Allegiance

The battle lines after the White House Incident have been drawn, and there's no question who the enemy is. At least, not until Beast meets Vixen, a feral female and a Brotherhood member. Things get complicated when first attraction and then love get in the way. X-Men vs. Brotherhood, following their hearts vs. their ideals- in the end, where will their allegiance lie? Set Post-DOFP AU. Originally posted on fanfiction.net.
January 27, 1973

Just a trifling, non-scientific observation: It hurts a lot to jump out of a third story window. Even if you're a feral mutant and a metal-bending madman breaks your fall.

In fact, it's almost as painful as seeing the woman you've been in love with for years for the first time in a decade and having her completely ignore you.

But the horrible, marvelous thing about humanity- mutanity?- is that we can live with an astonishing amount of pain. We don't thrive- nay, we suffer, we trudge, we wonder how on earth we will go on- but somehow we survive.

I learned that living with Charles for the past decade. Watching my dearest (basically only) friend, my mentor, and the man I respect above all others in the world waste away from grief and drug addiction has taught me some very hard lessons I won't soon forget.

So shaking off the bone-jarring impact with the ground outside the Hotel Majestic is relatively easy. The crowd of watching humans screams as I roar and grab Erik Lehnsherr, professional sociopath, by the collar and throw him into the hotel's fountain.

It feels good to bash the back of his head into the fountain's bottom, a guilty pleasure to watch him thrash around underwater as I snarl in his face.

Sending a bevy of missiles at the American and Soviet navies, putting a bullet in Charles' back, leaving him bleeding on that Cuban beach, taking Raven with him and then trying to kill her today... His list of sins are endless, and I can't say I would feel much remorse if he died.

But then, just as Erik's flailing ceases, I feel myself being wrenched up and away from my prey. He sits up and looks on with grim satisfaction as the metal decorations of the fountain twist around my body and bind me in place.

I struggle to get away, but I'm held fast. On display, roaring in useless fury like a trapped animal at the zoo for the gawking humans to ogle. I've never felt so exposed, so hideous.

And that's saying something.

Humiliation clouds my vision as Erik moves away, flinging people out of his way with supreme unconcern as he searches for Raven. I can only hope that I gave her enough of a head start to escape him.

The clicking of photographs being taken and the steady whirl of the cameras witnessing my shame seem thunderous in my ears as the crowd falls silent while I hang there, trapped.

Now I know exactly how an ant under a magnifying glass feels. It's like their frightened, disgusted stares are searing my very skin.

I'm a captured animal, my degradation a source of horrified fascination for them all. A beast in the truest sense. And no matter how hard I strain, I can't break free from my metal bonds.
Movement in the crowd suddenly catches my attention- a solitary, black-cloaked figure running towards me, pushing past the other onlookers. I can tell it's a female from the high-heeled boots she's wearing.

She makes an impressive leap into the fountain and somehow manages to land on me, gripping my thigh with her knees.

"Hi," she says cheerfully, like we're just two strangers meeting in the street. "Hold still for a second, ok?"

"W-what are you doing?" I ask, completely taken aback by her sudden appearance.

She's pretty in a sweet and innocent girl-next-door sort of way- white-blonde hair peeking out from under her hood, a full mouth that's too large for her jawline and smallish chin, and a cute nose and cheekbones that have a light scattering of freckles across them. Her large, hazel eyes are a tawny brown around the pupil that fades to beryl green, encircled by black around the edge of the iris and framed by long, dusky-blonde lashes.

The woman snorts disbelievingly and peers up at the metal holding my wrists in place. "What does it look like I'm doing?" she retorts. "I'm trying to get you out of this. You don't exactly match the decor."

I can only open and close my mouth like a dying fish as she pulls a knife out of her boot and uses it to cut through my bindings like butter. My immediate thought is **wow, where can I get one of those? It's very handy.**

"Thank you," I murmur hoarsely, fervently once she's done.

Her lips twitch up into a reluctant, amused grin, revealing a set of dainty little fangs on the first incisors and canines of her top and bottom jaw. I note the fact that underneath the hood of her cloak her ears are pointed, like an elf's, and the tips poke out of her hair.

"You're welcome," she replies. "Good luck."

She leans in and gives me a swift kiss on the cheek, leaving my skin burning and my head reeling. She smells very nice, like flowers and sunshine. Based on her scent, I highly suspect she's also a feral mutant.

Like myself.

The woman hops off of me before I can say anything else. She lands on the edge of the fountain with the grace of a bird and takes off running. She clears a police vehicle in one leap-

And disappears into the horrified crowd again.

I untangle my legs from the metal cables and drop down into the fountain with a splash.

Free. I'm free.

That girl, for whatever reason, freed me.

I rise immediately and run away from the scene of my humiliation on all fours, fleeing the horrified stares of the crowd. The way they cower away from me only spurs me to move faster, back to the safety of Charles' private plane.
How ironic is it that a mutant showed more mercy and humanity than all of those humans combined? I can only guess what horrible things the authorities would've done to me had they caught me. The diminutive scientist we just saved from assassination, Dr. Trask, would've had a field day.

But that woman saved my life.

I wonder- will I ever see her again?
"Sounds like the Brotherhood is hitting up an Agent Orange shipment tonight," Alex announces after entering my laboratory (may I add that he did so without knocking?) late one evening at the beginning of March. "Charles wants us to head them off at the origin facility."

I nod, stifling a sigh of annoyance. My plan tonight was to work on a DNA sequence analysis, but it's clear that's not meant to be.

But I know I shouldn't complain, so I don't.

After all, after years of watching Charles wither away from grief and apathy before my eyes, seeing him put forth an effort is extremely gratifying.

I spent years taking care of him after he lost all that he cared about- his best friend, his adoptive sister, his lover, his legs, and then, the one thing that kept him afloat: his school.

It was a thankless task, looking after Charles as he descended into alcoholism and serum-addiction, the very serum I created to give him back his legs, because I suppose I hoped that by giving him back one thing it would make him forget everything else he lost.

That didn't work, of course.

The serum I created had an unexpected side-effect: it took away Charles' telepathy, a condition that he welcomed at the time. I think he relished the feeling of emptiness, of being alone in his own head after years of hearing other people's thoughts.

But not only that... I think the serum took away a large part of himself. The Charles I knew, back before Cuba and the events that followed, was an unmitigated idealist, a man who looked for the good in others no matter what. That man disappeared in the intervening years, leaving a rude, angry drunk who endlessly tried my patience and deliberately made hurtful comments.

Honestly, at this point I'm like an insult Navy SEAL.

But I didn't give up hope that things would turn around, and for good reason as it turned out. Everything changed last January, when we received a message from the future in the form of Logan- the Wolverine- who came to warn us that if we allowed Raven Darkholme, Charles' erstwhile adopted sister, to complete her mission and kill Dr. Bolivar Trask it would cause an apocalypse. Charles, after eight years of languishing inactivity and self-pity, was finally goaded into action to save his sister from herself.

And thankfully we succeeded. Raven gave up her mission. But rather than coming home to her brother, she chose to go her own way and leave us again.

I can still remember the tiny smile she gave to Charles, the way it faded as her eyes met mine as she finally, finally looked at me for the first time in over a decade.

The way Raven looked down, exhaled, and walked away again.
From both of us.

I try (and fail) to ignore the sudden burning, tight feeling in my chest at the thought. It's hard to accept being dismissed like that, to know that you don't matter at all to someone after loving them for so long.

It would probably be easier to move past it if I had something even remotely resembling a social life.

Alex is staring at me with growing irritation as I sit there, lost in my own thoughts. I think at times like this he wonders if I have some sort of attention deficit issue.


He agrees and leads the way over to the locker rooms, where we put on our uniforms. Mine is laughably loose until I shift into Beast, bringing my feral half to the forefront of my mind and giving him free reign.

Beast is a part of myself I don't like to acknowledge much. My feral personality is still a source of shame for me, despite his obvious uses when it comes to combat. Beast is the Mr. Hyde to my Dr. Jekyll- all instinct and animal rage- with the added absolute joy of making me look like an outlandish cross between a blueberry and a gorilla.

Can you really blame me for my lack of enthusiasm?

Within minutes we're joined by Sam, Scott, Ororo, Jean and Warren. Sam, also known as Cannonball, is the only other adult on our team besides Alex and myself. The rest are only sixteen years old.

It's a fact that makes me uncomfortable still, even though this is by no means our first mission together and the four of them have more than proven themselves in the field. The fact that all of them volunteered to be X-Men is slightly soothing to my conscience. I was only seventeen when Cuba happened, and Alex has trained our comrades well. Certainly better than we were back then.

The others listen intently as he explains the situation.

"Logically speaking, the Brotherhood is most likely to hit the supply truck on the road because the security will be minimal," Alex says. "I think we'd better head straight for the facility and just keep the shipment from leaving in the first place."

"What's the Brotherhood after, anyway?" Ororo asks when he's done.

"Agent Orange," Alex replies, his tone serious.

"I don't even want to think about why they want that stuff," Warren mutters.

"Agreed," our field leader says. "So let's get going."

Our target is in New Jersey, only a short jet ride away. There's a silence between all of us during the trip, that sort of quiet that falls when you're completely focusing on the mission to come. It's too highly-charged to truly be comfortable.

Alex sends Warren- Angel- out to do some aerial surveillance once we arrive at the factory. All is quiet and deserted from our view, which worries me immensely. Shouldn't we see men loading the supplies into a truck for shipment or something?
Angel confirms the lack of activity when he returns, landing on the ground with a soft thud.

"There's nothing going on, from what I can see," he reports. "But there are three entrances, all unmanned."

Alex frowns, as do I.

Who keep an incredibly toxic herbicide under such lax security?

*Hello America, your tax dollars at work.*

"The loading dock must be underground," I hypothesize. "Like the Blackbird hangar is."

"But where are the guards?" Cyclops wonders aloud.

I suddenly have a sinking suspicion that the Brotherhood is three steps ahead of us tonight.

"Beast, Cyclops, you go for the east entrance," Alex orders, his voice harsh with anxiety that we're too late. "Cannonball, take Storm and Angel to the west. Marvel Girl, you're with me. Only engage if absolutely necessary, you got it? And radio in immediately if you find the shipment."

The effect of his words is immediate as all of us begin to execute his orders like a well-oiled machine. That moment of hesitation that comes from second-guessing orders can easily get you killed.

And none of us have any interest in dying tonight.
It's You

It's You

I view the broken security access panel for the facility door with dismay- the odd marks on it are sure signs that the Scarlet Witch is here, working the strange energy manipulations I've heard her refer to as "hexes."

Her presence means that Quicksilver is here as well, since one twin is never without the other. I regret to say that Erik's message of mutant superiority won out in the mind of the kleptomaniac speedster who helped us last year, a failure that I think still haunts Charles.

As for what other members of the Brotherhood are present tonight, I'm sure I'll find out all too soon.

"Ready?" Cyclops- Scott- asks quietly. His hand is held at the ready on the switch of the red quartz visor I made for him. It controls the flow of the energy beams that constantly blast from his eyes.

I nod and kick the door open, immediately darting out of the way to give him a clear shot just in case.

But there's no one there.

No one but the missing security guards, that is. Their prone forms lay neatly in a row just inside the door.

We enter the small reception area with care, knowing that the Brotherhood could be anywhere at this point. Cyclops keeps watch as I kneel down to check the vitals of the guards.

"They're just unconscious," I tell him with no small amount of relief. Human lives tend not to mean much to Erik's followers.

I stand, and together we proceed further into the building. My steps are silent even to my own ears, though Cyclops' are obviously a little louder. Still, he's not bad for a non-feral.

The next room is a large suite of cubicles, which brings visions of pitiable office drones hunched over cramped desks to mind. The poor souls.

I'm just thinking that it wouldn't hurt to take a look at some company files, just to see what else this facility is up to, when movement across the room catches my eye.

Two mutants are now watching us, their appearance so sudden it's as if they materialized out of thin air like ghosts.

The one standing in front of the door is male, of middling height and wiry in a solid black jumpsuit and a calf-length cloak. His hazel-green eyes bore into mine aggressively when my gaze meets his, and his lips curl back to reveal a decent-sized set of fangs.

Wonderful. Another feral male.

Looks like I know who's coming for me if this turns into a physical fight.

Oh, who am I kidding? I know it is. These two are clearly Brotherhood members, and they won't
let us by without dispute.

My gaze shifts to the other newcomer, who's perched on a cubicle wall like some sort of black-cloaked bird.

This one's a woman, platinum-blonde and petite in an outfit similar to her companion and wearing blood-red lipstick and dark eye makeup. She smiles- revealing dainty fangs that enhance her rather vampish image- when I look at her, though it doesn't seem like a gesture of friendliness. It feels more ironic, like I amuse her somehow.

Something about her disturbs me immensely. I have no idea why, but this woman bothers me.

My observations take less than a second, but apparently that was too much time. Cyclops is already sending an optic blast straight for the door, and the feral in front of it.

He doesn't waste any time, does he? Sometimes Scott Summers reminds me so much of his brother it's eerie.

The male feral darts out of the way just in time, leaving the way clear for me to attempt a charge for the door. The goal is still to find that Agent Orange shipment, and the only way to do that is to go forward.

I'm only a few steps away when movement on my right alerts me that I'm about to be in big trouble. I turn my head just in time to get the female's boot in my face. A searing pain tells me that she probably just fractured my cheekbone.

Um, ow.

The blow is powerful enough that I lose my footing and stumble to the side. By the time I recover the woman is poised in a defensive crouch between the door and myself.

There's commotion to my left, drawing my eyes. The male feral (apparently disgruntled over being fired at) has engaged Cyclops, and they're fighting furiously-

Leaving me to deal with the little pixie of a girl who just broke my face.

"You cannot pass," she says, grinning impishly.

I frown- the words seem vaguely familiar, like it's a quote of some kind. I want to rack my brain to figure out where I've read it, but now is not the time. Obviously.

And more than that, her pretty smile sets off another tremor of- unease?- inside me. I feel like I'm missing something, and I have no idea why.

I put the thought from my mind, instead focusing on how to get by her. My best bet, I decide, is to bolt in the hopes that I can both outrun her and break free of her grip if she happens to grab me.

So I dart to the left, hoping to clear the girl before she can react.

But no such luck- she flings her legs out, tangling them with mine and levering them to wrench me backwards. I land flat on my back, completely breathless, but I manage to recover myself enough to get my legs up in time to use them to block a tackle and springboard the woman across the room. She goes flying somewhere beyond my head.

I expect to hear some sort of landing thud as I hop to my feet, but I don't. I haven't even taken my
first step towards the door when she jumps on my back. One of her arms wraps around my throat
while she presses hard against the side of my neck with her free hand.

*Good luck with that,* I think grimly.

I'm surprisingly hard to strangle, thanks to my thick hide, so my attempts to get her off my back are
half-hearted at best. I notice that she smells nice- like flowers and summer time...

I know that scent. *Why* do I know that scent?

But then I actually start to feel woozy- whatever she's doing to me is apparently working after all,
and *fast* so I step backwards and slam her against the wall. Her grip immediately loosens enough
for me to regain my senses and pry her off of me.

I turn and pin her to the wall by her wrists, my body holding hers in place with her feet at least six
inches off the ground.

Every muscle in her body is rigid with fear and anger. Trust me, I can feel it. I can feel all of her,
the softness of her pert bust and the hidden strength in her tiny frame, pressed against me.

And she clearly doesn't approve of being restrained. She glowers at me, a quiet snarl working its
way out of her throat. Her eyes- tawny and gorgeous green in the center, ringed by black- are
narrowed with anger-

Her eyes.

I know those eyes. Obscured as they are by makeup, I remember them.

I remember *her.*

"It's you," I gasp.
The Vixen

The Vixen

The more I look at her now, the stupider I feel for not realizing her identity before.

It's her, it's really her- the full lips, the adorable freckles, the captivating eyes. The intervening year since I saw her last has turned her from a girl-next-door to some sort of almost unrecognizable femme fatale, but it's her.

The girl who saved me in Paris.

I've wondered about her since that day, the pretty guardian angel who appeared out of nowhere to help me in my hour of need. I've wondered if she's ever thought about me the way I have about her, even though time had faded the exact details of her face until I saw her again. Who was she? Was she safe? Would I ever see her again?

And now I've found her.

And she's a member of the Brotherhood.

Also, I'm currently forcefully pinning her to a wall, and mere seconds ago she was snarling in my face. It's not exactly the reunion I had in mind, to be honest.

Now she grins reluctantly. "I was wondering when you'd recognize me," she says, her eyes sparkling with wry amusement.

And something else.

Something I can't really pinpoint, but still somehow makes my mouth go dry.

"You remember me?" I ask- a completely stupid question, I know.

Last time I checked, there haven't been many furry blue monsters walking around. Unless you count the Cookie Monster (may that puppet burn in hell) from Sesame Street, which I don't.

Her smile turns rather coy as she chuckles. Something about her laugh makes my stomach feel like it's trying to escape my abdominal cavity. "Of course," she replies. "You're a little unforgettable, Mr. Blue."

"Beast," I correct helplessly.

"Beast," she agrees, her voice barely above a breathy whisper.

And then she strains her neck enough to lean in and kiss me.

My eyes widen with shock as her lips press against mine, sending a bolt of electricity through all my limbs.

Kissing me. She's kissing me.

I vaguely wonder if I'm dreaming, but then I remember that my imagination isn't this good.

For a split second I panic completely. I don't think about how this girl is a Brotherhood member
and therefore an enemy, or how only moments before she was trying to pull a Vulcan nerve pinch on me.

No, I'm trying to think of how to kiss her back, because she's beautiful, and I've been thinking about her for months, and because clearly I'm an absolute idiot about the female sex.

But then some semblance of instinct takes over, and my mouth begins to tentatively move with hers.

I've never actually kissed anyone before- the only time I've even come close was when Erik interrupted Raven and I as she leaned in, her lips a whisper away from touching mine.

But I think I'm doing it right, because after a moment the girl hums against my lips, almost like a purr, and deepens the kiss. It elicits a low rumble from my own chest in response, and I start to reply with equal, ardent enthusiasm.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My hands drop of their own accord, sliding down along her arms and back to rest on her waist. Doing so allows her feet to find purchase with the ground again.

Her hands lace into my hair after I release them, her claws tracing teasing patterns against my scalp that make me want to shiver as she presses against me. Her body fits to mine so perfectly that I wonder if she can feel my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest.

But then her hands start to drift- both cupping my face for a moment, then one starting to skate down my back before I lose track of it-

"I'm sorry," she murmurs against my lips. Her thumb is making lazy circles against my cheek.

"For what?" I ask blankly, with my eyes still closed, because I'm too caught up in kissing her again for her regretful tone to register much.

And then she cracks me in the temple with the handle of her knife so hard I see stars and collapse.

"For that," she replies, with a heavy sigh.

She steps over me while I helplessly clutch my head in agony and surveys the scene in front of us. Cyclops and the male feral- who I highly suspect is this woman's brother, all things considering- are still locked in battle with each other, and the feral clearly has the upper hand.

I watch him dart in under Cyclops' guard and viciously slash at him with his claws through eyes clouded with pain and humiliation. It looks like Cyclops is bleeding from several other wounds as well. I shake my head in an attempt to clear it- I need to get up and help my teammate, but my limbs aren't cooperating.

I'm dimly aware of a staticky burst coming from a radio at the woman's hip.

"We're done. Time to go," a male voice says. I have a feeling it's Quicksilver. "Hurry up before I get bored!"

Definitely Quicksilver.

Damnation. We've failed.
The woman doesn't reply to the radio summons. Instead she pulls out her knife and throws it with
deft precision right at Cyclops' head.

I watch with horror as he collapses like a rag doll, and pray fervently he's only unconscious. The
alternative does not bear thinking of. How would I even live with myself if he died? As if I could-
Alex would surely murder me if I let his brother get killed.

"Vixen," the male feral whines. "What was that-?"

"You're being needlessly cruel," she retorts sharply.

"Needlessly cruel?" You're the one who just made out with me and then sucker punched me, I think
bitterly.

"Now come on. It's time to go."

He lets out an irritated sigh, but he grabs the knife she just threw and tosses it to her with ease.

Am I imagining the regretful glance she- Vixen, apparently- throws my way as she turns to leave? I
must be.

The way I can only stumble to my feet indicates that it would be wise to let the two of them go
without pursuit. I'm in no shape for a fight or a high speed chase under the aftereffects of Vixen's
handiwork. The Brotherhood clearly won this round, adding to my chagrin over what transpired
between Vixen and I.

I unsteadily make my way over to Scott. He's alive, though there's a big fat goose egg forming on
the side of his head.

Oh, wonderful, we match.

It appears that Vixen threw her knife carefully, to make sure she only incapacitated her victim
instead of killing him. Small consolation, obviously, but I'm just glad he's alive.

I pull out a small vial of smelling salts that I keep on my utility belt and waft it under Cyclops' nose.

He wakes up almost immediately, gasping for air and looking around wildly as he sits up. Then he
clutches the bump on his head and groans.

"Ow," he grumbles. "What happened?"

"The female knocked you out with a well-aimed projectile from behind," I explain succinctly.

Cyclops focuses on me. "Looks like she got you, too," he remarks, gesturing to the throbbing welt
on my temple.

I purse my lips.

Scott, you have no idea, I think grimly.
We are the walking wounded getting back to the jet. Everyone has some varying degree of injury, but nothing severe enough to warrant my immediate medical attention. I direct Jean- who is sporting a busted lip- to bandage the worst of Scott's cuts for now until I can see to him properly back in Westchester.

She's the only one who's ever shown any interest in medicine, so I know she won't mind helping out. And besides- I think she has a crush on the younger Summers boy, anyway.

Besides Scott, Alex seems to have gotten the worst of it. He has a black eye and a dislocated shoulder, which I don't look forward to resetting, but otherwise our hurts are relatively mild. I think the wounds to our pride ache more than our physical bodies.

Speaking of wounded pride-

"What happened to your face?" Alex asks as I start the jet. He's gingerly cradling his dislocated arm, to stop it from flopping around sickeningly.

*It broke, that's what happened. With a little help from a pretty girl, the one I thought-

I stop myself from going down that line of thought. Now isn't the time to dwell on my humiliation. I'll save that questionable joy for later.

"I got kicked in the face by a new recruit," I explain calmly. "Cyclops and I ran into a pair of ferals. The female's name is Vixen, but I don't know about the male."

"That's interesting. Me and Marvel Girl met a new recruit, too. He was paired with Mastermind," Alex mutters. He gestures to his useless arm. "I have the new guy to thank for this. I got him back, though."

I make a noncommittal grunt in reply.

Alex likes to rehash the events of missions, to look for mistakes in our tactics in the hopes that we won't repeat them, but I prefer not to. To be honest, I don't particularly like the combat aspect of being an X-Man. Despite my bestial appearance, I don't like violence.

And besides- I don't need to relive tonight's mission to know exactly where I went wrong this time around.

Once back at the mansion I set to work putting everyone to rights. Just like always.

Tonight this mostly involves handing out ice packs and aspirin, but I end up needing to stitch together some of the deeper slashes that feral male's claws made in Scott's flesh. Alex suffers through the resetting of his shoulder with quiet stoicism- probably because this has happened to him so often. I've lost count of how many times, anyway.

It's not that he's stupid, or reckless. Charles would've never named him field commander of the X-Men if that was the case. It's more that Alex believes that a good leader does everything he asks his subordinates to do and then some. He takes his position very seriously. It's definitely a huge
change from the angry eighteen-year-old I met back in 1962.

Sometimes I wonder what Sean- that lovable, unflappable goofball who died much too young- would say if he could see us now. Would he have eventually become more solemn, bowing to age and circumstance? Or would he have remained forever unaffected by stress and loss?

It's an unanswerable question. He bled out in enemy territory while I worked feverishly to save him back in 1964. Was there something else I could've tried? Was there a way to save him?

It's a thought that haunts me to this day.

I've always tried to look on the brighter side of life- God knows I needed to during all those years Charles wasted away- but sometimes it's difficult for me. It gets very disheartening to have to patch up my friends night after night, knowing that there may be a day when one of them sustains an injury that I can't bring them back from. That one of them may die under my hands, just like Sean did.

But that day is not today, thankfully.

After I'm done dispensing first aid, I head to my own room with an ice pack in hand. I keep fiddling with it- first placing it on my cheekbone, then on the lump on my temple. I can't decide which throbbing wound hurts worse, but I do know that by tomorrow the entire upper right hemisphere of my face will be black and blue.

*Tomorrow, I decide, will be a sunglasses inside sort of day.*

I get ready for bed slowly, brushing my teeth with completely unnecessary concentration. I'm trying to avoid thinking about our botched mission tonight, but I know it's right there on the edge of my consciousness.

Sure enough, thoughts of Vixen fill my head as soon as I lay down.

I can't decide who I'm more upset with- Vixen, for tricking me, or myself, for falling for it like a complete fool.

I'm under no delusions about her behavior. We both know she saved my life back in Paris, and she realized the moment I hesitated when I recognized her that she could use my sentimentality for her against me.

And use it, she did.

The memory of Vixen's lips on mine, her scent, her taste, the way her body fit against me like a matching puzzle piece fills my chest with a burning sort of disappointed anguish. I liked kissing her, far more than I should have.

Until she knocked me into next week, of course. That effectively put the kibosh on the whole thing.

That, I think, is what kills me the most.

For twenty-eight years I've been an awkward loner more than anything else. Growing up, I was an outcast, a freak. The world rejected me, so I found solace in science. It was my refuge, my replacement, in many ways, for human interaction.

I'm a little better now, but I'm still quiet, still rather shy.
And, truth be told, I'm lonely.

I want to connect with people, but after a lifetime of minimal human contact I don't really know how. It feels like there's a void between the world outside me and myself, and it's just too wide to cross.

So for one brief, shining moment while I was kissing Vixen I felt the possibilities blooming between us- like the first flowers after winter's last frost, all tentative, fragile, and optimistic. It was that feeling of connection with another person that I've been missing all along.

I hoped it was real.

But it wasn't. That kiss was merely a ruse to distract me, to get me to loosen my hold on Vixen so she could escape. And I, vulnerable wretch that I am, fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

That's it, I've decided.

I'm more upset with her than myself. Sure, she didn't know exactly how much of a naive headcase I am, but it was still cruel to play on my emotions like that. She took advantage of me and my inevitable gratitude to her for what she did in Paris. Those are the facts.

I resolve here and now to avoid Vixen as much as I can during our next inevitable clash with the Brotherhood.

She fooled me once. I won't let her get me a second time.
Unexpected Company

March 20, 1974

Three weeks go by, with no further skirmishes with the Brotherhood. I do my best to enjoy the respite from the fighting while I can. I know it will end eventually.

Erik believes a war is coming between humans and mutants, but until then the X-Men are keeping him plenty busy.

It's a war of mutants versus mutants, fought in darkness and for the most part beneath the notice of the masses. And no matter what, we all lose. There's no glory in being a casualty of this war, and no sense of victory. Not when many of the humans we're trying to keep safe repay our efforts with hate and fear. It's a stalemate, a conflict that I fear will never end. In my darker moments I wonder if anything will ever really change.

But this isn't the first time I've faced a situation where I worried that things would never get better, only for righteousness to win in the end. Charles is a case in point.

The only thing we can do is keep the faith, keep fighting, and never lose hope.

One night Charles approaches Alex and I about sneaking into a private facility to wipe the company's computer hard drives because they've been compiling the locations of various mutants.

"The Brotherhood most likely won't be bothered about such a small company, but I still think it wise not to take any chances with the list," Charles says. "Since they're not likely to show up, I feel like just the two of you would be prudent, yes?"

We readily agree.

The trip there is rather stress-free. After all, this is supposed to be an easy mission. Minimal security, no Brotherhood, deleting lines of code - as far as our extracurricular activities go, theoretically this should be a piece of cake.

*Should*, being the operative word.

And it is, at first.

There's only one security guard for the whole building. He's nodding off, not even paying attention to the monitors in front of him, so it's easy to knock him out with one punch.

I look over his desk, combing it over for any incriminating information. There's nothing, though it's littered with Twinkie wrappers.

Just wrappers. No creamy cakes of pure deliciousness left for a furry monster who's in for a long night of overwriting data on not one but several hard drives.

*Bastard.*

From there we head towards the server room, a cold, sterile space that would've given me the creeps if I hadn't spent most of my life in rooms just like it.
"I'll stand lookout," Alex tells me after taking a precursory glance around the room. He's not very good with computers, so this part of the mission is better left up to my expertise.

The door automatically swings shut behind him, but that doesn't bother me. Considering the task ahead of me, he would only be a distraction at this point.

And it's not like there's anyone in here to worry about, right?

I almost groan when I see the six computers waiting for me. Six computer hard drives to go through and overwrite the pertinent data on. If there's no search network, I'll have to go through the files one by one until I find the right ones to destroy. And what if the list of mutant locations is embedded?

This is going to take a while.

I sigh and immediately sit down to work. Merely contemplating the task won't complete it any faster.

So I boot up the computer and settle down to search.

And I find... nothing. Nothing.

I go on to the next computer, and the next. It's all the same.

Oh, the operating systems work, but there's no data to be found. Nothing in the trash bins, nothing that's been overwritten. The hard drives are just... empty.

I grunt in frustration and tip my chair back, pondering this turn of events.

How did this happen? It's like someone came in before me and, rather than merely deleting the offending files, wiped out every single shred of data on these computers.

I suppose I could thank the culprit for doing my job for me (too thoroughly, to be honest), but I'm still curious-

"Admiring my handiwork?" a feminine voice suddenly says, from the other side of the room.

It startles me so badly I push back too much and completely tip the chair over. I fall back in a heap, snarling on the way.

I know that voice- I've been doing my level best not to think of its speaker for the past three weeks.

I have to stifle a groan of irritation as I recover my feet, though deep down I feel a tremor of an emotion I can't even identify at the thought of seeing her again.

Sure enough, Vixen is leaning against the opposite wall, arms crossed and clothed in her black jumpsuit and cloak. Though her posture is outwardly relaxed, I can see the alarm brought on by my snarls in her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I ask sullenly. My frustration at myself for being so clumsy in front of her is being compounded by the residual humiliation I still feel over that kiss, so I'm not exactly civil.

"So rude," Vixen says. Her tone is light, but she's watching me like a hawk.

She's definitely no fool- she's clearly aware that any sentimental attachment I had for her is gone in
the aftermath of her trick last time. Vixen's on her guard, but I can tell she won't attack me if she can help it. Otherwise she wouldn't have given up the element of surprise before trying to escape.

Honestly I'm rather grateful for her restraint. It may be my imagination, but I swear my face is still a little sore from where she kicked me.

"You did try to lobotomize my temporal lobe the last time I saw you," I reply stiffly.

Vixen snorts derisively. "Did not," she retorts. "You're a feral- a strong one, too. I know how hard I hit you. You should've been fine by the next evening."

I purse my lips. She can't know that I take a serum that leaves me human- with human weaknesses- most of the time. If I didn't... perhaps she'd be right.

She gives a small, ironic smile. "I think you're upset because I kissed you," Vixen continues. "Which is a pity. It was a great kiss."

My face warms as I look away- would she be able to tell if a blue monster blushed? And she thought it was great, too?

I mean, it was great until she hit me...

I grunt dismissively. "What are you doing here, Vixen?" I repeat, only slightly more polite.

"The same thing as you," she replies briskly, shifting on her feet. "Deleting files. I just finished, though, and was about to leave when you waltzed in. What was your plan, exactly? Overwriting? How tedious."

"What method did you use, then?" I challenge.

"A little hardware," she explains.

I tense when she reaches into her pocket, but she merely pulls out a trio of screwdrivers and a degaussing wand.

A degaussing wand. She completely wiped the hard drives of these computers. All of this company's information- files, payroll slips, employment records- everything is gone.

I shake my head in disgust.

But really, what else should I expect from a member of the Brotherhood?
"You destroyed this entire company," I tell her, not bothering to hide my accusing tone. "Think of all the people who work here. Not all of them can be bad. This list could just be the work of one person, and you've gone and ruined the lives of-"

"Oh, spare me the righteous indignation," Vixen cuts in, her eyes narrowed. "Are you X-Men really that weak, that you're concerned over the livelihood of people who are a danger to our kind? The people who work here can get new jobs. Or they can choose to rebuild this company from the ground up. It'll take time, yeah, but hopefully by that time the status quo will have changed and it won't even matter that they were compiling that list. Until then, consider this as acceptable collateral damage."

"There's no such thing as 'acceptable' collateral damage. 'Collateral damage' is just a term lazy people use to excuse their actions when they result in unnecessary pain and death," I say coldly. "You can try to make yourself feel better by calling it that, but putting an absurd label on the consequences of what you just did doesn't make you any less guilty."

Vixen has the audacity to look insulted, her lips pulling up in disgust. Doing so reveals her fangs. "You know what? I'm done here. You're welcome for doing your damn job for you," she says sardonically. "Now excuse me, you sanctimonious prick."

I snort derisively- really, is that the best insult she can come up with?- which causes Vixen to look even more offended. "Be my guest," I tell her, gesturing towards the door.

She's hesitant, like she expects me to attack her at any moment, but I make no move towards her as she approaches the exit. I'm more than happy to see the heartless little minx go.

Vixen pauses before she leaves, though. I realize she's listening through the door for the coast to be clear, which it's definitely not.

Alex is out there. On guard.

This is going to be a problem.

"Who's the mouth breather outside?" Vixen asks through clenched teeth.

"The brother of the man you knocked out last time," I reply acidly.

She lets out a snarl of frustration and turns around to scowl at me. "Did you see what my brother was doing to that boy?" she asks, her voice rising in indignation. "Would you rather your buddy have a bump on the head or be turned into mutant sashimi?"

This apparent act of mercy surprises me, but deep down I know Vixen is right. Her intervention last time saved Scott several stitches and weeks of recovery from his encounter with the feral male. I just haven't viewed it that way until now.

But I don't let that revelation break my composure. "I'd rather not have fought in the first place."

"Your little friend started it when he fired the first shot," Vixen hisses.
"Actually, you started it by trying to steal that Agent Orange," I counter loudly. I don't care how childish and petulant I sound right now. "We were just trying to-

Alex chooses that inopportune time to burst right through the door, having finally heard our raised voices from outside the room. Vixen jumps back several yards, landing catlike on her feet with a snarl.

I know what's going to happen the moment before it does. Alex thinks that we were fighting, and is now here like the cavalry to assist me.

"Havok, don't-!"

But I'm too late.

Alex raises his arm and sends an angry red energy blast right at Vixen, forcing her to leap out of the way behind one of the computer desks. His beam follows her, turning the computer into a twisted, melted pile of plastic and the desk into a smoldering matchbox.

The smell of burning wood and silicon fills the room- it immediately makes my eyes and nose sting.

In the next moment, before Alex or I can even react, Vixen jumps out from behind the desk and onto my back.

And it's definitely not in a "give-me-a-piggy-back-ride" kind of way, though her arms are around my neck and her legs are locked around my waist.

No, she's holding a knife against my neck, the blade so sharp I can feel its edge even through my thick fur. I immediately freeze, for fear that if I move I'll slit my own throat.

"Nice going, genius," Vixen snaps at Alex. "Now we'll be lucky to get out of here before the fire department shows up."

As if on cue the fire alarm goes off, its ear-piercing shriek loud enough to raise the dead.

Alex sneers at her. I can tell he's measuring his chances of hitting her without injuring me in the process. His aim is now astonishingly good, after so many years of practice.

"Despite what you clearly think, I don't like hurting people," Vixen murmurs in my ear. "I will if I have to, though. Don't make me."

And for some reason, I believe her. She was quite content to withdraw from this situation without a physical fight until Havok burst in and changed the conditions.

But now she's alone, outnumbered, and backed into a corner. The circumstances are calling for desperate measures on her part. As much as I hate to admit it, I understand this move and can't be angry with her for threatening my life.

Not this time, anyway.

"Havok, Vixen is going to get off my back and walk out of here, and you're not going to attack her," I say, trying to placate them both.

"Or what?" he demands.

"Or I slit his throat and come for you next," Vixen snarls.
For the first time tonight I experience a tremor of genuine fear. Just as I heard the sincerity in her tone when she said she didn't want to hurt me, I hear the promise in her threat now.

Alex, though, seems unconvinced. I can see his fingers twitching, like he's fighting the urge to take a chance and fire anyway.

So I make a choice, a decision I can't even really justify. The only way of explanation I can think of is I'm afraid to risk Alex's life on the off chance Vixen will actually get a knife into him after she's through with killing me.

I move sideways, keeping myself between Alex and Vixen as I step towards the door. My teammate is looking at me like I've completely lost my mind.

Who knows- maybe he's right?

I use my foot to swing the door open wide enough for my unwanted passenger to be clear.

"Thanks," she whispers, surprising me with her courtesy.

And then she's gone, disappearing like some sort of wraith in the night.

Alex is watching me like I've just committed some sort of terrible crime, and I guess in a way I have. I just helped a Brotherhood member escape.

"What the hell was that for?" he demands angrily.

I open my mouth to reply. There has to be some sort of valid reason, right?

I helped Vixen because she saved me in Paris. Because she performed an act of mercy for Scott last time. Because she was trying to leave this confrontation without exchanging blows, and I was inclined to go along because I hate violence above all else.

But in the end I just tell Alex the truth.

"I don't know."
We sneak out of the building right before the fire department shows up to take care of our accidental computer casualty.

By then Vixen is gone without a trace.

Then, surprising me not at all, Alex spends the entire flight home badgering me about the little feral female. He's not satisfied until I go over in detail what was said between us.

"Typical Brotherhood move," he mutters after I explain about the deguassing wand and the hard drives. "Not caring about the consequences."

*Says the man who just utterly destroyed a computer.*

I wonder if Vixen found that at all hypocritical? I think I would...

I sigh. "To be fair, she did leave the hardware intact. Technically speaking, they can compile their data again, given the time," I muse.

*Just like Vixen said...*

Alex raises his eyebrows. "Are you saying Vixen was actually right?" he asks incredulously.

It almost feels like it, and the thought doesn't sit well with me *at all.*

"I wouldn't go that far," I reply defensively. "But I suppose what she did is better than completely wrecking the computers themselves. Or burning the entire building down."

The way the rest of Erik's little minions would have.

For a few minutes Alex says no more, giving me hope that the impromptu inquisition is over. But then he speaks again.

"I still can't believe you just let her go," he blurts out. "She's Brotherhood, Hank."

"I know she is," I agree. "But she was just trying to defend herself from you."

"She had a knife to your throat."

"Yes, but it was a ploy-"

And then I pause.

I think about when Vixen kissed me- it was a ruse, a trick to get me to drop her. Because she was looking for a way to escape with as little damage as possible.

How was this situation any different? And if I can logically rationalize her behavior now, when she *threatened to kill me,* can I do the same for the prior circumstances?

Why does this feel so muddled?
I grit my teeth in frustration.

"Vixen was just looking for an out. I think Charles would agree with what I did," I finally say. When in doubt, bring up Charles. "I mean, she didn't turn hostile until you walked in. She clearly wanted to leave in peace."

"What are you even talking about, saying she wasn't hostile?" Alex retorts. "I heard you arguing."

I make a noncommittal sound in reply.

"It's kinda crazy, because I've never heard you raise your voice before," he notes. "Except for when you, you know, 'Beast out' or whatever."

"Thanks," I say sardonically.

But he's right, of course.

I'm not the type of person who yells. I'm the calm one, the one who would rather use logic than emotion to handle disputes. I'm the one that stays placid and serene no matter what, because there's a monster inside of me and I'm afraid to let him have control of me.

So why did I lose my cool with Vixen?

My first instinct is to say that she was just so blatantly, brazenly wrong in her thinking, but that's not true. The truth is, a lot of the things she said tonight actually make sense- almost.

Like her supposed intervention with Scott- yes, she showed him mercy, but it wouldn't have been necessary if she and her brother weren't there to steal the Agent Orange in the first place with the rest of the Brotherhood. Or the way she trivialized the troubles of the employees of that company tonight. Yes, they can rebuild, but she didn't think about what will happen to them in the immediate future.

That, I think, is what's driving me to distraction. Vixen is clearly a clever woman, but she's not seeing the entire picture. And for me it's almost a crime to see such intelligence wasted.

But on the other hand, that's something I see all the time without getting so worked up over it. People don't operate on their full mental potential all the time, choosing instead to stay blissfully ignorant and cling to their erroneous beliefs. I just accept it as a quirk that I don't understand about people- yet another addition to the long list of things I can't comprehend about the human race.

So what makes Vixen so different? Why do I care? Do I care?

For that, I have no answer.

Life goes on for the next three months at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.

Scientific research in my laboratory and training in the Danger Room take up much of my time, though I do take note of some of the events going around me.

Things like how Alex's younger brother Scott becomes caught in a rather one-sided love triangle between Jean and Warren. It's quite the adolescent drama- boy likes girl, but is too reserved and unsure of himself to say anything. The girl- rather shy, as well- likes boy too, but another boy is also vying for her affections.

On one hand it's amusing, like a modern-day version of A Midsummer Night's Dream. On the
other, though, Sam, Alex and I worry that the issue will cause discordance in the team. Jealousy and unrequited love have a bad habit of doing that.

It's a relief when Scott finally admits his feelings to Jean, who then in turn lets Warren down easy.

I worry, though, that there's some lingering bitterness on Warren's part. The handsome, extraordinarily rich and charming Warren Worthington III isn't used to being turned down by the ladies, giant angel wings or no. It's enough to shake a man's confidence.

There are missions during this time, too- secret forays into various facilities, run-ins with the Brotherhood- all in the dark of night, trying to protect our kind.

I don't engage Vixen during this time, though I'm ashamed to admit that I notice her quite a bit. Much more than I should, anyway.

Without even knowing why I do this, I start to pick up things about her- and many of these things puzzle me exceedingly.

Vixen isn't your average Brotherhood member, and most of the time I wonder if it's because she's a new recruit and hasn't had her thinking poisoned by her comrades yet. I've seen that their cruelty tends to feed on itself, each member egging the others on to worse and worse behaviors. So really it's only a matter of time before Vixen becomes just as ruthless and awful as the rest of them.

But for now, she almost never attacks first, she would rather wound than kill, and she's neither needlessly cruel nor destructive to people or property on missions. By Brotherhood standards, anyway.

I can't decide if that's truly who she is, or if these almost imperceptible virtues are all in my head. If I want the girl who saved me in Paris to be in there somewhere still, for Vixen to be redeemable before she's too far gone to save.

And then I get upset with myself, wondering why it even matters to me.

I try to put these things from my mind, to focus on the mission and view her as I should. She's just another member of the Brotherhood. An enemy.

But then comes the day that changes everything.

And I can never look at Vixen the same way again.
A Tentative Overture

June 21, 1974

It's a balmy summer's night in June.

We've been doing surveillance for the past week on a laboratory where we believe they're experimenting on mutants. Charles even suspects this facility is owned by Major William Stryker—also known as Trask's toady and the man who made Logan have a psychological breakdown in that conference room of the Hotel Majestic in Paris last year.

As if I could hate him more.

So tonight the goal is to free any captive mutants we can find. And I wouldn't mind destroying any samples they've compiled while we're there, either.

I'm paired with Jean and Warren this time around. Our task will be to carry the captives out once we find them. Alex and Ororo, along with Scott and Sam, are in charge of taking care of security and searching for the test subjects.

It's simple, but it's a good plan.

If it happens to actually work, anyway.

All the lights are on in the building when we arrive, which is our first clue that something's off. On our previous nighttime reconnaissance missions only the emergency lighting was engaged.

"What gives?" Sam asks, gesturing towards the building as we congregate some distance away.

"I don't know," Alex replies. "Beast?"

"The only thing I can think of is that they've caught wind of our plan and are doing something to their subjects now," I surmise.

"Something?" Jean echoes, shivering. "I don't like the sound of that."

A sort of collective shudder runs through the team. Actually, none of us like the sound of that.

"Let's get going," Alex orders grimly. "Be careful, guys."

Jean, Warren and I give the others a three minute head start before we make our way inside.

The building's walls are a bare, sterile white and carry that creepy, unsettling aura of a mental institution. I half-expect to see people rocking back and forth in the corners wearing straitjackets.

It spurs me into walking faster—the sooner we can leave this horrible place, the better.

For five minutes or so the halls are completely deserted. No security, no employees. Every door we open reveals another room empty of people.

Surely we should've run into someone by now? Why were the lights on, if the building is empty?
I'm getting the sinking suspicion that something is wrong.

And then Jean's radio crackles.

One word, in Sam's voice.

"Brotherhood."

Warren swears.

Yes, that just about sums it up.

That's when Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver attack. Scarlet's hex misses me by inches as I evasively roll to the floor. Now the Brotherhood is cutting me off from my teammates.

"Keep going, Beast," Warren calls out, dodging a punch from Quicksilver. "We've got this."

I glance at Jean, who nods even though her face is pinched with concentration as she begins to do battle with Scarlet Witch.

Trust them.

I have to put my trust in their training, and their abilities. If I try to baby them it may make them lose confidence.

So I reluctantly leave them behind, heading down the hall to hunt for test subjects.

I turn left, down another hallway, and open the door on my right-

I see what happens next as if it's in slow-motion.

Vixen is standing on the other side of a lab bench, burning a pile of paperwork and pouring bleach on some slides and test tubes.

As the door opens she reaches for her knife before her gaze even lifts enough to see who it is. Her eyes meet mine just as the knife leaves her fingertips, already heading in my direction. She has just enough of a handle on it that she misdirects its flight at the last microsecond.

Instead of landing in my frontal lobe, the knife drills the wall right next to my head.

Now events unfold at normal speed again.

Sweat erupts on my forehead and my heart starts pounding in delayed reaction to almost dying courtesy of this woman's blade. Again.

Vixen, who looks quite startled, takes several steps backward and shifts into a defensive position.

I realize she expects me to attack her following that little knife mishap.

"I'm going to assume that was caused by an overabundance of caution," I say after a momentary pause to catch my breath. I think I deserve a second, all things considering.

Vixen nods curtly, but doesn't move.

There's an uncomfortable silence between us.

The last time we actually spoke she called me a 'sanctimonious prick' and threatened to kill me. I've
basically gotten over it since then, but still. Talk about awkward.

"What are you doing here?" Vixen asks finally, voice strained.

"Trying to liberate test subjects," I reply. "We haven't been able to find any, though. We ran into some of your people rather quickly."

I slowly reach up and pull the knife from the wall, my eyes never leaving her face. She tenses, but makes no other move. I carefully walk over to the lab bench between us and lay it as far on her side as I can before backing away to the now-closed door.

This probably seems absolutely insane, but from what I've noticed of Vixen I have a feeling she won't attack me unless I make a move against her first. And I don't want a fight, or her following me out of here in high dudgeon as I try to leave.

Not when there might be captives around here, waiting to be saved. Giving back her knife is a peace-offering, and I'm sure she'll recognize that.

Relatively sure, anyway. Like... fifty percent sure.

Ok, maybe I want that knife back now.

Vixen relaxes just a fraction after my gesture, though I do sense a hint of wary puzzlement in her expression. "We haven't been able to find any, either," she tells me. "I think they moved them out earlier today. This stuff-"

She gestures to the files she's burning.

"-Was left behind, but I decided it's better to be safe than sorry."

I nod. In this case, I'm in perfect agreement with her.

Vixen tentatively steps closer, back to the table between us. I reflexively tense when she picks up her knife, but she merely puts it back on her belt.

She's willing to let bygones be bygones and play nice if I am, just like I thought.

Again, I'm stuck by how different she is from her teammates. Scarlet Witch, Magneto, Mastermind- none of them would have an issue killing me following what they would see as an act of weakness when I returned the knife.

But not Vixen. She seems to operate on her own "tit-for-tat" sort of code.

I'm about to withdraw- she seems to have this handled, and I don't think the peace will last much longer if I stay- when a huge explosion rocks the room. It's so powerful I can practically feel the building shift on its foundation.

Vixen looks alarmed. "One of yours?"

I shake my head. "Yours?"

"Nope."

For a long moment we just stare at each other, unsure of what to do.

Vixen sighs.
She breaks first and briskly walks around the table, making for the door. She's almost shaking with overwrought energy when she passes me, as if she still half-expects me to attack her.

But I don't.

Instead I merely follow her out of the room.

The hallway in the direction from which I came is completely blocked by rubble. It's impassable, the wreckage so complete that it looks deliberate.

Almost like someone purposely cut us off from our teammates...

A soft growl escapes Vixen's throat. "I don't like this," she mutters.

*Well that makes two of us.*
Two Birds, One Trap

Vixen glances at me questioningly.

I nod.

Without a word we both turn on our heels and head in the opposite direction. Not because we want to, but because it's the only way we can go.

We walk quickly, with purpose. Vixen pulls out a pair of knives as we move, but this time I don't feel threatened. Until we figure out what's going on, we will operate under a truce.

After a few minutes we reach a T-junction, where we halt.

Vixen holds up a hand when I open my mouth to ask which way she thinks we should go.

"You hear that?" she murmurs.

After listening intently for a moment my sensitive feral hearing registers a ticking sound.

A ticking sound?

It's almost like a-

I launch myself at Vixen right before the hallway to our left explodes, sending debris flying in all directions. I do my best to cover her body with mine, shielding her from the potential shrapnel as we go skidding down the linoleum hallway.

She's completely white-faced when we slide to a halt, the freckles on her nose and cheeks standing out in stark relief and her breathing coming in abrupt gasps. I can't tell what surprised her more- the explosion, or my chivalrous reaction to it.

"Are you ok?" I blurt out, my own breathing unsteady from adrenaline.

I was almost just blown to bits, and now my face is mere inches away from that of a pretty girl's. Can you blame me for being a bit shaky?

"There's a three hundred pound fur ball on me, but otherwise I'm grand," Vixen replies sardonically, though her eyes are still rather wild.

Hey. I resemble that remark.

"I only weigh two twenty-five," I retort reflexively.

It's pitiful, I know, but I get a lot of ribbing for my weight- the fur makes me look heavier than I really am. It's enough to give me a complex about it.

Vixen gives a little huff of reluctant laughter and gestures for me to get off of her, which I do readily enough. She ignores the hand I offer to help her regain her feet.

"Thanks, for that," she begrudgingly says, once we're both standing.
"You're welcome," I reply, typically awkward.

She looks around uncertainly. "Now what?"

I consider the circumstances for a moment. "I'm starting to get the sinking suspicion that we're being herded."

"I'm starting to feel the same way," Vixen agrees, putting her knives away. "Might be time to try to run for it."

I concur, because there isn't really another option right now.

Together we begin to run, trying to use our speed to outrun the explosions. But we can't.

One goes off right behind us, followed by one directly in front of us. It boxes us in and forces us to go through a large laboratory room out into another hallway, where another explosion shepherds us to the left.

"How are they even tracking us?" Vixen growls. "Do you think it's pressure triggers in the floor, or-?"

"This lab is owned by Major William Stryker," I reply. "He was helping Bolivar Trask with his Sentinel program, which had the ability to identify mutant DNA. Perhaps he's using it now to keep tabs on us."

Of course that hypothesis only leads to more questions. Why the two of us? Were we in the wrong place at the wrong time, or is there something else at work here? A program designed to identify feral DNA, perhaps?

Vixen's silent, thinking about my explanation for a moment. Finally, she mutters, "some things never change."

I'm about to ask her what that means when the floor gives way below us, falling away in one solid piece like a plug being pulled out of a bathtub drain.

Vixen snarls in surprise and grabs onto the edge of the gaping hole, but I'm too far from the edge to reach.

I'm falling, falling-

And then she catches a hold of my wrist with her free hand, leaving me dangling over an abyss. It's too dark for me to see how far I am from the ground below, or what's waiting for us there.

"Only two twenty-five? You're such a liar," she says through clenched teeth, straining to keep us both from falling. Her claws are digging into my flesh.

If the situation was different I might have laughed, but right now I can feel the bones in her wrist popping out of place and know those in her shoulder are sure to follow.

"What do you see down there?" she asks, her voice pained.

I look. "I can't see anything," I tell her. "Here, try to swing me over so I can grab onto the edge."

"Easier said than done," Vixen mutters, but she tries.

She can't do it, though. She's much stronger than a human female of her size, but she lacks the pure
strength needed to generate the momentum to get me to the edge.

And I can't help her, for fear of my efforts completely wrecking her shoulder. If we're facing Stryker she's going to need full function of her arm.

But Vixen doesn't give up- I have to admire her tenacity. She's still trying when we hear the approach of footsteps.

Our eyes lock momentarily when she glances down at me. She looks almost... frightened.

It makes me wonder if she knows even more seedy information about Stryker than I do.

"Well, well- what do we have here?" a male voice says.

And Stryker's smarmy face appears over the edge of this pit that we're stuck in. Both of us snarl up at him automatically.

"Two for the price of one. I like it when I get two birds in one trap," Stryker continues, smirking.

It clicks into place then. This whole lab facility set-up, all of those test subjects- it was all just bait, to lure in more mutants for Stryker to snatch up. After all, why go looking when you can make your prey come to you?

"And a female feral, too. I've never seen one of you before."

The way Stryker says it hints at a dark intent. I bare my fangs and growl at him in warning.

He chuckles. "Testy about your girl, are you?" he asks, looking amused. "Well, not to worry. I'm not so heartless as to separate a mated pair. Studying the pair of you should be quite... educational."

"Go to hell," Vixen hisses.

But Stryker just laughs and bends over to inject a needle into her hand, ignoring her snarls. She's helpless to do anything to stop it without dropping me.

Her grip on my hand almost immediately loosens. I feel her slip on the edge of the pit.

Damnation.

"Vixen, fight it-"

But she can't.

Her hold releases, and we're falling down, down-

I pull her in against my chest and turn my body so I take the brunt of impact when we reach the bottom with a sickening thud. Whatever we land on has a slight recoil that makes me suspect that we're on a truck bed of some kind.

I hope I just killed the suspension, I think bitterly.

The impact knocks the air from my lungs, but otherwise I'm unscathed. I sit up, cradling Vixen as I peer around. We appear to be in an underground garage of some kind, from what I can tell. There's absolutely no light though, so even with my night vision I can't see much.
I'm just standing up to see what I can find down here when I hear the whooshing sound of a dart gun and feel the prick of a hypodermic needle on my neck.

The injection quickly steals my senses, but I vaguely hear the truck I'm on start.

And then all I know is darkness.
Imprisoned

Imprisoned

June 22, 1974

I wake up in chains. My wrists are bound in handcuffs, the chain threaded through a metal eye to keep my arms above my head. And my legs are shackled, too.

*Wonderful, just wonderful.*

How did I get myself into this situation again?

And then I remember- Stryker, running away, and-

Vixen.

*Where is Vixen?*

I glance up quickly and feel a hint of relief when I see her chained to the wall just as I am, still unconscious. It's small consolation, but at least I'm not alone.

*She looks younger like this.*

Ok, maybe not *younger,* because Vixen always looks young- how old is she, anyway?- but I suppose she looks more sweet and innocent right now, despite the vampish makeup.

Right now... right now she looks more like the girl who saved me in Paris.

I sigh regretfully and take note of our surroundings.

We're in a small, windowless room- I can't even see a door, actually. It feels very claustrophobic. The walls are made of metal, as are the ceiling and floor. I would say it was overkill, but considering the damage a feral's claws can do maybe I should call it prudence on Stryker's part. There's no cameras, but I wouldn't rule out a hidden microphone somewhere near the ceiling.

Vixen lets out a deep sigh and stirs. I hold my breath as her eyes fly open and she looks around frantically.

"Sonuvabitch," she hisses, rattling her chains. For a moment she strains to rip it out of the wall, but it's a fruitless endeavor.

Finally her eyes meet mine.

"Hi," I offer.

"Hi," Vixen replies sullenly. "Been awake long?"

I shake my head. "Not much longer than you," I tell her honestly. "And I definitely have no idea where we are, anyway."

"We're in one of Stryker's *many* labs," she explains with a sigh.

"It sounds like you've seen the inside of one before," I note.
Vixen winces. "Not as a prisoner," she replies darkly.

There's a pause.

"Care to explain?" I prompt, my curiosity piqued.

She's quiet for a moment, and when she speaks she sounds reluctant. "Have you ever noticed that Jackal is a little..."

"Unhinged?"

I'm trying to put it nicely.

I actually have the suspicion that Jackal, Vixen's younger brother, is clinically insane based on what I've seen of him. He was the one who so brutally attacked Scott, and he has no regard for his own safety, or that of his teammates. He also seems to relish in inflicting as much pain as possible on his opponents, like he's a rabid dog. The only person he ever seems to listen to is Vixen.

Fox, her older brother, is a little more sane- but still just as vicious. He has it out for me especially because I'm a fully mature feral male, like himself. Our instincts tell us to fight to the death, and after the first time we encountered each other face-to-face it took me several days to fully recover from my wounds. He was in even worse condition than I was.

Vixen scowls at me. "That's not the word I would use, but yes, Jackal's a little..." she agrees unwillingly. I can see the pain in her expression when she says, "he didn't used to be like that. It's only happened since Stryker got a hold of him."

I stare at her blankly.

"Stryker has a thing for ferals," Vixen explains. "It's our healing factor, I think. But anyway, Stryker caught Jackal and tortured him, only God knows why. It took me some time, but I was able to break him out. He hasn't been the same, since."

"So you were in Paris for revenge?" I guess.

She frowns, looking insulted. "No," she retorts. "I was still trying to track my brother down at that point. I saw you and knew if you were caught you'd be next, so that's why I helped you out. But revenge... what a useless motivation. It doesn't bring anyone back. It doesn't make you feel better. I have no use for it."

To say I'm surprised is an understatement. Again, I'm struck by how unlike her comrades Vixen is, with their pathological desire to fuel the destructive cycle of vengeance between humans and mutants. I want to ask her what in the world she's doing with them, but I keep my mouth shut.

Vixen sighs and seems to shake herself from her nostalgic melancholy.

"Do you like to read?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply uncertainly. "Why do you ask?"

She pointedly glances around and mouths the word "*talk.*"

*Um...*

"I can just tell that you do," Vixen says aloud.
"Are you saying I look like a nerd or something?"

She grins. "Possibly. Are you?"

I look at my feet sheepishly. "Yes, I suppose you can say I am."


This, of course, knocks me speechless. What can I even say to that? Especially when part of my brain is now babbling, "she thinks you're handsome, she thinks you're handsome?"

I'm such an idiot.

She makes a motion with her hand, her annoyed expression telling me I need to keep speaking.

"I-I actually have a doctorate," I mumble, my face burning.


So I do, though I realize now that this is yet another ploy. She wants me to talk so my voice will cover the sound of her chains clinking together, just in case there's a bug in this room.

While I'm talking, Vixen quietly and precisely raises her legs up to where her hands can reach them, barely jingling her chains as she practically folds herself in half. My abs and arms hurt just watching her and her dislocated wrist performing such a feat.

When she brings her legs back down there's a bobby pin in her hand. It had been hidden in her boot.

Then she gets to work on picking the lock of her handcuffs.

The funny thing is, she's listening to me the entire time I talk. She proves that by asking pertinent questions, and sounds genuinely interested when she does. Something tells me this isn't just part of the ruse. She's actually curious.

I'm full of admiration when she frees herself completely, within mere minutes.

Next Vixen takes off her shoes and socks, revealing cute little feet.

I must admit, I have a thing about feet- probably because my hand-feet are so freakish and ugly and have always, always been a source of shame for me.

And Vixen's are just... adorable. Can feet even be adorable?

Wait, focus.

She's like a cat with how quietly she moves across the room and kneels down next to me.

"Do you like to read, too?" I ask as she starts on my shackles.

Vixen grins, not looking at me. "It's my favorite thing to do," she says. It has the air of a confession, like she's admitting a weakness.

"I thought beating up X-Men was your favorite thing to do," I snidely remark.

"Shows what you know about me," she mutters. "That's my third favorite thing to do. Books are
much more relaxing."

I laugh, surprising myself.

My feet are free now, so Vixen straddles my lap to get to my wrists. The position puts her perky little breasts directly level with my eyes. That stops my laughter rather abruptly.

*Oh, my stars and garters. Where do I look? Where do I look?*

Because I can't really look away- there's nowhere else to look.

And she smells so good, and the weight of her in my lap feels fantastic, and-

Vixen clears her throat, finally pulling my gaze away from her cleavage.

When I glance up I see her grinning at me, her eyes smoldering and sparkling with mischief. It makes my heart stutter all over itself.

"Beast," she says in a breathy whisper, gently running a claw along my jawline. It feels like an electric current passes through me.

*Oh dear Lord.*

"W-what?" I manage to croak out.

*"Keep talking,"* she mouths.
"W-what's your favorite book?" I stutter, trying (and failing) to sound blase about what just happened.

"Pride and Prejudice," Vixen promptly replies.

"That's a good one," I agree.

"'Good?' Just good?" she scoffs, shaking her head. "And you were just starting to grow on me, Beast."

My hands are free now, and Vixen stands up so I can rub some feeling back into my wrists. When I'm done I say, grinning, "it's a very good book, but I would argue that there are better."

She indicates that she wants me to stand, so I do.

"Name one," Vixen challenges, eyebrows raised, while silently gesturing that she wants me to pick her up so she can check around the ceiling for bugs.

"The Great Gatsby," I supply off the top of my head.

I make a step out of my hands, which Vixen uses to more easily hop onto my shoulders.

"Terrible," she tells me while we walk slowly around the room. "All of the characters in that story are horrible people."

"They're supposed to be," I argue. "It's a critique of high society during the Roaring Twenties."

"Next," she orders flatly.

"The Count of Monte Cristo," I offer after a moment's thought.

"Hmm. That might be a contender," Vixen muses. "All human wisdom is contained in these two words, 'wait and hope.'"

"Very true," I agree. Charles, and by extension myself, are living proof of that philosophy.

We're silent for a moment until Vixen nudges my shoulder with her foot.

"I'm still waiting."

"I would argue that I've come up with appropriate alternatives. It's all just a matter of taste," I retort.

Vixen snorts and hops off my shoulders. Without thinking I reach out to steady her, my hands going to her waist.

And then I realize what I'm doing and release her like a burning firebrand.

"'Appropriate alternatives?'" she quotes. "Who talks like that?"
I shrug. "I do, I guess."

"Nerd," Vixen says. Do I detect a note of affection in her tone? She gestures around the room. "It looks like we're clear. What do you suggest we do next?"

I consider that for a moment. While I can hope the X-Men will come to find us, it's good to have a back-up plan.

"They have to come and get us if they want to use us as test subjects, right? I think the only thing we can really do is wait for that, considering that they took all of our things."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," she agrees dejectedly.

Vixen plops down on the floor, legs crossed and elbows to knees. Her knuckles settle under her chin. Failing alternatives, I sit next to her.

And for a while we just talk, because it's not like we have anything else to do. The way we easily continue the banter that started as a ploy to cover the sounds of our movements disturbs me.

Vixen has a quirky sense of humor and is whip-smart. She's feisty and spirited, and I enjoy talking to her so much it makes me sick to my stomach.

I don't want to like her, I don't. It would be so much easier for me if I hated Vixen, if I found out now that every semi-good thing I've guessed about her is completely wrong. She's part of the Brotherhood.

I should want nothing to do with her.

"Shakespeare?" I prompt curiously.

"Hells yeah," Vixen replies, laughing. "You?"

I nod in affirmative, grinning.

"Tragedies or comedies?"

"I'm not particularly fond of the tragedies," I admit. My life tends to be depressing enough on its own- I suppose I like to keep my fiction light.

She gasps in astonishment. "What? Not even Romeo and Juliet?"

I wrinkle my nose in distaste.

"But why not?" Vixen asks. "I mean, it's one of the most classic love stories of all time."

"I find it difficult to enjoy a story when the downfall is brought on by the characters' own folly," I reply stiffly. "If either of them had stopped to think for a moment, the tragedy would've been averted."

"That's not the point," she argues. "The point is that their love was so strong they were willing to give up everything for it."

"You realize they each killed themselves over someone they'd known for a grand total of three days, right? Where's the sense in that?"
"It's not necessarily supposed to make sense. Not everyone is as rational as you are, Dr. Beast, and it's unfair to expect them to be," Vixen retorts. "The tragedies are supposed to make you feel. To have empathy for other people's faults, you know? Take Antony and Cleopatra, for example. You can feel bad for them both without thinking it's a good idea to stab yourself with a sword or let a snake bite your boob, right?"

The nature of her argument- however sound it is- startles me into laughter. "Perhaps," I finally concede.

She flashes a triumphant grin that makes her hazel eyes sparkle.

"Does that mean you put no merit in Shakespeare's comedies, then?" I ask, pointedly ignoring the effect her smile is having on my insides.

"Hey, I didn't say that. Unlike some people, I can appreciate both," she teases. "I think my favorite quote from all of Shakespeare's comedies is: How far that little candle throws his beams!/ So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

"The Merchant of Venice," I supply immediately.

Vixen nods happily.

For a moment we're quiet, but it's not an uncomfortable silence. Vixen isn't the kind of person who needs to fill the stillness with mindless chatter, something I find lacking in a lot of people.

Also missing in so many others: the compassion this woman showed me in Paris. All of those humans stood by and gawked at my plight that day, but not her. How fitting it is that that particular quotation is her favorite.

"That's how I thought of what you did for me in Paris," I murmur. "A good deed like that isn't something you forget."

She looks away, as if the memory is making her uncomfortable.

Perhaps it's because the next time we saw each other she used my gratitude against me, and now she feels guilty about it? A likely explanation, judging by the look on her face.

Vixen- still barefoot and avoiding my gaze- suddenly scoots around and places the soles of her normal-looking feet up against my monstrosities. They're so tiny that mine must be at least three times bigger than hers.

I watch her face, looking for a sign of disgust as she compares our limbs, but I find none. The shame is quickly replaced by fascination alone in her expression. None of the horror I've come to fear and expect when people see my feet.

My finger-toes curl over reflexively under Vixen's scrutiny, as if they're trying to hide from her. Doing this means that I'm gently holding her toes and the balls of her feet.

She lets out a delighted laugh- a real one, not just a half-amused chuckle- that makes my toes tingle and causes them to hold hers just a little harder.

"I like your feet," Vixen tells me, and for a moment my heart literally feels like it's glowing.

And then something happens to ruin the moment. Of course.
Suddenly we hear a bloodcurdling scream echo through the walls, the sound coming from some far away, unseen source.

Both Vixen and I are on our feet immediately, listening for more and wondering if fate is about to spring something horrible on us. I instinctively step closer to her, ready to protect her. But nothing happens for several minutes, so we relax.

A little.

Vixen shudders. "What I'm going to do to that man when I get my hands on him," she mutters, her expression darkening.

"I thought you said revenge isn't your thing?"

"It's not," she replies sharply. "There's a difference between revenge and making sure that bastard is never able to torture another mutant ever again."

I raise my eyebrows. "So you plan on killing Stryker."

Vixen lifts her head defiantly, staring me right in the eyes. "If I can manage it, yeah," she says, her tone a challenge. "Why? Have any other suggestions?"

"We could turn him in to the police," I offer.

"So they can release him an hour later?" she scoffs. "Think about it, Beast. Bolivar Trask is on trial for selling American military tech to the Chinese. Not for building giant murder machines aimed at innocent civilians, and not for torturing a bunch of mutants to death. What makes you think they'll hold Stryker for anything? We're not people to them."

Part of me thinks that maybe she's right, but another part- the one that magically grew into existence when we argued about collateral damage- decides to speak up.

"And you think killing humans will make them finally see us as equals? Can't you see that what you do just makes them fear us even more? We've become the monsters in their closets, and nothing else," I say harshly. Then I laugh bitterly and shake my head. "But that's right, the Brotherhood doesn't want equality between the species, does it?"

"What are you trying to say?" Vixen asks icily.

"I'm saying you want mutant superiority," I snap. "That you see humans as these lesser beings not worthy of the same respect-"

"And I say again," she hisses. "That just shows that you don't know me."

This absolutely floors me- this slight indication that Vixen doesn't see humans as scum. But why-?

"Enlighten me, then," I say.

"Not that I have to explain myself to you," Vixen replies coldly, "but I want mutants to be seen as equals. All these things we do... it's to earn respect. To get a seat at the table for mutant rights."

"You might believe that, but the rest of your little friends don't," I tell her, recovering quickly. She opens her mouth to argue, but I cut across her. "I've known them longer than you have, Vixen. I've known Erik Lehnsherr for a long time. He wants mutant superiority, not equality."

I sigh.
"And as for your self-destructive methods-"

"Spare me the speech from your high horse," she says bitterly, turning away. "At least I'm doing something."

"You think the X-Men are doing nothing?" My voice is almost a growl.

"It seems to me that your only goal is to block our efforts," Vixen explains stiffly, "and to teach young mutants how to hide who they are."

"We teach them control," I reply, my tone sharp. "We give them a place to belong and teach them to accept themselves, to make something of their lives."

She turns back to me, and I think I see a glimmer of uncertainty pass over her face.

*Have I gotten through to her?*
Vixen opens her mouth, like she wants to argue more, but then quickly closes it. She clears her throat and doesn't look me in the eye as she mutters, "I'm tired."

I try to swallow my disappointment. For one brief moment there I thought I'd gotten through to her, but apparently not.

"I'll keep watch," I offer, my tone very formal compared to the casual way in which we spoke with one another earlier. Before we got so angry with each other.

Vixen nods and says, "thank you," just as stiffly before pulling up her hood and curling up in the corner farthest from me. The way she sits snuggled into her cloak against the wall with her knees tucked up reminds me of a napping kitten.

And while she sleeps, I ruminate.

Vixen wants the same things we do, it seems. Mutant equality, not superiority.

The revelation fills me with a curious mixture of emotions. Relief, because my instincts about her true nature were right. Sadness, because despite that knowledge she's still so radical in her methods. And hope, hope that perhaps one day she'll see that what she's doing is self-destructive to her own cause and change tact to something that's much more productive.

And why does this matter to me?

I have to begrudgingly admit to myself that I've enjoyed being around her today. It was all too easy to slip from wariness of each other into pleasant, stimulating conversation. We've been stuck here in this tiny featureless room for almost an entire day now, but I've barely noticed. I admire Vixen's spirit, her fire- I feel drawn to it, like a moth to a flame.

Even the way I felt while we were arguing... I have to wonder if I've ever felt more... more alive.

For the first time ever, I'm not content to be walked all over in a disagreement. That's how it was with Charles when he was a bitter drunkard, how I've always been when someone made fun of me.

But with Vixen I feel something inside of me stir. She makes me rise to her challenge, to match her arguments with my own. Otherwise I never would've said half the things I did to her today.

I feel... strong around her. More assertive and sure of myself. And for some reason that scares me.

Because even if she's different from her fellow Brotherhood members, Vixen is still one of them.

Still an enemy.

So I need to be smart about this- we're trapped here together, yes, but that doesn't mean we should become friends or anything. In fact, it's more prudent if we don't. We'll have to work together to get out of here, but after that we'll go back to our opposing organizations.

I resolve to be politely cordial, but not get any friendlier with Vixen than I already have. Clearly, our earlier conversations were a mistake. Having made her laugh, made her smile, and having
protected each other will make it difficult enough when I inevitably face her in the field again after this. I don't need any more conflicting feelings.

Vixen seems to agree with my conclusion, if the way she addresses me with wary politeness when she wakes up is any indication.

"I'll keep watch if you'd like to get some rest," she says coolly.

"No thank you," I reply.

Vixen rolls her eyes. "I'm not going to kill you in your sleep, you know," she snaps.

She's surprisingly grumpy for someone who just had a nap. Then again, she's probably hungry after at least an entire day without food. I'm feeling rather peckish myself.

"I know," I agree. And then I can't help adding, "you're different from the rest of them that way."

She opens her mouth to retort, but I keep talking.

Though I told myself I was going to be distantly polite from now on, something in me won't stop poking the pretty little feral with some verbal barbs.

I think maybe it's because part of me finds her irritation inexplicably attractive. The way her eyes flash and her pale cheeks flush with anger when she's arguing with me does something strange to my insides.

And I know I shouldn't do it, but I can't help myself.

"Think about it- Fox, Scarlet, Mastermind- none of them would've hesitated to kill me by now. Especially for what I said to you earlier," I say impatiently. Doesn't she know her own teammates? Her own brother? "But you... you're smarter than they are. More logical. And I'd even say kinder. I've watched you since you joined up, Vixen. You don't kill unless you feel you have to, and you certainly don't torture people."

Vixen's irritated expression flickers for a moment before she purses her lips together again and her eyes flash. "Just get some sleep, will you? You're going to be useless if you're too tired to fight," she tells me, clearly annoyed.

"Fair enough," I agree. I lay down, facing away from her.

I have to, because I'm trying not to smile.

---

June 23, 1974

I wake up a few hours later to the echoes of more screaming. The sound makes my fur stand on end. It takes a moment for me to find my bearings, but then I remember- Stryker. Imprisonment. Vixen.

She's pacing back and forth on the other side of the room, arms hugging herself and singing softly. Everything about her screams agitation and discomfort.

"Vixen?"

"It's been going on for the past twenty minutes," she mutters. "By the way, you snore like a bear."
"Sorry," I say honestly.

Because I feel a little bad for her, being stuck in this tiny room listening to sickening screams and my snoring. No wonder she looks like she's losing her mind.

Vixen sighs and stops walking. "Ok, you don't really snore," she says, clutching her head. "But the screaming is driving me nuts."

"I've noticed."

She gives me a sardonic look and goes back to pacing. I just sit there watching her, noting that the way she walks- even when flustered- is as graceful as a panther. It's rather mesmerizing.

"Tell me about the school," she says after a few minutes of this.

"What?"

Vixen glances at me. "Distract me. Tell me what you can, at least," she clarifies. "I get that you might not be able to say much because of security reasons, but still."

I shrug. "It's not like I think you'd storm the castle or anything," I idly remark.

*Like she could. I designed the security system myself.*

She snorts. "After everything you accused the Brotherhood of earlier, you really don't think I'd try?"

"No," I reply. "I don't."

"Are all of the X-Men that naive, or is it just you?"

"It's not naivety," I say, my tone defensive. "It's about giving people second chances. New beginnings, redemption. We believe people can change, if they're shown a better way. It's about... hope."

Despite my rather gloomy nature at times, I believe deeply in the power of hope. The last ten years would've broken me irrevocably if I didn't. Even though Charles gave me every reason to lose faith in him, I never lost hope.

And now look at us all. It's not something you can underestimate.

Vixen stopped pacing as I explained myself, and now she's scrutinizing me with a strange curiosity mingled with *yearning*, perhaps? I can't help wondering if my words have touched her somehow, if-

And that's when a panel in the wall slides open, revealing five armed guards.
Escape

For a split second their reaction is almost comical. The five guards stare at us, completely dumbfounded, as if trying to understand how exactly their prisoners got out of their chains. It's like their mouths have dropped open wide enough to catch flies.

Vixen's reaction is even more priceless. She stays frozen for less than a millisecond-

And then she picks up her combat boots and slings them right at the guards' faces.

It's ridiculous, but it works. One guard she gets right in the forehead, knocking him out. The other boot is enough of a distraction to the other guards that we're able to leap into action.

Vixen goes high and to the left; I go low right. We knock into the humans like they're bowling pins, sending all of them flailing backwards into a dimly-lit hallway. Like our tiny prison cell, the walls are made of thick, solid metal.

I suppose that's why I haven't heard from Charles, then. With all this metal surrounding us, he won't be able to "see" me- not even with Cerebro. As soon as we can get out of this place I need to call him and let him know I'm alive, because he's probably panicking at this point. I've been off the grid for well over a day now, probably two.

But at least I know for certain that back up isn't coming. Vixen and I need to get out of here on our own.

The fight is quick and dirty. Vixen is able to wrench a gun away from one of the guards and uses it to knock him out. Another she kicks in the face. I'm able to throw one guard into the wall, where he crumples like a rag doll. The last I knock out with a well-aimed punch to the temple.

Vixen lets out a little huff of satisfaction. "Step one, complete," she says, picking up her boots and slipping them on. "Want to split up? One of us can figure out how to get out of here, and the other can see if we can find any other captives?"

"Or we can look for captives together while trying to find a way out," I retort.

Considering what she said about her plans earlier, I don't trust Vixen not to go and murder Stryker if I let her run off alone. I want to leave here with as few casualties as possible, and that means not allowing Vixen out of my sight.

She knows what I'm thinking, too, because she gives me a tight-lipped frown for a moment before rolling her eyes. "Fine," she grumbles. "But first let's see what we've got here."

Together we go through and strip the unconscious guards of all of their weapons. Each one has a pistol loaded with bullets that seem to be made of the same material as Vixen's old knives.

You know, before they took them from her.

Thankfully all of these men have such a knife on them. Vixen gives me a genuine smile when I hand all six of the blades to her.

"Trust me with these?" she teases, looking them over.
"Not really," I reply. But it's not like I have a choice. She's so proficient with knives that it would be downright stupid not to utilize her abilities to the fullest.

While she looks her new weapons over I take the cartridges out of the guards' guns to examine them, trying to figure out what they're made of. Vixen notices my efforts.

"It's adamantium," she explains. "The knives, too. It's basically indestructible. Here, watch this-"

She holds one of her new knives up about six inches from the metal floor and then releases it. It sinks in almost up to the hilt, with no other force applied except for gravity.

"Intriguing," I murmur. "Where'd you get your pair, before?"

"I stole them from Stryker during a break in. I didn't get my brother, but it wasn't a complete loss," she says briskly, standing up. "Are we ready?"

I stand as well. "Yes," I reply.

To my surprise, Vixen holds out a hand to shake. "I give you my word that I won't ditch you here, even if we get separated," she tells me solemnly.

I frown. "That hadn't even crossed my mind," I say honestly.

I look her in the eyes when I say that, because I mean it. Strange that I don't trust her not to go kill Stryker, but that I fully believe she won't abandon an ally.

"I told you, you're diff-"

"I get it," she cuts in impatiently, withdrawing her hand.

She doesn't bother to ask me to make the same deal- I think she knows it goes without saying that I won't leave her trapped here. She trusts me that much, at least. Or maybe she just knows an X-Man wouldn't do such a thing.

"Let's go," she says.

And Vixen takes off down the hallway, leaving me scrambling to catch up. I do, though, and together we follow the sounds of someone- another male- screaming in agonizing pain.

On the way we check every room we come across, looking for more captives.

But all we find is a room full of eviscerated feral mutant corpses, victims of who-knows-what but certainly well past suffering now.

There are seven of them in all, laying exposed and shrunken on cold metal tables. No one even had the decency to cover them up.

"Oh, my God," Vixen whispers, using a hand to cover her mouth as we step farther in the room. The stench is enough to make my eyes water. "So many of us..."

I know what she means. It fills me with a burning anger to see so many members of our race, already on the verge of extinction, dead and so defiled.

"This is one of the guys we heard screaming earlier, I think," Vixen says quietly, gesturing to the freshest victim. "Y-you don't think they started this while he was still alive, do you? Wait- what's that?"
She's pointing down into the abdominal cavity, so I come closer to take a look. It looks like there's some sort of metal inside, like his bones are made of it or something.

The realization makes me want to vomit.

"I think you were right about one thing, Vixen," I tell her quietly. "Stryker likes ferals for their healing factor. Look- I think they were trying to coat his skeleton with adamantium, but his system wasn't strong enough to take it."

Her expression is as horrified as I feel. She shivers, like she senses Death right over her shoulder, and looks at me with this indescribable emotion burning in her eyes.

For a moment I think she's going to scream at me about the evils of humanity, to see what they're capable of, but she doesn't.

Instead she blinks furiously and says, "what do you say about us giving them a Viking funeral?"

I glance around us, taking in this ugly room that has become a tomb for our brethren. If they were alive I'm sure we'd be trying to kill each other. Because it's what male ferals do- a sad truth, that we take each other out even as our race is fading from existence.

But they're dead, and I'm not.

I nod. "Let's do it."
It surprises me that Vixen can make a bomb out of cleaning supplies, but I suppose it really shouldn't. She's a borderline-terrorist. Of course she knows about makeshift explosives.

"Did the Brotherhood teach you this?" I ask her while she works. I swear I don't sound judgmental about it. Just curious.

She scoffs as she starts dumping lye into a bucket. "I have two brothers and grew up in the middle of nowhere," she mutters. "We had to have fun somehow."

I picture Vixen as a mischievous child blowing up mailboxes and things. For some reason the idea almost makes me smile even while I pack up autopsy photographs. They're to take back to the X-Men.

"You must have kept your parents quite busy," I muse. I assume that Vixen's parents are ferals, too, considering that all three of their children are.

Vixen turns away so I can't see her face. "Yeah," she agrees quietly. There's an awkward pause, and then she clears her throat. "This will go off in two minutes."

Her reaction to the mention of her parents immediately rouses my suspicion, but I obviously can't ask about it. It feels too personal.

"Let's get going then," I say.

Vixen takes one last look at the bodies surrounding us and nods sadly. Is she upset she couldn't save them? Is she picturing her brothers, dead and cut open, on those tables?

Suddenly I feel the urge to take her hand and give it a comforting squeeze, but I resist the impulse. It honestly sounds like a surefire way to get myself punched in the face.

Then Vixen turns away, ready for action again. I lead the way out of that horrible room, and within a minute her makeshift explosive goes off.

The disturbance, of course, draws a pack of guards. They announce their presence by shooting tranquilizer darts at us.

"Whoa!" Vixen yelps in surprise. She uses a knife to deflect one dart and hits the deck to avoid the others headed her way.

I'm able to dodge the darts aimed for me and then proceed to mow through the guards, throwing them around with impunity.

Vixen joins the fray, landing a flying kick to the face on one man just as he's raising his real gun to shoot me. He collapses to the floor with a black eye already forming.

Ouch. Trust me, I know how that feels.

We easily dispatch the rest of them and keep going, finally reaching a huge room- almost like an aircraft hangar- that has an assortment of medical and metallurgy equipment. The two of us hide in
the shadows behind some barrels, taking in the scene.

The centerpiece of the space is a man-sized shallow tank of water, surrounded by tubes and what appears to be a reservoir of liquid adamantium. Clearly, this is where the ugly experiments have been happening.

Right now the entire room is awash with activity, because there's a man in the pool-

And then he's not. He's standing, completely naked, with adamantium claws protruding from his knuckles and screaming his head off while everyone else is all in a tizzy.

Oh, my stars and garters.

The man is Logan.

Logan, who obviously just survived a procedure that killed several other ferals. It appears that they successfully bonded adamantium to his skeleton.

"Logan," I murmur.

"You know him?" Vixen whispers.

"Yes- well, no," I reply. I don't know this Logan yet, only the one from the future we tried to avert. This one will have no memory of meeting me at all. "It's rather complicated."

Logan is now flailing around, slashing through equipment like butter with his new metal claws while the human workers attempt to subdue him.

Good luck with that.

"Well, he seems fun," Vixen observes dryly.

Correction: he seems insane. But I suppose he has a valid reason, considering that he just had liquid metal injected into his body.

I'm still trying to figure out what to do. Do I allow Logan to continue on his berserker rampage, or do I try to intervene and possibly get stabbed for the trouble?

Vixen makes the decision for me.

She darts out from our hiding place and disables a couple guards in order to get to Logan, who at this point is trying to kill everyone within a six foot radius- and unfortunately succeeding.

I know a moment of fear when he turns and makes a downward stroke with his claws right at Vixen, but she manages to block it with a pair of her knives.

"Hey! Stop, stop- it's ok!" Vixen says earnestly. "I'm like you. I'm a feral mutant too, see?"

She shakes her head slightly so her pointed ears are more visible through her hair.

This causes Logan to pause in his murder spree.

He stares, breathing heavily, at Vixen like he's never seen anything like her before- and perhaps he hasn't. Female ferals are ridiculously rare, after all. Vixen's the only one I've ever met, though it's not like I get out much.
"See, it's alright," she tells him. She sounds like a mother trying to soothe a cranky baby to sleep. "Come with me, and I'll get you out of here, ok? And clothes, I'll get you clothes."

*Yes, please do. The rest of us are trying very hard to ignore his junk.*

Logan hesitates.

*Come on, go with her. I think I would follow her, if she talked to me like that.*

That's not exactly a comforting thought.

It happens in a split second. Logan takes a step towards her-

Making it so the bullet Stryker just fired at his head barely misses its target.

The first bullet is quickly followed by a barrage of others, aimed for both ferals.

But I don't think Logan notices this, because he lets out a roar of betrayal and takes a swipe at Vixen, like he thinks she was trying to trick him.

She's able to dodge his attack and the bullets, too, as she retreats back towards me. When she passes by my hiding place, with Logan chasing her, I take the opportunity to tackle him.

I snarl in his face and hold his wrists over his head, keeping the new murder-accessories well away from me. Let me just say that this is a situation I *never* want to be in again, pinning a naked man to the ground.

*Ugh.*

For a moment I have him subdued, but I lose my grip when more bullets come our way. I have to shift to dodge them and Logan uses the opportunity to get loose and roll us over so he's now pinning me.

*Double ugh.*

He's fortuitously hit by a bullet in the arm at that moment, which takes his attention off of me. Usually I'd feel bad about someone getting shot but under the circumstances, not so much. I'm thankfully able to shove him off while he's distracted and regain my footing.

Logan stares at me, completely wide-eyed, and I feel a swell of pity for him. Did the procedure affect his brain? He looks so lost. I wish Charles was here to talk him down.

But he's not. It's just me.

"Logan-" I begin.

And then another shot hits him in the chest.

He flinches slightly, growls, and then runs away. He's clearly making for the exit.

*Well, then. So much for persuasion.*

In my defense, I didn't even get a chance-

"Drop it," a feminine voice harshly orders somewhere behind me, before I can chase after Logan.
I turn and see Vixen on Stryker's back, holding a knife to his throat. His eyes are bulging with surprise and fear over his sudden predicament.

"I said *drop it,*" she repeats. A thin line of blood appears under her blade.

*Well then. So much for not letting Vixen out of my sight.*
Stryker drops the gun. At this point his face is turning purple. With rage, humiliation, or terror - I can't really tell which. Maybe all three?

"On your knees," Vixen orders.

She regains her feet as Stryker obeys and then kicks the gun away when she moves to stand in front of him. She pulls out another knife while she glowers down at the man and holds both blades, crossed, to her victim's throat.

I open my mouth to speak, to try to dissuade her from literally executing a man in cold blood, but nothing comes out. It's like my vocal chords have stopped working from the sheer horror of it.

The girl who laughed with me, who dislocated her wrist to keep me from falling into a pit, the one who just tried to be kind to a beclawed madman, is going to be a stone-cold killer.

She's no different from the rest of them, after all, I think bitterly. I was completely wrong about her.

The realization fills me with a rather startling amount of disappointed anguish. I had thought maybe, for just a moment, she'd truly heard what I was saying back in that cell. But apparently not.

"You've been torturing and mutilating my kind for years, using us as your playthings. Like we're not people, just like you. My brother has never been the same since you got your filthy mitts on him," Vixen hisses. "I'd love for you to give me one good reason not to slit your throat right now."

Stryker's mouth opens and closes uselessly, like a fish out of water. He can't even think of a single word to say in his own defense. But then, his actions are truly indefensible.


She pauses, and I think, this is it, she's going to kill him-

The moment before she acts seems to last forever, like time has completely been suspended. And when it finally starts to move again, something has inexplicably shifted in the air.

Vixen...

"I want you to remember this moment, Stryker," Vixen slowly whispers, so quietly I almost can't hear her from my spot several feet away. "I should gut you right here and now, but I'm going to let you go. A mutant had you on your knees, and she gave you a second chance. Remember that the next time you feel like playing mad scientist, because I promise you I won't be so merciful when I find you again."

And then she slams the handle of her knife into his temple. An expression of shock is still frozen on his face as he falls over unconscious.

Vixen lets out a little huff of dissatisfaction and stands there staring down at Stryker for a long moment. I wonder if she's thinking about changing her mind?
Then she all-out kicks him in the shin, as if knocking him senseless wasn't quite enough for her. I suppose it's better than killing him, but I do hear a sickening crunch that tells me she just broke his kneecap.

"Asshole," she mutters, before turning back towards me. "Let's get out of here."

I nod mutely and follow Vixen after she passes by me, headed for the exit. I catch up within a few paces so I'm walking at her side. Her jaw is set and her head is held high- with her pointed ears she looks as regal as an elvish queen.

I'm still in shock, I guess, that she let Stryker go. The man who left her brother forever mentally damaged, who killed and tortured so many of our kind, and who she vowed to kill back in that cell- Vixen let him go. She gave him a second chance. I can't believe it.

She glances over at me and notices that I'm staring at her.

"What?" she demands defensively.

"You didn't kill him," I say. The statement itself is a question. Why? Why didn't she?

Vixen rolls her eyes. "Your powers of observation are astounding, Beast."

But she offers no other comment. It forces me to ask her outright.

"Why not?"

"Are you complaining?" she retorts.

"No, but... I'm just curious as to why you didn't, after you said you were going to," I explain.

Vixen shrugs, but avoids looking at me when she rather sheepishly replies, "I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Oh my God!" she says, clearly exasperated. I half-expect her to stomp her foot. "Because I felt like it, Beast! Now let it go before I change my mind again."

So I let it go.

And try not to let her see the pleased smile on my face.

_Please I was right about her, after all._

"I say we jump," Vixen announces.

"You're joking, right?"

We're currently standing at the top of a fifty-foot tall waterfall. This is where we ended up after following the path Logan took out of the facility- a route that included going through a wall on which he clearly used his new adamantium accessories to rip open into a drainage tube. We ended up here, where the pipe emptied out into a decent-sized river that almost immediately turned into our current waterfall dilemma.

I'm debating on whether or not we should head back the way we came to find another exit, but I know it's not really a good idea. We'll have to fight our way back through again, since I'm sure the
guards we incapacitated will be waking up by now.

It seems our only real options are to either climb down or jump. Vixen is in favor of jumping- I suspect because it's less time-consuming than climbing, and less stress on her wrist- but I'm hesitant. It's late afternoon, and even though it's June I can feel the hint of a chill in the air. I think we're in the mountains somewhere, but other than that general idea I have no clue.

"Nope," Vixen replies to my question. "I think it will be fun. And I'd rather jump into the water than lose my grip on the rocks while climbing and end up breaking every bone in my body when I land on the shore."

I frown, because there's actually logic to her point. Unless there's rocks in the water, too-

There's no time to bring up any further argument, though, because Vixen sees the change in my expression, grins, and jumps right off the cliff.

Oh my stars and garters- really?

I don't even pause- I follow her in an instant, without thinking of the consequences.

Consequences like shattering bones and how my fur will take forever to dry even if I'm not plummeting to my death right now.

That might say a lot about me and my responses to this woman, unfortunately.

It's a long way down, but even a distance like that disappears rather quickly when you're worried about breaking both of your legs upon landing.

It feels like I only have time to think, "Wow, I hope this doesn't kill me," before I hit the water, feet-first, with a splash.

Vixen is giggling madly when I surface, both of us safe and sound. It rather feels like a miracle, to the point where I'm surprised I'm not babbling thanks at this moment to a God whose existence I usually question.

"Wasn't that awesome?" Vixen asks eagerly, treading water.

"No," I retort sourly. "That was terrifying."

She scoffs teasingly, but her tone is serious when she says, "you're not living enough if you're not doing things that scare you now and then, Beast."

Then she giggles and splashes me, ruining the gravity of her statement.

I can't help it- I laugh, too.
Breaking and Entering

I get out of the water immediately, but Vixen takes a minute to wash off her makeup before joining me on the shore and wringing out her cloak.

Considering the fact that Vixen's last suggestion was jumping off a cliff, I'm not really sure soliciting her opinion is the best idea. But I do it anyway and blame it on how my mother spent so much time drumming manners into my head when I was younger.

"Which way do you suggest?" I ask politely as she combs through her damp white-blond hair with her claws.

"Follow the river," Vixen replies after a moment's thought. "People tend to build along water, so that's better than aimlessly walking through the forest, right?"

I nod in agreement, and together we set off to follow the river through the oncoming twilight.

I find myself staring at Vixen a lot as we walk. She seems perfectly at ease here among the trees, moving with a silent, graceful tread. I tell myself that my eyes are drawn in Vixen's direction because her platinum hair practically glows in the deepening shadows of the forest around us, but I know it's a lie.

The truth is, I... like looking at her. Especially now that the dark, sultry makeup is no longer obscuring her lovely features. That, combined with the fact that she just showed mercy to a mortal enemy, makes Vixen seem less like an adversary right now and more like the pretty girl who showed me compassion in Paris. The one I hoped to see again, to get to know.

And now here we are...

It's full dark by the time we reach the outskirts of a little town that's sandwiched between the river and a highway. I couldn't be more delighted for the sign of civilization- and neither can Vixen.

"Look, a diner!" she cheers, running over to what seems to be the only place of business in the entire settlement. "Yes! I'm starving."

I follow her much more cautiously, taking care to avoid the glow of the street lamps. Vixen may blend in as long as no one looks too close, but I certainly don't. I stay in the shadows as she peers through the glass doors.

"It looks closed," I observe. The lights are on, but seem too dim to be inviting. "I think it might be Sunday night already."

"So much the better. It's perfect- they even have a phone you can use," Vixen agrees happily. She goes around the side of the building to a small back window. I trail behind, wondering what on earth she's doing this time. "Here, could you give me a boost?"

"What exactly are you doing?" I ask uneasily.

I have a bad feeling I'm about to be an accessory to a crime, which I don't really approve of. There's a difference between breaking and entering for the sake of protecting mutants and breaking into an establishment just because you're hungry.
Even if you're really hungry.

"Trying to break in and make some food," Vixen explains, frowning like I just asked a stupid question. "I don't know about you, but I haven't eaten since Friday evening."

"But-"

"Look, I won't hurt the window," she says impatiently. "And I'll leave money for the food I make, too, so I'm not really stealing."

I pause, though I'm reluctantly letting her logic work on me.

We're both hungry and thirsty, and if we clean up after ourselves and pay... And there's no payphone in sight, so this will be my best bet to contact Charles...

"Jesus, are you always such a stuffy goody-goody?"

I frown, feeling slightly insulted. "Fine," I finally agree, giving into my starving, dehydrated state and her wheedling.

Vixen grins at my acquiescence and turns around so I can easily pick her up by the waist and lift her to where she can reach the window. She has it open quicker than the blink of an eye and slips inside with ease.

"After you," she announces with an exaggerated bow after I come back around to the front door.

"Thanks."

By unspoken agreement we both head straight for the drink dispenser and down about six glasses of water each. Then we each head for the bathroom to find some relief. Both of us have been holding out in that department, thanks to the distinct lack of facilities in that metal room.

Afterwards Vixen heads into the kitchen to survey the provisions while I call Charles. I offer the phone to her first, but she declines.

This makes me confused, though I say nothing about it to her. Doesn't she need to call someone to get a ride home? Or is she going to make her own way?

In which case, why is she still here with me?

"I'd really prefer it if you didn't mention to your Professor X that I'm here," Vixen says seriously before she disappears into the kitchen. At my questioning look, she explains, "it'll just raise some questions that are better left alone."

I hate to lie to Charles, even by omission, but I think I understand her reasoning. After working together to escape Stryker, will we ever truly see each other as enemies again? Will we be able to fight each other in the field?

Charles may understand if I can't do it, but I know Erik won't be so forgiving if Vixen admits that she was fraternizing with the enemy like this. It's safer for her if we pretend that none of it happened.

For some reason that thought depresses me. It takes me a moment to shake it off and focus on the task at hand.

Charles answers his private line on the first ring. "Hello?"
"Hi," I say. "It's me."

"Hank? Oh, thank God," he breathes. "I've been searching all over for you with Cerebro. Where have you been? Are you alright?"

I have to hold back a laugh because Charles sounds less like the leader of a para-military group and more like an exasperated schoolmarm.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "Major Stryker got me and locked me up in a completely metal facility. I escaped and found a phone as soon as I could."

"Where are you?"

"I'm holed up in a diner in a town called Alkali Lake," I reply. That's the name I saw on a welcome sign as we walked in.

I can hear him fumbling around for a map at his desk. "I've got it. You're in British Columbia. We'll be there as soon as we can, yes?"

"Ok."

"Are you sure you're alright?" Charles asks anxiously.

"Yes."

"Alright. See you soon."

I marvel at the difference a year and a half can make after I hang up. Up until last January Charles was bitter and indifferent to the well-being of those around him. He was too lost in his own grief to notice.

But now he's found himself again, and he's once more committed to helping our kind. The caring, compassionate man I knew him as is back and just as much a mother hen as he was back in 1962. In a good way, though.

And it's all thanks to Logan's visit from the future.

Logan. Where is he now? Is he alright? I can only hope he-

Vixen's voice, calling out from the kitchen, interrupts my thoughts.

"Beast, get your ass in here! I'm not cooking for you!"

Well, then.
Enjoy This While We Can

I enter to the kitchen to find what seems like half the refrigerator's contents spread out across the counters. Vixen, who's taken off her cloak, is surveying the mess with the air of a tiny commander considering her battlefield strategy.

"Um- what are you making?" I ask. "Everything but the kitchen sink?"

She shoots me a look, but deigns to reply, "I'm making steak and eggs. The rest is for you to see what you want."

"You're making breakfast for dinner, huh?"

She raises her eyebrows. "What makes it breakfast?"


"And why does a meal have to be 'breakfast for dinner' if it includes eggs?" Vixen asks haughtily. "Why can't it just be dinner?"

Don't ask me why, but I willingly walk right into the debate she's presenting. I blame the way her eyes are sparkling at me, inviting me to meet her challenge.

*Have fun with me,* those hazel orbs seem to say. *I dare you.*

I dare.

"Because eggs have a set place in American society as a breakfast food," I explain, coming closer. "Certain foods, by rule, are eaten at a certain time of the day. Like... like pancakes or hash browns. Those are breakfast foods, too."

"And who makes these rules?" Vixen demands, but I know she's teasing. "I want to meet these people who get to declare what we eat and when. Go argue in front of the committee or something."

I grin. "And what would you say?"

"That I don't give a damn about their arbitrary rules and if I want to eat eggs for dinner I *will*-without the stupid breakfast label."

And she pulls out two eggs along with a steak with a flourish while I watch. I don't bother hiding the smile on my face as I go around behind her and grab a steak of my own.

What can I say? Red meat sounds good right about now.

"It's still breakfast," I murmur as I pass.

Vixen turns her head to glower at me. "That's it, you food fascist," she says, brandishing a spatula like a weapon. "I'm making pancakes and hash browns just to spite you."

And we both laugh.
We sit down across from each other at a table that's loaded with food. Over-easy eggs, hash browns, pancakes, toast, bacon, and steaks cooked rare, of course, to account for our feral palates. It's nice not to feel self-conscious about that for once.

At first we're too hungry to make conversation, but once both of us get over the feeling that we're starving we begin to speak again.

"You said you've known Magneto for a long time," Vixen observes at one point.

The statement immediately puts me on my guard. We seem to get along just fine- more than fine, really- until someone mentions the X-Men or the Brotherhood, and now she just brought it up again.

Not for the first time do I curse Erik Lehnsherr's existence. What sort of dispute will the conversation between us degenerate into this time?

I nod reluctantly in reply.

I really don't want to argue with Vixen again. I just want to eat my dinner/breakfast in peace while we talk some more about the merits of Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies. Vixen's arguments may be rather unorthodox, but they also have an internal logic that I find both amusing and intriguing.

That was fun, for us both I think. Why can't we keep doing that?

Unfortunately, Vixen either ignores or doesn't notice my disinclination. "How long is a long time?"


She blinks in surprise. "Wait- how old are you?"

"I'm turning twenty-nine in a few months," I tell her, feeling embarrassed but also relieved that the conversation is moving away from Erik. "What about you?"

"I'm twenty-one," she says, grinning.

There's a sharp pang somewhere deep in my gut.

Here I am, almost thirty, sitting across from this lovely, vivacious woman who practically glows with life and energy. At her age I was trying (and failing) to take care of Charles, instead of going out and living my own life.

I'm an old man in comparison to her. An old man who wasted the prime of his life, who never got to really live.

"I feel like an old man now," I observe dryly.

"Don't," Vixen replies, waving away my self-deprecation. "How old you are has nothing to do with the number of years you've lived. It's about what you've experienced."

There's a haunted look in her eyes as she says this, one that makes me want to reach out and take her hand in comfort- the same urge I had back in that horrible morgue in Stryker's laboratory.

I get the feeling once more that something terrible happened to this girl, that there's a dark sadness in her past. Maybe even several tragic events. After all, it's not like happy, well-adjusted people join the Brotherhood.
Or the X-Men, to be honest. I mean, we're not exactly bastions of mental health, either- all of us have our own damage in one way or another. I guess it's part of being a mutant.

We're all a little broken on the inside.

"I'm still an old man, then," I retort, with a wry grin.

Vixen's answering smile is empathetic. I know she understands perfectly.

*Perhaps, I wonder, I've found a kindred spirit?*

The mood has lightened considerably by the time we start doing dishes. We're back to the teasing, jocular exchange that I enjoy so much with her. It's quite enlivening, and *fun*.

Since Vixen ended up cooking most of the meal (despite her determination *not* to do so), thanks to her insistence that we have breakfast for dinner, I feel honor-bound to volunteer to perform the clean-up. I'm not exactly thrilled about it when she agrees.

"I'll clean up, since you did most of the cooking," I offer once we've finished eating and collected the dishes. "I was rather useless, wasn't I?"

Oh, I grated some potatoes and made toast, but I'd be lying if I claimed that I made any true contribution to the meal besides watching Vixen work. Also, I stole brownie batter while she wasn't looking. So there's that, too.

"Sounds good to me," she says brightly.

Damnation. I was rather hoping she would offer to share the clean up duty.

But Vixen merely giggles over my dejection and hops up onto the counter next to the sink- so I suppose she's at least going to keep me company. In her hands is a plateful of the largest piece of brownie a la mode I've ever seen.

"What's with the face?" Vixen teases.

"I hate getting wet," I reply. "My fur feels all poufy afterwards."

"Why didn't you wear gloves?" she laughs.

"Claws," I explain shortly.

Vixen makes a sympathetic sound and glances down at her own claws. "I know how that is," she agrees, taking another dainty bite of ice cream and brownie. She gets another ready on her spoon and holds it out to me. "Want some? Chocolate makes everything better. Even bad hair days."

The offer startles me, but I go with it anyway and let her feed me a bite. The intimacy of the gesture makes me suddenly wonder to myself once again what I'll do when I meet Vixen in the field after this. And in turn, what will she do?

I look into her eyes and I know without asking that she's thinking the same thing.

For a moment we just stare at each other, both of us wondering if we'll ever have what it takes to hurt the other after the ordeal we went through together over the past two days. I feel like the question gets harder to answer the longer we're around each other. The more I get to know Vixen, the more I like her.
And that doesn't bode well for either of us.

Vixen breaks first, glancing down at the brownie on her plate and letting out a little sigh as she takes a bite. When she meets my gaze again she gives me a tiny smile and offers me another spoonful.

We polish off the dessert together while I finish up the dishes, making small talk as we do.

I think both of us know that we should enjoy this while we can.
We take care to leave the diner exactly as we found it, with the exception of the slightly damp twenty dollars Vixen takes out of her boot (my stars and garters, what else does she have in there? A pen and stationary set?) and leaves next to the cash register in recompense for all the food we ate.

"Some date you are," she jokes as we sneak out. "Making me get the whole damn check."

I know she's kidding, but the idea that our meal was somehow a date still makes my heart stutter. It takes me a moment to compose myself enough to think of some sort of witty comeback.

"I'm sorry, my wallet is in my other uniform. How about I promise to pay the next time we get captured and escape from a mutant-hating military scientist together?" I ask formally, holding out a hand to shake.

Vixen laughs. "Deal," she agrees.

The electric current running from her fingers to mine as we touch has to be part of my imagination, right?

Right?

We head for the forest again, scouting out a clearing for the Blackbird to set down in in order to pick me up. I estimate that the X-Men will be here at any minute, and by experience I know this is the sort of area they'll head to land the jet.

"Will you be alright?" I ask her as we loiter in the treeline of a decent-sized clearing. It's full dark now, and the forest seems ominous and forbidding behind us. I can't imagine Vixen walking back into it by herself. "Are you sure you don't need a ride?"

She lets out a derisive snort. "I'm sure that would go over so well with your teammates," she says. Ok, maybe she has a point there. "Don't worry, Beast. I'll be fine."

"Then why are you waiting here?" I blurt out, finally giving voice to the thought that's been bothering me since we escaped.

Why hasn't Vixen gone her own way by now? It... it couldn't be just because she wants to spend time with me, could it? What an absurd idea, right?

Right?

Her eyebrows raise. "Why?" she asks, like she's offended. "You worried I'll head back to the facility and kill Stryker after you leave?"

My heart sinks in disappointment. "I wasn't until now," I admit. She wouldn't do that, would she? No. I shake my head. "No, I don't believe you'll go back and kill him. You're not like that."

Vixen's lips tug up into a reluctant smile in response to my certainty. "You say you know that about me, but we don't even know each other's names."
"I'm Hank," I tell her.

For the other X-Men sharing their real name with a member of the Brotherhood would be unthinkable. But Vixen's not your average Brotherhood member, and I trust her enough for that.

She could've killed me about twenty times over the past two days, or least done nothing and just let me die. She could've chosen to leave me chained to the wall in that underground facility and ditched me there.

But she didn't. Trusting her with my name seems inconsequential after everything.

"Hank," Vixen repeats gently, and in that one word I can sense the inevitable goodbye coming all too soon.

The goodbye that means Vixen will go back to the Brotherhood, I'll go back to the X-Men, and this unlikely camaraderie between us will be gone.

I don't want to let that go. I don't want to let her go, for reasons I'm afraid to even acknowledge to myself.

"We both know you're different from the rest of them, Vixen. You don't really belong with the Brotherhood," I say earnestly, the invitation to come with me implicit in the words.

Please. Come with me, Vixen. I... I really like you, and I don't want to-

She grins wryly. "Maybe. I know I didn't kill Stryker, but you haven't really changed my mind, Hank," she tells me. "I'm still not sure the X-Men are doing enough for mutants."

I can only nod and sigh, because I know nothing I say at this point will make her change her position on things any more than she already has. I've already said everything I could.

"If you ever do..."

"I know," she assures me. "Thank you."

For a moment we just stare at each other. I have no idea what my expression looks like right now, but Vixen seems rather torn and apprehensive. I think for a second that maybe she's rethinking her choice, that she wants to come with me-

But then she impulsively closes the distance between us and cups my face in her hands so she can bring my lips down far enough for a kiss.

This is different from before, when Vixen was kissing me as a ploy to escape my grip. I thought that kiss was incredible, unbelievable (even factoring in the slight concussion she gave me at the end), and I honestly couldn't imagine a kiss getting any better than that.

But it can.

My reaction is pure instinct, and so enthusiastic that if I were in my right mind I would be a little embarrassed. I respond fervently, passionately the moment Vixen's lips touch mine, without thought or reason. It's almost as if part of me has been waiting for this, for her.

First I pull Vixen in so close there's no space between us at all, and then I move forward and press her against the nearest tree. It feels like she's everywhere, the way her scent fills my nose and her warmth pushes back against my own. I'm lost in the feeling of her soft lips, her tongue and the way
her hair feels like silk between my fingertips.

Kissing Vixen is like getting struck by lightning. That's the only way I can explain the way the air seems to hum around us, the way my very cells light up in response to her, like I'm about to spontaneously combust.

Our breathing is ragged when we finally come up for air, but we don't draw away from each other. I lean down to touch my forehead to hers, with my hand gently cupping her cheek. I can hear her heart beating just as fast as mine is.

"It's Vivien," she says in a breathless whisper. "My real name is Vivien. If you were wondering."

"Vivien," I murmur. And then I press my lips to hers again for another lingering, soul-searing kiss.

The sound of a jet engine approaching low and from the east is what finally breaks us apart. Vixen- Vivien- pulls away from me upon hearing it, immediately alert to the inherent danger to her thanks to the arrival of the X-Men.

Somehow my arms feel empty the second she steps away from the tree and out of my embrace. Almost as empty and hollow as my chest feels, now that the moment of parting is really here.

Vivien brushes my cheek with the back of her hand and grins wistfully. "I'll see you in the field, Hank," she says, her tone a little rueful.

And then she disappears into the trees before I can even reply.

I feel almost dazed when the Blackbird lands in the clearing. I can't tell if it's due to lack of oxygen from all the kissing or if my brain is just so overloaded with everything that happened that it's refusing to process it all right now.

I decide I'm grateful for the numbness, though. It helps me compose myself and act normal when I climb up the ramp and see my waiting friends.

There will be time to fall apart later.
They're all here for me- even Charles, which is a big surprise.

"Beast!" Sam cheers from the cockpit, since he's piloting the jet. "It's good to see you alive, buddy."

Everyone echoes the statement, with various degrees of enthusiasm. Ororo and Jean stand up and hug me. Warren pats me on the shoulder with a smile. And Scott shakes my hand, as reserved as always, while Sam turns the Blackbird towards home.

I receive their greetings and relief over my safe return with my habitual awkwardness. I'm not exactly used to being the center of attention.

"Don't pull this disappearing crap again," Alex says, punching me in the shoulder. "You realize we're in deep shit without you around, right?"

It takes me a moment to realize what he means.

After all, he's the field commander of the X-Men, not me. I've always known I don't have what it takes to be a leader- I tend to over-analyze things and I'm loathe to make the tough decisions that have to be made sometimes. But Alex- occasionally impulsive, but very decisive Alex- is a good leader.

That's not what he's talking about, though. He's referring to the fact that I'm the school doctor and field medic for the X-Men, as well as tech support on our equipment. My presence is essential for a lot of reasons.

I guess it's flattering to be needed like that. But considering the fact that I was just imprisoned and he's complaining about the inconvenience my absence caused, I'm tempted to ask Alex if he missed me for myself, or just the absence caused by the role I fill on the team.

"I'm glad you're safe, Beast," Charles says sincerely, cutting into my rather cantankerous musings. "We were all very worried about you."

I try to smile politely, but I'm not sure if I'm successful. "Sorry," I tell him. "But I promise I'm fine."

Physically speaking. Mentally, though, I'm less sure about.

But then again, what else is new?

"Are you sure?" he presses.

I nod, avoiding his eyes. I know what's coming before he even asks.

Sure enough-

"What happened to you?" Charles asks.

I describe the explosions herding me at the abandoned laboratory, and getting tranquilized and taken elsewhere. I tell him about waking up in a cell completely comprised of metal, escaping
when the guards came, and finding the room full of corpses. I produce the slightly damp autopsy photographs to corroborate my tale. I even explain about seeing Logan, and how I tried (and failed) to get him to come with me.

But I don't mention Vixen. Not once.

No, I now make the distasteful leap from "lying by omission" to outright lying through my teeth about the circumstances of my little adventure in Stryker's laboratory.

Charles swallows my story without any qualms, though. And that kills me just a bit, because after all these years he has no reason to question my loyalty. I'm abusing his trust, and I know it. The knowledge makes me sick to my stomach.

*Keep it under control, McCoy.*

"At first we thought the Brotherhood had captured you for one reason or another," Charles comments when I'm done. "But then Erik contacted me asking the same thing about us-"

"As if we do that sort of thing," Ororo cuts in bitterly. She clearly doesn't approve of being accused of practices in common with the Brotherhood.

"-Because one of his people is missing as well," Charles continues, as if he hadn't been interrupted. "Did you happen to see Vixen while you were there?"

"Is Vixen the blonde girl?" I ask weakly, feigning ignorance.

Charles nods.

*Yes, I did. I spent the past two days getting to know her. She's impulsive and clever and funny and her lips taste like-

"No," I reply. The bold-faced lie feels like acid on my tongue, but I say it anyway. I'm protecting Vixen- *Vivien*- because I owe her that much after what she did for me.

But then, I also owe Charles quite a bit, too. My job, my home, a place that accepts me-

And this is why you shouldn't become friendly with your enemies, let alone *kiss* them. It complicates things unbearably.

"If she was there, I didn't see her."

It's nice to be home again- to be able to use the injection that changes me back into my human self, to take a hot shower and have a chance to lay in my own bed. There's other things that are great about the mansion, but tonight that's all I'm interested in.

A chance to be comfortable while I sort myself out, if that's even possible. Because I feel mixed up in the worst sort of way.

And it all comes down to Vivien. *Vivien*, not Vixen.

Because the name "Vixen" refers to a Brotherhood member, an enemy. Vivien... Vivien is the fiery, spunky girl I got to know over the past two days, the one who called me a "food fascist" and fed me dessert after deciding to not kill Stryker. She's the one who passionately kissed me goodbye.
The one I can't see as a "bad guy" anymore.

And therein lies the problem.

I don't think I'm capable of separating myself from what I feel for Vivien after everything that happened these past couple days. I'm quite attracted to her- her beauty, her grace, her quick wit. I even enjoy our bickering for some reason. And the feeling I got when we kissed... I've never experienced anything so intense, so vital in my entire life.

But even discounting all of that, I'd still consider her a friend now.

At this point even the thought of hurting Vivien is repugnant to me. And obviously that's an issue, because she's part of the Brotherhood. She's less insane than the others, but her methods are still too destructive to be left unchecked.

So what can I do to stop her when we're out in the field, when I meet her on our next mission? Ask Vivien nicely to give up and hope she does, for me?

Like that would work.

I groan and roll over to stare up at the ceiling.

What is it with me and women who believe in militant causes?

First Raven, who believed in mutant superiority for so long and left me not once, but twice to pick up the shattered pieces of her brother when she left him behind while she ran off to continue her "mission."

Because that's what she did for a second time, back at the White House. Left Charles and I holding the bag once again. The first time was when she left Charles on that beach in Cuba, which I forgave because he told her she should go. But in Washington she chose to waltz away from the mess she made by almost killing Trask, leaving us to deal with the fall out.

And now there's Vivien, Vivien who apparently has always wanted equality for mutants but is going about it the wrong way. I wish I could make her believe me, but I failed in that. And it's not like I'm going to get another chance to convince her...

You know what my problem is?

I seem to always yearn for that which is out of reach.
Cross Purposes

July 1, 1974

I'm not so naive as to automatically assume that Vivien's actions weren't all calculated to fool me into a feeling of friendship with her. It's something I consider long and hard, because I'm unwilling to be tricked a second time after the kiss-turned-assault when we met in that Agent Orange facility.

I want to believe that her actions were truthful, but I know the only way to find out for sure is to see how she reacts to me when we meet on a mission.

Fate doesn't keep me waiting long.

The Brotherhood makes a move against another facility about a week after my little mountain adventure. This time Charles has enough forewarning to send us out before they get there.

"Beast, you and Storm get the inside just in case someone slips by the rest of us," Alex says after we scout out the place. "Angel, you-"

"Yeah, I know," Warren sighs, fluttering his wings. "Eyes up top."

Alex allows himself a wry grin. "You got it."

Everyone is trained so well that Storm and I don't even have to speak as we enter the building and find a good spot to watch for wayward Brotherhood members on a second floor balcony overlooking the rest of the warehouse.

We settle down to wait in complete silence.

Storm's not exactly chatty, so this is unsurprising. She likes to keep to herself most of the time, and she's rather bitter and mistrustful for such a young person. But I guess she has good reason to be after her years on the streets in Cairo.

It's a trial not to fidget while we wait. I haven't been this anxious on a mission for a very long time, but right now I'm ruminating on what I'll do when I see Vivien again.

If I see her- I find myself hoping this is a false alarm.

It's mind-numbingly dull for two hours, at which point both Storm and I are praying for Alex to get on the radio and tell us we're all-clear.

But then a familiar scent drifts over, filling my nose with the aroma of sunshine and flowers.

Vivien.

I automatically look over my shoulder to peer into the darkness behind us, but I see nothing. And I also hear nothing except Storm's breathing and heartbeat. Vivien must've just observed us for a moment before quickly moving on, using her ghost-like tread to avoid detection.

"What is it?" Storm asks. "Do you see something?"

"No," I reply honestly, taking a step backwards. "But let me go check something. Stay here and
keep watch, please."
"You sure?"

I nod.

Tracking the scent is effortless, because it's both recent and familiar to me. After Alkali Lake I feel like all things "Vivien" are rather unfortunately branded into my senses. I can't forget how she smells even if I try.

I'm halfway around the warehouse when the trail gets very fresh. There's a lot of boxes and pillars here, and I can sense eyes on me, though I hear and see nothing.

You know the feeling- that tingling sensation you get when your subconscious is trying to tell you you're being watched.

"Vivien," I whisper loudly. "Vivien-"

She seems to materialize out of thin air from behind a pillar. She gives me a tentative smile, though her eyes are still cautious.

"H-hi," I say, awkwardly shifting my feet.

"Hi," Vivien whispers. Her smile gets a little warmer as she notices how unsure I am.

I'm completely at a loss of what to say to her, but I take a stab at it anyway.

"You made it back alright?"

She chuckles. "No. You're talking to my life-model decoy," she teases, holding up her hand and wiggling her fingers. "Very realistic, don't you think?"

"Yes, very. I can't even tell the difference," I reply, grinning. I take a breath and tell her sincerely, "I'm glad you're safe, Vivien."

She laughs quietly. "You too, Hank."

A pause.

There's so much I want to ask her, but I know I can't.

*Have you been thinking about me the way I have about you? Do you dream about that kiss in the forest? Have you-*

"I've missed you, you know," Vivien murmurs. "No one will talk about books with me like you did."

My stomach flip-flops painfully, and I have to look down at my feet while my cheeks warm.

*Is she serious?*

"Vivien-*" I begin, but when I glance up I see that she's starting to back away from me. "Wait-*" I say, stepping after her.

"I can't stay," she tells me with a wry grin. "I'm the only one who could get by your people outside. I'd say that's mission aborted for the night. I'll- I'll see you around, Hank."
And then Vivien melts into the shadows and vanishes before I can reply.

_Damnation. She needs to stop doing that._

My mind is racing as I make my way back over to where Storm awaits.

Vivien decided to withdraw rather than pressing ahead with whatever the Brotherhood's goal was tonight, claiming that she couldn't because she was alone. That's a surprise to me, because through my observations of her I've noticed that Vivien actually _prefers_ to operate by herself. The only time she's partnered with anyone on missions is when her insane younger brother is present, because she has to watch him.

So why did she give up tonight? Because of my presence, or because she didn't agree with the goal of this mission? The former hypothesis is flattering, but I think I'd much rather have it be the latter. That would mean she's thinking for herself, rather than blindly following the Brotherhood's line. I want that for her so badly, for Vivien to see the error of her ways and leave the Brotherhood.

The fact that our encounter was perfectly amicable is both comforting and depressing. It makes me realize that Vivien and I truly are "friends" after our adventure together.

But we're friends at cross purposes. It's saddening to know that whatever we have between us is not only dangerous for both of us, it will also never reach its full potential.

How could it, when we're fighting on different sides?

---

October 1, 1974

That's why I agree when Sam comes to me with a proposition a few months later.

"Hey, Hank," he says, coming into my lab while I'm running PCR one day. "I need you to do me a favor."

"What is it?" I ask willingly enough. Because I like Sam- he's cheerful and very talkative, a welcome change for an occasionally gloomy introvert like myself.

"I have a date on Friday night," Sam explains, "but the girl wants to make it a double with her roommate, so... what do you say?"

I stare at him, completely dumbfounded.

Is he really asking me what I think he is? For me to be his wing man? Does he know I haven't even really been on a date before?

For some reason Vivien comes to mind in this moment. How it felt to have her in my arms, to kiss her. Since then the only contact we've had has been quick, whispered conversations and wistful looks when we see each other on missions. Otherwise, we've purposely stayed well away from one another so we don't have to fight.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her these past few months. Vivien has become a burning ache I constantly feel in my chest, with no hope of relief.

Nothing can ever happen between us, after all. I mean, it's not like I'll ever be able to take her out to the movies or anything.

Maybe it would be better for me to try to forget about Vivien. To find someone who _isn't_ part of an
enemy organization, someone nice and normal.

A normal relationship- isn't that a novel idea?

"That sounds nice," I tell Sam, shoving aside a niggling guilty feeling. "What time?"
Trying to Forget

October 4, 1974

Friday night comes and finds me wearing one of my nicer outfits and carrying a little bouquet of Gerber daisies up the walkway of a small, tidy home in Salem Center. It belongs to Alison, Sam's date, and Lucy, who's my date for the night.

"You ready?" Sam asks cheerfully.

"As ready as I'm going to be," I mutter.

Earlier I made the mistake of questioning him as to why he asked me to come along rather than one of the other teachers. Sam's reply?

"Because you'll make me look good."

Ouch.

He didn't have to explain further than that. He doesn't want to compete with, say, Alex, with his aura of authority and his latent bad boy charm. Sam would much rather be compared to me in front of the opposite sex.

Boring, dependable, quiet me. I'm like the oatmeal of the dating scene, but with furry blue monster sprinkles.

Can you blame me for not getting out much?

"Do either of them know we're mutants?" I ask Sam as we stride up the walk.

"Nope," he replies.

I feel a hint of relief for that. Now I won't have to worry about anyone asking what my mutation is and having to explain that I basically turn into a big, blue gorilla.

Sam rings the doorbell, and a pretty blonde answers almost immediately.

"Hi, Sam," she gushes, flinging herself at him. He doesn't seem to mind all that much though. It takes a few seconds before they extricate themselves from each other while I stand there like an awkward third wheel, but then she turns towards me. "And you must be Hank, hi. I'm Alison."

Alison holds out a hand to shake, for which I'm grateful. I'm not too sure what I would do if I got the same overenthusiastic greeting she just gave Sam.

"Hello," I say politely.

"Come on in," she tells us, before calling out over her shoulder, "Lucy! They're here!"

A curvy brunette comes bounding down the stairs, but she stops halfway and lets out a gleeful squeal. Then she turns around and runs back up out of sight.

"He's tall!" Lucy whoops. "Hold on! I'm going to change into heels!"
"Um... Hello to you too?"

"Just give her a second," Alison assures us, stepping aside so we can enter the foyer.

It's five very uneasy minutes before Lucy reappears, tottering down the stairs in ridiculous high heels that put her forehead level with my nose.

"Oh, flowers!" she says, taking them from me eagerly. "How sweet of you."

I open my mouth to tell her, "you're welcome," but then I realize she didn't actually say, "thank you." And besides, Lucy's not looking at me. She's exchanging loaded glances with Alison in some sort of secret language only women can understand.

"Are we ready?" Sam asks, and the girls agree.

Lucy takes my arm as we follow Sam and Alison down the walkway- I think she needs the leverage to keep her balance. We move at a snail's pace because of the shoes.

"You look nice," I tell her, because she does. She's wearing a flower print knee-length dress and little barrettes in her brown hair.

She's taller than Vivien, even without the absurd heels, and curvy where Vivien is leggy and decidedly petite. Lucy's eyes are warm and brown, but they hold none of Vivien's perpetually amused sparkle- the kind that's all mischief and secretive laughter, leaving you dying to find out what exactly her private joke is. And when she smiles-

Stop that, I tell myself sternly. You're forgetting about her, remember?

"Thank you," Lucy replies, smiling.

I open the door for her when we finally reach the car and then hop into the driver's seat.

Lucy and Alison dominate the conversation on the way to the City, which I don't really mind all that much. What does bother me is how Lucy keeps asking questions without waiting for me to answer them before following up with another question.

"So you're a doctor?" she asks. She's giving me this look that implies she finds that doubtful, because she thinks I'm slow. The truth is, I can't really get a word in edgewise between her and Alison.

"Sort-"

"Like a surgeon? Family practice? Specialist-?"

"I don't have an M.D.," I finally manage to interject. It's the truth- I merely practice medicine as a hobby. "I have a Ph.D in genetics."

"Oh," Lucy says. I might be feeling defensive at this point, but it almost sounds like she's a little disappointed for some reason.

I'm about to ask what she does for a living, but she's already talking to Alison and Sam again.

Dinner is more of the same. I have to wonder- is this normal for a date? Sam seems to be having a good time, so that makes me think it is. And I wanted normal, didn't I? So I guess it means this date is going well.
That assumption is reinforced when I drive us back to the girls' house. Lucy and I leave the other two in the backseat to "talk," which I'm under no delusions about, so I can walk Lucy to the front door.

"I had a nice time tonight," Lucy announces.

*Basically no thanks to me.*

"Me, too," I agree.

Because sometimes being polite means you have to lie a little. I mean, this date wasn't terrible, but I'm also relatively sure it could've gone better.

"We should do it again sometime," she says brightly. "Maybe just the two of us, though."

"That'd be nice," I agree, with more sincerity than before. Perhaps it would be better if we got to know each other on a one-on-one basis? I'm not so unmoving that I won't give this another chance.

"Good. I'm free next Saturday," Lucy tells me. "Pick me up at six-thirty?"

"Ok."

She stands there fumbling with her keys, and I know she's waiting for me to make a move. I'm not *completely* clueless, after all.

So I tentatively start to lean in to kiss her, because that's what you're supposed to do at the end of normal first dates, right?

You're not supposed to kiss someone in the middle of a fight, right after you try to basically strangle them, like-

Lucy meets me partway, and it's... It's what a first kiss is supposed to be, if what they're supposed to be is awkward and a little uncomfortable. I'm not sure where to put my hands, so I settle for her waist and hope for the best.

She's smiling when we pull away from each other, so maybe I'm not completely terrible at this.

"I'll see you Saturday," Lucy says, with a lascivious wink.

"Right. Good night, Lucy," I tell her.

We say good night to Alison, and then Sam and I head home. He's quite chatty, telling me how wonderful Alison is and patting himself on the back for finding me a girl, too.

I tell him thank you, because I really am glad for the chance to not be alone anymore. This is much healthier than pining after someone for a decade, right? And I've certainly been there and done that.

Now is my chance to do what's actually good for me.

If I can start ignoring the part of me that won't stop thinking about a certain feral female, I'll be just fine.
A few days later I find myself searching for files in yet another facility while Alex keeps watch outside. It should be easy—get in, grab the files, and get out.

Should.

But there's a door between my goal and myself, a door that's guarded by one of the most complicated coded security systems I've ever seen. It feels like two new codes pop up every time I manage to break one, and I'm simultaneously filled with both admiration and irritation at the complexity.

How does anyone ever get into this room with a system like this? Am I missing something?

*I will not let this door beat me. It's starting to get personal.*

I'm standing there glowering at the keypad and considering my next move when suddenly a voice carries to me from down the hall, which takes a bend out of sight to the left about ten yards from where I stand. It belongs to a male, and sounds vaguely familiar.

A second, female voice briefly answers the first, and I instantly recognize the speaker.

Vivien.

Which means—

I quickly dart into the fortuitous hallway to my right, which thankfully opens up into a T-junction and allows me to hide out of sight. I have a bad feeling they'll still be able to smell me, though. Maybe that's why Vivien is having her male companion talk: she's already picked up my scent and is trying to distract him from it.

"Humans are a worthless species," the male says, with the air of someone who has just finished a soliloquy. I recognize who it is now—Jackal, Vivien's mentally unstable younger brother.

*Great, just great.*

I press into the wall, trying to think invisible thoughts.

"Who told you that?" Vivien demands, her tone sharp. I'm trying to ignore the way my pulse jumps at the sound of her voice.

"It's just what I think," Jackal replies stiffly. But then he sullenly admits, "Mastermind."

"Well, he's wrong. Humans aren't worthless. Don't you remember Dad? Dad was human," his sister says.

That's news to me.

"So were the bastards who killed him and Mommy," Jackal retorts, sounding slightly agitated.
Vivien sighs. "You can't blame an entire race for what a few ignorant rednecks did, Myles."

"Yes, I can."

And suddenly his voice gets very loud as he starts shouting at her about chickens and fires and walls covered in blood-

It's everything I can do to not reveal myself and tell Jackal to lay off his sister. She certainly doesn't deserve this abuse.

"Shh," Vivien murmurs, "shh."

She starts to sing softly, and her voice is so lovely it feels like it's piercing right through my heart. Jackal quiets almost immediately in response.

I chance a look around the corner because they sound so occupied. Vivien is standing there hugging her brother, pinning his arms to his sides like a living straitjacket. His expression is becoming less and less troubled by the second under her influence. I quickly pull my head back before they notice me.

"How about you go wait for me where we came in, ok?" Vivien asks gently after a few minutes. "I'll be quick."

"Ok."

I plan to wait a minute or two to make sure Jackal's gone, but the heavy, shaky sigh- almost a sob- Vivien gives just then instantly pulls me from my hiding place.

"Vivien," I call quietly as I approach.

Her eyes widen when she sees me and she immediately stands up straighter. The disconsolate expression on her face instantaneously turns into an amused smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Hank," she greets me warmly. "You're still here. Let me guess- I 'cannot pass'?"

Again, that saying. I feel like I should know it.

"That's the second time you've said that to me, but I can't place it for some reason," I muse.

"Gandalf to the Balrog in the Mines of Moria, The Lord of the Rings," Vivien explains. She shakes her head as if disappointed. "And you call yourself a nerd."

I grin. "I'm accordingly ashamed of myself," I tell her.

For some reason this makes her smile even more, though I can see her heart's not really in it.

"Are you ok?" I ask gently.

She frowns. "Of course," she replies. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I heard you talking to your brother."

Her expression ices over. "You were eavesdropping?" she snaps.

"Technically I was here first, and then you two came along and blocked my exit so I couldn't leave. Did you expect me to cover my ears and whistle?" I retort.
Vivien glowers at me a bit more, but then her expression falls. She looks...

Lost. Forlorn. Alone.

And it kills me.

I'm not sure how it happens, but one moment we're standing a polite distance away from one another, and the next she's in my arms.

*My stars and garters, she smells divine. And the way it feels to hold her-*

"Sorry," Vivien mutters, but she doesn't pull away.

"Don't be," I assure her. I brush my claws through her hair. "W-what are friends for?"

She just hugs me tighter and says nothing.

But she doesn't have to.

I know she's thinking about a father and mother that were murdered by humans, and an impressionable brother who she's starting to lose to the grips of the Brotherhood's poisonous thinking.

The fact that Vivien doesn't blame the rest of humanity for the murder of her parents makes her singularly unique among the Brotherhood. They see the evils of the human race and believe it's the rule, rather than the exception. But not her- she holds onto the good.

Maybe now Vivien's starting to see what I've told her all along: that her goals for mutant equality will never mesh with her comrades' desire for superiority.

It's very tempting to tell her, "I told you so," but I hold my tongue. Because I'm providing comfort to her right now, and I don't want to take it away from her by being a condescending jerk.

So instead I hold her and wonder how it is that just pressing my lips to Vivien's hair makes it feel like there's an electric current running through me and sticking my feet to the floor, but when I kissed Lucy the other day I felt nothing of the sort?

What would Vivien say if I told her I kissed another woman? And why do I suddenly feel guilty for holding her like this when she doesn't know-?

It's the squeak of a boot on the tile flooring that gives Jackal away, allowing Vivien just enough time to spring back from me right before her brother rounds the corner and witnesses our embrace. I'm assuming he came to see what was taking her so long. Or maybe he caught wind of my scent somehow.

Jackal doesn't even pause when he sees me. He roars, baring his fangs as he runs straight at me.

Vivien immediately takes evasive action. She stomps on my foot with a heavy combat boot and swings her torso around to throw an elbow into my nose, making it seem like we're mid-fight.

I snarl in pain and retreat slightly, allowing her to run and intercept her brother before he reaches us.

"Come on," she urges him, even as he strains to attack me. "We'll try again another day."

Jackal relents under her firm hand, and together they run off.
Leaving me alone to watch the blood from my nose drip onto the floor.
Impossible Dreams

It takes me several more minutes, but I'm finally able to get through the infernal door and grab the files I'm here to steal.

"What happened to your nose?" Alex asks when I meet him outside.

"Vixen happened," I reply glumly. I know she did it to avert what would have been a very violent fight between her brother and I, but that doesn't make my nose any less broken.

_Can Vivien just stop going for my face?_

"I think she was after the same files as I was."

"At least you won and got them, right?"

I won in a manner of speaking, I suppose. After all, she didn't even try the door.

I wonder what Vivien would've done if one of us managed to get through it? It makes me sick to think we actually would've had to fight each other, especially after the moment we shared...

And just like that, the memory of having her in my arms suddenly becomes painful. How right it felt to hold Vivien doesn't change how wrong it is for me to have these feelings for her in the first place.

Every time I see her it just exacerbates the ache of what can never be between us.

_________

October 12, 1974

I spend a lot of the next few days as Beast, trying to use my healing factor to fix my nose in time for my date with Lucy. Thankfully it works, and the bruising is gone when Saturday night rolls around and I go to pick her up.

Her and her ridiculous shoes.

"This will be so much fun!" Lucy says once she's safely in the car and no longer in danger of falling on her face. "So, tell me about yourself. What do you like to do in your spare time?"

I think about it for a moment. "I-"

"Television? Do you watch television?" she asks.

"Occasionally-"

"I _love_ watching _The Mary Tyler Moore Show_ and _Hawaii Five-O_ and-"

And on she goes, with minimal participation required on my part.

I guess it's not so bad, considering how most of the time I usually don't have much to say for myself anyway. I worry, though, that while I'm learning a lot about Lucy, she can't say the same about me.
Except that I'm a good listener, I suppose.

After I pick her up I drive us to this fancy bistro that she suggested, where Lucy orders a salad.

A salad.

Why do women do this to themselves? Surely that can't be filling. At least Vivien wasn't afraid to eat around me when we-

*And we're going to stop thinking about her right now.*

"Are you ok?" Lucy asks. The fact that she asks this right as I'm thinking of another woman is uncanny. Do females have a sixth sense about that sort of thing?

"I'm fine," I reply. "You were saying?"

"I just asked you what exactly a Ph.D. in chemistry does," Lucy explains. She looks a little annoyed, and I can't say I blame her since she just caught me ignoring her.

In my defense, I think the constant talking *at* me, rather than *to* me, is becoming more background noise than anything. At this point the fact that she actually asked me a question that requires an answer on my part (rather than one she can provide herself) is slightly astounding.

"Sorry," I say contritely. "But my degree is actually in genetics. And I mostly study genetic mutations, their effects on cellular mechanics, things like that."

Lucy nods like she understands, but I'm not sure she does.

Now there's an awkward silence between us, and I can't help thinking that my speaking somehow ruined the conversation. I guess my work just isn't all that interesting to her.

I quickly try to think of something to say that will bring it back to where she's comfortable.

"D-do you like to read much?" I ask. After all of Lucy's chattiness I never heard her mention that as a hobby.

"Oh, sure," she replies. "I read *Cosmo* all the time."

"What's that?"

"It's a ladies' magazine."

*That's... not exactly what I meant.*

"What else?" I press hopefully.

Lucy shrugs. "Nothing, really," she says. "I don't have time for that."

*Don't think of Vivien, don't think of Vivien-*

"Oh," I murmur, trying to hide my disappointment.

Eventually Lucy starts talking again (something about what she read in the ladies' magazine, I guess), and I think I'm just fine with that. Clearly the conversation is better left up to her anyway.

By the end of the evening I'm feeling rather hesitant about whether I want a third date with Lucy or
not. Mainly because it seems like we don't have much in common.

But how do I tell her that?

Suddenly it's easy for me to see why people stay in relationships with someone they don't truly want. Being with a person you're ambivalent towards beats being alone, I guess. And no one likes hurting the feelings of other people, do they?

I blame my reluctance on that front for why I say "yes" when Lucy asks if I'd like to go out again. Wretch that I am, I don't want to be alone anymore.

"Why don't we go to a movie next Friday?" I ask.

Lucy's face lights up- I think it's because I'm the one taking the initiative here, rather than being passive and making her decide. Once again I feel an inexplicable stab of guilt.

"That sounds wonderful," she replies.

And then she kisses me with an enthusiasm I try to match but don't truly feel. I'd always feared Beast would threaten to make an appearance in a situation like this, but he stays somnolent and uninterested in the back of my head.

No danger of me losing control here. And for some reason that troubles me.

I beat myself up about my apathy on the way home, after we say good night.

What is wrong with me? Lucy's a pretty girl and nice enough, even if she might be a little self-centered. So why don't I feel anything when I kiss her, the way I did with-?

Vivien.

For just a moment I indulge myself in a fantasy.

I imagine taking Vivien out instead. I have no idea what kind of clothes she'll wear, but surely she'll at least have on shoes that she can walk in when I come to pick her up. I'll bring her flowers, and Vivien will give me that amused half-smile of hers and laugh when I blush after she says thank you and kisses me on the cheek.

Then I'll take her somewhere, somewhere nice, and she'll confound the wait staff by ordering French toast or an omelet even though it's dinner time. Being in her company will make it the best evening I can remember spending in basically forever- we'll talk about anything and everything and never get bored.

And then I'll bring her home, and Vivien will pull me in for a kiss that will make the blood sing through my veins and my heart beat right out of my chest. And I'll confess to her how I can't stop thinking about her, that I've tried, but-

But nothing.

It seems like no one ever tells you how much it hurts to dream. Especially when your dreams are impossible.
October 18, 1974

My third date with Lucy goes a bit better than the last—mostly due to the fact, I think, that we're in a movie theater for most of it and talking isn't allowed. I'm sad to say that sitting there in silence in the darkened cinema eating popcorn together is the most I've enjoyed her company thus far during the span of our acquaintance.

Unfortunately that pleasant feeling fades when we get to the car.

"What'd you think?" I ask as I drive her home after the movie. We just finished watching Chinatown, which I liked. I wasn't expecting the nature of the rather tragic ending.

"It was ok," she replies, though she seems a little insincere. "I don't understand why it was in black and white, though. I mean, this is 1974, not 1934."

"It's a neo-noir film," I explain. "An homage to the film noir crime dramas in the 1940's and 50's. The genre actually has German Expressionism to thank for a lot of its visual style."

Lucy still looks lost. Maybe even more so than before.

I try again, drawing on my somewhat limited television knowledge. "Um, think Columbo in black-and-white. But more dramatic, I suppose."

"Oh! Now I get it," she says, but without any real enthusiasm.

Somehow I rather suspect that she's annoyed with me. Perhaps I unintentionally came across as condescending?

I liked it better in the movie theater, I think despondently.

I arrive back at the mansion to find Alex waiting for me anxiously (alright, perhaps not anxiously, because Alex doesn't do anxiety. More like impatiently waiting for me) at the door. As soon as I walk in he beckons for me to follow him.

"What's happening?" I ask as we walk towards the elevator.

"A new guy showed up at our front gate with a pretty bad gash on his head," Alex explains.

That explains our destination, then— the medical bay, so I can stitch the newcomer up.

"His name is Spyke," Alex continues. "He was actually in my platoon in 'Nam. Trask almost got him, too."

I nod in acknowledgement before asking, "how'd he get here?"

"That's the weird part," Alex mutters.

I don't have a chance to ask for an explanation, because we've arrived in the infirmary.
A brown-skinned man with quills for hair is clutching a bloody towel to his forehead and sitting on one of the hospital cots. Charles is with him, looking attentive in his wheelchair.

"Hello," I say, shaking the newcomer's free hand. "Spyke, is it? I'm Hank."

"Hi," he says faintly.

"I'll get you patched right up," I promise. "Just one moment."

I set to work- washing my hands, putting on gloves, and grabbing my equipment. Spyke winces when I give him a shot of lidocaine in his forehead. While I wait for it to take effect I finish my prep work.

"Why don't you tell us what happened?" Charles inquires gently as I start stitching the gash on Spyke's hairline. It's not too bad, thankfully. Head wounds always bleed much worse than they truly are. "Perhaps it will distract you, yes?"

Spyke shrugs, making me slip a stitch. "Sorry," he mutters.

"It's fine," I assure him, "but please try not to move."

*I mean, it's your face, but I do have pride in my profession here.*

And Spyke tells us about how he was roughed up by police on the street in New York City last night for being a mutant. Hence the head wound. When he tried to flee their abuse, the officers arrested him and put him in jail. He thought he was going to be stuck there for a long time-

"But then this guy ripped the entire wall of my cell away," Spyke explains. 'Called himself Magneto and told me to come with him, so I did. He started telling me all this stuff about humans being a lesser species, how they should be scared of us, and asked if I wanted to join him and his Brotherhood. But I said, 'maybe they're scared of us because you do shit like that,' talking about the wall, you know? And he told this guy who was with him to 'take care of me.' And that guy- he put things in my head that made me think the cops were beating me again-

"Mastermind," Alex mutters.

"But finally they left me alone, and... I was, um, able to get out and come here. I heard this is a safe place for mutants," Spyke says. "It is, right? Summers?"

Alex nods.

"You're welcome to stay here for as long as you like," Charles tells the injured man.

They chat some more, but I'm not really listening as I finish stitching up Spyke's wound.

Something about his explanation seems... off. Like he didn't tell us the whole story.

How did he know to come here to Westchester, anyway? How did he manage to escape from the Brotherhood?

From the sounds of it, Erik had every intention of brain-washing Spyke until he was disposed to join him. I have a feeling that Erik probably wanted this particular mutant for his ability to make people physically ill.

So it's not like the Brotherhood willingly let him go free. Spyke definitely had to escape wherever they were holding him. It's plausible that he could do that on his own, I suppose.
But that doesn't explain how he knew to come here, to Westchester...

_Not unless he had help._

"Did someone help you escape?" I blurt out, surprising everyone.

I watch Spyke closely for his reaction. His eyes immediately dart around, casting down to the floor and then up and away at the ceiling. His entire body tenses at my question, like a coiled spring.

"No," he replies steadily, but he's not meeting my gaze. "I got out on my own."

_He's lying. I know he's lying._

Charles swallows this without a qualm and says something about Spyke being a good man to have in a pinch, but I'm not fooled.

Someone helped him get out of the Brotherhood's base. Someone told him to come here.

And I can think of only one member of the Brotherhood who would have moral qualms over brain-washing a new recruit into following their militant cause. Only one who would have the compassion to free Spyke and send him our way.

_Vivien._

It's like the sun coming out from behind the clouds after a terrible storm, the feeling that overcomes me now. Vivien sent him here, betraying the Brotherhood in the process.

The scene I overhead between Vivien and her brother comes to my mind at this moment. I remember how upset she was because Mastermind was feeding Jackal lies about the evils of humanity. The ideals of superiority, rather than the equality she fights for.

And now this situation with Spyke happened, a further illustration of the Brotherhood's vile behavior. They were willing to take away a mutant's free will to get what they wanted, but Vivien set him free.

Does this mean she's changing her mind about her comrades? Does she see the truth about them now? About their methods?

My heart starts beating faster, like I'm sprinting.

Because I'm picturing Vivien coming here, and what I thought was hopeless suddenly becoming a possibility. We would get a chance to explore whatever this bond between us is- the attraction, the feeling of connection that I can't seem to forget, or ignore.

_We could be..._ I can't even bring myself to think the words.

I can't help it- I'm beginning to hope.
Impasse

I half-expect (and sincerely hope for) Vivien to show up on our doorstep the next day, but that doesn't happen. I begin to despair by the time an entire week passes.

It doesn't even cross my mind that my hypothesis about Vivien's involvement in Spyke's escape may be false. I know that she helped him. That's not in doubt.

So where is she?

Did Erik find out that she helped Spyke? The idea that he did something to punish Vivien for her perfidy haunts both my dreams and my waking thoughts.

But as the days pass, another fear begins to prey on me. I begin to wonder if my conclusion is wrong, and that she won't be coming to the X-Men after all. But surely she wouldn't choose to stay with the Brotherhood now that she knows what they're capable of- right? I thought that she would come here, but...

What if Vivien has decided to go off on her own, like Raven did?

Meaning another woman I cared for disappeared without a trace, without even bothering to say goodbye to me.

In despair I call Lucy up and ask if she wants to go out again on Saturday.

October 25, 1974

There's an emergency on Friday night, one that requires the entire team.

"A police task force has most of the Brotherhood pinned down in an abandoned building," Charles explains as we suit up. "It's a stalemate right now, but if Erik gets there-

The stalemate will turn into a one-sided massacre.

No one needs to tell us to hurry up, that's for certain.

We infiltrate the building while Charles starts clearing out the police, though I think most of us X-Men would actually prefer to hand over the Brotherhood members to the authorities. That's simply not an option right now, though, because as soon as Erik arrives the police will all just be potential victims.

"Flush them out," Alex orders. "Get them to retreat."

All of us fan out, searching, searching-

That scent.

I almost don't believe it when I come across it. I've convinced myself by this point that Vivien is gone, having chosen to go her own way rather than stay with the Brotherhood and swallow Erik Lehnsherr's lies.
But the scent filling my nose right now says otherwise.

Suddenly I'm angry, angry with Vivien for being here with the Brotherhood after finding out the truth about them. Having her vanish without a goodbye would even be preferable to this. It's a betrayal of everything I thought she was.

I'm an animal on the hunt now, and a vixen is my prey.

Mastermind tries to attack me as I follow Vixen's scent, but I punch him in the face before his illusion of the building up in flames is even set. I have no time for mind games right now.

The smell of blood is now mixed in with Vixen's flowery sunshine scent—my guess is she probably got hit by a stray bullet at some point.

A vicious part of me is almost glad for it (she won't be able run from me now, will she?) but another part—the larger part—wants to find Vivien so I can help treat her wounds and is terrified over how badly she's hurt.

Vixen. Vivien. I don't even know what to call her right now.

I find her hiding in a janitor's closet, trying to tie off a makeshift bandage on a wound to her calf.

Vixen has a knife at the ready when I fling open the door, but she lowers it immediately when she sees it's me.

"Hi, Hank," she says weakly, like she's embarrassed over her current circumstances.

All of my anger towards Vivien vanishes the moment I set eyes on her face. I'm just too relieved to see her to stay mad.

So I sigh, shut the door behind me, and pull the pocket-sized first aid kit off my belt.

"Hi. What are you doing here?" I ask as I kneel and start to treat her leg. Her silky smooth, shapely leg.

"What's it look like?" she teases, gesturing to her wound. "Trying to patch myself up."


She frowns in confusion, but I can see the wariness flicker behind her eyes.

"I know you helped Spyke escape," I say stiffly. "I thought you'd-"

Now she looks angry. "Did he tell you that?"

"No," I reply, finishing up her bandage with quick, practiced movements. "He didn't have to. I knew he couldn't get out on his own, and you're the only Brotherhood member with a conscience."

Vivien sighs and goes about carefully pulling her jumpsuit leg down and replacing her boot, avoiding my eyes. "Thanks," she says, gesturing to her wound.

But I won't be distracted.

"Why didn't you want me to know, Vivien?" I ask painfully.

"I didn't want to give you hope that I had changed my mind," she murmurs.
I'm stunned. The only thing I can think to say is, "what?"

"Be honest, Hank," Vivien says, giving me a sad smile as she finally looks at me. "The moment you realized I helped Spyke get out, you were hoping that I would show up in Westchester."

I nod. She's exactly right, of course.

"When you didn't I thought you'd left the Brotherhood and gone off on your own," I admit. "Or that Erik had caught you."

She scoffs. "Caught me? I've got more skills than that. Give me some credit."

A pause.

"So... why are you here with them then?" I ask slowly. "Why didn't you leave the Brotherhood? You saw how low Erik will stoop to get what he wants. You can't possibly still think-"

"Yes, you were right about him. Are you happy? You were right," Vivien snaps. "But let me ask you something, Hank. Would you rather fight a Brotherhood with me or without me in it?"

I stare at her blankly. What's she getting at?

She sighs. "If I'm with them I can stop stuff like what almost happened to Spyke," she explains, "and maybe show these guys there's a better way."

I shake my head. "You're wasting your time, Vivien. They-"

"I thought you said people can change?" Vivien retorts. "Isn't that what you're hoping for so badly with me?"

I cringe as she throws my own words back at me.

"You want me to leave the Brotherhood so badly, Hank," she observes quietly. "And I understand that that's part of who you are, what you believe. But why can't you just accept that this is what I am? Am I really that bad?"

We're silent.

I know she's waiting for an answer, but I don't really have one. I can't even look her in the eye.

Vivien nods shortly and tries to regain her feet. I quickly stand and help her, leaving my hands at her waist to keep her steady. She places a hand on my cheek, and I automatically lean into the touch.

"This is hopeless," Vivien says sadly. "I'm not going to leave the Brotherhood, and you're not going to stop wanting me to. This- whatever the hell this is, between us- is just hurting us both. I think it'd be better if- if we just stayed away from each other, ok?"

"Vivien-"

"I'm sorry," she murmurs. "But please don't speak to me again."

She stands awkwardly on one tiptoe and plants a chaste kiss on my lips, one that still manages to feel like an electric shock, before backing away and limping out the door.

I'm still trying to process what just happened when a huge explosion rocks the building.
Vivien is nowhere in sight when I run out of the closet, but I notice that the entire building seems to be listing slightly to the left right now.

Clearly, it's time to go.

Charles confirms this when his voice whispers in my head, *Get out, as quick as you can. The humans are clear.*

*What was the explosion about, Charles?* I send back, concentrating my thoughts.

*Apparently the police had time to lay down an explosive before we got here. They just remotely detonated it.*

I sigh as I start running for the nearest exit. Once again, the X-Men are stuck in the crossfire between the Brotherhood and the authorities, when all we were doing was trying to help.

I'm the first one out of the building, but Alex, Jean and Scott join me almost immediately. Within minutes- before the rest of us can start to get worried- the others meet us out front.

Right before half the building collapses on itself, causing a plume of dust and pulverized wood to billow out in an ominous mushroom cloud.

**Vivien.**

Did she make it out of there, with her wounded leg?

I feel a tremor of fear- she could barely walk, let alone run out of the way of a falling ceiling.

The foreboding only gets worse when there's no sign of her or the rest of the Brotherhood emerging from the debris after the dust settles.

"Do you think they got out?" Jean asks in a hushed voice, echoing my thoughts.

"Good riddance," Ororo mutters.

Her lack of empathy bothers me, but I'm too worried about Vivien to comment. Yes, she just told me to never speak to her again, but that didn't magically make me stop caring about her.

I feel a stinging in my eyes as that conversation replays in my head. What if that really was the last time I'll ever see her again? Ever talk to her? What if she's *dead*? Or gravely injured?

Perhaps I might be able to save her if I can find her in time?

"I think we should-" I begin to say.

"Mags is here," Alex mutters, pointing up at the levitating figure that just appeared in the sky. "We better leave before it gets ugly."

I don't think I've ever been happier to see Erik in my life. Surely he'll get his people out of that building? If not due to affection (I don't think he's truly capable of such a human emotion), but at
least necessity?

Please, let her be ok.

October 26, 1974

Needless to say that I am not in a good mental space on Saturday. I'm moving around listlessly, too consumed by worry, regret, and mourning to really engage in anything.

Vivien might be dead. That lovely, funny, fiery woman may be gone from this earth. It brings a lump to my throat to think that I'll never see her smile or hear her laugh again.

What makes my grief worse is that if Vivien truly is dead, she died thinking that I basically believed she was a bad person.

"I'm not that bad, am I?" she asked, and like an idiot I didn't answer.

I should have. I should have told her that she's not, that I've always respected her attempts to do what she feels is right. That I've noticed how lately she's been half-hearted at best when it comes to the more violent, destructive stunts the Brotherhood has pulled, ever since our adventure together at Alkali Lake.

But I didn't, and now I may have to live with that regret for the rest of my life.

And even if Vivien isn't dead, she still told me to stay away from her. To never speak to her again, because I can't accept her the way she is.

I can't accept her. Why does that sound familiar?

Oh, maybe because I'm twenty-nine and I'm still making the same mistakes I made when I was seventeen?

And people think I'm intelligent.

I'm not really in the mood to deal with Lucy by the time evening rolls around, but I feel obligated to go because I'm the one who asked her to dinner and initiated this date in the first place.

So I dress myself nicely, grab my keys and head for the garage.

"Dr. McCoy!" a female voice calls out from behind me.

I turn to see Jean running towards me, looking frantic.

"Jean?" I ask blankly. "What's wrong?"

"Follow me-" she says, turning back around. I catch up to her in a few strides and listen as she explains, "Magneto just showed up with one of his people, asking if you would treat her-"

My insides freeze over.

"Her?" Could it be?

"How bad is she?" I ask aloud. "Have you seen her?"

The pause Jean takes before answering tells me everything I need to know.

I think I'm hoping it's not her right up until I enter the medical bay and see Vivien laying on one of the cots.

**Bad. Really bad.**

That definitely sums up her condition.

Vivien's unconscious- which is probably a good thing right now, all things considering. Her left side, revealed by her unzipped jumpsuit, is covered in the splotchy purple-black bruises that indicate internal bleeding. The color is a stark contrast to the crisp white sheets underneath her and the blue camisole she wears underneath her uniform. Meanwhile, the rise and fall of her chest is labored and her breathing sounds watery. I'm guessing a broken rib (or three) and a collapsed lung. And let's not forget the bullet wound to the leg.

It's like seeing a beautiful, wild creature lying broken and bleeding in the snow. A tragedy.

**Vivien... I can't let you die this way. Not when I might be able to save you.**

I'm aware of other people around me as I run over to her hospital bed, but I don't really see them. My eyes are only for her right now.

"How long has she been unconscious?" I ask the room at large as I begin to assess the damage.

"Since late last night," a male voice replies- Erik, Erik is here.

I check her pupils- normal. "Did you give her something?"

"Just morphine."

That explains the lack of consciousness, then. "No concussion," I mutter to myself. I listen to her chest with a stethoscope and hear my worst fears confirmed. "Collapsed left lung. Her heart's going much too fast."

"She said she was fine when I got her out," Erik says. He actually sounds a little defensive. "Even after she fell asleep, we thought she would heal on her own because she's a feral."

I finally look away from Vivien's pretty face- unmarred, except for a bruise along her jaw- and find Magneto in the crowd of X-Men protectively surrounding us. They're clearly uncomfortable with his presence in our school.

A surge of renewed hatred washes over me as I meet his eyes.

Forget past slights- right now Vivien is in this condition because of him. Vivien could **die** because of him. I could never get a chance to make things right between her and I, to tell Vivien how sorry I am, because of Erik Lehnsherr.

"You were wrong," I retort grimly. "She's only a class two feral. Her healing factor is working so hard to repair the damage, it might burn out her system and stop her heart."

And as if on cue, Vivien stops breathing.
"Damn."

I immediately jump into action, doing chest compressions and rescue breathing on Vivien.

_Come on, Vivien. Come back. Don't die on me like this._

It feels like I've been flung back to 1964, working feverishly to bring Sean back from the brink of death. I failed back then. How will I ever live with myself if I fail this time?

"Someone get an empty syringe," I order, since my hands are busy. "Please."

There's some shuffling around me, and then a syringe is held out in my field of vision. The hand that's holding it is shaking.

I thrust the syringe into the left side of Vivien's chest as I breathe for her. Doing so immediately relieves the pressure and lets her lung expand properly while I continue on with my efforts.

*I'm begging you, Vivien. Breathe._

Vivien takes a weak, shuddering breath. And then another, slightly stronger inhale. Her eyelids flicker, though she doesn't wake up.

But her heart is beating again, and that's the important part.

I send out a silent "thank you" to the powers that be in the universe, even though I know we're not out of the woods yet.

I take in the crowd surrounding us for the first time as I turn to get more equipment.

Jean is directly on Vivien's other side- she was the one who handed me the syringe. Behind her stands Warren and Sam. Charles is anxiously watching for the foot of the bed with Erik beside him. Alex, Scott, and Ororo have oriented themselves around the metal-bending mutant and are watching him with hyper-vigilance. I feel like if he so much as scratches his nose the Summers boys will fry him.

"I could use a little space," I say quietly.

Charles- so kind, so compassionate for all living things- won't want Vivien to die, but everyone else probably doesn't really care much either way. Treating her wounds is the right thing to do, but to them she's just another member of the Brotherhood. I don't need their apathy around me while I'm trying to save my--friend? The word seems inadequate to describe what Vivien is to me.

No one moves after I speak- except maybe to throw dirty looks at Erik.

"They don't trust me," he observes dryly, with a ghoulish smile.

"Can you blame us?" Warren mutters.

"I'm flattered that you have such a healthy fear of me, but I can assure you that I intend no harm here," Erik says. "Especially not when you have one of my people as a potential hostage."
Even I join in on the glares sent his way this time.

How dare he imply that we would stoop so low as to use Vivien like that? As if he didn't know perfectly well that we would show compassion to his injured soldier when he showed up here, with no strings attached.

Because that's what being an X-Man is about. It's what separates us from the Brotherhood.

"You know better than that, Erik," I say, my voice mild. "You wouldn't have brought Vixen here for me to treat, otherwise."

His face is expressionless, and I feel this strange mixture of pity and disgust. How twisted is his soul, that he views the world via such a warped, paranoid prism? That he preys on our compassion and yet scoffs at our "weakness" at the same time?

"I give you my word that I will do my best to heal Vixen," I tell him.

Certainly not for you, though. Only for her.

"But I need time and the freedom to do so," I finish, gesturing to the press of people in the room. "And everyone feels obligated to keep you in their sight, so..."

"After she's better, you have my word that Vixen will be allowed to return to the Brotherhood, Erik," Charles finishes. "But Hank is right- your presence is a hindrance."

Erik is silent, and for a moment I think he's going to argue. Maybe even try to take Vivien and leave without treatment- in which case I wouldn't hesitate to fight him for her. She needs me right now.

Vivien has to live. I can't bear it otherwise.

But then Erik nods slowly. "Very well," he says.

He tries to exit the room with dignity, but that's hard to maintain when you have three people basically frogmarching you out of the room.

Charles follows, as does everyone else to escort Erik from the mansion. I hope someone had the sense to tell Spyke to stay out of sight.

"Will you be alright for a few minutes?" Charles asks before he goes.

I nod- to be honest, I work better on my own in the first place.

Once they're all gone I move feverishly, setting up a heart rate monitor and gathering what I need in minutes.

Vivien's blood pressure is ridiculously low, thanks to all the internal bleeding. Her heart is still working much too hard just trying to keep her alive, and her healing factor-

She needs a blood transfusion, and it has to be from a feral. Our antigens are different from a human's, or even a regular mutant's.

I fear that if she doesn't get one, she's going to flat line again. Soon.

Ideally I would ask for one of Vivien's brothers to donate for her, since they're family and likely to match. But asking Jackal or Fox to come here to the school would be ludicrous (not to mention
dangerous), and too time-consuming besides.

Which leaves me as Vivien's only hope. No pressure or anything.

*Maybe this will be better for her, anyway,* I muse as I set up a blood test kit. I'm trying to be optimistic, which doesn't necessarily come naturally to me in this kind of situation.

I'm a class four feral mutant, meaning my healing factor is rather advanced. My blood being in Vivien's system may provide a boost to her own and keep her body from destroying itself in the process of healing from her extensive injuries.

At least I hope it will.

I slip off my shoes and shift into Beast so as to quickly perform the test. Thankfully I'm a match, so I set up an IV from my arm to hers. It isn't exactly ideal, but in an emergency like this I'll have to risk a direct transfusion.

I reach out and take Vivien's hand while my blood flows into her veins.

After a minute or two I decide that I like her hands- the soft skin, the faint freckles across the back, the dainty claws. I like how it feels to hold her hand in mine, the way our hands look together.

Different, but similar somehow.

I'm starting to feel confident that she'll pull through by the time I stop the transfusion, shift into my human form and put my shoes back on. Vivien's heartbeat is already more regular and her breathing is more sure- definitely good signs.

"You're going to make it, Vivien," I murmur, bringing her hand up to my lips for a kiss. "You're too stubborn to die on me."

Her eyelids flutter again, but there's no other response.

I sigh and turn away to tidy up a bit, rolling up the tubing and gathering up the used needles to sanitize.

Hopefully soon Vivien will wake up, and then... perhaps I can convince her to speak to me again, despite her request that we avoid each other from now on? Surely saving her life earned me some points in that regard-?

The heart monitor suddenly flat lines, and it feels like a boulder just fell on me.

*No. How-? She was-*

I whirl around, ready to perform CPR again. Keeping her heart beating, that's all I can do-

But the hospital bed is empty.
Um... what?

I glance up just in time to see blonde hair whip out of sight through the medical bay's door.

Oh, good, she's awake. And trying to escape.

Just wonderful.

"Vivien!" I call out, running for the door. "Vivien, stop! You're safe here-

I actually completely understand why she's trying to run away. She just woke up in an unfamiliar laboratory setting, hooked up to a machine, with only a strange human in sight. It's probably like a scene from a nightmare for her.

But still. I just put in a lot of hard work bringing Vivien back from the edge of death, and she's probably puncturing her other lung with one of her broken ribs at this very moment.

She's not even halfway down the hall when I catch up to her. She's not running so much as stumbling.

"Vivien!"

I'm not expecting her to still have the strength to spin around and throw a punch, but she does. Thankfully it's so sloppy I manage to block it and grab her wrist in a firm grip. My other hand goes out to steady her waist because her legs are weak and the swing knocked her off-balance.

"Let me go, asshole!" she snarls, baring her fangs.

"Vivien, it's ok," I protest earnestly, looking her right in the eyes. "You're safe, I promise."

She stares up at me for only a moment, but I see the recognition flash across her face even as the blood drains from her cheeks.

"Hank?" she whispers, her confusion evident.

And then Vivien passes out in my arms.

I grab her as she slumps over and wince in sympathy when I swing her limp body up into a bridal hold. The jostling isn't doing her injuries any favors.

How'd she know it was me? I wonder as I carry her back into the infirmary. My voice?

I'd always thought my voice sounded different when I was Beast, thanks to the roughened vocal cords, but perhaps it's similar enough that Vivien picked up on it and recognized me in my human form.

In that case, I hope she finds my presence reassuring enough that she won't try for a repeat escape attempt. I really don't want to have to tie her to the hospital bed or something.

I check her over again once I've got her settled back on the cot. There's no new injuries that I can
detect, to my relief.

After that I sit down in a chair next to the bed so I can wait for Vivien to wake up. Thankfully it doesn't take long.

Vivien awakens with a jolt and immediately hisses in pain from the movement.

"Easy," I urge, reaching out a placating hand but not quite touching her. "Vivien, you're fine-

She looks around frantically, her expression utterly bewildered in regards to her surroundings, until her gaze finally settles on me. Her skittishness reminds me of a wounded animal, wary of human approach.

"You're in Westchester," I explain gently, "for medical treatment. It was touch and go for a few, but I think you're going to be ok. How do you feel?"

In hindsight, a stupid question.

"Like a building fell on me," Vivien says dryly. Her voice is weak, but at least her sense of humor is intact.

I'm not sure I'm allowed to laugh at that, considering the circumstances. My lips still give an involuntary twitch though.

She's watching me closely, her expression incredulous.

"Hank? You are Hank, aren't you?" she asks.

I nod sheepishly. "H-how'd you know it was me?"

"Your eyebrows, of course," Vivien replies, impatiently gesturing towards me. "What the hell, Hank?"

"I take a serum that makes me look human, most of the time," I explain.

"You smell human, too."

"That's because while I'm on the serum, I am human," I reply wearily. "Genetically speaking, at least."

Vivien looks angry now, like I've betrayed her in some way. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you take a drug that hides who you are?" she demands, her voice getting louder. "I thought you said you don't teach the kids here to hide? But you get to? That seems hypocritical to me."

I'm immediately defensive- I just saved her life, and now she's criticizing my choices? Where's the fairness in that?

I open my mouth to make a retort, but Vivien's desperately gasping for air now and I doubt she would hear me.

"Sit up all the way, please," I say, moving to gingerly sit slightly behind her on the cot. When she does I place my hands on either side of her chest and press firmly against her ribs. "Try to breathe
deep now."

And she's finally able to catch her breath.

"Getting a little handsy, there?" Vivien mutters grumpily. My hands are dangerously close to her breasts.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I reply, even though right now it's all I can do to not pull her back against my chest and bury my nose in her hair. "I need to wrap your ribs. Swing your legs over for me, please."

She obeys, so now she's sitting on the edge of the cot, but doesn't speak while I pull out the things I need. I take the opportunity to explain myself while I fix her up- I figure if I wait until afterwards, when she has the breath to talk again, she'll be so busy yelling at me that I won't get the chance.

I sit in front of Vivien on the chair I was in earlier and start to wrap her ribs. She places her hands on my shoulders to make it easier.

"I didn't used to look like that," I say quietly. "Furry and blue, I mean. I looked pretty much like this, basically human but with huge hand-feet. Looking back... it was stupid to be so self-conscious about them, but I was. I tried to develop a formula that would hide the physical attributes of my mutation, and ended up turning into Beast, instead."

Vivien's hands squeeze gently. A glance at her expression tells me that she's (rather reluctantly) sympathetic to my former plight.

"Sounds like a Greek tragedy," she murmurs.

"It does," I agree. "But eventually I developed another serum that completely masks the X-gene. I can change back and forth as needed- though if I get worked up it's harder to keep control."

"'Worked up?'"

"Emotional, excited... when I feel any animalistic urges," I explain awkwardly. My cheeks are suddenly as warm as a furnace. "Usually I can fight them off, but-"

"But nothing," Vivien argues. "You're still hiding."

"Don't we all?" I retort. "I'm guessing you don't walk down Fifth Avenue with your hair up and smiling at everyone, Vivien. The world is what it is. Can you fault me for wanting a normal life?"

Her expression is quite dissatisfied. "No, I get what you're saying on that count. That's not what I meant," she mutters stubbornly. "I was talking about you hiding from your own emotions."

I choose to ignore that comment. She may have a point on that count, and I don't particularly want to delve into my myriad of emotional issues right now.

"Lay back down," I tell her gently instead. "Breathing should be easier, now."

Vivien nods, gingerly settling back down in the bed.

I'm about to turn around and tidy up again when she whispers, "Hank, you're not normal. And that's just fine. Because you're extraordinary. And the reason I fight is so you and all of the other mutants are free to just be themselves without shame of who they are."

I'm still thinking of a reply when Charles enters the room.
"Vixen, good to see you awake," Charles says as he approaches. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than I did, sir," Vivien replies. Her tone is wary, but polite.

*What, no sarcastic remarks for him? You're making me jealous, Vivien.*

I suppose in a way it makes sense, though. Despite his innumerable faults, Erik has always taught his followers to be respectful of Charles. I would think less of Vivien if she was rude to my mentor.

"Glad to hear it," he says.

He looks at me, and I know what he's thinking already.

"Aspirating the lung seems to have worked," I tell him. "I gave her a blood transfusion and wrapped her ribs. As long as Vixen rests, she'll pull through just fine."

I watch Vivien hold her wrist up to her nose and sniff out of the corner of my eye. I'm sure she can smell my scent mixed in with hers.

"Whose blood?" Charles asks, surprised.

"His," Vivien replies, frowning. "It smells like he marked me. Jesus, my brothers are going to kill you."

Marked. As in a mating mark.

Ferals take monogamy to an extreme- there's no such thing as divorces for us. Once marked, we mate for life. And that's it.

Yes, I can imagine how upset Fox and Jackal would be if their sister returned to the Brotherhood mated to an X-Man. As if they didn't hate me enough already.

"It's a feral thing," I explain when Charles looks confused. I can feel my face heating up in embarrassment as I turn back to Vivien. "Would your brothers rather you be dead?"

She tries to laugh but ends up clutching at her ribs. "Possibly," she gasps out.

"You need to stay here for a few days, anyway," I tell her. "Just in case you relapse. But that will help with the scent, too."

Vivien nods, looking unimpressed. I can guess what she's thinking- *so much for staying away from each other from now on.*

I wonder if she plans on not speaking to me for the remaining duration of her stay? Telling me to leave her alone?

The prospect fills me with a choking, terrible despair.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you like, Vixen," Charles says sincerely.
"Thank you, sir."

"I'll have some food sent down for you both," he assures me. "You should stay with your patient."

I nod. "Thanks."

"Is he really as nice as he seems?" Vivien mutters thoughtfully after he's out of the room.

"He is," I say.

*Now, anyway. In the years prior, not so much.*

We're silent for a long moment.

"Thank you," she says quietly, causing me to glance down at her. "For saving my life."

"You're welcome," I reply. "Does that make us even? I think I've lost count."

"So have I," she agrees, giving me a reluctant grin.

I take that as an invitation to sit back down in the chair next to her bed again. I'm hoping, *praying* that Vivien will keep talking to me, even if it's just idle banter. I want so badly to speak to her, but I'm also trying to honor the sincere request she made the other day.

Even if it kills me inside.

But despite my hopes, an uneasy silence falls between us again.

*Please,* I beg silently, painfully. *Speak to me, Vivien. I'm sorry, and I just want-*

Her eyes finally meet mine as we both sit there uncomfortably.

Our gazes hold for a long moment- so long, in fact, that I think time stops moving for a second or two as I mentally plead with her to relent and talk to me.

And then-

Vivien's expression softens, and she lets out a sigh of defeat. "So... you guys are really letting a Brotherhood member stay inside the sacred X-mansion?" she asks tentatively.

*Yes!*

"We are," I reply, trying to conceal my elation that she's speaking to me, despite the topic.

"Why?" I can tell she's genuinely perplexed by the notion.

"Part of being an X-Man is showing mercy, even to your enemies," I explain after a moment's thought. "You were dying, and Erik, even if he thinks we're weak for it, knew we would help you because it was the right thing to do."

She considers that. "That could bite you guys in the ass really badly. What if I decided to-?"

"Would you?" I interject. But I know the answer already.

"No, but it's naive to think all of your enemies will have the same scruples."

I shrug. "We're not going to compromise our beliefs because other people aren't honorable," I tell
her. "If we do, it's like our enemies win anyway."

Vivien scowls.

"What?"

"I think being so rigid in your ideals is dangerous to the kids you're trying to protect here," she says stiffly. But then she sighs and looks thoughtful. "I guess when you think about it, that's the big difference between the Brotherhood and the X-Men. We don't bother with having so many high-minded rules that we set out for ourselves. That way we can't feel bad when we end up breaking them."

"Don't pretend like you're completely devoid of a moral compass, Vivien," I say, my tone a little sharp. "I wouldn't be alive if that was true."

"Oh, I have one," she concedes. "I'm just not sure it points true north, is all."

For some reason this makes me grin. "I admire your self-awareness. It's a rare trait in a Brotherhood member," I dryly observe.

"Yeah, well- I think we can agree that you believe I'm some sort of Brotherhood snowflake," Vivien replies sardonically.

I start to chuckle, because what else can I do? We both know she is different from the rest of them. She's just too stubborn to give up on the others.

But then I cut myself off because I hear footsteps in the hall.

Seconds later, Jean and Alex enter the room, trailing behind two floating trays of food. Jean seems a little nervous, but Alex just looks surly. Nothing new there.

"We brought you food," he announces unnecessarily.

"Thanks," I reply, taking the trays out of the air. One has regular food on it- including a brownie- and the other holds a rather unappetizing assortment, complete with Brussels sprouts and Lima beans.

This is going to go over well.

I put mine down and help Vivien gingerly set up the tray on the hospital bed. Her tentative, cautious smile freezes in place when she glances from her food to mine, but her tone is still civil when she says, "thank you."

"How are you feeling?" Jean asks kindly.

Vivien looks surprised, but answers politely, "a little better, thank you."

"How soon will she be well enough to leave?" Alex directs the question at me, his voice carefully monotone. I can tell he won't be happy if Vivien has to stay here long.

"A few days," I reply mildly.

"Alright," he says. "We'll monitor her in two's-"

"We can, if it makes you feel better," I tell him, "but I don't think that's really necessary."
"I know you don't trust me, but I give you my word I won't cause trouble while I'm here," Vivien interjects quietly. "It would be poor repayment for the kindness that's been shown to me. And if you don't believe I have a conscience, I hope you at least give me credit for having a brain. Trying anything in a house full of X-Men while I'm wounded is pure stupidity."

"Fine," Alex mutters after a moment's thought. "Hank-

"Keep an eye on her," I conclude. "I will."

He gives Vivien one more circumspect glance before heading for the exit, but to my surprise Jean stays behind.

"If you tell me your sizes I can find you some clothes," she says tentatively. "Since you're going to be here for a few days."

"That- that would be wonderful," Vivien cautiously tells the other girl. "Thank you."

Jean writes down the sizes and then excuses herself, leaving Vivien and I alone.

She turns to look at me. "So... what can I do to convince you to share that brownie with me?"
It's Only Getting Worse

I pretend to think about Vivien's question, even though I plan on sharing the brownie with her anyway. I'd wish Brussels sprouts on no one. Especially someone who's supposed to be healing.

And besides- I'm not above a little bribery if it keeps her talking to me.

"Eat all of your food," I tell her, "and I'll consider it."

Vivien pouts prettily, and for some reason the expression makes my heart trip all over itself. I immediately want to give in to whatever she wants.

Because clearly I'm a pushover where she's concerned.

"Fine," I agree, with a feigned sigh, "but please eat. I know it's not the most appetizing of meals, but try anyway, alright?"

The playful, challenging smile she gives me as I settle down to dinner with her causes my chest to constrict and my blood to pump a little faster. Something in her expression just makes me very aware in this moment that I'm a man, and she's a gorgeous woman.

Not that I ever truly forget how pretty Vivien is. It's just that sometimes, like right now, it really hits me-

"Is she really that nice, too?" Vivien mutters suddenly, interrupting my train of thought.

I reply without thinking. "Who, Jean?"

She drops her silverware and covers her ears with her hands. "I don't want to know her real name, dammit!" Vivien says sharply. "We know each other's, and look where it's gotten us."

Yes, look where it's gotten us.

We're enemies who are no longer enemies, the natural enmity between an X-Man and a Brotherhood member instead replaced with an unspoken, undefinable bond. And said bond is hurting us both so much she wants us to stay away from each other...

Part of me has occasionally wondered just how much Vivien cares for me. I know she does to some extent, at least. The warm smiles she tends to send my way whenever she sees me, how she sought comfort in my arms that night I overheard her speaking to her brother, those desperate goodbye kisses we shared back at Alkali Lake-

I know these actions weren't completely devoid of feeling on Vivien's part. It's just hard to tell how much, considering her oftentimes mercurial, coquettish nature and the way she infinitely prefers to approach emotionally-charged situations with sarcasm and teasing, rather than allowing herself to be truly vulnerable.

But now, for the first time, I consider the possibility that the very reason Vivien wants to distance herself from me is due to how deeply she cares. That she'd rather stay away and never speak to me again than cause me the greater pain of endless, hopeless longing because she won't leave the Brotherhood.
I clear my throat. "Marvel Girl is very kind, yes," I say. "She helped me get you breathing again after your heart stopped beating earlier."

Vivien looks startled—perhaps she thought I was exaggerating when I told her she was dying when Erik brought her here. Well, I wasn't.

"Sounds like I need to thank her again," she murmurs.

She's quiet for a few minutes, too occupied with picking at her food to speak. But soon enough Vivien is grinning winsomely at me over her empty plate, her pensive mood gone and her current intentions quite evident.

"Yes?" I say, feigning ignorance.

"I believe I was promised part of a brownie," she replies imperiously.

"So you were," I agree. I chuckle and hold out the entire thing.

"Just part of it, silly," Vivien admonishes me. She breaks it in half and pops one piece into her mouth. The other she holds up to my face.

As I acquiesce and lean in to take a bite I'm strongly reminded again of that night in Alkali Lake, how she fed me pieces of brownie there, too.

I suppose not much has changed in the months since then.

Except perhaps how it's all just gotten worse, that is.

Jean reappears a few minutes later with some clothes and various toiletries. Vivien is quite effusive with her thanks— I think she's tired of wearing her jumpsuit in her current condition, and I can't say I blame her.

"Are you going to need help— er, changing or anything?" Jean asks.

"No, I've got this," Vivien replies, stiffly maneuvering herself to where she can get out of bed. "But- Marvel Girl, thank you. Not just for this, but for earlier too. I heard you helped when I croaked."

"You're welcome," the younger mutant says. She looks like she might want to say more, but instead she turns and hurries out of the room.

Vivien sighs and manages to get to her feet, heavily favoring her right leg even though her left one was the leg that had part of a building land on it.

Oh, right. I forgot to change the bandage on her bullet wound.

I resolve to do that as soon as she's done in the bathroom.

But first—

I hurry to her side. "Put your arms around me," I tell her. When she opens her mouth to protest I say, "you're never going to get better if you overexert yourself."
Vivien sighs and lets me gently pick her up. Even as a human this is easy for me, since I always have a little boost of strength from Beast and she doesn't weigh much in the first place.

I think I like holding her like this, though. Her body is soft and warm against mine, her face is mere inches away, and she smells so wonderful...

Yes, I definitely enjoy it. Too much for my own good.

"You know, right now it feels like you're just rubbing it in my face how *not broken* you are," Vivien gripes as I carry her to the bathroom. "Show off."

I chuckle. "Sounds like you're on to me," I joke.

She smiles and impulsively, without even seeming to think about it, leans in to kiss me on the cheek. It instantly feels like she shocked me, like my feet are going to stick to the floor.

My face warms, and Vivien immediately winces. Like she forgot for a moment that she's supposed to be keeping her distance from me, for both our sake's, and now deeply regrets her impetuous action.

Now it's awkward between us, thanks to Vivien's impromptu display of affection. The weight of all the things unsaid, of all that cannot be, seems to choke the surrounding air.

Don't ask me why, but the only way I can think to respond is to reply in kind- to give her a quick peck on the cheek in return. Her skin feels like a flower petal on a summer day under my lips: smooth, warm, and smelling of sunshine.

It has the desired effect. Vivien is so surprised that she bursts into giggles, though unfortunately she almost immediately stops and clutches at her ribs.

"Sorry," I mutter sheepishly, but Vivien shakes her head, her expression rather guilty and-confused?

I set her down gently, keeping my hands on her to help her regain her balance when she wobbles.

"I feel like a baby giraffe," Vivien sighs. She sounds annoyed with herself.

Vivien might be only 5'4 at the most, so the comparison to a giraffe has to be one of the most ridiculous things I've ever heard.

"It behooves me to tell you that even newborn giraffes are at least six feet tall, so they're easily taller than you," I say. "Maybe a baby horse would be a better comparison?"

*On second thought, perhaps it wasn't a good idea to call her a baby horse. Oops.*

"Thanks, Hank. Thanks."
Bittersweet

Vivien hobbles into the bathroom after I unwrap her ribs again. I can hear the laborious change in her breathing as soon as I remove the support, and it worries me.

"Try to be as quick as you can, ok? But don't be afraid to take a break if you need it."

"I shall consider it," she replies haughtily.

And then she sticks her tongue out at me as she shuts the door in my face. I can hear her giggling through the wood over her little piece of vengeance for my horse comment.

I smile, too elated that she's back to teasing me to feel chagrined. This is "normal" for us, and I've missed it.

Vivien takes a very long time in the bathroom, but I forgive her that because of her injuries. Finally she emerges, fresh-faced and wearing a white, flowing silk negligee that doesn't even reach her knees.

Oh, my stars and garters.

This is the first time I've ever seen Vivien wearing anything other than her jumpsuit (tantalizing in itself, with the way it hugs her form), and let it suffice to say that I certainly- enjoy- the view. I can see her long, graceful legs, the lightly freckle-covered skin of her arms and shoulders, and the cleavage of her-

"What are you looking at?" Vivien asks pointedly. She looks slightly amused over my rather stupefied reaction to her scantily-clad state.

"Nothing," I say quickly, and then curse myself. "Um, ok, not nothing. You- your-"

I gesture vaguely towards her small bust line. My face feels like it's on fire at this moment- I'm mortified that she caught me so blatantly ogling her, and now I'm only making it worse with my bumbling awkwardness.

"They're, um, quite nice, even if they're rather small-"

Her eyebrows raise so high they're in danger of disappearing into her hairline.

"I mean-"

"Jesus, Hank. Just stop talking before your head explodes," Vivien interjects, shaking her head in exasperation.

"Good idea," I agree weakly. I hold up the compression bandage again and clear my throat. "I apologize. Um, may I-?"

She nods and lifts up the edge of her nightie so I can wrap her ribs tightly for the night. Still blushing furiously, I kneel down in front of Vivien and try not to think about how she's basically in just her panties like this.

But then the sight of most of the creamy, freckly flesh of her torso covered so thoroughly in bruises...
drives the embarrassment from my thoughts.

*Oh, Vivien...*

"Do you need some painkillers?" I ask quietly. My hands tenderly brush along the mottling on the skin of her stomach, down her sides. For some reason she shivers. "Sorry."

"It's fine," she assures me. "Y-your hands are cold, is all."

There's a false note in her voice as she says that, but I let it pass without comment. This is awkward enough as it is.

I move hastily, trying to cause as little discomfort for her as I can. Then I gently carry her back over to her hospital bed and work on the bullet wound on her calf.

"There," I announce quietly. "I'll have to change that bandage in the morning, but for now you're good to go."

"Thank you," Vivien says sincerely. She's blinking slowly, as if she's starting to have trouble staying awake. Not surprising, considering how much effort it took her just to change and use the facilities. "For everything."

"No problem," I tell her. I go and get a blanket out of the closet and arrange it over Vivien while she looks on sleepily. "Get some rest, Vivien."

"Are you staying in here?" she murmurs. She can barely keep her eyes open now.

"Yes," I reply, absently brushing away a stray lock of hair from her cheek. "Just in case. I don't want all my hard work to be for naught, you know."

She falls asleep with a tiny smile on her face.

---

**October 27, 1974**

I wake up hours later with a kink in my neck and a sore back that makes me grimace when I sit up.

*Ouch. Why on earth did I sleep so badly?*

It takes me a second to realize where I am: the infirmary, at Vivien's bedside.

I recall sitting down in my chair, but I don't remember falling asleep. It looks like I ended up slumped over with my head on the bed. Not exactly the most comfortable of sleeping positions. I'm surprised my glasses didn't cut into the side of my face-

*Where are my glasses?*

After a moment's search I realize Vivien has them in her hand. I'm guessing she woke up at some point, saw me sleeping with my glasses still on, and took them off for me.

Her other hand is right next to where my head had been laying. Like maybe she'd been stroking my hair...

The realization does something strange to my insides, filling me with this bittersweet, painful longing. It's a gesture of tenderness I didn't expect from her, one that she probably shouldn't be giving me and I shouldn't be so happy to receive.
It just makes things even more complicated than they already are between us.

Charles motors into the room right after I slip my glasses on again.

*How is she doing?* he asks, his voice whispering in my head.

*A little better, I think. This is a natural sleep,* I reply, gesturing towards Vivien's resting form.

Charles nods. *I'll keep an eye on her if you'd like to freshen up and get some breakfast.*

I hesitate to leave Vivien like this, while she's still sleeping. Not because I don't trust her enough to leave her alone in the mansion, but because I just... don't want to be away from her.

Vivien chooses that moment to wake up. She opens her eyes blearily, gives a start, and sits up too fast.

"Dammit," she hisses, clutching at her ribs. I wait for a second for her to regain her composure.

"Good morning," I say when she looks at me.

"Morning," Vivien mumbles grumpily, her eyes darting over to Charles. "Hi, Professor."

"Good morning," he replies politely. "Hank is going to excuse himself for a bit. I hope you don't mind if I keep you company in the meantime."

Vivien lets out a wry chuckle. "It's your house, sir. Your rules."

Charles smiles genially at her.

"Would you mind helping me before you go?" she asks me, gesturing towards the bathroom. "Please?"

"No problem," I assure her. I easily scoop her up and try to ignore Charles' staring.

I think he's surprised at my level of comfort in touching Vivien that way. Let's face it- I'm more likely to awkwardly stutter and embarrass myself in front of a woman than to sweep her off her feet. Literally.

"I won't be long," I murmur to Vivien as I carry her. I'm trying to provide reassurance, because I suspect that Charles actually wants to have a private discussion with her. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"A double bacon cheeseburger and onion rings."

I snort. "Still fighting breakfast food stigmatization, I see," I comment, unable to stop a smile. She's definitely a girl who's not afraid to eat like a real person, instead of a bird. I admire that in a woman.

"Damn straight," Vivien agrees, with an impish grin that makes my stomach flip flop.

"I'm sorry, but I really don't think your stomach can handle that request. It had a building fall on it less than two days ago, you know."

She pouts, and it's like a kick right to the gut. It takes all I have not to close the paltry distance between us and kiss the expression off her face.
What on earth is wrong with me?
I'm back downstairs in the infirmary within half an hour, having hurried about showering and my other tasks. I tell myself it's because I'm still worried about my patient, but the truth is... I'm afraid that at any moment Vivien will change her mind and decide once again that she wants me to stay away from her from now on.

As such, I want to enjoy her company as much as I can while I can get away with it.

Charles and Vivien are speaking about the mansion's prodigious library when I come back, bearing a bowl of cheeseburger soup for my lovely, recalcitrant patient.

Vivien takes one look at the meal I've provided and bursts into a storm of giggles.

"You're- the best," she gasps out, clutching her ribs. "Thank you."

"We aim to please," I tell her, feigning a wary sigh.

Charles raises his eyebrows at the rather familiar exchange.

"I've discovered that Vixen has issues with arbitrary meal conventions," I explain awkwardly. "And I just want her to eat, or else her healing factor is going to burn itself out."

*I'm trying to be a good doctor. That's a workable excuse.*

I don't want to slip up and reveal something damaging in front of Charles. Something like how Vivien and I escaped Stryker together and are now much closer than an X-Man and Brotherhood member should be.

He nods gravely in understanding, which tells me perhaps he's already had a run in with how stubborn Vivien is while I was absent.

Intractable, headstrong, perverse. That sums her up, in a nutshell.

But I also know there's more to Vivien than that. She's funny and intelligent, and underneath her occasionally prickly exterior there's a surprisingly good heart.

And when she smiles, you feel like your feet aren't even touching the ground. Or maybe that's just me.

"Professor X was just telling me about the library," Vivien tells me as she eats her soup. It's clear that she wants to see it, though she won't admit it out loud.

I glance at Charles, the question evident in my expression. Would he really consider it advisable to allow a Brotherhood member to traipse around the school as she pleases? He doesn't know her like I do, but it's also Charles Xavier we're referring to. Nothing more needs to be said.

"You're not a prisoner, Vixen," he says. His tone is kind.

"But..." Vivien continues dryly.

"But nothing," Charles tells her. "You're free to move about as much as Hank allows you to. I only
advise that you don't venture anywhere alone, just in case."

She nods. "I understand."

So it is that I find myself pushing Vivien to the library in a wheelchair an hour later. She's now barefoot and wearing one of the dresses Jean found for her, this one white with flowing sleeves.

It's relatively early on a Sunday morning, so we meet no one as we go. I'm glad for that- I'm not sure how my teammates would react to seeing a member of the Brotherhood getting a tour of their home.

"Here we are," I say as I turn her chair into the large, book-filled room.

Vivien's hands tighten on the armrests, but otherwise I perceive no other reaction from her. Curious, I lean over slightly so I can see her expression.

She looks... she's absolutely radiant with joy, her smile wide and her eyes sparkling with glee. It's a breathtaking sight.

"What do you think?" I ask, though the answer is obvious.

"I think I want to look around," Vivien replies eagerly, turning her heart-stopping smile my way.

I chuckle. "I can't say I'm surprised," I say. I help her gently out of the chair into a standing position. "Not for too long though, alright?"

She nods distractedly, too busy figuring out which direction she wants to go in first to really listen. This doesn't upset me, though- I can certainly understand her absorption with all these books around. It's something we have in common.

I settle down on the window seat and watch Vivien limp from bookcase to bookcase from there. I don't think I've ever seen her this happy and content, and witnessing her tranquil expression fills me with a warm, glowing feeling. I honestly don't think I could get tired of watching her like this.

Occasionally Vivien makes some comment or other about a book she finds and smiles when I reply. Over an hour passes peacefully this way.

But then-

"My mom used to read this to me all the time," Vivien notes, cradling a copy of *A Little Princess* in her clawed hands. Her expression is suddenly wistful and far away, as if she's re-visiting those childhood memories.

They are memories that end in heartache, if the conversation I overheard between Vivien and her brother is anything to go by. Both of her parents were ripped away by violence.

"What happened to her?" I ask quietly.

Vivien's lips purse into a thin line at the question, which she obviously views as intrusive.

"She is no longer suffering from personhood," she replies stiffly.

I knew this. But I still say, with heartfelt sincerity, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Vivien tells me, trying (and failing) to make her tone sound flippant as she leans
casually against the bookcase and looks away from my gaze.

Her thoughts are clearly still elsewhere, because I notice her absently rubbing her ribs. I'm instantly on alert that she may be in pain.

"Please come sit down for a moment, Vivien," I offer, gesturing to the empty space next to me on the window seat. "Don't strain yourself."

She lets out of a sigh of irritation, and for a second I think she's going to argue with me. But she must be legitimately tired, because she limps over to sit next to me without any further protest.

I realize then that it's not me she's annoyed with, it's herself for being unable to function properly just now. I don't think Vivien has much patience with herself in regards to her own injuries.

"It's ok to be weak sometimes, Vivien," I say quietly. I reach out and take her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. I'm secretly delighted that she doesn't pull away. "No one will think less of you for it."

"Except me," she retorts ruefully, with a reluctant grin. She flips her hand over and laces our fingers together.

For a few minutes we just sit there silently on the window seat. Vivien is staring down at our entwined hands, and I'm doing my best not to stare at her.

It's a task easier said than done. The white dress she's wearing and the platinum blonde of her hair, combined with the sun shining directly on her, gives Vivien an ethereal, angelic look. She is a pink-lipped elvish princess, with hazel eyes that seem impossibly dark and full of secrets when framed as they are by their long, dusky blonde lashes.

She's almost unbearably beautiful to me in this moment. Despite the fact that she's holding my hand, it still feels like the worlds of a creature such as she and myself were never meant to touch.

Vivien glances up at me, and when our eyes meet it's as if something inside of her comes loose. Like a piece of her that she keeps frozen and locked away just melted.

She takes a deep breath, her gaze not faltering from mine.

"My mother," she says softly, "was murdered."
I wince at her bald admission. I was already aware of that (or at least highly suspected it), but that doesn't make the statement any less jarring.

"H-how?" I ask.

Vivien pulls her hand out of mine and tucks herself into a ball, with her back leaning against the window frame. The retreat stings a little bit- I was quite enjoying the contact, and I also have the sinking suspicion that the withdrawal means she's not going to tell me. I try to hide my disappointment.

But then she starts talking.

"I grew up in the Louisiana bayou," Vivien says, looking out the window. "Me, my brothers and my parents, we lived in this little cabin out in the middle of nowhere. Mom was a feral like us, but my dad was human. They were very different from one another, but they loved each other a lot. I think... I think he fell in love with her spirit, you know? And she loved how gentle he was."

I nod.

"They tried to keep us away from the other people that lived in the area- homeschooling, not really allowing us into town- because we were so obviously not human," she continues. "It didn't bother us, though. We had the bayou and each other. But we grew up a little wild. My parents just didn't have the heart to tame us."

She sighs.

"That's how it started. We didn't know how to be 'human,' not really. The way we moved, the way we looked. Myles and James thought it was funny to sneak over to people's houses and steal their chickens and stuff. Rumors started to go around about rougarou running around the bayou, and who else would it be us? We were the wild children that no one ever saw but for glimpses through the trees. You know how people are. And then a mutant killed the president, and that made everything more tense. The townspeople had started to suspect what we were. So my parents decided it wasn't safe for us anymore, but the night we were going to leave-"

Her breathing catches, and it takes a moment for her to go on.

"The local sheriff led the mob," Vivien says bitterly. "My mom heard them coming and made us hide in the woods. I remember she slapped James because he tried to argue with her about it. 'Just run and don't come back,' she told us. So we started to run, until we smelled it."

A single tear rolls down her cheek, and it's like a knife straight to my heart.

Only one tear for so much pain. I don't know if I should admire her strength or despair of it, because life has forced her to be this way.

"They barricaded my mom and dad in the cabin and burned it to the ground," Vivien whispers. "We found what was left of them in the morning, wrapped in each other's arms."

What can I even say to that? There are no words to express how sorry I am for her loss, and
certainly none to make the pain go away.

I have a strong urge to lean in and pull her into my arms, like the way I did weeks ago, but I settle for reaching out and taking her hand from its place wrapped around her knee. I hold it in mine gently.

Vivien allows me to take her hand, but she's still avoiding my eyes and staring pointedly out the window. "We blamed the sheriff for killing them," she murmurs. "He was supposed to uphold law and order, not lead a lynch mob. So James- Fox, I mean- killed the sheriff. But getting revenge on him didn't bring my parents back. It didn't make us feel any better. It made us... the monsters in their closets, and nothing else."

My hand squeezes hers in reaction to her last sentence, causing her to look in my direction.

I said those very words to her once, back in Styker's lab when we were arguing about killing the dastardly military scientist. I told her that the Brotherhood's methods only make humans fear us even more. I'm amazed she remembers what I said so thoroughly.

"What?" Vivien says defensively, taking in my surprised expression. Her lips quirk up in a small smile, despite the seriousness of our discussion. "Not everything you say is complete peacenik bullshit."

This startles me into a chuckle. "Thanks," I say dryly.

For a moment we just look at each other, our linked hands laying on the seat cushion between us. It's... peaceful, sitting with her like this.

I think I understand Vivien better now, after hearing about her childhood. She obviously doesn't speak of that period of her life very much, and it's an honor to have her trust me enough to share it with me. It feels like she let me in, behind her sarcastic, witty exterior to the vulnerable, wounded girl underneath it all.

If I liked her before, it's nothing compared to how I feel about her now, I think rather hopelessly.

"Hey, Hank," Vivien says suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Hmm?"

She grins cheekily. "You know, you've still never named a better book than *Pride and Prejudice.*"

We sit there for hours, talking quietly. I only realize it's lunchtime when my stomach starts to growl.

"I'm getting hungry," I admit, because I'm sure she can hear it. "Are you?"

Vivien laughs. "I'm pretty much *always* hungry, Hank."

I smile sheepishly. "I suppose I've been a bad doctor then, neglecting the care of my patient," I muse, but she merely rolls her eyes. "Would a roast beef sandwich be sufficient?"

"Two," she counters.

"Ok," I agree, chuckling. I stand up. "But only if you promise to eat them *very* slowly, alright? I'll be back in a minute. Just sit tight."
"Well it's not like I can go anywhere fast," Vivien mutters.

I give her a sympathetic look- I can only imagine her frustration over her injuries, considering how independent she is. "I know," I murmure. I impulsively, without even thinking about it, reach out and tenderly brush her bangs away from her eyes.

Vivien smiles at me. A brilliant, beautiful smile that makes me feel like I'm the luckiest man on the planet simply for being the recipient of such an expression. My knees threaten to give out right on the spot.

I'm shocked at my own nerve over such a boldly affectionate gesture, but that smile was certainly worth it. I'm sure I'm grinning like an imbecile now.

"Be right back," I promise, trying to ignore the heat rising in my face. And then I scurry away before I say something stupid.

Once I return with the sandwiches we eat them together while sitting on the window seat.

And then Vivien and I talk some more.

It feels like we're in our own little bubble, a place where the X-Men and the Brotherhood don't exist. A little ironic, if you ask me, considering the reason for Vivien's presence in the mansion.

But it's true. For a few hours, the only people in the world are Vivien and I. Talking and laughing, getting to know each other even more. I don't think I've laughed this much in years.

Being around her... I somehow feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff but laying in the comfort of my own bed at the exact same time. Simultaneously breathless and more than a little nervous, but also wholly serene and content.

It's completely unfamiliar and a little unsettling, but I think... I think I like it.

Around six-thirty Vivien's head jerks towards the library's entrance, like she heard something. A disappointed frown appears on her face.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Charles is coming," she replies, scooting away from me slightly.

In the past few hours we'd drifted closer to each other, until our arms were touching and our feet overlapped while we spoke. Every now and then we would reach out and touch each other's hands. A few times I even found the courage to reach up and brush the side-swept bangs out of her eyes again. The way Vivien smiled at me afterwards made my stomach do a back flip and my mouth go dry all over again, each and every time.

"Oh," I say now. I shift away from her as well.

Just in time, too, because Charles enters the room at that moment.

"Hello," he genially greets us. "All is well, I hope?"

Both of us nod stiffly.

I feel like a teenager who was just almost caught making out with his girlfriend. Trying to act normal and nonchalant but failing miserably.
"It's dinner time," Charles notes. "Why don't you join us?"

I glance at Vivien. I believe she would behave herself, but what about everyone else? Having a Brotherhood member as a dinner guest might ruffle some feathers.

"Is that really a good idea?" I ask carefully.

My mentor scoffs. "Why wouldn't it be, Hank?" he demands. "It's not like she has the plague."

Maybe not. But to some X-Men, I think the Black Death would be preferable to spending time with Vivien.
An Uncomfortable Dinner

An Uncomfortable Dinner

I'm still not sure about this, but I defer to Charles' judgment.

To be honest, I think he wants to show off the school a little. For Vivien to see the happy mutant children who live here, so she can understand what we do at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters in comparison to the Brotherhood's methods.

*Ok, maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all.*

I think that perhaps I want her to see this as well. Then she'll know what I was talking about back at Alkali Lake.

"I don't mind," Vivien says calmly. She starts to stand, and I hurry to help her up from the window seat. "Thank you."

I probably don't actually *need* to keep a hand on her waist, and neither do I really need to use my other hand to hold hers as I assist her to the wheelchair. But I do it anyway, because I want to touch her while I have an excuse.

"Splendid," Charles replies. After Vivien is in place, he politely says, "after you."

He motors along next to us as I push Vivien's wheelchair through the hallway. Soon enough the generic sounds of a school cafeteria start to float towards us.

"Here we are," Charles announces when we turn into the crowded dining hall.

What happens next is almost like a wild fire.

First one or two children look in our direction- either mere errant glances, or to simply see who the newcomers in the room are. They're the sparks that ignite the whispers that spread through the room like flames through dry brush, until the entire cafeteria is buzzing about our arrival.

Within thirty seconds, everyone is looking at us. The weight of the stares- some only curious, some shocked, and a few outright hostile- makes me want to run right out of the room. And it's not even directed at me.

They're all staring at Vivien, the stranger who (according to the whispers) is a Brotherhood member. I'm surprised the school's general population is so well-informed.

"Come along," Charles murmurs. I think he's a little disappointed by our rather off-putting reception.

The counters in this room are specifically fitted to be wheelchair accessible, so it's simple enough to push Vivien along while I make up our trays. Charles still ends up waiting for us at the very end of the line, though, because of the extra time it takes for two meals.

"I can fill my own plate, you know," Vivien says huffily as I place small portions of mashed potatoes and green beans on her plate.

"I don't trust you with this," I retort. She asked for two sandwiches earlier and ended up giving
most of the second to me thanks to becoming too short of breath. "Your stomach-"

She's pouting now, and leaning back in her chair so I can see the irresistible expression.

I sigh and put two brownies on her plate. "Happy?"

Vivien grins at my enabling. "I love you, Hank."

I almost drop the tray, but recover myself right at the last moment.

She's joking, of course, but the words still fill me with a sort of pitiful yearning. I (stupidly) find myself wanting her to mean them.

"This way," Charles orders after we get our food and reach him once more. He leads the way to the table where the X-Men usually sit, though it's currently empty.

*I have a bad feeling about this.*

But I follow warily behind him, balancing my food on the back of Vivien's wheelchair. When we reach the table I situate her chair to my left, so she's at the corner between Charles on the end and myself.

Vivien glances at me strangely, as if wondering at my rather obvious reluctance to sit here. I shake my head- she'll understand soon enough.

Jean and Scott, followed closely by Storm, are the first X-Men to enter the room. Jean merely looks surprised, but Storm frowns when she sees us sitting there. Scott (predictably) keeps his face expressionless.

After they get their food I watch the three of them arguing about where they're going to eat. Jean seems to want to sit in their usual spot, where we are, but Storm is vehemently protesting.

I'm unaware of how tense I'm getting until Vivien lightly lays a hand on my arm.

"You need to relax," she murmurs, with a wry grin. "I usually have this effect on people."

"But-"

"But nothing," Vivien interjects. "I'm actually a little relieved. What would I do with myself if all of the X-Men were as saintly as you and the Professor?"

I want to ask what she means, but there's no time- the three young mutants are headed our way.

"Hello," Jean says tentatively when they reach us. She takes a deep breath after we return her greeting and sits directly across from Vivien.

Scott nods in greeting, but Ororo pointedly looks anywhere but at our guest.

An awkward silence falls over the table. Vivien doesn't seem to be bothered, but it's enough to make me lose my appetite.

Charles tries to fill the void. "Did you all enjoy your weekend?"

Scott just nods again- he's not exactly Mr. Chatty anyway- but Jean makes more of an effort.

"Y-yes," she replies. "Scott and I went into town earlier. There's a-"
"Does she really need to be in here?" Storm suddenly blurts out. She's glaring daggers at Vivien, who stares back, utterly impassive. "Why can't we just bring her her food like last night?"

Oh dear.

Charles frowns. "Vixen is our guest, and since she's been feeling better I thought it best that she join us," he explains.

"But she shouldn't be out where the kids are, Professor," Storm argues. I can tell she's trying very hard to stay relatively calm and not shout at her headmaster. "She could, I don't know-"

"Eat them?" Vivien suggests brightly. She actually looks amused. "Tell them lies and get them to join the Brotherhood? Maybe you should be a little worried- I mean, I'm not that good at persuasion, but I've always found children to be delicious."

Oh my stars and garters.

I snort back laughter while everyone else stares at Vivien, absolutely dumbfounded. Even Charles doesn't seem to know how to react to that.

"Oh my God, people," Vivien sighs. "Joking. That was a joke. Look, I get that you don't trust me. I wouldn't trust me either, if I were you. But your Professor X invited me to sit in here. So I promise I'll behave if you will."

Storm glowers at the smaller woman, who merely gives her a cheeky grin and goes back to eating her mashed potatoes.

The rest of dinner passes by to the accompaniment of sporadic, stilted conversation, but mostly in uncomfortable silence. As soon as Vivien finishes her food I suggest that we leave, because it's clear that her presence is unwanted.

"You didn't have to leave with me," she mutters once we're safely outside the cafeteria.

"I know," I reply. "But I wanted to."

"You're not afraid I'm about to up and kick the bucket at any moment still, are you?" Vivien asks, turning slightly so she can see my face. She's frowning.

"No, I think you're out of the woods at this point. Now it's more about making sure you don't overdo it while you're recovering. I have a feeling you'll have a very difficult time with that. You need constant supervision."

Also, I want to spend time with you while I can. Because I'm clearly a masochist.

She smiles at my statement. "It's almost like you know me or something."

I grin back. "Almost."
"I'm glad you didn't take what I said the wrong way," Vivien tells me as we continue on to the medical bay. "I don't really eat kids. There's not enough meat on their bones. Like chicken wings."

*Oh, dear Lord.*

"Storm started it," I reply reasonably, once I've stopped laughing. I must admit, it takes a few minutes. "I thought you did well to diffuse the situation with humor."

*Perhaps a little off-color, but still humorous.*

She snorts. "It seemed like you were the only one who thought it was funny," she mutters. "Who knew being such a goody two-shoes means you can't have a sense of humor? Is that a prerequisite for being an X-Man, or do you just lose it over time?"

"Hey-" I begin to say, ready to defend my friends.

But Vivien merely giggles, because I'm only illustrating her point for her.

Her laughter brings another grin, however unwilling, to my face. I decide then that I like her laugh very much, how absolutely contagious it is. I like it almost as much as I find myself enjoying making her laugh.

And then her smile... The only way I can think to describe it is like it's sunshine in the spring: bright, refreshing, and warm. Vivien lights up a room when she does it. And when she smiles at me, it feels like I've missed a step going down stairs-

*Stop it, I tell myself sternly. That's not helping.*

We've reached the medical bay at this point, and I assist Vivien into bed even though I know she can handle it herself. I want to blame it on chivalry, but I know deep down I'm just looking for more excuses to touch her.

And it's not like she seems to mind.

My heart skips a beat when Vivien smiles and pulls me down to sit on the edge of the bed rather than having me sit in the chair I used last night.

The familiarity is certainly nothing like a doctor/patient relationship. Like this afternoon when we were sitting on the window seat, this doesn't even feel like the polite distance between platonic friends. It feels more like something I shouldn't be thinking about with Vivien.

But I can't help thinking about it anyway.

Because this- this *intimacy* between us is practically effortless. Like we're magnets, drawn together, and we just can't help ourselves when we're around each other-

"Do you have a music room here?" she asks, interrupting my rather wistful musings.

"Yes," I reply. "Why?"
"I'd like to see it, if that's ok," Vivien says. She's trying to seem nonchalant, but the hope in her eyes gives her away.

A memory comes to me now: Vivien kneeling at my feet, working to unlock the shackles on my ankles back in that laboratory at Alkali Lake. Telling me that reading is her favorite thing to do, and beating up X-Men is the third.

Did I just find her second favorite pastime?

I grin at my realization. "Music. Your favorite thing to do, second only to reading," I announce. "But more than you like beating up X-Men. It's not as relaxing."

Vivien laughs, though she looks a little surprised. "You remember that?"

"Of course."

She seems pleased for some reason.

"I heard you sing to your brother that one time," I tell her. "Y-your voice is beautiful."

I feel my ears growing uncomfortably warm as I try to pay her the compliment.

*My stars and garters, can I get any more awkward?*

"Thank you," Vivien murmurs shyly, casting her eyes down and smiling a little. I might be mistaken, but it looks like her cheeks are turning a little pink.

She's blushing too? I just made her blush? And here I was thinking that Vivien was practically shameless. What's the world coming to?

"I'll show you the music room tomorrow," I promise her.

Her answering smile sets off a storm of flying insects in my stomach. "Thank you," she says brightly.

She sits up completely and kisses me on the cheek, wincing a little as she lays back against the angled bed. For a moment my concern over the fact that she's in pain wins out over my other conflicting emotions.

"Are you ok?" I ask anxiously.

"I'm fine, you big worrywart," Vivien assures me. "Just sore, is all. I have a feeling I have your blood to thank for that, all things considered."

I shrug apathetically, uncomfortable (as always) with the veiled reference to my secondary mutation.

*My mistake.*

I wasn't a feral before my experiment gone wrong, and the new instincts that came with my altered form made the changes all the more difficult to cope with back then. The rage, the impulses, the worrisome disconnect between my conscious and more primal selves. It was terrifying.

How would I ever control anything in my life after this, if I couldn't even control *myself* anymore?

Thinking of that now makes me wonder if Vivien has ever struggled with her feral nature. She was
Born like this, after all. Did that make it different for her?

"Do you ever... do you ever wish you weren't a feral?" I ask hesitantly.

Vivien raises her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the instincts, the physical aspects of your mutation- do you ever wish you didn't have that?"

She thinks about it for a minute before answering, so at least I know she'll be honest with me. "Sometimes, I suppose," she says finally. "But not too often. Honestly, I think it's mostly worth it. Being able to run so fast it feels like I'm flying, being able to see and hear and smell everything so strongly- I'm pretty sure human perceptions would be dull in comparison. I'd much rather be this way."

I've never really thought about it like that. I suppose I've always been so self-conscious about myself that I didn't stop to think about how different, how vivid my perceptions are when I'm Beast. Sights, sounds, smells, and even my emotions are all so much more vibrant...

"I guess I don't have to ask you the same question," Vivien says quietly. "It's pretty obvious."

I nod uneasily, not meeting her gaze. "Sometimes I wonder if I'd be more at peace with it if I'd been born that way," I muse wistfully. "Like you were."

"Oh, I doubt that," she retorts. "Considering your issues with your feet in the first place."

"Fair point," I agree with a sigh. "I... I've always just wanted to be-"?

"Normal. But that's boring, Hank. 'Normality is a paved road. It's comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it,'" she recites cheekily.

I frown. "I'm not sure quoting a man who cut off his own ear is helping your case," I observe dryly.

Vivien rolls her eyes. "You're missing the point," she says impatiently, sitting up again. This time she tenderly cups my face between her hands. "The person you are is based quite a bit on your experiences. Your feet, your second form- they've shaped the person you've become, the person you are. And you, Hank, are exceptional in too many ways for me to even count. Why would you want to be anyone but who you are?"

It's painful, this feeling in my chest.

"Y-you really think that?"

She smiles mischievously and shakes her head slightly in disbelief. "No, I'm lying to you," she replies, her voice dripping with sarcasm. She leans in and kisses me on the cheek again. "God, you are such a clueless dork sometimes."

Somehow Vivien makes that sound like the sweetest endearment in the world.
October 28, 1974

Eventually I excuse myself to go to bed—but only after making Vivien promise that the only moving around she'll do while I'm gone will be to the bathroom and back. She rolls her eyes, but I think she's secretly touched by my concern. Otherwise she would've chewed me out by now, several times over.

Once I'm in my room it's hard for me to sleep, knowing Vivien's down in the infirmary by herself. It feels like she's a magnet, inevitably pulling me back to her side. And even though I spent all day with her I still haven't gotten my fill of her presence.

I dare not examine the reasons behind this desire, this need to be close to Vivien. But a tiny part of me, more self-aware than the rest, thinks that perhaps I already know why I feel this way, deep down.

I'm just afraid to admit it to myself.

So in the morning I head down to meet Vivien immediately after I shower and dress. I find her sitting cross-legged on her hospital bed, reading the book—*The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton—she nabbed from the library yesterday. She's wearing a red sundress that somehow brings out the green in her beautiful hazel eyes, and she's clearly waiting for me.

Seeing her... as soon as I lay eyes on Vivien my heart somehow feels lighter. A grin automatically comes to my face.

"Good morning," I say as I approach.

"Mornin'" Vivien replies. The smile on her face steals my breath.

"How are you feeling?" I ask when I get to her bedside. I reach out and gently touch her ribs. "Sore?"

She gives me a one-shouldered shrug. "A little. Mostly hungry, though," she says, a heavy-handed hint. "When's breakfast?"

"Right now," I tell her.

I offer Vivien my hand and try to ignore the tingling feeling in my fingers when she takes it. I try to pull up the wheelchair, but she immediately balks.

"I don't need that anymore," she says, backing away like the contraption is a venomous snake.

"Vivien—"

"No."

"You're not even wearing shoes," I protest.

"And?" she retorts. "It's a house. It's not like there's broken glass and hot coals all over the floor."
Her jaw sets stubbornly, and I get the sinking feeling that resistance will be futile in this situation. Better to surrender gracefully.

"Fine," I sigh. "But please don't push yourself."

"Ok," Vivien agrees. She grins and stands on tiptoe to kiss me on the cheek again. "Thank you, Hank."

Yes, I'm a pushover, but I'm a pushover who just got a kiss. And if this is what losing against Vivien feels like, I think I'm ok with it.

Vivien limps slightly on our way to the cafeteria, but not enough to make me truly fear for her. I satisfy myself with the occasional helping hand on her waist and don't complain when she leans into me a little.

Just to help her walk, of course.

I spot Alex, Scott and Jean sitting at their usual table when we enter the dining hall, along with Spyke. When Alex sees Vivien he immediately leans over and says something urgent to Spyke—probably an entreaty to leave before the Brotherhood member sees him.

Spyke nervously glances over his shoulder, but the fearful expression on his face dissolves when he sees who it is. I watch him speak to Alex, stand up, and make his way over to Vivien and I just as we finish making up our bowls of cereal. He leaves his breakfast companions looking absolutely flabbergasted.

"Incoming," I murmur to Vivien, nodding in Spyke's direction because he's behind her and she's too busy trying to convince me to allow her to have a chocolate chip muffin to notice.

The female feral turns, startled, towards the newcomer. Upon seeing him her expression immediately becomes tense, and I can't help noticing how her eyes dart warily over towards the X-Men in the room.

"Hello, Evan," Vivien says cautiously.

"Hi, Vixen," he replies.

"What's up?" she asks.

"I-I just wanted to say 'thank you,' again, for helping me," Spyke explains, his tone unmistakably sincere. "I'm really happy here, and it wouldn't have happened were it not for you."

Vivien smiles reluctantly, and her gaze skates nervously over to the X-Men again. "I'm glad to hear it. Just don't tell anyone else that I helped you, ok?"

He frowns in confusion. "But why? I thought, because you were here-"

"I'm just visiting," she says quickly. "A building fell on me, and the people here were kind enough to help me out."

"Oh," Spyke replies, his expression now decidedly guilty. "My bad."

He looks like he wants to say more, but I think he realizes it's just not the place for it.

"Thank you," he says again, before excusing himself.
Vivien is quiet and pensive as I lead her to a table for two right next to a large window overlooking the grounds. I roll my eyes when I notice that she managed to pilfer the muffin we were arguing over, but she doesn't see the gesture. She's too busy looking out the window, her thoughts far away.

"You could, you know," I say quietly. "Stay here, I mean."

**With me.**

It's a concept that fills me with almost overwhelming hope. How I would love to see Vivien every day, to make my wistful dreams of being with her a reality. To fight next to her, rather than constantly fearing that one day I'll have to decide between her and my mission-

She snorts derisively. "Of course, because I've made such good friends here," she mutters sarcastically. "Oh look, here comes one of my new best buddies right now."

Alex is headed our way, looking angry. I think he only seems that way because he's confused- Alex hates feeling like he's not in control of a situation.

"What's this about you helping Spyke escape from Magneto?" he demands abruptly.

**Oh dear.**

"Good morning, Havok," Vivien says ironically. "I'm doing great, thanks for asking. How about you?"

Alex glares at her, but she's having none of it. Her expression is completely inscrutable.

"Well?" he snaps. "Did you or didn't you?"

"That's none of your business," she replies flatly.

"I'd say it is," Alex retorts. "I want to know why our enemy is sending people to us. It makes me suspicious of-"

Vivien stands up abruptly, making both Alex and I tense. Thankfully she makes no other move, or I'm sure my colleague would try to blast her.

"That man's done nothing wrong," she says coldly. "Leave him alone."

And Vivien begins to walk away, taking her stolen muffin with her. She holds her head up high- the picture of dignity, except for her slight limp.

Alex rounds on me. "I'm worried that Spyke might be a Brotherhood spy," he tells me. "Pretending that he escaped from them when he's really here to get dirt on us. It didn't hit me until today that there's no way he got out on his own, and then he's claiming Vixen, of all people, helped him-"

"She did," I assure him quietly. "She just doesn't want people to know."

"Why not us, at least?" he asks.

"Protecting herself, maybe," I offer. "So word doesn't get back to Erik somehow. Think of that old saying: two can keep a secret if one of them's dead."

"Ok, fine. But why would she help him out in the first place?"

"Because," I murmur, standing up to follow my patient. "She's different from the rest of them."
"If you don't trust Spyke, ask Charles to rifle through his thoughts just in case," I tell Alex. "Please excuse me- I need to watch over my patient."

And then I leave him to his own devices, following after Vivien. There's only two places I can think of for her to be: the infirmary or the library. Somehow I have a feeling it's the latter.

Sure enough, I find Vivien sitting on the same window seat from yesterday, her knees tucked to her chin. She studiously looks out the window as I approach, though I know she can hear me.

"Found you," I say, taking a seat.

She scoffs quietly. "If I was trying to hide you'd never find me."

We're quiet for a minute, a rare awkward silence between us. I'm not exactly sure what to say. Such a heated conversation with one of the X-Men right after I told Vivien there's a place for her here if she wants it doesn't exactly bode well for my offer. Not at all.

"Sorry I walked out like that," she mutters. "I thought it would be better than getting into a nasty argument."

"I understand."

Vivien sighs and looks at me, her eyes pleading. "Please don't let them take it out on Evan, ok? He doesn't deserve any problems just because he got caught up in the Brotherhood's crap. I was really just trying to help him."

"They won't do anything," I tell her gently. "Don't worry."

She still doesn't look convinced (and I suppose I can't blame her, considering how Erik probably handles such problems in the Brotherhood), so I decide to change the subject.

"I believe I promised you a trip to the music room today."

Vivien perks up immediately. "You did," she agrees.

"Come on, then," I say. I take her hand and help her up off the window seat. "This way."

The halls are bustling with activity by now, full of children heading off to their first classes this Monday morning. I reluctantly release Vivien's hand once we're out of the library and lead her on while she looks around with keen interest.

I think this is the first time Vivien's ever actually set foot in a real school. She told me yesterday that she was home schooled until her parents died, and eventually she got her GED on her own. But otherwise, Vivien's never even been in a classroom. I wonder what she thinks of this?

"Here we are," I announce when we arrive at our destination.
The music room is medium-sized with a rather low ceiling, to help with the acoustics. Add that to the fact that there's no windows, and it can feel a little close in this room. It gives off the aura of being half-finished, or maybe even the air of a storage area for instruments thanks to the lack of sound-proofing on the walls and the neglected feel to the place.

I can immediately tell Vivien's disappointed, even though she's trying to hide it from me. I think she was expecting something nicer after seeing some of the other rooms here in the mansion.

"We've never really had a music teacher," I explain apologetically. "So I never got around to finishing this room."

"What's the point of having it, then?" she asks petulantly. Her expression is glum.

"The kids like to come in here sometimes to goof off. And... maybe one day we'll get a teacher. Then I'll finish it."

Vivien snorts. "Or maybe you should finish it first, and use that to lure a teacher in," she mutters. She steps over to the baby grand piano in the center of the room and presses a few keys. "Still in tune."

"You play?"

She nods. "This and guitar, but that's about it."

I tentatively step closer, until I'm at her side again. "How'd you learn?"

"My dad," Vivien replies softly. She sits down on the piano bench and stares at the keys, looking rather sad. "The human. You ever notice how a lot of mutants see themselves only through that prism? Like, being a mutant is the only way they can see themselves, because that's all that anyone else sees. Not musicians, or lovers or even friends. Just... mutants."

"You don't get that so much around here," I tell her quietly. Feeling bold, I take the seat next to her. "We want the kids to know that what they are is only a mere part of who they are."

Vivien chuckles wryly. "Must be a Brotherhood thing, then," she mutters. She reaches out and skates her fingers across the keys without pressing them down. "They're all too busy being 'mutant and proud' to really be anything else. God, I think it's been over a year now since I even touched a piano."

"Maybe you should play something?" I suggest, and then I hold my breath.

The smile she gives me is a little shy. "Only if you promise not to laugh if I'm terrible," she says pleadingly. "It really has been a long time."

"I promise."

"Good. Now, just so we're clear- if you laugh, I'm going to punch you."

She's joking. I think?

"Deal."

Vivien takes a deep breath and places her hands on the keys. "Alright, here goes."

She starts to play for a minute- long enough for me to vaguely recognize the song as Pachelbel's Canon- but then hits a sour note. And then another, and another.
"Dammit!" she whispers, shaking her head frantically.

"Don't pressure yourself too much, Vivien," I say, trying to soothe her since she seems so genuinely distressed. "You said it's been a while."

"You don't understand," Vivien retorts. "Music is- it's the way I keep my dad alive for me. It's the one thing I can do that actually feels like it's a purely positive force in the world. Because even when I'm trying to help mutants I'm still hurting people, you know? But this... with this I feel like I can create something good, rather than destroying things. Without it, what am I?"

She seems to be on the verge of tears, a horrifying prospect for me. Vivien, crying? I didn't even think it was possible.

"Vivien," I murmur. Without thinking I reach out and wrap my arms around her. The way she melts into the embrace feels absolutely heavenly. "Give yourself a moment and try again. I'm sure you haven't really forgotten how to play- you're just rusty is all."

For a minute I just hold her, savoring this feeling while I can. I'm not a person who seeks physical contact from other people- far from it, considering that there's a monster inside me- but with Vivien it's different.

I honestly can't help reaching out to her, wanting to touch her.

As such, I feel a pang of loss when she pulls away and composes herself.

"Ok. Ok, let's try this again," she says, closing her eyes.

And she begins to play again, with more confidence this time. It's a different song than before, one I don't recognize at all. After a moment I realize that she probably wrote it herself.

Then to my delight she begins to sing:

"When the sun came up/ We were sleeping in/ Sunk inside our blankets/ Sprawled across the bed/ And we were dreaming."

It's hard to decide what I enjoy more: listening to Vivien's impromptu performance, or watching it. She seems utterly transported, like she literally feels more alive right now.

Creating something beautiful, rather than being a destroyer.

Chapter End Notes

Song credit to Straylight Run. Song title is "Existentialism on Prom Night."
I completely lose track of time while listening to Vivien. Her confidence grows as she goes on, finding her rhythm again and shaking off the rust, as it were. She wrote quite a few of the songs she plays herself, and I can't help being impressed by her talent.

And that's not even my obvious bias talking, either.  
"I'm getting hungry, how about you?" I ask eventually. "You only had that muffin you stole for breakfast, didn't you?"

Vivien nods, looking wary and more than a little reluctant. I can't say I blame her- the cafeteria hasn't exactly been a place of welcome for her thus far.

"I'll go get us something and bring it back," I assure her, "like yesterday."

"Thank you," she says gratefully.

Her sincere tone at the prospect of not having to brave the dining hall makes me wince.

It's the first real indication Vivien has given as to how uncomfortable she's been, surrounded by so much hostility. But still, each and every time one of the X-Men has tried to start an argument she's deferred or removed herself from the situation. She's truly been doing her best to not bother anyone.

"I'll be right back," I tell her, standing up.

I'm almost to the door when Vivien calls out my name quietly. "Hey, Hank?"

I turn back towards her. "Yes?"

For a moment she looks like she's about to say something serious, if the expression on her face is any indication. But instead she swallows and gives me a mischievous grin instead.

"Make sure you get me something chocolate."

"I'll consider it," I reply. I leave the room chuckling.

My plan is to just make a quick trip into the cafeteria, but as soon as I enter the room Alex makes a beeline for me, with Charles in tow.

Oh, what now? My thoughts are impatient.

I stop and wait for them to reach me, mentally preparing myself for basically anything.

"I just wanted to let you know Spyke checks out," Alex says, without preamble.

This obviously doesn't surprise me in the least, but I nod in acknowledgement anyway.

"I guess Vixen really did help him escape," he continues, shrugging. The idea seems to completely boggle his mind. "Where is she, anyway?"

"In the music room," I reply. I'm speaking mostly to Charles at this point. "Considering the
disruption her presence caused both times she came in here, I thought it would be prudent to circumvent the same situation."

My mentor looks disappointed, though he nods in agreement.

It makes me wonder how much he knows, or at least suspects about Vivien. Has he dipped into her thoughts to take a look around? Does he see that she's not really a bad person underneath it all, and think it's feasible that she may possibly want to stay here if we make her feel welcome enough?

That would explain his dismay with her less-than-warm reception, at least. Knowing Charles, his door would always be open for someone looking for a fresh start- especially a reformed Brotherhood member. But unfortunately no one else has been very accepting towards her so far.

Sure enough, Alex looks troubled. "You left her alone?" he asks. To give him credit, he's trying to keep his voice even.

"Yes. Only for a minute," I say, just as mildly. "I'm just getting her food and heading back."

And to prove the point I excuse myself and get in line to make up a tray- a tray that includes two brownies, among other things. One dessert is ostensibly for me, but I have a funny feeling I'll give it to Vivien if she so much as bats her eyelashes at me.

The way she can now wheedle things out of me so easily should probably disturb me, but it doesn't. I find myself wanting to see her smile at me- to be the reason she's smiling- more with each passing moment.

I guess there's no use in fooling myself about Vivien anymore. What I feel for her- what I've felt, for a long time now- goes beyond mere attraction or friendship, no matter what I've tried to lie and tell myself since Alkali Lake.

I think... I think I'm falling for her, whether I want to or not. Like she's carving a space for herself in my heart that's getting deeper and deeper the longer I'm around her, and nothing can stop the process.

Was this inevitable? It certainly feels that way.

At this point trying to stay away from Vivien seems not only abhorrent, but ultimately futile. Especially when my growing attachment to her feels as natural and effortless as breathing.

That should probably scare me more than it does, too.

Even though I'm a little distracted it still doesn't really surprise me when Charles and Alex follow me out of the dining hall.

"What did Vixen think of the music room?" Charles asks conversationally as he motors along beside me.

I almost laugh. "You'll have to ask her, but I don't think it really measured up to her standards," I explain dryly.

Alex gives an injurious sniff- like a Brotherhood member's opinion on something in the mansion would matter, right?- but Charles merely chuckles.

"I suppose it would be a bit of a letdown after the rest of the house," he muses.
We're in for a shock when we reach the hallway to the music room. All of us can hear that there's more than one voice singing along to the scales being played on the piano. I can even hear someone hesitantly strumming an acoustic guitar.

Charles, Alex and I exchange glances.

Vivien is clearly not alone.

The three of us head down the hall with a little more urgency now, trying to find out what exactly is going on. It's definitely an interesting sight that greets us when we reach the music room's doorway.

Vivien is sitting at the piano with a guitar across her lap, leading a group of four children through the scales she's tapping out on the piano keys. The guitar player is actually Jean, of all people, sitting on the bench next to Vivien holding an instrument of her own. None of them have noticed us yet.

"That's great, guys," Vivien says encouragingly. "But you're singing from up here-"

She points to her throat.

"I want you to try from down here," she continues, pointing to right below her sternum. "When you sing, you sing from your heart. That way you can project without hurting your voice, ok? And Jean- give me a G chord now. Like this-"

She positions her fingers on the frets of the guitar in her lap as an example and then helps the redheaded girl mimic her.


Jean tentatively does so.

"There you go," the blonde woman says brightly.

It's only as she's turning back towards the children that she notices Alex, Charles and I standing in the doorway. The enchanting smile on her face- so open, so genuinely happy- immediately vanishes at the sight of us.

*She thinks she's in trouble,* I realize. *For talking to the children.*

Charles is clearly thinking along the same lines. "Don't let us interrupt," he says gently. "Please, continue."

Vivien's gaze flits over to meet mine, her eyes unsure.

I nod and try to give her a reassuring smile.

She returns the gesture tentatively and turns back to the kids, who are waiting eagerly for her to continue on with this impromptu music lesson.

"Ok, let's go again," Vivien tells them. "And remember, from the heart."
The music lesson continues on for perhaps another twenty minutes until the bell rings and Alex, Jean, and the rest of the children have to head back to class.

"Thank you, Ms. Vivien," one of the little girls says timidly on her way out.

"You're welcome," Vivien replies, with a warm smile.

Jean is just as shy with her goodbyes, but she seems sincere.

From the sounds of it, she and her little friends had been on their way to the play area after lunch—she often helps out as a chaperon to the school's younger children—when the sounds of Vivien's playing caught their interest enough to join in.

Alex is subdued as he takes his leave. I know he's not comfortable with Vivien interacting with the students here like that, but he's also fair enough to acknowledge that her behavior in this situation was beyond reproach. I guess that's as much as I can hope for right now.

That leaves Charles, Vivien, and I.

"Lunch?" I offer, gesturing to the almost forgotten tray of food in front of me.

"Yes, please," Vivien replies gratefully. She limps her way over to me at the room's small conference table.

"Well, that was interesting," Charles comments, coming over to join us. "The children certainly seemed to enjoy learning from you."

A pause.

Vivien shrugs, but makes no other reply. In fact, she's pointedly staring at her plate and avoiding looking at either of us. Like she's embarrassed.

Stubborn, infuriating girl. She had just as much fun as the children did—maybe even more. She just doesn't want to admit it to us. Actually, she probably won't even admit it to herself.

"What'd you think, Hank?" Charles asks. Calling in backup, as it were.

Does he really have to drag me into this, too?

"It seemed like everyone was having fun," I say diplomatically. And then, because it's Vivien and I can't help myself, "including you, Vivien. You really have a knack for teaching."

She gives me a look.

I grin.

I know intuitively that it's time to change the subject or else I'm risking an argument. Therefore I hold up the brownie that had been resting on my plate as a peace-offering. "Brownie?"

Vivien's lips twitch, like she's trying very hard not to smile. "Thanks."
But then Charles has to persist.

"Perhaps it's time we finished this room," he muses suggestively.

Vivien immediately tenses up. I can see the warning in her face and I know it's time to step in.

*Charles,* I call out mentally.

*Yes?*

*I advise you to back off and let her think. She's confused, and if you keep talking about it you're just going to push her away.*

Charles nods almost imperceptibly. "So much to do, still," he says with a sigh. "Since we've only reopened so recently. Hank- it's been two years, yes?"

"Not quite, no."

"Yes, of course," he agrees. "And we've been so busy getting the core subjects covered that I'm afraid we're lacking a little culture here. But we'll get there eventually, I'm sure of it."

*Good save.*

*Thank you. I try.***

Vivien relaxes and grins wryly. "When you put it like that the way this room looks is sorta forgivable," she allows. "At least the instruments are in tune."

"How charitable of you," I say, making her giggle.

And so the subject is dropped.

For now.

Charles stays for only a little while after we finish eating, and I'm actually glad when he's gone.

I don't like the feeling of him watching Vivien and I, wondering if he's drawing any conclusions from the way I look at her. I'm doing my utmost to hide my feelings for Vivien, but I fear they're growing so painfully obvious that they might break through my natural reserve.

It's extremely difficult to hide how happy it makes me just to be in the same room as her. And I'm not sure what Charles can read from her expressions, either- does he see the softness that comes to her eyes when she looks at me, or is that completely in my imagination?

Therefore it's a relief when he makes his exit, leaving Vivien and I alone at the conference table.

She's writing out guitar chord charts for Jean, just in case the other girl wants to practice more. Vivien offered to show me how to play earlier, but considering that I'm about as musical as a tone deaf rock I had to decline.

Instead I simply sit next to her, patiently waiting. I certainly don't mind just watching her. The succession of expressions on her face as she works- a thoughtful frown, a contented smile- amuses me for some reason.

"Almost done," Vivien mutters. "Sorry if I'm boring you."
"You're not. I enjoy watching you like this," I reply, without really thinking about it. Then I wince. 

*Way to sound creepy, McCoy.*

She snorts and leans her head against her arm, propped on the table. "Like what?" she teases, her eyes dancing mischievously.

My hand seems to move of its own volition to gently brush Vivien's bangs away from her face. And then, even though my mind is screaming at my disobedient limb to stop, that this might be over the line, my fingers go on to tenderly stroke her cheek. It feels like there's an inexorable force pulling me towards her.

I can't escape it. But I also don't think I want to.

"Happy," I tell her honestly. "I enjoy seeing you happy."

It's with both an intense pleasure and a yearning ache that I watch Vivien close her eyes and lean into my hand. Her responses to my clumsy attempts at affection make me want to be even bolder, consequences be damned.

How I wish I could draw her in for a kiss, to tell her how I feel-

"We've been doing a horrible job of not talking to each other, you know," she says quietly, opening her eyes.

*Or not.*

My insides instantly turn to ice as I quickly withdraw my hand. I try to keep my face expressionless, to hide how much the very concept of distancing myself from her at this juncture wounds me, but it's impossible.

Honestly, stabbing me in the neck with her No. 2 pencil would probably have been less painful.

"I-is that *really* what you want?" I ask. "For us not to speak to each other anymore?"

Vivien quickly casts her eyes down, avoiding my gaze.

"Vivien, please don't," I beg, taking her hands in mine.

"Vivien, please don't." I beg, taking her hands in mine.

She looks up and stares at me for only a moment before letting out a sigh of defeat. "No, I don't want that," she replies reluctantly.

I relax slightly, the momentary relief of her reassurance leaching the tension out of my limbs.

My reaction is obvious enough that Vivien notices. She chuckles softly, a bemused grin tugging wryly at the corners of her lips.

"What?" I ask, immediately defensive.

"Nothing," she assures me. She reaches out and lets her fingers trail across my face, leaving tingling skin in their wake as she sighs. "It's just... I don't know what it is about you, but whenever I look you in the eyes, I melt. I feel like I'm falling apart but at the same time completely whole, for the first time in my life."

The wistful yearning, the poignant vulnerability suddenly apparent in her eyes makes my breathing hitch. It's an expression that I know is mirrored in my own countenance.
"I... I feel the same way," I admit quietly.

*My stars and garters, where did the courage to say that come from?*

But it's too late to take it back.

And now time completely stops, both of us perched on the edge of a knife. Each of us is leaning in slightly, as if searching for the merest hint from the other that it's ok to give in, to cross this boundary that circumstances have placed between us.

To say the words that would be a point of no return for us both.

I'm aware of how illogical it is- what I feel for Vivien, how deep these emotions are already and how they grow with every passing moment. I don't even know this woman's last name, but I know that the power of my feelings for her is frightening in its intensity.

That's why I don't think I care about being logical right now. Not with the way she's looking at me, how I'm drawn to her so strongly it's like there's a magnetic force between-

"Fuck it," Vivien whispers.

Right before her lips come crashing into mine.
In this moment it feels like my very soul is on fire, every molecule inside of me burning like the sun.

Without hesitation I reach my arms out and wrap them around Vivien's waist, pulling her in closer so she can slip off her chair and get on my lap. She swings her legs over so she's straddling me, her claws tracing along my scalp as her mouth moves with mine. I clutch Vivien closer, savoring her taste, her absolutely intoxicating scent.

There are no words for what I'm thinking, what I'm experiencing right now. The joy I feel transcends such paltry mode of expression, because language is simply insufficient to describe this bliss.

Vivien makes that purring noise again and bites my lip, taking care not to break the skin with her fangs. Little rivulets of pure desire radiate through my veins, sending all of my blood rushing south. My hands, too, are moving in a southerly direction of their own accord to boldly slip under her dress.

My stars and garters, Vivien is perfection. A magnificent combination of soft curves and smooth planes that my hands wander freely over, the better to relish every inch. I'm practically giddy that she's letting me touch her like this, that she actually wants me to.

Every atom of my flesh seems to yearn towards her, like the feral part of Vivien is inexorably calling to the same in me. All of the desperate longing I've tried to hold back over the months I've known her is now finding an outlet in this outpouring of passion that consumes us both.

Needless to say, Beast breaks through the mental barriers I have propped up against him like they're tissue paper. I'm fuzzy and blue within mere moments.

With a low growl I slip my hands underneath Vivien and easily lift her onto the table. Vivien tugs at my collar to encourage me forward as I lay her back, but it's an inducement I don't need. I follow eagerly, loving the way my body covers hers, the way we fit together perfectly.

Vivien is gasping for air by the time I finally break away from her lips to kiss along her collarbone, but I can't tell if that's from my kissing expertise or her broken ribs. I highly suspect it's the latter, sadly.

"Well," she whispers breathlessly, her eyes gleaming. "I think you're officially 'worked up,' Hank."

I grin sheepishly and lean in to nibble on her lip, drawing a little hum of approval from her. "Yes, I am," I agree. "D-do you mind?"

Vivien giggles and laces her claws through my hair. "Hell no," she replies, pulling me down for another steamy kiss.

I'm vaguely aware that this isn't exactly a situation I want someone walking in on, what with me in all my furry blue glory on top of a table engaged in a rather involved make out session with a Brotherhood member.

But I'm too caught up in the passion between us to really care.
Can you blame me?

The way Vivien kisses me makes me forget about all of my insecurities, how uncomfortable I've always felt in my Beast form. With her, being like this feels strangely natural and absolutely exhilarating.

It's a feeling I don't want to lose.

For a while we are content to kiss and explore each other with all the joy that newly reciprocated affection and lust have to offer. I love how it feels to have Vivien under me like this, her warm, plaint weight pressing against me. And I adore the happy little purring noises she makes when I kiss along her neck. It makes me feel much less self-conscious about the sounds I make, too.

But eventually we have to stop, because the temptation to mark her is just getting too strong for me to resist for much longer. And we definitely don't need to think about that just yet.

So instead we lay down facing each other on the table to catch our breath, which sounds strange but somehow actually feels completely normal.

Vivien has a secret smile on her face as she reaches up and plays with my facial hair.

"What?" I ask uncertainly, suddenly as self-conscious as ever.

"Nothing," Vivien replies. Her gorgeous hazel eyes are shining as she leans in and nuzzles my face, a rather feline gesture of affection. "I'm just really happy right now. It's- it's a little weird for me, I guess."

I grin and kiss her forehead. I want her to be happy- I want to be the one who makes her happy. "Me, too."

She scoots closer and snuggles against my side. As I wrap my arms around her I can't help musing that this windowless, unfinished room might be my favorite in the mansion from now on after the events of the past several minutes.

Especially this table.

While we lay there I concentrate on caging Beast again, but it's difficult and takes me a while. He's not too keen on being locked up again, not with Vivien around.

"You completely busted right out of your shoes," she notes after I finally morph back. She hands me my glasses, which ended up somewhere or other while we were... busy.

"It happens." Like I need reminding.

Suddenly Vivien bursts into a storm of giggles, an absolute gale of mirth that leaves her clutching at her ribs and hissing in pain.

"Vivien-?" I pull her upright, trying to help with her breathing.

"I'm sorry," she gasps, still stifling her guffaws. "I was just thinking- it's true, what they say about guys with big feet." And she gives me a rather naughty grin that feels like a blow to the head.

My cheeks are suddenly hot enough to melt steel. I was rather hoping Vivien hadn't noticed how- excited- I got earlier, but clearly she did. Now I'm absolutely mortified.
"Oh my God, Hank," she says, nudging me playfully. "That was a compliment."

"Oh."

I grin sheepishly as she pulls me down to cuddle with her again. Vivien fits against me like she belongs in my embrace.

She wants me, too. And how much she enjoyed the children... Surely she's staying here now-right? I think to myself.

Staying here with me.

"Think you can brave the cafeteria for dinner?" I ask a few hours later.

"I can," Vivien replies carefully. Her fingers begin picking at the strings of the guitar currently in her lap.

"But you don't want to," I conclude with a sigh.

She raises her eyebrows. "Would you?"

"Not really," I concede.

We're silent for a moment, but then Vivien sighs. "I guess I should go, though," she admits. "To get this to Marvel Girl-"

She holds up the guitar chord diagrams.

"-And besides," Vivien continues, "I've messed up your daily routine enough as it is."

"I haven't minded," I say quickly. "Truly."

On the contrary, having Vivien here has been like something out of a dream. My day-to-day routine is mostly working in my laboratory, going on X-Men missions, and occasionally tutoring children who need it. It would be a lie- or at least a gross exaggeration- to say that my life lacks purpose, because it doesn't.

But Vivien's presence provides a color and richness that has been absent in my life for so long now that I can't even remember if I ever had it before. The way she looks at things, the way she challenges me- it gives me something I didn't realize I was missing until she showed me that I was.

"Now come on. It'll be ok."

Vivien grins and takes my hand when I stand and offer it to her.

"Alright, fine. I'll willingly follow you into the lion's den, Hank."
I chuckle and begin to lead Vivien from the music room.

"Wait- don't you want to put on shoes before dinner?" she asks, gesturing down to my bare feet. "Unless you're doing the whole barefoot thing with me now?"

I'd completely forgotten about my current lack of shoes until that moment. The startled look on my face as I glance down makes her laugh. "Oh, right," I agree sheepishly. "Here- wait just a minute and I'll be right back."

I hesitate for a split second, but then gather my courage to lean down and kiss her. The way Vivien responds to my lips on hers and the lovely smile she gives me when I pull away leaves me with a rather foolish grin on my face.

Running upstairs to change my ruined shoes and shirt takes only a few minutes, but Vivien's expression lights up like a sunrise upon my return. Like just my mere presence is enough to make her happy, as astonishing as that is.

"Ready?" I ask.

She nods and stands on tiptoe to kiss me again. "Lead the way," she murmurs wryly.

Our hands brush against each other as we keep up an awkward almost-contact whilst walking to the cafeteria. Every now and then our fingers interlock gently for a moment and then break away.

I can't really tell what it means. Is Vivien hinting that she wants to hold hands? It's a rather public display of affection, after all.

Does she want this, whatever this is (no seriously, what is this?), to be known to the X-Men? And if so, that has to mean she's staying here, right?

What will everyone else say? I know we don't exactly seem like the most suitable match for each other, even though we are both ferals. I'm almost eight years older than Vivien is, and-

Oh, let's be honest here. Our age difference is going to be the least objectionable issue about a relationship between Vivien and I. There's practically a laundry list of reasons why we shouldn't want to be together.

She's a Brotherhood member, for one, and impetuous and fiery where I'm much more reserved and mild. Vivien's very confident in her abilities, and I've always been riddled by self-doubt.

To an objective observer, we don't make sense together at all.

But love is never logical, is it?

Once we enter the cafeteria Vivien assumes the same demeanor she's had with me in front of other people since she arrived- friendly, but certainly not romantic. Like this afternoon didn't happen.

I guess I'm fine with that, though. We need to talk about what we are first, and I'm not necessarily in a rush to do that just yet. Being around her is enough, for now.
Or maybe I'm just afraid to find out.

"Where are we going to sit?" Vivien asks once we've made up our trays.

Her face is utterly expressionless as she surveys the room, though I do sense caution in her eyes. Unfortunately we still drew a lot of pointed stares when we entered the dining hall. Sam and Warren are currently watching us with un-concealed distrust and muttering to each other.

*Fantastic.*

"Um, let's go over here."

I lead Vivien over to an empty table that's quite far from where the X-Men usually sit and out of the thoroughfare of the room. I don't think either of us is too interested in being a main attraction tonight.

And so we sit and begin to eat our dinner. Eventually the rest of the X-Men come in and sit down, and despite my half-hearted hopes their eyes are inevitably drawn towards us.

Ororo and Warren don't bother to hide their dislike of Vivien's presence in this room. Even Sam has a frown on his face when he glances in our direction. Scott is characteristically impassive. Alex looks annoyed and rather puzzled, like he's not sure what to think about Vivien after the scene he happened upon this afternoon in the music room. Only Jean seems to have any compassion for the feral girl.

Vivien, in turn, is more anxious for me than anything.

"They're not going to turn on you, are they?" she murmurs, casting a sideways glance their way. "For spending so much time with me?"

I shake my head. "As far as they're concerned, you're simply my patient, and I'm spending time with you because..."

"You're my glorified baby-sitter?" she guesses.

"Basically."

But I can't help feeling a tremor of fear at her perturbation.

Vivien being worried about the others' opinion of us merely "spending time together" probably doesn't bode well for her wanting to tell them the truth about us, does it?

Because why would we need to hide how we feel about each other? Unless-

I try to push the dark thoughts from my mind, not wanting to ruminate when this dining experience is tense enough as it is.

Instead I grin and pretend to make a grab for her brownie. Vivien gasps in moral outrage and smacks my hand away.

"Don't you dare!" she scolds, giggling. "You should never get between a woman and chocolate."

"So I've heard," I say.

Despite my efforts to lighten the mood, it's still a relief when we stand to leave.
Vivien waits for me to go and dump our trays before heading for the dining hall's exit, where she'll stay while I hand off the guitar chords to Jean.

She questioned me earlier about the wisdom of giving Jean the piece of paper in full view of everyone, but I argued that it shouldn't be an issue. It's not like it's a coded message or something.

And besides. If I don't give it to Jean now I'll have to go find her later- something that will take me away from Vivien's side, which I'd prefer not to do.

"Hey, Hank," Alex greets me when I approach. "What's up?"

"Nothing, really," I reply. I hold out the paper for Jean. "Here. She wants you to have this."

Jean takes the proffered missive with some trepidation, but then smiles when she sees what it is. Her eyes search out Vivien by the door and she gives her a small wave.

Vivien gives a tiny smile in reply and awkwardly waves back.

"What is it?" Warren asks. He sounds a little agitated at the thought of X-Men and Brotherhood members exchanging notes.

"They're guitar chords," Jean explains shyly, holding it up for him to see. "Viv- Vixen was showing me how to play guitar a little."

"And some children how to sing," I add.

The ugly look on Warren's face is mirrored in Storm's expression, and even Sam's and Scott's to some degree.

"She was-" Ororo began angrily.

"Lay off it, Storm," Alex orders brusquely. "Professor X, Hank, Jean and I were all there. Nothing happened. It looks like the girl's keeping her word not to cause problems while she's here."

Storm looks properly chastened.

An awkward silence falls among the X-Men. I'm trying to think of a polite way to excuse myself when Sam says something that almost knocks me over.

"Hey, Hank, I guess you stood Lucy up the other day? I covered for you, though. Told Alison to tell her that you had a work emergency come up," he tells me. "Not really a lie, right?"

Lucy. Oh dear.

I'd completely forgotten about my date with her Saturday night in light of Vivien's dire straits. And these past two days... my thoughts have just been too full of the pretty little feral to think of a woman I feel ambivalent towards over seventy-five percent of the time.

"Thanks," I say, recovering myself slightly. "I owe you one. I'll- I'll try to make it up to her."

Sam nods, his eyes a little anxious. His gaze flits over towards Vivien, but thankfully he says nothing else.

I take my leave hastily, my mind still reeling.

Vivien is still waiting for me at the door. Her expression, seemingly almost always on the verge of
self-amused laughter, is so stricken that it makes me feel like I'm about to lose my dinner. It's clear that she overheard at least part of the conversation, and I curse her feral hearing abilities.

But I know it's not her fault. This is my doing. I'm in trouble and I know it.

Sure enough, Vivien's voice is icy cold as she asks, "Hank, who the hell is Lucy?"
"I-I can explain," I say, utterly chagrined. At least I hope I can.

Her eyebrows go up incredulously. "I'm listening."

"Not here," I tell her, glancing around. I'm afraid that we'll start to draw attention to ourselves. More than usual, anyway.

"Fine," Vivien agrees. She turns around and walks- more like *stalks*- away, leaving me to trail after her like a wayward kite.

Within a minute it's clear we're headed for the infirmary, a destination that I approve of. We'll have more privacy there, and I've never felt more of a need for it than now. I just hope she doesn't punch me or something.

Vivien remains standing, so I do as well. Her expression is shuttered, with a barely controlled anger bubbling just below the surface. If I say the wrong thing I know she's going to explode.

"Lucy is a girl I've gone out with a couple times," I explain awkwardly, and then hold my breath. I sound lame even to myself.

"Why didn't you mention that you have a girlfriend?" Vivien demands, looking devastated.

"She's not my girlfriend," I say quickly. "We've only been out a couple times. Honestly, I don't even like her very much. I feel like I'm forcing myself to go out with her, because-"

Vivien's expression darkens even further, shutting me up immediately. I feel like such a cad.

"Because being with someone you don't like beats being alone?" she guesses. "You realize you're basically using her, right?"

"Yes," I admit sheepishly. I hate how disgusted with me Vivien looks right now. I feel like such a cad.

"Because of you," I blurt out, compelled into honesty.

Vivien's eyes widen. "What?"

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since Alkali Lake, Vivien," I admit painfully. "Maybe even before then, I don't know. But you've gotten under my skin, so deep I don't think I could shake these feelings even if I wanted to, especially now. I've tried- that's why I went out with Lucy. I wanted to forget about you, to have some sort of normal relationship instead of pining after someone I couldn't have."

Her eyes soften just a little. "I guess I can understand that," she says begrudgingly, after several tense seconds.

Relief, hope, joy, awe- I feel all of these things in the wake of her reluctant forgiveness. It gives me the strength to take a huge chance.
"It doesn't have to be like that for us anymore, right?" I ask, tentatively reaching out to take her hands in mine. A little hopeful bubble starts to grow in my chest when she doesn't pull away. "We can be together, can't we? If you stay here?"

Vivien's hands clench spasmodically around mine. Her skin suddenly goes ashen underneath her freckles. "Stay here?"

My little hope bubble instantly deflates like a popped balloon at her consternation, but I press on anyway. "Y-yes. Will you stay here, Vivien? With me?"

There, I finally said it. I've finally asked the question that's been burning in me since Vivien was brought here. After these past few days, I don't think I can bear to let her go again.

Her jaw sets, ever so slightly. "Is that the only way you think we can be together? I have to quit the Brotherhood first?"

"How else can we be?" I ask blankly.

"Just like we have been," Vivien replies, her eyes hopeful. "We can keep it a secret, Hank."

I frown. "Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Catherine and Heathcliff. These tropes never seem to end well for the star-crossed lovers," I say.

"Works of fiction," she retorts impatiently.

"Of course they are," I agree sarcastically. "Because in real life people tend not to be so foolish."

Vivien glowers at me and pulls her hands out of my grip. There's a stinging in my chest as she tells me, "I really can't stay here."

"Why not, Vivien?" I ask, my tone becoming almost pleading now. "We wouldn't have to hide how we feel about each other here, you know. And admit it- you like it here. Separate from however you feel for me. The library, the children- I saw how much you enjoyed teaching those kids today, Vivien. You were nurturing them, giving them something beautiful instead of hurting people. Imagine doing that every day."

"You don't get it," she snaps, angry red patches now burning on her cheeks. I seem to have touched a nerve there.

"It's because I like it here that I can't stay," Vivien tells me. "Do you think Magneto is going to let me walk away without retribution if I stay here? He'll pull this place apart brick by brick if the X-Men 'steal' one of his soldiers. And even if he doesn't, he'll never allow his people to come here if one of them needs medical treatment ever again, even if they're dying like I was. What if the next person to get badly wounded is one of my brothers?"

"And speaking of my brothers- as soon as they find out I left for you they'll hunt you down, and they won't stop until either you or they are dead. No matter who survives that situation, I lose. And how do you think you'd feel if you won, knowing you killed the only family I have left?"

She sighs.

"I see what you meant, back at Alkali Lake. And I like what the X-Men do here, Hank, but I'd feel useless if I stayed. I wouldn't be able to go out in the real world and try to make a difference like I can with the Brotherhood. We both know the rest of the X-Men will never trust me enough to go
on a mission. I'd just be stuck here twiddling my thumbs," Vivien says sadly. "I want you, baby, but there are things out there that are bigger than you and me. I can't just ignore them and ride off into the sunset with you."

The old insecurities that have always haunted me now rear their heads and begin to attack me like biting flies. The vicious thoughts that say I'm not worth enough for a woman to stick around for, that being with me wouldn't be enough to make a girl happy because her mission is more important.

The sting is like salt on an old, festering wound that's never truly healed.

Vivien seems to sense my pain, because she steps closer again and cups my face between her hands, forcing me to look her in the eyes. "We can be together, Hank, we can. We can have both each other and our missions. Haven't we seen these past few days that being on different teams doesn't have to come between us?" she murmurs earnestly. "We can meet in the City and spend time together. If we're smart and careful, no one will find out."

"A secret, like we're ashamed of each other," I say, bitterness in every word. "What kind of relationship is that?"

"The only kind I can give you," Vivien replies quietly.

I close my eyes, trying not to show her just how much that hurts me.

But there's no way to hide it when your heart is breaking, is there?

For a brief couple of hours, I had an infinite world of possibilities open up in front of me. A future with someone I love, happiness for both of us. An open, honest love, rather than a secret, shameful infatuation that dies a slow, painful death over a decade.

And now I will watch as those dreams crumple into dust.
Ashes, Ashes

Ashes, Ashes

Vivien's hands leave my face, forcing me to open my eyes again. Her expression is anguished.

"Nothing's changed at all, has it?" she asks bitterly. "I thought we could get past this and meet somewhere in the middle after these past few days. But... but I'm still hurting you by not leaving the Brotherhood."

It feels like we're right back in that supply closet, and I'm listening to Vivien give me her reasons why she was still with her comrades right before the building exploded and brought us to now. Has nothing really changed since then?

Only how much more this hurts.

"So leave the Brotherhood. Stay with me, Vivien," I plead. My hands automatically reach for her in supplication, but she steps back.

"I already explained to you why I can't leave them," Vivien retorts. "We both know I'm not as bad as I used to be, right? Well, maybe the others can change, too. I have to at least try to make the Brotherhood better- to make my brothers better. I have to. Because if I walk away from them like this I not only put you and everyone here in danger, I also turn my back on who I am. And the only family I have left. I can't just leave Myles, Hank."

She sighs, the expression on her face somehow simultaneously both appealing and resolute as she looks at me.

"No- this is me, Hank. Brotherhood member, crazy brother, and all. Do you accept me as-is, or not?"

"Of course I do," I reply, "but-"

"There can't be any 'buts,'" she says, shaking her head.

"That's not fair," I tell her, rather petulantly.

"Neither is trying to change me, Hank."

I can't even think of anything to say, and I can tell it hurts her. She bows her head and turns around, heading towards the bathroom.

"Vivien, wait-" I say, but she shuts the door in my face. "Vivien-"

Pathetic, ridiculous, absurd.

That describes me standing outside of the bathroom pleading with Vivien to open the door so we can talk with a rather appalling accuracy.

"Vivien, please come out," I beg. I lean my head against the wood and resist the temptation to bash my head into it in frustration. "Please-"

I stumble slightly when the door opens, revealing Vivien in her jumpsuit. And worse than that- her eyes are over-bright, like she's fighting the urge to cry.
My heart plummets right out of my chest- I think it ends up somewhere around my toes. "You're leaving?"

"Very observant of you," she mutters acidly, striding around me. Still limping, I might add. She's carrying the toiletries and clothes Jean got for her.

"But you're still hurt," I tell her, pathetically following her over to the bed.

"Am I dying?" she asks. She begins folding the clothes, avoiding my eyes the whole time.

"No, but-

"Then I'm fine," she says shortly. "I'll just take it easy for a few more days."

"What about your scent?" I'm grasping at straws now. "You still smell like I marked you. Fox and Jackal-"

"But there is no mark, so no worries," Vivien replies, gesturing to her neck. She finally turns to face me, but her gaze is focused on my left shoulder rather than my face. Like she's afraid to look me in the eye. "Please tell the Professor thank you, for everything. And Je- Marvel Girl, for being so kind. And thank you, as well, Hank."

I grab her upper arms, finally forcing her to meet my gaze. Of course now she's glaring at me, but I'll take a small triumph at the moment. "Please don't leave this way," I implore. "Let's talk about this, Vivien."

"There's nothing more to say," she tells me, shaking her head. "I want to be with someone who loves me for who I am, rather than what they want me to be."

Vivien shrugs off my hands and heads for the door, leaving me stunned. Once she's there she turns towards me and says, "Lucy will probably forgive you if you go apologize, you know. That way you can have that 'normal' relationship you want so badly."

I can't speak past the lump in my throat. I feel like I'm watching this disaster unfold from somewhere outside of myself, like I'm viewing a horror film. You want to tell the blonde not to go into the closet because there's an ax murderer in there, but she does anyway and gets her head chopped off.

You want to tell the fool standing there like an idiot by the bed to say something, anything to keep the beautiful girl he's fallen for from walking out on him. But he can't find the words.

"I can't be what you want," she tells me, her voice curiously flat and devoid of emotion as she fights to keep her tone even. "So I want you to stay away from me. I mean it this time, ok? Just- I'm just another Brotherhood member to you now."

And then she walks out the door.

---

For a long time I stand there frozen, as if my anguish has locked my muscles in place.

No, not anguish- what I feel is a sort of numbness, with the encroaching pain just on the edge of my awareness. Like a burn victim coming down off morphine, the agony will roll in with the same slow, inexorable certainty of high tide.

I think part of me is waiting and hoping that Vivien will be caught on her way out of the building.
but I know such a thing is an impossibility. The woman moves like a shadow when it pleases her to do so.

*I did this, I think dully. I ruined a relationship in less than six hours. That has to be a record of some sort.*

What will I do now?

I sink down onto the hospital cot and pick up the silky negligee Vivien had been wearing for the past two nights. I bury my nose in the garment and deeply inhale the flowery sunshine aroma that still clings to it. How long will the scent last before it, too, fades away and leaves me with no trace of her at all?

Nothing except this piercing, throbbing ache in my chest that is getting more and more painful with each heartbeat. The grief spreads outward, through my bloodstream, to paralyze my limbs and turn my heart to dust.

I'm suddenly overcome with overwhelming regret. What is *wrong* with me, that I throw away happiness with both hands?

First Raven, and now Vivien. Women whose feelings for me I've only repaid with criticism and nonacceptance. Women who told me I'm wonderful just the way I am, right before I pushed them away.

Clearly, they don't see the real me. I may look mild-mannered and diffident on the surface, but inside I'm an evil brute who burns everything I touch into ash.

Raven tried to care for me, but I trampled on her heart when she didn't want to be "normal" with me. And then I almost destroyed Charles because I hated to see my dearest friend in so much pain. My attempts to help him by giving him the serum only succeeded in making him a pitiful wreck of a man.

It's obvious that I'm a monster who ruins everything I love. Me, and my need to be normal.

So maybe Vivien was right, and I *should* go give it another try with Lucy.

Normal, regular Lucy, who I don't think I could ever love.

Surely that will keep her safe from me.
Lucy's expression is haughty and a little annoyed when she answers the door and sees me standing there.

"Hello," she says stiffly.

"Hi," I reply, feeling awkward because of her rather forbidding expression. "Um, should I have called first?"

"You should have called on Saturday," Lucy snaps, "instead of standing me up."

I wince. She has good reason to be upset with me- much more than she knows. "I'm really sorry about that," I tell her sincerely. "I had a work emergency and couldn't get away until now. I came over as soon as I could."

"What kind of work emergency is so important that you couldn't at least call?" she demands. "For two days?"

"Someone was dying," I explain. "And needed my help."

"I thought you said you weren't a medical doctor," Lucy retorts suspiciously.

Nice to know you do pay attention sometimes.

"I'm not. That's why it took two days," I lie glibly. "I was the only person they had at my work facility."

It's an explanation that wouldn't work on anyone else, I think, but somehow it works on her. She nods sagely and tells me she understands.

For some reason I'm a little contemptuous of her easy acceptance of my flimsy excuses- and the fact that she didn't even ask how the person I treated is doing right now. I mean, I said the person was dying. Wouldn't it be polite to ask-?

I brutally subdue the feeling.

Lucy steps aside and lets me in. I follow her to the living room, and I swear that I hear her grumble something along the lines of, "should've brought me jewelry to apologize. Or at least flowers."

I almost roll my eyes at her but catch myself at the last second. I chalk it up to being around Vivien so much for the past few days. She has a habit of doing that when I make lamer-than-usual jokes, but then she still laughs anyway-

The anguish catches me off guard, like someone just stabbed me in the chest at the mere thought of her.

"I came as soon as I could get away," I tell Lucy, pressing on through the pain. "I really am sorry."

"It's ok, I guess," she replies, still rather huffy. "I'm sure you'll figure out a way to make it up to me."
"I'll try," I agree, accepting the kiss she gives me. "But enough about me. Tell me how your week was."

And there Lucy goes, chattering away at me. Just like always.

My mind drifts while she speaks, despite my best efforts to listen. I can't stop thinking about what Vivien said to me before she left, even though doing that makes it feel like I'm being flayed alive from the inside.

"I want to be with someone who loves me for who I am, rather than what they want me to be."

It's certainly not a terrible thing to ask for, is it? Going into a relationship hoping to change someone is surely a recipe for disaster.

I suppose that's part of where I went wrong with Raven, as well. I expected her to change- mind you, because she told me she wanted to- and then I got upset and said horrible things when she decided not to.

Vivien, on the other hand, has never expressed such a sentiment. It was I who foolishly made assumptions about everything, that she would finally leave the Brotherhood because of how she felt for me.

My fault, as always- making presumptions without the evidence to back them up. Perhaps it's because I'm usually correct in scientific matters that I try to draw fallacious conclusions like this, without taking the time to check them.

I'm not as smart as I think I am. Certainly not about emotional matters.

The more I think about it, the more I believe that the Raven I fell in love with back in 1962 was a fiction of my own making. I saw a pretty face who smiled at my hideous mutation and immediately felt a bond with her. The fact that she hated her own mutation further drew us together. But what else did we have in common? Anything? I think now that perhaps we assumed that because we both hated our mutations, we would be similar in other ways, too. We just never talked about anything else to find out.

Raven represented so much for me. The chance to get rid of my hand-feet, the first woman to look at me and see me as something other than an awkward geek with nothing to offer the opposite sex. I wonder if I fell for that?

Because the woman I thought I knew would've never left her brother bleeding on a foreign beach, despite his urging, would've never believed in mutant superiority, and would've never walked out on Charles and I at the White House to deal with the mess of her creation.

The Raven Darkholme I loved probably never really existed.

It's different with Vivien, though. I've never been blind to her faults- the snarky attitude, the infuriating stubbornness and the occasionally off-beat sense of humor. She's impulsive, and mercurial, and-

And when I'm around her I feel more alive. I feel strong, and whole and... happy, just being myself with her.

It startled me this weekend, how much we have in common. Books, movies, the way we look at so many things... I'm starting to wonder if we're as far apart as I thought we were.
I feel another strong tremor of remorse.

Vivien saw it, saw how similar we are. She fell for me the way I am— an incurably awkward nerd—and didn't ask me to change a thing. She let me in, let me see the quirky, introspective girl underneath her sarcastic exterior. She told me I was extraordinary, just the way I am.

And in return I asked her to turn her back on her entire life, her only living family. On everything she is.

Because I have to admit now that Vivien was probably right— her choosing to stay at Xavier's would be a huge risk to everyone there. Erik wouldn't take her desertion lightly, and of course Jackal and Fox wouldn't stop until I, at the very least, was dead. Even Vivien's desire to make a difference in the world, in the Brotherhood, now takes on a nobility that is awe-inspiring.

Again, our similarities strike me. We both have so much hope that people can change and become better. How much of a hypocrite am I to begrudge her in her attempts with the Brotherhood? Her own brothers?

_I'm such an idiot._

I was so blinded by the way I _thought_ things had to be that I didn't bother to consider anything else. Didn't we prove these past two days that the fact that we're on different teams didn't have to come between us, just as Vivien said?

Could we really be together like this? Can we have both each other _and_ still hold onto our missions?

It wouldn't be easy, and it certainly wouldn't be normal.

_Normal_...

I focus back on Lucy, who's waffling on about how she's caught between two hairstyles that she wants to try, and whether her face shape would look better with a bob-

Again I feel a surge of irritation aimed at her. Lucy's world is so small, so vapid. She's like a television performer, stuck in a tiny box. It doesn't even matter if I, the audience, am paying attention behind the fourth wall or not.

_If this is normal, then I really don't want it._

I want something extraordinary. I want what I had— and hopefully _still have_— with Vivien.

"Lucy," I say, interrupting her. "We need to talk."
Taking Chances

Lucy looks startled—after all, it's not good form for the audience to interrupt the performers, is it?

"What about?" she asks blankly.

*Um... how exactly do I put this?*

"I-I don't think we should see each other any more," I tell her, and then mentally cringe.

How will she take that? Does she see how incompatible we are, how disengaged I am from this?

Lucy gasps in surprise. Her expression is akin to someone who just got slapped across the face.

*I guess that answers that question.*

"But- but why?" she demands.

*Because I want someone else. And even if she hates my guts now, I've finally realized that it's better to be alone than to be with someone I don't care about.*

Obviously I can't tell the truth in this situation. If I admit to Lucy that there's someone else, she's going to turn around and tell Alison, who will then mention it to Sam. And I definitely don't need him asking questions about who the "someone else" is.

"I just don't think this is working out," I explain lamely.

"Why not?" She seems to be inflating, like her rising indignation is going to make her explode.

"Well, we don't have much in common-"

*And the fact that I completely forgot you existed for two whole days was probably a bad sign.*

"-And I just don't..."

I'm trying to be diplomatic here, which isn't always my strong suit. I can't just outright say that I don't like her, it would be rude- and maybe even unnecessarily cruel. I'm starting to remember why I continued on with this terrible facsimile of a relationship in the first place. Breaking up is so uncomfortable.

"I mean, I think you're great," I mumble, fumbling awkwardly. "But you deserve someone who appreciates you for everything you are, and I'm not that person."

"Are you really giving me the 'it's not you, it's me' line?" Lucy asks. She's baring her teeth at me now, and I can't help but think that it's much more impressive when Vivien does that.

"Yeah, I am," I agree weakly. "I'm sorry."

And then Lucy explodes.

"I can't believe you," she shrieks, pummeling me with her fists. I hold my arm up in a pitiful attempt to shield myself. "First you stand me up and don't call me for two days, and then..."
you dump me? You asshole!"

I rise to my feet, trying to get away from her.

Beast is awake and growling in the back of my mind- the only reason he hasn't already made an appearance is because of his natural abhorrence towards hurting females.

*I think it's time to make my exit.*

"I'm sorry," I repeat, beating a retreat for the door.

"Whatever," Lucy screams, chasing after me. "Just so you know, I was just with you because you're a doctor- and you're not even the right kind! You're a big, goofy dork and your clothes are hideous! So take that, you bastard! Now get out of my house, and don't come back. I don't ever want to see you ever again!"

And she slams the door behind me.

*Well. I think that went fantastic, all things considered.*

"Hank!"

I turn to see Alex and Charles coming towards me almost immediately after I enter the mansion.

*Oh, curses. There goes my plan of a quick escape.*

My emotions are a kaleidoscope right now- chagrin over what just happened with Lucy, hope that I can somehow make things right with Vivien, and abject terror that I won't be able to do so.

Needless to say, I'm not exactly fit to speak to anyone at the moment.

"Yes?"

"Where were you?" Alex demands, his expression tense. "Where the hell is Vixen?"

"Vixen felt well enough to go back to the Brotherhood, so she did," I reply- or more accurately, *lie*. But I don't think it would be prudent to admit that I chased Vivien away with my stupidity to these two. Despite my new found hopes, the memory of her leaving still stings unbearably. "So I stepped out to see Lucy."

"I'm surprised that Vixen left so... suddenly," Charles murmurs, looking slightly downcast.

*Yeah, well. That would be my fault.*

It's almost impossible to keep my expression neutral, but I do.

"I was worried she killed you and went off to bury your body in the woods," Alex adds.

I grin wryly. "No such luck I'm afraid," I say. "She just thought... it was time to go, I guess. I think- I think she was a little afraid of how much she liked it here."

It's not a lie, not really. Not when part of the reason Vivien refused to stay was to protect us all here at Xavier's. But I can't safely get any closer to the truth with these two without revealing anything damaging.
"She did tell me to thank you for her, Charles. You and Jean, for being so kind."

Alex sniffs, as if insulted that he didn't warrant a thank you. "Now that we've got that figured out," he mutters, with an irritated flick of the hand. He sets off down the hall without further ado. "'Night, all."

Charles eyes me sadly after Alex departs. "It will certainly be interesting to meet Vixen in the field from now on," he notes quietly. His gaze is sympathetic, though he offers no other comment at first.

"Yeah," I agree calmly. "Interesting."

"Hank, will you be alright?" he presses.

I wonder if my emotional turmoil is so palpable he can sense it without reading my mind? Right now it certainly feels strong enough that even non-telepaths would notice.

"Of course," I reply. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He gives me an exasperated look. "I could see that you quite liked Vixen," he tells me. "I've never seen you smile that much, not even when..."

Raven's presence hangs between us for a moment.

Though I doubt that Charles suspects just how deep my feelings for Vivien are, it's obvious he noticed that we were becoming quite...friendly while she was here. But now that she's back with the Brotherhood he knows that we'll both have to set aside those feelings and be adversaries once more.

And why shouldn't he think so, all things considered? Knowing me as he does? I let Raven go without a word, never left his side in the decade that followed that fateful day in Cuba. There's no reason to believe that I wouldn't put Vivien behind me and soldier on as I always have.

But I'm not going to let her get away from me. Not if I can help it, anyway.

No, the next time I meet Vivien in the field I plan on making a declaration of love, not war.

"I'm fine, Charles," I assure him. The only reason I sound believable is because I'm holding my hope close, like a talisman. "I always am."

"Yes," he agrees, and I can tell I've managed to convince him. "You always are, Hank."

For the next few days I vacillate between bright, incandescent hope and agonizing despair while I wait for our next bout against the Brotherhood.

If only I can get Vivien alone, I can apologize to her and tell her I want to try to work things out between us.

And then she'll forgive me- won't she?

Vivien has to forgive me. How can I bear it otherwise? She seemed so sincere in her feelings—perhaps she'll still care enough for me to give me a second chance?

Who am I kidding? Vivien's probably already written me off. And I can't really blame her, after I was so narrow-minded about everything and trying to change her. I wonder if in the end I'll have to
live with yet another regret of what almost-but-never-was.

The only thing I can do is try and hope for the best. Hope that I can find Vivien, beg for forgiveness, and that she'll grant it. And then we, the X-Man and the Brotherhood member, will be together.

It's frightening, to take such a big chance and chase after my own happiness. I've always been the dependable, reasonable one. I'm the man who gave up almost ten years of his life to stay by Charles' side during his darkest days. And what I'm contemplating now- trying to start a romantic relationship with a member of an enemy organization- is not only absolute insanity, but also somewhat of a betrayal.

We'll be risking everything, but I truly believe that the way I feel about her (and the way she, hopefully, still feels for me) is worth the danger, worth the risk. This connection is just too precious to squander. I just pray she's willing to give me a second chance.

And there's only one way to find out.
We Meet Again

October 31, 1974

My chance comes three days after Vivien leaves, on Halloween night.

We find the Brotherhood loading up a delivery truck at a chlorofluorocarbon factory on the periphery of a small town in the Ramapo Mountains. The building is right on the edge of a forested clearing, and that makes it easy for all of us X-Men to encircle our enemies and observe the situation from behind the trees without being detected.

It looks like there's only four Brotherhood members out tonight- Scarlet Witch, Quicksilver, Fox, and Vivien.

Just seeing her makes my heart skip a beat. After these past few days of agonized waiting, she's finally only twenty feet away from me.

Soon, hopefully, soon this uncertainty will be over, and I'll know one way or the other whether Vivien will forgive me or not.

The other three are loading the back of the truck with huge boxes from the factory- why the Brotherhood wants an aerosol propellant, I'm not sure- but Vivien is crouched on top of the truck keeping watch, like a black-cloaked bird.

"Must be nice just to sit there while the rest of us work," I hear Fox say in a mutter designed to carry. He says it with the air of a repeated complaint.

Vivien doesn't take the bait to argue, though I see her jaw clench in irritation from my vantage point several feet away. "It is," she agrees sarcastically, without looking at him.

I sense the depth of her disquiet and annoyance in just those two words. She's just as frustrated with herself as her brother is for her weakness- possibly even more. Why doesn't he see that? Doesn't he know his own sister at all?

It's clear he doesn't understand her pique, because her comment only seems to make Fox angrier. "You little-"

"Hey!" Scarlet Witch chides. "God, what the hell is with you two lately? Lay off of her, Fox. She's still healing from having a building fall on her."

This doesn't phase Fox, though. His angry retort makes it clear that he didn't appreciate his little sister returning from her sojourn with the X-Men smelling like she was marked by me, just as Vivien feared he would react. I can only imagine what she's been going through these past few days, given what I'm seeing now.

But Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver are quick to jump to Vivien's defense, which is just as well. The woman in question is actually ignoring all of them at the moment.

No, her attention now seems to be focused elsewhere. Her chin is lifted and she's taking deep breaths in through her nose, almost like...
She can smell us.

I wave my hand frantically, getting Alex's attention while staying behind the tree that shields me from the clearing.

He frowns at me from his own spot behind another tree several yards away, his eyes questioning.

I point to my nose, and then at Vivien.

Alex mouths a curse and turns to get Storm and Scott's attention.

The next events happen simultaneously.

Vivien stands up and shouts "X-Men!" just as Havok and Cyclops open fire on the truck. It gives her and her comrades just enough time to jump clear before the Summers boys' combined energy beams turn the truck- and its contents- into a smoldering wreck.

I thank the powers that be in the universe that chlorofluorocarbons aren't all that flammable, but I do feel rather guilty about the hole in the ozone layer we probably just opened up directly over our heads with all of those chemicals.

Oops.

Then Storm lays down a cover of fog, making it impossible for any of us to see a thing.

"Shit! Bail out!" I hear Quicksilver shout through the fog. His voice is already behind our line, somewhere in the trees. "Meet back at the rendezvous point!"

I mentally curse to myself- with this blasted fog, there's no way I'll be able to find Vivien now- but fate decides to smile on me for perhaps the first time in my life.

Vivien runs right by me, close enough to touch in the mist. Her eyes meet mine for a split-second as she passes. But then her jaw tightens and she looks away, right before she disappears into the fog.

I'm only barely aware of Alex giving the order for Warren, Sam and I to give chase to the Brotherhood for good measure, to keep them from returning to the factory tonight.

He's too late- I'm already following Vivien.

Tracking her seconds-old scent is easy enough, but I'm still glad when we're out of the blinding mist and I can see her. She's fast- faster than I thought she would be, considering the wounds she's still recovering from- but tonight I'm faster.

"Vivien, stop!" I call after her.

She glances over her shoulder, sees how much ground I've gained on her, and presses on in even more haste.

Damnation.

I pick up the pace as well, fueled by my now-desperate desire to speak to her. If only she would let me explain-

After over a mile Vivien decides that I'm too close for comfort and tries to take drastic measures. She makes an impressive leap towards a tree, landing about ten feet high up its trunk.
But thanks to her wounds, it's not far enough.

I use all my strength to jump up and grab her boot before she can scramble out of my reach. My weight, combined with my downward momentum, is enough to make her lose her grip and fall with a loud snarl.

We land in a heap (my fault, another oops) with Vivien cushioned on top of me, though still facing upward.

"Vivien-" I begin.

She throws a bony elbow into my gut, making my breath escape in a whoosh. She's up and running again before I can fully recover, though I do manage to make another futile grab for her leg before she's out of reach.

Failing that, I then scramble to my feet and launch myself after her, making a flying tackle before she's ten feet away. I do my best to shield her from our impending impact with terra firma by landing mostly on my side and cradling her against my chest, but we still hit the ground with a rather uncomfortable thud.

Oops again.

Vivien immediately tries to work herself free- hissing and snarling all the while- once more, but whilst we were airborne I wisely grabbed hold of her wrists and I have no plans to let them go.

I maneuver us so she's laying flat on her back on the forest floor with her wrists pinned above her head for fear that she'll disembowel me with her claws if I free her hands.

"Let me go, you bastard," she snaps, baring her fangs.

"Vivien, please-"

She kicks me in the shin.

Ow.

I growl in annoyance and shift my weight so I'm halfway on top of her and pressing her into the ground. I use one of my opposable feet to grip the ankle that's more free so she can't kick me again and wince, knowing that all of this running and struggling has done her various injuries no favors at all.

"Vivien, please stop," I beg. "I just want to talk."

"I don't want to talk to you," she hisses, her eyes blazing. "I told you to stay away from me, remember?"

"I know," I reply. I shift my hold on her wrists, freeing one of my hands without letting either of hers go. I stroke her cheek gently. "But I can't stay away from you. Please, just hear me out."

She turns her head into my palm and tries to bite me.

Alright, that's it. No more Mr. Nice Monster.
The side of Vivien's neck is bared to me, thanks to her attempt to bite my hand on her face.

So I do the only thing I can think of to make her calm down and listen: I lean in and press my fangs to the space right below her ear.

The place where my mark would go, if I claimed her as my mate.

Vivien immediately freezes as stiff as a board and stops squirming, just as I knew she would. Her growls instantly die away, the feral in her instinctively submitting to my show of dominance even though I'm not biting down at all.

I hate every second of it, hate doing this to her.

Almost as much as I hate the part of myself that feels this beautiful, vivacious female underneath me and really does want to claim her as mine, right here and now. To steal away her choice and force her to stay with me forever.

I pull back, feeling disgusted with myself for allowing the thought to even cross my mind.

And now the anger in Vivien's gaze is so blistering I'm surprised I don't spontaneously burst into flames.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I just want to talk to you, Vivien."

"Fine," she growls. "Talk, so I can pretend to listen to you tell me why I should become an X-Man and then you can let me go."

It's not exactly an encouraging, receptive audience for my suit.

But I know I don't deserve one. Not after the way I hurt her the other night.

"I-I don't want you to become an X-Man," I explain hesitantly. "Well- I mean, I do, but I realize now why you can't. All of your reasons were perfectly valid, I was just too caught up in my own narrow-mindedness to listen to your point of view. I'm so sorry."

Vivien looks at me like I just told her I want to build a space shuttle to Mars using old Cola cans.

But thankfully she doesn't try to bite me this time when I tentatively reach down and stroke her cheek again. I consider that to be a good sign.

"Vivien, will you please give me another chance? Please?"

"Beast!"

"Beast! You out there?"

It's Warren and Sam. I can see them through the trees, though they haven't spotted me yet. They've
probably already chased the other Brotherhood members as far as they could, and that's why they're looking for me.

No! I haven't even begun to explain myself! I need more time-

I release Vivien and help her sit up, though I kneel by her side still.

"I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but will you meet me at the Balcony Bridge in Central Park tomorrow?" I plead in a whisper, taking her hands in mine. Gently, this time. Entreatingly, rather than restraining. "Two o'clock? Please?"

She nods shortly, reluctantly. I can't help wondering if she's only agreeing to placate me enough that she can get away right now, but I shove the pessimistic thought from my mind.

"Thank you," I tell her ardently. After I assist her to her feet I bring her hands up to my lips and lay a kiss on the back of each.

"Beast! Hello?"

I feel Vivien's hands slip out of mine when I turn to look for my teammates. By the time I locate them and turn back, she's completely melted into the shadows and disappeared without another word.

Will she come or not?

I try to smother my apprehension, because I know it won't help tomorrow get here any faster. I just have to wait a little longer and hope for the best.

"I'm over here," I call out, directing my steps towards my fellow X-Men.

As I go, I can't help but remember the last line of The Count of Monte Cristo, the one Vivien quoted to me all those months ago in Stryker's lab.

"All human wisdom is contained in these two words, 'wait and hope.'"

November 1, 1974

I'm in Central Park over twenty minutes before I'm supposed to meet Vivien because I'm simply too keyed up to stay in the mansion anymore.

Now that I'm here I walk around a bit to kill time and stave off my anxiety, but the few people out and about in the park start giving me weird looks. I know I must look strange, pacing around and fiddling with the gardenia I brought for Vivien in my hands.

So instead I plop down on one of the benches on the bridge with a sigh and start checking the time every five seconds instead.

By one fifty-eight there's still no sign of Vivien, and I'm trying not to panic.

Come on, McCoy. Take a breath. She's not late yet.

I hide the face of my watch with my sleeve and try to concentrate on my surroundings instead.

It's crisp and cool, and autumn has turned the trees above me into a riot of gorgeous yellows and reds- for now, at least. For some reason the colorful display only serves to remind me of the
brevity of such beauty.
"Nature's first green is gold," I mutter aloud.

Great, now I'm talking to myself.

But still, I continue on:

"Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf’s a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief-"

"So dawn goes down to day/ Nothing gold can stay," a female voice says, finishing the poem.  
"Robert Frost, huh?"

Vivien.

She's really here, she came to hear me out.

I almost give myself whiplash in my haste to turn around, to drink in the sight of her.

She's standing a few feet away and dressed completely in black: black knee-high boots, black thigh-length hippie dress with flowing sleeves, and a black fedora to hide her ears. The white-blond hair flowing down her shoulders practically glows in comparison.

How did I ever think of her as merely pretty? Surely Vivien, with her full, luscious lips and large hazel eyes, is as lovely as an angel. She takes my breath away.

"H-hi," I say, rising to my feet.

Vivien watches me stand with wary eyes. "Hi, Hank."

"This is for you," I tell her lamely, holding out the gardenia. I feel even more awkward than usual, if that's possible. "Y-you look beautiful, Vivien."

Her lips twitch slightly, like she's fighting back a smile as she takes the proffered flower. "Thank you."

Silence.

Now that Vivien's here in front of me I have no idea what to say. A thousand different things are buzzing around in my head, but every single one of them dies before they reach my lips.

She raises her eyebrows, waiting while I open and close my mouth uselessly. Trying to will the words to come out.

Come on, McCoy. This is your chance-

But words are failing me right now.

So I do the only thing I can think of. An impetuous, impulsive thing that I would've never considered doing until Vivien walked into my life and turned everything I thought I knew upside down.
I reach out and slip my arm around Vivien's waist, and even though it might earn me another broken nose, I pull her in for a kiss.

It's too brief for her to respond, but that's ok. Because the words have finally come unstuck.

"I absolutely adore you," I tell her fervently. "Everything about you, exactly the way you are. And I want to be with you, if you'll have me. Please?"

Chapter End Notes

Credit to Robert Frost for the poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay."
Vivien frowns, and my heart sinks just a little. That's not exactly the reaction I was hoping for, though I guess I shouldn't just expect her to fall into my arms. I'll need to convince her of my sincerity.

"Did Lucy dump you or something?" she asks suspiciously. "Is that what this is about? I thought you wanted a 'normal' relationship."

I shake my head. "I told Lucy I didn't want to see her anymore," I explain. And then, to illustrate how complete the break between us was, I add, "s-she replied by calling me a 'big, goofy dork' with a hideous sense of fashion."

Vivien's lips twitch again—fighting back another smile—and she reaches up to smooth down the collar of my shirt. "Well, she's not wrong," she mutters. She pointedly steps away from my embrace and sits down on the bench behind me.

"About which part? The 'goofy dork' part, or the bad fashion sense?" I ask, turning to look at her.

She smirks up at me, just a slight curve of her lips, and her eyes dance with mischief in that way that makes my breathing catch. "Both."

**Hey. If you prick me, do I not bleed?**

I grimace and tentatively sit next to her—close, but not too close because I don't want to push my luck. Vivien watches me impassively, and I curse her ability to keep such a calm poker face at a time like this. What on earth is she thinking right now?

"I don't want to talk about Lucy anymore. She's not the one I want. Normal isn't what I want, not anymore. You are," I tell her hesitantly. I'm not used to being so open about my emotions, so this is a completely new experience for me. I take a deep breath. "Tell me, Vivien, is there some way I can make up for what I said, or have I completely ruined my chance with you?"

"I don't get you, Hank," Vivien says, shaking her head. "A few days ago it was either join your squeaky clean club or nothing, and now you've done a complete about-face. I want to know why."

"I took the time to think about your reasons rationally, once you were gone," I explain slowly, "and realized you were right. I'm sorry- I realize now that I was asking you to change who you are for me, and that wasn't fair. The truth is, it's you I've fallen for, Vivien. You, just as you are. I hope I haven't repeated my past mistakes and lost you, too. H-have I?"

She raises her eyebrows inquisitively. "'Mistakes?"

**Of course that's the part you focus on. Not the apology or the declaration of love.**

I hesitate for a moment, but I know this is the right thing to do. I need to explain about Raven to get Vivien to understand just how serious I am about this.

"Remember how I told you I didn't used to look like Beast? That I made a mistake with the formula I created?"
She nods.

"The serum wasn't just supposed to be for me," I tell her. "It was meant for someone else, too. Raven Darkholme, the shape shifter whose genes I used to create it. She hated the physical aspects of her mutation just as much as I did mine. We were going to take the serum together, but when it was ready she changed her mind."

"You loved her," Vivien murmurs.

"Yes," I agree. "But I was upset that she didn't want to be normal anymore. I looked at it like she was refusing the greatest gift I could ever give her, a normal life, and said terrible things to her. I told her the world would never look at her true form and see beauty."

I shake my head at the painful memories. Despite my recent revelations in regards to my feelings for Raven, I still regret what I said to her that night.

"I lost Raven because I couldn't accept her for who she was, and now I've gone and made the same mistake with you. And I'm so sorry for that. Tell me, am I too late to fix things? Please, Vivien, will you give me another chance?" I beg. "I want to try to make you happy, and... I don't want to lose the feeling I get when I'm around you. It's not normal, it doesn't make sense, and frankly, it frightens me a little, but-"

My pleading is cut off by a pair of warm, vibrant lips pressed briefly against mine.

"Apology accepted," Vivien whispers, brushing her hand across my cheek.

"R-really?"

She nods, a tiny smile playing across her mouth. She scoots closer and purposefully hooks both of her legs over one of my thighs, as if the matter is completely settled for her.

"I get it," Vivien says simply, shrugging. "You're human, you make mistakes. And... apparently now I'm a huge sucker for big, goofy dorks with bad taste in fashion."

With a relieved chuckle I lean in and kiss her again, pouring all of my joy, my gratitude and my devotion to her into the connection of my lips on hers.

"Thank you," I murmur earnestly when we finally pull apart to catch our breath. I lean my forehead against hers, mindful of her hat, to take a moment to just savor the feeling of receiving a second chance at happiness.

I couldn't wipe the big, fatuous smile off my face even if I tried. My soul is flying somewhere up above the clouds right now, lighter than air.

"So... what happens next?"

Vivien's incredulous laugh makes my fingers and toes tingle. "Nothing has to happen next, Hank. We just... be. You and me, together," she says, as if it's the simplest thing in the world.

And maybe it would be, if it weren't for the Brotherhood and the X-Men.

I think she senses my trepidation, because her expression becomes more serious. "Out here, we're just Hank and Vivien," she explains, gesturing vaguely. I take it that she's referring to this non-mission related setting. "Out here, the Brotherhood and the X-Men don't exist. Hank and Vivien have never been enemies, have they?"
"No," I agree, "but Beast and Vixen-?"

Vivien shrugs. "We've never really had many run-ins with each other."

"My face would beg to differ," I mutter dryly, thinking of the time she broke my nose. And before that, when she fractured my zygomatic and almost cracked my skull.

She looks like she's trying very hard not to laugh at my petulance. "I said 'many.' not none," she retorts, tapping my nose with her finger. "What I'm trying to say is, I don't think much has to change on that front."

"But if it were to come down to choosing between you and the mission..." I begin hesitantly.

"I want you to choose your mission," Vivien replies, completely serious. "And I'll do the same. I think we can both understand that, right?"

It's an easy thing to say now, sitting side-by-side on a park bench on a lovely autumn afternoon, but wholly another to put such claims into action. Will I really be able to make that choice? Will Vivien truly forgive me when I do my utmost to stop her on a mission? Will I do the same?

*How is this ever going to work between us?*

Again, Vivien seems to know exactly what I'm thinking. "We've got to believe that anything is possible, baby, if we want it badly enough," she tells me. "If we want *this* badly enough."

And looking into those hazel eyes, I can't help believing her.
Now Vivien grins and cuddles against my arm. "So- Central Park, huh? Was there a reason you wanted us to meet here for your big declaration?"

I give a one-shouldered shrug. "It was the first place I could think of," I explain, "where we could come and speak alone. The only thing I worried about was one of us possibly getting mugged while we're here."

She rolls her eyes and haughtily sniffs at the gardenia I gave her. "I could floss my teeth with the perps who hang out here. You're safe with me."

I let out a snort of laughter.

"But no, really- I was just wondering. I've always liked it here," she assures me, glancing around. "It kinda has this air of ruined splendor, you know? And the colors are so gorgeous in the fall. While they last, at least. Hey- is that why you were reciting Nothing Gold Can Stay?"

"Yeah," I reply sheepishly. "A little pretentious, I know."

"Oh, I don't know," Vivien says. Her eyes are teasing me, sparkling in that way that makes my heart trip all over itself. "I think you knowing poetry is sexy."

I feel my ears getting warm in response to her praise.

Sexy? Me? Not exactly a modifier I've ever heard to describe yours truly.

My blush makes Vivien giggle for a moment, but then she frowns thoughtfully. "Actually, I read a poem just this morning that reminded me of you," she says. "I think it went-"

And she hesitantly recites:

"How shall I hold on to my soul, so that it does not touch yours? How shall I lift it gently up over you on to other things? I would so very much like to tuck it away among long lost objects in the dark in some quiet unknown place, somewhere which remains motionless when your depths resound. And yet everything which touches us, you and me, takes us together like a single bow, drawing out from two strings but one voice. On which instrument are we strung? And which violinist holds us in the hand? O sweetest of songs."

Ok, perhaps Vivien is right- reciting poetry isn't pretentious. Not when she does it, at least. Every word is made even more beautiful as it passes her lips, and I soak up each syllable of this poem
with relish. Especially considering the subject matter.

An inexorable pull towards each other, no matter how we might wish otherwise- yes, this composition certainly resonates with our situation.

"Rilke?" I guess after she's done.

She nods, grinning brightly. She seems pleased that I know that.

Well, likewise. Just when I think I can't be any more captivated by Vivien than I already was, she goes and proves me wrong.

"That was-" I begin, but I fumble on what to say. I clear my throat and try again. "I see what you mean about a knowledge of poetry being 'sexy.' But I also think I could listen to you reading the dictionary and still find it erotic."

She laughs so hard- with a hint of pink on her pale cheeks- that she almost falls off the bench. "I love it when you talk dirty to me, Hank," Vivien teases, which of course makes my own face heat up again.

Eventually she suggests grabbing something to eat at a place she knows only a few blocks away on the Upper East Side.

"What's it called?" I ask curiously, though I'm already walking next to her willingly enough.

I'm suddenly starving, courtesy of not having much appetite for the past few days. This morning I was so anxious to see her that I didn't eat at all.

But now here we are. Things worked out much better than I even allowed myself to hope for.

Feeling bold, I slip my hand over Vivien's as we walk. The smile she gives me as she laces her fingers with mine causes my stomach to do back flips. It makes it very difficult to act casual when my heart is singing over the simple skin-to-skin contact.

Oh dear, she's right. I am a dork.

"The Lexington Candy Shop," she replies. And then, seeing my amused expression (a candy shop? Really?), she quickly adds, "oh, don't give me that look. It's actually just a diner. My kind of place, where they don't judge you for ordering an omelet whenever you feel like it."

"That certainly does sound like your sort of place," I agree, laughing.

We walk through the streets of New York City hand-in-hand, without a care in the world as to who sees us. In a city of eight million people, what are the chances of someone we know spotting the X-Man and the Brotherhood member together? Essentially zero. We are safe in the crush of people, safe to just... be.

I'm practically buoyant as I open the door for Vivien once we reach the restaurant. I'm out on a date with her, just as I once yearned so hopelessly for.

And it's everything I imagined it would be.

Vivien orders chocolate chip pancakes, scrambled eggs and bacon even though it's after three in the afternoon, with a chocolate milkshake for good measure. In the spirit of things I ask for French toast, which makes her giggle so much she has to cover her mouth to keep the waitress from seeing
She tries to look wounded but can't quite manage it. A dazzling smile breaks through within seconds.

And then we just sit and talk, holding hands across the table—though Vivien is careful about how she sets hers down, to hide her claws from the casual observer.

It's only if you watch closely that you can tell she's more than human. Something about the way she holds her head, the careful smiles that don't show her teeth, the predatory stillness in her graceful form that's almost eerie—these things give Vivien away.

But only if you stare at her for a long time, like I unabashedly am right now. Otherwise, I fear that the painful lesson Vivien learned from her parents' death has forced her to perfect the human mask she affects in public like this.

We tarry long after we finish our food, reluctant to leave even though we both know we probably shouldn't stay out too long. Eventually, though, good sense gets the better of me and I reach for the check.

"Need some help with that?" Vivien asks, her eyebrows raised over my presumption.

"No," I reply. I pull out my wallet and start counting bills. I can feel her eyes on me, the tenor of her gaze drifting between exasperation and amusement like a pendulum.

"Women's lib is a thing now, you know," she comments.

"Yes, I know," I say, placing the check on the edge of the table.

"I'm happy to help pay the bill," she hints more heavily. "Split it down the middle, at least?"

I sigh.

This is one of those situations, I think, where our age difference is going to be a problem. She's a young, very independent woman. But I was raised to always be chivalrous—a trait that's perhaps a bit antiquated in today's times.

There has to be a way to reconcile our viewpoints, right?

"I know you can help, but I don't want you to."

Vivien tilts her head and frowns. Her expression reminds me of a cat trying to decide whether or not to pounce on a bird that was dumb enough to land too close.

"Am I some sort of fainting flower to you now?" she asks icily.

The very idea makes me chuckle. "*You*, a fainting flower? Vivien, you could kill all of the men in here with a napkin," I assure her, earning a somewhat flattered smile out of her. "And besides, I owe you from our last date."
It takes her a moment to remember, I can tell, but then Vivien laughs and says, "fair enough," when she remembers her comment about having no choice but to pay the entire bill back at that diner in Alkali Lake.

The place where, in a lot of ways, so much of what is between us began.

As to where it will end... of that I wish I knew.

Chapter End Notes

Credit to Rainer Maria Rilke for the poem "Love Song."
"Was this so terrible?" Vivien asks as we walk back towards the Met, where I parked my car. Her tone is light, but I can sense the sincerity behind her question.

I know what she's referring to- us sneaking out to meet each other here in the City, just as she suggested while we were pleading with one another in the mansion that night.

Right before she left me.

My hand squeezes hers reflexively at the memory, causing Vivien to glance up at me with a concerned frown. I shake my head in answer to the question in her eyes.

"It wasn't terrible," I admit, bringing her hand up so I can kiss it. "Not at all. I quite enjoyed myself today."

Her smile is dazzling. "Me too."

At this point we've reached the front of the museum. Vivien stops walking and hops up onto the first step, so she's only a few inches shorter than I am for once. She wraps her arms around my neck when I turn to face her, and my heart sings as I place my hands on her waist to hold her close.

"I've gotta be careful with you, baby," she jokes, "or you'll turn into a hunchback from leaning over so much."

"I'll manage," I assure her.

Vivien giggles and leans up to kiss me, slow and lingering.

Kissing her makes me forget that we're in a public place- it makes me forget my own name. It's its own sweet form of madness, making me feel so achingly alive-

Vivien pulls away suddenly, leaving us both gasping. "Phew," she huffs, with a shaky little chuckle. "Getting a little carried away there. And I don't want you to turn into Beast and end up on the evening news."

I grin sheepishly to cover my embarrassment. "Sorry," I mutter, genuinely contrite.

"Don't be." The utterly bewitching look in her eyes hits me below the belt, if you catch my meaning. She gives me a quick kiss, followed by a nibble on my bottom lip. "Kissing you is way too much fun, Hank," she purrs.

My knees promptly almost give way.

Oh my stars and garters, this woman is going to kill me. And I'm going to enjoy it thoroughly.

"I-I could say the same about you," I say, at which she laughs. "So... when can I see you again?"

"So eager," Vivien teases, though she looks flattered. I grin weakly in reply. "What about us meeting here at the Met on Monday? Same time?"

I nod earnestly and reach into my jacket pocket for a paper and pen. "This is my private number," I
explain, writing it down and offering it to her. "So if I don't answer, it's safe to leave a message. Call me if you can't make it or- or if you just want to talk."

Vivien takes the paper and smiles sadly. "You know I can't give you a number to reach me at, right?"

"That's ok," I reply. I suddenly have a vision of trying to call her up and getting Fox on the phone instead. He makes over-protective fathers everywhere look completely sensible. "I understand."

"Thank you," Vivien says. And then she steps into my embrace, her face tucked against my neck, and murmurs Juliet's parting words to Romeo at the end of the famous balcony scene: "'parting is such sweet sorrow/ That I shall say good night til it be morrow.' I mean, Monday."

And we both laugh.

I kiss her goodbye, but as I turn to go I can't help the foreboding that washes over me.

Vivien and I may be star-crossed lovers, but I really hope we don't emulate Romeo and Juliet's fate.

November 2, 1974

My thoughts are still so full of Vivien the next morning- the echoes of her laugh, her voice, the play of expressions across her face as we talked yesterday- that it takes me a moment to notice Sam sitting directly in front of me when he accosts me at breakfast.

"Hank, you in there?" he asks, waving a hand in front of my face.

I blink and then grin sheepishly. "Yeah, sorry," I say. "Is something wrong?"

"I dunno," Sam replies. His tone is solicitous. "You tell me. I went to see Alison last night and she mentioned that you and Lucy aren't seeing each other anymore."

"Oh. Right," I agree. I try to arrange my face into an expression of regret. "We're not."

"You ok? It probably didn't feel great, getting dumped like that," he says.

"Getting dumped like that?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Yeah." He looks confused. "Lucy was so mad about you being a no-show on Saturday and then being all lame with your apology that she told you to forget about it, right?"

It's a challenge to keep myself composed, but I manage it.

Lucy lied, obviously. And while I can only guess at her motivation, I have to assume that it pertains to protecting her own wounded vanity.

I can't say I mind, honestly. In fact, I'm rather grateful for her shallow, petty untruths. If everyone thinks Lucy was the one who broke it off, no one will likely be able to guess that I ended things so I could romance a Brotherhood member.

"Yes, well," I say, playing along, "getting dumped doesn't feel good no matter how it happens."

Sam looks sympathetic and gives me that classic post-break up pep talk that I think every person gets from their friends. "Don't feel too bad about it, Hank," he assures me. "I'm pretty sure Lucy was only into you because you're a tall doctor type. You can do a helluva lot better."
I chuckle rather nervously, wondering what he would think if he found out about Vivien. "Thanks, Sam."

November 3, 1974

Vivien seems amused when I tell her that about Lucy's deception and Sam's encouragement on Sunday night when she calls. Ostensibly her reason is only to check if our plan to meet the next day is unchanged, but we end up chatting for a while anyway.

I can't help thinking how absolutely normal it feels, to be talking on the phone with my girlfriend- like this. It gives me hope that maybe this won't be so difficult after all.

"I don't know," I say at one point. Somehow the conversation has fallen on my failed relationship with Lucy. "It really felt like we had nothing in common at all. I asked her once if she liked to read, and she told me the only thing she reads is something called Cosmo magazine. Ever heard of it?"

Vivien chuckles quietly. "Yes," she replies, her voice low. I wonder where she's at, that she has to speak so softly, but I know I can't ask. "It's a magazine. It's got some fashion in it, but a lot of it is about husband-hunting."

"W-what?"

"You know, tips on snagging a man so he'll marry you," she elaborates. "My God, it's like the whole thing was written by Mrs. Bennett. Making yourself attractive to some tall, rich doctor who'll save you from your working-class life."

Why does that sound familiar?

"That seems so... under-handed," I mutter.

"Maybe," Vivien agrees. "Looks like you prefer my methods- bashing a guy's face in a couple times until he's brain damaged enough to go out with me."

"I guess I do."

A silence falls after we finally stop laughing, but it doesn't feel awkward.

I'm fully aware that I'm laying in my bed, staring up the darkened ceiling, but I'm also somewhere else- some sort of invisible third space with Vivien, a lovely place that's warm and filled with her presence.

But then there's a faint sound on her end of the line.

"Shit," she whispers. "Gotta go. See you tomorrow-"

I hear her blow a kiss into the phone, and then the call ends.

"Tomorrow," I murmur to the dead air left behind her abrupt ring off.

Ok, so maybe this isn't completely normal. But that's just fine. Vivien's too extraordinary to be normal, anyway, I think to myself. And I wouldn't have her any other way now, would I?

My thoughts are all of her as I fall asleep with a smile on my face.
"What do you think of this one?" Vivien asks quietly.

We're walking through the Met together, and the painting Vivien is presently referring to is the *Portrait of Madame X*. I admittedly gave it only a precursory glance before turning my attention to the lovely woman currently holding my hand. Her face holds much more appeal for me than the pale socialite depicted on the canvas.

"Hmm?"

Vivien glances up at me, and her contemplative expression immediately darkens when she sees me looking at her rather than the artwork.

"Are you bored?" Her tone is wounded.

I shake my head rapidly. "No, of course not."

"Then why are you staring at me, you weirdo?" she demands in a whisper.

*Think fast, McCoy.*

"I'm not staring," I retort, trying to make light of the depth of my intense infatuation for her. I don't want to creep her out. "I'm... I'm gazing upon you in adoration."

Vivien snorts so loud the elderly couple next to us *tsk-tsk's* at her reprovingly. She ignores them, of course.

"Cute," she remarks. "But seriously, Hank, it's ok if you're not into this."

"I'm enjoying myself."

Honestly, I'm just happy to be in her presence. Watching her intent expression as she examines the paintings, her insightful comments, the feel of her skin on mine- even if I was completely uninterested in the artwork, I'd still be having a good time.

"You sure?"

I nod and lean down to kiss her.

It's supposed to be just a quick meeting of lips, but with Vivien that's simply not possible. Every kiss, no matter how thorough, still leaves me wanting more.

And she seems to feel the same, if the way she's insistently tugging me forward by the collar is any indication. I turn towards her more and pull her against me-

There's a pointed cough behind me, and the sound breaks us apart. The old woman is glaring at us reproachfully for our rather enthusiastic display.

"What?" Vivien snaps, scowling at the senior citizen. "You were young once, weren't you? A guy
can't kiss his girlfriend without you getting all judgmental about it?"

Oh dear.

I grin apologetically at the elderly couple and hurry us away, completely red in the face, to a different part of the museum. Vivien allows me to tow her along willingly enough, but in the meantime she's muttering something about "crotchety old bats" and it's an intense inner battle for me not to chuckle at her resentment.

"Stuck-up old biddy, being so damn nosy-"

"You're going to get us kicked out if you scold the other museum patrons," I whisper pleadingly.

"They started it," Vivien hisses, bristling with righteous indignation. "And then you- you kissed me first! Why are you picking on me?"

Again, it's a struggle not to laugh sheepishly. But somehow I subdue my slightly guilty humor and manage to ask, gesturing to the Monet painting in front of us, "what do you think of this one?"

She glowers at my attempt to change the subject, but begrudgingly chooses to answer. "I'm not a fan of Impressionism."

"Why not?"

"The brush strokes," Vivien replies, squinting at the canvas. "When they're that obvious my eyes focus just on those, rather than the whole painting. I guess it's a lot like having a smudge on your glasses."

"Feral super senses strike again," I murmur.

She chuckles. "Yeah, I suppose so," she agrees. And then, her eyes alight with excitement, she says, "maybe we should break in here one night so you can look at the paintings as Beast. Then you can see what I mean for yourself."

My only reply is to purse my lips uncomfortably.

"Oh, what now?"

"I'm not exactly comfortable with breaking and entering," I explain stiffly.

"You break into places all the time. I mean, weren't you telling me you broke into the Pentagon last year?" Vivien retorts, laughing quietly. "Talk about ambitious."

"I did break into the Pentagon, but that was for a mission. I only break the law when I absolutely have to."

She rolls her eyes, but she's also fighting back a smile. "You're such a-

"Sanctimonious prick?" I suggest rather peevishly. "I do believe you called me that once."

And then almost immediately afterwards you held a knife to my throat and threatened to kill me. Ah, memories.

Vivien snorts back laughter and reaches up to stroke my face fondly. "Sometimes you are," she teases. My expression falls. "Oh, Hank, I'm joking. The truth is, baby, I only called you that because I was jealous."
"Jealous of what?" I ask, absolutely baffled.

"Of what a good person you are," she replies. When I merely frown in confusion she elaborates: "I wish I could be like that. You're a rare breed, Hank McCoy. Genuinely good people are very hard to find in this naughty world. And there you were that night, throwing how bad of a person I am in my face. I didn't exactly appreciate that."

"You're not a bad-"

Vivien puts a quelling finger to my lips. "Yes, I am," she says quietly. "Don't try to defend me from myself, I don't deserve it. And definitely don't try to defend the horrible things I've done. I did them because I thought they were necessary at the time, but there's a reason they say the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

I know she's not completely wrong. She has done terrible things, but...

"Vivien, sometimes good people make bad choices," I tell her, reaching up to gently move her hand away from my mouth. "It happens. But it's never too late to start making the right decisions. You can too, if you want it badly enough."

Her smile is a little rueful. "I don't know," she murmurs, gesturing between us. "Clearly, seducing a saint is a lot easier than redeeming a sinner. It's like falling down a slippery slope versus making a completely uphill climb."

The veiled warning in her words chills me to the bone.

Is Vivien implying that by sneaking out to see her like this I'm in danger of falling down a rabbit hole of impropriety? It certainly seems so. And perhaps she's not wrong in this case, either.

I'm fully aware that I'm already compromising my integrity to a degree through my lies of omission in regards to my feelings for her to Charles and the others. But the fact that that knowledge frightens me much less than the thought of losing Vivien does tells me that this is a risk I have to take.

*But there are some lines I will never cross*, I firmly promise myself. *Not even for her."

"Maybe we can meet in the middle somewhere," I offer quietly. "Or are you already having second thoughts about us?"

Vivien chuckles wryly. "No, I'm not having second thoughts. I'm generally a selfish creature, Hank. I want it all," she tells me. "I want you, and I want to make a difference in the world. I just- I just worry that I won't be able to have you without getting my dirty fingerprints all over you."

"Then wear gloves," I retort.

She bursts into giggles, effectively breaking the tension between us.

Still, as I pull her in for a kiss I can't help agonizing over how my heart is at odds with my values and ideals. How can I-?

"Oh, really now!" a woman's voice huffs indignantly behind me- it seems the judgmental old lady and her husband have made their return, just in time to catch us kissing again. "George, go get security! This is a museum, not a-"

Vivien's temper flares immediately. "Look, lady-"
"Come on, sweetheart," I hastily interject, pulling her towards the nearest exit. Some of the security
guards are already coming our way.

"No, dammit, this is horseshit-" she hisses in outrage.

I sigh and brace my arm around her waist, so her feet can't find purchase with the ground anymore.
"Yes, it is," I agree as I half-carry, half-drag her out of the museum. "But they're not going to
believe us over a respectable, older couple."

"Respectable, my ass," Vivien growls. "Grumpy old shrew."

Her resentment makes me chuckle indulgently. She's so adorable like this-

"What are you laughing about?" she demands through her teeth.

We're outside the Met at this point, so I finally allow her to regain her feet. "I'm sorry," I tell her,
reaching out to straighten her hat. My hands drift down to cup her face. "It's just- your anger is
amusing. And very endearing."

Her eyes narrow and her lips start to curl in disgust.

"When it's not directed at me, at least," I add hastily.

Vivien's expression darkens further, as if she's currently considering inflicting me with some
bodily harm.

I sigh. "It's directed at me now, isn't it?"

"Yup."

"Would a heartfelt apology and a trip to the Guggenheim make up for my indiscretion?" I ask
hopefully, purposely giving her a wide-eyed look.

She sighs reluctantly. "I suppose."

"Then I whole-heartedly apologize for demeaning your righteous fury with my mirth," I tell her
sincerely. I'm intentionally laying it on thick. I take her hands and kiss the palms of each. "I didn't
mean to offend--"

Vivien tries her best not to laugh at my deliberately exaggerated apology, but quickly fails. "Oh
Jesus, come on," she huffs, and starts dragging me towards the other museum.

"Yes, ma'am."
November 25, 1974

I sneak out to see Vivien several times over the next few weeks. We do all manner of things together—going to museums or the cinema, or simply sitting in coffee shops talking.

On one of these outings she shows me a record/music store that she frequents so often the shop's proprietor (to my dismay) has developed a crush on her.

"Hey, Viv," the pimple-faced young man calls out brightly when we step through the door. "Come to visit your- oh, you brought a guest?"

Vivien gives him a close-lipped grin. "Yes," she replies sweetly, leaning into the arm I have wrapped around her waist. "This is my boyfriend, Hank. Hank, this is Fred."

I experience a glimmer of self-satisfaction at the way this interloping Fred looks so disappointed to see Vivien on my arm, but that's nothing to how it feels to hear her proudly declare that I'm her boyfriend.

I like the sound of that.

"How do you do?" I ask politely.

We exchange rather awkward greetings—awkward, because Fred is eyeing Vivien like she's a piece of candy he's been told he can't eat—and then Vivien leads me straight over to the acoustic guitars.

"Do you like being called 'Viv'?" I murmur curiously to her, casting a glance over my shoulder. Fred's expression is still rather sulky as he watches us from across the shop.

"Nope," she replies. She already has a guitar down and proceeds to plop down right on the floor with it. "I correct him almost every week, but he still does that."

"I think he likes you," I observe, sitting across from her.

She rolls her eyes. "I know. Usually he hovers around me while I play. It's annoying, but if letting him do that keeps him from kicking me out..."

"You realize you're basically using him, right?" I tell her, parroting her own words to me about my relationship with Lucy.

Vivien gives me a quelling look, to which I can only grin.

"Why do you come here, anyway?" I ask, prudently changing the subject. "I thought you had a guitar?"

"I can't afford a new one," she explains. She's strumming the strings with a pick she (unsurprisingly) pulled out of her boot. "I had one, but... I gave it away."

"You gave it away?"

Vivien nods, her eyes downcast.
"Vivien, what's wrong?"

"It- it was my dad's guitar," she murmurs reluctantly. "He gave it to me the night he- you know."

The idea that she gave away one of her father's possessions, especially one so obviously meaningful to her, boggles my mind. "You miss it, don't you?" I ask shrewdly.

"Yeah, of course," she says.

"Then why-?"

"Because they needed it more than I did, and it was all I had to give," Vivien replies impatiently. She clearly doesn't want to discuss it anymore.

My mind begins to churn rapidly. Who this mysterious guitar-recipient is, Vivien's motivation for being so altruistic- neither of these things matter to me. All I hear is the longing in her voice, and it goads me into action.

I stand up quickly, startling her. "Fred," I call out, "I'd like to buy one of these guitars, please. And a case and strap."

"What are you doing?" Vivien hisses.

I kneel back down in front of her while Fred half-heartedly bustles around to fulfill my request. "Giving you something to trade your dad's guitar for," I explain, reaching out to stroke her face. "Whoever you gave it to- ask if they'll accept this one instead. And even if they don't, at least you'll have one again."

Her expression vacillates between surprise, joy, and affection before somehow landing on discomfort. "I'll pay you back."

"Don't. It's a gift."

She bites her lip, still unsure. "Hank-"

"Please, Vivien, just let me do this for you," I plead.

It feels like an eternity before Vivien finally relents and whispers fervently, "thank you."

Then she shoves the guitar out of her lap and tackles me to the floor, knocking my glasses askew as she leans down and kisses me ardently. Far from shrinking from her exuberance, I lace my fingers in her hair and kiss her back just as passionately.

"Hey!" Fred snaps, all in a huff. "Could you not do that-?"

We pull apart reluctantly, gasping. My face immediately heats with embarrassment for being caught in such a compromising position in public, but Vivien merely giggles as she slides of of me.

"Please excuse us," I say, sitting up and clearing my throat- a poor attempt to save what's left of my dignity. "Do you take Visa?"

"Yeah," Fred replies sourly, stomping over to the cash register.

The man sulks the whole time he's ringing me up and doesn't say good-bye when we leave. Clearly, our public display of affection went unappreciated by him.
"I don't really think we'll be welcome there again, do you?" I observe as we walk back towards the subway station.

Vivien laughs. "Nope."

"That's two places I've basically gotten kicked out of with you," I muse. "Are we going to make this a habit?"

She grins sheepishly and shrugs. "Never a dull moment, right?"

"Indeed."

Unfortunately, that same night the Brotherhood makes a move against another chlorofluorocarbon facility. Meaning that Vivien and I might meet in the field for the first time since we started seeing each other.

To say that I'm nervous would be an understatement. My fear is so strong it makes me almost physically ill.

What will I do if I see her? What will she do? Can we forgive each other for whatever happens tonight-?

There's only one way to find out.

Charles has enough forewarning that we're able to spread out and station ourselves at the entrances to the factory's loading dock before the enemy arrives. Our goal is simple- don't let the Brotherhood get their hands on the product inside.

"What do you think the Brotherhood wants with this stuff, anyway?" Warren asks, breaking the long silence between us. We haven't spoken since we took up our posts, over an hour ago.

"I'm not really sure," I reply honestly.

The fact that the Brotherhood is going after this compound for a second time is cause for concern. It seems to indicate a strong determination, like CFC is a necessity to some scheme, rather than a desire motivated by random whim.

What can they be planning, that requires an aerosol propellant so much?

The reason seems to maddeningly dance just outside the edge of my understanding, making me grit my teeth in irritation. I hate to have the answer to a problem elude me this way.

I wonder if I could piece together anything from Vivien when I see her on Friday? If I'm oblique enough with my questions-

Guilt halts that line of thinking in its tracks. After the agreement we made about separating ourselves from our alter egos, trying to ply secrets out of her like that would feel like a betrayal.

"Do you think they're going to show up tonight?" Warren asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I shrug. "I don't know. It's only been an hour."

He scoffs. "Only an hour," he mutters morosely. He gives a rather overly-dramatic sigh and ruffles his feathers impatiently.
And then, as if in answer to Warren's restlessness, the vague shapes of Vivien and Jackal materialize out the darkness in front of us. Their movements are so much like shadows that Warren doesn't even notice them just yet- he's too busy looking at his carefully trimmed nails.

My heart sinks. Why did it have to be her that came this way? Why not Quicksilver, or even better, Mastermind? Someone I wouldn't mind beating into a pulp, despite my natural aversion for violence.

For a moment neither feral moves, instead choosing to observe us in silence. Perhaps Vivien is trying to think of a way around us.

*Go away,* I try to plead silently. I can feel her eyes on me, though it's too dim to fully see her face. *Angel hasn't noticed you yet. Just leave, don't force this-*

But my attention is focused on the wrong person.

Suddenly Jackal leaps from the shadows with a snarl that bares his teeth, completely revealing his presence. He puffs himself up, like he's pointlessly trying to intimidate us into stepping aside for him.

"Goddammit, Myles," I hear Vivien hiss, somehow audible despite the sounds of her brother's growls. She steps into the light as well.

Warren- Angel- jumps at the ferals' sudden appearance, but he quickly recovers. "Oh, great," he mutters sardonically, "it's Crazy Pants and his wicked sister."

*Oh, no. Did he really need to say that?*

With a roar, Jackal heads straight for us.

Or more specifically, straight for Angel.

Which leaves-

*Damnation.*
The First Face-Off

Vivien skitters around the combatants, trying to get to the door. The door which I am currently blocking.

This is exactly what I feared would happen- a direct confrontation between the two of us. What will she do? What can I do in response?

It's hard to believe that less than twelve hours ago dear old Fred kicked us out of his music shop because of the way we were kissing in front of him on the floor.

We were deliriously happy, an ordinary pair of lovers causing mischief.

And now...

"You cannot pass," I announce, stopping her in her tracks several feet away. I think the optimist in me hopes that Vivien will appreciate my attempt at humor and back off.

*A furry monster can dream, I guess.*

She gives me a rather sardonic look. "Says you," she mutters peevishly.

And then Vivien breaks into a sprint, running straight for me. I tense, ready to vault after her should she try to dart to my left or right-

But she doesn't. Instead she unexpectedly drops into a feet-first baseball slide, her momentum speedily carrying her forward on the tile flooring.

My choice is thus: either jump out of her way, or let her take me out at the knees and squash her flat when I fall.

Of course I leap to the side.

Doing so allows Vivien to get through the doorway. She regains her feet in a single, fluid motion, ready to take off down the now-clear hall towards the loading dock.

She doesn't even make one step before I (try to) tackle her from behind. She ducks at just the right moment, though, which sends me flying over her back. I just manage to grab onto her arm as I clear her overhead, wrenching her forward in an attempt to pin her to the floor.

Vivien dodges and twists in mid-air, so I somehow end up flat on my back with her straddling my hips.

*Um, how did this even happen?* I wonder, blinking up at her in bewilderment.

My puzzled expression seems to amuse Vivien— she's fighting back a smirk as she tenderly strokes my cheek, just a whisper of a touch, before springing to her feet and bolting-

I grab her ankle and yank backwards, forcing her to lose her footing and land flat on her stomach. I quickly scramble over and take hold of her wrists with my hands, while one of my legs holds both of hers in place. I'm careful to not put my whole weight on her, though.
"Says me," I agree belatedly, impulsively leaning down to kiss her cheek. But then I get serious. "Why is the Brotherhood trying to steal an aerosol propellant, Vivien?"

I've decided that while asking her this question when we're out in the City together would be wrong, here it's acceptable. Right now I'm just an X-Man, trying to get information out of an enemy combatant.

So what if I also happen to want to kiss her senseless?

Vivien glowers at me over her shoulder, but doesn't answer.

"Vivien, answer me," I order, shaking her slightly.

Her expression falls, to my surprise. "I don't know," she admits reluctantly.

I glare at her.

"What?" Vivien demands sharply. "I'm not lying to you. I never have. I honestly have no idea why Magneto wants this stuff, ok? None of us do."

"Doesn't that worry you at all?" My tone is reproachful.

"Of course it does," she snaps. She struggles against my grip. "Ugh, get off me!"

I don't. Instead I flip her over so she's facing me, my hands still holding her wrists. "You have no idea what his plan is, but you're going along with it anyway," I state disparagingly. I thought she was better than that.

"Obviously," Vivien replies acidly. "I have to. You really think he's ever going to tell me what's going on if I'm not cooperating?"

This gives me pause.

Is she implying that she's only going along with Erik's demands in order to find out what his overarching plan is? That's certainly what it sounds like.

But if that's the case, what happens once Vivien's figured it out? Will she go along with his agenda, or try to stop him somehow, the way she did with Spyke?

Who's side are you on now, Vivien?

I open my mouth to ask, but before the words come out I'm hit hard in the side by a flying tackle courtesy of Jackal. The well-aimed blow knocks me off of Vivien, who springs to her feet immediately and goes to her brother's side when I roll away.

Jackal and I recover ourselves at the same time, both of us crouched and snarling as we square off against each other. Two feral males, gearing up for a fight.

An inner battle begins to rage within me.

My feral, masculine instincts are telling me to rip this little brat apart for taking me away from my mate- unmarked as of yet, but the beast in me already recognizes Vivien as mine.

She's mine.

On a deep, instinctual level I suddenly know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Vivien is my mate.
Beast has already accepted her inner Vixen as his mate, and she already recognizes him as hers. It's only a matter of time before we make it official.

As her brother Jackal's not competition for her hand, but he's still a nuisance that needs to be dealt with.

The more rational part of me knows how upset Vivien would be to watch a confrontation between her brother and I and is therefore naturally repelled by the brewing altercation.

Also, I'm well aware that I'm not here tonight to take out my resentment against the circumstances that keep Vivien away from me on Jackal, even if he is one of the reasons we have to hide our relationship.

No, I'm supposed to be keeping the two of them occupied and away from the chemicals they're here to steal.

But I also have another concern.

"What'd you do to Angel?" I growl at the younger feral. There's no sign of my teammate following after Jackal, and my previous experience with this particular Brotherhood member tells me there's definitely reason for worry.

Jackal's answer is merely to laugh maniacally, his guffaws completely devoid of real mirth. It's enough to make my hair stand on end- which is obviously no mean feat.

I'm in a conundrum. Letting these two go without a fight means a failed mission. But I also have no idea what condition Angel is in. In the grand scheme of things, is keeping the Brotherhood from having this chemical worth losing an X-Man?

My gaze meet Vivien's.

"Jackal," she interjects sharply. "Come on."

"No," her brother retorts, eyeing me hungrily. He shifts slightly, so I defensively mirror his movements and give him a warning growl. "I want to fight him."

"Well, you can't," Vivien snaps. "Remember our mission. We're not here for you to get into a pissing match with anyone. Now let's go."

She reaches out and tugs on his wrist, trying to get him to follow her towards the loading dock, but he flings her hand off. Jackal doesn't see the hurt flash across her face, but I do.

"I'm not a little kid anymore, Vixen," he practically whines.

Really? Could've fooled me with that tone of voice.

"I know you're not," Vivien replies, clearly straining for patience. "And that's why you need to think about your duty to our kind right now. Not your testosterone levels. Come on, Jackal. We're here for a reason."

Jackal pauses, but then nods and starts to back away from me. Neither of us relax our posture, though.

My eyes find Vivien's face as they go. Relief is mingled with despair in her expression, and I wish with all my heart that I could reach out and hold her right now.
But I know I can't.

Right before they disappear around the corner to the loading dock Jackal points at me and bares his teeth. "I owe you one, Beast," he calls out ominously.

The words are a promise.
Conflicted

November 29, 1974

Vivien is sitting on a bench already waiting for me when I arrive in Central Park four days later, but she rises to her feet when she notices my approach. The way her shoulders are hunched and her arms are tightly crossed gives the vague impression that she's trying to hold herself together.

For a moment we just stare at each other, unsmiling. Vivien looks rather pale and drawn, like she hasn't slept since I saw her last. What's happened, that she looks this way?

I suppose I can hazard a guess as to what ails her- Erik's plan still eluding her understanding, the fact that her brother threatened her boyfriend with grievous bodily harm the other night, and, possibly, concern for Angel.

Her brother's victim.

Vivien has no real attachment for the winged young man, I know. But if she had enough compassion to show mercy to Scott so many months ago, when her brother attacked him, it's not a stretch that she would feel similarly now.

"How is he?" she asks quietly, confirming my hypothesis.

Warren was in dire straits when I found him the other night, thanks to Jackal's merciless claws and fangs. Long gouges across his chest and back, a large bite taken out of his shoulder, a laceration in his arm so deep I could see bone... I'm relatively certain that the memories of those gory wounds will resurface in my nightmares at some point.

But I was pleasantly surprised to find out that Warren seems to have some sort of healing factor, the strength of which is comparable to my own. He's clearly not a feral though, so I'm intrigued by this unexpected aspect of his mutation. I'm looking forward to doing more research on it, despite the circumstances that brought it to light.

"He's going to be fine," I assure her.

Vivien marginally relaxes. "Good."

And then she steps closer so she can wrap her arms around my waist in a fierce hug. When I enfold her in my embrace Vivien seems to squirm even closer, as if she wishes she could crack open our rib cages and merge together.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I murmur, stroking her hair.

Her reply is muffled by my shirt. "Nope," she says.

"You sure?"

Vivien lifts her head enough to rest her chin on my chest. "I'm positive, baby."

There's a hint of steel in her expression that tells me not to press further unless I want a very ugly argument. She doesn't want to discuss Jackal's threats or Erik's dastardly plans.
"Fine," I relent with a sigh. "But Vivien- I want you to promise me something."

"What?" she asks warily.

"Please don't hesitate to ask for help if you need it."

Vivien eyes me speculatively for a moment, and I know she understands what I'm not saying. That if she figures out what Erik's plan is and feels the need to thwart it, the way she did with Spyke's attempted-brainwashing, she doesn't necessarily have to do it alone.

"Ok," she agrees reluctantly.

"I have your word?"

Despite her occasionally ambiguous morals, keeping her word means a lot to Vivien. I know that if she promises me this now she will come to me for help, if she feels it's needed. Unwillingly perhaps, and as a last resort.

But I want this assurance for if she gets in over her head. I want to keep her safe, if it's in my power to do so.

Vivien purses her lips like she's going to argue, but finally nods. "You have my word, Hank."

I place a hand on her cheek to bring her in for a kiss. "Thank you," I say. "Here, let's sit."

It's difficult to hide the foolish grin threatening to cross my face when Vivien swings both of her legs over one of mine and cuddles against my arm as we take a seat on a bench. I love it when she does that. She doesn't do it because she's cold- the chilly air doesn't bother Vivien, thanks to her feral nature. She sits that way and cuddles against me because she wants to.

"How was your Thanksgiving?" I ask once we're settled.

She rolls her eyes. "Pure madness. It always is, when Peter's involved."

"How's that?"

Vivien goes on to tell me about the silver-haired speedster's pestering while she and Wanda tried to make Thanksgiving dinner. He was such an annoyance that Vivien ended up pinning him to the wall with a few carefully-thrown knives and then having Fox take him outside.

Afterwards they played touch football, where Peter redeemed himself in Vivien's eyes by catching ten of the passes she threw for touchdowns.

"We creamed my brothers," she says proudly. "It was awesome."

It's strange to hear her describe these people so fondly, as friends, when I know them only as enemies who commit horrible atrocities. I think Vivien picks up on that in my expression, because she says, "you don't know them like I do, Hank."

"No, I suppose I don't," I agree.

"That's why I think there's some hope for them," Vivien tells me earnestly. "Wanda and Peter-they're just there because Magneto is their dad-"

Somehow, by some miracle, I manage to keep the surprise from registering on my face at that revelation. Erik, a father? The twins' father?
Vivien seems to think the twins' parentage is common knowledge, if her casual reference to it is any indication.

But it isn't. She just unwittingly gave me some pertinent intelligence to add to the profiles the X-Men keep of our enemies. This new information provides a clearer picture as to why exactly Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch joined the Brotherhood last year when they knew Xavier's was an option.

*What will Charles think when I tell him?*

And then I realize that I can't tell him this.

To begin with, he'll wonder how I discovered this information, and that will lead to questions I can't answer without revealing my own subterfuge. And more importantly... to divulge the things Vivien tells me in confidence here would be a betrayal to our relationship.

No, I definitely can't tell Charles about Erik's children.

"-And they're trying to make their father proud," Vivien continues. She's quietly thoughtful for a moment. "The twins aren't bad, Hank. Once those two have decided to trust you, they're loyal to a fault. Blindly so, really. And maybe... maybe they're used to taking the easy way out. But they're really not bad people."

"And Mastermind? Your brothers?"

I want to take the question back as soon as the words leave my mouth. Vivien stiffens, and her expression becomes rather anguished.

She may make excuses for the twins, but her own siblings? What of them?

The way Jackal took such delight in mauling Warren the other night wasn't exactly a recommendation for kindness. And I've seen firsthand the cruelty with which Fox speaks to her, his own sister. Try as she might, Vivien can't really justify their behavior. She may be hoping they'll find a better way, but thus far...

"Never mind," I say quickly. "Vivien-"

She shakes her head and clears her throat. The subject is now closed.

"And how was your Thanksgiving, Hank?" she asks, a regretful little smile playing across her lips.

"About the same as yours," I reply. "Pure madness."

And I describe to her what a holiday at a mutant school is like, trying to make her laugh and forget, at least for now, the various moral dilemmas she's faced with presently. The quandary she's in is hers alone to face and unravel.

The only thing I can do is be here for her, and hope she'll make the right choices.
Sharing Is Caring

December 24, 1974

*The things I'm willing to do for this woman,* I think exasperatedly to myself.

I'm currently standing on a street corner in Hell's Kitchen, awkwardly avoiding the gaze of other passersby- mostly for my own protection. I've been here less than five minutes and I've already been propositioned for sex once and drugs twice.

Needless to say, I'm intensely uncomfortable. But I'm supposed to meet Vivien here, so I stay put. As to why we're rendezvousing in this unseemly part of town, I'm praying that I find out soon.

It started last week, when I suggested that we see each other on Christmas Eve. Vivien initially declined.

"Oh," I said, deflating somewhat. "D-do you have other plans?"

"It's Tuesday, so sorta," she admitted. But then she gave me this searching look, as if making a momentous decision. "You know what? I want you to come with me."

"Come where?"

"You'll see, baby," Vivien replied, grinning mischievously. "Meet me on the corner of 43rd and 11th at ten, and dress warm."

So here I am, waiting in Westie gang territory just waiting to be mugged.

Literally.

I sigh and push back my sleeve to check my watch.

*Great, she's late. She chooses today, of all days, to be-

"Nice watch," a rough voice says, from directly in front of me. I glance up to see an unkempt, surly-looking man holding out a switchblade. "I'll take it and your wallet."

*Oh my stars and garters. Today is not my day.*

"Um-"

"Now, chump!"

I can't believe this. I know instinctively that if I so much as make an aggressive move, Beast is likely to appear. I'm already on the verge of losing control.

Meaning I can do nothing in my own defense. There's a *monster* inside me, and I have to allow this miscreant to brazenly take my wallet in broad daylight.

*What I would do to you in a dark alley, you reprobate,* I think bitterly as I go to undo the clasp of my watch. *Hopefully I can at least keep him from finding out about Vivien's present.*
And then, like a miracle-

One moment the sidewalk is clear, and in the next Vivien is at this scoundrel's side, pinching his ear between two fingers of one hand and holding a knife to his throat with the other.

The man lets out a strangled cry as he realizes his sudden predicament.

"What have we here?" Vivien purrs seductively. The sound of her voice makes my knees go weak. "A little bit of attempted petty theft?"

"Let me go," he whines. "You bi-"

"Manners," she admonishes, giving his ear a tug. He whimpers as her blade presses into his skin. "Being rude to the girl who has a knife to your throat probably isn't the best idea. Now, I want you to drop the knife-"

The man drops his weapon.

Vivien stands on tiptoe and leans close to his ear. "And run," she whispers menacingly, releasing him.

He barely spares me a glance as he stumbles away, trying to get as far away from the deadly little blonde as possible.

"Hi, baby," Vivien says brightly, as if she hadn't just interrupted an attempted robbery. She slides her knife back under her dress and steps closer for a kiss. "Sorry I'm late."

"On the contrary, your timing was perfect," I reply.

She chuckles and retreats back down the sidewalk, to where an abandoned little red wagon loaded with full paper bags sits next to a guitar case on the ground.

"What's this for?" I ask, trailing behind her. I can see an assortment of clothes of peeking out of the bags- coats, hats, gloves, even some shoes- along with a copious collection of canned goods.

"My friends," Vivien explains simply. I'm still puzzled, but I take the wagon's handle from her and fall into step willingly enough.

We travel along for another block or two until we reach a rather large alleyway between two abandoned warehouses close to the waterfront.

The space is filled with grumpy-looking people garbed in various degrees of shabbiness and dirt huddled around fires set in garbage bins. It's clearly a homeless enclave of some sort.

I hesitate, but Vivien approaches the group with confidence. Their expressions change instantly when they catch sight of her, morphing from irritability to delight.

"It's Vivien! Vivien's here!" several of them cry out. "Merry Christmas, Vivien! Who's that with you?"

Vivien gives my hand a reassuring squeeze before stepping forward to accept the embraces of a few of the people who are swarming us. The contents of the bags on the wagon are quickly distributed among the group with a politeness that I'm ashamed to say surprises me.

A youth with deep brown skin and a scraggly mustache sidles up to me while Vivien is distracted. He gives me a rather obvious once-over and asks, "you Vivien's beau?"
I clear my throat. "Yes."

He smirks. "You pretty cute."

"Um-

"Don't tease him, Marcel," Vivien chides, suddenly reappearing at my side with her guitar case and looping her free hand around my arm. She's grinning, despite the rebuke, and I'm startled to see that she's allowing her fangs to show. "Hank, this is my friend Marcel. Marcel, this is Hank."

"Hi," I say awkwardly.

"Hi," Marcel replies, grinning mischievously. His next words are directed at Vivien. "You better keep an eye on your boy, baby girl. Don't want no one to steal him."

I blush fiercely at the insinuation, but Vivien merely laughs. "I'll keep that in mind," she says. "Where's Mr. Cole?"

"His usual spot," he says, gesturing down the alleyway. "I'll be there in a sec."

Vivien nods and leads me forward, smiling at the people we pass and introducing me to some of them. Again, no one seems bothered by her fangs. "You ok?" she whispers.

"I'm fine, but- what exactly's going on?" I murmur. "Are they human? Do they know what you are?"

"They're human, yes. And they know what I am," she replies. Her expression becomes rather shy, to my surprise. "I've been coming here for months, bringing them food and trying to help out."

I raise my eyebrows, urging her to continue.

"I don't know. I guess what you said back at Alkali Lake really did stick with me," she explains, shrugging. "How mutants are the monsters in peoples' closets. I was just trying to think of a way to show humans that we're not, even if it was just a few of them."

I'm in awe of her at this moment, the initiative she took after our encounter months ago. Charles’ philosophy, while a positive force in the world by giving mutant children a place to belong, hasn't made much headway in mutant-human public relations. Erik's methods have obviously made them worse. But what Vivien's doing here... she may not be changing the entire world, but she's affecting the small part of it within her reach.

"You're amazing," I tell her.

She actually blushes a little. "I didn't bring you here to show off, Hank," she murmurs. "It's just- there's so many things I can't share with you about my life. But this, this I can."

I lean down and kiss her, indifferent to our audience. I can't even describe how jubilant I am to hear her speak thus, about her wanting to include me in her life as much as possible.

Vivien's cheeks are still flushed when I pull away. "Over here," she says, gesturing to a man sitting against the wall just ahead of us. He's cradling an acoustic guitar in his lap.

I have a feeling I'm about to meet the mysterious guitar-recipient.
"Hello, Mr. Cole," Vivien says cheerfully as we approach the man.

He's perhaps Charles' age, though his face is prematurely lined and more careworn. Mr. Cole's scanty remaining hair is gray, and his frame gives the impression of a once-strong man who's been wasted away by bad circumstances.

"Vivien," Mr. Cole replies, smiling broadly even though he doesn't turn to face us completely. He holds out a searching hand, which Vivien detaches herself from me to kneel and take. "Ya brought a guest?"

"I did," she agrees. "Hank, this is Mr. Cole. Mr. Cole, this is my boyfriend, Hank. He's the one that bought you the new guitar."

"Great to be able to thank ya in person," he says genially, still looking straight ahead. With a jolt, I realize he's blind.

"It was no trouble," I assure him, recovering quickly. I kneel down and gently touch his wrist, an offer for a handshake that he readily accepts. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

"Nice, firm grip he has," Mr. Cole observes to Vivien. "He good to ya?"

She gives me a sideways glance and grins when she sees my cheeks flushing. "Yes."

"I'm glad," he says. "Ya deserve a blessin', after everything you've done for us 'round here. Hank, ya better treat this girl right. She's one-in-a-million."

I grin sheepishly, though I know he can't see. "I intend to."

Vivien laughs. "Do you feel like playing today, Mr. Cole?"

"I always feel like playin'," Mr. Cole replies, cradling the guitar in his lap. I recognize it as the one I bought, and my heart soars knowing that Vivien has her father's instrument back. "Ya gave me music again after missin' it for twenty years. I've got some time to make up for."

"Do you mind?" Vivien asks me.

"No, of course not."

And so I sit and listen to them play for a while, as do several others who gather around. Marcel eventually joins in the recital by tapping out a rhythm on his thighs and the ground. He also pleads and coaxes until Vivien sings, gracing all of us with her lovely alto voice.

It's late afternoon by the time we excuse ourselves.

"I'll see you next week," Vivien promises, waving to her friends as we leave.

"I hope you bring your boy toy, too," Marcel remarks, with a lascivious wink. Then he leans in and whispers something in her ear that makes her cheeks flush slightly.

"Bye, Marcel," she says. She's giggling, despite the exasperation in her tone.
"What was that about?" I ask as we head away from the docks, hand-in-hand.

"Nothing," Vivien replies shyly. "So what did you think? Definitely a different way to spend Christmas Eve, right?"

Yes, it certainly was.

Every person I spoke to had their own story as to why they were homeless. Marcel was kicked out of his father's house last year for being gay. A lady named Theresa turned to drugs after escaping from her abusive husband, and the other people in the group are currently helping her get clean. Mr. Cole has been in and out of the VA system since the Korean War...

And Vivien is doing her best to help all of them.

"I'd like to go back with you, if you don't mind," I tell her. "I'll bring some stuff, too."

She smiles. "Yeah?"

I nod, grinning too. "Yes. You're doing something wonderful for those people, Vivien."

Her smile fades a little as she looks away from me. "It doesn't feel like enough," she murmurs, so quietly I'm not sure if she meant for me to hear.

I fumble for something to say, to bring Vivien out of her suddenly melancholy mood. "I still need to give you your Christmas present," I finally offer.

"Shit, your present!" she hisses, smacking herself on the forehead. "I left it at-"

Vivien cuts herself off and eyes me speculatively. I automatically assume she left it at the Brotherhood base or something.

"It's ok," I assure her. "You didn't have to get me anything, any-"

"Hank, knock it off. I'm giving you a present," she says sternly. "It's just-"

She sighs.

"It looks like it's my day for over-sharing," she mutters, and starts walking. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" I ask, dragging the empty wagon behind me. I'm trying to ignore how painful this is to my dignity.

"My apartment. It's only five blocks from here," Vivien replies.

"Your apartment?"

"Yeah. Come on, I'll explain when we get there."

_Honestly, it's more of a closet than anything else_, I observe to myself upon entering Vivien's "apartment."

It's a tiny studio, complete with a matchbox kitchen, cramped bathroom and a kerchief-sized closet. The only other furniture besides the overstuffed bookcases full of books and vinyl records that line the walls of the living area are a card table, folding chair, dresser and a bed. The bed is neatly made despite being comprised merely of a mattress on top of a box spring. Next to it sits a record
"I know it's not much, but it serves its purpose," Vivien says, shrugging.

"And what purpose is that?"

She gives me a rueful smile and takes the grand total of three steps needed to cross the room to the bed. She plops down and pats the space next to her, a clear invitation.

I sit with some trepidation, suddenly very aware that I'm in a woman's apartment, sitting on her bed with her. Vivien and I haven't been able to do anything other than kiss chastely since that day in the music room, for fear of me turning into Beast in public.

*But we're not in public now, are we?*

My anxiety only worsens when Vivien slips her legs over one of mine. She always sits that way, but now the position offers much more opportunities.

Suddenly my hands are aching to slip under her dress, to pull her in so I can rediscover all of the curves I barely had a chance to explore last time. I want to touch her, to kiss her until she's gasping my name and begging for me to love her. I want it with a desperation that shocks me.

"It's a safe house," Vivien explains, breaking into my lustful thoughts.

*So much for being a gentleman.*

"A safe house?"

She nods. "Ever since my parents- died- whenever we go somewhere, I get a place to stay in case of emergencies. It's come in handy once or twice, trust me."

"Do your brothers know about it?"

"No," Vivien replies, laughing mirthlessly. "To be honest, for the past couple months the main reason I've come here is to shower and change clothes after seeing you. I don't want James and Myles to smell you on me and start asking questions."

I wince- not only at the thought of what would happen if such a thing occurred, but also because she needs to be so careful. I hate the danger she puts herself in just to see me.

"You're the only person I've ever shown this to," Vivien murmurs, suddenly very vulnerable. "I... I trust you, Hank."

Her gorgeous hazel eyes are piercing into my very soul, pleading with me not to betray her trust. I know very well how hard it is for Vivien to put her faith in others. It's the main factor in why she tends to operate alone, the reason she keeps people at arms' length with a veneer of sarcasm.

"I won't tell a soul," I promise.

She smiles in relief and leans in to kiss me.

"Thank you," she whispers sincerely. "Now, about your present-"
Vivien gracefully gets to her feet and sashays over to the minute-sized kitchen counter for a small, wrapped rectangular object that's clearly a book of some kind.

"For you," she says earnestly, placing it into my hands once she sits back down. And then she seems to hold her breath why I carefully undo the wrapping paper.

Her gift is a French copy of The Count of Monte Cristo- a sentimental choice that makes me smile, remembering our conversation back at Alkali Lake. It's obviously a much older, illustrated edition, though it's in very good condition. I check the frontispiece-

L'echo Des Feuilletons, Paris 1846.

Oh my stars and garters.

"This is the first non-serialized version," I say, awestruck.

Vivien nods proudly. "Yup. Do you like it?"

"Of course I do," I reply, giving her a kiss. "How on earth did you get your hands on this? It's in such good condition and- oh dear, Vivien, you didn't steal it, did you?"

She looks deeply affronted, and I immediately regret my hasty accusation.

Open mouth, insert foot.

"No," she says sharply, withdrawing from me and huffily crossing her arms. "A book collector owed me a favor and gave me a good deal. How could you even think that I'd give you something stolen? Give me some credit, here."

"I'm sorry," I tell her quickly. "Vivien, truly. I didn't mean- I just-"

"I get it," Vivien sighs, cutting into my hopeless babbling. "I'm not exactly known for traveling the straight and narrow. It's an easy assumption to make."

She studiously looks down at the faded carpet at our feet, her posture ramrod straight. I curse myself furiously for wounding her so badly, especially when she was only trying to do something nice for me.

"It's an assumption I shouldn't have made," I say, trying to placate her. "Darling, I'm sorry."

Vivien's silent for another minute or so before finally relenting. "It's fine."

"W-would you like your gift now?" I ask tentatively. Now I'm feeling rather glad that I'm going second in this gift exchange. Perhaps Vivien will forget my thoughtless question when she sees her present.

"Sure," she replies, her tone decidedly neutral.

I hold out the little box I've been keeping in my pocket.
Vivien gives me an amused look as she takes it from me, probably because I obviously went the cliched jewelry route for her gift.

"I made those for you," I explain lamely as she opens the box, revealing the pair of simple tear drop gemstone earrings within.

"You made these?" she asks, eyes wide as she holds them up to the light.

I nod sheepishly. "It wasn't hard. I just polished the stones and used a soldering iron on the silver," I tell her. "I-picked andalusite because it reminded me of your eyes. And, well- I thought if I made them long enough, you could still wear them in public without showing anyone your ears. Do you like them?"

"Of course I do, baby," Vivien assures me, laughing. "Thank you."

She takes the earrings out of the box and puts them on. They fall below her jawline, still clearly visible past the braided hairstyle hiding the tips of her elvish ears.

"What do you think?" she asks, tilting her head back and forth to give me a better view.

"Beautiful," I reply honestly.

Vivien giggles and swings a leg over me, so she's straddling my hips.

My heart immediately starts to do double time, an almost painful staccato against my rib cage, when she leans in and kisses me. I automatically reach up and pull her in closer, responding with an almost feverish ardor to the feeling of her lips on mine.

Yes yes yes-

Coherent thought has already completely fled when Vivien suddenly pulls back, both of us gasping. I'm almost overwhelmed with a crushing disappointment.

But then-

"Take off your shirt and shoes," she orders.

"Why?" I ask, immediately self-conscious.

"Because," Vivien replies suggestively, trailing her hands down my chest. The alluring look in her eyes makes it feel like my insides are melting. "You're about to get a little 'worked up,' baby, and I'd feel bad if I sent you home with a busted shirt and no shoes in the middle of December."

"Your logic is unassailable," I murmur, awkwardly shucking off my shoes and socks using my feet while Vivien slips my glasses off for me.

I'm torn between gratitude for her foresight and bitterness over the need for it as I nervously take off my shirt. She's right, of course. I can't even make out with my girlfriend without turning into a furry blue monster.

If only I could be normal. If only-

My rather doleful train of thought goes completely off the rails as soon as Vivien pushes me back onto the bed and playfully pounces on me like a kitten.

The sounds she makes, the way she tastes, the patterns her claws are tracing down my bare chest-
I last about three seconds before I shift into Beast, instinctively reacting to what she's doing to me, her mere proximity.

In the blink of an eye I flip us over, so I'm now pressing her into the mattress. Vivien doesn't seem to mind though, if the way she purrs and wraps her legs around me are any indication. She pulls me in even closer, touching me all over like she can't get enough of me. *Me.*

It practically boggles my mind, how much she seems to want me.

Vivien reaches out and tenderly strokes my face when we finally come up for air several minutes later. "God, you're beautiful," she murmurs.

I snort derisively, disbelievingly.

"Hey," she chides. "What? You don't believe me?"

"We both well know that I have the ability to scare small children with the mere sight of my face," I observe warily.

Vivien rolls her eyes. "And?" she retorts. "I have huge ears and fangs. I'm freckly, skinny, and I have the chest of a twelve year old boy. But do you still think I'm pretty?"

"I think you're beautiful," I reply honestly. "But it's not the same thing, Vivien."

"Sure it is," she scoffs. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that beauty is in the eye of the beholder? Whatever you think of yourself, it's not going to change how I see you. You're the smartest, sweetest man I've ever met. Strong, but gentle too. And a genuinely good person who treats me nicer than anyone else ever has. All in a ridiculously sexy package."

This startles me into a laugh.

"Tall, gorgeous cheekbones, and muscles for days," Vivien continues in a seductive voice, her hands trailing over my face, down my arms. "Eyes like sunsets-"

"-Skin and fur like a blueberry-colored shag carpet," I add dryly.

She smirks, her eyes now smoldering up at me and immediately making me forget my pique. "Blue happens to be my favorite color," she purrs, pulling me in so she can nibble on my bottom lip.

I kiss her, because I simply can't help myself when she does things like that. Conscious thought tends to go right out the window, leaving only pure desire behind.

"Did you really mean that?" I ask finally, once I can think again. I fight to keep my voice neutral, but I know she can still probably sense my plea for her good opinion. "What you said about me?"

She pretends to think on it for a moment. "No," Vivien replies. She's keeping a straight face, but her eyes are suddenly dancing mischievously. "I lied. My favorite color is actually black, Hank. I'm so sor-"

I pretend to growl my displeasure for her response and roll us over, both laughing, so she's on top of me once more.

But then- after the giggles finally die away- Vivien kisses me deeply, cradling my face with her hands. When she pulls back her eyes are soft, all trace of mockery gone for just a moment.

"I meant every word, baby," she whispers.
My heart feels like it's glowing. She makes me feel wanted, desired- she makes me believe that I truly am the person she sees me as.

Vivien smiles and leans down to kiss me again-

And in that moment, I know I'm in love with her.
"I have a surprise for you," I tell Vivien as we approach my car, hand-in-hand.

We've just spent the past few hours with her friends in Hell's Kitchen, handing out the food we managed to collect this week. It was quite enjoyable, despite Marcel's good-natured teasing of both Vivien and myself.

Now Vivien's eyebrows raise, a playful smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "Does this surprise have anything to do with the fact that tomorrow's my birthday?" she teases.

"It does indeed. I thought I should give this to you now, since we won't see each other tomorrow," I reply, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

After some consideration we decided it would be wise for Vivien to stay put at the Brotherhood base tomorrow because her brothers will inevitably do something for her birthday. Neither of us want James and Myles to become suspicious of her repeated absences, and one on such a personal event would draw too much unwanted attention.

I know it's a logical decision, I truly do.

But I still feel resentful that I can't do something so simple as to take the woman I love to a New Year's party, or at least spend her birthday with her, for fear of her murderous relatives finding out.

Despite my attempt, Vivien still senses my rancor. "I know, baby," she sighs, nuzzling against my arm. "I know."

She offers no other comment, but there isn't really anything she can say. No promise that one day it will be different, that things will be better for us. No hopes of a real future together.

No, these stolen hours may be all we ever have. But still- whenever I think of losing even this, it feels like my heart is trying to rip itself out of my chest.

I love her. I love the way she can recite poetry and random quotes of anything from Longfellow to Shakespeare, but sometimes forgets what she had for breakfast. I love her off-beat sense of humor, the way she truly listens to my more obscure theories, even if she doesn't always understand them. I love how she makes me feel more alive than I ever thought possible.

I don't want to lose her.

I kiss the top of Vivien's head and release her hand so I can open the trunk of my car. "I had this idea, after you showed me your safe house," I explain awkwardly, "that since you have a place your brothers don't know about, I could get you one of these-"

The trunk opens, revealing an electric piano inside.

"-Without anyone asking questions about where you got it. W-what do you think?"

"You got me a piano?" Vivien asks faintly.
I glance at her face, hoping to see a joyful expression. I'm actually quite proud of my gift- I'm giving her something she loves that's been missing from her life for so long. It couldn't be more perfect for her, really.

Vivien looks rather stunned, but her expression is otherwise unreadable. It makes me deflate somewhat. Is she upset that I spent so much money on her? Or-?

"I'm sorry. I thought you would-"

She cuts me off with a fierce embrace, hugging me so tight the air escapes from my lungs in a whoosh.

"Thank you," she whispers fervently, pulling my face down for a kiss. "Oh, Hank- this is honestly the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me in my entire life. Thank you, thank you-"

And she kisses and nuzzles me as she thanks me over and over again until I have to reluctantly pull away, for fear of getting too overwhelmed on a public sidewalk.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"Don't be," Vivien replies, giggling. The coquettish look in her eyes absolutely liquefies my skeletal structure. "How about we get this thing upstairs? And then I can finish thanking you properly?"

I grin. "You won't hear any arguments from me," I assure her. "Happy birthday, Vivien."

"Hank! There you are," a familiar, English-accented voice calls out behind me as I head for my laboratory. "I've been looking all over the mansion for you."

I turn to see Charles motoring towards me, his expression a mixture of curiosity and relief. I stop walking and muster up a smile for him, trying to seem nonchalant.

Like he didn't just catch me sneaking back in after a date with one of our sworn enemies.

"I'm sorry," I say politely. "Here I am."

"Where have you been?" he asks. Luckily he seems only mildly interested- after all, the headmaster of a mutant school has more important things to worry about than one wayward scientist. "Out with- what was her name, Lucy?"

I wince.

Lie.

My best friend and mentor, the man who happens to be the strongest telepath on earth- I have to convincingly lie to him.

And, if Charles keeps his word about not reading my mind (I put my foot down, so to speak, after one too many drunken forays into my thoughts and told him to stay out of my head or I would walk away several years ago), I should be able to get away with it.

"Lucy dumped me. She wasn't pleased that I disappeared for two days without word," I explain, my tone appropriately dejected. The falsehood comes with disturbing ease to my lips. "And it's not like I could promise that it wouldn't happen again, so..."
Charles frowns in sympathy. "I had no idea at all. I'm sorry, my friend," he tells me. "I know lately I haven't been very-"

"You've been busy. I understand completely," I interject. I give him a wry grin. "And besides, it wouldn't have worked between Lucy and I anyway. Not with my cyaneous alter ego making an appearance at the worst possible moments."

He looks uncomfortable, like he wishes he could disagree but can't in good conscience.

"I'm fine, Charles," I assure him. "Really. We both know I'm no stranger to being alone."

"It doesn't have to be that way for you," he admonishes. "You don't have to be alone, Hank."

*I'm not really alone, Charles,* I mentally reply, thinking of the lovely afternoon I just spent with Vivien, listening to her play the piano. *Not anymore.*

But I can't tell him that, no matter how much I wish I could.

I want to tell him that I'm in love with someone, that I've finally found a woman who accepts me for everything I am- awkward quirks and all. That for the first time in my life, I'm slowly learning to enjoy something in the moment rather than agonizing over what could happen tomorrow.

But I know that his happiness at my newfound felicity would be overshadowed by his dismay and censure over who I've found it with. What would he even do if he discovered I've been sneaking out to see Vivien?

Telling him is simply not an option.

So I shake my head and clear my throat. "Were you looking for me for a reason?" I ask calmly.

Charles frowns, but allows the subject of my perpetual bachelorhood to be closed without further comment. He's well aware of my long-held beliefs in regards to my own destiny. Since my transformation into Beast, I've always known I would grow old and die alone.

Even Vivien coming into my life has provided only a small glimmer of hope in that regard, taking our rather impossible circumstances into consideration...

"Yes, actually," Charles replies, interrupting my melancholy. "I was hoping that you would assist Jubilee in hanging up the decorations for the party tonight."

"Certainly," I say. "Let's go."

Thankfully he doesn't ask me again where I really was this afternoon as we head for the ballroom.

If I said there was no guilt mixed in with the relief I feel for his lack of persistence, I'd be lying.
Valentine's Day

February 14, 1975

Saint Valentine's Day was originally a feast day for the early Christian saint Valentinus, who— one tradition goes— was martyred for performing unauthorized weddings for Roman soldiers and preaching Christianity in the Roman Empire while it was illegal.

It wasn't until the High Middle Ages that the day became associated with romantic love, flowers, cards, and candy. This was due to the evolution of "courtly love," a concept encouraged by Geoffrey Chaucer and the like.

Right. Thanks a lot, Chaucer.

This is the first ever Valentine's Day where I actually have a significant other to consider celebrating with, and I'm definitely feeling the pressure.

Should I get Vivien flowers? Chocolates? Jewelry? A card? All four? How much is too much?

Planning gifts for Christmas and Vivien's birthday was plain sailing in comparison to this. A whole holiday dedicated to love? Where going overboard can be looked upon as smothering, but not enough effort is construed as indifference towards one's special sweetheart?

Trying to hit the right balance is enough to give a man an ulcer.

In the end I get my love a bouquet of gardenias and violets (because I pay attention, and I know she thinks that roses are cliche and unimaginative) and a box of assorted chocolates, because it's Vivien and she fervently believes that candy should be considered a major food group. I consider finding some sort of card, but eventually decide to forego the inevitable aneurysm that would be sure to accompany choosing that sort of thing.

And as it turns out, all of my panic and ruminations are for naught.

Vivien's already waiting for me, sitting on a bench, when I arrive at our meeting place in Central Park. An incredulous smile crosses her face when she sees what I'm holding.

"For you," I say, offering the flowers and candy with a slight flourish.

"Aw, thank you, baby," she tells me, a hint of a blush rising in her cheeks as she stands to take the proffered gifts and give me a kiss. She seems pleased, though slightly puzzled. "What's the occasion?"


"Oh," Vivien says rather sheepishly. "I actually didn't even realize."

A long sigh escapes me, a product of how foolish and disgruntled I suddenly feel. "I've been panicking for days trying to think of what to get you," I admit. "Talk about wasted anxiety."

"Oh, Hank. I'm so sorry. But I love this, really," she assures me earnestly, standing on tiptoe to kiss me. "You're much more than I deserve, baby."
I allow myself to be mollified and let Vivien tug me over to sit down. She snuggles against me and then, surprisingly me not in the least, immediately opens the box of chocolates.

_Not one for delayed gratification, are you, my love?_

Her eyes light up immediately upon surveying such bounty. "You really know how to treat a girl, Hank," she jokes, picking one at random and taking a bite.

Then she offers me the remaining, half-eaten piece. It admittedly looks rather unappetizing, what with the teeth marks and everything.

_Oh, why not? It's not like we don't share germs as it is._

"I try," I mutter, leaning in to take the proffered morsel.

"So, what holiday are we celebrating next, so I'm not surprised next time?" Vivien teases after a few minutes. "Saint Patrick's day? For your heritage and all that? McCoy is an Irish name, right?"

"Originally Scottish, actually," I reply. But her reference to my surname brings a sudden realization to mind. "You know, we've been seeing each other like this for over three months and I still don't know your last name."

Vivien frowns thoughtfully. "You're right," she agrees, chuckling. She pops an entire chocolate in her mouth.

And says nothing else.

"Well?" I prompt after a moment. "What is it?"

She rolls her eyes at my persistence. "Why do you want to know?"

_Because in my most quixotic, impossible daydreams I think about changing it to mine, I mentally reply._

"Curiosity, I suppose," I say aloud, shrugging.


"There. Was that so difficult?"

She sticks her tongue out at me and picks up another candy.

After taking a bite she pretends to offer the rest to me- only to pull her hand back and pop it into her mouth (with rather unnecessary gusto, I might add) when I lean in to take it from her.

"Very mature, Vivien," I say, laughing.

"Well, I am quite younger than you are," she retorts archly, a mischievous grin playing across her lips. _Old man. It gives me some leeway on the whole maturity thing._

I prudently decide not to pursue that line of discussion. Joking or not, I don't like thinking about how I had the right to vote before Vivien had even reached her teens. It doesn't change how I feel about her, but still...

I cough uncomfortably, making her giggle. "Babineaux, huh? Your ancestry must be Acadian, then," I offer as a distraction.
Vivien looks begrudgingly impressed. "How'd you know-?" she begins to say, but then cuts herself off and shakes her head. "Oh, never mind. You know everything."

This startles me into a laugh. "Well, not everything," I joke. And then I inwardly wince, worried that my attempt at humor came across as condescending and conceited.

But Vivien merely laughs and offers me another morsel of chocolate. Thankfully she seems to understand my sense of humor more than anyone else does.

"It still seems strange to me that you're from Louisiana," I muse after a few more minutes of silent candy-eating.

"Why is that, sugah? 'Cuz I don't sound like some kinda cun-try bumpkin?" she asks in an exaggerated Southern drawl that makes me snort. She sighs and explains, "I used to have an accent, but I lost it over the years. I haven't been down there in a long time."

"Do you ever miss it?"

"You mean, do I ever miss the place where I lived when my parents were alive and my brothers and I weren't mixed up with a terrorist organization?" she asks rhetorically, her lips twitching up into a wry grin. She looks away and shakes her head. "I do, but it's not like I could go back. Nothing is the same anymore, and it wouldn't feel right. The Vivien Babineaux who lived there was young and innocent. She always had muddy feet and leaves in her hair, because she loved to take books up trees to read them. And now... It's like I'm not even the same person anymore."

"I understand. 'It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then','" I murmur. It's a quote from Alice in Wonderland, one that illustrates what I think she's trying to say perfectly.

Vivien grins sadly and strokes my face. "Exactly," she agrees. She snuggles against me even closer and moodily takes another bite of chocolate. After swallowing, she whispers, "I miss being that person. You would've liked her. She was sweet and-"

I take her chin between my fingers and gently turn her head to face me. "I like who you are now, Vivien," I interject firmly. "I wouldn't be sitting here with you if I didn't."

She smiles faintly, her eyes searching my face. "I think that earned you a whole candy, Dr. McCoy," she murmurs finally, with a cheeky grin. She picks one up, sniffs it, and offers it to me.

I lean in to take the chocolate from her-

And gag immediately after taking a bite.

"Ugh, coconut," I choke out, while she giggles maniacally. "Y-you did that on purpose!"

She can't even defend herself from the accusation. So instead, Vivien leans in and sweetly kisses me on the cheek. "I know," she agrees, batting her eyelashes at me. "But will you still be my Valentine, Hank?"

I melt immediately.

"Of course."
Kindness

May 1, 1975

I stifle a yawn as I start my car and back it out of the mansion's garage.

It's an ungodly hour- three-thirty in the morning- to be going anywhere, but today is a special case. Vivien and I are taking a road trip to Ocean City to watch the sunrise on the beach together and play around at the boardwalk.

This longer, out-of-state trip is admittedly a bit risky, but with the passing of time Vivien and I have gotten bolder with our meetings. No one's taken notice of our repeated absences, giving us the ability to stop constantly, incessantly thinking about getting caught. There are many days, in fact, where this relationship really does feel "normal."

But that's not to say we've grown careless, though. The consequences are much too great to allow for mistakes.

I don't even want to know what Fox and Jackal would do if they found out about us, I think despondently. At this point I'm a few miles past the school's grounds, heading towards the small town of Salem Center. They'd probably-

Vivien suddenly emerges from the trees lining the road up ahead like some sort of forest nymph. Her sudden appearance startles me into slamming on the brakes.

Oh my stars and garters.

"You almost gave me a heart attack," I tell her reproachfully as she hops into the passenger seat with aplomb.

"Well aren't you just a little ray of sunshine this morning," Vivien replies teasingly, raising her eyebrows at me. "Good morning, Hank."

I sigh and lean across the gear shift to give her a kiss. "Good morning, darling," I say begrudgingly. "But what happened to meeting at the gas station in Salem Center?"

"I know it's early, but you've lived here so long there's still a chance that someone might recognize you around here," she responds. "I think it'd be better if we went to the next town over to load up on snacks and stuff."

"You have a point," I reluctantly agree.

And so we drive on, because the sun waits for no one.

We make good time- probably because it's so early- after we stop and grab coffee and various forms of sustenance (i.e., Twinkies, chips and candy) from a gas station.

I can't imagine having more fun on a road trip than I do with Vivien, and that's even factoring the ridiculous hour of the morning. She brought a knapsack full of 8-tracks with her, and she keeps us well-supplied with music for the entire journey.
"Sing with me," she coaxes at one point.

I shake my head. "You don't want to hear me sing," I hedge. "I'm terrible."

"You can't be that bad, can you?"

Yes, yes I can.

I sigh and relent, because I know otherwise she'll just keep badgering me until I give in. To say Vivien is tenacious is to put it lightly.


Vivien has a hard time not laughing from the moment I start (trying) to sing. She claps her hands over her mouth as I serenade her along with Elvis Presley to keep from bursting into giggles, but her restraint gives out halfway through the song.

"Oh, my god," she gasps, doubling over in her seat.

"I told you so," I mutter sullenly. My ears are burning from the embarrassment- could she be perhaps a little more tactful?

But then Vivien says, a gorgeous grin on her face, "you are so damn cute. I absolutely adore you, Hank McCoy."

And my chagrin inexplicably vanishes. The only conclusion I can make as to why is that there's some sort of magic in her smile.

There's a chill in the air when we arrive on the deserted beach in Ocean City, courtesy of the breeze blowing in off the waterfront. I'm more than happy to spread out the blanket we brought and sit with Vivien between my legs, snuggled in my embrace. Her body heat is like a living furnace.

"How big is the Atlantic Ocean, Hank?" she asks in a hushed whisper, the way people always speak in those quiet moments before dawn.

"Forty-one million, eight thousand square miles," I answer after a moment's thought.

Vivien laughs softly. "I can't believe you know that," she murmurs. She turns slightly to kiss my cheek. "Nerd."

My only reply to that comment is to shrug.

What can I say? I haven't had much of a social life to distract me from soaking up extraneous factoids.

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm feeling rather insignificant in the face of the big blue this morning," she says dryly. "I was just wondering if I should be feeling it more, I suppose."

I laugh. "We're all insignificant in the grand scheme of things, darling."

"Yeah," she agrees. "We are."

There's a hint of dejection in her tone as she says this, and it gives me an insight into the direction
of her thoughts.

She won't talk about it much, but Vivien hasn't given up on somehow trying to dissuade the Brotherhood from some of their more radical methods- the very methods she once prescribed to, but has now backed away from. She wants to change the world, to make a difference for our kind.

The wistfulness in her voice tells me that her efforts aren't going well. And even though I don't have much hope for the other members of the Brotherhood, I still want to support her in any way I can.

And how can I do otherwise? Her goal is my goal, too.

Because I've come to realize over these past few months that Vivien and I truly aren't on different sides at all, despite our team affiliations. We've always wanted the same thing: peace for humans and mutants. It's a comforting thought, one I hold close to my heart when I think about all the lies and half-truths I tell to continue seeing her like this.

"That's not to say one person can't make a marked impact on the world, though, right?" I murmur aloud, trying to offer some hope to her efforts. "Gavrilo Princip basically started World War I single-handedly when he assassinated Franz Ferdinand of Austria. And Raven killing Bolivar Trask is what set off the events that led to the Sentinel takeover in the future Logan came back to prevent."

Vivien snorts. "Sounds like it's pretty easy for one person to completely mess the world up," she observes dryly. "But almost impossible to change it for the better."

"Maybe my examples leave something to be desired," I concede. "But Vivien- think about what you've done for Marcel and the rest in Hell's Kitchen. I don't think some of them would've made it through the winter without your help."

I reach up and stroke her face gently.

"You changed their lives, didn't you? An act of kindness from one person to another might not change the entire world, but it definitely changes the life of the recipient of a kind deed. I certainly think that's still admirable."

She stares at me for a long moment, considering my words, and I can't help unabashedly staring back. I can see every gold facet in her black-ringed hazel eyes, how they practically glow in the light of the oncoming dawn like a cat's.

Once upon a time, back when I was trying so desperately to be like the rest of humanity, Vivien's more obviously inhuman attributes would've made me recoil in distaste.

But now... now all I can see is how beautiful she is.

"Doing good deeds? Sounds like more peacenik bullshit, you goody-goody," Vivien says finally, with a wry smile playing at her lips.

I grin back, pulled out of my more love struck musings. "You know that happens to be my specialty," I reply flippantly.

She giggles leans in to kiss me as the sun comes up, and in this moment- if only for this moment- everything is perfect.
"All of those animals look so sad," Jean murmurs to me.

"Indeed," I reply quietly, taking in the scene before us.

We're currently in a medical testing facility, lying in wait for the Brotherhood to possibly pay a visit. The other X-Men are positioned throughout various areas of the building because we're unsure what exactly the target is this time around.

I'm paired with Jean for this mission, hiding in a room filled with kittens and puppies locked in tiny cages for testing.

It's a depressing sight, to say the least, to see cute, cuddly animals being treated this way. I'm aware that such testing is sometimes necessary for scientific advancement, but it doesn't make it any less distasteful.

As for the Brotherhood, my guess is their goal in attacking this building will be to steal supplies—though I can't say why or what kind. This particular facility happens to be geared towards cancer research.

And that's not exactly a topic that springs to mind when I think of the Brotherhood.

Jean shifts uncomfortably. "Can I-?"

But just then I hear a voice outside the laboratory, on the other side of the door.

A voice I'm quite familiar with— one that always makes my stomach do back-flips when I hear it, no matter what the circumstances.

Vivien.

I automatically duck back behind a desk, pulling Jean with me as I give into the cowardly instinct to flee and therefore avoid a direct confrontation with my secret lover in the line of duty.

I can feel Jean eyeing me curiously as Vivien strolls into the room, followed closely by Fox, and I studiously avoid my teammate's gaze. I sincerely hope I didn't just give anything away with my hasty actions.

"Keep your voice down, Vixen," Fox gripes sourly as the two of them enter the laboratory. "Can't you smell the X-Geeks stinking up the place?"

I have to fight off a grin— it's clear to me that Vivien's been making a lot of noise on purpose, most likely because she doesn't really agree with the objective of this mission. This half-hearted sabotage is something she's been doing more and more of lately, the more disenchanted she's gotten with the Brotherhood.

"My bad," Vivien says, though she doesn't sound particularly apologetic.

But I hear some rustling, as if one of them is making for the door to pass through the laboratory to
the next room.

_Damnation._

I obviously can't let them get by us, no matter how loathe I am to confront Vivien. I'm about to signal to Jean that we need to attack-

But then the movement halts.

"You coming?" Fox asks, impatience clear in his voice.

"What exactly are we here for, Fox?" Vivien sounds like she's still near the other door, purposely holding him up.

_She knows I'm in here,_ I realize with a jolt.

How she knows, I'm not sure- my scent, or perhaps she feels the same hyper-awareness of my presence as I do of hers- but still, she can sense I'm here and is trying to obliquely feed me information. Information she can't give me otherwise without tying my hands on sharing how I gained the intelligence for the X-Men.

_My stars and garters, I love her,_ I think fondly. _My little traitor._

"What do you mean? Mags didn't tell you?" Fox asks blankly.

"Of course," she replies sweetly. And though I can sense the lie, I don't think Fox can. Erik is clearly still keeping Vivien in the dark, then. She's seeking out information for the _both_ of us. "I just don't understand why."

"We're here to get some muta- mutane-"

"Mutagenic?" Vivien supplies. Her voice is farther into the room now, as if she's aimlessly examining the occupants of all the cages.

"Yeah. Mutagenic stuff for Stryker to work with," Fox explains.

_Um, what?_

My surprise is reflected in her tone as well. "Stryker?" she demands, her composure breaking at the thought of her old enemy. "What the hell does Stryker have to do with any of this?"

"You mean you don't know?" Fox asks, his voice dripping with self-importance. "Well, then, I'm not going to tell you."

"Why not?" Vivien snaps.

"Because there's obviously a reason _Magneto_ hasn't told you," he replies. "Maybe he thinks you'll kill Stryker if you can get your hands on him. Or maybe..."

It sounds like he's grinning sickeningly.

"Maybe he just doesn't trust you enough."

"But you _can_ tell me," Vivien presses again. "I'm your sister, James."

"That doesn't matter," he retorts harshly. "The mission is more important."
Now there's a pause, a tense silence so heavy the air suddenly feels like lead. I can only imagine Vivien's expression right now, how much that comment stung her.

How much the knowledge that her brother is choosing the Brotherhood over her hurts.

She clears her throat and murmurs stiffly, "fair enough."

"Glad you're being reasonable for once," Fox says spitefully. "Now, let's go."

"No, I think I'm going to stay in here and let all these animals out," Vivien replies, her voice completely even and detached. I know that's how she sounds when she's been deeply wounded.

I hear her brother move back towards her, away from the door. "Why?" he scoffs rudely.

"So they won't be experimented on anymore, obviously."

"What does it even matter?" Fox derides. "It's not like you're changing anything, not really. And besides, we have a mission to complete."

"I don't give a shit about this mission."

"Whatever. But you're still not-"

"A small act of kindness may not change the world," Vivien interjects firmly, "but it does change the world for the recipient of that kind act."

I can't help smiling, even though Jean might see the expression, as I remember our conversation while we watched the sunrise the other day in Ocean City.

Later we played miniature golf (Vivien won- I contend because she cheated), window-shopped on the boardwalk, and then let the ocean waves roll over our feet on the beach. We were tired, sunburned, and covered in sand when I dropped her off in Central Park.

But also happy. So, so happy to have had an entire day to be together.

Fox snorts, wiping the grin off my face. "What kind of hippie horseshit is that?" he jeers. "You going soft on me, sis- don't you dare!"

I hear several soft clicks, as if a release on the cages has been hit and the doors are opening as one.

And then a high-pitched alarm goes off, complete with flashing red lights on the ceiling.

"God dammit, Vixen!" Fox howls.

The sound of a blow landing on flesh reaches my ears above the din of the alarm's wailing, followed by Vivien's hiss of pain.

I react to her plight without thinking, my instincts compelling me to go to my mate's aid and rip whoever hurt her to shreds.

With a growl I make to dart out from behind the desk-

And freeze as a soft, pale hand grabs my wrist.

I glance over to see Jean, completely white-faced, shaking her head frantically at me.
The words that pass through my thoughts in that moment aren't exactly suitable for print.

How could they be, when the knowledge that I might have just given my feelings for an enemy away in front of a teammate is turning my blood to ice?

"Great, are you fucking happy now?" Fox snarls at his sister. "Mission aborted. Let's get out of here before the X-Geeks show up."

As one, Jean and I peep out over the desk to see both Brotherhood members fleeing towards the exit, surrounded by gamboling puppies and kittens.

Vivien pauses in the doorway and glances back at us, revealing the fresh red mark- the exact size and shape of Fox's hand- on her left cheek. The sight fills me with a black, murderous rage.

She shakes her head and gives me a sad, reassuring smile that somehow cuts me right to the bone-

And then she's gone.

Leaving me alone with Jean.

Jean, who saw way too much for my own comfort tonight. What did she take away from my reactions just now? Will she mention it to anyone else-?

"Dr. McCoy?" she asks quietly.

"Yes?"

I glance over to see Jean biting her lip pensively, like she's trying to decide how to word something. Finally, she murmurs, "I like her, too. Your secret is safe with me."

I sigh in relief.

"Thank you, Jean."
The Calm

My thoughts are tangled as Jean and I make our way out of the research building back to the jet. Does my companion suspect that I've actually been seeing Vivien for months, or does Jean believe that my feelings are just residual from Vivien's stay in the mansion back in October?

I wish there was a way to find out, but I'm afraid to ask any questions. No matter how oblique, they'll still draw attention to a situation that I don't want any scrutiny on.

Perhaps the less that's said about it, the better, I decide as we reach the rest of the X-Men. Despite Jean's assurance that she would keep quiet, I can't help feeling a tremor of anxiety over the fact that at least some degree of my secret is out and in the hands of a seventeen-year-old girl. Jean's mature for her age, but can you blame me for being a little nervous?

"Anyone have a clue what that alarm was about?" Alex asks the group as I head for the jet's cockpit.

"Vixen hit the cage release and let all of the test subjects out in the lab we were in," Jean explains evenly, taking her seat. Of course, I can't help analyzing every syllable, wondering if she'll somehow give me away. "It set off the alarm."

"Why would she do that?" The question comes from Sam.

Because she wanted to sabotage the Brotherhood's mission tonight. Because she wanted to be kind to those animals when no one else has been.

Like the other X-Men would actually believe that she purposely sabotaged the mission. Even if it's the truth.

"I guess she has objections to animal cruelty," I offer blithely. "But there's more- Marvel Girl and I overheard Vixen and Fox talking about what they were doing here tonight. They were trying to steal some mutagenic compounds for Major Stryker."

"For Stryker?" Alex asks sharply. Oh, right, Vivien isn't the only one with a personal vendetta against the dastardly scientist. "Why the hell is the Brotherhood working with Stryker?"

Why, indeed?

Why would a mutant-hating military scientist assist a human-hating terrorist organization in any shape or fashion? Such an alliance makes no sense at all.

Vivien clearly had no idea. I wonder how she'll react to this knowledge, considering how much she loathes Stryker? She didn't kill the man back at Alkali Lake, but I know that doesn't mean she's forgiven him for what he did to Myles.

Questions and more questions.

Hopefully the next time I see Vivien I'll get some answers.
May 6, 1975

I sigh impatiently and lean against a light pole as I check my watch.

I'm currently waiting for Vivien to show up at our regular meeting place in Hell's Kitchen. It's Tuesday- meaning we're supposed to go visit Marcel, Mr. Cole, and the rest of our homeless friends.

Thankfully at this point I'm much more comfortable waiting for her here on the corner- mainly because the miscreants who roam these streets now know I have a knife-wielding little blonde girl meeting me. Their fear of Vivien keeps me from being bothered anymore.

But that doesn't curb my anxiety right now. She's over fifteen minutes late, and I'm starting to fear she's not going to show up. This would be the first time in the six months that she's missed-My stars and garters, has it really been that long?

I quickly do the math. Yes, we've been seeing each other for six months now- our "anniversary," in fact, was last Thursday. I don't think either of us expected that we would be able to get away with this for so long...

Just then I catch sight of Vivien hurrying towards me, looking exhausted.

"Hey, baby," she says, setting down her burden of paper bags and her guitar case. "Sorry I'm late."

"It's fine," I assure her. I pull her in for an embrace, burying my nose in her hair. "I was getting a little worried, though."

Vivien chuckles as she stands on tiptoe to kiss me. "You, worried?" she teases. "Since when?"

She's trying to make light of my concern, but I don't find this a laughing matter.

My relief at her arrival suddenly disappears as I cup her face in my hand and examine her features. There are shadows under her eyes, and a fading bruise on her cheek from where Fox hit her.

Vivien sees the change in my expression and sighs. "Did you tell the X-Men about Stryker?"

I nod. "Any idea why the Brotherhood is working with him?"

She shakes her head, her eyes narrowed with frustration. "No. And no one will tell me, either," she replies bitterly. "Not even Myles."

"Myles knows?" To say I'm surprised would be an understatement. I can't see Vivien's younger brother knowingly condoning anything to do with Stryker, given their history.

Vivien nods. "Yeah. And when I tried to remind him of what that scumbag did to him Myles just told me that our duty to our kind is more important. Great, he gets that now, over this kind of thing, right?" she says exasperatedly. She leans her forehead against my chest, completely miserable. "I don't know what to do, Hank. My own brothers won't tell me what the hell is going on, but I know if Stryker's involved it can't be good."

I'm at a loss of what to say, but I take a stab at it, anyway. "You'll think of something, darling. I know you will. Just remember that I'm here for you if you need me."

She lifts her head up and gives me a wistful smile. "I know you are, baby," she whispers, and she meets me halfway for the kiss I lean down to give her.
It's amazing, the effect kissing Vivien has on me. Like the entire world falls away while her lips are on mine. I get so lost in the feeling of her mouth, her warmth, the way her fangs brush my lips, that I forget my very salient concerns, if only for a-

Vivien breaks away, whipping her head around to look over her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" I ask anxiously, following her gaze.

Nothing. I see nothing out of the ordinary at all. Just another Tuesday afternoon in Hell's Kitchen.

"Vivien? Do you think you were followed?"

She doesn't reply for a moment. "No, I guess not," she replies slowly. "I just felt... for a second it felt like we were being watched."

Cold fingers of fear trail their way up and down my spine as I search the crowd more thoroughly, clutching Vivien close. I don't see anyone that I recognize, thankfully, but that does little to soothe my sudden disquiet.

"We won't go to your safe house after our visit," I murmur. "Just in case."

She nods in agreement, though she looks uncomfortable. "Ok."

We try to shake off our shared apprehension as we visit with Mr. Cole and the others, but can't quite manage it. The situation is preying on both of us, so much so that it takes quite a bit of even Marcel's light-hearted flirting and teasing of me to finally bring a smile to Vivien's face.

"What's wrong, baby girl?" he asks eventually, slinging an arm around her shoulders. "Hank bein' bad? You need me to whoop his ass for you?"

She gives him a small grin, as if reminding herself not to let her troubles affect the people here. Not when they have plenty of problems of their own. "Hank's always being bad," she replies. "That's part of why I like him so much."

Vivien winks at me, a wicked gleam in her eyes that makes my heart trip all over itself.

"Uh- I, um-" I stutter, unsure of what to say in present company.

Which of course makes them all laugh at me- a moment of frivolity and teasing among friends.

But I see the apprehension in Vivien's eyes, and I think both of us know this respite cannot last.

No, I fear this is only the calm before a storm.
"Marcel, where's Theresa?" Vivien asks, glancing around the group of our homeless friends as they divide up this week's haul. "And Harry?"

Marcel shrugs, looking rather downcast. It's an expression that sits oddly on the young man, because he's usually always so upbeat and cheerful.

You'd think being disowned by his family and living on the streets would have a disheartening effect on a boy young enough to still be in high school, but not Marcel. This despondent attitude is far from the norm.

"I dunno," he admits. "They up and disappeared the other day."

"Not a word to any of us," Betty, a woman with a one-year-old who was quite close to Theresa, adds.

I frown. "You don't think they relapsed, do you?"

Theresa is the recovering addict who left her abusive husband. Harry, for reasons of his own, is- was?- also a former junkie trying to stay clean. Neither of them are what I'd call completely stable, but at least they were trying.

"I don't want to believe it," Betty replies, her expression anguished. "But why else would they leave without saying goodbye?"

Why, indeed?

"I wonder what happened to Theresa," Vivien mutters darkly. "She was doing so well- I hate to think she fell off the wagon, you know?"

We're currently laying on an old blanket in Central Park, trying to enjoy the lovely spring day after our weekly visit with the homeless enclave in Hell's Kitchen.

But the disappearance of her friend is clearly weighing heavily on Vivien, and I can understand why. After so many months of relatively successful sobriety, Theresa and Harry's purported relapse is a shared disappointment for all of us.

I make a noncommittal sound in reply to Vivien's observation. "It's discouraging, yes. But she still seemed a little... shaky to me," I reply diplomatically.

Vivien flips over onto her stomach, the better to see my face, and smiles sadly. "You didn't see her before," she retorts, her tone rather wry.

"Fair point," I allow, reaching out to absentley play with her long, blonde hair. I love watching it glow in the sunlight, the radiant halo it gives her. Like she's my own personal angel on earth.

"You know, I still can't believe your Professor was an addict," Vivien muses after several peaceful minutes of this. "He seemed so... serene, I guess, when I talked to him."
A couple months ago I told her about Charles' descent into alcoholism and serum addiction, as well as my part in it via my near-constant enabling. It felt cathartic to finally admit it to someone, the guilt I've carried around for so long.

Vivien was a very patient listener, and when I finished she took my face between her hands and sternly told me to stop blaming myself, that I did my best with what the horrible situation gave me. It didn't completely absolve me, but hearing her say that definitely eased my conscience somewhat.

"I know," I agree now. "But I promise he was. I had a front row seat."

I sigh, thinking of those wasted years and that feeling of being helpless, hopeless and trapped by the circumstances. No matter how bad it got, I could never quite bring myself to leave Charles- out of both loyalty to the man he was once and, I suppose, pity for his broken heart.

Vivien firmly disagreed with me when I told her that.

"It wasn't pity. It was because you had hope for him, baby," she said, stroking my face. "As long as we're alive, there's always hope for things, for people to get better."

_You have to believe that, darling, _I thought to myself at the time. _Because of your own brothers. You don't want to give up hoping that they'll somehow see reason and stop doing such terrible things, along with the rest of the Brotherhood. But I can't say I blame you for that._

"I still don't understand why people do that to themselves," I mutter presently, staring up at the bright blue sky overhead. It seems so impossible to fathom in my current state of repose, laying on my back next to Vivien. "Being in such a terrible state of mind and purposely taking something that makes them feel worse."

"I can," she says quietly. I glance over to see a wariness in her eyes, a remembered pain. "The shitty things people do to themselves- it's just a way to drown out your own voice. To kill your memories without killing yourself. That's why people do it."

"You speak like you have experience."

Vivien laughs bitterly. "Yes, well- I wasn't always the picture of perfect mental health you see before you now," she teases sarcastically, studiously picking at the blades of grass next to the blanket. "After my parents were killed... there was a rough couple of years, there. I wouldn't say I was an addict, not really, but I wasn't above a little experimentation in trying to kill some brain cells so I could forget how messed up my life was."

I can't say this revelation surprises me, not really. In a way Vivien and Charles are quite similar- they have both known suffering and the resulting self-abuse and come out the stronger for it.

"What made you stop?" I ask softly.

She shrugs. "I'm not really sure," she says. "I remember waking up one morning thinking, 'Mom and Dad wouldn't have wanted you to live this way. The world can suck sometimes, but... but there's beauty in it, too. I don't want to be numb to that anymore, to walk through my life half-asleep.'"

Vivien rolls over suddenly, so she's laying on her back with her face, eyes closed, raised towards the warm sunlight.

"I want life in all its stupid sticky rawness," she murmurs dreamily.
She glances over and gives me a radiant smile, the kind that still steals my breath no matter how many times I see it.

And now her eyes are sparkling at me, all tawny and green and lovely, and I love her.

I love this flawed, brave young woman who has seen so much and yet still clings to hope. She infects me with her zest for life, her desire to seize happiness out of every day. Everything about her calls to the things deep inside of me, like she is the answer to every question in my soul.

I love her so much that I don't think I can contain it anymore.

I think that's why the words suddenly tumble out of my mouth, as if by their own volition:

"I love you, Vivien."

It's not how I planned on telling her, not really.

I had the vague idea of giving her a flower of some sort and suavely informing her that its meaning was a declaration of love, or something otherwise appropriately romantic for the first time you tell someone those magic words.

But now they're out there in the atmosphere, beyond recall.

For a split second, an expression of incredulity flickers across Vivien's face. But then it's replaced by a joyous smile so resplendent she practically glows.

She turns onto her side and kisses me with a passion that makes my thoughts go unfocused and the sunshine suddenly feel overly-warm.

Throwing good sense to the wind, I slip my hands around her hips and pull her over so she's straddling me. Vivien purrs in reply and cradles my face, like it's something precious to her.

My elation knows no bounds, having her respond to my declaration this way. Surely, surely this means she reciprocates my feelings?

As if in answer to my silent question Vivien breaks away from the kiss, leaving us both gasping for air and allowing me to maintain my presently tenuous hold on Beast.

All I can see is her, those hazel eyes dancing and soft as she whispers, "I-"

Something over my head suddenly catches her attention, causing her to break her gaze from mine and glance up. And whatever Vivien sees immediately makes the blood drain from her face, leaving her as white as a sheet.

That's my only warning that something has gone awry.

In the next instant my arms are empty as she springs to her feet and takes off, running with a speed that's rather inadvisable for such a public setting.

Before I can even sit up and turn around, Vivien is gone without a trace.
Hurt.

That's the first thing I feel upon Vivien's desertion. A lifetime of insecurity and self-doubt causes my thoughts to immediately jump to the conclusion that she ran away from me because she was repulsed by my declaration of love.

*And why not? I'm a monster. Why would she want such a creature to love her?*

For a few minutes I wallow in my misery, but then the reality of the situation intrudes itself on my angst.

*Pull yourself together, McCoy. Since when has Vivien ever had a problem with Beast?*

She'll never admit it, out of deference to my feelings, but I actually think Vivien *prefers* me in my Beast form. It's the face I wore when we first met, the shape I take when we're kissing furiously on her bed. She's also pragmatic enough to know that my human form has its advantages as well, but still-

The fact that I'm a monster has never bothered her.

So why did she run?

I replay those last few moments in my head.

We were kissing, and then she pulled away to catch her breath. Vivien started to say something-

And then she saw something behind me. Something that seemed to terrify her, if her expression was anything to go by.

Something, or someone?

My thoughts suddenly stray to last week, when Vivien thought for a moment that we were being watched while we were embracing in Hell's Kitchen. What if we *were* seen? What if someone followed us today, and she managed to spot them-?

Forget being hurt. Now I'm terrified.

What if a Brotherhood member saw us? And Vivien spotted them and went after them-?

I spend hours combing through Central Park, fruitlessly trying to find a clue as to Vivien's well being, a way that I could help her.

In the end I have no choice but to head back to the mansion and station myself in my room, anxiously hovering next to the phone in the hopes that she'll contact me.

I have no idea how long I wait there- first attempting to read a book, then trying to go to sleep, and in the end giving up all pretense at calm and pacing my room- but it must be past midnight when I hear a knock on my door.
It's Alex, looking quite business-like.

_I hate it when you look like that. Nothing good comes of that look._

"Good, you're still awake. We need to suit up," he says seriously.

_See? It never fails._

I sigh. "What's happened?"

"The Brotherhood is hitting another warehouse," Alex explains. "The Professor thinks we'd better throw a wrench in their plans."

This perks me up slightly. "Ok."

Because what if Vivien's there? On a mission with the Brotherhood, unscathed and sheepish from frightening me with a false alarm this afternoon?

At this point I'd even gladly take a broken nose to know she's alright.

---

We find Mastermind, Scarlet Witch, and Quicksilver loading up a van at the facility in question.

But no sign of Vivien, or her brothers.

I don't have time to really bask in my disappointment, though, because the Summers boys immediately unleash their energy rays at the Brotherhood, sending them scattering.

We immediately pursue them, splitting up between inside the warehouse and the perimeter. Somehow I end up inside, on my own as I patrol the corridors.

Ostensibly I'm trying to clear the building, but let's be honest. I'm really just looking for Vivien.

_Though now that I think about it, wandering around alone probably isn't the best idea..._

After a few minutes I enter a room full of stacked shelving units, intending to check it over for Brotherhood members (or really just one)-

Suddenly the door shuts behind me with an audible, ominous snap.

"What have we here, Jackal?" a male voice calls out in a chilling tone. "Looks like a big, blue fur ball."

I immediately recognize the speaker- it's Fox. Calling for Jackal.

Meaning I'm now trapped with two feral males who bear me a great deal of ill will just for existing.

_Damnation._

I turn to see Fox now guarding the door, his fangs bared as he stares me down. Within moments Jackal appears at his side, his face lighting up with insane joy when he catches sight of me.

"I've been waiting for this," Jackal murmurs gleefully, loud enough for me to hear. "I told you I owed you one, Beast."

Clearly, I'm not in a good situation. Even the alpha male feral in me can acknowledge that a two-
on-one fight would not be to my best advantage, need for dominance notwithstanding.

And the fact that these two are the only living relatives of the woman I love doesn't help matters, either.

*Is Vivien here? Surely she won't stand for this? Won't she try to distract them, like she did the last time Jackal tried to goad me into a fight?*

My eyes dart around, searching for a sign of her.

"Vixen's not here," Fox says, eyeing me closely.

I freeze.

*Uh oh.*

"What? You don't think we've noticed how you look at our sister?" Fox jeers. "How she looks at you? Ever since she came back from the X-Geeks she's been spouting all this peacenik bull, and I know exactly who put that dangerous shit in her head. You obviously got to know each other while she was at the school."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I retort, trying to make my tone as condescending and arrogant as possible.

Fox snorts derisively, clearly not fooled. "Yeah, sure. But I've got some bad news for you, Fur Ball. You're going to have to find some other girl to drool over. All that talk about humans worked a little too well on her, because Vixen's been sneaking out to see some goofy-looking nerd."

So it seems my hypothesis was correct. It sounds like Vivien caught someone watching us and went after them- I'm assuming to protect me.

The fact that apparently Fox and Jackal are much more observant than we gave them credit for, if they noticed the longing looks exchanged between Vivien and I during the past few months, also strikes me. And it sounds like they blame me for her change of heart in regards to the violent methods and anti-human philosophy of the Brotherhood.

*Wonderful. Just wonderful.*

My decided lack of response seems to puzzle Fox, if the glance he exchanges with Jackal is anything to go by. Clearly, they both thought I would react with jealousy to the revelation of Vivien's supposed perfidy.

"Oh well. She won't be sneaking out for anybody anymore, will she, Jackal?" Fox sneers finally.

*Anymore? What?*

It feels like a ball of ice just dropped into the pit of my stomach, turning my veins glacial. Something about his tone makes me foolishly forget my feigned indifference and fills me with fear.

I suddenly snarl, surprising them both. "What did you do to her?" I demand, baring my fangs.

Both brothers are silent for a long moment as they process my reaction to the threat to Vivien's safety, following so closely on the heels of my nonchalance towards her apparent disloyalty to our "romance."
And I know, with a sinking, dreadful certainty, that I just gave myself away.

"It's him," Jackal says, his eyes gleaming eagerly. "Beast is the goofy dork."

Again with the "goofy dork" description. Am I really that bad?

"You think so?" Fox asks speculatively.

I try to recover, though I fear it's useless now. "Oh, please," I snap, gesturing to myself. "I'm clearly as far from human as a mutant can get."

A shadow of doubt clouds the older brother's face, but Jackal is unfazed. "Quicksilver says he's got a drug that makes him look human," he mutters distractedly. It appears that the tension is making him tetchier than usual.

Fox looks startled. "Why didn't you say something before?"

"Because it's ridiculous," I interject impatiently.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But we're still going to kill you either way," Fox interrupts, with a sickening grin.

"Yes," Jackal agrees, his face lit up with maniacal delight.

The Babineaux brothers exchange a look, and begin to stalk forward.

Towards their prey.

"Gentlemen, is violence really necessary?" I ask, backing up slightly.

Fox and Jackal laugh, but don't slow their progress. Their mincing, careful steps are bringing them closer, closer-

"Is violence really necessary?" Jackal mimics disdainfully. My hackles raise instinctively in response to his derision. "Jesus, what kind of feral are you?"

A different kind. Just like your sister.

And with a roar, both ferals launch themselves at me.
My first move is an emotional response, rather than a logical one.

I know, rationally speaking, that I should try to take out Fox - the elder, stronger, and cleverer brother - first. But I also know how Vivien feels about Jackal, and how he ignores his own limits once he fixates on something in his madness. I don't want a prolonged fight against the younger feral and run the risk of grievously wounding him.

As such, I waste a precious millisecond knocking a shelving unit onto Jackal, who snarls in surprise and disappointed rage when it collapses on him. Fox uses the opportunity of my diverted attention to attempt a flying tackle on my unprotected back.

Thankfully I'm able to turn just in time to deliver a hard, open-palmed blow to his solar plexus. He stumbles back, clutching his chest and gasping, but quickly recovers and makes another charge towards me. I manage to get a grip on his wrists - ignoring the way his long claws pierce into the flesh of my knuckles - and use one of my opposable feet to wrap around his ankle and make him lose his footing.

Fox causes a rather sickening crash when I send him flying, face-first, into another set of shelving units.

I begin to back away towards the door - and sweet escape - keeping up a low, warning growl as I do.

But I don't leave fast enough. Jackal, who has now struggled free of his bookcase dilemma, makes a running leap for me right before I reach the exit. I easily dodge his attack, causing him to slam into the wall... and allowing him to block me from the exit again.

While I'm otherwise occupied, Fox recovers from his own mishap and makes a fresh assault against me.

I've got to hand it to them - their ability to work in tandem is admirable, especially considering how rare it is for feral males to coexist together, let alone fight side-by-side. By the time I parry an advance from one brother, the other recoups enough to come at me from another angle without giving me enough time to fully regain my own balance.

I'm faster than they are, though, and stronger than either of them on their own. My problem lays in the fact that as a lone combatant I will eventually fatigue long before my opponents.

I need to end this quickly, or Vivien's brothers are going to tear me apart.


Me, a coward? This coming from the guy who's attacking someone two-on-one, I think sardonically.

I'm well aware that he's trying to bait me into abandoning my defensive position - and in the process expending more energy - so I don't react beyond baring my fangs at him in disgust.

This nonchalance seems like the last straw for Fox and Jackal.
With a roar, Fox makes a direct run for me. But I'm ready for it- I sidestep him, grab a hold of his head, and brutally slam his forehead into the wall.

He's still falling to the floor, unconscious, when Jackal makes a leap for my back.

And this time I'm not fast enough to stop him.

His claws rake my chest as he latches onto me, but I manage to reach back and grab his neck with one hand before he's able to sink his teeth into my jugular. My other hand goes to trap his wrists, to keep him from ripping out my larynx.

Jackal's snarls are deafening in my ear as he strains against my grip, doing his utmost to kill me.

"Jackal, stop this," I order through gritted teeth. "Do you really want to kill your own kind? Think about why you're doing this-"

"Shut up! All you X-Geeks do is talk!" he howls, and struggles harder. I can see in my peripheral vision that he's now frothing at the mouth and looking utterly mad.

Well, then. There's nothing else for it, is there?

I turn and slam my body backward, sandwiching Jackal between myself and the wall. I tighten my grip on his throat and hold on, waiting until his flailing ceases and he falls unconscious due to lack of oxygen. He slumps to the floor when I finally release him and step away to observe my handiwork.

Both brothers are out cold. Jackal is barely even breathing.

I'm sure feral males are supposed to feel exhilarated and hopped up on testosterone after winning a battle for dominance like this. I should feel on top of the world right now, having fully asserted my alpha male status against these two.

But all I feel is heartsick.

May 14, 1975

The next day is perhaps the worst of my life- ranked right up there, I think, with the night I transformed into Beast and the following day when I held Charles while he brokenly sobbed after losing Erik, Raven, and his legs.

That sensation of hopelessness, the feeling that nothing would ever be alright again- it's all too familiar to me, and it dogs my steps now.

I'm horrified by the violence I was forced to portray against Fox and Jackal. It doesn't matter that I had no choice but to fight them or else lose my own life- I still hated having to do that. I mean, I almost strangled someone to death.

And that someone happened to be the baby brother of the woman I love. Will Vivien even forgive me for that sort of transgression? Will she understand that I was only trying to defend myself?

Now more than ever do I wish I had a way of getting in contact with her. To have a chance to explain myself, to ask for forgiveness and, most importantly, ask if she's alright after Fox's insinuations.

But I don't. Short of going into the City, breaking into Vivien's safe house and waiting for her
there, I have no way of reaching out to her.

*Darling, where are you?*

---

It's late by the time I return to my room for the night on Wednesday, after a long day of trying to drown myself in work in the laboratory. Once inside I head for the bathroom and remove my shirt so I can do a routine check on the wounds Jackal gave me the previous day.

Thankfully the scratches aren't as deep as I originally thought they would be, considering the sting I felt when he made them. Between the uniform and my fur, Jackal barely drew any blood. The wounds at this point are basically only raised welts.

I feel lucky to have escaped the insane feral relatively unscathed, especially when I remember what he did to Angel. The scratches Fox left on my hands are healing up as well. In a few days, there won't be any physical evidence of the altercation between the three of us.

Mentally, of course, it's a different story.

My anxiety and despair seem to increase with every passing moment, all revolving around a certain feral female.

Is Vivien alright, or have her brothers done something to her? Did they tell Erik about our relationship? Is she being punished because of me at this very moment? Is she *dead*?

"*These violent delights have violent ends,*" I murmur gloomily to my own reflection. All the disquiet is making me even more pessimistic than usual.

Because Vivien and I have known we were star-crossed lovers from the very beginning. Two people on opposing teams who fell for each other, even though they had every reason not to. A connection that burned too brightly, obscuring good sense and prudence.

Just like *Romeo and Juliet*, that damnable play that Vivien likes so much.

And now I fear she and I are racing towards our own tragic ending, like a train that's lost its brakes. For all I know, Vivien has already met a terrible fate.

I shake my head to clear it of the horrific mental images assaulting me and grab my shirt, stepping out of the bathroom with the intention of retrieving my pajamas and getting ready for bed-

And then I stop in my tracks.

Because sitting on the edge of my bed, idly playing with a loose thread on my comforter, is Vivien.
"V-vivien," I sputter, dropping my shirt in surprise.

To say her appearance is unexpected would be an understatement. Where has she been? How did she even get in here?

She smiles wryly. "Hi, Hank," she murmurs, rising to her feet.

And then she's in my arms, alive, and I'm holding her tightly and peppering the faint bruises and scratches on her cheeks and forehead with kisses while I ask repeatedly if she's ok.

"Are you ok? You're ok, aren't you? My stars and garters, Vivien-"

"I'm fine, baby, I'm fine," she assures, kissing me back just as feverishly.

Her fingers delicately trace the healing wounds on my chest, just a whisper of a touch that somehow makes my nerve endings forget that they're supposed to be registering pain signals. Not... other sensations.

"Are you ok? What happened to you?" Vivien asks.

I wince. "Your brothers happened," I reply succinctly. "Vivien, they know about us."

"Yeah, they know I've been seeing a human-"

"No, darling, they know about us. Beast and Vixen seeing each other."

And I quickly detail the events of the night before, while Vivien's expression darkens further and further.

"Fuck," she mutters, leaning her forehead against my chest. "This has fallen apart really, really fast."

"It has indeed," I agree helplessly. I gently lift her chin, so I can examine her face. The fresh bruises, the thin scratches along her cheek. "What happened to you, Vivien? I've been worried sick."

"Yesterday I caught a glimpse of James watching us in the park," Vivien explains. "And I took off after him, wanting to get him away from you. We fought, but he stuck me with something and knocked me out."

I frown. "Does he usually carry a sedative?"

"No, that's definitely new," she tells me, looking rather grumpy about that. "Anyway, I woke up back at base, locked up. And they had Mastermind work on me for a bit..."

Vivien shivers, and I hold her tighter.

Mastermind.

A mutant who can build such detailed mental illusions that you can't help but think they're real.
He's not a telepath, not really, but the Brotherhood uses him to distract their enemies with his mind games. He's the one who Erik planned on using to torture Spyke into madness.

The thought of him attempting the same on Vivien makes my blood run cold.

She looks up and gives me a grim smile. "It'll take more than that asshole to break me," she assures me. But then her expression falls. "The worst part was Wanda and Peter telling me to stop fighting it. No one wanted to tell Magneto what's been going on, what I've been doing and saying, because they're afraid of what he'll do to me. But not even they were on my side, not really. Still, I promised them I would think about it while they were gone on whatever mission they had last night. I don't think they expected me to be able to get out of that room, but I did. I escaped, grabbed my stuff, and cleared out of base before they came back. I've been laying low all day, waiting to come talk to you."

"How'd you get past the security system?" I ask, mildly curious.

That old mischievous sparkle is back in her eyes. "You know I have a talent for getting into places I shouldn't be, Hank. Just leave it at that."

I sigh and decide not to pursue that issue right now. Not when there are much more serious problems to consider.

"What will you do now, Vivien? Your brothers know you've been sneaking around with an X-Man. If they haven't told Erik already they probably will soon."

"I'm not really sure," she admits in a small, rather fragile voice. "I mean, I think it's safe to say I'm officially not part of the Brotherhood anymore, but..."

"Are you thinking about running away?"

About leaving me?

If Vivien decided to leave New York, would she want me to come with her? Or would she feel too guilty about asking me to abandon my entire life here for her? In which case, could I demand that she take me with her?

It's the first time I've seriously considered leaving all of this behind. The X-Men, my friends, my laboratory, the only home I've known for over a decade...

Could I turn my back on all of it? All of them? Bow out of the fight for mutant equality?

Suddenly I feel a bone-deep weariness settle over me.

I'm tired of wondering if there will come a day when I won't be able to save one of my teammates, of using my gifts to design newer, more efficient ways and weapons to hurt other mutants with our equipment. I'm tired of fighting this endless war, of being a piece in the chess match between Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr.

So very tired.

Yes, I think at this moment if Vivien asked me to run away with her I would do it without hesitation.

"I'm not running away," she replies firmly, shaking her head. "I can't just walk away from this, knowing Magneto is planning something big. I guess I'll hang around the area, try to piece together
what I can."

She grins sadly.

"But if I did take off- would you come with me if I asked?"

I simply nod.

"You'd leave all of this behind?" Her tone is incredulous. "Your friends, your lab? Your home?"

"In a heartbeat," I tell her honestly.

Vivien's eyes close as that sinks in. And when she opens them again, they're swimming in unshed tears. "God, I don't deserve you," she mutters. "I've brought you nothing but misery, and still-"

"No, you haven't, Vivien," I retort. "I've never felt so happy in my life as when I'm spending time with you. To be honest, just thinking about you makes me smile like a complete buffoon."

She lets out a surprised chuckle.

"What we have isn't easy, darling. But it's been worth it," I admit. "To me, anyway."

Vivien grins shyly and cups my face to pull me down for a soft, sweet kiss. "Trust me, you're worth it," she whispers, her eyes shining up at me. "I love you, Hank."

Forget butterflies in my stomach. It feels like there's an entire zoo in there, hearing her say those words to me for the first time.

_Could she really-?_

I close my eyes and reach up to grip her wrists gently. "Say that again."

"I love you, Hank," she repeats, and the smile I hear in her voice makes me meet her gaze again. "Jesus, Hank, how could I not? I love everything about you. I love that intense look on your face when you're explaining some theory I'll never understand. But I listen anyway, because I love the sound of your voice and how you're too cute for words when you talk about science and junk."

I duck my head and grin sheepishly, feeling my ears go warm.

"I love how it feels when you hold me, and the butterflies I get when you smile. I had no idea how much you would end up meaning to me when I first saw you, but now... You're my everything, Hank. And I love you for exactly who you are, and- and who I am when I'm with you."

You are not going to cry, McCoy. There's just something in your eye.

"I love you too, Vivien," I manage to get out in a steady voice. "More than words can say."

And whatever comes next, I think as she smiles and pulls me down for a kiss, _I promise to face it with you, by your side._
Swept Away (Rated M to be safe)

Chapter Notes

Just a warning, this chapter is rather citrusy in flavor. Nothing too explicit, but rated M to be safe.

Swept Away

The kiss starts out sweetly enough, but quickly turns heated as the entire world falls away from us both and leaves us to be consumed by our own passion.

Vivien and I have made out so often that I've lost count of how many hours we've spent entwined on her bed and kissing ardently. To be alone with her like that, to feel the intimacy between us- to me it's been its own form of heaven.

But by unspoken agreement neither of us have ever tried to go beyond- what's the term?- heavy petting, if you will. The risk that I could lose control of myself in the heat of the moment if we went farther than that (and let's face it, third base was temptation enough) and mark Vivien was just too much of a gamble to take.

And to claim her as my mate would be to cut her off irrevocably from her brothers for the rest of her life, as they would never tolerate their sister being bonded to an X-Man.

But tonight we're forgetting all of those reasons and fears.

Tonight we're both too caught up in the emotions of it all- the gratitude and joy that we're both alive after our respective ordeals, the elation of newly admitted, reciprocated love- to give thought to the consequences anymore. Tonight we're both living in the moment, whatever the possible repercussions.

I'm not sure who starts us moving towards the bed first, her or I. Perhaps it's a synchronous decision. But by the time Vivien's back hits the mattress she's deftly undone my pants and kindly helped me remove her dress and bra without me making too much of a fool of myself.

I barely manage to avoid falling on my face as I finish taking off my own clothing. I don't even remember where I end up setting my glasses. I'm too busy drinking in the sight of the lovely creature in front of me. The long, graceful legs, her adorable little feet, the elegant curve of her waist, the swell of her small, perfectly-shaped-

Vivien smirks and raises her eyebrows, her expression falling somewhere between flattered, amused and- maybe even a little shy?- under my intense gaze.

Oh, no. Stop staring, you weirdo.

"You're even more beautiful than I imagined," I blurt out honestly.

And that just makes you seem creepy, idiot.

But she merely giggles. "And exactly how often have you pictured me naked?" she teases,
provocatively arching her back.

My face warms up unbearably.

"Oh, Hank," Vivien chides, shifting on the bed so she's on her knees in front of me. She wraps her hands around my neck and pulls me in for a gentle kiss. The sensation of her bare chest flush against mine wrecks all sorts of havoc with my blood pressure. "I've thought about you like that, too."

"Yeah?"

"Mhmm," she murmurs. She rubs her nose against mine affectionately as her claws start skimming through my hair, down my back. "I think both of us have wanted this for a long time."

"I know I have," I admit, holding her close.

I'm starting to tremble, my body- and Beast- reacting instinctively to her tantalizing attentions. Every molecule, every atom that makes up my cells seems to yearn towards Vivien with an intensity that borders on agony.

"Then what are you waiting for?" she whispers seductively into my ear.

And just like that, I'm a goner.

With a low growl I shift into Beast, the hands on her waist spouting blue fur and claws. In the blink of an eye we're on the bed and I'm covering her body with mine, kissing everywhere I can reach. I'm savoring every inch of her, taking Vivien in with every sense at my disposal- her flowery-sunshine scent, the sweet taste of her mouth, the feel of her satiny skin...

I want to imprint all of this into my mind forever. Because what if this is the only chance I'll ever get, to show her how much she means to me?

"I love you, Vivien," I murmur against her neck, before my lips travel south- very south. The way she shivers and clutches at my hair makes me smile against her skin.

"Hank, please-" Vivien whispers insistently after a few minutes, tugging at my shoulders to get my attention. Then she wraps her legs around my hips, and I once again can't help marveling at the manner in which our bodies fit together so perfectly.

Almost like- like we were made for each other. Like perhaps there is such a thing as destiny, and we've always been fated to find each other, to fall in love all along.

I think that's why I'm not as nervous as I thought I'd be, this being my first time and all. I thought I'd be terrified of ruining the experience somehow, or feel so awkward I would freeze up. I'm aware that Vivien has done this before, and I thought I'd be agonizing over not measuring up to expectations, the inevitable comparisons with previous lovers.

But I'm not.

That's not to say I don't have some anxiety- I want to do everything right for Vivien, to make sure she enjoys it. But with her, there's no need to feel the crippling self-consciousness that has dogged my steps for my entire life. With her, I am comfortable to just be... me.

Blue, clawed, and furry me.
Making love to Vivien is the first time I've actually *liked* my body, this form of flesh and fur that has always felt more like a prison than anything else. But how can I really hate something that gives her so much delight?

"Do you like this?" I ask several times- not out of a propensity for "dirty talk" or anything, but because I want to know what she wants. I'm relatively sure she's enjoying herself, if her intoxicating scent and the noises she's making are anything to go by, but some reassurance never hurt. Especially when we're being so utterly vulnerable to each other.

I *need* to know that I'm doing this right, that I'm satisfying Vivien fully. To show her without words how deeply I love her. I want her to desire me the same way I crave her, for her to *need* my touch the way I need hers. At one point after I ask Vivien *again* if she likes what I'm doing she chuckles breathlessly, her gorgeous hazel eyes sparkling up at me like stars. It feels like there's an entire universe contained inside of her, a place where I will lose myself completely.

"For the thousandth time, baby, yes," she replies exasperatedly. "So whatever you do, *please* don't stop."

So I don't.

I allow myself to be swept up and carried away by my instincts, the animalistic urges that have plagued me since I became a feral but I now find myself feeling grateful for. Once I stop questioning myself I realize that I know intuitively what to do to Vivien, how to please her. Letting go of my self-control, being with her like this, feels as natural as breathing.

In a way, this is just as much about Hank making love to Vivien as it is about Beast and Vixen finally being allowed to act on the primal, magnetic attraction between them that's existed almost since we first met. It's a true union of our feral and more conscious selves, the duality in each of us finding its perfect match in the other.

I'm so caught up in the sensations of it all that I completely forget myself when that final moment comes. I'm too lost in the euphoric expression on Vivien's face, the look in her eyes as she completely falls apart in my arms to keep a hold of myself- and my more primal instincts.

As I follow her over the edge, into bliss, I lean in and sink my fangs into her neck, in the space right below her ear.

Forever marking Vivien as mine.
May 15, 1975

My first action upon waking is to inhale deeply, breathing in the heavenly aroma surrounding my nose. I bury my face in the sunshine-flower scented hair that-

Wait, what?

I lift my head slightly to take stock of my circumstances.

I'm currently in my bed, naked, furry, and halfway draped across an equally nude Vivien, who's laying on her stomach. The fingers of my left hand are laced with hers, and the finger-toes of my left foot are gently gripping her ankle. Moments ago I'd been sleeping with my face buried in her long-presently rather wild-white-blonde hair.

Vivien's head is turned away from mine, but the sound of her breathing makes me suspect that she's waking up as well.

I lean in and kiss her bare, freckly shoulder. "Good morning," I murmur, testing my theory.

She hums and turns over, keeping our hands locked. Her eyes are hazy from sleep still, but I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful sight than the woman I love first thing in the morning.

"'Morning," she replies, with a slightly drowsy-and incredibly sexy-grin.

It's a smile that ties my stomach in knots and brings the events of last night to mind. The expression is too reminiscent of the way Vivien looked at me as I worshiped her body with mine mere hours before.

Suddenly I feel rather bashful, remembering the things we did to each other, and my cheeks warm accordingly. "Did you sleep well?" I ask awkwardly, brushing a claw through her bangs.

Vivien rolls her eyes and chuckles. "I slept fine, Hank," she replies. She cups my face in her hands. "Are you really going to get all shy on me now?"

I shrug unhelpfully. My face must be bright purple by now.

"You are such a dork sometimes, I swear," she says, laughing outright. And then she kisses me thoroughly before resting her forehead against mine.

Now her lovely, sparkling hazel eyes fill my vision, the black rings around her irises causing the green and gold to stand out in stark relief.

And she is so, so unbearably beautiful to me right now, tangled hair and all. Just looking at Vivien sends a warm, blissful tingling sensation through my veins, like drinking hot chocolate on a cold winter's day.

I'm so lucky that she loves me. That she's mine...

"I love you," I whisper fervently, wanting to hear her say those words again.
Vivien's smile is like pure sunlight. "I love you," she replies.

The kiss she gives me quickly escalates into something more, the passion between us igniting like flames consuming dry brush. Our hands begin to wander, as do my lips when I begin to rove the peaks and valleys of her body-

Vivien lets out a choked gasp when I kiss a trail up her neck and reach the space right below her ear.

I pull back, suddenly uncertain-

And get a glimpse of the fresh imprint of my fangs standing out brightly against her skin.

_Oh, right. I forgot about that._

We were admittedly a little too... _caught up in the moment_ last night for my impulsive action to truly register. But now I can fully examine the emotions that wash over me upon the realization that Vivien and I are now bonded for life.

I'm a little frightened of the complications we will inevitably face, given our circumstances, and anxious as to what her reaction will be- especially since we didn't speak of this beforehand.

But mostly I feel happy.

_More_ than happy, really. I feel elated, ecstatic, jubilant, euphoric... the English language is much too limited to describe the joy I'm experiencing, knowing that Vivien will always be mine.

And then I catch sight of her expression.

Which is, in a word, horrified.

_Uh oh._

"You marked me?" she snarls, her fingers tentatively probing the wound in question.

I quickly scoot away, wincing at her tone. "It appears so," I reply weakly.

"Jesus. We have sex _one time_ and- and you didn't even ask, dammit," she fumes. She sits up, only to despairingly put her face in her hands. "Oh my God."

I sit up as well, completely at a loss for words. Vivien's less-than-thrilled reaction to the concept of being my mate is definitely a cause for dismay.

_Can I really blame her, though?_

I'm suddenly awash with guilt. She's right- it's not like we _talked_ about becoming mates. I just... made the decision for both of us, because I lost control of myself. She said she loved me, yes, but does she want to spend the rest of her life with me?

_This is my fault. I should've asked her..._

"I'm sorry, Vivien," I murmur sincerely, reaching out to gently stroke her back. "I forgot myself for a moment, and-"

She snorts bitterly. "Did you?"
I pull back, feeling stung. "What are you implying?"

Vivien's eyes are sparking with anger when she finally meets my gaze. "This is what you wanted, right?" she hisses, clambering out of bed and slipping on her bra and panties in a flash. "To cut me off from my brothers for good? Looks like I don't have a choice now, do I? They'll never listen to me again."

The allegation makes my hackles raise.

Suddenly we've regressed to the antagonistic relationship we shared previously, back before we became friends at Alkali Lake. But now I no longer find her anger amusing.

Not when the woman I love is accusing me of something so heinous.

"You caught me," I agree sarcastically. I get out of bed and replace my own underwear as well. "All this time, I've been secretly plotting to force you to leave your brothers. That's why I've been lying to my friends and sneaking out to see you for months. I had some sort of dastardly plan to lure you away from the relatives who abuse and belittle you and literally just tried to have you brain washed. Not because I love you and was willing to accept any sort of relationship you could give me, as long as I could be with you in some way."

Vivien glowers at me, and for a moment I scowl right back. We're standing in the middle of my room clad only in our undergarments, absolutely furious with one another.

This doesn't exactly bode well for our future, does it?

But I quickly find that I can't maintain my anger. I know why she's acting this way- she's terrified of what will happen now, just as I am. And I'm well aware of my own culpability in this situation.

I sigh. "Vivien, I'm truly sorry for losing control like that. I never wanted to destroy your relationship with your brothers- even if I can't fathom why you'd still want one after what they did to you the other night," I tell her. "Or the way they've treated you in the past. I don't think you understand what a trial it's been not to rip Fox's throat out every time he hits you."

Her expression flickers, and she pensively purses her lips. Like she's begrudgingly considering the fact that I may be right about James and Myles.

Family or not, they don't deserve her. Not by a long shot.

"And I'm sorry that we didn't talk this over beforehand," I continue. "But I'm not sorry that I'm your mate now. Because I love you, and I've known for a while that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And when you realize something like that, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."

Now Vivien stares at me with a torn expression on her face- a strange mixture of love and a terrible sadness. But she no longer seems angry with me, for which I'm grateful.

"The rest of our lives," she whispers finally. "Hank- I'm kinda an endangered species right now. If-if we're just two idiots in love and the Brotherhood knocks me off, it'll hurt for a while, but one day you'll get over me. But if we're mates and I don't make it..."

Simply put, I'll never recover.
"Or if they killed you to get to me, if you died because of me-" Vivien continues. Her voice chokes on the words, her expression anguished. "I-"

She cuts herself off and turns away- I think in an attempt to compose herself.

And truthfully, I could use a minute myself.

I'm rather relieved she's not angry that now she's basically "stuck" with me forever, the way I feared she might be.

Instead Vivien's thoughts are of me, of my possible death at the hands of her brothers or what would happen to me in the aftermath should she fall victim to the Brotherhood's revenge. From what I've heard, ferals don't do so well after the loss of their mates. They never recover from the trauma. I don't even want to imagine what my life would be like should I lose her now.

But the strange thing is, while I'm certainly worried, the more I think about it the more I realize that I'm actually not afraid of the future anymore- and that's despite how utterly impossible our current situation may be. Being with Vivien, knowing she belongs with me now, is enough to banish such fears.

I step forward and wrap my arms around her from behind, holding her close. Then I quietly repeat Romeo's speech to Friar Lawrence as he tries to convince the man to perform his marriage to Juliet in her ear:

"Amen, amen. But come what sorrow can,  
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy  
That one short minute gives me in her sight.  
Do thou but close our hands with holy words,  
Then love-devouring death do what he dare;  
It is enough that I may but call her mine."

Vivien listens breathlessly to my recitation, and when I kiss the mark on her neck I feel her skin warm under my lips.

"I thought you didn't like Romeo and Juliet?" she whispers, her voice a little shaky.

"I don't," I reply, "but it seems rather apropos to the situation at hand. I won't give up hope that somehow this will all work itself out. But even if it doesn't... I can face anything the future throws at us, darling, as long as you're mine."

"I see," she murmurs.

And for what feels like an eternity, neither of us moves.

I'm waiting tensely for Vivien to decide how she feels about all of this, whether she'll forgive me for what I did to her. I hold her as tightly as I dare, barely able to breathe from the agony of uncertainty.

And then-
Vivien suddenly turns around in my embrace so we're facing each other once more. A tentative, teasing smile is playing across her lips. "I guess if I'm yours, you're mine. Right?" she asks.

A fatuous grin crosses my face. "Right."

She giggles and pulls me down for a kiss.

Then I gratefully enfold her in my embrace, inhaling the sweet smell of her hair. Thanks to our mating there's now a hint of my scent mixed in with hers, just as my own now reflects her aroma.

It's actually rather soothing, this tangible evidence of our bond.

But I still find myself wanting... more.

"Vivien?"

"Hmm?" she asks, cuddling against my chest.

"Will you marry me?"

To my astonishment she begins to laugh incredulously, actually throwing back her head in mirth. "Marry you? Is being mated for life not commitment enough or something?"

I wince, feeling rather chagrined over the reception to my proposal.

"Seriously, Hank, why do you want to get married?" Vivien presses, a curious frown on her face.

"Well... I didn't ask you to be my mate," I explain haltingly. "I stole that choice from you. But I'm hoping that you'll choose to be my wife."

I swallow thickly.

"And besides," I continue, my voice taking on a pleading tone. "The way I see it, this is just another way to belong to each other."

Vivien eyes me warily for a moment and lets out a long, exasperated sigh.

"What?" I ask defensively.

"I couldn't say 'no' to that, even if I wanted to," she gripes.

"Does that mean you're saying 'yes'?

She nods, smiling at the joyful look on my face.

I pick her up and swing her around in circles while she giggles in delight, too elated to care about acting like a lovesick fool.

But maybe that's because I am a lovesick fool? Despite my previous disdain for Romeo, I'm really starting to identify with him.

Which is a very frightening thought.

Still- I can't explain why it matters so much, because as mates we're bound together far more strongly than a mere piece of paper. But I really want to be lawfully married to Vivien.

For us to be tied together in every possible way.
"When?" I ask eagerly, holding her close.

She shrugs. "I have no plans today. Want to hit up a justice of the peace?" she asks. "Unless you want something fancier?"

I shake my head. "I don't care how it happens," I reply honestly. "As long as we're married."

Vivien wrinkles her nose. "I wonder if you're always going to be so sickeningly romantic the morning after sex?" she teases, reaching up to ruffle my hair fondly. "I guess I'll find out."

"I guess you will."

She smiles and gives me a quick kiss before stepping out of my embrace and beginning to pick up her clothes.

I frown in confusion. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah," Vivien replies, slipping on her dress. "I've gotta get out of here before too many people are up and about. What will your neighbors think if they see me leaving in last night's clothes?"

"But..." I protest, "do you have to-?"

"It's my wedding day, baby," she interjects with a saucy grin. "I only get the one. I want to look nice."

How can I argue with that reason?

Oh right, I can't.

Not when she's showing enthusiasm over our upcoming nuptials, however impromptu they may be. Especially considering her initial reaction to my proposal.

Though perhaps I shouldn't be too surprised. Once Vivien has decided on something, she throws herself into it with avid vigor—perhaps too much at times. But in all honesty, that fire and zeal is just one of the many reasons I love her.

As such, I choose to acquiesce to her decision with grace.

"Fine," I agree. "And I suppose I should get you a ring? To make up for the anticlimactic nature of my proposal?"

Vivien laughs. "Oh, yeah. A great big one," she replies. It's hard to tell if she's being sarcastic or not.

She skips over to my window seat and hops up onto it with bird-like grace.

I trail along as well, suddenly very nervous about Vivien taking her leave as the vision of Fox and Jackal patrolling the edge of the school's grounds, waiting for their sister to leave its safety, flashes through my head.

They'll be aware that she escaped the Brotherhood base by now, after all. And they know— to some extent, at least— about our clandestine relationship. It wouldn't be much of a leap of logic for Fox and Jackal to assume that Vivien sought refuge here at the mansion with me.

So if she leaves it...
"Vivien- perhaps it would be better if you stayed here," I offer tentatively, giving voice to my anxiety.

She freezes in the act of unfastening the window sash and eyes me warily over her shoulder. "You're worried about my brothers finding me, aren't you?"

I mutely nod.

Vivien sighs and turns around so she can slip her hands around my neck. "I'm not going anywhere besides my apartment and the courthouse," she explains patiently.

"But what if they know about your-?"

"I moved it right after I escaped the base the other night. Now I'm down in Chelsea."

"You moved all that stuff by yourself in one night?" I ask incredulously.

"You'd be surprised what I can do when I'm motivated. And trust me, I was motivated," she replies. "I borrowed a truck and-"

"Borrowed?"

Vivien grins at my incredulity. "Well... I didn't ask if I could use it, if that's what you mean. But I did leave it in front of a police station with the keys in the ignition. And a few bucks for gas money. I may be a thief, but I'm an honorable thief," she says, full of mock sincerity.

I purse my lips.

"You're still such a stuffy goody-goody," she observes, laughing at my obvious disapproval.

She leans down to kiss me sweetly.

"And I wouldn't change a thing."
I Do

Vivien again turns to go.

"Does this mean you're not angry with me?" I blurt out. Mostly because I'm trying to stall her from leaving, but also because I truly want to know.

I mean, she said she would marry me. Surely that means she's not too upset about the way I marked her without her consent.

Right?

"Oh, I'm furious," Vivien replies, though her tone is too light to be truly cutting. "But I know you'll make it up to me, somehow. And besides- to be honest... it was sorta inevitable, anyway."

"It was?"

"Yup. We can't fight fate like this. Don't tell me you can't feel it, baby," she murmurs, grinning wryly. She playfully taps my nose with a claw-tipped finger. "Didn't you know? We're star-crossed lovers."

And then, after pressing a quick kiss to my lips, she jumps right out of my second-story window and disappears into the mansion's grounds.

I can't shake my unease after Vivien's departure, especially considering her parting words. They echo my melancholy sentiments from the previous night, before her sudden appearance in my bedroom, much too closely.

She seems to think our love is written in the stars, meant to be. That it was inevitable, despite our being on enemy teams, that we would fall for each other.

Just like Romeo and Juliet.

Does that mean we're also fated to meet the same untimely end? At the moment, with all of the odds stacked against us...

I try to shake off the foreboding that threatens to settle over me.

We're getting married today.

It's a joyous occasion, and I'm determined to focus only on the happiness ahead for Vivien and I. No matter how short lived it may be.

I debate on whether I should actually buy Vivien a ring, but in the end I decide to make her one-just as I did with the earrings I gave her at Christmas.

It's a simple enough procedure to make a diamond, believe it or not. I accidentally stumbled upon the method one day several years ago.

And when I say "accidentally," I mean I discovered it by inadvertently blowing up half my laboratory.
But after further investigation I developed a much safer (and less destructive) way to do it. It's not something I've mentioned to anyone- I can imagine the kind of havoc such a discovery would wreak on the world's economy- and I have no particular desire for great wealth, anyway.

Instead I simply plan on making a worthy ring for my gorgeous wife-to-be.

A great big one, as requested.

After all, if Vivien doesn't understand by now that I will always try to make her happy in any way that's in my power, she's quickly going to learn.

I can't help chuckling to myself as I set down to work.

If anyone told me a year ago that I'd be marrying the enigmatic feral female who had recently given me a concussion and held a knife to my throat, I would've politely asked them what kind of medication they needed to be on.

But here we are.

Far from being the heartless little minx I originally judged her to be, Vivien is highly compassionate and kind to those she deems worthy. She's introspective and deep, though she doesn't always know how to communicate her private musings.

We're similar that way.

In a lot of ways, really- more than I could've imagined at first. For the past several months we have been each other's escape from a war neither of us wanted to be a part of in the first place. We're both trying to do the best we can with the hand life's dealt us.

And now we'll do it together.

Vivien fills the vague yearning, the muted sadness I've always felt in my soul, even though I've almost always appeared outwardly serene.

I think it's safe to say that life hasn't been very kind to me thus far. I grew up listening to my mother tell me, "God made you this way for a reason" with tears in her eyes after every folk remedy and prayer meeting didn't cure me. I let the bullies hit me because I felt they were right- I was a freak, some sort of monster that needed to be fixed.

And I tried.

I tried so hard to fix myself, to be like everyone else, and instead everything fell apart. It made me think that I wasn't meant for happiness, that I was meant to remain the lonely man I grew up to be in this big, empty house save for the drunken man I couldn't bring myself to abandon.

But everything's different now, because hope won out in the end.

And now that I've found happiness, I'm not letting her go.

Our wedding is simple and quiet- just the two of us, the justice of the peace who performs the ceremony, and a few strangers who are waiting their turn.

A tiny part of me mourns the fact that my friends aren't here on this special day, but that regret is overwhelmed by my other emotions.
Today is about Vivien and I, and no one else. Both of us making the choice to put one another above all others, to belong to each other completely.

She shows up at the courthouse looking so beautiful in her white, knee-length dress with flowing sleeves and flowers in the braided halo of her hair that it makes my chest hurt. I'm grinning like an idiot the entire time, and I can't take my eyes off of her even as we move to our places in front of the judge when our turn comes.

Vivien, to my intense gratification, seems absolutely radiant with joy to be standing here with me. She's fighting hard to keep her fangs from showing through her smile, but I can tell it's a difficult task.

"I, Vivien, take you, Henry, to be my husband," she recites in a clear voice. "To have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse-

They are the traditional wedding vows, spoken by millions of couples. But when Vivien says them the words seem to take on a fresh, deeper meaning. I wonder if every groom feels that way, hearing his bride promising to bind her life to his?

"Do you have rings to exchange?" the judge asks in a patient (if slightly bored) tone.

I nod, earning myself a questioning look from Vivien.

Her incredulity morphs into startled, bemused delight when I reach into my pocket and pull out the ring I made for her. It's rather minimalist in design- a round one carat diamond stone in a plain, six-prong setting- but I hope my effort and sincerity will make up for that fact.

"Oh, my God, baby," she gasps in wonder. "I was joking about the ring thing."

I shrug laconically. "I guess I didn't get the punchline."

Vivien bursts into laughter and impetuously throws her arms around my neck, the better to reach up and press a fervent kiss to my lips.

The officiating judge coughs. "Um, ma'am, we're not quite to that part yet," he chides stiffly. "Could you please-?"

My lovely bride merely rolls her eyes and steals another kiss, as indifferent as always to tradition. I can read her thoughts in the playful, teasing grin she gives me as she finally steps back into place.

"Can you believe him? For a guy who performs wedding ceremonies all day, every day, he sure doesn't have a sense of romance."

I have to stifle a chuckle of my own.

But thankfully the sense of frivolity vanishes when I slip the ring onto her finger and make my own pledge. "With this ring, I give you my heart," I murmur sincerely. "I promise from this day forward that you shall not walk alone. May my heart be your shelter, and my arms be your home."

I'll never forget her expression as I say those words to her. The naked elation, the obvious jubilation evident in Vivien's face fills my heart with so much bliss I think I'm about to explode with it.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the judge declares. He gives Vivien a pointed look. "Now you can kiss him."
And she does, with an exuberance that borders on unseemly for a wedding ceremony.

*My mischievous, coquettish little vixen.*

But let's face it- I wouldn't have her any other way.
"Where to now, Mrs. McCoy?" I ask as we step outside the courthouse, hand-in-hand. I relish the way her new name sounds on my tongue.

Vivien grins, casting her eyes down in a fashion that would be demure, if it weren't for the impish gleam in them. "I am Mrs. McCoy now, aren't I?" she laughs. "'Vivien McCoy' really does have a nice ring to it."

"It does indeed," I agree. There's a besotted, foolish grin on my face, but I can't bring myself to care in this moment as I look down at my bride.

My wife.

"Let's buy a cake and go down to visit everybody in Hell's Kitchen," she suggests eagerly after a moment's thought. "I can't wait to see Marcel's face when I tell him you're officially off the market."

I raise my eyebrows at her incredulously.

"What?" Vivien demands, with a coy smile. "Maybe I want to show you off a little, husband mine. You're quite a catch, you know."

I chuckle at her reasoning.

After all, the concept of anyone wanting to "show me off," considering me "a catch"- me, the perpetually awkward, unassuming Hank McCoy- is highly laughable.

But also rather flattering.

"Alright then," I agree. "Lead the way, my love."

After placing a rush order at a bakery, Vivien directs me to her new apartment so she can pick up her camera. It's quite satisfying to see that she has no reservations about me knowing where her new safe house is- it's a tacit demonstration of her trust that not many would fully appreciate.

Still, I can't help balking at the knowledge that I'll be in a lot of pictures today. I'm not a fan of seeing myself in photographs, and she knows that.

"Oh, Hank," Vivien chides. "Humor me, just for today. I mean- we have almost no pictures of us, after all this time. And that's just sad."

She may have a valid point on that count.

There are a grand total of three pictures of us together, and they were all taken in a photo booth in Ocean City the other week after Vivien pleaded and coaxed me into it, practically dragging me along.
"Smile," she ordered brightly, settling down on my lap once we were inside. I wrapped my arms around her and mentally prepared myself for the ordeal. "And not like you're in pain, either. Pretend you're happy, dammit."

Her imperious manner brought a (slightly reluctant) grin to my face. Vivien just knows me too well, I suppose.

I'll never admit it aloud, but I actually really like those pictures.

One is of us smiling at the camera, another of us kissing. The last is that moment after the kiss, immediately after pulling away. Vivien's looking at me like I'm somehow the most wonderful thing on the planet to her, her unguarded, loving expression forever captured on film. That one is easily my favorite.

Perhaps it's a bit imprudent, but I keep my copy of those photographs in my wallet. That way I always carry a memory of that day with me...

And I suppose that if our wedding day isn't worth remembering in the same fashion, nothing else really is.

"Alright, fine," I acquiesce with a sigh.

I'm rewarded with a sweet kiss. "Thank you, baby."

Our friends are confused to see us so soon after our weekly visit- especially since we come bearing cake, rather than canned goods.

_Could it really have been only two days since we saw them last? It honestly feels like it's been a lifetime._

"Surprise!" Vivien exclaims as we approach the alleyway our friends call their home. She proudly holds out her be-ringed left hand. "We just got married!"

"Congratulations!" several people called out.

We're quickly surrounded by well-wishers, accepting hugs and affectionate pats on the back. It feels nice to have so many people wishing us joy, especially considering how our families would feel about our union.

Marcel, of course, has to take the opportunity to tease us. "You not pregnant, are you, baby girl?" he jokes. "Shotgun wedding, anyone?"

Vivien turns a little green. "No, of course not," she replies quickly. "We just wanted to, is all."

"Uh-huh, sure," he says, grinning wickedly. His expression- except for the playful gleam in his eyes- becomes mournful as he turns towards me. "I thought we had something, Hank."

I cough. "Sorry, Marcel," I return in mock solemnity. I kiss Vivien's temple and squeeze her closer against my side. "But you never stood a chance against this one."

And all of us laugh.

It becomes quite a party- complete with food, music, and (to my chagrin) dancing.

I try to avoid it as much as possible, though, leaning against the alley wall with a Coke in hand like
the perennial wall flower I am while I avidly watch Vivien dance with Mr. Cole. I love seeing her like this, so light-hearted and happy.

"You goin' to be good to her?" a voice next to me asks.

I tear my eyes away from my wife with difficulty to see Marcel next to me, his expression serious.

"I will," I promise. "For the rest of my life."

"Good," he replies. Marcel's gaze turns towards Vivien, an affectionate grin on his face. "She deserves it. She saved my life, ya know."

"She did?"

"Yup. That's how we met," he explains. "One night, I was out panhandling and these four homeboys came at me, started pushin' me around and callin' me-

He repeats some racist and homophobic slurs that make me wince.

"-One of them pulled a knife, and I thought that's gonna be it for me. But then Vivien appeared out of nowhere and kicked their asses from here to next week."

I grin as I picture my lover, all aglow with righteous anger, teaching some manners to a pack of hoodlums.

"I was a little scared, cuz I ain't never seen a girl do somethin' like that, and asked her what she was. And Vivien just laughed and tells me, 'I'm the monster in God's closet.' But that didn't make no sense, since she'd just saved me, so I said, 'honey, I know all about closets, and you ain't a monster. Com'on and meet my friends.' And she's been comin' here ever since," Marcel concludes. "We've all got a story here. It don't matter if she a mutant or not."

Once again I feel a surge of pride over Vivien's efforts towards human-mutant relations. She's done so much good for these people, and I-

"Come dance with me," Vivien pleads, suddenly appearing at my side.

I grimace. "I don't."

"Please, baby?" she asks, batting her eyelashes at me. She kisses me on the cheek to sweeten the bargain.

Of course I melt immediately, unable to resist her. "Fine," I concede with ill grace.

Marcel starts to laugh hysterically. "You so whipped."

"Or maybe he's just being smart, giving his wife what she wants," Vivien retorts, sticking her tongue out at him.

That just makes him laugh harder, which unfortunately doesn't help my self-consciousness as Vivien leads me out for our "first dance."

"Relax, baby," she murmurs soothingly. And then, louder, "Mr. Cole- you know what to do."

Mr. Cole, with a secretive smile on his face, begins to play a song I don't recognize. Is this one Vivien wrote and taught to him?
It appears so, because my beautiful, incredibly talented bride begins to sing:

"Take my hand, I'll teach you to dance/ I'll spin you around, won't let you fall down/ Would you let me lead? You can step on my feet/ Give it a try, it'll be alright-"

It feels like our audience completely disappears while I listen to her singing just for me, leading me through mincing steps that make it seem like we're dancing.

All of my embarrassment and awkwardness vanishes as we look into each other's eyes, smiling like the fools in love we are.

Like- for only a moment- nothing else in the world exists.

Chapter End Notes

Song credit to He Is We for the song "All About Us."
Moving Forward

After our improvised reception I once more drive us to Vivien's new safe house in Chelsea- another tiny studio apartment, much like the previous one in Hell's Kitchen.

It's certainly not five star accommodations, but as long as the place stays unknown to other people it will serve its purpose. We deliberately take a roundabout route to the building to ensure we're not being trailed.

I follow Vivien up the stairs and wait patiently for her to unlock the door, but once she does I sweep her into my arms- earning a squeak of surprise out of my wife- to carry her inside.

"What are you doing?" she laughs.

"Upholding tradition," I reply simply, setting her down. "Carrying my bride over the threshold."

"Tradition, huh?" She presses her hips against mine provocatively, an alluring grin playing across her face. "Any other traditions do you want to keep, hmm?"

I lean in and kiss those full, luscious lips of hers, crushing them against mine. "I can think of one or two," I murmur.

And that's the end of coherent conversation for quite a long time.

I startle awake in the dark, feeling the empty space against my side where my mate is supposed to be. I know a moment of panic, but that vanishes as soon as I hear the toilet flush and then the sink running in the minuscule bathroom a few feet away.

Vivien looks like some sort of pagan goddess as she steps back into the room, completely naked. The way her pale skin and hair glows like a pearl in the dim light of the streetlamps streaming in through the curtains makes my heart squeeze.

I still can't believe this beautiful creature is meant for me, I think, feeling rather awestruck.

She slips back into bed, burrowing under the covers until she's next to me again. I clutch her closer and bury my nose in her hair, inhaling her sunshine-flower scent.

"Sorry if I woke you," Vivien whispers, nuzzling against the arm of mine that she's commandeered as a pillow. She's laying on her side, facing away from me.

"It's fine," I murmur. I lean down and kiss the mating mark on her neck. "What time is it?"

"About two AM," she replies. Her voice is already becoming sleepy again.

Two AM? Oh dear.

I hadn't meant to stay the night here- to be truthful I originally planned to coax Vivien into coming back to the mansion with me tonight- for fear that my absence would be noticed in some way.

But the light doze I fell into after our repeated bouts of lovemaking eventually morphed into a deeper sleep, and it's certainly too late to head back now without the risk of attracting further
Sloppy, McCoy, I chide myself. You're getting sloppy.

Part of me is upset with myself for getting too bold, for becoming lax and careless after all these months of relative success hiding this from the X-Men...

But another part of me wonders if the caution is truly necessary anymore.

If Vivien's no longer part of the Brotherhood, and her goal is to thwart whatever plan they're cooking up... doesn't that mean she's on our side now? That we can therefore stop hiding what we are to each other?

Or is it too late?

She's no longer an enemy now, but she technically was when we began our relationship. And I don't know if I can count on all of the X-Men to forgive me for my fraternization.

Knowing Charles, he'll probably be startled but ultimately accepting of what I've done- especially when my long record of loyalty and dedication is taken into account.

Let's face it- he basically owes me this much, after what I went through for him over the past decade.

But the fact that I will possibly have to use my long years of friendship with my mentor as leverage makes me slightly sick to my stomach.

I try to shake off that feeling and continue on with my assessment, clinging to logic in the face of uncertainty.

Jean, to some degree, already knows how I feel about Vivien. I don't think she'll mind. Scott will probably follow her lead- at least outwardly, anyway. Alex, if he keeps himself calm enough to consider all the facts, will begrudgingly admit that Vivien has never been as bad as the rest of the Brotherhood. It'll take some persuasion, but I believe he can be swayed into accepting her.

That leaves Storm, Sam, and Warren to be convinced. That, I fear, will be a monumental task in itself, taking their behavior towards the feral woman during her convalescent visit last October into account.

I'm afraid my only real hope with them is Charles.

Charles, who I've lied to for all these months...

I can only hope that maybe, if I'm completely honest about it and ask for forgiveness over what's transpired, the fact that Vivien has defected to our side will help smooth over the gravity of my transgression.

My reasoning is a little shaky, but I feel the risk is outweighed by the possible rewards.

More protection for my mate, if she's safely ensconced in the mansion with the other X-Men. No more subterfuge, finally being able to be honest to my friends about my love for her.

And, most importantly, I know Vivien and I aren't enough to take on the Brotherhood by ourselves. We need more manpower, more resources to discern and defeat Erik's currently mysterious plan.

We need the X-Men.
But will Vivien, my little lone wolf former terrorist, agree with that conclusion?

*I think I'm in for a taxing conversation in the morning, I tell myself grimly. Better sleep while I can.*

---

**May 16, 1975**

I want to start this discussion off on the right foot, so when I wake in the morning I carefully extricate myself from the cocoon I've created around Vivien- making sure to tuck the blanket around her securely- before injecting myself with my serum, dressing and quietly letting myself out.

My destination is a diner I noticed less than a block away, where I order a double bacon cheeseburger, onion rings, and a chocolate shake for my breakfast-at-breakfast-time-eschewing wife.

Is this bribery? I'd like to think it's not.

I'd like to consider getting my lover her favorite meal before a difficult conversation to be stacking the deck in my favor, as it were. I have a bad feeling I'm going to need all the help I can get.

Vivien is sitting up in bed, now wearing only a camisole and her panties, and groggily rubbing her eyes when I re-enter the apartment. Her hair looks like a hurricane just blew through it, and as I shut the door she gives a decidedly unlady-like yawn.

"Good morning, my love," I say, overly cheerful.

She snorts and throws herself back against the pillows, pulling the covers over her head.

"Looks like someone isn't quite ready to be up and about yet."

"I brought you breakfast."

Vivien's eyes are sparkling with amusement as she peers them out from under the blanket. She raises her eyebrows expectantly, as if to say, "*oh really?*

"I knew that would get your attention," I tell her, laughing. I set down my burden and sit on the edge of the bed next to her. "How does a double bacon cheeseburger, some onion rings, and a chocolate shake sound?"

"It sounds like you're putting yourself in the running for husband of the year," Vivien replies. She's giggling as she sits up and takes the proffered to-go box in my hand, giving me a thorough kiss in thanks.

I mentally wince. *If only.*

She almost immediately senses my disquiet, freezing in the act of bringing her burger up to her mouth for the first bite.

Suddenly her expression is appraising, suspicious- accusatory, even.

"Or like you're trying to butter me up for something," she mutters. I shift guiltily under her laser-like gaze. She's caught me. "What is it, Hank? Spit it out."

I sigh in resignation. "Darling, we need to talk."
Vivien's eyes narrow even further. "About what?"

"About what we're going to do now," I reply, making sure to keep my tone reasonable and calm. "I think- if you're willing, of course- that we should go to Charles and explain ourselves."

She snorts derisively. "And then what? I become an X-Man? I don't think so," she says, shaking her head. "I'm not much of a team player, Hank. I mean, the only reason I joined the Brotherhood in the first place was to keep my family together. Look how well that turned out."

"Vivien, be logical about this. Do you really think we're going to take down the Brotherhood all alone?" I ask. "You can't just go in like the Lone Ranger-"

She laughs, interrupting my plea. "The Lone Ranger, really?" she teases. "Does that make you Tonto? I think you're a bit too articulate for that."

I glare at her reproachfully for trying to change the subject while she giggles and takes a bite of her food.

After Vivien swallows she eyes me speculatively. "And anyway- do you really think the X-Men would be open to me joining them? You saw how they treated me back in October."

"You were a part of the Brotherhood then," I argue.

"Yeah, but what's the proof that I'm not now, huh?" she retorts. "Just my word and yours? I know I wouldn't believe me. Or you, baby. Clearly, your brain is too fogged by sex to know any better. I'm obviously a double agent trying to get information for the Brotherhood, and you're falling for it like a chump."

"Give them more credit than that, darling," I reply, straining for calm past the rising heat in my cheeks. Fogged by sex, indeed.

She shakes her head. "They might be better-than-average people, but they're still people. You tell them you've been sneaking out to see me for months, and they're all going to turn on you. The Professor, too. And what then? It's too risky."

"You don't know that. We have to at least try, Vivien," I tell her. "You may believe that we can do this on our own, but I know better. You're not invincible, love. And I refuse to just let you die because you're too stubborn to ask for help. Or do you have a death wish or something? Is that it?"

*Ok, that last part might have gone too far.*

Sure enough, she immediately bares her fangs at me in anger.

"Got any other comments about my skills, my mental state or my intelligence?" she hisses venomously, throwing down her food. "Come on. Better get it all down on the table now."

"I didn't mean it like that," I groan, feeling rather exasperated. This is what I was afraid of- Vivien digging in her heels against the idea, no matter how reasonable, and not budging. "I'm trying to keep you safe, Vivien. Not because I think you're a fainting flower or anything like that. But
because the thought of something happening to you scares me to death. Now, I know we have a moral responsibility to try to take down Erik's plan no matter what, but what's wrong in giving ourselves the best chance to do it and come out alive? And I think going to the X-Men gives us that chance."

Vivien doesn't reply. She merely stares at me, completely stone-faced and silent.

I suppose I understand why she's so unwilling to come clean to the X-Men about what's happened. If they were to repudiate me, she would probably blame herself for destroying my life. Such as it is, anyway.

And I also think a tiny part of her is loathe to openly ally herself with the team that opposes her brothers. No matter what Fox and Jackal have done to her, Vivien still has a smidgen of familial loyalty left.

I sigh. "Just-think about it, please?"

She nods sullenly.

"Do I have your word?" I press. "That you'll think about it?"

She glowers at me, but relents. "You have my word."

*I guess that's better than nothing.*

"Thank you."

---

May 19, 1975

The next few days are a mixed bag of emotions for me.

I'm happy that Vivien (reluctantly) agrees to stay at the mansion, hiding out in my room for safety. I can tell she's not really comfortable with the situation, though.

Not because she's afraid of getting caught by one of the school's residents- she's much too adept at concealment for that- but because she's worried that her presence will bring the Brotherhood down on the school, no matter how many times I assure her that they can't get past the security system now that I've applied several updates.

"I can," Vivien retorts.

"Yes, but that's because you're you, darling. You've never met a code you couldn't break," I patiently reply, kissing her on the cheek. "We both know the rest of the Brotherhood doesn't have your skills."

"Oh, stop trying to flatter me."

"Why, is it working?"

And she laughs until she almost falls off the bed.

I love having her here with me, no matter how untenable our situation is. It's an arrangement that is by nature temporary, but that doesn't stop me from enjoying her uninterrupted presence as much as I can.
Sleeping in the same bed as her, wrapped around her small, warm form, waking up next to my lover in the morning... They may be silly, inconsequential things to some men, but to me they mean the world.

I spend as much time as I can with her without raising suspicion. Thankfully I have a reputation for keeping to myself and being a loner in general, because no one bothers to question why I don't leave my room except for meal times and perfunctory visits to my lab over the weekend.

The lack in scenery change quickly grates on Vivien, though.

By the time I return to my room on Monday afternoon, bearing lunch, she's pacing the room like a caged tiger at the zoo.

"Sweetheart?" I question tentatively, pulling out the sandwich I brought for her and setting it down. "Are you ok?"

"I'm awesome, obviously," Vivien mutters. She idly trails her claws along the back of the sofa in my little sitting area. "Nothing like staring at the same four walls and no sunlight for three days. Really, it's doing marvels for my complexion, don't you think?"

She holds out a pale, freckly arm for my inspection.

My chest constricts on itself, hearing the discontent in her tone.

I can only imagine what it's like for a free spirit such as she to be stuck in here, with not even her music to fill the void. In this moment I almost feel like Vivien's a butterfly I've managed to trap in a jar- a beautiful, wild thing that I'm holding captive for my own cruel amusement.

I take her proffered hand in both of mine and bring it to my lips. "Bored with me already?" I try to joke. I hate seeing her so dissatisfied and restless.

Because there's a small inner voice- the part of me that I fear will forever remain insecure and awkward- that takes note of her malcontent and whispers that Vivien will leave me for it. That I'm still not worth staying for.

She gives me a sardonic look. "Of course not, baby," she says impatiently. "I'm just- I'm going stir-crazy in here, Hank. As nice as it is to be with you all the time, I still need to get out and stretch my legs. And I can't do that here without someone possibly seeing me."

"I know," I sigh. "I understand. But tomorrow's Tuesday. We can go see Mr. Cole and everyone in Hell's Kitchen. That's something, right?"

"Right," she agrees, with a brave, tiny smile.
Gone

Gone

May 20, 1975

The next day Vivien meets me at the edge of the grounds- much as she did the day we went to Ocean City- so we can drive to Hell's Kitchen together.

It's very warm out, but she insists on having the windows down so she can enjoy the fresh air.

The wind streams through her hair, making the white-blonde tresses swirl around her face as she laughs. Her beautiful smile flashes in the sunlight as she looks at me with love in her eyes-

It's one of those perfect moments that stick with you. A mental snapshot you take and tuck away in your heart, to pull out and hold onto during dark times.

If only I could guess how quickly such times would be upon us.

"Where is everyone?" Vivien asks blankly.

We're both loaded down with canned goods and standing in the completely deserted alleyway that- until now, apparently- was home for our friends.

"I don't know," I reply, just as disconcerted.

Vivien sets down her bags and steps forward, looking around carefully.

I follow suit, noting the blankets on the ground, the still-smoldering embers in one of the metal barrels our friends use to contain their cooking fires.

It feels like they just stepped away, and will be back at any moment. They obviously didn't plan on leaving this place for an extended period, or else they would have gathered up their meager worldly possessions to take with them.

Which begs the question- are our friends absent by choice, or for some other reason?

"I don't like this," I mutter uneasily.

Vivien hums in reply, a frown of concentration puckering her lovely features.

Her face is slightly lifted as she takes deep breaths in through her nose- clearly sniffing for something that I, with my presently weak, human senses, cannot detect.

"Anything?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I don't understand. It's like they just... disappeared."

Both of us shiver, a black cloud of foreboding premonition passing over us. I don't usually believe in things like that, but right now...

I clear my throat, trying to shake off the unsettling feeling. "I'm going to ask around the neighborhood, see if anyone's seen anything and willing to share."
Vivien nods distractedly. She's picked up a torn jacket— one I recognize as belonging to Marcel—and breathing in its scent.

"Be careful, baby," she says. "You still look too much like a goddamn boy scout to fit in around here."

I allow myself a brief grin before I kiss her temple and step away in the search for information.

It takes me several minutes to find anyone willing to talk to me. Most people outright ignore my polite entreaties for a few minutes of their time— maybe because Vivien's right, and I look like some sort of missionary or something.

*No, wait! I just have a few questions. I promise I'm not trying to bring you the Good News...*

One or two stop, but then hurry away with fearful expressions when I mention the homeless enclave that lives in the alleyway between 43rd and 44th.

That sort of reaction ratchets up my anxiety level tenfold, of course.

*What on earth happened?*

Finally, *finally*, I find someone who's willing to talk to me.

"Excuse me, sir," I say politely to a seedy-looking man currently rocking and humming to himself on a street corner.

I'm admittedly getting a little desperate.

"Yeah?" His eyes are unfocused and bleary, staring off over my shoulder at something only he can see.

"Um, I was wondering if you could tell me what happened to the folks that live in the alley two blocks over? There's about thirteen of them?"

"They're gone," he says.

"Gone?"

"Gone, gone," he sing-songs, continuing his rocking. "Taken away. Monsters took them away."

"Monsters?" I repeat, utterly confused. I'm starting to think that this is a lost cause, but I press on anyway. "Can you describe them?"

"Fangs and claws," the man replies distractedly. "White hair. Eyes like a cat's."

My insides suddenly turn to ice.

His disjointed description sounds chillingly familiar— almost like he's talking about Vivien, with her unique hazel eyes and white-blonde hair. And her claws and fangs...

But *she* obviously had nothing to do with this.

*Which means...*

I hastily pull a twenty dollar bill out of my wallet and hand it to him. "Thank you," I tell the man, before I turn and run back to the alleyway with my news.
"Vivien-" I call out when I arrive. "Vivien, your brothers-"

But the alley is deserted. There's no trace of my wife at all.

"Vivien?"

I comb the space, searching for a hint as to where she went. Did she leave at will, or did Fox and Jackal, laying in wait, manage to snatch her up?

The only clue I find is a business card, innocuously laying on the ground.

It reads, in plain bold lettering:

"Major William Stryker."

I scour the surrounding area for Vivien, but find no sign of her, where she went, or by what means she vacated the vicinity.

Which leaves me with some very dismal prospects.

One, my mate was captured by her evil siblings and is now being subjected to who-knows-what in retribution. After all, it's safe to assume Fox and Jackal won't react well to the fact that their sister is no longer just dating an X-Man, but has also been claimed by one.

Did they hand Vivien over to Stryker, for him to experiment on her? Is that why they left the card behind, to purposely taunt me? To leave me to my own imagination in regards to what sort of torture my lover is being subjected to?

But that theory still doesn't explain where Marcel and the rest of our friends are. Therefore I believe I can logically rule that out.

Far more likely is that Vivien's brothers stole away her friends and handed them over to Stryker to lure her in. I wouldn't put it past any of them- especially now that the formerly mutant-hating scientist has inexplicably stooped to working with the Brotherhood.

I can imagine how Vivien would react, seeing that card. I love her, deeply and truly, but she doesn't always think things through before acting. The idea that the man she despises so wholeheartedly is hurting her friends would easily be enough to make her snap and go after him, just as our enemies planned. And she's so accustomed to operating alone that it probably didn't even occur to her to ask for my assistance.

Meaning my wife has probably run off on a half-cocked rescue mission by herself, maybe even setting herself up to fall into the Brotherhood's hands.

*So much for teamwork,* I think to myself bitterly. I'm trying to fight off a growing swell of panic. *Why, why did I leave her alone?*

But in the end, I know I only really have one choice.

I need to find Stryker.

---

The past few days have not all just been about getting our fill of newlywed bliss. Vivien and I also spent some time trying to pinpoint a possible location on the laboratories Stryker has been using to assist the Brotherhood, utilizing the meager intel she gathered before parting ways with the team.
Between the two of us we narrowed it down to three possible locations. It's a lot of ground to cover by myself, but what other choice do I have? Time is of the essence to save Vivien- and hopefully our friends as well.

I head back to the mansion and hastily ready myself for action. I plan to start at the nearest laboratory and work my way out from there.

Dusk is falling as I make my way downstairs to the X-Jet.

"Hey, Beast!"

Or not.

I turn to see Alex exiting the Danger Room, a curious frown on his face. "Where you going?"

This day just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?
I could lie to him- Lord knows that I've gotten plenty of practice over the past several months. I could tell Alex that I'm on my way to do some maintenance on the jet, or tinkering with our uniforms again. He would swallow those reasons easily, without question, and leave me to it.

But I have to think logically. I'm going into this situation blind, with no idea what's in store for me at that laboratory. What if the entire Brotherhood is waiting for me there, with Stryker's goons besides? It would be suicide to attempt this by myself.

No, I can't do this alone. In order to save Vivien and our friends, I need the X-Men.

Vivien may be upset about their involvement afterwards, but in my opinion I'd gladly have her murderously angry with me than- my heart clenches at the thought- dead.

"I've been looking for you," I smoothly tell Alex. "I have a lead on a lab that Stryker might be using to assist the Brotherhood."

And to possibly torture my wife, Marcel, Mr. Cole and the others.

*Don't think like that,* I tell myself sternly. *It won't help anything.*

The only way I can maintain any semblance of calm is to focus on the next step in front of me, rather than what's waiting for me at the end of this road. If I start to contemplate what could be happening to my mate I find myself starting to slip into a blind panic.

Alex seems surprised. "Nice," he comments, looking slightly impressed. He mulls it over for a moment. "Go ahead and suit up. I'll go grab the others. We can do a little surveillance on the place, see if you're right."

"Surveillance" isn't exactly what I had in mind- I'm thinking more along the lines of outright storming the castle- but at least it's something.

*Please,* I silently beg the universe as I agree to Alex's plan. *Let me find them- all of them- before it's too late.*

It's full dark by the time we arrive at the closest laboratory, a large building set several hundred yards back from the street and sequestered from its neighbors by a grouping of old elm trees.

After some consideration I land the Blackbird a surreptitious distance away, in a small clearing, and together we head out.

It's a trial to measure my steps to those of my companions. I'm aching to run ahead, to end this horrible suspense and hold Vivien in my arms again.

But finally, *finally* we arrive at the edge of the trees and stop to examine the state of the building. It's clearly lit up from within, but there's no sign of any workers or technicians anywhere from our vantage point.

No source of movement at all-
Wait. What's that?

The light in one of the rooms on the ground floor has a flickering, wavering quality to it. Almost like someone is stepping back and forth in front of it.

Or like it's a flame?

"Let's take a closer look," Alex murmurs. "Beast, you and-"

"I wouldn't get any closer if I were you," a familiar female voice says. It carries to us from a mere few feet behind me.

Oh my stars and garters.

I whirl around and almost collapse to my knees at the sight of Vivien, safe and sound, leaning against a nearby tree.

Thank God, Thank God. Oh, Vivien, I don't know if I want to hug you or shake you for giving me such a fright-

I have just enough time to take in the murderous expression on her face before Scott sends an energy beam at her, forcing Vivien to duck behind the tree for safety.

"Hold your fire!" I snap. It takes all the willpower I possess not to turn around and throttle my teammate for shooting at my wife. "It sounds like she was trying to warn us about something."

Sam snorts disbelievingly. "Yeah, right. More like she's trying to distract us while the Brotherhood do something nasty," he retorts, glancing around. "Hell, they could be circling us right now."

I grit my teeth in frustration and choose my next words carefully.

"Vixen, are any of your- your friends here?" I call out. Let the X-Men think I'm referring to the Brotherhood, I don't care.

A rather hysterical gasp of laughter escapes from behind the tree. "Not anymore," she replies, bitterness dripping from every syllable.

"Not anymore?" What-?

"I don't believe her," Storm hisses. "There's gotta be at least her brothers hanging around."

"Marvel Girl, search the area," Alex orders Jean.

We wait tensely for several seconds for Jean to thoroughly scan our surroundings with her telepathy, trying to find the mental signatures of other people nearby.

She shakes her head. "The nearest person is miles away. Vixen's alone," she explains.

Alone? But where are Mr. Cole and the others?

The wintry ice that grips my heart in that moment would make the polar ice caps feel like a tropical resort.

Meanwhile, my companions are exchanging rather puzzled looks. The concept that Vivien is here, by herself, and apparently giving us a warning to steer clear seems to baffle them.
Alex recovers himself first. "Hey, Vixen," he says. "Come out where we can see you. I promise that we'll play nice if you will."

A pregnant pause.

And then Vivien hesitantly emerges from behind the tree, her tense movements eerily similar to a cat on high alert. She stops perhaps five feet away from me and seems to be pointedly avoiding my gaze as she surveys our group.

The expression on Vivien's face utterly terrifies me. There is a deep abiding anger in the tightness of her jaw, an unspeakable sorrow in her eyes that wrenches at my heart.

Something tells me I really don't want to know what happened to our friends.

"Where are your little friends, Vixen?" Alex demands.

She scowls at him, though her eyes are suddenly over-bright. "I don't have any friends," she retorts sullenly. "Not anymore."

Vivien, what happened to them?

Alex snorts disbelievingly. The other X-Men also make sounds of exasperated incredulity. "Cut the crap. We already know that Stryker is helping out the Brotherhood somehow. Now, there are more of us than there are of you-"

Vivien bares her fangs at him, showing just what she thinks of the implicit threat in his words.

"-So it'd be best if you just told us what was going on here."

Another hysterical giggle- almost a sob- escapes her lips. She stifles it with a clawed hand across her mouth and squeezes her eyes shut, as if to compose herself.

Finally Vivien says, "the Brotherhood kidnapped a bunch of homeless humans and brought them here for Stryker to play with. I think- I think he tried to use some kind of experimental treatment on them, to turn them into mutants and-"

A shudder runs through her.

Don't say it, love. Please don't tell me-

"-And it didn't work. All of them-"

Died. All of them died.

They're all dead, gone where neither of us can save them.

This wasn't a ploy to lure Vivien in at all. It was merely an act of senseless cruelty carried out to punish her for daring to leave the Brotherhood.

I unconsciously start to take a step towards her before I realize what I'm doing. Reacting on instinct to her pain, seeking comfort for my own.

But then Sam speaks, bringing me back to myself.

"Ok. So why exactly shouldn't we go in there?" he presses, eyebrows raised. "Didn't think you'd care about our delicate sensibilities."
Vivien stares at him with evident disdain. She tilts her head, as if listening for something, and holds up three fingers.

"Three... two... one."

The laboratory building explodes, sending out a shock wave so strong Jean actually stumbles into Scott, forcing him to catch her. The rest of us all practically jump out of our own skins.

"That's why."
Given Vivien's penchant for Viking funerals, I can't say I'm really surprised. It seems like the perfect send-off for our friends.

The rest of the X-Men, though, don't have as much familiarity with her fondness for pyrotechnics. They react to the explosion as they are trained to, with defensive action.

And it's all directed at my mate.

First, Alex sends an energy beam at her.

She snarls and uses one of her adamantium knives to redirect it at Warren, who's making a running leap past me in an attempt to tackle her. He crumples to the ground after the point-blank hit to the chest.

Vivien then dodges Sam's cannonball flight, catches his wrist, and whirls him around so he flies right into a tree. She throws one of her knives with adept precision so it hits Scott's forehead, handle first, and knocks him unconscious.

Now Storm squares up on Vivien, who uses her superhuman speed to jump up, wrap her thighs around the taller woman's neck, and flip her over. She springs lightly to her feet, ready to take on Alex next-

*I think that's my cue.*

I lunge at my mate, anticipating the dancing evasion she makes to the left, and manage to pin her to the ground.

"Vivien," I plead over the sound of her growls, my face pressed to her neck, "please stop. *Please.*"

She struggles against me for a few moments more before wilting. "They're all dead, Hank," she whimpers, so quietly no one else can hear. There's a world of agony in her voice. "All of them— even the baby. They were just *left* here to die so I could find them. I should've protected them. This— this is all my fault."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to stop the sudden burning behind my retinas. How I wish we were alone, so we could hold each other and mourn together.

But we can't.

"This was *not* your fault, Vivien," I whisper sternly.

And then I clamber to my feet before our conversation becomes noticeable. I keep my arms around Vivien, holding her wrists, in order to ostensibly restrain her. That way no one notices how she slightly leans her back against my chest, seeking comfort in my embrace.

"Nice work, Beast," Alex says, looking relieved. Then he levels a rather ugly expression on the small woman in my arms. He's clearly not happy about her treatment of our teammates.

"You started it," Vivien hisses at him preemptively.
"You blew up a goddamn building," he retorts, gesturing towards the burning wreckage.

Really, children?

"Why'd you blow up Stryker's lab, anyway?" Storm pipes up. She's recovered and currently helping Sam (who still appears a little woozy) painfully assist Warren to his feet. "I thought him and the Brotherhood were buddies now?"

"They are," Vivien replies.

I almost growl in frustration when she offers nothing more, for the fact that I feel honor bound not to spill the beans without her consent.

Just tell them you're not part of the Brotherhood anymore, Vivien.

"Then why-?"

"Those were people," Vivien snaps impatiently. I can only imagine her expression right now. "They deserved better than what they got. I was trying to give them a little dignity on the way out."

The X-Men stare at her like she's grown a second head.

"Why the hell would you care?" Warren demands. "All of you Brotherhood people think humans are scum."

"You don't know a damn thing about me," she retorts, and there's resignation in her tone. She shakes her wrists. "Let me go, Beast."

I reluctantly release her, unwilling to let her leave my sight. When will I see her again?

Vivien pulls up her hood and begins to walk away.

"We're not done here," Alex sputters in indignation. He throws a reproachful look my way for letting her free. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To hunt down Stryker," she replies, without looking back. "I owe him something."

The steely resolve in her voice terrifies me. It tells me exactly what she's going to do when she finds the scientist. After all this time, we've somehow come full circle and Vivien is once more dead-set on killing Stryker.

She showed him mercy last time, but she promised she wouldn't again. How can I-?

"Vivien!" I call to her retreating back.

Now the X-Men are all staring at me, but I ignore them in my desperation. I don't want the woman I love to slip back into the murderous ways we both thought she'd left behind.

My mate freezes, but doesn't turn around- she's afraid, I think, to meet my eyes. Would I be able to make her stay, if she looked at me?

"Vivien, no matter how you try to justify it to yourself, if you kill him now it's revenge," I tell her. "And that's- that's not who you are."

Her hands clench into fists, and I think for a moment she's going to turn around-
But she doesn't. Within seconds my wife has disappeared.

Scott chooses that moment to sit up, obviously a little dazed. "What's going on?" he asks groggily, while Jean tenderly strokes his hair.

Alex's eyes are burning holes into the side of my head as he sighs heavily. "I really wish I knew," he mutters.

"I don't think Vixen is part of the Brotherhood anymore," Jean suddenly blurts out.

"What makes you say that?" Alex asks incredulously, glancing over his shoulder to where she sits with Scott's head in her lap.

It's a welcome relief for Alex to look at something other than me, considering the puzzled stare he's kept up from the co-pilot's seat the entire flight home thus far.

"Well," Jean begins tentatively. "The way she referred to the Brotherhood as 'they' or 'them,' for one. Did you notice how she never included herself? She never once said 'we.' And the fact that she just blew up Stryker's lab, how she said she was going to hunt him down, even though the Brotherhood is working with him... That just doesn't fit, does it?"

It's official, Jean. You're now my all-time favorite student.

"She could just be trying to trick us," Sam muses after a moment.

"She could," Alex concedes. "But..."

They're all silent for several minutes, contemplating Jean's theory.

Meanwhile, I'm trying to contain my own swirling emotions. Would it be too much to hope for, that the X-Men could come to the conclusion that Vivien has left the Brotherhood on their own?

And then there's also a deep, agonizing despair over the fate of my friends in Hell's Kitchen.

Gone, they're all gone. They died so senselessly, used as pawns by the Babineaux brothers to punish their sister.

Their sister, who's out there right now, probably contemplating murder.

"What do you think, Beast?" Alex asks. I can feel him watching me with an intense expression once more. "About Vixen?"

"I think... I think Marvel Girl's theory has merit," I reply guardedly.

"Ok, but do you think she's still part of the Brotherhood?" he presses.

No, I don't think so. I know so.

I sigh. "No," I admit. "No, I don't think she is."

He's silent for the rest of the flight home, but once we're back at the mansion he pulls me aside. I know I'm in for an interrogation of some sort.

"I didn't want to say anything in front of the others, but- what was that about with Vixen, Hank?" he inquires. "The revenge thing?"
"During... during her visit here, Vixen told me that she doesn't believe in revenge," I explain carefully. "Vengeance doesn't bring anyone back, doesn't make you feel better. It was obvious that those humans dying really upset her, so I thought she needed a reminder."

Alex stares at me, long and hard.

I brace myself, wondering if he's going to ask the question I dread answering- what exactly do I feel for the blonde little feral? Could I find it in myself to lie to his face about this?

At the moment I think I would blurt out the truth if he asked, I'm so close to falling to pieces, no matter how livid Vivien would be.

But finally he speaks. "She's never been like the rest of them, has she?"

"No," I reply, somehow managing to conceal my relief. "She hasn't."
May 21, 1975

*How much more of this anxiety can my system take before I have a heart attack and keel over?* I idly wonder the next night as I pace my room.

Vivien never came back to the mansion last night, hasn't made any attempts to contact me all day. I'm worried sick about her, like every tick of the clock's second hand is killing me slowly.

Where is she? Is she alive? Did she manage to track Stryker down? Did she kill him? Was she captured? Where is she-?

The unanswered questions run through my mind over and over again, like a hamster in a wheel or a vinyl record stuck on an infinite loop.

*I swear,* I vow to myself, collapsing on the edge of my bed, *there will be no more of this. I'll handcuff our wrists together if I have to, but there won't be any more lone wolf suicide missions after I get my hands on her.*

There's a terrible squeezing, wrenching feeling in my chest- one that bubbles and twists as it finds its way to my throat, making it impossible to breathe.

I may be pretending to be tough to myself, but let's face it. I love Vivien far too much to truly be angry with her for long, no matter what happens. I just want her *with* me, where she belongs.

"May my heart be your shelter, and my arms be your home," I recite quietly to myself, remembering the look on her face as I slipped my ring on her finger. My vows were supposed to be a promise that she could rely on me for anything, that we would face the world together.

*And then she ran off. Without me... again.*

I sigh in exasperation, because I know I sound like an angsty teenager who got stood up at prom or something.

*My stars and garters, Vivien, I'm becoming more like Romeo by the day.*

But then-

The faint sound of scratching on the window is enough to break through my brooding. I can see the shape of a small figure, illuminated by the moonlight as they attempt to undo the latch and let themselves in.

"Thank God, Vivien-" I gasp out, practically flying towards the window from the relief I feel.

I arrive just in time to catch my mate as the glass swings inward, causing her to clumsily fall and collapse into my arms. The impact is so sudden and unexpected that I'm forced to awkwardly catch us as we go to the ground together.

"Vivien?"

The scent of fresh blood immediately assaults my senses- my hand, as I reach up to stroke her
chalk-white face, is covered with it.

"Vivien," I repeat, more panicked now. "My stars and garters, darling, what-?"

Her eyes focus on my face with difficulty. "Hi," she whispers pathetically. "I think- I think I need some help, baby."

_No, you think?_

"Where's the wound?"

"Stomach," Vivien replies with a grimace. "Knife-"

I don't need more than a cursory glance to determine she needs surgery. _Badly_. At the moment I'm afraid to even look too much closer, for fear of what I'll see.

"I've got you," I promise her. I hastily stand, taking care to jostle her as little as possible. "Hold on, love."

She's too out of it to really reply.

Without further ado I take off out of my room, heading for the infirmary like the very hounds of hell are chasing me.

By the time we've reached the ground floor and are almost at the elevator to the basement I start to think that by some miracle we're going to make it there undetected. But then-

"Hank?" a blonde figure queries as I race by.

It's Alex. Because of course it is.

"Hank, who's- is that _Vixen_?" he demands as I reluctantly stop and turn towards him.

"Yes," I reply hastily. I don't have time for an inquisition right now. "It is. Go get Charles, meet me in the infirmary and I'll explain everything."

"How'd she even get in-?"

"Alex, please," I interrupt, already backing away. "I'm begging you, just do it."

I don't give him time to respond. I'm already running, cradling my dying mate in my arms.

What happens next is like an out-of-body experience.

It feels as if I'm floating above myself, watching someone else cut Vivien's jumpsuit off of her, revealing the long gash steadily oozing blood across her abdomen.

Watching someone else dump a quick-clotting solution on the wound to keep everything from spilling out, because the outfit was basically the only thing keeping her together. Someone else frantically cleaning the wound and stitching it up...

Minutes, hours, days- I don't know how much time passes as I feverishly try to save my mate. The obligations and pressures of the outside world cease to exist, everything condensed down to a single focal point: Vivien's survival.
Whoever stabbed her knew what they were doing, that's for certain. With a single stroke of a knife they managed to perforate her spleen and rupture her appendix.

She ends up losing both, and over a liter of blood, besides.

I only come back to myself when I finish hooking up an IV from my fuzzy, blue arm (I don't even recall shifting into Beast) to the slim perfection of hers. I collapse into a chair and watch my healing blood flow into her veins.

Again, I can't help morbidly thinking.

"Hank."

I glance up, startled, to see Alex and Charles watching tensely, only a few feet away from my operating theater. I had been completely unaware of their presence.

"Is she going to make it?" my mentor asks gently.

My eyes are drawn to the steadily beeping heart monitor I set up at Vivien's bedside. Each little blip, every beat of her heart seems like a defiant No! shouted in the very face of Death.

"I think... I think this woman has more lives than a cat," I dryly observe.

*Used a few*, the more fatalistic side of me whispers.

As if I need reminding.

"I think she's going to pull through."

Charles nods, a relieved smile tugging at his mouth.

"Want to explain how she got in here?" Alex cuts in. He's watching me with undisguised suspicion.

"My window," I admit uneasily.

I have a bad feeling the moment of truth is coming. And fast.

"And how did she know which one was yours?" Alex presses further.

He really wants me to come and outright say it, doesn't he? He wants me to admit that I'm the one who let Vivien into the school.

Which isn't true, by the way. After breaking the security codes, she brazenly walked in through the front door and sniffed me out while most of the mansion's residents were sleeping last week. That's how she ended up in my room that first night.

*The night she told me she loved me for the first time...*

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I blandly remark.

He raises his eyebrows incredulously.

"You wouldn't," I assure him. "You clearly think I let her in, and I didn't."

Alex rounds on Charles- calling in the big guns, metaphorically speaking.

"Hank," Charles says quietly. It feels like his piercing blue eyes are x-raying me. And let's face it,
that's probably not too far off the mark. "You appear to be hiding some things from us."

Seeing his kind face twisted into a puzzled, disappointed frown as he looks at me makes my insides squirm. The weight of what I've done, the trust I've betrayed, presses down on me like a stone.

I sigh and glance down at Vivien, still unconscious and much too pale under her adorable freckles. I wish she could be awake for this, but...

*I don't really have a choice, darling.*

I open my mouth to speak-

Charles' head tilts, as if he's hearing a voice only audible to himself. His frown deepens as he listens, leaving Alex and I to tensely wait.

"Erik is here," he finally says. "Looking for Vixen."
I barely manage to tamp down the growl that threatens to escape my throat.

"Erik?" I repeat.

"Yes, along with Vixen's brothers," Charles replies.

My fur almost stands on end at the very thought of the two feral males in this school. "You can't let them in here," I tell him firmly. "Any of them. This is a ploy of some kind. Vivien isn't-

I pull myself up short.

"Isn't what, Beast?" Alex prompts, his expression intent.

"She's not part of the Brotherhood anymore," I admit with a sigh. "For all I know, they're the ones that did this to her."

"And you're sure of this?" Charles queries seriously. "That she's defected?"

I nod, holding back the surge of guilt I feel over his complete faith in me. "Absolutely."

Alex clearly wants to ask more questions, but our mentor hushes him. "We'll figure out the details later, Havok," the older man says. "First, we need to deal with the situation at hand. Beast, do you think Vixen is stable enough to be left alone for a few minutes?"

I glance down at my mate, taking in her condition and factoring in my reluctance to leave her side. "For a few minutes, yes," I finally reply.

"Please accompany me to the front gate, then. Both of you."

The trip to the edge of the mansion's grounds is too short to attempt explaining anything, but long enough to feel horribly awkward. A heavy silence lays between the three of us like a pall of smoke as Alex drives us out to meet Erik and his cronies.

My brothers-in-law, I realize with a start.

I haven't really thought of Fox and Jackal in that light, to be truthful. I'd rather not claim kinship with them.

And their reaction upon seeing me indicates they feel much the same way. Both ferals bare their fangs and growl as soon as they catch sight of me exiting the car.

The shadows cast by the floodlights overhead make them seem mysterious and deadlier than usual, but I take note of the way they're stiffly carrying themselves. The faint smell of blood reaches my nose, carried by the faint stirring of a breeze.

The Babineaux brothers, it seems, have been recently wounded. Jackal in particular has an ugly gash across his face, and a black eye besides. Both of them are standing gingerly, as if unable to put too much weight on one leg or the other.
Perhaps those injuries were received during a scuffle with their sister?

"Enough," Erik snaps harshly. He seems decidedly less than pleased with them both.

*I wonder why?*

Finally the six of us face off, safely divided by the fence that surrounds the school's grounds. It's a fence that even Erik's powers cannot manipulate, and to even touch it is to put your life in your hands. I'm quite proud of it, actually.

"Can I help you, Erik?" Charles asks calmly.

"I certainly hope so, my friend," the metal-bender replies. "How is Vixen faring?"

*And how do you even know she's wounded?*

Charles glances over at me, clearly thinking along the same lines. But rather than believing she received her injuries at the hands of the Brotherhood, he's considering that perhaps she came here with Erik's blessing.

*Damn.*

"Beast believes she's going to make it," Charles says.

*Try not to be disappointed, Erik.*

"That's good," Erik remarks. His attempt at sounding convincing falls far short of the mark. And that tepid effort tells me everything I need to know about his reasons for coming here. He only wanted to confirm Vivien's presence at the mansion, and to find out if she lived or died from her wounds. I'm almost positive that it was her brothers who hurt her, considering their current state.

I also highly suspect that when my mate wakes up she will have some very important information for us- information that Erik would much rather we didn't get our hands on.

"I want to see her," Fox cuts in- clearly a last ditch attempt.

*Trying to finish what you started?* I think bitterly.

"You can't," I reply flatly, before Charles can.

The other feral growls at me. "And why not?" he snaps. "She's my sister."

"You've been recently wounded. Your brother, too," I remark acidly. "How'd you manage that? On a kitchen knife? Or did she tag you back?"

Both Babineaux brothers regard me with sullen, guilty anger. Charles shifts in his wheelchair, taking note of their expressions and hopefully drawing the right conclusions.

"That's what I thought," I say triumphantly. "So until she tells me otherwise, I'm not letting you within a hundred meters of her."

"And who are you to say whether we can see her or not?" Jackal demands petulantly.
There's danger in that question, the risk of revealing myself. I wanted to talk this over with Charles first, not have my perfidy all come out in the open in front of the Brotherhood.

"You know exactly who I am. Use your nose," I reply, "if you haven't already."

Fox and Jackal both snarl.

They don't like that insinuation, not one bit. The knowledge that I've marked their sister clearly rankles like a festering sore.

I can feel Erik regarding me with an icy glare as I stare down his companions. I've completely foiled his eleventh-hour hopes by saving Vivien and then denying him access to her. I'm sure if we let any of them in they would force my mate to take whatever secret she has to the grave.

But of course he won't be contented to withdraw from this encounter without scoring at least one point.

"Tell me, Charles," Erik murmurs suddenly, in a voice like poisoned honey, "did you approve of their little love story? Was Beast acting on your orders to lure Vixen away from the Brotherhood?"

A deeply offended growl escapes me at the thought of my love for Vivien being a mere manipulation, just another move in the chess game between these two. The realization that Erik basically just tattled on me doesn't even sink in for a moment because I'm too outraged over his accusation.

Once more, I can't help feeling some pity for Erik. The only person who ever really loved him, I think, was his mother, and he watched her die at Shaw's hand all those years ago.

That's not true, I remind myself. Charles loved him like a brother, and look what happened. He betrayed him, left him bleeding...

Suddenly I don't pity Erik anymore.

"We both know Charles had nothing to do with this," I snap.

Erik's cold, dead eyes have a satisfied gleam as he takes in Charles' consternation- evident in the way the wheelchair-bound telepath is now regarding me with confusion and surprise. Alex, standing next to him, looks absolutely furious.

"Oh, you really didn't know, did you?" Erik asks innocently. "Then I must inform you that your loyal sidekick has been unfaithful to you. He's been sneaking around with Vixen like a-"

"Enough," Charles interjects, his expression now carefully controlled. It cuts me to the bone that he's avoiding meeting my eyes, but I know I deserve that- and more. "Erik, you've gathered the information that you came for. Vixen is here and alive- and likely to remain so. I cannot allow you in to see her when it's quite probable that her brothers had some part in causing her current condition. I'm sure she'll be happy to share the full story with us when she's ready."

He gives the metal-bending mutant a meaningful look, one that makes a tiny spark of hope flare up in my chest.

Would it be too much to ask for, that Vivien would be allowed to stay?

For a long moment the two friends-turned-enemies share a grim, baleful stare.
"Very well, then," Erik sighs, breaking first. "Until we meet again, old friend."

"Goodbye, Erik," the telepath replies coolly.

The three of us are silent as Erik and Vivien's brothers take their leave. It's a silence that's almost deafening with unanswered questions and mute accusations, made all the worse by my anxiety over my lover's current well-being.

"Go check on your patient, Beast," Charles says quietly. "But then... I think we need to talk."
My fears give my feet wings. I make it back to the mansion, down into the basement and into the infirmary with a speed that would make the fastest Olympic sprinters look like turtles.

Is Vivien still alive? What will Charles say now? What will we do if?

But then all of my panic over our current situation vanishes when I see Vivien blearily opening her eyes upon my approach.

Those lovely hazel orbs focus on my face. "H-hank?" she murmurs.

Relief causes my knees to give out. I kneel at her bedside, gently taking her hand and pressing a fervent kiss to it.

"Vivien," I breathe, "h-how do you feel, darling?"

A tiny attempt at a wry smile tugs at her lips. "Like I got stabbed."

"You did? How did I miss that?" I ask dryly, pretending to peer down at her heavily bandaged wound, now covered by her camisole.

Her grin gets wider, and the sight of it makes my soul feel like it's soaring above the clouds. How I treasure that smile. To think that I almost lost it-

The thought sobers me somewhat. "How did this happen, Vivien?" I ask. "Did Fox get you?"

She weakly shakes her head. "Myles," she replies sadly. "I went- back to base-"

I groan in exasperation. "Why?"

"Looking for Stryker," Vivien says, her expression sheepish as she takes in my immediate frown. She offers me a rather impish grin that catches at my heart. "If you're going to scold me, you- you might as well get on with it, baby."

I exhale deeply through my nose, trying to control myself because she's wounded.

Nope. Not having it.

"Don't you ever do this to me again," I tell her sternly, clutching at her hand. "We're married now, Vivien. We're supposed to be a team, and you took off on a suicide mission alone. You almost died. Do you understand what would happen if I lost you? I-"

"Oh, come on," she scoffs. "With you- taking care of me, I couldn't die if I tried."

Her attempt at humor falls flat with me this time. "That doesn't mean you should risk your life like that," I snap.

"I know," she sighs, casting her eyes down guiltily. "I'm sorry."

"Promise me, love. Promise me you won't run off on me like this again," I entreat.
"I promise," she murmurs. "I give my word that- from now on it's me and you against the world, Hank."

"Thank you," I say.

I lean in to kiss her, and the meeting of our lips feels like a blissful homecoming after a long, painful absence.

"I love you," Vivien whispers, brushing her hand across my face.

I place my hand over hers, pressing her palm to my cheek. "I love you," I reply. I nuzzle her nose with mine and simply allow myself to savor her presence for a moment.

We're still in that position when Charles and Alex enter the room.

Vivien tries to snatch her hand back, but I hold it in place.

"It's too late, Vivien," I murmur. "They already know."

Her expression is a mixture of alarm and reproach as the other two come closer.

"It wasn't me," I grumble defensively. "Erik and your brothers showed up here and outed us. I think it's time to just come clean."

She lets out a disgruntled harrumph. She's clearly unhappy about this, but I can tell she can't refute my proposal.

I rise to my feet and take a deep breath when my oldest, closest friends reach my secret lover's bedside. Both of them are regarding me with confusion- and, more painfully, distrust.

"Charles, Alex," I say, taking Vivien's left hand in mine. "Allow me to formally introduce you to Vivien McCoy."

I turn my mate's hand so the ring I gave her sparkles with conspicuous brightness.

"My wife."

The silence that follows is so loud it almost hurts my ears. Both Alex and Charles' eyes dart between us incredulously, as if expecting either Vivien or I to burst into laughter and assure them that my pronouncement was just a tasteless joke.

I suppose it doesn't surprise me when Charles recovers his composure first.

"Um... perhaps it would be best if you started at the beginning, yes?" he suggests, his expression now unreadable.

"It's a long story," I mutter.

"We're a captive audience," Alex interjects acerbically. "Trust me, I'd love to hear this."

I glance at Vivien, who merely makes an "I-told-you-so" sort of face at me.

So helpful, darling. Thank you.

I sigh heavily and retake the seat next to her bed. "I suppose it started in Paris," I begin. "For me, anyway. Vivien is the girl who cut me down from that fountain Erik stuck me on, did you know
Both X-Men shake their heads, their eyes going to the wounded woman now.

"I was hunting Stryker," she explains, her expression guarded. "He had my brother. I helped Hank because..."

Vivien attempts to shrug, and hisses in pain.

"Don't move," I scold her gently.

She sticks her tongue out at me.

"Anyway," I continue, fighting off a chuckle. I know now isn't the time. "It was upsetting to find out that my savior was now part of the Brotherhood when we next met- especially after she used my hesitation to fight her against me."

My next words are directed at her.

"I wanted to hate you for that," I admit.

"I don't blame you," Vivien murmurs. "I wanted to hate you after the night you called me out for going overboard with that company's computers, because I think part of me knew you were right. I thought at first you were just this holier-than-thou prick who got off on telling people they were wrong, but... I watched you after that."

I grin. "I watched you, too."

"I realized that you didn't just talk the talk. You were actually good, through and through."

"And I realized that you weren't like the rest of the Brotherhood. I didn't understand why it mattered to me so much, that you were different, but it did. I suppose I hoped that the girl from Paris was still in there somewhere."

She smiles. "And then Alkali Lake happened," she says softly.

"Yes," I agree. "I'm sorry, Charles, but I lied to you when I said I didn't see Vixen at Alkali Lake. The truth is, Stryker captured us and imprisoned us together. We- we got to know each other over the next few days and Vivien saved my life several times, so when she asked me to pretend she wasn't there I agreed."

His lack of response- neither censure or sympathy crosses his features- is rather unnerving. I look at Vivien helplessly.

"Hank told me about the school while we were stuck there," she says. "Since then, I haven't really been able to see you guys as enemies. Maybe you're a little soft sometimes, but you mean well. I didn't like to admit it, but the stuff he said about the Brotherhood was right, too."

She swallows painfully.

"I couldn't just walk away from them, but I couldn't forget about Hank, either. Something about him..." Vivien's cheeks flush slightly. "It was hurting us both, to want each other so much and not be able to be together. So I tried to tell him to stay away from me..."

"And then she was wounded and brought here. We tried to fight it, but neither of us could deny how we felt anymore. I asked her to stay with me," I murmur sadly, thinking about the heart-
wrenching discussion that followed.

"I wanted to, baby, but I was afraid of what would happen if I did. And I wasn't ready to give up on my brothers yet- for all the good that did me," she mutters bitterly. "We've been seeing each other secretly ever since."

She sighs.

"I know I don't deserve a chance with you guys, Professor. Hell, I didn't deserve a chance with him," Vivien says wistfully. "But that's the thing about Hank- he loves you with all he has, even when you haven't earned it. And you know you don't deserve something so pure and beautiful, but he- he makes you want to try."

There's a painful silence, one that fills me with dread.

But then-

Charles smiles gently. "I know the feeling."
Forgiveness

Alex gives our mentor an accusatory look- probably because the older man is clearly being a sentimental softy.

"Ok," he interposes briskly. "We get it. You two are a regular Romeo and Juliet. Now I want to know how you ended up here with the Brotherhood on your tail."

"That's another long story."

"Still got time," Alex retorts. "And I think we deserve to know, considering that we're now protecting your ass from Magneto behind Beast's nice, shiny fence out there."

"That's a little harsh," I protest, jumping to her defense.

"No, he's right," Vivien tells me. "Hank-

I anticipate what she's going to say. "I've told you before, Vivien, we're safe. They can't touch anyone here."

She lets out a long, slow sigh- and then winces as the deep exhale pulls at her stitches. "Alright," she murmurs. "Fine. Those people in that laboratory I blew up last night? They were my friends. Some homeless folks I've been trying to help out in Hell's Kitchen. When my brothers found out about Hank they snatched them up and gave them over to Stryker to experiment on-"

Vivien's breath catches as she squeezes her eyes shut.

"To punish me, for loving Hank. My friends died because of me."

"If you place blame on yourself, give me my share as well, Vivien," I say firmly. "You weren't alone in this secret relationship."

"Yeah, but if I'd never started going there in the first place-"

"Which you might not have done had I not put it in your head to show humans that we're not the monsters in their closets," I retort. "We can go back and forth on blame for this until we get to biblical times, darling. It's not your fault."

"Just your crazy-ass brothers'," Alex mutters.

"Fuck you, Fry-Boy," Vivien snarls, reflexively defensive. "You have no idea-"

"Vixen," Charles interjects. "Vivien, I mean. Please, continue with your story."

She purses her lips and nods sullenly. "After I left that lab I headed back to base to do some snooping and find Stryker. I managed to get the files on their computer and then wipe it completely. They probably have another set somewhere else, but at least it's something. I brought this for you-"

Vivien attempts to reach down but only manages to succeed in hurting herself.

"Easy," I tell her gently.
"That's going to get old really fast," Vivien mutters.

I grin indulgently. "Which shoe, sweetheart?"

"Left one."

I reach down and pull a floppy disk out of her boot, holding it up for Charles and Alex to see.

"I suppose that's why Erik wanted to know whether you made it here alive," the telepath observes dryly.

"Part of it anyway," Vivien replies. "I managed to get Stryker, too."

"'Get' him how?" I ask suspiciously.

She sighs. "I thought about killing him, once I found him," she admits. "But he was just too pitiful, and I couldn't do it."

"Pitiful?"

Vivien nods somberly. "I found him in a little room, facing the corner and talking to himself. The best I can figure is Mastermind pushed him too hard and made him go completely cuckoo for cocoa puffs."

"Where is he now?" Charles asks.

My wife glances at me. I read the answer in her hesitation- Stryker is at her safe house.

"I know where he is," I tell the other two. "The question is, how to go get him with the Brotherhood on alert and probably watching us?"

"That shouldn't be a problem," my mentor assures me.

"How'd you get hurt, Vivien?" I ask. "You said Jackal-?"

"Once I figured out where Stryker was, I knew I needed a diversion," she explains. "I can get around without being seen just fine alone, but with him it just wasn't going to work. So I blew up half of the base-"

I groan. "Just add that to the growing list of reasons Erik wants you dead," I mutter.

It's no wonder the man was so angry with his subordinates. Vivien had been content to leave the Brotherhood relatively quietly, but then the Babineaux brothers decided to take punitive action by killing her friends. And in return she blew up their organization's base, as well as delivering their files and scientist into enemy hands. This ultimate demonstration of cruelty, I think, was the last straw in making her willing to join the X-Men.

Or at least I can hope she's willing now...

"It's getting longer, isn't it?" Vivien teases, grinning wryly for a moment before sobering once more. "But anyway, that distracted everyone else, but not Myles. He caught me as I was trying to lead Stryker out. As soon as he got wind of the change in my scent he-"

"Your scent?" The question comes from Alex.

"Um, it's a feral thing," I reply awkwardly. I can feel my face flushing purple at the thought of
explaining the mating process to the other two. "Go on, sweetheart."

"Myles went nuts and knifed me. That got James's attention, of course. I managed to push them back enough that I could jump out of a window and escape."

"And Stryker?"

"I threw him out first and he broke my fall," she says. Her expression becomes defensive when she notes my disapproval. "What? I took a knife in the gut trying to get him out of there. Can we agree he owed me one?"

We're all silent for a few minutes, digesting Vivien's story. I can't help watching the expressions of my companions intently, hoping for some clue as to their thoughts.

Finally, Alex speaks.

"Look, I believe you're not part of the Brotherhood anymore," he says slowly. "But I want to know the real reason you left. Was it because you've changed your mind, or just because you wanted Hank?"

"Alex-"

"No, Charles, seriously," the blonde argues. "She was sneaking out to see him, she got caught, and her brothers killed her friends for it. Any of that sound like a real change of heart to you?"

He focuses on Vivien with a piercing stare. "Well?"

My mate seems to consider that for a long time.

"Look... I love Hank," she says seriously, "but I've actually never believed in mutant superiority like the rest of the Brotherhood. I thought at first that what we were doing would somehow help us gain equality with humans, but Hank basically showed me how deluded that was. I think I would've figured it out on my own eventually, though, especially with the stuff they've been doing lately. Honestly, the only reason I stayed so long was for my brothers..."

Vivien sighs.

"I can tell you I wouldn't have tried to approach you guys if it weren't for Hank, but I want the same thing you do. To stop Magneto so he can't make things worse for us. It's been a long time coming, but this was just the final straw."

"You've never belonged with the Brotherhood, Vivien," I add quietly.

She snorts. "So you've said. But I don't know if I belong with the X-Men, either," she retorts. She casts a meaningful glance in Charles and Alex's direction. "They're too nice to toss out a wounded girl who brought them some choice intel on their enemies, but actually wanting me to stay."

"Oh, I think we can put that question to rest," Charles cuts in, waving his hand dismissively. "You're welcome here, Vivien. Our doors are always open to someone looking to start over."

"Even a former Brotherhood member?" she asks suspiciously.

He nods, his expression perfectly sincere. "You've clearly reformed. And as for Hank..."

I stiffen in preparation for bad news.
"You are my oldest, dearest friend," Charles says. "You stood by me when no one else did, even when it all seemed hopeless. I can't say I'm not hurt that you lied to me, but I also understand why you did."

He smiles gently.

"Love can make us do crazy things sometimes. And besides, it seems to have worked out for the best, don't you think?" he concludes, clearly referring to the way Vivien's timely defection has given us the upper hand on the Brotherhood. "I want you to be happy, and I won't let this come between us. I forgive you, Hank."

An explosive sigh of relief escapes me.

"Thank you, Charles."
"Now, I think it would be best if Vivien got some rest," Charles announces. His tone is too gentle to truly be called a command, but it definitely carries an air that says arguments will not be tolerated. "Alex, if you come with me we can take a look at the contents of that disc. Hank, mind your patient for now. I think it would be safer to wait for daylight before retrieving Stryker."

I nod in agreement, trying not to seem *too* eager to be alone with my mate right now.

I'm not fooling anyone, though. Alex gives me a begrudging smirk as he takes his leave, while Charles' expression is one of almost avuncular tolerance.

The second they're gone Vivien slumps back against her pillows like a limp noodle. "Did that really just happen?" she whispers, her eyes wide in wonderment.

"I think so," I reply, equally flabbergasted.

She lets out small, disbelieving chuckle and holds out her arms, a clear invitation that I can't resist. But first I help her slip out of the tattered remains of her jumpsuit and camisole and replace it with my shirt, to make her more comfortable.

It takes some careful arranging, but by laying on my side I then manage to squeeze onto the hospital bed next to her.

For several minutes we just lay there together. Vivien closes her eyes and leans her face into my palm when my hand goes up to caress her cheek. The sigh she breathes speaks to a bone-deep weariness and sorrow.

"Sleep, darling," I murmur encouragingly, brushing a claw through her bangs. "It's going to be ok now."

"I'm afraid to go to sleep," she whispers.

Her voice is suddenly brittle, like breaking glass, and I belatedly realize that the events of the past twenty-four hours are starting to really sink in for my poor sweetheart.

*Oh, darling*...

Vivien shudders. "I'm afraid that I'll see all of them again. They had blood pouring out of their eyes, their mouths-"

I recoil against the mental images that begin to assault me as she describes the state she found our friends in, back in Stryker's lab.

"Mr. Cole was still alive when I found him. Whatever they gave him made it so he could see again before it killed him," she tells me. "And right before he died he told me- he told me he *always* knew I was pretty, from my voice-"

And for the first time since I met her, Vivien begins to cry- the enormity of what's happened, I think, is finally catching up to her. Each broken little sob feels like I'm taking a knife in the stomach, too.
My heart bleeds for her. That's the only way I can describe this gut-wrenching feeling, like someone's digging around my abdominal cavity with a hot poker.

Is this what it is to truly love someone? To experience their pain, their suffering right along with them, only magnified because you would do anything to make them stop hurting?

I don't try to hush her. I merely cradle her as best I can through the storm of her weeping, taking care not to jostle her wound. I wish there was some other, better way of comforting her, but short of bringing Marcel and everyone back from the dead I don't think there's anything that could.

"They're really lost, aren't they?" Vivien whispers eventually, after most of her sobs have subsided.

"I wouldn't say that, sweetheart," I reply soothingly. "I want to believe they found peace."

She snuffles. "No, I meant my brothers."

I really don't know how to answer that.

Part of my life's philosophy is about hope- the hope that almost anyone can be redeemed, if they try hard enough.

But as far as unforgivable sins go, killing a group of innocent people just to get back at your sister because you don't like her boyfriend is pretty high on the list.

Um, can I plead the Fifth?

Vivien reads the answer in my hesitant expression. "Yeah, I think so too," she says mournfully. "I lost them the second we joined the Brotherhood. Once Magneto got a hold of them it was all over. It just... it just took this happening for me to realize it."

She buries her face in my chest as another gasping sob wracks her body.

"I don't have a family anymore, Hank," Vivien whispers. But then she stiffens and pulls away slightly, so her gaze meets mine again. The currently puffy redness of her eyes makes the contrasting green in her hazel irises look absolutely stunning. "No, that's not true, is it? You're my family now. Right?"

"Yes," I reply, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to her lips. "Now and always, Vivien."

Vivien falls asleep soon after that, lulled by her own exhaustion and the sound of me purring. It's a rather embarrassing noise to make, but it's soothing for my mate and I therefore do it without complaint.

Once I'm sure she's asleep I gently extricate myself, hurry upstairs to replace my shirt, and then seek out Alex and Charles. I find them in the lab, poring over print outs from the files Vivien managed to steal.

"How is she?" Charles asks as I approach.

"She's sleeping," I reply. "Thank you for giving us the time alone. She- she really needed that."

"I can imagine," he agrees sympathetically. "The people who died- they truly were her friends?"

I nod. "Back at Alkali Lake," I explain, somewhat apologetically, "we argued quite a bit on tactics for human-mutant relations. I told her that what the Brotherhood does only makes humans fear us,
not respect us."

Alex and Charles listen gravely as I tell the story of Vivien saving Marcel and her continuing efforts in the aftermath to provide him and the rest of the group with food and clothing. It's only with difficulty that I can restrain my emotions at the thought of their passing, the unfairness of both their lives and deaths. They deserved so much better.

Both of my companions look sickened when I describe the symptoms of the humans' final moments, as detailed by Vivien.

"It sounds like whatever compound Stryker introduced into their systems caused a mutation that's simply unsustainable," Charles comments fretfully when I finish.

"Yes," I agree. "The mutagens work, for a time. But it sounds as if the body begins to eventually attack itself, or perhaps the cells themselves just die off."

I gesture to the stack of papers. "Is there any further information in here about the formula? Its composition, the mechanism behind it?"

Charles shakes his head. "A lot of it is in code, but we did manage to glean what Erik intends to do with it," he replies grimly. "Here."

I take the proffered sheet and scan it quickly- and then again, more thoroughly.

It appears that Erik- that homicidal psychopath- has been working on this a long time. Even the Agent Orange Vivien and the Brotherhood were trying to steal last year was geared toward making this venture work. With Stryker's help, he's managed to turn this mutagenic compound into an aerosol and now wants to place a propelling device on top of the Statue of Liberty. From there it could infect thousands- no, millions- of New Yorkers and turn them into mutants.

*Until they start bleeding out of every orifice and dropping dead, that is.*

Does he know what happens to people once the mutation truly takes hold? Does he not care that he'll be essentially sentencing them to death-?

"Oh my stars and garters," I mutter in astonishment.

"Yup," Alex concurs sardonically. "Looks like Magneto is tired of the whole low-level terrorism thing and is going straight for super-villain status."

Charles looks deeply saddened by that. He hoped that by giving Erik a second chance after the White House incident, letting the metal-bender go free, things would be different.

Apparently not.

Erik is clearly just as lost- possibly even more so- as before.

Charles sighs. "Dawn's in a few hours. We'll let Vivien sleep, but once she wakes up we need to introduce her to the rest of the team and determine a plan for stopping Erik."

"And getting Stryker," Alex adds.

*Oh dear.*

"Looks like Vixen's in for a rude awakening."
"I'll say."
Here Goes Everything

May 22, 1975

Vivien sleeps- fretfully, in a slumber obviously disturbed by nightmares- for a few more hours. I'm waiting at her side when she finally awakens.

"Morning," I murmur to her when she opens her puffy, bloodshot eyes.

"Hi," she croaks like a pack-a-day smoker. Vivien is clearly not at her best this morning, but I think she has a reasonable excuse. Almost dying and then crying yourself to sleep can do that to a person.

"Here, I got you some water," I say, solicitously offering her a glass.

"Thanks, baby," she tells me after a few sips. "So... what's the plan for today?"

"Well, when you feel you're ready, Charles wants to introduce you to the rest of the team and explain the situation to them."

Vivien looks less-than-thrilled at that proposition. "They're not going to be happy about this, Hank."

"Probably not," I agree truthfully. "Not at first, anyway. But just be yourself and they'll come around, Vivien."

She rolls her eyes. "Just be yourself?" Now I know why you got beat up so much in school," she mutters.

"Thanks, darling," I reply acidly.

"Oh, come on, I was just kidding," Vivien assures me with a small smile. Her expression then becomes rather pensive as she reluctantly admits, "I'm- I'm a little scared, Hank."

"Don't be," I tell her. I reach out and take her hand, cradling it in mine. "Everything's going to be alright, I promise."

She studies me for a long moment, as if trying to decide if she believes me or not. But then she finally nods.

"Alright, fine," she says grimly. "But can I at least go to the bathroom before you feed me to the wolves?"

It takes quite a while to get Vivien presentable- partly because of her injury, but mostly because she's purposely dawdling and procrastinating the inevitable.

"I wonder what someone would've done if they opened up the dryer and found these in with your things?" she teases, holding up a set of her panties that I laundered while she was off trying to get herself killed. "A keepsake from a one night stand, or-?"

"Just put them on, Vivien," I tell her quickly. Seeing my mate- even grievously wounded, as she is now- in her glorious nakedness is making it hard to focus.
"I would, but I can't really bend over right now, can I?" she retorts.

I sigh. "Good point."

Vivien grins and places her hands on me to steady herself when I kneel down to assist her.

Or that's what I thought she was doing, anyway.

Her claws immediately start to tease along my scalp, the back of my neck, in just the way she knows will make my skin erupt in flames.

I glance up to see her watching me with a devious little smirk that instantly heats my blood and takes my breath away.

"You're wounded," I remind her. I don't even sound convincing to myself.

"We can improvise," Vivien replies, provocatively stroking my inner thigh with one of her perfect little feet.

My own traitorous hands start to trace patterns under her breasts, along her sides of their own accord. She shivers, and her scent becomes heavier, more intoxicating than ever.

It's tempting- so, so tempting to capitulate to my mate's cajolery and my own desires. After the past couple days we could certainly use the reassurance such intimacy would bring us, but it's a monument to how much I love this woman that I refuse to take the risk of giving in to her seduction and possibly hurting her further.

I tenderly kiss her stomach- the part that's not covered in bandages right now. "When you're healed," I say firmly.

Vivien pouts. "You're no fun."

"So you've said before. Now stop stalling, Vivien."

Finally she's ready, and I notify Charles telepathically to meet us in the infirmary.

_Splendid. I'll tell the others to meet us down there as soon as they can._

I'm confused to see that he appears rather puzzled when he arrives and catches sight of me, once more at Vivien's bedside.

"What's wrong?" I ask him as he approaches.

"Nothing's wrong, really. I'm just surprised you're still blue, is all," Charles replies, gesturing to my furry self.

I actually have to glance down at my hand-feet to realize that he's right- I _am_ still in my Beast form. I didn't shift back after I gave Vivien a blood transfusion last night, and by now the serum in my system has run its course.

But I simply haven't noticed, because around my mate I'm too comfortable like this to even think about it.

"I don't get why you use your serum when you're home, anyway," she comments.
"I wince. "I don't like being the freak among the freaks," I mutter quietly, unable to meet her eyes. "I hate the idea of the children here being afraid of me. Even a monster has feelings."

"Monster?" Vivien scoffs. "What are you talking about? Hank, look at me."

She tugs imperiously at my sleeve until I sit down on the edge of her angled bed. Then she tenderly cups my face between her hands, like she has so many times before, and kisses me heartily- despite having Charles as an audience.

"The man I love is no monster," she tells me firmly. "You got it?"

I know better than to argue with her when she has that steely look in her eyes. "Yes, ma'am," I agree weakly, kissing her again.

Charles is smiling when I pull away from her, causing me to blush slightly.

"What?" I demand defensively.

"Nothing. I'm just considering what a good influence your wife is on you," he replies, with supreme serenity. "It's nice to see you accepting yourself."

That comment leaves me at a loss for words, though I know they're true. Vivien does make me feel more confident, less self-conscious of what I am.

Vivien saves me from having to make some sort of cliche platitude in reply by giggling. "You hear that?" she archly teases. "He thinks I'm a good influence, baby."

I grin. "You have your days. When you feel like it."

Watching Vivien and Charles laugh together makes my heart swell with joy. They are easily the two people who are most dear to me on this earth, and to see them getting along gives me hope for the future.

For a moment I allow myself to imagine it, envisioning Vivien happy here, with me. She'll teach music to the students and write more of her own. She'll finally find peace, creating, instead of destroying. And every night she will fall asleep in my arms-

My wistful daydream disintegrates at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Before you get to the happy ending, I remind myself firmly, you have to weather the storm.

And defeat the sociopathic madman hellbent on destroying humanity. And get your housemates to like your wife even though less than forty-eight hours ago they were all convinced she was our enemy...

You know, minor details.

Vivien's laughter cuts off rather abruptly as her eyes dart to the medical bay entrance, her muscles immediately tensing up. She reminds me of a wild creature preparing to run from peril.

I instinctively react to my mate's stress, rising to my feet to deal with the incoming (hopefully imaginary) threat to her safety.

What will the X-Men think when they see her here?

I try for a moment to picture Vivien the way my teammates will- as a possible danger- but
immediately realize it's impossible for me.

Everything from her currently wan, ashen complexion to the way she's unconsciously hunching over fills me with the urge to protect her, to keep her safe. This pale beauty is my angel, my vixen. My mate. Even under the circumstances I can't bring myself to see her any other way.

"Here goes everything," she murmurs dryly as Sam and Storm, followed by Warren and Alex, step into the doorway. Jean and Scott are right on their heels.

Indeed.
The uninformed members of the X-Men freeze at the sight of Vivien sitting in their school infirmary for a second time.

Warren is the first one to recover his poise, his expression twisting into one of disgust. It looks like he's still holding a grudge over Vivien hitting him with that redirected energy blast the other night.

"What's she doing here?" he demands, gesturing pointedly as he leads the way farther into the room.

Charles sighs over the young man's attitude- probably because he knows what an uphill battle this will be. "Vivien is here for medical treatment," he replies calmly.

I can't help but notice how Jean perks up slightly at the use of Vivien's real name.

"Again?" Storm mutters in a voice designed to carry.

Vivien snorts back laughter, earning an askance look from all of us.

"What?" the feral girl says defensively. "She's not wrong."

I'm torn between the urge to reluctantly laugh or groan. Now might not be the time to showcase that quirky sense of humor of hers.

Plus, I don't appreciate the reminder that this has been yet another near-death experience for my mate. I sincerely hope this doesn't become a habit for her- the stress is bad for my heart.

"Since when are we the official hospital for the Brotherhood?" Sam asks stiffly.

Charles glances at my wife, his expression clearly expectant.

She winces and takes a deep breath, like she's preparing herself for battle. "I'm not part of the Brotherhood anymore," she explains.

The incredulous silence that follows reminds me of that instant immediately preceding a lightning strike. Electrically charged and eerie, a moment of suspense right before the world's blown apart.

Sure enough-

"What?"

"And we're supposed to just believe that-?"

"How do we even know you're telling the truth-?"

"Really? You left your own brothers-?"

"Shut up, all of you!" Alex orders in a raised voice, earning an immediate cease to the rapid fire questions. "Maybe, if you let her talk, she'll give you a reason to believe her."

I send up a silent "thank you" to the heavens for Alex's support. Charles is the official head of the
X-Men, but Alex is the one who trains and leads us in the field. Therefore, his opinion carries a lot of weight. As difficult as this is, it would be practically impossible without him.

"Thanks," Vivien says, with a small, grateful smile. Then she becomes serious again. "I get why you don't believe me, but I'm telling the truth. Do you really think I could sit next to the most powerful telepath in the world and get away with lying about this?"

That gives them pause, silencing the outraged members of the X-Men enough that she can continue on.

She nods. "That's what I thought. Look, I've never believed in mutant superiority," she admits. "I joined the Brotherhood to keep my family together, thinking I could compromise my beliefs somehow. And for a while I did. But I can't do it anymore. I don't belong with them, not even my own brothers. Especially after they killed my friends the other night in that lab and then tried to do me in, too. That's how I got hurt- my own brother tried to kill me."

Vivien levels a cold, steely glare at the X-Men.

"Magneto's planning something big with Stryker- something that could wipe out an entire city," she says grimly. "I'm not saying that I'll ever deserve to be forgiven for the things I've done, but I want to try to stop him. I owe my friends that much, and I don't care if you X-Men help me or not- though it'd definitely be easier if you did. But I'll take him out by myself if I have to."

Don't forget about me, my love.

I place a hand on her shoulder in solidarity, but the gesture goes largely unnoticed by the others because Charles begins to speak.

"You're certainly off to a good start," he muses, with a rather dry chuckle. "Vixen- Vivien- not only stole sensitive documents for us and wiped the Brotherhood's computers, she also managed to blow up a decent part of their base and kidnap Stryker from right beneath their noses. If that's not a sign of good faith, I don't know what is."

The X-Men- even Storm, to my delight- look reluctantly impressed over Vivien's feat.

"Has anyone looked over the files yet?" Sam asks carefully.

"Me and the Professor have," Alex replies, "but a lot of it's in code."

"Vivien can probably break it," I offer quietly, causing the others to stare at me rather incredulously. I shake my head at their skepticism. "She's better than I am, when it suits her. She even cracked the security codes to get into the grounds."

Now everyone looks uncomfortable, Alex included. He raises his eyebrows at me questioningly.

I sigh. "I told you I didn't let her in, didn't I?"

He gives Vivien a rather accusatory frown.

"What?" she asks innocently. "Would it make you feel better or worse to know that I've been able to walk in here whenever I felt like it, but haven't hurt anyone?"

Alex grimaces, conceding the point, causing my lover to burst into giggles. She's feeling rather giddy, I think, that this is going relatively well.
I have to admit that the circumstances that brought her here last night—though deadly and therefore repugnant to me—have gone a long way in making her presence acceptable to the rest of the X-Men. It's hard to argue someone's motives after they've proved themselves the way Vivien did, as opposed to her simply coming here and claiming she's left the Brotherhood, the way I suggested...

Oh my stars and garters, she's going to be absolutely incorrigible after this.

"Why don't you take a look at those files while we're retrieving Stryker?" Charles suggests, breaking into my rather horror-struck musings.

Vivien nods. "Yes, sir."

"Where is Stryker?" Jean asks.

My mentor glances at me, eliciting a reply. "In an apartment in Chelsea," I explain.

"Very well," Charles says. "I think it best if Hank, Ororo, Sam and I go fetch him. The rest of you remain here and keep an eye on things, yes?"

There's a general murmur of agreement from the team.

"Splendid."

While he delivers some more general instructions to the others I take a deep breath and kneel down next to Vivien's bedside again. I'm wondering how she'll react to the question I'm about to pose to her.

"Do you want me to bring your things back while we're there?" I don't even bother to hide the hopefulness in my tone.

Please say "yes." Tell me you want to live here permanently, with me. Tell me you're done with being ready to drop everything and run away from danger at any moment...

"You mean give up on having a safe house?" Vivien asks warily.

I nod. "Yes," I reply, my heart in my throat. "It's safe here, so you don't have to worry about running anymore. I- I want you to to stay with me, Vivien."

She's quietly thoughtful for a long moment, squinting at me while I hold my breath. Then she lets out a rather defeated sigh. "Ok."

"Yeah?"

Vivien smiles at the joyous expression on my face. "Yeah. If the X-Men will have me, I'll stay here," she tells me quietly. "With you."

With me. She's going to stay with me.

My exultation in that moment is so boundless that I completely forget the other people in the room. When my mate leans in I accept the kiss she gives me eagerly, without reservation.

Thankfully no one has noticed our quick, whispered conversation and furtive display of affection by the time we manage to drag ourselves away from each other.

No one, that is, except Jean.
I know a moment of fear as my gaze meets hers- will she draw attention to my obvious attachment to the newcomer, so lately an enemy? We've carefully avoided mentioning our involvement with each other, trying to get over this first hurdle of the X-Men accepting her mere presence, but how will they react if-?

But Jean merely smiles, winks, and doesn't say a word.
"Do you think the Brotherhood is still hanging around out there?" Storm asks tensely as we head for the school's gate, riding in one of the multiple cars at our disposal.

I wince.

The thought of the Brotherhood lurking nearby makes me uncomfortable, for obvious reasons. It's not a good state of mind to be in as I drive away from Vivien, even if I know they can't get in...

Though I know it's rather irrational, I hated leaving my wounded mate's side- especially surrounded by people who feel so wary and ambivalent towards her. The other X-Men still seem torn between cautious respect and bitterness over past encounters with Vivien's fighting skills.

Only Jean, as we were taking our leave, came forward with any sort of welcome for the feral girl. She offered to grab Vivien breakfast and some writing utensils to help with the arduous code-breaking process ahead.

I can only guess at the cause of Jean's unfailing kindness towards my mate- though I suspect part of it stems from her telepathy. Jean has an insight into Vivien's character that the other X-Men do not, and has always seen the goodness (which is, admittedly, sometimes sacrificed for pragmatism) in my wife.

Whatever the reason, I'm glad for it. After everything Vivien's been through lately, she could certainly use a friend.

"It's certainly possible," I admit to Storm. "Probable, even. None of them mentioned Stryker when they came to speak to us last night, and obviously neither did we. Since it's illogical that Vivien would go through the trouble of extracting him from their base for the sole purpose of killing him, it's safe to assume that the Brotherhood believes she hid him somewhere."

"Just keep your eyes open," Charles murmurs bracingly. I can tell his thoughts are elsewhere, concentrating on scouring the area with his mind.

All of us hold our breath as we pass through the school's gates, leaving the safety of the grounds behind. For several minutes none of us speak while Storm and Sam vigilantly keep watch out the van's windows and Charles searches with his thoughts.

I focus on driving, ever ready to react to a sudden attack and vaguely wishing that I could have remained in my Beast form for this outing. The boost to my reflexes would've been welcome in this situation.

But it seems all of our caution and worry is for naught.

Though none of us let down our guard, there is no sign of any of the Brotherhood members around. It makes me consider the possibility that perhaps they retreated to their base to lick their wounds, figuratively speaking.

Either Vivien hit them harder than we originally thought, or they're waiting until we come back with Stryker before they make their move.
I still take a roundabout route to Vivien's safe house, just to be careful.

"This is it," I tell the others as I park our van in front of the rather seedy-looking apartment building.

"She brought him here?" Sam asks incredulously.

"Yes," I reply, trying to keep the defensiveness out of my tone. "This is Vivien's safe house."

"Safe house?"

I sigh. "Vivien hasn't had the most... settled of lives. She likes to keep a place to stay as a last resort if things go wrong. She's never even trusted her brothers with its location."

There's an awkward, pregnant pause.

"And how exactly do you know about it?" Storm demands suspiciously.

My gaze helplessly meets Charles' in the rear mirror, but he offers me no reaction whatsoever. The decision of what to share, clearly, is mine.

Should I lie, and say Vivien told me about the existence of this place a mere few hours ago? After all, these two (along with Warren) will be the hardest to appease when it comes to my clandestine relationship.

Best to take it slow. Ease them into it, rather than dropping everything on them at once.

"Because she trusts me," I reply simply. Truthful, but sparing the gory details. "Shall we go in?"

Sam and Storm follow me, though they obviously have more (likely to be highly uncomfortable) questions. Getting Charles up the apartment stairs would only be an exercise in aggravation, so he remains in the van on high alert.

Once we arrive at Vivien's door I pull out my key (at which my companions exchange increasingly alarmed looks), take a deep breath, and open the door.

The apartment is just as it was when we left it, the morning after our wedding night. The vinyl records, the piano, Vivien's guitar, everything neatly stacked but not put away just yet, because she hasn't had time to do so.

It's all exactly the same, except for the unsavory scientist sleeping on the floor next to the bed.

Major William Stryker- the man who has used his position and funding to commit countless atrocities against mutant kind- is currently curled up in the fetal position, sucking his thumb in his sleep.

Neither of the other two move towards our intended target, so I bite the bullet and kneel by his side.

"Uh... Mr. Stryker? Major Stryker?" I mumble, gently shaking the man's shoulder. "Could you wake up, please?"

Stryker swats me away with the hand not currently in his mouth. "No," he mutters petulantly. He hunkers down even more, like a child who doesn't want to get out of bed.

I exchange worried glances with Sam and Storm.
"Let's try this again."

"Stryker, wake up," I say more sternly.

The harsh edge in my tone—though very slight—causes the man to jolt awake.

But rather than sitting up, he cowers down with his hands over his head. "Please don't hurt me," he whimpers pathetically. "I'll do whatever you want, just don't hurt me."

Oh my stars and garters.

I'm at a complete loss on how to handle this.

"Charles?" I ask aloud, because I know the telepath is listening in.

I expected this, given Vivien's description. Charles' mental voice is resigned. I'm going to direct him down the stairs and into the van. Please be quick about gathering Vivien's things so we can head back. I have a lot of work ahead of me.

With that, Stryker rises to his feet and walks towards the apartment's door with the jerky motions of a robot, or a marionette on strings. I suppose Charles didn't feel the need for subtlety in the current circumstances.

I sigh. "Leave the furniture and the kitchen things, but let's get everything else," I tell the others.

"The piano?" Sam queries.

"Comes too," I reply, nodding. I have a vague hope that I can fit it into my room—our room?—somewhere, so Vivien can play in private whenever she feels like it.

There are only one or two items to be swept back into the duffle bag she used to transport her clothes here from Hell's Kitchen and the Brotherhood's base.

I can't help noticing (even considering how clueless I usually am about clothes) that the sum of Vivien's wardrobe is rather limited, thanks to her unstable lifestyle up until this point.

It will be different now, I vow to myself. I'll absolutely spoil her with clothes, books, records—anything she wants. She'll finally be able to settle down. She'll finally have a home.

Each of us make a trip down to the street, arms full. Then Sam and I manage to maneuver the piano through the stairwell and into the van while Storm gathers one last load.

She still hasn't appeared downstairs by the time we finish settling the piano snugly inside the vehicle's spacious back end.

Curious as to what's keeping her—and because I want to do one last sweep, to make sure we're not forgetting anything—I make my way back up to Vivien's apartment.

I find Storm standing by the bed, staring at something in her hand with a horrified, disgusted expression on her face.

"Ororo?" I ask. "Are you alright?"

She glowers at me. "No," she snaps. "Care to explain this?"

And Storm holds out the little slip of pictures Vivien and I took weeks ago in that photo booth in
Ocean City, brandishing it like a prosecutor to a guilty defendant.

That's a rather accurate comparison, with the cold, hard proof of my perfidy is staring at us out of those smiling photographs.

_Uh oh._
The Proverbial Fan

The Proverbial Fan

Even my new lying abilities are no match for such irrefutable evidence, so I don't even attempt it. Instead I try to play it as cool as possible, and that's not exactly my forte.

"Vivien and I took a trip a few weeks ago," I explain mildly. Like it's a normal thing to go on amusing excursions with women who are ostensibly part of an enemy organization.

Storm isn't buying it. "A trip? Like a date or something?" she snaps. "What are you trying to say, Dr. McCoy? Have you been going behind our backs to see Vixen?"

Right to the point, isn't she? So much for easing into it...

I sigh in resignation. "Yes," I reply. "Vivien and I have been discreetly seeing each other for the past few months. We just got married last week."

Her indignation is actually palpable, like the pressure building in a shaken Coke bottle. "How could you-?"

"She's not our enemy, Storm," I interject.

"Maybe not anymore, but she was," Storm retorts.

I shake my head earnestly. "No. Vivien's never really-"

Could you please save this argument for when we arrive back at the school? Charles' mental voice suddenly interrupts.

"Did you know about this, Professor?" Storm asks the empty air.

Not until recently, Ororo. But please, let us discuss this with the rest of the team. I understand that it's an important conversation, but we're still out in enemy territory here.

Storm glowers at me. "Fine," she agrees, though her tone is sullen.

I have a bad feeling she's planning on going straight to Warren when we return, to get him on her side. But Jean is supportive, as is Alex... Where will Scott and Sam fall?

My relationship is already tearing the X-Men apart, I admit to myself despairingly. The guilt is almost overwhelming.

We'll make it through this, Hank, Charles assures me. This isn't the way I would've liked to approach it, but we have to make due with the hand that's dealt to us.

With that questionable vote of confidence, I reluctantly follow Storm as she stalks out the door. She makes a point of tossing the photographs at me with obvious disdain, as if her opinion on the matter weren't clear enough.

I throw one last glance over my shoulder at the small apartment, a silent goodbye to the close of a chapter in my life. Whatever happens now, some of the happiest hours I've ever experienced were spent on that bed, with Vivien.
And who knows what's coming next?

Storm wastes no time filling Sam in, speaking in an angry whisper, on the recent developments he missed whilst downstairs with Charles and Stryker. I can't hear exactly what's being said, but let's be honest- I don't really need to.

I do my best to ignore it, clutching the steering wheel like a lifeline as we drive back to the school. Meanwhile, Charles focuses on keeping a weather eye out for the Brotherhood and Stryker remains slumped over in his seat like he's catatonic.

We're not exactly making a triumphant return as we pull off the main road, entering the long, winding drive to the school.

"Fox and Jackal are out there, keeping watch," Charles murmurs.

I immediately stiffen.

"I'm making it so they can't see the car," my mentor assures me. Then he quietly adds, with a shudder of disgust, "dear Lord, they hate you, Hank. Be very careful from now on."

"They believe I took their sister from them," I mutter disconsolately.

"It's more than that, I'm afraid," Charles replies. Revulsion twists his normally kind face. "You stole away the only female feral of child-bearing age they know."

Child-bearing age? As in-?

Their own sister?

I flinch in abhorrence towards his insinuation. A growl rises in my throat, despite my human form, at the very thought of someone taking my mate away from me- let alone doing anything like that to her.

For a moment my possessive, animal instincts get the better of me. "She's mine," I snarl, gripping the steering wheel with unnecessary fierceness.

I can sense shock and confusion emanating from the vehicle's other occupants over my vehemence.

"Hank," Charles chides, "she's not a possession. I never took you for a chauvinist."

"I'm not," I tell him, recovering my composure. I try to think of a way to properly explain the connection I have to my lover and finally settle on saying, "I'm her mate. I belong to Vivien just as equally as she belongs to me."

I steal a glance and see him smiling gently- like he's truly glad that I've finally found a woman to share my life with.

At least someone's happy for me, I think glumly. Storm and Sam are whispering to each other again.

"Hank, I think it would be best if you went to check on your patient," Charles offers innocently once I pull into the cavernous garage. "Moving Vivien's things inside isn't very pressing, and I can handle Stryker. Sam, if you'd please assist me-?"

In other words, go warn my wife that the excrement is about to hit the proverbial fan.
I don't need to be genius to read the subtext in that directive.

"Thank you," I murmur fervently.

I find Vivien sitting on the floor in my laboratory, surrounded by printouts of the Brotherhood's files.

Jean, Alex, Scott, and Warren are all leaning against the counter some distance away, speaking quietly while the blonde girl mutters to herself and feverishly pores over the paperwork.

Vivien glances up at my approach, a welcoming smile already forming—she obviously recognizes my footsteps—but the expression freezes on her lips when she catches sight of the look on my face.

"Hank?" she queries, painfully rising to her feet. She grimaces as the movement pulls at her stitches.

"Careful," I scold automatically.

And then I gently enfold Vivien in my arms, heedless to our audience.

Being separated from her so soon after her grave injuries, the implication that her brothers have such sickening, incestuous designs on her, the impending confrontation with the X-Men over our relationship...

In this moment, I just need the reassurance of Vivien being in my embrace. Even in her weakened state I still find myself gathering strength from her presence.

"Hank," she whispers confusedly. I can tell she's uncomfortable with this overt display of affection in front of the other X-Men. I can practically feel Warren's growing indignation from here.

"We've got trouble," I murmur. I pull away slightly and slip her copy of our Ocean City photographs from my pocket, offering them for her examination. "Storm found this in your apartment. Now she's on the warpath."

"Shit," Vivien hisses.

"It's not exactly how I wanted everyone to find out about us," I admit. "I was planning on letting them get used to you, at least while you're healing, and then—"

She snorts. "Since when has any of this gone to plan, Hank?" she mutters disparagingly. "Seriously, why waste the brain power on making one?"

I can't help grinning at that. "Good point," I concede.

Vivien's right, of course.

Planning on eventualities has basically gone out the window since I met her, considering how nothing ever really goes the way I expect it to, anyway. She certainly wasn't something I planned on. Ever since Vivien walked into my life I've just been taking each day as it comes, seizing happiness where I can...

But we've gotten through everything that life's thrown at us thus far. The only thing we can do is keep pressing on, together.

There's just enough time to press a quick kiss to my mate's lips before Warren stomps over, clearly...
outraged, with Alex and Jean trailing apprehensively behind him. Scott, of course, is as impassive as always.

At the same time my companions from our foray outside the school's borders finally enter the room. Storm and Sam are in high dudgeon, while Charles appears to be mentally preparing himself for his inevitable role as referee in the upcoming showdown.

My protective instincts flare in the face of so much hostility. I press Vivien closer against my chest with a hand on the small of her back.

For the second time in less than six hours, I find myself facing a group of angry X-Men.
Storm simply can't contain her indignation. "Dr. McCoy has been sneaking out to see Vixen behind our backs for months," she explains succinctly to those not in-the-know. "They even secretly got married last week."

Alex gives me a slightly sympathetic look as the others react with varying degrees of horror (Warren) and bemused surprise (Jean- which I suppose answers the question of how much she knew about my relationship with Vivien).

*It's just not your day, man,* my friend's face seems to say.

*Indeed it isn't.*

"So you've been lying to us this entire time?" Scott asks, his expression unreadable.

"Pretty much," Storm replies. I can see little sparks of lightning arcing between her fingertips.

*Oh dear.*

"Makes you wonder what else he's been lying about," Warren mutters loudly.

Vivien snorts, drawing the ire away from my indiscretions and earning herself several narrow-eyed glares. I stare at her in astonishment as she reaches up and fondly pats me on the cheek.

"Looks like you went about this the wrong way, Hank," she tells me, ostensibly ignoring the others. "You were supposed to ask *permission* to have a girlfriend. Missed the boat on that one, baby."

"That's not the point," Warren snaps. "It's not that he needed *permission*, he just shouldn't have-"

"Fallen for me in the first place?" Vivien supplies coldly. "Well I'm going to give you a newsflash, Fancy Pants. Hank's a grown up. Who he sees and what he does with his spare time is none of your business."

"It does when it endangers everybody here," Sam retorts.

"I didn't endanger anyone," I cut in defensively. "Vivien and I agreed from the very beginning to separate ourselves completely from our other personas. We barely even spoke of the X-Men and the Brotherhood at all-"

I give Vivien a rather sheepish look.

"Except, I suppose, when I would tell her she didn't belong with the Brotherhood and should leave them."

Incredulity is evident on the faces of my teammates.

I can't tell what they find more unsettling- that such an agreement would actually *work*, or that I trusted Vivien to abide by it in the first place. I have a feeling it's the latter, though. How did I know she wasn't just trying to lure me away from the X-Men that entire time?
Only my faith in her, in us.

"It doesn't matter what we say, Hank," my mate mutters bitterly, taking in their expressions. "Never mind that I'm the one who ditched her team, not you, so that big issue of 'what if' is complete bullshit. Their whole view of you just got blown to smithereens, and they can't wrap their heads around it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Storm demands.

Vivien levels an icy glare at the other woman. "You guys don't view Hank as a person," she explains, "so the fact that he went off and did something for himself boggles your mind."

Storm opens her mouth to argue, but the feral girl continues on with her diatribe, practically shouting at all of them.

"All of you see him as a tool- something you use and then put away when you're done, but otherwise you don't really think about it. All of you freaked out when Stryker kidnapped him- who was going to be your doctor if Hank was gone? Your tech support?- but have any of you noticed him leaving the house for hours on end for the past few months? No, because you didn't need him. You thought because he's quiet and never complains that he was happy with his situation in life. Did it even cross your minds that he was lonely, and just didn't know what to say? And do you think he likes using his smarts to build weapons that hurt people? Do you realize how much it scares him, knowing that if he messes up on anything he could have your blood on his hands? Of course it hasn't even crossed your minds. So forgive the man for doing something for himself for once in his entire damn life!"

Vivien glowers at the X-Men, fangs bared. The perceived threat to her mate is bringing out her own protective, feral instincts.

"Easy, sweetheart," I murmur, trying to soothe her. It won't do any good if she completely loses her temper and tries to go after Storm- especially in her current condition.

I try to ignore everyone staring at us as I stroke my wife's hair, feeling almost overwhelmed with how much I love her in this moment. I've never spoken of my fears and troubles aloud- not in so many words, at least- but Vivien understands me in a way no one else ever has. Not even Charles. She knows me inside and out, and still somehow loves me for it.

The connection I have with Vivien is worth all of the trouble, no matter the outcome of this confrontation- which is clearly not going well. Her efforts have only made the X-Men feel guilty and ashamed of themselves, if their expressions are anything to go by. Forgiving and sympathetic, not so much.

My mate lets out a wary, defeated sigh, and tries to make one last valiant effort to defend me. "Hank wanted to be honest with all of you from the get-go, but I asked him not to, ok? I felt I couldn't leave the Brotherhood, and neither of us could give each other up. Trust me, we tried. So this seemed like the best solution at the time. I didn't think of the future, of what would happen if this situation ever happened," she explains sadly. "I just... I loved him too much to let him go."

"The feeling was completely mutual," I assure her. Holding my lover close, I gather my courage and address my teammates. "I'm sorry for lying to all of you, and I understand why you're upset. I only kept it a secret because I knew you wouldn't believe a relationship like this could work. But I'm not going to apologize for falling in love with Vivien, because being with her makes me happier than I ever thought possible for myself. Can you really blame me for that?"
The heavy, expectant silence that follows is physically painful to me. And the longer it lasts, the more I despair of being able to remain here.

Yes, Charles and Alex have granted me forgiveness, but that won't mean anything if the rest of the X-Men refuse to work with me anymore. We're a team, and we can't afford discord among us. If the others can't forgive me...

Jean tentatively steps forward. "I know I can't," she says quietly.

"Jean," Storm chides, but the other girl shakes her head.

"Vivien hasn't really been our enemy for a while now. Think about it," Jean practically pleads, "for months, she's done her best to avoid attacking any of us- unless provoked, like the other night. She's even sabotaged the Brotherhood a few times. And we only found out that they're working with Stryker because she purposely got Fox to feed us information. Dr. McCoy kept their relationship a secret, yes, but he's right- we wouldn't have believed the truth anyway. So I can't blame you, Dr. McCoy. I'm glad you followed your heart."

"Thank you, Jean," I murmur gratefully.

The redhead throws a pointed, meaningful look over to her boyfriend. Scott coughs. "I guess I understand, too," he mutters reluctantly.

"Thank you."

Now it's Sam's turn. The grin that comes to his face is hesitant, but sincere. "I get it. You two are like a modern day, mutant-version of Romeo and Juliet."

Vivien giggles at the wary sigh I let out over the inevitable comment. "Hank doesn't appreciate the comparison," she explains. She nudges me affectionately. "Cheer up, baby. We've been married for a week and neither of us have bit the dust. We've already outlived Romeo and Juliet."

"Not for lack of trying on your part," I remind her, to which she rolls her eyes.

Everyone chuckles at the easy, loving rapport between the two of us, lightening the mood exceedingly.

Everyone, that is, except for Storm and Warren. They hold themselves stiffly, disapproving but also aware that they're outnumbered at this point.

*It's not everyone*, I tell myself bracingly, *but at least it's a start.*
The cafeteria.

On Vivien's last visit to the school it was an un navigable minefield, a place of little welcome and openly unfriendly glares.

It's different this time.

Oh, there are still stares and whispers aimed our way when Vivien appears in the doorway, clinging to my arm for support (both moral and otherwise), but they're more curious than anything else. The fact that a few of the X-Men have already spread the word seems to have helped with the hostility.

"Here," I murmur, practically carrying Vivien over to a table and pulling out a chair for her. "I'll go get you something to eat."

She looks like she wants to protest the high-handed treatment, but just the walk here from the infirmary has left her looking decidedly pale and drawn. This topic is no longer open to negotiation.

I should've just brought her food to her in the first place, but I foolishly allowed the relieved atmosphere after the recent showdown with the X-Men to soften my better judgement.

"Hank-"

"You've already taxed yourself too much this morning," I interject firmly. "Humor me, please."

Vivien glowers at me, which I choose to take as acquiescence.

I grin and give her a quick kiss.

It doesn't take me long to make up a plate for her, but Vivien still manages to collect a slew of visitors in the short amount of time it takes for me to return to our table.

By the time I arrive there's a flock of excited children- I recognize several of them from that day in the music room, so long ago- gathered around Vivien, and Spyke is sitting next to her with a shy smile on his face.

"You're really staying here?" one of the little girls asks eagerly.

"I am," Vivien replies, with a radiant smile that makes my fingers and toes give an inexplicable tingle.

"Are you going to teach us to sing some more?"

My mate hesitates slightly, though the tentative longing is clear in her expression. "If the Professor wants me to, I will," she says carefully.

I open my mouth to assure her-

"Of course," an English-accented voice supplies from directly behind me.
I turn to see Charles, balancing a tray on his knees, maneuvering his wheelchair in the spot catty-corner from Vivien, across from Spyke. I hastily take the seat next to him for fear that I would lose out on the opportunity to sit near my own wife at lunch.

"I would like nothing better than for you to teach here," the telepath continues genially. "Hank, you must finish the music room straight away."

"I'll add it to my to-do list," I assure him with a grin.

Far from feeling imposed upon by his rather imperious command, I'm almost sublimely happy at the very thought. Having Vivien here, with me, teaching and sharing the thing that gives her so much joy- it feels like a dream come true.

*I'll need to make her a new jumpsuit, too, I muse to myself. Definitely with body armor underneath. And perhaps I can design something that will make her knives-

It doesn't even cross my mind to try to dissuade Vivien from going into combat as soon as she heals, though the idea of my mate being in danger makes my feral instincts flare like a lighted match.

But I'm also not completely devoid of common sense, and I know that any sort of attempt on that front would only be an exercise in futility.

Especially since her most heartfelt desire has always been to help mutants somehow, to change the world for the better for our kind. For so long her misguided methods left that aspiration in conflict with her feelings for me, but no more. After all this time, the allegiance of Vivien's heart and her ideals are now aligned.

As, finally, are mine.

My rather blissful contemplation hits a speed bump when I notice my wife staring at Charles with her eyebrows incredulously raised.

"Aren't we missing a crazy person?" she asks. "Or did you decide he wouldn't make a good dinner guest?"

The telepath sighs. "Essentially, yes," he admits. "A few of the students- or their family members- have had run-ins with Stryker in the past-"

Spyke shifts uncomfortably in his seat, clearly remembering his own adventure with the military scientist.

"-And I thought it best not to subject the school's general population to the reminder," Charles concludes. "I'm keeping him asleep in the infirmary for now. I'll see what information I can lift from his thoughts later."

"I'd like to know how he ended up working with the Brotherhood in the first place," Vivien mutters, picking at the mashed potatoes on her plate.

"Wouldn't we all," Alex chimes in, plopping down next to Charles.

He's quickly joined by Sam, Jean, and Scott, though Warren and Ororo are rather pointedly absent from the table.

But still, the others *are* making a point of sitting with us.
My own cautious hopefulness at this gesture of acceptance from most of the team is mirrored in Vivien's expression. The X-Men, it seems, truly are living up to their own principles and giving her a chance.

"How exactly does a military officer who moonlights as a mad scientist hook up with a mutant terrorist organization?" Alex asks rhetorically.

"I intend to find out," Charles replies, his expression grim.

Lunch is filled with tentative overtures to make friends on both sides.

I can tell Vivien is trying very hard to be friendly, since I know her natural inclination is to be reserved and guarded around other people- a relic, I think, of her lonely upbringing and subsequent traumas. Letting people in, past this natural defensiveness, is difficult for her.

"So, Vixen, where are you from originally?" Alex asks.

Vivien looks slightly startled at the blase nature of the question, but quickly recovers herself. "I grew up in Louisiana," she replies cautiously. "What about you? I think Hank said you lived in Alaska for a long time?"

She almost immediately realizes her misstep.

"I mean, Hank mentioned it once. When he talked about you as his friend," she adds hastily. "He only ever spoke about you guys as his friends with me. Not as X-Men."

An uncomfortable silence falls.

"What- what sort of things did he tell you?" Jeans asks tentatively. It's clearly an encouragement for Vivien to prove the harmless nature of our illicit conversations.

My wife chances a questioning glance at me. I nod, trying to be supportive.

"Well... he told me how much Evan seems to like it here," she says slowly, giving the man a small smile. "And what the Professor went through before starting the school up again. Hank mentioned how you used to call him Bozo, Havok. He told me that he thinks that you could be a doctor, Jean, because you're so kind and clever- as if I hadn't figured that out on my own. And how it was you-" she points her fork at Sam accusingly.

"-Who set him up with that absolute twit, Lucy."

Sam grins sheepishly. "Guilty," he admits. He looks at me speculatively. "She didn't really dump you, did she? That's why you seemed surprised when I mentioned it."

"Yes," I confess. "I broke things off because I couldn't continue to see her in good conscience. Not when I loved someone else."

I cast a meaningful look at Vivien, who gives me a shy smile.

"But I think Lucy lied about how things ended between us to soothe her own vanity."

"Shallow as a puddle, that one," Sam agrees, nodding sagely. "I don't know what I was thinking, setting her up with you, of all people."
"You were thinking of getting in good with Alison," Alex whispers, with the air of a conspirator.

And all of us chuckle at Sam's slightly embarrassed, guilty grin.
The rest of the day passes relatively quietly.

After eating, Vivien goes back to working on the Brotherhood files, Charles leaves to go probe Stryker (along with Sam and Alex's help), and Jean offers to help me move Vivien's things into my room.

I'm quite thankful for the assistance, because I don't relish the thought of lugging the piano to the second floor, super-strength not withstanding.

Soon enough I'm trailing behind the redheaded teen as she uses her telekinesis to maneuver the instrument upstairs whilst carrying an armful of vinyls and Vivien's duffle bag over my shoulder.

"Jean, how much did you know about Vivien and I?" I ask inquisitively, unable to help myself.

I know she was aware of my feelings for the feral girl to some degree, and it would be nice to put my curiosity on the subject to rest.

Jean glances over her shoulder at me, causing the piano to bobble dangerously. She quickly corrects its movement before it crashes into anything.

"I could tell that you fell for each other when she visited here," she admits. "I just didn't realize that you still loved one another until that night we heard her talking to Fox. I felt so bad for you both because I thought you'd never have a chance to be together. I had no idea that you'd been seeing each other secretly, if that's what you wanted to know. But now..."

She smiles.

"You can finally be happy without having to hide it from us."

I grin at the thought of being able to be open about my feelings for Vivien, uncaring of whether Jean thinks my rather fatuous expression is ridiculous or not. I want nothing more than to live openly with my wife, to not feel any guilt over the happiness she gives me.

And now I finally have that chance.

It doesn't take long to organize Vivien's things in a matter I find to be satisfactory- though to be fair, it's not like there's many ways I can botch this. I know that as long as everything is put away neatly Vivien's not going to care much on how it's arranged, and it's not like she has that many possessions to begin with.

I take a moment to admire my own handiwork before I go downstairs to check on her.

Once I moved a bookcase over, Vivien's piano fit quite nicely along the far wall of the room. It took little effort to find places in my dresser and closet for her rather minimalist wardrobe (and it's not like mine is that extensive, either), and with some careful rearranging I managed to fit all of her records and books in the shelving I already possessed.

I don't truly believe in fate or anything of that sort, but the way Vivien's things fit in here so
seamlessly feels like a good omen. I want this room to be our home for a long time to come, so it's nice to have at least one aspect of our lives merge together smoothly.

As for the rest...

Only time will tell.

I end up carrying Vivien most of the way upstairs when the time comes to retire.

Her breathing quickly becomes too labored to escape the notice of even my weakened human senses, despite her claims of being strong enough to not require the elevator. The light sheen of sweat appearing across her brow begs to differ.

My offer of a wheelchair earlier this morning had been met with a flat refusal. "There's nothing wrong with my legs," Vivien snapped, in a voice that brooked no arguments.

She's probably wishing she'd listened to my earlier entreaties to take it easy now, though. Losing so much blood and a couple internal organs tends to have this effect on people, regardless of their mental fortitude.

"Hank-" Vivien protests as I scoop her up in my arms only halfway up the stairs.

"We're about to make our first authorized and sanctioned entrance into our room," I declare, trying to spare her pride a little. And unashamedly trying to earn myself some "good husband" points. "I think such an occasion dictates that I carry you over the threshold again."

She snorts and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "You're such a transparent liar," she mutters fondly. "But a sweet one."

"And you're an obdurate contrarian," I retort, nuzzling her hair. "And I love you."

I set her down once we're behind closed doors.

"What do you think?" I ask as Vivien begins to totter around the room, taking note of how I put things away. "Does it feel like home for you?"

No one else except for her, I think, would be able to hear the underlying anxiety, the silent plea in my voice as I ask the question.

Vivien seems to seriously consider the question before answering, so I know she'll be completely honest with me. That doesn't stop me from waiting with baited breath for her reply, though.

Finally, finally she responds.

"Yes," she says. "Yes, it does."

I let out an explosive sigh of relief and rush over to sweep her into my embrace, taking care to be gentle with her injury. Vivien giggles over my rather uncharacteristically exuberant display and pulls me down for a tender kiss.

Home.

She's home here, with me.
Maybe one day it will become mundane and commonplace, but for now the sight of my wife preparing for bed is extremely gratifying. Right now I utterly rejoice in watching Vivien brush her teeth and wash her face next to me, am delighted at the thought of how her hair will be a frazzled mess when she wakes up in my arms tomorrow.

So imagine my dismay when she lets out a rather shaky sigh upon settling into bed together.

"What's wrong, Vivien?" I ask, ever alert to any sign of distress.

I peer down at her face, and even though it's dark and I've taken off my glasses I can see the melancholy in her expression.

"I feel..." she begins hesitantly. And then she pauses to organize her thoughts. "I feel bad, I guess, because I'm so happy right now."

"You feel bad for feeling happy," I repeat, rather baffled.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," Vivien scolds. I can see her frowning. "It's just- my brothers killed all of my friends forty-eight hours ago, and then tried to murder me last night. I miss Marcel and everybody but... I'm also stupidly happy that I get to wake up and go have breakfast with you tomorrow. I- I wonder if it's wrong to be compartmentalizing like this, I guess."

I chose my words carefully, especially taking into account how I feel about Fox and Jackal - essentially, that they're no loss at all. But as for the others...

"Vivien, do you think for one second that Mr. Cole would want you to completely curl up into a ball and cry for days over him?"

I can feel her rolling her eyes, even though I can't see the action in the darkness. "Hank-"

"No, he wouldn't, would he?" I cut across her. "He'd want you to move forward. The best way to honor his memory and everyone else's is to live your own life, and to stop Erik's plan so no other human ever meets the same fate. And as for your brothers... I suppose the same logic applies. They tried to steal your very life away, and before that they tried to control you-"

I just barely manage to quell the outraged growl rising in my throat at the thought of what else Fox and Jackal wanted to do to her.

"-So I don't think there's anything wrong with putting that behind you and trying to live exactly the way you want to. Don't they always say that 'living well is the best revenge'?"

"I don't believe in revenge, remember?"

"True, but I think this might be one of those perfect times for you to take exception and bend your own rules," I reason facetiously, leaning in to kiss her. "You won't be able to once I make you a uniform, since you'll officially be an X-Man."

Her smile is a flash of white teeth in the dark. "God," she whispers. "I love you, Hank."
The Pancake Party

May 25, 1975

Two days pass.

Vivien spends most of those two days working furiously on the Brotherhood files, while the rest of the X-Men hold their collective breath. Waiting, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Or at least for us to have more to go on, so we can form some semblance of a plan.

The lack of headway is really starting to grate on my wife, though. Her frustration is just coming to a head when I step into the laboratory to check on her early Sunday afternoon.

Vivien is so focused on the papers in front of her that she makes no sign of noticing my approach. She's as still as a statue, gaze intent-

"Mother fucker!" she snarls, slamming her fists down on the table.

She crumples up the page in front of her and throws it with unnecessary force at a nearby garbage bin. The pile of similarly discarded notes forming there is starting to vaguely mimic the size and shape of a mini-Mount Everest.

"That bad?" I ask, coming up behind her.

"Worse," Vivien mutters miserably.

I hate to see her so upset- especially over something I can't really help her with. Vivien truly is better than I am when it comes to code-cracking.

So instead I cast my thoughts around wildly, trying to think of something, anything to cheer her up and focus her thoughts once more.

"I don't believe you've seen the kitchen yet," I muse aloud. "How does a sandwich sound?"

She manages a half-hearted, teasing grin- at least it's a start. "I think we haven't been married long enough for you to be telling me to go make you a sandwich."

I laugh. "Perhaps not," I agree, "but I actually meant that it might be good for you to take a break. Sometimes distance from a problem is all you need to solve it."

Vivien takes so long to reply that I'm already considering other methods of convincing her when she finally nods. "I guess a break wouldn't hurt," she admits slowly. "It's not like I'm being productive at this point, anyway."

Vivien leans into me as we walk to the kitchen- out of affection now, rather than using me as a crutch. Her injuries are healing relatively well, for which I'm grateful.

"This is it," I tell her when we arrive. "How about I-?"

I meant to ask what she wanted, but Vivien's already sniffing around on her own. The inquisitive
light in her eyes makes me doubt that she's ever seen such modern cookery before.

"I think I want to make pancakes," she announces after a few minutes.

I think you just want a reason to play around with all the high-tech toys you just found.

I have to hide a rather indulgent smile from Vivien. But at least she's no longer grinding her teeth together in frustration over those codes.

"Red velvet. With cream cheese batter," she adds.

"And the fight against breakfast stigmatization continues," I comment. I can't conceal the fondness in my tone- I absolutely adore this woman, culinary affectations and all.

Vivien is hard at work whilst I sit at the counter and look on in amusement when Alex, Scott and Jean wander in. Both of us greet the newcomers warmly.

"Pancakes?" Jean guesses curiously.

"Yup."

Scott looks puzzled. "It's afternoon," he says. "Isn't it a little late for breakfast?"

Vivien lets out a gasp of feigned outrage, brandishing her spatula. "Late? Breakfast?"

And she launches into an impassioned speech attacking the unfair "breakfast" distinction attached to certain ghettoized, unfortunate foods and defending the rights of people to eat whatever they want to, whenever they want, without a discriminatory label.

By the time Vivien concludes her diatribe with an extended invitation to her audience to- and I quote, "join the resistance"- I'm choking on my laughter. The expressions of the others are just so stupefied that I can't remain stoic under the circumstances.

"Is she serious?" Alex asks me, completely nonplussed.

"Oh, she's completely serious," I assure him. "Breakfast liberation is a cause that's quite near and dear to Vivien's heart."

"Today it's pancakes, tomorrow it's toast!" she adds solemnly.

The blonde man shakes his head. "God, she's just as weird as you are," he mutters. And he cracks a reluctant grin.

"'Weird' is just another word for 'awesome,'" Vivien retorts loftily.

Jean, Alex, and I laugh- even Scott looks mildly amused. Within minutes Vivien is directing her new friend on how to make the sweet cream batter while the rest of us look on.

The way all of them (and Sam, too) have been so cordial to my mate, obviously keeping an open mind about her, warms my heart. Once or twice I've been tempted to tell Vivien, "I told you so," about all of the others just to see her roll her eyes at me, but I've held my tongue.

Mostly because Storm and Warren haven't budged one iota in regards to their behavior towards her. As if on cue, the two of them cautiously enter the kitchen.
"What's going on here?" Warren drawls, his tone distinctly condescending.

The smile on Vivien's face vanishes- clearly she's thinking along the same lines that I am. It feels like trouble on the horizon.

_Uh oh._

My reaction is automatic, without conscious input. I immediately rise from my spot on a nearby stool and make my way to Vivien's side, barely bothering to make the movement seem casual. Real or not, the perceived threat to my mate puts me on my guard.

"We're making pancakes," Jean explains to Warren, almost aggressively cheerful. I have to admire her undaunted attitude. "Red velvet, with sweet cream batter. Do you want some?"

"It's three o'clock in the afternoon. Why the hell are you making pancakes?"

"Because Vixen's a rebel without a cause," Alex mutters.

"Hey," she protests, with a tentative grin. "Breakfast liberation is my cause. Don't make fun of my cause and I won't make fun of your haircut."

I think it's the first time anyone has _ever_ poked fun at Alex's appearance, and his reaction definitely reflects that. His hand goes to his hair self-consciously, his eyes round with surprise.

Scott snorts into his stack of pancakes, and Jean giggles. I can't suppress my own mirth over Alex's startled chagrin.

"I think that's the first time anyone's really taken Alex down a peg. Where were you when he kept calling me 'Bozo' when we were seventeen, darling?" I joke.

"Busy being ten years old," Vivien retorts, with a cheeky grin.

My cheeks warm as the others laugh at me this time. "Touche."

She giggles and kisses me before turning back towards Alex. "You know I was only kidding, right?" she asks, her expression slightly anxious.

Vivien is trying hard to strike a balance in her behavior towards the X-Men. She wants very much for the others to like her, but also doesn't want to present a false version of herself. She just wants to be accepted by the team for who she is.

Alex gives her a reassuring grin. "I figured," he says. "I mean, we all know my hair is perfect."

More laughter- even Warren seems to be in danger of cracking a smile.

Progress, I think hopefully.

And then-

"This all seems nice," Storm- whose disapproving expression hasn't slipped once in the midst of all this light-hearted teasing- interjects. "But aren't you supposed to be _doing_ something?"

Vivien winces, casting her eyes down guiltily. The atmosphere in the kitchen suddenly turns to lead.

"Vivien's been working very hard on breaking those codes," I say defensively. "I thought she could
use a break."

Storm sneers. "So instead of working to stop the Brotherhood," she states in a deadpan voice. "you decided to have a pancake party? Do you even want to break those codes?"

Silence.

And then my wife, for some inexplicable reason, chooses that moment to burst into a fit of giggles.
"Vivien," I murmur, rather uncomfortable with her apparent mirth. Has all of the stress from the past few days finally made my wife snap?

"What?" she asks in a conspiratorial whisper designed to carry. "Come on, baby, laugh. Storm just tried to make a joke. You're going to make her feel bad if you don't at least give a polite chuckle."

Vivien turns towards the other woman, her eyes wide with an innocence I now realize is completely feigned.

"You were just joking, right? I mean, you weren't really trying to imply that I'd be procrastinating on purpose to help those bastards after everything they've done to me and the people I cared about, were you?"

Storm glares sullenly at the feral girl, but Vivien maintains a sweet, cloying smile on her lips while she waits for a reply. It's all the more unsettling when you consider the steely look in her eyes.

"That's what I thought," my mate says brightly when she receives no answer after several tense seconds. "Do you want some pancakes?"

Both Storm and Warren stare at her like she just offered them a plate of dead spiders.

"No thanks," Warren replies disdainfully.

"Oh well," Vivien says, shrugging. "More for me!"

The other two stand there awkwardly for a minute, as if trying figure out a way to salvage the situation while the feral woman takes a bite of her food with exaggerated enthusiasm.

"They're good, right?" she asks the rest of us. This question, I think, is actually sincere.

"Delicious," Jean tells her, and Scott nods in agreement.

"Your cooking is always good, sweetheart," I assure her.

"Whipped," Alex coughs. "But yeah, they're pretty good."

I give him a disapproving frown, but Vivien is giggling and Jean looks amused.

After witnessing that light-hearted exchange Warren and Storm finally recognize defeat. They mutter goodbyes and quickly retreat with as much dignity as they can muster, considering how Vivien just made them look rather foolish.

They leave those of us who remain feeling decidedly anxious and unsettled, despite the moment of levity. None of us can quite manage to look at each other as we eat, like our previously festive meal is suddenly some sort of crime.

Try as I might, I can't decipher the reasons for Storm trying to instigate this little showdown. Does she truly believe that Vivien is trying to stall on breaking those codes, and was trying to warn the others of that fact? Was she trying to goad my mate into a fight, as if a violent confrontation would somehow prove that Vivien is still our enemy?
For whatever the reason, I'm proud of Vivien- Vivien, with her rather fiery temper and impulsive nature- for not giving in to the provocation and diffusing the situation calmly, just as she did during her visit to the mansion in October. And I feel such restraint on her part deserves recognition.

"I'm proud of you," I whisper to her.

"For what?"

"For not turning Ororo into a pile of dog kibble."

Vivien's wry grin doesn't reach her eyes. "I considered it," she murmurs. "But then I thought about the clean up. I think it's better to just stay with Jonathan Swift's playbook."

I chuckle, immediately understanding the literary reference.

"What's so funny?" Alex asks, his mouth full of pancakes.

"Vivien was just saying that she wants to use Jonathan Swift's approach when it comes to Storm and Angel," I explain. At the blank expressions of the others I elaborate. "He was an Irish satirist who believed in illustrating the absurd with the absurd."

I give my wife a fond smile.

"Things like eating children, for example. Or pointing out how ridiculous it would be to think that someone would try to help an organization that murdered all of their friends."

Alex nods, his expression grave. I can tell he's worried about this divide that's forming in the team, a divide I caused by bringing Vivien to the X-Men.

We can't allow this sort of tension to persist- not if we're going to stop Erik's plan. But if Storm and Warren continue to be so obdurate about Vivien... What will we do?

Jean, it seems, is clearly more optimistic than my colleague and I.

"They'll come around," she assures the feral girl, her face shining with sincerity. "Just give them time."

Vivien shrugs apathetically. "I'm a realist, Jean. I don't have any delusions of universal popularity," she admits. "I just..."

A rare flash of vulnerability crosses her lovely features.

"I just wish they'd try to get to know me before they decided to hate my guts."

None of us really know what to say to that, causing an uncomfortable silence to fall.

My wife morosely picks at her food for a few more minutes before giving up completely. "Go ahead and leave the dishes, I'll get them later," she tells us, studiously keeping her eyes down. "I'm going to get back to work on those codes."

"Darling-"

"It's fine, baby," Vivien interjects, a brittle smile plastered on her face. "Really. I need to focus on that or I'm never going to get it done."

She kisses me and gracefully exits the room, despite the slump to her shoulders.
"She's a really bad liar, you know," Alex comments dryly once she's gone.

"I happen to like that about her," I reply.

"You would," he mutters, grinning. But then he becomes more serious. "Have you finished her uniform yet?"

"Yes, earlier this morning. Why?"

"So Vixen can start training with the rest of us," Scott supplies helpfully. "Right?"

Alex nods. "We need to get her in the mix, have the rest of us learn how to work with her," he explains.

I shake my head. "She's still wounded," I tell him. "I can't let her start training in good conscience until she's completely healed."

"We'll take it slow at first."

I roll my eyes- a habit I know I picked up from my mate. "Vivien doesn't know how to take it slow, Alex," I retort. "You have no idea how tenacious she is once she's decided on something. Personal safety doesn't even compute for her. That's how she ended up with that gash in the first-"

Alex holds up a hand, causing me to fall silent- out of habit, rather than inclination. "I hear what you're saying. But we can't let this hostility continue in the team, Hank," he says. I hate how absolutely reasonable he sounds. "Vixen needs to get in the Danger Room, get trained up, and prove herself to the rest of us as soon as possible."

I can't help laughing bitterly. "Prove herself?" My tone is incredulous. "What more does she need to do to satisfy you, bring us Erik's head on a platter?"

"You know what I mean," he sighs, clearly straining for patience.

And the truth is, I do.

Having Vivien train with the rest of the team, forcing Warren and Ororo to see how sincere and committed she is to this cause, will hopefully soften their animosity towards her.

Hopefully. Maybe.

And I hate the idea of risking my mate's safety on a "maybe."

For all that I've wanted Vivien to be an X-Man for months, ever since we got to know each other at Alkali Lake, now that the opportunity has finally arrived I find myself dreading it. The danger is suddenly much too real, especially in her current state of injury.

"Prove herself," Alex said.

What if she hurts herself even worse in the process?

"Can we wait a week?" I ask tentatively, though I know what the answer will be. "A few more days, at least?"

Alex shakes his head grimly, though his eyes are sympathetic. "We can't have this hanging over our heads, Hank," he says. "With our luck, the Brotherhood will pull something soon. We need to be ready."
I sigh in resignation, kowtowing to necessity. "I guess so."
Welcome to the Team

Vivien is predictably excited about the opportunity of training with the X-Men. The prospect is even enough to shake off the lingering effects of the afternoon’s confrontation with Warren and Ororo.

"I've been wanting to see the Danger Room ever since you told me about it," she says, hazel eyes shining brightly. "You made it sound so amazing whenever you talked about training."

Yeah, well now I wish I hadn't, I think bitterly as we lay in bed that night.

I try to muster up a smile for her but fail miserably. Of course she notices immediately.

"What's with the face?" she demands. "Isn't this what you wanted? For me to be an X-Man?"

I wince. "Yes, but..." I reach out and brush my hand gently against the healing wound on her stomach. I can feel the raised bumps of the stitches through the thin cloth of my shirt that she stole to wear to sleep.

"You're such a worrywart," Vivien laughs. "I feel just fine."

She scoots closer and snuggles against me.

"And I'm really looking forward to seeing the uniform you made for me."

I can't help grinning hopefully, already anticipating her reaction to the jumpsuit I made specially for her. It was a labor of love, and I pray she likes the end result.

Vivien giggles when she sees my expression. "That's more like it."

May 26, 1975

We go down to the basement a little earlier than everyone else so Vivien can try on her suit.

"I'm glad you didn't make mine the same color as everyone else's," she says, turning this way and that in the locker room mirror. "The blue is ok, but yellow is not my color. Black is more my style."

"Uh-huh," I reply absently from my seated position on a bench nearby. I'm already in my own uniform, fuzzy and blue.

Vivien glances over her shoulder, a puzzled frown on her face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I assure her, grinning. "Just... admiring the view, is all."

Show me a red-blooded male who wouldn't enjoy the sight of his wife in a skin-tight outfit. I dare you.

Vivien laughs and skips over to me, slipping her hands around my neck. I put mine on her waist, looking up into the face of my lovely mate. I curse myself sometimes for thinking that she was merely pretty the first time I saw her. Especially because there are many moments now when I feel
rather awestruck over how absolutely *breathtaking* she truly is.

"Well, are you going to tell me about my uniform or are you going to stare at my ass all day?" she prompts.

"Don't tempt me," I murmur cheekily. But then of course I jump at the chance to show her what I've made for her. "Your suit has reinforced body armor through the torso to protect your vital organs."

"Doesn't feel like it."

I grin. "That's the point. I considered putting you in a big suit of armor-"

She makes an exasperated face.

"-But I suspected that would be too heavy for you to move around in. This is a compromise," I explain. "Then you have a sheath for each of your knives-"

I gesture to the spots on her outer thighs and the small holster apparatus that crisscrosses on her back. I automatically assumed she would also stick a pair of knives in her boots, as is her custom.

Speaking of boots-

"And you also have a utility belt for anything you want to carry that doesn't fit in your boots."

Vivien giggles.

"But the best part is these," I tell her, taking her hands in mine and holding them between us, palms up.

She obviously couldn't wear normal gloves because of her claws, so I made a finger-less set that protected the backs of her hands as well as her wrists and forearms, much like mine.

But with one special addition.

"Here, let's go in so I can show you."

Vivien allows me to lead her into the Danger Room, obviously curious.

"Go ahead and throw this at the wall," I direct her, handing her one of the knives she stole from Stryker's men, so many months ago.

Puzzled, she does as I bid her. The knife lands with a solid thud, several feet away.

Wordlessly, I reach out, raise her hand, and make a small, inward flicking motion with it.

The knife immediately comes whizzing back towards us, handle first, allowing Vivien to catch it with ease.

She gasps with delight, eyes wide with wonder as she looks up at me.

"I've noticed that in combat you run the risk of losing your knives once you've thrown them," I tell her. "The other night, for example, after you nailed Cyclops in the head. You wouldn't have gotten that one back if I hadn't grabbed it for you. So I designed a way for you to call your knives back to you. See, there's a transponder in the handle of each one that will respond to that flicking motion I just showed you. They'll come straight back to the sensor in the palms of your gloves. What do you
Vivien laughs and throws her arms around my neck. "I think it's perfect of course," she assures me gleefully. "Thank you, baby. Have I told you lately how absolutely amazing you are?"

I'm saved from the necessity of a reply when she stands on tiptoe and pulls me down for a kiss. I eagerly reciprocate, slanting my mouth across hers and tugging her closer.

It's easy to lose myself completely, feeling Vivien against me like this, allowing the satisfaction and relief I feel over how enthusiastic she is about her new uniform to turn into a rather ardent display of affection. I finally give myself permission to feel completely happy for the opportunity to fight with my mate by my side. With her lips on mine, I forget where we are, that other people are coming-

Until a wolf-whistle intrudes onto my awareness.

I manage to unglue myself from Vivien, breathing heavily, and turn to see Alex and Sam watching us.

*Would it be too convenient if the earth opened up and swallowed me right now?*

"Ahem," Alex coughs. He seems torn between wry amusement and embarrassment on my behalf for catching my lover and I in such a passionate embrace. "Were'n't you supposed to be showing Vixen her new uniform?"

"He did," Vivien replies brightly. "You just interrupted me thanking him for a job well done."

Sam snickers. I'm almost positive that my face is bright purple by now.

Alex manages to stifle a grin. "I'm glad you like it, but try to lay off the PDA in here, ok?" he says seriously. His leadership persona slips into place in the blink of an eye. "We're here to focus on training."

"Ok," Vivien mutters, taking a deliberate step back from me. I shuffle my feet awkwardly and nod, still feeling rather mortified over getting caught making out like a hormonal teenager.

"In here, you're Beast and Vixen," Alex continues. "Not Hank and Vivien."

"Got it."

"You're not married, you're just teammates-"

"I got it, Havok," Vivien says, her voice slightly edgier. She clearly isn't appreciating the lecture.

"Ok, good. And would you mind putting your hair up?" Alex adds. "I don't want it getting in the way."

Her gaze shifts heavenward, as if praying for patience, as she reaches into her boot and pulls out a hair tie. With quick, practiced movements she wraps her hair into a bun on top of her head.

"Anything else, Fearless Leader?"

"No, that's it for now," Alex replies calmly.

Vivien makes a face at him and sighs.
Jean and the other three members of the X-Men arrive at that moment, and I use the chance to step closer to my wife again.

"He's not saying these things to be domineering, sweetheart," I murmur to her, so no one else can hear.

"I know," Vivien replies with another sigh. "I tell myself that, but you know how much I love being told what to do."

With a tremor of unease I remember her telling me that she's not a team player, that she only joined the Brotherhood to keep her family together. I'm well aware of her wariness towards other people, how difficult it is for Vivien to trust. She's practically the definition of an independent operator.

But she's also willing to try to make this work, and that has to be worth something, doesn't it?

"Alright," Alex announces, interrupting my private ruminations. "Let's get started."
"Now, we've got a new teammate with us today, so I thought we could go around and describe our powers," Alex says. "Vixen, you go first."

"I already know all of your powers," Vivien notes, with a wry grin. "And you know mine."

"Just go with it," I murmur quietly. "It's tradition."

She looks very tempted to tell me to stick my tradition where the sun doesn't shine, but she takes a deep breath and plays along. "Alright. My powers: I'm fast, agile, pretty strong for someone my size, and I've got super senses," she explains. "I wouldn't call it a power, really, but I've got a knack for getting into places I shouldn't be, and I'm good with knives and blowing stuff up." She shrugs. "That's it, I guess."

"Good," Alex says. "Marvel Girl, you next."

And so we go around the group, like a mutant paramilitary version of an AA meeting. Or would it be show-and-tell? Whatever the description, we go through the motions for form's sake.

When we're done Alex clears his throat and looks at all of us seriously. "There's no point hiding from the elephant in the room," he tells us. "Vixen was a part of the Brotherhood, and all of us have fought against her at some point or another. And I don't know about you guys, but I've never been able to beat her in a fair fight-"

The frank admission of a weakness surprises me, coming from him. I feel a little ashamed of myself for not giving Alex enough credit for his own self-awareness.

"So I think we should use that to our advantage. Yeah, I can try to point out areas that we all need to work on here in training, but it's different being on the other side, in combat," he says. "Vixen, before we do anything else, how about you point out some weaknesses you've noticed when fighting us in the past?"

Vivien looks startled, but recovers quickly. I think she almost immediately understands what a good point Alex has in asking this of her. What better source to learn about our shortcomings than from a former enemy?

She eyes all of us appraisingly for a minute before speaking.

"Havok, you favor your right hand too much. It's easy to dodge a hit when you know what side it's coming from."

He accepts the criticism stoically.

"Marvel Girl, you always seem to hesitate before attacking," Vivien tells the redhead. "Like you're scared to really hurt anyone. Trust me, the Brotherhood notices. It costs you a lot, especially when you're going against Quicksilver. You are so strong, and you shouldn't be scared to show it, you know?"

Everyone listens to her advice calmly (though Vivien doesn't offer me any- I think because we both know that my biggest weakness in a fight happens to be *her*) until she gets to Storm.
"No offense, Angel, but you wear too much cologne," Vivien says rather apologetically. I know she's trying not to give the be-winged young man another reason to dislike her. "Even the Brotherhood members who don't have super senses can smell you coming. And Storm, you-

"Do we really need to listen to this?" Ororo interjects. "I don't get why we should listen to her, anyway."

"I don't know, Storm," Sam replies, his tone slightly sarcastic. "Maybe because she took down most of the team in about thirty seconds by herself the other night? She knows what she's talking about. I think she's had some fair points, personally."

Storm grinds her teeth in frustration.

The rest of us look at Vivien expectantly.

"Storm, you rely on your powers too much," the feral girl says warily, as if she already knows this will not be taken well. "It's easy to catch you flat-footed-

It should be noted that there are some people out there who simply cannot take criticism, no matter how gently it's given. Any sort of negative evaluation of their skills is automatically misconstrued as an insult, likely to set off an argument as they defend themselves from what they see as baseless recriminations.

Storm is one of those people.

As Vivien speaks, the younger woman seems to swell with indignation. The air crackles with electricity- and not just a figure of speech in this case, but actual electricity.

Oh dear.

"-Because you're not used to close-quarters combat. I think if you focused more on that for a while, you could really-"

Storm sends a bolt of lightning straight at my mate, causing my heart to leap into my throat.

"Storm!"

"Flat-footed, huh?" she sneers.

But Vivien dodges the threat with an easy grace. "Yup."

Another lightning bolt. Another evasion.

All of our teammates back away, obviously unsure of how to react in this situation and rather loathe to get hit by a stray bolt of lightning.

I take a step forward, instinctively trying to protect my mate.

Alex grabs my arm, trying to hold me back. "Beast, let them work this out," he says sternly.

I angrily shake him off. "I thought you said we would take it slow," I snarl. "She's still wounded, Havok."

"I know. But this needs to happen between them sooner or later, or Storm's never going to get over herself," he argues. "Stand down. That's an order."
I hesitate, torn.

A lifetime of being an adamant rule-follower is at war with the innate necessity of keeping my mate safe, leaving me simultaneously frozen in place but straining towards the combatants, ready to dash in.

Despite my aversion, a tiny (very tiny) part of me understands Alex's reasoning. Storm needs to develop a proper respect for Vivien and what she can contribute to the team, and the quickest way to do that is to have the feral woman prove her point through example.

But while I have no doubt Vivien will be able to beat Storm, even wounded as she is, it doesn't mean I have to like watching this confrontation.

My wife is more than handling herself in the midst of my minor nervous breakdown.

Though at first she appeared to give ground before Storm's lightning strikes, her dodges are now bringing her closer and closer to her attacker. The weather-manipulator is so focused on trying to land a hit on the elusive feral woman that she doesn't notice that she's within range until it's too late.

Vivien springs at her, making an impressive leap of over ten feet from a standing position that causes her to fly right over Storm's head and touch down, feet-first, against the wall behind her opponent. She then rebounds off the wall, twisting in midair to land directly in front of the younger mutant.

They're close enough to touch now, and yet Storm is too flabbergasted by the sudden change in circumstance to even react.

"See?" my mate says in a conversational tone. "Flat-footed."

And then she hits the other girl, using the heel of her hand to thrust upward against Storm's nose and breaking it. The abused protuberance immediately starts gushing blood while she whimpers in pain.

"Ow!" she cries, covering her face with her hands. For some reason (perhaps it's because she was just firing at my wife) I can't manage an ounce of sympathy for her.

I instantly relax a little, even though one of our students is now bleeding all over the floor. I'm just glad my mate is no longer in danger of being struck by lightning.

Next to me, Alex groans. "I get that she needed to prove the point, but did she really need to break Storm's nose?" he mutters.

I open my mouth to retort, but Vivien's sharp ears caught the complaint as well.

"Did she really need to try to hit me with a goddamn lightning bolt?" the feral woman snaps, bristling with indignation. "If she's going to start something, I'll finish-"

Vivien winces, reaching with her hand to press against her stomach. Her palm is red with blood when she pulls it away.

*Oh my stars and garters. Her stitches-"

"Shit," she mutters. "I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?"
I immediately rush to my mate's side and scoop her up into my arms.

The others say nothing as I rush Vivien from the Danger Room, intent on stitching up her freshly re-opened wound in the medical bay as soon as possible.

Or maybe they do say something, and I simply can't hear their voices because I'm too focused on my mate's well-being to notice anything else. An angry buzzing noise fills my ears, urging me to hurry, hurry and stop the bleeding.

"How mad are you?" Vivien murmurs after I set her on a hospital bed, mere moments later.

"Mad?" I repeat, my voice tight with too much emotion. I set about gathering up the tools I need to perform yet another impromptu surgery on my wife. "I'm not mad, I'm furious."

Her expression falls slightly. I immediately cotton on to her dismay.

"Not at you, love," I assure her.

She obviously thinks that I'd be upset with her for being too careless and hurting herself again, but how could I be angry with her in this case? What was she supposed to do in there, allow herself to get struck by lightning? Especially when none of us (including me) stepped up to assist her?

"I'm angry with Storm for acting like a petulant child who can't take criticism and then trying to hurt you," I explain as I examine Vivien's wound, which is now sullenly oozing blood.

It's clear that all the dodging and twisting she was forced to do ripped a few of the stitches out of her skin. The sight makes my vision go a little red around the edges.

"I'm furious with Alex, for having you start training already even though you're still wounded. And then allowing that little showdown between you and Storm to go this far," I continue. A sudden realization makes it suddenly hard to swallow, as if there's a ball of lead settled in my throat. "But I think I'm the most upset with myself."

"Baby-"

I shake my head as I finish preparing my needle and the sutures I need.

At this rate, what's the point of even putting my tools away?

"I shouldn't have let Alex convince me that this was necessary, so soon after you getting hurt," I tell her after I give her a shot of lidocaine. "And then I actually listened to him when he told me to stand down. Instead of protecting my mate I just stood there and watched Storm try her damnedest to kill you like some sort of mindless robot."

Vivien opens her mouth to argue with me, but then shuts it.

As much as she automatically wants to protect me from myself, we both know that I'm right. My concern over following the rules, with ending the disharmony on the team, momentarily took precedence over her well-being.
While she might not go so far as to say it, I know that right now I'm a failure as a husband, as a mate.

"Well, I'm not dead," Vivien offers finally, with a cheeky grin. "You need to stop being so hard on yourself, baby."

"No," I reply firmly. "This isn't going to happen again, Vivien. I don't really care much if anyone walks all over me, but in a situation like this, when your life is on the line... Your safety is too important to jeopardize because I'm too weak-willed to say anything. Never again, darling."

I lean down and kiss her before I begin stitching her up again. I can feel her eyes on me as I work, though she says nothing.

I've just finished zipping up her jumpsuit over the new bandages when Charles and Alex enter the infirmary, escorting a still-bleeding Storm. Vivien glances over at the newcomers, but I pointedly ignore them as I gather up my tools to sanitize.

"Vivien, Ororo has something to say to you," Charles announces calmly.

My wife raises her eyebrows incredulously.

Storm sighs. "Vixen, I'm really sor-" she begins in a monotone voice made worse by the fact that she has to pinch her own nose shut to stem the bleeding.

Vivien chuckles, holding up a hand to halt the tepid apology. "Let's not say things we don't mean, Storm," she tells her wryly. "We both know the Professor is making you do this."

Out of the corner of my eye I see the younger girl nod sullenly, not even bothering to refute the claim.

Meanwhile, Charles looks rather disappointed and perhaps even a little guilty about his transparent attempt to force a reconciliation. I assume it's because he somehow expected this feud to die away after bloodshed, that maybe Storm would realize Vivien's worth after being so publicly beaten by her.

But it appears the humiliation has done nothing to lessen her antipathy towards my wife.

Vivien grins at Storm's agreement, though I think the honest admission hurts her more than she's willing to let on. "That's what I thought," she says. "So, I'm willing to accept an apology from you when it's sincere, but until then just save your breath. Half-assed apologies are beneath you. Now excuse me-"

She lays her head down and closes her eyes.

"I've been bleeding out a little too often for my own liking these past few days, and I think I could use a nap."

Despite the abrupt dismissal, I see a glimmer of new-found respect flash across Storm's face. Vivien's refusal to go through the motions, even in front of Charles, along with her claim that a faked apology would be beneath the weather-manipulating mutant seems to have raised Vivien a degree or two in Storm's regard.

Charles sighs in defeat. "Very well, then. Beast, could you help Storm with-?"

"There's an ice pack in the freezer," I stiffly reply, without turning around as I (for the moment,
anyway) put my tools away. "There's nothing else I can do for her."

*Even if I wanted to. Which I wouldn't.*

I don't say the words aloud, but the heavy silence that follows my statement indicates that my posture and tone communicated my feelings on the matter quite clearly. I can only imagine the expressions on their faces right now.

Alex clears his throat uncomfortably. "I'll get it," he mutters.

I hear shuffling behind me, the sound of the infirmary's freezer opening and closing.

"Ororo, I suggest that you take some Tylenol and rest," Charles says quietly. "Keep icing your face, and I'll check on you soon."

"Ok."

"Storm," Vivien calls out suddenly.

The younger mutant's footsteps, which were fading towards the exit, now stop.

"Just so you know, I meant what I was trying to say in there," my mate says. I glance over to see that she's still laying in the bed with her eyes closed. "Before you tried to fry me, I mean. I think that if you focused on honing your hand-to-hand skills, you'd be unstoppable."

Curiosity momentarily weakens my resolve.

I look over my shoulder to see Storm thoughtfully regarding my wife. As if maybe, just maybe, she's re-thinking her opinion of the feral woman.

*Finally. But that's still not worth Vivien getting hurt again.*

"Hank," Charles entreats, once Storm has left the room. "What's wrong, my friend?"

Did he seriously just ask that question?

I whirl around to face him, and despite my best efforts my words still come out in a snarl. "What's wrong? What's wrong is that I was forced to stand by while my wife was fired upon, despite being promised that we'd take it slow at first. I didn't even *want* her to start training yet, but my medical opinion was overruled. And now look at her- we've set back her recovery even further."

My mentor casts a sidelong glance at Alex, who shifts guiltily. "Sorry, Beast," he mutters. "I honestly thought you were just being overprotective about your girl."

"Easy assumption to make," Vivien mutters. I glance down to see her looking at me with an undisguised, disarming fondness. "But give Hank more credit than that, Havok. He knows he can't get away with babying me *too* much, or I'll knock him into next week."

Alex sighs. "Alright," he says. "I really am sorry you were hurt again, Vivien. Lesson learned."
The next morning sees a breakthrough in the code-cracking front.

"Oh my God," Vivien says suddenly, sitting up straighter in bed.

She's been relaxing against the headboard while going over the Brotherhood files again, having promised to take it easy today by my request. For the past several minutes she's been muttering to herself, words that were utterly incomprehensible to me as I readied for the day but which may or may not have meant something to her.

And now-

"What is it, sweetheart?" I ask. I've just finished slipping on my shoes in order to head down to the laboratory.

My mate's face is awash with a triumphant glow. "Hank, I've got it! I've figured it out!" she crows gleefully, gingerly scrambling to get out of bed. "Quick, I need to see the Professor."

Vivien's impatience is obvious as we slowly head downstairs, our progress curtailed by her reopened injury. Still, we manage to make it to Charles' room within minutes.

*Come in,* the telepath's mental voice murmurs after my polite knock.

We find Charles in his sitting area, drinking tea and looking every inch the English sophisticate he is in a tweed bathrobe and house slippers.

"You two are up early this morning," he observes. "Is something wrong?"

"I broke the code," my mate explains excitedly.

He sits up straighter. "You did?" he asks, interest piqued. "Come, sit down."

There's only one other chair in Charles' sitting area, so Vivien ends up sitting in my lap across from the eagerly awaiting Professor. Not that you'd catch me complaining about that.

"It's actually not really a code at all," my wife tells us both, spreading the papers across the small tea table. "Have you guys heard of code-talkers before?"

"Yes," I reply, though Charles looks puzzled. "The information was declassified a few years ago-

*Deep into Charles' dark period, so it's not like he was paying attention.*

"That the United States military used the Navajo language as the basis for a code, mainly in the Pacific theater. It was never broken by the Axis powers."

"Right," Vivien agrees, "but did you know that the Navajo weren't the first code-talkers?"

I raise my eyebrows curiously. "Really?"
"Nope. Choctaw Indians in France during World War I were. The Germans weren't able to break their codes, either," she tells me. She chuckles and kisses me on the cheek. "I can't believe I know something historical that you don't. Maybe I should savor this moment."

"Don't rub it in, darling," I grumble. "What does that have to do with this?"

"I kept thinking that this stuff seemed so familiar, like something I couldn't quite remember," Vivien explains. "But then I started to say it out loud, and it clicked. These documents are in Choctaw. My grandfather was actually one of those code-talkers back in the day- my mom taught me the language when I was little. I'm not used to seeing it written, and that's why I didn't get it first. And it's not like I speak it every day, anyway."

She shakes her head in exasperation.

"Still, I can't believe it took me this long to figure out."

"At least you did it, though," I assure her, kissing her bare shoulder. She's absolutely ravishing today in a forest green sundress that brings out the gold in her eyes. "What do you think, Charles?"

"It makes sense in a way, I suppose," the telepath murmurs thoughtfully. "Stryker comes from a military family. It would be quite clever of him to use an obscure language previously utilized as a code in combat for his own purposes. Do your brothers know this language? Does Erik know that you're familiar with it?"

Vivien shakes her head. "No on both questions. They never had the patience for academics. And we take after our dad in the looks department," she explains, gesturing to her white-blond hair with a pale, freckled arm. "No one would realize we're part Indian unless we mention it. And I don't see Magneto randomly asking my brothers if we happen to have Choctaw blood, let alone if any of us could speak the language. He probably thought I wouldn't be able to do anything with this-" she starts gathering up the files on the table.

"-And that's why he hasn't made a move yet," she continues. "I'll have these all written out by tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

Charles grins. "You're a treasure, Vivien."

She laughs and shakes her head disparagingly, but I hold her close. "That she is," I agree proudly. "Have you been making any progress with Stryker, Charles?"

I ask mainly out of morbid curiosity, rather than a particular regard for the military man's well-being.

Besides what he's done to countless unknown mutants in the past, my dislike for the man is now also founded on a more personal level. One has to wonder what Vivien's life would have been like had it not been for the scientist torturing Myles into madness. Would her brothers still have fallen in with Erik? Would they have been more receptive to her pleas for nonviolence, as Vivien's own views shifted?

No one will never know.

My mentor sighs. "Not much, I'm afraid," he admits. "What Mastermind did to him- how can I explain it? I've put as much of Stryker's mind back together as I could, but it's like a shattered mirror. Some of the pieces are too fragmented to repair, and even what I've managed to mend will never be whole again."
"So he's stuck like how I found him forever?" Vivien asks, horror-struck.

"Not quite as bad as that," Charles replies. "He has his moments of lucidity-"

The telepath's expression darkens.

"-Though sometimes I wonder if it's better for him to remain unaware," he murmurs. At our puzzled expressions he elaborates. "I'm sure you've wondered how a man like Major William Stryker ended up helping Erik create a mutagenic weapon of mass destruction."

We both nod.

"It wasn't by choice," the telepath tells us. "From what I can gather, Erik, Mastermind, and Fox broke into Stryker's house and managed to kidnap him, his wife and young son. The Brotherhood then held his family hostage and forced him to help create both the formula and the mechanism to dispense it. Mastermind's powers- and the torture Fox and Jackal put Mrs. Stryker and young Jason through- kept him docile most of the time, but recently he managed to briefly break free of the control and kill his wife and son."

"His own wife?" I repeat. My skin is crawling with revulsion, and I reflexively hold Vivien tighter against me. "His own child?"

"If they're dead, the Brotherhood can't hurt them anymore," she whispers. "My- my brothers can't hurt them anymore."

Her hands clench into fists, drawing blood from her palms as her claws dig into her flesh.

"How could I have been so blind to what was happening? Did I miss something-?"

"Darling, no," I murmur soothingly, reaching out and taking her hands in mine. "I'm sure they purposely hid all traces from you, because they knew you wouldn't stand for it."

"Hank's right," Charles agrees, his tone bleak. I can imagine what these realizations cost him, knowing that he allowed Erik to walk free at the White House. "Erik couldn't definitively prove that it was you who helped Spyke escape the Brotherhood months ago, but he had his suspicions. Once he decided on this course of action he thought it best to keep you completely in the dark, because he knew you would oppose it."

"Wanda? Peter?" Vivien asks desperately. "Did they know?"

"I don't think they knew everything, but they're aware of some of it," Charles replies reluctantly. My wife turns and buries her head in my shoulder for a moment, digesting this.

The twins, I know, were her friends, and the fact that they hid this from her... To have this betrayal on top of everything else is yet another terrible blow for Vivien.

And there's nothing I can do to make it less painful.

Finally she clears her throat and looks up again. "I want to see him," she announces. "I want to see Stryker."

Charles eyes her steadily for a long moment, a mixture of empathy and reluctance in his quiet gaze.

"Very well," he agrees.
A Changed Man

"Why do you want to see him, Vivien?" I ask quietly while we wait in the hallway for Charles to dress himself. "Is it because you feel guilty? Because you shouldn't, darling, you heard what Charles said-"

I'm silenced by Vivien placing a gentle finger against my lips.

"No, baby. I get what the Professor said, for the most part. It's more like..."

She looks away, her expression pained.

"I'm not sure how to make you understand," she whispers. "You've never hated someone like that. I used to hate Stryker so much, like this vicious burning in my soul. I used to dream about killing him, about every horrible, painful thing that could possibly happen to a person happening to him."

"And now it has," I murmur.

"And now it has," she agrees. "And it's not that I feel like my wishing for it somehow made all of this happen, it's just... I didn't think about how it would affect the people who loved him. His son, his wife- they didn't deserve to suffer because Stryker is a big, fat douchebag. But they did, and..."

She shrugs helplessly.

I wrap my arms around her, holding her close and inhaling her sunshine-flower scent. "I understand, sweetheart," I assure her quietly.

We stand there like that, taking comfort from each other's nearness, until Charles joins us.

"Shall we?" he prompts.

He leads us just down the hall to one of the unused dorms, a simple bedroom with an adjoining bathroom.

"Who's he talking to?" Vivien murmurs when we reach the door. She tilts her head, listening curiously to a voice too faint for my human ears to catch.

"His wife and son," is the sad reply.

Oh my stars and garters.

Vivien grips my arm tightly as Charles leans forward and knocks. Clearly, she feels the same way.
as I do.

A minute later, Major William Stryker answers the door.

This is a changed man from the upright military officer I saw back at Alkali Lake, or even a mere few days ago. He's unshaven, unwashed, and clothed in an undershirt and boxer shorts under a thick, black bathrobe. Though I know he's only in his mid-thirties, there's streaks of white in his hair and his face is completely ashen.

"Charles!" Sryker says cheerfully. "Come in, Emily was just finishing breakfast."

"Thank you, William," Charles replies calmly. "Do you mind that I brought some guests?"

"Not at all," the other man assures him, beckoning us inside. "Come in, come in. Emily- better put on some more eggs and bacon!"

We follow him in, though Vivien and I hover near the door uncertainly as he stumbles along. She takes a deep inhale, her nose wrinkling in disgust. "Hank, I smell blood," she whispers. I frown and do a visual scan of the room, but I see no source. My sense of unease, already high, ratchets up even further.

"You remember my son, Jason?" Stryker asks proudly, gesturing to a completely empty chair at the tiny table in the back of the room. "And my wife, Emily?"

Vivien chokes back a broken little gasp of dismay. Despite all of the despicable things he's done, I can tell she's feeling a great deal of pity for Stryker right now.

"Yes, of course," Charles agrees, humoring the sickening delusion. "Would you like me to introduce you to my friends?"

"Of course."

"This is Dr. Hank McCoy, and Vivien, his wife-"

The innocuous statement causes a great change in the scientist. Stryker's face, which had been arranged in an open, welcoming smile, suddenly contorts into a mask of pure anguish.

Um-

"Wife?" he cries. "My wife is dead- my son- dead. I-I killed them, I killed them-

And he collapses into a chair, his body wracked with tearless sobs.

Driven by what I assume is some sort of compassionate impulse, Vivien steps away from me and approaches the man that was once her greatest enemy.

"Hey- shhh, shhh," she whispers, brushing her hand soothingly through his hair while I look on in astonishment.

The Vivien I met so long ago would never have done this, would never have comforted the man who caused her family so much pain. But I suppose the past year- even the past week or so- has had a huge impact on her.

Stryker glances up, curious as to who's trying to comfort him, and recognition flashes across his
"You," he gasps, rising to his feet. He towers over her by almost a foot. "I remember you- you tried to kill me once."

"Technically several times," Vivien mutters. "But yeah."

"Where's your big blue boyfriend?"

I shift my weight uncomfortably.

"Oh, he's definitely around," she replies sardonically.

A pause.

And then Stryker surprises all of us by grabbing both of her upper arms and shaking her slightly.

"You didn't back then, but I want you to kill me now," he begs. "Please-"

Vivien shakes her head and tries to back away, but the human holds her fast.

"Please," he pleads. "What I've done- my family- I-I helped Magneto- please kill me, it'd be a mercy. kill me-"

And he begins to shake her violently.

"Charles-" My warning comes out as a snarl, despite my human form.

Before the telepath can react Vivien reaches up and grabs Stryker's bathrobe-clad wrists, hitting a pressure point that makes his knees buckle. "I'm not going to kill you, dammit," she snaps, shoving him back into the chair, where he slumps over listlessly and laughs maniacally.

I feel a moment's relief, but the emotion quickly vanishes when Vivien looks down at her hands.

Her blood-covered hands.

"Hank!" she cries out, a rare edge of panic in her voice. She reaches out and pulls down the cuffs of Stryker's bathrobe, revealing deep gashes on both wrists that are steadily streaming blood. "Oh my God!"

My brain immediately shifts gears.

"Keep pressure on those wounds," I order, before racing out of the room. I catch a glimpse of Vivien bending down to do as I bid her while Charles looks on helplessly.

I rush down to the basement in haste, grabbing a blood bag, bandages, and sutures, though I fear it's no use.

How long has he been bleeding out for, without our knowledge because of the thick bathrobe? And the glimpse I got of Stryker's wounds- clearly self-inflicted, though I don't know what he used-made it rather clear that he's done a thorough job of himself. His study of human anatomy, gleaned from dissecting untold numbers of ferals, has clearly paid off in spades.

Still, I have to give it my best effort.

Vivien has managed to get Stryker into the bathtub by the time I make it back to his room. She's
tied off hand towels across the man's forearms in an attempt to staunch the bleeding, but they're already soaked through.

It honestly feels like a scene from a horror movie.

Stryker looks like he wants to protest my attempts to save him, but at this point he's so weak he can't put up much of a fight. Vivien hovers next to his head, her jaw set against the sickening sight before us.

I work furiously for several minutes, trying to repair severed veins and arteries, but it's just as I suspected- too little, too late. I feel ashamed of myself for failing when I meet my mate's eyes, giving a small shake of my head to tell her it's no use.

Vivien bites her lip and looks down at Stryker, who is now fading in and out of consciousness.

And then she begins to sing quietly. "And honestly I have been begging for answers/ That you and only you can give to me./ My voice crying loud-

The dying man's gaze focuses on her, astonishment playing across his chalk-white features because this creature he has despised and viewed as less-than-human for so long is trying to ease his death throes.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" he croaks when she pauses after the chorus. "After everything I've done-"

Vivien opens her mouth to answer, closes it. Then she swallows thickly and murmurs, "because you're a person, too."

He stares at her blankly for a moment, and then whispers, "sing some more?"

A final request from a dying man.

And my Vivien certainly doesn't have the heart to refuse. She sings to him, her voice as pure as an angel's, as his eyes drift closed for the final time.

"Does this deafening silence mean nothing to no one but me?"

"For everything- everything I've done, to you and yours... I'm sorry," he gasps out when she finishes her song.

Right before he slips away.
"He's gone," I murmur. "Charles, I'm sorry, there was nothing I could."

I glance over and realize that a crowd of X-Men has gathered at the door without my notice. Rather understandable, I think, considering what I was just doing, but I can't help feeling ashamed of myself for failing in front of my teammates.

Are any of them afraid that I would founder in the same way, were they in Stryker's place?

I certainly am.

The emotions roll over me with the force of a tidal wave- pity and sadness for Stryker's death, however despicable he was in life; a shroud of doubt cast over my own abilities to heal; and most of all, a growing sense of fear that I'll fail again, but this time when someone I truly care about is on the line...

I can hardly breathe for the crushing weight of it all.

Charles shakes his head. "You tried your best, Hank," he assures me sadly, his expression rather shell-shocked. "I should've known not to leave him alone, to think that he wouldn't feel so guilty it would lead to self-harm."

"Hindsight is twenty/twenty," Vivien murmurs. After a long, pregnant silence she clears her throat and stands up, her tone decidedly brusque as she asks, "Professor, do you want to give him a proper burial on the grounds?"

My mentor nods, though the gesture is somewhat apathetic- like he's distracted by the contemplation of his failings in this situation. "Yes, I suppose that would be the best thing."

"Alright. Cannonball, Havok, you guys take him downstairs to the med bay for now. Wrap the shower curtain around him, but Jean, I want you running interference ahead of them to make sure none of the kids see this," Vivien orders. "Cyclops, take the Professor outside and figure out where you want to bury him. Angel, you go get some cleaning supplies. You, me and Storm are going to clean this room from top to bottom."

I sense, rather than see, all of the X-Men stare at her like she's some sort of alien that just sprouted up out of nowhere. Who is this creature, who pushes aside emotion and becomes so practical in a time like this?

Only someone with a lot of practice at dealing with unexpected losses.

For all that we're an elite fighting force, none of us- expect perhaps Alex and I- have much experience with violent deaths. The others clearly don't know what to do in this situation, so Vivien's immediate take-charge attitude following this disaster is rather astonishing.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she snaps. "Go!"

Her forceful command sends the X-Men scattering to fulfill their tasks- even Storm and Angel, to my surprise. In another circumstance the robotic obedience to my wife's whims would be amusing, but not in this case.
"Hank," she says, a gentle call for my attention.

I glance up at her, blinking rapidly. Until that moment, I realize, I'd been staring at Stryker's ashen face, the bloody gashes in his arms like I was trying to solve a puzzle and bring him back to life. Did I miss something? Was there a way I could've saved him, had I realized in time-?

My confidence, always rather tenuous, is completely shaken.

"Hank, I think you should go rest for a while," Vivien tells me. "Go upstairs, I'll meet you in a bit, ok?"

How odd. Isn't it always me telling her to rest, not the other way around? I think dully.

"Ok," I agree automatically, without thought. I feel drained and disjointed, like a wood chipper just spat me out. Sleeping for a while- maybe a thousand years or so- sounds like a wonderful idea.

If only the nightmares of what just happened would stay away.

But that would be too easy, wouldn't it?

Sleep- of any kind- proves elusive, so instead I lay on the sofa in my room, staring up at the ceiling and letting the regrets wash over me like waves breaking on the shore.

I don't know how long I stay there until Vivien appears at my side, her entrance and approach so silent I don't even notice. I just blink, and suddenly she's settling herself on the floor next to the sofa with our faces mere inches apart.

"Sometimes I wonder if you can teleport," I observe dryly.

She grins impishly. "It's not my fault you can't hear worth a damn on your serum," she retorts.

I manage a faint smile in reply before I return to brooding.

"He used a butter knife to sharpen a toothbrush into a scalpel," Vivien whispers after a moment. "I found them under the bed."

I don't know how to respond to that, so I say nothing.

She sighs. "Look, I'm not a doctor, but I do know something about killing people. I took a good look at Stryker's wrists, baby, and there really was nothing you could've done," she tells me. "He was a dead man walking the second he did that to himself."

Vivien reaches up and strokes my face.

"So stop beating yourself up about it, because I know you are. If I'm not allowed to blame myself for Marcel, you can't feel guilty about Stryker," she says sternly. "We can't focus on the people we couldn't save, Hank. Just be thankful for those you can."

"Easier said than done," I murmur.

She gives me a sad smile. "I know," she agrees. "But don't let shake your confidence, baby. You're the best, but sometimes even the best we have isn't enough."

"And that's what frightens me," I reply. I sit up and swing my legs off the sofa, reaching out to cup Vivien's face between my hands. "The thought of losing any of them- of losing you- absolutely
terrifies me. How could I live with myself after that? What if there's another day I fail, and it's you? Or Jean? Or Alex-?

It's the first time I've outright admitted any of these fears out loud, and even though Vivien has already guessed about them, verbalizing it all still feels cathartic.

I still have the same fear of failure at twenty-nine as I did at nine years old. It's just now the stakes are infinitely higher.

She doesn't say anything for a long moment as she simply pierces right through me with those big hazel eyes of hers. It's times like this when Vivien no longer seems like a young woman barely over twenty. She is timeless, positively ancient, with a world of wisdom in her eyes.

"You know," she says suddenly, grinning wryly. "That's the problem with you perfect people. You get so used to doing everything right that the thought of failing scares you to death."

"I'm not perfect," I retort defensively. "Far from it. But-"

Vivien stands up, placing her hands on my shoulders. "But you've got a huge weight of responsibility on your shoulders, and you're afraid to let anyone you care about down," she finishes. "I know, baby, I know. But the only thing you can do is meet every situation as it comes and try your best. Most of the time, it's enough."

She smiles sadly and steps closer, hopping onto the sofa to straddle me.

"I know I wouldn't be alive right now if it wasn't for you," she murmurs, nuzzling against my face in that feline manner she has. "To be honest I would be worried if you weren't afraid to lose me. Or any of the other X-Men. And you know I'm not just saying all of this to make you feel better, because I suck at that."

I manage a weak grin and hold my love closer, taking comfort in the warm, enticing weight of her in my lap. I know she's reeling from Stryker's sudden demise just as I am, and I deeply appreciate her attempts to set her own feelings aside and make me feel better.

I also know that there may be another day like today, where I'm powerless to save a person who needs me. But I can't let the fear of that happening inhibit my continued efforts to protect the people I care about.

Vivien's right- I can only try my best, and pray that's enough.
June 2, 1975

By the following Monday I cautiously agree that Vivien is officially no longer an invalid, and can move about freely- as long as she takes it slow.

After six days of mostly bed rest (to her intense displeasure- my lovely wife became more waspish by the day under such confinement. She's been dying to do something productive against the Brotherhood after the revelations about Stryker) I remove her stitches and set her free.

Mostly.

"Just- please, take it slow," I plead, though I fear my exhortations are futile. "There's no need to- to exert yourself unnecessarily."

Vivien's coquettish smile makes me choke on my words. "'Unnecessarily?' I'm not sure I like that. I mean, who gets to decide what's necessary exertion and what's not, hmm?" she coyly asks, running a claw along my jawline and wriggling her shoulders suggestively.

"Um-" I eloquently reply.

She makes a "come hither" motion with her index finger, looking decidedly- and may I add delightfully- devious.

I drop my set of forceps. They clatter to the ground and lay there, utterly forgotten, as I automatically come closer to her, like a puppet on strings. My treacherous hands are sliding up her thighs, wrapping her legs around me.

How can Vivien do this to me with a mere flutter of her lashes? Just one glance and I'm a salivating fool, putty in her hands. My mate, my love, has me completely, body and soul.

She pulls me down by the collar, but stops when our lips are a breath away from a kiss.

I open my eyes, surprised by the sudden pause. But then I read the reason for her eleventh-hour hesitation in the suddenly questioning, vulnerable look in her eyes, so close to mine.

Is this ok? she's silently asking. Show me. Show me that you want me just as badly as I've been wanting you.

We haven't made love since the morning of the day we discovered that our friends in Hell's Kitchen were missing, and believe me when I say that keeping my hands to myself has been an exercise in self-control. I've been aching to touch Vivien, to act on the new level of physical intimacy we so recently achieved before she was wounded. She's a constant temptation to me, even when she's not trying to be.

But recently, when she's tried to teasingly seduce me, I've had to somehow scrounge up the willpower to refuse. And I hate telling Vivien "no" over anything, let alone something that I desperately want as well. Out of concern for her injuries I've (barely) managed to resist. I suspect that my rebuffs have hurt her, though Vivien is far too proud to say so.
It's only now, with the playful pouting and cajolery stripped away, that I can see how my actions have wounded her. Though we're plenty affectionate with each other, the forced lack of deeper intimacy has taken its toll. My attempts to safeguard my mate's well-being have unfortunately resulted in her feeling unwanted.

Oh, darling, I think to myself, feeling a rush of guilt.

"Do you realize how difficult it's been to keep my hands off of you this past week and more?" I murmur.

"Really? Could've fooled me," she mutters.

"I didn't want to make your wound worse," I explain gently.

Vivien looks like she very much wants to make some sort of snippy retort, so I head her off by placing my lips against the mating mark on her neck. It has the desired effect- she instinctively melts into me, baring her neck further so I can lay a trail of kisses down to her shoulder and up again.

The way Vivien responds to my attempts at seduction fills me with no small amount of masculine pride. I'm well-aware of my lack of experience and expertise in this department, so the fact that my mate is so receptive to my advances is definitely a confidence boost. I'm almost overwhelmed with awe at how she loves me, fumbling awkwardness and all.

"I've always prided myself on my self-control, but you, my dear, are enough to drive a saint to distraction," I tell her now, lacing my fingers through her hair and kissing her deeply, fervently.

Vivien's cheeks are a beautiful rose color when we come up for air, her eyes like glittering jewels. As for myself, I can already feel the energy burning through my veins, can sense Beast pushing against my mental barriers.

"Therefore, I think this is definitely a situation that calls for some necessary exertion."

"Here?" Vivien asks, obviously incredulous. She seems torn between lust and a fear that I'm only patronizing her, rather than acting out of a genuine desire. "Right now?"

My face warms. "I've always fantasized about having a girl in here," I confess rather sheepishly, gesturing around the infirmary- and adjoining laboratory- where I'd spent ninety percent of my time before we started dating. I cringe inwardly for admitting such a nerdy fantasy, even to her.

But she only giggles lightly, clearly out of amusement at this particular venereal whim rather than ridicule. "Well then, Hank, I think I'll just have to let you have sex with me right on this bench," Vivien declares in mock sincerity. "As your mate, it's my duty and pleasure to indulge you in this sort of thing. Just- what about the door? Someone could walk in-?"

In answer I reach between us and flip the emergency switch hidden on the underside of the lab bench. The door to the laboratory closes with a soft hissing sound, leaving us cut off from the rest of the mansion until I open it again.

She laughs. "Very smooth, baby," she murmurs appreciatively, pulling me in closer.

"So," Alex asks meaningfully, "how is she?"

I blink at him, startled.
We're at lunch, where Vivien is currently engaged in a conversation with Charles about starting classes for the younger children now that I've finished the music room. I'd been listening in, cheerfully contemplating the possibilities—though my mind, admittedly, kept straying back to this morning’s interlude in the laboratory—until Alex interrupted my musings.

*She's amazing, of course. My wildest fantasy was nothing compared to-

*Oh, wait. He's not talking about that, is he?*

"S-she's fine," I sputter, praying that my cheeks don't turn red. "I took out her stitches this morning."

*And then I utterly ravished her. Twice.*

"In your medical opinion, do you feel like she's ready to start training?" Alex asks seriously.

I consider that for a long moment before answering, trying my utmost to be objective. A difficult task when it comes to Vivien's safety. "Against the more difficult simulations, no, I don't think so. But I think she'll be alright doing some of the other exercises with the team," I tell him honestly. "Some light sparring, maybe?"

"How about we start off with you training against her, then? That way you can control how much effort she has to give without over-doing it?" he offers. "Say, tomorrow?"

I don't relish the thought of fighting— or even pretending to fight Vivien, but Alex is so clearly trying to be solicitous of my judgment without being too pushy about getting my wife in the Danger Room again that I can't think of a logical reason to say no.

"Tomorrow," I agree with a sigh.

Vivien tunes into our conversation at that moment. "What's tomorrow?"

"You've just been cleared to start training," Alex explains, gesturing towards me.

My mate grins, a wicked gleam suddenly in her eyes as she glances my way. "Today just keeps getting better and better," she says brightly. Underneath the table she strokes along my thigh with her claws.

I cough, and I know there's no fighting the half-aroused, half-embarrassed flush coming to my face.

Alex looks back and forth between us warily. "Do I even want to know?"

"No," I reply quickly. "No, you don't."
June 3, 1975

Ever since Vivien pointed out that some of the X-Men could use some brushing up on their hand-to-hand combat skills, Alex has been prudently making that the focus of our training sessions.

Today, Vivien's return to the Danger Room since her re-injury, will clearly be more of the same.

"Alright, guys," Alex begins calmly. "Today I want us to do a little one-on-one practice. You are not allowed to use your powers or any other weapons, understood? I want you to focus on physical fighting right now. Marvel Girl, I want you and Storm to pair up. Beast, you're with Vixen-"

Everyone throws sidelong glances our way, and no one even bothers to hide their smirks. Even Storm and Angel appear to be slightly amused at the thought of me, basically a behemoth of fur and flesh, practicing against my tiny pixie of a wife.

After Alex finishes pairing everyone off (himself against Scott, with Cannonball and Angel against each other) we separate.

"You're not going to be too easy on me, are you?" Vivien asks incredulously as we drift off to a corner by ourselves. "Is that why Havok put us together?"

I try to keep the guilt from showing on my face, but I'm not sure if I succeed. Yes, Alex purposely paired us together so I could ease her into training. She's not going to be pleased if she realizes that I'm planning on going-

Her expression immediately darkens. She lets loose an irritated hiss, telling me that I gave myself away already.

_Uh oh._

Let's be clear here: in my Beast form I outweigh my wife by over eight stone, and can easily lift up to ten tons using brute strength alone- as opposed to Vivien, who can lift only slightly more than triple her own body weight. I also have a longer reach than she does, and the advantage of my dexterous feet in a fight.

But when she looks at me like that... I actually get a little scared of her. Scared- but also turned on. Because I'm strange like that, I suppose.

Vivien attacks with a snarl, her movement so quick I barely manage to deflect the elbow she tries to throw into my face. And then she uses the sideways momentum from my block against me by slipping her legs around my neck and knocking me backward.

I land flat on my back with a rather pathetic thud- I've forgotten just how fast she is.

She's actually faster than I am, if I'm completely honest with myself. For a long time her favored sparring partner in the Brotherhood was Quicksilver, so you have to know that's bound to pay off.
Don't just lay there, I scold myself. Do something.

Vivien does a back flip, neatly avoiding the grab I make for her ankle. I've already pulled that trick on her before, and I've never seen her make the same mistake twice.

She settles into a crouch just out of my reach as she watches me regain my feet. The proud, mischievous little grin on her face makes me feel decidedly weak in the knees and I can't help thinking that that sort of expression is cheating.

With a sigh of resignation I make a quick, low leap towards her, planning to tackle her to the ground. Vivien springs up, causing me to pass under her, but I manage to grab her wrist with one of my feet and swing her underneath me.

Too far, though. I planned on landing on top of her, pinning her down, but she manages to scramble away with that superior speed of hers.

We end up facing off against each other once more, only this time I'm the one that's grinning. But mostly because the disgruntled pout on my wife's face right now is absolutely adorable. She clearly didn't like the foot-grab, not one bit.

Perhaps I'm a little too confident now. I conjecture that as long as I can manage to keep snatching her out of the air, there's no way she can beat me. "You're cute when you pout," I tell her, because I know it will annoy her.

Vivien bares her fangs at me, snarling.

My stars and garters, she's sexy, I muse. The chauvinist in me practically glows with pride, knowing this magnificent female is mine.

But if I thought Vivien's opening move was quick, it's nothing compared to what she does now.

She feints left, selling it so well that I over-commit and can't recover when she rebounds off the wall to clothesline me with a stiff arm before doing a one-handed handspring out of my range as I fall to the ground.

And in that Vivien's hit on a winning formula.

My strength and longer reach don't do me much good if my opponent is so fast I can't get my hands on them. She darts in and out of range, landing quick blows with her feet and elbows because using her entire body weight is more effective than throwing a punch.

With a slow horror it dawns on me that Vivien may have been sandbagging me in our previous encounters- except, perhaps, for the first time in that Agent Orange facility, and even then I only barely managed to pin her to the wall before she made me pass out.

But the night Jackal savagely attacked Angel, when Vivien admitted she was only going along with Erik's orders so she could deduce what his plan was... it isn't much of a stretch to think that she—even unconsciously- let me stop her from following through, is it?

And when she blew up Stryker's lab a few weeks ago? I managed to get her then, but only because she was focused on the other six X-Men that were attacking her. Plus, she was deeply shaken by finding all of our friends dead...

I don't even bother counting Halloween, when I caught her and convinced her to meet me in Central Park the next day. Vivien was still recovering from getting crushed by that building, not up
to full-speed at all.

But today she's giving it her best, trying to prove to me that she's back in fighting trim. And it hurts to admit it but... she may actually be better than I am.

This just won't do.

Because as just a man, I might've tolerated the fact that my wife is a better combatant that I.

As a feral male, though, this is simply unacceptable to my pride- even if we're merely training right now. While it's heartening to know that my mate can take care of herself, how is she supposed to trust me to protect her in her most vulnerable moments if I can't even beat her in a fight? The truth is, she can't.

Every instinct in me rebels at the thought of not having my mate's trust, her respect.

I throw myself into the fray with renewed vigor, determined to prove myself to my mate and- well, myself.

The next time Vivien tries to hook her feet around my neck in an attempt to throw me to the ground again, I reach out and knock her out of the air, rather than trying to grab one of her limbs.

This sudden change in tactic gives me just enough advantage- Vivien is so surprised she can't recover her feet fast enough.

I pounce- cradling her head to keep it from smacking the floor as she lands- and then move my hands to pin her wrists to the floor.

She struggles for just a moment before realizing there's no way she can get away, not with my weight pressing her down. Breasts heaving, eyes glittering up at me (my stars and garters, she's so lovely it hurts), she turns her head to the side and bares her neck to me in submission. Her entire body softens underneath me as her own instincts take over, yielding to her alpha, her mate.

I kiss my mark on Vivien's neck and nuzzle her face, purring deep in my chest to show my mate that everything's fine, that I can protect her from harm. Didn't I just prove my strength and dominance to her?

She purrs and nuzzles me back, a clear affirmative.

It's everything I can do not to tear her uniform off, right then and there.

And from the look in her eyes, Vivien feels the same way.
Unwanted Reunions

Alex's voice brings me back to the reality of the situation, like a lead balloon falling back to earth.

"Alright, everyone, I think that's enough for the day," he calls out. I have the sinking suspicion that he sees the compromising position Vivien and I have gotten ourselves into and feels the need to intervene.

I glance down at Vivien, suddenly sheepish at letting my instincts run away from me.

"We'll finish this later," she whispers, with a naughty smile that turns my bones to jelly. It doesn't help when she teasingly presses her hips against me, either.


*Come on, McCoy. Act casual.*

And I somehow manage to calm myself and help Vivien to her feet.

"How do you feel? Does anything hurt?"

I admittedly got a little carried away in the end, trying to prove myself to her. Now the anxiety that my overzealous display aggravated her condition comes rushing in.

"Just my pride," Vivien replies, slightly sullen. As we go to regroup in the center of the room with the rest of the X-Men she says, "besides the fact that I ended up *losing*—how'd I do?"

"Spectacular," I reply honestly, considering what a close contest it was between us. "I'm just glad you're on my side now."

She laughs, but I can tell she's been mollified by the praise.

I reiterate my opinion of her skills and readiness when Alex requests a status report a few minutes later. All of us have exited the Danger Room, and are now headed for the locker rooms.

"You actually *did* spar a little, didn't you?" he asks pointedly.

"We did. And Vivien is fine," I assure him, face warming unbearably. The feral in question is next to me, hand laced with mine now that we're not technically "training" anymore and such displays of affection are allowed. "More than fine, really. I think we can start doing-"

Vivien suddenly stops walking, her head whipping around to gaze back towards the hallway that leads to Cerebro with a worried frown.

"Sweetheart?"

She doesn't reply. She visually scans the area, as if she's searching furiously for something but coming up with nothing.

I mimic her, curious as to what she's looking for, but I don't sense anything out of the ordinary. Still, her actions are obviously unsettling.
What on earth is going on?

Vivien scrunches her eyes closed—now Alex is staring at her in confusion as well, along with a few of the other X-Men—

When she opens her eyes my mate's gaze immediately focuses on something behind Angel, who is the furthest down the hall. Something none of the rest of us can apparently see.

She lets out a savage growl and rips her hand from mine as she leaps around the feathered mutant, reaching for something—

A split second later Vivien is pinning Mastermind to the wall by the throat, her claws digging into his skin.

Oh my stars and garters. How did he even get in here?

The rest of us exchange horrified glances at the revelation that an enemy was in our midst, undetected.

"Mastermind," Vivien hisses, "what an unpleasant surprise."

"H-hey Vixie," her prisoner replies, his voice quite weak despite a feeble attempt at bravado. And understandably so, considering how my mate is lifting him an inch or two off the ground by his neck. "How are you?"

Vivien ignores this. "How the fuck did you get in here?" she demands, coldly business-like.

No answer.

Instead my vision starts to get fuzzy, fading around the edges. Next to me, Alex is blinking and shaking his head, like he's trying to clear it from some annoyance. The others are doing the same thing.

It's Mastermind's powers, I realize. If he manages to blind us all, he can-

Vivien is clearly not fazed. She eases back on Mastermind's throat just a fraction and then brutally slams his head against the wall again. "Knock it off and start talking," she snaps.

"Or what?" he sneers. "You're an X-Man now, remember? A goody-two shoes. You're not going to-"

Quick as a flash, Vivien takes out a knife and throws it down into the man's foot. The adamantium blade sinks to the hilt through not only his shoe and flesh, but also out the other side over an inch into the floor.

Mastermind squeals in pain like a querulous child.

It never struck me until now what a coward this particular Brotherhood member is. He constantly hides behind his powers, and when faced with a direct confrontation he would much rather turn and run. A situation like this, where he's trapped and unable to use his abilities to escape an entire team of X-Men, is easily his worst nightmare.

Vivien summons the knife—now covered in blood—back into her free hand with a flick of her wrist. "Looks like they haven't worked out the rough edges yet," she notes sardonically.

She begins tracing along the man's face with her blade, just enough that he can feel how sharp it is.
Mastermind appears to be on the verge of tears as his eyes try to keep track of the weapon.

"And trust me, after what you did to Stryker and his family, I could kill you and sleep like a baby tonight."

Alex shifts uncomfortably. "Vixen--"

Vivien ignores him. "How'd you get in here, Mastermind?" she repeats. The tip of her knife skates along under his chin, an easy slip away from slitting his throat. "We both know Magneto only has one rule for the Brotherhood, and that's not to let any of them try to enter this school without permission--"

That's news to me.

And unsettling news at that.

We've never had a break-in before- besides Vivien, of course- and I thought it was because of the efficiency of the security system. But what if it was only because the Brotherhood never really tried to sneak into the school?

"-And yet here you stand," she continues. "So what's got that crazy bastard breaking his own--"

Vivien suddenly cuts herself off as a frightening realization dawns on her.

"Sonavabitch!" she hisses. "That stupid helmet!"

She slams the hilt of her knife into the side of Mastermind's head, knocking him unconscious.

In the next instant she's sprinting down the hallway back towards Cerebro, leaving the rest of us in a state of utter bewilderment and horror.

The helmet. The Brotherhood is after the helmet.

The telepathy-blocking helmet that Charles refused to allow Erik to take with him when he escaped from the White House. We've kept it here, inside Cerebro, in safekeeping to ensure that Erik couldn't get his hands on it. It's given us peace of mind knowing that Charles could find the metal-bender at any time with Cerebro.

Now it appears that Erik is desperate enough to try to get the helmet back- I'm assuming so we'll have a more difficult time stopping his plans. And he's desperate enough to send his minion into harm's way to get it.

But that begs the question- is Mastermind the only one trying to infiltrate the school right now? Or did he bring some back up?

My wife has clearly already made the deduction that he has.

"Hank, come on," Vivien calls back urgently.

I take off after her, leaving Alex back with the others to decide what to do with the unconscious Mastermind. As ferals, Vivien and I far outstrip any of the other X-Men when it comes to speed.

By pushing myself to my absolute limit I manage to gain enough ground that I'm only a few yards behind my mate when she turns the last corner to the hallway that leads to Cerebro's entrance.

Our tread is silent, despite our haste.
That's the only reason Vivien is able to get close enough to throw her knives before either of the two mutants currently attempting to break into the cavernous room notice her. They're pinned to the wall behind them by their jumpsuits before either can even react.

Which is definitely a momentous accomplishment, because our two intruders are Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch.

"It's just a day for unwanted reunions, isn't it?" Vivien gripes under her breath.

*Indeed it is.*
A Little Chat Between Friends

Vivien's mocking, cruel demeanor with Mastermind outside the Danger Room made her dislike for the man quite obvious. They had been merely teammates- and certainly not friends- while she was with the Brotherhood, and now she can make clear her contempt.

But with Wanda and Peter it's a different story.

The twins were once her closest companions, the ones Vivien defended the most vehemently during our debates about redemption. She genuinely cared for them- though I always questioned the sincerity of their regard for her- and it deeply hurt Vivien to find out they hid so many horrible truths about the Brotherhood from her.

And now that she has the two of them properly subdued she doesn't seem to know how to approach the situation. I read it in her hesitation to come any closer, the set in her jaw as she steels herself and starts walking towards her former friends anyway.

The only thing I can think to do is to stay by her side, facing this situation together.

"Hey, Vixie," Quicksilver- Peter- says cheerfully, like they've just met us by chance at a coffee shop. "You figured out we were in here, huh?"

Vivien nods solemnly. "It took me a minute to understand what it was, but I felt the slipstream," she explains, her voice subdued. She gestures towards Cerebro. "Having any luck?"

The twins shake their heads.

"Want to give us a hand?" Wanda asks ruefully.

Vivien snorts. "I couldn't even get in when I tried-"

I glance at her sharply.

She gives me a sheepish grin. "I had to test it out, just to make sure," she whispers defensively. But then she sobers again and directs her next comment at the other two. "But even if I could, I wouldn't help you."

The atmosphere shifts following her declaration, like she just metaphorically threw down the gauntlet.

"Aw, come on," Peter scoffs after an uncomfortable pause. Though his grin is merely cautiously hopeful, his eyes are pleading. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"Not anymore," Vivien replies coolly. "But then, I don't know if we ever really were."

Hurt flashes across his face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," she snaps. "Letting Mastermind try to brainwash me, not telling me that Stryker was helping the Brotherhood-"

"We already told you that the only reason we didn't mention Stryker was because we thought you would kill him," Wanda interjects. "We know how much you hate him."
"Sure," Vivien retorts disdainfully. "But then you were just fine to sit back and let my brothers and Mastermind torture him, weren't you? No problem."

Peter shrugs- or tries to, considering how his arms are pinned to the wall behind him. "After all that guy's done-"

"But his wife?" my mate counters, her voice shaking with emotion. "His kid? What the hell did they ever do to deserve any of that?"

The twins exchange startled glances. I have a feeling that their astonishment at finding out about the torture of Stryker's family is actually genuine. Will they then make the logical conclusion that if what Vivien is saying is truthful, their own father has been keeping secrets from them as well?

Wanda recovers first. "How are we supposed to know if that's true?" she asks, incredulity evident. "What if the X-Men have been lying to you, huh?"

She gestures towards me with her chin, her eyes narrowed in clear dislike.

"He's playing you, can't you see that? He just wants to get you away from your friends, your family."

I stiffen in response to the accusations, but Vivien just laughs bitterly.

"You mean the family that killed a group of innocent humans I was friends with just to get back at me for leaving? That family?" she asks sardonically.

Again, surprise flickers across their faces. Did the twins not know about Fox and Jackal killing Mr. Cole and the others, either?

"Because I want no part in that kind of family," my wife continues. "Beast is my family now. And I hope that one day the other people here will become that for me, too."

The pleading in Peter's expression is even more pronounced now. "You can't really believe that, Vixie," he says gently. "I mean, Vivien- you don't really belong here. You know that, don't you?"


When Vivien steps closer to me I automatically slip an arm around her waist, pulling her into my side. She seems so sure, so utterly convinced of the factual nature of her statement as she looks up at my face that it's actually rather humbling.

With my other hand I reach up and lovingly caress her cheek, letting her absolute conviction wash over me for a moment.

Yes, darling. You do belong with me.

Then I glance over to gauge the twins' reactions.

Wanda looks visibly dejected, disappointed that their attempts to reason with their former friend have come to naught.

But Peter... Peter is gazing at the unaware Vivien with an expression of wistful longing, a clearly painful, frustrated yearning. His face hardens into lines of undisguised hatred when his eyes meet mine.

He loves her, I realize then. This man is in love with my wife.
I don't have time to analyze my own reaction to this revelation, though, because Vivien has gotten back to business now that there's no question as to whose side she's on.

"I want you to tell me how you guys got in here," she says firmly.

She locks eyes with Peter, who squirms under her unrelenting gaze. "Mastermind made us invisible to a guy coming in the fence, so he didn't notice when we followed him in," he admits reluctantly. "My speed took care of the rest."

Vivien turns her head towards me slightly, obviously questioning.

"That's an easy fix," I assure her, so quietly the twins can't hear.

It's nothing some infrared sensors and an extra access prompt on the gate can't cure. I'm actually rather relieved that there's such a simple solution.

She nods in acknowledgement and looks back at the other two. "It's pretty clear that you can't break into Cerebro, isn't it?"

The twins both appear to be unwilling to admit defeat, but finally acquiesce.

"Yeah," Wanda agrees, while Peter echoes her.

"Good," Vivien whispers. "Just... remember what I said, ok? Maybe you should start asking some questions, and you'll see what I mean about them."

And then she flicks her wrists, summoning her knives back to her and freeing her prisoners.

Within the blink of an eye, Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver are gone.

Vivien doesn't move for a long moment. She just stands there rigidly, staring at the spot her former friends so recently vacated like she's lost in thought.

She's only a foot or so away, but for some reason the distance seems far greater right now. Almost insurmountable.

I make a move to touch her, to bring her back to me somehow, but the sound of several approaching footsteps snaps my mate out of her reverie.

We turn to see Alex, Scott, and Storm running towards us.

"Who was it?" Alex demands. "Where are they?"

"Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch," I supply, when Vivien offers no answer. "They're gone already."

"Gone?" His eyes narrow. "You mean you let them go?"

Vivien shrugs, completely unperturbed by his reaction. Her mind is clearly still on other things. "We found out how they got in," she explains. "Hank's going to fix the loophole in the security system. They're not going to get another chance at the helmet, even if they tried again."

"B-but-"

"What were you going to do, hold them hostage?" Vivien snaps impatiently. "Torture them for more information? We got what we needed. Keeping the twins here was just begging for Magneto to hit this place with all he's got, so yeah, I let them go. Do you really have a problem with that?"
Alex purses his lips as her unassailable logic works on him. His first instinct may have been to accuse Vivien of going easy on her former teammates, but her reasons truly are ironclad. Perhaps her only mistake here was not waiting for orders, but it's a forgivable one.

"You're right," he begrudgingly admits. "Nice- nice job, Vixen."

"You're welcome, captain," she replies, making a jaunty, mocking salute. She gives him a smile, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Now, is it dinner time yet? I'm starved."
Vivien doesn't really join in the conversation much at dinner. I can tell she's still mulling over the afternoon's events, sorting out her feelings after seeing the twins again. I'm trying to give her time to do so, though it's difficult for me to see her so withdrawn.

She doesn't even seem to notice when Storm and Angel sit down at the table with the other X-Men- though I can assure you that the rest of us certainly do.

All of us exchange surprised, wary glances when the two purposely choose to share a table with Vivien for the first time since she returned to the mansion.

Where exactly is this going? Is Storm going to accuse my mate of secretly trying to help the Brotherhood again? Or is she finally willing to make peace?

In the end none of us comment about the change of behavior. We merely watch and wait, until-

Storm takes a deep breath, as if preparing herself for an ordeal. She seems well-aware of our scrutiny. "Hey, Vixen," she says.

"Huh?" Vivien replies absently, glancing up from her plate. Her expression becomes guarded and wary when she realizes who just addressed her. "What's up?"

"I just wanted to say that I thought what you did today was, um- great," Storm mutters, fumbling on the compliment.

Vivien eyes her suspiciously for a moment, but decides to take the comment at face-value. "Thanks."

"I was wondering... how were you able to break Mastermind's illusion?" the weather-manipulating mutant asks tentatively. "Is that another ability of yours?"

Ah, now I understand.

Storm knows that if Vivien truly wanted to help the Brotherhood, she could've feigned ignorance of their presence once she realized they were here. No one would've been any the wiser.

But Vivien didn't, because she's truly on our side. And now Storm accepts that.

I have to hide my pleased grin behind a napkin as I tune back into the conversation.

"No, it's not," my mate replies. "It's something I learned out of self-defense. Mastermind is a disgusting pig with a perverted sense of humor. Me and Wan-

She clears her throat.

"Me and Scarlet Witch figured out pretty quick how to block him out of our heads."

"Can you teach us how?" The question comes from Angel.

And she goes on to explain how it's better if you're able to cut Mastermind off before his illusions are completely set, by breaking his concentration. But if you can't, you have to force yourself to doubt what you're experiencing is real. You have to *know* it's fake. Doing so destroys the illusion, taking away his power.

I chance a look around the table as Vivien speaks, gauging everyone's reactions. All of the X-Men- Storm and Angel included- are listening to her intently, respectfully. Actually being receptive to what she has to give to the team.

My heart lifts slightly.

*Progress.*

Despite the short respite and glimmer of hope on the Storm-and-Angel front, Vivien remains pensive and preoccupied after we retire to our room for the night. When she excuses herself to go shower I use the opportunity to lay in bed and examine my own feelings over what I learned today.

Namely, that another man is in love with my wife.

Part of me wants to reject the validity of Peter's feelings for her out of hand- he could never love my mate the way I do, of course not- but I know that's unfair.

What could've happened between them, had I not come along and complicated Vivien's life unbearably? She would have certainly saved herself a lot of pain if she never fell for me in the first place...

*But she did,* a soothing voice inside me says. *She said herself that she belongs with you. She chose you.*

*Not really,* another part argues. *You marked her without her consent, remember? You stole any choice she might make about the future away from her. Remember how angry she was?*

*She did choose to marry you, though.*

*A mere formality at that point. You were already bonded for life. What kind of choice was that?*

The uncertain tenor of my thoughts sends me practically running for the bathroom, seeking reassurance. I manage to pull myself together before entering so I don't needlessly worry my love.

Vivien's just finished with the blow dryer and is combing out her hair when I walk in and come to stand behind her. The small smile in greeting she gives me turns into a flattered chuckle when I automatically reach out and start playing with her white-blonde tresses, letting the silky strands slip through my fingers.

Of course I adore everything about Vivien- from the black rings around her hazel irises to the dimples on her adorable little feet- but I especially love her hair. I love how it catches the light, how soft it is, how it looks when it's spread across my pillows while we make love...

So needless to say, me fondling Vivien's hair is a regular occurrence. A gesture of intimacy that I find soothing, no matter how quickly my thoughts are racing right now.

My wife has no idea what kind of crisis of conscience is going on inside my head until I blurt out, "Peter is in love with you."
Sometimes I astound myself with my diplomacy.

Vivien wrinkles her nose in disbelief. "No, he isn't," she says. "It was never like that between us. I mean, you saying that is like you saying one of my brothers wants me."

And she shakes her head at the impossibility of it, chuckling.

Yes, well, about that...

I haven't told Vivien about the disturbing impulses Charles picked up in her brothers' thoughts, nor do I intend to. Fox and Jackal have caused her more than enough pain, and I have no desire to pour any more salt in those wounds than there already is.

"As a sufferer of the same affliction, I recognize the signs," I tell her instead. "He loves you, darling."

"Loving me is an affliction, huh?" Vivien somehow looks simultaneously amused and insulted. "Sometimes you're so romantic you make me want to swoon."

She giggles and falls against me for dramatic effect before I can reply.

I easily catch her and cradle her upper body against me. "I know what it's like to love you and not be able to have you, Vivien," I say quietly, resisting her playfulness. "I remember how it felt all too well. It's no picnic, trust me."

She frowns thoughtfully for a moment, but then shrugs. "He's got a short attention span," she mutters. "Even if what you say is true, he'll get over it."

What other choice does he have when you've trapped me here, with you?

Vivien doesn't say it, but my own guilty conscience adds the words as she regains her feet and reaches for her toothbrush.

"Are you still angry about this?" I ask suddenly, touching the mark on her neck.

Her gaze is puzzled, thanks to my apropos of nothing question, when her eyes meet mine in the mirror. But then understanding slowly dawns on her face as she realizes the source of my disquiet.

"No, I'm not," she replies softly. "I was at first, yeah, because I was afraid and pissed that you didn't ask first, but at this point... I guess I'm relieved."

"Relieved?"

"Mhmm. I wanted to keep you, to be yours, but there were so many reasons why I couldn't before," she explains. "I felt so selfish, hoping you would want to be with me forever, but knowing how messed up our lives would get if you claimed me..."

"And then I did mark you. So you got what you wanted- what we both wanted- but it was my fault," I conclude succinctly. "Not yours."

Vivien grins sheepishly. "Exactly," she agrees. "Are you angry?"

"No," I reply honestly. "Just relieved that my mate isn't going to resent me for the rest of our lives."

She shakes her head and leans back against my chest, allowing me to enfold her in my arms and bury my nose in her hair.
"I-I think I still have hope for the twins, Hank," she quietly admits after a few minutes of this. She sounds almost ashamed of herself for allowing such a hope to exist.

I remember how the twins looked when Vivien referred to the more heinous crimes the Brotherhood has committed lately, how genuinely shocked they seemed. They were aware of some of it, and therefore not completely absolved, but...

"Me, too."
"I don't think I've ever seen you this nervous," I observe, not bothering to hide my amusement.

Vivien makes an irritated face at me. "Thanks," she mutters.

And then she goes back to smoothing her dress and fiddling with her earrings, practically vibrating with anxiety.

Today is her official first day as a teacher at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. She's been fidgeting since she woke up this morning, and I perfectly understand why. Vivien has been looking forward to this for a long time (and to be honest, so have I). She doesn't want to blow it.

"Hey," I say gently, wrapping my arms around her. "I didn't mean that as an insult, sweetheart. I know what this means to you."

She nods, slightly distracted. "It's just- I've kinda wanted to be a teacher since I was a little kid," she admits. "But my life got so messy after my parents died, I lost sight of that for a while. And now that I'm getting a second chance at it, I really don't want to screw up."

"You're going to be fine," I assure her.

I tilt her chin up to give her a kiss, savoring the way she melts into me just a little. Beast or human form, it doesn't matter- her body always fits to mine like we were made for each other.

"Want me to stay in the room with you?" I offer when we come up for air.

Vivien snorts. "Oh, please. Don't pretend you're not going to be lurking in the hall outside the whole time anyway, baby," she teases, her tone light.

I grin guiltily. "Well, not the whole time."

I know I don't need to, but I walk her down to the music room anyway.

"Are these from you?" Vivien asks when she immediately spots the vase full of flowers I sneaked out and got for her this morning, before she woke up. Violets and gardenias, her favorites.

"Yeah," I reply shyly, feeling a little unsure despite the smile on her face as she goes over and sniffs the blooms. "Is it too much?"

"Oh, Hank," she mutters exasperatedly. She rolls her eyes. "What am I going to do with you?"

And she gives me another kiss in thanks- a gesture which, I suppose, answers my question.

Vivien's gaze goes to the door as she steps away, her expression becoming expectant. I see why when a minute later Charles enters the room with several children in tow, about ten in all ranging from ages seven to ten years old.

The plan is for Vivien to teach three classes a day: one for the smallest children, another for
students aged eleven to fourteen, and a third for the eldest students. Since it's an optional class and is set to take place during what's traditionally been a free period for the older kids, Vivien doesn't have high expectations for attendance on that one.

I have a feeling she's going to be pleasantly surprised.

"Children," Charles says genially, "you remember Ms. Vivien, don't you?"

His inquiry is followed by several cries to the affirmative. A few of the children seem to be warily appraising the newcomer, but most remember Vivien from their previous encounter and seem eager to learn.

Charles smiles. "She's going to teach you about music, and you're all going to be on your best behavior, yes?"

Vivien laughs before any of the kids can reply. "Thank you, Professor, but I don't know if you guys need to be on your best behavior," she tells them, with a mischievous, conspiratorial grin that I can tell immediately wins her students over- even the shy ones. "Come on, kiddos, let's get started."

She steps over to the empty, carpeted space in the center of the room and gracefully sits down. A simple pat on the ground next to her has the children scrambling to join her. A class where they don't have to sit at desks? It's a novel, exciting thing for them.

"Now how about we go around in a circle, and everyone can tell me your names- and your favorite songs, too?" Vivien suggests brightly. "I'll go first. My name is Vivien, and my favorite song is..."

It's a strange feeling, watching her interact with the students like this.

Vivien is almost always vivacious and teasing around those she's comfortable with, but I'd estimate that more than half of the things she says are usually twinged with sarcasm.

Not in this case, though.

She's as vibrant and spirited as ever, but that bitter, defensive edge that usually underlies her behavior- even with me occasionally- is gone right now, as she connects with these children. There's a softness about her, a tenderness that melts my heart and makes me all the more besotted by her, if that's even possible.

I'm unaware of the fact that I'm just standing there next to the piano, watching Vivien with a stupidly love struck expression on my face, until Charles brings me back to earth.

*Come on, Hank,* his mental voice whispers. *Let's leave her to it.*

*I don't want to.*

I'm not purposely projecting it, but since he's tuned into my thoughts at the moment Charles hears that anyway. He manages to turn a chuckle into a cough, his amusement at my reluctance rather clear.

But right now I'm enjoying the sight of Vivien looking so happy surrounded by these kids too much to really mind. I can't help thinking about what an amazing mother she will be, seeing how much she loves children.

Visions of her radiantly pregnant with my child, of Vivien smiling and holding a blue-haired, elf-eared, monkey-toed baby, of her teaching our kid to play the piano, fill my thoughts.
Until this moment having a family wasn't something I'd ever really considered - the risk of passing down my mutation, which had plagued my entire life, to any potential offspring was rather repugnant to me. And of course before I met Vivien I never thought anyone would ever want me, let alone want to have my children someday. Then later, with my lover being part of the Brotherhood, that sort of future was just too impossible to contemplate.

But now, with this felicitous turn of events, I am considering such a thing. And I want it with a surprising intensity - to be a father, to have a family, with Vivien.

Some day, at least. If she wants that, too.

With a monumental effort I manage to follow Charles out of the room, with frequent glances over my shoulder. Like I'm afraid that at any moment my Vivien will disappear.

"I think she's going to do quite well," Charles muses as we travel down the hall. "The children truly love her already."

I grin. "I think so, too."

I resist for as long as I can, but I eventually find myself drifting back towards the music room. It's time for the informal class for the older children, the one Vivien feels will be sparsely attended because it's during an otherwise free period.

I'm just checking to see if she's right, is all, I artlessly tell myself.

Strains of more than one guitar playing reach my ears as I approach, which I take to be a good sign. But even that omen doesn't prepare me for the wonderful sight that greets me when I peek into the room.

All eight of the older students are sitting in a circle on the floor, each one with a guitar in his or her lap as Vivien goes around adjusting their grips on the instruments.

Scott and Jean, Storm and Angel, even the older kids who aren't X-Men like Jubilee and Doug - all of them decided to give the former Brotherhood member a chance to teach them.

"Angel, try curling your pinkie over more, like this," Vivien instructs gently. "There. Try now."

Warren grins when the sound comes out properly this time. "Thanks, Vivien."

My mate's expression lights up, hearing the young man willingly use her proper name. It seems the confrontation with the Brotherhood down in the basement the other day has truly changed Angel's opinion of her for the better.

Her eyes somehow find mine, still slyly peeking in. She raises a questioning eyebrow at my spying.

"I told you so," I mouth to her smugly.

I don't think Vivien has ever been so happy to be wrong in her entire life.
An Unwelcome Interruption

June 28, 1975

If my life was a movie, the weeks that follow would be a montage of joyful, happy moments cut together against some sort of ridiculously saccharine soundtrack.

The Beach Boys, maybe.

Because I've honestly never felt this contented in my entire life. Every day with Vivien feels like a miracle, like the culmination of everything I ever could have wanted out of life but never thought to ask for.

I once believed myself unworthy of such things, thanks to my mutation. Who would ever want me, especially after I turned into Beast? I was convinced that a life like this, a life filled with a requited, transcendent devotion and all the happiness entailed, was something I could never have.

But now I do.

Waking up and falling asleep next to Vivien every day, training with her in the Danger Room, watching her bond with the students and the other X-Men- all of these things feel like a gift. If it weren't for the feeling of impending doom hanging over all of us, thanks to Erik's villainous plan, things would be perfect.

In a way though, knowing that all of this could be snatched away at any moment just makes me cherish and hold onto it all the more.

That includes letting go of my dignity a little. What's the point in feeling self-conscious when everything could be destroyed tomorrow?

It's so much better to be happy today, to live without regrets.

"Ready?" Vivien prompts.

"As ready as I'm going to be," I mutter, with a feigned sigh of resignation that doesn't fool her in the slightest. I'm curious as to what she has in mind after this little contest.

It's a balmy summer evening in Westchester, and we're about to engage in a foot race around the entire estate- a distance of several miles.

Of course, when Vivien first tried to wheedle me into taking a run around the grounds I automatically balked at the idea- I've always preferred reading or some other intellectual pursuit to physical activity. Running around without purpose is wholly unappealing, in my opinion.

"Oh, come on," my wife coaxed. "We haven't really been outside in ages."

I make no claims at being able to read minds, but I understood the subtext.

Someone is clearly tired of being cooped up in the mansion for so long, and since Vivien knew I'd be hesitant about us leaving the security of the fence to go do something she tacitly offered a compromise. Outside, but still safe.
Surely I could meet her halfway?

She sensed me weakening like a shark smells blood in the water.

"Please?" she asked, batting her eyelashes at me and smiling sweetly.

*Now that's just cheating.*

"Alright, fine," I conceded with ill grace.

"Yay!" Vivien cheered. She clapped her hands and stood on tiptoe- at first I thought in order to kiss my cheek, but instead she bit my ear and whispered, "don't worry, baby. I'll make it worth your while."

Needless to say, that got my undivided attention. The promise in her voice finished what the eyelashes already started- it was truly an irresistible combination.

With that inducement I transformed into Beast and allowed Vivien to lead me outside to the edge of the arboretum, where we now stand at the ready.

"Get set," she says. "Go!"

At first I feel ungainly and clumsy, running on all fours while she remains on two feet.

But then again, I think *anyone* running next to Vivien would feel distinctly uncoordinated.

She practically flies among the trees, with her feet barely seeming to touch the ground. Her grace reminds me of a deer bounding through the forest, or the mythological Atalanta running with her long hair streaming behind her. Every now and then I hear a delighted, carefree peal of laughter carry back to me on the breeze.

Watching Vivien like this makes me forget about how sweaty and gross I'm going to feel when we're done. The joy she clearly feels is infectious, allowing me to simply appreciate the freedom of moving in this way, the power and strength in my own body.

Vivien outstrips me by a goodly distance at first, but about five miles in I start to regain ground on her. It seems that while she is faster, I have better stamina.

I manage to pull even with her about ten feet from the tree we previously deemed to be our finish line. With my longer strides, surely I can just manage to stretch it out and win this-

Vivien makes an impressive leap, a jump that carries her all the way over to the tree while I'm still several feet away. She turns and grins at me in ill-gained triumph.

I skid to a halt, sputtering indignantly and slightly out of breath.

"I win," she says brightly.

"You cheated," I accuse.

"How's that?" Vivien demands, clearly affronted. "We agreed that the first one to the tree wins. There weren't any other rules."

I frown, trying to find a hole in her logic. I'm rather irked that I can't. "Fine," I huff ungraciously.

She laughs at my discomfiture, clearly pleased with herself. "That's what I thought."
Vivien steps away from the tree, beckoning me towards her and looking at me through her long eyelashes in a way that immediately makes my mouth taste like it's full of laundry lint and my knees feel all wonky.

She's a pagan goddess, a forest nymph in her natural domain, and I, a mere mortal, am completely at her mercy. I can't resist the spell she casts over me with just a toss of her head even if I wanted to.

I follow Vivien into a thick copse of trees, entranced by the sway of her hips, the fall of hair over her shoulders as she glances back at me with a bewitching smile.

We eventually drift into a lovely little meadow. I can feel the springy grass under my feet and see the fireflies coming out for the evening, hovering in the small clearing between the trees. The space is also completely hidden from the mansion's edifice- or anything else, really.

Once we've reached the center of this glade Vivien turns towards me and raises her eyebrows, an inviting smirk playing across her lips.

She doesn't say a word, but she doesn't have to.

I know what she wants: me, right now, in this meadow.

This glorious, fantastical creature wants me.

The old Hank McCoy would have balked at this. Making love outside? What a horrible idea. What about bugs? Poison ivy? Why do it here, when there's a perfectly good bed in our room?

Now all I can think is... why not? I want her, she wants me. Carpe diem, and all that.

I grin. "I was wondering why you wore a dress to a footrace," I comment dryly, stepping closer. I get on my knees and start trailing my claws along her thighs, up and out of sight. "Am I wrong to assume it's for ease-of-access?"

Vivien giggles and runs her claws along my scalp. "I didn't want to scar any squirrels for life," she admits.

"Oh, I think we're going to do that anyway," I assure her.

Carpe diem, indeed.

Vivien beats me by an even wider margin on our return back to the mansion, and of course she can't resist gloating about it as I catch up to her on the front steps.

"You were even slower that time," she teases. "Is my old man getting feeble?"


And to prove the point I lean down and wrap my arms around her waist, lifting her with ease so she's head and shoulders above me.

"Do you realize how difficult it is to concentrate on my feet when I have this in front of me?" I give her bottom a cheeky squeeze. "I'm lucky not to fall on my face."

Our shared laughter turns to something else as I release my hold on Vivien, allowing her body to slowly slide down the length of mine as she regains her feet. We fit together so perfectly there's no
space at all.

"Round two?" I ask hopefully, pressing against her even more.

"You're insatiable," she laughs.

"I have a lot of time to make up for."

I kiss her heartily, eventually moving to nibble on her ear. Vivien purrs in approval, digging her claws into my hair as she tilts her head, giving me better access-

A pointed cough breaks into my awareness.

"Ahem," a female voice says. "Am I interrupting something?"

I glance up, feeling beyond embarrassed-

And freeze.

Standing at the end of the front walk is Raven Darkholme.
The Warning

"Just a little," Vivien admits ruefully to the newcomer, who she obviously has no way of recognizing. "Hi, there."

Her attempt to disengage herself from my embrace and look halfway presentable finally unfreezes me from my thunderstruck condition, allowing me to face our visitor head-on.

Raven Darkholme.

I haven't seen her in well over two years now, since that incident at the White House.

Right now she's wearing the golden-haired mask I thought myself in love with over a decade ago, and it's suddenly as if all the haunting memories I've kept locked away have suddenly risen up like in a George Romero movie. I can't helping thinking of that pitiful Hank McCoy who fell for a fiction and pined after her for so many wasted years.

Part of me wants to be angry with Raven, for not being the person I thought she was. But of course that's ridiculous, isn't it? How can I be mad at her for not meeting the assumptions and expectations I had about her in my own infatuated brain?

And besides- a larger part of me is actually thankful towards her.

Without knowing Raven, I don't think I would have ever appreciated Vivien's beauty. My mate's claws, her fangs and elven ears- once upon a time I would've viewed these obviously inhuman attributes with distaste. But Raven taught me to appreciate such things. And...

If I didn't watch her walk away from me- not once, but twice- would I have ever found the courage to chase after Vivien? Without that remembered pain of what-could-have-been, of so much regret in regards to Raven I doubt I would have come to my senses and realized I couldn't let my one shot at true happiness disappear without a fight.

So in the end, I suppose I'm grateful for what she taught me.

All of these feelings pass over me within a moment, a moment in which Raven stares at me with an unreadable intensity that makes me distinctly uncomfortable. She hasn't replied to Vivien's greeting.

"Hi," I offer, a beat too late. I try to sound sincere, but I'm not sure I manage it. "Welcome home."

She frowns disdainfully. "This was never my home, Hank," she tells me. "I just used to live here, is all."

So it's going to be like that.

My arm is still around Vivien's waist, so I feel her stiffen slightly over the rudeness. I immediately make an attempt to diffuse the sudden edginess in the air.

"Charles will be glad to see you," I offer, floundering for civility. "He's missed you very much."

Raven's displeasure is even more pronounced now. "He just misses how I was before."
"Have you really changed that much?" I ask quietly.

"Yes," she replies sharply. She draws herself up proudly- still trying to be Mystique, still trying to proclaim her independence from everyone and everything that ever dared to cross her. "And so have you, by the looks of it. Last time I saw you, you were definitely... not blue."

Raven gives me a very obvious once-over, a gesture that I can sense makes Vivien even more rigid.

"You look good, Hank."

I look down at my feet reflexively- of course I'm still in my Beast form. Because I highly doubt she would say the same thing if she saw me on my serum, as is my usual.

Mutant and proud, says the shape-shifter who can look any way she wants.

"Thank you, Raven," I manage courteously, choosing politeness over truth at the moment.

And then I swear to myself inwardly.

That was probably the juncture where I should've pointedly coughed and introduced my wife. I have a bad feeling I'm going to pay for that mistake later. Vivien isn't going to-

"Raven?" Vivien's voice is barely above a hiss. She takes a step forward, without even thinking about it.

Oh dear.

I'm well aware that my mate holds Raven in contempt for her actions over the years.

Leaving Charles, the man she'd considered a brother for eighteen years, bleeding on that beach in Cuba without at least getting him to a hospital first, not checking on him in the decade afterwards, and then walking away all over again at the White House...

Charles was the damaged party in all of those situations, and Vivien felt for him deeply. But her most profound lament was for me, somehow. She holds Raven responsible as the root cause for all of the loneliness and suffering I endured during Charles' dark period, and hates the shape-shifting mutant accordingly.

Vivien isn't very nice to people she doesn't like. Actually- that's putting it mildly, if her treatment of Mastermind and Stryker are anything to go by.

It's for that reason that I pull her back against my side after she takes that step forward, rather than allowing my wife to get her hands on the other woman.

I have no doubt who would win in a fight between these two- and she definitely doesn't turn blue. Charles would be upset if Vivien ripped his sister apart.

Raven misinterprets my action, though. "I'm not going to hurt your little girlfriend, Hank," she assures me, with an overly confident smirk that clearly says, "but I could, if I wanted to."

She's already sized up Vivien and found her to be lacking, apparently.

If this were anyone else, such an assessment would be forgivable. Vivien is five foot four and quite
petite, and her girlish figure, large eyes, and freckles combine to create that girl-next-door facade I once mistakenly assigned to her in Paris.

But Raven Darkholme, of all people, should know that appearances can be deceiving.

Vivien raises her hand and, in a superficially unconscious gesture, uses her claws to brush back a lock of hair behind her ear. "I don't think it's me he's worried about," she says. She tilts her head coyly and gives the other woman a sickly sweet smile that reveals her fangs. "I can take care of myself."

"And who are you, exactly?"

"Vivien McCoy."

Raven looks almost insultingly impressed as she appraises my wife and I, her antipathy abating somewhat.

Seeing me in my Beast form, the one she feels is "the true me," and married to a woman with physical mutations of her own has clearly raised me in her estimation by quite a bit.

_Hooray for me?_

"You're very pretty, Vivien," she murmurs.

"Thanks," my mate replies guardedly. "So are you."

The mask Raven prefers to wear suddenly shifts into her natural blue form.

Her very _naked_ natural blue form.

I'm not a complete fool- I immediately focus on Vivien, all but whistling to show I'm not looking at the nude woman in front of us.

"How about now?"

My mate shrugs. "Being butt-naked is a bit much, but if you got it, flaunt it. I guess."

Raven smiles.

At this point I'm seven levels of uncomfortable (_seriously, are they having a weird bonding moment or something?_) and just want this conversation over with. "Raven, are you here to visit Charles?"

"No," she replies, shifting back into her human-looking mask. "I'm here with a warning."

That gets our attention.

"Erik's got a big project coming up."

"Yes, we're aware," I tell her. "We know he's going to release an aerosolized mutagenic compound into the air from the Statue of Liberty. We just don't know what day."

Raven looks surprised that we're so well informed. "Alright, but did you know he's been hanging out at Club X?"

I stare at her blankly. "Is that supposed to mean something of import, or...?"
"It means he's recruiting again, baby," Vivien says with a sigh. "Club X is a night club- only mutants allowed. All the mercs hang out there. It's where- it's where Magneto found my brothers."

It's Raven's turn at befuddlement. "Who are you?" she repeats.

Vivien grins wryly. "I told you already. I'm Vivien McCoy," she replies.

"My wife. Also known as Vixen," I add quietly. "Formerly of the Brotherhood."

The shape-shifter's expression flickers for a moment- surprise? regret? I can't tell- before becoming unreadable once more. "Interesting," she comments dryly. "Well, then-"

She turns to go.

"I've done what I've come to do. Good luck."

"You're not going to stay and help?" I ask- but I already know the answer.

"Nope," Raven replies, retreating down the front walk into the gathering darkness. "I've learned it's better to stay the hell out of Erik and Charles' reindeer games."

And the sad thing is, she's not wrong.
"Well then," Vivien murmurs. "Might as well get going."

She steps away from me, heading for the mansion's front door.

I hasten to open it for her. "Going where?" I ask blankly as I follow her inside.

"To Club X, of course," she replies, like it's obvious. She's moving along at a quick pace, clearly in a hurry.

Um...

"You want to go to a nightclub that you know Erik has been frequenting?" My tone is incredulous. "Is that really wise?"

"Probably not," Vivien admits. "But we need all the information we can get, and it'd be stupid not to use the opportunity."

At this point we've reached our room, for which I'm thankful. I smell a heated discussion coming, and the privacy is welcome.

"It'd be stupid to go looking for the man who wants you dead," I retort sharply once I've shut the door behind me. "What exactly are you planning?"

My mate takes a deep inhale through her nose, as if she's praying for patience. "I plan on doing a little spying, Hank," she replies through clenched teeth. "It's something I'm good at. I won't get caught."

"Perhaps we should discuss this with Charles."

Vivien gives me a look that clearly tells me what she thinks of that idea.

Still not much of a team player. But what else was I expecting?

"Don't turn this into an argument, Hank," she says testily. "We need information, you can't deny that. So I'm going, whether you like it or not."

Her resolute expression indicates that all arguments on that front will be futile. While she respects my opinion and my concern for her safety, she feels that this trip is necessary, she will play it safe...

And whatnot and so forth.

I sigh in defeat. "Alone?"

"Not if you choose to come with me," Vivien replies. She's prudently choosing not to dwell on her victory in that stare down. "That's your decision."

I grimly weigh my options while she digs around in the closet- I'm assuming for something to wear that's nightclub appropriate.
My wife is adamant about going on this mission. She already knows my opinion on the matter and isn't changing her mind.

So, short of tying her to the bed (which, let's face it, probably wouldn't even hold her for long- she makes Harry Houdini look like an amateur) or going to Charles and having him tamper with her thoughts I don't really see how I can deter her from the course. Both options wreak of bitter betrayal, and I can't bring myself to do either.

It helps that Vivien seems to be quite sure she won't get caught. While I hate the risk it would be, I'm inclined to trust her judgment in this situation because it's something she's dealt with before.

At least this time I'm invited, I think to myself, with half-hearted enthusiasm. I can't seem to stop trying to find a silver lining, I suppose.

"Alright," I call out, just as Vivien comes out of the closet with her arms full. "I'm coming with you."

She smiles and shoves the bundle she's holding at me. They're my clothes, I realize.

Oh, hell. Am I really so predictable?

"I know you are," Vivien laughs. "Now put that on."

Over an hour later I find myself feeling rather aggrieved about how my evening is turning out.

My previous vision of how the night would unfold included a shower together after our footrace, followed by another round (or two... or three) of lovemaking preceding some post-coital cuddling while reading The Hunchback of Notre Dame to each other.

I got my shared shower, but it was decidedly more business-like than I originally hoped for. And then Vivien immediately kicked me out of the bathroom so she could get ready.

Because apparently an act of espionage at a nightclub is still a night out, in her opinion.

And she says I never take her anywhere anymore, I think to myself sarcastically.

I'd be lying if I didn't feel a guilty twinge of conscience for that. We used to do so many things together- meeting at the park, going to the movies and museums. But ever since Vivien joined the X-Men we haven't, and I know she feels rather stifled. Small wonder she's so eager for this trip.

It doesn't help my disgruntled attitude much that I'll be going out in public as Beast, either. But Vivien insisted that I not use my serum, because the club bouncer's ability is sensing other mutants and he'll be able to tell that I'm not genetically a mutant while on it.

Only the desire to not call undue attention to ourselves (though let's be honest, being my big, blue, furry self is going to attract plenty of notice on its own) on this mission made me relent. Let's just get this over with.

Finally, Vivien emerges.

"Ta-da!" she announces grandly, stepping out of the bathroom.

You know how in cartoons, when a male character sees a female he finds attractive, his eyes pop out of his head and his mouth drops to the floor?
That's an accurate assessment of my reaction right now.

Vivien's dress- if you can even call it a dress- has a halter top and a neckline that plunges to below her belly button, and the hem is quite a few inches shy of mid-thigh. It's also fire-engine red, to match her lipstick.

Giggling at my expression, she spins around on her strappy heels so I can see the view from behind. The dress is backless, just enough fabric to cover her pert little bottom without being obscene. She's wearing her hair up in some kind of elegant twist so it doesn't obscure the sight of her beautiful, bare back.

"Y-you're wearing that?" I somehow manage to sputter.

*I honestly think I just had a stroke.*

"Yup. What do you think?" Vivien asks. She's clearly amused by my dumbstruck expression.

What do I think?

I think that that dress and those heels make her legs look like they're miles long, and I want nothing more than to have them wrapped around me at this very moment. I think that her sensual mouth has never looked more inviting than right now. I think that I want to spend the rest of the night kissing every inch of her exposed flesh, from her lean shoulders to the barely visible scar on her stomach all the way down to her feet and back again.

I think all of these things and more- like what a struggle it will be not to throttle any man who so much as dares to *look* at my mate. And how seeing Vivien all dolled up for a night out makes me desperately wish we were staying in. I don't want to share her with anyone. She's mine.

But like I said, I just suffered some sort of cerebrovascular episode, and the ability to speak has quite deserted me.

I still have control of my limbs, though. And right now every cell in my body is yearning towards her so much it's painful.

Once the initial shock wears off I rise to my feet and show Vivien *exactly* what I think of her appearance tonight.

Right up against the bedroom wall.

"Hank," she moans. It's a tepid protest, and easy to ignore because she's clinging to me like a spider monkey at the moment. Her legs are wrapped around my hips, just the way I wanted. "Hank, we have to-"

"Fifteen minutes," I murmur against her breast. "You can time me."

"See?" I proudly remark to her fifteen minutes later, both of us panting and satisfied. "I told you."

Vivien chuckles breathlessly. "So you did," she reluctantly agrees. "But now I have to go re-do my hair."

I nibble her pouting bottom lip and set her on the ground again before putting myself back to rights. "I would apologize, but I'm not sorry," I reply, not even bothering to hide how smug I am right now.
She snorts and heads back into the bathroom.

It's barbaric and chauvinistic and I'm horribly ashamed of myself, but I feel much calmer now that Vivien is completely saturated with my scent. The overpowering instincts to protect my mate and reinforce my claim on her have momentarily been appeased. Other ferals, at least, will be deterred from approaching her.

I guess I'm not as evolved as I thought I was. At least not where Vivien is concerned.
We don't exactly sneak out of the mansion, but we take care not to draw attention to ourselves all the same. Vivien is adamant about not involving the other X-Men in this. Too many players in the game means more opportunities for discovery.

I have the feeling that she doesn't even really want me to come along, for all her picking out my outfit and everything. But she promised the night she almost died that from now on it would be the two of us against the world, and Vivien is a mutant of her word.

It feels strange to be driving in a regular vehicle as Beast- I can't even recall the last time I did it. I find myself cringing every time we pull even with another car, or when headlights flash into ours.

Oh my stars and garters- what if we get pulled over?

That's a scenario I don't even want to try to envision.

"If you keep driving like a grandma we're never going to get there," Vivien teases eventually. "At least do the speed limit, baby, or a cop's going to think you're drunk."

I sigh- that's actually a decent point- and bump up the speed a little. "Any other comments about my driving?"

"No, but..."

Uh oh. But? But what?

"Yes?"

"When we get there, I need you to pretend you don't know me," she says quietly.

I'll admit it: my first thought is that she's too embarrassed to be seen in public with me like this, and it hurts my feelings. My only defense is that the insecurities of a lifetime aren't going to just fade away after a few months.

I glance over and see her studying me with an unreadable expression. In shifting my eyes down I notice that she's not even wearing her ring tonight, and that just stings all the more.

"I see." My tone is stiff, formal. "May I ask why?"

"I need people to talk to me," Vivien explains. "And you-"

"-Are a furry monster."

"-Are a very imposing figure," she finishes pointedly. "Trust me, baby, you're not even going to be the scariest person in there. But if you're next to me the whole time I'm not going to be able to..."

It clicks for me then. Not wearing her ring, the scanty outfit, telling me to avoid her-

"You won't be able to flirt with other men," I growl. My steering wheel is in serious danger of being crushed.
Jealousy burns in the pit of my stomach, like I swallowed hot coals. There's a metallic taste on my
tongue, and my vision is suddenly a little red around the edges. If I weren't already in my Beast
form I would've shifted right here and now.

Anticipating that other men would possibly make advances towards my mate tonight is one thing,
but her actually inviting the attention? On purpose?

Jealous? Oh yes, I'm jealous.

Vivien has the audacity to roll her eyes. "I'll be more approachable on my own, and you know it. I
need people to talk, Hank," she snaps. "We're trying to stop Magneto, remember? If flirting with
random guys is what it takes, then so be it. You're the one I'm going home with. Don't you trust
me?"

Well that's not fair.

"Yes," I reply sullenly. "Of course I do."

"Uh huh. That's why you absolutely covered me with your scent tonight," she mutters, her tone
acidic. "Because you obviously know I'll tell guys to 'back off' without your scent just doing it for
me, right?"

I squirm in shame, feeling like there are live snakes slithering around in my stomach. It's made
worse by how Vivien just lets the observation hang there between us, demanding comment or
excuse.

But I don't really have either.

Finally she speaks. "You're not the only one who gets jealous, you know," she informs me. When I
glance over at her in shock she elaborates, her voice becoming low and deadly, "I almost scratched
that bitch's eyes out tonight for being so obvious about looking you over. Like I wasn't
standing right there. And then you, you just let her ignore me. You were in love with that woman
for years, Hank. How do you think that made me feel?"

And I thought I felt guilty before.

"Vivien..." I swallow thickly.

"Do you still want her?" She's staring out the windshield, utterly stone-faced.

"No. I have no interest in Raven at all," I reply, so firmly Vivien has to know how truthful my
answer is. "I- I apologize for not responding in a more appropriate way. I was caught off-guard by
her showing up and didn't know how to react. Forgive me, Vivien. I'm only human."

She huffs in reply, but because she's not yelling at me I chose to take that as encouragement. I
tentatively reach out and take my mate's hand in one of mine, mindful of the steering wheel.

"What I felt for her in the past is over. Not only that, it pales in comparison to my feelings for you.
You have to know that I never thought I'd feel about anyone the way I feel about you," I tell her.
"I've waited my whole life to find you, darling. Someone to belong to, to give all of myself to-"

I wince.

"This sounds like sentimental drivel. Even if I mean it."
"I think right now I need to hear some sentimental drivel," Vivien retorts. "Especially if you mean it."

I can't chuckling at that. "Alright, fine," I agree. "You're the love of my life, Vivien. I'm still afraid that one morning I'll wake up and realize you're a dream that's been cruelly taken away. Or that you'll realize that you could have done so much better than me and grow to resent that you're stuck with me. I can't even bear the thought."

She scoffs irritably. "Well, I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not going to resent you. So you need to trust me, Hank," she tells me, her tone stern.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And stop selling yourself short," Vivien adds. A coquettish grin plays across her mouth. "Why would I need another man? I already have one who's smart, funny, sweet, sexy, and a total stud in the sack."

*She certainly knows how to instantly brighten my mood, doesn't she?*

I bring her hand up to my lips for a kiss. "I love you," I tell her fervently.

"I love you, Hank."

Not long after that we pull into a quiet parking lot in an area full of business fronts in the City.

"That's it," Vivien says, pointing to the building across the street.

"Really?"

It's not exactly what I envisioned for a night club.

No line out the door, no velvet rope, no flashing bright lights. The building has a nondescript brick face and a single overhead light over the steel double doors. No sign advertising what lies inside. If Vivien hadn't enlightened me, I would've easily believed it was a warehouse of some kind.

"Yup," she replies. "It's an underground scene, remember? Can't be too flashy, or it'll attract unwanted attention."

I shrug- I'm liking this less and less by the moment. "If you say so."

Vivien squeezes my hand. I can tell she senses my trepidation. "It'll be ok, baby," she tells me. "If anything goes sideways, just follow my lead."

*That's... not exactly reassuring.*

"Right."

She leans over the gear shift and kisses me.

With one last glance in the mirror- she's still gorgeous, of course- Vivien hops out of the car and saunters across the street.

A few moments later she's disappeared inside.

I'm supposed to wait ten minutes before following her, but impatience and an overactive
imagination get the better of me. The horrifying thought of Erik, James and Myles waiting just inside the doors to snatch Vivien up goads me into action.

I take a deep breath and make my way across the street, trying to keep my head down. It's dark, but a man of my description has to work hard to be inconspicuous.

The metal doors shut behind me with an ominous clang as I enter a tiny, boxlike anteroom. Standing in front of a second door is the creepiest-looking man I've ever seen.

I instinctively tense up.

*What if he asks for my ID or something? It's not like I have one that-*

But he merely gives me a once-over and a nod before opening the door.

I square my shoulders and prepare myself for my first look at Club X.
Welcome to Club X

Club X, despite the off-putting exterior, is about what I expected a nightclub to be.

The large dance floor is sunk into the ground and accessible by little sets of steps on each side, and the space is completely ringed by red velvet couches set against all the walls save for the empty stage to my left. Every few feet along the couches there are small tables with tea lamps on top, the only real lighting in the club save for that refracting off the multiple disco balls on the ceiling. It's a soft, golden light, but not too low as to make things impossible to see.

On the wall to my right there are a few doorways covered by gauzy curtains- private VIP rooms, I assume. The wall directly across from me hosts a huge bar that's packed with people out on a Saturday night to party.

Not regular people, either. Mutants.

This entire club is crawling with mutants.

Most of them look relatively normal- the man in the white polyester suit, the woman in the blue romper and go-go boots- but I can smell that they're mutants all the same. Some of them even have physical mutations, like the girl with green hair or the lady who has cat ears and a tail and who is only wearing a sparkly gold bathing suit.

I'm around mutants every day, but they're adolescents for the most part. Going through the normal trials and tribulations of growing up with the additional burden of being a mutant on top of that. Many- if not most- are uncomfortable in their own skins (a condition I certainly relate to).

But these people, for the here and now, at least, practically *exude* self-confidence. The knowledge of who and what they are, their place in the world (or at least in this club), sits upon this crowd like a golden mantle. Physical mutations and all.

It's absolutely fascinating.

And Vivien was right: I'm not even the most frightening mutant in the room. That award, I think, goes to the feral male lounging on one of the couches next to the dance floor, nursing a beer and leering at the other patrons. He's easily six foot six, maybe more, heavily muscled and more than a little savage-looking. Everyone's giving that man a wide berth, and I decide it would be prudent to do the same.

Seeing such an ominous figure here makes me anxious to locate Vivien, but I find her easily.

She's leaning against the bar, idly playing with the stirrer in her drink as she surveys the crowd. Sultry but sophisticated, attractively bored and yet intent, she's graceful even in repose.

Before I can even catch her eye Vivien's gaze locks with someone else's in the crowd. She smiles seductively and raises her eyebrows in challenge before turning back towards the bar, ostensibly ignoring whoever it is. But then she glances over her shoulder, a clear invitation.
It works like a charm. Within moments a man wearing a leather jacket and tight-fitting jeans emerges from the crowd and goes to her side.

My wonderment at being surrounded by so many mutants in such a public setting instantly goes sour.

I need a drink.

And because I'm a glutton for punishment I take a seat at the bar on Vivien's other side, so I can listen to her openly flirting with another man. I'm torn between cursing and being grateful for the music level, which is low enough to have a conversation over without straining. I'll be able to hear every word.

"A rum and Coke, please," I tell the bartender.

Out of the corner of my eye I see my mate sipping on her drink, facing forward. Her potential suitor - target? victim? - is leaning against the bar in what he probably assumes is an attractive way, watching her intently. With his carefully styled hair and clothes he looks like a James Dean wannabe.

"I'm Ken," he says, his voice artificially deep.

I roll my eyes.

I hate him already.

"That's nice," Vivien replies. She's still pretending to ignore him, but her lips are turned up at the corners.

"What's your name?"

She grins coyly, clearly playing hard to get.

"Come on," Ken urges, sidling closer. "You can tell me. How about this- I buy you a drink, you tell me your name. Deal?"

How original.

Vivien pretends to huff in annoyance. "Alright, fine. Ah'm Hannah," she tells him. "Happy now, sugah?"

I almost turn and stare at her in amazement.

You could cut that accent with a butter knife. My stars and garters, it's adorable.

But even the cute Southern accent doesn't make listening to this any easier.

They go over the basics, though Vivien makes him work hard for every answer. Doing so forces this rebel without a cause to give more information about himself in exchange for her paltry offerings.

Our courtship was so much more direct than this, I muse. Girl saves boy, boy pins girl to wall, girl kisses boy and then gives him a concussion...

But I think I prefer our love story, however unconventional, to this farce. I could never view Vivien as a prize, an object to be won over, the way this game seems to require. She assessed Ken's
character correctly from the start, though I don't know how. He's a man that needs to "win" a woman to validate himself, and she's playing him like a harp.

Eventually Ken becomes so desperate for her attention that he devolves into belittling the other patrons in order to make himself look better.

And that includes me.

"Check out the guy behind you," he murmurs hopefully.

*Really, do you need to be so close to her when you talk? It's not like the music is too loud, you creep.*

"He looks like a blue Lon Chaney, Jr."

Vivien's facade immediately cracks.

Maybe the need to defend her mate makes her forget herself for a moment. Or it's possible that she's known for several minutes that this cretin definitely lacks the "mutant and proud" attitude Erik requires of his followers and has been looking for a way to end the encounter.

Perhaps it's a combination of the two. For whatever the reason-

"Does that make me Gloria Holden?" she suddenly hisses in Ken's face.

The way he stumbles backwards tells me he just got his first good view of Vivien's fangs, up close and personal.

*That's what you get for being too close.* Even my mental voice sounds smug.

I'm snickering- not very mature of me, I know- by the time he scrambles away from the woman who just went from Southern belle to Dracula's daughter in one second flat.

Then she whirls around on me. "What are you laughing about?" she snaps.

*Uh oh.*

I immediately sober. "Nothing," I reply, affecting an innocent air- which of course doesn't fool her in the slightest.

"Pretending to be interested in another guy isn't easy for me, you know," Vivien says indignantly. "Having my mate right behind me makes it even harder."

"Sorry," I mumble. I'm torn between genuine contrition and soothed vanity. I don't want to block her efforts towards getting the information we need. But I also don't mind hearing that it's difficult for her to feign attraction to another man, with or without my presence. "I'll just- go sit over there or something."

I hang my head slightly, allowing myself a moment to wallow in the dejection and bitterness.

My mate growls under her breath, clearly exasperated with my behavior. "Jesus Christ, it's like I just kicked a puppy in the face," she mutters unhappily. She then reaches under the bar and squeezes my thigh gently, her expression suddenly wistful. "I wish you'd take me someplace like this just for fun, together."

Another tremor of guilt washes over me.
The offhand remark just drives the point home even more, how much Vivien has been dying for a change of scenery lately. Not to get away from me, but to get away with me. For us to spend time together, exploring the City the way we used to.

This isn't really my type of place, but I'm fair enough to admit that it would be fun to just come here one night and sit with my wife while we observe all of these mutants, letting that feeling of wonder and oneness soak in.

But my own paranoia over the Brotherhood has prevented such things, and she's barely even complained...

Before I can reply, Vivien finishes her drink and rolls her shoulders.

"Back to work."

Chapter End Notes

For those who aren't in the know, Lon Chaney Jr. and Gloria Holden are known for playing The Wolf Man and Dracula's Daughter back in the 1940s.
It's difficult for me to have an unbiased opinion about the woman I love, but I know, objectively speaking, that she's not the prettiest girl here tonight. Not to other men, at least. But there's something else about Vivien that draws these males to her, like honeybees to a flower.

Or ants to a picnic.

I try to pinpoint just what it is while I sit there sulking on one of the velvet couches lining the dance floor, sipping my drink and trying not to look like the awkward loser I clearly am.

Is it the impression of frailty in her petite form, the illusion of easy prey to some chauvinist pig looking for a "little woman" to take care of? How ironic, when she's the one doing the hunting tonight. Is it her deceptively sweet face, which conceals the iron will that lies within? The captivating way she can seem like an innocent ingenue one moment and a seductive siren the next? Or maybe it's the grace with which she moves, like a ballerina or a panther on the prowl. It's absolutely mesmerizing, the way she easily sashays around in those high heels. My eyes follow her hungrily wherever she goes, and I know I'm not the only one.

And... My stars and garters, the woman can dance. It seems she doesn't just have a talent for making music, but moving to it as well. She clearly feels the beat deep in her soul, and I would love simply watching her like this if she was by herself.

Which she's not.

After finishing her drink Vivien headed for the dance floor and started dancing alone... for all of thirty seconds. It didn't take long for a partner to materialize out of thin air, and she hasn't been lacking for one since.

Meanwhile I've been sitting on the periphery, keeping Vivien in sight just in case she needs me but virtuously staying out of her way while she "works." I'll admit it, I'm feeling a little sorry for myself.

But then I'm startled out of my self-pitying reverie by someone taking the seat next to me.

It's the cat lady in the sparkly bathing suit, come to keep me company. As I glance over at her she gives me an inviting smile, as if to say, "I've put myself here. Now it's your move."

Well this is definitely new.

"Hi," I say politely.

"Hello," Cat Lady replies. "What's your name, handsome?"

"I'm- Frank," I tell her. Wildly inventive, I know. And I had the audacity to mock Ken for his lack of originality. "And you are?"

"Lucia."

"Lucia," I repeat. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. You're looking quite lovely this evening."
Because she is, in an exotic, feline way. Her skin- which, thanks to her skimpy attire, is prominently on display- is covered in a fine dusting of tawny fur, complete with tiger stripes, and her hair is an intriguing shade of auburn.

"That gold really makes your coloring quite striking."

Lucia's smile gets even wider, like my inane pleasantries are the deepest of compliments. I suppose I can relate- looking so... unusual myself, I know what an effect a few kind words can have.

She's so pleased she scoots even nearer, making herself comfortable quite close to me. I actually feel a little bad for her now. Does she long for attention so much? Or is she just thrilled to be meeting another feral, apparently alone?

Her expression suddenly falls as she gets a full read on my scent. "You're mated?" Lucia asks, with evident dismay.

I nod. "Yes."

"Where is your mate?"

*On the dance floor allowing herself to get groped in the name of saving humanity from Erik Lehnsherr.*

"At home, with the children," I blithely offer.

"With the children," Lucia repeats slowly. "And is she a feral, too?"

"She is," I reply.

Lucia looks begrudgingly impressed that I've found another female and apparently fathered children with her. Not that I can find fault in her reaction, considering how rare ferals are, and females in particular.

The fact that Lucia and Vivien are even in the same building right now is like seeing two unicorns frolicking in the woods together, or something equally impossible.

"Did you have an argument with her?" Lucia guesses. She's obviously trying to puzzle out why I'm here alone, without my mate.

"No, no," I tell her quickly, out of reflex. Belatedly, I realize that would've been a good excuse. Oh, well. "I just- I just needed a night to myself, I suppose."

Though for life of me, I can't imagine ever wanting to abandon Vivien at home with our (currently imaginary) children to come to a place like this, mutant solidarity or no. Some men may be like that, but not me.

"Am I bothering you, then?"

"Not at all," I assure her, mustering up a genial smile.

An idea strikes me now- Vivien isn't the only one who can try to get information out of the other club patrons tonight, right? I can, too.

And here is the perfect opportunity.

If this woman happens to be a regular club-goer, perhaps she's seen Erik around. Maybe she's even
heard of his plans? As a feral with physical mutations, it's certainly possible that Lucia would be susceptible to his rhetoric.

*It's worth a shot.*

"It's nice to not have to hide what I am here," I add conspiratorially. "What about you? Do you come here often?"

"Oh, yes," she replies. "Almost every Saturday night."

*Jackpot. Come on, McCoy, you can do this.*

"I can see why," I say, gesturing towards the mass of mutants around us. "It's quite-comfortable here, being around so many other mutants. Oh- would you like me to buy you a drink?"

Lucia grins, revealing her fangs. "Yes, please."

We spend several minutes sharing anecdotes and commiserating over what life is like when you are so obviously something other than normal. I've been hiding my true face- for the most part, at least- for several years now, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten what it feels like to be called a freak.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way for mutants," I say glumly.

Lucia purses her lips, and I fear for a moment that I've been too obvious.

"What if it didn't have to be?" she asks in a low voice.

I frown curiously. "What do you mean?"

She looks around meaningfully and scoots herself even closer. Really, if she was any nearer at this point she'd be in my lap. "Can you keep a secret?" Lucia whispers into my ear.

*Now we're getting somewhere.*

I'm so eager to hear more that it's difficult to keep my face under control, but I manage it. Let Lucia think that my sudden tension is thanks to a physical response to her nearness, I don't care.

I glance around too-

And see that Vivien is staring at me from across the room, her expression quite unhappy as she dances with yet another tool in polyester.

I look away quickly, feeling guilty over being caught in this position with another woman even though I'm aware of my own good intentions. Now I know exactly how Vivien felt, flirting with another man in front of me.

"Have you looked at me?" I reply to Lucia, grinning. "My whole life is a secret."

She chuckles. "Well, do you remember the man who tried to kill Nixon at the White House?"

I nod, feigning mild curiosity.

"He's going to do something that will make it safe for mutants everywhere, starting right here in New York City," she explains.
"How?"

"I'm not sure," Lucia replies. "But he's been coming here, inviting mutants he thinks are worthy to witness it happening."

"And you're worthy," I say. "He'd be a fool not to think so."

She preens over this. "Yes, he thinks so," she agrees happily. "And I think you are, too."

It's clear that I've gained her trust, and I suddenly feel dirty, unclean for using Lucia this way. After all, it doesn't sound like she knows everything Erik is planning. Would she protest it if she did? Or would she approve?

I force myself to shove the guilt aside and smile. "That's very kind of you," I tell her, like I'm pleased by the praise.

Now it's time for the big question.

"Well, then. When and where?"

"The Statue of Liberty, next Friday night."

Erik Lehnsherr certainly has a flair for the dramatic.

Carrying out his dastardly plan on the eve of America's celebration of independence at such an established symbol of freedom definitely has the sort of metaphorical resonance he so enjoys. He proved that when he tried to kill the President and his Cabinet with the very weapons the humans created to destroy mutants two years ago.

What better time to try to turn everyone into mutants (he feels), ushering in a new age of freedom for our kind, than on the anniversary of the day our country declared its own independence? It's perfect.

To your average crazy person, anyway.

I clear my throat and bring my attention back to Lucia, who hasn't noticed that anything is amiss on my part. I paste a thoughtful grin on my face. "I'll have to ask my mate, but it definitely sounds intriguing," I tell the feral woman.

Her smile fades. "Right," she murmurs dejectedly. "Your mate."

Lucia's fallen expression pricks at my conscience once more. It's apparent that she'd managed to forget that I have a mate in the midst of the lovely conversation we were having, though I certainly never did.

I'm at a loss as to how to extricate myself from this situation now that I have the information I need.

But the reminder that I'm irrevocably taken seems to have completely deflated my companion's mood. After all, it's not like I'm merely a married man who could possibly be induced to leave my wife for another woman. Lucia is well aware that ferals mate for life. We had a nice talk, but nothing will ever happen between us.

I feel terrible- not because I would ever want to leave Vivien, but because this nice woman clearly liked me and is now upset. It's flattering, but still.

Call me a sucker, I guess.

Lucia visibly shakes herself and smiles sadly. "Perhaps I will see you both there," she says. "I would love to meet your mate- there are so few of us."

"That would be nice," I agree politely.

*Oh, you'll definitely see us there. But on what terms will it be?*

"Goodbye, Frank," Lucia murmurs regretfully.

She leans in, kisses me on the cheek, and walks away. She heads straight for the exit, leaving me feeling uncomfortable and remorseful that I had to hurt her feelings.

*Who knew that I, of all people, could be a heart breaker?*
I sigh.

At least we got the information we needed- and a little extra, too. Erik is gathering mutants who he thinks will be cooperative to his cause for the big show. I have a feeling it's because he wants some cover, a distraction to keep the X-Men busy when we inevitably show up to thwart him.

I'm still mulling it over when a new individual takes a seat on the couch next to me.

I don't even have to turn to know who it is- I don't even have to smell her. Vivien's presence is like the relief of an ache that's been there so long I forgot to notice it until it disappeared. A feeling of homecoming, of belonging, strangely complemented by the way every atom of my flesh lights up just by being near her.

"I can't take you anywhere, can I?" Vivien asks lightly, gesturing towards the door Lucia just left through. It seems that for whatever reason our charade of not knowing each other is over.

I scowl at her. "I could say the same of you," I retort. There's a slightly (and I think quite justifiably) sullen edge to my tone.

She sticks her tongue out at me. "Hey, at least it worked," she tells me. "I found out Magneto is making a move on-"

"The Fourth of July," I finish. When she raises her eyebrows in question I explain, "the lady who just walked away invited me- and you too, actually. I think Erik wants to use an audience to keep us busy while his machine does its work."

Vivien looks impressed, but not insultingly so. "Very nice, baby," she murmurs, with a well-pleased smile. "I'll make a spy out of you, yet."

I shake my head. "No, not really," I reply hastily. "I actually feel terrible- that lady was very nice and I was just using her for information. I think for a while there she forgot that I had a mate, and when I brought you up again she became sad and left."

My wife just stares at me for a long moment with that soft, fond look she only reserves for me in her eyes. "You are so adorably clueless," she mutters.

"What do you mean?" I ask, puzzled.

"Don't worry about it," Vivien assures me, squeezing my hand. "It's part of your charm."

She sighs.

"I guess we should get going then, now that we got what we came for."

She begins to stand up, but I catch her hand again and pull her back down next to me. "No, wait," I tell her. "Let's just stay here for a bit."

Vivien frowns at me, clearly confused.

"It's- it's rather nice, being among all these mutants," I explain awkwardly. "Adults, I mean. I want to enjoy this with you for a while. If you want to, of course."

She gives me a radiant, breathtaking smile. "I'd love to."

And for a while we do just that. I fetch us both drinks, and together we sit and watch the crowd.
Occasionally Vivien points out someone she remembers encountering during her days as a mercenary, before James convinced her to join the Brotherhood. It's not a time in her life that she speaks of very much.

I notice that the people she indicates give respectful signs of recognition but make no moves to approach her and exchange pleasantries. I don't know if it's because of my "imposing" (as Vivien worded it) presence, her own reputation or- worst of all- because they know she's got a price on her head, thanks to Erik.

When I mention this last to her Vivien gives me reassurance that that's not the case.

"They're just being polite, baby," she tells me. "Mercs aren't exactly known for small talk."

"If you say so," I murmur dubiously.

She taps her foot unconsciously whenever a song she likes begins to play, and even though I know I really should ask her to dance I can't quite find the courage to do so just yet. I'm paralyzed by self-consciousness, afraid to make a fool of myself in front of-

*Oh, to hell with it. My wife wants to dance, so I'm going to dance with her.*

I toss back the rest of my drink- a little liquid courage never hurt anyone- stand up, and offer her my hand.

"Time to go home?" Vivien guesses as she rises to her feet.

"No," I reply, gritting my teeth in determination. "Come dance with me, sweetheart."

She raises her eyebrows incredulously. "I thought you didn't dance, Hank."

"I don't," I agree. "So please don't hold this against me."

It's really not as bad as I thought it would be.

Oh, every now and then I have a moment of panic that I look like an idiot, but mostly I concentrate on mimicking the other mutants around us and following Vivien's lead.

It helps that she's an undemanding partner and seems content to sway to the beat with our hips pressed together while running her fingers over my chest, through my hair. I just hold her close, allowing my hands to roam all over the soft skin of her back-

*You know on second thought, this isn't bad at all.*

"Is this so terrible?" Vivien murmurs, mirroring my thoughts.

After watching her dance with other men all night, it feels amazing to have her back in my arms. And I'll admit that having such a desirable woman ostensibly pick me over everyone else is definitely an ego boost.

"I suppose not," I concede.

We both laugh, and I lean in and give her a kiss.

*I guess I'm not the only one who suffered from fits of jealousy tonight,* I idly muse as she returns the gesture, with interest.
I'd be lying if I said that wasn't gratifying.

"Let's get out of here," Vivien murmurs against my lips.

"Ok." Because I can't resist her anything.

I'm grinning like an idiot as she leads me towards the door, already anticipating what we're going to do to each other as soon as we get home-

And then in walks James and Myles.
I immediately freeze up, but Vivien doesn't hesitate. She darts into the propitiously empty VIP room to our left, dragging me with her before either of her brothers manage to glance in our direction.

Both of us stand at the ready, but fortune seems to be on our side (for the moment, anyway). She was quick enough. We watch the two ferals obliviously walk by through the gauzy curtain with no small relief.

"Phew," Vivien breathes. "That was close."

"Agreed," I murmur. "Darling, we need to get out of here."

She doesn't answer immediately, which worries me. Instead of concurring she flattens herself to the wall and peers out the curtain into the club beyond.

"Magneto followed them in," she whispers.

_Oh my stars and garters._

"Then we _really_ need to get out of here."

"Uh huh," Vivien agrees absently, still watching intently. "They're meeting with Sabretooth, it looks like."

"Who?"

"The huge feral in the corner that everyone's been avoiding all night," she explains. "He's for hire, but I've heard he's also one of those types who likes killing and raping just for shits and giggles. Not a good guy."

That would probably be the large, savage-looking male I privately deemed the most frightening patron at the club upon my arrival. It looks like my opinion was just confirmed. And then some.

I'm glad Lucia had the sense not to go near him after our talk. Perhaps she's met him before?

But I have more pressing concerns right now.

"Would he recognize you?" I ask anxiously.

If Vivien's acquainted with him it's possible Sabretooth could mention seeing her here tonight to her brothers. That would definitely be a problem.

"No," Vivien assures me, "he wouldn't. I've never met him, I just know him by reputation. And I want to keep it that way. I mean, did you get a look at that guy? Imagine what he'd do to a frail like me."

My fists clench reflexively. "I'd prefer not to."
"He's even got my brothers cowed," she murmurs. It sounds like she's somehow caught between admiration and disdain. "That's not like them. Maybe that fight with you finally taught them some manners."

I grunt dismissively. "Perhaps," I say. "But right now we need to focus on getting out of here without being seen, Vivien."

"Hmm." I have a bad feeling I know what's going on in that reckless brain of hers. "I wonder..."

She takes a step, like she's going to try to get closer, but I grab her wrist and yank her back towards me. "Don't you dare," I snap, pinning her against my chest.

"Let go of me, dammit," Vivien hisses.

"Not until you get that ridiculous thought out of your head," I retort sharply. I keep a firm hold of her upper arms as I lean her back just far enough to look straight into her eyes. "We got what we came for, Vivien. We won't gain anything by trying to listen in any further. We just run the risk of getting captured."

She shakes her head. "After everything I did, you really think they're going to keep me alive?" she asks bitterly.

Come to think of it, your brothers will definitely make a convincing argument to Erik in that direction, I mentally reply. For their own sick reasons.

"All the more reason not to go courting more trouble," I say aloud.

Vivien's expression turns dark, deadly. "What if I could take Magneto out?" she suggests. "Tonight?"

For a moment I seriously contemplate the dreadful proposition.

Though I know it goes against everything the X-Men stand for, I can actually see her point. If Vivien were to kill Erik now, his plan would likely die with him. He keeps such an iron grip on the reins of power within the Brotherhood that they'd fall apart without him, just as the first organization did after Erik was captured for killing JFK.

One life taken in exchange for the ensured safety of millions.

But at what cost?

My wife. Or at the very least, her soul.

"I understand what you're saying," I say slowly, "and I can see the logic in your thinking. But I can't let you do it. It's too risky, even if I help you."

Vivien opens her mouth to argue, but I cut her off.

"You know I'm not going to let you try that alone," I tell her preemptively. "So what we have is Erik out there with three ferals, two of whom are your own brothers. Even if we succeed in killing him, do you really think we could both make it out alive afterwards? Even after everything they've done to you, do you really believe you could murder your brothers- or stand aside while I did- if it came down to it? Is that who you are? Who you want to be?"

She stares at me for a moment, but then hangs her head in defeat. "No," she whispers. "That's not
who I want to be."

Infinitely relieved, I enfold her in an embrace. "I know it isn't," I murmur, kissing her forehead.

After a minute Vivien shakes herself and going back to keeping watch.

"Oh shit," she gasps. "Oh shit- Hank, they're coming this way. What if they come in here?"

If they come in here the jig is up, simple as that. They'll probably kill me quickly- on second thought, slowly, just for fun- and then take Vivien prisoner.

I know that we're too far from the exit door to chance a run for it without being seen by our enemies. I'm just too distinctive to escape notice.

But Vivien isn't.

"Get out of here," I tell her, "before they get too close-"

She steps closer and wraps her arms around me. "Now you're being ridiculous," she snaps. "This road goes two ways, baby."

Me and you against the world...

I hold my mate tightly, desperately, as we hide just inside the doorway, against the corner that shares a wall with the other VIP room next door.

"You first," I hear a low, rumbled voice say. Sabretooth, I'm assuming.

And it's outside the other room, not ours.

Oh thank heavens. A stay of execution.

"Is that other room empty?" It's Erik, probably directing Fox or Jackal to check.

Vivien lets out a breathless moan from her spot sandwiched between me and the wall. It's loud enough to be audible to an individual with sensitive hearing, if they're listening close enough.

I frown at her in confusion.

Um...

"Yes, yes, more, more," she gasps, like she's deep in the throes of passion. "Don't stop!"

She pinches me.

Oh.

"You like that, don't you, baby?" I ask, finally catching the hint. I think my face is about to melt off from embarrassment. "You like it when I- fuck you like this?"

Vivien's reply is a wordless, pleasurable sound of encouragement.

"It's just a couple doing it, boss," I hear Fox say obsequiously. He clears his throat awkwardly. "Uh, do you want me to clear them out?"

"No, I think we can afford to leave them to it," Erik observes. He sounds amused. "Both of you stand watch out here."
We just bought ourselves a moment's reprieve, though I still don't know how we're going to get out of here with Fox and Jackal standing watch right next to us.

*We're just lucky they haven't smelled us.*

I speculate that Vivien's brothers aren't familiar enough with my scent to recognize me- and what's one more mutant in a club full of them? And my earlier amorous attentions have camouflaged their sister's scent so thoroughly they can't sense her...

*Score one for jealous instincts. Oh, I'll never let her live this down. If we live through this, that is.*

"I can't believe you just said 'fuck,'" Vivien whispers, obviously restraining laughter. "I don't think I've even heard you cuss before, and then you come out with that. It was kinda hot."

I give her a reproving look, but the effect is ruined by the purple stains I know are growing on my cheeks. "I can't believe how convincing you sounded," I counter. A disturbing thought occurs to me. "Wait- you don't fake it like that with me, do you?"

She snorts. "There's no *need* to fake anything with you, Hank," she assures me, running a claw along my jawline.

*Well that's nice to know. At least there's a little spot of sunshine in all of this mess.*

But the moment of levity quickly passes as soon as Fox and Jackal start talking.
"You really think he's going to help?" one of them asks, so quietly that Sabretooth and Erik won't be able to hear over the sound of their own conversation in the other room.

Vivien and I instantly freeze, listening intently.

"I don't see why not," the other replies- Fox, I'm thinking, because he speaks with an older brother's accustomed authority. "Even if he's not in it for mutant rights, Mags has the other offer to make him."

Jackal lets out a growl of disapproval.

"Knock it off, Jackal," Fox hisses. "We don't actually have to give him Vivien-"

My wife's head snaps up, and her eyes are suddenly burning out of her face.

_Uh oh._

"We just need him to _think_ we will so he'll help the Brotherhood take out the X-Geeks. With any luck he'll permanently get rid of Beast for us, and then she's all ours."

I clap a hand over Vivien's mouth because I know she's about to let out an indignant snarl and furiously shake my head in warning. No matter _how_ offended I am by what I'm listening to, no matter how much I don't want to hear any more of this, I know we can't give ourselves away.

_I have a bad feeling I know where this is going..._

"What about the other frail, the tiger lady?" the younger brother presses anxiously.

"Relax, little bro," Fox assures him. "He's not going to have her, either. It's just you and me. We'll share the two of them between us. I'll even let you pick first."

_Seriously, these two take misogyny an entirely different level._

I personally find it nauseating.

"But Sissy already has a mate."

"Yeah, but she won't for long," the elder replies impatiently.

I highly suspect from his tone that they've had this discussion before, but Jackal keeps bringing it up. He may be twenty years old, but his loss of sanity means that more often than not he needs the constant reassurance and repetition one would give to a child.
Vivien rarely ever lost patience with him, but Fox clearly doesn’t have the forbearance.

"We'll get rid of him, and then she'll be ours. We're not trying to be her mate, we're just trying to make cubs and keep the species going. Right?"

"Right."

Silence for a moment.

"Hey, do you think that couple's still going at it?"

Vivien, rather understandably at this point, is seething with outrage over both the conversation we're eavesdropping on and my ill usage of her. She glares meaningfully at me until I get the point.

When I uncover her mouth she lets out a strangled gasp and then sharply jabs me in the stomach, causing me to let out an exclamation of surprise. To the uneducated listener, it sounds like the noises of carnal completion.

The two ferals outside chuckle.

"Fox, Jackal," Erik’s voice suddenly calls from inside the other room.

"Yeah, boss?

"A word about the terms of the agreement, please."

*Oh my stars and garters, could it be-?*

I peek my head out.

Yes, Fox and Jackal have stepped behind the curtain into the other VIP room to discuss how they're going to purportedly sell their sister to this savage in return for his help in destroying New York City. It's the lucky break we've been hoping for.

Quick as a flash, I pull Vivien out of our hiding place and towards the exit, watching behind our backs the entire way to make sure none of our enemies make a reappearance before we can escape.

Then we're in the anteroom, where the creepy doorman, who Vivien informed me is called Caliban, gives us a knowing grin as we pass through. I suppose we look like a pair who decided to hook up for the night to him.

Once we're out of sight of his watchful eyes, blissfully outside, I scoop my mate into my arms and bolt across the street, trying to be considerate by not forcing her to run in her high heels.

It's only after I've helped Vivien into the car and we've set out for home that I finally allow myself to relax.

Just an infinitesimal amount, anyway.

Vivien wordlessly kicks her shoes off and curls into a ball in the seat, leaning her head against the window glass. She looks rather shell shocked, and I can't say I blame her in the slightest.

Erik and her brothers are using her- and maybe even Lucia- as an incentive for Sabretooth to join the Brotherhood, or at least to help with this plot.

As female ferals Vivien and Lucia are extremely rare prizes. Even a- excuse the term- "frail" who's
lost her mate, the way Vivien would have to for their plan to succeed, can theoretically still produce children with another male if her bonded partner is dead.

Reproducing with a female of our kind practically guarantees that the children of such a union would be ferals- and strong ones, too. Passing along one's genes in a stronger iteration for the future is the kind of chance a feral male would have no qualms killing for.

As if Sabretooth has any problems with murder in the first place.

I have to assume that Erik is making the offer in good faith, but from the sounds of it Fox and Jackal definitely aren't. Sabretooth might believe that the Babineaux brothers wouldn't stoop to committing incest, but he would be a fool to think they'd willingly give up a chance with Lucia for him, orders or no.

I don't know if this Sabretooth is a particularly smart or suspicious man, because otherwise I would love to point out to him that if one part of the bargain smells funny, the rest probably should too.

"Sweetheart?" I ask, trying to break the oppressive silence.

"Yeah?" She's so weary by all these revelations that she sounds positively ancient.

The only thing I can come up with to say to her is, "how do you feel?"

"I just found out my own brothers are trying to sell me like a side of beef to a serial-killing rapist, and then double-cross him to keep me themselves," Vivien mutters, glowering out the window. "How do you think I feel?"

"I believe the term in common vernacular is 'pissed.'"

Her laugh is bitter and quickly cuts off into a sort of broken sob. Hearing it is like a knife to the gut. "They're going to try to kill you," she whispers. The thought clearly horrifies her.

Because the only way to break my claim on Vivien and therefore hypothetically free her to carry another man's child is by killing me.

Theory is all any of us really have to go by in this situation. Ferals have always hovered on the edge of extinction, so it's not like a lot of studies could be conducted on us. Actually, most of what we know about our own physiology comes from folklore. I've had to read between the lines and draw my conclusions from that.

I know we mate for life, and that after being marked a female can carry only her mate's progeny to term. I think it's because her body's immune system will target anything else as an invader and destroy it automatically. But again, this is only conjecture.

I've never found record of a male recovering from the loss of his mate, which I suppose is why most ferals are so hesitant to claim one in the first place. A male whose mate dies is like a ship without anchor, a man who's lost all purpose in life. The males tend to die off rather quickly afterwards, I can only assume from loneliness. Many ferals would prefer to avoid that dependence on another being.

Females, though...

The body will reject being fully claimed again- no matter how many times it's attempted, the bond just doesn't "take" the way it's supposed to. But I've read that in a precious few cases a female has had a child with someone else after her mate dies. My theory is that once the bond is broken her
body stops producing those antibodies, allowing a pregnancy, wanted or unwanted, to proceed apace.

But would a grieving widow who's lost her life partner truly be interested in carrying another man's baby? Probably not. To many feral males, though, willingness or widowed status doesn't even matter.

*That's what those cretins want to do to my Vivien...*

"Yes," I agree calmly. "They're going to try."
Vivien apparently takes issue with my calm acceptance of this fact. She sits up straighter in her seat and frowns at me in confusion. " Doesn't that bother you?" she asks heatedly.

"Of course it does," I reply, my tone indignant. "I don't want to die- not any time soon, at least. After all this time I finally have someone to live for: you. And I plan to, for a very long time. I want to grow old with you, darling."

I grin.

"Well, you'd probably say old-er, but still."

But unfortunately the cloying (though completely true) statement and attempt at humor don't distract her the way I hoped they would. She continues to eye me with the intensity of a thousand suns.

Of course the laser-like focus makes me squirm.

"You didn't seem surprised," Vivien observes suspiciously. "About any of it. Not even my brothers trying to go all Old Testament on me. And come to think of it- you didn't really answer when I asked if you honestly thought they'd keep me alive, if they caught us. Why is that?"

Uh oh.

I wish very much that we were anywhere but in a car right now. I can only feign so much absorption in driving, after all, and there's no escaping what's coming when we're trapped this way.

"What aren't you telling me, Hank?" she demands in a dangerous hiss. "Did you already know about this?"

I grimace.

"Well?"

_Damnation. Might as well get it over with. She's not going to let it go._

But I can't say I blame her, all things considered.

I sigh in resignation. "I deduced some of it," I admit. I can practically _feel_ her gaze burning a hole into the side of my head. "When Charles and I came back after getting Stryker from your apartment he sensed your brothers keeping watch and read their minds. He told me how much they hated me- not just for taking their sister away, but also because you're the only female feral of child-bearing age they were aware of at that point. It's not too much of a logical leap to surmise they would eventually try to get rid of me and get you back for that purpose."

Vivien struggles with that revelation for a long moment. Out of the corner of my eye I watch a myriad of emotions play across her face- disgust, fury, and finally despair. The sight is a pain beyond words for me.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she whispers brokenly.
"Logically speaking, I didn't have a chance at first," I admit. "We were too busy convincing the X-Men to not throw us out for sneaking around together. But it was more than that. Your brothers had just killed all of our friends out of spite, and then they tried to murder you for daring to fall in love with me. The knowledge that they would have such sickening designs on you after all of that would only hurt you further, and I wanted to spare you that pain."

My next words are almost a growl.

"And it's not like it matters in the long run," I mutter fiercely. "They'll only touch you over my dead body."

"Weren't you listening?" Vivien snaps. "That's what the plan is! There's three of them, Hank, and two of us. I'm not a fucking genius like you, but that math definitely isn't in our favor."

I take a deep breath in through my nose and mentally count to ten, rather than allowing my own temper to flare in response to her hostility. I know Vivien's only being snippy because she's afraid for me.

"Dammit," she snarls, slamming her head back against the head rest. "Why me?"

"Because you're a feral, Vivien," I explain. "They want to perpetuate the species, and the best way to ensure that is to breed with another feral."

"But my dad wasn't even a mutant," she protests desperately.

I know she's trying to find a loophole in her brothers' reasoning, but of course it doesn't matter. I'm not the one who needs convincing.

"And the fact that you and your brothers are all ferals is astonishing because of that," I reply gently. "Your mother must have been class four or five, otherwise you would've been born an utter weakling. You're obviously not, but if your mother had reproduced with another feral you'd be much stronger than you are. Your brothers don't want to chance weakening the strength of the next generation further."

Vivien slumps over in defeat. She can't argue against this madness, no matter how hard she tries. "What are we going to do, Hank?" she whispers. Her gaze meets mine, seeking any reassurance I can give.

I sigh.

Several outcomes run through my mind, and none of them are particularly optimistic.

Even the best case scenario (for the two of us, at least) would be for Sabretooth to realize that Fox and Jackal are trying to double-cross him before they manage to kill me off and to then confront them about it. I'm sure at least one combatant wouldn't survive that fight, and that would go far in evening the odds in our favor. It would be even better if he took out both Babineaux brothers and then rode off into the sunset with Lucia, leaving my mate and I to live out our lives without fear...

The fact that I'm hoping for other people to die- no matter how despicable all three of those feral males are- and pushing Sabretooth on Lucia makes me sick to my stomach. I don't want to wish ill on anyone, but I desperately want to live with Vivien, to finally have a chance to just be happy without having an ax hanging over our heads.

"We just have to hope for the best, Vivien," I finally say. "It's what we've been doing, and it's been working out just fine so far."
"Hope? Hope?" she asks incredulously. "That's your plan?"

"I happen to recall you telling me it's pointless to actually make plans, because they never work out for us anyway," I remark. Then I let out a weary sigh. "But I don't see how we can do anything else in this situation, sweetheart."

Vivien is silent for a long moment, contemplating our horrible situation, before she ruefully shakes her head and mutters, "looks like we might end up like Romeo and Juliet after all."

"How so?" I ask, though I think I already know the answer.

If I'm Romeo, and she's Juliet, that makes Vivien's other "suitors" (for lack of a better term) representative of Count Paris, the man Juliet was almost forced to marry. And we all know what she did to avoid that...

Sure enough, Vivien declares, "because if they kill you, they're never taking me alive."

I want to automatically protest the idea- just the thought of a world without her, even if I'm not here to experience it, is deeply upsetting.

But I also understand her reasoning, and I can't say I wouldn't do the same were I in her shoes should that terrible situation come to pass. If Vivien says she'd rather be dead than to be used as a brood mare by her brothers and/or that miscreant Sabretooth, over and over again, I'm not going to argue.

What sort of life would that be?

"Ok," I agree quietly.

She seems surprised by my calm acceptance. "Ok?" she repeats dubiously.

We're at a stop light, so I look over at her. "I understand your feelings on the matter," I explain. "It's your body, Vivien, and they have no right to force you into becoming some sort of walking womb and pretend you're not a person. But I hope it wouldn't come to that extreme, should they kill me. I hope you would be able to escape and continue to help the X-Men, even if I'm gone. To live your life, and hopefully find happiness in some way."

It costs me quite a bit to tell her these things. I don't want to contemplate Vivien spending the years that are supposed to be ours alone, without me. We're supposed to have adorable elf-eared babies and grow old together...

But as much as it hurts, I still mean it.

Vivien's only reply is to stubbornly shake her head and face forward again. A resolute, unwavering expression I'm quite familiar with graces her countenance.

Just like Juliet, it seems my love is determined not to live without her Romeo.
"Are you serious?" Alex demands.

"Yes," I calmly reply, "We're serious. Erik plans to make his move on Friday night, along with a group of new recruits that I theorize are there to distract us from disabling his device."

It's late the next morning, and I just finished relaying our newly-gathered information to Charles and Alex in the former's office. Since Alex took the chair across from Charles at the desk, I'm leaning against the wall next to the windowsill where Vivien is currently perched.

Upon arriving back at mansion late last night- or, more accurately, early this morning- my mate and I agreed to share the intelligence with the X-Men's nominal and field leaders first thing.

And then we fell asleep tangled in each other's arms, clinging to one another in desperation after such a roller coaster of a night. First seeing Raven, followed by all the jealousy, finally discovering the extent of Erik's plan, and then finding out about the Babineaux brothers' scheme for their sister... To say that it was an exhausting evening would be an understatement.

"How'd you find out about this?" Alex asks. He looks a little suspicious.

I shuffle my feet and glance at Vivien, all but biting my tongue to keep myself from blurting out, "it was her idea!"

She rolls her eyes and frowns at my guilty behavior. "Hank and I went out on the town last night," she replies, "to Club X. Raven Darkholme popped into the grounds for a minute to let us know Magneto's been going there-"

Charles winces, clearly hurt by the fact that his sister visited the mansion without bothering to make an effort to see him. I feel pity for him and his wounded optimism, but at this point I'm so disillusioned that I expect nothing less from Raven.

"-And we were able to ask around and find out pretty easily. Magneto's not keeping the timing a secret. He wants an audience."

"So let me get this straight," Alex says through gritted teeth. "You went to a place you knew Mags has been hanging out, without telling anyone here."

I sigh- I had a bad feeling that would be the point he fixated on.

"Pretty much," Vivien agrees. She appears to be completely unapologetic.

Our teammate is gripping the armrests of his chair so tightly his knuckles are white- I think it's an effort to restrain himself from punching something.

Oh dear.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he snaps. "Do you have any idea what could have happened?"

"No, of course not," my mate retorts sarcastically. "I'm blissfully unaware that I have a big fat
target on my back. I walked around the whole time just hoping trouble would find me. Damned if it didn't, though. Maybe next time I should try harder."

The ugly expression on Alex's face tells me it's time for me to intervene, considering how Charles is still lost in Raven-land. Or maybe he wants Alex, as the team's field leader, to handle this.

The younger man's mouth opens, ready to make some sort of angry reply- "What Vivien is trying to say," I interject tactfully, "is that we were aware of the risk and decided that it was worth taking a chance, especially if only two of us went. We were careful, Alex."

"Would it have killed you to let us know, though?"

\textit{Ok, you have me there.}

I give my mate a helpless look.

"Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission," Vivien offers haughtily.

\textit{That's... not helpful, darling.}

"Yeah, but you're not asking for either," Alex counters.

She grins impudently. "Not really, no," she concedes. "But would you really have let us go?"

"Probably not," he admits reluctantly, after a long moment's thought. Noting Vivien's vindicated expression, he rushes to add, "but for good reason. It was way too risky for you guys to do that."

"I'm not above taking some risks if it means nailing Magneto," she replies, shrugging.

I'll give the man credit here, for not spewing the litany of curses that are currently swirling around in his head. Alex glowers at us both, his gaze shifting back and forth like he's deciding who he's more angry at- Vivien, for her impenitent attitude, or me, for not- what's the phrase?- \textit{keeping my woman in line}?

For her own part, my mate is looking at me with a wary, "\textit{I-told-you-so}" expression that clearly says this sort of situation is exactly why she didn't want to be a part of a team in the first place.

\textit{I should have just stayed in bed today}, I think grumpily, eyeing the two of them. \textit{Talk about a rock and a hard place.}

But then Alex goes for the jugular, figuratively-speaking. "And you're ok with putting Beast in unnecessary danger, too, Vixen?" he queries.

Though he asks the question with the air of someone who already knows the answer, he doesn't yet realize just \textit{how} touchy a subject that is for Vivien right now. We didn't inform him of that particular facet of the Brotherhood's plan.

Which is why my wife's reactive snarl comes as such a surprise to him. His eyes practically pop out of his head at the sight of her bared fangs and the guttural sound issuing from her throat.

"Like \textit{hell} I am," she growls. "You-"

\textit{Oh my stars and garters.}

"Vivien," I say sharply.
She glares at me, but I only return her gaze steadily. A moment of silent communication passes between us.

"I'm hungry," she announces abruptly, hopping off the windowsill. "Excuse me."

I catch her hand as she passes by, taking comfort in the way she returns the pressure when I gently squeeze. "I'll meet you in the kitchen," I murmur.

Vivien nods and moves to leave-

But then she turns back and presses a quick kiss to my lips. Almost like she's afraid her opportunities for doing so are limited.

The thought causes a sharp pain in my chest.

"For the record, I volunteered to go with her last night," I tell the other two, once my mate closes the office door behind her. "Even though she didn't particularly want me to come. Vivien still prefers to operate by herself, you know."

Alex grunts irritably. "Great teammate material," he mutters.

"She isn't used to it yet," I explain defensively. "She's used to relying only on herself."

"You're telling me she didn't even depend on her brothers, before?"

I wince- Vivien's brothers are definitely a touchy subject, what with the ongoing murder and incest plot.

*It just goes to show that she was right to never fully trust them.*

My reaction does not go unnoticed.

"There's something you haven't told us," Charles observes, finally breaking his long, watchful silence. "What is it, Hank?"

"Do you recall how angry Fox and Jackal were because I stole away the only feral female they knew?" I begin. "Well-

My companions listen intently as I tell them the details of the Babineaux brothers' plan, their disgust increasing with every moment. And of course my explanation must entail a short foray into feral physiology, which doesn't help matters.

"I'm learning way more about your sex life than I ever wanted to know," Alex comments when I'm done.

"I don't particularly relish violating my own privacy," I retort stiffly. "Or my wife's."

He snorts- I suppose because he thinks I'm still too uptight. "So," he says, looking at Charles. "What are we going to do? Have Beast and Vixen sit this one out?"

I begin to protest, but Charles beats me to it. "I don't see a point in that," the older man replies. "That's just running from the problem, not solving it."

*And he would know a little something about running from his problems.*

"Besides," I add, "you need me there to disable the device."
"And Vixen?"

It's my turn to snort derisively. "I'm not going to even dignify that with a response."

"Ok then, fine," Alex snaps. He doesn't like problems that don't have clear-cut solutions. "What do we do? Just stick to the plan like nothing's changed?"

"I think that's our only option," Charles gravely agrees.

Alex still looks dissatisfied, but what else can we do?

"Just promise me one thing," I murmur finally.

"What?"

"If anything happens to me, promise me you'll take care of her," I plead. "Don't let them..."

I trail off, swallow thickly.

"She deserves the right to choose her own life."

The other two nod, and with that assurance I hurriedly take my leave.
Tick Tock

When you're bored every minute seems to last an hour, and when you're enjoying yourself it seems to speed by in a rush.

But an important exam, a trip to the dentist, a family reunion with relatives you hate... Have you ever noticed how time slips away, like water through your fingers, when a dreaded event approaches?

It seems like in no time at all you're being forced to sit down across from Aunt Marge at a family reunion, but your escape is an eternity away.

That's how it feels for me in the week preceding Erik's attack.

Just when I want time to move slowly, it speeds up to an unbearable rate. Minutes, hours, days- I want to hold on to them, to savor every second I might have left with Vivien. I want to enjoy what little time there could be remaining to us.

Because in the back of my mind I can't help thinking that these might be the last few days of my life. Fox and Jackal intend to capture Vivien, but the only thing keeping her from being of any "use" to them is me. I know, without a doubt, that I'm going to be a prime target in the upcoming confrontation.

As much as I try to be an optimist, I can't help the fear that grips my heart. But not for my own sake- I'm terrified of what will happen to my Vivien should her brothers' plan succeed.

The same sense of foreboding hangs over her as well, though she doesn't say anything outright.

There's a hint of hysteria in her laughter these days and there are times when I catch her staring at me, like she's trying to memorize every last detail of my face. At night Vivien clings to me, even in sleep.

Neither of us speaks of our fears aloud because there's nothing we can really say on the subject- except for, perhaps, false offers of reassurance. But neither of us is much good at lying, and especially not to each other. How can we tell each other that everything will be alright when we don't really know?

All we have is hope.

July 3, 1975

We're laying in bed, a tangle of naked limbs and musky sheets, and trying not to think about how this may be the last night we ever have together when Vivien drops a bombshell on me.

"Hank?" she asks. She lifts her head off of my chest and peers up at me in the dark.

"Hmm?" I murmur lazily, playing with her hair. It's a complete mess right now, but I happen to like it that way. Or should I say, I like making it that way?

_I think you catch my meaning._
"I have to tell you something," she says, and she sounds a little nervous.

My afterglow dissipates slightly. Usually nothing good comes of such a statement.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"I think..." Vivien takes a deep breath. "I think I might be pregnant."

Well I definitely wasn't expecting that.

Several emotions sweep over me all at once with the force of a tidal wave, a hurricane force wind. Joy, trepidation, anxiety, outright fear... I feel all of it and more at the thought of Vivien possibly carrying my child right now.

Me, a father? I'm going to be a dad? How did this even happen?

Ok, I suppose I know how it happened, but I'm still shocked.

While we haven't exactly been careful, we also didn't think it was necessary. It's difficult- very difficult- for ferals to conceive when the females aren't in heat, and those only happen three times a year. It's part of the reason our population numbers are so low, along with all the other factors. Since Vivien isn't due for her next cycle for another month, we thought we were safe from unplanned pregnancy...

But maybe not.

I'm really going to be a father?

God knows I want us to have children, but the fact that I have a big target on my back makes me afraid that we won't get the chance. This isn't exactly the best time to start a family, what with the possible imminent death hanging over me and all.

It reminds me of that old saying, how life is what happens when you're making other plans.

"A-are you sure?" I sputter.

Vivien shakes her head. "No, I'm not sure," she admits.

As much as I understand on a logical level that it would be better if she isn't pregnant, I still feel a pang of disappointment. What we hope for isn't always logical, is it?

I turn on my side to face her. "What makes you think you could be, then?" I manage to ask calmly.

"Little things," she replies. "Even though it's not the right time for it I'm cramping a little, my boobs are hurting, I had some spotting yesterday and this morning... I don't know, Hank."

She looks embarrassed, a rare occurrence for Vivien McCoy.

"Maybe it's just wishful thinking."

I lean in and inhale deeply, breathing in her scent.

My nose trails from my mate's ear down to her shoulder, trying to discern any difference in that flowery-sunshine aroma that is so uniquely Vivien. Surely I would be able to smell a change?

"It's faint, but there might be something," I tell her. "Of course, that may be wishful thinking on my
Would it be better or worse for Vivien to be carrying my baby, should I die tomorrow night? From the look in her eyes right now I know what she believes.

*Oh, darling...*

Even if the thought of Vivien raising our child all alone is almost unbearable, I have to admit to myself that I hope having a piece of me live on would be a comfort to her.

If she manages to stay out of the Brotherhood's clutches, that is.

I cough. "Do you want me to give you a blood test?"

"No," Vivien replies decisively. "At least, not until Saturday. Maybe Sunday."

In other words, she wants to wait until *after* we (hopefully) stop Erik to find out. She suspects I might try to convince her to stay behind tomorrow night if we discover she's pregnant.

She's not wrong.

"Vivien-"

She shakes her head. "If- if something happens to you, I don't want you to go out with that on your conscience," she says. The vulnerability in her eyes tears at my heart- I know it kills her to even mention such a thing aloud, after all the time we've spent avoiding the subject of my possible demise. "We'll find out once we're through this."

"Ok," I finally agree. Though I can think of several reasons why it would be better to know, I don't want to spend this night arguing with her.

*We'll find out on Saturday,* I tell myself firmly.

So instead I kiss my way down Vivien's front, nuzzling as I go. And for a while I just lay there with my head pressed against her stomach while she strokes my hair and I try not to think about how I may never get to meet the baby possibly growing inside her.

Eventually we make love again, and once Vivien falls asleep in the languorous aftermath I slip out of bed and sit at my desk.

For a long time I stare down at the piece of paper in front of me, wondering how to word what I need to say. I want to leave something for Vivien just in case... Well, just in case.

Finally, I begin to write:

"*Dear Vivien,*

*If you're reading this it means I didn't make it for one reason or another. As such, I truly hope you never have to read this letter. But no matter how inadequate this is, I still feel the need to write it should the unthinkable happen.*

*I never wanted to leave you this way, but if I do... tell our child I loved them before they were even born, and I'm sorry I couldn't be there for them.*

*I love you, Vivien. I love you with all of my heart, with every fiber of my being. I have plenty of*
regrets, but believe me when I say that you, my darling, are not one of them. You gave me the happiest days of my life, and my deepest sorrow is that I didn't have more time with you. The only solace is that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you, and I did.

I love you.

Forever Yours,

Hank"
In This Together

July 4, 1975

 Independence Day, 1975 dawns warm and bright. As far as possible last mornings on earth go, it's a nice one.

Since it's a holiday Vivien has no classes to teach, and we spend much of the morning just laying in bed together, savoring each other's presence.

Around lunch time we rouse ourselves enough to go have a picnic on the grounds. No one bothers us as I lay there with my head in Vivien's lap, listening to her read to me while she runs her claws through my hair. I unabashedly stare at her, memorizing every freckle on her nose, every gold facet of her hazel eyes.

So peaceful and relaxed. All in all, it's a perfect day with my love.

My only complaint is that I wish I knew whether I would have more with her.

Before I know it Charles is calling us all down to the basement for our final briefing before we leave. I stand next to Vivien, of course, so close that our hands surreptitiously brush against each other without anyone noticing.

And then our mentor gravely surveys us, his X-Men. We're all in uniform and ready to go.

"I won't deceive you in this," Charles says sincerely. "This will be the most difficult, dangerous task I've ever asked of you, and we cannot allow ourselves to fail. Too much is at stake. We cannot allow Erik to succeed, or else millions of people will die-"

"No pressure," Warren murmurs.

"Indeed.

"He's spent over a year planning this, so we have to know he won't let go of it easily. There will be some unfamiliar faces out there tonight, mercenary mutants who make a life out of killing and brutality. I beg of you to remember your training, and make it home safely," Charles concludes. "Good luck."

The other X-Men nod, their expressions steely and intent.

Most of them are just kids. They could die tonight, I think to myself with a pang. But they're the only hope we have to stop the Brotherhood.

Everyone else starts to make their way to the Blackbird, but I linger behind with Charles. This is my best chance of making sure my mate gets the letter I wrote to her last night.

"If anything happens to me, please give this to Vivien," I tell him quietly, holding out the missive. "And- and please, remember your promise. Keep her safe for me."

He looks startled. "Hank-"

I shake my head. "I don't plan on dying today," I assure him. "But it doesn't hurt to prepare for the
worst, even when you're hoping for the best."

Charles manages to find a kind smile for me, though I can see the worry behind his eyes. "Ever practical, Hank. It's that sort of thinking that's gotten us this far, hasn't it?" he murmurs wryly. I think he's referring to everything we went through over the past decade. And then he adds, almost on impulse, "you know, there is no way I could have built this school- or this team- without you."

In those words I can hear his thanks- his thanks that I never left him over the years, that I stood by him through all the hardships and pain. Even if I hadn't asked, Charles would take care of my wife as a matter of course in honor of my loyalty.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Charles."

We shake hands solemnly, and then I head for the jet where the other X-Men are already waiting.

As I pass by her seat I notice that Vivien hasn't fastened her harness yet- she's too busy curiously looking around the interior of the Blackbird. Belatedly, I realize she's never actually been in here before.

"What do you think?" I ask as I kneel down and start to buckle her in.

"I think it's amazing, of course," Vivien replies, clearly awestruck. "You're amazing. God, I hope our kids have your brains."

There's a hint of wistfulness in her smile, an emotion that I'm sure is reflected in my own expression even as I laugh and flush at her comment.

"And your musical talent," I add, kissing her gently. "I love you, Vivien."

"I love you too, Hank."

A supersonic jet like the Blackbird makes the trip to the City from Westchester in less than twenty minutes. Upon our approach I switch the aircraft into stealth mode, making us mostly invisible as I do a fly-by of Liberty Island.

"Looks like they're gathering at the base of the statue," Alex comments from the copilot's chair. "Blocking the entrance, of course."

"How many?" Sam asks. He's sitting in the seat behind Alex.

"About thirty."

I wince- even if not all of them are combatants, thirty against eight are still some long odds.

"Hey, can this thing hover?" Vivien calls out from the back.

"Yes," I reply, with just a hint of pride. Though I can't say I much appreciate my invention being referred to as a "thing."

"I bet they put the machine in the torch, and that's why they're guarding the entrance to the stairs," she reasons. "Could you get us close enough for Havok or Cyclops to destroy it with their laser beams from the plane?"
"They're plasma blasts," Scott chimes in, slightly miffed.

"Whatever."

"The idea has merit, but we can't know if the Brotherhood rigged it with explosives as insurance against tampering like that," I conclude.

"Then how about Angel-"

The jet's controls suddenly begin to shudder in my hands, forcing me to fight to keep the plane steady. Despite my best efforts the Blackbird starts to careen drunkenly through the air, causing a few yelps of surprise behind me.

"Beast?"

"It's Magneto," I explain tersely. The jet's cloaking device has no effect on a man who can sense metal. "Looks like he noticed us."

Sure enough, I can see him levitating in the midst of his cronies as he fights me for control of the plane.

"Everybody get ready to bail out," Alex orders flatly. "He wants us to bring the fight to him, we'll do it."

I don't particularly relish the idea of entering this engagement on Eriks' terms, but as the Blackbird's altitude drops lower and lower I have to admit we don't really have a choice.

"Storm, lay down some cover."

The weather-manipulator obliges our leader, sending out a thick layer of fog over the island.

"Beast, you need to find that device and disable it as fast as you can," Alex tells me. "The rest of us will cover you."

I don't protest, mainly because I'm trying to land the jet in one piece now that Erik's stopped interfering. But I know Vivien's not going to approve of me going in alone, not one bit.

That's why I'm not surprised when she stays right by my side after we land and all of us disembark. The rest of the X-Men immediately fan out in preparation to meet the Brotherhood and their accomplices.

But not her.

Vivien walks a few steps ahead of me and glances back over her shoulder expectantly, grinning. "Ready?"

I hesitate, feeling torn.

Ahead of us the swirling mist begins to clear just a bit, making it so Alex and Scott's plasma blasts are visible, as is Storm's lightning.

The battle has begun. And it looks like the "spectators" did feel the need to get involved in the action.

I'm guessing that Erik probably already had time to deliver some sort of rousing, bigoted speech before we got here that stirred up the masses and predisposed these mutants into hating our human-
loving ways.

Or something along those lines.

*Nice to know he can be depended on for something, at least.*

I feel a swell of pity for all of them. They're all just cannon fodder to Erik.

"Come on, Hank," Vivien urges impatiently. "You know you're going to need me."

I cringe at her words, however true they may be—when it comes to evasion and getting into places undetected, she has no equal.

But I'm also aware that I'm a prime target during this confrontation. After all, Erik knows I'm the one who will be sent to disable the mutagen device, and then there's the added bonus of Fox and Jackal trying to kill me.

Vivien would probably be much, much safer if she stayed away from me.

*But that's also been true of basically our entire relationship,* I wryly admit to myself.

I sigh and step closer to her. "Lead the way, sweetheart."

*We're in this together.*
Vivien doesn't go straight for the statue's entrance.

Instead she leads me along Liberty Island's perimeter, using darkness as a cover while we scout out the best route to the top. We encounter a couple sentries- all strangers unknown to me- but my lethal lover knocks them out from a distance using her knives as well-aimed projectiles.

"Is there a back entrance?" I murmur. It'd be infinitely preferable to avoid the messy fight occurring in the front if possible.

"Doesn't look like it," Vivien replies, peering at the base. "But that's ok. Come on."

She sprints across the grass and makes an impressive leap that gets her almost to the first level of Lady Liberty's pedestal. Without pausing she then swings her legs up in a fluid motion and then stops, waiting for me at the top in a crouching position.

"Show off," I mutter grumpily.

I follow with decidedly less grace.

Though we hug the wall, we still move relatively quickly to the front where the entrance is once more. Our vantage point from there gives us a full view of the fighting going on below us without attracting much attention.

Even in the face of such overwhelming odds, the X-Men are holding their own.

Alex and Scott are cutting through wide swaths of their opponents with their plasma blasts. Warren and Sam are tag-teaming Erik, and Jean is battling Scarlet Witch.

The latter contest has already carved out huge pieces of the island's lawn, as Jean hurls bolts of telekinetic energy and the other mutant uses her hexes to avoid them. Wanda's defensive actions actually result in her taking out some of her own cohorts with the deflections.

As we watch, she gathers up a momentous effort to redirect a blast straight back at Jean. The redhead girl brushes it aside like a troublesome fly.

A troublesome fly that takes out a sizable chunk of the statue's base when it hits it.

Vivien lets out a low whistle. "Glad I'm on her side now," she says.

"I'm sure she feels the same way about you."

Meanwhile, Storm has been scattering mutants left and right with her lightning bolts, causing her adversaries to flee from her like she's some sort of vengeful weather goddess.

One combatant, braver and more athletic than the rest, manages to dodge the bursts and get under Storm's guard.

*My stars and garters, it's Lucia,* I realize immediately.

I'm vaguely disappointed to see that she's clearly succumbed to Erik's militant rhetoric, if her
actions are anything to go by. I feel a strange sort of regret, remembering our pleasant conversation at Club X but knowing Lucia's fallen in with a man who believes humans are the enemy. I suppose Erik's words resonated with her life experiences, and now...

She slashes at Storm with her claws, but the weather-manipulating mutant easily recovers to make an impressive block and manages to then grab Lucia's head and bring it forward in order to slam her knee into the feral's forehead.

"I'd like to think you taught her that," I tell Vivien, pointing to the white-haired teenager. "She's definitely not flat-footed now, is she?"

"Well done, Storm," my wife murmurs proudly. "You're a lady and a scholar."


Vivien gives me a radiant smile. "God, I love you," she says, impulsively kissing me. "Now come on, baby. We've got a city to save."

I follow her with some trepidation. While I caught sight of Quicksilver engaging in a game of cat-and-mouse with the Summers boys and Mastermind has already been knocked out cold, I've seen no sign of Fox and Jackal out here.

Or Sabretooth, for that matter. So I think some concern is completely justified.

There are two mutants guarding the entrance, but we catch them unawares from our position on the high ground of the pedestal's next level. Vivien takes out one and I the other with flying tackles from above. After that it's easy to slip inside the museum.

We then move cautiously, purposefully past the exhibits towards the stairs. No one else has tried to stop us yet, even though we've almost made it.

*This is too easy,* I think grimly. The lack of resistance is making me nervous.

And with good reason.

Some sort of sixth sense tips me off to the danger at just the right moment, prodding my protective instincts into overdrive.

At the exact same moment Fox jumps down from the museum's second floor landing, his clawed hands reaching for Vivien, I grab my mate around the waist and spring several feet away to relative safety.

The feral mutant snarls as his surprise attack comes to nothing. His landing- more like a tumble to the floor- isn't exactly dignified, either. He clambers to his feet, spitting like an angry cat.

Before any of us can make our next move, Sabretooth suddenly pops up from behind a display like the world's scariest Jack-in-the-box.

Vivien promptly hooks her arm in mine and uses my body weight as a pivot point to swing around and kick him- *hard*- in the face. She releases her grip on my arm and twists to land behind me in a slight crouch as her enemy stumbles backwards from the blow before recovering his balance.

And now my mate and I stand back-to-back, up against two snarling ferals who want to destroy us. No words need be said as they stare us down, ready to attack.
I really don't like this.

Right now I'm facing Fox, who I'm confident (but not overly so- I know cockiness can be detrimental to your health) that I can handle.

But that means that Vivien- my tiny, possibly pregnant wife- is currently squared up on a serial-killing rapist who is over a foot taller and almost two hundred pounds heavier than she is.

 Seriously, David and Goliath have nothing on this match-up. Darling, do you need a sling-shot?

I'm terribly afraid for my wife, my mate- my love's safety.

Because that's what this woman is to me, no matter what the circumstance.

Back when Vivien was still in the Brotherhood we promised each other that we would separate ourselves from our alter-egos while not on missions. Vivien and Hank were never enemies, though for a while Beast and Vixen were. We disconnected ourselves accordingly, with general success.

And now that she's changed sides I know that Alex has tried to drum into our heads that when we're out in the field as X-Men Vivien and I are still just Vixen and Beast, merely teammates. Not a married couple. Not mates.

But to hell with that sort of thinking.

Vivien is Vixen, I am Beast, and there's no separating myself from the desperate need to protect the woman who is to me the most important person on this planet.

I shift my weight, trying to place my foot behind me in just the right position so that I could simultaneously turn and face Sabretooth. That way Vivien could then slide around and face her brother (who I fervently believe she has the skills to beat), and neither of us would have to present an unprotected back to our opponents.

But when I try to telegraph this intention to my mate she doesn't budge.

Fox gives me a vicious smile as I make a more insistent attempt, placing my hand on her waist and giving a gentle nudge.

I know what he's thinking- this match up favors his objective, in his eyes. Fox doesn't really need to beat me, he surmises, he just needs to keep me busy until Sabretooth can subdue Vivien. Then the two males can team up and dispose of me as they see fit, before making the rest of my lover's life a living hell.

But Vivien still doesn't respond to my silent entreaty.

"Vivien-" I breathe urgently, not taking my eyes off of her brother.

"Do you trust me?" she whispers. I can tell from the way the words come out that she's baring her fangs at Sabretooth, even though I obviously can't see her face. A low growl is starting in the back of her throat.

What kind of question is that? Oh, I have a bad feeling about this.

"Yes," I honestly reply.

"Good."
And then my mate launches herself at the hulking feral male.
Principles Be Damned

Oh my stars and garters.

I can't help myself- I turn around, absolutely horrified and heedless to anything else, to watch my wife make a baseball slide towards Sabretooth. She stabs him in the back of the knee as she passes by.

His leg buckles as she regains her feet, this time to knife him in the kidney-

Some glimmer of self-preservation takes hold just then, forcing me to turn towards Fox, who's taken advantage of my inattention and made a flying leap for me.

His face is only a foot away from mine when I make a quick uppercut into his jaw, knocking him backwards. He tries to kick me, but I use my opposable foot to grab his leg and fling him across the room.

My focus again goes back to Vivien, darting in and out of range to inflict heavily bleeding wounds to her opponent. Sabretooth can't quite keep up to get his hands on her, and is probably loathe to give a severe wound to his future "baby mama" anyway.

I realize then why she chose to go for the bigger male.

Vivien is small and fast, able to quickly dole out quite a bit of damage with her adamantium knives without taking any in return. Fox, in his hopes that Sabretooth would easily beat her, definitely underestimated not only his sister's fighting abilities but also her ferocity. It's clear that she intends for me to disable her brother before we then turn our joint attention to the older feral to finish him off.

Turned the tables on them, did she?

Not that that fixes the heart attack I'm having, watching this confrontation. Vivien isn't holding anything back as she stabs and slashes at her opponent with her knives. I wonder if there's a way I can help her-

But just then Fox recovers from his aerial adventure across the room to make a fresh assault against me.

I easily duck and roll forward as he sails overhead.

It's both a fortuitous and unfortunate reaction, but I didn't really have a choice in the matter. In the moment before I moved I felt Sabretooth at my back, much too close for comfort. He somehow managed to maneuver himself between Vivien and I.

It's good that he couldn't reach out and kill me, but now I'm cut off from Vivien with both her brother and Sabretooth between us. Fox regains his feet, looking rather pleased at this unexpected turn of events.

I freeze, trying to predict what will happen next.

"You're one tough little frail," Sabretooth grumbles. Though I can't see his expression, I can picture
some sort of lascivious, evil grin on his face. I notice that the wounds Vivien managed to inflict on him are healing before our eyes- his healing factor is very advanced then. Great, just great. "I like that."

_Hey, that's my tough little frail you're talking to._

Vivien sneers at him. "I don't give a shit what you like, asshole," she retorts heatedly.

Sabretooth just laughs. "Oh, but you will, kitten," he says. Again with the suggestive, taunting undertone. "Once we kill the fur ball-"

*I'm guessing he means me.*

She waves her hand dismissively. "I've heard all about this stupid plan. Did it ever occur to you that Fox and Jackal were just using you to kill my mate for them?" Vivien snaps. "You think they'd be just fine letting you have two females, just because you're so big and bad?"

"Of course not," the feral replies smugly. "I ain't stupid, frail. I've been planning on doing this anyway, but might as well get it over with. Maybe you'd like to watch, huh?"

And before any of us can react, before I can even move a muscle, Sabretooth reaches around, grabs Fox by the neck, and proceeds to rip his throat out with one hand.

Blood immediately gushes from the wound, which is obviously fatal.

For a long moment I can only stand there, frozen by horror, while Fox clutches at the gaping hole where his larynx used to be. He manages to stagger around so he's facing Vivien as he collapses to the floor.

As he falls my mate lets out an agonized wail that I can only describe as the sound an injured animal makes. Her face is a mask of surprise and anguish as she watches her brother bleed out in front of her.

"Just the other pipsqueak and the fur ball to go now," Sabretooth boasts. He sounds almost gleeful at the thought of two more murders to commit, the sick bastard.

Despite his words, the expression on Vivien's face immediately goads me into action.

It's as simple as a mathematical equation. Two plus two is four. Mate is upset, go to mate and try to give her the support she needs right now- because in all honesty, Vivien looks like her knees are about to give out from the shock she just received.

I'm so focused on her distress that I forget about Sabretooth- incredibly stupid, I know.

He launches himself at me with a triumphant snarl.

My dodge is unsuccessful- he tackles me, slamming my head against the floor and growling in my face, fangs bared. The feral then tries to pull the same maneuver he just used against Fox on me, but I manage to grab his wrist to stop him from ripping out my own throat.

I'm working my legs free- if I can get a hand-foot around him I have a chance- but Sabretooth leans down to try to tear my jugular out with his teeth-

And then suddenly there's a knife sticking out of the side of his head.

In any other situation the astonishment on his face would be comical, but certainly not in this case.
His mouth goes wide with surprise, even as the life fades from his eyes and he slumps over.

I scramble out from under his body as Vivien summons her knife back to her, her expression grim. She's shaking with overwrought emotion, and she won't look me in the eyes.

Out of shame, possibly, for what she just did? Does she think I can truly be angry with her for saving my life in this circumstance, no matter what her method was?

The X-Men are supposed to be against killing people, but when it came down to choosing between her newfound ideals and me, Vivien picked me. Her choice lay with her heart.

If I'm honest with myself, I know now that I'd do the same thing if the situation were reversed. Principles be damned.

"Nice throw," I offer, approaching cautiously. "Thank you, for saving me."

She nods shortly.

I glance back at Sabretooth when I reach my wife's side. "Do you think he's really dead?"

Because after seeing how quickly the feral healed from all of the other wounds she inflicted, I wouldn't be surprised if he could recover from this, too. I'd be fascinated by Sabretooth's mutation if I weren't so repulsed by him as a person.

"I don't care if he is," my mate hisses. "He was trying to kill you, and he- my brother-"

Her voice cuts off with a gasp. I immediately pull her into my arms, trying to soothe her.

Despite everything, I know she will need to mourn the loss of her brother. If not the twisted creature he became, at least the boy she grew up with before life mangled his soul beyond repair.

"Is he really-?" Vivien whispers, gesturing vaguely towards Fox even though her face is buried in my chest. "Can you do something?"

I know there's nothing I can do, but I also know I have to make the token effort to at least check for her sake.

Squaring my shoulders, I step away from Vivien and go to kneel by her brother's corpse.

And it is definitely a corpse at this point, upon closer inspection. The blood pooled underneath and around him is already congealing, turning the gaping wound on Fox's throat to black. His eyes-their color so similar to Vivien's- are utterly blank and glassy.

I suppress a shudder and reach out to gently close them.

Most days I'm not sure if I believe in God, but right now I can't help offering up a prayer to whatever powers that be in the universe that I will never see my mate's eyes so wide and unseeing.

"I'm sorry, Vivien," I murmur. "He's gone."
A lesser woman would completely break down at this new development, but not her.

Vivien takes a deep breath, nods, and appears to pull herself together. I can practically see her wadding up all of her emotions and stuffing them into a corner to deal with later.

"We still have a job to do," she says, her voice carefully monotone. "We better head out, just in case tall, dark and scary decides to resurrect himself."

"Ok," I agree- because I can't really think of what else to say.

There are three hundred fifty-four steps inside the Statue of Liberty. I know this, because I've been counting as I followed Vivien up to the crown.

She throws up a hand in warning before we come into sight of the observation deck, a plea for me to be still. Both of us listen with all our might, but we hear nothing.

Still, Vivien gestures for me to remain a few steps below while she goes up to check it out first.

I give her a look that tells her just what I think of that, but my wife's stony-eyed glare forces me to relent. I wait on tenterhooks while she disappears from sight, moving as silently as a shadow with her knives at the ready.

Thankfully she doesn't keep me waiting long.

Within a minute or two she reappears and gives me the go-ahead to follow her.

One of the panes of glass closest to Lady Liberty's raised arm is broken, but otherwise there's no sign of disturbance here.

"Looks like it is in the torch," Vivien explains to me quietly, pointing to the opening. "I caught sight of Myles, but I'm not sure if he's alone out there. He's been stripping off the flame part of the torch itself, so the machine's exposed now. We won't be able to come at it from inside."

"Not much room for maneuvering," I note grimly. "Or places to hide."

"So what do we do?"

"I don't particularly like the idea of storming the castle," I muse.

I have another idea, but I'm afraid to broach the subject out of concern for both Vivien's physical and mental well-being. Thankfully, she does it for me.

"How about... how about I go talk to Myles?" she offers hesitantly. "Distract him so you can get into position? Then you can jump him."

I hate the idea of letting Vivien go speak to her younger brother- her insane younger brother- by herself.

It's not safe, on any level, and on top of that I'm sure the painful knowledge of everything that's
happened weighs heavily on my mate. The last time she encountered Myles she ended up minus a couple internal organs. This isn't going to be a happy reunion by any means.

"Are you sure you're ok with that?"

Vivien grins ruefully. "Are you?" she retorts, her expression knowing.

"Not really," I admit. "But..."

She nods. "I'm pretty sure I can handle him."

I still have misgivings, but I nod in agreement.

With one last kiss, she heads out onto the statue's arm. I watch, full of trepidation, as Vivien moves swiftly across the narrow passage- only a few hundred feet up in the air- to make a running leap at the torch. She lands easily, perching like a bird on the structure's rim.

It's too far away to hear much of what she's saying to her brother, thanks to the inevitable breeze this high up, but I can see Vivien making a placating gesture towards Myles. I can tell that she's doing some fast-talking from how quickly her lips are moving.

Feeling virtuous, I wait for a grand total of thirty seconds before following after her- and trust me, it's a struggle to wait even that long. Jackal is barely visible to me from my vantage point, but I can practically smell the crazy wafting off of him, even from here.

For once being blue is paying off, I admit to myself as I ghost along after my mate. In the deep shadows cast by Lady Liberty's torch my blue hide basically fades into the copper's patina.

Once I'm directly underneath I pause to assess the situation above.

"We only wanted to keep all of us together," Jackal is saying, his tone at once pleading and defensive. "Forever. You, me, James, and our babies."

That's just revolting. Let's make the family tree look more like a brier thicket.

But the young man is also so clearly deluded that I can't help feeling pity for him.

"I have a mate, Myles," Vivien explains, clearly straining for patience. "I love him. I'm his, and he's mine."

"Beast took you from us," her brother growls.

"If anyone took me from you, it was Magneto," she retorts heatedly. "You and James- I lost you as soon as you started thinking of humans as lesser beings. And then to make it worse you killed all of my friends. Those people never did anything to anyone, Myles!"

"No," Jackal replies earnestly, "we didn't kill them. We made them better for you, so you can have mutant friends!"

Again, his words give me a sickened feeling. According to Myles, the terrible fate of Mr. Cole and the others was an act of love.

Does he truly believe that, or is this some sort of attempt to rationalize his evil actions?

"And now this machine is going to make everybody in New York like us! Can you imagine, Sissy? Being able to walk around."
"Myles, listen to me," Vivien demands, cutting him off. "This machine-

"Hey, Beast."

The voice is slightly familiar. And it's also right behind me.

I whirl around to see Quicksilver- Peter- looking a bit worse for wear and standing mere feet away. He managed to sneak up on me easily.

Damn that speed of his.

He doesn't seem too pleased to see me, despite the mocking grin on his face, but I suppose the feeling is mutual.

I open my mouth to speak-

And then we've zipped right up on the torch, too, along with Jackal and Vivien. Peter has a strong grip on me, and I know that I can't even try to move without him being able to stop me about six or seven times.

Together he and I form the third point of a triangle around the torch's circumference, a strange sort of standoff with Myles and Vivien. Between us, where the gold-plated casing of the flame used to be, there now stands the mutagen machine.

I recognize the parts rather easily. If I can get myself free I'm confident I can disable it with no problem.

But again- if I can get myself free.

"Hey, Vixie," Peter says now. He makes an attempt at casual, but I can hear his underlying anxiety.

Something bad is coming. Something, or someone?

"Peter," Vivien replies. Her eyes meet mine, obviously startled and worried. "Where's Magneto?"

Erik's son winces. Answer enough.

Myles snarls as the sight of me properly subdued registers with him- slow on the uptake, as usual. "You-" he growls, getting ready to spring.

But then my mate suddenly gasps and begins to tear off her knives, tossing them away from her. They skitter across the bottom of the torch, harmless and out of reach.

The weapons appear to be vibrating, thanks to some unseen force...

Even Myles stops his attack to puzzle over what she's doing. Why would she be disarming herself in the midst of a standoff? Unless-

Oh my stars and garters.

I strain against Peter's hold- he's got my arms pinioned behind my back- desperate to help Vivien. "Hurry," I urge her. "Hurry, Vivien. Your gloves, too-

But she's not fast enough.

My wife is suddenly jerked backwards over the abyss, like some invisible puppeteer pulled on her
strings.

Or, more accurately, the adamantium knives still in the sheaths across her back.

Now she hangs suspended in the air, with only the whim of a metal-bending madman saving her from a free fall to her death. And I'm helpless to do anything to save her.

"Vivien!" Dear Lord, I would do anything to wipe that terrified expression from her face.

"What have we here?" a smug voice calls out.

Erik smoothly levitates into sight, with Scarlet Witch clinging to him to hitch a ride. She has a bloody nose and looks rather lightheaded, though her father appears to be unscathed and actually rather pleased over this predicament.

Looking him in the face is like looking into the cold, dead eyes of a shark.

Pitiless, ruthless, and utterly without mercy.
Erik and Wanda touch down lightly, joining the growing party on the torch.

He callously ignores the way his own daughter slumps to the floor once he stops supporting her weight. He's too busy gloating about how our attempt to thwart him has stalled.

The metal-bender spares me only a glance before turning towards Vivien. I'm a regular thorn in his side at this point, but she's a new aggravation.

"So," he says contemptuously, "the traitor makes one last effort to stop our righteous endeavor to help mutant kind."

If the situation were less dire, I would've rolled my eyes at his histrionics.

"Righteous endeavor," my hairy hand-foot.

But as it is, I can't pull my eyes off of Vivien. I'm afraid that at any second my love will drop out the air, falling to her death.

Right now her face is ashen with fear, but otherwise she's giving no sign of how frightened she is. Her head is still held high, her expression defiant despite her circumstances. But what will come of her bravery?

"If I'm a traitor to anyone it's to myself," Vivien retorts. "For letting myself get caught up in this human-hating bullshit in the first place."

"We're trying to make things better for our kind."

My mate shakes her head furiously. "You're wrong," she says. There's a tremor of desperation in her voice. "You're making it worse. Right now mutants are just the monsters in the closet, but if you use that stupid machine you're going to make it open season on us all, can't you see?"

"The mutagenic formula in this machine introduces mutations that are completely unsustainable for the human body to withstand," I add quickly. "If you use it, you're going to kill every non-mutant citizen of New York City."

This stirs Wanda from her half-conscious stupor. "Kill?" she repeats, frowning.

"Yes, Wanda," Vivien replies earnestly. She's practically pleading with her former friend to believe her. "I've seen it with my own eyes- my brothers gave my human friends the serum, and that's what killed them. I watched them die in front of me."

Wanda seems to ponder this.

Behind me, her twin shifts his weight uncomfortably. Clearly, neither of them like the sound of that.

And then-

Vivien suddenly plummets through the air, out of my sight. A shriek of surprise and utter terror escapes her lips, her arms flailing helplessly-
"No!" I cry out, trying to lunge towards the spot where she disappeared. I can't, though, because Peter has such a tight hold on me. I barely manage to keep myself upright, I'm straining so hard.

Mine is not the only protest raised against Erik.

"Sissy!" Myles exclaims.

"Dad!" the twins scold sharply.

Erik smirks and makes a small gesture with his hand.

Vivien rises back into view, unharmed but trembling violently from the scare she just had. I can't say I blame her. Her gaze finds mine, and I can feel her fear, flowing from her eyes into mine. It's amplified, added on top of my own.

I wish I had some reassurance to give her, but I don't.

"Don't lie to us anymore," Erik snaps.

"I-I'm not lying," my mate argues shakily.

The metal-bender raises his eyebrows disdainfully and flicks his wrist, causing Vivien to drop another foot or so in the air as a warning.

She bites back a scream. "I'm not," she repeats, and flinches in preparation for another free fall. "I swear, this thing kills people. Not like that would bother you, Magneto."

He definitely has no argument for that last comment. Erik has never been squeamish about human collateral damage.

Meanwhile, watching my mate in peril and being powerless to help her is pure agony.

_Come on, McCoy. You're supposed to be a genius, remember? Think of something._

I can't do anything physically, subdued as I am by Peter.

Peter, who I sense is wavering a little, thanks to the new information we just gave him. Peter, who I know is in love with my wife.

An idea strikes me then. It's tenuous and desperate, but it's my only hope.

"Breathe, sweetheart," I call to my mate. Somehow my voice comes out evenly. "He's trying to scare you, but we both know that Magneto needs to keep you alive. Unless he plans to break his word to Sabretooth, but I don't think that would be wise."

Vivien nods, trying to take a calming breath.

Erik and Myles both glower at me, but I can tell the twins are confused.

_That's what I thought. They had no idea._

"What are you talking about?" Peter demands.

"Oh, you didn't know?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder at him. "We overheard your father making a deal with Sabretooth. In exchange for his help tonight, Magneto is going to give him Vivien. Go on and ask him if you don't believe me."
"Dad?" The question comes from Wanda, slumped against the railing. She doesn't look pleased.

Erik is spared the need to explain himself by Sabretooth's sudden appearance on the torch's rim to my left.

*Really, it's getting rather crowded up here.*

The disgruntled feral snarls in barely contained rage as he surveys the situation. The effect is quite ghastly, taking his blood-soaked appearance into account.

*It looks like he managed to resurrect himself, after all. Damn.*

He stomps around the machine to stand in front of where Vivien is floating helplessly and gives Erik an expectant look.

The metal-bender grimaces- I can't tell if it's because he's loathe to give up his captive without meting out some retribution for perceived slights, or because he's conscious of the disapproval now emanating from his children. It's *certainly* not because he feels compunction for bargaining over a person without their knowledge or consent.

Whatever the reason for his reluctance, Erik still allows Vivien to drift forward, hissing like an angry cat, into Sabretooth's grasp. Once she's close enough my mate spits in the feral's face.

He snarls and snatches her out of the air by the throat. Sabretooth then spins Vivien around back-to-front and presses against her, one hand pinning her in place by the neck while the other openly gropes her.

"You're gonna pay for that, frail," he growls.

At this point my vision has gone red, seeing another man put his hands on my mate. I'm so furious it barely registers for me that Erik has turned towards the mutagen machine and begun the start up sequence.

"Dad, are you sure about this?" Wanda asks weakly.

"Absolutely," her father replies. "You can't let Charles' pets twist your thoughts with their lies."

"But... what if they're not lying?" Peter presses. "And you can't just do this to Vivien-"

Erik's expression is glacial as he looks at his children. "We've come too far to stop now," he snaps. "And Vixen deserves whatever happens to her."

"But-"

"Enough. Don't try to stop this, you two," he snaps. "You won't like what happens if you do."

Wanda exchanges an alarmed look with her twin as she realizes that their father is willing to throw away a woman's life to a complete sadist without batting an eye and then threaten his own children if they try to stop him from possibly committing genocide.

And in that moment, I feel something shift.

The lies, the acts and promises made without their knowledge, the fact that Erik is still willing to use this machine even if it might kill everyone in this city- perhaps this threat is the final straw in a growing pile for the twins.
"Get Magneto," Peter mutters to me.

He now has my complete attention, distracting me from the continuous snarl I've been keeping up. When I pull against him, fighting to get to my mate, I realize that Peter is no longer restraining me.

"You hear me, dude? Get Magneto."

Is he serious?

It's a little hard for me to believe what he's saying, but right now I just have to trust that he's not toying with me. And while I would much rather go rip Sabretooth's face off, I understand that if I take Erik out, Vivien will then be able to use her knives again...

I nod stiffly.

"Count of three," Peter murmurs.

Erik turns away and busies himself with the machine again.

The next phase is starting up.

"Three-"

One more, and the aerosolized compound will be released into the air.

"Two-"

God I hope this works.

"One."
There's no room for hesitation.

On the count of one I immediately leap into action, launching myself at Erik before he even knows what hit him. I'm not going to lie: it's very satisfying to punch him in the head and watch him collapse like a rag doll.

*Oh, I liked that. Get up so I can do it again.*

I suppose it's probably for the best that he doesn't. My blow- placed in just the right spot, the way Vivien taught me- knocks the metal-bender unconscious.

My mate takes action the moment Erik is out of the equation.

With a flick of her wrists she summons a pair of her knives back into her hands, and then in a fluid motion flips them around to stab Sabretooth neatly under his rib cage on either side of her own body. Vivien ducks out of the feral's grasp while he's still reacting to the pain.

Peter darts out from behind me to take a look at the mutagen machine while my attention is focused on my wife.

"I don't know how to turn this thing off," he admits, looking a little wild-eyed and panicked.

I suppose open rebellion against one's own parent can do that to a person. Some teenagers just steal Dad's car for a night of joy-riding, but Peter, no, Peter has to go and thwart his father's terrorist plot.

"Wanda?"

The female mutant shakes her head helplessly.

Vivien is now grappling with Sabretooth in this tiny space, brutally slashing at him with her knives.

*I need to help her-

"Hank," she snaps, blocking a blow from the angry feral. "Turn that damn thing off!"

*Or not.*

So instead I step over to the machine, ready to focus on the task at hand.

The apparatus is now almost finished with phase two, pulling in a massive amount of air that will then be spewed into the atmosphere propelled by both the pressure build up and the aerosol components in the formula.

I can't just push a few buttons to turn it off at this point. I need to make sure I send the air out the back way, not through the mutagen mechanism. That would be disastrous.

"Hurry, dude," Peter urges anxiously while I get to work.
And then-

Until this moment Myles has been a negligible factor in the situation. Without Vivien or James there to direct him he's chosen to pace nervously on the far side of the torch, tearing at his hair and becoming increasingly agitated as events progressed.

He picks this juncture to act. And as always, his timing is terrible.

It all seems to occur simultaneously, a horrifying series of events that my brain processes in excruciating detail even though everything happens in less than a few seconds.

Myles launches himself at the battling ferals just as Vivien hops up onto the railing to gain the advantage of the high ground against Sabretooth.

Meanwhile, the machine slips into the final phase. Just a hint of a fine mist gushes into my face right before I finish disabling the apparatus and send the rest of the air pressure spewing harmlessly through the intake valve.

Just a hint, but I know I inhaled some. I feel it searing my lungs, an unpleasant tingling moving through my veins.

But I have no time to contemplate what effects or consequences may result from this misfortune.

Because it is at that same microsecond that Myles slams into Sabretooth, who pitches over the torch's railing, head-first. The younger feral's momentum carries him over the side as well.

On the way Sabretooth's massive shoulder knocks into Vivien, who tries valiantly to keep her balance on the railing-

And then she falls too.

My mate's eyes lock onto mine, her mouth forming a scream as she drops out of sight-

A silver blur brushes by me as I scramble to reach Vivien- neither Peter nor I have any qualms about following her over the side of the torch. I vaguely hear Wanda's cries for her brother and her friend as they plummet to apparent oblivion.

Peter gets to Vivien first, thanks to his superior speed in reaching the edge and jumping off. He grabs her hand as they fall, and I get a grip on his ankle-

If either he or I had been a millisecond slower all three of us would've been smears on Liberty Island's lawn.

But instead I'm able to latch onto the edge of the bottom railing with my hand-feet, saving all of us from the fatal fall.

"Are you ok?" I call down to my mate anxiously. I can see how pale and terrified she is, gripping Peter's wrist with both hands.

"Just peachy," the speedster quips before Vivien can answer. "Hanging upside down a thousand feet off the ground is totally my idea of a good time."

I have to fight the urge to roll my eyes at his sarcasm, though it warms my heart to see Vivien's lips twitch up into a tiny smile. "Vivien?" I ask more pointedly.

"I'm ok," she replies shakily.
"Just hold on a little longer, darling."

It takes some careful maneuvering and a bit of assistance from Wanda, but we're finally able to get back to the safety of the torch platform.

As soon as we're both upright Vivien collapses, shaking like a leaf, into my arms.

Not that you'd catch me complaining. I hold her as tightly as I dare, reflexively purring deep in my chest as I nuzzle my mate. It's reassurance for us both, that we're safe and sound together.

"Myles..." Vivien whispers sadly.

Myles definitely didn't survive that fall. There was nothing to save him, nothing to catch hold of on the way down. Nothing except Sabretooth, and who knows if even the quick-healing feral could live through that drop.

"I know," I say. It feels terribly inadequate, but all I can tell her is, "I'm so sorry."

I want to believe that Myles intended to save his sister with his final actions, but we'll never really know. It still doesn't change the fact that my mate lost both of her brothers tonight.

"Me, too."

We're silent for a moment.

"Thank you, for saving me," Vivien murmurs finally. She pulls away just enough to look me in the eye, a wry smile on her face. "And you used to hate your feet. How about now?"

I'm startled into a chuckle. "I don't think I'll ever complain about them again," I reply. After all, I owe my mate's life to the dexterity of my hand-feet.

My hand-feet and Peter, really.

The silver-haired speedster was immediately assaulted by his sister for his dangerous stunt upon his return to safety. Wanda is still alternating between smacking the boy and hugging him, so at this point Vivien decides to intervene.

"Thanks for saving me, Peter," she says, detaching herself from me despite my reluctance to let her go.

Peter shrugs, pretending to be casual about his heroism, but I can see the wistfulness in his expression when Vivien hugs him. I try not to let that bother me.

He saved her, I tell myself sternly. You can't be jealous over this. He earned a hug, at least.

"Seriously," I add, "thank you. For Vivien, and..."

I gesture towards his unconscious father.

"I didn't do it for you," Peter impudently replies.

And then he yelps when Vivien pinches him.

"Be nice," she admonishes, stepping away and back into my embrace.

"What do we do now?" Wanda asks then. She looks rather lost. "I'd say the Brotherhood is
officially dead now."

"You could join the X-Men," Vivien offers, but without any real feeling.

The twins both wrinkle their noses in displeasure.

"Or not."

"Who says we have to be on a team, right? Let's just go back to Mom's house for a bit," Peter says. "I miss Lorna. And Mom's probably dead bored without me around for the excitement."

_Somehow I doubt that._

"And your dad?" I ask.

It's the million dollar question, since Erik's obviously too dangerous to be allowed to go free. But will they agree with that?

The Maximoff twins exchange loaded looks.

Wanda shrugs. She's trying to seem nonchalant, but can't quite manage it. "Take him to the cops," she tells us. "The lies and everything he sold us on- we had no idea what this machine could really do. And now I'm just... I don't want to be a puppet for anyone anymore. Not even our dad."

She takes her brother's hand.

"Right, Peter?"

"Right."
Goodbyes

The Macy's Fourth of July fireworks start just then, and by unspoken agreement the four of us turn to watch the display over the East River. I think all of us need a moment after the excitement.

And besides- it seems like a fitting punctuation mark to Wanda’s declaration of independence from her father’s schemes.

Said man stirs once during the show, but he's sent back into unconsciousness with a swift kick to the temple by my obliging (and slightly vengeful) wife.

We then make quite an interesting procession down the stairs.

Wanda hexes the mutagen apparatus to be feather-light so she and Peter can get it back down to the ground level. Vivien leads the way, carrying the vials containing the actual formula as a precaution, and I bring up the rear with Erik's body slung over my shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"This is so slow," Peter complains. "Why didn't we just drop this stupid thing off the side?"

"Because we don't want anyone to have the pieces, just in case," I reply.

"'Just in case?' God, Vixie, is he always such a worrywart?"

Vivien glances over her shoulder at me. "Always," she says, smiling fondly. "But I don't mind. He worries, I act without thinking, and we make it out alive somehow."

Her smile makes me miss a step on the stairs as I grin like an idiot right back at her. Erik's head smacks the wall, but that doesn't bother me too much.

She becomes decidedly more grim when we reach the museum downstairs. James' body is still laying there where we left it, and the gory sight even makes Peter sober up for a moment.

I move to my mate's side instinctively, ready to provide support.

"Can we- do you think we can bring them with us?" she asks me quietly. "I think I want to cremate them and take them back to Louisiana."

It would take a much harder man than I to say no to such a request, especially after everything she's been through tonight. "We'll make something work," I assure her.

We exit the Statue of Liberty to find the X-Men finishing up with the resistance.

Alex is the first one to see us, and he immediately tenses upon catching sight of our new companions. He raises a fist, ready to fire.

"Easy," I call out. "These two were a big help up there."

He looks incredulous but allows us to approach without issue.

"You stopped it, then?" he asks, gesturing towards the machine. "No problems?"

I feel a tug of worry about the accidental inhale I took of the formula, but nod anyway.
"And you two?"

"We're out of here," Peter replies. "Vixie."

He dumps his end of the machine, forcing Wanda to follow suit. It tumbles rather carelessly to the ground as the Maximoff twins entangle Vivien in a three-way hug.

I shake my head vigorously when Alex opens his mouth to protest this obvious farewell.

He may want to try to hold Peter and Wanda for further questioning, but I disagree. For starters, catching Peter is practically impossible. Also, if these two want to disappear quietly and leave their Brotherhood days behind them, it would be unwise to distract the Maximoff twins from that goal.

And besides- letting them walk away is the least I can do, after Peter saved my mate's life.

"I know better than to say 'stay out of trouble,'" Vivien tells them dryly, once the embrace is broken. "So... keep the trouble to a minimum, ok?"

"You mean me, don't you?" Peter asks.

"Yes, you."

"You're asking a lot of him, you know," Wanda mutters. "But we'll both do our best."

My wife chuckles, but then her expression becomes serious. "Thank you, guys," she says, "for doing the right thing before it was too late."

"Sorry about Fox and Jackal," Wanda tells her.

"Thanks," Vivien replies sadly. "Me, too. Take care of each other."

She gives them each one last hug, including a kiss on the cheek for Peter. The affectionate gesture makes that hopeless yearning return to his face.

I'm surprised to realize I'm not jealous, despite Peter's obvious feelings for my wife. The gratitude I feel because he saved her overwhelms such pettiness. Instead, I can't help sympathizing with him for treasuring every little evidence of her regard, even if it will never be enough for him.

Peter then fixes a half-mocking, half-threatening look on me. "You take care of her, Fur Ball," he warns. "Or I'll kick your ass faster than you can blink. And steal your wallet while I'm at it."

"Duly noted," I murmur wryly.

Vivien rolls her eyes.

"Bye, Vixie."

And then the Maximoff twins are gone.

Charles will be so proud of all of them, I think to myself as I pilot the jet home.

The X-Men performed beautifully, superbly.

We made it through intact, though not completely unscathed. Sam sustained a broken arm, and Scott may have another concussion, but since that's the worst of the team's injuries I can't find it in
myself to complain.

I can't believe we did it. We stopped Erik, hopefully for good.

Before we left Liberty Island Alex sent Angel off to the nearest police station to deposit a heavily sedated and thoroughly zip-tied Erik Lehnsherr in front of it. We surmised that the authorities would know what to do with the fugitive wanted for attempting to assassinate one president and succeeding with another. I suspect that before he wakes up Magneto will find himself back in that cell under the Pentagon.

After everything that's happened, I'm unable to summon even an ounce of sympathy for him.

Though there's an atmosphere of triumph to our return to the mansion, the team is noticeably subdued about our victory on the way home. I suspect it's in deference to Vivien's loss.

My mate spends the flight back to Westchester sitting hunched over with her knees drawn to her chest on the floor between her brothers' sheet-wrapped bodies in the cabin's rear. Her eyes are dry as she stares straight ahead, and I can't help feeling a sense of admiration for her self-possession.

Jean offered to sit with her, but Vivien politely declined. The redheaded girl took a long look at her and reluctantly agreed to give the feral woman some space. I can easily see the telepath becoming a very dear friend to my wife some day, if you can't say that she is already.

How many people do you know who would willingly help you hunt down your brother's broken dead body in the dark? Very few, I'm sure. But that's what Jean volunteered to do- she assisted Vivien and I in locating Myles' corpse and then used her telekinetic powers to help us wrap him in a sheet, repeating the process with James in the museum.

Though we looked, there was nothing remaining of Sabretooth save for a patch of blood near Myles' landing site. The feral thankfully made no reappearance as we made our solemn way back to the group. He chose, I think, to go off to lick his wounds in private without looking for retribution today. As for the future...

I fervently hope to never meet the savage ever again. But if we do, I know we'll be ready for him.

Upon our return to the mansion Vivien and I carry her brothers' bodies to the incinerator I have on site for biohazardous materials. Tonight it will double as a crematorium.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask before I turn it on.

She nods. "You know Viking funerals are my body disposal method of choice," she murmurs, summoning up a wry smile for me.

It's a rather chilling observation on her life that she even has a preferred method, but I let that pass without comment as I press "start." The corpses immediately catch fire, burning away the remains of Vivien's last living blood relatives.

Yes, we won tonight. But the price of victory was a heavy cost for my wife, and I know that she's in pain right now even if she's refusing to show it. The fact that she can hold it in at all says a lot about her strength of character. Truly, I'm in awe of her.

"Tell me what to do for you," I say, rather desperately. I'd do anything to make her hurt less, but I'm at a loss. "What do you need?"
Vivien steps closer, snuggling against me. My arms automatically wrap around her.

"Just this," she sighs. "Just you."
What's Done Is Done

July 7, 1975

A few days pass, and still Vivien doesn't cry.

I keep waiting for her grief over her brothers' deaths to overwhelm her, for her to break down, but it doesn't happen.

Instead she becomes impassive and remote, even with me. My awe over her composure that night soon gives way to increasing worry as the days drag on.

Vivien doesn't laugh, she rarely smiles, and even music seems to leave her untouched. She answers questions when directly addressed, but prefers to spend her time in silence, gazing out at the grounds from the window seat in our room. Even though she sleeps curled up in my arms at night, it still feels like she's a hundred miles away.

It's as if Vivien is merely a shadow of her real self, and it makes me frantic to do something, anything to bring my mate back to me.

Is this healthy grieving? She told me previously that when her parents died she went into a self-destructive spiral. Will she try that again? But what about the baby? Is there a baby?

Despite our agreement to find out for certain after we stopped the Brotherhood, Vivien has made no mention of taking a pregnancy test. I'm afraid to push her about it, to do anything to upset her, but she's barely eating anything and I fear for both her and the baby she might be carrying if this continues.

But my plate of troubles is not yet full.

On Monday morning I try to inject myself with my serum for the first time since the Liberty Island mission after spending the weekend in my Beast form because I know Vivien prefers me that way.

And it doesn't work.

I try a stronger dose, and yet another, but there's no change. I remain fuzzy and blue.

It appears that I will always be a beast, now and forever, thanks to that stray inhale of the mutagen serum I got as I disabled the machine.

For a long while I sit there, contemplating this new blow.

Better just you staying blue than all of New York City dying, I tell myself. And at least you have Vivien, you know she'll still love you. She likes you better like this, anyway. And it'll be better for your children's self-esteem if you don't hide-

But no matter how many reasons I come up with that this revelation is manageable, the knowledge that I will never look normal again is a hard pill to swallow. I'll never be able to walk down the street anonymously again. Never be able to take Vivien out to dinner, never be able to take her to a museum without attracting hostile stares...
Ironic, isn't it, that I arrived at this predicament by trying to save the very people that will scorn me?

I know a moment of bitterness and then sigh. "Things without all remedy/ Should be without regard. What's done is done," I murmur aloud. It's a quote Vivien is fond of.

I can't change this, and I have too much to be thankful for to allow myself to fall into despair. I would do it again in a heartbeat.

But still- do I tell Vivien about this, or wait until she's more herself? What if she can't shake off this malaise on her own? How much space am I supposed to give her? Am I selfish for wanting her support right now, when she has so many of her own troubles?

Even though it goes against my natural inclination for privacy, desperation drives me to ask Charles for advice.

"Should I approach her about this?" I ask, after explaining the situation.

And also after listening to my mentor give me the obligatory pep talk about forever losing any sense of normalcy remaining to me. Such platitudes as, "it was for a noble cause," and, "you know Vivien will love you no matter what." I know he's only trying to make me feel better, but his words still smack of condescension and set my teeth on edge because I know that underneath all the feel-good tripe he pities me.

I don't want pity. I just want my wife back.

"Should I wait? She's so used to dealing with things on her own, and she knows I'm here for her if she needs me, but I don't think I can stand to see her like this much longer. And then dropping this on her-"

"Hank," Charles interjects, looking slightly exasperated. "You already know the answer to your question. You shouldn't keep secrets from your wife. So stop looking for permission and go speak to Vivien."

I sigh and stand to take my leave.

"Hank- I truly am sorry," he tells me when I reach the door.

I shrug. "It could be much worse. I've been through worse."

Because this time I'm not alone.

My mate gives me a faint smile from the window seat when I enter our room, but then turns back to looking outside.

"Vivien-"

"Hmm?"

"H-how are you?" Great opening line, I know.

For a split second Vivien looks like she wants to make a sarcastic retort- something that I would welcome, because it would be more like herself- but she swallows it and shrugs. "I'm fine, I guess," she murmurs.
I cross the room and kneel next to her. "Are you really?" I press. "Darling- I'm worried about you. I'm here for you, you know that. Right?"

"I know," she replies calmly, brushing her hand across my face. "I'm sorry that you've been worried."

I have to hold back a sigh of disappointment. This is nothing she hasn't said previously, right before falling back into frustrating silence. And the inscrutable attitude is downright eerie at this point.

"What's with the look?" Vivien asks.

"I just- I'm waiting for it to really hit you, I guess, that they're gone," I blurt out. "For you to break down and-"

She shakes her head. "I've already cried my tears for my brothers," she murmurs, looking back out the window. "I lost them months ago. The men who died that night were monsters who wore my brothers' faces."

That's one way of looking at it, I suppose.

"Then what's wrong, Vivien? Please tell me how you feel," I entreat.

"I'm not sure I know what I feel," she confesses. "I guess I'm pissed off at them for what they did to my friends, what they tried to do to me. I'm angry that they died without ever trying to make it right. There's no shot at redemption now, not anymore. Hope's always the last thing to die, isn't it? Because I guess I hoped for this last minute change of heart, for my brothers to prove that they loved me the way they should have, as their sister, but it never happened. They were just fucked up and crazy and now they're dead. But they were my brothers, you know?"

I reach out and smooth out her hands, which clenched into fists as she spoke until her claws bit into her flesh. "I want to believe Myles was trying to help you when he died," I offer gently.

"Maybe," Vivien concedes bitterly. "But because I'm his sister, or because of whatever twisted feelings he had for me?"

For that I have no answer. I mean- knowing Myles, it was probably the latter. But I can't tell her that, can I?

*This is not my strong suit. Why can't I just lie to her like a normal person would to make her feel better?*

"We'll never know," I offer instead.

At this shoddy attempt at diplomacy she laughs for the first time in days.

Just a incredulous chuckle, but it still feels like dawn after a long winter's night. Upon hearing it the knot of anxiety I've carried around for days finally loosens just a fraction.

Vivien pulls me in for an embrace, so my head is pressed against her chest as my arms wrap around her.

"I really am sorry to worry you, baby," she murmurs, nuzzling my hair. "I do that a lot, don't I?"

I grunt dismissively. "Worrying about you is in the job description," I reply. "I just want you to be
happy, darling."

"I know," she whispers. "I'm so lucky to have you."

My arms tighten around her. "And I, you."

This moment of complete support for each other feels as good a time as any to broach the topic of my new discovery. I know that together, united as one, we can make it through these trying times.

I take a deep breath. "Vivien, I have something to tell you."
"What's wrong, baby?" Vivien asks. "Besides everything, I mean."

Indeed.

I pull away from her just enough to look her in the eyes, keeping my hands on her waist though I remain kneeling in front of her. "The other night, when I disabled Erik's machine, I-I breathed in a bit of the mutagen formula."

I falter, gathering my courage.

To my horror, Vivien's expression is immediately stricken. "Does that mean-? Are you- are you trying to tell me you're dying?" she gasps out, clutching at my shirt. "Hank-"

"No, no," I reply hastily, mentally chastising myself for my untimely pause. Of course she would leap to that conclusion, after seeing all of her friends die from the same cause. "Darling, no. If it could affect me that way I'd already be dead."

Honestly, if they handed out medals for being terrible at delivering bad news, I'd win the gold.

"I suppose it's because I'm already a mutant that it didn't kill me."

"Ok," Vivien says slowly, after a heavy exhale of relief. "Then why are you telling me this?"

I swallow thickly. "I tried to use my serum today, and..."

"It doesn't work anymore?"

I nod glumly. "Correct."

My mate lets out a long, slow breath. "Ok. And how do you feel about that?" she asks.

I shrug. "I think... I actually think I'm ok with it," I tell her.

Vivien gives me an incredulous look. "Don't bullshit me," she warns. "You don't have to pretend to be fine with me, Hank. I mean, it's a worthy sacrifice you made, and you know I like you this way. But I also know you've always been really self-conscious about your Beast form."

"Maybe I always will be," I admit. "But truly, I think I'm ok. Or at least, I will be. I have you, after all. Right?"

She rolls her eyes. "That goes without saying, baby."

I can't help grinning at her matter-of-course attitude. I suppose I knew better already, but it doesn't hurt to have my hopes affirmed out loud. "So I have a woman who loves me, no matter what I look like," I reason. "Yes, it would be easier for me- for us- if I was still able to look normal when necessary, but there's nothing I can do about that now. I thought about it, and I realize that I have too much to be thankful in my life to allow myself to wallow in misery over something I can't
change. And besides-

My thumbs brush against her stomach.

"Remember when you accused me of being a hypocrite for using a drug to look normal, when we're supposed to be teaching the kids here to accept themselves?"

Vivien frowns. "Yeah, but I was talking about you hiding from your emotions, remember?"

"I remember. But you were also right about the other ways I hide, too," I confess. "It's time to start practicing what I preach, Vivien. Any children we have are bound to have physical mutations, with parents like us. I want them to grow up knowing that there's nothing wrong with them, no matter what they look like. I can't do that if I'm hiding what I am."

She responds by kissing me ardently, passionately, with an intensity that shakes me to the core. "I am so proud of you," she whispers against my lips, cradling my face in her hands. "I really am, baby."

I'm suddenly torn between wanting to just bask in my gratitude towards Vivien for her understanding and my desire to see if we can come up with some sort of new favorite sexual position on the window seat. Or would that be insensitive?

Oh, to hell with it.

I thread my claws through her hair and kiss her again, taking note of her eager response to my advances.

I suspect then that Vivien needs this intimacy just as much as I do. An affirmation of our love, our complete devotion to one another, despite the events that threaten to break us. Things aren't alright-not by a long shot- but at least we have each other.

Apart, we're strong. Together, we're unstoppable.

We eventually move to the bed to enjoy the afterglow for a while. It feels good to forget about all of the problems we'll face and just lose myself in my mate for a while. I think her thoughts echo mine.

"Hmm," Vivien hums, snuggling against me as I lay on my back. "I feel a lot better now."

"Yes, well- not to brag, but sex with me has been known to have that effect," I tell her, all empty bravado of course.

She bursts into giggles and pretends to smother me with a pillow. "I meant after talking about everything, dork."

I flip onto my side and snatch away the offending pillow, feigning indignation. "Are you saying the sex didn't help at all?"

Vivien pretends to consider that for a long moment, a mischievous grin on her face. I let out a low growl and burrow my face against her neck, my lips seeking the mark on her skin.

"I suppose," she concedes with mock reluctance, squirming against me provocatively.

I purr in approval and take a deep inhale, letting her intoxicating scent flood my nose-
And freeze.

_Do I smell-?_

I take another breath, just to be sure.

_Yes. She's..._

How did I not notice this before? Was I too worried about her mental well-being to pay attention these past few days? Did I write it off subconsciously as wishful thinking again, or is the change in my mate's scent just now finally becoming strong enough to truly register?

"Hank?" Vivien asks uncertainly. "What do you smell?"

I try to control my building excitement. "I think- I think you're pregnant, Vivien," I explain. My hand goes down to rest on her stomach.

She scrambles upright. "R-really?"

"That's what it smells like."

The hope that my sense of smell is correct, that I'm going to be a father, feels so intense it borders on painful. It doesn't help that there's a tiny bit of guilt mingled with my anticipation. We haven't even laid James and Myles to rest, but here I am praying that their sister is carrying my child.

Can Vivien handle the emotional roller coaster of pregnancy, so soon after these other traumatic events? And what if our hopes end in disappointment, either today or at a later date?

Or should I just be thankful that she's showing more and more signs of life now that the prospect of her possible pregnancy has resurfaced?

"Can we go see for sure?"

_Thankful, _I decide as I read the sparkling eagerness in her eyes, an emotion I'm sure is reflected in my own expression. _I'm thankful for this._

"Let's go."

We're dressed and downstairs within minutes, but our further progress is curtailed by the way several children feel the need to stop Vivien and ask if she'll be teaching class tomorrow (since I asked Charles to excuse her from teaching today).

My mate takes one look at her students' hopeful expressions and promises to be there. She has a shy, well-pleased grin on her face as we head down to the lab.

"See? The kids aren't scared of you," Vivien teases once we're inside.

I noticed that too, to my profound relief. Despite my fear of being the freak among the freaks in my Beast form, no one even blinked at me.

But I still can't help joking back, "I don't think they even noticed me. They were too busy talking to their favorite teacher."

She scoffs, but I assure her I'm telling the truth.
The children love her so much. She's going to be such a good mother...

After I draw her blood and start the assay we both hold our breath, praying for a confirmation of our hopes.

Finally, finally, I take a look-

"Vivien," I crow, sweeping her into my arms, "it's positive! You're pregnant! Oh, darling, you're going to be such an amazing mom."

She laughs at my uncharacteristically exuberant display and holds me tight. "And you're going to be such a good dad."

I'm going to be a father, I think, completely awestruck.

I kiss her fervently and then kneel down to do the same to her stomach.

"I love you, Hank," she whispers, running her claws through my hair.

"I love you, Vivien."

Our love used to seem so impossible in the face of everything going against us- from not only its initial beginning, but its continual existence despite all of the overwhelming odds.

We've faced murderous family members and opposing teams, differing ideals, and several near-death situations since we met, and beat them all simply by following the allegiance of our own hearts.

Next up, parenthood. And, I suppose, dealing with a world that will be terrified of my face.

But I'm not scared. Because together, Vivien and I can overcome anything.

The future, I believe, is bright.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Not quite the end... the next (and last) chapter will be an epilogue!
January 27, 2023

"Dr. McCoy?"

The tall, furry man turns to look at the redheaded woman who just called his name and smiles. "Jean, how many times must I tell you that you can call me 'Hank' now?"

Jean grins sheepishly, because it's not the first time her former mentor has offered the gentle correction. She hasn't been his student for decades now, but to her the blue, rather intimidating-looking man with a heart of gold before her will always be the same Dr. McCoy who encouraged her to go into medicine and become a doctor herself. "Sorry," she says. "Old habits. But- I thought you weren't due back from Washington for another two days?"

"Yes, well-" He holds up the bouquet of gardenias and violets in his hand. "Some things are more important than politics," he observes mysteriously. "And my wife is definitely one of them. Is she in her classroom?"

Jean nods, giggling at the feral's love struck expression. Hank McCoy is still a reserved man in most situations, but those concerning his wife- despite almost fifty years of marriage- are always an exception.

He has come a long way from the reclusive scientist he used to be.

His outlandish (or as his beloved would put it, imposing) appearance made him a perfect poster boy for mutant rights, and after the birth of his first child he realized he was doing his family- and himself- a disservice if he didn't do something more concrete to help mutants. Over the past forty-five years or so he has risen from obscurity to become the country's most prominent mutant activist, even going so far as to join the President's Cabinet.

But only thanks to the support of a certain someone, he thinks to himself.

Hank excuses himself politely and heads for the classroom wing. Doing so takes him past the staircase just as a dazed-looking Logan descends from upstairs.

"Morning, Logan," he tells the other feral cheerfully as he passes. He chuckles over the man's evident bewilderment. "Late start?"

Hank doesn't take offense over Logan's lack of reply. Mornings are not the Wolverine's forte, and after all, he got that nickname for a reason.

It would have been easy to locate Logan following their adventure to save the future back in 1973, but Charles decided long ago not to force the issue. If time flowed like a river, he reasoned, the older feral would make his way into their orbit sooner or later.

And sure enough, after a second chance meeting Logan ended up joining the X-Men. Gentle probing on Charles' part indicated that the man had no idea that he'd met the telepath, Hank, and Vivien before, but that was alright. He ended up right where he was supposed to, and Hank considers him to be a good friend.
Just like Logan said they would be, back in January 1973...

Hank frowns pensively as a new thought occurs to him.

*Future-Logan first came to us fifty years ago on this very day,* he thinks. *And he came from exactly fifty years ahead, in an apocalyptic future. Which means we did it. We changed everything...*

Hank can't help smiling as the realization sinks in, a mixture of both triumph and relief washing over him thanks to this final confirmation of their success. He had a feeling Logan would need some guidance on the new, brighter present he suddenly found himself in now, but surely this was infinitely preferable to the one he remembered.

By this point Hank is only a few feet away from the slightly ajar door to the music room, and he can hear his favorite voice in the whole world raised in song.

Grinning, he peaks his head in to observe his wife surreptitiously for a moment. She's singing as she prepares for her first class of the day and is as yet too intent to notice his presence.

Despite being seventy years old, Vivien McCoy could easily pass for a woman in her late thirties thanks to her feral nature. Bearing five children gave her petite figure curves in all the right places (or as she put it, "the breast fairy finally showed up, thank fucking Christ"), and Hank thinks she is even more lovely *now* than the day he met her.

The singing suddenly stops.

"I know you're there, baby," Vivien says without looking at the door. "Now, are you going to come in or are you going to keep watching me like a creepy weirdo?"

"Hard to say," Hank replies. "Both options have merit."

His mate glances over her shoulder and gives him a come hither look that still makes his knees turn to jelly, even after all these years. "But if you don't come here, how will I be able to kiss you?" she teases.

"Your logic is unassailable, my love."

Vivien giggles and meets him halfway in a fervent welcoming kiss. "This is a pleasant surprise," she purrs against his lips when they finally come up for air. "I thought you were in Washington until Monday?"

"Yes, but it's not every day you can celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the day you met the love of your life and she saved your unworthy hide. I wouldn't miss it for the world," Hank explains. He offers her the flowers. "Happy anniversary, darling."

She grins and looks up at him through her long lashes as she takes the proffered bouquet. "And happy anniversary to you," she replies. "Thank you, baby."

And to emphasize her thanks she gives him another kiss after she puts the bouquet in a vase.

Hank reaches up to touch her face, his claws as soft as butterfly wings across her skin. He's so thankful for the life they've had together, thankful for the fact that he's standing here right now with her. In another future he would be long dead, their family (which includes five children, nine grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren with another on the way) nonexistent.

*Which reminds me-*
"You might find Logan to be a little- different from now on, Vivien," Hank observes aloud.

Vivien frowns, puzzled. "Oh? Why's that?" But then, only a moment later, understanding dawns across her features. "Wait, I know. Fifty years... He's come back from the 'other' future or whatever, hasn't he?"

Hank nods, smiling just a little at how quickly she comprehended the answer. Her cleverness never fails to cause him some degree of delight, even when she uses her genius against him.

"Well this is going to make for some awkward conversations," she muses dryly. Charles, Hank and herself are the only X-Men who know of the time traveling intervention back in 1973. They never even mentioned it to the Logan of their present for fear of some sort of dimension-altering repercussions. "Poor Logan."

"Yes," Hank agrees solemnly. "Poor Logan."

"Now that he knows what happened I definitely want to thank him," Vivien murmurs, fiddling with her husband's tie. He's wearing a tan plaid suit today, which amuses her somewhat. Hank's predilection for terrible fashion choices has grown into an endearing quality over the years, in her opinion. "Without his sacrifice I'm pretty sure my life would've been a shit show from start to finish."

Hank frowns. "What do you mean?"

She gets a far-off look in her eyes. "A dream, last night. More like a nightmare-"

He winces- even after all this time, his mate still has nightmares when she's not in his arms as she sleeps. Sadly, even decades of happy memories have not been enough to fully eclipse the trauma from her earlier life and some of their more death-defying adventures since then.

"-It was just a bunch of flashes, really, of what my life would've been like without you," Vivien explains, shivering at the recollection. "I woke up in a cold sweat with a weird sense of deja vu. I didn't really think anything of it until you mentioned Logan, but now I wonder if it was more than a dream."

"Do you want to talk about what you saw?"

She shakes her head emphatically. "No. I want to forget all about it," she replies firmly. "It never happened, and now we know it never will. Thank God. I wouldn't change this life for the world."

"So... are you saying it was worth it?" Hank asks, still unsure. "Everything you went through after we met?"

"Without a doubt," she assures him.

It used to be that Vivien wondered how she could live with herself after losing so many people she loved, but time has given her perspective. Her brothers, she feels, died so she could live. Though it hurts to admit it, she knows the world is a safer place without them and their hatred. More importantly, Vivien honors the memory of her friends from Hell's Kitchen by making kindness a priority in all she does.

Hank can't doubt the sincerity written clearly in her hazel eyes. He kisses his mate again and holds her close.

"So are you here for the weekend, or do you have to go back?" Vivien probes, snuggling against
"No, I'm all yours for the foreseeable future," Hank replies. "Though tomorrow we're expected at Hope's house for a family dinner. All of the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren included."

Vivien smiles at the thought- it can be difficult to get their growing brood under the same roof, and she relishes the opportunity to spoil all of her babies at once. "What are we having?"

"I believe pancakes are on the menu."

She laughs. "That's my girl," she announces proudly, referring to their eldest daughter, Hope. She, along with her siblings- Marcel, Sophie, Cole, and Louise- all inherited their mother's enthusiasm for liberating traditional "breakfast" foods from their arbitrary bonds. "And tonight...?"

"Tonight, my love, you are all mine," Hank tells her. "We're going to a play, if you're amenable."

"Oh? Which one?"

"Romeo and Juliet," he says. "I thought a play about star-crossed lovers would be fitting for the occasion, considering how we began. The irony is that we were able to change our stars."

"I disagree," Vivien replies, grinning. "We were meant to live happily ever after together from the get-go, baby. It's fate- the universe, whatever- that messed up the first time around. That's why the universe ended up reshuffling the deck and dealing it out again by sending Logan back in time."

She kisses her mate heartily, until they're both breathless.

"No, Hank. This is the winning hand we were supposed to be dealt all along."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!