# Nightworld

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## Summary

The beginning of a new Alpha Flight continuity, which diverges following the events of Alpha Flight #101.

Several members of Alpha Flight are M.I.A., including both of their active mystical powerhouses, Shaman and Witchfire. Vindicator has no choice but to press Shaman's ailing daughter Talisman back into service. With two of the X-Men in tow, Vindicator leads the team on an inter-dimensional search for their missing members. Meanwhile, Northstar and Aurora each reach a turning point, and things will never be the same for either of them.

(Special thanks go from me to former Alpha Flight writers Fabian Nicieza, John Byrne, and James Hudnall.)

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#).
Night in the City

Chapter Summary

Diamond Lil is enraged when Vindicator reveals that Lil and Box have been assigned separate missions. Northstar, hiding out from Alpha Flight in Montreal, missing his sister Aurora, and attempting to drink himself into oblivion, is temporarily pulled out of his pity-pot when he meets a nice man named Kyle at a gay establishment. Aurora, for her part, is in Montreal as well, and when she enters the deconsecrated Catholic church she has found herself supernaturally drawn towards, she beholds a living nightmare!

Lilian Crawley breathed in the crisp, clean night air of Ottawa while she stood outside the headquarters of the Canadian superhero team Alpha Flight. Life felt good to her at this moment. Earlier, she had found out that the tumor in her breast was benign. Lilian had taken this to mean that whoever or whatever force was in charge of this thing we call existence had given her a second chance, and she was determined not to screw it up.

Life had never been easy for the woman colloquially known as Diamond Lil. Standing over six feet tall and possessed of a mutant gene which surrounded her body with a near-impenetrable aura, most men were already intimidated by her even before they became acquainted with her salty, ornery personality. But Madison Jeffries was not most men. A fellow member of Alpha Flight, Madison -- or as Lil affectionately addressed him, Maddy -- was a secure, stable sweetheart of a man who had become her lover, and the only person Lil felt she could let down her guard around. Perhaps, mused Lil at that moment, the abrupt reminder that life is a short and precious thing, never to be taken for granted, was a sign that she and Maddy should take their relationship to the next level. She considered the possibility of HER proposing marriage to HIM, even though it was unusual and probably considered unladylike. Lil chuckled to herself as she remembered that she was no lady.

Suddenly, Lil's reverie was interrupted by a familiar feminine voice.

"Penny for them, Lil?"

Lil turned around to see that Alpha Flight's team leader, Heather McNeil Hudson, codename Vindicator, had snuck up behind her. The guarded, feisty Diamond Lil persona went right back up around her.

"Dammit, Hudson, ya scared the Bejeezus outta me. And what business is it of yours anyway?"

During the tense silence which followed, Lil thought about how, despite her respect for Heather's steely leadership skills, and despite their generally being civil around each other, she and Heather were never likely to become gal pals. Strike one: Heather and Madison had had a lengthy love affair before he became Lil's partner. Strike two: In her unsavory past, Lil had been a member of the super-villain team Omega Flight, which made her guilty by association in the death of Heather's husband, James Mac Donald Hudson, the founder and original leader of Alpha Flight. Though Lil felt that she had redeemed herself several times over since crossing to the side of the angels, she wasn't a telepath, and therefore could never know for sure that Heather had fully forgiven her.

And, recently, the uneasy relationship between Lil and Heather had grown even more complicated. James had come back from the dead as a cosmic cyborg, only to be all-too-quickly taken away again
from Heather by sacrificing himself in Alpha Flight's and the Avengers' titanic battle against the invading alien Consortium. Only the most hard-hearted person in the world could have failed to sympathize with the bereft Heather, and Lil, for all her rough edges, did have a soft heart, underneath the hard shell she had built around it. Furthermore, it was by chance that Heather had been the first to discover that Lil had a lump in one of her breasts. Lil felt uncomfortable being vulnerable in anyone's presence, let alone Heather's. Again, Lil had no idea whether her health scare had changed Heather's perceptions of her for the better or for the worse. Lil cringed at the thought of anyone thinking of her as weak. But Heather's reply would partly alleviate Lil's fears.

"You're one of our best warriors, Lil. That's why I'm sending you on a mission to help rescue our missing members from whatever and wherever that dimension they're trapped in is."

"Thanks...I think. Are you sending Maddy, too?"

"Sorry, but no. His machine-whisperer skills would place him at a disadvantage in an environment where magic rather than tech is the status quo. I've assigned him a solo mission."

"DAMMIT, HUDSON!" Lil punctuated her growl by slamming her fist into her palm.

"There's no room for bargaining here." was Heather's firm reply. "The situation is what it is. You're to report in the morning for the debriefing. Good night, Lil."

As Lil watched Heather turn her back on Lil and walk away, she bit back her tears so hard that her teeth started to grind.

MEANWHILE...

Seated at the bar of Montreal's most notorious gay establishment, Jean-Paul Beaubier, erstwhile Alpha Flight member codenamed Northstar, had come to lose himself in this noisy, crowded environment. He was pouring it down in a vain effort to numb the pain of what he regarded as his recent abandonment by his beloved sister and teammate Jeanne-Marie. Jean-Paul had three days beard, was showing signs of alcoholic bloat, and had dyed his conspicuously silver hair black. He didn't want to be recognized by anyone, even though he told himself that he didn't care whether or not anyone recognized him as the famous, nay, notorious Canadian celebrity he was. Nothing mattered anymore, as far as he was concerned.

"Pardonez moi?" piped up a voice Jean-Paul was unfamiliar with. Merde, he thought to himself, whoever this is has picked the wrong time to be a pest. Jean-Paul turned his head with the intention of cursing loudly at the stranger. But the foul words got caught in Jean-Paul's throat as he unexpectedly beheld a smiling, strikingly handsome young man, with big, soulful eyes, standing next to him.

"Hey there," said the young man, still speaking in French, "Am I right in guessing that you find this place just as obnoxious as I do?"

His face involuntarily breaking out in a wide grin, Jean-Paul laughed heartily before replying in French, "Yes, but even more so!"

The young man responded by saying, "I know another place, not too far away, that's a lot smaller and quieter. Why don't you come go with me?"

As Jean-Paul lifted himself out of his seat, he began to say, "Very well, my good man, thanks very much...", but before he could finish expressing his approval for the sexy stranger's proposition, he
felt his legs seemingly turn to rubber and began to lose his balance. The sexy stranger intervened just in time to save him from a nasty fall.

Most likely due to this embarrassing mishap, Jean-Paul was uncharacteristically sheepish as he and the young man stepped outside and began their walk. The young man promptly smiled his most winning smile and inquired, "Were you, by any chance, raised in this great city?"

"Indeed I was." replied Jean-Paul, returning the smile as best he could.

"Wonderful. I could tell from your accent, but I wanted to make sure. And what's your name? Mine is Kyle. Kyle Jinadu."

Jean-Paul hesitated, worrying that revealing his identity might ruin the night before it even got started. But he quickly decided to trust himself as a judge of character. Kyle appeared to be genuinely, guilelessly sweet and open. And so he replied, "My name is Jean-Paul."

"Well, Jean-Paul, it's lovely to meet you, and something tells me we're both onto something good."

AND AT THAT VERY MOMENT...

Jean-Paul had no way of knowing that his sister was actually in the very same city as him, but in a very different kind of neighborhood. Most of the buildings there had been abandoned and left to rot and go to pieces. The few people scattered along the street were mostly homeless, and they all mistook Jeanne-Marie Beaubier's beatifically glowing form, which was floating in mid-air, as though she were either an alcoholic hallucination or a genuine vision of an angel come to deliver them from their wretched lives. Jeanne-Marie, whose Alpha Flight codename was Aurora, felt her heart breaking at the sorry sights before her. She had taken an ancillary role in Alpha Flight in order to devote most of her time to helping society's less fortunate, and under any other circumstances, she would have attended to the disenfranchised people in this neighborhood. Unfortunately for both them and her, there were other, more pressing matters at that moment.

Jeanne-Marie had been raised in the harshest, most inhumane form of Catholicism, and these small-minded teachings became the catalyst to a troubled, divided soul. And while she had come a long way in a relatively short time towards putting her traumatic past behind her and finding a sense of balance and inner peace, the foundations of her psychological well-being were still quite shaky. All it had taken to rekindle the fire fueling her personal demons was a mental summoning (perhaps telepathic, perhaps supernatural), which had been directing her towards this particular neighborhood in Montreal, and specifically toward the neighborhood's crumbling, deconsecrated Catholic church. As Jeanne-Marie found herself being drawn nearer to it, almost as if she no longer had a will of her own, she began to hear noises emanating from within the church.

Eventually, she was close enough for her ears to sort through the fervorous shouting and chanting, and to isolate the one raspy male voice rising above the others. This, she assumed, must be a priest leading a mass. But what form of priest, and what form of mass? As the scenarios in her head grew darker, she felt a sharp chill run through her body. At that moment, she realized she must use stealth to confront whoever or whatever had been calling out to her. She dimmed the light which she naturally emitted in what was now her default form, and she assumed the appearance of an attractive but mostly nondescript woman, her long silver hair being the one thing that stood out. Jeanne-Marie hoped that her hair would not make her conspicuous, but as she hesitantly entered the church it appeared she need not have worried. No one in the audience seemed to even notice that someone else had entered the church. She quickly made her way to a pew, and crouched down.

After taking a couple minutes to catch her breath, she began listening to what the priest was saying.
His words were, to say the least, alarming.

"Sisters and brothers, brothers and sisters," roared the priest, whom Aurora had not yet raised her head to look at, "I am here to deliver you! Deliver you from the barbaric conformity which passes for the society we live in! The society which worships the light, and fears the dark to the point of persecuting those who are drawn to the dark. For within the dark is the truth. And the truth shall set you free! HALLELUJAH, THE TIME OF RECKONING IS UPON US, CHILDREN! A reckoning with the hypocritical parasites who attempted in vain to control all aspects of your lives, and who have reduced this Earth to a dystopian wasteland. For you are the superior ones, the special ones, THE ONES WHO SEE IN THE DARK! THE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT!"

Jeanne-Marie finally looked up, and she beheld the horrific site of a young man with a deformed face covered in makeup which was styled somewhere between androgyne and killer clown. The robes he wore were a garish parody of the ceremonial vestiments of a Catholic priest. His enormous fingernails looked like claws, and were painted in even louder hues than his face. His hair was long and light blond, and it swirled all around his head as he worked himself, and the crowd, into a fever-pitch froth. Jeanne-Marie momentarily turned her attentions to the crowd, who were mostly teenagers and who took the supposed preacher's gaudy appearance to the next level. The phantasmagoric results were a head-on collision of Hieronymus Bosch and Ziggy Stardust, with an added helping of the Hellraiser movies.

As the crowd's screaming died down, Jeanne-Marie directed her eyes back at the supposed preacher, and it was then that she recognized him. He was one of Alpha Flight's two missing rogue members, Kyle Gibney, codename Wild Child. Before she could react, Gibney resumed his terrifying oration.

"Sadly, children, it would appear that in this life we have no choice but to struggle our way through until we the moment of our death. Ah, but that is yet another one of the LIES sold to you by the PARASITES! Those same parasites whose Bible -- the book of their most EGREGIOUS LIES-- claims that the meek shall inherit the Earth. HA! But I am here, children, to bring you the truth. THE TRUTH, THE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH, SO HELP ME GODDESS! Yes, Children of the Night, thanks to myself, your savage Messiah, your Goddess's humble servant...thanks to myself, the all-powerful, all-loving Goddess of the Dark is coming RIGHT NOW to bring you salvation, to help you BREAK ON THROUGH!"

And then, with his sweeping arm making a melodramatic gesture, Gibney directed the crowds attention to a rapidly expanding object directly behind him. As it grew, it came to resemble a giant multi-colored amoeba. Jeanne-Marie was, by now, scared stiff and speechless, even as the more assertive side within her was demanding that she take a stand against this monumental blasphemy.

"Now come forth, Children of the Night!" commanded Gibney. "Come to another world, a better world, the world of the Goddess of the Dark. I, the Goddess's humble servant, shall lead the way."

The mesmerized crowd began walking towards what Jeanne-Marie now realized was a portal into another dimension. Suddenly, something within her snapped, and she asserted herself at last, floating above the crowd and defaulting back to her natural glow, raising the intensity to near-blinding levels.

"STOP THIS, ALL OF YOU!" Jeanne-Marie demanded. "You claim to see through lies, but you yourselves fail to realize that you have been tricked by the ultimate liar. I speak of none other than SATAN! Follow me out of this den of iniquity and I shall show you the path to TRUE enlightenment."

Gibney was unmoved, if not outright amused. "Sisters and brothers, it appears we have a non-believer in out midst. I do believe the time has come for an ACT OF THE GODDESS! Yes, Children of the Night, you are about to witness a MIRACLE!"
Frantically, Jeanne-Marie braced herself for any one of the horrors which were now crossing her troubled mind. What finally emerged from the portal was not something she had been expecting.

A lithe, athletic female figure clad from head to toe in red and black, complete with a full-faced, full-headed mask, came leaping through the portal and into the church, landing on her feet. Demonstrating astonishing speed and stamina, she executed a triple-somersault as she gracefully moved closer to a once-again-paralyzed Jeanne-Marie. This woman, Jeanne-Marie realized, was the other rogue member of Alpha Flight. Her codename was Nemesis, her real name classified.

Jeanne-Marie began gasping her assailant's codename. But before the soft sound could fully emerge from her, Jeanne-Marie witnessed Nemesis moving ever-faster, leaping in every direction until she became a human blur. And before Jeanne-Marie's eyes could register that Nemesis had drawn her sword, Nemesis leaped directly at her, and used that selfsame sword to run Jeanne-Marie through the heart. The glow which Jeanne-Marie had been emitting now quickly faded away as her life force ebbed out and her body hit the floor.

"PRAISE THE AVATAR OF THE GODDESS!" belted Gibney, shattering the silence which had descended over the crowd. "Yes, children, the Goddess has seen it fit to vanquish this mouthpiece of the parasites' lies. THANKS BE TO THE GODDESS OF THE DARK!"

As the crowd started to cheer, Nemesis sheathed her sword and triumphantly placed her foot atop of Jeanne-Marie's body.
Into the Unknown

Chapter Summary

In the wee hours, Northstar wakes up in Kyle's apartment, only to find himself in the company of the intruder Nemesis, who makes him an offer he can't refuse.

Vindicator, Diamond Lil, Puck, Sasquatch, and Cyclops & Jean Grey from the X-Men are among the heroes assigned to the search & rescue mission involving the missing Alpha Flight members. Vindicator's proposed method of crossing over into other dimensions meets with some fierce objections, but in the end, the mission proceeds as planned.

Meanwhile...Aurora lives?

Jean-Paul awoke abruptly, to find himself in unfamiliar surroundings. And even when he realized that he was sleeping on the couch in the apartment of that nice young man he had picked up at the bar, he still did not feel good about his situation at that moment. His intuition told him something terrible had happened to his beloved sister Jeanne-Marie, plus his head hurt, and he feared he may be about to vomit.

In the blink of an eye, things went from bad to worse. Not unlike his sister, Jean-Paul's reflexes were not as quick as the physical speeds he was capable of. So it was that, without having moved from the couch, he suddenly found himself with the blade of a sword at his throat, as though someone had instantly materialized next to him. Out of the corner of his eye, Jean-Paul could see that that was, indeed, the case.

"So, Northstar, we meet again." said the intruder. Jean-Paul winced when he immediately recognized the voice. "Hello...Nemesis." he huffed.

"Your sister sends her regards." hissed Nemesis.

"My sister?" gasped Jean-Paul. "What do you know about...?"

"Come with me if you want to meet her..." commanded Nemesis, adding, "...and if you want to live."

"Just please do not harm the kind young man who lives here." choked Jean-Paul.

"Why would I?" asked Nemesis, "He has done nothing wrong. Now, let us depart."

The split second after Nemesis and Jean-Paul had teleported away, Kyle exited his bedroom. "Jean-Paul?" he whispered, "It sounded as though you were talking to yourself. Are you unwell, dear heart?"

MOMENTARILY...

The first thing Jean-Paul noticed about the dimension to which Nemesis had brought him was the monolithic blackness of the sky. Not one star shone in the firmament. This dimension's equivalent of street lamps were enormous, and appeared to be fueled by living creatures of various races, some
humanoid, some not. What they all had in common was the glazed expression in their eyes, which Jean-Paul's own light powers allowed him to look into without him being blinded. He shuddered as he heard Nemesis say to him, "Behold, Jean-Paul, the dark realm of the Goddess. She, in her infinite wisdom, holds the truth which will set you free...or destroy you."

Jean-Paul's sneering response was typical of him: "That is a rather melodramatic way to put it, I would say." He looked around at the dimension's winding roads and elaborately sinister architecture -- musing that the term "Gothic" did not even begin to describe its ominous appearance -- before getting to the point: "Where is my sister?"

Nemesis silently pointed to a none-too-distant gateway flanked by enormous twin pylons. Beyond it lay a gigantic, asymmetrical castle whose haphazard-looking structure defied the laws of physics. Then Jean-Paul reminded himself that the laws of physics most likely did not apply within a Goddess's dwelling. Especially in an alternate dimension. Though he was as rattled by all of this as any reasonable human being would, he did not let it show to Nemesis, who merely said to him, "Right this way," as she began walking ahead of him.

As Nemesis and Jean-Paul approached the edge of the castle's moat, he could not help but notice the wispy, constantly morphing blobs of...was it smoke? He could sort of make out faces on some of the blobs. Perhaps they were ghosts? Or goblins? Before he could inquire anything of Nemesis, he saw her, with her back still to him, come to a stop, unsheathe her sword, and raise it. Aha, he deduced, that must be the signal to let us in, and the sooner the better.

Once the drawbridge was in place, Nemesis began to cross it, and Jean-Paul hesitantly followed. His curiosity got the better of him, and he walked over the right-side edge of the bridge to look at the water in the moat. Only for him to discover that it was not water -- it was a viscous, ebon-black form of matter, bubbling and morphing. Hang on a second, he thought, morphing??

His dulled-by-alcohol reflexes once again betraying him, Jean-Paul failed to back off as a slimy tendril, of the exact same shade of black as the mysterious liquid matter, emerged abruptly from the moat and headed directly for him. Not missing a beat, Nemesis leaped toward Jean-Paul, sword aloft, and sliced off the tip of the tendril. The liquid matter bubbled fiercely and noisily, until it was once more quiet and relatively settled.

"That, you fool," explained Nemesis contemptuously, "is raw shadow matter. The more the Goddess turns away her attentions from it, the less she is able to command its actions. The shadow matter's default instinct is one of protecting the realm, and the castle in particular, at any cost."

Jean-Paul took a minute to catch his breath and still his heart, before quipping, "I would have much preferred a three-headed watchdog."

"Let us see if you are so defiantly droll in the Goddess's presence." hissed Nemesis as she resumed her approach to the inside of the castle.

"Indeed," replied Jean-Paul, expertly hiding his raw nerves as he followed her inside, "let us see."

MORNING, IN OUR OWN DIMENSION...

As Alpha Flight leader Heather Mac Neil Hudson, codename Vindicator, approached the conference room of her team's headquarters in Ottawa, she glanced at the sunrise coming through the window, but it did nothing to calm her state of anxiety. She wondered to herself whether her counterparts from other lands, Captain America and Captain Britain, also felt sick to their stomachs whenever they found themselves having to make a tough call required for a seemingly insurmountable crisis.
She entered the room, her head held high and a poker face firmly in place, hiding her painfully grinding teeth. Heather noted that the rest of the active Alpha Flight members -- Diamond Lil, Windshear, Sasquatch, and Puck -- were all present and accounted for, but the team's four special guests had not yet arrived. There was a tense silence in the room until Puck greeted his team leader with a friendly, "G'day, Heather."

"I can only hope this does turn out to be a good day." was Heather's forced, flat reply. But when she saw the snarl on Diamond Lil's face, Heather instantly knew that she had put her foot in her mouth. She attempted to assume an authoritative, all-business posture, but in her gut she felt that she was coming across as stiff and awkward. Being a leader never gets any easier, no matter how much tenure and experience you have, Heather thought to herself grimly.

To Heather's great relief, two of their expected guests walked in at that very moment: Professor Charles Xavier and Scott "Cyclops" Summers, respectively the elder statesman and the field commander of the world's flagship mutant team, the X-Men. "Welcome, Professor, and welcome, Cyclops. It's always a pleasure." Heather said to them. "The pleasure is all ours." replied the reliably serene Professor.

Puck decided right then to chime in by innocently inquiring, "Where's Logan, eh? I'm surprised he didn't come along for the ride."

Once again, it was the Professor who did the speaking. "Wolverine is...regrettably indisposed." he stated stoically. But Cyclops' clenched fists, reddening face, and bulging neck veins said volumes to those who noticed, particularly Diamond Lil. She desperately wanted to sneer at Cyclops to lighten the hell up already, only keeping quiet because her mind went off on a tangent after she reluctantly admitted to herself that he was cute, which segued into a reminder of how much Lil was pining for the absent Madison Jeffries. Lil ended up glumly slumped in her chair.

And, again as if on cue, the entrance of the two remaining guests provided Heather with a convenient means of defusing the tension. Jean Grey, the X-Men's telepathic-telekinetic powerhouse, and Cyclops's lover as well, was pushing a wheelchair as she entered. Sitting in the wheelchair was the source of Heather's anxiety and guilt: The ailing Alpha Flight member Elizabeth "Talisman" Twoyoungmen, a once-mighty sorceress from Canada's native Tsuu T'ina tribe. A disastrous tactical error on her part while on a rescue mission involving Puck, Sasquatch, and her father, Michael "Shaman" Twoyoungmen, had resulted in Elizabeth's mind being fried from too much mystical input at once. Her beautiful raven tresses had been shaven off in order to facilitate brain surgery, and she was currently undergoing extensive physical and psychological therapy in an effort to return to being a functional human being.

"Uh...heya, Liz." piped up Puck nervously. Elizabeth's reply was sub-verbal and palpably hostile. Heather knew that if she wanted to regain face with the team she led, it was now or never.

"At ease, everybody." Heather said firmly. "This emergency meeting of Alpha Flight will now come to order." She took a quick breath before resuming, "Here's the situation -- our team is currently six, count them, six active members short. Northstar went A.W.O.L., and the other five -- Shaman, Persuasion, Pathway, Goblyn, and Witchfire -- all disappeared abruptly from Pathway's hospital room when Pathway herself lost control of her teleportation powers. We've had zero luck finding any trace of these five, even with our state-of-the-art inter-dimensional scanners. Which leads me to conclude that whatever dimension they're in is mystical in nature and cloaked to our scanners. The course of action I have decided on..." she paused to swallow hard, "...is to penetrate that dimension by combining Jean and the Professor's telepathy with Talisman's dormant mystical powers. Any questions?"
"No offense, Heather, but that's stone cold crazy!" barked Sasquatch. "To say nothing of cruel, callous, immoral, and unethical."

Heather fixed Sasquatch with a steely glare and asked him point-blank, "Do you have a better idea?"

"Well...not off the top of my head, but..."

"It's completely unfair to poor Talisman!" Windshear stated, taking Sasquatch's side in the argument.

"With both Talisman's father and Witchfire missing, we have no other recourse.‖ Heather replied with an icy detachment that surprised her as much as it did her teammates and guests.

"STOP IT!!" screamed Talisman with obvious difficulty enunciating, "I won't...be...spoken of...like I'm...NOT HERE! I rec-og-nize the...need for dras-tic measures...and I say...let's...just...GET THIS OVER WITH!"

"Hear, hear!‖ snapped Diamond Lil impatiently.

"Very well, then." said Heather, gently taking back control over the conference. "Let's roll."

MEANWHILE, IN THE REALM OF THE GODDESS...

The Goddess's castle felt smaller and narrower on the inside than Jean-Paul had expected. As with the area outside the castle, all lighting was provided by living creatures, their bodies squeezed into large lamps and their minds seemingly trapped in some kind of stasis. Jean-Paul, had, as Nemesis demanded of him, bathed and shaved. He also had a proper meal in his stomach for the first time in at least three days, and he had regained his sobriety. All very well, he thought, but when the numbness is removed, one actually must deal with the important issues they have deliberately been evading. Such as why he had been kept waiting in the Goddess's ornate, eccentrically decorated antechambers for what felt to him like an eternity.

The more Jean-Paul paced, the faster he paced, and he was beginning to literally wear a groove into the stone floor. All he had wanted was to be reunited with his sister Jeanne-Marie, as Nemesis had promised him. Surely, he thought, that is not an unreasonable demand.

Of course, there was the matter of Jeanne-Marie's heart having been run through by Nemesis's sword just a short time ago, but Nemesis had understandably kept Jean-Paul in the dark about that. But in the realm of the Goddess, life and death were wholly mutable states. So it was that, in another corner of the castle, Nemesis and her fellow Goddess acolyte Kyle "Wild Child" Gibney were witnessing Jeanne-Marie's body being moved by an elaborate set of wires and pulley's, with the purpose of immersing her in a large cauldron containing both raw shadow-matter and an assortment of mystical potions. As Jeanne-Marie was lowered into the swirling muck, Gibney could no longer contain himself and blurted to Nemesis, "What we did to her is wrong, what and we're doing to her is even more wrong!"

Nemesis was profoundly unmoved by what she saw as Gibney's display of weakness and its implied loss of faith in the Goddess. "As if right and wrong were anything more than empty words to the Goddess!‖ she snapped back at him. "Did I not promise you salvation and solace? And did I not deliver? Or would you rather go back to being persecuted under the laws of the parasites who rule our native dimension?"

"Yeah..." grumbled Gibney as he slouched his body and cast down his eyes, "...whatever."

Jeanne-Marie emerged from the cauldron, with the help of the wires and pulleys, her body dripping wet, her long hair equally wet and hanging over part of her face. She was thrashing about, gasping
for air, and moaning sub-verbally.

"Excellent!" Nemesis exclaimed triumphantly.

A BIT LATER...

"At last!" roared Jean-Paul as he saw Nemesis enter the antechamber. "I thought I would go mad if I had to wait a minute longer!"

When Gibney walked in right behind Nemesis, Jean-Paul grew tense and frustrated. "Gibney?? What the hell are YOU doing here??"

"Hiding out from the Canadian authorities, dumb-ass! What else?" growled Gibney.

"Do not test the limits of my tolerance for you, Gibney! This is the worst time to...."

Jean-Paul's angry rant ended as quickly as it had started, once he saw his beloved sister Jeanne-Marie follow Nemesis and Gibney into the antechamber. She had been clothed in a form-fitting red & black suit similar to what Nemesis wore, only without the mask or the high collar...or the sword.

"Could this really be happening?" said Jean-Paul, feeling hope for the first time in days and unable to hold back his tears of joy and relief. "Is that really you, Jeanne-Marie?"

"I am Aurora." she replied with zero emotion.

Jean-Paul responded by laughing uneasily and saying, "Enough joking, my sister. Come, give me a hug."

Aurora merely continued to stand still.

"I would not demonstrate such a display of affection for just anyone, Jeanne-Marie." snapped Jean-Paul angrily.

Aurora remained unresponsive. Jean-Paul approached her, in order to get a better look at her eyes. When he saw in them the same glazed look as he had seen in the eyes of the realm's living lamps, he exploded.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO HER?? DID YOU BRAINWASH HER?? YOU DARED HARM MY SISTER?? NOW I SHALL HARM YOU MOST GREIVOUSLY!!!"

As Jean-Paul stood poised to attack, Gibney assumed a similar crouch, baring his sharp teeth and growling threateningly.

Nemesis abruptly drew her sword and lunged at Jean-Paul, seemingly intending to swat him in the face with the flat of her blade. But Jean-Paul's super-speed powers kicked in, and he easily dodged her. He then charged at Nemesis like a mad bull, only for her to leap away while simultaneously slashing at his legs in one sweeping motion. Her sword connected with one of Jean-Paul's thigh muscles, and he went down screaming.

"Sweet dreams, dude!" laughed Gibney as he kicked Jean-Paul in the ribcage.

Aurora approached her fallen brother, still wearing an impassive expression on her face. As he struggled to regain his bearings, he saw her point a finger at him. Then she discharged a blinding beam of light at Jean-Paul, for whom everything suddenly went black.
Chapter Summary

The mixed search-and-rescue team of Alpha Flight members and X-Men enter the Goddess's dimension. The prisoners in the Goddess's castle each deal with their grim dilemma in different, sometimes surprising, ways. The search-and-rescue team spots the castle from a distance, then takes cover to catch their breath before they make their attack. The Goddess and her avatar, Nemesis, recall their origins as their relationship sours. Finally, the would-be cavalry storms the castle, but things don't quite go as planned.

"I love this place!" Puck exulted with palpable sarcasm. "Maybe we should just forget the mission an' have ourselves a picnic in the park, eh?"

When he heard a few of his teammates, including mission leader Vindicator, chuckling in response, Puck felt relived and smiled a genuine smile. A bit of levity was exactly what was needed once the Alpha Flight/X-Men search & rescue squad -- Vindicator, Diamond Lil, Sasquatch, Puck, Talisman, Cyclops, and Jean Grey -- had been in the Double Goddess's dimension long enough to appreciate just how dark and bleak it truly was, and how the illumination provided by living creatures trapped inside large lamps only made it creepier.

Vindicator's smile faded as she observed Talisman awkwardly orient herself and silently point in the direction they must go. Heather then got down to the even more serious business of planning the team's next move. "Jean," she commanded, "see if you've been able to maintain your telepathic link with the Professor, and let him and Windshear know that we got through the portal just fine. The rest of you, keep moving forward." "On it." replied Jean.

Jean's need to refocus her concentration in order to get the message to Professor Xavier's consciousness on the Astral Plane had a direct effect on Talisman, whose legs buckled and arms flailed before she collapsed on the ground. Puck immediately rushed to her side, while Sasquatch furrowed his brow and shook his head. He still couldn't believe that someone as proud as Talisman would willfully volunteer to become little more than a marionette animated by Jean's telepathy. Sasquatch sighed ruefully as he recalled Vindicator's reasoning at the team meeting -- that they would absolutely need some kind of mystical compass to guide them through the portal and then across a dimension unfamiliar to them all, and Talisman was the only option available.

In fairness, thought Sasquatch, Jean and Xavier didn't have it much easier, Jean with helping Talisman both in moving her body and in sifting through the necessary spells in her damaged mind, and Xavier having to maintain the portal open indefinitely while staying anchored in the home dimension, while Windshear guarded his unconscious body. Neither, Sasquatch thought further, did Vindicator have it easy, for that matter. The fact that she managed to keep herself together the way she did amazed him, even if he still disagreed with her tactics. As an ex-football player, Sasquatch knew all about teamwork, and as a longtime member of Alpha Flight, he knew all about being a good soldier. If only it wasn't for all the messy shades of gray in this thing we call life.

Diamond Lil was doing some mulling of her own. If, she though, Cyclops was cute in his own strong, silent way, then Jean was simply the most awesome chick she had ever encountered -- talk
about multi-tasking! And looking great while doing all those important things at once. Lil was so impressed with Jean that she even began to wonder if she might be bisexual. No, she told herself right away, I'm a monogamous woman, just like Madison's a monogamous man...except there was still all that unresolved relationship crap with Heather. Lil found herself finally accepting that she had basically stolen Maddy from under Heather's nose -- not cool. It's incredible, Lil thought as the team continued its march, the things that go through your head when you're supposed to focus on the task at hand.

MEANWHILE, INSIDE THE GODDESS'S CASTLE...

"How d'ya like the Goddess's dungeon, Northstar?" Gibney taunted Jean-Paul as he pulled him across the floor by the hair. After a beat with no response from the prisoner, Gibney remarked, "Heh. He ain't regained consciousness yet. Too bad, he's gonna miss his only chance to say goodbye to his Alpha Flight pals."

Still holding Jean-Paul by the hair, Gibney brought himself to stop so he could face the three holding cells inside which the other prisoners with Alpha Flight ties lay. Shaman was alone in the one on the left, Persuasion and Witchfire shared the middle one, and sisters Pathway and Goblyn shared the one over to the right.

"Heya, folks. Still enjoyin' yer accommodotions?" Gibney taunted the prisoners. When they refused to answer or even look at him, he raised his voice. "I suggest you take a good look at yer comrade Northstar here -- because you ain't ever gonna see him alive again. He got excitable with Nemesis, and so it's directly to the torture chamber for him! Do not pass Go, do not collect yer money!"

Gibney roared with laughter at his own lame joke before exiting the dungeon corridor while tossing back one final taunt, "Don't any of ya worry, yer time will come, each an' every one of ya losers!"

As Gibney found himself alone with his thoughts again, he admonished himself for the twinges of guilt he had been feeling, especially concerning Aurora. Hell with that, Gibney thought, because no matter what dimension you're in, it's the same old winners and losers game, and he always sided with the winners...even when he didn't like to.

Shaman, normally unflappable and serene under even the worst of circumstances, as befitting his status as both a doctor and a Tsuu T'ina medicine man, was feeling his blood boil and his patience evaporate. Nemesis and Wild Child and the members of their Children of the Night cult had gotten the jump on him and the four young women when Pathway unwittingly teleported them to this dimension. With his medicine pouch nullified after his daughter's near-lethal impulsive behavior, and the lack of any raw materials inside his antiseptic cell with which to properly cast a spell, Shaman felt impotent and weary. He had never backed down from a challenge before, but now he felt himself doing just that. And this wound to his pride hurt like a million hot needles being driven into his flesh.

The tween twin sisters Pathway and Goblyn, for their part, had both been heavily sedated, the former so she could not teleport herself or anyone else, the latter to ensure that there would not be any of the relentlessly violent behavior she tended to show while conscious. The teenage girls Persuasion and Witchfire, by contrast, were both allowed to be awake and aware, though Persuasion had been blindfolded to prevent her using her mind-control powers on anyone. And the blindfold and been dipped in a magic potion which would cause harm to anyone who tried to remove it.

"Do you have to be so freaking quiet??" Persuasion screamed at Witchfire, whom she obviously could not see, only hear. "I'm going stir-crazy here!!:

"And what would you have me say?" asked Witchfire with no small amount of drollery as she sat in a meditative position on the cell floor.

"I don't know!" Persuasion snapped back at her cellmate, before pausing to better ponder Witchfire's
question. "Okay," Persuasion finally said, "tell me another story about being the daughter of the devil. I still don't believe you at all, it's like something out of a bad comic book, but, oh, my God, anything to break up this BOREDOM!"

Witchfire stood up and quietly snuck up to Persuasion. Then, without warning, she pressed her hands on Persuasion's face and gave her cellmate a deep, long, sloppy kiss. She backed off just in time to avoid Persuasion's angrily flailing arms.

"EEEEWWWWW!" cried Persuasion. "GROSS! Why did you DO THAT??"

"I believe," Witchfire replied serenely, "that you had told me you wanted anything that would alleviate your boredom. And also, I'm presently not in the mood to talk about my father."

"You creepy psycho bitch!" Persuasion spat out. "From now on, just shut up and stay away from me!"

MEANWHILE, IN A CANYON NOT FAR FROM THE GODDESS' CASTLE...

As the majority of the Alpha Flight/X-Men search-and-rescue squad renewed their energies with a well-deserved rest, have already worked on a strategy for the upcoming assault on the Goddess' castle, Diamond Lil, seated on the ground at the top of the canyon, looked at her watch. She then knew that her stint as the team's lookout person was over, and she should expect her replacement any minute now. Soon enough, she heard the dirt and the gravel crunching under the heels of whoever was climbing up to take her place. It turned out to be Puck.

"All right, Lil, here I am." said Puck. "Go treat yourself to a nap, eh?"

"Thanks." replied Lil as she began to make her way down the canyon.

About halfway down to where Lil had seen what looked like a good spot to lie down, she heard whispering. Listening intently, she made out two voices, one male and one female. She crept, with as much stealth as she could, over to the jutting rock formation where the voices seemed to be coming from the side opposite her. With one hand supporting her and the other balled up in a fist, she approached the rock, walked around it to the other side, and swung herself over, ready for anything.

What Lil found was no less than the team's resident romantic couple, Jean and Scott. Jean, her beautiful green eyes closed, was resting her head on Scott's broad shoulder and her hand on his firm pectoral muscle as he tenderly stroked her long red hair. Deeply embarrassed, Lil stumbled away out of sight and almost lost her balance. A couple minutes after regaining her footing, she was satisfied that she had not disturbed them and returned to climbing down the canyon. Despite her initial embarrassment, Lil now found herself smiling. She had sensed almost from the beginning that there was a sweet, affectionate side to Scott the X-Martinet. Jean was so lucky, Lil thought, to have what a lot of women spend their whole lives searching for: A man whom she could turn to at the end of the day, and whom she could rely on to make her feel like a woman again. All of which made the need to resolve all the issues between herself, Madison, and Heather more urgent to Lil than ever before.

LATER, INSIDE THE GODDESS' CASTLE...

As the avatar of the Goddess, Nemesis had the privilege of her own private chapel built into the castle, where she was able to communicate directly with the Goddess herself. At that moment, Nemesis entered the chapel, which was elaborately decorated considering its relatively small size, festooned in bright multicolored crystals and all manner of miniature mystical paraphernalia. It was also completely dark to anyone other than the Goddess' avatar, for only she was allowed to see in the dark and to be able view the Goddess' manifestations. Nemesis got down on her knees, her hands
high above her head, and begged for an audience with the Goddess. Within seconds, the Goddess appeared in her default form: two female silhouettes joined at the hip, one with waist-length hair and a sylphlike build, the other with shoulder-length hair and a more voluptuous build. Both their faces were hidden in the shadows, except for their eyes, from which there shone the only lights in the room.

"I thank you from the bottom of my unworthy heart for answering my call in this time of need." said Nemesis.

"You may stand," replied the Goddess in a soft but authoritative voice that would have been soothing if it had not sounded like it was echoing off the walls of an impossibly deep cavern, "and state the purpose of this audience."

Nemesis took a moment to gather her thoughts before declaring, "I sense that my day of reckoning is near, and I ask to find greater strength within me to accept your will. I also sense that the young mutant female you commanded me to bring to the realm may turn out to have a purpose which would be counter-productive not only to myself, but to the survival of the realm, and even the survival of your own divine, all-powerful self, and I ask that I be allowed to kill her once again, this time permanently."

After a couple of seconds, the Goddess spoke: "Avatar, you claim to desire acceptance of my will, yet you question it incessantly, and quite possibly more relentlessly than any of your predecessors. Considering how little time has passed since you assumed the mantle, I find myself most preoccupied. State your reasoning behind your troubling actions."

"I work tirelessly to enforce your will," said Nemesis with more than a hint of bitterness, "and yet, inside I feel more anxious and furious than ever before. Though I thirst to avenge my son's death and the hands of Alpha Flight, I find that as the possibility of the final reckoning draws nearer, such passions begin to feel rather...hollow. Surely there must be a greater destiny in store for me than to be your angel of death?"

"All I have to say to you," replied the Goddess sternly, "is that it is not for anyone other than myself to know what fate has in store for them, not even you. Unless you overcome your all-too-mortal sense of entitlement, you will never find any of your infinite possible destinies satisfactory."

"You call me entitled," stated Nemesis in a defiantly argumentative tone, "but how can a mother not be entitled to closure after a tragedy like the one I have lived through? My son Alec may not have been the most perfect man, but he had a brilliant mind which could have offered so much to the world under more ideal circumstances. Instead, I was unable to prevent him from becoming misguided, embracing lawlessness, and paying for it with his life! I could not find solace or comfort in the worship of the Christian god, and so I turned to you. And now, you have failed me too!"

"I failed YOU??" screamed the Goddess, and inside Nemesis felt like jumping out of her skin, but remained outwardly stoic. "I fail NO ONE! YOU have failed YOURSELF, and now you must SUFFER the REPERCUSSIONS of your BLASPHEMY!!"

"I have suffered enough of your callousness and abuse!" yelled Nemesis as she removed her mask to reveal a youthful but plain face and a head of red hair whose short cut might have been considered sensible to a parochial mentality. "From this moment on, I serve no one but myself! I shall find a way back to the dimension I was born into, and no one will stop me, not even you!!"

"Is that so?" inquired the Goddess rhetorically, her voice so serene it was downright sinister. "Then prepare to meet the destiny you have brought upon yourself."
And a split second after the Goddess had spoken, powerful twin beams of light shattered the door to the chapel, and there, in the empty frame, stood Aurora, her body aglow not with the soft light of a illumination, but the white-hot light of damnation.

Nemesis unsheathed her sword with a ferocious flourish, then charged like a juggernaut at Aurora, who took flight at the last possible second, thus escaping the bite of Nemesis’ blade. Aurora now landed on the floor of the corridor, standing tall, her hands on her hips and her eyes blazing furiously. With an unearthly, eardrum-shattering battle cry, Nemesis leaped in the air and brought down her sword, intending to cleave Aurora's head like an overripe melon.

Instead, Aurora caught the blade between both of her blindingly luminescent hands, and prevented it from striking her. So firm was Aurora's grip that the rest of the blade bent towards the right, causing Nemesis to slam against the wall. The shock to her system made Nemesis unhand the hilt of the sword. Nemesis could not believe Aurora was now capable of this, but there was a more unpleasant surprise in store.

Aurora now turned up the heat, causing the blade of the sword to melt until the metal ultimately evaporated, and the hilt struck the floor with a dull clunk. Nemesis was speechless and paralyzed as Aurora looked down on her fallen form. Then Aurora's eyes began to glow even more intensely than before, and once more they fired twin beams of light, this time directly at Nemesis, who desperately turned her head away and tried to shield herself with her hands.

When the glow faded away, Nemesis found to her surprise that she was still alive. But then Aurora opened her mouth and declared, "What the Goddess gave you, she now takes away from you."

At that moment, Nemesis began to feel her entire body aching, as if every cell which made up her skin was on fire, every muscle ached unbearably, and her bones calcified and became brittle. To attempt any kind of body motion, even blinking, was so intensely painful that she now longed for the death she had feared only a minute ago. Nemesis did not need a mirror to know that her skin had shriveled and her hair had turned white. And at the rate her eyesight was blurring, she would not have been able to see herself anyway. The Goddess had punished Nemesis by taking away not only the powers she had given her when she made Nemesis her avatar, but also the youth she had restored Nemesis to.

AND INSIDE THE CASTLE'S TORTURE CHAMBER...

Northstar had always been too proud to beg, and even now, when he was shuddering that the thought of being introduced to even more diabolical torture devices than those that had already had been used on him, he still stubbornly refused to ask his tormentor, Wild Child, to show mercy. Jean-Paul Beaubier felt like he had nothing to live for, not his squabbling dysfunctional team, not his beyond-all-hope sister, not...Kyle? Dieu, he thought, how could he have forgotten those few hours of genuine joyfulness he had felt in Kyle's company? He struggled to contemplate this as he awaited the next phase of the torture.

"Holy crap," exclaimed Wild Child, "you sure can take it! I'm almost impressed with you. Almost."

He paused as he looked around the chamber, seeking some kind of instrument to further test Northstar’s endurance.

Suddenly, Wild Child was denied his sadistic jollies when two of the Children of the Night barged in frantically. "Oh, now what?" growled Wild Child.

"Your holiness," gasped one of the gaudily attired teenage followers of the Goddess, "there is no other way to say this -- we are under attack from those we had been warned to expect."
"The rest of Alpha Flight, here??" snorted Wild Child. "Don't that just take the cake! But why isn't Nemesis leading the counter-attack?"

"She turned on the Goddess," replied the other Child of the Night, "and she was transformed into a feeble old woman."

"And Aurora?" asked a now-desperate Wild Child.

"She claims the Goddess has forbidden her from fighting." was the reply.

"All right then," huffed Wild Child, "We're gonna take the fight to them -- but we're gonna do it MY way. In other words...EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF!"

OUTSIDE THE GODDESS' CASTLE...

Despite being guarded by the scariest-looking, tallest, most muscular members of the Children of the Night, the taking of the Goddess' castle by the Alpha Flight/X-Men squad appeared inevitable. The guards had weaponry and savagery on their side. The heroes had teamwork and superpowers on theirs. The diminutive but agile Puck was proving that the bigger they are, the harder they fall; the towering Sasquatch was swatting them away like insects; Vindicator's electromagnetic blasts neutralized any weapon the guards pointed at her and her team; Diamond Lil's invulnerability allowed her to roll with the punches and return them with interest; and Cyclops' expertly tactical use of his powerful ocular beams provided cover for Jean Grey and Talisman, who were being kept behind for the final push.

This is almost too easy, Vindicator thought to herself, and we're now in danger of letting it make us cocky. Moments later, Vindicator's worst fears seemed confirmed when she saw Sasquatch break formation and take a series of mighty leaps and bounds straight toward the castle. "Sasquatch," she barked, "fall back into formation! Remember the battle plan!"

"I'm seeing a chance and I'm taking it!" replied Sasquatch. By his own calculations, one more leap would take him soaring over the moat and through the front wall, and his momentum and solidity would shatter the wall as if it were glass rather than stone.

But what Sasquatch had not counted on was a very large -- larger even than him -- and extremely vicious monstrosity rising out of the moat and snaring him in one of it enormous tendrils. Sasquatch felt his circulation being cut off and his bones breaking as the creature wound its tendril around him more tightly by the second. Just before he blacked out, he saw the creature heaving its bulk out of the moat and heading for his teammates with an agility which belied its considerable size.

Worst of all, the next member of the squad to be ensnared by the monster was team leader Vindicator. She tried to get it to loosen its grip with the most intense electric shocks she could muster, but to no avail. Now she found the creature's mouth come closer, ever closer. The monster's enormous teeth looked like they could turn her into flesh-and-blood puree in one bite, and the stench coming from within the monster overwhelmed her and caused her to pass out.
Breaking the Circle

Chapter Summary

Fighting off both the Children of the Night and the creature from the castle's shadow-matter moat, the heroes are nearly overwhelmed, and one shall surely die.

In the end, the surviving members of Alpha Flight are variously transformed & empowered, blinded & bereft.

Within the two-minute window of time which passed between Sasquatch breaking formation and Vindicator being on the verge of becoming chow for the monster that had emerged from the castle moat, Jean Grey and Talisman had managed to hold a full conversation, thanks to Jean's telepathy speeding up communication:

"Set me free!" demanded Talisman, whose mental "voice" did not have the speech impediment her speaking voice had acquired after her accident.

"I don't understand what you're talking about." replied Jean.

"What I need you to do is to help me find the spell that will create a focused mystical blast, which will be aimed at the monster."

"Nothing seems to affect the monster, he doesn't have a scratch on him. How do you know that spell will defeat the monster?"

"Because I am going to put my entire life force into the blast."

"Talisman, no! There has to be some alternative..."

"Do you think I WANT to keep living in THE STATE I'M IN?"

"I'm sorry, but I cannot condone suicide."

"Listen, white woman, and listen good -- I can feel that my mystical powers have returned full force, but I'm still having trouble focusing them. If I have to, I'll cast a random spell at your brilliant mind, and the shock to the system will kill us both."

"Please, Tal...Elizabeth, I beg you to be reasonable."

"As one of the few white men I respect once sang, 'Now ain't the time for your tears.' Either you set me free now, or I take you down with me AND Heather gets eaten by the monster."

"Very well, then, I'll help you find the spell and focus it, but I wash my hands of your decision."

In all, only a split second passed in "real time" before Jean and Elizabeth located the proper spell and Elizabeth began to cast it, but in that time frame, Jean had witnessed Elizabeth's entire life flashing before her eyes -- Elizabeth's tragic loss, at a tender age, of her mother to cancer, with her father's overly optimistic promise to cure her mother adding insult to injury, and resulting in their estrangement from each other; their reunion in the recent past after fateful circumstances conspired to
transform Elizabeth into Talisman, the mightiest sorceress in the Western Hemisphere; Elizabeth's trials and tribulations as a member of Alpha Flight, including her triumphant confrontation with the near-omnipotent villain Llan the Sorcerer; and finally, her impulsive and ultimately fatal mistake in absorbing all at once the entirety of the esoteric knowledge contained in her father's medicine pouch, which had destroyed her mind, her body, and, in the end, her will to live.

"My time has come." Elizabeth informed Jean. "Release me now, or you'll die along with me. And...thanks, Jean, you're okay for a white person."

In less time than it took for Jean to blink, she had set Elizabeth free to launch her mystic assault on the monster, as a humongous lightning bolt emerged from her, hitting the monster point blank, and causing it to drop Vindicator on the ground as its life force quickly ebbed away. By then, Elizabeth's spirit had left her body, hopefully to end up in a happier place, and the already-damaged flesh vessel flailed for a few seconds before hitting the ground. Jean did nothing to stop the flow of tears which were now spilling from her eyes and getting all over her face. When she realized that Elizabeth had not said a word about telling her father that she loved him, Jean began to sob. Cyclops rushed over and took her in his arms, while the other heroes that were still alive and still conscious were finishing off what appeared to be the last of the Goddess' Children of the Night guardians.

Suddenly, the castle's drawbridge began to creak, until it came down with a deafening thud. A new armada of Children of the Night, with the Goddess' high priest Wild Child as field commander, came pouring out of the castle. At the same time, other Children of the Night emerged from the castle turrets, firing weapons at the heroes.

"Jean..." whispered Cylops into his lover's ear, "...I'm sorry to have to say this to you, but this is war and you have to pull yourself together, just like I've been forced to lead the final push now that Vindicator's down. As soon as we get back home, you can cry all you want and I'll be there to comfort you, but right now, we desperately need your powers. I need you to create the biggest psionic pulse wave you can muster, in order to knock our enemies off-balance. C'mon, Jean, I know you can do it!"

Within mere moments, Jean had willed herself to regain her composure and to fulfill her duty in the battle being fought. And though it had taken a lot out of her, she managed to stay on her feet as she joined the rest of the still-standing heroes now charging the fallen enemy armada. Diamond Lil made a beeline for Wild Child, who had just crept out of the massive pile of humans, and was still trying to find his balance when Lil practically took his head off with a good, hard swing of her fist. Those enemy warriors who had not been already knocked unconscious by Jean's pulse wave were finding that they were no match for Puck, who ricocheted off the woozy warriors like a pinball, taking them all down in record time. At the same time, Cyclops had been providing cover for Lil and Puck by blasting the castle's weapon turrets to bits.

There was nothing left to stop the heroes from breaching the castle, and they did just that. As they rushed in, Cyclops commanded, "Jean and I will head left, Puck and Lil will head right. We'll meet back at the entrance in five."

"Lead the way, Puck," said Lil to her designated partner as she continued to run, "you've been in a lot more castles than I have."

"Roger that," replied Puck as he cartwheeled forward. "I'd say we best head for the most likely location of the antechamber, eh?"

SHORTLY, AT THE TORTURE CHAMBER...

"Mon dieu," groaned a bloodied but still acerbic Northstar when he saw Jean Grey enter the
chamber, "what took you so blasted long?"

"Nice to see you, too." said Jean sarcastically. "Now hold still while I free you."

A minute later, Northstar was back on his feet, and Jean was saying, "This way. Cyclops is freeing the other prisoners from their cells."

Indeed, at that moment Scott only had one cell door left to blast open with his ocular beams, and that was the one leading to Shaman. Flanking Cyclops were Witchfire, who was holding up the semi-conscious Goblyn, and Persuasion, who was doing the same for the similarly awakening Pathway.

"Okay now," declared Cyclops, "here's the first order of business now that you're all free..." He paused to remove a first-aid kit from the biggest pouch on his belt and then hand it over to Shaman, "...Vindicator and Sasquatch both got banged up, and they need your medical skills ASAP. Girls, you are to help Shaman any way you can. Understood? And also, Wild Child is unconscious but still needs to be restrained."

As the former prisoners filed out of the cell block, Cyclops briefly shuddered before calling out to Shaman. "Michael?"

"Yes, Cyclops?"

"There's something you need to know -- Heather had a tough call to make, and she ordered Elizabeth to come and help us find you, and...I regret to say that Elizabeth chose to sacrifice herself to save us all. My condolences, Michael."

"I...I see." replied Shaman softly, refusing to drop the stoic shell he had long ago built around himself. He then added, "I will see you outside, Scott," before turning around and walking away, still standing tall and dignified.

MEANWHILE, IN THE ANTECHAMBER...

"Er...fancy meetin' you here, Jeanne-Marie." said Puck with uncharacteristic hesitation as he and Lil walked into the large room to find Aurora deep in thought and having levitated herself a few feet off the ground. "Um...how's it goin', eh?"

"I am Aurora. Jeanne-Marie is dead." was her emotionless reply. "She breathed her last right before she was killed by Nemesis."

"Say...what ended up happening to Nemesis, anyway?" asked Lil after an awkward silence which seemed to go on forever.

"Follow me," said Aurora as she began floating down the corridor, "you are both to have the privilege of witnessing an event of celestial import."

She led them to the doorway of what had been Nemesis' private chapel. The weak but still-living body of Nemesis lay on the floor, curled up in a fetal position and shuddering.

"Jane? Is that really you?" gasped Lil, refusing to believe her eyes.

"In the spotty flesh." mumbled Nemesis ruefully, refusing to look up at Lil. "Tell me something while I'm still here, Lilian...do you think Alexander could have redeemed himself if he'd been given the chance?"

Nemesis was referring to her deceased son, Alexander "Smart Alec" Thorne, a megalomaniacal
genius who had been teammates with Lil in the villainous Omega Flight, and whose death she had blamed Alpha Flight for, and whom she had hungered to avenge by infiltrating Alpha Flight, with the initial plan to destroy them from within. Then she had made the fatal mistake of allowing her ego and her sense of entitlement derail her best laid plans.

Lil pondered Jane's question before responding, "Yes." It was a lie, and she thought Jane probably wasn't fooled, but Lil knew that saying anything to the contrary was unthinkable under these circumstances.

Jane changed the subject. "I'm not the first Nemesis, you know. But..." she began to cackle, "...it looks like I've set the record for the shortest-lived avatar of the Goddess."

Without warning, the Goddess' echo-laden voice began to boom throughout the castle. "No, Jane, your life has not even begun." declared the Goddess.

"You misunderstand. I have willed it that you shall not experience any further misery." replied the Goddess as she surprised everyone by manifesting herself outside the chapel, once again in the form of two female silhouettes joined at the hip. "Instead, you shall become one with me."

"I am a very young Goddess, you see, and it has only been recently that I have admitted to myself that I possess the fallibility which bedevils all sentient forms of life, even those on the higher planes of existence. I see now that I have much to learn and many changes to make if I am to evolve as all sentients must. Transforming Aurora into my new avatar was the first step...ah, I see her metamorphosis is nearly complete."

At that very moment, Aurora floated to the ground and ceased to glow. When she turned around to face Lil, Puck, and Jane, they were startled by the change in her appearance. One side of her face and hair remained the same as before, but on the other side, her face and hair had both become as dark and shiny as obsidian, with only the blazing white-hot light of her eye standing out.

"She is now equal parts light and shade." declared the Goddess. "She is to symbolize my new credo. Where once my avatars and acolytes preached extreme beliefs, now they shall work to find the proper cosmic balance."

"And what exactly is MY role in your new order?" rasped the quickly-fading Jane.

"At birth," explained the Goddess, "I was but a single Goddess, the Maiden. After a very long time, I reached the next level and evolved into the Double Goddess, Maiden and Mother. Now you, Jane, are to become the seeder of my final component, the Crone. And thus I shall at last be the Triple Goddess."

"Then please, take me now," pleaded Jane, "I can't take the pain anymore."

"Yes," replied the Goddess, "the time for this crucial step is now." And with those words, Jane's body crumbled to pieces, and the pieces crumbled to dust. When the witnesses to this miracle looked up again at the Goddess' manifestation, they now saw Jane's silhouette had been joined with the other two.

"And all is well again in the realm!" exclaimed the Goddess.

"The hell you say!" shouted Northstar, who had silently entered the antechamber moments ago, accompanied by Jean and Scott. "I demand that you return my sister to her real self!"
"You protest in vain, brother." said Aurora. "And who are you to deny me the capacity to evolve and change for the better?"

"Do you realize what she has turned you into??" raged Northstar. "No man will ever be able to look at you without panicking!"

"WRONG!" screamed the Goddess. "There are plenty of tolerant male sentients who will not be distressed by her appearance. You, on the other hand, are a petty, possessive, obsessive, selfish, bigoted little man who should know better, especially considering the unconventional lifestyle you lead. But then, you have spent years hiding that from the rest of the world, have you not?"

Northstar's jaw dropped and he was barely able to choke out an angry response. "What business is it of theirs? And what business is it, even, of YOURS?"

"Your arrogance truly knows no limits." sighed the Goddess. "Very well, then, you must learn humility. And as you have been so judgmental of all that you have seen with your eyes, including your own sister, then I decree that YOUR EYES SHALL SEE NO MORE!"

"No," gasped Northstar, running his hands over his now-blind eyes. "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!" As his head slumped down and he fell to his knees, Northstar discovered to his partial relief that at least his eyes could still produce tears. And it was probably for the better that he could not see that Aurora appeared unmoved by his plight, and made no effort at comforting him. Finally, Jean and Scott walked up to him and helped him to his feet.

"You may all leave now," declared the Goddess, "with the exceptions of my avatar, Aurora, and my high priest, Kyle Gibney, the latter whom I believe you have bound outside the castle, and whom you intend to bring back to your dimension for prosecuting? It shall not be so."

"No offense, your Supreme Ladyship," sneered Lil, "but he's a killer, a moron, a jerk, and a complete waste of flesh. He deserves nothing better than to rot in prison."

"Oh, Lilian, Lilian, Lilian," laughed the Goddess, "who are you to judge him? Have you not sought redemption for your own past misdeeds? Why should he be denied that opportunity?"

"Goddess makes a good point!" interjected Puck. "Cuz at least if Gibney stays in this dimension, she'll keep him on a leash all the time, eh?"

"Yeah, that's true." admitted Lil. "And it'll be nice to be rid of him..." her face broke into a wide grin, "...without having to worry about him coming back into our lives."

"So be it." said Jean. "Now, let's go home."

LATER, BACK AT ALPHA FLIGHT HEADQUARTERS...

"Windshear, I can sense they are returning." said Xavier with typical serenity as he rose from the mattress he had been lying on.

"About bloody time." was Windshear's smirking riposte.

As the team filed in through the portal and into the room, Windshear and Xavier could not help but notice how grim the expressions on everyone's faces were.

"Uh...welcome back, mates." said Windshear with forced jollity. "Did...um...did we win?"

"Does this answer your question?" asked Shaman as he entered last of all, carrying his daughter's
lifeless body in his arms.

"Ooooh, man...oh, Shaman, I'm so sorry, man..." stammered Windshear.

"I have already declared to Heather my intention of resigning from Alpha Flight." said Shaman. "All that remains is to make it official. Once that is done, I shall disappear from all your lives for eternity."

Nobody said anything, as they were in silent agreement there was nothing left to say. They left the room, one or two at a time, until only Heather and Lil remained.

Lil put her hand on Heather's shoulder. "I might not be who you want to hear this from," said Lil, "but I can appreciate now that you always do the best that you can, and that's all any of us can do."

"Thanks." said Heather. "But if you don't mind, right now I think I need some alone time."

"I understand." replied Lil as she walked out of the room.

Alone at last, Heather sighed heavily as she settled in a chair, her back to the doorway. Once again, she thought about Captain America and Captain Britain, but this time she felt certain that they had been where she was now. Being a national icon was a thankless job, but it was still their responsibility, their burden to bear.

End Notes

I found myself having to do a bit of a continuity fudge -- in Alpha Flight #101, the last issue before the timeline divergence, Northstar claims that his sister Aurora has disappeared into another dimension along with other members of Alpha Flight. This is a mistake, probably due to an editorial oversight. In fact, Aurora was not with the members who were accidentally teleported to another dimension. Moreover, Aurora had last been seen in issue #95, taking a considerably reduced role in Alpha Flight in order to go her own way.

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