurt asked. "I don't think she's had lunch. Have you had lunch, liebe?"
Bluebelle shook her head.
"You *can't* let her go hungry, sir," said Evan, who was busy feeding his chicken. "That'd be irresponsible."
"Rrrr," said Principal Kelly. "*Fine*..."

Bluebelle had apparently inherited her father's appetite. She'd ordered a quarter of the cafeteria menu and was still busily stuffing her face with her selection. The cafeteria staff had refused to let any of their crockery or cutlery out of their sight, so they'd set up a little meeting at one of the tables. Despite her appalling lack of colour sense, her appetite and attitude, she was still a cute kid. And the further away from Bayville she went, the cuter she was.

"Now, Kurt," Kelly began. "Obviously disturbances such as this can't be allowed to continue. Especially given Bluebelle's -er- highly strung nature."

"She's okay, mein Herr," said Kurt. "As long as nobody tries to touch her. It's an abuse thing."

Kelly's left eye began to twitch again. The last thing he needed right now was a reminder of his disastrous employee choices.

"...is he sick, daddy?" Bluebelle's voice was barely above a whisper.

"You all right, mein Herr? That eye should be looked at."

Kurt's pet chicken started to attack his shoelace.

_What on *Earth* posessed me to give the students chickens as part of Sex Ed? Oh yes. Todd Tolenski, Fred Dukes, Pietro Maximov, Tabitha Smith and Lance Alvers going beserk about eggs being posessed... For *seven* *days*..._ Damn _Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ to the lowest Hell that Hades had.

"My *eye* would be *fine*," Kelly said. "If things would just carry on *normally* for just *one* week. Seven days. That's all I ask. Seven days of normalicy. That's not too much to ask, is it?"

"Perhaps not," said Kurt. "But since 'normalicy' is defined as conformity with the 'norm', and 'norm' is a standard or model or pattern that's regarded as typical, then you're essentially wishing for more of the same."

"...huh?" said Kelly.

"Well, it's like this. Wierd things happen all the time in Bayville. Therefore, weird stuff is 'normal'. Ergo, wishing for normalicy is wishing for more weirdness. You should wish for weirdness instead."

He could feel the headaches starting again. "Just keep your daughter at home. Except when she should be going to *her* school?"

"I'll try, mein Herr."

"...are you mad?"

Twitch twitch twitchetty twitch twitch twitch. _Maybe I'd be better off wishing the Institute and the boarding house never existed... _"Just," twitch. "Upset. Honey."

"And you thought *Bluebelle* was highly-strung. You should take a holiday."

Twitch. _YES! A nice little holiday somewhere serene and peaceful. Like Dante's Peak..._ "Just get her home and make sure she *stays* there, this time," he whimpered. The chicken was killing his socks.

"All done?" Kurt asked Bluebelle. She nodded. He produced a paper napkin out of nowhere and cleaned her up, then took her hand and lead her away.

The chicken, thankfully, followed him.

_Next year_, he thought, _I'm giving them SimBabies. I don't *CARE* how much it costs, it *has* to be less trouble than this..._

"Hello Kurt. I gather you found Bluebelle."

"Er. She found me. Sort of," Kurt sounded as if he were stifling a laugh. "She found her way to the High School all by herself."

Xavier pinched his nose. "Oh dear..."

"She got tired of waiting for someone to spend time with her, so she decided to spend a little time herself."

"And nothing - untoward occurred?"
"Nein. We just had a little scare." Now his grin transmitted down the 'phone line. "Bluebelle managed to scare the entire Brotherhood."

He sighed. "I'll send Ororo over and ensure Hank begins a remedial education program."

"Sure thing. I'll be waiting by the gate."

She couldn't believe her luck. He was there, with only a child for a witness. Just standing there, out in the open. All he needed was a big sign reading 'Take me'.

Hilde quelled her instincts. Bruna had given her instructions, and she knew what would happen if those instructions were disobeyed.

The last thing they needed was more attention.

But, oh, the boy was so sweet in bed...

Enough. She had to do what she came to do.

Package in hand, tag around her neck, she left her car and crossed the road. She schooled her face into a look of nervous hope.

"Kurt Wagner?" she asked. "One of Hess' survivors?"

His eyes flicked to the tag. "Jawohl, meine Dame."

She caught him up in the embrace before he could say another word. The package slid into the waistband of his trousers, leaving her fingers free to find the pressure points she knew so well.

He didn't know her face, but he knew her smell. She could feel him stiffen. Her lips found his ear.

"Erinnern Sie sich, an wem Sie bildete," she whispered. "Erinnern Sie sich, an was Sie sind. Erinnern Sie, an wem Sie gehören."

She kissed him, and he went limp. Ah, Ragdoll. His first line of defense.

Hilde sat him down, propping him against the stone post of the school's gateway, and then she walked away. Leaving the child crying for her father.

She could have had them both. Like that. But that wasn't the point. The point was to sabotage his testimony.

Ororo found him by the gate, but he wasn't waiting. He was - well - away. RagDoll seemed to be at the helm.

Bluebelle was upset and crying. Afraid to touch him.
"Aunty O?" the little girl risked. "Please fix him?"

_But - Hess is in *prison*..._
"Of course I told Principal Kelly," said Ororo. "All he did was mutter something about sailing the _Titanic_ and a nice day for deckchairs... He has a nasty twitch under his left eye..."

Bluebelle was trying to make Kurt brush her hair. "...please, Daddy? I promise I'll be good. Please come back."

Xavier dipped into Kurt's head, finding Kurt and updating him on the situation, replete with Bluebelle's memories.

_That's it?_ he asked. _After what she did?_

A blast of memories...

The woman wore a tag from the hotel where the 'survivor convention' was going on. She wore an expression of hope and worry when she asked him his name.

As soon as he identified himself, she grabbed him.

He'd assumed she was a part of the Heirelgart clique. Until she hid her parcel into his waistband, and her fingers found several spots that Hess and her cronies knew best.

His nose filled with _Nacht in der Blute_.

The scent of a predator.

She whispered in his ear. "Remember who made you. Remember what you are. Remember who you belong to."

Fingers found the sensitive spots on his tail. Up his spine.

He'd moaned, despite how filthy he felt at her touch.

And RagDoll came forward, to protect him. RagDoll, who saw everything but did nothing. The tag identified her as Minka, 37, from somewhere near the old Soviet border. Ragdoll got a good look at it when she put them down.

Xavier winced, involuntarily backing his chair away.

"Sorry, Professor," said Kurt, holding Bluebelle close. "The masks are still in defense mode."

Almost on automatic, he spread out a napkin on the floor, then put a container of seed and a container of water down for his chicken.

Mr Peeper investigated it on general principals, then settled down for a solid grooming session.

Kurt sat up a little, and bought the packet from his memories out into the open.

"Is it a present?" asked Bluebelle.

"I - don't think so." He stared at it, trying to figure it out. "It's from one of Hess' lieutenants; it could be anything."

Xavier instantly held out his hand. "I'll have it scanned before we open it," he said. "In the meantime, you and Hank can begin work on a remedial education programme for Bluebelle."

Kurt stretched a few psychosomatic kinks out of his back. "Jawohl, mein Herr."

"School?" repeated Bluebelle. She'd heard nothing but horror stories about it. She'd *been* there. It was a scary place.

"Not a proper school, not yet. We have to catch up with everyone else your age, first," said Doctor Hank. "Once you're properly literate and numerate, we can begin to socialise you with children your own age."

"But - strangers are dangerous," said Bluebelle.

"Yes, liebe. Some strangers *are* dangerous. Most are just people trying to get through the day; and the trick is that you can't tell them apart. We're going to teach you how to be careful, as well."
"As well as what?"
"I was thinking," said Daddy. "How would you like to learn to be a tumbler? I can teach you in the
afternoons as a reward for being a good girl in your lessons." He balanced, upside-down, on the
back of his chair. "Wouldn't you like to know how to do this, Liebling?"

Bluebelle giggled.

Meanwhile, in the hotel where most of the witnesses were staying, little cards were being put into
the rooms' pigeon-holes. They came, one by one or in small groups, and were randomly chosen.
They all bore the same message.
"You *know* what happens to bad little boys and girls who tell lies."
They were signed by Hess.

Sharon double-checked her computer. "I've found three Minkas, but none of them are from the
region you named, Professor. That tag must have been a fake."
Xavier sighed on the other end of the 'phone. "Well, it's a relief to know that none of Hess' victims
are following in her footsteps, at least. We need to have this 'lieutenant' matter investigated as soon as
possible."
"There's also been a few disturbances in the hotel," said Sharon. "Apparently, Hess has been
sending her victims some love letters."
"That won't go over well in court," Xavier understated. "How are the reactions?"
"Mixed. Twenty percent are more determined to take the witness stand, fifty percent want to do
video testimony, and the rest are trying to psych themselves back into putting Hess down. Their
families just want to kill her. How about your survivors?"
"Only Kurt has received anything. It's a package. As far as I can tell, its contents are inert. There's a
little biological residue. No trace of any pathogens, though."
"Be extremely careful with it," Sharon advised. "Hess kept all sorts of weird trophies. Some of the
witnesses went nuts just seeing photographs of them."
"Understood. Thank you for your time."

Kurt knew the package was probably trouble when the entire team drew themselves around him.
"It's one of Hess' little love notes, isn't it?" he asked.
"You've had stuff like this before?" said Rogue.
"Ja. During the Bad Times, she used to send me little 'presents'. No return address. There was
always a note, 'thinking of you' and some little relic of her 'good times'. If they were body parts, I'd
quietly bury them somewhere and pray for the owner's soul and safety."
Kitty shuddered. She was nervously petting Mr Peeper.
Evan's chicken, McNugget, was safely nested in its own shoebox.
Everyone expected things to go nuts, as soon as he opened the package. Lord alone knew what
Hess or her Lieutenant had put in there. The Professor said it was inert material and a little bit of
biological residue. He said there were no pathogens present.
Of course there were no pathogens.
Hess didn't need them.
She was a pathogen all by herself.

What Kitty hated most, she decided, was how she forced her victims to become so ickily casual
about certain things. Kurt wasn't bothered by dead bodies, for example. He seemed to treat them like
people who needed some kind of medical attention.
Kiss and make it better.
Her stomach roiled and she held Mr Peeper close, petting him so that they'd both keep calm.

Hess soiled everything she came in contact with. Stained people's future irrevocably. She was the
one who taught him to kiss so sweetly, to take such gentle care with the one he loved.
How could such beauty spring from such evil?

Scott clenched his fist. He wanted to hit something. *Do* something. Anything. He'd missed it. He couldn't believe he'd missed it. He should have seen it when Kurt first arrived. The softly-spoken boy on edge and perpetually worried about getting things wrong.
Sensitive to what people thought about him.
Desperate for acceptance.
Scott should have seen it; but it was overwhelmed by the Kurt that had fun and goofed off and woke everyone up at the butt-crack of dawn every day of the frikkin' week.
That Kurt was nothing like the Kurt that sat in the middle of them now, holding a padded envelope as if it were a bomb and he were someone on the bomb squad.
_I guess I really *was* lucky with Mr Winters,_ he thought. _I wonder if he really *knew* that there were worse people out there, or if it was just something he said so I wouldn't try to run away..._
He'd never find out, though. Winters had drunk himself to death, leaving Scott with a whole heap of nothing and a free ticket to the state orphanage. His power had manifested by then, and he'd been paranoid about opening his eyes to anything. He'd routinely worn bandages under his shades as a reminder not to hurt people.
Then Xavier had rescued him, and Scott had thought he'd never have to shut his eyes to anything ever, ever again.
Wrong.
Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Kurt took a deep breath. He had to do this. He had to face whatever sickness Hess had decided to send his way, deal with it, and get on with the remains of his life.
It wasn't as if he wasn't used to it, anyway.
He tore open the envelope and shook whatever was inside out onto his hand. It was a tile smeared with old blood.
_Bad Times,_ he thought, and all the Masks inside his head went insane.
"Jean!" The Professor yelled as his world dissolved into darkness. "Help me help him!"
All fall down.
The realm of memory is usually like a jigsaw. Pieces can fit together in an alarming number of ways. This one was like a field of broken glass.

Kurt woke up, then threw up in short order. Where? Hess' place. One of them, anyway. She'd had time to decorate, lining the walls with implements of torture and sprays of blood. At least it was *dry* blood, or he'd have to throw up again. He hadn't felt so sick in his entire life. Hess had put a leash on him again. Head was full of fog. He couldn't tell where he was. Someone was crying, and it wasn't him. Great. It looked like he was going to be 'initiating' someone. Poor soul. *God save us...*_ Someone picked him up and placed him on the bed. Hess. "I have a present for you, my lovely demon," she said. "Take a look in my pants..." Kurt sighed, letting Hure meld with him. This was almost straightforward and normal. For Hess, anyway.

He was seven years old, almost eight, and he knew more about cunnilingus than most people thrice his age. He wasn't proud. It wasn't an accomplishment. It was just one thing he did to survive. To make sure his family and his tribe survived.

Hure made his fingers probe her wetness, but Kurt was the one who was shocked when they came back red with blood. She was bleeding, but it smelled wrong. Sort of - stale. Ever since he could read, he'd read up on various tantric arts, lest he upset Hess. He'd read about what one should do if a lady was 'in her menses' and thought it was some kind of bidet. He'd never made the connection between that phrase and the times when Mama or other women in the troupe were irritable. Likewise, he didn't connect it with Hess' bleeding, either. "You're - hurt..." he blurted. Hess laughed as she removed her underpants. "You should enjoy it," she told him. "Demons love blood." _This demon doesn't_, he thought, knowing better than to contradict her out loud. He just froze, wondering what to do next. "It might not be around for much longer," she purred, spreading herself before him. "You should be glad of the opportunity."

Kurt started to cry. Hure was terrified. Fight wanted to lash out and Flight wanted to run away. The others huddled in the back of his head like a frightened crowd of children, clinging to the Archivist like a drowning man clung at straws. Hess siezed his head and bought him down with a final command of, "Demons *love* blood."

She let him go the minute his struggles sated her. He turned and ran for the little room where he knew he could be ill. He vomited up stale, bad blood gone wrong, mixed with bile. He could still smell it. It was all through his fur. Then he saw, above the pretty tiles, the specimen jars. Bits of *people*. Pickled foetuses. _Oh God, help us..._ He had a son.
There was no mistaking it. Everything Kurt had, this baby had, too. The child was *his*.
Hess was pounding on the door, demanding he come out or join the others in a jar.
He leaned against the pretty tiles with his soiled hand, and brushed the glass of his son's jar with the
other. "I'll get you free," he promised. "I'll sing you to sleep and I'll get you free of her. I promise. I
promise. I'll do it."
With that promise, a new persona was born. Not quite the one Hess wanted, but the one Kurt
needed at the time.

There were five prisoners. Two, he had to 'break in' while Hess watched. He made it merciful,
whispering in their ears to wait, and he would have them out of Hess' horror-show.

All around, were jars and other trophies.
Tanned human skin.
Children's bones.
Preserved organs.
All carefully lit to give their maximum effect.
He was going to free them. He was going to put *Hess* in a bottle. In a cage. His name was
Justice.
All he had to do was bide his time, and strike when that time was right.
But he got it wrong.
He spent too much time trying to calm a hysterical girl rather than free her. Her screams bought
Hess. The girl was deemed a failure, owing to her lost 'potential'.
Hess dissected her, and left her open body beside her bed to remind him of what happened to those
who failed her.
Then she raped him for three days in a row. Chained him up in the attitude of the murdered girl, and
left his son in the open for him to see.
"If you escape," she said. "I'll have another child on that table, over there. Perhaps your sister, yes?
Or perhaps all three..."
She said the wrong thing at the wrong time.
He was out of his bonds in an instant, slashing at her with talons grown during his stay, there.
Hess backpedalled. She ran. Too late. There was a monster after her, combined with Fight and
Justice and even Kurt.
Hess could do what she liked to him. He had no choice. But his sisters were innocent. His sisters
were holy.
His sisters were *his*.
She ran for her life with a baying demon snapping at her heels, slashing at her naked flesh. Taking
twists and turns and scrabbling for cover in a labyrinthine house of horrors she'd taken years to
collect.
Justice wanted blood.
An eye for an eye.
A tooth for a tooth.
Her organs, red and dripping, hot in his mouth.
_No!_
He bought her to bay in the same bathroom he'd found his son in. She cowered in the tub and tried
to hide her nakedness with her hands.

They growled together. Their noise echoing off the pretty tiles. The pretty, bloodstained tiles.
On all fours, tail lashing like a cat's, Justice advanced slowly. Let her fear. Let her whimper. Let her
cry.
Just like all her victims.
He bought his teeth down through her shoulder. Dragged his talons down her body, from her
sternum to her stomach.
Hess gasped.
She was smiling.
"Yes, my demon. Come to me. Drink me. Eat me. *Be* me..."
Snap.
Just like that, Kurt took control. He helped her out of the tub, put a coat over her, and pointed her at the door.
"Go," he said. "Now. If I cross paths with you again on my way out, I won't be able to stop him."
"Stop whom? Fight?"
"No. Justice."
Hess fled. This time, she *was* afraid.
Kurt leaned forward and vomited so hard he thought he'd turn himself inside out. The Archivist's mercy was already working. It had been working since Hess uttered the words, 'Be me'.
He'd almost...
He'd almost *killed*.
_God, help me..._
Justice died in the same pretty bathroom he'd been born in. Only two weeks old. He died how he was born. Vomiting up blood and bile.
Kurt cried, helpless to stop.
All that death.

He picked himself up, not knowing how he had the strength or whether he'd still have it when he started running. He made Flight check every room in the house.
Hess was gone.
She'd taken his son with her.
Kurt spent another hour weeping when he realised that.
He'd failed. Again.
Naughty little boy. Start over from when you were four!
Shut up, Perfectionist. We don't *have* that long.
He found a pair of pants. Not even remotely his size. He tore a hole for his tail and pulled them on, anyway. He made sure they stayed on with a piece of bloodstained rope.
Hess had something of his. Fight promised that they'd find another chance to take him back.
One day.
Not now, though. He had to *run*, now.
And Flight was very good at that.
Together, they sniffed the air.
That way.
They'd had to give him a painkiller so that he'd sleep.
To the outside world, Kurt had stared at the tile, and then fainted. When he came to, an hour later, he'd cried like a child.
Bluebelle was understandably upset.
Kitty tried to comfort her by telling her that her Daddy was just sad about something he'd just remembered.
They had to give the child a painkiller, too.
Professor Xavier and Jean also took painkillers, but their reaction was far less severe to the chemicals than Kurt's and Bluebelle's.
Guilt settled over them like a dark cloud.
Logan carefully put the tile back in its envelope and muttered, "That bitch is goin' *down*.:"
"Thanks for the sentiment, old friend, but I'd rather the law handled things for now."
"Too bad she can only die once," he muttered.
There was a general murmur of agreement.
Xavier spoke. He sounded as if he wished he were also asleep. "Recovering a hidden memory is always traumatic, but a memory like this one -- Kurt may not be himself for a few days, at the very least. We must be on guard for randomly emerging personas - or a complete psychological breakdown."
"OmyGod," said Kitty. Her eyes were red and puffy from tears.
"Principal Kelly's gonna *flip*," said Evan. "He's gonna go nuts for *sure*, this time."
"And how," said Rogue. "Not only did he hire a predator, but her *friend* just up and attacked Kurt on school grounds. In broad daylight."
"Lots of things happen in broad daylight," said Kitty. "We think we have to like, shut out the night, because that's when the bad things happen, but we're like, wrong. It happens in the day, and people let it because they're like, too busy to bother trying to help."
Jean gripped her shoulder. "Hess worked all hours," she said. "She took pains to go unnoticed. Nobody could have done anything."
"I should have been able to do something," Kitty sobbed. "I should have seen it..."
"We *all* missed it," said Hank. "There's no blame nor guilt in not finding a secret."
"We still have to inform Mr Murdock. Stunts like this to sabotage key witnesses are illegal."
"Like I said," rumbled Logan, "Pity she can only die once."
Kitty picked up Mr Peeper in his nest/box. "I'm gonna like, keep him company, okay?"
"He won't wake up for a while," said Scott. "He mightn't even wake up until the morning."
Kitty phased through the wall.
"Didn't look like she cared much," said Rogue.
Kitty sneaked her shoes off and crept under Kurt's blanket, but not the sheets. Sure, he was in his PJ's, and Kitty was still in her street clothes, but after Lance and Hess, nothing much felt safe.
She'd put Mr Peeper and his nest on his dresser, not knowing where Kurt usually kept the bird, and figuring he'd be safe there.
Kurt was whimpering in his sleep, one hand looking for something to hold.
Kitty gave him her hand.
His fur was soft and wonderful. His hand didn't get sweaty-clammy like most hands did. So what if it only had two fingers?
Okay, one thing felt safe.
Being with Kurt.
Kitty snuggled up next to him and closed her eyes, listening to him breathe.

She woke with his lips against hers.

"Heh," he said, "Always works a charm. Now, my lady, shall we work on your appalling lack of direction, mmm?" He reached over the sheet to caress her thigh.

Waitasecond...

"Back off, Hure," she warned. "I came her to comfort Kurt, not entertain *you*."

"You want *him*? That crybaby? And by the by, you have it backwards. *I'm* the entertainment. For a modest fee."

"Nobody paid for you," she explained. "This is like, your *room*. You *live* here."

"But this is a predator's place," Hure whispered.

"No," said Kitty. "It's a safe place."

Flight flickered to the front. "The tile. We remember the tile. We remember the bad times. The Archivist couldn't hold onto the memory any more... This is a bad place. We have to get out of here."

"No, no, no. Shhh... This isn't a bad place, Flight. Ask Kurt. Ask Kurt if he knows where he is."

"Kurt's crying. Kurt only cries in the Bad Places..."

"It's Hess," Kitty explained. "She sent a - memento here. A tile with blood on it."

"...pretty, pretty tiles..." whispered Flight, and he flickered away. Kurt flickered back. "I'm sorry, Kitty. So sorry. Tears filled his eyes and he fell into her arms. "I'm so sorry for everything."

Kitty got herself comfortable. How many times had Kurt done this for her? Now it was her turn to be strong for him.

Hess was a genius at opening old wounds.
The bitch.

He shuddered to a halt after an eternity of Kitty thinking up creative deaths for Hess. She just petted his shoulder and gently stroked his face.

His lovely fur was wet with tears.

"You okay, now?"

"I'm all cried out, at least," he sighed. "Sorry I got your shirt wet."

Kitty gave him another hug. "Like, forget about it, you silly elf. Wanna like, go show Bluebelle you're, okay?"

"Ja. I think I can handle that."

"Can you like, handle being alone for like, five minutes? I've *got* to like, change. These clothes have been *totally* slept in."

He grinned. "I think I can survive without your company for a while, meine geliebt."

"I'm like, going to *have* to get a bilingual dictionary."

"Get revenge," suggested Kurt as she phased through the wall. "Start speaking Hebrew at me. Or Yiddish."

Kitty skipped down the hall to her room. Silly elf.

Silly her.

How could she feel so fantastic after sharing the same bed as someone who could be locked away in an asylum?

Because the whole world was insane, that's why.

Kurt showered quickly, but brushed down hard. He needed to remove the echoes of the Lieutenant's touch. He knew the woman as surely as he knew any of Hess' creations. The Lieutenant didn't have an original bone in her body. She did as she was told, or echoed what she saw. Nothing more, but often less.

The Lieutenant was nothing without Hess. A puppet with no-one at the strings.

Therefore, to deal with her, he had to be rid of Hess.

He let Mr Peeper out of its nest for breakfast, dressed, and headed down the hall to Bluebelle's room, brushes in hand.
Kitty heard their voices before she realised what was up. What with all the excitement, she'd completely forgotten to break the news to her folks.

They must have seen her on the news.

It didn't sound like they were believing the Professor, much, when he repeated that yes, Kitty was fine. She'd just managed to get away from Hess with nothing more than a scare and a few lingering nightmares. She was *fine*. Honest.

Kitty decided to take mercy on him and make an appearance. She also decided to act dumb.

"Mom. Dad. Like, what are you doing here?"

"We came as soon as we could," said Dad.

Mom had already crossed the distance between her and caught her up in a hug. "My poor little girl... Did she hurt you? Did she make anyone else hurt you? We can hire you a therapist--" her senses caught up with her mouth and Mom hugged her again. "Kitty! You've been *eating*... I'm so relieved!"

Thin didn't equal love after all. Thin equalled fear. Kitty hugged her back. "I'm sorry I like, scared you. Compared to all the others, I hadn't been through all that much. I just like, forgot to tell you."

"You *forgot*?" Dad blurted. "We saw you on the news, Kitty. What were we supposed to think?"

"CNN's been showing her - collections for the past forty-eight hours," said Mom. "We were so scared for you."

"She didn't get to do anything to me, okay?" Kitty sat between her parents on the couch. "When I was abducted, she like, drugged us with ether and --"

"Us?" quoted Dad. "There's an 'us' now?"

"She took Kurt when she took me," said Kitty. "We were like, in the same mess together." She explained, as best she could, about the basement and what Hess had done. It was frightening at the time, but compared to some of the video testimony that was being leaked to the media, her horror story wasn't that frightening at all.

Mom and Dad both went pale at the mention of Kurt's kids.

Dad held her shoulder while Mom held her hand.

"Honey," said Dad just as Kurt came in the door. "We don't want you to have anything to do with that Kurt boy any more."
There was a long minute where they stared at each other. Bluebelle hid behind Kurt and peeked out at the Prydes from behind his elbow. Mr Peeper did what chickens did best - peck aimlessly at anything that looked like it might have become edible within the last ten minutes.

"Why don't you tell *me* what you find so objectional about my company?" he suggested. He didn't have his hologram on. Neither did Bluebelle. "Or haven't you the nerve to insult me to my face?"

Mom hid her mouth behind both hands. Dad had frozen solid, mouth and eyes open wide. This was *not* the first impression she'd been aiming for.

"Kurt, I'm sure Dad was like, talking about the whole thing with Hess. He's like, scared, okay?"

"I screwed up, didn't I?" he murmured.

"I'm pretty sure it can be like, salvaged." Kitty smiled. "Mom, Dad, this is Kurt. He's like, had to look like this all his life. He's the kindest, gentlest, most considerate guy I've like, ever known. The whole Hess thing has been like, a total surprise."

Kurt said something in another language, and Dad's eyes flew open.

"You *dare*," he hissed.

"I'm sorry. I don't know the Yiddish," said Kurt. "I made a point to learn the phrase, 'I mean no harm' in as many languages as I could. I didn't mean to offend, mein Herr."

"I never thought I'd hear a *German* dare to speak my language."

"Sir. I'm Romani."

Another moment of silence.

"I'm - sorry," said Dad. "I guess you can't help where your people settled."

Kurt smiled, making Kitty's parents shrink back because of the fangs. "Maybe I should add the fact that I'm Romani to those words, ja?"

"It couldn't *hurt*," said Dad.

Mom was watching two spade-tip tails flip and toss themselves about in the air.

Kurt picked up Mr Peeper. "Look," he said. "They trust me with small animals."

Kitty giggled. "He's incorrigible, Mom. Kurt's like, tame anything with wings or fur."

"Except skunks," he said. "I learned my lesson on them *fast*."

Mom's eyes started sparkling.

"And this is my daughter, Bluebelle," he said, squeezing her shoulder. "Hess had her. I rescued her. Together, we're healing." He sat as Professor Xavier made a quiet exit out another door. Bluebelle crept onto his lap as he set up a 'meal stop' for Mr Peeper.

Kitty took her place back between her parents. "Bluebelle's kinda scared of strangers," she said.

"If'll take her a while to get like, used to you."

"Ha," said Dad. "Now *that's* irony."

Kurt raised an eyebrow and grinned ironically. "Ja? When it comes to recoveries, yours has been pretty fast. At least you weren't screaming."

"*Kurt*..." Kitty chided.

"I'm allowed to say it, Katzchen. I've lived it."

"I still don't like hearing it."

"I love you, too," he smiled, hugging Bluebelle. "Now, liebchen, there's no need to be scared of Herr and Frau Pryde. They're good people. They're Jewish."

"Just like Kitty?" said Bluebelle.

"Ja. Just like Kitty."

Bluebelle slowly unfolded herself and crept up to the Prydes. Curiosity, as always, overwhelmed caution and she had to touch Mom's coat. "Schones hubches," she whispered.
Daddy just looked at her outfit, which was the purple track pants, the rainbow shirt and the bright yellow jacket with the pink flower trim. "I think we guessed," he said.
"Things like this happen," said Kurt. "I want to give Bluebelle every freedom I can; and that means picking out what she wears herself."
"You should have seen us when we like, got her ribbons," said Kitty. "She had to wear them all at once. I was like, 'less is more' and Kurt was like, 'leave her alone' and Bluebelle was like, jumping all over the place and saying, 'pretty, pretty, pretty'... It was like, *nuts*."
Bluebelle giggled behind her hands.
"Aw," Dad smiled, warming to Bluebelle. "There's no need to hide such a pretty smile. Come on. You can put your hands down."
Bluebelle shook her head and giggled again.

Kurt let himself fade into the background. Quite a feat for someone who was sitting still, let alone anyone who resembled a fuzzy blue demon. He needed to be unnoticed for a little while.
Hess' attempted sabotage had stirred up the monsters. They were extremely unquiet, rattling at the bars of their metaphorical cage. They wanted out. They wanted blood. They wanted vengeance. Fight was lurking just underneath the surface like a shark. Flight was screaming and gibbering in corners.
Das Kinder was crying.
The Perfectionist was obsessing over things that had gone wrong, replaying moments of time over and over again inside his head. Trying alternate situations. Muttering, _If we had killed..._ repeatedly until Kurt wanted to be sick.
__If we had killed, _he told his Masks, _we would have been no better than Hess. We would have become another Hess. We would have been reborn a monster._
That made the Masks consider things. It made them settle for a little while.
The Monsters were still going beserk. Not a lot of them fully understood things like that.
Even Ragdoll was upset. Simple meditation was not going to work. He got up, startling the Prydes anew.
"I'm sorry," he said. "I have to go find some peace."
"Hess?" said Kitty.
"Hess," said Kurt. "She got the Monsters upset and they aren't calming down. I'll be at my church, geleibt." He kissed Kitty and Bluebelle on the forehead before he tidied up Mr Peeper's rest stop and left.
"Uh," said Mr Pryde. "Honey? What was he talking about?"
_Oops._ He was so used to everyone knowing about the Masks that he'd started chatting about them as if they were invisible friends. Now he'd left poor Katzchen to explain things. Hardly gallant behaviour.
He couldn't go back, not with all his Masks so upset. He needed to reset. Desperately.
Kurt found his way to his personal church, and knelt by his son's grave, polishing the little plaque that marked his resting place. "Hello, love," he whispered. "I took a long time to keep my promises, didn't I?" He could already feel his Masks calming down. None of them wanted to frighten the baby.
"No matter. I think we all have to be patient in order to get rid of the real monsters. And the big promises, the most important ones, take a long time to keep." His name gleamed in the sunshine. A name it took him eight years to earn.
"Hess is locked away, but her reach is still wide. I fear we may have to hunt down her Lieutenants as well. Otherwise, it may never stop. Logan says it's a pity she can only die once; but I say death is too final for the likes of her. She should be - studied. Put in a glass box as a reminder for all eternity that monsters are real." He sighed. "But would that be justice? Hess and her clique in a cage? Forever?"
"Beats me," said Logan. He had a talent for sneaking up on folks. "Sounds about right, though."
Kurt jumped three feet. "Herr Logan. I -er- Ah..."
"Relax," said Logan, he hadn't moved from where he was propping up a tree. "I talk to dead people too. They're excellent listeners. Lousy for advice though. You sorta need the livin' for that."
"I know, but the Masks aren't exactly company people, sometimes."
"Hess got to ya."
"Ja."
"She got to ya here, too," he said. "This is where Lance got Half-pint as well. I don't get it. This is the middle of nowhere, far as the estate's concerned. How can two people just waltz in without setting off the alarms?" Logan had a point that made Kurt's hair stand on end. *All* of his hair.
"Gruss Gott..." He tried to remember everything of the events that had occurred in his Church. The last time he was here, Lance had run off, sure, but he'd run off towards - nothing. Hess had come at them from the same direction. Archivist surrendered a flicker of memory. Lance saying goodbye to Kitty, and heading off in a direction that made no sense. No sense at all.

Automatically, he turned that way, looking at the trees. "When he ran off," Kurt ventured, "he went *that* way... but there's nothing but brambles..."

Logan strode in that direction. "Think I'm gonna check and make sure."
Kurt followed him. He had to know, too.
They found the brambles as they always did, but there was something different. They had changed. Kurt sniffed, eyes shut, to feel what was wrong.
"There's - a tunnel through them," he said.
Logan sliced a few tendrils and discovered the same thing. The plants had made a hole in the wall, and someone had made a hole in the plants, tying branches of thorny brush aside with bits of plastic shopping bags.

Kurt looked at one fragment, the telltale neon pink of *Gals' Stuff*, and felt betrayed. *Gals' Stuff* was Kitty's favourite shopping place.
He threw his head back and howled.
Mr Peeper was suffering from conflicting instincts. One said stick near Mom. The other said to run away from the big scary loud noisy thing.
Unfortunately for Mr Peeper, Mom *was* the big scary loud noisy thing. He obeyed both instincts by running around in circles and making as much noise as he could.

Logan spent a panicked few seconds trying to identify the source of the unearthly noise. He really panicked when he realised it was the Elf, who’d dropped to his knees, looking heartbroken.
He’d never done anything like *that* before.
Maybe he’d never had the need...
Logan searched for a clue for what could have set the boy off. He found it in the shreds of the pink shopping bags that Half-pint always seemed to be bringing home from the Mall.
Half-pint had tied some of the branches together to make a secret entrance/exit from the estate.
There was no security here. They thought they hadn't needed it.
"*ELF*!" He yelled at the top of his lungs, "Knock it off! You're scaring the bird!"
He didn't seem to hear.
_On the upside, he seems to have an amazing lung capacity.... "Take a breath before you pass out, you stupid squirrel-boy!"

Kitty froze at the noise.
"What the hell is *that*?" Dad demanded.
Bluebelle burst out crying. "Somebody's hurt Daddy," she said. She didn't think. Just started running. Whatever it was that was making Kurt making that noise, it was going to find out what live was like with it's insides phased into outsides.
_Professor! Scramble the others! Something's wrong with Kurt!_

Tom Pryde hung on to Bluebelle, mainly because she was seven years old and she was crying. Then he clung to her because she was handy and a lot of very strange things were coming out of the woodwork and heading off in the same direction Kurt had.
One of them looked like a big, blue bear in trunks.
Another one looked like an ordinaryish girl until she turned into a wolf.
Thirty of them looked exactly identical.
One was on fire.
The weirdest thing was that the little girl was narrating the fly-by in a calm little voice.
"...And *they're* all Jamie. He's nice. That's Amara. She's a little mean, but she lets me play with some of her jewellery, sometimes. *That's* Aunty O who just flew by, and that was Aunty Rogue. She's Daddy's half-sister."
"Does this sort of thing happen all the time?" asked Ruth.
Bluebelle shrugged. "I don't know. I've only been here a little while."

He’d fallen into a ball, sobbing and gasping for air. At least it seemed to be over.
"Take it easy, Elf. Anyone could have used those--"
He was interrupted by Kurt getting his wind back and howling again.
_Well. So much for reason..._
Logan picked him up and shook him. "SNAP OUT OF IT!"
Of course, the rest of the team chose that moment to show up and demand to know what was going on. Damn their lousy timing.
_Let him *GO*!_ Red screamed in his head.

_He won't stop it, Red._ he thought back. _*Do* something._

She ruffled through his short-term memories anyway. Nice to know he was so trusted.

Jean instantly switched from Logan's head to Kurt's.

And she thought his baying *aloud* was a problem...

Imagine at least nine voices raised in cries of pain and anguish. Add the howls of monsters. Now put the volume up to maximum.

Jean forced a merger between Kurt and RagDoll. At least it would quiet him down on the outside. She was going to need painkillers after *this*_. Big time.

Mr Peeper stopped panicking. Mom had stopped being the big scary loud noisy thing and had gone back to being Mom again. Mr Peeper calmed down enough to find food-things in amongst the sharp non-food things.

Mom always went to weird places, but there was always food, so Mr Peeper didn't complain.

Mom decided to settle down for a nap. This must be a very safe place to eat. Mom never napped out in the open much.

Kurt was still weeping.

Betrayed.

By his beloved.

She'd hurt him more than Hess ever could. With a simple shopping bag that was torn to shreds.

He'd helped her, loved her, treated her like a future wife. And she'd betrayed him.

She'd let the predators in.

Betrayed.

He wanted to throw back his head and howl again. Howl until his broken heart stopped hurting so badly. Except the forced influence of RagDoll kept his open reaction down to whimpering sobs.

He could feel Jean holding the two of them together in a grip like a vice. He knew why. He was scaring people. People who knew and trusted him. People who, she insisted, loved him.

He wasn't too certain about that.

He'd been betrayed.

Kitty hid her mouth with her hands. They'd found her secret passage, and obviously put two and two together to get five.

Kurt, already emotionally unstable, was looking like the world had been pulled out from under him. Like his best friend had tried to kill him.

And, in a way, he was kind of right.

*Her* secret passage had been the means by which she and Kurt had been abducted. If it wasn't for Kurt's years of experience, or their powers, Hess would have certainly proved deadly.

She was at his side in an instant, looking into his eyes. "Kurt. Please. You have to believe me. I like, never told anyone but Lance about this place. I swear. I swear to God. If Hess knew, it like, wasn't from me. Please, Kurt? I never meant for it to happen."

He settled down, at last, clinging to her while he did so.

Jean stopped concentrating so hard.

Kitty had to confess. "When I thought I was like, in love with Lance," she began. "I like, helped him make this like, little tunnel here so we could like, meet and talk without like, anyone giving us the third degree. It was supposed to be for a little slice of like, freedom. I never thought anyone would like, turn it around."

Kurt shuddered, still gasping and sighing. "Oh, meine liebe. Meine geliebt... Ich bin taurig... I thought - I thought you'd betrayed me."

She just held him tight. "It's okay. It's okay... Shhh..."

Wolverine was poking around in the hollow of the brambles with one claw. Picking up bits of
debris, sniffing them, and dropping them again. He finally settled for two cigarette butts. "Someone else betrayed the both of ya," he announced. "Someone who smokes."

Kitty looked at the butts. One of them had lipstick on the filter. It wasn't a 'teenage colour'. "But - the only other person who knew about this was --" she stopped herself. _No..._

"Lance," Kurt whispered. "On top of everything else, he sold you to Hess. Meine schlechtes geliebtes..."

Kitty started feeling more than a little unstable, herself. How much more would it take to make other people inside *her* head? Did Kurt feel like this, in the beginning, or did he just snap under pressure? What did it feel like, to suddenly have someone else in your head?

Logan unsheathed his claws. "*I'll* sort him out," he volunteered. "After I'm done, he won't even wanna *think* about crossin' our paths again."

"No, Logan," said Jean. "Let me."

"Yes," whispered Kurt.

Lance yawned as he watched the continuing exposure of tonnes and *tonnes* of Hess' screwed-up shit. CNN was going on and on about Scientists' efforts to match up the remains that Hess preserved with the families of missing children from practically halfway around the world.

Ms Rosa was into some seriously twisted shit.

She was also apparently turning on her best friends in the hope of a plea bargain.

_Eh. I'd probably do the same,_ he thought as his latest yawning fit threw him into sleep. He dreamed.

He smelled blood. Old blood, new blood. Someone was crying. He couldn't move. All tied up in leather and chains. He opened his eyes and saw a chamber of horrors. Every possible part of a human body on display, and done so with artistic flair.

Then Hess/Rosa came out of the darkness behind him. "Hello, liebe," she cooed. "I couldn't get the one I wanted, so I decided to settle for you. And it looks to *me* like you're experienced in these matters..." A finger traced some scars from one of his many abusive homes.

Then he saw who was crying.

Kitty.

"Shall we begin?"
"'Sup with him, yo?"
"Looks like a nightmare," said Fred. He gently taped Lance on the shoulder. "Hey, wake up."
"That's not how you do it," said Pietro. "Allow *me*.*" In a flash, the speedster had Lance over his
shoulder and headed towards the bathroom.
"Let us have a moment of silence," announced Tabitha, "for the lost peace and quiet that we had
once enjoyed."
{Flush!}
"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"
{zwip} Pietro was instantly behind Fred. "Ididn'tdoit, nobodysawmedoit,
there'snowayanyonecanproveanything."
To everyone's surprise, Lance didn't immediately follow him out and threaten battle, war, and
sudden death to the rest of the Brotherhood for letting him get flushed.
He actually *walked* out, looking pale and -well- flushed. "Thanks," he said, and turned the news
off. "That was one heck of a nightmare."
"Yo, 's gotta be," said Todd. "I'd'a thought *anythin'* was better'n havin' your head down *our*
toilet..."
"Try dreaming about being in Rosa's fun house, sometime," said Lance. "I'd rather have the toilet."

"Let me get this straight. You *never* watch the news?"
"Not a bit of it," said Ms Wilde. "It's *way* too boring for me." She scooped her purple hair away
from her eyes. "Besides, anything *really* important gets to me through word of mouth."
"You mean gossip."
"Pretty much, yeah. And I've learned to take what I hear with a grain of salt. According to
*rumour*®, that Wagner kid has a kid that's practically half his age." She snorted. "How real is
*that*®?"

The prosecution and the defense conferred.
"She's too young."
"So are over half of Hess' victims. She's an American citizen. She's old enough to decide who runs
the country. *I* say why not?"

The defence hummed. "Well, it *is* kind of hard to find someone who hasn't seen any of the news.
She has an open mind."
"I'm willing to let her in," said the prosecution. "She sounds like a nice girl."
"Okay. She's a candidate."

The prosecution turned back to Ms Wilde. "Thank you, that's all we need to know. Do you have
any questions for us about being a juror?"
"Yeah. I heard you get paid for this?" Risty swept her hair back again. "How much?"

Kurt looked at the studio, at the cameras set up around it, and the play area in the middle. "You
know that I've formally requested that her identity is obscured."
"Yes. We're going to do that on the released videos. We're also going to destroy the originals, so
that her privacy is maintained."
"Sehr gut." Kurt turned to his daughter. "You think you can do this, liebe? Just answer the
questions to the best of your memory, ja?"

Bluebelle nodded.
"Go on. I'll be watching from out here. If you get scared, just call for me."
"...okay..."
He kissed her on the forehead before he helped her into the room.
"The psychologist's bilingual," said the supervising technician. His hand hovered over a control panel. "Just in case the kid panics and switches languages."

Kurt just watched through the trick mirror. He was extremely worried about Bluebelle, since the psychologist's curly hair might remind her of Hess. On the other hand, the psychologist was softly spoken, pleasant, and apparently carried an infinite supply of candy in her voluminous purse.

Kurt watched Dr. Prinz enter through another door. Bluebelle spotted her and tried to hide behind a chair.

"Hello, Bluebelle," Prinz's voice carried over the speakers. "Don't you remember me? I spoke with your father the other day. You looked at my books, as I recall. And you had a lollipop."

Had was a slightly incorrect term. Kurt had had to act as an intermediary for its transfer. Bluebelle had always kept something between herself and Prinz.

"Must burn you up, havin' that living with ya," said the technician.
Kurt glared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"That's Hess' kid. Wouldn't she be like a constant reminder of everything that happened to you?"

"Nein. She's just a little girl. *My* little girl. Hess' sins aren't hers."

In the room, Bluebelle had crept forward to touch Prinz's lacy, floral-print dress. Prinz maintained a gentle, encouraging smile, and let her take things at her own pace.

"Schones hubches," Bluebelle whispered. "Why do *you* get to wear so many colours at once?"

Kurt had to laugh. "I dressed her this morning," he informed. "She was quite upset at my three colour limit."

The technician boggled at him. "You're kidding me."

"Nein. Bluebelle's kind of new to clothing."

"Jesus," the technician whispered. "She's one sick bitch, isn't she?"

For once, Kurt didn't upbraid him about the minor blasphemy. "Sick," he repeated, testing the word. "Ja. It fits. A diseased and scaberous mind. Trying to infect others."

Prinz had worked out that Bluebelle was scared of her hair, and got the little girl to put it in a different style. She'd chosen pigtails, because of another little girl who'd 'come in' with them.

Soon, she'd get Bluebelle to start 'showing' her what happened to the girls and boys who 'came in' with Hess. It was going to be a long day.

"Uh. Pal? Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Go for it," said Kurt.

"What's with the chicken?"

Evan hadn't been here since the funeral. The whole thing creeped him out to such an extent that he'd been giving it, and K-man, a wide berth. Now he was out taping Bluebelle's testimony, he felt more or less safe to come here.

Kurt's 'church'.
It was just a big-ass rock in the middle of a clearing in the woods, but Kurt felt it was holy ground. This was the place where Hess finally abducted him, and he still felt safe, here.

Evan skirted around the grave and climbed the rock from the low side, staring at the clearing from Kurt's favourite perching spot. What did he see here? Evan just saw a dumb clearing.

Maybe it was a German thing.
Or a Gypsy thing.
Or a Heirelgart thing, he didn't know.
It certainly didn't feel as intimidating as the average church. The few times he'd been in one, he'd sweated his way through the entire service, trying to keep up with the others and being a beat behind all the sitting and kneeling and standing.

Here, it was actually peaceful. Maybe that was why Kurt kept coming back.

The talking to himself part was just a mystery. Kurt claimed he was talking to God; but God *knew* everything and saw everything. A big omnipotent invisible guy, looking down on everyone.

Evan lay down on the rock and watched the clouds drift by.
"I don't get it," he announced. "What's so holy about *this* place that makes the K-man keep coming here? This ain't no scary church. There's nothing here like the churches *I've* seen. So why's *this* holy ground?"

No response. Evan had more or less expected that. He was perpetually afraid of doing something wrong in *real* churches and getting swallowed up by the ground, or smote from heaven for screwing up. Not here, though. Here, talking out your problems seemed right.

"I swear, every day I've been here, I've been trying to figure the K-man out. Where he comes from, you know? Well. Okay. After I was done being scared of him and everything, but you know that. At first I thought he was such a goof 'cause he wanted people to like him despite his looks, and then I figured he did it to get people to like him *because* of his looks. Guy's got an ego like *that*, y'know. He spent most of his life in this tiny little mountain town where everyone knew everyone else's business... Not that he isn't a likeable guy. He's sweet, y'know? You can't *help* liking him - but --" Evan sighed. "This whole business with Hess or Rosa or whatever she calls herself... He's started scaring me again. And I don't wanna be scared..."

Risty Wilde settled herself into her Juror's hotel room. Signed permission from her 'parents', and other documentation had long since been dealt with. She locked the door and let herself revert to her normal shape.

She toured the two rooms and a closet, tested the bed, and checked the view.

She could see the Institute from here.

"You'll have justice, my son," she said. "I'm not much of a mother, but I can promise you justice. Everything she did to you will be reflected back on her in full. Every child she hurt will be vindicated, every death avenged."

Raven touched the glass and wished, not for the first time, that she was touching her son.

"I'll see to it," she said. "Personally."
Fracture Thirty-Seven: Grandstanding

The bottom right-hand corner of the screen read, "Live CNN" and pictured a court room. An otherwise harmless-looking old woman sat proudly with the defense. Only her orange jumpsuit declared her as a felon. A white cane hung suspended from the prosecution's chair.

A girl in the jury with purple-dyed hair checked her makeup before taking out a notebook and a pen. Another juror was knitting. A third was working on sketches.

Murdock, Prosecution, stood and felt his way to the outer corner of the desk. Then he counted a precise number of steps to the juror's box before finding it with one hand. The world had seen him do something similar in the pre-trial. The world knew he was blind.

He began his opening statement. "Frau Bruna Hess is a sick person, there's no doubt about that. The defense will state that she did what she did because she is insane. I intend to prove that she *knew*. She knew *exactly* what she was doing. Every step of the way. She deliberately and repeatedly abused thousands of children. Ruined thousands of lives, families, hearts, and even homes. She has devastated thousands of people and she *chose* to do so.

"Whether or not she is insane is not the point. Frau Hess is competent, capable of dealing with day-to-day life. Capable of making rational decisions. Even though those rational decisions resulted in irrational actions. We intend to prove that Frau Hess deliberately and intentionally raped, tortured, and even murdered *children*. She even conspired to do so with others." He paced his way back to his desk, and found his chair.

Mason, Defense, stood next. "My client is insane. There is no stretch of the law so vast as to rule her otherwise. As such, she was not responsible for her actions."

The court erupted in shouts and took five minutes to settle down.

Mason continued. "My client was, in fact, not initiating her own actions, but imitating a trauma she survived. Frau Hess was driven insane by experiments on herself and her twin during world war two."

"Objection!" Said Murdock. "There is no proof of this in any of her records."

"You call me a liar?" Hess stood and peeled back her left sleeve. "Here is your proof!" She displayed a number to the entire court.

"Die ist meine Zahl Opa! Du Fotze! Mach es dir selber und wurfel, du Arschgesicht!" The camera focused on a teenaged boy with blue hair who was being restrained by the bailiffs. After a moment, the camera labeled him as a Survivor. "That's my Opa's number, you *BITCH*! Du Dreksau!" He was dragged out of court yelling, "I'll kill you myself! Ich beende Sie selbst!"

They cut back to the studio.

"Well, wasn't that a turn-up for the books, Mike?"

"It sure was, Sal. And we have with us in the studio reporter Judi Bloom, who has been following these remarkable events ever since the Expressway Incident. Is that correct, Judi?"

"That's right, Mike. I was there when troubled teen and Hess survivor, Kurt, had escaped a failed abduction attempt and wound up on the Bayville expressway. We've later discovered that Kurt was one of the many that Hess 'infected' - if you will - with Multiple Personality Syndrome. The footage played on the screen of Kurt on the highway. "Here, we plainly see another persona. Note the body language and the crouched posture. The almost ape-like way of locomotion..."

Bluebelle's tridactyl hands curled into fists, scrunching wrinkles into Herr Pryde's shirt. Mr Peeper was slightly upset to be left at home, but seemed satisfied with the food and water. Bluebelle was more upset that people had dragged Daddy away from the cameras.

"Are they going to lock Daddy up, too?"

Herr Pryde patted her shoulder. "No, sweetie. They just had to take him out of court so that he'd
 settle down. Hess pulled a dirty trick on him and he got mad, that's all."

"What did he mean, that's his Opa's number?"

Herr Pryde took a deep breath. "A long time ago, there was a very evil man called Adolf Hitler..."

Dr Prinz kept her distance as she watched Kurt calm down. She knew he was one of the many survivors who had a 'thing' about being touched. She also knew that 'thing' was a grossly inaccurate word for describing the complex set of quasi-rules the survivors had about touching, but it *was* a marvellous shortcut.

Kurt could touch and be touched by his friends and family, and it took one a significant amount of time to be included in that group. A stranger *could* touch him, but only areas that were clothed, staying away from the front of the torso and - funnily enough - the legs below the knees.

Right now, he was in a typically defensive posture. Curled up into a ball, yet also crouched on the chair, hands knotting into his hair and his face hidden between his elbows and his knees. He was still spitting out epithets about Hess' stunt, in between sobs.

"You love your Opa," said Prinz. She rested her hand on his shoulder.

"Ja," he croaked. "She had no right. She can do what she likes to me... I'm used to it." More soft noises of mourning. "But she *can't* touch my *family*. That's *mine!*"

"It's all right. They're going to cross-check that number with the Holocaust tattoo database and find out who it really belongs to. Hess' stunt won't last long."

"That's not th' point," said Kurt. "The point is that she *knew*. She knew everything about me and those around me. She was *this* close," he gestured with his thumb and first two fingers, "to my family. My *tribe*, and I was unaware. That - that - *animal* found my *family*."

"And family's very important to you, of course," she prompted.

"I was adopted," he said. "My birth mother abandoned me, but the Wagners took me in and raised me as their own. They didn't care about my condition. They didn't care how people reacted to me. They loved me. They still do."

The condition, Prinz knew about. A rare disorder that effected the muscles and ligaments of the hands, making the afflicted effectively tridactyl. There were operations and medication to partially remedy the condition, but the cure was still worse than the disease.

The reactions he just mentioned puzzled her. "How *did* people react?"

He smiled. A weak little ironic smile. At least he was easing out of his defensive ball. "Heirelgart's a little mountain town in a cluster of little mountain towns. Not many people move about, but superstitions spread like wildfire, ja? Some people think that the devil also has hooves for hands. Anyone with just three fingers could be Satan in disguise. People were scared of me because of that."

"*Really*?"

"Ja. My village is used to me. Lots of other people aren't, though. I used to think I'd scare people forever until I got this scholarship. Here, nobody even notices. It's like a breath of fresh air."

Light dawned. Dr. Prinz had been studying the whole case, including Hess and the 'lieutenants' that had been bought in so far. Hess had repeatedly referred to Kurt and his two children as 'little demons'. Now she knew *why*. "And because of *that*, Hess chose you."

"Hess likes to pick on the different," said Kurt. "She told me that she was making us into something 'magnificent'."

"She's a very sick woman."

"*Ja*."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Ja. I'll go back in to prove she didn't get to me and then go back home as soon as court's adjourned. Besides, I abandoned Kitty in there. I swore I'd never leave her side."

He stood, making a motion like putting on an invisible mask. Prinz recognised the emotionlessness of 'the Archivist'. So. He could do it deliberately as well as accidentally. She watched, fascinated, as the personalities merged. She really wished she was working with his therapist. This phenomenon would make a *fantastic* book.
Maybe she could cut a deal into the study of him.

Kurt exchanged a long, cold glare with Hess as he strode back into court. He could practically feel the bailiffs tensing in preparation for another fistfight.

One of them even murmured, "You're not on Jerry Springer, pal. Remember that," as he passed.

Kurt pretended he didn't hear the man, and just found his seat beside Kitty. They hugged, and Kitty kissed him behind his ear, and Hess suddenly seemed less significant.

Hess hadn't touched his family, but she had been near them. That was all she'd done. He had to remember that. The old cow could only threaten his family, but she couldn't touch them.

Not while he stood between them and her.

Finally, he came up with an appropriate Romani curse. "[May all your attempts to gain freedom put you deeper behind bars,]" he whispered at her.

"Settle down," Kitty whispered to him, adding another kiss. "She can't like, hurt you any more. She can't hurt anyone any more."

He instantly gentled, for Kitty's sake, relaxing in her embrace. "Sorry, meine geliebt," he hissed back. "Hess has very long claws; may she cut herself with them..."

"I like, sorta guessed. Relax. They're like, going to want to lock her up for like, ever."

Kurt snuggled into the hug, allowing the Archivist to fade into the background, and laid a string of seductive kisses along her divine neck, making her giggle. "Have I told you how lovely and curvy you're getting, geliebt?" he purred.

She had a lovely blush, too.
Fracture Thirty-Eight: Adjusting

Fracture Thirty-Eight: Adjusting

Tom thought he'd panicked when he found out Kitty was a mutant. Staying in a whole school full of them was just constant terror. Every time he turned around, someone was doing something bizarre and unearthly. Sure, he'd got used to Bluebelle and Kurt through near-constant exposure, but the others just unnerved him.

They pulled *stunts* with their powers. Like Bobby icing over an entire room so the rest could throw 'capades' in the summer. Or Evan's 'indoor rock climbing' experience in one of the sub-basements. Or Amara's 'cook-outs'.

*Then* there was 'share a skill nite'; which was as unnerving as all heck, because kids were teaching other kids how to do incredibly dangerous-looking stuff and now they had a seven-year-old girl involved. She looked unnaturally gleeful to be there.

"Pumpkin?" he begged from the control/observation room "Please tell me you don't do this?"

"Like, relax, Daddy. The safeties are like, totally on."

From the middle of the high wire, Kurt called out, "Come on, liebe! We're all waiting!" He was standing there as if it were a perfectly normal thing to be bouncing on one foot several meters above the very solid ground.

Either they did this every week and nobody figured out how to tell him, or they were doing it now as a subtle hint for him to go home.

He certainly wasn't going to stay here for his *health*.

_Submitted for your approval, one Principal Edward Kelly. A humble man with dreams of grandeur on the bottom rung of a tall ladder that leads, in his dreams, to the highest seat in the nation. In reality, mister Kelly's hands are clasped firmly around the doorhandle to - the Twilight Zone._

A guitar plucked itself in the back of Principal Kelly's head as his left eye continued to twitch.

"Great," he muttered to himself. "I have a dead TV presenter in my head. Keep calm. Keep calm. *Just* keep calm. You only have to worry when you *see* him. Keepcalmkeepcalmkeepcalm..."

"...um. Sir?"

He looked up at his secretary. "Darla? Are you *used* to this?"

"Used to what, sir?"

"The earthquakes. The strange happenings. The demon sightings. The - the *everything*. The insanity..." he whimpered and twitched again. "The chickens in your car."

Darla looked at him as if his head was about to explode. "Sir, Tammy Richards' parents are here to see you."

_Oh God..._ He put on his Show Face with a lot of effort. _Sparkle, sparkle._ "Lus. Patty. Hello, Tammy. Bonbon?" He pushed a little bowl of them forward with a nervous jerk that was more of a spasm.

"Don't you touch those, sweetie, you don't know what's in them," said Patty.

"*Mommy*..."

"We wanna talk to you about this alleged gym teacher that's in the news," said Lus. She had piercings covering one half of her face and an interestingly celtic-style tattoo on the other half. "If she even *breathed* on our little girl..."

"*Mo-om*..." Tammy cringed in her seat. "I don't even *take* gym. I never went *near* her..."

"You said you weren't sure, honey," said Patty. She had jewelry that matched her outfit. Her one concession to her life-partner was an extra piercing in her right ear, which had the yin half of a yin-yang circle dangling from it.

A quick check in the forest of Lus' earrings eventually found the matching yang. They also wore wedding bands.
"From what we can gather," Principal Kelly managed, "Frau Rosafar-- er; *Hess*... was more interested in -ah- old acquaintences, as it were, than taking new victims."

Lus leaned on his desk. "Our five-year-old said she saw Hess hanging around his kindergarden. He said she was taking notes."

Was that a flicker of black in the corner of his eye?

"Ms. Richards, please... I had no idea who she was when I hired her," just to be safe, he backed out of his chair and paced his office. "I can't do long, investigative personality checks on new members of staff. What with all the -" twitch "- damage to the school, I can barely afford *staff*. Nobody wants to pay any extra to help support the school... the chickens in my car..." twitch twitch twitch. Kelly jerked a nervous glance over his shoulder. He was certain he'd seen... No. It was just a trick of the light.

"Sweetie, did this man touch you?"

"*Mom*..." Tammy sounded indignant. "I *am* taking Tae Bo classes, you know. You *make* me."

"Ms Richards... I swear I've never had anything to do with -- D'AAARGH!"

Rod Searling was walking down the street outside the school. He was looking right back at Kelly. "What in hell's wrong with you, twitch-boy?"

All that came out of his mouth was an inarticulate gibber. By the time they came to see what he was pointing at, Rod Searling was gone.

"I'm starting to think this entire school is insane," said Patty. "Honey, we're going to get you a *therapist*, okay."

"*Mom-meeeee*..."

Lance Alvers woke up screaming. Again. He wasn't getting much in the way of sleep, lately. Every time he closed his eyes, he'd see the old biddy experimenting on him and all those he felt close to. Every time he closed his eyes, it got worse.

_God, I'm so tired..._ His head hurt. He couldn't focus.

Maybe he could take a pill. But the thought of being trapped in a nightmare with Hess for company didn't appeal.

But, hey, there just happened to be two telepaths in town who were suckers for a sob story. He looked haggard enough for them to believe that he was suffering.

_Who'm I fooling? I *am* suffering...._ He was in no shape to drive, so he began the long walk towards the institute. Good thing he'd slept in his clothes, otherwise he'd be plodding towards the mansion in his jammies. He didn't care. He needed rest. Rest without Hess in his head.

Bluebelle hid her scream behind both hands as Jamie fell, and cringed at the squeak that escaped anyway. Any second, now, a hand would descend from above...

It did, but embraced her shoulder.

"It's okay, Bluebelle," said Daddy. "He has a safety harness on, see?"

She looked. Sure enough, Jamie was dangling in mid-air, arms flapping comically.

"Look, I'm flying!"

Bluebelle giggled, relaxing again. Mistress wasn't here. She had to keep telling herself that. No-one hurt her here.

But she kept waiting for the blows to fall. Even when Mistress was feeling nice, she'd never lasted this long without hitting her. She was more than a little nervous every time something went wrong. She had to keep reminding herself that that this was a new place. Daddy said it was safe, and so far, he'd told the truth.

She turned and hugged Daddy with all the strength she had. She didn't want things to go bad. She wanted the good things to go on forever.

"Hey, what's that for?"

Bluebelle didn't want to say, so she shrugged.
Daddy just chuckled and said, "I love you, too. Come on. It's your turn, now."
Bluebelle grinned. She was starting to enjoy this part. She readied herself to leap for the bar, and almost jumped out of her skin when an alarm went off.
The holograms and unused training gear put themselves away. The rest lowered everyone to the safety of the ground.
Daddy {Bamf!}ed her into the control room with Doctor Hank. "Stay here," he said and {Bamf!}ed away again.
Bluebelle found a nice pipe to dangle from as Doctor Hank typed things into the computers.
"We should be able to watch the proceedings on the monitors," he looked back at her and smiled.
"Shall I obtain popcorn?"
"Can I really?" Popcorn was still a special treat. Daddy wanted her eating properly before he let her 'go nuts on the junk'.
"One bag won't hurt," said Doctor Hank.

Their enemy hardly looked fit to walk, let alone fight. He seemed to be holding himself up by sheer force of will alone.
Lance Alvers was a changed mutant. His cocky grin was replaced by an exhausted pout. His sneering eyes were bloodshot, bruised and had bags underneath them. His hair and clothes looked like they'd been slept in by an insomniac.
He'd lost a lot of weight.
"I surrender," he croaked, barely able to hold his hands up. "I just - I came here to - I need help."
"Whoah," said Kitty. "What happened to you?"
"Can't sleep," he managed. "Keep havin' nightmares 'bout Hess an' all her sick 'games'. 'S like I'm *there*. I feel everything even after I wake up and my whole body hurts and every time I shut my eyes, I'm back there and I'm too scared t' sleep but I *need* to and -- oh God... help me..."
Kurt glared at Jean as he helped Lance into the Institute's grounds. _Enough is enough, I think_, he thought at her. _He's suffered enough. Give him respite. Let him rest._
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Lance was saying, half out of his mind through lack of sleep. "I'm so sorry I gave you to Hess, Kitty... Just wanted you back... Just wanted you to love me again..."
"It doesn't work like that," said Kitty. "You should like, *know* that by now."
"I'm sorry," he whimpered. "Believe me I am *so* sorry..."
They'd told Lance to confess his crime to the police, as it was the only way he could 'get rid of the guilt'. In the meantime, Jean zapped him into a dreamless sleep - shortly before the Professor gave her a lecture about taking justice into one's hands and when to tell one was overdoing it.

Kitty lingered in the medical bay after everyone was gone, watching Hank tidy up.

"You *are* a doctor, aren't you, Mr McCoy?"

"All I lack is my internship," he said. "I was going to do that shortly before my transformation."

"So, you could like, prescribe stuff and like, stuff?"

Hank smiled. "Ah, the alterior motive presents itself. Yes, I can provide you with a prescription for something, though I'd prefer you took the issue up with a properly qualified GP."

Kitty went red. "Well... more like a family planning centre..." she mumbled.

Hank raised an eyebrow. "I thought you and Kurt weren't -er--"

"Not yet," said Kitty. "But - you know... It's gotta like, happen soon. He's like, *way* grabbier than like, Lance was and like - I guess... I've decided that if it happens I wanna be like, prepared and junk?" She went even redder and her voice lowered. "And since I've like, 'filled out'? My -um- myperiodshavestartedupagain."

Hank chuckled. "There's no need for embarassment; it's all part of becoming an adult. You'd know that if you read that book Kurt gave you instead of looking at the pictures."

"But - the pictures are so *distracting*. I'll like - try." She scratched her arm. "But I still like, need -youknow - insurance."

"I don't think Kurt would ever rape you. It just isn't his style."

"I know that, but like, he's so - so --"

"Demonstrative?"

"Yeah! Lance like, hardly touched me. Like, ever." She looked at the floor and muttered, "I don't like, have much basis for comparison, you know..."

Hank patted her shoulder. "Again, nothing to be ashamed of. Especially in this day and age. You're worried about getting pregnant, yes?"

Kitty nodded, turning beetroot.

"You also have to consider other consequences. Especially considering your partners' -er- histories. You could already have caught something nasty. And Kurt may also be a carrier."

"...OmyGod..." Kitty cringed.

"There's a standard blood test you can take," he offered.

Kitty held out her arm and squinched her eyes shut.

Kids and needles. They were almost all the same. Except Kurt and Bluebelle. Needles were the least of their worries.

Hank took the necessary blood and told Kitty to come back the next day for the results. And to talk to Kurt about the possibilities of communicable diseases.

He'd barely began on Kitty's test when Kurt barged in demanding his own. He could hardly sit still whilst he waited for Hank to quit fiddling with test tubes. By the time Hank was ready, Kurt was tying himself in knots with anxiety.

Literally.

"So," he said conversationally, "Just how do you expect me to find a vein when you're like that?"

"Er..." Kurt untangled himself and sat properly for a change. "Like this?"

Frankly, Hank was surprised he could actually sit like that, what with the tail and all. Still, he'd evidently figured it out. He readied a clean needle and proceeded.

Kitty had started wearing her new wardrobe. It was still a little loose on her, but she was filling it up
nicely. She was glowing, too, and not just because Logan's training helped her gain muscle as well as fat. Every time he touched her, she'd shine.

So, of course, he had to touch her. A hand held here, an embrace there. Some glorious neck-nuzzling time during couch-play. And tickle-fights - which he won, owing to his tail.

Not that she didn't get 'revenge', of course. Kitty discovered several sensitive spots on him and used them to her advantage. The two and fro would have them tumbling about until, laughing until they were sore, they'd collapse into a long, luxurious hug wherever they wound up. It was marvellous.

Kurt suspected he was glowing, too.

Love did that to people.

For the moment, he was quite happy to bask in that glow. It felt warm, inside and out, just to be with her. She felt safe; as if the world's nastiness couldn't possibly touch them when they were together. He'd purr in pure delight when she held him and nuzzled him back.

Hess could go hang. *This* was love.

Bluebelle had to smile. It was an okay smile that didn't show any teeth, so she didn't think she had to hide it. At least, not yet. Daddy was playing cuddle-games with Kitty again.

She didn't know why, but it made her feel warm inside to see them doing so. She liked that warm feeling. It was almost like the warmth she got when Daddy hugged her.

Mr Peeper was playing chase-tail with her again, and Bluebelle kind of let him, keeping her tail's movements erratic enough to keep the chicken interested, whilst also ensuring that he wouldn't actually *catch* her tail and start trying to 'kill' it.

That sort of hurt.

Someone was laughing, the sort of laugh that was trying not to laugh at something that was inherently funny. Bluebelle turned to see Jamie chuckling at her, and laughed herself. She only hid her mouth with one hand out of force of habit.

"Uh, the others are kinda playing Calvinball outside," said Jamie. "Wanna be on my team?"

Jamie also made her feel warm inside. It made her blush and giggle a lot, and want to hide, but at the same time spend more time with him. They didn't actually touch, not yet; but Bluebelle could see sometime in the distant future where they might hold hands or something.

"Kay," she said, and crept out of the room.

Mr Peeper followed her for a few steps, and then realised that she wasn't Daddy. He went back to where Daddy was playing with Kitty with a loud barrage of nervous peeping.

Then he decided to catch Daddy's tail.

"Hey! That's not an appetiser!"

Kitty giggled.

Bluebelle caught up with Jamie. There was a glorious afternoon of Calvinball ahead.

Lance snapped awake. He'd actually slept. Without dreams. Without Hess in his head. It felt marvellous. He felt completely refreshed, like he could take on the world.

But he still had a crime to confess.

According to the self-righteous X-geeks, anyway. They didn't know as much as they pretended to know. And he was sure that now that he was avoiding the news, he wouldn't have anything to fill his dreams with that bitch and her nightmare games.

Everything was back to normal. He didn't need the X-geeks or anything. He'd had a break, and he was back to normal. Everything was fine.

He straightened up his clothes and let himself out of the mansion's hospital wing. With luck, he could get out of there without anyone noticing, or getting in his face.

He dodged out of the way of a couple of kids. One was the Squirt-a-thon, Jamie, and the one with the tail and a complete lack of taste in clothing had to be Bluebelle. The screaming wonder.

Unfortunately, he chose to dodge into the common room, where Kitty and the freakshow were playing cuddle-games. When his stupid chicken wasn't attacking his tail.

He laughed at the wrong moment and earned a glare from the freakshow, and the Spanish
Inquisition from Kitty.
He barely heard the billion questions she came out with, staring instead at her body.
She'd grown up - and out.
"Whoah," he said. "Kitty - you look --" he fumbled for the right word. "*Fantastic*.
It used to be that a compliment like that would have her in his arms in seconds. Not now. She clung
to the furball and grinned like a cheshire cat. "You think so?"
"Hell yeah! Are you on a new diet? What's this one called?"
"Like, a *healthy* diet," said Kitty. "Turns out all that like, dieting junk was like, *totally*
detrimental. There's this like, entire book on it."
Books. Lance snorted. Like they could save lives. "You really *are* becoming a member of the
geek squad, aren't you?" he said. "You used to be cool."
Kitty glared at him. "*You* used to be nice. So what?"
"Katzchen," said the fuzzball. "Leave it alone."
"But - you *know* what he did to us. He should like, pay!"
"Ja, but he also let me find my daughter. And rescue my son."
Lance boggled. "You have *two* kids?" he screamed. "*Crap*! Where the hell's the other one?"
"He died."
Lance swore. "Forget it. Forget it. I am *out* of here. Big time. You guys can just -- you guys can
just be freaky together. I suddenly stopped caring. Later." And with a final looser salute, he left. At
speed.
Fracture Forty: Forcing to Remember

She'd become Risty Wilde to be closer to her children, to try and form some kind of bond between them after years of separtation. She and Rogue were becoming fast friends, or at least, she hoped so. Kurt was a lot more distant with her. Possibly because he thought she was a norm.
Sometime after this mess was over, she'd have to develop a shape-shifting power and see if she could become his friend as well. Maybe. She'd have to come up with new and creative ways to avoid Wolverine if she did.

Never mind.
She had another job to do, now.

Raven put a 'do not disturb' sign on her door, just in case, and transformed into a raven. She fluttered out of her window and towards Hess' jail cell.
If Hess wasn't insane already, she'd see to it that she would be.

Bruna Hess was kept alone. Mostly because people were afraid of her, but also because no-one wanted her 'infecting' any other prisoners with her particular degree of madness. She was used to being alone, to hiding, to waiting.

It let her think.
There was a soft noise in her cell.

Hess turned to face one of her dead failures. Alive again, and looking angry.
"You killed me," said the little boy.
"You failed," said Hess. "Failures die."
Then he struck her. "You killed me!" And then he was another failure. "You killed me."
"Go away," Hess ordered. "I've never had ghosts before and I'm not going to have them now."
"You killed me and you'll have to pay," said the little girl. And then she was a different girl. "You'll have to pay for a long, long time."
"Do you think you can make me regret it?" she demanded. "You could have been glorious! You could have been marvellous; but you failed. You deserved to die."

Now, the child was a little demon boy. "But I just wanted to be me," he said. "I didn't want to be marvellous."
"Get out of my sight, you traitor!" Hess roared. "Demon filth! You accepted your glory!"
"Pipe down in there," said the guard.
"If you don't learn young, you'll never learn at all!" Hess raved, but the boy was gone. He'd be back. He always came back to her. Always. "Think of the prestige! Your reputation! They would be nothing without me!"

And that was when the guard came in and helped her shut her mouth with a nightstick. It was professionally done, and didn't even bruise the bone.

In Kurt's place, was a jar. Its occupant, another little demon, was unscrewing its lid from the inside. The baby demon hauled himself partially out of the alcohol and looked straight at her.
"Why, Mama?" he said. "Why?"

Hess started to scream.

Raven lay back in the bathtub and sighed. She hadn't shapeshifted that often since she was young and foolish. A hot bath was just the thing to relax her tired muscles. It had been a hard afternoon, driving Hess to the brink.

With luck, the old cow wouldn't be able to look any of her accusers in the eye. At least, not any more.
And if she was still defiant, then Raven could always go back. Until one of them surrendered. Then, she'd have to consider something to do for her granddaughter. 

_Good God, I'm a grandmother,_ she sighed. _I guess it had to happen _eventually_, but - they're still _teenagers_. She'd barely considered being a mother.

Grandmotherhood was something of a shock. Especially that she'd been one for seven years _already_. How were his adoptive parents handling this?

"What? But we just got _back_..."

"He's our _tribesman_," said Hans. "We should be there for moral support."

"Besides," added Andrei, "enough of the circus quit that idiot General's hire that we practically have the old troupe back. Just think of it as a comeback tour - plus some."

"But - your people have never been outside of Germany," said Johannes. "That's bound to cause some reactions, you know."

"Come on, liebe," Astrid soothed. "Nobody offends a Centaur twice. They'll just have to get used to them."

"Yeah," Taelin Jarelmann snuggled a bungee strap tight. "They were here long before we were. It's high time the rest of the world knew that."

Katja, Anja and Erika looked up at their father with pleading eyes.

"Come on, Papa," said Erika. "You can't tell me you don't miss flying..."

"Ach..." He sighed. "All _right_. But only because most of the village is going too, and I'm not ready to grow roots just yet."

"I'm coming, too," said Mrs Meirs.

"Mama," said Astrid, "You're sure."

"This is my grandson," she said. "And my great-granddaughter. I'd like to see you stop me." She straightened up to four foot ten and put her hands on her hips.

Johannes had to laugh. As if anyone would dare defy Astrid's Mama.

"Why? Why did you kill me?"

"You were not a survivor. You were not strong. What I did was a mercy."

The child fiddled with his leg brace. "You dissected me while I was alive," he said. "Just to hear me scream. That isn't mercy."

"You were a failure," Hess repeated. "You could have been magnificent, but you _failed_. You _deserved_ to die."

"I didn't want to be magnificent. I just wanted to be me."

"I _guard_," said the Archivist. A slight frown was all that betrayed the intense anger that Kurt was feeling, somewhere deep underneath. "I do not share. Especially with _outsiders_."

Sharon groaned under her breath.

"Tell me again how this cross-examination works."

"And what were you two doing in this 'secret place' of yours, Ms Pryde?" asked Mason. Kitty swallowed. _He's going to discredit me by making me look like a slut._ "We were just hanging out. Talking and stuff. You know, like, spending time together."

"Can you tell us _why_ you felt you had to spend this time?"

"Objection! Relevance," said Mr Murdock.

"OVERRULED."
Kitty started hating the judge. "I was like, waiting for a pregnancy test result," she said. "I was like, raped a couple of weeks before. Kurt was like, my emotional support."
Murmuring broke out amongst the few members of the public that were in the audience.
"You're certain about that?"
"Objection! Badgering the witness."
"Sustained."
"Very well," said Mason. "Back to the basement. What, exactly, did you see in there?"
Kitty took a calming breath. "The first thing I like, saw when I woke up was like, Kurt in a harness. He was like, strapped to some kind of examination table. Then I like, realised I was like, trapped, myself. I was like, maybe four feet off the ground in this weird rig? And there was like, blood on the walls..."
"You're certain it was blood?"
"Yes."
"What else did you see?"
"There was a little kid hiding in a corner. That was how I like, met Bluebelle? Um. And uh, kinda like, whips and these like, medieval weapons on the walls like you'd hang up power tools? And there were a few empty tables and chairs with like, straps and blood on them."
"And you are positive that you were in Frau Hess' basement."
"Yes. Because I like, *saw* her go in there."
Murmuring broke out again.
Mason looked like he was trying not to swear. "At any time, did Hess touch or hurt you?"
"No, we didn't like, give her the chance."
"So all you had to rely on was Mr Wagner's and Bluebelle's *word* that Hess was going to torture you."
"That blood like, didn't get there on its own, you know," said Kitty.
Mason sighed, but subtly, so the jury couldn't pick it up. "Do you *know* how the blood got there?"
"No."
"Thank you, Ms Pryde. You may step down."


The little girl on the television screen would have appeared to have been playing with dolls, if one turned the sound down and ignored some of the positions she used.

Risty Wilde had her hand over her mouth.

A curly-haired blinking doll represented Hess. A velociraptor was her, a tyrannosaur Kurt, and a small dinosaur in a glass bottle represented the baby that she called 'brother Michael'. Kitty was a brown-haired dress-me doll.

This was the last 'game'. Dr Prinz had started with the earliest memories that Bluebelle could recall, and finished with the incident that ended in her rescue.

Only Risty knew why the little girl chose saurians to represent herself, her father, and her brother. They were the only dolls there that had tails.

So much had happened to her granddaughter.

Hess was going to *pay*.

As always, she took notes, all the better to torture Hess with. Hess was never 'mother'. She was always 'Mistress' to Bluebelle. Hess made her wear a leash, and damn little else. Bluebelle didn't remember ever wearing clothes. In cold weather, Bluebelle would huddle up in a nest of army blankets or help 'keep Mistress warm' in Hess' bedchamber.

Sick, sick stuff.

She had to keep notes. Had to keep tabs on what Hess did and to whom. Which faces belonged to the dead, and which to the living. How old they were when Hess started on them.

All the better to drive her mad.

"Nuggie! Nuggie? Where are you, you stupid little feather duster?" Evan looked under the furniture, in closets, in drawers. Nothing. No sign of the half-fledged McNugget anywhere.

All he found was Rahne trying to read a book. "No, I haven't been chasin' him," she said before he could ask the question. "I *am* capable of ignorin' me lupine instincts, ye know."

"*There* you are!" Kurt was looking ticked off. He had Mr Peeper under one arm and McNugget under the other. "Your chicken has been molesting mine again."

"Molesting?" Evan quoted. "What do you expect *me* to do about it?"

"You're the one with the gay chicken," said Kurt, handing the bird back.

"He is *not* gay!"

"Oh? So *then* what? Mr Peeper is a *Ms* Peeper?" Kurt stopped himself in realisation. "Mein Gott, she *is*.* Then, after further thought, "Stop trying to get my chicken pregnant, Evan!"

"*Me*? It's McNugget that's *doing* it..."

"Never heard about 'parental responsibility'?"

"So put your chicken on the pill!"

"Chickens don't *have* the pill!"

"So lock her up!"

"Lock yours up first!"

"*Guys*;" said Rahne. "Stop bein' bloody daft."

"But," said Kurt, "Ms Peeper's far too young to be having kinder. And so's McNugget."

"Hey, she's *your* jailbait chicken," said Evan.

"*Jail*bait?"

"She's tempting my Nuggie with her feminine wiles."

"Ja? How? By hiding under the furniture?"

Rahne went werewolf and growled at them, thus scaring them out of the room. She sighed as she reverted to her human shape. The things she had to do for a peaceful, quiet read.
"A brand new fold on the Hess case, an entire *village* has begun a roving *circus* in order to gain funds to travel to America to support one of the survivors. Our reporter on the scene, Kevin Rainer, is reporting live by satellite. Kevin?"

Kevin had one hand to his ear and a German accent. "The entire village of Heirelgart has pulled together, here to come and support one of the survivors from that town. Here, we see some species that have not come out of the Black Forest for well over half a century."

The camera focussed on a mixed group of centaurs. One was apparently part Clydesdale and was almost the same colour as gold. They carried on with their day-to-day circus business as if hoping the Media would leave them alone. The assembled camera crews had already learned to keep their distance.

Andrei, Centaur, flicked on for a prerecorded interview. "Kurt is not only my tribesman, but my also my oldest friend. The instant we heard about this mess, we started planning to go in his aid."

"You did not think about how others would react to you?"

"Why should I?" said Andrei. "Centaurs have been here longer than humans. We should have come out of the wood years ago."

"Kevin," said the newscaster, "are there any elves in there?"

"Haha," said Kevin, somewhat dutifully. "No. Just centaurs and people, all claiming to belong to the same tribe."

Mason pinched his nose and tried to get his client's attention. "Bruna. Bruna. Bruna." At last, he broke through her babbling. "Bruna... The insanity plea is not going to work. Not any more. It doesn't *matter* how insane you pretend to be. The jury *knows* you deliberately and repeatedly abused children. There's no good defense against that."

"But you have to *move* me," Hess repeated. "Mein children are finding me. They're haunting me. Even the ones who are still alive. My son keeps coming back to me, still in his jar. Mein kleine kind. He hates me. He hates me..."

"It's not going to work, Bruna. The videotape evidence from your daughter is too strong. The only thing that could screw you more thoroughly is the testimony of her father."

Hess slowed, then smiled. "Ahhh, yes. I have something for him. He will not be the same when I give it to him."

"Like the tile, Bruna?" Mason shook his head. "The jury is *not* liking you pulling stunts like that. It just isn't working."

"This will work, mein freund. This will shatter him into a million pieces."

"It'd better. One more grandstanding stunt and you're down so deep they'll find *Hoffa* before they find you."

Kitty held her hand on the edge of the envelope. Kurt held his in a similar way.

"On three?"

"On three."

They counted, and tore the envelopes at the same time. Mutual pieces of paper were unfolded. Mutual sighs escaped their lips.

"Clean," Kitty breathed.


They embraced. The predators hadn't scarred them *that* way. It was such a relief to know that. At least one part of their lives would be forever untainted.

Bluebelle couldn't hide her laughter with any of her hands, they were both busy helping her run. She was fast becoming a fan of jeans and slacks, as they let her move with more freedom. And, since she'd started eating properly and growing a lot, she was thinking of even giving her first dress to the Chagnys. It hardly fit any more.

But she wasn't thinking anything like that, right now. She was running and having fun.
Bluebelle bounced off a wall, ricocheted off of Logan's head, and continued baring down the hallway at top speed, laughing all the way. Logan was then caught up in the stampede of mutants that were chasing her.

"*ELF*!" He roared.
Bluebelle laid on a little more speed, laughing all the way.

Lance sighed, feeling clean. He'd done what he'd come to do. He was still in the interview room, but he felt so much better. The nightmares wouldn't be coming back, he was sure.
"You realise I'm going to have to arrest you for being an accessory to a kidnapping," said the officer.
"Sure," said Lance. "No big deal. I've been in jail before." He was going to be as sweet as sugar during his time in the joint. A model prisoner. No waves. None at all.
He didn't really listen to the court-appointed attorney. He just kind of switched off and let everything happen as it would. There was the possibility of a plea bargain, the adding of evidence to the now world-famous Hess Trial, and so forth could all get his sentence down. Lance could personally care less.

"Prosecution calls Kurt Wagner to the stand," said Murdock, Prosecution.
Kurt, Witness, strode forward under the watch of a bailiff. A couple more bailiffs could be seen gathering on the sidelines. Everyone remembered the reaction he'd had to Hess' fake concentration camp number stunt.
"Mein Damon," Hess said, keeping her voice pleasant, "Lassen Sie die Gefangenen und die Speicher frei sein."
Kurt, Witness, spasmed. His head threw back and a single cry of pain escaped his throat before he fell like a rag doll, twitching and thrashing violently once he was on the floor.
Hess just sat in her place and smiled like a snake.
Inside Kurt's head, it was a brawl. The bars holding the monsters back had vanished. The hold that the Archivist had on the memories burst like a dam, flooding them with his past under Hess. All of his Masks wanted to use the body at once, and none were co-operating. Which was why he appeared to have epilepsy.

It must have been a post-hypnotic command. Hess knew about his masks, she'd have studied everything she could use against him. The only good demon is one you can control.

He was lucky that the people from the Institute were there for moral support. Otherwise, the paramedics would have given him the wrong medication. Perhaps put him in a coma. Hess planned for everything. The memories surged through him, making him want to scream. Making him want to vomit. So filthy. So unclean.

And he'd wanted to *touch* Katzchen...

Kurt could only howl out his misery inside his head.

"Just like before, Jean. We held him together during a smaller memory flood. We can do it again."

Kurt was strapped down on the gurney, still twitching. He had a plastic bit jammed in his mouth. So far, he'd shown no sign of any awareness of the outside world.

Xavier sighed and was thankful that he'd worked hard on creating a small private hospital for the treatment of mutants. Kurt would be amongst friends. People who would help him, despite how he looked, instead of panicking.

Jean sat opposite him, on the other side of Kurt's gurney. They linked hands, fingers intertwining for a physical bridge for their power. The Professor's right to Jean's left. Their other hand found Kurt's temple, and they went in.

They were almost instantly lost in the maelstrom.

"I can't hold them," said the Archivist. He looked almost upset. The impression of his hands was bent and broken, even bleeding. "My hands... I can't hold them. I can't take them away."

Das Kinder was holding his head and screaming for someone to make it stop. *Please*.

Even Ragdoll was keening in a mental corner.

Monsters were running wild. Everywhere. It was like a mad, howling cyclone of amorphous shapes with glowing eyes.

Kurt was holding on to the Archivist, trying to hold him up. Somehow, Hess had done something to stop them merging. If he could merge with Fight and the Archivist, he could have healed the damage. But there was no merging at all. No-one could co-operate.

So they fought.

He couldn't hold up the Archivist and yell at the others at the same time.

"Listen to me," Kurt said in the mask's ear. "You have to focus on living. If you die, we all come undone. Please. Stay with me. Please."

And then there were other hands, holding the both of them.

Jean. Professor Xavier.

Kurt almost fainted from relief. He couldn't be weak. Not yet. He had to wait until the Archivist was better.

Jean took the Archivist's hands in hers, petting them gently. "There, now," she soothed. "We'll make this better, soon. Just relax."
The Professor took over the job of holding the Archivist up. "It's all right," he said. "We'll help."
The Archivist sighed. His hands were healing.
Kurt let go. There were others that needed help. He scooped up Das Kinder into his lap and purr-sang at the boy, rocking him back and forth.
Some of the simpler Monsters stopped their rioting in order to listen. Flight stopped baying. Fight slowed in his eternal battle against anything that could harm them.
It was working. It may have been working in tiny pockets, but at least it was working.

What was happening in the scenery of Kurt's mind was an analogy for the mental torment he was undergoing. It was all perception.
The Archivist was close to psychic death, since he no longer held in the memories that fractured Kurt into the surviving personas. Hess' post-hypnotic command had done something to the Masks' ability to co-operate, share, and help each other.
_I found it,_ said the Professor.
There was a painful snap, and all of Kurt's personas cried out at once.
The Archivist healed spontaneously as he gathered the wild memories. He moved amongst the others, taking the memories that wounded them. The disturbance was nearly over, but the hazard wasn't.
There was no restraint on the Monsters. It would take far more than they had at the moment to restrain them.
Xavier had enough work pulling Jean back into her head.

They 'woke' in a ward, a curtain pale enough to let the light in, but opaque enough to block people seeing inside had been pulled over the window.
"Good morning," joked the attending medic. "You're lucky our healer scoped him out when you came in. There's nothing we can do medically for your student."
Kurt was still twitching, but it was more in the manner of someone who was dreaming, rather than a full-on fit. He was a long way from healed, inside.
The Masks were battling, most likely the 'civilised' masks against the wild Monsters, and none had the time to surface.
"Thank you," managed Professor Xavier. Even though he was exhausted, he had to ask, "What news of the trial?"

"...yet *another* example of Hess sabotaging the witnesses, today. The victim in this case being long-time survivor Kurt Wagner." Footage played of a spectacularly violent fit thrown in the middle of the courtroom. "Once again, the trial is suspended until the prosecution's key witness feels well enough to testify."
"Good God," Andrei muttered. They were only a few towns shy of a chartered flight to the States, and *this* had to happen.
If it was up to *him*, that Hess woman would have been hoofed into jam years ago.
To think, he'd actually given her *directions* when he was a child.
He'd let her find where Kurt lived; and never known what he'd done.
"Nasty mess," said the cashier, trying not to stare at his hair-end. "Your tribesman's stuck in the middle of all that. Such a shame."
_My near-brother... I'm sorry._
He felt sick at the mere thought of letting Hess near Kurt, let alone the whole Wagner family. _God, forgive me for what I did._

Kitty could barely control her tears as she listened to what the quietly-worded doctors had to say. Kurt was still struggling for control. Neither science nor magic nor mutant power could do anything for him. The Professor and Jean had already exhausted themselves holding him together - more or
less - during the 'memory flood' he suffered in the courtroom.

Therefore, the only thing left was friends and family. Familiar voices, even though there was no indication that he could even hear what was going on outside his body.

He was hooked up to some elementary life support and a lot of monitoring equipment. His breathing was erratic, just like his movements.

They'd strapped him down.

Kitty resolved to stay by his side, if only so he wouldn't panic when he came around. Kurt hated hospitals with a vengeance. They reminded him of his nightmares. She sat beside him and gently petted his hand.

His eyes focussed on her, but the minds behind those eyes were flickering like some ancient movie. Flick, flick, flick, flick, flick, flick...

She could even tell some of them apart.

Das Kinder, unknown, Hure, the Perfectionist, unknown, Kurt, unknown, unknown...

Every single one of them focussed on her; and every time Kurt came up, however briefly, tears filled his eyes.

She could almost hear him apologising.

"Don't be sorry," she whispered. "It doesn't matter what you did in the past. I love you for who you are, okay? I want to like, spend all the time I can with you. You *and* the people in your head."

The unknown one currently behind Kurt's eyes wept. "Forgive?" he croaked.

Kitty kissed him on the forehead. "Yeah. Even though it wasn't like, *ever* your fault."

He went under again with a faint sigh.

Kitty did her best to hide her tears. Damn Hess to every Hell that sentient life had ever come up with.

Hess had done this to him, and more likely than not, had no means of reversing the damage.

Kitty picked up his twitching hand and kissed it before she pressed it to her cheek. "Please, Kurt," she begged. "Please get better?"
Fracture Forty-three: Shattered past

They were rounding up the Monsters one by one. It was hard work, and most of the other Masks needed to rest and recouperate. Some had to do so after each Monster.

Poor, wounded things. Crippled and incapable of handling life outside of a torture chamber. They didn't know what to do with safety, always waiting for pain to descend from above.

They responded well to Kitty, but they still had a hunger to kill, or destroy. He couldn't trust them on the outside.

This latest one was a puzzle. He just gave up and headed for the new cage. He seemed almost - happy. Kurt escorted him in to the enclosure that held several of his fellows. Then he saw why he was so happy.

The Monster was holding a little gem of hope. He showed his fangs in an unfamilliar smile and said, "Forgiveness..." in his gutteral voice.

The others in the enclosure clustered around it like frozen men around a campfire.

"Yes," Kurt whispered. "It is beautiful."

Das Kinder tugged on his pants. "I found this," he said, and shared a shard of memory...

It was the dawn of his eighth Adoption-day, the day he traditionally celebrated his coming of age, and already someone was screaming. He hadn't even woken up, yet. Unfair.

Yawning, he stumbled outside in his pyjamas to find Mama and Papa at the gate, talking animatedly with the village constable. He could already hear bits of the conversation. Horrible. Monstrous.

"Jakob Weiss. Murder.

The constable fell silent the minute he saw Kurt.

"I was asleep, I swear!" Kurt protested. "Whatever it is, it wasn't me!"

Herr Schwartzmann laughed. "I never said it was, Kurti."

"Kurt," protested Kurt. "I *am* eight, now." Technically, he'd been eight for a couple of months, but on that far more quiet anniversary, he spent an afternoon praying for the wellbeing of his genetic parents, wherever they were. "What happened to Jakob Weiss? Is he here?"

Everyone went very, very quiet.

"Sweetheart, Jakob Weiss is dead. Something got to him last night. Herr Schwartzmann was saying - he's barely recognisable."

Kurt could feel the Archivist stepping up to report the actions of all the monsters. Nothing, all across the board. Still, the ghost of Justice would be vindicated.

"Can I see?" he/they asked.

"No," said Papa. It was flat denial.

"I don't understand," said the Archivist, through his mouth. "He's only dead."

"That's one of mine," said Kurt. "The Archivist will probably be greatful he has one less to sort, ja?"

Das Kinder nodded and smiled. "I also found one of the old nightmares," he said. "You know the one we couldn't always remember? Well. It's right here."

"All of it?"

"*All* of it."

Kurt knelt to see. They'd only ever remembered bits and pieces before.

There was an old man standing over him. He was safe in bed, but he cooed at the man. (Kurt recognised him as Magneto)

"Now, shhh..." said the man. "Your mother's just gone to sleep. Shh, now. We're going for a little
walk."
Two giant hands picked him up, and he wriggled in midair before the man settled him into a carrying-hug. He tried the man's shoulder for food value on general principles and kept trying to grab his hair. He got the man's ear several times, so that was just as good.
The man put him on a cold table underneath a bright, shining thing that he couldn't reach. After a few tries of reaching it, he gave up and sucked on his foot and then played with his tail.
"Initiating stage one enhancement," said the man.
And then green light came from the shining thing, and his whole body hurt.

"So that was why..." Kurt said, hoarding the memory of the nightmare. The equipment he didn't recognise as a baby, he knew now. Magneto had put him into some sort of DNA lab, for 'enhancement'.
But what did he *do*? The memory of his body was exactly the same, then and now. Did he actually do anything, or did Mystique somehow rescue him from being altered?
There were only two people who knew for sure, and Kurt had no particular desire to talk to either of them.
Still, he had to wonder if there was a third who knew something.
Professor Xavier *was* very good at keeping secrets.

Raven soaked in the hot water and was really, *really* glad that she didn't need very much sleep. She and her son had one other thing in common besides their colouring, and it wasn't a good thing to share. Both of them had been rented out to the curious when they were children, both of them had been molested.
She'd put it together when Magneto arranged for their one day together after becoming sick of her misery. She easily figured it out because she knew all of those mannerisms. Therefore, she'd played a mother to the hilt, making their day together something special. Something worth remembering in his dark times.
Had she known about Hess and her habits, she'd have killed the gypsy scumbag then and there - right in front of her son - and not cared.
As it was, she was content to stop the abuse when she could. A simple mother's duty to her boy. It took her a year to sneak away from Magneto, and almost another to track down the gypsy, Jakob Weiss. In the process, she'd found that he'd married into the tribe, and was gypsy only in name. The Romani as a people had far more respect for their children.
The man wanted more money if she wanted 'seconds' in the 'off season', explaining that it was extremely difficult to get the lad away from his family once he was home.
Raven transformed into a demon-monster and almost flayed him alive.
He fought. She enjoyed it.
She left a note, just in case anyone else had similar ideas. She wrote it in careful and formal German, in Jakob Weiss' blood.
"The same curse will visit anyone who rents out children."
Raven had been up in the foothills by the time the screaming started, and watched the disturbance below her with the same detachment as a child would watch an anthill. She could just pick out the tiny blue figure in the neighbouring village.
"I know it's a little late, my son," she whispered, "but happy birthday. You're free of him." Then she blew him a kiss, and walked away. The curious could just remain curious from now on. There would be no more unscrupulous middlemen; and quite a few Romani tribespeople on their guard against the bolder members of the inquisitive.
At least she'd done that right.
And now, she could 'curse' Hess, and her cronies, to the best of her ability. Raven's revenge was slow, but at least it came. As surely as death.

The back of his chair bumped up against the heart monitor, and his reach across to both Kurt and
Jean was awkward, because Kitty refused to leave his side. Xavier reminded himself that it was only physical discomfort and prepared himself for another effort at reconstructing Kurt from the inside. Even though it was inadvisable, he had to help. No matter what the cost to himself. Kurt was his student. His responsibility. And now, his patient. Charles Xavier could do no less than his utmost. He cleared his mind, and with Jean's help, entered the whirling maelstrom that was Kurt's current psyche. Monsters still roamed loose. Shards of memory flew about, immersing both of them in a flood of recall when they hit.

_The look on his parents' faces when he said, "He's only dead."_
_The exhilaration at the freedom that his holowatch represented._
_Flying on the trapeze._
_How it felt when Kitty screamed at him._
_Mama._

When he came out of the barrage, he had lost contact with Jean, and surrounded by personas. Fight had him in an elbow-lock.

Kurt was looking pissed off to the extreme. "We found an old nightmare," he said.
_The lab. The green light. The pain._
"We find it interesting that this nightmare matches the start of Rogue's nightmares. I'm sure you know the one."

Inadvertantly, he thought of it. The baby crying. The lab. The monster named Eric Magnus.
"Thank *you*," said the Archivist, taking the slip of memory from him.

The Perfectionist appeared over his shoulder and compared the two views. Remarkably alike.
"Now. Be honest, Herr Professor," said Kurt. "We have you. We'll *know* if you lie. Did you know?"
"She's safe," said Kurt. "Off playing in happy memories with das Kinder." He took a breath as the Perfectionist leaned on Xavier's shoulder. "Did. You. Know?"
Xavier sighed. "Yes. I knew. And I - chose... not to tell you."

Kurt's assembled masks glared at him.
"I thought it would be damaging to you," Xavier defended. "I knew you were having a tough time dealing with the knowledge that Mystique was your mother. That, on top of everything else..." He sighed. "I just couldn't do it."

"You thought I wasn't strong enough," said Kurt. "You thought I couldn't stand up to it."

Ashamed. "Yes."

"Why?" Kurt tapped his head in demonstration as he said, "You *know* me. You've seen my nightmares. Glimpsed my memories. How could you possibly think I was weak?"

"It's still damaging knowledge," argued the Professor. "The opportunity for self-doubt alone..."

"Do you know what he did?" asked Kurt. "Do you know what he changed?"

"I tried to find out," said Xavier. "All I got was a shard of memory."

"I'll take it," said the Archivist. It was an order.

"Kurt, *please*... You need help."

"Then help me," said Kurt. "Share what you know."

"I'm sorry for this," Xavier said, bringing forth the shard of memory. "I really am."

Running scared. What the hell did he just *do* to her special little boy? He was crying. Poor little boy. Hush, now, please. We have to hide from the bad man.

It was in a tiny nook, a breath of a moment, when her son opened his eyes, and Raven saw glowing yellow instead of the almost-invisible blue of his mother.

_He doesn't have his mother's eyes, any more..._

Then the wolves started howling.

Kurt looked incredibly disappointed. "That's *it*? You were going to fight us over keeping *that* secret?"

"Ja," said the Archivist. "My eyes could have turned that colour anyway."

The Perfectionist angled a meaningful glare at him. No sense of scale, no sense of strength.

"I'm stronger than you," he said to the habitually silent Mask.

Kurt grinned. "Good. You pass. Herr Perfectionist has a nasty habit of trying to grind you down when you're doing something else. I have to help out. Not babysit you."

Xavier raised an eyebrow. "Now who's underestimating whom?"

Kurt sighed. "Mein Herr, I live here. You don't. Now that the others can merge again, they might try something with you or Jean. You can look after Jean; but I can't be everywhere."

At last, he recognised Kurt's demeanor. "You haven't slept."

"Nein. The others need me."

"You won't be able to help them if you're exhausted."

"Fein. I'll get Fight and RagDoll to watch over me. Just be wary, ja? Some of the Monsters are still loose."

"But this is fun! You should watch."

Jean folded her arms. "Kinder," she warned. "You said you were going to help me find the Professor. Not show me 'home movies'..."

"But I *am*," said Das Kinder. "We stay in one place and he finds us."

Impeccable logic for a four-year-old. It'd probably work in the little village of Heirelgart. Jean wasn't so sure how well it'd work in the labyrinthine depths of Kurt's mind.

"Come on," she wheedled. "I'm getting worried about him. Can we go look? He might be lost."

"It's okay," said das Kinder. "Kurt's looking after him."
There was a creeping shadow on the edge of her awareness. A pair of glowing eyes in the dark shape.  
"You're sure?" she asked.  
"Oh, don't mind the Monsters," he said. "They don't hurt anyone on the inside."  
It was getting closer, yet it never seemed to move while Jean was watching it.  
Jean repeated herself. "You're *sure*."  
It was a large one, tattered edges of trauma hanging off it like a garment somewhere between pre-loved, grunge, and the rag bin. Its face, shrouded as it was in darkness, was unreadable. Its eyes enigmatic. Hypnotising. Hungry.  
"It's okay," said das Kinder. "Really. He doesn't know how to handle a woman who doesn't hit him. Poor Monster."  
It was right next to her, sniffing her hand. Jean stayed perfectly still as the incohate persona investigated her. It looked filthy, wounded and weary. Like an abused animal seeking food.  
Slowly and very, very carefully, she reached out to pet him.  
The Monster purred and flexed under her hand, somewhat catlike in his motions. It was like touching a lion.  
"Don't move suddenly or make any loud noises," advised das Kinder in a whisper, joining her in petting the beast. "He could hurt you if he gets scared."  
Jean could feel the Mask's thoughts whenever she touched him. He didn't understand this gentle-love thing that was going on between Kurt and Kitty. He just wanted to try and see what it was like, and Jean happened to be available. Jean, for her part, sent calming thoughts to the creature, creating an atmosphere of trust.  
Then, as gently as she could, she kissed him on the forehead.  
The Monster purred up a storm.  
"*Jean*!" It was the Professor.  
"Shhh..." she cautioned. "He's okay as long as you don't startle him. He was just trying to understand, that's all."  
The Professor joined her, but didn't touch the Monster. "Kurt calls them Monsters for a reason, Jean."  
"Yes," said Kurt. "Its because that's what they'd be to other people if they ever got out." He took the Monster's arm. "Gekommen, knabe. It's time to go home."  
The Monster went quietly, touching the memory of Jean's kiss over and over again.  
"You're lucky," said Fight. "That was one of the quiet ones. Most of them still out? They're the ones that'll fight *you*."  
Kurt curled up for a little rest. RagDoll, besides being a remarkable observer, also made an efficient pillow. Fight would keep any Monsters who wished to harm him away. There was so much yet to do, but he was so tired. Just a little rest. So he could help again.  
Sleep.  
Perchance to dream.  

Heirelgart was cold and empty. The streets were bare. There weren't any tracks in the foot-packed dirt of the streets. Not even a dog trotted down them.  
The houses were empty. Completely empty. They didn't even hold furniture that had been there longer than living memory. His house was a smoking ruin.  
Hess had been here.  
The chill that overcame him made all his fur stand on end.  
Kurt heard Bluebelle screaming and started running towards the sound, taking a new road that lead him, somehow, to Bayville and the Institute; where he could see his friends and family.  
They were turning away from him.  
Except Bluebelle, who was lying in the mud and crying.  
He knelt in the mud to pick her up, but neither his clothes nor his fur acquired a stain.
"Daddy, it hurts," she said. "It hurts inside..." And then she crumbled to dust in his arms.

The Monster had been fighting for quite some time. It was good at it. The Perfectionist rather approved of its style. Wild One snapped and growled at it, fencing the creature in while the Professor attempted to calm it with his mind.

Jean couldn't help thinking that they had it completely backwards. She faded back from the group of Monster-hunters and thought about it. Kurt wasn't a real fan of force, preferring to use cunning and guile to achieve goals. So how would that work with the Monsters?

Simple. Find what they want and use it as bait.
What they *wanted* was Hess, preferably dead, but definitely as wounded as possible.
But they'd settle for warm memories.
Jean sat, lotus position, and concentrated on what it felt like to be loved.
Just as she predicted, the Monster calmed right down so it could look, and touch, the focussed memory.
The Professor was positively shocked by her choice of actions, but already applauding how well they worked.

Jean opened her eyes before the Professor did. "It's done," she whispered. "The Monsters are all rounded up. Whatever happens next is up to Kurt."

The Professor touched his eyes as soon as he surfaced. He exchanges a look with Jean and they both went morose.
"What? Is it like, bad news?" Kitty's grip spasmed around Kurt's suddenly-still hand. "Is he going to like, be okay?"

The Professor backed away from the bed. "I'm sure he's going to be fine. This is - just a secret that isn't mine to tell. It's his secret. I shouldn't have kept it from him."
_
Telepaths..._
Kurt opened his eyes. "Katzchen?"
"I'm here," she said, squeezing her hand. "Are you gonna be okay?"
"We have to test Bluebelle. She could be sick. She could be dying. Hess and her Lieutenants had her for years. We have to test her. We have to test her *now*."
They had him in for "observation", and Kurt felt creeping paranoia overcome him. Yes, it was a hospital for mutants, but it was still a hospital. Hospitals gave him hackle trouble, in that his were always up when he was in one.

There was actually nothing wrong with the place. The staff were friendly, outgoing, patient, marvellously colourblind and could actually be relied upon to treat him like a human being without needing to be 'prepped' by a third party.

The accommodations were next to luxurious. The views - when he was allowed to wear his holowatch and look outside - were marvellous. Even the food was good. Nutritious, delicious, and calorie-rich, just for him.

He just hated hospitals.

"Cagey, huh?" Nurse Caroline scared the skin off him for the third time that day. "Can't say I blame you. Us physical mutants have it rough in places like this. At least *I* can cover up with makeup - although I was always afraid it'd slip, somehow... and everything would go pear-shaped because of me."

"Try being burned at the stake sometime," said Kurt. "It makes you *really* appreciate being able to hide."

Caroline laughed. Her mutation made her an empath and something of a healer. It also mottled her skin, giving her a pattern of pale spots against her dark skin.

Kurt found it quite alluring, and would have flirted on general principals were it not for the wedding band on her finger, and the fact that Kitty would probably kill him.

"You should be glad that you don't have to hide while you're here," she told him. "I'm still in a hospital," Kurt said. "And it still gives me the creeps."

"Too many cheesy Sci-fi films as a kid, right?"

Kurt nodded. "That *could* be a contributing factor. But I think the large number of people who mistake me for a demon might have something to do with it, ja?"

"Then you can just relax," said Caroline. "We only excorcise demons. It's the *aliens* that get dissected."

Kurt had to laugh.

Bluebelle watched the needle. This time, stuff didn't go in, it came out. Blood.

"That's not how Mistress gets blood," she told Doctor Hank.

"Mistress isn't here," he said, tinkering with lab equipment. "There's a little something called the Hippocratic Oath that all doctors have to uphold. One of it's chief phrases is, 'above all else, do no harm'; that means that any treatment or test should be as uninvasive as possible."

"What do you want the blood *for*?" Bluebelle asked. "You aren't going to make me eat it, are you?" Personally, she always hated that part. It made her sick.

Doctor Hank laughed. "No. I just need it so that I can run a few tests. Kurt's worried that you might have caught something nasty from your time with Hess and her cronies."

Bluebelle frowned. "I don't get it," she admitted. "How can you test *blood*?"

Doctor Hank moved into lecture mode as he measured out various liquids into test tubes. "These chemicals are designed to change colour when they encounter specific antibodies. You remember about antibodies, don't you?"

Bluebelle nodded. Even though there'd been pictures of blobby things, she kept imagining little tiny soldiers in her blood. Little elf-shaped soldiers, for the record.

"Well in most cases, for each disease, there's an antibody. And since it's easier to find them than the disease, we test for them like this." He dropped a drop of blood into a tube, then shook it up. "If it
stays clear, then the antibody is not present."
"But what happens to the heemagoblins?"
"Haemoglobins," Doctor Hank corrected. "Your blood cells are still there, just dispersed to the point where their pigment is no longer visible. Just like putting a drop of food colouring into your bath." He shook up more test tubes. "And no, I'm not suggesting you test out that analogy."

Bluebelle giggled, her hand automatically covering her mouth, but it was a negligent gesture. "How long does it take to change colour?"
"An hour or three."
"That's *forever*," Bluebelle complained.
"You can always work on your math to help pass the time," Doctor Hank suggested.
She groaned under her breath. Math was tricky stuff. She hadn't known about all *sorts* of numbers. There were remainders and dividers and negatives and fractions and all *sorts* of things. There were even imaginary numbers, like infinity and the square root of minus two. And every time she seemed to have it pinned down, there'd be another twist to the whole mess.

But she did like drawing graphs, though.

Bluebelle supposed it was her own fault for asking questions, because Doctor Hank *loved* answering them. Sometimes he got so into answering a question that he'd go into very confusing explanations that left her feeling lost in a sea of answers. Sometimes, he'd even stop himself and realise that he'd gone too far ahead for her, and tell her to worry about whatever-it-was at another time.

Just the concept of infinity had had her sitting quietly for *days*.
Maybe another question would take his mind off of making her do math.
"Doctor Hank? Why are Daddy and me so different?"
"The correct grammar is 'Daddy and I', Bluebelle."
"Sorry. Why are Daddy and *I* so different?"
Doctor Hank smiled. "Now *that* is a subject close to my heart..."

Bluebelle hid her grin behind both hands. Well, at least it got her out of math.

Kurt blinked in the sunshine and felt weird about having his hologram on. After all this time wanting to go outside, he wanted to retreat back *in* now that he'd got his wish. It was safe in there. Out here, it was a world full of Hessish nightmares. Re-lived again and again until something snapped.

_I'm stronger than she is,_ he told himself. _I can take her down and make sure she stays there. I can do it._

Herr Murdock was waiting for him. "The court's ready for you whenever you're ready for it," he said. "I'd like for you to testify as soon as you're able."

Kurt consulted briefly with his Masks. "How's this afternoon for you?"

The media was making an almighty flap about him being just released from hospital, and still testifying against Hess. He tried to find a calm centre, to ignore the snapping of cameras and the baying of the media. He could do it with Ragdoll and the Archivist helping him. Just barely.

The flashes nearly blinded him.
"Kurt!"
"Kurt!"
"Kurt!"
"What did she say to you?"
"What did she do to you?"
"Why did you throw a fit in the middle of the courtroom?"
"Why did you scream?"
"Have you anything to say?"
"Do you know *why* Hess says you're a demon?"
"What about your daughter?"
"Kurt! Which one of your personas was in control on the highway?"
"How many personalities do you have?"
"Kurt!"

He sighed. They weren't going to give up any time soon. They were going to jabber at him until he went deaf out of self defense. "Please. Leave me *alone*. Whatever I have to say, I'll say it in court. Just leave me alone."

They didn't. Cameras loomed into his face and media people jostled against him. He felt sick with worry. Ill with fear.

_I'm stronger than that. I'm stronger than her. *We* are strong. We'll *be* strong._

It was a long, long walk into the courtroom, where most of the media were banned for being too rowdy. Kurt almost sighed with relief when they entered the media-free-zone, blinking away the flashbulb's after-effects from his eyes.

By that time, a bailiff was leading him up to the witness stand. Hess seemed surprised to see him, and was chewing words up under her breath. He was sure he lip-read, 'filthy little demon' at least once. Kurt smiled winningly at her and the scowling defense lawyer.

He recognised more than a few faces in the audience. Sibylle Jarelmann. Big Sven. Ilse Wurtig.

_What the--?_ He looked around. There were centaurs standing on the edges of the courtroom's audience section, as if anybody could really *stop* a centaur from going where they wanted to go. Even Andreii was there, and nodded him encouragement.

Heirelgart was here.

Kurt grinned, and whispered at Hess. "You have no power over me, old woman. No power at all."

He stood as straight as he could, and put his hand on the bible.

"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

Kurt stared straight at Hess when he said, "Yes."
Fracture Forty-Six: Damning Testimony

Kurt's face went almost completely emotionless as he sat. Raven, under the guise of Risty Wilde, didn't let her fear show. She just took notes, as she always did. She'd need this material to drive Hess so insane that she'd never harm another child ever again.

Matt Murdock stood and traced his way around the table. "Mister Wagner, how long have you known Frau Hess?"

"Objection!" Mason stood. "Events that occurred overseas have no relevance in this particular case. We are trying Frau Hess for crimes committed in America."

"Your Honour," said Murdock, "I'm attempting to establish a pattern of behaviour."

"I think we've pretty much done that already with the videotape and witness testimonies. Objection sustained."

Murdock nodded. "Very well. Let's focus on events in the states. How long did it take you two to recognise each other?"

"Objection! Speculation."

"Sustained."

Murdock tried another tack. "How long did it take you to recognise her?"

"Quite a while. She'd changed her face since I last met her."

"And how long is quite a while?"

"A little short of half an hour. I went through gym class normally. It was afterwards that I had the first encounter with her in years."

"What happened during that encounter?"

"First, she established my identity as one of her favourites. Then she came onto me. Aggressively so. I backed away until I hit a wall. She pressed up against me. Kissed me. Brushed up against my crotch..." There was a brief struggle in his face, as if part of him was trying to emote, but another part was restraining him.

"And how did this encounter end?"

"I bought forward RagDoll - one of my personas. He's catatonic, so he's not much fun for the predators."

"One of your personas?" Murdock asked, strictly for effect. "You're one of the survivors with Multiple Personality Disorder, aren't you?"

"That is correct."

"So, who am I actually talking to, right now?"

"I am the persona known as the Archivist. I keep all the memories, because they have little impact on me."

"Yet you were just talking about the memories of Kurt. I'm curious; how can *you* testify to the actions of another persona as if they were your own? Surely you weren't *there*. You weren't - 'out', as it were..."

_Clever,_ Raven thought. _Asking the wrong questions before the defense has a chance to._

"Regardless of who is 'out', I remember *all*. On the outside, I am Kurt Wagner. On the inside, we are a team."

"So, on the *inside*, was it you or Kurt who 'bought out' RagDoll?"

"Kurt chose him."

"I see. So what happened after that?"

"Hess realised what had happened as soon as I stopped responding to her."

"As soon as *RagDoll* stopped responding," said Murdock.

"Yes. As I said, RagDoll is catatonic. He doesn't *do* very much. He doesn't react. A predator can't play with RagDoll for very long. He's no fun."
"Now *that* was just plain chilling...

"So, how long did Hess 'play' with RagDoll?"

"No longer than two seconds. She realised very quickly what I'd done."

"How did she react?"

"She was upset. Angry. She grabbed me by my hair, and the back of my neck, and lead me outside. She was looking for my friend."

"You're certain of that?"

"Yes. Because when she found Evan, she threw me at him and said, 'Bilden Sie ihn richtig, Schwarzeschmutz aus, oder ich jage Ihren vollständigen Stamm unten'. That means, 'train him correctly, negro filth, or I'll hunt down your entire tribe'."

"And that was all she did, that day."

"Yes."

"Yet 'RagDoll' didn't immediately go back. Why?"

"On the inside, we didn't feel safe enough. We were still in an area where a predator was."

"And that was on a Thursday, correct?"

"Correct."

"When did Hess try to contact you again?"

"The following Monday." Kurt's hands were flexing in and out of fists. "That was when she abducted me from the school."

"Did you know what she intended to do?"

"Yes," said Kurt. "She said she was going to keep me."

"And you knew what that meant."

"Yes. It was a threat."

"Was Hess planning to do some of the things described in prior testimonies?"

"That and more. I was her favourite; so I got special treatment."

"I see. That was also the Monday you leaped out of a moving car and wound up stuck on the Bayville Expressway, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Somehow, I don't think RagDoll was responsible for that. Who *was* in control, that day?"

"A persona named Flight, sir."

"Does he fly?"

The court tittered.

"Objection, your honour. What is the *relevance* of this line of questioning?"

"Merely showing the levels of control Kurt has over his personalities," Murdock breezed. "And establishing a who's who, as it were."

"Overruled. Witness will answer the question."

"No. Flight's job is to run to a place of safety."

"Which happened to be the middle of the Bayville Expressway."

"I got turned around after the truck threw me off. I couldn't tell which way to run to get back. I didn't know anyone who was there. I *had* to do what I did that day."

"You mean *Flight* had to do what *he* did."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We were afraid of what she'd do to me."

"You were *certain* of what that was."

"Yes." He glared at Hess. "I know how she thinks."

"And the last time she abducted you? You *knew* what she was going to do?"

"Yes."

"What *was* Hess going to do?"

"Objection!"

"Overruled."

"She would start by making me watch her torture Kitty or Bluebelle. Then she'd use me to - 'initiate'
"Kitty." Everyone knew what that meant, by now. "Then she'd torture the three of us. Possibly for weeks. Possibly for more."
"And how do you know this if it didn't actually happen?"
"I know because it's what Hess usually did when I was with her."
"Thankyou." Murdock sat. "Your witness."
Mason stood, and paced back and forth a few times, apparently mulling over the mysteries of the universe.
"Are you absolutely certain that this is the same woman who abducted and tortured you in Germany?"
"Yes."
"Are you absolutely certain that the abductions here in the states were going to lead to the same result?"
"Yes."
"You knew this, even though you escaped her twice before waking up in her basement?"
"Yes."
"Are you *certain* that Hess had set up her basement for the purposes of torture; rather than - say - an elaborate joke. Or a home-made movie?"
Kurt suddenly looked - angry. "Have you ever been in a room 'decorated' with human blood, Herr Mason?"
Mason was so shocked he actually answered the question. "No, I can't say I have..."
"*I* have - always at the hands of Hess or her little minions. I can tell you, mein Herr; it's a stench you never forget." He steadied himself into calmness once more. "People *had* been tortured in there. Every object in that room had human blood on it. The air was *thick* with the smell. If we hadn't escaped, we would have been next to put our blood on things."
"None of you wanted to wait and see if it was true?"
"Would *you* stay in a room with a tiger - just to see if it *might* attack?"
"No. I suppose I wouldn't."
"Exactly my point. Hess and her kind are predators. Plain and simple. They live to hurt children."
"And you're certain you remember everything, as the Archivist."
"It's what I do. I remember *everything*.
Mason toured back to his desk, and turned his briefcase around so Kurt could see inside it. "Do you see my briefcase?"
"Yes."
He closed it, and returned it to its place. "What was in it?"
"The bottom contained, left-to-right: One stack of legal documents, faces down. A wooden ruler, turned on its edge. One plastic lunchbox containing a half-eaten sandwich, a whole apple, and a candy bar - black wrapper, red writing. I couldn't make it out. Near the lunchbox were approximately ten pens held together by a rubber band. The top held a tax return, three holiday pamphlets, a spiral-bound notebook and a recent Action Man comic."
The court giggled.
Mason paled, and opened his briefcase for a look. He swallowed. "Let the record show that the witness was one hundred percent - correct." He sighed and sat back down. "No further questions."
Fracture Forty-Seven: An Excercise in Surrealism

Fracture Forty-Seven: An Excercise in Surrealism

Andrei had been growing again. He was bordering on clearing eight feet. He was fiddling with a cork overshoe, worn so that his metal horseshoes wouldn't cause too much noise or damage to the interiors of the public building.

He put his huge hoof back down the second he saw Kurt. "Are you all right, Kasegewicht? You're looking a little - ill."

"Hey, Fassfuss," Kurt managed. "Just feeling a little - odd. It doesn't seem real. I just did it and it doesn't seem real."

"Heh," Andrei laughed. "You're just not used to the new way of screwing her over, nein?"

There was a moment of silence. "Bad joke, mein freund."

"Sorry. Sometimes the worst jokes get the biggest laugh, you know. Gekommen auf, Kasegewicht... Let me give you somewhere warm to sit." And just like that, Andrei lifted him up and settled Kurt on his withers. "You don't look quite right for walking, to my eye."

Kurt hugged his best and oldest friend. "We haven't done this since I was seven."

"I remember," said Andrei. "You fell down a mountain."

"I only fell *halfway*," said Kurt. "You always exaggerate."

"I'm big, it's my job." He spotted the Media and instantly went into battle posture, sidling up to them. "What's the matter?" he demanded. "Never seen a centaur give anyone a lift before? Verpiss dich!" He didn't have to tell them twice, or give them a translation. "Vermin," he muttered. "Feeding off pain like that."

"Leave them alone. They only want a story. Until a better story comes along." Kurt closed his eyes and leaned against the centaur's back. "You're warm..."

"Hey!" Andrei patted his hand. "Stay awake! I didn't leave the tribe behind to listen to you snore. You're supposed to be showing me America, remember?"

"Mmm," said Kurt. "Sorry. I feel - all wrung out."

Andrei sighed. "You're the only guy I know who could get shock from repeating facts in a courtroom. You know that?"

"Ja. But consider the facts."

Kitty had to laugh at the news. For most of her time shared with Kurt, she'd believed Andrei and his people to be an elaborate, extended joke that he didn't know how to give up on. She'd though that until the day she saw him on the news.

Now, she laughed at the way he dealt with the media, and wished *she* had a friend like that. She had, through the media, overheard a few words and decided to look them up in her new secret weapon, a German-English dictionary.

_Fassfuss... "Barrel-foot"? Okay, I like, get *that*. Kasegewicht... Ah. "Cheese-weight"? What the heck are these Germans like, *on*?_ This was definitely something she'd have to ask them about.

Then it hit her.

The whole thing with Hess was over. *Over*-over. There'd be no more attacks. No more fear. He'd done what he'd gone to do and Hess had no good reason to sabotage him any more.

The "lieutenants" were so busy finger-pointing and sparking witch hunts that they couldn't be bothered going after a witness who'd already testified.

A weight came off Kitty's shoulders, and in it's place was the gentle fog of mild shock.

When Bluebelle decided to watch something, she could be downright unnerving. It just wasn't *natural* for a seven-year-old to just *sit* and *stare* for hours on end. On the other hand, it did mean that she learned how to do things relatively quickly.
What she was watching, in this case, was Ms Peeper.

Since the chicken had grown up, Daddy had moved her out of her shoebox and into a cardboard box that formerly housed fruit, and lined it with shredded documents to make a sort of nest.

Ms Peeper apparently loved it. She hardly moved out of it, these days. For such an active chicken, this was a radical change in behaviour. That was why Bluebelle watched.

Ms Peeper had her eyes half shut, and her neck drawn in to the point where she nearly resembled a feathered football. Every now and again, she'd sort of sing a {brrrrrrrp brrrp brrrrp brrrrp} sort of sound. It was very confusing.

Could she be sick? Might she have -and here, Bluebelle had to smirk - Chicken Pox?

Ms Peeper kind of shuddered and closed her eyes. What if she was *really* sick? Then, without preamble or warning, Ms Peeper began *screaming*.

{DUKEEEEEERRRRK DUKDUKDUKDUK! DUKEEEEEEEEEERRRRRK DUKDUKDUKDUK! DUKEEERK DUKEEERK DUKEEEEEEEEEERRRRRK DUKDUKDUKDUK!}

On pure instinct, Bluebelle shot backwards about three metres, colliding with the opposite wall. She instantly turned and headed for the nearest available hiding place, under Daddy's dresser, and put her hands over her head. As Ms Peeper continued to scream as if there was a murder going on, Bluebelle started to cry.

It was a melee by the time Kitty reached Kurt's room. Ororo was carrying an inconsolable Bluebelle in her arms. There was an apparently rabid chicken in the corner that Hank was trying to isolate with a towel. Logan was yelling at anyone who'd listen that the chickens should have been sent away ages ago. Bluebelle, between gasps and sobs, was trying to explain that she was only watching, that she didn't mean it, she didn't even *touch* Ms Peeper and that she didn't want to be hit, *please*.

That last one made Kitty want to cry. In fact, she could feel her eyes stinging right now.

Ms Peeper stopped having her screaming fit, and settled down to making {brrrrrrrp brrrp brrrrp brrrrp} noises again. Hank placed the towel over her nest-box, just to be sure.

Which left Bluebelle, who was bordering on hysterical.

Kitty found Kurt's brushes and took the soft one out of its place. She got Ororo to sit on the bed and started with Bluebelle's lovely hair.

"It's all right, now," Kitty soothed. "It's *all* over, now. Everything's quiet, now. Shhh... Shhh..."

Bluebelle transferred her hug to Kitty. "So sorry," she whimpered. "Didn' mean it. 'M so sorry, Mistress. Please don't hit me?"

"Classical regression," Ororo murmured, petting the girl. "She'll come out of it."

"...should have had those birds out of here the *second* that dumbass project was over, but *no-o-o-o-o*... *We* have to wait until they get their grades back!"

"Mr Logan?" said Kitty. "Could you like, take that elsewhere, please? Bluebelle doesn't exactly like, need anger in the room, right now."

Logan stared at her in shock before he shrugged and left, taking his litany with him.


Bluebelle just cried, clinging tight to Kitty. She was shaking like a leaf.

"It's okay to be scared," Kitty said, still brushing the bits of Bluebelle she could reach. "It's okay to cry; but you don't have to be sorry. You just got scared. You didn't *do* anything at all."

Sam poked his head around the door. "What's all the ruckus about?" he asked. "I could hear you clear down the other side of the house."

"Ms Peeper went like, ballistic," Kitty summarised. "She scared the heck out of Bluebelle."

"This is *nuts*," Sam announced. "Ain't nobody ever heard a chicken lay an egg, before?"

_Ohboy. Kurt's going to *love* that..._ Kitty thought.

Ororo stopped being calm and gentle and started looking a little ticked. "*Evan*..." she yelled in the warning tones that adults use when kids have been found out. "Evan James Daniels, you come here right *now*!"

Wow. That was it. Apart from the students who were sequestered Jury members, life had a fair-to-passing chance of returning to some semblance of normalcy.

Which meant that he, Principal Kelly, could only look forward to mysterious earthquakes, demon sightings, ghost sightings, 'ectoplasm' in the boy's showers, exploding vending machines and freak whirlwinds.

It almost felt - homey.

He went back to the resume of the teacher in front of him. It was impeccable. It was perfect. But then, so was Hess'.

"Tell me, Mr -uh--"

"Endicott. Jarod Endicott," the man smiled and ate another Pez.

"...Mr Endicott; do you have any *legal* trouble we, as a public institute, might want to know about?"

"Oh, no. No legal *trouble*. I was a legal assistant once."

Kelly didn't really know if he should laugh or not, but the man's easy smile was infectious. "You understand that I have to be cautious. The - uh- recent unpleasantness with one of our teachers has made everyone jumpy."

"Ah, well; then you'll have to know that I change my last name regularly," he said, sparking off alarms in Kelly's head. "It's a case of mistaken identity, I swear; but these people just won't listen. So, of course, I have to move around a lot."

Kelly felt his brain implode. "Why don't you just confront them? *Tell* them you're not who they're after."

"They have a licence to kill." Jarod smiled again. "Don't worry; if anything goes down, I'll lead them away from the school, first."

Kelly's eye began to twitch.

"That's a nasty tic," said Jarod. "Have you had it looked at? You know, a small injection of botox into the responsible nerve can do wonders."

"Really?" Kelly brightened. This guy *knew* stuff. "So - why are you applying for the position of *gym* teacher?"

Another Pez became a target for mastication. "I believe that in order to teach, one has to learn as well. I happen to have a lot to learn in this area, and I feel these kids can teach me a *lot*.

"Before we go on, I have to warn you--"

"Bayville is the epicentre of some pretty unusual happenings, I know," Jarod breezed. "One of my hobbies is unusual phenomena. I'm not worried in the slightest--"

"You're hired," said Kelly, automatically.

"--I'm actually intrigued..." Jarod smiled again.

Like a shot, Kelly was around his desk. "Welcome to Bayville High, Mister Endicott!" He vigorously shook his hand.

"Please," he chewed a fresh Pez. "Call me Jarod."
"What on *Earth*?" Scott boggled. "He is *not* greeting everyone by name."
"Heirelgart's a small town," said Jean. "What do you expect?"
"Okay," said Kitty, "That is *so* not German," she flipped through her dictionary. "That is *way* not German. It's not even *dialect*. What *language* are they like, *speaking*?"
"It's Romany," said Rogue. "Ever since he found out about our relationship? He's been tryin' to teach me the lingo. Said I wouldn't be able to fit in, otherwise."
Everyone turned to her with a hopeful look.
"And no, I am *not* providin' a translation for y'all. What I can understand is mostly 'hello's and 'how are ya's. Pretty borin'."
Evan was the one with the cynical prediction. "We're going to the circus, tonight, aren't we?"
"Going, hell," said Kitty. "We're like, guests."

Bluebelle stared at the envelope. "What's this for?"
"Your blood test results," said Doctor Hank.
She opened it, and read the paper. "Oh, I failed," she said. "See? I got negatives in everything."
Doctor Hank patted her head. "When it comes to nasty diseases," he said, "That sort of result is a pass. With flying colours."
"Huh," she said. Adults were *weird*.

He could care less about his left elbow. Or forty-eighths of seconds. All that mattered was the smell of sawdust and the wind in his hair, the feel of the bars in his hands or the wire under his feet. He was flying high.
He was in his element.
Kurt was never more whole than when he was flying, *really* flying; not pulling stunts on gymnastics equipment a mere few feet above the ground.
Here, he was the amazing, the astounding, the awe-inspiring Fleidertuefel. Here, he was free. The concerns of earthbound life were nothing while he was in the air. There was just his body, and the laws of gravity, and he was at home with both.
His sisters, his tribe, and his family were with him. He was at peace, with nothing more to concern him than chalk dust and playing to the audience.
Hess didn't exist, when he was up in the air. Predators and their ilk were ground-creatures. Stumbling, ungainly things jealous of his ability to fly, and hurtful about it.
He pitied them.

"...holy *crap*..." Evan muttered.
The tumbling Wagners were such a hit that the audience was dumbstruck.
"Professor," whispered Ororo, "remember all those times Kut would ask you for a practice rig and you said 'no'?"
"He has the Danger room if he wishes to excercise his abilities," Xavier whispered back. "The extra advantage is that he can share his skills amongst the others."
"Sir, I don't often say this, but--" Ororo fought with the phraseology. "That's just damn stupid."
"I agree," Jubes murmured. She was focussing a camcorder on the Wagners. "With all due respect, sir, that's one bone-headed move."
"Hey, Chuck," Logan whispered. He'd been completely absorbed in the act. "Remember all those times the Elf came whinin' to ya for a practice rig?"
Charles sighed. "Yes. I've just been reminded."
"You're changin' your mind."
Kitty leaned across Ororo and tapped his arm. "Pssst! Professor..." she whispered. "Could you like, re-think the whole practice rig thing? Kurt like, *so* needs it, and we won't like, take up the Danger Room when he like, teaches us."
"Damn," Amara murmured, eyes fixed firmly skywards. "He's *hot* in that outfit... Hey, Professor..."
"I *know*," said Charles. "I'll consider it."
"Wow," Bluebelle murmured at a particularly impressive stunt. "I wanna fly like that, too."
"Kurt's gonna teach you," said Jamie. He had a giant wad of cotton candy in one hand and Bluebelle's holographically-disguised digits firmly in the other. He offered Bluebelle a bite. "He's good at teaching stuff like that."
Bluebelle, in turn, offered him a lick of her lollipop.
Jamie couldn't help but grin.

It had been a long trial already. Why did they have to make it longer with closing statements? Raven tried not to yawn whilst doodling a picture of Hess on a gibbet in her margins.
"...and we've heard, most importantly, from the victims who were unable to speak. Mountains of evidence to some, human remains to others. Children were abducted. Raped. Killed. Dissected and put on display as if they were *animals*. And all of this was done by one woman. One, very sick, woman." Murdock pointed at Hess' table. "She's sitting right there, ladies and gentlemen, and she does *not* deserve to go free."
Murdock found his place, sat, and tidied away his things.
Mason stood. Raven had watched him go grey during the trial. She'd have gone grey, too, in his place.
"I've done a lot of things in my time as a lawyer," he began. "I've never been ashamed, because I told myself I was just doing my job. This one has been my hardest. I can not defend everything that my client has done. I can only defend a few acts, here and there, as the actions of a madwoman. The rest, I'm afraid, fall into the category of atrocities. She has only *recently* begun to show signs of remorse and, given her record, I can not say if it is genuine.
"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury; Bruna Irene Hess is insane. No stretch of the imagination can classify her as otherwise. She calls her actions her 'work' or her 'art'. She believed herself to be improving the children she abducted. She a thousand reasons why. A million tricks to try and make her witnesses back down, or disappear, or be too frightened to come forward.
"Yes, she is insane. Yes, she is old; and *yes*, she has a thin grasp on reality.
"They're just excuses, and not good reasons to let her go free." Mason leaned on the divider. "It's my job to tell you that they are. It's my job to let *that*," he pointed at Hess. "Go out, free, on the streets. Well, ladies and gentlemen, if I succeed in that job: I'm going to quit." He took a deep breath and sighed. "The most lenience I could hope for is imprisonment in a mental institution. Please. Consider it."
He went and sat back down, while Hess looked like she could start on adults. Beginning with Philip Mason.

The jury didn't take long to deliberate on the verdict.
"Guilty."
"Guilty."
"Guilty."
"Guilty as Hell."
"Guilty."
"Guilty."
"Guilty."
"Guilty."
"Guiltier than the Devil hisself."
"Guilty."
"Guilty."
"Guilty."

"That was easy," said the elected foreman. "Okay. Punishment, anyone?"
"I'm with Mason," said Risty. "Put her in a mental ward. A *high* *security* mental ward. It's ideal. They'll keep her so doped up she won't know up from down. *And* she gets to spend the rest of her life with people pulling her apart to see what makes her tick." She smiled. "Sort of appropriate when you think about it."

There were a group of nods.
"I'm with her," said another. "Look her in the loony bin."
"Germany wants her," said another juror. "I say we let the USA extradite her after about - what? Ten, fifteen years?"
"Twenty at the outmost," suggested a third.
"Sounds good to me," said Risty. "All in favour?"

Kitty practically leaped on him the second he was offstage. Her tongue was almost down his throat in seconds.
"Katzchen!" he managed, a little shocked. "What's got *into* you?"
"All those other girls drooling for your lovely, blue, fuzzy, *gorgeous* tight ass..." Kitty licked her lips. "I had to make 'em know you're *mine*.

"Always and ever," Kurt chuckled, returning the favour. She was as sweet as ever. Delicious. When they came up for air, she said. "*God*, you're hot in that outfit... And you smell so - so... *Rrrroowwwrrrrr*..

"Pheremones, liebchen," Kurt said. "I'm a little bit blessed on that score. I make it a point to wait until I've bathed before I see if the lady is really that interested."
"You *know* I'm like, interested," Kitty teased, running her hand over his exposed pelt. No-one minded him as he was on the highwire, or in his circus gear. Everyone thought it an elaborate costume and let it go. After all, the centaurs were more interesting to look at.
"True, but I like to know I'm not taking advantage of anyone."
"Gallant Elf," Kitty cooed.
Kurt bowed as he headed for the nearest available shower. "I shall see you anon, my love. Then I'll know if you like me - or my smell."

Kitty laughed. She'd caught his carefree attitude, tonight. And, perhaps later, they'd find another way to fly. Together.
They'd been planning this event for weeks. It had felt like forever, while they were trying to find a piece of time, but they'd found it. The story for their comrades and families was that they were seeking a little 'together time'. It was strictly true, but no-one had mentioned, or asked, what they were *doing* together.

It had been a wonderful morning. Breakfast at the Waffle Barn, followed by a fluff-brained comedy movie to chase the last shadows out, and then to the little hotel room.

Kurt, of course, had a surprise for her in the elevator.

There was a small velvet box, it would have almost blended in with his blue fur, nestled in his palm. Kitty knew what was in there. "Oh, *Kurt*..."

"I can't pledge forever, liebe," he began. "We're still young, and we have a lot of growing to do. People do the most changing between fifteen and twenty-five. And then they change again." He sighed. "We may grow past each other... but for now, until we *both* decide otherwise, I'd like nothing else than to grow with you." He opened the box.

Kitty was right. It was a delicate little engagement ring. She tried it on, and it fit. "Oh, *Kurt*..." Tears pricked her eyes. "I wanna like, grow with you, too."

They kissed, and almost missed their floor as a direct result. Kurt's kisses always made Kitty giddy, and they giggled all the way to the room, laughed at Kurt's fumbling with the key, and wound up having a tickle-war when they got inside.

Kitty gasped when she noticed the room. Kurt must have had a quiet word with the management when he made the booking. The bed was scattered with rose petals, and the room itself lit with candles. The little floating ones, set in glass bowls of water.

"Did you like, read my diary or something?" she asked.

Kurt had somehow lost his hologram during the tickle-fight, and his blue fuzzy face was a forged picture of innocence. "Me?" he said. "I never pry into a lady's secrets." He pretended wounded dignity for all of three seconds. "If you must know, Rogue was holding a reading while you were on one of your dates with *him*.

"I'll kill her later," Kitty said, gently easing Kurt's overshirt off his shoulders. "If I don't have a good reason to thank her."

Kurt began kissing her neck, licking as he nibbled there, too. "What are Elves for?" he said, "If not to make dreams come true?"

Her sweater joined his overshirt on the floor, and despite her feelings for him, she blushed. Kitty hated her shoulders, and always tried to hide them from public view.

Kurt seemed pleased about her just standing there in a shift-top and pants, caressing the newly-exposed flesh with a delicate, plush touch. Nervous, yet sure her Elf would never hurt her, she pulled his undershirt out of his pants and explored the lovely pelt underneath it.

_He's so soft,_ she marvelled. _And so hard underneath. Iron under velvet. All alive. All mine._

Kitty murmured her appreciation as they moved into an embrace, and Kurt sighed with her. She only flinched a little at the feeling of hardness at around crotch-level in Kurt's pants. Tabby had been right. Kurt *was* bigger than Lance.

"If you're scared," Kurt whispered. "If you want to stop, and absolutely mean it, your safe word is 'grove'. Can you remember that?"

"Yeah. But like, why do I need a like, safe word at all?"

"Sometimes," he murmured, kissing and nibbling at her ear, "a partner will moan something that sounds like 'no', or say 'no' when they don't really want to. This clears up the confusion." He paused, and looked her in the eye, loving and affectionate. "Mine's 'Heirelgart'."

It made sense. Heirelgart was the one place in the world that was purely, one hundred percent safe.
for him. Kitty kissed him, tasting his mouth. Sweet and fresh, with a hint of strawberries from the breakfast they shared.

"Did we remember to put the 'Do not disturb' sign up?"

"Yes, meine liebe," Kurt slowly sneaked her shift off, leaving her with only her bra for cover.

Kitty got quick revenge, skinning his long-sleeved shirt from him and leaving him looking extremely ruffled and fluffy all over. _God, he's sexy like that,_ she thought. _I wonder if he'll look like that - youknow - *after*..._ Kitty blushed again, but by that time, Kurt was sort of rubbing himself up against her. The lethal weapon in his pants rubbed against her crotch. It felt good.

They fell together onto the bed, scattering rose petals and exploring each other. Kurt's ever-handry tail managed to undo both flies whilst his hands were pre-occupied with the bra. Kurt slowly seduced each breast, thoroughly nuzzling, kissing, nibbling and licking each nipple before buffing her body with his delicious fur.

Kitty was panting. It all felt so wonderful. He was fuzzy *magic*. Somehow, he made her want nothing more than to feel filled by him. She wasn't even scared about how big he was. She knew he'd be gentle.

That tail of his snaked into her pants, brushing over her legs and caressing her in a feeling both alien and wonderful, strange and seductive.

Their witty repartee, of course, had dissolved into nothing more than moans, coos and whimpers. Breathless endearments, hastily whispered in the fight for oxygen.

They lost their pants, somewhere in their tumblings together, and Kitty was beginning to feel a little overwhelmed by the fuzz. One of his hands descended to her crotch, thinly covered by her panties, and massaged her.

It was more than she could stand. In a moment, he had her screaming his name, calling out to God, and moaning with relief. She felt so embarressed that she could actually *do* that...

Kurt, as always, was gently smiling. "Happy first orgasm, geliebt," he purred, adding an extra dimension to the sensations already overwhelming her. Her whole body felt like it was sizzling.

"There's," she panted, "going to be more?"

"Many more," he promised.

The tent in his boxers was, once again, almost a threat. Kitty had only caught the briefest glance of Lance's 'equipment' and that had hurt like a pile-driver had smashed into her. She'd been almost too scared to try and look at Kurt's, when they were in Hess' basement, but she'd had to sneak a peek, regardless. In Hess' basement, inactive and quiet, it hadn't looked that much. As blue as the rest of him, sure; but it wasn't that scary.

Now that it was 'awake', Kitty was having second thoughts.

Kurt lay on top of her, just gently pressing himself into her, letting her get used to the feel of him. It wasn't so bad. In fact, she got a second orgasm off of it. Kurt adjourned, at that point, to help himself to something in the 'fridge.

"Typical Elf," Kitty giggled, still mazed with the sizzling stars all through her body. "Always stopping to snack."

Kurt just laughed, and scurried back to her. His next kiss included an ice cube. The shock of its chill woke her up to all sorts of naughty things written on the girl's bathroom stalls. _Oh, God. He isn't..._

Kurt retrieved the ice from her mouth and began kissing his way down her body, stopping periodically to torture her with the ice. He was always sure to chase the freezing ice with his red-hot mouth, but that, too, was becoming torture.

By the time he began easing off her panties, she practically thrust her hips into his face. She wanted to feel him there. She *needed* to feel him there. Kurt chuckled, an, "Einfach, Madchen," and tossed her underpants - somewhat accurately - at the pool of clothes near the bed. Then he continued his kissing, ice-torture path down to the promised land.

Kitty practically screamed when his hot tongue invaded her labia and curled around her clitoris. She definetely did so when he guided the ice around the same parts. Sharp fangs threatened, yet never
broke tender skin. A clever, masterful tongue played her like an instrument. Between him, his fur, and the ice cube, Kitty got three more orgasms, at least. Especially when he put his tongue inside her. And then the ice cube.

Kurt surfaced, grinning, with a tiny little chip between his teeth. He fed it to her with his mouth, and Kitty was glad of the tiny drink, no matter where it had been. She was even gladder of his mouth, and the taste of her on top of the taste of him.

His damn pants were still on! Kitty growled a little and frantically tugged at them, only to find Kurt fighting her. "Not yet, geliebt. Not yet."

"I need you, damn it," she panted. "I need you inside me *now*."

"I'd hurt you," he said, equally out of breath. "I want never to hurt you."

Kitty straddled one of his legs, her hips thrusting with want. "Please," she begged. "I don't care if it hurts, I *need* you."

"I know. I need you, too. But not now. Here," deft, he lifted her, and put her naked body astride his tail. "Hug me from behind."

The tail was sort of okay. She could even nearly feel a spinal cord through the fuzz-coated flesh. It wriggled and writhed up between her nether lips as she attempted to seduce Kurt. His hands were free to explore her legs, while hers caressed his rock-hard muscles and teased at kitten-soft fur.

Kitty shrieked a little when Kurt's tail, with a sudden hitch and half-twist, entered her increasingly wet vagina. It curled into her of its own accord, twisting deeper with each passing moment. The stars overwhelmed her for an eighth glorious time, just to feel that peculiar, twining glory writhing about her insides.

Kurt grunted, too, and Kitty could tell that he was getting at least some pleasure from - well - tail sex. "You've got good pelvic floor muscles," he said. "Been doing a lot of exercise, ja?"

What an ironic thing to discuss in the bedchamber! Kitty had to laugh, even though she was madly trying to thrust even more of his tail into her. "Mom always *said*," she panted, "I'd make my man greatful."

"And how," Kurt breathed, pressing her close to him. "Geleibt, you have *no* idea... *OH*!" He threw his head back, onto her shoulder, and they managed to French - albeit at an awkward angle - as the stars overcame them both.
Fracture Fifty: Peace in Another's Arms (part two)

They didn't care how loud they were. It didn't matter how loud they were. All there was was each other.

Kitty all but ground herself into the base of his tail as the coiling, twining, prehensile limb filled her like nothing else. Kurt's pulse made it jump inside her, his heart's rhythm driving her wild.

When she came down from her tenth and eleventh successive orgasms, her hand was in Kurt's lap, gently petting his poor tent. Kitty had to note the growing patch of warm moisture, there.

"Wow," she breathed. "Guess I got even." It was still standing strong, somehow. Either he'd gone off and come back up while she was still climaxing, or his own climax was very recent, and he was still 'standing to attention'.

Kurt's reply was an inarticulate string of 'oh's and 'ah's.

Poor Elf. From what Kitty had read, guys needed a few more minutes of recovery time. His tail wriggled free of her, and only served to reheat her ardour. She could wait, though, for her poor beloved to return to his senses. Kitty gently smoothed his back-fur down, going with the grain and adding gentle massages at points where he sighed.

There was one little place, right where his tail departed from his spine, that made him sigh and moan. She'd been grinding her pelvis against it when they were having tail sex. She must have given him a bruise.

His poor moist tail was dancing, though, whenever she touched that spot. _He must be like, sensitive there_, she thought, and a wicked idea overcame her.

Kitty kissed her way down to that spot and, murmuring as she did so, kissed and licked it, sometimes adding a play-bite to the gentle rise at the beginning of his tail. By the time she was done, the tent was back to its full glory, and poor Kurt was incoherent.

"You - little witch," he managed, tackling her in a fierce embrace and covering her with kisses. "You - sorceress..." Fuzzy hands ghosted over her, feeling ever inch. A busy mouth kissed until she was sure his lips were getting friction burns. "No-one," he panted. "Never..." He worked his way in between her legs and, leaning her back, once again lay on top of her.

His eyes looked a little frenzied. His hold on himself was becoming fragile. His eyes flickered, and Kitty caught a glimpse of Hure, before Kurt resurfaced.

"I *am* in control," he whispered. "I can do this. I *want* to do this. I don't need you. I need *her*.

"Are you all right?" Kitty panted. His frenzied actions had lit her fires once more, but even though she was hungry for release, she was worried about her lover.

He was relaxed now. In control. "Ja. But FYI?" he guided her hand to that little place. "*There* is an Elf erogenous zone. Don't give it too many hummers."

Kitty giggled. "Any other little places I should like, know about?" she asked, half playful.

"I'll give you a hint," he said, and sucked on her earlobe a moment before he answered, "Foot play."

Kitty smiled and twined her leg with his, her toes teasing at his fur as she felt out his thighs and calves. She watched his reactions the whole time, but got nothing more out of him than a mysterious, sexy smile and some purely divine breast play.

When she got down to his ankle-joint, Kitty fearlessly explored his differences. At one point, she got an amusing idea for an alternate use for his toes, but decided to keep until later. He twitched and sighed at last when she found his dewclaw-toe with hers, and rumbled a delighted purr against her when she tickled him on the underside.

Kitty grinned with glee and dove for his nearest foot. At first, she tickled him with her fingers; then, emboldened, began kissing him. Kurt was forced to return his appreciation along her bottom and
thighs, but he did so with lips, tongue and hands.
  "Leiber Gott!"
  "Nice to know I'm appreciated," Kitty purred, and returned to torturing his toe with tongue, lips and teeth.

Kurt got revenge on her, of course, by giving her a little feedback. Her upturned bottom also exposed her sensitive and slightly swollen nether parts. Kitty decided, after the resultant orgasm, that there was nothing on Earth like a hummer from a guy who could also purr.
  "That makes it an even dozen," Kurt said, panting a little as he helped Kitty to lie by his side.

"You're almost ready, Liebchen."
"Do do what?" she asked. "Explode?"
"Exploding's my department, Schatz," he joked. "One more little stretching exercise, and I can give you what you need."

"I don't think I can," she gasped, "take many more orgasms..."
"You're stronger than you think, meine geliebt." And once again, his hand was at her crotch.

For such thick fingers, he was a master of manipulation. His silky fur sliding between her labia felt divine. And then that same, too-thick digit entered her. It was only a little painful, a discomfort easily overcome by his finding her G-spot with an alarming accuracy. Before she knew it, he was deep inside her and she was writhing to get more. His thumb agitated her clitoris, and she came again.

Unlucky for some.

Kitty smiled at the familiar stars and lazily tugged at his shorts. They stuck a little on his 'tent-pole', but his glory was soon revealed to her.
  "See?" Kurt said. "I told you I was getting blue balls."

Kitty had to laugh at him. "You - fuzzy elf!" She dragged him down to her and gave him a good Frenching. "Now, let me appreciate the view, huh?"

Kurt finished escaping the boxers and posed. He was fuzzy all over, and the fine fur on his shaft fluffed a little with each beat of his pulse. He *was* carrying a concealed weapon. Kitty was positive. Once she had that thing inside her, she'd just *die*.

With a smile on her face.
Kurt crawled up to her, purring like a big cat, and produced a tube of something he'd picked up with his tail (another lethal weapon) from his pants on the floor.
  "I don't think we like, need lube, fuzzy," Kitty said as she watched him smear his member with the substance.

"It's spermicide," said Kurt. "Just playing safe."
  "But I'm like, on the pill."
  "Like I said. Playing safe."

"I thought you weren't supposed to believe in contraception," Kitty said.
"I know. I'm a *very* naughty Catholic. I should go and confess," he moved closer to her, eyes full of love, "Except this doesn't feel like a sin." He ducked as he approached and kissed his way *up* her stomach this time; and gently, carefully, pressed himself into her.

It didn't hurt at all. There was a little initial discomfort as he slipped into her opening, but once past that, it was solid gold. Kitty gasped with relief, just to have him joining her. She also had to grunt each time he pressed a little further in.

Tabby hadn't been joking when she said he was big. He felt, to her sensitive parts, to be positively ginormous. She was personally amazed that she didn't split wide open.

His fur tickled and teased her with each thrust *and* each heartbeat, and it felt like an agony of eternity to wait for him to encapsulate his member inside her.

He went deeper and deeper, and all Kitty could do was want more. Did he go on forever or *what*?
She could feel him sort of pushing against the top of her vagina. She wanted more of that, preferably for the rest of eternity. Kurt obliged by withdrawing a little, then pushing harder, just enough to make her moan, but not enough to cause pain.

Kurt withdrew a little more, pushed a little more, and Kitty gasped, the stars were threatening to come, and so was she. _Just a little more..._

"Just a little more," he whispered encouragingly, as if in answer to her thoughts. With each thrust forward, his fur tantalised her stomach, breasts and chest. He thrust again, pushing at her again. Deeper. Harder.

Kitty cried out, "More! Oh, *please*, more..."

Kurt looked intensely relieved. "Don't want to hurt you," he whispered.

"I don't *care*," she whimpered. "Fill me up."

Gently, always gently, and *agonisingly* slowly, he obeyed. Kitty was caught up in yet another climax as he finally sheathed his entire shaft inside her body.

"What are you doing?" he joked as soon as she came back to herself. "Trying to wring me dry?"

"I want all of you, Kurt Wagner," she said. "Every last fuzzy inch."

"Seven and three-eighths, actually," he murmured. Kurt buried his face in her neck before his hips started moving.

He withdrew nearly all the way, and Kitty feared he'd start slowly filling her again until he surprised her with a sudden, deep thrust that almost made her come again. The second time, she realised it was another fuzzy trick. Nine short thrusts, followed by one big one. It was agony and ecstasy all in one; and he looked like he could keep it up - no pun intended - forever. Then, with equal surprise for Kitty, he gave her ten solid, deep thrusts that threw her over the brink.

Kitty got *very* religious at that point. Kurt could renew just about anyone's faith in the Almighty. You needed someone to *thank*.
Just as soon as she recovered from the last orgasm, he began working on the next. Kitty was dazed. She'd already come - what? Fifteen times? And *he* had yet to fill her with his seed.

"What are you?" Kitty panted as he began the short-stroke trick again, pressing against her cervix once for every ten thrusts. "Some kinda superman?"

"It's just the tantra, liebchen," he said. "I want to make it a gift for you. Make it pure. Make it *right*..." his voice fell into a whisper as he buried himself in her. "In all honour."

Kitty wanted to weep, but she was too caught up in the fantastic things he was doing to her. Just how long and how often was he going to go? Kitty had to wonder if - or how - *she* wasn't supposed to explode after orgasm number sixteen travelled up and down her spine.

Kurt's tail snaked between her legs and teased her swollen labia. Then that wicked, spaded tip played in her juices before worming its way downwards, towards another opening.

"Clench, then relax," he whispered in her ear.

Kitty obeyed, and a slippery invader slid into her ass! She barely had time to think, _*More* tail sex?_ before it and Kurt together pushed her into another screaming orgasm. Seventeen. Seventeen times. Kitty was starting to feel exhausted. Her heartbeat reverberated through her entire chest. Kurt was *everywhere*. Suckling on her earlobe, playing with her breasts, soothing the small of her back, or the curve of her buttocks, twining into her ass and relentlessly, inevitably, pounding into her vagina.

Kitty reached eighteen as his tail-tip worked between them and began playing with her clitoris. Damn handy thing to have, that tail, she thought, and reached a decision.

"Kurt, Kurt, Kurt," she whimpered. "Please. I don't want the tantra... I want *you*. I want good, honest, boyfriend-and-girlfriend *sex*. I don't think--" she gasped and gulped. "I don't think I can stand - much more..."

"You're strong," Kurt hissed. "You're strong. Be strong, geliebt. Just two more. Please. Two more?" This time, his French kiss was desperate. He needed this from her. For the strength of his soul. He needed it to heal.

Kurt was whisper-chanting, "One more," this last time. His face was a portrait of pain, need and raw lust all rolled into one. He *needed* release. He couldn't keep going like this. At around fifty, Kitty found the strength to move her right hand, ever-so-slowly, down his spine. At sixty-five, he realised what she was up to, but both his hands were desperately busy with her body.

"Liebe? Liebe?" he panted, fear adding to the mixture in his eyes. "What are you-- *Liebe*..."

Seventy. Nearly there. At seventy-eight, she found that sensitive spot. At eighty, began to play with it. At ninety, he finally lost control.

It was a long, slow, scream from him, starting low as he realised he could no longer keep his rhythm, and ascending as he approached climax. Kitty siezed his ass with her other hand and wrapped her legs around his, toes stroking the dewclaw-toe of each ankle for good measure.

Kitty joined him, screaming in delight and thrusting her hips up to meet his as she continued to ruffle and smooth the fur just above his tail with her hand.

Kurt, desperate, chanted, "Liebe, liebe, *liebe*!" with each strong and hearty thrust. With one final, almost ear-splitting, "*LIEBE*!" Kurt filled her insides with red-hot ejaculation.

Kitty screamed with him, glad to finally join souls with him as boiling delight filled her from top to toe. That one moment seemed to last forever. A golden, shining second where they were both together in the same place.
There were stars, but they were scattered beneath her, like the rose petals. For a moment, just a moment, they touched Heaven together.

They sank slowly back into themselves. Kitty held Kurt tight above her, not minding his weight, just yet. The sizzling in her blood filled her ears.

One hand, unbidden, rose to pet Kurt's hair, almost as soft and marvellous as the fur that covered every inch of his body. Especially, she smirked, Seven and three-eighths of it.

That glorious length was still pulsing inside her. Kitty wished she could purr with the delight of it, but hummed a note of satisfaction, instead.

Twenty. He made it to twenty.

When he woke up, Kitty would have to tell him that just one would suffice for normal circumstances. One just like the last one.

Kurt began sobbing into her shoulder. At first, his breath hitched, then gasped, gulped and finally, broke out in shudders of pure misery.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he whimpered. "I'm sorry I lost control like that. I'm so sorry... Was supposed to be a gift. Everything I knew. Given to you in all honour. I'm sorry..."

"Sweetie, Kurt, please... Listen to me," she brushed the fur of his face and ears, smoothed the tousled hair from his face with her hands. "Listen to me." Kitty chased some of the tears off his face. "The part I liked the best was when you lost control. It was all you; not some discipline that - that - monster taught you. Just you, needing me. And me needing you. That's what good sex is supposed to be about. Needing each other."

"But I wanted--" he whispered, and his voice stopped with tears. "I wanted to make it clean. I wanted to make it *right*."

"It was, sweetheart. Darling. Beloved. It was clean. It was right. Didn't you feel it?" Kurt sniffed. "Ja. I felt it. But - I did it wrong..."

Kitty had to French him. "Lover; you did it wrong in all the right ways. Like, trust* me on this."

She said trust her, and Kurt did. He didn't particularly want to disengage, just yet, and neither did she; so he sort of rolled them onto their sides so that he wouldn't crush her. They held each other tight in a peculiar lassitude where the rest of the world was on the other side of their own private bubble.

Kurt had to smile, watching Kitty watch him - through half-closed eyes on both sides - as they faced each other. "Hubches Dame," he murmured. "Ich bin Ihre, fur Immer."

"Forever's a long time, sweetie," Kitty murmured. She put her hand on his shoulder and stared at the ring he'd given her. "We've got ten years before we like, know who we are, and another few like, growing into that person. What if we like, don't like who we become?"

"I'll save that question for when it happens, geliebt," Kurt said. "I just don't want to let you go, right now."

"Okay," she smiled. "For now - forever."

It was a pledge he could live with. "For now - forever."

They sealed it with a kiss and fell asleep in each other's arms.

When he woke, the bed was empty. Kurt startled, looking for handcuffs, restraints, and lipstick messages before he remembered where he was.

Kitty had drawn a sheet over his nudity.

There was no paint anywhere.

Not even the edible kind.

Verdammt.

Kurt stretched and got up, ignoring his clothes for the meantime in his search for Kitty, who, as far as he could tell, was also going skyclad.

A naked Kitty beat any kind of body paint any day.

He found her in the room's ensuite, relieving her bladder. Kurt wolf-whistled by way of a greeting. Kitty shrieked and pulled at the TP in an effort to cover herself.
"Liebe, we just had sex. I think worrying about your current nudity is somewhat - moot?" He sat on the edge of the spa tub and turned on the hot water. In a few moments, he'd adjusted the temperature to be nicely warm to furless skin. He'd find it slightly tepid, but he knew other ways to keep warm.

Kitty saw his mischevious smile and started grinning, herself. "Again? I can like, hardly walk after the *last* time."

"Exactly why you need a hot bath," he said, adding bubble-bath to the water. "Peps you right up."

Kitty finished up, washing her hands before testing the water in the tub. "Mmmmm... Nice and *hot*. Just like someone else I know."

"*Now* you're getting into the spirit of things." Kurt grinned as he caught his beloved up in a seductive embrace. "Care to play in the tub with me?"

"I thought you'd like, *never* ask..."

So, hanging on to her waist, he 'fell' into the shallow, foaming water and dragged her down with him. Kitty shrieked delightfully and, once recovered, immediately splashed him with the water. "You fuzzy *fink*!"

All being fair in love and war, they wound up kissing passionately before the water covered their waists.

Katzchen had an excellent singing voice, and Kurt found out, with the help of some H2O, that she could, in the right circumstances, hit E above High C.
"*Some*body *sco-ored*..." sang a voice as Kurt escorted Kitty back towards the Institute. "Clappe, Andrei," Kurt told him. "Go find some clover, or something."

Andrei emerged from the shrubbery, toothpick worrying at some greenery in his teeth. "Hey, come on. *I* can smell it on you and you're *downwind*. How long do you think you're going to last against that Logan guy?" He munched on some more greenery. "The least you could do is tell me a little about it before he slices and dices you."

Kurt sighed. "Andrei..."

Kitty held up a finger and tried not to think about where it had been last. "Uh. You guys - graze?"

Andrei bowed at her. "Us Centaurs are vegetarians by force, ma'am. Of course, we can eat *grass*, but it's a little - bland. Your Professor let us in his estate in our search for flavour."

"It's very nice, here," said another Centaur, emerging from the other side of the path. "Well, well, what have *you* two been up to? You *know* your Mama's not too fond of more grandchildren, right now..."

Kurt sighed again. "Franziska..."

"Heh," said Andrei. "You can't keep secrets from a Centaur."

"Or a group of them, it seems," Kurt said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Just keep it to yourselves for as long as you can, ja? I like my new life, thankyou."

"Certainly gave it a good start."

"*Andrei*..."

"And maybe someone else, too."

"*Franziska*..."

Kitty guided him away. "Come on. They're only teasing. I think. They won't like, tell anyone."

"I certainly hope so. You know the Institute rules about hanky-panky."

"Yeah, but we didn't like, do it on Institute grounds."

"I suppose..." he said. "I hope..."

A thought occurred to her. "Um. Andrei and Franziska. Are they -uh- youknow?"

"It never pays to pry into the affairs of Centaurs," Kurt said, "Because a hoof to the ribs often offends."

Bluebelle laughed as she flying-tackled Jamie. "Gotcha!" she crowed as they tumbled along the grass. She wound up on top of him, and decided that, yes, she liked him more than enough. She'd never done this to anyone she *liked* before.

Slowly, softly, she pressed his lips against his, adding only the faintest lick of her tongue against his lips to hint at the possibilities of more.

"*Bluebelle*!" he shrieked, backpedalling as fast as he could scurry. "What was *that*?"

"But--" Bluebelle twitched her now-empty hands. "I thought we *liked* each other..."

"Not like *that*," he protested. "Not *yet*... We're just *kids*. We're supposed to like, play and junk. Like, G-rated stuff!"

"But I thought..." Bluebelle scraped at her eyes with fists. "Don't you like me any more?"

"It isn't like that," he said. "That kiss - that was too old for you. It was too old for *me*.

Bluebelle started huddling up on herself. "I just wanted to show you I like you?"

"You don't gotta do it like that, okay?"

Bluebelle felt weird. All sad, yet relieved at the same time. "I'm sorry," she said at length. "I guess I'm still trying to find out what's right and wrong."

"It's okay," Jamie relaxed at long last, and held her hand. "Next time, warn me first, okay?"

"Okay."
Children, came Xavier's telepathic call. There's some people to see Bluebelle, here. Activate your holowatch, please.

Bluebelle sighed and turned on her hologram. It was *weird* being pink instead of blue. Personally, she didn't know how Daddy could stand it.

She came in, because that's where she guessed the people were, and found Daddy talking to them with the Professor. Bluebelle clung to the door frame and whimpered.

The men were dressed in dark suits and looked imposing. The sort of people who, on television, made other people disappear.

"It's all right, liebchen," said Daddy. "These people just came to talk about your citizenship."

"I don't have one," she said. "You can't make me."

One of the men smiled.

"Gekommen sie," Daddy gestured at a seat next to his. "We're just trying to make you official, ja? It's just paperwork."

Bluebelle worked her way towards Daddy, keeping cover between her and the men. She didn't like this. She didn't trust them. The minute she settled herself in her seat, she clung to Daddy like a limpet.

"That does it," he said. "You're not watching the Hallmark Channel without supervision any more. You see too many movies showing you the wrong things."

"They aren't gonna take me away?"

"Nein. We're just trying to sort out a bunch of things so you officially exist."

Bluebelle didn't understand *that*. "But I exist," she said. "I'm right here."

"That's true," said one of the men. Bluebelle called him Goon1. "But you don't have any documentation - any papers - saying you are who you are. As far as the government's concerned, you just sprang up out of nowhere the day your father rescued you."

"We just need a few details so we can fix up that problem," Goon2 smiled. "The government doesn't like it when little girls pop up out of nowhere."

"Do you know what day you were born, sweetie?" asked Goon1.


"You don't have to celebrate it," said Daddy. "I celebrate the day I was adopted, since I don't have a real birthday."

"You can have mine," said Bluebelle. "It's *yuck*."

Daddy just laughed and gave her a hug. "That narrows it down, ja? April twenty-seventh, Ninety-five. Just put the Schwartzwald as the place of birth. Hess liked hanging around, there."

"That's still a lot of turf," said Goon2. "We might have to question her and her cronies, but I don't think they'll talk."

"They'd want to cut a deal, and we're not really that desperate for details," said Goon1.

"All else fails, we'll throw a dart at the map. Closest Hess strike zone gets to be her place of birth. Officially, of course." Goon2 busily took notes.

"There's another way to work this," said the Professor. "Forensic evidence and witness statements have put Hess in smaller areas. All we have to do is locate which area she was in during April of Ninety-six."

"Heck, they could probably give you a street address," said Daddy.

Both Goons laughed.

Kitty froze the second Logan entered the room. He was sniffing. She tried acting nonchalant. After the -er- 'dirty' bath, they'd both washed like people with OCD. There was no possible *way* that Logan could know.

He came right up to her and said, "Hope you two were playin' safe."

Kitty managed a nervous giggle. "We're not in trouble, are we?"

"I know the rules ain't gonna stop ya if you're determined; but if you're gonna play at being adults, you better start acting responsible, too."

"We were," said Kitty. "We *are*. And we will. Promise."

"Good." Logan helped himself to a soda. "You're way too young to be a Mom, Half-pint."

"I sorta like, figured that out already."

"What sort of closing argument *was* that?"

"The best you could get," said Mason. "Bruna, we both know you're guilty. There *is* no defense for what you did. The second this trial is over, I quit. You're going to have to find another lawyer to defend you. Because I *can't*."

"You insolent little man! You're working for me! I *order* you to help my appeal."

"Bruna," Mason sighed. "You stain people. I'm not hanging around to see how dark my soul gets. Like I said. I quit."

"You can't quit," she said. "I fire you!"

"Good luck finding a new lawyer," said Mason. "You'll need it."

"Hey, Elf. Packages for you and the rugrat."

Bluebelle gave him a hug on her way past, despite all of Logan's best efforts to appear hard-bitten and feral enough to never need a hug in all his life.

And, despite his act, he smiled at her and clapped her on the shoulder.

Kurt grinned. He *knew* Logan was soft on kids.

Logan snagged his arm as he passed. "I already talked to Half-pint," he said. "Don't make me talk to you."

Kurt swallowed. "Jawohl, mein Herr." That was an official warning. Any more premarital hanky-panky and Kurt would have certain parts shortened by adamantium. Not that they weren't doing a fine job of hiding on their own, right now...

He escaped Logan and found Bluebelle already tearing the wrapping off of a large box. It was a giant white teddy-bear, almost as big as she was. The card, once unearthed, had a bunch of flowers on the cover and a hand-written message inside that read, "Hope this helps make up for lost time. Gram'ma."

Kurt's package was a rare Beatles album and a similar card. "I know I'm not much of a mother, but I can give you something no-one else can. 17th July, 1985. Your birthday. Do with it what you will. Mom."

No 'I love you's. Just a peace offering. And no return address.
Fracture Fifty-Three: Full Circle, Sort Of

Another day, another Gym teacher. For as long as it lasted, anyway. Kurt tried not to look wistfully in the direction his troupe was, and put up with the amiable questions about the Centaurs while he waited for the new hire to appear and manage the class.

Yes, they had two hearts. Yes, they were vegetarian, but they could eat fish, eggs and dairy products. Yes, most of them lived in the Sewartwald, Germany. No, they usually didn't hoof people. Yes, they *were* a lot stronger than humans. No, he was never scared; because they were also pacifists. The smell of blood made them ill.

"All right," said a pleasant male voice touched with amusement. "When we're quite done on the comparative biology lessons." The speaker had their full attention, stretch shorts, a T-shirt, clipboard and a Pez dispenser strung around his neck. "My name is Jarod Endicott. I'll be your gym teacher for a while. Now," he consulted the clipboard. "I believe this class was working on elementary gymnastics before everything went a little pear-shaped."

There was a sussenration of laughter.

"Now," Endicott continued. "I know a lot of you wouldn't know a cartwheel for a somersault, so I'll grade most of you according to the amount of effort you put into it."

Kurt groaned. He was going to fail.

"And for the seasoned professionals amongst us, I'll just have to consult with you on how *you* feel your performance is doing. I expect *everyone* to be honest. I *will* catch out all fibbers."

He ate a Pez and grinned. "Now. Who do *you* think is the best here?"

"So how long have you been training to be a gymnast Mr--?"

"Kurt Wagner."

"Wagner," Endicott pronounced it correctly. Most Americans didn't bother. "How long?"

Kurt huffed a brief laugh. "I never studied to be a gymnast," he smirked. "I'm an acrobat."

"Professional?"

"Used to be. Every summer."

"Well, in that case, you can show us the rings. And try not to pretend it's the trapeze."

Kurt dusted his hands with chalk and leaped, catching the rings on the first go.

The class gasped. He had to admit, it was quite a jump for a mere mortal, but not outside the realms of possibility for someone who knew what they were doing. He *could* jump higher. *Far* higher, but ordinary people couldn't, and he had to pretend normalcy whilst under the hologram. Or else.

All the same, he *did* enjoy hurling himself around on the rings. It was almost, but not quite, like home. The Perfectionist only murmured under his breath about imperfections in his traitorous left arm, adding the odd snide comment about sex effecting athletic performance.

Kurt could easily ignore him, this time. There were no predators on his personal radar. He landed, smiling, and bowed at the applause. Ah, public. What a treat.

"Okay," said Endicott. "How would you rate yourself?"

"Er. B minus," said Kurt. "My left arm needs work."

"B minus it is," he said. "Now, who here thinks they absolutely suck?"

One hand went up. An asthmatic girl with a pale face and red hair. "I have an inner ear problem," she said.

"So we'll put you on the balance beam," offered Endicott. "It isn't that far to fall, and we can both work out what you can do."

It had been an interesting lesson, Kurt had to admit. He was almost glad to see the end of it.

"Mr Wagner, a word?"
"You *know* I'm an acrobat."
"Well, yes. I saw your show last night. Very educational. Especially when your Centaur friend juggled you and your three sisters."
Kurt grinned. "Most people find that funny."
"I must say you have a very interesting costume. Isn't it hot under all that makeup?"
Kurt was very careful to shrug. "I'm used to it."
Endicott looked straight into his eyes. "I know you're not who you seem to be. I can keep that a secret."
Something clicked. It was a recognition of sorts. "You're not exactly who you say *you* are, either."
"Really?"
"You don't move like a teacher," said Kurt. "You move like a fighter. Someone who's always on their guard."
"So do you," said Endicott.
He had a point. "What do you want, Herr Endicott. If that *is* your real name."
"Actually, I want your help," he ate yet another candy. "Can you teach me how to fly?"
"Why me, Herr Endicott?"
"Call me Jarod," said Jarod. "There's another circus near Mexico that's violating basic human rights. I need to pass myself off as an acrobat. A *good* one."
"There are plenty of good acrobats around, mein Herr."
"True. But none with a good motive," Jarod picked up a red notebook from inside a duffel bag on the stands. Inside was a circus poster. "I believe you know the guy running this one. He calls himself 'The General'."
Kurt glared at the pictures. "At every available opportunity. Ja. I know him."
"I believe some of his 'freaks' are merely mutant children. I need to appear as someone who can do what you do, but - without your physical adaptions."
"You're going to do something to him?"
"And how." Jarod grinned.
"I believe some of the troupe may have a decent practice rig set up on the campgrounds," Kurt allowed. "I should be free to teach tomorrow night."
"Why not start tonight?"
Kurt smiled. "I have to take Bluebelle trick-or-treating. It's her first night; and one of the rare come-as-you-are parties."
"Trick-or-treating?"
"Ja, man. It's Halloween."
Jarod shook his head. "I've had a somewhat isolated childhood. Can you explain this phenomenon?"

"He's late," announced Jean.
"He's never late," said Evan. "Not on Salsbury Steak Day."
"Well, he's late." Kitty chewed her lip. "Um. Isn't today the day we get that new gym coach?"
A silence descended upon the group. Scott was the first to scan the crowd for any signs of anything awry.
"There he is!" Kitty crowed. She stood and raced towards him. The second she reached him, she nearly flying-tackled him.
"*Katzchen*..." Kurt laughed. "Do you mind? It's Salsbury Steak Day..."
Kitty had to laugh. "We were *worried* about you, elf. What were you *doing* all this time?"
"You won't believe me."
"Try me."
Kurt smiled. "I believe I already did that."
Kitty mock-punched him. "Just tell me what you were doing..."
"Believe it or not, I was explaining Halloween to Herr Endicott."
"You're kidding me."
"Honest truth," Kurt crossed his heart. "Herr Endicott is a very strange man. He's just discovered Luck Trolls."
"You are *kidding* me."
"Nein, liebchen. He said they were a fascinating idea. A -er- what was the phrase? 'Interesting modern totem'."
"He like, *said* that?"
"Direct quote."

"MBAAAAA-
HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!
"Shuddup," said Logan.
"That's you're Halloween costume?" laughed Ororo. "What on *Earth* posessed you?"
"Lost a bet with Poindexter."
Hank was sniggering in a corner. "Oh, tweed is *you*, dear. Absolutely."
Jamie just re-entered his hysterics.
"I *said* shuddup, squirt."
Even Charles had a hard time containing his laughter. "I'm sorry," he giggled. "I can't help myself."
"At least it's gonna be the 'in' costume this year," Logan sighed.
"What?" said Jubes. "Boffo the Clown's Mom?"
Logan growled at her. It had no effect because he was wearing the following: One tweed skirt with matching jacket, one nice pink blouse, trimmed with lace, a pearl necklace, black high heels, and a little pillbox hat over a steel-grey curly fright wig. He hadn't bothered to shave.
"No," he said. "I'm Hess." He pulled a fake bloody knife out of his purse. "See?"
Hank had replaced his usual slacks and shirt with a couple of animal skins strung strategically over his massive frame, though he wore his uniform pants underneath for the sake of personal modesty. He'd also sprayed a light dusting fake snow over himself.

"Okay," said Charles. "Just what--"

"I'm the abominable snowman," he announced. "Rarr."

Ororo's costume was a simple white dress trimmed in gold. Her headgear consisted of a glowing loop suspended above her head with a wire. She did pretty much the same thing every year, so it was easier for Charles to guess.

"A goddess, correct?"

"Of course," Ororo smiled.

Logan had already explained himself, but word was getting around. Every now and then, snickering would issue from around the area of a doorframe. Logan ignored it and massaged one of his feet. "How the hell do you gals *stand* these things?" he wondered.

"Usually, we wear pantyhose. Cuts down on the chafing."

"Screw that," said Wolverine. "Musta shredded ten pairs just *trying* to get 'em on."

Hank burst out laughing.

"Shuddup."

Ororo vanished upstairs for a handful of minutes and returned with a tiny packet. "Here. These are one size fits all."

Logan opened the packet with his usual multi-purpose blade. "Tea bags?" he said.

"They're footlets," said Ororo. "They *do* stretch."

Logan tried one, stretching it to its limit. "kinell..."

"Just put them on."

"Wow," said Jubilee. "How do you *walk* in those things?"

"It takes a great deal of practice," said Amara, swanning around in her outfit - the authentic costume of a Nova Roman Princess, replete with impossible-looking shoes. "So of course, I'm a natural."

Jubilee slicked her hair back and fastened it under her suit jacket before she applied her makeup - an eyebrow pencil to her upper lip.

"Cross-dressing, Jubes?" said Amara. "I never knew you had it in you."

"If Logan can do it, *I* can do it," she said. "Besides, I *am* a gangster." The final touch was a cheap toy ring on her pinkie finger, and an equally cheap plastic tommygun. "Now, where's my trick-or-treating bag?"

"BOO!"

"Jamie, we knew it was you," Jubes didn't even look up. "We heard you sneaking down the hallway for the last five minutes."

"Aaaaaawwww..."

"What *are* you, anyway?" Amara asked. "The ghost of idiots past?"

Now Jubilation looked. Jamie was wearing camouflage pants and army boots, a 'Friends of Humanity' shirt, swastica armbands, a white, pointed hood that covered his face, and a glowing halo wagged above his head. "Good *grief*," she said. "A little mixed, don't you think?"

"No," said Jamie. "I'm the spirit of intolerance."

They had to give him enginuity points.

Scott always had trouble with his costumes, since he had to incorporate his everpresent shades into the overall look. Therefore, he always went as some kind of agent from a government organisation.
This year, he wore a black suit with a white shirt and a black tie. "MIB," he said, flipping open a fake ID at Jean. "Have you seen any unidentified flying objects recently, Ma'am?"

Jean giggled. She was wearing a blue gingham frock and had plaited her red hair into pigtails. "Well," she said, "There *was* the Wicked Witch of the West..."

"So where's Toto?" he asked with a smile. 'Dorothy' brought a stuffed toy Scottie dog out of her little basket. "Bark, bark," she squeaked. "I surrender," said Kurt as he passed them by.

"Kurt... What the heck are you doing in uniform?" demanded Scott. "Ah, ah, ah... Not *quite* uniform. I left the belt in my room," Kurt twirled to demonstrate the absence of his belt. "I'm the Bayville Demon."

"Kurt, you big fuzzy cheater!" Kitty staggered out of her room. "You could've like, put a bit more *work* into it..." She was laboring under the weight of two gigantic feathered wings, and also wore a rather pretty white dress and another glow-in-the-dark halo. "I *have* been busy, liebe."

"Okay, I can like, forgive you."

"Ah, divine Katzchen..." they kissed, a chaste one, before Kurt helped her with her wing rig. "Here. You're a little crooked. Let me help..." A moment's tugging and hefting. "Better?"

"Ah. *Much*. I was beginning to like, wonder if like, Warren wasn't like, driven *insane* by these things..."

"He grew up with them, he didn't notice," Kurt grinned. "Shall we go help Bluebelle with her costume, Schatz?"

"Yeah, let's."

A moment later, Rogue emerged from the room she shared with Kitty. She was a vampire, replete with teeth. No-one was surprised.

Bluebelle had decided to dress up as Hess' demon. Her costume consisted mostly of red, and the absence of her holowatch. She'd even added fake plastic horns care of Jamie's dress-up box. Jubilee had painted her nails red, and let her borrow a tiny bit of glitter paint for eye makeup.

"Knock knock, liebchen," Daddy tapped on the door. "What scary thing are you this Halloween, eh?"

She grinned and showed herself off. "I'm Hess' demon!" she said. Daddy had frozen. He looked horrified. "Where did you get *that*?" he pointed at her neck. Bluebelle instantly felt the red collar on her neck, then fiddled with the leash. "I bought it myself," she said. "Out of allowance money."

Kitty was looking a little horrified, too. "Liebling, Schatz, Honig; wir sind nicht Tiere..." Daddy took a breath. "We're *not* animals. We're *not*..."

"I wasn't going to make anyone lead me around," she said. "I was gonna lead myself..."

"I know, liebe. I know. But--" He knelt and held her. "Can we take it off?"

The first thing he ever did for her was take off her collar and leash; and she'd felt naked without it. Leashes *really* bothered him. "It's okay, Daddy," she took it off herself. "I won't do it again."

"I'm sorry, liebchen," he took her into a fierce hug. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Just as Logan predicted, there were Hess costumes everywhere, that year. There were black Hesses, white Hesses, Asian Hesses... guys and girls all over Bayville were Hess. There was Hess in straightjackets, prison jumpsuits, tracksuits, formalwear, rubber aprons (spattered with red paint, of course), and twinsets with pearls. Logan was almost conservative. Especially next to the Hess portrayed by a two hundred and twenty pound black guy in a red bridal frock - Bride of Satan Hess.

Bluebelle had had the concept of Halloween explained to her, and mastered the majority of it fairly quickly. But, all the same, for the first few places they visited, the usual chorus of, "Trick or Treat!"
was joined by one little voice yelling, "Gimmie candy or I egg your house!"

Logan was most amused.
"I only have one question," said a pleasant voice. "How the heck can you stand walking around in those heels?"

Logan turned. It was the new gym teacher. Jarod whatsisface. He, too, was in drag, acting as if it was a personal joke, but Logan didn't get it. "Mary Tyler Moore didn't smoke," he said.

Jarod grinned. He was wearing a grey ladies' power suit with a cream blouse and a Mary Tyler Moore type wig. Plastic toy weaponry dangled out of his purse and he smoked a fake Hollywood herbal cigarette. "Believe me," he said. "There is very little on this planet that's scarier than Miss Parker."

"I wouldn't know," said Logan. "I ain't met her." He fished around in his purse and unearthed the packet of footlets 'Ro had given him. "Here. These cut down on chafe."

"Tea bags?"

It was a fairly good night. When at last, the kids felt they'd filled their bags to capacity, they drifted towards the Monster Mash, an annual event set up by the local radio station.

There were more Bayville Demons hanging around, some were targets of flirting by various Hesses. Goblins, ghosts and ghouls abounded, laughing and shrieking in the night.

Those bold enough or generous enough would enter themselves in the Monster Mash costume parade for the price of five dollars. The proceeds went to a kid's charity, and usually with much fan fair. Categories were wide and varied, including current events, mythology, original costumes, and cryptozoology amongst their number.

Logan wound up in Current Events, with a crowd of Hesses and a host of Lieutenants, along with a few relatively minor criminals and enemy figures like Sadam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden.

Kurt and Hank were both relegated to the Cryptozoology section. And the former was much peeved to come second to a Bayville Demon who was *red*.

None of the Centaurs entered. They much preferred to hang around on the sidelines and make slightly rude comments about bizarre American two-legger practices. The rest of Kurt's tribe/troupe didn't enter either, but some wore traditional Gypsy garb and smiled for numerous photographers.

Jamie won first prize for his original costume, and spent the remainder of the evening lording it over Amara, who hadn't won a thing.
Fracture Fifty-Five: Epilogue

It had been quite a year. A memorable year, certainly. The Media continued to rake over the cold ashes of the Hess trial. Hess herself continued to fight for adequate legal representation for her re-trial, though there wasn't a single lawyer anywhere who would touch her case with a pole of any length or variety.

Raven, unknown to a large proportion of the world, continued to drive her mad with visions of her numerous victims. By the time Germany extracted her from Raven's clutches, Hess would be a gibbering wreck, incapable of doing any harm. Or even feeding herself.

Everyone needed a hobby.

Bluebelle's education leaped forward, and her social life improved somewhat gradually under Jamie's careful guidance. She still had a habitual flinch if anyone came at her from behind, and tended to be nervous around strangers. She still hid her smile, but that one hand was becoming increasingly negligent and lax.

She marked her birthday by spending time talking to her brother's grave, giving him news as she'd seen her father do. She didn't pray for Hess. She'd tried, but found that she couldn't come up with the right words.

Kurt celebrated his birthday as he'd always done before - praying for his genetic mother and father at the local Catholic church. It felt strange for him to have it finally narrowed down to one day, instead of the week he'd usually spent, praying and wondering, his whole life.

His A-day celebrations were somewhat curtailed in the wake of the anniversary of the New York disaster. They did try, though, to celebrate life and liberty. It worked, but only to a degree. Some things simply changed the world too much.

But now, it was a very special day. One that just about everyone had been anticipating. October Twelfth. Bluebelle's Liberty day.

Preparations were intricate and bizarre. Logan had made a Hess dartboard for one of the games. Ororo made several cakes. The tables practically creaked with the burden of various treats.

Bluebelle had spent ages on the invitations, selecting friends and family to invite, but was still unable to keep it down to twenty guests.

{SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAM!}

Kurt winced and blocked his ears, a long-suffering wince etched onto his holographic face. He stood in the middle of pure bedlam. Fifty small girls, all roughly Bluebelle's age, were apparently working out how loud a crowd could get - the hard way.

They were playing, as near as he could work out, a variant of tag that had also involved blowing up every single balloon they could lay their hands on. Having filled the room, they swam around in it, squealing at the top of their lungs, and batting balloons everywhere.

Jamie could barely be seen, hunkering for cover under a coffee table. His fingers were firmly in his ears and he, too, wore the same expression as Kurt.

And not *one* kid in the entire room had even had anything red to eat or drink, yet.

Bluebelle was in the thick of it, squealing and laughing with all the rest, bounding through balloons and catching her comrades for mutual shrieks and giggles. Her outfit, a somewhat formal dress, also included long gloves, so no outsiders would feel her fur.

"Look out, look out... Like, big person coming through. Nobody get stood on. Look out..."

Kurt turned to face his best-beloved, and couldn't help smiling. Katzchen. Sweet, adorable Katzchen. She'd not only filled out, but grown a few inches taller than he in the past year. He didn't mind a jot.

Kitty, though, was sensitive to the height difference, and started wearing her hair down, so her
ponytail wouldn’t tower over him. She still had a lot to learn about judging people. That was part of
growing up. Yet she was still the same brave and valiant girl who’d walked into a strange house as if
she’d owned it, and hollered, "Here I am!" to the world at large.

Kurt, hiding behind a potted aspidestra, had fallen in love with her at that moment. As a result, he
spent too long in one place, got discovered, and then screamed at in short order.
Oh, the incredibly stupid things he’d done to try and get her used to him, those first few weeks. He
smiled at the memory as much as he smiled at Kitty. Her inner strength kept drawing him to her, and
it would continue to do so. Always.

Kitty approached him with that same wistful-lustful smile, and caught him up in a hug, and gave
him a kiss that bordered on breaking the PG rule that every interested party seemed to be enforcing,
these days. And there were a lot of interested parties.

"*God*, I wish we were like, eighteen already," Kitty gasped. "I like, spend every night thinking
about what I'm missing out on."

Kurt purred softly into her ear, kissing her earlobe and sniffing deeply at her neck. "It's more than
just sex, geliebt," he murmured. "It's about being *with* each other."

"Mmmmm," Kitty murmured. She gave him a more chaste kiss. "And that's the *only* thing that
like, stops me going *nuts*."

"Me too," he sighed.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, *Daddeeeeee*..." Bluebelle yanked at his
overshirt. "It's your turn to throw the *darts*."

"Ach... Parential duties call, liebe."

"Go get 'em, Fuzzy."

Kurt let himself be dragged up to the Hess dartboard by his eager daughter, laughing all the way.
He made a show of juggling the darts until childish protests once again threatened to harm his
hearing. "Now," he wondered aloud. "Where shall I hit her, eh?"

"Pierce her ears, Daddy!"

"Vicious little girl," he chided. "Are you sure you're mine?"

Bluebelle laughed. "And poke her in the nose," she added.

"All right," Kurt announced. Two ears and a nose. I think I can do that. But I was never taught to
throw these things, ja? I might pop a balloon. Or stick some little girl's hair to the wall." He smiled as
the kids gleared the danger zone out. "These things happen when you're only taught to throw knives
in a circus."

At last, it looked safe enough, and he aimed the first dart, sighting along it as if it were a throwing
blade.

The kids laughed.

"Hop-*LA*!" Kurt threw the first dart. It landed exactly in Hess' earlobe.

The crowd went wild.

He repeated the trick for the ear on the other side. Again, the missile hit home. Kurt bowed,
flourishing the last dart as if he held a flower. The third and last time he took aim, half the kids in the
room made drum-roll noises. Of course, he played it up, making them giggle every time he made to
throw, then sighted along the dart again.

At last, he threw, and the resultant cheering broke the pain barrier as balloons flew *everywhere* and
bedlam once again erupted amongst the girls.

Kurt took his chance to sneak out of the room and listen to his ears sizzle in the relative silence
outside. Kitty joined him in a few minutes, finger busily working in one ear.

"Like, can they *possibly* get any louder? It's like a weapon in there..." She scrubbed in her other
ear. "Any more and I think I'll like, go *deaf*."

"Sure you want children?" he smiled. "They'll be just as loud..."

Kitty smiled and hugged up against him. "If they're yours, sure. I'll even like, put up with them like,
crawling on the ceiling."

Kurt chuckled. It was pleasing to daydream like this. Their whole lives stretched before them on a
blanket of possibilities. He was an optomistic Elf, true, but he knew life wasn't made of dreams.
He held his best-beloved close, knowing that, in a few short years, they may grow apart. Yet he’d be forever drawn to her. An eager moth to her flame.

"Don't you *dare* get depressed on me, Fuzzy," Kitty chided, tickling his 'magic spot' as they both named it - the little patch of hypersensitive flesh just at the start of his tail. "It's Liberty Day. You should only think positive."

"Is that a new rule, geliebt?"

"It's *my* rule."

"Ah," he nodded sagely. "Then I have no other choice but to obey." He smiled. "How about a nice little palace facing the bay? That way, our fifteen children will have plenty of room to run around in."

"*Fifteen*?" yawped Kitty.

"But of course," Kurt purred. "I'm planning to slip fertility drugs into your tea."

Kitty laughed and tickled him into submission. Life was good.

Charles Xavier found the couple in a tickle-war, tangling in each other's limbs as they romped about on his lawn. He cleared his throat and got an instant, "We weren't doing anything naughty!" from the both of them.

Poor children. So afraid that they'd be seperated. Charles remembered vaguely encountering such love before. "I know," he said. "You can relax, both of you. You've been very responsible about your relationship, this past year." He took a deep breath. "Which is why I felt it necessary to present you with an appropriate reward on your anniversary." He held out a hotel key for them. "You do realise that I'm trusting you to be equally as responsible, this time."

Kurt took the key. "But--" Their minds were a whirl of potential pitfalls.

"Everything's going to be taken care of. Enjoy yourselves."

"*Jawohl*, Herr Professor!"

Charles watched them go, hand in hand, heading towards Kurt's car. Ah, young love. They really *were* responsible, facing reality and calamity with equal fortitude, whispering their little pledge to each other in moments alone.

"For now, forever."

It meant a lot to them. Knowing that time might change them, yet not wanting to contemplate a life where they were apart. Charles turned his chair about and headed back to the party.

He had more than a sneaking suspicion that Kitty and Kurt would continue their relationship for at least a while.

Logan appeared out of nowhere to ask, "Sure that's wise, Chuck? Lettin' 'em know they can break the rules like that?"

"In this case, they've been rather mindful of the rules. Almost painfully so. They deserve a little time together. Just each other and the stars."

From now, until forever.
Appendix: Side-flings, Homages, and Downright Rip-offs

Kurt's Masks are:
The Perfectionist: Mostly mute, only talks to Kurt inside his head. Never speaks to others. Demands absolute clinical perfection. From everything they do. Has OCD.
RagDoll: Catatonic. Has no speech, no thought.
Das Kinder: Kurt stuck at age four. The innocent of the group. Broke off to *be* the innocent one.
Hure: Bisexual, incredibly open minded, keeps wondering who 'paid for' him if it isn't clear. Willing to do just about anything for money.
Fight: The warrior of the group. Main function is to keep the Monsters down.
Flight: Just there to get them the hell *out* of a threatening situation.
The Archivist: In charge of *all* memories. Even the bad ones.
The Wild One: basically, all instincts and very little sentience.
The Monsters: Group mind, can work individually. They have no names, and are everything Kurt is not. Once out, they can only be put back by contact with Holy Ground.

Okay. Now for the annotations.

1. Scent of a Predator
   The title, of course, is a play on the movie, _Scent of a Woman_ - which I haven't actually *seen* yet. Oh well...
   Staff turnover at Bayville High -- Come on. You *don't* think people would quit that place as if it had the plague? Monsters, earthquakes, strange happenings...
   Rosafarben is German for "pink".
   Confusion over Kurt's country of origin -- a side-fling to Alaer Kino's fic _Trick'n'Love Game_, where idiots keep thinking he's from France. I just *love* that mental image...
   mein flockiger Damon - my fuzzy demon
   "...so then I'm like, 'nuh-*uh*', and he's all like, 'yah' and I'm like, 'bu-bye, loser' and he goes - he goes..." -- I just wanted to see how long I could go without having any actual *content* to Kitty's diatribe... It's also slightly riffing an old routine from a _Comedy Company_ sketch, from way back when they were actually *funny*.
   'Bilden Sie ihn richtig, Schwarzschmutz aus, oder ich jage Ihren vollstandigen Stamm unten' -- 'Train him correctly, negro filth, or I'll hunt down your entire tribe'. That's what I plugged into Babel Fish to get it :) 
   "Don't you have homework to do?" -- is it me, or do all adults ask this when they're asked a question they don't want to answer?
   Schmerzmann -- literally, 'pain man'. My story is that young Kurt went quiet whenever he was hurt, and the old 'show me on the doll' routine didn't work because no dolls were quite like our favourite fuzzball. His Mama solved the problem by making his -er- mascot. Yeah. That's what it is. A mascot. ;)

2. A Pleasant Interlude
   "Hey, *relax*. Nobody's gonna notice a thing. We'll only be gone a few minutes." -- whenever one teenager says this to another, trouble is in the wind. It's a law of nature or something.
   _Her mouth tastes like applesauce..._ -- Kurt's thoughts are similar to Bart's words about the bad-girl preacher's daughter in an episode of _The Simpsons_ :)
   There were two chandalliers. This was something of an open invitation. - - You're a trained acrobat who feels far more comfortable upside-down than right side up. Are *you* going to turn down an opportunity to swing? Thought not.
Statleindorf is derived from Statler and Waldorf, muppet hecklers from the _Muppet Show_.

Kurt's stage name - die Fleidertuefel - means "The Flying Devil" and I made it up out of whole cloth. It's *mine*.

Mrs Nesbit, of course, is the mouse from _The Secret of Nimh_.

I had to physically stop myself from writing the whole day. It was really very sad and bittersweet. A three-kleenex deal.

3. Girls Can Rape Guys
   They can, too. It's very difficult to define, and even harder to prosecute. I don't think any man has ever successfully pressed a rape charge against a female.

   Tabby's little message on the mirror is all Kurt needed to define the previous night as 'rape' - basically because of a whole buttload of bad memories. For the record, they didn't get into anything bolder than a little mild BDSM.

   Kurt's Uncle Wolf is another made-up person. Basically, he's the Romani that gives other Romani a bad name. Lying, stealing, breaking into things, etc. He taught Kurt a rather large number of unsavoury habits as 'survival skills' and Kurt usually doesn't use them.

   Nobody *ever* mentions how tough it is to teleport, and it's starting to tick me off >:(

4. Other Pains
   "You can't get pregnant the first time." -- Lots and lots of people all over the world owe their existance to this particular lie.

   "I'm gonna die if I don't" -- another big lie guys use on inexperienced girls to get their way. Don't believe a word of it and knee him in the nuts, ladies.

   Something about me just *loves* writing primitive minds. I don't know what it is, it just appeals to me.

5. No Sense
   Yes, I know the Archivist doesn't *have* emotions, but he can use them when necessary.

   "Ich bin Ihr flockiges Pluschpielzeug, Liebe. Ich halte die Alptraume weg" -- "I'll be your fuzzy plush toy, love. I'll keep the nightmares away"

   "The mask was just supposed to be a way of facing an audience if I got scared" -- true acting excercise to combat stage fright. You make yourself 'become' a character for a while. This can be troublesome for some people. Sometimes the character 'follows' an actor home. Sometimes the mask takes them over. Sometimes they fight. It gets complicated.

6. Back to School
   "Someone had blown up his locker, and several others surrounding it had payed the price, too." -- who else here thinks Tabby has only one way of dealing with her problems? Thought so.

   "...mi mi mi mi mimi..." -- said sotto voice and in the same rythm as the last words spoken by the enemy. The usual 'witty comeback' used in high school whenever the bully was out of hearing range.

   Faboo -- taken wholesale from the _Animaniacs_. I love 'em.

   "Kurt growled at her and siezed her/his shirt by its neck. A little twist. A little turn. A little pressure on the collarbone and he had her pinned against the lockers and choking." -- there is a way you can grab someone by their shirt-collar and get their undivided attention. It's a knack.

   "I make a woman out of her..." -- Lance is seriously deluded, here, following the mindset of certain of my contemporaries - believing that you weren't 'adult' until you 'did it'. Seriously, sadly, majorly deluded.

   "Come off it. Everyone *knows* that after a girl gets some, she can't stop." -- yet another myth about feminine sexuality. This one 'lets' deluded guys think they can gang up on a girl because she's 'pretending not to want it'. IMO, all males who think like this should be neuterred with the rustiest, dullest blade anyone can find.

7. Get out!
Egress is another word for 'exit' :) 
Autobahn is German for 'highway'. I used it to add a little character to the narrative. As for the trivia factlet - I have no clue. I just made up something that sounded about right.

"...storm front is expected to continue moving eastwards." -- this is a riff from a beer advert that's popular over here. The beer, FYI, is _Carlton Cold_ or something of the like. I don't partake, owing to allergies.

"Ah saw him..." -- Maybe it's just me, but a lot of the witnesses that the media interview are hardly intelligible.

Jeff, Truckdriver, is patterned a little on Jeff Foxworthy, one of my favourite comedians.
I love writing the Media. They're so *good* at stating the obvious...

8. Interview
"Ich bin ihre Liebling Laune..." -- I plugged in 'I am her favourite freak' and got this.
I love the idea of head-hopping as a teep vice.
Because someone out there was repeatedly hitting his soul with a metaphorical hammer. -- I just love this phrase. It's so - evocative :)

9. Holy Ground
The last subtitle read, "[In German] I am their favourite mood." -- when I plugged my German phrase from chapter 8 into BabelFish and translated it back, this is what I got. Strange, but true.
meine kleine Kirche -- my little church
"Wie kann ein Teufel einen Engel wie Sie lieben?" -- "How can a devil love an angel like you?"
Clearly, Kurt has some serious image issues, here.
Why had she wasted her time with ashtray-breath? -- It's true. Kissing a smoker is like licking an ashtray. Disgusting.

10. Desire
"Ich fast beendete. Ich bin nicht sicher, gleichmassig auf heiligem Boden" -- "I nearly killed. I'm not safe, even on Holy ground"

11. Blades of Memory
The Karma Sutra is actually a religious book. Trust Hess to pervert it into something else.
People with MPD suffer greatly when one of their personas 'die'. It's as real to them as a death in the family.
The 'bad blood' referenced here and in further chapters concerning the tile incident is menstrual blood. It smells kinda funky.

12. Guarding Broken Treasure
Romany are intensely family-oriented. Considering the vast amounts of opposition they get from the rest of the world - who else can they really trust?
Fotze -- Heh :) Part of the female anatomy. Starts with a C.
Dummer Junge -- stupid boy

13. Close Calls
"Maybe if I lost a couple *more* pounds, he'd like me again" -- one part of the alleged logic behind eating disorders. Do not fall prey.
Schatz -- sweetheart
Nacht in der Blute -- Night in Bloom
Sie gehoren mir, kleiner Damon. Erinnern Sie sich an das. -- you are mine, little demon. Remember that.

14. Stimulus and Response
Was ist der Stoff? -- What's the matter?
15. An Encounter in the Mall
   The whole encounter with Lance is taken from Kaz Cooke's book _Up The Duff_, as noted in the author's note :) 
   I don't know *quite* where I got the "Fuck you/you wish" routine, but it was probably from high school. We were quite crude, back then.
   Arschloch -- Asshole
   Tapferes Madchen -- brave girl
   She was leaning on a corner and holding a cigarette in a little 'ok' sign in her hands. -- Europeans hold their ciggies between their finger and thumb. Americans use two fingers. I haven't watched the air polluters in Australia long enough, but I think we go the American way...

16. Things That Make You Go AUGH!
   The title's a play on the song title, _Things That Make You Go Mmmm_, and of course, deliberate acknowledgement of the fact that I'm torturing you :D
   The whole apple thing is a play on the Garden of Eden story. Guess who the snake is?
   Ambisinister is a word made up by Terry Pratchett, meaning lousy with both hands.
   Gluckwunsche -- congratulations

17. Hess' Games: Hide And Seek
   Ether makes you feel as sick as a dog when you wake up from it.
   "Ruhe, bitte... Mistress ist wutend an Ihnen." -- Quiet, please... Mistress will be angry.
   kind -- child
   Honey and meat ants -- something I was always threatened with in Primary school. You smear the victim in the honey, then you tie them down near the meat ants.
   "Aus Ihnen kommen Sie" -- Out you come
   "Falsche Monsters erhalten nicht eingezogen" -- bad monsters don't get fed
   "Ich bin ein Tuefel" -- I am a devil
   "Ich bin taurig, meine arme Tochter" -- I'm sorry, my poor daughter
   They both looked solidly at the floor while they got dressed. -- True phenomenon. People can go through all sorts of hell, naked together, and still look away as they get dressed. Bizarre.
   "Schones hubsches" -- lit. "beautiful pretty"

18. Hess' Games: Blind Man's Bluff
   gescheites Madchen -- clever girl
   Something icky going up Kitty's pants -- this is a movie *classic*. Heroine lets mouse/rat/tarantula/scorpion/whatever crawl on her rather than let the villain find her. So cool.

19. Way Out
   bint is another word for 'daughter'
   Logan calling Hess 'darling' -- Logan calls all blokes 'bub' and all females 'darling' until further notice
   Tarantulas are, apparently, not poisonous. Me? I wouldn't gamble.

20. Slow-Healing Wounds
   geliebtes -- beloved
   _Real Gorgeous_ by Kaz Cooke -- This should be every young girl's bible. Lots of stuff on the beauty industry and body image.
   Sie sind willkommen -- You're welcome

21. Damage Control
   Bluebelle is reading from _Green Eggs and Ham_ a Seuss classic.
Grossartigtochter -- granddaughter
Wer sind Sie? Wo sind Sie? -- Where are you? Who are you?
Claire and Lucien are vampires from the wicked webcomic _Bite Me_ at:
http://projectkooky.com/dylan/biteme/biteme.html It's a very fun site ;)

22. Discoveries
Never eat at a greasy spoon diner called "good eatin". It almost invariably *isn't*.
Trish and Earl are recurring handy names. I swear.
Chagny is the last name of Raoul from _The Phantom of the Opera_
Nie wieder is the catchcry of anti-Nazis everywhere. Some lessons of history should never be repeated. Hell, they shouldn't even be poked at with a long stick...

23. The Ties That Bind
Matt Murdock is the Dare Devil. I just happened to make him a mutant ;)

24. Chain Reaction
Some part of me just loves spit-takes. I don't know why.
ObTrivia: It's very difficult to change the eyes with plastic surgery.
And his little twig, too. -- A riff on _The Wizard of Oz_, naturally.

25. Survivors
Kitty's weight thing -- I just think she's drawn a little thin, you know. Plus I like the idea of her having borderline anorexia for the purposes of the story ;)
Size 10 is a tool of the Devil. I swear. Why *this* size got deemed to be 'perfect' I shall never know. It's phenomenally rare to find anyone who's a natural size 10 these days.
"thin equals love" -- another one of the tenets behind eating disorders. It's a meme that should be destroyed, IMO

26. Faces of Fear
Aspidestras are a favourite plant of mine. They make cameos everywhere.
Jamie unknowingly plays Kurt's 'game' of hide-and-peek in order to ease Bluebelle's fears about him.
Later, Jamie is reading to Bluebelle from Terry Pratchett's book _The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents_. A very funny book ;)

27. Making Friends
gekommen -- come
"...telling her stories from the time when Daddy was a little boy..." -- grandparents do this. It's revenge for all the stuff their kids did to them.
I decided I needed something for comic relief, given the upcoming nastiness in the chapters ahead. Hence, Mr/Ms Peeper.

28. Confessions
Papa voices my own thoughts on my growing fic. It *was* turning into a soap opera.
Wir lieben Sie -- We love you [formal, regrettably, because of BabelFish]
Parents also tell friends, relatives and complete strangers Embarrassing Baby Stories. It's part of their parenting licence.
Romany and Jews *do* get along. It comes from being persecuted for thousands of years.

29. Adventures
Lance's bad smell is the odour of stale cigarettes. Next to that, Todd smells like a rose.
"Mmmm, mmm. *Love* those butterflies..." -- a side-fling to one of Red_Witch's fics in which the Brotherhood go to the zoo.
I made up Wanda's childhood personality out of whole cloth. Obviously, she's changed by now.

30. Adventures Part 2
Scheissekopf -- shithead
Possessed eggs -- a tribute to a screamingly funny [IMO] episode of _Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ in which - you guessed it - posessed eggs take over people and do the bidding of some demon in the school basement.
"...wishing for normalicy is wishing for more weirdness..." -- I just *adore* the logic of this argument. It took me a while to work it out, too :)
Dante's Peak is the name and location of a volcano disaster movie.
SimBabies are little baby-sized robots with internal sensors, etc. They do just about everything a real baby does. Especially cry.
"Erinnern Sie sich, an wem Sie bildete, Erinnern Sie sich, an was Sie sind. Erinnern Sie, an wem Sie gehoren." -- Remember who made you. Remember what you are. Remember who you belong to.

31. Sabotage
Kelly's comment is taken from the expression, "to rearrange deckchairs on the Titanic", meaning to engage in a completely useless activity in dire circumstances.

32. The Blade Cuts
I just love the idea that Kurt is sexually experienced, yet doesn't know the first thing about menstruation. I just think it's funny, is all. In an ironic way, of course.

33. Recovery
A strong enough painkiller will knock a person right out. Unfortunately, when you have a metabolism like a furnace, that strong enough painkiller is ordinary paracetamol or codine.
"Lots of things happen in broad daylight..." -- very true speech. Most injustices are perpetrated in broad daylight, and nobody does anything because it's 'not their problem'.

34. Defence
Talking to dead people is the habit of one Lord Miles Vorkosigan, as written by Lois McMasters Bujold. Look them up, sometime.

35. Six Degrees
The title's in reference to the game, _Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon_, where you connect people to the man of the title.
"Take a breath before you pass out" -- a line taken from a _Calvin and Hobbes_ comic

36. Justice
This chapter intentionally left unreferenced

37. Grandstanding
Mason is named after Perry Mason; and in fact you're supposed to think he *is* Perry Mason until you get to his first name ^_^
"Die ist meine Zahl Opa! Du Fotze! Mach es dir selber und wurfel, du Arschgesicht!" -- That's my Grampa's number! You cunt! Go fuck yourself and die, you assface!
"Ich beende Sie selbst!" -- I'll kill you myself!

38. Adjusting
_Submitted for your approval..._ -- it's a riff from the Twilight zone, and a very obvious one at that. And yes, the guitar *did* play before they did the fanfare to the opening of an episode.
_Sparkle, sparkle._ -- What Shirley Temple's mother told Shirley before each performance.
I *just* realised that a funnier set of names for the Richardses would be Patty and Selma. Sigh. So
many lost opportunities... *Any*way. Lus is short for Lucinda. Just FYI.

Rod Searling was the presenter for _The Twilight Zone_ and _Night Gallery_, shows where reality got turned on its ear :)  

39. Helping to Forget
   This chapter intentionally left unreferenced

40. Forcing to Remember
   "You killed me." -- a riff from Buck Godot's adventure _P.SmIth_
   The General is a manufacture of mine, patterned vaguely after Elvis Presley's Colonel, but definitely after the worst examples of intolerant humanity.

41. A Little Slice
   The Centaurs of Heirelgart owe a lot of their existence to Donna Barr and her creation _Stinz_. In one of her comics, she mentions Romani centaurs, and a few of their physical traits; like being physically larger than 'normal' centaurs and tending to have gold horse-halves.
   If there *are* elves in the black forest, they're certainly not talking to anyone.
   "Mein Damon, Lassen Sie die Gefangenen und die Speicher frei sein." -- My demon, let the prisoners and the memories be free.

42. Broken
   The flicking personas is borrowed from a Miles Vorkosigan book. I forget the name of the story, but the key point is that someone sabotaged a mnemonic chip, and the victim was lost in time as a direct result.

43. Shattered Past
   The title is a play on the episode title, _Shadowed Past_.
   Part of my continuity is that something horrid always happens around Kurt's A-day. I may explore this idea further in another fic.

44. Strength
   Has anyone else noticed that Xavier's really tight about secrets that he ought to share with the people involved?
   knabe -- boy/lad - dialect

45. Survival
   Colourblind, in this case, means that the people spoken about don't care what colour a person is.
   "Why did you throw a fit in the middle of the courtroom?" -- A more apt question would be, 'why does the Media ask bloody stupid questions.
   "You have no power over me" -- a line from Jim Henson's _Labyrinth_, one of the coolest movies on the planet, IMHO.

46. Damning Testimony
   Most of the testimony references past chapters.
   Blood *stinks* when it goes off. Hess' basement would have been unbearable.

47. An Exercise in Surrealism
   Kasegewicht -- cheese-weight. Used to imply that the person spoken about weighs about the same as a wheel of cheese. Obviously, this is a childhood nickname.
   Fassfuss -- barrel-foot. Used to imply that the person spoken about has big feet. No argument there.
   Gekommen auf -- come on
   Verpiss dich -- piss off
   I grew up with chickens [ObUselessFactlet: What Americans call 'baby chickens' Aussies call 'chicks'. The adults are called 'chooks'] so I know most, if not all, of their weird little
And yes, I know you don't need a rooster to get eggs. They *do* help, sometimes, though. Jarod Endicott *is* meant to be the Pretender, of the series of the same name.

48. Home Away From Home
Romani/ Romany -- for the record, the accepted spelling is 'Romany' with a 'Y'. I use the terminal 'T' because Germans tend to spell like that, and to indicate that these gypsies are German gypsies.
He pitied them. -- For someone who abhors pity, this is apt revenge :)
Just imagine it with me: twenty years in a mental ward with Raven Darkholme picking away at your sanity. Hell on Earth, in my humble opinion.

49. Peace in Another's Arms (part one)
Einfach, Madchen -- easy, girl

50. Peace in Another's Arms (part two)
The one-in-ten technique outlined here, and in the next chapter, is a real technique to help a lady climax.

51. Peace in Another's Arms (part three)
Tantric sex is all about delaying orgasm to achieve a higher state of consciousness.
"Hubches Dame, Ich bin Ihre, fur Immer." -- Pretty Lady, I am yours, forever.
Skyclad is an old and rather poetic synonym for 'nude'. I rather like it.

52. Home and Healing
Centuars have far more acute smell and hearing than mere mortals.
"And maybe someone else, too." -- liberated from a conversation in Terry Pratchett's _Wyrd Sisters_ about the Doit de Signeur.
"It never pays to pry into the affairs of Centuars, Because a hoof to the ribs often offends." -- Plagaurised from the old 'never meddle in the affairs of wizards...' saying.
Gekommen sie -- lit. 'come you' but mostly used for 'come here'
Lots of Hallmark movies seem to feature kids being taken away from their parents by government men. Odd, that.

53. Full Circle, Sort Of
I like the idea of coming full circle. It's just satisfying to me :) 
"An asthmatic girl with a pale face and red hair." -- my hair was more brownish, but I simplified things for animation. Yes, that's my cameo, right there.
"He's late" -- _Waiting for Godot_
Salsbury Steak Day -- a side-fling to _South Park_, probably with altered spelling...
...there's just something hypnotising about the idea of Logan in drag...

54. Trick or Treat
Footlets do kinda look like weird little tea bags when you take 'em out of their packet.
I think most of the side-flings in this chapter are pretty darn obvious...
Honig -- honey
we sind nicht Tiere -- we're not animals

55. Epilogue
Everyone needed a hobby. -- Liberated from a _Deep Space Nine_ episode, _The Alternate_ - wherein Odo confesses that death rituals are a hobby of his.
Kurt's Adoption Day [A-Day] is the 20th of September. Just in case you were wondering.
And not *one* kid in the entire room had even had anything red to eat or drink, yet. -- the ancient Australian 'Red Cordial' joke resurfaces again [See the PWP _Red Dye 366_ for further elaboration]
A jot, for the terminally curious, is the dot above the lowercase 'j'. An Iota is the dot above the lowercase 'i'. A tittle is the crosspiece on the lowercase 't'. Fascinating, no?

That's it. Thanks to all of you who reviewed. You made me feel special ^_^

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!