Summary

When Gambit left Rogue on the shores of Blood Moon Bayou, he slipped a playing card into her hand. More than a conciliatory gesture, it signaled the start of something that carried the understanding: Never bet more than you are willing to lose.
Hi! I'm octobertown. You may remember me from such legacy works posted under the pen names, Lucia de'Medici, Carmine LaCroix, or Kira Coffin. "The Ante" was posted on May 14, 2006 at Fanfiction.net for the first time, and twelve years later, I'm picking through the old draft, scouring my hard drive for my plot notes, and endeavouring to actually try and finish it. I am posting the revised chapters as they are completed. If you're new to this story (Hi!) the original draft is three hundred thousand words long and incomplete at thirty chapters; the last ten of which I'm revising now. For the old fans who've found me, feel free to read along, or, wait until I start releasing the new stuff: I'm compiling a chapter summary for anyone who doesn't want to commit to a full re-read of the work that I will eventually post to my Tumblr.
Lake Pontchartrain gleamed; its surface a shimmering mass of grey reflecting the Louisiana sun in broken patterns. It made him squint if he looked long and hard enough.

He kept his focus ahead of him at the bumper of the car a few yards away, ignoring the brief flashes of the sun's reflection out of the corner of his eye. Distracted, he shook his head, unable to keep the hair out of his face when the wind picked up. It was growing out, some, mostly out of neglect.

Not that Remy was thinking of what his barber would say; he had something else on his mind entirely:

If fortune favored him, he'd be blown clear off the bridge and into the murky depths below; the commandeered motorcycle, the trench coat folded into the seat behind him, his half-battered pride, fancy hair, and all.

Remy LeBeau was a lucky man, but perhaps not that lucky. Not today at least.

Mulling this over, he concluded: He needed a cigarette.

Glancing at the speedometer of his bike, and pressing his mouth into a grim line, he urged the throttle a little harder.

Behind him, though perhaps not quickly enough, New Orleans was receding beyond the bay; the spires of the business district fading in the grey haze of pollution. It threw the city's skyline into a lazy blush, coquettish and yet somehow, beneath that touch of rose, still just as debauched as ever from what he glimpsed of her by glancing into the rear-view.

"Au revoir," he murmured, his voice torn away from him by the cool wind that whipped around the bridge. It made the skin on his arms ripple with gooseflesh despite the heavy humidity, displaced the instant he'd roared off from the plantation's gravel drive.

Jean Luc really needed to tighten the security around that place, Remy thought, smirking. Or maybe, Jean Luc really just needed to tighten the security on him if he'd expected him to hang around any longer than he already had.

He'd overstayed his welcome, and he knew it. Moreover, he didn't need the hospitality, the strained smiles and subtle looks shared between the elder members of the Guild. They no longer wanted him - hadn't wanted him for the better part of a year, truly - and that was just fine by him. Sometimes, it
was best to collect your winnings and get clear of the table as quickly as possible.

The bike was his fee for tolerating Jean Luc's sly scheming for the better part of a year while living cloistered beneath the hand of the very family that had forced him out to begin with.

Remy gunned the engine, cutting off a sedan in the right lane with ease though the driver blared his horn, and coaxed the Harley faster, as if the increased speed would lend a little more ease to his flight.

Mindful of the settled weight in his chest when he looked back at his home, he put himself to his task of watching for the turn off that would take him north through St. Tammany parish.

Still, she called to him, that blossom on the horizon with her worn cobbled streets and her heady perfume. The city, laced with the scent of bougainvillea and creeping myrtle, coming to life when the sun faded and her lights winked on for the evening. She was a nocturnal creature, dissolute and sultry; his first love and his mentor. She'd weaned him amongst her streets and back alleys, made him hard by running her rooftop gauntlets, and heated his limbs while learning the taste of her. He'd miss her for the short time he'd be gone, but like a loyal mistress, the Crescent would welcome him back into her embrace if... when... he returned.

This time, at least, his departure didn't stink of the same shame that he'd experienced when he was eighteen. This time, the city had forgiven him his trespasses, if only by half.

Releasing the handlebar beneath his left hand, he pressed his fingers against the back pocket of his denims; taking a small comfort. The square corners of a pack of cards angled beneath his touch, and with practiced ease, he slid the weathered burden into his palm. Flipping the worn package open with a thumb, still keeping an eye on the road, he pulled the first card from the top half out with his index finger.

He chuckled to himself.

The deck was short one card. Its absence was irritating, yet, at the same time, it provided an unusual comfort. He could guess easily where she would have kept it.

"Feeling a lil' lonely, mon gars?" he chuckled, peering down at the solitary King of Hearts that he'd extracted from the deck. "Remy thinks it's about time t' take care of that old ache, ein? S' burnin' something fierce."

It was the perfect excuse, though he didn't need one.

With a snap, the King found its place back in the deck, the blare of car horns shadowing Remy's reckless driving as the front tire bit into the interstate.

The path before him was clear.

—

"Oh come on, Rogue! We are so going to be late!"

She punctuated the last seven words with a rap against the doorframe; each knock serving to grind Rogue's teeth together one notch more.
"Ah'm on it like white on rice," she muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing," she snapped. "Kit, Ah swear, if ya didn't hog the darn bathroom every mornin' -"

"Just hurry up. Scott said he'd drive us to class if we got out of here at, like, a reasonable hour."

"It's only a quarter to - besides, Kurt could just 'port you into a back alley if you're so concerned about missing home ec. Ah'm short a rather crucial accessory at the moment, if ya hadn't noticed."

Jerkily, as if her five fingers could convey every ounce of scathing disdain she felt at that instant, Rogue waved her bare hand at her roommate.

"Don't you have to take those off anyway when you're cooking?" Kitty asked.

Rogue dug into the top drawer of her dresser, and tossing a wadded ball of socks over her shoulder, her fingers touched leather. Finally.

"Must have forgot the last time you had me 'helping out'," she said beneath her breath, "your upside down cake tasted like a catcher's mitt."

"Hey!" Kitty simpered with mock offense. "Kurt says my baking skills have improved… a lot."

"Ah'll remember that the next time Kurt ends up in the med bay after eating your 'special' brownies," she returned flatly, tugging out a glove that was conspicuously missing its match.

"The milk had gone bad," Kitty muttered in her defense.

Rogue, too frustrated at that particular moment to muster the venom, tried another tactic: "Kit, there ain't any milk in brownies," she huffed, recommencing the search for her missing glove. If she couldn't find it, she couldn't leave the Institute. Not that that was the worst thing that could possibly happen to her that morning, but honestly, the last item on Rogue's list of things to do that day involved dish detail for the rest of the students as punishment for involuntarily cutting class. Add one more detention for unexplained absenteeism, and she wouldn't see the outside of the Danger Room until graduation... if she'd actually be able to graduate this year.

Rogue frowned to herself, momentarily back-sliding into the Realm of Dwelling On It.

She had to find that stupid glove.

Kitty, mercifully, didn't respond. She was probably pouting, Rogue thought with a grim sense of self-satisfaction, gleaned only by the immediate gratification of being able to shut the Valley girl up for a few minutes with a quick quip.

Lordy, she hated Mondays.

"Kitty?" she called over her shoulder. "Have you seen my spare pair? The lace ones? They don't cover as great, but Ah can't find the second to this set -"

Rogue's fingers brushed against the side of something sharp, and just as quickly, she withdrew her hand from the drawer with a gasp.

A thin, barely-there sliver lanced into the fleshy part of her finger. Cautiously, she pressed the fine cut, and a little well of blood pooled in the edge.
"No, Jean was on laundry detail yesterday." Kitty sniffed from the doorway. "Maybe you should ask her. She, like, doesn't screw things up so easily, you know?"

Rogue sighed, forcibly repressing a reflexive roll of her eyes. "Ya know Ah didn't mean that -" she began, half-turning to face her roommate, her finger still holding her attention. For a moment, Rogue couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten a paper cut...

"Whatever." With a frustrated huff, Kitty phased through the floor and out of sight before Rogue could apologize.

"Darn it," she muttered, turning back to the task at hand. She'd deal with Kitty later. It wasn't the first time one of their early morning exchanges had turned sour. Frankly, Rogue thought it best not to think on it too long. The further away she kept her roommate, the more comfortable she'd be with their living arrangements.

She winced at the thin cut on her finger. That was a rarity, she thought. Being covered from head to toe all of the time usually prevented the little injuries.

Peeking into her drawer, her search for her missing glove forgotten, she hunted for the offending item.

At the very bottom, squeezed in between a rumpled ball of underwear and a pair of pajamas, the corner of a small, mostly-battered playing card peeked out on an angle. Gingerly, Rogue pulled it from the confines of her drawer, holding it carefully by its sides as if it would suddenly explode in her exposed hands.

Its edges were frayed in places, the corner was bent, and the face of the stoic Queen of Hearts was smeared with dirt. Despite being welted by swamp water and handled more times than she could count, finding the card made her breath catch.

"I always save her for last."

Rogue shivered as the revenant of his voice returned to her with almost haunting accuracy. The slight softening of the consonants, the languid cadence, the slow roll of his tongue as he pronounced words that she could only understand after he'd traced a finger against her cheek and she'd absorbed him.

"My lucky lady. She's gotten me outta a whole lotta jams."

"Couldn't get ya outta the one you're in now, Ah'd reckon," she said to the Queen of Hearts, surprised by the unexpected bitterness in her voice. Rogue hesitated, furious all of sudden that such a tiny piece of paper was the cause of so much trouble. She frowned only a moment before crushing the playing card with one decisive movement. Her sliced finger twinged vengefully, and with a yelp, Rogue dropped the Queen back into her sock drawer.

That damned Cajun was miles away and yet he still managed to hurt her.

She appraised the wadded card with a frown, and after a moment's scrutiny, banged the drawer shut, giving up on her search for the missing glove altogether.

It wasn't worth it. It was a small, forgivable sacrifice if it meant getting away from that thing, and all it stood for, quicker.

In three strides, she'd snatched her book bag from the spot against the foot of her bed where she'd
thrown it on Friday night, and stomped into the hall, her heavy-heeled boots marking her exit. She
didn't forget to slam the door behind her, though Rogue did note with some malevolence that she
wouldn't hesitate to give anyone a pat on the back with her bare hand that day if they irritated her.

She'd throw out Remy's stupid Queen of Hearts when she got home.
Shuffling

The Ante
Chapter II: Shuffling

... "If a car leaves New York traveling at fifty miles per hour and the distance to Louisiana is thirteen hundred and fifty miles, assuming the driver takes no more than three pit stops per each eight hours of road time — and allocating a reasonable amount of time for rest each night — how long will it take to reach his destination?"

Rogue slumped a little lower in her seat, her elbow skidding across the desk where her sleeve refused to grip the pitted wood. She propped her head up in her hand, using her hair as a shield against the teacher's inquiry.

The problem, scrawled in white on black on the chalkboard, continued waiting for an answer.

Someone across the room raised his hand.

"Is the driver a mutant?"

Rogue closed her eyes, trying to tune out the accompanying snickers that followed the question.

"If the driver was a mutie, he probably wouldn't be using a car, dumbass!" someone hissed in response. "Some of those freaks can fly!"

Rogue's fingers flexed involuntarily, nails digging ruts into her scalp.

Louisiana.

Maybe she'd misheard, her ears playing tricks on her. There hadn't been time for a cup of coffee that morning, and the whole ordeal with Gambit's card left her nursing a number of ideas, none of which she wanted to contemplate for long.

"But if it's a mutant doing the traveling, then maybe there'd be velocity too — the coordinates would get all whacked, and you'd have to calculate the triangulation and —"

"Thank you Dennis. For simplicity's sake, let's assume the driver is normal."

With a sharp inhalation, she forced herself to let the teacher's comment slide. Mutant baiting was practically commonplace these days, but in a classroom? That was just plain poor taste.

Several heads swivelled in her direction as if anticipating a reaction. She shot a disparaging look at a blonde girl at the front of the class, who scowled back. With the tips of her ears growing hot from the attention, Rogue snapped her gaze to the large windows lining the far side of the room. Escape, they beckoned; freedom from this unending torture.

Once, not so long ago, Risty would have been waiting for her beyond those panes of glass; sitting cross-legged on a picnic table, waving invitation while Rogue scrambled to get a hall pass and make a break for it.

That was before the illusion broke down. The ghost of her imaginary best friend haunted the
hallways of Bayville High even with Mystique long gone.

The deception brought with it the whisper of something else: not of Mystique, but...

Louisiana. A cigarette hanging off his smirk.

Rogue's cheek sagged against the bare knuckles of her exposed hand, now tucked close where no one would brush her accidentally. Her gloved fingers tapped a loosely held pencil against the tabletop, drumming an anxious staccato.

Everything else was a muted roar in the background; life carrying on around her.

It was probably a good thing that Kitty left the Institute without her that morning, she mused. If Katherine Pryde — the prodigy, the busybody, and Rogue's de-facto best friend — had known with absolute certainty that Rogue left without a glove? One ridiculous little article of clothing? The whole place would have probably been put on orange alert.

She liked Shadowcat, though admitting it out loud would probably result in a mall crawl and several hours of gossiping that Rogue could otherwise live without.

Still, the vengeful voice of Rogue's sense of self-preservation (which, incidentally, sounded a whole heck of a lot like Kitty) was currently berating her for taking off without the damnable thing anyhow. When it came to her skin and everything it represented, one simple article of clothing could mean a coma for someone else stupid enough to touch her, which meant a future career as a stripper was out of the question, but also, leaving the house without protecting absolutely everyone else around her from her became her absolute responsibility. Absolutely.

Rogue glanced at the clock, muffling a sound of contempt.

If Shadowcat's psyche had stuck around in the aftermath of Egypt last year, she'd probably be doing a number on her head too. Apocalypse saw to that, purging her of each and every spectre who once inhabited her mindspace.

Rogue's own conscience nagged in her own gravelly southern drawl: no glove meant high risk for contact. Even an X-Man who was slicker than owl shit and wearing twice as much eye-liner got rattled once in a while: She'd spent the better part of the morning with her hand crammed into a pocket, thinking about the stupid card in her top drawer.

The pencil snapped.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Rogue inhaled deeply, trying to centre herself. No sense getting worked up with forty five left on the clock. She was stuck as a duck in a dry pond. She folded the pieces of wood together.

This was better than winding up with another absence from trig, at least. Why trig was so important in the greater scheme of things… that left room for debate. Unless, of course, she was trying to measure the distance from where she sat to one particular former adversary who'd disappeared the year before into the swamps of Louisiana.

Obstinately, Rogue mentally declared that she was definitely not doing that.

She peered at the clock again, doleful.

Forty-three minutes, and twelve seconds until lunch. Eleven seconds. Ten seconds. Nine… Her eyelids drooped, and she hummed, slipping into the familiar, comfortable headspace that was
conducive only to the illusion that you looked like you were still taking notes. In actuality, you were enjoying the refreshment of a light nap.

*How long will it take to reach Louisiana?*

The teacher droned on. There were more pressing things to deal with than the innermost workings of her mucked up brain, she decided; like how fast the grass grew or whether the group of kids ditching class behind the bleachers were about to get nailed by the school's custodian while doing his late morning rounds.

She made a half-hearted attempt to focus on the neatly trimmed grass of Bayville High proper outside; the bike racks lined haphazardly against the main walkway and the parking lot beyond. Just another day in this quaint suburban hell.

Rogue let her eyelids close, and the memories rose with absurd ease even though she'd done her best for the better part of a year to repress them:

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*The bayou smells nothing like any other body of water she's been near before. It's a thriving microcosm, heady and heavy-lidded with the perfume of wet cypress trees; their roots splayed and anchoring them into the silted bottoms of the swamp. Here and there, tiny white blossoms cling to the shadows, strangled by dry bits of lichen and tangled vines.*

*She brushes aside the sagging Spanish moss that catches in her hair. It's humid and dark, and the trees are tinged with the green-black ache of the water where the light catches the reflections cast from their meagre torchlight.*

*She doesn't need to see where they're going; the directions have been implanted into her mind alongside the flurry of Julien Boudreaux's memories. They make her temples throb, but she doesn't want him to know that.*

*Gambit is seated at the stern of the small skiff, gently guiding the rudder where she directs him, and Rogue keeps herself pointed stubbornly forwards at the prow. It's easier like this. He can't see her straining to rein in Julien's psyche.*

*She feels his eyes on her anyway, two smoldering points of red in the dark; they make the back of her neck burn. They make her blush to the tips of her ears, and she forces herself to sit still. Forces herself not to hunch or duck under the attention.*

"Nice," he murmurs in appraisal, and Rogue feels the heat rise to her face.

*Something sizzles, pops, and flares. The light illuminates the glossy surface of the water momentarily, and she swivels to find the cause of the disturbance. Her heart hammers madly in her chest.*

*Gambit has pulled from his pocket a handful of Mardi Gras confetti, sparkling over the water's surface with kinetic charge. They're like fireworks: beautiful. Ephemeral. When they disappear, the shadows grow longer between the trees.*

*Gambit smiles, satisfied that he's captured her attention. He watches her expression morph between embarrassment, to wonder, and back into that guarded scowl that hardens the planes of her face.*

"So." Rogue clears her throat, trying the squash the unease with her usual, tepid grosgrain. Small talk is not her strong suit, and it comes out sounding forced. "All this trouble and Ah thought ya
didn't like your father."

"I don't. Just because someone adopts you, it doesn't make them a parent."

"Yeah," she murmurs, disconcerted by the familiarity of his statement.

"Mystique? You mean it wasn't her motherly instincts that led her t' take you in?"

She can hear the grin in his voice; he's mocking her, subtly, but nonetheless... Its playful, rather than vindictive. It throws her only a little, and she recovers quickly.

"Let's just say it was my powers she wanted to nurture," she deadpans.

He pauses. She can hear him inhale sharply, and she knows with full confidence that he's studying her from behind. How often has he done this? How many times had she not known that Gambit had been in the shadows prior to this moment, dogging her footsteps, taking in everything about her?

How much does he know?

Rogue shivers, though the air is warm and the humidity from the swamp is making her shirt cling to the sweat on her back.

She thinks she already knows the answer.

"You and I, we could write a book about it. Been down th' same roads." He trails off, letting the thought hang, gestating into something dark and delicate; a fragile proposition that doesn't really lead anywhere, but trembles with potential. It shivers, that idea; it rests on the 'we' in Gambit's contemplation. Not 'I', nor 'you'...

A pause lengths between them, stretching to the point of becoming awkward. He'd been so darned cocky on the train, telling her how he'd known she was awful lonely, that it'd be a good feeling to know that someone was watching out for her.

He'd been the one doing the watching out, not Mystique. The way things ought to have been hardly work out that way.

She didn't need the extra care, and she definitely didn't deserve it.

"Difference is, you're here trying to save your father. It's more than Ah did."

Much more.

Gambit probably knew that, too, and yet, he'd looked past it.

Rogue sucks her lower lip into her mouth, feigning to see through the murk ahead. Her thoughts have not yet found purchase elsewhere; rather, she lingers on the feel of warped wood beneath her gloves, her damp jeans, the humid chill of swamp mist, and the smell of leather, bourbon, and cayenne spice.

It's beautiful, she thinks, her conscience suddenly lighter than it has been in days:

The bayou is beautiful at this time of night.

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"Rogue! Rogue!"
"Go 'way! M' sleepin',' Rogue said into the crook of her arm.

"Keetty, Rogue's not wearing a glove!" Shock and awe. Typical: Kurt stating the obvious, Rogue groaned to herself.

"Rogue, wake up. Come on, seriously! We need to get you out of here, like, yesterday!"

She pawed at the indentations left on her cheek from the notebook's spiral binding.

With a wince, she managed, "Where…? Oh."

The lunch bell must have rung while she'd been resting her eyes. Kitty and Kurt stood over her, both managing to look suitably fretful, though the rest of the class had long cleared off.

"You fell asleep," Kurt said, exchanging an uncertain glance with Kitty. "When you didn't turn up for lunch, we thought…"

"You've got to get back to the mansion," Kitty cut him off. "Your arm was like, hanging half off the desk. Anyone could have brushed past you, and then there'd be…" She wrung her hands. "Oh my gosh! There'd be someone in a coma on the floor and you'd be asleep and like --"

"Or worse," Kurt interjected.

"Or worse!" Kitty trilled. "I totally thought you were joking this morning. I mean, like, I know how seriously you take things some times, but honestly — How could you leave the house like that?"

"Seriously stupid," Kurt added.

"Mega crazy." Kitty's ponytail bobbed along to add emphasis.

"Mega hyper nuts-oid."

"You know?" She flailed. "Ohmygosh! Like -"

Blinking at the smear of pale foundation left on the opened page before her, Rogue clapped a hand to her face and winced at the sensation of bare skin lanced through with pins and needles. She'd fallen asleep on her arm, and her circulation was paying the price. Not to mention her eardrums, but that was mostly due to Kitty's shrieking.

"You actually left this morning without both your gloves!" Kitty hissed at her.

Kurt, at least, had the decency to throw a nervous look over his shoulder. "Well, one is better than none…"

"Kurt, that's not helping!"

A wisp of her dream returned to Rogue then; the sensate quality of wet wood, coated by strips of peeling paint beneath her gloved hands, the dampness clinging to her fingers though she didn't actually touch the boat herself.

It faded altogether too quickly, along with the warmth of his grin, the scent of him.

She bristled beneath her friends' twin gazes of reprimand.

That wasn't fair. She'd had other things on her mind. She would have been late. Again. Rogue snapped, "Like Ah had any other choice. You all left without me. Ah had to run to school." She
shoved away from the desk, her chair skreeing to a violent stop into the wall behind her. "Some of us," she threw a deliberate glower at her brother, "if ya forgot, aren't blessed with teleportation."

"But, Rogue, what if someone touched you by accident?" Kurt asked, stealing a damning glance at Kitty.

Rogue threw a wry look at him as she gathered her things and dropped them into the opened bag at her feet. "It's not like anyone'd come within ten feet of me anyway," she retaliated. "Everyone in this school skirts around me like Ah've got the plague to begin with."

Kitty bristled, clearly not having forgotten their spat from earlier. "Well," she began in an overly patient, reasonable tone — like she was talking to one of the New Mutants rather than a senior teammate. "Maybe if you didn't dress like death incarnate they wouldn't be so worried. Its all posturing, Rogue. Don't act like we don't know you any better."

Kurt shrank.

Rogue rose from her seat, muscles coiled. She sneered. "Claws out, huh? Short on the catnip this time of the month?" Rogue bit back. "Or is it that Lance ain't hangin' around for ya anymore, Kitty? Did he get sick of being your scratching post?"

Kitty's blushed deepened to a rich red, the double entendre plain.

"Are you volunteering to fill in for him? Maybe I could scrape some of that clown makeup off while I'm at it!" she shot back.

Rogue dropped her bag. To hell with the consequences; Kitty always balked before the moment of contact anyhow. Sometimes, it was worth it just to see the spark of fear sliver through her friend's eyes when Rogue drew her fist back to strike.

"Damen!" Kurt near-yelled, sliding between them. He chuckled, his hands held defensively before him, although the only thing that would really save him if they got going was a quick 'port to the basketball court. "No scratching! No power-sucking! Let's leave this little disagreement for the Danger Room, ja?"

"Ah do not look like a clown," Rogue ground out.

"You're a menace!" Kitty shouted.

"At least Ah'm not cuh-razy!"

"No, you're just dangerous!" she spat.

Between them, Kurt jerked. It took a moment, their collective breaths held, to let that echo between them. Kitty, it seemed, was taking that moment to crumble at the edges a little, as if realizing the magnitude of what she'd said. It must have registered on Rogue's face -- the sharp intake of breath and a flinch of hurt. Lordy, this place was turning her soft.

"Oh," Kitty said, covering her mouth. "Oh, Rogue, I didn't mean -"

It felt like a punch in the gut; the sort originating from a hand with three adamantium claws built-in. Rogue snatched up her bag. "Whatever."

She didn't care that Kitty's lip twitched into a tremor. She busied herself, adjusting the straps of her bag, slinging it over one shoulder, and slouching with as much disdain as she could muster.
"You're in my way," Rogue informed her, not making eye contact.

More high-pitched than normal, Kitty managed, "Fine. I have a chem lab." She lingered anyway.

"Well?" Rogue demanded, glowering at Kurt, who was still occupying the role of ineffectual middleman.

"Fine," Kitty said again.

Her ponytail whipped Kurt in the face as she made her exit.

He sighed, rubbing his cheek. "Come on, Rogue. I'll teleport you back to the Institute," he offered, casting a look at Kitty's retreating flounce. He added in an undertone that was loud enough that they both could hear, "I left my second lunch in the fridge anyway."

She felt the embarrassed flush before she could prevent it. Intent on squashing out the unsettled sensation in her stomach that wasn't due to Kitty being the slightest bit right, she forced back the lingering impression of Blood Moon Bayou. New Orleans. She thought she could smell the swamp still. Those little flowers. It was better a dream than a memory that dulled when she woke up.

"Just get me outta here," she muttered.

"Hey, Rogue?" Kurt began tentatively, plucking her bag from where she'd slung it over a shoulder. It was heavy, and it was nice that he'd carry it for her. No one else did that sort of thing. No one had the gall to try.

Kurt took her arm gently, holding her by the elbow. Conspiratorially, he whispered, "Did you know that your accent gets heavier the madder you are?"

"Git!" She scowled, lifting her bare hand menacingly.

Kurt grinned, the hint of two extended incisors apparent at the corners of his mouth.

"You wouldn't hurt your own brother, would you?" He gave her arm a playful squeeze, before Rogue felt the sudden lurch of Kurt's mutant power yanking them out of one location, and depositing them in another with a loud, BAMF!

Sulphurous smoke cleared, Rogue hastening its progress by waving her hand in front of her face.

"Only if he was askin' for it," she said, defiance marred by the sudden urge to cough.

Kurt chuckled. "You can't hit what you can't see!"

"What if Ah just swing blindly? Ah'm sure ta hit somethin' -"

Kurt's teleportation haze lifted, revealing the second exact person she didn't want to deal with.

All too suddenly, Rogue wished the cloud of rotten egg-smelling smoke would linger a little longer. It stank, and as much as she hated insulting Kurt, she couldn't help but dislike the fact that his mutation offended the nostrils. That, however, wasn't as awful as being greeted at the door by a psychic.

Jean probably saw the whole fight too.

"You're home early," she said.

"Hi, Jean," Kurt mumbled, sheepish. "Forgot my lunch." He cast a sidelong glance at Rogue. "I mean, the second one. I ate the first one already."

"Kurt." Rogue said his name like a warning.

"Okay!" he said brightly. "Bye now!" With that, Kurt ditched her. The residual plume of teleportation was an afterthought.

"Are you okay?" Jean asked, the unmistakable look of perfected concern shaping her features into something beatific. Rogue tried not to scowl.

In response, she held up a bare hand. "You know already, don't you?" she asked, her tone flat.

"Where –?"

"Don't ask," Rogue cut her off.

"Are you going –"

"No."

Rogue's clipped returns didn't seem to phase her. Jean had perched herself atop one of the mansion's stone banisters, an ankle caught behind her shapely calf. It was the perfect place; sunny in the morning and shaded in the afternoon. At lunch hour, she could frequently be found sipping a coffee on the steps and enjoying the view over the grounds since she'd graduated Bayville High the year before.

It's not like she had anything better to do either; what with the Professor training her to become permanent staff at the institute like Ororo and Logan, and her correspondence course in genetics being far less of a challenge than any of the mansion's residents had expected. Jean's natural aptitude for study had been bolstered, of course, what with Henry McCoy still in residence, and the Professor himself having a degree in the field.

"You shouldn't be cutting class so close to graduation, you know."

She'd almost forgotten, Rogue thought to herself: Jean had taken to nagging - the second best sport besides soccer.

Jean's breezy smile twisted into a pinched purse.

"I'm not 'nagging' you, Rogue."

"Didn't say ya were, and don't read my mind. Is the Professor in?" she asked, trying to steady herself enough to cover the surprise of having her thoughts probed by the psychic.

Jean was picking up every little projection these days. It was if her telepathy had been cranked up to the most sensitive setting. Frankly, Rogue thought it was making her a little more tetchy than usual.

With a wince, she offered an, "I didn't mean to," instead of an apology.

Rogue glowered at her.

Defeated, Jean confessed, "He's in his office."
Rogue ducked her head and trudged past. She didn't bother saying thank you; Jean was already staring off into the distance of the mansion's grounds.

"Your missing glove is in the hamper mixed in with Piotr's uniform," Jean called over her shoulder, a half-hearted attempt to smooth over her blunder.

Not wanting to linger on the idea of Piotr Rasputin's leotard in such close proximity to the garment that usually fit snugly around her fingers, Rogue beat it past Jean as if she could outrun the very idea.

Once in the clear, she slowed to a tramping death march, letting her boots drag on the hardwood floors. They left faint scuff marks in her wake. She didn't care, and the Professor tolerated it.

Frankly, the man tolerated a helluva lot, all things considered. There weren't a lot of guys pushing seventy who were still willing to share their homes with twenty-odd hormonal mutant teenagers.

At this time of day, the mansion was vacated save for the senior staff. Beast was probably working in his laboratory, Logan wouldn't be in from happy hour for a stretch, and Piotr would more than likely be tinkering with the jet.

Cyclops had been toiling for the past week reprogramming the Danger Room to ensure that their nightly training sessions were tripled in difficulty — something about slacking on their sessions — or maybe the stick up his butt had lodged itself in further since being appointed to Team Leader in Chief.

Not that Rogue minded Scott's rigidity when it came to their training sessions: he preferred structure, dedication, diligence, ad nauseum. All fine traits to be had by such a model X-Man, and while she'd be hard-pressed to admit it, she'd learned a lot since Scott had taken the initiative to push them harder. It had furthered the illusion that Rogue was still managing to hold her own in the aftermath of the previous year.

The last thing she wanted was to be singled out as a victim of Apocalypse. She wasn't a charity case, and she definitely would not let the others tread around her gingerly. It took one particularly gruelling session, a concussed Berserker and a demolished simulation projector, but Rogue had reinserted herself back into the relative normalcy of routine. They had pretty much left her to her own devices since, and she was just fine with that.

It didn't make walking the Institute's corridors feel any less strange when the mansion was this empty.

Save for the Professor's omnipresence, Rogue was alone. She hugged her arms close, and kept walking.

The midday sun warmed the oak-paneled corridors, casting its light through the large windows of the common areas. Slowly, she made her way towards the girls' wing, to the room she and Kitty had shared for the better part of four years.

Knowing that the Professor would have sensed her presence by now and would probably summon her telepathically, she dropped her bag off and slogged onwards. The estate felt different without everyone bustling about: In the evening, the halls rang with chattering, laughter, and the blare of stereos and television sets. Every so often, someone's powers would manifest themselves loudly, making the sublevels of the school shake.

It seemed to Rogue that for once, with the floating particles of dust caught in the sunlight and the ringing silence around her, she felt a little closer to the place she called her home. It didn't help any
that the only reason she could convince herself of the emotional tie was because the empty mansion reflected her own isolation.

She really shouldn't have threatened Kitty like that, she thought. Out of everyone, even her adopted brother Kurt, Kitty was a constant in Rogue's life for as long as she'd lived at the Institute. She accepted every snide comment, rude retort, and disdainful brush-off. The exact look on Kitty's face when she decided Rogue's coldness towards her hurt — the wide, wet eyes, and the petulant pout — Rogue committed to memory.

The refresher course was unnecessary.

She meant well, Rogue reasoned. She just didn't quite get it.

No one, in fact, ever really got it.

Well, there had been one person, she reflected, who had 'gotten it'…

Rogue looked up into the stairwell, hesitating. The card in her drawer could have been a star going supernova. It's presence was a light that drew her out and held her captive like a moth to a lightbulb. Stupid, really -- that a playing card could have that effect on her. She crumpled and chucked it like trash; treating it the way she felt in the year since she'd returned to the X-Men and he'd stayed behind in the bayou. Like he'd just forgotten about her entirely. Like it just hadn't been a thing.

That damned card was all she had left to remember him by.

A heart's beat pause, and then, suddenly afraid that she'd done more damage than she'd wanted to it that morning before class, she ran.

Taking the steps two at a time, she sprinted down the corridor with her pack slapping harshly against her legs. Rogue took full advantage of the desolate upper halls. The bag's weight stung where the corner of her Geometry text collided with her shin as she collided with her door. She forced the knob, throwing herself into the room, dropped her bag, and vaulted over Kitty's bed to the dresser.

His voice lingered like the wisp of a psyche that had long been purged from her mind. Still she could recall the exact sensation — the warm rush that spread like bourbon in her stomach when he spoke to her:

"So what now?"

Hesitating. She was always hesitating around him, even when she'd said goodbye and she couldn't have mistaken that slight expectancy as he murmured those words -- like he would've invited her to stay with him if she'd had the choice.

Rogue swallowed hard, pulling off her remaining glove. She touched her temple with her bare fingers and realized with sudden horror that her hands were trembling. Dammit, why today of all days? Hadn't she put that night behind her?

"Ah'm going back with the X-Men. Ah don't care what you do."

Hadin't she put him behind her?

"Ah don't care," she announced to the empty room, to the… to the thing inside her dresser. She winced at the loudness of her voice. It was a hollow sound, laced with uncertainty.

"Sure, y' don't."
Rogue shut her eyes. She was being stupid:

It was a piece of paper, for mercy's sake. It was nothing to get all worked up over, and nothing to cling to so stubbornly...

Then why had she kept it this long?

Because he'd given it to her, because he'd gotten "it" — lord knew how — but he'd understood at least partially. The Queen of Hearts was some sort of symbolic talisman; he'd passed his good luck charm on to her.

Or had it had meant something more?

Embarrassed that she could entertain the idea for even a second, she squashed the thought and yanked the drawer open.

In a wadded, partially-crumpled ball, the Queen remained at the bottom amidst a retinue of Rogue's dainties. She seemed to wink with one regal eye from between the folds of black silk and lace.

Rogue let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

She could remember the exact perfume of Blood Moon Bayou; the chill from the water that soaked her clothes, and the sodden, squelchy feeling of the swamp in her boots. She remembered, with the acute bittersweetness of the forsaken, how warm he felt standing mere inches behind her, before he pressed his hand into hers, and he'd slipped away.

Before she'd let him go.

"Y' will be fine, chérie. You've got people watchin' for you."

Her breathing hitched, and though she reached out for the abused playing card, she did not touch it. It was as if the Queen had developed a life of its own from the time she'd found it that morning, to the moment where she fist her hand above it.

It was as if by touching it she'd be able to absorb whatever traces of him he'd left behind, and that, she knew, was one great big stinking lie.

Rogue withdrew her arm, her heart rate escalating, and relishing the sure-as-anything bubble of adrenaline as it hit her bloodstream.

For all that she remembered in vivid detail from that night in New Orleans, there had been one thing she'd neglected to dredge back up to the surface: In the end, he'd left her alone.

He'd had a choice too, after all.

Eyes narrowed, she appraised the small token of Gambit's misplaced affections with renewed understanding: It was nothing more than a parting gift, no more special than anything else handed off to any other girl in any other town with that sly half-grin he'd become notorious for.

Ignoring the treacherous twinge deep in her belly, she reburied the crumpled trinket beneath her underwear.

She was careful not to touch it with naked fingers, just in case.

Closing the drawer, Rogue was struck with a sudden and desperate urgency: She wanted her gloves - both of them - badly.
If a mutant on a motorbike leaves New Orleans traveling at a hundred and fifty miles an hour on a souped-up Harley, and assuming the driver makes no rest stops (save one in North Carolina at four o’clock in the morning for a half hour to stretch his legs and throw back a quick cup of coffee), it would take a little over twenty-six hours to reach the outskirts of New York state.

It didn’t mean he’d be feeling particularly pleasant after the journey, but nonetheless, he’d arrived in one piece, barring several welts from insects that had crashed into his chest while using his torso like a windshield.

Remy scrubbed at his chin with the heel of his hand, grateful for the cover of darkness. It was a little past ten, Monday evening, and the sun had long since slipped behind the ramshackle roof of the Brotherhood house. It left behind only the straining, winking stars overhead, and one lonely streetlight guttering half-heartedly at the corner.

He’d tucked Jean Luc's Harley around the side of the garage, out of sight and out of the way of the large oil stain on the driveway; it looked like Avalanche had yet to part from the old, battered up Jeep he’d driven in high school.

Remy smirked.

"Th’ more things change," he murmured to himself, slipping around the side of the house and avoiding the dilapidated porch altogether.

His fingers traced the first ledge he came to. Surprisingly, the windowpanes were intact, but it really wouldn’t make too much a difference were he to knock them out with his fists.

Still, one had to respect the codes of breaking and entering: If you didn't do it with style, you didn't do it at all. No matter how shitty the venue.

"Th’ more they stay the same," he concluded wryly, scanning the darkened interior of the Brotherhood's great room: a quick appraisal revealed broken furniture, cracks in the ceiling, and patches in the walls that had been blackened with... scorch marks?

He chuckled, slipping a card from one of the many spare packs in his pockets, and wedged it under the window latch.

"St. John," he mused, only half-surprised at his good luck finding the place where the Australian had holed up. "Been wonderin' where that fool had gotten to."

The card warmed beneath his fingers, tingling with kinetic current as it glowed red momentarily, and the lock popped with a dull, whump!

Remy slid the window up and waited for a sign that anyone was home. When only silence returned to him, he vaulted over the chest-high barrier and landed on the threadbare rug. The only sound he made was the soft brush of his trench coat clearing the window ledge.

He strolled over to the couch, swept his jacket out from underneath him, and made himself comfortable.

All he needed to do now was wait.
"Get off me now, Toad."

"But baby cakes…!"

"Don't touch my sister slimeball."

"Or what? What're you gonna do, huh, speedy? Make me dizzy?"

"Could you two just knock it off – hey!"

A clatter, several loud yells, and a snarled oath.

"What the hell, mate? Hit the light switch, already."

"Pyro! That's not the light switch!"

"Well then... was it as good for you as it was for me?"

"Guys!"

"Someone squished my Twinkie."

"What the hell?"

"Hey!"

"GUYS! GUYS!"

"Shut up, Toad -"

"GUYS! We're not alone."

In the darkness of the Brotherhood's living room, two red eyes gleamed with unsettling brightness.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

A card flashed, restrained from full charge between dexterous index and middle fingers. It illuminated only a small portion of the room, bathing Gambit's features in deep scarlet and black.

Slowly, with his free hand, he traced the line of his lapel, extracting a small, bound bundle from his coat that he dropped unceremoniously on the coffee table. It made a hollow thunk as it hit the gouged surface, clunking to its side awkwardly.

"I'm here t' make you an offer you can't refuse, mes amis," he said with a grin that could make even the Devil reconsider his claim to a man's soul.
The Hand You're Dealt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Ante

Chapter III: The Hand You're Dealt

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"What's he doing?" Lance asked, peering around the corner of the kitchen door, a mix of suspicion and irritability keeping him near the great room, spying on their unexpected visitor.

"Gambit's gonna kip on the couch," Pyro offered brightly. "Don't see why not - it's like a bloody family reunion having him blow in like this." He paused, surveying his housemates. "Mind, the lot of you weren't there at the time. With old Binhead, I mean." He conked his temple for emphasis. "You know - Mags? Anyway, you're sort of like a family... more or less." He eyed Wanda. "What?"

"I'm contemplating what you'd look like wearing your internal organs," she returned.

"Oh, artsy tonight, are we?" He nodded his approval. "I like that."

Beaming, there was a distinctive bounce to his gait as he brushed past her in a beeline for the pantry, though the linoleum beneath his feet popped and crackled with a menacing rumble.

He shot a warning glance at Lance. "Holster the tectonics, Lance. I'd like t' eat me popcorn without choking."

Pyro heaved himself onto the counter to reach the highest shelf where Fred usually stashed his junk food. He flailed, nearly tipping backwards, but gripped the shelving at the last possible moment.

"What were you talking about, out there?" Lance demanded at last, unable to keep his displeasure reserved to simple brooding.

"Did someone eat the last bag of Orville Reddenwhatevers?"

The walls shook with another tremor, causing several boxes to tumble down on St. John's head, knocking him to the floor where he landed with his legs splayed wide. An assortment of boxes littered the space around him.

"Brilliant!" he called a moment later, holding a Jiffy Pop tin aloft. "Forgot we had these..."

"John," Wanda said, the warning plain in her voice.

Pyro glanced up, taking a quick survey of the girl from boots to spiked collar and earning a glare from her brother. The new Brotherhood stood around him, all-ears and altogether willing to create an unnecessary sense of claustrophobia in the way that they hovered over him, waiting for answers about their unexpected houseguest.

"He didn't say nothing, mate. Just catching up on old times. No more, no less," he replied with a shrug. "Could have fared a right shade better, I might add: he could have kept in touch." He shook the tin, as if determining if there was enough butter inside worth popping it. "He bloody well buggered off for an entire year; not a care for me, not even a text message..."
Lance fixed him with a glower.

"But I'm not complaining. That blighter's a sight for sore eyes," Pyro cooed. "And he's damn well more fun than you lot. Might be good to have him back."

"He's not staying here," Lance snapped, appearing as if he was prepared to barrel down the hallway back to the living room and haul the Cajun from his makeshift bed.

With little effort, Fred blocked him — his bulk taking up the better part of the doorframe. "I think we should talk about it… maybe." He shrugged noncommittally. Lance bared his teeth.

"Get out of my way, Blob," he growled. "I'm the one making the rules around here, remember? And I say this is sketchy."

"At best," interjected Wanda.

Pietro snorted. "Lance? Leader? Since when?"

"Comedian, more like." Pyro grinned in agreement, picking at the paper cover of the popcorn tin. It appeared to be stuck.

The glare Lance gave him had him biting his cheek into submission. St. John cleared his throat and refocused on the task at hand, plucking at the tin foldings of the Jiffy Pop with renewed vigor.

After a pause, Pietro scoffed, "Oh, captain, my captain."

Pyro snorted.

Plaster fell from the ceiling as the house quaked.

Fred frowned, his triple chin rumpling, and crossed his arms over his barrel-like chest.

"Dunno, man," Todd said, pulling himself out of the fridge. "Sounds like an easy gig — this thing he’s suggesting."

"Too easy," Wanda murmured, casting a considering, sidelong glance at the Australian.

"So easy, in fact, that it seems almost suspicious," Lance groused.

Pietro agreed, "I don't like it." His white hair quivered despite the volume of gel he'd gooped into it as he shook his head. "But still, it's been a while since we've had any real action, youknowwhatImean? I'm getting antsy just thinking about standing around here doing nothing while the X-Geeks are still out and about having a total ball."

"Yo, I miss that," Todd chimed in. "Madness and mayhem, no stupid truces keeping us caged; feel like I've been on a leash the last few months…"

"...And I don't like the fact that suddenly we're playing hotel to that bum," Lance continued, ignoring him. "Don't you remember what happened the last time Gambit 'dropped by', Tolansky?"

"Awe man, don't remind me. Guy destroyed my favorite set of curtains, yo."

Wanda snorted and turned her attention to her chipped nail polish.

From his spot on the floor, Pyro struck at the nearest dial on the stove with a fist. The cardboard insert of the Jiffy Pop tin was half-glued to the foil cover, stuck fast and refusing to budge. "Oh, piss
off! Would you listen to yesselves?" he demanded. "You lot have gotten so stinking jaded. I'm bored as piss with all this namby-pamby deliberation shite. You lot used to be hardarses; now a wee scuffle with your old mates gives you the willies."

"You think we're scared?" Lance demanded.

Pietro sneered.

"That ain't right." Todd frowned.

The flame caught in the burner, and Pyro pulled it into his palm with ease.

"I think," he continued, admiring the fire, "that the offer Gambit's making is a right shade better than a burnt stick in the eye, you ask me."

A scorching ball of flame launched from one hand to the other, consuming the pan of Jiffy Pop with a roar. It licked upwards to the ceiling, searing the cover to cinders, and inflating the contents with an alarmingly fast crackle.

He snuffed the blaze to better admire his handiwork, the scent of singed popcorn permeating the now-smoke-hazy kitchen. "A fight with the X-Men's better than lazying around this hovel, at any rate. I think its high time the lot of you kiss and make up with Gambit," Pyro said. "Let bygones be bygones."

Blinking away light spots, Fred shuffled uneasily. Even the larger boy seemed to mark the heightened tension in the room.

"Wanda?" he asked from the doorway. "You're better with all that probability stuff. What do you think?"

"I can remodel probabilities; I don't predict the outcomes," Wanda returned.

Pyro cleared his throat, saying a little louder, "Bury the hatchet."

"We can't trust him," Pietro was quick to interject. "Gambit worked for —" He exchanged a look with his sister, their father still a sensitive topic.

"So did he." Wanda jutted her chin at St. John. "We let him in."

"Yeah, but so did —" Todd began. In a blink, Pietro was beside him. Just as quickly, Todd doubled over, clutching his midsection and wheezing for breath. Pietro slapped him on the back.

"Gotta watch that tongue, Toad. We wouldn't want you choking on it, now, would we?" Laughing, Pietro's gaze darted between Lance and Fred. Wanda didn't seem to notice the exchange; though the others seemed no less tense for the close shave: Wanda had been kept in the dark about having her mind wiped by Mastermind at Magneto's behest. Everyone wanted to keep it that way.

Thoughtful, Pyro added, "Let sleeping dogs lie…"

No one missed the double meaning.

"Someone shut him up," Lance and Pietro snapped in unison.

"What? Do I have to start nattering on about how the 'dingos ate my baby' to get your attention?" John chuckled, tossing a cheeky wink at Quicksilver.
"It has been a while since we've done any damage," Fred said wistfully, cracking his knuckles. "Hey, can I have some of that, John?"

"Cheers!" Pyro crowed, his mouth now stuffed with semi-charred popcorn.

"What do we have to lose. Maybe we'll show those freaks up for once," Pietro conceded, dropping his unease just as suddenly as he took note of John's blackmail material.

"Amen!" Pyro cackled. "Best start polishing y' gear, mend those pesky uniform rips and such. We wouldn't want to make a poor fiftieth impression, now would we?"

"Hey! Last time I checked, I was in charge here," Lance barked. "And I say this is bullsh—"

"Wouldn't mind stretching the old tongue a little," Todd mused, his gaze sliding from a fly lingering near the empty fruit bowl on the table to Wanda in the corner.

Hip cocked to the side, expression neutral, she didn't even deign to roll her eyes.

"If this is a trap," she promised Pyro, "I will break you."

With a last assessing look at the Australian, she stood upright, locking her thumbs into her studded belt. "Let me know what we're doing in the morning." She waved off Lance's frustrated grunt of protest, and sauntered from the room.

Pyro shuddered, though not unpleasantly.

Toad's expression fell.

Cocking his head to the side and appraising Lance, Pietro mused, "Hell, if you're not good for a fight with the x-dorks, maybe we should re-evaluate the whole 'fearless leader' bit, don't you think?"

"Ooooh, sounds like a challenge, that."

"Just give me one good reason…" Lance began.

"I get it," Pietro announced. "Lance still hasn't dealt with his residual animal shelter issues."

Pyro snorted, spraying bits of half-chewed popcorn across his lap. "PUTTHY WHIP TH!"


"What? No! There's nothing between her and me anymore —“ Lance said, defensiveness forcing his eyebrows into the scrunched bridge of his nose.

"Naw!" Toad called, springing out from behind the fridge door and aiming for the stairs, out of reach. "That big metal man muscled in on your game, homeboy. He's scorin' while you're out on the bench."

"What." The walls shook, the cutlery in the drawers rattled, and the glasses — the ones that weren't already broken — tinkled on their shelves.

"Colossus?" Fred made a face. "The big Russian guy?"

"Wonder if he can metal-up only selected parts of his anatomy at a time," Pietro contemplated aloud.

Pyro choked.
"FINE!" Lance bellowed, the linoleum warping as a tremor shook the foundations of the house. "WE'LL DO IT. JUST SHUT UP ABOUT HER ALREADY!"

With that, he stalked from the kitchen; delicate little trickles of plaster dust from the ceiling followed him as he stormed upstairs.

"Crikey." Pyro coughed. "That's all it takes? Mention the Sheila and Petey?"

Pietro shrugged, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and rocked back on his heels. The grin he wore was beatific.

At the door, Fred's face crumpled in confusion.

"What body parts?"

Gambit awoke to the sun filtering through the moth-eaten curtains, striking his closed eyelids. He winced, his neck creaking from sleeping at an odd angle against the armrest of the Brotherhood's couch.

"G'morning, sunshine!"

Remy cracked open an eye. Pyro had coffee.

"Mmph."

John, bouncing on his heels, set the steaming cup down on the table before him and nudged it forwards. It smelled better than he'd expected for something coming from the Brotherhood's kitchen.

"Nice to see you too," he said, flopping into a chair opposite — all gangly limbs and familiar freckles. "You don't write, you don't call, you left me all by my lonesome, and I don't even get a proper stinking 'bong-ja' outta ya," John groused. "Southern hospitality, my arse."

"The hospitality's offered, John; don't work the other way 'round." Dragging the cup towards him, he took a cautious whiff. "Cinnamon?"

"Yeah mate, just the way you like it." John wrung his hands. "No chicory, but the cinnamon's the next best thing to take that old edge off... you big softie."

"Merci," Remy murmured, sitting up.

"So?" Pyro pressed, his nervous tension palpable.

Remy sipped his coffee, restraining a grimace. After a moment spent deciding the coffee wouldn't poison him, he appraised St. John over the steaming cup:

Knobby knees protruded above the coffee table (actually a converted pantry door on cinder blocks), too-long arms attached to too-long fingers clasped between them. John looked on earnestly; a familiar, slightly manic expression lighting his blue eyes.

This was the same young man Remy had known so many months ago, but he was broader in the
shoulders, and firmer around the jaw, and there were several more shining burn scars on his arms since the last time Remy had seen him last.

"Stop looking at me like yeh plan on eating me, yeh pervy."

"Couldn't possibly, mon ami. You're not t' my taste... much like the rocket fuel y' put in this mug."

"Engine oil," John corrected. "Siphoned it from the wanker's jeep m'self."

Remy smirked, and just like that, the pair of them were grinning at each other, the lapse of time and circumstance forgotten.

"Well?" demanded John. "Don't leave me dangling on the wire, mate! You've got me by the Crown Jewels, here, and that isn't bloody well comfortable, is it? Yeh've got a plan, clearly, but yeh're only telling the wee mites part of it. Not that I care so much about the finnicky details — but knowing you, there are finnicky details —"

"Time is it?" Remy asked, setting the cup down and swallowing to clear the foul taste from his palette. The deliberate side-step of John's question earned him an eye-roll.

"Half-six and daylight's wasting," John replied eagerly. "I've got me gear all sparkled up, real shiny-like for the occasion. So when do we leave?"

Remy, giving the living room a once-over, tossed a foot up onto the table and felt his trench coat for a rumpled pack of cards; having found them still tucked safely into his left breast pocket, he relaxed.

"S' just you, then?"

"What? No, no," John waved it off. "They're all in. They're just having a nice lie-in since they prattled on about 'their decision' until two last night. Bloody sods — you'd think they get opportunities like this all the time what with the way they're acting."

"Been a little dull in these parts, huh?"

"There's a 'truce' in effect," John explained, with no shortage of derision. "Between the Brotherhood and the X-Men. With Magneto gone bollocks enough to check himself into the sanitorium, and Mystique M.I.A., the kids... mate, its not that they've lost their passion for trouble, its that they've taken a permanent hiatus from it."

"Sleeping off Apocalypse, still?"

Pyro snorted, mimicking a coma-like doze.

"Y' cool, John?" he asked seriously, appraising his former teammate with a level stare.

"I am on fire," Pyro declared. "You should have heard some of the stuff I had to spit out at them to get them to go along with that plan of yours. I'm as cunning as a shithouse rat."

Remy smirked, standing. "I rubbed off on you, Allerdyce?"

"Oh, don't piss on my back and tell me its raining. This is all me." He stroked himself, preening.

"The next bit'll be a piece of cake — if you've got everything sorted on your end, if ya catch my drift - and there is something on your end, I can smell it. I'm not daft enough to miss that particular twinkle in yeh eye. Wait... where are you going?"

"First, m' gonna take a shower."
"And then we're leaving?" He looked entirely too hopeful.

"Non; then m' gonna do some reconnaissance."

Pyro made an impatient noise.

"Patience, mon ami. Y' gotta pay your respects before cremating th' bodies."

"Mate," Pyro exclaimed. "Have I ever told you how much I bloody love your way with words?"

"Th' femmes? They tell me that all the time," Gambit called over his shoulder with a smirk.

"Must be a real morbid lot you've been hanging out with lately, Gambit. That weird, zombie voodoo shite they've got going on in New Orleans is finally getting to you."

Gambit grinned. "Y' got no idea, Pyro," he murmured to himself, climbing the stairs.

Remy could just barely make out John's next words as he locked the bathroom door behind himself. It sounded something like, "That can't be healthy."

He couldn't be more wrong.

The grounds of the manor were hazed; kissed by the first rays of bleary sunlight that filtered through the lingering mist. It was damp outside, which turned his tread cautious as Gambit leapt onto the perimeter wall of the Xavier Institute. One false step, one slip, and he'd trigger the mansion's security system.

The light artillery would wind up first — springing out of the foliage that lined the property, lifting up concealed panels in the ground and taking aim by locking onto his heat signature.

He had them memorized: their locations, their rate of fire, the speed at which the stunners could swivel, and the angle at which the lasers arced before reaching their target.

The only thing he couldn't calculate was the intensity of the blast. He hadn't given the mansion's feeble defenses the opportunity to clip him, ever, and frankly, today wasn't going to be the day he found out how much a shot from one of those cannons hurt.

Remy slid his bo from beneath his trench coat, extending it with a snap of his wrist. It provided additional balance and a quick means of defense as he ran the length of the wall from gate and into the safe haven of the North forest — not that he needed it.

Grinning, looking at the path through the tree limbs: It was a little more overgrown than the last time he'd been here, but for the most part, the terrain was familiar to him. Using his staff to vault the first row of concealed cameras, he swept upwards and landed nimbly on the first sturdy tree limb.

Too easy, he thought, tucking his staff away and taking a moment to sizzle a tally mark into a familiar tree trunk with his index finger. There were several dozen already carved into the bark, sealed in by tree sap.

From here, it was a hop, skip, and jump to his desired destination, his second most favorite place in
the entire world — the shadows.

"Perhaps there is an alternative we have not yet examined."

Rogue sighed, slouching a little lower in her seat in front of the Professor.

Yesterday's "meeting" had been delayed due to an incident with one of the new mutants — henceforth unnamed — and Logan's motorbike, the evening prior.

Rescheduled to the morning, the "meeting" with the Professor wasn't going any better than she'd hoped.

Same old, same old.

"Ah don't know what other 'alternatives' there are," she confessed. "Ah mean, its not like Ah haven't thought about it, but Ah can't see what more Ah can do about my powers than Ah already have."

"If I'm not mistaken, Rogue, like several other students — your powers have yet to develop fully. There is still a chance yet that complete control will manifest itself gradually, as is the case with certain secondary mutations. Evan, for example..." 

She frowned. Evan had long left the Institute in favor of taking up residence with the Morlocks, but that didn’t mean he was forgotten. In his present condition, he couldn’t walk around in public without cloaking himself, and Rogue knew for a fact that he’d never do that willingly.

"Are ya sayin' that Ah might be lucky enough to take up residence in a sewer?"

The Professor's benedictive smile was enough to drive her mental. "I should hope not, although your sense of misplaced humor indicates to me that you are certainly in a better mindset."

There it was. "This is about yesterday, ain't it?"

He regarded her thoughtfully, folding his hands on the blotter covering the better part of his oak desk.

"Is there something you wish to tell me, Rogue?"

She hesitated, unsure how to answer his question. Not willing to reveal everything muddled up matters some.

"Sir, Ah… it's not that —“ she stammered. "Yesterday, Ah couldn't find my glove."

There it was; no dodging the bullet.

"Ah knew Ah shouldn't have left the mansion, but this is the second time Ah've had to go through senior year. Ah just…” She exhaled. "Ah just want to get it over with."

Because of her powers, because both Mystique and Apocalypse had done their damnedest to exploit her, a fair chunk of her academic life had been screwed up. Add to that the prolonged absences from class as a result of a jaunt to Tibet, and an extended stay in Egypt, and not to mention that impromptu
"vacation" to the South that she was definitely not thinking about again, and the aftermath of shoving Mystique off a cliff...

It was amazing the Professor wasn't forcing her into therapy too.

"Ah'm sorry," she almost pleaded. "Ah knew it was wrong of me. It was irresponsible, but Ah just want to finish this part of my life and move on."

"Rogue, were it not for the incident with Apocalypse…"

"Ah know, sir," she interrupted, morose. "Repeating a year ain't the end of the world so long as Ah don't have ta think about it again when it's over. Ya'll just did what ya thought was best for me." Her now-shrouded fingers twisted together in her lap. "Ah appreciate it."

With a gentle smile, the Professor moved from behind his desk, his wheelchair making the barest of whispers as he rolled across the carpet to stop before her.

Rogue didn't meet his gaze.

"Your teachers felt the same way, Rogue. You have such potential academically, and as a gifted individual."

"Cursed, more like."

"You were under so much strain," he soothed. "Matters with Mystique did not help. It was a difficult time, and that I cannot pretend to understand. I can only offer you my sincerest conviction that we must persevere, and we must not lose hope."

Carefully, Professor Xavier placed one weathered hand atop her gloves. She flinched — whether it was at the mention of her adoptive mother, or at the gentle pressure against her knuckles — Rogue didn't know.

What Rogue did know was that no one touched her carelessly. She didn't let them. Not anymore.

"Give it time, Rogue. Patience is the greatest virtue you can possess: patience and determination. The latter of which I am certain you have in abundance given your recent record in the Danger Room."

She looked up, surprise bleeding into pride. "Logan told you?"

"The repairs have presented Cyclops with quite the challenge." He beamed.

Rogue dipped her head again, retracting her hands from beneath his, relieved to be separated by more than just a thin layer of leather. She took a moment to adjust her gloves before meeting the Professor's gaze. Even at their snuggest, they left a thin strip of skin exposed around her wrist when her shirt sleeve rode up.

"What can Ah do?" She held up her hands. "About these?"

"Well, there are certain psychological studies that may be of interest to you, if you were inclined to pursue a new form of training."

"Psychic?"

He chuckled. "Thankfully, no. Nothing so invasive. Dr. McCoy has informed me of what you may very well already know, Rogue: Your powers are not limited to your skin, though absorption occurs through the epidermis since it is an active organ that offers transference — minerals, vitamins,
hormones and the like. We are inclined to believe that it may simply be a cognitive link that activates your powers."

"Which means?"

"Essentially, it is your mind that controls your ability to imprint other sentient beings."

"Ah just can't control my mind," Rogue concluded. "So my powers are always set ta 'on', right?"

"With time, my dear, you may find that it is simply a matter of perseverance in discovering, and subsequently conquering the involuntary aspects of the trigger. I would not be surprised if we were to discover that there are indeed, certain telecognitive aspects to your gift as well."

"Ya mean… Ah might be…"

"Predisposed to a mild psychokinetic ability? It is indeed possible, yes, though I do not believe that your mutation is within precisely the same vein as Jean's, or even my own, for that matter. Rogue, believe me when I assure you that you are wholly unique in your gifts." The look he fixed her with was so intent that it was difficult to find an argument against the Professor's convictions.

"It would be the one aspect of your nature that allows you to effectively copy the abilities, memories and personalities of individuals for a time, and perhaps," he quirked an eyebrow, "with adequate motivation, you may learn to recall the specific attributes of those you have imprinted before."

"Great," Rogue exclaimed, flopping backwards heavily into her chair. "You're saying my head's like a library catalogue. There's nothing there anymore, Professor. Ah got a reboot, remember? A full-on cranial wipe."

"I think you will find, Rogue, that the chasms of the mind are far deeper than you and I could possibly imagine, and we have not even begun to plumb the depths of your potential —"

He paused, his mouth pinching a little at the corner and his eyes narrowing as his gaze shifted to a point beyond her shoulder. He pressed two fingers to his temple in concentration.

Rogue knew the expression. Usually, it meant he had detected something or was communicating telepathically with someone else in the mansion.

"Professor?" Rogue began.

"I'm sorry, Rogue. Perhaps it's best if we continue this discussion after school," he said, returning to himself. "If would appear that… ah! Yes, I see, Jean. Thank you." He smiled broadly, his gaze clear as he focused again.

His expression lit with something that, were he not such a serious individual, could be mistaken as mischief as he informed her, "I believe we have unexpected, but welcome, company."

Taking it as her cue to leave, Rogue stood. "Uh… okay, Professor. Ah'll see you later, then." She slung her book bag over her shoulder, heading for the door.

"Rogue?"

Halfway into the hall, she turned.

The Professor paused, a hint of something disconcerting turning his mouth up at the corners.

"Remember: patience. You are among friends who want nothing more than to help you."
She nodded, not thinking much of the well-used phrase, and slipped down the hallway, into the foyer, and out of the manor.

—

Her sneakers skidded in the wet grass: the bright green blades streaked across the canvases, leaving behind patchy black smears on dusty charcoal. She was shoe-gazing, and she didn't care.

People expected her to resort to this sort of melancholy introspection, anyway, Rogue thought. The conversation with the Professor became a lingering black cloud over her head on an otherwise luminescent morning. The sun, white in its newness, was barely beginning to clear the tops of the trees over the North forest.

A light breeze ruffled the leaves as she made her way across the lawn to her favorite spot beneath an overhanging oak on the northernmost side of the property. As the sun rose, the ground beneath the tree would be dappled in shade. For a little while, she could sit on the bench and think a bit before being rushed off to school by Kitty or Kurt.

Maybe, she'd just walk today, she thought; clear her head a little. Everyone else seemed to be off like a herd of turtles.

Figured.

Still, the Professor's convictions lingered, tantalizing:

Control.

Sighing, Rogue tugged her sleeves a little lower over her forearms. Control of her powers was like some sort of abstract ideal held in front of her like a donkey with a sugar cube before its nose. The question was: Could she be moved by it?

She dropped her bag on the sodden ground beside her, tossing herself onto a stone bench. The seat was as cold as the morning air, and she hugged her arms around herself to stop from shivering.

To think that for her whole life, she'd convinced herself that she would be the only one to hold herself like that was a little frightening. Rogue — not the little girl once known as Anna Marie — had made it this far giving everyone a wide enough berth, but to say she liked it would be a gross understatement.

Control? Rogue snorted aloud.

Xavier saw the good in everyone, and sometimes, he could be almost frighteningly idyllic. It was best not to get her hopes up, she decided. Failing a trig test was one thing, but failing herself by dreaming of something she couldn't possibly hope to attain, and then never getting it? That was masochism.


Some promises were never meant to be kept, she decided. Why make them when they only left you hurting after the dreams that held them together fell apart?
But still, there was a spark of something there; a childlike, innocent little thing, deep in the pit of her belly. It felt like excitement. It felt like...

Nevermind. Rogue brushed the thought away and returned to staring at her Converse.

Maybe her secondary mutation was dormant, maybe it was biding it's time, or maybe, like the small seedling of hope that made her chest tighten imperceptibly with unvoiced contentment, there was something inside her that she couldn't deny forever.

...And her sneakers were filthy.

Resigned that she couldn't let it go, Rogue shut her eyes and hummed just to hear the sound.

Alone with her thoughts, her psyches purged and the silence of her mind cavernous without their voices, Rogue understood isolation. It had been a little more than a year since she had willingly absorbed anyone, and while on some days, the quiet was wonderful, other days, she wondered how she got by with her sanity still in tact. She was doing a damned fine job of slaying her Danger Room sessions without added help from her psyches, to boot — handling it all by herself, with her skills alone, was a reward she hadn’t expected: duking it out in there, all by herself, that was something — that gave her real pride in her own abilities, and yet —

She wanted more than this, she concluded.

The scary thing was that Gambit had known of that particular desire, and he'd offered it to her freely… for the wrong reasons, true, but he'd given her the chance to be something more, to seize what she wanted.

It was a chance she'd taken, once.

Rogue paused, held her breath, though the need to do so was irrational. Her mind strained to slip back to the familiarity of the thing buried in her dresser drawer:

His Queen of Hearts.

That damned card was a reminder of all that "potential" Xavier had been talking about. It was like a fist of pent up energy just begging to be released.

Why couldn't she just let it go?

She snorted bitterly at the unseemly justice of the thought: Gambit was the one just throwing himself about everywhere, a kinetically-charged waste of potential, while she had kept it all under lock and key; that was control. That was discipline. That was strength.

She flexed her fist, admiring the instrument of her salvation; stretched around her knuckles where the leather wore down from hitting things.

"It is what it is," she muttered, and then fell to pensive silence.

It was unusually quiet that morning, and the sound of her own voice made her feel excruciatingly hollow.

Straining her ears, Rogue looked up for the first time since she'd sat down. It was too quiet, she thought. Usually there were birds; the forest was full of them: whippoorwills and crows, jays and woodpeckers, but now, nothing made a sound.
Except…

There was a strained groan and Rogue snapped her attention overhead a second too late. The branch of the oak overhanging the bench she sat on was dipping lower, cracking beneath the weight of…

"Merde!"

Gambit leapt, springing off the splintering limb just as Rogue stood and staggered backwards. He dropped ten feet to the ground, clipping her on the side and taking her down with his momentum. The pair rolled over each other, absorbing the impact though their limbs tangled.

Rogue inhaled sharply, realizing, despite the fact that her hair was obscuring her vision, that she had landed on top of something extremely firm… Something extremely firm that was breathing and smelled like aftershave and cigarette smoke and had just cussed in French.

Something that was now starting to laugh a very familiar, very distinctive, very infuriating laugh.

She sprang upwards to her knees so that she could see better, to see for sure…

"Y’ miss me, chérie?"

Rogue, eyes widened, took in the fine dusting of stubble on his chin, the strong jaw, the smoldering red cast of pupils set into black sclera, and the wry quirk to his mouth:

Remy.

Remy LeFuckingBeau.

Rogue squinted. Had she just gotten hit in the head with a tree branch? Was she hallucinating now?

Remy, chuckling at the ideal position he found himself in, wet his lips and slowly, ever so slowly, reached up to brush a fan of white hair from her eyes.

She jerked backwards reflexively.

He merely raised an eyebrow.

Damnit. Not a hallucination, Rogue concluded. So not a hallucination, in fact, that she could feel every tensed ripple of muscle fitted perfectly beneath her body; every curve, every dip, and every line. So, it seemed, did Gambit.

Ashamed that she could feel the heat seeping from his body directly to her face, she spat at him, "What the hell are you doing?"

Planting her hands over his wrists and struggling to extract her calf from beneath his knee, she swore a blue streak. Gambit, it seemed, had other ideas: he held firm, locking her leg in place and pulling her hips flush with his. Forgoing the gasp, Rogue felt her arms shudder at the sudden, inexplicably intoxicating contact.

"Just enjoyin’ the view." He smirked, trying to lift a hand to brush her hair away from her face again, and failed, realizing she still had him pinned. He let her think she could hold him, for a moment. "Mind, I usually prefer the top, myself."

Returning to herself, Rogue was about to make a snappish retort when Gambit forced her hands off his wrists, his attention fixed on the tree overhead. Wrapping his arms around her, he covered the top of her head and spun them to the side, just as the tree branch snapped. It came down heavily where
they'd just lain, a stray branch lashing at his shoulders.

"S' better," he murmured into her hair, his breath tickling her neck.

"Get off me!" She shoved at his chest.

Obligingly, Gambit rolled and stood in one fluid motion, sweeping low to offer her a hand. The gesture teemed with chivalrous pomp, and Rogue slapped his fingers away without as much as a blink.

"You could have gotten yourself killed, ya damn fool Cajun. What were ya thinking?" she yelled, standing up.

He shrugged, peering at her through his fringe as he brushed himself off. "Tree's not as sturdy as it used t' be. Or mebbe I spent a bit too much time up there; outdid m' welcome."

Rogue gaped. This wasn't happening.

"It's been a while, non?" he voiced for her, the hint of a smile tugging at his mouth, the perfect bow of his lower lip shadowed by a neatly manicured pinch.

"You yellin' at Remy, Remy threatening t' blow up a box car…" he trailed off.

He'd grown out his hair, she thought: It hung into his eyes, strings of auburn shag. As if noticing this, he raked it back, his eyes roving, drinking her in.

"Remy speakin' in third person? Yeah. It coulda been a stretch longer," she snapped, putting as much force behind it as possible.

"Still got that old sass." He murmured appreciatively, gaze lingering on her mouth. "Dieu, I was afraid that fire'd gone out." It came out breathy and satisfied.

Rogue swallowed, remembering all too clearly the sensate quality of his voice; how it felt so visceral just to hear him speak; like every syllable was intended to undress her, one scrap of fabric at a time.

As if he realized this, Remy took a step back to appraise her properly.

She folded her arms across her chest and scowled.

"Whaddya want?" she deadpanned, relieved to find the quaver in her voice almost entirely absent. "Plan on gassing and kidnapping me again? It's getting kinda old, Gambit."

"'Remy'," he corrected. "S' what my friends call me."

"You ain't got no friends here, ya swamp rat."

He grinned openly. "Figured you wouldn't be too pleased t' see me. S' cool." He shrugged, unconcerned. "Y' want t' play that game, I'm all for it."

"Ah ain't interested, Gam-bit," she enunciated, biting off the 't'. "Just tell me what ya want and be off with ya, I've got class in a half hour."

Eyebrow cocked in speculation, that old arrogance masking his slouched stance, making him appear more welcoming than anything, Remy slipped his hands into his pockets as he sidled up to her.

Rogue forced herself to glower directly at him, to hold her ground though she was furious that he'd
just dropped in on her out of nowhere, like nothing had changed between them. The fact that there wasn't a "them" to begin with didn't faze her in the slightest. He was such a… such a…

"Y' keep staring like that, I think y' might be trying t' burn a hole in m' skull," he murmured.

She sniffed with disdain, contemplating for the first time in what felt like forever if she could deal with Remy's psyche gallivanting through her head unchecked. There were plenty of exposed places on him that she could use to bring him down: his face, his index and pinky fingers, his mouth...

Realizing she was staring outright instead of seething, Rogue's eyes slitted. She hitched her best sneer into place though he towered over her.

"Bonjour," he whispered, and Rogue tasted coffee on his breath.

Unaware of how he'd managed to get so close, she took a staggering step backwards.

Unruffled, Gambit continued, "Or mebbe you just like what y' see. Sight for sore eyes?"

He held his arms out, turning around on his heel, his trench coat opening to reveal a lean torso, muscular legs, and those stupid shin guards he insisted on wearing over his boots.

Gawd, he'd filled out across the shoulders. His trench hugged his biceps from elbow to collarbone, all corded sinew and gristle beneath a too-tight top.

"More like making 'em sore," she scoffed. "Haven't changed a lick: you're still just as cocky as ever," she tossed back at him, turning away to conceal a rising blush. Rogue sidestepped the fallen branch to retrieve her school bag, cursing herself all the while for allowing herself to be baited.

"Just came t' check in on you, Rogue," he said, two steps behind her. She could hear the wet blades of grass brushing against his boots. "S' all. Just wanted a word, if you're willing t' hear a scoundrel out."

"Ah wouldn't bet on it if Ah were you," she muttered, and the hushed noise of his pursuit stopped.

"Non?" Gambit said the word like it carried a heavier meaning than intended.

Undaunted, she picked up her pace, trying to put distance between them. "Ya tried to apologize to me once, LeBeau…"

"And you listened then." He caught her wrist, turning her to face him. Surprised, Rogue spun where he directed her to, practically crashing against him once more.

How had she not heard him move?

"Or were y' lying when you took that card?" Gambit pressed.

Her breath caught despite herself. The Queen of Hearts — it wasn't a good luck charm, it was a damned omen. She should have known that finding the Queen was like some sort of portent: spill blood on the card and the Cajun comes a-runnin'.

"About what?" she snapped.

Something lit his gaze, a smoldering interest that warmed her from collarbone through to the tips of her ears.

He mimicked her last words to him, "'I don't care what you do.' As I recall, you were the one who
walked away from *me*, cherie."

Rogue groaned inwardly, not entirely convinced she was disappointed, but what did that matter? He hadn't written, called, or even e-mailed in a year. Some unspoken promise that had been -- giving her the Queen of Hearts because he wouldn't or couldn't be there himself to do something about whatever went unsaid between them.

"It's not like it meant anything," she said, finally finding her voice.

"To you or t' me?" he shot back.

Rogue sucked in a breath. A pause lengthened between them, and they struggled equally to stare the other down.

Stalemate.

—

"Let me go," Rogue said finally through grit teeth.

After a pause, Remy lifted his fingers, one by one, from her sleeve. He'd managed the twist the garment so that a small patch of skin was exposed between her wrist and forearm.

Lily white, he thought, before forcefully shoving the associated images of chilled, shivering funeral blooms away. Oddly satisfied, he watched her turn, heaving her bag onto her shoulder, and give him a parting frown.

"Ah'm going now," she informed him, and that was fine. Fact of the matter was, he hadn't really let go at all. Not ever. Not that he was confessing anything so eagerly to anyone. He was still thinking of her skin; flawless...

Remy didn't even protest as she broke into a run across the manor grounds to the garage.

Cocking a quizzical eyebrow, Remy contemplated the light tingle in his thumb where he'd brushed her wrist.

She hadn't felt it.

He patted at himself, a grin spreading across his features, albeit fleetingly.

Not comatose, he decided. That was good.

Her reaction to seeing him? Not so good.

"Well, if that don't put pepper in the gumbo," he mused. "Gonna make Pyro a happy man, at least."

There was, after all, two way of doing things: the hard way, and Gambit's way.

With only one item remaining on the to do list, having already secured the perimeter on the way in, Remy scanned the grounds before slipping back under the cover of the trees.

It was easy to ignore the feeling in his stomach that was rapidly dissolving into a jittery burst of
adrenaline, brought on by the aftermath of the gamble he'd just taken. In some ways, it felt to him as thrilling as a successful heist — and in some ways, it was.

Smirking, Remy calmed himself by reaching for the pack of cards he'd saved for this very occasion.

Chapter End Notes

Translations

Bong-jer: Bonjour
Dieu: God
Eh bien: ok
Femmes: ladies/women
Merci: thank you
Merde: shit!
Mon ami: my friend
Trop facile: too easy
Chapter IV: Openers

Shoulders squared, hips swinging, fists balled at her sides, Rogue strode into the Danger Room, her eyes already narrowed with a purpose that her surveyors in the control tower couldn't possibly guess at. The drop of her boot heels echoed loudly against the reinforced floors.

"Activate: Rogue's Run, x-five-point-niner," she shouted.

Overhead, tucked safely into the reinforced operations booth, Kurt pressed his face against the glass.

"She's using decimals?"

"You should all be using varied sequences by now, Elf," Logan rumbled, keying in the sequence and logging her start time at seven p.m. "There isn't a whole lot more I can teach you that you don't already know."

"Rogue has been showing much more initiative the last few months," Henry remarked, adjusting his glasses to monitor the lit screen in front of him that would track her vitals during the session. "What do you think is the cause of it?"

"I don't know, but I definitely do not want to get in her way when she's in that mood," Kurt pointed out.

Logan grunted. "You should have seen her this afternoon, Elf."

"Two sessions?" Kurt exclaimed. "You mean she's in there again today willingly?"

In response, Logan punched the com link, and spoke through the intercom, "Get to it, Stripes. The peanut gallery's waiting."

Below, the Danger Room had morphed from sleek titanium into rough terrain: hewn boulders had sprung from the ground, making passage difficult as it spread across uneven gorges and rises.

Wasting no time, Rogue hauled herself, hand over hand, over the largest ledge. She dropped into a crouch at the top, waiting just long enough for the nearest sensor to fold out of the wall, mark her gene signature, and start firing. The look she wore on her face was one of grim determination as the first beam of red sliced through the air towards her. Evading it easily by somersaulting off the rock, she landed with one knee bent beneath her, and then the real show began.

"What's her objective this evening, Hank?" Logan asked. He tipped himself against the far wall and extracted a cigar from his shirt pocket.

"Evasive maneuvers. It's fairly standard in this type of environment."

"Huh."
"Was that a laugh or a question, Logan?" Kurt threw over his shoulder, teleporting to the opposite end of the control room to follow Rogue's movements. Two large mechanical droids, a variation on Trask's sentinel design, dropped down in a hiss of steam on either side of her. A whirr and several clicks later, and the assault began at full force.

"Watch it fuzz ball, or I'll drop you in there myself," Logan returned, lighting his cigar.

"But —!" Kurt's eyes widened, only partially aware of the wrench in his gut as he realized that Rogue versus the Decepticons might not end so favorably for his sister:

Without an immediate source of absorption, all she had was her own agility and speed to see her through the session. Kurt readied himself to throw down alongside her, hesitating only at cautionary look from Wolverine.

A hand on his shoulder stopped him completely.

"Uh uh. Let her work it out for a minute."

Below them, Rogue spun backwards, vaulting behind the boulder she'd been perched on before turning her face up and grinning with feral abandon. Kurt gasped — he could have sworn her eyes had darkened, the ghost of some psyche manifesting itself through her will and the pressure of the session.

That was impossible, Kurt thought, wasn't it?

"Did you see that?" he asked the room.

Doctor McCoy made a short, interested noise.

"What?" Kurt demanded, his tail flicking with tension.

Henry, however, had turned his large, blue face to his computer screen, and was tapping out a series of codes with such forced concentration that he didn't hear.

"I think that's enough outta ya, bub," Logan rumbled, following Rogue's movements. "Get suited up. There's enough robot for the both of you to tackle at once."

"But —" Kurt began to protest, cutting himself short when he saw what was happening below. Several concussive blasts sounded in short succession, stalling him.

Overhead, the lights dimmed, leveraging the difficulty of the session. A mech lumbered towards Rogue, gears whirring with rhythmic precision; the next moment, a sliver of bright pink arced across the room and connected with its shoulder. It swayed backwards a moment, its balance compromised, but only just; it righted itself, weapons reloading and firing again.

Despite the lowered visibility, Kurt could still see the mech's smoldering hydraulic joint.

Mouth dry, his concern for his sister forgotten — since she'd clearly developed a newfound ability to blow the crap out of the Danger Room — Kurt decided that his furry blue behind shouldn't be within a hundred feet of anything remotely explosive.

"What was that?" he asked. "Did you see that?" Logan appeared to be considering the same thing as him.

Before he could answer, a resounding static crackle echoed, followed by the sizzle of electricity and
a rising cloud of synthesized, environmentally accurate dust. A tangle of titanium-plated limbs occupied the center of the detritus. Atop the pile, Rogue stood with her hands balled on her hips, contemplating the wreckage.

Kurt grinned, turning to face Logan with his arms folded over his chest. Relief that he wouldn't have to join the session emboldening him, he grinned. "Nevermind. Forget I said anything."

Hank exclaimed, standing, "This is unprecedented!"

"Huh," Logan grunted again, swaggering to the window and surveying the damage on the floor below: both mechs had indeed short-circuited themselves, and lay in a scorched heap.

Rogue kicked an arm for good measure.

"Ya tell Cyclops he oughta program these things to be quicker!" she shouted.

Logan smirked, hitting the intercom button so Rogue could hear him below. "Tell him yourself, kid, and bring a box of Kleenex with ya when ya do. This is the sort of show that makes him cry himself to sleep."

To the others in the control tower, he sneered, "Scooter's gonna love this."

Henry, dumbfounded, exclaimed, "She was in there a minute and fifty-two seconds."

Chomping down on his unlit cigar, he jutted his chin. "Huh."

Kurt demanded, "What does that even mean?"

"Ah wanna go again!" Rogue called, waving to get their attention. "Hank! Logan? Give me an override!"

Wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her sleeve, Rogue looked at it in distaste, as if remembering she'd traded in her black and green spandex outfit for something a little more technologically advanced, and accordingly, a little less comfortable.

Kurt didn't blame her. The new getups were stiff as anything; it'd be a few sessions before the team could break them in properly.

"Maybe its the suits," he proposed aloud.

Logan grunted. "Put a kid in leather and they think they're a superhero. Sure."

"Well, it's just a theory —"

Logan punched the com button. "Hold on, kid. We're sending the Elf in with ya," he told Rogue. "He's doing too much thinking up here."

"Was?" Kurt swiveled around, his shoulders drooping as he took in Logan's grim smile.

"Ya heard me, bub."

"Scheiße!"

"Watch the language."

"You don't even speak German!" Kurt argued, wishing almost immediately that he hadn't said
anything. The look Wolverine gave him was enough to have him splinch himself, teleporting quicker than the crack of lightning.

For little more than a few seconds, the only sound shared between the two men in the Danger Room's observation tower was the hum of the computers.

Tentatively, Hank asked, "You don't really think it's the new uniforms?"

Logan raised an eyebrow.

"Certainly the bio-sensitive reinforcements are an intelligent design, really quite an ingenious addition, but —"

Logan fixed him with a level look.

"Ah," Hank nodded, "I thought not." He pushed his glasses further up his nose. "Analytics?" he asked.

"Analytics," Wolverine agreed.

With a few key strokes, the computer before them spat out a series of garbled, frantically spiking scans, documenting Rogue's session.

"Should I look into the psychological implications?" he asked, hitting the print button absently. "Fascinating, truly… that she might be actively using her mutation once more, but at what prompting, I wonder —"

"Hank."

"Was I doing it again?"

"Talking to yourself?" Logan smirked, humorless. "Yeah, but that's not the point. When was the last time Rogue asked for a double session?"

Henry shook his head and turned back to the monitor. "In truth, I was more surprised by such a concentrated display of prowess that has little to do with her honed physical ability or endurance, and largely interested in the explicit exhibition of her mutation —"

Logan frowned. Hank paused, and scrubbed his forehead.

"Yes, well." He seemed to take Logan's grimace as a sign to get to the point. "I would estimate that would be the last time she exhibited a similar style, force, and tactical execution was roughly the same time as the last incident where she eviscerated one of Scott's droids using explosive kinetic force. The amplification of the gene signature in these readings is simply…" He paused, clearing his throat. "Uncanny."

Logan rumbled, "That's what I was afraid of."

"...And at this degree of difficulty?" Hank typed in a series of codes with swift, blue fingers that brought up Rogue's training record for her duration at the Institute. He continued, "The last known record was February of last year."

The two men settled into thought as the room's lighting changed from dim halogen to brilliant orange, as flames engulfed a large portion of the terrain below. Apart from the occasional, shuddering explosion, the pair resigned themselves to contemplative silence.
"Hank?" Wolverine asked after a stretch, watching attentively as Rogue landed a swift series of punches to a holo-villain, only to take its knees out once disabled.

"Yes, Logan?"

Wolverine bit down on the end of his cigar, chomping it thoughtfully. After a moment, he sniffed at the air, choosing the most obvious answer to the newfound revelation:

"It's definitely not the suits."

He turned away as Rogue's defense rapidly dissolved into a vicious offense: Something splattered against the danger room wall, dark enough to be oil, but viscous enough to be simulated blood.

Behind her, Kurt teleported out of the way before she could swing wide and immobilize him.

Henry murmured something indecipherable, standing up. Logan grunted in agreement. Neither had seen that particular power manifest in some time. Both had been under the impression that Rogue had gotten it out of her system with the clutter of psyches stolen from her by Apocalypse when he'd risen.

There was no mistaking it: The crate on which Rogue was standing was humming, but more distinctive than that was the bright fuchsia glow that surrounded it.

"Oh my stars and garters," said Hank.

"I don't know any kid who'd ask for a double sesh unless they had some demon to work out of themselves. That girl down there has fight, but nothing would get her begging for two rounds of this; not unless something was really eating at her."

Hank nodded. "Well... I’d be curious as to what prompted her to use her mutation once more. The energy signature is quite specific, in this case —“

"Where was Rogue last February, Hank?" Logan muttered, the grim turn of his mouth a plain indicator that he already knew the answer as he exited the control tower, not waiting for the doctor's reply.

Below, the crate exploded with a force violent enough to send Rogue soaring into the air.

Henry McCoy squinted at the monitor, his glasses again being claimed by gravity in a downwards slide. "Speculative," he said to himself. "Until there is irrefutable evidence of our suspicions…” he trailed off, initiating a diagnostic comparison in the system.

There was something oddly curious about the patterning of energy that had induced the explosion. He'd seen it before, on only on one occasion, but those samples were long lost, entombed with Apocalypse. Never had he seen such a demonstration from Rogue, however, and never in a controlled environment where she would readily allow herself to be studied.

In fact, Henry had been under the impression that Rogue had gone to great lengths in the past twelve months to deliberately avoid using her powers, and as far as Henry knew, she'd succeeded.

The screen flickered before him, and with the eager click of his mouse, the machine began to scan for possible matches with a similar sequence in their expository signatures. Less than a minute later, the system beeped, signaling the closest analogous frequency — a genetic signature bearing the name of a mutant that Henry McCoy knew to have been sequestered to the city of New Orleans for the better part of the past year.
Henry's eyes widened, turning to watch as Rogue was plucked out of the air by Nightcrawler's teleportation.

"Huh!" he murmured.

—

"Charles, ya here?"

With a perfunctory knock on Xavier's door, Logan shouldered his way into the office.

Seated across from Jean Grey, who perched on the end of her chair looking for all the world as if she'd been expecting him, Charles Xavier, namesake of the Institute, gave him an unnervingly knowing smile.

"Come in, Logan. Jean and I were just finishing up."

As if to illustrate this point, a variety of textbooks and notes were spread out between them:

Diagrams of genomes, DNA helixes, and pages upon pages of mathematical calculations littered the surface of the table. Jean blushed, embarrassed by the fervor that inspired the mess, and began assembling the pages neatly with a display of telekineses so forceful the window panes rattled.

"Sorry, Professor." She flushed. "I'm just not myself these days."

"Not at all, Jean."

She glanced at Logan. "Did Rogue really destroy both automated firing systems?" Jean asked, before she could stop herself.

Wolverine merely raised an eyebrow.

"Logan, I —" She stammered, rubbing her temple. "I think I'm just a little tired. I'm picking up everything today. Sorry," she apologized again.

"That's alright, darlin'," Logan said, gesturing for her to keep her seat. "You might as well hear this out, too." He shrugged, tapping his temple. "Fill in the gaps."

Grateful that her slip of telepathic etiquette didn't seem to offend him, Jean stayed where she was.

Charles asked, "Is something wrong?"

Wolverine grimaced, his shoulders hunching on instinct, though there was no visible threat in sight — or in smell, as the case might be.

"There's something funny going on with Rogue," he began, to which the Professor offered a benign smile, as if this particular fact had made the Psychic Hotline, Telepath Post, and Vision Network all at once, hours before.

"Oh?" Jean asked mildly.

The pair of psychics shared a look between them that made Logan bristle.
"I think someone might've paid her a visit unannounced," he continued.

Charles steepled his fingers before his chin; whether it was to conceal his smile or not, it set Logan's nerves on edge.

Jean widened her eyes to keep from blinking too often. That act wasn't going to work on him, and Logan set his jaw as if to demonstrate his resolve; he could smell a snake in the grass a mile away — this snake just happened to smell like bayou backwater.

Something was definitely up, and the two resident mind-benders knew all about it.

"What aren't you telling me, Chuck?"

At that moment, Hank burst through the door, waving a printout of the diagnostics he'd just taken from the Danger Room session and the records of the one particular mutant whom none of them had expected to hear from for quite some time.

For Wolverine, forever would have been too soon:

The words "Remy LeBeau" were stark in the upper lefthand corner, printed next to the punk's alias, "Gambit." All other fields, including his date of birth and parents' names, were blank.

Remy Goddamned LeBeau.

The look Charles Xavier wore was far too impassive for his liking, which meant, by Logan's understanding, that he wasn't about to drag a motive out of the man anytime soon.

"Gumbo," Logan growled, turning on his heel, stalking past a breathless Henry and out of the room.

"Logan!" Henry called after him.

"Later, Hank," he snarled.

"But —"

"Let him go, Henry," said the Professor. "Logan desires what we all do for our students: to allow us to care for them until they can care for themselves."

Jean raised an eyebrow.

"And perhaps beyond that, still," he offered as a concession.

Henry cleared his throat.

"Please," Charles continued, beckoning the large, blue man to enter his office. "Tell me what you have discovered about Rogue's recent display of powers?"

Surprised, Henry exclaimed, "Rogue? Oh no, my dear boy. It's Gambit's newly acquired genetic alteration that we should be concerned with."
The bathroom gleamed; the fluorescent lights were jarringly bright compared to the ambient hallways of the mansion. Rogue didn't give her eyes time enough to adjust as she stalked in, her knees still trembling — not from the rigors of the Danger Room session — but as if they'd decided that a skeleton's cancan was their way of declaring independence from her brain.

The door shut behind her with a soft click. She locked it though the small brass bolt would do nothing to keep the rest of her housemates out if they really wanted to find her.

She well and truly hoped they wouldn't.

Something was utterly, horribly, astonishingly wrong.

One quick psychic sweep from Jean and the entire house would know what had happened that morning, and then just a few minutes ago in the Danger Room. She shuddered, the feel of him was too near the surface to ignore.

Rogue glanced at the windows, almost expecting to see Bobby trying to sneak a peek into the girls' showers by way of his ice slide. It was dark enough that she could see her own reflection mirrored in the panes, but nothing else. Shuddering, she wished desperately for her nerves to settle.

Gambit had done something to her, she thought viciously: Fired her up like a charged card and left her to fizzle out all on her own.

A glance in the mirror confirmed it: she looked a mess. Her hair had frizzed and gone curly from the humidity of the early summer, and after her recent bout with the Danger Room's new modifications, it was matted down with sweat. Barely better than being tousled by the deft brush of fingers that came too close to the scalp, her outward appearance was little better than a poker tell: it was all over her; the flush, the heat, the charge...

To spite her, her body tingled where his hands had been hours before.

He hadn't touched her skin. He hadn't, and yet if felt as if he'd left his mark everywhere on her.

Looking at her face in the windowpane's reflection led to yet another confrontation with herself: guilt was seldom pretty. She was too pale, too haggard, but the telltale blush that she'd clearly done something she shouldn't have had yet to completely depart. Rogue drew a shaky breath, dropped her toiletries on the ceramic countertop, and turned away from the window.

It had come out of nowhere — a delicious tingling that started at her core and seeped into her limbs, the charge lighting beneath her skin, seeking the quickest way out. The first mech had drawn it out of her when she had tried to disable it by whipping a small stone at the weak point on its torso. She hadn't expected the zing of the charge, the kinetic energy spiraling into the rock and then exploding when her throw had flown off course.

She'd been too shocked to feel him inside her head, an unvoiced second sense that directed her footing, the arch of her spine as she evaded and parried with the offense, and the steady, confident ripple of power that had guided her hands when she'd blown up the crate. Voiceless, faceless, everything drawn from intuition — and if she'd concentrated, she'd found she was able to anticipate the mechs' attack pattern.

Worse, it had felt... good.

Good to have an edge against the mechs. Good to be a little more than she was. Good to push a little harder, a little farther.
But something was amiss: If she had truly absorbed Gambit, his powers wouldn't come without a price.

Every imprint she took came with a personality.

Try as she might, scouring her head turned up zilch, zip, nada: not a memory, not a spot of confusion, not a perverted twist to every waking thought that would indicate he'd been absorbed. No cravings, no latent habits, no smooth talking voice in her ear telling her how happy he was that she'd finally found herself a private moment to indulge his awareness. Nothing. She would have been elated, if it wasn't so downright terrifying that her lack of control over herself had given way to a new sort of unpredictability.

Rogue stumbled to the showers, all too aware that the whole day seemed like a dream touched by fever.

She needed to get his mark off of her, wrest back the control over her body despite the sickening sensation that somehow it felt entirely too decadent to be decent.

She snapped on the hot and cold taps and pulled her hands back just in time to avoid the first spray from the shower head. Her mind threatened to replay the encounter again; alarmed, she began tugging off her clothes with more force than necessary.

She hadn't touched him, she was sure of it. She'd have sensed it. She would have sucked the rascal bone-dry and left him a quivering mess on the ground if she'd so much as breathed on him.

She would have felt his psyche; the ghostly, deft curl of his fingers as he shuffled his cards absently, that heavy-lidded look he liked appraising her with, and that slow, soft rumble his voice made when he spoke to her.

She couldn't have absorbed him, yet she must have, because how else had she been able to blow up that crate?

A buckle snapped, and Rogue ignored it in favor of the rapidity at which she peeled off her uniform top, the tank beneath, her gloves, her shoes and socks. She nearly sobbed as the clasp of her bra snapped against her back as she fumbled with it.

This couldn't get any worse, she thought, vainly trying to ignore the way her nipples pebbled below the thin cotton.

Every move she made, her body managed to betray her again.

"Damnit!" she swore, looking to the ceiling and whatever higher powers lay beyond it as she struggled to get her pants off her hips. They stuck to her stubbornly, peeling away only to ripple with gooseflesh as the cool bathroom air hit her sweat-dampened skin.

All but throwing her toiletry bag into the shower, she wriggled out of her dainties, scattering her shampoo, conditioner, and soap across the tiled floor. She stepped in after her belongings quickly, snapping the curtain half shut behind her, and flung herself beneath the jet that pounded from overhead.

Tipping her face upwards to greet the hot water, Rogue held her breath and began counting to ten — hoping in that span of time she'd have scalded off the unsettled tingle in her limbs…

That he inspired, she thought venomously.
One.

Somehow, she'd get past this. She'd be all right. She'd get a decent night's sleep and push the entire incident from her mind, along with the residual flutter of his powers.

She peeked an eye open.

*His* powers, siphoned through her, *tonight.*

Lordy, how was that even possible? She wanted to groan, but bit down on her lip instead.

This called for experimentation.

Gingerly, she poked at the lightly scented bar of soap swimming in the recessed holder in the wall. No sizzle of kinetic power, no flash of garish pink. Exhaling, Rogue found herself momentarily relieved.

Perhaps that little stunt in the Danger Room had been a fluke — an echo of the powers she'd absorbed when Mesmero was using her as a vessel to restore Apocalypse to power.

It didn't seem likely. It had been a year since she'd absorbed him; a year since she'd absorbed *anyone* for that matter. It was impossible. No psyche meant no imprint. *That* was the rule. *That* was how her stupid mutation worked.

Trying to force a strangled scream back down her throat, she shut her eyes, grit her teeth, and resumed counting her way to a meditative, tranquil, serene state — free of Cajuns falling out of trees and exploding things and absent psyches.

What in *hell* had he done to her?

Two.

Somehow, Remy — *Gambit*, she corrected herself — needed to be reminded that when you played with fire, you ended up with scorch marks all over the carpet. Hadn't he spent enough time with that crackpot Pyro to know that?

Three.

*Gambit.* He had all the subtlety of a hurricane. Rogue's belly twisted pleasantly, and on impulse, she squeezed her thighs together.

Maybe it was the fact that he'd disappeared for a full year, and managed to resurface again, the same cocky grin still in place, the same smoldering appreciation greeting her as he sized her up…

No! Rogue's eyes snapped open, blinding herself with her running mascara. She stepped back from the spray, holding her hands against her face.

*Gambit.*

Where had he been for so long, and why had he returned?

Having him in Bayville was like having an itch between her shoulder blades that she couldn't possibly reach despite how much she strained her limbs to scratch it.

This... *this* contemplation was sanctified madness, and she was downright certifiable.
Maybe, if she hadn't found that card yesterday morning… Rogue swiped at her eyes, hyper aware of how her skin tingled where the hot water hit her, and held her hands in front of her.

Her fingers were trembling, and so she fist them hard, turning the knuckles white.

It was as if finding that Queen of Hearts card he'd palmed and slipped between her gloved fingers last year in Louisiana had set off a homing beacon. Like a shark smelling blood in the water, he'd returned.

Rogue blinked the water out of her eyes. Well, she thought, she wouldn't let him come in for the kill. That was it. That was all, and she was just dandy, thank you kindly.

With grim determination, Rogue scowled and reached forwards, her fingers dancing lightly over the taps.

If the Cajun wanted to play, so be it. She was up for the worst, and she'd give it back twice as hard.

With that, Rogue snapped off the hot tap, shrieking in surprise as the first blast of ice water touched her skin.

She giggled, breathing heavy, and just a little shocked at her own determination not to succumb to the temptation of Remy's presence in Bayville.

—

"Rogue?"

Rogue jerked to a stop, clutching at the towel wrapped around her body. She'd hoped to sneak into her room, change, and hide for the rest of the evening.

Lady luck was a spiteful harlot, she thought. Kitty Pryde had ghosted into their room directly behind her without as much as a whisper.

Forcing every ounce of flippancy into her cadence, she replied with a, "Yeah?"

If Kitty noticed the lack of steam pouring from their bathroom, she didn't comment.

"Can we talk? I mean, like, not right now but, like, in maybe, I dunno, when you're done?"

Rogue dropped her clothing on the foot of her bed. Did Kitty know? Was she blushing again, oh gawd…

"Because, uh, well, you know, like, I was thinking about it and, you know," she stammered. Rogue didn't turn around. Kitty's lapse into valley-girl speak was usually a clear indicator of excitement or nerves. This time, she figured that the frequency at which Kit was spitting out 'likes' probably lent to the latter.

"Like, I know we've had our issues before, but I think we've come a long way from back then, and I was really out of line today, and I just wanted to say… you know… that I'm sorry?"

Rogue exhaled heavily, unaware that she was holding her breath.
"Yeah, Kit. Me too." She peeked over her shoulder, offering a faint smile, praying all the while that Kitty hadn't picked up on any outlandish gossip. Rogue figured she'd have an hour tops between the Danger Room fiasco and the entire Institute putting two and two together.

A glance at the clocked indicated that she had at least fifteen more minutes peace before all hell broke loose.

"Really?" Kitty's expression brightened considerably. "Well," she bounced on the souls of her feet, clasping her hands in front of her, "Okay, I'll — I mean, if you wanted to — I'll make some milkshakes or something, and we can talk. Meet me in the kitchen?"

"Ah'll be right down," she promised begrudgingly, but Kitty didn't notice. Turning back to the pile of damp clothing on her bed, Rogue fiddled with the knot of her towel, waiting for Kitty to leave so she could dress.

"Cool!" Kitty exclaimed, buoyant in her enthusiasm.

Rogue waited until she heard the click of the door as it closed before letting her shoulders slump. Her hair left a steady trickle of cold water running down her neck, and she shivered.

Trying to shake the sensation off proved futile. Since their encounter that morning, Rogue could hardly dispel the feeling that beyond the inky blackness of night outdoors, he was out there.

Cautiously, she approached the window.

Was he watching her now? Pressing her face close to the glass, she clutched at her towel with one hand, and placed her fingers on the cold windowpane with the other.

She looked across the grounds to her tree with its splintered limb. The branch Gambit had broken that morning had been cleared away, but its absence made the tree seem incomplete somehow.

It wasn't too far off from her room; she had a clear view of the oak, and now that she knew where he'd hidden, she supposed he'd had a decent view inside the mansion as well. Slowly, Rogue moved from behind the window to the large French doors that opened onto their balcony.

The view was mostly the same, though from here, her bed usually took the brunt of daylight pouring into the room when the sun rose.

Save for the amber glow of the security lights that illuminated the mansion and its surrounding pathways, the grounds were veiled in a thin, blue-green cast, and beyond that, darkness.

Nothing stirred, though more importantly, no one stared back at her.

With some reluctance, she drew away from the glass.

Kitty would be waiting for her, and if she lingered too long, she'd probably come back and start asking questions. Rogue hurried to her dresser, mentally bracing herself to avoid the card hidden in the top drawer, and froze.

There, smoothed out against the surface of her mirror, the Queen of Hearts stared at her. The wrinkles were still present, the tattered edges still evident from all the card's handling, but more disturbing was the thing beside it:

Taped with one corner overlapping the Queen, a new card was stuck to the mirror's surface.
Knees turning wobbly so that she had to brace herself against the dresser, Rogue caught herself reaching for them.

Her hand lingered over the pair a moment, unsure whether she wanted to tear the cards off the mirror, but her heart had risen. It had begun pummeling a staccato in her throat.

He had been here, and he had found the Queen to his King.

"Oh!" she cried, covering her mouth to staunch the sound. Gambit had gone into her underwear drawer to find it!

If that wasn't bad enough, he had added his own two cents for good measure: A response to her snarled attempt that morning to dissuade him from hanging around. He'd had the last word even though she'd walked away from him, even though hours had passed:

Scrawled across the face of the rumpled Queen, and bleeding over onto the King of Hearts' regal countenance, written in heavy black ink, was the response to her flippant retort to him:

"I'd always bet on you."

Just as she was reaching to tear Gambit's cards off the mirror, or perhaps to draw her fingers over them to be certain that she wasn't imagining them, a flare of bright red in her peripheral vision tore her gaze to the balcony.

Rogue's hand dropped, hitting the top of the dresser with a hollow slap.

The grounds of the Xavier institute were alight with flame.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Scheiße: Shit!
Was: What
"Where's Gambit?"

"He bailed, I'll bet," Lance ground out. "Wouldn't put it past him."

"Said he'd give us a signal, mate, and when Gamby-pamby gives you a signal, ya can't miss it," Pyro said from his perch atop the stone peristyle, his dismissal airy. "Believe me, Pebble. He means it when he says it."

The Australian was seated cross-legged, making small flame animals fueled by the throwers hooked up to his arms.

"Look!" Pyro called down to Fred, "A duckie!"

The small mallard, cleverly shaped like a rubber duck and fifty times as sinister, licked its way over Blob's head, singeing his Mohawk.

"Hey!" Fred barked, clamping his hands over his smoking hair.

Toat sprung into the air to land on Fred's shoulders. "Shut up, bro! You're gonna get us all picked up for loitering before we get any action!" To make his point, he clamped both hands over Fred's mouth as the larger boy tried unsuccessfully to beat him off, hamhock arms swinging.

"Toad, you are never gonna get 'any action' if you keep eating flies every time something in a skirt walks by." Pietro chuckled.

"Knock it off," Wanda threatened, her hands coated in the telltale blue shimmer that indicated she was packing a wallop. Given that a tense Wanda was rarely a happy Wanda, everyone save Pyro took note of the warning.

"No need to get your knickers in a knot, love. Just trying to add some levity, is all. No need to be so serious."

"Having the word 'saint' in your name doesn't make you one," Lance bit back.

"It's Sin Jun, not Saint John!" Pyro corrected, petulant. "Learn ta speak Australian!"

"Whatever." Lance rolled his eyes. He turned his attention back to the gates, his shoulders squared and his jaw set in a firm line. "If I had a dime for every time you mangled the English language —— " He cocked an eyebrow at Wanda. "I'd buy the Scarlet Witch a pair of fishnets that didn't need safety pins to hold them together."
In return, her mouth twisting darkly, Wanda said, "I like the feeling of metal on skin."

"And I like knowing that it's not my skin feeling it," he deadpanned.

Pyro chortled, "Turns out Lance's ex is into the metal thing too."

"I'm blissful in my ignorance," Lance muttered.

"Read: frustrated beyond belief, yo," Toad interjected.

Lance warned, "Watch it Tolansky. You aren't much better off."

"Wouldn't you know it, lover boy?" Quicksilver leered at him, wetting his lips suggestively.

"What did you say, you psychotic fruitcake?" Lance retorted, the ground beneath him shuddering.

Pyro cackled. "Fruitcake! Mate, you've obviously never tried your girlfriend's cooking. That stuff blocks up the plumbing like —"

"She is not my girlfr—"

"I like fruitcake," Fred said absently, his eyes going glassy at the thought of a late-night, pre-battle snack.

"Enough!" Wanda snapped.

"Someone dob the bloke in, already - the wee shiela's been buffing the chrome for the last six months at least," Pyro continued, ignoring Wanda's warning.

"Pyro, I told you to back off —" The air surrounding Wanda crackled menacingly.

"Oh shit, sweetums you don't really wanna do that —" Toad cautioned. "Can't work this job without the wallaby!"

"Ozzie!" Pyro barked.

"We could make do," Quicksilver offered. "The Scarlet Witch doesn't need the added stress."

"You're all so bloody, stinking repressed," Pyro snickered. "I could damn well choke on all the unresolved tension in this group — it's made you lot tetchy. Especially you, my dear, darling, Scarlet Bi—"

"Finish that sentence and you—!" Pietro threatened, zipping up the wall, his fist cocked back, ready to swing.

Nearly as quick, the sound of gaspipes opening to full thrust accompanied a shimmer of heat as Pyro released a warning jet of flame into the night sky over their heads — high enough to scorch the trees overhanging the Institute gates.

"Or. You'll. What?" he ground out, grinning.

Pyro's gaze flicked to Wanda's, Wanda narrowed her eyes, fingers curling in a way that suggested she was priming her aim.

Pietro sneered at Pyro, hissing, "Now you've done it!" and zipped out of the way.

Eyes glossy from the heat of the fire, he breathed, "Ello, love. Fancy a play date?"

She sneered, glowering from beneath lidded eyes. Flames reflected in them. "I don't play well with others."

"Hey!" Fred called, ambling up to the gates and effectively blocking Pyro from Wanda's direct line of fire. Gripping at him but altogether too aware of the precarious position the bigger boy had placed them in, Toad remained atop Fred’s shoulders, eyeing both Scarlet Witch and the firebug warily.

"What's the signal supposed to look like?" Fred asked.

Six heads swiveled around, searching the darkness that blanketed the Xavier Institute grounds. They didn't need to look long, however, as a long sliver of fuchsia-tinged light shot straight into the sky from the North forest and exploded violently over the trees.

"Awe, isn't that pretty?" Pyro cooed. "Pretty sodding weak," he finished with a grimace. The throwers on his arms spat out two large licks of flame in sympathy, before returning to the form of a placid-looking duck. The coil of fire spluttered, threatening to become something larger at Pyro's behest.

"Was that it?" Fred asked. "Was that the signal?"

Quicksilver, cracking his neck and swinging his arms round to loosen up, barely had the chance to open his mouth when several smaller explosions detonated in rapid succession.

Toad leapt from Fred's shoulders to the wall, grinning toothily. "That's what I'm talking about!"

A long line of cards whirred to life, lighting either side of the pathway that led to the mansion's massive portico. They crackled like cherry bombs, lighting the grounds in a long chain of small detonations.

"Gambit's rolling out the red carpet for us, yo!" Toad called over the noise.

"That's more of a pink to me," Fred hedged.

"Fuschia," corrected Wanda.

"Almost carmine," Fred amended.

"Nah," Pyro said, "You're all bloody blind. It's magenta, believe me."

Pietro let out an exasperated whine. “Can someone get the gate? Lance!” he said, zooming to his sister. Wanda's coat fluttered with the breeze, but she didn't appear to notice, her eyes narrowed at the Australian. For a moment, it appeared as if she wanted nothing more than to swat at him, like a fly on the wall.

Pyro grinned between them both, enjoying himself.

"I'm on it, let's rock!" Avalanche shouted, stepping forwards to scowl at the wrought iron gates. He clenched his fists at his sides and gritted his teeth. With a groan, his eyes rolled back into his head, the ground shuddering with the first of several rolling tremors.

Pietro latched onto his sister, his arm looping around her waist. "Wanda!" he cried, his voice strained, before lifting her bodily and zipping out of the way of the shuddering Institute gates.
She swatted him off, extracting herself from below her brother's concerned hands, and snatched at his chin. Pietro allowed his face to be wrenched towards Xavier's. "Look!" she directed.

Several more explosions boomed, infinitely larger as the charges detonated along each key weapons hold across the grounds.

Cheeks puckering, eyes scrunched to happy slits beneath the folds of his forehead, Fred's head turned to follow the arc taken by a large hunk of twisted metal that once resembled a stunner. It soared into the air, trailed by a flaming line of fire and smoke. Soon, the sky was filled with the bright blaze of burning machinery.

"That's pretty," Blob purred.

"Gambit's even took out the minor artillery!" Toad shouted, letting out a loud, "Oh, I want me a piece of this!" before springing off the wall and into the grass on the other side.

"Well?" Pyro called down to the Maximoffs, gesturing to Gambit’s handiwork, as if he’d expected nothing less from his old friend. "Isn't that bottling your blood's worth?" Pyro bellowed over the noise.

Wanda's lack of expression bordered for a moment on scarily sociopathic.

In front of Lance, the gates clanged to the ground. He grinned over his shoulder at the group. "Piece of cake."

He strode through the crumbled hole, a swagger to his step that made the lawns curl like undulating sod serpents.

"Shall we?" Pietro smirked, proffering his arm to his sister.

Wanda inspected the illuminated grounds, lifting her hand from her brother's face, finger by finger, and placed it lightly on his shoulder.

"Something isn’t right, Pietro," she murmured, her eyes narrowed in suspicion at the Australian. He continued beaming at them, audacious enough to bounce on the balls of his feet at each consecutive explosion, clapping his hands and tittering.

Quicksilver smirked. Leaning close to her ear, he murmured, "Just because it doesn't feel right doesn't mean it isn't. That's half the risk and half the fun, right sis?"

Wanda bit back a grimace, peering at him through her lashes.

"You're deranged," she said haughtily, though it didn't completely conceal her wry grin. "And you're trying to distract me."

"Catch me if you can," he whispered in a heated rush before disappearing in a blur of blue and silver and dust.

Wanda brushed her hair behind her ears, her lips curving into a small, vindictive smile, as she stepped lightly over the wreckage of the front gate.

"And you're suicidal," she called to Pyro, not looking back as she stalked away.

Pyro blinked once, twice, scrubbed at his visor with the heel of his hand, and shuddered a little, watching Wanda slinking onto the Institute grounds behind her brother. Pyro wobbled precariously a
moment, a little off-put by the siblings' exchange, and truthfully, a little disturbed.


A moment later, his attention turned back to the grounds, trying to savor the moment and failing as his eagerness won out.

So much flame, so little time to make use of it all.

With a cackle, Pyro’s little fire-duckie morphed into a very large, very ominous dragon.

—

An Hour Prior…

Remy leaned against the oak tree’s trunk, his arms folded across his chest, and waited beneath the splintered overhang of its broken branch.

The glow from inside the mansion was a welcome comfort. In truth, it reminded him a little of home: Not the sterile, metallic underground base Magneto had built for his Acolytes when he'd been a welcome member of that circle, but the soothing embrace of a warm flat on Rue Saint Anne. He longed for the uncertain flicker of gaslight and the sweet, sharp bite of real chicory coffee spiked with something stronger to soothe his nerves.

Soon, he conceded with a small smile. He'd be home soon.

Remy cracked his neck and pushed the thought out of his mind. He needed a clear head. The charges he'd set earlier that morning — working his way from the steps of the mansion all the way to the very foot of the paved drive — were rigged together at a connection point in the North forest.

Why exactly Charles Xavier permitted him to hang around wasn't beyond him. The telepath was well aware of his late-night haunts, had been for years, and yet he'd never bothered him about it. So long as he never broke the "look, but don't touch" rule — that unspoken agreement the pair of them shared without any verbal assent — he had clearance to skulk about beneath the cover of the trees. The Professor probably figured that this graciousness was invitation enough: Charles Xavier waited for him to finally join up with the X-Men, and Remy waited around for her.

Well, he mused, "waiting" wasn't exactly the word.

Remy LeBeau waited for no woman, and definitely no girl, but tonight, he'd make an exception. That he could break his own rules for kicks comforted him a little.

They had unfinished business, he reminded himself. He'd known Rogue’d be stubborn about it, and he knew at the same time, that somehow, he'd have to resort to this anyhow.

Still, you can't blame a man for trying.

"One of these days," he murmured to himself, squinting upwards into her darkened bedroom. "I'm gonna get a proper thank you."

Though it had been worth it to see her blush right to the tips of her ears that morning.
So what if it was a flush in anger? At least on Rogue, it was sort of endearing. She was too pale to begin with; not enough sun, probably. As it were, there weren't many people he knew of who were capable of coaxing out her natural color. It looked nice on her.

"C'mon chère," he hummed, making one final cautious check that the pack of cards he needed was still tucked into his pocket. "Lessee where y' been all afternoon."

As if answering his request, the light in the second room from the northernmost side of mansion flicked on. Remy smirked, slipping behind the tree and blending in easily with the shadows.

Familiar trails fell beneath his feet. No longer needing to focus on his footing, he cleared the side of the building in a matter of seconds. From beneath his trench coat, he extracted his compacted bo and added two grappling attachments, two switches, and secured them into place on either end of the condensed whole.

Remy flipped the staff over, pointing one end at the roof's eaves, and the other at the ground between his feet. One push later and the grappling attachments released with a muted, ping!

Peering upwards, he gave the makeshift rope a tug, already knowing it would hold his weight. It was fixed firmly into the mortar three stories overhead. He lifted himself by his arms, wrapping one leg around the metal stays of his staff, and grinning, he hit the second button. This part had always been too easy — too quick to really savor — but the short flight reminded him of days long past; of jumping rooftops in the Quarter; of the sudden rush that made it seem like a man could fly.

He shot upwards, enjoying the sensation of the wind slapping the coattails of his trench against his legs, and only slowed as he reached his destination: the third floor, second balcony from the right.

Swinging over the stone rail with ease, he dropped to a crouch and slid up against the wall.

Silence gathered around him like a mantle; thick as an impenetrable cloak.

Remy peered into the room beyond the French doors.

Empty.

He cocked an eyebrow, a slow grin spreading across his face as he took in the light seeping out from beneath the bathroom door.

"Y' make this too easy, ma belle."

With that, Remy stood, confident that unless someone was prowling the perimeter of the mansion, he wouldn't be seen. He placed a hand on the door handle and turned the delicate ironwork beneath his fingers without even needing to charge the lock.

He slipped inside, closing the door behind him quietly, and for a moment, he simply stood there.

Despite the number of times he'd stood on the outside, pressed up against the wall by an open window while Rogue slept, or studied, or sat on her bed just thinking with that sorry look on her face he'd come to know so well, he'd never been more grateful for his mercenary training than at that moment:

The shower was running.

Remy forced himself to bite back a grin.
She'd knock his block off after she discovered that he had been here, and one day, maybe, they'd both laugh about the entire fiasco heartily.

Providing she didn't kill him first.

The deck of cards was in his hand before his brain registered he'd even slipped the stack from its box. He cut the cards in half in one palm, relishing the feel of the coated paper against the pads of his fingers. Dropping the box in the wastebasket as he moved across the room, Gambit barely glanced at the blue packet marked Bicycle Playing Cards as he continued to shuffle through the deck. He drew the card, knowing instinctively which he had pulled before looking at it.

"Bonsoir, Roi Charles," he murmured, approaching the large chest of drawers and the mirror overhanging it. "Home at last."

The rest of the deck was gone in a snap of the wrist, tucked back into a holster on his belt and finally ready to be used in combat now that its two most irksome royalty were about to be reunited.

Flexing his fingers, he eased his grip delicately around the knobs of the top drawer.

Had he not seen Rogue's reaction early this morning when standing in this very spot, he'd have had to rifle around a little, wasting time and invading her personal space trying to find the good luck charm he'd given to her.

As it were, from his perch on the limb of the old oak and with the aid of a simple, yet effective set of high-powered binoculars, he'd caught every last ounce of trepidation plainly evident on her face when she'd stuck her hand in the drawer: From the dimpling on her cheeks, the frustrated downturn of her mouth, and the wary, shuttered appraisal her eyes conferred as she'd contemplated the contents.

He cocked his head to the side, listening as a frustrated groan echoed in the adjoining bathroom. The shower was still running, which meant he was still working on stolen time.

Fine by him.

Remy slid the drawer open, careful not to make a sound though wood ground against wood, threatening to squeak or shudder with the friction.

"Merde," he hissed, unable to stop himself from grinning at the delicates scattered pell mell before him. Carefully, with a pinkie finger, he lifted aside a pair of black, cotton panties.

No frills. No lace. No satin. Everything in the drawer was simple, plain, and utterly utilitarian as if no one other than Rogue would ever be granted audience to her clad simply in her...

Dieu. Remy's eyes widened at the revelation. He peeked over his shoulder at the bathroom door, letting out a quick breath. Still closed.

All this watching, waiting and now fiddling was making him skittish.

Rogue's mutation prevented her from that sort of intimacy; sure, he'd known that much without having to make any huge leaps between hypothesises. But just because she couldn't touch anyone directly, it didn't mean it was the end of all things pleasurable. There was an entire world of exploration the girl must have forgone in her teenage years; her choice of delicates made that fact plain. But could she really be that afraid of herself?

Remy swallowed, surprised at how quickly his mouth had gone dry.
If there was one thing he'd learned in his time, it was that you could learn a lot about a woman by her undergarments.

After a moment, her panties dangling daintily from the very tip of his finger, he returned to business. Determined not to let himself be deterred from the task at hand by the mental image of Rogue wearing little else than that shy smile she'd once favored him with and the very garment dangling off his finger, he dropped Rogue's panties and pulled the crumpled playing card from the bottom of the drawer.

"Seen plenty of them things before, LeBeau, get over yourself, y' damn domion," he muttered.

It didn't help matters that his thoughts quickly reverted to the fact that she was showering a just few feet away, and he was probably the only one to have ever seen her dainties up close and personal.

"Merde!" he mouthed, mentally slapping himself. Task at hand. Right. There would be plenty of time to contemplate the details later.

Quickly, he smoothed out the Queen of Hearts against the bureau. Remy plucked her from the desk and gave her one final, chaste kiss before extracting a roll of adhesive from a pocket. He fixed the newly rejoined pair to the mirror, the King overlapping the bottom corner of the Queen slightly.

Admiring his handiwork, Remy slid the drawer shut and stepped backwards to ensure that the two cards would be visible when Rogue stepped out from the shower.

They were. He nodded at his work. Better than any Cezanne, he decided.

With this job done, all he needed to do was pop back outside and send up the signal to the Brotherhood waiting just beyond the mansion's perimeter wall. They would take it from there, and Remy would be free to follow through with the rest of his plan.

Before he could move, before even considering bolting from the room; Rogue screamed shrilly, the sound muffled by the bathroom door.

Remy pivoted, acting on instinct. His bo opened to full length with a soft snap! He leapt across the room on light feet, using the foot of her bed as a spring, and stopped just short of the opposite wall. A card was between his fingers, aimed at the doorknob, ready to blast the lock, and then… Rogue giggled.

One part curious and two parts disappointed that he no longer had the excuse to justify a dramatic shower rescue, Remy pressed his ear to the door.

Rogue giggled again, breathless, followed by the sound of a heavy sigh.

A small smile crept across Remy's face as he stood there, realizing what had prompted the shriek only moments before. Cold water hitting a hot body did that to a person.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Remy took the liberty to just breathe a bit. It had been a long time since he'd been anywhere near the girl, and her presence, even though a wall separated them, was a welcome comfort he hadn't entirely expected. He flicked the card back up his sleeve, listening to the shower run for a moment longer.

He had meant it when he said he'd been looking out for her. Even when she'd left him at Blood Moon Bayou, even when she'd returned home, even when he'd been left to face Jean Luc, the Guilds, and every sordid bit of his past that he thought he'd left behind; he'd thought of her, on occasion.
He owed her for that time back in New Orleans. He hadn't forgotten, though there were certain things, he was sure, he'd remember if he could… and many more he'd forget.

Remy swiped at his chin, knowing that he was drawing his luck thin by lingering.

If all went well, maybe settling those old scores would make him feel a little less the villain. He resigned himself to that. He hoped for better.

With a glance at the cards pasted to the mirror and then back at the door handle to the bathroom, he weighed his options:

A peek wouldn't hurt; what was one stolen look, anyhow? He was a thief, albeit a semi-reformed one, but nonetheless… She'd never know the difference, and he would have something coveted, tucked away in the safest place a man could have: his memory.

With his free hand, Remy pinched the bridge of his nose.

Tempting.

His fingers lingered on the door handle to the bathroom, and after a moment, Remy drew back. He collapsed his bo with a decided snap.

That was not something he could take from her, no matter how much he was willing to risk by showing up on her turf. It had to be something she wanted to give him willingly. Resigned, he brooded on all the things he craved but couldn't have; a list he could count on one hand.

After a moment, he cast a sly glance at the cards stuck to the mirror.

With a smirk, Remy crossed the room, plucking a black marker from Rogue's desk, and scrawled a promise over the faces of the two cards that recalled her own vicious denouncement from that morning:

"I'd always bet on you."

If she didn't believe it now, there was plenty of time later to prove his sincerity.

Payback in full for what he owed, and then some.

In the bathroom, the pattering sounds of water ceased.

Remy grinned and bolted from the room. The doors to the balcony snapped shut behind him quietly, and with one soaring leap he was zipping back down to the ground. Unlatching his staff, he left the tension rope in place, and sprinted towards the forest, pulling two cards from his stack, an Ace and a Jack, and urging a charge into them.

One he flung at the carefully concealed cord dangling limply by the oak tree. The card caught, forcing the charge down the long line of explosives he'd set around the property; the other he held firm between his fingers.

Skidding into the nearest clearing, he had a split second to admire the stars peeking through the cover of leaves overhead. Then, he threw the Ace.

It exploded with a resounding boom overhead, bathing the treetops in rich scarlet and sending a scattered assortment of kinetic fireworks back towards the earth.

Remy swiveled, turning back to the mansion proper, and watched as each carefully placed weapon
flared to life — hissing and crackling as the charges caught.

Like a big brass band, he thought — hitting all the right notes. The mansion exploded into action.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Bonjour: Hello
Dieu: God
Domion: peeping tom
Ma belle: My dear/my pretty, a term of endearment
Merde: Shit
Roi: King (References the slang term for the King of Hearts Card — Charlemagne, or King Charles VII — for which this chapter is named.)
"Piotr!" Kitty's startled shout came a half-second too late.

The mansion rumbled, a tremor from outside creating ruptures over the once-smooth lawns, racketing through the sublevels and up the foundations. While the floorboards remained intact, the reverberations hammered the Institute from its core like an earthquake. Colossus teetered on the top stairs, his armor coating his skin to blunt the pain from the impending tumble. Kitty, running at full tilt, crashed into him. The pair phased through the staircase before they could fall over each other.

They emerged through the last few steps at a stagger, the Russian shoved forwards by a distraught Shadowcat.

"It's Lance," Kitty declared, stumbling through Colossus' chest and staring fixedly out the front doors. "Oh my god, what is that idiot doing?" she cried.

Piotr propped her upright, managing to restrain a grimace at the mention of Kitty's former beau, and not entirely contented that the petite teenager had phased straight through his midsection.

Kurt teleported in beside them, a rank cloud of sulfur trailing him in whorls of wispy grey. "It's the Brotherhood — they're attacking the Institute!"

"Team! Formation!" Cyclops bellowed, jogging out of the kitchen, already suited up. "Where is everyone?"

Jean soared from the west wing of the mansion, tailed by a panting Ray. "I'm not made for this sort of exertion!" Berserker gasped, following Jean at a dead run. As he leapt off the portico's stone banister, those left inside heard him let loose a loud cackle and a "Whoop!" that was almost wholly drowned out by Sam as he zoomed by a moment later.

"Let's go, everyone! Two groups! I want to see ground defense to match an aerial sweep. Let's flush them out!" Cyclops yelled. "Cannonball, follow Jean, but watch your aim! Nightcrawler, status report!"

Kurt ported out and then back in. "I don't get it! They've knocked down the gate and tripped the mansion's light security. But — they're not heading for the mansion. They're just tearing up the grounds. Everything's smoking!"

Grim resignation colored Colossus' assessment, the flicker of distant firelight dancing across his armor: "It is Pyro." He hunched his shoulders and banged his way out the front door, scowling. "This matter I vill settle vith him personally," he said.
It was this haphazard array of X-Men that Rogue tumbled upon a moment later, her uniform still sticking to her shower-damp limbs:

"Where's Logan?" she shouted from the top of the stairs, tugging on one of her boots as she hopped past the landing. Her wet hair slapped at her cheeks, leaving her skin clammy and uncomfortable. Already she was flushed and sweating into a clean change of uniform, and she was no more appreciative that her muscles were protesting the effort of trying to get out of the mansion as quickly as possible.

Scrunching into her gloved fist, acting as a catalyst for the surge of vitriol-fueled adrenaline flooding her system, were two playing cards that went utterly unnoticed by everyone else:

To Rogue, however, the King and Queen of Hearts were a solid, physical reminder that she would soon be tearing Gambit a new one for his efforts — providing that she beat Logan to him.

"Logan left this afternoon, Rogue. He has not returned as of yet," was the Professor's projected response. "I cannot gain a clear psychic reading from the Brotherhood. The full intentions of their engagement are unclear."

Rogue grimaced: It appeared that she was left with the honor of dealing with the Cajun personally. No one else set off charges like that — but the number of them… How the heck had he managed it? Sure, he was a good shot with the cards he always carried with him, but there had been too many explosions in too quick of a succession across too large an area for Gambit to set off all at once.

He'd planned this, Rogue decided; yanking hard on her laces and cramming the cards into her belt like they were evidence.

"Professor?" Cyclops asked aloud. "Is Magneto behind this?"

"Not at all, Scott. It is... difficult... to be certain, but I believe the reason for this attack is slightly more complicated than we can plainly assume. I caution you all to stay together. Your strength as a team is formidable, and this may very well prove to be a valuable learning exercise."

"If you say so," Nightcrawler muttered, clearly dubious.

"Let's go! Armatage formation!" Scott bellowed, scanning the crowd of younger mutants filtering through the doors. Magma passed him, tailed by Boom Boom, who ducked under his arm, sniggering.

"Where's Iceman?" Cyclops called after them.

Jubilee bounded past, pirouetting with a shrug. "Last time I saw him, he was trying to convince Roberto that he was better than the fridge's ice dispenser."

At the top of the stairs, Rogue swiveled, searching out the rest of the students, though most of them had made it outside before she'd even passed the girl's wing. If she could avoid the crowd, then maybe she'd have a clear shot at finding Gambit. If she had to scrap with him, she decided, it'd be on her terms. Not his.

Jamie tripped as he ran down the stairs, scattering himself into seven identical replicas. "What formation?" three of them asked simultaneously.

"Come on, Multiple!" Bobby cried, exasperated. A bridge of ice trailed him, dripping icicles. "The double cheeseburger one!" he explained, heaving the smaller boy up by the elbow as he passed. Several of his clones scrabbled to their feet.
"Oh!" Jamie grinned sheepishly, sliding back into himself. "The one where we do the double hamburger thing?"

"Fries on the side!" Iceman agreed.

Rogue shivered; Bobby left a chill in his wake that frosted the tips of her still-wet hair. The defensive tactics gave her an opening, at least. While the others winged the Brotherhood from opposite sides of the property, flushing them out through the front gates as the covered area narrowed, she could skirt the edges of the forest and keep a look out. An aerial sweep by Jean, Storm, and Cannonball would beat the Brotherhood back, giving her a clear path to search for the swamp snake.

"Iceman!" Cyclops directed. "Help Storm with the fires. Multiple, you're with me, South of the property. Rogue and Kitty, North side. Now! And you heard the Professor, stick together!"

Perfect, Rogue thought as she leapt onto the banister, skidding down its length and pelted at full tilt across the foyer, down the stone steps of the portico, and onto the front yard behind Kitty.

"Something's wrong," Kitty shouted, making a break for the forest. "There isn't anybody in the Brotherhood who can make explosions like that!"

"He's mine, Shadowcat!" Rogue snarled.

"What?" Kitty cried, her legs pumping hard to keep up. Jean and Storm were well overhead, taking the direct route towards the gates and Blob, who appeared to be tearing their topiaries to bits. "Who?"

"Gambit!" Rogue snapped, hurdling over a flaming pile of twisted metal that had once been a recessed laser. "Who else would —"

FOOM!

"Evening, shielas!" Pyro cackled. "Fine night wouldn't you say?" he roared, clapping his hands together over his head. The flames between his palms exploded outwards and shaped into a wavering, roaring fireball that spread its wings wide.

"Get down!" Rogue shouted, tackling Kitty around the midsection as an enormous jet of flame shot towards them.

"Dragon!" Kitty gasped, and Rogue rolled over onto her back. The wall of shimmering heat spun the stars into a wavering blanket, banked by the roaring, sucking creature of flame forming overhead.

"Darn thing even has fangs," Rogue gasped, watching the inferno lick upwards, illuminating the lawn in a blinding blaze of red and gold before it bore down on them. She could feel the impossible inferno sucking the humidity out of the air, making it difficult to breathe. In another moment, Pyro would sear the eyebrows off their faces, phased or not, if he kept it up.

"Guess we'll have to do milkshakes some other time, Kit," Rogue ground out.

Shadowcat managed a startled yelp of surprise in response. "That's all you can think of right now?"

All things considered, Rogue was contemplating the life sentence she'd be sure to spend in prison if the Cajun had actually had the audacity to show up in person.

"She's a beaut, isn't she?" Pyro yelled, laughing as he directed the monster towards them again. It swooped, stuttered, and vanished mid-air just as Kitty struck out for Rogue's hand to phase them
through the fire.

Rogue looked up in time to watch as Colossus hefted Pyro clean off his feet.

"I do not appreciate it when you attack my friends, tovarisch."

Pyro emitted a strangled sound, followed quickly by two distinctive pops and a low wheeze as the gas pipes were torn from the fuel tank on his back. They dropped to his sides impotently, filling the air with the acrid scent of butane that hissed from the chamber.

"Piotr!" he squeaked, scrabbling at the metal hand that fisted around the front of his uniform. "Long time no see. Yer looking in fine condition. Urk!"

"Colossus!" Kitty bellowed, getting to her feet. "Don't hurt him!"

Piotr paused mid-stride with Pyro flailing at arm's length. "I am merely taking out ze trash." He gave her a small smile and turned his back. By the looks of it, Colossus really was heading to the dumpsters on the outside of the property.

"Okay," Rogue huffed, pushing herself off the grass. "Ah don't see any point in letting them have all the fun."

"But Scott said —"

"Ah'm gonna find that Cajun an' Ah'm gonna leave him a vegetable for this!" she interrupted, her eyes narrowed as she scanned the estate for a telltale flare of offending pink.

"Rogue! Wait! How do you know that it was Gambit?" Kitty protested.

"He left his calling card!" she snapped, tearing the welted playing cards from her pocket and brandishing them before Kitty's face. She gave them a rough shake, as if the gesture would clear Kitty's dumbfounded expression:

Shadowcat took in the King and Queen of Hearts that Rogue had torn off her mirror in her haste to head off the attack. They were still taped together, stubbornly refusing to be pulled apart. While this seemed to infuriate Rogue even further, Kitty appeared only cautiously quizzical.

Squinting, she took a cautious step closer to read the message written across the faces. "Oh, no way!"

Beneath their feet, the earth rumbled again, and Rogue forcibly restrained herself from scowling.

"Way," she spat.

Kitty seemed to brighten. "He came back to see you! Wait, where did you find those?" she asked.

"In our bedroom," she groused. At Kitty's delighted expression, she attempted to clarify her horror and disbelief: "Kitty: Our bedroom. Gambit broke and entered. Our. BEDroom."

"And you're... you're mad?"

Mouth hanging open, Rogue decided to omit the fact that she'd been in the shower at the time of the burglary.

"There ain't time for this," she snapped over the shrill, creaking whine of the sprinklers being torn from the earth with the aftershocks.
"Take Lance out, Kit!" Rogue spun, bracing herself into a crouch, her fingers clawing the grass so that the rippling ground wouldn't knock her over. "Phase him through ta China if ya have ta. Ah ain't rebuilding the mansion one more time."

"But —" Kitty began in protest, only to be silenced by a wet, SPLAT! "Mmmph!"

"Girl talks too much," Toad called, clinging to the side of a tree nearby.

Kitty phased out through the lawn, struggling with the thick puce-colored mess coating her face. She was out of reach before Rogue could get to her.

"C'mon slimebag," Rogue goaded, turning to Toad and fisting her hands before her. The cards crunched, biting angles into her palm, but Rogue ignored the discomfort. Furious that she was still allowing herself to even touch them, she stuffed the pair into a pocket. "You can get down here, or Ah'll come up there myself."

"Heh," he chuckled, his uneven yellow teeth bared in something close to a grin. "Everyone wants a piece of the frog man!" He sprang off the side of the tree, twisting mid-air, with both arms and both legs reaching to tackle her.

Rogue didn't even flinch. Toad's momentum was lacking, and without the force to propel him, Rogue stepped out of the way easily as he hit the ground and tumbled.

"Ow!" he moaned, doubling over on himself.

"Some challenge you are," she muttered, striding over to where Toad had fallen. She peeled off her glove, locked a foot beneath him, and rolled him onto his back.

"I hate this part," he whimpered, wincing.

"Where is he?" she hissed, waggling her bare fingers over his face with menace, stopping just short of the point of contact. Usually, it was enough to scare anyone who knew what she was capable of into talking. "Ah know ya'll ain't behind this — you don’t rally like you used to."

When Toad tried to wriggle away, she planted her foot square on his chest. "Trust me, the last thing Ah want is ta have ya bouncing around in my head makin’ a mess of things. Talk."

"Yo, homegirl," he laughed nervously, "you got it all wrong, see —" He looked nervously to either side of him, searching for a way out, and stopped thrashing.

With an exultant grin, he cheered, "Babycakes!"

Rogue had barely turned before she was slapped sideways off her feet by a jet of blue light. It crackled, wrapping around her torso like a fist of sizzling, static current that shot her upwards fifty feet into the darkened night sky. It was a moment before Rogue even realized Wanda was stalking across the estate towards her.

She hovered a moment, straining against the pulsating bubble of energy that clapped her arms to her sides. Straining, Rogue clenched her fingers around her glove, pressing it into her thigh. Unwilling to let the damned thing go after the trouble leaving it behind had caused her the day before, the little bit of leather was now her official lifeline.

Once Wanda had decided that Rogue was sufficiently immobilized, the tension eased off just enough for her to squirm. Peering downwards, Rogue swallowed the rush of vertigo that came from dangling at a height high to kill if Wanda released her. It took another heartbeat to register the level of
A blue blur was knocking over her teammates at random. Large parts of the estate, the topiaries, and the gardens were aflame — though Iceman was making quick work of the larger blazes. Blob had successfully overturned the ornamental fountain, drenching the lawns nearest the street and turning the sod to a muddy mess, and with Nightcrawler porting in and out, visibility was steadily decreasing with the lingering clouds of smoke from his teleportation.

"Shit," she muttered. There was no sign of Gambit.

Rogue could just make out Cyclops' optic blasts through the haze. The X-Men were forcing the intruders towards the street, but progress was slow-going.

Below her, her captor waited. "How does it look from up there, princess?" she shouted.

"Looks like a party," Rogue yelled back, wincing as Wanda's hold on her tightened, drawing her back to the a height where conversation could be maintained without hollering. "Ah'm sorry Ah'm missin' it!"

"You're more anti-social than I am." Wanda laughed. "I don't believe for a second that you'd actually like to mingle with these plebes."

"Your boyfriend and Ah were just havin' a little heart ta heart, sugah," she shot back, straining. "We were about ta go and get us some punch."

"Spare me the feeble puns," Wanda waved at her airily with her free hand, her other fingers twisting in a way that made Rogue's bonds tighten uncomfortably. "We're not here to chat."

"Didn't think ya'll were much for social calls."

"The Brotherhood?" Wanda sniffed, drawing Rogue level with her. At her side, Toad grinned broadly, clearly proud of the woman who bluntly refused to return his affections. "No, I can't take these cretins anywhere."

Toad frowned.

"That mean we're still on for the Marilyn Manson show next month?" Rogue asked, mocking. Wanda seemed to consider this.

"For fifty bucks a ticket?" She smirked. "Standing room only? I'd pay that much just to see what you'd do in a mosh pit. How will you cope, Rogue?"

Rogue bristled. "Ya wanna tell me what's goin' on here, Wanda? Maintaining that tentative truce and all we had going —"

Wanda shrugged, peering at her, all sugar and spikes, while running her nails along the lapels of her trademark red coat. "I said I couldn't take these halfwits anywhere. You, on the other hand, have an old friend in town who's made us a very reasonable offer if we clear your schedule."

"What?" Rogue snapped. Wanda smiled her most beguiling smile.

"Bearing that in mind," she continued lightly, "I would apologize for the trouble, but really," she shrugged, "it hasn't put us out at all." She grinned, seeming to guess at what Rogue was thinking: Wanda was a deadwoman. "Be seeing you." She winked, the glint in her eye not totally obscured by her eyeliner.
"Wanda —"

With that, she flung Rogue across the lawn, releasing her hex and letting her drop. She hit the ground hard and rolled, coming to rest at the opposite end of the property, winded, bruised, and utterly livid.

Coughing as the air rushed back into her lungs, Rogue sat up, her chest heaving, and struggled to her knees. Her glove had landed a few feet away, and growling, she slammed a bare fist into soft earth in frustration.

Apart from a flattened semi-circle of grass and sore knuckles, punching sod not only proved an ineffective stress-relief, but it failed to produce the Cajun.

He was so dead.

Crawling forwards, all dignity shaken off in the fall, she angled for her glove.

"Pleasant evenin'."

She halted, arm reaching for the garment, only to find that in the gloom, the end of a staff pinned it to the ground.

"Although, I do say, I hadn't thought it fittin' for a lady to be crawlin' around without me asking real nice-like beforehand. In the very least, chère, I shoulda bought you a cocktail."

"Gambit," she seethed.

Materializing from the darkness, his boots, and then the hem of his trench coat emerged as Remy LeBeau eased into view. His low chuckle broke the relative silence of the North forest:

"But maybe Rogue ain't no lady?"

Rogue's fury was molten.

"Lose somethin'?" he asked, flicking her glove upwards and catching it in a snap. His shit-eating grin disappeared just as quickly, the darkness consuming him whole and silent.

"Gambit!" she bellowed, her voice returning to her from the impenetrable cloak of night beyond the trees. She stood, grateful that her legs supported her. She'd be a little bruised from the fall, but otherwise she was raring to go. Her palms itched. Cool air razed her knuckles. She flexed her fingers into a fist.

"No need t' yell. Though I must say, chère, hearing ya shout my name like that does somethin' wonderful for my ego," he murmured from her left, his breath against her neck coaxing out a searing blush from ear to collar.

Rogue pivoted, searching the thick veil of shadow before her, her heart rate climbing to the point where she could feel her pulse singing just below her skin. A flare of fuchsia blinded her momentarily from beneath the broken canopy of her oak tree, and with her temper singing, Rogue spun to face him down.

"Ah," Gambit grinned, eyes flashing mischievously, and doused the charged card. "There you are." He winked. "Bonsoir."

With the tip of an imaginary hat, he gave her a dutiful half-bow from the waist. Eyes not leaving hers as he stepped out from the gloom, he rubbed the mangled scrap of leather against his palm, single-
handed, working its softness with his thumb as if he were caressing her hand itself.

"Figured it was time we had that lil' chat y' promised me." Resting his quarterstaff against a shoulder, he rolled it lazily between gloved fingers.

Rogue fisted her hands at her sides. "Ah didn't promise you nothin'!" she spat, her sudden desire to smack the smirk off his face overriding the immediate concern of the battle. Her eyes, however, betrayed her:

Gambit saw the glance at her glove, saw her raw need for the tiny scrap of fabric.

"That may be true, but I'm not the sort t' take no for an answer." He raised his chin, letting his gaze slide over her, before returning to meet her hard stare. "It's a shame — y' didn't get the chance t' show me what you can do these days. Wanda, y' know, she's a little eager when it comes t' these rendezvous-type things. Woulda been a pleasure t' watch, I'm sure: you scrappin' with the Brotherhood."

"That's right," she returned snidely. "You're always watching and never doing," she snapped, holding her ground as Gambit spun the staff over his knuckles. The space between them sung with the sound of cold metal cutting through it with practiced ease.

"Is that an invitation?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"For what exactly? You askin' ta get dropped like your buddies over there?" she lied, baiting him.

He chuckled, taking the long way around her; his easy stroll a slow waltz; Gambit's dance of the dead. Rogue tracked him, matching his steps, her muscles tensing with each soft pad of their footfalls. "Y' mean you were saving yourself for me?" he leered. "You didn't touch any of 'em, Rogue."

"All Ah need is one finger ta take ya out. One touch, Gambit," she said bracingly, though she was none too thrilled at the prospect. "And you're still holdin' on to your own lifeline." She jutted her chin at her glove.

He shrugged. It didn't appear as if he was at all concerned by the threat, and given the circumstances of Rogue's recent display in the Danger Room, there was probably a damned good reason if the idiot was still coherent.

"Prefer a kiss, myself," he replied in that same, languid cadence that he'd always used when trying to soften her up. Deftly, he flipped the staff over his shoulder and let it rest against the back of the opposite leg. "Considerin' I don't remember the last one you gave me, figure a fella could use a reminder..."

"What are ya talkin' about? Ah never —" she began.

He raised an eyebrow. "Certainement, you did. Had t' watch the security tape t' be sure, but you did." He smirked. "Guess Mesmero wiped that from y' mind, too."

Cold, hard history never stung quite as badly as that:

It always seemed to come back to Apocalypse.

"You're lying," she argued.

The look Gambit wore was far too smug.
"I think y' know better. Way down deep, girl; some things - we are hard pressed to deny, after a time; after a fashion."

There was a security tape? The Professor hadn't told her that. Rogue had known she'd taken out the Brotherhood, the Acolytes too - but the details; she hadn't even thought...

"Or maybe it just wasn't worth keepin' that memory tucked away in my head," she spat, dodging numerous possibilities that she hadn't even considered before.

Oh, damn. She swallowed. She'd kissed him?

It was a lie, she decided. When she'd been under the control of Mesmero, she'd done a lot of things she regretted even though memories were no longer there. Used like a puppet for two days, only to become Apocalypse's vessel of deliverance, there were a handful of things from that time in Rogue's life she was glad to have forgotten.

Leave it to Gambit to bring that up now.

"Y' wound me, chérie." He pouted, thrusting out his lower lip. His eyes betrayed the expression; they glittered in the darkness like beacons.

He was deliberately trying to unsettle her, throw her off guard; just like he'd done that morning. It steeled Rogue's resolve.

"Ah'll do more than just wound ya, you filthy, manipulative —"

"Now, now, p'tit, it's not polite for a precocious young thing such as yourself to run off at the mouth like that."

Of all the condescending, self-important, arrogant... Rogue mentally marked an "x" on his chin where she planned on socking him.

"What did ya do ta me this morning, Cajun?" she forced out, amazed by her self-restraint. "Ah'll give ya one chance ta explain yourself, and then Ah'm takin' ya out just like Colossus did back there to your buddy, Pyro."

"Quoi? No time t' get reacquainted?" He chuckled, low in the back of his throat. "That's a sorry situation indeed, chère. Back home, we take things a little slower, show some hospitality t' old acquaintances —"

"Enemies, Cajun," she shot back. "Adversaries! You're about as welcome as a skunk at a lawn party."

"Details," he purred. "S' not the past that matters, Roguey; that sort of backwards-facin' perspective only gets you so far. The present time and company, however, now that there's somethin' to be considered..."

She snorted, clenching her fists tighter. "Coming from someone who lives by the seat of his pants, Ah'm not surprised that ya say that."

"Comin' from someone who knows that y' haven't absorbed no one since last year because you're too afraid of repeating history, I do," he quipped. An all-knowing glance at her glove served to fortify his point. It was almost as if Gambit knew how badly she needed it back. Was he waiting for her to beg, or what?
"Y' ain't been using your powers, chérie; but your secret's safe w' me."

Rogue froze, the skin on the back of her neck prickling in a way that was far too familiar for comfort. It was a sensation she hadn't experienced in a long time, and now she knew why. It was the sort of second sense that made a person look over their shoulder when walking down a dark alley; the sort of uncomfortable frisson that indicated the weight of someone else's gaze.

He'd watched her; made her his mark on more than one occasion. He knew the truth of his assertion.

...But was he aware of their absent history? Did he know just how very much things had changed since Blood Moon Bayou?

His conspiratorial wink said otherwise.

"Most of the time," Rogue said in low tones, "Ah'd let bygones by bygones —"

As Gambit considered her, that familiar self-satisfied, smug grin drawing his mouth up at the corner, a cold fury settled into Rogue's limbs.

"This time, Ah'll make an exception," she hissed.

Rogue sprang at him, throwing the first punch. Gambit dipped out of the way, her fist whipping past his ear where his head had been only a moment before. He stepped around her nimbly, tapping the back of her thighs with his staff, and turned to face her again with a grin, and a glove dangled between them.

"Could learn a thing or two, chérie. I've got plenty t' teach a willing student," he said. Somehow, he managed to make it sound perfectly dirty.

She pivoted, her leg whipping out to catch his side with her heel. Gambit blocked her, grabbing her leg.

"What were ya thinkin'? Dance lessons?" she snapped, her fists raised before her, ready to crack him in the jaw. While Rogue tried to yank her foot back from his grasp, Gambit merely chuckled. He tugged on her ankle lightly, bemused by their stalemate.

Rogue forced herself to ignore the warm press of his fingers through her boots.

"Not a bad idea," he conceded. "That mean we get t' do this more often?"

Thrusting her leg out so that Rogue spun blindly, her balance offset by the force of the throw, Gambit's arm slipped around her waist and dipped her, her back arching against his knee. With one arm around her shoulders, one hand against her hip, and his bo cast to the ground, Gambit's gaze trailed from her eyes to her mouth, seeming to draw her to him instinctively.

Beneath her hand, the coil of his taut bicep wrapped in leather proved unyielding. She let her fingers drop away before she could linger on the sensation.

"I think I could get used to this," he hummed, his eyes half-lidded.

"Could ya?" she asked, breathing hard. Defiantly, she ignored the rich, rained-out scent of his trenchcoat and lifted herself onto her toes. "Ah think Ah might not ever be able ta stomach the stench."

She kicked upwards hard, catching the back of his head with her shin. Rogue tumbled over, using
his knee against her back for leverage before he could drop her, and landed on all fours a few feet away, her fingers sinking into the soft, cold grass.

Tossing her hair out of her face, she bared her teeth at him.

"Dieu," he grimaced, scrubbing at the back of his head. "Y' kick like a mule."

"And ya smell like one." She added, "You backwater bumpkin."

He was already laughing.

"Thought I was your 'swamp rat'," he grinned. "Wouldn't let anybody else call me that after you."

"Why?" she asked, sneering. "Fond memories?"

Her muscles tensed as she stood to full height. In the distance, near the road, someone yelled: Whether it was a shout of pain or victory, Rogue couldn't discern.

"It's got a special ring to it," he smirked, peering at her from beneath the shag of hair that fell into his eyes. It had grown out some, she thought — and vehemently, she concluded her appraisals with an audible huff. "And it makes y' stop scowling long enough for me t' appreciate you properly,\" Gambit added.

Rogue grimaced. Unbelievable: even in the midst of a spat, he was still trying to flirt with her.

"What do you want, Remy? Ya came here to fight, so let's get on with it," she said, unable to reign in the spike of irritation that turned her tone venomous. "Right?"

Gambit toed his staff and kicked it into the air. He caught it easily and compacted it, slipping it beneath his trench coat with one fluid snap of the wrist. Her absent glove had vanished again; another one of Gambit's parlor tricks, no doubt.

"Say that again," he said, challenging her.

In the darkness, backlit by the backup security lights that were now flicking on around the property, the shine of his eyes glimmered, intensifying steadily. Struck with a sudden sense of deja-vu, Rogue recalled the first time they'd faced off. The sounds of the battle around them dulled, becoming the background soundtrack to the hush of their conversation. For a moment, the world around her dissolved and all she could see were Remy's eyes. The colour shifted from carmine to the smoldering red of glowing embers.

She snarled, "Say what? 'Ya came here ta fight so quit stallin'. Get on with it, Ah'm getting bored, already."

"Non. Y' know what: the other thing."

He took a step forwards and stopped, waiting to see if she'd comply.

Rogue tensed, realizing her slip of the tongue: she'd called him by his first name.

When it failed to fall from her mouth again, he shook the hair out of his vision, breaking eye contact. Rogue blinked away her surprise, but the discomfort lingered.

"I'm not here t' fight you. I told you already," he insisted.

He opened his arms, displaying his hands palms up, in a gesture of plaintive surrender.
Somehow, that rattled her more than his presence in Bayville. She’d thought she’d understood him: she’d left, he’d stayed, he gave her a parting gift. It meant nothing. Time had passed. It was supposed to mean less. It wasn’t supposed to make her chest feel tight. Seeing him like this without answers or solutions wasn’t supposed to make it feel like her throat was closing off. It wasn’t supposed to make her eyes burn.

"Then give me back my glove," she managed.

For a moment, Rogue thought he hadn’t heard her. Gambit, rooted, merely stared.

Across the gardens, a loud KRAKOOOM! echoed. She flinched, turning her head just in time to witness a large part of the forest bathed in growing firelight. Reality rushed back with the reliable slap of their partly-demolished surroundings. It rolled across them both with the gust of a strong wind, the acrid taint of smoke on the air that seared the sinuses, and the pungent tang of water-drenched, peeled-back lawns. In the distance, the cracked fountain belched a half-hearted jet of water.

Gambit’s mouthed curved into a small frown, and he rubbed at the stubble on his chin.

"You can't blame me f' that," he said, changing the subject. "They be a bit boisterous, The Brotherhood; being cooped up so long."

Rogue hunched her shoulders, balling her fists at her sides as she strode forward.

"You set this up, didn't ya?" she snarled, shoving Gambit in the chest. "You came here, planting your stupid cards to explode everywhere ta draw everyone outta the mansion, luring them straight into a distraction so you could get ta me. So what — Shove. "Is." Shove. "So." Shove. "Important."

"My, aren't we feelin' a little full of ourselves?" he jeered.

"You just couldn't leave well enough alone!" she shouted, pushing him again. Gambit walked backwards, matching her pace, and keeping his hands at his sides. "As if this morning wasn't enough!"

"Y' didn't want t' listen to begin with," Gambit explained. "You left me no other choice," he countered. "An' what's the best way to get a fille's attention, I asked myself?"

"Recruit the Brotherhood?" she snapped. "Are you insane or just stupid? We were under a mutual truce!"

"Pyro did mention that, yeah," he conceded. "I thought he might've been suffering brain damage from all th' smoke he usually breathes in. Oxygen deprivation, y' know?" He tapped his temple for emphasis. "Mostly, I think they've just been bored, them... because of this 'mutual truce'."

"So what? This is somehow our fault that the Brotherhood got bored?"

"Non, a gentleman would never point out the faults of his gentler companions."

She wanted to throttle him. 'Gentle' her derriere! She’d 'gentle' him right into next week and then kick his ass on Tuesday!

"They're my family, Gambit," she pointed roughly at the scattered X-Men. "And when ya mess with my family, ya mess with me!"

"I'm not messin' with y' family," he said, stopping dead so that she walked straight into his chest.
Swearing, Rogue shoved at him again, though he proved immovable. "That's not somethin' I take lightly, chère. One thing I know is loyalty t' your kin... Although, by rights, I should say that I'm more likely to suffer someone else's hard feelings for havin' dragged you out like this, n'est ce pas?"

He wrapped his hands around her upper arms and dipped his head so he could meet her furious gaze.

"I'm not messin' with you either," he clarified, his voice lowered to an undertone. His face seemed to swell before her, taking up the entirety of her attention; as if nothing and no one else was around them. The red irises seemed to glow a brighter shade of crimson.

"Ah don't give that much credit," she growled. She wrestled against him. "You're a liar and a thief, LeBeau."

"Reformed thief," he corrected with a wry grin, his fingers loose but unrelenting.

From one of his many pockets, her glove appeared with a flourish. Rogue was not so far gone that she didn't sense the weight of his gaze; not once did he look at it as he offered it to her: Remy's attention was all for her.

"But still a liar," she said, unyielding. "Ah absorbed ya this morning, Cajun — Ah don't know how you're still standing, but Ah blew the absolute shit outta the Danger Room before Ah realized what Ah'd done —"

"Y' did?" he interrupted.

When Rogue persisted in fuming at him, he relented, cocking his head to the side and pursing his lips. "So you did," he acknowledged with a low whistle. "Impressive."

Rogue scoffed and settled in for a stare down. The glove hung limpid between them, like some sacrificial offering that carried a weightier meaning:

If she took it, he won this round. Damn him.

"What's that supposed to mean? Did you know that would happen?"

With a surprised noise, he responded: "Non."

Something about the unblinking, unflinching, un-fidgety, and utterly convincing manner in which he delivered the negation left her thinking he wasn't actually full of crap.

"So what are ya doing here, then? Ya just popped back into Bayville ta shoot the shit and catch up?" she pressed. "Yeah, right. You're not that selfless — that much Ah remember from the last time Ah absorbed you."

Seeming to shrug, Gambit cocked his head to cast her beneath his leisurely appraisal: head to toe, as slow as warm honey.

"Why don't y' touch me, then?" he offered. "See f' yourself if you don't believe that my intentions are utterly —" He paused for emphasis, "And unequivocally above reproach."

It figured that he'd goad her with the one thing she did not want to do.

Letting go of her arms, Gambit stood back, presenting her with his hand. The other, ironically, still offered her the only means of protection she was entitled to.

Rogue pushed aside the thought that he'd gotten bolder over the last year, rubbing at her arms with
consternation; he'd managed to hold on long enough to distract her into comfort, without getting
smacked once.

What in hell could have happened to him in New Orleans to prompt him into getting so nonchalant
about the things that could possibly kill him?

Glowering at his hands, she noted absently that he'd changed his gloves. The last time she'd seen
him, Gambit had worn scrubby-looking things with the fingers cut off, frayed down to nothing over
his knuckles. These were a new acquisition: thin black fabric covered his palms and thumbs, his
middle and ring fingers, but the other digits were exposed.

It was still too much skin, she thought, collecting herself enough to smile at him with derision.

"Like Ah want you runnin' around inside my head," she bit out, turning away.

He laughed outright, the sound reverberating pleasantly in her chest. Rogue set off at a purposeful
march.

"How's that any different from now?" he called after her.

Bristling, wanting nothing more than to turn around and belt him, she set her shoulders. The flames
were a dull flicker in the distance, but she set her course in their general direction; all too aware that
Gambit was probably tailing her.

He still had her glove.

"Pompous, self-assured, conniving…" she recited below her breath.

"How bad is it, Rogue?" he called, his tone edged with a grim sort of conceit.

"Ah don't know what you're talking about!" she barked, quickening her pace. There wasn't enough
distance between them yet; a mile would be too little.

"How much does it take for you t' hold back like that? You still can't control it, can you?" he
shouted. "That's why you didn't absorb Toady back there. You're afraid of what might happen if y'
do, that someone else like Apocalypse might come along and try t' take advantage of what you got
again — but lord knows, it's in your nature, chère. It's what you are, and someday, you're gonna get
tired of always runnin' from it!"

She froze.

Over the perimeter wall, she could make out the floating form of Blob, levitated at least fifty feet of
the ground by Jean's telepathy. The X-Men needed her; her conscience reminded her sternly. This
joker just wanted to waste her time.

"Ah get by," she said. The effort to squash the rising swell of humiliation that his words triggered
choked her confidence off at the neck, crushing the words to a whisper.

He knew she hadn't absorbed anyone; Gambit hadn't been back in Bayville more than a few hours,
and already he understood more about the past year of her life than the people she lived with.

Gritting her teeth, Rogue tried to shake it off. The momentary hesitation gave Gambit the opportunity
to close the gap between them.

"Nobody can live life like that, f' long. You keep runnin' but y' never get nowhere."
His voice was softer, nearer. She heard the whisper of his boots through the manicured grass; smelled that familiar rich, earthen scent that clung to his clothes as he moved to stand behind her.

"...And the legs get tired after a while," he breathed, trying to take the edge off with blunted humor. "Trust me, you run around in my mind enough for me t' know it."

She could feel him smirking, and it stung.

"You were gone and you stayed gone," she returned, accusing. Unable to walk away without having the last word, she added with barely concealed bitterness, "How's that for running away?"

He searched her expression, and not for the first time, Rogue was struck by how well she knew his face: each angle and shadow, memorized. But now that he was standing in front of her — it betrayed his memory. This was too real.

This could not be happening.

"We're all runnin' from something," Remy replied, his tone subdued. "Sometimes, it ain't th' best idea t' face it down alone neither, but eventually, it'll find you, and y' find that you've run out of options."

Something in his expression shifted, and for a moment, it seemed as if Gambit was having difficulty metering it all out. There was some truth to what he was saying, Rogue decided; that much she understood in the way his eyes clouded.

"One time," he said slowly. "I told you that there was always gonna be someone watchin' over you." The words hung there, buoyed by the sudden hush that surrounded them. "If it couldn't be me, I knew it'd be them."

Gambit surveyed the scene across the property, watching the waning battle. Rogue had to drag her gaze away from the cut lines of his face; the curious dips and ruts that made Remy seem older, somehow; more worn. She fixed her attention on a spot just beyond his shoulder so she wouldn't dwell on the disconcerting hollow where he let the words fall. Silence was filling in the gaps for him; the memories swelling somewhere beyond a place where she could reach.

They were subtle changes; longer hair, the rugged stubble that peppered his cheeks, and a hardness to his eyes that she might've noticed once, a long time ago, and forgotten. Or maybe it was the look of someone who'd seen and done things she herself could understand from having been to those darker places. They threatened to lure her in with the promise that something surely dwelled inside, laying in wait:

That was Gambit, just a snake in the grass ready to lead her by the wrist to the nearest apple tree.

The flames over the forest had been staunched, and it appeared that the few remaining members of the Brotherhood were just about ready to stagger home, the poor fools.

"Besides," he said after a moment of scrutinizing her expression. She hadn't realized his focus had shifted, and it left her flushed under his stare. Gambit cracked a small, but triumphant smile. "If y' want t' get technical about it, you left me, as I recall."

Rogue opened her mouth to snarl something objectionable, but Remy had pressed two covered fingers against her lips in a gesture that should have been romantic.

Instead of swooning, Rogue flinched, wanting to wrench herself backwards, but finding herself incapable. His hand had snuck around her waist.

"I'm not done," he said. "Y' had the choice, and you chose them."
She slapped his hand away, spun out of his grasp, and spat, "It doesn't matter. You've done the wrong things for so long now that Ah can't even begin to figure out which way your head's screwed on!"

He grinned knowingly, trying to school his expression.

"What?" Rogue cried, hating the way her voice cracked. Her hip seared from the heat of his touch.

"I suppose th' cards I left on your mirror were one of them wrong things, ein?"

Rogue froze. Remy stepped back, his expression veiled, and slipped his hands into his trench coat, hooking his thumbs into his belt. In the same motion, Rogue touched her fingers to the seam of her pockets, pressing down gingerly and feeling nothing but her own leg through the fabric. With a sinking feeling in her gut, she knew that the cards were no longer where she'd put them.

She'd lost the King and Queen of Hearts in the scuffle.

"Wouldn't you like that?" he mused aloud. "Didn't know y' were so sentimental, Rogue, wanting t' keep a piece of ol' Remy all to yourself," he continued, enjoying her shaken expression as he began a slow circle around her at a stroll. "Y' kept the Queen."

“So what.”

He chuckled. “Queen deserves her King, no? They belong together, I think.”

“She was doing fahne on her own.”

He paused, raising an eyebrow. “We talking about the card, Rogue, or you?”

She didn’t have an answer to that. Not one that she wanted to admit to yet. Rogue sucked in a breath, but held her tongue.

"I’m offerin' something a lil' different, that's all,” he said.

"Like what?" She narrowed her eyes. "Ah don't cut deals with the Devil, Gambit."

Pausing, Remy considered her words; he appeared to take pride that she remembered that his moniker was well-earned.

"Some company when y' decide t' make a break for it again?" he offered lightly, favoring her with a small, half-smile. "A chance, if you're willing t' take a risk?" He winked. "You just gotta know how much it's worth t' you before y' put your chips on the table."

He dangled her glove. "I believe, ma'am, that this is yours... But do you really want it back so bad?"

Reluctantly, and though she didn't want to admit it, it felt good to have her fingers bare. It had felt good that morning, although it had set her on edge to be so exposed.

"Wouldn't it be nice t' dispense with 'em altogether?" he mused.

Quickly, she crushed the thought. It was useless to even think about it.

"Yeah.” Rogue blew her hair out of her eyes. "Well, people in Hell want ice water too."

Gambit pursed his lips, giving her a sidelong look. Carefully, he slipped the glove into her palm — a tender, silent offering for her to do as she pleased with it. She clutched the leather in her fist, but
didn't put it on. His outstretched fingers still waited, inviting.

"You want t' know, Rogue. There's a part of you that will always want t' find an answer; t' listen t' that part of you inside that demands a solution to the problem — no matter how much it hurts, no matter how much it'll cost you in the end. That's why you came out here to face me down. That's why it'll drive you mad if y' walk away from this." He took a step closer. "Th' only thing I can offer is that y' see for yourself, and decide if the price t' pay is t' get in at this table is worth it."

Fingers bare and warm in the fire-glow; welcome with promise, knit together with pretty dreams and even prettier words, Gambit didn't falter.

She clenched her fists, and bit out, "Ah can't."

Patiently, he remained standing as he was; too confident, too sure of himself — what was worse was that she'd given him what he needed to know to make the offer a weighty one:

She'd all but spelled out for him what had happened that morning: He'd touched her skin, and for whatever reason, he was perfectly fine for it. She hadn't even noticed she'd absorbed him until she'd gotten into the Danger Room and blown up half of Scott's carefully constructed simulation.

So, sure. Fine. There was something to his mutations, if she gave Gambit his due credit. Something was different about him that wasn't merely a surface consideration, but was it really worth the risk of finding out firsthand?

It might have been a fluke that morning, for all she knew, Rogue rationalized. He might have been laid-out, toes pointing heavenward just as soon as she'd bolted for the bus.

Damn fool Cajun.

He still hadn't retracted his hand.

"Ah don't wanna hurt ya, Remy. Ah don't wanna hurt anyone," she insisted, relying on her old protests.

The gravely undertone to her voice was a secondary consideration to her renewed shame. That was the sum of it: putting your boots in the oven didn't make 'em biscuits.

Turning her gaze back to his, for a moment, Rogue found she couldn't look away. She meant to impress upon him how dangerous she was, but instead, Remy's eyes were doing that curious pulsing thing again, filling her vision and dampening all sense of everything around her.

"I can take the pain." He stepped towards her, smiling gently, his hand between them. "Y' might even like it." He winked, the usual arrogant smirk an afterthought.

Rogue swallowed, and focused instead on his fingers. There was nothing strange about them. Nothing unusual, she concluded — a hint of hysteria bubbling upwards when she realized she was actually considering absorbing him to find out what had happened to Remy in New Orleans in the year that he'd been gone, and that he'd returned, able to withstand her touch?

Lordy, did she need to know that bad?

"Trust me, Ah wouldn't take any pleasure in it," she scoffed. "Heaven knows where ya been prowlin'," she muttered, attempting to brush off her unease with sarcasm. "Ah'd be scrubbin' out the filth in my head for weeks."
How could he control it, she wondered? The thought was a sharp spike in the onset of panic.

He grinned. "That's right, you've got your own way of keepin' me around. Looked like that Queen of Hearts card got enough of your special sort of care."

Though she was ready to snap at him, Gambit stopped her, fingers paused mid-air as if wanting to tilt her chin up before making contact. It brought her attention back to his face.

"All I'm asking is that y' give what I got t' say a chance." He shrugged, confidence making the motion negligent. "Think it'll be any different than this morning?" he goaded. "Like you said, I'm still standing."

"Why can't ya just tell me? Ya been so intent on talking that ya set all this up!" She waved at her friends, straggling back to the Institute proper.

"It's not that easy. You won't want t' give me your trust even if I could put it into words." He frowned. "Come t' think of it, I wouldn't either, if I was you."

Rogue scoffed.

"It's better like this," he assured her. "You'll know f' sure."

"Can't lie in a memory."

He shook his head, smiling with a twist of bitterness.

"Can't say that's possible," he agreed.

Strange, she thought after a moment, her vision taking on a hazy, detached quality. Remy really did have the nicest eyes — oddly colored, certainly, but no one else that she knew had eyes that glowed in the same manner. It was as if a dying ember was set into the black surround of ash. They warmed her, and looking at him — truly looking at him for the first time in a year — Rogue felt the hint of a dewy smile curving her mouth.

"I feel — strange," she whispered.

Rogue glanced at his hand again, and tried to shake of the cottony sensation that suggested he was doing something to her head.

Absently, she wondered if it really mattered. Her care for the battle evaporated like the final wisps of Pyro's smoke, pushed away with Storm's handiwork. The thought became distant, little more than specter of true worry. It felt nice.

"Th' heart don't lie," he said calmly, offering a small smile — a genuine one, the shine to his eyes more intense than ever.

It felt good, she concluded: like the last two years had never happened and they were back at the docks on the first day they met; Gambit was pulling her towards him with his stare, pressing a King into her outstretched fingers…

Rogue hesitated, trying to recall why exactly she had put up such a fuss to begin with, and failed. Her fingers reached slowly of their own accord and then drew back. The pads of his fingers looked rough, calloused from wielding his staff for so many years, but that wasn't what deterred her… Slowly, she returned to herself, shaking her head a little as if to clear it.
What was she doing?

"It's okay, chérie," he reassured her, and with her peripheral vision softening once again, Rogue nodded.

Everything was going to be okay. Remy said so.

"Don't blame me if ya spend the rest of the month in the med bay," she said vaguely, the sound of her voice trailing as the glove slipped from her hand and dropped to the grass beside her boot.

Everything was fine. She was floating. Remy was home. Everything was fine. Rogue hummed. Her head swam. Remy's eyes shone. Everything was fine. They were such a pretty shade of red…

Like she was breathing easily for the first time in what felt like forever, Rogue exhaled, brushing her fingers against Remy's. It was a ghosting of flesh, silken and barely there — and Rogue's awareness returned to her with a crushing force:

Oh no, was her only thought. Oh no, oh man, oh no, she recited to herself.

She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the onrush of his memories — that bright sizzle of his mutation flowing into her… What the heck had she been thinking?

"Hmm," he hummed.

Rogue peeked open an eye, her mouth forming a small, "Oh!" of surprise as she realized there was nothing in her head but the pounding of her own heart. Remy's fingers were beneath hers, curling her hand around his gently. "You - what in hell did you just do to me?" she spat, accusing.

"Chérie?" Remy drew her attention to himself by squeezing her fingers. Her bare fingers. In his hand.

Oh gawd.

"What?" she gasped, staring, not wanting to believe, but seeing it first hand nonetheless — their touching fingers — skin to skin, rough and soft, tanned and pallid pressed together so easily. So normally. "How?"

"Y' ready, girl?" he asked, still wearing that insufferable smirk. There was challenge in his eyes — a concentrated, brilliant triumph that lit his entire face.

He was fine. Good lord. Rogue couldn't get her head around it.

Nonetheless, he was grinning — a proud, lopsided smile that made Rogue's breath catch. His eyes were brighter than she'd ever seen, but this time as she looked at him, she felt nothing but an acute distress that his skin was unimaginably warm against hers, and the brutal awareness that he wasn't dead yet from the contact... It made her light-headed.

She nodded mutely, her heart lodged firmly in her throat, and utterly dumbfounded that he was touching her, actually touching her.

She blinked. "Ready for what?"

He laughed and bent forwards, his mouth hovering over her hand.

"If that ain't th' question of the night," he said, placing a lingering kiss on her bare knuckles.
The moment slivered, split in half out of wonder that his touch could be so gentle, and then it shattered completely.

It came at her in a rush: a barrage of sounds and sights and smells that flooded over her as she staggered backwards. She let out a small groan, snatching her hand back and clutching at her head as the memories — his memories — began to form clear pictures.

Before her, Remy dropped to his knees, breathing hard, but still grinning: victorious.

Rogue didn’t even notice as he strained to catch her before she swayed and fell to the ground next to him.

—

She’d kissed him.

But for the life of him, Remy couldn’t remember the feel of her lips; whether her skin was warm or cool to the touch, or what she tasted like.

He sat in front of the recording system in Magneto’s stronghold, his trench slung over the back of his seat, and hit the rewind button for the twenty-third time that hour. The large screen before him paused on a frame, then rapidly, the figures began moving backwards. Scattered bits of dialogue crackled through the speakers in a higher pitch than normal.

"Awe, yeh not still at it, mate?" Pyro wheedled, banging the door shut behind him.

Remy didn’t turn around, and he didn’t deign to respond.

"Magneto says we're leaving in an hour, and I'd like," Pyro paused, dropping into a chair on the far side of the room and wheeling over with a spin and a flourish, "some bloody entertainment me'self."

Gambit caught his wrist before Pyro could hit the play button.

"Later, mon ami," he said evenly, his gaze fixed on the shivering video before him.

"Ow! Gambit! Leggo!"

Remy held firm to Pyro's wrist.

"Y' gonna let me have m' five minutes peace, John?"

"Ugh! If ya let me have my wrist back before ya break it, you great stinking pillock!" Pyro struggled to get free, and Gambit looked at him out of the corner of his eye, his lips drawn into a thin line.

"Ha! Alright, alright!" Pyro laughed nervously. "Ya can bugger yesself all you like to that tape. Go ahead and see if I care." He grimaced. "So much for share and share alike," he added in an undertone.

Remy gripped his wrist a little harder, and Pyro's sleeve hummed to life as the molecules of his uniform began to vibrate rapidly, taking on a bright fuchsia glow.

"Ack!" Pyro screeched, struggling to break free of Gambit's hold. "Fine! Yeh not a perve! I take it
back!"

Gambit raised an eyebrow.

"I take it back!" Pyro screeched.

"S' better," he murmured, diffusing the charge and releasing him with little ceremony.

Pyro snorted. "If the Sheila's worth blowin' up your buddies, mate, I'd say you've gone soft on us."

Pyro pushed back in the chair, hard, so that he rolled well out of reach. "Bloody tosser."

Gambit smirked over his shoulder.

"Take a squizz at this, Gambit: once Mags is finished with her, there won't be much left to have a naughty with anyway. Best hold onto that tape; it's all you've got."

Pyro ducked out of the room a second too soon. Remy looked at the crackling card between his fingers, produced with little more than the flick of his wrist, and frowned. He chucked it into the hallway anyway.

Turning back to the screen as the card exploded behind him, he hit the play button one more time, just as the door to Magneto's surveillance room slid shut.

"Bravo, chérie." His own voice returned to him from the speakers, in the eerie, surreal quality that comes from listening to one's own self. No matter how many times he replayed it, it always served to unsettle him.

Onscreen, the security camera looked down on two figures from overhead, tracking their motions across the base's storage facility with the aid of automated motion detectors:

He was clapping.

"Looks t' me like Rogue is up t' no good."

He lifted his staff, poking her in the shoulder. The glint off her armor was disconcerting, and for a moment, she merely stood there before returning to her normal shape, devoid of Colossus' stolen powers.

"But hey," his recording continued. "I like that in a girl."

She knocked his staff out of the way; batting it like a cat would a piece of string.

Before the monitor, Remy leaned his chin against his fists, trying to force his mind to comply with what his eyes were seeing.

"Only thing is, you're not alone in this, are you? Who's behind it — Mystique?"

He evaded her reaching arms, grunting as he flipped backwards onto a crate.

"I think so. Question is, why?"

"Remy, y' damned fool," he cursed himself, squeezing his eyes shut.

"See if ya can guess," Rogue snarled.

Gambit listened to the scuffle, knowing she'd brought him to the floor. The only things between them
were his legs lifting her by her midsection and his quarterstaff. Rogue strained, reaching for him.

With a heave, he flipped her off of him. Remy opened his eyes, watching his own figure turning slowly, searching for her.

From behind him she emerged swiftly, a blur of torn clothing, lily-white skin, and smeared eyeliner. Remy bowed his head before the computer screen. He heard his own muffled groan, and again, he tried to recapture that sensation: that swift peck on the lips that plucked his powers from him with such absurd ease.

He frowned, his mind drawing a frustrating blank where the memory should have been, and hit the rewind button again.

—

With a gasp, Rogue's eyes fluttered open. The earth was wet beneath his knees, and his arms were heavy. Nonetheless, Gambit reached for her.

She struggled, clutching at her head as he pulled her against his chest.

Rogue whimpered and her eyes closed again.

Remy held on gently, waiting for her to ride out the memories.

—

They'd failed.

Straining, grit sliding beneath his fingernails, hurting his hands as he tried to push himself off the dusty floors of Apocalypse's tomb, Remy struggled to heave himself from the ground.

They'd failed, and somehow, they were still alive — the ones he could see anyhow. His ribs were bruised, his face caked in sweat and dirt, and it was probably a miracle that his head hadn't cracked with the force of the blow that knocked all of them — the Acolytes, the Brotherhood and even the X-Men — to their backsides.

He coughed, feeling his chest expand with lightning crackles of pain. His arms shuddering with the effort, Gambit pulled himself to knees that could barely support him. Pyro was out-cold to his left, and Xavier lay in a crumpled pile ahead of him -- thrown clear from his wheelchair.

Magneto?

Remy blinked the grit out of his eyes, though they burned anyhow.

Alive. He coughed. Unconscious, maybe, but alive. There was hope yet.

On the far side of the room, Sabretooth was growling to himself, cursing the slowness of his healing
factor, apparently. His leg stuck out at an odd angle.

"Gambit," he snarled, his teeth bared. Creed never used his codename without a hint of malice backing it. "Get the frail."

After a moment, he nodded — little more than a grim acknowledgement of their mission. The three of them — Sabretooth, himself, and Wolverine — had been appointed a specific task, and damned if one of them wasn't going to finish it... even if it was half passed the eleventh hour and Rogue was probably dead anyway.

At least Creed wouldn't be the one getting to her before him. So much for putting past trespasses aside, he thought. That was one of Magneto's orders he wasn't willing to stomach when it came to Sabretooth. The guy made it impossible to play nice.

He winced, unsure whether the pain was issued by a twinge from his insides or from the thought that Rogue might be gone for good. Who she was, where she'd come from — all of that was tucked away neatly under years of well-concealed contempt. What a shame that it might've disappeared so quickly. He hated it, as much as he hated the sluggishness of his limbs, and the despicable sense of failure that threatened to overtake him.

Sabretooth growled again, and Remy brought himself to unstable legs.

"Good t' see you're well." He sneered as best he could, hobbling past the downed motley crew of mutants.

Creed bared his teeth. "If ya don't move any faster than that, you won't be."

Gambit waved him off with a wince. "Heard 'nuff of that already. Save it for Wolvie when he comes to."

When he reached the first wall, Gambit nearly groaned. At least, he would have had his throat not been so dry. It was as if he'd swallowed a sandbag and washed it down with a healthy glass of dust.

Two figures were sprawled at the bottom of the chamber. They lay together, a twisted mass of limbs crumpled together on the floor. Dolls, he thought; they looked like rag dolls that a child had grown bored of.

Wasn't that entirely appropriate, given the situation?

He staggered down the long row of steps, knowing that regardless of how fast he could move, getting to her quicker wouldn't give him the answers he was looking for.

She was dead, snuffed out without ever really offering him the chance to know if they were as alike as he'd thought. One more missed opportunity, one more sacrifice, and one more death on his hands because he wasn't quick or strong enough.

And just like that, she moaned.

Gambit staggered down the last few steps, nearly collapsing over the prone body of Wolverine.

"Rogue?" he croaked, dropping to his knees and reaching out to feel for a pulse. He stopped, his hand inches from her throat.

"Merde!"
Her skin — he couldn't touch her skin, he reminded himself. Wincing a little as his side pulled painfully, he held his fingers beneath her nose, saying a silent prayer.

Moist warmth, barely there, but there nonetheless...

She was breathing.

Ignoring the throb in his side, he scooped her up with a taxed groan. Sliding one arm beneath her legs and the other below her shoulders, he rocked her against his chest so that her head slid back against his shoulder and her airway was clear.

He didn't spare a second glance at Wolverine, though his leg twitched a little against the dirt in a spasm. He'd be up sooner than later.

Remy turned, checking to see that the unconscious girl in his arms would stay there without slipping until they reached the top of the stairs, and began the upwards climb.

She weighed next to nothing, and in the dim light of the darkened chambers, Rogue appeared paler and more drawn than ever.

What had that fils the putain Apocalypse done to her?

Remy fixed his eyes on the top of the stairs, a grim line setting his jaw, and climbed.

One step at a time, he moved towards the light.

A shuffle from behind, and too slow to turn, Gambit steeled himself for the worst —

"I'll take it from here, bub."

Heart pounding, Remy winced, his arms shuddering a little. Wolverine stood at his side, ready to intercept. His wounds had knit together already, mostly, and he was getting healthier every second.

"I've got her." Remy grimaced, protesting even as his legs threatened to crumple beneath him.

"Ya done enough, Cajun."

It was that simple. And just like that, Logan slipped her from his arms and into his own.

He hadn't done a thing.

Gambit frowned, closing his eyes for a moment.

"You okay." It was more of a statement than a question. Wolverine eyed him.

His muscles burned, his head hurt, and he was cold.

Not waiting for an answer, Wolverine turned, taking the last few steps to the chamber room with increasing ease.

Remy LeBeau wasn't built to be a hero anyway.
“You're not…” Rogue moaned, her fingers flexing uselessly against her head. "You didn't…"

"Shh, it's almost over," he murmured into her hair, rubbing slow circles over her back with the palm of his hand. Gambit swiped at his forehead, mentally gauging the amount of time Rogue needed to work through the last of it, and the amount of time they had before the X-Men returned from damage control.

She shuddered. "Ah know," Rogue said weakly. "Ah know ya meant well. Just like with Jean Luc…"

"Don't struggle against it," he whispered, unsure whether she could hear him or not. Wordlessly, he collected her fallen glove from beside her, and slid it over her bare fingers as gently as he could.

It offered a suitable distraction from the flicker of concern that he'd given her too much; just a small taste would have been fine: Three memories chosen selectively. More than that could present a problem.

He ignored the tightening knot of worry in his chest at the thought, resigned to the fact that it made up only part of the risk. Right now, it was more important just for Rogue to make it through the next thirty seconds.

She slipped away again, sinking back into her mind and his memories with a groan fresh on her lips.

—

Remy ducked his head, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. The alley stunk from the backlash of Rue Bourbon; rain water, trash, stale alcohol, and that sweet, heady perfume of hothouse blooms that hung heavy over the window boxes.

Beneath that, the unmistakable scent of the swamp.

He knew each cobbled road, each corner, each lamp post like he'd grazed the pads of his sticky fingers over them all, caressing the city's dips and curves, her damp, secret places untouchable to only those who feared them.

She was his, and she offered the sheltering cloak of night to him eagerly.

He smirked, appraising the Botanica's decrepit exterior with something akin to amusement — but not quite.

The address was correct: he'd memorized the scrap of a note left by Tante Mattie and destroyed it without as much as a bat of an eye. He couldn't leave any traces lying around that would incriminate her if either of the Guilds showed up.

The last time he'd been here, Julien had made him the promise of a permanent slumber at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain — not that that would ever happen; not now, at least... Not with Julien rotting in the Boudreaux family crypt at Lafayette number one.

All that bad blood washed aside, Remy had to admit, his small flat overlooking Rue Saint Anne was
comfortable, especially with Tante Mattie coming around once a week to fill up the kitchen with the heady scents he remembered best from childhood... Last night's crawfish étouffée had been particularly good.

He cast a lopsided smile at the woman in the doorway who did not fail to purse her lips and look down her nose at him like he was a sewer rat just waiting to be swatted off the stoop with a broom.

He was here only because it kept him from the crowds of grazing, drunken tourists — those easily distracted by a brush of a shoulder or a sly half-smile.

They opened their pockets to him willingly, and the ladies, they opened their hearts, and more often than not, their thighs.

"Hmph," the woman standing within the rectangle of light cast from the back rooms said for the second time. Her hands were tucked into a faded, patterned apron that covered her sizable belly.

"'Cho name, chile?" she asked him. Her voice was like rich chocolate spiked with a sharp bite of cayenne.

"LeBeau, mam'selle. Remy LeBeau."

"Maman don't see nobody she don't know, and she don't know you if I don't know you." She appraised him sternly. Proud woman, he thought. He liked her already — especially since she was lying through her teeth. "An' don't you try spreadin' that charm here, boy-o, devil you do."

"S' what they call me," he inclined his head politely. "Le Diable Blanc. Y' think y' were readin' m' mind."

"Hmph," she said again, folding her arms across her large bosom, blocking even more of the doorway than she had a moment ago.

"Cecile! Quit your small talk an' bring that boy in here!"

Cecile "harrumphed" one last time before stepping aside to let Remy pass.

He could feel her gaze on the back of his neck as he ducked beneath the doorway. The inside of the Botanica was small and smelled heavily of incense, burned herbs, and the metallic twang of copper beneath that. Blood on the floors, he thought; there was nothing out of the ordinary then. This place, like many others in the city, served as a temple for old ghosts.

"To the back," Cecile muttered, giving him a light push to the shoulder. "An' mind your manners 'round Maman Brigitte," she added with a frown.

The air was considerably warmer than outside, and a thick layer of dust covered the artifacts piled high on the shelves and tables he navigated. Not wanting to brush anything to the floor, Remy peered at the wide assortment of bell jars; their magnified contents floated suspended in liquids that had obviously gone off with time. Roots and stones and bones, trinkets and talismans, twine and buttons — all kinds of worthless knickknacks that any self-respecting thief wouldn't bat an eye at.

He frowned. Tante was a wise woman, but perhaps her age was beginning to show. He hadn't taken her for the superstitious type.

"Mmmhmm. Not concerned by the look o' this place, huh? You c'mere boy, an' let Maman see you for herself."
Beyond the thin layers of moth-eaten fabric, a low gaslight flickered. A woman, stooped with age, sat beneath the shadows where the torch light couldn't reach.

Cecile had disappeared abruptly.

Slowly, Remy slipped behind the thin curtain that divided two rooms and stopped, suddenly wary.

"Don't you know, chile? There be more like your kind in this world, an' some o' us have seen more an' done more then you'll ever imagine."

She shifted in her seat with a groan, beckoning him closer with a gnarled finger.

Remy didn't move.

"They say you got red eyes; that you're gifted."

"Oui," he replied, masking his unease with pointed, abrupt respect.

"Take a seat chile. This ol' dame can't do nothin' but help you."

She leaned forwards, her body creaking from the effort — or perhaps the weight of her numerous shawls made her old bones grind together. The light overhanging the small table cast a warm glow across her weathered features; it deepened the shadows beneath her eyes and made the lines around her mouth look like tree bark. Her eyes were hidden beneath a pair of sunglasses that looked as if they'd been plucked straight out of the 1980s. They caught the flare of gold from the low-burning tallow candles, creating oddly tinged reflections in the lenses - like amber irises floating on the plastic surfaces.

Remy shuddered, a feeling of familiarity blurring together with his discomfort and leaving him unsettled.

"If y' lucky, you’ll look older than me one day, if that’s why you’re starin'," she wheezed, laughing at him dryly. "A hunnert an' four, Maman be, if you curious," she added primly, puffing herself up.

"You get t' be my age, chile — ain't no foolhardy children gonna tell you different."

"Pardon madame," Remy bowed his head, moving forwards to take the seat before her. "Je m'excuse, Tante didn't say why I should visit. She just said t' come. I'm thinkin' she's trying t' give me a taste of m' own medicine."

"I'm blind chile, so don't make Maman strain t' hear you too. Viens, sit by me."

Remy did as he was told, sweeping his duster out from beneath him as he perched on the small stool opposite the Mambo.

"Yuh Tante, oui. She told Maman all about you. She say, ‘That boy's got the luck. He carries a Dead Man's Hand wherever he walk.’ She say, ‘But the boy's foolish, and he don't always think. He don't realize his full potential, under his Papa's thumb like he is.' An' dat's where Maman Brigitte comes in."

Bristling at the mention of Jean Luc, Remy forced himself to relax. At least the lady didn't have anything to do with the family business; it was a small mercy.

She groaned, raising herself to a stoop and shuffling from behind the table. Her fingers dragged across the surfaces that fell beneath her arthritic hands, feeling her way by combination of memory and touch. With the aid of a gnarled cane, she made her way slowly to a concealed cabinet, buried
beneath several thick shawls. These she parted, revealing a dusty looking curio. She opened it with gnarled fingers, and to Remy's surprise, revealed a strong box with a combination lock that would be intimidating to anyone other than himself.

“She wanted me to give you somethin',” she murmured. "A lil' gris gris t' polish off that lucky mojo of yours. A fix, we call it.”

Remy coughed, masking a chuckle. He stifled it with his fist and prepared to stand.

"Désolé, madam. I mean no disrespect, but I'm not much the sort t' put stock in magic, and least of all, this one don't need 'spiritual' help. Tante Mattie musta told y' 'bout the cards -"

“You just plant you rump,” she boomed.

Remy did what he was told, properly cowed, but not at all convinced.

"Bon p'ut," she continued, turning around with a small bundle held loosely in one hand. "But this ain't no hoodoo, no sleight of hand neither."

She settled herself before him once again, and beckoned for him to lean closer.

Placing the package on the table, her knotted fingers peeled back the thin fabric covering the item in question.

Best humor her, he thought. If he didn't, Tante wouldn't let him live it down — not to mention the fact that he'd be cooking for himself as long he stuck around in the city. Quite frankly, Tante Mattie's gumbo he could survive without if he had to, but the nagging? Remy repressed a shudder.

“You gimme your hand, boy,” she said, revealing a mouth full of gummy, blackened holes where her teeth had once been. "And you hold on tight. It's gotta touch your skin for it to work."

Carefully, she dropped the bundle's contents into his hand.

He blinked, his eyes narrowing as he looked at the strange stone. It was a dull red, nearly the size of his palm, and cool to the touch — cool, until from its depths, a light flickered and his fingers began to tingle where his skin touched its surface.

"Dieu," he breathed, his eyes wide.

The sensation spread from his palm and up his arm. It was a crackling heat he was familiar with — as if his own powers were siphoned into the stone. It felt… cleaner, somehow. Stronger. The gem crackled in his fingers, leaping charges of fuchsia wrapping around his wrist and rocketing beneath his flesh. He could feel it singing in his veins. Remy gasped, dropping the stone to the table as he felt his power surge. It imbued the air around him in a kinetic ripple that he could practically see: each molecule of dust vibrating, desperate to explode in the small confines of the room.

A ringing filled his ears, and he looked up at Maman Brigitte as his vision tripled, swimming hazily out of focus in a burst of vibrant magenta. Doubled over across the table, shaking and grinning her toothless smile, she seemed to spin with the room as vertigo overtook him.

The stone pulsed on the table, once, twice, his heart singing with the tremulous demand to be let loose from his chest, just like his power, and on the third time, Remy blacked out with the sound of the Mambo's laughter in his ears.
“Remy?” Rogue groaned, her pupils an unfocused red on black as she opened her eyes, blinking. After a moment, they settled into the familiar slate he'd grown used to.

He breathed a little easier for it.

A steady rain had begun to fall, smothering the errant blazes that flared across the grounds courtesy of St. John.

No doubt, the X-Men had Storm to thank for the change of climate. The Weather Witch had taken care of his friend in much the same way before.

"I'm right here," he assured her. His strength had returned for the most part, and lifting her to his lap had been a small pleasure.

"Ah didn't take all of 'em," she murmured tiredly.

Remy reigned in a knowing smirk.

"It's fine, Rogue, I didn't give you all of 'em. Just the important parts."

She tried to smile and 'hmmed' instead.

"Y' want me to take y' to the med bay?" he asked, hoping just the same that she'd say no. For added emphasis, he gave her a small mental nudge — a hint of his ability to manipulate people into agreeing with him. He was not disappointed.

"Mmmno," she murmured into his chest. "Ah'm good right here, sugah."

He chuckled. So she was a little delirious. While he hadn't quite expected that sort of response, he wasn't about to stop her either. A little charm couldn't hurt the girl, really, he reasoned.

"'Fraid y' friends aren't gonna think the same way, chère." Remy slipped an arm beneath her knees and lifted her easily as he stood.

"Remy?" she whispered.

"Oui?"

"Ya gonna show me how ya did that?" She yawned, trying to curl a little closer to him. "How ya were able ta touch me?" It had become cool enough outside to feel a chill if you lingered in the damp long enough.

"Like they say, sometimes, its best t' have nine lives an' six packs of cards." He chuckled, setting off across the lawn. "For you, let's just say I owe you that much."

"Are… did she… Ah mean…" She mumbled something unintelligible, but Remy understood her nonetheless.

He smiled.
"Louisiana," she whispered after a moment, her lashes fluttering lazily, with a small smile on her face.

"That's right, Rogue. That's where we're headed."

With that, they slipped beneath the cover of the trees and out of sight.

—

In the grass, not more than a few yards away, two crumpled playing cards lay where they had fallen — a King and Queen of Hearts, taped together at the corner with a promise scrawled across their faces.

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:

- "Like I want you running around inside my head." X-Men #8.
- "I can take the pain." Ultimate X-Men #53.
- Memory Number One: Based off Dark Horizon I
- Memory Number Two: Based off Dark Horizon II
- Lafayette number one: A cemetery in New Orleans, one of the many Cities of the Dead.

Translations:

Bonsoir: Good evening
Désolé: Sorry
Fille: girl
Fils the putain: son of a bitch
Gris gris: A curio, a conjure, a bit of N'awlins hoodoo
Homme: man
Je m'excuse: Excuse me
Ma Belle: My pretty
Mon Ami: my friend
Merde: Shit.
Oui: Yes
Pardon: Pardon me
P'tit: little one
She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so tired. The disassociation was one thing; the free-floating ease with which she found herself deposited behind a warm body lent to her delirium, but the desire to curl up into this dream and enjoy it? Well... worse things could have happened.

"Y' gonna hold on?" Remy murmured, settling her against the back of his Harley. He'd done so in a most genteel fashion, proffering his arm to her as she placed one foot on the exhaust and hauled herself over the seat.

Rogue couldn't help it if the worn leather had made a rude noise as she'd plopped down. The seat was still relatively comfortable, though, all things considered.

Nodding, she rubbed at her face. Her hands itched beneath her gloves, but it was a distant discomfort. Remy's voice was a detached echo that wavered in clarity and volume. Humming, she enjoyed the feeling in her chest.

"Comfy," she murmured, nestling into the cushion of his shoulder blades.

"We'll ride as long as you can stay awake. If I feel you slipping, we'll stop. D'accord?"

She nodded again, her cheek making a scrunching noise against Remy's trenchcoat. A gust of wind shivered through the leaves overhead, causing a domino-like ripple to run through her limbs, making Rogue tremble. The night had left its mark on Bayville. It settled around them, damp and shifting where the condensation made the air thicken. There would be fog soon. It was the sort of chill that would make a cold morning beautiful — dewy and touched with a lingering mist — but now, sometime after midnight, it was just uncomfortable.

Remy shrugged off his trench coat, propping Rogue up by the shoulder before she could slump forwards, and draped the garment around her. It was far too big, the sleeves falling several inches past her fingers, but the heat from Gambit's body had warmed it, turning it cozy. He pulled the collar up around her neck, tucking her in.

"You're gonna get cold," she complained, trying to blink the sleep out of her eyes. She yawned instead, covering her mouth a moment too late to be polite. "Sorry," she muttered, mussing her hair to the side.

Remy reigned in a chuckle.

"It's fine, m' powers'll take care of th' chill; I won't even feel it," he assured her.

Rogue looked at him for a moment, contemplative. The world was wrapped in a dream-like haze that made the situation surreal. If this were a dream, then she needn't restrain herself so much.
If this were a dream, she might allow herself to relish the scent of him clining to the jacket.

She did.

Rogue managed, "What happened to you? How could ya touch my hand like that and still be standing there, right as rain?"

Remy smirked and straddled the bike. His weight caused the shocks to sink a little, and Rogue slipped down the seat. She came to rest against his back with her thighs brushing his hips, and confused, she looked behind her. There was a bare two inches of seat left for the second passenger, which should have been fine, except there was no back rest.

If she moved back any farther, and Remy hit a pothole, she might actually get a quick flying lesson.

She squirmed a little, trying to give him some distance, her head beginning to clear. What was she doing here? Hadn't they been fighting just a little while ago?

"Y' shy now?" Remy smirked over his shoulder at her.

Oh, right. Rogue shook herself, sitting up straighter. She blinked at the back of his head. It must have been a dream — one to match her Geometry class naptime from yesterday. There was no way, under any circumstance if she was in her right mind, that she'd be anywhere close to the swamp rat, contemplating a quick getaway to... to... where were they headed again?

"It's a long trip South," he cautioned.

Right. Definitely an intricate fabrication on the part of her subconscious. There was no way in tarnation she was going back to New Orleans; history repeating itself and all that other bull—

"No!" she returned defiantly, though she hesitated to place her hands on his… on his… oh no. She'd forgotten about the belt. The damned thing was slung low on his waist. Much like a gun holster, it had several external pockets attached to carry his tools and packs of cards. What was she supposed to do? Grab his legs, or his pectorals?

Breath hitching as the motorcycle roared to life, Rogue weighed her options with muzzy torpor. Remy lifted the kickstand with his heel.

There was no way in her right mind she'd be sitting on the back of the swamp rat's bike, contemplating where she was supposed to put her hands while still trying to be discreet. She grinned. That made it alright, then, didn't it? If she just slipped her fingers down his thighs, feeling his muscles contract beneath her touch; the heat of him.

Still, her head didn't feel like it was screwed on straight.

Didn’t matter so much, now, did it?

"Y' sleepin' back there?" He chuckled and twisted the throttle warningly.

"Ah'm just checkin' for holes in my eyelids," she muttered, her voice drowned beneath the purr of the bike. It sure did sound real, though. Her butt was vibrating along with the engine, the scent of exhaust tingling her nose.

"Best hold on then."

"Gambit!" she cried, throwing her arms around his stomach as the Harley roared to life, climbing to
sixty and leading them off one of the mansion's back alleys in a matter of seconds. Her fingers rolled over muscle — the indentations in the skin so lifelike as her hands fluttered across his belly button. He hitched a little, the muscles jumping beneath her touch. She felt him stiffen, his surprise so very real.

Rogue could feel his laughter beneath her hands and against her chest where she pressed herself to his back. That felt oddly true to life too… not that she'd ever touched the Cajun like that.

"Y' keep holdin' on t' me like that, girl, and I'm not gonna need that coat back."

"Ah thought ya said your powers'd take care of ya," she yelled, her voice carried away on the wind.

"It's my favorite coat," he returned, almost defensive, but not without a wry grin over his shoulder. 
"'Sides, I think y' look better in that skimpy thing y' call a uniform."

She pinched him below the ribs, her fingers straining to find something other than muscle to squeeze. Gambit laughed out loud, and Rogue forced her gloved fingers to clasp together instead of settling on the ripple of his abdominals.

She flushed, glad he couldn't see her, and yawned into his back. This wasn't the worst possible arrangement, she thought. In fact, it was rather nice.

"Remy?" she tried again, the lull to slumber coaxing her once again.

"Oui, ma belle?" he called, taking a corner sharply near Bayville's mall, and gunning the engine before the lights could turn from yellow to red. They shot through the intersection and tore out onto the quiet thoroughfare that led to the interstate.

"Ah… Ah lost the Queen at the Institute," she said, resting her chin on his shoulder.

When Gambit didn't reply, Rogue ducked her head, pressing her cheek into the strong dip between his shoulders, and closed her eyes against the rush of wind that whipped around them.

—

After a moment of feeling Rogue settle against him, Gambit smiled. A little bit of charm went a long way, it appeared.

"No matter, chére. Got you, don't I?" he said, turning off onto the interstate.

—

"Is that it?" Jean asked, landing near Scott.

Wearily, Cyclops nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I think so."

He turned to look over the Institute grounds from the top of the portico steps. "What a mess," he muttered.
"Come on." She smiled and gave his arm a reassuring tug. "Let's debrief everyone and see if we can't sort this out. I'm sure there's a logical explanation."

Shaking his head, she led him into the mansion, which, thankfully, was still standing despite the appearance of its grounds.

"When has the Brotherhood ever needed a reason to instigate a riot?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, man," Ray called, hauling a limping Bobby down the corridor beneath one arm. "That was great! I am so going to sleep well tonight. My shocks are totally tweaked out."

"Speak for yourself," Bobby grumbled. "The next time I see that fungal infection —"

"Toad?" Ray offered.

"Don't say his name," Bobby bit back. "The only reminder I want of his existence is the carving on his tombstone. I'll be picking frog-snot out of my icicles for a week."

"Hey!" Scott called. "Bobby, that is not what X-Men stand for. With that kind of attitude, no wonder the Brotherhood think its fair game to come knocking on our door."

"Knocking down our door, more like," Sam muttered, staggering into the foyer and rubbing his forehead. "Golly, is it just me, or has Blob gotten thicker around the middle? Ah thumped myself good tryin' ta knock him off the fountain."

"Uh, Sam?" Jamie asked, contemplating his mud-soaked uniform, unmindful of the tracked footprints he left behind him as he walked into the foyer. "You sorta hit the fountain yourself."

"Students," Professor Xavier projected. "We are congregating in ready room number three. There is something Hank and I would like to discuss with you about the events of this evening. Kurt, if you could leave the door open; Logan has just arrived and will be coming up the drive, shortly."

Nightcrawler paused, one blue finger held over the security system's numeric panel near the door. "I guess there's not much point arming the mansion, is there?" With a nervous laugh, he dropped his hand to his side.

He was met with a snarl a moment later.

"Wolverine?"

"You heard the Prof, Elf. Move it." He sniffed the air, baring his teeth. "We've got more problems than just a few trampled petunias out front."

Kitty phased up through the floor a few feet away, hefting herself to her knees on the rug and looking around the room. Two crunched playing cards poked out of her fist where she braced herself against the carpeting.

Wildly, she searched her teammates' faces.

"Where's Rogue? She's not in the briefing room," she said, her voice two octaves higher than normal and shrill enough to make Logan wince.

Logan’s claws made a distinctive snikt as they extended and then retracted. He glowered a moment, his eyes flicking to the cards clenched in Kitty's fist. She gripped them even more firmly when
Rogue failed to appear among those gathered in the entranceway.

Logan sniffed, catching the smear of scent left on the King and Queen of Hearts.

"Problem numero uno," he growled and stalked past Kitty and down the hallway, banging his fist into a recessed oak panel. The wall popped with a hydraulic hiss and slid to the side, revealing the elevator that led to the sublevels of the mansion.

"Get in," he rumbled to the remaining X-Men. "Now."

Logan pointed to the cards that were now pressed to Kitty's chest. She yipped, knowing she was singled-out. "Bring those with you."

—

It smelled like sweet grass, Remy thought, breathing a little more easily now that they'd cleared state lines. Pennsylvania, however, was still too close to New York, and for the first time Remy had to repress the irrational discomfort that if the wind changed direction, it'd be blowing straight back into the nostrils of Rogue's overprotective bulldog of a father figure.

Wolverine would be more than willing to claim a pound of flesh for this particular offense, he thought. He'd promised as much the last time they'd had an altercation: The cooyon had torn six puncture holes into his jacket as a reminder, and tacked him up against a cypress tree.

Idly, Remy wondered if Rogue would be willing to stop Wolvie again if it came to that.

Somehow, he figured she might be the one to really give him a thrashing when she returned to her senses. His subtle coercion tactics wouldn't have been worth a tick without the backing of his mutation — at least, not with her. Rogue was single-handedly the most stubborn femme he'd ever met — save Bell, but with Rogue nestled comfortably against him, Belladonna Boudreaux was the furthest thing from his mind.

Nonetheless, he'd given Rogue just a small mental nudge as insurance — just a tiny brush of that charm he was renowned for — and now she was snuggled up around him like it was the most natural thing in the world.

He wished he had a Polaroid camera.

She really was going to kill him for this later; he smirked, enjoying the feeling of her trembling thighs against his hips as she strained to stay upright behind him. The warm weight of her arms around his stomach assured that she was still holding on, though since half two, he was noticing the steady droop to her wrists. She'd reposition herself occasionally, brushing against him and sighing — and if that wasn't utterly disconcerting, the mental images that accompanied those slight shifts of her weight had nearly driven him off the road twice.

When she moved, he could feel the light press of her breasts and the angle of her hips as she fit herself to his back. In fact, if his compacted staff hadn't been in the way, he'd probably sense the concentrated warmth pressed against his tailbone too.

Remy shook himself.
It was… nice, he thought stiffly. And if he didn't leave it at that, he'd really be in trouble.

They needed time — a day at best — but if the X-crew were really determined to find them, they'd disappear.

What good was a thief who could be found when he didn't want to be?

"Rogue?" he asked after a stretch, feeling her slump heavily against his back. Her hands fell idly into his lap.

Remy cocked an eyebrow, peering down at the juncture between his legs where her hands rested, and with some difficulty, restrained the string of lewd thoughts that threatened to slingshot across his temporal lobe.

Rousing herself with a small groan, Rogue's fingers fumbled their way back to modesty.

"Time t' pull over," he muttered, more to himself than to the girl behind him. As fate would have it, an illuminated sign for lodgings and food passed on his right at precisely the moment he required it.

24-Hour reception. Swimming Pool. Vacancy. One of these things they could live without.

He took the exit ramp, and within minutes, Remy had parked the bike and collected the key to a battered motel room from an equally battered-looking receptionist, who had leered and asked if he'd be paying for the night or by the hour.

It had been an exercise in self-restraint to not blow up the magazine the clerk had been reading, leaving bits and pieces of Buxom Babes in cinders, and a perplexed and pock-marked receptionist in the snowfall of its ashes.

That would have been rude. Instead, he welded the latch on his way out — snapping the door lock with a fizzle of kinetic charge and melting the deadbolt straight through. Remy hoped the kid liked his job enough to stick around, 'cause he wouldn't be going anywhere for a good long while.

Finally, after negotiating the stairs to the second floor gallery, he'd carried a sleeping Rogue to the threshold to a dingy room:

With the peeling paint flaking off in furrows that left the dull puce undercoat exposed, Remy peered at the dangling, rusted number fourteen nailed to the door. The rusty nails tacking the plated numbers right-side up clung stubbornly to the old wood, though the 'one' looked as if it was heading southwards. If the door still hung on its hinges when he kicked it open, he'd be mightily impressed.

Granted, Remy had seen worse, though a niggling thought at the back of his mind declared that while he deserved crap accommodations, Rogue should have seen better.

Beggars couldn't be choosers, and all that.

Fitting the key with its tacky plastic tag into the lock while holding the girl aloft had been no challenge. She was precious cargo, and precious cargo needed to be treated as such — didn't matter if it was an ancient artifact or a person. Trained as a thief from near-infancy, it had been deeply ingrained in him early on that damaged goods were utterly useless.

Remy tried not to linger too long on the metaphor: Rogue wasn't damaged — not outwardly anyhow. But to him it was clear that being used as the catalyst for Apocalypse's resurrection hadn't done anything to help her particular situation.
The girl in question snuffled in her sleep, her wrists folding over themselves against her chest.

Even in slumber she managed to draw inwards on herself.

Remy frowned.

He should have been there until the end. He should have gone back after Magneto had been defeated and stood alongside the X-Men. He should have kept a closer eye on her, and yet, he hadn't. He'd stayed in Louisiana with Jean Luc and had stood by uselessly as his own future was determined for him.

Maybe Rogue's stubborn insistence that she could take care of herself had been excuse enough for him at the time.

She was strong — had always been strong — but even strong people needed support, sometimes, and that was on him for not being there for her. It's not like she would have asked — but she could have — if that’s what she’d wanted.

Would he have returned if she’d tracked him down?

Dropped everything and high-tailed it North of the Mason Dixie?

Gambit’s jaw ticked.

Maybe he’d have turned a new leaf — ditched his responsibilities for a girl with a white streak and a scowl.

Or, maybe it had taken the reminder that he was no longer a welcome party among the Guilds to take the initiative and get gone.

Edging into the room sideways, careful not to bump her dangling feet against the door, he slid the deadbolt without so much as a grunt of effort. He turned, frowning at the peeling wallpaper, the stained carpet and…

"Merde," he said flatly.

The double bed. The only double bed.

Pursing his lips, he eyed the coverlet suspiciously. At least the sheets looked clean enough.

Depositing her gingerly in the middle, he carefully slid his trench from her shoulders as she rolled onto her side and pulled her boots off. These he deposited at the foot of the bed, and moved around quietly to stand over her. He'd have to lift her legs to coax her beneath the sheets, but somehow the prospect of handling her too much made him uncomfortable. She wouldn't appreciate it at all, but he highly doubted she'd thank him graciously if she awoke cold and with a stiff neck either.

Even that was overshooting expectations a lot.

Hastily, Remy slipped an arm beneath her calves, enjoying the soft press of relaxed flesh beneath the suit she wore for just one guilty moment, and then pulled the cover from beneath her, draping it over her side quickly.

"You're a dead man, LeBeau," he reminded himself, unsure weather he'd be grateful to be throttled by such a fine looking femme, or whether he should seriously consider worrying about how she'd react in the morning.
Rogue sighed, snuggling down into the sheets, and Remy permitted himself a small smile before tossing himself into the one uncomfortable chair nearest the door. Unceremoniously, he propped his feet up on the mismatched table beside it.

"Here's hoping Henri remembers t' bring out the Jazz band for y' funeral," he murmured to himself.

A tug on the moth-eaten drapes allowed for a weak beam of murky amber from a streetlight to fall across the bed. It struck Rogue's face just so; casting crescent shadows beneath her eyes. Her mouth was tinted to faded plum where her lipstick had smeared across her chin, and there'd probably be remnants of that dark color against the back of his shirt, but Remy remained unconcerned: The study took priority.

Truth be told, he hadn't had much of a chance to admire the changes a year could bring earlier, but with Rogue sleeping soundly a few feet away? It was almost like old times; when Remy could appreciate at his leisure from the comfort of the shadows outside her bedroom.

The tousled white streaks in her hair slid over her cheek; she'd let it grow out some since the last time he'd seen her. He cocked his head to the side and surveyed her expression.

She was peaceful like this, pretty even, and although Remy LeBeau relished the supple curves beneath the sheet and the repressed innocence that managed to cling to the girl, somehow, it just wasn't right. It was such a stark contrast to her usual scowl.

Remy smirked, trying to get comfortable with the chair back digging into his ribcage.

He couldn't help but anticipate the downturn to those pursed lips and the dimples that would form in her cheeks when she woke up and saw where she was.

Frankly, Remy couldn't wait to see Rogue back in her natural element: flushed beneath the collar, limbs tense as anything and ready to snap him in half, each muscle clearly defined against the taut body armor that covered her from head to toe, and that brilliant, beautiful darkening of her eyes.

There was nothing more striking than that very girl when she was angry.

With a chuckle, Remy pulled out a pack of cards. He cut the deck, the soft sounds of paper sliding against paper a comforting lull to whittle away the early morning hours.

—

Mississippi haze clung to the shores, casting everything in brilliant gold and soft violet where the trees relinquished their dappled shade. She loved the damp, rich scent of wet earth that caked between her toes as it dried and insinuated itself beneath her fingernails. She always took a little bit of the shore home after they played here.

Her feet were in the river, the hem of her dress creased with drying mud, and she was sprawled in the grass — fingers tangling between the cool sheaves of green, and sun-warmed tangles of auburn above her head where she stretched her arms.

She could almost hear the bullfrogs.

It was a nice dream.
Rogue's eyes fluttered, still unwilling to wake up fully. She wanted to remember the willow — how its heavy branches swayed overhead, slow and serpentine in the dull afternoon sun. They seemed to bend down to her, and maybe, if she reached far enough, she could grasp their dripping fingers.

Rogue stretched, uncomfortable though she had plenty of room to move.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to bring back the sun — unearth that day in her yellow dress by the river and pull it back from the depths of her memory before the lazy ripples of the river could swallow it whole.

Laughter. Rogue smiled into her pillow, arching her back to work out the kinks. *Cody.*

It was fading; a soft echo that insisted on slipping back into that steady babble that overtook her thoughts when she woke. The sun grew brighter, and slowly, Rogue's eyes fluttered open.

Less lucid, Rogue could still see him: Cody Robins; his hair haloed in bright amber, sitting against the trunk of that old tree — bare feet stretched out before him, heels tipped up onto a large river rock.

She hummed, smiling, and blinked into the daylight where his face was still silhouetted by the shadows cast from the overhanging leaves. She could feel him smiling.

"Sleep well?"

It was fuzzy, that sound. Rogue tried to burrow a little beneath the covers, her face turning into the pillow to escape the glare of early morning.

Something was wrong. Cody's voice had never sounded so deep; he was just a boy. Rogue frowned.

Something was wrong. The linens smelled musty, like they'd sat in a closet too long. The bed was lumpy; its springs were digging into her hip, and it stank of foreignness.

Something was *wrong*, her mind shouted at her.

Rogue scrubbed at her face and winced. She'd scratched herself with the back of her glove — the stiff leather hard against her cheek. She never slept with them on.

Across the room, someone chuckled. Rogue tensed, pushing herself up with her arms and rolled onto her back.

Not her bed. Not her room.

*He* chuckled.

"Was planning on sticking a charged Ace beneath y' head if y' didn't wake up soon."

The soft flick and snap as he pulled another card from his deck, the light scrape of paper against a laminate surface, was background noise for the panicked voice that steadily grew in volume at the fore of her mind.

Ears working overtime though her eyes were still bleary, Rogue blinked hard to get the sleep out. Gradually, Gambit came into focus before her.

Her reaction time had taken too long. She cursed herself.

"Where am Ah?" she ground out, her voice sounding hoarse and her tongue thick from sleep in her mouth.
Rogue looked at the sheets tangled around her body.

"Cajun —“ her voice cracked. “Explain.”

"Pennsylvania," he answered smoothly, not looking up from his game of solitaire. He was slouched in a chair across the room, one leg on the table and the other beneath it, his heel supporting his weight against the wall. Behind him, the morning sun bathed the shag of the auburn hair overhanging his cowl in bright gold. Like fire, she thought, taking in his profile.

If this were some sort of twisted temptation — the sort that determined saints and martyrs — for a moment Rogue was convinced she was being sent straight to hell in a hand basket. It was a good thing she'd packed light.

She tore her eyes away and scanned the room quickly.

The door was clear, she noted. Bathroom. Bare bulb on the ceiling. Filthy carpets. Television that probably didn't work. Deadbolt on the door. Rumpled sheets.

*Rumpled sheets?*

The fight. There had been a fight with the Brotherhood — she strained, wincing at the stiffness of her limbs as she sat there. Her head felt fuzzy.

She wasn’t restrained.

The thought made her want to snort-laugh that he was improving his technique. The rest of what she felt was a mixture of rage and dread and disappointment.

"Ah'm gonna ask ya this once," she said in a low grosgrain, sliding the sheets from her legs and being at least partially relieved to see she was still fully dressed. "What in blue blazes am Ah doing in Pennsylvania?"

He shrugged innocently with one shoulder and frowned, his eyebrows lifting as if repressing a grin.

Rogue was out of the bed in a second, leaping across the room. She dropped and rolled — kicking one of the chair legs out from beneath him and sending him arcing backwards, chair and all. Gambit's leg shot out, catching the small overhang of the table and tipping it so that it flipped onto its side and clattered against the wall.

Cards rained down on top of them: a flutter of clubs and spades and diamonds that she stubbornly ignored. Rogue pinned him — a knee on his chest and a hand on his throat — and pulled back her opposite fist. The knuckle protruded slightly, ready to drive into the bridge of his nose.

"Start talkin'," she bit out through clenched teeth.

Remy smirked, holding his hands out in defensive supplication.

“Good morning to you too.”

"What did ya do ta me?" she spat, her eyes narrowing. She shifted her weight to press down a little more firmly on his sternum. Gambit didn't even flinch. It should have been cutting off the oxygen to his over-inflated head.

"Well," he began lightly, peering at her knee on his chest with something close to approval, and then returning his attention to her face. He laced his fingers behind his head and appeared to settle in,
despite the fact that Rogue was still poised to rearrange his bone structure. "Y' see, first Remy asked you if you'd have a normal conversation — thought mebbe we'd have some supper, nice bottle of wine, catch up a little," he drawled.

"Dream on, swamp rat," she spat.

"Then something funny happened," he continued, ignoring her indignant retorts. "Suppose you were still a lil' sore, mebbe a lil' shy since you hadn't seen me in so long, so I had t' make some arrangements with my old friends t' smooth things over."

"Ah am not shy," she snapped.

"I can see that now." He leered, his gaze sliding from the knee on his chest, up her torso and resting on her mouth for a moment before returning her speculative expression. "Y' keep putting me in this position, chérie, and I keep tellin' you —"

"Ah don't care what sort of perverse preferences ya got, LeBeau. You had the Brotherhood attack the mansion! That ain't 'smoothing' things over' where Ah'm from." Her fist clenched near her ear.

"...Left y' this lil' invitation — stuck it t' y' mirror back at the Institute," he continued lazily, offering a sly grin. "Shoulda been a grand ol' time… Remembered how much you liked th' Mardi Gras fireworks back in N'awlins, so I brought the party on up t' New York." He winked, shifting his shoulders to get comfortable beneath her knee.

"Oh, Ah am ever so grateful," Rogue said, rolling her eyes. "Ah don't think ya realize what kinda damage your 'fireworks' did, Gambit."

"Au contraire. The end, in this case, appears t' justify the means." Gambit's eyes seemed to smolder in amusement, the red of his irises flaring brightly against the darkened sclera, and Rogue felt a stirring sort of familiarity — it was like an involuntary tug, an implacable, unvoiced demand for her to agree with him.

His mouth curved easily into a lopsided smile, and he lidded his gaze. "You're here, ain't ya?"

Something twisted in the pit of her stomach as he smiled — if that little upturn of his mouth could even be considered a smile.

He was enjoying this, she thought venomously.

Rogue snorted, finishing the discussion for him. "Kidnapping again? Ah shoulda known," she returned, determined to best him. "You don't seem ta get much more original than this, Cajun."

Gambit cocked an eyebrow.

"Don't you remember?" he murmured, and slowly, he pulled a hand from beneath his head and held it up before her. He waggled his fingers, waiting for her to focus on them. Rogue's attention snapped between the two bare digits exposed by his oddly-cut gloves and his face, suspicion keeping her firmly in place atop him, poised to break his nose.

"What?" She sneered. "You finally find out how ta use primitive tools? It's an opposable thumb, swamp rat. You're about twenty millennia behind right about now."

He chuckled, pursing his lips. "Trust me, I know how t' use m' hands just fine."

Rogue flushed despite herself. Why was it that everything that rolled off his tongue had to sound so
darn *dirty* all the time?

He kept his gaze trained on her face as slowly, he reached for a stray lock of hair that had fallen into her eyes.

Entranced, Rogue watched his fingers, barely aware that even as those few uncovered appendages moved towards her, she was pulling backwards.

"Don't —" she warned, her breath bouncing back to her from his hand. He was too close.

"Rogue," he said, coaxing, gentle; intent on demonstrating just how little he was concerned by the possibility of being knocked out cold with one tiny brush of his skin against her cheek.

Fixed on her expression as it shifted between wariness, to fascination, to fear, Remy didn't seem to be bothered by the danger.

Rogue, however, was all too aware of the threat she posed.

"Ah said don't!" she yelled and shot backwards. Digging her heels into the threadbare carpeting, she scrabbled until her shoulders made contact with the recently toppled furniture.

Her back crashed into the fallen table, and she grunted. Bracing herself, her gloves sliding over the slick surfaces of the cards that littered the floor of the motel room, Rogue shuddered and turned away. A moment later she'd wrapped her arms around herself protectively, swallowing back the immediate revulsion born from skittering too near the edge because of a little temptation. She didn't want to look at him — not when he looked at her like *that*. There was something veiled beneath his schooled expression — was it curiosity? Or was it some sort of sick preoccupation with danger that had prompted him to try and touch her?

Incensed by the thought, she glanced at him, her mind rushing to catch up of its own accord: How could she have forgotten so easily?

Last night — the Brotherhood attacking the Institute as a distraction — explosions — fire — *Remy* —

She swallowed, keenly aware that throughout this altercation she had carefully sidestepped something excruciatingly important:

"Ah — Ah absorbed ya," she breathed, the night's events tumbling into reality. "Oh man…" She covered her mouth, and looked at the cards surrounding her without really seeing them.

Remy sat up, watching her closely. "And?"

She could feel his unsettling stare on her even as she flinched at his prompting.

"And what?" she shot back.

Shit, she thought. He'd taken her to Pennsylvania. This wasn't a kidnapping; she'd left with him willingly.

Dear lord, Logan was going to kill her.

"*Dieu!*" Gambit chuckled, brushing himself off. "Y' really don't remember, do you?"

She winced. Oh, but she *did*. 
"Or you do and you just don't want t' admit it." He leaned forwards, ducking his head so that he slid into her direct line of sight. Rogue glared, her gloved hand balling against her mouth. She desperately wanted to bite down on a knuckle to keep herself from screaming at him.

"That's a bad tell, Rogue — when y' do that with your eyes." He clucked, bemused despite the deliberate condescension in his tone.

"Do what?"

"They get a bit darker 'round the edges." He grinned, slow and Cheshire-like, drawing his thumb against the corner of his mouth absently. "When your pupils dilate," he continued, rubbing at the small tuft of his soul patch below his lower lip, inadvertently drawing her attention to his mouth. "The grey goes green."

"My mutation doesn't do that," she countered.

"Non, it's subtle," he said. "It's not part of y' powers; you'd barely notice it if you weren't paying attention."

He sat back on his knees, his hands on his hips. Dimly, Rogue acknowledged that he probably knew exactly what the position did to enhance his musculature.

Something else surfaced in her memories from the previous night: the feel of his abdominal muscles beneath her wandering hands.

Rogue blanched.

"Cased you for a long time," he admitted unabashedly. "This, however," he dipped his head again, once again insinuating himself in her direct line of vision, "ain't something you can tell but up close."

"What's your point?"

Cocking his head and winking, he replied, "I'm glad I got to see it."

Rogue opened her mouth to snap, but thought the better of it.

"In any case," he continued, "this ain't a kidnapping. Y' practically begged me t' bring you with me."

Horrified, Rogue snapped, "Ah did not!"

Gambit shrugged, his eyes glittering with mischief. "I'm used to it," he added, waving it off in such a way that, Rogue decided, he'd perfected just to piss her off.

Rogue fumed, anger bubbling up in her chest like a hot spring. She braced herself against the ground, getting ready to lash out at him with a foot, a fist, anything to smack that sly grin off his face. Her hands skidded, and she glanced at the cards again.

If she had absorbed him last night, that meant she'd be sitting on a geyser of Gambit's powers. It'd be just like the Danger Room, she suspected, only this time, she was sure of the imprint: she had his memories sifting towards the surface of her mind to know it. It was just a matter of calling back that tingling in her fingers, that sizzle, that crackle in her nail beds that threatened for release...

Slowly, Rogue shifted her weight so that she sat on the fingers of her gloved hand.

"How do ya figure?" she asked. She had to keep him talking, keep him distracted. She pulled back her arm a little, slowly, wiggling her fingers to loosen them from the glove.
"Well," Gambit wet his lips, squinting for added affect, to make it seem as if he was mulling over a particularly difficult question.

Fake, she thought at him snidely. Charlatan. *Poser.*

"Y' know how you took m' hand when I offered it to you last night?"

Rogue froze, racking her brain furiously. Oh, no. *No* she *didn't*…

"And then y' just *stared* when you didn't feel that old wrench in y' gut when there was no absorption?" he continued, his tone dropping to a desultory sort of purr, bordering on obscene.

Rogue's eyes widened, looking down at herself. Stupid body, she thought furiously. Stupid, betraying, deceitful body!

"And then y' let Remy treat you like a proper Southern belle for all of two seconds before you knocked him t' his knees?" He lidded his gaze, appraising at her slyly. He licked his lips. Oh gawd, he’d kissed her hand. He’d *dipped* her like she was his dance partner.

He murmured, "Figures you'd like having this *homme* at y' feet, Rogue."

That was it! Rogue drew her arm back, tearing off her glove and launching at him. Powers or no powers, she had the best right hook in all of Caldecott County, and there was no way she was going to put up with one more murmured *bit* of innuendo from that ribald mouth.

"Easy!" Gambit moved a second faster than her, catching her at the wrist and rolling with her momentum so that they both landed, sprawled, side by side against the carpeting.

"This is cozy," Gambit decided after a moment, shifting her arm across his chest without releasing her wrist. "But you're not quick enough, I'm afraid." He tapped his temple with his free hand, giving her a sidelong smirk that served to infuriate her even further. "I saw y' move before you even thought about it."

"You callin' me predictable?" Rogue struggled, trying to pull her arm back, but Gambit held firm. Beneath her elbow, she could feel the steady rise and fall of his chest. He wasn't even breathing hard.

"That was the last thing on m' mind," he confessed. Rogue blew the hair out of her face with a frustrated huff. There was something strange about his expression — it was too open, too honest almost, but as quickly as it came, it was gone.

"Ah don't think Ah even want ta know what's running through your head half the time."

"But th' other half's just fine, *ein*?" He smirked. She shook it off and tried to peel away from him. "Ah!" he chastised, locking a knee over the back of her legs so she was rendered immobile, stomach against the floor, her ribs pressing into his side. "This conversation's just begun. The more y' fight it, the longer its gonna take for me t' explain myself."

Rogue squeezed her eyes shut, quietly contemplating the nonexistent options.

In this position, she wouldn't even make it to the door — and if she did manage it, hotwiring a car to get away would take more time than she'd have if he followed.

"*Fine,*" she bit out. "*Talk.*"

"*Merci.*" He nodded, seeing her settle a little despite the inherent tension in her limbs. "As I was
saying, y' shoulda taken a few of m' memories last night — not all of 'em, since I can siphon out what I want to show you if I drop my guard just a little bit and focus hard on the important parts; just a couple t' give you an idea."

Rogue's eyes snapped open.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, p'tit. Y' might be sporting a few residual bursts of m' power but not nearly enough t' disable me long enough t' keep me down."

"Now that ya mention it," she muttered dryly, glaring downwards at the carpet two inches below her nose. She pulled a face, tugged her free arm around, and rested her chin in the crook of her elbow. In doing so, she found that a stray two of spades had stuck to her wrist.

"Quoi? You thinking of blowing me up?" Remy asked, reaching over and plucking the card out from under her arm. Rogue sniffed disdainfully. "You'd make more of a mess of this fine establishment than it already is." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling in distaste.

Rogue peered at the soiled carpet, mirroring his expression.

"Didn't have a choice, for what it's worth," he continued, confirming her apprehension while peeking at her out of the corner of his eye. It almost sounded apologetic, but it just didn't quite make it. Idly, Remy rolled the playing card over his knuckles, flicking it in and out of sight in a steady rhythm. "You were gonna fall off th' bike if we didn't stop," he said finally.

"Bike?"

Waving the question off as if their transport was irrelevant, Remy answered, "It's parked outside, one floor down, three spots over."

Rogue shook her head, frustrated. "Ah don't get it."

He threw the card, and it fizzled out over their heads, falling to the bed as a charred, wilted, and blackened rectangle. Gambit didn't just blow it up, he nuked it from the inside out without a sound.

Chuckling at her expression, he elaborated, "It's simple; y' see, you put down th' kickstand and pull out th' key and —"

"That's not what Ah meant and you know it," she interrupted. "Your memories are there, but barely, it's like —" She gestured feverishly at her forehead, as if the very thought of the images he'd shared with her were itching just below her skin. "An echo of someone speaking. A shadow of someone who's just left the room. Ah can feel them," she continued, frustrated at her inability to explain the sensation to someone who'd never had two dozen ghosts cavorting around in their skull. "Ah know Ah saw them, but you ain't in there. Gambit, where's your psyche?"

He turned his head sharply, startled. "You're serious?"

"Usually, when Ah absorb someone, a large chunk of their personality settles into my head, and Ah can't get them out. Your memories, your powers, your feelings, everything gets a nice new place in my mind —" she continued, aware of the bitter taint to her words even as she gave them voice. "You'd think that eventually Ah'd run outta room. 'Parently not."

"Non, that's not what I meant," he cut her off. "You mean, y' remember what I showed you?"

"What's that supposed to —"
"Do you remember it, Rogue?"

She stared at him, hard. He matched her gaze intently, red eyes swimming in her vision when she refused to look away. Clearly, Gambit's concerns weren't the same as her own.

It figured. Grimacing, Rogue turned away with a frown, turning inwards, mentally poking gingerly at the scenes, vivid behind her eyes.

Gambit's memories — she paused, sucking in a sharp breath:

Exerting whatever control she could before they threatened to overtake her mind, they slid into focus, merging with her experiences and creating an interplay between Remy's and her own:

*Rogue can feel the cold touch of steel controls beneath her hands. She runs the pads of bare fingers over the tracking knob, the play button, and she hears the soft whirr of the hard disks in Magneto's control room before hitting the rewind button again. The machinery is warm beneath her touch and warmer still where her hands have rested against cold metal.*

His memories, distinct from her own by their clearness — *the attention to detail that cut grooves into the hieroglyphs lining Apocalypse's tomb, the scent of her own hair just beneath his nose, the acute impression of pain — failing muscles and fresh bruises.*

His memories; seen from a Thieves' eyes, everything is animated, everything is in motion — *the swirl of dust caught in beams of light, the tiny, trembling sensation of molecules below Gambit's fingertips as he excites them. The stone — a shard — something he hadn't expected to ever come across because such a thing he himself never needed — but nonetheless, it shocks him, throws him off balance.*

*Rogue can feel the rush of Gambit's power through her own limbs, surging upwards and around — treading a fine, silken path over her arms. It makes her hair stand on end. He is encased, stronger than he's ever felt — it's feedback from the gem and it embraces him entirely. The gem... the name of it so close, and so evasive that she can't grasp it —*

Rogue could feel her heart's driving rhythm, sending a rush of adrenaline into her system that would eradicate any possible need for a cup of coffee later on in the morning.

There was something to the stone. It had changed him, somehow; enough that he could withstand her mutation. Moreover, Gambit knew it was still in New Orleans. That he'd come back to Bayville to retrieve her while knowing this was... well, Rogue didn't know what that was, but it made her uncomfortable, and it made her heart pound with the sudden knowledge that they were still touching from knee to hip.

Still, she fixed her stare on Gambit's and dared not to blink. It was a test of wills, more than any search for truth.

She wanted to snicker, and for one perfectly irrational moment, she nearly stuck out her tongue from the desire to placate her rattled nerves.

Gambit was the first to give into the silence.

Not looking away, he whispered heatedly, "Is there somethin' stuck in m' teeth?"

Rogue snorted, the tension broken, and tugged her hand back. He grinned, releasing her arm and sitting up. Rogue could feel the sizzle of his gaze as he sized up her prone form appreciatively.
"This place is disgusting," she threw over her shoulder, before rolling onto her back, and raising herself to sit beside him. She shuffled over to put an extra foot between them, for which Rogue was all the more relieved, but no more appreciative.

"Y' make it into a paradise, chérie. Don't need t' pay attention t' the scenery with you here," he countered lightly.

Rogue rolled her eyes, and turned away just enough to conceal a fast flush.

"But you didn't answer th' question." It figured he'd be relentless.

Rogue sighed, knowing full well that as long as she sat there with him, they weren't going to get anywhere unless she ignored his persistent teasing. "You ask too many, swamp rat."

"One thing at a time, then, river rat." He grinned, clasping his hands loosely between his knees. The look he favored her with was a combination of amusement and curiosity. With Remy's strong features, the gritty, unshaven look of someone who'd spent the night half-awake and watchful, it was unsettling. Again, Rogue was struck by the way he'd changed. His face was a map of strong angles, a hard-worn tan, and a mouth that pursed lightly when he smiled. It wasn't a full grin he offered her; it never completely reached his eyes though they shone all the same.

She snatched at her boots, concentrating on pulling them on instead of looking at him.

"Something happened to your powers when ya went back ta New Orleans," she said after a stretch, fiddling with one of the buckles on her boots. She carefully avoided the other two blurry memories that settled into the back of her mind.

"X-Men and their keen observational skills," he said wryly.

Rogue glared at him, gritting her teeth.

"If you're so intent on talking about it, then shed a little light for me, won't ya? What was that rock ya picked up? Why is it that you can touch me now? And," she gestured at the room around them, "How in the hell did Ah agree ta this?"

He quirked an eyebrow, watching her as he wiggled his fingers before him and produced a card, seemingly from thin air.

Rogue smirked at the fluidness of the trick. A simple sleight of hand, but he'd done it so fast that she couldn't begin to fathom where he'd drawn it from.

"My powers," he began, transferring the card, the Jack of Spades, over his knuckles, "let me charge any object's latent energy. Don't matter th' size, don't matter th' molecular structure. You excite the molecules enough, and they sing t' you." The card flashed pink, erupting in a brilliant, blinding glow of fuchsia. "The thing is, for a long time, I couldn't light up just anything."

Her gaze trained on the sparking Jack, trying to determine the difference between how he lit up the card, and how he'd scorched the two of spades of ash without as much as a lick of flame. "What do ya mean?"

"Had to be inorganic in nature," he answered, his attention fixed on the card with a reverent expression. "Concrete, paper, metal." He shrugged. "Whatever. No pulse, no problem. But that's not the interesting part."

He flicked the card with his opposite hand, and snuffed the charge as easily as he'd lit it up.
"That gem," he continued, turning to face her, "did something t' me. I can sense it now — the latent energy in everything. It's just begging t' be released. I feel it in m' bones, in m' hands, m' skin. I feel it in other people, in obstacles — I can see the potential in everything now, as obvious as a smack upside th' head. I didn't know for sure," he shrugged again, this time indolently like he was trying to downplay it. "Had t' get some tests done." He turned away, glancing at the card again as if the Jack could offer his support. "But the end result is that…" He hesitated, taking a deep breath. "Dieu, this is gonna sound crazy…"

"Ya think it changed your mutation," Rogue supplied for him.

He nodded, silently turning the card between his index and middle fingers. "I don't think it did."

"Ya know it." Rogue frowned, looking at her still un-gloved hand.

Gambit turned his gaze upwards to the ceiling to avoid looking directly at her. "I figured that out last night," he muttered. It came out in such a low murmur that Rogue almost didn't hear him.

"What?" Rogue deadpanned, getting to her knees.

"I had t' confirm it." He grimaced, still evading her glare.

"Confirm what?"

"Y' know th' bit about being able t' touch you?" He peered at her askance, trying to gauge her reaction. Remy didn't flinch, but for a second, it looked very much like he wanted to.

"You didn't know if ya could," she whispered, suddenly horrified. "Ah coulda killed ya."

"Non, non, non — wait. Because of —" He gesticulated towards himself. "Because of this, because I can sense it better than I did before, I knew after I woke up th' next day that something was a lil' different with my own biological blue printing. I did a few preliminary tests with laser defense systems and such, just t' see what this enhancement might be like — and it's controllable," he insisted. "Just a bit of a block that keeps me from touching anything directly. It's like m' own internal biokinetic charge sort of bled out. It's real thin, bit of a force field like… Star Trek, you know? No fingerprints, comprends?" He grinned a little, sucking in a short breath and offering her a brief flash of teeth. "But still the same level of sensation, n'est ce pas?"

Rogue was on her feet. She stepped over his legs in the cramped space between the bed and the wall and snatched her glove from the floor.

"Ya did it again, didn't you?" she spat.

"Quoi?" Remy asked, sounding genuinely surprised at her reaction.

"You used me! Ya hadn't been in Bayville more than twenty-four hours and you're already batting me around like a lab rat in a cage! I know what a secondary mutation is, Gambit — I talk about these possibilities with the Professor all the time. They're theoretical. They don't always happen, and when they do, it's a little like playin' roulette: you don't always know what you're gonna get."

"It's not like that, chère…"

"Don't ya 'chère' me nothing!"

She bent down, placing her feet on either side of his outstretched legs and grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt to haul him closer. "Ya took a risk at my expense," she hissed. "If you'd died, it'd be on my
head. Maybe that doesn't bother you, but me? Ah'd rather not live with that kinda guilt. Ah have enough of that ta last me a lifetime."

Gambit peered down at her hands with a frown, and then leisurely, he dragged his gaze back up to her face. A shadow of some dark thought crossed his face, and though his expression remained placid, save for the wry smirk, Remy's eyes were cold.

"Skeletons not rattlin' in y' closet these days?" he purred. "Pity. Mine's been soundin' like a Mardi Gras marching band for some time now."

Rolling his head back to peer lazily at her, Remy flashed a small, hollow smile. "While I respect your opinion on th' matter, that's not exactly right, Rogue…"

The next few seconds happened so quickly that Rogue barely had the chance to realize that Gambit had latched onto her legs and flung her over his shoulders. She hit the bed was a gasp, her booted heels smacking into the lumpy pillows, and before she could twist around, he'd leapt over her and pinned her hands.

"Y' see," he said thoughtfully, leaning closer to whisper. "If you'd listened to th' whole story you'd know that part of this involves you, and not in any way that'd be so… macabre."

"Get off me," she spat, twisting under him, trying to get a knee up.

"Non." His breath was warm and sweet, and he was close enough to make the down on her cheeks prickle pleasantly. She froze, his proximity sending off instinctual warning bells that made her press backwards and away from his skin.

"Get off now." Rogue forcibly solidified her resolve. She was infinitely grateful that her voice didn't quaver as Remy's weight settled over her knees. It prevented her bucking him off, but it put him three inches farther away.

He tutted, seeming to notice that despite his assurances about being able to touch her, Rogue wasn't relaxing. Good, she thought fiercely. Nothing was assured in life, she reminded herself frantically. Not promises. Not potential. Not nothing when it came to her mutation.

If Gambit wanted to die, she wasn't about to play his Kevorkian. Too damned bad for him. That was the only guarantee she had to offer.

"The first thing I thought of after I'd figured out that my mutation can do a whole lot more f' the both of us…" he began, his inflection softening, as if a few gentle words would placate her.

Rogue grit her teeth.

"— Was probably something that involved a seedy motel room in the middle of buttfuck nowhere Pennsylvania," she snarled. "How did Ah guess?"

He took a breath, startled, and pulled back a little. Rogue didn't fail to miss the stung expression, the slight furrowing of his brow, or the subtle downturn of his mouth.

"You really don't think too much of me do you?" he said after a moment, his voice tight.

"At this point in time, Ah wouldn't put it past ya," she spat. "You're still on top of me, aincha?"

He let go of her wrists as if scalded. Rogue readied to shove him off, but in a second, he'd shifted off her, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and was moving around the room towards the upturned
The hell was he playing at? "Drop the act, Gambit. You're a terrible actor and this damned pity party ain't gonna do anything for your image."

"It was a risk I was willing to take," he said in an undertone, collecting his trench from the floor with a snap. "For me, that is. Didn't mean t' hurt you in th' process."

Rogue pushed herself to her elbows, watching his motions guardedly. Gambit's jaw was set, his eyes downcast as he slung the trench over his shoulders and began rifling through the pockets.

He shrugged noncommittally. "Figured if th' stone could boost th' control of m' powers up to maximum effect, it'd do the same t' yours."

He didn't look back on her once as he unhooked the deadbolt and opened the door.

"I thought I owed it to you for helping me out with Jean Luc last year, seeing as how y' still don't have control and all," he said over his shoulder.

Stunned, Rogue sat up fully.

“How did you know Ah didn’t have control yet?”

He looked at her for a long moment, something working in his features. He lifted a shoulder in a...
If she held on too long, that was it. She hurt people. She was damned dangerous.

But beyond that, a small, selfish seedling of curiosity was blooming.

A mutant with her abilities could never be normal, but something closer to it? Rogue worried her lower lip, the decisive tug of her attentions pulled to the sound of receding footsteps seeping through the thin walls.

Swallowing a ripple of embarrassment, she peered around the debris of the hotel room.

On the ground, in the centre of the wreckage created by the upturned coffee table were Gambit's scattered cards; one in particular drew her attention.

Breath hitching a little, Rogue yanked on her glove, and plucked the Queen of Hearts from the pile.

—

"You don't want to go in there," Lance muttered, leaning against the doorframe that led into the Brotherhood's Great Room. Jabbing his thumbs through his belt loops, he pretended to inspect the scuffed toes of his boots.

"What? Why?" Pietro tried to peek over Lance's shoulder, but Lance merely shook his head, trying to stifle a laugh.

"Uh uh." His jaw quivered as his shoulders began to shake. "I hate to say it —" Lance managed between chuckles.

A wail cut through the otherwise quiet house, followed by several loud curses and a strangled sob.

"But when I said it was a bad idea, I wasn't kidding," he said, flinching as a chair flew from the great room and crashed into the opposite wall.

Pietro sidestepped the soaring La-Z-Boy easily, and folded his arms across his chest.

"What the hell, man?" Toad muttered from the top of the stairs. Wanda knocked him out of the way as she strode past. Toad squawked, teetering on the landing precariously.

"Can't I get any sleep around here?" Wanda grimaced as she shoved between the boys.

"Wanda, don't go in there, believe me —" Pietro cautioned, grabbing at her wrist. His fingers scrabbled over the lacings on her gauntlet. She glowered at the offending appendage, and with a slap of blue current, she flung Pietro's hand off her arm.

A bandage wrapped her wrist, which she tightened with a perfunctory tug.

"Do not grope at me, Pietro. Ever," she warned.

She hadn't been the only one injured in the previous evening's scrap with the X-Men, but all things considered, and compared to the display she was met with upon entering the Great Room, Wanda was probably the least affected out of all of them.

"What's wrong with Pyro?" she demanded, only to be met with more shoe-gazing.
Sniffing disdainfully, she stepped into the archway.

"Bad idea," Lance said, not a second too early.

Wanda reeled backwards, stumbling into Pietro, who propped her upright.

"Not what you were expecting, huh, sis?" he said.

Wanda, at least, had the decency to appear only slightly ruffled.

Lance snorted and shifted his weight with a wince. The sting of pain cut the laughter from his face.

"Shnookums?" Toad called from the top of the stairs, taking them gingerly, one at a time, rather than with his usual spring.

Wanda didn't have the gumption to snap at him; instead, she turned to her brother for reassurance.

"It's like one of those bad horror movies," she whispered.

"Worse," Lance chuckled. "Ever seen that movie with that wizard dork?"

Pietro cocked an eyebrow.

Lance gave the siblings an exasperated look, making an elaborate squiggling motion with his index finger. "You know the one with the glasses, and the scar?" he explained, finally working out something that resembled a lightening bolt in midair.

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From the living room, Pyro bellowed, "SHE WAS MY FRIEND!" He whinnied, his howl cut short with another sob.

"Uh," Toad said, peeking through the group's combined legs. "Wrong line, guy."

"I'M GOING TO KILL HIM!" Pyro choked, his voice hoarse from crying.

"Man, I can't watch," Toad cringed, shuffling back from the doorway.

"What's Pyro complaining about?" Freddy asked, lumbering out of the kitchen with a carton of milk squeezed between his thick fingers in one hand, and a gargantuan bowl of cereal in the other. "Someone ate all my frozen waffles, and there are no marshmallows left for my cereal."

The group stared between each other, exchanging uncertain glances.

"I like marshmallows," Fred insisted morosely. "They take forever to get soggy."

Lance piped up, "John's having a rough morning, Blob. You think you can talk to him? You know — calm him down a little?"

Fred blinked. "Me?"

"You're the only one who won't get killed if Pyro throws the couch, homes," Toad answered, backing Lance now that the power structure within the group had shifted.

Lance offered a sage nod, as if to approve the remark, and cocked his head at the destroyed armchair, broken into a mess of stuffing and splintered wood. A chunk of torn chintz fabric clung to the banister where the chair had scraped past before slamming into the plaster on the far side of the hall.
"That was my favorite recliner," Fred said, dejected.

"Don't tell him there aren't any Twinkies left," Pietro said in a furtive whisper to Lance. "I can't handle them both in a bad mood. I'll kill myself first."

In response, St. John Allerdyce keened.

"He came in last, this morning," Wanda hissed, sinking her nails into Pietro's forearm. He winced, but didn't voice his complaint. "I didn't think it was this bad. I was too busy enjoying the iodine to hear him." In explanation, she gestured to her injured arm absentely, her eyes fixed on the scene before them.

"Didn't see him either after Gambit took off," Pietro added. "The psycho —"

"Psychic," Wanda corrected.

"Whatever. *She* nearly chucked me into a mailbox. I couldn't run fast enough to get away."

Wanda threw him a wry look.

"Well that was after I made sure you were okay," he added hastily.

"Did anyone know what happened to John after Colossus got a hold of him?" Lance asked. He was met with several blank expressions. "Think we oughta find out. This'll go on all day otherwise, and we don't have that much good furniture left," he added. Slowly, four pairs of eyes turned to Blob, standing at the edge of the group, still looking at his armchair sadly.

"Freddy?"

Turning back to them, Blob took in their expectant faces. Finally, he shoved his breakfast at Toad, who toppled backwards into Lance's legs. Fred ambled past, a look of determination cutting lines like warpaint into his sagging cheeks.

"Brave man, Blob," Pietro said, too loud.

Wanda snorted, adding in an undertone, "Or just too stupid to know any better."

—

The Great Room was a mess. As a central living area, it had been the place that suffered the most abuse from the Brotherhood's members — but never in his three years spent boarding in Mystique's former house, had Fred seen it in worse condition:

Chunks of the carpet had been torn out, the window hangings — those that remained — drooped, and the remaindered furniture was in a state not fit to grace the garbage dump. At the center of the room, Pyro hunkered, his breathing ragged.

"St. John?" Fred tried in the gentlest tone he could manage.

Sniffing, his shoulders heaving as he sighed, Pyro's head lolled on his neck.

"*Sin Jun!*" he corrected tightly, his voice unnaturally high-pitched.
From Fred's vantage point at the door, he could just make out the filthy bottoms of the Australian's socks from where he knelt, facing the fireplace. Why Pyro had thought to remove his boots, but keep his uniform on, was not entirely beyond him — but Fred didn't want to hazard a verbal guess to confirm it.

He could see clearly the severed fuel pipes hanging listlessly off Pyro's gloves.

They flopped uselessly against the floor while John's shoulders shook.

He laughed. It was a strangled, watery sound.

"I'm gonna kill him, mate," he sniveled, not turning around. "He knew — the bastard knew — and he let us walk right into it like a bunch of bloody sheep. Why do I always have to be somebody's bitch?" Pyro sighed heavily and let loose an unnerving titter that, anywhere else, could pass easily for nervous laughter. In Pyro's case, Fred knew better.

This wasn't good.

Fred shifted uneasily, the battered floor creaking beneath his weight. "John?" he tried again. Pyro ignored him.

"My poor baby," Pyro cooed, petting his arms and the spaghetti noodle tubes that flopped from them. "Yeh never did anything to deserve this, love. You were so beautiful." He hiccupped, and Fred took an apprehensive step forward to peer over Pyro's shoulder. "Wasn't she beautiful, mate?" Pyro didn't look away from the compacted bundle of twisted metal in his arms. He caressed it lovingly, running his gloved fingers against the dips and swells, smearing the leaking lighter fluid across the warped surface. It left behind an oily sheen as it evaporated, and the air stunk of it — acrid and volatile.

Fred swallowed. Nope. Not good at all.

He hoped Lance had had the sense to pocket the matches off the fireplace mantle before Pyro really had the opportunity to mourn the loss of his firepower.

"Wasn't she beautiful?" Pyro shouted, his shoulders hunching to form a protective wall around his former flame thrower.

"Y-yeah," Fred managed. "She — she was great, John."

"Her name," he snarled, clutching his demolished fuel pack to his chest and twisting around, "was Stella."

From beyond the cover of the wall leading to the hallway, someone muffled a snort.

"I'm gonna kill him," Pyro said again. "Right after I give the old girl a proper seeing off," he babbled, his lower lip quivering a little. "Gonna bury her in the backyard, right under the hydrangea."

"That'll be… nice." Fred winced, and hastened to add, "I'll help you, John. I can get the shovel and —"

"No!" Pyro's voice rose a few octaves as he waved Fred off. "No, this is between me and the old lady. She'd have wanted it like that."

Fred frowned. Pyro hiccupped again.
"Pyro?"

Heaving a huge sigh, Pyro stood up on wobbly legs. Slowly, he turned, and Fred had to divert his gaze. Pyro's face was a blotchy mess — wet from crying and red-ringed around the eyes.

"Yeah, mate?" he asked feebly, rocking the fuel pack like he would a baby.

"Who are you gonna kill, exactly?" After a slight hesitation, he added, "Colossus? I would have helped, you know — but you were already in that dumpster and —"

Pyro sniffed and jutted his chin defiantly.

"Not Piotr," he interrupted petulantly. "Who else? 'Y' need a lil' action, need a lil' fun. Mebbe blow off a lil' steam — all yeh gotta do is distract 'em," Pyro imitated Gambit in a falsetto. "The same arse who didn't bloody well leave us any compensation for our —“ He hesitated, glancing at his fuel tank forlornly a moment. "Sacrifices," he finished at a higher pitch.

Pyro's face crumpled and he sank to a crouch again, sobbing haplessly.

"What?" Lance snapped, stepping around the corner. "What do you mean he didn't leave us compensation — we had an agreement —"

Wanda pushed past him, levitating the remaining furniture with her uninjured hand. She flipped the couch over mid-air, dumping the cushions. When nothing other than a few crumbs and some loose change fell to the carpet, she moved on to the ruins of the coffee table, levitating the wreckage in case they'd missed something, in case the small bundle had been moved or buried during Pyro's fit.

"It was right here! He left it on the table last night. I saw it with my own eyes!" she snapped.

Pyro laughed mirthlessly.

"You lot obviously don't know Gambit that well," he sneered, the expression falling as he clutched at the tank again. He pressed his cheek against the crumpled ball.

"Thieves' honor," Pietro interjected wryly. He leaned against the doorjamb, his hip jutting out.

"Figures."

"But it was here when we left, Pietro!" Wanda argued, dropping her hex so that the remaining furniture fell to the ground with several cracking sounds and resounding thuds.

"Didn't I say we should have given it a demo beforehand?" Lance looked to the ceiling as if to say, 'why?' to whatever omnipresent being was lurking overhead.

Fred followed his gaze, though all he saw was crumbling plaster.

"We were just being practical," Wanda muttered bitterly. "Considering the fact that Gambit had led us to believe he was planning on sticking around a little longer before heading back…"

"You actually believed that?"

"I told you, Pietro, something didn't feel right the instant those charges went off at Xavier's," she shot back.

"Not to mention that you thought this was a great idea to begin with," Lance interjected, pointing an
accusing finger at Pietro.

"Hey, I was only agreeing with John, man —“

"It's good to know you're still capable of functioning all on your own, Quicksilver. At least we'll know next time that your mouth's still faster than your brain."

"Watch it, Alvers —“

"Or what? Gonna sick daddy on me? Last I heard he was running around calling himself Joseph in some loony bin up at Redwood Pines — can't even remember that he was the 'Master of Magnetism.' A lot of good that'll do for you, Junior."

"Hey!" Toad called, wincing as he stood to his full height from amidst the wreckage of the television unit. He held aloft a small, carefully wrapped bundle. "Is this it? I think I found it, yo, the Gem of cyt-cot-torra-ACK!"

Fred turned, Wanda leapt, Lance spun, but Pietro was the quickest. He'd snatched the bundle from Todd's fingers and was across the room before anyone had even taken a step towards the corner.

"Cyttorak," Pietro corrected. "Do you need me to spell it out for you, genius?"

He squeezed the bundle tentatively and sniffed it. With a disgruntled grimace, he dropped it almost as quickly as he'd picked it up.

"False alarm; it's one of Fred's old sandwiches."

The floor rumbled.

"John?" Lance ground out.

Pyro looked up blearily, a vague smile on his face as he rocked back and forth on his heels.

"I think you're going to need some help with that —“

"STELLA!" Pyro barked.

"With Stella, yeah." Lance balled his fists at his sides. Pyro's recently destroyed object of affections being the furthest thing from his mind. "And after?"

Wanda nodded her grim assent. “We know where he’s going.”

A silent plan of vengeance began formulating among the members of the Brotherhood of Mutants.

"That mean we're taking a vacation?" Toad piped up, looking hopeful despite the situation. "I hear New Orleans is one of the most romantic cities in the world, yo —“

"I hear the swamps have alligators big enough to swallow a man whole," Wanda returned, her lip curling as she appraised Todd. "Frog legs on the menu?" she asked with mock innocence.

"I'll buy the first round if we get that rock." Lance sneered.

"And I'll get the second, if we take down the Cajun," Pietro added. "Permanently."

Pyro sniffed. "It's not a proper wake unless ya get properly pished.” He shook his head, chuckling without humor.
There was a pause as they collected themselves, coming to an agreement without words, without needing to vocalize the promise of retribution in plainer terms.

After a moment of looking between the Brotherhood's determined expressions, Fred asked, "What are we doing?"

—

The door shut behind him with a groan. Someone needed to oil the hinges, Remy thought absently.

He paused, leaning against the chipped stucco wall outside room number fourteen, and waited.

"C'mon, chérie," he whispered, more to himself than the girl he'd just left in the hotel room.

Three seconds. Six seconds. Ten, and the floorboards groaned inside as Rogue got off the bed.

Remy smirked and pushed himself off the wall. He strode to the end of the narrow gallery that lined the second floor of the motel, and leapt over the banister — taking the fifteen-foot drop to the concrete below with ease.

He landed, and with a nimble spring in his step, strolled over to his bike without looking over his shoulder. In passing a nearby garbage can, Gambit pulled from his pocket a very battered-looking parcel — a decoy, naturally, that was nothing more than a pretty piece of painted glass.

If there was one thing Jean Luc had taught him, it was always to have proper leverage. With that, he dropped the bogus stone, smirking at the resounding clang as it hit the bottom of the metal receptacle.

It was only a matter of moments before he heard the whining door to room number fourteen as it opened.

He slowed his step.

Rogue's voice cut the chill morning air. It could have melted any late-season frost:

"Remy!"

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:
- Mechanic (Poker): A cheater who uses sleight-of-hand to arrange the deck or deal to benefit himself or a partner.
- "S' like m' own internal biokinetic charge sort of bled out." Gambit #16
- "She was my friend, ad nauseum": Tip of the hat to "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban" in there. Paraphrasing the film rather than the book… as if Lance would read for recreational purposes.
- Stella, Pyro's fuel tank: A nod to "A Streetcar Named Desire."
Translations:
Au contraire, chérie: On the contrary, dear.
Coyoon: (Cajun) idiot
D'accord: alright
Dieu: God
Femme: Woman
Fille: Girl
Homme: Man
Ma belle: my sweet, my pretty
Merci: Thank you
Merde: Shit
Non, non, non — attends, toi: No, no, no — wait a second, you!
Oui: Yes
Quoi?: What?
Breathy Southern Belles at least had an excuse: corsets. Rogue was nearly gasping as she threw open the door and flung herself onto the gallery. In the distance, a whippoorwill warbled a tinny falsetto, and beyond that, the open stretch of the interstate hummed with the rush of wind and clatter of truck tires.

It made her shout seem that much louder:

"Remy!"

True to his word, Gambit had left his motorcycle in the small parking lot just outside the motel: one floor down and three spots over, just as he'd said. Perched on the bike, his hands in his lap and his head bowed, Remy fiddled with the keys to the Harley.

_Fiddling_, she thought, nearly breathing a sigh of relief.

Was he waiting for her? A quick twinge of ire at the fact he _expected_ her to stagger after him met with her initial relief. Conflicted, Rogue raked her hands through her hair as she made her way across the second floor balcony, the echoes of his name still ringing in her ears.

The clang of her boot heels racketing down the aluminum staircase was unnaturally loud. Even though her steps were sure, everything else in the surrounding area, including the small thicket of undergrowth and the feeble forestation blocking off the motel from the highway, seemed slightly duller, a little more detached.

It was the polished machine beneath him, the gleaming chrome and brilliant red paint, the dewy black of the wheels, and the scuffed brown of his upturned collar that were the most real to her at that moment.

When Gambit turned his head, it was the glint of his eyes and the tired smudges beneath that seemed to rouse her into full wakefulness. Like emerging from a dream, Remy's lukewarm reception was the face-full of cold water Rogue needed to realize the seriousness of what he'd been trying to tell her:

If he'd gained another handle on his mutation, could she do the same to hers?

It was a dizzying thought. Steadying herself against the railing, Rogue found that the metal was cold even beneath her gloved palm.

She'd been hasty, and part of her was relieved that he hadn't taken off without her.

"Remy?" she said again, quieter this time, as she stepped onto concrete.
The sun arched over the treetops in the East. Where the shadows receded, its fingers slowly crept across the parking lot and the light lit his features for the second time that morning:

There was a faint trace of stubble lining Gambit's jaw, and the little auburn pinch beneath his lower lip was a brighter shade of russet with the sun behind him. He scrubbed at his chin, running his fingertips through his trimmed goatee. For a moment, Rogue wondered what it would feel like to press her naked fingers against the roughened planes of his face — to cup his strong jaw, feeling the muscles flex as he smiled…

She shook herself.

The realization that she'd been the one to bruise him, not physically, but with her snappish rejoinders, made her stomach constrict. Somehow, she thought, it might've been easier for the guy to take a punch.

He had come back for her. He'd never promised to, never in words; they weren't friends, and he had no reason to do anything he didn't have to. She was the one who'd made the decision to go back to the X-Men — it was just unfortunate that he had reminded her of it. She had done a fair job of convincing herself otherwise.

But he had, as promised, opened the door for her once before.

Rogue wasn't positive that made him a gentlemen, exactly, since his methods were a tad questionable, but at least this time it didn't seem like he'd forcibly shoved her through; he hadn't kidnapped her or drugged her, and she suspected that while his approach was unorthodox, he’d turn around and bring her straight back to Xavier’s if she asked.

He continued watching her as if he had all the time in the world while she worked out the weight of what he'd just told her:

This was an opportunity. This was another chance.

This was Remy trying to redeem himself in her eyes.

Rogue had hoped that despite everything, he'd left her the Queen of Hearts as a reminder that he would return someday; that this was Remy's version of an I.O.U.

She rubbed the new card between her fingers, feeling its stiff backing bend beneath her gloves.

Sighing, unsure how to begin — if she could begin at all — Rogue nearly missed the small upturn at the corner of his mouth.

"Bonjour," he said.

It was just that simple.

And just like that, the spell was broken. Gambit turned back to the keys in his fingers, slinging them around absently. They jangled together, metal clacking into metal against the soft barrier of his palm.

Somehow, she could recall that particular feeling with absurd clarity now that she'd dislodged his memories from her skull. He had calluses, and his fingers would be warm despite the chill — but not quite as warm as his mouth.

She rubbed her knuckles absently where he'd left his kiss the night before.
Stop it, she berated herself.

Rogue shut her eyes and took a deep breath. "How far is it to Louisiana?"

He didn't glance at her as he answered, "'Bout a day's ride."

Silence. Nothing sounded save the intermittent drone of cars on the freeway, the irritating call of birds on the far side of the property, and the steady clink of keys.

"And…"

He looked over his shoulder, holding her gaze for a second, and looked away again, squinting into the approaching daylight.

Rogue blew out a breath and shifted her weight, crunching the card in her fist. She forced her hand to slacken around it and smoothed it against her hip forcibly.

"And if ya meant what you said up there…"

"I always mean what I say, chère," he said, his tone level.

"But ya don't always say what you mean," she returned plaintively. "How can Ah believe ya?"

He turned around on the seat, swung his leg over the side, and folded his arms across his chest in a fluid gesture that recalled experience, rather than practice. Scooting over enough so that the passenger seat was free, he patted the space, indicating that she should join him.

Rogue squashed the playing card again in her fist.

It was reflexive, she told herself: like a tick.

"C'mon," he inclined his head.

She looked at him guardedly. "Said the spider to the fly."

Gambit grinned. Peering at her from beneath his lashes, a small smile tugging devilishly at the corner of his mouth, he extracted a battered pack of cigarettes.

"Y' already got this Cajun tangled up in y' web, Roguey," he hummed. "Not much worse you can do t' me now."

Rogue started and then pinched her lips shut, swallowing a retort.

"I'm not gonna bite," he said. Raising an eyebrow, he extracted a Marlboro and clamped it between his lips. The cigarette tilted upwards a little as he smirked. "Not unless y' ask nicely, anyhow."

Gingerly, Rogue took a step forwards, though she didn't take the bait.

Gambit pressed his pinkie finger to the end of the smoke, igniting the tobacco into a slow burn. In his other hand, he began spinning the keys around his index finger.

Tink tink tink tink.

He inhaled, and Rogue watched the muscles across his chest stretch languidly.

The card was fast becoming a wad of matted paper in her palm.
"Can't ya ever answer a question without skirting around it first?" she asked. Something was amiss here. Granted, Gambit didn't strike her as the all-benevolent type, but he'd convinced her that somehow she'd slighted him.

This was too nonchalant for forgiveness, and too tense for a good ol' time between friends.

Which they weren't, she reminded herself for the second time.

"I'm just thinking," he replied with an indolent shrug. "If I say th' wrong thing, you're gonna bolt like a jack rabbit." Seeing her incensed expression, he pointed. "Y' see? Just like that. Or," he paused, wetting his lip as if tasting the accusation, "You're gonna try t' hit me again."

Rogue began to protest, but he cut her off with a silencing wave of his hand.

"Pardon; how soon my memory plays tricks with me. Y' kicked me in th' back of the head; your first punch was too slow." He waved idly with his smoke, leaving thin, bluish-grey rings to dissolve around his shoulders. "It's a slight triviality, truly, that left hook." Gambit pursed his lips and took another drag, eyeing her intently.

The keys continued their rapid spin around his free finger. Tink tink tink tink…

"You're forgetting that this is the second time this has happened," she countered, ignoring the sound as best she could. "The second time Ah've woken up in a strange place, not a hundred percent convinced that you're lookin' out for my 'best interests'."

"Trust me, I remember the first time quite well," he assured her. "This time you're not tied up, not drugged, not nothing. Like I said," he gestured lazily to the dismal parking lot, "you wanted t' come. Y' just –" Gambit hesitated, surveying her expression as if calculating how irate his response would make her, "…didn't know it yet."

Rogue inhaled deeply, balling her hands into fists, and squashing the ruined Queen of Hearts against her right hip. She shut her eyes, collecting on a brief pause before she outright yelled at him for being a smartmouth. She was not going to do that, she reassured herself, but he wasn't making it any easier to squash the impulse to handle him then and there, then wash out the bloodstains later.

"You're singing a different tune now, aincha?" she bit out. When Gambit's expression didn't shift from bemused neutrality, she conceded, "Ah don't remember it. Ah don't remember making that decision."

“For true?” he asked.

Tink tink tink tink tink… Rogue grit her teeth.

"Yeah, really." She didn’t believe herself either.

"Mebbe it was th' shock to your system. It's been a while since y' absorbed anybody," he said, untroubled. He was toying with her — trying to get to admit to it: she wanted this. She wanted control.

She looked up at him, surprised at first, before the invasiveness of the statement caught up with her and she glared outright.

"How do ya figure that exactly?"

"Quoi?" Gambit looked around himself, feigning a graceful sort of stupidity that didn't at all suit him.
"That's why you didn't want t' absorb Toad, non? Y' got control problems, Rogue, and that's just th' beginning of the list: You haven't willingly absorbed anyone since Apocalypse… No one at all, in fact, and I'm willing t' bet that's why you're so wound up at the fact that it had t' be me who broke your track record."

"No one knows that," she hissed, stepping forwards. "No one except —"

"Th' Professor and the good Doctor McCoy. It's in your file — but that I knew six months back," he added, flippant.

"What file?" she demanded, forcefully swatting at the hovering cloud of smoke he blew upwards to avoid sending it straight into her face. It still stank.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "I'm impressed you held out this long without using your powers. I'm more impressed that no one else figured it out." He paused, speculative. "Does Wolvie know?"

"No," Rogue ground out, too quickly.

Nodding as if he'd suspected as much, but found it amusing nonetheless, he chuckled. "Us two — y' know th' story, chère — we both got our share of secrets. Sometimes it's better t' keep a lil' mystère about, non? Saves a lot of heartache."

"Don't change the subject," she snapped, her patience wearing dangerously thin. "Ya keep avoiding the question, Cajun."

"And you keep avoiding th' problem," he pointed out.

"Ah didn't have a problem until you showed up."

"And y' still don't. All you've got is a choice," he said. "You can gimme the benefit of the doubt, get on this bike, and forgive my past transgressions, or you can tell me t' stuff myself, and I'll take you home."

Gaping, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly, Rogue spluttered.

"Just think about it for a second." Remy held up his hand, mimicking her threat from earlier by wagging his bare fingers, the keys dangling against his palm. It was the same warning gesture she'd used as leverage against Toad, one meant to inspire fear, to convey the danger that one touch was all it took to break a person.

One touch made her a liability.

Somehow, Gambit warped the meaning of a bared palm, turning it from a weapon into an invitation.

"How long y' wanna wait before you learn that you don't have t' live like that?" he asked, all traces of mirth wiped away with the illusion that morning in this ramshackle, nowhere part of Pennsylvania was pretty.

"Like what?" Rogue hugged herself, her mouth suddenly dry.

"Y' think that mebbe you'd be a lil' less obvious if y' didn't keep up this act?" He pointed at her with his cigarette, remembering finally to tap off the ash. "Th' makeup, th' clothes. It's very Seattle mid-nineteen ninety. You keep everyone at a distance. Y' done it so long I don't think you even realize it anymore." He shook his head. "You keep scaring everyone away who tries t' get close."
She snorted, struggling to keep her voice free of the sharp strain of anger. "Where do you get off?"

Gambit paused, a slow grin spreading across his face as sure as sloe gin leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Rogue winced a moment too late.

"Y' wanna find out?" he asked, voice thick with suggestion.

"Ah set myself up for that, didn't Ah?" she said flatly.

"No more then usual, girl." Grinning, he flicked his cigarette into the gutter behind her.

Rogue watched the embers bounce into nothingness, blown in circles by a halting breeze that couldn't decide which direction to send the ashes.

"You don't know me," she said after a moment.

"I know more than y' think."

"This 'file' of yours? Probably somethin' pulled together by Magneto, right?" She glowered. "If you wanted ta know anything about my life, he ain't the person ta talk to."

"I know."

Surprised at his easy acquiescence, Rogue blinked at him for a long moment. Unspoken was the mutual understanding that if Magneto hadn't spilled the beans about her life with or before the X-Men, her estranged mother had probably done her share of damage.

Damnit, she thought.

Mystique was never totally remiss when it came to stirring things up for her or her half-brother. Lord knew where the woman was lurking now, but Rogue would bank on it that she was never too far off.

"So." She rebuffed him, "Ya don't know me, swamp rat." With a hard swallow, she dug her fingers into her arms, trying as best she could to mask the sudden swell of insecurity from being scrutinized so brazenly. The ragged corner of the Queen poked out between her fingers and elbow. Rogue didn't bother trying to hide the card. "You couldn't possibly know what Ah want."

Gambit's gaze seemed to fall on the small triangle of paper; it was white and red against the black of Rogue's uniform, a stark contrast to the reinforced material. He didn't mention it. A moment later his attention was fixed on her expression squarely, the ghost of a smirk tugging at his mouth.

His mouth. Which she stared at for an entire half-beat longer than she should have. Guilty, her gaze flicked back to his. She turned away, feeling her cheeks burn.

"Not if y' don't gimme the chance."

Nothing good could possibly come of this. If Gambit was anything like he was a year back, there was nothing selfless about this entire interlude. She had every reason to be suspicious, she reminded herself. No one, no one at all offered up the sort of unconditional, incredible promise without wanting something in return. Never mind that the thought alone was too big to grasp at once: what they were talking about, without having given voice to it, was control.

Control over her powers meant control over her life.

It meant not being afraid to hold someone’s hand.
It meant not feeling like she was such a fucking hazard if she wore a tank top.

It meant quiet in her mind.

It meant maybe, someday, not feeling like she had to stop herself from feeling like she wanted something more when someone looked at her the way Remy was looking at her right then.

If anything, it was crap. Crap on toast, Rogue decided — so why, for the life of her, was she entertaining the idea of sticking around and setting a spell?

_Tink tink tink tink tink tink tink…_

Gambit was twirling the keys again.

"Do ya have ta have an answer ta everything?" she asked finally, ignoring the small lump condensing at the base of her throat.

"Do you have t' be so stubborn?" he shot back, this time a little more good-naturedly.

"Ah don't trust ya," she said.

"That's funny. Half th' time I rarely trust myself." He winked.

"Just tell me something," she said, ignoring his attempt to banter again.

"Shoot."

She turned and looked at him hard.

"Why are you doing this?"

Gambit stood up, the motorcycle groaning as he lifted his weight. He took a step forwards so that he towered over her, and then leaned down a little so that their gazes levelled.

"I'm doin' this for me," he replied, an unshakable intentness changing his entire countenance.

Rogue blinked. Well, she had expected a whole lot of different things to come tumbling out of his mouth, but she hadn't expected _that_.

The leaden, heavy sensation in her stomach didn't ease her tension, but she nodded slowly nonetheless. It was probably as close to the truth as he would get. He straightened.

A pregnant pause settled between them, neither willing to step away. Rogue searched his expression. Veiled as it was, it didn't betray him. Lord, he'd had practice with his poker face. What in hell was she getting herself into?

Finally, bitterly, Rogue accepted with a frown and a nod.

Gambit's eyes widened as if surprised that she wasn't arguing with him, and when Rogue moved to turn away, he tucked two fingers beneath her chin and drew her gaze back to his.

"Don't," she cut him off firmly. She set her jaw, daring him to respond.

Gambit reserved himself to a slight inclination of his head.

"If Ah find out," she said in a throaty purr, "that ya lied ta me, that this is just another scam ta use my
powers for your own benefit?"

A small smirk quirked the corner of his mouth, but he repressed it. Ducking his head, he squinted at her almost comically.

Rogue dropped her gaze, lingering pointedly on his mouth.

"Ah am gonna call up the organization that fitted Logan with his claws," she murmured, finding she was able to taste the smoke when he breathed, "and Ah'm gonna have 'em do the same thing ta me. And when that's done? Ah'm gonna slice up your hide, find that Tante Mattie of yours, and have her make me some real gumbo."

She smacked her lips, her eyes narrowed to slits.

Gambit 'hmmed' and lidded his eyes, apparently appreciating how close their little tête-à-tête put them in proximity to one another.

"Y' just can't wait t' get a piece of this homme for yourself, can you?"

She scrunched her nose. "Ah take it back. Ah think ya might be too wiry ta make a good soup."

Gambit did not hesitate to slide his covered knuckles against her cheek as a reminder. It was merely a matter of decorum, she reminded herself: he was trying to earn her trust by only gingerly pushing at her boundaries.

She stared him down, marking him, her jaw clenched.

It wasn't that it wasn't nice.

It was everything that until she had control, she was still lethal.

Despite what he could or couldn't do, the "no touching" rule was still firmly in place. As far as Remy was concerned, Rogue was all too aware of the risk inherent in getting too close to him.

What if his "shield" failed? What if her mutation was stronger than what he could handle? Oh shit, Rogue thought. Oh hell. He'd let go of his control last night, she realized. Absorption wasn't impossible. Rogue wet her lips, readying to ease out from under his touch — so close to his skin, a knot of worry settled in her chest. The sudden awareness of how desperately stupid the entire situation was turning out to be made her shiver.

Gambit noticed, but he misunderstood the involuntary reaction as one of pleasure.

"Y' wouldn't accept an apology," he murmured, seemingly satisfied that she was distracted. His thumb sliding against her jaw left a warm trail behind on her skin, the lightest brush of thin fabric the only thing keeping her rooted to the spot. "Not last year, not right now. This is how I'm gonna atone for it."

It was like a rock dropping in the deep pond of self-awareness. The admission broke her unease, hauling her back to the shores of control like a lifeline.

Atone for what, she thought? Kidnapping her?

He leaned closer, invading her space. Holding firm, not pulling back, she decided: What utter crap, she thought. Who did he think he was fooling? Instead of drawing away, she leaned imperceptibly forwards.
"Gambit?" she murmured, dragging her gaze to his mouth — a bare few inches away from hers.

"Oui, chérie?"

His breath came out in a moist tuft against her cheek. Rogue sucked in a small breath through parted lips, smiling secretively.

"Just because you can touch me," she whispered, her arm drawing back to find just the right amount of force to press against his chest, "doesn't mean Ah'm gonna let ya."

Gambit staggered backwards, cursing colorfully and caught off guard by her shove.

“Just a technicality.” He grinned despite the show of force.

Rogue snorted, advancing on light feet. Deftly, she plucked the keys from the ground before he could straighten up.

"Admit it, swamp rat, you ain't used ta having someone set ya straight," she said.

Hooking the small bundle of jangling keys into a belt loop behind her back, Rogue bit down on the middle finger of her left glove, peeling it off with her teeth.

"Non, mais, it's still it's own peculiar sort of amusement."

"Only you would think it's an enjoyable past time ta get knocked around by a girl," she muttered wryly, tucking the glove beneath her arm and sliding out the Queen with her bare fingers. She hoped this would work. It would be the only way she'd know for sure if she could tolerate him.

"But what a fine fille she is. Y' can smack this homme around as much as you like. Punishment ain't exactly my thing, but if you've offering t' spank me…" He paused, his eyes flitting between her hand and the crook of her arm. "That was th' best pull I've seen y' do yet," he admitted, his flirtation derailed.

"Really? Why thank ya Mister LeBeau. Ah guess having a little bit of your filth in my head might be beneficial," she quipped.

"Unless you aim t' be playing dirty, I dunno how much good that's gonna do ya."

"Well, since we're settling old scores this morning…"

She sauntered up to him with a swagger that would have made Logan proud. Gambit cocked an eyebrow, stalled momentarily by her boldness. Rogue's eyes narrowed.

"Let's just say Ah owe ya this one."

She held his gaze and presented the card to him, face up. Frowning, Gambit peered down at the Queen.

A slow grin broke out over his face, and he leaned forwards, grasping the card — ensuring that his fingers grazed hers. Her inhalation was audible, and Rogue's attention snapped downwards at the feeling of warm, dry fingertips over her knuckles. His fingers were covered, she reminded herself. She had to pull this one off on her own, just like the Danger Room.

"This mean you forgive me?" He lidded his gaze and pulled her towards him a little. Rogue, responding in kind, leaned in, her eyes downcast. "I told you that y' were th' sentimental type," he said. “Because this feels mighty familiar t’ me.”
When she looked up finally, she was smiling.

The shade of her eyes shifted from grey, to hazel, to green — and then, like smoke, from the corners tumbled deep obsidian. The black quickly overtook the white of her sclera, and her pupils slid into a burning red to match Remy's own.

"This means Ah'll give ya the benefit of the doubt," she murmured. "For now."

Between them, the Queen of Hearts flared to life — it crackled in Remy's fingers as Rogue let go, making a break for the Harley.

Gambit stared at her retreating figure a moment, considering. Awkwardly, he shook his wrist, sending sparks to the pavement below, peering down at the charged card.

With a grin, he shouted after her, "I like th' odds of that!"

A deft flick of his wrist, and the Queen sailed into the parking lot behind him. It exploded, sending a shower of gravel into the air just as Rogue jammed the key into the bike's ignition, and revved the engine.

"You coming, Cajun?"

The bike rumbled; a growling, thrumming thing between her legs that shuddered. She glanced over her shoulder, daring him to follow.

Cracking his neck, Remy tipped his head to the side, appreciative of the view she presented him with. Without preamble, he broke into a sprint as Rogue swung the bike around. Trench coat flapping open, legs pumping, Gambit leapt and landed on the seat behind her before she could ride off without him. The force of his landing caused the bike to fishtail, spitting gravel and dirt in an arc behind them, and Rogue was forced to lean hard to level off.

"Didn't say nothing about y' driving," he said into her ear a moment later as they peeled out of the parking lot.

She tensed, his hot breath against the back of her neck sending a shiver — a rather pleasant one this time — down her spine. Gambit slid both hands lightly into the spot where her thighs met her hips, and Rogue blanched — the bike veering dangerously left, cutting off a beaten Buick as they reached the overpass.

He chuckled. She could practically feel him wetting his lips.

"Ah didn't say nothing about putting your damned hands all over me!" she snapped over her shoulder. "Hold on to the bike, swamp rat, or I'll leave ya with stubs instead of arms!"

"And if Remy falls off? Y' gonna come back for me?" he teased.

She snorted, twisting the throttle hard and accelerating as they took the turnoff onto the interstate. "Ah think you'd make a handsome stain on the road, cher," she shot back.

"That's not right," he complained. "What have I done t' deserve such cruel treatment?"

"Sugah, that's just my take on your lame pick up lines."

"That Mississippi flavor, ein?"

"Damn right."
"Bet it tastes like mud pie," he goaded, obligingly removing his hands from her hips. He gripped the back of the seat and leaned forwards to blow into her ear.

"You ain't never gonna find out either way," she snapped, hunching her shoulders against the tickle of hot air. He smelled like smoke and spent spearmint. "Ah said —"

Remy grinned, peering at her in the rear-view mirror and waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Y' said 'don't touch meh!'" he parroted in a falsetto. "It appears, as the Oxford Dictionary would put it, that I most certainly am not."

Rogue grumbled, scowling at him and his good old boy charm in their shared reflection, and then took a double take at her smeared eyeliner.

"Oh my gawd…"

Behind her, Remy chuckled at the horrified look on her face, partially relieved that her eyes had returned to their normal color.

"You're beautiful, chérie," he said huskily against the shell of her ear.

Rogue flinched, her lips drawn down into a thin line, choosing to ignore him.

A few minutes passed in silence, the sound of the bike a steady purr beneath the pair of them while Rogue grew increasingly irritable.

After a moment, she snapped, "Gambit!"

Rogue was forced to swerve the bike between two shuddering trucks in warning.

"Stop smellin' my hair!"

—

"I don't like this one bit, Chuck."

Charles Xavier steeped his fingers before his face, his elbows resting on the arms of his motorized wheelchair. Surrounding him at the kitchen table, the X-Men scrubbed the sleep out of their eyes, sipping coffee or tea or juice.

Absent were the younger students, who had lingered long enough to be debriefed regarding the Brotherhood's attack in the early hours of the morning, and were now regaining their energy or tending to minor injuries.

"It is suspicious behavior, I must admit — but perhaps we are overestimating the gravity of the situation. Gambit would not attempt a second kidnapping."

"How can you know that?" Wolverine growled, pausing in his pacing. The Professor was showing visible signs of fatigue, having stayed up the better part of the night attempting to determine a reasonable course of action that would not involve a nationwide bounty hunt.

"I am familiar with him, Logan," he replied. It was too simple an answer for Logan.
"Either you're not telling us everything, Charles, or you really have no idea what to do. I say you let me take the jet, and we'll have Rogue home by dinner. How does everyone feel about a little bit of mutant jambalaya at seven?" Logan asked the room at large. "I'll bet there's still enough meat on Gambit's hide to carve out a nice chunk."

"Ew, I'd rather not." Kitty winced, rubbing at her face. She sagged against the kitchen counter, having returned to the deliberations table moments ago from a sleepless night.

"If I may propose a theory?" Henry interjected, pushing his glasses up on his nose. He pulled several printouts towards him.

"I am afraid I must agree with the Professor, Logan — granted, I do not share the same rapport with our estranged colleague — but the evidence regarding Gambit's present evolutionary station would suggest that his verbal methods of coercion have improved considerably."

"You're saying he talked Rogue into going with him?" Logan snarled.

"It is a distinct possibility," Henry replied, thoughtful. "I was under the impression that the pair shared a fledgling camaraderie upon Rogue's return from Louisiana last year. Incidentally, Gambit does possess mild hypnotic powers. It wouldn't be entirely unreasonable to suggest that he finessed the conversation to some degree."

Logan grunted.

Hank continued, "Regardless, Rogue's self-imposed mental blocks would have blunted the effect — perhaps not entirely, but I would imagine that she would not lose her wits fully were that the case."

"But there's no guarantee?"

"No," said Henry. "Nothing is assured at this point."

"They were friends, you think?" Kurt piped up. "I thought Rogue hated him?"

Kitty shook her head. "She never mentioned him, you know? But then again, Rogue doesn't exactly tell me all her secrets." To emphasize her point, Kitty nudged at the pair of cards she'd placed on the table for everyone's inspection the night before.

The King and Queen of Hearts stared vacantly overhead at the florescent lights; the message across them dark and black across their faces.

Scott didn't move from his seat other than to grimace at the cards. "I still can't believe that Gambit got into the mansion undetected."

"Into Rogue's room," Logan growled. "Wonder how many times he's managed to pull that off right under our noses?" He glowered at the Professor as if the telepath were hoarding secrets about the former Acolyte.

If anyone would know about a security breech like that, Charles Xavier would.

The Professor remained pensive, and after a long moment, he answered, "This has been the first incident where Gambit has infiltrated the mansion's walls."

"But not the first time he's been on the grounds?" Scott pressed.

"No," he replied, his tone non-committal.
"Great," Logan snarled.

"I have been aware of Gambit's activities for some time," he admitted, "as has Jean."

Cyclops dropped the glass he was holding, slopping fruit punch across the counter.

Jean threw him an apologetic look. Several heads swiveled to look at her. She blushed, and stood to find the roll of paper towel to clean up after her boyfriend.

Xavier continued, "We have monitored his movements as best as we could. As it were, Gambit's mutation creates an impenetrable psionic block."

"If it helps any," she managed, "he hasn't been here in a year. The Professor and I only noted his return two days ago with the help of Cerebro."

"At which point, he reacquainted himself with Rogue," Henry supplied.

"He WHAT?" Logan and Kurt barked simultaneously.

Jean sighed. "They had a conversation," she said, dabbing at the countertop spill.

"You've got to be kidding me?" Kurt blanched. "That's my sister, you know. And Gambit's… Gambit!"

"Quiet, Elf," Logan snapped. "Why weren't we informed of this 'conversation'?"

"Talking isn't a crime, is it?" Jean returned archly. "We thought it might be good for Rogue to socialize outside of her immediate circle. She's been really down lately. “She pursed her lips. “They had a connection — her and Gambit.”

Jean hesitated, seeming to realize that the popular opinion was the exact opposite.

"Everyone, please." The Professor rubbed at his temples. "I must remind you that we are not in the same predicament as we were one year ago. Jean and I both feel that Gambit's intentions are non-hostile, perhaps even benevolent."

"But, Professor, how can you know that without being able to get into Gambit's head?" Kurt insisted.

"Because Gambit likes her," Kitty blurted, and almost as quickly, she clamped her hands over her mouth.

Kurt craned around, a horrified look on his face. "Katschen?"

Mutely, she pointed at the cards and the message scrawled across them.

"It's totally right out of Cosmo," she said apologetically. "Modern day Romeo and Juliet style," she flushed, embarrassed. "You know what I mean?"

Professor Xavier chuckled. "Perhaps nothing so dramatic, Kitty. I am inclined to believe that Gambit may feel somewhat indebted to Rogue, however: given the circumstances of their abrupt departure, he may have come to the forgone conclusion that our response may not have been favorable to a proposed rendezvous."

Kitty chirped, "Totally star-crossed."
Logan snorted and Scott muttered, "Is it any wonder? He sent the Brotherhood here as a decoy to distract us. He's a bad seed, Professor."

"That's not 'non-hostile' to me," Kurt agreed.

"Rogue doesn't exactly do coffee dates, though," Kitty countered. "Honestly!" she added when Kurt looked at her like she'd sprouted a second head.


"Without Magneto around, Gambit has no one to... lackey... to, though," Kitty argued. "Who else would he be working for?"

Piotr, who has otherwise remained silent for the duration of the morning's conversation, murmured, "I vos an Acolyte as well. We each had different reasons to... collaborate... with —" He tasted the word, "'Bucket Head', as you call him."

Kurt gaped, realizing his blunder and trying unsuccessfully to backtrack. "Sorry, mein freund," he said after an awkward stretch. "I didn't mean it like that."

"What about Rogue?" Jean asked, standing. "Don't you think we're putting a bit too much responsibility on Gambit, here? She's nineteen, and you all know just how stubborn she can be. Contrary to popular belief, she is capable of making her own decisions."

Several glances were exchanged across the table.

"Nope."

"Not possible, Red."

"Nien."

Henry cleared his throat. "Might I offer a hypothesis?" He pulled out a chart outlining Rogue's bioelectrical scan from the previous day's Danger Room session. Alongside it, he placed a similar linear scan, belonging to Gambit.

"The readouts denote the variation in molecular constitution at the height of physical exertion, at the exact moment when there is a release of bioelectrical charge. If you look here, here, and here, there are enormous augmentations of kinetic feedback in various places on both diagnostics," he explained. Henry slid the two translucent acetates over one another. "They appear near-indistinguishable."

"In English, Hank," Logan muttered.

Henry blinked.

"It appears that Rogue absorbed Gambit, if partially," he translated. "These assessments are his and her readouts, respectively."

"Indeed, that is enormous personal progress," the Professor murmured, a small smile apparent on his thin lips.

Kurt opened his mouth, closed it, looked to Kitty, who shook her head, and said, defeated, "I think I don't get it."

"Rogue hasn't absorbed anyone since Apocalypse," Logan ground out. "Not by accident, and not on
her own. Think about it, Elf. When was the last time she used anyone else's powers in a training session?"

"Oh my gosh," Kitty murmured, her elbows phasing into the table a little before righting herself. "I can't believe I didn't see it. Storm, did you know about this too?"

Orooro nodded silently. "It was evident. Rogue's lack of faith in herself has been as much a hindrance as her inability to touch without harming another. She fears that someone may try to take advantage of her unique abilities again."

"Was!" Kurt shouted for the second time, his head snapping back and forth between his team-mates. "Does that mean she's had control this long and hasn't told anyone?"

"No, Kurt," the Professor answered patiently. "Rogue has not developed any more control over her powers than she has had previously. She has been exceptionally careful not to use her own mutation against anyone, in turn so it may not be used against her as it was when Mesmero used her as a vessel to deliver Apocalypse. She has instead focused on other means of self-discipline and combat tactics to survive the Danger Room sessions. She has been quite successful thus far."

"And pretty clever about hiding it, too," Scott muttered. Jean patted his shoulder consolingly.

"Only from you, kid," Logan muttered, resuming his pacing. "No one hides anything from me in this house, no matter what they might think."

"Hey!" Kurt and Kitty echoed. Logan grunted in response.

"Consequently, there is a distinct possibility that with Gambit's evolved mutation, he has presented to Rogue the opportunity to take matters into her own hands as well."

"Doesn't that guy know that if a thing ain't broke you shouldn't fix it?" Logan grumbled.

"Rogue may not see things in the same light," Jean interjected. "Think about it. If you were her, what would you do if someone gave you the opportunity to obtain full control?"

"Stripes isn't that desperate," he growled. "This has everything to do with Gumbo. Whatever the hell he told her to get her to leave with him, I don't like it."

"Mr. Logan?"

"What, Half-Pint?"

Kitty fidgeted, folding her knees beneath her on the stool. "Maybe she is that desperate." She shrugged, wincing a little. "I mean, you can kind of tell, can't you? With Rogue, I mean? She doesn't like her powers."

"Like?" Kurt squeaked. "More like she hates them."

"We must not confuse hate with fear, Kurt," the Professor corrected. "Rogue has undergone many tribulations at the hands of her mutation — whether directly or by the influence of others. If it is Gambit who has managed to entice Rogue to trust herself in respect to her abilities, then I can say in full confidence that Rogue will be in contact shortly."

"The dilemma," supplied Henry, "is not necessarily the methods by which Gambit has proposed such a drastic physiological change, but how he intends to accomplish it."
The Professor nodded. "I agree, Hank."

"Mr. McCoy?" Kitty asked.

"Allow me to surmise my findings. Perhaps that way we may investigate the options more thoroughly by understanding Gambit's modified mutation."

"Great," Logan rumbled. "With all do respect, Hank, Charles, but the more time we sit around trying to figure out what Gumbo's got cooked up, the more time we spend idealizing the why and the how, the farther away Rogue's getting."

"I'm sorry Professor, but I have to agree," Scott chimed in. "We could be using our time more effectively if we were to track Rogue."

"Find the punk and ask questions later." Logan nodded grimly.

"Do you not mean, 'Slice first, ask questions later?'" Storm murmured.

"That'd work, too." He flashed teeth at Ororo in the semblance of a grin. "That punk and I have a score to settle for the last time he did something this stupid. He's just doubled the bounty on his head."

Henry puffed himself up, clearing his throat, and folded his large blue hands on the tiled tabletop before him.

"Go ahead, Hank," Logan muttered, giving in though he rubbed his knuckles impatiently.

As Henry opened his mouth to slip into lecture mode, he was cut off abruptly by the sharp ringing of the kitchen's telephone.

"Kurt?" The Professor smiled, gesturing to his student. "You will want to answer that call, and please, hold the line for me. I will take it in my office."

"Chuck?" Logan cocked an eyebrow accusingly, knowing something more was transpiring, and not liking it one bit.

Charles paused, his wheelchair humming silently as he turned before the door. The phone rang again, and he nodded for Kurt to pick up the line.

"It's Rogue."

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Attends, p'tit: Wait a second, little one
Bonjour: Hello/good morning
Certainement: Certainly
Fille: girl
Homme: man
Mam'selle: (Mademoiselle) Miss
Merde: Shit
Non: No
Oui: Yes
Quoi: what
Vraiment: Really
"Rogue!"

"Hi, Kurt."

"Where are you?"

"Uh… well, Ah —"

"Everybody's here; we're all in the kitchen, and boy is Logan mad. The Institute is a wreck, and the front lawn is totally trashed, but we totally kicked the Brotherhood's — Wait — What? Oh, Logan says its completely Gambit's fault and he wants to know — What? — I am not telling her that — Hang on — Okay, okay: 'Rogue, are you okay we were worried sick what were you thinking?' His words, not mine."

"Well, Ah —"

"Wait — Really? I can't believe it. She wouldn't — What? No way!"

"Kurt?"

"Tell me you didn't run off with… run off with… Has he done anything to you, Rogue? I'll kill him."

"Kurt —"

"Just tell me where you are, exactly, and I'll 'port as close as I can… like on Gambit's head."

"Kurt, Ah'm fine. I'm in…"

"Hold on, Keetty! Rogue? Are you still there?"

"Kurt, listen —"

"Stop it, Katchen! I said stop it! No, you can't have the phone! Ow! She bit me! Ow! Ow, that's my tail!"

"Kurt!"

"Not my tail!"

(More shouting.)

"Kurt? Kurt, are you alright?"
"Hang on, Rogue; Keetty wants to yell — I mean, she wants to talk to you."

"— I'll just be a second Professor, I swear! Rogue? Rogue, are you there?"

"Hey, Kit."

"Oh my gosh! You totally did not do what I think you did."

"What did Ah do?"

"Did Gambit, I mean, like, did Gambit, you know…"

"What? Kit — I can't hear ya — listen Ah'm on a public phone in —"

"Rogue? Rogue!"

"Kitty!"

"I can't hear her. She's breaking up… This phone totally sucks."

(Loud smacking sounds, much like a telephone being beaten against a countertop.)

"Kitty?"

"— Pass it over half-pint. Stripes? That you?"

"Logan! Finally, someone with enough sense ta listen..."

"The reception's garbage, kid. Can ya hear me?"

"Yeah, Ah can hear ya fine, Logan. Y'all okay over there?"

"We're just peachy. Are you all right? Where are you?"

"Ah'm in Virginia — listen, I was just calling ta say —"

"But you're not staying in Virginia, are you?"

"N-no, but listen, it's fine, okay? Just trust me on this one. Ah don't know how long Ah'm going ta be, but Ah'll check in once we're settled, alright?"

"Where are you headed?"

"Logan? Ah don't like that tone you're using."

"Don't be smart with me, kid. Where's that damned Cajun taking you?"

"He's not —"

"Eh?"

"He's not 'that damned Cajun'. He's got a name."

"You don't sound so sure of yourself. What's he done? Tell him I'll rip him a new one if he thinks he can get away with this."

"Logan! It was my choice."
"Logan did you just *snort* at me?"

"Sorry, kid. Kurt's shedding… Elf, if you flick me in the face with your tail *one more time…*

"Logan! Y'all gotta relax. Gambit's… Gambit's…"

"What's he done? If he's laid one stinking, slimy finger on you…"

"It was nothing she couldn't handle, *mon ami.*"

"(Indecipherable snarling.)"

"*Bonjour, Monsieur Wolverine —*

"— Swamp rat! Give me back that damned phone!"

"*Désolé, chérie.* Let th' grown-ups discuss this. Wolvie? That you? Don't growl at me, *homme*, that's impolite."

"If you hurt her, Cajun, I have no trouble turning you into a shish kebab. Ya hear me, bub?"

"Logan?"

"Stripes? Steal the phone back? Good."

"Yeah, sorry. He's just *peachy* — Gambit, I mean."

"Sounds to me like Gumbo's being grabby. Tell him to keep his paws off ya if he knows what's good for him. Where can we pick you up?"

"Ya can't."

"What?"

"Ah told you, this is my decision. I'll be home soon. I just needed ta let ya'll know that Ah'm fine."

"This isn't kosher, Rogue."

"Look — you all keep telling me that Ah've gotta sort out my own business, be more responsible, and Ah'm trying to but —"

"Rogue! OHMYGOD!"

"Kitty?"

"Like, Mr. Logan dropped the phone. Apparently he can't hold the receiver when he pops a claw… So, is it *true*?"

"Is what true?"

"Oh, don't sound so paranoid! This is *so* romantic, like — the *cards*, Rogue! I didn't understand what you were talking about, you know, when the Brotherhood was attacking us and all — but now I get it! I mean, it *is* a little creepy, what with Gambit sneaking around our bedroom and all — don't you think that's a bit, you know, *risky*? Whatever. Don't answer that. Did he want to meet for a secret rendezvous? *That's* why he left you the King of Hearts! It makes *so* much sense now: you being all
secretive and grumpy when he wasn't around —"

"What? NO! No, it ain't like that at all —"

"You are so totally lying right now!"

"Kitty!"

"It's just so sweet! He went to all that trouble just to get your attention. What kind of guy does that?"

"Lance knocked ya on your ass enough times for you ta know, Kit —"

"That's not in the same context at all. Like, you know that I know that he knows that by doing that he totally has a thing for you."

"…"

"Rogue? Are you still there?"

"Ah'm trying ta decipher what you just said, Kit —"

"Oh, whatever. The point is that this is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done in like, the history of Bayville."

"Ah take it the Brotherhood didn't tear down the mansion?"

"What? No, of course not. Like they stood a chance. They weren't too happy when they left, though. OW! Mr. Logan!"

(Sounds of a struggle in the background.)

"YA HEAR THAT SWAMP RAT? AH'M NOT GONNA KICK YO' ASS FOR DESTROYIN' MY HOME!"

(Distant laughter.)

"Stripes?"

"Hi, Logan."

"I can hear ya blushing from here, Rogue."

"Ah am most definitely not blushing."

"Oui, she is. It's sorta cute."

"GAMBIT!"

"CAJUN! You keep your distance from that girl or your skin will decorate the seat of my motorbike! It needs reupholstering!"

"Geez, Logan, stop yellin' please. No, swamp rat, Ah'm not tellin' him that! Go use the other phone if ya need ta yammer at someone… No, not that one… Farther. Ah said farther! Can't ya give a girl some privacy? Damnit! Ah swear as soon as Ah find somethin' ta throw at ya Ah'm gonna blow ya ta kingdom come!"

"Rogue?"
"Professor? Oh my gawd, did y'all just hear that?"

"That's quite alright, Rogue. I'm certain I will regain the use of my left ear later this afternoon. Logan, are you still on the line in the kitchen?"

"Hey, Chuck. Yep."

"I'd like to speak with Rogue for a moment privately, if I may."

"Me and Gumbo were having words, Charles."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait. Would you…?"

"He's gone, Logan. Ah made him go to the far side of the building. Ah think he's callin' his MAWMAW! BECAUSE HE'S GONNA NEED HIS MAWMAW WHEN AH'M DONE WITH HIM!"

"You tell him, Stripes. Chuck? I think I do feel a bit better about this situation now."

"That's good to hear, Logan — even with the dull ringing in the background."

"Sorry Professor. Bye Logan!"

(Muttering.)

"Hi again, Professor."

"Hello, Rogue. Are you well?"

"Ah am, sir. Ah'm sorry to have caused all this trouble."

"I can hardly place the blame on your shoulders. After all, Gambit is acting in your best interests, is he not?"

"Ah… Ah think so. At least he says so, and… well, he sort of… gave me a little demonstration."

"We have discerned as much. Gambit has permitted you to absorb his memories and powers?"

"Well, the first time, he… well, Ah think there was a deliberate slip of the wrist, if ya catch my drift. Ah didn't even know he'd done it at the time, really… Bit of a surprise in the Danger Room for me. But Ah suppose it makes more sense ta me now."

"Are you referring to the discussion shared beneath the oak tree?"

"Yes, sir. Ah'm sorry… well, Gambit's sorry about that, though maybe not so much the tresspassin' part. I think he thinks that's old hat by now. But it was his fault that the branch broke."

"Please inform Mr. LeBeau that it was an old tree. It had seen many better days, and he should think nothing of it."

"Ah will, sir."

"Rogue, I must be frank with you, as I am sure you are eager to continue on your journey. Henry has analyzed the new patterning of Gambit's abilities that you displayed in your Danger Room session post-absorption. There are significant changes in his genetic makeup that I am certain you are aware of."
"Ah know, Professor."

"If I may, has Gambit informed you of how he came to acquire these… enhancements?"

"We… well, we haven't really discussed it much yet."

"I would advise that you do so immediately, Rogue. There are many potential hazards in the sudden augmentation of a mutant's abilities that may put you at risk. Henry has informed me that while Gambit's mutation has indeed evolved at an exponential rate, this may not indicate complete stability. Due to the nature of his mutation, the data we have is inconclusive. What we do know is that the inconsistencies of his powers manifested through your imprinting are significant. Accordingly, any current symptoms he may be exhibiting could be temporary at best. As tempting as control may be, I must caution you to exercise extreme discretion while considering possible avenues of… Ah… exploration."

"…"

"Rogue?"

"Did Dr. McCoy say what sort of 'symptoms'?"

"Well, with respects to yourself, I would imagine, Gambit appears to have developed a passive energy field around himself. It is merely an outward manifestation of his inherent powers. Henry feels that this particular aspect of Gambit's mutation is not as stable as it should be, or could be, given the degree of control it requires to maintain for long periods of time."

"You're saying… you're sayin' that Gambit's powers aren't fully baked?"

"Whatever he may have told you, Rogue, please keep in mind that Gambit may know little more than we currently do about his present physiological state. Henry is still conducting tests, however, the data we have is from a secondary source — you."

"Ah see."

"I must ask you, knowing that I cannot prevent you from continuing on if your mind is set, please to —"

"You want me ta consult with ya first?"

"…"

"Professor?"

"It is for your safety, Rogue. Any and all information you can provide us with to study would be beneficial to everyone."

"So… so you're not coming ta get me?"

"At the present time, no. You are an adult, and I have the utmost confidence that when the time comes, you will make the right decision."

"WHAT?"

"Ah, Logan, there you are."

"Damn telepaths…"
"As a matter of fact, I could hear you breathing through the phone."

"You're not the best when it comes ta stealth, sugah."

"Don't you get all cocky with me, Stripes. Charles might think you're capable of handling yourself, but that Cajun is bad news…"

"Ah can handle him, Logan."

"So he is giving you grief! I'm coming. I'll take my damned bike if I have to, Charles... Hey! Give that back!"

"Rogue."

"Scott?"

"Professor?"

"Scott."

"Logan?"

"I took the phone from him. This is Scott. Rogue?"

"Scott?"

"Rocky!"

"…"

"Sorry, Ah couldn't help myself."

"This is highly irregular."

"I'm sorry, Professor, I'll only be a moment. Rogue? We're coming. You can tell us where you're going, or I'll have Kitty trace you. She's already set up the laptop and configured her global positioning software to locate your genetic signature."

"What!"

"Scott…"

"Professor, we're a team. As the leader, I feel it's necessary that I exercise at least some authority in this matter — even if it's only to keep Gambit in line."

"Oh my gawd, you cannot be serious. You can't veto the Professor, Scott. It's called seniority."

"My apologies, Rogue, allow me: Scott, I understand your concern, but I must remind you that this has not been agreed upon collectively."

"There's nothing 'collective' about Rogue running off like that —"

"Don't Ah get a say in this?"

"Until we gather more data, I have to say that answer would be 'no way.'"

"Oh forget it. Y'all just stay put, you hear? Ah don't need your help."
"How many times have we heard *that*?"

"Right, Ah'll just be the resident charity case. Ah'm done with this. Professor, Ah just wanted ta mention — when Ah absorbed Gambit last night, there was a memory of his Ah picked up. Ah think there was a stone. A red gemstone. It might've been a ruby or a quartz, but Ah never saw anything like it before."

"Rogue, wait —"

"Ah'll be in touch. Ah've gotta go."

"Wait, Rogue!"

(Click.)

"Great."

"Scott? Come to my office and bring Logan. Immediately."

--

"Mate?"

"Alright, Pyro?"

"Yeah, what a bloody trip, though. Hope the sheila's worth it."

"It's all set, then?"

"Yeah, yeah…"

"Allerdyce?"

"S' fine, pumpkin. Don't you worry that pretty head of yours. Cor, this is the *last* time, though. You have no idea what Colossus did to my poor Stella. It damn near broke me heart ta see it happen —"

"Stella?"

"Yeah, you bloody seppo – about that…"

"I'll take care of it."

"You promise? We had a deal, Gambit."

"Aren't I always good for these things? When this is all over, even the devil gon' get his due, *homme*. Trust me."

"Considering the last time you said that you bailed with half buckethead's — god rest his sanity — security system beneath that trench coat of yours, and we didn't hear from you for six months…"

"Do they suspect anything?"

"Naw, mate; not enough brains to give themselves a headache. Also… *I* am a *brilliant* actor."
"Merveilleux."

"So, I'll see ya there, mate?"

"Can y' give me a few days?"

"What? Why?" (A considering pause.) "Something come… up?"

"Mind y' mouth, John. I've got a bar of soap with your name on it."

"Crikey, you getting pissy in your old age or what? They're getting shirty, mind. They want your head, you know, and Wanda wants your bits fricasseed. Think she might just do it too…"

"Did you say 'hi' t' Pete for me?"

"What do you take me for? And I saw that coming a mile away, mate — you're just as dodgy as ever. Waltzing off in the middle of the night, all gallant-like, while I had to take the heat for your smarmy arse. Petey was none too gentle either, I might add."

(Laughter.)

"That bloke's the one that bent Stella all outta shape — which, by the way…"

"Relax, mon ami. Just give Gambit a lil' time and he'll sort out your lost kit. Got plenty on m' hands right now."

"I'll say — Rogue's turned into something else, hasn't she?"

"It's not like that, John."

"Of course not. Look, you just do what yeh need to, and I'll see you this weekend."

(A sigh.)

"Like they say… Laissez les bon temps rouler."

(Click.)

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:
- Table Talk: (Poker) Any discussion at the table of the hand currently underway, especially by players not involved in the pot, and especially any talk that might affect play.
- "Rocky!" Tip of the hat to Rocky Horror.

Translations:
Désolé: Sorry
Homme: man
Laissez les bon temps rouler: Let the good times roll.
Merveilleux: Brilliant
Mon ami: my friend
Chances.

In an ordinary man's life, he is offered a handful at best: forgiveness, empathy, mercy, unconditional trust, a willing ear, and a guiding hand on the shoulder... And love, on occasion. Depending how the odds favored him.

For an ordinary man, these things suffice.

Remy fingered the instructions card, shucked into his palm from a deck he'd found stashed away in one of his many coat pockets.

He wasn't an ordinary man; never had been, never would be. Remy ran through his chances like he did his cards — fifty-two per fight, per hour, per day, per week — when running, when working, when at rest. Fifty-two chances offered graciously by the Bicycle Card Company whenever needed. A dollar in your pocket could buy you a lifetime of better odds.

Better days, however... those came at a higher price.

Remy LeBeau would know.

Beside him, the phone sat cooling in its cradle, warmed briefly by his ear where he'd kept it tucked between his shoulder and chin for a quick conversation with someone two states away:

Someone with the skill to carry out a bout of histrionics flamboyant enough to distract a roomful of people while a bogus payoff was slipped from the coffee table.

St. John Allerdyce was the next best thing to an Ace up the sleeve as far as Remy was concerned — though Remy himself kept the Jokers under his cuffs.

Fitting, really.

Rogue, out of earshot, was talking to Xavier or Cyclops or one of the more "responsible" adults of the Institute.

Remy knew this because if it had been Wolvie, he'd have wrung the phone from her grasp just to taunt the old man some more. Remy knew this because Rogue's gaze had flicked in his direction only once since the long-distance arguing had tapered off. Remy knew this because, as imperceptible as it would be to anyone else, Rogue had drawn a little closer to herself in the most subtle of ways:

He saw it in the roll of her shoulders, the petulant thrust of a hip where she tipped against the aluminum siding of the phone booth, and the nervous habit of folding her arms across her chest —
gripping one elbow with a gloved hand. With her head bowed, only the lower half of her face was visible through her thick shock of hair. She chewed on the inside of her mouth, and for a moment, Remy wanted nothing more than to smooth his thumb against that tense curve of pink.

The instructions card flared to life between his fingers — a dull bit of charge to remind him that the odds were still to his advantage.

They would come; sooner or later, all of them would converge on the French Quarter — the X-Men, the Brotherhood, and the others when they realized he'd defied them and returned home.

For now, the game was played between him and Rogue. Priorities first, as they say.

He doused the charge, reabsorbing the jittering energy that made the hair on the back of his arms stand at attention, and relished in the pleasant aftershock as his body neutralized the small effort. Ditching the instructions card, he rolled the Ace into a tight cylinder and slipped it into the pay phone's change dispenser.

"Ya shouldn't litter," Rogue called, hanging up the phone. So, she was watching him.

How very interesting.

"I wasn't," he returned, not looking up.

"Ya shouldn't lie either," she continued.

Remy smirked, enjoying the grosgrain rasp of Rogue's voice.

She was hard as nails, bit to the quick, and every primal instinct that Remy had ever possessed declared that it was a sound that didn't need to be honeyed to get any sweeter. Dieu, what had he done to her to make her hate him so much?

Running his thumb against the deck of cards in his hand, he flicked at them absently as their hushed conference served to stoke the flame beneath Rogue's ire.

Fifty-two chances for any other time and any other day; but for once in a long time, Remy only had one option available — and this was it.

The hell he wasn't about to make it worth his while.

"What are you smirking at?"

He peered at her from beneath his fringe, shifting his weight against the phone booth to better slide his gaze from her ankles to the top of her head in one leisurely sweep.

"What did they tell you now?"

"What you didn't."

Slow swing of hips, shoulders following the lazy curve of her spine, the drag of boot heels on broken concrete — there was no denying it; a year ago, Rogue had been awkward, hostile, and insecure. She masked it over with a thick coat of eye shadow and a heavy lipstick, sure, but beneath all that, there was this creature.

She raised an eyebrow.

Remy couldn't control it — the same shit-eating grin fixed firmly in place was answer enough most
of the time for most ladies, but Rogue wouldn't take that from him. She didn't want that from him.

Then again, Rogue wasn't exactly a lady.

This creature standing before him, Remy thought — lazily dragging his thumb over the edges of the pack — this creature was something new. She was just as hostile as ever and still insecure, but the fluidity of her step betrayed her. She walked differently, and she held herself differently. From the smooth slope of her neck to the slight outturn of her ankle, those slim legs, and the slight musculature of her thighs — the format was the same, but the content had changed. The rules were different, but he didn't need an instructions card to know that.

Sometime over the past year, probably when Remy had been arguing with Jean Luc, or hiding from Jean Luc, or making cameo appearances in places he wasn't supposed to be to piss off Jean Luc, Rogue had slid into a new skin:

She wasn't a predator yet, but her stripes were definitely beginning to show.

Remy wet his lips. More appealing still was the fact she didn't know or just didn't care that she had grown into something beautiful.

Remy figured it was the former. She would have gotten out of the whole Goth thing if that were the case. Then again, not everyone used their assets to their advantage — least of all someone who could put you in a coma if it was more profitable just to take you out of the game altogether.

If she had been inclined, Rogue would have made an exceptional Acolyte, had they been on the same side back then. It took a bit of suspicion, a lot of skill, and a dash of recklessness to do the job well. Rogue had all three qualities in abundance, far as he could tell.

"What didn't I say, chérie?" he asked.

"First of all, ya touched me without telling me so two days ago." She also had the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

"Slip of the wrist. Wasn't nothin'," he returned.

"Really? Well apparently it ain't since Beast has been running tests on us both."

Remy cocked an eyebrow. He'd expected as much — hoped for it, even. If there was one thing to be said about the X-Men, their doctor and resident scientist, Henry McCoy, was certainly efficient. The fact that he'd already run the scans proved it.

"And what did th' good doctor tell you?"

She raised her chin defiantly, eyes flaring beneath the smear of makeup that marred her complexion and at the same time, gave her the protection she craved.

Everything and everyone were held at arm's length — not for their safety, but for her own. It was a strategy Remy knew well; he'd coined it. He had Belladonna to thank for that, at least partially. Remy shoved the thought aside and focused on the girl in front of him.

"Ah didn't speak ta him. The Professor told me." Hesitating, she searched his face. "You don't really know what's happened to ya." Rogue phrased it as a statement, rather than a question.

Pity, he thought. Assumptions made asses out of everybody, and asses needed tails pinned on them, because inevitably, you looked stupid when someone nailed you.
"I know enough," he returned, all too aware of how non-committal it sounded. Rogue wasn't about to stick him with anything he couldn't get out of, it didn't matter how great a geneticist Henry McCoy was.

"You're not fully evolved into your secondary mutation." But damn if she wasn't persistent.

"C'est possible." He shrugged, matching her stance by folding his own arms — the deck of cards slid easily out of sight for later. "You wanna know something, Rogue? You've gotta ask. Y' can't draw out the bluff with me."

She shook her head. "We're not playing."

"The first bets are made before a hand even starts, chérie. Me? I see what you've got in the pot. You just need t' gimme the time t' decide how much I'm willin' to put in alongside you. Or," he shrugged, flashing her a winning grin, "Just gimme time."

She blew out a breath, rolling her eyes heavenwards.

"Not even if you were Trent Reznor, Cajun."

Remy chuckled. Figures she'd listen to that sort of thing. He'd have to remember to find that CD — Theo had it somewhere, no doubt. It was just his breed of broody.

"Look, they ain't coming for me just yet," she said stiffly. "As it is, Ah figure we're gonna have ta put up with each other until we meet with that friend of yours."

Rogue dropped her hands and fixed her gaze at a spot beyond his shoulder. She wasn't ditching him, and they weren't after her. Interesting.

Thoughtful, though more amused than anything, Remy asked, "You're sayin' you're barely tolerating me?"

She fought back a grimace, and Remy, watching, intrigued, saw Rogue's jaw twitch.

"Barely is a huge understatement," she corrected. "You said ya made me this offer ta help yourself. Ah don't know what that means, but Ah'm not gonna push it just yet. New Orleans is what, two days' ride? Won't help me any by turnin' you into a vegetable now. Whatever you meant by that, it doesn't sound much better than any of the other garbage you been spewin' since ya showed up."

"It's th' truth," he replied.

"How can Ah believe that? Ya couldn't even tell me that Ah was a test run ta see if your powers had been boosted. Ya shouldn't have done. It wasn't your place ta make that decision for me."

He took a step forwards just as she took a step back. "I wasn't expecting th' damn branch t' break on me, but I don't regret it either. I call that luck."

"You touched me to see if you could."

"You took my hand when I offered it."

"After you hypnotized me —"

"Technically it’s not hypnosis —"

"What Ah’m concerned about are your intentions; that you’re not doing anything out of care, not out
of concern — hell, you deliberately set up a full scale attack just to make first contact," she argued. "What's not to regret? You got what you wanted."

Hardly, he thought to himself, giving her a wry look that indicated she didn't have the slightest idea of the sort of powder keg she was sitting on. Hell, she could be flicking lit matches at it, and it'd still be safer than what they were heading into.

"Don't ya come any closer," she warned. "You might be able ta filter off the memories ya want ta let me see, ya might be able ta hold up that force field of yours for a little while, but ya don't know for how long, and Ah'll be damned if Ah'll be the one ta help ya test your limits."

"I'm not afraid of you, Rogue."

She snorted, glaring at him. "You should be."

Slowly, Remy shook his head. "Fear hobbles a man. I'm not the sort t' stagger around in circles just because I'm a lil' nervous of runnin' full tilt at what I want."

"No, you've got a death wish."

"Mebbe I don't have anything to lose," he shot back, all mirth lost with the abrupt shift in their innuendo.

She paused, fixing him with a very particular, expectant look that made his insides twist unpleasantly. For a moment, Remy wished he hadn't said it: It was far too close to the truth for comfort, and until that point, he'd decided it might've been best to play the whole thing blind. It became almost instinctive to divert her attention, to keep her from scrutinizing him too hard.

Gingerly, he took a step closer so that he fell within the circle of Rogue's personal space. She sucked in a breath but otherwise held her ground.

"You're tempting fate." It was hard to tell if Rogue's whisper was a result of mounting tension, or a bi-product of her latent discomforts with personal proximity.

_Dieu_, how much did she hate this? Remy couldn't imagine. Everything within' reach, but all off limits — self-imposed restrictions that kept the thermometer hot enough to crack, but always just stopping short.

"And you're just plain tempting," he whispered back, offering her a small smile, a pleasant diversion.

"If Ah didn't know better, Ah'd say you were putting on this act just ta get under my skin," she breathed, scrutinizing him.

"Is it workin'?"

"Ya know it ain't."

"I think your mouth moves quicker than y' mind, _chérie_. You're rethinking that already," he said softly, tilting his head a little and leaning forwards so that she'd feel the soft caress of his breath against her cheek.

"Ah think you're too self-assured for your own good." She shivered, turning her head to the side, watching him with wary caution through slanted eyes.
"I think y' enjoy it. Gives y' a thrill."

"Ah think ya better take a step back from the stove before ya get burnt."

"I like playing with fire."

"Then go find your old buddy Pyro."

They stared at each other hard, Remy enjoying the way her glare intensified. He was practically towering over her, their torsos nearly brushing. He didn't dare drag his gaze away to admire the quick rise and fall of her chest — the scooped neck of her uniform offering a tantalizing display of creamy flesh, flushed a rosy pink around her collarbone and spreading to her neck prettily.

"Y' got some brass, Rogue," he acknowledged after a moment.

She stepped back, thrown off guard and dropping relief in sheets.

Point, Remy thought.

As cliché as it was, perhaps honesty was the best policy. Pity she only believed him one time out of ten.

He'd have to work on that.

"I appreciate that."

She blinked. "What?"

"I said, I appreciate that," he repeated.

"Ah heard what ya said. It's the way you said it that's unnerving," she said, disconcerted. "And it ain't for your benefit," she added. "Ah'm still me whether you're here or you get gone."

He shrugged. "I can respect someone with strong convictions."

"But ya sure as hell ain't respecting the convictions themselves — personal space, for one," she groused, sidling backwards across the parking lot.

Remy followed at an unhurried waltz, taking the time to brush the hoods of the parked cars that littered the concrete, stepping up, onto and over the ones that blocked his weaving path. All the while, Remy kept his gaze fixed squarely on hers.

"Might surprise you," he said, descending from the bumper of a defunct-looking pickup. "There's a lot y' dunno about me. We carry on like this," he gestured between them, keeping his smirk in check as he stepped up to her, teasing, "and I probably won't live as far as Tennessee. You'll end up dropping my bones in a bag on Jean Luc's doorstep."

"Is that what this is about? Ah knew it!" She poked him in the chest, partly to get him to back down. "What's your daddy done this time?"

Remy frowned at her gloved fist as she jabbed at him, but otherwise, didn't respond to the none-too-subtle prompting.

"How's that fair?" He looked at her hand pointedly. "You can touch me but I can't touch you?"

Rogue tore her arm away.
"What's wrong with Jean Luc?" she demanded.

"Everything," he replied dryly. "But that don't have anything t' do with you."

Much, he thought. At least, not if he could help it. Jean Luc had a nasty tendency of turning family business into everyone's business.

She narrowed her eyes and hissed, "Prove it."

"Mon dieu." He rolled his eyes, and Rogue slapped at his arm. "Ow! Merde!" he shrugged away from her with an exaggerated stagger. "It's like this, Rogue," he said, holding his hands defensively before him, "Jean Luc kicked me out."

"Like Ah believe that," she scoffed.

"I'm serious!" he insisted. "You're just gonna have t' see where I'm living t' believe it."

"In the gutter?" she returned sardonically. "Ah could imagine that. Ah think, it'd suit you. Gonna have ta change your name now to sewer rat instead of —"

"Rogue!" he said loudly, pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezing his eyes shut. "Just stop for a second. You can smack me around more later. Y' wanna know? I'm trying t' tell you." He dipped his head, crooking a finger beneath her chin and lifting her gaze to meet his. She slapped at his hand.

Remy put it back beneath her chin. She slapped at him again.

"Look and see if I'm lying instead of beating me down all the time," he said firmly, restraining his roving fingers from what felt natural. "You took your medicine — three dollops of genuine Gambit courtesy of a lil' thing called memory. That's a fair chunk of the authentic article if I don't say so myself, and there ain't no reason you can't look me in th' eye and tell for yourself if I'm being straight with you."

"Three selective memories," she corrected tersely. "Without the whole package, it's damned hard ta make a sound judgment call."

"Better than just a Thieves' word, non?" he countered.

She relented grudgingly, squaring her shoulders. "Should Ah try ta take your pulse at the same time? 'Cause I reckon that'd defeat the purpose of not knockin' ya flat."

"If that's what it'll take, be my guest," he said, reaching for his cowl and digging his fingers in to present her with his bare neck.

"Ah am not touching ya."

"You just did," he retorted, letting the springy fabric snap back into place.

"Cause ya keep pushing me!" she snapped, balling her fists at her sides.

"And I'm gonna keep pushin' until y' realize that there's more than one way that I can get through t' you!"

She snorted. The leather of her gloves stretched across her knuckles, whitening from wear. She brushed at her hair irritably, knuckling it roughly behind an ear. "Ta you, swamp rat? Ah'm like Fort Knox."

"I can break into the Pentagon with m' hands tied and m' eyes blindfolded. Y' wanna test that theory?
Fort Knox? Shoulda picked a better analogy. I *relish* the challenge.*"*

"Like that's gonna win my trust —“

"I don't need t' *win* that. I'm trying to earn it but you're giving me th' roundabout." He jutted his chin, eyes narrowed. "Ever heard of Escher?"

She paused, frowning suspiciously at the abrupt shift in conversation.

"The artist?" he continued. "*Homme*'s a personal favorite. *You're* like one of his staircases — upside down, backwards and inside out. Forever an upwards climb, no matter which direction you try to tackle it from —“

If the girl didn't want to be touched, so be it. There were other more effective ways of getting around that particular defense mechanism, and if the first was earnestness, the second was a good analogy.

"Now listen t' me." Remy widened his eyes comically, cleared his throat, and spoke very slowly: "I am not interested in Jean Luc's business."

Mimicking his enunciation, Rogue parroted back, "Ah think you're full of shit."

"You know otherwise, Rogue," he chastised lightly. "Do y' know why?"

Eyes narrowed, and making no attempt to hide the fact that she was chewing on the inside of her cheek to maintain her surly silence, Remy could only wait for Rogue to make a concession that would move them forwards.

"Been down the same roads," she muttered blandly, finally, turning away.

Pausing, the tight coil of tension loosening across his shoulders as Rogue's venomous look dissolved into bitter indulgence, Remy chuckled. He had never been more pleased to know that she hadn't forgotten their temporary truce from a year before.

He grinned. "Y' did me a solid that time."

"Ah helped you free your good-for-nothing adoptive father."

Nodding, he considered her phrasing. Yep, that sounded about right.

"Despite your better judgment," he added as an afterthought. Despite his better judgment too, but she needn't know that.

"That's what we do, Gambit. We help people we care about."

Remy's eyebrows shot up. "Care about —“

"NO, Cajun!" she snapped, her cheeks flushing deep rose as she struggled to backtrack. "That's not what Ah meant."

"It's a general ‘care’ for everything, *oui?*" he sniggered.

"Shut up," she bit back. "Ah'm only here because if what ya said was true, then Ah've got a real chance…"

"For control." He nodded. "For freedom. The real sort."
There it was: a neat little stack of chips on the metaphoric table between them. You couldn't put a price on those things; to Rogue, they were more valuable than the highest stakes, and that made for a cautious player.

"You gonna give me some line about opening doors next?" she muttered.

He shook his head, satisfied that at least she'd measured what this little jaunt down South was worth to her. Apparently, suffering his company was acceptable trade for the payoff. He knew it would be, though Remy didn't tell her so.

"Chére, you already stepped through." He offered her his arm, which she didn't decline as much as she slapped away.

"C'mon, let's get some breakfast. I'm starving," he said, resigned to drop his hands into his pockets.

"Wait." Rogue motioned for him to linger; she was still a little flushed from her admission.

Apparently hate was far too strong a word to describe her sentiments towards him. What was it then? Disdain? Discomfort?

Rogue swiped at her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Just give me a reason — a real one. If you're doing this for yourself, then what is it? You think that Ah'll think less of you if you tell me what it is? Shit, Cajun, it can't be that bad if you're still crackin' jokes."

He pursed his lips, considering just how much he could tell her. The answer, simply, was very little.

"Guess not," she muttered, turning on her heel. "Forget it," she said over her shoulder, striding across the beaten parking lot. "Ah couldn't begin ta understand how your head works anyway. And Ah know who Escher is — if either one of us can be compared ta one of his paintings, it's you."

"Don't I get a say in this?" he called after her, breaking into a light jog. Catching her by the elbow, he turned her around to face him, fully prepared to launch into another round of verbal sparring laden with suggestion.

Rogue looked at him tiredly, a hint of unease apparent at the fact that he still held her lightly by the arm.

"Gambit," she laughed mirthlessly, rolling her head back on her shoulders to ease the coiled muscles. "Please." She glanced pointedly at her arm; at his fingers pressed into the soft spot at the elbow joint. She didn't tear away from him or try to wrest herself from his grasp, but this tired resignation felt like a last straw; he'd gone too far, pushed too hard, reached out one too many times.

He released her delicately, lifting his fingers and not bothering to linger.

Was it ironic that now he could touch her physically, she didn't want him to?

Perhaps it was just a matter of going deeper than that.

"I get it," he said after a moment, dimly aware that her request had landed heavily in his gut. She genuinely didn't want him anywhere near her — the question was, why? It settled there, leaving a growing silence between them that made him uncomfortable. He was never at a loss for words, and if anything, Remy LeBeau always had an answer.

"No," she said quietly, shaking her head. She smiled at him a little, sadly. "You really don't."

Rogue turned, stalking towards the truck stop they'd decided to break at before heading South.
They'd driven for two hours on empty stomachs, exchanging snappish comments and flirtatious banter – well, he had provided the latter, at least.

Remy watched her retreating back, his confidence deflating a little. That hadn't gone as planned.

"You're wrong!" he called after her. It sounded feeble even to his own ears, and inwardly, Remy winced. There was no room for him to get caught up in anything that could present itself as a liability in the days to come.

He'd learned his lesson once already, hadn't he? Twice if he counted Belladonna. Three if he let Genny come to mind...

That Rogue had reserved the number one spot for herself, well… it wasn't like she was counting. *Dieu,* it didn't seem as if she cared at all.

This hand was going sour fast, and that meant one thing and one thing only.

"I watched you for a *long time,* Rogue. I know you better than y' know yourself."

Pulling the Aces.

She froze between a battered Toyota and a ridiculous little red thing that looked like it could barely fit two people comfortably. As Remy approached it, he noted with some disdain that the minuscule vehicle was named a "smart" car.

"What th' hell kind of idiot would buy one of these things?" he muttered to himself.

"The kinda idiot that doesn't need ta overcompensate for the things they're *lacking,*" Rogue shot back.

Remy smirked. That was better.

"Didn't ya have anything better ta do with your time, swamp rat?" she asked, exasperated. ":Cause that's a line I've definitely heard before."

He remembered. He'd thought her unhappy. Before Remy could continue that path down through the deeper forests of bleaker tribute, Rogue spoke, "Fool me once, shame on you," she said, the vitriol lacking.

Feigning indifference, he shrugged. "Mebbe I just liked what I saw."

Scoffing, Rogue brushed her hair out of her face, regarding him archly. "How many girls fall for that garbage?"

Remy waved it off, ushering her towards the diner door so he could hold open it for her before she could object.

“Wouldn’t know,” he admitted, the confession sincere. “I’ve only really spent time outside your window.”

Rose pinked her cheeks. Her jaw worked, her gaze searching to find the lie in his words. He held her gaze, too aware all of a sudden of the immediate hush that cottoned his ears, making the pounding of his heart seem loud in his chest. Gambit swallowed, trying for a smile and failing.

She looked at his mouth, and it felt like she’d drawn a match across his skin.
"Like I said, gimme time," he murmured. It came out more confident than he felt following that small, strained admission.

"Fat chance," she muttered, striding into the diner ahead of him. She didn’t sound wholly convinced either.

He let out a breath.

—

Rogue paused, taking in her surroundings. The parking lot had been full, but apparently she hadn't expected the teeming crowd inside as well. Already, she was pulling closer to herself and ensuring that she had a clear path around people. Remy strolled forwards to a little sign that read, "Please wait to be seated."

A girl no more than seventeen stepped around the counter. Her step faltered a little, pale blue eyes roving over his figure. Remy lifted a casual eyebrow. Rogue appeared in his peripheral vision.

She pursed her lips, appraising the girl's expression with a coolness that bordered on hypothermia.

"Ain't there enough food in this place? She looks like she's ready ta take a bite outta ya," Rogue muttered dryly.

"Table for two, s'il-vous-plait," Gambit smiled lazily at the waitress, leaning in a little to read her badge. "Jennifer?"

At his side, Rogue rolled her eyes.

"S-sure," the girl stammered, collecting two menus and smiling at him, all bashful expectancy and sunshine. "Right this way, sir." A faint blush crested her cheeks. She peeked over her shoulder to see if he followed.

The starched fabric of her blue and white waitress uniform bunched at the waist as she walked. Cute. Probably clingy, he assessed, with an affinity for small, yappy dogs. He knew the type:

That sort kept their doll collections well into their mid-twenties because it reminded them that at one point, the only man in their lives, apart from their daddies, were named Ken. Incidentally, Ken was usually easier to keep around — plastic grin, bendable legs and all. Ken didn't argue. Ken didn't complain. Ken was always a willing ear who didn't comment on a ballooning waistline or the trivialities of birth control.

"Merci, Jennifer," he murmured, letting the waitress' name slide of his tongue like syrup.

"Oh, please," Rogue snorted, brushing past him. "Ah'm gonna use the bathroom. Get me a coffee so Ah can wash the taste of vomit outta my mouth."

Gambit grinned at Rogue's back, at the smooth crescent of creamy skin at her neckline that taunted him where her auburn hair brushed to the side as she walked. Rogue, he'd be willing to wager, never had a Ken doll in her life.

And if she did? He smirked; she was probably the type to have stuck the poor plastic bastard in a
microwave and set it to "nuke."

"And stop starin' at my butt!" she snapped over her shoulder.

Cutting past the other servers, the jutting tables and the few folk who were either leaving or being seated, she stuck her arms firmly to her sides just in case someone brushed a little too close. It was like a dance, Remy thought:

Despite the heavy boots she wore, Rogue evaded and parried around people with the nimbleness of a ballerina; her hips swaying as she dodged the threat of exposed skin.

Remy tried not to shake his head at her behavior.

Outside had been a slip, and not such a p'tit slip either: Reaching for her that one last time had nearly been an honest-to-goodness screw-up.

She didn't like being touched; not physically, for fear of her power, and not emotionally, because she'd been used up and thrown out too many times.

He needed to turn the hand in his favor with a deft draw, or a mighty streak of luck. In poker, the odds were fifty-fifty at best: Fifty percent handed graciously to chance and the other fifty to skill. In life, you worked the angles and fucked the success ratio.

It's what Remy had been trained to do, after all.

Scanning the diner, he ran a quick mental diagnostic of the place: Two visible fire exits, rows of windows emblazoned with various advertisements for new five-minute culinary conveniences to sample, and probably a backdoor through the kitchen. Safe enough when you accounted for the number of people squeezed into the space.

Secondary analysis, intrinsic to his training as a member of New Orleans' Thieves Guild, located sixteen purses, a quarter of those open or half-opened, two with broken zippers, twelve wallets within ridiculously easy reach lined up at hand-level to his left and... jackpot! He allowed himself to be jostled, bumping his hip into the table of nearby teens that clearly appeared to have spent a late night out.

"Pardon," he said politely, offering the teenagers a little bow. "It's a lil' crowded."

One of the girls tittered. None saw the small slip of his fingers as he extracted what he was looking for from her minuscule purse.

The breakfast rush appeared to be in full swing — the smells of bacon, frying eggs and flapjacks on the griddle suffusing the cramped eatery's atmosphere. He shucked off his coat and slid into a booth, draping an arm across the backrest. Thanking Jennifer with a polite dismissal, his attention lingered on the periphery of the establishment, waiting for the restroom door to open.

"Attends, p'tit," he called the waitress back, flipping open the plasticized menu and selecting two plates, barely looking at the choices illustrated in favor of the distracted, yet still charming grin he flashed at her. "Make th' eggs spicy, if you could."

Movement out of the corner of his eye alerted him to Rogue's return, though he feigned disinterest as she slid into the seat in front of him.

She'd scrubbed the smeared makeup off her face, leaving her skin a little rosy in the cheeks and a lot creamier everywhere else. Remy leaned closer, entirely unable to prevent the half-smile that tugged
at the corner of his mouth.

"What are ya lookin' at, swamp rat?" she snapped, her shoulders hunching.

"Y' eyes," he informed her. "They're green."

Her mouth —two plump peach slices if he'd ever seen them — pulled into a tight frown.

"...Without all that black shit on 'em, anyhow," he added, unable to resist the jab.

Rogue glowered.

Remy held a hand up before him, silently requesting a little patience. In the same motion, he pulled the recently acquired stick of kohl from beneath the table. He twirled the eyeliner, slipped from the spilled contents of another girl's purse, between his fingers. She eyed it warily.

"I'm just saying it's a good look on you." He shrugged, sliding a little lower in the seat and continuing to watch her intently. "But since you're not comfortable without it…" He offered her the stolen cosmetic.

"Do ya usually carry around women's makeup?"

Remy remained silent, taking in the slight dimpling in her cheeks, the soft curve of her lower lip as she chewed on the inside of her mouth, fighting back a smirk.

"Non. This is merely a demonstration of m' good will." He beamed, beatific.

"You can drop the act, Gambit. Ah told you already, Ah'm not interested."

Nonetheless, after a moment's hesitation, she plucked the eyeliner from his fingers. Rogue turned the reflective surface of the napkin dispenser to face her, glancing at him with outright distrust.

"Stop starin'. Ah’m not interested."

Remy stifled a chuckle.

Schooling his expression, he waved her on, though he didn't look away as she applied a thick layer of black around her eyes with the deft and precision of a skilled lock-pick.

He couldn't help but notice how the tension in her shoulders loosened. It wasn't much, but it was something.

It was just a damned shame that the kohl made the natural color of her irises dim.

"Of course y' not interested," he said, preoccupying himself with the adjustment of his already fitted gloves. "That's why you're not sitting at this table with me, not appreciating the gesture, and not thinkin' about the numerous, clandestine possibilities of th' journey ahead."

Seeing her half-horrified astonishment, he wet his lower lip. Remy metered out his words as if he were tasting the reaction they provoked:

"And you're definitely not thinkin' about anything so scandalous that it'd make y' blush so hard."

"Ah’m here," she ground out, aiming at firm, and barely managing flustered, "because —" She faltered. "Because —"
"Because you're tired of dancin' around people so y' don't touch 'em," he supplied. "And because I'm th' best lookin' thing in these parts, and you can't keep y' eyes off me," he added.

"Ah'm surprised your head still fits comfortably on your shoulders," she groused. "Where's the menu?"

Unhurried in his appraisal, he replied, "Took care of it."

Her eyebrows shot up; surprised or offended, he wasn't entirely certain.

"You ordered for me?"

In response, Jennifer shimmied back to their table and deposited two plates before them. "Can I get you anything else?" she asked breathily.

Remy didn't turn to her, choosing instead to enjoy Rogue's expression as she stared at the plate. The look on her face fell someplace between surprise and malcontent.

He offered Jennifer an absent half-smile. "It's perfect, merci."

"Ya gotta be kiddin' me," Rogue muttered, shaking her head.

Remy chuckled and pulled his own breakfast closer. He threw a wink at Jennifer, who managed to look a little disappointed that his attention had settled on his companion. It was enough to prompt her to totter off.

"You know this is downright creepy, right?" Rogue remarked, picking up a fork and gingerly poking at the food on her plate.

"I'm just proving a point."

"You knew Ah like grits and sausage," she deadpanned, her fork dangling.

"Don't forget the eggs. I told Jenny t' make 'em spicy, just in case y' needed a bit of extra excitement this morning."

Experimentally, he took a bite of his own scrambled concoction and winced. Fumbling for the steaming cup of black coffee in front of him, Remy slurped at it, trying to flush the taste from his palette.

"Mebbe we shoulda stuck to the local cuisine." He grimaced. "They put paprika in this instead of cayenne."

Rogue snorted, tasting her own food and chewing thoughtfully. Delicately, she picked up her napkin, and promptly spit out the mouthful.

"For once, Ah think Ah might have ta agree with ya," Rogue said, and as if realizing that she wasn't antagonizing him, she flushed a little and dipped her head, covering up another muttered, incoherent complaint with a mouthful.

"It was a nice thought, non?" he murmured, noting the slight bit of exposed wrist as Rogue lifted her hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Slivers, he thought, the girl was all slivers of skin — those dangerous tracings of lily white that held within it something far crueler than any man could ever imagine. Desire and denial were friendly bedfellows that made those predisposed to reckless abandon quiver.
As it stood, Remy appreciated her for what she was: a blossom of deadly caliber; strength and fragility encapsulated; a thorned rose, arsenic and fishnets.

Rogue cleared her throat, looking pointedly at the table and pushing the food around with her fork, contemplating. When she didn't snap at him outright, Remy concluded that he wasn't wholly wrong.

She just didn't know how very strong she was; what a hard case to crack.

Remy always loved a challenge. Fort Knox, indeed.

"What else do ya know about me?"

She said it so quietly that he almost missed it beneath the scraping of forks and knives, the clatter of plates from the kitchen in the back, and the noisy conversations taking place all around them.

Rogue was the calm centre of the diner at that moment, and to Remy, it was as if the rest of the world had the volume turned down.

*I know y' scared*, he thought. Remy cleared his throat.

"I know your *mère* and *père* were Owen and Priscilla," he began, tracing the rim of his coffee cup with light fingers. "I know y' don't remember them, and I know you don't remember y' *Tante* Carrie neither."

He studied her, but the smooth plains of her face remained impassive, her gaze fixed on a spot on the tabletop between them.

"I know you were adopted when she couldn't take care of y' no more. You were four," he continued, loud enough that only she could hear his whispered confidences, and gentle enough to dull the pinch of memory.

"Your foster mother, Raven Darkholme, alias *Mystique,*" he spat the name, "sent y' t' live with Irene Adler, alias Destiny. She never told you she was a precog — but that's how they knew that you were gifted. That's why Mystique chose you," he hesitated only a moment longer than necessary, kinship casting the admission in a familiar glow. "It was prophesied."

Rogue hunched her shoulders, shrinking into the seat as if he'd said something she didn't care for.

"This ain't a gift, Cajun," she interrupted. He ignored the self-deprecating twinge of the statement.

Even if Rogue avoided talking about her foster parents outright, the look on her face when he'd said Mystique's name was telling. Raven was a difficult woman to appreciate for her methods, given the ease at which she ranked her priorities:

Rogue and her brother Kurt were only significant inasmuch as they were useful to her.

It wasn't any surprise to Remy that Raven had gotten along so well with Magneto. Those two were like Bonnie and Clyde; always trying to find an advantage that was better put to use towards furthering their ambitions... Until, of course, there was that little "incident" involving Rogue, a Mystique-shaped lawn ornament, and a steep cliff.

Remy figured it'd be better for his health to avoid that topic, as long as there was a scalding cup of coffee on hand that could find its way to his face — or worse, his lap.

Mystique, despite her failings as a parent, did have one redeeming quality: she kept *great* records; the
evidence of which could be fit onto a key-sized memory stick, tucked into a shirt pocket, and still weigh in at a sizable hundred sixty gigabytes. There were things in Rogue's file that Remy still hadn't read, even after having it in his possession for over a year.

Carefully, he continued:

"Destiny took care of you until y' powers manifested, despite being blind. She did her best to condition you for your future; t' protect you."

Rogue flinched. "You mean she was protecting everyone around me."

Pushing the atrocity that was his breakfast to the side, he leaned across the table.

"Non, that's what you started doin' when you realized what folks wanted to use your powers for," he countered. "They left you out of the equation: separating who you are from what you could do to suit their own ends. Y' think I'm a stranger to this, Rogue? Just look at m' relationship with Jean Luc."

With Rogue's hair obscuring her face, it was difficult to see her exact reaction, but he could hazard a guess how she was taking it. It was incredible that her shoulders didn't knot up the way she pulled in on herself all the time.

Go easy on her, LeBeau, he reminded himself.

"But chère," he said, "protecting everyone from you by keepin' yourself apart ain't the smartest thing either. You only end up hurtin' yourself."

"She used me," she hissed. "My so-called 'mother' tried ta follow Destiny's prophecy to the letter."

"I was there," Remy said, the admission hollow. "I know."

"Ya weren't there for all of it," she muttered. "Apocalypse brought her back."

Remy froze, his coffee cup raised halfway to his mouth. Carefully, he controlled the tremor that threatened to slop the black brew over his wrist. He set the cup down and propped his weight on his elbows, the tabletop suddenly captivating.

Forcing his expression into one of utmost passivity, he considered the bitter reminder of his prolonged absence from Bayville.

"I knew that." He didn't like it, but he certainly knew it.

"Didn't even send a sympathy card." Rogue's mouth took a dark turn. She folded her arms across her chest, triumphant in one-upping him.

He frowned.

"Don't ya start," she warned. "Ah don't need ta hear any of that cockamamie nonsense about how you feel guilty for staying in Louisiana when the rest of us were out saving the world."

Remy dropped his gaze, dropped his hands, and stared fixedly at his palms. His fingers itched to find a pack of cards.

"Cajun?"

Shaking his head, he began fiddling with the condiment rack to avoid her scrutiny.
“Y’ speak true, Rogue.”

The chrome plate surface of the saltshaker was nearly as good as a small hand mirror, he discovered: a thoughtful expression softened her features. It vanished the instant he looked back at her.

"Ah didn't mean that," she said.

She afforded him an awkward, unsettled shrug; meant to shield her from his searching look and avoid the pockets of dropped conversation. Neither of them wanted to catch up with everything that had happened over the past year, and if Rogue wanted to let it slide, that suited him just fine.

He cleared his throat.

"No, you did," he said finally. "I deserve it."

In truth, he deserved much worse, but they'd come to that eventually.

Blowing out a breath, Remy sought around for an indicator that he could smoke. There were no ashtrays, but no signs either. He wondered if he could chance it with a quick puff. Jennifer might let him get away with it, or, at least, she would have, if he'd lavished her with all the attention that Rogue was receiving.

Finding her behind the counter, gazing blankly past the shoulders of the scruffy travelers taking their breakfast, Remy decided against it: The waitress offered him a glassy, empty smile that plainly told him that her ongoing daydream was ten times more interesting than paying attention to the coffee she was pouring. Moreover, he just didn't want the girl interrupting.

"You were sixteen when y' ran away," he continued his previous train of thought, steadying himself as he began to speak again.

"Destiny knew you’d get gone before your powers manifested, of course, and t' keep you safe from yourself she maintained that you had ‘a rare skin condition’ so you’d keep covered.”

Rogue grimaced.

"These things don't always work out, y' know — Jean Luc used to tell me that had a sensitivity t' light. Made me wear glasses for a year after he adopted me." He grimaced and added, "Stupidest thing I ever done. Tante Mattie had t' pull out the bits of smashed glass from m' forehead after a scrap with the Rippers 'fore Pere let me stop wearin' em. Damned things."

She peeked up at him through her fringe, a small smile appearing for a second.

"What happened?" Rogue asked, the pitch of her voice dropping, taking the edge off with the smoky, Southern cadence he remembered fondly.

Remy laughed, forcing as much disdain into it as he could muster, and narrowed his eyes. "Jean Luc learned m’ eyes were better t’ intimidate the competition when he took me t’ his 'business meetings.'"

He gestured lazily. "I learned that Jean Luc was less intimidatin', red-eyed kid or no, if his pants accidentally exploded while he was wearin' ’em. Only happened once, mind… but Saturday mornin’ cartoons were always that much better for it. No early morning jobs on the weekend after that."

She smiled at that, though the expression was fleeting — there and gone with the blink of an eye.

Rogue's file had been lengthy, documenting everything from meal preferences to socialization —
which wasn't much prior to involvement with the Brotherhood and then the X-Men. The one thing that remained constant were certain behavioral patterns Mystique had noted in the file from her childhood:

Even now, Rogue was unusual in her mannerisms: Insecure? Sure, but not a pushover. Fiercely independent? Without question. How much more collateral did she need before accepting his offer to help without skepticism? She was still resisting, despite his best efforts to persuade her to trust him. Rebelliousness? Saints, the fact that she was sitting in front of him two states away from home confirmed all of that and then some.

The meticulous detail on the accumulated information was unsurprising. When Magneto had been around, the interest in Rogue's abilities had been furthered by Mystique's involvement in their cadre. That information wasn't something he was ready to offer — it had been difficult enough selecting the memories he'd allow her to see when she'd absorbed him yesterday night. Even then, perhaps Remy had revealed too much.

Rogue had yet to comment on anything other than the stone. But perhaps it was best left untouched for now. Sharing these little anecdotes about their respective, dysfunctional upbringings was fodder enough for bonding.

Hell, she'd smiled!

The file, however, had been incomplete, and frankly, flicking through digitized paperwork wasn't Remy's style to begin with.

It was the hands-on approach that provided some spark of interest, and before whisking her away to Louisiana for the first time, his reconnaissance had been thorough.

He continued his recitation:

"Your name —“ he paused, surveying her reaction through the fringe of hair that fell into his eyes.

An unchecked, satisfied smile spread across his face as Rogue's head snapped up. Savoring the feeling that he'd surprised her, and enjoying the way she offered her emotions to him so easily through the dissolving curtain of hospitable reception, Remy was finding it difficult not to crow out loud triumphantly. He'd trumped her.

"Y' real name, th' one on your birth certificate?" he taunted.

Rogue shook her head slowly, her eyes slit to narrow bands of green pressed between heavy black.

"No one knows that —“ she hissed. "It's Rogue. Just Rogue, ya hear?"

Leaning in a little closer, his chest pressed into the edge of the table, knowing full well that those ties to her past made her particularly uncomfortable, Remy relaxed by increments. Not that he needed something to lord over her, but the element of surprise was like keeping a card up the sleeve. It was completely, and utterly invaluable when you needed it, and at that moment, Remy wanted nothing more than a little faith siding with his luck. If something unsettled her enough, then maybe he'd find a way to slip through her guarded demeanor.

Finally, agonizingly, he whispered, "Is 'henceforth undisclosed."

"Ugh!" Rogue threw her hands into the air, and Remy chuckled as she wadded up her napkin and lobbed it at him.
"It's cool."

Remy dallied with the idea of letting it slip, and decided against it. He needed time to win her over; work his way past Rogue's defenses. Knocking them all out forcefully took no skill, no style, no finesse, and was no fun.

"I won't tell nobody." He was good at being patient.

She folded her arms across her chest and scowled at him. "You know this ain't fair? You know all this about me, but you ain't offering anythin' in return about yourself."

He sidestepped the accusation, giving her a wolfish grin. "I'm a gift y' gotta unwrap, ma belle." Then leaning on the word, he emphasized, "Slowly."

She sniffed, albeit with a touch more derision than before. "What else ya got on me, swamp rat?"

Shrugging it off, knowing he'd bested her once already, he took a sip of his coffee.

"Y' want me t' give you the psychological profile I pulled too?" he asked.

"Do Ah have a choice?" she asked.

"Always."

"Then Ah don't want ta know," she returned, picking up her fork and stabbing at her cooling breakfast sausage. "If ya got all this information from Magneto, ya'll probably had some crackpot running analyses on all of us, right?"

Giving her a noncommittal tip of his head, he neither confirmed nor denied the accusation, choosing instead to pull a pack of cards from a pocket. Absently, he began shuffling hand-to-hand over the tabletop while Rogue struggled with the inherent creep-factor of having a handful of her enemies knowing the intimate details of her life.

"What did it say?" She held up the speared link, looking at it distrustfully. "Ostracizes herself from the great part of the plebeian hoard? Tendency towards the morbid? Severe bi-polar tendencies, approach with caution?"

She bit into the sausage with vicious relish, and Remy found himself repressing the urge to cross his legs beneath the table.

Recovering quickly, he shot back, "Disarmingly beautiful and doesn't see it for herself?" He cocked his head, leaning back into the seat without sacrificing his composure. Rogue rolled her eyes.

"That's hardly part of a psychological assessment, LeBeau," she said out of the corner of her mouth, chewing.

"That's just th' part I found out while doing recon."

Rogue's fork dropped with a clatter.

"Y' think I was gonna let some stuffed shirt have all the fun? Pah!"

After taking a large gulp of coffee, she accused sullenly, "Ya destroyed my favorite tree, ya know?"

Collecting her fork from the plate, she prodded at the grits. They were beginning to take on a grey tinge. Rogue kept her eyes on him.
"Y' keep crushing m' hopes of a romantic interlude," he retorted, offering her a sly smile. "The balcony thing gets a lil' old after a year."

The fork hit the plate again, and Remy snatched it out from under her grasp, setting it on the table in front of her. He returned to his cards, his fingers finding the right rhythm again without as much as a glance.

"Balcony?" she demanded.

Nodding slowly, admiring the quick flush that crested over her cheeks as she grasped the entirety of the admission, Remy decided that she was definitely something else when she got flustered.

"You keep gaping like that, and you're gonna get a fly stuck in y' mouth," he teased. "Couldn't just waltz through th' front door t' leave you that card, could I? Had t' be a bit more creative."

"What did that mean, anyway? 'Ah'll always bet on you,'" she snarled. "You can't hustle me, swamp rat. Ah'm wise to ya."

"Is that so? I think y' like it," he goaded. "You just can't bring yourself t' admit it — it'd destroy y' image, river rat."

"Ah don't have an image, bayou breath. This is me; ya take it or ya leave it."

He tsked her.

"Know you better, Rogue," Remy returned mildly. "You dress like that for one reason and one reason only. 'Look, but don't touch,' oui? You're not protecting anybody but yourself. I'm sure th' local Hot Topic just loves you for it too."

She scowled, forcibly yanking her gloves higher on her wrists, straining the seams where the joints fell between her fingers.

"Next thing ya'll are gonna tell me is that ya know what color underwear Ah'm wearing right now too, aren't ya?"

"Black," he said, not missing a beat, twisting his wrist around to cut the cards at a different angle. The paper bent, buckling against his thumbs, and they slid together easily.

"But if I'm wrong, I hope y' plan on correcting me proper."

He lidded his gaze, appraising her with just enough suggestion to make her shift in her seat. He had yet to forget the fact that he'd rifled through her dainties to find the Queen of Hearts he'd affixed to her mirror upon returning to Bayville.

Rogue blushed straight to the tips of her ears, her fingers twitching on the tabletop.

It appeared she hadn't forgotten either.

"Y' want details, too?"

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for the inevitable moment where she reached across the table to smack him. He'd deserve it, certainly, but at this point, if it were coming from Rogue? It'd be too good an opportunity to pass up.

And when that window of opportunity presented itself…
"Ah think Ah need some air," she said flatly, shoving her plate away and readying to slide from the booth.

_Merde_. Wrong window.

"I tell y' what," he began, summoning whatever indifferent grace he possessed at that moment. "Let's make a deal, you and me."

Regarding him with outright suspicion, Rogue stilled, hands poised against the table edge.

"Ah don't like bargains, Cajun," she said, a note of warning clipping her tone.

Damnit, LeBeau, think fast, he berated himself. He needed to keep her sitting there; needed to keep her listening for just a little while longer.

"Then let's make a bet," he hedged, immensely impressed that his voice hadn't taken on the thready quality that would have dashed his nonchalance into little bits against the linoleum.

"Ah'm already giving ya enough of a chance as is," she rebuked him.

"And for that I'm honored. It's more than I deserve." He pulled from the deck one card, a red suit, and presented it to her pressed between two fingers. "But I'm a gambling man, Rogue, and I'll take as many of them chances as you can offer."

She sighed, waving him on with a bored look at the King of Hearts. It wasn't the mollifying way in which she flung herself backwards against the seat cushions, but the sharp awareness in her gaze that revealed her interest.

"Y' gave me the Queen of Hearts at the hotel," he began, prepared to launch into a list of his punishable offenses against her. "You charged it. Don't think th' reference blew past me, girl; we square now?"

Rogue replied, her mouth quirking upwards with the ghost of a smirk, "You nearly blew off my hand the first time we met. And Ah thought you were bein' gallant, tryin' ta step in and warn me before things got hairy."

"Ah," Remy grinned into his chest, his eyes downcast, contemplating the fight from over a year before. "I remember."

He nodded to himself, recalling the five minutes he'd spent hunkered behind a crate waiting for her, his legs cramping, back sore, the splinter stuck in his thumb and the prospect that finally, he'd make one hell of an introduction.

Even before he'd met Rogue, he'd been putting himself through the ringer just to be close to her.

"Couldn't possibly forget that look on your face when I handed you that card down at the docks," he said, almost wistful. "But why did y' give me the Queen today?"

Her attention drifting unseeing to the window, she seemed to smile. "Thought it'd be ironic," she admitted. Jutting her chin at the familiar card in his hand, she added, "You gave me a charged King the first time we fought."

Reigning in his surprise that she actually remembered the exact card, he kept his tone light, nearly playful, "And it blew up in y' face, didn't it?"
She swatted at a tuft of white hair, feigning indifference. The girl didn't have a poker face at all, he chuckled to himself.

"You should be glad that it did," she said. "Honestly, Cajun — the King of Hearts? Ah know you've got an ego the size of Texas, but really…"

"Caught your interest?" Remy arched an eyebrow, rolling the card between his fingers. "What did you think I was telling you with le Roi Charles?"

Rogue glanced between the King and his face, and back again, as if looking for a viable comparison.

"Thought that was a clever analogy? Trying t' tell you something about myself?" he pressed, holding the scrap of paper alongside his cheek. "Me?" he said, frowning, "I think I look better than this guy."

A wry smile curved Rogue's mouth. "You're not the King of Hearts. Never have been. Not ta me."

"What am I, then?"

He grinned, slipping a second and third card from the deck with ease, a black and a red suit — a heart and a spade. He set both elbows on the table and waited for her response.

"Because I certainly know what you are, and what you pretend to be."

Leaning closer, eyes glittering beneath the neon track lighting of the too-crowded diner, Rogue hummed, "You think too highly of yourself, swamp rat. The King is the second highest card in the deck, and being that it's a heart suit you find so appealing, Ah'd say you think ya got some sway over the fluttering pitter-patter of a lady's heart. The problem," she informed him, "is that Ah ain't that lady." She flicked her wrist in distate at the Queen of Hearts. "And you're something else entirely. But Ah appreciate the gesture." She nodded to the Queen of Spades. "That's a bit closer to the truth. No pretendin' involved."

"That so?" he asked, amused.

"You're damn right it is," she returned.

"Black Maria."

"Black Maria," she agreed.

Remy grinned. It figured that Rogue would see herself as the Black Queen; the Queen of Spades.

"Y' play?" He meant poker, but Rogue seemed to suspect a silent suggestion of something else.

She shrugged, trying to feign disinterest. "Poker? Used to. Sam Guthrie cleaned me out one too many times, and Ah lost interest."

Remy couldn't help but notice how her gaze flit back to the cards he held before her, hesitant, curious, and still cautious.

"Then y' know that when you pull the Queen of Spades, the game stops on her," he said slowly, trying not to laugh outright at how absurdly easy Rogue was making things. "If you're playin'," he lingered on the words, "Black Maria."

She stiffened, affording him a cagey appraisal. "Everyone antes again."

Remy slid his fingers together, the cards brushing against one another in a quick shuffle. Rogue
watched him carefully as he deposited three cards face down on the table before them.

"You can't play poker with three cards," she informed him.

"Non, 'course not. This is three card monte."

Jutting his chin, indicating that she should pay attention to where the cards fell, he flipped them once more for her to see their faces.

"Two hearts and one spade. Two faces for you and one for me. One makes a pair, the other's a bit of a..." he paused, flashing a grin, "...rogue."

He pointed, spreading his hands over the cards like a carny talker. "You pull th' red Queen, we carry on like this as long as we have to: I tease you, you blush, y' threaten me with something."

"Nothing changes because the card's a lie," she corrected archly.

Remy declined to rise to the bait, fixing her with a confident smile as he turned them back, faces to the table, and shuffled again.

"Ah told you," she insisted. "That ain't me."

"As th' lady says."

"And if Ah pull the Black Queen?" she asked, sliding forwards, pushing her plate with an elbow.

"You stop calling me 'Gambit' and you start calling me 'Remy'. Moaning or breathy whispers optional," he answered. "Then we ante again. Raise the stakes, so t' speak."

She scoffed. "How's that fair? This is your cracked version of Russian roulette, Cajun — worse odds with only one wild card."

Grinning, his fingers skimming the tops of the cards as he began to swap them across each other: Left, right, above, below, left, right, above, below.

"These are my rules. Y' pull the card that best represents me, and I'll tell you what I meant by th' message I put on y' mirror last night."

She shook her head. "No deal. Ah want measure for measure what ya just told me about myself. The truth. All of it."

Remy cocked an eyebrow, holding her gaze though his hands maintained the steady rhythm of the shuffle.

"Ah want your file, LeBeau." Peering at him with a determined half-smirk from beneath her fringe, Rogue's challenge sizzled eagerly across his skin. Ah, he thought, an exchange of information — transference of leverage. Chips in the maudite pot. Sure.

"Them's fighting words, Roguey." He paused, fingers hovering over the cards, and whispered, "But I don't lose neither."

"And if Ah pull the Queen of Spades," she continued with almost secretive airs, "we're doing this again, aren't we?"

"You pull Black Maria, and it's my decision what the stakes are. You pull th' black Queen, I make the call." Returning to the task of swiping the cards back and forth, he nodded, jutting his chin in
silent contest. "Just say when."

Remy turned the speed of his shuffling up a notch, the cards sliding back and forth against the table in random, but controlled, order.

Rogue lidded her eyes.

"You sure do like keepin' a gal on her toes."

"Just makin' things interestin'."

"Or tryin' ta keep me interested?" She tilted her head.

"Don't have t' try, girl. You still sittin' there."

"Stop."

Rogue pointed to a card furthest to the left, and Remy, smirking, flipped over the Queen of Spades.

"Good choice." He nodded with mock solemnity.

"Fine," she hissed through grit teeth. "What do you want?"

He cocked an eyebrow, fingering the edge of the card. It scraped lightly over the puckered linoleum tabletop, the noise lost beneath the volume of the diner.

"Y' sure?"

"Ah'm good for it, Cajun. Ah don't shirk on my promises. Just tell me what it is," she bit out.

"You're going on a date with me when we get to the Big Easy," he replied.

"What?!!"

"Don't bet nothing y' can't afford to lose." He grinned, starting the shuffle again.

"Ah don't *do* dates!" Rogue barked. "Least of all with the likes of you."

He chuckled, grinning at her outright. "You lost, Rogue, but you've got another chance coming up. How bad do y' wanna know 'bout what goes on inside m' head? Hmm?"

Waggling his eyebrows, Remy shuffled blind again.

"You ain't touching me, swamp rat. I told ya —" she started, the heat rushing to her face, making her cheeks flush in a flattering shade of strawberries and cream.

"That's fine," he said, mindful that cutting off her protests was likely more hazardous to his health than letting Rogue run through the regular roster of warnings regarding skin to skin contact. He'd have choice words with Henry McCoy for persuading her that Remy's most recent evolution wasn't up to snuff, if he ever met up with the man face to face, which was entirely possible given Rogue's reluctant desire to accompany him home.

"I can get to you without layin' a finger on ya," he informed her.

"You are such a —" she seethed, nearly growling. She straightened. "No holding hands, no linking arms, no nothing!" she snapped, biting off each word.
"Is knowin' that much about me so important to you?" he asked, genuine interest keeping the shuffle steady.

"Yes," she ground out. "Its the only way Ah'll know for sure what you've got up your sleeve, Cajun; just short of sucking it through your skin, anyhow."

"You pull that Queen again and I'm gonna get you t' wear a dress too," he quipped, pleased with his good fortune.

She smacked at his hands, jabbing at the card to the far right this time. "Stop!"

Remy chuckled, and flipped over another Queen of Spades.

"You dirty, no good, two timing —" she snarled.

"Quoi? Figure you're a size six, oui?" he returned lightly, dropping his gaze before he could take in an eyeful to measure her.

"Did ya get that from my 'file' too?" Rogue spat derisively.

"Non, from y' closet."

Rogue slapped her hands over his, wrapping her fingers around his wrists and dragged him forwards into the table. The cutlery rattled, the creamer bounced in its holder, and the sugar dispenser wobbled precariously in the direction of the window.

Remy smiled, nodding a hello at an elderly couple that peered distrustfully at them from a few tables away.

"You cheated," Rogue hissed, her grip tightening.

Inclining his head to the cards between them, he continued to appreciate the stubborn set to Rogue's jaw.

"See for yourself," he murmured, meeting her halfway across the table obligingly.

She let go of his wrists, nearly throwing them away from her, and flipped the three cards over, whacking them against the table in her irritation.

Two hearts and one spade remained spread between them.

"Go again?" he asked lightly, swallowing a laugh at her infuriated expression.

"You're dead." She flipped the cards over again.

Remy began the shuffle for the third time, chuckling.

"I knew y' wouldn't be able t' pass up the opportunity to try and best me."

"Stop," Rogue murmured, her gaze fixed on the cards between them. After a moment of staring at the stationary trio, she lifted her gaze to meet his. Rogue was smiling.

"Your choice, mam'selle?" He dipped his head, politely stifling further commentary.

Slowly, tentatively, Rogue reached over and grasped his hand. Her fingers were warm beneath the gloves, and despite the fact that he nearly started from the quick movement, neither pulled back.
Remy stopped laughing entirely and forced himself not to stare at the slim fingers working their way beneath the leather covering his wrist, or the little stripe of teasing, ivory flesh that peeked out from between Rogue's own sleeve and glove. From beneath the thin protection of his wrist guard, Rogue pulled a card.

She held it up before him, releasing her hold, and tapped her temple.

"Ah told ya, you're not the King in the deck," she declared, triumphant. "And ya did say ta pull the card that best represents you."

Remy snorted, shaking his head at the Joker, and for all purposes, trying not to appear shaken.

She had touched him willingly, knowing where to look and exploiting the sliver of information about himself he hadn't counted on her knowing.

Moreover, it appeared that if it was on her own terms, Rogue would flout her own rules — she was careful about it, sure, but she’d laid her hands on him.

Interesting, he thought.

"Ah knew it," she said, smirking. "I knew you were keepin' something up your sleeve."

He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. The spot on his palm where her fingers had gripped him was still warm from the contact, and the myriad explanations for Rogue knowing such a coveted tidbit was both staggering and scary.

"So," she said lightly, folding her hands beneath her chin and dangling the Joker negligently between gloved fingers. She peered at him with amusement that lit her entire face, changing her sullen airs into something seductive.

"Why don't you start by telling me why ya left me that note on my mirror?"

Remy forced a laugh, his mind sliding back into the comfortable place where he could assess and process and form a strategy.

It wasn't the number of chances available that were important here, not the ratio, not the mechanics that would tip the odds in his favor, he reminded himself:

It was the ante.

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:
- Black Maria/Queen of Spades: (Poker) It's a variation in seven-card stud. I was trying to find a proper summary of the rules on the variation and came up with two different things: When the Queen of Spades comes up in a hand, the hand stops and everyone has to bet again. The second variation involves the holder taking half the pot. I'm referring to the former.
- "Gimme time." If you're old enough to remember "Hackers" – Dade Murphy. Same goes for the dress bit and, "Ah don't do dates."
- "...Wit'out all that black shit on 'em, anyhow." The Breakfast Club.
- Trent Reznor: Lead singer of Nine Inch Nails.
- Escher: Google "Relativity: 1953" if you want a visual.
- Ante: (Poker) An ante is a forced bet in which each player places an equal amount of money or chips into the pot before the deal begins.

Translations:
Attends, p'tit: Wait a second, little one
Bonjour: Hello/good morning
Dieu: God
Fille: girl
Homme: man
Mam'selle: (Mademoiselle) Miss
Merde: Shit
Non: No
Oui: Yes
Quoi: what
"This is my fault," said Cyclops, head bowed, hands clamped around his biceps. Though he spoke into his chest, the occupants of the War Room heard him clearly.

Displayed in three-dimensional, holographic clarity, a rotating projection turned on the table before them. The stone was large, nearly twelve inches in length, and faceted in such a manner that was too complex for human machines to design, and too perfect to be natural.

It was garish crimson.

"Alex and I —" he faltered. "We thought we destroyed it. Asteroid M fell. Sanctuary fell. There couldn't have been anything left."

"There wasn't, Scott," Professor Xavier affirmed. "Progressive scans of the area confirmed it. Magneto's dream of a unified, super-powered mutant-kind was destroyed with the asteroid."

Wolverine made a low noise in the back of his throat.

"Uhh… hey? Guys?" Tabitha piped up. "What are we talking about exactly?"

On one side of the steel table, the New Mutants who had joined the Institute after the events that led to the rise of Magneto looked between themselves, clearly uncertain about the discussion taking place between the elder members of the team.

Bobby nudged Jubilee, who in turn nudged Amara, who poked Tabitha in the ribs.

"Be more specific," she hissed at Tabby.

Beside her, Sam nodded, Ray frowned and peered at Jamie, who continued to stare, wide-eyed, at the revolving gem stone hologram. Roberto scrubbed the back of his head, waiting for someone to clue them in.

Dani looked on with wide, curious eyes, her hands folded into her lap. “Scott — I think what Tabby is asking is… what does this gemstone have to do with the destruction of Asteroid M?"

The holographic red stone continued spinning, the chatter replaced by a nervous hum that receded to nothing.

Across the table, Kitty cleared her throat.
"It's a little complicated, actually."

"Professor?" Jean asked.

Charles merely gestured for Jean to pick up the briefing, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"Well," Jean began, tapping a button on the control panel and changing the projection. Before them, a three-dimensional asteroid now hovered. The rock face was pitted, dark blue, and interspersed with glittering striations of metallic alloy. Jutting chunks of internal reinforcements marred the entire structure; beams, domes, and causeways dotted its surface.

"Cool," Jamie hummed.

Ray elbowed him to shut up.

"It was a couple of years ago," Jean said, casting a sidelong glance at her boyfriend: Scott frowned, not yet willing to offer his input.

"Magneto was still at large, at the time," she continued. "In fact, it was this particular incident that alerted us to his presence in Bayville."

"It was our informal introduction, actually," Kurt murmured.

"He had modified this asteroid and set it to orbit on Earth's gravitational current. As you can see, the infrastructure is quite advanced."

Jean pointed to the small pinpoints of light illuminating the rock face. Several buildings dotted the landscape.

"He intended for only the most worthy of adversaries to coexist on the satellite," Storm offered.

"Mutants united against the human threat," Kitty said, fingerin} the two playing cards resting on the table before her. It was an absent gesture that earned a stern look from Wolverine. Kitty dropped her hands.

"What a crackpot," Tabitha snorted, turning her attention to her nail polish.

"Boom Boom!" Bobby hissed. "Don't be so insensitive!" He jutted his chin at Scott, who didn't look up.

"Don't be such a kiss-ass, popsicle!" Tabitha stuck out her tongue.

"How were 'the worthy' determined, Jean?" Amara asked.

"We fought," Jean said.

"We were attacked," Kurt corrected.

"By the Brotherhood," Kitty added. "I mean, we were, at least. But only Rogue was chosen."

Wolverine growled again, his jaw working.

Piotr leaned in, examining the projection. "And she vos taken to zis place? For vot?"

Jean took a breath. "Blob, Avalanche, Quicksilver, Sabretooth, Storm, the Professor, Rogue, and myself were taken. The Brotherhood fought for what they claimed to be their 'rightful places'
alongside Magneto."

"Us versus the Brotherhood," Kurt supplied. "As usual."

"Jean and I defeated Toad and Mystique, respectively," Storm said.

"Wolverine pulled a punch at my behest, allowing Sabretooth take his place," the Professor continued. "I warned him telepathically, as Magnus had already assumed control of the jet in which I was seated, and had brought me to him."

"Scott," Jean continued hesitantly, "Scott and his brother Alex —"

"We went by our own volition," Cyclops murmured.

A hush fell over the room as their leader began to speak. His red-tinted glasses reflected their faces back at them as he searched their faces, imploring as if willing them to understand.

"Magneto had built a chamber into the asteroid — a genetic enhancer that he meant to use to bolster our mutations. We were to become the completely evolved versions of ourselves. It would have given us complete control."

Scott stood, leaning into Jean a little as he slammed a finger down on the controls that changed the holographic display. The previous projection returned.

"This stone, the Gem of Cyttorak, fueled the machine," he said, his voice taking on a hard edge.

"How Magnus was ever able to obtain the gem..." Xavier trailed off, his eyes fixed on the projection.

"Alex and I, well, since Magneto had invited us and we'd gone willingly, he saw no need to force us against our will. He thought the others would be a liability, though."

"He imprisoned us in stasis," Storm explained. "Four translucent, self-contained environments; they were climate-controlled, of course."

Beside her, Logan snorted. "What Storm means, kids, is that he stuck them into giant-sized test tubes for safekeeping. What could you do? Buckethead thought of everything."

"He trapped us and forced us into slumber so that we would not be capable of using our powers," Storm said, the sharpness of her tone betraying her true feelings about being caged. It was a known fact amongst the X-Men that the weather witch had an acute phobia of enclosed spaces.

"I did not see or sense the Gem on Asteroid M," the Professor said. "I would not have known of its presence were it not for Cyclops' record of the events that transpired. Erik ensured that particular detail, I am certain."

"Stripes wouldn't have known about it, either," Logan added. "She was locked up and knocked out alongside ya, Chuck. There's no way she could have recognized it even by absorbing Gumbo's memories. By name, sure, she'd know it — she was debriefed when it was all over. But by sight? No way."

"And Gambit certainly would not know of it's history, either," Storm added. "He is impulsive, but he is not stupid. He would not risk himself bodily harm if he understood the risks involved. Moreover, I suspect that while under Magneto's employ, such a disaster would not be openly discussed with his new recruits."
Piotr made a noise of agreement. "This would be correct. There was nothing in the databases documenting the destruction of the asteroid, and no catalogue record of a Gem."

"How do you know?" Kurt asked.

Piotr turned to him, offering a small but knowing smile. "I was responsible for securing many of Magneto's personal effects, especially those that could prove useful."

Kitty interjected in a loud whisper, "He means he moved all of Magneto's boxes for him."

"What does it do?" Sam asked. "If it's just a rock —"

"It's not just any rock," Cyclops continued. "Magneto claimed that the Gem emitted a radioactive field, but that's not entirely accurate."

"Not at all," Charles murmured. "I have seen what exposure to the Gem in its raw form can accomplish. Magneto processed its energy, and in turn, he was able to manipulate the fields produced by his enhancement chamber."

"He brainwashed us," Cyclops admitted bitterly. "He tried to wipe my mind and Alex's. 'Purge it of unnecessary emotion,' he said."

"As a result of Magneto's tampering, the outcome of both Scott and Alex's modified mutations were temporary. They exerted themselves entirely, draining themselves of their freshly acquired powers by attempting to destroy Asteroid M when it began to break apart."

"We succeeded," Scott murmured. "I thought we had succeeded."

"You might have, Slim," Logan rumbled. "At least partially. Chuck? You said you've seen what the Gem can do firsthand? How's that possible if Magneto knocked you out cold?"

"I have," he said, almost tiredly. "And I am not referring to the Asteroid M incident in which I witnessed a firsthand display of the stone's effects."

The Professor looked around the table at his X-Men, concern furrowing his brow.

"There is one individual who used the Gem of Cyttorak to its maximum capabilities, and because of it, he was changed forever both physically, and emotionally," he explained. "He became hostile, violent, and uncontrollable. The powers of the Gem activated his latent X-gene, turning a man — a baseline human — into something very near a monster. To this day, he is unstoppable."

"I don't like the sound of that," Kurt murmured, casting an uneasy look at Kitty.

Shadowcat leaned forwards, pulling her laptop closer and linking to Cerebro's mainframe through the mansion's wireless network. In a moment, peering at the Professor over her reading glasses, she sucked in a breath and modified the holographic projection before the team.

"Professor?" Bobby asked, the crack in his voice echoing the silent surprise of the entire team with one quavering word.

Professor Xavier examined the revolving hologram before him, his face now devoid of expression. "His name is Cain Marko."

All eyes turned to the center of the table.

"You know him simply by the moniker, The Juggernaut; my half-brother."
A growing silence followed this statement, the tension in the room increasing. Even the new recruits were well versed with Juggernaut's abilities: He was the nearest thing to a tank on two legs that anyone had ever witnessed. He cared for no one, and literally, nothing could stand in his way.

"That bulldozer?" Ray said after a moment. "You're related to…?"

"That's enough Ray," Jean cut him off sternly.

"He is invulnerable to any form of physical attack," the Professor continued.

"Though he always demonstrated his dislike of our familial relations, it was his envy, indeed, his hatred, amplified by the Gem, that shaped his determination to destroy. He cannot be controlled. Only I have been able to weaken him psychically. He is now in a private detainment centre, suspended in an indefinite slumber."

"Are you saying," Kurt began hoarsely, "that if meine schwester were to use the Gem like Gambit did… that she'd… she'd… turn into something like…"

"Gambit has not demonstrated any indication of that," Jean said firmly, bringing everyone's attention back to the situation at hand.

"Jean's right." Scott let out a breath. "Hank would have seen that in the readouts. Excessive violence, or…"

"More stupidity than usual?" Logan snorted. After a moment, he subsided, muttering, "Sorry, Chuck."

"There is no indication of such behavior, no," Henry said.

Several members of the team looked up to the spot overhead where Beast hung upside down, clinging securely to the pipes crisscrossing the ceiling. Jamie jumped, unaware of the doctor's presence up until that moment, and scattered himself into several copies — one of which knocked Ray off his chair, and another of which landed in Tabitha's lap. The clone smiled sheepishly, vanishing a moment later.

"The stupidity, or…?" Logan pressed, ignoring the replicated mutants dusting themselves off.

"Violent, aberrant, or hostile behavior," Hank clarified. "Gambit is much cleverer than you give him credit for, Logan. The tests have indicated two possibilities. Either Gambit's augmented control over his powers — his psionic shield, his ability to manipulate and excite matter of a molecular level — have surpassed our database's estimated calculations, allowing him to suppress his innate abilities and siphon off only a portion of his powers to Rogue when she absorbed him, or," he paused, glancing at the Professor, "the genetic enhancement was incomplete."

"Which would indicate an instability." The Professor nodded thoughtfully. "Or perhaps, only a portion of the Gem's powers were accessed," he added.

"Or maybe the Gem itself is only a fragment of the original stone," Scott muttered. "Maybe it can't do the same sort of damage if it was broken when Asteroid M was destroyed."

"Would you use a broken razor blade, Cyclops?" Logan asked.

Scott looked up, paused, and then shook his head.

"You'd do a helluva lot more damage to yourself if ya did," he ground out. "What's there to say if the
Gem's busted, and Stripes is thinking of using it?"

"A very good analogy, Logan," Hank said. "If the stone was fractured, it could very well account for
the fact that Gambit himself was not turned into a Juggernaut himself, thus lending to my theory that
Gambit may very well experience a decline in his current capacity as a result of using the stone in
whatever state it's in. Suffice to say, his secondary mutation isn’t going to ‘stick’, according to the
parlance. As it were, our database reports that an alien crystal such as this —“

"Alien?" Ray squawked. "You're not serious?"

Tabitha elbowed him; her interest was finally perked by the ongoing conversation.

"Its origins are debatable," the Professor conceded, "though it is widely held that the Gems, for
indeed there are several, were not human conception. The myths surrounding them are steeped in
mystical tradition and cult worship."

"They are said to be the instruments of Cyttorak himself," Storm continued, her posture relaxed as
she motioned for Kitty to change the hologram before them. "Legend has it that Cyttorak was a
vastly powerful sentient entity banished from earth millennia ago. The stone is said to be imbued
with his powers."

Someone groaned.

"What's the worst case scenario?" Logan asked, abruptly ending the history lesson before the kids
could get themselves worked up over E.T.

Kitty returned to the hologram of the stone with two clicks.

Hank shook his head. "We do not know Gambit's exact condition. I could offer you a probability
ratio of the outcome if Rogue was to use the Gem, but my hypothesis would be purely speculative."

"Then guess," Logan ground out.

"Fatality seems improbable," Hank replied, a little flatly.

"That's it? You're saying it won't kill her?" Kurt asked, aghast.

"There are worse things than death in this case, I am afraid," the Professor murmured.

"Well, like, that's reassuring!" Kitty cried, tossing her arms into the air. Her hands had returned to the
King and Queen of Hearts as Logan turned a watchful eye to the cards at her outburst.

Kurt slumped backwards into his chair.

"What I want to know is, how the hell did Gumbo get his hands on that rock?" Logan asked, jabbing
a finger onto the surface of the table for emphasis.

"I think I can answer that," Scott murmured, frowning at the hologram.

Beside him, Jean's eyes widened. "Oh no…"

"Was?" Kurt sat up again, leaning across the table.

"There were only two people left on the asteroid before it crashed," Scott muttered. "Magneto is
presently in custody up at Redwood Pines respite home, and the other has been unaccounted for
since Apocalypse…"
"Scheiße!" Kurt swore, standing up, realization making his face pale despite the thin coating of blue fur.

"Sit down, Kurt," the Professor warned.

"You can't be serious!" he near-shouted. "I knew it. I knew she'd be back! She's been waiting for an opportunity to hurt us since we told her we wanted nothing to do with her after Apocalypse!"

"Kurt, calm down." Kitty tugged him back into his chair. "What are you talking about?"

Nightcrawler remained tense, curling his knees against his chest and flicking his tail irritably against the table. He brushed off Kitty's reassuring hand.

"My mother," he spat. "Mystique obviously hasn't learned her lesson — she only ever wanted us around for what we could do for her. Rogue will…" Kurt turned to Kitty, eyes wide. "She'll kill her."

"That's assuming Rogue knows its Mystique behind it," Scott interjected.

"You don't think Gambit would willing work for Mystique, knowing her history with Rogue —" Kitty began.

Logan rumbled.

"Shadowcat," Scott cut her off. "This is a worst case scenario. We can't determine whether or not Mystique has hired out Gambit to bring Rogue to her at this point."

Kurt's head snapped around, his expression darkening.

"However," Scott continued, "it is a fair assumption that's what happened. Mystique and Magneto were the last two people off that asteroid, and considering Magneto is presently incapacitated —"

"Amnesic," Bobby supplied.

"A vegetable," added Tabitha with a snigger. "Total tomato."

"I thought a tomato was a fruit? It has seeds!" said Bobby.

"Pure parsnip?" Tabitha tried again.

"Boom Boom!" Ray and Roberto snapped together.

Tabitha shrunk a little in her seat, making a face but nonetheless falling silent.

Logan sniffed. "Chuck?" he raised an eyebrow.

The Professor lifted his head, his thoughts interrupted in a way that took him a moment to come to a conclusion. Something simmered in his gaze that remained unspoken.

"I will visit Joseph," he said at last. "He will not remember, given his present voluntary condition, but perhaps if certain… selective… memories may be unlocked. We may find proof that it was indeed Mystique who secured the Gem."

"Cyke?" Logan asked, standing. "What's the game plan?"

Scott stiffened, slipping into his role as the leader with little difficulty though it was clear he was
none too pleased about taking the suggestion from Logan to get moving.

"I want a small team. Iceman, Colossus, prepare the jet. Storm will pilot. You," he pointed at Amara, Ray, Tabitha, Jubilee, Roberto, Dani and Jamie, "are my intelligence team. I want live feeds. You track Rogue and Gambit, you determine their destination, and you provide Kitty with the digital readouts. I want twenty-four-hour surveillance. If anything comes up on the news, send us the feeds. I want to know where Gambit's taking Rogue, and I want you to find out if Mystique is within a fifty-mile radius of that location."

He paused, turning to Kurt and Kitty. "Shadowcat, you're on the receiving. Get in the jet."

She nodded, and with one last look at Kurt, she phased through her seat, and through the floor. With her, Gambit's cards had disappeared.

"Nightcrawler?"

Kurt looked up at him, three-fingers of each hand balled into fists against his shins. His tail made a hollow bonking sound against the table leg where he sat.

"If you're going to be a liability, I'm leaving you here," Cyclops warned.

"Rogue's my sister," he spat. "I swore that I wouldn't let Mystique hurt her again; not after what she did to Rogue for Apocalypse. This is personal. I'm going." With that, Kurt ported out in a puff of sulfur.

Cyclops nodded, turning to the Professor and to Hank. "We will be back in no more than twenty-four hours. Our objective is to obtain Rogue, detain Gambit, secure the stone, and, if she's there, capture Mystique."

"Hey, kid," Logan called. "I'm coming." He nodded to Jean. "If Gambit's working for Mystique now, there's no telling what the pair of them have cooked up. You'll need all the firepower that you can get."

For a moment, it appeared that Scott's mouth had disappeared into his chin; his lips were pressed together so hard that they'd gone white.

"You sure this isn't your way of saying you'd rather skewer Gambit personally?" Jean asked wryly, sauntering towards the War Room door.

Logan chuckled, following. "Red, ya gotta stop peekin' into my head."

"That would be unethical," was Cyclops' terse interjection.

"Then Red knows me far too well, Cyke," Logan's voice trailed off as they rounded the corner.

"Henry," the Professor hummed after his X-Men had filed out of the room to prepare.

Hank craned his head back a moment, and deciding he rather preferred to talk to the man face to face, he swung overhand and dropped to the ground a few feet away.

"Is it possible that I've misjudged him?" the Professor asked after a moment. "I was so certain that Gambit's intentions were honest…"

Henry considered this. The Professor was an idealist, after all, but it was a rare occasion when his assessment of a mutant's character was this inaccurate. Hank himself had been near-convinced by
Gambit's behavior – the boy's methods were certainly questionable, but the intent behind them?

Remy LeBeau had prompted Rogue into using her powers again. Certainly, there was merit in that. Privately, Henry had hoped that in doing so, Gambit had reached her in a way that no one else had even dared.

"How did he read, Charles?" he asked.

The Professor shook his head. "He did not, my friend. He did not," he replied with a sigh. "While Gambit's mental shields proved far too strong for a thorough reading, his assurance had been enough to placate my concerns... At the time."

Henry raised an eyebrow, but did not press the matter.

"Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind." He nodded consolingly. "They will find them, Charles; Rogue and Gambit both. Perhaps you may find that you have been correct in your assumptions all along."

"I can only hope, Henry."

—

New Orleans was an atomic bloom that infused the sky with bright violet light. Rogue half-expected to hear the blare of zydeco from where she sat on the back of Gambit's motorcycle.

"She's a beaut, non?" Remy said over his shoulder.

Rogue had to lean a little closer to hear him above the wind carrying across the lake. The Potchartrain causeway was longer than she'd imagined. The last time they'd come here, they'd traveled freight in the lowest class seats possible — crate boxes, in other words. She hadn't remembered that the city was so bright, even at four in the morning.

"She doesn't sleep," he continued. "She just carries on all day and all night. My type of femme."

Rogue rolled her eyes, though Remy flashed her a winning grin over his shoulder.

"Y' like?"

Rogue sucked in a breath. The air tasted fresh, a little humid, but clean. She blinked the wind out of her eyes and arched her back, letting go of the seat and clinging to the bike with her legs. She let her hands trail out behind her, the rush of air running through her gloved fingers pleasantly. It cooled off some of the sticky, unshowered lethargy that had settled on her once they'd crossed the Tennessee border.

"It's alright," she replied, dismissive in her nonchalance.

In truth, the lights reflecting off Lake Pontchartrain — red and gold and purple and blue — made her chest ache just a little. It was a good hurt, though. It reminded her of the home she'd once shared with Irene, of lanterns strung up around the fourth of July; their glow tinting the banks of the Mississippi River in lazy, rippling patches.

"That's hardly an answer," he chastised lightly.
"That's cause ya haven't answered any of my questions, swamp rat. Fair's fair."

He laughed, a true sound that made his shoulders shake. Rogue grinned a little, taken aback by his sudden show of good humor. Apparently, being home really did a number on the guy.

"You're right, that's fair." He shrugged, the white of his smile a ghost in the rearview.

"You're not gonna tell me either, are ya?" she pressed, far from defeated but too tired to argue. It had been a long day, and although they'd made good time, all Rogue wanted was a shower, a change of clothes, and a comfortable bed for the night.

Remy and his secrets be damned.

Since they'd left Virginia, he'd successfully evaded her every attempt to wrangle out more than a surface explanation for his return, his life, or how he'd managed to acquire her file from Magneto's base. Rogue knew a few things: like her, Remy'd been adopted at a young age. He had a foster brother in his late twenties who was married, and destined to inherit the family business. He had two cousins, from two different sides of the family who lived at Jean Luc's base of operations. He also had an aunt, of sorts, who he spoke of with reverence and affection.

Rogue knew that Gambit loved his hometown, but again, like her own issues with Mystique, Remy had deep-rooted problems with his father. One sure thing she had gathered was that Jean Luc would not be happy for his son's grand re-entry to the city, though Remy had turned the conversation to Rogue's unwillingness to hold onto his waist before she could pursue the matter.

"Never said that," Remy returned, distracted by something in the distance that Rogue herself couldn't see. He narrowed his eyes, but from what Rogue could tell of Gambit's intent expression in the rearview, he seemed to be pleased by whatever it was. "There's a time and a place for everything," he continued, wholly unapologetic, "and having that conversation like this is a lil' awkward, not bein' able to face you and all."

"Then when?" she insisted.

He chuckled again, easing off the throttle a little and switching into the right lane.

"Y' know, my brother Henri always told me that I could talk the ears off anyone who'd listen. I think you might be givin' me a run for m' money."

Rogue snorted half-heartedly. "Cajun, ya been trying ta prove that you can get in my head all day. Ya gotta get yours sometime, too."

The Harley slowed, pulling up to the narrow shoulder, barely six inches between the yellow stripe marking off the road and the guardrail. They were halfway across the causeway.

"What are ya doing, exactly, swamp rat?" Rogue asked.

She peered over the guardrail at the black, brackish water below. The drop to the lake was substantial, appearing farther with the dense shades collected beneath the bridge. It made her head swim.

"Just announcing my arrival, chère. Won't take a minute," Remy said, killing the engine and sliding off the bike in one fluid motion. He strolled around to the front wheel, sliding his trench coat off his shoulders and tossing it at her.

Rogue caught it, surprised at its weight. "The heck are you carrying all this around for?" she
muttered, feeling the oddly-shaped curiosities in his pockets blindly through the leather.

Remy tsked, slipping his bo from a belt loop and extending it with a quick snap of the wrist.

"Best t' be prepared for anything," he said, getting a feel for the staff with a quick spin. "To answer your other question," he said, though not without a hint of coyness: “Tomorrow we start recon. Gotta head back t' the place where I met Maman Brigitte to make sure everything’s in order. Tomorrow night, though…” he grinned. "Y’ owe Remy a lil’ something, non?"

"You don't have ta keep reminding me, swamp rat. My memory goes farther back than five minutes," she retorted, swinging her leg around the bike and sliding into the driver's seat.

"Just checking." He smirked.

He'd been gloating for the better part of the afternoon, much to her chagrin. Despite her best efforts to shut him up about their "date," his frequent quips had lightened the mood considerably, especially since in the long-stretching lulls between the state borders, Rogue had resorted to contemplating one of two things, neither of which was entirely pleasant… Not to say that the idea of going on a date with the swamp rat was pleasant. Lord, no. She'd cornered herself into that one, and she'd grin and bear it, sure. Didn't mean she'd enjoy it — but she wasn't about to balk neither.

She would not give that low-life snake charmer the satisfaction of besting her.

Damned Cajun didn't know what he was in for — and if he dared try to get her into something pink and frilly to fulfill the condition of having to wear a dress, she'd use that staff of his to give him an adamantium enema.

Rogue sniffed, unable to restrain her scowl.

"Quoi?" Gambit asked, seeing her expression.

Glowering, Rogue folded her arms across her chest and fixed him with her best glare. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to have the same effect on Gambit as it did everyone else.

Instead of cowering, Remy merely subsided in his teasing, offering her a knowing, cock-sure smirk, and turned back to the darkness.

Without streetlights to line the causeway, the only illumination offered was the dull shine of the moon, the small bits of reflecting tape lining the guard rails, and the beam of amber light cast from the Harley that fell across the backs of Remy's legs.

"How the hell can you see anything?" she muttered, squinting past his shoulder.

Not turning around, Remy tapped his temple. "Powers," was all he offered. "Kinesthetic awareness, better than night vision."

"Figures," she muttered. "That a new thing too?"

"Non," he answered. "Been relyin' on it for years. It's just a bit stronger than it used t' be, thanks to the Gem."

"How much is a bit?" she asked.

He grinned: a shitload, said his smile. "You'll see soon enough, girl," he promised.

Rattled by the ease at which he glossed over the truth, she muttered, "You're all about the
The first mental hurdle she'd encountered was facing the possibility that this was all a sham: There was no stone. Gambit had lied about his powers to persuade her to return to the Big Easy with him. He had done it once before, and who was to say he wouldn't do it again? For all his airy banter and sly subtext, the guy had somehow convinced her to come this far... again... and he'd used the same damned lines on her... again.

Moreover, he'd somehow managed to insert three very distinctive memories into her head to persuade her. If it wasn't enough that she'd absorbed him, Rogue had come to the wary conclusion after a few hours of racking her brain that his psyche was clearly, unquestionably, conspicuously missing from her mind.

And that left her feeling about as easy as a duck stuck in a dry pond.

Rogue stretched, rolling her shoulders and kneading at a small knot that had formed in her lower back. She groaned, dropping the coat on the seat before her, and Remy raised an eyebrow.

"Don't say it," she muttered, waving him off before he could comment. Knowing him, he'd probably offer to give her a massage or something equally ludicrous.

The guy just didn't get it: his powers might've been whistling dixie, but that didn't mean she suddenly trusted herself not to hurt him.

Remy shrugged and rolled his wrists. "If y' knew what these hands could do t' ya..." he trailed off.

_Really_ didn't get it.

"You know what _my_ skin can do to ya," she threatened, albeit half-heartedly.

He hadn't stopped badgering her. Thankfully, since their little exchange at the diner when she'd yanked him into the table, he'd backed off some. He hadn't tried to touch her since that morning, for which Rogue was grateful. However, that didn't resolve the slight problem of sitting on the back of a bike practically curled up against the swamp rat for the better part of the afternoon.

He'd pick-pocketed the keys to the Harley without her even knowing he'd slipped them from her belt. Rogue figured it had been retaliation for finding the Joker under his wrist guard. Problem was, she didn't know how she'd known the exact spot he'd hid it. The thought had materialized, and she'd acted on a hunch.

Groaning as one of her vertebrae popped with satisfying snap, Rogue shifted her weight to give some relief to her sore hips.

It wasn't _her_ problem if Gambit was so predictable as to keep cards up his sleeves. He sure as hell hadn't needed to take it out on her afterwards. Some of the things that came out of the boy's mouth were downright scandalous.

As such, Rogue had struggled to keep two inches between them for the better part of the day, and at speeds that nearly broke the sound barrier, it had done a number to her muscles. Everything ached. It was small price to pay, all things considered, but sitting behind him gave her far too much opportunity to have her nose filled with the heady scent of his cologne: Dark musk, bitter clove, and dry tobacco swirled around her pleasantly, fading a little as the day wore on and the sun grew hotter.

It was a warm, feral smell that wrapped around the bike like a pair of heavy limbs. At one point, she caught herself leaning into him just a little while trying to place it. It wasn't a commercial brand
cologne, for which she was grateful. He at least had some taste.

Thankfully, Gambit hadn't caught her sniffing at him. She'd never hear the end of it if he had.

Were that not insult to injury enough, she'd memorized the positioning of each and every sliding, sinuous bit of muscle on his back, his arms, and neck — from the slight flex of his triceps when he urged the throttle, to the graceful shifts his body would make when leaning into a turn and skirting around other, slower vehicles.

Presently, she was still trying to convince herself that it had only been out of utter boredom that she'd done so.

A girl could only count the stripes on the road for so long.

Sure, that was it.

"I know," he replied after a long moment. Or perhaps it had only been seconds. What had they been talking about?

Remy threw her a lazy grin, as if to say he actually enjoyed the prospect of being knocked unconscious. There was, however, the slight loophole that he could touch her now, albeit briefly. But if what the Professor had said was true, the possibility of having his shield fail if he did was too risky.

Rogue shivered, trying to repress her unease with a scowl. She wouldn't even begin to entertain the idea, she swore to herself.

It was better this way. It always was.

She slid into his seat. "Ah think it's a disease ya got, Cajun."

He looked as if he were about to retort, opening his mouth and snapping it shut promptly.

"This is taking too long," Remy muttered, changing the subject. He kicked his staff into the air and leapt onto the rail. Landing nimbly, crouched, he stood to full height while using the staff to balance himself.

"Gambit!" Rogue shouted, stricken, as he gave an exaggerated wobble as he leaned over to peer into the darkness below the causeway.

Two bridges ran side by side across Lake Pontchartrain, one into the city, and one out. Both were equally darkened, deserted stretches of road.

"Merde, m' legs are stiff." He threw her a wink as he straightened and began bouncing along the beam.

"Ya darn fool Cajun! Get down here this instant!" she shouted, leaping off the bike. She followed, because if he fell, she'd be the one diving into the lake below to save his sorry hide and frankly, Rogue reasoned, he'd probably float with that over-inflated head of his anyway. The thought brightened her, a little.

"Ah ha!" he called, pivoting on his toes and slinking backwards.

He spun the staff in front of him over one knuckle, caught it, and then spun it the other way — changing the balance of his weight without as much as tilting with the force of his swing. His steps were sure, but Rogue couldn't help the slight twinge of embarrassment.
"You do care what happens t' this ol' scoundrel. I knew it!"

"Are ya suicidal or something? Ah am not gonna dive into that lake ta fish ya out! Get down, now!" she barked, advancing on him.

Chuckling, Gambit spun the staff again. The weapon rolled over his shoulders, beneath one arm, and continued the motion in a figure eight across his chest — above one arm, behind the shoulder, across his chest, behind the other shoulder, and back to the front. Rogue watched his calves flex, the taut lines drawn across his thighs, and shook herself promptly.

Show off.

"Come and get me," he taunted.

Rogue swallowed, peeking over the ledge again and seeing the first few feet of a concrete piling before even that bled into blackness. She could pull at his legs, but she doubted she could support his weight if he went over.

She was spared the necessity of an impromptu rescue as three sharp clangs echoed from several yards away. The sound reverberated along the rail, and Remy spun with a flourish on his toes, his staff singing as he swept it before and behind him.

Rogue had all of three seconds to appreciate the firm butt he presented to her, flush brightly, and wrench away her attention before he noticed.

Damnit.

"Je m'excuse, chérie," Remy grinned at her in profile, peering at the squatting black smudge of a figure that stood opposing him. "There are some traditions y' gotta respect when you go home. This is one of them."

He banged his staff against the rail three times in response, once to his right, once to his left, and once in front of him as he dropped into a full crouch.

"Merde!" was the furious, surprised response he received from the man silhouetted against the backdrop of the city. "Remy?"

"'Evenin' Lapin!" Remy called, grinning. "Y' miss me?"

"Bof! The engine's runnin' but nobody be driving, hein? Whaddefuck y' think y' doing?"

"I'm home, Lapin. Officially," he returned, motioning for Rogue to hang back.

"F' now!" the man called Lapin all but shrieked; a touch of hysteria overtaking his immediate surprise.

"F' now."

"Cause you ain't gonna leave this city alive if you think y' gonna do this!" he warned.

Remy called back, "Don't have a choice anymore. Lessgo, mon ami. Follow th' protocol. En guard."

"Fils de putain," Lapin huffed. As Rogue's eyes adjusted to the gloom, she could see him shaking his head urgently, waving an arm as he stood. "I'm not doin' this! Ain't gonna fight you,homme. No way, no how."
"You wanna play cards instead?"

"Ha!" Lapin barked. "You’re not the one who's gonna have t' report back to Jean Luc tomorrow — tell him his boy’s come home."

"You're not the one who's been hiding under his nose for six months!" Remy shot back.

"Quoi? Go to bed…"

"Stop running that foul mouth of yours! There's a lady present!" Remy chortled, throwing a glance at Rogue. "Sort of."

Rogue merely shook her head, regarding the other man warily. At this distance, he was little more than a blackened shadow, a barely distinguishable lump set against the backdrop of the city.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "That's all very good. 'Scuze moi, mam'zelle, but did y' know that Monsieur LeBeau over there's the biggest coyoon this side o' the Mississippi?" Lapin called.

"Ah sorta guessed that!" Rogue called, approaching to better see Remy's expression. "What's he talking about?"

"Mmm," Remy paused, scrunching his nose. "Y' know that thing I told you about Jean Luc kicking me out?"

"Kicked you out?" Lapin bellowed, moving closer along the beam, a hint of panic evident in his throaty laugh. "That's a lot softer than th' terms Marius used!"

"Cajun?" Rogue pressed warningly.

"It's a long story, chère..." Remy murmured. Rogue opened her mouth to object, fully aware that he was avoiding her again when Remy shouted, "Lapin! Shut y' mouth and fight before I shut it for ya!"

"Fine!" The figure straightened, puffing himself up. "Fine!"

"Observe the formalities, Emil Lapin," Remy chastised, grinning. Rogue watched as, with careless grace, Remy's staff sung through the air again. Cautiously, she took a step backwards to avoid being clipped by the weapon.

"Merde," Lapin muttered again. "None shall cross this bridge lest they observe the trials of he who guards it. As it was in the times of old, as it will be until the last of the Guild sets down his staff,“ Lapin called. "He who crosses the bridge declares himself to the Guilds of New Orleans. Do you who seek entry t' the Crescent City live beneath the law?"

"I do," Remy answered.

"The law of whom?"

"The law of th' Thieves."

"To whom do y' answer?"

"T' myself," Remy returned cheekily.

Lapin stomped on the beam, causing it to shudder with several muted clangs. "That's not right, Remy!"
Remy snorted. "To m' father and Guildmaster, Jean Luc LeBeau," he corrected smartly. "May the saints preserve him." Remy seemed to roll his eyes.

"For what business do y' seek th' Guild?"

"I don't."

"Quoi?" Lapin hesitated, unsure if he'd heard right. "Say it again? Think I might be goin' stupid."

"Just do y' thing, Lapin. I'm not here for that sort of dealing."

"That's a lie," Lapin declared. "Y' think I can't hear it in y' voice, Remy? Known you since you was a kid, and you're gonna try t' pull a fast one on me before I can even see y' stupid face."

"Lapin," Remy implored.

Rogue bristled, uncertain as to what was transpiring before her, but knowing that she didn't like the sound of it anyway.

"Then what th' fuck are y' here for?" he cried, exasperated. "Social call? You don't come back here making a public declaration of your arrival if it doesn't involve th' families, Remy! You can't avoid them. They won't avoid you unless y' be a body they need t' step over t' cross th' street. Merde! Fout-pas-mal!"

"I'm here t' pay my debts," Remy returned clearly, his voice ringing over the quiet causeway. He glanced at Rogue briefly. "T' old friends."

"Y' gotta be kiddin' me! You're riskin' y' sorry excuse of a hide for a fille? 'Scuze encore, mam'zelle, but I hope y' worth the trouble!" Lapin called, repeating again to himself, "Merde!"

"Ring true, Emil?" Remy called, a trace of irritable boredom making the question cutting. "Heureux au jeu, malheureux en amour."

"Oui, f' true," Lapin returned. "Yes. Fine. Whatever. I believe you. Y' been doing stupid things on th' account of women for years." Then after a moment's hesitation, he muttered to himself loudly, "I knew I shoulda let Theoren take first watch tonight."

"Jean Luc put you up t' this?" Remy asked. "Making you take turns watchin' over th' bridge, waiting t' see when I'd show up again?"

Petulant, Lapin replied, "Oui."

"When did that start?"

Lapin paused, counting to himself. "Bout three weeks back?"

"Bout the time I actually left, then," Remy said, glancing at Rogue. That was a lie. He'd only gotten into Bayville two days before. If he'd left three weeks ago, that meant he'd returned to the city after being completely unaccounted for for at least two weeks.

He fixed her with an imploring look, knowing she'd caught him, and when her expression didn't change, Remy mouthed the word, "Tests."

Astonished, Rogue realized it had been almost a month before he'd come looking for her; a month where he was getting used to his newfound abilities, and a month to perfect the argument he'd used
to convince her to go with him. Rogue worried her lip, not entirely certain she wanted to believe it, and yet, there they were.

At least it wasn't a flight of fancy, she conceded. Somehow, that didn't make her feel any better.

"Y' get this over with, Emil, and Jean Luc'll know enough t' not send you out here in the middle of the night again once y' make that phone call," he said, turning back to Lapin.

Rogue could hear Lapin suck in a small, delighted breath, and quickly, he hastened to get over with what seemed like Thieves Guild tradition:

"'T' enter the city, y' must prove yourself worthy of your forebears. Stand down now or fight the bridge's keeper t' gain passage. How do y' answer?"

Remy yawned hugely, making a big show of stretching his arms over his head.

"I'm tired Lapin, lessgo!"

Lapin muttered another string of muffled curses and straightened up. Even at this distance, Rogue could hear the whoosh of air around the smaller man. It appeared that he possessed a weapon similar to Remy's.

Then he charged.

It happened so fast that Rogue nearly missed it — Remy surged upwards as Lapin ran at him, the pair meeting at a midpoint between each other in the dark. The resounding clang of two adamantium quarterstaffs slamming together forcefully echoed across the bridge.

The pair parried, Remy moving backwards with light steps, until they settled beneath the beam of the Harley's headlight to duel. Rogue, moving closer, could barely track their movements as the two brought their staffs together — over, under, to the side, Remy leapt and landed in one fluid motion as Lapin tried to sweep his legs out from under him. Gambit back flipped, one hand on the rail, and mimicked the motion. The smaller man, Lapin, yelped and jammed his staff diagonally into the rail to keep from tipping over. The two staffs caught again, and Remy laughed aloud.

"Y' getting slow, Emil!"

In response, Lapin grunted and tugged on his bo. The scrape of metal was a wince-worthy shriek that had her gritting her teeth together. Rogue flinched as Remy tapped him in the knee, and Lapin brought his own staff down over his head.

What happened next would have been unbelievable if Rogue hadn't witnessed it herself. Remy launched from beneath Lapin's leg, fingers grappling around one of the man's ankles, and swung out over the lake — one leg tucked and the other sailing before him in an arc. He landed on the rail a few feet away, his staff swinging behind him and catching Lapin in the back, toppling him to the hard shoulder of the concrete below.

The entire exchange had taken no less than a minute and a half.

"That's not fair," Lapin grunted, rolling onto his back — his bo clattering over to the toes of Rogue's boots. "I taught y' that."

"I think Henri might argue that," Remy chuckled, gripping Lapin's forearm and helping him stand. Lapin brushed at his backside, his face scrunched like an irritable two-year-old on the verge of a tantrum, and stopped fussing long enough to peer begrudgingly at the man who'd bested him in their
The two stared at each other a moment, and for a moment, Rogue grew concerned that they weren’t done brawling.

Hooking his thumbs into his belt, Lapin jutted his chin at the taller man.

"Ça boume?

In response, Remy lifted a shoulder.

The next moment, the pair embraced in the most testosterone-filled hug Rogue had ever seen, complete with backslapping and several muffled niceties that included a smattering of curses, insulting monikers, and compliments on their fight.

She repressed a snort and plucked the quarterstaff from the ground. It grated against the concrete noisily.

"Rogue," Remy said, dragging the stockier man along, his arm slung around his shoulders. "Meet m’ cousin, and one of m’ oldest friends —"

Lapin stood a head shorter than Remy, but was built stouter with thicker arms and wider shoulders. His hair was a spiky shock of orange under the lamplight, and the corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. He couldn't have been much older than Remy, and to Rogue, it was obvious that the Thieves Guild boys all had a curious fascination with facial hair; Lapin had a pinch and a goatee to match Remy's own.

"Mon dieu," Lapin murmured, traces of bayou-bred Cajun flavoring his speech. "Now I see what all th' fuss is about."

He beamed, displaying a row of perfectly pearlescent teeth, and broke free of Remy's amicable hold. Lapin swooped before her in a low bow, made deeper by the fact that he was barely taller than she was.

Delicately, he grasped three fingers of her hand and planted a light kiss on her gloved knuckles. She tried not to recoil, though her initial response was to yank her arm free as quickly as possible. Lapin didn't seem to notice, and if he did, he didn't acknowledge it, much to her relief.

"Enchanté, mam’zelle," he purred, standing up. "Emil Lapin at y’ service."

Flushing, she pulled her hand away. "Ah see the charm is a family thing," she muttered uncomfortably, handing Lapin his weapon.

Lapin scrubbed at his chin, digging his clipped nails into his rough swatch of ginger-colored beard, and peered up at Remy as he tapped the staff down into a more manageable size with his free hand.

"Non," Lapin said. "The pichouette here had t' learn it from someplace." He puffed his chest theatrically. "Remy copied the best," he finished, brushing his nails against his chest and blowing on them.

Remy sniggered. "That's a bold-faced lie, mon ami. You couldn't get a date for the life of you until y' started hanging 'round me."

"I'm almost offended. If I didn't know 'bout that mutation of his," he said to Rogue, "I'd say Remy was almost a natural."
Rogue glanced between them. “You’re not —”

“Mutant?” Lapin finished for her. “No ma’am, this’d be raw baseline talent, you see here. Sorry t’ disappoint.”

“No, Ah mean, Ah didn’t mean —”

“Remy’s the one that got the genes in our family. Th’ rest of us gotta rely on street smarts and that good ol’ fashioned hoodoo t’ get ahead.”

She stared.

Lapin chuckled, ignoring the look his cousin wore. “Remy here, though — used t’ have the girls eatin’ out of his palm. This one time, we were down on Magazine at this dive — a real hole in th’ wall on the inside of the Channel — and Remy started doing this funny thing with his eyes; they got all glowy, sorta looked like firelight, and in a few minutes, he had half th’ femmes in th’ place draped all over him. Turns out he was hypnotizin’ ’em... Now y’ tell me, how’s that fair for the rest of us regular folk, eie?”

Rogue turned to Gambit, eyebrows raised.

“Just foolin’ about th’ hoodoo, though —” Emil scrubbed the back of his head. “ Mostly.”

Grinning at her from beneath his fringe, Remy's eyes seemed to sparkle with a wicked gleam.

"I am the pinnacle of propriety and innocence," he purred.

Lapin chortled. Rogue caught the gist:

So that's how he'd convinced her, she thought. The damned swamp rat had turned on the charm, and now there was a large hunk of her memories blurred together where there should have been a clear visual of Rogue cracking him in the skull and refusing to leave with him.

As if reading her reaction, Remy murmured, "Won't do it again, chérie. Scout's honor."

Lapin snorted, missing their shared exchange entirely. "When were y' ever a Boy Scout? Did y' know," Lapin turned to Rogue again, who continued glaring at Remy over Lapin's shoulder, "that the only badge this poor fool's got is in lock picking? I don' think they teach that t' Boy Scouts these days." He clucked, and added in an undertone, "Tante Mattie made it for him one day when he was eleven so he wouldn't feel bad."

"Merci, Lapin." To Rogue's ears, it sounded like a plea for Lapin to shut up.

Lapin snickered and then turned serious. "How the hell m' I supposed t' explain this t' Jean Luc?"

Remy shrugged. "Don't."

To Rogue it seemed that he relaxed a little at the change of conversation. It really didn't make much difference to his outward appearance; everything he did was already nonchalant. His movements, from the slight slouch to his shoulders, to the easy folding of his arms across his chest were sinuous, careless. He appeared to be at ease with everything — even when she was snapping at him.

"Tch! Y' know I can't defy the laws of the Guild," Lapin muttered, irritable. "It'll be my head instead of yours. Belle's already on the warpath, and you know it — not saying anything about you being back would cause more problems than you’re worth.”
Remy sighed, looking up at the night sky and squinting.

Somehow, even when looking bored, Gambit maintained the sort of grace that even Jean couldn't match.

"She giving y' problems, still?" he asked.

Lapin snorted. "Problems? Problems! There's a war goin' on between th' families, Remy; the worst in a hundred years, and it's your fault, so don' play stupid with me."

Rogue coughed politely.

"'Scuze, Rogue. But y' friend here, as I said before, likes draggin' trouble behind him."

"Wasn't my fault," Remy said evenly, lowering his eyes and smirking at her, as if sharing an inside joke that only she could pick up on.

She'd heard that before. In fact, she'd lost track of the number of times that something 'wasn't Remy's fault' over the course of the last forty-eight hours.

"Non," Lapin held up his hands, shaking his head, completely oblivious. "It was Julien's but he's not here t' defend himself, ein? Marius don't care. Belladonna don't care. They caled for blood, but we gave justice. They had that for a year. You comin' back here breaks the pact, messes up the whole bargain we got goin'."

Rogue watched the exchange silently. Remy cleared his throat.

"I told y', I been here six months, mebbe more," he said, squinting off into the darkness, avoiding eye-contact.

"Right under their noses?" Lapin asked with a touch of incredulity.

"It's the safest place, non?" Remy countered.

Rogue stifled a snort. It figured that he would use that sort of logic. It was almost crazy enough to make sense, or perhaps, that was just Gambit's preoccupation with the hazardous peeking through. Rogue was beginning to see a pattern.

As if voicing her thought, Lapin asked, "Smack in the middle of the danger, right?" He chuckled. "No wonder Jean Luc's been so uptight."

"He knew," Remy added, shifting his weight to his other foot as if the conversation was old news. "That's why y' only been stationed out here three weeks. He was keepin' tabs on me before that."

"That much I'm guessin'. Didn't bat an eye when his bike went missing," Lapin snorted. "But oh, it's fine 't fix up Lapin with guard duty every night for nearly a month on th' causeway in case th' bike came back."

His expression sobered, turning into an indignant pout. "Y' didn't tell me! All this time I been bored senseless with Henri and Theoren, and you were here!" he huffed.

Remy ignored his complaint. "Belle too?" he asked. "She doesn't know I've been in and out?"

Thoughtful, Lapin replied, "Don't think so. Y' don't wanna know what Belle's gonna do when she hears about this."
"Don't care what Belle thinks," Remy countered.

"That so?" Lapin gave him a pointed, searching look before turning to fiddle with the buckles hanging off a well-altered utility belt, trying to find something in a pocket. "I'm calling it in, Remy. You can't stop me."

Rogue raised an eyebrow. Catching her eye, Remy merely shook his head, silently pleading that she didn't get involved in the conversation.

"Belle?" she mouthed. Something caught in her chest, a little snag she chose at that very moment to ignore.

Remy pursed his lips, and mouthed back, "Jealous?"

Rolling her eyes, Rogue forcibly swallowed a nervous laugh, though she could feel the heat rise to her face. "Not surprised," she mouthed back with a smirk of her own.

Remy cocked an eyebrow, dropping his gaze suggestively, and peered up at her from beneath his lashes. He wet his lips, slowly, and against her better judgment, Rogue's line of sight was drawn to the little tip of pink that left a trail of moisture behind on his lips.

She repressed the urge to bear her teeth as she returned to herself.

Lapin continued with forced lightness, unaware of their silent exchange. "Then I suppose y' don't care t' know what she did when she got the papers y' sent her?"

Lapin had extracted a cell phone. He brandished it like a warning.

"Lapin," Remy said waringly, his attention snapping to his cousin. Perhaps there was more to this 'Belle' character than Remy was willing to let on.

Rogue cleared her throat, not willing to be an oblivious bystander any longer than she had to be, and still trying to feign indifference as she asked, "Papers?"

"Not important," Remy answered, slapping Lapin on the shoulder and gripping him hard enough to make him wince.

Rogue snapped her head around so quickly that her neck cracked. She glared at Remy, who matched her gaze evenly, though a muscle in his jaw began twitching.

"Thank you, Lapin," he ground out, his gaze not leaving Rogue's. "You put out th' word that I'm home, if y' need to. Y' don't know where I'm staying. Y' don't know why I'm here."

"Brah, I don't think y' understand — there have been attacks from both families," Lapin hastened to add. "Henri just barely got away with his life two weeks back. These aren't scraps, we're talking 'bout anymore — it's full on, kill or be killed on sight — "

"Then they've already broken the treaty. My presence here shouldn't make any difference."

"They're watching the city, Remy," Lapin insisted. "Belle's got her eyes everywhere, waitin' for you t' screw up just one last time so she can take y' out herself."

A small, indifferent hum was the only response Remy offered.

Gambit released him, giving his cousin a faint but reassuring smile. Rogue turned on her heel, already stalking back to the bike. She couldn't hear his footfalls, but instinctively, Rogue knew if she
turned she'd find him close on her heels. Already, she sensed his slow smoldering appraisal — it made the down on the back of her neck prickle, though not unpleasantly.

"This is war, Remy!" Lapin called. "They don't care whose blood gets spilled, the streets are runnin' with it already. They called in Marius! Don't y' understand?"

"The whole clan's back in town. I get it." Gambit waved him off, picking up his trench coat from the Harley's seat where she'd dropped it.

Lingering, wanting to know more but knowing that she needed to follow Remy, she bit down on the inside of her mouth and mentally ran through the information she'd been exposed to.

"They reinstated th' name!" Lapin called. "The Assassins Guild is operational again; the Rippers are answering t' Marius Boudreaux!"

Watching her, Remy tipped his head to the bike; a silent invitation for her to join him.

"You will explain."

He nodded.

Rogue pulled herself onto the back of the motorcycle, and froze as Remy claimed the seat in front of her. The bike dipped, and she slid into him.

"Assassins?" she hissed, trying to squirm an inch between them.

Gambit nodded. Quirking an eyebrow, he asked, "Y' afraid?"

Rogue bristled, balling her hands into fists on her knees. "Do I sound like Ah'm afraid? Why didn't ya tell me?" she whispered furiously to the back of his head.

He didn't answer.

Rogue slapped his shoulder.

"It's not your problem," he replied at last, slipping the key into the ignition and starting the engine. "I'm not making it your problem. We're not doing this like we did the last time, Rogue."

"It is my problem since ya brought me here. Ya knew?" She laughed mirthlessly. "Of course ya did. What did ya mean by getting 'kicked out' exactly?"

He shifted, lifting the kickstand with his heel.

"Exile," he murmured.

"Hey!" Lapin called from a distance.

They both ignored him.

Rogue snorted. "The hell did ya do ta get exiled?"

Gambit paused, turning his head to the side a little so Rogue could see his profile against the backlight from the shore, but not his expression. "I'll show you," he replied after a moment. "If y' let me."

Rogue stiffened. Were they back to the touching thing again? She leaned around him a little to see
his face. Remy didn't blink; his eyes were a smoldering, intense glow beneath the shadows of the bridge. His mouth was set in a grim line, and his expression was determined.

"Don't try that eye thing with me again," she growled.

"Won't," he agreed. "Can't. Doesn't work once y' know about it. Maybe if y' trust me enough not t' abuse it, but I wouldn't know…"

It frightened her a little, though she would never admit that willingly. Gambit continued to stare at her with the sort of intensity that dared her to counter him or to back off. One or the other, it came to same thing — a little bit more of the truth, a little more risk taken by absorbing him.

If Remy couldn't put it to words, it didn't mean he wasn't entirely unwilling to face it, she surmised.

She still had to collect on their little card game from the diner that morning, she reminded herself. Slowly, Rogue nodded, not wholly convinced that she was ready to accept the offer.

"Baby steps," she murmured, settling back into her seat.

His posture seemed to visibly relax, the tension easing from his shoulders.

"Hey!" Lapin shouted again. "Remy!"

"They throw them into the bayou and force 'em t' swim before they can walk 'round here."

"No wonder ya'll are the way you are," she quipped. "You were deprived of oxygen to the brain as a child. Did ya sink like a stone, Cajun, or are ya just getting my hopes up?"

"You are so cruel t' me," he complained, half-smiling. "Tomorrow, how 'bout you and me test that theory, hmm?" he asked, adjusting the rearview so he could see her expression.

"You plan on showing me the swamps?" she asked, surprised.

Gambit grinned over his shoulder at her. He whispered huskily. "I'm gonna show you a whole lotta things."

Rogue fought back a snide retort as Lapin approached. "What, y' lose your hearing too? Been hollerin' at you," he groused.

He peered at her over Remy's shoulder, rubbing the back of his neck absently. "Eh, Remy? Sais-tu si c'était une bonne idée de chicaner au presence de la femme? Je n'ai pas vue déjà, tu sais? A cause des lumières du pont…"

Rogue ducked her head, biting her lower lip. Remy shifted on the seat in front of her again, the bike dipping as his lifted the kickstand with his heel. Vaguely, Rogue wondered if he was feeling just as stiff as she was from their long ride.

She peeked at him in the mirror; he was watching her, a small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Y' asking me this now?" Remy chuckled, turning back to his cousin. "T'as raison, Lapin. Mais peut-être tu pouvais me demander en avance si j'étais avec quel'qu'un. Ce n'est pas exactement polis de…"

"…Speak a language ya think Ah don't understand in front of me ta keep me confused?" Rogue finished for him.
"Ah took three years of French in school." She shrugged. "It's fine, sugah," she continued. "Remy's gonna tell me all about the sordid details, ain't he?" She smirked. "We got no secrets," she goaded.

Gambit cocked an eyebrow. "You called me by name that time and I didn't even have to make you feel guilty t' do it."

"Cajun," she warned. Realization struck her, and she swatted at him. "Ya did that 'poor me' bit this morning on purpose!"

"Got y' outta Pennsylvania, though," he mused. "And technically, it was yesterday morning, seeing as how it's four thirty and all."

"Ah swear if ya don't start playing it straight Ah gonna — "

Lapin cleared his throat, bouncing on the balls of his feet to get their attention.

"S' not gonna happen. Remy's as crooked as they can get, and y' haven't seen him drinkin' yet, I'd reckon." He frowned. "Don't give him vodka; he gets ugly." He shuddered.

"Lapin!" Remy coughed, muffling the sound with his fist.

Lapin puffed out his chest, his hands on his hips.

"I like her." He nodded at Rogue. "She don't sound like she gonna put up with your shit. It's about time someone set y' hobblin' in a straight line."

Rogue smiled a little at Lapin, who winked.

"If y' get him t' crawl, I want pictures," Lapin whispered loudly, quickly mimicking the action of a camera being snapped with his hands.

"Stop your conspiring. We gotta go," Remy muttered. "It's too damn late t' get picked apart by you two. Call Tante for me, would ya, Emil?"

Lapin rolled his eyes, stalking off to collect his staff from the ground a few feet away.

"She ain't gonna do nothin' for you at this hour, Rem."

"S'il-vous-plaît?" Remy flashed him a winning smile. Rogue stifled a yawn. "We got a busy day tomorrow… today."

Lapin waved it off. "It ain't tomorrow 'til the sun comes up."

Remy sighed hugely. "Same difference, Lapin."

"Then you'll see Tante first thing tomorrow morning." He nodded, moving to the guardrail. "She know where t' find ya?"

"Always, mon ami," Remy grinned. Lapin merely rolled his eyes.

"Y' watch him." Lapin pointed to Rogue, then pointed at Remy. "He knows that he's bein' stupid goin' back home. So if he dies?" He flashed her a bright smile. "Y' can always come visit me."

Rogue chuckled. "Thanks, sugah. Ah'll keep that in mind — especially if Ah just happen ta be the
one who takes him out first."

Lapin whistled, placing a hand on the rail and hefting himself over the steel divider. "I'll be waiting then." He blew her a kiss and waggled his eyebrows at Remy, who pulled a card, charged it, and sent it sailing in Lapin's direction.

Lapin yipped, and a moment later, he disappeared beneath the small explosion.

"Oh my gawd!" Rogue cried. "What did ya do that for?"

Remy gunned the engine, tearing back out onto the causeway. He jutted his chin at a small speck climbing a lamppost at least a quarter-mile away where the bridge closed in on the Metairie suburbs, and there were lights to illuminate the expressway beyond.

"There's a reason his last name's Lapin," he said.

"Rabbit?" Rogue asked, translating directly from French. She leaned with the bike as Remy switched lanes sharply.

"Th' Guild's very own. He's just as quick as one," Remy returned with a grin.

—

As they passed below the lamppost, Lapin waved at them from his perch. Though they could not hear it over the purr of the Harley, Emil was muttering to himself, already faced with the dilemma of calling Jean Luc and reporting in.

He fiddled with the small, sleek cell phone in his hand, twirling it absently as the pair continued onwards into the city. After a moment of consideration, he slipped it back into a concealed pocket in his boot.

They could use a few hours peace, he reasoned, fiddling with the rigging on his zip line that he'd strung below the bridge and up the pole. Absently, he clicked the caliper open and closed a few times, metering his rapidly skipping heartbeat with the nervous gesture.

He'd inform Jean Luc of Remy’s arrival in the morning. In the meantime, Lapin only hoped they wouldn't run into anyone unwelcome before daybreak.

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:
- House Rules: (Gambling) Rules, especially betting, agreed upon by the players.
- "Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind." (Hamlet, William Shakespeare)

Translations: English to German
meine schwester: my sister

Translations: English to French
Demain matin: Tomorrow morning
Eusti tabarnac: (Esti tabarnac) It's a religious oath. Won't make much sense when directly translated. I think this is actually way more Quebecois than Cajun French.
J'ai pu d'choix: I don't have a choice
Mon ami: my friend
Parler une langue que je compreds pour essayer the me confusez: Speak another language that I understand to try and confuse me.
Putain the merde: (Equivalent of) fucking shit. Also, loosely, son of a whore.
Sais-tu si c'etait une bonne idée the chicaner au presence de la femme? Je n'ai pas vue déjà, tu sais? Sont les lumières du pont...: You think it's a good idea that we talked about that in front of the girl? I didn't see her before, you know. It's the bridge lights...
Salut: Hi
Sil-vous-plait: Please
T'as raison, Lapin. Mais peut-être tu pouvais me demander en avance si j'estais avec quel'qu'un. Ce n'est pas exactement polis the...: Good point, Lapin. But maybe you should have asked me first if I was with someone. It's not exactly polite to...
Tu veux jouer aux cartes: Do you want to play cards?
Fout-pas-mal: Reckless/indifferent to potential consequences of one's actions
Heureux au jeu, malheureux en amour: Happy in the game, unhappy in love.
Destiny’s garden is a rich collusion of waxen leaves and heavy blooms that cross over the flagstone path, waiting to ensnare those who remain uncertain of their footing by tangling around the ankles.

She walks the maze of undergrowth with ease, though she is blind and the Garden District house is still foreign to her after so many years spent in Caldecott County.

These are trivialities.

She is here this morning to enjoy it for the last time.

Like the shadows that frequently pass over her dulled retinas, pressing inwards and forming shaded pictures of those she cares for, has cared for, and has dreamed of, the visions are nondescript shapes that make little sense to anyone but her alone.

The garden is different.

She can imagine what it must look like — those heavy vines, the coiling creepers and faintly sighing blossoms that open with the humidity and darkness when the sun dips beneath the horizon. Night blooming jasmine, myrtle, bougainvillea - the soft, velveteen press of dewy roses beneath her fingertips, and the lush green canopy overhead, twisted from the latticework of the old Victorian mansion behind her: she smells their rich perfume, and she can touch them to know their shape.

Destiny can imagine the garden, holding it in her mind’s eye as clear as anything, but she does not require it. She has known this garden only once before. She has dreamed it, as well as the many moments leading her to this particular spot on the cracked flags.

On this early morning in New Orleans, many dreams become reality.

Irene Adler savors this knowledge for the brief time that she can:

As it were, Destiny's path ends here, tonight.

Such is the course of fortune, weaved skillfully by the fates — an intricate journey that must conclude for other futures to catalyze.

Feeling her long cane at her side, Destiny carefully compacts the possession, leaving it on the stone entablature beneath an overhanging banyan tree for Raven when she returns from her mission in the Quarter. Destiny has not said goodbye, has not lingered on the chaste kiss that she pressed to Raven's temple that morning, though there is no more time for regrets.

Already, she can smell her death approaching.

It is three blocks due north and moving swiftly.
For the future to become reality, Raven must mourn her lover's loss in her own way. Such is the nature of their alliance, indeed, of their affections.

She would understand even without reading the books that Destiny has kept in her possession for decades. There are so many that even one could be easily misplaced or overlooked. One diary — an empty space between volumes twelve and fourteen — will be the keystone for the plans Mystique will construct.

Those tomes contain too many possibilities. Raven will take note of all, but in the end, she will only urge one into desperate reality.

This satisfies. It fulfills Destiny's purpose.

Folding her weathered hands before her with practiced grace, she inhales the deep, rich, earthen scent of the garden.

Her thoughts rest on Rogue, and Destiny smiles. The image of the auburn-haired girl, her face framed by two unusual white stripes of hair, rises to the forefront of Destiny's mind. It is clearer than any photograph and brighter than any memory wrested from the vice-like grip of old age.

As the two men descend from the rooftops, skillful killers that she has paid well to ensure that their act is flawless, Destiny enjoys the simple act of sighing — knowing that with the stilled rise and fall of her own chest, her daughter will achieve something that she and Raven have only imagined.

The scent of copper registers, thin and metallic, before Destiny even feels the blade against her throat. She does not hear the patter of blood hitting the ivy, twined about the trellis, but she can see that rich red speckling against the verdurous foliage. She has seen it before, after all.

The feeble limbs of those leaves shudder with it, as does Destiny, though it is not out of fear — the sound is clouted, unrecognizable, and unclear amidst the rapidly passing flashes of memory that speed before her unseeing eyes. One image remains constant as the rest fade: Rogue.

The sound of victory is a roar, and at the same time, as quiet as Irene Adler's last, thinly drawn breath.

In the pre-dawn light sliding between the gables, dipping into the hazed streets of the French Quarter, two mutants edged around the corner of Rue Royal after concealing their transport in the dingy carriageway of a Creole townhouse.

The sky grew steadily lighter, and although no one would venture out on a Thursday at such an ungodly hour, it was still best to be cautious. Even the late-night revelers from the *Calle de Bourbon* seemed to have stilled their festivities — the sounds from two blocks away were distant echoes of a night well-spent.

Steadily, the sun slipped its fingers over broken stucco, and the gaslights petered out to make way for the morning.

Rogue was entranced. Albeit, it was an exhausted sort of enchantment with the city; but nonetheless, even with the encroaching humidity and her uniform clinging to her sticky limbs, she'd never seen anything quite like it: It seemed as if morning in NEw Orleans brought with it the promise of something new — something like expectation.

Remy stilled against the wall of a ramshackle building, settling against the cracked façade and lighting a cigarette with the tip of his finger.
The carriageway, though it was little more than an alley, was still a tight squeeze, and the pair had wedged themselves together into the small space. Large enough to fit a garbage can or two and two bodies uncomfortably, but that was it. Their close proximity didn't put her at ease.

"Why are we stopping?" she asked. Remy blocked her way out by setting his foot against the wall opposite.

His attention was focused, though he puffed airily, sending up bluish tendrils of heavy smoke.

Rogue waved it away, sloppy from exhaustion.

"Those things'll kill ya."

"They will, too." He inclined his head, staring hard at the rooftops across the street.

Rogue had to shuffle closer to him to peer around the jutting edge of the building at her back, but sure enough: two darkened figures sprinted over the rooftops, their footfalls silent. They leapt from gable to gable without pause, two trailing whispers of night.

When she turned back to him, Gambit's gaze was lowered. From the ever-clinging shadows, his eyes glowed faintly, watching her.

Goosebumps prickled down her arms.

Evidently Lapin hadn't been exaggerating: it might be worthwhile to be cautious, given the imminent warning that a war between Guilds was in full-swing. Rogue wasn't entirely sure what that meant, nor what a Guild war might look like, but she suspected that it involved the sort of stealth and discretion that made shadows out of ordinary men.

"It's clear," Gambit murmured, tipping his head to the cross street and indicating that they ought to move.

Rogue turned back to Rue St. Anne. Sure enough, the two men had vanished as fast as they'd come.

"Were they…?"

"Assassins. Heading back t' base, probably." He pointed lazily overhead, drawing a jagged crescent with his index finger in the air. "First South, t' drop the trail if anyone follows, then Northwest to th' swamps bordering the Lake."

"How do ya know that?" she whispered. "Ah mean, how can you predict which way they're headed?"

Remy tapped the ash from his cigarette, and pressed a thumb to his temple.

"It's all up here, chérie. Y' live in these conditions as long as I have, and y' start thinking of these things like a game of chess."

She sized him up, newfound appreciation for Gambit's skillset a sudden threat to the rose in her cheeks. "Ah get it."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Do you?"

Lifting himself off the wall with a roll of his shoulders, he ditched the cigarette with a mournful look, flicking it into the street so that it hit the cobblestone and burst into a scattering of red embers against the curb. "Y' gonna have t' tell me 'bout it sometime."
"You've been anticipating their movements; that's not so hard," she muttered, keeping her voice low despite his assurance that the street was clear. "If you've been watching them long enough to know them, that is," she added, all too aware that she was throwing Remy's words from the diner back at him: That he'd managed to learn so much about her without her knowledge had settled about as easily as a rash. It chafed her to know that she had yet to settle up with him over her file.

Rogue stepped into the street, and he followed in silence.

"Which way?" she asked.

Nodding in the direction they were headed, he meandered to the spot beside her - just far enough that the sleeve of his coat could brush her arm if he leaned an inch to the right. He didn't. Rogue tucked her elbows into her sides anyway.

"But Ah don't think ya can anticipate everything, even if ya been living right under their noses," she continued.

She appraised him out of the corner of her eye: Remy's expression remained impassive, though Rogue thought she caught the barest twitch of his fingers before his hands slid into the deep pockets of his trench coat.

His cards, Rogue realized, grinning to herself. So Gambit had a tell, too: He reached for them when he was nervous.

That could only mean she'd struck the right vein, and satisfied, she pushed a little harder to coax out the information he withheld.

"What happens when something unexpected happens? Something ya can't predict?" she pressed, deciding to leave the question open to his interpretation.

"Everything's a gamble," he replied, his voice pitched equally low. "Sometimes y' win, and sometimes y' don't. It's the element of surprise that makes the risk worthwhile."

"Don't ya mean 'entertaining'?"

Remy grinned to himself, affording her a sidelong look.

"There's a difference. But you're right, you can't know all the angles to the game — not chess, not cards, not life. Y' just gotta take it as it comes... And the things you can't see for yourself?" Gracing her with a careless, sly smirk, he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Sometimes y' gotta wait for the right person t' point 'em out."

Rogue raised an eyebrow. "If Ah didn't know better, Ah'd say ya almost sounded humble for a minute, Cajun."

"I could admit I don't see all the angles." He shrugged, sidestepping her as they approached a worn iron gate, nestled between two buildings. "Or I could admit that I'm just working the table," he tossed over his shoulder.

Chuckling, Rogue watched as Remy lifted the rusted padlock holding the gates closed. He bounced it in his palm while sweeping into a back pocket and producing a slim lock pick and tension wrench with one fluid motion.

Rogue slid behind him as silently as she could as he worked, slipping the instruments into the keyhole and picking it with a speed she doubted even Quicksilver could match.
Raising herself to the balls of her feet, she whispered into his ear, "So you're saying you're tryin' to play a game where ya don't know all the rules?"

The lock dropped open in his hand.

"Why ever would you think that?" he replied lightly, glancing at her.

Rogue could feel her breath bouncing back to her from his collar, they stood so close.

"I'm hoping you're gonna figure out eventually that everything sees its time on the felt," he explained. "It all gets played out, girl… Call often enough, and eventually, y' learn how t' break the system down."

"Sounds to me that you don't take much seriously."

He smirked.

"Nah, see? That's you takin' the bluff."

She fixed him with a dour look.

He continued with a smile, "Life's like a game of cards, chére: Got winners, got losers, got liars, got crooks, got people who'll cut y' down before you can even get dealt in — but above all, everyone's playing their own hand. It's only the means by which y' get to the end that can be a bit tricky." He leaned in closer, invading her space. "And you know just as well as I do that it's always high stakes."

"How's that?" She raised her chin defiantly, only to shrink back when she saw his eyes lined up so close to hers. Rogue's attention dropped to his mouth; that shrewd smirk spreading as his irises flared into a slow, rolling glow of red on black.

"Some of us are just using the element of surprise to our advantage — and card up the sleeve."

Remy grinned as she leapt backwards, his arm snaking out and drawing her against him so that he spun with her — pressing her shoulders back against the ironwork. The gate creaked with the extra weight, and Rogue, shocked at the light touch against the small of her back and curving against her ribs where his arm supported her, couldn't find the strength or the speed to shove him off. Instead, she rolled her wrists against his arms and tried to remember to breathe.

Damnit, he smelled good. For two days without a shower… oh gawd did he ever… that wasn't right. That wasn't possible. But he did.

This was his element of surprise?

"You're playing for something else entirely," he murmured against her hair. "But you involved yourself, made it personal, and that's the point. The instant y' find something worthwhile t' work towards, you're in the game."

The warmth of it, that smooth, narcotic lull of the heat from his body made her tingle.

"...You play for the things y' want, but can't have. For the things y' missed, but didn't take when y' had the chance. For the things that could be, but y' won't have… These are high stakes."

She froze against him, acutely aware that her heart rate had escalated to the point where it was hammering erratically in her chest.

"Y' been looking at me trying t' figure out the trick, but you forget, y' found the Joker. You already
"Ah _don't_ know…" she gasped. "Ya can't be so darned cryptic and expect a gal ta sort out your metaphors —"

Remy pulled her closer, her hips pressing against his thighs, and for a moment, Rogue stopped breathing.

It wasn't worth it, a tiny, stern voice yelled at her from the very depths of her mind: The risk, the gamble, whatever the hell he was playing at… _Gawd_, he was warm… _so warm_ beneath that trench coat… This little game of his — it wasn't _worth_ the risk of hurting him because he couldn't restrain himself from the temptation — but she… what was she doing?

Rogue's eyes snapped open, her gaze level with Remy's collarbone.

Rogue's powers were all about restraint: Control exacted over herself because she herself didn't _have_ control over her powers. They ruled her. They shaped her. They made her choices for her. Yet, Remy wouldn't accept that.

"There's no trick. There's only the obvious, and the fact that y' don't let yourself too near it for fear that it'll swallow y' whole," he murmured, his fingers working a slow circle into her back.

This was how he intended to seduce her to his side, she realized: touch was her kryptonite, and control was what she wanted the most so she could have it without fear.

She wasn't a temptation to him, she realized suddenly. She was something much worse.

"You've got a big mouth for all the shit ya talk."

Her breathing hitched. Still, she hadn't pulled away; hadn't pushed him off. Shivering despite the heat, she settled further into his body where he drew her near, wanting suddenly to feel more of his delicate ministrations, wanting just to feel... More. It was heady. Her head swam with it; knees buckling from the unexpected and visceral desire.

"Ain't that the truth," he murmured. "Y' miss this, Rogue? Or do you not know what it's like t' be so near to someone?"

Remy's voice lowered a notch, and he continued, his fingers tracing a light pattern up her spine. "It's a risk for you. Being this close t' another person — it makes you uncomfortable because you're afraid of what you'll do, you're afraid of what you've already done, and what you're still capable of." And again, a little lower, a little slower, "That hasn't changed even though y' haven't absorbed anyone in a year. But I'm _not_ afraid of you, and that hasn't changed from the moment I first set eyes on you either."

He took a breath. "Some rules are _meant_ to be broken... especially the ones you impose upon yourself."

She shuddered as if waking from a dream, her limbs tensing reflexively. Stiffening as stark panic overrode her senses, she clutched at him, trying to find the will to draw back. The feeling bled quickly into distress, and then despair.

"Let me go."

It came out as a muffled whimper against his chest. Her breath, stale from the lack of sleep, returned to her – making the embrace unpleasant despite the comfort he offered.
"Let me go," she tried again, this time, no more than a croak. She couldn't find the strength to push away. The conflict of wanting his nearness and knowing that she shouldn't be within striking distance of anyone for fear that she might hurt them warred with each other; it tore her up inside.

She was a weapon, a means to an end.

And she just wanted to give in to it for a second -

She was a monster, and Remy found that seductive: worse, Rogue always had been and always would be — inflicting as much damage onto others as she did onto herself.

And she was a monster for wanting what she couldn't have — shouldn't deserve —

She trembled, her limbs weak. She couldn't find the emotional strength to push him away.

Thumbs circled her back, caressing, gentle.

She felt him whisper into her hair, "Shh."

If she couldn't trust herself around him, then how could she trust anyone else?

Her eyes fluttered. She was so tired.

He was right. These were high stakes, and damn him for calling her on them.

Behind her, something slid against the metal, and Remy walked them through the gates, Rogue's heels dragging a little as he lifted her up. He wasn't forcing her, she realized, swallowing the heavy lump that was forming in her throat. It effectively hampered her objections from being voiced with full vitriol. He was carrying her.

In the depths of her mind, something sparkled — a glimmer of a memory — fighting towards the surface though she forced it back down into the darkened depths where it could be restrained, shackled back into the niche where it was safe from her own examination.

"Please, Remy — Please just let me go."

"While I appreciate that you're askin' so nicely... Not a chance, chérie," he murmured into her hair.

Again, he cradled her loosely, leaving enough room for her to pull back from him. Instead, Rogue sagged against his chest, suddenly tired. Fear, caution, always having to think out each gesture — it was exhausting. It would feel so good, for just a moment, to give up, give in — things that Logan and Scott and Xavier himself wouldn't understand if she tried to explain it to them.

"I let y' go once already," Remy explained, "and I've lived t' regret it in more ways than I can count. Not gonna happen, not like that, and not again," he assured her, his murmuring measuring out her speeding heart, coaxing her to calm down.

She wanted to believe him, wanted to trust him this time. And because she wanted to, just like everything else, she couldn't. She couldn't even trust herself not to bleed him dry with her powers.

Better this way, her tired mind reassured her; better to keep him at a distance, to keep them both safe when everything went to hell. Still, she didn't move away.

"Ya can't do this ta me," she breathed, her voice thready. It was her burden to bear; one that she wasn't sharing with anybody — and there was Remy, carting her along, trying to play the hero because she didn't scare him the way she should.
"I told you I'd show you," he countered, still maintaining that infuriating neutral tone.

Better this way, better to keep herself closed off and tucked away where her rebounding mistakes couldn't be used against her.

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

Rogue knew the difference between duty and desire, and still, she bowed her head, curling her arms against herself even as she heard the muted ping of a grappling hook being latched onto the eaves of the ramshackle apartment; even as Remy tucked her against him, and held her there, his hand resting lightly between her shoulder blades. Rogue trembled, fighting desperately for some semblance of control.

Push away, she told herself. Do the right thing.

She didn't want to. Lordy —

"Ya can't make me take that chance," she insisted. "Ah won't."

"But y' want to."

"It doesn't matter what Ah want," she bit back. It didn't matter that he was right.

"I think it does."

"Well Ah don't care what ya think!" she nearly sobbed. She couldn't look at him, and he didn't force her, though his hold tightened around her waist. "Ah don't care that you paid attention in class when Magneto was teachin' you Acolytes all about me; Ah don't care that you listened a little too well when Mystique was debriefing the Brotherhood; Ah don't care that ya stalked me ta find out what ya needed. Ah don't give a damn about any of it — It still ain't the real thing; it still ain't me. None of that information tells you what Ah want, or what Ah need... And Ah don't give a crap if you think you suddenly know me better than Ah know myself."

Better this way, just because it staved off the hurt and the hunger for something more a little longer. But still, her mind protested as they sailed through the air to a small landing on an even smaller balcony above. Still, it felt... No! She swore at herself. She didn't want to feel anything. Already, it was fading — that sensation, that warmth.

"Ah don't care," she insisted feebly.

"Sure y' don't."

Remy set her against the rail, swinging his own legs over and pulling her after him gently, one hand beneath her elbow as her boots touched the rickety wooden slats below.

Damnit, why did he have to be right?

"If..."

Remy dipped his head, pulling her off the wrought iron so she wouldn't topple over to the flags and the little unkempt backyard garden below.

"If there was a chance," she rasped, glaring at the toes of her boots, at the weathered paint peeling off the balcony, at the shambles around her. "If there was a change that whatever happened to ya could work on me... And that ya could make that happen... that you could fix this?"
She bobbed her head, her throat closing against her struggle. She would not cry in front of him. She
*never* cried and most definitely *not* for herself.

Bringing her fists to her face, Rogue flexed the leather of her gloves, stretching it against her
knuckles as she balled them into hard knots. Her hands quivered; weary muscles and mind protesting
the exertion with vehemence, but still finding fight left after all.

There was something in her that Remy had seen despite her best efforts to hide it; that spark of hope,
that willingness to take a risk, cleave to the slimmest chance, and make a difference.

Remy smiled, though Rogue missed it – too concentrated on keeping her vision clear of that burning
wetness that threatened to spill over her cheeks.

She was *so* tired of all of it.

When Rogue raised her head to look at him, her mouth was set in a grim line.

"Ah'd bet on ya too, swamp rat," she bit out, knowing finally what the message written across the
cards he'd left on her mirror meant.

They shared a moment's pause: gazes meeting without guile; an uncommon but familiar
understanding that there lingered something more between them: a feeling Rogue could place
because it felt like… home.

If home were edged with the threat of constant mortal peril and sexual tension.

He nodded with a languorous inclination of his head. The flash of a subdued grin made Rogue's
chest clench as Remy produced an old, brass key from one of his many pockets, and turned to the
door.

She let out a shaky breath.

Game's on, Rogue thought sullenly, trying to avoid nursing the small, budding blossom of hope that
had somehow begun flowering where there had once been so much clutter; where she locked away
her skeletons.

She wouldn't let herself believe it. Not yet. But Gambit's touch lingered — a warmth that settled in
her spine, making her limbs loose and light so that she sagged against the handrail.

*He was so warm...* Rogue shut her eyes, trying to wall herself off and grow cold once again.

That way, if everything failed, and she was really, truly destined to live with the skin like strychnine
and the unforgivable, "Untouchable" moniker, she wouldn't hate herself anymore than she already
did for giving in — if only for a little while.

Hope never won any battles — none of hers, at least.

Remy opened the door, holding it open for her and stepping back. Barely noticing the titanium
plating that slid back like a second skin into the wall behind the first door, she crossed the threshold
to a room where the ghosts of old cigarettes lingered in the air, staining the walls with their sour
perfume.

She ignored the flashing numeric panel and digital security display, and the tiny, near-imperceptible
wires that slipped beneath the crown molding and out of sight. The floors beneath her feet
announced her entry as she creaked into the spartan space. The apartment was impeccable, despite its
outside appearance and musty scent. It had no walls to separate the rooms, save a few doors; one that undoubtedly led to an adjoining bathroom.

It was warm, though she did not notice. She'd already begun peeling off her boots, staggering towards the one large bed against the wall opposite, the hardwood creaking with belabored sighs and groans.

"Chérie?"

Rogue was already pulling back the gauzy mosquito netting around the bed as Remy secured the drapes, effectively cutting off the feeble dawn light that crept in from the narrow slats in the shutters.

With a weary peek over her shoulder, she sighed, turning to sit down heavily on the corner of the bed.

"Ah don't have anything else ta say to ya, swamp rat," she said. "You won this round. Satisfied?"

He crossed the room in silence, the floorboards making no noise despite his weight. Each step was sure, as if he'd memorized the exact path across the room that wouldn't give away his location. She barely paid attention, too caught up with the sickening sense of self-defeat that was settling in her chest. Remy held out a long sleeved tee shirt and a pair of boxers like a peace offering; his own clothes, probably.

Surprised by the gesture, she controlled herself enough to contemplate the offering: It was hospitable; more hospitable than she'd imagined the former Acolyte capable.

Accepting the small bundle, but not trusting her voice enough at that moment to thank him, Rogue merely worked her hands into the cotton, confused.

"Get some sleep," he murmured, assessing her — always searching for the things she wasn't verbally offering him.

When Rogue gave him no more reason to linger, he crossed to the bathroom without a backward glance, shucking his trench as he went. The door clicked shut with a satisfying snap of brass and wood.

Rogue fingered the fabric absently for a moment, setting her elbows on her knees. The bathroom light winked on beneath the door, and in a moment she heard the splutter of water from the shower. She blew out a breath and peeled off her gloves to rub her eyes. They stung, too dry now that her emotional lapse had passed. Mostly, she was just tired; it went beyond the physical need for sleep.

He hadn't even acknowledged it. Damn him.


That made for an even playing field, didn't it?

Hope. She wanted to laugh. Instead she pressed her fingers to her temples and inhaled heavily, settling as she peeled off her uniform and pulled on the shirt and shorts, not bothering to lift herself from Remy's bed. The linens smelled clean, like laundry detergent and the lingering scent of cologne embedded too deep in the fibers to be washed out.

Rogue pondered that for a moment, listening for even the barest whisper of something familiar lingering in the depths of her mind. Apart from the sound of the running shower, silence returned to her — a disturbing hollow that had not been filled with chatter since Apocalypse had purged her of
the personalities she'd absorbed: Her head full of phantoms, no longer haunted.

Where was Gambit's psyche? The thought nagged at her despite her fatigue.

At first, the silence had been a welcome relief. Despite the fact that she'd despised herself for giving Apocalypse power and bringing him back, the calm of the aftermath had been comforting for a time. Once in a while, she'd caught wisps of the lingering personalities — the shy laughter of Dorian's psyche flitting just out of her conscious reach — but after a while, even that had ceased. There was only silence, like the thick mantle of a heavy snow, or the drowning, stifled sounds of keeping your head under water for too long.

It felt a little like that: asphyxiating, in its own way; trapped in her body, denying herself the use of her powers.

Then, Rogue had come to rely on her own strength.

In some ways, she had missed the constant chatter, the din of psyches disagreeing with each other or interjecting their opinions at the worst possible opportunity. It had been irritating, frightening at times, but just the same, they had kept her company.

Now there was only the resounding echo of her own thoughts.

Rogue turned, crawling over the bed, and slid beneath the sheets.

In some ways, the emptiness in her head was worse than the constant pandemonium she'd grown used to. Shutting her eyes, she pulled the linens to her chin and balled her bare hands into them. It was disconcerting, especially now, since it shouldn't have been empty.

Remy's psyche should have been tucked away in her mind. She should have figured out his angle by now.

It bothered her more than she was willing to admit, but what Rogue couldn't sort out was whether or not it was because she wanted to find him settled somewhere in her head, or because he should have been: the potential behind the latter was a cavern too deep to plumb.

She pressed her face into the pillow beneath her head, muffling a low growl.

In the bathroom, the shower shut off. Rogue kept her eyes shut, realizing for the first time that she'd crawled into his bed. She stiffened. Where would he sleep? Surely he wasn't planning on joining her.

"Rogue?"

Swallowing thickly, Rogue tried to regulate her breathing. She couldn't handle this right now. Really, she didn't want to even think of him. She kept her eyes shut, trying to give off the illusion that she'd already nodded off.

"I know you're awake," he said.

Damnit.

Sighing, she cracked an eye open. Remy squatted near a bedside table she hadn't noticed before; one elbow on the oak surface, the other propped casually on his knee. A pair of striped pajama shorts covered his lower half. His hair hung in wet strands around his face, dripping water down his neck and onto the undershirt he'd slipped on.
"I'm gonna take the couch," he said after a moment, tipping his head to the wall opposite.

With some hesitance, Rogue nodded, the flutter in her chest settling only by a fraction.

"We're safe here."

Keeping his gaze downcast, he stared at his fingers. He flipped a card absently between them.

"I gave you the Queen of Hearts once for luck," he said. "'Y' know why I left you the King?" he asked tightly.

Rogue shook her head, the motion burying her deeper into the pillows.

Remy held up the Joker, inspecting it. He met her gaze as her breaths lengthened, turning their staring contest into a struggle where Rogue was forcing herself to stay awake.

With a whisper of his fingers, he pulled back the light netting that surrounded the bed. Rogue swallowed, curling around herself and shifting the sheets until she was tucked into a neat ball.

Leaning over her, Remy placed the Joker on the empty pillow beside her, face-up.

"Because no one — not even a Queen — deserves t' be alone."

He drew back, closing the netting around her, and after a moment when she didn't respond, he turned and slipped beneath the shadows to the far side of the room.

Rogue heard the springs on the couch groan as he settled himself, and after that, silence.

Stillness prevailed in the false-darkness, save the sudden, hesitant shuffle of fabric as Rogue reached over and palmed the card left on the pillow beside her, pulling it to her chest.

In another five minutes, she'd fallen to slumber.

Remy counted each second, listening to her breathing as it steadied, each exhale growing between lengthening pauses.

Two and three quarter hours had passed, to the minute.

Once he was certain that he wouldn't wake her, Remy shifted on the couch, trying to find a better, more comfortable position. With his heels propped up on the armrest, and his head sinking into his laced fingers — elbow squashed against the back of the divan — it was a losing battle.

Rogue snuffled in her sleep, and Remy froze.

Faced with the darkened safehouse and the soft sound of protest coming from across the room, he cocked his head to hear her better.

Rogue whimpered in her sleep for the second time, and Remy had to fight the urge to get up and go to her. They had made… progress, he conceded. Perhaps not in the way that he'd have liked; he had gotten right into her face to prove to her that he could.

In hindsight, he ought not have done that, but the results were a step in the right direction:

She'd fought him the entire time, but surely she had to know by now — if the incentive wasn't there, then how could a person truly realize what they wanted?
He'd held her. It was something so abysmally simple, and yet, she'd surprised him. She hadn't reached for him in turn, but she'd lingered in his arms, too tired to fight him, or too disarmed, whichever. She'd stayed for just a little while.

Sighing, aggravated, he knew that when she woke, it would not happen again. Not by his instigation. It'd be a miracle if she didn't hate him for it, too.

If she did, it'd probably make this easier on them both. Conflicted, Remy rolled onto his side and tried to shove his feelings down.

Some demons you just had to fight on your own, despite his best inclinations otherwise.

Or at least, that's what he told himself while staring at the obnoxious, dull gleam of patchy sunlight peeking through the drapes that created false night in the flat.

Rogue whimpered again.

Remy sat upright, straining his ears: Nightmares, he concluded.

He had his fair share of them, too. Nothing unusual. Nothing to be troubled over, he told himself. Why was he concerned in the first place?

He just hadn't expected... well, he hadn't quite expected her to respond so easily beneath his touch.

He shouldn't have been surprised. If it was any other woman, they'd have given up and given in to his enticements without this much struggle. Rogue would keep fighting him, much in the same way he suspected that she was fighting herself.

If he were someone else, he wondered idly, would Rogue have responded the same way?

She mewed, and Remy gave up sleeping entirely as a lost cause. He sat up, fumbling for his pack of cigarettes on the coffee table.

"Genevieve."

Barely discernible, but nonetheless, she'd said it.

"Non," he whispered, standing. The sheet dropped from his midsection, pooling on the floor at his feet, half-tangled between the couch cushions.

It wasn't possible.

He stepped over the coffee table, his cigarettes forgotten as he slipped through the long shadows of the apartment, making no noise at all as he approached her.

"Etienne."

Remy froze.

Nightmares. What did he know of them? He'd lived them all his life.

Like apparitions they sometimes clung stubbornly to their makers, and in this city, they returned to the forefront of his memory more frequently than ever.

Rogue groaned and rolled over, her breathing less labored as she spread her arms over her head,
knuckles bumping lightly against the headboard.

"Julien."

Almost a sigh this time — a list of past transgressions that haunted him.

Nightmares indeed, but not hers. Remy turned away, unable to listen any longer. He moved silently to his closet, pulling out something that could be worn without attracting attention and that wouldn't identify him for who he was.

He almost laughed, looking into the dark space of the wardrobe as he dressed.

The skeletons, he decided, he'd leave behind for now, but the boots he'd need.

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:

- Down the Street: (Gambling, cards) At another club (which could be a considerable distance away and not necessarily even on the same street). This term is used, rather than naming the establishment, because it's considered bad form to talk about a club other than the one in which you're playing.
- Destiny in the Garden: Heavily inspired by "The Sandman: Endless Nights" and countless days from my youth where I all but worshipped Anne Rice's "Taltos" and "Lasher."
- Dorian: Dorian Leech (Ascension II)
“That one, mate! That's our ride!” Pyro shouted, arms and legs pumping as he ran, knees lifted nearly to his chin. "Here we go, here we go, here we go! Hup to! Pick it up!"

"This is so stupid!" Fred bellowed, his large gut wobbling as he lagged behind the group. Toad sprang from Fred's shoulders, and in two bounds, he slammed into the moving boxcar, latching onto the stays.

Quicksilver appraised the rest of the motley crew as they tried to jump the train from a comfortable surveying position beside his sister, tipped against the open doorway.

"Common, yo! Blob, you could total this train if you wanted!" Toad yelled back to his friend.

The remaining members of the Brotherhood broke into sprints as the engine gained speed.

Fred groaned and kept a steady lurch; the stunted grasses and rocky ground of the freight station catching at his ankles and making him stumble: Blob was only unstoppable inasmuch as he kept his footing.

Pyro cackled, tearing ahead of him, the freight car rolling towards the turnpike. Launching a backpack into the open caboose, he bellowed over his shoulder, "Quit your whinging and move, you yobbo!"

Leaping at the stepladder, Pyro caught it by the tips of his fingers and swung his feet off the ground. Kicking, he couldn’t quite make it into the car as the train jostled and bumped.

He grimaced a smile. "Little help, love?" John wheedled. Wanda stared down at him with her arms folded across her chest.

Sending a hex to wrap around Fred, she ignored the indignant shout of protest from the Australian. Lifting Blob easily, Wanda drew him forwards and into the carriage, only to deposit him with a
jarring whump! that rattled the entire boxcar.

"Th-thanks, Wanda," Fred wheezed, lowering himself to one knee, then to his bottom, and then flaking out spread eagled against the dusty floor.

"I meant me!" Pyro shouted, clinging to the ladder.

Wanda leaned down, sweeping her long, red jacket behind her legs.

"John," she said with false sweetness, "you are the one who got us into this mess."

"What?" he squawked. "Yeh filthy swot! You've barely broken a sweat!"

"I nearly broke a nail," she said with distinctive menace.

He attempted to appeal to Pietro. "She's torturing me!" Pyro whined, clutching desperately at the ladder as the train rattled onwards. "Me!" he continued, "Who took the biggest loss from that stupid fight with the X-Men? ME! You lot still have your firepower! Stella's wrecked!"

"For you? A lighter is sufficient," Wanda bit out.

"After all I've done for you sods, this is the kind of treatment I get?" His foot slid off the bottom rung, his chin nearly banging into the plywood floor. "A plastic Bic?"

"Let him in," Lance said, though he didn't move to help Pyro either.

"You lot forget… I've got the bloody, stinking, sodding, duffering directions down me trousers!" Pyro swinced as the train bucked as it took a bend. His grip slid.

"Pull him in, Wanda," Lance muttered again. "We need him."

For a moment, it appeared as if Wanda was considering the exact opposite.

"I've had the most irritating, nagging feeling in my gut since Gambit showed up on the couch," she ground out. "Why does it feel like you have something to do with it, St. John?"

Pyro's hair flopped into his widening eyes, the wind setting his legs to a scramble against the side of the train as Wanda leaned over him.

"I don't know what you're on about, love — I'm no more responsible for the Gem going missing than you are."

"I don't trust you." It sounded more like a threat than a declaration.

"Wanda," Lance warned.

"Ugh," she snarled, grabbing onto Pyro's collar and hauling him into the cabin, unmindful that she'd scraped him over the floor in the process.

He exhaled heavily, finding himself safe at last, despite the seething Scarlet Witch hovering above him.

"Technically," he grimaced, "since it was put to a vote, you lot oughta be blaming yesselves, too."

When Wanda didn't move to strike, he nudged Fred's calf, making a better pillow to rest his head against, using the larger boy's knee. Todd squatted on Fred's stomach.
"You're outta shape, yo." He poked Fred's wobbling triple chin.

From where Lance had settled, his legs dangling off a large crate, he could see Toad rising two feet and dropping two feet with every labored breath Fred took. Those who were paying attention to him glanced between each other uneasily.

With a lascivious smile, his gaze flicked to Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch with a pointed look that was both suggestive and derogatory. It produced the desired effect:

Pietro reddened, his hands balling into fists at his sides. Wanda, however, peered at John as if he'd sprouted wings and she was contemplating the best approach to causing the greatest pain possible by tearing them off.

Satisfied by the Maximoffs livid expressions, John pulled a harmonica from his pocket.

"Oi, Freddie?" he asked, eyeing Wanda.

"What?" Fred rasped, still winded.

"You're from Texas, right mate?"

"All homes needs is a ten gallon hat." Todd nodded, answering for Fred.

Blob continued wheezing — partly due, Pyro suspected, to the mutant still sitting atop his chest.

"But he makes a better cow than a cowboy if you ask me," Todd added, patting Fred's bulge.

In the corner, spectating, Lance merely shook his head. If he had to start mediating now, they wouldn't make it as far as Washington.

"Know any good tunes about forbidden love, mate?" Pyro poked the ham of Fred's leg, though his gaze didn't waver from the twins. "Nice and hokey, like?"

Lance cleared his throat, a terse note of warning that went unheeded as Pyro began to sing.

"Oh, many, many years ago, when I was twenty-three, I was married to a widow who was pretty as can be. This widow had a grown-up daughter who had…" He peered up at Wanda, "jacket of red, my father fell in love with her and soon the two were wed…"

"John?"

"This made my dad my son-in-law and changed my very life, for my daughter was my mother 'cause she was my father's wife. To complicate the matter though it really brought me joy — I soon became the father of a bouncing baby boy. Oh bugger it… chorus!"

Fred wheezed as Pyro used the side of his ribcage like a drum, beating out a rhythm to match the tune, smacking his heel to the floor in time.

The air around Wanda crackled menacingly.

"I'm my own grandpa!" Pyro bellowed. "I'm my own grandpa! It sounds funny I know, but it really is so! Oh, I'm my own grandpa!"

"JOHN!" Lance bellowed.

Crossing his legs at the ankles, Pyro lifted his head to peer at Lance upside down.
"Yes, darling?" he drawled, putting the harmonica to his lips and blowing a warbling, off-key note.

Pausing, surprised by Pyro's sudden focus, he asked with a mote of hesitation, "You're sure this is the right train?"

Pyro hitched on his best Cheshire smile, not removing the instrument from his mouth, and answered into the harmonica. The result was a muffled, airy garble of words, completed with a waggle of his eyebrows and something that sounded curiously vulgar.

Wanda kicked him in the hip, preventing any clarification.

"I think what John was trying to say is…" she began.

"You kicked me, you slag!" he cried, his voice cracking with the sheer injustice of having become an assault victim.

Wanda's rebuttal came with a sudden, CRUNCH!

Several necks craned towards the ceiling of the caboose where John's skinny frame had made a substantial dent. Spitting a string of unintelligible profanities that were muffled out by the aluminum roof, John wriggled, held in place by the Scarlet Witch's sheer force of will.

"Day-um," Toad said, admiration marking his tone.

Wanda, patiently inspecting her nails on her free hand, translated the Australian's garble:

"Pyro says this is the right train. Unfortunately for him, he is unable to respond for himself at the moment due to the fact that he has his mouth full."

She bared her teeth at Lance in the semblance of a smile, and turned her wrist slowly. The hex continued to pinion Pyro to the ceiling, grinding him into the roof and sending a flaked scattering of rust-colored grime to the floor.

"Wanda," Lance repeated, a touch of worry adding new color to her name.

"Since no one thought to bring soap," she continued, more casual than a pair of khakis on Scott Summers, "I would assume that the next best thing would be to wash his dirty —"

CLANG!

"Filthy —"

THUD!

"— Perverse mouth out with paint chips. It's the next best alternative," she explained.

"Do you think they were still using lead-based paint the last time they gave this thing a touch up?" Pietro asked, appreciating his sister's handiwork.

"I can only hope so." She smiled with saccharine sweetness.

"Wanda!"

With a roll of her eyes, she released the hex. Pyro slammed back to the floor next to Fred, the wind knocked out of him, covered in debris from the ceiling and bleeding from his lower lip.
Swiping at his mouth, Pyro stared with outright disbelief between the streak of blood on his thumb, and the scarlet-clad harlot who'd injured him.

"Keep him quiet," Wanda ordered, her good mood evaporating. Baring her teeth in a snarl, she gave Pyro a final warning glance, and swept off to the far end of the boxcar, and began rearranging the stack of heavy crates into a neatly arranged, fortified wall. In the process, several mountains of cargo went flying out the opened door.

Discreetly, with everyone's attention elsewhere, Pyro tucked his lighter back into the waistband of his jeans.

He laved at his newly acquired cut, sucking his lower lip into his mouth and eyeing his assaulter's fortifications.

"Brilliant," he grumbled. Toad pulled a face at him, and Fred continued with the struggle to catch his breath. Across the car, though scowling, Pietro opted to leave him licking his wounds, and Lance... Who knew where that duffer was off too — taking in the scenery; imagining what Kitty Pryde's knickers looked like. Whatever.

For the moment, it appeared that Pyro had found his reprieve. He groaned, propping himself up on an elbow.

"That smarts." Coughing theatrically, he pounded a fist against his chest. "I think I just about swallowed the blasted harmonica," he said to no one in particular.

Wheezing, he bellowed over Fred's massive stomach, which blocked Wanda from view, "You owe me a harmonica, Witch!"

He could practically hear Pietro smirk. "Be glad she didn't cram it up your a—"

"Enough!" Lance bellowed, rattling the car. "Where are we switching trains, John?" he snapped.

"Alabama, sir!" he answered promptly, flashing his bloodied teeth in a feral grin.

"That's disgusting, yo." Toad grimaced, leaping off Fred and springing over to Wanda's makeshift stockade at the far end of the car.

Lance grimaced. "It's a miracle she didn't throw you off the train entirely."

As if to emphasize his point, the hollow sound of splintering wood from the opposite end of the boxcar interrupted John's retort. It appeared that Wanda was successfully venting her frustrations, turning one crate at a time into toothpicks.

"That shiela needs to get some action in a bad way," Pyro chortled, giving Pietro an exaggerated wink.

"Really? I can call her back over here if you want," Pietro said. "That box could just as easily be your neck, Oz."

"Ozzie!" Pyro cackled. "Ozzie Ozzie Ozzie!"

"Idiot," Pietro breathed, stalking away to join his sister.

Pyro ratcheted a grin onto his face, his eyes narrowed. "Anything else, o benevolent one?" he asked Lance. "Or can I take a breather at long last?"
Avalanche merely shook his head, slouching over to the opened doors to peer out at the landscape that whizzed by with each rattle and rumble of the train.

It was going to be a long trip.

Pyro cracked his neck, making one last silent assessment of his traveling companions.

When it appeared that they were all occupied, Pyro rolled onto his stomach, dug into his pocket for a wadded ball of paper with the directions, then shifted to his other hip, and extracted a small Zippo lighter.

Without hesitation, he clacked open the lighter and ignited the flame with a deft flick of his thumb. Propping his head onto his fist, the directions crunched beneath his chin. For a moment, he merely stared at the flame, fixated with the subtle flicker or orange and yellow, before turning the blaze into a delicately formed cyclone with a swirl of his finger.

He peered at the directions like an artist would a freshly primed canvas, and with a grin, dropped them into the blaze. They crackled for a moment, blackening at the edges, before being spat back out as several smoldering, charred bits of ash.

Beside him, Fred coughed a little, but paid Pyro no mind.


With a shrug, he flopped onto his back. Jerking, Pyro swore. Something dug uncomfortably into his ribs.

"Crikey!" he shouted, elated by his good luck. "My harmonica! Look mates! I didn't swallow it after all!"

—

Waking.

"Whomsoever God hath joined together, let not any man put asunder…”

Rogue's eyelids fluttered, and the world swam, leaving her momentarily disoriented.

The resinous coil of incense, smoking freely from its brazier in the corner, dampens the smell of the roses that line the aisle. The scene before her, nightmarish in its clarity, strikes a resounding chord of familiarity, of dread.

Dim, hazed evening sunlight splayed across floors from the balcony. The doors were thrown open wide, letting in the sounds of traffic and chatter from the Rue St. Anne below. At the far end of the apartment, a similar set of French doors was opened — letting in a fragrant cross-draft. The flimsy curtain around the bed swayed with the breeze, billowing outwards, shroud-like where Rogue looked to the ceiling and could see nothing but the gauzy netting. Like a fine mist, it filtered out the pale sunset, amplified in contrast with the roll of thunderheads further to the East. Propping herself on her elbows, she blinked the sleep out of her eyes. Humidity made lying beneath the blankets uncomfortable despite the circulating air.
The dream faded a little more with each moment that passed.

The incense is thick, but it does not cover the copper tang of blood. Her feet are sticking to the marble floors of the church. The stain, so dark that it's nearly black, spreads steadily from the fatal wound… Her hands are covered in it. She can do nothing but stare.

A woman is crying, the sound clear amidst the roar of voices in the background. Sharper still is the voice of the Priest; he is begging.

"Please! Please! You mustn't — this is a house of God!"

Shuddering, she passed cold fingers over her forehead to wipe the fresh beading of sweat from her skin. Beneath the cuff of Remy's shirt — the one that she had slept in without complaint — something crackled lightly. Pausing, she looked at her hand, not entirely remembering — and then, with the snap and recoil of waking in unfamiliar surroundings, Rogue remembered: The muddled memories of the morning tumbled into clarity.

Tucked into her sleeve, the half-bent Joker was digging into her wrist.

Oh hell, Rogue thought.

The card brought the early hours of the day she'd slept through to the forefront of her mind with vivid definition.

"Chile," a voice startled her. "Y' been sleepin' like the dead. The sun's settin'; now, up y' get."

To her right came the distinctive clatter of plates and cutlery, and the sizzle of something hitting a hot frying pan rose over the noise of the street below.

Beyond her gauzy confines, a person-sized shape moved around the kitchen.

Rogue flushed, sitting up and fussing to yank the card from the shirt cuff. It tore with a muted rip. She hesitated with a momentary twinge of guilt, and dropped the pieces before kicking the tangled covers off her legs.

"Remy?" she called, her voice faltering.

She grimaced at the catch in her inflection. "Gambit!" she tried again, a little more harshly. It sounded a little closer to her usual, harder sotto.

"Remy be back soon enough," came the woman's terse, but amused reply. "He left y' them bags over there."

Straining, Rogue found a few packages propped up against the armoire opposite the bed.

"I come in here," said the warm voice from the kitchen, "you be countin' sheep so heavy you don't even hear the door catch, and Remy? Y' think he left me a note? Naw."

Something from the stove made a crackling, fizzling sound as a heavy-looking frying pan was hefted into the air, and an indiscernible golden blob flipped into the cooking oil.

Rogue started, pausing with one leg in the air, the other still half-tangled beneath the linens. The mosquito netting lifted with the breeze, billowing outwards and peeling back from the bed, revealing a heavy-set woman ambling about the kitchen: She moved with the deliberate control of the age-burdened; someone who wouldn't stop once they found their momentum.
"Um —"

The woman had put herself to the task of cooking a fine Southern meal, and she didn't appear as if she was about to slow down. She glanced at her, sized Rogue up, and cocked a heavy-set eyebrow.

"A fine conversationalist, I see," she remarked. "Well, no matter."

Rogue gaped.

"That boy," the continued, tutting as she ambled around the small island and set down the flatware. "Been runnin' off at all hours f' as long as I known him, not a word t' Tante neither." Huffing, she wiped her hands on her checkered apron. "If y' ask me, I think y' scared him good, whatever y' gone and done."

Tante. Lapin had said the name, hadn't he? Tante Mattie.

This was Tante Mattie. Lapin had said she'd find them.

"M-ma'am?" Rogue found her good manners with some difficulty. The word felt rusty in her mouth. "Ah didn't mean ta —"

"Don't fuss, chile." Tante winked, urging her to get out of bed and come to the counter. "Emil said Remy had a handful on th' back of his bike, but you're just as timid as a kitten."

"Ma'am, really Ah didn't do anything ta him —" Rogue protested.

The pieces of the torn Joker had plastered themselves to her thigh, the backings sticking to her sweat-damp skin. Irritably, Rogue peeled them off and flung them away. They fluttered, disappearing between the folds of the sheets.

"If y' did, y' wouldn't know it. That boy's a hard case t' crack, but if y' got him runnin', I reckon y' done somethin' good. Takes a strong woman t' get that sorta reaction from m' boy."

She nodded, appraising Rogue with something close to approval.

"He only done that with two other women, and I'm one of 'em." She waved her spoon.

Rogue grinned a little, unsure what to make of this friendly welcome, and wondering idly who the third woman in their elite circle was.

So, Remy had disappeared while she was sleeping.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh, aren't you just sweet as boysenberry pie, girl. 'Ma'am'! You just go ahead and call me 'Tante'. Where your people from?"

"Mississippi, Tante," she replied. "Caldecott, originally — a small town just west of the river —"

"But not of late; I hear somethin' else in your speech; I see it in your manner," she observed.

"I live in New York; have for some time —"

"Huh."

"Ma'am?"
"Tante," Mattie corrected.

Rogue blinked. "Tante," she repeated with careful and deliberate patience. "Where did Remy run off to, exactly?"

Mattie fixed her with a penetrating, scrutinizing eye: it was the sort of look that knew exactly the sort of sensations the thought of Remy encouraged; the mingle of crackling heat and tensed nerves, shivering and the warm press of fingers into her spine — and abandonment. Loneliness. Still evenings spent flipping a single, solitary playing card over and over and over again in her fingers, waiting.

Rogue turned away.

"Breakfast is ready," Tante Mattie said, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, her gaze lidded and knowing.

Rogue started, more awake and embarrassed than ever.

If anything, Gambit had brought it on himself: She hadn't been the one to instigate their little… snuggle session… or whatever the heck that had been.

Rogue recalled the exact sensations he'd produced in her in those early hours of the morning — the precise, deft caress of his fingers sliding between her shoulder blades, the heat of his body, molded around hers protectively…

Her eyes widened. She was not thinking about the swamp rat like that, she reprimanded herself. She would not contemplate the swamp rat like that. That was exactly what he wanted in the first place, wasn't it?

Tante interrupted her thoughts, pointing to the steaming supper on the table.

"Well? Aincha hungry?"

A soft, cool radiance settled about Tante's rounded features. It felt eerily as if she knew exactly what Rogue was thinking about; it was a fluid sort of understanding that shifted and changed as easily as the tide. It made Rogue think of oceans she'd never seen; of coastlines and the changeable force of a hurricane. Mattie exuded power; it rolled off her in waves, an old world sort of comfort that reminded her of cayenne and cottonseed oil rubbed into cowry shells for luck. There was something undeniably motherly about the woman, something Remy had hinted at, but hadn't expressed in any way that Rogue could understand.

Rogue could feel the prickling, heated sensation of the blush as it rose to her face when Mattie smiled at her; all knowing, but willing to keep her secrets just the same.

"C'mon, chile. Not to slight your New York family, but I can promise you, they can't cook like this."

She would have been hard pressed to say Tante made her uncomfortable, especially when she spoke to her as if they'd shared confidences before. Something about the way Tante spoke made Rogue want to confess everything in her heart, and that made her a little bit dangerous.

Wetting her lips, Rogue nodded. "Ah'm starvin'."

The dream had gone entirely by then, smothered out with the sick babble of her own conscience reminding her that she was still under the scrutiny of a woman she did not know, in a place she wasn't wholly comfortable with, and wearing the clothes of the man who had let her have his bed
after coaxing out her desperation for human contact.

Tante's expression remained subdued while Rogue decided for herself whether or not she'd trust her enough to eat at her table. Her hair was a crazed tuft haloing her face that she'd fastened back with a tignon in a shade of carmine so dark it was almost purple. It matched her skirts.

When Tante smiled, it reached her eyes, but didn't wipe the shrewd understanding from them.

"Well?" she asked again.

Rogue pulled back the curtains and slid from the bed. Hesitating, she scooted around to her uniform, folded into a neat pile atop a large, ornamented wooden chest at the foot of the bed. Funny, she hadn't noticed it the night before — she must have crawled right over it. She picked up her gloves, hastening to put them on.

"Don't you put those things on when y' eatin' at my table," Tante scolded.

Rogue flushed. "Ah — ma'am, Ah hafta."

I need to, she thought: I don't want it, I just need it.

What an utter mess. They were gloves: not heroin, not pain killers, just simple, unadorned leather. With thoughts of Remy lingering threateningly near the surface of her composure, those small, worn garments practically begged to be put on.

"Ah —" she tried again, only to be cut off abruptly:

"Don't be foolish. Viens." Tante Mattie urged Rogue forwards, ushering her forward. "Y' just sit right there and pick up a fork. Growin' girl like you needs a bit of meat on her bones, y' ask me."

Tante pulled the gloves from Rogue's grasp gently, setting them back atop her folded uniform.

"Y' name's Rogue," she continued with a nod, stating the fact rather than asking as she ambled back to the kitchen, her hips rolling awkwardly as she walked. Arthritis, Rogue thought — she'd seen Irene moving in much the same way, but it didn't seem as if Tante would let a little pain stop her.

"I know all about ya. Y' can call me Tante, just like everyone else does. There ain't no one 'round here that's gonna try t' touch y' when I'm around, y' hear? Not even that boy. Lord, y' think he don't know he's not too old f' me t' put him across m' knee. Pah!"

Rogue grinned a little, casting a last, longing look over her shoulder at the limp leather atop the pile of her dirty clothing.

"Ah'm sorry, Ah didn't mean ta sound impolite, but Ah… my skin… it… it ain't safe, ma'am."

Rogue fiddled with the sleeves of Remy's oversized shirt, and cast a nervous glance around the apartment. Since the first time she'd arrived, she took in her surroundings; the flat was spacious and simple; a bed, an armoire, a couch, three stools lined up against a counter. The walls were painted a fading coral, and the trim was cracked with age. Several pieces of artwork adorned the walls, though only one in particular caught her attention; it hung above the armoire opposite the bed — a strange and meticulous choice for a place that had clearly seen better days. Grey and white, Escher's "Relativity" stared back at her. A Cezanne hung nearby, but it seemed like an afterthought.

Rogue pursed her lips, but didn't comment.
The entire room seemed warmer for the hazy sunset pouring through the open windows. Beyond the small kitchen, Rogue could see the wrought ironwork of a balcony overlooking the street. Over the rooftops of the houses opposite, the sky darkened, bruise-like, promising rain later in the evening.

"S' fine, dawlin'," Tante said reassuringly. "Tante's a healer. She knows all about your unique talents without y' having t' tell her." She winked. "You just sit right down and have a hush puppy or two. I made ya some fried catfish, not too spicy just in case y' weren't feelin' up to the excitement just yet."

"Ah think the excitement's only getting' started," Rogue replied, padding across the floor to the small island that divided the kitchen from the rest of the flat.

"Honey," Tante said in a no-nonsense tone of voice. "Y' known Remy long?"

"Depends what you mean by 'know'," Rogue said under her breath, perching on a stool and accepting the plate Tante offered.

Her stomach rumbled appreciatively, and ignoring the fact that Remy had probably dropped a none-to-subtle hint that hush puppies and catfish were second on her list of favorite meals, she dug into the food with relish. The thought that he must have scoured her file for that tidbit she shoved down with the first swallow of steaming, fried dough.

She groaned, forgetting her manners, and graciously accepted the tall glass of iced tea Tante passed to her with a satisfied nod.

"Don't talk with y' mouth full, girl. Y' just eat up, now."

Wiping her hands on her apron, Tante turned back to the stove to fill another plate with the delicious-smelling food. She set it between the burners to stay warm, covering it with a bowl to keep the rising steam in. Gambit would be home soon, Rogue surmised. The thought made her stomach uneasy, and she swallowed a gulp of the sweet tea as if to drown out the feeling. It tasted like nectar. Rogue took a larger gulp, the food and drink doing something wonderful to her disposition. It only made the moment sweeter when Tante began talking about Remy in an innocent, off-handed tone.

"I known th' boy since he was still runnin' jobs for Fagan," she said lightly, eyeing Rogue for her reaction.

When it seemed that Tante piqued her interest, she pursed her lips, nodding to herself.

Rogue flushed, unable to disguise her curiosity.

"- Nasty fella, that Fagan," Tante continued. "Jean Luc picked Remy up none too soon, f' true," Tante Mattie continued, "and I'll tell ya – Remy? He put the 't' in trouble."

Tante took her measure, and Rogue fought not to squirm.

"Now what's a good girl like you runnin' with him for, huh?" She peered over her shoulder with a small frown. "Y' don't seem like his usual type, if y' don't mind my sayin' so."

Rogue chewed a little slower, acknowledging the prickly, uncomfortable truth of the statement.

"Ah don't suppose Ah am, ma'am," she replied, the resignation in her tone winning out.

Tante chuckled. "Don't get me wrong. Don't mean t' be rude or nothin'." She sighed. "S' been a long time since that boy look so beaten down. Only one conclusion f' Tante, y' see; either he's met his match or history's repeatin' itself." She winked, and went back to the task of setting the dishes to
Rogue cleared her throat, vengefully squashing the irritating, bubble of expectancy the words brought with them. Met his match?

"Ah’m sorry?"

*Obviously* she wasn't Gambit's type. The thought made her want to laugh. Still, how could she explain why he was going out of his way for her? How he'd known so much about the past year of her life when he hadn't been around to find out for himself? Collecting the information that made up her 'file' was one thing, but *no* one knew she hadn't used her powers since Apocalypse - at least, not the people who *should* have figured it out for themselves.

"It seems to me," Tante said, matter-of-factly, "that while the boy has a good heart, he don't always show it to his women, if you understand my meaning."

Gambit had clearly done his research, and he'd even gone beyond the call of friendly obligation to retrieve her from Bayville - but who was to say there wasn't some sort of nefarious subtext she wasn’t reading?

"Too much fire in the head, I always thought: and fire, if you follow, can consume a house in a matter of minutes. It devours from the inside out, and then keeps on burnin' just because its never fully satisfied."

The boy was locked up tighter than a maximum-security prison, and with some dismay, Rogue realized that he had yet to reveal anything about himself willingly.

He'd said he was helping her to help himself, hadn't he?

Rogue took a bite, her teeth grazing the fork a little too closely. Jerking with the electric twang of metal, she winced back into reality.

"You listenin', girl?" Tante asked.

Rogue nodded, her thoughts scattered.

In the very least, everything he'd done for her so far pointed to one very possible conclusion: control of her powers. That was something Rogue couldn't ignore or beat down. She wanted it, loathed as she was to give the thought life by saying it aloud.

"Sometimes, what a man needs ain't a bucket of water," Tante muttered. "Sometimes the best medicine is the thing that feeds the blaze, rather than stifles it."

A distant preoccupation caused Mattie to rub the counter in the same circular and rhythmic motion, her gaze faraway.

"Ma'am?" Rogue asked.

Taking notice of her, Tante changed the subject.

"Nothin' chile. Don't trouble yourself. Remy's cousin called me this mornin’… Emil? Lil' peeshwank, 'round your height? Been tellin' him t' cut his hair, but y' think he'd listen t' Tante? Naw. Boy'd rather look like a porcupine —“

Rogue remained silent.
"…Said Remy be back in town, brought along a pretty lil' thing — that'd be you, I'd suspect — a regular spitfire, Emil said."

She nodded, seeming to agree with Lapin's assessment, and Rogue flushed.

"Lord knows Remy could use a taste of his own medicine from time t' time."

Sniffing, Mattie smiled almost wistfully. "Back in th' day, when my boyo was still just a pup, Belle was th' only one who ever got him t' sit still long enough t' keep him off Jean Luc's radar," she trailed off. "Mind you, on most occasions, I'd say the two of them were cookin' something up: Weren't no occasions of lengthy quiet that didn't end in an explosion of some sort."

Belle? Rogue's ears perked up. Lapin had said the name too, and Remy had shut down the conversation quicker than green grass through a goose.

Before Rogue could ask about the girl, Tante returned to herself, clearing her throat.

"I don't think y' need me t' say so, but if he don't behave himself? Y' let Tante know. I taught that boy t' behave himself like a gentleman; if he puts one toe out o' line..."

Gentleman my magnolia-scented butt, Rogue thought. "Ma'am, Ah've got lines drawn all around him, Ah promise ya."

Ducking her head with a grin, she mentally tucked away the name, "Belle," to ask about later.

"Good." Tante folded her knuckles against her hips. "He's a good boy, our Remy. Loyal to a fault, but that don't mean he don't make mistakes."

From the front gallery, a dusk-scented gust billowed the gauzy curtains inward. Rogue turned at the sudden movement, finding a silent shadow watching her, the setting sun haloing him where the dingy shades drew back. She jerked in surprise, nearly flipping the remains of her meal.

It took a moment before Remy smirked, something dark dancing in his eyes, just out of reach of her understanding.

"Ain't that th' truth," he said.

Tante Mattie didn't seem the least bit surprised by Gambit's soundless entrance. Propped up against the edge of the French door, Remy stood with one arm folded around a large box. It figured that Gambit knew how to lean in just the right way to load tension in his biceps and across his shoulders. Rogue scowled. Apparently, using stairs was completely out of the question among the members of the New Orleans Thieves Guild: they seemed to prefer materializing out of thin air.

"You forgot t' comment on how devastatingly handsome y' little boy's become, Tante Mattie," he drawled, strolling into the kitchen and pressing a warm kiss to Tante's cheek. With a wink over her shoulder at Rogue, he set the large, black box on the counter.

He eyed the stove. "This for me?" he asked. In a blink, he'd slipped under Tante's reach a lifted the covered plate waiting for him on the stove.

"Remy LeBeau!"

Pulling a dishrag from the countertop, Tante swatted at him. "You wash up, boy! Don't y' be puttin' those paws all over the kitchen I just cleaned not two minutes ago!"
Remy froze, the plate half-lifted, steam wafting as he attempted to sneak a whiff of dinner. He peeked at Rogue from under Tante's waving, warning dishrag, grinning.

"Put that back!" Tante barked.

Remy dropped the plate. It barely rattled back into place as he leaped from harm's way and Tante's threatening wooden spoon.

"Y' see what I been sayin'?" Tante demanded of Rogue, exasperated.

Behind her, Remy grinned, flipping on the water, and silently sliding from the sink to the stove without Tante's notice. He snuck a biscuit, proceeding to wave the pastry over her head, before cramming the entire thing into his mouth. Beaming at Rogue, triumphant, he chewed hugely.

Rogue pursed her lips.

"Gambit, didn't ya hear the lady?" she snapped, putting as much force into the last two syllables as she could.

The effect was instantaneous: it was as if a storm cloud had descended over Tante Mattie's head. Like a cyclone, the old woman swung around.

"Mmph?" Remy's eyebrows shot up, desperate to hide the evidence as Tante wheeled on him. He backed up, his hips knocking into the sink as he shook his head vehemently, pointing at Rogue over Tante's shoulder. He couldn't accuse her of anything for the wad of biscuit still stuffed into his face.

Served him right, she thought.

Tante loomed. Rogue smirked.

"Thank ya, Tante Mattie. It was delicious," Rogue called, tossing Remy a wicked grin and hopping from her stool. "Can Ah help with the dishes?"

"Was nothin' chile, and don't ya worry about cleanin' up. You just see to y' toilette, y' hear? The powder room's over there," she said over her shoulder. "The bags down there've got some fresh clothes for ya. And you, boy!"

"Mmph!" Remy protested, his mouth still crammed with biscuit.

"Don't talk with y' mouth full! Haven't I taught ya nothin'?" she raged.

He spluttered, his normal speech patterns obstructed by the doughy wad in his mouth. So much for suave, Rogue thought.

Exultant, Rogue shielded her expression by ducking her head, and set to toeing at the bags: He'd gone shopping for her too. For a moment, she wasn't sure if she wanted to poke through the contents at all. Nightmarish visions of pink frills and dainty chiffon with floral patterns made her stomach flip, but with more clarity, she worried even more that he'd gotten it right... Remy knew her uniform preferences: black, black, black, black. Maybe a dark plum — the color of bruises. Worse, maybe he'd found something in a rich hunter green... no one knew it, but it was her favorite color. That was personal. And so were her measurements.

Pausing at the thought, her hands on her hips as she studied the line of shopping bags propped against the dresser, Rogue weighed her indignation against her nerves. Neither seemed to want to declare victory over the other, and it wasn't as if she could waltz around the city in her X-Men regalia.
and hope to remain incognito.

Behind her, Remy let out a choked yelp: "You're all against me in this town! Rogue! How could you?"

"Just returning the favor, sugah," she returned with false sweetness, not turning around.

Inwardly, she bristled at the reminder that there were more things about Remy and the current situation in New Orleans that he didn't want her to know about.

"Ya skimped on our bargain, remember?" she reminded him, determined not to let their wager from the diner slide, not after Tante had sparked her curiosity about that "Belle" person. Not that she was jealous, or anything...

She blew out a breath, closing her eyes in satisfaction as Tante thundered, "He did what?"

"It's nothing ma merveilleux Mattie. Just a joke me and Roguey got going. Isn't that right, chère?" he called, a trace of desperation evident in his laugh.

Gritting her teeth, Rogue contemplated counting down to ten before she answered him. Staring straight ahead of her, her gaze unfocused, she managed to get to nine and a half before she registered the blurry sketch at eye-level. She leaned in, surprise turning to grim amusement as she read the name and title of the work in the lower left of the frame.

Turning on her heel, a malicious spark of amusement getting the better of her, she jerked a thumb at the wall.

"Ah'd say that's relative, don't ya?"

Hanging over the bureau was the framed woodcut she'd noticed upon waking; the very piece of art that Remy had alluded to when they'd been at the diner in Virginia yesterday morning.

In the corner, the canvas was signed: a wobbly scribble proclaimed the piece to be the work of M.C. Escher. This was his *Relativity*.

"Ah hope this isn't an original," she muttered, studying the fine lines of the print: Every measure appeared to be calculated to a precise degree; staircases wound in and out, upside down only to tumble onto another surface where a different body approached from a different angle. Emerging and disappearing from a variety of realities, almost, the tiny figures ascended and descended and swirled out of focus as her eyes and mind tried to reconcile the irregular planes.

It made her head swim. Rogue grinned. She liked it, despite the fact that Remy had compared it to the inner-workings of her mind; it wasn't too far off, really — minus the big, glaring neon that proclaimed, "Vacancy."

No psyches? No problem.

Though if she had the choice, Rogue wouldn't subject her consciousness to a maze of such orderly chaos.

"I'll remember this!" Remy shot over Tante's head. It appeared that she had ushered him to the sink to clean up. "And it is an original!" he added with a smirk.

Tante *tsked*. "Where are y'all headed the evening?" she asked after a moment's inspection. Rogue sunk to her knees, bracing herself to see what Gambit had brought back for her to wear.
"We're gonna head over t' see y' friend, Tante," Remy replied over the running water in the sink.

"What y' talkin' 'bout, chile?" Tante muttered, overseeing his efforts. She appeared nonplussed at Remy's attempt to scrub the frying pan in his hands. "Did I teach y' t' wash the dishes like that?" she huffed, elbowing him out of the way and taking over.

Remy, meanwhile, had snatched the plate of food from the stove and vaulted over the island countertop, his slacks sliding easily over the tile and coming to rest with his legs dangling over the edge. He lifted the plate with a flourish, and inhaled the rising steam deeply.

"She's not expecting us, exactly," he replied. "But I'm sure th' femme will remember Remy. Everyone does." A sly grin crept across his face as he supervised her tentative exploration of the packages. Unsettled by the scrutiny, Rogue tried (and failed) to dismiss the nervous tingle spreading through her belly.

Abruptly, she turned away, yanking one of the shopping bags towards her with more force than necessary.

Clearing her throat, she busied herself with the task of finding something to wear.

"That's your ego talking, Cajun."

"Hush, girl," Tante murmured, though not without a proud smile at Rogue's brash retort. "Who's this y' talkin' about, Remy? You know how busy I've been with the Guilds."

A pause stretched while Remy failed to reply, which prompted Rogue to look over her shoulder. With Tante's back to her, Rogue couldn't see her face — but the pensive expression Remy wore couldn't be missed, even if it only graced his features a moment.

"Busy?" he repeated.

"Busy," she echoed, giving him a purposeful frown that Rogue only caught in profile.

Their simple conversation seemed to have more weight than either wanted to let on.

Finally, taking her notice, Remy cooed with a tender chuckle, "Not too busy to cook us the best meal I've eaten in a year." His gaze lingered on Rogue. "Don't y' know you're the only femme for me, Tante Mattie."

Dropping backwards, he pressed a warm kiss to her cheek, all the while following the progress of Rogue's blush with the plate of food balanced neatly in one hand. Mattie chuckled, accepting the compliment with an, "Oh, Remy! You're just as charmin' as you ever was."

With an indignant sniff, she deliberately avoided the ease at which Remy supported himself with his abdominals alone. ('Look, ma, no hands!' Rogue thought with no shortage of derision.)

Tante patted the top of his head with motherly affection. "Mon p'tit prince."

"Y' gonna get ready, Roguey? Or y' gonna keep m' waiting all night?" he asked, popping a hush puppy into his mouth.

Muttering to herself, she stuffed her hand into the first bag, "You're gonna be waiting a whole lot longer than that."

Apprehensive, Rogue pulled back a sheaf of black tissue paper, nearly sighing at the comfort of
seeing dark shades at the bottom of the bag. She tugged out a pair of Dickies, made out of stretchy black cotton, a studded belt with a heavy buckle, and a light, long-sleeved shirt in a deep shade of charcoal. There were socks in another bag, a few more dark-colored tee-shirts, denims and at the very bottom of the third bag, when Rogue had nearly grinned in relief at the convenient lack of anything brightly colored, her bare fingers touched something silky, something lace-trimmed, and something that couldn't have been anything more than a piece of dental floss.

Remy was whistling at the counter, casually watching her and picking at his dinner while Tante busied herself with the washing up.

Swallowing the string of profanities she felt bubbling upwards, Rogue's hand clutched the dainty things, drawing them into the evening light to see for herself.

"You couldn't resist, could ya?" She glowered, brandishing the lingerie in her fists.

Gambit, licking his fingers clean, cast a flirtatious grin in her direction. It was apparent that he was enjoying her reaction.

"You're something when y' blush like that, chérie," he purred.

Rogue stared, horrified, at the green satin monstrosity in her hand. "How's this supposed ta cover my butt, Cajun?"

"Personally, I prefer if y' didn't cover up at all, chère. That's a nice set of legs." He leered, popping his thumb in his mouth, sucking off the crumbs. "Th' derrière's not too bad either," he conceded with some solemnity.

Rogue looked down at herself, at the pale skin of her thighs, the enormous long-sleeved tee shirt that was nearly hanging off her shoulders and then back to Remy. With a snarl, she snatched up the clothing, including the matching green bra and panties, and stormed into the bathroom.

The door slammed behind her, and with some amusement, Tante Mattie turned to Remy and shook her head.

He shrugged lazily, rubbing the stubble over his jaw. "Mebbe I shoulda gotten her th' black ones."

—

"S' gonna rain, chile," Tante murmured, staring out into the descending twilight from the balcony of the Guild Safe House.

At her side, Remy breathed in the heavy, sodden scent of the impending storm, touched with a hint of ozone.

"Thunder, too," he agreed, reveling in the sounds rising from the street below. Inhaling deeply, his senses swirled with the promise of nightfall — the amber glow of gaslight, the smell of Creole cooking, jasmine from the window boxes, and thirsty concrete begging for the rain.

Beneath the heavy hand of darkness, he would lead Rogue into the heart of the Quarter. Through the path made by shadow, above the streets where it was still reasonably safe to travel if they were quick, they would return to find Maman Brigitte.
He wondered if Rogue was half as nervous as he was.

Remy took Tante's uncertainty regarding the whole affair in stride: age played with memory sometimes, stretched things into indiscernable shapes. He didn't bring it up again. It was clear she had no prior knowledge of Maman Brigitte; her attentions were elsewhere, like most, wrapped up in the Guild war. The thought unsettled him, but he refused to linger on it. He'd ask Maman Brigitte herself, when the time came, just who had sent him down that particular path — that little back alley, that led to her Botanica.

It seemed to him that Tante knew, somehow, that he was changed. She just didn't know that he'd believed her to be responsible for orchestrating the meeting that had led to his present... metamorphosis. He tasted the word, finding it fitting the present circumstances.

He glanced off the thought that regardless, he'd made Rogue too many broken promises already: he would oblige her; they would find the Mambo.

From there, the trajectory seemed a little less clear.

Remy listened hard, picking up the light patter of water from the shower through the bathroom door. Rogue was certainly taking her time, he thought wryly, though part of him was content with the fact that she hadn't tried to do him permanent injury him upon returning home.

Of course, night was still a fledgling smear of blue and grey crawling over the horizon with the clouds. There was still time for dismemberment, he supposed, smiling a little and not fearing for his safety in the slightest.

Tante chuckled, her weathered hands resting on the wrought iron rail as she appraised him.

"Why, y' look just like y' did when y' were ten and Jean Luc brought y' home y' first birthday present."

He rolled his head on his neck, tossing her a lopsided grin, before turning his attention to a couple strolling on the street below.

After a moment of perusing the contents in a storefront window, the pair embraced, hands roaming lazily around each other's waists, fingers gliding beneath the hem of a tee shirt or into a belt loop.

Brush of skin, the barely-there condensation of sweat that you couldn't even feel with the humidity. Remy watched with detached interest. Gestures that were too intimate, too light and careless to go unobserved by those participating — but not by him.

The theory was simple, if you could understand the effectiveness of the barest bit of pressure — on the shoulder, on the hip, against a cheek, below the chin — the mechanics became a whole lot simpler. Touch was a language that you could stutter through or speak with smooth, sanguine emphasis at precisely the right times, to garner precisely the right effects.

Remy sighed; he was a little disgusted that he was still contemplating the technicalities of the situation. It became a little bit more difficult when the individual receiving your conversation wouldn't hear it.

It offered him limited options.

Somehow, he'd convinced himself that Rogue would have appreciated it: the offer, the opportunity to be physically close to someone.
Sure she was attractive. Sure she was lonely. Sure he wanted her if only for the conquest and subsequent victory that assured him that he was still an accomplished Casanova. He wasn't trying to reassure himself, he concluded stubbornly.

It wasn't his pride that was being battered here… much.

Three days of close proximity, and Remy still found himself contemplating the reasoning for her abject, utter rejection of his advances. He could touch her. He could. In fact, he was probably the only person in the entirety of the universe at that point in time who had such a mixed bag of blessings. He could touch her, sure — but he couldn't reach her.

For all his research, the carefully hatched plan of action, the flirting which had, he conceded, elicited a blush or two, she just… didn't want to let herself want him.

That riled him more than anything ever had before. She was providing the kindling for a furnace that was already hitting unbearable temperatures.

Subtract touch.

He'd given her a taste of it, and she'd all but melted into him — but that wasn't right either. There was no satisfaction in that simple gesture, in manipulating her with her own fears and desires, and giving her a soupcon of the real thing. It had turned around in a few short hours to bite him sharply on the ass:

Rogue was remembering things in her dreams that were not hers to remember.

He had not given those names to her willingly. More clearly than ever before, Remy was beginning to understand why Rogue referred to her powers as a "curse." It was bad enough that those things haunted him. They were his memories from his past and his alone — and somehow, despite his best efforts to siphon them out, she'd absorbed them too though she didn't rightly know it yet. They'd settled in her subconscious, only to come out in dreams — of that he had no doubt.

What else was lurking in the depths of her mind? What else had she taken from him against his will? Curiouser, he was still standing. No blackout. No overt absorption courtesy of Rogue's powers.

It was a good thing she hadn't remembered her dreams upon waking. Remy breathed a little easier for it, but the experience left him doubtful. Could it be that Henry McCoy had been right, and this was only the beginning of the end? Those three sins alone could become his undoing.

Outwardly, Remy smiled at Tante, and turned his face to the waning light. Inwardly, he forced his nerves into steel coils.

He wouldn't touch her again, he assured himself. That had been a mistake — a pleasant one, but nonetheless a mistake.

The reasons for such a decision, he assured himself, were based solely on the fact that if he did not accomplish what he'd set out to do, if he lingered too long on the fact that he'd meant every single damned word he'd said to her, or the fact that somehow, by some freak coincidence, he fucked this up — Rogue would be on a plane back to Bayville in no time flat.

He couldn't have that. That sort of play wasn't worth the risk. Not again. Not ever. This wouldn't turn into another Blood Moon Bayou.

Remy LeBeau did not share his burdens with anyone.
No, no — Remy wanted Rogue to beg him to touch her.

That's the way this was going to unfold. He'd make sure of it.

He looked back at the couple on the street, arms wrapped around each other, swaying off in the other direction like they were drunk on each other's proximity.

A person could communicate enough with gesture; with a language that carries more weight than words, but you do not, must not, cannot give too much of yourself in the process.

The scent of her filled his mouth again, and Remy inhaled heavily, stretching against the iron rail to work out the kinks in his back from half his dreamtime spent on the couch, and the other half walking the Quarter in full daylight when that itself was akin to suicide. Frankly, Remy wasn't sure anymore where he could draw the line between catastrophic and apocalyptic. Both were equally bad.

"Y' care for her doncha?" Tante murmured, to which Remy made a noncommittal noise, his eyebrow cocked.

Schooling his features in such a way that Tante could read his response how she liked, he thought to himself: damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Swallow it down, LeBeau, he warned himself. He chuckled and straightened as behind them, a floorboard creaked. The shower had stopped running moments ago, and Remy turned a finely tuned ear to the movements inside the apartment.

"Only as much as I care for myself, Tante."

He winked, acutely aware of the irony in the statement. It was lost on Tante Mattie, as expected.

"And not half as much as I care for you," he purred.

She swatted at him, laughing.

"Y' still m' little man, pichouette, but that don't mean Tante ain't wise t' ya. You treat her good, y' hear?"

She leveled her gaze on him, and sternly, she added, "Y' take care of her. Don't do nothin' stupid t' show off, y' understand?"

Rogue cleared her throat to get their attention. "Ah think Remy's already outdone himself in the stupid department, ma'am."

Mattie, at least, was surprised.

"You shoulda seen what he did ta my home before convincing me ta come down here with him," she added.

Remy turned slowly, taking in the lean figure that stood in the doorway behind them.

Tante hmmmled.

"Y' don't say? Shouldn't be surprised, really. Remy always liked t' put on a big show for th' pretty ones."

Remy smirked at Rogue's flush — a light pink that touched her collarbone prettily and spread across her pale cheeks. In a moment, she recovered, jutting her chin and trying to look disdainful as she stared him down.
"Everything… fit alright?" he asked after a moment, allowing the words to roll of his tongue with nothing more than a throaty hum.

Her expression glacial, Rogue growled, "Just fine."

Remy took her in, letting his gaze wander over her curves, smoother than an oil slick. She'd found the Dickies, choosing to stuff the legs into her boots so that they puffed out like combat fatigues midway up her shins. The shirt was lightweight; a deep shade of grey with sleeves long enough to cover three-quarters of her arms, leaving four inches of skin exposed from wrist to glove. It was a strategic choice on his part, choosing something so daring: Four inches of exposed arm on Rogue was like a teddy on other women.

Despite the modesty of the top, with its narrow neckline that cut most of the way across her shoulders, her decision to actually wear it spoke volumes. Despite all of Rogue's protestations, despite her prickly attitude, she couldn't hide the fine tremor of expectancy that shone in her expression. It shimmered despite the heavy ring of black eyeliner, as crystalline and cold and pure as the first snowfall. There was determination there, turning Rogue's expression into a cocktail of explosive potential.

Remy wondered if she knew what the small triangles of exposed, creamy flesh between her neck and shoulder did to him.

Nodding appreciatively, he conceded in demure tones, “Good choice, ma belle."

Rocking backwards on her heels to peer down at herself, Rogue thrust a hip to the side, masking her self-consciousness with forced nonchalance.

"Ah figured showing off this much wouldn't be a bad idea, considering where we're headed and all."

He smiled a little at that, and inclined his head. Well played, he thought.

Despite his previous misgivings, apparently their shared moment from earlier that morning had the desired effect. Outwardly, she didn't appear nervous, but the determined quirk of her mouth suggested she was ready:

She wanted control.

And when a woman wants, Remy is always happy to oblige, he thought.

"Bye, Tante," Remy pecked her on the cheek. Strolling past Rogue, his gaze lingering on the smooth curve of her neck as he re-entered the apartment, he took the time to note her posture:

She stiffened as he passed close enough to step into the circle of her personal space. Unconsciously, she was already tipping back against the doorframe, withdrawing as not to brush him, though he gave the appearance that that was precisely what he was trying to encourage. Smirking, Remy collected his trench and slung it over his shoulders, moving to the kitchen to retrieve the large box he'd left on the counter from earlier.

Behind him, the women exchanged a few words of parting.

"Y' take care, chile. I'll see y' both soon, I hope," Tante nodded as she passed him. "I'm gonna leave before the rain comes."

Rogue thanked her, and Tante crossed with painstaking slowness to the side exit, where a set of outdoor steps would lead her to an unused carriageway that connected to Rue St. Anne below.
"A bientôt," Remy called, mentally verifying the sound of the door as it locked behind her.

—

Rogue remained in the doorway to the balcony, her gloved fingers playing with the hem of her shirt. Remy didn't turn around, allowing her to watch him under the pretense that he did not know she was doing so.

He set the box atop the ornately carved trunk at the foot of his bed, beside the small pile made by Rogue's folded X-Men uniform.

"What is it?" Rogue asked finally, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Standing to his full height and turning slowly, a small, obstinate grin pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"This?" He cocked his head towards the package.

"Yeah, that," Rogue replied, following him into the room. Her footfalls were heavy, and she moved with guarded steps as it to staunch the creaking protests of the old hardwood.

Remy shrugged noncommittally. "Size four, right?"

With a dip into his pocket, he pulled a deck of cards.

Rogue froze, her stomach doing a back flip as she stared between the Cajun, and the large, black box now positioned directly in her line of sight.

He'd bought her a dress. The dress — the one she'd be forced to wear because she'd lost his stupid little game of three-card-monte-you-pick-me-I-pick-you-double-or-nothing-on-Black-Maria.

Rogue worried the inside of her lip. Remy began an absent shuffle.

She could have balked. It would have spared her the humiliation if she'd only let go of her curiosity, and let Remy keep his secrets. No, she'd needed to know why he'd come for her, and that's why she'd accepted the challenge, and that's why Remy had every right to smirk down at her smugly.

She could have accepted that she was his alleged Queen of Hearts, and that would have been that. No date. No dress. But if Rogue had let him call her out, accepted that there was part of her that wanted to be the Red Queen, it would have been like Remy was winning anyway.

Inwardly, Rogue scoffed. Hell, she still had some pride. Bully for him that it made her the loser.

Now he was taunting her with it: that insufferable smirk was fixed firmly in place as he handled his infernal cards. Her stomach fluttered again. Remy was already nervous about the night ahead, and beneath the worn leather protecting the rest of the world from her hands, she could feel the uncomfortable accumulation of sweat on her palms.

Absently, she pushed down the top of her glove and rubbed at the indentation left behind on her wrist. It was a dull red line, fading to white as her circulation compensated for the burden of having to wear protection in the sickly heat. She'd grown used to it in the last few years, though only in appearance. After a few hours, her hands began to itch.
Her gaze darted between the gift and Remy, while all the while, he shuffled.

Flexing her fingers, Rogue dug into her hips.

"Its tasteful," he assured her.

The look he wore said it was anything but.

A date, she thought, in a proper dress, without having to cover up for the first time in her short, nineteen years of existence… with the swamp rat.

Rogue blew at a stray lock of white hair, already curling with the humidity as it dried.

A thought burst into clarity: dates usually meant dinner, didn't they? Or a movie. Or both. Or sometimes, in the old South, they meant dancing and strolls in the moonlight.

Most of the time, they involved hand-holding, or the soft press of a kiss.

Remy's eyes danced, and Rogue felt her cheeks burning. Involuntarily, her fingers were creeping up to her mouth, touching her lips.

She didn't know if that was necessarily a bad thing — the dress or Gambit or the date and what it promised. Everything seemed trivial in hindsight:

Tonight, she'd have control.

She could have laughed, but she squashed it before it reached her throat. The prospect was making her light-headed.

"Cat got your tongue, girl?"

Rogue swallowed. She didn't want to think about tongues. Or lips. It didn't help that her attention was focused squarely on Remy's mouth.

Sometime between waking and her shower, the hope seedling had burst open into a bright and beautiful bouquet of possibility: It was the sort of delayed realization of something you don't embrace because for a stretch, it seems less real and more like fantasy. Like a vacation you know you're going to take to someplace exotic, only to not realize it until you're standing at the airport at baggage claim. It had hit her like a ten-ton truck, all at once, in all its shimmering, promised-filled glory.

She was going to have control over her mutation.

Kissing was a very real possibility all of a sudden. And hand-holding. And... other things.

She jutted her chin, pursing her lips to reign in a grin.

"It better not be pink, Cajun."

What the hell, she thought, dropping her eyes and raking over him. It gave him pause. She grinned at him coyly, unable to stop herself.

Turning before she could catch his reaction, Rogue strode across the room with self-assured steps and snapped the doors closed. Something overhead bleeped! in alarm. Looking up, she noted the automated detectors built in against the lintel to blend into the wall. The control panel was almost seamless; it was little more than a small, white box with two registration lights blinking intermittently. The wires connecting to it, however, were so thin and so numerous, that Rogue suddenly realized the
amount of security necessary to keep such a place safe from the Thieves' enemies.

For such a prime location, she hadn't thought of Lapin's cautionary advice. He'd said that they were walking into the midst of a war, but the serene streets offered no indication of the imminent danger he'd warned them of. Excepting the two Assassins they'd seen running over the rooftops in the early morning, the Rue St. Anne below looked like the postcard-perfect definition of normal.

Were it not for the sudden realization that the place Remy had taken her to was literally a "Safe House", Rogue would have forgotten all about it.

Remy coughed politely, the sound underscored by the soft shuffle of cards. If the constant movement of his hands was any indication, he was nervous — maybe more so than she was.

The thought pleased her; it rippled through her belly to meet with the growing knot of excitement forming in her chest. She turned away from the window to find Remy watching her.

"Pink's not y' colour, chérie," he said of the dress. "I'm surprised, though - you've never seemed like the type to take defeat so well."

"Swamp rat, you could have set me up with a gig in a girlie show. After tonight, Ah wouldn't bat an eyelash at a date," she replied dryly in the attempt to smother out the giddy titter that threatened to bubble to the surface. She cleared her throat instead. "Least of all with the likes of you."

Calm down, girl. It hasn't happened yet, she reminded herself. Hell, was she flirting with him?

"That so? I might have t' cancel our soirée t' accommodate your wishes. Dieu," he laughed, "I wouldn't be complaining."

"Ah know you wouldn't, ya snake charmer," she replied, brushing her damp hair back. "But then Ah'd be just like every other girl who falls for your charms, now wouldn't Ah?" she added, though the rejoinder sounded a little flat to her own ears. "Besides, Ah don't think Ah'm your type."

"And how would y' know what m' type is?" He sounded dubious.

"Oh, you know… I talked ta Tante a bit before ya showed up," she returned, trying to keep her mannerisms airy.

"Your segue's a lil' weak, Roguey," he said in a low tone; chastising amusement lanced through the reprimand. It darkened the sound of his laughter at the edges, and kicked up her awareness another notch.

Forcing as much disdain into it as she could, Rogue scoffed and rolled her eyes. Annoyed, she turned back to the window, effectively blocking out his smoldering appraisal, though she was no longer looking at the street below.

With twilight descending, the windowpanes were fast becoming a mirror that reflected the dim sunset falling across the floor at her back. Remy was a featureless shadow; a specter just beyond her shoulder, and when she raised her eyes just so, Rogue could almost catch the flash of his grin in the reflection.

In an instant, like her attention was an invitation, he was right behind her - close enough that she could feel the heat of his body. She stiffened, feeling the light pressure in the space between them. He was tense, and it was rolling off him in waves.

"Maybe it's just a matter of practice," he hummed, and Rogue could almost feel the purring rumble
against her shoulder blades.

His voice stirred the fine hairs on the back of her neck, simultaneously lighting a fire in her limbs, and making her lean heavier against the glass. She took a moment, just a few seconds to recognize that she’d stopped breathing, deciding that a hot shower hadn’t been the best idea. She should have snapped on the cold water, she thought bracingly.

Determined not to have a repeat of that morning so soon, slowly, Rogue turned to face him.

"Then why don't ya show me how it's done?" she replied, deliberately measuring every syllable. "Last chances and all?" She raised her chin, narrowing her eyes in challenge.

He lifted an eyebrow, reaching up with painstaking slowness to flip the latch on the door. Something embedded in the wood gave a hydraulic hiss. The alarm chirruped again, confirming that the doors were secured, and Remy rested his palm against the lintel over her head.

"The door pops," he explained, making it sound for all the world like an invitation to his bed instead of something so banal, "if y' don't lock it just right."

Rogue ignored the tiny voice that declared she'd already been in his bed, instead diverting her flitting attention between his casual gesture and the inch at her back that had her hips banging into the glass.

"And I been trying," he breathed, leaning forward in all his serpentine grace as if he were sampling the perfume of her body, searching, seeking. For a moment, Rogue found herself moving closer into the spill of warmth emanating from him, wanting to reproduce the sensations wrought from being near him in the early hours of the morning even though she knew it was wrong; that it was dangerous even now, with the promise of control in sight. Then, suddenly, Remy's expression shuttered, and he stepped backwards.

"Let's go," he muttered, taking a breath.

Rogue blinked, shocked into clarity. She exhaled and found herself confused, her limbs sticky from the heat, and her hair curling in damp ringlets uncomfortably against the back of her neck.

What had just happened?

Remy was already drawing away.

"Are you for real?" she asked, incensed that he'd somehow managed to rattle her again and masking it with scorn. "Ah swear, Gambit, Ah think ya losing your touch," she said, shoving herself off the door and stalking to the center of the room.

Whether she was pissed about his teasing, or pissed that he still wouldn't give her a straight answer about anything – not even a stupid dress – Rogue didn't know.

Frankly, she didn't care. It was flat out easier being mad when it came to Remy. She could handle him when he wasn't preying on her sensitivities – better when he wasn't on top of her. Goddamn swamp rat, she thought.

"Lessgo," he said again, side-stepping to get to the armoire. Pulling open the top drawer, he slid out a concealed shelf and extracted his quarterstaff, plucking it from a fitted casement. Alongside the now empty space, embedded into black velour, were several similar devices. Rogue noted with some surprise that while the Safe House was equipped with technology that could rival the Institute's, the array of weapons were simple, almost deceptively non-lethal-looking with a selection of fitted attachments. All of it was hand-held, made for intimate person-to-person combat. He slipped the staff
into a concealed pocket and shut the drawer.

"Gonna be a long night," he said under his breath, more to himself than to her.

"Gambit?" she demanded, unsure why he'd suddenly turned so somber. If Remy's bland tones were meant to suggest submission, it wasn't working. The only thing his avoidant gaze was doing was making her nervous — and Rogue decided she definitely didn't need any more butterflies battering about her insides.

"Oui?"

Turned from her, quickly crossing the apartment and needlessly double-checking the doors to the balcony, Rogue couldn't see more than the back of his head with a few wispy hunks of auburn spilling from his cowl. Beyond the windows, the sky had sunk into a rich grey, and a light rain had begun to fall.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied.

"Remy?" she tried again. Finally, he stilled, his back to her. In the reflection of the windowpanes, his red eyes glowed faintly. He watched her through the glass.

"Did Ah do something?" she asked, her tolerant mood evaporating, taking with it the mix of heated things she wasn't about to give a name to.

He shook his head, a movement so quick and so subtle it barely registered.

"Non, Rogue. Everything's fine."

"You're lying," she said, her tone harsher than she'd have liked. "You can't do that ta me, Cajun. Not now. So tell me what's running through that thick skull of yours before Ah suck it outta ya myself."

He continued to watch her silently.

Stubbornly, Rogue pulled off a glove. "Ah'm gonna count ta three."

"Y' won't do it, and even if y' did, it wouldn't work," he murmured. "Put y' glove back on."

He was right. She wouldn't. Worse was the fact that she couldn't even bluff with him. It was a sullen consolation for a shared understanding that was heading south fast.

Grimacing, Rogue conceded, sliding the glove over her fingers bitterly.

"Fine," she muttered. "You made your point at the diner yesterday, and you're right – Ah won't absorb you willingly, but that's the point of all this, right? Get me back in touch with my bad self? Get me using the full breath of my powers?" She scoffed.

"Did y' sleep okay?" he asked quietly.

She hesitated, thrown. After a moment, she narrowed her eyes at his reflection. "What?"

He didn't answer, choosing instead to patiently observe her through the window's glossy surface without turning around. Cautious, Rogue took a step forwards, the floorboards creaking. So much for stealth, she thought, flinching against the tired sound.
Remy didn’t move as she approached him. In a few moments, she stood at his elbow—close enough to catch the scent of his cologne and the musty smell of his duster. Unlike him, Rogue didn’t deliberately fling herself into his personal space.

Their shared reflection, though broken by the small slats of wood that divided the panes of glass, looked serene: Two darkened, near-featureless figures; two sides to the same coin. Wordlessly, Remy held a pack of cards out to her.

Heavily, he seemed to shake the question off when she didn’t reply.

"There's no guarantee what'll happen to us," he said. "You need t’be sure that going out there is worth th' risk. Y' need t’be sure that you want whatever it is you're after badly enough."

Rogue nodded, warily accepting the unspoken note of caution.

"It won't be your problem."

Remy shook his head. "It's been my problem since th' first time I laid eyes on you. It's been my problem since long before that."

Rogue snorted, though the sound came out uncertainly. The seriousness in Remy's tone was disconcerting.

"The world ain't on your shoulders, swamp rat. This is my choice. You took your chances, and now it's my turn." After a moment, she added, "You don't owe me anything. Ah forgave you a long time ago for doing... what ya did."

She flushed, avoiding his gaze. "Last year," she added awkwardly. "Ah told ya, we're square... And I slept fine," she added hastily, scrubbing at her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Ah'm not a liability, if that's what you're suggesting. Ah don’t mean ta be."

Remy started. For a moment it appeared as if he wanted to correct her, but he checked himself before he could continue. Instead, he shut his eyes for a few seconds longer than a standard blink. When he next looked at her, a look of determination had softened the lines around his mouth.

"Take 'em," he insisted, turning to face her with the cards held between them. "If y' need to, if there's trouble, I'll drop my shields, you take a piece of me and you use the cards."

"Ah don't do that anymore," she answered firmly, pulling at her glove to make a point. "You know that. You just said that."

He raised an eyebrow. "Chérie," he said tolerantly, "I'm not asking you."

"And Ah’m telling you — Ah don’t need that sort of protection." Rogue squared her shoulders.

"You just use y’ powers for weak threats, huh?" he hummed.

"Ah don’t know if it's a good thing or not, but you're not in my head right now," Rogue continued, ignoring the jibe. "Ah’d like ta keep it that way as long as Ah can."

She folded her arms across her chest, effectively removing the option of accepting his cards willingly. Obstinate, she added, "Ah can take care of myself."

"Doesn't mean y' have to."

"Yeah," she sighed. "It does."
When Rogue looked up again, he was standing over her, waiting for her gaze to return to his. His eyes glowed faintly, a dull throb of red that brought her an inch closer to him, but no more than that.

"Stop it," she said softly. "Don't try and pull that hypnotic stuff again."

"I told you, I can't. It only works once, far as I know," he said, his voice equally low-pitched. "You're moving all by yourself." He smirked, though the expression lacked its usual self-assured twist.

Rogue took a step back. "Better?"

"Not really." He appeared conflicted, like an internal argument was playing out inside his head. Hot and cold: He liked the idea of danger, but he didn't want to get too close either, she thought. It figured.

"Look," she inhaled sharply, attempting to block him out so she could think a little clearer. "Let's go, alright? Ah'm anxious enough without all this." She gesticulated feverishly at the space in between them. "And yes, Ah want it. Ah want control," she emphasized, so there was no miscommunication.

"Ah'll take the risk involved, just like you, even if it's temporary."

"Who said it was temporary?" he asked.

Rogue hesitated. "The professor," she said after a moment. "They just didn't know what to make of you," she added. "Ah mean — look what ya done, Remy? You were an Acolyte. They — we — have ta be suspicious."

"Don't bother me none." Shrugging, he flipped the deck of cards over, palming it and rolling it over his knuckles in one fluid motion.

"Ah don't think anything does," she tossed back. "You're too slick for your own good. Everything just slides right off your back — slippery as a snake."

"That's not true. The X-Men can think what they like. It's you that matters right now — your opinion. I can live with you hating me, sure, but I'm not taking you into Assassins territory unless y' can put your faith in my judgment just a bit."

"Ah don't hate ya," she said, surprised.

"But you don't trust me either," he countered, his tone serious. The cards stopped moving, disappearing from her peripheral vision entirely.

"How can Ah? Ah don't know you, Remy. You don't want me to," she argued.

Something in his expression shifted, a troubled flicker of emotion smoothing into a distant contemplation before settling again into acceptance. It was eerie how quickly Remy could control himself, and as an answer, he offered a shred of something significant, finally:

"What we want and what we need are two very different things, Rogue."

That she could understand. It resonated deeply, striking her consciousness like a stone settling at the bottom of a deep well. The ripples drew up stirrings of her life with the X-Men: sacrifices she'd made to accommodate her mutation instead of giving up entirely; things she kept to herself to save the
others around her from sharing the pain and the hurt of a lifelong existence always a step back from those she wanted to be close to.

"It's dangerous stuff," he conceded. "The fact that you came all the way out here demonstrates that in the least, y' have hope. You saw your chance, and y' took it. This is what we call an opener, chère; some risky business with a high payoff, and I need you t' know that I'm gonna watch your back as long as you're here. But you have t' let me, otherwise we're not going nowhere."

His expression remained closed, guarded almost. In that instant, Rogue understood, at least a little: Remy couldn't open up to her, not verbally. Somehow, by putting it into words, he'd make whatever it was that he was protecting himself from real. Or perhaps he was afraid of what she'd think if she knew his secrets. Perhaps, like her, he was only trying to protect her from himself.

"Ah bet its damned hard," Rogue sympathized. "That's why ya did all that research? That's why… you chose those memories ta show me?"

Gambit stiffened.

"Of course, ya could have been lying." Rogue's eyes narrowed, but it was an exaggerated suspicion. There was no doubt behind the accusation, and Remy confirmed as much for her:

"C'est pas possible. I might be powerful right now, chère, but a man can't change the things he's seen or what he's felt. It's you that's gotta come t' terms, and that's why y' gotta have some faith."

Crap, Rogue thought. Crap on toast.

She swallowed, taking in the enormity of what he was asking. It'd be an outright denial of what she'd been trained to do, who she'd been trained to be. It would mean letting go of their past animosities, like trying to forget Blood Moon Bayou had never happened the year before, like trying to forget Apocalypse, and all the unsaid things from a year spent apart.

Rogue could say the words, "I forgive ya," until she was blue in the face, but to start from scratch? To give her trust to someone who she felt had betrayed her, and wouldn't offer anything in return to compensate? There were too many unspoken accusations for that.

"Ah can't," she replied quietly, shaking her head.

"I knew you'd say that," Gambit said, resigned. "That's who you are, chère. I wouldn't expect any less from ya, but y' can't blame a man for tryin'."

Gawd, had he always been so arrogant?

"Don't get ahead of yourself. You don't know me either," she countered. "For everything that ya pulled outta my file, that's not who Ah am. Ya can't fit the whole of a person's experience into Cliff Notes. There are no words to describe it, and no book that can hold somethin' that big."

Amused, he paused in his progression to draw the cotton drapes across the doors.

"Who said it's a book?" he tossed over a shoulder, contemplating the wan light smothered by the fabric. "Maybe its a manilla file folder."

Nonplussed, Rogue folded her arms across her chest. "Do ya try ta be difficult, or is it a natural talent?"

"Look, y' keep tryin' t' impress upon me that I can't understand th' intricate details of your life. If
"You're so sure of that, then gimme the opportunity t' find out first hand, for myself."

"Only if you do the same," she shot back. "That's the only way we're gonna get past this," she said firmly. "You're not playing solitaire, Cajun. There are two of us, and it's gotta go both ways. You hear me? Its give and take or its nothin'."

"Y' let Wolverine get away with the lone wolf act, I bet," he answered dryly.

"Wolverine didn't get his powers boosted, and Wolverine hasn't ever kidnapped me," she argued. "Bad example." He grimaced. "I think y' know all about it, chérie. Just because I'm not handing over my history like a good pup, it doesn't mean I don't understand you."

She snorted. "Maybe we should contact a publicist."

He grinned. "Write a book on the subject?"

"Isolationism 101."

He laughed at that, and for the span of a few heartbeats, the pair shared an uneasy silence — the sort that begged to be filled, though neither party quite knew what to offer the other.

"Gimme the damned cards, Cajun," Rogue said finally, a little exasperated. It wasn't anything big, but it was a start.

Remy strolled around her, his gaze fixed on hers so that Rogue was forced to turn with him as he headed towards the rear balcony of the apartment. There was a surety in his step that was unsettling; predatory, almost. Remy had never been awkward, as far as she remembered, but he'd never moved like smoke either. It seemed almost as if he called the shadows to him, a darkened smudge that felt at home mantled by the shifting shades of the apartment — a predator in the night, appraising his take and the best way to capture it.

"They're already in y' pocket, chérie."

Opening the door for her, he bowed from the waist. It broke the spell, but the impression it left didn't dissipate as easily.

"How kind of ya," she muttered, feeling for the weight of the deck. Sure enough, he'd slipped it into her back pocket without her knowing.

"Ah'm gonna consider this insurance," she said, determined not to let her ownership of the cards be anything more than a token of the smallest, most miniscule acceptance of an actual truce. Rogue didn't want him to think that he'd bested her by planting them. "But it definitely doesn't mean Ah intend ta use them."

Ever the gentleman, Remy shrugged; it was little more than an insolent rise and dip of one shoulder. Rogue sighed inwardly.

"There's always a use for a deck of cards, Roguey," he said. "Mebbe we play a lil' strip poker when we get back, ein?"

She laughed in a full, throaty chortle that echoed across the backyard garden. A light drizzle had begun falling. Stepping into the mist of rain, Rogue raked her hand through her hair.

"Do ya ever stop?"
"Non," Remy returned smoothly. "Not for these stakes."

Remy's gaze dropped suggestively as he placed a hand at the small of her back to guide her out of the exit. His hand lingered just long enough.

"Ah'm really starting ta get sick of all this talk of game play," she muttered, turning and bumping into the corner of the opened door. "That's all this is to you." She sniffed. "Well ya know what they say — it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye."

"Or consciousness." His eyes glimmered mischievously. "So," he said, "You sure you're up for it? Big decision on your part, Rogue: a lifetime of freedom awaits. I don't know if y' can handle all that."

The door clicked shut behind her. With Remy deliberately leaning into her as he fixed the locks, Rogue had no better place to go to avoid him other than over the railing — over which was a twenty-foot drop to the courtyard below.

"Folks do crazy things when they're given th' opportunity t' cut loose," he continued.

"Freedom of necessity," she muttered. "I'll still be an X-Man."

"And I'm still an ex-con."

"Sugah," Rogue started, "if you of all people could handle what that damned rock could do, Ah definitely won't have a problem." She raised her chin defiantly, leaning away from him as far as she could with the railing digging into her back. "But Ah'm warning ya — any funny stuff on the way, and Ah swear Ah'll drop ya before ya can say 'merde.'"

"My, my... Such language," he teased. Leaning loser, he whispered in challenge, "Merde."

Sidestepping him, she rolled her eyes.

"Where to?"

"Up the water spout," he replied, nodding to the roof. "Up and over th' Quarter, through neutral territory as far as we can."

For a moment, Remy's attention strayed to the skyline overhead, an indulgent moment spent taking in the patter of rain.

"Up?" she repeated.

Following his gaze, Rogue glanced skeptically at the overhanging eaves of the townhouse. For the most part, the building wasn't decorated, though she could make out several notches that would make good handholds. While they were on the second floor, the façade was a vertical climb straight to the pitched roof.

"You couldn't be normal and stroll through the streets, now could ya?" she asked.

"Oui, we could do that if y' wanted t' be on a first name basis with your mortality," he hummed, slitting his eyes and squinting upwards. "The city from above is somethin' else — somethin' you've gotta see t' believe. Plus, in these conditions, with lowered visibility as such, it's less likely that we'll be spotted by th' people we're trying to avoid."

Rogue snickered. "The Rippers? If Ah remember correctly, those jokers couldn't hold up against us
"Assassins," he corrected. Gambit's expression remained impartial as he replied simply, "Times have changed."

"What happened?" she asked. "That Julien character still giving ya trouble?" She scoffed.

At his somber expression, she stopped abruptly. "What?"

He didn't offer her a joke at the mention of his adversary, and for all purposes, it seemed as if the careful dispassion edging his expression was more paper-mache-thin than porcelain. Gambit pulled a card from an interior pocket. Igniting it absently, he didn't meet her gaze as he held it against the wall so Rogue could see the ascending pattern of protruding bricks that would help with the climb.

"Time's-a-wastin'," he said, a hint of forced gentility straining his inflection. "Ladies first."

Recalling Lapin's words from the night before, Rogue remembered: the Rippers were no more; the gang seemed to have been assimilated into a broader title: the Assassins.

"They're a Guild, aren't they? Like ya'll?"

He frowned.

"Who's Marius Boudreaux?" she asked, Lapin's babble resurfacing.

"No one you want to meet in a dark alley." Remy motioned for her to climb.

Sensing that she'd get little else from him on the subject, Rogue propped a boot against the wrought iron. Without having the time to contemplate it further, Gambit hefted himself onto the railing beside her, impatient. Frankly, she didn't think the thing solid enough to support both their weights. Time to hustle, she thought.

"It's solid," he urged, and automatically, Rogue ignored the hand he offered her. She stepped fully onto the narrow rail of the balcony and glanced down. Below, the garden was a small jungle of overgrown and unkempt plants; nature overtaking the rough grey flags and the ornamental fountain that stubbornly spat an irregular burble of water into the air. The leaves of a banana tree brushed her back, giving her a start. Not wanting to test her acrobatic skills so soon, she launched herself at the wall.

He'd evaded her again: avoiding all the hard questions. She'd need to find that Lapin character; maybe he'd talk.

The thought set the pace for the upward hand-over-hand rhythm.

Something had happened, something bad, she concluded. In the span of time he'd been away, Gambit had seen some hard times. It was clear to Rogue that something had affected him. Lapin had said he'd been exiled from the city - maybe even from his Guild and family, since he clearly hadn't seen his cousin in months, though Remy claimed to have been living right under their noses. He'd been hiding in plain sight. Whether or not she wanted to overturn that particular rock, Rogue had yet to be certain.

The glow of fuchsia extinguished, and for a moment, Rogue gripped the wall, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness.

Her fingers locked around the brickwork, the toes of her boots cutting into the old mortar, and began
feeling her way. There were obvious handholds on the wall, probably from Remy's previous expeditions scaling the building. The hollowed nooks made the ascent much easier, though her muscles strained without having been warmed up first. Pacing herself, Rogue hauled herself upwards, enjoying the initial tension across her shoulders as she tested her strength. Grinning as it became easier, she glanced down to see if Gambit followed.

A foot below, his eyes were an attentive, alert red. He kept climbing as she paused.

"Does that look you're giving me have something ta do with the war Lapin was talking about?" she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"The look I'm giving you has more t' do with the fact that your derriere is at eye-level, chère," he said, his appreciation forcing her to snap her attention upwards, glad that he couldn't see her face as it reddened.

"You keep up like that, and Ah swear, LeBeau, Ah'll knock ya off the roof," she spat, continuing the climb with renewed force.

Below her, Remy followed — leaping to catch the drainpipe a few feet to the left of her heels.

"Can't think of a better way t' go," he called, his trench coat slapping against his legs as he swung outwards, clinging to the building with a show of upper-body strength that was damned-near insulting for all the work she put in the Institute's gymnasium.

"Knowing you, you'd probably try ta sweet talk Lady Death into giving you another chance at life," she groused, grunting as something in her shoulder girdle popped. A moment later, she swore under her breath as the muscle coiled reflexively.

This had been easier in the Danger Room a few days before, she decided, coming to the sorry conclusion that Wolverine's rigorous training sessions worked better on the body when you had them daily. Three days off, and an overhand climb became punishment.

"Who said anything about talking?" Gambit chortled, bemused. For a moment, he dangled idly at eye-level. Seeing that he finally had her attention, he unhooked the fingers of his left hand, flexing them as if he were warming up for a piano solo, and tapped the spout at a point where the brackets connected it to the wall.

A rivet exploded with an audible pop, and he tipped his weight sideways. The shift sent him careening bodily, landing him beneath her once again.

Nonplussed, Rogue leaned outwards from the wall, peering down between her knees at his broad grin. The broken drainage pipe fell to the ground with a rough clatter, and Remy leered as if he'd found the best seat in the house.

Snapping her stomach as close to the wall as she could seemed to be the best way to block him out. The last thing she needed was to have a clear image of Remy's head between her legs. Too much room for the imagination to bolt with that particular visual.

"Ya can't pay the reaper with sexual favors," she groused, hefting herself over the rickety gutter. Rogue crawled onto the roof and rolled over to settle back on her haunches. She didn't offer him a hand up as he scaled the building after her.

"It's my charm that wins her over," he answered. "Every time."
"Too many close shaves and ya get nicked," she said dryly, peering over the slight overhang of the eaves to the garden below. Remy popped his head over the cornice, grinning.

"Y' know all about that, don't you?"

Rogue rolled her eyes and stood. Climbing the steeply pitched roof to the very apex, she balanced on the narrow joinery that supported the gables. Before them, a few blocks southwest, Bourbon Street was alight with the glare of neon and gas lamps. Storefronts glowed, Jazz and blues and zydeco blared from the many shops and bars lining the sidewalks, and there were crowds everywhere despite the rain that turned the streets into black mirrors that caught and reflected the lighted shop signs. Hoards of people circulated, talking, laughing, and jostling each other.

It made her uncomfortable just thinking about that many bodies, that much chance for exposure.

Flatly, she replied, "Don't patronize me, Cajun. Until Ah've got control of my powers, Ah can still knock ya flat."

"Huh. You seem t' forget that I've got control of mine," he countered, deciding that the shingles were in suitable condition to cling to. "Advantage: Remy. And you're telling me that I've got a death wish?" he sniggered, effortlessly pulling himself up and perching on the edge, his feet dangling over the garden below. "You think I'd just let y' punt me over the side? Can't get rid of me that easy."

"Ah'm not the one sitting on a slant," she warned, casting a dour glance at him from where she stood at the higher vantage point. "Piss me off anymore, and they'll be peelin' your guts off the pavement tomorrow."

He frowned, pushing himself from a crouch to a stand. "You'd do that t' me?"

Scowling, Rogue stalked across the gable, farther away from him, and closer to the street. "You'd make a beautiful corpse," she shot back.

"Live fast and die by the hand of a belle femme, that's my motto," he drawled, his pacing easy as he bounced along the slick shingling.

"Keep talkin' and ya might just get your wish." She smirked. Remy, however, was intent on having the upper hand. A moment later, he'd dove out from behind her, rattling along the hip of the roof in a wide circle. For a second, it looked like he'd dive straight off the edge before he looped upwards, and launched himself in front of her, hands in his pockets.

"This your idea of flirting?" he asked, teasing. "It's kinda morbid."

"Scare ya?" she said lightly, pulling her hair off her forehead where the damp breeze pushed it into her face. The rain was making the ends curl.

Gambit cocked his head, pirouetting to face her.

"Non, but y' wanna find out what does? Fear and adventure: they sleep in the same bed together." He swiped at the hair falling into his eyes, blinking out the trickles of rainwater.

Scoffing, Rogue folded her arms across her chest, and almost immediately decided that wasn't a wise way to keep her balance.

"One thing at a time, doncha think?" She waved a glove hand in front of his face, but Gambit merely shook his head, disturbing the wet strands further.
"Something t' keep us occupied until we arrive, mebbe?" He graced her with a coy, nearly innocent expression. As innocent as a fox in a chicken coop, she thought.

"You said it wasn't that far."

Her stomach twisted at the thought of what waited for her between the roof and the Botanica, and again, she looked to the crowds on the streets below. Maybe it was better that they were so high up.

"It's not." His irises gleamed, flaring like the lights on the signs dotting the streets below. "Figured you might like a little time t' adjust to the idea… Or that mebbe y' couldn't move as fast as me over these roofs."

He shrugged, giving a negligent flick to the water that was settling on the shoulder nearest her. Grimacing, Rogue wiped at her forehead where the spray hit her. "I can understand that," he continued, strolling with a little bounce in his step, taking in a full hundred and eighty degree panorama of the city below. "It's easy t' get distracted up here – feels like no one at all can touch ya, when you're above th' world like this."

"Ah could match ya, and Ah could best ya, swamp rat. Don't think Ah forgot that Ah sucked up some of your powers. Ah got plenty of your own skill on reserve ta prove it," she declared.

"And no control t' call it back," Gambit chortled. "But what about you?"

Dropping his hands into his pockets, he measured her lazily from head to toe. "Can't do it without my help? My... powers? Isn't that what you've been doing, all this time?"

Rogue bristled. She didn't need anyone's imprinted mutation to see her through an obstacle course, least of all Remy's.

"How far are we?" she asked, trying to mask her determination with scathing disdain. In truth, she was full of nervous energy. A good race topside over the city could be interesting. It wouldn't be any more difficult than a hard run in the Danger Room. She peeked at the undaunted crowds below, imagining what it would feel like to walk among that many people without the worry that someone would bump into her, touch her skin and fall comatose at her feet.

"Few blocks, mebbe... If we cut straight across the Quarter." He shrugged. "You're anxious." He assessed. "That's understandable, but it will be fine, chérie."

She'd heard that before.

"Ah'm not anxious, and you can't promise me that, swamp rat," she returned. "Especially since ya might not make it to our desired destination if you keep lookin' at my butt the way you are."

He whistled, springing up in front of her again.

"Just appreciating th' view." Giving her a broad grin, he lidded his gaze in appreciation.

She rolled her eyes, pointing to the city lights. "That's the view, out there."

"It's all relative, Roguey. Besides, y' probably like looking at mine just the same." He twirled, the bottom of his trench coat flying out as he presented his back to her.

The rain pattered earnestly around them, gaining in intensity and making the roofing tiles slippery below their boots.
Gambit didn't seem to notice or care. He was too intent on catching her attention over his shoulder and waggling his eyebrows.

"Lead," she said stiffly, rubbing her knuckles and stretching the dampened leather. "Ah'll follow ya."

"That's the sorta thing I like t' hear." He beamed, turning one last time to face her – muscles contracting as his balance held nearest the edge of the wet shingling. With a snap of his wrist, he'd extracted and extended his staff. Gambit spun, pelting down the gable and leaping to the roof of the smaller shotgun house below. He landed with less than a thump, and took off along that roof.

"C'mon!" he shouted. "Let's see what they teach you at that school of yours!"

Rogue crouched, adjusting to the heavy hand of the muggy night and the sodden trickle of rainwater running down her neck — for the first time finding she was envious of Gambit's trench coat — and took off after him.

"This one time," he called, vaulting over a chimney with Rogue trailing a few feet behind, "when m' brother and I were thirteen or so —"

Rogue dodged the chimney, the rain gathering in intensity so that she had to swipe her wet hair off her forehead.

"We used t' go freerunning over the District to train. Guild stuff — you understand."

"What's that?" she yelled, clattering along after him, the shingles wobbly below her feet. He leapt at an ivy-tangled trellis, clinging to the side easily and scaling to the top of the next building without pause.

"Used t' be called Storyville," he shouted at her, pausing at the top of the next gable to be sure that she followed. Rogue's ascent was a little slower, but the burn in her arms felt excruciatingly good. Fixing her attention at a spot overhead as she climbed helped, but it meant getting the full patter of rain on her face.

"You mean the place where all the ladies of ill-repute did their business," she shot back, swinging her legs over the ledge and rolling to her feet as Gambit continued to the next house.

"The very same. It's been almost a century since it was in business, though," he explained. "Now it's the Iberville Projects."

"So what were ya doin' down there exactly?" she called back, watching for any snags in her path as she rattled over to the cross gables where Gambit had stopped. "If ya weren't trying ta get a date?"

He crouched over a window, his staff lodged between the shutters to lock him in place. Gargoyle-like as he paused to grin at her, Rogue could just make out the twist of his mouth in amusement before he tumbled over and dropped down to the cornice. He landed in a crouch and motioned for her to join him.

"Learning the tricks of the trade. Learning th' rules," he replied, nodding to the window behind them as Rogue slid next to him - balancing herself with one foot in the gutter. It was an unstable foothold at best. Too much pressure, or even the slightest shift of weight, and it looked as if it would snap off its rusty fixtures.

"What rules?" she asked. "What tricks?"

"Y' either rely on y' partner when y' need to, or you lose. Mebbe hurt yourself in the process."
She peered behind her through the window and into a lavishly decorated room.

"This is it?" she asked doubtfully, unsure what he was getting at. It didn't resemble the memory she'd taken from him at all.

"Non," he replied, unconcernedly. "This is an old Guild lesson. This is t' establish trust."

"What?" Rogue's head snapped around, a moment too late.

As if on cue, the gutter below her feet gave way, and Rogue skidded down the three feet of the jutting overhang. Her feet shot out in front of her, and with a gasp, she realized she was about to drop at least forty feet to the street below. For a split second before she fell, Rogue scrabbled, her body reacting before her mind could process that Gambit had slid an arm around her waist. They bounced mid-air.

She waited for impact, her feet dangling, but it did not come.

Cautiously, she peeked open an eye.

"Oh, gawd."

Gambit chuckled into her hair, and frantically, Rogue locked her arms around his neck. They hung over Rue St. Anne, suspended by a grappling line that swung over to the houses on the opposite street.

"No need t' call me that. Remy's just fine," he said lightly, his breath tickling the side of her throat. Rogue had to crane her neck around to glare at him. He held her securely to him, one leg hooked around hers tightly, and the opposite arm around her waist. The other hand was wound around his quarterstaff, and at the push of a button, they were in motion. Slowly, suspended by the rope bridge, he carried them across the street much in the same way that he'd brought her into his apartment that morning. "Y' trust me yet?"

"Ah'm gonna kill ya." Rogue swallowed.

"A simple, 'thank ya' would suffice," he said lightly, depositing her on a window ledge a moment later. Rogue pressed herself into the glass at her back, peering at the street below and imagining what would have happened if he hadn't caught her. Remy merely hummed, disassembling the attachments and, just as quickly, re-attaching them to the roof over their heads.

"The hell did ya do that for?" she hissed finally, her breath hitching.

"We've got Lapin t' thank for setting up the rigging. There's cabling all over the city, largely because he was too impatient as a kid to go anywhere on foot," he said. Peering at her, Remy grinned, "And because he's always been too lazy t' clean up after himself. Makes m' life that much easier."

Rogue stared, seeing the network of well-concealed cables crossing the street: they meshed too well with the electrical wires. Only when she looked hard, could she find the spiderweb connecting the rooftops.

"They're all over the city?" she breathed, recalling the bridge from the night before — how quickly Lapin had gotten to his perch atop a streetlight.

Remy grinned.

When Rogue could only gawp at him, he blew ineffectively at the hair hanging into his eyes and
asked, "Did I drop you?" Clearly, he'd found the Tarzan act far more exciting than she had.

"No," she said after a stretch, begrudgingly.

"Did y' really think I'd let you fall?" he pressed, amused by her reaction. Twisting an attachment around his bo without sparing it a glance, Remy tested the cabling, giving it a yank that sent a scattering of droplets into the air.

Rogue shifted her weight, leaving enough room so that they stood shoulder to shoulder against the building, staring fixedly at the street below.

"No," she admitted.

"Did y' really think I'd bring you all th' way out here just t' screw with your head? Do y' really believe, for just one second, that if I wasn't sure that the stone's the real deal, I'd let you use it?"

Rogue tried to glower; failing that, she shook her head. Gawd, she prayed silently, let Henry McCoy for once be wrong.

"Then that's all you need t' know about me right now. Oui?"

"That ain't fair," she protested.

"Is too," he said stubbornly.

"Is not."

"Is too."

"Whatever," she muttered.

"Say it."

"Shut up!"

"C'mon, chérie. Y' know I'm right," Remy insisted, nudging her shoulder playfully.

"Fine," she grumbled. "For now."

"Say it," he goaded, drawing it out. "Lemme hear it from them lovely lips of yours —"

"Ah trust you, okay?" she yelled.

Gambit laughed loudly, long and hard, doing a small, but victorious dance beside her while humming something that sounded like a broken, out-of-tune Charleston.

"Don't gloat," Rogue muttered. "And ya definitely can't dance, so please stop before Ah hafta gouge out my eyes."

"Bien," he chuckled. "Now if you'll just admit that y' found that fun —"

"Don’t push it, Cajun," Rogue began.

"Okay, okay… Then let's go. Y’ got yourself some powers that need fixin’." He grinned cheekily, his hair hanging in limp, wet strands before his eyes. Remy shook his head, flinging bits of rainwater onto her.
Despite herself, Rogue laughed. She swatted at him, and gently, Remy caught her hand. He flashed a broad, true grin that lit his face up, his red eyes sparkling intently as he brought her knuckles to his mouth and gave her gloved fingers a chaste kiss.

The nervous, fragile bubble of hope returned to her. It was real, she thought. She was going to have control of her powers.

Looking at Remy, Rogue thought to herself: the first thing she'd do when she could touch was give the swamp rat one huge, wet kiss.

Then she could smack him with a bare hand for every perverse thought that had ever crossed his mind.

Damned Cajun, she grinned, turning away before he could tease her.

"Y' ready?" he asked, his fingers curling her hand into his. "It's just behind us, one street over and down one of the back alleys."

Nodding, unable to respond with the rush of adrenaline that had hit her bloodstream, Rogue ushered him onwards.

Remy drew her against him, locking an arm around her waist and giving her that selfsame Cheshire grin. A bead of water rolled off his nose, hitting her forehead, and Rogue blinked at it before it could sluice into her eyes.

Her heart felt as if it would pound right out of her chest. When was the last time she had felt like this? She couldn't remember, but it was good. Even as the rain gathered in intensity, in the murky gloom atop the building they clung to, somehow, it felt right.

Nearly as right as Remy's arm felt around her where he hugged her against his chest, hunkering his shoulders around her to ward off the damp. With one last tug to the tension cable, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, waiting for the word.

Rogue inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself and failing with the rush of excitement.

"Let's go, sugah." She smiled, and with a nod, they jumped off the ledge — spiraling down to the ground below and landing nimbly. Overhead, the grappling mechanism pinged and snapped up from Remy's grasp. He didn't bother to watch as the line retracted into the darkness. It was another heartbeat before they stepped away from one another.

"This way," he nodded, licking the rainwater from his upper lip. With a nod, Rogue followed, reluctantly releasing the crook of his elbow.

She hadn't realized she'd been holding onto him.

Leading her around the building and into a dingy, barely lit alley, Remy shook at the excess water rolling off his coat brusquely.

"It's raining harder than a cow pissing on a flat rock," Rogue groused, though the complaint lacked the usual twang of irritancy. She swiped at her sodden hair and splashed after him, leaping over a puddle that Remy had sidestepped with ease.

"No worries, chérie," he assured her, flipping up his collar and diving between the trashcans peppering the small alley. Dancing around a particularly large pile of trash, he took the corner at an easy clip, disappearing though his voice carried. "Maman Brigitte has a roof and prolly a cup of tea
or something. Take a shot of bourbon in that and it's all —“

He stopped, halting in his tracks so abruptly that Rogue all but walked into his back as she turned down the connecting alleyway.

"Dieu," he breathed. "Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?"

"What's wrong?" she asked, stepping out from behind him and catching herself on his outstretched arm.

"Chère —“

Under the weak streetlamps, his hair plastered to his forehead in wet strands, Remy's face took on an ashen pallor.

Rogue turned, following his gaze:

The scene would have been the same as the images she'd taken from him, mimicking Remy's memory to the very last detail: The back street sat in darkness, the cobblestone beneath her boots running with the rivulets of dirty street water. Garbage lined the gutters, and the sign that proclaimed the Botanica once stood there hung half-off its post near the spot where the door should have been.

She could just make out the worn, tilting green stoop that had led to the entrance. But everything else...

Rogue sucked in a small breath.

Everything else surrounding the Botanica where Remy had gone to see the woman with the stone was caved in on itself. What remained was a hollowed husk that had been charred from the inside out; little more than rubble and refuse. The roof on the Creole cottage had buckled; patchy timbres, scorched in places and snapped beneath the weight of the small store, protruded like blackened, broken bones.

The only things holding the remains in place were gutted, red pilings — more dust now than brick. They appeared to have been blasted to bits; too many still scattered the streets, some with scorched halves, and others, no more than an ochre-colored powder that smeared the ground. Only one thing could have left such destruction in its wake; one thing that she knew too well:

She had seen the effects of his charged cards firsthand. She had seen the effects of an explosion of this degree when she herself had manifested his powers in the Danger Room.

How had she not known? How had she forgotten that last, glimmering charge of light before his memory faded to black after he'd touched the stone?

Rogue turned to Remy, silent, condemning.

"You did this."

The accusation hung in the air between them — the finality of it pushing her away from him a step, and then two, and then three — until Rogue had turned and began running though the hard rain.

It splashed her face, cleansing the saltine sting that she could not reign in.

Remy had lost control to gain it, and in doing so, he had destroyed her chances as well.
Post Script:
- Snakebit: (Poker) Having bad luck. "How ya doin'?" "Terrible. I've been snakebit for a week. Can't make a hand when it counts."
- "I'm my own grandpa" by the Grateful Dead
- "I don't want it; I just need it" (Tool.)
- Escher (Relativity: 1953)

Translations:
Belle Femme: beautiful woman
Bien: Good
Dieu: God
Merde: Shit
Mon p'tit prince: My little prince
Quartier: The French Quarter
Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?: What happened
Viens: Come
Eleven fifty-two on a Thursday night in New Orleans is occasion for good business: it's prime market time. The city watches, eyes heavy-lidded, though never somnolent. It watches, lurking just beyond the peripheral vision of those who remain unaware or untrained.

It watches. It hears every footfall. It notes every heavy breath. It knows the tears beneath the steady patter of rain.

The girl kept her head bowed against the downpour; her makeup running in a steady stream of black that she didn't bother swiping at. She glowered at anyone passing who and gave her a second look.

There were two blocks worth of unseeing steps before she would cross over: The divide had been set for years, distinguished by those familiar with it by the in-built tracks that cut across the wide expanse of Canal Street — the St. Charles streetcar line.

One half the city for them; one half the city for the others.

Like Montagues and Capulets, their exchanges possessed the frequent, violent brevity that their treaties afforded. Peace is a commodity that can sometimes be bought, but more often than not, the gestures that bind it can be revoked with the simplest of gestures; accomplished most often by the foolhardy and the impulsive.

That rare pact had been destroyed for many months now; those responsible had been punished accordingly. Evidently, it had not been enough. Remy LeBeau, brazen as ever, had returned, and he’d brought company.

"Follow her."

The words, spoken in a level soprano, were noted by those present and agreed upon with little more than the assent of masks being pulled across skin.

They obeyed.
"Shadowcat, do you have confirmation?"

"Negative," Kitty replied, her fingers drumming a steady rhythm over the laptop's keyboard. Before her, dropped to eye-level from the cabin's ceiling, a wireless display flickered rapidly, the images on it changing with the speed of her keystrokes. She adjusted the hanging prompter; its extension arm sagging enough that the two screens bumped together whenever the jet hit turbulence.

"What's the hold up?" Logan groused, leaning out of his seat to peer across the aisle and over her shoulder. The flashing numeric codes on Kitty's computer, to him, were absolute gibberish, and after a moment he gave up trying to decipher them, sinking back into his chair.

"Buckle up, Wolverine," Cyclops muttered from the cockpit, flicking several overhead switches, readying for descent. Beside him, Storm eased the jet into a gentle arc over the city of New Orleans.

Rumbling an oath low in the back of his throat, Logan growled, "I can get tossed out of this plane at this height and still live to tell the tale about the freefall, bub."

"Yes, but then Scott would feel responsible," said Jean. "He'd make it his personal prerogative to scrape you off the street himself." She smiled, tapping him lightly on the shoulder. "He's so meticulous."

"He'd probably bring you home in a doggy bag," Iceman chimed in from beside her.

"Hey!" Scott complained from the front. "Do you mind? Control? Control! Over!" he shouted into his headset, pressing the microphone closer to his ear as he strained to hear.

Begrudgingly, Logan complied. "Just because you put it so nicely, Red. And knowing you, Popsicle, with your appetite that doggy bag wouldn't last too long. You'd mistake me for ground beef."

Bobby grimaced. "Loganburger, adamantium on the side."

Below them, beneath the misty cover of rain, the city lights flickered, emerging from the foggy darkness to spread into an illuminated grid of moving automobiles across the network of roads. With the sentient, stationary presence of the surrounding buildings the only landmarks visible though the haze, their descent would be difficult, especially if Louis Armstrong International didn't give them clearance to land.

"Half-Pint?" Logan asked after a moment, and Kitty looked up, blinking away the distraction, before realizing she was being spoken to.

Without being asked for the information, Kitty reported:

"Rogue hasn't used her powers recently. Without a clear signature, I can't get a lock on her," she said, her face cast in the dull blue gleam of the computer screen propped on her lap.

She adjusted the extended controls at eye-level, tugging on the floating monitor that protruded from the jet's wall. Her gaze flicked between the two terminals intermittently.

"Rogue hasn't used her powers in a helluva long time, kid. Not willingly," he said, referring to the Cajun's indiscretion from a few days before. Somehow, Gambit managed to get himself absorbed by Rogue — probably against her better judgment too, Logan concluded.
"Doesn't this heap have a better tracking device? Genetic signature, maybe?"

Cyclops harrumphed.

"In a city of this size, attempting to narrow in on one warm body is a near-impossibility. Cerebro's mainframe is the most secure resource we have at this point," Storm relayed. "As it were, Cerebro's tracking system is limited without something definitive to lock in on. The best we can gauge is that Rogue is within an area of approximately one hundred and fifty miles. She is here, Logan. It is just a matter of determining where."

"That's at least half the city, Storm," Logan returned irritably.

"It's not like having the Professor onboard to narrow in on her," Kitty continued. "The computer system needs to process the data, recognize the presence of an active x-gene, then scan the database for a match." She hesitated, making an idle movement towards her pocket that didn't go unnoticed by Logan, but Kitty caught herself.

"Can't you, like, use your nose, Mr. Logan?" she asked instead, looking up from the computers while her fingers found their rhythm again; they kept a steady staccato over the keyboard. It was slightly disconcerting.

"Leave it to the resident bloodhound," he rumbled, glancing at the window and mentally making a note of the streams of condensation. "With this rain? There's too much water on the ground. It wipes the trail clean. We'd be running into the sewers trying to sort out which way she went."

"What about...?" Kurt began.

"Gambit's signature is cloaked," Kitty interrupted.

"He's not stupid," Wolverine groused.

"That would have been, like, too easy. We've got him on record, right? Because Rogue absorbed him."

"Too easy," Logan growled.

Kurt worried his lip. "What about...?" he tried again.

"Mystique?" Wolverine supplied for him. "She has no scent. None at all. Can't afford to waste time trying to track her — not unless she drops right into our laps — and even then I'd be suspicious. There's no guarantee she's even in these whereabouts."

Kurt flopped back into his seat. "This is a wild goose chase."

"We found Rogue last time, kid."

"We just don't know what Gambit wants with her this time," Kurt argued.

"We'll just have to figure that out, then, won't we?"

"We can't afford any mistakes, Logan!" Kurt said, his anxiety getting the better of him.

"No mistakes," Scott agreed, flicking on the com radio and connecting with the airport. He winced, static filling the headset. "While I get through to these guys, you think you can take care of this, Storm?" he asked, squinting into the darkness.
"It would be my pleasure," she murmured in reply, her eyes shifting from a neutral brown to swift, blizzard white in a matter of seconds.

Before them, the clouds cleared, parting like two heavy, velvet curtains. Grey thunderheads rolled backwards, elephantine and sluggish, to reveal stars smothered by light pollution from the city below.

"Mein gott." Kurt swallowed, his face pressed to the window. "I'd forgotten how busy it is, and it's not even Mardi Gras."

"It is very beautiful," Colossus said, leaning over Kurt to share his view of the city.

"You've never been here before, Petey?" Kitty asked over her shoulder, her fingers still working furiously. "Not even, like, you know — when you were working…” For the first time, Kitty's keystrokes slowed to a pause, resuming with cautious hesitance a moment later when she finished, "With Gambit?"

"You mean," Piotr asked, perfunctorily clearing his throat, "when I was working for Magneto?"

"Great time to think of your stomach," Bobby snickered, covering his face with his palm to squash the sound before Logan could round on him. "Get it? 'Gumbo'? Ha ha!"

"I believe he means Gambit, Katja." Piotr smiled. Kitty turned a furious shade of crimson.


Next to her, Logan grimaced. The look of fatherly displeasure he wore was accompanied by a matching sound that bore an eerie resemblance to the growl of a distempered alpha wolf.

"How did he communicate with his 'connections'?" he asked, leaning on his armrest and turning to Piotr, behind him opposite. He tugged at the fastenings on his harness, demonstrating his displeasure at being caged, though the sympathetic look Jean favored him with stilled his struggle a little.

"In the way that we do, I would imagine," Piotr answered. "Telephone. Internet. Satellite broadcast."

"Secure lines." Kitty nodded, returning to herself at the mention of encrypted communication lines. "I could hack the nearest databank," she offered, her tone carrying a hopeful edge.

"Gambit vos very private. Ve did not discuss such things openly," Colossus continued. "Such information creates… liabilities."

Kitty swiveled in her seat, her mouth opened partially to console him, but Jean beat her to the punch.

"How is your sister, Piotr?" Jean asked.

Kitty's jaw clacking shut was an audible, flinch-worthy noise in the sudden silence.

"Illyana is vell," he replied after a moment, turning his attention back to the window. Beside him, Nightcrawler's expression darkened at the mention of family.

"Enough with the chit chat," Logan groused. "What do we know about Gambit? The guy's gotta have a track record a mile long. Can he be traced?"

"It's totally the same deal," Kitty explained. "Unless Cerebro picks up his bio signature when he, like, exerts himself…"

"Blows something up," Bobby supplied.

"Yeah — and well, he hasn't really. There's no way Cerebro could miss him if he did," Kitty said.

"If you find one, you'll find the other. Monitor them both, Shadowcat," Jean said. "In the meantime, maybe there's something already on file that we can use to narrow the search area. Can we patch through to the mansion and get Tabby to transfer Gambit's file?"

"Tabby?" Bobby squawked, sitting bolt upright in his seat. "Why not Amara, or Jubes, or… heck, even Jamie!"

"Tabitha is more than competent to handle a simple file transfer," Jean chastised lightly, patting Bobby on the wrist. The small gesture did nothing to ease the look of panic on his face.

"You don't have to deal with her," he answered. "Tabby's attention span is totally non-existent. The last time I had to get her on a live link, she nuked half the War Room because I wasn't responding to her quickly enough. It wasn't even my fault! There's a thirty-second delay with the satellite transmission!"

"I don't see how —" Jean began, but Bobby cut her off, his knuckles iced-white and partially transparent on the hand rests. He shook his head with vehemence.

"You don't get it. Logan decided that I had provoked her that time. I had to clean it up." He cast an uneasy look in Wolverine's direction, hissing, "Do you know how impossible it is to get scorch marks off reinforced titanium floors?"

"Control? Hello, do you read?" Cyclops yelled into his headset. "Damnit!"

"Shall I continue circling the area?" Storm asked archly, raising an eyebrow.

"We are not touching down until we get clearance," Scott muttered. "The paperwork'll be hell if we do."

At the back of the plane, Bobby groaned.
"Hey, Icecube."

"Here we go," Bobby rolled his eyes, already regretting his muffled sound of protest.

"Looks like you've got time to get Gambit's file transferred after all. Get a visual with Boom Boom." Logan grinned, a feral gleam in his eyes. "I bet she misses you already."

Her footfalls had faded; drowned out beneath the steady rush of water into the sewers, the seemingly endless rainfall, and the distant sound of passing cars. Remy heard her turn a corner, muffling a sob, but he did not follow. Not yet.

Standing before the ruins of the collapsed Voodoo Botanical, he slipped his hands into the pockets of his trench coat, running his fingers over a pack of cards that offered him little comfort; an absent distraction.

This was wrong.

This was all very, very wrong.

He had known something was amiss the instant Tante Mattie had questioned him about their destination. He’d been too hasty, dismissing her lack of recognition as preoccupation with the warring Guilds. He’d brushed it off to deal with at a more convenient opportunity, turning the conversation in a direction that would pacify the healer, while trying to incite a reaction from Rogue.

"Stupid," he assessed, pushing the image of her clad in nothing but his boxers and a too-big tee shirt roughly from his mind. He could go back to the safehouse and bury his face into those clothes, and he’d probably still smell her on them.

"Th' hell would y' do that for, LeBeau?" he asked himself aloud.

He wanted to slap himself. He wanted her to slap him. That’d be simpler, he reasoned; it’d be much easier to bear than the cold stare, the hollow expression, and the crinkle to her chin that indicated she was about to cry.

Her facade cracked. His fault.

This was not how he wanted it to happen.

Remy had endured waterworks from hundreds of girls in his lifetime. He had watched even more fall into the circle of his arms, sobbing, and had used it to his advantage on more occasions than he could remember. Yet, the prospect of Rogue walking through the rain, alone, and mourning her own condition in her own particular way made his stomach take a downward plummet in the direction of his boots.

Sighing again, he pushed irritably at the hair hanging limp into his eyes. Small rivulets of water ran down the planes of his face, but he didn’t notice. The natural, constant heat of his mutation kept him comfortable despite the weather.

As comfortable as could be, given the situation, he thought.

Tante had left him the note not more than a month ago, telling him specifically where to go, and he’d done so — not questioning in the slightest how or why she’d become privy to the information. That
was his first mistake.

Tante had looked out for him ever since Jean Luc had first taken him in. There had been no reason to question her about it as she only wished him the best, and like his usual, impetuous self, he'd gone right ahead and done as the note had suggested.

As if to prove the results, Remy flicked a card from beneath the cuff of his jacket, charged it, and sent it arcing over the ruins. It flared brightly a moment, a beacon that cast spindly shadows over the fallen timbers, and exploded — bathing the area in light.

What the sudden charged revealed was disheartening. There was nothing left of the Botanica: especially not the stone. Not under that wreckage.

"Absolument stupide," he re-affirmed, as if trying to commit it to memory, and still not entirely reconciled of the fact that he had made a horrible oversight.

His nerves prompted him to pull out his pack of cigarettes, one of which he popped into his mouth, lighting the tip and hunching over it to prevent the rain from soaking the filter through.

Tobacco tasted terrible when it got wet, though not nearly as bad as the bitter taste of guilt settling on his pallet.

Peering into the vaulted shadows of the ruined building, he wondered with a grim sort of thrill at the prospect of so much bundled power released violently enough to disembowel an entire Creole cottage; had he really done this?

He didn't remember. Ironic, since finding the gem seemed to be one of the few good things that had happened to him in the past year. He'd woken the morning after in his own bed, with Tante bustling about in the kitchen, nattering about Jean Luc's latest petty irritancies.

Remy remembered the discovering the new sensation in his limbs; his body humming, filled with the thrum of latent energy, but by no means aching as it once would have. The need for release was a secondary consideration. After he'd experimentally blown up one of Tante's potted plants, painting the balcony of the Guild safehouse with chlorophyll, he had come to realize that there must have been more to it than the old woman had promised. He had felt like a king, and that day the city had been his domain to rule over. The Guilds couldn't touch him, though they were certainly doing a number on themselves.

Remy sighed, taking a drag and grimacing at the cold, mushy filter.

He hadn't returned to the Botanica since. Other things had led him out of the city temporarily. He had assumed it would still be standing after he'd set his affairs in order, made his arrangements to his advantage, and returned with Rogue. Places that old didn't disappear overnight... unless, of course, they'd been blown to smithereens.

"Merde," he muttered, dashing the half-burnt, soggy cigarette to the ground.

This was his fault. Partially.

Just like it was her fault. Partially.

She'd been the first thing he'd thought of. Not that he could explain why — and most definitely not because he needed a reason to do anything, he thought to himself obstinately. The chips were fated to fall the way they did. Fine. That he could accept. Hell, it sounded better than the alternative.
His mouth set in a grim line, Remy hunched his shoulders and slunk into the remains of the Botanica. There was a chance, after all, that the safe remained intact. If that was the case, all he'd need to do was pop the combination, retrieve the stone, and then find Rogue.

Rogue.

He stilled, a foot propped on the low ledge of brick that had once been the front wall, his spatial recognition working quickly, spreading out in a ripple in all directions. She hadn't gone far, for which he was grateful. Tracking her would be easy after leaving her to her own thoughts for a while.

It wasn't his style to chase after women. Best that she walked into him, he reasoned; chance meetings always proved more interesting. Remy smirked, though the expression faded just as quickly.

He wouldn't take amusement in this at the expense of her feelings. He owed her that much.

The ironic thing was, seeing the destruction before him, he was almost compelled to go one step further than simply settling the debt and finishing the job.

Almost... but what could he offer her? Himself?

Absurd. He was worthless in comparison.

She'd be done with him the instant she had control.

That was why she'd shunned his advances, he mused. A slight tinge of bitterness laced the thought, making Remy grimace.

No reason to get attached; no reason to put any more on the table than there already was.

"Never bet more than you're willing t' lose," he repeated to himself, echoing the exact words he had told Rogue at the diner the day before. "Gambit'd do good t' remember that."

Remy peered around himself, surveying the wreckage and instantly growing impatient with the inefficiency of his search. With a wan smile, he tapped two bare fingers against the wall that blocked his way further into the building, sending a sizzle of kinetic charge down its length. He stepped to the side nimbly as it detonated.

"Not bad. A lil' on the lean side, but it'll have to do," he murmured appreciatively, peering at the cleared path before him into the remains of the building, smoke wafting from the wreckage.

"As they say," he hummed, gliding with protean grace through the debris, "it ain't the size that counts."

Her head down, hands fisted at her sides, Rogue stalked through the crowds from one street to another, barely mindful of the path she took through the city.

She evaded other pedestrians automatically, skirting around both tourists and natives to the metropolis alike, entirely unapologetic when she cut them off. Each dodge, sidestep, and insincere, "pardon me" only served to anger her further.

The rain had muted the smell somewhat, but the perfume of stale beer and fetid garbage clung to the corners, and beneath that, closer to her and stubbornly refusing to wash away with the steady downpour, the fading warmth of Gambit and his promises.
Rogue walked faster, as if her quickened pace would not only serve to put him behind her but the thought of his betrayal as well.

She didn't know where she was going, and she didn't care so long as he wasn't within ten feet of her.

Sucking a rattling breath into her lungs, she stepped in front of a car that was preparing to roll through the intersection. She ignored the blare of its horn and the subsequent curses that followed from the driver as he rolled down his window. Though she was crossing at a red light, and she didn't care in the slightest if she got hit. A small part of her wished for exactly that — a brilliant, bright red and sticky end to her miserable existence.

They wouldn't be able to revive her corpse if they brought her into a hospital. She'd put the first nurse who dared touch her skin into a coma.

Wouldn't that be poetic justice?

There were no saviors for the likes of her. Whether she was living or dead, she was destined to fend for herself, and the instant she stopped fighting?

Rogue blew out a breath, her stride quickening as she crossed the wide expanse of Canal Street.

When she gave in to that stupid, craven desire to be something closer to normal? That idiotic idealism that somehow things would someday be all right, or that there would be someone else who had a genuine interest to help her without wanting something in return?

"Shit like this happens," she said to herself, wiping her wet hair off her face and earning an odd look from a couple huddled beneath an umbrella a few feet away.

She had believed him. Worse, she had cautioned herself against it, and yet, here she was, soaked to the bone and climbing the wooden steps to the St. Charles streetcar, doing the exact thing she'd been named for. Funny, she thought, how sometimes you can forget yourself so easily with the right distractions.

Gambit had certainly seen to that, she concluded with a resentful grimace.

Rogue did not notice the sky clearing rapidly overhead as she slumped into one of the damp trolley seats. The windows, steamed from the inside and dotted with rain on the outside, blocked her view of the sky, and the clouds as they rolled back.

Unfortunately, the streetcar's clanging bell, or the rumble of the wheels over the tracks couldn't drown out the sequence of thoughts in her head.

Had he deliberately kept that part of his memories from her? Had it been a set up? A ruse to bring her out this far for something else?

Remy had done it once before, and Rogue could not put it past him that he'd do it again.

She blamed herself for being naïve, but she blamed him for making her hope.

"Criss."

"Don't swear so much, Emil."
"Eh bien, you see that?"

"Oui. I'd know that idiot anywhere."

"What's he doin'?"

"No idea. But y' know Remy; whatever it is, it prolly ain't good. He's on their side as is."

"The Assassins gon' have a fit."

"You tellin' me."

"Y' see a girl anywhere?"

"Quoi?"

"When he got here yesterday, there was a girl on the back of his bike. Do y' see her?"

"…"

"Henri?"

"Y' eyes are younger than mine, Lapin. Look yourself."

"I don't – oh! Regarde! Three blocks down —"

"Eh! Y' didn't have t' hit me! Mercy's gonna see that bruise and she's gonna think I was getting roughed up again by the Assassins, an' y' know what her temper's like —"

"She be all like, 'Henri, if y' wanted bruises like them, all you had t' do was ask me!'"

"Don't make fun of m' wife."

"She gonna chase after y' wit' a wood spoon again, too? Mercy's turnin' more into Tante each day that goes by, mon ami."

"Emil."

"Quoi?"

"Is there a point t' this?"

"Ah — oui. 'Scuse. Look over there — see the fille with the hair like a moufette?"

"She's got skunk hair?"

"White stripe. She look like a drowned skunk right now with the rain that just passed."

"Oui, I see her."

"You tell m' something, Henri: What's Remy doin' over there, when that girl's over there with three shadows?"

"Merde."

"Y' see them at least, y' old fart old man: three of 'em followin' her and she don't even know it."
"Lessgo. We gotta intercept. Got no choice in th' matter."

"But what about Remy?"

"This between the Guilds."

"And he's not part of that?"

"Non, Emil. Jean Luc can't have nothing t' do with him. Remy's on his own, a free agent. No implications, no more trouble."

"But —"

"Lessgo."

"But he's family, Henri!"

"An' that's why we gonna take care o' them three Assassins followin' the skirt without Remy findin' out."

"Oh."

"Quoi?"

"I just don't see why —"

"They don't want her, Emil! If they know that Remy's back, and she's with him, the Assassins won't go for him. Whaddya think Belle would do? She'd take out the knees before taking off the head."

"She'd do that?"

"..."

"Mmm. Yeah. Belle would. She likes seein' him suffer. Lessgo, old man."

The St. Charles Streetcar ground and clattered to a halt, old iron rattling against old iron in the midst of an avenue where grasses grew between the fissures in the pavement. The air inside the car carried the heady bouquet of the Garden District's nocturnal perfume, dampened by rain-soaked humidity.

Rogue slid from the worn wooden bench before the thick scent of bougainvillea and night-blooming jasmine from outside could infiltrate the sodden-smelling streetcar.

This was the end of the line, in more ways than one. She wanted to enjoy the silence, punctuated only by the hesitant warble of cicadas, before she left the city.

She would leave, she decided, and soon. There was nothing for her here except the reminder that Gambit had not changed in the year that he hadn't darkened her doorstep.

Shutting her eyes, she tried to crush the accompanying sadness that came with her resolve.

"Are you getting off, or what?" the conductor called. Rogue couldn't even muster the disdainfulness to scowl at him properly.

Resigned, she stood and trudged to the back of the car, and dismounted; her feet moved of their own
accord while the rest of her body followed without thought.

Another time, under different circumstances, she would have enjoyed the walk through the old neighborhood. The surrounding mansions, their gardens bursting with thick, waxy leaves and their walls strong beneath the onslaught of creepers and ivy, stood stoically against the backdrop of a clear night sky. The Spanish, Italianate, and Victorian villas were nothing compared to the Institute; but nonetheless, they possessed their own distinctive, elegant charm that even she could appreciate.

The houses surrounding her were fit for the stuff of novels. Smiling sadly, she turned on the spot, looking for some indicator of where she was. At the corner, she could barely see the ironwork of a street sign declaring that she was at the corner of Third and St. Charles.

Rogue nearly chuckled as she began walking, grateful for the distraction, no matter how small:

She knew this place, though she'd never been here.

When she was younger, and Anne Rice had still held some appeal, she had read the stories that revolved around a mansion in this area. The house on First Street had been the setting for a haunting; unraveling around characters who had been deceived by their own blood. The Mayfair witches had been cursed, and for that she empathized with them instantly. Their world was their own, though they walked with others who couldn't possibly begin to understand them.

It had stopped raining, she noted absently.

With a light step over the roots of an ancient oak tree that surged upwards through the sidewalk, breaking the concrete in messy hillocks, she wandered. Idly trailing her gloved fingers across the imperfections in their faces, Rogue tried to imagine the feel of them — the damp, gnarled bark taunting her with each light press of her fingers.

She no longer wanted to touch them, she thought; not for real.

If you didn't want something so bad, it couldn't hurt you when you didn't get it. Her gloves ensured that.

It was easier to feign indifference, to be scornful, turn up her nose and sniff at such an innocent, self-indulgent past time. She didn't need to touch. She didn't need to feel. She was the Rogue, and she would always be the same: dangerous.

Turning the corner of Washington, Rogue's path ended abruptly. At least half the block ahead of her had been barred with police tape that read, "Police Line – Do Not Cross." The flimsy yellow ribbon cordoned off a massive Victorian mansion and most of the street surrounding it.

Officers stood sentry around the perimeter, keeping a small crowd of gathered onlookers at a safe distance to prevent contaminating any possible evidence that could be found.

Rogue suspected the crime, whatever it was, had to be serious enough to warrant a half-dozen police cars and twice the number in special skills units bustling over the property.

"Keep moving, missy," a particularly fat, balding policeman cautioned her. Rogue noticed his thick fingers, the hairy knuckle of his thumb sticking into a belt loop, and the one meaty palm resting on his nightstick.

"What happened?" she asked, despite his warning.

The officer's expression remained placid as he approached her, the polished tips of his shoes glinting
beneath the golden gleam of the streetlights.

He sniffed. "Girl like you shouldn't be concerned."

His gaze wavered, flickered almost. Shifty old man with prematurely clogged arteries, she wagered. "Ah'm not," she retorted.

"Then move along," he growled, muttering under his breath, "Kids these days."

Slowly, Rogue curled her lip at him in disdain. Debating whether she could flip him off and still walk away unscathed, she stalked off in the opposite direction.

Casting one last glance over her shoulder, she paused. Strange, she thought, casting one last look at the officer before he turned his back to her. Perhaps it had only been a trick of the light; it was probably the light reflecting off his bald head, she thought maliciously.

For a moment, she thought she had seen a strange, yellow cast to his eyes.

Perched atop a building tall enough to see the expanse of the city, Gambit surveyed the streets below with a grin that nearly split his face.

He rubbed his jaw, watching with interest as the streetcar turned a corner from Canal onto St. Charles, continuing its direct path into the well-to-do part of the city.

Chuckling to himself, he draped an arm across a bent knee, his foot propped up against the lip of the complex's concrete roof.

Overhead, the clouds had receded far too quickly to be natural. There was only one explanation that he could think of for the sudden change in the weather, which meant he needed to find Rogue and tuck her away someplace safe for the night:

The cavalry had arrived.

_Possibly_, he thought, as he tossed himself from the roof and plummeted to the next ledge with the litheness of a falcon diving for its prey.

Finally things were turning in his favor.

One less problem to deal with was one less headache.

He landed nimbly, bouncing off the balls of his feet and strolling to the next ledge. He leapt once again — twisting mid-air so that when his feet touched the ground for the second time, Gambit was already sprinting towards his bike.

Rogue sucked in a breath, finally taking in her surroundings: Her feet had led her to this place without direction, and so, dragging her gloved fingers over the crumbling exterior of the whitewashed perimeter wall, she finally came to stand before the iron gates.

The words, "Lafayette no. 1" decorated the archway of the old cemetery. Beyond, only the heavy,
peaked roofs of the aboveground crypts loomed, silent and watchful, and nearly skeletal in their various states of ruin. Row upon row they stood, these houses for the dead; the place of spirits, a sanctuary for the haunted.

Rogue smiled, hesitating only a moment before gripping the padlocked, iron bars of the gate and vaulting over. She landed with a muted thud on the other side, her heels brushing, but not catching, the spiked tops of the ironwork.

Overhead the moon illuminated the tombs, but only just. Of the squat mausoleums, only the older, battered, bone-white structures cast some luminance with the amber glow of the streetlights beyond the overhanging oak trees that bordered the cemetery. Many had fallen to ruin over the years — the burial places of Civil War soldiers and wealthy aristocrats offering their pristine splendor so easily to the elements.

Still, the long shadows between the rows of leaning sanctuaries bestowed to the city of the dead its ethereal romance.

Rogue smiled: Remy was right. She was just a little bit morbid when it came to appreciating certain things.

Around her, the sepulchers loomed, large and silent, leaning against one another in the places where their foundations could no longer support their bulk. Twisting in labyrinthine rows that conferred little direction, Rogue moved silently among them, appreciating their chilled welcome. The stooped and pitted ornamental statuary gazed back at her forlornly, though no cherubim moved, and she recognized no name on the markers. Soon, she gave up looking at all and simply walked among the tombs, thankful for their indifferent acceptance of her presence.

"S' beautiful, non?"

Starting at the sudden sound, Rogue snapped her head around, searching for the man to go with the disembodied voice.

"Don't come out here much anymore," Gambit continued, his tone wistful, his voice slithering across her shoulders and claiming no corner to call its own. At first, it was disconcerting, not knowing where he was, but after a few moments, Gambit's drawl turned to a bemused boastfulness that set her hackles rising.

"These cemeteries are good for training th' younger members of the Guild, but for Master Thieves? Gets a lil' old."

"Where are you?" Rogue snapped, turning on the spot. Nothing moved from the shadows, and the narrow enclaves between the mausoleums did not reveal the telltale gleam of red that would identify where he stood.

"The tourists, they think these places are haunted, so they come out here alone with fat wallets and expensive cameras and their candles and they try t' commune with th' dead."

He let loose a long-suffering sigh, and Rogue looked up. She barely made out the shape of his boots, crossed at the ankles, from where Gambit lay comfortably atop a nearby tomb. He appeared to be looking at the stars.

"S' funny, if the tilling's good — if the apprentice's quiet enough — the tourists leave thinking they've been robbed by ghosts." He chuckled.

"So Ah take it you can disappear just as quickly as ya show up?" she snapped.
"Chérie," he murmured, patronizing in his earnestness, "y' don't want me t' leave so soon. It's not safe out here."

"Ah can take care of myself," she snarled, marching up to the tomb and grabbing onto the hem of his trench coat that hung over the wall. With one forceful yank, she pulled him over the side.

Remy, twisting around to land on his feet and hands, peered up at her through his fringe, a small smile playing around his mouth.

Rogue towered over him, fists clenching and unclenching at her sides.

"Ah'm done," she hissed. "This," she gestured between them, "is done."

"I understand that you're upset," he began, shifting his weight to his haunches, his gaze fixed on hers, but Rogue cut him off.

"Ya don't understand anything," she said with menace, glaring as he stood to full height. "Whatever ya think ya know about me, whatever ya learned, whatever ya saw don't mean shit. There was one important detail you neglected all this time, Remy — and it's real simple, so let me see if Ah can get it lodged into that thick skull of yours."

Expression bemused, Remy cast an exasperated look at the night sky. Rogue had to yank him bank down to her level by his lapels. She hissed into his face, "You can break my trust, but ya can't break me."

Gingerly, he slipped his hands around her wrists, and up the back of her hands. Distracted, Rogue peered at Gambit's fingers lacing over hers — a mixture of beaten leather, bare skin, and frayed threads all wound together with such gentle insistence that for a second, she paused to appreciate the tender gesture.

No one had ever held her hands before. Not like that.

"Rogue," he murmured, taking a step closer so that her elbows were the only things separating them.

Rogue pulled back quickly as if scalded. Thrown off-guard, she rubbed at her knuckles to rid herself of the sensation of tingling warmth, of the comfort that came so close to being hers.

"Not again," she said warningly, more as a reminder for herself than for him to lay off his tricks. "It's done. You've done enough." She shook her head. "You lost, Cajun." Laughing bitterly, she added as a reminder, "You blew it up, for heaven's sake! And my chances for control with it!"

"I didn't know —" he began.

"Bullshit!" she yelled. "You're so full of it that Ah bet ya can't even tell when what you're sayin' is one of your half-baked, glossed-over lies or the truth anymore, and don't even consider trying ta tell me you don't remember what happened." She tapped her temple viciously. "It's all up here. It cuts off right at the most important part, don't it?" She sneered. "How fitting."

"There's nothing after. I blacked out," he tried to reason.

"Y' the Queen of somethin' all right," he returned, pulling out his pack of cards. He drew his knuckles across them, halving the deck and brandishing two Queens with a flourish. The rest of the pack disappeared with little more than a whisper. "The question is, which one would y' rather be?"
Beneath the gloom of the old cemetery, the overhanging cast of silver-blue that gave the crypts with their elegantly decayed ironwork fences and subtly smeared edges, Rogue looked between the Queen of Spades in his left hand and the Queen of Hearts in his right. Their paper-white faces stared back at her, holding their secrets close. A small, sardonic smile curved her mouth as Rogue decided:

"Neither."

With that, she turned and stalked away down the row.

"Sometimes y' don't get th' choice, Rogue," Remy called after her.

She took a corner, turning down another path that led into the deeper shades of the cemetery.

"Sometimes all y' get is chance; you either take it or y' don't. You live with the consequences."

Gambit's voice laced the dark, lending substance where the shadows gathered too thickly and Rogue lost her footing.

"And we all know exactly what you're about, don't we?" she muttered under her breath.

"Non," he said from her left. Rogue snapped her head around, her pupils straining to adjust. Gambit leaned against a tomb nonchalantly, his foot resting on an ornamental urn, and his head inclined.

How had he gotten there so quickly?

"Why don't you tell me?" he asked.

"You tried ta play me again!" she all but shouted. "You planted that memory so Ah'd think that maybe Ah had a 'chance' — that maybe whatever ya gone and done to yourself would work for me too," she spat accusingly.

"You absorbed me all on y' own," he shot back. "I didn't force you t' come out here."

"It was damned close, though. Turning on the charm without telling me that was part of your mutation? What the hell, Remy? That's coercion!" she cried.

"Y' took m' hand because you wanted to," he countered. "I didn't have anythin' t' do with that. That's free will, Rogue. What you need to learn is accountability."

"Ya worked the angles and exploited the one thing Ah really want and can't ever have!"

She froze, horrified at the admission.

"Leave me alone," she said coldly, turning on her heel and marching away from him once again.

"That the only thing that's bothering you?" He laughed.

He laughed. Rogue fought back the sudden desire to kick something as she felt the ground change from staggered cement to a thatched mix of grass and gravel. "You're lying t' yourself, then, because you and I both know that there are a few things you want that you aren't fessin' up to. More importantly, you already have it, Rogue — it's all yours. Y' just gotta take it."

"You are so presumptuous!" she bellowed, turning and finding the spot he'd been standing in empty.

"Shit!" she snapped, pivoting. To her right, a mammoth society tomb blotted out the thin cast of amber streetlight from beyond the perimeter wall. To her left, the unfettered dark settled into hazy black beyond the nearest slab of cracked marble. She put her fingers to the edge of the tomb, feeling
exposed brick beneath her gloves, and stepped into the inky swell, finding the space to be a modest alley.

"Saying the things you can't isn't presumption," he murmured from overhead. Rogue swiveled, looking up into the red gleam of his gaze. He'd taken to the tops of the tombs again, crouching just over her like a large gargoyle would on the eaves of a church. "It's accurate observation."

Rogue bristled.

"Observe this, swamp rat." Grinning sarcastically, she held up a fist, extending her middle finger.

"Is that an invitation?" he called as she slid into the narrow space offered by two large, badly beaten mausoleums. She padded over the uneven slabs of stone separating the two, and emerged on the other side.

"It's an invitation only if you feel like making a home for yourself in one of these crypts," she muttered, a twinge of resentment bubbling to the surface. She swallowed it down.

"I checked it out, Rogue — the Botanica," he called from somewhere behind her.

"Ah don't care!" she yelled, quickening her step as the moon peeked out from beneath a swath of flimsy cloud. Though the light was weak, it gave her the confidence she needed to weave further in.

"Y' know, even with the memories I gave you, y' shoulda known that it's not like I stole the stone: The rock was kept in a safe, inside a cabinet, in the Botanica by Maman Brigitte. I woke up in m' apartment the next day not remembering a damn thing. You know why?"

"Maybe cause it doesn't exist! Maybe your stupid, vivid imagination messed with my head when Ah absorbed ya!" she yelled. "Maybe you've been playin' tricks on me since the very beginning, just like ya play with those damned cards!"

"Non, chère — th' gem exists. Of that, I am absolutely certain — and more importantly, it survived the explosion."

Rogue stopped dead, turning and scouring the shadows for his face. He didn't emerge, and for a moment, it seemed as if Gambit's hushed voice came from everywhere - sliding around her; sinuous and melodic in the gloom.

Her stomach plummeted, and the sense of loss settled on her once again.

"Ah saw the building, Remy," she said, defeated, certain he'd hear her even if her voice dropped to a whisper. "Ah was standing right next ta ya."

"I asked for a little faith. You shoulda waited… for me." He sounded strained.

"Ah did," Rogue replied heavily, moving to the nearest stone entablature and resting her shoulders against it. With Remy cloaked in the surrounding darkness, if anyone were to see her at that moment, it'd appear very much as if she were speaking with a phantom. She smiled a little at that, sadly. "Ah waited a year."

Silence returned to her, heavy and uncomfortable. Rogue closed her eyes, too ashamed to even think of the implications of what she'd just told him.

"An' two minutes more woulda killed you?"
Rogue smiled sadly, feeling the warmth of his breath against the shell of her ear as he slid next to her.

Gently, with the lightest touch, his fingers pressed into the palm of her hand.

"We're gonna need that," he said after a moment, his fingers slipping away from her reluctantly. "The Botanica's safe was empty."

Slowly, Rogue opened her eyes, looking down at the card cupped tremulously between her knuckles:

The Queen of Hearts.

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Chapter End Notes

**Post Script:**

- Graveyard Shift: (Gambling, general) One of the three shifts in a 24-hour card room or casino, the shift between swing and day. Graveyard shift usually starts anywhere between midnight and 2 am and ends eight hours later.
- The First Street House (Brevard House - 1857): Referencing the "Lives of the Mayfair Witches" and "The Vampire Chronicles" by Anne Rice. It's Greek Revival-Italianate, and the former home of the writer. (It's also achingly gorgeous.)

**Translations:**

Fille: girl
Merde: shit
Mon ami: My friend
Moufette: skunk
Quoi: What
Regarde: Look
"What's this?" Rogue asked wearily, the Queen gripped between her index and middle fingers: It was a fresh card, the backing still stiff, the edges clean and perfect.

It felt foreign; too new, almost, and for a moment, Rogue thought of the last Queen of Hearts Remy had given her — lost somewhere back in New York.

"A lil' luck," Remy replied, splintering her brief, melancholy longing. His shoulder brushed against hers, and Rogue leaned away, effectively putting an inch between them. The small gap between their bodies did not lessen her discomfort. She was acutely aware of his nearness, though she bluntly refused to look at him and acknowledge it.

This new Queen didn't feel right. It didn't fit into her palm in the way that the other had molded to her hand. It hadn't seen the hardships of the past year, hadn't been stained with the stoicism to survive on her own, and hadn't witnessed the struggle of becoming the Rogue she'd turned into after Apocalypse. This Queen of Hearts was a band-aid.

"Your lucky lady," she sneered, tossing the card back at him, "doesn't mean a damned thing."

He caught it; plucked it straight from the air with preternatural grace without as much as a fumble or flicker in the low light between the tombs.
Rogue pushed off the lime-washed wall and turned to appraise him coolly. "An empty safe only means one thing ta me when you're around."

Remy cocked an eyebrow and proceeded to roll the card over his fingers so that it made a muted *fwip fwip fwip* sound as he passed it back and forth. He seemed to shrug, adjusting his body to better embrace the mantle of shadows settled around them.

"A good omen?" he ventured, unperturbed by her clipped retort.

"Good business," she shot back, "for a thief anyway."

"If I had the stone, why would I keep it from you?" he asked.

"Why would ya do anything, Gambit? Ah sure don't know," she tossed over her shoulder, crossing to the nearest dilapidated crypt that appeared short enough to scale. She dug her fingers into the crumbling mortar between mits exposed brickwork and hauled herself to the top. Sliding over the small gable, Rogue dug her heels into the hard surface, and flopped backwards so that she faced away from him.

"You see," she explained lightly, as if she were talking to a four-year-old instead of a grown man, "ya got this slight problem when it comes ta being upfront with me: You haven't been. The only thing Ah know about the reason ya brought me all the way out here is that you've got somethin' nasty hanging over your head that ya feel ya can't deal with directly. What was it you said back in Pennsylvania? You wanted ta 'atone' for something? What exactly *is* that, Gambit?"

Silence.

Rogue laughed without humor. "Think Ah hadn't figured that out yet? That's why you haven't told me anything about yourself, ain't it? Ya said you were doing this for *you*, Remy. Talk about selfless," she added scathingly. "Ah don't even factor in."

"Y' knew that, and yet, you still came," he murmured from behind her. There was nothing accusing in his tone, but Rogue bristled just the same. She could feel the heat of his breath against the top of her head, but she didn't look up. He'd joined her atop the crypt without as much as a stirred breeze. Idly, Remy leaned over her and dangled his hands just over her shoulders; close enough to touch, but keeping his distance just the same. Tease, she thought bitterly.

Rogue shrugged it off. "Whatever," she said flatly, not turning around. "It's not gonna happen, is it? That building was in pretty bad shape, Cajun. Ah have no idea how you got outta there alive after blowing it ta hell, and frankly, Ah don't care. That the safe was empty doesn't mean anything — you handled the stone; I remember that from your memory. You dropped it on the table and then you blacked out. You might as well have blow it up along with the Botanica and you just don't remember it."

"Seems unlikely when the last thing I remember wasn't an explosion, but Maman Brigitte’s laughter in m'ears," he countered. "Woulda made a big *boom*, no? Someone had t' drag m' caracass home — wasn't like I woke up in a ditch or nothing. It's too convenient — makes me look bad, sure, but that's what I would do if I was trying t' paint myself to blame."

He had a point. Regardless, Rogue bit down on the concesssion.

"And let's not talk about selflessness, Rogue," he continued, "I'd hate t' be the one t' bring up the fact that you left with a known enemy who attacked y' home because the only thing on your mind was what y' wanted for yourself."
"Shut up," she said quietly.

"You and me, chère: they cut us from the same cloth," he said evenly. "You can point th' finger as much as you like, but I'm not hearing any of it until y' take a good look at yourself first. Like it or not, we've all got our own agendas."

"Shut up," she said again, squeezing her eyes shut. "You don't know what it's like, and don't ya dare condescend ta think ya do."

The brush of his trench coat was a whisper against the mausoleum's roof as he settled next to her. Damned spook, she thought: Ghosts made more noise than Gambit when he was being careful.

"Don't I?" he asked, conspiracy lacing his tone. It carried an edge of something sharper than what she was used to, and that was enough to prompt Rogue into glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. "Don't I know what it's like t' be used because of m' powers? To have m' life orchestrated by the very people who claimed t' care for me?"

"You don't know what it's like to be alone," she hissed.

Gambit chuckled, and the illusion of razorblade-flavored chocolate melted beneath the warm sound of his self-deprecating laughter. Fixing her attention squarely ahead of her at the mottled, peeling grey roofs of the city in miniature around them, she tried to ignore the prickly discomfort that set her teeth on edge. For all her defenses, Remy spoke to her as if he could see right through them. Remy spoke to her as if he understood, and that, by far, was much more unsettling.

"It's the choice, Rogue. You give in or y' fight it. I think you've been fighting against what y' want for so long that you almost manage t' live without it." He paused, resting a little too heavily on the thought, and added with weighted familiarity, "Almost."

"Well that just sums everything up, huh?" She laughed bitterly. "Ah guess you have it all worked out. Good for you."

"Non," he said airily, "I can't figure out why, when there's one person who's doing his damnedest t' get through to you, y' keep pushing him away."

Gambit held out his hand, palm up, the Queen of Hearts pinched between the tips of two fingers. Rogue glanced askance at it, swallowing the frustration that accompanied the offer.

"Y' see — and this is the really ridiculous thing — if there's one person on the entire earth who can touch you, y' still don't want it. That makes me think there's more to it than that, hmm?"

"Yeah," she said, her mouth dry, "it's real simple too: Ah ain't that desperate."

He chuckled. "Non, you're just lying t' yourself." His tone maintained that same, unconcerned air. Remy dropped his hand and the card disappeared into his sleeve. Seeming to think for a moment, laughter stole across his face, smothered seconds later as Gambit's trademark insouciance returned. "Y' not desperate, just a poor liar. Suppose I should be flattered," he said airily.

"The hell are you talking about, Remy?"

Grinning, he winked and replied, "The security tape from Magneto's base tells me a whole lot more than you're willing to. Actions speak louder, chère… Damned shame I don't remember that kiss you stole."

With that, Gambit stood, leapt from the roof of the crypt and disappeared into the gathered darkness
below. He reemerged into the slatted light from the streets beyond, his shadow lingering — a
dancing specter that spilled behind him, beckoning to her.

Eyes narrowing as she lurched to full height, Rogue towered over him. "You think that's funny do
ya? That memory ya gave me is still in my head, swamp rat, so you tell me — how many times did
ya watch that surveillance tape?"

"Sixty three total," he replied, not missing a beat. Rogue wanted to smack the smile right off his
smug face.

"That's not funny," she warned, watching as he danced away beneath the cover of shadows offered
by the tombs.

"I know it's not. You weren't the one trying t' remember what it felt like," he taunted from the
darkness. The only thing visible as he withdrew was the gleam of his teeth, and the shining scarlet
glow of his irises.

Rogue flushed, gaping at his retreating form. She didn't have an answer for that.

"But it proves a point!" he called.

Dumbfounded, Rogue gawped after him. Sixty three times? Sixty three times Remy had rewound
and re-watched the security footage from Magneto's base; watched their fight, and watched her take
him down with a kiss she herself couldn't recall. Lordy.

"What point? That you're an obsessive stalker?" she shouted after him, launching from the tomb top
to the next, and springing from there to jump to over to the next row as Gambit danced away below,
darting between the crypts only to reappear beneath her as she tailed him from above.

"My point is that there are certain things you can't remember when y' head gets messed with," he
returned lightly. "And some of it's a damn shame, n'est ce pas?"

"Swamp rat!" she shouted, flushing, and suddenly grateful for the low light. "That was
different!"

"Quoi? I black out because m' powers have been supercharged with a gem, can't remember what th'
hell happened to me t' get me out of that Botanica…'Cept I woke up the next day in bed, perfectly
fine. Then there's you: brainwashed by Mesmero t' walk around like a zombie sucking up everyone's
powers so they could use you t' resurrect Apocalypse. You woke up the next day not remembering a
damn thing either — how's that different?" he said laughingly from somewhere below her. Rogue
skirted around the top of the tomb, searching, but not finding him.

"Ah don't believe you, that's how!" she bit back to the night.

"Do you need t' see the tape?" he returned, bemused.

"That's not what Ah meant!" she barked.

"Chère," his voice echoed from below, a mockery of modesty, "I'd be happy to offer a refresher
course."

"Ah'm not talking about the damned tape!" she spat. "Besides, Ah think a girl's only entitled ta one
first kiss, Gambit, and at this point, since it was with you, Ah'm happy ta not remember!" she
snarled, furious that he'd managed to wrangle yet another confession from her. This time, she felt the
tips of her ears burn.
"It's not like it was y' virgin—"

"You won't finish that sentence if ya know what's good for ya!" she yelled into the gloom.

"Je m'excuse, chérie." Remy chuckled, and Rogue pivoted to her left, following the sound. "If it helps any, it was barely a peck, and that hardly counts."

"Ta you maybe," she muttered, more to herself than to him, but he heard anyway.

He quipped, "Well it would if I could remember." His fingers found their way to the ledge between her boots, and he pulled himself up, his head peeking between her feet, to smirk openly at her. Rogue had to restrain herself from kicking him in the head.

"Care t' refresh my memory?" He shot her a winning grin, and Rogue drew back her boot with a frustrated shout.

"I'll take a rain check!" he assured her, dropping out of range. "One thing at a time, I suppose, hein? Got a rock t' find, and for that, it looks like we gotta work on your recollection skills first since you obviously got y' facts messed up. Must be m' disarming persona," he added smugly. "Can't help it if I'm a distraction."

"What are you talking about?" she snapped. "Ah saw it myself. That creepy lady handed you the stone; she dropped it into your hand, and then the entire place lit up. Kaboom! Blackout. What's more ta know?"

"First of all —"

From directly below her, two gloved hands reached out, wrapped around her ankles, and yanked her off balance. Rogue dropped, gasping, only to be caught by a pair of strong arms and set upright against the marker of a recently sealed tomb.

"I'd prefer t' have this conversation face t' face." He nodded pointedly. Incensed, Rogue shoved herself from the tomb, her shoulders scraping against the flaking brickwork. It brought their chests within an inch of each other, but Remy hadn't shifted to let her by. In fact, he seemed perfectly content to peer down at her from where he stood, using their close proximity to further his amusement.

"Move," she demanded, a request that was met with a smirk, but nothing further.

When Rogue readied to shove past him, she found her way blocked by his bo on one side, while his arm caged her in on the other. He leaned against the wall of the tomb with utter nonchalance, feigning ignorance towards Rogue's suddenly scalding expression. He had discarded his trench coat, exposing one mostly bare, perfectly muscled arm.

Rogue narrowed her eyes, her gaze traveling from his wrist to his shoulder.

"Ya think a little skin is going ta stop me from leaving?" she hissed, raising her chin defiantly.

Remy pursed his lips. "You're the most stubborn person I've ever met, y' know that? You're so determined t' not listen..." He sighed. "Oui, Rogue," he nodded slowly, perhaps even a little sadly. "A little skin is going t' stop you because this," he paused, drawing his hand up slowly to settle a mere inch away from her face. She drew back, peering at the fingers that were exposed by the strange cut of his gloves. "This scares you." He mimicked a tender caress with the backs of his knuckles, a hairsbreadth from making contact with her cheek. While Rogue stiffened, she thought for a moment that she could feel the ripple of an electric charge pass between them.
"Ah'm not afraid of you," she hissed, shoving the imagined sensation to the back of her mind.

"You're afraid of yourself, and that's worse," he countered.

He drew back, his hand settling beside her head against the worn structure.

Rogue didn't reply, not trusting herself to keep her voice level even if she did. A string of curses ran through her head, none of which she managed to vocalize, given the proximity of Remy's bare arm. Damn him, she thought, casting a sidelong glance at the light speckling of hair across tanned skin. He was right.

She glared, hugging her arms to herself. She'd had to pick the one shirt that left her forearms exposed. Great.

"When y' left, I cleared off some of the debris from the Botanica," he explained patiently, deciding Rogue's time contemplating the fleshy prison of his embrace was over. "Took a few minutes, but there was nothing there. I checked the back room. There were parts of th' table, parts of th' chairs, and most of the flooring. It wasn't like there was a hole in the ground; most of the inside's flattened, but it's still in the debris. The stone wasn't. Moreover, the safe was closed — locked up tight."

"What difference does that make?" she shot back, unable to keep the bite of resentment out of her voice.

"The last time I saw the stone, it was on th' table. I dropped it before I blacked out. That means someone picked it up and put it away because that safe was left open after Maman Brigitte pulled the gem out for me." Remy pulled backwards, resting his staff against his shoulder and offering Rogue the invitation to step away if she needed to. She remained rooted to the spot. He didn't seem to mind.

"Y' think that if I had charged up everything in the place, someone woulda had the presence of mind t' go back and tidy up? There wouldn't have been anything left," he explained.

"How can ya be so sure?" she asked warily.

Remy smirked, flicking the Queen out from beneath his wrist guard. "Because when I charge something, I know just how much energy it needs for nothing t' be left behind."

The card fizzled to life, singing in a high-pitched whine of excited molecules and igniting in a flare of bright fuchsia.

"Wait!" Rogue shouted, reaching for his wrist. She stopped short, her gloved fingers hovering near his hand. The card continued to crackle, though Remy did not release it. Instead, he lifted an eyebrow and brought it back between them, the charge waning as he did so. It glowed faint pink, illuminating the planes of his face and softening his expression.

"Ah thought ya said you always saved her for last," Rogue said quietly.

Remy favored her with a lopsided smile and doused the charge.

"I've got you for that, chérie," he murmured smoothly, and Rogue felt her face heat up beneath his appreciative stare. "Only need one Queen of Hearts."

"Ah'd rather stick with Spades," she muttered.

"You're both," he conceded, bemused. "Even if y' don't believe it yourself. In the end, you're still a Queen."
Rogue changed the subject before he could comment on her blush. "So what's this mean exactly? If ya didn't blow up the place and destroy the stone —"

"That means someone came in and did one real ugly job of covering their tracks."

"Thieves?" she asked.

Remy's lip curled. "I'll have y' know," he said almost disdainfully, "that the Thieves Guild has much more class than that." Remy sniffed, puffing his chest. "We got style. That was just messy."

"You think someone orchestrated the Botanica’s destruction — someone who wanted the gem."

He raised an eyebrow. “Perceptive.”

"So what now?" she asked, folding her arms.

"Now, we come t' an agreement," he said decisively, twirling his staff with a flourish and digging one end into the dirt between the flags. "Can't carry on th' way we are, girl — neither of us'll live t' see the end of it if we do."

She watched his fingers rolling against the cold metal, knowing that as he did so, he left behind a touch of heat. She shivered, her thoughts lingering on his words. He could touch her, though it would still be a risk. If Remy’s powers negated hers, at least temporarily, she wouldn’t hurt him.

Idly, Rogue wondered if she could feel the thin layer of energy that would separate his skin from connecting with hers — a protective shield so fine that she hadn't noticed the difference in those few, brief seconds when he'd shown up at the Institute and offered her his hand.

Rogue pushed the thought aside as Remy continued.

"We can either search for th' stone, tear up this city in the process, have a lil' bit of that thing kids these days like t' call fun," he hummed. Then with a shrug, he added negligently, "Or you can call up y' friends and tell 'em t' pick you up. I'm sure they won't mind."

"Right," she said flatly, "Ah'm sure they'll just love ta fly across the country and swing by for a Hurricane cocktail and some jambalaya."

Remy squinted, looking upwards to the clear night sky above. "I wonder if the in-flight movie'd be any good."

"No televisions on the X-Jet," she deadpanned, squinting at the sky as if it would offer some sort of guidance. When had it stopped raining?

"Your choice," he said, his tone low, and his focus shifting back to her.

His gaze, much like his hands, was ever-present. It left a lingering trail that made the skin on her neck prickle pleasantly.

Rogue wet her lips, reluctantly replying, "What's the catch?"

"No catch," he said, smoother than butter and without a second's hesitation.

As if she believed that. As if she had any other choice. "Yeah."

"I'm just the facilitator," he added, as if that sufficed for an explanation.
"One condition," she said, relishing his lingering attention though she was avoiding looking at him directly. That wasn't good at all, Rogue concluded. That had to stop. The rest, she could maybe handle for a couple more days, but if Remy continued prodding at the weak spots in her armor, he was going to find himself in a world of hurt sooner than she thought herself possible of restraint. Had they been friends, had their rapport been a little less charged — hell, had they even been on the same side — it might not be so awful... But the constant teasing, persistent innuendo, and hints that he was lording vital information over her head wasn't about to keep their strained relationship — their working relationship, she amended — on an even keel.

It wasn't helping that every time he looked at her, she found that parts of her body were happy to betray her by tingling, heating up, turning pink or generally responding in ways that were downright embarrassing.

Hell no. Rogue demanded better odds than that. She hit him with a conditional offer:

"Ya gotta lay off me, swamp rat. Either you give a little of yourself in this exchange, or you back off."

She felt his smirk before she saw it. "I'm willing t' give."

"Oh, Ah know ya are, but not in the way you're hopin'."

He paused, studying her. "Non," he said after a moment, compacting his staff and tucking it into a pocket. "No deal."

He swaggered away, collecting his trench coat from where it was draped across a crooked bit of wrought iron fence surrounding a nearby vault. Smirking back at her as he crossed the ragged walkway, he shrugged his arms into the sleeves, and flopped gracefully onto a nearby, ornamental stone bench. He propped his legs up to occupy the full length of the seat, linked his hands behind his head, and peered at her upside down.

"For all that trouble? Non. I'm not gonna back off because I can't just leave you to y' own devices. They haven't done anything for you up until now, hein? You're getting schooled, Roguey. Just call me Professor LeBeau."

Rogue stalked after him. She hovered over his supine form. "Ah beg your pardon?"

"You heard me," he replied. "And y' can be forever in m' debt when this is all over."

"What the hell kinda answer is that?" she shouted, her patience dissolving. "This is stupid. You're being stupid."

"I'm responsible."

"You ain't my guardian, LeBeau!" she stabbed a finger at him. "Moreover, Ah certainly didn't ask for this chivalry crap. Ah fend for myself. Ah always fend for myself."

"I'm th' closest thing t' an angel lookin' over y' shoulder that you got, Roguey," he returned. Rogue was all too aware of the quirk to his mouth and the suggestive, lazy appreciation he favored her with. "Without me watchin' over you, this city'll eat you alive."

She snorted. "That's such garbage. We've been here a whole day and Ah haven't seen a darn scrap of this 'war' Lapin was talking about. You both made it sound like the end of the world: streets running with blood and all. Don't ya think that the Rippers would have made themselves known by now if it was so bad?" She waved her hands in front of her, injecting an exaggerated quaver to her voice,
laughing at him, "Oooh, Remy LeBeau's back in town. Let's go kill him for somethin' obscure and unspeakable... and his little girl too!"

He sighed, tossing an arm across his eyes. "Wake me when y' done." A moment later, he corrected her, "Assassins. Not th' Rippers."

"You're full of shit, Gambit," she continued, gloating. "Ah wouldn't be surprised if this whole thing was a ruse ta keep me close by; no worse than the memories ya selected so carefully ta convince me ta leave with you, and no worse than a little bit of hypnotic charm ta keep me passive. That's two strikes, Cajun. Two!" She held up two fingers to demonstrate.

"They prolly tagged you, chére. That's the sorta thing I would do if I was —“

"What?" she asked when he didn't finish. "If you were what?"

"Nothing." He sighed, dropping his arm so he could peer up at her.

"There ya go being evasive again," she said, exasperated. "Sure, keep me in the dark. Way ta keep the mysterious bad boy act workin' for ya."

"It's all relative."

"Ah'll just bet."

Remy paused, giving her a once-over that left a melty feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Promise?" he asked, though the sudden shift in his tone threw her more than how he colored her words with his own meaning. It wasn't fair how easily he could disarm her, she thought. That wasn't the sort of thing she'd trained for with Wolverine.

A thought stole across his face, something wicked, undoubtedly; something that would guarantee her ten lifetimes in hell if she gave in to it. He wet his lips, deliberately drawing her attention back to his mouth. Seeming to appreciate her from the angle he was in, Gambit raised an eyebrow in question... or invitation; whichever it was, it wasn't wholly innocent.

"Gotta think of the bigger picture, Rogue," he purred.

Something clicked — a ghost of a thought that smothered out all hints of romance from their gothic setting. What was left over was a stark realization, taken from the only clues Remy had given her. It was an ugly thing that contorted as the seconds ticked past, becoming bigger and less controllable as her doubt dropped away.

"Oh my gawd." She drew back a step, recoiling as if she'd been socked in the stomach. The feeling wasn't dissimilar.

"Ah knew it!" she breathed. Shaking her head, Rogue continued pacing backwards until the back of her boots hit the low rise of a nearby vault. She wobbled a moment, teetering, and sat down heavily on the cracked granite surface, staring at him with new realization. Rogue didn't even look at the name on the tomb.

"That's what you meant when ya said you were doing this for you. What's the ultimatum, Gambit? Or should Ah guess?"

He sat up, opening his mouth to retort, but Rogue cut him off — her thoughts whirling.

"Ah shoulda figured with all the flirting, the suggestion, the hints that Ah should embrace the fact
that you could… do that… to me. That we could —“ Rogue froze, her thoughts slamming into one another as her tone turned sharp. "What did you expect?" she asked, struggling to turn her hurt into revulsion. "That Ah'd be ever so grateful that the first thing Ah'd do once Ah got control was run straight into your arms? That's what the lingerie was about, wasn't it? Gawd…"

"Quoi?"

"Everything you said ta me was meant ta weaken my defenses. You wanted me ta put my trust in you, because that'd make it all that much easier ta get closer to me, wouldn't it?" she shouted. "What did you expect? You'd help me find the stone and Ah'd be so grateful that Ah'd just fall out of my clothes?"

She shook. Somehow, this was worse than all the possible scenarios she could have imagined.

"Ya kept babbling about how Ah was a challenge and Ah'm… man, Ah'm an idiot." She laughed; a brittle, humorless sound that rang amongst the old tombs.

"You're not an idiot, Rogue, but you're sure sounding like one right now," he returned, a note of warning evident in his tone.

Rogue didn't care. "Shut up, Remy."

"Make me!" he bit back, exasperated.

"Fine!"

She lunged at him, her anger getting the better of her. Remy braced himself as Rogue sprang from her seat, tackling him and knocking him over the bench. He landed with a muffled thud, his hands gripping her hips to prevent full collision, and in turn, he absorbed the impact of the fall himself.

"Is this what ya want?" she shouted, struggling to her knees so she straddled him, the tails of his trench coat tangling beneath her legs and setting her off balance. She dug her boot heels into his sides and, and though he was breathless, he laughed. To see him smiling only infuriated her further.

"That tickles!" he sniggered, grabbing at her wrists before she could draw back her fist.

"Ah hate ya!" she screamed. "Ah hate ya, and Ah swear if Ah had ta do it again, Ah'd have drained ya straight when Mesmero had me under his spell!"

Remy froze, his jaw clenching as he yanked her forwards.

Rogue splayed on top of him, landing chest to chest, and she struggled to dig into his ribs with her elbows.

"You don't mean that," he said evenly, fingers encircling her wrists and snapping her hands as far from his face as possible before she could claw at him.

"What do ya care what Ah mean?" she spat. "It's no difference ta ya. This is just a damned game, and Ah was stupid enough ta believe you cared when all you were trying ta do was seduce me!"

He grit his teeth. "I'm gonna pretend like I didn't hear that."

"That's all you can do, ain't it?" she struggled in his grip. Though his hold was firm, he wasn't hurting her. Instead of freeing herself, the only thing she managed was to wiggle one leg in between his.
"When there's somethin' ya can't bear ta hear, ya shut down or switch the subject or ya run away... disappear ta goddamned Louisiana the instant things get hard, only ta show up again when its convenient for you, and who cares if you're throwing everyone else's lives inta chaos? Remy LeBeau doesn't give a damn about anyone other than himself, does he? Remy LeBeau's just working the situation to suit his own advantage!"

"And what about you, Rogue?" he shot back. "Y' keep everyone as far away as y' can not because you're afraid of hurting them, you're afraid of how they'll hurt you. Irene? Mystique? You don't want t' live up to your own potential because it makes you a liability. You haven't been using your powers because you think it'll bring y' closer t' being the person they wanted you t' be — and that's something you can't handle. You're not strong enough t' believe in yourself, and if you see yourself like that, how do you expect t' see anyone else differently? That's why y' can't trust no one, and that's why you refuse t' trust me."

"How the hell am Ah supposed ta trust ya when ya been lyin' ta me this whole time?" she spat.

"When did I do that, Rogue?" he asked, pulling her wrists in between them. Rogue dug her elbows into his ribs, and though Remy winced, he didn't let go.

"You're drawing these conclusions all on y' own without any proof. Its easier t' believe th' worst of someone. Takes no effort at all t' see things as black and white — but in th' process, you're missing all the fine shades of grey in between."

"Ya don't give me reason ta believe otherwise," she seethed. "Carefully leavin' out the details ain't no better than a bold-faced lie."

"Then take it," he said. "Go on. Take off a glove and see for yourself. The last time I made that offer, y' didn't. You wouldn't do it then, and I'll wager that you're just as scared t' do it now for th' same reasons!"

"The last time ya made that offer ta 'see for myself' you kidnapped me!" she countered. "And you were usin' the same old tricks on the sly as you are now."

"And I was wrong!" he yelled back. "And I'm sorry! What more do y' want?"

"Ah want the truth, and Ah want you ta know how damned hard it is ta give it," she hissed. "Ah'm not taking it from you. Ah won't put myself on your level, and Ah won't play th' role of thief because you think that it has somethin' ta do with accepting what Ah'm capable of. You don't know the half of it."

"I know more than you're willing t' admit yourself!" he argued.

"Ah don't want ta reach into your head and force it outta ya! You should be willing ta give it all on your own!"

"I can't," he ground out, something deeper etching into the lines of his face, making him appear almost pained for a second before it disappeared. "It doesn't work like that."

He didn't want it to work like that, she thought.

"Ah'm not some sorta vampire, Cajun. You're being selfish asking me ta rape and drain your mind and just let ya fall while Ah have ta sort through all the shit in your head."

"I wouldn't let y' do that alone, Rogue," he said, his voice lowering. The gleam in his eyes flickered, dulling to muted ochre.
Rogue laughed mirthlessly. "Don't ya get it? Ah'm always alone. You're not in my head when Ah have ta face down your psyche. You're not in my head when Ah have ta relive your memories. Ya don't have ta deal with the guilt. Ya don't have ta feel sorry. Ya don't have ta feel like you're going crazy because once you're in there, ya don't get out."

"They fade," he said, gentler now that she had stopped struggling against him.

"After months, Gambit. Months! And even after that, they’re never really gone. Ah’m never really alone with my thoughts, and Ah’im completely alone against my thoughts all the damned time — there wasn’t a moment’s goddamn peace in my brain when I was actively using my powers. Do ya know what forever feels like?"

Frowning, he nodded. "Months are better than years."

Something in his tone resonated deeply — a stirring of things long past that brought darkness to his eyes that Rogue found frighteningly familiar: It was the look of someone haunted; hollowed but not yet defeated. She’d seen the same expression in her mirror on more than one occasion in the past year. He was asking for unconditional acceptance, perhaps because the things that stalked his memories were too difficult to relive, and Rogue knew then that what she asked of him was no longer so simple.

Pushing the immediate guilt to the side, she forced herself to remember why it was so important to begin with: she couldn't trust him this way. Not without understanding at least a little bit of who Remy LeBeau was.

"Gawd!" she cried, renewing her struggle. "Why do ya have ta keep turning everything back on me? Ah'm supposed ta feel sorry for ya?"

"I don't want y' pity," he returned firmly, tipping her to side slightly so she couldn't avoid the intense expression on his face.

"And Ah don't want ta deal with your problems for you."

"I'm not asking you t' do that," he said, a hint of puzzlement slowing his cadence.

"Yeah, you are. Ah don't do anything by half, and it's not fair that you get ta take the easy way outta this so Ah get ta find out what you're all about." She shook her arms, still pinioned between them so that Remy shook a little too as Rogue renewed her struggle to break free.

"There is no 'out, chère," he laughed bitterly, and Rogue felt the reverberation through her own body. "You said months, right? Me? I live with these things all m' life. They don't go away. They don't fade. Th' memories are just as clear and crisp as they were the day they were made."

"And you're willing ta hand it all over freely, knowing you can control how much ya show me." She sneered. "Censorship shows how much ya care."

"What do you want?" he shouted. "Je suis completement en enfer, ici! I don't know what the right answer is for you, Ms. Rogue — but right now, tu me rends absolument fou."

"You're no more crazy from this than ya already are," she retorted. "Ah didn't do nothing to ya on that front."

"Well then, I suppose that makes us perfectly matched," he said blandly, his head dropping backwards to the hard packed earth.
Rogue stiffened. "Ah ain't nothin' like you."

"You're everything like me," he said sternly, jerking forwards so quickly that Rogue nearly gasped. Remy's breath was a hot rush against her mouth, and desperate to keep a safe distance, Rogue arched backwards. It did nothing more than press her chest into his, mapping out the rise and fall of his diaphragm, and the stack of flexed muscles supporting them both. "We're so close t' living the same life that I know what you're feelin' right now is terrible. You hate being powerless, and y' hate being used, and that's why I'm not making the same mistakes again," he insisted.

"What in blue blazes are ya talking about, swamp rat?" she asked, incredulous and more aware than ever of how warm he was beneath her.

"I'm not letting you go," he replied stubbornly, relaxing. "I can pick y' up and carry you the rest of th' way, but you're not walking out on me again, and I sure as hell ain't lettin' you give up on yourself."

Rogue balked, her muscles uncoiling a fraction as she sunk into him. "Ah didn't —"

"Don't start that again," he warned. "I left you. You left me. I come back. Y' smack me in th' face —"

"Ah did not —" she argued.

"It's metaphorical and it doesn't matter!" Remy interrupted, squeezing her wrists a little. "What did I tell you?"

She sneered. "In between all the flirting and the sly looks, ya done a good job of helping me forget."

Gambit cocked an eyebrow. "That's good t' know," he said offhandedly.

She tried to slug him. He held fast.

"I told you I'd look after ya. I told y' that you could count on me. I told you —"

"That you'd always bet on me," she finished for him, quieting.

"And you said?" He gave her thigh a squeeze in between his knees, the motion alerting her to their closeness, the way their hips fit together, the snug press of sinewy muscles and harsh breathing that had fallen into a steady rhythm between them.

Rogue flushed, returning to herself. "Ah said that Ah didn't want ya touchin' me, swamp rat!"

Gambit smirked. "Ein! Wrong! Y' said?" he tried again, wiggling his hips a little beneath her. This time, however, Rogue gasped.

"Well, that woulda been the preferable response t' begin with…" he offered innocently.

"Stop it!" she bit out and froze. Shifting her legs a little against his, her breath caught as something hard pressed into her thigh. "Remy, Ah swear that better be your bo staff in your pocket…"

He smirked. "Wanna find out?"

Rogue blushed so hard she thought her cheeks might catch fire. "Ah… Ah…No!"

"Ein! Wrong again!" In one quick movement, he'd snapped her arms behind her and flipped their positions so that he was on top of her. He locked her wrists behind her, bear-hugging in a show of strength.
There was one surefire way out of a hold like this, and Rogue knew just how disappointed Wolverine would be, knowing that she wasn’t bringing her knee up between his. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to find a lick of patience.

"Cajun, get up," she said through grit teeth.

"Must be paralyzed," he murmured into her hair, his weight settling across her comfortably.

"Convenient position," she returned, her voice muffled by his neck. She flattened her hands beneath the small of her back in the attempt to loosen the tension in her arms. Rogue tried to control her breathing, a task growing increasingly difficult as, with each inhalation, her chest pressed comfortably into his. Remy's breathing met her own as if they'd been matched; they fit together like two well-played-with puzzle pieces.

Maybe he hadn't been entirely wrong about their similarities.

Rogue winced, turning her head away.

"There's only one way t' get outta this," he hummed, not at all perturbed over their compromising position.

"Ah said Ah'd bet on ya too," she spat, not meeting Remy's gaze.

"And that would imply that there's a wee itty bitty bit of trust there, non?" he pressed. "Un peu?" he rolled over onto his side, leaving Rogue free to stand if she wanted to. She didn't move. "Un p'tit peu?"

"Benefit of the doubt," she muttered, staring fixedly at a particularly stubborn clump of grass that had forced its way through the cement footpath.

"Or a chance, mebbe?" When she didn't reply, he conceded with a small sigh. Her arms relaxed, but she remained unmoving.

"Bien," he nodded, propping himself up on an elbow and peering down at her. "At his point, it's more than this thief deserves. I'll take what I can get."

Rogue remained motionless, staring past him, past the tops of the broken, beaten mausoleums that towered above them on all sides, and past the skeletal tree limbs that lanced across the lightly dotted sky. Stars, Rogue realized — you could see them out here better than in the city proper.

"Ah thought your sort had higher standards than that." Rogue's voice cracked, and she cleared her throat.

"The highest," he said without hesitation.

Rogue swallowed her surprise, though she could not help the quick glance to her right. Restraining herself from reacting outwardly, she forced her breathing to slow and her muscles to loosen. She relaxed into the ground — still as a stone.

He really had no intention of giving up, she realized suddenly. A part of her wanted to embrace it, latch onto that solid offer that he'd be there — but that kind of temptation, she'd long learned, was meant to achieve an ends and nothing more. Mystique had done much the same thing when she had disguised herself as Risty and pretended to be Rogue’s friend.

She hadn't been put off by Rogue's cold shoulder, her outward disdain towards just about anything
and everything that moved — but then again, Mystique had been using her to accomplish an ends. Worse, she had succeeded. It had been Rogue who had taken down Apocalypse for the final time, and she had stood alone.

Yet, Rogue breathed, removing her hands from beneath her and rubbing her forehead, Remy wasn't Mystique. Remy was… she paused, studying him quietly. With the only light offered by the distant streetlights broken by the tall crypts, his face remained cast in shadow. Still, she could sense him. She could almost see the small downturn of his mouth.

There was a part of her, Rogue knew, that longed to reach over to him and draw him forwards into the narrow beam of light that spilled between the rows so that she could see his face. Just once, at such a short distance, did she recognize that the three inches he'd put between them could have been a mile. She'd added to it, she thought sadly. She'd felt she'd had to.

He had come back for her. He had something to prove, sure, but the intention sitting behind all his bad business had a shred of noble intent, at least.

And… he could touch her. The small voice of her conscience piped up, burgeoning with that very same desperate hope she'd thought she'd killed off earlier: he could touch her. He was trying. She just wasn't letting him reach her.

More fiercely, the voice in her head demanded: she wanted him to.

Her mouth had gone dry. Her palms sweat beneath her gloves.

Remy remained quiet, and out of the corner of her eye, Rogue noticed that he'd pulled the Queen again from his cuff.

Gawd, she wanted him to be the one to touch her.

"Did y' mean what y' said before?" he began, almost reluctantly. "You were waiting for me?"

The words hung there a moment. He was giving her the time to accept or reject the question. Not once had she heard him sound unsure, and frankly, it was disconcerting. He was unapologetically the most incorrigible flirt she had ever met. He deliberately went out of his way to unnerve her; invading her personal space, touching her lightly whenever he could, teasing her relentlessly — and with a sudden, plummeting realization, Rogue knew why.

It was an act; a defense mechanism like her own sharp attitude. Rogue was sarcastic, but Remy doled out the affection. He didn't know, she realized, he didn't know how she felt, but still, he persisted in his pursuit regardless.

He'd been doing his best to find out, probably in the only way he knew how.

Her voice caught, eyes straining against the murky shade that kept him from her, Rogue struggled for an answer. When she remained silent, swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat, Remy nodded.

"I see."

"Remy, Ah —“ she started, turning to him a moment too late.

"'C'mon," he said, standing up and brushing himself off, deliberately avoiding her gaze.

"Remy?"
"It's fine, chère."

He didn't offer her a hand, and slowly, Rogue pulled herself up onto the bench. He'd already started around it, brushing off his duster with sharp, deliberate slaps.

"Think nothing of it." He smiled, but it lacked the usual accompanying glimmer she'd grown used to.

She cringed inwardly, her chest tightening. Why hadn't she replied? He'd offered her the chance. All she needed to do was tell him that she'd kept the Queen he'd given her on the shore of Blood Moon Bayou a year ago, hiding it away after she couldn't bear to look at it any longer. He'd seen the card. He'd seen the condition she'd left it in — worn and creased and cared for, only to be discarded when she couldn't bear to think of him anymore. It hurt too much, believing he wouldn't return to Bayville — believing he didn't have a reason to return. Re-discovered months later, the Queen was like the talisman that had called him home.

She'd thought it would have been easier, keeping it at the bottom of her sock drawer in a place where she could have kept buried the memory that clung to the card.

And yet, he'd come back for her. It *had* meant something, and she'd never let herself believe it.

In truth, Rogue didn't know what to say, so instead, she stood and followed, hyper aware of the silence that had seemingly thickened around them. It made the halting rhythm of her heart a condemnation, her breathing more pronounced, and the swish of his jacket against the backs of his legs sound like sandpaper.

"There's something y' oughta see while we're here." That same unconcerned smile, flashed over his shoulder.

"Remy?" It was little more than a whisper.

He didn't turn around, though he stopped before a large, hulking, carved piece of masonry and marble. Slowly, Rogue approached him, standing just a little behind and off to the left. He did not take his eyes from the tomb.

"You wanted t' know," he said simply, his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat and bowed his head a little, nodding towards the ornately decorated slab that sealed the internal chamber from the elements. Names decorated the granite-speckled surface, the earliest dating to the founding of the city nearly two hundred years before. There were hundreds of them, entire families entombed in one place for centuries.

All had one thing in common.

"We call them clans or Guilds, but they mean one thing essentially," he murmured. "Family."

He slid his arms into his trench and turned the collar up protectively. Rogue stepped alongside him, watching his expression turn stony.

"Ours and theirs, Thieves and Assassins," he continued. "For years, the war was waged between us quietly. Never exposed t' the public — that'd be the end of us. When Jean Luc adopted me when I was ten, he told me, 'Remy,'" he paused, drawing a breath, '"when y' take the name LeBeau, y' become one of us. Th' bond is thicker than words. It's blood — the blood of the family. When you do yourself injury, y' do it to us all. We bleed together.' He asked me if I understood."

Remy frowned. His red eyes traced the names listed before them. "I didn't know back then, was just a pup — thought it all very romantic: all that adventure, all the things I never had offered t' me so easy." He
grimaced. "I couldn't have…" His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat again.

This time, the pause was longer.

Rogue flexed her fingers experimentally, her heart jack hammering wildly in her chest, uncertain of what he was telling her, but understanding why just the same. He was trying to make amends, trying to mend the frayed tension between them.

"I couldn't have said no t' that. You can't say no t' the families," he said tightly. "Think it's written in the lore somewhere — Guild law. Never saw th' books for myself, honestly. Jean Luc liked t' keep those things locked up tight — what with a buncha raucous pichouettes growin' up at th' Guild house, you couldn't leave th' most valuable manuscripts lyin' around. Couldn't hide them either, really, 'cause we used t' get into everything. Lord knows I spent enough time lookin' for 'em… Always needed t' see for myself…" He shook his head, the expression on his face gone distant.

"He used t' tell me stories…" Remy stopped, glancing at her and collecting himself before he could say more.

He laughed a little, taking a step forwards and pressing a finger to the most recent name, tracing the grooves left on the smooth surface where it was etched out of the marble.

"Anyway, you asked me t' tell you," he said, the sound strained as if he was still debating whether or not he could entrust her with the information. "I want you t' meet one of my ghosts, Rogue," he said quietly. "This is what happens when you say 'no' t' either of the Guilds."

Slowly, Rogue slid beside him, looking at the name as Remy's arm fell slack at his side.

It stared back at her, and she struggled a little, trying to place it.


Suddenly, it dawned on her:

"We fought him," she said quietly. "Last year? He was the one who attacked us at that Jazz Club down in the Quarter."

"The very same."

Rogue swallowed. Something suggested the boy hadn't died by any natural means.

"Julien defied the families by challenging me and —" Remy stiffened, his shoulders going rigid. "I was obligated to defend m'self. It's tradition."

At his sides, Remy's fingers flexed of their own nervous volition.

"Because of the jazz club?" she asked.

He offered only a rough shake of his head, his thoat bobbing as he swallowed. "Was long after you went back to New York," he managed, his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat.

"The clans, they understood it was self-defense, but it broke the peace the Head of th' Guilds negotiated. In three minutes, I'd destroyed everything th' families had worked to create for so long."

Wordlessly, with only the barest hesitation, Rogue slid her fingers into his palm.

The effect was instantaneous. Beside her, Remy tensed, looking down at her small, gloved hand, her
thumb pressed lightly against his knuckles, and then he met her gaze. Something in his expression morphed, changing rapidly between the hardened look he'd given the tomb a moment before, into something so furtive that it made her want to withdraw.

He had killed someone.

Instead, Rogue squeezed his hand.

The reality of it sank heavily. Like a weight that pressed on her chest, making it difficult to breathe, Rogue realized that Remy had probably lived with the very same feeling for months. The guilty understand the inevitability of frailty; to think you are a killer, to know that you have the stain of someone's life on you, Rogue knew, was not something easily washed off. After all, she had killed Mystique once — or at least, so she had thought.

Rogue afforded herself the luxury of a shaky breath.

Remy's fingers went slack in hers. Rogue dropped his hand.

"What are you thinking about, Rogue?" Remy's voice was pitched low, barely more than a rumble in the back of his throat. His expression had turned cold, calculating as he appraised her.

The change was abrupt: Remy's face contorted briefly as if being forced into submission. It kept her from seeing the flash of guilt that changed his entire countenance.

He took a step forward, advancing on her.

This was his defense: he thought himself dangerous, and so too did Gambit think the world should see him in the same light. Rogue didn't turn away, fascinated by the change that overtook him — seeing that mask slip into place like armor.

"How?" she asked, her voice equally as soft. Gingerly, she followed suit, matching his pace. For each of his slow, carefully placed steps, she took one of her own backwards. They moved together, Rogue strengthening her resolve and understanding for the first time what he had meant when he'd said they were alike, and Remy, misunderstanding her retreat. She saw it in his stance, the predatory set to his mouth, and the steady gait he took with her.

It should have scared her, but Rogue now knew better.

“Tell me how it happened,” she whispered.

"A duel." He shrugged noncommittally, stopping and effectively breaking the moment. The gleam faded from his eyes, dying out to the low, hard color of fading embers. "If y' weren't afraid of me before..." Bitterly, he laughed, gauging the distance between them and grimacing at the two feet of space.

"Ah'm not," she replied, her voice even. And she wasn't. Not one bit. “This is why the Guilds kicked ya out, ain't it? This is why they made you leave,” she guessed.

Slowly, Remy nodded, his mouth pulling downwards into a frown.

"Cajun," Rogue sighed, shaking her head. "You might be a gutter rat and a thief, but you're not a murderer."

He stopped himself from flinching, but something in her chest twisted at the pain in his expression — there and gone in an instant.
She meant it to sound sympathetic, but the words sounded flat even to her own ears.

Moreover, it was evident that he wasn't going to take it at face value.

"Y' don't know that f' sure, chère," he said, stepping up to her and cocking his head. "You don't trust me," he whispered.

The challenge was made clear, she thought, nettled that even in the midst of this discussion he was intent on throwing her off balance. He was trying to intimidate her, and Rogue was determined not to let that happen, though she was grateful for the wall at her back. Without it, she was certain she would have slumped to the ground if he took another step forwards.

To spite her, he did.

"Are ya tryin' ta make me doubt ya?" she asked, incredulous, though her voice faltered at his nearness. She edged up on her toes, the Boudreaux tomb behind her keeping her stuck.

His confession, if anything, was having the exact opposite effect:

It figured — a little raw honesty made the man smoulder.

Aware of the flutter in her chest, Rogue’s breathing turning shallow as she took in the hard line of his jaw, the subtle arch of his cheekbones and the wry, fine lift of a curious eyebrow.

They stood so close that she could see the faint tinge of his five o’clock shadow.

"Non, mignonne, I'm trying t' convince myself that you're not gonna bolt again," he returned, leaning over her so that his scent — that rich swirl of tobacco and body heat — filled her mouth, making her head swim as she breathed him in. A swell of warmth rose from the very pit of her belly, working its way up her spine and making her head swim as she held his gaze.

"Ah can handle ya," she replied, though she wasn't entirely certain.

There was always one way to find out for sure, she thought.

He smiled, a slow, bourbon-heavy grin that carried more weight and more suggestion than anything she'd ever experienced before. Before her, Remy's chest was a wall of muscle, and Rogue pressed back a little, her palms flat against the surface of the tomb so that she wouldn't reach out to trace those hard lines that molded his shirt to him.

He cocked his head to the side. "Y' don't sound so sure of yourself, p'tit."

"You could say Ah'm taking a gamble," she whispered, her gaze lingering a little too long on his mouth, on the small tuft of auburn gathered beneath his lower lip, wondering if it had tickled the first time… the first time that she didn't remember.

Remy paused, weighing the words before he spoke them.

"Y' know what happens when mercury breaks free of its thermometer?"

His breath was warm, and against her better judgment, Rogue wet her lips. He was too close, she thought, her fingers grazing the cracked exterior of the sepulcher at her back, hips bumping into it. There was nowhere left to go, no place to displace the charge that seemed to jump between them, thickening the air and making it difficult to breathe with the closeness of him muddling her senses.

"It runs."
It was a bare murmur, his lips nearly brushing her own, but still not close enough.

Never close enough.

Rogue sucked in a breath, silently accepting the contest, and closed the gap between them.

Remy hadn't meant to.

Hands sliding up Rogue's back to pull her against him, knuckles grazing the small space between the arch of her spine and the rough exterior of the mausoleum, Remy pressed his mouth to hers, pulling her lower lip into his mouth and sucking it gently. Rogue tasted like honey; like sugared violets and lime. Sweet and cold, though her mouth was warm and wet and inviting beneath his.

He hadn't meant to.

She moaned softly into his mouth, and it took every ounce of self-restraint to keep from pressing her against the Boudreaux tomb, lifting her up to rest on that cold slab, wrap her legs around his waist and pull her against him. Instead, gently, his hands moved over her body and up her sides, folding the fabric of her cotton shirt beneath his palms as he strained to get closer to her body.

_Dieu_, she felt good, he thought, imprinting the sensation of her shiver beneath his hands. He wanted to remember this.

Rogue gasped, and admiring her through lidded eyes, Remy traced his tongue against the fine part of her lips, silently begging entry.

When she yielded, her mouth opening to him and offering that sweet, heated nectar, he gently coaxed his way in, teasing her tongue with his own, urging her to deepen the kiss.

He hadn't meant to close that distance between them. But like anything coveted, temptation proved too great, too heated, too soft beneath his hands, too sweet in his mouth, and too sinuous to hold onto for long.

It was then that he felt the pull.

With Rogue's hands shyly wrapping into the lapels of his coat, drawing him into her, he mistook it for her own silent, supple plea to be nearer. Relishing the small victory, Remy fell into it, savoring the gentle press of her mouth and the hesitant, but delicious reactions he elicited from her. He blocked out the insistent lull, along with the part of his mind that threatened to cut off all conscious thought, and the stubborn voice of reason that had started caterwauling the instant she'd opened herself to him.

She was better than he'd imagined.

Soft and pliant and hot beneath his hands, rigid when he dragged a thumb over her ribs, sighing into his mouth the next and leaning into him for support.

Possessively, he curled his fingers into her hair, tangling into the soft locks that had curled naturally with the humidity, and claimed her mouth anew.

The pull became stronger. Like a frayed ribbon being pulled taut, he felt the initial tug across his
body and mind. It was a coaxing, slow drag that latched onto his nerve endings and drew him forwards.

Rogue kissed him harder, and it turned into pain.

"Merde!" he breathed, leaping backwards and releasing Rogue so quickly that she staggered and slumped back against the tomb, dazed and hurt by the sudden rejection.

"Remy?" Her voice quavered.

Remy swiped at his brow, his hand coming away wet with sweat. Startled, he looked down at himself, his vision doubling for a moment, and then back to Rogue.

Backlit by the streetlights, he shouldn't have seen the shine to her eyes. He shouldn't have seen the crestfallen look, or the momentary confusion — she didn't know she'd absorbed him.

Shuddering, Remy tried to stand to full height, only managing to stumble backwards, his feet uncertain of where to go to support his weight. His vision swam with black spots, threatening to overtake him.

"Remy, what's wrong?"

He swallowed, blinking blearily, but still grasping at consciousness, straining against the knowledge that his body had suddenly betrayed him.

"M' sorry," he choked out, disbelieving and ashamed.

On the verge of being swallowed by darkness, he ran.

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:

- Post Mortem: (Poker) An exhaustive discussion after a hand is over about the play of the hand, with so-called experts giving their opinions (with the loser usually providing the most strident) on how the hand should have been played.
- "Convenient position, etc. etc." Uncanny #367.
- Julien Boudreaux: Showed up for the first and last time in "Cajun Spice." The actual story of his death, which we'll see in one of the upcoming chapters, is from X-Men #8-9.
- "Guilds are a family, ad nauseum." X-Men #9, I think. Not a direct quote but close enough to warrant a footnote.
- "Professor LeBeau": Tip of the hat to Anamarie Chambers and her awesome story set in X-Men moviemverse, "Broken Road."
"Qu'est ce que tu veux?" he shouted. "Je suis completement en enfer, ici! Je ne sais pas quelle est la bonne reponse pour toi, ma belle. Mais presentement, tu me rends absolument fou."

"What do you want?" he shouted. "I'm in hell, here. I don't know what is the right response for you, my dear. But right now, you're making me absolutely crazy."

Quoi? Non!: What? No!
Un peu: A bit
Un p'tit peu: A little bit
The shadows stretched before him, their fingers sliding into the places that marked his path as Gambit slipped through the cemetery.

Darkness gathered in thick mottles of grey in the shells of broken tombs, looted of their occupants through the natural cremation process that made the aboveground cemeteries of New Orleans unique. They offered little compassion for the complaints of the living.

He didn't stop to think of the irony that something he'd grown so familiar with had turned right around and shunned him:

Try to cross over into the light, even once, and the night spurns you for it.

He laughed without humor at that, marginally grateful that his head had cleared at last. The fog she’d left him in made him sluggish, slower to process what had transpired between them — the kiss that lingered, and the failure of his mutation.

He shoved the thought down, trying to bury it someplace within himself well out of sight.

That was the foundation for insanity, wasn't it? Deal with enough evil on a regular basis — some forced upon you, some initiated by you, some so utterly and completely incomprehensible — and you just tucked those moments away entirely, never to reflect on them though you know, somehow, they've contributed to the person you've become.

Unfortunately, he couldn't very well hide from himself within himself, could he? Couldn’t hide from his failings. Couldn’t hide from his past.

And Rogue’s very nature meant skirting the edge of a knife where everything might be brought into
the spotlight with a single touch.

"Merde," he said flatly, his own voice returning to him in the descending silence.

At this point, it didn't seem as if he'd be able to conceal himself much longer.

Gambit frowned, stalking onwards between the rows.

He reprimanded himself for the fifth time in ten minutes: He shouldn't have done that — shouldn’t have given in to temptation.

The words "monumentally stupid" rang true, clear as a bell and just as resonant. He shuddered against it, yanking up his collar and stopping to rest, finally, against a mortuary slab bearing the name of some long-dead politician who no longer mattered.

He needed ten minutes and two cigarettes to set his head straight and settle his racketing heart, in the very least.

Rogue had fallen silent where he'd left her. She had not pursued him. Whether or not he was grateful for the temporary solitude was another matter entirely.

Remy shook a Marlboro from his pack, tossing it into his mouth and ignited the tip. He pulled on it hard, tasting the paper filter and hating the way the smothering flavor of tobacco drowned out the taste of her mouth left on his lips.

Absently, he licked them. Catching himself trying to recall the dewy urgency that accompanied Rogue's kiss, Gambit grimaced.

Why the hell had he done that, he begged himself silently. The mingled, fading sensations of that momentary solace — the pleasure of it — still thrummed in his veins. It set his pulse hammering at an erratic rhythm; a torrid pace he was familiar with from having run many heists in his day.

He swallowed the smoke; he was uncomfortable with the comparison but all too certain that it was an accurate metaphor.

So close to danger: So seductive to dance along the edge of that knife when her powers might reveal everything he hid from the world with a brush of her fingertips, stealing every secret.

Thieves took things that didn't belong to them. He was living up to the archetype wonderfully, he sneered.

Tapping the cigarette, ashes brushed the length of his trench coat and tumbled to the wet grass near his boots.

Gambit squeezed his eyes shut, knowing that as the scene replayed itself, he was taking masochistic pleasure in recalling it just the same:

Her hands had tangled in his coat uncertainly, and she'd trembled — he'd felt the vibration through the soft press of her breasts, the shudder in her shoulders as she curled into him, seeking warmth — that fire he knew too well.

It made him ache. It made his mouth go dry at the thought. It made him hunger, and it had been a long time since he'd felt the urge to sate a need that was so bone-driven.

She might as well have been hard-wired into him. Rogue was automatic — responding to each
touch, each nip of his mouth, the same old tricks he'd used on hundreds of others reinventing themselves and adjusting to accommodate her. Only her. She filled his senses, smothered out every similar exchange he could possibly compare that kiss to, and Remy found himself wanting to go back there, to her, and drown inside it all over again.

An aconite kiss, he concluded: which made him sound like he was romancing the entire interlude. It was something he would brag about, if he could — if there was anyone to listen, which there wasn't.

They were alone in this: just the two of them. Three if you abstracted a little — two Queens and one Joker — a wildcard gone awry, and respectfully, a girl who couldn't decide whether or not she'd bewitched him or wanted to kill him.

He'd certainly made that decision easier on her, he concluded with self-deprecating confidence.

Laughing at that, Remy rolled his eyes skyward and thunked his head against the tomb behind him, trying to recall the sensation of his life force being drained. His vision darkened a little, but the swoon that should have accompanied it did not. Was it like the last time she'd absorbed him? He couldn’t recall the particulars. He couldn’t compare the feeling. Not really. Not when he couldn’t remember clearly the details of the first time without the aid of a video tape to remind him that it had happened.

That he'd been able to stagger away this time, breaking into a light jog, and then a flat out peel across the cemetery was a miracle in and of itself, he was sure.

Gambit took another drag, wiping his hands against his coat to rid them of the soft feel of her hair. The cigarette hung from his mouth, blinding him with the sting of smoke.

Something different, then.

Fingers follow their own path. He knew that when the way is found once, they don't forget. Thief's hands: calloused yet sensitive, demanding, but at the same time gentle and giving – they'd remember Rogue's curves even if his mind forgot.

Groaning, he thumped the back of his head against the crypt behind him again, wincing a little at the low throb it produced; still nonplussed that his powers — his supposedly bolstered mutation — had failed at the exact moment when he really, really, really hadn't wanted them to.

"Suppose this is what inadequacy feels like," he muttered to himself. He didn't like it one bit.

Back and forth, he weighed out his current options: He wanted to go back to her, wanted to look into the descending blackness ringing her irises, and the matched red gleam of her pupils that mimicked his own. He wanted, even more desperately, to see himself in her — even if it was just for a moment. To see what she could see, to see if she hated him with the same passion now that she'd matched with want only minutes before.

Perhaps it wasn't because of him that she'd responded so eagerly. Perhaps it was only a convenience that he had taken what he'd wanted and given her back something she probably didn't recognize yet. Perhaps… if he had been someone else… then maybe it wouldn't have mattered.

The thought made him wince. When had he become so starved for her?

Remy sighed, dashing his cigarette to the ground half-heartedly.

He'd kissed her. He'd kissed her after telling himself he wouldn't touch her. He'd kissed her after telling himself he wouldn't touch her, and he'd liked it. Hell, he'd liked it a lot — liked to the point of
not so much liking but longing and lusting and languishing ten minutes later in a spot where she couldn't see or follow or —

This was the long con, wasn't it? The game? He wasn't rightly sure anymore.

"Dieu," he breathed, his eyes widening as he realized fully what the consequences of his actions were. Not that he hadn't before, no — that's why he'd ran, wasn't it?

Grimly, Gambit conceded that was at least part of it; he hadn't wanted her to know the intimate details of his life, his past, and thus far, he'd been successful in keeping them shrouded under a thick blanket of suggestion and misdirection. Worse, in one stupid move he'd probably broken her confidence in him. A thousand jagged little promise shards: that he'd see her through if she absorbed his memories; that he'd stay with her, that he'd take care of her — all of them littered his mental playground and mocked him with the eerie echo of cicadas clinging to the arching tree limbs overhead.

Their song pointed out the fool and his tragedy.

Now, all bets were off. Rogue's powers worked in such a way that even if he'd gotten the luck of the draw, she'd have taken a substantial chunk of his memories with that kiss. The problem was, there was no telling which memories she'd gotten, and there was definitely no way of knowing how or when those memories would surface.

It was ironic, really, since he hadn't meant to let her absorb those things from him to begin with. Saying one thing and doing another were two different matters entirely.

He'd controlled what she might draw from him when they'd fought at the mansion a few days ago. All it had taken was a little concentration, and the willful, deliberate shutting down of his mental shields for a few moments, and a brush of lips against her bare knuckles. His body had done the rest, and thankfully, he hadn't needed much time to recover from it.

The contact had barely lasted three seconds, and in turn, he'd handed over three memories. Under controlled circumstances, that had been an accomplishment. He had shown her just enough to leave her wanting more. The problem had only surfaced the night before: she had spoken their names in slumber:

Three names for three sins that he had yet to forgive himself for.

That meant she had taken more than he'd been willing to give initially, and that, in turn, gave rise to a whole new problem: There was no telling what lurked in Rogue's subconscious now. Remy shuddered, swiping at his forehead with the heel of his hand and sucking in a deep breath to steady his nerves. Even the half-truth he'd told her about Julien's death, would she learn the rest of it too? There was no telling.

Higher stakes meant a higher payoff, but it appeared that the cheat had finally been bested at his own game. By kissing her, Remy had all but handed over his winning hand with a smile on his face.

He'd been so confident that his powers would keep him safe, and they had, for a short time. As it were, he chuckled a little to himself, there were certain things he just couldn't resist.

"Damned fool, LeBeau," he muttered to himself.

Perhaps she could hate him as much as he hated himself at that moment. Logic dictated that it might take a bit of the burden off himself. Maybe.
On the downside, Remy wasn't usually that lucky.

He hadn't won this round. He'd pilfered the prize, narrowly leaving a piece of himself behind in the process. Moreover, it wasn't a clean pinch. Whatever it was that made his limbs tingle, his head throb, and his mouth water for her made it a very, very messy pull.

It felt as if he'd handed more of himself over to Rogue in that one kiss than he had ever to anyone else before, and it wasn't just because his mutation had failed him.

Remy hung his head, his hair flopping into his direct line of sight as he tried to process that fact.

Failed powers. He could stick his bare hand in the beam of a laser and not trip a security system, but he hadn't been able to hold onto Rogue for more than a few minutes.

Grinning a little, he mused, but what an amazing few minutes that had been.

Just as quickly, his expression sobered. Perhaps she was stronger than he'd given her credit, or perhaps there was some merit to what the X-Men had unearthed about the Gem. Could it be that what had happened to him really was temporary?

Remy held his hands before him, flexing his fingers and enjoying the subtle tingle of spatial awareness that had become second nature. Everything hummed around him, vibrating at different frequencies. He could close his eyes and still feel the subtle shifts of energy from the tombs, the trees, the ground — a series of silent obstacles that he could dance around, evading them easily, even if he were blindfolded.

He'd come to relish it.

Without effort, he let his awareness wander; sliding across the cemetery to where Rogue remained. Finding her there, he exhaled at the ease at which his powers continued to function. Apparently, all was not lost just yet.

He drew a clear visual with his mind's eye, his powers working intrinsically to calculate her posture, the boneless slump of her body where she sat against the Boudreaux tomb, and down to the smallest detail — her arms wrapping around herself consolingly, her chin resting on the bridge of her forearms.

Did she wish that it was his embrace? That he was comforting her?

Remy inhaled sharply and leaned back against the nearest mausoleum for support.

He'd harmed her by claiming that kiss, fractured her trust and done himself injury in the process, and yet all he could think of was how he could steal the next.

He stilled himself, his senses working overtime to smother out his imagination as invisible fingers trailed their way over Rogue's shoulders and into the soft dip of her collarbone, up her neck to cup her face, and down over her sternum to feel the rattle of her heart in her chest. He lingered there, in that warmth that bordered on violation for the nearness to her curves, but he couldn't resist it. Her pulse slowed steadily, and with it, he felt her shrink in on herself. Remy wet his lips, unsurprised that his mouth felt parched. This was the place, he realized, this was the centre he wanted so desperately to touch:

His Queen of Hearts.

He did not sense tears, for which he was thankful — but if he focused hard enough, he could almost
feel her steadfast pulse, the flutter of her breath, and the constriction in her chest that demanded release. In all its picturesque glory, the scene shifted a little as his attention was drawn elsewhere. The molecules reformed themselves around Rogue, dampened at the edges in a moiré of color as she exploded into action.

Something was wrong. There was too much movement, too many bodies in motion taking on blurred contours in the periphery of his awareness.

He winced, making a strained gurgling noise in his throat as his eyes opened to the perpetual gloom of Lafayette Cemetery at night.

"Merde!" he swore, launching himself from the wall and leaping at the nearest elevation, his staff slinging from his belt and snapping to full length in less time than it took to exhale.

Across the cemetery, Rogue screamed.

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**A few minutes prior…**

Picking absently at an unusually long blade of grass protruding through the cracks in the granite foundations of the Boudreaux tomb, Rogue curled her legs into her body, allowing her shoulders to slide against the cold marble at her back.

She should have been elated.

She'd shared her first kiss, albeit for the second time, with a former Acolyte, exiled Thieves Guild member and — she peered suspiciously at the crypt marker over her head — champion duelist, by the sound of it.

If that wasn't something to write home about, she didn't know what was.

She *should* have been elated, but she wasn't.

Rogue blew out a breath, growing increasingly frustrated as the minutes passed without sign of Remy.

Well, frustrated wasn't exactly it. Her head hurt something fierce from the tension, her palms were sticky inside her gloves, and she felt feverish. Add nausea and the impending sense of dread that she'd clearly forced herself upon him into the equation, and it was no surprise that he'd bolted.

How could that possibly make her happy?

*Gawd*, he'd run from her without as much as a backwards glance.

"Stupid," she muttered to herself, still experiencing a certain temporal dislocation that seemed to go hand-in-hand with her weak knees and fluttery stomach.

Then why was she still sitting here, she asked herself. Would he come back for her? It was just like he'd said, when things get too hot, you got the heck out of the kitchen. She snorted. She hadn't meant to test that theory exactly, it had just sort of… happened.
He'd been toying with her this entire time, and she'd went right ahead and played it back to him without really thinking of what she was doing. She'd been so caught up with the prospect of finally being able to touch him… touch someone, she corrected herself firmly… that she hadn't really considered how he'd react.

She'd thought, just for a moment, he'd felt the same. That's why he'd shown her the crypt, wasn't it? Hadn't Remy been trying to make amends? Wasn't he trying to take the first step by crossing the bridge of his secrets that separated them from each other?

Rogue swallowed hard, suppressing the disappointment and squeezing her eyes shut against her body's protest to such a small movement.

Her thighs felt like Jell-o, and truth be told, she wasn't certain she trusted herself to stand on her own just yet. It was best to just sit here a moment, she reasoned. It wasn't like she was waiting for him to come back, she reminded herself, the bitterness of the thought smothered by the swell of self-loathing that accompanied it.

That was why he'd asked if she'd waited for him, wasn't it? He'd led her to believe that he'd felt the same for her.

Rogue sighed, closing her eyes against the burn that gathered there, making her throat squeeze shut. Had she read him wrong? Or was Remy just being his regular self — the playboy with the devil-may-care attitude? Surely he had a pocketful of conquests and too many notches on his bedpost to count.

Not like she'd ever get that far. She wasn't… Rogue swallowed… she wasn't his type. It was just like Tante had said; Remy's usual string of girls probably gave him much less trouble. Inwardly, she cringed, contemplating just what Remy's "type" was. Rogue concluded quickly that she didn't want to venture into those territories.

She ripped at the grass, and chucked the shivery green blades right back to the ground promptly. Stricken, she wondered if the propensity to destroy things fell into the same basket as wanting things too. Nice things. Comfortable, warm things with wide palms, soft mouths, and a demanding touch. She shivered though she was unbearably warm, uncomfortable even in her own skin. Her head throbbed viciously, sending a series of tingling ripples straight down her spine and all the way to her feet. It made her toes curl in her boots with the tension. She felt as if she might burst any second, and frustrated, she dug her fingers into her arms and gripped as hard as she could.

It did nothing but force her to choke down a sob.

Was she mooning over him? Horrified, Rogue sat up straighter and cleared her throat, blinking at the foreboding sting behind her eyes. In the same breath, she mentally checked herself, affirming that she was not, in fact, pining over someone she couldn't have… even if she wanted him, which she didn't. Moreover, even if she did want that someone in question, it was a yearning that, like most things, would go unfulfilled.

He'd run away from her, and the thought made her a little ill. Was she that bad? She hadn't drooled on him, had she?

Rogue laughed a little, cynically, and wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. Her gloved knuckles burned the tender flesh over her upper lip, and with a soft, "Oh," of surprise, she pressed her fingers to her mouth.
Her lips were swollen. Rogue closed her eyes and fought vainly to push aside the reasoning for why that was.

A small voice, echoing deeply within the recesses of her mind, chastised that this is what happens when you get too close.

"Just a moment of weakness," she said to herself, ignoring the way her clothes stretched across her skin. With each shift, each breath, her flesh protested violently that there was no heavier contact than that. Her body was demanding something that went beyond logic, and there was nothing she could do to rein it in.

"Ya did it to yourself, girl." She swallowing the sour reprimand. "And now ya know."

She knew she hated it.

Another lapse in judgment like that, and she could have killed him, her conscience snapped back at her. Horrified, Rogue shrank back against the Boudreaux tomb. She'd let herself go entirely in that one moment, too entranced by the taste of him, the gentle way he'd touched her, making her bend beneath him to his desires.

They'd fit together, she thought miserably. It was the way a real first kiss should have been.

Rogue closed her eyes. The memory careened off on its own course, making her stomach flutter, producing a delicious roll of warmth between her thighs.

She sniffed, acutely aware that her chest felt a little tighter than usual, and again, she wondered where he'd gone. Was he okay? She must have hurt him terribly to send him running scared like that. After he'd told her what had happened with Julien, she'd all but thrown herself at him.

She sighed, quieting. Where was he?

"Remy?" she whispered to the still night surrounding her, though nothing but the sound of the crickets returned to her, scornful in their nocturnal symphony.

Rogue drew her legs to her chest, pulling them close and resting her chin on her arms. She waited, trying to squash the rising, hollow echo in her limbs that longed for his touch.

He'd left her. After promising he wouldn't, he'd run from her.

Lies, she thought, the word sinking almost as quickly as it had risen to the forefront of her mind. Rogue's jaw clenched, working against the telltale burn and the blurring vision that accompanied it.

It settled into her subconscious, burrowing deeply to settle and then germinate. He'd used her. He'd fed her what she'd needed to hear to throw her off guard, and she'd let him. Lies, she told herself again, and he'd played innocent the entire time.

She'd scared him in the process, but he'd invited it.

He ought to have known better: She lived a cursed life, a half-life deprived of the one thing that her mutation prevented her from taking willfully.

What stopped a person, she wondered; what prevented a mutant from becoming a monster? What held her back, shackled into a life less frightening through the absence of touch – a self-imposed restriction, bound though it gnashed at its bit constantly? She did.
She controlled it.

Remy was determined to wrest that control from her grasp.

That was his angle, and that was his game.

She was the wager, no better than a stack of chips on a table topped with green felt.

Rogue grit her teeth, the points of her fingertips leaving ten sensitive bruises on her arms that throbbed a little as her grip slackened. She exhaled forcefully through her nose, her breath coming out in a muted huff.

He shouldn't have kissed her back, she thought ruefully, and he shouldn't have left her alone.

She winced, recognizing the sting of betrayal for what it was, and taking it into herself entirely. Roughly, Rogue swiped at her face, her gloves scratching the dewy skin beneath her eyes. She didn't care. She didn't feel it, she insisted silently.

Feeling things led to getting hurt, and Remy was the last person on this earth who'd hurt her again.

She bit down hard on her lower lip, unconvinced by the surge of vitriol that petered out with little ceremony. Treacherously, her chest tightened again, and she drew a shuddering breath. To feel that one more time – Rogue blinked slowly, brushing away the tears that had yet to fall – to feel him next to her, his hands doing dangerous things to her ribs, teasing the underside of her breasts without actually touching them, his other hand twined in her hair, guiding her mouth to his. She sucked in a breath, her body responding to the memories against her will. Her fingers slackened over her arms as the warmth pooled outwards again from her center. Besting that was a ripple of lust so strong that it made her moan, the sound muffled by the sleeve she pressed her mouth to.

Please come back, she thought, embarrassed just the same but hardly caring since she couldn't vocalize it to the empty cemetery surrounding her.

Please.

It was almost a relief when, not more than a minute later, she felt the heavy weight of a hand settle on her shoulder.

"You came back," she sniffed, half relieved and half gripped with the fear that he should find her like this. Looking up, Rogue froze as the glint of a steel blade caught the light from beyond the perimeter wall.

The hand dug into the muscle of her shoulder, crumpling her collarbone into tendon and ligaments, rending black spots across her vision as pain bloomed fresh and dark through her neck.

"Non, p'tit. Where you're goin', dere be no comin' back. Crier pour nous, and taste your last moments."

She screamed.

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:
- Unglued: On tilt. Playing poorly and irrationally due to emotional upset, often caused by the player in question having had a good hand beat by a freak draw from another player (often in complete disregard of the odds and good play) or the player having lost a pot because of his own bad play. Also called steaming, having one's nose open, opened up, unglued and being wide open. Ex: "He just came unglued after he had pocket aces beat for the second time by the same live one."

**Translations:**
"Non, p'tit. Where you're goin', dere be no comin' back. Crier pour nous, and taste your last moments."
": "No, little one. Where you're going there is no coming back. Scream for us, and taste your last moments."
Dead Man's Hand

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Title: The Ante
Chapter 17: Dead Man's Hand
Fandom: X-Men: Evolution
Author: Kira Coffin
Summary: When Gambit left Rogue on the shores of Blood Moon Bayou, he slipped a playing card into her hand. More than a conciliatory gesture, it signalled the start of something that carried the understanding: Never bet more than you are willing to lose.
Rating: Teen/Mature
Pairing: Rogue/Remy
Warnings: Violence, unresolved sexual tension

The Ante
Chapter XVII: Dead Man's Hand

Remy shot off the tomb, his heart rocketing into his throat. He pulled out and extended his bo, launching himself effortlessly atop the nearest crypt. Her shout cut the night, raising the hair on the back of his neck with a jolt. He sprang into action — vaulting over the roofs without concern for the shabby surfaces where his footfalls landed.

His flight carried him across the cemetery to Rogue in little more than a few leaps. Skidding to a stop and rolling off the dilapidated roof of a particularly derelict mausoleum, the tails of his trench coat flapping behind him, Remy dropped into the narrow space between two crypts.

Rogue yelled again, this time, with a guttural edge he'd missed before in his blind chase: It was a battle cry.

Skittering forwards, light on his toes, back flat to the wall, he drew his staff over a shoulder in preparation to swing wide once he hit free air.

He slammed to an abrupt halt on the periphery of darkness; the movement echoed only by the slap of his trench coat hitting his calves.

The sight that greeted him was not what he'd expected in the slightest:

"You hooligans think it's polite ta sneak up on a lady?" Rogue snarled at the three masks surrounding her. She grapples one around the wrist, yanking him into the circle they'd formed around her as if getting ready to dance.

She planted a foot on his hip, her weight forcing him backwards into the nearest tomb, and then she heaved: his arm ripped forward while the rest of his body stayed pinned; the suddenness of the thrust yanking it from its socket with a sick pop!

Mask stretching across his mouth, the man paused only a second before he sucked in a lungful of air, and bellowed an oath loud enough to wake the dead.
Rogue lunged into him even as his arm sagged, the other two men forgotten momentarily. Not good, Remy thought; marking the glint of steel that flashed in the gloom as a blade came out. They were Assassins Guild, but that was no surprise.

Still, he hesitated: a worse situation would be Rogue believing that he thought she was incapable of fighting her own battles.

Arching backwards, as her body twisted, Remy saw the reason for the awkward jerk-and-duck capoeira ginga Rogue was doing: while one arm dangled uselessly at the assassin’s side, the hand Rogue gripped held a slim blade clutched between gloved fingers. Each moment she failed to release her attacker, the knife arced towards her, preparing to gouge through her sleeve and into soft flesh. Even working one-handed, the *salaud* could easily take off an appendage with only a glancing blow.

With a thud, the knife dropped to the ground. Rogue kicked it away with vicious force into the unkempt grasses spotting the bases of the tombs as her quarry howled, his wrist now twisted at an odd angle. He looked like a rag doll, a child’s toy gone to seed with the stuffing ready to spew from joinery held together by weakening threads.

Remy had to give it to her: Rogue worked quick.

"Quit your bellyachin’," she snapped, grabbing the Assassin by the collar as he doubled over, clutching at his dangling arm. She brought her knee up swiftly, catching him in the jaw. His neck snapped backwards, and he slumped to the ground.

She rounded on the other two other men who circled her. "If y’all complain as much as your buddy over here does, Ah swear Ah'll have ya eatin' dirt just ta keep you quiet."

She kicked the fallen man in the stomach for emphasis, though the only response he offered was a wet squelch forced from an unconscious body.

"This one's gonna be flossin' out the rocks in his teeth for weeks," she sneered, fisting her hands hard enough to strain the leather across her knuckles.

The pair paused, exchanging a glance between them as Rogue sized them up— one to her left, and one to her right. Unfair odds, but nothing she couldn't handle on her own, Remy surmised. The Assassins signaled each other with a twitch of a shoulder, a jerk of an elbow — discreet movements that decided who went first.

This wasn't an ordinary kill, then, Remy guessed. That, or they'd collectively decided that Rogue had proved herself by taking out their third, and it'd be worth the extra few minutes to spar.

While it could be said that the Boudreaux clan frequently trained baboons instead of mercenaries, Remy wasn't wholly willing to let Rogue have all the fun. The desire to leap in and go back to back with Rogue against two of Belladonna’s brethren set an acute itch to tingling in his hands. It had been far too long since he'd had a decent fight, and far too long since he'd really had the chance to put a crater in the earth — the thought gave him pause, and then it sank with the gravity of a two-tonne weight.

After their kiss, there might as well have been a canyon between them.

Maybe it would be best to wait and watch, he considered. If he played the odds to his favor, perhaps if he swooped in at precisely the right moment, well… It might've been too much to hope for that she'd forgive him so soon for reacting in the way he did. Truth be told, he wasn't entirely certain of how he could explain himself — not that he *would* if he could help it.
Gambit grinned, watching with appreciation as Rogue crouched into a defensive pose, her muscles flexing in the places where the shadows swept off her to reveal lean thighs, a trim waist, and pert bottom ready to deliver a sound roundhouse kick. Her weight shifted, the toe of her right foot barely brushing the ground, ready to switch stances if necessary. To Remy, it looked as if she was welcoming a good scrap. No powers allowed, he thought wryly — not that she really needed them with these fools.

He studied the pair of Assassins: With their masks on, there was no way of knowing who hid beneath the cover of thin nylon, but their movements indicated a certain stylized grace that he was familiar with; they were Belladonna's flunkies, but nobody especially important within Guild ranks.

That was their first mistake.

They'd need an army to take Rogue out.

Rogue's eyes narrowed, and Remy caught the flash of something red in their depths, winking out just as quickly as it had appeared.

He started, forgetting about her attackers entirely for a split second. Swiping a palm across his eyes, he searched again for the telltale glimmer of scarlet that would confirm his suspicion that she'd absorbed him, but the night hung heavily about Rogue's shoulders, bathing her features in half-cast shadows. 

_Merde_, he thought to himself, and slipped back into hiding with a hiss at the conflicted desire to help her, and the more self-indulgent craving to sit back and watch the show.

"C'mon, boys," she purred. "Ah'm havin' a rotten night. Such a fine evenin' without a soul ta enjoy it with." She pursed her lips, making a kissy face at the man to her left.

Inwardly, Remy winced a little at that. On the bright side, if Rogue intended to beat the stuffing out of the two fully-grown, trained Guild members, perhaps that'd spare him the same sorry fate for running off on her.

"What's wrong, sugah?" she continued. "Don't wanna fill up this gal's dance card? Ah promise Ah won't tell no one ya got two left feet!"

The pair lunged for her, one trying to sweep her legs while the other vaulted, drawing a katana from the scabbard strapped to his back.

Remy scoffed, rested his staff against a shoulder and yanked out his cigarettes. Eager to preoccupy his restless hands, he flicked a card out from the cuff of his sleeve in anticipation. He should have brought popcorn, he thought with a smirk, pointing the spade at the one without a weapon, drawing an 'x' in the air over his back as if to mark his target.

"Dibs," he murmured around his cigarette.

Rogue leapt backwards as the pair dove at her, her back arching as she somersaulted, feet kicking upwards with the momentum and catching one of the Assassins in the ribs. Dropping to her knees, she lashed out with her heel. It connected with an ankle, and he howled, the katana drooping in his grasp. Remy stuck a foot out from his hiding place, nonchalantly tripping the spare Assassin and sending him sprawling.

He withdrew into the shadows as discreet as a whisper.

"Y'all ain't afraid of lil' ole' me, are ya?" Rogue asked, tossing her head to the side to get the hair out
of her face. She stood to full height, rolling her shoulders to work out the kinks. In profile, her skin gleamed with the incandescent, lily-white perfection that matched the ageless beauty of the marble carvings that surrounded her.

Marvelous, Remy thought: enjoying the slight thrust to her hip as she looked between the pair of Assassins with disdain. Like poetry in motion, Rogue moved with the sinuous, feline grace as she turned, readying herself for the next attack.

Apparently, in the time he'd been away, she really had taken the initiative with her training. Rogue had gotten good.

With an appreciative noise, he flicked the card in his hand to life — fuchsia light smoldering to flame with a little nudge. Remy lit his cigarette, the tip flaring red in the gloom, barely a pinprick next to the burning Ace of Spades. Oops.

Rogue's attention snapped to the conflagration of his powers manifesting, and she frowned.

"Ya gotta be kidding me," she muttered, her mouth twisting into a frown.

Remy inhaled, holding the smoke in his lungs for two heartbeats while weighing the number of things he could possibly tell her that would smooth away that look on her face. He blew it out with force, his mind drawing a blank where he should have been able to remedy the hurt.

It wasn't the first time. Hell, it probably wouldn't be the last either.

"Sorry m' late, chérie," he murmured, the words rolling off his tongue with a little too much detached indifference.

It sounded cold, even as the card in his hand crackled meaningfully. Still, he didn't douse the charge.

The Assassin on the ground leapt up, his spine creaking as he pivoted, searching for the source of the voice. At his feet, the first man Rogue had taken out remained motionless. The third was unaccounted for.

Rogue hesitated. It was barely a second, but Remy registered it nonetheless. Acidly, she replied, "No worries saloon boy, Ah've got these two taken care of."

The lackey with the katana stood with a snarl, nodding silently to his partner who reappeared on the opposite side of a nearby tomb, and lunged at Rogue. She rolled her eyes, sidestepping him as he flew across the footpath and latched onto his shoulders. The Assassin growled, retreating with Rogue clinging to him so that her back cracked into the nearest tomb.

She winced in pain, and smiling grimly, the cigarette hanging off his lower lip, he stepped from beneath the cover of the crypts and into the bleary light cast off from Washington Avenue. It pooled between them, illuminating the figures who'd accosted her.

"Damnit!" Rogue swore, pained, and released a hand to latch onto the slight overhang of the tomb's roof. Digging one foot into the Assassin's back, she propelled herself upwards, kicking him squarely off of her so that he stumbled, sprawling over the prostrate body with the bloody nose already on the ground.

"And what a wonderful sight you are." Remy smiled, plucking the cigarette from his mouth and running his tongue over his lower lip, all the while watching her movements with rapt attention.

Rogue hauled herself backwards, legs kicking up, the momentum hauling her topside to her knees
atop the crypt.

She frowned at him, the expression turning into a sneer as the Assassin sprang to follow her. Lashing out with her heel, Rogue sent him sprawling backwards with a clatter.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded. The slightly higher pitch of her voice betrayed her true sentiments, and Remy repressed a frown. She was upset with him, and uncertain how to remedy it, he opted to rely on convention.

Swinging his staff off his shoulders and using it like an over-extended golf club, he knocked her attacker backwards just as he'd brought himself to his knees, and jammed the card into the marble slab decorating the entrance to the vault at his back. Turning quickly, he felt the charge spike down his arm, and slid the Ace like a credit card into the brittle joinery that kept the tomb sealed. He heard the mortar split, and leaving the Ace in place at the bottom of the receiving vault, Remy spun out of the way as the marker blew outwards — sending a cloud of stone, dust, and century-old bone into the air.

"Smoke break," he explained out of the corner of his mouth, gesturing to the cigarette and puffing on it with crass enthusiasm. He learned around the side of the tomb to inspect his handiwork.

Rogue couldn't seem to find a reply to that, and Remy couldn't find the gumption to suck the words back. For a moment, he wasn't certain if he even wanted to with the way she was looking at him.

She frowned. It wasn't more than a small downturn of her mouth, her lips still too red and plumped from their shared kiss, but it jarred him nonetheless. His hand raised, palm upwards in a gesture of apology, Remy opened his mouth to reply, and promptly choked on a suitable explanation. The cigarette drooped from between his lips.

Rogue frowned, turning away from him a little, her posture conveying more than words could at that moment: Disappointment.

Without time to think on it, the Assassin with the katana sprang back into the circle between the tombs, and ever obliging, Remy stepped to the side before he could dice his shoulder. Without as much as a grunt of effort, he whacked the man between the shoulder blades, using his bo to thrust him headlong into the freshly opened vault. The Assassin met the back of the crypt with a dismal crunch.

"Perfect fit," he muttered, prodding at the protruding toes that hung out over the edge of the shelf.

Rogue wasn't smiling.

If the tightness in his chest were indicative of anything, he'd have done his best to brush it off as heartburn or something a little more mundane. He couldn't place the sensation, although it was familiar. He didn't want to identify the feeling, though it reminded him strongly of something he'd successfully forgotten a long time ago.

His expression, a cool mask of indifference, kept the facade from cracking as he appraised her on her perch.

"Not now, Cajun." She still wouldn't meet his gaze.

Inwardly, Remy winced. She was searching for the third Assassin. Good thing at least one of them had their priorities straight.

"Rogue," he began, wanting to explain. It came out stilted. He cleared his throat, squinting through
the rising smoke.

She looked at him, her eyes defeated and mournful — perfectly suited to their surroundings.

Beneath the cover of shadows, a mottled speckling of thicker shades lent by the twined branches overhead, Rogue appeared to shrink into herself. The trees offered their hushed conference, drowning out the many possible things he wanted to say to her in that moment. It made his chest tighten, barely perceptible, but budding with uncertainty nonetheless. Remy knew she remained in the same spot: somber and watchful. But all too soon, the moment was gone, stolen by the idiot with the katana who groaned nearby.

"Remy, watch out!"

Blinking, he turned in time to see the sharp blade arcing towards his head.

Rogue leapt at him, knocking him clear, and landed atop the sword-wielding Assassin.

She parried with the attacker, snarling as their arms lanced together. He lifted her by the elbows, locking her arms near her neck and prevented her from taking a clear shot. Between them, the katana gleamed with menace, catching the light and reflecting ugly patterns over the faces of the old tombs. She kneed him in the groin, hard.

Remy winced with mock sympathy. "Homme, that's gotta hurt."

Again, the one with the katana stood to full height, brandishing the sword like a baseball bat rather than with the balanced precision the instrument deserved.

"What are you?" Gambit cocked an eyebrow, frowning derisively at his attacker. "Rookies?"

He slung his staff across his shoulder, draping a wrist over one end, the other hand plucking at his smoldering cigarette and exhaling through his nose.

"Ya just gonna watch, Cajun? Or maybe give a girl a hand?" Rogue snapped, one arm breaking free from the Assassin's hold and uppercutting him. He took the blow, and despite the audible crunching noise that accompanied it, he didn't back off.

"Didn't think y' needed one. But since you asked, and so nicely... we should mebbe go now."

"Ya think?" she shot over her shoulder, fending off katana boy with all she was worth.

With a grimace, he dashed his cigarette to the ground and swept his staff around to his front. It sliced through the air with a low whistle.

Rogue ducked as the Assassin lunged, and Remy took the opportunity to leap into the fray.

"Hey ugly!" he called. His head snapped towards him, and although he was masked, Remy sensed the man's lips curl. There was a light speckling of blood near the mouth, making the black fabric shine a little more brightly. "I got a message for y' boss!"

Three cards slipped between his fingers from beneath his wrist guard. He held them to the side, his staff rolling over the knuckles of his left hand to keep him at a distance. He parried, the katana singing off the adamantium with a teeth-gritting shear. The Assassin danced backwards, brandishing the sword like he wanted nothing more to skewer them through in tandem. A vibrant flash of pink illuminated the ground near Remy's feet as the charge increased steadily, and with it, the air filled with the whining crescendo of excited molecules.
"Ah don't think these idiots know what a memo is, swamp rat!" Rogue snapped, ducking a sweep of the sword and leaping backwards in the process. Remy caught her, his staff coming to rest across her chest, his fingers splayed at her collarbone. She was breathing hard, and her heart hammered steadily.

He jabbed at the Assassin, sending him staggering backwards a few steps.

"They know, I'm sure. I've dealt with their sort before. We got two more incoming," he said into her hair, his spatial awareness picking up the warm bodies moving with haste across Prytania Street.

"What?" she asked, incredulous. "How do you know that?"

She tried to push off him, but Remy yanked her backwards, hoisting her by the waist and waltzing two steps to the side as katana-man swung wide at Rogue's midsection.

"Think of it like m' spidey sense," he joked.

Rogue tensed beneath his arm, and Gambit hugged her against him a little more firmly. "You're safe with me," he assured her, pivoting to shield her from the next blow. At his side, the sizzling, whining cards gained in amplitude.

"So long as you're around! You left," she hissed fiercely, "again!"

"And for some reason, I always seem t' come back t' you." He grinned into her hair. He took the opportunity to crack an Assassin in the knee soundly, bowing with her still fit snugly against him as if the fight were of no consequence at all.

"Ah'm sorry Ah waited this time," she growled.

Bad territory, he cautioned himself. This was no time to try and rationalize what had happened between them, and definitely not the right opportunity to discuss what it meant being absorbed by her when such a thing shouldn't have been possible, given the nature of his secondary mutation.

"Consider y' dance card filled, chérie," he cut her off, grinning as her hand clasped his wrist. He noticed she still wore her gloves, but he didn't question it. Rogue still refused to use her powers even in combat, even though their lives were both very much at risk. "There are two more on foot. You good for it, or y' want me t' take 'em?" he asked instead.

"Ah could use a change of pace," she muttered dryly, matching her steps to his as they swept to the right. Remy turned her, gently, but with deliberate direction. He was grateful that she followed as the man he'd thrown into the crypt flew out of the darkness from their left, and the pair of Assassins descended on them again as a team.

"Thought I shook things up enough earlier, non?" he said, making a small noise of effort as his staff took a wide arc, catching the shorter of the two roughly in the jaw. He swept the staff overhead to block the follow-through from the katana.

Remy registered the first impact and the following light speckling of blood that splattered the grey slabs of flagstone that made up the broken path beneath their feet. The Assassin staggered, groaning, his mask torn at the mouth in a jagged line that displayed a glimpse of lacerated flesh lanced with scarlet so dark it appeared black in the gloom. He stilled a moment, teetering in a swoon, and then slumped over a nearby grave marker that jutted off into the darkness.

One down, Remy thought, grinning a little.
"Where's our third guy?" he asked.

"He bolted."

Coward, he thought fiercely. Probably running home to lick his wounds.

The cards in his hand crackled menacingly, and his fingers began to burn with the itch of unfulfilled release.

"You tell me this isn't a better time than being stuck runnin' simulations in that Danger Room of yours."

"Not the time for that, Remy." Rogue sucked in a breath, and Remy swooped around with her, the heels of her boots edging up onto his toes, the bo locking her against his chest. Narrowly, they missed the brush of the katana again, metal scraping against metal where the katana slid off the barrier of the staff, its wielder grunting from the effort of tracking them.

"It's never a good time with you, is it?"

"Ah wasn't aware Ah was workin' around your schedule," she retorted.

Remy clutched her harder, his arm crossing her ribs, and Rogue gasped. He felt the inhalation beneath his hand, and he thought, were this another time and another place, it could almost be romance. Almost.

The Assassins crawled to his knees and seeing the glint of a blade cast away from Rogue's earlier victory, he staggered forwards.

"I'm sorry," Remy said, a compounded apology for many things he couldn't begin voicing, and with force, he jabbed at the man squarely between the shoulder blades. The hit sent him face first into the dirt, the blade forgotten.

"You said that already," she returned, her hands wrapping around his forearm and leaning back against him as she kicked out, her heel coming down on the Assassin's shoulder.

"Typically a lady'd accept if a gentleman apologizes twice."

"Well there's the problem: you ain't no gentleman."

"What else am I supposed t' do?" he asked.

"How about you tell me why ya bailed ta begin with," she pressed.

When Remy remained silent, Rogue took the momentary lapse in conversation to strike at the man fumbling with the katana, tugging away from him for a moment, but coming back to rest against him in a matter of seconds.

He hadn't needed to hold her to him that time.

"Y' wanna play with m' stick?" he offered, feigning innocence while trying to veer the conversation in a different direction.

"Twirl me, Cajun," she muttered, ignoring the invitation to parry with him. "If ya can't do nothin' else."
"It's better than 'screw ya' I suppose." He complied, the staff compacting and disappearing up his sleeve as he gripped Rogue's fingers. She swung out with her leg, her shin clipping the Assassin and causing him to stagger, before Remy snapped her back against him neatly.

"How's about we just forget about it?"

Clearly, that was the wrong thing to say.

"How's about ya go ta hell, swamp rat?" she snarled in response, struggling to break free. He held firm.

"Only if y' goin' with me," he returned.

"Ah'm already there!" she yelled, her shoulders twisting against his chest.

Unable to stop himself, he breathed into her ear, "You're tellin' me this is that bad?"

"Ah'm telling you that Ah don't care!" she shouted, tearing away from him. Before them, the Assassin struggled to his feet unsteadily. Rogue turned on her heel, facing Remy down. "Ah'm only dealin' with ya to get that stone, and then Ah'm gone, Remy. Do ya understand? Ah hope ya do, 'cause Ah'll have ya know you're not the only one who can leave!"

Gambit stiffened, the flames encircling the cards licking at his sleeve and spreading — they dripped to the ground, rolling down his coat and suffusing the air around him with a charge so strong that it nearly made him sway on his feet. He held firm, molecules shuddering uncertainly and rocketing across the flags below his feet. Each illuminated one at a time, a series of charges primed for detonation. He felt the burn of each and every one as they grew.

"Take it," he said, unsurprised at the cold tone that laced the statement. He snapped the staff from his sleeve and pressed it into her hands. Continuing with forced civility, he said, "Y' get one clean shot, and if he gets up again, I'm gonna blow this cooyon straight t' the other side of th' Mississippi. Comprends?"

His hand was beginning to ache from the strain. It was almost a welcome pain, and Remy relished it. It took his mind off her nearness — but only just. He remembered the feeling: the slow constriction and the hard knot at the base of his throat. With that bitter realization, he recalled where that old ache in his chest had once blossomed. It's hard to forget what it feels like, being used, and Rogue had all but said their little interlude was a matter of convenience. She was using him, he thought. Maybe it served him right. Hadn't he done her the same injustice a year ago?

Disdainfully, he peered at the felled Assassins, sparing a fraction of his attention for the one who still approached, determined to finish the job despite his obvious injuries.

Remy remembered all too clearly. He knew who'd sent them, after all: it was just like Belladonna Boudreaux to try and forget old wounds by making new ones.

It created an unnatural sort of cicatrix cycle, he thought wryly. There was never enough time to heal over from the first scars she left behind.

His wrist burned with an ache that filled his bones. It took his mind off the real pain.

Funny, he'd told himself he wouldn't put himself through that sort of torture again for a femme, and here he was.

"Remy, your hand —" Rogue started, her eyes widening.
"It's nothing," he replied, his teeth gritting together. He hit the button that brought his bo to full extension with his thumb. Rogue looked down at the staff in her hands, frowning as if realizing she'd accepted his help. Remy became acutely aware that the burn had spread to his muscles, and the charge was now lancing through the flags beneath their feet.

"You're such a liar!" she said, wrenching the bo away.

Mentally, he agreed, his mouth twisting with solidified resolve. He wouldn't put himself through it again, not even for her.

Business before pleasure, as it were, and pleasure to blunt the pain.

"Keep it in check, swamp rat," she snapped, her features hardened to the point where the soft southern goth became near unrecognizable. "Ah don't want ta think of the property damage," she spat, and leapt backwards with a shout as the last Assassin leapt at them.

Remy smirked, a caustic twist of his mouth that fixed firmly to his features.

That settled it, he decided.

"Think of it as artistic license!" he shot back, and with a grunt, Gambit let the cards fly.

"We're blowing up!" Kitty cried.

Logan spun in his chair, straining to see the large red dot blinking on the laptop's monitor. Beside it, several faint pinpricks glowed feebly, indicating a handful of other mutants in the area.

"We have a target. We've got him!" She grinned, her fingers mapping out the exact coordinates where the signal had shown up.

"Storm!" Logan bellowed. "Take this bird down now!"

"Was?" Nightcrawler yelled, struggling with his seatbelt so he could see for himself. After several seconds of unsuccessful battle with his harness, his teleported out to land beside Kitty's chair in a puff of noxious smoke.

"No, Storm! You keep this plane level. We do not have confirmation to land." Cyclops yelled. "Everyone! Sit back down this instant! Wolverine, stand down!"

Logan snarled. "That punk's down there!"

"And we're not landing without the proper protocol," Scott returned.

"Protocol schmotocol," Bobby said. On the prompter before him, Tabitha rolled her eyes. He stuck out his tongue at her, and the feed went dead. "Crap. She did it again."

"Doesn't matter right now," Logan said, claws popping and retracting just as quickly.

"I'll go," Kurt volunteered. "If we can't land, just fly a little lower, I'll 'port out."

"And yer takin' me with ya."

"Confirmation, Scott?" Storm asked.

Conflicted, his hand still clamping his earphone to the side of his head, Cyclops grimaced at his co-
pilot and then peered over his shoulder at Logan and Kurt. Wolverine looked more than ready to slice a hole into the side of the jet and throw himself from it bodily, if it meant getting down to Gambit and Rogue quicker.

"Fine," he relented. "Get us clear, Storm, and give Nightcrawler the least amount of distance to the ground that you can."

"Oh, mon dieu! C'est pas vrai!"

"Shh, Emil! Quiet!"

Lapin swept up the perimeter wall, rattling along the edge that followed Prytania and led to the Lafayette Cemetery gates. Behind him, Henri followed, his gait a little shorter, but keeping up to his younger cousin nonetheless.

The flare of fuchsia lasted no more than a moment; the three charges detonating in rapid succession on the far side of the cemetery, setting off several car alarms in the vicinity. The neighborhood was already waking to the noise; amber lights flicking to life behind curtained windows throughout the district. In the wake of the explosions, a blossom of fire sprouted against the wall, illuminating the stark, staggered tombs that littered the graveyard in ragged rows. There wasn't much time.

"They're not there," Henri confirmed, barreling across the uneven rooftops just as Lapin continued his rapid dash around and over the crumbling, stucco-covered gateway.

"We're late," Lapin said, ducking his head and cutting across Henri, who swore colorfully having his stride broken.

"Pay attention! Merde…"

"Bec mon cul!" Lapin shot back, scouring the darkness and wincing against the orange glow of flame as his eyes struggled to adjust to the contrast. There was no sign of the men they'd followed and no sign of either the girl or…

A voice they both recognized broke the tense silence: "Y' fuzzy tail'd get in the way, mon ami."

"Remy?" Lapin cried at the sound of his cousin's lazy drawl.

He pivoted so fast that he lost his balance, teetering on the wall a moment before tumbling backwards. Lapin landed with a dull thud that knocked the wind from his lungs.

Blinking, surprised, he sucked in a great gulp of air, and, a moment later, took notice that cemetery dirt didn't taste any worse than regular dirt. He thanked the saints his ancestors founded the city on a scrap of land before the water table that prevented in-ground burials, and promptly spat out a clot of earth that was decidedly not corpse-flavored. He punctuated his gasps with a few colorful oaths.

Wheezing, Lapin rolled over onto his back and stared at the three figures overhead: one svelte charmant from up North, one bald and short pain-in-his-ass, and one lanky sight for sore eyes in a trench coat. With a wince, Lapin unholstered his bo and used the weapon to hoist himself to shaky feet.

Feigning injury, he asked Remy, "Y' come t' kiss it better?"

Henri chuckled.
Rubbing his backside, Lapin casually sized up the company: That they loomed over him, statuesque and gigantic, didn't put Emil off in the slightest. He might've been vertically challenged (no thanks to the good old LeBeau genes he'd inherited from his mama) but with the added height afforded by the tombs on which they stood, he was the equivalent of an ant compared to the three. Lapin comforted himself with the knowledge that he was a quicker draw than all of them combined... well, mostly: Remy didn't count, what with his unfair advantages and all.

To Henri's left stood Rogue, her hips canted to the left, attitude sluicing off her in rivers. Remy's staff supported her weight. She held it like a walking stick, fingers twisted around it without any finesse. Her gaze flicked to Remy momentarily, and he peered back at her over Henri's shoulder. Remy appeared at ease, his hands concealed inside deep trench coat pockets with his trademark, semi-permanent smirk plastered across his face — but something was off, Lapin decided.

No one spent their life in the Thieves Guild without being at least a little observant.

Lapin made quick work of his assessment, doing his best to deduce the newfound tension between them:

Rogue was stiffer than the last time he'd seen her on the Pontchartrain Causeway, her gaze shrouded beneath heavy white bangs that fell across her face in strips, and her lips pursed as she glowered at Remy with thinly-veiled hostility.

Curioser, and curioser, he thought to himself: Remy's expression faltered. It happened so quickly that Lapin near missed it, but nonetheless, it had happened. His cousin's eyes took on a faraway, distracted look. By the time Remy had recovered himself, Lapin was primed and waiting with both eyebrows glued to his hairline in question.

"Who died?" Lapin asked, scrutinizing his cousin without bothering to be discreet.

Remy merely blinked at him, his expression stony. He didn't respond. Not that Emil Lapin thought he would. Still, it never hurt to try.

Henri clucked, "Manners, Lapin." Turning to Remy, he asked, "Boy, y' alright?"

Remy nodded, stepping over Lapin's head to embrace his brother. The pair clapped each others' shoulders, slapping each others' backs open-palmed and muttering pleasantries in French.

Lapin hunched his shoulders, tapping at Remy's heels irritably with the end of his staff. "Mind the gap!"

Remy looked down between his boots, and Lapin grinned.

"Y' keep that thing to yourself, ein?" Remy toed the point of Lapin's staff away and returned to his perch on the wall at Rogue's side with a graceful leap.

Lapin huffed, patting at his immaculately formed orange spikes. "Just watch it when it comes to th' coif. Don't need your boot soles in m' hair."

"P'tit?" Henri asked Rogue, who nodded in turn.

"Ah'm fine."

Frowning, Lapin realized that after such a long time of not seeing his brother, Remy sure was behaving strangely. Lapin flicked his gaze back to Rogue, who peered down at him, offering a strained smile.
"Huh."

"Whacha laughin' at, short stuff?" she asked, crouching to peer over him.

Sooty smears crisscrossed her slacks, matching the scotched hem of Remy's trench coat. They made quite a fashion statement, thought Emil — chimney sweeps, the pair of them. Strained, stressed, an visibly tense to boot.

Perhaps neither of them had emerged from the fight unscathed. That wasn't unusual. From what Lapin had heard about the girl the last time she was here with Remy, she held her own against the Rippers pretty good. But if it was Remy stirrin' up trouble, then there wasn't much to be done about it: there wasn't a femme south of the mason-dixie line that was safe from Jean Luc LeBeau's pride and joy.

"Nothin'," he said, nodding to Remy's staff still clutched in her hand. "Considerin' you're holding on to that thing? Nothing at all, ma belle." He threw her a winning grin. "Since when y' been using a quarterstaff, ein? That what you used on the Assassins?"

"That's who they were?" She looked surprised. Across from her, Remy cleared his throat pointedly. Lapin ignored him, happy to be the focus of Rogue's attention.

"Mais, oui! Who else goes runnin' across the city leavin' breadcrumbs when they try t' track someone?" he asked with mock exasperation. "I dunno what Marius' been teaching 'em, but I sure as shit wouldn't pay good money to have those idiots doin' my dirty work for me. Pah! Not a speck of style, you ask me —"

"Lapin?" said Henri.

"Quoi?" Emil asked, not understanding the unspoken message he was trying to convey with his eyebrows wiggling all over the place. If Henri's mustache started twitching, that was it —

Remy shook his head. "If they ever bring you in t' torture information out of you, Lapin, that'll be a sorry day for us all indeed."

"Y' knew?" Lapin asked Remy, unconvinced. "How'd he know?" he shot at Henri. "We were tryin' to intercept them before they could reach you. We saw 'em, didn't we, Henri? Way back off Rue St. Anne in one of the back alleys. The belle femme over here turned a corner, and they were on her like white on rice."

Henri pressed gloved fingers to the crown of his shaved head, rubbing the dome of his skull as if he'd developed a migraine. It was the sort of weary gesture that usually earned a smack from Mercy, Henri's wife. "I give up," he sighed.

"Lapin still hasn't built a filter between his brain and his mouth, I see," said Remy.

"No sense of discretion," agreed Henri.

"The Assassins Guild was followin' me?" Rogue looked Remy for confirmation, her eyes narrowing. "And you knew?"

In his defense, Remy held up both hands as if to say he was innocent. "Was sort of busy at th' time. " A slow smile curled the corners of his mouth.

"What…?" Lapin began, unable to repress a shudder at the sight of Rogue's expression:
If looks could kill, Remy would be dead ten times over for the glare she fixed him with.

"Button it, Emil," Henri warned.

Lapin pointed between the Rogue and Remy; staring each other down as if they were preparing to tear one another's throats.

"Rogue looks like a mad alley cat, right 'bout now." He turned to glare at Remy. "What did you do?"

"You're still at spitting distance, Lapin," Remy cautioned. "Y' talk about Rogue like that and she might just use you for target practice."

Rogue snorted. "Trust me, if Ah was taking aim at anyone, it wouldn't be Lapin."

Remy smirked, but it was strained. Something had shifted between them; a power play changing hands, Lapin concluded, a little relieved that he'd guessed correctly: Remy, however he'd managed it, had probably done something stupid to piss the femme off.

Given his cousin's track record growing up, that was hardly a surprise.

Lapin barked a nervous laugh, grateful that it was his cousin on the receiving end of Rogue's expression. He cleared his throat, attempting to diffuse the situation:

"Th' bald one up there be Henri LeBeau," he offered by way of distraction.

"M' brother," Remy supplied. With a small, forced smile, she acknowledged Henri properly.

"Ah'm Rogue."

"In more ways than one," Remy muttered. She ignored him.

"It's m' pleasure, chère." Henri bowed a little from the waist. "Y' could say I'm the better half of the family."

"And that'd be an understatement," Lapin supplied. "Don't get any ideas, though. He's taken." He winked at Rogue, beaming. "But I'm still available."

"That's good ta know, Lapin," she replied. "It's not like Ah'm spoken for or nothin'." She smiled coolly at Remy, who feigned indifference.

"I'm sorry t' say this, but Lapin's not much of an improvement from m' brother," Henri said. "Your best bet," he nodded to Rogue, "would be t' steer clear of 'em both."

"Why y' gotta go and ruin m' chances, Henri?" Lapin whined, trying vainly to lighten the mood.

"Y' don't have chances t' ruin t' begin with," Remy interjected. "Besides," he added, "there's not much you can do with a girl who can't touch."

Lapin barely had the chance to duck as overhead, Remy's staff sailed through the air with a muted whoosh. When Lapin next looked up, Rogue had turned on her heel, stalking off down the wall, and Remy was rubbing his forehead, grimacing.

"Merde," he muttered, his eyes tearing as he blinked at the pain. The staff thumped to the ground beside Lapin, compacting inwards as it rolled against his boot.

"Good job!" Lapin exclaimed, applauding him with sarcastic slowness.
"That's gonna bruise," Henri clucked at him, shaking his head.

"Chére!" Remy yelled, motioning for Lapin to throw him the staff. He looked after Rogue, making an impatient gesture with his hands for his bo. Lapin picked it up and tossed it. This time, Remy caught the damned thing instead of letting it hit him in the head.

"Merde!" he said again, giving chase. He didn't even wobble.

"Always said he had a hard head," Henri muttered.

"If that's how y' gotta treat the femmes to get 'em to like you, I'm gonna start acting like a jerk more often," Lapin mused aloud.

Henri merely shook his head dolefully. "You're hopeless, Emil."

"Quoi?" he called after Henri, who took off across the tops of the tombs, probably to survey the damage left by the explosions. "I bet she'll kiss it better! Makes the concussion worth it!"

When nothing but the silence returned to him, Lapin huffed, stalking off towards the flickering glow over the cemetery in the distance.

"That fille'll knock you out twice and then you know you're a winner," he muttered to himself. "If you're in a coma, you can't complain."

Like a moth drawn to gaslight, her eyes stinging, Rogue leapt and landed hard on the sodden ground, unconsciously moving towards the blaze from their earlier scrap with the Assassins. Her heels sunk a little as she slid between the rows, making the waterlogged earth squish with each step she took. Beyond the flare of the spreading fire, she'd break for the gates of the cemetery and over into the streets of the Garden District.

The cemetery was quiet, but behind her, she heard Remy yell — and that was enough to spur her onwards.

Where she was a lesson in absolutes, Remy was the epitome of caprice: he had to twist the knife deeper.

Saturnine, saturated with the sting of his words, Rogue barreled onwards. She came to a clearing a moment later. Blinking hard to clear her vision, she realized she'd managed to lose her way amidst the myriad pathways of Lafayette Cemetery.

"Damnit," she breathed. She needed a place to hide before he descended on her. She'd wait it out, let him pass, and then get the hell out as quickly as she could.

She'd find the stone herself. She didn't need him, and she definitely didn't want to deal with him.

"Asshole," she breathed, her voice turning gravely with the exclamation. He knew how much it'd hurt to throw it in her face that no one could possibly want her, her powers being what they were. If that was what it was like for his stupid pride to compensate for being rejected after he'd run from her, she didn't need him. The Rogue didn't need anyone.

Overhead, a mournful hoot permeated the air.

Despite the low note, it seemed out of place in the quiet cemetery. The Garden District didn't have the towering buildings of downtown, nor the historic architecture of the French Quarter, but it was
still the city. Last she checked, owls weren't really a thing in metropolitain places like New Orleans.

Spinning on her heel, Rogue found herself staring upwards into wide, unblinking amber eyes. The owl's head swiveled, watching her speculatively, and hooted again.

"Git," she hissed, her arms prickling with uneasy gooseflesh.

There was something familiar about its markings: The oily gleam of its coat a little too slick, too grey-blue where it should have been black. Rogue shivered despite the heat, the back of her neck growing cold.

It had been in a cemetery similar to this, years ago in Mississippi, that she'd lost herself to her powers for the first time. She'd been at a high school dance that night — some social function or another. Whatever it was, it had mattered to her then, though now, she could barely remember the event. Cody had invited her: Cody, the strong, shy, stubborn jock who wouldn't have taken no for an answer, not even from the one freak at the school: the Goth with the "skin condition" who nobody else would talk to, much less ask to a dance.

Cody. She softened at the thought of him — broad-shouldered, ash-blond Cody Robbins who had the smile of an angel and the heart to match.

He'd been so nervous around her that it had taken the prompting of one of his football-playing friends to coax him into asking her to the dance floor. What a mistake that had been.

What happened after Rogue could only remember in fragments: He'd fallen into her somehow, his wide, warm palms touching her skin for just a second — and just like that, his mind and his soul had poured into her like water flowing from a pitcher.

She'd run, confused and scared, through the back alleys and over the fences of residential Caldecott County, from herself, from the voices in her head that pursued her, and wound up in a cemetery much like this.

She'd put Cody in a coma, but she'd only learned that later.

Rogue shivered, remembering the graveyard that night:

It had been moonlit; cast in slivers of milky silver and shadow, and she'd seen an owl similar to the one watching her now when the X-Men had found her. Her powers had manifested — stolen from Kurt, and then Storm. The damage she'd done that night — the flood, the lightening, all of it — had been at the prompting of Mystique:

She'd manipulated her into thinking the X-Men wanted to hurt her for being a mutant.

Rogue bristled.

"Git!" she insisted, waving at the owl. Its likeness was uncanny, and even if Mystique was long gone, she didn't need a reminder of the one monster who'd used and exploited and sacrificed her to suit her own ends hooting at her. Stupid bird.

When it didn't move from its perch atop a carved ornamental urn, decorating the apex of a crypt's roof, Rogue dipped her hands into her pockets and rooted for something to throw at it.

She didn't like it. In some ways, the eerie, incandescent shine to its eyes reminded her of the things she'd left behind or forgotten that night, like a… a harbinger, or a psychopomp, or some other nasty beastie whose appearance foretold unspeakable doom.
Her gloved fingers came in contact with the edge of something palm-sized and firm. The cards, she realized, the deck Remy had slipped her while they were still at his apartment.

Rogue shut her eyes, pulling back her hand sharply as if scalded. "Ah so don't need this right now," she breathed, trying to control the quaver in her voice. She swallowed thickly, pushing back the acidic rise at the back of her throat.

She didn't want to think about him, but hell, it had felt just as good to thunk him in the head with that staff of his as it did to kiss him. Funny, she'd have thought his reflexes were better than that.

Rogue barked a laugh, and just as quickly, clamped a hand over her mouth. The sound rang around her, and to her right, the owl offered an antagonistic flap of its wings.

She grimaced. "You shut up," she shot back at it. The owl blinked.

Ignoring the small well of guilt that came with the vindication of returning a little bit of the pain Remy had doled out, it didn't staunch the sting of rejection.

He'd all but announced that nobody would want her. He'd all but said he didn't want her, and somehow, that hurt more than it should have.

"Ah hope Ah left a bruise," she said to the owl, which remained unresponsive this time, puffing its chest. She muttered, "If you understood me, Ah'd tell ya ta go find that swamp rat and shit on his head."

As if on cue, the owl dipped its head, spread its wings, and took to the air with an explosion of sound.

Leaping backwards, startled, Rogue watched it a moment, soaring up into the night sky — a blackened speck against the deep blue overhead, disconcerted by its quick departure. She snorted nervously, wondering if the bird had actually understood her.

The nighttime heat returned like a heavy slap across her shoulders, and she stiffened beneath its weight.

She'd lingered too long.

Remy was nearby. The smell of his cologne filled her nostrils. It made her feel sluggish, somnolent and heavy below his gaze. He'd found her.

"Leave me alone." She didn't turn around.

He didn't say anything, though she felt the brush of his fingers at her shoulders as he moved behind her, and gingerly swept her hair to the side.

Rogue flinched away from him, grimacing, though she did not turn.

"Y' don't want t' take another swing at Remy, chérie?" Gambit murmured, the low rumble of his voice causing the shiver down her back to renew itself afresh. "He'd deserve it."

Rogue smiled, the expression strained as she glanced at him over her shoulder. She slid her hands into her pockets, fingers brushing his cards.

"Sugah," she said with all the false and syrupy indulgence she could muster, "it's like you said, what good is a girl who can't touch ya?"
"'Bout as good as an homme who can't seem t' do the same t' you," he replied. There was nothing reproachful about it, and nothing apologetic either. She couldn't decide which stung more.

Rogue hummed. "'Bout the same," she echoed, brushing his hands off her shoulders and replacing her fists into her pockets.

"Look at me."

Rogue squinted into the darkness, swallowing the lump in her throat, hard. Where was his sincerity now, she wondered. Wasn't he always like this? Full of sly looks and self-assured confidence to smooth the ends of his words and make it all sound good enough to forget he wasn't being sincere? She hated that he played it off, seeming so unaffected.

"Ah don't think so, Gambit."

"Don't call me that," he said quietly. "S'il-vous-plait. It's like you're puttin' added distance between us, and lord knows, we don't need anymore of that."

"Ah could call ya 'asshole' instead, would that be better?"

"At least you'd be calling me."

Rogue frowned, turning her head to the side a little. "Why do ya always have ta do that?"

Remy stepped into her peripheral vision, and she turned away, not willing to subject herself to the intent gleam of his unnerving gaze.

"Do what?" he asked blithely, his fingers steadily working their way back into her hair. Rogue braced herself, feeling the gentle pressure where he pulled lightly on her curls.

"What you're doing now," she said hoarsely. Rogue cleared her throat, determined to step away, determined to put some distance between them and find that safety net of a few inches once again. "Ah told you not ta touch me."

"What we want and what we need are two very different things, mignonne. It's just the difference of drawing th' line between them and finding a way t' leap over it, non?"

It wasn't an apology, she reminded herself.

"Ah can't do that, and ya know it." She sighed, pulling away from him, and finally, turned to stare him down, finding him looming in her personal space. She took a step backwards, startled that he'd moved so close. "Stop it," she whispered.

"Quoi, chérie?" he asked, a small quirk to his mouth as he lidded his gaze.

"Stop it," she said again, her voice uneven and delicate. She hated it instantaneously. "Ah'm sorry," she ground out, "Ah'm sorry Ah kissed ya, but Ah can't take it back so you're just gonna have to live with it -"

Gambit raised a hand, silencing her.

"You kissed me?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow. He was determined to draw this out, she thought, her hackles rising. Could he embarrass her any further?

Rogue jutted her chin, strengthening her resolve. "Ah said Ah was sorry Ah kissed ya, and if you'd let me finish, it won't happen again. Ya hear?"
It was like looking into the face of a marble statue: a very convincingly life-like, very neutral, unconcerned statue with eyes that looked straight back at you and told you nothing about what was going on under the surface.

Determined this time to not back down, she stared right back.

He held her gaze until Rogue was certain he could hear her heart pounding.

After a moment that seemed to stretch out forever, he said with a shrug and a bemused quirk of the mouth, "Non."

She could have slapped him she was so tense.

"You're not allowed having regrets. My game. My rules," he explained.

Scoffing, but not without a remarkable amount of self-control, Rogue balled her hands into fists. "For the last time swamp rat, Ah'm not playin'."

Her head ached something fierce, a dull, pulsating throb that started in her temples and worked its way around to the point between her eyes where it could irritate her the most.

"Too late t' deal you out now," he returned carefully, like he was sampling the words in his mouth before letting them drip down on her. Each syllable seared like acid.

"Can't you just stop for a minute?" she cried, furious. "You hurt me, Remy!"

He clasped the fingers of her left hand, pulling her forwards to lift her chin, as if to inspect her then pushing her back to arm's length. "Where?" he asked, looking her over with a slight lift to his expression. Concern chased by something else, she thought, smothered out by that inscrutable, arrogant, flippant appraisal that made her feel more exposed than cared for.

Like she was a piece of meat. Or just a piece.

Rogue shook him off. "Don't be obtuse!" she spat at him.

He mustered up an innocent expression — toying with her, she realized.

"Why would ya care?" she snapped, drawing backwards at last, out of range to be hit by his direct scorn.

"Gambit always cares, chère," he replied with far too much indulgence, his eyes glittering. "You tell Remy what y' need, where it hurts, and he promises he'll help you take y' mind off things."

"Full of promises that don't count for nothin'. Stop talking," she snapped. "You're wastin' your precious breath, and you're wasting my time."

"There's only one way t' get me t' shut up, Roguey," he purred, leaning closer.

His eyes pinned her, like darkened pools with molten centers, and Rogue shivered. He lidded his gaze, wetting his lower lip, and despite herself, Rogue found herself doing the same. It was a damned shame that with his shields up, she couldn't knock him flat just by biting his lower lip. That'd teach him a lesson. So what if that would mean history would repeat itself? At least this time, she'd be in her right mind to remember laying him out flat.

"You said ya wouldn't use that charm power on me no more," she said, the sense of betrayal wrestling with the flutter in her chest.
He hummed, "I'm not. But thank you for th' compliment."

"Ah didn't pay ya one," she returned, her face heating up.

"Uh huh," he replied, unconvinced.

Rogue pushed him off, her fists smacking into his chest, but he proved immovable. Still smirking like he knew this was killing her, his hands wrapped around her wrists and held them balled against his chest. Beneath the heels of her hands, when she stopped fighting him a moment, she could feel the steady pulse of his heart. It was firm, constant, and heavy. For a moment, Rogue desperately wanted to press her palms flat against that wall of muscle and feel through the leather and the tight fabric of his uniform, that solid, anchoring beat.

She flinched away.

That was the reason she needed to get away from him, she realized.

"You still want t' leave?" he asked softly, a hint of dry humor lacing his tone. It scared her a little.

Rogue wet her lips. "This ain't you," she said quietly, her voice hitching. She didn't look at him. "The way you're acting."

"Y' don't know me, Rogue," he countered.

"That's cause ya won't let me," she bit back.

He thought about it a moment, and replied simply, "Fair enough."

"And what if Ah want ta know you, ya damned snake charmer?" she snapped, returning to herself. "If the worst you can do is tell me that ya hurt someone in an accident and expect me ta freak out on ya, you obviously haven't been payin' any attention ta that stupid file ya claim ya have on me. You keep telling me that Ah don't know what Ah want, or Ah keep denying it — but your observational skills are clearly lacking in that department, LeBeau." She sucked in a huge breath. "Or are ya just scared?" she flung at him, challenging.

Hecocked his head to the side, eyes narrowing.

"Did y' just call me a chicken?" His laugh reminded her of the super villains in the movies who chuckled, self-assured and subdued, as they plotted world domination.

"Actually, Ah called ya a whole bunch of different things that wouldn't be polite to repeat in shared company," she retorted.

"Touché."

"Why won't ya tell me?" she asked, almost plaintively. "Can't ya just… Gawd! Remy you kissed me back!"

"Non," he replied stubbornly, too quickly almost. "Non, I didn't."

Shocked, Rogue gaped at him. It felt like a punch in the gut, her lungs constricting painfully to keep her from breathing, from steadying herself. He didn't want her. Had she imagined the entire thing? He didn't want her. Not his type. Just a game that she'd played right into. She had to hear it for it to be real, and there it was: laid out between them.
Trying to ignore the ache in her chest, the pain in her head that thrummed steadily, increasing in fortitude, Rogue had to force herself to take a breath, to ignore the way he was looking at her. It hurt, oh gawd, it wasn't supposed to feel like that.

"Look," she said, thankful that her voice didn't break right then and there. She forged onwards, trying to recreate the sharp tone she was familiar with. "Ah don't know what kinda messed up delusions you're livin' under, but Ah'm sorry, Ah... Ah shouldn't have done that. Ah didn't mean ta... It just... It just happened. That's it. We're done. Conversation over."

She exhaled, humiliated and wanting nothing more than to escape him, to get out from under his scrutiny where he kept her pinned like a struggling butterfly. Rogue tugged on her wrists, feeling suddenly boneless and sickened by herself that she had to argue with him over it. "Let me go."

"That's your answer for everything," he stated, releasing her wrists, practically tossing her hands back at her.

She folded her hands inwards against her chest, rubbing at them and blinking away the burning sensation behind her eyes. He was giving her what she's asked for, but what she never really wanted. How fitting.

The space between them felt hollowed out, colder somehow though the air was warm. Rogue hugged her arms to herself, and Remy looked on, his face an impartial mask.

"Yeah." Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. "It's like that when ya hurt people. That's what happens when Ah stop thinking. Ah wasn't... thinking," she ground out.

This was her fault. She'd let herself get too close, and again, she'd gotten wounded in the process.

He was silent a moment, and then, solemnly. "Well y' definitely done a number to m' face. It's gonna bruise, chérie. Don't think I can forgive you for that."

Rogue looked up, startled at the fleeting grin on his face. It almost reached his eyes, but not quite.

"That's not what Ah meant," she said, her voice roughened by the strain of maintaining some semblance of composure. "Ah've spent all this time determined not ta hurt anybody with my powers, and the first thing Ah do was try ta test the limits of your abilities. That ain't right." She added, forcing the words out though it was becoming increasingly difficult to talk, "You have every reason ta be afraid of what Ah can do. You had every reason ta run, Ah just wish..." She swallowed, then, a little dryly, "Ah just wish you'd tell me why ya did."

Remy dipped his head, his hair flopping.

He patted at his trench coat, searching for his cigarettes no doubt.

A pause grew between them, lengthening, elongating until Rogue almost felt that she might break down right then and there if he didn't reply.

It was a brush off. Another shrug. Slowly, like an itch spreading across places you couldn't possibly reach without contorting, realization dawned on her. Fresh pain. This is what it felt like to have a psychic perform open-heart surgery without any instruments. She'd laid herself bare before him, and true to the name of Thief, he'd carved out a little piece of her for himself and hadn't bothered to close up the hole left behind. This was the sting of rejection. It was new and cruel, and to Rogue, it felt cold. She felt cold.

"Gambit," she said, struggling to centre herself.
"Told you not t' call me tha."

Rogue frowned, and carefully, she took another step forwards.

She couldn't muster the vitriol. Something bubbled in her chest, a slow spreading ache that uncoiled through her musculature like a sedative making her limbs heavy. It thrummed just beneath her skin, a crawling, grave despondency, and the last vestiges of something that felt like hope, begging to be smothered out.

"Chére?" He lifted an eyebrow, and she was struck by just how very strong his features were. Remy was the sort who could conceal his emotions easily. Even with his unusual eyes, he could school his expression without a second thought so that she couldn't guess what he was thinking. That only left one option, and while the thought unnerved her for the risk it implied, it wasn't as if she hadn't done it before.

She could kiss him one last time. She could take the answers from him, if he wouldn't offer them willingly. She could hold on until his shields snapped.

Rogue took another step forwards, acutely aware that if she bent her knees a fraction, they'd brush his.

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

…And then she would know what separated the monsters from mutants:

It was desperation.

"Ah think you overestimated yourself, Cajun," she said around the lump in her throat.

"Remy never underestimates himself, chère," he replied, bemused, unconcerned by her close proximity and unaware of her intentions. "You shouldn't either." He dropped his gaze, measuring the shrinking distance between them, finally resting on her eyes, sliding to her mouth and then back again.

He was smooth, she had to give him that. Rogue squeezed her eyes shut for a second, bracing herself, wondering if he'd struggle against it, or wondering, if she pushed hard enough, could she break past that invisible bioelectric barrier that protected him?

Rogue sucked her lower lip into her mouth. "Let's finish this, then," she offered quietly, more to herself than to him.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Remy shook his head.

"Can't," he said coolly, extracting a cigarette and flipping it idly between his fingers. He didn't bother lighting it, choosing instead to stuff it back into his beaten pack a moment later.

"Why not?" she asked, her hands working of their own accord, her thumbs straining to tug at the leather of her gloves. Plan B.

He didn't reply, and silently, Rogue cursed his unwillingness to share that part of himself with her.

Now or never, she concluded, disheartened, and lifted herself slowly on her toes.

"Remy?" she whispered hoarsely, tilting her head upwards a little so that she felt his breath grazing her cheeks.
Rogue's eyelids fluttered, a dribble of wetness escaping from the corner and trailing down her cheek.

He stilled, watching her, though he made no move to pull back.

His expression betrayed nothing, though he watched the tear's progress over her skin. He didn't try to brush it off.

"Ah'm —"

"Hey! Mes amis!"

Rogue flinched, dropping backwards on her heels and turning to find Lapin bounding over the tops of the tombs. He stopped a few yards away, sinking to a squat and swiping at his brow.

Rogue sniffed, quickly using the heel of her hand to wipe at her eyes.

"Remy? You there?" Lapin called again.

Gambit didn't even look at her, though he frowned. "Over here," he yelled back.

Rogue squinted, taking a shaky step forwards, away from Remy, afraid that he'd hear the loud hammering of her heart. She'd nearly tried to absorb him, she realized, horrified. She gulped, her mouth too dry to facilitate anything more than a painful gulp of air.

Her hands were shaking, and frightened, she looked down to see that she'd managed to tug one of her gloves half off her hand. The fleshy part of pale skin just below her thumb joint gleamed in the dull lamplight – far too pale, though far too sinister to be innocent.

"Oh my gawd," she whispered, trying to still the tremble in her fingers. She adjusted her gloves fretfully, keenly aware that a bare hand was merely a fallback plan. She had intended to kiss him again like some sort of vampire, in the midst of a cemetery, no less… and he'd just stood there.

Damned fool Cajun, she swore.

"Mmmm," Lapin continued, unsure. "I think y' better come and look at this," he said.

Remy brushed past her, and Rogue ducked her head, her hands falling slack at her sides, uncertain of what to do with them.

"You coming?" he tossed over his shoulder, not waiting as dipped into the darkness between the tombs.

Her heart heavy, having found no other recourse, Rogue followed at a distance.

From its perch on a nearby tree, the owl surveyed the scene below. It shook itself once, its feathers rustling with little more than a whisper amidst the creaking branches of the tangled, sentinel oak tree.

On the ground, in the place where the footpath diverged in two separate directions before a particularly large mausoleum bearing the name 'Boudreaux,' the bedrock was exposed in a jagged hole of broken concrete. Hissing pipelines that had been too near the surface and clods of wet black earth bulged upwards. All was ringed with scorched stones, and the occasional flickers of a dying fire left behind by an explosive charge.

Three men and one young woman stood around the hole. From the owl's perch, it appeared to be a makeshift grave, almost, considering its occupant.
"...I didn't do this," one of the men was saying, his gloved fingers raking through auburn hair that caught the waning flickers of burning stone left over from the fight.

"They ran," the girl continued. "Gambit scared them off. There were three of them originally: Two were wounded. Ah knocked one of them out, but they grabbed him before takin' off."

"Did y' see it, Remy?" the short one asked. With the waning fires lit around them, the stocky man shook his head. "How're we supposed t' explain this?"

"I didn't kill him," Gambit assured him, almost as he was trying to convince himself.

"There weren't any of them left!" the girl insisted.

The third man — bald, in his late twenties at least — rubbed at his face. "We have t' go. Now. Jean Luc will want t' hear about this before Marius gets wind."

"You believe me, Henri?" Remy asked, his voice cold.

A moment's pause, and the owl, her hearing better than any human, baseline or mutant, puffed herself up, pleased that the man doubted himself.

"Doesn't matter what I think," Henri replied. "It's what th' Assassins will believe. Even if you didn't do it, Rem..." He shook his head, stepping to the side. "They'll hit us just because they'll think we hit them first."

As he shifted to the side, the hole in the ground, blasted wide open at the sides, revealed the body of a man — half singed with the last licks of fire and pinned to the earth by a curved sword through the sternum.

The head, though covered by a mask, had been twisted around with such violent force that the face pressed into the earth below. It was an unnatural contortion, the result of a spinal column snapped with no more difficulty than a child stepping on a dry tree branch.

The cadaver's limbs stuck out at odd angles, bones twisted and broken in places that would have caused him significant pain, were he not dead before he was mutilated.

It was a testament to the macabre findings of a murder that had taken place not a few hours ago, three blocks away, in the garden of a Victorian mansion within the same neighborhood. That there could be a connection between the two would be doubtless, and likely the first thing to be investigated by the police.

The girl flinched, turning away with her hand covering her mouth.

"We have t' go," the short one continued. "We gotta get clear before they show up lookin' f' this one."

"They might still be around," the bald one added.

"Remy sensed two people before," the girl said, quietly, her hand muffling the sound.

"These two," Gambit replied grimly, pointing between the two men with them. "There's no one else here. They left already."

"Are y' sure?" the short one asked, peering around suspiciously.

After a pause, Gambit nodded. "Nothing human."
In the distance, the first sirens could be heard — a fresh squadron of police and fire fighters to tend to the destruction in the historic cemetery.

"You can't go back t' the Safe House. Not now. The apartment will be the first place they look for you — both of you."

"But we didn't do this!" the girl insisted.

"He's right," Gambit said, somewhat stiffly. "It doesn't matter right now who's to blame."

"You're gonna come, then? Jean Luc'll figure this out." The short one nodded firmly. "You're still his son, Remy. No matter what y' done before, no matter what th' rest of th' Guild thinks of you."

"He'll be the first one t' offer me up t' the Assassins," Gambit responded dryly. "Done it before, non?"

"That was different," Henri interjected firmly. "There's no time t' argue, we gotta go."

"M' bike's round the corner," Gambit said.

"Leave it. The last thing we need is t' be traced."

He nodded. A moment later they departed, the girl throwing one last look at the body before slipping between the rows and out of sight.

Attentive, the owl waited. She listened as the four scaled the wall and took off down Prytania Street in the direction the two thieves had come. Once they had cleared the small gathering of people near Third Street, blending into the crowd of curious onlookers who clustered around the police tape — the air thickened with the morbid, fetid preoccupation of human tragedy — her feathers shifted, her wings elongating into limbs, and her taloned feet morphing silently into long, blue limbs.

Delicately, Mystique dropped from her perch, landing nimbly and drawing to full height.

In the gloom, were anyone around to see the gleam of unnatural yellow eyes, they would have seen her grin over her work.

She toed the remains of the flatscan on the ground, and when he remained unresponsive, she tipped her head to listen for his wounded compatriot.

He was not far. Her adopted daughter and the miscreant who accompanied her had done fair work of the Assassins prior to her arrival. It satisfied, at least partially. The third Assassin would report of the fight, and though she was reluctant to let any of them survive, she acknowledged that at least one witness was necessary.

She smiled, an expression bearing startling resemblance to a grimace as her lips pulled back across her teeth. Thinking of the blade that had pierced Irene Adler's neck, and the hand that had held that sharp device, she concluded that she would keep the knife as a memento of Destiny's passing, when she found it.

Revenge, as it were, was a dish best served cold, and serve it she would — garnished with the garish, fastidious attention that made such vengeance worthwhile and meaningful. The thought calmed her somewhat. With such a task completed, she would be free to focus her attentions on other things.

Mystique sighed, the tightness in her chest loosening somewhat as her form shifted once again. As
she took to the night, the beat of strong wings punctuated the onset of the hunt.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Bec mon cul, bon homme: Kiss my ass, man
Comprends: Understand?
Fais attention! Criss: Pay attention! Christ…
Femme: Woman
Fille: Girl
Homme: Man
Merde: Shit
Mes amis: my friends
Oh, mon dieu! C'est pas vrai!: Oh my god! It's not true (lit. Closer to "you're not serious" in meaning)
Pardonnez moi: Excuse me?
Quoi: What?
Salaud: Bastard
S'il-vous-plait: Please
T'es la: You there?

Post Script:

- Dead Man's Hand: 1) Two pair, aces and eights. 2) The black aces, black eights and nine of diamonds. The hand Wild Bill Hickok was holding when he was shot to death.
- "Ya jus' gonna watch, Cajun? Or maybe give a girl a hand?" etc. etc. Again I'm missing the issue number on this. Without my collection at my disposal, I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to. (But feel free to supply.)
Overhead, a thin, barely-there sliver of the moon reflected on the Mississippi. Like a shivering white scar, it strayed just ahead of them, marring the mirror-like surface of the water until the small motorboat turned into a darkened niche of cypress trees, and the river broke off into the bayou.

The "borrowed" van they'd used to transport themselves past the Faubourg Marigny and to the edge of Bayou Sauvage had been abandoned near the levee behind them. Rogue figured with some resignation that they'd most probably do the same with the boat whenever they reached the Guild House.

If she'd guessed correctly, the property was safely hidden, nestled into the swamps like the Thieves' rivals, the Assassins.

This wasn't plantation country; they were too far North East for sugar cane or cotton to thrive on the land, and from what Rogue understood of Lapin's nervous chatter below the drone of the motor, the Guild appreciated both the security and the splendor of the old property that served as its base of operations.

"Not too far now," Emil said. Whether his voice was pitched low out of respect or caution, Rogue couldn't discern.

"They know we're here, y' see. It's important t' be recognized as family; take things slow. Y' just keep y' head down, and there won't be any trouble."

"Why would there be?" she asked, her attention divided between Emil at her side and the constant weight of Remy's gaze on her back. She hadn't turned around once, nor did she intend to. He and his brother were so silent that for a time, were it not for the grim reminder of what had transpired earlier, she'd have forgotten they were there.

"This is th' back entrance," he whispered. "It's usually better t' declare yourself instead of tryin' t' sneak in — especially if y' not part of the clan. Jean Luc don't go in for this sort of thing – bringing strangers home." He offered a weak smile. "It's not you, ma belle," Lapin assured her without much
"Non, it's me that's the problem," Remy said from behind them.

Lapin hissed, “Keep y' voice down!”

Rather than acknowledge him, Rogue continued to glower at the prow of the boat.

"Ah think maybe ya'll should consider droppin' the liability overboard if that's the case," she returned. "Considerin' he's such a problem and all."

"You'd never forgive yourself, chérie. It'd be just like Romeo and Juliet; you'd be tossing yourself in after me in no time."

"Feel like testing that theory, swamp rat?" she shot back, not turning around.

"I think there were knives involved in that story, actually," Lapin interjected.

“And poison," Rogue supplied, keenly aware that her skin would fit the bill perfectly for that particular criminal accessory. She grimaced at the thought, thinking of what she might have done to Remy if Lapin hadn't interrupted them back at Lafayette Cemetery.

She'd worked hard for a year to avoid using her powers when the pressure was on. The last thing she wanted was to start collecting psyches in case another Apocalypse came along and decided to tap into her reservoirs. At the first sign of temptation for physical contact, she'd nearly cracked. Remy didn't deserve the easy way out of this one, she decided — least of all, at her expense. Or her sanity.

"Quiet, you three," Henri said, silencing the exchange. "Have some respect."

The motor slowed to a low putter as the boat turned into the trees. With a muted click, Henri pulled a quarterstaff seemingly from nowhere, extending the weapon and using it to drive into the silted bottoms of the swamp. It propelled them forwards with the soft sound of dragging water at their backs.

Massive cypresses loomed on either side of the canal, their roots splayed in arches where the waterline dropped away and creating bridges of tangled roots that dipped their tendrils into the black water below. Overhead, the Spanish moss dangled in wispy vines, falling from the branches in curtains that snagged at Rogue’s hair.

With a heavy sigh, she tried to shove away the memory of the last time she'd visited the swamps: a different sort of tension suffused the journey, though in retrospect, her first visit to the bayou had been under equally difficult circumstances. Still, she had to admit, the place had a particular sort of magic to it:

In the distance, mist clung about the trees, softening the edges of darkness like a smoky, grey blanket. Hazy shapes emerged, becoming gnarled tree branches, pitted trunks, shifting shadows that seemed to appear at the corner of her eye at one moment, and vanish as Rogue turned her head to find them.

Lapin edged forward, motioning for her to look at a patchy shape that they approached from the right.

"What?" she asked, taking note of his smirk.

He pointed to a grim-looking thing dangling over the water not more than a yard or so from the
The mist had thickened to the point of being smothering, but that didn't stop Rogue from starting when she saw the body.

Behind her, Henri *tsked* at her gasp, but Emil laughed outright.

Heart hammering, a strange-looking stuffed dummy materialized in the gloom: it had been strung by the neck to a tree branch.

"Th' **look** on your **face**!*" Lapin cackled.

It's features became clearer as they approached: a mouth, stitched on sackcloth in a series of red x's and blackened crossed for eyes smiled down at them. A sign was slung about its neck like some hoodoo charm, declaring that trespassing was punishable by law.

"Emil!" Henri said warningly, a note of tension evident as he angled the boat down a different alley of cypress trees.

Ghostly orbs flickered to life in the distance, splitting the gloom with pinpricks of wavering, gilded warmth. The Guild House. As if sensing their approach, the mist receded, drawn back to the darkness between the trees revealing a narrow, watery road towards an apparition from the old world in the gloom.

She could make out the hazy lights falling across the water, mirroring the wavering foundations of a massive plantation house.

The reflections over the water revealed the whitewashed façade of a three-story antebellum mansion whose gallery wrapped the second floor; massive Greek-revival columns supported a hipped roof. The shutters of the French doors lining both levels were painted black to match the ironwork of the rails, and at the top, flanked by two towering, exposed-brick chimneys, a small, dark figure stood on the Widow's Walk, waving them in with the arcing beam of a flashlight. Rogue couldn't help but think that they sculpted the house into a many-eyed visage — a stark face composed of hollowed eyes with a gaping mouth for a central back door.

Low, flickering amber lights dotted the flagstone path that spilled out from beneath a lush garden canopy. It led from the back gallery all the way to a small dock, where several other boats, a pirogue and a hydrofoil were moored, bobbing serenely with the low current.

"Home sweet home," said Remy. Rogue didn't miss the bite of his words.

"Ah think it's beautiful," she declared.

Emil grinned, pointing to the cover of trees blotting out the sky. "Y' might want t' wave, Rogue."

Overhead, silent and watchful, guards lined the trees. Positioned in various states of concealment amongst the branches, some had guns, others carried bows, and more carried quarterstaffs. Taut strings slackened and safeties were switched on as Emil waved upwards at them.

"*Bonsoir, mes amis!* All good? Jean Luc around?"

One of the guards shouted back. "Who's with you, Lapin?"

Behind her, Remy snorted.
“Henri…and some friends,” Lapin replied.

Exasperated, Remy shouted with some finality, “Your ‘famille’, Theoren!”

"Merde," Emil muttered. "You couldn't have waited 'til we got t' shore, hein?"

"Remy,” Theoren echoed. The sound of a semi-automatic weapon clicking accompanied the question. "Then I think the term 'family' is debatable," he added.

"Missed y' too."

Rogue turned in her seat to survey him, but Remy's expression was as unreadable as ever. He didn't look at her, choosing instead to pull out a pack of cards and begin shuffling them idly. She couldn’t help but note the way his gaze remained fixed, his fingers working the cards with a deftness that left her prickling and uneasy — like he was readying himself for the sort of business that got him into trouble more often than not.

"Put 'em away, Rem," Henri warned, guiding the boat into the dock with a final heave of his bo. Accompanied by a dull scraping sound, they stopped moving at last as the bottom of the boat banked roughly. “No scrapping on Guild grounds tonight.”

“C’mon, p’nit,” Emil urged, hopping onto the small wooden dock that jutted out into the bayou. He held out a hand for Rogue, which she hesitated at only long enough for him to snort at.

On solid ground, she teetered a moment, her vision darkening a little, and pressed her fingers to her temple. Before her knees gave out, a strong arm wrapped around her waist and hoisted her back up.

"Ah'm fine," she said, the sudden dizziness disappearing. "Just a bit of a headache."

"That's good t' know," was Remy’s only reply. Startled, Rogue snapped her head around as he slipped his arm out from around her. He didn't turn back as he stalked away to greet the men filtering out from the trees, but the spot where he'd touched her was colder somehow.

Lapin busied himself by fastening the boat down securely in its mooring, overly careful at avoiding her attention. Or pretending not to notice the exchange. She wasn’t entirely certain.

"Remy's a good boy at heart, said Henri, startling her. "He just don't know what's good for him sometimes."

Whether that was supposed to comfort her or just fuel the sorry, sad ache in her chest, Rogue wasn't sure.

"Theoren." Remy greeted a clean-shaven, dark haired, barrel-chested man who swung down from the trees and landed before them, effectively blocking the path up to the Guild House.

Appraising him, Theoren replied in a tone that was several degrees cooler, "Remy."

"Where's Jean Luc?"

"Same place y' left him, I'd imagine."

"Really?" Remy appeared nonplussed. “Doesn't surprise me none, all things considered. Still chained t' that desk of his, then? Drawin' up plans t' make life better for everyone?"

“It's more than I could say for you, y' ungrateful, treacherous son of a —”
Theoren bristled, shoulders hunching, and Rogue found herself quickening her pace to intervene. Henri stepped in front of her, a hand extended in warning, begging her to hold off for one moment more as Lapin darted up the path to get between the two men.

"Bonsoir!" Lapin cut in between them. The smaller man grinned beatifically, as if his stature didn't matter a lick compared to the two giants that loomed over him. For a second, it seemed as if Theoren and Remy wanted nothing more than to tear out each other's throats. Emil didn't seem to mind. Nor did it bother him that one of them was still brandishing a weapon, and the other could easily leave a crater the size of a New York city block where they stood if he was so inclined.

"We got business t' discuss, hein?" Lapin said, patting at Theoren's chest. "Ooh, been workin' out, brah? Lookit 'em pecs! Leave the machismo at the door, hein? No time! No time! my late. my late." Lapin ushered Remy around Theoren, using his body as a shield.

"...For a very important date." Remy smirked over his cousin's head.

"No time t' say, 'Allo! G'bye!' my late, my late, my late!"

"Ah take it this is as close ta going down the rabbit hole as Ah'm ever gonna get."

Henri offered her a warm smile, taking her by the arm. The gesture threw her for a moment — the subtle politeness of the South almost alien to her, given how long she'd been away. She recovered, accepting it for what it was: a kindness.

"P'tit, you got no idea," he said with good-natured humor. "Let those two take care of business. Mercy'll get y' set up in one of the guest suites so you can take a load off. I'll show you the way."

He took a step, and realizing that he intended to escort her, Rogue snapped her lips shut before she could protest — especially given that Theoren's attention had finally left Remy's back. As they passed him, he gave her a once over that left her with the feeling that spiders were marching over her skin.

Family or not, bad blood was bad blood, and Rogue didn't doubt that whatever the animosity was shared between the two men, somehow Remy was to blame for it. Oddly enough, it didn't bother her as much as it should have. Stranger still was the fact that she'd be willing to defend Remy if she had to — if she had to, she repeated mentally. A ways ahead of them, Remy and Lapin had their heads bowed together, discussing something quietly.

Rogue hesitated, scanning the large back porch and the cover of trees that lined the property. There were security cameras, obvious ones, and less-visible ones as well tucked into recesses in the walls, the floor, and the ground lining the path. Two men with leashed dobermans circled around the far sides of the house, one nodding to Henri, acknowledging their arrival.

"Ah suppose it'd be redundant ta ask if this place is safe," she said.

Henri chuckled, patting her knuckles. "Safer than the boudoir of the Queen Mother."

"Will it be alright that Ah'm here?" she asked. "If Remy's... tell ya the truth Ah don't know what Remy is exactly. Not welcome, I suppose."

"Hasn't told you anything?" Henri asked.

Near the large portico, Remy and Emil continued their conversation. They were too far away to hear, but from what Rogue could discern, their discussion had turned serious. She could make out their profiles, her gaze lingering a little too long on the aquiline nose and firm jaw line, as Remy offered
his cousin a small, reassuring nod. Lapin looked over his shoulder and grinned at her, giving both
she and Henri a brief waggle of his fingers, which she supposed passed for a wave.

Slowly, to Henri she replied, "Ah saw the grave."

"Ah." He fiddled with his moustache with his free hand. "Exile," Henri said after a moment, "is a
serious thing in the families. They forgave him, or at least, we did — most of us — but père couldn't
offer the Assassins anything in return that would keep 'em satisfied long enough t' stop the blood
flow." He took a breath, resignedly, and continued, "The war's gone on as long as both families have
lived in New Orleans. Mon Grandpère — Jacques LeBeau — he used t' say the war started even
before that. Six hundred years, maybe, from France to America; Thieves and Assassins killin' each
other over some indiscretion they couldn't even remember starting. There are factions of the Guilds,
smaller groups scattered around the globe. Each operates autonomously from the others."

She thought of Julien Boudreaux — how he’d attacked them without prompting. He’d made it look
easy. Like it was no trouble at all to lay Remy low.

"And Julien?" Rogue asked.

"Julien was the son of Marius Boudreaux, and Marius Boudreaux is Patriarch of the Assassins Guild;
he's the leader." Henri turned to her. "It was a miracle Remy got out with his life. It was Marius who
demanded that his punishment be exile for Julien's death: the life of one for another. That's the law."

"But Remy came back. He said he's been living here for at least six months."

Henri pursed his lips, his pencil-moustache turning downwards at the corners. "That was true, then?"

She flushed. "Ah don’t suppose I was supposed to confirm or deny that."

The corner of Henri’s mouth lifted in a smirk.

"Ah guess Remy’s a better sneak than Ah realized; especially to be so close to his family for all that
time and not have them know any different."

"He's one of the best thieves I ever seen," Henri conceded. "Dieu, we know he’s never been modest
about that, but I wouldn’t tell him to his face. Never hear the end of it."

He winked at her, asking lightly, "What did he take from you to make you so mad?"

Rogue felt her face heat up, but Henri at least was gentlemanly enough to drop it when he noticed
her discomfort.

"Maybe stayin' here for a bit'll rub off on you some." He smiled a little, gesturing that they should
continue up to the house. "There ain't no better thing than getting one up on a man in his own game.
'Sides, I know this place could use some lightenin' up after tonight."

"You believe us, don't ya?" she asked hesitantly. "We didn't do that to that man back at the
cemetery," she insisted when Henri didn’t reply.

"Th' laws of the Guilds don't see you as one person, chère," he replied carefully. "They see th' whole
clan."

Rogue opened her mouth to object — to tell him that she was nothing of the sort; she wasn’t Thieves
Guild. She was an X-Man, but she was cut off abruptly as a shout rose from behind them at the
waterfront.
"Remy!" Theoren bellowed. "Don't think we've forgotten."

Henri shook his head.

"Sacre dieu," Rogue heard him mutter as he slipped his arm from hers, preparing to intervene.

On the porch, Remy stood with his head cocked, a card aflame between two fingers. Rogue couldn't see his expression with the mansion casting his features in shadow. For a moment, she could have sworn his gaze shifted, flicking to her before he doused the charge and turned with the snap of his trench coat to follow Lapin into his former home.

Henri glanced at her skeptically out of the corner of his eye.

"Least I can say is that you came in time for the fireworks," he offered.

"Well, had I known that," she said. "I'd have paid you all a visit a long time ago."

Placing a guiding hand on the small of her back, he urged her forwards into the light spilling from the house.

"That's Theoren Marceaux. A cousin. Long story. Even longer memory, that one has."

She chuckled dryly. "Ah figured. The secretiveness runs in the family, don't it?"

"I could tell y' that, chère," Henri smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners good-naturedly, "but then I'd have to kill you."

—

"Lapin?"

Hands slack at his sides, he could feel the nervous itch that begged him to pull out his cards, a cigarette, something to keep them occupied. His cousin's name lilted in question, fragile in a way that left him warming in the face and awkward otherwise. He didn't like it.

Lapin huffed. Scrubbed the back of his head.

He waved it off, and Remy allowed the knot of stress between his shoulders to loosen an inch.

They were cool, even if Theoren wanted him dead, still.

"my sorry about him, Remy. He hasn't changed, y' know: Theoren never forgave himself, so he's never forgiven you neither," Lapin said.

"Non, not that."

"Quoi?" Lapin asked, pausing before the steps of the large back porch. "Ain't like you t' hold back on me, brah. What is it?"

"I need you... t' do something for me."

Lapin's eyebrows shot up, and then slyly, he drew backwards and leered.
"Whoa! Whoa! Sorry *homme*, you're attractive for a guy an' all, but y' know I don't swing that way. Now — no pun intended — I know its *hard* but y' gotta restrain yourself from followin' though on those impulses… not like' ooglin' my perfect butt ain't helpin' none —“

"I'm gonna clean out y' skull one of these days, Lapin, with my fist," Remy threatened, although the jibe lacked its usual punch.

"That wouldn't make y' look too good in front of the *belle damme, mon ami.*"

"I don't think I need anymore help in that department, thanks," he said dryly.

"Okay." Lapin shrugged, cramming his hands into his pockets and rocking back on his heels.

"*Quoi*?"

"Oh-kay. What do you need?"

Remy raised an eyebrow. "Since when did y' become such a pushover?"

Lapin glanced over his shoulder and smiled widely. Remy didn't turn to see who he was looking at, though he could hazard a guess. He frowned. His fingers itched. Worse was the nagging feeling that pulled at him, willing him to turn around and look at her. He managed, somehow, to keep his gaze fixed on Lapin.

"If I think I know what this is about? That ain't being a pushover, *cousin*. That's called a whole lotta trouble. More than what we're in right now." He waved at Rogue and Henri, waggling his fingers. "You draw trouble to you like bees t' honey."

If Remy turned, just a little, he could pick up two blurred figures in his peripheral vision. It'd have to do for now, even if it made his head ache with something he didn't want to identify. Giving that particular pang in his chest a name would give it life, make it real. It was easier shutting it into its own walled-off, imaginary cell; it was easier to pretend it wasn't there or didn't exist; keep it safe, save himself.

All the same.

Whatever it was, it rattled him – that vengeful little secret. Compounded with the fact that in minutes he'd have to face off with Jean Luc, he *had* to clear his head. If he looked at her, if he let her, he'd lose his composure for sure. Cash in. Check out. Hobble off empty-handed, empty-hearted and cold.

Remy smirked at the irony. Lapin raised an eyebrow.

"This is *bad,*" Emil said, a hint of foreboding drawing out the last syllable almost comically. *Baaaaaad.* "I ain't seen y' like this since Belladonna."

Remy inclined his head, conceding with a small, self-deprecating nod.

"You're not gonna tell me, are you?" Lapin asked. "'Bout Rogue? 'Bout whatever this is about? 'Bout why y' came home?"

"I never left, Emil," Remy returned.

"Uh — 'scuze me? *Hello! Yes, you did!*" Lapin insisted. "I saw it with my own eyes. You looked like a beat down *dog* after Marius and Jean Luc reached an agreement, but I know you put your sorry lookin' carcass on that bike you so conveniently lifted from Oncle Jean Luc and I didn't see you
for lord knows how long… and how many text messages did I send you that you didn't reply to? Pah. I'm almost insulted."

"It was a vacation."

"Mmm. Vacation. Right." He nodded. "If you hadn't left, Bella woulda sent you on permanent vacation for what y' did to her and Julien both, and Marius woulda helped just because he could."

Remy's expression, trained into remaining impassive after years of experience, did nothing to subdue Emil.

He continued, "You can keep all the secrets y' like, Rem: 'bout where you’ve been and what you’ve done since the last time any of us have seen you — and who you've become because of it all — but just so you know — whatever it is that you cooked up — there's one Assassin dead already. The longer you try t' work the situation in your favor, the more problems you create… especially with the Guild."

He checked himself. Nodded, even.

“Still me, Lapin. Nothin' gonna change that."

“I dunno whether to be relieved to hear it, or frightened."

Remy, unmoved by Lapin's particular brand of deadpan humor, fixed his gaze somewhere past Lapin’s left shoulder, and let it all wash over him:

Cards. Cigarette. A dead Assassin. A missing gemstone. Julien's grave. The kiss they'd shared. The kiss Rogue claimed she'd given him, when he thought he'd kissed her.

Remy lingered on that thought a moment too long. It took some effort to swallow it down, what with how the thought made his chest tighten. Not wholly unpleasant. Not wholly right because the ache spoke of absence. It spoke of wanting, and Remy always took what he wanted — except this. Except her.

The urge to look at her was overwhelming; to just see that she was still here, still within the circle of his attention and this whole mess. Still within reach.

He shook himself. Shook it off. Let out a breath.

Remy LeBeau never folded this early in the game, nor did he reveal how he worked the table. Emil pursed his lips, sniffing at him as if as if he might suss out his secrets.

Not even to family, Remy decided.

Rogue told him she was going to leave, he reminded himself. It sobered him, and sluggishly, his resolve returned.

If this was her way of paying him back for hurting her, it was a hollow threat. Of course, coming all the way out here into the bayou — to Thieves' territory no less — was one way of finding out if she'd been bluffing.

He was counting on it that she didn't mean it, and as much as he hated to admit it to himself – his want was clearly threatening to overtake his need for her to stick around.

It didn't make the pang in his chest go away, unfortunately.
Remy's fingers tingled, an aftershock of nervous energy from funneling too much of his kinetic power into the three cards he'd used to defend himself and Rogue at Lafayette Cemetery. Again, his mind slid back into that dangerous headspace, and on demand, the scent of her filled his senses.

Something. He needed something to take his mind off it or get it out of his system. He couldn’t focus like this, and if he couldn’t focus, he couldn’t get the job done.

He blew out a breath, and deftly, his fingers contorting in a way that would be painful for anyone who didn't have the sort of dexterity that he possessed; Remy dug his middle finger into his wrist guard and slid a card into his palm.

He squeezed it, imprinting the feel of stiff paper into his gloves.

A single downwards glance told him all he needed to know.

It must have been a lucky draw that he'd pulled the Queen of Hearts.

He smirked a little at that.

"I need you t' pool your resources," he said to Emil finally, running his thumb against the face of the card. It soothed him somewhat; kept him grounded knowing how easy it'd be to throw that particular Queen away.

"I'm lookin' for something, and I know I can run all over this damned city m'self, but it'd take half the time if I went through you."

"Less than that." Lapin sniffed, puffing his chest imperiously. "The fille musta really hit you in the head hard to make you forget that I'm the best there is."

"my head's fine," Remy replied shortly. "You'll do it, then?"

Lapin’s brow furrowed, sizing him up. Trying to see how serious he was. "What am I lookin' for exactly?"

From the waterfront, an interruption: Theoren bellowed, “Remy!"

Jaw clenching, Remy turned to peer into the darkness. He saw him fine enough: muscles corded with hostility, the threat of him small against the backdrop of the swamp; another ghost from his past, rising from its watery grave to haunt him.

"Don't think we've forgotten!"

He hadn’t.

"How could I, Theoren?" he muttered under his breath. "What with you reminding me every chance you get?"

Lapin waited a beat. “Wasn't your fault, Rem.”

"I know." An automatic response.

"Etienne wasn't ready for the Tilling." An automatic answer.

He nodded, but it was a moment further to meet Lapin’s gaze.

Turning back to the night, and to the two figures on the path that had stopped their slow progress up
to the house, Remy stilled. His eyes adjusted easily to the gloom, and for just a moment, his gaze lingered — seeking out the shine of telltale green, electric in the darkness. Rogue was a beacon. She drowned out the concerned expression worn by Henri, the sneer affixed to Theoren's face, and like anyone who would flinch from the recoil, Remy blinked — surprised by how intense the look she fixed him with was.

It was a second too long.

Bang. You're dead.

He turned away, the Queen of Hearts scrunched in his fist.

"So," Lapin said brightly, the change in subject unremarked. "What are we fixin' to steal?"

Not missing a beat, Remy clapped his cousin on the shoulder.

"I need you t' find me any record you can come across involving a gemstone fragment; a ruby the size of my fist," he said, quieting to a hush. Lapin leaned in. "Origin. Acquisition. Ownership. Check the antiquaries records if y' have to. Last location was in the possession of a femme who calls herself Maman Brigitte…"

—

"REMY LEBEAU."

A screech, lilting and feminine, halted Rogue in her tracks. Barely a foot across the threshold, she leapt back as a blond blur, clad scantily in a silk negligee and matching aquamarine night robe, darted out of one of the side rooms and collided solidly with Remy.

Remy embraced her, laughing and hoisting her up to give her a fond squeeze. Rogue bristled, eyeing the bare, tanned legs and ridiculous little slippers that dangled off the dainty feet that kicked a solid two feet from the ground.

Beside her, Henri snorted. "I hardly think it's fair that Remy gets this sort of welcome while your own husband has t' stand by and watch, Mercy."

Rogue couldn't conceal her surprise as the woman — a busty, petite blond — released him, dropping to her toes and holding Remy at arm's length. She peered over at Henri with mock sourness, her cheeks dimpling prettily.

"You mean t' tell me that I don't get t' welcome my own brother-in-law home properly? Where's your hospitality, dear husband?"

"He left it out on the doormat for the milkman," Lapin piped up, earning a swat from Henri's wife, who moved quicker than a fox in a chicken coop.

Rogue flushed a little as Mercy rounded on her, embarrassed by her knee-jerk reaction to a woman who was smiling at her so kindly.

"An' who might you be?" Mercy arched an eyebrow, placing her hands on her hips and throwing a sly grin over her shoulder. Remy lidded his eyes, shrugging with a carelessness that made the
movement seem both graceful and seductive.

"She followed me home?" he offered innocently.

"'Ah seemed ta have dragged him in, as a matter of fact," Rogue ground out. "If that's a problem, 'Ah'd be happy ta put him out too. Name's Rogue." She nodded, and Mercy whistled.

"Rogue!" she exclaimed. "'I knew it. Jean Luc went on and on about you takin' out Julien and his boys last spring, didn't he? I'm just sorry I missed it. Musta been quite a show, you and Remy workin' together like that to bust Jean Luc out of the Rippers' stronghold — especially since Remy's been flyin' solo since he was sixteen." She added in a stage whisper, "You know how fellas get at that age. So difficult — think they can do everything by themselves."

Rogue sized up Remy pointedly, as if he couldn't hear her running commentary. "Clearly, some of 'em don't grow out of it quick enough."

Remy put on his best innocent expression.

"Oh, you are gonna fit right in 'round here, girl," Mercy stated, sauntering over. "That Southern sass is a rare commodity. It's good t' hear, 'specially with that accent of yours. Where y' from?"

"Mississippi," Rogue replied, and hesitantly, she added, "but 'Ah live in New York now."

Lapin coughed. "X-Man!" he managed in between pounding his chest and hacking with exaggerated loudness. Rogue pursed her lips, giving him a sound thumping in between the shoulder blades that sent him staggering theatrically across the wide hallway.

"Mmmhmm," Mercy said, brushing her bangs out of her eyes and peering down at Lapin, peeling himself off the polished hardwood. "They teach you how to hail a cab up North, but there ain't no other place that'll teach a girl to hit like that than the South. It's good to meet you. I'd shake your hand, but I hear you're uncomfortable with that sort of thing."

Rogue raised her eyebrows.

Mercy lifted a shoulder in a none-too-innocent half-shrug.

Rogue held out a gloved hand.

"Brass," Mercy said, appreciatively, accepting the gesture.

Strength in her grip, despite delicate fingers. Mercy flashed teeth. Rogue liked her instantly.

"Word does travel fast, don't it? What else do ya'll know about me?"

Henri cut in, "Too much t' include in a two minute conversation. Chére, Rogue's gonna be stayin' with us for a couple of days. Think you can get her settled?"

Mercy nodded. "You're gonna have to show me that swing of yours while you're here." She winked. "It's tough, keeping these hooligans in line." She peered around them, smiling fondly at her husband. "Bein' the only femme who runs with 'em can get a lil' rough."

"Only as rough as y' want us t' be, Merc," Remy purred.

Mercy raised an eyebrow. "Good t' know some things haven't changed." To Rogue, she added, "Remy's a pack of trouble, don't you know." She leaned in, winking. "Awful cute, though, hein? Always said it was a pity... such a nice package belongin' to such a rotten boy."
She clucked at him, and Remy rolled his eyes.

"Ah been hearin' that a lot lately," Rogue agreed dryly.

"Th' *femmes* like that sorta thing." His gaze shifted a little, raking over Rogue suggestively, and she found herself balling her fists at her sides. She cocked an eyebrow, daring him to continue. "The normal ones anyhow," he added.

Rogue scoffed to block out the accompanying sting of his words. It was a delayed reaction, if only by a second or two, but if Remy noticed, he didn't comment. When she folded her arms across her chest, she experienced the belated sensation that it was out of defense. Frowning, she wrenched her body in the opposite direction of his appraisal and disentangled herself. Planted her feet and straightened her spine. A long, dour look in his direction had her canting a hip. Tossed her hair out of her face as if to say, "Whatever."

He stared, lids lowered. She glared.

"So what are you doin' here, exactly?" Mercy asked. "Not that we ain't happy t' see you, Remy, but…"

“It's a long story, Mercy. Something’s up in the ‘Easy. Guild stuff, you know. Gotta talk t' Jean Luc — and —“ Lapin glanced at Remy, "the sooner the better."

Mercy sighed, slipping out from beneath her husband's arm. "Fine by me, you got me outta bed at four in the morning plenty of times before, and probably for less, no doubt. C'mon, girl." She motioned for Rogue to follow her. "Let's let the boys wallow in the testosterone."

Rogue turned to Remy, who had dropped his gaze to his hands. She blinked, surprised to see that he was rolling a card over his knuckles. Between the flashes of movement, she could discern brief blurs of red on black. It was a hearts suit, and which card specifically, Rogue had a fair idea. He was nervous, she decided. The smooth-talking, sly, stubborn, swamp snake was actually nervous enough to fidget. That comforted her somewhat; at least she knew he was still human underneath all the bravado.

He wasn't going to let her in on it, either, she realized: whatever had happened out at the cemetery, while it involved them both, the Guild came first. A lump collected in her throat — from relief or from irritation that he'd leave her out of it, she wasn't sure.

“It's family business," he said simply, as if that would alleviate the sudden rush of responsibility she felt. "I'll deal with it."

He glanced up at her, and Rogue felt her stomach do that same sinking, fluttering, and uneasy twist that she'd experienced right before she'd kissed him. Rogue swallowed, watching as Henri and Lapin flanked him. Remy stood there a little longer, returning her gaze even as the others began moving away down the hall.

Mercy cleared her throat and rocked back on her heels. With a graceful twirl, she crossed the foyer, hands folded neatly behind her back. "Stairs are over this way, Rogue. I'll be at the top."

Remy didn't move, though through the shag of hair that fell into his eyes, Rogue sensed that he was taking her measure. He was waiting for her to make the first move.

"It's not fair that you should have ta have that conversation alone," she said once Mercy's footsteps had faded.
Remy shrugged, looking back to the card. "Got lady luck watchin' over me."

"Ah should be there, too," she insisted.

Remy merely shook his head. "You don't know Jean Luc like I do."

Rogue counted to five before she hissed at him, stalking across the hallway and tearing the card out of his grasp. He looked between his empty fingers and the partially torn Queen now gripped in her fist, and smirked.

"If you'd asked nicely…" he began, but Rogue cut him off.

"Listen up, Cajun," she seethed, squaring her shoulders as she advanced on him. "If ya think you can just shoulder that man's death all by your lonesome, ya got another thing coming. You've been pushing me for the better part of a week about my own issues, and Ah been stupid enough not to realize why ya were so confident about it. You do the same thing, that's why ya know how Ah react. Ah know exactly what it feels like ta have ta stand on my own two feet and hold up against the world, and because of you, as much as Ah hate ta admit it, Ah know it doesn't have ta be like that."

He quirked an eyebrow. "If this is your way of propositioning me, chérie…"

"Stop tryin' ta make me blush!"

"It's workin'," he countered smugly.

"It's ending right here, right now." Rogue grit her teeth.

"Non, actually —" Remy lifted his hand, and with the tips of two fingers, he lifted a lock of white hair from the side of her face. "Looks like you're still hot under th' collar t' me."

"That's not what Ah meant!" Rogue swatted at him, and Remy evaded her. She held her ground, turning with him as he circled her. "This ain't gonna turn out like Julien. Ah won't let it," she said firmly. "That was an accident. Ya said so yourself. This ain't even our fault, so stop tryin' ta play the martyr. Ah don't buy it!"

Remy slowed, his steps little more than a whisper against the bare hardwood floors. She had his attention. Good, she thought viciously.

"That's what you're afraid of, isn't it? They're gonna pin ya with this too, and you've been pushin' me away so you can take the blame. You're so damned scared that by opening up Ah might see something there that you can't face yourself. That's why you been acting like such a… such a…" She floundered, waving her hands in a small, severe gesture of frustration.

Remy jutted his chin, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. His eyes had darkened, and for a moment, Rogue had to bite down on her tongue to keep from spluttering something she didn't entirely mean.

"Shut up!" she snapped finally.

"Didn't say anything."

"But you're thinkin' it — it's all over your face!" she bit back.

"My, my," he purred, pressing a hand to his chest and splaying his fingers. He stretched languidly, rubbing his side and deliberately drawing her attention to his personal ministrations. "You are quite
striking when y' get tongue-tied, *chérie,*" he tossed at her easily. "It's a pity I couldn't be of more service in that department."

It felt like a punch in the gut.

Bowing her head, Rogue lifted the card again, turning it over between her fingers.

That kiss was going to be her undoing. Standing so near to him made her feel as if she wanted to unravel right there on the spot, but it didn't mean she was any closer to him than before.

He was determined to keep her at arm's length, no matter what she did. She could hand herself over to him, body and soul, and he'd still somehow manage to shut her out to save his own sorry hide.

"You're somethin' else, LeBeau," Rogue replied after a while, her tone lowered. "If Ah'd known that's what you were playin' at this whole time, pretending that ya really wanted ta help me and all…" She shook her head, laughing bitterly under her breath. "Ah don't know what it is with you, but somehow, ya always get me ta believe you right when Ah decide to stop believe in anythin' at all."

She took a breath, smiling wryly at the Queen. She waved it at him. "Stakes get too high?" she asked. "That's why you bailed, huh?" Then sardonically, she added, echoing the promise he’d made: "'Ah'll always bet on you.' Right. You just can't bet on yourself; it's gotta be somebody else who does it for you. And when they do, you cash out. Game over." She held the card out to him. "You're gonna need her," she said, resigned to the fact that if he didn't want her help, there was nothing she could do to force him into accepting it.

Remy didn't even look at it. Instead, he stood back placidly, his gaze smoldering.

"Take it," she said again, this time a little more forcefully.

"Y' gonna leave?"

He refused to extend his hand. Refused to take the card.

The question was voiced in a tone weighted with something Rogue couldn't possibly begin to understand. It carried with it something hollow and bottomless, and Rogue knew, if she stepped too near to that edge, he'd pull her over and down with him.

An hour ago, she would have leapt into that darkness without question. She would have followed, if only she'd known he'd be there with her. Now, she was certain of the absolute opposite.

"Everyone leaves, Remy," she said coldly, her hand dropping. "You should know that better than anyone."

She turned on her heel and shot over her shoulder as she left the room, "When you decide that it might be a nice change to take things on with a bit of backing, maybe take your own advice and stop playin' *solitaire,* you can come and find me." She held the card aloft above her head, not turning around as she stalked through the doorway Mercy had disappeared through. "You get *one* Queen, swamp rat, and it ain't this paper one. As a reminder, Ah'm keepin' this damned card."

She had never been more thankful that her voice had remained level.

Beneath the staccato pounding of her heart and her thin, constricted breathing, Rogue didn't hear the heavy sigh, or the muffled oath that echoed behind her as she took the stairs two at a time.
Mercy clapped her hands together, stopping before an impossibly large door on the second floor of the house. "Okay!"

It had taken nearly five minutes to reach their destination, crossing through two parlors and passing several rooms that appeared to be loaded with electronics, surveillance equipment and computers—not to mention the half-dozen sculptures that decorated the massive corridor. Thankfully, Rogue had quickly managed to siphon off the nervous knot of tension that was forming between her shoulder blades with the long walk, but the lingering echo of her one-sided conversation with Remy had stubbornly clung near, making her heels heavy. It was a weight that matched that of the Queen of Hearts now crammed into her coat pocket.

The art adorning the mansion, however, was an easy distraction.

Rogue had forced herself to keep walking the instant she'd seen the first Caravaggio. She'd staggered in front of the floor-to-ceiling Reuben's and barely collected herself enough to follow Mercy's running commentary of the family's "collection."

It had been the Escher framed neatly next to the guest room door that betrayed her utter astonishment, causing her chest to fill with a leaden ache that had her leaning against the doorframe lest she fall apart entirely.

"Quoi?" Mercy asked, her ponytail flicking over her shoulders as she looked between Rogue's gobsmacked expression and the woodprint on the wall.

"That's an Escher."

Mercy made a disgruntled sound in the back of her throat. "That's an Escher, yeah. It's a replacement for the one Remy took before he left. The original was much better — buncha staircases goin' all over the place? This one's alright, but Remy always had to have his favorite." She cocked her head to the side, peering at it. "He always liked to wake up in the mornin' and have something pretty to look at."

Mercy glanced at her, a small smirk causing her cheeks to dimple.

Flushing, she cleared her throat. "Where's Remy's room exactly?"

Mercy’s smile was beatific as she opened the door to the guest suite, letting Rogue pass her with tentative steps.

"Why, it's just across the hall, girl," she answered. "Pleasant dreams."

With the door shut behind her, Rogue seized the opportunity to swear loudly.

When he had left New Orleans, if anyone would have had the brass to tell him, and if he'd had the
slightest bit of sense to listen, he wouldn't have lifted a finger:

He would have sat the hell back, kicked up his feet, waited for Tante to make him dinner, and maybe read *Forbes* to pick up a few new "clients" until he got bored and the clubs opened for the evening.

He'd have woken up in a strange smelling bed the next day, with another strange smelling woman in the shower, stumbled home, and the routine would have started again in its vicious, predictable, circadian cycle.

He would have been fine with that, Remy told himself.

Remy paused, cocking his head and listening as Rogue's footsteps faded away on the second floor and down the East wing.

He really was shaping up to be a poor liar.

Just when the hell had he lost his touch?

Oh that's right, he thought derisively, the instant Rogue had unconsciously robbed him of his ability to exercise that particular discretion. Not that she knew about it, and not that he'd tell her... Telling her that his bolstered powers had failed him after a few minutes contact with her skin would defeat the whole purpose of coming out this far, wouldn't it? It'd mean admitting defeat, and as long as Remy was still standing, as long as that rock was out there, there was still a chance. Slimmer odds, but still a good chance. He'd do what he had to make it happen, but now he wasn't so sure just how far he'd have to go to keep her around.

Frowning, he headed down the long hall of the Guild House with his hands in his pockets. It had been a while since he'd been back home; such a long time, in fact, that although he remembered the way to the back rooms where Jean Luc kept his office, the long walk still afforded him too much time to think about his misdeeds.

He had known this entire situation would be a gamble. He had known that trying to fix things would have risks. He hadn't anticipated his own reactions. He hadn't measured the critical loss, hadn't measured the fact that somehow, Rogue had learned to work him just as he had taught himself to work her.

Just when had the wager gotten so high?

He should have taken his own advice.

"*Never bet more than you're willin' t' lose.*"

He'd have it tattooed to his forehead one day as a permanent reminder.

Remy grimaced, raising his fist before the heavy door that bore no markings and no indicators of what lay beyond.

With a frustrated sigh, he knocked on the door to Jean Luc's office.

—

Dreaming again…
Wisps and tendrils of things slide past Rogue's subconscious. Seated on the back of a large, blue elephant, her knees tucked beneath its flapping ears, Rogue flies — her fingers trailing lazily in thick, cotton clouds that evaporate into ripples of molasses. The clouds drip behind her, her arms growing tired as she continues to pull her fingers through the streams. When she draws her hands back, joyful in the delirium and disjointed lucidity of the subconscious mind as it rests, her fingers come away sticky.

Curiously, she licks her thumb, expecting something sweet and sugary… but it is wrong somehow.

It tastes like metal.

With bleary, dubious recognition, she realizes that it's not molasses. The dark, viscous coating on her hands is blood, and she is covered in it.

The elephant disappears, and below her feet unfolds a solid plane: a checkerboard of marble, diamond patterned and severe. The floor spreads to all sides of her, and where it stops, walls build themselves like steam turning solid.

It is then that she smells the heavy, soporific resin in the air.

Rogue remembers, and at the same time, she knows that it is not her memory. This is the property of someone else. She has stolen it from them, and the thought draws a smirk from her, as does the empty space on her ring finger, soon to be filled.

The lines that delineate Rogue's identity blur where the dream shifts to accommodate that of another. This is his memory, tumultuous and wavering before it settles, solid and heavy once it does. It is Remy who stands before the altar at St. Alphonsus church, but it is Rogue who feels the hard marble steps below her feet, and Rogue who begins to understand and recognize, experiencing as he had, as the story tells itself through Remy's eyes.

Her hands are clean and bare, and for a moment, as the ghosts around her swirl into form, she is disoriented. The tuxedo she wears is pressed neatly, the tie too tight at her throat, the cummerbund uncomfortable, but she wears it with ease, and she knows she looks good.

Several women in the crowd of onlookers gaze at her appreciatively to reinforce her outward calm. She can't help but send a few winning smiles back in return. She winks at one, who titters, turning to a girlfriend and whispering heatedly.

In the front most pew, her adoptive father, Jean Luc, looks on. For him, this is a business arrangement, which leaves the celebration of the union lacking its expected luster, though the church is magnificent and the company resplendent. Members from both Guilds sit on either sides of the space, divided for now by the aisle that has been strewn with white and pink rose petals, but soon, that will change. They bear it. They will learn to get along because there is hope that they can. This union will forge the links between them and make the Guilds strong once again.

Beside her, Henri clears his throat.

"There anything you need, Remy?" he asks, and Rogue grins, her gaze fixed on the door as the bridal march blares from the organ overlooking the altar from the second floor balcony.

"Plan on giving me tips for the wedding night, frère?" she replies good-naturedly.

Her brother gives her a firm slap on the shoulder, and beside him Emil chuckles. "Remy should be givin' you pointers, old man."
Henri chuckles. "Can't teach an old dog —" "Eh, mes amis?" Rogue hears herself saying, her smile widening. "Think you can save this lil' debate for another time? I think it's a sin t' be talking 'bout this sorta thing in church."

"I think it's a sin t' ever have done them sorta things in a church," Emil shoots back in a whisper. Henri rolls his eyes. "Remy, you didn't —"

"Wasn't my idea," she returns, smiling even wider. Her chest swells, a feeling of happiness so thorough that she could burst. "Belle? She's something else."

"Worth actually listening to Père for once?"

"Gonna shame me before the altar, Henri?" she asks through her smile. "Nah," he says. "Nah. Just proud to see that you've grown up some since you got back from New York, lil' brother."

"Couldn't stay away forever," she replies quietly. "Besides, it's Belladonna."

Henri understands. This is a dream Remy's never thought possible. Everything on the periphery — Magneto, Bayville, his problems with Père, everything — fades away under this new promise of hope for the future. It has to.

"He's been sayin' that since he was fifteen," Emil mutters. "Me? I think y' both crazy."

Emil's complaints go unheard. Rogue is happier than she has ever been, a feeling experienced vicariously through the memory. True, she herself has not known a sentiment so strong, so pure; it thrums in her deeply, making her head swim and drowning all logic. It fills her lungs and leaves her dazed as through the massive, open doors, in walks Remy's bride-to-be.

This was worth coming home for, surely.

Remy is cotton-mouthed, light headed, but Belladonna is — Rogue's breath catches — she is everything she has ever imagined, wrapped delicately in white satin and pearls. It scares her a little, though that is not something she can admit to her brother or cousin, regardless of how close they are. Nor to Mercy, who frequently tries to ply her for information involving her escapades. Belle is not pure, no, but neither is Remy. They understand one another, and above all, it is not the contract of their marriage, nor what it will do for both clans, but what it will mean for them after they are joined that matters. He's convinced himself that this is the right thing to do; he is certain that Belladonna will stand by his side and defend him no matter the odds. This knowledge gives him strength. This is the reason Remy knows that despite the lingering tug of fear, this marriage will benefit everyone.

At Belle's side, his arm cocked at a severe angle in the crisp linen suit he wears, Marius Boudreaux deposits his daughter at Remy's side, placing a light kiss on her cheek and offering Remy a glance that carries with it a warning.

Do not trifle with me and my own, it says, and Remy doesn't care.

Not a lick.

Remy is buoyant, and Belle, smiling, radiant, beautiful Belle, who has taken out the rows of knotted
braids in her hair for today so that her gold locks fall lightly over her bare shoulders, is an angel.

This love, thinks Remy/Rogue through their symbiotic union in memory, this love makes him want to drown, press his face into Belle's neck and lose himself in the welcome embrace of the woman who he has known since the tender age of ten, who he has loved from the age of thirteen, who he thought he'd lost so many times, and now — at eighteen — she will be his and he hers. As much as it scares him, somehow, Remy knows that this is right. This is how it was always meant to be.

He has never seen Jean Luc look so proud, sitting in his cream seersucker suit in the first pew. Remy has finally done something to serve his family that has nothing to do with his mutation. For once, he is worthy of them as a person.

He doesn't see the hairline fracture in Père's smile, doesn't see the years of orchestration and planning that have come to make this moment possible. Sure, this wedding is part of the nonaggression pact, but all Remy sees is Belle.

She is smiling at him, her blue eyes wide and shining as the Priest begins the opening speech.

—

"Remy."

"Bonsoir, Jean Luc."

Sighing, the Thieves' patriarch re-settled himself behind his desk. Near the door, Henri and Lapin exchanged a glance. Remy did not take the seat that his adoptive father offered him.

"Henri tells me y' brought a friend with you." The way Jean Luc said the word "friend" aggravated him. It sounded like he'd smeread the word beneath a streak of oil, making it difficult to hold onto.

Remy concealed his disdain by quirking an eyebrow.

"Rogue didn't do it either, if that's what you're getting' at," he replied evenly, embellishing the circumstances with a tiny, white lie: "I was with her when Henri and Emil found the body, and both of us were with Henri and Emil just after the fight."

It didn't account for the three minutes that he spent chasing her down across the cemetery, but no matter how berserker-pissed-off she might've been at him, three minutes hardly offered enough of a window for Rogue to do to the Assassin what had been done to him. Besides, X-Men didn't kill. That was against their motto. Jean Luc didn't need to know those details, though. Better to hold his cards close to his chest, while he still could.

Jean Luc ignored him, choosing instead to fold his hands into steeples before his pencil thin moustache. "It's that girl, isn't it? The one that helped me escape from the Rippers last year?"

Remy looked askance at the series of monitors that lined the far wall — a new addition. Different parts of the mansion flicked on and off, revealing images of everyone who could be anywhere and at anytime. Jean Luc knew what each and every individual in or around the Guild House was up to at all hours: the all-seeing eye. It was precautionary. It was clever.

Remy made a mental note to disable the cameras in both his and Rogue's room that night.
"I don't know what you think you're doing, mon fils —"

Remy forced himself to bite back a snide retort as Jean Luc lingered on the word. "Son" was a subjective term, just like "father."

"But I can tell you this: since the Assassins were led to believe you haven't been back here, it's obvious to me that you either haven't been mindin' the agreement made between Marius and I, or you've been putting your nose back where it don't belong."

"Don't tell me these are dangerous times, Jean Luc. I've seen worse."

"You ought to be more careful, Remy," he said, in a tone that made him seem less concerned for Remy's personal safety, and all the less interested in his wasted investment — which is to say, not at all. "I can't take care of you in this situation. You're not even supposed to be in the city."

"I know," he said, enjoying, just for a moment, the ire it caused the man before him that he'd made his presence known at all. Dear old Dad, Remy thought; Jean Luc and his precious legislative inter-Guild bullshit. It was a simple enough concept that no one seemed able to adhere to: you stay out of our way, let us do our business, and we'll stay out of yours.

"Then you know that because the nonaggression pact's broken, the deaths of those two Assassins will make the streets run again."

"There was more than one?" Remy asked, casting a long glance over his shoulder at Henri for confirmation. He appeared just as startled.

"Two dead," Jean Luc repeated.

"Merde," Emil said flatly. "We didn't see a second. The first one was bad enough."

"I'll leave as soon as I'm done what I came for. Things'll go back to normal," said Remy, as if that concluded the matter. He wanted to leave. Standing around in front of Jean Luc and getting lectured wasn't something he'd done willingly since he was fifteen. He wasn't about to offer up any openings to reinstate the tradition.

"What you came for," Jean Luc echoed, his tone deceptively level, "don't want you no more. When are y' gonna realize that?"

Remy swallowed, his composure holding despite the strain he felt at those words.

"Like always," he said, grinning without humor at the irony of the situation he'd found himself in, "it's always been about what you wanted for the Guild that came first, Jean Luc. Guess you could say the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree." He paused, tipping his head to the side and examining the weathered lines on his old man's face. "Or maybe that's a side-effect of being under your care for so long. Its hard to think of anything else other than what's 'best for the Guild'." He shrugged, looking about the room and recalling the wasted years he'd spent, sitting across from the man before him. "Not like I ever had much of a choice in the matter, did I?"

—

"Whomsoever God hath joined together, let not any man put asunder..." the Priest intones, smiling
benevolently at the couple before him. Remy smiles softly, taking Bella's gloved hand with gentle guidance, and waits for Henri to present him with the ring.

Just as Henri steps from behind him, the sound of panting, staggering footfalls and the clang of metal against marble floors reverberates through the quiet sanctuary.

"Stop this!" Julien shouts, his ragged voice rising over the startled protests of the crowd. "This can't happen! Putain — you get you hands off my sister!"

"Julien!" Marius roars, standing to full height in his pew.

Most of the congregation has swiveled in their seats. Necks crane around, people whisper, others point out the sword dragging from the scabbard at Julien's hip. It scrapes roughly as he pulls it free. His arm quivering, he points it at his father while those nearest the blade shriek and lean backwards as he swings. Quarterstaffs snap open, and the draw of knives against their sheathes from beneath blouses and inside coat pockets pepper the air with the sound of betrayal: none were to have brought their weapons into the church. Neither Guild is willing to trust the other, that much is obvious.

"Non, père! This wedding will not happen so long as I live!"

In an instant, he is racing down the long aisle.

"Marius! What is the meaning of this?" Jean Luc cries, standing as well.

"They mean t' break the treaty!" someone else shouts. "This is treachery!"

"They want the power for themselves!"

"They set us up!"

"False peace! Liars! Oathbreakers!"

Julien bellows, "Belle get away from him! That maggot ain't even blood to LeBeau! He's adopted!"

"Dieu," Bella breathes beside him, "this can't be happening." Remy squeezes her hand tightly. The crazy cooyon means to slaughter him right then and there by the looks of it.

"There won't be some urchin runnin' the Unified Guilds — I won't have it! I won't answer t' him!"

Julien rails.

He is nearly at the steps. Pulling Belle behind him, Remy searches for something to defend himself with. Foolish enough to leave his cards at home, he is unarmed. He believed in the terms they'd set: he'd believed that peace could be found between Guilds from their union. He believed exactly what his father had promised him.

As it were, the closest thing at hand is a bible, grasped in the Priest's trembling fingers, and a bowl of holy water, neither of which seem particularly appropriate to use as a weapon.

"Remy!" someone shouts. From the side of the church occupied by the Thieves, the hilt of a sword sticks out over the crowd.

It is pandemonium as the Assassins surge upwards, the Thieves rising to match as brawls break out amongst the rival clans. Through the midst of it, Julien continues to run at him.

"I challenge you, Remy LeBeau! Defend yourself!"
"There's nothing you can do." Jean Luc continued evenly. "The damage is done, and as per usual, it's gonna be the people y' leave behind who pick up the pieces, Remy." He shook his head slowly, apologetically almost, but Remy knew better.

"This guilt thing," Remy gestured between them, "it don't work anymore… Père."

That caught Jean Luc's attention. Though his outward expression didn't change, Remy had known the man far too long not to notice the slight twitch of a muscle in his neck. It was involuntary, and therefore, an unreliable tell, but Jean Luc had taught him how to read people. How long had it been, a year? Two since Remy had referred to Jean Luc as "father"? He couldn't recall.

"An' I suppose y' got a better solution… mon fils?"

Jean Luc had taught him a lot of things: how to cheat, how to steal, but most importantly, how to lie.

"Something more valuable than all the artwork y' got stashed upstairs," he replied neutrally, pulling out a deck of cards. "What would y' say if I told you that fille upstairs was the girl who helped y' escape last year?"

His interest piqued, Jean Luc leaned forwards. "And what do you suppose she can do for me?"

Conversely, Belladonna had taught him how to kill. She was, after all, the daughter of an Assassin.

Remy smirked, splitting the deck with feigned disinterest, his fingers working the cards quickly into a steady shuffle.

Now, he thought, it was time to go in for the kill.

—

"Julien! I don't want to fight you!"

Remy leapt, soaring into the melee and plucking the outstretched hilt from his cousin's hand. The sword has barely torn from its scabbard, and Julien is upon him.

In the background, through the din, he can hear the priest yelling, "Please! Please! You mustn't — this is a house of God!"

The resinous coil of incense, smoking freely from its brazier in the corner, dampens the scent of the roses that line the aisle. Remy flings himself through the floral arrangements, tearing past the neat silk ribbons that drape along the pews. Thorns and stems catch on his slacks, slowing his progress out of the fray and out from beneath Julien's sword.

For a moment, as his ears fill with the grinding sound of steel against steel, Remy wonders where in the world Julien came up with the idea of using a blade to do him in.
It's far too Shakespearean for his liking: medieval, almost, and Remy's always been a Star Trek kind of guy. Using his shin to knock Julien's knee out from beneath him, the swords scrape together again, and he grits his teeth against the force of the blow.

He'd have much preferred his staff — something a little less… sharp.

Belle screams. It startles him. Never has he known her not to fight when the opportunity presents itself, but standing there in her brilliant gown, she is no longer Belladonna; she is heaven personified — she is an angel who will watch over his death. Remy thinks he's ready for anything, usually, but for just one second, he doubts he can die for her. He does not want to die for her, no matter how strong he believes his love to be.

Turning to see that she is unharmed, there is a slight miscalculation. Just as Remy twists, as the world around him slows down, Julien lunges forward and the point of Remy's sword pierces cotton, and then, meeting a slight, rubbery resistance, flesh.

He can feel the blade sinking, its path into Julien's ribcage stilted as the weapon shears against bone. Right next to his ear, he hears Julien struggle for breath where the boy sinks into him — it comes out as a rattle, a quiver as the blood spurts against his fingers. When Julien sags against him, the trickle becomes a flow as the wound opens.

Over Julien's shoulder, he can see the tip of the foil. It glistens darkly, streaked with oxidized scarlet.

—

Jean Luc smiled thinly, leaning back in his chair.

Remy waited, his expression neutral.

At the door, Emil and Henri remained sentinel, not moving, and not making a sound.

Jean Luc cocked an eyebrow, peering at Remy over his offering on the corner of the desk.

—

The incense is thick, but it does not cover the copper tang of blood. His feet are sticking to the floor of the church. The stain, so dark that it's nearly black, spreads steadily from the fatal wound. Remy's hands are covered in it. He can do nothing but stare as Julien slumps to his knees and lands sprawled on the cold, hard marble.

The foil makes an ugly, wet sound as it pulls free from Julien's chest.

Belle is crying, the sound clear amidst the roar of voices in the background. Sharper still is the Priest; he is begging for the fighting to stop.

"Père?" Remy croaks, silently praying that Jean Luc has a way to fix this. Jean Luc, who has taught him everything and made him clever, Jean Luc who has all the answers. "Papa?"
Belladonna keens, staggering over to her fallen brother. She is babbling.

"No, oh no, Julien! Julien, no… no… Dieu, somebody help… Somebody help him!"

"Jean Luc!" Remy bellows, the sword still grasped in his hand, the business end quivering over Julien's body – pointing to the atrocity on the floor.

Silence descends, thick and heavy as the nearest Thieves and Assassins both turn to stare.

Belle is crying.

"Papa?" Remy whispers, horrified that he has done it again and so soon. He has blood on his hands again, and this time, it is not figurative. It is a real stain that will turn the water red when he tries to wash it off.

"You killed my son," Marius Boudreaux whispers, condemning. His large form pushes the crowd aside. He stares coldly at the body on the floor, his gaze turning to Remy with a look of mingled horror and disgust, and then to Remy's father.

Jean Luc is shaking his head, his eyes closed.

"Your son's life for mine," Marius demands, his voice pitched so low that it comes out as a hiss.

"It was —" Belladonna hiccoughs, swiping at her running makeup, "an accident!" she sobs.

"T' keep the peace, there must be justice!" Marius bellows.

Belle howls, and Remy can't bear it. Swallowing, he turns from her.

His angel.

From the places he will go, she cannot deliver him.

Silently, Jean Luc concedes, and with a nod, he confirms Remy's fate.

—

Rogue woke, her chest aching, her feet ensnared in the bedclothes that twisted around her ankles. Pressing her shaking hands to her face, she sobbed, her fingers coming away wet with hot tears.

Thin, pre-dawn light slipped through the curtains, drawing a veil across the suite. Still half-cloaked in darkness, and through the sheen of tears, she had difficulty orienting herself. Kicking at the sheets with a hoarse moan, Rogue finally managed to draw her legs up to her chest where she buried her face into her knees, her shoulders shuddering with the empathic weight of Remy's burden.

It hurt. It hurt like her heart was being tugged out of her chest.

With the pain came a tumult of something else, something she felt so acutely that it started her sobs afresh just as she thought she'd calmed down.

It was love. A love so strong and so forceful that it would sacrifice itself just to survive a little longer despite the strain of time and distance. A love that turns to bitterness and self-loathing; a love that
becomes the mortar for the wall that is built around the heart to protect it in its most fragile state.

A love that can know none other because it had seen its lifespan once, for someone else.

It was not for her.

It could never be for her.

Slowly, shaking with the effort of straining against the sadness of sudden and violent understanding, Rogue extracted herself clumsily from the bed. Setting her bare feet down on warm wood floors, she retrieved her socks, her boots, the clothing Remy had bought her, and her trench coat.

She dressed, swiping at her nose occasionally with the heel of her hand while keeping her eyes downcast, not really seeing the shadows of the room as they shifted.

What did it matter? Like a thief, she had collected a part of Remy that she should never have seen. It meant something far worse — Rogue took a shuddering breath, and moved with deliberate, dragging steps to the en suite bathroom.

One look in the mirror was all she needed.

Cringing away from her reflection, she fled, her fingers pressed to her mouth to keep a fresh peel of sobs restrained.

She padded silently into the hall, her boots grasped in one hand to not make a sound as she escaped from the night-bathed mansion and headed for the swamps.

So immersed in the lingering emotions wound tightly into Remy's memory, the understanding that by kissing him, she had absorbed him, that his powers had failed, she did not see the shine of red eyes in the corner of her room watching her.

A dismantled security camera sat on Remy's lap.

Chapter End Notes

Post Script:

- Suicide King: King of Hearts. So named because in the drawing the king appears to be stabbing himself in the head.

- The Guild House: I'm basing its appearance loosely on Oak Alley. An architectural note, antebellum isn't a style per se, but refers more to the period in which these houses were built. The "not style" refers to pre-Civil War buildings – symmetrical, a little boxy. Oak Alley was designed in the Greek Revival style.

- "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date." Largely thanks to the White Rabbit in "Alice in Wonderland" and the convenient parallel made with Lapin.
Space shifted, the air splitting with a violent crack that forced two bodies through a cloud of sulfur and into Lafayette Cemetery number one. The X-Men alias Wolverine and Nightcrawler appeared on a small footpath in Lafayette Cemetery number one, the sound of their arrival echoing against the houses of the Garden District.

Wolverine, his mask covering half his face, hunched his shoulders and sniffed at the air with ferocious determination.

"Bingo," he said gruffly.

Beside him, Nightcrawler narrowed his eyes. "Is she here?"

"One thing's for sure, we ain't alone," Logan growled, stalking off into the night. Nightcrawler followed, his prehensile tail flicked in agitation as he took in his surroundings. While the part of the graveyard they'd teleported to remained dark, several yards away, men moved amidst the glow of security flares.

"There are cops crawling all over this place. Stick to me, Elf. They see that blue mug of yours and it'll turn into hunting season quicker than you can say 'donut.'"

"How can you tell?" Kurt asked.

"Smells like blood," was the only reply he offered.

A twinge of nervous tension laced his next question. "Is it Rogue's? Is she... was she hurt?"

"She ain't here. Neither is the Cajun. But they were, and not too long ago. I'd know his stink anywhere. This is human — baseline. It smells dirty and it's strong. Come on."

Logan ploughed forwards, his shoulder knocking into a crypt, though it didn't slow him down.
They emerged on the outskirts of a police line. It created an ugly, polygonal blockade around an even uglier hole in the ground. Worse, the place was crawling with feds who, for all they were concerned, would consider them either vigilantes or worse: suspects.

Logan sniffed again, thrusting an arm out to keep Kurt in the shadows.

"Stay put," Wolverine rumbled, his teeth bared.

He sniffed again, taking in a lungful of the sodden air, and grimaced. Logan shook his head and Kurt hissed, "What is it?"

From Nightcrawler's vantage point, he couldn't see what the problem was, though from Logan's expression, he was beginning to put together a pretty good idea.

"They were here," Wolverine murmured, more to himself than in answer. "I can smell them all over these two. That can't be right."

"What? Who? What can't be right? Wolverine!"

"You shouldn't see this, kid," he rumbled in a tone that left little room for argument. "The cops are going to be coming this way soon. There's another one behind us. It's downwind, but the scent'll turn this way once the breeze picks up. It's even nastier than this. We need to move."

"Another what?" Nightcrawler asked, trying to push past the firm barrier that blocked his view of the hole.

"Back up, Elf," Wolverine warned. "I mean it. We need to get out of here. Now. Getting implicated in this mess will bring the roof down on us all."

"But you just said Rogue was here. Aren't we going to follow her?"

Wolverine rounded on him, picking him up by his uniform collar and dragging him backwards. "I don't know what the hell that punk got her mixed up in, but this ain't right," he said again, though this time, it sounded to Kurt as if Logan was trying to convince himself of some unspoken fact he didn't want to voice. "Stripes wouldn't. But the Cajun…?"

"What are you talking about?" Kurt hissed.

Wolverine wagged his head. "Her scent is all over that poor bastard back there. He reeks of it. Gambit's fainter, but there's only them two. I don't smell anyone else — two others, maybe, but they didn't touch the body."

"Body?" he croaked.

"Two of 'em. This is a murder scene."

Wolverine was losing it, Kurt concluded, his toes barely dragging over the ground where Logan carried him back the way they'd came.

Whatever scent it was that he'd picked up, it had to be bad.

Incensed, Kurt moved instinctively and teleported out of Logan's grasp, delivering himself into the shadows of an overhanging oak tree that looked down on the splintered blemish marring the earth below.

What Kurt saw there nearly made him fall out of the tree entirely.
Logan's sigh might've been a growl. "I told you not to look, kid."

A moment later, once Kurt swallowed the bile at the back of his throat, he looked up to see Wolverine's figure stalking away, a black dot blending into the shadows.

He said he'd smelled Rogue on the body. Her scent must have been strong, because even with the coppery tang of blood and the bitter undercurrents of other things festering beneath it, Logan would have known if she'd been here. Kurt covered his mouth and nose, but it didn't help: what he saw cordoned off with police tape and covered by tarps was hardly contained. Little plastic numbered pickets marked off bits of evidence, and those, though small, wouldn't fit under the sheets.

Kurt thought that one of them might've been a finger.

Swallowing the urge to be sick, he considered what Wolverine had said:

If Logan could only smell Rogue and Gambit on the body, that meant... no. It was impossible. Rogue wouldn't hurt anyone unless she had to — and these people were mutilated beyond recognition.

Kurt's stomach dropped as he recalled the ruthless, cold grimace Rogue had worn the day she pushed Mystique off a cliff at the Institute. It was a marked incident that stood out in his mind as the one moment that had redefined who she'd become over the course of the last year. Apocalypse hadn't helped, but Mystique had backed her into a corner: Mystique, who had brought a side out of Rogue that he hadn't thought she'd had in her.

There was a side to his step-sister that Kurt could not recognize. It was the part of her that had been too abused by Mystique to ever reclaim her innocence.

Rogue had been repentant, he tried to convince himself. She was repentant; she was sorry for acting impulsively. But being sorry didn't bring back the dead. Rogue had wanted vengeance. She had sought it and claimed it. Mystique, Kurt's birth mother and Rogue's foster mother, had been destroyed. One terrible moment was all it took, and in Kurt's eyes, no matter how much he'd embraced his sister afterwards — even after he'd said he'd forgiven Rogue and they had found Mystique was alive and well, a part of him still understood that it was the potential for great evil that he would remember more clearly than anything.

With Rogue's abilities, her training, her mutation — there was great and terrible possibility in her, and in some ways, Kurt knew it was not an unfounded fear.

He loved her, but love didn't erase the fact that in some ways, by being a mutant with her unique talents, Rogue was more dangerous than any of them put together.

But was it possible that Rogue was a killer? Kurt knew it could be true, and instantly, he hated himself for doubting her — but doubt festers, and his had had taken root months ago. With the sight that confronted him, it began to flourish.

Kurt thought he might be sick.

"Mein schwester," he choked under his breath, "what have you done?"

—

A whisper of something ephemeral lingered at the back of Rogue's mind as she stalked across the Thieves' Guild estate grounds. The grass was dewy and left wet streaks across the toes of her boots.
She shuddered, reflecting on how easily her movements suddenly seemed to her. She felt changed, somehow, as if by adapting to Remy's fragmented memories and knowing by habit the fastest route to the swamp was through the cover of trees.

Rogue ducked into their cover moment later, slipping into the cover of predawn as if the shadows were a familiar cloak. She knew the locations of the security cameras, the arc taken between two angled sweeps of the lenses, and the exact amount of time in between where she was afforded the cloak of stealth to pass beneath them undetected.

It was as if the memory that had surfaced as she slept, stolen from Remy's past, had flicked on a switch in her head.

It had been second nature to slip into one of the side rooms and pull a spare bo from the Guild's artillery. She hadn't known the passcode to unlock the drawer in which the training weapons were stored, but she had picked the lock in under five seconds flat. She'd even had the gall to consider that five seconds was slow, before she checked herself:

This was decidedly bad, she concluded, and feeling that a sense of trepidation might actually get her head working the way it ought, she rolled with it:

"Where are you, swamp rat?" she asked his psyche through grit teeth.

Though she strained to find him, Remy's psyche was simply not there. Unfortunately for her, a substantial amount of other indecipherable information was. It was patchy at best — a network of half-formed, foggy thoughts that meant little or nothing if she concentrated on them too hard. One thing was certain: she had a fair idea of why he was acting the way he was, and it pissed her off to no end.

Like faces in the mist, his memories rose to greet her. Women — hundreds of women — all nameless and indecipherable from one another beneath the grey veil of forgetting lined her thoughts. When Rogue tried to focus on any one of them, their features shifted, their eyes turning blue and sad, hair shifting into silken blond. These were the ones he'd used to try and forget her: Belladonna Boudreaux; Remy's childhood sweetheart and first true broken heart — and no one could drown her out entirely.

Without his psyche, without Remy himself, there was no one there to see Rogue swipe at her eyes. They stung from crying, and after having looked in her bathroom mirror moments before, Rogue couldn't bring herself to see what condition she was in since.

Dully, she reminded herself that even if her eyes were bloodshot, they wouldn't be noticeable next to her red pupils and black sclera.

She sniffed, yanking at her gloves, trying to smother out the electric tingle she felt straight down to her bones. Her head hurt, her mouth tasted like ashes, and every thought that surfaced twisted into a grim reminder of what she had experienced in slumber:

It was all too hazy, and try as she might, Rogue was having a difficult time trying to pull out another clearer memory to block out the burden of Remy's loss.

He had cared for Belle so much, and her chest ached with it. His pain. Her pain. His exile. His broken heart. Hers? She ducked under a branch.

Whether it was her own feelings for Remy, or Remy's feelings for the woman he'd left behind, Rogue couldn't tell. There was no clear mental line to distinguish between the two.
It hurt; it burned in her chest like an old fire that refused to be stomped out. Little embers, like searing spots of self-reprimand, lingered in the aftermath of the blaze. You couldn't snuff that sort of devotion out.

That was all she needed to know to keep moving.

At the Institute, whenever she'd had a particularly bad day, the Danger Room had always served as an outlet to blow off some steam. Running against enough mechs and dealing with the sore muscles and bruises after a hard training session was better than therapy.

Physical pain blunted the lingering emotional aches.

That was good. She could deal with that, she reasoned. She'd relish a sentinel or two. Hell, she'd take on a dozen sword-wielding Assassins if she could. But all she had was Remy's agility, a pack of cards, and an adamantium quarterstaff tucked into her belt — and nothing to defend herself against.

She'd make do with a gator. She'd satisfy belting out a few rounds with the warm body that followed her at a distance, providing it wasn't *Remy*.

With her luck, Rogue thought morosely, it probably was.

Part of him constantly stoked the flame, blowing on those lingering coals of his memory. Why he did it, Rogue couldn't even begin to understand, but she did know that it served as some sort of moral penitence for what he'd done to Julien Boudreaux. But there was more to it than that, wasn't there?

He felt he'd destroyed the Guild peace. Perhaps his family blamed him for it.

He definitely blamed himself.

She drew a shaky breath. In those terms, she understood Remy in a way that no one else could. It made her heart ache.

And that gave her all the more reason to avoid him; empathy had never been her strong suit.

A low breeze from the southwest pushed his scent to the line of trees beyond the docks where she stilled, breathing deeply. It was a faint smell, but distinctive. How that boy managed to get out of so many tight spots in his line of work, wearing that much aftershave, was beyond her.

Keep moving, she told herself, breaking into a clipped jog over the protruding roots where the ground turned to muddy shoreline.

She'd been foolish to take what he'd said at face value. Heck, the Professor had told her explicitly that whatever changes Gambit had undergone might not be permanent, and yet she'd gone and kissed him anyway. She'd blamed him for trying to get away as quickly as possible, but he'd probably known the entire time that something had gone wrong.

It didn't mean it wasn't her fault; he'd given her the bait, and she'd reacted. Who wouldn't, she thought defensively, launching herself one-handed over a fallen tree trunk.

"Like a damned donkey with a carrot in front of its face," she huffed to herself.

It didn't have to mean the kiss was anything more than that, she thought defiantly. No strings attached, just the spectres in her head to remind her that there was no use in competing with Belladonna's memory. But how could he *bait* her like that? Did it make him feel good about himself to jerk her around?
Rogue swore.

Perhaps there was more of him in her mind than she'd believed initially.

The thought chased her down, setting a prickle in her limbs she hadn't noticed before. It was a nervous shiver, nipping at the back of her consciousness and making her fingers twitch. Accompanying it was the sudden, reflexive urge to test her strength, and just below that, the sharper craving for nicotine.

She grimaced, cursing the Cajun for being a smoker. She wasn't about to humor him, she asserted herself; not with *that* filthy habit.

Bearing that in mind, Rogue broke into a run, darting into the thick twine of tree limbs and heavy mosses, leaping wide onto the first felled cypress that crossed her path, and extending her staff to vault into the trees.

For a moment as she soared through the air, her heart lifted. She savored the freedom of escape, the fresh feeling of her muscles responding. Rogue ran.

—

Like a shadow, Remy tailed her through the cover of hanging vines and thick mosses that swayed lazily under the grey cover of the bayou. Despite his nimble leaps from branch to branch, banking over the deeper gullies that opened over the swamp, he felt clumsy; anxious.

He didn't like it.

He paused a moment, fingers weaving through the tangles of Spanish moss that blocked his way, stilling their hushed movements, and listened.

It was still dark among the trees, though dawn was probably breaking in the East by now, lighting the plantation grounds and warming the windowpanes. The swamp, however, was as placid and rank as ever. Twenty feet below, the water was barely visible beneath the heavy overhang that concealed his position from view.

Either way, it was still too damned dark to really know where Rogue had gotten to so quickly.

She couldn't move that fast, not without a little… help.

Remy grimaced.

His "help."

He snorted at the irony, uncaring that the sound carried easier here. If Rogue had absorbed his powers, she undoubtedly knew that he was shadowing her. Hell, if she was thinking like he usually did, she was probably luring him out here to have her naughty way with him.

He'd be an alligator's breakfast in no time.

It'd be a small sacrifice, he smirked. Just as quickly, the smile vanished. This was all getting way out of hand, and that was saying something given the fact that he usually enjoyed the element of surprise.


Lather. Rinse. Repeat.
But like most things that carried with them the potential for great payoff, nothing was ever quite so simple or so effortless. It was the entanglement that was causing the problem — foreign as it felt to feel anything at all. That made him uncertain enough to stop from putting a finger on what it was exactly that sent him after her: that particular emotion had long been dormant in his arsenal, and frankly, he wasn't sure what to do with it, much less what to tell her about it without making himself look like a complete cooyon for the trouble.

Perhaps had he been less impulsive, less determined, and less infatuated with the whole idiotic, romantic notion that he was somehow fashioned for her at the most basic, and therefore the most complicated level, then he could forgive himself.

The fact of the matter was, he wanted her.

Badly.

The problem was that in the grand scheme of things, Rogue wasn't willing to let herself fall into the roll of "the conquest," and Remy, determined as ever, wasn't entirely certain of what he thought of that. Which brought him back to square one.

He squatted on the tree branch, bracing an elbow against the pitted trunk, and scrubbed at his face. Things had been much simpler when they'd been fighting against one another — an Acolyte and an X-Man standing in the middle of a dockyard exchanging niceties by way of exploding playing cards. Back then, the emotional baggage hadn't quite weighed in so heavily for either of them.

The odds these days were evened up, so to speak: Rogue had her mental cargo, a head full of ghosts, and he had his skeletons tucked away neatly in his closet. In some ways, they were so alike it was unnerving.

Dieu, he deserved her.

The thought sobered him, bringing him back to his surroundings. The wood beneath his fingers as he pressed his palm into the tree was damp and moldering. Pieces of the greyish bark peeled away as he peered at his fingers, clinging stubbornly to his palm in chipped flecks that would be difficult to pick off once they burrowed into the fabric.

"And isn't that an appropriate metaphor," he hummed to himself, a touch sardonically.

Rogue had absorbed him, and while she was dealing with the consequences of his assimilated memories, he was subsequently dealing with her, dealing with his dirty laundry. What were they at now: two, three times in the span of a week? It'd be downright hilarious if, like an inoculation, he eventually found himself becoming immune to her touch... But that was too much to hope for.

In fact, it seemed that the exact opposite was happening.

Each time he touched her, she took a little edge off his powers. Whether it was permanent, or if she was just exhausting him because she'd already reached a formidable level of strength, Remy had yet to determine.

"Dunno how much I want t' find out either," he muttered under his breath, extending his staff with a muted click. Using it to peel apart some of the moss obscuring the view, he peered into the swamp.

More disturbing still was the fact that he continued to mull it over, when clearly, he should have been making an active effort to prepare for endgame. The X-Men were in the city already, the Brotherhood would be close behind, no doubt, and the gemstone he only hoped Lapin could take
He needed Rogue, but Rogue needed the stone. It was a pretty weighty catch fifty-two, or was that twenty two? Whatever.

Instead of contemplating all that, Remy's thoughts lingered on her.

Like the little bits of broken bark burrowing into his gloves, she had somehow managed to work her way under his skin. She was forcing him to develop a conscience, and that was a dangerous thing. In a time like this, with Jean Luc gnashing at the bit to level the playing field before the Assassins could attack, and Remy himself trying to delay the inevitable as long as possible, his defenses were worn down, and Rogue had slid in.

It had probably been a bad idea altogether to pick the lock to her room and try to dismantle the surveillance camera positioned in the corner while she slept not ten feet away.

But that was part of the fun: not getting caught, but hoping that maybe he would be. Appreciating Rogue in her sleep had been a favourite past time when he'd been out in Bayville on contract with Magneto. Once upon a time.

He'd heard everything as he stood at the foot of her bed, his toolkit clenched in his fist while he admired the pale curve of her bare shoulder: his memories replayed in dreams, experienced first-hand as if Rogue had done Julien in herself. Exposed by the slipping blankets, as fragile and innocent in her slumber as she had ever been, even all those times when he'd perched on her balcony and peered through her window back in Bayville: Rogue's nocturnal habits remained a constant: she spoke in her sleep.

Last night, she'd said the words that condemned him.

Worse, when she'd awoken shaken and sobbing, he hadn't been able to comfort her. Something had prevented him from reaching out to her because he was too stunned or too stupid or too shocked that his powers had failed; that she'd taken so much and in such detail.

Touching her skin again meant running the risk of getting absorbed again, and while he could live with the comforting abyss of unconsciousness, he doubted he wanted to find out what else she'd pull from his head.

Dangerous: this whole endeavor.

His past shames were one thing, but what if she sussed out what he was up to on accident?

Some part of him trilled at the thought: a tightness in the chest that belied his expectation. Part of him wanted Rogue to know: part of him wanted to allow himself to be laid bare before her.

He shoved the desire down. Kicked some mental dirt over it to bury it good.

No point entertaining that sort of fantasy: femmes didn't want the damage. They wanted the charm. "Cajun!"

Remy pivoted, dropping to a crouch and peering down through the woven branches.

"Ah know you're up there!" Rogue bellowed.

Over the solemn croon of bullfrogs, Remy heard her boot heels striking wood at a fast clip, and the
unmistakable sound of a deck of cards being shuffled.

*Merde.*

"*Bon matin!*" he called back, slipping his trench off his shoulders. Rogue didn't reply. The silence stretched while Gambit waited. It thickened, growing in intensity with each moment that passed and she didn't respond. He glanced at the garment a moment, contemplating, and with a heavy sigh, he dropped it through the tangle of tree limbs as if that might preserve his favourite article of clothing a while longer.

The explosion that followed was near deafening as a charged card hit the base of the tree in which he was perched. He moved sinuously, flipping off the branch backwards so that his shoulders took the brunt of the lashing branches on his freefall to the swamp.

A moment later, he twisted mid-air, landing in a squat opposite Rogue. Beneath him, jutting over the swamp like a saggy bridge, a felled cypress trunk supported their shared weight. It sagged a little with the combined strain of both bodies, letting water slop over and making the surface slippery. For the most part, it was still buoyant over the dark pool below them.

Though it was wide enough across to balance comfortably, one misplaced step to the right, and he would have his morning bath.

The coat caught on a hooked branch, draped there as if he'd hung it up for it later.

Remy chuckled. "Y’ picked a good place for a fight."

Behind him, the waning flames left by the detonated card petered, the wood too moist to sustain the fire.

Before him, Rogue shucked another card into her palm, toying with the edges. She cocked her head to the side, surveying him in a manner that left him edgy and excited despite the obvious threat she posed.

"Ah don't want ta argue with you anymore, Gambit," she said evenly.

Remy glanced behind him at the scorch marks left on the base of the tree. "Then what was that?" He cocked his thumb over his shoulder. "A wake up call? *Femme,* I hope y' didn't ruin m' favorite coat."

Rogue smirked, brushing her hair out of her eyes. Remy stilled, his breath catching at the sight.

"*N'inquiet pas, cher,*" she murmured, favoring him with grin that was all too familiar. "Ah'd say it was best that it was your coat and not you. Wouldn't want ta damage the goods, now would we?"

Remy blinked away his surprise as Rogue pursed her lips at him, her eyes glimmering in the dappled shade offered by morning sun as it crept through the trees. Shining scarlet on black, her gaze reflected his sin back to him — if he could even call it that.

"Rogue," he began, taking a ginger step forwards.

She appeared entirely unconcerned by his proximity, placing a hand on her hip and thrusting it to the side as she sized him up.

"Surprised, *cher?*" she asked, taking in his full measure. It made his stomach clench, being acknowledged by her like this. It was still wrong, of course, since she wasn't enjoying the view of her own volition.
"You're not yourself right now, p'tit," he continued. With each inch forwards, the tree trunk sagged a little more, bouncing in the non-existent current and creating little ripples over the glasslike surface of the swamp. "An' I think that's partially my fault."

"Ya think?" she scoffed. "If you'd kept your distance to begin with like Ah'd asked, Ah wouldn't have hurt ya, and Ah wouldn't know what Ah know now."

"I'm not hurt," he countered. "I'm just peachy. See?"

He held his arms out to the side, his staff compacted in his fist, though he managed to pry his fingers off of it long enough to show her his hands were otherwise empty and he posed no real threat.

"Oh, ya look just fine, sugah." She lowered her lashes, peering at him with barely concealed suggestion. Remy tried to play it off nonchalantly. Less than a half-hour before, he'd seen her sobbing. It had been the desperate, hollowed out sound of someone who'd experienced an agony so acute that it felt like her heart was being shredded. He knew it well; he'd lived it after all.

This was his first line of defense, and she was using it against him. Part of him wanted to indulge in it, seeing it played back to him so easily, and part of him wanted to dive into the swamp and swim as fast and far as he could.

She was dangerous like this because he knew he was too.

"So what y' gonna do?" he asked lightly. "Throw that card?" He nodded at the Queen in her hand, which she rolled lazily over her knuckles with careless effort. The motion was buttery smooth, and Rogue replied in a tone that was equally laden.

"Ah'm not sure. Ya see, mon ami. Ah wouldn't want ta mess up that lovely face of yours — but since you wouldn't let a girl have her privacy? That's just plain rude."

"I was concerned," he answered, unsure whether she'd known he'd been in her room, or if she meant that he'd followed her into the bayou. In either case, it was true: he wanted to look out for her.

"More for yourself, Ah'd wager." Slowly, her hips rolling in time with each step she took towards him, making her body sway with the hypnotic, slow curl that set his blood speeding, she approached.

"Worried about what Ah took from ya when we touched, Cajun?" she murmured. "Or is that morbid curiosity of yours actin' up again, and you decided that ya just had ta find out for yourself what it feels like ta be on the receiving end?"

"Can't say I'm not appreciatin' it, but I think I prefer you with your own prickly attitude," he returned. The muscles in his hands twitched as her forward motion slowed.

Rogue had discarded her jacket, but she'd pocketed the cards he'd slipped into the coat. From his vantage point, a bare few feet away, he could see the slight, rectangular bulge in her pocket. The deck made the fabric stretch flatteringly, wrapping a little more tightly around her right thigh.

Against his better judgment, he wet his lower lip. Rogue noticed.

Quirking an eyebrow, she drew out her next comment slowly so that it would sear a little longer. "Ah thought ya preferred the woman you married, Remy."

"Rogue —" he began, struggling to find the words to explain to her what she'd seen.

"There's other stuff in here, too." She gestured lazily with her free hand. "Things Ah can't
understand exactly, memories that are only half-formed," she continued, her voice pitched so low it was nearly inaudible below the drone of the bullfrogs lining the banks of the marshes that stretched beyond the immediate periphery of the trees. "There's more, isn't there? Others things you buried deep because you didn't want to be reminded, but ya do remind yourself — all the time. You keep those things close so ya won't forget what ya done. Feels like you're punishing yourself, neh?"

"Rogue —" he said more insistently, his patience tapering.

"If you think you can make me understand by sweet talkin' your way out of this one, you've got another thing coming," she said, a hint of reprimand evident in her tone.

"It was a long time ago," he tried to explain.

"The memory is as fresh as ever," she supplied, her eyes narrowing. "Which means that your concept of 'a long time' is a little off."

"It's not that simple," he tried again. "There are circumstances involved that go beyond what I did back then and why I went through with it at all —"

"It's what you felt and not what ya did," she hissed, the Queen of Hearts in her hand sizzled into activity between her gloved fingers. "What ya did was try ta coax me into a false sense of security. You tried ta play me, Gambit — just like all the girls ya used to dampen that feelings you had for Belladonna. How many were there? Ah lost count. There were too many faces, too many names — all of them swirling together in the end ta create one huge blur of senseless pain; all of them drowned out because ya did what you always do: You left. When she needed you most, ya left her behind," she spat.

The card fizzed, emitting a high-pitched whine that could make any dog cower with its tail between its legs. Remy was no street mutt, and he wouldn't bow beneath Rogue's intimidation.

He heard the unspoken accusation in her tone: "Just like you left me."

"There's a reason for everything. If you let me explain, then mebbe you can try to understand," he tried again, straining to keep his voice even.

"Ah know enough."

"But you don't know everything," he countered, his gaze flicking to the charged Queen at her side with marked concern. "Throw the card, Rogue," he urged, keeping one eye on her face, and one on the flare of fuchsia at her side. "Y' can throw it at me if you have to, but you gotta let it go."

"That's your motto, isn't it? Just chuck it when it gets too hot for ya ta handle," she snapped. "Ah keep things, Remy. It all gets filed away in my head for later. Ah don't throw anything away."

"We're not talkin' about what we've done or what we know. This ain't some sort of elaborate metaphor. Th' card, Rogue — it's just a damned piece of paper."

"Well maybe it meant something ta me!" she shouted.

She had to pull the Queen, he thought miserably. She had to choose a card that was significant for them both.

The Queen sung at a higher pitch, the card's excited molecules racketing for release, sending sparks to the dark water below and bouncing off Rogue's slacks. There was no foreseeable way she could control the charge, and if it exploded in her hand, she would be blown to smithereens.
Deeply, he felt the tug of unbridled dread as he tried to read Rogue's expression. It was the look of someone whose hope had been stomped out. Where that shine of promise had been when he'd kissed her, that sanguine swell of expectancy was smothered under the sick desperation of someone who'd known more losses than victories.

Yes, they were exactly alike in that respect.

There was no time to think on it longer, and seizing the only weapon he had at his disposal, one that would probably cause more harm than good for them both, he shouted, "Well mebbe you mean something t' me!"

The words were out of his mouth before he could reign them back, and the effect was instantaneous.

Rogue's expression fell, her eyes welled up, and her mouth twisted in a grimace. She sucked it down in the same way that her defiant stance slumped, letting loose one loud, dry sob. His powers would begin to seep out of her, and sure of what would happen next, Remy lunged as the card's whining reached its crescendo.

He caught Rogue around the waist, hoisting her off her feet and knocking her wrist with his staff. The card detonated not three feet away, sending the pair of them staggering.

Remy skidded on wet wood as they landed, trying to cover Rogue's head as she tried to fend him off at the same time. They twisted, and the log dipped precariously, preparing to roll them both off into the bayou as their weight shifted.

"Putain de merde!" Remy swore, leaping up to solid ground as Rogue slid from his grasp and a sting of pain ruptured in his side.

She'd clipped him in the ribs even as he'd tried to protect her.

He swiveled, launching himself up and over a tangled dam of mosses and broken branches. At his heels, Rogue followed, spitting an expletive in French. She cut him off, the sound of a bo staff extending a millisecond before she knocked him between the shoulder blades and dove ahead of him, coming up fast on another tree bridge and blocking his way.

"Rogue!" Remy hissed, wincing at the twinge in his back. "This isn't going t' resolve anything!"

She rattled down the log, feet moving quicker and steadier than he'd seen yet, and spun to face him. In her hands, a staff that matched his own crossed her chest. She spun it once, deftly, and snapped one end to the side of her boot. It made a hollow thock! sound that echoed amongst the quieted grove.

"Who says Ah want resolution?" she shot back. "Ah'm teachin' you a lesson, Cajun. Ah might be ta blame for bringing this on myself by touchin' ya, but sugah, there's stuff up in here that needs some serious explainin' — and if ya can't tell me like a normal human being, Ah'm gonna beat it outta ya!"

Remy grit his teeth, moving up to stand on the log. Five feet below, the swamp offered a mirror reflection in the water. He peered over, looking at the pair of them reflected on the rippling surface, each of them mimicking the other's stance.

His nerves sung, every molecule of his being vibrating with unspent energy. Dieu, she had him wound something fierce.

"I think you might need t' cool off a bit, Roguey," he hummed, extending his own staff. "Don't wanna hurt you, truth be told, but if y' don't want t' be mature about this —"
"Oh shut up about maturity. You've got about as much aptitude for mature conversation as some of the kids Ah babysit at Xavier's. Honestly, Ah think some of them already surpass ya, and they're half your age."

"You're only hot under the collar 'cause you're not getting the answer you want."

She scoffed. "Last I checked, I got a little too much from you."

"Got more on offer. Only need ask politely."

"Who says I want it?"

He tsked. "Then what's this about, exactly? The fact that I've got a few secrets or the fact that there was someone before you who knew them?"

Rogue's eyes darkened, her grip tightening on the staff as she leapt at him, swinging it wide over her head. He blocked the blow easily, though he hadn't anticipated the force of the hit. It left both their hands quivering with the shared vibration as his staff held hers off.

"This is about being told half-truths," she hissed. "For misleadin' me, and for making me feel like crap because it makes ya feel better about yourself. You don't care about anyone other than good old number one, Gambit. That's how it goes, so don't ya dare try and pull that garbage that ya care for me, because of all things, that ain't in my head with the rest of your leftovers!"

"Wasn't my intention t' mislead you," he replied, squatting as she parried backwards, the staffs coming together with a resounding clang, and then another, and another as she tried to knock his legs out from under him. "But some things, a man's gotta keep to himself t' keep his pride intact. For th' record, that's not the whole truth: I was married. I was disgraced. The Guilds forced me out. That's exile for you. So what? You it said yourself, you've got pieces up there, Roguey — it's a big jigsaw, isn't it? Buncha things that don't mean much unless you have the picture t' compare 'em to and see what it's supposed t' look like."

Remy leapt up, using the top of the bo to grind down to her knuckles as he tried to force her backwards along the fallen tree. Rogue held firm, though her feet skid a little as she tried to swing at him.

"You're right. Ah don't have the whole picture, and Ah don't want it. Seen enough to recognize this game."

He blocked her, chuckling to himself. "Funny story," he continued. "You've been blaming yourself, non? That's why you're takin' it out on me — you think you're all alone in this, but your forgettin' your partner in crime."

"Ah said Ah was sorry!" she bit back, her eyes narrowing.

"So did I, as a matter of fact," he returned, ducking as she swung wide again and leaning away as the bottom of her bo sung towards him. "But prolly not for what you're thinkin'," he said as he popped up again.

"Ah'm sure ya got a lot ta apologize for. Might as well start now before Ah knock your head off," she snapped.

"No famous last words just yet, chére," he returned, blocking another stinging blow that clipped his fist. He winced but tapped her staff away again just as readily. He changed directions. "Y' need this, don't you? This is how y' blow off steam? Saw it when y' were fightin' the Assassins. You love th'
energy, you love how it makes you feel afterwards — all soft an' sore and drained. Helps you stop thinking for a bit, hein?"

"Shut up," she snapped. "This ain't about me! It's about you and what ya keep feedin' me ta keep me around." He blocked a blow with his heel, kicking her staff away and forcing her backwards. "What Ah couldn't figure out is why you're even botherin', especially now that Ah know about your wife."

"Ex-wife," he interjected.

"You loved her Remy," she protested, her voice breaking. "Doesn't that sorta thing count for somethin' with ya? Or have ya forgotten what that does to a person when someone takes it away?"

"I'm a thief. That's what I do; I steal things," he countered, leaping backwards as she jabbed at his stomach. A low chuckle escaped his lips, and smirking wryly, he took the offense. They parried backwards, staffs swinging in wide and controlled arcs, clapping together at measured intervals. Not once did Rogue hesitate, her footing on the narrow beam suspended over the swamps sure each time. "Hearts included," he added with cagey candor.

"An' that makes you a threat," she bit back, leaping as Remy tried to land a blow to her calves. She landed with a grunt and cracked him soundly in the side.

"One!" he hissed.

"Oh, are we keepin' score?" She laughed mirthlessly.

"Best to ten wins." Remy grimaced, driving his staff between her feet. He twisted the bo, catching Rogue's leg and setting her off balance. She flailed uselessly a moment, and on instinct, Remy reached out and snatched her wrist, yanking her upright. "Winner take all if th' other goes down."

She glared.

"Ah'll take your sorry hide with me, swamp rat!" She somersaulted backwards, her foot narrowly missing his chin, before landing a few feet down the bridge.

Remy grinned, his hands sliding down his staff, caressing the cold metal lightly.

"I'd follow you either way, chérie. All y' gotta do is ask."

"Would ya get lost if Ah asked ya ta do that too?" she snarled, her hair falling into her face. She swatted at it roughly, smearing her cheek in the process with soot. Blinking, Rogue looked down at her partially scorched glove, her lip curling in distaste as she peered back at him.

"Not a chance. I'm sworn t' protect any belle femme in distress," he replied, giving her a once over and cocking an eyebrow.

Rogue huffed, compacting the staff and sticking it roughly into her belt.

"An' you too, I suppose," he added lightly. He couldn't stop himself from laughing outright at her incensed expression.

Face flushed, her eyes narrowed, the spark of red renewed itself in the depths. Rogue's posture loosened, though she still braced herself as she reached for the cards.

"That's not playin' fair," he muttered, snapping his staff into a more manageable size and discarding it.
"Ah guess ya know how it feels, now, huh?" she returned. "Let's see what happens when the odds are in my favor… cher." She smiled at him in a way that made his stomach tighten, and for a moment, Remy contemplated the possibility of ten lifetimes spent sweating in hell, as opposed to ten minutes beneath the femme's stare. Surely, heaven couldn't be that great — not when she looked at him like that.

"The odds don't belong t' you. They're de playthings of fate," he said levelly. "You an' I? We just goin' along for th' ride."

"That's your problem, Remy. You're just lettin' yourself be led wherever. Ya don't look, ya don't think, ya just keep moving. That's what happened with the stone, and that's what happened with Belladonna, and that's what you're doin' with me too," she returned, her tone unwavering as she stared him down.

"What would you like me t' do? Take it back? I can't. Tell you that it'll be okay? I'm tryin'. Tell you not t' worry? Then I'd be lyin' — there's plenty of stuff to be scared of out there, and I bet I seen more of it than you."

"Ah'm not making any more wagers with ya." Rogue shook her head, as if she was trying to clear her vision. "You haven't been straight with me ta begin with, and now it's just a little bit useless ta try and make things right. Ya can't, Remy, but you're right about one thing — ya can't take back what you've done. Ah know all about that."

"I know y' do," he said, his tone dropping an octave in the effort to sound consoling. "That's why it's gotta be you, Rogue."

"What's gotta be me?" she asked, her brow furrowing. With a little remorse, Remy noted the way her mouth curved downwards in a small frown.

Merde, he thought. When your toes hit the line that divides "Point of No Return" land from the rest of sanity, sometimes you have to lob yourself forwards. Other times, you stagger over that line and pray to whatever higher power you believe in that you'll survive it. Remy found himself doing precisely that.

"It's gotta be you here an' now. S' why we need each other," he admitted.

"We?"

Remy sucked in a breath, already running a number of mental curses at himself through his head. "Oui."

"Ah'm sorry," she snorted in disbelief, "what did ya just say ta me?"

"Don't gloat or anything," he muttered.

"No, no, Cajun — say that again." Remy winced at the sharp, brittle bite to her words as she took a step towards him.

"I need you."

A pause. Remy held his breath, cringing inwardly at himself while trying to keep his expression neutral. Rogue's eyebrows shot up. Unable to hide her surprise, she advanced on him, her eyes lit with the fire of the rising sun filtering through the canopy of trees. It was as if they glowed, the tongue of flame dancing in the brilliant flicker of red and gold set against blackened sclera.
She didn't want to believe him; that much was evident. What he didn't expect was the sting of the thought that accompanied it. Somehow, it was crucial that she did, almost as much as it was important that she took the risk to believe in him.

But when had that become so important to him?

Remy couldn't find an answer to that, so instead, he shrugged, gritting his teeth as he looked down at the few feet between them and to the water below. It reflected their frames in shivering, distorted pictures. Funny, he thought, that was how he usually saw himself too.

"You're not used to asking for help." The realization lit her face.

Fact: he never asked anything of the sort.

"I am not a humble man, Rogue."

She raised her eyebrows. "There's a truth."

Wrestling with the discomfort of his confession, he debated telling her how ancient his ancient history was when it came to Belladonna, but thought better of it.

"You believe me?" he asked instead, a small, hard knot of tension gathering in his chest at the realization that he wanted her to; he needed her to be on his side for this.

"Ah believe that about as much as Ah can take your word for what it is, Remy."

Remy frowned, forcing his gaze upwards to settle on her. For a moment, he merely stared, trying to sort out what was going through her head at that instant. He scrutinized her, just as she did the same to him.

"You skimped on our bet!" she yelled finally, exasperated.

The knot eased.

He might've laughed had she looked less serious about it.

With a quick snap of the wrist, Rogue produced four cards, crackling to life between her fingers. Three she held in her left hand, and one, the Queen of Spades, she flung at him.

Remy snatched it out of the air and snuffed the charge before it could detonate.

"You threw this one out, chérie! It doesn't count anymore!" he shot back, brandishing the card.

"Oh yeah? Well Ah recall ya kept a Joker up your sleeve, swamp rat — see if this counts!"

She lobbed the next one at him, and that too he plucked out of the air, absorbing the charge effortlessly though the ripple of energy felt tweaked and foreign. His hands sung with it.

"Keep it comin', Roguey. Mebbe by the time y' blow me up you'll realize the mistake in blamin' yourself all the time."

"Speak for yourself!" she snarled, launching three cards this time in the general direction of his chest with a loud, "Ha!"

Two Gambit caught, somersaulting backwards, but one landed on the log. He shot out with his leg, kicking it into the swamp. It sent up a spray of reeking, putrid brown bayou muck that splashed his
boots as the card exploded beneath the calm surface.

"Why can't you just be sorry and mean it for once?" she shouted, shucking out a few diamonds, two jacks and a club.

"Doesn't matter what I say if you don't believe me," he bit back. "You get past that emotional blockade of yours and we'll talk about forgiveness."

"Ah already apologized for absorbin' ya!" she snarled. "These are my powers, Gambit — Ah don't have the luxury of turnin' them off!" she bellowed back, the cards gripped between her fingers singing in a furious harmony.

"Not your fault my powers failed. They shoulda offered an extra layer of protection."

"Nice of you to point out the elephant in the room."

"We're outside," he pointed out.

"It's a figure of speech!"

"Mebbe we do a little less talking, hein? Get to the heart of the problem."

She blanched.

"I'd like to help you with a remedy — I know it's a long road to acceptance, what with you kickin' and screamin' the entire way no less. That's gratitude for my services!" he chortled. "Unfortunately, I can't do nothing about it when you start internalizing."

"And what do ya do? Basic manners, Cajun!" she spat, sending the cards flying. Four hit the water, drenching them both, and two hit the log. That was enough, Remy decided as he pelted down the bridge at her. "Ah do somethin' wrong, Ah say Ah'm sorry. You do somethin' wrong, you act like a jackass — psychologists call that 'projecting.'"

"Keep blamin' yourself, chère. You do it for everything else, so this ain't no different." He laughed, goading her.

The cards primed behind him as Remy leapt, catching Rogue around the midsection and covering her to shield her bodily from the impending blast.

"What —?" she began, only to be cut off as the cards exploded and the bridge tipped to the left.

Even as they wobbled, Remy found himself smirking in triumph. "Because I kissed you and I'm not apologizin' for it."

With that, Gambit dipped low, pulling backwards and catching her hand. He placed a lingering kiss on her gloved knuckles and pivoted before she could lash out at him. The fallen tree dipped precariously beneath the weight of them both. The wood had splintered, forcing them to balance on an uneven keel.

"Whaddy'a hafta say 'bout that, Roguey?" He laughed, a full, throaty chortle that echoed amongst the vigilant cypress.

Her response came in the form of an angry shove.

It happened so quickly that even as Remy was tipping backwards, his hand reached on instinct and latched onto her elbow, effectively pulling her down with him as he tumbled, the pair of them hitting
the water with a noisy slap.

Below the surface, the murky calm of the bayou with its rank water stung his eyes. He felt Rogue pull away from him, breaking the surface a second before he did so himself.

Spluttering, she spun to face him, swiping at her eyes and blinking hard.

He was grateful to see the usual hue had returned to her pupils, the sclera white again, and ringed with red.

"This make us even?" he asked, treading water to stay afloat.

Rogue coughed, and blinking at him, she asked, "What are you referring to; your little contest up there, or... what happened between us?"

"I concede t' the duel," he said with gentlemanly pomp, "but the stakes are still up in th' other respect as far as I'm concerned." He favored her with a grin, before spitting out the rancid water in his mouth and grimacing. "Dieu, this is disgustin'."

Rogue shook her head. "That's all it is in the end," she said tiredly. "It shouldn't be about who wins. I ain't a prize at the end of a card game."

"Non, y' not," he agreed, and continued garnishing the half-truth, "but y' see... if I kissed you, and you kissed me, and if we were playin', par exemple... that would make us both winners, non? It'd be a draw."

"Ah think you're forgettin' something, Remy — one, Ah can't touch ya, and two, that love ya had for Belladonna..." she trailed off, shaking her head. "Ah ain't a substitute for somethin' that ya claim ya left behind."

"Never said y' were," he said shortly.

"But Ah felt it," she argued vehemently, a touch of something cold lining her expression as she drew up the exact sensation in her mind.

"But you didn't feel what came before or afterwards," he admitted. Rogue could only stare at him. She knew he was right. Remercie dieu, there was hope after all.

"Look," he said, pulling himself closer and bobbing a little in the water before her. "When I say there are a multitude of other things involved... Rogue, nothing is ever that simple. What I might've given you in that kiss by way of my memories isn't anything other than th' simple truth of the moment. It ain't everything, chère, and that you've gotta believe — not on faith but on experience, because you and me, we've got something in common that goes before everythin' else: we're only human. We all need our secrets, Rogue, and trust me when I say, some are more difficult t' dredge up than others." He swallowed, pushed down the ghost of pain thinking about Belladonne brought with it. "There's more to that story."

"That you're not willing to tell."

He searched her expression. Shook his head. Not yet.

"How do Ah know you're not lying ta me?" she asked warily, swiping at the hair plastered to the side of her face and slopping more filthy water on herself. She grimaced, appearing utterly disgusted for only a moment. It was a look that Remy found endearing:
There was so much she had seen and had experienced, and yet at the same time, Rogue retained an innocence about her that couldn't be covered up with her heavy makeup and cantankerous demeanor.

"I can't offer y' anything more than my word when I say I'm not the same person as I was a year ago. That part of me is dead; it goes with the territory of bein' exiled," he replied, albeit a touch more dispassionately than he'd intended.

"What's the difference?" she pressed, blinking the water out of her eyes.

"I couldn't die for her," he said guardedly, struck by the naked honesty of the statement. "That's the difference. I couldn't stop the war. I couldn't be Jean Luc's prodigal son. That's the difference."

"It would have kept on without you," Rogue argued, her tone gravely, her empathy peeking through at last.

Wordlessly, Remy reached for her to pull her alongside him as he continued to tread water. She batted at his hand, splashing him with a face-full in the process. He glowered, his chin dipping back into the swamp as she tugged on his hand, holding him back from escaping the conversation.

"You dying instead of Julien would have made no difference," she insisted. "For them — the families. That madman would still be on the loose, and then what?"

Her fingers slipped from his.

"Absolution," he muttered, kicking away towards the log.

She let him, though from behind, he heard her murmur, "It broke your heart ta leave."

Remy didn't reply as he pushed towards the shore. When the fallen tree was closer to the waterline, he latched onto the side, hauling himself upwards. It took a considerable effort with the added weight of his soaked clothing dragging him down. Mostly, he felt leaden, though he doubted it had much to do with his dip in the swamp.

Rogue swam towards him and a card floated by on the water. He ignored the Jack of Hearts in favor of the girl who was looking at him so quizzically.

"It's resilient," he said at length, offering her a hand up, which to his surprise, she accepted.

Crawling onto the log, Rogue dropped her legs over the side. She gave him an uneasy glance, collecting herself, and taking a heavy breath.

"Not when it doesn't heal properly," she murmured.

Remy hummed, crouching next to her and lacing his hands together with his elbows propped onto his knees. "That's my problem… not yours, Anna Marie."

Her head whipped around to stare at him in stupefied recognition. Eyes widening, her lips parted in silent shock, she shook her head slowly, not wanting to understand, though she did fundamentally. That much Remy could see without her having to confirm it verbally.

"Like I said, we all have our secrets," he murmured.

"How did ya know my name?" she whispered.

"Th' both of us, we run from the things that have caused us grief. We're born to fight and die in a world that loves us not at all, an' cares for us even less. Me? My whole life's been orchestrated for
me. Don't know my birth parents, don't know how much Jean Luc had his hand in the way I lived before coming to the Guild, but I do know that even before I was adopted, he was workin' me. I was an asset to be exploited both for m' powers, ans as a link between the Guilds when he and Marius arranged my marriage to Belle." He looked at her hard, trying to read her expression though she was closing herself off to him quickly. "I don't even know how much Belle knew about it. Mebbe she never loved me at all, but what difference does it make? I'm here, I'm alive, an' I got a purpose."

"Arranged…?" she started.

Remy shut his eyes, holding up a finger that requested a little patience. "Mystique done the same t' you, n'est cs pas? That woman sees a golden opportunity, and she acts like a vampire: drainin' it dry." He shook his head. "Merde, she tried and nearly succeeded with Apocalypse… But even before then, before y' started runnin' for the first time, you buried who you were, and along with that, y' left somethin' behind to mark its passing. That was y' name, Rogue. You want me to face my past? I can't do that. Not alone, and I think y' know why because you don't always want to face your own either."

Rogue remained silent, her gaze turning to the trees that surrounded them, the soft sound of water moving around their roots, washing them clean over and over again.

"That's how I know. These secrets, they keep us safe, non? They may leave some scars behind, but we can look at 'em later and remember where they came from. There ain't no one in the world who understands that unless they've felt the pain of it themselves."

She swallowed, looking upwards into the canopy of grey green leaves and virgin sunlight and blinked hard.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you in not being completely forthright," he said. "But I meant it when I said it — you an' I, chère, they cut us from the same cloth. We've just been runnin' in different directions ever since the fabric tore us up a bit. There's no reason for it. Not anymore."

He held out his hand, patiently, and waited.

"You knew my name," she hissed through grit teeth. It was an accusation, thick and laced with the sour taint of self-defeat. She refused to look at him, choosing instead to drop her chin to her chest, letting the fan of wet hair obscure her face from view.

He nodded slowly, knowing that he'd taken out her defenses in one fell swoop. "It don't mean nothin' to me. Names don't make us who we are inside. An' I know what's inside you, Rogue. That's all that matters."

"But Ah don't know anythin' more than Ah've taken from you." She shook her head. "That ain't right."

"Then we fix it. I'll fix it."

"You can't," she said plaintively. "Ah can't change what Ah am, and ya can't change who you are either. Ya don't just go back ta zero every time somethin' goes wrong. It doesn't work like that."

She paused, turning to look at him seriously, her eyes a shining, brilliant green. The random patterning of shades falling across her face from the cover of cypress looming over them broke her steady expression. Resolutely, Remy refused to back down.

"Ah have the potential to truly know ya, and Ah… Ah don't think Ah want ta," she whispered.
"Least not be absorbing me, hein?"

The corner of her mouth quirked. She blew out a breath. "How can ya live with it inside all the time?"

"How can you?" he countered gently, offering her a small, genuine smile.

She didn't have an answer to that, though she sucked her lower lip between her teeth.

Remy shook his head. "Sometimes, you don't get the chance to think beyond your own fear. When you're ready, chère. Only when you're ready." He sighed, moving to sit next to her, and pausing in case it was too close for comfort just yet. He hovered, stooped at her side. "You're not protectin' yourself anymore when you start hurtin', especially not when y' try to push everyone away to keep yourself from feelin' anything that's got a potential risk factor. I know that all too well. We all hurt somewhere, chère – but some of us, well, we learn how to live around it."

"Ah get by."

Remy bowed his head, nodding silently. "Y' said that to me before we even left Bayville, but you know it and so do I; skimmin' the edge of happiness ain't living. Not lettin' yourself have what you want from time t' time, that's self-flagellation. This is a gift, Rogue. Let's not waste it."

"My entire mutant power is about restraint," she ground out. "Ah can't touch another livin' being without fear of swallowing that person whole. Their thoughts an' hopes an' dreams become mine. Ah got no control over my abilities. And you?" She shook her head, turning to face him, her eyes hard. "You got no control over yourself. Chargin' up an' object an' throwing it away — that's your 'special gift'. Ah ain't an object, Gambit," she said warningly. "Ah'm a person. If ya can't — if ya won't — treat me like one, then please leave me alone." She croaked, continuing, "If ya have any feelings for me, then just go. It'll be easier in the long run."

Slowly, Remy nodded, standing to full height and folding his arms across his chest. He peered down at the top of her head in an almost contemplative silence.

"That's the bargain, huh?" he asked after a moment.

"No bargaining. You level up with me and ya show me that whatever you're saying is the truth without… without forcin' me ta steal it from ya. Those are my terms."

Rogue sniffed, pulling her knees below her chin and hugging them close. The swamp water left her hair a matted tangle that hung limply to her shoulders, sending little streams of dirt down the back of her equally soaked shirt.

The parts of her arms that were exposed were streaked with strips of murky brown, and peering down at himself, Remy noted that he appeared in no better condition.

For a moment, he stood by watching, though Rogue didn't say anything more, and she didn't turn to look at him.

With a resigned nod, he turned, and walked away.

Rogue shut her eyes tightly, blinking out the grit and tiredness and the last trickles of water that undoubtedly teemed with microbial life.

The log bounced a little with every step Remy took, his boots squelching unpleasantly as he tracked off back the way they'd came.
It was a moment before she allowed herself to breathe in shakily.

Rogue sat there, listening to him slip away, too stunned to call him back, to say she'd been wrong. It confirmed one thing, though: at least there was some shared respect between them. It did little to soothe the ache.

It was another moment before she buried her head in her arms.

The swamp around her thrummed with morning life; the odd bullfrog croak, the throaty hum of dragonflies flying low near the water, and the liquid gurgle of water laving the tree roots lazily.

Every sound was disjointed, unconnected though life continued despite everything else that had broken the natural rhythm of the bayou for a few short minutes. It was another moment after that when she felt the log dip beneath the weight of a person, bouncing softly, the soles of his boots squishing.

Remy didn't hesitate as he slipped his jacket around her shoulders, his hands a warm weight that drew her against his chest where he folded her against him.

Rogue didn't protest, finding herself unable to do so around the lump in her throat. She did not uncoil herself from the fetal position she'd taken, though his touch was welcome through the coat he'd wrapped around her.

If she could have made a noise, it would have been a sigh of utmost relief.

"S' funny," he murmured into her ear gently. "M' feelings for you are the very same reason I'm stayin'."

Chapter End Notes

**Translations:**

Merde: Shit  
Femme: Woman  
p'tit: little one  
mon ami: my friend

**Post Script:**

- Hook: A Jack. So named because the "J" resembles a hook.
- "We're born to fight and die in a world that loves us not at all, and cares for us even less." John Mason Skipp, Dark Destiny.
"Names don't make us who we are inside. An' I know what's inside you, Rogue, that's all that matters." (X-Men #24)

"My entire mutant power is about restraint," she ground out. "Ah can't touch another livin' being without fear of swallowing that person whole. Their thoughts an' hopes an' dreams become mine. Ah got no control over my abilities. And you?" She shook her head, turning to face him, her eyes hard. "You got no control over yourself. Chargin' up an' object an' throwing it away - that's your 'special gift'. Ah ain't an object, Gambit," she said warningly. "Ah'm a person. If ya can't - if ya won't - treat me like one, then please leave me alone." (Uncanny X-Men #297)

"M' feelings for you are the very same reason I'm stayin'." (Uncanny X-Men #297)
"Hey, Pyro!" Pietro cackled. His neck was craned at an odd angle to survey the Australian. "How they hanging?"

Overhead, affixed firmly to the roof of the train the Brotherhood had hopped, and dangling by his feet from a yellow suspension cord looped around one of the steel reinforcement beams, Pyro grimaced.

"Upside down and a little to the left, mate," he deadpanned.

"That must do something godawful to your circulation," he clucked. "Gives new definition to the words, 'blue balls,' huh?" Pietro sneered.

"Not like ya'd know anything about that," St. John quipped, leering as best he could despite his position. The look he shot at Pietro's sister went unnoticed by everyone else in the car, though they were positioned around him like an angry mob. The only thing missing were the pitchforks, he thought wryly.

At least he still had his lighter, and if Pyro still had a source of firepower, there wouldn't be a witch burning that day… and if there was, it would be a certain Scarlet-clad mutant on the pyre for stringing him up by the ankles, and not him.

"John," Lance growled in warning.

"Alvers." Pyro grinned back.

"Did you know we were headed in the wrong direction?"

"Does a wallaby fly?" he returned, unmindful of what the side retort would mean for his health. Given that Wanda had strung him up promptly as soon as the temperature had dropped in the caboose and the first muddy mountains of snow had started peeking through the stubby tundra grasses, it would have been a wiser idea just to keep his mouth shut and let the duffers figure it out.
themselves.

Sadly, a bloke never had any fun doing that, and after all, John had lived with Sabretooth.

"I told you something felt off," Wanda groused, her arms folded across her chest as she glared at him. It was a look that could peel paint off walls, Pyro decided.

He wriggled a little, fingers scrabbling for the Zippo in his pocket through the ropes. They burned a little at his wrists where he wrestled with them, but that was a welcome sensation even in situations where he'd clearly drawn the short straw.

"Might be that your britches are a little knotted, love."

"Perhaps they'll be a good model for what I'm about to do to your greater intestinal tract," she returned.

"What's the deal?" Toad asked, peering at him skeptically. "I thought we was cool, homes."

"Gambit got to him." Pietro sneered. "What kind of bargain did he make you, John?"

"Mmph!" Pyro sniffed. "Mum's the word. I'll never tell. You lot want a gab fest? Oh, we can deal alright, but it'll involve being set upright and keeping the harpy on a leash."

"Fat chance, Allerdyce," Pietro snapped. "You're lucky that Wanda's restrained herself from using your vocal cords as a violin."

"Better than that harmonica, anyway," Toad interjected. "Right, shnookums?"

Wanda cocked her head thoughtfully. "I've always wondered if the lungs could be used like bagpipes…"

"She's a right shade more violent than she used to be," Pyro said, twisting in his bonds to cast a cock-eyed glance at Lance, who'd begun circling him slowly.

"Think ya might want to reign her in, mates — keep us all in-line and real subservient-like."

"Kinda hard to control everyone when you get us on a train going North instead of South, Pyro," Lance replied. "I think they oughta have their say."

He sniffed, fingers scraping over the edge of his front pocket. Deep in his denims, the lighter shifted but didn't fall the two inches to his straining fingers. That settled it, Pyro decided. This was the last time he wore tight pants… even if they flattered his bum.

Fixing a look of innocent astonishment to his face as he thrust his chin at the rapidly moving countryside beyond the opened doors, Pyro exclaimed, "Cor, did you see that?"

Lance smirked, hooking his fingers into his belt loops, but not turning away. "See what?"

"It was a flying wallaby you pig-headed prig! Now let me down!" Pyro bellowed.

Lance merely snorted. "Freddie, find out what the deal is with this guy. I want to know what Gambit's up to, and why John wants to show up in New Orleans so fashionably late." He paused. "Wanda? Turn this train around."

"My pleasure," Wanda ground out. Licks of blue, near-electric conductivity licked around her lithe frame and wrapped around the boxcar. There was a grinding sound as she snapped her wrists
backwards, her head thrown back in an expression of utmost ecstasy as the train derailed. It rattled off the tracks, the boxcar coming unhinged from the steel couplings with a teeth-grinding shriek as it lifted into the air.

The world spun a moment, and groaning, the rest of the train followed suit though it still moved at speeds upwards of a hundred miles an hour. Midair, the world outside was a white-grey blur. Wanda sighed, her eyelids fluttering as she snapped her arms down and the train slammed back to the tracks, not breaking its forward momentum.

The Scarlet Witch sauntered to a spot beside Fred, just out of spitting distance from the dangling pyromaniac, but still within his sights. She draped an arm over the large boy's shoulder, narrowing her eyes at Pyro.

"Save some for me," she cooed.

In response, Pyro swallowed with some difficulty, though this time it had little to do with the fact that he was suspended upside down.

—

In the distance, the steady tapping of a woodpecker resounded amongst the trees. Gradually, the sound tapered off, leaving a hollow silence in its wake that settled around both Rogue and Remy where they sat on the fallen log, their feet dangling over the muddy bayou a yard below.

With Rogue's head tucked comfortably beneath his chin, his palm rubbing a slow circle over her shoulder blades, Remy settled into the embrace, not wanting to make a sound lest it break the spell.

She was soft and warm beneath his hands, and she was pliant enough that she'd let him drape her knees over his thigh so that she was half into his lap.

Remy kept his eyes turned down to the inward turn of her toes where her boots dangled between his own. Rogue kept her gloved hands on her knees, fingers twined together loosely, but nevertheless, even without the evident tension in her body from being this near, she was still reluctant to reach out to him herself.

It was comfortable, he decided, his fingers trailing lightly down her back and coming to rest on her hip.

On the downside, they both smelled like pond mulch.

He chuckled, low in the back of his throat. "Chére?"

Rogue sighed, mumbling into his chest, "You had ta go and talk, didn't ya?"

"Y' like the sound of my voice, beb. Don't deny it." He smirked, tipping his head to the side as she pulled back to appraise him through half-lidded eyes. She looked exhausted, though that was nothing a good, strong shot of bourbon and a long nap wouldn't cure… though hopefully not without forgoing a bath.

It'd probably be too much in asking if he could join her for that particular activity.

After a moment, she sniffed deeply and scrunched her nose.

"Ya stink, swamp rat," she declared, though she didn't move to pull back from him, which made their nearness seem all the more intimate.
Remy cocked an eyebrow. "Was gonna say the same thing 'bout you, river rat."

"Ah discovered your secret signature fragrance." She pursed her lips. "Eau de bayou."

"Toilet water," he confirmed, nodding with solemnity. Rogue rolled her eyes, her shoulders hunching as she peeled away from him. Reluctantly, he let her go, though it took another moment for his hands to slip off her body. Her slacks left a wet patch where she'd been draped over his lap, though it made little difference, since Remy himself was soaked through to his skin. "Next time you want to have a heart to heart, you think mebbe we could do it over dinner?" he asked, peeling his shirt away from his skin. It made a sticky sucking sound.

She fixed him with an arch glance.

"Coffee?" he tried again, using the tips of his fingers to pluck at a stringy bit of moss that had wedged itself against his throat beneath his cowl.

Rogue smirked, shucking his coat off her shoulders and folding it carefully over her lap.

"Someplace that doesn't smell like Lapin's gym shorts?" he persisted.

Rogue snorted, wincing at the mental image, though she laughed a little as well. Remy decided it was a good look for her: without her makeup, and without the perpetual scowl, her cheeks had a natural pink tinge to them. They plumped pleasantly in the apples when she allowed herself the momentary lapse of her hard façade.

"We're on semi-cordial terms right now. That doesn't mean I'm forgivin' and forgettin'. You owe me."

He bobbed his head, appreciating the small smile that tugged the corners of her mouth upwards, though she tried to maintain a stern tone. "Fair 'nuff."

"You forgotten already?" she asked, as she did her best to avoid his gaze. It was a struggle, he noted with some satisfaction, since like her, he was having a fair amount of difficulty playing at indifference with their newfound understanding coloring their conversation.

"If I say 'no' are you gonna knock me off my seat?" he asked good-naturedly, trying to coax out her smile once again.

"Would ya be lyin'?" she threw back, amused, and a little wary as well.

"Softening the truth; it's more like roundin' off the edges —"

Rogue opened her mouth to snap something laced with her particular breed of verbal poison. The small inhalation was audible as she took a breath to begin berating him. It was interesting, to say the least, seeing the way her demeanor could shift so suddenly. Constantly on the recoil, Rogue was like a viper, and at that moment, just as deadly. Not that he minded — the element of surprise, and the quickness of her spoken attacks could very well match the physical offence he knew her to be capable of.

She stopped. Clapped her mouth shut, her gaze dropping to his mouth. "Why are you smiling?"

With almost flippant regard, Remy snapped a card from a pouch on his belt, flicking it between two fingers. It produced the desired reaction:

Her expression softened as surprise bled into embarrassment. Her lower lip curved into a pout as
recognition sparked deep in her eyes. They darkened a little in the way that Remy was truly beginning to admire. It was such a subtle and involuntary shift that it bore a striking resemblance to the effects of lust: a little rouge in the cheeks, a small dilation of the pupils, the quick gasp being reigned in before it could become a sigh.

"Now how on earth could I forget our little wager," he purred, enjoying the way Rogue bristled at being finessed. Despite everything that had happened since they had arrived in Louisiana, it was reassuring to know that she hadn't forgotten the results of their card game at the diner back in Virginia: she owed him a date, and Remy owed her...

"Speakin' of which," she began, "Ah'd say we ought ta have a nice, polite conversation, Gambit. Seein' as how Ah'd like to avoid the surprise of dreaming your memories again. You don't have to give me the whole story — just enough to call us even for that file you have with my name on it."

She smiled, though he knew it was all for show. Remy wondered what she'd do if he tried to soften the pinch to her lips, undoing the hard line of her mouth with the deft coaxing of his own. Already, he was hard pressed enough not to reach over and pull her against him again for warmth. Though the air was humid, sitting around in soaked clothing kept him uncomfortable and clammy with the way the skin on his arms prickled.

Or maybe that had something to do with the fact that Rogue was just as wet, and wet clothing on a girl did something particularly flattering to their figure.

"I think you owe me a date, Roguey. And don't think I forgot about that dress I got you neither."

"Talk first. While ya still have the chance."

"What are y' gonna do? Knock me out?" he shot back. "Absorb me?"

"Watch it, Cajun," she warned.

Remy shrugged. "Try," he challenged, though the prospect of his shields slipping out of his control made him decidedly uneasy. "Worst thing that happens is that you take something else outta my head. Best thing that happens is that whatever you get is good this time."

"Ah think the best thing that could happen is nothing at all," she groused.

"True," he conceded, reaching over and tugging on her sleeve to draw her attention away from the indiscernible spot in the trees she was glowering at. "But you've gotta take that risk eventually. We both do."

"You're not sure if what the stone did to ya is permanent either, huh?" she offered him a wry smirk. "Guess we're on the same page, then."

"It's nothing to worry about," he said, though he felt the exact opposite. "At this point, we gotta run some schematics and try to figure out where the gem is to begin with, before we start worryin' about how long it's effects last."

Her face fell at that. Probably contemplating the many possible difficulties in finding a gemstone in a city like New Orleans. It could be anywhere, in the possession of anyone...

"Can't ya ask Tante?" she asked. "She was the one who told ya about it, wasn't she?"

Inwardly, Remy winced. "That's gonna be a problem, I think."
"Oh?"

"Tante's… eh… Tante's the traiteur for the Guilds. She's a healer, y' know — she's the go-between whenever there's been a fight; takes care of everyone; stays impartial and doesn't get involved with the politics. Since last night, the Assassins have probably heard all about what went down at Lafayette. She's gonna be over on their side of town until things settle down some."

"And Ah suppose it's not like we can go and knock on their door, huh?" Rogue favored him with a rare, wry smirk. She shook her head, chuckling. "Bad luck sure does follow ya, LeBeau."

"Gonna have to keep lady luck close, then," he hummed, running a finger lightly down her sleeve. Rogue shivered, flinching away at little at the contact, and Remy dropped his hand.

Remy didn't go where he wasn't welcome.

But that didn't mean he was admitting defeat.

He considered telling her that he'd put Lapin on the job, but thought better of it. She didn't need to know everything, after all: some information, sure, he could part with — but it hardly seemed worth kicking up a fuss over one little item on their collective to-do list.

"Ah'm gonna take off my gloves," Rogue said after a moment. "Ah can feel my fingers going all pruney underneath."

"Okay," he said, trying hard to reign in the bemused lilt in between syllables and failing just the same. "Thanks for the warning." It earned him a glare.

"That doesn't mean ya have an invitation ta do something stupid like grab my hand or… or…" she continued, struggling in a halting, unnerved fashion that demonstrated that she was deliberately avoiding any topics involving a deeper sort of shared intimacy. Unable to restrain himself, Remy was forced to cover his smirk with his fist.

"Compromise your reputation?" he supplied, the sound muffled by his palm.

Rogue turned away with a huff.

"No touching," he promised, crossing his heart.

"No touching. Definitely not. At least, not until we've got a better idea of what your limitations are."

"And what they mean for you, right?" he asked lightly.

"It ain't like that," she said, peeling off a glove and dropping it beside her. It made a wet slopping sound, and muddy water trickled over the side of the log. She did the same with the other a moment later and attempted feebly to dry her hands on her equally sodden slacks.

"Ah give up," she muttered, shaking the swamp muck from her fingers. Several droplets flecked Remy in the face, and in return, he shook out his hair — splattering Rogue, who swore colorfully.

"Ya do that again and Ah will hurt ya, Cajun."

Remy snickered. "I'm sure you'd try, but that don't mean you'd succeed."

She favored him with a small, sardonic smirk, picking his coat up from her lap and tossing it at his chest. From where he was seated, a shy two feet away with his legs kicking in an even rhythm over the bayou, the weight of numerous utilities he kept in the pockets was nearly enough to knock him
"Y' trying to cause me undo injury, chére?" he asked, dropping the coat and stretching his ribs. "Funny, thing: You've got no problems beating up on me, but it's a whole other ballgame when it comes to y' powers. Can't say I don't see the irony in that." Gingerly he prodded at the spot in his side where she'd clipped him in their scuffle, arching his back in a languid stretch until she finally peeked at him though the fan of muddy white obscuring her face from view.

Remy caught the flash of green and the accompanying burn of pink in her cheeks, and satisfied that she'd reassured him that she was still concerned about his well being without having to say it, he relented.

"It was a good hit," Remy conceded, depositing the trench beside him. "But I don't think y' could have done the same were it not for me," he tapped his temple, "up in there."

"You're not," she said, tapping her own temple, "up in here."

Remy pushed his hair off his forehead and out of his eyes to see her better. "How's that possible? I thought when you touch someone y' take everythin' they got."

Dryly, "Ya make it sound like Ah'm a vampire."

"Well? Ain't ya?" He grinned, jerking away as she took a swing at him. "You can suck my blood any day, chére. No complaints from this homme."

Rogue rolled her eyes, peeling her shirt from her stomach and grimacing at the feeling. Remy noted with some satisfaction that in those wet clothes, muddy river rat that she might be, she did look damned fine. He wet his lips and tried not to appear too conspicuous as he took in her curves through the clinging garments.

"Ah'd rather not, thanks," she said quietly a moment later. It lacked its usual punch, and Remy frowned.

"You're still upset?" he asked.

"It's kinda hard not ta be," she replied, her gaze fixed on her knees. "Ya coulda told me. One way or another, things like being married come out after a while, Remy."

Deciding he was not about to discuss Belle with Rogue, he cleared his throat. Too strange. Too confusing. The pair of them had insinuated themselves in his head, one way or another, but trying to compare the two was trying to say the least:

Rogue was feisty, sure, but she didn't have Belle's temper, Belle's ruthless ambition, or Belle's lack of conscience. Belle was a killer, trained from infancy into her teens. Rogue… he glanced at her askance, surprised to see her watching him out of the corner of her eye too. Rogue was softer beneath her straight-razor attitude.

Remy turned his gaze to the swamp foliage, squinting up at the dappled sunlight falling hazily through the trees, smirking a little when she became a little bolder and he felt the intensity of her stare strengthen.

"You're a challenge, Rogue. But you also have a heart," he said. "Fair shade more than Belladonna Boudreaux can lay claim to."

For all her talk of not being able to touch people, she'd been wrong about one thing – she'd managed
to touch him in a place that no one had in a long time.

Not that he'd admit to that.

"What's so funny?" she asked, suspicion lacing her words. He must have been smiling to himself.

"Thought y' didn't want to know all about my 'filthy thoughts.'"

"Yeah well," she sniffed. "Ah think it's a little late for that. Besides," she said haughtily, "you owe me for that wager."

"So y' are thinkin' about me. Huh."

"Not like Ah have a choice," she muttered. "Look. Ah have the potential ta know anything about anyone. All it takes is one brush of skin, and usually, Ah have that person locked up in my head. Trust me when Ah say it ain't always pleasant. Ah'd much rather hear it from you firsthand, LeBeau… especially since your memories… " She shook her head. "Ah don't know what it is, but nothing's sticking around long enough for me ta make sense of it."

"Imprinting." Remy nodded, patting at his pants and coming up with a soggy cigarette stuffed into an equally soggy, mostly empty pack of cards. Disgusted, he tossed them to the space on their makeshift bench between them.

Rogue pursed her lips. "In my file, right?"

He shrugged. "Don't exactly understand the mechanics, but to me, it sounds like a headache."

She nodded, shifting a little where she sat. "Ah had… an episode… last year. The people Ah absorb stick around while the memories fade, and if it's a mutant, their powers'll go after a while too. But there's always something left behind, like a miniature version of that person stuck inside my head. Professor Xavier thinks that the psyches… Ah don't know… they're almost like ghosts, right? He thinks that when Ah learn how ta control my powers, Ah'll be able to tap into their residual potential, no matter how long its been since I actually absorbed the person or how weak the imprint has become. Like a library." She gestured. "But with powers. Skills."

"Y' mean if it's a mechanic that you absorbed, you'd be able to fix my bike when it breaks down?" he joked.

She scrutinized him, looking at him so seriously for a moment that his grin faded.

"If Apocalypse's psyche was still inside my head, and Ah couldn't control him? It'd be a holocaust if he took over."

"I'm not sure how that's 'tapping into potential' exactly," he responded slowly, a little unnerved by the revelation, though outwardly his expression remained unperturbed.

Rogue shrugged, turning away to look at the muddy water below their dangling feet. "With great power comes great responsibility. That's what the Professor always told me."

"Jean Luc used to tell me that with great power came a great paycheck," he said flatly. At Rogue's surprised look following this disclosure, Remy added, "How I feel about my adoptive father ain't a big secret."

She cleared her throat to avoid offering him a commiseration. He appreciated it, gesturing for her to continue.
Rogue said, "If Ah can't control it, and something like Egypt happens again, then that's it. Rogue's gone." She laughed shortly. "That's why Ah haven't... you know." She gestured nervously, indicating the long stretch of time that had lapsed between the last time she'd absorbed someone, and him. "Until now, that is."

"But?"

She sighed. "But your psyche ain't there."

"How can you be sure?"

She smirked at him, resting her chin on her shoulder and giving him a long, smoldering look that made his chest tighten agreeably.

"Gambit," she said, "Ah don't think Ah could get your psyche ta shut up each time Ah get out of the shower and there's a mirror nearby."

Remy whistled, and laughing, he managed an impressed, "Too true, chérie. Too true."

Falling silent, she pulled her lower lip between her teeth. For a moment, Remy merely watched her in the least obvious way he could without it being noticeable. The number of times he'd done the very same thing, but at a distance, had probably run into the hundreds long after the first time they'd fought. Those were nights spent in Bayville that he shared with no one except Rogue; the knowledge of which belonged to him alone. Maybe she'd understand if he explained himself, or maybe his nocturnal habits were best kept to himself.

Hell, he'd cased all the X-Men at Magneto's orders, but even once he'd understood both their strengths and weaknesses, one thing had never sat right.

As lightly as he could, he asked, "So what's stoppin' you from controlling it on y' own?"

Rogue chuckled, drawing her knees up to her chest and folding her bare arms across them to rest her chin. She hummed.

"Me," she responded simply. "My damned head, apparently."

Remy swung around on the log so that he was seated facing her. She peered at him from below her lashes, and as he folded his arms across his chest, indicating that he was waiting for her to elaborate, she rolled her eyes and continued.

"You know Shadowcat?"

"The p'tit who walks through walls, oui. Katherine Pryde. Age eighteen, born in Deerfield, Illinois, dropped through the ceiling the first time her powers manifested before getting a visit from the good Professor," he recited.


Idly, Remy wondered if joining the X-Men had alternative benefits for the Russian since the Acolytes had disbanded. He'd have to ask him the next time he saw him — which, at this point, should be any time now.

Rogue didn't appear impressed. "Her natural state is intangible. It's a conscious effort on her part not ta phase through solid objects. For me," she sighed, pressing a thumb to her temples and rubbing
them slowly, "it's the same idea. Ah just haven't found the 'off' button yet."

"It's instinctive," Remy supplied.

"It's psychological," she nodded. "Skin's just a conductor — it transfers stuff; vitamins, water, hormones, but it ain't the thing tellin' me ta absorb. That'd be the part of my brain that works like the part of Kitty's brain that's always set ta 'on.' My powers are on the same level as breathing, swallowing, the heart beating — they're unregulated. My body just does it. It's ready ta go without even havin' ta think about it."

"How'd y' find all this out?" he asked. "The specifics, I mean?"

She shrugged. "Doctor McCoy," she replied simply. "We have files too, ya know."

"Cerebro's records. Yeah, I saw those." He grinned.

Rogue bit back a retort. "Anyway, he thinks that it's part of the limbic system, the paleopallium. That's the part of the brain that controls that sorta thing — breathing and body temperature and hormone secretion and… stuff," she finished flatly. "Man, he's explained it ta me a few times and it still sounds like Latin when ya start throwin' the terms around."

"So, someone takes a head shot at you…?"

"Just like a zombie. Pretty sure that'd take me out."

"Pretty sure that'd take anyone out, in fact."

She raised her eyebrows.

He rolled the idea around a little bit: turning off Rogue's powers might be as simple as getting her to hold her breath. Or as challenging.

"Fight or flight," he mused aloud. "Y' said hormones, non? The body responds instinctively to certain stimuli that we can't smell or see or taste. It's a chemical reaction."

"Yeah, how did ya know that?" she asked.

Remy hummed, enjoying her surprise. It made her expression open up; her eyes widen, her mouth open just a sliver, a little swollen at the corner from where she'd been chewing her lip thoughtfully.

"Basic biology," he said slowly, forming the words with deliberate suggestiveness. "What do you think makes one person feel lust towards another? It's hard coded to a person's synapses: the decision isn't even theirs — it's already made for them in their genes. Left up to the great wheel of fortune that two people should land on the same numbers. You can't stop it." Remy tipped his head to the side, blatantly admiring her and hoping to see her just a little unsettled that he was doing so.

He was not disappointed.

"It figures there was something perverse involved," she deadpanned, shifting uneasily.

"Magneto's rules. You work for him, you know the ins and outs of the opposition… y' shoulda seen Sabretooth trying to sit through those lectures: That homme used to take so many breaks to use the litter box, Dieu!"

Rogue snickered a little at that, and then, clearing her throat, her expression turned stony again. That was okay, Remy concluded — he wasn't aiming for miracles, just little inklings of potential. She'd
stayed with him. She hadn't followed her impulses and run, though the thought had probably crossed her mind more than once. At that point, it was all that mattered.

"So how is it the p'tit got a handle on her gifts and you don't?" he asked.

Swatting at an errant fly that had begun making its rounds as they sat together on the fallen tree, she cut him a sidelong look.

"Well, it's not like Ah haven't tried."

Remy held up his hands defensively. "Okay, I wasn't suggestin' that you were slackin' on the job, chére — just curious."

She glowered and pulled her heels closer to herself so that she was huddled in a small, sodden ball.

"Ah don't even know if it's possible," she muttered bitterly. "What with your powers not being so reliable right now... Heck, we don't even know what happened to that stone ta begin with."

"But you're willing to take that chance." He nodded, impressed that she'd take the gamble despite the odds.

"Wouldn't you?" she threw back. "You couldn't handle my life, Cajun. You wouldn't survive a week without tryin' ta put your greasy hands all over the first thing that sashayed by ya."

"Mebbe I haven't been so clear on that, Roguey — I'll take whatever risk you throw at me," he replied. "So start sashayin'."

"Ah'd rather not."

"Ok. Then you can tap dance for all I care. Doesn't change anything —" Remy gestured between them, "here."

Rogue snorted, dropping one leg over the side of the tree and glaring at him. "What exactly," she mimicked his idle gesture with a touch more heat, "is this?"

He cocked an eyebrow, and leaning forwards, he murmured in a tone that was as close to verbalized silk as you could get, "Whatever you want it to be, chérie."

She shook her head, her gaze fixed on his mouth. Rogue's eyelashes, long and reddish-brown without her usual heavy layer of makeup, brushed the apples of her cheeks as she tried to blink away the distraction. Slowly, Remy smiled. It was a predatory grin, and even more carefully, he began inching forwards.

Two feet of space separated them, and that two feet, he discovered with a ripple of excitement, was charged with a current of emotional static so strong it made the hair on the back of his arms stand at attention.

She was just short of giving him frissons, the way she looked at him right then.

"Nothin' there, swamp rat," she breathed, tearing her gaze away.

Merde, Remy thought. Too fast, too soon. Step back. Hold the cards a little closer. Work the table, he concluded resignedly.

"Ah don't — Ah can't have anything ta do with you like that. You know what happens."
"What about what I want?" he asked, not backing off, and not moving away. Instead, he placed a hand on the small space between them, and leaned nearer, trying to draw those huge pools of watery green back to him.

"What do ya want, Remy?" she asked, still clinging stubbornly to her knee. Her knuckles were wrapped so tightly around her ankle that they were going white.

Inwardly, he winced. The desire to peel her hands apart and rub the blood flow back into her fingers was strong, but he suppressed the urge to reach out to her physically. Instead, he insinuated himself in a position that was near enough to incite a reaction, near enough to catch the light scent of her skin beneath their shared swamp water cologne, and near enough that if he wanted to, he could wrap an arm around her waist. He could pull her to him and close the short distance she still wasn't willing to cross herself.

"Ah'm dangerous," she insisted.

"You're just unpredictable," he countered.

"No, you're unpredictable, Remy. One minute ya act like Ah'm the scourge of the earth and the next you're tryin' ta weasel your way back into my favor."

"It's all part of the charm, belle." He flashed her a bright grin. Unfortunately, the only thing he accomplished was encouraging Rogue to bristle at him. Scowling, she flicked a lock of hair out of her eye and turned away again.

"Don't call me that," she said sternly. Remy pursed his lips — and she thought that was a sore spot for her. "That was her name," she added quietly. "In case ya forgot."

How in hell could he forget that particular tragedy?

"Mignonne?" he tried again, trying to soften her up, to distract her.

Get her off the subject.

"That either." She sniffed.

"Chére —"

Rogue held up her hand, silencing him. Remy smirked, contemplating whether or not he should seize the opportunity and plant a kiss on her palm. A quick one couldn't hurt, given that she already had a hearty dose of himself locked away somewhere in her mind, it wouldn't surprise him if it all went to pot anyhow.

He had to remind himself to be cautious, if only for a little while until the air was cleared between them.

On the bright side, if she did knock him out this time, he wouldn't have to delve into the lengthy heartache and subsequent self-loathing that frequently accompanied thoughts on his former affections.

Small price to pay, indeed.

"If there's one thing Ah've learned over the past week, it's that you like taking risks. You spend so much time tryin' ta size up the odds of a situation, that by the time ya realize what you've done, you're already in neck-deep. Then ya start ta panic."
Panic? That wasn't panicking. That was self-preservation, Remy reassured himself.

She peered at him, trying to gauge the weight of her summation. Remy remained stone silent, outwardly appearing mildly amused, but instinctively, he knew that Rogue had latched onto a vein of truth.

"You can't just throw things away every time it gets too hot for ya. Eventually," Rogue picked up one of her gloves, showing him the singed fingers, "ya get burned."

"You hold on too long and worse happens," he returned, mimicking a very dramatic explosion with his hands and accompanying sound effects.

"Ah'm not talkin' about your powers," Rogue said, dropping the scrap of leather with a wet slap.

"Neither am I."

"Shit," she muttered. "Sugah, you've got some serious issues if that's how ya been living."

Remy smirked, opening his arms wide over his head and stretching his shoulders. "And yet, I'm still alive to tell the tale afterwards."

"If you were actually tellin' and I wasn't living the experience vicariously through your memories," she corrected. "Frankly, Ah'm not sure what's worse."

"The first hand experience was worse," he said blandly. "Trust me."

"Julien's death wasn't your fault."

"You weren't there," he shot back, regretting it almost as quickly.

"Oh please, Ah was close enough. Ah know how you felt about having ta leave, and Ah know it was an accident, and Ah know why you act the way ya do: You said that nonsense about the thermometer yesterday, and Ah swear, if Ah had had my full faculties about Ah would have cracked ya in the head for sayin' somethin' so dumb… But it's not. You're mercury on the floor."

"I keep things interesting," he said noncommittally.

"You keep moving so you don't have to linger on any one thing too long," she said. "But ya never really broke free from this life, did ya?"

"Just like you can't get away from y' powers, Rogue. I wasn't born a thief – least I don't think so – but it's all I know. No, you never get away from this." He hesitated, adding the next thought cautiously without telling her outright what the circumstances were. "And that's why we can't stay here long." This place is poisoned, he added silently.

"Ah'm sorry ya had ta come back here."

"I'm sorry you had to see that the way you did," he said.

"That's why you ran away from me last night," she realized, frowning. "You knew I'd absorbed you."

Wincing, Remy looked past her into the trees. What he knew was that his shields had slipped, and with them, he'd temporarily relinquished control of the situation over to Rogue.

"Twice before, you touched me and I took a bit of your powers. Once when you showed up at the
"Institute —" she continued.

"When you were pulling away from me beneath the oak tree, I grazed your wrist," he confirmed, as if it bore repeating.

"And it manifested when I was in the Danger Room."

"And once more before we left." Because he'd had to. Charming her hadn't been enough. He'd needed the leverage to convince her of his sincerity about the gemstone.

"But you controlled it. You were able to focus on what you wanted me to see," she said. "You were fine, Remy. Weren't you? When we left?"

"I had a handle on it, yeah," he admitted.

"But this is the first true memory I've been able to recall."

That wasn't entirely true, but he wasn't about to admit what she'd said aloud while dreaming at the Guild Safe House. Those three names were condemnation in and of themselves, and Remy knew — he knew — after Julien, the other two were just waiting on the backburner in Rogue's mind. They'd spill over again if he carried on in the way he was, for sure. All it took was one kiss to let Julien's death out of the bag. He wasn't about to confess that without his mental shields, Remy had a vault of other unsavory things that Rogue didn't need a lock pick to get at. Dieu help him if she ever decided to outright seduce him. Julien, Genevieve and Etienne were the cornerstones to his self-destruction. What about the rest of it?

Yet… here he was. Still tempting fate.

"It could be progressive," she thought aloud, glancing at him, voicing his fear. She dropped the train of thought almost as quickly, not wanting to follow through. He understood why: if each time she touched him, caught him unprepared, Rogue took a little more of his edge off, he was in no better a position than he was before he'd even hatched this crazy idea. "Or the stone's effects could be temporary, just like Dr. McCoy said."

"Won't know unless we find it and you use it, chère. Providing you still want to."

"It might be dangerous," she said.

"I wouldn't set you up for something that'd hurt you."

She glanced at him, searching his features.

Nodding with a frown, she said, "I know. Hell, it might not have any effect on me at all."

A look crossed her face, one of wary apprehension that he was becoming rapidly familiar with. Before she could twist the circumstances around to convincing herself that she was a danger to him, he intervened.

"Still here, Roguey." He waved, waggling his fingers. If anything, Remy was a danger to himself when it came to Rogue. "Not runnin' now."

"Runnin' again," she corrected sternly.

"Again," he conceded, dipping his head with a small smile. Not yet, he added silently.

"Y' know," he began after a lull had drawn out between their conversation. "Back at the cemetery?
"Oh my gawd," she said in a monotone. "Remy LeBeau's at a loss for words. Ah think hell might have just frozen over."

"We can warm it up again, if y' like." He winked.

Rogue scoffed, rubbing at her face. "Don't let's start. Ah don't want ta hear it, especially since Ah know Ah'm partly responsible for the way you reacted last night."

"Wasn't you," he replied, surprised. "It's both of us, really. The only thing I'm afraid of is the conclusion you're coming to about yourself with this new bit of information about how our mutations are responding to each other. It's not like I can get into y' head and find out for myself, but the look you're wearin'? Girl, I can hazard a guess, and it's none too good."

"Ah never knew you were so demure, Cajun. What's it matter?" she asked, albeit a touch too stiffly.

Remy leaned forwards, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands linked together loosely. Peering up at her, he pitched his voice low as if to lure her into his confidence. "You shouldn't be afraid of what you can do, not even to this ol' scoundrel."

Rogue flushed. "Ah can kill a person with the slightest touch. What's not ta be afraid of?"

"Your life. Living," he said simply. "Everything involves some sort of sacrifice. Sometimes you just gotta stack the deck for yourself; make sure the odds are in your favor. Leastways, you make an effort at setting things right so y' don't come down so hard on yourself if you come up short."

"It's hardly me that's the problem, Remy. It's what can be done through me. Don't ya understand?"

"Everything has a price, chérie."

"At the cost of the people Ah care about? That's not somethin' Ah can afford."

That gave him pause. Ducking his head to hide a flicker of a grin, he murmured into chest, "That's why we steal."

Aghast, she argued, "Ah don't –"

"Sure y' do," he interrupted. "Stole this Cajun's heart, didn't you?"

Gaping, Rogue shook her head at him in stunned consternation. Her expression softened after a moment as she tried to process it. She'd probably expected another round debating the pros and cons of her mutation, and gloating inwardly, Remy was glad that he'd thrown her a curve.

Rogue's eyes crinkled at the corners a little, and she half-frowned, half-smiled. It was if her mouth was determined to take a downward turn despite what her brain was telling it to do.

She looked exhausted, defeated almost.

"Ah can't claim something that you already gave ta someone else."

Whoa. Back up.

"Quoi?" he croaked, sitting up fully.

"Everything involves some sorta sacrifice, right? That's your motto, Cajun — that's how ya live your
life. Me? Ah couldn't give up something so easy. Even if they made me. Even if it meant Ah had ta fight for it day in and day out. Even if it killed me in the end." Thoughtful, she paused. "It's different, under these circumstances: I never had your heart ta begin with. Ah have nothing ta lose."

"Now, look here just a minute -" he started.

"That was your 'gambit' – it was a trade off: your life in exchange for your place in the Guild. You had ta leave Belladonna behind so that everyone else'd believe you respected the decision the Patriarchs made on your behalf. But you came back to New Orleans, didn't you? Did you do it just ta spite the people who kicked you out, because you could? Or did ya come back maybe because you couldn't bear ta stay away from her? You're not a pawn, sugah, not when you have the last say in what you do with yourself." She sighed, still smiling with that same forlorn look. "Things aren't over just because someone disappears."

For a second, he thought she'd actually seen his memories for herself, but this was only speculation. Knowing as much relaxed him only a fraction — enough to take notice of her hands:

She rubbed her thumb and index finger together, staring absently at the mark of a thin, white scar. It was no bigger than a paper cut.

He cleared his throat. "Rogue?"

Offering him a fleeting, wan smile, she didn't hold his gaze. "Hm?"

"When was the last time you had your gloves off long enough to give yourself a cut like that?"

Thrown by the swift change in conversation, she drew backwards, her eyebrows furrowing. "Ah – Ah don't know."

Remy tipped his head to the side, giving her a sidelong appraisal that prompted a rising blush. "It's not even healed yet, chère. Got to have been recent."

She swallowed, seeming to shake herself. Awareness stole across her face, opening her features for one precious, unguarded second. It was important, he suspected. It was right in front of him all along, too.

"Monday," she said thickly. "Just before class. Ah couldn't find one of my gloves." She shrugged. "Doesn't mean anything."

He wet his lower lip. "Where do y' keep your gloves, usually?"

She glanced away, shrugging noncommittally.

"Top drawer of your dresser?" he tried, insinuating himself just beneath her gaze where she couldn't avoid him.

She worried her lower lip. "Maybe," she answered, stubbornly playing naïve.

"I know what else y' kept in that drawer, Rogue – besides y' underwear, of course."

She shrugged away from him even as he slid nearer across the log.

"Somethin' small, and sharp at the edges if y' don't handle it properly. Somethin' that'd give you a cut just like that. Trust me," he said, "I've given myself a few in my time to know what a slice from a playin' card looks like — especially when the water makes it all white and puffy, like that."
"So I kept the stupid Queen of Hearts you gave me!" she exclaimed, folding her hands into her armpits to hide the evidence. "So what?"

"So, for someone tryin' to tell me that I can't stay away from someone who clearly doesn't want me anywhere near them, you sure got a lotta nerve tryin' to downplay your motives for bein' here with me right now. Time and distance, Rogue: 'things aren't over just because someone disappears.' That's what you said. You always had a part of me, so long as you kept that Queen."

"Oh, that's nice!" she spat sarcastically. "Can ya gloat a little harder? Ah'm sure Ah won't feel any worse."

"You should feel bad," he agreed, smirking. "You're an awful liar. Could give you a few pointers, if I was convinced it'd help your argument."

"Bein' a good liar is not something ta be proud of, Remy!"

"That's true," he conceded. "How else would I know that y' care about me if you weren't so bad at denying it?"

"It doesn't matter!" she shouted. "It doesn't matter how Ah feel because it'll always be Belladonna before anyone!" She slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with horrified shock. Remy blinked, surprise outweighing his amusement: Rogue wasn't just jealous, she thought she was outdone. **Dieu.**

Remy shook his head, awed momentarily that anyone could be so pigheaded. "I came back because New Orleans is my home, Rogue. I don't fit anyplace else." Brow furrowed, he tried to get her to look at him. "Where was I supposed to go?"

If she had an answer, she caught it between her teeth. It was almost like she could see her chewing on it.

"I was dead to Belladonna the instant Julien's blood hit my hands," he confessed.

Rogue frowned. How could he explain to her that he'd loved Belladonna first, but he hadn't loved her last?

Dragging her hands through her hair, pushing lank white streaks out of her eyes, Rogue blew out a breath. "Ah think Lapin was right about you, Remy: trouble follows you wherever ya go."

"This life was all I knew. Without the Guild, without the profession, I was a walkin' deadman." He shrugged. "I'm little if not nothin' without the risk involved."

"With me?" she smiled wryly, seemingly accepting the explanation he offered. "It's always about that risk. Can't let ya put yourself on the line like that."

"Not y' choice to make, **chére**. This is the way the cards have been dealt: It's fate that brought you and me to this point in time."


"All this we been through? You and me, alone *and* together, it's brought us to this point here." He jabbed at the log to emphasize his words. "If it was a coincidence that I would up in Bayville, of all places, on the *one* team that was put together specifically to bring your team down, I'd eat my cards. All fifty two of 'em."
"There ain't no such thing as fate." She stifled a yawn. "You forget, Ah lived with Destiny for far too long ta take advantage of *that* excuse."

"It's too romantic, for you, isn't it?" he asked dryly. "Can't just take it for what it's worth."

"Never can, Mister LeBeau. Not with my life." She gave him a wistful smile and exhaled heavily, shutting her eyes. "The decisions you make, they open up doors for you along the way. When ya pick one, others get closed forever. The point is that it's your choice ta make."

"That sounds like you're leavin' an awful lot to chance — a pick a card, any card, type scenario; what happens when y' choose the wrong one?"

She shrugged. "Ah don't have those options. My X gene determined my life for me. The Guilds determined your life of the past year for you, but they never said you had ta stop caring for Belladonna when they forced you ta leave."

"That's *bullshit!*" he exclaimed, startling her. "This martyr stuff might work on the X-Men, but I'm tellin' you right now, p'tit, you're not foolin' this *homme*. You can't touch — so what? You think that means y' can't be close to someone? You're afraid that the risk y' take by openin' yourself up to someone'll hurt y' in the end. Not them. *You*. That excuse don't work with me. Belladonna? Y' wanna know about Belladonna? I'll tell you about Belladonna."

"Cajun," she said warningly, her voice strained. "We might be on sorta amicable terms right now, but you're pushin' it —"

"Oh, so now we're friends? After all that about the choices I had to make, like it was ever in question that I had any other choice. I left twice, Rogue. Twice I told Jean Luc that it was for good, and twice, I ended up back in the Big Easy even though there's not a damned thing easy about this town. When I met you for the first time… Pah! Lemme tell you something… Magneto? He had a few ideas that made perfect sense to me. There's no good, sound, or smart reason to hide who or what you are. There's no reason to be ashamed or exploited for it neither, and when you are? You fight back. That's the only way to live, Rogue — that's the only road to take, the only door to open – otherwise, we'd all end up like you when something goes wrong."

"Shut up," she hissed. That woke her up, he sneered.

"It hurts, don't it? Hurts more to know you're lettin' life slip by you because you're scared."

"Shut *up*, Remy. Ah'm warnin' you," she threatened.

"Non," he replied obstinately. "You can't make up y' mind whether or not y' want me to tell you about myself, and now you're getting my life story. So sit back, quit complaining, and take y' medicine."

"You were in *love* with her, and you're playin' it off like it was nothin' at all! What do ya want me ta say ta that?" she snapped, her bare hands slapping to the log on either side of her. "And what about the rest of them? All those girls whose names and faces ya can barely remember because ya used them ta drown *her* out of your head! Ah know what that's like. Ah know what it feels like ta be used by you, and it ain't happenin' *again*! Blood Moon Bayou, Remy! Ring a bell?"

"I made mistakes," he returned hotly. "'But I'm not gonna live my life stewin' in regret for them."

"That's 'cause you run," she hissed. "You don't stick around long enough afterwards ta really see what kinda damage ya done."
"I been used too, Rogue!" he shouted back. "Don't you understand that? I'm the only mutant in the Guild. I was the one thing that was disposable — that's why when Julien died it didn't matter that I had to leave!"

"Whatever," she snapped. "Ah'm sick of this." She moved to lift herself from the log, and Remy's hand shot out, yanking her back down. She landed with a huff, her other leg skidding over the side of the log so that she faced him.

Firmly, Remy planted his hands on her knees and pinned her down.

"Me too," he said though grit teeth, forcing the incensed swell of resentment down into a light simmer in his chest.

"Back off, Cajun," she bit back, unsure what to do with her bare hands.

Between them, a pair of gloves and his pack of cards sat in the small space.

"Only if you listen to what I have to say," he insisted, letting her go. His fingers hovered, and reluctantly, he drew back to himself as Rogue swung herself back over the log to face the swamp instead of him. "You fight me for not tellin' you a thing, and when I start, suddenly, you don't wanna hear it. This isn't a concession, Rogue. It's all I have to offer that won't send you runnin' scream' in the other direction."

It appeared as if it took her physical effort to keep from slapping him.

"Merde," Remy muttered, scrubbing at his face, determined to preoccupy his hands though they itched to touch her again. He yanked on his hair, directing his frustration to his scalp instead of towards anything that had the potential to explode under his touch. She was staring at him outright with patience that was equally frayed.

This was supposed to be the fun part, right?

Remy had liked roller coasters when he was younger, but this was taking things to a whole new level.

"Talk," she spat.

"I was ten when I met her." He grimaced, wrestling with the first yowl of his instinctual, self-preserving, subconscious self at the admission. "Was just a street thief back then. Ran with a gang that didn't operate any under jurisdiction that I knew of; petty stuff to survive in the Vieux Carré." He shrugged, forcing his fingers to stop their jittery prowl. "Parents abandoned me when I was a bébé, no use for a kid with freak eyes. Did what I had to to get by." He swallowed, squinting into the tree line, his jaw working. "She was bein' attacked by a couple of guys from a rival Guild that Marius had pissed off. I stepped in."

"How very heroic of you, Robin Hood," Rogue sneered.

"Wasn't giving back to the poor back then, Marian," he returned, pleased that his voice at least retained the neutral indifference that masked his caterwauling conscience. "I was the poor. I was the shit stuck to the bottom of the Quarter's proverbial shoe."

"Not much has changed, then, Ah take it."

Remy smirked, giving her a coy look. "You're so sweet sometimes, y' make my teeth hurt." Something uncoiled, relaxing a little between them.
Rogue snickered, trying to dampen the sound by clearing her throat. Remy clucked at the poor show, but continued anyhow.

"We got to be friends." He shrugged again, this time out of the inability to do anything else. "Belle liked a thrill, an' me? I was more fun to run with than her brother. Julien was always a lil' bit of a stick in the mud," he mused. That was being polite, really. "Jean Luc..." He paused, considering. "Jean Luc set it up; the problems between the Assassins Guild that brought two flunkies out to the city to attack Belle, me bein' where I was that day — turns out Fagan, the guy who I was runnin' for, he owed Jean Luc a favor. And meetin' Belle? Jean Luc musta known I couldn't resist a femme in distress."

He smiled thinly and without humor. "Two months later, he just 'happened' to be in the right place at the right time."

He glanced at Rogue, his heart rate slowing gradually, evening out.

"I picked his pocket," he explained in a monotone. "You don't pick the pocket of the Thieves Guild Patriarch without him knowing. It's bad form if y' don't get away quick enough — but he was expectin' me, I think. Left a note in his pocketwatch an' everything." He pursed his lips. "It was even addressed to me." Cocky sonofabitch.

"He adopted ya," she said, her tone matter-of-fact.

Remy nodded. "Trained me, taught me, brought me into the family knowin' that when the time was right, there'd be use for me."

"You mean ta tell me he went ta all that trouble just so ya could marry her?"

"I was an asset that could be groomed," he said. "Molded into what they wanted me to be." He glanced at her. "A marriage between the two families meant peace for the Guilds. It's very Montague and Capulet if y' ask me." He feigned indifference. "I was eighteen," he added after a moment. "Just a kid." Just a year younger than Rogue.

"You weren't... Ah mean. Ah felt how happy you were to be marrying her —"

Slowly, Remy nodded. "I never found out if Belle was involved; if she knew about the setup, the courtship." His chest constricted. She couldn't have held me down to begin with, but I didn't stick around long enough to ask when the contract was dissolved."

"Why not?" she asked softly.

"Hell hath no fury, an' all that. Remy shook his head. "Her brother's blood is on my hands, chére — if I was Belle, I'd have wanted me dead too, just like her daddy." Lightly, Remy began tracing a pattern on the log in between them, charging the path his finger took with just enough energy to leave a scorched trail behind in the shape of an idly formed heart, which he proceeded to blacken in. The stain made him ease up a little, and though it was imperceptible, his posture relaxed. "In the end, it was better for everyone that I left," he admitted. "Snatched the power right out of her hands. Knowing that it was authority over the Guilds she wanted doesn't ease the heart much, but it does offer some perspective."

"It broke your heart," Rogue whispered.

Remy didn't reply. He'd fixed that, hadn't he? Glued his pride back together and crammed it into the safest spot he knew of — oblivion; that vast recess of forgetting that scores the underbelly of desire, but doesn't make it bleed. They were two separate things, after all, weren't they? Love and lust:
friendly bedfellows that you can't leave alone in a room together for more than three seconds.

Things get ugly after you cross that particular line.

Then you spend the rest of your time trying to fix the rest of the things that were broken. One at a time.

He grimaced.

"Remy, that's not something ya can run from forever," she said.

Sure you can, he thought, his expression hardening. Look at you, chère.

"Don't give me advice you can't take yourself, Rogue," he said quietly. "What you want, you're scared of getting hurt from, so y' keep it at a distance."

"Ah want the real thing." Rogue hesitated, pulling at her gloves.

"No, y' don't." Remy smiled almost wistfully. "What I had with Belladonna wasn't real. Maybe in the beginning, but things change after a time. Priorities change." Hers had.

"Oh?" Rogue raised an eyebrow, shifting marginally so that Remy once more became aware of her physicality; her nearness. "It certainly felt real enough in my head."

Remy couldn't restrain flashing a small, forced smile. "I think what happens in the head and in the heart's a lot different than what happens in reality."

That silenced her for a stretch, and for a time, they merely sat on their log, waiting for the golden moment when the sun finally broke through the trees and hit the water. It was slow moving, waiting for that kind of illumination.

"Ah'm not afraid," she muttered finally and with the sort of petulance that could be in the same breath both maddening and adorable. Remy was grateful that she'd broken the tension. It left him free to contemplate his next move, though he played out the bluff admirably. Quirking an eyebrow, he leaned closer to her, anticipating the way she drew back from him.

"Is that so?" he asked, nodding pointedly to the angle that she'd taken to maintain the buffer zone. "Care to make a wager?" He waggled his eyebrows, to which Rogue grit her teeth.

"No," she ground out, readying to get up again, though she struggled to hoist herself to her feet. She sighed. "Move."

"This is stupid," he muttered a moment later, leaning forward and grabbing onto her boot.

"Hey!" she chirped, startled as Remy pulled, catching her other ankle and spinning her forty-five degrees so that she faced him. He dropped her legs and latched onto the back of her knees. One good heave later and she was nearly in his lap, her legs draped lightly over his thighs.

"Damnit! Cajun!" she snapped, holding her bare hands to her chest so she wouldn't touch his skin. In the process, she'd begun tilting a little to the side. Remy caught her waist easily and steadied her.

Three splashes echoed below them – the sound made by a pair of wet gloves and a ruined pack of cards hitting the water. His last cigarette floated by, a tiny white canoe buoyed by the splash, then sank with the rest of it. Remy smirked openly, his thumbs locking into Rogue's belt loops and shifting his weight a little to lock his feet together below the log so she couldn't knock him off.
"You're in a bad position to be cursin' at me, girl," he chastised.

"You're insane!" she yelled back, her hands clutched to her chest and her eyes wide. "Ah absorbed ya once and now ya want me ta go and do it again! You – are – so – stupid! Ah could hit ya! Ah swear Ah would if Ah could right now!"

"There's nothing stoppin' you," he returned easily, sitting up a little straighter and giving her another yank forwards. Rogue gasped, trying to lean away and failing when she started tipping again. Unwilling to use her hands in case she touched his bare arms, she had to rely on Remy if she didn't want to take another dip in the swamp.

Clearly, it was driving her insane.

Fitting, since she was doing a fine job of doing the same to him.

Remy tsked her. "By now, you should know that I can read you like a poorly played game of Go Fish, so when y' do that little pucker thing with y' mouth?"

"Ah don't pucker!" she bit back.

"S' cute, but that's beside the point. You can't fake it. my psyche might be playing cache cache in y' head, and you might be getting lil' bits and pieces of me here and there that don't make sense, but the stuff I don't know about you, Rogue? The stuff that can't be found in a file?" He scrutinized her. "I just have to look a little harder to find out."

Rogue made a strangled noise in the back of her throat, glaring at him.

"Put y' hands down." Remy nodded to her lap. "I'm not gonna get hurt, and you're not doing anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"This makes me uncomfortable," she ground out through clenched teeth, not lowering her hands.

"Dieu, donne moi la patience," he hummed to the sky. "You were comfortable last night, weren't you?" He nodded – a perfunctory, self-congratulating tip of the head. It shut her up. It also made her flush a brilliant shade of scarlet Remy couldn't help but find just a little bit endearing, and very, very seductive at the same time.

"Am I making you do something you don't want to do?" he pressed.

She hesitated. "I'm worried I'm gonna hurt ya."

He gave her a look. "Are you concerned that I have my hands on your hips?"

She swallowed, looking a little less put out. "No, not specifically —"

"That our knees are touching?"

"No, that's not what -"

He shifted. "Does it bother you that I didn't ask permission to kiss you last night?"

A red flush rose on her cheeks. "You're not gonna kiss me again, are you?"

"Do you want me to?"

He watched her throat work. Her lips part. Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and then back up.
That was an answer, but it wasn't permission.

"I won't," he assured her. "Because that's pushing your limits to discomfort, but wanting something and acting on it are two sticky things that like to cling together. They don't necessarily have to, though."

She nodded. Swallowed. Relaxed a little more.

"Now, a lesson -"

"Don't ya dare go back to that schoolmarm crap you tried ta pull yesterday," she warned, fingers twisting inwards a little more.

Remy pinched her side through her shirt and Rogue yelped.

"Y' squirm, I drop you. Y' behave, and maybe we find some mutual restitution."

"Been reading a dictionary lately?" she shot back, fidgeting to put some distance between them.

Remy stopped her, his fingers splaying across her lower back and holding firm.

"Been brushin' up on tryin' to get a point across to someone more stubborn than me. It's like… diplomacy for a brick wall," he said, ever philosophic.

"Ya get that off the back of a cereal box?" she countered.

"Fruit Loops," he said, chuckling as Rogue bit down on the corner of her mouth, trying to stop herself from laughing.

"S' alright, chérie. You can smile. I won't tell no one," he purred.

"Shut up, swamp rat," she muttered, flushing, and finally, lightly, she dropped her hands, wrapping them around her elbows. "Will ya let me go now?" she asked, forcing exasperation. "Ah could try ta kick ya, but at this angle, Ah don't think Ah could reach."

"Sure y' could," he said, his voice throaty. "You know what y' did back there to me with that quarterstaff? Nice bit o' acrobatics. You're limber."

The emphasis he placed on the last word caused her to blush even more fiercely.

"Get to the point so Ah can get down, Remy," she said. "Ah'm tired, and Ah swear, if this wasn't so totally uncomfortable, Ah'd likely fall asleep where Ah'm sittin'."

"There are other ways to be close to someone," he replied.

"Like how?" she scoffed, incredulous.

Remy offered a mischievous smile. "You're far too innocent for your own good, Roguey. I don't think I should tell you, might corrupt you — then Wolvie'll turn Gambit into hamburger meat." He shook his head. "There won't be anyone to make you all red in the face after he barbecues me."

Rogue threw him a wan grin. "Ya sure do think highly of yourself."

"Until we find that stone, we're gonna have to make do, n'est-ce-pas?"

"Who said anything about doing anything?" she shot back, renewing her struggle.

With one final yank, Remy pulled her into his lap so that she straddled him, her feet kicking uselessly
and her bare hands coming to rest below his throat. With Rogue's arms between them, he was forced to slide a hand up her back to support her weight as she tipped backwards.

Ultimately, it produced the desired response. With one hand pressing lightly into the small of her back, and the other cradling her to him, the tension in Rogue's muscles slackened a little when she finally realized he wasn't pushing her any farther.

Not like he could, really. Rogue molded to him in a way that was near indecent. Remy wasn't sure if it was better or worse, but it felt right somehow. Decidedly worse, he concluded. What happened to the three-second rule?

"Remy doesn't go where he's not wanted, chère," he murmured, leaning backwards a little to peer up at her. "But Remy's gonna push at that wall of yours as long as he has to for it to give a little. For your own good, y' know."

"It won't," she snapped. "It can't."

"It is."

To demonstrate his point, he pressed his fingers lightly against her spine, dragging them downwards to the dip in her back above her tailbone — inviting her arch into him. On the second pass, she did, shuddering a little as her eyelids fluttered, straining to maintain some semblance of control over herself.

So he still had the touch. Merveilleux.

"S' not so bad," he hummed. "Non?"

"Shut up, Cajun," she muttered.

"Let go," he said quietly. "Just for a second. Let go."

"You first," she insisted with a tenaciousness that Remy found he was slowly growing used to. Again, her muscles drew taut beneath his hands. Much like her mutation, it appeared that Rogue's reflexes functioned on a similar automatically responsive level. Remy smirked, kneading her back in slow, deliberate circles to ease the knots below her soaked shirt and warm skin. She fisted her hands into his shirt. Lips parted.

Two inches and he could close the distance between them. Two inches and his chest tightened with desire. He watched her mouth, tracking that small smile between parted lips, and she watched his.

Her death grip eased, palms splaying over his pectorals. Careful not to brush his neck.

Remy could feel the warmth of his hands through his damp clothes.

He watched her lick her lower lip, her face red.

The nod she gave him was near-imperceptible, but when she flicked her gaze to his and breathed, he knew that were things different — were he a weaker man — he would've closed that distance.

"Yes," she breathed.

Savouring it for a moment, he squeezed her waist in acknowledgement.

"Then hold on," he murmured, his breath bouncing back to him from Rogue's face. She watched him warily a minute, her shoulders slumping in defeat as she turned her head to the side to yawn.
Nodding sluggishly, for the first time, Rogue gave in just a little.

He didn't say anything else, choosing instead to watch her slump forwards, her eyes sliding shut. She hummed once, but other than that, Rogue made no more noise as slowly, hesitantly, she moved her hands first to rest lightly on his shoulders, and then, as he pulled her to him gently, to slide around his neck as Remy continued his ministrations: just a caress. Just a taste to feel what it was like to be cared for; to express that affection through touch.

The sun had risen fully, casting long strips of hazed gold into the swamps by the time Remy had lifted both himself and the sleeping girl in his arms, and turned around the head back to the Guild house.

The light hit them at odd intervals, brightening certain spots of the path he walked, while others remained cloaked in shadow.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

- Quoi: What
- Homme: Man
- Merde: Shit.
- Bébé: Baby
- tu sais: You know
- Quartier's: The French Quarter
- Dieu, donne moi la patience: God, give me patience.
- cache cache: Hide and seek
- n'est-ce-pas: Is it not
- Merveilleux: Brilliant

Post Script:

- Backline (Poker): Make an agreement between two or more players to accumulate chips in the following manner. One of the players usually maintains the back line. Whenever he or the player with whom he has made the arrangement wins a pot, a certain portion of the chips in that pot are put on the back line, that is, in a pool for later distribution.
- "With great power comes great responsibility." (Stan Lee, adapted for Uncle Ben in Spiderman)
Deuces Wild

Title: The Ante
Chapter 21: Deuces Wild
Fandom: X-Men: Evolution
Author: Kira Coffin
Summary: Never bet more than you are willing to lose.
Rating: Teen/Mature
Pairing: Rogue/Remy
Warnings: Language

Years ago, things had been different, thought Mattie Baptiste as she wiped her hands on her skirts. The mansion of the Boudreaux household, resplendent in its own right, nonetheless bore the telltale signs that a family of selective skill lived within. A selection of weaponry from the various corners of the world and from a multitude of different eras adorned the walls of its corridors. They gleamed and glinted with the dim cast of gaslight sconces as she passed them. To the Boudreaux family, such devices were much like the decorative splendour stolen from the Renaissance and Baroque that their counterparts, the Thieves Guild, displayed proudly in their halls.

Simply put, neither clan could resist a little showing off.

If she was unnerved by the multitude of blades, bows, and axes, the traiteur to both the Thieves and the Assassins did not outwardly show it. Her station afforded her a certain diplomatic status between the warring Guilds, though often she could not help but wish that, were it possible, she could turn back the hands of the clock to a time when things had been simpler for the families.

Measured in the growth of the same sentinel oaks that dotted the Louisiana landscape, she had watched the young men and women that she thought of as her children grow tall. In the same years it had taken them to escape their youth, they had turned from each other. It was a gradual process, but as she herself was nearing the ripened age of one hundred and twenty, a decade felt like little more than a few moments.

Such a shame, she thought, pausing before a door that had been left open a crack.

Raising her fist to knock, Mattie stilled as the voices from within carried into the hall.

"Y' certain, Gris Gris?"

"There be no mistake. It's him at the door."

"C'est impossible, he wouldn't come this far out unless he wanted t' leave in a body bag."

"Belladonna —"

"They killed two of our own and then they have the audacity t' send an envoy? Bring him t' me. I
want to hear what the thieves' traitor has t' say for himself."

"And if y' don't like it?"

There was a pause, one that Mattie understood with the nonverbal assent of those trained in the killing arts.

"We'll deal with that when the time comes," Belladonna replied.

To Mattie, the girl had lost the sweetness of her cadence little more than a year ago. Growing up in such a short span of time had tuned her hard.

"Mebbe we should call your pére…"

"Do not defy me. Were Marius here, he'd do the same and since I'm actin' in his place until he comes home from his business dealings, you're gonna listen t' me if you know what's good for ya. Comprends? Bring me Theoren Marceaux. And Fifolet? Accompany Gris Gris. Make sure he don't do anything rash."

The door swung open onto an empty hallway. On the floor, lining the crevice where the moulding met the joinery that ran along the length of the hardwood, an inconspicuous trickle of water clung to the edge and out of sight as two men passed.

Theoren? But it was impossible. Visiting the Assassins without invitation was a grievous offence. If the Thieves did not sanction him for the visit, it would mean that he had defied his family and risked the compact that kept the Guilds apart from one another; a preventative measure intended to staunch the bloodshed that followed their encounters. What could prompt him to do such a thing? Mattie waited, hidden by her mutant form, and contemplated what it would mean for both Guilds if Theoren were seen with the Assassins by his own clan.

Certainly, the Thieves would consider it an act of betrayal.

The thought worried her. It was imperative that Mattie understand what his presence meant in the wake of the murders that morning. Would Belladonna demand equal payment for the deaths of two of the Assassins' own? That was tradition. That would be how the matter would be handled were Marius passing the judgement.

Flanking Remy's cousin, they returned. Theoren was a dour man at the best of times, practical to a fault with the disposition to match. A "real stick in the mud", Lapin liked to say. This morning, however, there was a shine to his eyes that unnerved Mattie: she knew that look — the boy was up to something. Carefully, as the door shut once more behind the party of three, Mattie trickled into the room, staying closest the wall and out of sight.

"This is a surprise," Belladonna murmured.

Theoren remained silent, though he glanced at the men hovering nearby as if to ask if they would be party to whatever it was he'd come to discuss.

"Gris Gris, Fifolet, Questa — wait outside. the thief and I will converse alone," Bella instructed. Her compatriots did not hesitate as they turned and left the pair, shutting the door.

To linger would be considered an insult to Belladonna's rank and esteem.

Theoren's gaze cast around the office. Unlike the corridors, the variety of trophies that ornamented Marius' study were not simply decorative: the hand gun on the blotter, the shoto on display on the
bookcase, and the selection of kunai throwing daggers less than three paces to the left were all hallmarks of successful contracts. More importantly, they were armaments still in regular use.

Her compatriots, three men of equal skill and notoriety, left Bella and her guest to their business, and Mattie, inconspicuously, to oversee the unusual visit.

"If this isn't a surprise meant for the history books, Theoren. Does your brood know that y' came all the way out here t' defy them? I wonder what Remy'd think of this," she purred. "Or is it because of Remy that you came to call?"

Theoren bared his teeth in a smile. "Let's forgo the pleasantries, Ms. Boudreaux," he said. "This is a business proposition and nothing more."

As Bella reclined in her father's chair, she favoured the stranger with a shrewd smile. There was something about the eyes that didn't sit right; a lighter cast, perhaps, bleeding the brown to yellow.

They flickered, and as Theoren gathered himself, Belladonna took in the stance: the fold of his fingers and regal bearing as he drew himself up. One foot notched behind the other. Feminine, almost.

Bella raised an eyebrow as the figure dissolved before her: losing an entire foot in height, hair lengthening, skin darkening to an eerie, unnatural shade.

"That's some trick."

It was not Theoren after all, but a shape shifter — a mutant.

Yello eyes narrowed, but the woman offered a demure, graceful nod.

"I expect you realize the danger you put yourself in by taking the shape of my enemy?"

"I am partial to making a statement, Ms. Boudreaux."

Belladonna nodded, considering. She shrugged, indifferent, though her attention remained rapier-sharp. "Sides, Theoren knows the rules, and if you knew Theoren, he woulda told y' what they were: decorum, for one, requires that the territories be respected. Assassins and Thieves do not cross the lines of old set across this town, least of all do we show up for sweet tea and biscuits on each others' porches. I take it you've no affiliations with the Guild."

"I owe no allegiance to the Thieves," the woman murmured in a tone that was equally as cool.

"Mutants rarely do, Madame…?"

"Please, spare the honorific." She slipped into a seat without invitation. "I expect your house is secure?"

"Can't say we normally take house calls, but yes." Bella rolled the words around a little. "For those that belong in its walls."

If the impertinence bothered her, she didn't show it.

"And there is no chance that our conversation will be overheard?"

"If there's conversation to be had." The blade glinted, extracted from saints-knew-where. Belladonna twirled the instrument over her knuckles, setting it at last, tip-first, into the desk's surface. It was a warning, and a none too subtle one at that.
If the stranger was unsettled by the quick flash of steel, her tone remained neutral as she replied, "There is a time for such shows of skill, my child; but I assure you, this is not it."

In less time than it took to blink, the blade stuck, point first, to the seat back a bare hairsbreadth from the woman's ear.

She smiled thinly, casting yellow eyes to the hilt, but left the knife where it was; lodged into the supple leather.

"The next time, I won't miss," Belladonna promised.

"Of that I have no doubt." The woman paused, considering. "Do you believe in fate, Ms. Boudreaux?"

"I believe that two inches to the right and you would lose more than just an eye." Settling back into her chair, Bella eyed the woman as if concluding that anyone so unflinching must mean business.

"I respect your need for anonymity." She sized her up. "Our clientele requires discretion. The house is secure, of that I can assure you. What is it that y' want from the family?"

"Your cooperation," she said evenly, pulling seemingly from nowhere an envelope that she placed on the desk. It slid forwards in one sinuous stroke.

"A contract?"

"Something of the like," the woman responded. "I offer you nothing more than information. In exchange, you will consider this offer as a token of my good will."

Belladonna raised an eyebrow. "Good will festers in debt, madame. There is nothing you can need of us that has only your word as payment."

"Not even to end the blood feud between your family and the Thieves?" she asked.

A beat. Bella fell to a stillness so concentrated that it appeared as if she'd become a lion that had spotted prey.

"The only end to this war," Bella said, "is a full cemetery vault." She leaned forwards, fingers steeping before her.

"I am aware of your losses, my dear. To be bereft two individuals, assets to your family and to your trade is grievous indeed. I offer my… condolences. I can understand your thirst for justice."

"Justice," Belladonna repeated. The word seemed strained, fraught with barely concealed amusement that curled her mouth upwards. "That's a pretty word for vengeance, as I understand it." She narrowed her eyes. "What are our affairs to you, stranger?"

"I, too, understand the machinations of revenge, my dear."

Bella sniffed. "It is none of my concern what you think you know, madam. Of the Guilds? The war is old, and fresh spilled blood is nothing the Assassins shy from. State your business with my family, or to hell with you. I have no interest in offers of 'good will'; pretty promises don't fix what's broke."

"Not even to assume control, to claim the very thing that was wrested from you with the murder of your dear brother?" the woman asked, the same cold shine blanketing her gaze.

Slowly, Bella moved from her casual slouch, uncurling with keenness so sharp that Mattie could feel
"What would you know of Julien?" Belladonna hissed. "No one outside the family knows our business."

"Nor would anyone know of the intended — failed — unification of the Guilds following his untimely passing. No one, save those interested in drawing certain circles to their conclusion." She pressed the envelope forwards. "We are architects of our own destiny, child. Who are we to question that which winds about the wrists and guides the hand of fate?"

A small, eerie smile turned the corners of the woman's mouth up.

Interest piqued, Bella carefully pulled the envelope towards her, watchful of her guest all the while. She lifted the flap and slid the contents to the blotter: a solitary playing card fell to the table.

Bella's expression clouded.

"He will be in the Quarter tomorrow evening," the woman said in a tone that suggested she understood more of Belladonna Boudreaux's secret, furtive thirsts than anyone might ever possibly know. Rising to her full height, a long shadow fell across the Master Assassin's desk.

Bella slid the Ace of Spades beneath her nails, lifting the card and inspecting either side. Slowly, a grim smile spread across her face.

"You're certain?"

When Belladonna looked up again, Theoren stood before her. He bowed from the hip, his eyes still cast in the same unnatural hue.

"It has been foretold," was the only reply offered, before the shapeshifter turned and slipped from the room.

What began as a breathy sigh of delight, rolled slowly into a chuckle that began in Belladonna's belly. Gathering in strength and volume as she clutched the Ace, she leaned back into her father's chair — and deepening, she roared laughter into the night: a brittle, maniacal sound that carried through the wood-panelled halls.

Mattie slipped beneath the door once more — a steady trickle of liquid that coalesced in the hallway. She summoned her form together, turning first into a clear puddle, and then rising into her natural shape. A moment later, she brushed at her skirts. Her hands shook.

Still, Belladonna's laughter echoed.

It rose the skin on the back of Mattie's arms.

From down the hall, Gris Gris and Questa looked up, unmoved by her sudden appearance.

Rapping hard on the door with her knuckles, Mattie swallowed the ill sense that a terrible agreement had just been concluded. She would go to thieves as soon as permitted. She would speak with Remy, but not before she could try to reason with her charge on the other side of the door.

As Belladonna called for her to enter, Mattie thought of her children, her heart constricting with worry and fear: what had they become that it should fall to this?

—
Sunlight clotted in the curtains, washing the floors in dull ochre where pinpricks of light seeped through the thick damask. It made the shadows untrustworthy. Rogue blinked blearily against the heavy veil of sleep, scrubbing her face and propping herself up on her elbows.

How had she gotten here?

The thought woke her fully: Remy.

Ignoring the stiff straining of her muscles against the effort, the sheets bunching at her waist, she sat up. Her clothes felt sticky and a little damp from a mixture of sweat and dried swamp water, and her muscles twinged with the ache of being left in cold clothing for the duration she'd slept.

What time was it? She had no idea.

Kicking off the covers, Rogue slid from the large bed and padded across the floor to the covered windows. Remy had taken her boots off, she guessed, and left her in her own room in the Guild mansion. He hadn't bothered undressing her, for which she was at least partially relieved, but sleeping in wet, dirty clothes wasn't exactly her idea of comfort. At least the Cajun understood her limits.

"What a gentlemen," she muttered.

The sunset spilled in the room, rose-coloured and warm where it touched the exposed skin of her forearms and shoulders. No gloves, she noted. She'd lost them in the swamp. Wincing against the light, Rogue looked out over the dusk-drenched bayou. It was like the juice of a blood orange had been smeared across the sky — leaving a messy, watery red staining the tops of the trees.

She'd slept through the day. Rogue sighed; rubbing at her face and trying to ignore the persistent subconscious nagging that declared Remy had carried her to her room and put her to bed. She felt a little foolish that she'd fallen asleep on him out in the swamp, but beneath that, the steady, warm blossom of something comfortable insisted that it was all right. It had felt good for a time to be cared for.

She reigned in a small smile, lidding her gaze against the glare of twilight. Her fingers twined the tassels that lined the edge of the drapes, memorizing their texture.

Had she done the same to his hair before he'd coaxed her into slumber?

Would it be so bad if she had?

With the ghostly feeling of Remy's arms wrapped around her, his fingers kneading gently, working out the knots of tension coiled through her back, came the sort of nightmarish clarity that makes the heart stutter:

She could have hurt him.

It hadn't seemed like much of a concern when he'd held her so tenderly, but the knowledge that his shields had failed when they'd kissed was a serious problem.

There was also the awareness of his feelings towards his ex-wife, grazing lightly beneath the surface of her conscious thoughts.

She might've been Remy's three hundred and thirty eighth rebound for all she knew — another notch on a bedpost, another conquest to forget Belladonna. His feelings were confused and fading, which made it all the more difficult for her to understand what truly remained in his heart.
Remy said he'd kissed her. He'd announced it with the sort of pride that declared he'd one-upped her in their little battle of wills. Worse, he said he'd cared for her.

"Well, shit," she huffed, staring outside at nothing in particular.

He wasn't afraid of her powers, and to prove it, he'd tuck ed her against him, pressed her so close that she felt every ripple, every notch, and every indentation of the muscles in his chest.

A warmth spread through her belly at the thought, and to staunch the sensation, Rogue shut her eyes, flattening her palms against the cool glass. She forced herself to breathe evenly, inhaling through her mouth and exhaling through her nose.

It didn't help.

"Shit," she swore again, disbelief that she'd let her defences drop entirely when she was around him leaving her distracted.

She turned back to the room, unsure of what she should do. She was a stranger in a house full of criminals; a mutant amidst baseline humans who she put at risk since she no longer had her gloves. What if she went out and someone touched her by accident?

Part of her knew that this was an excuse: she wanted to avoid Remy.

Rogue grimaced, looking at her hands and the flecks of muddy brown still staining her bare forearms. She could shower and buy herself some time. There, she decided. That was a plan. She needed time to think without the swamp rat in the immediate vicinity. He had a very bad habit of clouding her judgement.

Hell, had she really fallen asleep in his arms?

Rogue shook herself, glancing at the discoloured bed sheets. Shower first, she decided, frowning at the huge, dried stains left on the linens. Swamp water on fourteen hundred-thread count Egyptian cotton. Remy clearly wasn't worrying about the damages done by leaving her to sleep in wet clothes.

She paused — the sight of the bed before her off in a way that felt as if reality was about to tilt and toss her off. Approaching the side of the bed where she hadn't slept, she found that the pillow was indented, the sheets creased, but not slept in. They were slept on.

Her mouth went dry. The covers were cool to the touch, the sheets remarkably soft beneath her fingers, but the knowledge that she hadn't slept alone remained:

Remy's stayed with her. Beside her. In bed.

Before she could contemplate the Joker tucked into the sheets, Rogue turned on her heel and marched to the bathroom, a searing blush burning her cheeks as she slammed the door after her.

—

"This is the reason why I don't like dealing with Tabitha." He punctuated the last word with his fist hitting the dash, the keypad proving useless to open the com lines with the Institute. It wasn't the machine's fault: rather, the girl at the end of the line was ignoring Iceman's efforts.

"Cool off, Iceman," Cyclops warned.

"That's so redundant it's almost funny," he shot back.
Bobby scrubbed at his face, weary with the lack of sleep. His teammates were in no better condition, though they remained vigilant after a night spent circling the city, awaiting clearance from the airfield to land.

Kitty bounced on the soles of her feet, hovering near the door. "Why aren't they back yet?" she asked.

Nearby, Jean shook her head with a frown.

"They've been delayed," she said. "They're on their way, but Kurt's teleportation is erratic. I've given them our coordinates, and they know Scott wants them to rendezvous before it gets dark."

"Is Wolverine with him?" Storm asked.

Jean cast a glance at Cyclops. "Yes, and from what I sense, he's not particularly happy about what they've uncovered. They will both be here momentarily."

"Would it not be more effective if we were to establish a search perimeter?" Colossus asked. "Split up?"

"It has been more than twenty-four hours," Storm said. "Not only have we prolonged the mission considerably, but it would not be safe to continue without rest."

"If one-eye hadn't been so damned preoccupied with the legislative landing crap, maybe you wouldn't need to take a nap," Logan groused. His shoulders hunched as he stalked out from beneath the wing and into view of the jet's occupants. A wispy cloud of dark grey smoke trailed him, preceded by a defeated-looking Nightcrawler.

"Kurt?" Kitty asked, her voice an octave too high.

He sighed, his voice strained as he tried to find the right words to express himself. When he could not, he teleported to a seat near Cyclops. When Kitty tried to approach him, he merely shook his head, staring past out to the wide stretch of Louis Armstrong International's airfield.

"Mr. Logan, what happened?" Kitty pressed.

"Why does Nightcrawler look like someone died?" Bobby asked.

Clearly, it was the wrong thing to say.

In a large puff of sulphuric-tinged smoke, Kurt was upon him. His blue fists twisted into Bobby's uniform, yanking him so close that his breath fogged with the cold. Kurt crouched over the seat, his feet straddling the armrests, his prehensile tail thrashing.

"Was bedeutet das?"

"Whoa!" Bobby yelped, icing up so quickly that part of Kurt's fingers frosted over. "Back off, man!"

"Nightcrawler!" Logan snarled.

Kurt turned slowly, his mouth twisted to bare his incisors. Yellow eyes darted around the cabin, until finally, drawing a shaky breath, he released Bobby.

"Es tut mir leid," he muttered under his breath, backing off. "I'm sorry," he ground out. "It's been a long day."
"And it'll be an even longer night for you if you don't get it under control," Logan growled. "Sit!" he ordered, and begrudgingly, Kurt turned and teleported back to his seat.

Kitty asked, "Did you find Rogue?"

Logan shook his head, keeping his eye trained on the blue mutant as if expecting another outburst.

"We were too late," Kurt muttered, wilting under Logan's scrutiny.

"What?" Kitty's voice rose another octave. "She's not… oh my god! Rogue's not dead?"

Colossus placed a hand on her shoulder as if to calm her.

"No, half-pint, Rogue's alive," Logan answered. "Got her scent all right, but Gumbo's got her mixed up in something bad." He nodded to the team's leaders. "I'm going back out there, see what I can find before the trail dies."

"She is still in the city?" Storm asked.

Logan nodded. "We ought to get to her before the police do, or worse."

"Worse?" Scott asked. "Wolverine, you need to be debriefed —"

"Later. Talk to the Elf. He'll give you the details."

Kurt swallowed, turning away.

"We tracked them all day," Logan continued. "But the Cajun's stink died out at the river. The blue one's nerves are worn out, so he stays. I'll be back before dawn."

Nightcrawler didn't acknowledge the statement.

"Jeannie? Take care of the kid. Half Pint, quit gaping. It'll be fine." He peered around them, and as an afterthought, Logan added, "You all look like hell." He stalked from the plane without another word.

In the fading light, Kurt's eyes shone a brighter shade of yellow as he glanced around his teammates, as if only acknowledging where he'd wound up for the first time.

"Storm?" Cyclops asked. "You'll accompany Wolverine."

The Weather Witch nodded, turning swiftly to follow. Leaving Logan to his own devices in the mood he appeared to be in was not prudent — not for anyone who crossed his path, and definitely not for Gambit. Perhaps with Storm's help, they would stave of an incident.

"Kurt?" Jean asked quietly. "Just relax, okay?"

He held up a hand, silently telling Jean he did not want his mind probed for the information. Slowly, his accent thickening with obvious grief, he began telling them what he'd seen.

—

The bathwater took on a milk-white cast, she'd sat in the tub so long.

The flesh of Rogue's knees, where they broke the surface, were dewy rose from the combination of the hot water and her vigorous scrubbing. There hadn't been the option of a shower, so she sat
immersed up to the neck in the claw-footed tub, knowing full-well that the tips of her fingers were
turning pruney the longer she refused to get out.

Getting out meant seeing the Cajun.

Getting out meant swallowing the ridiculous nervousness that had peaked not more than an hour ago,
and facing the proverbial symphony of self-doubt, self-loathing, self-reprimand — and last but not
least — self-restraint if she had to see him in the condition she was in.

She wrapped her fingers around the lip of the bathtub, gripping the porcelain like she'd drown if she
let go too quickly.

A wet cloth hung over the side of the bath, and a bar of soap floated before her. She poked at it with
her toe, watching it bob as she stewed — both literally and figuratively.

It hadn't been more than four days since the last time she'd been in this position; in a bathroom,
prodding a bar of soap to see if she could fill it with kinetic charge. It felt like a lifetime ago. So much
had happened since then, and like Monday night, Rogue found herself thinking about Gambit again.
Except, it wasn't quite in the same way.

She had let herself get coerced into taking an impromptu vacation, led on a wild goose chase for a
stone she knew nothing about, for the sole reason that there was a sliver of hope that with it — like
Remy — her powers would reach their plateau, and she'd gain complete control.

She had been attacked, seen two dead bodies, had her hopes dashed when they'd found the Botanica
blown to bits, and had absorbed Remy not once, not twice, but three times in the span of a week.

He'd completely negated the efforts she'd exercised all year: not absorbing a soul. Keeping herself —
and her powers — contained.

Gambit had managed to disarm her in less time than it took to realize what he'd accomplished. So
much for strengthened resolve and all that other garbage Scott always talked about.

Her conscience twinged at the thought. She hadn't spoken to the X-Men since she'd called them from
the phone booth in Virginia. It had been three days. She ought to get in touch, and soon, considering
when they were left to their own devices, they tended to assume the absolute worst.

It wasn't like Remy was plotting to take over the world with her facilitating the conquest, but still, her
emancipation could be easily misunderstood by those who didn't quite "get it." They just didn't
understand what it was like to live like she did. None of them had any problems cozying up to each
other; none of them ran the risk that they could kill another person with something as simple as a
hug. Good intentions didn't mean plum dixie when you were the one responsible for putting
someone in a coma.

Moreover, the X-Men didn't "get" Remy either. She did. A little. She thought? But for the most part,
he was a riddle all unto himself.

What Rogue did understand was that Remy, as reluctant as he was to reveal too much of himself,
had sought her out when his powers had been boosted. Previously married, his family's black sheep,
an exile from his home; Rogue knew all that. It wasn't that difficult to empathize with, really, she just
wished he was willing to give instead of forcing her to take those pieces of his past from him. It made
the picture of the man she knew patchwork at best, and it made her feel like she was the thief in this
relationship.

Wait.
Relationship?

Where had that come from?

Rogue felt the flush in her face, spreading quickly to the tips of her ears where it tingled.

"Ah'm so screwed," she breathed, vainly trying to ignore the million reasons that said it was a very, very bad idea to even consider it. Those ideas burst behind her eyes, a flurry of possible scenarios, many of which left her feeling hollowed out, used, and left discarded when Remy realized that the game wasn't fun anymore.

Shit. Had it stopped being fun even before she'd even met him?

How was this any worse, she asked herself.

She'd seen how easy it was for him to shift in personality. From seducer, to vindictive bastard, to the intense, driven mercenary who thought it was good fun to crack jokes with her in the midst of a fight with people who were trying to kill them. He was more of a rogue than she was, and Rogue had the distinct impression that he was just warming up.

Their scrap in the swamp that morning had practically been foreplay, for heaven's sake!

Rogue shuddered, though not unpleasantly, as she sank lower into the tub. Her chin dipped into the water, and she stared fixedly at her toes poking out of the placid surface at the far end.

In the simplest terms, she understood that he blamed himself for a lot of things that he still wasn't willing to share with her. The thought left her nettled. He'd been doing his best to convince her that he cared for her in whatever misguided way he was capable of, but truly, he'd missed the point: He'd be happy to receive if she was offering a little more than friendship, but he wasn't willing to share himself — at least, not in the way that would get her to trust him fully.

"Stupid swamp rat," she muttered to the empty bathroom, her voice sounding louder to her own ears, making her feel marginally crazier than she had been to begin with.

Maybe he couldn't share himself like that. Maybe he'd trained himself not to. That would explain the offhanded way he responded when she'd tried to bring up Belladonna. It didn't feel like dishonesty, just… an absent bit of information. As if in not revealing that part of his past, he could pretend it didn't exist.

Rogue couldn't touch anyone physically, but Remy wouldn't let himself be touched emotionally. They really were alike in some ways.

At the end of it all, she found she really didn't know that much more about him, and the thought unnerved her almost as much as the silly streak of acrobatics her stomach did when she thought about him sleeping next to her all night… in the same bed.

She'd slept with Remy.

"Oh my gawd," Rogue moaned, squeezing her eyes shut and submerging. Rogue held her breath, her ears filling with the impenetrable, comforting hum of quiet. A bubble escaped her nose, and the underwater silence pressed in around her — but it didn't stop the incessant, roundabout chatter in her head.

He was trying to break her down, get by her defences. He'd said he would, but Rogue had been so adamant about fighting him, it had sopped her energy. The one instant she'd let her guard down, he'd
waltzed straight in.

She held her breath until her lungs began to burn.

Reluctantly, she admitted to herself again that it had felt good in his arms. It felt even better knowing that regardless of the inherent risk in being close to her, Remy wasn't giving up. It would be a heartening thought — flattering even — if he didn't act like such a cornpoke jackass swamp rat with a nasty chip on his shoulder when she'd tried to give him a real taste of his own medicine.

Her vision spotted with black dots, and Rogue shot back up, gasping for air before she drowned herself.

He could dish it, but he certainly couldn't take it.

She pushed the hair back from her eyes.

The thought emboldened her. What had it been? She strained to remember: when she'd said she was going to go back to Bayville, he'd started acting funny. Remy had fed her the same lines that he'd probably used on a hundred other women, and because of that, she'd retaliated. They'd snapped at each other consistently until that morning when she'd woken from the dream of Julien's murder.

As sorry a state as it was to resort to physical combat, the fight had helped. Knocking him into the swamp would have been a promise well kept, if he hadn't taken her down with him.

Rogue sniggered, the sound echoing off the walls.

If they were this bad facing off with one another, she couldn't imagine the possibilities if they actually teamed up. The X-Men wouldn't stand a chance. She grinned, thinking of Scott going apoplectic at Gambit's antics. The pair of them could probably damage the Danger Room enough to get them out of training for at least a week.

Rogue sighed, slapping the water with her hand, finally fed up with the train of thought. She was supposed to be angry with him, but why in tarnation could she not stop smiling?

She had to call the Institute, just to check in. Doing that meant getting out of the tub, and getting on with facing him. She could do it, she decided, swallowing the nervous bubble of apprehension that accompanied the thought. She would just avoid him as long as possible until they figured out what to do about finding the stone. She would not mention the whole covert sleeping together thing.

Rogue stood, snatching a nearby towel of a small rack near the tub.

Her legs, thankfully, felt a little less wobbly.

She could do this.

The Cajun had nothing on her.

Not a thing, she assured herself, drying as she walked, and collecting a thick, white, fluffy bathrobe from off the back of the door. Her clothes were ruined from the impromptu swim in the bayou, but Mercy was nearly her size. Rogue supposed she might not mind it if she borrowed clothes. And if she could find the girl's room without running into Remy on the way? All the better.

Rogue ignored the nervous flutter in her stomach, wrapping the robe around herself and cinching the belt tightly at her waist. Her wet hair hung over her shoulders, dripping into the collar. She snatched up the towel and went to work on it, not even minding the stubborn way it began to curl around her
He may have been truthful about caring for her. Maybe, just *maybe* it was genuine, she thought, but that didn't mean she had to moon over him. Then again, Remy may have been trying to coax his way into her heart and bed too — but then why hadn't he tried to make a move on her that morning? He was crazy enough to try something like that again.

Again.

Rogue stopped fussing with her hair. The thought sent a warm wash of hope through her chest.

Staring at her reflection in the large mirror over the sink, she drew a shaky breath.

Would he stick around if they actually found the stone and she had the chance to use it?

Would it even be permanent? She didn't even know the extent of her powers, much less what that damned rock could do to her — but if it meant that there was the possibility of not being so damned afraid of herself, she'd leap at the chance.

She wanted it, she decided suddenly. She craved control with every weakened muscle, every inch of her deadly, cursed body that she could lay her hands on.

That Remy could lay his hands on.

Rogue flushed brightly, biting down hard on her lower lip, embarrassed that she could even think it. Before her imagination could drag her away, she swore, once, loudly. Why the hell didn't this place have a shower with a cold-water tap?

She opened the bathroom door, still grinning a little to herself and working the towel through her damp hair.

"*Bonsoir, chère.*"

Rogue froze, the towel dropping limply in her hands. It slapped to the ground a moment later as she faced the intruder:

Gambit stood in the doorway, his heel propped against the doorjamb, arms folded across his chest, looking particularly smug.

"Don't ya ever knock?" she snapped, feeling the cool air coming from the hallway wrap around her legs, cooling her toes on the warm wood floors. How long had he been standing there?

He cocked an eyebrow, his gaze lingering a shade too long on the v of skin left exposed by her bathrobe. Rogue glared, yanking the soft terrycloth tighter to her chest, and Remy smirked.

"*Pardonnez moi.*" Bemused, he backed into the hall, shutting the door before him.

Rogue waited, glaring at the now-closed door and trying to swallow the fresh, anxious ripple of surprise.

Three sharp raps resounded not more than a second later through the oak, and she forced her features into a scowl.

"Ah'm dreamin'," she said, exasperated.

"*Non,* I'm as real as they get, *p'tit,*" Remy yelled through the door. "But if you need a pinch to make
sure you're awake, y' best wait for me otherwise I'm gonna feel mighty gypped. Can I come in now?"

The door creaked open a few inches, and Gambit stuck his head in, grinning. "I brought un p'tit souper. Bit of a snack?"

Rogue had just enough time to catch the quick flash of teeth, the dimpling of Remy's left cheek, before he ducked around the corner and retrieved a tray of food. Dinner — breakfast, really — considering the hours they were keeping.

"C'mon." He tilted his head to the bed, giving her a bemused once-over when she didn't move; half-glaring and half... something else.

It occured to here that she'd never seen Gambit wear anything other than his uniform.

Remy set the tray down at the foot of the bed.

"Quoi?" he asked, fully aware that she was gaping at the worn-in denims slung off his hips, and the tight, white t-shirt that appeared painted across his shoulders. He fixed her with a smile so sly it was vaguely obscene.

Rogue cleared her throat, trying to restore her mettle to its original, disaffected state.

"Food's over here, Roguey," he hummed, his accent thickening. "Course, you can take a bite outta Remy anytime y' like."

Busted.

The shag of auburn hair that fell into his eyes was longer than she'd remembered, but she hadn't expected the sudden, brash compulsion to run her bare fingers through it to see if it was as soft as it looked.

He was enjoying her appraisal a little too much.

"Ya stayed with me," she accused, keenly aware of the burn she felt in her face as she stalked around to the opposite side of the bed, putting as much distance between them as she could.

Remy shrugged, flopping gracefully and kicking his legs up. His feet were bare, the t-shirt riding up just a little to expose a sliver of toned muscle. She tore her gaze away, settling herself on the edge of the bed.

"Was cold in m' room." Displaying a lazy, slow flash of perfect teeth, the smile he fixed her with was a little bit wolfish. "Besides, I didn't want you t' wake up in the middle of the day alone. 'Specially not if y' had another dream."

Rogue tried to scoff, the sound clipped. "Ah'm a big girl, Remy. Ah can take care of myself."

"I know, chère. Not offering to fight your subconscious battles, only t' be here when you need waking up. Seemed like you appreciated the gesture, at least." He shrugged. Out of the corner of her eye, Rogue caught the movement; saw the tug of a smile at the corner of his mouth. "Considerin' how comfortable y' were and all."

"Damnit, Remy!" she snapped, turning to face him fully.

He smiled; a full-blown, megawatt beam of a grin that brought the heat back to her cheeks. He
motioned for her to come closer as he dragged the tray between them.

"Ever heard the expression make love, not war?" he teased. "S' fine, p'tit. I'm just messin' with you t' enjoy the expression on your face a lil' longer." In a conspiratorial whisper, he added, "It's a rare treat t' see such a belle femme the colour of a tomato."

"Hush up, Cajun," she muttered. "This tomato would sooner chuck ya out a window if ya don't stop runnin' that mouth of yours."

He chuckled, lifting the covers from the food. "C'mon, beb. Gotta get some energy. We got a long night ahead of us."

The smell of pan-fried rice calas, andouille sausage, and sweet potato greeted her. Remy lifted another cover, displaying the thickest, brownest gumbo that she'd ever seen spooned over a bed of rice — chunks of carefully sliced okra and shrimp topping it off. Finally, he nudged a large, steaming cup towards her. Taking a sip, she nearly moaned.

"Chicory coffee," she breathed. Her stomach rumbled in appreciation. "Who'd ya have ta bribe ta whip this up?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "What good's a man if he don't know what the inside of a kitchen looks like? Really, Rogue." He tsked her, handing her a fork. "Y' come to my house, y' gonna eat my cooking."

If the utensil was a peace offering, she might've hesitated further, but there was no guile: careful not to brush his fingers, she took the fork, noting that Remy wore gloves despite his civvies — the same pair with the oddly placed finger holes, his wrists cuffed off with two large leather bands.

"Go on," he encouraged her, waiting.

Rogue took a bite of the sausage, her head rolling back on her shoulders as she groaned.

Remy smirked, satisfied. She could feel his gaze on her, but unwilling to acknowledge just how awkward it'd be if she played into it, Rogue didn't look up, choosing instead to tend to her empty stomach.

Halfway into the gumbo, she looked up, licking her lips and tasting the rich roux and spicey grit. It looked like mud, but tasted like heaven.

"What do ya mean we've got a long night? What are we doin?" she asked between bites.

"There's a certain stone we need t' be getting our hands on," he said. "But first, we gotta find the thing." He shrugged, one-shouldered. "I might have a lead."

Her chewing slowed. "Are ya suggestin' that we're gonna steal it?"

"Think of it like… acquiring stealthily." Skewering the bite of sausage Rogue had been aiming at, Remy grinned around the mouthful. While the silence stretched, she couldn't help but notice the way his mouth moved. Gaze half-lidded, he returned the favor.

She restrained the impulse to fidget, though it proved downright difficult to tear her attention away. It was a pretty mouth, she decided, measuring the slow trail of his tongue as he licked the sauce from the corner. Not pretty in the girlish sense, but it was a full mouth, with an impossibly soft lower lip. Idly, she wondered if after the spicy food, would his kiss burn with it. She repressed a nervous shudder, trying to force the thought from her mind, and failing just the same.
"Chérie?"

Shit. He'd been talking.

"I said," he continued. "Lapin's gonna do some research while I do a bit of recon. We're gonna set everything up the way we normally do; run some scans on the records before we do anything in the field."

"How —" Rogue paused, clearing her throat and focusing on the food, anywhere but on his mouth, his jaw, his eyes. "How do ya normally set things up?"

"We got the equipment downstairs. Lapin's a genius when it comes t' computers, if he can't find this Maman Brigitte femme, then she's a figment of of my imagination."

"Ah know your imagination's real vivid and all, but Ah sure don't think ya hallucinated that entire thing."

"Non, but something doesn't sit right about it. Folks in city can disappear if need be — plenty of cracks to fall through if you're slippery, if you follow me."

"Guess that's why she liked ya so much."

"Same reason you do, huh, chère?"

Rogue nearly choked on the forkful of gumbo she'd just bit down on. Coughing, she scowled at him, her eyes tearing as she reached for her cup of coffee to wash it down.

Remy grinned, dangling his fork off his fingers and munching as if her reaction was exactly what he'd been angling for.

Rogue favoured him with her most vicious glare. It lasted all of ten seconds before something sparked in Remy's eyes; the pupils glowed, flecks of lighter scarlet mingling with the red, turning his irises to embers. They almost danced; a firelight glow that brightened his entire face.

She found she couldn't deny it: mischief looked good on him.

"Don't try that charm crap with me again," she muttered. Their shared plates became her only focus while the slow, smouldering gleam of his gaze lit a blush in her neck that crept all the way into her hairline.

The silence grew, punctuated only by the light clink of cutlery and the occasional interference of his hands as their utensils crossed when he reached over to get a bite of something on her side of the tray. Remy might have been perfectly at ease, but the knot in Rogue's stomach was tightening, turning her hesitant and awkward, knowing what his quiet appreciation was doing to her.

It was as if an unspoken agreement had passed between them — a sliver of shared understanding that made the air between them thicken. For only two feet of space, it was much too far a distance, and still, not close enough.

If they'd been playing a game of cards, she thought, she'd be holding on to the worst possible hand imaginable: If she folded now, if she cashed in, she'd leave the game with no less than she started with. If they kept going the way they were, admitting that she cared for him meant she actually gave a damn about the stakes they were playing for.

The wager was her own damned heart as much as it was about her powers.
"So," Remy said after a stretch, his voice steady, though a notch lower than before. She found she was unable to do more than glance at him without feeling horribly embarrassed for not countering his statement. "What are y' gonna do, when we find the gem?"

Rogue set her fork down, pushing away from the small tray to lean against the headboard. Pushing away from him, more like, with just a shred of reluctance in doing so.

"Ah'm gonna squeeze the hell out of that stone," she said under her breath. "Ah'm gonna hold on ta that damned thing until Ah know that it works."

He nudged the tray into her knee, sliding down on the bed so that his shoulders were propped against the headboard, his legs stretched out in front of him.

"And then?"

Rogue sucked in a breath. "How long did ya have ta touch it for?"

He frowned, his eyebrows furrowed. Even though the expression should have been comical, the focus was nearly unnerving. "What are y' getting' at?"

"In your memory, the one ya gave me, ya touched the gem for a few seconds. Ah was thinkin' that maybe if ya held on longer, if ya hadn't blacked out... when ya touched me, Ah wouldn't have absorbed ya. Maybe a few more moments would have pushed your powers to the next threshold."

"Y' don't think whatever change the gem can affect in you's gonna last," he surmised. "You think that if I hadn't passed out when I did and let go of the stone, m' shields wouldn't have failed me last night. You think I didn't hold on long enough t' make the changes permanent."

Unable to stop the defeated plummet her heart took at his acknowledgement, she nodded.

"Would it matter?" he asked. "Whether it was for a few days, or forever, chérie — There are some things you can't pass up when the opportunity comes a knockin'," he said. "Would you rather live y' life not knowin' what coulda been because you weren't sure? Merde, fille. No one knows the way the cards are gonna be dealt. You just gotta play the hand."

"Or keep an ace up your sleeve."

She felt his smile. It was a warmth that bathed her left side in a delicious afterglow. Unable to help herself, she faced him, taking in the full effect of that radiant gleam.

"Y' know me better den y' think." He nodded, both impressed and pleased at the same time. Rogue flushed, grinning a little to herself. Maybe there was some truth to that statement.

"The Professor said that there might be a chance that my powers are tied in psychically," she continued quietly, feeling the shift of the bed beneath her as Remy moved the tray to their feet, edging closer to her so that his knees brushed hers, sitting up further. She peered down at him, only to see that he was studying her face, listening intently. "Telecognitive was the word he used. It ain't the same thing as Jean's telepathic abilities, but there's a mental aspect there that he thinks Ah can use ta my advantage."

"What do y' mean?" Remy asked.

Rogue exhaled, wincing with a small, self-deprecating grin. "He said my head's like a filing cabinet. Every time Ah absorb someone, that part of them Ah tuck away gets locked in there. If it's a mutant, and Ah use their powers, it gets depleted after a while. There just ain't anything left ta use after a
stretch. Professor Xavier said that… when Ah get control, Ah might be able to tap into those abilities again; call up whoever Ah absorbed at will."

"Pick and choose," he supplied. "'S' like a buffet."

"Thanks, Cajun," she said wryly, though not unkindly.

"You can go around and absorb whoever y' like t' test it out, but that's a secondary consideration, isn't it?" Remy asked.

"To what?"

He leaned in. "Y' gonna be able t' smack me bare-handed."

She peered down at him, surprised and a little taken aback. "Is that what ya want me ta do, first thing? Deck ya? Remy, Ah…" What was she supposed to say to that? How could he even think it?

Rogue shut her mouth, stumped. The realization hit her like a freight train. She wanted to touch him all right, but the impulse that came to mind first and foremost had nothing violent about it.

The blush prickled across her cheeks.

"Ya gonna be there with me?" she asked.

The brilliant flare of crimson in his eyes should have been answer enough.

He didn't hesitate. "No doubt. No question."

"Even if Belladonna comes waltzing around the corner?" she asked, masking her uncertainty with the thin cover of humour.

"Mignonne, if Belladonna came waltzin' anywhere, it'd be safe to assume there was probably some very bad shit about t' go down," he said. "I'd be runnin' with you thrown over m' shoulder, no less."

"Gee, thanks, Tarzan. Why don't ya just drag me by the hair?"

"And miss the opportunity for heroics? Naw. You still think I'm a criminal, gotta convince you of the opposite somehow." He afforded her a cheeky wink.

"Ah think you're a deviant," she corrected. "A little too insane for your own good, maybe, but Ah think Ah can deal with that."

Remy's eyebrows shot up. When Rogue glanced up, she found his smile reached his eyes: turning the irises to embers.

"Mebbe I'm gonna have t' stick around when this is all over," he said mildly. "Lead you on over t' the dark side and show dem X-Men of yours how t' have a little fun, n'est ce pas?"

His expression betrayed him, however: Remy looked as if he might start doing back flips.

Rogue cleared her throat. "You would be welcome, Remy… at the Institute."

"Charles made me an offer once, when we thought Magneto had died fighting Apocalypse."
Rogue stiffened, sitting up a little straighter against the headboard. The Professor had tried to recruit him? Piotr had come back after some time spent in Russia, taking care of his mother and sister, but she hadn't known about Remy.

Remy glanced at her askance, his expression unreadable. It was as if he knew exactly the thought pattern she was processing: he had an opportunity, but he'd declined it. It stung, but wrestling with the feeling of rejection before it could become rejection was somehow worse.

Not wanting to prolong the torture, allowing it to grow into something that would keep her up later thinking about it, she asked finally, "Why didn't ya take it?"

Not meeting her gaze, Remy dangled the fork between his fingers, examining it as if it were the most interesting thing on earth. "Familial obligation had t' come first."

Rogue blinked away her surprise, pushing the breakfast tray past her feet and drawing her legs beneath her as she turned to stare. "You coulda come back with us," she said. "Ya could have gotten away from all this."

"I know," he said, peering up at her through his fringe. From where Remy had slumped beside her, she towered over him, and not for the first time, Rogue was aware of the acute discomfort caused by sitting so near to him. Idly, he reached over, fingers brushing against her leg, causing her to jump, and tugged lightly on the belt of her robe. He drew the end to his stomach, flipping the terrycloth between his fingers. Remy didn't drop his gaze, though Rogue was hyper aware of his fingers working over the belt, along with the light tugging at her midsection that accompanied his idle hands.

"But at the time, I was trying t' fix things," he said.

"Even though they kicked ya out?"

He nodded. "Even though."

"Why is it so important to ya?"

Remy fixed her with the same level stare, his gaze unwavering as he took her measure. Her gaze dropped to his hands, working over the end of the robe's belt, and then back to his face. He gave no impression that he was thinking of a cagey response. Fighting not to turn away, Rogue waited.

She always seemed to be waiting for him.

"Ya walk away from everythin', but not this life."

"Can't walk away from the things that make you who y' are," he continued for her. "Try to, and sometimes you make it out with a scrape or two, but the getaway ain't always so clean." He paused. "I left a mess behind for Jean Luc to mop up. It's my fault the war between the Guilds continues. I might not like Jean Luc too much, but he's still my family. There's honour in that — in seeing things through to their bitter end."

"Ah thought there wasn't honour among thieves."

"It's a unique sort of thing. Rare commodity." Remy shifted, sitting up a little straighter so that if Rogue shrank down into the pillows, they would be at eye-level. She did.

"Are ya still tryin' ta… you know… fix stuff?"

After a moment, he nodded.
"Don't lie to me, swamp rat," she warned, watching his expression for anything that would belie what he was telling her.

"Merde, fille! What's it gonna take? Do I have to kiss you again and let you see for yourself that I'm tellin' the truth?" he asked, only half-joking.

Stomach dropping at least two inches at the thought, she opened her mouth to warn him off the idea — to tell him he was tempting fate, but she stopped short: her attention snagged on the way his gaze dropped to her mouth, as if he were considering it.

It wasn't a particularly bad sensation, but it did a number to the composure she managed to maintain since he'd shown up in her doorway. "Ah didn't mean that as an invitation —"

An infuriating twist of his mouth curved his lips upwards. She watched it happen, too.

"I'm kiddin'," he murmured, leaning closer. Rogue pulled backwards in the same motion, her head hitting the headboard with a sharp thud.

Wincing, she managed, "Ah wouldn't risk it." Balling her hands into her robe sleeves, Rogue used her knuckles to push at his shoulder. "Lordy, why do ya have ta be so damned persistent?"

"Why do you have to regress each time we take a step forwards?" he challenged. "Let's not go back to that, chérie. I know that it hurts to keep denyin' it to yourself, so please… clear the air with me, just this once."

Her breath caught. The scent of his cologne was a rich swirl that filled her mouth. She shut it promptly, not liking where this was going. They didn't have the stone yet, which meant she couldn't touch him without running the risk of causing him some serious pain. It figured he'd be masochistic enough to try anyway.

"We're friends, swamp rat. That's it. Ah think that's enough," she forced the words out despite the bitter aftertaste.

"There benefits included with the title?" he teased.

Admittedly, it was getting increasingly difficult to stay pissed at him when he made her insides squirm whenever he looked at her.

"Don't lie t' me,' river rat," he parroted, his voice husky despite the obvious effort to unsettle her.

"Don't make me make that decision, Remy," she returned. "Ya know Ah can't." Not yet, she added mentally.

"Didn't stop y' this morning, so why now?" he returned.

"Why can't you tell me what ya need ta do so badly ta make up for what ya done?" she shot back.

He fell silent, scrutinizing her. After a moment, he looked down at his hands, at the belt of her robe pressed between his thumb and index finger. He tugged on it with an ounce greater insistence.

"Why's it such a concern to you?" he asked. "Good Southern gal like yourself would mind her business, if she recalled how things were done this side of the Mason Dixie."

She bristled. "Ah don't give my trust blindly, Cajun. Ya gotta give me a reason ta have faith in you." It was the truth.
Fine. She wanted him. She could admit that to herself. It didn't mean she had to *tell* him that, though. If he was serious, he'd better be willing to run the gamut. There had to be something backing his advances, something solid so that she could understand what it was he was after.

"I'm not your mother." It sent a shiver down her spine, understanding how quickly his demeanour could change. She shook it off, trying to be discreet and failing. He noticed. "Of that I guarantee, Rogue."

"I know," she said finally, and with only a drop of hesitation, she placed a hand on his shoulder to reassure him. "And Ah'm not another person you can use ta put your past behind you."

There it was, thought Rogue, in a nutshell. Remy's history in the Guild was a huge problem for him, so much so that it would be a problem for them both if he couldn't get beyond it. Nevermind what "it" was.

Her touch was feather-light, uncertain, and just as quickly, Rogue thought better of it and attempted to pull her hand back. Remy was quicker, snagging the cuff of her robe and drawing her back to him gently. She didn't fight it as he twined his fingers around her wrist, pulling the sleeve down to cover her hand as he placed it on his chest, over his heart.

"I know." He said it like a promise. Something burned behind his eyes; an inscrutable determination that Rogue couldn't tear away from, though she tried. "And believe me, if I could tell you..." He trailed off, sitting up though not breaking his gaze, and not releasing her hand as he slid his fingers between hers through the terrycloth. "If I could..."

"But ya won't."

"*Chére*, you've got your own darkness to worry about. Let me have mine."

Beneath her hand, the steady rhythm of his heart was strong, steady, and even. It didn't falter, and his gaze stayed level. He was telling the truth in the simplest terms without really telling her anything. It hurt. As much as she didn't understand his intentions, he didn't trust her with his past. Maybe it hurt too much. Maybe he was ashamed of it. Maybe — maybe behind all his swagger, Remy was afraid of who he'd been, and maybe facing it so that he could become the man he was trying to be was the trial.

"There's more than what Ah saw than just that memory of Belladonna." She didn't phrase it as a question, knowing that with the slight increase of his pulse, it was true.

Remy didn't respond, his face a perfect, neutral mask that gave no indication of just how bad it could be; just how many horrors lurked behind those red eyes — Many, Rogue guessed, and some were undoubtedly fresher than others.

"Battle scars?" she asked.

"Something like that."

She pressed no further, though she shifted her weight a little, leaning fractionally closer to him so that she could sit without toppling into his lap. Remy offered no sign that he was ready to release her hand. Her shoulder brushed his, drawing his gaze away, to the arm she supported herself with, and to the slight dip of the robe at her neckline.

"Some scars you can't see," he said, his gaze drawing a searing line over her exposed collarbone, the column of her throat, and coming to rest on her mouth for a second longer than he should have. "Not on the skin." It was almost a whisper the sound was so hoarse. He cleared his throat, and slowly, his
other arm snaked out, slipping to her waist in a movement so fluid Rogue only registered it once she felt the heat of his hand on her hip.

"Ah keep mine hidden too," she said weakly. It brought the heat to her face, or perhaps knowing that Remy's touch was slowly sliding around to her back, drawing her forwards, her knees sliding over his as he turned beneath her. "But Ah don't punish myself for it half as much as ya do."

The robe, though it was long, was slowly slipping apart over her legs where it caught below Remy's knee.

"Not bein' able t' be close t' y', chère — that's punishment enough," he murmured, his breath a slight puff against her mouth.

She sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes widening as she understood:

"Oh, no. Remy, I am not your penitence."

That's what he had meant when he'd said he was atoning: helping her gain control — finding the stone — was his way of repenting for the things he'd done.

"I'm sorry, Rogue." His eyes shone, a brilliant shade of ruby that slivered her defences. He knew what he'd been doing all along. He'd told her, and Rogue had listened — but she hadn't really heard him. It appeared he wanted to say more, but he stopped himself.

Suddenly, it didn't matter. His past, what it was exactly she'd been trying to force out of him all this time — those dark things that lurked just beyond the thin film of his freshest memories — those burdens, whatever they were, no longer mattered:

Through her, he thought he could make it better.

"What do friends do if they can't show each other their hurts, mignonne?" he asked, settling next to her, their legs intertwined.

He'd swaddled her in the robe so that he could hold her to him without risking contact. It was precarious — dangerous even — and yet…

She fisted her hand into his shirt through the robe sleeve and shook her head, not trusting her voice entirely to remain even. It was bittersweet, knowing what he meant to do, knowing that even though he was helping himself release the things that had caused him so much pain, he'd be helping her too.

"Ah don't think they're really friends ta begin with," she said. His breath caressed the shell of her ear. "They're much more."

She sniffed, laughing nervously, and patted down the twisted fabric of his t-shirt. His hand slipped to her wrist, holding it loosely to him, no longer afraid that she would try to tear away.

He had her.

"But they understand each other, non?" he asked, his head dipping low and his mouth nearly brushing her jaw. Rogue shut her eyes, the skin on her legs erupting in goosebumps. Damn.

He'd gotten her good.

"Sometimes." It came out as little more than a puff of air, so quiet that it was nearly lost beneath the shift of the sheets below them as Remy turned her, tucking her legs between them, her feet catching
in the linens. Gingerly, she moved them so that her heels rested on his opposite side, her calves brushing his lap, and the robe collecting below her, riding ever higher up her legs.

"What about the rest of the time?" he asked, his hair brushing her cheek as she felt him move to look at her face.

"It's a gamble," she managed.

Her eyes fluttered open. Remy released her hand, slowly dropping his palm to hover over the expanse of exposed knee in front of him.

"Are you willing t' try your luck with me?" he asked.

His fingers were steady, but so close to her skin that she could feel the heat radiating from his palm. Fear lanced through her at the sight, but she didn't move. His mouth was at exactly the right level to kiss. She left her hand on his chest, fingers working their way out of the sleeve and pressing him backwards to a safer distance. It did nothing, other than to serve as territory for wandering fingers. It wasn't possible to have pectorals that hard. She blushed again, her lips parting to suck in a sharp breath. She couldn't seem to get enough air.

"I don't know what's happenin' to me, Rogue. I don't know how long the effects of the stone will last, but you've gotta understand me when I say that it wouldn't matter either way. Powers or no, girl — extra level of protection or not."

"Ah thought about it." He was so close. It was just like the cemetery, but there was no challenge to it this time. It was an open invitation.

"Awe hell, she thought, pressing her knees together, flinching at the ripple of warmth that flooded her limbs, making her mouth dry and her limbs heavy.

"Maybe it's not the stone at all, or how long ya held onto it. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered. It could be me," she said. Her voice wouldn't stay steady. "Ah've touched you more than Ah've touched anyone in a year. Maybe it's me," she repeated, uncertain. "Maybe Ah'm takin' the edge off your powers."

"So I go back to the way I was before. Does it matter? I don't need to be able to blow up leaves if it means I could be close to you like this, just one more time." He wet his lips. His heart hammered beneath her fingers. The sensation was intoxicating.

"One kiss," he said, his voice hoarse. "Just one, chère — all a joker asks to ease his heart and mind, because I can't help but think that if you hated it the first time, you wouldn't be here with me now."

"Ah didn't hate it," she said quietly, the sound catching. "Ah hate that Ah hurt ya. Ah made ya run, and there wasn't anything Ah could do about it other than let ya go."

"Don't go takin' the blame for me," he said warningly. "You didn't make me do anything. You did nothing wrong at all."

It was difficult to breathe with him so close. Still, his hand hovered, caressing the air just over her thighs. She watched his fingers, both with caution and the plummeting sensation that if she moved so much as an inch, the fingers exposed by his oddly cut gloves would graze skin. Would she absorb him? She didn't know. The thought excited her as much as she feared it.

"Why aren't ya afraid of me?" she asked, her voice breaking. "Why doesn't being this close ta me scare ya?"
She was stalling, drawing it out in the same way that the tightening in her belly was turning into a pleasurable pain. Remy shifted, his gaze trained on hers once more; the red of his irises had darkened, the pupils widened with want. She wondered if hers looked the same to him. Rogue swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. Remy's lips were achingly close.

"I'm more afraid of what you do to me already, rather than what your powers could," he said, a new strain in his tone she hadn't heard before — as if it hurt him to hold back.

She felt it beneath her hand on his chest, a vibration so low it could be mistaken for the purr of a large cat.

"You're no different than anyone, Rogue," he continued. "Other than the fact that you make it extremely difficult to focus on anything else when you're nearby. I don't see you as anything but normal, and I'm not gonna treat you any different because you've got something special in your bones. I'm just gonna treat you, if you let me."

"It's in my head," she said quietly, her voice strained. "That's where the problem is."

"I'm asking for the whole package," he replied, his mouth hovering desperately close to hers.

"Ah'll hurt ya," she argued. "Ah done it once, what's ta say Ah won't again?"

"It's a grim thought, chère — but I can think of a million different things I'd rather live without than not knowing what coulda been because I passed on the chance. It's the sorta pain that don't go away — not knowin'. I take my chances."

There was more to this than just them; than just their powers and consolidating old debts. It meant she'd relinquish a part of herself that she kept locked up, barred away, and safe from possible injury. What damages was he capable of if she let him have that part of herself?

"It's a good sorta pain, Roguey." A smile tugged at his mouth, fading fast.

She knew that kind of pain. It was sharper than any knife and more attractive than anything she’d ever known before. It was the sort of sadistic craving that could do nothing but sting. Rogue was certain now that it was the best sort of ache.

She swallowed, her elbow buckling. Remy caught her between the shoulder blades, easing her gently to the bed. Her heartbeat caught, faltering as she felt the press of his palm on her thigh. Rogue forced herself to bite down on her lower lip to stifle a gasp, as if by not breathing, she could force control over her mutation. She exhaled a moment later, shakily, as she realized she felt nothing more than the press of his gloves.

No fingers. No skin.

No control.

"The things I'd do to be inside you," he murmured, leaning over her, his arm supporting his weight. Rogue flushed, her eyes widening with the admission. Had he always been so bold? Seeing her shocked expression, he chuckled, correcting himself: "Inside y' head."

"Ya done a fine job of wormin' your way in there so far," she breathed, unable to uncoil the thick knot of tension that drew tight at her core with his words.

"But I don't know any more or any less than what y' give me, chère." His hand moved, dragging up
the expanse of exposed thigh, bunching the thick terrycloth at her hip. Gently, he pulled it back in place, covering her modesty without dropping his gaze from her face.

"You either, Cajun," she breathed, swallowing as she felt the press of his fingers once more, sliding over her hip to her waist, her ribs, brushing over her arm and sliding down from her shoulder, across her chest and beneath the lapel of the robe. If she flinched, it was involuntary; accompanied by the low, ardent throb that made the muscles in her stomach tighten. There was an intimacy to the caress. Though he didn't press his hands to her breast, he elicited a shudder from her just the same.

"What can I give you?" Remy asked, his voice throaty. Slowly, his hand moved down her sternum, resting on her heart. "Tell me, Rogue."

Her eyes half-shut, Remy hovered over her. She felt the weight of his leg slide between hers, the soft brush of worn denim against her bare shins, the warmth of his body as he slid over her, sinuous and demanding. He smiled, a slow rush of warmth accompanying the heated glow of his eyes as he settled against her, making her breath catch.

God, this was so dangerous, she thought.

Why in hell was it turning her on?

She didn't have an answer. She couldn't. She wouldn't ask for it.

Rogue breathed deeply, finally realizing that her arms were flopped out to either side of her head. Her fingers flexed, unconsciously yearning to spread over his broad shoulders, to feel the waves of muscle down his back, and to wrap into his hair. She wanted to feel the roughness of the stubble on his jaw, to rub her thumb against the small patch of auburn below his lower lip. She wanted to run her fingers against his mouth, that soft, inviting cup tinted with the rush of blood below the surface. She wanted to drink from him, taste him again. Had she already forgotten his flavour?

Rogue wet her lips, shifting below him and deciding as she arched further into his hand that nothing that felt this good could be bad… and to hell with it if it was.

Did he feel the quickness of her pulse? Did he know that her breaths were getting shorter the closer he came?

"We have t' know, chérie — if it'll last."

"Remy." It was nearly a moan — not quite, but close. "If Ah could touch ya the way your touchin' me now, even if it was only for a few minutes — Ah swear Ah'd take that chance."

"Y' want it, p'tit?"

She nodded. Remy's eyes danced, burning so brightly that she almost wanted to turn away. Rogue didn't. If he could watch her face through this, she'd watch his.

"Ah want control," she whispered, feeling his hand slide lower, tracing a heated course over her stomach to rest over her bellybutton.

"What are y' gonna do when y' get it, Rogue?" he asked for the second time that night, his tone laden with the heaviness of suggestion, and the sweet, narcotic lull of desire. She could practically taste it on his breath as he leaned over her mouth, lips grazing hers and making her shudder. She drew backwards, her arms coming up to rest on his shoulders. She turned her head to the side and exposed her throat, avoiding his mouth while she still could.
Bad idea.

"Stop teasin' me, Remy," she whispered, hating herself and wanting him just the same.

She felt his lips; the hot, swirling press of his breath against her collarbone. It was light and moist, a kiss so quick that it was over and done even before she turned back to him.

The grin he favoured her with could have melted every ice flow in Antarctica.

Lazily, he cocked an eyebrow. "I haven't even started teasin' you, mignonne."

"Did you just…?"

A small conspiratorial smile. "You feel that?"

Rogue sucked in a shaky breath. He'd kissed her, and she hadn't absorbed him. Nothing. She racked her brain, searching desperately for a whisper of something — a memory, a thought that was too cocky to be one of her own. There was nothing.

She nodded, her eyes wide. Remy's fingers twined casually in her hair, the other hand moving beneath the lapel, using the robe as a cover to cup the side of her face. That was as close to being careful as he was willing to get.

"The way I see it, last night might've been a fluke. Maybe it just takes a bit more concentration on my part to hold up the shields. Maybe…" he breathed, brushing the corner of her mouth. "You bewitched me into losin' myself for just a little while, and I let go of the control I needed t' keep it up."

"Only one way t' really find out," she breathed.

Rogue wet her lips, her breath coming erratically. He was going to kiss her. Oh man, she thought, oh man oh god oh…

"Oh, merde!" The lilting, feminine voice in the doorway yipped, startled.

Remy winced, pulling back a few inches as Mercy laughed outright. "Désole, you two. You think in a house full of thieves more people'd lock their doors. I'll just… ha… oh mon dieu —"

Remy smirked down at Rogue, not at all perturbed that they'd been caught in such a compromising position. Mortified, she couldn't move. Her face was on fire. Her ears burned. Her heart jammed against her ribs, threatening to burst from her chest.

"Take a raincheck?"

The look in Remy's eyes sent a tremor straight down to Rogue's toes. She had to force herself to breathe again, still lying in the same place, suddenly colder from the loss of contact as Remy shifted, but just as enflamed as she was before. He'd covered her, but the robe was now smothering — the fabric itching her skin. Her pulse beat in her temples as she drew herself together.

"Ah… Remy? Henri's waitin' for ya downstairs," said Mercy. "Said he's gonna go with ya t' the Quartier, pop by the Assassins t' see if they cookin' up somet'in' stupid."

Remy didn't tear his glance away from her as he answered his sister-in-law,

"Attends, Merc. I'm coming."
An extra few inches of distance wouldn't stop the thready swell of wanting to be touched by him again, and that was clear in the way that Remy was hesitating. He would have kissed her. He would have risked getting absorbed all over again; sacrificing his memories and his secrets for just one more touch.

She barely registered Mercy as she took a tentative step into the room, a bundle of clothing held in her arms.

"Brought ya some clothes, girl," she said. A feeble peace offering. "Even got some gloves. they might be a bit small, but y' know, beggars can't be choosers. Merde, talk about awkward," she chuckled, more amused than anything else. And yet, she still wasn't leaving.

Rogue waved it off, covering her mouth, trying to hide her face. She mumbled something that she supposed might've passed as a thank you but please get out.

"I'll be back by midnight," Remy said. Rogue swallowed. Her ears popped. What did he just say? Damnit, why did her head feel like it was stuffed full of cotton?

"What?" she croaked, finally looking between both thieves and sitting up. Mercy offered her a knowing smile, setting down the small pile of clothing on the foot of the bed. She collected the tray of leftover dinner, trying to busy herself while eavesdropping at the same time.

Remy slid off the bed in one fluid sweep. "Got a couple of things to take care of in the Quarter. Emil'll be downstairs waitin' for you; should be set up by now."

Rogue couldn't believe her ears. She shook herself, trying to understand what he was saying. "You're going back into the French Quarter tonight? What about the Assassins? Shit, Remy —"

"It'll be fine, chérie. they can't touch me if they can't catch me."

"Ah'm comin' with ya," she informed him, flipping her legs over the side. "Non, you're not."

Opening her mouth to give him a verbal lashing — to tell him exactly what's what and that he hadn't stolen any final goodbye kisses, if that's what that was all about — but he stopped her: "It's more important that you help Emil."

He meant the stone. The look he gave her was so intense, so serious that Rogue nearly felt her knees give.

"Divide and conquer," he insisted.


"Cajun," she said bracingly. "Ya do something stupid ta get yourself hurt, and I'll kill ya myself."

He grinned; a cocksure half-smile that pulled at her so easily that Rogue nearly hit him out of sheer frustration. Smooth as anything, he slid beside her, his fingers grazing the small of her back as he dipped his head and whispered in her ear, "Toi pis moi, chére — we've got a score t' settle."

She shivered against him, leaning into his touch just a little.

And then he was gone; out the door behind Mercy without a backwards glance.
Translations: French to English

C'est impossible: It's impossible.
Père: father
Comprends: Understand?
Bonsoir, chère: Good evening, chère
Pardonnez moi: Pardon me
Merde, fille: Shit, girl!
Quoi: What?
Sans doute: Without a doubt
Déssole, vous deux: Sorry, you two
Mon dieu: my god
Toi pis moi: You and me

Translations: German to English

Was bedeutet das: What does that mean?
Es tut mir leid: I'm sorry

Post Script:

- Deuces Wild: A form of high poker in which the 2s are wild (that is, a 2 can represent any other card for the purpose of forming a better hand: a deuce can pair any other card, fill the "hole" in a straight, make the fifth of four cards to a flush, and so on); usually played as draw poker.

- Ace of Spades: There are a couple of reasons for this choice — in the last chapter, while discussing his past with Belladonna, Remy claimed that the Ace was the one card Rogue threw out because she said the Joker described him better. If the Ace is recognizable by Bella as something that defines Remy, this should indicate that it's how she used to know him. I didn't know if that was obvious at all, since we don't get Belle's POV and her input (and we probably won't over the course of the concluding chapters.) and that makes for limited explanation. (Have I also mentioned that it's the death card? That too.)
They called it the Devil's playground. An apt title, Remy thought, tapping the end of his cigarette to ignite the tobacco. He pulled on it, enjoying the swimming sensation in his head as he filled his lungs:

Straight into the blood.

Just like his city.

"Bonsoir, ma belle damme," he greeted her, the smoke dangling idly off his lower lip as he took in her sprawled form. The streets below, a tangle of dark alleyways, pulsating nightclubs, perfumed bodies, and flashing neons sang their siren's song to him — a medley of laughter, clinking glasses, and the blare of Dixieland.

"Je vous en prie, pardonnez moi. I’ve not forgotten you for someone else.”

It was good to be home, he thought, puffing idly on his cigarette and contemplating the best route across town. Henri had deposited him not long ago on Decatur, letting him take to the rooftops, blending with the shadows like a ghost renewing its love for old haunts.

"Mais, what a someone else she is,” he hummed, contented with clinging to the ledge of a particularly posh apartment building. A Spanish-style balcony hung a few yards below; an assortment of potted plant life dripping over the edges. He liked the ledge. He liked the view. He liked knowing that when he got back to the Guild house, a warm temptation waited for him.

He smirked, rising from his crouch. His trench flapped around his legs with the light wind. It was a comfortable, balmy breeze that cleared his head and dried the sweat on his back. With it came the fragrance of fresh beignets, stale beer from the bars below, and hothouse flowers from the window boxes of the upper crust. Comforting smells and sounds of familiarity, masked over by the rippling echo in his memory of soft sighs, and the heated, clean scent of freshly bathed skin — drenched with the perfume of desire. He could still taste Rogue on his tongue, and it made his pulse quicken.
It should have made him nervous.
It would have too, if he weren't so consumed by the thought of her spilled across that bed.

He chuckled.

*Le Diable* would walk the streets of sin city that night, relearning her secret places and worshipping the shadows that had birthed him. One last time, he thought — believing sincerely in his heart of hearts that he was truly ready to leave his lifelong love. The city beckoned him with the blare of car horns and the caws of tourists, inviting him to know her intimately just once more. How could he deny her that, Remy thought, wetting his lower lip and tasting her with the eagerness of someone whose virtue had been rekindled by the coy flavour of a New Orleans nocturne. This was their game, after all.

He bowed his head, a small smile playing about his mouth. He prayed the Crescent forgive him for giving his heart so easily to another.

"*Je suis désolé,*" he apologized to the city. "*Mais,*" he shrugged, "you know it would have never worked between us, *ma belle.* I’ve always just been passin’ through to you."

Charging the cigarette butt in the same time it took to snap it out over the broken concrete of Bourbon Street, he watched as it detonated in a beautiful blossom of pink and orange.

Below, several individuals heard the small explosion, turning their faces to the night sky as a delicate stream of sparks floated towards them, only to be snuffed out by the wind that became steadily stronger with each moment that passed. A chorus of exclamations followed, some drunken, others merely cautious. None saw the former thief as he leapt off the ledge of a window to the second story balcony of an American townhouse, disappearing one moment and reappearing in the midst of the throng on the street another.

—

Rogue padded around the first floor of the mansion, tugging at the hem of the tank top Mercy had given her. Too short and baring midriff. Bare shoulders. A naked scoop of decolletage.

Her fingers were covered by white cotton gloves — the sort used by jewelers when handling precious gemstones.

The irony was not lost on her, but damned if the things weren’t too tight. They stopped at her wrists, leaving the entirety of her arms exposed, rendering any real protection from skin-to-skin contact completely moot.

People touched shoulders more often than they touched hands.

It was an unwritten rule of social greeting in informal exchanges: shoulders, backs, upper arms were fair game. In short, she was screwed. Rogue knew it, and it made her more anxious than she already was.

She yanked on the too-small tank again, giving up a losing battle and peering at the inch of exposed tummy over the grey sweatpants, which, incidentally, were about six sixes too big and had the word "Tulane" printed across the butt. Were it not for the drawstring cinched tightly around her hips and
double-knotted, she'd be walking around with her ass hanging out.

Remy was going to have a heyday when he saw her….

She swallowed hard, focusing on her bare feet as she tracked across the warm wood floors. The sweatpants flopped listlessly, catching under her toes whenever she hit a particularly plush Persian rug.

…Assuming he could restrain himself from mauling her first.

The thought sent a ripple of staunched pleasure through her gut that Rogue forced herself to pass off as nerves. She and Remy had reached an understanding that \textit{should} have alleviated her concerns and placated the roar of her pulse in her ears.

It hadn't.

Tight clothing usually stifled sensation, but the sweats were loose and warm, brushing her thighs lightly and creating a pleasant friction that Rogue tried to ignore. Whatever had nearly happened back in her room could have cost both her and Remy dearly. Thinking about it didn't make it any easier, since by thinking about it, she consequently thought of the look in his eyes, the curve to his mouth, and the warm weight she could still feel in her limbs. It made her sluggish. It made her insides hum with the needy, nervous ache to be touched again. That — above all things — made her very, very nervous.

Remy had made his point: what the body wants and what the body needs and what the body \textit{shouldn't do} because it led to dangerous urges was a stark reminder of why she put the effort into keeping people at a distance:

Knowing what it felt like hurt more when it was gone.

Remy had left with Henri for the Quarter, but the memory of his hands on her body was fresh. Even without him, she found herself responding to the thought of his hands without any prompting. Rogue braced herself against a wall, stealing a breath to clear her head, and tried to focus on finding the kitchen and Emil.

She turned down the first hallway she came to, hoping that the Cezanne she'd just passed wasn't the same Cezanne she'd walked by a few minutes ago. The Impressionists all looked alike to her.

He'd be fine, she told herself again. Anyone would be concerned, she told herself.

What would she do when he came back? More importantly, what would Remy coax out of her next?

Rogue shivered, absently running a hand to her neck, her fingers tracing her collarbone with light fingers as if her own touch could renew the sensation he'd inspired. It was a pale comparison. He'd left his mark on her, and there wasn't a thing she could do to wipe it off.

Worry chased her frustration, her frustration chased her desire, and her desire slammed into the perpetual wall of confusion that was growing stronger each minute that passed and Remy didn't de-lurk from the shadows.

Whatever it was that Henri needed him for, neither Thief wanted her to know the details.

Her hands on her hips, and her head down, Rogue considered the options: the only things she knew of to be in the Quarter were the stone. Possibly. And the Assassins. Probably.
She rubbed at her forehead. She couldn’t be sure of either — unless there was something Remy wasn’t telling her.

And Gambit was a spectacular liar.

All his talk of living in the moment and seizing the things you wanted when the opportunity presented itself was too tempting to ignore, however, and that thought had her marching forwards in her quest to find Emil. For all of Rogue’s self-denial, she’d never opened herself long enough to really consider what she wanted. She did what was necessary. She kept herself and everyone around her safe.

Remy would cause himself more harm if his powers failed and he tried touching her. That, somehow, managed to weigh in heavier than any lingering thoughts on his ex-wife being out there, somewhere, eager to pick him off for flouting their Guild treaties, or whatever.

Rogue snorted; leave it to Gambit to be attracted to girls who could kill him with next to no effort.

That he would take the risk of trying to be close to her, closer than anyone ever had before; that he didn’t shrink away from her when she told him to back off; that he wouldn’t take no for an answer without a fight — that was something unexpected. She had to give him credit: it was seductive beyond words.

In his roundabout manner, he’d proven that he’d cared for her. He wasn’t afraid of her. He wanted her.

"Damn," she breathed, swallowing a nervous laugh that echoed along the corridor.

He was wearing her down; but at the same time, she was growing to appreciate his efforts.

Contemplating this, Rogue started when, to her left, a face twisted into a smile in the gloom — two eyes peering from an alcove to her left looking more the phantom than the man:

"Evenin’," Theoren purred, materializing from the shadows. "Fancy a stroll at this time of the night?"

Theoren was a big man at over six feet. With a thick neck and brown eyes so dark they were nearly black in the muted glow of the gas lamps, he appeared more suited for work as an executioner rather than a Thief. All he needed was a hood and an axe. Or a guillotine on wheels.

She repressed a shudder.

"Fancy a lurk?" she shot back.

He bared his teeth. On anyone else, it might’ve been a smile.

"Where’s your boy toy?"

Her good mood evaporated, blown away by the light breeze that spilled into the mansion proper from the open windows of the rooms lining the hall.

Not appreciating the way Theoren stared down at her, and even less enthusiastic that he’d caught her in the midst of her preoccupied rambling, Rogue squared her shoulders.

"Ah was lookin' for the kitchen," she said instead of answering.

His mouth twisted in an unpleasant smile. "Suppose you think because ol' Remy dragged you home, you’re entitled to the run of the place, huh?"
"Not hardly," she bit back, deciding she didn't like the way he said Remy's name. He spat it out like a curse. "Ah haven't been dragged a damn place yet, and even if Ah was, it sure wouldn't be by your cousin. Not here, not anywhere."

"He's not my nothing," Theoren growled, looming as he advanced on her a step. To her credit, Rogue held her ground, though animosity pooled between them — hot and bitter.

"Well," he breathed. "Let me tell you somethin' — you're the first Remy's brought home. He usually just went to their places; whatever street trash he managed t' pick up."

A beat, the implication sinking stonelike and heavy — an icecube sliding down her throat and spreading cold through her chest. Between her grit teeth, she returned, "Ah wonder why that is? With your company, it ain't no surprise."

"Mind your mouth, girl. You don't know what your getting' into."

Rogue stepped up to him, her hands balled into fists at her sides. "And ya don't know who's neck your breathin' down," she countered.

He sneered. "I've got a pretty good idea — and it ain't much."

Her gaze flicked to his hands, slack at his sides and bare save for one gold band on his ring finger. For one brief, shining moment, she considered the threat she presented — all too aware of her naked arms and Theoren's empty hands in such close proximity to each other. A flicker of something sinister loomed in her imagination — a high-pitched humming in her ears echoing the tension in her limbs: If he touched her and she absorbed him, Rogue thought she wouldn't feel the slightest bit of remorse to see him slack-jawed and drooling on the floor for the trouble.

Her heart squeezed, starting to hammer against her ribs when he didn’t back down.

Theoren's hand twitched, and she reacted on instinct — flinching back and taking the threat of her bare skin with her.

He grinned so wide she thought she could see his molars. Shame at herself for recoiling chased repulsion, the whole concoction souring in her stomach: She didn't want to know what Theoren knew. She didn't want to know why he hated Remy so much — those thoughts would taint her own. Now that she and Remy were at even odds, she wanted to keep it that way.

Theoren chuckled, victory in the sound rattling around the empty corridor like disturbed memories of the children who once lived here — darkening with time and age, turning hollow as they grew into their responsibilities, and ill-fortune laid its claims on the house.

It was a low, empty sound that held some dark amusement Rogue couldn't even begin to fathom.

The desire to absorb him out might’ve been staunched, but that didn't mean she wouldn’t knock his block off if pressed.

"You obviously don't know Remy so well if you're standin' up for him. Brash, p'tit. Very brash. Mebbe he thought you’d be more useful than the rest of the salopes Remy's kept on standby, and that’s why he's keepin' you around."

The rush of anger was so strong she could taste it. It held a bitter aftertaste that left her tongue dry and sticking to the roof of her mouth, and all Rogue found she could do was glare.

Theoren appraised her once more and backed up, knocking on the door behind him without turning
his back. The knob turned under his hand easily, but it figured he wouldn't leave without a parting jab:

"I dunno what Remy promised you, but I wouldn't hold it too dear, p'tit. Whatever he does, he does for himself and not for the sake of it. You best remember that — there ain't no one worth so much to him to risk his own sorry neck."

The door opened to a large study as his back: glass-paned cabinets held an assortment of treasures that glinted under dim halogens. On the floor-to-ceiling shelves, books towered in an ascending blur. Old spines. Gilded titles. Leather.

She nearly missed the figure seated at the desk, looking to them both with thoughtful consideration — the sort that was easily misconstrued as measured interest.

"Theoren," Jean Luc chastised, rising. "That is no way to talk to our guest."

Like warm butter, his inflection possessed a smooth edge that softened the consonants. She supposed he meant to placate her with his tone, but the way he looked at her pulled the muscles between her sohulderblades into a tight knot — like he'd found a particularly valuable asset.

Theoren didn't look at all cowed; instead, he smirked outright at her expression.

"Come, ma petite — is the boy givin' you trouble?" Jean Luc asked.

"Which one?" Rogue said under her breath.

Theoren sneered over Jean Luc’s shoudler as Remy’s father joined them in the doorway, cutting off her view of his office.

“Everything’s fine,” she said. "Ah was just tryin' ta find the kitchen, and it seems that Theoren doesn't know his way around his own home enough ta help."

He ushered her into a half-turn that put Theoren behind them.

“You can begin without me,” he instructed, his attention an all-encompassing pool that threatened to swallow her. A final searing glance at Remy’s cousin, and Rogue found that Theoren had settled into the gloom before Jean Luc’s desk. Shadows swallowed him once more, but his interest lingered, prickling the back of her neck with the creeping insistence of a thousand spiderlegs marching down her spine.

Jean Luc had a certain tightness about his mouth that appeared worn in with his frown lines. It made her uneasy.

"I will escort mademoiselle Rogue to de kitchens. I've not yet had the pleasure of making her acquaintance."

Jean Luc's voice had an oil slick smoothness to it that made her hackles rise like there was more to what he was saying than what was actually said. He could have told her he was going to gut her like a fish, but with that sly smile, she would have understood something totally different. Whatever the hell he was offering with that grin couldn't be good, and knowing how Remy felt about his adoptive father was warning enough to keep her guard up.

Jean Luc offered her an arm, covered to the wrist with a pinstriped sleeve and pinned by a platinum cufflink. Rogue peered at the bend of his elbow with suspicion, though Jean Luc only offered the same benign smile that expressed nothing and revealed even less about what he was contemplating.
“How kind,” she replied, taking his arm, but at the same time, acknowledging a whisper of something at the back of her mind — a wordless echo to be cautious — more of an impression than a warning: keep your guard up around him. It was exactly what Remy would warn her of.

—

"Are you certain, Wolverine?"

"When is my nose ever wrong, 'Ro? Push the wind the other way."

Storm fixed him with an arch look, turning midair so that she hovered on a wind current that traced over the roof, ruffling Logan's hair. It smelled of ozone. Reminded him that she could just as easily hit him with a lightning bolt where he stood.

"Please," he hastened to add.

Storm had once been worshipped as a weather goddess, but sometimes the knowledge got misplaced along with wayward birthday dates and anniversaries.

Not that Logan took the weather witch's powers for granted, no. He was just… distracted.

"I smell swamp skunk," he growled, turning his attention back to the arched roofs and stunted squalor of the Quarter beneath them. The statement directed his companion’s attention, and Storm turned to the twining streets below; suffused with the tawny gleam from dimmed storefronts that had long closed for the night.

“Where?”

He gave the air another sniff. "Four blocks South and moving West."

Rising ever higher into the night sky, and with Bourbon Street less than a block away, she was risking announcing their presence over the Dauphine Hotel. Tourists flocked southbound to the lights and sounds of the riverfront. The streets below were peppered with the odd passer-by, but for the most part, they ushered themselves along with their backs to the two mutants sheltered by the eaves of the old palatial residence.

“And Rogue?” Storm called back to him.

If it were possible, Logan leaned even further out over the lip of the shingling, sniffing fiercely into the breeze that Storm commanded.

"All over him." He made a low sound in the back of his throat, nearly inhuman in both pitch and meaning — like a dog readying to tear a piece out of your hand when you offered to pet it.

Storm swept past him, her arms spread wide, commanding his attention. "Calm yourself, Wolverine. If Gambit is rendered unable to tell us what has happened to Rogue, we will be no further in our efforts to find her."

He translated her meaning: “What you mean to say is that if I render Gambit unable to tell us what happened to Rogue --“

“Perhaps Rogue’s allegiances have shifted. None are so inconstant as teenagers, Logan — one false
step, and we may lose them both."

He rumbled, "Something's up, 'Ro. We don't have the time to treat the kid delicately."

“I understand how dire the consequences may appear, Wolverine,” she said. “But resorting to violence will not bring us any closer to attaining the information we require about the Gem.”

“It'll sure as hell make me feel better, though.” With that, Wolverine grimaced, unsheathing his claws. “You can interrogate the punk the way you like — if you get to him first.” He bared his teeth, offering little more than a flash of white canines, and pelted along the roof.

Storm sighed and followed at an easy pace, prepared to sweep to the far end of the French Quarter before Wolverine could reach their quarry and exercise any significant amount of damage. With serene calm, she passed overhead as Logan took to the fire escape, skidding down the rungs three at a time, the adamantium blades slowing his momentum just enough that he maintained control over his descent.

Storm followed.

“You have explained what you believe transpired last night,” Storm said, her hair billowing upwards as she matched Logan's rattling plunge down the rusted iron. He slashed at the lever that would send the security stairs to the alley below, and when they failed to unhinge, he growled.

“They're in over their heads,” he snarled, leaping the remaining ten feet to the concrete and rolling with the impact. Storm descended before him, blocking his path out of the passageway.

“There were two scents that I knew of on those bodies at Lafayette Cemetery,” he reiterated, holding up two fingers. “One was Rogue, and one was the Cajun,” he continued, picking himself off the ground. "They fought, that much was clear. But the setup —” He shook his head. Flexed his hands into fists. “It was a setup.”

With his stature, Storm's elevation forced Logan to crane his neck upwards to compensate for the two feet of missing height.

“Those kids aren't capable of what I saw, 'Ro. You know just as well as I do who we're here for — the only person who could slaughter two able-bodied men without leaving a trace: Mystique is setting the odds against them. It's a frame. It's damned smart, too — as much as I hate to say it. I couldn't pick up her scent anywhere 'cause she ain't got one. I knew as much when we were up in Tibet trying to track her and Mesmero, and Rogue last year."

“Should you not have informed Nightcrawler of this revelation?” Storm asked, her lithe frame crackling with static electricity.

Logan knew the signs: Storm’s tension crackled through the clouds overhead. Any more prompting on his part, and he'd be dealing with ball lightening, or worse, a hurricane, given the muggy climate. He knew Storm to be capable of such a thing, if there was the right prompting, and he was testing her limits with his approach.

Wolverine was hoping for exactly that, assuming it was directed at a particular sneaking renegade thief who'd gotten Stripes mixed up in this whole mess. Regenerative healing took time, and at the rate things were going, that was a commodity he simply didn't have to squander.

Logan shook his head. "What should I have told Kurt, darlin'? His mom's stepped up the tactical training to include murder?"
"Rogue would not join Mystique willingly," she countered. "Their shared past is too much of a burden to move past, regardless of the promises Raven could make should she have the Gem in her possession."

"Exactly. Makes sense to get a third-party involved — a former colleague easily persuaded with the right sort of payout? Kid’s a Thief, Storm. His sort don’t have scruples. And besides, what would Gumbo do if the price was right?” he asked. “What if he's working Stripes into a corner just to hand her over to that bitch of a stepmother Rogue’s got?"

He scrubbed at his mask, claws snicking back into his skin. “What's Gambit’s payoff in all this, huh, Storm? More importantly, who's doing the paying?"

That did it, he thought: Storm’s eyes faded from a misted blue-white, to the bleak, thick colour of an impenetrable blizzard.

"We shall soon see.” She rose out of earshot after that, too busy putting the pieces together for herself to continue the conversation.

On the ground, Logan sniffed again, catching the unmistakable whiff of a rat in a concrete maze. The kid could be working for Mystique, and if the kid convinced Rogue otherwise, he was better than Logan thought.

If the kid wasn’t working for Mystique and he'd dragged Rogue out here after Wolverine had expressly told him he'd gut him if he did something stupid again, well, then — Gambit was fair game.

To Logan, that spelled out a win-win situation.

He tasted the air on the back of his tongue, grimacing at the clutter of scents that blotted out the Cajun. Below the upper notes, street grime and salty sweat, he memorized the acrid scent of deceit: It was a pungent reminder that he was steadily beginning to hate New Orleans.

It was that acidic trail that drove him through the streets as Wolverine ran; not the scent of cheap aftershave or fresh cigarettes, or even the unmistakable press of Rogue's touch on the Cajun's clothes — that just made him pissed. Wolverine was rarely on an even keel when it came to the students he'd come to think of as his kids, but Rogue?

You didn't fuck with Stripes unless you wanted to fuck with Wolverine, and Logan was through with Gumbo's foreplay.

—

They walked side-by-side, arm in arm, in a strained silence that knit Rogue's eyebrows together. Jean Luc strolled at leisurely pace, like he had all the time in the world to share the high ceilings and obscene opulence of his home with her.

For what felt like ages, they passed through halls that smelled of warm, varnished wood, laced with the faint bite of linseed oil and lemon Pledge. Like the dust concealed by the blue-tinged moonlight that filtered in from the long windows lining the rooms they passed, gas lamps chased the shadows that weren't quick enough to escape the light.
The entire main level of the mansion was bathed in the gilded gleam of that wavering glow.

Beyond the doors that were left open, Rogue could see the arc of night drenching the horizon in darkness so absolute that more often than not, she was startled by her own reflection passing before the window panes.

Jean Luc tapped her gloved knuckles, still supporting the light press of her fingers with his elbow as if she weren't completely uncomfortable being paraded around the Guild house.

"Y' must forgive my nephew," he said after a time, rolling the words around his mouth like he was sampling a fine wine. "Theoren is not known f' being delicate of disposition with shared company."

She afforded him a sideways glance. "Yeah, Ah gathered that much."

At Jean Luc's quizzical look, Rogue ducked her head a little, knowing she was being rude but unable to prevent it. "Sorry," she mumbled.

He favoured her with a smile, not showing any teeth. "Emil was astute, I see. When he called me t' tell me Remy crossed the Pontchartrain Bridge a few nights ago, I thought he'd been exaggerating."

He patted her hand again, as if to say he understood what all the fuss was about. Rogue tried not to flinch away.

"Remy’s always been drawn to femmes with fortitude. That’s a good thing, Rogue," he continued. "He occasionally seems to forget the things I taught him, as a boy. Long lessons. Hard lessons. Perhaps you might remind him when he won't listen to me."

Rogue stopped mid-stride.

Jean Luc released her, but the ghost of his touch lingered.

Of all the things she'd expected from him, she hadn't expected that. It sounded almost as if Jean Luc was conceding defeat, but for what, she wondered?

He paused, turning in a half circle. With all pretence wiped clean away, he appraised her anew. Calculating.

"Remy is a clever boy, petite, even though his decisions don't always seem to be for the best. He means well."

"Theoren seems ta think otherwise," she replied, guarded and unsure of how much information she could entrust to the LeBeau patriarch.

Given their shared confidances, it seemed as if he was the last person she ought to trust, especially with how frequently Remy likened Jean Luc to Mystique.

"Theoren," Jean Luc said, unruffled, "has his own ghosts to deal with. As we all do, I’m certain."

Though he kept his gaze level, Rogue had the impression that he was measuring her, trying to anticipate her reaction. As it were, Jean Luc possessed more patience than she did herself.

"If this is about what happened back at the cemetery --"

Jean Luc raised a slender hand, begging her silence as he pressed his index finger to his lips in a graceful mockery of the request.
"A terrible tragedy," he said lightly, inclining his head in respect. The movement was mechanical to the point of being practiced. "We wish the best to our most worthy adversaries and hope that the grudges they bear us will someday be mended."

Rogue gaped. He was brushing it off like it was nothing? Just how bad was this war everyone kept talking about if he could treat the deaths of two Assassins like a trip to the grocery store?

He smiled coolly at her expression. "I must ask something of you, knowing that my son trusts you more than he trusts his own pére."

There it was, she thought. He was buttering her up now.

"What?" she asked.

"Take care of my boy," he said stiffly. "He's forgotten the way — our way. When you leave here, take him with you. This is no place for him anymore."

"Ya want ta get rid of him," she deduced, her chest tightening. How cruel was this man? Remy hadn't been exaggerating when he'd told her Jean Luc had orchestrated his life. The thought sent a spike of anger through her gut.

Jean Luc breathed a heavy sigh, surveying her in the same calculated and anticipatory air that made her skin prickle unpleasantly. Below that, for the first time, Rogue saw for the first time the machinations of a father who once cared for his son, who had his hopes dashed when obligation had overtaken sense.

She swallowed, her throat suddenly tight. She knew that look: it was one that Mystique had once favoured her with.

"There is no offer, no promise, no bargain that can be made when the answer is so clear to us now. He must leave New Orleans, and he must not come back," he continued. "He can do no more to help."

"Why the obligation?" she managed, her pulse quickening. For a moment, the sound swelled in her ears. She had the strong urge to hit something. "Ya don't want him, and yet he feels indebted ta this life ya raised him in."

"Honour," Jean Luc replied, a trace of pride in his level tone. He turned away, looking to the walls. A flicker of something in his expression might've been disappointment, or it might've been resignation.

It wasn't enough to convince her of his sincerity, but it was enough for her to know that there was something more to Jean Luc's request. They'd failed each other somehow — both father and son. It hurt to look at that knowledge, so raw on the older man's face. Rogue had the distinct impression that Remy and Jean Luc shared an inherited pride when it came to the things they thought they were bound to by tradition.

So much macho bullcrap, she thought.

Both were probably too stubborn to realize that they did little more than hurt each other while trying to remedy their shared problems by themselves.

"You're protectin' him," she concluded. The realization stung. That was the difference between Remy's family and hers; Mystique would never have done the same for her. Rogue was expendable. Remy was not.
Jean Luc shook his head. "Remy will always be a treasured member of the family, but no more can be done. See that he understands that, petite. Make sure he listens. He's bartered for aid and protection, but y' must leave soon. There won't be more I can do for either of you if you linger too long."

"But why?" she asked. "He came back here, risking himself so he could help ya, and Ah don't even know why because he won't tell me. Ah do know that it's important ta him. Don't ya see? Why can't ya just talk ta each other?"

Jean Luc's gaze turned hard. "There is a time and a place for every't'ing. That is not something I expect you to understand — if fate is kind t' the family, then all will resolve itself."

"Oh Ah understand that all right," she snapped, her patience breaking. She stalked up to him, forgoing niceties altogether. "Ya can't use people ta serve your own ends, least of all your own kin. Sittin' around and waiting for the opportune moment ta drag him back here when ya need him doesn't fly with me. Ah don't know what 'fate' has ta do with this, but let me tell ya something — Ah know firsthand what happens when ya put all your eggs in that basket. It doesn't work out. Ever. People get hurt, and Ah swear right now, Ah won't let ya do that ta Remy again… not now, not when the 'time is right' or some other cockamamie nonsense that relies on something so abstract that ya don't really know if it's got truth ta it or not."

"You talk like y' know more about us then Remy's led us to believe, petite," he responded. A small, sardonic smile pulled his mouth up at the corner. "Ah know what Ah know because the same damned thing was done ta me by my mother. There ain't no such thing as fate. Ya make your own destiny," she bit back. "That hasn't worked for the family so far."

"Right, that was the failed attempt at Remy's marriage, Ah suppose? Or maybe it was before that? What would Ah know — Ah only lived with a precognitive until Ah was sixteen. Ah wouldn't know a damned thing about tryin' ta fit into those patterns ta bring about a specific ends," she snapped. "They only tried ta make me fit inta that mold my whole life. Ah'll look after Remy, all right, but Ah swear, if ya try ta manipulate him though me — now? In ten years from now? In a hundred? Ah'll drop ya myself."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a promise."

Jean Luc held her gaze, his face a cleverly hardened mask as the silence stretched between them. He weighed her words with silent diplomacy. Something invisible dimmed, like a switch being thrown, and his expression softened.

"Being as suspicious as you are, you’d make an excellent thief."

She'd met his expectations somehow, and yet it felt like it lacked any compliment. She balled her fists. Unflexed them. Took a breath.

She raised her chin, defiant. "I am a thief, mister."

The only acknowledgement he offered was a raised eyebrow and a knowing nod.

"As I am aware. Your powers would be of a particular interest for anyone in, ah, my line of work."
“Ah’m not interested.”

“I’m not offering.”

The standoff lasted a beat further, and having wrested some of the control back in the conversation, Rogue considered him now with the regard of someone who put aside her relative young age and experience to his calculated maneuvering.

“An exchange, however… Perhaps a trade of conveniences?” He trailed off. “Everyone has a price, Rogue. It’s just a matter of finding the right one.”

Despite all the roundabout nonsense, Jean Luc clearly had an ulterior motive. He wanted Remy gone, but he clearly wasn’t letting him go. That’d be too easy.

Jean Luc peered at her askance. “With abilities like yours, petite, you would be an asset to our family.”

Blood pounded behind her eyes. “My powers would buy Remy a get out of jail free card.”

Jean Luc didn’t turn, though he paused a few yards before the opening to a large room bathed in fluorescent light. They’d nearly reached the kitchen.

“Our war is old, Rogue,” he replied. "New blood in our ranks is always an advantage. Remy knows that much, an’ sometimes, he thinks exactly like I do.”

Cold spread from her belly outwards: a melting glacier that left her shivering. Had Remy offered her so easily to the Thieves? To the man who supposedly orchestrated his life, treating him like little more than a means to an ends?

"My son likes you Rogue, and that’s a rare thing. I've never seen him use my own tricks against me quite like he has in the last day."

Half-bathed in the bright glare from adjoining rooms, Jean Luc appeared almost wistful. "He bartered for your safety with his own. But I want neither of you unless you’re willing."

He thought for a moment, and added softly, "Never have I seen him try to work me for a girl. She must be something special for him to do that to his own père."

She flushed. She had been ready to condemn Remy so easily that she was embarrassed by it.

Jean Luc must have noticed, because he continued in an undertone, "If you’re interested, then you will someday have the right to tell me what you think of the way I run this clan because you will be part of it. Until that time, petite — understand that tradition guides us; it forces us to peer down the long line of the generations to come, considering those who’ve not yet risen in our ranks. We must consider the needs of the many; they outrank the needs of the few, no matter how close the few are to you."

She would get Remy out of this somehow, even if she had to drag his stubborn ass back to New York.

Somehow, she didn't entirely think it'd be necessary. Rogue smiled at that, a gesture that Jean Luc accepted, mistaking that it was for his words instead of his son.
The streets carried a distinctive perfume. Even that would be too polite:

Sweat, body heat, lingering wafts of cologne, and sewer runoff layered atop the dripping, stale scent of leaking air conditioners and pavement warmed by the millions of feet that had long since worn down the original cobblestone.

Remy breathed it in, drunk on it all.

Any other time, any other place, he'd have thought less of himself for indulging it, but he was having a damned good night so far, and there was very little that could dampen his spirits.

He drank in the night and the city, his head thrumming with the clatter and the chaos, and in the midst of it, one thought shone brighter than the streetlights and flickering advertisements for Voodoo artifacts and souvenirs:

Rogue.

Avoiding the shadows beneath the overhanging balconies that protruded over the beaten walkways; bearing out-of-season Mardi Gras flags and earnest, thriving blooms nestled comfortably into window boxes, Remy slid through the crowds. Mercurial, he moved with the sea of bodies without breaking stride.

The image of her followed him, seared into his mind like a beacon to follow, letting him know that even as he enjoyed the city for the last time, Rogue was calling him back to her.

If it hadn't been for that too-large bathrobe slipping off her shoulders, he might've been okay.

If he hadn't tried his luck by leaning a little too close to catch the light scent of her skin, he probably would have been fine.

Damned if he didn't like trying his odds.

"Bonsoir," Remy murmured, bowing around a group of tittering college students clustered in front of one of the many bars lining Bourbon Street. The dive offered a variety of brightly-coloured alcoholic slushies in too-big plastic cups and blared an uppity, obnoxious form of dance music that made him grit his teeth together as he grinned.

Beneath his left arm, a dress box was tucked away neatly. His pockets were weighted with the few crucial souvenirs from his tithe, and a carefully rolled and packaged woodcut print was locked away in a plastic container that looked like little more than an artist's scroll.

What a riot.

The girls giggled, returning the smile he offered. And then he was gone. Lost to the crowds.

How he managed to balance everything without stumbling down the bustling street awkwardly was a trick he'd learned from his brother, Henri, a long time ago when they'd both been pups still scouring the district to entertain themselves. It helped that his sensory perception mapped a path out for him through the sea of people, but where the opportunity arose, he brushed the teeming swell of bodies when he wouldn't be noticed — earning several blushes and a few suggestive remarks. He was out and gone before any of them could follow.
The fact that he’d picked three pockets and snagged a Rolex with his free hand was testament to the level of skill required on his jaunt through the most notorious neighbourhood of all.

The tourists were almost too easy.

That was why, when he first felt the wind increase and heard the first complaints of an unnatural cold descending on the Quarter, he’d turned his attention to the sky. Gambit kept his pace leisurely, but he grinned in a way that would have told anyone who knew him that the night was definitely about to get more interesting.

Three mutants followed: two on foot, and one above the city.

He marked them, taking their measure through his heightened perceptions. Wolverine breathed too hard, though his heart rate was normal. The old man was sweating. Overhead, the X-Men’s very own weather manipulator was beating the former to their mark.

The third… the third was problematic. Though Gambit sensed the body, it was nebulous; like the form didn’t want to pull together through the modulated surface of his spatial senses. Though he had known the third had begun tailing him after leaving the Rue Saint Anne safe house, he couldn’t form a clear picture. That was slightly unnerving, but only just:

It was probably an Assassin — and as they’d already proven the night before, one measly killer was hardly a challenge. Remy remained unconcerned, though the thought of meeting Wolverine before he wanted made him bristle. He preferred to have all his extremities attached when he saw Rogue again.

He also knew that the X-Men wouldn’t reach him in time. Not unless he wanted them to.

The craving to go back to the bayou and finish what he and Rogue had started kept him moving.

He could have killed Mercy for interrupting, though partly, he wanted to thank her too:

It had taken all of three seconds to realize he wouldn't have stopped.

He should have stopped.

Unless the decision to suddenly hand over his entire life story took priority, a little had to be enough.

"Everything in moderation," he said to the night. There was some irony, too: Remy LeBeau was not a man of moderation, either: he wanted all Rogue offered, and he’d have it too.

With one more stop to make before returning to the relative sanctity of the Guild house, Remy sank down a side-alley and melted into the darkness, waiting in shadow for his trails to follow.

—

Rogue lingered at the entrance of a massive kitchen, hands on her hips, trying to parse the jumble of her feelings.

Concern for the swamp rat kept her peeking at the clock, but elation that Remy had gone to lengths to protect her from Jean Luc was keeping her tethered. It was stupid, but she appreciated it, nonetheless. There lingered only a shred of guilt that she thought otherwise too.
Happy.

She was happy.

There. That settled it, she told herself. She'd kick his ass when he got back, sure, but the desire to smack him was steadily buried under the nervous, gut-fluttery desire to hug him too.

A hug. When was the last time she'd instigated something so simple?

Turning into a sop didn't get things done, she decided: there was work to do and a stone to find, and she'd dilly dally long enough to keep Lapin waiting. Rogue braced herself before the door, wincing at the glare of the fluorescents off the brushed chrome appliances.

Emil, seated on proportionately large marble countertop, was watching a flat screen television set mounted on the wall across from a fridge the size of Professor Xavier's office.

She cleared her throat, and he waved her over.

Scattered around him were several unopened bottles of liquor, a case of beer, a few bags of chips, onion rings, pork rinds, bags of Twizzlers, gummy bears, and something that looked oddly like wheat grass juice in a pitcher already frosted with ice.

He turned the volume up with a miniscule remote. He said, "Some crazy shit comin' our way."

The picture on the screen remained constant; an aerial shot of a moving train bathed in helicopter spots took up the majority of the screen. It appeared that someone was chained to the train's roof — his mouth opened in a perpetual scream.

As the camera zoomed in, a shock of orange hair was clearly visible as the person shook his head back and forth. The young man grinned, laughing in between shouts; a maniacal, petrified expression like that of someone riding a rollercoaster.

On a scrolling newsreel, the words, "Train Hijacked: Mutant Terrorists at Large," rolled by in white on red letters.

"… According to the engineering crew recently evacuated from the train originally en route to Anchorage, Alaska, the engine diverged course at approximately seven thirty this morning. The means by which the freight's route was changed is left to debate. Eyewitness testimony informs us that there was a flash of electrical current so intense that the train derailed, levitating nearly a hundred feet in a matter of seconds, and making a complete hundred and eight degree turn midair. After slamming back to the tracks, it continued its journey in the direction from which it had came," the announcer said.

She stepped closer to the television. "Ah know him," she managed. The sound was strangled.

Pyro mouthed something to the camera, wagging his head and sticking his tongue out, his eyes bulging.

For a moment, Rogue was glad the audio was drowned out by the sound of the choppers in the background. She had the distinct impression that if his arms hadn't been locked in place, he would have been making the sign of the beast and head banging too.

"Friends of yours?" Emil asked lightly.

Rogue shook her head, not turning around. "Ah wouldn't believe it if Ah didn't see it."
"…The crew has since been removed from any possible threat, but the individuals who have commandeered the freight have yet to comply with negotiations on the part of the special forces teams who have been monitoring the train’s progress. Government officials have confirmed that the mutant-specialized S.H.I.E.L.D. division has been called in…"

“They’re headin’ South-East in a straight line,” Emil pointed out. “Farthest they can get is maybe Florida? But that ain’t too far from this neck o’ de woods, if you catch my meaning.”

"Hold on," Rogue murmured, squinting. A flash of red velvet — a sleeve belonging to the trademark crimson coat of a very particular punk rocker she knew — stuck out of the caboose, the wrist flicking airily. Atop the train, Pyro stopped thrashing, choosing instead to look on in sheer terror at the emerging figure.

"…Wait a minute, it appears that the terrorists are trying to communicate…"

A blinding flash of blue-white light filled the screen, and the feed went dead. The television filled with static, though the reel at the bottom continued to play before the reporter came back on.

Lapin hit the mute button.

He clucked, flipping the remote off to the side and folding his arms across his stout frame. Fixing her with his best whithering stare, he asked, “This the kind of company you keep back home? Makes the Assassins look cuddly by comparison.”

Rogue laughed. “Don’t start — Ah was supposed to go to a concert next month with one of them. Guess Ah’ll be postin’ bail instead of payin’ the scalpers.”

"You’ve got some messed up friends, chère," he said. Lapin flashed teeth. "Gonna introduce me sometime?"

She rolled her eyes. Between Emil and Remy, she wasn’t sure if she’d survive the night. "Come on, short stuff. Don't we have some work to do?"

"Just tryin’ to be sociable." He leapt from the counter, ushering her over. "Help me carry some of this crap, p’tit. We gonna need it later."

Cautiously, Rogue peered over the selection of junk food and alcohol. "Is there a party Ah wasn't informed of?"

"Party?" he asked with mock-offence. "We got work to do, fille. This is brain food."

Lapin worked quickly, loading his arms with the bottles of vodka, tequila, rum, schnapps, gin, whisky and three tiny bottles of soda. Two bags of chips he stuck under his armpit, and last, he collected the package of Twizzlers with his teeth.

She hefted the case of beer with the remaining foodstuffs stacked on top, and asked, "Do ya think better inebriated?" The green stuff looked more like someone’s science experiment, and she left the pitcher.

“Most men do, Rogue," he said around the bag in his teeth. "Until the next mornin' that is." He nodded for her to follow as he ducked into a swing-door and the dim corridor beyond.
Mattie Baptiste fled through the streets as quickly as her legs would allow. There were too many people, too many bodies obscuring Remy from view, and each time someone brushed her, her form wavered — threatening to collapse back into its most comfortable state. If the gutters ran far enough, it would not have upset her to return to liquid state, but Remy's path was unpredictable:

She could not anticipate, but only follow.

Sensing him, knowing intrinsically that he was near once she'd been deposited on the outskirts of the Quarter, Mattie had done exactly that. Remy's energy was a flare in the darkness, a glowing pulse that churned and rippled and raised the hairs on the back of her arms when he was feeling something particularly strong.

At the moment, he was excited, and it wasn't in any modest way either. Mattie pursed her lips. Sometimes, the boy had no shame at all.

As a healer, she knew bodies. She understood the subtle shifts of energy that indicated if a person was well or ill, and by a stretch, she could sometimes understand their emotions if they released a particularly strong sense of themselves. It made following the boy easier, but it was putting a distinctive strain on her heart having to rush.

The Assassins expected her to return home to a modest cottage on the city's periphery. Once she had been left near enough to walk and her envoy had left, she'd planned on taking the streetcar through the Baton Rouge. Henri would meet her in designated neutral territory, and bring her back to the Thieves' Mansion.

If Remy was prowling the Quarter at this time of night, it was a better opportunity to speak with him without Jean Luc interfering. Strictly speaking, as an exile, Remy could be discounted as a member of the immediate Guild. He'd be told little, and kept from the dealings with the Assassins if Jean Luc's authority still extended over the clan as strongly as it had when his son had been crucial to securing their wealth and power. Simply put, Mattie thought it an injustice that he could treat his adoptive son so harshly. It hadn't been Remy's fault in the first place that he was no longer a welcome party, though a small part of her was contented with the fact that because of the very rules that prevented his interference in Guild business, Remy had the opportunity to leave this life without the attachments foisted on the others because of custom.

More importantly, if the Patriarch was advised of a surprise attack the following night, Mattie's status as a neutral party in the Guilds' war would be breeched. She would seal their coffins herself, were that the case.

 Tradition. It kept them safe in the same way that it harmed them.

She sighed and ploughed forwards through the throng. Remy was within two blocks, and following the ebb of his power, she turned down an alleyway off Bourbon Street.

It was darker the further the healer journeyed from the lights and sounds of the Calle. In these parts, the seedier places that thrived on the most knowledgeable patrons dominated the hours severed from daylight. She knew many places such as the smaller, less gaudy storefronts that she passed. Many did not even appear to be habitable at all, but for those who knew of their existence, it hardly mattered.

It was their purpose that made their presence fearsome.

Witchcraft, devilry, superstition, and religion. Mystics and vodooiennes, high priests, and conjurers.
In the darker places, if a person sought hard enough, they would find the sorts of things that made the skin crawl with power.

For the most part, Mattie steered clear of them. Mysticism and mutants frequently did not mix well. She was familiar with enough of it to know that none of it boded well for the body or the mind.

She pressed onwards. What business would Remy have in these parts, she wondered, deciding that once she caught up with him, he would get an earful without hesitation. The boy still wasn't too old to be put over her lap.

The lights dimmed further as she turned another corner. On either side of her, the darkened backs of the looming buildings were black in the absence of streetlight. They muted the sounds coming from the major thoroughfares, leaving the alley bathed in silence so sepulchral that she questioned whether or not she'd taken a wrong turn.

She sensed something, a shifting mass — as if the person itself was uncertain of their form. It seemed to shrink on itself, drawing inwards so forcefully that even as she felt the person's life force constrict, she'd taken a step backwards. She hadn't felt the presence a moment ago.

"Who's there?" Mattie called, her voice smothered by the high walls, trapped in the corners blocked off by garbage bins. A sense of unease spread over her limbs, as from the shadows, the hunched form of a woman emerged. Her stooped body coalesced from the very darkness itself.

She felt wrong somehow, incomplete. A pair of heavy, plastic-rimmed sunglasses covered her eyes, and her shawls were so long that they dripped to the ground where her gnarled hands failed to clutch at them.

"Mattie Baptiste," she rasped, displaying a gummy mouth with blackened gums. "Viens. Maman Brigitte has seen your boy, le Diable Blanc, pass this way not two minutes ago."

Mattie was not fooled; there was no streetlight in the alley to create the amber reflections on those dark glasses where the woman's eyes shone through. Fear rose to the back of her throat, a dull, choking ache that staunched her ability to shift in form.

"Maman gonna help you, child – you listen too good, you see too much. Maman knows. She knows everything."

Mattie felt the spike of power, the cool bubbling of shifting flesh as she turned blindly, trying to run, trying to liquefy her limbs and escape the alley and the mutant behind her.

She gasped once, sharply, as the press of reptilian blue hands encircled her throat, jolting her backwards and to the side as fingers wrapped around her jaw. She heard the harsh sound of snapping bone, and felt the straining twitch of the tendons in her neck before the world fell to a swift black, and Mattie Baptiste saw no more.

—

Remy grimaced at the added weight. With the fuel tank tucked inside the dress box, even though it was a slim casing that could easily be concealed beneath Pyro's uniform, the compressed gas in the twin chambers was heavy.
He wasn't complaining, not really, although it made his ascent to the rooftops of the Quarter slightly more arduous since he'd chosen the leisurely route of scaling the side of a building's battered trellis. Pyro would be grateful, that much he knew:

The kid was half himself if he was forced to go without his preferred source of firepower for any length of time. Besides, Remy owed him.

He should have strapped the stupid thing to his back, he concluded, lobbing his packages over the side of the cement guardrail and hauling himself along after them. It was a plain building at the edge of the Quarter that looked down on Canal Street. Below, life thrummed as per usual, but the skies were quiet. Too quiet almost. The perpetual bruised haze of night, striped with washed-out grey clouds that skittered across the face of the moon, left him unsettled.

He wanted a glimpse of the X-Men, just to see what sort of condition they were in before he left the bustle of the city for the night. Tante had taught him manners at some point, several of which he did in fact still remember. But if they didn't make an appearance soon, he wouldn't be able to leave a calling card.

A wind curled around the building, softly at first, then gathering in intensity. Remy smirked, his fingers moving of their own accord to extract a deck of cards. Idly, he flipped through them, looking for the one in particular that managed to see him through every scrap he'd ever been in.


"Huh," he remarked, bemused. Five Aces in one deck. He smirked and kept shuffling.

When the blank-face of the Red Queen failed to surface, he fanned the cards out before him.

The wind grew stronger, whipping the tails of his trench around his ankles.

Still, no Queen of Hearts.

Remy patted his pockets and came up empty. He hadn't changed into his uniform prior to leaving that evening, assuming that going plain clothes wouldn't arouse suspicion. He kept six decks at all times on him in a specially tailored belt — but the maudit belt didn't fit his jeans. What he had counted on was the fact that his trench had his backup pack of cards.

He'd given them to Rogue, and Rogue had kept the Queen in a fit of stubbornness.

"Merde," he muttered. "This ain't good."

"Has your luck run out so soon, Gambit?"

Her voice was as willowy as the crest of air she rode on, and as commanding as the crackle of lightening that flashed overhead, announcing her presence. He looked up in time to see Storm sweeping down to the rooftop before him, her hair an untamed fan of white that spilled about her shoulders as her feet touched the roof.

Remy cocked his head to the side, surveying the brilliant white overcast to her eyes, and offered her the most self-assured grin in his arsenal.

"With you here, chère – I think my luck’s about to turn."
"Eh," Lapin said around the pack of candy clenched between his teeth. "Rogue?"

Emil wiggled his hips as he walked; his flip-flops slapping the ground as he balanced the snacks. Behind him, Rogue followed, nearly smashing into him when he stopped without warning.

She glowered, the case of beer rattling as she stopped short, but the look lacked its usual venom.

Lapin waggled his eyebrows, tipping his head to the numeric keypad next to the door. The lock had a place to swipe a key card, and two little lights at the top. One flashed red.

"Can you get the key? It’s in my pocket," he asked. "Since y' know, if I drop Remy's bourbon, he's not gonna be too happy."

Dressed in a pair of shorts that hung past his knees and a tee-shirt that was too small for his broad chest, his ginger hair sticking out like a mussed pincushion, Lapin was more animated than ever. Every movement was exaggerated with the stocky man. He was short, but that didn't seem to stop him from bouncing back and forth across the halls, kicking his sandals off and chasing after them – the bottles in his arms rattling precariously all the while.

Twice, he'd dropped the same bag of chips. In the end, he'd settled by kicking it along in front of them for five minutes before they'd reached their destination.

Rogue raised an eyebrow, peering over the case of beer at his pocket. She didn't see a key card.

Lapin grinned even more broadly and turned around. He stuck his left butt cheek out, and shook his hips.

“That pocket.”

Rogue stared at him.

“Ya know I’ve dropped bigger guys than you with a graze of my finger,” she informed him.

He jut his chin, unconcerned. “Oh, go on.”

She balanced the beer on one raised knee. Straining to remove her fingers from the small cardboard handhold on the side, she tilted, her balance offset by the weight of her cargo. On the top of the case, the pork rings slid to the side a little as she shifted, and Lapin started to reach out to her. Gasping, Rogue forced herself to catch the handhold before she could drop the lot of it and leapt backwards.

"Don't brush my arms," she warned him. "Don't fall over, don't lean inta me, and don't touch my skin."

“That’d be decidedly bad, I think,” he agreed, a little too enthusiastically. He was just as crazy as his cousin, Rogue decided.

"Lapin," Rogue said, trying not to sigh, her fingers straining a little with the weight of the beer. "If ya think you’re gonna get your jollies by having me put my hand in yo' pocket, ya got another thing coming."

He grinned around the candy, the package bouncing against his chin.
“Worth a shot.” With a shrug, and in a movement so quick that she nearly missed it, Lapin lobbed two bottles over their heads, reached around to his backside, pulled out the key card, passed it through the lock, and caught the bottles securely as they fell between four fingers.

Rogue blinked, and Lapin was already stepping through the door, the little security light flashing green.

"Ya sure ya ain't a mutant?" she asked.

He chuckled, spitting out the bag of Twizzlers on a table in the middle of the room. He moved over to a wet bar on rollers to deposit the haul, and with a pirouette, flashed a pleased look in her direction.

Rogue staggered in behind him, taking in the sight:

The room was enormous. Lined wall-to-wall were computers, surveillance equipment, cameras, and worktables loaded with half-repaired electronics. A server took up the large part of the back wall, cables spilling over each other in neat tangles that were fed off into the other units.

It was a hacker's dream. Kitty would kill to spend even a few minutes in a place like this.

"Y' like?" Lapin asked, zipping over to relieve her burden.

"Ah don't even know what half of this stuff does, but yeah — all those blinking lights are impressive." Emil crunched the beers into an ice-filled cooler beside the one piece of furniture in the room that seemed out of place:

An eight-sided, felt covered table was set up in the middle of the space. Six chairs were positioned around it, and on the surface sat a deck of cards atop a leather case:

Poker chips.

Rogue shook her head, watching Lapin position the cooler carefully at one side, angling it carefully as if its position made all the difference.

She snorted under her breath, “Not a party, huh? Just a poker game?"

Lapin looked up, appalled. “There is no such thing as 'just' a poker game. The greatest heists have been deliberated while seated at the Sacred Octagon.” He referred to the table like it was a relic, whispering its name like something sacrosanct.

He continued, “The best pulls, the dirtiest and most difficult security breaches – established here.” He held his hands over the table in a manner that was almost reverent. Leaning forwards, he whispered to the surface, "She didn't mean it, mon coeur. She don't know our way."

"Ah shoulda figured," Rogue muttered.

"It's tradition," Lapin wheedled, his hands pressed to the edge of the table, caressing it with a tenderness that seemed almost possessive.

Rogue rolled her eyes, though not without the hint of a smile.

“I’m gonna go get Theoren's green shit,” he informed her. “He won't drink anything else. Don’t you go sayin’ anything to upset the table. You’ll ruin my luck.” He continued, muttering to himself, “Already owe Henri $500 for the last time he cleared out.”
"Theoren?" Rogue asked, surprised. She hadn't expected him to involve himself in their plans. She should have known searching for the stone would be a family affair, but how he and Remy could stand to be in the same room together for any given length of time was a frightening prospect. Hell, she didn't want to be in the same room with him.

Emil answered carefully, "I'll leave the door open so you'll have a clear escape route in case he shows up before I get back." He winked, sauntering back into the hall. "Don't touch the table," he warned again.

Rogue folded her arms across her chest and gave him a sour purse of the lips. Lapin grinned, disappearing around the corner a moment later.

Rogue stood there, staring at the open door. It was at least a five-minute walk back to the kitchens, and filled with the hum of machinery around her, she didn't quite know what to do with herself. Poking around seemed a little too nosy for her tastes, but standing in the same spot feeling uncomfortable wasn't any better.

She peered around the room, her gaze coming to rest finally on a wall-mounted phone beside the server. She hadn't called the mansion yet, and now seemed as good a time as any to take care of it.

Taking a deep breath, she crossed the room, lifted the handset, and dialed the number slowly. It rang five times before someone took the call on the other end of the country.

"Hello?" The bored voice that filled the phone was clear and crisp-sounding, as if the person who'd picked up was standing right next to her. The snap of chewing gum being popped against Jubilee's tongue filled the receiver.

"Jubes? It's Rogue."

Silence. "Is this a joke?" Jubilee asked, faintly amused.

Joke? Rogue bristled. "Patch me through to the Professor," she said flatly.

"Whoa, it is you! Ray! Guess who's on the phone!" she bellowed, followed by the delayed sound of a hand brushing the mouthpiece to muffle the shout.

Rogue fought back an eye roll. "No, no! Jubilee, this is important. Ah gotta talk ta Xavier, and if he's not there, get Logan, would ya?"

"What?" Jubilee asked. "Oh! Uh… Rogue, that's kind of funny, actually. The Professor's gone, he went up to Redwood Pines to uh… well…"

"Spit it out, small fry. Ah don't have all night," she interrupted snappishly.

"What?" Jubilee asked. "Oh! Uh… Rogue, that's kind of funny, actually. The Professor's gone, he went up to Redwood Pines to uh… well…"

"Spit it out, small fry. Ah don't have all night," she interrupted snappishly.

"Rogue, where are you?" she asked, her tone turning wary.

"Ah'm down in New Orleans, like Ah told them. Why? What's goin' on? Why's the Professor visiting the loony bin? He said he'd wait ta hear from me when Ah got down here."

"He went to see Magneto, or Joseph, or whatever buckethead's calling himself these days. Something about this red rock you're after. I guess you haven't found it then, huh?"

Rogue hesitated. Had the X-Men been debriefed?

"Jubes, what's going on?" she asked cautiously.
“That’s the question I’m askin’ myself. What do you think you’re doing?”

Rogue turned too slowly, her hand clenching around the phone as Theoren loomed behind her, reaching for the receiver. She hadn’t heard him approach. His bare fingers locked around her wrist, trying to wrest the phone from her grasp. For a heartbeat, Rogue saw the darkened, angry look on his face before she realized he was touching her skin.

Time slowed, dragging with the weighted precision of mounting dread before it snapped into fast-forward, and his memories bombarded her in an onslaught of sights and sounds that forced her to her knees.

—

On the edge of Bourbon Street, the *traiteur* to both the Thieves and Assassins stepped out from the shadows of a dingy alleyway. She brushed at her skirts, her back ramrod straight as she strode into the crowds.

She emerged from the crowds to discreetly catch a streetcar leading into Baton Rouge.

If anyone noticed the brief flicker in her face, the slight shine to her eyes, they paid no attention. The woman was forgotten as quickly as she was glimpsed upon, though if she had smiled, a cruel twist of the mouth that drew the lips back against her teeth, many more would remember her in the days to come.

Chapter End Notes

**Post Script:**

- Immortal (Poker): An unbeatable hand, based on circumstances.
- Tulane: Tulane University

**Author’s Notes:**

This is how you know you've married the right person: husband downloads all four seasons of X-Men: Evolution after you've rhapsodized "that thing you wrote thirteen years ago" and the show you based it off of with the intention of binge-watching the whole thing, even after you've explicitly stated to said fanboy that "the theme song isn't as good as XTAS, sorry." *finger snaps* I picked a winner, guys. Also: I still can;t get season four on DVD in Canada. Or on Prime. Or iTunes. WTF. How am I supposed to do my homework, here?!

Thank you for reading and for commenting. A couple of people have brought me to happy tears of late. <3
As clear as the sound of church bells in winter, Theoren's memories assaulted her in a barrage of sights and sounds that swept Rogue backwards. She crashed into the server, sagging towards the ground, a tangle of wires popping loose. She bit down on her tongue to keep from screaming. Swallowing the taste of copper, Rogue's feet skidded out before her and she hit the floor, listing to the side where she curled in on herself, fingers digging into her hair to staunch the onslaught. It did nothing at all to prevent the flood.

Belize is a large man. Bulky in the way that a tree has girth, he is a mass of muscle with hair that has faded to white with age. Theoren likes to think of his father as snow-topped, like a northern pine. It's a shared euphemism between him and his brother that never fails to coax a smile out of the youngest of the Guild's offspring. Theoren had seen those trees once, when the now seven-year-old Etienne was still just a baby. Looking at his father now, seated at his desk with he and Etienne positioned in chairs opposite, Theoren is reminded of those massive conifers. There is something earthy and wooden in Belize's cologne, something pungent and constant that reminds both his children to be strong despite the odds.

Now is one of those times.

"Mes fils," Belize begins, linking his hands together atop the blotter. At his side, Etienne at least knows enough not to glance at him. They both exercise whatever innocence they possess, meeting their father's stolid scrutiny. This is serious.
Theoren answers for them both, just in case Etienne decides to bring up that debacle from last week involving Tante's houseplants and the makeshift stink bomb Emil had designed. The wilted ficus is currently residing in its resting place, otherwise known as the dumpster beyond the Thieves' property. The infusion meant to be boiled down into a powder had gone rancid sometime during the separation process — they hadn't realized it was poisonous until Emil re-read the instructions on his chemistry set.

Theoren figures it's best not to bring that up unless Lapin is around. They agreed collectively — between Henri, Etienne, and himself — that it was entirely Lapin's fault.

"Oui, pére?" he says instead, swallowing the ripple of unease as his pulse speeds up.

At least it was Tante's ficus that suffered the horrible death and not one of them.

"I must discuss something with you, boys. It is important business, you understand — and I can't tell you enough how much it'll mean to your Oncle Jean Luc and I if you make the effort to be grown up about this."

Theoren knows that instead of that stupid plant, it could very well have been his kid brother who'd gotten a dose of homemade cyanide. He doesn't want to think of the consequences, although realistically, that is all Theoren can do. It leaves a cold weight in his gut, like he's eaten too much ice cream too fast. He decides then and there that their fathers will go easier on them all if he just confesses, if he just explains…

"Pére, it was an accident," Theoren blurts, feeling his cheeks grow hot.

To his left, Etienne swivels and gapes at him. Theoren doesn't catch his eye, choosing instead to stare at the wood paneling behind his father's head. He'll shoulder the responsibility for this. He's man enough at fifteen to know the difference between stupidity and egotism.

Belize has taught them better, he berates himself — and Etienne is his responsibility.

"I shoulda never gone along with it, pére," he continues, not meeting his father's inquisitive stare. "I shoulda stopped Emil before things got outta hand."

"Theo —" Belize interrupts.

Theoren forces back the lump in his throat. If he had only listened to what his father had told him about being responsible. He is the eldest among the Guild's children. He is supposed to look out for the younger ones: Henri is twelve, Emil ten, and with Etienne barely seven, it's hard enough to keep track of his own brother in the melee of the Guild house half the time.

"I'm sorry, pére. I — I promise — I'll do better next time," he chokes out, hating the way the corners of his eyes began to burn.

"Mon fils," Belize says, comforting. He rises, and Theoren thinks for a moment that the man could blot out the sun, he’s so big. Belize steps from around the desk, moving to place his hands on Theoren’s shoulders.

The scent of him swirls around the room. It is familiar and warm, like dry cedar and dark resin, lingering cigar smoke and fine scotch.

"This is a day to celebrate," he says. "Not to mourn Tante Mattie's dearly departed shrubbery."

Belize winks at Etienne, and finally, Theoren looks up.
"You will be more careful next time, I'm sure. You don't need to look so ashamed of yourself."

Etienne’s slid from his seat, his sneakers squeaking a little on the hardwood as he joins him. He hasn’t yet mastered the art of absolute stealth, but that’s okay: they have time. They will teach their youngest everything they know.

Belize embraces his children fondly, leaving one hand on Theoren's shoulder to remind him he stands with them both, leaving neither out of his consideration. Warm brown eyes crinkle at the corners as he smiles.

“There’s to be a new addition to the family,” he tells them. “Jean Luc is adopting a second son.”

——

"I'd tell you that you a sight for sore eyes,” said Remy. “But I'm afraid you might send a plague o' locusts down on I'm head."

Storm smiled benignly, approaching him at a steady clip. Gambit took the time to extract his cigarettes and pop one in his mouth. He offered her the last one in the pack wordlessly, but the weather witch merely held up a hand, declining as she drew to a stop.

He shrugged and ignited the tip, keeping one hand strategically concealed behind his back where he fingered his deck of cards — slipping them beneath his wrist sheath for easy access.

"Perhaps not locusts, Gambit," she said, tipping her face to the sky as the clouds gathered overhead. "But hail?"

A loud clap of thunder sounded, preceded by a dull, angry rumble of thunder. "Or perhaps something more localized — a hurricane, for instance."

“This mean you not happy to see me?” he asked innocently enough.

Overhead, a streak of lightening bisected the night sky, bathing the rooftop in a blue-white glow that illuminated her features. She did not appear amused.

"We might settle this matter with a few words," she continued. "It would be preferable to the other options I have presented."

"I thought The X-Men didn't kill, Stormy."

"Call me that once more, and perhaps I will consider revising our code of ethics for your benefit," she returned.

He smirked. He liked her. Overhead, the clouds swirled together, gathering momentum and pulling the sky into a cyclone of power. With a flick of her wrist, Gambit wagered that Storm could bring that cone down straight on his head.

Nonplussed, he raised an eyebrow. "As The lady wishes." He gave her a small bow from the waist, not breaking her gaze.

"Where is Rogue, Gambit?" she asked, her face a serene mask that echoed her absolute mastery over herself. Perfect control of her powers, and her disposition. Impressive, he thought. She might’ve
made a fine thief in the Guild with that sort of poker face.

Storm commanded respect: put the lady in leather and give her a whip, and any other time, Remy would be dog chow.

Pity, she wouldn't get him barking willingly.

"Safe," he echoed with an indolent shrug of a shoulder. Peering past her into the night, he offered his best bored expression, covertly casting his own sensory powers out and across the largest distance they could cover:

Gambit's kinesthetic awareness found Wolverine scaling a building four blocks away, claws digging into the mortar between the bricks.

The third individual that had been following had disappeared entirely off his radar. Curious, but it was nothing to be concerned with for the moment.

"I hardly think you are one to judge," she returned evenly. "You have endangered Rogue more than you could possibly know — regardless of your intentions or affiliations."

He peered at her, taking a drag. The smoke unfurled from his mouth and nose as he responded casually, "I have no affiliations, Stormy. I'm a lone agent just doin' his best for an old friend who deserves more than she allows herself."

Thunder boomed, a crash so sudden and violent he felt his ears pop as the barometric pressure changed. He didn't flinch, but Storm was pissed.

"A son of New Orleans Thieves Guild, second in line to inherit the legacy of your father, a former Acolyte of Magneto and abettor to Mystique — do not dare lie to me, Remy LeBeau. By the goddess, I will bring the sky crashing down on your head."

She rose up suddenly, a tearing wind speeding across the rooftops and carrying her forwards so that she hovered over him, regal and fierce.

Accomplice to Mystique? The accusation brought a grim curl to his lower lip.

A card was shucked into his palm, bathing the rooftop in bright fuchsia before he even registered his reaction. The cigarette was gone, torn away from him and sending sparks scattering with the wind she brought down around him. It made the tails of his trench flap at his legs, but Remy held his ground, staring up at her coolly.

"That was I'm last smoke," he muttered.

"Do you not deny it?" Storm boomed.

Remy sneered, feeling the rush of kinetic charge leap from his fingers to the card, dripping off the ends of his digits. It was as if the air had gained a tactile quality to it, and if he reached out, he could charge the very oxygen molecules that they breathed.

"Would you believe me if I said no?" he yelled over the wind.

The crash of lightening hitting a nearby satellite dish was answer enough. Remy flung the card, not waiting to survey the damage as it detonated where it hit. Already, the air was filled with the pungent scent of fried plastic and scorched concrete as he flung himself backwards.
Rogue gasped into focus at the jarring halogen brightness of the room around her.

Two feet to her left, Theoren lay sprawled on his back, unconscious. The boy he’d been in memory was buried in there, somewhere, but he’d grown harder in the past ten years.

Rogue thought of his brother — where was Etienne?

She doubled over with a moan, digging her fingers into her scalp as a fresh burst of Theoren’s memories sped through her mind.

—

"He's got the devil's eyes," Etienne whispers heatedly.

Tucked beneath his arm, the top of his younger brother's head is a scraggy mop of dandelion yellow — so blond it's nearly orange at the roots.

Theoren peers down at him with a frown.

"Manners," he replies out of the corner of his mouth, turning back to the scruffy-looking nine-year-old standing between Oncle Jean Luc and his père, Belize. He feels Etienne's fingers tighten into the hem of his shirt, and cautiously, he pokes his head out from beneath Theoren's arm.

The kid, a scrawny-looking thing in clothing that had seen better days glances between Theoren, Etienne, Henri, and Emil with suspicion, as if trying to gauge which one of them is dominant in the motley crew of Thieves Guild children.

Unusual red on black eyes are narrowed to the point of being skeptical, but Theoren knows better. The child is taking their measure and assessing which one whose favor he'd need to win if he wants the run of the place. It's no wonder that Oncle has chosen to adopt him — the kid is shifty, his hands already dirty with the trade.

Finally, after a long stretch of staring on everyone's behalf, he peers up at Theoren and cocks an eyebrow. The gesture is exaggerated. It looks like he's been practicing in front of a mirror.

"You all gonna keep looking at me like you scraped me off the bottom of your shoes?" he asks, smirking. The expression is too old for such a young face.

"Not too far off, I don't think," Emil replies, scrunching his nose. It earns him a cuff upside the head courtesy of Henri.

Towering over them, Jean Luc grins. "Already makin' Remy feel welcome. Fantastique. We'll just leave you boys to it, then, hein?"

"You mind you brother, Theoren," Belize adds. "Your Oncle and I got some work to do."
Etienne's cheek brushes his forearm, and Theoren settles his hand on his brother's shoulder as the men leave the boys to get acquainted. The kid looks on with something close to apprehension, his freckled face turning upwards to gauge Theoren's reaction to the family's new addition, as if Theoren sets the standard — and the decision as to whether or not the newcomer is welcomed is really only up to him.

The boy must have some skill, elsewise, the elders of the Guild wouldn’t have welcomed him in as they did. Theoren trusts his father. He trusts Jean Luc.

This kid — Remy — must be important.

Theoren lets out a breath, offering Etienne a small nod; giving permission.

So help him, if this boy hurts a hair on his kid brothers’ head — it’ll be hell to pay.

"Have they always been like that?" Etienne whisper-asks, directing his question to the strange boy with the even stranger eyes.

Remy smirks, tipping his head to the side and crouching to Etienne's eye-level. It isn't much of a difference, since the nine-year-old is little more than a few inches taller than him.

"Why? Want a pair for yourself?"

Theoren stiffens, not liking the kid's tone. No one makes fun of Etienne and gets away with it when he's around.

Etienne doesn’t balk, to his credit, but the kid doesn’t back down. “Either you’ve gotta trade a bit of your soul to get a set of these, or, you best just mind the questions you’re askin’. Could be that you’re just being too forward.”

"And you’re not?" Theoren shoots back.

Remy straightens, puffing out his chest and taking a bold step closer. He has to crane his neck back to hold Theoren's gaze.

He scrutinizes him, sticking his lower lip out and narrowing his eyes. "Hard not to be," Remy replies. "Where I come from, you don't get nowhere bein' a pushover."

"Where you from?" Etienne asks, edging out from beneath Theoren's protective hold. For a second, Theoren considers yanking him backwards. This Remy punk is little more than carrion. For all they know, he might slip a knife into his brother's ribs if any of them turn away for just a second.

What the hell had pére and Oncle been thinking, bringing him here? A common street thief?

Without turning his head, Remy's gaze travels to Etienne, and Theoren's spine turns rigid.

"Everywhere," he replies, shrugging. A scuff of his worn-in sneakers against polished floors, the uncertain wedge of fingers into his belt loops is all it takes — it’s a tell.

"Anywhere," Remy adds, his shoulders sagging a little.

He’s probably never fit in, never known family or a real home… until now.

It is Etienne who seems to realize it first, before even Henri or Theoren himself. Emil, as it were, has a tendency to remain blissfully ignorant of even the subtlest nuances of character.
Etienne separates himself fully from Theoren’s side, swatting at the fingers that linger at the back of his coveralls. With reluctance, Theoren lets him go, but hovers just close enough to haul him away from the Guild's newest addition if Remy proves himself a threat.

"That's a pretty big place," Etienne says. “You think you gonna like it here after that? I mean, the mansion's pretty big, and I know there are a few good spots to hide out in, but it's not like…” He shifts uneasily. "Everywhere. I bet you seen a whole lot of the world, huh?"

The kid blinks, his scrawny frame slowing to a stop — like he's trying to figure out if the awe in Etienne’s face is genuine. Theoren watches him process. Decide.

After a moment, Remy grins: the smile changes his entire demeanour, lighting the gaunt planes of his face in a way that makes him look less hard, less filthy — almost endearing.

Just a kid after all.

Remy sticks his hand out, inviting Etienne to shake it. He’s made his decision, and as Theoren meets Henri’s raised eyebrows and Emil’s look of utter bafflement, he decides that perhaps Jean Luc and pére have their reasons after all.

"The name's Remy," he says. “Everywhere isn’t that great, but it sure gives you a few stories to tell.”

The smile Etienne gives him could light the entire city of New Orleans for a week.

“I like stories,” Etienne says.

——

A tower of flame rose from the spot where the card exploded beneath the weather witch. Storm reeled upwards, her trajectory thrown off course. Remy tore for the lip of the roof, darting around the flames and aiming for the narrow gap where Storm disappeared.

It had been a well-placed throw; the light from the charge lit the entire top of the building and the walls of the alley to the west. He could see perfectly, but more importantly, with his power spreading out around him, he found her tumbling though an air current, so he knew precisely where to reach her before they both took a bite out of the pavement.

Whoever said chivalry is dead hadn’t spent enough time in the South.

Remy leapt over the side of the building, legs sailing out behind him, pulling his bo from a back pocket and snapping it to full extension. Heading in a hurtling plummet towards the ground, he rushed towards the tumbling Storm, locked an arm around the X-Man's waist, and brought the staff horizontal. Sparks flew from where the ends of the adamantium rod ground against the building walls, slowing their momentum with the drag, but making a racket as the pair descended. He grit his teeth together, ignoring the strain in his shoulder and the nails-on-chalkboard sound of metal scraping against stone.

The staff snagged, bending beneath their shared weight and sending both their legs dropping beneath them.

For a moment, the pair bounced midair, the tendons in Remy's shoulder twanging as Storm turned
upwards to look at him, her hands resting lightly on his forearm, and her eyes a bright sky blue.

He grinned at her expression, trying not to wince.

The alley below them wasn’t more than another fifteen feet. He said a little prayer of thanks to no one in particular, and managed, "Stormy, you gotta lay off the chocolate," before his fingers slid off the staff.

—

Rogue groaned, the room coming into focus before her. Below her cheek, the floor was sticky with her own sweat, and with trembling arms, she pushed up just enough to see Theoren's profile again.

She couldn't understand it. The memories were sequenced, but buffered by other things that moved too quickly to pick out. Those would return later, she knew — those were transient things; flashes of people, snippets of laughter and shrieks, late nights, little sleep, days on end spent before a computer terminal, codes, numbers, passwords, security cracks, free time spent fishing on the bayou, playing Half-Life until dawn, and the sweet waft of perfume from a mother Theoren never knew — she'd died too young, a photo kept on a bedside table, Theoren’s maman with baby Etienne, celebrating Henri’s tilling, his first rite of passage, formal robes that were scratchy with starch, ritual incense tickling the nose, the thrum of pride in successful heists, the rush of adrenaline when alarms failed to go off, the dusty smell of the air vents — those memories would return to her when she slept and her subconscious tried to process them.

Rogue barely had time to register the wavering shape of Lapin as he padded back into the room, the crash of a glass pitcher and the bright green contents spilling across the floors.

They came at her again, voices coalescing together in a thick braid that wove around her mind and pulled her back under.

—

Custom dictates it.

Despite the heavy humidity that makes their suits sticky with sweat, they have spread their father out in the front room. The grey coffin with its white satin lining seems misplaced, like it had been belched up by some passing funerary procession and forgotten.

Theoren's hands are sweating on the linen shoulder pads of Etienne's suit. It was specially made in a drab shade nearly the colour of their father's final resting place.

Theoren wears black.

Outside, scattered around the gravel drive lined by bowed oaks offering their shade for the mid-afternoon procession, the band is warming up. It seems fitting, somehow, that Jean Luc would want to celebrate Belize's passing in the tradition of New Orleans — loudly, with the gaudy pomp and circumstance of a jazz funeral.
The horns spike, blaring noisily and drowning out the sounds of the gathered mourners who converse in hushed tones. They make him wince with their crass tuning, and yet, he can't ignore the sound.

"It'll be fine," Theoren says to Etienne in a strained voice.

"He doesn't smell like pére anymore," Etienne whispers. The boy can't tear his eyes away from the coffin, from the man at peace inside it.

The band starts a slow dirge, signaling the beginning of the processional. They will come to close the coffin soon. This is the boys’ last chance to say goodbye.

Theoren swallows tightly, unable to find the right words to tell Etienne how to continue: how to act, how to be strong. Instead, his hand grips his brother's shoulder tighter, fingers digging into the soft linen of a suit that makes the ten-year-old look older than he should. It makes Theoren feel older than he is.

"Theo?" Remy asks, stepping abreast of him. Theoren catches the movement out of the corner of his eye, the dark charcoal of Remy's jacket blurring into his features. "The band's starting," he says with quiet reluctance.

Opening his mouth, Theoren can't force the words out. He merely nods and squeezes his brother's shoulder once again. Etienne bows beneath his touch, his chin dropping to his chest and popping off his clip-on tie. Remy catches it deftly, sliding it into his pocket. His eyes stinging, Theoren looks to the boy, pleading with him.

Remy understands intrinsically, mimicking Theoren's gesture by placing his own hand on Etienne's shoulder. He glances up at Theoren and gives him a barely perceptible nod over Etienne's head. Relief uncoils in Theoren's chest as one tear spills over. He turns away before either child can see, but nonetheless, he is grateful that Remy is there.

Etienne sniffs, fat tears rolling off his chin into his shirt collar. Beneath Theoren's hand, his brother shakes with a sob. With only a little hesitation, Theoren lets him go as Remy tucks him against his side.

"Be strong, Et," Remy murmurs. Theoren sees his brother's delicate fingers clutch at Remy's hand, and he is grateful. He can't be strong for the both of them this moment. His whole world is about to be marched down to St. Louis Cemetery and slid into the family crypt.

Two pallbearers move into the room like shadows, flanking the three boys who still stand in the parlor. Theoren can only shake his head, his lungs constricting to the point of being painful as he wills the men away with the sudden, bottomless urge to scream. Leaning on the side of his father's coffin, fingers digging into the cold, bunched satin, Theoren chokes down his own tears.

"Viens," Remy murmurs, turning Etienne into his side so he won't see he eldest of the Guild boys break down.

Someone pulls Theo back, gloved hands guiding him so the pallbearers can seal Belize away. Theoren shakes his head, his teeth gritting together while ignoring the comforting silence of Jean Luc, who had no words to express the loss of Belize himself.

Remy urges Etienne forwards as they shut the lid.

"Come and kiss the coffin," Remy says. "It's a sign of respect, Et. You make you pére proud."
Remy makes *him* proud that moment, thinks Theoren as his adoptive cousin helps Etienne up to place a brief, shaky kiss on the smooth grey surface. It is Remy who covers the lid with a spray of gladiolus and calla lily — white flowers, the somber, creamy-colored blooms that smell like a mourner's perfume — and leads Etienne from the room.

Jean Luc follows, the floorboards soundless beneath his weight.

Outside, the first slow notes of the requiem carry to the house, filling the silence in Theoren's heart and head with a sweet ache, a longing for his father's guiding hand that will haunt him for the rest of his days.

When everyone is gone, Theoren permits himself a shaking breath, running his fingers through the decorative sprigs of baby's breath and imagining that he smells the grounding aroma of cedar beneath the cloying flowers and polished coffin wood.

—

"Not that I am ungrateful for your impromptu rescue, Gambit, but if you do not get off of me this instant —"

He rolled to the side, winded but alive and ever the more grateful for the pile of dumpster-spill they'd landed on. His heels squished in the plastic bags and cardboard boxes as he crossed his ankles, looking over at the woman at his side. Somehow, Storm still managed to look collected despite the fact that there was a banana peel clinging to her shoulder.

"We should do this again sometime." He grinned through a grimace, hefting himself to one elbow. Everything twanged. Discomfitted bones. New bruises and the like.

She peered at him askance, one delicate eyebrow raised.

"Or mebbe not," he conceded, flopping backwards onto the heap. "*Dieu*, that's gonna leave a mark."

"That was unprecedented."

He shrugged and it hurt. "Damsel in distress; was I'm pleasure to be of assistance. Truly," he added, though it was strained.

"Which you invariably caused."

He heard the slight, amused smile in her voice without having to look over.

"We gonna start fightin' again?" he asked with a sigh, more for the added drama gleaned through feigning exasperation. He could do it if he had to; he just didn't *want* to do it. To be blunt, even prostrate beside a goddess, Remy's thoughts were drawn back to the bayou and what waited for him there.

Storm rose. "I will ask once again, where is Rogue?"

It seemed like both of them were preoccupied with the very same thing. Remy peered at her out of the corner of his eye. "You want the address?"

She thought for a moment, plucking the browned fruit peel from her shoulder and depositing it on the
heap beside her. "I want the assurance that no harm has befallen her. Were you to show the same consideration to Rogue as you just have to me, then perhaps it would be fitting that I offered you an apology for my rash behavior. We have been… concerned for Rogue's well-being."

He raised an eyebrow. "That's an understatement, Stormy."

"Do not call me that."

"She's fine," he replied. "Decided to stay in tonight; we had a bit of a problem with some local riffraff," he explained, side-stepping the fact that the problem had in reality been two murders and a Voodoo Botanical that had been nuked from the inside out.

"Then Rogue has not used the Gem?" Storm pressed.

To his credit, Gambit didn't miss a beat. "That stupid rock has given me more problems than its worth."

He supposed he ought to have acted more surprised, but the X-Men were on top of their game as far as their tech went. Hefting himself off the pile of garbage and offering her a hand, Storm accepted with uncommon grace.

At Storm's stern look, he added in an undertone, "No, Rogue hasn't used the stone. The Gem in question happens to be missin' in action."

She breathed a sigh of near-relief, causing Remy to raise a quizzical eyebrow.

"I don't get it," he muttered. "For Rogue's family, the lot of you don't really seem to be too concerned with her quality of life dese days. You'd think you'd all be jumping for joy the instant she'd be able to control her mutation, but no — me? I get attacked for tryin' to be helpful."

"We have assumed the worst, Gambit," she said. "And perhaps with good reason. Your history — your reputation —"

"Precedes me, I'm sure."

"Can she?" she pressed.

"Can she what?"

"Are Rogue’s powers under her absolute control?"

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Remy," he corrected, but waved her on.

She frowned. Waited a beat.

Resigned, Storm nodded. "Remy."

Ah, an ally, he thought. You save a woman who probably could have saved herself from near-death, and how the tables turn. Remy cracked his spine with a groan and tried not to look too pleased with himself about dodging the question.

"The stone is dubious in its power. It is known as the Gem of Cyttorak, a powerful catalyst that may have adverse effects on those who abuse it."
"I'm fine," he returned. "And I used it."

The Gem of Cyttorak. He imbedded the name into his memory, imprinting it as best he could for later when needed. It seemed familiar, somehow, but offhand, he found he couldn't place it.

Storm stilled, peering at him with a gaze so piercing that he felt his expression settling into his regular, preferred mask of indifferent amusement.

"We have been informed of as such," she replied. "Though outwardly, you appear no different than our last encounter."

Remy cocked his head to the side, flashing a roguish grin. "That a compliment? 'Cause you not lookin' so bad yourself."

She pursed her lips, but her eyes shone with appreciation nonetheless, much like you would humor a small child who did something particularly cute. He ignored it. Remy's ego was just fine as it was.

"See this?" he asked, gesturing to the buildings surrounding them. "The amount of exertion it'd take for me to blow up a whole city block would be less than it takes for your friend Wolverine to lift a can of beer to his mouth."

"I certainly hope you have not tested that theory."

Remy shook his head. "Haven't had the occasion for it. Might be that my past casts a long shadow, but I promise you, my intentions are as pure as the driven snow.‘‘ He squinted into the night. ‘‘Bit of a bad habit, that — not exactly a team player. Get the impression that going it solo might look a little more plotty and nefarious than originally intended.‘‘ He lifted a shoulder in an indolent shrug. ‘‘That’s why she got that moniker, eh? Girl goes Rogue and you all act surprised. Last I checked, I presented an opportunity, and she took a chance on it. Fair’s fair. I’m the living success story — hard to argue with that."

"Our concern," Storm continued, "is not what the gem has already done to you but the potential outcome of exposing Rogue to the stone. As it is, Rogue stands as a class three mutant with latent abilities that are unpredictable, at best. We believe —"

"That's not my decision to make," Remy interrupted.

"Nor should it be Rogue's without proper council," Storm returned. "She is impulsive, much as I feel you are as well. You may feel that you have found a kindred spirit, Remy, but I caution you — if you claim to be unaware of the origins and potential of the gem, do not pursue it. For Rogue's sake."

Something told him he didn't want to hear the end of the conversation, but curiosity was getting the better of him. Partly, the nagging desire to demonstrate that in some way he did care for the girl was winning out, and partly, he found that if he was being honest with himself, it was the truth.

"That's a hard case, Stormy," he said, his expression neutral. "Considerin' all I been doing is for Rogue to begin with."

"The best you may do for her is to let her go, Remy."

"Ain't that the truth?" It was barely a growl. At his back, the sharp sound of six adamantium claws puncturing Wolverine's knuckles were dull background music for the sharp stab of pain Remy suddenly felt in his shoulder.
"Rogue!"

She gasped, shivering.

"Don't touch me!"

She keened, the sound giving way into a guttural moan and then a sob. Theoren’s words fell from her mouth, “Père! Père, oh Ah miss ya, père!”

"Mon dieu," Lapin breathed, hovering over the hunched girl, uncertain what he should do about the comatose Theoren sprawled a few feet away. It didn't look like he was about to get up anytime soon, but he was breathing.

More disturbing was that the red-faced, sobbing girl on the floor was alert — her eyes wide and shell-shocked. Though it seemed that Rogue wasn't looking at him directly, Lapin couldn't help but choke off a surprised exclamation when she turned her face to him, and her eyes shifted in colour like a switch had been flipped:

From vibrant green to the darkest brown, for a second it seemed as if Theoren was looking back at him from Rogue's face.

He… she… they looked terrified.

—

"Non, I don't think so, mon ami." Remy cuffs Etienne on the shoulder. "Too young."

"Pshaw! In less than a year, I'm gonna go on my tilling. Then what? Still gonna be too young, Rem?" Etienne shoots back. "'Sides, Theoren says it's ok. So let's go."

Remy glances around him, his red on black eyes glittering in the gloom of the overhanging cypress tree. He pauses as if weighing out the truth of the statement, but Emil, to his left, merely shrugs. The movement is backlit against the trees, the silhouettes of the three boys barely discernable in the midnight darkness.

“This wasn't my idea," Lapin mutters, the top of his head barely visible as he hunkers to whisper. "I think you’re lyin’ — Theo wouldn't let you out of his sight for more than two seconds. Why'd he say you could come now, hein?"

Remy grins — handsome features in a fourteen-year-old face widening in a brilliant smile over the little the tangle of stunted weeds.

None of them are hidden very well.

It’s Remy’s flash of teeth, shining in the shadows with a wicked gleam, that suggest Theoren should step out from around the corner of the Guild mansion, making his presence known by the security lights.
If he didn't know Remy better, the expression would have made him nervous.

The three boys squat in the weeds nearest the perimeter fence, a favorite spot of Remy's. Twice now, Theoren has caught him smoking cigarettes in the trees just overhead, but he hasn't yet said anything to Jean Luc. They have an agreement amongst themselves — a non-verbal concord that Remy is Etienne's watchman. It has been that way since his father's death three years prior. Theoren, in turn, says nothing about Remy's smoking even though it is against the rules.

In fact, Remy has a general disregard for the rules that borders on neurosis, but Jean Luc humors him, just like Belize once humored Theoren. He can relate to that, at the very least, even though Theoren's grown out of the mischief-making phase. That leaves him responsible for the boys who still seem to be neck-deep in it.

Propping his shoulder against the wall, Theoren continues to eavesdrop on the three teenagers without an ounce of guilt. Where Etienne was concerned, his kid brother's safety is his prerogative — and by association, Remy's.

"You sure, Et?" Remy asks. "Gonna be dangerous," he warns.

Emil drops his voice. "We could get…" he swallows with an exaggerated gulp, "…killed."

"I'm not scared," Etienne returns. There's boldness, and there's stupidity — the kid's young, still, and it's only marginally nerve-wracking that he tries so hard to prove himself to the older boys. He keeps up, besides. Takes it twice as hard, twice as often. It's impressive, really.

Theoren tries not to chuckle. Leave it to his brother to mimic Remy's style.

"'Course he's not." Theoren hears Remy clap his brother on the shoulder. "He's a Marceaux. He's gonna take after his big brother someday."

"Is it true Theo's gonna be the Harvest Master for the Guild?" Etienne asks.

Theoren smiles into his chest. The sound of admiration in his brother's voice rings pure in the way that only a twelve-year-old can muster when talking about the people they look up to.

He'd let him go this time. Remy would look after him; he always did. Granted, it didn't mean Theoren wouldn't worry. Between Lapin and Remy, they concocted enough trouble for the whole household.

Remy might be the family's black sheep, but it was Lapin who started the real trouble.

Jean Luc had the FBI on their backs when Emil had gotten his computer upgraded at Christmastime. Who would have thought the pipsqueak had a propensity for cryptology?

Remy's tendency to blow things up when he got excited wasn't half as bad as dealing with the feds. In the five years he's been a member of the LeBeau clan, Remy has proven his skill and quick thinking on more than one occasion. Letting Etienne out for a little bit of mischief before his tilling will be good for him, and with Remy looking out for Etienne, there isn't really anything to worry about… not too much, anyhow.

"Sure is," Remy replies, a little more loudly than before. It's as if he knows exactly how his voice carries, as if he knows exactly where Theoren stands and what it will take to be overheard. "Theoren's worked real hard to get where he is. Who else would be better for it, huh? Me?" he sniggers. "Your brother's a smart man, Et. Might not be all that much fun, but if anyone deserves Harvest Master, it's him."
Now Remy’s just buttering him up. He represses a chuckle.

Nah, nothing to worry about, Theoren decides, trying to ignore the swell of pride that accompanies Remy's praise and failing just the same. Smart kid. They wouldn't do anything too stupid, Theoren assures himself. He's just being overprotective.

Theoren hears the creaking of the metal fence a moment later as the three scale the wire mesh.

"So… what are we doin'?" Etienne asks, a hint of wariness evident in his tone.

The muffled thump of three pairs of feet is barely discernable over the bullfrogs' sonata from the swamp. Distantly, Theoren catches Remy's reply as the trio slides into the cover of the bayou. “There’s this plane Lapin and I found, thought we might go for a quick spin…”

Spin?

By the time Theoren reaches the fence, eyes wide and searching the darkness for the three teenagers, they are gone.

—

"Merde!" Remy swore, leaping out of the way before Wolverine could take another swipe at him. A blossom of blood spread across his shoulder, wrapping from the front to the back in three gristly gashes that sliced through his trench coat, through his tee shirt, and into the flesh beneath.

It stung, at first.

How the hell was he going to explain this to Rogue, he thought next.

"Logan, no!" Storm shouted, calling down a wind to force them apart.

The damage had been done, and if he hadn't been miffed before, Wolverine had done it with the turkey carving. Remy didn't think himself meaty enough for the job.

"That was a bad idea, mon ami — 'specially since Stormy and I were just arriving at an understanding."

“Oh yeah?" Wolverine growled. "Only thing I understand is that ya got your buddies to attack the mansion so you could steal Rogue away right under my nose. How'd she get to ya, Gambit? What did it take for Mystique to buy a two bit thief like you?"

Remy dropped to a crouch, cards slung between his fingers and glowing. He pressed a palm to the ground, feeling the cement, learning its structure before thrusting a charge into it and forcing it down the alley towards Wolverine.

"Don't know what you're talking 'bout, homme, but I'll tell you one thing, there ain't nothing two-bit about me."

The ground on either side of him ruptured, exploding upwards in a v of broken cement. A warning. Gambit pulled back his injured arm, grimacing at the tacky feel of warm blood sliding over his elbow and into his cupped palm, dampening his gloves. He shook it off.
"You're gonna be in a whole world of pain when I'm done with ya," Wolverine rumbled, brushing at the debris left on his shoulders. Remy merely smirked.

"Can't let bygones be bygones, hein?"

"Can't let ya do the same crap ya done to Rogue twice. I can't believe she hasn't seen though your act."

Remy snorted, tossing over his shoulder to Storm, "Who writes this homme's dialogue?"

"Who lets ya leave the house with that much cologne on?" Wolverine snarled.

"Same fille you're after by the looks of it, and Rogue likes it," he shot back.

"Stop this at once!" Storm bellowed. They ignored her.

"This is between me and Gumbo, Storm." Wolverine took a menacing step forwards, but somehow, the threat of the approach didn't inspire the dread he hoped for. Maybe it’d have been different if Gambit felt that Wolverine was actually a challenge.

“You gonna let this coyoon boss you around like that, Stormy?” he taunted.

Logan reddened beneath his mask.

"I will freeze both of you into the positions you are standing in if neither of you stand down!"

"Can't."

“Never gonna happen.”

"He had it coming."

"He's been wantin' a piece of me unsupervised for too long. Dirty old Wolvie," Remy clucked, baiting him. “And he almost took a chunk.” He inclined his head towards his shoulder.

"Powers actin' up, Gumbo?" Wolverine leered like he knew Remy hadn't seen him coming.

"Bones rustin' yet?" Remy shot back.

"Keep talking jail bait."

"Go take a nap, old man."

"Why don't ya try and make me, punk?"

"Sure, I'll put you to bed."

Storm exclaimed, "Clearly, there is far too much testosterone in this alley."

"Not for long," they replied in unison.

Wolverine glared. Remy chuckled.

"You kids all think you're invincible. Only one of us has a healing factor, bub," Logan snarled.

"That so?" Remy asked lightly, the cards crackling ever brighter as he brought them to his chest. "Let's test that mutation o’ yours, hein?"
He flung the cards, two hitting their mark on either side of the Wolverine and one exploding squarely over his gut.

"Gambit, no!" Storm yelled a moment too late. Wolverine was flung backwards with the explosion, a gaping hole visible where his stomach had once been.

"Musta misplaced my conscience," Gambit drawled, fingering the slices in his coat as he stood. "What's he talkin' 'bout, Stormy?" he asked, keeping one eye on Logan as he twitched against the concrete, claws dragging against the cement uselessly before retracting. "The both of you think I'm working for Mystique?"

Already, Logan's wound had begun to re-knit itself. Remy wasn't so lucky, his shoulder stung with a vengeance. It might've been a flesh wound, but he should have known Wolverine was creeping up on him. Why hadn't he sensed him with his spatial recognition?

There was no time to think on it. Storm landed before him, a buffer to prevent him from attacking as Wolverine healed. Her eyes were the colour of an avalanche.

"Mystique was last in possession of the Gem of Cyttorak," she said, glancing over her shoulder. Logan was still down, but there wasn't much time. Yet, she was helping him. Maybe it was because Remy was their only link to Rogue, and maybe Storm knew that having him killed wouldn't bring them any closer to finding her. Smart woman, he thought, gritting his teeth against the white-hot flare of pain in his arm. His fingers were slowly growing numb, and that was not a good sign.

"To our knowledge, she has been unaccounted for this past year," Storm continued. "We were led to believe that she might have contracted you to bring Rogue to her."

Remy's expression darkened, and he stood to full height. "Is this a joke?"

He thought of the third shadow — the tail that he'd lost only minutes ago.

Storm shook her head. "This is deadly serious. If not the stone itself, then the woman in possession of the stone —"

Wolverine stirred, and Remy cut her off.

"Tomorrow night. Come to the Quarter. Bring whoever you need, and we'll draw her out. If I know Mystique, she can't resist the lure of a good show," he said quickly. Neither could the Assassins, but that was a secondary consideration at this point. "I need to talk to my source."

He needed to talk to Tante. Tante knew all the goings on of the Quarter. The Guilds too. She might not be so forthcoming; hell, she was Switzerland when it came to Guild neutrality — be he was persuasive.

He needed to know if it was true.

"And Rogue?"

Remy had hauled himself up on a set of garbage cans, yanking his staff from the place where it stuck between the buildings. In two bounds, he was on the ground and running past Storm.

"She'll be there." If she doesn't kill me first, he added silently.

"You intend to lure Mystique out with Rogue?" Storm called after him.
Remy didn’t reply as he leapt onto the fire escape, barreling up the side of the building to collect his packages from the rooftop. The taste of shame in his mouth was too strong to talk around, though Storm continued to watch him as Remy made his escape.

—

"Rogue, snap out of it!" Lapin bellowed.

"Don't touch me, Lapin!" she gasped again. "It'll pass."

“You’re shaking — you’re not yourself — What's wrong with you?” he asked, leaning over her.

"What can I do?"

Her eyes bright and green once more, the edges pulsed with a roiling darkness. She shook her head.

"Ah… Ah absorbed Theoren when he touched my skin. It was an accident… Ah didn't mean t... gawd, it ain't done…” she moaned, bowing over. Rogue gripped her head, curling into a fetal ball, her bare toes scrunching with the strain.

"Does it hurt? Tell me what to do!" Lapin insisted.

"It's never been like this before…” She shuddered. With his palms curled into fists where he crouched next to the girl, Lapin first felt the heat radiating off her and mistook it as the sheer effort of trying to maintain control. When he looked down, however, he noticed the dim, spreading pool of fuchsia light. The floor glowed, a pulsating pink that edged from the point of contact between Rogue's body and the hardwood.

Lapin swallowed, edging backwards as the first dull burn of kinetic charge reached his fingertips.

"Rogue,” he croaked, for the first time, deathly frightened of what was happening. He'd seen Remy do the same thing once — and it hadn't ended well.

The only response she offered was a low ululation.

Lapin scuttled backwards, crablike, while the charge grew steadily stronger.

—

A mist has settled over the bayou. It crawls steadily in wisps and tendrils where the waterline recedes into the cypress. Twining to meet the dull night air like old friends grasping hands after a long time spent apart, the fog blankets and softens everything beneath its heavy hand.

It blurs the edges of the trees that line the gravel drive, making the black shapes hazy and dreamlike in the gloom.

Theoren sits on the porch in a rocker once favored by his father and waits for the boys to return home from Etienne’s tilling.
It is a rite of passage that dictates whether one will become a full member of the Thieves Guild of New Orleans, or whether one is permitted merely to live at the house, shunned from their rituals and kept forever away from the deeper secrets. There are benefits of being successful, of course — things that delve into the arcane. Their Benefactress measures out the futures of those worthy enough of the status, and Remy had found it bitterly amusing that Etienne's tilling should bring him to steal something from her home in Grenada, Spain.

Theoren does not think on her long. Rather, he contemplates Etienne's success, as it has been six days since both he and Remy, acting as shepherd, have left the Guild house. Remy's role is to oversee and not to intervene, to keep Etienne safe should trouble befall the boys and Etienne fail in his mission.

Nonetheless, six days is nearly too long, and Theoren can't help but sit pensively on the porch each night, awaiting their return, waiting for word whether or not his brother will be victorious, a man, a full Thief, or an outcast.

In the distance, shapes coalesce in the mists, mere shadows in the gloom that are inconsistent and changing as they draw closer. The distant rumble of motors break the stillness, and Theoren stands, his heart hammering.

The boys are home.

Two cars pull into the circular drive, black as pitch but visible with the security lights shining on their dew-kissed surfaces.

The doors open, and suddenly, Jean Luc is on the porch beside him. He wears an expression that is troubled, his mouth pinched together in a sharp line, his hand on Theoren's shoulder.

"Oncle?" he asks, distracted by the shape of Remy as he steps from the vehicle, bundled in blankets. The boy is soaked to the bone, supported by Henri's arm around his shoulders.

Etienne is nowhere in sight.

"There was an accident, as I understand it," Jean Luc mutters. "Henri called from the road."

Theoren can't look at him, instead, he fixes his attention on his cousin, the heat rising to his skull and putting pressure behind his eyes.

Remy freezes, three feet before the porch as the others cluster around him at a safe enough distance. His red eyes have dulled to the point where they are nearly as black as the sclera surrounding the irises. He is gaunt-looking, his hair wet and plastered to his forehead like he'd gone swimming fully dressed.

He stops in the middle of the lawn. No one else gets out of the car.

"Where is my brother?" he croaks. It's a whisper, but it makes Remy recoil like he's been slapped.

"Where is Etienne?" Theoren asks again, panic spreading in his chest like cold water.

Remy swallows, his jaw working as his eyes shine with a wash of tears. Theoren knows, even as he sinks to his knees, the impossibility of it a total unreality that puts him outside of himself — that leaves his ears ringing with he silence — that Remy has failed to protect his brother.

Etienne is dead.
Choices, Remy thought. It all came down to choices. Open one door and shut another. Then you live with the consequences.

At his age, he'd made far too many bad ones and even too many of those came back to bite him in the ass. As it were, the divide between right and wrong is a thin grey line that he'd been skirting for far too long.

With his cargo stuffed under his good arm, defending himself was a useless proposition.

Stopping by the first decent looking hatchback he came across, he didn't bother finessing the locks — he smashed a window, flung the dress box and painting into the passenger seat, and lobbed himself in after them.

The engine rolled over a minute later, wires crossed beneath the dash expertly. He extracted himself from beneath the steering wheel and peeled off into the night.

Mystique. He didn't want to believe it, but she was ruthless — and up until that moment, they had no explanation for the deaths of those two Assassins in the cemetery.

The problem was that Remy couldn't sort out a motive.

He smashed the steering wheel with his fist, driving straight through a red light and not caring in the slightest.

If Mystique was in possession of the stone, that meant it must have been Mystique who he'd met at the botanica. If she'd needed him alive, there was a possibility that Rogue's accusation that he had blown the place to bits was true. Mystique could have dragged him out of the rubble if he'd lost control if she still needed him, left him alive long enough to mull over his newfound powers and head back to Bayville thinking he was doing something good for a change.

He laughed at himself, shaking his head. “Have you lost your mind, boy-o?” he moaned without humor.

That's what he'd get for his troubles. It figured.

Maybe it wasn’t about Rogue at all.

The thought gave him pause. Revenge was a decided possibility, but what Mystique had against him in particular, he wasn’t sure. Gambit’s little black book of enemies spread multiple volumes, but if he’d rubbed Mystique wrong enough somewhere down the line, he wouldn’t be able to say why.

Chewing it over, Remy thought of Jean Luc — his past tete-a-tetes with Rogue about their parents — and concluded he was the chump in the middle. The facilitator. The messenger and the lure.

Knowing the similarities of their parenting styles — if you could call them that — he wouldn’t put it past Mystique to be fixating on the end goal: Rogue.

She’d done it before after all. Got herself cementified for the trouble.

And he'd dragged Rogue right into it, just like Mystique would have wanted… but what did she
want with her daughter after all this time?

He didn't know. He didn't know. What would Rogue think?

She'd never believe him.

She barely trusted him as is.

"Merde!" he swore, nearly missing the turn off into Baton Rouge. The car skidded as he yanked the wheel around.

Worse, it was his own damned fault for not coming clean sooner. That was the problem, wasn't it? He could have told her about Belle, about Etienne, of all things — and maybe she'd hate him for a while, but she'd have the truth of his life up front for examination.

He could have said he had nothing to hide from her, but his own hang-ups had left him uneasy confessing all of it. More importantly, it would have been a bold-faced lie. He had his own agenda, one that scraped the edges of involving Rogue, but up until now, hadn't directly. Better to be guilty by omission that guilty through confession. Fatally flawed, he was — and now he was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Mystique used him to get to Rogue, and Rogue… Remy grimaced. She'd never forgive him for this if he told her. The thought dug into a place below his ribs, making his lungs constrict. It shouldn't hurt so much, he thought. It shouldn't be this hard.

Whatever happened to boy meets girl, girl likes boy, boy and girl run off into the sunset together on the back of a motorbike?

The stuff of fairy tales. Dieu, he hadn't known he wanted to give that to her until that moment, but he did, and it stung.

Peering at the dress box beside him, Remy stilled, his hands loosening on the steering wheel.

He'd bought himself twenty-four hours. Borrowed time, but still enough to make things right between them. Maybe. He couldn't hope for it, but he could risk it. He swallowed tightly, realizing the value of what he was about to do. He would tell her everything, anything, all of it. He'd lay it all out on the table before them, hold her hand, and tell her he was wrong, that he'd miscalculated. If Rogue valued honesty as much as she claimed, it would mean more to her than trying to absolve them of the mess he'd made. She'd be hurt. She might never even want to see him again, but if it kept her safe from Mystique, if he could do that for her, then it was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

Remy took a calming breath, his shoulders relaxing, and he slid lower in the seat. The engine protested, the car rattling as he shifted gears.

Inwardly, he settled. Somber composure loosened his limbs and heart as Remy made his decision.

If it was all going to go to shit anyway, then why not make it worth their while? Why not roll the dice a little harder? Why not draw out the bluff? Why not?

Remy smirked, a slow upwards curving of the side of his mouth that spoke of self-defeat so deep that it cut worse than the lacerations over his shoulder. He pulled out a deck of cards with his free hand, smearing blood across the faces as he fanned them out before him.

Chances. He had fifty-two of them.
"Rogue! Stop it before you hurt yourself!" Lapin bellowed across the room, his back pressed into the far wall.

On the ground, hands fisted before her, Rogue drew herself fully to her knees. Her shoulders rose and fell, breathing too hard for the level of power she was exerting. Slowly, the kinetic charge spreading across the floor to Lapin's feet dimmed, crawling back into her.

He breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived.

Through the shock of hair failing over Rogue's face, she tipped her head to the side and peered at him coolly. Shadows fell into her eyes, keeping her expression hidden. He knew one thing for certain; she wasn't smiling.

“They said it was an accident,” she murmured, her voice pitched so low that it was barely a rumble in her chest. “And I remember much of that night, and the night when they found my poor brother. Remy got lucky, like he usually does.” Her mouth twisted in a familiar, bitter expression that Lapin recognized. His heart hammered, but he didn’t dare look away from her. Didn’t dare check to see Theoren in a pile nearby, and not speaking through Rogue’s mouth like she was a puppet.

“But Etienne,” she continued. “He drowned. Why do you think that is, Emil? Why was Remy picked up by that fishin’ trawler, and they couldn’t find Etienne’s body until three weeks later? There was barely anything left of him by then, and I would know — I had to identify the body.”

Lapin froze, pinned by her stare — not willing to move forwards; without enough space to press himself through the wall.

Backed into a corner, Lapin had no place to run.

"Do you know what three weeks of water damage does to a corpse?" she asked in Theoren's voice.

"Do you know how swollen Etienne was? The colour of his skin grey? his fingers the size of sausages — so bloated the nails had fallen off? I couldn't even touch him, Emil. I couldn't bring myself to hold his hand, thinkin' the skin would slide right off his bones."

Lapin swallowed.

"Rogue?"

She shook her head slowly, turning to the sprawled body of Theoren nearby.

"He didn't look peaceful, Emil. He looked rotten. That's no way for a kid to go."

Lapin caught a sliver of her expression, the darkened shade of her pupils as she turned to him, and from Rogue's face, Theoren's eyes stared back at him.

"It wasn't your fault," he said, unsure of whether he was actually talking to Theoren or Rogue. The expression she favored him with was uncanny; making his mouth go dry with the familiarity of that reproachful look.

That's why.

—

That's why.

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“They said it was an accident,” she murmured, her voice pitched so low that it was barely a rumble in her chest. “And I remember much of that night, and the night when they found my poor brother. Remy got lucky, like he usually does.” Her mouth twisted in a familiar, bitter expression that Lapin recognized. His heart hammered, but he didn’t dare look away from her. Didn’t dare check to see Theoren in a pile nearby, and not speaking through Rogue’s mouth like she was a puppet.

“But Etienne,” she continued. “He drowned. Why do you think that is, Emil? Why was Remy picked up by that fishin’ trawler, and they couldn’t find Etienne’s body until three weeks later? There was barely anything left of him by then, and I would know — I had to identify the body.”

Lapin froze, pinned by her stare — not willing to move forwards; without enough space to press himself through the wall.

Backed into a corner, Lapin had no place to run.

"Do you know what three weeks of water damage does to a corpse?" she asked in Theoren's voice.

"Do you know how swollen Etienne was? The colour of his skin grey? his fingers the size of sausages — so bloated the nails had fallen off? I couldn't even touch him, Emil. I couldn't bring myself to hold his hand, thinkin’ the skin would slide right off his bones."

Lapin swallowed.

"Rogue?"

She shook her head slowly, turning to the sprawled body of Theoren nearby.

"He didn't look peaceful, Emil. He looked rotten. That's no way for a kid to go."

Lapin caught a sliver of her expression, the darkened shade of her pupils as she turned to him, and from Rogue's face, Theoren's eyes stared back at him.

"It wasn't your fault," he said, unsure of whether he was actually talking to Theoren or Rogue. The expression she favored him with was uncanny; making his mouth go dry with the familiarity of that reproachful look.
Rogue's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I know that now. It was Remy's."

Lapin tried not to shiver at the twist of her mouth, the cold, narrow glare she gave him. It was a look of hatred so pure that it made the hair on the backs of his arms stand at attention.

"I trusted him with my brother's life, Emil. Remy saved himself before he even thought of Etienne."

Rogue/Theoren paused, her hands fisting atop her thighs as her composure broke and she slammed a fist into the floor. She didn't even flinch, though she rubbed at the knuckles lightly.

"It shoulda been him," she said, the calmness of her tone splintered by emphasis she placed on the last words. Deep down, Lapin knew Theoren believed exactly that:

It was Theoren’s greatest failure, one that he'd never acknowledge. Rogue had done it for him.

Rogue/Theoren turned away, tipping her head to the side as if finally seeing the unconscious body to her right.

"Emil," she said levelly, in that no-nonsense tone that Theoren always used when he was running short of patience. "Dit moi, why am I on the floor over there, when I'm talkin' to you from over here?"

—

The Guild house was quiet, light spilling in slats from the porch as Remy weaved through the trees with his burden. Henri's car was gone, which meant he'd received a call from Tante to collect her.

Good. That was good. He let out a breath, finding his nerves to be a distasteful rattle in his stomach.

He swallowed it down, mentally forcing his mind into a blank. The more Remy thought about what he would say to Rogue, the more it pained him to think about how Rogue would react.

It would bring them back to square one, shunting them into the place they'd been last year when he'd manipulated her for the first time. It made him sick to think of it, the brush of trees lining the property laughing at him all the while, though he knew he'd brought it on himself again, despite his good intentions.

What would it mean to lose her, he wondered. Was it even possible to lose something you never had to begin with?

He knew intimately that the answer to that was a resounding "yes." The like had happened with Belladonna, once upon a time. The thought made him slow his pace to a sluggish drag through the corridors, heading for the server room where the Thieves conducted their deliberations.

His head swam, an uncomfortable blotting of his thoughts from too much blood loss. Regret followed him through the corridors, leaving a long, dotted trail of red drips behind him.

—
"Get outta my head!" Rogue gasped, her eyes shifting once more.

It was like a hand had gripped her around the base of her skull and begun squeezing as she forced Theoren out. He protested loudly, his voice echoing in her mind.

She peered up at Lapin, her eyes tearing with the effort of holding the psyche back.

"It's fine," she ground out. "He's just bein' an asshole."

Lapin looked between Rogue and Theoren.

“Control freak,” she breathed, choking a laugh. “Domineering sonofa — lordy, Ah need a drink,” she laughed without mirth, squeezing her eyes shut.

A ripple of fresh loathing bubbled upwards, but it wasn't directed at her. Theoren's psyche did not belong to a happy man, and was less contented with the fact that he had to share his life with her, of all people.

"What do I do?" Lapin asked, still squashed into the corner as far away as possible.

"Nothing," Rogue breathed, gasping as spots threatened to wipe out her vision. The psyche was going to give her a migraine if he didn't settle down soon.

“You talked to me in his voice,” Lapin said, his voice too shrill to be welcome at that moment, even if it indicated she was back to reality. Rogue waved at him, trying to get him to hush up so she could concentrate. “You charged up the floor like Remy!” he insisted. “And than it just disappeared!”

Rogue groaned, pushing her fingers into her temples, her eyes still shut.

Theoren’s psyche spat something at her angrily, and she hissed out loud.

"It was the part of me that absorbed Remy reactin' ta Theoren. They don't like each other too much, if ya haven't already gathered.” And now she knew why. Rogue forced herself to swallow back bile, determined not to let Theoren gain control again. She'd throw up with the strain before that, she vowed.

A thud at the door.

—

"Lil' help, s'il-vous-plait?"

"Fils de putain!" Lapin cried, scrabbling out from the corner.

Rogue looked up, her eyes slanted, turning just enough to see Remy sagging against the doorframe, his arm hanging limply at his side. His shoulder was soaked in blood so dark it was nearly black in the dim light.

"I left my Queen o' Hearts," he chuckled; fingering the three large slashes in his jacket that crossed his shoulder. His fingers came away smeared red. “And that damn coyoon ruined my favorite coat.”

She couldn't get up. Theoren bellowed something obscene in her head at the sight of him, and Rogue
clamped her fingers into her hair, trying to direct the pain elsewhere as she pulled on the roots.

"Chére?" Remy looked between Theoren on the floor, unconscious, and Rogue, doubled over and clutching the sides of her face. A cold sweat broke out over her forehead as she struggled with the psyche. Remy watched, transfixed, as her eyes bled from green to brown, bordering on the colour of coal, and back again.

"He's inside my head," she hissed through grit teeth.

"Your bleeding!" Lapin echoed.

His heart sped up; all sense, all reasoning wiped clean away. The look of pain on her face, Rogue struggling with his demons, was too much. He wanted to protect her, he realized, he wanted to take that ache away from her even if she hated him for the way he did it — but he knew, then and there, that he couldn't cause her any more agony.

Not like this.

His palms were sweating as he dropped his packages, his heart climbing to his throat.

Remy walked over, his footfalls even despite his injury. Already, Lapin was trying to pull his coat off him. Wincing, Remy let him tug the jacket off as he kneeled in front of her.

Just like that, the game changes, he thought distantly.

—

"Remy, gawd... stay away from me or Ah swear Ah'll hit ya," she bit out, her eyes tearing.

Three large slashes lanced across Remy's shoulder, exposing three matching cuts beneath. The wounds were cleanly made; so precise that she shuddered at the stain that spread over his chest, a mixed wash of emotion twisting her features. From concern to satisfaction, she moaned through gritted teeth while Lapin fussed at his side, prodding at his injury.

"It's just a scratch," he said to both of them, reaching for Rogue with unsteady fingers, finding her knees. Pressing gently for her attention even though it hurt to do so.

"I'll get the first aid kit," Lapin said fervently, leaning over him. "Remy, you gotta lie down."

He batted him off, spreading his palms over the tops of Rogue's thighs and forcing her to look at him. His fingers left a messy smear of scarlet behind on her sweatpants.

"He touched you?" he asked.

Rogue searched him, something at war within her. She grit her teeth. Let out a whimper, and nodded. A swell of anger so strong brought the heat to his face as he looked over at Theoren's form. He'd hurt Rogue, maybe to get back at him, or maybe not — but that wasn't something he'd let slide.

"How could you leave him, Remy?" she ground out, her voice sinking into a low baritone, fraught with an old pain that wasn't hers. "How could ya do that to me? To Etienne? He loved you like a brother!"
"Rogue, look at me," he instructed. "Now."

She shook her head, wincing as if she were hearing things that he himself couldn't. Theoren's psyche yelling, Remy concluded. He would do that.

"It hurts. He's hurtin' me," she moaned. It was a sorry sound that made Remy's anger sharper than ever. This was his fault. He could have told her, and she would have been prepared for the worst. He could have stayed with her and kept her safe from his cousin and his cousin's vendettas, but he hadn't. He was to blame, and for a moment, Remy understood that there were things he could never tell Rogue — things that would make her feel towards him the things Theoren did. She wouldn't understand, and if he could protect her from those parts of himself — he'd stop at nothing to do so.

He couldn't bear knowing that he was responsible for the look on her face.

"Look at me, Rogue," Remy said evenly. Her eyes unfocused, Rogue forced herself to meet his gaze, as gradually, they settled into a murky green.

—

A sudden eruption of pain burst at the base of her neck, and then, it dulled. Remy's eyes were glowing.

"You will be fine, chérie." An echo of his words from long ago. "Theoren can't hurt you anymore. He's passed out, and his psyche is very, very tired."

Slowly, she lifted her head. It felt like her mind had suddenly disengaged from the rest of her body. She tipped her face to him willingly, blinking away the last slivers of pain. It felt fine. Theoren's psyche quieted as if Remy had turned the volume down on him, until the loud, angry French became little more than a hushed whisper at the back of her skull.

Gently, his blood-covered fingers staining the fingertips of her bleached white gloves, Remy tucked his hand beneath hers, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. That felt good too, she decided. His eyes didn't leave hers, and Rogue understood with the dull, anesthetized acceptance of hypnosis that he was helping her. He'd charmed both her and Theoren's psyche.

"It's not you Theoren's mad at," he assured her calmly.

Distantly, Rogue knew Lapin was fidgeting beside him, a wadded roll of gauze in his hand, and Remy was bleeding freely. It rolled in rivulets down his elbow, puddling on the floor beside him.

"I'm sorry, Rogue," he said, lifting the heavy blanket of his powers for just a moment, allowing her the freedom to accept the apology herself without his interference. The voice inside her head had quieted. Theoren was nothing more than a hushed whisper. Slowly, Rogue nodded.

"Later." It was little more than a puff of breath. "We'll talk about it later."

Her throat was awfully dry, and despite Theoren's psyche being shut up stoically by Remy's natural abilities, Rogue found herself having a sudden yen for the green smoothie spilled across the floor. Somehow, she knew it'd require a chaser — bourbon would be best. She wet her lips, less disgusted with the craving knowing that it wasn't hers. Hell, if it kept Theoren quiet, she'd down whatever she had to — green or violent purple. If it was wet, it was fine by her.
"You're bleeding all over me, Remy," she croaked, her eyes growing dewy with tears.

He smiled a little at that, still holding onto her hands gently. He brought her knuckles to his mouth, placing a lingering kiss on the fabric. Something swam in his eyes as he smiled at her, a touch of sadness, perhaps — something deeper than his usual expression. Maybe it was delirium setting in after he'd lost too much blood.

"Sorry." He shrugged, still giving her that soul wrenching smile and not giving a damn that he was bleeding. He didn't let go of her hand as Lapin fussed at his side, trying to force on a pair of latex gloves. They stuck to his shaking fingers awkwardly, ballooning at the palms in a web of plastic, fingers flopping half-off his hands.

Rogue sobbed openly, half-laughing with relief. It was all too much, all at once, and no matter what Remy could do with his hypnosis, it didn't blot out the memories — those swam to the surface, making her heart clench.

"Lapin — gimme those darn gloves. Ah'll do it," she managed with a hearty sniff.

Shakily, Lapin flopped backwards onto his butt beside them, a wad of gauze in one hand, the contents of the first aid kit hastily scattered around him, and the latex gloves held out unsteadily to Rogue.

"Merde." He barked a harsh laugh. "I need a drink."

"Bourbon," Rogue said automatically, her voice cracking, tears still running freely over her cheeks.

"Bring the bottle," Remy added.


Chapter End Notes

Translators:

Mes fils: My sons
Mon fils: My son
Oui, pére?: Yes, father?
Homme: man
Fille: girl
Fils de putain: Son of a bitch!
Viens : come
mon ami : my friend
Merde: Shit
Dit moi: Tell me
s’il-vous-plait: Please
Post Script:

Shade Work: Markings placed on the backs of cards, additions made to the natural design (as additional circles on a clock face or spokes on a bicycle wheel), for the use of cheating players or dealers.

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