Scenes From a Most Unusual Family

by alcimines

Summary

Set in an AU where Logan, Ororo, Daken, and Laura are family. Originally, this was mostly about the kids becoming a part of the family. Over time, it becomes about the kids growing up.

Notes

This is sort of a sequel to "Everything Important". Actually, it's more like a prequel and a during-the-middle-of-quel. I wrote this because Lychee Loving keeps dropping hints that she wants to see more. Also a talented fan artist named ladynorthstar (check out her tumblr page) did some art for her version of this AU that got me thinking. I shamelessly stole at least one of her ideas.
Chapter 1

SCENES FROM A MOST UNUSUAL FAMILY

"You're not my mom," were the first words that Daken said to Ororo. He was scowling so hard that his eyebrows formed a savage and uncompromising 'V'.

It was a creditable performance for a five year old boy.

"I know," was Ororo's calm reply.

Daken - so utterly sure that he was going to get a stronger response - blinked in surprise. Logan, lurking in the background, tried to hide his smile. His son had no idea what he was getting into...

Then Ororo crouched down and carefully ran a hand through Daken's Mohawk. It wasn't a haircut. It was part-and-parcel of Daken's mutation.

Daken frowned at the familiarity, but didn't otherwise object. Some part of his hind-brain was suggesting that maybe he shouldn't get too pushy with this particular woman.

"I had hair like this once," Ororo said thoughtfully.

Daken became even more surprised. So surprised that he forgot to be truculent - which was a fairly rare phenomenon.

"Really?" he said as he studied Ororo's glorious waterfall of lustrous white hair.

"Really," Ororo said as she got to her feet. "By the way, do you prefer your hot chocolate with or without marshmallows?"

"Uhm..." Daken hesitated. He didn't want to admit that he didn't have a clue what a marshmallow was.

"I hate marshmallows," Logan interjected calmly.

"Lots of marshmallows," Daken said with complete certainty, refusing to look in Logan's direction.

A few minutes later, Daken was sure that he'd found the food of the gods. He was so happy that at first he didn't notice that Logan's hot chocolate also had marshmallows in it. Eventually, he did notice. That was when Daken first faced the horrifying possibility that there might be people in the world actually smart enough to fool him. And he was living with two of them.

A Month Later...

"Ororo showed me this," Daken said, just before he handed Logan a photograph.

Logan took the picture and examined it. Then he smiled. The photo was a little worn around the edges, but it showed Kurt, Logan, and Ororo. Ororo was standing between Kurt and Logan - she was noticeably taller than both men - and they had their arms around each other. Ororo had her Mohawk and was dressed in a rakishly punk set of black leather.

Logan nodded as he tried to suppress a cherished memory of undressing Ororo from the outfit she
was wearing in the picture.

In recent years, Ororo's dress style had become more conservative. Now, she tended towards long, colorful, African-style skirts; usually with a plain white blouse. Expressive jewelry that ranged from simple and inexpensive to exotic and very expensive often completed her outfit.

Come to think of it, Logan liked undressing her out of that as well.

Well... when you got down to it, Logan just really liked to undress Ororo.

"I like her hair," Daken said quietly.

"You've got good taste," Logan replied as he handed the photograph back to Daken.

"When was that?" Daken asked.

"A long time ago," Logan answered. "Ororo and I were full-blown X-Men in those days. That picture was taken just after a tangle with the Brood."

Daken frowned at the unfamiliar word. "The what?"

"The Brood. Alien critters. Sort of like vicious bugs, but a lot bigger. They're the scourge of whatever part of the galaxy they turn up in. And they were about to move into our neighborhood."

"You fought them?" Daken said interestedly.

"Yep."

"Will I fight them someday? I mean... if they come back?"

Something clenched in Logan's stomach as he looked at his son's face.

"That's a decision you can make when you get older," Logan finally responded.

Daken seemed to pick up on Logan's mood. He nodded soberly, but said nothing else.

It was the most civilized conversation the two of them had ever had.

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A Half-Hour Later...

"Ororo?" Daken said quietly.

Ororo was unloading some groceries from the truck. Daken was giving her a hand. Logan was getting his gear together - he had to go to work.

"Yes, Dak?" Ororo asked distractedly.

"I was talking to Dad about something. And I think I said something that bothered him."

Ororo put a bag on one of the porch chairs. "What were you talking about?"

"Fighting the Brood. Dad said you and he and Uncle Kurt did that once."

Ororo winced and then shook her head. "Actually we did that more than once."
"I asked Dad if I would fight the Brood someday."

Ororo stopped, frozen in mid-motion. Daken recognized the look that was now in her eyes. It had been in his father's eyes just a little while ago.

Suddenly concerned, Daken took Ororo's hands in his own and asked. "Mom, what's wrong?"

Ororo came back to Earth. Then she pulled Daken to her and held him very close.

"We do not want you to ever fight something like the Brood," Ororo finally said very tensely, "but someday there might not be a choice."

Daken hugged Ororo back. Hard.

"It's okay, Mom," he said - almost desperately. "It's okay. It was just a question."

Ororo let go of Daken and then wiped her eyes. "Help me get the groceries inside. Your father has to go to work."

It took everyone a while to realize that Daken had finally started calling Ororo "Mom".

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**Two Years Later...**

"Are you my mother?" were the first words Laura spoke to Ororo.

"Yes," Ororo and Daken said simultaneously.

Laura was nestled in Logan's arms. She glanced uncertainly from Ororo to Daken.

"I'm your brother," Daken added firmly.

"Why are you here?" Laura responded warily. She seemed a bit uncertain of the "brother" concept. And perhaps somewhat disapproving.

Daken thought that over for a moment. "I think I'm supposed to take care of you when Mom and Dad aren't around."

Laura seemed a little skeptical about that, but she didn't voice any objections.

Logan put Laura down and said, "Why don't you show Laura around the place, Dak?"

Daken nodded and held out his hand. Laura looked at it suspiciously for a moment, but then took it.

"Dinner in an hour," Ororo said calmly. Then she bent over and kissed both kids on top of their heads.

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**An Hour Later...**

Daken and Laura walked into the cabin's living room. They were covered in leaves, pine-needles, and dirt. And their clothes were torn. A young black bear that wasn't much bigger than Laura was with them. There was a tattered length of rope looped around the bear's neck and Daken was
holding the other end.

The bear looked confused. Not unhappy or angry, just... confused.

"Can we keep him?" Laura asked excitedly. Daken nodded his head in eager agreement.

Logan peered over the edge of his newspaper at the bear. He didn't seem to have anything to say.

"He's alone and he needs a mom and a dad!" Laura continued earnestly. She seemed absolutely certain about what she was saying.

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Dinner Time...

Dinner for Logan and Daken was the usual - meat, with a side of meat, lightly garnished with meat.

In a show of feminine solidarity, Laura helped Ororo finish off the salad. Actually, Ororo appreciated that a great deal. However, as soon as the green stuff was gone, Laura's appetite also became decidedly carnivorous.

The bear was sitting outside on the porch. He wasn't tied up, but didn't seem inclined to go anywhere. He was contentedly munching on a half a cabbage, a bell pepper, and a left-over cheeseburger.

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A Year Later...

The bear didn't exactly live at the Logan residence, but he did stop by every now and then to cadge a free meal (he still liked cheeseburgers) and play with the kids. And since he made a point of staying in the area, the bear made a pretty good guard dog. Or guard bear.

When Dr. Henry McCoy finally got around to visiting Logan and Ororo's little backwoods cabin, he was a bit surprised to meet the family companion.

"You named him Hank?" Hank-the-person said as he and Hank-the-bear exchanged long looks. Hank-the-bear obviously had no idea what to make of Hank-the-person. However, any possibility of trouble was limited by the fact that Hank-the-person was actually bigger than Hank-the-bear. It also helped that Hank-the-bear was at the moment giving Laura a ride on his hirsute back. Hank-the-bear was always on his best behavior around the kids. He liked them.

Just to make the comparison between the two Hanks even more congruent. Daken was riding on Hank-the-person's shoulders.

Logan was having a hell of time keeping a straight face.

"It was Daken's idea, Ororo explained.

"He reminded me of you because you're both all furry," Daken said helpfully from his perch on Hank-the-person's shoulders.

Hank-the-person threw back his head and began roaring with laughter.

Hank-the-bear snorted, turned ponderously, and took Laura with him deeper into the woods.
Humans were weird.
Chapter Summary

What do you suppose is the most important lesson Logan and Ororo have to teach Daken and Laura?

NO CLAWS

"And what's the most important rule at school?" Ororo asked as she double-checked Daken and Laura's sack lunches.

"No claws," the kids chorused. Laura seemed excited by the new ritual. Daken was obviously less interested. He'd heard it before. Many times before.

"Say it again," Ororo ordered as she handed the kids their lunch.

"No claws!"

"One more time? Louder?"

"NO CLAWS!" Laura yelled. Daken just rolled his eyes before replying.

Ororo kissed them goodbye and the kids ran out the door. Logan was outside, warming up the truck. He was driving them to school.

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Hank the bear was on the front porch. He eagerly whuffed and sat up awkardly as the kids left the cabin. Both Laura and Daken took the time to energetically ruffle his fur while he urged in pleasure. When they finally left, Hank felt a bit dissapointed. He wasn't sure why they were going. This was a new thing and bears are intrinsically quite conservative. They aren't big on change.

With a deep sigh, Hank left the porch and ambled off to find his favorite patch of blackberries.

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Daken hopped out of the truck and held the door open for his sister.

Laura examined the school yard carefully, not yet moving from her seat. It wasn't shyness or fear. She just had a tendency to observe and analyze.

Logan smiled and smoothed down his daughter's hair. "What's the most important rule at school?" he asked quietly.

With a very tiny smile, Laura looked up at her dad and said, "No claws."
Then she got out of the truck. Daken grabbed her bookbag and he helped her put it on.

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As he got back on the road, Logan’s phone rang.

"What’s up, ’Ro?” Logan asked.

"How did it go?” Ororo asked.

"Fine. Laura hesitated a little, but she didn’t seem scared.”

"Good. Come straight home.”

Logan frowned. "I was going to stop at the hardware store and then talk to the guys at the county treasurer office about our property taxes.”

"I am naked.”

"Right. Home. On the way.”

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The bed was a mess. Blankets, sheets, and pillows were scattered all over the bedroom.

The couch cushions were disorganized.

The kitchen table looked a little wobbly. And perhaps a bit shocked and offended.

At the moment, Logan and Ororo were taking a well-deserved break. They were tangled up in a buffalo-hide rug in front of the fireplace. The fireplace's morning fire had died down to embers, but it was still cutting into the autumn chill. A lot of physical exertion on Logan and Ororo’s part had made up for the rest of the temperature deficit.

It had been a while since Logan and Ororo had the cabin entirely to themselves. And privacy was a bit of an issue.

"Maybe we should also send them to summer school,” Logan mused thoughtfully.

Ororo just smiled, sat up, and straddled Logan once again. The advantages of being married to a man with inexhaustible stamina were many.

Then Ororo’s phone rang. With a sigh, Ororo got to her feet and walked over to kitchen counter where it was sitting. Still laying on the rug, Logan craned his head to enjoy the view. Watching Ororo without any clothes was like watching a sunset. You could see it a thousand times, but you never got bored. And you always wanted to see it just one more time...

"Hello?” Ororo said into her phone. Then she paused to listen.

"Oh, dear,” Ororo said. Something in her voice made Logan immediately get to his feet.

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Logan and Ororo had a rule of their own where school was involved: Ororo did all of the talking. Logan tended to get very... terse... when it came to his kids.
So Logan was waiting out in the truck while Ororo talked to the Principal.

Daken and Laura were sitting to one side in the Principal's office. They looked fine, although their clothes were bedraggled and torn. Daken had a rather resigned expression on his face. Laura seemed unperturbed.

"Mrs. Howlett," Principal Davis said through clenched teeth. "We simply can't have this kind of... disturbance in our school."

Ororo arched an eyebrow at Mr. Davis. Actually she wasn't completely unsympathetic to the man's plight. Mr. Davis was a reasonable man who showed no particular trace of anti-mutant bigotry. He knew what Logan, Ororo, Daken, and Laura were - and he was doing his best to make things work for them at his school.

"What kind of disturbance are you referring to, Mr. Davis?" Ororo asked.

"Daken beat up the sixth grade!" Laura announced brightly.

That made Ororo pause. She gave Daken an inquiring look.

Daken smiled sheepishly and nodded.

"One of the older boys tried to take the candy-bar from my lunch," Laura continued.

"And what did you do about that?" Ororo asked slowly.

"It was mine," Laura replied in a level tone that was terrifyingly in its implacability.

"I thought it was more than it was," Daken confessed. "So I went to help Laura. Then Laura punched Whit in the nuts and he fell down and started screaming. But Allen and Greg didn't see what happened and they thought I'd done something to Whit and..."

"I think I understand," Ororo said quietly.

Then Ororo looked back at Principal, "Mr. Davis, I believe we can reasonably say the Daken and Laura were provoked. And then matters escalated out of control. It was not all their fault."

"I agree," Mr. Davis growled. Ororo, who had become an expert on masculine growls, gave it a solid 7.5 out of 10. "And don't think I'm going to let those other boys get away with what they did. Especially Whitney. However, I can't have Laura and Daken responding to every affront with violence."

"I will have their father talk to them," Ororo said immediately.

Mr. Davis gave Ororo a long and narrow look. He didn't seem particularly comforted by what she had said.

"And I will talk to them as well," Ororo added quickly.

Mr. Davis nodded and leaned back in his chair.

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It was after school and Logan was driving Daken and Laura back home.

"No claws," Laura said quietly. She was sitting between her father and Daken.
"No claws," Daken seconded.

Logan didn't smile, but he did give Laura's hand a squeeze.

"No claws," he agreed.
Every parent watches their children and wonders nervously about the lessons they are learning.

DECISIONS

"'Now is the winter of our discontent,'" Daken muttered. He sounded appropriately disgruntled.

Laura glanced curiously at Daken. Then she looked up at her father and asked, "What did he say?"

Like Daken, Logan was eyeing the dinner table with no little skepticism. However, he did take the time to answer Laura's question. "He's quoting Shakespeare. Richard the Third."

"What does it mean?" Laura continued curiously.

"It means I hate avocados," Daken announced as he glared at the green stuff on his plate.

Ororo just smiled calmly and said, "A vegetarian meal once a week is hardly a great burden."

"Avocados are okay!" Laura challenged Daken.

Daken glared at Laura. "In thy foul throat thou liest."

"Quit being a jerk," Laura shot back. She was rather beginning to dislike the Shakespearean version of Daken.

"Eat up," Logan ordered. Then he took a deep breath and followed his own command.

Daken muttered a few choice comments about green slime. Logan gave him a long and level look. Daken ate the rest of his dinner in a state of silent protest.

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They were in bed. Logan was mostly under the covers, with his back up against the headboard. Meanwhile, Ororo sat next to him on the edge of the bed. She was wearing a simple white nightgown that covered her from neck to ankle. And her eyes were closed in quiet pleasure as her husband worked a brush through her long and straight hair.

Logan had never exactly put it into words, but Ororo wasn't allowed to brush her own hair when he was around. Instead, Logan did it for her. Ororo thought that it was an eminently pleasant way to honor and obey her husband.

"You were very patient at dinner," Ororo said quietly as her head nodded from side-to-side to the rhythmic pull of the brush.

"Damn right I was," Logan chuckled. "Why the sudden avocado attack?"

"I talked to Hank. He says a meat-heavy diet is normal for you, Daken, and Laura. However, he is
concerned that there are certain nutrients the children may not be getting."

That was good enough for Logan. "Okay, then. Meatless Mondays it is."

Ororo smiled, turned around, and wrapped her arms around Logan's neck. Logan tossed the brush aside. Then their lips met.

Making love was problematical in a home occupied by two children with inhumanly superb hearing. So Logan and Ororo had developed a habit of waiting until after Logan dropped Daken and Laura off at school. But in the evenings, it was possible for them to make some quietly extravagant promises about what tomorrow would bring.

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Daken, Laura, and Hank-the-bear were lying in a pile on the cabin porch. Hank was curled up around Laura and snoring impressively. Laura was dozing on-and-off as she enjoyed the furry warmth. Daken was using Hank as something comfortable to lean against as he finished up some reading.

With a deep sigh, Daken suddenly closed his book and tossed it onto a nearby rocking chair.

"What's wrong, Dak?" Laura asked sleepily.

Daken was silent for a few moments before he responded. "Richard the Third was a bad guy."

"He's the king you've been reading about? The one who talked funny?"

"Yeah," Daken said shortly as he got to his feet. Hank growled a sleepy protest at the loss of body heat.

"Sorry, Hank," Daken said quietly, "but it's bedtime."

Laura held up her arms and Daken lifted her out of the bear's grasp.

Hank opened an eye and gave the kids a slightly betrayed look. Still clinging to her brother, Laura sniktched out a foot-claw and reached down with her leg to scratch Hank behind the ears. He loved that.

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It only took about a half-hour to drive to the rural school that Daken and Laura attended. Laura often dozed at least part of the way. Daken had lately taken to using the time to finish up schoolwork.

Laura was slumped bonelessly against her brother, with her eyes closed. Daken had an arm wrapped around her as he used his other hand to jot down some notes.

Daken silently closed the notebook, inserted his pen into the spine, and then stuffed it into his backpack with a little more force than necessary.

Logan glanced at his son. "Something bothering you, Dak?"

Daken was silent for a few moments before he responded. "I finished up that story about Richard the Third. He was kind of a creep. I kept hoping all of his talk about being bad was just talk. That he'd decide to be something else."
Logan nodded slowly. "Yeah. There are some holdouts, but most historians don't seem to have anything good to say about him. He pretty likely murdered his nephews. They were between him and the throne."

Daken didn't immediately respond. Logan could tell that something was on Daken's mind, but he'd long since learned that you were better off waiting for Daken to speak up in his own time.

"He was different from everyone else," Daken finally said.

Logan didn't immediately respond. "Different from everyone else" was a big subject in their family.

"You're talking about his back, right?" Logan finally asked.

Daken nodded. "Yeah. I read an article that had a picture of a guy with a deformed spine. It was pretty bad."

"He probably spent a lot of his life in pain," Logan said. His hands involuntarily flexed on the steering wheel.

Daken seemed to consider that for a while. "Maybe Richard wouldn't have been so bad, if he hadn't been different from everyone else."

"Maybe," Logan said quietly, "but you can't judge a man by what might have been. All you have to work with is what he actually was - and what he actually did."

"In the story, Richard said that he didn't have any choice except to be evil. Being different made him that way."

Logan paused as he considered his own blood-soaked past. Then he shook his head. "You always have a choice. You just have to be willing to make the right one."

Daken frowned and retired back into what Logan and Ororo both called "Dakenland" - a place of deep and silent brooding where their son went to consider the things he considered important.

They were another five miles down the road when Daken finally spoke up again. "Being different is a pretty lousy excuse for hurting other people," Daken said as he stared out the window.

Logan wordlessly studied his son's profile.

The kids tumbled out of the truck in a flurry of limbs, jackets, scarves, gloves, and book-bags.

"Avocados are still okay!" Laura growled at her brother. The argument had started again just before they got to the school. Laura seemed pretty determined to defend the honor of avocados against all aggressors.

Daken rolled his eyes and then called upon his new-found familiarity with Shakespeare once again. "Dispute not with her: she is lunatic."

Laura punched her brother in the shoulder. "Out of my sight! Thou dost infect mine eyes!"

It occurred to Logan that he hadn't heard this much Elizabethan English since the last time he had a
drink with Thor.

Daken grinned at Laura as he rubbed his shoulder. As small as Laura was, she packed a considerable punch - and Daken respected that. "Did you get into my homework last night?"

Laura shrugged. "I didn't like that book. Too many funny words. And I didn't want Richard to be such a bad-guy. I kept hoping he'd get better."

Daken nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. Same here. I wanted him to change, but after a while I ran out of excuses for all of the bad things he was doing."

Laura nodded in silent agreement. Maybe there was something sad in her eyes.

Then Daken took Laura's hand in his so he could walk her to the front door. From inside the truck, Logan watched them enter the school.

"'So wise so young, they say, do never live long,'" he quoted quietly to himself.

Well, he and 'Ro were there to make damned sure that didn't happen.

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Ororo greeted Logan back home with a kiss.

"How was the drive?" she asked as she wrapped her arms around Logan and tucked her hands into the back pockets of his jeans.

"Pretty good," Logan replied slowly.

Ororo noticed that something was off in Logan's voice. "Is something wrong?"

The ghost of a smile appeared on Logan's face. "Dak doesn't know it, but he's in the process of deciding what kind of man he's going to be."

Ororo frowned as she examined Logan's face. "What is he deciding?"

Logan's smile turned into a broad grin and he kissed Ororo again.
Logan and Ororo have a long history with some very dangerous characters. One of them has re-entered their lives.

THE VISITOR

Logan was at work. The children were in school. And it was a crisply beautiful autumn afternoon.

Sitting in her husband's pickup truck, Ororo considered her next move. She was parked in the center of the small town that was the closest thing to civilization near where they lived. Logan kept his office there. The school that Daken and Laura attended was located just outside of town.

And an old and deadly foe was in town. Ororo had caught a glimpse of her just a few moments ago. There was a decision to make. Her husband was in danger. Her children were threatened. Ororo had to act.

Ororo's eyes flared white. Off to the west, amid the storm-friendly mountains, the atmosphere bent to her will. Pressure patterns shifted and winds began to whip erratically back and forth as clouds formed and piled up.

Still sitting in the truck, Ororo impassively watched her handiwork as an ominous-looking storm front steadily became more and more visible. Within minutes, it was fully formed and advancing down the mountains.

A local deputy sheriff walked by Ororo's truck, obviously surprised by the sudden development in the weather. Then he noticed Ororo and gave her a polite, but distracted, nod. His name was Ed Barnett, and he was a young veteran who had signed on with the Sheriff's department a year ago. The local consensus of opinion was that Ed was a good catch for the county. He was a reasonable and fair young man who took his job seriously.

Ororo nodded to Ed in return. It was strange to think that he might be arresting her in just a few minutes. Yes, Ororo could easily handle the young man in any kind of confrontation, but that wasn't something she particularly wanted to do. Ed would just be doing his duty.

After all, Ororo was about to kill someone.

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Ororo took a deep breath and stepped out of the truck. She left the door unlocked and the keys in the ignition. Logan would be needing the truck after she...

Standing next to the truck, Ororo closed her eyes for a moment. Then she ran her fingers through her hair and opened her eyes again. Her mind was a whirlwind of possible consequences. In the next few minutes, she might very well lose everything. Once she'd done what was necessary, she would either have to accept being arrested or flee.
No. She wouldn't allow her children to become fugitives. However, she couldn't imagine leaving them. Or her husband. She was so happy with her new life. The idea of throwing it away was almost too much to bear.

Could she claim self-defense? The person she was about to kill was a well-known international criminal. Ororo was willing to murder for her family, so lying would be no problem. But how sympathetic would the local courts be to a mutant defendant?

As Ororo crossed the town square, the gust-front from the approaching storm washed over the town, blowing cold and strong. The few locals still outside begin quickly heading indoors.

Then every building in town seemed to shiver as a flash of lightning and a near immediate crash of thunder rolled down the mountains.

Ororo made the storm wait until just after she stepped inside the town diner. Then the rain finally began to pour down.

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Inside the diner, Ororo made a quick assessment.

Two elderly gentlemen - a pair of local ranchers - were sitting near the window, having coffee as they discussed the problems of the world. Ellie McPherson, the young mother who was the afternoon waitress, was topping off their coffee cups. The owner and cook - Charlie Wash - was busing some tables. All of them were staring out of the diner's plate glass front window, startled by the sudden downpour.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Howlett," Ellie said politely to Ororo. Ororo smiled automatically and returned the greeting. Charlie also said hello and then went back to work. The two ranchers just nodded stiffly, which was a common reaction from the older folks in the area. Ororo had never been able to figure out if they were simply being formal and old-fashioned - or if they had a problem with black people, mutants, outsiders, or some combination of the three. In any case, they were never specifically rude or troublesome. And, when you got down to it, that was pretty much all you could ask of people.

In the back of the diner, a woman dressed in a hooded coat sat alone at an isolated table. The back door, which lead to a narrow alleyway, was right next to her table.

Ororo considered her options. The civilians at the front of the diner were a complication. However, if Ororo used the storm she'd just created to augment her natural power, she could call a massive lighting strike through the back door. That would be enough to kill the woman sitting in back.

The problem was, Ororo couldn't absolutely guarantee the safety of the other people in the diner. Lightning was intrinsically vicious and capricious - even in her hands. And the diner was a small and confined place.

As Ororo watched, the woman she was planning to kill raised a hand in greeting. Her hand was abnormally large and her fingers were at least twice as long as a normal human's.

The owner and the waitress tried not to stare. The two elderly ranchers unabashedly watched with coldly disapproving eyes.

Outside, the storm howled and rattled at the windows.

Orooro considered ending it right then and there. Her storm was furiously ready and she could sense the deadly dance and play of potential electricity in the air. Besides, getting close to Deathstrike would be unwise. Like most of the inhabitants of Logan's circle of boundless violence, Deathstrike was horrifyingly dangerous at close quarters. Orooro would be making herself desperately vulnerable if she actually closed the distance between them.

But the closer Orooro got the Deathstrike, the better she would be able to control her lightning.

The diner fell silent as Orooro paced down its length, but the rain was still pounding away at the roof.

Yuriko Oyama - Lady Deathstrike - was wearing clothing that was heavy enough to conceal the most extreme of her cybernetic enhancements. Even the sleeves of her coat had been long enough to conceal her strange hands, until she chose to reveal them.

There was a pot of tea on Yuriko's table. An untouched cup was sitting in front of her.

Her eyes never straying from Yuriko's, Orooro pulled a chair away from the table and sat down.

The situation was dangerously balanced on a knife's edge. If Yuriko attacked, Orooro would only have the slimmest fraction of a second to react. But even if Yuriko dealt a death-blow, Orooro would probably still be able to call down her lightning. And that would be devastating.

"You should not have come here," Orooro said. Her voice was cold and distant, but not angry. It was long past the time for anger.

Yuriko's brown eyes had a faint rim of orange around the iris. The pupils were oddly gear-shaped. Her original eyes - her real eyes - were long gone.

For a long moment, she silently examined Orooro's face. Then Yuriko tapped the teapot with the claw-tip of an abnormally long finger. It sounded like a click of metal on ceramic.

"Would you care from some tea?" Yuriko asked.

Orooro considered the question. Then nodded wordlessly.

Yuriko's gaze shifted away from Orooro. "Please," she called to the waitress in excellent English, "could we have another cup?"

Ellie silently put a cup in front of Orooro, filled it from the teapot, and then hurried away.

"I thought Logan would be the one to visit me," Yuriko said calmly as she picked up her own cup and took a sip.

"You would not want that," Orooro responded.

A brief, bitter smile flickered across Yuriko's lips. Despite the strange scars her father had carved into her face, and the ravages of the Hellfire Club surgery that had transformed her into a cyborg, it was still possible for Orooro to see what Yuriko had originally looked like. She had not been a beautiful woman, but her lean face had once held a certain handsome dignity.

"I have fought Logan many times," Yuriko said thoughtfully. "I have both won and lost."
"You would lose that fight," Ororo said with a shake of her head. Logan would see Deathstrike's presence as a threat to their children and would react with headlong fury. The only question would be how many pieces Yuriko would be in once Logan was done with her.

Yuriko simply shrugged. "I think nobody would win that particular fight."

Ororo didn't reply. Yuriko was right. Once Yuriko was dead, the new life Logan and Ororo had built for themselves would be gone forever.

"How did this happen, Ororo?" Yuriko asked curiously.

"What do you mean?"

Yuriko smiled again. "How did two such formidable warriors as yourself and Logan-san come to take up quiet and peaceful lives?"

Ororo shrugged broadly. "We found ourselves with new responsibilities. We changed to meet them."

"You mean the children," Yuriko said thoughtfully.

Not trusting herself to speak, Ororo nodded.

"And it is because of the children that you intend to kill me?" Yuriko added.

Ororo nodded again.

"But they are not really your children," Yuriko pointed out.

A low, intense, and impossibly long growl of thunder reverberated through the building. The teapot and the cups on the table rattled as the floor vibrated. Then a flurry of gasps and curses came from the front of the diner as static electricity began to visibly play across the metal objects and fixtures of the room.

Ororo's eyes were now pure white.

Yuriko froze and kept her hands visible and still. Next to her on the table, a discarded spoon was rattling from side-to-side as it emitted faint blue sparks.

Then she said softly, "I meant no insult, Lady Howlett. I am simply stating a fact."

"Daken and Laura are my children, Lady Oyama. Never forget that."

"As I said, Lady Howlett: I meant no insult. And I am no threat to your family."

Ororo nodded once. And then the play of wild electricity in the diner receded.

"Your presence here is a threat," Ororo said coldly as her eyes cleared and became visible again.

Yuriko shook her head. "That is not true."

Ororo wasn't in an agreeable mood. "You have been at war with my husband for years, Yuriko," Ororo said tersely. "How has that changed?"

"Everything has changed," Yuriko answered with a laugh that seemed slightly off-center. "Because your husband has changed."
Ororo gave Yuriko a questioning look.

Yuriko took a deep breath. "For so long, I told myself that I was fighting Logan because his existence was an insult to my father's honor. Then, after years of empty battle, I told myself that it had become a personal struggle between us. I thought that I had to end the Wolverine if I was to ever find peace with myself."

Ororo still didn't say anything as she studied Yuriko's face.

Yuriko sighed and continued. "This morning, I used everything I've learned over the years about tracking Logan. I kept my distance and made sure the wind and the sunlight favored me as I followed him. And then I saw it. I saw Logan drive into town. I saw him drop you at the market. I saw him leave his children at their school. He made sure that they had their books and lunches. He gave his son a few dollars for some reason. Then he kissed his daughter goodbye and she hugged him. I could tell that the boy wanted to do the same, but he is at that age where a boy begins to feel there should be some physical distance between himself and his father. It is a silly thing about fathers and sons that I saw happen long ago in my own family."

Then Yuriko looked Ororo in the eyes. "I saw then that the Wolverine was gone. I hadn't killed him, but he was gone. Congratulations, Ororo. You've done something I could not do with all my years of hate and violence."

Yuriko looked down at her distorted hands. They were resting on the table in front of her. She curled her long fingers and the familiar motion was both smoothly mechanical and eerily, coldly, insect-like. It did not seem at all human.

"And it was all for nothing," Yuriko finished tonelessly. She seemed bottomlessly tired and sad. "The hating. The fighting. The killing. What I did to my body and my soul. What I did to others. All for nothing. The Wolverine is gone and I had little, if anything, to do with it. It is as if I have never existed."

Ororo slowly reached over and took Yuriko's deadly hands in her own.

"So this is victory," Yuriko said as she began to cry a substance that wasn't tears. "My glorious, glorious, victory."

********************

The county airport was a concrete airstrip built by the government during World War II. A few odd support buildings - most of them not in use - were clustered at one end of the strip. The terminal had been built in the seventies. It was about the size of a medium bus-station.

Ororo and Yuriko were waiting in the terminal as Logan drove up. Ororo had used the pickup to drive herself and Yuriko to the airport. Logan was getting a lift from a young man who worked for a local land surveyor. The surveyor and Logan both had an office in the same building. They occasionally exchanged neighborly favors.

After thanking his driver for the lift, Logan walked into the terminal.

Ororo and Yuriko were sitting next to each other. Ororo looked tired and wan. She was obviously coming down from an adrenaline high. Yuriko looked...

Logan found himself searching for the word to describe Yuriko. All he could come up with was "empty".
Yuriko stood and bowed to Logan. "Logan-san," she said politely.

Logan carefully returned the bow, not allowing himself to lose sight of Yuriko as he did. Old habits died hard. Historically, whenever he and Lady Deathstrike were in each other's presence, a deadly fight ensued.

"It is good to see you again, Lady Oyama," Logan said in Japanese. Politeness would cost him nothing. And the essence of courtesy was the sociable lie.

Ororo moved to her husband and kissed him on the cheek. "Hank and Kitty are on the way," she said quietly. Logan nodded in response.

"I am sorry to have intruded," Yuriko continued, her eyes oddly distant and lost. "But Ororo and I were talking and she suggested that perhaps Dr. McCoy could help with some issues that are of concern to me."

Logan nodded slowly and said, "Hank is really good at what he does."

It seemed to Logan as if something was broken in Yuriko. Logan was glad that he wasn't in a fight. He was even happier that Ororo wasn't in a fight. Yuriko Oyama had always been a terribly dangerous foe - as much due to her iron-willed fanaticism as her physical prowess - but there was something unsettling about seeing her like this.

Off in the distance, Logan could hear the roar of the Blackbird's engines. They must be turning in order to make their final approach.

"I will miss you, Logan-san," Yuriko said distantly. She had also heard the Blackbird.

"Perhaps we will meet again," Logan said.

Yuriko gave him a tiny smile and shook her head. "There is no need."

***********************

Holding a cellphone to his ear, Logan glanced at the couch. Ororo, Daken, and Laura were on it, dead asleep. The kids were curled up in Ororo's arms. Ororo wasn't letting them out of her sight. And Logan wouldn't let either Ororo or the kids out of his sight. They were over-reacting, of course, but it was completely understandable.

"Can you help her?" Logan asked.

Hank's voice was startlingly clear given the normal reception problems in the part of the country where Ororo and Logan lived. But then again, the phone Logan was using had a fair amount of Shi'ar technology built into it.

Hank sighed, "The real problem isn't the cybernetics. It's psychological. I'm consulting with Dr. Samson. Removing as much of the cybernetics as possible will help Yuriko's mental state, but she'll still need psychological counseling."

"Okay," Logan said doubtfully. This wasn't really his sort of thing. He just hoped...

"Do what you can for her, Hank. Please," Logan heard himself say. Deep down, despite all the years of insane violence, he'd never thought Yuriko Oyama was evil. Just horribly misguided.

"We will. How are Ororo and the kids doing?"
"Asleep in a big pile on the couch."

"It is my medical opinion that you should join them."

Logan chuckled. "Sounds good. Any other suggestions?"

"Work less and play more. Kiss and hug your kids more often. Make wild and passionate love to your beautiful wife whenever the opportunity presents itself."

Logan grinned into the phone. "Hank, I should ask your advice more often."

"Also, you should eat more vegetables and cut down on the drinking and smoking," Hank continued.

"Go to hell, you quack," Logan grumbled into the phone.

Hank was still laughing when Logan hung up.

Logan kicked off his boots and wiggled onto the couch. Daken growled a sleepy protest and then immediately fell back to sleep. Laura didn't even awaken as she burrowed deeper into the warm spot between her brother and her mother.

Ororo smiled, pressed her backside against Logan, and gave him a wiggle that was innocently meaningless to their children, but was somewhere between R- and X-Rated for Logan.

Burying his face in his wife's hair, Logan kissed her on the back of the neck, and then went to sleep.
**Chapter Summary**

Laura encounters someone's comicbook collection.

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**THE LITTLEST COMIC FAN**

Billy Watt was in love, but he just didn't know how to express it. That's a problem common of many men and boys, but it can be especially acute when you're in the second grade.

So while Daken and Billy's big-brother Brad played video-games in the living room, Billy showed Laura around the house, all the while wretchedly trying to figure out a way to tell Laura how he felt about her.

"And this is where my dad hangs out. He calls it his den," Billy said as he tried not to stare at Laura's green eyes. As far as Billy was concerned, Laura had the coolest eyes he'd ever seen.

Laura was actually mildly impressed with the Watt home. The Watt family had a much bigger house than the Howlett family. Why... Brad and Billy each had their own room! And the only place that Laura's dad had all to himself was his office here in town.

"Does your dad work here?" Laura asked.

Billy shrugged. "Sometimes. Mostly he just reads and does things on his computer."

Laura entered the room. Maps -- modern and historical -- covered most of the walls. However, there were also more personal displays. A family portrait was framed on one wall. There was a diploma from an out-of-state college. Another picture showed a younger Mr. Watt and some other men in soldier's uniforms. A special place of prominence went to a flag folded into a neat triangle that was displayed in a wooden box. Next to the flag was a photo of a man who looked like an older version of Mr. Watt.

Overflowing bookshelves were haphazardly scattered around the room. An elderly desk had an up-to-date computer sitting on it. The desk chair was a little dilapidated, but still serviceable.

Being who she was, Laura immediately bee-lined towards trouble. There were some brightly colored publications piled on Mr. Watt's desk. Laura picked one of them up.

"What's this?" she asked curiously.

"It's a comicbook," Billy replied authoritatively, glad for the opportunity to show-off for Laura. "My dad collected a bunch of them when he was a kid. And he still buys some. Lately, he's been looking through them a lot. He told mom that he's trying to decide if they're worth something, but I think he just likes to read them."

Laura stared at the cover of the comicbook she was holding. A dark-skinned woman with white hair, dressed in a scanty outfit, was poised dramatically in mid-air. Lightning surrounded her and danced between her widespread hands. Meanwhile, two outlandishly clad men seemed to be rushing towards the reader. One of the men had blue skin, solid yellow eyes, and a barbed tail. The
other was brandishing metal claws from each hand. They were grimacing aggressively and both of them seemed to have a lot of sharp teeth.

Laura began flipping through the comicbook.

**********************

An hour later, Logan arrived at the Watt household. He hadn't been able to pick the kids up from school on time. Mrs. Watt had been kind enough to let them stay with her.

"Sorry," he apologized to Mrs. Watt. "I got stuck at the office. Thanks for keeping an eye on the kids."

"Oh, don't apologize," Mrs. Watt said with a laugh. "They've been pretty quiet -- well, except for whenever Daken and Brad get into a tight spot in their game and start shouting."

"What's Laura been up to?" Logan asked.

"She and Billy are in the den -- doing some reading. They're so cute together."

While Mrs. Watt fetched Laura, Logan dragged a loudly protesting Daken away from his game.

**********************

Dinner was over. Logan and Daken were outside, dealing with an errant tail-light on the truck. Laura was perched on the kitchen counter, next to the sink, helping her mother wash and dry the dishes. Laura wasn't exactly talkative, but it seemed to Ororo that Laura was even less voluble than normal. She had something on her mind.

As Ororo passed a dish to Laura, Laura finally broke her silence.

"Mom, were you once married to a man named T'challa?"

Laura had pretty impressive reactions. So she was able to grab the dish before it hit the floor.

**********************

Logan and Ororo were sitting together on the porch-swing.

"I will never understand why you did not allow me to deal with that Hudlin fellow," Ororo fumed.

"Because you were mad as hell," Logan replied dryly. "And I'm the only person in this family allowed to make a fool of himself because of his temper. Besides, Reggie was just a guy trying to make a living. And he was obviously kinda hung up on you. Believe me, I understand that last part."

Ororo gave her distracted husband a tiny smile. Even a goddess is vulnerable to those odd moments when a man unwittingly makes what he considers to be a simple truth into the deepest sort of flattery.

"So what did you tell Laura?" Logan asked.

Ororo rolled her eyes. "The truth. That Africa is a big place and I never actually met T'challa -- either as a Prince or a King -- until after I came to America. And that we have never been more than friends."
"Did she have any other questions?"

Ororo gave Logan an amused look, "Well, she did want to know the details about you and Jean. She saw that portrait of you two kissing."

Logan let out a long, whistling breath. There was a glass of whiskey on the porch railing next to Logan. He downed it in one swallow.

"Laura is concerned that you and her Uncle Scott were fighting over her Aunt Jean," Ororo added. "She feels it was rather stupid and that everyone should have just been friends."

"She has a point," Logan conceded. "What else?"

"She wants me to teach her how to pick a lock," Ororo continued.

Logan considered that as he slowly rattled the ice-cubes in his otherwise empty drink.

"Logan!" Ororo protested.

"Lockpicking is a handy skill," Logan pointed out. "You and Gumbo used it to save our tails more than once. It might be a good thing for Dak and Laura to know."

"I will not train our children to be thieves!"

"I agree, but we should consider anything that might give them an edge," Logan suggested. "Eventually they're going to grow up and go out into the world. And we don't know what they're going to run into. I'd rather they have other options to settle situations besides just sticking their claws into someone's neck."

Ororo thought that over, her fingers drumming thoughtfully on the arm of the swing.

"We should wait until they are older," she finally said.

Logan nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. What else did Laura mention?"

"She wants to go to Japan and meet Yukio someday."

Logan took a long and yearning look at his empty glass.

"Okay," he said eventually. "So just what did those comics have to say about the three of us?"

Ororo pursed her lips. "As for Yukio and I... well, the comics were suggestive, but never explicit. I'm sure that Claremont fellow had his suspicions, but he was writing in a more conservative time. On the other hand, whenever the comics have you in Japan, it usually ends with you and Yukio kissing passionately on a pile of dead ninjas."

"Once upon a time, that was actually kinda accurate," Logan conceded. "Did any of the guys at Marvel make the obvious connection?"

Ororo shook her head. "Probably, but there were limits to what they could put into print. Thank goodness for the Comics Code!"

"So... no stories that involve the three of us naked on the roof of the Imperial Palace?"

Ororo's lips quirked. "We had far too much Sake that night."
Logan was also trying not to smile. "And then we couldn't find our clothes the next morning."

"I should never make love after I have had too much to drink," Ororo admitted. "The weather turns unpredictable and that can include some very powerful winds."

"It did make sneaking out of the palace grounds kinda tricky."

Ororo smiled and took her husband's hands in her own. The kiss they shared was long and lingering.

"Any idea which other comics Laura's read?" Logan finally asked.

"I think we are going to find out," Ororo suggested ominously.

Logan let out a big sigh. "We should have sued Marvel into the ground. I told Charles and Scotty to sic Matt Murdock on them."

Ororo frowned. "Charles thought that the comics would enhance our public image. And they obviously did help. Remember when children would ask us to autograph their comicbooks?"

Logan shrugged. "Yeah, but the guys at Marvel are pretty big into soap opera. And their stories just got crazier and crazier over time. People have some strange ideas about us."

Ororo's eyes suddenly went wide. "Thank the Goddess they never made that movie!"

Logan's grimaced in exasperated agreement. "Remember the guy that was supposed to play me? The six foot tall Australian pretty-boy?"

"At least their version of you had coherent lines. That leaked script had me saying the oddest thing about electrocuting a toad."

**********************

It was after bedtime for the kids. And Ororo was also asleep.

Logan was still on the porch, enjoying the night air. And waiting. He knew he was going to have a visitor. Logan could be a lot more patient than most people realized.

"Daddy?" a quiet voice spoke up from the cabin's doorway.

"Come here," Logan said as he opened his arms.

Laura immediately crawled into her father's lap.

For a long moment, they both examined the night forest in a way most people couldn't. Hank-the-bear was slumbering near the woodpile. A nervous raccoon was perched in a nearby tree, hoping that the leviathan below would eventually leave. In another tree, an owl ignored the bear and the raccoon as it considered its options. Then, with a graceful flicker of wings, the owl glided off its branch.
There was a tiny gasp from the forest-floor as the owl slew its prey.

"What's wrong?" Logan asked.

Laura didn't answer immediately, but after a moment or two she eventually spoke up. "Did those people at Weapon-X really do all of those things to you?"

"Yes." Logan answered. He really wasn't sure what else to say. Meanwhile he prayed that Laura hadn't seen that damned Barry Windsor-Smith graphic novel. That one was too damned close to the truth.

A whirlwind of blood and agony. Alarms howling and people screaming. The stench of panic. The meaningless impact of bullets jerking his body back and forth. And the bloodthirsty fury that filled Logan... it was like a blissful mix of heroin and heaven. How much of his life since then had been nothing more than an attempt to once again find that state of being?

Laura was silent for a long time before speaking again. "If you and mommy and Uncle Kurt and Uncle Peter hadn't rescued me -- would they have done the same thing to me?"

The roar of gunfire intermixed with the occasionally thunderous thump of a grenade. Peter picking up a power-armor trooper and pitching him through a steel wall. Kurt teleporting back to them, yelling that enemy reinforcements were coming. He had a through-and-through bullet wound in one thigh and was trying to hold it closed. Ororo, her face streaked with blood, running towards him, carrying a small, crying, bundle.

Logan closed his eyes and hugged Laura very hard.

"No," he lied to Laura and to himself and to the universe. "They wouldn't have done anything like that to you. You're just a little girl."

Laura was quiet for some time before speaking again.

"Will Sabertooth ever come after us?" she asked in a whisper.

"No," Logan said flatly.

"Why not?" Laura wasn't precisely scared, but she obviously considered the subject to be something to worry about.

"He's gone," Logan said shortly. Everything in his voice said that the subject was closed.

Laura looked up at her father. Then she nodded and laid her head against Logan's chest. Laura knew what her father's word was worth.

She was asleep in seconds.

Logan held Laura as he stared into the darkness.

As long as Creed was alive, they -- and even more importantly, Daken and Laura -- would never be safe. That had to be corrected.

They simply had no choice.

Logan and Ororo silently held hands as the remains burned away to dust in a high-temperature medical-waste crematorium. Then they took the Blackbird around the world, scattering Creed's ashes in the waters of five oceans. At each stop, Ororo whispered the words of an ancient African
ritual that was half-way between being a prayer and a spell. It was intended to forever banish the damned and doomed souls of the most evil of men.

Logan was oddly quiet during the whole thing.

After they were done, they landed in South Africa and made love on an isolated beach. It was the closest they ever came to celebrating a death.

Logan and Bradley Watt were having a drink in the better of the two local bars. They had a corner table to themselves, giving them some privacy as they talked quietly.

"I'm sorry Laura got into my collection," Brad sighed. "That was careless of me. I'll keep it locked up from now on."

Logan shrugged as he took a sip from his beer. "It's okay, Brad. It was pretty much inevitable that this would happen someday. It's probably better that we've finally got it out of the way."

"You know, I've never asked you about those stories in the comics..." Brad said slowly.

Logan contemplated his beer. "Some of it is true. Some of it is bull. The guys at Marvel are entertainers -- not reporters. They have a schedule to keep and getting a story in print is more important to them than getting all of the details right. And it's not like we tell them everything."

That was about as much prying as Bradley felt comfortable doing.

"You know," Bradley mused thoughtfully, "it's a probably a good thing they never made that movie."

Logan nodded in agreement.

Autumn continued its slow drift to winter. Eventually, there were some decisions to be made in terms of Halloween costumes -- Logan and Ororo always took the kids into town to go trick-or-treating.

Ororo drew a firm line at cutting Laura's hair into a Mohawk -- even though Laura's hair would grow back within a day. And without the Mohawk, Laura didn't want her first choice of a costume. Besides, it wasn't like a punkish black leather outfit was really appropriate for a girl her age. So instead, Laura settled for a variant of her mother's original black and gold-trimmed costume. She seemed more than happy with it.

"Whoosh!" Laura yelled just before jumping off the fireplace mantelpiece. Her cape flared dramatically behind her as she hurtled across the room.

Ororo expertly caught her in mid-flight. If you lived with Laura, you had to expect sudden bursts of acrobatic energy. Then Ororo swung a wildly giggling Laura over her shoulders.

"I think we should go for a real flight," Ororo told her daughter. Laura was cheering as Ororo carried her outside.

Daken came out of the room. His outfit was brown and orange and featured a savage-looking necklace of teeth and bones.
"This is great!" Daken said proudly to his dad. "I was scared it would be kind of dorky."

Logan smiled at his son. "What did you expect? Yellow spandex?"
Daken is smitten by a girl at school. And the most lethal pre-teenager on the continent has no clue what to do.

SMOOTH OPERATOR

Aliza Horseman was one-half Mexican, one-quarter Sioux Indian, one-quarter Irish, and - as far as Daken was concerned - one hundred percent gorgeous.

Their eyes met in the hallway. They were heading in opposite directions as they hurried to their next classes.

"Hi, Daken," Aliza said with bright smile.

Daken tried to say something like, "Hello, Aliza. You look great today."

What came out instead was, "Hurk."

Aliza gave him a puzzled look. And then she was gone.

Daken sighed and slammed the book he was carrying against his forehead. Hard.

It was after-school. Daken and Laura were sitting on the steps, waiting for their Dad to pick them up.

Aliza Horsemen walk by - she lived just a few blocks away and she had to get home and help her mom with chores.

"Hi," Aliza said distractedly to Daken and Laura.

"Hi," Laura replied.

Daken opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Then he paused, took a deep breath, mentally regrouped, and...

By then, Aliza was halfway down the block.

"HI!" Daken roared. Everyone in the schoolyard stopped what they were doing and stared at him. Aliza didn't even notice.

"You can be such a dork sometimes," Laura sighed in disgust.

Daken frustratedly ran a hand through his Mohawk.

"Tell me about it," he growled at his sister.
Daken was sitting on the porch, using Hank-the-bear as a backrest. And he was deep in thought as he tried to figure out why it was so difficult to talk to Aliza.

"Something wrong, Dak?" Logan asked as he stepped outside. He was about to enjoy his evening cigar.

"Girl problems," Daken replied shortly.

Logan paused for a long moment as he examined his son. "Anyone I know?" he asked.

"Aliza Horseman."

Logan frowned thoughtfully. "The pretty little brown girl with the red hair?"

"Yeah."

"Taste in women is apparently genetic," Ororo called from inside the cabin.

Logan chuckled. Daken threw his hands in the air, stood up, and stalked off into the woods.

Hank-the-bear opened one sleepy eye and made an interrogative chuffing sound. Logan sat down cross-legged next to the bear and scratched him behind the ears.

"Don't worry. He'll be back," Logan assured the bear.

"It's just a case of puppy love," Logan said with a shrug.

He and Ororo were sitting on the couch together. They had some of their best conversations there.

"Yes, but we still should give some thought to what adolescence will be like for them," Ororo suggested

"Dak and Laura are good kids. They'll sort it out. And we'll be here to help him."

Ororo sighed. "You are probably right. I should not worry about it too much. And we have some time to consider how to handle it."

Logan nodded and gave Ororo a long kiss.

Daken jumped out of the truck and wordlessly walked back into the cabin. He hadn't said a word all the way back home.

"What's wrong with him?" Logan asked Laura.

Laura rolled her eyes. "He tried to talk to Aliza during lunch. But as he was walking over to her, he tripped over his own feet and fell on his face. Everyone in school saw it."

Logan winced. "I suppose they all laughed at him."

Laura shook her head. "They didn't dare. What's wrong with him?"

Logan hesitated, not sure how to explain. Then he gave it a try. "Dak has some feelings about Aliza. It takes time to sort that out. And it can be kind of tough."

Laura frowned. "Is it about sex?" she asked.
Logan stared at his daughter. "It dam... danged well better not be. Not at his age. And just what the heck do you know about sex?"

Laura responded instantly. "At its most basic, it is a procreative process in which the male penis becomes erect due to increased blood flow and is inserted into the female vagina..."

Logan was sitting in the bed of his truck. He was making pretty good headway on a bottle of whiskey.

Ororo walked up and handed him a glass. Logan tended to gulp down whiskey when he was drinking straight from the bottle. A glass actually slowed him down a lot.

"Laura is upset," Ororo informed her husband.

Logan poured some whiskey into the glass. He didn't reply.

Ororo tried again. "I told her that you really did not intend to dig a dungeon and lock her away until she was thirty-five. However, she should probably hear that from you as well."

Logan glared at Ororo. "I start digging tomorrow. Do we have enough money in the bank for five hundred bags of concrete? And twenty-five bundles of rebar?"

Ororo sat next to her husband. Then she performed a task that some people considered roughly akin to trying to brush the teeth of a Great White Shark and took the bottle away from Logan.

"She read about sex in a book in the school library," Ororo said as she downed a generous slug of whiskey.

"I hate the twenty-first century," Logan said mournfully.

"I know. But it is better that Laura already knows the important details."

"Yeah. You're right. And I suppose I should have a talk with Daken. Or did he read the same book that Laura read?"

Ororo smiled. "I do not know. Although in Daken's case he probably already has some insight based on the Internet. Many of his friends in town have web connections at home."

Logan winced. "Porn is even worse than Hollywood for giving people the wrong idea about reality. I'll talk to him."

"Well... the Internet is not all bad," Ororo said thoughtfully.

Logan frowned for a moment. Then his face suddenly cleared. "You're thinking about that hotel room we stayed in after that job in San Diego? The one with the really good WiFi connection?"

"And we found that website..." Ororo continued teasingly.

"Click with the mouse-thing and it would show you a random sexual position," Logan remembered fondly. "Yeah. That was okay."

"Okay? We didn't leave the room for two days," Ororo laughed.

"Too bad we never got that last one to work," Logan added. "You know... the one where we needed a hammock?"
Ororo sighed. "In retrospect, trying to rig a blanket as a hammock was a bad idea. I was almost knocked out when it collapsed. And we tore those big holes in the walls. I still think the hotel overcharged us for the repairs."

Logan grinned and hopped out of the truck. It was difficult for him to get drunk and just as difficult for him to stay drunk. "I'll calm Laura down. Then Dak and I can talk about a few things."

"How did it go?" Logan asked. It was the following day and they were driving back from school.

"We sat together at lunch," Daken said. "She taught me some Spanish. I taught her some Japanese. It was... cool."

"And he didn't do anything too dorky this time," Laura contributed immediately. "Except for the part where he almost poked himself in the eye with his fork."

Daken gave his sister a long, level look. Then he turned back to his father and asked, "The dungeon is definitely out?"

Logan nodded.

A few days later, Ororo picked up the mail in town. There was a package addressed to her.

Deep in the forest, about a mile from the cabin, there was a particularly lovely spot right next to a small waterfall and a natural pool. And it had just occurred to Ororo that there were two strong, straight trees next to the pool that were just the right distance apart...

Ororo opened the package.

It contained a hammock.
It turns out that Magneto played a role in rescuing Laura from Weapon-X. And now that he's semi-retired, Erik Lehnsherr has moved on to a new life.

THE DEEDS OF A KING

Years ago...

"We found her," Rogue said quietly. She was obviously exhausted and dried blood was crusted on the side of her face and down along one arm.

Magneto stepped closer and looked into the bundle that Rogue was carrying. A pair of bright green eyes peered up at Magneto - apparently not frightened of the grim, helmeted face gazing down at her.

"Where are Logan and Ororo?" Magneto asked.

Rogue made a small gesture with the child in her arms. "I figure they're fighting like hell. The last I saw, they were leading those Weapon-X bastards on a merry chase all over Canada. Peter's with them. Kurt's back at the mansion with a bullet-hole in his leg. I need to go back and help."

Magneto shrugged, "And what do you want from me, Rogue? I told Logan about the latest incarnation of Weapon-X. I disrupted their sensor network so you could get inside their facility. My part in this is done. Actually, I'm not even sure why I bothered to help."

"Sorry, Eric, but you're not quite done yet," Rogue said - anger creeping into her voice. "We need time. Time to finish off Weapon-X once and for all and make sure that this little girl is safe. So you have to hide her until then."

"Marie... are you giving me an order?" Magneto replied mildly. His gray eyes were hard to see, buried as they were in his helmet, but they were definitely amused.

"Actually, sugar, I'm begging. Want to see me get on my knees?"

Magneto hesitated. Laura reached out of her blanket, curiously trying to grasp the intriguingly strange man who was just beyond her reach.

"You've always wanted to be a king," Rogue said, her voice deadly serious, "but if you want to be king, that means you sometimes have to do deeds that are worthy of a king."

Now...

The local diner did double-duty as an ice-cream shop. And whenever he happened to visit, Erik liked to take the kids there. Daken was a huge fan of the banana split. Laura preferred the strawberry sundae.
"Here you go, Mr. Lehnsherr," Ellie said as she put the roast beef special in front of Erik.

"Thank you, Ellie," Erik said. Nobody had been more surprised than Erik when he eventually realized that the food in this rather unprepossessing and deeply provincial establishment was actually quite good. He usually had the special whenever he was in town. He was yet to be disappointed.

Ellie nodded and tucked a stray blonde hair behind her ear as she topped off Erik's coffee cup. Truthfully, she was a bit charmed by Mr. Lehnsherr. He had a certain old-fashioned dignity that reminded Ellie of her long-departed grandfather.

Daken was done with his banana split. Laura - a daintier eater - was still working on her sundae.

"So what will happen to her when you take over?" Daken asked curiously.

Erik blinked in surprise. "Pardon me, Daken?"

"When you take over," Daken repeated. "What happens to Ellie and people like her?"

Erik smiled into his coffee cup. "Conquest is no longer on my agenda, Daken."

"But it once was," Laura piped up. She had a smear of strawberry syrup on her chin.

Erik used a napkin to wipe Laura's face clean. She scrunched up her face at the indignity, but actually didn't mind.

"If I had 'taken over' as you put it, then Ellie's life would have remained very much the same," Erik said as he put down the napkin and picked up his fork.

"So she wouldn't live out her life as a servant or a concubine?" Laura asked.

Erik cocked an eyebrow at Laura.

"She got her hands on some comics," Daken explained wearily. "And don't ask if she knows what a concubine really is. She does."

Erik sighed and tried the roast beef. As expected, it was quite good.

"No such thing would have been tolerated under my rule, Laura. However, I would have insisted that single mothers like Ellie go to school and either get a sensible degree or sufficient vocational training so that they would be better able to support themselves and their children. And the men who abandoned pregnant women would have found themselves regretting that decision."

The kids thought that over.

"So... no gladiatorial games?" Daken asked thoughtfully - and perhaps regretfully. "Where people would fight to the death?"

Erik's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Exactly what do they say in those comicbooks?"

"All sorts of dumb things," Laura responded as she finally finished off her sundae. "Like... there would have been camps. Camps where it would be decided who lived and who died."

Erik's fork clattered to the table.

"Mr. Lehnsherr?" Daken asked urgently as he reached over and yanked on the cuff of Erik's jacket.
"Grampa?" Laura said as she leaned forward, her eyes wide and frightened.

Ellie saw what was happening and took a few urgent steps in their direction. That was how her grandfather had passed. One moment talking normally and then...

Erik suddenly took Daken's hand. Then he reached over and touched Laura's cheek. She immediately grabbed his wrist with both of her hands and held on tight. There were tears in her eyes.

"Sorry," Erik softly reassured the children. Then he glanced at Ellie and said, "I'm fine, Ellie. I just became lost in thought."

Ellie nodded and slowly backed away, but she was obviously still worried.

The kids were playing in the park. And Erik Lehnsherr was vastly amused to be having coffee with a woman who had once been considered a goddess, but who was now wearing worn-out jeans, a flannel shirt, and a pair of ranch boots.

"Logan is influencing how you dress," he chuckled. "I'm not sure I approve."

"This is what the local people wear," Ororo pointed out. "It is best if I fit in as much as possible. And besides, it is quite comfortable."

Erik smiled as memories of desperate and ferocious battles, filled with hot white lightning and gleaming claws, flickered through his mind. Sometimes, it had been a coin-toss which one of those two particular opponents had been the most savagely uncompromising foe.

"I'm curious, have the children been given IQ tests?" Erik asked suddenly.

"No, but the school has done estimates based on academic performance. Daken has a 115 - about the same as Logan. Laura is off the charts."

Erik considered that. "The other half of the DNA that Laura was created from - it was from a human project scientist..."

Ororo nodded. "Dr. Sarah Kinney - who had a measured IQ well over 200."

"Hybrid vigor," Erik said slowly.

"The thought has occurred to me as well," Ororo responded. "Perhaps the future does not belong to Homo sapiens or Homo superior. Perhaps it belongs to a combination of the two."

"Once, I would have called that heresy," Erik mused.

"We probably would have had a fight over that," Ororo said dryly.

"Times have changed," Erik shrugged.

"Perhaps you have changed," Ororo suggested.

Erik smiled bitterly. "I am a failed conqueror and - even worse - a failed father. Any change is inevitably for the better."

"You fought when nobody else would fight," Ororo pointed out softly. "In the early days, you fought for a cause only a few understood. You bought us all time."
"Perhaps, but those days are gone. My time has passed."

Ororo shook her head. "Erik, just a few years ago you helped us rescue Laura. You found out about her and told us. You helped us get inside that Weapon-X facility. You kept Laura hidden until she was old enough to stay with us. Without any of that.."

Ororo let the rest of her words hang.

Erik sipped his coffee. "Rogue would say those were deeds worthy of a king."

"She would be right."

Erik looked into Ororo's eyes. "I've never asked you this before, Ororo. But if I had won, would you have served me?"

Ororo smiled. "I think I would have been with my husband."

Erik smiled back. "I'll accept that as a polite 'no'."

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Ororo and the kids had gone to the tiny municipal library. For Daken, that was akin to Purgatory, but they had to pick up the pile of books that Laura had ordered through interlibrary loan. For the moment, Erik was on his own. However, there was somebody else he had to talk to.

There was a fairly basic rule about Erik and Logan: they almost never talked. The things they had done to each other over the years were too much. The memories were too bad. The feelings were too harsh.

And besides, they were both a pair of stubborn bastards.

The two of them had come to a truce that was named 'Laura'. Aside from that, there was almost nothing else between Erik and Logan.

Almost nothing.

Erik marched into Logan's office and nodded a stiff greeting.

Logan just stared at Erik as he began calculating all of the steps necessary to eliminate Erik Lehnsherr once and for all. He couldn't help himself. He automatically did it every time he saw Erik.

"A man named Joseph Curwin died two days ago," Erik said without preamble.

Logan cocked his head at Erik, but said nothing. His eyes remained hard.

"In 1945, Mr. Curwin was a Sergeant in the United States Army. He was assigned to the Sixth Armored Division. He rode in one of the lead tanks that liberated Buchenwald."

Logan seemed to untense slightly.

"Sergeant Curwin died without family. He was apparently a bit of a loner and after the war he became a lifelong alcoholic. He will be buried in Billings tomorrow morning. They can't seem to find anyone to attend his funeral."

Logan nodded and got to his feet.
"I'll meet you there," he said.

Two weeks later, Logan and Brad walked into the diner. It was lunchtime.

Ellie was obviously very happy about something. There was a cluster of people around her and it looked like a small celebration. Everyone was talking at once to Ellie and she wasn't getting much work done.

Charlie Wash - the diner's owner - rolled his eyes as handed them a pair of menus.

"I'll get to you guys in a minute," he promised, but it was obvious that things were stacking up in the diner.

"What's going on?" Brad asked.

Wash shrugged. "Some outfit called the Magda Maximoff Foundation called Ellie this morning. She has a full-ride scholarship at the community college. There's even something in it to pay for her boy's daycare."

Logan raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Brad was shaking his head as they sat down. "I've never heard of the Maxi-whatever foundation, but that was a great thing to do for Ellie."

Logan looked up from the menu, thinking about something a friend had once told him.

"Yep," Logan said. "You might even say that it was a deed worthy of a king."
Chapter Summary

Kitty, Kurt, and Lockheed take the kids on a weekend trip to a tropical island.

THE BABYSITTER

The island was a tiny and isolated atoll located well northeast of Hawai'i. Thanks to a lack of fresh water and arable land, it had never been settled. Even during World War II, when island bases were vital, it was ignored.

However, what the island lacked in strategic value, it more than made up for with beautiful beaches. Daken and Laura took one look at them and fell in love. As soon as the Blackbird's passenger ramp lowered, they dashed out of the aircraft and straight towards the surf, leaving a trail of discarded clothes behind.

Without being asked, Lockheed unwrapped himself from around Kitty's shoulders and took to the air.

"Swimsuits!" Kitty yelled as she tossed a pair of trunks and a one-piece suit skyward. Lockheed snagged them in midair and then arrowed after Daken and Laura.

The kids were buck-naked by the time Lockheed dropped the suits at their feet. Daken scrambled into his and then ran into the surf with a whoop. Laura rolled her eyes and put hers on with the air of someone being dutifully tolerant of silly demands.

Kitty grinned at Kurt and shook her head. "They're a handful."

Kurt was hauling a cooler down the ramp. "That's why we are giving Logan and Ororo the weekend off. They need some time to themselves."

Kitty and Kurt quickly set up camp.

The kids, as agile and energetic as otters, were dashing in and out in the water. Lockheed orbited overhead, keeping an eye on them. Occasionally, he would swoop down to buzz Daken and Laura. They would respond by splashing water up at him.

All three of them were obviously having a ball.

Back on shore, Kitty was ensconced in a folding chair, shaded by a wide beach umbrella, with a paperback book in hand. She was wearing a tiny black bikini, an oversized pair of sunglasses, a liberal coat of sunscreen, and a ballcap emblazoned with the legend "Mother of Dragons". Kurt was nearby, fiddling with a portable grill. The color scheme of his swim trunks was a breath-taking ode to garishness as a fashion statement.

The Blackbird loomed darkly in the background, carefully parked between the jungle and the beach. Even it somehow managed to look relaxed.
"Is Laura still wearing her bathing suit?" Kitty suddenly asked as she peered in the direction of the kids.

Kurt stood up to get a better view and nodded. "Ja. Really, kitten, if Laura wishes to run around without any clothes, there is no harm to it. Not way out here."

Kitty gave Kurt a stern look, "I'm not telling Ororo that we encouraged Laura's skinny-dipping instincts."

Kurt laughed. "As if Ororo has any right to complain. When we first joined the X-Men, she thought the mansion's pool was clothing optional. She almost gave the Professor a heart-attack."

Lockheed circled around and lost altitude. Skimming just a few feet above the water, and carefully upwind from Daken and Laura, he glided silently towards his prey.

Lockheed's race were predators and warriors. Culturally, they were firm believers in educational play that imparted vital life lessons.

As Lockheed had watched his two charges, he noticed a problem. Both were too used to the idea that their excellent senses would give them more than ample warning of impending trouble. They didn't realize that they were in an environment - the water - where they had lost some of that edge.

Also, Laura was a bit too easily distracted. And Daken tended to keep an eye on his sister to the detriment of maintaining full local awareness.

It was time to teach the nestlings a lesson about watching their backs.

The plan was to glide in, snag Laura by the back of her swimsuit, haul her a few feet in the air, and then give her a playful toss. That would get everyone's attention, but would certainly not hurt anyone of Logan's bloodline. It shouldn't even give Laura much of a scare. After all, Ororo routinely took her children for flights. The windrider's daughter would have no particular fear of heights.

The plan was going just fine until Lockheed noticed a large and dark shadow in the water.

Lockheed's eyes narrowed. The shadow seemed to drifting towards the nestlings.

Then a fin broached the surface.

Bother.

"Where are they?" Kurt asked suddenly, putting a hand above his eyes to shade the sun. He couldn't see anybody out on the water. A second ago, there had been some pretty wild splashing...

That was the last thing Kitty wanted to hear. She immediately jumped to her feet. After a quick scan offshore, she began sprinting towards the water.

Kurt teleported well ahead of Kitty and landed ankle-deep in water.

A dozen yards offshore, Laura, Daken and Lockheed suddenly popped to the surface. Lockheed was piggy-backed on Daken's shoulders. Daken had a firm hold of Laura's arm.

Lockheed did a quick look-around, his long-necked head writhing around in a full circle - and then back again - as soon as they surfaced.
"Are you all right?" Kitty asked anxiously as everyone clambered out of the water. Lockheed launched himself from Daken's shoulders and landed on the wet sand. He immediately shook himself free of water - and then blew out a gust of flame that super-heated the air around him. That finished drying him off. Lockheed didn't dislike water, but he also wasn't a fan.

"We're fine," Laura said quickly.

Daken hesitated and glanced at his sister. In Daken's experience, adults had a habit of getting upset about things that really didn't matter. And they certainly didn't want to scare Aunt Kitty and Uncle Kurt. After all, they might decide that they should all go back home.

"We went swimming underwater," Daken said carefully. Which was, as far as it went, a completely true statement.

"And I scraped my swimsuit on something," Laura added immediately. Which was also essentially true. Laura was examining a long cut along the side of her suit.

Kitty crouched and examined the damage. Some fabric was gone, but the suit was essentially still intact. It looked like Laura had brushed up against something rough. Laura showed no sign of injury. Which was no surprise since, if anything, she healed even faster than her father and brother.

But still...

"Is it lunchtime yet?" Daken asked suddenly.

"Yeah!" Laura immediately pitched in. "I'm really hungry!"

The concerned look on Kurt's face suddenly shifted gears. Daken and Laura were both voracious eaters. They had brought plenty of hamburgers and bratwurst, but somebody had to start cooking.

"Help me get lunch ready," Kurt said as he started back to camp. Daken and Laura eagerly crowded after him, each grabbing him by a hand. Laura immediately began telling Kurt an excited - and distracting - story about her gymnastics class.

Kurt smiled to himself. He wasn't a sucker, and he knew the wide-eyed-innocent look when he saw it. But the kids were fine and sometimes it was wiser to not demand every detail. It was an attitude that a boy growing up in a circus learned to cultivate.

Still crouched down, Kitty reached over and used a thumbnail to rub the scales right above Lockheed's eyes. He loved to be scratched there.

"Anything you want to tell me?" Kitty asked suspiciously.

Lockheed looked Kitty in the eyes. Then he rubbed the side of his head against Kitty's hand as he coiled the length of his body around her arm. He was being extra-adorable.

The lesson had gone even better than Lockheed had hoped. Large carnivores were excellent instructional assistants.

As Lockheed settled into Kitty's arms, he reflected on the fact that it had turned out to be a wonderful day.

They really needed to get out more often.

About a mile from the island, the shark was fleeing as fast as it could manage. Battered, cut, and
seared around the edges, it was definitely worse for wear.

A shark doesn't really think - it's mental processes actually consist of highly efficient reflexes that evolution settled into place millions of years ago. But it was dimly aware that it was trailing a cloud of blood. That was a problem and the shark knew that it had to be careful.

After all, it had just learned that there were some really dangerous critters in the local waters.
Jean Grey is on telepathic watch duty and she checks in on some friends.

"Hello, Jean," Betsy said quietly as she handed Jean a clipboard. Then, with a tired sigh, Betsy took off the Cerebro helmet and put it down on its stand.

I was Jean's turn on watch. Her job was to keep an eye out for any mutant activations or other psychic activity. She was also supposed to check in on anyone who was either on a mission or otherwise away from home.

Jean examined the checklist. There wasn't much going on today. Hank and Rogue were in Texas, investigating a sudden spike of mutant births in the Lubbock area. And Kitty and Kurt were somewhere in the Pacific with Daken and Laura.

Jean raised an eyebrow and then looked at Betsy. "Why do Kitty and Kurt have the kids?"

"A weekend getaway," Betsy replied as she unpinned her long dark hair. Then she ran her hands through her hair, smoothing it out.

Jean put down the clipboard as she tied her own hair back into a ponytail. "So Logan and Ororo are still at home?"

Betsy nodded. "Yes. Kurt and Kitty decided to give them some time to themselves. So they took the children out on an excursion."

That made Jean smile. "That's a good idea. We should do that more often."

Jean settled into position, donned the Cerebro helmet, and scanned the memory log for recent signs of psychic activity. There was nothing of any importance.

Then Jean checked on Hank and Rogue.

Nothing alarming was happening, but Hank was obviously deep in thought. After a moment of hesitation, Jean decided to see what was going on. Hank distracted easily. It was a good idea to make sure nothing was going wrong while he was concentrating on his work.

A hotel room strewn with papers. An open laptop on a table. A precarious pile of journals and books on the nightstand. Hank was furiously typing away on the laptop's keyboard.

Rogue was wrapped up in a fluffy bathrobe, curled up on the bed with a tv-remote in her hand.

Hank's mind was a whirling maelstrom of... well... science. He had a theory about the multiple mutant births and he was cross-checking it against his mental bibliography of important sources. Hank's mind at work was a strangely awesome and beautiful thing to experience - like watching
the gears of a massive, yet graceful, clock.

Rogue, on the other hand, was fresh out of the shower, bored out of her mind, and watching a soap opera. Oh, and she was also hungry and thinking about barbeque.

As Jean "watched", Rogue reached over the side of the bed and grabbed her bra from the floor. Then, with a wicked grin, she gave it an underhand toss in Hank's direction. It landed boobs up on top of Hank's head.

**Without breaking concentration, Hank flicked his head and the bra fell to the floor.**

Rogue was laughing and Jean had a grin on her face as she cut the connection.

Next up was the Pacific picnic.

*Water and sky and sand. A hot beach, that was just beginning to cool as evening approached. Kitty and Kurt were tending the grill. Lockheed was gliding around, enjoying the sea breeze and wondering when the hot dogs would finally be ready. Laura and Daken were happily building a sand-castle as they waited for dinner.*

Laura's thoughts were direct and uncomplicated. Children spend more time in the here-and-now than adults, and they put every ounce of their considerable energy into it. Laura was no exception. In fact, Laura's ability to focus was so strong that it rivaled Hank's.

Daken, on the other hand, had a mind much like his father's - with two strongly delineated levels. The first level was that of a boy and was concerned with the sort of things any boy might consider important.

The other level of Daken's mind was constantly watching and testing the world around him. Analyzing distances, vectors, and priorities. Looking for trouble. Looking for threats. He wasn't as good at it as his father, but he was developing steadily.

That had always bothered Jean. Someone as young as Daken shouldn't have something in his head that more closely resembled a Siberian Tiger than a human being. But it was hard to argue with the way Daken's predator-mind was always watching after Laura. Laura had the most dangerously aware big brother on the planet.

When Laura got older, dating was going to be tricky.

Laura could have developed the same way as Daken and Logan, but it hadn't happened. Jean suspected it had to do with Laura's gentler experience as a baby.

Unlike Daken, Laura wasn't there when her mother was murdered.

In any case, both kids were excited and happy to be out with their Aunt Kitty and Uncle Kurt. Even the shark was just a quickly receding memory.

Jean blinked. Wait... what? A shark?

*A shiny little flicker of a mind 'looked' at Jean. Laura was so incredibly bright and aware. And 'talking' to one of her many telepathic aunts was not even slightly strange to her.*

*HI, AUNT JEAN!* she yelled. Mind-to-mind, the normally reserved Laura was a bundle of loud excitement.
*Hello, Laura. What's this about a shark?* Jean asked.

*HE WAS HUNGRY! WE BEAT HIM UP AND HE RAN AWAY!*

*Oh. Uhm... are you okay?*

*YES! PLEASE DON'T TELL AUNT KITTY AND UNCLE KURT! THEY MIGHT GET SCARED! AND I WANT TO GO SWIMMING AGAIN AFTER DINNER!*

*Wait until an hour after dinner,* Jean said sternly.

*OKAY! CAN YOU COME SWIM WITH US?*

And suddenly Jean wanted to do just that.

*I'm working right now,* Jean said regretfully. *And besides, I'm something like six thousand miles away.*

*YOU AND UNCLE SCOTT SHOULD COME WITH US NEXT TIME!*

*Next time,* Jean promised.

*OKAY! BYE!*

Jean received a mental impression of a small, but enthusiastic, kiss on the cheek.

*Goodbye, sweetie,* Jean replied wistfully.

And then Laura was gone, running off to dinner.

Jean was still smiling to herself when she dropped in on Logan and Ororo. They weren't an active part of the team any longer, but the X-Men still checked on them regularly. Logan and Ororo had done a grimly effective job of letting it be known that they and their children were to be left alone, but it didn't hurt to give them as much backup as possible.

And besides, it was an opportunity to chat with Ororo. Jean didn't see Ororo as often as she once did. They both missed that.

Jean idly wondered what Ororo and Logan were doing now that they finally had some time to themselves.

_They were together, flesh intertwined with flesh. As soon as the kids boarded the Blackbird, Logan and Ororo went straight home and right to bed. But Jean had caught them in a quiet moment, tangled up in each other's arms and dozing peacefully._

_Jean tried to back away and sever the connection, but failed. Together, Logan and Ororo formed an incredibly powerful mental and emotional gestalt. The attraction Jean had always felt for both of them wasn't helping. Even in the afterglow of sex, they were dragging Jean into the whirlpool of their mutual intensity. It was like being caught in a telepathic riptide._

_Ororo immediately recognized Jean. The two of them had communicated via telepathy many times over the years. By now, Ororo knew Jean's mental signature quite well._

_One of Ororo's eyes opened, cat-like and blue. Then the slight curve of a smile appeared on her lips. Ororo could sense Jean's blush._
Jean was trying to ignore the muscular compactness of Logan’s naked body. The warmth of him next to Ororo. His chest hair against her back. The powerful arms curled around her body.

That wasn’t easy.

*Jean, are you checking out my husband's ass?* Ororo chuckled.

*Sorry,* Jean said. *I didn't mean to do any such thing, but since I'm here...*

*Do not be sorry. It is a fantastic example of its kind. I am proud to call it mine.*

*Lucky you. Oh... I just checked on the kids. They're okay. And they might have some interesting stories to tell you when they get home.*

*That is good to hear.*

Behind Ororo, Logan stirred. He was halfway between asleep and awake, but he was distantly sensing Jean's presence.

There was a low and rumbling growl as Logan pulled closer to Ororo. A hand cupped one of her breasts. The other slid down the length of her bare thigh. Lips pressed sleepily against the back of Ororo’s neck and both Jean and Ororo gasped in response.

*I... think I better be going,* Jean said hurriedly.

*Say hello to Scott!* Ororo laughed as she helped Jean break the connection.

With a sudden psychic jerk, Jean slammed back into the reality of the Cerebro chamber.

She was still blushing like a schoolgirl.

On the clipboard, Jean jotted down an entry for Logan and Ororo. Next to it, she wrote, "Do Not Disturb."
Chapter Summary

The dead must be paid their due.

THE DEPARTED

California

Sarah Kinney was buried in a small and crowded cemetery in the hills east of San Francisco Bay. The inscription on Sarah's headstone was simple - merely noting her name and the years that marked the short span of her life.

Standing in front of her parents, Laura stared somberly at the grave of her biological mother.

"None of us knew her," Logan said. He had a hand on Laura's shoulder.

"You said she worked for Weapon-X," Laura said slowly. "Was she a bad person?"

Logan stirred uneasily, not quite sure what to say. It was difficult for him to see anyone who had ever been a part of Weapon-X in anything other than the most negative light, but he knew that wasn't fair to Sarah.

The look Logan gave Ororo was almost desperate.

"No," Ororo said. "Sarah made a terrible mistake when she joined Weapon-X. But after you were born, she realized that she could not continue. She somehow contacted Erik... I mean, your grampa... and he told us about you."

"And they killed her for that?" Laura asked quietly.

"Yes," Logan said flatly. "Whatever else she did, she died saving you."

Laura slowly reached out to touch the gravestone.

"Mama," she whispered as she ran her fingers across the polished stone.

Japan

The cemetery was located on a low rise that overlooked an ancient Japanese village. Off in the distance, the sea rumbled as it continued its eternal, one-sided, conversation with land.

Logan and Daken were both kneeling before a small grave-marker. Between them and the stone, two sticks of burning incense protruded from a bowl filled with white sand. A hand-sized portrait of a woman in traditional garb was propped up against the marker.

Further down the hill, Laura, Ororo, and Yukio were patiently waiting in a small and lovely park.

"I don't remember much," Daken said as he stared at the portrait of his mother. "Just... fighting.
And screaming. I think there was blood. I remember falling."

Logan looked at his son. "You were pretty young."

"What was she like?" Daken asked, his voice quavering slightly.

Logan paused for a moment. Carefully trying to find the right words.

"Gentle, quiet, and dignified," Logan finally said, his voice haggard and distant. "Your mother was old-fashioned. A woman from a different time."

"Why did you marry her?"

"I was wrapped up in a crazy world of hatred and violence and I wanted to get away from it. I thought I could do that with Itsu. I thought she was the way out. I was wrong."

"What happened?"

Logan closed his eyes. "You can gave up on violence, but that doesn't mean violence has given up on you. My past came after me. I should have known. I should have seen it coming. I should have done something to stop it. Itsu didn't deserve what happened to her."

Neither Daken or Logan were physically demonstrative people - especially with each other. That just wasn't who they were and nothing was going to change that. But Daken heard the terrible, depthless, sadness in Logan's voice and without hesitation took his father's hand.

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Kenya

N'Dare Munroe was a princess, but even a princess eventually returns to the dust. However, her grave was in a carefully fenced-off section of the royal cemetery and was marked only by a bare slab of carved wood. It was quite plain compared to the other graves.

"What happened?" Daken asked. He and Laura were standing on either side of Ororo.

"We were living in Cairo," Ororo replied distantly. "And then a war broke out. It was fought for reasons that no longer make any sense. An aircraft crashed into our home and your grandfather and grandmother were killed."

"How did you get away?" Laura asked.

Ororo shook her head. "Luck. Nothing more than luck."

Daken seemed puzzled. "Cairo is a long way from here, isn't it?"

"My mother's family has considerable influence with the Kenyan government. The embassy claimed my mother's remains and had them returned home. The Egyptian government said that nothing was left of my father."

Laura looked up at her mother, "And you were left behind in Cairo?"

"Everyone assumed I was dead."

"Why isn't Dad here with us?" Daken asked as he turned his head to look behind them. Logan was waiting outside the cemetery gate.
Ororo shook her head sadly. "Even after all this time, there are those in my family who do not approve of the marriage of my mother and father. They feel she married below her station. They also feel that as a daughter of that marriage, I am not worthy of this place. Years ago, when I came here for the first time, they sent men to force me to leave."

Ororo paused for a long moment.

"I would not fight them," she eventually continued, her voice very soft. "Not here. Not in front of my mother's grave. However, your father was with me and he felt differently."

Daken and Laura exchanged glances.

"What happened?" Laura asked carefully.

Ororo sighed. "An understanding was reached. I and my children are allowed to visit my mother. However, your father cannot enter the cemetery. According to the ways of my people, he is my champion - a common warrior who battles for my honor and name. However, there are places he cannot go because he is not of noble blood. This is one of them."

"But we're adopted," Daken spoke up suddenly. "Is that a problem?"

The smile the momentarily reappeared on Ororo's face was a strange combination of fond, bitter and feral. "If my tribe's elders consider that to be an issue, they are invited to discuss it with your father."

Outside the graveyard gate, Logan was apparently ignoring his surroundings as he waited patiently. A dozen-or-so tough-looking young men were standing nearby. They were watching Logan closely, but they all seemed rather nervous.

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British Columbia

Logan's mother was buried in an isolated plot in a corner of the old estate.

The Howlett mansion itself was long gone, destroyed decades ago by a lightning-lit fire. All that remained were some tumbled-down stone ruins. Trees and underbrush were steadily encroaching into the area. As the years passed, it was becoming more and more difficult to separate the grounds of the estate from the surrounding forest.

Ever since he regained his memories, Logan visited once a year to maintain his mother's grave. This was the first time that anyone had accompanied him.

Daken pitched in and helped Logan with the hard work of clearing brush. When they were done, Daken wiped sweat from his forehead and took a moment to gaze at the lone grave. There wasn't much to see other than a worn and unreadable headstone, a small indentation in the ground, and a rusty iron fence.

"Why is she alone?" Daken finally asked.

"She committed suicide," Logan answered shortly as he secured the tools to their ATV. "Because of that, she can't be buried in a real graveyard."

"Where's your dad?" Daken asked after a brief pause.

Logan considered his answer for some time before replying. He used the time to stow their tools on
the ATV.

"That's a good question," he finally said to Daken.

Daken said nothing. He just waited. He knew that the conversation wasn't over.

Logan sighed and leaned against their ATV. Then he ran his hands through his hair.

"It's an ugly story," Logan said, "and it's not an easy one to tell, but I figure you're old enough to hear it."

Daken nodded. Then he sat crosslegged on the ground, facing his father.

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**New York**

The Xavier family graveyard was located behind the mansion, with an excellent view of the lake and surrounding woods. In accordance with his wishes, the grave of Charles Xavier was quite modest.

"I cannot tell you how important Charles was," Erik Lehnsherr said with a slow shake of his head. "He saved your father from becoming an animal. He saved your mother from a divine fantasy. And they are far from the only people he rescued... and taught."

"Mom and Dad talk about Professor Xavier all the time," Daken said. Laura nodded her head in solemn agreement.

"Did you help him?" Daken continued.

Erik's eyes were locked on the grave. "No. I fought him. I fought Charles tooth and nail for years on end. I thought his way was disastrously wrong."

"When did you change your mind?" Daken asked curiously.

Erik let out a long breath. "After it was far too late for my friendship with Charles."

"But Grampa..." Laura piped up, "what made you change your mind?"

Erik carefully considered Laura's question.

"There were many reasons," Erik said, "Charles death certainly made me reconsider many things. But perhaps the most important reason was that I met someone who needed my help. Unfortunately, at the time all I knew was war, so war was the only thing I could offer her. I realized that wasn't enough. I decided to try something else."

Laura nodded very seriously, her eyes deeply concerned. "Did you help her?"

Erik finally smiled as he put a gentle hand on top of Laura's head and smoothed down her hair. "Yes. I believe I did."
A small prince-charming helps out a down-on-her-heels princess.

HIS FATHER'S SON

Donovan's Pit Stop was one of the two gas stations in town. It had been in business for over fifty years, and was known for reasonably priced gasoline, high quality mechanical work, greaseily unrepentant filth, and a comfortably surly brand of customer service. It also had a reasonable selection of soft drinks and junk food. And since it was only a few hundred yards down the road from the county school, Donovan's had a semi-constant stream of young customers.

Daken had just purchased a grape soda and was on his way back to school. As he walked out of the office, he spotted a motorcycle parked by one of the gas pumps. A large man and a small woman, wearing the usual combination of leather and denim, were standing next to the bike. Their body language was tense and the words they were exchanging were heated.

As Daken watched curiously, the argument escalated. Than the man slapped the woman so hard that she was knocked backwards. Only the fact she ended up leaning against the gas pump prevented her from falling.

Over the years, Ellie was sure she'd seen all that her tiny hometown had to offer. After all, working as a waitress in the only restaurant meant that you saw or heard just about everything that happened in town.

Then Deputy Ed Barnett brought Daken and a woman Ellie didn't know into the diner.

Daken and the woman were handcuffed to each other.

"Sit down," Ed said as he pointed to the nearest booth.

The woman wasn't young any longer, but had a figure that many a younger woman would envy. Her hair was blonde, but the crowsfeet at the corners of her eyes and mouth suggested that she'd seen a lot of mileage. She was dressed in worn pair of jeans, a dark t-shirt, and a fairly heavy denim jacket. Her hair was tied back with a red bandanna. She was also pretty battered. The bruises on her face were fresh, and they were going to become gloriously multicolored within a day or so.

Daken also looked worse for wear. He was sporting a black-eye and there was a smear of dried blood around his nose and mouth.

Both prisoners were eyeing Ed resentfully.

Ed took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then repeated slowly, "Sit. Down."

Daken and the woman slid sullenly into the booth. Daken had the aisle end. The woman was against the wall.
Ellie and several customers were staring. Even Charlie - the owner and cook - was peering out from the kitchen.

Ed took the booth's other bench.

"Coffee," he told Ellie.

"Same here," added the woman.

"Make it three," Daken said.

Ellie nodded decisively. "Okay... two coffees and a milk. Coming right up."

Daken gritted his teeth and looked to the heavens for help.

None came.

"You wanna tell me why I'm under arrest?" the woman asked angrily.

"Disturbing the peace," Ed answered. Then he glanced at Daken. "The same for you."

Silent rebellion smoldered in the woman's eyes. Daken looked much the same. The silence dragged on as Ellie put two coffees and a glass of milk on the table.

"Where are your parents?" Ellie asked Daken. She was obviously worried.

"Dad's out of town on a job," Daken replied after a brief pause. "Mom is back at the cabin."

Then Ellie gave Daken a handful of napkins. "There's blood on your face. You better clean it up before your mom sees it."

Daken dunked a napkin in his milk and began scrubbing at his face.

"Tell me what happened," Ed said calmly.

"I got beat up - and the young fellow here helped me out," the woman answered shortly.

Then the woman cracked a smile as she glanced down at Daken. "Tell you what, sweetie. Wait until you're a little older before you try something like that again. That guy was three times your size."

Daken stared into his milk and didn't reply.

"What's your name?" Ed asked the woman.

"Sarah MacArthur," the woman said as she took a sip from her cup. The hot coffee hit a freshly acquired cut on the corner of her mouth and made her wince.

"Show me your ID," Ed ordered.

Sarah used her uncuffed hand to pull a wallet out of a jacket pocket. Flipping it open, she put it in front of Ed. He glanced down at it, nodded, and pushed it back to her.

"If I run your name, what will I find?"

Sarah gave Daken a side-long glance. "I've been arrested a few times. Solicitation and possession. I
never did more than a week in jail and never had anything harder than weed on me. I don't steal. I
don't deal. I don't hurt people."

"So what happened back at the gas station? Give me the long version this time."

Sarah sighed. "I was riding west with a guy. I'm going to see my sister in Umatilla - that's in
Washington state."

Ed nodded. "Your ID says you're from Chicago."

Sarah shrugged. "I don't have a job. My sister has a garden shop and nursery. She says she can put
me to work."

"What did you do for a living back in Chicago?"

Sarah's eyes flicked once again from Ed to Daken, and back again. "You might say I was an
entertainer. But that's behind me now. I'm too old for it. The last few years have been kind of
rough."

Ed decided not to pursue the question any farther. "So what was the problem with your buddy on
the motorcycle?"

Sarah snorted. "I made a deal with him in exchange for taking me west - and I was keeping up my
end of it! But he decided halfway there to renegotiate our contract. I told him to go to hell and he
hit me."

Ed looked at Daken. "What did you see?"

"I was buying a soda-pop at Mr. Donovan's place," Daken said as he finally took a skeptical drink
from his glass of milk. "I came out the door and saw some asshole beating up a girl."

"Language," Sarah and Ed growled simultaneously. Then they glanced at each other in surprise.

"I don't like it when women get hit," Daken said with all of the flat finality of a law of physics.

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Ben - the guy giving me the ride - had me pinned up against one of the gas
pumps and was slapping the sh... the heck out of me. That was when the little guy here came up
from behind and kicked him square in the... butt."

Ed gave Daken a long, worried look. "That wasn't real smart, Dak."

Daken shrugged. "I had to get his attention."

"I don't think Ben believed it at first," Sarah continued. "He let me go and tried to grab the kid, but
the kid didn't even try to run away. Instead, he jumped right into Ben's face. They both ended up
down on the concrete, beating on one another. It was like watching a housecat trying to fight a
bear."

"I was winning," Daken said flatly.

"He was going to kill you!" Sarah responded heatedly.

"I told you to run!" Daken replied. "You should have listened!"

"And let Ben beat you to a pulp?" Sarah shot back, her voice rising. "No way!"
"Everything was under control!" Daken's face was getting red.

"He had you by the throat!" Sarah shouted back.

"I had him right where I wanted him!" Daken snarled.

Ed shook his head in disbelief. "SHUT UP!" he roared.

Both combatants subsided. Ed took the opportunity to reach across the table and remove their handcuffs.

"Anyway - thanks for the help, kid," Sarah said as she rubbed her wrist.

Daken shrugged, "The part where you were kicking him in the face after I knocked him down? That did distract him. Thanks."

"What's Ben's full name?" Ed asked Sarah as he tucked the handcuffs back onto his belt.

Sarah hesitated before answering. "I can't say I ever caught his last name. We were just travelling in the same direction."

Ed didn't say anything. He more-or-less understood - Sarah just wanted to be on her way. Besides, Mr. Donovan down at the gas station had managed to get the license plate number of Ben's motorcycle. Ed had put out an APB. Wherever Ben was now going, the state patrol and local police were going to make his trip very unenjoyable.

"Are we still under arrest?" Sarah asked. Daken tried to mask his interest in the question.

"No," Ed answered.

"I don't suppose a bus passes through here?" Sarah asked. She didn't sound hopeful.

Ed shook his head. "Sorry."

Ellie put a largish slice of cherry pie topped with a small mountain of whipped cream in front of Daken.

"On the house," Ellie said as she handed Daken a fork. Daken looked pleased.

Then Ellie refilled everyone's coffee.

Ed's eyes strayed across Ellie's body as she leaned over the table. Then he quickly looked somewhere more neutral. Daken noticed - of course - but his hormones hadn't developed to the point that it meant much to him. Sarah also caught it, but she better understood what was going on. She hid her smile in her coffee cup.

Then Ellie looked at Sarah. "They have a bus station in the town where I go to school. I'm heading back there tonight. Be here at six and I can give you a ride."

Sarah made a quick decision and then glanced at Ed. "I think I can stay out of trouble until six."

Ed nodded as he watched Daken demolish his pie.

The black-eye Daken had been sporting when they entered the diner was already gone. Ed said nothing as he finished off his coffee.
There was a rumble that caused Ed to glance out of the diner's window. A nasty-looking storm was building up to the west of town. Mrs. Howlett must have heard that her boy was in trouble. She was on her way into town.

Ed shook his head and looked back at Daken. "Congratulations, Daken. Your first damsel in distress and your first brush with the law. Both in the same day."

Daken smiled lop-sidedly. One of his front teeth had been knocked out in the fight, but it was growing back.

A pickup truck screeched into a parking spot just outside the diner, the tires bouncing off of the curb. Ororo got out of the truck and slammed the door shut behind her with no little violence.

Behind her, the storm was inexorably walking into town on a dozen lightning-strike legs.

Daken now had a rather grim look on his face.

Ed got to his feet.

"I'll talk to your mom," he told Daken as he headed for the door.

"Uh... thanks," Daken said worriedly.

The storm had passed. Daken was shaken and bent by it, but it hadn't broken him.

After all, he was sure that he was in the right. And Ed's explanation and words of support had helped.

"Is it okay if we stay in town? Until Sarah gets on the road?" Daken asked quietly once his mother was done with him.

"I see the apple has not fallen far from the tree," Ororo said after a long sigh.

Then she agreed.

Ellie drove a car that was older than her. But she had an uncle who was a pretty good mechanic. He kept it running for her.

Sarah didn't have much luggage - just a sports bag that she managed to snatch off of Ben's motorcycle before he fled town. She tossed the bag into the back of Ellie's car, but before she got in, Sarah crouched down next to Daken and gave him a kiss on the forehead.

"Just my luck. I finally meet a real man and it turns out he's way too young for me," Sarah said as she carefully smoothed Daken's hair back.

Ororo was sitting on a nearby bench. She rolled her eyes. Well... it wasn't as if she hadn't expected this sort of thing to happen someday. And it was certainly not going to be the last time.

"He's already got a girl," Ellie called from inside the car - she was strapping her baby boy into the back. "A pretty little thing named Aliza. And she has him wrapped around her little finger."

A slightly embarrassed look appeared on Daken's face.

Sarah laughed and shook her head as she stood up. "You're a real piece of work, kid. Just promise
me you won't get into any more fights with giants. Okay?"

"Be careful on your way to Umatilla," was Daken's reply. He didn't like to make promises that he might not be able to keep.

Sarah got into the car. "Hey, Deputy!" she called after she rolled down her window.

Ed was nearby, leaning quietly against his patrol car. He was making sure that Sarah left town.

Ed looked at Sarah, but didn't say anything.

"Don't wait too long," Sarah suggested with a wink and a nod of her head towards Ellie.

Ed didn't react as he watched Ellie and Sarah drove away.

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Ed was done for the day. The room he rented was nothing much, but Ed had a rather sparse and severe lifestyle. The room suited him.

Locking the door, Ed took off his boots and pants. Then, with a sigh of relief, he sat down on the bed and unstrapped the prosthetic leg and foot that completed his right leg below the knee. He'd lost the rest outside of a place called Kandahar.

Getting up, Ed expertly hopped over to his dresser. Pouring himself a shot of whiskey, he glanced out the window. He had a good view of main street. He could even see the diner.

Taking a sip from his shot glass, Ed let his mind wander. He thought about Sarah. And Daken. And Mrs. Howlett.

And Ellie.

"There are a lot of secrets in this town," Ed whispered to himself with a shake of his head.

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Two weeks later...

"For you," Ororo said with a knowing smile as she handed Daken a letter.

Daken was obviously surprised. He'd never received mail before.

The letter was from "The Overaged Damsel in Distress" and had a return address for Umatilla, Washington. It was addressed to "The Smallest Knight in Shining Armor" and had been sent to the Howlett family post office box.

Inside was a piece of paper and a photograph.

The note said, "I'm not much of a writer, but I wanted you to know that I got here okay. And things are working out. Take care!"

The photo showed Sarah and another woman of about the same age. You could see the family resemblance. They were dressed for work and it looked like they were taking a break from unloading a truck. Both were waving to the camera.

"Everything okay?" Logan asked. He was sitting in a nearby easy chair, perusing a newspaper.

"Fine," Daken said. Then he left the room. There was a spot in his and Laura's bedroom where he
could pin up the photo.

Ororo calmly took the newspaper from her husband's hands and then sat in his lap. "He cannot help himself. It is in his blood," she said.

"Maybe," Logan replied with a carefully hidden smile.

"Absolutely," Ororo corrected, just before she kissed him.
Ed barely hit the brakes in time. As it was, he fishtailed across the road and came close to running into the woods.

Getting out of the car was an experience. It was viciously cold and the blowing snow and a thirty miles-per-hour wind didn't help. Ed's regulation jacket and gloves were nowhere near warm enough.

Then Ed's artificial foot hit a patch of roadside ice and skidded out from under him. Ed cursed as he grabbed the car door to keep from falling. He ended up sitting on the door frame. His prosthetic had slipped loose from his leg - and Ed could see the red blob that had been waving at him from the back of the pickup staggering through the snow and wind towards him. Ed hurriedly readjusted his artificial leg, trying to use the car door for cover.

Nobody in the county knew about Ed's leg and that was the way he wanted it. Not too many police departments would hire a man with a prosthetic. Ed wasn't sure what the Sheriff or the County Commissioners would do if they found out about it, but he didn't want to find out.

Then the red blob appeared, Ed finally realized that it was a youngster, dressed in a red snowsuit, red hat, red scarf, red boots, and red gloves.

"Deputy Barnett?" the kid called over the wind. It was a little girl's high voice.
"You okay, honey?" Ed asked, quickly scanning the girl for injuries as he got back to his feet.

"It's Mr. Wainwright! He's in the truck! And he's hurt!"

Ed finally recognized the pickup. It was an ancient make and model, only kept in service by the stubbornness of its owner. Jeremy Wainwright was one of the county's many characters. Nobody was exactly sure how old he was, but the elderly rancher refused to give up on his property and retire.

However, Mr. Wainwright's children were long since grown up and moved away, his wife was dead and gone, and the old man only had a few distant relatives left in the region. So who the heck was the little girl?

That wasn't what really mattered at the moment. He had to check on Mr. Wainwright and move his vehicle off the road.

Taking her by the hand, Ed leaned into the wind and trudged over to the pickup. Peering through the frosted glass, Ed could make out a still form laying on the bench.

Ed opened the truck door. What he found surprised him.

They were sitting in the building that housed the local volunteer fire department. Outside, the storm was still howling. From the office, Ed and Laura could see the ambulance that had brought Mr. Wainwright into town. It was still caked with snow.

Ed had a cup of coffee. Laura - now wearing only her snowsuit and boots - was nursing a cup of hot chocolate. The mug looked huge in her hands.

"Is Mr. Wainwright going to be all right?" Laura asked in a small voice. She was obviously worried.

Ed shook his head. "I'm not sure, Laura. Mr. Wainwright isn't a young man. It gets harder to come back from being hurt as you get older. We'll just have to wait and see."

Laura nodded slowly as she peered into her hot chocolate.

Suddenly, Ed's cop-sense kicked in. Up until now, he'd been acting on reflex and the need to get vital things done as quickly as possible. Now questions were occurring to him.

"Laura, what were you doing out on the road? That's miles from your folks' place."

Laura looked up at Ed. "I was checking on Hank. Then the storm came up in a hurry. And then I saw Mr. Wainwright drive off the road and hit those trees."

"Hank? Who's Hank?"

Laura hesitated before answering. "He's our pet."

"Oh... did he get loose?"

Laura nodded. "Hank kind of wanders, but he's found a place to stay for the winter. He's doing okay."

Ed pulled out his cellphone. He wasn't exactly sure what Laura was talking about, but he decided to let it go and focus on something more important. Reception to places out in the woods could be
spotty, but he should let Mr. and Mrs. Howlett know where their daughter was.

Mr. Howlett had some questions, and he was worried about Mr. Wainwright, but he really didn't seem too concerned about his daughter. Under other circumstances, Ed would have been shocked, but...

But things were different with the Howletts. Ed had figured that out a while back. Alone in the woods, miles from home, and in a nasty blizzard, Laura was probably just fine. The very thought went against all of Ed's instincts, but Ed wasn't big on denying reality.

The door opened and Ernie Langtry entered in a spray of snow and cold wind. He was the eldest of the volunteer firemen. Leveraging the door shut behind him, Ernie pulled down the hood of his coat and shook his head.

"I've seen worse storms," he announced tiredly, "but it's been a while. How are you two doing?"

"Fine," Ed answered for himself and Laura.

"Doc Peterson says Mr. Wainwright is looking okay."

Ed nodded, "That's good to hear."

"You did a good job with that tracheotomy, Ed," Ernie said as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

Ed and Laura exchanged an eyes-only glance. "Oh?" Ed said neutrally.

"Yeah. Mr. Wainwright must have smashed his larynx against the steering wheel when he crashed. He was barely able to breath. The trach-job you did on him probably saved his life."

Ed just shrugged. He was trying not to look at Laura.

"But you can expect to get some razzing from the rest of the guys," Ernie continued. "What did you use to cut open Mr. Wainwright's trachea? A bear claw? Doc Peterson is talking about making sure that you deputies have a scalpel in your first aid kits. And using the body of a writing pen to keep the airway open was fast thinking, but it's kind of unsanitary. You do have a pre-packaged tube in your kit."

"I guess it's kind of a scary thing to do a tracheotomy," Ed said as he looked at Laura. Laura was sitting absolutely still as she stared at Ed. When she did that, her green eyes seemed to dominate her face.

Ernie suddenly turned serious. "That's nothing to be ashamed of Ed. The important thing is that Mr. Wainwright is okay."

Ed just nodded.

Mrs. Watt had agreed to take care of Laura until the storm passed and the Howletts could get into town. Well... actually, Mrs. Watt had called Ed and pretty much demanded that Ed bring Laura over immediately. Ed didn't think it would be wise to argue. Women like Mrs. Watt were the secret masters of their world. They didn't make their will known too often, but when they did, a wise man obeyed.

And Ed was a wise man. So they were on the way to the Watt residence, Ed's car carefully feeling
its way down snow-swept streets.

Not looking away from the road, Ed said, "Do you want me to keep letting people think I was the one who did the first aid on Mr. Wainwright?"

"Yes," Laura replied quietly.

"Do you want to tell me how you did it?"

Laura was silent for a long time. "No," she finally said.

Ed nodded. "Fair enough."

One of the trickier things in life was knowing when to stop asking questions.

Mrs. Watt was waiting at the door when Ed dropped Laura off. Her youngest son Billy was with her. Billy and Laura immediately began chattering as Mrs. Watt helped Laura out of her snow gear. It occurred to Ed that Billy was a bit taken with Laura.

Within seconds, Billy and Laura had raced off to peruse the latest additions to Mr. Watt's comicbook collection. Billy's brother Bradley rolled his eyes as he made room for them to get past him in the hallway. "Nerds!" he yelled at their receding backs.

"Thanks for bringing Laura over," Mrs. Watt said... as if Ed had been given any choice in the matter.

"No problem, Mrs. Watt," Ed said as he watched Billy vanish inside the doorway to his father's den. Laura paused for a moment, glanced back at Ed, and smiled at him before following Billy.

"She's very different girl," Mrs. Watt chuckled.

Ed nodded slowly. "You could say that."
Cycle of Violence

Chapter Summary

The wheel just keeps on turning.

CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

"I don't remember much," Daken once told his father. "Just... fighting. And screaming. I think there was blood. I remember falling."

And that was the truth, but it wasn't all of the truth.

Daken also remembered faces. He remembered his mother's face. And he remembered the face of the man who murdered her.

He remembered them in his dreams. And he remembered them in his nightmares.

Mr. Watt's interest in people with super-powers extended beyond comicbooks. He also subscribed to several magazines that specialized in the goings-on of the super-powered world. During one of his visits to the Watt household, Daken took the opportunity to 'borrow' some of them from Mr. Watt's library. The next day, Daken took them to school and helped himself to the school's copying machine.

"What are you doing, Daken?" Mrs. Humphries asked. She was the oldest teacher at the school - not far from retirement. She had walked in on Daken while he was copying.

Daken had, of course, heard her coming. And he made some quick adjustments just before she arrived.

"I'm writing a paper on oil pipelines," Daken explained as he held up a news magazine. The cover showed some protestors at a construction site. Actually, that was true. Daken would be turning in his paper next week. It was already written.

Mrs. Humphries nodded as she glanced at the stack of magazines and copies on the table next to the copy machine. What Daken was really doing was buried under a pile of camouflage.

"Don't overdo it," Mrs. Humphries said sternly. "Copies cost money."

Daken nodded quickly - every inch the dutiful student. "Yes, ma'am!"

Mrs. Humphries hesitated. She'd been around students her entire life and had developed a sensitive nose for deception. And there was something off about the way Daken was acting. It was just a little too good to be true...

At that moment, a squabble broke out in the hallway. Mrs. Humphries immediately left to deal with it.

Daken stuffed everything into his backpack and quickly vanished.
The man who killed his mother was tall and slender. Daken remembered that. Except for his shoulders, they were broad and strong. And he had a strange silver arm and was clad completely in black. He had angrily demanded something from Daken's mother - his first mother. But she didn't have what he was asking for.

Or maybe she just refused to give her killer what he wanted.

"Thanks," Daken said shortly.

Brad nodded. He and another boy were responsible for the distraction that got Daken out of Mrs. Humphries' clutches.

"No problem," Brad grinned. "Did you get your copies made?"

"Yeah," Daken said as he handed Brad the magazines. "Can you get these back to your dad without him noticing?"

"Sure," Brad said as he took the magazines. Then he curiously glanced at the cover of one of them. It was a montage of grainy photographs. They showed a tall, lanky man wearing an outfit that appeared vaguely military. His right arm appeared to be some sort of metal prosthetic. He was carrying an assault rifle and was apparently involved in some sort of firefight.

Bold red letters blared across the cover. "IS HE BACK? IS IT POSSIBLE? WHERE HAS HE BEEN?"

Brad wasn't as interested in the world of supers as his father, but like any schoolboy, he had a working knowledge of super-heroes and super-villians. However, he didn't recognize the figure on the cover.

Frowning thoughtfully at the magazine cover, Brad asked, "Who's this guy?"

"James Buchanon Barnes," Daken said - trying to sound casual and only partially succeeding. "He goes by Bucky. Some people call him the Winter Soldier. Born 1928. During the war, he was Captain America's partner. Declared missing in action in 1945. He reappeared just a few years ago."

Brad heard the edge in Daken's voice and stopped asking questions.

Daken remembered the flicker of dark steel. Daken's mother shoved him behind her and he lost his balance and fell. Then his mother pivoted at the last moment, blocking the knife with her own body. She screamed and staggered backwards as something warm and wet splattered across Daken's face.

Aliza and Daken weren't dating - they were much too young to think of it that way. However, they were friends and they spent a lot of time together.

"Hi," Aliza said as she appeared at Daken's shoulder.

Daken blinked in surprise and looked up from the computer monitor. The school library gave each student a limited amount of free time on the internet. Daken was watching an online video. It was sliding in and out of focus and seemed to have been shot with a cellphone. The video showed two dark-clad figures - one male and one female - in hand-to-hand combat with some men dressed in green and yellow uniforms. The video title was, "Black Widow And Winter Soldier versus Hydra!
"Lunchtime," Aliza told Daken. They almost always ate lunch together.

Daken seemed to need a few seconds to refocus. Then he smiled automatically, got to his feet, and closed the notebook in which he had been sketching.

Aliza caught a glimpse of what Daken was drawing. It was stick figures in various athletic poses. The figures themselves were simple, but the drawings were rather expressive. The particularly showed a smooth flow of motion from one posture to another. That part was actually fairly sophisticated. More sophisticated than Aliza recognized.

"Are you drawing the fight?" Aliza asked curiously.

Daken smiled and shrugged. "Yeah. It's more fun than drawing a tree."

Aliza wrinkled her nose. They had an art class together. Their teacher was notably uninspired.

They walked to the lunchroom together. Billy, Brad, and Laura joined them at their table. It was a corner table and Daken always chose it whenever it was available. And he always sat so that he was between the others and everything - and everyone - else.

It was automatic on Daken's part. He didn't realize what he was doing.

As his mother died, Daken looked up into the face of her killer. His eyes seemed distant and unfocused. There was no trace of regret or remorse in them. He was already considering his next move. What he had just done really wasn't that important to him.

Laura could smell impending violence. It was the scent of adrenaline and a host of other chemicals that flooded someone's bloodstream whenever anger was on the verge of taking control.

So she knew her brother was in trouble.

There was an empty room in the back of the school, left abandoned as the slow and steady decline of the local population reduced the required number of classrooms. There were no particular rules about staying out, but there was nothing in the room that was of much interest to most students.

Daken was in there. Laura knew that, because she had his scent.

There was no point in trying to sneak up on Daken - he had her scent just as surely as she had his. So Laura simply opened the door to the classroom and walked inside.

Daken's backpack was laying mostly empty on the floor. Daken was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room, staring at the old-fashioned blackboard.

The blackboard was covered with copies, printouts, and drawings - all neatly taped to the board's slate face. Lines, arrows, circles, punctuation marks, and a few terse words were drawn on the board in a surprisingly neat hand. They were joining, separating, and commenting on the rest of the material.

Every week or so, Daken took everything he knew about James Barnes and put it up on the board for review.

Laura put a hand on her brother's shoulder. Daken didn't react.
"You should talk to mom and dad," Laura said quietly.

"No," Daken replied.

"You can't fight him," she added.

Daken nodded in agreement. "Not yet."

Laura sighed and sat next to her brother. Then she carefully scanned the blackboard.

Several minutes passed in silence.

"You're missing something," Laura eventually said. "Something important."

Daken frowned and then gave the board another long look. Yes, there were gaps that he had to address, but nothing fundamental seemed to be absent. On the other hand, Daken had long ago admitted to himself that his little sister was actually a lot smarter than he was.

"What?" Daken asked.

Laura got to her feet and brushed off her jeans. "Why hasn't daddy killed him?"

Daken's eyes narrowed as he watched Laura leave the room. Once she was gone, he went back to studying the board.

"I don't know," Daken whispered to himself.
One of the problems with keeping who you are a secret is that it can lead to misunderstandings. And that can be lethal.

MONSTER HUNTERS

The old man was commonly known as Michael Horseman, but that wasn't his real name. It was just the name he used in the world of white men. Among his own kind he was known as Hunts Wolves. And as far as Michael was concerned, that was the truth of who and what he was.

Age erases the past. As each friend or family member passes to whatever lies beyond, another small part of what has gone before is lost to memory. So now there were only a few left who knew that Michael once had yet a third name.

He had once been known as Hunts Monsters.

Mrs. Horseman tried not to smile as Aliza and Daken walked out of the school together. As the school year wore on, she couldn't help but notice that the two of them were spending more and more time together. And while Aliza and Daken were much too young to be called a couple, Mrs. Horseman couldn't help but wonder what the future might hold.

Speaking in the language of the People, Mrs. Horseman turned to her grandfather and said, "That is the boy I told you about."

Michael didn't reply - which wasn't surprising to Mrs. Horseman. He had never been especially talkative, even by the taciturn standards of the Sioux. Instead, he carefully examined the young man who was in the company of his Aliza.

Daken could always tell when someone was looking at him.

From opposite sides of the street, Michael and Daken locked eyes.

Neither was exactly sure what they were seeing.

Aliza's face brightened and she began waving.

"Papi!" she called eagerly. Her great-grandfather was strange and stern, but she loved him anyway. He didn't come down from his mountains often enough for her taste.

Michael didn't return Aliza's smile as she hurried across the street. He was still staring at Daken.

Aliza, Mrs. Horseman, and the old man were heading home. Daken was still standing on the street corner, watching Michael's receding back.
"What's wrong?" Laura asked as she walked up to Daken. She was lugging an overloaded bookbag that seemed to be almost as big as she was. They were both waiting for their father to pick them up.

Daken was silent for a long moment, still staring after Michael Horseman. His every instinct told him that something was wrong.

"I don't know," he finally said.

"Tell me about the boy you were with," Michael said - ordered, really. He spoke deeply accented English. It pained him that his great-granddaughter knew only a few words of Sioux, but that was reality and Michael didn't love her any the less for it.

They were sitting at the dinner table. Mrs. Horseman was serving ham and sweet potatoes. It was Michael's favorite and she always made it when he visited.

Aliza looked embarrassed. "He's... nice. His family lives in a cabin way out of town. His father has a business here. And he has a little sister named Laura. She's nice, too."

Michael nodded. "What does the father do?"

"He's a security consultant," Mrs. Horseman said as she finally sat down.

Michael looked puzzled.

"He advises people on how to keep intruders out of places," Mrs. Horseman explained.

Michael nodded again. "The boy is Japanese?"

Mrs. Horseman hesitated. Once, long ago, Michael Horseman had gone to war. And he had fought Japanese soldiers all the way from New Guinea to the Philippines. Michael didn't talk about those days, but Mrs. Horseman did know some of what happened to Michael during the war. In a city called Manila, Michael had seen terrible things done by Japanese soldiers. Some in the family said he had never recovered from it.

"His mother was Japanese," Aliza said quickly. "She's dead. Daken lives with his father and stepmother. His father is white."

"Why does he wear his hair like that?" Michael asked mildly.

"He was born that way," Aliza answered - not sure if her Papi understood the concept of mutation. Michael nodded thoughtfully, as if that was the answer he expected. Meanwhile, he used his knife and fork to precisely cut his meat into small squares.

"Does the boy fight?" Michael continued.

Aliza and Mrs. Horseman exchanged glances.

"Some. Not a lot," Aliza replied hesitantly. Even as she spoke, Aliza realized that she wasn't being completely truthful. There had been the fight with all of those older boys after one of them hassled Laura. And that business with the biker. Neither of them had exactly been Daken's fault, but...

"Is he good at fighting?"

Aliza made a face. "Yes, Papi. He's very good at fighting."
"Does he get hurt?"

Aliza blinked in surprise. "I don't understand, Papi. Doesn't everyone get hurt?"

Now it was Michael's turn to pause. "I mean... when he is hurt, does he heal quickly?"

Aliza nodded her head as she remembered how Daken's cuts and bruises seemed to vanish in almost no time. "Yes, Papi."

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Horseman asked. She really didn't like the way this conversation was going.

"I think the boy has a wolf in him," Michael said calmly as he began to eat his dinner.

The table was silent for a long moment as Aliza and Mrs. Horseman watched Michael eat. Neither of them knew what he meant, but the old man was from a different time and place. Sometimes it seemed as if he had more in common with the days when buffalo were hunted from horseback with lance and bow than he did with the modern world. He was a man of old and half-forgotten beliefs.

"Dinner is very good," Michael told his granddaughter. He was being polite, but it was also true. Michael wondered if it was the last dinner he would enjoy with this family.

Dinner and the evening's homework were done. Laura was in the cabin, catching up on some reading. Daken was outside, on the front porch, staring out into the forest as he absently ran his fingers through Hank's fur.

Ororo examined her son carefully. Daken was prone to long silences, but this was unusual even for him. He'd barely spoken since returning from school.

"Dak, is something wrong?" Ororo finally asked. She always took the initiative when Daken was like this. As far as Logan was concerned, their son had every right to retreat deep inside himself. It was a trait they both shared.

Daken glanced at his mother and frowned. "Aliza's great-grandfather is in town. He and Aliza's mom walked her back home after school. He..."

Then Daken hesitated.

"He what?" Ororo prompted gently.

"I don't think he likes me," Daken finished awkwardly.

Dinner was done.

In Mrs. Horseman's tiny guest bedroom, Michael unsheathed a knife from a concealed pouch in his old leather traveling bag. The blade was ancient and had been made long ago by powerful spirit-workers. It was composed of iron that had fallen from the stars and had many strange properties and powers.

Most importantly, it could kill the otherwise unkillable. Even evil spirits who took the form of men.

Michael hefted the knife in his hand, testing the old, familiar, balance.
It had been a long time. As a young man, Michael was chosen to fight the wolves-who-walk-like-men. Then, after he thought he had won, he went to fight the Japanese. After that, he came home and found that the wolves-who-walk-like-men had returned and were leaving a trail of murder and violation behind them. And so Michael went to war once again.

There were almost a dozen bodies moldering in unmarked graves scattered across three states. Michael had put them there. Those bodies were held in place with chains and spikes of silver, while shamanic totems and Christian crosses warding the graves.

Michael had spent the decades since then watching and waiting. It now appeared that his long watch was over.

There was a mirror over the dresser. Michael looked at himself. He was old and the lean muscle that had once covered his frame was gone. His hair was pure white and there were deep lines on his face. He had waited too long. He had dared assume that the battle was finally over.

He should have chosen a successor. A younger man. But he hadn't.

The odds were not in his favor. Even against a boy.

A boy...

Michael rubbed a tired hand across his face. The boy was quite possibly a monster and a threat to all that was worth preserving. He had to remember that.

A bitter smile appeared on Michael's face. Was that what the Japanese soldiers had told themselves in Manila as they took bloody revenge for their collapsing empire? Was that what the soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry told themselves at Wounded Knee?

The next day dawned cool and clear. Michael left the house, leaving a note for his granddaughter saying that he was going for an early-morning walk.

Michael found a copse of trees not too far from the school. The wind was favorable and would not bring his scent to the prey. He also had the rising sun to his back. And the shadows among the trees were deep and dark.

It was a good spot. Michael settled down to watch. He wanted to see Daken again. And he wanted to get a look at his sister.

Before he acted, Michael had to be sure what he was facing.

He had to be more than sure.

The expected flurry of cars and trucks appeared, hauling youngsters to school. Some elderly school buses brought even more students. Michael watched worriedly as Aliza walked to school, lugging her backpack and chatting with another girl.

Michael felt himself grow cold. If he was right, then a deadly creature was spending its days in the same building as his Aliza. Sometimes in the same room. Inevitably, its savage instincts would take over and children would die. That was as sure as the turning seasons and the rising and setting sun.

Then one particular pickup truck appeared. Daken and a young girl that Michael assumed was
Laura exited the vehicle. The man behind the wheel of the pickup exchanged words with the children. Michael judged him to be rather short, but his shoulders suggested great physical power. And the look of feral savagery around him was obvious.

Michael let out a long breath and shook his head. Three of them. There were three of them. The signs were apparent not just on the boy, but also on the girl and the father. It was worse than Michael had imagined. If he didn't act, this entire valley would descend into carnage.

Whatever the man in the truck was saying, the children nodded energetically in response. Then they turned about and walked towards the school. Daken was holding the girl's hand while keeping a close eye on the traffic. And that was bafflingly wrong. Since when did the man-wolves act so human?

The man in the pickup drove away.

Daken and Laura were almost inside when suddenly, impossibly, Daken sensed that something was wrong.

In his day, Michael had hunted grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolves - and monsters. Whenever you attempted to hunt a predator, any kind of predator, the possibility existed that you might find yourself the one who was being hunted.

Some hunters lived for that particular thrill. Michael considered them to be fools.

In his deep shadow, Michael stopped breathing. He stopped blinking. He went from being still to being utterly motionless. And he waited.

Daken turned his head and looked directly at the trees in which Michael was hiding.

The wind was behind Daken and he had to squint into the early morning sun as he peered into some trees at the edge of the school grounds. He didn't know what was wrong, but there was something...

The spot between his shoulder blades was itching. And his skin was crawling. And there was a strange sense of anticipation. The world seemed to holding its breath.

It occurred to Daken that those trees made for a good hunting blind.

Daken made his decision and yanked his sister inside the school.

"Stay here and call dad!" he told Laura urgently. Then he dropped his backpack to the floor and began sprinting down the hallway towards the school's side exit.

Laura gave her brother an exasperated look. Then she turned and shoved her bookbag into the hands of a startled girl. After pulling Daken's cellphone out of his backpack, she ran in the opposite direction from Daken, into a large classroom which occupied that corner of the school. It wasn't occupied at the moment and there was a loose window that she could easily kick open.

All of Michael's instincts told him that the boy had spotted him and was pursuing him.

Michael faded back from the trees, keeping them between himself and the school. There was an obvious and easy path back into town - the remains of an old deer-trail on the flank of a ravine. Michael ran down it for about a dozen yards until the dirt under his feet turned into erosion-
exposed bedrock. Then he veered right, scrambling up into a cluster of glacial-remnant boulders. There were dense patches of hard-scrabble brush growing out of the cracks and gaps in the stones. They afforded a fair amount of cover.

Crouching in the rocks and brush, Michael waited for Daken to walk into his ambush.

He hadn't come here looking for a fight - not yet. It was too soon.

But now he was out of choices.

It didn't even occur to Michael that he could simply run. That wasn't who he was.

Moving carefully from cover to cover, Daken still managed to get to the trees fairly quickly.

Daken found where Michael had been watching the school and immediately recognized the old man's scent. On the other side of the trees, he found footprints that were leading down a faint trail. It looked as if Michael was heading back to town.

Daken began carefully advancing down the path. The wind was at his back and he was still looking into the sun.

It didn't even occur to Daken that he could simply go back to school and wait for his father. That wasn't who he was.

Michael willed himself to become stone - silent and strong. The blade in his hand was cold and ready. It was an odd characteristic of the knife's strange iron that it never warmed. It always seemed to hold within it some of the eternal cold from the space between stars.

As Michael watched, Daken took the bait and began walking down the path.

Tensing his muscles, Michael waited for the moment to arrive.

As dangerous and aware as the boy - the creature - might be, he was also inexperienced.

It was a hawk that changed everything. Soaring over the landscape, it let out a long, haunting cry. Daken glanced towards the call, which was uphill - the direction where Michael was hiding.

Daken's eyes met Michael's. And Daken suddenly knew what it felt like to be the hunted instead of the hunter.

Michael lunged out of cover, straight towards Daken.

The boy and the old man collided with each other.

Michael tried to catch Daken's throat with the tip of his blade, but Daken knew that was coming and blocked it with his forearm. He hissed in pain as the blade slid through muscle and tendon and ground to a halt in the bones of his arm.

Logan had spent a long time inculcating a 'No Claws' rule into his children. He had no choice, since he couldn't let just any schoolyard disagreement end in a funeral. So Daken didn't immediately unsheathe his claws. Instead, he crouched low and pivoted awkwardly, using his
smaller size as a fulcrum in an effort to overbalance his older, taller foe.

Unfortunately, Michael had also learned something about judo when he was on post-war occupation duty in Japan. He dropped to his knees, lowering his center of gravity, and yanked the knife free from Daken's arm in a spray of blood. Simultaneously, he whipped an elbow around and smashed it into the side of Daken's head.

Daken's head was ringing and there were bright white spots dancing in front of his eyes.

And that ugly cut in his arm wasn't regenerating. Instead, it just kept pouring out blood.

Daken realized that he was losing the fight. And he knew that his opponent had every intention of killing him.

The claws came out.

Michael was ready for claws. Hell, he was ready for far worse. But Daken's claws were all wrong...

Still on his knees, Michael lunged directly into Daken. He had to finish this right now.

Daken's right-hand claws pierced all the way through Michael's left hand - Michael had deliberately parried with it. Daken's left-hand claws jammed deep into Michael's ribs. Michael had tried to trap Daken's arm between his own arm and body, but Daken was too fast. It was a blow that might eventually prove lethal to Michael, but he was still fighting.

What really mattered was that Michael's knife hand was free.

For a frozen split-second, Daken knew he had lost. And Laura was back at the school.

Alone.

Undefended.

The knife thrust for Daken's heart. Daken managed a hasty knee-kick that caught Michael underneath the elbow and threw his thrust off-target. The blade awkwardly scraped over Daken's collarbone and split open the muscle at the juncture of his head and shoulder.

Fiesty little fellow, Michael thought to himself distantly. Michael knew that he was very close to death. The claws in his side were in so deep...

Well, he would just have to take care of current business before he joined his ancestors.

Michael tangled one of his legs around Daken's legs, momentarily pinning them. And his knife-hand was still free. He began to make the thrust the Daken wouldn't be able to stop.

Then Laura snagged the wrist of Michael's knife-hand, while simultaneously thrusting the claws of her other hand deep into Michael's back.

Michael hissed in agony, spat out a mouthful of blood, and collapsed onto Daken.

Logan found his children and a strange man - a Native American by the look of him - in a low
ravine a short distance from the school. Daken and the old man were badly hurt.

"I'm sorry," Daken whispered to his father. His claws were still out. Blood, both the old man's and Daken's own, was splattered all over him. Laura was frantically trying to staunch her brother's bleeding. That was when Logan realized that for some damned reason his son wasn't regenerating.

"I'm sorry," Daken repeated to Logan, there were tears in his eyes.

Laura didn't say anything, but her green eyes were wide and panicky. There was blood all up and down one arm. Her hands were bright, sticky red and Logan could see the quickly-healing cuts on her knuckles that indicated her claws had recently been out.

The old man was laying on the ground in an untidy heap. He was unconscious, but - incredibly - Logan could tell that he was still alive.

And Logan could see something else in Daken and Laura's eyes. Something wild and fierce.

Time passed.

Michael Horseman was in the local hospital. It was located in a town several hours drive from where his granddaughter and great-granddaughter lived. The doctors and the paramedics were still shaking their heads, trying to figure out how a man as old and badly injured as Michael had managed to make it to the hospital alive.

As the doctors worked to save him, Michael dreamed of far-away places, half-forgotten battles, and long-dead friends and family. He was somewhere just this side of dead, and that was a good vantage place from which to hear the spirits. And they seemed to have a lot to say.

In his dreams, Michael walked across the prairie with his ancestors, and they talked about many things. They talked about mistakes and age and duty. And then they talked about monsters, warriors, weapons, the eternal turn of the seasons, and inevitable end of a man's days.

It occurred to Michael that he wasn't particularly interested in living. Oh, he was not eager for death, but he didn't fear it either. However, there was something important that he had to do. And that meant he had to live at least a little while longer.

Three days after the fight with Michael, Daken opened his eyes.

Daken was in his bed back at the cabin and he was hurting - a lot. But he could feel the familiar hot shudder of his healing factor as it worked to regenerate his injuries. However, it was working slower than was usually the case. Much slower.

That wasn't important. What was important that his mom was sitting next to him. And for the first time, Daken had a glimpse of how Ororo would look when she was old.

Daken reached out and took her hand.

Five days after the fight with Michael, Daken and his sister were walking around the property. Hank-the-bear was following them. He was clearly worried about Daken, who was moving slowly and carefully. He kept snuffling at Daken and giving him tentative pokes with his nose, trying to figure out what was wrong and hoping it would get better.
They stopped for a moment at the edge of a fast-flowing creek. Daken and Laura sat down together on a large flat rock as Hank cheerfully splashed into the creek and sat down in it.

"What do you think?" Daken finally asked.

Laura was silent as she stole a sideways look at her brother. There was something they were both hesitant to talk about.

Daken sighed and then added, "There's something in me. Something bad and scary. I like to fight."

Laura held her silence for a long while. Then she curled a hand into a fist, looked at it, and said in a small voice, "Me too."

A week after his fight with Daken, Michael finally opened his eyes again. He was in a hospital room. Aliza and her mother were sitting in chairs next to him. Aliza was reading a book about somebody named Harry Potter.

They both looked tired. Very tired and perhaps scared. Michael regretted that with all his soul.

"Hello, little flower," Michael said in the language of the People. His voice was weak, but the tone otherwise seemed to suggest that he had done nothing more strenuous than go for a walk.

Mrs. Horseman gasped as Aliza looked up at her great-grandfather in surprise. Then Aliza dropped her book and eagerly jumped to her feet.

It was as Aliza hugged him that Michael decided that living a little while longer was actually about more than just duty.

More days passed. Michael was getting better, but it was a slow process.

Over Aliza's loud protests, Mrs. Horseman sent her back home. She ended up staying with the Watt family as she went back to school.

The first day back at school was difficult.

"Hi," Daken said to Aliza. He looked tired. It occurred to Aliza that everyone she knew seemed to look exhausted.

Aliza wasn't sure what to say.

"Do you know what happened?" Daken asked.

Aliza nodded. The authorities were unsure. As far as they were concerned Michael had been ambushed while out on a morning walk. However, it was an open argument whether Michael had been attacked by a bear, or a cougar, or a man. However, when Aliza asked her great-grandfather for answers, he would not lie to her.

"I'm sorry," Daken said. He didn't seem to know what else to say.

Daken turned to walk away.

"Wait!" Aliza said as she grabbed him by the shoulder.

"He thought you were..." Aliza began, but she had a problem finishing.
Daken waited for her to go on.

"He thought you were a monster," Aliza continued, wretchedly aware how little sense her words were making.

But to Aliza's surprise, Daken seemed to be seriously considering what she was saying.

The police kept coming to Michael's hospital room. He told them that he remembered nothing. Michael thought they believed him - except for the young deputy named Ed. There was something knowing and canny in that one's eyes. Michael decided that he should be careful around him.

Otherwise, Michael knew he was due to have a visitor, but when it finally happened it wasn't the visitor he'd expected.

"Michael?" someone said quietly.

Michael opened his eyes. It was early evening. He could tell by the sunlight outside his window. His granddaughter was getting something to eat. And looming over Michael's bed was a tall and broad figure.

"Steve," Michael said with a tired fraction of a smile.

Steve Rogers took Michael's still-bandaged hand in his own.

"It's good to see you," Michael whispered. He wasn't exactly sure if this was real or another vision, but it was welcome either way.

"I thought you were long gone," Steve said with a shake of his head.

"For many years, I thought the same about you," Michael replied honestly.

"I thought the father would come for me," Michael said quietly. It was the day after Steve arrived. Michael was sitting up in bed - another temporary victory against entropy.

Steve glanced heavenward. "It's not the father you have to worry about. It's the mother. She's pretty sure that you should be finished off as soon as possible."

"Women are merciless when their children are threatened," Michael observed.

Steve examined Michael's eyes for a long moment before speaking again. "So are you a threat?"

Michael shook his head. "I thought the wolves-who-walk-like-men had returned. I thought the boy, the girl, and the father were monsters. Everything happened quickly and I was in a fight before I knew it. Actually, now that I've had time to think, I am not even sure what the hell they are. So you tell me, Steve, are they something I should be hunting?"

Steve shook his head. "No."

Michael sighed. "That's good. Because that's a fight I would not win."

Steve and Logan were in the diner, having a cup of coffee.

"Where do you know this guy from?" Logan asked.
"Back in '42, we went through basic training together," Steve replied. "After we were finished, he went west while I went east."

"So what's his deal?" Logan asked slowly, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Michael is a member of a small Sioux warrior society," Steve said. "They hunt something... well, we'd call them werewolves. That's not a hundred percent accurate, but it's close enough."

Logan frowned. "I know about those guys. I ran into one of them back during the Depression. They're a tough bunch. I can't imagine there are many of them left."

Steve took a sip of coffee. "Michael saw Daken and became suspicious. So he decided to check a little closer."

Logan snorted, "And then Daken spotted him and decided to do some checking of his own."

"It's done," Steve said quietly. "He knows you aren't what he's after. He isn't a problem anymore."

Steve Rogers had spent two lifetimes fighting. It was a refreshing change to be a peacemaker. He just hoped he could make this work. In this case, both sides were proud, dangerous, and stubborn.

Logan's eyes went coldly grim. "Steve, it took two days for Daken's healing factor to really start working again. My wife and daughter spent two days and nights in hell, waiting for my son to die."

Steve just nodded.

"And now you're telling me it's over? Just like that?" Logan challenged.

"Yes," Steve said quietly. "Just like that."

Logan stared into his coffee cup for a long time.

"I don't want them to be a part of it," Logan said softly.

Steve didn't say anything. He knew what "it" was, and he agreed with Logan with all his heart, but it would be best if Logan had a chance to say what he was thinking.

"All of it," Logan continued angrily and perhaps desperately. "All of the damned fighting and killing. I want Dak and Laura to stay away from that. I want them to grow up, and go to school, and learn stuff, and then get on with their lives just like other kids - ordinary kids. Ro feels the same way. It's the kind of thing we never got a chance to do. We both went straight from the school of hard knocks to being soldiers for Charlie Xavier. We don't exactly have regrets, but still..."

Logan paused.

"There's nothing wrong with any of that, Logan," Steve said calmly.

Logan nodded bitterly. "And now, thanks to that damned old man, my kids have tasted blood. And that scares me more than anything else."

Dinner at the Howlett's was a meat-intensive experience. Steve knew that, but he was still impressed by roast-beef and pork-chop platter. And the dessert was fantastic. Who knew Ororo was such a good cook?

"Have you talked to Mr. Horseman?" Ororo said with a mild smile as she dished a second helping
of apple cobbler onto Steve's plate.

"Yes, ma'am," Steve said with a polite and careful nod. This particular conversation desperately needed to go right.

"And what did you tell him?" Ororo asked. She was still seemingly distracted by tending to her guest.

Steve took a deep breath. "That if he ever does anything to threaten Daken or Laura again then you will go to war against the entire Sioux people. And they will lose."

Ororo finally looked Steve dead in the eyes. "Does he believe me?"

Steve used a fork to poke at his cobbler. "I think the stream of tornadoes that ran past his hospital made your point."

Logan and Steve were on the front porch, sipping whiskey. Laura and Ororo were inside, washing dishes and dealing with leftovers.

Daken was sitting nearby, quietly watching the two men.

Steve took a moment to examine the boy. Daken had wary eyes, but there was no sign of injury. Given that Michael had been left half-crippled after his fight with Daken, that was impressive.

"When are you heading home?" Logan asked.

Steve nodded. "Tomorrow. Things are stacking up. I've got to get back to work."

"Say hi to everybody," Logan said agreeably. "Even the ones who hate me."

"Sure," Steve replied.

"And say hello to Bucky for me," Daken said suddenly.

There were quite a few kids who were excited by the idea that Steve had once had a young partner. They were glad that Bucky was back. So Steve was used to hearing that sort of thing.

And Steve didn't know everything about Bucky's long absence.

Steve gave Daken a friendly smile and replied, "I'll be sure to do that."

Logan took a long sip from his glass of whiskey as he looked at his son. But Daken had slipped back in his dark corner and it was impossible even for Logan to make out his face.

Fall was almost done and the first chill of winter was in the air.

Laura came out of the cabin, carrying a half-dozen apples. Hank-the-bear was getting steadily more and more distant and sleepy. Soon, he'd need to find a place to hibernate away the winter. Laura had every intention of making sure that he had a good layer of fat on him before that happened.

What she saw on the porch made Laura freeze.

Piling the apples on a nearby chair, Laura poked her head back in the cabin.
"Dak!" she whispered fiercely.

Daken appeared almost immediately. The tone of Laura's voice had alarmed him.

Not saying anything else, Laura nodded her head towards what had caught her attention.

Driven point-first into one of the timber posts that held up the porch roof was a knife. It was pinning a folded piece of paper to the post.

For a moment, Daken was simply blank in utter surprise. It just seemed impossible that someone could sneak up on this particular home.

Then, with a strong yank, Daken pulled the knife loose. The black and pitted blade seemed crude, but solid. The handle was carved from yellowed antler. And the knife as a whole was well-balanced.

It seemed oddly cold in Daken's hand.

Daken unfolded the note. Then he frowned.

"What's it say?" Laura asked.

Daken made a slightly confused gesture with hand that was holding the knife. Laura noticed that the blade didn't seem to reflect light as it wandered in and out of shadow.

"Keep the knife," Daken read slowly, "it is yours and you will need it someday. Also, when you take Aliza out she is to be home by 10 P.M. Signed, Michael Horseman."

Daken and Laura looked at each other and frowned.

Michael was going home. The horse he had left in the barn of a friendly rancher had missed him and was also more than ready to return home. So Michael saddled his mount and together they began to slowly work their way back up the mountains that had been Michael's lair for the last half-century.

Michael was not fully recovered - and knew he would never get completely better. Pain still whispered through his body and Michael suspected there was only one way that it would ever end. Fighting was for young men. Old men dabbled in it at their own risk.

All of the signs of a long and hard winter were in the air. And Michael knew it was possible he wouldn't make it through to spring. Yet Michael was still smiling as he rode uphill. For the first time since he was fourteen years old, he was free of his burden. And yet he hadn't simply thrown it aside.

Someday the wolves-who-walk-like-men would return.

And there was a terrible surprise waiting for them.
Sister-Talk

Chapter Summary

Rogue decides something is bothering Laura. So she pays the Howletts a visit.

SISTER-TALK

Rogue stared at the computer monitor, trying to understand what was bothering her.

Laura's latest email seemed prosaic enough, but amidst the usual updates concerning family, school, grades, Hank-the-bear, and her best friend Billy (that part always brought a smile to Rogue's face), Rogue thought that something was wrong. Something that Laura wasn't able to put into words, but Rogue could somehow sense.

Within a few hours, Rogue was in the Blackbird and heading west at Mach 2.

The hill overlooked the broad valley that was Laura's home. It was the place where Laura and Rogue went to have important conversations. Sometimes they were the kind of conversations that Laura couldn't have with her mother and father.

The climb was just difficult enough to keep most people away, but it was no particular problem for Laura and Rogue. The hilltop itself was surfaced with flat basalt and was just big enough for two people to sit side-by-side.

The view was spectacular. The sky was a cloudless bright blue, with snow-covered white mountains breaking up the horizon. Laura and Rogue could make out individual people in the town below. The school loomed just beyond the edge of town, like a hulking, dark-brick, fortress.

The Howlett cabin was, of course, impossible to see. It was hidden deep within the huge swath of pine forest that filled most of the valley. Rogue was pretty sure that was exactly what Logan wanted, and that never failed to sadden her. It seemed a shame that Logan had found something so precious, and then hid it away from the rest of the world.

Rogue understood why. Logan was scared - scared of what might happen if he didn't conceal his family in a place that was both hard to find and easy to defend. A place where the odds favored him and his family if anyone ever made the mistake of trying to hunt them down.

Rogue respected Logan's reasoning and was even pretty sure that he was right. But at the same time, the situation worried her. Rogue's early life had been spent in a small and isolated rural town. There were good things about growing up in that kind of environment, but there were also a lot of limitations. Daken and Laura were missing so much.

Laura rummaged through her backpack and pulled out a thermos and a pair of expertly-assembled peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. That broke Rogue out of her reverie and made her smile. For her age, Laura was startlingly self-sufficient.

It was cool, but there was no wind as Laura carefully poured hot chocolate into a pair of battered tin cups and handed one to Rogue. Then she gave Rogue one of the sandwiches.
"Thanks," Rogue said politely. Laura just smiled in response.

A few minutes passed as the two of them companionably shared their lunch and watched the comings and goings in town.

Rogue pointed to a tiny figure. "Who's that?"

"Mrs. Havelock," Laura replied instantly. "She's in her nineties and lives in the big old brick house in the center of town. Her family owns the bank. She goes for a long walk every day."

"And that?" Rogue pointed to someone else.

"Chuck Beasley. He works for Mr. Donovan and Daddy thinks he's a pretty good mechanic. When he was young, he went to jail for beating up another man in a fight over a girl. But Mommy and Daddy say he's done his time and should be treated like everyone else."

"And that? Wait... I know her..."

Laura nodded. "Ellie McPherson. She's used to work all the time at the diner, but now she's going to school, so she's only part-time. She has a little boy named Troy, but Troy's daddy left. Grampa is helping Ellie pay for school, but she doesn't know it and we're not supposed to tell."

Rogue finished off the last of her hot chocolate. She was never going to get used to hearing Laura describe Erik Lehnsherr as "Grampa".

"Logan must love that," Rogue muttered to herself.

"What?" Laura asked curiously.

"Nothing," Rogue said with a shake of her head. "Do you know everyone in town?"

Laura shrugged. "Sort of. Like Daddy says, it's not a big place."

"Would you like to live somewhere bigger?"

Laura thought about that for a few seconds. "Yes. Someday."

"Like where?"

Laura smiled eagerly. "Tokyo! I can speak Japanese. And Aunt Yukio says I can stay with her and Amiko if I want."

That made Rogue blink. The possible ramifications of Laura living with the lady ninja crime-fighter who used to be Logan and Ororo's mutual girlfriend were... daunting.

On the other hand, it did seem to be working out for Amiko. Who would have thought that pretty, deadly, wild, Yukio would make such a good mother?

Laura used the opportunity to ask a question of her own. "Why did you come here?"

Rogue didn't hesitate. "Well, sugar, actually I'm a little worried about you."

There was subtle shift in Laura's expression. "I don't understand. Everything's fine."

Rogue reached over and carefully brushed some hair away from Laura's face. "Are you sure nothing's wrong?"
Laura took a while to answer, but then she nodded cautiously and said, "I'm okay."

Rogue decided not to push. "Well, that's good. Then I guess I wasted a lot of aviation gas. Scott's gonna be mad."

"Uncle Scott's always mad about something," Laura observed.

Rogue shook her head. "Not really. Scott just tends to be angry whenever you happen to see him. Your father does that to him."

"Yeah... I've noticed that Daddy is kind of the same when Uncle Scott is around. Why is that? Is it because of Aunt Jean?"

Rogue's eyes went momentarily wide. "Uhm... no. Actually, the problem is that they're too alike and too different - both at the same time. And that business with Aunt Jean was a long time ago. How the heck do you even know about that?"

"I've read some comics. And Chris Claremont told me the details."

"Who the heck is Chris Claremont? Oh, wait a minute, isn't he that fu... fudging comic book writer?"

Laura nodded seriously.

"And you've read some of his comicbooks?" Rogue asked, suddenly feeling nervous.

Laura nodded again and then said. "And we sometimes chat."

"Chat?" Rogue said, becoming more worried by the second. "You mean... like on the internet?"

"Yes."

Rogue gave Laura a long and careful look. "Sugar, just what did Mr. Claremont have to say?"

Laura shrugged. "Lots of things. Did you know that he once wanted to write a story where a lady named Irene was Uncle Kurt's mother and Mystique was his father?"

Rogue blinked hard.

"Mystique transformed herself into a man so she could have sex with Irene," Laura clarified.


"Is Uncle Kurt's father really a demon?" Laura asked curiously.

"A demon?! No! I swear, those writers at Marvel are out of their minds!"

"I think I'd like to meet Mystique some day," Laura added thoughtfully.

Which will be a cold day in hell if I have anything to say about it, Rogue thought grimly to herself, but didn't say anything aloud.

Then Laura cocked her head at Rogue. And that gesture was so perfectly reminiscent of Logan that Rogue felt a sudden tug on her heart. Except for the coal-black hair, Laura didn't really look a lot like her father, but sometimes the body language was almost a perfect match.
"Are you mad at Mystique?" Laura asked.

There was a long pause as Rogue looked off into the distance. Then Rogue finally refocused on Laura and answered the question.

"Yes. I'm really, really, mad at her. But, Laura, you've gotta understand - she's still the woman who took care of me when nobody else would. I wish we could somehow fix things between us, and Lord knows we've both tried, but it just never seems to work out. She's crazy and stubborn and I'm angry and stubborn. That's a bad and dumb combination. Promise me you won't ever be like that."

Laura nodded slowly. Her green eyes were very concerned.

They hiked down from the hill, skirting the town, and working their way through some rough terrain. Eventually, they ended up near the school. Along the way, the two of them chatted about various things.

"How are you and your boyfriend getting along?" Rogue asked with a sly smile.

"Billy's not my boyfriend!" Laura shot back.

"So how'd you know I was talking about him?" Rogue asked calmly.

It was a rare day when Laura found herself verbally out-maneuvered. She was a very smart little girl, but her Aunt Rogue had guile and experience on her side.

"He's... not my boyfriend," Laura repeated awkwardly.

"Okay," Rogue shrugged. "So what is it you and Billy do when you're together?"

Laura thought for a moment. "We read his daddy's comics - although there are some that Mr. Watt won't let us see. I help him with his homework. We do stuff on the internet. And he really likes baseball, so we play catch and practice our batting a lot. I didn't like that at first, but now it's kind of fun."

By now they were walking up a ravine that led to the school. Laura paused where an outcrop of rounded boulders loomed over a narrow path.

"Baseball is a big deal with the X-Men," Rogue said teasingly. "So it's probably in your genes. I imagine you're pretty good."

Laura frowned. "I don't think you can inherit baseball."

Now Laura had stopped walking. She was standing next to one of the big boulders. Rogue effortlessly picked her up and perched her on top of it.

"P'shaw. Why can't you inherit skill at baseball?" Rogue argued. "Your mommy and daddy are both pretty good. You must have got it from them."

"Mommy isn't my biological mother," Laura pointed out.

Rogue looked Laura in the eyes. "Okay. I give up. You've out-argued me. I'm helpless in the grip of your superior science."

That made Laura giggle as Rogue scrambled up onto the rock and sat next to her.
Then Rogue got serious. "Why are we here, Laura?"

Laura's smile drifted away. Then she looked around, her gaze finally settling on a spot on the path just a few feet away.

"I almost killed somebody right over there," Laura said very softly.

Rogue didn't even blink.

Too many years. Too many missions. Too much violence. The crazy had become normal. And that included talking about killing with a pretty little bit of a girl.

"What happened?" Rogue asked.

Laura told Rogue everything. About Mr. Horseman. About Daken. About the mistakes they both made, and the horrible fight that was born from those mistakes. And about how Mr. Horseman was going to kill Daken when Laura came up behind him and put a pair of eight inch claws deep into Mr. Horseman's back.

"Mr. Horseman fell down," Laura continued distantly, "and I could tell that Daken wasn't healing. All of his wounds just kept bleeding and bleeding. I was trying to stop the bleeding when Daddy found us. We did what we could for Daken and took him home. I think Daddy let the police know where they could find Mr. Horseman."

"It was a long time until Daken started healing. Mr. Horseman had a knife that could do something to a healing factor... make it stop working. Mommy didn't say anything, but something about her changed. She spent most of her time with Daken, but I heard her and Daddy talk about finding Mr. Horseman and killing him. Mommy wanted to know why Daddy hadn't done it when he had the chance. Daddy didn't say anything - and Mommy walked out of the house."

Rogue went tense.

"Daddy followed Mommy. I saw them out in front of the cabin. Daddy was holding onto Mommy and trying to calm her down. She was really mad, and yelling at Daddy, and hitting him - and it was raining real hard. Then they ended up kissing and talking. After a while, they came back inside."

Laura fell silent.

"So what happened after that?" Rogue asked.

"Daken finally got better. Daddy and Mommy left Mr. Horseman alone. Then Captain Rogers came to town. He talked to Mr. Horseman and then he talked to Mommy and Daddy. He explained what had happened and why. And I guess everyone decided there was no reason to fight anymore."

Rogue put an arm around Laura.

"Your mom was scared," Rogue said quietly. "You can't blame her for being angry. And in the end, she did let it go. I've known your momma for a long time, sugar. Trust me when I say she has a knack for doing the right thing."

"I know," Laura said in a small voice.
Their long ramble circled back into town and paused on a bench in the town square.

"So how are Daken and Aliza doing?" Rogue asked.

Laura made a face. "It's been weird ever since the fight with Mr. Horseman. Sometimes, it's as if nothing happened and they're just as they were before. Other times, they have a hard time talking to one another."

"Not surprising," Rogue sighed, "but that's too bad."

"And Brad is always around now," Laura continued.

Rogue gave Laura a puzzled look. "That's not a bad thing, is it?"

"No, but I think Brad likes Daken a lot."

It took Rogue a moment to realize what Laura was saying - and another moment to get over the fact that Laura actually realized what she was talking about.

"Oh. Does Daken know how Brad feels?"

Laura shook her head. "I don't know. Daken is easy to figure out sometimes. Other times... he's really hard to understand."

Like father, like son, Rogue thought to herself.

"Maybe you should be careful when you talk about Daken and Brad," Rogue said worriedly. "People around here might not understand. Or want to understand."

Laura nodded.

Then they walked through the town together, Laura pointing out houses and telling Rogue stories about the people who lived in them.

"You know," Laura said suddenly, "it's weird, but there are a lot of people online who think you and Daddy should be together. There are even websites about it."

Rogue rolled her eyes. "So I hear. It bugs Remy - which is kind of funny considering the wandering eye that man has."

"There's a comic where you and Daddy kiss," Laura said authoritatively. "You had just joined the X-Men and nobody trusted you. Then you and Daddy went to Japan and you got hurt real bad. He had to give you his healing factor so you would get better."

Rogue nodded immediately. "That did happen. I would have died if your Daddy hadn't helped. And when he did that for me, he was pretty badly cut up from a fight. He risked his life to save mine."

Then Rogue paused, holding her breath. Waiting for Laura to continue the subject.

Laura didn't say anything.

Oh, thank God, Rogue thought gratefully to herself, Laura hasn't seen that damned comic. Rogue had to threaten the writer - a fellow named Milligan - with violence to make sure he didn't tell everyone just how far things had really gone between her and Logan. And even then, more than a few people had guessed.
"No offense, but I really can't imagine you as my mommy," Laura observed thoughtfully.

"I think I'm way better as a big sister," Rogue agreed.

"Yep," Laura agreed, unconsciously mimicking her father for one syllable. "I just wish I could see you more."

"Sorry. I'll try to make it out to these parts more often."

"That's okay. I know you're really busy with being an X-Man."

"No. I should make the time to see y'all - and especially you. After all, we're blood-sisters."

That seemed to surprise Laura. "What?"

Rogue smiled. "I suppose it's time I tell you about that. You see, way back when I first met you, we shared blood, but you were just a baby so you don't remember."

Laura's eyes were bright with interest. "What happened?"

"We found out what Weapon-X was up to," Rogue began slowly. "Actually, Erik - your Grampa - told us what they were doing and where they were. So we hit Weapon-X hard. It was your Mommy and Daddy, Uncle Kurt, Uncle Peter, and me. With Erik's help, we managed to sneak inside their facility, but eventually we got spotted."

"It went bad in a hurry. Poor Kurt got shot early on. Peter and your dad and me ended up tangling with the Weapon-X security guys, while Kurt teleported behind them to take out their leadership. Your mom broke away from us, got into the nursery, and grabbed you. I can still remember the sight of her running back to us with you in her arms. She was covering you with her body and the room behind her looked like one big lightning strike. I could see a dozen Weapon-X power-armor troopers spasming and lighting up like Christmas trees as their electronics shorted out."

"Ororo shoved you into my arms and told me to get you out of there. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to leave everyone else behind, but there are times when you just don't argue with Ororo, and that was one of them. So I flew us out."

Then Rogue reached over and ran her fingers slowly through Laura's hair.

"Some shrapnel caught us on the way out. I got hit in the head and the arm. You had a tiny little nick on your face that closed up in no time at all. But you squeaked and I looked down at you. Our blood was mingling and I remembered what the old timers back in Mississippi used to say - about how you could mix your blood with another man and that made you blood-brothers. I figure there's no darn reason it can't work for girls as well. So that's how we became blood-sisters."

Laura looked vastly pleased.

Logan visited Rogue just before she left.

"Whatever you did, you cheered Laura up," he told her. "Thanks."

"She's still upset about the thing with Daken and Mr. Horseman," Rogue said.

Logan shook his head. "She should be."

"And she heard you and Ororo talking about maybe killing Mr. Horseman," Rogue added
Logan let out a long breath. "Ororo was... well... it was touch and go for a while. I thought she might go straight to the hospital and fry Horseman right on the spot."

Rogue grinned. "Fortunately you - calm and mild-mannered you - were there to keep things under control."

Logan shot Rogue a bleak look. "As you might guess, it's usually not that way."

"So maybe what you're saying is that you and Ororo are good for each other?" Rogue suggested.

That made Logan grin. "Looks that way. I guess we're just stuck with each other."

Rogue laughed. "Oh, by the way, there's something we have to watch out for."

"What's that?" Logan asked warily.

"Uncanny X-Men #169. The second series."

Logan looked puzzled at first. Then he winced and said, "Is that the one about that Golgotha business? The one where you and I..."

Logan didn't finish the sentence.

Rogue nodded. "Laura hasn't seen it yet, but given her interest in comics, it's probably just a matter of time. And she's so darned smart that she might start drawing some conclusions. Accurate conclusions."

Logan suddenly began to look worried.

"Maybe we should get our stories straight before that happens," Rogue suggested. She was trying not to smile - and not completely succeeding.

"That sounds like a good idea," Logan replied slowly.

"We've never really talked about what happened," Rogue said. Her voice was suddenly quite practical. "We just kept our mouths shut and hoped not too many people figured it out."

"Ororo knows," Logan replied. "I told her."

Now it Rogue's turn to wince. "Oh... what did she say?"

"She knows how this damned telepathy and projected emotion stuff works. She's not mad at us."

"I figured that from the fact we aren't both smoking piles of ash," Rogue responded tartly. "But what did she say?"

Logan spread his hands wide in a startlingly helpless gesture. "She said that next time she expects not to be left out."

Rogue really wasn't sure how to respond to that.
The Close Call

Chapter Summary

The Howlett family come quite close to a modern variation on an old problem. Fortunately, they have some friends who are more than capable of lending a hand.

THE CLOSE CALL

Mrs. Watt was a bit old-fashioned, but her husband and sons were ardent technophiles. And if she wanted to keep an eye on her boys' online antics, she had no choice but to learn the ins and outs of the internet.

"The internet is a both a vital tool and a useful means of self-expression," Mrs. Watt explained earnestly to Ororo. "But it can also be a sea of boundless depravity, lashed by the twin tempests of degeneracy and debauchery."

Ororo paused with her teacup most of the way to her mouth. In her younger days, Jackie Watt had been a lay preacher. She was still capable of turning an impressive phrase - or a melodramatic one. Sometimes she did both at the same time.

"Logan likes to describe the internet as the greatest means ever created to distribute stupidity and pornography," Ororo replied as she put down her tea.

"He's not wrong," Mrs. Watt sighed.

"What is bothering you, Jackie?" Ororo asked mildly.

"Do you know that Laura has a webpage?"

Ororo was obviously surprised.

They were in Mr. Watt's den and both Ororo and Mrs. Watt were sitting in front of his desk. The desk computer was on and the monitor was displaying a particular webpage.

"'Laura Loves Comics'," Ororo said as she read the page's title aloud.

"She and Billy work on this pretty regularly," Mrs. Watt said. "As near as I can tell, Laura started it a few weeks ago. It's a Tumblr page."

"Tumbler?" Ororo repeated.

"There's no 'e' in the name. It's a social media site. Users can register for free and start posting immediately."

"Like Facebook," Ororo said immediately.

Mrs. Watt nodded. "A lot of Tumblr pages are just personal notebooks. People with the same interests become friends, chat back and forth, follow each other's posts, and share their work and
thoughts. That part is harmless. In fact, it's fine. However, Tumblr doesn't do much to control what's posted, so some pages can be pretty disgusting."

By now, Ororo was scrolling down through Laura's page, examining the posts. "These are about people with super-powers - both in real life and in fiction," she observed.

"Look closer," Mrs. Watt suggested.

The topmost image was a panel from a well-drawn comic and showed Carol Danvers, in her full Captain Marvel outfit, fighting some aliens. There was a spirited discussion going on in the comments as to how realistic it was.

The previous post showed a grainy photograph of a woman in a white, skin-tight, costume. She was crawling up the side of the Empire State building. Underneath, an image from a comicbook identified her as someone named Silk.

Underneath that was a photo of a young girl in a rather eccentric version of Captain Marvel's old costume. To Ororo's discerning eyes, the girl was no more than a few years older than Daken. The large number of followers and excited comments seemed to suggest that she was quite popular with Laura's online friends.

The last post on the page was an older comicbook panel. It showed Ororo blasting a Sentinel with lightning as Rogue savagely tore off its head. "My two favorites!" was Laura's cheerfully proud comment.

Ororo hid a smile as she immediately clicked to the next page. She really wasn't sure just how much Jackie knew.

"These are all about women with super-powers?" Ororo quickly asked Mrs. Watt.

"As near as I can tell," Mrs. Watt responded.

"Who is that?" Ororo asked, pointing at a portrait of a dark-haired and powerful-looking woman who was wearing a decidedly patriotic outfit.

"Wonder Woman," Mrs. Watt replied immediately. "She's a character from DC comics, but she's completely fictional - not like the people Marvel writes about."

Ororo couldn't help herself. She smiled.

"Of course I know all about this stuff," Mrs. Watt confessed resignedly. "I'm married to a crazy comicbook fan."

"I understand," Ororo sighed. "You would be amazed how much I have had to learn about beer. But what kind of Tumblr pages are you worried about?"

Mrs. Watt rolled her eyes and reached for the keyboard. "Let me turn off the parental controls."

"Tumbler?" Logan repeated. He and Ororo were in his office. It was just a few blocks from the Watt home.

"There is no 'e' in the name," Ororo provided helpfully.

Laura's page was up on Logan's office laptop. He was frowning thoughtfully at it.
"This seems pretty harmless," Logan said with a shrug.

"I agree," Ororo replied.

"What's Jackie so worried about?"

"For one thing, there is a lot of questionable material on Tumblr. And some of it goes well beyond nudity or extreme opinions."

Logan continued to examine Laura's page. "Can Laura get to that stuff?"

"Not from the school or from Mrs. Watt's house. They have software to control the worst of it - although Jackie did say it is not fool-proof. However, that is not the point. The problem is that anybody can create a Tumblr account and then start communicating with anyone else who has a Tumblr account."

"Like Facepage," Logan said.

"Facebook," Ororo corrected.

Now there was a concerned look on Logan's face. "Laura uses her first name in the title of the page. Does she give out any other personal information?"

Ororo shook her head. "No. However, anyone reading her page would probably realize that she is a young girl. She writes well above her grade level, but her actual age is obvious."

"We're a long way from anywhere," Logan pointed out. "And Laura is pretty smart."

"I would rather Laura be a few years older before she encounters the seamier parts of the online world - or the real world."

Logan nodded at the laptop screen. "Do you think we should shut this down?"

Ororo hesitated. Both she and Logan were inclined to allow their children as much freedom as was reasonably possible.

"No, but we do know people who can help us deal with the situation."

Logan nodded. "I'll make the phone call."

It was after dinner and Logan had decided it was time to talk.

"Something you should know," he said to the kids. "I've talked to Hank. He and the rest of the big-brains back at the mansion are putting together something that keeps an eye on what you two are doing on the internet."

Laura just nodded. Meanwhile, a slightly stormy look appeared on Daken's face.

"So from now on," Logan added, "whenever you're on the internet, just assume that Aunt Kitty is looking over your shoulder."

Laura didn't seem particularly concerned, but Daken's eyes had gone a little wide.

"Okay," Kitty said, "we got the system in place and we're keeping an eye on the kids. Tell Daken
It seemed to Logan that Kitty sounded a little grumpy.

"What's bugging you?" he asked.

There was a pause from the other end of the phone.

"I took a look at the tag count of Laura's Tumblr page," Kitty finally said.

Logan sighed. "What the hell is a tag count?"

Kitty sighed right back. "Every post has tags - they're essentially descriptions of the post's subject or subjects."

"Okay," Logan said cautiously. Talking technology with Kitty was usually an invitation for confusion.

"So I checked on Laura's favorite subjects."

"What did ya find?" Logan asked - beginning to get a suspicion what the problem was.

"Ororo is Laura's favorite lady superhero."

"You're surprised?" Logan growled.

"Rogue is next."

"Right..."

"And I'm fourth," Kitty said through gritted teeth.

"Okay, now you're being silly. Laura loves you and you know that. Wait... you're fourth? Who's third?"

"Cassandra Cain."

"Who?"

"She's a version of Batgirl. DC has something like a million of them. Laura likes her a lot."

"Batgirl? Does she hang around with Batguy?"

"BATMAN!" Kitty yelled. "His name is Batman!"

"Okay! For Pete's sake, how am I supposed to keep track of this stuff?"

"Have you considered actually getting involved in the twenty-first century?!"

"I haven't found it too impressive so far, but a lot of people I like live there."

Jimmy Dahl had a problem and it was going to destroy him someday. Unfortunately, Jimmy was really good at his chosen vice, so he had the potential to wreck quite a few young lives before the inevitable happened.

The Denver police hadn't been able to prove anything, but they had asked a few questions - just like
the Kansas City cops before them. That was why Jimmy was currently living in Billings. It actually didn't really matter where Jimmy lived since he made a pretty good living as a contract programmer. His laptop was essentially his office. The flexibility that afforded him was one of the reasons he was so hard to find.

Seated in a comfortable coffeeshop, Jimmy hooked up to the internet and remote-accessed to a server that was located on another continent. Then he checked the logs of his web-spiders. They were programs custom-designed by him to scuttle from page-to-page on the social networking sites, looking for patterns and focusing on promising potential targets.

Today, he had quite a few likely hits.

Jimmy examined the results and made a few choices. Then he took a sip of coffee and activated a more complex analysis program. Within seconds, it had crunched the data from the accounts that Jimmy had chosen.

There were several hits that looked particularly interesting. One was a Tumblr account that registered as being run by a highly intelligent pre-adolescent girl. Some comments about time, weather, sunset, and a half-dozen even more obscure indicators, suggested that she lived in a rural area somewhere nearby, but not across the Canadian border. She might even be within driving distance.

Jimmy thought it over. Small town girls were less worldly and tended to be easier to approach. However, small towns were also intrinsically difficult terrain in which to operate. Everyone knew everyone else, so outsiders stood out. The most dangerous part of Jimmy's hobby was when he actually approached one of his girls - he lost almost all of his advantages when he came out of his virtual hidey-hole. The two times the cops had talked to him had both stemmed from that. Jimmy had become a lot more careful since then.

Still, he was merely in the research part of the process. Jimmy always took his time before making a personal approach. He'd once spent six weeks focusing on a young and very pretty black girl in Atlanta who had an interest in 'My Little Ponies' - only to find out at the last moment that 'she' was actually an obese white guy in his fifties who was living in a Des Moines trailer park.

Jimmy just hated the weirdos who infested the internet.

Jimmy made his decision. With a few keystrokes, he activated a program that used a pair of Tumblr sock-puppet accounts to approach the target account, make themselves into followers, and post some generically flattering comments about her page. Eventually, Jimmy would use the two accounts to establish personal communication. Then he would alternate between the accounts, inviting comments and asking harmless-sounding questions that taken together would winnow out a useful target profile. The process could take some time, but Jimmy enjoyed the hunt.

Jimmy Dahl had a problem and he knew that it was going to destroy him someday.

What he didn't know was that his day was coming soon.

A few days later, somebody knocked on the door of Jimmy's apartment. What he saw when he answered the door was something of a surprise.

It wasn't every day that a huge, blue-furred, monster appeared in your life.

"Hello, Mr. Dahl," Hank said evenly. "We need to talk."
Jimmy tried to slam the door shut. Hank put a bear-sized hand up against the door and didn't let that happen. Then he put his other hand against Jimmy's chest, pushed him more-or-less gently back into the room, and then stepped inside and closed the door behind them both.

Grabbing Jimmy by the collar of his shirt, Hank effortlessly dragged him across the room and forcibly sat him down on a worn-out sofa.

Jimmy finally found his voice. "What the hell is going on?" he snarled.

Hank didn't answer immediately. Instead, he took a moment to examine the other man. What he saw didn't fit any particular stereotype. Jimmy was of medium-height, in his late-twenties or early-thirties, and had a build that suggested he exercised fairly regularly. He was even mildly good-looking.

And then there was the obvious intelligence glittering in the other man's eyes.

Such a waste, Hank thought regretfully.

"My name is Henry McCoy. You may have heard of me."

Jimmy nodded slowly.

"You and I are going to the local FBI office," Hank continued calmly. "Then you are going to tell them everything they might want to know about your online activities - and where they lead."

The conversation was finally on Jimmy's home-ground. If there was one thing Jimmy knew, it was that whatever he did with a computer or on the internet was absolutely secure.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jimmy said contemptuously.

Hank sighed. "Mr. Dahl... you don't understand. For one thing, I am actually saving your life. And for another, I'm not the one who tracked you down. A colleague of mine did. She's waiting outside and you can talk to her if you want. However, I wouldn't recommend that. Her name is Kitty Pryde."

Jimmy became very still. He knew that name. Every programmer, hacker, and cracker on Earth knew that name.

"I'm afraid you've awakened a dragon, Mr. Dahl," Hank finished softly.

Jimmy began to cry.

"The FBI didn't even know that this guy was out there," Kitty said over the phone. "They're happy to have him in custody."

Logan considered what would have happened if Jimmy Dahl had actually made an attempt to "visit" Laura. Every option ended the same way. One way or another, he would have never made it home.

"Thanks," Logan said quietly.

"No problem. Hey... Hank, Doug, and I are thinking of doing some more work with the system we built to keep an eye on the kids. There are other guys like Dahl out there. We'd like to help find them."
"Sounds good."

Kitty was getting concerned about Logan's reticence. He was speaking almost entirely in one and two-word sentences and that was never a good sign.

"Logan..." Kitty continued carefully, "the odds of this happening were really long. It was just a weird coincidence and Laura was never in any danger. You don't have to keep her away from the internet."

"I know," Logan said.

Kitty wasn't sure what else to say. So she decided to let Ororo deal with Logan for right now. And visiting Logan as soon as possible was suddenly looking more and more like a good idea.

"Give the kids a kiss for me," Kitty continued.

"Sure."

"Goodbye, Logan."

"Bye, Kitty. Thanks again."

Logan closed his phone and then walked out onto the porch of his cabin. There was fresh snow on the ground and Daken and Laura were building a snowman together. Leaning up against one of the porch's support posts, Logan watched his children play.

Very few people had Logan's long perspective on life. He knew better than almost anyone the fleeting and precious nature of childhood. And how it took so very little to steal it away. Dahl had never been a real threat to Laura, but...

But if James Dahl had ever actually shown up. If he had got to Laura before Logan or Ororo found out what was going on...

What Laura - or Daken - might have been forced to do would have changed them forever. Logan had already found his children all but standing over the barely breathing body of one man. And ever since the fight with Mr. Horseman, Logan could sense a difference in both of them. Their range of possible options had expanded ominously. It was hard to see that in Daken. It was almost more than Logan could bear to see it in Laura.

What would life be like the day after Logan found his children standing over a corpse?

Logan knew it was just a matter of time before the world stole the innocence from his children. All he and Ororo could do was fight a holding action. They were just delaying the inevitable and trying to cushion the fall.

But then again, wasn't that what all parents do? With his family, the difference was essentially just a matter of scale.

Ororo slipped up behind Logan, wrapped her arms around him, and rested her chin on the back of Logan's head. Ororo had known Logan long enough to know that something was bothering him. And this close to him, she could tell that he was filled with dangerous tension.

The snowman was done and the inevitable snow-fight had erupted. In a flurry of thrown snow, two small figures were dodging back and forth around the snowman. Daken was carefully underperforming so he wouldn't overwhelm his sister. The ghost of smile appeared on Logan's face
- and then vanished.

"Is there something I should know?" Ororo asked quietly, her warm breath stirring Logan's hair.

Logan put his hands over Ororo's, lacing his fingers into hers. "Yeah, but we can talk about it later."

Ororo didn't argue, but she did hug her husband tighter. Logan was only really scared of one thing, but it haunted him day and night - the fear that something might happen to his family. When Logan was in the grip of it, Ororo did whatever it took to bring him back from the brink.

Sometimes, it was nothing more than simply being there.

Logan closed his eyes and leaned against Ororo.
The New Neighbors

Chapter Summary

Mystique is in town. That sort of says it all, doesn't it?

THE NEW NEIGHBORS

Logan caught her scent when he left his office to go to lunch. There was no mistaking who she was.

He eventually found her in the town square, sitting on a park bench and calmly reading a paperback book. She was a young beauty with dark-hair and eyes, dressed in a tight, knee-length, one-piece, white dress and black high heels. A white lace scarf covered her hair and she was wearing matching gloves. Most people would have found her outfit quite eccentric - especially for a small town in the mountains of the American West.

Actually, her clothes were just sixty years out of date.

His face grimly skeptical, Logan sat next to the woman. She put down her paperback and looked at him. Most men would have found her eyes mesmerizing.

Then she smiled at Logan. It was the kind of smile that could change a man's world.

"Hello, Logan," she said softly. Her voice had a trace of an accent.

"You better have a damn good reason for being here," Logan replied bleakly.

The woman shook her head. "Do you know this one?" she asked, making a gesture with both hands that seemed to refer to herself.

Logan's face was expressionless, but something seemed to flicker in his eyes.

"Sophia Loren," he replied eventually.

"Did you know her?" the woman asked curiously, her accent now gone. "I've heard rumors that you were a couple for a while."

Logan didn't say anything. He just waited.

Raven Darkholme sighed, shook her head, and said, "There's something I've been meaning to tell you for some time, Logan, but I've never gotten around to it."

Logan still didn't say anything.

"We have a son," Raven finished.

It was just after noon. Daken and Laura were at Donovan's Pit Stop - a gas station a few hundred yards down the road from the school. They were picking up something unhealthy to supplement their lunch.
"Hi," a boy said to them as they stepped outside. Laura was carrying a bag of chips.

"Hi," Daken replied as he carefully studied the boy who'd just spoken to them. Laura didn't say anything as she kept to the background, but she was obviously curious.

They didn't know the boy. Given how few people lived in their part of the world, that was remarkable in and of itself. However, he appeared ordinary enough. His age was somewhere between Daken's and Laura's, but the only thing about him that really stood out was a wild shock of dark-red hair.

"My name's Raze," the boy said.

Logan and Raven were in his office. Logan was pretty sure they were going to have a conversation that he didn't want overheard.

"It was the last time we were together," Raven told Logan. "About a year after Itsu died, but just before you and Ororo stopped being idiots and finally got around to admitting that you had something."

Logan seemed to consider what Raven had said, his eyes searching her face.

"Paris," he said.

A smile flickered across Raven's face. "We were both seriously screwed up. You because of Itsu. Me because of... because of other things. We tried to use alcohol and sex to make up for it."

"It didn't work," Logan pointed out. "At least, not for long."

Raven was silent for a moment before responding. "In the long run, I guess I wasn't who you needed. Ororo was."

Logan nodded.

"After we split up, I realized I was pregnant," Raven added. Then she paused, trying to gauge Logan's reaction.

He was trying not to react, but Raven could tell she was getting to him.

They were sitting on the front steps to the school. Raze was attracting some strange looks from passers-by since nobody knew him. Daken and Laura were sharing their sack lunches with Raze. For his part, Raze had bought the soda-pops they were drinking.

"How long will you be around?" Laura asked. She still seemed to be slightly wary around Raze.

Raze shook his head. "I don't know. Mom said she has some business here in town. And then she said something kinda strange."

Raze paused thoughtfully.

"What did she say?" Daken pressed.

"She said we might be here for just for a few hours," Raze said. "Or that we might never leave."
"What you want?" Logan said.

Raven looked Logan in the eye. For a brief moment, Sophia Loren's eyes flickered yellow. Then Raven's face and body shimmered back to her normal form.

She was Mystique again.

"I'm on the run and I need help," Raven said.

Then she waited tensely. Raven was fairly sure there was nobody on Earth who would greet what she had just said with any semblance of respect. She had spent too many years compulsively lying to and betraying everyone she encountered. Too many years making enemies.

Coming to see Logan was a gamble, but it was the only option left to her. All she could do was roll the dice and pray.

"Keep talking," Logan said.

Okay. Maybe there was one person left on Earth who would actually listen to her.

"It wasn't an accident that you met us," Laura said suddenly. "You were waiting for us at Donovan's."

Daken didn't say anything, but he was looking at Raze. He was waiting to see Raze's reaction.

A wry expression appeared on Raze's face.

"I was checking out the school," Raze said, "hoping I'd see you. Then I saw you go into the gas station, so I decided to talk to you."

"Why?" asked Laura.

Raze looked back at Laura. Her bright green eyes seemed to be gazing right into him. It was an unsettling experience.

"We're a lot alike," Raze responded.

"I want to make a deal," Raven said. And for a moment she wondered at the desperation that was suddenly creeping into her voice. It was real. Shockingly real. But would Logan believe her?

After all, she had been lying to him for almost a century. He had every reason in the world - every right, in fact - to tell her to go to hell.

Logan raised an eyebrow. "What kind of deal?"

"I need somewhere to hide."

Logan just stared.

Raven licked her lips. "Let me stay here for a while, Logan. I'll give you whatever you want."

"Raven, what the hell have you gotten yourself into?" Logan demanded.

"I'm still in the middle of it all, Logan." Raven said helplessly. "And I can't seem to get out. Even if
I try to quit, it doesn't matter. They keep coming after me."

"They?" Logan said - it was more a statement than a question.

Raven nodded exhaustedly. "Hydra, AIM, Weapon-X, the CIA, the FSB, MI-6, Mossad, PLAN Intelligence, the Mafia, the Cartels - all of them and more."

Logan nodded. He understood.

"How the blazes did you do it, Logan?" Raven asked distractedly. "How did you manage to get out?"

"There's nothing 'Ro and I have done that you can't do," Logan replied flatly. "Hell, Raven, you're better at hiding than anyone else on Earth."

An angry smile came over Raven's face. "Logan, do really not understand just how much I've pissed everyone off?"

Logan snorted. "Yeah, as a matter of fact I do. You've played too many angles and burned too many people for way too long. There are folks who don't ever forget, Raven. And they sure as hell don't forgive. You have a knack for finding them and making them mad."

"My Mom is called Mystique," Raze said.

Daken didn't react, but Laura leaned forward. She was obviously interested.

"Right now, she's talking to your dad," Raze continued. "I don't know for sure what they're talking about - I think Mom wants to stay here - but I thought it would be a good chance to see you."

"Hydra came up with some intel on me," Raven said tiredly. "They caught me in my Chicago safe house and killed all of my people there. They also hit my other hideouts and took down my bank accounts. I think they got to my money caches, as well. I just barely managed to grab Raze and get out of town."

"Raze?" Logan repeated.

"Our son," Raven replied.

Logan nodded slowly. "How'd Hydra find you?" he asked.

Raven shrugged helplessly. "They got to somebody who was working for me. He sold me out."

Logan leaned forward, "Are they trailing you? Did you lead them here?"

Raven shrugged again, "I don't think so."

Logan seemed to consider Raven for a long moment. Raven knew that Logan was trying to consider all of the angles.

If he decided that she was lying...

"What can you do?" Daken asked.
Raze looked at Daken. "What do you mean?"

"If you're Mystique's son, then that means you're a mutant. So what can you do?"

There was an awkward silence. After looking around the mostly-empty schoolyard to make sure nobody was watching, Raze reached over and grabbed a soft-cover book that was sticking out of a pouch in Laura's book-bag. It was pretty well worn. Raze smiled as he examined the cover. It was a copy of "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone."

Raze's body suddenly shifted and changed. For a brief second, there was a momentary glimpse of a very Mystique-like blue skin and yellow eyes. And then Daken and Laura were looking at a young version of Daniel Radcliffe as Harry Potter. He had the glasses and lightning-bolt scar, and he was dressed for school.

Laura cocked her head curiously, but didn't say anything.

Despite himself, Daken grinned and said, "That's cool."

"Can you do Hermione and Ron?" Laura asked suddenly. For the first time since meeting Raze, she was smiling.

"I need somewhere to hide," Raven explained. "Just for a few days, until I can get this sorted out. I can fall back and rebuild, but I need time."

For a long while, Logan didn't say anything. All of his thoughtful pauses and extended silences were bothering Raven. She was used to Logan making decisions quickly and acting upon them without hesitation.

Of course, that version of Logan didn't have a wife and two kids.

He's changed, Raven suddenly thought to herself. Suddenly, she wasn't sure if she knew Logan as well as she once had. And that was something to worry about. It might make him unpredictable.

Logan pulled his cellphone out of his jacket.

Kurt and Rogue arrived a few hours later. They were backup in case Hydra showed up. They were also the two people you wanted around when you were dealing with Mystique. They both had a bitterly-acquired talent for detecting and dealing with Raven's bullshit.

Kurt and Logan ended up in the local diner, having a cup of coffee. Kurt was in street clothes and using an image inducer. Several of the local ladies were giving him the eye. Just like Sophia Loren, Errol Flynn had a charisma that spanned generations.

"Ororo and my mother are talking?" Kurt said slowly. He was obviously somewhere between worried and horrified by the idea.

Logan's reply was a stoic nod. When your wife and your oldest ex-girlfriend get together, it was never a good thing. Logan just hoped that nobody would end up hurt... or worse.

"Is that wise?" Kurt asked cautiously.

Logan sighed. "Oh, it's definitely not wise," he said, "but it has to happen."
There were things that had to be settled, but Ororo didn't particularly want Mystique in her home ever. So they met at Mr. Donovan's gas station. They ended up sitting at a filthy picnic table that was just outside of the building itself.

The pickup truck was parked a dozen yards away. Rogue was in the driver's seat. She and Raven didn't react to each other's presence. That bothered Ororo more than she wanted to admit.

"If you are lying, if this is some sort of trap or trick, then I will kill you myself," Ororo said after she sat down. As conversational openers went, Ororo's words had the virtues of simplicity and truth.

To somebody who didn't know Ororo, she seemed coldly calm. Raven knew better - the distant rumble of thunder was a sure clue. Raven knew that she was quite possibly in more danger than at any other time during a long and difficult couple of days. However, this was something she had to endure.

She had to keep Raze safe.

Actually, so far the conversation was going better than Raven had expected. At least she hadn't been on the receiving end of a punch in the mouth... or a lightning-bolt.

"I'm not looking for trouble," Raven replied steadily. "We won't be here long and if Logan wants us gone, all he has to do is ask."

Ororo nodded, pulled an envelope out of her jacket, and put in on the table between them. "There a house about mile or so north of here. You will have plenty of privacy and there are multiple escape routes. Directions and the keys are in the envelope. We've paid for a month's worth of rent and utilities."

"That'll do," Raven replied as she reached over and took the envelope.

Then both women seemed to run out of anything to say.

"You don't have any questions?" Raven eventually asked. It vaguely bothered her that Ororo wasn't being more vocal.

Ororo smiled briefly before replying, "Not really. I actually understand you fairly well, Raven."

Raven cocked her head at Ororo in a gesture that was very much like something Logan would do. Ororo found herself wondering if Raven had learned it from Logan - or vice-versa.

"Oh? What do you understand about me?" Raven said. There was a faint edge of mockery in her voice.

"Logan once meant something to you," Ororo explained, "and - no matter how much you pretend otherwise - you cannot quite let him go. You keep trying to fill an empty hole in your life with children you do not really love. You have a mad desire to breed some sort of overpowered combination of yourself and the most powerful men you know. You are a compulsive manipulator who finds pleasure in playing games with the lives of others. Oh, and you are insane. Off hand, Raven, I think that covers everything important."

Normally, Raven had a formidable poker-face. But this time she couldn't quite help herself. She was angry, but this wasn't the time or place for anger. She needed Ororo's cooperation.

Ororo stood up. "We will protect you and Raze. Otherwise... do nothing to endanger my family,
Raven. If you want to know how serious I am, you can ask Sabertooth."

Then Ororo began walking away.

"Ororo!" Raven said suddenly.

Ororo paused and glanced over her shoulder at Raven.

"I do love my children, Ororo. I don't expect you to believe that, but it's true."

The kids sprinted into the diner, just ahead of the rain. Raze was in the form he'd worn when he first met Daken and Laura.

With a wide grin on her face, Laura joyfully swarmed into Uncle Kurt's lap. Daken sat next to his father. Raze stayed awkwardly on his feet.

"This is Raze," Daken said to Logan. "He's Mystique's kid."

Logan noted that both Daken and Laura seemed comfortable around Raze. Which was interesting since they both had good instincts about people.

"Sit down," Logan told Raze.

"Okay," Raze said as he got into the booth next to Kurt and Laura.

As Raze sat down, Logan and Kurt exchanged a glance. They both could tell that someday - when his voice finally finished maturing - Raze would sound just like Logan.

Rogue was still in the truck as Ororo opened the passenger door and climbed inside. The incoming rain had arrived. The windshield wipers were flickering and raindrops were beginning to pound against the cab roof.

"So you didn't kill her," Rogue said with a tiny smile. It was hard to tell if she was pleased or disappointed.

Ororo just shook her head as she put on her seatbelt.

"How much trouble is Logan in?" Rogue asked as she expertly put the truck into gear and pulled out of the parking lot. As a girl from Mississippi, driving a pickup was built into her DNA.

"I am not angry with Logan," Ororo said steadily. "Raven is using him. She is using him just as she uses everyone else."

Then Ororo suddenly remembered who she was talking to. She reached over and put a hand on Rogue's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Ororo said softly.

Rogue smiled bitterly. "You didn't say anything that isn't true."

"You are not responsible for her, Rogue. You do not have to spend the rest of your life saving her and picking up after her."

"Yes, I do," Rogue replied.
Ororo looked out the window and into the rain. "Why does everyone keep forgiving her?"

Rogue didn't answer.

Laura was sitting on the rug in front of the fireplace. Another Laura was with her. Laura had borrowed some of her mother's nail polish and was painting the other Laura's toenails. Daken was at the table, half-surrounded by books and papers.

"Thank God you're home, Mom," Daken said plaintively as he looked up from his homework. "Dad cooked dinner."

"It wasn't that bad," suggested Laura.

"Yuck," shot back the other Laura.

Ororo smiled. "I will make some sandwiches. What do you want?"

"Peanut butter and jelly!" both Lauras said simultaneously.

"Ham and cheese," Daken added absently. He was already back into his algebra.

Squatting down near the two Lauras, Rogue took a moment to examine the on-going pedicure.

"You know, normally all of the nails are the same color," Rogue suggested. The two Lauras were going for a more free-form approach that involved multiple colors and a frankly terrible combination of stripes and polka-dots.

"This way is more fun!" one of the Lauras replied seriously.

"Raze," Ororo called from the kitchen door, "be careful not to get nail polish on the rug."

The Laura with the bottle of nail polish in his/her hands frowned and turned back into his normal form. Rogue tried not to stare. At first glance, with the blue skin, red hair, and yellow eyes, Raze most obviously resembled Raven. However, if you knew Logan well, you could see him in the lines of Raze's face.

"How did she know it was me?" Raze asked. He was obviously puzzled.

Daken glanced up. "She has mysterious mom-powers. We can't figure out how they work. It's kinda scary."

Laura nodded in solemn agreement.

The apartment was small, but clean and well-furnished. It overlooked main street and the landlord had mentioned that their neighbor across the way was a deputy sheriff. Both Kurt and Rogue, who were used to east-coast rental prices, were astounded by how little it cost.

Rogue put a bag of groceries on the kitchen table. Kurt dropped their traveling bags on the couch.

"You take the bedroom and I'll take the couch," Kurt suggested as he handed Rogue a key to the door.

"No argument there," Rogue replied with a smile.
"I called Scott and told him we'd be here for a while," Kurt continued.

Rogue nodded. "What did he say?"

"He approves. Raven's story about Hydra seems to check out, but he thinks we should operate on the assumption that she has a plan."

Rogue chuckled and began putting groceries away. "Scott knows Mom fairly well."

"Not as well as we know her," Kurt said with a shrug.

"So how does it feel to be sort-of related to Logan?"

Kurt made a face. "I was wondering when somebody would notice that. Is there even a word that describes our relationship? My best-friend is my half-brother's father."

Rogue thought about that. "I don't know. Sort of a step-father once removed, I suppose?"

Kurt just shook his head.

"Raze seems to be a good kid," Rogue suggested.

Kurt turned serious. "Let's hope he stays that way."

The house was well-situated and Ororo was right about the multiple escape routes. There was considerable cover that allowed for quick exits into the woods, the hills, or back towards town.

Raven made sure her firearms were loaded and placed in easily available locations throughout the house, and then set up a few alarms. In the process, she noticed that there was a cord of dry wood in the woodshed, so once she was done, Raven built herself a fire in the fireplace.

Alone in her new home, sitting on a slightly dusty couch, Raven watched the flames.

They matched her eyes.
Chapter Summary

Mystique is still in town. Raze is bonding with Daken and Laura. And everyone else is quietly freaking out.

THE NEW NEIGHBORS - PART 2

Raze's eyes were very wide. Which was actually pretty reasonable since a rather large bear was carefully examining him.

"This is Hank!" Laura announced eagerly. She was using both hands to scratch the bear behind his ears. "He's our friend."

Raze swallowed hard. It didn't even occur to Laura that Raze might be alarmed. For his part, Daken was doing his best not to laugh. Raze had to meet Hank sooner and later. And besides, it wasn't like he was in any actual danger.

"I thought he was supposed to be blue," Raze said faintly.

Laura shook her head firmly. "No. That's Uncle Hank. This is Hank-the-bear. They're completely different."

Hank gave Raze an interrogative sniff. Then - after a moment of bearish thought - he playfully butted Raze with his nose. Apparently the boy met with Hank's approval.

Watching the scene from his seat on the porch, Logan understood what had happened. The bear had caught the part of Raze's scent that was Logan and the kids.

He knew that Raze was family.

Logan wondered if he was ever going to feel the same way.

Raze stayed for dinner. Then he, Daken, Laura, and Hank played together until well after sundown.

Raze seemed to warm up to Ororo quickly - which didn't surprise Logan at all. Ororo knew the mindset of Logan's offspring better than anyone else in the world. She knew when to be firm and when to let the kids run wild. They responded well to the mixture of structure and freedom, even when they were filing loud objections to the "structure" part of the deal.

Only Logan kept his distance from Raze. He wasn't sure if that was the right decision - or something to be ashamed of.

Just after nine, Logan dropped Raze off at the old ranch house that was now Raven's latest hideout. The drive into town was silent until the very end.

"G'night, Mr. Howlett," Raze said politely as he jumped out of the truck.
"Goodnight," Logan responded. Then he watched as the boy walked to the front door.

If Raze knew that Logan was his father, he was doing a remarkably good job of concealing the fact.

But...

But Logan really didn't know what to believe. Whenever Raven was involved, reality and lies blurred together until you weren't sure what was truth and what was illusion. After all, there was a time when Logan was sure that Raven loved him.

Raven appeared at the door. She crouched down to greet Raze as he ran into her arms, and then smiled as he began eagerly telling her about his busy day and new friends.

That was when Logan finally knew.

Raze wasn't some sort of monster-child out of the movies, pretending to be human. He was just a kid. A mutant kid with the misfortune to have two parents who guaranteed him a lifetime of trouble.

Logan and Raven's eyes met. And just for a second, Raven's aura of supreme self-confidence seemed to waver. But she quickly recovered, smiled crookedly at Logan, and walked Raze back into their house.

Logan sat in his truck for a long time, watching the closed door behind which Raven and Raze had vanished.

"How's it going?" Kitty asked. She was obviously concerned.

"It's weird," Logan replied shortly. He was on his way home and talking to Kitty on his cellphone.

"Any sign of trouble?" Kitty didn't need to explain what - or who - she was talking about.

"Mystique is around. So there's trouble."

Kitty took a deep breath before continuing. "What's the boy like?"

Logan paused before answering. "I'm... not sure what to think about him."

Kitty's reply was careful. "I know you're worried, but Mystique also raised Rogue. She turned out fine."

"She turned out fine after she left Raven. Until then, she was one of the bad guys. And she damned near went crazy because Raven forced her to use her power too much."

Kitty sighed. "What can I do to help?"

"Go to Chicago and do some checking. Everyone else is focused on Raven. Find out what you can about Raze."

"I'm on the way."

When Logan got home, the lights were out and the children were in bed. Ororo was waiting for Logan on the porch. Her hair and simple white nightgown seem to glow in the faint, pale,
moonlight.

Sitting next to each other, Logan and Ororo silently enjoyed the evening air. It was an unseasonably comfortable autumn evening and the night birds and insects seemed to be trying to stave off winter with a steady chorus of calls and sounds.

"If we have to run, where do we go next?" Logan asked suddenly.

Ororo's response came only after a long pause. "I love this place. The cabin. The woods. The town and the people. I would miss it."

Logan nodded sympathetically. "I know, but we need a plan. Just in case."

Staring out into the woods with narrowed eyes, Ororo considered their options. "We should still avoid heavily populated areas... I have my mother's property in Kenya. You have your parent's old estate."

"They can both be traced back to us," Logan pointed out.

Ororo frowned thoughtfully. "Japan? Yukio once offered to let us take over that little house she has in the mountains of Kyushu. The schools are excellent and both Daken and Laura speak fluent Japanese. And it would be good to see Amiko more often."

For the first time that day, a smile tugged at Logan's lips. "I dunno... Yukio made it pretty clear how she expected us to pay the rent."

Ororo smiled back - as a day's worth of anger and tension seeming to drain from both of them. "It would not be the first time we have had Yukio between us on a sleeping mat. And I admit that I miss that little squealing sound she makes. It is such an unlikely noise for a hardened ninja."

Logan's half-smile turned into a full chuckle. "Okay... Japan's our fallback position."

Ororo got to her feet. "I also have a plan."

Then she began unbuttoning her nightgown.

"It has been a bad day," Ororo continued as her gown fluttered open, revealing nothing underneath but bare brown skin. "It is up to us to turn it into something better."

Logan got to his feet and put his arms around Ororo, his hands underneath her open gown and on the soft skin of her back.

"When was the last time we made love in the back of the pickup?" Ororo asked. She was smiling and the devil was dancing in her blue eyes.

"Too long," Logan said just before they kissed.

Rogue was yawning and rubbing the sleep from her eyes when she answered the door. All she was wearing was a haphazardly-buttoned pajama top. That left her long legs well exposed - as well as a lot of her midriff.

Logan tried not to smile. Rogue's hair was a mess, she wasn't wearing a trace of makeup, and her eyes were red from lack of sleep. And she was gorgeous. Women never seemed to understand just how little makeup and stylish clothes really meant to most men.
Rogue stepped to the side and wordlessly waved Logan into the apartment.

"For Pete's sake, Rogue," Logan growled as stepped inside, carefully keeping his eyes somewhere neutral. "Put some clothes on."

"Don't you dare be a grumpy at me!" Rogue shot back blearily. "At least not 'til I've had some coffee."

On the kitchen counter, a half-full coffee pot was making gurgling sounds. Logan grabbed a mug from the kitchen table, filled it, and handed it to Rogue. She accepted it gratefully.

"Let me guess," Logan said. "You two were up until the middle of the night talking about Raven?"

"Ja," Kurt grumbled from the couch. He was underneath a blanket, curled up into an improbably small ball. Kurt's flexibility was akin to a cat's.

Logan shook his head as he filled another coffee cup. Raven had a talent for taking up permanent residence in other people's heads. For Rogue and Kurt, it was understandably worse.

Logan put the other coffee on the table next to Kurt's head. A three-fingered hand reached out from under the blanket and grabbed it. Then Kurt unfolded out from under the blanket, seeming to double in size in just a few seconds.

"What have you got?" Logan asked as he sat down in an easy chair that looked like it had seen better days.

By now, Kurt was sitting up. Rogue put her cup on the floor and unceremoniously dropped onto the rest of the couch. The top of her head was propped up against Kurt's thigh and her bare feet were sticking out over the far end of the couch.

"Remy is working his contacts," Rogue said as she stared up at the ceiling. "Everything Mystique said checks out. Hydra has made a big move against her. They're pissed because of a job she did against them for the Saudis. The new big-boss at Hydra has put out the word that it's time to, quote, 'deal with that infernal bitch once and for all', unquote. They hit all of her safe-houses that we knew about - and a few we didn't know about. The Chicago operation turned into a big firefight that the FBI is still trying to sort out."

"Those aren't the only deaths," Kurt added quietly. "Hydra killed everyone they found near any of Mystique's operations. According to SHIELD, there are dozens dead and that includes innocent people who just happened to be in the area."

Logan grimaced. "Hydra isn't taking any chances with Raven's shape-shifting abilities. If anyone might be her, Hydra kills them."

"Hydra isn't playing by Raven's rules," Rogue observed. "They're making it harder for her to just change form and walk away."

"Warren confirmed that Hydra has shut her down financially," Kurt continued. "They've put out the word that siding with Mystique means that you are an enemy of Hydra. Even the Swiss have suddenly noticed some 'irregularities' with her Zurich bank account that has made it necessary to freeze the account and 'investigate' until further notice."

"I know she has money caches," Rogue mused thoughtfully, "but she's gonna have problems getting to them. And if her story about being ratted out by one of her own people is true, then she can't know which are safe and which are being watched."
Kurt shook his head. "She would have at least a few stashes that nobody else knows about."

"Hydra is pretty good at figuring out things that people thought were secret," Logan pointed out. "They've suprised us in the past."

Rogue's eyes narrowed. "So Mystique can't know for sure that any of her caches are secure, but she needs money to survive. Normally she'd just blend into the crowd, pick up what she needs, and walk away."

"But that won't work if Hydra just shoots anyone who comes after those caches," Logan pointed out. "As a matter of fact, Hydra may be using them as bait."

Kurt nodded thoughtfully. "And in any case, Mystique can't take her usual insane chances..."

"...because of Raze," Rogue finished.

"So she'll need someone to pick up those stashes for her," Kurt sighed.

Logan spoke up again. "Okay, so the first part of Mystique's plan was to find a secure place to hide - and she's done that."

Kurt stirred uneasily.

"Ya got something to say, Elf?" Logan asked. There was a trace of a smile on his face.

"Something occurred to me last night. I fear Mystique has outmaneuvered us."

Logan nodded soberly. "Yeah, I've thought of that, too. She came here and shoved Raze in my face. So I took her in - which means me and 'Ro are protecting her. Then I called for backup just in case she was up to something and you two naturally showed up."

"So now all four of us are her bodyguards," Rogue said with a disgusted shake of her head. "And by extension, the rest of the X-Men are backing her as well. Even if Hydra finds her, they can't just attack. Not without putting together a really big operation."

"Well, we always knew she was smart," Logan shrugged. "So she now has the security she needs - at least for a while. The second part of her plan will be to get the resources she needs for long-term survival. That means money. But what does she do after that?"

"She needs to get Hydra to back off," Rogue answered immediately. "Mystique can hide for a long time, but if she - or more likely, Raze - makes a mistake then Hydra might very well spot them. They'll come after her hard and won't hesitate to kill every possible suspect just to make sure they get her. Mystique doesn't mind being on the run, but being on the run from Hydra while trying to take care of Raze at the same time... That's too much."

Logan and Kurt nodded.

"He's going to school," Ororo said. She wasn't exactly challenging Raven, but something in her tone of voice suggested that disagreement wasn't an option.

Raven didn't like that at all, but it didn't sound like she had much choice.

For his part, Raze seemed excited by the idea of attending school. Daken and Laura were also eager - they had brought along one of Daken's old backpacks. It contained all of the supplies they thought Raze would need.
"He should stay out of sight," Raven responded. She was obviously worried.

Ororo shook her head. "This is a small town, Raven. By now, everyone knows that a mysterious woman with a young boy is living at the old Renwick place. We need to make you less mysterious. And that means Raze has to do the things that any boy his age would do after moving to town."

"I'll need time to establish a cover..." Raven began.

"Your name is Helen Bright," Ororo interrupted. "You are a life-long resident of a small town in Indiana named Granville. You and I were friends at Ohio University. You are on the run from an abusive husband and called on me for help - which means people should be careful who they talk to about you. Because of the situation with your husband, the local school will not attempt to contact Raze's school in Granville. Both you and Raze will have a full set of ID and supporting paperwork by this evening."

Raven was obviously surprised.

"We have done this before," Ororo added dryly.

"What does the school have in mind for Raze?" Mystique asked slowly.

Ororo nodded. "They are putting together a program that assumes Raze will be around for at least a few weeks. He will need to take some assessment tests today."

"Tests?" Raze asked - from across the room and in the middle of an animated conversation with his half-brother and half-sister.

And that answers the question of whether or not Raze has the heightened senses of his father and siblings, Ororo thought to herself.

Watching from the window, Raven watched the kids climb into the truck. Raze unhesitatingly grabbed Laura by the waist and gave her a boost. She reciprocated by reaching out and gave him a hand up. Daken, of course, disdained any such assistance. Real men could obviously get in and out of a truck on their own.

Raven felt a strange sense of unease. Everything was going more-or-less as planned.

Everything except Raze. It was amazing how quickly he and his half-siblings had taken to each other.

That was going to be a problem.

As the truck drove away, it passed Rogue. She was walking down the dirt-track that lead to Raven's place. Everyone waved at Rogue - except for Raze.

Rogue waved back. Raze was obviously puzzled.

"That's Aunt Rogue," Daken explained to Raze, but Raze clearly didn't have a clue what Daken was talking about.

"Actually, she's your adopted sister," Laura corrected.

"What?" Raze exclaimed in surprise.

Ororo sighed and shook her head. Meanwhile Daken and Laura began trying to explain that part of
"Nice place," Rogue said as she glanced around the interior of the old ranch house. "Maybe it needs a little work."

"It's a hovel," Raven replied evenly.

Rogue shrugged as she sat down in one of the kitchen table's wooden chairs. "It's not that much different from that house in Mississippi where you and Destiny raised me."

"That place was a hovel, too. Hovels are a great place to hide, Anna. Nobody cares who lives in them."

Rogue leaned back in her chair. "Yeah, I guess that's true. Funny thing, though. As I recall, that neighborhood was full of crappy houses, but most of the people who lived there were happy."

"Sheep are always happy right until the wolves show up."

Rogue smiled, "Really? How many of those people are on the run right now?"

Raven stared into Rogue's eyes - then shrugged, sat down next to Rogue, and changed the subject. "Sorry, but there's no coffee or tea. I've haven't had a chance to go to the store."

"I've got a rental down at the end of the drive," Rogue said. "I'll give you a lift to the store."

"And what is the most important rule at school?" Ororo asked as the kids scrambled to organize their school gear. Raze was in the same form he'd been using yesterday, when he first met Daken and Laura.

"No claws," Daken and Laura chorused automatically.

Raze seemed puzzled. Ororo looked at him, smiled, and ruffled his hair.

"You cannot use your powers in front of others," she explained.

"And Mom and Dad are scared we'll hurt somebody," Daken clarified further.

Raze nodded. Then he balled his right hand into a fist. The claws that popped out were a triple set - like Logan's. Proportionally, they weren't as long as Daken or Laura's.

Ororo blinked in surprise. Daken and Laura both grinned in delight.

"What is the most important rule in school, Raze?" Ororo asked once she found her voice.

"No claws," Raze said instantly. He twisted his wrist and his claws vanished.

"All of you - say it again," Ororo ordered.

All three children responded. "No claws!"

"One more time? Louder?"

"NO CLAWS!" they all yelled together.

Ororo kissed them goodbye - Raze seemed surprised by that, but not unhappy - and then the kids
The Ford Taurus that Rogue and Kurt were renting was packed with groceries. And now Raven and Rogue were in the town diner.

"Excuse me, honey," the elderly woman who was their waitress said right after she took their order, "but has anyone ever told you that you have a strong resemblance to Sophia Loren?"

Raven gave the woman a dazzling smile. "Yes. My mother's side of the family is from Italy. I've always wondered if we might be related."

Raven's accent was pure mid-western American. The waitress nodded politely and walked over to the kitchen window.

"How's the money situation?" Rogue asked. And for just a moment, something in Raven seemed to unbend. Anna had always been so practical - even when she was a little girl.

Raven snorted. "Tight. I'm technically rich, but I can't get to any of my accounts. After grocery shopping, I have about three hundred dollars in cash with me. I also have some small, high-quality diamonds that I always carry with me. I don't suppose I can talk you into selling them for me?"

"Sure. I'll have Remy fence them."

Raven rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything.

"You're the one who needs help," Rogue responded tightly. "Maybe you shouldn't be too picky about who you get it from."

Raven's face twisted into a scowl. "I gave up on being picky when I came to Logan. He's the alpha-male of all alpha-males, dear. Great in bed, but the longer you're around him, the more he inevitably ends up taking over your life."

Rogue nodded. "And this is just your second day here. Bet it's gonna get worse."

Their eyes met again. "Anna, are you trying to get me mad?"

Rogue smiled coldly. "Actually, I'm trying to save your life."

"Thank you, but I can take care of myself."

Rogue actually laughed. "And you're doing just a grand job right now. Normally, I'd say this was all on you, but now there's something new in the picture. Why the blazes didn't you ever tell me about Raze?"

"It wasn't any of your business."

"It sure as hell was Logan's business."

"And that's between him and me. Stay out of it, Anna."

"Too late. I'm here, Kurt's here, and we're involved. And don't pretend that wasn't part of your plan all along."

"How clever of you. How is Kurt?"
Rogue leaned back in her chair and eyed Raven. "He's fine. And he's perfectly willing to forgive you - if you ever give him the chance. Talk with him, mom."

Suddenly, Raven looked uneasy. "There's nothing to talk about."

Rogue shook her head. "Dear God, what a fucked-up family."

"Are you waiting for me to disagree?" Raven asked coldly.

Smiling, Rogue leaned forward, resting her arms on the table. "You know, I've had a thought."

"What?" Raven asked warily.

"The thing about Hydra is that you just never know with them. They're big, they're everywhere, and they aren't exactly scared to use people and resources - they aren't short on either. So you need something that will get Hydra off your back. Otherwise, they'll make your life a living hell and eventually kill you and Raze both."

Raven nodded slowly. "You haven't told me anything I haven't figured out already, dear."

"But what can you give them?" Rogue mused thoughtfully. "What would make Hydra decide to leave you alone? It would have to be something useful and very rare. Something that would pay off for years and years to come."

Raven didn't respond.

"Something young," Rogue finished.

Raven carefully examined her adopted daughter. Rogue unflinchingly looked back. And they were both as still as the nearby mountains.
The odd grouping of Logan, Ororo, Laura, Daken, Kurt, Rogue, Raven and Raze continues to be caught up in each other's cares, worries, and problems. And in the end, Raze unwittingly makes a disastrous discovery.

THE NEW NEIGHBORS - PART 3

"Even after all these years, I still find this very hard to believe," Kurt said with a slyly amused smile.

They were in Logan's office. Logan was behind his desk while Kurt was occupying a spare office chair. Kurt was still using his image inducer to look like Errol Flynn.

"What?" Logan asked distractedly. He was in the process of emailing an invoice to a client.

Kurt gave Logan a broad grin. "What you have become," he said. "A man with an office, a home, a wonderful wife, and two fine kinder. I envy you, Logan."

Logan sent his email and looked up at Kurt. "No reason you can't do what 'Ro and I have done. And my offer of a partnership is still open. I've got more clients than I can handle."

Kurt shook his head. "I'm afraid not, mein fruend. Or, at least, not yet."

"Just as well," Logan shrugged. "You'd actually have to settle down - instead of chasing women like a blue-tailed Hugh Hefner."

"Ach... you wound me, Logan. Are you suggesting that I am living the adventurous life simply to attract beautiful women?"

Logan snorted. "How many ladies are you dating right now? Lessee... last I heard you were seeing a cop, a nurse, a stripper, and two actresses. Oh, and what about that cute Chinese gal? Is she still with AIM?"

Kurt immediately shook his head. "Min has left AIM and is taking classes at Berkeley - she plans to get another doctorate and enter the private sector."

Logan paused, frowning thoughtfully. "Hey... she was a weapons specialist for AIM, right? Maybe I can hire her as a consultant. What does she know about nerve gas dispensers?"

Kurt gave Logan an alarmed look. "Logan, just what kind of security consulting are you doing?"

Logan's smile became rather thin. "Once I got my memory back, I realized that I had all kinds of contacts in the intelligence, military, and black-ops world. Some of them have pretty specialized needs."

Rogue helped carry the groceries into Raven's house. Then she helped put them away.
"This refrigerator is a crime against humanity," Rogue said as she peered inside the appliance in question. Her nose was wrinkled in disgust.

"Leave it open and don't put anything inside," Raven said as she filled up a cupboard. "I'll clean it up."

"You know, I think I've seen every damned superpower known to God and man and none of them can clean a kitchen or a bathroom," Rogue complained as she put a plastic bucket into the sink - there were some ancient cleaning supplies under the sink - and began filling it with hot water.

Raven closed the cupboard and turned to face Rogue. "I don't need your help."

"You've never needed my help more," Rogue countered.

"I doubt that. And I can certainly handle a refrigerator on my own."

Rogue turned off the water - the bucket was almost full anyway - and held up her hands in surrender. "Okay. It's all yours. Have fun."

As Raven began scrubbing out the refrigerator, Rogue looked at the stuff Raven had left on the kitchen counter. She recognized the ingredients.

"Lasagna," Rogue said thoughtfully.

Raven hesitated and glanced over her shoulder at Rogue. "Yes. You can stay for dinner if you like."

Rogue's lips curved into a smile. "That was my favorite when I was a kid."

"Raze likes it too. I thought he might need something to cheer him up."

Rogue shrugged. "Are you paying attention, Mom? He's so cheerful right now you'd have to hit him with a club to make him stop."

Raven didn't respond - and went back to cleaning the refrigerator.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, is it bothering you that Raze is fitting in so well with Logan's kids?"

Raven slammed her fist against the refrigerator frame - the refrigerator rocked backwards and slammed against the wall - and then turned and gave Rogue a venomous look.

"Logan took you away from me!" Raven snarled. "He isn't taking Raze!"

"So you didn't go to a school?" Laura asked. She didn't seem surprised, just interested.

Raze nodded. "Mr. Simonsen was my teacher. He'd show up every morning and we'd have lessons. It was just him and me."

"I've heard of stuff like that," Billy said thoughtfully. "It's something they do in big cities."

The three of them were sitting in the study hall. Laura and Billy were between classes and were supposedly working on assignments. Raze was taking a break from a morning of tests.

"They do it in lots of places," Laura told Billy, "but it's kind of expensive."
"That means you didn't see your friends very often," Billy objected. The idea seemed to disturb him.

Raze shifted uncomfortably. Laura had the feeling that Raze wasn't sure if he was supposed to be talking about the details of his life. "Mom didn't want me to leave the grounds."

"Grounds?" Billy asked. "What grounds?"

"My house was on the edge of town. And there was a fence around it. I wasn't supposed to leave unless I was with somebody."

Laura scrunched her nose. "That doesn't sound like much fun."

Raze shrugged.

"Why couldn't you leave?" Billy asked.

Raze shrugged again. "There are people who don't like Mom. That was why she was gone all the time - she didn't want them to find me."

"So who stayed with you?" Laura asked.

"Mr. Daniels was the groundskeeper. He didn't say much and kept to himself. Miss Garcia took care of me and the house. She was nice, but could be kind of strict sometimes. Mr. Finelli and Mr. Spitz kept watch. Mr. Daniels and Miss Garcia thought they were scary guys. Except sometimes, when nobody else was around, Mr. Finelli would talk to me about sports."

Raze paused, seemingly lost in thought. "He said he was going to take me to a Cubs game someday. But I think he's dead now."

"I've never quite understood how your cover works," Kurt said thoughtfully.

Logan sighed and leaned back in his chair. "It isn't much of a cover. Both 'Ro and I stick out in a crowd and anyone with the right resources can figure out where we live. Hell, some of the locals have figured out who we really are. What we really have going for us is isolation, defensible terrain, and a threat. The threat is pretty blunt: mess with us - mess with Dak and Laura - and there's no limit to how we'll respond."

Then a cold smile crept onto Logan's face. "And we have lots of friends. Besides the X-Men, the word is out that Laura calls Erik Lehnsherr 'Grampa'. And as much as I hate to admit it, having Erik in our corner helps a lot."

"And, of course, there was that business with Sabertooth," Kurt said softly.

Logan's eyes met Kurt's. "That sent a message. So far, everyone seems to have got it."

Kurt didn't respond.

"I know you don't like it," Logan added quietly.

Kurt snorted. "The day has not yet come when I weep for poor, lost, Sabertooth. It's just..."

For a second, Kurt seemed to fumble for words. Then he found them.

"You and Ororo tracked Sabertooth down. It wasn't a fight. It was a hunt."
Logan seemed to think about that. "You know, Ororo and I are great fighters. We're even better hunters."

"Logan didn't take me away from you," Rogue said coldly.

Raven slammed the refrigerator door shut and turned to face Rogue.

"Really? Tell me, dear, has it happened yet? You and Logan?"

Rogue hesitated.

"Of course," Raven said in disgust. "I'd ask if he was good, but we both know the answer, don't we?"

"You don't understand," Rogue said steadily, despite the fact she was furious inside. "And I'm not going to explain it to you."

Brad and Daken had joined Billy, Laura, and Raze.

Laura noticed a slightly distant and withdrawn look on Daken's face. As everyone else chattered, Daken barely had anything to say. Laura knew what that meant.

Raze gave Daken a curious look.

Kurt sighed. "Logan - what happened with Sabertooth was cold-blooded and merciless. And it was terrifying."

Logan nodded. "That was the idea."

Kurt made a helpless gesture with his hands. "Do not misunderstand me. I understand why you did it. I just..."

Kurt stopped. Logan waited patiently for his best friend to finish what he was saying.

"I just wish Ororo hadn't been involved," Kurt completed sadly.

Logan nodded and switched off his computer monitor.

"Y'know. Creed and I were always fairly evenly matched," Logan said thoughtfully. "But Ororo was all the edge I needed."

Then Logan paused before continuing.

"I guess Ororo was always what I needed."

"I get it, Mom," Rogue said softly. "You lost Logan. You lost me. Hell, you threw away Kurt. Of course you're wondering if you'll eventually lose Raze. After all, you always seem be alone in the end."

Raven closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she opened her eyes again.

"There's no point in continuing this conversation," Raven said coldly.
"Raze?" Mrs. Humphries said. She was doing her best not to show her opinion of the names people were giving children nowadays.

The kids sitting at the table all looked up.

"It's time to go back to your tests," Mrs. Humphries continued.

Raze nodded and got to his feet.

Balancing on his one intact leg, and naked as the day he was born, Ed leaned against the window of his room and watched main street.

"Get away from the window," a languid voice ordered from behind Ed. "The whole town's going to see your dick."

Ed smiled and looked over his shoulder. Ellie McPherson was curled up in bed, covered by nothing more than a sheet. She'd dozed off a while back and Ed had let her sleep.

Once upon a time, Ed Barnett had a plan. He was an ex-Army military policeman who was missing a leg from the knee down, but wanted to stay in law enforcement. Unfortunately, not too many police forces would hire someone with his disability, so he kept his loss a secret.

Oh, Ed knew it would come out someday, but he just needed time to build himself a place and a reputation. Once he'd shown his superiors that he could do his job, they wouldn't as be inclined to fire him when they found out that he hadn't checked the box that asked if he might have any physical conditions that would interfere with doing his job.

Of course, one thing Ed couldn't do while he was settling in was get intimate with anyone. He had to be careful about that. Very careful.

So... no women.

Ed wasn't familiar with the quote, "Life is what happens when you're busy making plans," but he would have immediately understood the sentiment.

"It's force of habit," Ed said to Ellie with a shrug. "You spend enough time in law enforcement and you never stop watching."

Ellie smiled, rolled over onto her back, and kicked the sheet that was minimally covering her bare body down to the foot of the bed.

"How do you like the view now?" she asked archly.

Ed laughed and hopped over to the bed.

"So is anything interesting going on out there?" Ellie asked as she grabbed Ed by the arm, overbalanced him, and dragged him onto the bed with her. She was pretty strong for her size.

Ed rolled partway onto Ellie and grabbed her wrists, pinning them above her head. Then he kissed the tip of Ellie's nose. She giggled in response.

"Well," Ed began after a moment's thought, "The lady who looks just like Sophia Loren and is
supposedly named Helen Bright was out shopping with the lady with the striped hair who's renting
the room just across the hallway from here. They know one another, but you can tell there's some
problem, because they're really careful around each other. Meanwhile, the guy who's also in the
room across the hall - he looks just like Eroll Flynn - is hanging out with Mr. Howlett. They're
obviously friends who go back a long ways. Oh, and despite the fact they're sharing a room as Mr.
and Mrs. Wagner, the folks across the hall aren't a couple. They act more like brother and sister."

Ellie's eyebrows were raised. She was obviously impressed. "What else do you know?"

"Mrs. Howlett drove three kids to school his morning. The new kid is the son of the lady who
looks like Sophia Loren. She and the boy are living out at the old Renwick house and Mr.
Howlett's paying the rent. The three kids are getting along great, but Mrs. Howlett and Mrs. Bright
don't really like one another."

"What do you make of all that?" Ellie asked.

Ed hesitated before replying. "They're either all spies for a foreign power - and if they are I have no
idea what they're doing here - or there's some sort of big, weird, family connection."

"Maybe," Ellie said skeptically. "Do you know any other big secrets?"

"You're a natural blonde, very ticklish, and never have to fake an orgasm."

"Didn't take any particular talent to learn any of that," Ellie replied dryly.

"Okay, then how about some high-school gossip? Cindy Duboise is sleeping with two boys at the
same time. They're John Collinwood and Chester Graves. Both of those boys are big, tough, and
bull-headed - Cindy seems to like the type. If they get in a fight, someone's going to get hurt, or
worse. And someone might end up going to jail. Nobody wants that to happen."

Ellie frowned. "I used to babysit Cindy. I'll have a talk with her."

"I'd appreciate that."

The tests were done and Raze had been let loose. He was supposed to report to the Vice-Principal's
office after lunch.

Meanwhile, Raze was worried about Daken. Something had obviously been bothering the older
boy when Raze saw him earlier that morning.

From the now-empty table in the study hall, Raze backtracked to the library. The librarian glanced
at Raze and gave him a friendly nod.

Raze's recent scent was concentrated at one computer. Nobody was using it at the moment.

Sitting down, Raze checked the web-browser's recent history. It had been cleared.

Raze frowned.

Then he spotted a stray piece of paper tucked most of the way under the keyboard.

Raze picked up the paper and looked at it. The handwriting was very similar to Raze's, and Daken's
scent was all over the paper. He'd obviously handled it.

It looked like a list of web addresses.
Daken and Laura were playing outside. Ororo was at the stove. Logan snuck up on her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and bit her lightly on the junction of her neck and shoulder.

Ororo growled in pleasure and arched her back. Logan chuckled.

"How was work?" Ororo asked as she turned to face Logan.

"Kurt spent the day with me. We got to talking and Sabertooth came up."

Ororo gave Logan a long, lingering, kiss.

"That has always bothered him," she said eventually.

"Yeah. He still thinks I dragged you into it."

"Why have you never told him that it was my plan? I will speak with him tomorrow."

Logan shook his head. "No. I don't think he'd handle it too well. Kurt's always loved you a little bit."

Ororo nipped Logan's eyebrow. "Perhaps he idealizes me too much," she then whispered into his ear. One of her hands was inside Logan's shirt, on the bare skin of his broad back. The other had a firm grip on his belt and was holding him very close.

"Kurt's a die-hard romantic," Logan responded. "but he's made a fine choice of who to romanticize."

"Where are the children?" Ororo murmured, her blue eyes bright and hungry.

Logan paused - seeming to consider the question for a moment. "About two hundred yards, north-northwest. On the edge of the creek."

Ororo smiled. And there was a minor shift in the local weather that left the children upwind from the cabin.

They kissed again. It was more than a little savage.

They were having breakfast for dinner. That was Kurt's favorite.

"How did it go with Mystique?" Kurt asked carefully. He could tell that Rogue was upset.

Rogue put a pair of plates on the kitchen table and sat down. "We talked. I told her that it wouldn't be a good idea to try and make a deal with Hydra and that we were watching for that. Then we went food shopping. When we got back to her place, we got into a fight."

Kurt put down his fork. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Rogue shrugged and broke the yolk of one of her eggs with her toast. Kurt knew the act well. Rogue tried to hide it, but nobody could hurt her like Mystique.

Of course, Kurt suspected it went the other way as well.

"What did you argue about?" Kurt asked.
"It doesn't matter. She's scared, jealous, and lonely. That's making her angry."

Dinner was lasagna - with extra meat. Raze dug in enthusiastically.

"How did your tests go?" Raven asked. She was still on autopilot after her fight with Rogue, but she was trying to put on a good show for Raze.

"Mrs. Humphries said I did pretty good," Raze said through a mouthful of food. "I have a report for you. It's in my backpack. I'll start regular classes tomorrow."

Raven smiled automatically as she picked at her dinner, but didn't say anything.

"School is great - there's a lot of kids," Raze added eagerly.

Raven frowned. "Don't get too used to that. We might not be here very long."

Raze looked up at his mother. "I like it here. And I like being with you."

"We still have to be careful," Raven said firmly. "And that means we might have to leave at any time. And you might have to stay with someone else."

Raze wasn't a pouter, but he came pretty close as he looked back down at his dinner.

"How are Daken and Laura?" Raven asked carefully, groping for a neutral subject.

Raze shrugged. "Okay... oh, something was bugging Daken."

"What?"

"I don't know. He was okay when we got to school. During lunch, I followed his scent back to the library. He was on a computer for a long time. I think he saw something that bothered him."

Raven found herself wondering if Raze was just curious about his new friends, or if he had inherited his mother's tendency to gather any personal information about others that happened to come her way.

"Who's the Winter Soldier?" Raze asked curiously.

At first, Raven didn't respond as she carefully studied her son.

Then she smiled.
The New Neighbors Part 4

Chapter Summary

A night of dreams and memories is followed by a morning of discovery.

THE NEW NEIGHBORS - PART 4

When Raven slept, Irene sometimes came to see her.

Even after all this time, Raven really wasn't sure if those appearances were merely dreams, or a sign of her own impending insanity, or a ghostly communication from beyond the grave. But in the last few years, Raven had come to accept Irene's occasional visits as just another part of her life.

And besides, their talks helped Raven think. Irene had always been good for that.

"Was asking Logan for help a good plan?" Irene... Destiny... asked.

"No," Raven replied shortly, "but I was low on options. It was the only move that gave me some real flexibility."

They were sitting together in a passenger car of a turn-of-the-century steam locomotive. Their seats were simple wooden benches that faced each other. Both Raven and Irene were wearing wide hats and long, dark, ankle-length dresses. Raven had vague memories of riding in just such a train when she was quite young. She had been similarly dressed - except her parents had made her wear gloves and a veil to conceal the color of her skin.

That was decades before Irene was born. Raven wasn't at all sure why her sleeping mind was drawing a connection between Irene Adler - who died in the first years of the 21st century - and a childhood memory that dated back to the 19th century.

For some reason, Irene wasn't blind. And her strong gray eyes were both alert and heartbreakingly lovely.

"You could have gone to ground and hidden yourselves in some big city," Irene suggested. "After all, you and Raze are both shape-shifters."

"Raze is young," Raven countered. "One mistake on his part could give us away. Also, I don't know what kind of psychic resources Hydra has available - nobody does - and shape-shifting doesn't work against telepaths. Besides, I refuse to spend the rest of my life waiting for a Hydra assassination team to show up. This way, I have some breathing room. I have a chance to consider other options."

Irene seemed doubtful. "Have you found any?"

Raven turned her head and looked out of the passenger car's window. The train was passing through a tall forest of deciduous trees. They were in western Pennsylvania, but Raven wasn't sure how she knew that.

"Rogue and Kurt think I'm planning to buy Hydra off," Raven replied distantly. "But I would need
something important. Something so valuable that Hydra would be willing accept it in exchange for leaving me alone."

Irene seemed to shift uncomfortably. "Raze?" she asked.

Raven gave Irene a long, cold look. "No."

Irene considered that for a moment, and then shrugged. "There are the other obvious possibilities. However, taking Daken or Laura would be suicide. Logan and Ororo would pursue you and never stop. The X-Men and more than a few Avengers would help. You would have Omega-level telepaths, Cerebra, and a pack of world-class thieves, trackers, investigators, and mages looking for you. Even Anna - who knows you better than anyone else alive - would help them. You would be better off facing Hydra."

Raven looked back at Irene. "What if I didn't have to kidnap one of Logan's children? What if I could give Hydra something that would make Daken join them of his own will?"

Irene frowned thoughtfully. "Can you do that?"

Raven let out a deep breath. "Perhaps. Logan was once married to a Japanese woman named Itsu. In fact, Daken is his son by her. She's dead. Nobody seems to know the complete story of what happened, but there's a rumor I've heard several times over the years. According to that rumor, Itsu was killed by James Barnes."

Irene shook her head. "The Winter Soldier? That seems unlikely."

Raven nodded. "So I thought. After all, Logan would never let that pass. And Barnes is still alive."

Raven went silent.

"And?" Irene prodded gently.

"Raze says that Daken is researching Barnes."

"Interesting, but that's not enough," Irene said flatly. "You need to know more."

"I know. I'll find what I'm looking for."

Irene smiled. "Of course you will."

"Are you sure?" Raven asked.

Irene's eyes met Raven's. "I'm called 'Destiny' for a reason."

Then Irene leaned over and kissed Raven goodbye.

Raven opened her eyes. Then, with a sigh, she rolled over onto her back and spent a long moment studying the ceiling.

The scent and warmth of Irene was with her. The taste of Irene was on Raven's lips.

Raven wiped her eyes and got out of bed. She was naked, but earlier that day Raven had found an old nightdress in her bedroom closet. Now it was freshly washed and folded over the back of a nearby chair. Raven slipped it on. The dress ended just below her knees. The woman who once owned it must have been rather short.
On bare feet, Raven padded out of her room and down the hall. Raze was asleep in his room and she felt the urge to check on him.

Standing in the doorway, Raven looked in on her son.

Raze's eyes opened, glittering yellow in the dimly lit bedroom.

"Mom? Is everything okay?" he asked sleepily.

Raven smiled to herself. It was almost impossible to sneak up on Raze.

"Just checking, sweetie," Raven said softly. "Go back to sleep."

"'kay," Raze whispered. Then he drifted off again.

Raze's dreams were uncomplex. He went to an ordinary school, had friends, and his mom was always waiting for him when he went home at the end of the day.

"Can't sleep?" Rogue asked with a tired smile as she stepped out of her bedroom and into the apartment's tiny living room. She'd awakened a few seconds ago and noticed that the light was on in the other room.

"Ja," Kurt replied. He was sitting up on the couch, a dog-eared paperback book in hand. The lamp on the small table next to the couch was turned on. Rogue noticed that Kurt's book was 'Lord of Light' by Roger Zelazny. Lately, Kurt had been working his way through the science-fiction classics - the mansion was full of people who could make suggestions along those lines. It suddenly struck Rogue that the book was a particularly good fit for Kurt. It was adventurous and swashbuckling, but with a spiritual side.

Rogue flopped into an easy chair and yawned mightily. "What's wrong, sugar?"

Kurt shook his head as he put down his book. "Sometimes, when we are around Mystique, I have dreams."

Rubbing her eyes, Rogue nodded. "Same here. Nothing bad, really. Mostly just stuff from when I was a kid. Back when Raven, Irene, and I were together."

There was something obviously wistful in Rogue's voice. Kurt felt a mild flare of jealousy, but he refused to allow it to take hold. His mother had abandoned him, but taken in Rogue. That was a fact and there was no point in dwelling on it. And it was certainly not because of anything Rogue had done.

The fault lay elsewhere.

Instead, Kurt merely said, "I have no childhood memories of Mystique at all. I was a baby when she gave me to the circus folk."

"Better than pitching you into a raging river," Rogue said with a grin.

Kurt couldn't help but laugh. This was an old joke between them.

"The writers at Marvel always go for the most melodramatic option," Kurt chuckled.

"So what was your dream?" Rogue asked.
A suddenly pensive look appeared on Kurt's face. "Mystique had somehow betrayed us. Logan and Ororo were relentlessly hunting her down. She came to me and begged for help, but I did not give it to her."

Rogue wasn't sure how to respond. After all, it seemed entirely possible that Kurt's dream might prove to be precognitive.

"And what was your dream?" Kurt asked, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

"Nothing much," Rogue responded thoughtfully. "There was this small lake back where I grew up. I used to go fishing there when I was a little girl. This time, as I was fishing, a train rolled past. It was old-fashioned kind of train - like in those old cowboy movies - not like the trains we have today. There was a passenger car on the train and through one of the windows I could see Raven and Irene. It looked like they were talking about something serious. I waved to them, but they didn't see me. The train just passed me by."

Logan woke up as Ororo slipped out of bed. An odd aspect of their marriage was that there was little Ororo could do in Logan's presence that he wouldn't notice. Ororo had never indicated that Logan's hyper-awareness bothered her, but he had developed the habit of not always reacting when she did something out of the ordinary.

Ororo stood at the window and looked out, her slim body shaded by the yellow moon.

Opening the window, Ororo took a long, deep breath of the cold night air while running her fingers through her long hair. Her body language bothered Logan. Something was obviously bothering Ororo.

Logan got to his feet. Ororo glanced at him.

"Go back to bed," she said quietly. "I am fine."

Instead, Logan walked over to Ororo and took her in his arms. His face was pressed against the back of her neck and his arms were wrapped around her mid-section. Ororo sighed and closed her eyes, enjoying the simple animal pleasure of Logan's presence.

"Are you okay?" Logan asked quietly.

"Just give me a moment," Ororo answered. She was trembling slightly.

"Fine," Logan said.

Ororo didn't say anything. She just relaxed in her husband's arms, even as her mind was in a turmoil.

Why had Raven showed up now? Now, of all damned times?

It was like fate was sending some kind a message.

She would have to tell Logan. He would notice soon.

Down in the kitchen, Raven made herself a cup of tea. Then she stepped out onto the front porch and sat on the steps. It was a cold night, but Raven didn't seem to notice.

Overhead, there was a vividly clear sky full of brilliant stars, unclouded by city lights. To the
A full moon was visible between two mountain peaks.

That triggered an unwanted memory.

*Raven and Logan were together again. It was two years after Irene died, and a year after Itsu’s death. They had accidentally stumbled across each other in Paris. Raven and Logan were trying to use sex, alcohol, and violence to wipe away their pasts. It wasn’t really working, but at least they finally had something to cling onto - even if it was mostly just a facade over the self-loathing of two people who were tired of outliving everyone they loved.*

*In Marseilles, Raven won a decrepit one-mast schooner in a poker game, and together they sailed it out of the harbor. Neither was terribly surprised to discover that the other was a competent sailor. Lives as long and difficult as theirs were filled with opportunities to learn a variety of skills.*

*They crisscrossed the Mediterranean, without any real plan or destination. Eventually, they took to prowling among the islands of the Aegean. Occasionally they landed to take on supplies, or to explore old ruins and beached shipwrecks.*

*One night, some smugglers found their ship at anchor and mounted a midnight raid on them. There were a dozen smugglers, armed with the usual AK-47s, and in a fishing boat that had been upgraded with better engines. The schooner must have seemed like easy pickings - a useful auxiliary craft to support their smuggling operation.*

*Afterwards, Logan and Raven wrapped the bodies of the would-be pirates in chains and tossed them into the sea.*

*Still covered in blood, and high on a mixture of death and the heroin she’d found among the smugglers's stores, Raven stripped off her clothes and performed a graceful and languid dance underneath a huge, yellow, moon. The flames of the burning fishing boat strangely illuminated her bare body with a mixture of light and darkness. There was no music - the song that Raven was dancing to was strictly in her head.*

*As Raven danced, a trio of Middle Eastern slave-girls they’d freed from the smugglers cowered together against the aft of the schooner. The terrified girls were helplessly waiting for whatever terrible thing fate had in store for them next. Hope was a long forgotten concept, and nothing about the two mad creatures who had so efficiently killed their former owners suggested that mercy was even a vague possibility.*

*Logan took the girls down into the schooner's tiny cabin and let them sort through the food stores. Then, back up on deck, Logan and Raven made love by light of the moon. Like always, it was harsh, brutal, and just this side of uncaring.*

*The next day, they set sail for Athens. The journey took several days. After docking, Logan walked the three former slaves to the Canadian embassy and calmly blackmailed the station intelligence chief into helping them. Logan knew where a lot of bodies were buried. After all, he’d put a lot of them in the ground himself.*

*Then Logan vanished. Raven was still working her way through the captured heroin, so she didn’t even notice until a week later. She wasn’t particularly angry when she realized that Logan was gone. After all, it was inevitable that they would separate again, although Raven was mildly irritated that this time Logan was the one who got to walk away first.*

*In retrospect, Raven knew what had happened. Logan had always possessed a soft streak and the plight of the three girls got to him. When he decided to help them, that put him back on the path of*
being a do-gooder.

He was one of the X-Men again.

Within a few months, Raven realized that she was pregnant. The child was Raze. Raven's best guess was that he'd been conceived the night of the pirate attack, when Logan took her on the schooners's blood-soaked deck.

There was a lop-sided smile on Raven's face.

"Best fuck I ever had," she said with a bemused shake of her head.

Then Raven poured the last of her tea onto the cold ground and stepped back inside.

She knew what she had to do.

Logan and Ororo's morning routine was changing. Now they all drove into town and Ororo dropped Logan off at work. Then she picked up Raze. That was a politely distant affair, with Ororo parked in the drive, waiting for Raze to dash out of the house as Raven watched from the kitchen window.

Raven was still surprised by how enthusiastically Daken and Laura greeted their half-brother. It seemed strange to her that the children had bonded so quickly. Or perhaps not. After all, they were three-of-a-kind. Nobody understood Raze like Daken and Laura. And vice-versa.

There was no sign of Kurt and Rogue... yet. Raven wasn't surprised - they had to establish a cover and keep to it. Until the locals became used to their presence, they would be careful not to spend too much time in any one, notable, location. If Raven had to make a guess, Kurt and Rogue were establishing an electronic surveillance post up in the hills overlooking the valley. That would enable them to watch both Raven's house and the approaches to town.

Raven knew that she had a limited time-frame in which to get something done. Very soon, the others would create a solid surveillance routine that would watch for outsiders while simultaneously keeping an eye on her. The X-Men were very good at that sort of thing, but while the watch was still being established, Raven had some leeway. It would be a mistake not to take advantage of that.

As soon as Ororo drove away with the kids, Raven slipped out the back of her house and began working her way around the edge of town. The area was heavily forested and provided excellent cover.

After she got to the school, Raven observed for a while, noting both arrivals and general patterns of movement.

Eventually, Raven took the form of one of the school janitors and slipped into the school through a side exit. Janitors tended to be invisible. Better yet, they had the full run of the buildings in which they worked. Raven just had to make sure that she didn't run into the person she was imitating, or another maintenance worker - who might notice that she wasn't where she normally should be.

It worked. The kids ignored her, while the teachers just nodded a greeting or said brief hellos. Raven put a slightly harried look on her face - as if there was something she had to be doing - and made polite and minimal responses while hurrying past. Everyone let her pass without comment. Within a matter of seconds, almost nobody would remember their encounter with her.
In a maintenance closet, Raven found some cleaning chemicals and carefully doused herself. There were three children in the school who had extremely keen, animal-like, senses of smell. She had to make sure they didn't catch her scent.

Then Raven simply stayed out of sight until she saw her opportunity.

That morning, while Ororo was picking up Raze, Raven had made a point of noting the style of backpack that Daken carried. At morning recess, she found it with a bunch of others, propped up against a wall. The janitor's closet had provided a pair of disposable cleaning gloves. Raven used them to open the backpack. Then she methodically flipped through the contents.

Wedged into a sleeve in the backpack was a bulging file folder. It was worn and frayed and held closed with a pair of large rubber bands.

Even though Raven had a rough idea what she was looking for, she was still surprised when she opened the folder.

Putting the folder on the floor, and sitting cross-legged next to it, Raven carefully went through every page of its contents - spending no more than a few seconds on each page. Raven didn't have a photographic memory, but she had long ago trained herself to note and memorize general patterns of documents.

All in all, the file was impressive. Using strictly locally-available and public resources, Daken had built a surprisingly good subject dossier. It was essentially the same sort of thing Raven put together when she was planning an important operation against some individual. Like a seduction. Or an assassination.

"Good job, Daken," Raven whispered approvingly to herself after she finished.

Raze snatched the football out of the air and tumbled to the grass. The other kids on his team whooped and jumped up-and-down as they ran towards the new line of scrimmage. They were well on their way to another touchdown. Daken had a good passing arm and both Raze and Laura were phenomenal pass-receivers.

As he jogged back to the huddle, Raze saw something that made him pause.

One of the janitors - Raze didn't know his name - had stopped to watch the game. Hadn't he caught a glimpse of the same janitor just a few seconds ago? Way on the other side of the field, near the dumpster's?

Raze looked over his shoulder back towards where he'd previously seen the janitor. He was still near the edge of the school grounds, tossing bags of trash into a dumpster. But when he looked back to where the janitor had just been watching the game, he was gone...

Raze smiled. She had seen his last catch.

"Raze! Get over here!" Laura called urgently from the huddle.

Raze sprinted back to the others. Laura - the tiniest person on her team - grabbed and yanked him the last few feet back into the huddle.

The phone on Logan's desk rang. As he picked it up, Logan glanced at the incoming number
display. He didn't recognize who was calling.

"It's me," said a voice on the other end of the line. The voice was unmistakable.

"Hi," Logan said. He didn't bother asking Mystique how she had a supposedly private phone number. That was a waste of time.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," Raven began.

Logan settled back in his chair. This conversation could go so many ways. Most of them were bad.

"What?" he asked.

"You remember the schooner? The one we sailed to the Aegean?"

A wild cascade of memories flickered through Logan's head. A lot of them featured Raven. And in most of them she wasn't wearing any clothes. The most vivid was of Raven dancing nude on the deck of their boat - slowly and precisely, her bare feet stained with blood. She was lit by both moon- and fire-light.

"Yeah. I remember."

"After that fight with the smugglers, we found three girls on their boat. You eventually took them to the Canadian Embassy in Athens. What happened to them?"

Logan didn't even pause before answering. "Rachel went back home to Israel. She did a tour in the army, but got thrown out for insubordination and abusing some civilians. Now she's tangled up with an extremist group that's just this side of being a terrorist gang. Sabiha ended up with some distant relatives in Toronto. They threw her out when she got too wild for them. She's been in and out of drug rehab a few times, and works in the porn business to pay for her habit. Miryam went back to Lebanon. Her family figured she was damaged goods and married her off to some loser. She didn't like him and they fought a lot. He killed her during an argument."

There was a long moment as Raven absorbed that.

"Which one was Miryam?" she asked softly.


"So... no happy endings," Raven said quietly. As improbable as it seemed, Logan was willing to swear there was a note of wistful disappointment in her voice. It was that part of Raven - the well-hid human part - that Logan couldn't forget. Even after all this time and all of the bad blood between them.

"No happy endings," Logan responded, "but the two who are alive still have a chance."

Raven snorted. "Not really, Logan. Deep down inside, they're still on that smuggling boat, providing amusement to a gang of thugs, and on their way to be sold. We didn't save them. Nobody could really save them."

Logan considered that for several seconds before responding. "We've both been around long enough to know that there's no predicting what people will do with their lives. Sometimes, they surprise you."

"And we've both been alive long enough to know that everyone's life ends the same way."
"It's what you do with yourself before the end that counts."

"Maybe."

Logan sighed. "Raven, why the hell are we having this conversation? It's too early in the morning for philosophy."

Raven paused before answering.

"I guess I was hoping for that happy ending," she finally said.

"You just told me you don't believe in them."

"I can dream, can't I?"

Logan couldn't help but smile. "That's your privilege," he said.

"Yes it is. By the way, I don't suppose you know the name of the man who murdered Miryam?"

Logan didn't respond at first. Then he shrugged - a gesture that Raven, of course, couldn't see.

"It doesn't matter," Logan said. "He's dead."
The New Neighbors Part 5

Chapter Summary

Mystique gets in contact with Hydra and makes an offer.

THE NEW NEIGHBORS - PART 5

In the hills overlooking the town, Kurt found a good location for their surveillance equipment. It was a stony ledge, narrow and isolated, situated on the face of a high cliff. Given how small and isolated the ledge was, there was little reason for anyone to climb up to it. And besides, it would take mountaineering equipment and good climbing skills to do so.

Kurt, carrying a backpack full of sophisticated observation equipment, simply teleported onto the ledge.

Crouched invisibly in the shadows between a pair of rocky outcrops, Kurt took a moment to enjoy the view. He could easily make out the house in which Mystique had taken refuge. The roads and trails into town were also quite obvious. Just beyond the edge of town, he could see the school.

The entire valley was filled with green conifers. Snow was swirling around distant mountain tops. Grim and rocky hills, covered with tenacious vegetation, squatted at the base of the lordly mountains. It reminded Kurt of the wilder parts of the Bavarian Alps, and he felt a momentary pang of home-sickness.

After a moment of quiet contemplation, Kurt went to work. Within a matter of minutes, a set of cameras and other sensors were in place. Camouflage chameleon coatings triggered once the equipment was activated, and the gear suddenly blended into the surrounding rocks and shadows. Kurt was standing amidst the surveillance equipment and even he was having a difficult time seeing it.

"Henry, you have outdone yourself," Kurt muttered to himself with a slow and amazed shake of his head.

Then Kurt pulled a tiny radio out of his pocket. "Rogue, the equipment is in place," he reported.

Rogue's voice came back clearly. "That's a big ten-four, good buddy. I'm reading all of the eyes in the sky and the view is faaaannnnnn-tastic. Come on home, bright-eyes."

Kurt smiled at Rogue's descent into 1970s CB lingo. He attributed it to her unseemly affection for old Burt Reynolds movies.

"On my way," Kurt replied.

Kurt took a moment to glance back downhill. Once again, he studied the house where Mystique was staying.

How many times had she and Kurt spoken over the years? Five times? Ten? And how often had those merely been a few yelled words in the midst of some fight?
It would be so easy to simply go to where she was staying, knock on the door, and...

And what?

What was there to talk about?

Kurt shook his head. Then he teleported downslope, appearing next to a deer trail that led towards town.

Raven had a cellphone that was so secure - so heavily encrypted and intricately shielded - that she could call anyone, anywhere, at any time, and there was no way the call could be traced, tracked, or intercepted. It had cost her a small fortune and was worth every penny.

However, this time it didn't really matter if it worked or not. Raven was pretty sure that the very dangerous people on the other end of the line would eventually be able to figure out where she was. They just wouldn't be able to do much about it. At least not a first.

This was a dangerous play, but Raven was sure it was the only play she had.

"You've got to be kidding me," exclaimed the astonished voice on the other end of the connection.

Raven smiled to herself. "Hello, Manfred."

Manfred was her contact in Hydra. Raven had never met the man personally, but had been communicating with him for over two decades. There was a time when she occasionally did work for Hydra, and the man she always talked to - the person who set up the jobs and made sure she got paid - was Manfred.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Manfred asked skeptically.

"I want to settle things with Hydra," Raven answered.

Manfred sighed. "Sorry, Mystique, but that's not going to happen." There was something like actual regret in his voice.

"I can give Hydra something it wants," Raven shot back.

"Mystique... the Supreme Hydra isn't in the mood to kiss and make up. He's never liked you, and that thing you did in Saudi Arabia was just too damned much. It cost us a lot of money, prestige, and power, and it will take years to sort out the mess. Right now, I'm talking to a corpse."

"That was just business, Manfred," Raven snarled. "There was a time when Hydra understood that."

Manfred snorted. "The current Supreme Hydra thinks it's good business to make it absolutely clear that we can't be screwed with by an independent operator. He has a point."

"Manfred... quit talking like a movie villain and listen to me. I can give you something that Hydra has wanted for decades. Something it once had, but lost."

"And what would that be?" Manfred asked. He was obviously skeptical.

Raven's smile was vicious. "Here's something you might not know, Manfred - Weapon-X was really just a branch of Hydra. A branch that was an extremely expensive failure."
Manfred went silent. Raven knew she'd scored.

"I can give you Wolverine, Manfred. Oh, not the original Wolverine, but a version that's younger
and a lot less difficult to handle."

Manfred still didn't say anything.

"Just think, Manfred - decades of service from the most effective operative and assassin
imaginable. Not to mention unlimited access for genetic testing purposes. And that, of course,
would put Hydra closer to the dream of having an army just like him. And he'll gladly work for
you if you just give him what he wants. In fact, he'll walk right into your hands."

"What does he want?" Manfred asked carefully.

Raven laughed. "That part's not for free. It's time to start doing business, Manfred."

"Keep talking," Manfred replied slowly.

Raze had a smile on his face - and it had been there ever since recess.

"What are you so happy about?" Laura asked curiously.

It was lunchtime. Aliza, Brad, Billy, Daken, Laura, and Raze were all crowded together at one of the
cafeteria tables. A highly energetic round of trading sack lunch components had already taken
place. Raze had given up an apple for half of the burrito Mrs. Horsemen had made for Aliza. He
was pretty happy with the deal.

"My mom was here," Raze answered happily. "She saw us kick butt in the football game."

Aliza looked puzzled. Brad and Billy pretty much blew off what Raze was saying - they were
engaged in a brotherly argument about the quality of the Denver Rockies pitching staff.

Daken and Laura were definitely interested in what Raze was saying, but were doing their best to
hide it.

"I didn't see her," Laura said very mildly, seemingly paying more attention to her sandwich than to
what Raze was saying.

Raze glanced at Aliza, Brad, and Billy, and then gave Laura an amused look. "She was in the
crowd. I guess that made her hard to see."

"Everyone says your mom is beautiful," Aliza interjected. She and Daken were sitting close to each
other. Brad - on the other side of the table - was definitely not paying attention to them. Or at least
he hoped it looked that way.

Raze's smile turned into a grin. "She's just as beautiful as she wants to be," he told Aliza.

Daken wasn't saying anything. But he frowned suddenly, lifted up a strap from his backpack, and
gave it an interrogative sniff. Then he grimaced.

"What's wrong?" Aliza and Brad asked simultaneously.

Daken dropped the strap. "I think something got spilled onto my pack. It smells like ammonia."
Raven flicked off the safety of a rather big automatic pistol. She was standing well back from the front door and slightly off to the side. Then she aimed her handgun at the door, using a sure and steady two-handed grip.

"Come in!" Raven yelled, pitching her voice so that it wouldn't be clear where her shout had come from.

Kitty Pryde walked straight through the door and smiled tightly at Raven. Her eyes were quite cold, however.

She was also rather banged up. Kitty had a nasty looking bruise under one eye, a split lip, and her hair was a tangled mess. Her clothes were rumpled and there was a large stain on the right sleeve of her jacket that looked a lot like dried blood.

"Hey, Mystique," Kitty said mildly. "Long time, no see."

Then Kitty tossed the athletic bag she was carrying onto the floor between herself and Raven. It landed with a flat thud and then rolled onto its side. The zipper was partially stuck open and several bundles of hundred dollar bills spilled out onto the floor.

"From your Denver stash," Kitty said. "I didn't count it, and I had to use some for bribes and transportation, but I figure there's still something like ninety grand in there."

Raven lowered her weapon. There was no point to it anyway. Not against Kitty.

"Thanks," Mystique said. "You're still fetching for Logan, I see."

Kitty shrugged, "I suppose I'll always have Logan's back. And he'll always have mine. It's actually a good feeling, but I don't expect you to understand it."

Mystique didn't reply, but inside she was worried. She could con Logan - although that was a dangerous game. She could con Kurt and Anna. But the number of X-Men in the area that she didn't have a handle on had just doubled.

On an upper floor of a London office building was an organization that the British government - and particularly MI-6 - was positive belonged to them.

They were wrong.

"What is your report?" the director of the office asked. He was an older and floridly obese man who was dressed in an expensively tailored suit.

The other men and women at the conference table deferred to the slender, colorless man who was their spokesman.

"Our analysis of the audio file and cellphone traffic data that Mr. Manfred sent to us was inconclusive. We've known for some time that Mystique has access to Stark- or Doom-level communication technology, so that is no surprise. She was even able to mask background noise with a white-sound emitter. All we could get out of the file was the actual conversation between Mystique and Mr. Manfred."

The director's lips went tight, but he didn't say anything. His people were good at their jobs. He should hear them out.
"The analyst continued. "Original reports from the failed assassination attempt on Mystique noted that she escaped with a child in tow. However, our operative in her organization had no knowledge of the child. Her subsequent attempt to access her Cicero safe-house ended in a gun-battle and she was forced to flee once more. She then tracked down our operative and executed him. Presumably, he was the only other person who had knowledge of her Cicero location."

"We don't know if Mystique tested any of her other facilities or caches - it is quite possible that she did so in disguise, noticed that we were watching, and backed away."

"We concluded that Mystique was without significant resources or allies and was accompanied by a hitherto unknown son or daughter. The consensus opinion was that Mystique had no choice but to remain on the North American continent, but would retreat to an isolated area. Her long connection with the American northeast suggested to us that she would be found there. Since she knew we had compromised her support structure, she would therefore not approach any of her established hide-outs. We gave an eighty-three percent possibility that she would attempt to access one of her money caches and suggested that we should focus our efforts on watching those caches while continuing to track down those that we didn't know about. We emphasized that the Mystique Protocol should be followed at all times - all Mystique suspects should be killed immediately."

Then the spokesman took a deep breath and continued. "After examining the audio file from Mr. Manfred, we have altered our original conclusions. The file superficially suggests that Mystique has had a son by Wolverine - or possibly Sabertooth - and is willing to trade him in exchange for an amnesty from our superiors."

The director's eyes narrowed. "Superficially?" he repeated.

The spokesman nodded. "Everything we know about Mystique indicates that it is extremely unlikely that she would give up her child. Nightcrawler was an exception for obvious reasons - Mystique had just given birth and she was in shock at the nature of his deformities. Given what we now know about Kurt Wagner, that was short-sighted on her part. All signs indicate that she has subsequently realized that she made a poor decision, and will not make that mistake again."

"So Mystique is lying to us?" the Director suggested thoughtfully. "She's playing some kind of game?"

The spokesman shook his head. "We do not believe so. We have concluded that Mystique did something radically unexpected when she fled: she made contact with a supposed enemy who still bore her some residual goodwill. At current time, we give a high probability to the prospect that she is with Wolverine and Storm, and has received sanctuary from them. Also, Mystique thinks she can somehow give us one of Wolverine's children - probably the boy."

"As partial confirmation, we know that Rogue and Nightcrawler - two X-Men with strong associations to Mystique - have vanished from the Xavier mansion and are not on any known mission. We think they have joined forces with Wolverine, Storm, and Mystique. Also, our team in Denver recently had an encounter with Shadowcat. She incapacitated them and walked off with a satchel full of Mystique's money. So Shadowcat should also be tallied as being in Mystique's corner."

The spokesman paused before finishing. "This is obviously very formidable opposition. And they can call upon additional support as required."

"So we know where Mystique is," the director said quietly.

"And she might as well be on the moon," the spokesman replied bleakly.
Logan's office wasn't that large. At the moment, occupied as it was by Logan, Ororo, Kitty, Kurt, and Rogue, it was pretty crowded.

Kurt took one look at Kitty after she entered, 'tsked' at her ragged state, and dragged out a first-aid kit. Now Kitty's lower lip was stained with an antibiotic cream and he was busily wrapping a bandage around a nasty cut on her wrist.

"Hydra is all over the Chicago metro area," Kitty reported. "There was at least two gunfights between Hydra agents and Mystique: one in Chicago and another in the town of Cicero. Both were at safe-houses owned by Mystique. Fourteen people are dead. They were a mix of Hydra agents, Mystique's people, and a half-dozen bystanders who were either killed in the crossfire or executed by Hydra on the outside chance they might be Mystique in disguise. SHIELD and the FBI are investigating."

"Do we know what triggered this?" Ororo asked.

Kitty nodded. "I had a chance to talk to a couple of Hydra goons. Apparently Hydra had several Saudi princes under their control and was maneuvering them into positions of power. Somebody found out and hired Mystique to end the threat. She did just that."

Rogue rolled her eyes. "I saw something about that on the news. Three dead princes in a week - two by heart attack and one apparently killed by a fanatic. The Saudi royal family is supposed to be in a tizzy over the losses."

Kitty smiled grimly. "If by 'in a tizzy' you mean, 'celebrating wildly over how they managed to dodge a Hydra bullet', then you're right. In any case, Hydra is taking exception to what happened. In one week, Mystique derailed a plan that was years in the making and the Saudis are now on watch for Hydra. The upper levels of Hydra are mad as hell and want to make an example of Mystique."

"What about Raze?" Logan asked quietly.

Kitty looked at Logan. "He was completely off the radar screen until just a few days ago. Even Hydra was surprised when they hit her main safe-house and he suddenly appeared. Mystique had him buried pretty deep. He lived on the grounds of the Chicago safe-house, almost never left, and was primarily raised by its staff."

Kurt and Rogue glanced wordlessly at each other.

"I tracked down Raze's tutor," Kitty continued. "His name is Simonsen and he was lucky enough to not be around when Hydra showed up. He was pretty relieved to know that Raze was still alive."

"What does he think of Raze?" Ororo asked quickly.

A grin appeared on Kitty's face - then vanished into a grimace as Kurt finally finished tying off her bandage. "Mr. Simonsen likes him, doesn't like how isolated his mother kept him, and worries that Raze might have problems later in life because of that. He says Raze is bright, but has problems buckling down and studying. His best subjects are history and math. English bores him, but he has a knack for languages. And he loves playing tricks on people with his power. The staff in Mystique's safe-house had to develop a password system in order to make sure they were actually talking to the right person."

"He doesn't like English?" Logan said thoughtfully as he leaned back in his chair.
"Is he a reader?" Ororo interjected. She was perched on the desk next to Logan.

Kitty blinked. "Mr. Simonsen says he likes history books and science-fiction."

Logan looked at Ororo, "We could get him into my military history books. Then have him do book reports. That helped Daken with his writing."

Ororo nodded energetically. "And we should find out if he's read Heinlein's juvenile fiction. And Arthur C. Clarke. Laura loves those."

"How about Asimov?" Logan suggested.

"Possibly too advanced - and not adventurous enough for a boy his age," Ororo replied.

Logan frowned, "We want to expand his range."

Ororo shook her head, "We are getting ahead of ourselves. We still do not know what he has and has not read..."

Kurt and Rogue were trying not to smile. Kitty was shaking her head in bemused disbelief.

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The director eventually made a report of his own. He did it by teleconference, but he didn't actually know to whom he was talking. During those conferences, the director only saw dark screens. He assumed that the people on the other end could see him and each other.

"How soon can we get confirmation that Darkholme is with Wolverine and Storm?" asked Screen #1.

"Within a day," replied the director. "We have a pair of agents on the way and have activated some resources in the local State Patrol."

"There is an obvious flaw in Mystique's plan," Screen #3 said thoughtfully. "All we have to do is tell Wolverine and Storm what she is offering. They'll kill her for us."

"Darkholme is betting that we won't do that," replied Screen #1. "She is assuming we want what she is offering."

"Or perhaps that Wolverine and Storm won't believe us," suggested Screen #2.

"Mystique is playing a dangerous game," said the director, "but she is in a dangerous situation. She feels she has to take high-risk actions in order to get big results. That fits her psychological profile very neatly."

"Assuming she is actually there, we should assume that Mystique knows we have guessed her location," Screen #2 stated very flatly.

"Agreed," said Screen #3. "However, she has probably drawn so many X-Men into the area that she believes we cannot take action against her. And, frankly, she's probably right."

The director took a deep breath, "I need guidance. Standing orders are to kill Mystique. However, she has made a tempting offer and may be well guarded. Which option should we pursue?"

"Both," Screen #2 replied. "We want Mystique dead and the resource she is offering working for us."
"Is there any way we can estimate what information Mystique has that would allow her to grant us leverage over a Wolverine-level operative?" asked Screen #1.

The director shook his head, "Not at this time, I'm afraid."

"I suggest we continue the ongoing operation," said Screen #3, "but we should defer Mystique's death until we have learned more."

The other screens agreed.
And it's all about to hit the fan.

"One more time," Randolph said, not taking his eyes off the road as he spoke. He tried to make it not sound like an order, but it was.

The woman sitting in the car's passenger seat rubbed her eyes. She understood why her partner wanted to be so careful. She just wasn't sure if it would matter.

"My name is Tonya Marilyn Jackson," she began, her voice distant and distracted, but still professional. "I'm the wife of Randolph Cooper Jackson. My maiden name was Pritchard. We've been married for seven years and currently live at 3145 Winchester Road, Colorado Springs, Colorado, zipcode 80840. We gave up the landline phone a few years ago and only use cellphones now. My cellphone number is 719-417-5910; yours is 719-417-6222. You're an accountant with an interest in geology. I'm a physical therapist. We don't have any children and that's how I want it, but you're increasingly interested in the idea. We're on vacation and have come up here to do some rock-collecting. Actually, I'd rather be doing just about anything else, but I'm bravely putting up with my husband's eccentricities. He thinks I love this sort of thing."

Randolph nodded in approval. They were equipped with enough background documentation - driver's licenses, cellphone accounts, bank and credit cards, business identifications, and so forth - to allow them to pass muster with local authorities. However, it was all superficial. If SHIELD, the CIA, or Federal law enforcement checked on them, their cover identities would quickly collapse. That kind of minimal cover was standard procedure during this kind of quick-and-dirty field operation, but it still made them both nervous.

Actually, Tonya was beyond nervous and well into being frightened. She'd been a Hydra agent for ten years and Randolph's partner for the last three. And in all that time, she'd never been ordered to do anything this dangerous.

Their mission was to confirm the presence of Mystique - in the town that was the Wolverine's lair.

That sounded suspiciously like a death sentence piled on top of a suicide mission.

Tonya looked out the car window and watched the trees and hills flow past. Distant, uncaring mountains loomed on the horizon. A line of clouds on the western horizon suggested that a front was coming through. Attempting to control the fear welling up inside of her, Tonya closed her eyes and took slow, steady, breaths.

Ed frowned in surprise. As a deputy sheriff, he had frequent cause to talk to the State Patrol. However, he usually didn't have anything to do with their investigative branch.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do know Mr. Howlett," Ed said carefully - keeping his voice
professionally neutral. He wasn't sure what the State Patrol knew about the Howlett family.

Then a brief smile flickered across Ed's face. After all, when you got down to it, Ed wasn't exactly sure what he knew about the Howlett family.

The voice on the other end of the phone belonged to a State Patrol Sergeant named Stevens. "We're interested in someone who might have recently contacted Mr. Howlett. I can't go into the details of our case, but what we really need boils down to this: have you seen anyone new in town? And are they in contact with Mr. Howlett?"

"Yes," Ed answered immediately, "a woman showed up three days ago and I've seen her talking to Mr. Howlett. Her name is Helen Bright. She's in her mid-thirties, Caucasian, dark hair and eyes, medium height and build - and she's quite a looker. She has a small boy with her. She's renting an old ranch house just outside of town and her boy has started going to school here. The way I've heard it, she's on the run from an abusive husband. She and Mrs. Howlett know one another from their college days and the Howlett's are helping her stay out of sight."

"That sounds about right," Sergeant Stevens said after a brief pause. "Do us a favor and keep an eye on her, Deputy. And I want to emphasize that the woman who has contacted Mr. Howlett is a potential witness in the case we're working - not a suspect. Please don't be obvious."

"Right," Ed said.

After he closed his phone, Ed stared at it and wondered why he hadn't told Stevens everything else he knew.

Something didn't seem right, but he didn't know what it was.

Kurt gave Kitty a long, curious look.

"Why did you bother to recover Mystique's money?" he asked.

Logan had thrown them out of his office, claiming that he had some work to do. Kitty was fairly sure that he actually just wanted to have a private talk with Ororo.

So Kitty, Kurt, and Rogue were taking a walk around the few, tiny, blocks that constituted the local downtown. The locals weren't exactly staring, but they were definitely attracting more than their fair share of attention. Outsiders were rare in this part of the world.

"I'm hoping that enough money will convince her to get lost," Kitty responded. "Ninety thousand dollars probably won't do it, but I'll talk to her and see if she's willing to give up the locations of a few more stashes."

Kurt didn't reply. Rogue just shook her head.

Kitty raised an eyebrow. "Don't you two want Raven out of here?"

Rogue grimaced. "Every second she's in town puts Logan and Ororo closer to losing everything they've built here. So, yeah, I want her gone."

Kitty let out a long breath. "Let me guess - you're worried about Raze?"

Rogue smiled briefly and glanced at Kurt. Kurt kept his eyes on Kitty.

"Raze is a good kid," Rogue said, "but I just don't know what he'll turn into if he grows up with
Kitty nodded. "We've all heard how Logan and Ororo talk about Raze. They're both sold on the idea of taking him in."

"That will not happen peacefully," Kurt said sadly.

"She won't give up Raze without a fight," Logan said quietly.

Ororo thought for a while before replying. "We could make the argument that it would be a tactically wise move. Raven needs freedom to maneuver. Raze's presence constrains her."

Logan shook his head. "You're right, but that won't matter. Deep down inside, Raven's never forgiven herself for ditching Kurt. She won't do something like that again. And she especially won't give Raze to us."

Ororo frowned, "Being with Mystique puts Raze in a great deal of danger. Surely she understands that?"

"Raven doesn't see things that way. She's been on the edge for so long that danger is... well... it's a constant. She respects danger and can sense degrees of it, so she understands she's in deep trouble right now. But her powers usually make it easy for her to deal with trouble. Maybe too easy. She's too sure she can always find a quick way out."

Randolph and Tonya were having a cup of coffee in the diner. Performing any kind of covert surveillance or investigation in such a terribly small town was a problem. Sometimes, the best thing to do was to find a public place with good visibility, and then simply sit down and enjoy the view while trying to look as innocuous as possible. Listening to local gossip could be startlingly useful.

"You say you're looking for rocks?" the elderly waitress asked curiously as she topped off their cups and picked up a pair of unused menus.

"Yes," Randolph answered amiably. "And we plan on doing some camping just outside of town - on National Forest Service land."

The waitress frowned as she eyed the blandly non-descript couple that she was talking to. "It's getting into fall. Nights are a might cold."

Tonya gave the woman a friendly smile. "We've done this before. Thanks for worrying, but we'll be careful."

The waitress nodded. "You know, there are some old mines in the area - mostly in the hills west of town. There are quartz crystals in the tailing piles. And my brothers used to find moss agates down by the river."

"Thanks! We'll keep that in mind," Randolph said.

The waitress wandered over to the next table. Randolph glanced out the plate glass window of the diner, and then back at Tonya.

"Over your shoulder," he told Tonya quietly. "Down the street and coming this way on the sidewalk. Three people. One is definitely Rogue and the other is Kitty Pryde. There's someone I
don't recognize with them, but he's a short male who looks like some kind of pretty-boy movie star."

"That's most likely Kurt Wagner with an image inducer," Tonya replied just as quietly. "The briefing package says he has a weakness for Errol Flynn."

Randolph wasn't looking directly at the people he was watching. That would be too obvious.

"We should report this," Tonya suggested.

"Finish up your coffee," Randolph ordered. "I'll take the car, get a few miles down the road, and call in. I'll set up camp. You stick around and see what you can find - concentrate on that woman who came to town recently."

Tonya nodded in agreement.

Kitty, Kurt, and Rogue walked past the diner. Kurt was poking at something that looked like a smartphone while Kitty and Rogue chatted about a recently released movie.

"Let me guess," Rogue said once they'd walked around the corner, "it's the couple right next to the window?"

"Yes," Kurt confirmed.

"Hydra? Or something else?" Kitty asked. "We don't want to get into a tangle with some SHIELD or FBI agents. They would have good reason to be interested in Mystique."

Kurt made a gesture with the sensor gizmo in his hand. "They're not armed. FBI agents - even undercover - would be carrying handguns. And SHIELD swears that they do not have a team in town."

Rogue shook her head, "I'm not sure I buy that last one."

Kitty nodded. "I have to agree. It never made sense to me that SHIELD didn't have someone keeping an eye on Logan and Ororo."

Kurt shrugged. "Logan agrees with you, but admits that he and Ororo have never been able to tell with any certainty. For a while, they suspected a deputy sheriff who moved to town a few years ago. However, we couldn't find any connections to SHIELD or a U.S. government agency. Emma did a telepathic check and cleared him."

Rogue frowned suddenly. "What a minute... is that the guy who has the room across the hallway from us? The one who's keeping company that pretty waitress?"

"Yes."

Daken slipped away from everyone else and found some privacy in an empty classroom. Then he took everything out of his backpack and carefully checked each item.

Nothing was missing, but his folder on James Barnes had a slight chemical tang. It was the same distinctive cleaning-chemical odor that he could detect on the exterior of the backpack. Somebody had been in his pack and had found his file on Barnes, but the overpowering scent of ammonia made it impossible for him to tell who it was.
Either one of the janitors had been in his pack, or someone was deliberately concealing their tracks.

There were only two people in the school who knew just how sensitive Daken's sense of smell could be. But if Laura or Raze had used some cleaning fluid to cover their scent, they would still smell of those chemicals.

It wasn't them.

The analyst took a deep breath before making his latest report.

"Our source in the local State Patrol indicates that an unknown woman arrived in town within the last few days. She has a boy with her and has been seen in Wolverine's presence. Two HUK agents are in the area and confirm the presence of Rogue and Shadowcat. They have also seen an individual who has a high probability of being Nightcrawler in disguise."

The director nodded. However, he didn't say anything.

The analyst continued, "It is all but certain that Mystique is in the target area. If she isn't, then we are being deliberately set up to think she is present."

The director didn't say anything for a long moment. Then he looked at the analyst and said, "Thank you."

The analyst nodded awkwardly and left the director's office. It was unnerving when the director became monosyllabic.

The director rubbed his eyes and then picked up the phone on his desk and punched in a long string of numbers that wasn't a conventional phone number.

"We have a high-value situation with extreme circumstances," the director said into the phone. "The operation in question is designated WILDERNESS EMPIRE. It might be necessary to expend special resources, and we should expect heavy casualties. I'll need releases for our HUK agents, and also for NORAM strike teams three and four."

Ed knocked on the door and put a politely bland look on his face.

After some delay, a stunning, dark-haired woman answered the door. She was minimally dressed in a loosely-belted robe and a pair of slippers.

"Mrs. Bright?" Ed asked politely, after hastily making sure that he was looking at the woman's face.

The woman warily examined Ed for several seconds before responding. "Yes, I'm Helen Bright. Can I help you, officer?"

"Actually, I'm a deputy," Ed replied easily. "My name is Ed Barnett. I just stopped by to say hello and talk. Maybe I should come back later?"

Mrs. Bright smiled and stepped away from the door. "Oh, no, deputy. Please come in."

Ed entered. It was obvious that Mrs. Bright had recently put some effort into dusting and cleaning. However, all of the furnishings were quite old. There was no sign that Mrs. Bright had added anything of her own to the house.
"Would you care for anything, deputy?" Mrs. Bright asked politely. "I could make some coffee."

She had a slight smile on her face. It occurred to Ed that Mrs. Bright was enjoying how much her lightly clad state was making the conversation awkward for him.

Manipulative, Ed thought to himself. And she's not modest or scared to use her looks to her advantage.

That was interesting.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Bright," Ed answered. "I just wanted to discuss some safety issues with you."

Mrs. Bright cocked her head at Ed. "Such as?"

"Well, Mrs. Bright, I don't know where you're from, but I get the impression it's from back east. You should understand that you're now living in a pretty isolated and wild part of the world. We do have animals in the area - including bears and the occasional mountain lion. So you and your boy should be careful, particularly at night or in the woods."

An appropriately concerned look appeared on Mrs. Bright's face.

"Also, while we don't have much crime in this county, please understand that you are a woman living alone about a mile from town. I'm the only peace officer in the area, and I have a big patrol area. If you were to call for help, I could easily be twenty or thirty miles away."

Mrs. Bright smiled. "It sounds like you want me to buy a gun."

Ed nodded without hesitation. "Actually, you should at least consider it. I know that might sound strange, especially from an officer of the law, but - as I said - things are a different around here. And the county does offer a pretty good gun training and safety course in association with the NRA."

"I'll keep that in mind," Mrs. Bright said. She sounded quite serious.

Daken was skipping study period. He didn't want to do that, but he didn't have a choice.

He was hunting. Which meant he really wasn't the Daken that others knew. Instead, Daken was now completely his father's son.

Which meant, arguably, that he wasn't completely human any longer.

So far, he'd tracked the chemical odor from his backpack to where he'd left the backpack during morning recess. Then Daken traced the scent trail back to a janitor's closet.

In the vicinity of the closet, Daken found multiple human scents. Two of the scents were both familiar and similar. Very similar. Almost as if they were from slightly different versions of the same person.

"There's just one more thing, Mrs. Bright." Ed said.

"Yes?" Mrs. Bright asked.

"I've been given to understand that you're in town because of some problems with your husband," Ed said in a very careful, neutral tone. "I don't want to get into your personal business, but is that
true?"

A perfect mixture of embarrassment, anger, and fear came over Mrs. Bright's face.

"Yes," Mrs. Bright admitted softly. "How do you know?"

"It's a small town and folks talk," Ed said gently. "Would you happen to have a picture of your husband? It might be for the best if I recognized him if he showed up."

Mrs. Bright paused, as if to consider all of her options, and then nodded her head. "I do have a picture. Let me get it for you." Then she got to her feet and left the room.

As soon as she was gone, Ed quietly walked over to the table that was in front of a couch. A yellow legal pad was flipped upside down on it. Ed noted the position, turned it over, examined it for a brief second, and then returned it to its previous position.

By the time Mrs. Bright returned, Ed was back where he had been standing before, calmly looking out the window.

"Here," Mrs. Bright said, handing Ed a photo. The photo was one of the more impressive parts of the identity package Logan and Ororo had given Raven. Off hand, Raven wasn't sure how they had put it together so quickly. She assumed the X-Men had helped.

Ed looked at the picture. It showed a happy scene of Mrs. Bright, Raze, and a tall, red-haired man standing in front of a carnival ride. Everyone was smiling and Raze looked a year or so younger.

"Could I borrow this?" Ed asked. "I'll make a copy and get it back to you."

"Of course," Mrs. Bright said.

Daken tracked one of the scents from the janitor's closet all the way to Mr. Abernathy. He was one of the school janitors. And when Daken found him, Mr. Abernathy was sneaking a smoke behind the school building.

"Dang it, Daken!" Mr. Abernathy growled in exasperation as he ground out his cigarette. "You and that sister of yours are like ghosts! Stop sneaking up on me!"

"Sorry," Daken said as he pulled back.

Now he understood the difference between the two similar scents.

One was a smoker. The other wasn't. Otherwise, they were identical.

Daken headed back to the janitor's closet. He could pick up the other trail from there.

Ed paused as he walked down the walkway that lead away from Mystique's house. Then he pulled out a notebook and carefully transcribed from memory what he had seen on the pad in Mrs. Bright's living room. It wasn't written in English, but Ed recognized one word.

Actually, it was a name.

Daken.

"Ed" frowned. Then, with a ripple of flesh, he transformed back into Tonya.
It amused Tonya no end that she was playing the shape-changing game against - of all people - Mystique. It was strangely exhilarating.

Daken left the school grounds and followed the scent back towards town. However, the trail quickly vanished at the highway. It was as if the non-smoking version of Mr. Abernathy had suddenly appeared on the side of the road that ran past the school.

Otherwise, the area was permeated with multiple different scent traces. But that didn't really matter. Daken recognized the one scent that mattered.

Standing by the side of the road, Daken cocked his head towards town. He could visualize the path the intruder had taken from where she lived to the school. He knew who had been in his backpack.

There was a hollow feeling in Daken's stomach. Theoretically, he had many secrets - far too many secrets for someone his age. But when you got down to it, he only had one secret that really mattered: the one about his birth-mother, the Winter Soldier, and what Daken planned to do someday.

And now Mystique knew.

Hidden in a stretch of woods on the edge of town, Tonya used her secure net connection to do some research. It took her a few minutes of word comparisons before she discovered that the words on the legal pad had been written in Basque.

Tonya nodded in professional appreciation. Not that many people spoke Basque. It was a good choice for jotting down notes that you didn't want someone else to easily understand.

Tonya's translator program made the usual, predictable, hash of the translation. Those programs weren't really sophisticated enough to understand proper grammar and the nuances of words.

But a few things stood out.

Tonya stared at her phone and tried to piece together what she was looking at.

Something about Wolverine's boy - Daken. And Daken's mother. And the Winter Soldier.

School was done for the day and all three kids scrambled into the pickup truck. By the time they were all inside, it was crowded in the truck cab - and it would get even worse when they picked Logan up from his office. Laura saved some space by sitting in Daken's lap. Raze crowded next to them. Daken, staring fixedly ahead, automatically wrapped his arms around Laura.

"Did anything interesting happen in school today?" Ororo asked as she put the truck back into gear and checked the rear-view mirror.

Laura and Raze eagerly began chattering about classes and friends and events. Ororo kept her eyes on the road as they pulled out of the school parking lot.

Daken didn't say anything as he closed his eyes and hugged his sister tight.

Laura paused in mid-sentence.

Rogue frowned at the laptop and then ran a quick check of the surveillance log.
"This is weird," she said.

"What?" Kitty and Kurt asked simultaneously. Kitty got up and walked over to where Rogue was sitting and peered over her shoulder. Deep down inside, Kitty didn't really trust too many other people with a computer.

Rogue continued. "That couple we checked out this morning? I have the guy a few miles north of town, in a campsite. But he was alone. Somehow, the woman didn't make it to the camp with him. She showed up just now - walking out of the woods as if she didn't have a care in the world. And I can't find anything on her after they left the diner together. She just vanished."

"Lemme see," Kitty said intensely. Rogue immediately bailed out of her chair and let Kitty take over.

Kurt had wandered over. The three of them were now clustered around the laptop.

Kitty tapped on the keyboard, flipping through surveillance video, sensor readings, and log recording files.

"Got it," she said after a few minutes.

A video clip began playing. It showed Randolph and Tonya leaving the diner. After a perfunctory kiss, Randolph got into their car and drove off. Tonya kept walking, turned a corner, and then vanished.

"When does the frau appear again?" Kurt asked worriedly.

Kitty ran a quick search routine. The video showed Tonya walking out of the woods and into the campsite that Randolph had set up. Everyone glanced at the timestamp on the video. Four hours had passed between when Tonya vanished in town and reappeared at the campsite.

"Not good," Rogue said with a shake of her head.

Kitty nodded and then did something complex. The computer began a long, slow, search.

After a good ten minutes, a small window appeared that displayed the words "Anomaly Detected". Kitty immediately hit a key.

A window popped up that showed Deputy Ed Barnett walking up the gravel road that led to Mystique's house. Another window showed a set of squiggles and time indicators that meant nothing to Kurt and Rogue.

"What're we looking at, Kitty?" Rogue asked slowly.

Kitty pointed to the video window, "That's the local deputy going to Mystique's hideout. Notice we don't see his car anywhere."

Then she pointed to the other window. "That's the same deputy making a radio call from his patrol car... at the exact same time and about twenty kilometers away."

"That's Raven walking up to the house, right?" Rogue half-suggested and half-asked. "She just took the deputy's form for some reason?"

Kitty hit another key. It showed a thermal-imaging view of the same scene. The "deputy" was one bipedal blob of heat. There was another, fainter, blob in the house.
"That should be Mystique in the house," Kitty said tensely.

As they watched, the "deputy" knocked on the front door. And the form in the house suddenly seemed to ripple as its heat signature shifted. Then it stabilized.

"And that's Mystique changing into her Mrs. Bright form," Kitty added.

"Verdammt!" Kurt cursed.

"Hydra has a shape-shifter of its own," Rogue said softly.

Randolph and Tonya were in their campsite just a few miles from town. Nothing they did was out of the ordinary or in violation of their cover. They even spent some time scrambling up and down a stony ridge-line, searching for interesting mineral specimens.

After an early dinner cooked over a camping stove, Randolph made their second report of the day - carefully reading back the copy Tonya had made from Mystique's notepad. Headquarters could get a full translation.

"We're operating under considerable constraints," Randolph said into his phone. "The local population is very small. We've established a cover that gives us reason to be in the area and to go into town regularly, but we have to be careful and that's limiting our effectiveness. We've already had to make use of an enhanced ability to imitate a local police official. And that could easily cause trouble."

"Understood," the voice on the other end said tersely. "Be advised that if your information checks out, you may be ordered to go to phase two."

"Understood," Ed replied.

The connection went dead and Randolph pocketed his phone.

"I think they like what you found," Randolph said to Tonya. "We should prep for what's next."

"That was fast," Tonya said in surprise.

Randolph shrugged. "We really don't want to stick around. Let's just get this done, get the hell out of here, and go to the next mission. We're needed elsewhere."

"Hail Hydra," Tonya responded sarcastically.

Randolph didn't reply. Tonya had been with him for several years now. They were partners and every now-and-then they even had sex - mostly just as a break from the loneliness and monotony of back-to-back missions. She was becoming comfortable around him. Maybe too comfortable. She was beginning to say unwise things in his presence.

Tonya was an extremely valuable Hydra resource, but even she had to be careful about what she said. Randolph really didn't want to kill her.

By now Tonya was sorting out some of her camping gear. Randolph looked down at his hands and flexed his fingers. Vanadium-steel claws extruded momentarily from his fingertips. He stared at them for a moment. Then he flexed his hands again and the claws vanished.

Ed was finally off-duty. It was a relief to go home, get out of his work clothes, and grab a beer.
Sitting at his tiny kitchen table, with a newspaper in front of him, Ed grimaced as his phone rang. Hopefully, it wasn't an official call. Getting up, he grabbed his phone from the nightstand next to his bed and put it next to his ear.

"Deputy Barnett here," he said.

"Code Whiskey India one niner seven," a voice said, speaking clearly and enunciating each syllable.

Ed blinked in surprise - then froze as the psychic overlay that had been put over his real personality slipped away. That overlay made who he really was undetectable to a telepath.

"Confirm activation," the voice on the phone said.

Tiredly running a hand through his hair, Ed closed his eyes and said, "Activation confirmed."

The connection went dead.

Feeling strangely hollow, Ed put down his phone. On the nightstand next to his phone was a picture of Ellie. He'd been planning on having it framed.

"Damn it," Ed whispered as he looked into Ellie's blue eyes.

Then Ed took his issue weapon out of it's lockbox, inserted a magazine, and chambered a round.

At the edge of town, right after they dropped off Raze, but before they got on the highway, Daken suddenly spoke up.

"I need to get out," Daken announced.

Ororo was driving. Logan was next to her. Laura was in Daken's lap.

"What's wrong, Dak?" Logan asked.

Daken paused before answering. "I've got to talk to somebody. It might take a while and... and it's kind of personal. Sorry, I should have said something about this, but I just made up my mind."

Ororo smiled sadly at her son. "Are you and Aliza still having problems about her grandfather?"

"Yes," Daken answered quietly. It was the truth and a lie, both at the same time. Daken never knew that it could hurt so much to say one word.

He'd considered telling his parents the full truth, but this was a subject that was just too close to Daken's soul. He couldn't hand it off to his parents. He couldn't let anyone take it from him.

Logan and Ororo glanced at each other. It was obvious that something was genuinely bothering Daken.

"I can stay at the Watt's place tonight," Daken added. "Mrs. Watt said it would be okay if I ever wanted to do that."

"Check with her before you show up," Logan said. "And call us if it doesn't work out and you need to be picked up."

Daken nodded. "I will."
"Okay," Logan agreed as Ororo pulled off to the side of the road.

Laura scrambled out of Daken's lap as he opened the door. Then Daken jumped out of the truck.

"Bye," Daken said shortly. His mind was obviously elsewhere.

Laura was staring at her brother. She knew that Daken wasn't telling the complete truth. Her eyes met his as she tried to sense what Daken was thinking. Laura felt a flutter in her stomach. Something was deeply wrong.

Daken closed the truck door and began walking back towards town. He didn't exactly know what to do. But at the very least he had to talk to Mystique.

And maybe more.

Within minutes after Randolph reported, the director notified his superiors.

"We know what Mystique is offering," he said. "Wolverine's oldest son - Daken - has an actionable weakness. The Winter Soldier killed his mother and he wants revenge."

There was a thoughtful pause from everyone. The director didn't have to explain any further. More than a few Hydra agents had signed on because it was their only route to payback. It was a standard, and quite successful, recruiting tactic.

"Very well," a voice hidden in darkness said. "Proceed with the rest of the mission."

"Kill Mystique."

Dinner was done and the dishes were washed.

"Where's Laura?" Logan suddenly asked Ororo.

Ororo was sitting on the couch, reading a book. She glanced up at Logan. "She said she was going to check on Hank."

Logan stepped out the front door and surveyed the woods surrounding the cabin.

Hank-the-bear was snoring in his customary spot next to the woodpile. He was alone.

Logan frowned. There was nothing in the woods that was a real threat to their children - not even a grizzly bear. So Logan and Ororo gave them considerable leeway in their ramblings.

But still... where was Laura?

On a small, isolated, dirt airstrip a hundred miles east of town, a pair of helicopters and two dozen heavily armed and armored men were waiting patiently. Anyone approaching the area was politely told that their presence was part of an FBI training operation and asked to leave. If the local FBI office was contacted, they would confirm that such a mission was taking place.

Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity. Orders were yelled and weapons were grabbed and checked as the rotors of the helicopters began to slowly turn.

Within two minutes, everyone was aboard the choppers. One after the other, they lifted off and
began flying westward.
Chapter Summary

Hydra makes its play. Everyone objects.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

THE NEW NEIGHBORS - PART 7

As soon as Laura was sure that her parents weren't watching, she snuck out of the cabin and took off at a dead run. She got to the main road within minutes and continued sprinting towards town. Even as small as she was, Laura could cover ground in a manner that an Olympic long-distance runner would have considered quite respectable.

However, that still wasn't enough - it was miles and miles to town. But then Laura saw a pickup truck rattling down the road. It was heading in the right direction.

Laura had an idea. And she was sure that it would work. After all, she'd seen it work on television.

Standing by the side of the road, Laura confidently stuck out her thumb.

The pickup slowed as it approached. Then it slowed some more. Then it pulled onto the shoulder and a wizened, elderly man leaned his head out of the driver-side window.

"Laura Howlett! What the heck do you think you're doing?!!" roared a startlingly strong voice.

Laura hesitated before replying.

"Hi, Mr. Wainwright," she responded meekly.

Standing on the cabin porch, Logan pulled his phone out of his pocket and quick-dialed the Watt home.

His phone didn't connect. Logan frowned and tried another number.

Still nothing.

"'Ro? Can you phone out?" Logan yelled into the house.

Ororo walked out onto the porch, her phone already in hand. She was staring at it in obvious
"I cannot get anyone," Ororo said distractedly as she scanned the woods, looking for any sign of her daughter. "Even the secure X-Men line is not working."

Rogue disgustedly tossed her phone onto the kitchen counter. It landed with a clatter.

"I can't get Logan, Ororo, or Mystique," Rogue growled.

"No internet connection," Kitty called out from where the laptop was set up. "And the feed from our surveillance gear is down."

"And all communication back to the mansion is dead," Kurt added quietly.

Rogue let out a long breath as she considered their options. "Okay... I'll check out the camp where that couple is staying. I think we can safely assume they're Hydra agents. You two go to Mystique's place and babysit her."

"If this is an attack, then the target might actually be Logan and Ororo," Kurt warned.

Rogue's smile was as cold as the space between stars. "If somebody is stupid enough to take them on, then they'll get what they deserve."

Brad sighed and shook his head as he turned to the last page in the file.

"I'm sorry, Dak," Brad said quietly. He'd always known that Daken and his family had secrets, but this particular secret - about Dak's real mom and the Winter Soldier - was worse than anything he'd imagined.

Daken didn't say anything. They were in a cluster of boulders and trees that was located just beyond the edge of town, but not too far from the Watt house. It was a good place to get away from the prying eyes of adults.

"And you say Raze's mom knows about you and the Winter Soldier?" Brad continued. "And she's some kind of bad-guy?"

Daken nodded. The gesture seemed strangely lost and resigned to Brad. It wasn't like Daken at all, and that was scaring Brad.

"What are you gonna do?" Brad asked. What Daken was saying seemed incredible, but Brad couldn't help but believe him.

Daken shrugged, closed the folder, and handed it to Brad.

"I'm going to talk to Raze's mom and see what she wants," he said, "but I want you to hang on to this until I get back."

Brad nodded.

"Please, Mr. Wainwright," Laura begged. She was sitting in Mr. Wainwright's truck. It was still parked by the side of the road. "My brother's in trouble and I need to get to town! Please don't take me home!"
Mr. Wainwright was unapologetically old and still the mental resident of a time and place where children as young as Laura did as they were told, with a minimum of backtalk. And he was not given to deviating from his perceptions of how the world should work.

However, Mr. Wainwright also owed his life to some fast thinking by... someone... last winter. He'd wrecked his truck in a snowstorm, and only some quick and unconventional first-aid had kept him alive. Everyone gave the local deputy credit for that, but Mr. Wainwright remembered bits and pieces of what actually happened - he just felt it was wise to keep his mouth shut about it. When all was said and done, the Howlett family were quiet, law-abiding folks who kept to themselves, yet never hesitated to lend a hand when needed. James had helped Mr. Wainwright track down wayward cattle more than once. Mrs. Howlett had looked in on him while he was recovering from his accident. And their children were well-raised and respectful.

So if the Howlett's had a secret, and that secret wasn't doing any harm, then it was no business of Mr. Wainwright's. Or anyone else, for that matter.

Not sure what to do, Mr. Wainwright stared into Laura's green eyes. One of his hands was unconsciously rubbing his throat.

"Fine. I'll take you to town, young lady," Mr. Wainwright finally answered stiffly. "And then I'm getting you and that brother of yours right back home!"

"Thank you," Laura said gratefully.

Mr. Wainwright let out a long sigh. "Your parents must be worried sick. They'll have every right to kick my tail up around my neck when they find out I didn't take you straight back to them."

They didn't bother with the truck.

Ororo sailed into the sky, accompanied by a whirlwind of dust, leaves, and other debris. Suspended a good hundred yards in the air, she performed a slow twirl, trying to catch sight of Laura.

Down on the ground, Logan spiraled out from the cabin, caught Laura's most recent scent, and began tracking her. She was moving towards the highway. And the scuff marks on the ground indicated to Logan that she was running. Running hard.

Understanding what Logan was doing, Ororo followed him.

As they approached the target, the Hydra helicopters switched into silenced mode - a trick stolen from U.S. Special Operations Command. They were now virtually soundless.

From each of the two helicopters, a string of three men jumped out, one after the other. After plummeting hundreds of feet, the six Hydra jumpers activated their flight kits. Like huge vultures, they deployed their wings and began gliding their way through the air on mini-jets that were built into the trailing edges of the wings. Both Tony Stark and Sam Wilson would have been mightily pissed to see how their technology was being misused.

The flyers raced ahead of the choppers.

"Birds deployed, sir! They're all green and on-course," the lead helicopter's crew-chief reported to the officer in charge.

The officer nodded wordlessly as he closed a map he'd been compulsively checking and
rechecking. Around them, the other men were tensely holding onto their weapons and staring ahead at nothing. The heavily cyborged heavy-weapons trooper, his hulking form taking up a considerable part of the helicopter's crew compartment, was finishing his final system check.

By now, communications in the target zone would be down, and the hunter-killer team should be infiltrating their way into the area. The sun was down and the last of dusk was dying, but everyone was equipped with low-light vision visors.

Everything was on schedule.

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Tonya moved like a whisper through the woods. Behind her, Randolph was almost as silent. Both were dressed in ordinary-appearing hiking boots, jeans, and jackets. However, the weapons they were carrying were far from ordinary. And their seemingly ordinary light jackets were actually sophisticated body armor.

Neither of them had any problem seeing in the steadily darkening woods.

They were almost at Mystique's hideout.

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"Where to now?" Mr. Wainwright asked as he drove his truck into town.

Laura frowned thoughtfully. "Do you know where the old Renwick place is?"

Mr. Wainwright bit off a slightly hot reply. Back in the day, he'd wooed one of the Renwick girls. Of course, that had been a long time ago and there was no way Laura would know that.

"Yep. It's about a mile north of town, just off of the old county road," Mr. Wainwright said.

Laura nodded. "Let's go there."

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He didn't want to stand out, so Ed Barnett was driving his personal car - a well-worn Honda Excel. Four years ago, he'd drove that same car all the way from his hometown of Caspar, Wyoming to the local county seat for a job interview. It had been a long drive, but a pleasant one. And it had ended quite well for Ed. He came out of the interview with a job as a deputy sheriff.

Or at least, that was how Ed remembered it.

Was that really what happened? Ed didn't know for sure. So many of his memories had shifted and changed since he got that phone call. He now knew who he really worked for. And he knew what he'd been doing in the Persian Gulf before he became a deputy - and that it had nothing to do with being a military policeman in the U.S. Army.

So much of what everyone thought they knew about Ed simply wasn't true. It was actually a cover.

But what about the rest? How much of that was real? Could he trust any of his memories?

Ed shook his head to clear it. Then he parked his car at the junction of the county road and the track that led up to where "Mrs. Bright" was staying.

On the seat next to Ed was an M-4 assault rifle and a set of body armor that was actually better than what the U.S. Army issued to its soldiers. Getting out of the car, Ed seated a thirty round magazine into the rifle, inserted a high-explosive armor-piercing grenade into the launcher that was attached to the rifle's underside, put on the armor, and strapped a gun-belt with his deputy's sidearm
around his waist. Then he grabbed a bag of spare magazines and additional grenades and slung it over his shoulder.

He was ready.

It was after dinner. Raze was working on his homework while Raven cleaned up.

As she wiped her hands with a towel, Raven paused in the kitchen door and leaned against the frame, gently smiling as she watched Raze work. He was sitting at the living room table, concentrating fiercely as he took notes from a textbook. He was also in his normal-human form. Raven was insisting that he stay in his role as much as possible.

As Raven watched her son, her thoughts drifted. Really, was this so bad? Why not just stay here and forget about the outside world? The school was competent enough, the locals seemed inclined to mind their own business, and where else would Raze find other kids just like himself?

After all, even Hydra had limits. Would they really dare come after Raven in a town that was also Logan and Ororo's home turf? Could she simply out-wait them?

And given enough time, perhaps could adjust the local scene more to her liking. Perhaps she could even take Logan from Ororo. After all, wasn't that what she did best - take the place of others? And Logan was a good man to have on your side... and in your bed.

It was something to consider.

Raze suddenly looked up. Then he turned his head to stare intently at the front door.

"It's Daken," he said, a big grin spreading over his face.

There was a knock on the door.

The sun was down, with only a trace of dusk left, but Logan was moving with the sureness of a man in broad daylight. He paused at the junction of the highway and the trail that led up to their cabin. Then he turned towards town.

Ororo swooped down to pick him up. Neither of them said anything as Ororo lifted Logan into the sky by his shoulders. It had been years since either of them had gone on anything that could be described as a mission, but they were effortlessly working together, like two interlocking pieces of a well-maintained machine.

Raze was still smiling as he opened the door. Then he saw the expression on Daken's face and his smile drifted away. Daken didn't look good. In fact, he looked worried and scared.

And maybe angry.

"What's wrong?" Raze asked.

Daken looked Raze in the eyes. Then he looked past Raze and at Raven. Raven was still in the kitchen door - as frozen as a statue as she gazed back at Daken.

"I need to talk to your mom," Daken told Raze.
Rogue had found the Hydra campsite fairly quickly, but nobody was there. The warm ashes of a fire suggested that somebody had been present until very recently.

"Dammit!" Rogue fumed aloud. Then she kicked a cooler so hard that it sailed a good twenty yards, spilling food and drink containers along the way, until it slammed solidly up against a tree and shattered.

Rogue knew there was no way she'd be able to track those two Hydra agents in the dark. Her best bet was to get to Mystique's place.

Rogue crouched and jumped straight up, crashing through branches until she got above the trees. Once she was clear, she began flying back towards town.

Daken and Raven were facing one another in the middle of the living room. Raze - baffled by what was happening - was back in his chair.

"I know you've been in my backpack," Daken told Raven, his voice oddly level. "And I know you found the Barnes file. But I don't know why and I don't know what you want."

At first, Raven didn't move as she absorbed Daken's words. Even the expression on her face didn't budge. Then - after a long few seconds - she shifted form. The likeness of a young Sophia Loren melted away, and Daken was left looking at Raven's blue skin, red hair, and yellow eyes.

Raze anxiously looked back and forth between his mother and his brother.

For just a moment, Raven was lost. Her plan was splintering to pieces in front of her eyes. For the last day or so, Daken's oh-so-exploitable weakness had been her ace-in-the-hole. It was the only thing she possessed that gave her any control over her future. If that was gone...

No. She wasn't quite done yet.

"I can give you the Winter Soldier," Raven said, her eyes fixed intently on Daken.

Daken sucked in a breath. "How?"

"Who's the Winter Soldier?" Raze asked plaintively.

"I can introduce you to some people," Raven continued, ignoring her son. "They'll help you."

Daken's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What kind of people? Who are they?"

Raven smiled thinly. "They're the kind of people who'll help you get what you want, but they aren't exactly boy scouts, Daken."

Daken figured it out.

"You want me to work with Hydra," he said flatly. "That's the plan isn't it? Trade me to them and that'll get you out of trouble with them. Or were you ever in any real trouble? Was this all just a trick?"

Raven stared at the boy in front of her. She'd underestimated Logan again.

Then Raven's face twitched. She'd meant Daken. Not Logan. She'd underestimated Daken.
Kurt and Kitty popped into existence just a dozen yards from Ed. They were accompanied by the characteristic rush of equalizing air-pressure and the stench of sulfur.

Ed almost cut them down with his rifle. However, he caught himself in time and instead crouched deeper into the brush where he was hiding.

All three of them were within sight of Mystique's front door.

"You've got the back," Kitty ordered. Kurt nodded and vanished again with a loud BAMF.

Then Kitty walked up the front door - and right through it.

Ed stayed silent and still. It wasn't time for him to act.

Tonya peered through her rifle's scope. She was looking into a well-lit living-room window.

"I can see Mystique's boy, but I don't have Mystique in sight," she whispered to Randolph.

Randolph looked up at the sky. He could hear the faint whine of wing-jets. The flying troopers were here. And there was a low, throbbing vibration that made the nearby trees shiver in an oddly repetitive pattern. Which meant that the silenced choppers were somewhere nearby and disgorging their troops.

Randolph smiled mirthlessly. The party was about to begin.

"I'm going around back," Randolph whispered. "Give me thirty seconds and then ace the kid. Remember the protocol. Kill everyone who doesn't have an ID transponder."

"Roger," Tonya replied tersely as she centered her cross-hairs on Raze.

She felt funny about killing a kid, but it wouldn't be the first time.

Randolph vanished into the brush as Tonya began counting.

Watching the back of Mystique's house, Kurt heard the sound of the wing-jets, but wasn't sure what they were. And despite his excellent night vision, he couldn't make out anything in the night sky.

Kurt teleported onto the roof of the house, taking cover by the massive stone chimney.

He kept scanning the sky, but still couldn't see anything.

"Get the hell out of here," Raven snarled at Kitty.

Kitty gave Raven a long, angry look. The look she gave Daken was considerably less hostile, but more than a bit surprised. What was he doing here?

"Communications are down," Kitty replied stonily as she returned her attention to Raven. "And there are Hydra agents in the area. I'm willing to bet you're about to get attacked."

Mystique didn't respond. Instead, she reached underneath the table where Raze had been studying, pulled a semi-automatic handgun out of a hidden holster, and expertly chambered a round.

Both Daken and Raze suddenly looked up. They could hear something...
Not even sure why he was doing it, Daken immediately grabbed Raze and yanked him out of his chair and away from the window.

The shot that slammed through the window caught Raze in the arm instead of the center torso. But Raze wasn't a large boy and the rifle round was pretty powerful. The shot almost tore off his lower arm.

Immediately after Tonya's first shot, Randolph snapped the latch off the back door with a twist of his wrist. Then he moved quickly, but carefully, into the kitchen. He had a sub-machine gun held at ready.

In the next room, Randolph could hear a child screaming for his mother.

That would help. With any luck, the target would try to help the kid. That would leave her fatally distracted.

Cursing softly, Tonya looked for another target. She'd had an excellent sight on her first target, but he'd shifted so suddenly!

Then another target appeared in the window. Tonya reflexively took the shot.

Nothing happened. The person in the window was still there.

Tonya blinked in surprise. Had she missed?

Kitty was deliberately blocking the window. The second sniper bullet passed through her harmlessly and buried itself into the far wall. But Kitty still couldn't make out where the shot had come from.

Her face set in a ferocious snarl, Raven was wordlessly dragging Raze towards the rear of the house, while simultaneously trying to avoid the other windows.

"Momma! Momma!" Raze sobbed as he clutched at his half-severed arm. Daken was both trying to hold Raze's damaged arm in place so it would heal properly, and was half-shoving, half-carrying Raze along the path Raven was taking. Red blood sprayed from Raze's wound with every beat of his heart, covering both Daken and Raze. Raze's injury was regenerating, but he was losing a lot of blood.

Randolph suddenly appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. He and Raven pulled the triggers of their weapons almost simultaneously.

Tonya was on the move, trying to find another firing position.

Ed - looking for the source of the rifle shots - caught the motion and put a three round burst into Tonya.

Tonya tumbled to the forest floor. Her body armor had kept her alive, but a bullet had creased the side of her neck.

A .45 caliber slug from Mystique's handgun impacted into Randolph's forehead and glanced off his armor-reinforced crania. However, the close-range impact still caused him to stagger backwards in
a stunned daze. The burst of sub-machine gun fire that Randolph managed to get off went mostly awry, but one bullet still hit Raven full in the stomach. Mystique let out a hiss of agony and collapsed to the floor.

Daken shoved Raze against a wall and out of Randolph's sight. Then he lunged for Randolph.

Randolph was trying to reorient himself, but Daken - snarling and with his claws out - lashed out at him. Daken's first slash tore open Randolph's face. Randolph was instantly blinded by his own blood.

Outside, Ed and Kurt saw flickers of movement in the sky. It took them both a moment to realize what they were looking at.

There were flying men approaching the house.

Ed immediately opened fire. One of the approaching flyers deviated sharply downwards and off to one side. Then he slammed into the upper boughs of a large pine tree.

Kurt made the difficult split-second decision to leave the fighting in the house to Kitty and Raven, and teleported into the first flying Hydra trooper that he could see. Grappling the man in midair, Kurt twisted the trooper's wings around until they were in a steep dive. Then, as they both plummeted straight down, Kurt sighted another target and teleported away.

One hand pressed against her neck wound, the other dragging her rifle behind her, Tonya rolled behind a tree and painfully sat up. Then she took a deep, shaky, breath.

Mr. Wainwright was about to pull onto the track that led up to where Raven was staying when the shooting started. He automatically slammed on the brakes and peered warily into the darkness ahead of him. Mr. Wainwright had never been in a war, but he had spent a lifetime around firearms. He knew there was a full-blown shootout going on up near the crest of the hill.

"Get down!" Mr. Wainwright said urgently to Laura as he yanked the truck's transmission into reverse.

Then he heard Laura's door open.

"No!" Mr. Wainwright yelled in a mixture of surprise and horror as Laura jumped out of the truck and vanished into the trees.

"Dang it, Laura, come back here!" Mr. Wainwright called. There was no response.

Mr. Wainwright let the truck's engine die as he fumbled a huge revolver out from beneath his seat.

Daken had literally climbed up onto Randolph, like a particularly vicious squirrel going up a tree. He had his legs partially wrapped around Randolph's mid-section as he continued to claw at Randolph's face. By now, it was obvious that Randolph had a reinforced skeleton - and that included his face and skull. Daken was instinctively going for weak points. He was trying to get a claw through one of Randolph's eyes and into his brain, but Randolph was struggling too much.

While Randolph was distracted and half-blinded, Kitty came into the kitchen in a low crouch. Then she expertly performed a leg-sweep on Randolph, which knocked him off his feet. Randolph
crashed to his back on the kitchen floor, but still managed to finally shove the muzzle of his submachine-gun up against Daken's body. Kitty reached over and slapped the barrel away from Daken. Randolph automatically pulled the trigger anyway, but the burst of fire was wasted as Kitty kept the weapon pointed up at the ceiling. Then she quite calmly removed the weapon's magazine and threw it across the room.

His skin an odd shade of pale blue, Raze dazedly groped his way into the kitchen. His injured arm was still useless, but the claws of his other hand were out. Raze dropped to his knees next to Randolph and noted an open side panel in Randolph's body armor. It had torn loose when Daken clawed his way up Randolph's body.

Raze unhesitatingly buried his claws deep into the side of Randolph's stomach. Then, with a ferocious howl, he ripped upwards.

As they flew towards town, it was obvious to Logan and Ororo that a full-blown battle had broken out near Raven's hideout. Without a word, Ororo took them right towards it. They both knew instinctively that Daken, Laura and Raze were almost certainly in the middle of the fight. And even if they weren't, the fight still had to be settled no matter what.

They almost immediately came across the two Hydra helicopters. One had landed in a clearing and the soldiers it had been transporting were forming up before advancing uphill. The other was still in the air, hovering off to one side as it provided air-cover for the landed helicopter.

The side door of the hovering helicopter was open and a door-gunner was manning a machine gun. Ororo performed a spinning downward swoop, just avoiding the rotor blades, and then used her momentum to throw Logan right into the troop deck of the hovering chopper.

Ororo saw a flash of silver just after she released Logan. A strangely hollow feeling came over her as she realized that this was the first time Logan had extended his claws in years.

It was then Ororo knew that they had lost. Not matter what happened next, they had lost. It was just a question of how bad it would be.

However, there were no time for regrets or second thoughts. Ororo had to find the children and salvage what she could.

The troops actually on the ground were still trying to get organized when a triple lightning strike came out of the dark and cloudless sky and hammered into the earth around them. The three points of the lightning impacts formed a precise triangle that encompassed the helicopter and its troops. The blast and shock leveled the Hydra soldiers and flipped the helicopter onto its side.

Ororo continued gliding towards the house. Above her, clouds were forming into a sudden, tormented squall.

Laura spotted Ed easily - and almost attacked him. However, once she realized that Ed was shooting at the same people that Uncle Kurt was fighting, she raced past him, crashing through a big front window and into Raven's house.

Landing in a tangle of drapes and broken glass, Laura scrambled to her feet just in time to be on the receiving end of an aerial tackle from one of the flying troopers. He'd either followed her inside or just happened to be going for the same window as Laura.

Both Laura and the trooper catapulted across the living room, scattering furniture as they went.
Between them, Ed and Kurt had managed to take out most of the flyers. However, one got past them and Ed and Kurt cursed almost simultaneously as a flyer managed to make his way into the house.

Ed immediately broke cover and headed for the front door. Kurt just teleported into the living room.

Gathering her nerve, Tonya glanced around the tree. She glimpsed a wild scatter of movement in the house, but couldn't define it very well. Then she saw somebody moving towards the door. He was carrying a weapon and his bulk suggested he was wearing body armor. However, her glasses didn't detect a friendly transponder signal.

She took another deep breath to stabilize herself, then shouldered her rifle, sighted on the target, and pulled the trigger.

At this range, using a rifle, conventional body armor was only minimally effective. The target went down.

Nobody was blocking the window. Tonya shifted her sight and scanned for another target.

Inside the house, Kurt was trying to decide between too many options.

Raven had a tiny entry wound in her stomach and a gruesomely ugly blow-out wound in her lower back. The carpet around her was brown with a huge halo of blood. Raven had a low-level healing factor, but it almost certainly couldn't handle a wound this bad. She was a dead woman if she didn't get immediate medical aid.

Laura - where had she come from? - was brawling with a flying trooper on the other side of the room.

In the kitchen, Kitty and the two boys were fighting somebody, but it sounded like they had the upper hand.

Kurt grabbed a stray couch pillow. Dropping to his knees, he tore the pillow open and began packing stuffing into his mother's gaping back wound. It was a bad solution, but every other option was worse.

The chopper that Ororo had pitched Logan into was still in the air, but it was veering and wobbling erratically. The men inside - the ones still alive - were firing wildly and were doing more damage to the helicopter and each other than they were to their attacker. Blood was spilling across the deck and drizzling out the open cargo doors.

As the wildly rotating helicopter tilted to one side and began its last dive, Rogue suddenly appeared in the cargo door, bracing herself against the edges of the frame. She had to immediately dodge her head to avoid a flying, gloved, hand that wasn't attached to a body.

Inside, Logan was locked in close combat with two Hydra troopers and some kind of combat cyborg. Rogue guessed that the cyborg was intended to carry heavy weapons, but it also made for a formidable hand-to-hand fighter.

Using the upper frame of the cargo door to anchor herself, Rogue delivered a two-legged kick into
the center of the cyborg's chest. The cyborg rocketed out the far side of the chopper. Arms and legs flailing wildly, it fell to the ground.

"C'mere you!" Rogue yelled as she yanked Logan loose from his savage melee. Then she flew away, twisting wildly too avoid the rotors of the violently pitching helicopter.

The helicopter impacted into some trees with a loud thump. Then the spinning rotors dug into the ground and threw the chopper's body into a wild cartwheel. It banged from tree to tree - losing momentum, chunks of fuselage, rotor blade fragments, and bodies - until finally ending up nose-down between two pines.

The kitchen had become a blood-soaked abattoir. Randolph had his fingertip-claws out and was slashing madly at Daken and Raze. He was blinded, but the fight was at such close quarters that it didn't really matter. Both boys were badly mauled.

Kitty was just trying to make sure that Randolph couldn't get in a lethal attack on the two boys. There was no controlling Daken and Raze. They were wild with fury and bloodlust and were clawing Randolph to pieces. Kitty had already been cut by them several times.

The flying trooper had Laura by the wrists and was holding her hands apart. For a brief, crazy, second she locked eyes with the man who was holding her.

He looked more scared and confused than anything else. She also noted that he was wearing rather light body armor, and apparently had lost his weapon after crashing through the window and grabbing Laura.

"I'm sorry," Laura said. Then she popped her foot claws and kicked acrobatically upwards, severing the tendons and blood vessels on the inside of her opponent's elbows. The man screamed, dropped Laura, and staggered away - holding his arms close to his body in an effort to staunch the bleeding.

Raven opened her eyes. She could dimly tell what was happening. Kurt had her on her side and was trying to control the bleeding from her back and stomach. He was crouched right next to her.

Suddenly, Raven realized that Kurt was in the line-of-sight of the window that the sniper shot had come from. She immediately reached up, grabbed Kurt by the hair, and yanked him to the floor.

A shot split the air just above Kurt's head.

"God! Fucking! Damn! It!" Tonya hissed as she chambered another round. What the hell was up with these freaking muties?! Were they really this good, or were they just phenomenally lucky?

Then the howling storm-front hit. Leaves, pine needles, dirt, and other debris flew through the air as the trees bowed away from an approaching Ororo. Lightning strikes pounded the ground and illuminated the area with blue-white light as thunder became a continuous roar. Wildly flickering globes of green, red, and yellow ball lightning began racing through the trees.

Tonya dropped her rifle, threw herself down, and covered her head with her arms.

There was a splintering, grinding sound as Ororo used her winds to tear the roof from Raven's house and send the pieces flying through the night sky. They impacted several hundred yards away. Yet oddly enough, the massive wind touched nobody inside the house.
Mr. Wainwright was intimately familiar with weather. Far more than most people, as a matter of fact. After all, he'd spent most of his long life outdoors. Yet he was utterly awestruck by what was happening up at the top of the hill. His stomach went hollow at the thought of Laura being in the middle of it.

Thanks to his bum knees, Mr. Wainwright couldn't exactly run any more - he just sort of did a fast shamble instead - but Mr. Wainwright gamely pressed on up the hill. Somehow, he knew that Laura wasn't doing the sensible thing and hiding in the woods. He had to find her.

That was when two men wandered out of the trees in front of Mr. Wainwright. They were dressed in dark-green uniforms, some kind of body armor, and had contraptions that looked like broken wings trailing down their backs. Both looked hurt, but one was carrying his obviously more seriously injured companion over his shoulders. He was also carrying some kind of fancy-looking gun.

The Hydra trooper and Mr. Wainwright automatically pointed their weapons at each other and then hesitated.

Neither was quite willing to pull the trigger.

The strange scene was intermittently illuminated by the flicker of lightning. Gusts of wild, erratic wind were whipping the nearby trees.

"Did you see a little girl?" Mr. Wainwright asked - speaking loudly to be heard above the wind and thunder. As soon as he spoke, Mr. Wainwright realized that his question must have sounded half-crazy given the circumstances.

The Hydra trooper paused. "No," he finally replied - also speaking loudly. "Which way to a road out of here?"

Mr. Wainwright pointed down the trail with the hand that wasn't holding his six-gun.

"Much obliged," the Hydra trooper said, "hope you find your girl." Then he lowered his weapon and continued down the path.

Mr. Wainwright just shook his head as he watched the two men vanish into the darkness.

Ororo gracefully touched down in the middle of what was left of the living room. Above, her storm was beginning to dissipate just as quickly as it had manifested. A warm rain started to fall.

Kurt was cradling Raven in his arms as she caressed his face and tried to gasp something out to him. Seeing that, Ororo regretfully deferred her decision to kill Mystique. At least for the moment.

Laura rushed to her mother and hugged her around the middle. The Hydra trooper that Laura had maimed was in one corner of the room, sobbing as he awkwardly tried to use some torn drapes to staunch his bleeding.

Kitty came out of the kitchen, towing Daken and Raze behind her. Both boys looked half-shredded. They were dazed and completely covered with blood.

Raze, one of his arms still dangling oddly, suddenly cried out and ran to his mother.

Even as weak as she was, Raven grabbed Kurt and Raze held them both tightly.
Screw Hydra.

Screw the mission.

Screw everything.

Tonya's only goal was to get the hell away. She left the rifle on the ground as she reeled to her feet. She was done with shooting and the rifle would only define her as a combatant - and a target. If she could just put some distance between herself and this... this... clusterfuck of an operation, she would present herself as an innocent camper who'd just happened to wander into a super-powered maelstrom. Then she would steal a car and get out of the area.

Staggering downhill, Tonya was forced to duck as two people flew right over her. One was carrying the other.

Tonya never knew that she missed encountering Wolverine and Rogue by just a few feet.

Cautiously approaching the wrecked house, Mr. Wainwright almost tripped over a body. He'd completely missed it in the rain and the darkness. Kneeling next to the body, Mr. Wainwright blinked in surprise when he saw who it was. It was the deputy - Ed Barnett. He wasn't in uniform, but he was dressed like he was on his way to a war.

Mr. Wainwright checked Ed's pulse. It was there, but it was faint. The boy had lost a lot of blood.

Ed's eyes fluttered open.

"Don't move," Mr. Wainwright ordered. Then he put down his revolver and began performing some very rough first aid. He was more used to doing it on cattle than people, but the basic principles were the same.

Then Mr. Wainwright heard something and looked up. A sudden flash of heat lightning gave him a good view of his surroundings.

Something had just stalked out of the woods a good fifty yards away. It was big - maybe seven feet tall - and seemed to be more machine than man. It was wearing the tatters of a uniform similar to what the two men Mr. Wainwright had encountered earlier were wearing. In its arms, it was cradling a massive weapon that struck Mr. Wainwright as something he didn't want to have pointed at him.

The creature was so intently focused on the house that it was ignoring Ed and Mr. Wainwright. Or perhaps it was so badly damaged that it just couldn't see them.

"Here..." Ed said weakly as he dragged his weapon over and awkwardly bumped it against Mr. Wainwright's leg.

Mr. Wainwright picked up the weapon and stared at it in puzzlement. It looked like a military-issue weapon, but it had something underneath that looked like an oversized shotgun.

"Shoot it," Ed gasped out as he nodded at the thing that had just come out of the woods.

Mr. Wainwright gave Ed a deeply skeptical look.

"The grenade launcher - the big tube? Use it," Ed tried to explain.
"I'll never pick up a hitchhiker again," Mr. Wainwright growled as he sighted carefully.

Then he pulled the trigger.

Logan and Rogue heard the explosion and landed to check it out. The muddy, rain-soaked ground squelched around their boots when they landed.

A two-legged mixture of man and machine was lying on the ground, twitching and sparking wildly. A big chunk of it's upper body was missing. Ed Barnett and Mr. Wainwright were some distance away, closer to the house. Ed had been shot and Mr. Wainwright was patching him up.

"Is he okay?" Logan asked as soon as they got close. Meanwhile, Rogue crouched down beside Ed and checked on Mr. Wainwright's first-aid work. To Logan's experienced eye, it looked like Ed was in good hands.

"Hey, Mr. Howlett," Ed whispered.


Mr. Wainwright looked up, wiping rain from his face. "Ed's got a heckuva big hole in him, but I've got it plugged. James, do you have any idea what the blazes is going on?"

Logan shook his head. "I don't have time to explain, Jeremy. Sorry."

Mr. Wainwright accepted that. "Oh... I saw your daughter hereabouts, but I don't know where she is."

"I'll find her," Logan replied as he continued to the door.

"I've got to get this guy to a hospital," Rogue said as she gathered Ed up in her arms.

Mr. Wainwright didn't even blink when Rogue flew off. After all, she was one of James' strange east-coast friends and folks from out there could do all sorts of odd things.

It was still raining when Logan walked into the remains of the roofless living room. He felt a sudden surge of relief when he saw his family. Ororo had kicked an easy chair back upright and was sitting in it. Daken and Laura were in her lap. Ororo was gently running her hand through Daken's mohawk. Laura was still hugging her mother.

Ororo gave Logan a bleak and despairing glance. Logan silently walked over, put a comforting hand on Ororo's shoulder, and kissed her on the top of the head.

"We'll sort it out," he told her quietly. After a brief pause, Ororo nodded.

Logan looked into Laura's eyes, and then reached down and picked her up. She buried her face in his chest and hugged him tight.

Kurt, Raven, and Raze were clustered together against the wall that separated the living room and the kitchen. Logan had the impression that Kurt was trying to hold both Raze and Raven together through sheer force of will.

A wounded Hydra trooper was sitting up against the opposite wall, frozen in place and wondering when someone would finally get around to killing him.
Kitty, bleeding from several nasty cuts, was standing in the kitchen doorway, as if trying to block access. The expression on her face seemed to indicate that she had something to tell Logan, but couldn't quite figure out what to say.

Actually, Kitty didn't have to explain. Logan could see the condition Daken and Raze were in. He could see the blood that the rain was washing from their bodies - just as it was being washed from his. He knew what it all meant.

He could sense the shock and horror and guilty triumph that came with taking a life for the first time.

Laura was in much the same shape. Not as bad as Daken and Raze, but almost.

Logan closed his eyes. The nightmare he'd spent years trying to hide from had finally found them.

"It's alright, daddy," Laura whispered into his ear.

Logan held her tight and hoped that she was right.

Afterword(s)

One Day Later...

Logan and Daken were on the SHIELD helicarrier. They seemed wildly out of place in their civilian clothes, surrounded as they were by men and women in uniform.

"Why are we here?" Daken asked slowly. He looked wan and bedraggled, and he didn't like being on the helicarrier. They were a long way from home and too high in the sky for Daken's taste.

"There's somebody you have to meet," was Logan's reply.

Then they entered a conference room. Daken froze when he saw who was inside.

"Hello," Bucky Barnes said as he slowly got to his feet. He had the air about him of a man who would rather be anywhere else, but had something important to do.

"It's time you two talked," Logan said gruffly.

Two Days Later...

"We are taking Raze," Ororo said coldly.

Raven was flat on her back in the medical-ward of a high-security SHIELD prison facility. Breaking out would be difficult even for her. However, there was nothing separating Ororo and Raven as they talked. If it came into their minds to try and kill one another, there was little or nothing that SHIELD could do to stop them.

Perhaps SHIELD had made a mistake in allowing Ororo and Raven to get that close to each other. Or perhaps somebody in SHIELD was hoping that Ororo would settle the Mystique problem once and for all.

Raven's eyes went dead and cold as she considered Ororo's words.

"You do that," she said eventually.
Ororo stared at Raven, not saying anything.

"I can't protect him right now," Raven finally added. She spoke as if the words had been dragged out of her.

Ororo nodded.

"But I'll be back for him someday," Raven finished.

"I will be waiting," Ororo responded softly.

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Three Days Later...

"You know, I never gave you a present for your last birthday," Jean told Ororo.

Jean was in the process of telekinetically moving a pair of heavy trunks into the Blackbird's cargo deck. Ororo gave Jean a look that was more than a little surprised. They and several other X-Men were in the middle of loading up the Blackbird. Ororo wasn't happy to be leaving, but they had little choice. The local people didn't deserve to have their homes turned into a potential battleground. Wherever Logan, Ororo, and the children ended up next, they would put a fair greater emphasis on secrecy.

In any case, this just didn't seem like the time to be talking about birthday presents.

"I think I'll give you Hydra," Jean finished. She sounded quite pleased with her decision. And there was something hot and dangerous in her eyes.

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Four Days Later...

"Are you sure about this?" Hank asked from the Blackbird's pilot seat. He was obviously worried.

Logan was standing at the open hatch. For the first time in five years, he was wearing his Wolverine uniform. He glanced over his shoulder at Hank and said, "It's okay."

"Nothing about this idea is okay!" Hank protested.

"I'll call you if I need a pickup," Logan replied. Actually, Hank was probably right, but this was no time for second thoughts.

Then Logan jumped out of the hatch and into a swirling tempest of wind-whipped snow. Landing in a crouch, just below the hovering Blackbird, Logan then began slogging his way uphill. With a growling scream of stressed engines, the Blackbird lifted up and away. Within seconds, it was nothing more than a black dot on the horizon.

Ignoring the cold and wind, Logan kept trudging forward through knee-deep snow. There was a stony outcrop just ahead of him. On it, somebody was waiting patiently for him. A red cape caught the wind and flared out dramatically behind the still figure.

"I need something," Logan said after he finally got face-to-face with the person he'd traveled halfway across the world to see.

The silent figure facing Logan just looked curiously at him.

"I need people who are tough and have no connections to this world," Logan continued
imperturbably. "People who can't be bribed and can't be threatened. People with special skills as warriors and hunters. I need an army."

The man standing on the stone peak shook his head slowly. "You ask a great deal, Logan. What do you offer in return?"

Logan laughed mirthlessly. The fury in his eyes was obvious by now. "I'm offering one hell of a fight against an enemy worth destroying. I'm offering honor and glory and battle - and maybe even some loot."

Thor smiled. Better than anyone else in this era, Logan had a knack for speaking in terms that an Asgardian would understand.

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Five Days Later...

The cargo ship was actually a disguised Hydra command facility and it was filled with exotic equipment. The specialized and powerful communications gear on the vessel cost more than the gross domestic product of some nations. The computers would have struck NASA as overpowered and were even more expensive.

Suddenly, the ship - all twenty thousand tons of it - seemed to silently explode into innumerable pieces. And then the pieces began floating in mid-air. Meanwhile, the screaming crew, along with every other non-metallic part of the ship, plummeted into the sea.

Magneto hovered above it all, considering his handiwork. Then, with a negligent wave of his hand, he pitched the fragmented ship away.

Gazing down into the sea, Erik eventually settled on one Hydra sailor and plucked him out of the water.

"There is something your masters should know," Erik told him quietly. "Tell them that I am out of retirement and that I am very unhappy with them."

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Six Days Later...

Ororo put down her paperback book - she wasn't really able to concentrate on it - and squinted out at the setting sun. She and the children were on an isolated island somewhere in the Caribbean. Betsy, Kurt, and Rogue were with them. Everyone had agreed that it would be best if Ororo and the children laid low for a while.

Logan was absent. He was taking care of some unpleasant, but necessary, business.

Kitty, Rogue, and Laura were sitting on top of a nearby hill of sand and scrub. Laura was sitting in Rogue's lap. They were engaged a long, rambling, conversation about any subject that came to mind. Mostly, Kitty and Rogue were just trying to keep Laura's mind occupied with something other than recent memories.

Kurt and the boys were down by the beach. Kurt was showing Daken and Raze the intricacies of how to properly skip a stone across water. Both boys were cooperating, and seemed to be both interested and enjoying themselves, but there was still a distant and isolated aspect to them.

Ororo hated the look she sometimes saw in their eyes. The look that was pure, cold, calculation.
Distances. Directions. Ranges. Vectors. Patterns. Threats. Daken and Raze were seeing the world as a place of actions and reactions in which dangers were to be hunted down and eliminated as efficiently as possible. It reminded Ororo of a time she remembered quite well - a time when that was the only thing she saw when she looked at Logan. She'd hated that look back then and she hated it now. And for a while, she thought she hated Logan because of it.

She eventually learned better.

"Daken, Raze, Laura - come here," Ororo called. It was time to tell the children something important. And perhaps it would help them not to fall too far into the world they had just discovered. A world of fury and bloodshed.

The kids responded quickly, gathering around Ororo.

"I have something important to tell you," Ororo began. The children were attentive and curious, but didn't say anything in response.

"I am pregnant," Ororo announced gently. "You will have a new brother or sister soon."

A wild grin came over Laura's face as she clapped her hands with glee.

Daken and Raze seemed to hesitate - as if caught off-balance while they were occupied with something else. Then they smiled tentatively. Then their smiles became broader and broader.

Ororo gathered her children in her arms and distributed kisses all around. She knew that even the most lost and deadly of predators could be brought back from the brink. After all, she'd done it once already.

She could do it again.

Two Weeks Later...

"I can't tell you where I am," Daken said. He and Brad were using laptops, and a connection that the NSA couldn't hack, to talk to each other.

"Okay," Brad said. "I get that. But are you okay? And Laura and Raze... are they okay, too?"

Daken looked straight into Brad's concerned eyes. He knew what Brad was talking about.

"More or less. We've... all got a lot to think about."

Brad seemed to consider what Daken had just said. And then he decided to let it go.

"So you're definitely not coming back?" Brad asked.

Daken shrugged. "I don't know. Probably not."

Brad hesitated before continuing. "You know that thing you gave to me? Just before the big fight? I still have it."

For his part, Daken didn't hesitate at all. "I don't need it anymore. So go ahead and get rid of it. Or maybe your dad would like it."

"Okay," Brad said, not even trying to hide how relieved he was.
"How is everyone?" Daken continued.

"Fine. Aliza misses you, but... well... this is kind of weird. Her grandpa told her not to worry. He says you'll be back someday. He says you don't have a choice."

Daken's smile became slightly grim. "We'll see. Say 'hi' to Aliza for me."

Three Weeks Later...

Maria Hill was unhappy.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked for the third time.

Ed Barnett was a good agent. She didn't want to lose him, but here he was in her office, with a determined look on his face and a letter of resignation in hand.

"Sorry, Director Hill, but I've made up my mind," Ed replied.

Maria leaned back in her chair, clearly frustrated. "You're just out of the hospital, Agent Barnett. Maybe you should take some time to think this over."

Ed shook his head. "I've been thinking about nothing else for the last three weeks."

"So you're going back to your little town?" Maria asked in obvious disbelief. "Back to being a deputy sheriff?"

"It's a good job, Director Hill. A job with people who need my help. And besides, the way Wolverine and Magneto are tearing Hydra apart, SHIELD may be facing some personnel cuts pretty soon."

Maria picked up Ed's letter of resignation and gave it a disgusted look. "Does this have anything to do with that pretty blonde who kept visiting you in the hospital?"

"She's part of it," Ed confirmed.

Maria scrawled her signature on the bottom of Ed's letter of resignation. "Your request is approved."

"Thank you, Director Hill," Ed responded formally.

"No problem, Ed. And thank you for your service to SHIELD."

Ed smiled - and then suddenly became more serious. "Thanks again. Oh, and there's something I've been meaning to ask... what happened three weeks ago that made you decide to activate me? Did SHIELD get the word that Hydra was on the way?"

Maria kept her face completely straight. "Sorry, Ed, but that's classified. And I certainly can't discuss classified matters with a former agent."

Ed didn't say anything, but his expression was suitably exasperated.

"And don't forget that you're a member of the SHIELD reserves for six more years," Maria added with a final, somewhat carnivorous smile. "Because I certainly plan on remembering that little detail."
Ed gave Maria a long, thoughtful, and slightly worried, look. Then he nodded and left the room.

Three Months Later...

They let Raven have visitors once a month. Rogue and Kurt generally took turns taking Raze to see her. This month, it was Kurt's turn.

Raven and Raze were always delighted to see each other. Raven was happy that their surroundings never seemed to bother Raze. They'd just finished a long discussion about Raze's schoolwork and the friends he was making at his new school.

"How long until you break out of here, Mom?" Raze asked innocently. Kurt stirred uneasily and glanced at the SHIELD guards who were standing on the other side of the room.

"Not long, dear," Raven replied absently. She was in no hurry. The food wasn't bad and her cellmate was both quite pretty and enjoyably submissive. Besides, it was just as well that - at least for now - she had a bunch of SHIELD agents between her and the outside world. From what Raven was hearing, Hydra was extremely distracted for the moment, but presumably still wanted her dead.

Speaking of which...

"How's Logan's little war going?" Raven asked Kurt.

Kurt let out a long sigh. "Logan and his band of Asgardians and Einherjar are merrily crossing borders and wrecking havoc all over the globe. Magneto continues to lend them assistance when needed. There have been angry public statements by various governments, but I suspect many are secretly happy that Logan is cleaning house for them. Especially since Hydra seems to have been shockingly well established in the intelligence and security services of so many countries."

Raven nodded thoughtfully. "Is what I've heard about Cuba and North Korea true?"

Kurt held his hands up helplessly. "Who would have thought that Hydra completely controlled those countries? We suspected a Hydra presence, but we had no idea it was that bad. In retrospect, that was naïve. We should have seen the truth. In any event, both countries are now a mess. The United Nations is trying to sort it out."

Raven gave Kurt a long look. "You know, the way Logan is so accurately finding such well-hidden targets suggests that someone is feeding him very good intelligence. Some might even suspect that he's getting psychic support."

Kurt didn't hesitate to respond. "Our official position is that Logan is getting intelligence from Magneto's organization - or from perhaps mystical Asgardian sources."

"Kurt, did you just lie to your mother?" Raven asked as she lifted an eyebrow in his direction.

Kurt smiled cheerfully.

One Year Later...

"Mom just got a call from dad," Laura said as she sat down next to Daken. They were in a park, on the edge of the Japanese village that was now their home. "He'll be home soon. And this time, it will be for good."
Daken grinned. The last year had changed him more than Laura and Raze. There were lean muscles developing on his shoulders and his voice had deepened. Despite his half-Japanese heritage, his resemblance to Logan was startling.

In Daken's lap, Kendall squealed and reached out eagerly for Laura. She was a beautiful baby girl, with very light brown skin, curly white hair, and wide blue eyes. So much of her appearance came from Ororo, but you could still see Logan in her strong chin and cheeks. And Kendall could do a quite impressive growl when she was unhappy.

On the other side of the park, Raze - in his ordinary human form - was playing basketball with some local boys. He and Daken had been taking turns watching Kendall while Ororo and Laura were shopping. It was Raze's turn to play, while Daken stayed with Kendall.

"Kendall, stop squirming!" Daken ordered uselessly as he gently tried to contain his littlest sister.

"It's okay, she's just trying to say hi!" Laura laughed as she reached out and took Kendall's hand. Kendall then promptly calmed down and snuggled back against her brother.

Raze broke away from the game and trotted back towards them. Kendall energetically waved a chubby fist at Raze and he returned the greeting by running his fingers through her hair.

"What's up?" Raze asked.

"Dad and Grampa are almost done burning Hydra to the ground," Laura replied distractedly as she tickled Kendall's nose. Kendall giggled in response.

Raze grinned at the good news, flopped down onto the ground next to his brother and sisters, and looked up at the blue sky.

They were all together. And it was a beautiful day.

Chapter End Notes

I'm calling a halt to this story for right now, but I'm pretty sure that I'll come back to it someday.

For one thing, I have an idea for another multi-part story. It'll be called "Men Like Wolves", and will be about Daken and Laura returning to their family's former home. After all, Daken has some responsibilities that he has to fulfill - and Laura knows better than to let her brother out of her sight. If you've read the chapter called "The Monster Hunters" then you probably have a strong suspicion what that story will be about.

Thanks for all of the support. I'm grateful to everyone who's taken the time to read this fic, and I particularly appreciate all of the kind comments that I've received.

Take care.
That Movie

Chapter Summary

Hollywood is making a movie featuring versions of Logan and Laura. Nobody has a clue what to make of it.

Chapter Notes

If you haven't seen "Logan", this contains spoilers for the movie. You've been warned!

THAT MOVIE

Thanks to Hydra, Logan and Ororo were forced to start over. To call Logan 'pissed' did not even begin to describe how he felt. His wife and children had been attacked. They were forced to leave their home.

And Logan had to become the Wolverine again. That bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

Those responsible had to suffer. And that was more than just a matter of payback - Logan had to make the cost of threatening those he loved brutally obvious. The entire world had to see the consequences.

Fighting Hydra would mean kicking over rocks and exposing things to the light that a lot of people really didn't want to see. It also meant that Logan wouldn't be playing by the precious rules of duly constituted international law and order. Governments - hell, the United Nations itself - were going to be deeply offended by the things he planned on doing. Even worse, he was going to embarrass a lot of people. And politicians really don't like to be embarrassed.

Logan's attitude about that boiled down to 'screw them all', but he still had to be careful about who he dragged into his war. Fortunately, Logan had some very strange and useful contacts.

So Logan gathered together an Asgardian war-band filled with dangerously unlikely allies. It was a canny choice on Logan's part. The Asgardians were from a realm almost completely separated from Earth. Logan's warriors simply weren't vulnerable to Hydra's usual means of coercion and subversion. Meanwhile, the Asgardian embassy to the United Nations flatly denied any actual political support for Logan's war. When asked, they stated that Logan's associates were merely volunteer raiders who were in it for the loot. The warriors in question were simply continuing the ancient Asgardian tradition of going Viking.

Logan received additional help from the X-Men and certain Avengers, but that aid was clandestine. However, Erik Lehnsherr's support was far more overt.

If you loved the status-quo, then Logan's war was the stuff of nightmares. He didn't particularly care what it would cost as long as he eventually killed Hydra and cut the words "Don't Mess With My Family" into its twitching corpse.
Meanwhile, Ororo and the children hid out in Japan. And Ororo was pregnant. To say the least, everyone was distracted. Give the circumstances, it was only reasonable that any news coming out of Hollywood would be considered trivial. At least at first.

A year before the release of That Movie

Ororo was almost three months pregnant and it was beginning to show.

Ororo and the kids were hiding in Japan, living in a small home on the edge of an isolated seaside village. The house was owned by a dear friend of both Logan and Ororo. However, it had been decided that as long as the Logan-Hydra war raged on, a rotating pair of active-duty X-Men would always be with Ororo and the children.

At the moment, Rogue and Bobby Drake were in residence. It was a weekend and the kids weren't in school. Laura and Raze were outside, kicking their Uncle Bobby's ass at basketball. Daken was stuck inside, catching up on some homework - and he was in a foul mood because of it. Daken wasn't exactly a scholarly soul.

Rogue and Ororo were in the backyard, wearing swimsuits and comfortably ensconced in lounge chairs. They were enjoying the sun and the fresh air as they watched the basketball game. Bobby had finally taken to using his ice-powers to even up the odds. Laura was laughing as she windmilled across the improvised court, trying to keep her balance on a sheet of sheer ice. Raze had assumed the form of Kobe Bryant, but he was sitting on the court and painfully rubbing his backside as he loudly accused his uncle of cheating.

"I don't believe it," Rogue said suddenly. She had her phone out and was reading the news.

Ororo glanced at her friend. "What's wrong?"

Rogue began flipping rapidly through the story she was reading. "Someone's gonna try to make an X-Men movie. Again."

Both of Ororo's eyebrows rose. "Really?" she asked. "I thought Scott had regained the movie rights."

Rogue sighed and shook her head. "Nope. Scott keeps trying, but Fox just won't let it go. I suppose the studio is convinced there's money to be made. We really should have kept a closer eye on Marvel after we let them make comics about us."

Ororo just shrugged. "I imagine nothing will come of it. They never seem to get an X-Men movie finished. Something always goes wrong."

Rogue chuckled. "Yeah - I think the term is 'production hell'. Some movie projects just never seem to work out."

A smile suddenly appeared on Ororo's face. "Remember the first time they tried? That dreadful script?"

Rogue took one look at Ororo's face and decided to encourage the conversation. Ororo was in hiding, worried sick about her husband, frustrated that she had to remain at home, and almost a third of the way through her first pregnancy. Anything that distracted her was worthwhile.

"Okay, I admit that Anna Paquin was a cute little thing..." Rogue said as she returned to peering at her phone, "but their idea about how I joined the X-Men was just wrong. And who the hell runs
away to Alaska?"

"I think I only had a dozen lines," Ororo said with a smile. "And one of them was about electrocuting a toad."

"Still, the actor who was gonna play Logan was pretty cute," Rogue added.

Ororo burst out laughing. "Do not ever say that to Logan! He refuses to say the man's name out loud. He just describes him as, 'that six-foot tall Australian pretty-boy'."

Rogue couldn't stop herself from laughing.

"By the way, whatever happened to him?" Ororo asked curiously. Rogue was far more in tune with popular culture than she was.

Rogue didn't hesitate. "He's had a fairly successful career. He does a mix of action-adventure and romantic comedy stuff. There was one movie I really liked, but the critics hated, where he played a monster-hunter back during Victorian times. He's always struck me as having real talent, but he just never seemed to get that one big role every actor wants and... huh."

"What?" Ororo asked.

Rogue was frowning at her phone. "That actor - Hugh Jackman - he's in the new movie. And so's Patrick Stewart."

Ororo nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, Stewart was also supposed to be in the old movie. He was going to be Charles - and I suppose he has the same role now. Actually, I thought that was very good casting. Who else is in the movie?"

"They don't seem to mention any other names," Rogue replied as she once again flicked through the article. "But the director is a fellow named Mangold. James Mangold."

Ororo gave Rogue a blank look.

"He did '3:10 to Yuma',' Rogue added.

Ororo's face cleared. "Logan likes that one. He says it is the best western since 'Unforgiven'."

But Rogue was back to frowning at her phone.

"Now what?" Ororo asked.

"The name of the movie... it's called 'Logan'. Nothing else."

Ororo was obviously surprised.

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_Eight months before the release of That Movie_

"Mom?" Laura called. She'd just reached the age where 'Mommy' was no longer acceptable.

"Yes, Laura?" Ororo called back. Ororo was in the kitchen, preparing dinner. Raze and Daken were outside, fixing a leaky rain gutter. Laura was done folding the laundry and putting it away - and had just finished with a quick internet break.

Laura walked into the kitchen. "Have you heard that they're making a movie about dad?" Laura
It took a second for Ororo to realize what Laura was talking about. "Where did you hear that?"

Laura pointed a thumb back towards the room with the computer - a gesture that reminded Ororo so much of her husband that it hurt. "It's all over the internet."

"Your Aunt Rogue told me something about that a while back." Ororo responded off-handedly. "I assumed it would fall apart, like all the other times they have tried to make a movie about us."

Laura didn't respond, but everything about her body language indicated that she wanted to say something.

Ororo wiped her hands on her apron. "What's wrong?"

"I think I'm in the movie," Laura replied hesitantly.

Seven months, twenty-nine days, twenty-two hours, and thirty-two minutes before the release of That Movie

"Perhaps I was not clear," Ororo said in an ominously flat tone. "I do not want my daughter appearing as a character in an R-rated movie."

Scott Summers, Matt Murdock, and Jennifer Walters were occupying separate windows on Ororo's computer screen. They all looked very uncomfortable.

"Ororo, we don't have any control over this," Scott said. He was speaking in that particularly reasonable and careful tone that Ororo had always respected, but which drove Logan crazy. This time, it was also driving Ororo crazy. Which really wasn't Scott's fault, but Ororo was an angry mother and that was always a force that should be treated with care.

"And besides, it's not definite that the girl in the movie is supposed to be Laura," Scott continued soothingly.

"Who else would it be!?" Ororo almost snarled back at Scott.

Everyone shifted nervously. Jennifer decided to grab the ball and run with it. They had to keep Ororo talking instead of reacting.

"The lawyer who represented the X-Men during your interactions with Marvel and Fox did a terrible job," Jennifer began sympathetically. "Marvel cut a questionable deal with Fox, Marvel's lawyer was only concerned with expediting matters, and your lawyer was essentially a doormat. Honestly, Ororo, the X-Men should consider investigating the possibility that there was some sort of collusion or fraud."

Then Matt spoke up. "But the law is clear in this case, Mrs. Howlett," he added crisply. "Even though Laura wasn't even born when the contract was signed, family members of X-Men are a part of the package. The language in the contract is really that broad."

"How did this happen?" Ororo fumed. Out at sea, an impressive squall was building up. Some impressive waves were crashing ashore.

"At the time, Marvel was in a lot of financial trouble," Scott supplied. "They were desperate and had to make a deal to avoid bankruptcy. In order to make their deal with Fox as sweet as possible,
they more-or-less included every aspect of the X-Men comic-book universe that they could think of. And like Miss Walters said, our lawyer did a lousy job. I'm sorry, Ororo. I should have caught it in time."

"So there is nothing that can be done legally?" Ororo asked.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Howlett," Matt said.

"Then I will go to America and discuss this matter with the responsible individuals," Ororo announced stonily.

Out at sea, lightning strikes were walking across the waves and towards the shore. The flashes were visible in the room where Ororo was sitting. It resembled a strobe light.

The alarm that the others felt began escalating rapidly.

It took an hour of reasoning - and sometimes begging - but they eventually talked Ororo down. In the end, she was simply too responsible to take matters into her own hands. And besides, as long as Hydra was out there, she wouldn't leave her children.

Six months before the release of That Movie

The kids were about to leave for school. Ororo stopped them just before they left and checked their uniforms. The Japanese school system was strict about proper dress.

Laura was meticulous about her uniform, and Raze was reasonably cooperative, but Daken was a rebel at heart. It took forever for Ororo to convince the principal of the local middle school that Daken's mohawk was simply how his hair grew - not a fashion statement. Daken had taken that as a personal insult. The resulting conflict between him and Authority was ongoing and would probably last forever.

Yukio and Peter Rasputin were Ororo's current bodyguards. Peter was in the back, clearing underbrush from the woods with an axe. Yukio was performing maintenance on the security cameras.

Amiko, who was Yukio's adopted daughter, was staying with Ororo and the children. She was just as fanatical about her appearance as Laura, but Ororo still made a point of also checking her uniform - just like the others. She never let Amiko feel like an outsider whenever she was present.

"Hey, mom, guess who this is," Raze said with a grin. Then he transformed into a young girl. The girl was about Laura's height, but with a slightly darker complexion and lighter hair. And she was wearing an exact copy of Laura's school uniform.

Daken chuckled while Laura rolled her eyes. Amiko just looked puzzled.

"Who is it?" Ororo asked as she adjusted Daken's tie. The knot looked like something a sailor would use to tie a ship to a dock.

"Daphne Keen. She's gonna play Laura in that movie," Rave said.

"She's cute, but she doesn't look much like Laura," Amiko said as she carefully looked over Raze's assumed form.

"That movie's ridiculous," Daken grumbled. "Raze and I aren't in it. You're not even in it, mom!"
And Jackman is just so... so..."

"Tall," Laura and Raze and Amiko all announced simultaneously.

"And pretty," Ororo added with a smile. "And Australian."

"He's pretty serious about his body-building," Daken admitted. "I've seen pictures where he's even more ripped than Dad."

"But he's still way too tall," Laura repeated. She was wrinkling her nose.

Then Daken suddenly looked at Ororo, "Mom, a lot of the guys at school seem to have a problem with dating a girl who's taller than they are. Was that ever a thing with you and Dad?"

"No, dear," Ororo replied with a smile. "Your father is not concerned about such things." Then she carefully brushed some semi-imaginary lint from Daken's jacket and sent the children on their way.

Ororo sat on the porch and watched the kids walk down the road - the village was small and the local schools were very near - when Yukio came out of the living room. She was a slim, yet muscular, Japanese woman. She kept her hair trimmed short and more than a few scars were visible on her face, arms, and hands. They were the after-effects of a once violent life.

She was smiling at Ororo. "I overheard you talking with the children. Did Logan ever mention to you his theory about taller women?"

Ororo was almost a foot taller than her husband. Yukio was an inch or two taller than Logan.

"'It don't matter how tall a woman is'," Ororo quoted.

"'They're all about the same when you bend them over,'" Yukio finished the quote. The smile on her face was both fond and exasperated.

"Then he proved what he meant. Graphically," Ororo continued. She was having some difficulty hiding her own smile.

"Why do we put up with his... what's the American phrase? The one about the excrement of cattle?"

"Bullshit," Ororo supplied.

"Yes. Why do we put up with that?"

"Probably because we both made the mistake of falling in love with him," Ororo suggested.

Five months before the release of That Movie

Daken dashed into the living room. "The first trailer's dropped!" he announced.

Ororo really didn't know what he was talking about. Her first thought was that there had been some sort of accident on the road that led into town.

Daken took a deep breath as he made an obvious effort to adjust into a mode of speech that older people would understand. Then he tried again.

"It's an advertisement for that movie! It just showed up on the internet!"
Ororo followed Daken into the room where they kept the family computer. Raze was sitting in a chair before the desk. He had the computer mouse in his hand and was obviously eager. Laura was sitting in his lap. She seemed worried.

"Play it!" Daken told Raze urgently. The kids had waited until Ororo could join them.

Raze clicked the mouse.

There was a moment filled with mournful guitar music, and then the sound of Johnny Cash's voice filled the room.

Daken and Raze watched intently. Their faces quickly became puzzled.

Ororo and Laura watched the trailer without any particular expression on their faces.

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Four months, twenty-nine days, twenty-three hours, and fifty-five minutes before the release of That Movie

When Logan's face appeared on the computer screen, a confused babble of words and attempted explanation burst out. Everyone was talking at once.

Everyone except for Laura. She was silent.

"It's looks kind of cool, Dad!" Daken said quickly. However, there was a troubled look on his face. "But it's also pretty weird."

Raze nodded in agreement. "Your character looks really old and sick."

"Yeah, I'm really not sure about that part," Daken admitted.

"And what they do with Laura is...," Rave continued.

Ororo put her hands over Daken and Raze's mouths. Sometimes she had to be very direct in order to calm the two boys down.

"Wait..." Logan said in obvious confusion. "Are you saying that they actually finished making an X-Men movie? And I'm in it? And what does that have to do with Laura?"

Ororo tapped Daken and Raze on the shoulders - and then pointed to the door.

There was some ritual grumbling, but the boys left. Then Ororo closed the door, sat down in the desk chair, and pulled Laura into her lap.

"Watch the trailer," Ororo told Logan. "We'll wait."

Logan nodded. Then glanced off to one side.

An Asgardian Valkyrie leaned into view and began fiddling with Logan's computer. She was blonde, had long braids, and was built like an NFL linebacker. A nasty scar ran from the corner of her mouth, along her cheekbone, and bisected an eyebrow. She was lucky to have not lost the eye.

"Hello, Lady Howlett," the Valkyrie said distractedly. "And you too, little one."

"Hello," Ororo replied politely.
"Hi," Laura responded in a subdued voice.

Then the Valkyrie stepped out of view. "You know," Ororo and Laura could hear her tell Logan. "You are a very good raid-leader, but you really should learn something about the twenty-first century."

Logan just grunted in response and began fiddling with his mouse. Nothing seemed to happen.

The Valkyrie sighed, reached back into view, and took the mouse away from Logan. Then she clicked on something.

The sound of Johnny Cash's singing came from Logan's end of the connection.

---

Four months and twenty-nine days before the release of That Movie

This one was so important that Scott decided to visit Logan in person. Logan was in Africa - it turned out that Hydra had its hooks into the pirate gangs that were haunting the western Indian ocean.

Scott took a deep breath as he tried to figure out what to say. Despite the hours it took to for him to reach Logan, Scott was still unsure exactly how to approach the situation.

Vast understatement: Logan was a lot less amenable to reason than Ororo.

Well, the best approach with Logan had always been the direct one...

"I know what you're thinking, Logan. And you can't do it," Scott said.

Logan gave Scott a skeptical look. The two of them were standing on the fore-deck of a recently pirated freighter. The just-freed crew were joyfully getting the ship ready to sail out of the harbor. Scattered amidst the crew were a number of tall men and women who were wearing ancient armor and wielding an array of ugly-looking melee weapons. Off in the distance, a cluster of winged horses - ridden by a group of women with a distinctly hard-bitten appearance - were descending on another ship. On the edge of the nearby village, a pair of buildings were burning. On the dock itself, a large number of battered-looking prisoners were sitting in a long and miserable line, with their hands behind their heads.

"We're the good guys, Logan," Scott continued. "And, yes, I even include you in that. Hollywood is arrogant and full of crap, but we just can't fight them. If we do, we might win the battle, but we'll definitely lose the war. I know you don't think much of things like publicity and public relations, but we can't give the movie industry the idea that we're their enemy. That will reflect not only on the X-Men, but on all mutants."

To Scott's vast relief, Logan actually appeared to be listening to what he was saying.

---

Four months and twenty-eight days before the release of That Movie

*How did it go?* Jean asked. She was in telepathic communication with Ororo.

*Do you remember how I reacted when I found out that Laura would be in the movie?* Ororo asked.

*Yes,* Jean said slowly.
*Logan was worse. Far worse. He has been quite defensive ever since we left America.*

Jean winced telepathically.

*Well, I haven't heard anything on the news about a raid on Fox corporate headquarters,* Jean said cautiously. *So you must have kept Logan calm long enough for Scott to get to him and have a talk. Good work, but how the heck did you manage that?*

*After forcing Laura to leave the room, I took off my blouse and bra and began teasing my nipples. And I told Logan that if he wanted to see any more, he would just have to calm down and listen to reason.*

*I imagine that would work,* Jean admitted thoughtfully. *The connection between Logan's cock and his brain can be really direct. How did it go after that?*

*I forgot that Logan was in a room filled with some of his Asgardians. They became very demonstrative after I took off my shirt and Logan had to throw them all out. Of course, that kept him distracted for a while and that also helped calm him down. Oh... and there is a burly Valkyrie who is apparently Logan's IT person. She offered to have a threesome with Logan and I.*

*How's Laura taking this?*

*I keep telling her that it is just a movie. And that the girl playing her looks nothing like her.*

*But?*

Ororo sighed. *She doesn't like how she and Logan are depicted. She's upset and she's trying to hide it.*

*How many days until the baby is due?*

*Hank says twenty days, but he is not completely sure. Mutant births vary more than the usual.*

Jean nodded decisively. *Okay... Hank, Rogue, and I will come down tomorrow. We'll stay until you deliver. And Laura thinks a lot of Rogue. They can keep each other company. In the meantime, you need to relax.*

*Jean - I'm the size of an oil tanker, my husband's at war, and my daughter is upset but won't talk about it. Relaxing is really not an option.*

*What's Logan doing right now?*

*He mentioned something about destroying the North Korean government - apparently they're just a Hydra front.*

---

_Four months and seven days before the release of That Movie_

Kendall was a ridiculously beautiful baby girl. She had the white hair and blue eyes of her mother, but you could still see both Logan and Ororo in her features. Her skin was a delicate shade of light brown - balanced midway between the coloration of her parents.

In observance of the unwritten boy's code, Daken and Raze tried to pretend they didn't care about Kendall's arrival. But to anyone who knew them, it was obvious that they were both taken with the newcomer. They kept finding reasons to sneak into the nursery and have one-sided conversations with Kendall.
The arrival of Kendall did finally break Laura out of her long semi-silence. She was delighted to have a little sister. That was when Rogue finally took Laura out for a long walk. That was how they usually began important conversations.

On a hill overlooking the ocean, the two of them sat down and spent a long and companionable moment silently watching the waves roll ashore. That part of the coast was more rocky than sandy, but there were some actual beaches. A small harbor hosted a few dozen fishing boats, one of which was heading out to sea as they watched.

"About that movie..." Rogue finally began.

Laura made a face.

"Another trailer came out," Laura said disgustedly.

"I saw it," Rogue replied. "I guess there's not much question who that little girl is supposed to be."

"It's going to be a dumb movie," Laura said - she was obviously angry.

"I'll wait to see it before I decide," Rogue responded.

"It's stupid and nobody is going to watch it!" Laura almost shouted.

Then Laura fell silent and went back to staring out at the sea. Rogue waited calmly. Logan was only patient about a few things, but hunting was one of them. He'd taught Rogue how to wait for the right time.

"The man playing daddy looks sick," Laura finally said to Rogue. That was obviously bothering her.

Rogue nodded. "He does. And if I had to make a guess, the movie's version of Professor X will die. There was a scene in the first trailer where it looks like Mr. Jackman is burying someone."

"I don't remember him," Laura said wistfully. Every adult she knew always talked about the Professor.

"You were just a baby, but you did meet him. He was so excited to know you. He held you for hours."

Laura nodded. Then she fell silent again.

Rogue waited.

"In the trailers, I hurt a lot of people," Laura finally said.

"It's not you, sugar," Rogue said firmly. "It's just a character in a movie."

"I think the girl playing me looks funny,"

"She's actually kind of pretty," Rogue suggested. "But in the trailers she snarls and screams a lot. That might be what's confusing you."

Laura again went silent. Rogue again waited patiently. She knew Laura would eventually get to the point. She always did.

"I think I was screaming when I almost killed Mr. Horseman," Laura finally said. She was looking
down at her hands as she carefully flexed her fingers.

"You saved Daken's life," Rogue pointed out.

Then Laura rotated her right wrist decisively. "When I put my claws into Mr. Horseman's back... I almost twisted them around. Something told me I should do that."

Rogue nodded. "I expect that would have killed him. But you didn't do it, did you?"

"I think the Laura in that movie kill's a lot of people."

"Movies are always silly about that sort of thing. Everything is yelling and fighting and explosions and... and... "

Then Rogue's voice trailed off as she had to force away some very ugly memories of her own. Laura carefully took one of Rogue's hands in hers. Sometimes she had to do that for her friend.

That particular silence lasted for quite a while. Eventually, Rogue gathered up a pile of rocks. Then she and Laura took turns pitching them towards the shore.

"I don't steal," Laura said suddenly.

"Of course you don't," Rogue agreed.

"I think Pringles are yucky."

"I kind of like 'em, myself. But you should stay away from the energy drinks until you're older."

"I really don't think the Laura in the movie had enough leverage to flip that clerk over."

"I think you're right."

"Those sunglasses were kind of cool."

Rogue put an arm around Laura's shoulders and kissed her on the top of her head. "I'll get you a pair," she promised.

Laura finally smiled.

Two months before the release of That Movie

With a little help, Logan had finally figured out how to Skype without asking for help. He was rather proud about it, but he was trying not to boast.

Ororo was breast-feeding Kendall as she talked to Logan. She'd long ago figured out how to Skype, but saw no reason to point that out.

"How much longer will you be hunting Hydra?" Ororo asked. She was careful to not always ask that question every time they chatted.

"A few more months," Logan answered after a moment's thought. "Cuba is still a problem - it's linked with the cartels in Columbia and Mexico, and the mess in Venezuela. Hydra's name is pretty accurate, but now that Fury has managed to clean up SHIELD, I'm shifting more and more of the load off onto him. And Jeannie and Betsy are sending tips to police forces and internal security agencies. Some of them are finally getting things done. That's a good sign - they aren't as scared of
Hydra as they used to be."

Ororo nodded. "I was thinking - that movie will be out soon. Should we tell the children not to see it?"

Logan raised an eyebrow. "It's an R-rated flick."

"Japan is more lenient about that sort of thing. And besides..."

Ororo let the rest of her sentence hang.

"And if any kids on this planet can sneak into a movie theater, it's definitely those three." Logan snorted.

Then he paused to think it over. He and Ororo had always given their children a great deal of leeway.

"I think we should let them make up their own minds," Logan said. "Besides, if we tell them they can't go, that'll just make them more determined to see the movie."

Ororo nodded in agreement. She'd already reached the same conclusion.

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One month before the release of That Movie

"I've got a bootleg copy of 'Logan'," Hank told Logan.

Hank usually met with Logan two or three times a month to coordinate the X-Men's secret part of Logan's war. They most often communicated with telepathic assistance, but every now and then they met in person. This time, they were meeting face-to-face in Mexico City.

Logan seemed surprised. "I thought it wasn't coming out for a few weeks."

"It was released at the Berlin International Film Festival," Hank replied. "Their online security wasn't particularly good. I hacked a digital copy."

"So how is it?" Logan asked cautiously.

Hank hesitated before replying. "It's a brilliant and bleak modern western. And it's complete nonsense. Charles is elderly and senile, and before the movie starts he apparently telepathically killed several X-Men while having some kind of seizure. At the beginning of the movie, you and he are hiding out in Mexico. Your healing factor is failing and you're slowly dying of adamantium poisoning. You're not married. Laura enters your life, but she's on the run from some corporate incarnation of the Weapon-X program. You, Charles, and Laura flee north, but are pursued. Lots of people die - many of them at the claws of a cloned version of you that symbolically represents what Weapon X wanted you to become. The Professor is murdered along the way, and in the end you die after saving Laura and her fellow escapees. However, I called the movie brilliant for a reason. It's incredibly well done. It's also incredibly depressing."

Logan let out a long and slow whistle. "Wow."

"The director really doesn't understand you and the rest of the X-Men," Hank continued. "And he ignored almost all of your family - except for Laura."

That made Logan wince. "What was she like in the movie?"
"Animalistic and abused. She kills a lot of people. Your character doesn't really take to her at first, but in the end the two of you are family. Oh, and while you do die violently, you do have a measure of peace in the end."

Logan's eyes became a bit distant. "Y'know, Hank. There was a time when dying violently - with no measure of peace at all - was how I expected to go. I figured there was no real chance for anything else."

"And then you married Ororo," Hank reminded Logan.

"And then I married Ororo," Logan agreed.

---

*One day after the release of That Movie*

Daken and Raze were in the backyard, moodily playing catch. They were obviously bothered about something.

Ororo came out of the backdoor. She had a pitcher of lemonade and some glasses. The boys immediately took a break.

"I am sorry," Ororo said to the boys as they all sat down on the back stairs. The boys were sipping lemonade.

Daken and Raze looked at her in surprise. "Sorry about what, mom?" Daken asked.

"Since Laura is actually in that movie, I spent a great deal of time worrying about how it would effect her. I was so worried about my daughter that I forgot about my sons."

Neither Daken or Raze bothered to deny having seen the movie.

"We weren't in the movie," Raze said hesitantly, "but..."

Then he paused.

"We aren't going to end up like that thing that killed dad," Daken said suddenly. He seemed to be speaking to both his mother and brother. "Nobody - nothing - can ever make us into something like that."

Daken's voice was certain. Raze nodded in agreement. However, Ororo was their mother, and she could see the fear buried very deep in their eyes. Unlike Laura, Daken and Raze had killed a man. They'd both fallen far and deep into that bottomless pit of rage and violence that was in their blood.

Ororo took her sons by their shoulders and hugged them close.

"Nobody can do that to you," she told them.

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*Two days after the release of That Movie*

Kendall thought Hank was the biggest and best teddy bear in the world. She was overjoyed whenever he visited. And he did that regularly in order to check on the health of her and her mother. As Kendall rested in her mother's arms, she kept reaching out to grab Hank's fur. Hank really didn't mind.

"Hank, how is that blasted movie doing?" Ororo asked as she once again kept Kendall from
yanking too hard on a handful of Hank's fur.

Hank sighed. "Sorry, Ororo, but it's making a lot of money and the critics love it."

Ororo shook her head. "I had hoped otherwise. Laura told me that so many of those super-hero movies have had problems."

"Movie-making is a hit-and-miss business," Hank admitted. "Frankly, it was just a matter of time until a movie about the X-Men was made. And this one is doing quite well. You might have to brace yourself and the kids for a sequel."

"A sequel?" Ororo asked ominously. "How? Isn't everyone dead at the end of this one?"

"Laura isn't," Hank pointed out. Then he steeled himself for Ororo's quite possibly explosive reaction.

Instead, Ororo just gave Hank a long look. "Oh, really?" she said finally.

Hand nodded.

"We will just have to see about that," Ororo told Hank calmly.

Then she reached for her phone. It was time to stop this nonsense before it went any further. There was a card she'd hesitated to play before, but now all bets were off.

There were limits to just how far she and her husband could go, but there were others who were not so constrained.

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*Three days after the release of That Movie*

James Mangold swallowed hard. Very hard. As a movie director, he was used to meeting all kinds of people. Some of them were powerful and perhaps even dangerous.

But he'd never met anyone like this.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Mangold," Erik Lehnsherr said to Mangold. His voice was mild and he didn't seem angry at all.

Not at all.

"Hello," Mr. Mangold responded carefully. Actually, he was doing a quite presentable job of keeping his voice steady.

"I want to speak to you about any movies you might desire to make in the future," Erik continued.

"I'm listening," Mr. Mangold said. There wasn't really a lot else to say. And he knew that calling security would be a disastrous mistake.

Erik smiled. "That's good. Do you know that I am well acquainted with Logan's family?"

"I've heard that," Mangold responded.

"I also know little Laura very well. Do you know what she calls me?"

Mangold considered that. Then he shook his head wordlessly.
"She calls me 'grampa',' Erik said. "She might not be biologically correct, but in terms of her heart and mine... well, do you understand?"

Mangold closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he nodded.

"One movie about the Logan family is enough," Erik continued. "They are no longer to be a part of your stock in trade. Is that understood?"

Mangold hesitated before replying. "You have to understand, Mr. Lehnsherr... the studio actually owns the rights..."

"I'll be speaking with them soon," Erik said as he got to his feet.

"By the way," Erik said just before he left the office. "Although many of the details were strange, your film was remarkable and I enjoyed it a great deal. The next time you see Mr. Stewart, please tell him that I consider his performance more than worthy of an Oscar."

---

A month after the release of That Movie

Being one of the X-Men can open a lot of doors. Rogue made use of that as she talked to people who introduced her to other people. Then she simply followed a surprisingly short chain until she got to where she wanted to be. She was surprised by how many famous people seemed to want to meet her - or any other X-Man.

Eventually, a package arrived at the mansion via registered mail. Rogue opened it and smiled. Within hours, she had fueled up a Blackbird and was arcing across the Pacific. She wanted to deliver this particular present in person.

A big grin came across Laura's face when Rogue gave her the sunglasses. She immediately put them on and peered at her reflection in a nearby window.

"They're just like in the movie!" Laura told Rogue excitedly.

Rogue smiled and then smoothed back Laura's hair. "Actually, they are from the movie. I got hold of someone who knows Miss Keen. There were maybe a dozen pair of these glasses used during the filming. She held on to two pairs. This is one of them. Oh... and she said to say hello. She says she'd like to meet you someday."

Laura seemed impressed. "How did you get in touch with her?"

Then Rogue's smile turned a grin. "I ran into a tall Australian guy. He introduced us."
A Big Family Tree

Chapter Summary

Logan is back from his war with Hydra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A BIG FAMILY TREE

It really wasn't too surprising that Logan had survived his war. After all, he was extremely dangerous - and even harder to kill.

However, there was something else that worked in Logan's favor. He had a very effective approach to conflict. Logan's methodology was primal: fight to protect those you love, fight to kill, and fight until you run out of enemies.

Then it was time to go home.

Actually, Logan had never seen the place where his family now lived. It was a modernish house with some associated out-buildings, located on the inland side of an isolated Japanese fishing village. The house sat on a hill that overlooked the ocean and the remainder of the village. The backyard bordered a small forest that was loosely managed by the Japanese government. It was a beautiful location, and a friend of Logan and Ororo's had sold it to them for a very reasonable amount.

The two X-Men on guard duty at the Howlett home were Sam Guthrie and Amara Aquila. By the time Logan appeared at the front gate, the sun was almost touching the horizon. Sam was restlessly prowling the border of the property while Amara was still asleep - she had the upcoming midnight shift.

"Hey, Logan," Sam said quietly. He'd known that Logan's war with Hydra was winding down, so Logan's presence wasn't a complete surprise. And the sensor system that ringed the house - the best Hank McCoy could put together - had already confirmed that the man who'd just appeared was actually Logan. Identity could be a big question where mutants were concerned.

"Sam," Logan replied with a nod. Then they shook hands.

The two men hadn't seen each other for over two years, but that was the extent of their initial greeting. They were that sort.

Sam glanced over Logan's shoulder. A winged horse, ridden by a severe-looking blonde woman clad in leather, fur, and armor, was lifting skyward in a flurry of flapping wings.

"Sam! Sweetie! Long time no see!" the Valkyrie yelled just before hauling on her mount's reins and turning seaward. She waved cheerfully as she flew away.

Logan raised his eyebrows. "You know Sigrunn?" he asked. Actually, he wasn't completely
surprised. Logan knew that Sam and his friends had been to Asgard more than once.

A slight smile appeared on Sam's face. "Yeah. She always liked Bobby and me."

Sam didn't seem inclined to explain any further. Logan decided to not ask for any additional details.

"Anyway, welcome back," Sam finished. "Sorry, but I have to finish the perimeter check."

Logan nodded as Sam walked away. Then Logan continued towards the house.

At the front door, Logan knocked - and was suddenly seized by an uncharacteristic moment of doubt. Maybe he should have called ahead? Surprises aren't always a good thing.

Ororo opened the door. Her eyes met Logan's...

And at that moment all doubt fled. And there was no need for words.

"Mom?" Laura called from inside. She'd heard the knock and knew that her mother was answering the door, but she didn't hear any conversation and couldn't catch a clear scent. Suddenly worried, she headed towards the front of the house.

At the door, her mother had her father firmly pinned against the door jamb. Logan and Ororo's lips were locked together. Ororo, taller than her husband, had her arms wrapped around him, with Logan's ass in a ferociously tight grip. She had a leg cocked around his body, and a bare foot was sensuously rubbing up and down one of Logan's calves. The silk kimono Ororo habitually wore around the house was hanging open and Logan's hands were inside of it. Laura caught a glimpse of her mother's underwear, which seemed almost shockingly white in contrast to Ororo's light-brown skin and the bright red of the kimono.

"Daddy!" Laura squealed.

Logan and Ororo actually jumped away from one another. Ororo hastily belted her kimono as she and Logan exchanged an amused look.

Daken, Raze, and Laura essentially flipped out. For them, it seemed as if an eternity had passed since they'd seen their father in person. Even Kendall - Logan and Ororo's youngest - shared in the general excitement, although she didn't grasp all of the details.

For the next hour or so, Ororo was never far from her husband's side, Laura was constantly in his lap, and his sons kept badgering Logan with questions about his war against Hydra. Kendall, just beginning to walk, took some tottering steps towards this strange new person. Holding onto his leg, she peered upward and wondered where she knew this man from.

Logan was ridiculously happy.

Sam had standing orders to call one particular friend of the family when Logan finally showed up. And he did just that. After all, it's never wise to piss-off a ninja.

Yukio eventually showed up. The first thing she did was give Logan a not very sisterly welcome-home kiss.

"Me first," Ororo quietly growled from the other side of the room.
"Welcome back, cowboy," Yukio told him in accented English. The smile on her face was tiny, but very real.

"And this is dinner," Yukio said as she put a big traditional bowl, topped with very untraditional aluminum foil, on a low table in the center of the living room.

"Dinner?" Ororo asked gratefully. "Are you staying?"

That question seemed to genuinely amuse Yukio.

"Oh, no. Definitely not," she told Ororo - this time in Japanese.

Then Yukio began gathering up the children.

"They'll be staying with me for the next few nights," Yukio said calmly.

Daken was old enough to understand and he grudgingly cooperated. Raze and Laura took some convincing, but Daken helped Yukio get his younger siblings out the door and onto the path to Yukio's house. Kendall adored Yukio, so she just peacefully settled into her aunt's arms and promptly dozed off.

Once everyone was gone, Logan and Ororo skipped dinner and more or less dragged each other into the bedroom. Then Ororo showed Logan the welcome home he'd been dreaming about for so long.

Later on, Logan quietly eased himself out of bed. Then he leaned over and kissed his wife on the side of her head, at the junction of the eyebrow and temple. Ororo, more asleep than awake, murmured appreciatively, but didn't object as her husband put on a pair of pajama bottoms and left their bedroom.

In the kitchen, Logan poured himself a tumbler of whiskey. Then he wandered out onto the front porch.

Sam and Daken were sitting together on a roughly-built wooden bench that was located near the front gate. Logan had overheard their conversation. They were talking about the upcoming baseball season. Sam didn't know the Japanese leagues as well as Daken, but they were doing a pretty good job of dissecting the chances of various American and Canadian teams.

They both called out greetings to Logan when he appeared.

"Sam, have you considered actually getting some sleep?" Logan asked plaintively as he joined them on the bench.

Sam regretfully shook his head as he got to his feet. "I'll look around one more time. Then Amara can spell me," he replied.

Logan nodded in agreement. There was no point - in fact it would be deeply unwise - to disrupt whatever system the X-Men had set up for guarding his family.

Then Sam slipped away, leaving Logan and Daken alone together.

"And what are you doing here?" Logan asked as he took a sip from his whiskey.

"I live here," Daken replied.
Logan couldn't help but smile. That actually settled his homecoming. He could eat at the kitchen table, hug his daughters, rough-house with his sons, and make love to his wife, but it still wouldn't be quite right until Daken shot his mouth off. That was just a part of Dak's nature.

"Sam caught me trying to sneak onto the property," Daken added. There was no rancor in his voice and Logan noticed that immediately. Daken really didn't like to lose, yet he was accepting a minor defeat with good grace. Daken had put on a few inches in the time Logan had been gone, but Logan was interested to see that he'd grown in other ways as well.

"This place is loaded with cameras, electronics, and drones," Daken explained - now with some irritation in his voice. "Raze broke a hundred thousand yen gizmo the last time he mowed the lawn. It wasn't his fault. The darn thing was hiding in the grass, got confused, and tried to crawl under the lawnmower."

Logan shook his head in amusement. Then he traced a thumb along one of the black and curvilinear designs on Daken's arm. "What's this?"

Daken actually looked embarrassed. "Raze and I were screwing around. We won't ever be able to get tattoos that'll last, so we drew some with a marker. It's kinda an experiment."

"They look Maori," Logan noted thoughtfully.

Daken nodded. "We saw them on the internet and we liked the look."

Logan gave his son a long look. "You know, if Yukio notices that you're missing, she won't be happy."

Daken hesitated for just a moment before replying. "I have a question."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "It can't wait till tomorrow?"

"Maybe it could," Daken admitted, "but I didn't want to ask with anyone else around."

"Oh," replied Logan thoughtfully, wondering what was bothering his son. "Ask away."

Daken's eyes met his father's. "Are there any more like us? I mean, like Laura, Raze, Kendall, and me?"

It was Logan's turn to pause. Actually, he'd been expecting that question for some time - years as a matter of fact.

Logan finished his drink and put the glass beside him on the bench. He suddenly felt the urge for another, but this discussion with Daken needed to be finished. There's a day in every father's life when he realizes that the talk he's having with his eldest child was actually an adult conversation. That was a day both proud and sad, because it meant the world had changed in an irreversible way. Something of the past was now gone forever.

"Yes," Logan told Daken.

Daken didn't obviously react, but Logan could sense the sudden spark of eagerness within him.

"Can we talk about it?" Daken asked. And that question - carefully looking for another person's boundaries - reminded Logan yet again how much his son had changed while Logan was gone. And he'd missed that. He'd missed it because Hydra had started a war and dragged Logan away
from his family.

The flare of resentment that Logan felt was awesomely deep. Unfortunately, there was nobody alive to pay the price for that.

"Yeah, I suppose it's time," Logan began slowly.

Then Logan paused as he searched for words. Eventually, he found them.

"I'm old, Daken. Well over a century - closer to two. I had wives and children before Ororo and before Itsu. And I've also had kids outside of marriage."

Then Logan looked deep into Daken's eyes. "I've done a lot of wrong things, Dak. And sometimes that included being careless with the women in my life. That's something I wish I could take back, but I can't. I hope you'll do better than me."

Daken nodded soberly and carefully. Logan examined his face for a moment before continuing.

"Dak, you have to understand that asking me about my kids is a big question. My first were born in the nineteenth century. Their mother was an Irish girl named Katie who I met in New York city. I married her and we moved west and homesteaded a ranch. We had two boys and three girls. One of the girls died young, but the others grew up. One of the boys and the two surviving girls had families of their own. The other boy came to a bad end when he was young, but I can't swear he didn't have a kid or two somewhere along the way."

"Descendents of my first children are alive right now, Dak. You have great-great-grand-nephews and nieces who are about your age. And more who are decades older."

Daken's eyes were quite wide.

"Are any of them mutants?" Daken asked.

Logan nodded his head. "There have been a few, but most have been - are - ordinary folks. No matter what anyone tells you, Dak, mutants aren't a race. We're just different people. You can have family who are mutants and family who aren't."

"Do they know you? Do you ever see them?" Daken pressed.

"They don't know about me - I keep my distance. It's better for them if nobody knows."

Daken considered that for a long time. Then he nodded in slow acceptance.

"Has there been anyone else?" he asked finally.

Logan nodded his head again. "Yeah. All ages and from all over the world. But there's one who's the closest to what I think you're asking about. She's a girl - a little older than you, but not a grown woman. Her mother wants her to be a secret, so I can't say much more. I figure you'll meet her someday, but that's not our decision to make. I hope you understand."

Daken nodded gravely. He'd grown up knowing the importance of both family and secrets.

"But ya gotta remember this," Logan added intensely, "we didn't know about Raze until Mystique popped up with him in tow. And there will always be somebody who wants super-soldiers, so there might be other clones out there besides Laura."

"So we just don't know for sure," Daken finished for his father.
Logan nodded.

Daken fell silent for a long moment as he considered what his father had told him.

"G'night, dad," Daken eventually said. Then he got up from the bench and slipped away into the night.

On the way back to bed, Logan sensed Sam and Amara switching off the night watch. Sam carefully woke Amara. Then they exchanged a sleepy kiss. The kiss lingered, and then turned into something more intense. Logan smelled the change in body chemistry as they became more interested in each other. By the time Logan got back to the bedroom he shared with Ororo, Sam and Amara were deeply entangled with each other.

Ororo's eyes opened as Logan slid the bedroom door shut. Then she gave her husband a slightly suspicious look.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked.

"Sam and Amara," Logan explained. He didn't have to explain any further. He and Ororo had the semi-telepathic link of married couples the world over.

Ororo chuckled and pulled back the bed-covers - revealing more than a little bare skin in the process. Logan slid into bed beside her. Settling next to his wife, Logan wondered how the hell he'd survived for well over a year without doing that every night.

Already, Ororo's absence was beginning to seem like a distant, bad, memory. Logan wasn't just where he wanted to be. He was where he needed to be.

"I never understood how it worked with the New Mutants," Logan said as he buried his face in Ororo's hair and inhaled her scent. "You can never keep track of who's banging who."

"Just assume they have all slept with each other and that any moment they might do it again," Ororo chuckled. Her eyes were now peacefully closed as she luxuriated in her husband's body heat.

Logan snorted, but then he became serious. Ororo's eyes opened as she sensed that.

"Daken was outside," Logan told her. "He asked if I had any other kids."

"That was inevitable," Ororo replied, "What did you tell him?"

"I told him about Katie. I told him about Rina, although I didn't tell him her name. And I told him there have been others."

Ororo frowned. "Does he want to meet Rina?"

"Yes, but I told him that Rina's mom wanted her kept secret for now. He accepted that. He's done a lot of growing up."

Ororo turned around to put herself face-to-face with Logan.

"By the way, does Matt Murdock know about you and Rina's mother?"

Logan shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe Elektra told him. Maybe not. I didn't think it was right to bring it up."

Ororo sighed a soft murmur as she drifted back to sleep.

Logan closed his eyes, but sleep eluded him.

Ellie had been Logan and Katie's youngest daughter. She was a beautiful, delicate, girl who was perhaps too frail to live on a frontier. She died of pneumonia when she was just five years old. Her all-but-unmarked grave was located next to her mother's, on a windswept Wyoming hilltop. The graves overlooked a stark valley, bounded by eroded hills and cut by a tiny creek edged with the occasional cottonwood tree.

In his mind's eye, Logan remembered that moment when Ororo dashed out of the Weapon-X 'nursery' - lightning howling in her wake - and handed the baby she was carrying to Rogue. Then she ordered Rogue to fly Laura to safety.

Logan was busy fighting a guy in HammerTech power-armor who was proving to be a lot more competent than most, so he only caught the briefest first glimpse of Laura. However, that quick look was almost Logan's undoing. Laura looked so much like her long dead sister...

Gently disentangling himself from Ororo, Logan turned onto his back and stared up at the ceiling.

Logan saw a blur of faces. One after the other - male and female, old and young, attractive and plain, showing the signs of just about every race on earth.

After taking a deep breath, Logan let it out slowly. Sometimes, that helped reign in the past when it returned to haunt him. The great curse of a long life is too many memories. Even after so long, the endings of those he'd cared for still cut deep. There had been so many.

And yet Logan always came back to the first child he lost. He remembered her long dark hair and eager green eyes, so full of life as she played with her brothers and sisters in the first snow of winter.

"Goodnight, Ellie," Logan whispered very softly. "Daddy misses you."

Chapter End Notes

This story popped into my head in response to an obvious question. Given that the Howlett family has three children out of four who aren't the issue of Logan and Ororo, who else is out there?

Years ago, Marvel put out a strange little alternative-future story that featured a character named 'Wild Thing'. While I have no particular interest in bringing Rina into this story, I've had a few people ask about her over the years. I thought it was time to at least mention her.

Speaking of oddball descendents, Ororo has one of her own. 'Kymera' is yet another character who comes from an alternative-future, and she's a daughter of Ororo and T'Challa. If I recall correctly, she's actually present in the current Marvel continuity, but has more-or-less been forgotten. I don't plan on bringing her into these stories because I've already had Ororo flatly state that there was never a relationship between her and T'Challa. I don't hate Ororo/T'Challa as a concept, but Reggie Hudlin was pretty crude in how he developed it and I'll never quite forgive him for that.
Katie and Ellie Howlett are an invention of my own. I first mentioned them in a story called "Super-Soldiers". That story does not actually take place in the same universe as the "Scenes From A Most Unusual Family" stories, but I decided that this story needed something from deep in Logan's past, and they readily came to mind.

What about the descendents of Logan and Katie Howlett? Or the 'others' that Logan mentioned? Will we ever meet any of them?

I have no plans for that right now, but you never know.
Author's Note: this story takes place not too long after Logan's return home from his war with Hydra. It has been about a year and a half since the Howlett's left their old home in the mountains and moved to Japan.

So far, the transition from winter to spring had been an easy one, with surprisingly little in the way of cold-snaps or storms. The nights were still cool, but the days were becoming steadily warmer. It was as if the cold and snow-driven mountains had decided - for once - to gracefully acquiesce to the change of seasons.

Ed Barnett pulled his patrol car to the side of the road and carefully examined the scene in front of him. A pickup truck from the county roads department was parked just off the road, near one end of the old and rusting bridge that crossed the Bigwater river. The driver-side door of the truck was open, and Ed could tell by a thin trail of exhaust coming from the truck that the pickup's engine was still running.

However, there was nobody in sight.

Like the other deputies, Ed knew that something was wrong in the county. And like everyone else, he wasn't sure what it was.

But people were going missing.

Ed got out of his vehicle and hesitated just a moment before deciding not to draw his sidearm. Then he walked over to the pickup.

There was nobody inside the truck. Ed turned and scanned the surrounding area.

Still nobody.

"Hello!" Ed called out.

Silence. In fact, except for the uncaring rush of the Bigwater river and the low rumble of the running pickup engine, there was no sound at all. Not even bird-song.

Ed put his hand on the butt of his pistol.

Then something drew Ed's eye. It was a splash of orange in the tall grass adjacent to the road, a few yards in front of the truck.

On closer examination, it turned out to be a hard-hat - part of the uniform worn by the county road crews. Ed nudged the helmet with his foot and flipped it over. In faded block letters, the name "Art Collins" was hand-printed on the back of the helmet.
Ed knew the man. Art was getting on in years, but he was a conscientious and hard-working county employee. Not the sort of man to walk away from a running vehicle.

Then Ed noticed that there were a few red droplets clinging to the hard-hat. There were also red-brown stains on the nearby grass. A trail of blood, partially hidden by grass and brush, was leading into the dense stand of trees that flanked the road.

Keeping his back to the pickup, Ed finally drew his weapon. Then, not taking his eyes from the tree-line, Ed retreated back to his car.

Bradley saw Aliza enter the library. She was a good half-hour late for the meeting of the local book club, and Aliza was one of those people who was never late for anything.

Aliza was a pretty mix of Irish, Mexican, and Sioux Indian, but at the moment she looked terrible - exhausted and obviously upset. Suddenly worried, Brad intercepted Aliza near the library's front desk.

"Aliza... what's wrong?" Bradley asked worriedly.

Aliza tiredly shook her head and then ran her hands through her already disheveled hair.

"I don't know," she said tiredly.

"I couldn't sleep last night," she added. "I kept having bad dreams."

There was now a cluster of vehicles - official and private - parked near the Bigwater bridge.

The county didn't have the money for a full-time forensics investigator, but the county medical examiner was doing what he could. Ed was standing nearby, carrying a shotgun as he tried not to look like he was guarding the medical examiner's back.

Meanwhile, two more deputies and a squad of local volunteers were combing the woods. By unspoken agreement, the volunteers were all armed with a mixture of rifles and shotguns.

Ed frowned as yet another patrol car came down the road and parked. It was the Sheriff himself - a florid and paunchy man in his mid-fifties. Since Ed's patrol area was about as far from the county seat as possible, Ed didn't see the Sheriff very often. Actually, Ed was okay with that. Although he had nothing specifically against the Sheriff, Ed preferred to keep his distance.

"Deputy," the Sheriff said in brief greeting as he got out of his car. Ed hadn't been with the department long enough for the Sheriff to actually use his name. That would take about another ten years. It would have helped if Ed had been born in the county and the Sheriff knew his family, but that wasn't the case.

"Sheriff," Ed replied in return. Two could play the terseness game. However, Ed had once been both a soldier and a SHIELD agent, and he couldn't help but do his job. His superior officer was on the scene and needed a report.

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"There are search parties up and down both banks of the Bigwater," Ed added quietly. "Doc Peterson is looking over the truck, but he doesn't seem to be having much luck."

"We have a blood-trail that leads to the riverbank," Ed continued. "We found Mr. Collin's jacket tangled in some driftwood. It's torn to pieces. If I had to guess, whatever was left of Mr. Collins
ended up in the river. I radioed the other departments down-river and told them to keep an eye open for body parts."

The Ed hesitated for a moment. "Chris Burley is with the search party. He has his dogs with him, but they won't go too far into the woods."

The Sheriff nodded distantly as he stared at the county pickup. Then he finally turned and looked at Ed.

"Jeremy Wainwright's ranch is over that way," the Sheriff said, nodding back down the road. "And somewhere up above him is where Michael Horseman lives."

Ed knew that but nodded anyway.

"Check on Jeremy," the Sheriff finished. "Ask him if he knows anything. And ask him if he's seen Horseman lately."

"Yes, sir," Ed said.

There's a considerable time difference between Japan and the western mountains of the North American. So it was early evening where Bradley lived, but morning in Japan.

"Things are getting weird around here," Brad said into his laptop. He was obviously worried.

On the other end of the connection, Daken's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"People are missing," Brad replied tensely.

"Who?" Daken asked. There was a sudden note of urgency in Daken's voice. He knew a lot of people where Bradley lived.

"Mr. Collins. John Younger. And Mr. Bell."

A thoughtful expression appeared on Daken's face. He knew all of those people. "What happened?"

Brad took a deep breath. "This morning, they found Mr. Collins' work-truck near the Bigwater bridge. Everyone figures he stopped to check on the bridge pilings, cause the river's been high. Mr. Collins was gone, but the engine of his truck was still running. Nobody's seen him since. Yesterday, John went hiking with some friends and then took off on his own - I think he was going to check on a patch of ditchweed he'd been talking about. He hasn't come back yet. And a few days ago, some folks got to talking about how they hadn't seen Mr. Bell for a while. Mr. Hernandez went up to Mr. Bell's place to see if he was okay, but couldn't find him."

Daken was silent for a long moment as he considered what Brad was saying.

"Anyone of those can be explained," Daken replied slowly. "Mr. Collins might have fell into the river and drowned. John might be somewhere off on his own - stoned off his ass, like always. And Mr. Bell... well, he's a weird guy. Remember how he likes to go on those long hunting trips? Maybe he just forget to tell anyone that he was going to be out of town for a while. He's done that before. The last time, Mr. Bell's sisters were pretty worried until my dad tracked Mr. Bell down."

Brad nodded. "Yeah, but there's still talk that something strange is going on. And now Aliza's worried about her great-grandfather. She and her mom haven't seen him for a while."
Then Brad paused. Daken didn't immediately respond as his eyes seemed to drift off. Mr. Horseman was an awkward subject. Once, Mr. Horseman and Daken had made a serious effort to kill each other. They'd both almost succeeded.

"Aliza's scared," Brad added quietly.

Daken suddenly nodded his head. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

_Daken didn't lie to his parents, but he also didn't tell them the complete truth. He'd long ago learned that was the most successful way - the only way, actually - to express an untruth to his father._

Oh, Logan knew that Daken wasn't telling him everything, but he could make a shrewd - if incomplete - guess why Daken wanted to pay a visit to their former home. Her name was Aliza Horseman and once upon a time she and Daken had been quite close. The Howlett family's departure from their old home had been quicker than anyone liked. Not all of the desired goodbyes were said.

What Daken was asking for certainly seemed reasonable enough. Logan really couldn't think of a good reason to deny his request. And besides, the kids were out of school at the moment and some family friends had agreed to let Daken stay with them.

"What do you think?" Logan asked Ororo.

Ororo shrugged, "We always knew they would eventually want to go back and visit their friends."

_I should go with Daken," Laura told her parents. Logan and Ororo exchanged an amused glance. As always, Laura was so very sure of herself._

The whole family was crowded into the living room of their new home. Yukio had sold the house to Ororo while Logan was off fighting his war against Hydra. On a very Western-style couch, Amiko was helping Raze with a written report, while Kendall lay on a blanket and watched them both with wide-eyed curiosity. Elsewhere in the house, Daken was busy packing.

"Mrs. Watt won't mind if I come along," Laura added.

"Perhaps later..." Ororo began.

"If I'm there, it'll help keep Daken out of trouble," Laura interrupted quickly.

Ororo paused - and then glanced at Logan. They'd always given their children a level of freedom that most outsiders found surprising... if not shocking. Actually, given Logan and Ororo's own childhoods, and how durable and capable their children were, they were being far more reasonable than most people realized.

"She's got a point," Logan said thoughtfully, agreeing with Ororo's unspoken question. When he was on his own, Daken was prone to taking chances. But when he was with someone else, he was a lot more careful.

Then Logan glanced at his younger son.

"How about you, Raze?" Logan asked. "Want to go?"

Raze glanced at Amiko and then shook his head. "No. I like it here."
Amiko smiled back at Raze. She seemed pleased with his answer.

"Wanna tell me why you're coming along?" Daken asked skeptically.

Laura almost over-balanced when she grabbed her traveling bag from the jeep and slung it over her shoulders. She was more than strong enough to handle the bag, but she was never going to be a big girl and sheer mass mattered when you were shifting around a lot of dead weight.

Daken sighed and took the bag away from Laura. She shot a dangerous glare in his direction.

"Because I want to see our friends," Laura declared. "And besides, somebody has to keep an eye on you."

A smile tugged at Daken's lips. "You're gonna keep me from screwing up?"

"Yep," Laura said in dead seriousness. The raw determination in that one syllable suggested to Daken that it might be best to let the subject lie.

Logan and Ororo were trying not to smile. Laura and Daken had been squabbling about one thing or the other ever since leaving the house.

"Both of you stay out of trouble," Logan said as Ororo distributed goodbye hugs.

"Sure," Daken replied easily. Laura nodded as well.

Their farewells said, the two youngsters began walking towards the old airstrip. The Blackbird was there, framed darkly against a background of green fields, its engines rumbling and eager. And Aunt Kitty was waving at them from the cockpit. Both Daken and Laura grinned and waved back as soon as they saw their aunt.

Parked at the end of the road that led to the airstrip, Logan and Ororo got into their old jeep and watched as their two children walked off on their own.

Raze was sitting in the back seat. Kendall was on his lap. She was watching Daken and Laura's departure with no little concern.

"Don na go," Kendall said firmly. Then her eyes became slightly milky and a wind suddenly whipped up. The wind was strong enough that Daken and Laura were forced to lean into it.

Ororo glanced back at her youngest daughter's worried face. Then her own eyes also went white - and the newborn wind died away.

Kendall giggled as Raze gave her a gentle squeeze. She enjoyed playing weather-tag with her mother.

Then Ororo turned to her husband. The look on his face was stolid and still - which meant he was hiding his feelings. Ororo smiled, gently took Logan's hand in her own, and then leaned over and kissed him on the temple.

"Where have the years gone?" she asked plaintively.

Logan glanced at his wife, smiled, and then leaned over and kissed her in return.

Within minutes, the Blackbird was aloft and roaring across the Pacific ocean.
Daken and Laura were finally out of range of their father's hearing. And Aunt Kitty was wearing a headset, so she couldn't be able to hear anything but radio traffic.

Laura looked at her brother and asked, "Okay, what's this really about?"

Daken sighed as he - not for the first time in his life and almost certainly not the last - wondered if he'd ever be able to hide anything from his sister.

"People are missing," Daken told Laura.

Laura's eyes narrowed.

Two winters had passed since Michael Horseman had surrendered his long watch. The name 'Hunts Monsters' was no longer truly his, but he didn't regret that. Michael had spent the better part of a century guarding the People - and, by extension, the rest of humanity - against the wolves-who-walk-like-men. That was enough. Now it was someone else's turn to carry that ancient burden.

Michael awoke after an unusually good night's sleep. Then he washed from a wooden bucket and got dressed. It seemed to Michael that his usual aches and pains - the result of old age and the lingering after-effects of a fight with a particularly dangerous young warrior - weren't too bad that morning. That was good since he was planning on an active day.

He intended to spend the morning gathering wild onions and herbs and then go hunting for some of the young, fat, rabbits that were seemingly everywhere this season. It looked to be a bountiful and prosperous year - filled with the kind of game of which hunters dreamed. Rabbit stew seemed a fine way to honor such a gift from the spirits.

Stepping out of his cabin, Michael took a deep breath of crisp morning air.

And then he froze, his eyes suddenly flickering warily around him.

Something was wrong.

There was no bird-song. And Michael's horse - who normally greeted Michael every morning with an eager whiney - was silent.

Michael peered carefully at the tiny, run-down, stable. There was no movement from within. And the corral was empty.

Then the wind shifted and Michael caught the scent of fresh-spilled blood.

Reaching behind him, Michael picked up the loaded shotgun he always kept just inside the cabin door.

There were no ordinary predators in these mountains that could kill a full-grown horse in utter silence. Michael knew what he was facing.

From deep inside the dark shadows of the stable, Michael caught a glimpse of movement. He raised his shotgun and sighted on a shadow that seemed darker than the others.

Michael Horseman, known to the People as 'Hunts Wolves', and still known to a very few as 'Hunts Monsters', believed that even the spirits did not know the time and place of a man's death. Ultimately, a man's end was a function of his actions and the world's responses to those actions. Michael also believed that if someone lived their life in accordance with ways of the People, then
after death they rejoined the spirits of their ancestors in an afterlife of eternal summer and good hunting.

Michael understood that a long life inevitably prepared you for death. It did that by inexorably taking away your family and friends. So many of those dear to Michael had preceded him to the spirit-lands, and all that remained were his grand-daughter, his great grand-daughter, a few elderly friends and acquaintances... and, of course, that white soldier - actually the white soldier - who was so eternally, irritatingly, young.

Like all elderly men, Mr. Horseman understood that the end was near. It was just a matter of time.

And now his time had run out.

And yet a savage grin appeared on Michael's lined and wrinkled face. After all, this was how his kind always met their end. It was only right. And today was a good day to die.

"Let us finish this," Michael called out to the ancient foe. It pleased him that his last words would be in the language of the People.

The response came from all sides. It was a chorus that expressed itself as something half-way between growls and laughter.

Aliza suddenly stopped in mid-stride. She was staring off into the distance, a stunned look on her face.

"Aliza... what's wrong?" the girl next to Aliza asked.

Blinking, Aliza came back to the here and now. She was standing on a worn and cracked sidewalk, on her way to the grocery store to pick up some things for her mother. A neighbor - a pale girl with frizzy black hair - was with her.

"I don't know," Aliza said worriedly. "It's just..."

Then Aliza fell silent as she wobbled slightly. She was having trouble keeping her balance.

"Just what?" her friend prompted. She took Aliza by the shoulders to steady her.

Aliza didn't say anything, but she was staring at the distant mountain that had once been the home of her great-grandfather.
The county airport was a repurposed World War II landing-strip that featured a scatter of more recently-built support buildings. It didn't look any different from the last time Daken and Laura had been there, but that was no surprise since the airport hadn't really changed in at least three decades.

As always, the Blackbird looked massively out of place. The airport was like a scene from a science-fiction movie - featuring a dark and sleek spaceship that had just landed on a backwater world. And actually, when you thought about it, that wasn't too far from the truth.

"Okay, you two," Kitty announced briskly as her two passengers gathered up their travel bags. "I'll be back in a week. Have fun, say 'hi' to everyone for me, don't get into too much trouble, and you have my number if you need something. Call me if anything - and I do mean anything - goes wrong. If it's a choice between me yelling at you because you somehow screwed up, or your dad... well, I think you know the difference."

"Yes, ma'am," Laura replied solemnly. Actually, Laura was thinking that she usually had better luck manipulating her father than Aunt Kitty, but she saw no reason to admit that out loud.

"Thanks, Aunt Kitty," Daken replied quietly. Kitty responded by giving Daken a quick kiss on the forehead. Then Laura and Kitty exchanged a long hug.

The passenger ramp lowered with a hiss of hydraulics as the mechanical odor of the Blackbird was suddenly overwhelmed by something more primeval. Daken and Laura exchanged a quick grin. Their noses were far more sensitive than those of ordinary people and the scent they were catching was quite familiar. It was the bare rock, pine woods, crisp open air, and distant snow of the mountains.

To Daken and Laura, it was the scent of home. They paused together at the top of the ramp, enjoying a moment that most other people couldn't completely understand.

Lockheed exited the Blackboard on his leather-like wings, zoomed up and over Daken and Laura, and then orbited above them. He urgently chattered out an incomprehensible message about responsibility, acting like adults, finding suitable mates, and making sure that they killed anybody who crossed them. He retreated back into the Blackbird after Kitty called him back.

Daken shouldered their bags and began walking down the ramp, but Laura saw who was waiting for them and couldn't restrain herself. With a happy yelp, she nimbly dodged past Daken, sprinting down the ramp and across the tarmac. Billy Watt immediately broke away from his mother and brother and dashed forward. He and Laura met halfway. Bright-eyed and holding each other by the shoulders, they began babbling so excitedly that their words turned into a blur that only they could understand.

Daken smiled to himself as he skirted past Billy and Laura. He would have a lot to say the next time Laura indignantly insisted that Billy wasn't her boyfriend. Teasing Laura required a fair amount of guts, but Daken was more than up to the task.

Bradley Watt was still standing next to his mother, with a broad smile on his face. Both Brad and Billy were dark haired and eyed. Perhaps unfortunately, they took more after their father than their mother. However, their wiry frames showed their mother's influence.
Mrs. Watt watched Daken as he approached. She was slender, blonde woman, aging gracefully through her middle years. Once, she'd been considered one of the great beauties of the county, and she still had the ability to turn a man's head. Her decision to take up with the rather plain and stolid Michael Watt had been a subject of some surprise and gossip when it happened. Actually, she was simply the kind of woman who preferred a good man to a pretty one.

Daken noted with interest that Mrs. Watt hadn't reacted in the slightest to the appearance of Lockheed.

"Oh, Daken, just look at you," Mrs. Watt said with a smile as she ran a hand through Daken's mohawk. "I turn my back for a just little while and now you're all grown up." Then she bent slightly and kissed Daken on almost the exact same spot where Kitty had kissed him goodbye.

Brad and Daken looked each other in the eye and hesitated for the briefest of moments as they tried to decide what to do.

Then they embraced.

It wasn't exactly a big surprise, but when Mr. Watt got home from work, Brad and Daken were sprawled on the living room floor, playing a video game. Mr. Watt didn't have a clue which game they were playing, but it seemed to involve guns, explosions, and zombies.

"Billy and Laura are in the den," Mrs. Watt told her husband. "They're catching up on their comic-books and arguing about the perfect lineup for the Avengers."

Mr. Watt considered that for a brief moment. "That would be Captain America, Ironman, Thor, Vision, Hawkeye, Scarlet Witch, and Black Widow."

After a pause to ruefully note that she actually understood what her husband was talking about, Mrs. Watt shook her head and said, "I'll let the three of you argue that out."

Daken and Bradley paused the game when they saw Mr. Watt. Daken jumped to his feet. The grin on his face was polite, but still genuine.

Mr. Watt offered his hand. Daken was of the age where that wasn't common and the gesture seemed to surprise him at first, but then he took Mr. Watt's hand in return. As they shook, a pleased expression lit up Daken's face - like most boys he enjoyed the first signs of being treated like a man. Mr. Watt tried not to smile at Daken's reaction.

Mr. Watt did notice that Daken had an unusually strong grip. Just like his father and - come to think about it - just like his mother.

"It's good to see you again, Dak," Mr. Watt said. And he meant it.

Mr. Watt had never been too sure how much his wife knew about the Howlett family - and had never asked. However, dinner was a fairly carnivorous affair, so she at least seemed to have a good idea how to feed Daken and Laura. Mr. Watt mentally filed that under, "she knows more than she's telling." That didn't really surprise him. Jackie Watt was an old-fashioned woman who had never been more than a few hundred miles from her tiny hometown, but sophistication and intelligence were two separate things, and his wife was actually very canny.

"Is it okay to go over to Aliza's place?" Brad asked once dinner had been cleared away and the dishes washed.
Mrs. Watt glanced at her husband.

"Sure, but make sure you stay in town," Mr. Watt replied after a brief pause. "I don't like those stories going around about missing people. There's probably nothing to it, but let's not take any chances."

Brad and Daken were the souls of innocence as they nodded in agreement.

For just a moment, Aliza almost forgot her worries.

"Daken!" she said happily as she pulled him into her arms.

Brad and Mrs. Horseman exchanged an amused glance. Brad ended it by rolling his eyes.

It occurred to Mrs. Horseman that the day was coming when that sort of thing would end with a kiss. Or perhaps begin with a kiss. The kids were growing up and that was something to keep in mind.

"I made lemonade," Mrs. Horseman said. "I'll get you some."

Aliza kept up her cheerful front until Mrs. Horseman left the room.

"I'm worried about Papi," Aliza told Daken hesitantly, searching his face as she spoke. Aliza was really unsure what to say. There were only two men in her life, and not that long ago they'd come very close to killing each other.

Daken nodded expressionlessly. "Have you heard anything from him?" he asked.

Aliza shook her head. "No, but today I ran into Mr. Wainwright down at the store. He lives as close to Papi as anyone. He said he would check. I warned him to be careful, but he seemed sure that he had to go look."

"Your mom doesn't seem too worried," Daken pointed out.

Aliza's frustration was obvious. "She says that Papi always keeps his distance. But this is different! The last year, he's been coming to town a lot more often. Mom was hoping he'd move in with us. And... and I just think something's wrong. I know it's just a feeling, but I'm scared. Something strange is going on."

"Okay," Daken agreed thoughtfully. Daken knew a lot of people who often had very accurate 'feelings', so he wasn't inclined to dismiss what Aliza was saying.

"We should wait until we hear from Mr. Wainwright," Brad suggested.

Aliza still looked worried, but she nodded in agreement.

Mrs. Horseman came back with glasses and a pitcher of lemonade. The children's conversation immediately switched over to what Aliza and Brad's schoolmates - all acquaintances of Daken's - were doing.

Mrs. Watt checked the house one more time before going to bed. All of the windows were closed and the doors were locked. It bothered Mrs. Watt that she had to worry about that. She'd lived her entire life unconcerned with locks. However, the recent disappearances had everyone on edge, even though they'd all happened well away from town.
So Mr. Watt was insisting on being careful. Being an old fashioned woman, Jessie Watt was given to ancient and traditional marriage practices. Whenever her husband spoke, she immediately acquiesced - and then did whatever she actually thought was right. In this case, she just happened to agree with her husband.

Brad and Daken were back from Aliza's place. They were now in Brad's room, talking quietly. As Mrs. Watt made sure the hallway window was closed, she overheard a snatch of what they were saying. The subject seemed to be Aliza.

Mrs. Watt decided the conversation was none of her business and quietly slipped away.

She found Billy and Laura curled up together on the living room couch, fast asleep. They were half-buried in a scatter of comics and graphic novels.

Laura's eyes opened, glinting green in the dim light. Mrs. Watt had long since noticed how oddly aware of their surroundings Daken and Laura could be, so she wasn't surprised.

For a long, frozen, moment, Mrs. Watt and Laura locked eyes.

Laura glanced at the still peacefully sleeping Billy, and then put a finger to her lips, warning Mrs. Watt to be quiet. Then she closed her eyes and nodded off again.

Mrs. Watt backed out of the room, turning off the light just before she left. In just a few years she would have to break up something like that. But Billy and Laura still had some time before the end of childhood innocence.

Upstairs, Brad was laughing about something. So was Daken, but he was quieter.

Mrs. Watt frowned to herself. There was a time when Daken had the louder and more ready laugh of the two boys, but that wasn't true any longer. That terrible fight with Hydra had changed Daken. Now there was something cold and empty in him. You could sometimes see it in his eyes. It wasn't visible unless you knew him well, and it hadn't yet taken him over, but it was there.

Mrs. Watt had seen that sort of thing before. When she was a little girl, her father had brought that same empty flatness back from a war. The first time Mrs. Watt met Logan and Ororo, she'd seen it in them. It took several years for it to even partially go away.

Mr. Watt was in bed when his wife entered their bedroom. However, he wasn't asleep. Instead, he was wearing his much-hated reading glasses and reviewing a survey report. Mr. Watt was a consulting geologist, but his career had reached the point where he read reports written by others, rather than walking the ground himself. He wasn't terribly happy about that, but it was the nature of things. Besides, that meant he now had a level of expertise that paid a lot more. And he did have a family to support.

"Is everyone settled down?" he asked as he put down the report.

"Brad and Daken are in Brad's room - they're chatting about something. Billy and Laura are on the couch in the living room. They're both asleep and I decided to let them be."

Mr. Watt shook his head. "It's funny how much Dak and Laura have grown up."

Mrs. Watt shrugged as she began undressing. "Brad and Billy grew up just as much. We just didn't notice it because we didn't see the changes all at once."
A smile crossed Mr. Watt's face as he watched his wife take off her clothes. He was the only person on the planet who knew that his supposedly staid and conservative wife preferred to sleep in the nude. Honestly, he didn't think it would be possible for him to get a good night's sleep anymore if her warm, bare, body wasn't next to him.

There were worse problems that a man could have.

Then Mr. Watt took a deep breath. It was finally time to ask that question that had been bothering him for so long.

"Jackie... just what do you know about the Howlett's?"

Mrs. Watt sat down in front of the mirrors and became running a brush through her long hair. Her eyes met her husband's in the mirror's reflection.

"James and Ororo are mutants," Mrs. Watt said. "Fairly famous ones, for that matter. I've read some of the super-hero stuff you collect - not all, but some. I know who they are."

"And their kids?" Mr. Watt persisted.

"They're mutants, just like their parents," Mrs. Watt replied with a shrug. "But before anything else, they're just kids."

"I worry about them," Mr. Watt added quietly.

"With good reason," Mrs. Watt sighed. "Daken, Raze, and Laura - and even little Kendall - have enemies. That includes enemies they've never met. People with a grudge against their father and mother. People who think they might be useful. People who just don't like the fact that they're different from everyone else."

Then Mrs. Watt hesitated before continuing. "They'll be dealing with that for as long as they live."

"Nothing but guns in the valley." Mr. Watt muttered.

"What?"

Mr. Watt shrugged, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. "Just something from a movie."
Jeremy Wainwright was worried. First that deputy, and then the little Horseman girl had asked him if he'd seen Mike Horseman. That put the thought into Mr. Wainwright's head. People were missing, and nobody in the entire county was more isolated than Mike Horseman.

Michael Horseman lived in an old cabin in the mountains north of Mr. Wainwright's ranch. Mr. Wainwright was one of the very few people who knew exactly where Michael lived. The cabin was located in some rough country and horseback was the best way to get there.

Mr. Horseman and Mr. Wainwright had never been friends. They were the last remnants of a distant and bitter time - a time when men both red and white saw each other as unyielding enemies. Their fathers had despised each other, and their grandfathers had waged merciless war on each other. That precluded the possibility of anything more than some barely admitted tolerable coexistence between Mr. Horseman and Mr. Wainwright. Yet over the years they had both developed a certain grudging respect for each other.

And besides, Mr. Wainwright had been strictly raised on the principles of an ancient code that, among other things, dictated that he should lend aid to his neighbors whenever it was needed.

The next morning, just after dawn, Mr. Wainwright saddled a horse. Then, after some thought, he decided to bring along some food and basic medicines. If Michael wasn't feeling well, he might need supplies.

After considering the matter further, he also decided to pack along his well-worn Bible and a short-handled shovel. After all, he just might need to dig a grave and say a few final words.

The rifle was just an ancient habit. Mr. Wainwright was mostly retired, but he still raised a few cattle. He might have to deal with any creatures he might come across that were a threat to them.

It was embarrassing as all hell, but it took three tries before Mr. Wainwright finally managed to mount his horse. The horse patiently endured his fumbling, although Mr. Wainwright suspected that he was more than a little amused by the struggle.

Eventually, they headed up the mountain.

It was good to be back on a horse again. Mr. Wainwright had been raised on horseback. He was in his early twenties when he finally learned how to drive - and in his thirties when he bought his first pickup truck. But Mr. Wainwright was grimly aware that in the last few years he had allowed his infirmities to take control of his life. He had become more and more sedentary. The parts of his property that he couldn't reach by truck had become strange to him.

Sometime after noon, Mr. Wainwright spotted the angular cliff that was the landmark for where Michael Horseman lived.

As he rode into the clearing where the cabin was located, Mr. Wainwright finally noticed the smell. It was bad enough to cause Mr. Wainwright's horse to shy.

Somewhere nearby, a fair-size creature was dead.

"Dammit," Mr. Wainwright grumbled as he carefully dismounted. His horse, upset by the presence
of death, was becoming more and more skittish.

It looked like he was going to need that shovel, Mr. Wainwright thought regretfully.

Hell. At his age, could he even dig a decently deep grave?

Then, still standing next to his horse, Mr. Wainwright saw something that made him freeze.

In front of the cabin, there was a scattered bundle of torn flesh and cloth. A small, dark cloud of flies was buzzing around it. Dried blood was splattered against the cabin's front door and stoop. A broken shotgun, its stock shattered and barrel bent, lay nearby.

Whatever had happened to Michael, it hadn't been a peaceful end.

Acting with unconscious precision, his eyes flickering across his surroundings as he tried to specify a threat, Mr. Wainwright slipped his Winchester out of its boot and worked the lever to chamber a cartridge.

From somewhere nearby, there was a deep, throbbing, rumble of a growl. Mr. Wainwright didn't bother to even try and control his horse as it suddenly bolted. There was no way he could get back on it in time, and he didn't dare let himself become too distracted. He didn't know what he was facing, but it sure as hell wasn't one of the mountain predators that he knew so well.

All of a sudden, the strange rumors Mr. Wainwright had heard over the years about Michael Horseman were beginning to make a lot more sense.

Jeremy Wainwright was a man of strong beliefs. For one thing, he believed that God chose the time and place of your death. In fact, it was chosen before you were even born. He also believed that when someone died, they were judged. And if they were judged to be just and righteous, they entered into a peaceful and golden after-life, rejoining those who had gone before.

Having buried most of his family, Jeremy Wainwright was more than a little tired of life and did not fear death. And although the thought of ending himself had occasionally crossed his mind, he had been taught at a very young age that it was a sin for a man to end his own existence. So instead of suicide, he waited patiently for the end, with an old man's certainty of what was coming.

Mr. Wainwright knew that the end was near, it was just a matter of time.

And now he knew that his time had just run out.

And yet, Mr. Wainwright felt strangely relieved. At least his end wouldn't be in some hospital bed... alone, forgotten, and hooked up to a bunch of soulless machines. This way, he would die like a man. On his feet and with a weapon in his hands.

Really, was that too much to ask?

"C'mon you bastard," Mr. Wainwright hissed, the stock of the rifle pressed against his cheek as he turned in a quick and careful circle, scanning for a target.

When the attack finally came, it was from multiple directions.

Aliza and Daken took a long, wandering, walk through town. They were mostly just saying hello to friends and acquaintances. Eventually, they walked to the edge of town and took a look at the school.
"I never thought I'd miss this place," Daken said with an amused shake of his head. Aliza smiled in response. Daken was actually pretty smart, but school simply wasn't his thing.

The school was mostly closed for summer, but there was a scattering of cars in the parking lot. Some special and make-up classes were being taught.

Aliza and Daken were sitting at one of the picnic tables outside of Donovan's Pit Stop - a garage and convenience store that was located just a few hundred yards down the road from the school. It was a favorite place for youngsters to score a snack. The guy working the counter had greeted Daken with a grin and a slap on the back.

Actually, the store wasn't too far from the place where Daken and Mr. Horseman had almost fought to the death. Daken saw no reason to say anything about that.

"Do you want to go inside?" Aliza asked as she inclined her head towards the school building. "We can say hello to the teachers."

Daken wondered at the fact that he actually found the idea appealing. "Okay," he said as he got to his feet.

He was several steps away when he realized that Aliza wasn't with him.

Looking back, Daken saw that Aliza was still sitting at the table. She seemed frozen in place and was staring at the mountains. And the look on her face was somewhere between frightened and angry and tragic.

"Someone just died," Aliza announced quietly.

The creatures fed on their prey. And when they were done, they shifted back to a near-human form.

The tallest of them looked disgustedly at the remains of their latest meal and then spat onto the ground. "I've had enough of stringy old men," he growled irritably.

The leader smiled at the big one, not bothering to hide his teeth. Killing the elderly hunter had been necessary - a gift from a triumphant present to a more desperate past. The old cowboy had simply been a target of opportunity. But the big one - the leader's tentative rival - was beginning to voice more-and-more contrary positions as he steadily worked up the nerve to make a challenge for control of the pack. A fight was just a matter of time, and the leader was steadily coming to the conclusion that perhaps they should just get on with it.

The other members of the pack shifted about uneasily. They sensed what was coming.

"You didn't taste it?" the eldest female said suddenly.

Everybody - everything - looked at her.

"They were different," the elder female continued. "There was something special in both of them - something most of the always-two-legged don't have."

Then she smiled coldly. Her face and hair was smeared with blood and her canine teeth were still elongated.

"And now we have taken it," she finished. "It is a part of us. We are stronger for it."
The leader and the big one considered her words. Then they both nodded and relaxed. The female had a knack for defusing the tension between them.

The leader looked at the scout. "We're heading down-slope, towards the town. Find the best path."

The scout - young, lean, and quick - nodded and trotted away from the cabin.

The elder female gave the leader a curious look.

"The old hunters usually have a pup or two," the leader explained. The female was the only member of the pack to whom he explained anything. "So there may be other hunters. If so, we'll kill them too. There aren't many of them left. They have to be exterminated - particularly the next generation."

The elder female nodded as she wondered at the emotions that were welling up inside of her. It just seemed incredible. From the day of her birth, she'd heard the long, howling, tales of regret and pain. There were fractured and ancient songs of how the hunters had come out of the icy north and immediately challenged her people for mastery of the warm land.

There were chanted lists of the dead. And once it had been sure that her people were losing. They were only generations away from extinction.

But after so many millennia of war, the long conflict was finally coming to an end. And the wolves-who-walk-like-men were going to win.

They were all crowded around the kitchen table, having lunch. Mr. Watt was at work. Mrs. Watt was over at a neighbors house.

"Nobody's heard from Mr. Wainwright," Brad said to the others. He'd just spent some time on his phone, checking in with the local network of youngsters.

Daken nodded stoically. Laura looked worried. Truth to tell, she liked the old man.

Billy spoke up next. "Mr. Wainwright is a long way from anywhere. And Mr. Horseman lives way up in the mountains. Getting back and forth would take some time. It'll be tomorrow before we hear anything."

Daken nodded again and then looked at Brad. "Your parents are giving us plenty of freedom during the day - as long as we stay in town. But we may need more time to ourselves. We need to start thinking about a way to get out of town."

Brad considered what Daken had said. "If we tell them we're spending the night at Joel Conner's place. Joel will cover for us."

"What about Joel's parents?" Laura added quickly.

"They're out of town for a few days," Brad replied. "Joel has the place to himself."

Laura shook her head. "Your mom will check on that," she declared flatly. "We need another idea."

Brad hesitated. Then he nodded. Laura was right.

They all knew that Laura was usually right.
Brad and Daken had made a lame excuse and were out somewhere. Laura suspected they were checking for poorly-watched vehicles. Uncle Remy had long ago shown Laura and Daken the basics of how to steal a car.

Their mother had not been happy about that and she'd said so - at length - to Uncle Remy. Logan was more ambivalent, making sure to tell his children that car-theft was something only to be done under extreme circumstances.

"Don't get hurt," Billy suddenly said.

Laura broke her pose - she was Billy's model for some sketch-work he was doing - and looked at Billy.

"Don't move," Billy scolded mildly.

"Make up your mind," Laura replied. "You can let me hold my pose or you can talk to me."

Billy considered that for several seconds. Then he sighed and put down his notebook.

They were on the porch of the Watt home. Laura was sitting on the wide wooden rail, with her back to a column. She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. Her long and slender legs were stretched out on the rail, with her bare feet crossed at the ankles.

Billy thought of his friend as 'pretty'. He wasn't old enough to understand the subtleties behind the word "beautiful". However, deep down inside he understood that some kind of change was coming - both with Laura and himself. And maybe that was why he wanted to preserve something of Laura the way she was.

"Don't get hurt," Billy repeated. He sounded very serious and there was now something in his voice and eyes that was older than his actual years.

"We aren't looking for a fight," Laura reassured him.

After a pause, Billy said, "Okay." Then he picked up his pad and pencil.

Laura went back into position - staring off into the distance. But now she was wondering if what she had just told Billy was actually true. She'd returned to town in order to see old friends and to keep an eye on her brother. She didn't think Daken wanted a fight, but she had to admit that he'd changed ever since the battle with Hydra.

Daken was less demonstrative. More quiet and analytical. He always seemed aware of everyone around him. And there were times when his eyes tracked other people in a way that really wasn't human. He seemed to be analyzing those around him and putting them into categories.

Laura knew that one of the categories was "threat". That was scary.

But there was another category - the even scarier one.

That one was "prey".
In his four-legged form, the scout glided downhill. He was like a ghost - soundless and almost impossible to see.

It was early evening and the scout was surveying the approaches to the town. The way was clear and he would eventually double-back and report. The rest of the pack were working their way down the mountain at a slower pace.

The decision to actually go into town was not the scout's to make. But there was a place that bothered him: a lonely cabin, well beyond the edge of town. It was redolent with the scent of hunting creatures. Whatever they were, the scout didn't recognize them. They were something that was human and yet not human at the same time.

Much like the pack itself, actually.

The scent was old. Whatever threat the not-quite-humans had presented was probably gone. However, the scout was serious about what he did. He decided he should check the cabin - just to make sure.

Hank-the-bear knew that something was wrong, but he couldn't identify it. There was something new in his world. There was a scent that reeked of aggression and danger. It wasn't strong, but every now and then a trace of it drifted down from the nearest mountain.

It wasn't a grizzly bear. It wasn't a mountain lion. And it wasn't a wolf - although that scent seemed closer than anything else.

Whatever it was, Hank didn't like it. And its presence triggered protective instincts within him. So he left the low ridge of heavily treed hills that was his current range and carefully drifted back to the cabin. Hank wasn't really lonely - his kind normally led solitary lives and were well adapted to that - but he did dimly miss those who had once lived at the cabin. Especially the cubs.

The youngsters had been gone for some time, but Hank had decided that he should make sure. There was something bad in the woods and the cubs might need him.

Lugging a basket full of laundry, Mrs. Watt walked down the hallway and past the living room. Then she paused and backed up several steps to get another look. Billy and Laura were in the room. Billy was playing a hand-held game, while Laura was on the Internet. She was looking at a page that was dominated by the badly drawn image of a gruesomely leering furred-and-fanged monster. It looked like a malformed bear or wolf, but was stalking through the woods on two legs.

Mrs. Watt walked into the den and put her laundry basket on the couch. "What are you looking at, Laura?" she asked.

Laura looked up over her shoulder at Mrs. Watt. "I'm doing some research about the missing people."

Mrs. Watt nodded, still looking at the web-page that Laura had found. The artwork on the page was garish and amateurish, but it was the sort of thing that might give a child nightmares.
Laura got out of her seat and walked over to the laundry basket. She began pulling clothes out, folding and arranging them neatly on the sofa.

"That page says a lot of people have gone missing in the big national parks - like Yellowstone and Glacier," Laura explained over her shoulder as she continued to sort and fold.

"This doesn't look like a site you should take too seriously," Mrs. Watt said as she used the mouse to scroll down. There was a lot of capitalized words and bolded text. Some of it was wild quotes from people who claimed to have seen strange creatures in the woods. Predictably, the writer was also sure that somebody in power was hiding the truth. Mrs. Watt was skeptical of the internet, and it looked as if nothing on that particular website was going to change her opinion.

"Yeah, he's nuts," Billy spoke up from where he was sitting. "But, he has some stuff from newspapers and magazines. People really are missing - hundreds in the big parks."

"That's hundreds of people over dozens of years," Laura clarified.

By now, Mrs. Watt was frowning thoughtfully as she examined a list of citations at the bottom of the web page. It was neatly formatted and linked, and looked a lot saner than the rest of the page. Clicking on a link, Mrs. Watt found herself looking at an archived article from the Washington Post. It had been written almost a decade ago and was dryly formal. As a result of an increase in disappearances among park visitors, the National Park Service was putting together a task-force to investigate search and rescue standards in its parks.

"Those parks are big places, Laura," Mrs. Watt said distractedly - she was still reading the story. "Yellowstone is bigger than some countries. And a lot of the people visiting them are city folk. There's all sorts of ways to get yourself in trouble if you don't know what you're doing."

"Yes, ma'am," Laura said respectfully as she finished folding a towel.

Ellie peeked out the window and laughed.

"Guess who's back?" she told her husband.

Ed frowned. Thanks to those missing person cases, he'd just finished a double-shift and he was dead tired. He wasn't in the mood for visitors.

Then he finally figured out Ellie's smile.

"Darn it," Ed grumbled as he carefully got to his feet. There was a tricky moment whenever Ed stood up when he had to make sure that his prosthetic leg was properly engaged and supporting his weight.

Ellie reached down and picked up their boy. Troy was pretty active now, but he was still a very quiet boy. So quiet that Ed was beginning to wonder if that was something to worry about.

The cabin had been a wedding gift from the Howlett's, and both Ed and Ellie were quite grateful. They had to stretch Ed's salary as much as possible. It also helped that the cabin was more centrally located in Ed's patrol area than the town.

But the cabin had come with one unusual feature - a resident bear. Ellie had grown up on a ranch and had no particular fear of black bears. She knew that they were shy and reticent creatures, far more inclined to run than fight. Only a sow with a cub was ever likely to be dangerous. But because of Troy, both she and Ed were uneasy about having Hank around the cabin. There had
been some yelling and thrown rocks involved in convincing Hank to stay away.

Out on the porch, Ed glared at Hank. The bear was resting on his belly next to the woodpile. He was motionless except for the occasional twitch of his ears. However, he wasn't asleep. It looked like he was waiting for something.

"I thought we'd come to an understanding," Ed said regretfully. Then he bent over and retrieved a stone from a pile he kept near the door. He never threw to actually hit Hank - just to bounce the rock off a nearby tree.

Hank suddenly growled. It was a surprisingly deep rumble that came from deep within his chest.

Ed quickly looked up.

But Hank wasn't looking at Ed. In fact, the bear had clambered upright and was peering off into the woods.

Something had Hank's attention. And Hank didn't like whatever it was.

Deep down inside, Ed suddenly went cold and wary. He carefully scanned the woodline for anything that was out of the ordinary, all the while calculating the precise number of steps required to get to the nearest loaded firearm.

Hank feel silent, but he was still up on his hind-legs and tensely alert. He seemed to be waiting for something.

A long, frozen, moment passed. Then a sparrow chirped tentatively. That seemed to break the ice as a dozen or so birds suddenly began to sing. Ed realized that he hadn't noticed until then the complete absence of bird noise.

"Ed?" Ellie asked. She was standing behind Ed with Troy still in her arms. She was obviously worried.

"Pack a bag," Ed said carefully, his eyes still on the trees. "We're going back to town. We'll be staying there for a while."

Ellie didn't say anything as she began backing towards the cabin door. She'd recognized the tone of Ed's voice. Something was worrying him. And it was serious.

Hank swung his massive head to look at the new people of the cabin.

"Hi," Troy said to Hank. However, Troy's lips didn't move and he didn't make a sound.

Hank seemed to consider that for a moment. Then he rumbled a return greeting before collapsing back to the ground.

"I have an idea," Laura said suddenly.

It was almost sundown and they were all gathered in the Watt backyard. Brad and Daken were splitting wood - mostly as a way of blowing off steam. The pile of split wood was already huge.

Everyone paused and looked at Laura. Despite her age, they knew that Laura was eerily smart.

"We could ask Deputy Barnett for help," Laura continued. "He knows about us. And he can go all over the county without anyone wondering why."
Everyone took a moment to consider what Laura had said.

"That could be really dangerous for him," Brad warned.

"He's in danger anyway," Aliza noted. "He's always out alone. This way, we'll be warning him."

Daken nodded and then buried the blade of the ax into a log. "We'll ask him tomorrow," he said.

The scout faded back from the cabin, leaving next to no trace. The cabin was inhabited by a couple and their child. Oddly enough, a male black bear was also in the area. That was strange because black bears tended to avoid people.

The near-human predators who had once lived there were long gone. The people who now lived in the cabin were ordinary humans - no threat - but the scout made a mental note of their presence. The pack might need them for food later on. Humans weren't the pack's primary prey, but isolated individuals and small groups were fair game.

His job was done and it was time to return to the others. And yet the scout hesitated. This happened every time he was separated from the others for any length of time.

What if he just kept on going? What would happen if he simply never returned?

The scout had vague memories of how to drive a car. His father was teaching him just before the scout changed, and the pack found him.

Would it be so hard to sneak into town, take a car, and then simply drive away?

But what would happen next? Would the pack follow him? Hunt him down? Or would they simply forget that he existed?

The scout closed his eyes and went very still.

It was so tempting. But what would he do after he left? Where would he go? He had nobody else. The pack killed his family when they took him. Since then, he had helped murder dozens of innocent people. The scout was a man-eater many times over.

He didn't really have a place in the civilized world. As far as ordinary folk were concerned, he was a long-forgotten name, and nothing more. He couldn't just reappear and try to live a normal life. He didn't really understand the world of ordinary people.

No, there was really no choice.

The scout began moving up-slope. It was time to go back to his own kind.

That was where he belonged.

The sun had set and Ed wasn't too happy about that. He had a rifle in one hand and a travel bag in the other as he walked Ellie and Troy to their vehicles. He was going to drive his patrol car into town. Ellie would take the pickup truck.

Troy was on his mother's hip, while Ellie carried some luggage in her other hand.

Hank-the-bear was still sprawled near the woodpile. In the dying light, he was just a dark lump near another dark lump.
Neither Ed or Ellie noticed how their son seemed to stare in the direction of the bear. And how the bear seemed to be looking back at their son. Troy was smiling and making inarticulate noises as Hank's ears twirled and his head shifted from side-to-side.

Aliza was in bed, staring up at the ceiling. There was too much going on in her head and sleep was elusive. Eventually, she got to her feet and slipped through the house and out the front door.

Out on the porch, Aliza sat down in a folding chair. It was late enough - early morning - that the town had gone silent. There were no lights visible in any of the nearby houses. A few widely-spaced streetlights shed a dim yellow light on the street.

It was cool, but not cold, and Aliza took a deep breath of night air. She wasn't wearing much - just an old-fashioned cotton night-dress that was a hand-me-down. It was superficially modest, with a hem that reached down to her ankles. However, it was also thin enough to become scandalous if Aliza allowed herself to be backlit. Her mother, very aware of the fact that Aliza was maturing into a woman, wouldn't have approved of her being outside wearing something like that.

A fantasy wandered in Aliza's mind. Daken was with her on the porch. They were sitting together, with their lips pressed together. And his hands were inside her minimal clothing, on her bare flesh...

Aliza let out an unladylike snort and shook the idea out of her head. She was being silly.

Suddenly, a man on horseback appeared down the street. He was advancing at a sedate pace, the hooves of his horse clopping slowly on the pavement. His path would take him past Aliza's home.

A man on a horse wasn't uncommon in Aliza's world. However, the hour was unusual and they were a little too far into town for that sort of thing to be normal.

Given how scantily she was clad, Aliza considered going back inside. But she decided against it. Actually, the more modest thing to do was to simply remain still. Her house was located between a pair of streetlights and the porch was dark. A passerby probably wouldn't notice her if she simply didn't move.

The horseman continued in Aliza's direction. Somehow, he seemed familiar, but Aliza couldn't get a clear look at his face. The darkness of the street worked both ways.

Aliza's plan to remain unseen failed. As the rider passed by, he somehow sensed Aliza's presence and glanced in her direction. A blush crept over Aliza's face. She could feel it on her shoulders and breasts. However, the man on the horse didn't seem to react to her femininity. Instead, he just nodded at Aliza, but said nothing.

Aliza nodded back.

The man and his horse continued on down the street, but Aliza quickly lost track of them.

Now she was staring out into the distance at the dark and vast flank of one of the mountains that loomed over the roofs and chimneys of her town. Aliza had sensed something, but it wasn't something she'd actually seen, heard, or smelled.

She knew something dangerous was out there.

And it was coming her way.
MEN LIKE WOLVES - DAY THREE, THE MORNING AND EARLY AFTERNOON

Moving slowly and carefully, Daken got to his feet. Brad was asleep on the floor right next to him and Daken didn't want to wake him. The boys were spending their nights on the floor of Brad's room, side-by-side in a pair of sleeping bags that they'd zipped together. They'd borrowed the sleeping bags from Mr. Watt's collection of camping equipment.

Sure-footed and soundless, Daken slipped through the Watt house and out onto the front porch. He knew someone was waiting for him out there.

Laura was already there, sitting in a rocking chair and swaying back and forth as she watched the sun clear the horizon. She was barefoot and dressed in her favorite sleeping outfit - a knee-length t-shirt emblazoned with an image of Captain Marvel. It was a gift from the lady whose recklessly grinning face was on the front of the shirt.

"Do you smell it?" Laura asked quietly, not bothering to look in Daken's direction.

When they were alone, Daken and Laura had a tendency to not look at each other when they spoke. After all, they always knew precisely where the other was located and didn't need the normal human conversational cues of facial expression and body language. It was a characteristic they shared with their father.

However, that behavior tended to bother other people, so when they were around others, Daken and Laura made a point of pretending that sight was their far-and-away most important sense. When they were alone, they didn't bother.

"Yeah," Daken said, tilting his head to better test the wind, "it wasn't there last night."

"It's a predator, but not a bear, wolf, or mountain lion," Laura mused thoughtfully.

"Maybe something that escaped from a zoo or a private collection?" Daken suggested as he sat on porch railing. Even as he spoke, it immediately occurred to Daken that he really didn't believe his own words.

Daken was pretty sure he knew what was out there.

"Maybe," Laura replied with a nod. "But..."

Laura paused.

"But?" Daken pressed.

"When the wind shifts, you can catch other scents. Similar but different," Laura continued slowly.

"There's more than one," Daken agreed.

"Can you tell where they are?" Laura asked.

Daken shook his head. "They're upwind. I can't get a good lock on them. But they're not in town. I figure they're uphill."

Laura nodded in agreement.
Daken did a long, thoughtful, pause before speaking again. "Something's up with Aliza. She's sensing things. She's pretty sure that the missing people are dead. That includes her great-grandfather and Mr. Wainwright."

Laura silently hoped that Aliza was wrong. She'd respected Mr. Horseman and she liked Mr. Wainwright.

"What are we going to do?" she eventually asked her brother.

Daken shrugged. "Keep everyone safe."

Laura nodded in agreement.

leader, the elder female, and the scout were standing on a wooded hill that overlooked the town. The rest of the pack was on the far slope, waiting tensely for a decision to be made.

"Two of them?" the leader said doubtfully as he sniffed the air. The hilltop was directly downwind from the town.

The scout shook his head. "Sometimes it seems like two. Sometimes like three."

"But they're young," the female added.

The leader's smile had many teeth. "That should make it easy."

"Me and Aliza are going to talk to Deputy Barnett," Daken said.

"I'm coming with you!" Laura replied quickly as she jumped to her feet.

"Then who's gonna keep an eye on the Brad, Billy, and Mr. and Mrs. Watt?" Daken asked with a raised eyebrow.

After a moment of thought, Laura grudgingly subsided. She knew that her brother had just out-maneuvered her, but she also knew that he was right.

Breakfast was done. Mr. Watt was at work. The kids were scattered around town.

Up in the attic, Mrs. Watt unlocked the old gun cabinet. A brief smile wandered across Mrs. Watt's face as the memory of her late father visited her. These had been his weapons. And it had been one of her father's characteristics that he never referred to a firearm as a "gun". He'd always called them "weapons".

Mrs. Watt took the semi-automatic shotgun from the case and checked it's action. Everything seemed fine. And the weapon was clean and lubricated.

Then Mrs. Watt loaded the shotgun. There was a corner in the pantry that was concealed from view by a set of shelves. She would tuck the shotgun behind there.

The old revolver would go into the bedroom that she and her husband shared. There was a high cabinet above the window. She would hide the pistol among the spare blankets she kept there.

That way, she would never be more than two rooms away from a weapon
Jackie Watt wasn't comfortable with the notion of loaded firearms in a house filled with children. But her children were well-trained in firearm safety. And she suspected that was also the case with Daken and Laura.

It was a compromise, but Mrs. Watt was increasingly worried about being without some means to defend herself and those she loved.

Ellie and Troy were back at the local boarding house. In fact, they were just across the hall from Ed's old place - in a room that Rogue and Kurt had once shared for several days. Meanwhile, Ed was sitting at a tiny desk in the station of the volunteer fire department. Ed was using the station-house phone to check in with the Sheriff's office and his contacts with state search-and-rescue.

When he was finished, Ed put the phone down, staring at it thoughtfully. Ernie Langtry - the oldest of the fire-fighters and the closest thing they had to a fire-chief - put a cup of coffee on the desk in front of Ed. Then he sat down in a nearby wooden chair.

"How's it looking?" Ernie asked calmly.

"Still no sign of any of the missing people," Ed said after a long and deliberate sip from his cup. The state and county search-and-rescue services were combing the local wilderness. Ed and some other deputies had spent the last few days helping them. The search was having no results and everyone knew what that meant. With every passing hour, the chance that any of the missing would turn up alive was steadily decreasing.

Ernie sighed. "People do vanish... that's just the way it works up in these mountains. There's a lot of ways to get hurt here - and if you're on your own you might not be able to make it back to safety. But I can't remember the last time we had three people missing all at once."

Ed glanced at Ernie. "Four people," he said.

Ernie put his cup down and looked closely at Ed.

"One of the search-and-rescue guys is gone," Ed continued. "His team said he went down a ravine to take a piss - and never came back. They tried tracking him, but couldn't find a trail. And the search dogs are still acting skittish. They won't go far from their handlers."

Both men were silent for a long moment, lost in their thoughts.

Then Ernie pursed his lips and glanced at the holster on Ed's hip. "You know, I gave up hunting a few years back. I guess I figured I was getting too old for it. It's been a while since I carried a rifle in my truck, but I think I'll start again."

Ed nodded.

"It was a good idea to bring Ellie and Troy back to town," Ernie finished.

Ed nodded again.

Ellie and Laura bumped into one another on the street, not too far from the diner where Ellie used to work. They were delighted to see each other.

"This is Troy," Ellie said, making a gesture with the baby she was carrying. Then she crouched so Laura could get a better look.
A big grin on her face, Laura leaned forward so she could see Ellie's boy.

Troy didn't hesitate. He reached out with one hand and touched Laura's nose. Laura let out a chuckle as she poked Troy's curious little hand with one of her fingers. Troy instantly wrapped his hand around Laura's finger. He had a surprisingly firm grip.

"He likes you!" Ellie told Laura. Ellie was obviously pleased.

Laura nodded her head, but then she looked deep into Troy's blue eyes... and thought she saw something. Something that was difficult to explain. It was a kind of awareness that was odd for Troy's age.

Laura's smile didn't waver, but it suddenly occurred to her that there was something about Troy that she might have to discuss with her extended family. Particularly with Aunt Jean.

Troy gurgled as he cheerfully yanked at Laura's hand.

Aliza and Daken caught up with Ed as he was leaving the fire station.

They'd decided that Aliza should do the talking. So Aliza had to say something, but she didn't have the slightest idea what it should be. If she just told Ed that her Papi and Mr. Wainwright were dead, then Ed might decide to investigate by himself. And Aliza knew that would be horribly dangerous.

It had occurred to Aliza that by mentioning her great-grandfather to Mr. Wainwright, she'd accidentally handed the old rancher a death sentence. She hadn't slept too well the night before. More and more, she just wanted to walk away and forget this horrible mess.

But people were dying and something had to be done.

Ed saw the look in Aliza's eyes and immediately became worried.

"What's wrong?" Ed asked. He was standing on the sidewalk, the half-open door to his patrol-car in one hand. He didn't like what he was seeing in Aliza and Daken's faces. Aliza was obviously troubled - and scared. And Daken had a look on his face that was far too grimly determined for a boy his age.

"Can you give Daken and me a ride to Mr. Wainwright's place?" Aliza asked suddenly. Then she stopped, more than a little surprised at what she'd just said. The words had just sort of popped out of her mouth.

Ed's first instinct was to say no, but he didn't respond immediately. Instead, he took a moment to consider who he was talking to.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?" Ed demanded.

Aliza and Daken gave each other a sideways glance.

"Look..." Ed continued in obvious exasperation. "Just forget that I'm the local county-mountie and tell me what's going on. Remember, I used to be with SHIELD. I was here when Hydra attacked. I know how really weird things can get. Why do you want to go to Mr. Wainwright's place?"

"I think he's dead," Aliza answered sadly. "I hope I'm wrong."

Ed absorbed that. Jeremy Wainwright had once saved his life.
"What do you think happened to him?" Ed asked slowly.

"You would call them werewolves," Aliza replied - this time without hesitation. They needed Ed on their side and she was sure that the truth was the best way to make that to happen.

"There's a pack of them," Daken added, "and we think they got Mr. Wainwright - and Mr. Horseman. But we need to make sure."

Ed stared at the two youngsters for a long moment. Now he was thinking about that strange scene back at his cabin. It was the only time since Ed had moved into the area that he'd been frightened of the woods.

"If what you're saying is true, then I sure as blazes shouldn't be taking you out of town," he finally responded.

Aliza's eyes met Ed's. "If you go out to Mr. Wainwright's place alone - and those monsters are there - you'll never come back. But if we're with you, we'll know that we should turn back before we get out of the car."

Ed glanced at Daken. The boy nodded silently.

Ed made his decision.

"I can't be seen driving you two out of town," Ed said. "Meet me at the old water-tower in fifteen minutes."

The scout had returned from the edge of town.

"Some of them are leaving," he told the leader.

The leader nodded. He and the female were still on the hilltop.

"Should we attack now?" asked the big one. He had followed the scout up the hill. "They're split up. We can pick off the loner."

For once, the big one wasn't posturing. Instead, he was making a useful and reasonable suggestion. The leader wished that side of him was visible more often. After all, if the coming fight with the big one didn't go as the leader planned, the big one might be running the pack soon.

"Not in daylight," the leader responded regretfully. "Not with so many witnesses."

There was a low rumble of assent from the rest of the pack. Even the big one nodded in agreement. The pack was always careful to cover their tracks. There were so many of those who only walked on two legs. If they ever became aware of exactly what they shared their world with, it would be disastrous.

Nobody was in sight when Ed picked up Aliza and Daken.

Actually, Ed wasn't too worried about being spotted. He knew what Daken was. And if Daken was sure they were unobserved, then that was more than good enough for Ed.

"I hope this isn't a mistake," Ed said after the kids buckled up and he swung back onto the road.

"We better hurry up," Daken said quietly. He was studying the sky.
"Why?" Ed asked uneasily.

Daken glanced at Ed. "It might be a good idea to be back in town before sundown."
MEN LIKE WOLVES - DAY THREE, LATE AFTERNOON

As the pavement gave way to gravel, Ed glanced side-ways towards Aliza and Daken. The kids hadn't said a word since getting in Ed's car. Ed wasn't surprised to see that they were holding hands. However, there was nothing amorous about that gesture.

"Where's Laura?" Ed finally said.

"Back at the Watt place," Daken answered. "She's sticking close to the house." Daken's eyes didn't move from the road as he spoke.

Ed considered what Daken had just said. "She's keeping an eye on the Watts?"

"She's keeping an eye on the whole town," Aliza said quietly.

Daken nodded. Ed wasn't sure what to say.

"I don't want her to get into a fight," Dakan said suddenly.

Ed considered that. "Me neither," he eventually said.

But Dakan couldn't quite let it go. He obviously had something say, but wasn't sure how to say it.

"Raze and me... we killed that Hydra cyborg guy," Daken said. "We went... we..."

Then Dakan stopped for a long moment, his eyes locked on a distant mountain.

"We tore him apart," Daken said almost thoughtfully. "We were hurt. Raze's arm was half shot-off. The cyborg guy was hurt. We all had our claws out and we were cutting each other to pieces. Everything was just crazy. Nothing mattered except killing the cyborg guy. Me and Raze were snarling, there was blood all over us, and we worked together as a team. It was like we'd done it... killing... before. But we'd only known each other for a few days."

"We tore him apart," Daken repeated. "And if Aunt Kitty hadn't been there to stop us, maybe Raze and me might have gone on and on and on..."

Daken was shaking. Aliza was gripping his hand so hard that the bones were grinding together.

"I don't want that for Laura," Daken finished, his voice desperate and wretched.

Laura carefully put a serving bowl on the counter. She and Mrs. Watt were in the kitchen, finishing up the last details for dinner.

"You've hidden guns around the house," Laura said to Mrs. Watt. The way she spoke was almost conversational.

Laura had caught the scent of gun oil and tracked the weapons to where Mrs. Watt had put them. However, she hadn't touched them - she simply noted where they were located.

Mrs. Watt finished scraping diced strawberries from the cutting board into the serving bowl before replying.
"Yes, I have," she said to Laura.

Laura noticed that Mrs. Watt didn't ask how she knew about the guns. Neither she nor Daken was really sure what Mrs. Watt knew about them. She certainly didn't treat them as anything other than just another pair of neighborhood kids. But at the same time, she didn't seem to have a problem with accepting things about them that were decidedly out of the ordinary.

"And I expect you and Daken to leave those guns alone," Mrs. Watt added quite firmly, her attention now on a bubbling pot of fruit glaze.

"Yes, ma'am," Laura replied solemnly as she took the cutting board and began rinsing it off in the sink.

Mrs. Watt wiped her hands with a towel and then glanced at Laura. "Do you and Daken know how to shoot?"

"Yes, ma'am," Laura repeated.

"What kinds of guns have you fired?" Mrs. Watt asked curiously.

Laura thought for a moment before answering. "Handguns - both revolvers and semi-automatics - carbines, submachine guns, bolt-action and semi-automatic rifles, assault rifles, laser rifles, plasma projectors, crew-served machine guns, mortars, rocket launchers, and light artillery. Oh... and an old-fashioned cannon, the kind you load from the front - like in the pirate movies. Uncle Kurt helped us with that. He had us dress and talk like pirates. That was really fun!"

Mrs. Watt didn't even blink. Instead, she just nodded approvingly. "Your family always did strike me as having a good grasp of the concept of self-defense."

Laura really wasn't sure how she should respond to that. So instead she got on her tiptoes and turned on the faucet for the kitchen sink. Then she added some dish soap and began scrubbing dishes.

Mrs. Watt smiled, reached over, and smoothed down Laura's hair. The Lord had seen fit to give her and her husband two fine and healthy sons before she lost her ability to have more children. So her secret hope for a daughter was nothing more just a dream. But when Laura was around, there were times...

And that was a thought that would do no good, so Mrs. Watt banished it.

Gravel crunching under his tires, Ed pulled his patrol car into the clearing located between Mr. Wainwright's house and barn. Then Ed took his shotgun out of its dashboard rack, pointed the muzzle out the open drivers-side window, and chambered a shell. However, he didn't turn off the patrol car's engine and he didn't get out. Instead, he looked expectantly at Daken.

Daken had already rolled down his window. For a long moment, he seemed to listen carefully. Then he took a deep breath. After holding it in for several heartbeats, he slowly let it out.

"It's okay," Daken said, "but I don't think Mr. Wainwright is here."

Ed nodded and got out of the car. However, he left the engine running and the door hanging open.

Aliza and Daken also got out.
"Stay near me," Ed said. He didn't look at Aliza and Daken as he spoke. Instead, he was scanning their surroundings.

"Yes, sir," both children replied simultaneously.

A few seconds passed without anything happening.

Daken frowned. Then he let out a sharp whistle.

Still wearing his saddle, Mr. Wainwright's horse wandered out from behind the barn. He seemed pleased to see somebody.

Ed looked at the horse. Then he glanced at Aliza and Daken.

"Watch my back," he said tensely.

Daken nodded. Actually, he and Aliza were already scrutinizing the avenues of approach that Ed didn't have covered.

Approaching the horse, Ed took its bridle in one hand. Ed noted the full saddle bags on the horse, a short-handled shovel tied off to one side - and the empty rifle boot.

He also noticed a long, five-clawed rake mark on the horse's haunch. Blood - now dry - had drizzled from the wound. Something had slashed at the horse, and only barely missed taking a huge chunk out of the animal. Ed put a hand against the wound to gauge the size of the injury. The spread of the claw marks was quite wide, larger than Ed's splayed open hand. The thing that had clawed at the horse had a paw the size of a bear, but a bear's claws didn't leave a clearly separate thumb mark.

"Damn," Ed whispered to himself. Then, he awkwardly began stripping the saddle and tack off the horse. He didn't have the means to get the horse back to town, and Ed was pretty sure that the only advantage the horse had over whatever was haunting the region was raw speed. If the horse was to survive, he would need every edge that Ed could give it.

"Let me," Aliza said as she took over the job of relieving the horse of his equippage. The horse gently nuzzled her as she freed him.

Daken was still and steady, staring at nothing in particular as his other senses maintained a picture of the environment. It was a way of perceiving the world that no human clearly understood.

"What do you think?" Ed asked Daken.

"Mr. Wainwright was on that horse, but he's not anywhere around here," Daken said. When he glanced at Ed, his dark eyes were serious. Daken knew what he was saying.

"We need to get out of here," Aliza said evenly as she threw the saddle over a porch rail.

Ed shook his head. "Before we go, we should check the buildings."

"Nobody's here," Daken said flatly.

It occurred to Daken that Laura was going to be crushed - she'd liked Mr. Wainwright.

"Go back into town," the leader told the scout. "Find the hunters and wait. We'll follow your trail as soon as the sun goes down."
The scout didn't bother to nod or say anything in response - it wasn't as if disagreement was an option. He simply turned and began loping downhill.

As the scout approached the town, he adjusted his form to one that was more fully human. Then, using his nose, he tracked down a pair of worn-out jeans that were hanging from an unwatched clothesline. The always-two-legs tended to spot nudity very quickly, but a half-clothed youngster was more likely to be dismissed if noticed.

He hadn't bathed since a several-days-ago romp in a creek, and his hair was long and tangled. He carefully tied it back into a ponytail, using a strip torn from a wind-whipped plastic bag.

All of that was good, but the scout still preferred to remain unspotted. There was a trick his kind knew that made it possible to pass unseen through a small town, or even along the fringes of a city. His senses were far superior to the always-two-legs. He would move slowly and carefully, avoiding crowds and waiting for those moments when he could simply walk between potential observers. Actually, the biggest problem was dogs. They always barked furiously as soon as they caught the scent of the scout's kind. He was always forced to put a great deal of effort into avoiding them while keeping the wind from carrying his scent.

Every now and then, the scout would leave a sign - a scratch mark in a tree or wall that was as much a scent trace as a visible sign - that marked his trail. That would make it easier for the pack to follow him.

Ed and the two youngsters quickly checked the house and the barn. There was no sign of Mr. Wainwright, or anyone else, at his ranch.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Aliza said. It wasn't really a question.

Daken didn't say anything, but the still and serious expression on his face made his opinion clear.

"We don't know that for sure," Ed replied slowly, but he didn't really believe what he was saying.

"I told Mr. Wainwright that I was worried about Papi," Eliza told Ed miserably. "He must have decided to check on him. I got Mr. Wainwright killed."

Ed shifted his shotgun awkwardly so he could put a hand on Aliza's shoulder.

"We don't know that," Ed repeated. "And even if that happened, you can't be blamed for what someone else did. Besides, I talked to Mr. Wainwright, too."

Aliza seemed to take no comfort from what Ed was saying.

Daken took Aliza's hand in his. "It wasn't your fault," he told her quietly.

Aliza wiped her eyes but still didn't say anything.

"Let's get back to town," Ed continued. His eyes were still carefully searching the area around them. Yes, he knew Daken's senses were better, but Ed couldn't help himself.

Daken and Aliza gave the horse a concerned look.

"I'll ride him down the trail," Aliza told the others.

Ed's eyes narrowed. Daken shifted his feet uneasily.
"I can ride," Daken told Aliza.

Aliza shook her head. "I'm better than you. I'll keep just ahead of the car until we're down on the flat. You two can cover me if anything goes wrong. Once we're clear, I'll let the horse go and get in the car with you guys."

Daken and Ed exchanged a long look.

"We aren't leaving Mr. Wainwright's horse," Aliza said very firmly.

Daken and Ed got back in the car. Aliza hopped on the back of the horse. She'd have to ride bareback, but she'd done that before.

Hank-the-bear did not like being this close to a town. Towns had people and people should be avoided. They tended to get dangerously angry at bears for doing bear things.

But he kept picking up strange scents - sometimes a single source, sometimes multiple sources. And they were a more intense and definite version of that strange scent he'd been picking up for days.

His instincts told him he should flee. He should leave the area, find a new range, and never come back.

But there were other scents also on the wind. And he knew them.

And besides, a voice in his head was keeping him there.

Hank sighed. It looked like there was a new cub that he had to keep an eye on.

From a perch in a tree that overlooked the backyard of the Watt home, the scout watched carefully. He'd found the locus of scents that were the hunters. At least one of them was in the house. It smelled like a young girl, and it reminded him of that old cabin located outside of town - there was the scent of things that were strange and alien predators, both human and yet not-human.

Once again, it occurred to the scout that such a description could easily also apply to his pack.

These were strange days.

Inside the house, Laura lifted her head upwards and sniffed carefully. Then her eyes narrowed.

They had a visitor.

Laura took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and emptied her mind. Her non-visual senses immediately went to work - creating a mental image of her surroundings. In many ways, it was more accurate than anything mere sight could have provided.

Mrs. Watt was still in the house. She was in the dining room, setting the table for dinner.

Mr. Watt wasn't home yet. If he followed his usual schedule, he'd probably arrive within a half-hour.

Billy and Brad also weren't at home. Brad was several houses down the block, mowing the lawn for an elderly neighbor lady. Billy had gone to the library but would be back soon.
Daken was off with Eliza and Ed - and Laura was still pissed about that.

The guns were still located where Mrs. Watt had put them. The handgun that Mr. Watt kept hidden in his study - Mrs. Watt and the boys didn't know about it - was still locked away in a concealed drawer.

The intruder was outside, perched in a tree that overlooked the backyard. It wasn't completely human, but Laura knew it was male and guessed he was young. For him to come this deep into town suggested that he had a mission.

He was focused on the Watt home. And he was far too close to Mrs. Watt. Laura couldn't allow that.

Walking over to the kitchen door, Laura opened it and stepped out onto the back porch.

Then she glanced up at the lowest bough of a densely-leafed tree. It was overlooking the yard and loomed over the backyard fence. And it wasn't really hiding the intruder - at least, not to someone like Laura.

Laura's eyes met those of the predator.

"Go away," Laura ordered.
"Go away," the girl on the porch said. She was looking right up at the scout, and she had a very determined look on her face.

At first, the scout didn't react. He was already unmoving, so there was no need to freeze. And he certainly wasn't going to leave.

Frankly, he didn't quite know what to do.

The girl who'd spotted him didn't look like a threat, but she had that peculiar scent-pattern he'd been tracking. She wasn't prey. She was a predator, but she was a predator both similar and very different from the scout and his kind.

The situation was all wrong. The scout simply didn't get spotted, and such a thing was new and strange to him. If the young predator had senses that good then, despite her appearance, she had to be taken seriously.

Also, she wasn't alone in the house. An older always-two-legs - a female - was present. However, the house was also filled with the mixed scents of other prey... and another predator much like the girl.

And there was something else. A third... thing... but it wasn't like the other two. However, the scout knew that scent-taste. It was a part of one of the old men he'd recently helped kill.

It was all deeply confusing.

Everyone else in the nearby area - a dozen or so people of all genders and ages scattered over most of two blocks - were ordinary human prey. They were no threat as long as the scout was careful and unobtrusive. Humans were only dangerous when they were in numbers, armed, and aware of the pack. The pack existed and thrived on its ability to strike when it chose and retreat when necessary.

The sun was edging towards the horizon. Soon, the rest of the pack would arrive. The scout simply couldn't allow them to walk into a situation in which they wouldn't have the advantage of surprise. In addition to the threat of these new and strange predators, if the human prey were alerted, they would have time to organize and arm.

The scout jumped down from his perch, effortlessly clearing the back fence. He landed on the back lawn with easy grace and then fearlessly met Laura's gaze.

Green eyes, the scout thought to himself. She had green eyes. That didn't exist among his kind.

There was no choice. He would have to kill the girl.

The creature facing Laura looked like a teenage boy, but Laura knew he wasn't human. He was something else.

He was about five and a half foot tall, with tangled dark hair, orange-brown eyes, and deeply tanned skin. He was wearing a tattered pair of blue jeans but was otherwise barefoot and bare-chested. He was definitely older than Laura, and even older than Daken. And for his age, he had
startlingly well-developed musculature.

At a distance, he would appear ordinary. However, up close there were some differences. His ears were slightly elongated. His eyes were wider apart than normal. His lower jaw seemed thicker than usual. No one of those features was too odd, but the combination was unusual.

If Laura had to guess, she'd say that he was about fifteen years old.

As Laura watched, the form of the boy who was facing her transformed. Hair sprouted all over his body and then turned to fur. His lower face shifted into a muzzle. His ears drifted up along an elongating skull. His arms and legs changed shape as his posture increasingly slouched forward.

It happened very quickly. Some might call the now four-legged creature that stepped out of the boy's ragged jeans a wolf, but just as the creature's mostly-human form had some differences from a normal human, his wolffish form was different from an ordinary wolf. It was blockier and wider and there was a kind of awareness in its eyes that went beyond the canine.

For a split second, Laura wondered if the boy facing her was like her Aunt Rahne. But the scent was wrong. Whatever she was facing, it wasn't a mutant.

Laura knew that a fight was coming and that it would probably be to the death. And she had no intention of dying. She wouldn't - couldn't - leave Mrs. Watt vulnerable.

It was then Laura realized that she'd finally come to that place her brothers had already found. Her options had narrowed until the only thing left wasn't just violence, it was killing.

Laura's brothers changed after they killed a HYDRA agent. They changed forever, a part of them irretrievably becoming grimmer and harder. However, they tried to act as if it hadn't happened. Everyone else also pretended - Mom, Dad, Aunt Kitty, Uncle Hank, Uncle Kurt, Aunt Marie, and the rest of their family and friends. They all tried to pretend that everything was the same as before.

But it wasn't.

It occurred to Laura that whatever happened next, she would soon be gone. She'd either be dead or have become something else.

Laura whispered something to herself and stepped down from the porch. Her claws were out.

The girl had said something so softly that even the scout - with his remarkable hearing - wasn't exactly sure what she'd said.

Something about her mother and father? Was it an apology of some kind?

The scout hesitated as flickers of memory echoed through him. He remembered screaming for his parents as they died.

Then the girl extended her claws with a clicking sound. They were long and... strange. Everything about the girl's body language suggested that she knew how to use them.

The scout didn't hesitate. With a guttural snarl, he leaned forward, ready to leap.

There was a simultaneous rustle and a sound. It wasn't the girl...

Too late, the scout realized that he hadn't been keeping watch on the back door.
The shotgun blast caught the scout square in the fore-quarters and smashed him backward in a wild howl of pain.

Both Laura and the scout had made a mistake born of inexperience. They were concentrating so hard on each other that neither sensed Mrs. Watt - armed with her father's shotgun - as she appeared in the back-door. Mrs. Watt had heard Laura warn someone to go away and hadn't liked that.

Mrs. Watt took one look at a wolf-like thing about to lunge for Laura and didn't hesitate. She immediately shot the creature right through the screen door. And back in her school days, Mrs. Watt had been a skeet-shooting champion.

Mrs. Watt kicked open what was left of the screen door. Laura immediately backed up the stairs until her back was pressed up against Mrs. Watt's legs and lower body. Laura was facing the scout and her claws were still out as she kept herself between the scout and Mrs. Watt. For her part, Mrs. Watt automatically put a hand on Laura's shoulder.

Incredibly, the scout somehow scrambled back to his feet. He was spewing blood from his muzzle and chest. Mrs. Watt gasped in surprise and tried to aim her shotgun with one hand while maintaining a tight grip on Laura.

The scout staggered forward, his eyes locked on Laura and Mrs. Watt. He just needed a few seconds. And the predator-girl was standing in front of the always-two-legs with the gun. The scout understood that the predator-girl was refusing to flee because she was defending the woman. He might be able to kill them both with a single rapid attack.

Without leaving her place in front of Mrs. Watt, Laura extended the claw in her right foot and lashed out with it. Only lightning reflexes prevented the scout from having his chest split open. As it was, both of the scout's forelegs and one shoulder were raked to the bone. A streak of blood jetted across the porch, partially splashing over Laura.

Mrs. Watt yanked Laura back up the stairs and wildly fired her shotgun once again, using one hand. Not surprisingly, even at that close range, she missed.

The scout snarled in pain and frustration and bounded off to the side. He hit the fence in a single leap - he wasn't quite able to clear it - but then quickly scrambled his way over the top.

Still holding onto Laura, Mrs. Watt awkwardly tried to line up another shot, but there was no time.

Then the backyard was empty. Blood-trail stained the grass and trailed across the back porch. There was a large smear of blood on the wooden slats of the fence.

Trying to keep the entire backyard in her field of view, Mrs. Watt urgently pulled Laura back into the kitchen. Laura kicked the backdoor shut behind them and Mrs. Watt hastily locked it.

"Put those away," Mrs. Watt told Laura, nodding at Laura's claws. Her voice was distracted as she pulled a box of shotgun shells out of a kitchen drawer and reloaded her weapon. Her hands were shaking as she peered through the kitchen window.

Her eyes locked on Mrs. Watt's face, Laura wordlessly retracted her claws. Mrs. Watt had never seen them before, yet she was reacting as if they were nothing remarkable.

Laura suddenly hugged Mrs. Watt around her legs. "Thank you," she said to Mrs. Watt.
Mrs. Watt, still looking out the window, carefully stroked Laura's hair. "It's alright, sweetie," Mrs. Watt whispered.

Meanwhile, somebody had begun pounding furiously at the front door.

Ignoring the pounding, Mrs. Watt put the shotgun down on the kitchen counter, yanked the phone off the wall, and began dialing.

After a few rings, there was a muffled and tired-sounding answer.

Ed pulled up to the Watt home and parked on the street. There were more than a few people clustered around the house. And men with weapons were prowling the neighborhood. Some nervous-looking dogs were accompanying the armed men.

As Ed got out of the car, Daken and Eliza exchanged a long look. Then they also got out.

Ed had his shotgun in his hands.

"Ed..." an older woman said in obvious relief. She was on the front porch of the Watt home. "Glad you're here."

Daken was sniffing carefully. He didn't look happy. Aliza had put herself behind Daken, facing outwards so they were back-to-back. Her eyes were roaming the nearby area.

"What happened?" Ed asked. He wasn't looking at the woman. Like Aliza, his eyes were flicking across the avenues of approach.

"A wolf got into the Watt's back yard," the woman answered anxiously. "It almost picked off the Howlett girl, but Jackie shot it first. It got away."

Daken and Aliza dashed into the house.

Tires squealed as a car rounded the corner, going well over the speed limit. Ed recognized Mr. Watt's car.

Being careful not to get into the street, Ed waved at Mr. Watt to slow down.

Still in four-legs form and whining in pain, the scout stumbled back to the woods. As soon as he was undercover, he collapsed.

This was bad, but something almost as bad had happened to him before. There was that poacher up north. He'd fought hard, putting a pair of .30-06 bullets right through the scout before he was overwhelmed.

As he lay in a pile of old pine needles, the scout could feel his body dealing with his injuries. The first of the shot pellets began popping out of his body.

Breathing in short, painful, gasps, the scout closed his eyes and waited.

He would heal. It was just a matter of time.
"A wolf?" the sheriff's voice said over the radio. There was enough distance between Ed and the Sheriff that the reception wasn't very good. Communication in that part of the world wasn't as effortless as elsewhere.

"That's what Mrs. Watt said she saw," Ed replied. He had to force himself not to say "over" when he finished speaking. The Sheriff's department wasn't as formal about that sort of thing as SHIELD or the U.S. Army.

"Jackie Watt isn't the kind of person who'd mistake a big dog for a wolf..." the Sheriff said thoughtfully. He was actually talking to himself, not Ed.

"No, she's not, sir," Ed agreed. "And she definitely hit it with a shotgun. There's blood trail leading out of town. There's also some pretty clear paw-prints that are big and really well-spaced. Jim Meyers - the vet - took one look them and said it had to be a wolf."

Ed could almost see the sheriff shaking his head. "I've never heard of wolves attacking people - that's supposed to be a myth. But... it's the only explanation we've got for what's been going on. I'll send everyone I can rustle up. How many of the local men have decided to go hunting?"

The Sheriff's last sentence had a resigned sound to it.

"I told everyone to stay home and protect the town and their families," Ed said, "That's mostly working, but I've heard that three men headed into the woods."

"Damnit, they'll most likely end up shooting each other," the Sheriff growled.

"It was the Bassey brothers and Earl Hutchinson," Ed added dryly. The Bassey's were professional hunting guides. Earl Hutchinson was a life-long hunter who'd been a Marine sniper in his younger days. Under any other circumstances, Ed wouldn't have been worried about them.

Looking at the last sliver of the orange-red setting sun, Ed found himself praying that those three men would make it back alive.

With a skill otherwise almost lost to the modern world, the Bassey brothers and Earl Hutchinson moved like ghosts through the woods. The three men had been hunting and shooting since they could walk. As far as ordinary human woodsmen went, you could find their equal in the world, but there weren't many who were their better.

They followed the blood trail of the wolf until they located the spot where it had finally paused.

"The hell?" Simon Bassey - the younger of the two brothers - breathed softly. The blood trail had led them there. You could see where the animal had holed up in a particular tight patch of underbrush that was flanked by tall rocks. The animal's blood loss was massive. As they tracked the beast, all three of the hunters became steadily more-and-more sure they would find the wolf bled-out and dead. It had already agreed that the pelt belonged to Mrs. Watt.
But the wolf was nowhere to be seen.

"Something's wrong," Charlie Bassey said very quietly. He was crouched next to the blood-soaked underbrush with his rifle across his knees. With one hand, he plucked something from the forest floor. Then he held it up, showing it to the others.

It was a loose piece of deformed buckshot.

Simon shook his head in puzzlement. Had the wolf worked the buckshot loose with his teeth?

Meanwhile, Earl Hutchinson was carefully keeping watch around them. Charlie was right - something was dead wrong.

Earl and the Bassey's were very good hunters, but there was a key difference between Earl and the two brothers. The brothers had always hunted animals. Back when he was a Marine, Earl had hunted men. That was why Simon and Charlie were missing something that Earl had noticed. The location where the wolf had holed up was well-concealed, but it also had an excellent view of the obvious approaches and a good path of retreat.

Every instinct Earl possessed told him that they weren't just hunting a wolf.

Without thinking, Earl worked the bolt of his Lee-Enfield rifle. The other two hunters glanced at each other in surprise. Earl was usually extremely careful about weapon discipline. He normally wouldn't chamber a round unless he had a target.

"We're going back," Earl ordered softly. "Eyes all around. Keep your weapons up. Assume we're being tracked. Assume there's more than one."

Simon opened his mouth to object but stopped when Charlie grabbed his shoulder and urgently pointed to a patch of bare dirt.

Simon stared, unable for a long moment to process what he was seeing. It simply didn't make sense. Then - as if it had suddenly snapped into focus - Simon realized what he was looking at.

It was only a partial print, but it was clear enough. It was more like a human footprint than anything else, but parts of it were wrong. Particularly the indentations of claws at the ends of the widely spaced toes.

In his time, Simon had seen pictures of supposed Bigfoot footprints. He held them all in contempt. They were obviously crude hoaxes created by people who didn't understand the subtlety of tracking in the same way Simon did.

This wasn't a hoax or a trick. A wolf had lain down and should have died. Something midway between a wolf and a man - and very much alive - had then stood up.

"Shit..." Simon breathed. Next to him, Charlie also readied his weapon. Then Simon did the same.

Then, deadly silent, the pack hit them from all directions.

Just before he died, Earl put a bullet through an eye of the one coming for him. The creature's head whipped backward, blood and brains fountaining away in a grisly spray. It was a magnificent shot, quickly and precisely executed under great pressure, but Earl didn't have time to be proud of it.

The three men vanished under a swarm of snarling monsters.
The pack was feeding, but the leader was silently crouched next to the dead youngster. A big rifle bullet, fired at close range, had torn open the youngling's skull and left his brains scattered across several yards of the forest floor. It was the kind of catastrophic injury from which even their kind couldn't recover.

It was a hell of a good shot, the leader thought to himself distantly. Part of the being the leader was to evaluate facts you didn't like.

The elder female, her offspring tucked in one arm, put a hand on the leader's shoulder. Their kind didn't exactly mourn as humans understood the concept, but the feeling of loss was very real. After all, the pack had been diminished.

The trees of that part of the forest prevented a clear view of the town, but the leader found himself glaring in that direction.

"We have to kill the real hunters and be done with this place. We're too close to this many always-two-legs," the leader said evenly.

"This has to be settled," he added after a pause.

The elder female nodded in agreement.

Aliza stood on the front porch of the Watt home and looked up into the foothills that bordered the northern edge of the town.

Then Daken and Laura wandered out onto the porch. The house was filled with talking people and they both needed some quiet.

"Three hunters are dead," Aliza said in a tone of voice that seemed more thoughtful than anything else. "The wolves-who-walk-like-men just killed them."

Daken and Laura exchanged a long look. Whatever Aliza was seeing, it was beyond even their senses.

"They died fighting and their ancestors have welcomed them home," Aliza added distantly. There was a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"The wolves-who-walk-like-men have our scent and are coming for us," Aliza then finished. "Any normal people who get in their way will die. We can't stay here."

Daken closely examined Aliza. The concept of somebody suddenly undergoing changes was very much a part of his and Laura's world. He didn't exactly know what was happening with Aliza, but he thought he understood most of it. And his instincts told him that it was necessary.

"How many of those wolves-who-walk-like-men are out there?" Daken asked.

"About a dozen, but not all of them are adults," Aliza answered.

Daken and Laura exchanged a long look. Aliza still looked disassociated from the regular world.

"Well... crap," Daken said softly. His idea of how many enemies they were facing had just increased drastically.

Laura put her arms around Aliza. Daken left the porch and slipped unseen through the house and back to the room he shared with Brad.
Pawing through his minimal luggage, Daken found the leather sheath that held the knife that Mr. Horseman had given him so long ago. It was the weapon of a special kind of hunter.

As always, the meteoric iron blade was cool in Daken's hand. It never seemed to warm up, no longer how long he held it. Even the bone handle never changed temperature. It was as if some part of the coldness of space was always with the weapon.

Tucking the sheathed knife into the small of his back, Daken smoothed his t-shirt over it so that it was hidden. Then he headed back to the porch.

Brad caught up to Daken in the living room. Mr. and Mrs. Watt were together in the den. Some other family members were present, offering what comfort they could. Billy was trapped on the couch between two aunts and looked like he wanted nothing more than to escape. He gave Brad and Daken an imploring look, but two older boys ignored him. As far as they were concerned, it was just as well that Billy was pinned down and couldn't go anywhere.

It didn't occur to either boy that they were thinking more like adults than teenagers.

"What crazy, stupid, violent, thing are you up to now?" Brad asked resignedly.

That made Daken smile, but the smile flickered away quickly.

"This has to be settled," Daken told Brad.

Daken didn't know that he'd just repeated someone else's exact words.

"And we have to win," Daken added.

Daken pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Back out on the porch, Aliza and Laura were still standing together. Laura still had her arms around Aliza. Aliza was still staring off into nowhere.

For an odd moment, Daken had the impression that they were being watched. Turning his head to scan the area, Daken could sense nothing specific, but that nagging feeling didn't go away. And Daken's father firmly believed that you should respect that kind of instinct.

Then, for just a split-second in the porch window, Daken thought he saw two reflections. One was of him. The other was right next to him, but it was of an older - much older - man. The older man looked resigned, but not unhappy.

Daken blinked in surprise. He recognized the older man.

"This has to happen," he told the reflection. Daken wasn't even sure why he'd said that, but he had a rough idea of what - who - he was talking to.

The figure in the window vanished.

Daken took a deep breath and let it out. That was definitely strange. However, his Aunt Illyana had long ago taught both Daken and Laura that the world was a stranger place than most people - even mutants - understood. Sometimes you just had to accept that.

In any case, whoever or whatever was watching them - and Daken had a strong suspicion who it was - didn't seem hostile. And since Daken had more immediate problems to consider, he shrugged it off and continued out onto the porch.
Standing next to the girls, Daken pulled out the sheathed blade and put it on the porch railing in front of Aliza.

"I didn't like your Papi," Daken began quietly. He wasn't good with words, but he had to say something. "And I don't think he liked me. After all, we tried to kill each other."

Laura gave her brother a deadly look, but Aliza just smiled and put a hand on the rail, covering Daken's hand with her own and giving it a gentle squeeze. Daken wasn't a talker and he needed to be encouraged whenever he tried.

"I didn't like him, but I respected him," Daken continued. "What he was... it was dangerous, but he believed in it. He did it for most of his life. And he protected people who couldn't protect themselves."

Aliza nodded.

"But I think he made a mistake about you," Daken said with a sigh, "but I guess it makes sense. He was from another time and I suppose there were things he just couldn't see. Or maybe he just didn't want to see it. Mom and Dad can be like that sometimes."

Laura's eyebrows raised as she figured out where her brother was going. Then her mouth described a silent and surprised 'oh'.

Daken gestured at the weapon that was resting on the porch rail.

"It isn't mine," he told Aliza. "I know that now. I've just been holding onto it. Maybe it had to be guarded until the right time."

Aliza was looking at Daken with silent and expressionless intensity.

"It really belongs to you," Daken finished.

Aliza gazed down at the ancient knife, studying the cold sheen of the black iron.

Then she picked it up.
At the edge of town, a kid on a bicycle was zooming through the gaps between streetlights. He was worried about his girlfriend and, despite the fact she was safely at home with her family, he decided to sneak away in order to check on her. It was a foolish decision, but it was the kind of thing a boy does.

The pack froze as the boy on the bicycle crossed their path. They were steadily working their way into town, following the trail that the scout had blazed. Now the boy was in their way.

Then the boy's phone rang. He skidded to a halt, straddled his bike, and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He was a fair distance from any light because he was trying to keep to cover. He didn't want a neighbor to tell his parents that he'd snuck out of the house.

Hidden in the deep brush of an abandoned ditch, the leader glared at the boy and then glanced at his scout.

The scout shook his head. "We'll be spotted eventually. It's just a matter of time. But if we can delay it..."

The leader shook his head, indicating that the scout should stop talking. The scout ground to a frustrated halt. Then the leader glanced at two members of the pack - including the big one - and jerked his head towards the boy on the bike.

The boy was dead in a matter of seconds. The kill was silent, but not perfect. The wind shifted just towards the end.

A nearby dog caught the scent of blood, death, and predators, and immediately began howling. It was more like a canine scream than anything else, completely unlike the routine "this is mine" barking of a dog guarding his people and place. It was a shrill, hysterical, and panicked warning.

Something bad wasn't just coming. It was already present.

The leader growled irritably and gestured for everyone to hurry up and get moving.

The final victory of his kind was within the leader's grasp. And perhaps that was blinding him to the risks he was running.

There was someone who sometimes communicated with Hank-the-bear. Hank only vaguely understand who it was, but that wasn't the point.

Right now, it was telling Hank that the cubs were in trouble and where to find them.

Hank had the scent of the strange predators. He began following it.

In their room, Ellie picked up her son and held him in her arms. Troy was staring off at nothing - something he did fairly often. It was beginning to worry Ellie.

As Ellie considered her options, Troy blinked his eyes, looked at his mother, and smiled. Then he let out a playful sound that something like a growl.
Ellie hugged him close.

Daken and Laura simultaneously looked in the direction of the suddenly barking dog. Aliza was still staring at the knife that had once been her grandfather's.

"They're six... no... seven blocks away," Laura announced softly, her head tilted up as she tested the wind. "Just past the edge of town."

Daken said something brief, blunt, and heartfelt. Then he vaulted over the porch rail. Landing in a crouch, he lifted his face into the air.

"A lot of them," he and his sister said simultaneously. That made Aliza snap out of her reverie.

The dog's howl became even louder and more frantic. Then it choked off. There was a stark moment of utter silence then, all over that part of town, other dogs explosively took up the warning. After a few seconds, another dog squealed and went silent.

Laura's lips drew back in a teeth-baring snarl that didn't look particularly human.

"They're after us," Aliza said flatly. "If we get out of here, but leave a trail, they might follow."

Aliza didn't have time to wonder how she knew that.

Daken considered Aliza's words - and then shook his head. His instincts didn't really include running from a fight.

"We can't risk that," he told Aliza. "We can't just abandon everyone."

"The things after us might see killing people as a way to force us to fight them," Laura told Aliza grimly. Her eyes were startlingly cold. Daken didn't like that look on his sister's face. He wanted to protect her. And he didn't want her to go down the path that they were already on. But what choice did he have? What choice did any of them have?

Aliza nodded in agreement. Frankly, she didn't really want to run away. Like Daken and Laura, that just wasn't in her blood.

The three of them took off at a dead run. However, they weren't running away.

They were looking for trouble.

"Incoming," the scout said softly, using a word he'd learned from his father. Then he shifted into his four-legged form.

The rest of the pack followed. Even the leader took the scout's lead. The big one was the only one who hesitated, but after a few frustrating seconds, he dropped the mangled body of a German Shepherd he'd just killed and grudgingly went along.

Both were five blocks within the town and getting closer to each other by the second. Neither side was unaware of the other, but they didn't know exactly what they were facing and how their opponents were advancing. However, Daken, Laura, and Aliza knew something that they hadn't known before. They knew that they were badly outnumbered.

Just before they came into contact, Daken made a quick decision. He pointed northwards and began moving in that direction. The others began following his lead.
Then Aliza grabbed Daken by the shoulder and the three of them ground to a disorganized halt. Aliza was staring at something that was in front of them. Something that Daken and Laura couldn't see.

Aliza saw, shadowed by the night, two men on horseback. They were blocking the route Daken had chosen. One of them lifted a long arm and pointed in the opposite direction. The other one - he was wearing a cowboy hat - actually made a leisurely shooing motion with the hand that wasn't holding his horse's reins.

"This way," Aliza ordered urgently, pointing in the direction that the horsemen were indicating. Laura looked puzzled, but Daken didn't argue. As a group, they jinked southward around an abandoned house, loped westward for some distance, and then once again turned sharp north.

The wind favored that move, and The-Wolves-Who-Walk-Like-Men lost track of their opponents for just a few seconds.

Those were critical seconds.

The wind was in Daken's face as he jumped over an untended hedge. The wolf on the other side was decapitated almost immediately. It didn't even have time to howl.

However, the dead wolf had a partner who was crouched just a few yards away. Laura and Aliza piled into it, claws and knife flashing from reflected streetlight. However, both girls had a problem that Daken didn't have. They were instinctual killers, but they hadn't actually killed yet. The knowledge that there was something at least partially human-like in their opponents slowed them both down for just a moment.

The split-open wolf let out a partial howl. Laura pinned it's head to the ground, and them Aliza cut its throat with her ancestor's blade. However, both girls glanced anxiously at each other in the sure knowledge that they'd screwed up.

Daken jerked his head backward. His instinct-that-was-a-plan was to hit and run. They'd approach again from another direction.

Concentrating too much on the girls, Daken missed the approach of the big one. The big one literally collided with Daken, with three other pack members following close behind.

"Dak!" Laura gasped as she closed the distance with her brother and made what looked like a wild swing with her claws. The wolf she was fighting decided that she was young and inexperienced and made the mistake of getting careless. Laura's next slash wasn't a feint - it took off one of her foe's front legs. The wolf collapsed and then began writhing away, howling and whining.

Aliza kicked another of the following wolves under the chin, causing its head to snap backward, but the third wolf was circling to her side. She whipped her knife around in its direction, hoping that it would force the wolf to pause...

It didn't. And Aliza disappeared under a mass of fur and muscle as the two wolves took her down. Laura scrambled toward Aliza, hoping she could get there before Aliza was torn open.

Then there was a mighty chuff from behind the fight, back in the direction from which the children had come. On all fours, Hank-the-bear charged into the fight. With one sweep, he batted a wolf off of Aliza. The wolf rolled a good five yards away, rose wozily to his legs and then staggered away. He apparently didn't know where the fight was located anymore.
Meanwhile, more wolves were appearing. Daken was tangled up with the big one. Aliza and Laura were fighting a wolf that was still on Aliza.

Hank stood on his hind legs and roared, his arms held wide in challenge, dark and bloody claws splayed wide.

Both sides were momentarily frozen by Hank's titanic roar. Then the leader howled a command... There were enough of them left to deal with the hunters and their strange ally.

Then a rifle shot slammed into the leader's broad chest. He went down, coughing blood.

There was another flurry of shots. More wolves squealed. Daken put his right-hand claws into the big one's chest and raked his other claws along the big one's flank. The big one tried to rip open Daken's throat, but Daken was very good at not being where he was supposed to be. Daken was bleeding from wounds on his shoulders and upper arms, and part of his face had been bitten away, but he was still fighting and that was disconcerting to the big one - he was used to winning fights quickly.

Horrified, the leader saw disaster unfolding. The pack could handle the hunter and her strange hunter-like friends. It could handle the two-legs. It could easily handle a lone bear. But all of them at once? Without the pack's normal advantages of stealth and surprise?

More shots were ringing out from a small skirmish line of humans with rifles and shotguns. A wolf trying to turn away from the fight and went down with a blown-out skull.

The leader leveraged himself up as his body healed. Then he spat out the bullet that had been lodged in his lung. He had to do whatever it took. He had to get whatever that was left of the pack out of there. If enough got away, they would heal and reform. Members could die, but the pack had to survive.

The young always-two-leg male... the one who wasn't quite a hunter, but had something like their scent... he was the key. Take him down and the two females would hesitate. Darkness would do the rest, making it harder for the two-legged riflemen to hit targets as the pack silently backed away.

It wasn't the best plan, but the leader had nothing else.

Healing and strengthening with every stride, the leader dashed towards Daken. Aliza, Laura, and Hank were still locked up their own, separate, fights.

Daken stood up from the body of the big one. He was shredded and torn. Then he saw the leader coming for him. Daken snarled, crouched, and made ready. The leader wasn't the only one who was healing and totally pissed-off.

The leader put every bit of muscle he had into leaping into his target...

He never saw the lightning bolt that incinerated him. Just, for a strange moment, there was a flare of light that illuminated everything all around him. Then, in a roll of thunder, the leader passed from this world to whatever waited for him on the other side.

A tall and dark woman, her long white hair fluttering in a stray wind, walked purposefully through a now white-streaked night. Lightning crackled around her, focusing into yellowish balls of light around her hands. Her eyes were glowing bright white.

What was left of the pack broke apart and fled in all directions.
On all fours, Hank-the-bear ambled up to Laura and gave her a friendly bump with his head. Laura wrapped her arms around his neck. Daken, bleeding from numerous fast-healing wounds, contributed some scratches behind Hank's ears.

Laura could tell that Hank was scared. He was too close to too many humans. And there were loud noises and things-like-wolves and all sorts of strangeness that was just too much for any self-respecting bear. And they were surrounded by angry and anxious men who were armed and more than inclined to shoot anything with fur.

"C'mon," Laura whispered into Hank's ear. "Let's get you out of here."

The voice in Hank's head agreed that was a good idea.

The elder female knew she was dying, perforated by human bullets. Under other circumstances, she might be able to escape and heal, but the two-legs weren't cooperating. Everywhere she went, the two-legs were there and they were all armed. She'd been shot twice more after that lost battle with the hunters.

There was no time to regret any of that. The only thing that mattered was her cub, but the cub was too young to survive on her own.

Desperately dodging from cover to cover, the cub gamely trying to keep up, the elder female tried to find something, anything, that would help.

Then she got lucky.

The two-legs was armed with yet another long weapon. The elder female looked at the two-legs and they both froze. The two-legs was a woman and she quickly leveled her shotgun at the elder female.

Something, she didn't know what, told the elder female that this was what she was looking for. With her snout, she nudged her whelp towards the human.

The always-two-legs woman blinked in surprise, staring uncertainly at the elder female and the cub.

Then the elder female turned and ran. She didn't get far. There was a half-dozen armed two-legs just down the street, and an unlucky flash of moonlight, caused by shifting clouds, gave her away.

Behind her, the two-legs woman knocked the cub onto its side and pinned it down with her foot and the stock of her shotgun. Then, as the sound of the shots echoed away, the woman peered carefully at her prize.

The cub let out a whine.

Laura got Hank out of town and into a thick patch of trees and rough ground that lead up into the mountains. He snorted a goodbye to Laura and proceeded uphill. Then Laura tracked down the others.

Aliza and Daken had wisely decided to back away from what was left of the battle. Not far from the school, they were waiting for Laura.
"Did you kill any of them?" Daken asked his sister when she finally appeared. His voice was urgent and oddly desperate. He couldn't quite meet Laura's eyes.

Laura didn't reply immediately. She'd never actually landed a killing blow, but she had certainly helped kill some of their foes.

She didn't like the look on her brother's face. He looked... scared.

"Sort of," Laura replied with a shake of her head, "I helped Aliza."

Aliza winced.

Daken took Laura's head in his hands. Then he looked deep into his sister's eyes. He seemed to be looking for something, but it was hard to tell what it was.

Whatever it was he as looking for, Daken suddenly looked relieved.

Then he hugged Laura tight.

The scout somehow scrambled free from the town. He was hurt, but he'd heal if he had the chance.

Then he realized that he was being followed. It was a two-legs and normally that wouldn't bother the scout too much. However, recent experience suggested that it wouldn't do to be too confident.

The scout put everything he had into shaking his pursuer and getting away. He used cover. He doubled back and split his tracks. He traveled up a creek to hide his scent. He advanced from rock outcrop to rock outcrop. He found patches of overgrown wood and brush that looked impenetrable and wiggled through them. He worked the wind and the clouds, hiding scent and sight.

His pursuer was beyond good, but the scout didn't bother to try and understand that. The only thing that mattered was that he had to get away.

Eventually, the scout was sure that he was free. Panting for breath, he paused on shaking legs to consider his next move.

"Hey, bub," somebody said in front of him in an amused tone of voice. "Nice run."

After a shocked moment of surprise, an instinctual growl rumbled out the scout's chest. Then he turned to face the foe that he couldn't outrun.

If it was time, then it was time, the scout told himself. Actually, the scout knew that he'd been dead for a long time. He'd just been going through the motions of life.

In the darkness before him, the scout saw a stocky, two-legged, form move in his direction.

Then there was a sound.

Snikt.

For a frozen second, poised for a fight, the two hunters gazed at each other.

A curious look appeared on Logan's face. He knew wolves - maybe not this very strange breed of wolf - but he could tell that this one wasn't full grown. And if there was one thing that Logan could recognize in others, it was regret.
Logan found the children in a large circular outcrop of stones that was located just outside the edge of town. Trees growing in the cracks of the stones were slowly breaking them to pieces, and sharp shards of rock were scattered everywhere.

It was a fine natural fortification. Logan wondered whether the decision to stay there was strategic or instinctual.

Logan sent Daken and Aliza back to town, accompanied by some firm and very believable warnings about what would happen to them if they happened to stray from his orders.

The left Logan and Laura alone. Laura was perched on a large rock, and she was suddenly very nervous about having been singled out by her father.

Logan sat next to his daughter. He carefully brushed Laura's wildly mussed hair away from her face.

The look on Logan's face was beyond serious. Laura gazed back at her father - and to her shock realized that he was...

Frightened? Was that the right word?

"Dad?" she asked hesitantly.

Logan seemed to look deep into Laura's face. That went on for far too long as Laura increasingly struggled not to panic. Laura had no idea what her father was looking for, but Daken had done the same thing to her.

What was happening?

"Daddy, did I do something wrong?" Laura asked quietly. Her usual air of maturity was beginning to disintegrate. Something she didn't understand was wrong with her father.

Logan stopped staring at his daughter and finally stood up. Then he smiled wanly as he gently ran his hands through Laura's hair.

"No. It's okay, sweetie," he told Laura. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Then Logan took his daughter's hand. They began walking back to town together, with Laura staying very close to Logan, tightly holding onto him.

Not yet, Logan thought to himself.

She wasn't a killer yet.

But it was just a matter of time.

It would keep happening. The violence. The enemies she didn't know she had. The monsters that came out of nowhere. Those were things she couldn't hide from. Eventually, she would follow down the path that had already claimed Logan, Ororo, and Laura's two brothers.
He'd just have to do his best to hold that day off as long as possible.

"Thank the goddess you called me," Ororo told Mrs. Watt.

The two women were in Mrs. Watt's kitchen. They were at the kitchen table, with steaming cups of tea in front of them. Kendall was peacefully dozing in Mrs. Watt's lap. It was the first time Mrs. Watt and Kendall had met, and they'd instantly taken to each other.

Mrs. Watt firmly suppressed any trace of disapproval over the invocation of a heathen supreme being under her roof. It was not the time or place. And besides, Ororo was a friend.

Daken and Laura were out on the front porch, having a long walk with their father. The subject of the conversation was the potential problems that might arise when you only told your parents part of the truth. Ororo was sitting that out for the moment, but she had every intention of revisiting the subject in her own time.

"How did you get here so quickly?" Mrs. Watt asked. Even that strange airplane that James and Ororo always seemed to have available couldn't fly that fast, could it?

Ororo smiled. "We have friends, Jackie. Uncanny friends who can do astonishing things."

Ororo left it at that. She had no intention of trying to explain Illyana to Mrs. Watt. Those two women had very different backgrounds and beliefs.

Mrs. Watt caught Ororo's hesitation and decided there was no need for additional details. She just nodded her head and brushed a lock of Kendall's white hair back from the little girl's face.

Kendall smiled in her sleep.

The lecture was over. Now it was time to discuss what had happened - and why.

Lessons had to be learned.

"I thought I could handle it," Daken told his father quietly. "I didn't know how many there were. I should have called you earlier."

Logan nodded. "Actually you were the third person to call."

Daken frowned in surprise and cocked his head in his father's direction. But he didn't say anything.

"Mrs. Watt called your mother right after the thing that happened in her backyard," Logan explained. "Something to remember, Dak - the mothers of the world are part of a huge conspiracy. Mrs. Watt knew something had to be done and she went right to the person she was sure would make things happen. That wasn't me. That was your mom."

A tiny smile appeared on Daken's face.

Logan continued. "Your sister heard Mrs. Watt talk to your mom. So Laura called Aunt Illyana as soon as she could. She knew your mother was gonna go ballistic and want to get here as soon as possible. Laura made sure that Illyana would be ready to go."

Daken nodded. That made sense.

"Then you finally called me," Logan finished.
"I was late," Daken observed ruefully.

"By about fifteen minutes," Logan agreed.

"When you look in my eyes, what are you looking for?" Laura asked her brother.

Daken stopped to consider the question. He wasn't quite sure what to say.

"You both do it!" Laura almost accused. "You and dad! What are you looking for?"

Daken still wasn't sure how to answer. It really wasn't a matter that could easily be put into words.

"Something blank," he finally told Laura.

"Blank what?!" Laura demanded.

"Dead and blank and empty," Daken told her. "I see it in Dad. I see it in Raze. Sometimes, I even see it in Mom. I'm sorry, but I can't explain it any better."

Laura studied her brother. He didn't add anything else, but Laura knew he was being honest.

Laura decided to let it go.

Logan and Ororo made the difficult decision not to attend any of the far too many funerals that were about to take place. They were worried that awkward questions might arise about Daken and Laura's role in recent events.

On their last night in town, Laura and Billy sat on the porch and talked quietly. However, for once it wasn't about comic books or anything else like that. It wasn't really a grown-up talk, but it was surprisingly close.

Aliza and Daken finally found a private moment on the back porch of the Watt house. Everyone else in the house knew they were together, but decided to steer clear.

The two youngsters held one another close, kissed, and made promises that they weren't sure they could keep.

After some discussion, the rules were bent and what was left of Mr. Wainwright was buried on his property instead of in a formal cemetery. Everyone agreed that it was the right thing to do.

Afterward, Ed Barnett and Mrs. Horseman slowly rode up to Mr. Horseman's mountain. It was a beautiful day, without a trace of clouds.

Ed had a shovel with him. In his jacket pocket was a bible. Ed had highlighted some words that he planned on saying. He was uncomfortably aware that those words might not speak to what had been Michael Horseman's actual beliefs, but Ed didn't think it was right to let a burial end in silence.

And there was always Psalms 18:39. "You armed me with strength for battle; you made my adversaries bow at my feet." Ed had heard that at more than a few Army and SHIELD funerals. It seemed right.

Of course, Mrs. Horseman was with him and that made Ed feel better. She would be able to say
Ed had moved his wife and son back into their cabin. Hank-the-bear was hanging around, but now Ed wasn't inclined to chase him off. He'd seen how Hank had pitched in to help Aliza, Daken, and Laura. It seemed to Ed that having Hank around would actually make his family safer.

As Ellie sat on the front porch with her son in her lap, she could see Hank prowling - if something as big as Hank could be said to 'prowl' - through the nearby woods. Sometimes she could swear she saw Hank and her son exchanging long looks. It was almost as if they were somehow communicating with each other.

Ellie decided not to think about that too much.

Back in Westchester, Jean Grey took off the Cerebro helmet and sighed tiredly. She'd just spent most of a day observing the Barnett boy.

"What do you think?" Betsy asked. She was leaning against the frame of the heavy door that opened into the Cerebro chamber.

"He's powerful," Jean replied. "Very powerful. We can't let him develop on his own. He'll need instruction, protection, and training. Otherwise, we'll end up with another Quentin Quire on our hands."

Betsy nodded. That was also her assessment of Troy.

"You, me, Emma, and the Cuckoos can take turns working with him," Betsy suggested. "Our guard-telepaths will watch him. I'll come up with a duty roster. Do you think we might have to bring Troy here? I'd really rather not do that."

Jean shook her head. "No. Not unless security becomes an issue. Actually, at his age, it would be far better if he stayed with his mother and father. We'll just have to make sure that it doesn't go wrong."

Betsy nodded again. "That seems right. Of course, we'll have someone in the area soon. She can help us keep an eye on Troy."

Mrs. Watt opened the door - and blinked in surprise. She didn't recognize the girl who was standing on her porch.

She was a young woman with reddish hair shaped in an oddly swept-back manner. And she had green eyes. Actually, she was quite pretty, but in a way that was more striking than conventional. Mrs. Watt noted approvingly that she was wearing a conservative dress, a simple blouse, sensible shoes, and a light jacket. Behind her, she was towing a traveling suitcase.

The young woman looked shy and more than a little worried about the reception she was about to receive.

"Mrs. Watt?" the girl said softly. She had an accent that wasn't familiar to Mrs. Watt. "I'm the nanny that Mrs. Howlett recommended. My name is Rahne Sinclair."

Mrs. Watt smiled and opened the door wider.
"Oh, yes! Come in, dear."

Behind Mrs. Watt, her daughter gave their visitor a curious look. Then the little girl cautiously sniffed the air.

For a long moment, the nanny and the little girl stared at one another. Then Rahne got down on her knees, so her eyes and the girl's eyes were closer to the same level.

"We're going to be great friends," Rahne said, her accent broadening slightly as she spoke.

The girl transformed into a wolf cub and trotted over to Rahne. They carefully took in each other's scent.

Then Rahne picked up the cub. The cub began licking Rahne's face.

The helicopter touched down in a flurry of snow. It had landed in an open space that decades before had been burned clear of trees by a forest fire. Surrounding the open space, as far as the eye could see, was a vast expanse of pines. To the west, a range of white mountains defiantly challenged a sky filled with tangled and wind-torn clouds.

Hank was piloting the helicopter. He glanced over his shoulder at his three passengers.

Well... it was more accurate to say his two passengers and their prisoner.

"You wanted the middle of nowhere," Hank announced gruffly into his helmet microphone. "Here it is."

In the compartment, the scout was in his wolf-form, but he was wrapped in chains. Logan was sitting next to him. The scout was glaring at Logan, but Logan was ignoring the scout.

Daken was sitting opposite his father and the scout. He had no idea where they were, or why they were there.

It seemed to Daken that they had come a very long way just to kill someone.

"Thanks," Logan told Hank briefly. Then he pulled off his headphones and yanked opened the compartment door. The temperature dropped tens of degrees in just a second. After jumping to the ground, Logan grabbed the scout by the tail and haunches and hauled him out. The scout began struggling wildly, but Logan was inexorable.

Daken pitched in and helped, bracing against his seat and shoving the scout out the door with his legs.

The chained scout landed on the snow-covered ground in an ungainly heap. His form shifted from human to wolf and then into something part-human and part-wolf. Then it shifted back again into that of a wolf and stayed that way. The chains on the scout's body shifted as his proportions changed, but didn't come loose.

Using the chains as a grip, Logan and Daken dragged the snarling, struggling scout away from the helicopter. There was a low rise about a hundred yards away. They ended up on top of it.

Squatting next to the scout, Logan took a long moment to peer at his now snow-covered prisoner. Daken, still unsure and increasingly worried that something was wrong, stood slightly behind his father and off to one side.
"There aren't many people up here," Logan told the scout. His tone was almost conversational. White breath plumed from his mouth as he spoke.

The scout snarled once again and jerked against his chains. A cold expression appeared on Daken's face as the boy leaned forward. Daken's hands were twisted into half-fists - a sign that he was about to open his claws.

"Stay away from the local people," Logan ordered the scout. "Do that and you'll never see us again."

The scout froze, his oddly human eyes flickering between Logan and Daken.

"I'm taking a chance," Logan added. "I think I can see something in you - something that wanted out of what you were in before. But if you even think about hurting anyone, I'll be back. We'll be back."

Daken gave his father an uncertain look.

The scout made a strange rumble of a sound that wasn't quite a growl.

Logan unlocked the scout's chains and then he and Daken walked away. The scout hesitated for a long moment. Then he wiggled free from his chains, rolled onto his four paws, and shook until his fur was settled back into place.

The land around the scout smelled... pure. A half-frozen river murmured in the distance. A ripple of wind shook the surrounding trees and dislodged clumps of snow. There was a herd of caribou somewhere.

The scout watched Logan and Daken trudge back to the helicopter.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Daken asked worriedly.

"He's on the list of people that our telepaths will check on every now and then," Logan told his son. "They'll let us know if he's turning into a problem."

As they climbed into the helicopter's passenger compartment, Daken didn't bother to ask what they would do if that happened.

He knew.

"You know what killing is," Logan suddenly told his son. "I couldn't stop that. I wanted to, but I couldn't."

Daken nodded. There was now something cold and watchful in his eyes as he gazed unblinkingly at his father.

"This is what mercy looks like," Logan added quietly.

Logan's eyes met his son's. "I figured you needed to see this. Remember it."

Daken blinked in surprise. Then he slowly, thoughtfully, nodded his head.

Logan handed Daken a noise-suppressing headset. Then he put on a pair of his own. There was no further conversation.

Up front, Hank decided that it was finally time to go. The helicopter's rotors, already slowly
turning, began to accelerate. Then, in a roar of engine noise and a white flurry of loose snow, the helicopter lifted off.

Back on the rise, the scout growled in soundless disapproval at the scent of exhaust as he watched the helicopter rise into the sky. Once it was finally out of sight, he turned away and loped into the woods.

There was a surge of elation in him, unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

He was finally free.

"She's gone," Mrs. Horseman said miserably. She had the look of a woman who was between bouts of tears.

Mr. Watt nodded his head slowly. He really wasn't surprised. And he could only think of one thing to say that would help.

"Aliza won't be alone," Mr. Watt told her. "She'll have help. Ororo promised that."

Mrs. Horseman considered Mrs. Watt's words. Then she nodded her head.

Aliza was walking down the side of gravel road. She had a pack on her shoulders and was wearing sturdy and well broken-in traveling clothes and boots.

There was a scent in the air that Aliza couldn't quite define, but she knew it was trouble. She'd been following it for the last few days. It seemed to almost call to her.

The world was becoming stranger every day. Sometimes, out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw two men on horseback following her. One of the men was native. The other was a white cowboy. She had the impression that they were both young and lean, but whenever Aliza turned her head to try and look directly at the two men, there was nothing to see.

Aliza had the strange and nagging feeling that they were worried about her.

Then a pickup rattled down the road and pulled up next to Aliza. Aliza noted that a young woman was driving. That made Aliza relax slightly - she'd already been forced to cut one man who'd become too friendly for his own good. However, there was a man sitting next to the lady driver. While the driver was young and very white, the man was older and native.

They were an odd pair, yet Aliza instinctively didn't fear them. And for some reason, the man in the pickup seemed to be looking at something behind Aliza. There was a faint smile on his lips. Then he respectfully nodded, but Aliza suspected it wasn't meant for her.

The woman driving the truck leaned out the window. She was young, yet had pure white hair. The color of her eyes seemed to wander between blue and gray.

"Daken and Laura say 'hi'," the white-haired girl told Aliza.

Aliza blinked in surprise. "Hello," she responded cautiously.

"My name is Illyana," the woman continued. Then she nodded her head at the man sitting next to her. "This gentleman is named Forge. If you don't mind, we'll be traveling with you for a while."

Aliza hesitated. Then Forge finally looked directly at her.
"Perhaps we can learn something from you," Forge added with quiet certainty. "And perhaps we can teach you something."

"And riding with us will be a lot faster and easier than walking everywhere," the woman added.

After a moment, Aliza glanced over her shoulder.

The two horsemen were behind her, still and watching. They didn't seem worried. The one who was native nodded his head at Aliza.

As Aliza drove away with her new companions, she glanced into the rear-view mirror. She caught a glimpse of the two mounted figures that had been following her.

Now, side-by-side, they were riding away. And as Aliza watched, they slowly faded away in a gust of windblown dust.

"Goodbye," Aliza heard herself say. And there was the sting of hot tears in her eyes.
A LITTLE LOST LAMB

MJ opened the door to her apartment. And then blinked in surprise.

There was a little girl at door. And MJ didn't know her.

"Hello, sweetie," MJ said as she leaned against the door-frame. That put her closer to her visitor... and that was when MJ belatedly realized that perhaps the girl at the door wasn't as 'little' as she'd first assumed. She definitely wasn't a woman yet, but there was the first beginnings of a bust developing under her jacket and shirt. Otherwise, she was very pretty, if a little short for what MJ took to be her age. She had long dark hair, pale skin, and green eyes that were impressively deep. On the other hand, her clothes were a little rough - a leather jacket, flannel shirt, a crisp new pair of jeans, and a worn pair of brown boots.

In MJ's very expert opinion, the girl would grow up to be quite a beauty.

The girl seemed surprised to see MJ. Then she glanced up at the number on the door, as if wondering if she had the right apartment.

"Is this the Parker residence?" she asked in a puzzled voice.

MJ smiled. "Yes, it is. Actually, I'm Mrs. Parker."

It seemed to take a second for the girl to absorb that. "Really?" she asked eventually. There was something definitely skeptical - and perhaps challenging - in that one word.

MJ raised an eyebrow. "Yes. Really."

The girl's eyes roamed up and down MJ's body - from MJ's bare feet to her long red hair. MJ had a distinct impression that she was being inspected... and that she was failing the inspection.

Then the girl's eyes narrowed. "You're Mary Jane Watson," she said very flatly. "The actress. My brothers like that movie where you're a Roman slavegirl."

That made MJ pause. There were a few scenes in "The Eagles of Rome" where she wasn't wearing much in the way of clothes. And one scene where she wasn't wearing any clothes at all.

"That's me," MJ replied, trying to be reasonable. "And who are you?"

"My name is Laura. Laura Howlett."

That rang a distant bell for MJ, but nothing particularly specific came to mind.

"Is unc... is Mr. Parker home?" Laura added.

"No, he's not," MJ said. "He's teaching a class."

"At Empire State University?"

MJ nodded.

"Can you give me the building and room number?" Laura asked after a moment's thought.
MJ smiled. "Yes, I could, but I'm not going to. This is the part where you tell me why you want to see my husband."

Laura's face was expressionless for a long moment as her eyes met MJ's. MJ returned her gaze without even blinking.

"I want to borrow his phone," Laura eventually said. "I'm separated from my parents and my phone is back at home. I need to call somebody."

MJ considered that. Then she leaned over, picked up her phone from the stand next to the door, and handed it to Laura.

Laura was still staring at MJ as she held the phone, absently rotating it over and over between her hands.

Several awkward seconds passed as the girl and woman locked eyes.

Much to her surprise, MJ finally figured out Laura's problem. MJ was used to people wondering why the hell she was with someone like Peter. People tended to think of MJ as being way out of Peter's league. Actually, Laura was doing something like that. Except she was apparently wondering if MJ was good enough for Peter.

That was a new experience for MJ.

Then Laura finally turned her attention to MJ's phone and expertly double-thumbed a number into it.

"Aunt Marie?" Laura said into the phone. "It's me... Laura. I'm in New York City."

A puzzled sound came from the phone.

"I was visiting the girls at the school," Laura said in obvious exasperation. "There was a teleportation accident and I ended up in town instead. Daisy is probably freaking out. Can you come get me?"

The sound on the other end of the phone suddenly became interrogative.

"No," Laura sighed. "I don't exactly have permission to be this far away from home. Sometimes I just... I just want to talk to girls my age. We never do anything but talk, watch videos, play games, and eat a lot of junk food. And I always make sure I'm back home by a reasonable hour. Normally, I don't even leave the school grounds. But things got strange this time."

The voice on the phone calmed down.

"Where am I?" Laura said hesitantly. "Um... I'm in a lady's apartment and using her phone. But I thought we could meet somewhere else. How about Central Park?"

The phone didn't quite explode.

MJ calmly reached over and took her phone from a surprised Laura. Then MJ put the phone to her ear and reeled off an address.

"You can pick her up here," MJ added.

There was a stormy look on Laura's face.
"Tell her," MJ said flatly. Then she handed the phone back to Laura.

Laura yanked the phone away from MJ. "Look, Aunt Marie, I don't have to stay here! I can..."

The voice on the other end of the phone went back to being agitated. Laura winced.

"Yes, Aunt Marie," Laura replied carefully.

The voice on the phone kept talking. It began hitting some very high notes. By then, MJ could make out phrases like 'stay right the hell where you are' and 'not too old for a spanking'. The person on the other end of the phone was a woman with a distinctly Southern accent. And - again - MJ had the distinct feeling she should know who it was.

"Yes, Aunt Marie," Laura repeated. By then her eyes were closed in a pained grimace.

There were a few final words from the voice on the phone, and then it went silent. Laura took a deep breath and handed the phone back to MJ.

"If you don't mind, I think I'll stay here," Laura stiffly informed MJ.

MJ nodded.

Peter Parker usually took the subway between home and work. Leaving the subway station, he saw Rogue drop out of the sky and land on the roof of his apartment building. It seemed to Peter that Rogue looked pissed. And Peter was well aware of the fact that an angry Rogue was not a good thing.

"What the hell?" Pete half-muttered to himself. Then he began sprinting towards his apartment building.

"Pete?" Marie said in surprise after Peter entered the apartment. "This is your place?"

Marie, MJ, and a younger girl were standing in the tiny living room.

"Hey, Marie," Peter replied. He was obviously confused. "What's going on?"

Marie gestured towards a young girl. "One of our lambs slipped away from the flock," she explained.

Peter glanced at the girl. Then he did a double-take.

"Laura?" he said in disbelief. It had been a few years since he'd last seen her.

"Hi, Uncle Pete," Laura said almost shyly. "There was a teleportation problem and I kinda got lost. So I came here. Dad always said I should find you if I was lost in Manhattan."

Then Laura paused before going on.

"So how long have you known Mary Jane Watson?" she asked very casually.

MJ was giving Laura a hard look.

Peter was still staring at Laura as he shook his head. "Laura... who the heck gave you permission to grow up?"
"That sort of thing just happens," Laura replied very seriously.

"Where are your Mom and Dad?"

"Japan."

Peter looked at Marie.

"We can get her home," Marie promised.

Then Marie glanced at Laura. "And I think we can get her home quietly."

Laura looked relieved.

Peter sighed in relief. "Well... good. So I guess everything's okay?"

"Uhm..." Laura said hesitantly.

Everyone froze and looked at Laura.

"What?" Marie asked in a tone that was both dangerous and worried.

Laura was wincing again. "While I was walking here, there was this guy. He said I was pretty and got kinda close. I didn't like that."

Marie's eyes were wide. "Did you hurt him? Is he okay?"

"No claws!" Laura protested. "Mom and Dad always tell us we shouldn't use our claws unless we have to!"

"Claws?" MJ asked. She seemed confused.

"Is he okay?" Marie repeated urgently.

Laura nodded. "I sorta beat him up. But I'm pretty sure I didn't break anything that was really important."

"Just how many unimportant things did you break?" Peter asked.

"The ambulance crew said he'd be fine! And the cops were laughing when they told me I could go!"

Marie and MJ still looked worried, but Peter was suddenly trying to hide a smile.

Laura and MJ were in the kitchen. MJ was making coffee. Laura had tagged along.

Marie and Peter were still in the living room, going over the details of getting Laura home.

"I really like Uncle Pete," Laura said suddenly.

MJ couldn't help but smile at Laura. "I've noticed."

Then Laura hesitated, obviously searching for something to say.

"I'm glad that you're happy together," Laura continued carefully. "I can smell how close you are. Your scents have blurred together. That's how it is with my mom and dad."
MJ wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but she nodded anyway. "Thank you."

"And your apartment is just filled with sex-pheromones," Laura continued. "I mean... wow! What the heck is it that you two do on the living room ceiling?"

MJ refused to blush. "Come back when you're eighteen and maybe I'll tell you about it."

"Okay." Laura responded with a reasonable nod. "And I'm sorry if I was kind of a B-word earlier. I guess I was surprised to see you here."

"That's okay, sweetie. I know you had a lot on your mind."

Marie and Laura were gone. Peter and MJ were sitting on the couch, trying to sort out what had happened.

"So just who are those two?" MJ asked.

"Marie's an X-Man," Peter explained. "Laura is Logan's daughter."

"Daughter? Logan?" MJ gasped. "Oh, dear God, Logan is reproducing?"

Peter shrugged. "He got married to Ororo. Besides Laura, I hear he also has a couple of sons and another daughter. That's why he sort of vanished until that thing with Hydra popped up a while back."

"So when did you meet Laura?"

A slightly nostalgic look appeared on Peter's face. "I babysat her. That was in the old apartment when we weren't married and you were off shooting that movie in Spain. A bad-guy showed up, and Logan and Ororo asked me to keep an eye on Laura while they dealt with the problem. What was supposed to be for one night turned into a couple of days. At the time, Laura was just a lethal little kid who liked pizza-rolls and cartoons. 'Gargoyles' was her favorite. I lost track of her for a few hours and she killed some rats that were bothering Mrs. Paduski down in her apartment. Mrs. Paduski baked us some cookies for that. Chocolate chip. They were pretty good."

MJ was smiling at Peter. "You know Laura has a crush on you? Right?"

Peter snorted. "Okay, that's silly. She's just a kid."

With a broad smile, MJ reached over and affectionately yanked Peter closer.

"I love it when you're oblivious," MJ told Peter. Then she kissed him. It was a while before they separated.

"So what can I do to make sure you'll never think about another woman?" MJ eventually purred.

A speculative look appeared in Peter's eyes. "Remember that movie you were in that was about the fall of Rome? You were a slavegirl? You had this one really neat outfit."

MJ looked disappointed. "Oh... I didn't save any of those costumes. Sorry."

Peter shook his head as he began unbuttoning MJ's blouse. "No. There's one you definitely still have. And it's always been a personal favorite."

MJ looked even more puzzled. "But I didn't... Oh! You mean... uhm."
Peter was smiling as he helpfully unbuckled MJ's jeans. "Yeah, that one."

Grinning, MJ kissed Peter again as she simultaneously began wiggling out of her pants.

Before heading home, Marie unbent enough to take Laura out for a pizza.

"Still mad at me?" Laura asked. Actually, she could tell by scent and body language that Marie had calmed down. But Dad always told her and her siblings that regular people sometimes had to talk things out.

"No," Marie said, "it's just that this was a surprise. And you should have told me that you were coming to town. That way, I could run interference for you."

Laura considered that and then nodded in agreement. That actually made a lot of sense.

"You're going to have to talk to your Mom and Dad about this," Marie continued firmly. "Yeah, teleporting is just another X-Men thing, but they have a right to know when you're going to the other side of the world."

Laura thought about that. Then she nodded again.

After that, an amused look crept into Marie's eyes. "So, are you planning to use your feminine wiles to take Pete away from MJ?"

Laura stirred uneasily before answering. "No. That wouldn't be right. And besides, Uncle Pete is really into MJ."

"That's good. Want to talk about it?"

Laura used her straw to stir the ice cubes in her glass of soda. "I didn't know Uncle Pete was married. So I was surprised when I met MJ. I got kinda..."

Laura paused.

"Is 'bitchy' the word you're looking for?" Marie suggested.

Obviously embarrassed, Laura nodded.

Marie reached over and squeezed Laura's hand. "Welcome to all of the stupid stuff that happens when you start growing up. A lot of it will just kind of sneak up on you. Oh, and here's a rough rule of thumb, if you think of a man as 'Uncle Pete' then you and he aren't destined to be together."

That made Laura smile. Talking to her Aunt Marie was always a good way to sort things out.

"On the other hand, we just found out that you have pretty decent taste in men," Marie continued cheerfully. "I recommend you stay away from the bad-boys. I fell for one and it's been just one thing after the other. They want you, but they also want to have the freedom to wander."

A waitress appeared and put their pizza in front of them.

"Uncle Remy doesn't wander," Laura said as she slid a slice onto her plate.

"Hmmph?" Marie said through a full mouth.

"Uncle Remy doesn't wander," Laura repeated as she poured what Marie thought were way too
many hot pepper seeds on her pizza. "I've never smelled another woman on him. Just you."

That made Marie frown. "But the way he talks..."

"It's just talk," Laura said idly. Then she attacked her pizza.

Marie considered that. "I suppose it makes sense that you can tell things like that. But be careful. You probably know things about people that they don't want you to know."

"I try not to talk about stuff like that, but sometimes things just slip. Oh, by the way, how much do girls charge for babysitting?"

Marie was caught off-guard by that.

"Where did that question come from?" she asked.

"I could use the money," Laura replied matter-of-factly. "So how much?"

"I'm really not sure," Marie admitted. "And none of the girls at school do any babysitting. Tell you what, I'll ask around."

Laura nodded agreeably as she sipped from her soda. When she and MJ were in the kitchen together, Laura had caught a faint scent on the older woman. Something Laura remembered from back when her mother was carrying Laura's little sister.

If Peter was her uncle, then Laura would soon have a little cousin. And Laura was really looking forward to meeting them.
"Who are you?" May Parker asked in surprise. She'd come all the way from Queens to finally meet the girl who usually babysat little Mayday. But instead of a girl answering the door to Peter and MJ's apartment, there was a boy. And in the background, she could see another boy.

The boy at the door was part-Asian and was quite lean and strong-looking. Broad shoulders suggested he would grow into a powerful build. And the boy in the background was...

Well, he looked just like the young fellow who'd played Harry Potter in those movies. Except that boy had long-since grown up, while this one still looked like Daniel Radcliffe as a teenager.

Both boys were dressed in ragged jeans, loud t-shirts, scuffed sneakers, and jackets. To May's eyes, they both seemed to have a rough-edged appearance. But then again, so many youngsters today - particularly boys - seemed to favor that sort of look.

The young fellow at the door seemed to consider May for a moment. Then he leaned slightly forward, tilting his head to the side as he did.

May blinked in surprise. "Young man, did you just sniff me?"

The boy at the door hesitated. Then he silently nodded his head.

"My name is Raze," said the boy in the back - the one who looked like Daniel Radcliffe. "The guy you're talking to is Daken. Don't mind that he sniffed you. He does that."

Daken shot a hard look over his shoulder at Raze. Meanwhile, May took a moment to marvel at the names people gave their children in the modern-day.

"Our sister is babysitting," Daken explained. "We came to town with her. We're supposed to be somewhere else, but we kinda got stuck here."

With vast determination, May stepped into the apartment. Daken hastily got out of her way.

"Where is the babysitter... I think her name is Laura? And where's Mayday?" she demanded.

Technically, Peter and MJ's little girl was named May - a source of no little happiness to the older May Parker - but somehow the nickname 'Mayday' got applied early on, and then stuck. If nothing else, it was a handy way of avoiding the 'which May are we talking about?' problem.

"Laura took her to the park," Daken said quickly.

Raze nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Whenever Mayday gets fussy, that calms her down."

That seemed sensible, but May's little-old-lady-sense was tingling. Something was wrong. The two boys were acting reasonable enough, but there was an edge to both of them. Something was wrong.

"Help..." someone called weakly from the kitchen.

Daken and Raze winced and looked at each other. May shot them a 'stay right where you are!'-look and walked into the kitchen.
There were three bruised and battered boys laying in a heap on the kitchen floor. They were tied up, but one had managed to work a gag out of his mouth.

"Help," the boy who could speak repeated pathetically. "Oh, please, lady. Help."

They were all sitting at the kitchen table. The three boys were untied but, of course, looked rather ragged. Daken and Raze were firmly sitting between the boys and May.

Everyone had milk and cookies in front of them.

Daken was mechanically eating his cookies, crunching them down one at a time while his eyes never moved from the other boys. His milk was untouched.

Raze was drinking his milk. Unlike his brother, he actually looked embarrassed.

The three other boys were a motley group. There were two younger ones and an older one. The older boy was about Daken's age and he was fuming angrily. The two younger boys were closer to Raze's age and they were obviously scared. All three were taking the 'street-hooligan' look even further than Daken and Raze, although the cuts and bruises they were sporting helped that along.

"Now tell me what happened," May said mildly as she snapped the cap of the milk jug closed and put it on the table next to her.

"They broke into the apartment right below this one," Daken said.

"We stopped them," Raze added as he dunked a cookie into his milk.

Daken took up the story again. "Mr. Carry - he's the old guy who rents downstairs- started yelling when these... buttholes... walked into his place. We heard the racket and decided to check it out."

"Is Mr. Carry all right?" May asked.

Raze nodded his head. "They didn't hurt him."

"He wasn't supposed to be there," the youngest of the beat-up looking boys said disgustedly. He was glaring at the oldest boy. The older boy glared back.

"What were you after?" May asked.

"We heard that the old guy has a coin collection," the youngest boy said mournfully. "We figured we could sell it at a pawn shop."

"The old guy was really scared when we walked into his place," the middle boy said quietly. He seemed bothered by that. He'd just discovered that crime was something you did to real people.

"Hey! You two shut the hell up!" snarled the oldest boy.

There was a blur of motion that ended with a meaty thud. The oldest boy's eyes crossed and then he fell out of his chair. The chair overbalanced, toppled, and went skittering across the kitchen floor. Everyone who'd been sitting nearby hastily moved to save their milk and cookies.

Daken was rubbing his knuckles. "Language," he growled to the prone boy.

"Daken," May said firmly. "That wasn't necessary. I've heard cuss-words before."
"Yes, ma'am," Daken said quietly. "Sorry, ma'am."

May thought Daken didn't look particularly sorry but decided to let it go.

"Have you called the police?" May asked.

"We were going to," Raze said disgustedly, "but Mr. Carry was really upset so we hauled these guys out of his place. We really couldn't think of anywhere else to take them but here. We were about to call the cops when you knocked on the door."

"It's been a busy day," Daken added with more than a trace of exasperation in his voice. "One thing right after another."

"Y'know, maybe we should just kick them out of the building," Raze suggested thoughtfully.

"That's not a bad idea," Daken admitted. "Because when Laura gets back, she's going to flip. This gig is important to her. Who knows what'll happen if she shows up before the cops do."

Raze gave the three would-be thieves a bleak look. "Man, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when Laura gets here."

"But what if they go after Mr. Carry again?" Daken objected.

"Wow, is that not going to happen," the middle-youngest boy said as he held a milk-glass up against his black-eye. He sounded very tired and rather disgusted.

Daken and Raze went silent as they looked unblinkingly at their prisoners. May had the distinct impression that they were seeing something that other people couldn't make out.

"Okay. Get out," Daken finally told the younger boys.

The two youngest would-be thieves were gone - they took off at a dead run after being told they could go.

Daken and Raze dragged the still-dazed oldest boy to the elevator lobby and dropped him on the floor. May was with them, hovering in the background.

"Okay, I'm pretty sure those other two are gone for good," Raze told Daken, "but what about this idiot? He thinks he's a master-criminal or something."

The older boy stirred, and then sat up. He shot a venomous look at Daken and Raze.

Daken punched the elevator button. "We could take him into the alley behind the building and beat him up some more. Maybe that'll get the point across?"

Actually, Daken didn't sound too enthused about his own suggestion.

"Not scared of you..." the older boy slurred. He was still glaring at everyone else.

"And on top of everything else, he's stupid," Raze said in disgust.

"No more beatings," May told Daken and Raze firmly. "Something could go wrong and you might seriously hurt him. Then you'll be the ones in trouble."

"Yes, ma'am," Daken and Raze said simultaneously. May had the impression they were relieved.
that she'd intervened. And neither boy thought to ask May how she knew what she was talking about.

"Still... we need to show him that we're serious," Raze said helplessly. He was looking pretty unsure of himself.

Daken nodded. Then he lifted a hand and formed it into a fist. With a clicking sound, a bone-like claw came out from between his first two knuckles.

With a surprised blink, May suddenly realized who Daken's father was. Now that she knew what to look for, she could see it around Daken's eyes, and in the set of his jaw.

Daken grabbed the older boy by his collar and hauled him to his feet. The boy took a weak swing at Daken that Daken didn't even bother to dodge. The blow just bounced off his shoulder. The elevator dinged open and Daken dragged the older boy inside. Raze held the elevator door open.

"Don't..." May began to say.

Then the older boy shrieked as Daken cut a notch into his ear.

Daken let go of the boy, retracted his claw, pushed the button for the bottom floor, and stepped out of the elevator. The other boy was screaming and holding his ear as blood gushed down the side of his face and neck.

"...don't hurt him," May finished belatedly.

"Tell all your jerk-wad friends that they better stay out of this building," Raze said just before the elevator door slid shut.

May had a hand over her eyes. These boys were definitely their father's sons.

"I knew what I was doing," Daken told May defensively. "Ear cuts bleed a lot, but don't kill anyone."

Raze nodded in agreement. "And if he goes straight to the emergency ward, they can sew it up."

They were back in the Parker apartment. Daken had just finished washing his hands in the sink - May had insisted. May was making sandwiches. She was also lecturing as she worked, emphasizing things like minimal use of force, the importance of not making rash decisions, and that cutting other people's body-parts was an objectively wrong thing to do.

Daken and Raze spent a lot of time saying "yes, ma'am" as they waited for their food.

The apartment's door opened. It was Laura and a peacefully sleeping Mayday. Mayday was tucked against Laura, but the little girl had the odd habit of wrapping her arms and legs around others. People didn't so much hold Mayday as she held them.

Still, Laura had both of her arms and a blanket around Mayday. May smiled to herself as she saw that Laura was wearing a colorful dress, tasteful jewelry, and a pair of fashionable-looking sandals. The outfit had a definitely African air and was actually quite lovely. Laura obviously made it a point to dress up when she worked for Peter and MJ.

May looked closely at Laura's face. Her father wasn't as visible in her as he was in Daken. Still, the hair and cheekbones were right. On the other hand, Laura's electric green eyes were as piercing as
May noted that the two boys weren't embarrassed to show that they were comfortable around babies. That made her wonder if Laura wasn't the youngest in her family.

May handed Laura her sandwich and then carefully took Mayday from Laura and Daken. Mayday, who was very active for a sleeping baby, wriggled closer to May's body heat.

"You must be Aunt May," Laura said as she waved her sandwich helplessly. "I'm sorry. I..."

"Oh, don't worry, dear," May said to Laura as she gazed down at Mayday. "There's nothing to be sorry about. Your brothers took care of everything and meeting them was... interesting."

"We're just that cool," Raze said to Laura through a mouthful of sandwich. Daken grinned. Laura glared at them dangerously.

"Shouldn't you two be at the concert?" Laura asked tensely.

Daken glanced at a clock on the kitchen counter. "Oh... yeah. It's started already, Raze. We better get going."

Raze swallowed the last of his sandwich and hastily got to his feet. Then his form shifted until he looked like a young Daniel Craig.

May wasn't exactly surprised to see that, but she wasn't exactly prepared for it either.

"Thanks, Mrs. Parker," the boys said more-or-less together.

Then Daken and Raze headed for the door. Laura looked at May, said "Excuse me, Mrs. Parker, I'll be right back," and followed them out.

May found a comfortable chair, sat down, and began gently rocking Mayday.

Outside, May could hear Laura berating her brothers. Something about "one day in New York and you two jackasses get into a fight!?" and, "don't even think about bringing any girls back here!" and, "Mom said no drinking!"

May shook her head and smiled.
"Guess what, Mayday?" she asked the dozing bundle in her arms. "It looks like your daddy isn’t the only dangerous man who finally found himself a good woman and settled down."

Mayday smiled in her sleep.

Then a thoughtful look appeared in May’s eyes.

"Did you know that Anna Watson and I got your mommy and daddy together?" May continued. "We set them up for a blind date and things just developed from there. Peter was a little wild until then. That helped calm him down."

Then May slowly nodded her head. "Perhaps Daken and Raze need to have some young ladies in their lives."

As May wove her plans, Mayday started snoring.

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