Summary

Sara Louise Adrien was just trying to survive High School one day at a time. Having most of the school mistake her for a trans*gal named Adrian Essel was just the start of her troubles. But today... today just started to go wrong when her X-gene began to manifest...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Disclaimer: The only thing I own is Sara. Oh, and the story concept. Just about everything else is owned by Marvel and probably Foxglove.

Misfits
InterNutter and Foxglove

The aging step-through died on the crest of the last hill.
"Aw, c'mon, Eileen..." complained the rider. They pushed the vehicle forward as if they were riding a scooter, and coasted down into the parking lot, using their sandshoes as brakes.
Eileen didn't really need the bike lock that the rider wrapped in complicated loops through and around her. It was just there to stop anyone towing her off as junk.
Sara unbuckled her helmet and stowed it in the seat, then slung on her heavy backpack and slouched towards school and her locker.
Another day, another dead rat.
This particular specimen had been "rescued" from a class dissection and had half its innards splayed about the floor of her locker space.
Sara just reached for the *other* pocket with the hole in it and drew out a plastic bag. She kept her face neutral as she encapsulated the corpse and dumped it unceremoniously into the nearest bin.
"Sara, Sara, plain and tall..."
_Oh *damn*.*. She's two minutes early..._
"When you got height, you got it all," Janine beamed at her, showing off her brackets. She was almost the polar opposite of Sara, being short and rounded where Sara was tall and thin. "When you got beauty, you were sore - you were stuck behind the door!"
It was a daily ritual. "One of these days, Janine," Sara promised, "even *you* will grow weary of that little ditty, and have nothing left but the novelty of a simple 'hello'."
But Janine wasn't listening. She was primping her copper-coloured curls at a boy who was desperately avoiding her eye. "What's up? Still sweet sixteen and never been kissed?"
"Let's just say that I'm getting bored," said Sara, heading off that particular rhyme. "I'm thinking of a behavioral experiment."
"What? Sticking a penny to the floor again?"
"Please, I did that already. *This* time, I'm thinking random pennies in random, obviously-stuck places. Walls, ceilings, the undersides of glass tables... I can use the school security cams to monitor them an--"
The next thing she knew, she was staring at some blood pooling on the linoleum, and Janine had vanished.
Whoever was dripping was real close. Practically right on top of her.
And then the pain blossomed from her temple.
"Oh frell," she muttered, touching the area. _Ouch._ She stood and found the locker she'd collided with. No visible rust, therefore there was a reduced risk of tetanus.
_What am I thinking? I've *had* my shots._ "Stupid girl," she muttered. Hand over her wound, she made it to the nurse's office shortly before the bell rang.
"Hall pass?" said the school nurse.
"But - I got here before the bell..."
"I didn't *see* you before the bell. Go to your class and get a hall pass."
Sara sighed and plodded back to first period.
"You're late, Mister Essel."
Half the school or more seemed to think she was a boy named Adrian Essel. She didn't bother correcting anyone.
Sara held up her gory hand. "I *do* have a valid excuse."
"You've been *fighting*,” he announced. "Straight to the office. Now!"
"But--"
"Must I escort you?"
"No," Sara murmured. "Though I'm sure you can't get the locker to press charges." It was a long walk to the office and, despite the pressure on the wound, she was bleeding like a stuck pig. Her head hurt and she was feeling all - woobly.
There was no-one at the desk when she got there, so she took a ticket and found a seat that looked easily cleanable. Sara leaned back in it and closed her eyes. _Hurry up,_ she thought to the invisible office staff. _I think I need stitches..._
Her unencumbered hand fell lax onto the pebbled plastic surface of the cheap chair. It would take sharp eyes to notice that the skin of her hand changed to match the colour and texture of the surface it rested on.
The human eye is naturally drawn to the sight of blood, so in a way, she was extremely lucky that she was bleeding.

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There was just no question about it. Today was not going to be one of the cool ones. He'd get through it anyway, but it would help if the speedtalker shut up just for a *minute* to allow Todd's brain to zone out of reality. Instead, every second had that too sharp awareness - allowing everything in at once. His brain could shut nothing out - not the cold, nor background noise, or the acidic emptiness in his stomach.
"So then I told her I would be better *off* with a slut compared to what *she* was, and she totally bitchslapped me! ME!!! I was like, 'oh no you didn't' and I woulda slapped her right back, but Coach Sanderson was all--"
"So wait," Lance interrupted in untimely fashion, "Some common girl managed to slap *you*?"
Freddy's shoulders began shaking with laughter. Todd would've joined in if he was feeling half as less disoriented. He managed a smirk.
Pietro scowled at the older boy. "Yeah, she slapped me. No powers at school, duh, or I swear I woulda -"
"You'd never hit a lady," said Lance.
"That was so totally not a lady!"
"Ha." Todd rummaged in his backpack, hopefully. "I think Lance meant you'd never hit someone with an innie."
Todd's questing hand closed around the remains of a poptart. He pulled out the stale cherry frosted breakfast pastry and bit into it. Finally, something that didn't have legs attached.
His next bite closed on air. "Hey!" he cried out, noticing the sudden absence of the poptart. Pietro glanced at him quizically.
"What?" the slender boy asked, licking crumbs from his fingers.
"That was my breakfast yo!"
"Eat a bug."
"I've been *doing* that all *week*. I'd like some real food for a change!"
"So would we. You get more nutrition than we do with those bugs, so stop whining," Pietro retorted.
"Like I'd ever not share insects with my bestest pals," Todd feigned an injured tone.
"Hakuna Matata," Fred joked. He patted Todd's back. "Don't worry about it. We'll do fine without them."
Todd rolled his eyes and walked toward the lockers.
"He really okay on just bugs?" Lance asked Pietro.
"Think of all that protein. How could he not be?"
"I'd rather not," Alvers muttered. "Okay. I'm off to skip geometry. Pietro, you have free period next. Why don't you steal us all something for lunch? And I mean *all* of us. You *do* owe him breakfast."
"Cheep, cheep, cheep, Mother hen."

Pietro expertly dodged Lance's swat. "Wiseass."

Todd grumbled all the way to his locker. He stood carefully to the side as he opened it so he didn't get sprayed in the face by his own booby trap in case he wasn't careful. He'd started putting traps in his locker - the type that sprayed shaving cream, slime, and Hawaiian Punch in random flavors of the week. It was just a kick to come back to find the locker swinging open with evidence of its exploded contents, even if he had to clean it up afterwards and take books spackled with several shades of tropical punch to class.

Even if he got the crap beaten out of him later for trying to one-up the bullies.

The trap was spent, from earlier that morning or last night. There were pieces of shaving cream all over his biology book. Could be worse. Todd took the book out and shut the locker. There would be no need to set it up again until the weekend. Best to allow for them to take retribution and think they'd taught *him* a lesson.

Tolensky ducked behind a showcase of sports trophies as he spotted Graydon, Duncan and Bruce walking down the hall. He wished he hadn't; they saw him anyway.

"Hey, Toady. What's up?" Duncan said, leaning against the wall beside him. Todd gulped.

"N-Nothin' Duncan. S'up wit you?" Best to answer. Silence was taken as form of rudeness.

"I'm fine. Had a nice score last night. She was pretty tight. Man did she scream."

Todd tried not to squirm. He knew what question they were going to ask next.

"How bout you?" Duncan asked, looking down at Todd. "You score lately?"

"N-No, Duncan. I haven't. And I don't think it's all that big a deal, really."

Graydon and Bruce burst into snickering. They were surrounding him in a circle. One beside him, one before him, the other and the glass showcase blocking his exit to the right.

"Why not?"

"I dunno. Guess I'm just a hopeless romantic?" Wrongthingtosay, wrongthingtosay. Todd closed his eyes as the laughter became raucous. He didn't know why he tried to be cool with them. He just knew that it was safer than running, and that the laughter hurt about as much as the beatings did.

"You're hopeless all right. Pick out a girl and screw her already. Unless of course you're *not* a dyke."

Ow. "I'm not." Todd's voice was small. "Just rumors, you know?"

"I wouldn't know," Bruce admitted. "But I ain't never seen you shower after gym."

Oh no... not that.

"What have you got to hide, man? That fact that you aren't one?" Duncan slapped hi-fives with Graydon. The trio departed with more laughter, leaving Todd to study the floor with undue fascination. Anything to avoid the eyes of others. Their conversation had been loud enough to carry down the entire hall.

Todd shifted his book and notepad and walked to the labs, trying to look careless. As if words like that would make him come apart, compared to everything else he dealt with. He could handle it, yo. Long as he kept telling himself...

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Tolensky."

"So sorry to hold up the learning process, Mr. Priscen. Hope you weren't to terribly stumped without me here."

Whoa. Where the hell had *that* come from?

"Office it is, yo," Todd sighed, doing an about turn even before Mr. Priscen could even point toward the hall and sputter.

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When Todd got to the office, the secretary was playing 'phone tag.

"Bayville High, please hold..." she intoned. "Bayville High, please hold... Bayville High, please hold..."
Todd took a ticket, then noticed the other guy who had. "Jesus H. frikkin' Christ on a crutch!"
"*MISTER* Tolenski!" The secretary barked. "Sorry, sir, I'm transferring your call, now."
Momentarily free from the 'phones, she stood. "Do you *really* want to earn a detention this early in
the day?"
"But this dude's bleeding to death, yo..." Todd pointed at the lanky guy sprawled into a cheap chair.
"Lookit that blood."
She did. "Oh my *goodness*!" She escaped from the tangle of lines and cables and rushed over to
the victim. "Mister Essel. Mister Essel, can you hear me?"
"Wnf? Oh. 'M sorry, I musta dozed off. C'n I have a hall pass?"
"A hall pass?" Todd blurted. "Yo' need a *paramedic*, foo'... Lookit all the *blood*..."
Essel did. "Whoah. I'd relax. It only looks that much 'cause it's all spread out. Can't be more'n a
teacup. I just need a hall pass so I can see th' nurse..." His gaze drifted down to his hand. "Okay... that's new..."
Todd looked. The kid's hand was matching the chair he sat on. Todd moved quickly to cover it and
fake helping him up. "Hey, yo. Why don'cha write us both th' hall pass an' I'll help him to the nurse?
I know yo' busy, so I can jus' recite the whole 'education is a privilege' speech an' get on back to
class, right?"
The secretary was only too glad to sign two slips and send them on their way.

"Okay," murmured Sara. Her elbow was currently on Mr Tolenski's shoulder, more for stability than
support. Like anything of a liquid nature in her presence, the blood was getting around. Her
samaritain was gaining transfer smears as much as she was. "I simply *must* be hallucinating... but
usually a blow to the temple causes some small personality hiccoughs, not illusions... so why did it
appear as if my hand was plastic?"
"It *was*, yo," said Mr Tolenski. "That was frikkin' close, dawg. Yo' can't let nobody know yo' a
mutant."
Blink. "I'm a what, now?"
Tolenski glared at her. "You mean yo' don't *know*?"
"I don't know a great many things," she announced. "...'s why I'm in Remedial Ed. So tell me all
about the sort of thing that I'm supposed to be, now."
"First, make yo' skin go normal, 'kay?"
Sara looked. One hand matched the heavy canvas of her backpack that she dragged with her, and
the other matched Tolenski's vest. "Oh *my*..." She focussed for a moment on making it go back. "Will
that do?" Once again, she was terrifyingly pale and her arms were covered with scars.
"Coo'. Keep it that way. Yo' still need t' get stitched up. Okay. Brief skinny. Mutants got this X-gene
that does really weird stuff, y'know?"
"Ah," said Sara with much sarcasm. "Mother *will* be impressed."
"Whatever. So yo' got this gene an' it activated, makin yo' do that skin thing," he continued leading
her towards the school infirmary. "Thing *is*, yo' can't let nobody know or yo' a smear."
"Fascinating," she said. "But I thought peasants with torches were banned by the Geneva
Convention."
"When they angry an' got rocks, nobody cares about Geneva," Tolenski said. "Just play it coo', yo. I
try t' talk to yo' bout it at lunch. Deal?"
"If I'm conscious by lunch. I feel so much like Alice..."
Another stare. "Whatever."

Essel wasn't all that heavy, but his weight was starting to drag a little. Todd looked over at 'him' to
see eyelids drooping.
"Yo, you can't doze off foo'. Talk to me."
Sara's eyes opened at a sluggish pace. "If you don't mind babbling, sure. I don't think I can stay
focused."
"Small talk. Tell me bout yourself. Go on and babble, I wanna know you're still alive."
"How d'you know about mutants?"
Todd paused as Sara's feet caught up to his. "I am one. I'll tell you later. I don't think you should focus on mutants now."
"But it's more interest'n th'n I am..." Sara mumbled.
"Try me, yo. Where'd you get the gash?"
"Um..."
Okay, that was going nowhere. "You got a hobby? Pet peeve? Pets? Anything." Todd knew damn well whom the blame would rest upon if Essel ended up requiring an ambulance ride. The person who'd *given* him the injury wasn't it.
The nurse's office door was closed. Todd knocked by means of kicking it.
"Excuse me!" the indignant response came from within. High heels clacked over to the door and yanked it open. "The proper way to knock, Mr. Tolenski, is not with - good *God*, Mr. Essel! *Another* fight?"
Todd snorted and with his free hand handed over the hall passes. "Yeah, sure, skinny just goes lookin' for trouble. In the meantime, nevermind the frikkin' 'ketchup' stains on Matthews' shoes."
The nurse glared. "Move him inside please. And have a seat." Todd half-dragged in the taller student and placed her on the sick bed in a sitting up position. Sara groaned as her head bumped against the wall.
"Sorry, yo. You're just so *tall*." ~
"Never mind," said Sara. "It's blunter than the locker." She stumbled into the bed, dumping her bag as she sat down. "I wouldn't mind so much if something of the ilk didn't happen every day..."
"You get in fights every *day*?!" Tolenski boggled.
"With various inanimate objects, perhaps... The lockers are just the end of a rather long list. Walls, doors, Vlad..."
"Vlad?"
The nurse arrived with a standard waiver form. "Fill this out, please."
"The hell?" Tolenski stopped the nurse vanishing again. "Yo, the dude's *bleeding*..."
"And school policy prevents me from touching him without a completed waiver form. If he was unconscious, I'd have to call 911."
Sara started writing block letters onto the sheet. "It's a standard thing, these days. So many litigious parents waving claims of abuse. Quickest way to stop it is to prevent all staff from touching *any* student. Hmp. Seemed to have regurgitated a thesaurus of late..."
"It's *nuts*." He hovered on escaping, then leaned towards the clipboard. "Need any help, dawg?"
"A few tissues to prevent bloodstains," she said. "Otherwise, I can still focus and write on the lines... is hospital a bad word for -er- 'us'?"
"Itoleyashuddapaboutthat..." he hissed.
That would be a 'yes'. _Hm. Reason for requiring physical contact..._ Sara wrote, "Bleeding all over the scenery."
Tolenski was craning his neck. "Who the fuck is Sara Louise Adrien? I thought yo' was some guy named Essel."
"You and most of the school," she muttered. Were her words slurring? No matter. As long as her skin was pink, she didn't need to fret. "My last name sounds like a first name, and with the two initials, I become Adrian Essel. My efforts to get people to remember the real me are... moot." She sighed. "Only two more years. I can survive two more years. Not including this one, of course."
The next line read, "Cause of mishap:"
"Yo, put down 'Duncan Matthews'..." suggested Tolenski. Then he did a classic double-take. "Yo' a *GIRL*?!"
"*Mister* Tolenski..." warned the nurse.
Sara held a bloody finger in front of her lips. "Shhh... it's my secret identity. I'm sure if Matthews knew my true gender, he'd be trying to ruin me for all mankind, rather than shoving me into inanimate objects." She wrote, "Unknown force moved head to intersect locker corner," instead.
The nurse had had enough. "Mister Tolenski, if you aren't here for any valid reason, you can go back to your class."
"He's here to take dictation if my vision fails, Ms Ogg."
Ms Ogg didn't think much of *that*. "There's a sink in the next room. At least get all that blood off you before you go."
Sara mouthed, "Sorry," at him, then signed the waiver.
Ms Ogg took it without reading it and urgently removed the existing semi-crust of gore. "Can't close that with butterfly sutures. I'm going to have to give you some stitches. How are you with pain medication?"
"Horrendous. I'm the point zero one five percent that gets weird reactions to over-the-counter medication."
"Half a CVS[1] acetaminophen it is," said Ms Ogg. She made Sara press her fingers to a medical pad while she vanished into the lockroom for the medication[2].
"Psst..." Tolenski poked his head around a corner. "Yo' gonna be okay?"
Sara managed a brave smile. "I'm quite used to pain. Don't fret."
He made a face as if not fretting was never an option. "The name's Todd. Todd Tolenski."
"Sara Louise Adrien," she supplied, in case he forgot. "Plain and tall."
"Ain't arguin' wit' th' tall," he grinned. "The plain... I dunno..."
"You're being nice," she said. "I saw you boggle when you found out my real self. I get mistaken for a boy. It happens."
"*Mister* Tolenski..."
"Whoop... argue later. Survive now." And then he was gone, sandals squeaking down the hall.
He was the first person to actually *worry* about her... who wasn't a teacher.

Todd, once around the first corner, dawdled so long in getting to his first class that he was actually early for his second.
And *that* period, he spent rewinding everything he'd ever done to his fellow students and looking for a tall, gangly figure in the middle of ground zero.
There *were* several food fights with Freddy in the middle, but Sara was on the edge. Fading out of view unless the Angry Straight Males happened to be offended by her breathing.
It shocked him to think of it as background noise, before. He'd thought that if it wasn't happening to him, then it wasn't his problem.
_"I'm quite used to pain..."_ she'd said.
His vindictive play-by-play memory zoomed in on the scars up and down her forearms. Long, thin lines, criss-crossing and intersecting. New over old...
Defensive wounds.
He knew *that* jargon from watching domestics when he was still living in the tenements. People threw up their hands to protect their eyes or face, and got the scars on their arms, instead.
_"I'm quite used to pain..."_
There were some people, he knew, who deliberately inflicted their own wounds along their arm. Not suicidal, no. Just wanting to control the pain they felt by making themselves bleed.
But those people almost always made patterns in their flesh.
Sara's arms bore no reasonable design.
He doodled in the back of his book, tracing the lines on her arms as they'd appear if she were protecting herself.
Either she was facing an ambidexterous assailant with a thing for swapping grips, or something else had caused those marks.
"Just try to raise your head, I need to wrap you with some gauze."

"...nnngghh..." Zombie-like, Sara tried to obey. She could barely get her head to twitch. She felt too heavy. As if the table was all that was stopping her from sinking wholesale into the centre of the Earth.

Ms Ogg lifted her head up for her. "You weren't kidding about the reactions, were you?"

"...nnngghh..."

The nurse sighed. "I'm going to have to lay in a supply of infant's painkillers. That's going to look interesting."

"...y' keep sayin' 'at... b't ch' allus f'get..."

Ms Ogg wrote herself a post-it note. "There," she slapped it onto the board. "Now I have a memo." Sara would have been heartened if the memo hadn't landed in amongst a flock of twenty identical ones.

"There. That's all I can do for you. Please consult your personal physician at your earliest convenience. And since you're still technically conscious, I have to send you to your next class."

Joy. Remedial Math with Mr Kawalski. She hated to disappoint him, so.

Ms Ogg helped her lift her backpack, and guided her to the door. From there, Sara was on her own. It was a long, slow, dizzying walk to Remedial Math.

"What happened to your *head*?" demanded Janine in passing.

"Skin plus locker equals blood," Sara slurred. Damn medication. She felt floaty and heavy and dizzy all at the same time. "I think it was fourteen stitches..."

But Janine was gone.

When she slumped into her chair in the Remedial Ed. room, three different people including her study-buddy Freddy asked what happened to her.

"Did you hit your head?"

"Nah... I w's mugged by a locker," she managed.

Mr Kawalski took one look at her and announced, "Instant quiet-time. Don't do anything that makes you fall over."

"...nnngghh..." said Sara, and gently rested her head on her desktop.

[1] Out here in Australia, we have several 'brands' of generic items. These include 'No Name', 'No Brand' and 'Black Label'. Apparently, CVS is the NY equivalent.

[2] No matter the paucity of official medication on a school campus, the official policy is to lock it up as if every drug junkie in town is going to want to share some.

~

Todd left off tracing the scars to doodle the memory of Sara's face. He was no Picasso, but he could make a passable portrait if he felt inclined. The hair went so... if Sara let it grow out a little more, it might be wavy.

Then the nose and eyes. Sara's eyebrows were more or less responsible for making her look like a boy. Everything else, from her cheekbones to her lips was either delicate or strong. The mixture was different from the average cheerleader, but different in a *good*, almost refreshing way.

Sara was beautiful. Nobody realized it with all the painted faces, big hair, and exploding bosoms (whether genuine or stuffed) parading around the halls. Todd tilted his head to examine his handiwork. It was hard to criticize, for the subject rather than the skill.

She'd *talked* to him too. Without laughing or making puking noises once his back was turned. Without the false sweetness Trish pulled on him once to get him to steal soda for her. On top of that, she was a mutant. The goody goods hadn't seen her, Todd noted with some hint of pride. Summers and Grey, the everloving Scout Leaders, had only preached Xavier's folderoy to the obvious and the well-endowed.

They'd continue to look over Sara. Todd was sure of it. If they didn't find value in a frog-boy with legs that could kick holes in walls and car doors, they wouldn't even bother with a girl who could
turn into wallpaper. None of them were outcast enough to see her. And even if they were, Todd wasn't going to allow them to pretend they did.

*He'd* been burned that way once. He had scorch marks on the inside of a thigh and along his left hip to prove it.

He'd talk with her at lunch. There would be no recruiting. Recruiting was done with. Over. The only thing he wanted to do was talk to her and help her understand who she was and how to stay alive. The Brotherhood's sole function now was staying alive. And lately, foraging the wood for berries and squirrels. Another mouth to feed let alone another *girl* was not gonna go over well with the guys.

The only thing he *didn't* want was to lose her. For some reason, the thought of her staring at him like Rogue did now hurt him desperately.

(Todd knew *why* Rogue looked at them like that. She loved Scott. Scott disliked the Brotherhood. Rogue therefore wanted to be fully cleansed and hated the Brotherhood for sullying her in Scott's crimson vision. It was sort of pathetic really...)

Todd was broken out of his reverie by a spitball smacking into the back of his neck. He closed his eyes, irritated, peeled off the wet projectile and tossed it over his shoulder. The snickering paused, replaced by invisible daggers. He must've had a hit. _Good_, He smirked. _Maybe that'll teach 'em._

*Thhhppp* [splat, splat, splat, splat] _Fuuuuck._

~

Lunchtime. Sara had partially resolved to subsist on aging twinkies and some of those rat bars she'd purchased at a survivalist's shop. It was better than running the daily gambit of attempting to avoid Jock's legs as she went through the cafeteria.

Freddy, however, had other ideas.

"C'mon, Sara... let me get your lunch for ya. Nobody messes with *me*." She sighed. In a way, she was glad he wanted to be helpful, in another, she sort of regretted that his world view included being tougher and meaner than everyone as a means of getting what he wanted. She fished out her wallet and gave him a small bundle of twenties. "Here. Lay on a small feast. I'm expecting company."

"Janine again?" Freddy made a face. He didn't like Janine.

"No... a mister Tolenski." "What? *Todd*?"

"You know him," Sara smiled. "Excellent. Lunch for three, then. Do you need more money?"

Fred counted them. "*Sara*..." he whispered. "This is over a hundred *bucks*..."

"And this is the fourth time you've worn those gravy stains," she said, traces of Boston emerging as she pointed out the smears on his overalls. "I can always tell when you're down on your budget cycle, Frederic... You can't afford washing powder."

"It don't feel right, takin' your money. I know how your Mom can get."

"Frederic, dear, I *do* run quite a number of scams to make up the gap. I probably won't even notice the difference." She made tiny little shoo-ing motions. "Go on. Keep the change."

A team of wild stallions couldn't have moved him, ordinarily; but her thin, flicking fingers had power over him. Freddy walked away to the cafeteria line, fist closed solidly over the money she'd given him.

Sara hid the wallet it came from under the feminine hygene things. Most teenagers were squeamish to the extreme about any kind of feminine hygene. So therefore a packet of maxi pads was bound to stop even the bravest of schoolbag thieves.

Well, except that mysterious person who'd abducted her bag one day and scattered the whole of its contents over the entirety of the campus. That was a doubly unpleasant afternoon. Mostly because she spent it in the company of her schoolgirl crush, Mr Hinkley - who now believed she was a very emotionally disturbed young gay or transsexual male.
Life sucked.
Sara spotted Todd and smiled a little.
Okay. Maybe it didn't suck *too* badly.

Todd found her before she saw him.
In times past, that sort of pose dictated 'victim here'. Hell, there would have been a time when he'd sneak up on her and try to raid her for cash. Not that he'd done that kind of thing. At least, not to her. His pickpocket brain classified her as Wallet-Not-In-Pants, and therefore not an easy mark.

_Yo, quit thinkin' of her as a potential victim. Yo' just gonna give her survival tips. That's it. How to be a mutie in ten easy lessons._

Then she saw him and smiled.

_Todd's heart leaped into his throat and did a rhumba._

_MAYBE A HUNDRED EASY LESSONS_ he thought. _She *is* in Remedial Ed. And hey - who knows? Maybe she wants me..._ That last thought, though, was extremely tenuous. Nobody wanted to spend time with a toad.

But then... she hadn't exactly wanted to *avoid* him, either.
And her face lit right up when she smiled at him.

This is Sara as she really appears. She's tall, standing at 5'11" in her socks, and still hasn't finished growing. Everything about her is stretched out, as if she was photographed in cinemascope and then squeezed to fit into a television. Her knees, elbows, hands and feet have yet to be grown into. Her skin is pale. Her hair is not.

Imagine the sort of hairstyle worn by the children of economical parents. That is Sara's hair in the shade of brown. It rather resembles a solid shape designed to fit snugly over the ears and brow, and just stopping short of the neck.

Her body shape is deceptively thin. And, alas for her aspirations towards looking like a girl, she still wears a training bra.

With the loose T-shirts and stiff jeans, it's small wonder that she gets mistaken for a male.

Todd floated over to her on cloud nine. "Hey," he said.
Sara blushed. Todd thought it gave her face life. "Hello. Do you mind that I bought lunch? Freddy's getting it. I gather you know him."

His gaze instantly zoomed over to the behemoth in the queue. He was gathering three trays and - what?- collecting *change*.

"Yeah, me an' Fred are ole pals," he said, possibly on automatic. "Are you an him - er..."

"Fred and I are study-buddies. We help each other with the Remedial Ed. work. He's my sounding board. I'm his explainer."

_And this means exactly what in the social standings? _"Um. So... yo' not lookin' fo' a boyfriend?"

Her eyebrow raised. "Mr Tolenski, I thought you were here to discuss Mutants 101..." Odd, now there was more than a trace of Boston in her words. "Or was your intent to deceive?"

"No, no. Honest, we can get to that... I was just. You know. Wonderin'."

"My appologies," Boston was gone again as she flicked out a chair. "Please. Sit. Tell me what I need to know."

Todd sat, affecting a comfortable slouch to disguise his froggy way of perching. "First off, yo' gotta play wise, y'know? Yo' can't let nobody know yo' a mutant."

Sara's fascinated smile fell to a worried frown. "Not even my *Dad*?"

In Todd's experience, fathers were the last people to drag into it. "Yo, parents get funny, y'know? It'll just make it weird. Or fatal."

Wide eyes. "Fatal?"

"Some people, they jus' want ordinary kids, yo." And the less said about that, the better. Momma and her murder-suicide stunt could just stay his dirty little secret. "Better to let 'em believe they got one."

"Can I stay normal-for-me?" she asked. "Because acting like one of *them*--" she pointed out the
chest-stuffing, makeup-covered cheerleaders, "--is completely against my style. Besides, I'll only ever be popular as a joke."

Todd winced. That was the second time she'd belittled herself in as many meetings. "Yeah, normal for you is fine. I just meant play it casual. You got yo'self a big secret, a'ight? Yo' better off workin' out what'cha can do an' how useful it is on yo' own. But workin' out how to pass is mo' important."

"Like wearing those bracers so that people don't look at the webs on your hands?" she suggested.

_Day-umn..._ "Yo' *good*..." he grinned.

Freddy arrived with the food, and placed a tray in front of each of them. He was, as always, generous with the portions. He laid a twenty, a five, and some miscellaneous change in the middle.

"Frederic, I told you to keep the change..."

"But I don't *feel* right taking your money," he complained.

Todd squeaked. Twenty-five dollars and *change*... That could buy a whole lot of Rice-a-roni.

"I can *spare* it," Sara insisted. "Freddy, *please*... I don't like hearing that you resorted to violence to pay for your essentials. Think of it - as protection money for the entire campus."

Todd's fingers twitched to take it.

Fred hung his head. "Actually, that kinda makes me feel worse."

_What are ya, *nuts*?_ Todd mentally screamed at his teammate. _Takeit! She wants yo' to!_

Sara laid a companionable hand on his arm. Next to Fred, she looked frail and easily breakable.

"Freddy... I know you're proud, dear. But I *know* you can use the money. Please?"

Shamed though he was to admit it, Todd started thinking about ways he could separate the girl from any other money she could spare.

Fred hung his head, not taking the cash.

Sara sighed and shook her head, not taking the cash, either. "Okay. So lesson one is 'blend'. Are we free to discuss lesson two?"

~

Todd had to force himself to look away from the money. Sara's face was much more attractive than Jefferson's, fortunately. "Okay, so number two then. You gotta learn control over yo' powers. You *don't* want anymore near accidents like we had in the office. Otherwise, it's gonna be hell tryin' to explain."

Sara bit into an apple. "Okay," she said, after chewing and swallowing. "So where and how do I learn this control?"

"Practice where people can't see you. And research chameleons, yo,'cause that's the critter who's got the most relevance to your gifts." Todd tried not to think about what his research on toads had brought up. Shedding skin[1]... ewwww. And the soap toxins, as if Uncle Manny[2] wasn't bad enough to scare him away from the shower. He was fairly hopeful that chameleon-study wasn't going to make Sara yak. "I know a couple of books you could use. Maybe we could meet in the library after school."

"Just keep me away from Terry Pratchett and the fantasy section, and we might actually get something done."

"Huh?"

"Um. I'm a bookworm. A fantasy bookworm."

"S'cool. I don't go into reading much. Lately haven't had time for it." Todd shrugged. His eyes dropped again to the money and flicked away from it, landing instead on Sara's scars. He stiffened in surprised embarrassment.

Sara blushed and smoothed her sleeves down to cover them.

"Sorry, didn't mean to stare," the frog-boy mumbled. "But... is that what Freddy meant when he mentioned how your mom 'can get'? 'Cause if it is, you might wanna consider... I dunno. We don't got much food but you've got money so that's not a problem for you, and we got some empty rooms at the boarding house, and it'd at least be a place to *stay* if you got into trouble."

Come live with me, pleeeease? Todd had to physically restrain himself from adding that; he bit the
tip of his tongue. Now it was Todd's turn to blush and duck as he felt both Fred and Sara staring at
him.
"What do you think I meant?" Fred asked, genuinely puzzled.
"Did your mom or someone give you those?" Todd asked, getting right to the point.
Sara stared. He seemed genuinely concerned whether she was being abused. Nobody had even
noticed except for Janine, who'd spread the rumor that she was a cutter. Janine later expressed that
she'd done Sara a favor; wasn't everyone nicer now that they thought she might kill herself? The
rumor had flopped of course, people were more ready to believe Adrian Essel owned about forty cats
rather than a cutter's angst. The scars didn't look deep anyway.
"These aren't from any *person*," she explained. "They're from Vlad."
"The Impaler?" Todd joked, unable to resist.
"The school harp. A regular bloodsucker."
"Heh. Good to know." Tolensky actually sounded like he was easier. Sara shook her
head. It was only imagination. Nobody could care for her that much.

[1] Toads are known to shed their skin like snakes - when they are young, every two weeks. Older
toads shed once a month (which might explain the monthly shower Todd takes - to soothe the
itching.) Not only that, but according to textbooks I've read, toads *eat* their shed skin to regain lost
nutrients. Yak, indeed. I don't think that fact went over very well with Todd.
[2] Internutter created Uncle Manny. He was a sexual predator who attacked young Todd in the
bathtub when Todd was living in the tenements. Soap is poisonous to amphibians because their skin
is so porous that the soap is absorbed into the bloodstream. The chemical toxins and lye kills them.
Todd is also mammal, so I don't think this would affect him the same way - it would just make him
sick for a while. Couldn't have helped his hygiene morale to *read* about it though.

~

_Rule One: Blend. Rule Two: Practice for control's sake, and don't let anyone *see* you practice.
Rule Three: Know your animal._ Sara did her best to memorise those rules as she ate. Considering
the necessary secrecy, it would be more than wise to not keep anything written.

Something occurred to her. "It's not just chameleons, you know."
"Hmn?" Todd surfaced from his mental wanderings. "Whut?"
"The skin-blending thing. It isn't just chameleons. Octupi and Squid can change their skin colour and
even their surface texture."
"Maybe," said Freddy. "But you ain't gonna like goin' around by 'SquidGal' or somethin'."
And seeing as how Freddy *knew* about this... maybe he was in deeper than he seemed. "We really
need a hankerchief code."
Both boys boggled at her.
"Was I speaking in tongues again?" she asked.
"Naw. Just from left field," said Freddy.
"What's a hankerchief code?"
Sara grinned. "I believe it belongs to San Francisco... There's so many preference variations over
there that the potential for mutual embarresment is overwhelming... so each society developed a
different way of folding hankerchieves into a visible pocket. Possibly it included variations for taken,
looking, and not looking... The point *is* - if mutants could easily recognize who was whom,
without letting the -er- mundanes[1] know... there'd be a better chance for socaillization."
Freddy looked down. Todd looked nervous.
"Uh... yeah. 'Bout that..."
Sara raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me. There's mutant gangs?"
"Kinda," said Freddy.
"Well, there's us in the 'hood, y'know? We call ourselves the Brotherhood. And then there's the X-
geeks."
"They call themselves the X-geeks?"
"Um. No. They call 'emselves the X-Men, yo," said Todd, twiddling with his spork. "Even though they got skirts in there with 'em."
Sara had to smirk at the anachronistic moniker for her gender. Most women alive today only wore skirts to interviews. "Gender equality will have to wait another day, hmn?"
"Sompin' like that... I never understood it myself, y'know? I mean, we had girls livin' wit' us, but we always th' Brotherhood. What *up*? I tried to take it to the boss, youknow, 'cause of discrimination an' all... but he just tole me to shut my yap." There was something else that he wasn't saying about the interview.
Sara could guess by the way he rubbed at a memory of pain... but she was never one to pry. "You have a boss? Someone in charge?" _Someone *runs* things?_
"Aaaaahh... less you know 'bout him the better, yo. Take my word fo' it. It don't pay to get his attention."
Ah. So he *was* warning her... and from the sounds of things, he wasn't in a good place, right now. "You know, that offer of a place to hide can go both ways," she said. "I know of rooms in my house that Mother never goes near. It shouldn't be the work of an afternoon to clear a few of them out and make them hospitable. I can make sure everything's completely hush-hush."

[1] Convention term stemming from Piers Anthony's lovely books. Mundanes are anyone who professes to be "normal".
~
"Sweet of you... but that ain't quite necessary. He ain't around enough to give us real trouble. Always on some mission or other. But y'know... if we do wind up needin' a place we'll look you up."
"She cares about me!_ Todd's heart squealed in the meantime.
"So..." Fred shifted. "I guess maybe you oughta know who the X-geeks are. Watch out for *that* one," he said, looking over at a red-headed senior seated at the X-men's table. "She'll pretend to be your friend and stuff... but man can she bite."
Todd followed Freddy's gaze and nearly rolled his eyes. Sheesh, not the Jean rant again. Granted, she was a class A preppie and a player, and sent Matthews after him whenever the 'hood annoyed her, but... she wasn't... all that...? Okay, he was going to shut up and let Freddy rant for a bit.
"Who Miss Perfect? Don't worry, I've got her figured. Mom unfortunately think's she's golden."
"No kidding?" Fred and Sara got busy discussing the evils of one Miss Grey.
Todd listened for about a minute. Then he shifted on the bench, not liking the way the conversation was steering and liking even less the fact that Freddy and Sara had something to bond over.
"Ahem," he tried for the third time and got their attention again.
"My apologies," Sara was blushing faintly and the Boston accent had returned. God she was cute when she did that. Todd could scarce believe he'd just admitted that so easily. "Pray continue?"
"Er... well, not that Jean *isn't* a bee with an itch, but lunch is almost over and I gotta tell you some more stuff." Todd didn't *mean* to sound as peeved as he was that Sara's attention had strayed. His tone apparently fired off some sort of message because the girl's eyebrow raised and Fred looked sheepish and rather like he was being squished.
"Such as?"
"Such as?" his mind echoed, just as expectantly. _Crap, yo. Ummm...._
"Erm... contact. In case things go screwy, you need to know where you can go. You know where the Brotherhood Boarding house is, right?"
"I've driven past it on Eileen once or twice. So yes."
Todd looked at her oddly. "Who?"
"My bike." Fred nodded; apparently he'd seen this Eileen beforehand. Todd felt peeved at that too, but he hid it better this time.
"Okay," he mumbled. "And maybe it would be coo' if we knew whereabout you lived? Or a number
or email? Just in case we need to contact you."
Sara gave the address as well as a phone number that was specifically to her room to avoid her mother screening her calls. Todd scrawled it on a paper napkin along with her email address. There was something else bugging him that he needed to tell her and he was hating himself for it. He knew Fred would too... but here went nothing.
"As whacked as the X-geeks are," Todd said, "If yo ever in a *real* pickle... one we can't help you out with... you should go to them." God that was painful to say. Todd glanced at Freddy and got the shock of his life. Freddy looked *relieved*.
"Yeah," the giant said, just as begrudging as Todd, though his voice was also full of concern. "Should you need more than us... Xavier will help. Just don't sign no contracts or nothin'."
"He'll want you to *fight* if you stay on as a boarder. For his little army. And he'll want you to get along with the mundane. Y'know, turn the other cheek and all that crap." Todd couldn't help sounding just a tad bitter. _If Mathtews was beatin' on any of *his* kids, Xavier would wax the mansion floors with his ass. But Matthews is smart, yo, so he beats on the stragglers._

~

"Dealing with the mundanes isn't all *that* difficult, is it?" Sara said. "Technically speaking, I was a mundane and Freddy and I got on fine."
For someone in Remedial Ed., she was pretty sharp. "Do I have to abandon all my friends just because of what I've become?"
"It's complicated," sighed Todd. He'd never had any real friends since moving to Bayville, and generally kept his company amongst his fellow mutants. All of the Brotherhood were transplants to Bayville. He'd never thought what it would be like to have lived there for a long time, to have connections, and only have them disrupted by manifestation. "I guess you can keep yo' friends an' all... just - be careful? If yo' secret gets out... y'know... life can get *real* nasty. Th' army might wanna take yo' apart so they can make invisible soldiers, y'know?"
"Yes," Sara said. "I can just imagine..." she winced and scratched at her back. "Ack! Pardon me... urgh... ow... oooohhh..." She sighed. "Ever had one of those itches that drove you simply *mad*? This one's been prickling at me since third period. Neef."
Todd found himself laughing even though he also knew the feeling. Once a month, in fact, when he got a new skin all in one go[1]. "Hey, yo. Mebbe yo' shedding yo' skin."
"Ha ha," she deadpanned. "I'm still warm-blooded, aren't I? Just because I can do what I can do doesn't mean I'm turning into a *reptile*[2]."
"Jus' sayin'," Todd managed. Inwardly, he was kicking himself. "Y'know. Lighten th' moment?" He cringed.
"Sorry," she said, blushing. "New to mutant humour." The bell rang, summoning everyone to class. "See you after school?"
_She still wants to see me!_ "Sure thing, yo."
Sara skipped as she withdrew.

"...can't get into my shoes... because my shoes refuse... to ever grow weeea-ry..."
"Singing, Sara?" Janine smirked at her. "What happened to make *you* so happy?"
"Oh, nothing much," she returned, knowing that if she told, it would be all over the school in nothing flat. "I might be making a friend."
"A *booooyyyyy* friend?" Janine grinned wider. "I saw you flirting with Freddy Dukes..."
Sara rolled her eyes. "I believe I was sharing lunch with him, Janine."
"Ooooh! You *deny* it!" Janine squealed. "It's *gotta* be true."
"As true as your own lesbian tendencies," said Sara in a low mutter. "Do you mind? They might be covering something new in English today."
The English class, carefully calibrated for students with problems, had been going over the proper placements of nouns and verbs, with some explorations into punctuation - for well over a month.
"Fine," said Janine. "If you won't tell the truth, I'll just have to draw my *own* conclusions..." she wagged her eyebrows suggestively. Nothing had ever stopped her so far. "Whatever." Sara concentrated on keeping her skin its accustomed colour.

[1] I *LOVE* that theory! Let's run with it.
[2] She'll get irony later.

~

Todd was so elated he nearly forgot about the money on the table. Fred was looking at it dolefully. Todd sat back down and waited for Fred to get over it and pick it all up. Fred sighed and continued to study it. "Oh come on, yo, she *gave* it to us!" Todd burst out. The cafeteria was already thinning out. "Yeah, I know, but... it don't feel right. I should give it back to her next period."

Todd fidgeted and decided to bite. "Why don't it feel right?"

"'Cause... she earned it, not us. And sometimes her mom cuts her off. Ain't right for us to take it."

"Unless," the smaller boy added after some thought, "We earn it, right?"

Fred looked at him. "Uh... I guess? What are you thinkin'?"

"Well, we're helping her, right?" Todd lowered his voice. "With the whole mutant thing."

The larger boy scowled. "So you wanna charge by the hour or somethin?"

"No!" It *was* an idea, but not one Sara wouldn't see through in about five seconds flat. Todd felt a twinge of dismay at the rising dilemma - he cared about what she thought of him and he *liked* her, but goddammit, they *needed* the cash. He was going to have to choose carefully and he was probably gonna fuck it all up anyway. "I'm just sayin' we should take what she freely gives. She wants us to have it, we need it, someday somehow we'll pay her back."

Fred considered it. "I guess that makes sense."

"Great, good. Keep the money, make sure it don't fall into Pietro's hands or Tabby's." Todd watched Fred scoop up the change and deposit it in his overall pocket. Good, a high and safe place. Nobody was going to shake Fred Dukes down for *anything*.

Now he'd better skedaddle before he got a detention for real this time.

"The dinosaurs in the Triassic era were mostly reptiles and amphibians," Mr. Dronall spoke at the head of the class. "The Triassic era took place during the splitting of Pangea into two continents. The northern continent was known as Laurasia, and was made up of North America, Europe, and Asia. The southern continent..."

Todd stifled a yawn and put his head down on the desk. Biology was interesting and all, but the teacher was as slow as molasses when it came to lecturing - and man did he try to cram every detail possible into the forty-minute time frame. Other than that, Mr. Dronall was nice and the sort of geeky old man whom the jocks verbally debased in gym class, which meant he didn't consider himself above smiling at the boy whenever they met in the halls.

For that reason along with others did Todd sit quietly in Dronall's class and try to learn something instead of throwing spitballs at Wagner in the third row.

"...was named Gondwanaland and was made up of South America, Africa, Australia, Antarctica, and India. Great changes occurred during the Mesozoic time period for plant life..."

_Maaaaan, get back to the amphibians, foo'. You almost had something interestin'_

Todd sighed and did the only thing that would keep him awake. He opened his standardized textbook and flipped to the chapter about amphibians. Compared to this chapter, the rest of the book was immaculate of highlighter marks and dogeared pages. Todd's eyes skimmed over the bits about the life cycle and he shut his eyes queamishly as he flipped one page over which contained a detailed photo of a dissected toad.

Bored with reading over old facts, Todd was almost about to doodle another picture of Sara when he remembered the book also had a reptile chapter or two. Heh, why not. Mr. Dronall was still going on
about petrified forests and ginkophytes. Todd flipped to the chapter and began to read.

Sara rubbed her back on the back of her chair and did her level best not to grunt. That itch was driving her positively berzerk...
The bell rang, delivering her from English Basics and sending her straight to Elementry Science. It used to be with Dr McCoy, but since he disappeared, Mr Hinkley had been filling in. It wasn't nearly as much fun without Dr McCoy, despite the fact that she got to stare at her schoolgirl crush for an hour. Dr McCoy - Sara once enquired and found out he held two doctorates: one medical and one scientific - put on a show that made the learning *interesting*. Even though Sara was learning it again. He'd put up with Sara not opening their books to page whatever. But Mr Hinkley... he demonstrated the principle if he had to, and usually made sure that observations were with litmus paper and thermometers. He *quantified* things until the eyelids flickered and drooped. He read directly from the textbook and demanded the class follow with him. And, to add insult to injury, Mr Hinkley - the teacher she still loved in a way - believed with all his heart that Sara was Adrian Essel... and that Adrian was gay. Not that Sara had anything against anyone being homosexual. She could see the logic. One knew the gender intimately, for example. It's just that she wanted to be recognized as a *female*. Mr Hinkley was writing on the board. A simple reaction between acid and alkali. Sara copied it out in full before it was done and turned to her back pages. Now there, if anyone cared to look, were pages that DaVinci would have envied. Equations danced between tiny doodles of machinery, circuits, and studies of insects. There was a miniature copy of Hokusai's _The Wave_ in ones and zeroes. There were attempts to write as small as the micro-writing on money. Somewhere amongst this, Sara found a blank space and doodled. She drew a phenomenally tall princess and a tiny, tiny frog with a little crown. In her miniature hand, she wrote the frog saying, _I'll figure *somethin'* out, yo._ "Mister *Essel*!"
It was pointless trying to teach him her name. Sara looked up at the board. He'd left a place blank for answers. "Sodium chloride, commonly known as salt."
"That's... correct." He stepped up to her desk and gently re-opened her notebook to the correct working page. "I'd appreciate it if you at least *appeared* to be paying attention, Mister Essel. Not creating little artworks in the back of your workbook."
"If you insist, I'll have to draw in the margins, sir."
That earned her a death glare. "I'd rather you didn't draw at all, thankyou."
Ugh.
Sara found a way to prop herself up so that she appeared to be paying attention and took her mind away. It was a nifty little trick she'd learned from multiple readings of _The Princess Bride_. By taking her mind away, she could be anywhere and anywhen, so long as some small part of her remained to go through the motions. Mr Hinkley never noticed she was gone.
Freddy did. He tapped her shoulder and asked if she was okay at the end of the class.
Sara came back for his concern. "Just took a one-head holiday," she explained. "I was *bored*.
"Really? I kinda had trouble with the last bit."
"Freddy... it's just a journey from unstable to stable. You pick the most stable chemicals out of the reactants and that's *it*.
"You're in a bad mood," he said. "Is it Mr Hinkley." "I'm - dealing... with Mr Hinkley," she said. "It's today. My back itches like nothing else and I *know* there's no chemical that can get through cotton without some observable side-effects..."
Freddy just nodded. "I get it. It's the change. I used to get cramps all over everywhere an' I just kinda bloated... Not that I was ever skinny like you."
"Freddy dear," said Sara. "I would gladly take a few of your pounds - strategically placed, of course - if I could. Alas, voluntary body mass transfer is but a dream."
Freddy laughed. "I didn't understand that, but it was funny."
"Tomorrow, Freddy. And scour the dictionary. You'll work it out and I expect you to tell me."
"Will do."

Ack. She was late for music.

It was the only class she ran for. Time with a harp - even if it was Vlad - was time in peace. Time to be the music. Perfect notes, written and appreciated by experts. No-one cared what the harpist looked like. They just listened to the notes that were played.

Most harps in Sara's experience were little old ladies. Her leased practice instrument at home was mass-produced, so it was a trailer trash grandma... young for the title, but old in terms of generations. Sara called that one Billie-Jo.

Sara took her seat and double-checked that Vlad's pegs were rammed home. One of those popping out meant a vicious whip of piano wire at high speed.

Vlad only ever worked if he was strung with piano wire. This generally cut the fingers, so generations of high school harpists used special tape to protect their fingers. Vlad would tolerate fishing line in the higher notes, the exact line of demarcation, B flat above high C, was sacrosanct. Any attempts to go lower were met with breaking cord and bloodshed appropriate to his nickname. Vlad didn't like kids, and only tolerated classical music. He could, Sara had noted, be bribed with a mothball pushed into his base. She did that now before Mr Larnblatt[1] could notice her.

If she was lucky, she'd get through this with only a minor injury.

Vlad had a temper, and since Sara's interaction with him was at the end of the day, just about anything could set him off.

She risked a run up the notes. In tune for a change. Lovely.

Sara made herself sit ready.

"Now class," said Mr Larnblatt. "We will continue our work on Mozart..."

It was later. Pain had happened[2].

The cut was minor, but it was bleeding and it was strategic. Vlad had zapped her *right* as the bell rang, thus forbidding her from entering the office of the school nurse.

Sara had been obliged to take care of it single-handedly. Literally.

The new mark went from the pad of flesh opposite the thumb on her right hand, down over her pulse-point, to halfway along her forearm. Butterfly sutures would hold it until she took it home, and a roll of gauze would ensure that the librarian wouldn't kick her out for bleeding on the carpet.

Now she scoured the reference racks for chameleonic lifeforms. So far, her lanky arms had encapsulated chameleons themselves, squid, octupi and one treatise on octopus skins that had entered into the library by mistake.

There was nothing more of interest on the shelves, so she returned to a centrally-located table, piled up her books, and waited.

She would be stoic, come laughter or simple abandonment... should it come to that. Sara was experienced in the matter of pranks, of course, but Todd seemed - genuinely genuine.

Her head throbbed, a migraine-esque headache emerging from the cut on her temple and the sweaty bandage it hid under. Her whole *back* itched like blue fury and the newest cut on her arm decided to join her head in throbbing.

This was not a good day. Well. Maybe apart from the friend she'd made. And it was now, sitting alone in the school library, that she would see if she'd been fooled about that.

[1] You might know him better as the zebra music teacher from _Ozy and Millie_ [www.ozyandmillie.org]

~
The only good part about gym was running laps. Strong leg muscles meant he could put a distance between himself and the jocks in his period without much effort. It also made him look cool to be able to do something without screwing up.

Of course it may have helped if he’d had something to eat during lunch rather than talk and stare at Sara. He’d skipped two meals now and was running on empty. Todd's metabolism was not liking him, and presently neither were his sides.

Groaning slightly at the cramps, Todd decided to slow down which allowed Matthews and his pal Bruce to catch up and pass him. Todd grumbled obscenities under his breath and much against his better judgement put on an extra burst of speed. His energy fizzled out halfway round the gym and he practically crawled the next lap.

Coach Sanders clicked his tongue at him as he passed for the final one. "You're usually better than this. Haven't been eating properly, have you?"

Todd grunted a negative, watching nearly everyone finish before him. Now it was down to him and Melvin Finkle, who was presently fumbling for his inhaler. Everyone else went to play basketball. Focusing on breathing through his nose and watching the coach to make sure he didn't notice Todd cutting corners, the boy failed to see the basketball until it slammed into his head and knocked him off balance into the metal equipment locker. Stars burst across his vision and sent him to his knees.

Todd heard Finkle's triumphant wheezing as the gangly boy passed him to the finish point but could see nothing through a haze of red.

"You... okay, Tolensky?" a familiar voice hesitantly inquired. Todd looked up blearily at Daniels who was hovering over him looking concerned and wary.

"Nnngh?"

"That ball hit you pretty hard. Not as hard as the cabinet though. Need a hand up, man?"

"No, Daniels, s'cool. You threw the ball?" Todd slurred.

"It was Graydon. Probably just an accident. Or not. They are jerks sometimes. I'm surprised you aren't bleeding."

Todd gingerly felt his head. No wetness to be had. There was only a tender spot that ached when he touched it. "Yeah, I'm fine." He struggled to his feet, ignoring the hand Evan offered only halfway - as if fearing it would be bitten off.

"Okay, man. Suit yourself."

"Come on, boy, let's keep playing!" Matthews called.

Evan scowled. "He calls me 'boy' again, he'll lose more teeth than game," he muttered and stalked back to the group. Coach Sanders, seeing what had happened, allowed Todd to sit on the bleachers for the rest of the period but made no move to talk to Graydon. Todd found himself nearly dozing off when the bell rang. Todd leaped down off the bleachers, wished he hadn't at the resulting dizzy spell, and sprinted to the nearest water fountain to splash his face and rehydrate.

He had Art last, and it was an outdoor project to sketch anything they wanted. Todd clambered up one of the sheltering trees as soon as Mrs. Spindell's back was turned and spent the rest of the class filling his sketchbook with Sara doodles and eating as many moths and caterpillars as he could catch.

Todd was seldom on time for anything in his life - but some things deserved the effort. After leaving a note on Lance's jeep that he would find his own way home, Todd took off.

He was three minutes late for his meeting at the library before leaving the school and running in his present state did little to make up the distance. The librarian glared daggers at him as he ran up the stairs, just daring him to try that inside. Todd wisely decided to walk through the building at a normal rate. His eyes scanned the tables and found Sara, already with a pile of books and tapping her fingers to the soft music on the PA.[1]

"Sorry, yo," he gasped, setting his bag down and dropping his sketchpad on the table. "Ain't no excuse for bein' late, but it always happens to me." He eyed the clock. "How late am I anyway?"

Eight minutes. Aw damn. "Oh man, I'm *sorry*," he apologized again, dropping his gaze.
"From the looks of things, you couldn't help it," said Sara. "That's a nasty bruise you have there." She mirrored the mark, tracing invisible outlines against her own skin.
Inter-person touching was a thing she never *quite* understood the sub-implications of, so she tended to avoid it. Sara followed the simple rule, _Touch as others touch you,_ and so far, no-one had.
"I have something in my medkit for that kind of thing. Are you allergic to iodine? Oh. Was it accident or design?"
"Hard to be sure," Todd grunted, unearthig a textbook from his own grungy bag. "Um. An' I ain't allergic to iodine." He knew that for certain, since either it or industrial-strength Dettol[1] were the panacea of the hour when it came to cuts and scrapes in the tenements. "Didn't know you could put that stuff on bruises."
Sara bought out a box and withdrew a tube. "Not the liquid, no. This is a gel. Pharmacists' don't carry it any more. You have to order the stuff. Lucky for me I have connections." She measured out a dose on her fingertip. "Gramma runs the company. Shh..." She made to ministrate, then paused, having no idea of the boy's personal-space rules. "May I?"
"Sure thing, yo. It ain't gonna sting or nuthin', right?"
"No stinging, I assure you," she almost laughed. "Though there is a slight risk of cramping in some muscles. You'll look absolutely horrid by dinnertime, but by tomorrow, there'll just be faint yellowing." Gently, afraid that she'd somehow hurt him, she applied the gel. Smooth, gentle circles, working it in and around.
"What happened to yo' hand?"
He noticed. Someone actually noticed and cared what happened to her. A statistical blip, she was certain. Perhaps it was smalltalk. "Oh, Vlad was in a bad mood. Demanded a blood sacrifice even *after* I bribed him."
"How in hell you bribe a *harp*?"
"Do you," Sara absently corrected. "I've found that Vlad is partial to the odd mothball in the base of his support column. I suppose it keeps the insects away from him. Wants to live forever or something." She shrugged. "Billie-Jo's all appearances. She's just happy with that glittery wax you can get cheap at the discount music dives. Quite vain, really."
"'Nother harp, right?"
"My home-practice one," said Sara. "Mother's already said it's never leaving the music room - except to go into storage when guests are over, of course." Her eyelid fluttered and she quelled it. Mention of her mother had been doing that, lately. She changed the subject. "There. All greased over. Try not to touch or scratch until it's soaked in."
"Sure you got it all?" he said, smiling. "Didn't miss no spots?"
"Any spots. No. I was sure to be thorough."
Todd muttered something that sounded remarkably like, "...damn."
"Pardon?"
"Oh. Um. I looked up some shi-uh... *stuff* on lizards an' reptiles. They only got one paragraph on chameleon in the whole chapter." He opened his book to show her, flipping the pages until he found the right zone.
"Considering that book also includes dinosaurs, I'm impressed they found space to mention them at all," said Sara, speed-reading upside-down wasn't all that much more difficult than doing it right-way up. When one practiced. "Evolutionarily speaking, they should rate about one sentence for the entire book." She paused. "Is 'evolutionarily' a proper word?"
"If it ain't yo' just made it one," said Todd. He flipped backwards for a second, checking the content. "Hey, you're pretty fast."
"When one's mother demands one's attention at random moments," said Sara. "One learns to read
fast or not at all." Flutter, flutter went the eye. Sara held it shut with her bandaged hand and read over
the paragraph still between Todd's webbed fingers. "Dissapointing, isn't it? The most fascinating
land-dweller on the planet, and it gets such a remarkably uninformative paragraph."

Todd boggled for the fifth time in as many minutes. _Okay. The chick can speed-read. She can
speed-read upside-down. She plays the harp and names 'em. She buys total strangers lunch an' tries
to heal them. An' she talks a *lot* like Big Blue[2], yo. What sort o' girl *is* she?_
"Uh. Yeah," he said, reading it over again. He'd read it a billion times and knew that there was more
to know about Chameleons other than that they had independant eyes and stretchy tongues... or that
they changed colour according to their mood or the lighting. "Tell yo' th' truth... I don't usually hang
here."

"I should think not. Fatal habit," Sara smirked.

_Wait. That was a joke?_ "I mean hang out," he blushed. "Um. Er. What'd you find?"
"Someone's thesis that came here by mistake. Interesting for the exact makings of the colour cells.
Several encyclopaedia in varying stages of out-of-date..." Sara opened one, and found a page with a
hole in it. "Not to mention editing[3]..."

"Aw man, that *sucks*," said Todd on automatic. "Don't people *think*?"
"I've seen worse. *Some* rip out the entire page."

Todd winced. Not that he was particularly *fond* of reference books, but he'd needed them enough
to appreciate them being both available and whole. "I know th' logic," he confessed. "It ain't theirs,
so they don't care. It's just like rippin' a page outta th' phone book. Fo' one number. Jerks."
"It gets worse. The library's forbidden to replace, repair or investigate until twenty percent of the
book is *gone*. Disgusting." She put aside that one and opened another. "More of the same. Native
to Africa and Madagascar. Eats insects. And the rest is out of date."

Todd picked up a slim volume on the care and feeding of chameleons. "Says they like bein' warm,"
he suggested.

"Doesn't everybody?" said Sara. "I've always been something of a heat-hog, myself, but that's hardly
any indicator of cold blood, is it?"

"That's what *I* keep tellin' everyone," Todd ranted. "Just 'cause I got trouble keepin' warm don't
mean I need a hot rock or nuthin'. I just got core temperature problems, yo."

"Doesn't," corrected Sara.

"Course, it'd help if we had *heat*, but that's another story..."

"Furnace on the blink?"

"Um." Todd remembered Fred's trouble taking her money. There was a subtle temptation to take her
for everything she could give. On the other hand, his moral compas was pointing due Girl Here, so
his usual instincts were a little muddled. "I don' like t' say, y'know?"

"You share a domicile with Freddy, don't you?" she said. She was checking her facts.

"Yyyyyyyyyeeexaaaah...?" Now his compas was wavering between Girl Here and Jealousy.

"Ah*. Monetary trouble's cut off the heat. I can fix that."

"You what?"

Her smile lit up her face. Even when it was an evil one. "I have no qualms against playing Robin
Hood. Care to join?" She gestured towards the school PC's and their internet access.

Todd's lower brain was thinking, _Hm. Tight, cozy little cubicle. We could - y'know - bump up
against her an' get *snuggly*..._. It waggled its eyebrows at him suggestively.

The fact that his lower brain even *had* eyebrows to waggle was so disturbing that he let it pass him
right by. "Sure, yo. Show me yo' stuff."

Sara almost leaped over. Her lanky frame made for some pretty long strides.

Todd leaped into a chair next to her as she loaded up the Bayville Herald. "What's that fo'?"

"Seeing who's taken the largest, most unnecessary pay rise this week..."

_Day-umn, yo! She wasn't *kidding*._ He grinned. This was going to be fun to watch.

[1] Brand-name antiseptic stuff that smells heavily of pine and stings worse than blue fury. And yes,
it is available in the States.
[3] People in my Primary School used to do this. The fact that someone did it in *High* School speaks of someone of very low intellect.

Sara scrolled through the Business columns with one hand on the mouse and the other writing down figures on scratch paper without pausing to look at it. The last number she wrote produced an "Aha!" of triumph.
"I don't know who Mr. Boliver Trask is, but he's about to pay some community service taxes." Todd peered at the information. "Day-ann. That's a lot of zeroes. What does he *do*?"
"Who knows," Sara shrugged. "The other cash source would have been Xavier, but you told me to go there if I needed help. I don't think that would have set up a good impression, even if he'd never find out it was me."
"Oh, he'd find out. Telepath," Todd informed. Sara shuddered.
"Yeesh. You would have stopped me, right?"
"Of course, yo."
"Then it's settled. Trask shall now cover your bills at the wave of my magic wand." Sara waved no wand, but instead she swiveled the mouse on the pad with a flourish, clicked twice and began to type furiously.
What happened next was a dazzling array of windows, commands and random small beeping noises(1) that made Todd's eyes hurt if he tried to follow along.
He reached up to rub his eyes, lowered his hand and the screen was blank once more, save for one window. Sara was now scrolling down the billing index for electricity and gas. "Who would it be under?"
"Alvers, yo. Lance Alvers. He's the oldest."
"How old *is* he exactly?"
"Eighteen."
"Yikes. So the rumors that he's old enough to go to college and held back...?"
"True as Trish's implants."
Sara looked at him oddly. Todd wanted to slap himself. Then something surprising happened. Sara giggled.
Sara immediately blushed at the sound. _You laugh too much._ her mother's voice snapped. _You sound like a cross between a chipmunk and a pig._
Her eye twitched yet again, but the giggles continued for a bit longer. "Sorry," she apologized simultaneously with Todd.
"I didn't mean to say that. Sorta slipped out," the boy mumbled, unsure whether she'd been laughing at him or at his joke. "Don't tell anyone?" The last thing he needed was Trish's posse of boytoys to smack him down for that remark.
"Don't worry. My lips are sealed," Sara promised and turned back to the computer.
"You won't get caught, will you?" Todd whispered.
"No. I'm telnetting - they'll never know it was me."
"Brilliant, yo," Todd told her. He had little enough idea of how and what she was doing, but he knew it was a good sixty miles above what he could do on his Frankenstein PC.(2) That and he just wanted to compliment her.
Her blushing was adorable.
"There," Sara said proudly, closing the window as soon as the transfer of funds to the Brotherhood billing account was complete. "Anything else you need paying for?"
Todd looked a bit embarrassed. "Eh... well, there's water. And Tabby's got phone bill this time. Which means it'll never get paid."
Sara felt a small twinge of something like jealousy. "Who's Tabby?"
"Oh, some chick who lives with us whenever we have money. She's away visiting her mother. Made the trip as soon as the lights went out and her turn for paying her keep came up."

"So, why don't you read her an ultimatum? Pay up or get out?" _Like you're one to talk, Sara. You couldn't tell a dog to 'sit' without feeling guilty._ Thus teased her inner consciousness.

_Shut *UP*_ She told it.

"Tabby's got a way with bombs," Todd muttered, rubbing at yet another phantom pain. This one happened to be on his tush. "They really *really* sting, yo."

"Sounds like you four need some sort of organized protest. I couldn't tell anyone off if my life *depended* on it, but well... you..."

Todd smiled, not offended. "I don't seem to have trouble with it?"

Sara blushed again.

"S'okay. I don't like bein' disrespected an' if the person's easy to deal with when riled, I got no trouble with lettin' 'em know where I stand. But... well..." Todd fidgeted. "One, Tabby's a *girl*. As in, she could cry rape whenever she *wanted*, and get us some seriously unwelcome attention. Most of us are runaways and tryin' to stick together with as little notice as possible. Even if they *didn't* find Pietro or Lance's DNA on her, we'd still be split up. Two, she's two-*faced*. Anyway you try to break it to her that she's a free-loader, she'll act like she's completely rational an' understanding, and then one of us will wake up in the morning with hair shaved off or scorch marks or a completely *trashed* room. You do not mess with Tabby. Messing with *Lance* is more sane."

"She sounds like fun," Sara murmured, bringing up the water bill.

There was a bit of a silence, broken only by the constant patter of keyboarding fingers.

"Sara?" Todd fidgeted.

"Yes, dear?"

"Um... Thank you. This really means a lot to me - I mean, us. Well, me too, if ya know what I mean." Okay, when *Sara* blushed, she was cute. Todd could feel his ears going red and believed himself to resemble a squashed turnip. "There uh... anything I can do for you? Really. Name it and it's done."

His voice was soft, a shyer quality than Sara had heard all day. He was serious. She looked over at him and his eyes mirrored the seriousness of his tone. They were very pretty... his eyes...

1) Thank you Nutter! And sorry it took so long.
2) From Nutter's fic about Kurt joining the Brotherhood... forget what it's called. Todd has this PC that he built from scraps of computers he found in the junkyard. Just thought I'd reference to it because I love the idea.

~

Sara fought the blush, she really did, but the rallying forces of natural rouge combined with unnaturally pale skin and threatened to take over most of her face, her ears, and at least half of what could charitably be called her chest.

"Uhm..." she managed, sounding highly intelligent. "It wasn't anything special," she babbled. "Anyone could do it. All one needs is a reasonable computer, internet access and a working knowledge of electronic security systems... It's nothing much."

"*I* thought it was awesome," said Todd.

"You're being kind," she murmured. "And -um- if you insist on some kind of deed-for-deed repayment... well... I'm sure I'll make a pest of myself in the fullness of time. You know. Irrelevant little questions..." She tore off a couple of post-it notes, and wrote a series of contacts on them.

"Perhaps we could stay in touch?"

Todd looked startled. "Yo' givin' me yo' *number*?"

"I won't abuse the privalege of having yours," she assured. "If you choose to give it, of course. That's my home number, a direct line to my room. That's my cellular, my email and my varying IM contacts. I finally got everything down with one central manager. Something *less* of a pest, but
only just. Oh, and my homepage if you feel like browsing by. I have a bulletin board."
"Yo, that's what I call *online*."
"I have trouble sleeping, so I keep running out of things to do." She shrugged. "Chatting online can help, but only for so long." Then she blushed anew, remembering why they were there. "I suppose we'd better get back to the books. We might find something of use..."
Todd pocketed her contact info and grabbed the spare post-it note. His presence online was as a lurker. Sure, he had an account on Deviantart, but since he posted indy work, nobody commented. All he had was that, his AIM contact, and the number for the boarding-house. Pretty slim pickings compared to Sara's haul.
Sara found it embarrassing because she was online far more often than she technically should be. And she lied in order to do it.
"Lying to your mother,_ said her Inner Mom. _If only she knew, she'd give you the hell you deserve, you ungrateful brat..._"
Her eye fluttered again, spreading out into a facial tic.
"You sure yo' awright?"
"I'll be fine in a minute," she said, focussing on boxing the bad emotions away.

Todd watched her face change with alarm. One minute, she looked supremely disturbed about something... the next, she was as cold and emotionless as carved marble. Then she was back. Her face was much better when she was at home in it.
They spent a cosy few minutes - subjectively speaking, since the clock whizzed through half an hour - exchanging laughable facts, before the librarian turfed them out.
"Oh my," breathed Sara. "Sunset already."
"It's pretty, isn't it?" he blurted. His stomach rumbled at him and he prayed she didn't hear.
"Majestic," said Sara. "If you want a snack, I know this delightful all-you-can-eat place. It's a little more -er- international than what you might be used to. I'm only thinking of it because it's the only place that serves bamboo worms..." She stopped. "Am I babbling?"
"Not even close," he soothed. "What's this about worms?"
"Bamboo worms. They're a delicacy in Hunan. Dad was up there years and years ago and I got a taste for the cuisine. They do western food, too, if you have a thing against edible insects."
"Yo, no *problems*, sugarlips," he said. _Er. Should I have said the last thing out loud? "I eat bugs alla time."
"Oh yes. Of course. The -ah- relationship with amphibians."
"Toads, yo. You can say it. I'm coo'."
"Really? I thought your physique was more froggish, myself."
"Meh. But who's afraid o' frogs, yo?"
Sara measured her pace to match his. "Do we *have* to make people afraid of us?"
He shrugged. "Momma always said, if yo' can't get their respect, fear'd do just fine."
Sara gestured towards the parking lot. "Perhaps, but people rarely destroy what they respect."
The only vehicle left, besides some staff cars, was a degraded-looking thing that, because it had two wheels, had to be a bike. Todd tried to be polite about it. "I'm guessin' this is th' famous Eileen."
_What happened to it? Fred sit on it?_
Sara knelt to undo the lock. "That's her. I only keep up this much security to stop people towing her as scrap. My compromise with mother--" flutter, flutter, went her eyelid, "--involved finding, purchasing, and maintaining my own vehicle so long as I did it wholly of myself. The minute we agreed, she cut me off without warning and locked all the house 'phones. I was temporarily destitute."
Hm. Nice woman. Todd thought she was past due some of that 'karmic realignment' that Sara billed Trask for. But how to teach her a lesson without hurting Sara? A problem for another day. "Hey, it's coo'. Got me a PC a lot like it. You know. F-O-R-D..."
"Found on rubbish dump, oh yes," Sara giggled. She freed her heap and put away the cable. "I should have asked, are you okay for meals? You barely touched lunch and you're looking awful
"Naw, I'm always this colour," he grinned. "I'm fine. Honest."
Sara offered him a choice of helmets. The dorky-looking purple one, or the bubble with little daisies on it.

~

Todd made Sara laugh by closing his eyes and choosing at random. He got the one with the daisies. Oh well, he was in a good enough mood to feel like silly if it meant she laughed. It was nice too... not to be on guard for once.
Eileen started up like a sputtering old woman who'd been woken against her will.
"Easy, girl, be good for me." Sara's voice was a little tense. "We have company today."
The sputtering relaxed into a gentler thrumming that sounded almost like a purr. "Wow," Sara grinned. "She *likes* you."
"Heh. Machines and I kinda get along... better than people most of the time."
Eileen took off at a slow pace, but with a lurch that made Todd bump in close to Sara. "Meep!"
Sara looked behind her. "Are you okay?"
"Yes, I'm just... I'm sorry. Contact like that usually gets me smacked, you know?"
"I would never," Sara protested, in a mock offended tone. Todd grinned at her sheepishly and his helmet slipped down over his eyes. Sara burst into giggles yet again, wondering what was making her feel so giddy today.

"Mmm... you should try the buttered grubs." Sara offered him a taste from her chopsticks.
"Wow... I didn't use to be much of a worm person. But these are *good* yo. Wait 'til I tell the others they got a bug cuisine in Bayville."
"Think they'll try it out someday?" Sara asked, popping a carmel cricket into her mouth. She'd skipped ahead to the desert bar to secure a share of them for both her and Todd. Those treats always went unbelievably fast.
"Well, Fred might. He needs a lot of food and likes something new once in a while. You can get him to try most anything, yo."
"What happens... exactly... if he doesn't get enough food?" Sara was already hypothesizing, but mutant powers were a new field of research.
Todd paused for thought, an almost guilty expression crossing his face as he stirred his chopsticks in the bamboo worms. "He can't move. Takes a lot of muscle to carry around that weight. No food means that his muscles start shrinking and..." He trailed off squeamishly and Sara could guess the rest from there.
"Any others in such danger?"
"Pietro. Same thing'll happen to him, but at a much faster rate. For a guy who normally takes thirty seven sugars in his coffee(1), no food for a *day* is dangerous. He gets cranky as shi - er, you know."
"And what will happen to - hold that thought." Sara ground her back into her chair, turning red with embarrassment at her display.
"Oh, about that," Todd started. "If you start losing a lot of dry skin... like *strips* of it... don't be alarmed. It's natural. Scared the hell out of me at first, so I want you to know you're okay."
Sara looked at him. "I'm going to get new *skin*?"
Todd nodded.
"What's it going to *look* like? Will it still look like me? Will I turn green?" _Mother is going to have a *fit*._
"No, no," he soothed, "I don't think that'll happen. And if it does, there's stuff you can do. You could wear an inducer like fuzz - like Kurt." _Even if I gotta steal that thing offa him, maybe I can make a copy._ Todd didn't want Sara to feel like she *had* to go to Xavier if an inducer became necessary. She'd be better off though... maybe...

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(1) Coffee references a high-sugar content beverage, which is often rich in sugar. In this context, it suggests that Pietro requires a significant amount of energy in the form of sugar, signifying his dependence on a balanced diet and the consequences of dietary deficiencies. This further underscores the criticality of food and sustenance for his well-being.
Todd knew what that bandaged hand over her eye meant, now. "Lemme guess. Yo' mom ain't that fond of makeup."
"She's not fond of makeup on me. A sow in mascara is still a sow." She bit the head off a bug with a savage snap. "I mean, it was all fun and games until I turned five, and when the prizes dried up, it was all over."
"Um..." said Todd. He ate an unidentified vegetable so he didn't have to comment. "Sorry," said Sara. "Old scars. I really shouldn't be showing them to you."
Todd gave her a classic, _Who? Me?_ look. "I just didn't wanna say nuthin'. Y'know. It's yo' bidness'n'all."
"Old, old news," Sara dismissed. "Dried up and mummified. You'd never believe I used to be cute."
"I believe yo' *still* cute."
"...oh, stop it," she muttered. "I'm no prizewinner."
"Only to the people who don't matter," he found himself blurtling. "Yo' pretty when you smile."
He knew she was flattered. But he also sensed that she was one of those unfortunates who were so worn away by criticism that they didn't know what to do with a compliment. "Awright, awright. I'll shuddup. But *you* gotta say 'thank you' when I say somepin' nice about yo'. Deal?"
"I'll try."
"Coo,' he grinned. Thinking of a compliment she could take. "Yo' very graceful, y'know. Precise."
"I have scars that would argue with--"
"Aa-aah?"
Sara blushed. "...thank you."
"There. Did that hurt?"
A deeper blush. A prettier smile. "...not really, I guess."

Todd came home late. Lance knew because he was waiting for him.
"And just where the hell have you been?"
Todd made three separate goes to wipe the goofy grin off his face. "Out," he finally admitted.
"Well, *duh*," said Lance. "Out where? Did Dunc rough you up or something?" _Translation: Did you do something to *make* Dunc rough you up?_
"Nope." The goofy grin, never far away, came back in full force. "I was out in *enjoyable* company, dawg."
Suddenly, Lance had no real desire to know, but he had to ask. Ever since Mystique left them to cope on their own, he was the responsible one. Him. Lance the rebel. Responsible. "You and a *girl*?"
The grin raised to a power of ten. "Her name's Sara... She plays Robin Hood and the harp and I think she likes me."
"Toad, you think girls who break your cheekbones like you."
"She bought me dinner."
"Okay. She might like you." He blinked again. "Now I'm trying to picture the kind of girl who'd find *you* desirable..."
"Shut it, yo. I'm a takin' a *bath*.
Lance blinked a third time. "But it isn't that time of the month[1]..."

"And what sort of hour do you call *this*, young lady - *AND* I use that term *loosely*, given the company you keep."
"I was out studying," said Sara. "With a new friend."
"Does anyone *I* know know this so-called 'friend' of yours? Or is it another useless little layabout like That Girl--" aka Janine, "--or that blimp of a boy who came over and ate out half the pantry."

"Nobody you know, Mom," said Sara, barely quelling the twitch. "Can I put my things away, please?"

"Don't you even *think* of walking out of this room, missy! I tried everything I *could* to get you a decent education and how do you thank me? You get *expelled* from every single school of any merit! With test results so poor that you have to sit with the *bottom feeders*. It's no wonder you've never met anyone of any *worth*! Just you wait until your *father* gets home!"

_Hm. November twelfth, just in time to heal all rifts before my birthday and Christmas. Still too long away._

"He's going to put his foot down *this* time, hearing about how you carry on! Lusting after your teachers! Going out until all hours with strange boys! They're only after one thing - and God knows, they could get it from *you* easily. One compliment and they could ruin your life! AND STOP THAT TWITCHING THIS INSTANT!"

"...I'm trying, Mom..."

"All you ever *were* was trying! From the moment you were *born*, you were trying! You never did a single thing for me! Never! I work and I slaved to get you ahead in society and what thanks do I get? Nothing!"

The twitch spread across her face, trembled down her arms, and made tears slide loose.

"Look at you! A spastic[2] wreck! Is it any wonder nobody wants to look at you? Is it any wonder that you're a shame to my family? To my *mother*? To my sisters and brothers who *all* have better children than *you* to their name... What did I *do* to get such a *curse* for a daughter?"

Sara whimpered. Both hands were ineffectually flailing at invisible attacking phantoms. She ducked and winced and wept. She trembled and shivered.

"I could have had a *beautiful* daughter. A nice intelligent girl like Jean Grey! Jean *Grey* doesn't twitch like she's been hit with lightning! Jean Grey *wins* things to grace her mothers' shelves! Jean Grey does *GOOD* in this world! What do you do? You twitch and you cry that you're *trying*! Well, you can stop being such a trial to *ME*!"

Sara couldn't manage anything but an incoherent garble.

"Ray? *Ray*! Come here and mop this excuse for a daughter of mine *UP*!"

Their butler escorted her into the big kitchen, the one they used when they held large parties. Ray sat her on the bench and helped her escape her backpack. He made hot chocolate with a marshmallow and cream, then carefully tended, treated, and re-wrapped her wounds.

He let her cry it out.

"There, now, ma'am... The master will be home soon enough. He'll set things straight. You'll see."

Sara could only nod.

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[1] I couldn't resist.

[2] Yes, I know it's a hate-word. It works in context.

~

Todd dried himself off and slid on a pair of dark sweatpants and a sleeveless tank. Teeth chattering from his cold shower[1], the boy wrapped the towel around his shoulders and started to work on his dripping hair. He was going to get in trouble tonight if he wasn't completely dry before he went to sleep. The house was colder at night and the insulation around Todd's window had fallen away with time.

Still rubbing at his head with the towel, Todd opened the bathroom door to bang his forehead on the chin of a very surprised speedster. "Whoa! That time of month already? Please remember to vacuum *everywhere* this time."[2]

"Ha ha. So amusing." Todd squeezed past him. His skin shedding wasn't due for another... Todd checked the calendar upon entering his room. Five days. Oh joy. That meant the itching would start
He plopped himself in his chair, forgetting that it was an old thing that didn't *like* to be plopped in and reminded him of this by squealing indignantly beneath him. "Ack! Okay, not doing that again..." he promised, planting his feet on the ground for support. Mollified, the chair didn't break.

Todd flicked on his computer and winced at the loud thrum and static. "Please," he prayed to it, "No death screen this time?"

Frankie[3] started up the disk-scan for errors program and Todd sighed in relief. That usually meant everything was okay and that Frankie had recovered from when Todd had to turn it off manually last time.

He connected to red shi(f)t and waited for AIM to load while checking his Deviant account. Yep. No new comments, but a load of deviations from members on his watchlist and hot topics. He'd have to view and clean that out later. From his jean pocket he rescued the square of paper Sara had given him with her information on it. He added her screenname to his friends list and waited hopefully to see if she had logged in yet.

She hadn't. Todd kept the list up and opened a paint program - Photoshop 5.5 which he'd ripped with a serial number from an online site. Randomly he began to draw with the mouse, experimenting with tools. He preferred pen and paper, but the scanners at school were ancient pieces of dung. He usually didn't bother, unless he had something he considered worth the wait.

In no time, his AIM list dinged at him and he checked to see who'd come up. Big Blue still had the away message...

Todd grinned at Sara's online persona and clicked on it. He typed a message and hit enter.

FrogPrince: 'Ey, what's up sunshine?
"Meep. Yo, I gotta remember to chill with the petnames," Todd muttered to himself. He started typing again.

FrogPrince: Sorry if that's outta line... /
Todd deleted that rather than hitting enter. "Maybe I'll just wait until she actually *yells* at me b'fore I apologize."

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[1]. No heat means no hot water. *shivers* But I don't think Todd's the type for taking long hot showers anyway.
[2]. He tends to lose small bits of skin the first day of his shedding cycle and they get *everywhere*. By the third day, the bits are larger and easier to pick up and throw away.
[3]. Short for 'Frankenstein'. Todd's monster PC needed a cute name.

~

Sara's teeth were still chattering as she logged on. Ah, dedicated lines. Bliss. Maybe this year, Daddy would get her that T1 she'd been dreaming of.

Maybe.

In a few moments, she was online and typing in Todd's deviant address.

{Boonk!}

Sara clicked on the flashing notice.

FrogPrince: 'Ey, what's up sunshine?

Sara grinned. Sunshine. Cute.

TheTallest: My hair? ;) JK. Got ritual chew-out from Mommy dearest. Checking Ur art now...

She peeked.

The Tallest: Oh *wow*. U know, w correct BS, I could get U gallery showing. Ur textures R delish.
Sara blushed. She was always more forward online, when there was a screen between herself and the people she spoke to. The itch invaded her bubble and, muchly vexed, she tromped into her bathroom to slather vitamin E cream on the bubbling flesh of her back. She dashed back to the PC.

TheTallest: Um. Something weird is happening to my back. Got nasty red weals, blisters & sores.

Ugh. Now *that* was romantic. Not.

~

TheTallest: My hair? JK. Got ritual chew-out from Mommy dearest. Checking Ur art now...

Todd winced. He really was going to have to teach that girl's mother a thing or two. Maybe he could ask Pietro for advice.

The Tallest: Oh *wow*. U know, w correct BS, I could get U gallery showing. Ur textures R delish.

The boy blinked. He'd been expecting a 'That's cool' at best or an 'Ummm, what is it supposed to mean?' at the very worst. Not somethin' about a freakin' *gallery*. He wasn't that good...

FrogPrince: U are way 2 nice. ;_; I'm an amateur. Thanks tho.

Todd gently swiveled his chair to reach for the blanket on his bed. He was getting cold. The treetops outside of his window were blowing. Great, a storm. He could hear the loose tiles on the roof rattling like dry bones.

Sara was being quiet. Todd waited patiently. Sometimes Big Blue went quiet without warning and Todd had never minded. Comfortable silences were a good thing in his book. This was kind of different, though... Todd was beginning to worry that he'd offended her or something when the window alerted him to a new message.

TheTallest: Um. Something weird is happening to my back. Got nasty red weals, blisters & sores.

Todd winced.

FrogPrince: Oh crap... did u put somethin on it?

The Tallest: Some lotion... doesn't help a whole lot.

Big Blue's away message disappeared indicating that he was back. Todd pounced on his name immediately.

FrogPrince: hey, blue, i gotta problem. maybe serious. can u help?

Big Blue: What seems 2 be the problem?

FrogPrince: friend of mine is also gifted. Any1 besides you?

Big Blue: All is clear. I am the only one in the room. how gifted exactly?

Big Blue was also a mutant as he'd told Todd online in what had been one hell of a rough but rewarding conversation. Knowing only he was a doctor who's opinion on mutants was a friendly one, Todd had taken the plunge to ask for advice when 'Tro had collapsed from lack of sleep. They had thought he was dying, but Blue had assured him - given the specs of the unconscious boy's power - that Todd's friend was merely in torpor[1] and would wake up in a few hours. Todd had his suspicions who Big Blue was, and he was sure Big Blue had already guessed who he was, but neither mentioned it.[2]

FrogPrince: beautiful, witty, and she can change her skin 2 match the walls.
BigBlue: my, that's pretty gifted.
FrogPrince: i'm talking 2 much. her skin is all bubbling and blistered and stuff. was itching earlier, kinda like i do once a month.

Another window beeped at him. Todd brought it up and started typing even before he'd finished reading Sara's message.

The Tallest: hello? did I scare u off?
FrogPrince: no, sweetums, i'm looking something up for u.
The Tallest: don't have 2.

BigBlue: so she's an amphibious type? like a chameleon? hmm. might be scales.
FrogPrince:... . o_O!!
BigBlue: did i alarm u? *poke*
FrogPrince: scales, huh? so what can she do about it?
BigBlue: let them grow out like nature intended?
FrogPrince: okay... anything else? she's in pain! :_;
BigBlue: Calm thyself, Romeo. Lotion should do the trick, preferably calamine. Other than that, lots of water to drink. will probably be thirsty like u.
FrogPrince: thanx

FrogPrince: Yo Sara, u okay? drink lots of water and use calamine lotion. that's what the good doc says.
The Tallest: Who?!
FrogPrince: long story, but he's safe, i swear!

[1] Hummingbirds are known to go into something called 'torpor' at night - a deathlike sleep to make up for a day's fast work. I think Pietro would go through this if he didn't have enough energy and rest, but I doubt he'd do it every night considering how much sugar he eats to give him energy. The others naturally freaked when he went down like a sack of potatoes in the middle of a sentence.
[2] Completely and shamelessly nicked from -Fein!-
~

"Good thing I'm not allergic to calamine," Sara muttered. A quick visit to the medicine cabinet and, after locking her door, she was typing one-handed and patting pink sludge onto her back.

TheTallest: As long as Dr. doesn't come w blue police call box, I'm happy.
FrogPrince: Um. What?
TheTallest: Sorry. PBS joke.
FrogPrince: OH! Dr Who. I get it.
TheTallest: Surpriste! No offence, but most don't get NE refs.
FrogPrince: Got roomie who watches TV. Lots of TV. Seen a few eps.

There was a pause.

FrogPrince: What's with those pepper-shaker things?

Sara laughed.
"Are you playing around on that internet again?" Mom called.
"Just doing some research, Mom!" Sara shouted back. She had a few windows on project topics open for a quick Alt+Tab to pretended innocence. Not that Mom often wanted to struggle past Sara's bookshelves to get a glimpse of Vincent's[1] screen anyway.
She resumed her chatting.
TheTallest: They're called "Daleks", dear. They're actually cyborgs of a sort from the planet Skaro. Inside those pepper-shakers is a globby, ugly mass of mutated flesh.
FrogPrince: Yummy [/sarcasm]
TheTallest: Oh aye, they're dead sexay.
TheTallest: Please forgive *that* mental image.
FrogPrince: Too late, yo. Just pictured mutant blob in bed w drumstick and Sarah Jane Smith.
FrogPrince: Eeeeeeexxwwwww...

Sara couldn't help laughing, but she tried to keep it under her breath.

TheTallest: ROFLMAOAPIMP! That's just *too* funny. Race U to conceptualize.
FrogPrince: RU kiddin? That's *sick*!

Drat. She'd offended.

TheTallest: Sorry, dear. Sometimes, sick things strike me as funny. I'll bin it if U think its bad.

There was a long silence. Sara winced as she patted calamine over her welty flesh. Maybe she'd scared him off.
While she waited, she storylined her site's featured animation. Once she had enough money to pay for another month of being homepaged, she'd take off the teasers and let the people see the whole episode.
This month's feature would show a certain overtall and androgynous character turning slowly into Godzilla.

TheTallest: M going 4 hot chocolate. If U're gone by the time I'm back, I'll understand. Shall stick to technical questions in future.

Sara thought for another minute.

TheTallest: I meant it about the gallery. U R talented.

She crossed her fingers and went to the nearest kitchen for a cuppa. It was past ten already. A good thing, since Mom hated the idea of the help seeing Sara in her underduds and calamine. Sara made a big mug and watched the storm whip about outside. Perfect atmosphere for her projected animation.

[1] Most first computers are named "the Beast". Sara just took it one step further. And yes, one of her PC guardians is a dolly modelled on the character played by Ron Perlman.

~

"FuckfuckfuckfuckFUCK!" came grumbling down the hall, accompanied by the sound of running water.
"Hold still, Todd. Second to last one." Lance pulled the bloodied shard of glass out of the younger boy's inner arm.[1]
Fred stepped out of Todd's room with a tray full of glass and wooden splinters. "I knew we shoulda cut that branch back earlier."
Watching Todd rinse off his arm, Lance sighed. "Well, no use crying over it now. You'll have to sleep downstairs tonight, Todd."
"Man, but it's cold down there too!"
"It's better than a room with a busted window."
"True. I gotta see about Sara, though." Todd struggled one-handed to tie off the gauze until Lance helped him.
"Stuffed animal?" the older teen smirked.
"No!" snapped the now red-faced amphibian. "My *girl*, yo. She's probably worried about me!"
Todd made a show of puffing out his chest and hopped down the hall to his room. The window had been covered with tarp, but Todd's room was still more or less a vacuum. The door slammed behind him, startling a squeak out of the boy.
"Sorry!" he called unhelpfully toward Pietro's room where the speedster had retired earlier with another headache.
Todd sat down at his computer, opened Sara's window and scrolled up to see what he'd missed.
"Aw, shit yo..." Hurriedly he typed an explanation.

FrogPrince: Yo, I'm back! Sorry for my silence, but it's nuts here. Window got busted by a branch an' the storm and I got the cuts on my arm to prove it.
FrogPrince: Yo, you forgive? Still there sweetie?

_Please still be there? Please?_ He didn't know how long it had been since she'd gone for chocolate. He didn't get an away message, so perhaps he still had a chance.
[1] They aren't that deep. Don't worry.

Sara chugged her third cuppa and panted for breath. _Damn. He wasn't kidding about being thirsty..._ She made a mental note to ask the good doctor about hydration per bodyweight while she mixed up some hot chocolate in her undertow mug[1].
It was half-empty by the time she got back to her room. And so was the economy-sized bottle of calamine lotion.
Todd was back.

TheTallest: Cuts? U sure Ure OK?
FrogPrince: Yeah, they're pretty shallow. Just bled everywhere.
TheTallest: U *did* vacuum the area, yes? Nothing worse than finding glass bits with tender portions.

Todd read that and boggled. The lighter portions of his crap were blown all over the boardinghouse and the heavier stuff was vacuum-proof... but all the same, the concept of cleaning his room alarmed him.
Then he thought about getting glass in his itchy, sensitive skin, and decided that cleaning wouldn't be *that* bad under the circumstances.

FrogPrince: Good thought, yo' Be five minutes.

Sara chuckled. Men.

TheTallest: Be sure to get everywhere you'd place yourself.
TheTallest: On the subject of dehydration, just *HOW* thirsty do you get? Usually my undertow mug lasts me some good hours. This time I'm down to a quarter left in under fifteen minutes.

She leaned back and sipped, imagining a bachelor's vacuuming job. He'd probably go over the bed and the path to his clothes and the computer and the door, forgetting the rest in his haste.

FrogPrince: Yes, Mom
FrogPrince: Um. Undertow mug?
TheTallest: It has such a large capacity that you have to watch out for the undertow.

Todd laughed out loud, his fingers already moving across the keys.
FrogPrince: LOL! I gotta get me one of them.
TheTallest: Hm. When's your B-day?

[1] PVP cartoon. I'll get the exact URL when I find it.

~

FrogPrince: august 30. brb.

Todd turned from his computer and tread carefully to the door. He went to the hall closet to pull out the 'free sample' that the Brotherhood had liberated from the vacuum salesman with the misfortune of being assigned to the territory. Pietro hazarded a peek at the unheard-of sounds of a Hoover coming from the room next to his. His eyes bugged at the sight of Todd behind the handle. The boy was grimacing as if it was sucking up a piece of his very soul along with every dustbunny. Every so often the crackle of glass and random small objects would sound off. Todd went over every place he could think of which was remarkably close to Sara's prediction. Seeing that not very much dirt was traumatized out of place by Todd's cleaning, Pietro got bored with the miracle and went back to lying down.

FrogPrince: Done! *pant*
FrogPrince: you were asking how much I drink when I'm shedding?
FrogPrince: those are some high numbers. Probly about a Gut Bomb supersize cup every hour. I gotta take a bottle to school and fill up in the sink when I can. I'd turn to dust by the time that water fountain pumped out half of what I needed.

The Tallest: Considering that half the fountains at school are either leaky faucets or hoses.
The Tallest: So I should bring water and water holder. Check. What do I do with the um... stuff. That comes off?

Todd bit his lip.

FrogPrince: Usually the shedding happens in a set of three to five days. One day, usually in the middle, is when the biggest pieces start comin' off. That you wanna stay home for and generally avoid public. That's when the *face* starts peelin'. The days before and after are for smaller pieces and pieces that generally take longer because they're not stretched as much.

There was a pause in which Todd hoped he hadn't completely disgusted her. He hadn't even really told her about the doctor's theory of scales yet.

~

Sara had refilled her giant cup with water and slugged a generous gulp down before replying.

The Tallest: Sounds like all the fun of menstruation without any of the social acceptance.
The Tallest: Though skin peelage shouldn't involve cramping... right?
FrogPrince: ( blush) Er... wouldn't know. Honest. I ain't never got no cramps, yo. But I never got skin that changes.
The Tallest: Sorry about that. The whole five days thing got me cross-connected. Shan't elaborate.
The Tallest: Grammar! Nit - "haven't ever", dear.
FrogPrince: Yo, grammar ain't my style.
The Tallest: Had mine beaten into me. Much fun. Not.

~
Todd stared at the words on the screen.

FrogPrince: Uh. You don't mean *literally* do you?
TheTallest: No, thank the Gods above and below... Harshest punishment was writing the rules
longhand as lines. For *hours*.
TheTallest: Being bored is the biggest plague ever. Was much encouraged to learn well and learn
fast.
FrogPrince: That gale outside is me sighin' with relief, yo.

Sara giggled, sipping water. She opened up a side-window and sought out the place that sold her
undertow mug.

TheTallest: LOL. You're cute when you worry so.

"I'm *cute*?" Todd boggled.

TheTallest: But I'm hardly worth the fuss. I don't actually *do* anything merit-worthy.
FrogPrince: You're Fred's study-buddy right?
FrogPrince: Don't that mean you helped him *pass*?
TheTallest: "Doesn't"
TheTallest: True. But one hardly gains awards for helping people pass.
FrogPrince: Awards, schmawards. You did a good thing. Be proud.

"Not in my nature, alas," said Sara. She alternated between chatting and clicking in an order for an
appropriately froggy undertow mug for Todd.

TheTallest: Sorry, I'm pathalogically incapable (g)
TheTallest: Ugh. I think I'm sweating under the old skin. Ew. I feel all - squishy.
FrogPrince: It's cool. Don't pop 'em. Let it ride. U should start some small peeling 2morrow.
TheTallest: O joy unbounded [/sarcasm]
FrogPrince: Know the feeling 2 well, babe. Pie keeps telling me I'm getting warts.
TheTallest: Pie? U have a talking savoury?
FrogPrince: LOL! Short for Pietro. He's an asshole and I can't ignore him 'cause he lives here.
TheTallest: Launder his smalls with Ben Gay.

Todd roared laughing, and noticed the time. Eleven already? Yow.

FrogPrince: Just my kind of evil. Watch for future bruising
FrogPrince: It's much late 4 me. Must go to bed if I want to fake awareness 2morrow.
TheTallest: It's cool. I have a small project to do NEway.
FrogPrince: School Project?
TheTallest: Personal finance. Check my site in the AM.
TheTallest: And go to bed. I know not everyone is a terminal insomniac like me.
FrogPrince: Goodnight sweetheart.


TheTallest: CU 2morrow, dear.

~

Todd smiled and traced a little heart on the screen with his finger. She had logged off, leaving
nobody but himself and Big Blue.

FrogPrince: Thanks for everything, doc. Sorry i gave u the bums rush.
Big Blue: Np. Kids in love do that. Happens to me like u would not believe.
FrogPrince: Got kids? O.o;
Big Blue: Not my own.
Big Blue: Brat! What was that face for?
FrogPrince: Meep *hides* nothing!!!
Big Blue: Lol. Go 2 bed. U are usually asleep around this time.
FrogPrince: My girl's feeling slightly better now. Knows what to xpect. S'all good. So i *could* go 2 bed.
Big Blue: Worry?
FrogPrince: Sorta. :/ And I am gonna have trouble sleeping.

Todd told him about what had happened to his window.

Big Blue: Not good. U need xtra blankets? Know a place you can get them for cheap. Almost nothing.
Frog Prince: Nah, i got a couple nice ones - knitted an' heavy. Anywayz, g'night.
Big Blue: Night then, sleep well

He logged out of AIM and saved the conversation he'd had with Sara. Frankie froze up at the request to go into standby mode, so Todd had to resort to a ctrl+alt+del command to turn the computer off. The boy stretched, grabbed the blankets and pillow off his bed, and trudged downstairs to make up his bed on the couch. Todd burrowed under the blankets and curled around himself until the cool air between the cushions and coverings became filled with trapped body heat. It wasn't a quick occurrence so Todd lay awake thinking about what the scales would look like and whether or not Cerebro would pick them up. The latter thought made his stomach do unpleasant things. He didn't want her to believe she had to dislike him. He didn't want her to be pressured to give him up.

_No way in hell,_ Sara's voice in his head assured him. _I'll love you no matter what._

Todd wished with all his might it was real. He closed his eyes finally and dreamt of a woman with snakes in her hair, flaring nostrils and beady red eyes who Sara introduced to him as his mother-in-law. Sara was reciting something with her eyes downcast and filled with tears. She looked miserable. Todd kept trying to tell her that she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to. Her mother's snake-hair hissed at him. She took out a yardstick and struck him across the shoulders every time he spoke out of turn. She belittled, degraded, ridiculed him. Made Sara recite the same words after her. Sara cried at each one. Todd grit his teeth and spat slime over the woman's mouth to silence her. Butterflies flew from his throat instead of gunk and they flurried around her face like dandelion fluff. She smiled horribly and Todd knew he had to run. He reached for Sara's hand only to have her pulled back and away by an unseen force. Todd ran after her. How he ran.

His heart hammering in his chest, Todd whimpered himself awake to find tears on his face. He didn't wonder at the cause. He was afraid. The wide and unfamiliar space of the living room cast in total darkness did not help.

Todd turned over on his side and buried his face in his arms as the storm outside continued to howl.

~

Sara was still awake by the time Todd was fast asleep and dreaming. So far, her animation had stock sounds and music. She'd do some composing in the morning. The need to sleep finally overtook her around two AM, and it was just a complicated wiggle and a step to the niche in the bookcases that sufficed as her bed.

~
For the first time in her life, she stripped to her underwear and did *not* slip her nightshirt on. Her skin was prickling and prone to itching at the faintest contact from fabric, so she doused herself liberally in calamine and flopped stomach-down onto her bed.

She dreamed of waking to discover her eyes were capable of moving independently, and that she could spear bugs with her tongue. Her dream-self even snapped up small birds[1], much to her personal horror. And always, Mom was there, lecturing her on how proper ladies would never be such exhibitionists about eating live birds. She suggested eating a frog instead, since the world could do with less of them.

But every time she looked at a frog, the poor creature turned into Todd. He'd look up at her as he perched on his lilly pad and say, "Don't listen to her, sweetums. She's trying to poison you."

Somewhere along the way, she turned into a snake, and itched to bite someone. She felt moderately like hell when she woke up. The rash-lumps had spread, creeping around to the front. Her back was no longer itchy, but it *was* irritable. Extremely sensitive to the touch and it felt like it had something *stuck* in it.

Several billion small somethings, to be precise.

It was worse than the time Pamela Anderson[2] accidentally-on-purpose pushed her through the glass wall at the conservatory at Babel Towers. She was finding infintesimal pieces of glass for *ages* afterwards. This was worse because somewhere inside her, she *knew* that this irritation couldn't be plucked out with tweezers.

She winced at the touch of a bathrobe and snuck out to her little eastern balcony. At the first touch of the dawn's light, she let robe, bra, and underpants drop and, very soflty, began to sing.

"Lalalala, lalala, lalala, lalalalalalalow...Good morning starshine, The earth says hello... You twinkle above us, We twinkle below. Good morning starshine... You lead us along, My love and me as we sing, Our early morning singing song..."

The sun always made her feel so much better. Especially the fresh new light of the new day. She washed herself in the light, dancing gently to the music in her head.

The song, like all good things, ended far too soon and she quickly became self-conscious. What if someone *caught* her doing this? What if *Mom* found out? What if the help knew?

Sara flew into her robe and stuffed her underthings into a pocket. She quickly tied the sash and bolted for her room. Yesterday's clothes went into the laundry hamper, and she rifled through her T-shirt collection for today's wear. Something kind to tender anatomy, for certain.

Ah yes. Her "Free the Thylacine" test-shirt. One hundred percent pure, non-allergenic cotton, and soft from multiple washings so it didn't irritate.

The rash was going to be trouble, she was sure. It had crept onto her face. _Looks like we might be on the fast-track, dear._ She could claim an allergic reaction today, and hide at the boarding house tomorrow. Lord knew she'd given herself enough days off by borrowing her mother's voice. Mother-dearest *did* have the opinion that not a single day's worth of education should be wasted.

She'd sent Sara to school with chicken pox, measles, and even the mumps.

It was Sara's own fault for being something of a dab hand with makeup effects. One home zombie movie and one's sick days were forever revoked.

Large Evian bottle, check. Books, check. Emergency supplies, check. Her bag was packed, and it was barely past five.

Sara toured down to the kitchens and rustled up breakfast for herself, mother, and the help. She wasn't much, but at least she could be useful. A little artful arrangement, and she had a tray for Mom. She was always quieter than a mouse when she entered her mother's chamber. A sort of ninja mission to deliver a covert gift.

If Mom ever knew that Sara cooked her breakfasts, she'd never eat them.

Sara hurried back to the kitchens so she could chat with the house's servants about this or that. She even asked if they knew what could cause such a horrible allergic reaction in her skin.

She barely remembered to be careful about her thirst.

Mother came down with her face submerged in her coffee mug. "I trust you found time to do your homework?"
"Of course, Mom. Would you like to check it?"
"It's too early for that sort of thing," sniped mother. "People awake at this ungodly hour are only there for the people who wake up later."

Sara shared a nonverbal I'm-sorry with the help.

Mom refreshed her coffee and stumbled back upstairs. The staff breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Almost time for you to go, ma'am," said Ray. He sounded mournful. "You know your bike has trouble starting in the mornings."
"And that's *with* the blankie," Sara sighed. "Don't worry about Mom. She's just angry at the world. As soon as I move out, she'll feel better."

"If you say so, ma'am," said Ray.

It was too soon. She wanted to stay home longer. But she had to go to school regardless of how self-conscious she was about her bubbling rash.

Another day, another dead rat. This one smelled of almonds, so it was a safe guess that it had been poisoned. Five seconds and a rubber glove saw it into the bin.

Her eyes itched and watered.

"Thara, Thara, plain and tall..."

_Oh *Gods*..._ "Janine... could you - not do that?" Ack. Rubbing them made them worse.

"Whoah. It's just a *joke*... I didn't know you were thith thin thkinned."

"Nah. I'm allergic to something. My eyes are giving me gyp. Oog." She forced herself not to rub. "I take it your orthodontist was mean to you?"

"New plate, threatening headgear, three more rubber bandth... do you know what you're allergic to? Could it be *boyth*?"

"I'm thinking I might be allergic to this school," said Sara, knowing she wasn't going to be heard. "I just feel so rotten."

"I told you thingth go wrong when you thwallow thperm..."

Sara scrunched her eyes shut. "That's an urban *myth*, dear." When she opened them, and blinked past the tears, Janine was gone.

Someone was shrieking with laughter down the hall.

Apparently, the rumour mill was grinding away.

"Todd, dear," she murmured, "*please* come by?" Slowly, and very dejectedly, she made her way to morning assembly.

[1] Large enough chameleons *will* eat small birds.
[2] No relation

Todd awoke some time around three in the morning to the sensation of cold skin. His stray hand sought the blankets which were most likely pooled around his ankles or had fallen off the couch. His hand came up with nothing.

The boy muttered and opened his eyes, searching around the room. He was *cold* and whoever's idea of a joke this was, it was not cool. His eyes fell on the awol blankets lumped up in an armchair.

"Yo, what gives?" Muttering, Todd got up and made his way over to the kleptomaniac furniture to steal back a few more hours of warmth and rest. A tug on a blanket's edge resulted in a string of muffled obscenities. The lump shifted away from him and struggled to tuck the edges of the blankets even tighter around itself.

Todd thought he recognized the voice. "Tabby?" he groaned. "Yo back already?"

His answer was a middle finger.

"I was sleepin' here! You got yo *own* room."

"So do you. Piss off."

"Yo just too lazy to walk up the stairs and turn a doorknob!" Todd shouted back. He got flipped off again. "Fine. *I'll* go sleep in yo room." The lump struggled mightily at this and struggled to extract
itself from the armchair and blankets. Todd raced upstairs, opened and shut Tabby's door, and stealthily hid in the linen closet.

The sound of heavy footsteps and death threats bumbled past his hiding place. Todd waited while Tabby's door opened and shut again. There was another string of curses and a soft 'flop' upon squeaky mattress springs. Todd made his way downstairs with the utmost quiet and reclaimed his blankets.

He curled back up on the couch and fell asleep until about six thirty when two small time bombs nestled between his back and the couch cushions knocked him yelping to the floor. "OW!" he ranted, gingerly exploring now blistered skin. "Tabby, you stupid bitch!"

"Good morning to you too, froggy," the blonde girl replied cheerily from the next room. "Oooh! Grapenuts! I love those!"

"Those are mine!" Pietro snapped. There was another explosion. Todd winced, knowing Pietro was in no shape to zip away from Tabitha's effects. "I... guess you could have *one* bowl," the speedster amended, sounding woozy.

Lance was naturally pissed that Tabby had come home early. The fact that he'd been half threatened into giving her a ride did not make for a happy trip to school. Principal Kelly arrived at the same time and upon seeing Tabby, approached the Brotherhood wearing his famous 'you're-in-deep-muck' face.

"Ms. Smith," he glared. "I'd like to have a word with you about your truancy--"

Tabitha waved his words off as if they were fruit flies. "I know, I had a whole bunch of stuff come up. My mother nearly had a heart attack."

Kelly raised his eyebrow. "Nearly?"

"See, we *thought* she was having one, but it turned out to be a mild case of cerebral palsy so she's okay."

Todd was currently making a valiant and painful effort to maintain a straight face. Kelly's expression required him to duck out of notice. "Ms. Smith, I'm not amused. Report to my office after morning assembly." Kelly walked away, either not hearing or not acknowledging the raspberry Tabitha blew at him.

Todd's snickering broke out into a fit of giggles and fortunately the other boys started laughing at about the same time. Tabby gave them all death glares and stalked toward the school entrance.

"I think that was about the best thing that happened all morning," Pietro commented, to which they all agreed.

To Todd, the best thing that would happen was if he managed to score a seat next to Sara at assembly. He detatched himself from the safety of his friends and went looking for her.

Sara was making her way toward the gym, dodging and apologizing as she tried to dance around people both smaller and larger than herself. Someone tripped her, or tried to. Todd saw her stumble and regain her footing. She was unhurt, though the smile on her face was replaced with a sort of resigned sadness. Todd ducked and twisted until he was near her enough to touch her hand. She looked at him and... there, the wonderful smile was back. And it was for *him*.

Todd returned it and squeezed her hand as they walked on. "Sit next to me?" he asked unnecessarily, but not daring yet to assume.

~

And all of a sudden, there he was, holding her hand. She could only see him if she looked at him directly. "Hello," she smiled. "Of course I'll sit next to you, dear. I need someone to lean on."

"Trouble?" he said. "Someone beat you up?"

"Nuh. I just feel like heck." She squinched her eyes again. "Maybe I *am* allergic to something..."

"Yo' got any of them antihistamines?"

"They always knock me right out," she said. "Bad idea when I blend into the walls." She let him guide her to two adjoining seats, and pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes. "Gyah..."

"So wassup? Yo' kay?"
"Ungh... my eyes..." she barely kept herself from whining. "They're all itchy and gritty. Got some weird kind of flimmer on the edges."

"Flimmer?"

Sara made herself look at him. "Sorry. Speaking in tongues. Flimmer's a kind of flickery, misty obscurity in the vision field. Ever had one of those really bad migranes where you lose patches of reality?"[1]

"Uh... no... but I know someone who does. You should see Lance when he's got a bad one. Feelin' aroun' fo' shit on the way to the tylenol, yo."

"Ouch. He has my sympathies." She blinked again. Her eyes were watery but she could fake ways of seeing around that. "I've got the obscured vision but none of the headache. At least, not yet." She groaned. "I'm ultra-hyper-sensitive on the back, too. How often do you go through this?"

"Once a month," Todd murmured. "Take it cool, yo. Yo' prolly got scales growin' in. That's gotta be tough."

"Scales?"

Todd managed a sick, I'm-sorry-as-all-hell grin. "The doc mentioned it might be a possibility. Sorry I couldn't break it to you."

Scales. She was probably growing scales. That jagged, abrasive, glass-in-the-back feeling was *scales*. "Well... at least I'll be waterproof..."

Todd saw the water bottle in her bag. "An' speakin' of water, yo' need to keep hydrated..." he risked it, "...sweetums." He loosened the cap and pushed the bottle into her hands. "Here. Take a good swig."

Someone was glaring at them. Some dumpy chick with copper frizz-hair and brackets. She looked extremely pissed off and kept staring at both him and Sara.

"Yo, take a picture," he sniped.

"I would, but you'd break the camera," she said, and went back to gossiping with her neighbours.

"Janine?" said Sara. She turned her head at a slightly wrong angle. "There you are. Got plenty of good material?"

"I'm thure I don't know what you're talking about Thara," lied Janine. "I wathn't thaying a thing about your allergieth."

_Syah. *Riiiight*,_ thought Todd.

"OmiGod!" The Trish next to Janine squealed laughing. "Allergic to *sperm*?"

Janine tried to look innocent while the whole school rivitted its attention on Trish, who blushed and tried to hide.

"Thank you, Miss Walker..." drawled Kelly. "Now, if we could move onto more *important* news?"

Sara was laughing behind her hand. "Ah, cosmic justice," she said. "Where is thy sting?"

Todd allowed himself a small chuckle. "She gets what she deserves, yo." _I'll see to it all, personal-like._

"Leave her be," said Sara. "Janine's just seeking social acceptability. It's difficult with her current appearance, so she falls to gossip."

_Damnit, _ Todd thought. _Can't you let me kick her? Just once?_ Aloud, he said, "Yeah, but she shouldn't talk shit about *you*... Yo' her friend."

"Associate," corrected Sara. "We kind of banded together as the kids that no team wants."

_Ouch. I'm hurting._

"She has her good moments, too, you know."

"Yo' got three of them?" wondered Todd.

[1] Yes, I have had headaches like that. It's most unnerving when one is writing notes and 'loses' one's notes, pen and hand, but not the notepad.
Sara chewed on her lip. "I appreciate the cavalier attitude, but I don't tend to judge friends for their shortcomings or flaws. She's not a dragon. That's good enough."

"Dragon?"

"Someone you have to do battle with."
"Ah." Todd was wincing inwardly. _So is that why she tolerates me? Cause I don't give her shit?_ Sara seemed to pick up on what he was thinking and poked him. "Don't you *dare*. I might not have high expectations of my acquaintances, but you I like. A lot." She faltered, uncertainly. What if she'd said too much?

_Good, scare him off. Not that you could do otherwise, but you'll be better off alone than with this one._ Her inner Mom put in.

Sara's eye flickered. She looked away from Todd and stared at her hands.

"I like you too, babe." Todd found no problem this time adding the endearment. She needed it. "A lot," he echoed with a teasing grin. _I wish you could know how much._

"Today, we will be conducting a fire drill," Kelly's voice droned on. The student noise level swelled with groans and excited chatter. "If I may have your undivided attention," the principal called out over the ruckus. He did not speak until there was considerably less sound traffic. This happened fairly quick since nobody wanted a prolonged assembly. "Anyone caught skipping out on the rest of the school day will be given a week's worth of detention. Suspension seems rather pointless for people who want *out* of school." His joke earned a few chuckles from both students and faculty.

Out of the corner of his eye, Todd saw Janine glare at him again and whisper something to Trish. He fought the urge to reach over and smack the back of her head. Sara saw his scowl and followed his gaze.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Associating with me will kick you down the social ladder a few pegs."

"People gossip about me all the time, yo. I'm used to it."

"Ah." Sara nodded knowingly. "The worst is when you don't know *what* they're saying, yet you know it's about you." She took a long draught from the bottle.

"Thirsty, Essel?" sneered Taryn. "You drink like a camel."

_Uh oh._ Sara could feel Todd's hackles raising. She moved her foot to nudge his and shook her head as he looked at her. Sara lowered the bottle from her lips and licked them. Oosh, they felt dry even while wet.

"Ignore them, dearest, and save thy energy. They're just dragonlets."

"Like I said, I'm used to it. But it's *different* when it's aimed at you," Todd murmured, looking distraught.

Sara's heart melted into a puddle of happy goop, but her brain sensed danger for him. "Don't invite more trouble on yourself."

"Trouble's my middle name, sugar. It don't need no invitation."

~

Halfway down the hall, following the shuffling masses, Sara said, "Want to see if I can spit like one?"

"Huh?" said Todd.

"That's what I should have said. I thought water made the brain *work*.

"Don't feel bad, yo. I'm always a li'l fogged when I'm sheddin'. Guess all that water's bein' used elsewhere."

Sara shut her 'bad' eye. "Nearly outside," she said. "Thanks for being my seeing-eye person."

"Hey, no problem," he said. "Yo need help an' I'm here, y'know? _Besides, you're kinda pretty and I don't want neither side getting their claws into you and I want you in ways that I've never considered with the other girls._ Sara giggled. "I keep waiting for the shoe to drop. The hammer to fall. Or Damocles' sword..."

"Who?"

"Myth and legend, never mind." She sighed and moaned slightly in the sunlight. Mmmm. Warm.
"Nobody's ever this nice to me unless they're setting me up. No offence, dear, but life has taught me paranoia."

"Eeehhhh..." said Todd. "An' I know there ain't nuthin' I can say to make it feel better 'cause the rats've said it first. Shit." He kicked a rock, and watched it sail directly over to Duncan Matthews' head. _Score!_ So what if it was only a pebble? Dunc would never trace it to him. "But I mean it when I tell yo' I don't want nuthin' bad happenin', 'kay?"

"Intellectually, yes. Alas, my instincts cry to protect myself. Just ignore it when I get twitchy." They had to separate to file into their first-period class lines. And by the time Sara found Janine, half the school was murmuring that Adrian Essel was currently high on E. Sara ignored them and applied another coat of calamine while they waited. At least the sunshine felt good. If only she wasn't so feverishly *thirsty*...

~

He couldn't help but play over her words in his mind as he walked to his class. He couldn't help but think of the time he'd laughed when Pietro bragged about scattering Sara's bag all over the campus. He didn't even know who Essel *was* and hadn't really had any part in it. Just felt good to be on the side of the prankster for once. Yet it still felt as though he'd helped torment her. Well he could do something now, couldn't he? Todd rescued his text book from the trash-cluttered doom box that was his locker and scuttled as he noticed the hall clock. He could prove it to Sara somehow that his intentions were honest. Er, maybe 'honest' wasn't the best choice all things considered.

"On time for once," congratulated his teacher as he ducked in at the last possible minute. He managed to score a seat in the second front. Unfortunately it was next to Daniels. The boy wasn't paying any attention to him which was good. Todd could do the same.

"Today we will be pairing up. You will interview your partners as if they were Shakespearan characters from Hamlet. I'll write a few sample questions up on the board. I want you each to ask about six and share the answers with the class in thirty minutes."

_Cool,_ Todd thought. Until he realized that everyone in his row had selected their partners, leaving Daniels. Evan looked half asleep already.

The only way Todd could tell he was still awake was by a lazy rolling pair of brown eyes which came to rest on him.

"So we're together." Evan's tone was flat.

"Er, guess so. Unless you wanna pass out and I can interview Yorick."

Evan stared blankly.

"The dead jester, yo."

"I cannot believe *you* pay attention in this class. How can you bear this stuff?"

"It's good, yo. More drama than Springer. Kid's mom marries his dad's murderer and pretends to go crazy. How can you bear to fall asleep?"

Evan rolled his eyes again. "Let's just get it over with."

Todd opened his text and flipped to the story. "Hang on for a minute. I'll pick out my character. Okay, I'm the uncle. Shoot."

Daniels stared at the scribbles. "You draw? That looks like Essel."

"Her name's Sara, yo. She's a girl. Everyone thinks she's a boy though."

Daniels looked wide awake now. "Are you shittin' me?"

"That doesn't sound like a very appropriate question, Mr. Daniels," remarked Mr. Hinkley as he passed them.

"Sorry." They waited until he moved on. "So he, I mean she... if that's true why hasn't she said anything?"

"Because people are stupid and they don't listen." Todd saw Mr. Hinkley coming back. "Okay, ask a question before we get detention. And I said nothin' about Sara that you need to go repeatin' around anybody, you unnastand, foo?"
Evan glared. "Wasn't going to."
"Good."
"You sure are protective of this info. Makes me wonder how you found out."
"Watch it wiseass. So, what made you believe Hamlet's mom was going to let you ax her hubby?"
"Huh?" Evan asked, caught off guard and not realizing the teacher was standing behind him. He caught on when Todd kicked his ankle under the desk. "Oh! Well... she thought I was hotter."
"Uhhhh huh. Anything else? Did you threaten her or promise her goods?"
"I guess I did both. I think I said I'd kill Hamlet if she didn't cooperate."
"Very creative, boys," Mr. Hinkley approved, smirking in amusement. He moved to another pair. Daniels sighed in relief and Todd moved on to the next question. They didn't bring Sara up again and something about the way Todd had looked when he did talk about her warned Evan against making a second attempt. By the time the bell rang ending class, Evan had forgotten her in favor of realizing that he had five minutes to study for an algebra quiz.

~

"What on *Earth* happened to *you* today?" asked Mr Sheindlin. "Anyone would think you didn't *like* Computer class."
"Contrary to rumour, I'm allergic to something mysterious," Sara slid into her seat and began opening tabs in her browser[1]. "The leading suspect is *air*."

Some of the class giggled and there were whispers containing a certain vowel. Lovely. Maybe she could work it into her featured animation.

Sara found out that she could focus if she scrinched her eyes painfully shut for an entire second, but all the same, she was mostly coding by feel. Mr Sheindlin had one rule for computer class: No games unless you code them yourself, or are beta testing by request of the coder.

Sara at least was popular when she finished coding a game. Albeit briefly. Half the accusations of "Adrian's" drug lifestyle came from the people who enjoyed her weird sense of humour.

No matter. All she had to do was survive. One more day. Then she could hide out and weather the worst of her skin trouble and work out what to do from there.

All she had to do was survive.

From computer class to Remedial Ed. Mr Kawalski sighed at her appearance and got her and Freddy working on spoken grammar.

"Your eyes look really bad," said Freddy.
"They do? How bad is 'bad'?"
"They're all milky an' stuff," he supplied. "An' before you cry? They get all bulgy."
"'And', dear. Mind your consonants."
"Right. Sorry."

Sara pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "Ugh. I haven't had this much trouble with my eyes since I made the mistake of painted contacts...[2]" Realisation hit her like a truck. "Lizards... Of *course*. Freddy? Is anyone watching us?"
"Nuh-uh."

She briefly washed her hands in a small slosh of her water, then held open one eye and plucked at its surface. There was a small, slithery feeling and a sudden relief of itch from one eye. And clarity. "Sara?" said Freddy.

"Snakes shed the scales that cover their eyes, dear," she said. Minor slithery feelings resulted in her newly cleared eye evicting the last shreds of the last eye-coating. "I guess I have some of those properties."

Quickly, now, she removed the other one and put the evidence inside a tissue. "Oh, *my* that is such a relief..."

The tears weren't going away in a hurry, unfortunately. Sara rode them out, begging a refill of her bottle halfway through class, and found herself counting the hours until the end of the day.
She couldn't wait to tell Todd about the eyes. She definitely had one up on the weird-ometer for that one.

Mr Kian removed her from class for a half-hour to lecture her on why drugs were dangerous. Rumour was *ever* a replacement for evidence in *this* school. She didn't protest, she just smiled and nodded, accepted the pamphlets, and added them into the grist she collected for the Janine Collateral Damage Collage she had planned for an art project this year.

Lunchtime.
Sara found herself craving protein and carbs, so it had to be the special fried rice plus the tuna salad. And a lot of milk.
She smiled when she found Todd and actually managed to avoid the gauntlet for a change on her way over to him.
"Hello, stranger," she smiled. "Are you okay for lunch today?"

[1] Mozilla Firebird and tab-browsing rock ^_^
[2] Some make-up effects are made by actually *painting* the inside of a contact lens. This causes irreparable harm to the surface of the eye. I'm frankly shocked that various makeup departments don't know this.

~

Todd was ranting at himself all the way down the hall. _Great, foo, why not just tell the rest of the X-geeks about Sara._ He didn't want them to notice her. It was bad enough if Lance and Pietro noticed her and he'd already proudly told them he had a girl. They were going to be paying attention. Freddy could help keep them in check if they found out Sara was loaded. But the X-geeks would approach her and make nice or wipe her brain or something. Todd shuddered involuntarily at the remembrance of spider legs walking through his mind right after his first espionage assignment. Todd had learned nothing of great significance, but Xavier had checked anyway. *He* had gone through his *memories* - ones he didn't want anyone to know. The ones he wanted to disown. Xavier probably knew all his secrets. Todd couldn't trust someone like that.

He popped open his locker. No text for Spanish today. He'd lent it to Tabby over the weekend and had seen nothing of it since. Ms. Cortes was going to skin him alive. Fortunately, Todd knew the combination to the locker next to his which belonged to Paul - one of Summers' friends. Todd pulled out the Spanish book and hoped he'd have time to return it before Paul noticed it missing.
"Hola, clase."
"Hola, Senora Cortes."

_Que aburrida,_ Todd scribbled at the top of his notes. _Deseo dormir ya, y la clase no ha comenzado._[1] He contented himself by drawing more pictures of Sara in the margins, paying attention only when the person in front of him was called to read from the book. Todd executed his turn, pausing when the teacher corrected his pronunciation.

High school Spanish wasn't a language class. It was a parrot class. Everyone just repeated what they heard while Todd practiced his own skills by writing his thoughts down in Spanish. Man, he was going to be screwed if Mrs. Cortes saw his notes, but Spanish was a secret code he could use to write about anything or anyone he wanted.

Todd looked up at the clock. Ten minutes left and it was lunch. Drawings were one pleasant distraction, but the real thing was infinitely better.

"Hey stranger, you okay for lunch?"

Todd looked up from a comic book.[2] "Yo, you're lookin' better. And you got an appetite. That's good news."

"Ugh, I might be looking more bright-eyed..." Sara popped a forkful of tuna into her mouth. Maybe not as gracefully as Lady Favisham would have approved, but she was *hungry*.
"I know," Todd soothed sympathetically. His voice was already quiet, but he lowered it just in case.
"I ain't never had no scales come in, but I can imagine. I've had *gravel* trapped between new and old, and it *wasn't* fun."
Sara made a face around her next bite. "Ack. The thought makes my skin itch even *more*.'"  


Sara didn't want to risk peeling her skin and exposing anything scale-like during school hours, so she placed her palms on her arms[1] and wobbled the flesh. Not that it did anything for her actual discomfort, but it quelled her desire to scratch. "Gyah. I'm going to change the subject to something even grosser, dear. I'm sorry, but at least it's not going to make me itch worse." The last remnant of her left eye-scale chose that exact moment to appear in the corner of her eye. Sara quickly wiped it out. "Remember my vision problems this morning? It turns out I was shedding skin from my *eyes*.*"  
Todd shuddered, but that didn't stop him ingesting. "Ick, yo."
"Sorry," she engulfed more of her lunch. "Dear... I think my metabolism might be going into hyperdrive.*"
Freddy was nodding. "That happens," he said. "You're not sick, but you *feel* that way?"
"Oh heck, yes," said Sara. She almost inhaled her milk. A snatch of tune escaped her mouth. "I'm not sick, but I'm not well..." She instantly blushed and covered her mouth.
Todd, seemingly unaffected by her caterwauling, sang the next line, "And I'm so ho-oooot, 'cause I'm in heeeee-eell..." He laughed. "Know the feeling, doll. If it's any consolation, yo, it's all gonna be downhill after tomorrow."
"O, tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow... creeps in this petty pace from day to day... Oh *dear*... Todd, darling, please... I *need* somewhere to hide out tomorrow. Mother-- twitch "--needs to believe I've gone to school. The school needs to believe I'm staying at home. Can I *please* hide over at your place?"
Todd remembered that he had his hand up his sleeve and a handful of dead skin. Yes, she *had* called him 'darling'. He wasn't dreaming. On the other hand, the way she said it had - *intonations*. It was you'll-be-a-darling-if-you-say-yes, not darling-I-love-you. When she said 'dear' to him, he heard I-kinda-like-you-but-I-dunno-what-to-do-next.
It was amazing what Sara could pack into a few syllables.
"Hey, take it as given," he breezed. "We got a room or two that we ain't using fo' trash. Y'know... if yo' need privacy fo' anythin'. Or somewhere t' stash yo' stuff. Or sumpin."
"Something," said Sara, possibly on automatic. "Thank you. Will you - er- also be there?" She went pink again.  
He loved that blush. _My crimson cutie..._ Part of his mind was appalled. _I did *NOT* just think that!_
Unfortunately for his hopes of answering, *Pietro* had to show up.
"Heywhatthellareyoudoin'talkin'toEsselfor? Shouldn'tyoubemakin'smoochiewithyouralleged*girl*?"
"Shuddup, Pie-pie," Todd growled.
Sara blinked. "Goodness. You certainly cram in the words per second, don't you? Todd, dear, is this a *friend* of yours?"
_Translation: Do we have to be friends with him because he's a mutant?_ "Yeah, he's one of us. Ignore him. He's an asshole. _And there's no way I'm tellin' you what he did to yo' stuff, neither._"Hey, atleastactually*talk*togirls," said Pietro.
"Thereisn'tagirlinthisschoolwhowon'tfallfortheoldquicksilvercharm."
"I can think of *one*," Sara drawled.
"Areyoustillhere?"
"Ah, so you're blind as *well* as stupid," Sara said. "No wonder you couldn't see that we were having a pleasant conversation."

_ZING!_ Todd grinned. Rare was the time someone got one up on the speedster. It looked like all that water was finally helping.

"Aren't you the guy who carries around *feminine stuff*?" He zipped around behind her.

"Lemme give you a simple hint. Dicks don't bleed."

_O God, no_ thought Todd.

"If you got nothing up here--" he 'honked' her left breast.

{WHAP!} "Comport yourself, sir!"

_The hell?_ Todd stood, trying to find where Pietro went.

"Whoah," said Freddy.

Pietro was under a neighbouring table, holding his face. Sara had one hand over her mouth in frightened amazement.

When he emerged, Pietro had a perfect red palm-print on his jaw. "Unh..." he managed. "Ah... fuckin' 'ell..." Very, very carefully, he made sure his jaw was still undislocated.

"I'm terribly sorry," Sara murmured, trying to untangle herself from the chair, her bag, and the table. "I didn't even know I *had* that reflex. Lady Favisham's must have *got* to me. Do you need a hand to the nurse's off--"

"Don't fuckin' touch me!" Pietro scrabbled away and hid behind Fred.

Fred immediately scragged him by the front of his shirt. "I got half a mind to pound ya *myself* for what ya did."

"Freddy, *please*," Sara chided. "Violence isn't *you*.

And, amazingly, Fred put Pie-pie down and actually *pouted*.

_Yo, this has gotta be some weird mutant power._ Todd boggled. Three words and she got the big guy to settle down and not want to fight. Sometimes it took the 'hood a whole *day*. "Did I ever tell yo' you're amazin'?" he said. He risked holding her hand. _Ow. Her poor skin. She's all dry an' lumpish. Damn, those must be new scales. Poor kiddo..._

She wrapped both hands around his and went pink. She ducked her head, but since he was much shorter, he was in an ideal position to see her smile for him. "No, I'm not," she mumbled. "It's just a dumb trick."

Daniels was giving them the hairy eyeball.

Todd gave him the finger.

Then, by some unknown magic, a teacher appeared into the scene. "*Mister* Maximoff! I believe this is the third time you've been *told* about brawling on school grounds?[2]"

"But-- he-- I mean--"

"No excuses. Detention."

There was a distant, "*Yes*!" from the X-geek table.

*Suck it, Daniels!* Pietro shouted.

"*Two* hours' detention," said the teacher. "Want to shoot for three or are we going to come along quietly?"

Todd took the chance to escort Sara from the scene and find the one faucet reliable for filling up bottles. "You OK?"

He was holding her hand.

A boy.

A real, live *male* of the species... *wanted* to touch her. Something quantum had gone wrong with the universe[3].

"Uh-uh," she nodded mutely and tried to swig from her empty bottle. No water. She was still thirsty.

"Here, yo." He held her hand - again - as he guided the bottle under the faucet and turned it on. He touched her face. Light, gentle, *cool* fingers... His skin was so smooth. "You sure you okay?"

"You're. You are," she said. Her whole body jumped in a shiver. "Hah... Oh my... I've never *had* nerves before. Is that what it's like?"
"Yo, you were fan-frikkin'-tastic, cutie-pie. I could *kiss* yo'."
"Something's stopping you?" she babbled. 
His gentle touch bought her head down to his. 
Their lips met. 
He tasted sweet. 
He smelled of forest floors and rich, wet earth. 
Such a moment could have lasted forever... but the bottle overflowed and the splashing water soaked into their ankles. 
They broke apart in an embarrased flurry to at least halt the spread of the mess. 
Sara spilled half the bottle over her shirt in her fright. 
"Todd..." she said. "I--"

[Rrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiimnnnnnnnggggg...]

|--have to go to class. Damnit._"After school?"
"Death can't stop me," he said, "Sugarlips."
Sara was beetroot-red and prone to giggle all the way to class.

Evan poked Kurt with a note in AP Chem. 
"Dude," he whispered. "We're supposed to be watching the *film*." 
"Read the fuckin' note," Evan hissed. 
Kurt rolled his eyes and unfolded the paper. 
_Just saw Essel and *Toad* kissing._ Evan had written. _Only, Essel's real name is *Sara* or something. I still think she's a guy. Does that make me gay?_
Kurt tore up the note with a pointed glare at his friend. "Get a *grip*," he murmured. "Geez..."

[1] Hey, that rhymed! Whee! 
[2] Teachers always pick on the wounded, rather than the woundee, to haul off to the office. I've yet to fathom *why*. 
[3] I'm pretty sure I've paraphrased Pratchett here...

~~

He couldn't help but sing, although mindful to do so under his breath while passing anyone who might pay the wrong kind of attention. She hadn't pulled away. Hell, she kissed him back. Todd was so happy he passed his classroom, swore cheerfully when he realized the mistake, and circled back. 
"Well, *you're* on time for once." Ms. Jones said by way of greeting. 
"Fine, how are you?" Todd distractedly answered the wrong question as he found his seat. 
The teacher launched straight into modern history and the standardized account of what happened during Eisenhower's reign as president. Eisenhower the hero. No mention was made in relation to the Congo or diamonds, or Patrice Lumbaba.(1) But Todd didn't feel up to writing side notes. For once he was content to dishonor the truth and be a sheep if it meant he could escape into his little dream world. 
Sara was going to stay with him tomorrow. All day perhaps while she waited out her changes . . . maybe more than one day - who knew? Todd knew he was going to have to make preparations. He could trust Fred or Lance to bring homework and make excuses for him if it extended past the weekend. Thursday he had to be present for a stupid group presentation in order to get credit. The rest of the days he could skip easy. Maybe Fred could stay with her on Thursday and have the day off for himself. 
Todd wasn't going to think of enlisting Pietro's help with any of this, not unless the speedster showed remorse. _Shyeah, like that's gonna happen. Ass._ He was going to have to see to him. Sara'd gotten him pretty good, but Todd would personally make sure the message had been delivered. He didn't want her to be bothered by anything - poor kid had enough goin' in with her new scales. He wondered what else was going to happen. Maybe her *eyes* were gonna change too. Pupils elongated and turned to slits in daylight. No matter what, she was beatiful to him. He was going to
make sure she knew that. She wasn't going to ever feel ugly. Or unwanted. Not like his pop had made him feel. She was going to be *happy* with who she was. Todd would do his best to make it so.

Someone tapped his shoulder. Todd then became aware of murmuring voices. The teacher was calmly up front reading from her grade book and everyone had their books open to the same page. Except him. Todd peeked at his neighbor's book and calmly turned to the correct page. The tapping started again, more insistent.

"Yo?" he asked, turning around. He came face to braces with Janine. "You aren't in this class."

"Thaking nothes for a friend. Did you really kith Thara? Trish thays thee thaw you."

Todd turned his back on her and looked back at his history book. They were supposed to be doing Assignment 3A review questions. Todd figured there was nothing else to do.

_`Poke*poke*poke_ went the sharpened pencil into his shoulder.

"What was the slogan Eisenhower used in his campaign?" Todd asked.

"We like Ike or something. Dith you or dith you not?"

"I did."

"Even though you thought the was a *boy*?"

"You're a sick sad little person you know that, Mouthy? She don't ever gossip 'bout you. Why you give her grief? Make you feel better bout yousell knowin' yo higher up on the food chain, don't it?"

"I'm thure I don't know what you mean by that," Janine stated, eyebrows raised coolly.

"You just wait til yo all alone one step up and ain't nobody got yo back. It's lonely up there with the other predators. Sooner or later they'll knock you down and ain't nobody goin' to help you up. Not even Sara. You'll be there one day. Count on it."

Janine glared. "I don't think I'm thalking tho you anymore. Goodbye." She slammed her book shut just as the teacher announced they could leave before the bell.

Art was a pleasant distraction from mulling over the unpleasant consequences that might come from pissing off Janine. Even though Todd hated cubism and hated newsprint collages even more. Somehow Mrs. Spindel had been forced into using less paint and more recyclable mediums. She'd combined cubism with newsprint this assignment. Todd was giving killer death glares to his tube of Elmer's which liked to give large overdoses to tiny shapes of paper no matter how gently he squeezed.

He wanted the day to be over; even in art, the clock was moving unnaturally slow. Todd pulled out the piece of black paper he'd managed to glue into his hair and stuck it to the canvas.

Kurt kept glancing at him, trying not to look threatening or curious, and failing at the latter. There were some times blissful moments when Todd forgot he shared a class or two with the elf. When he could pretend the X-men were just a bad comic idea.

"Problem?" he drawled.

"Not unless you wish it," Kurt replied evenly. "Just looking at your art, if you don't mind." He'd been looking straight at _Todd_ and both of them knew he'd been caught.

"Rumors flying around already?" Todd whispered. He knew what kind of rumors. "Tryin' to see if my skin'll turn rainbow?"

Kurt snorted despite himself. "Nein. Just trying to find a way to wish you good luck without getting my head bitten off."

"Luck?" Todd was dumbfounded.

"With all the pressure. Essel's a lady by name of Sara. I know that. Wouldn't care if I didn't. You love her, that's what's important right? I hope it doesn't make you doubt yourself or each other." Todd felt a small something twinge in his stomach. "I wouldn't. Er. I get defensive sometimes, you know? It's cause I want people to just stop... to just accept us and get over themselves."

Kurt chuckled. "Don't we all?"

"Yeah, we all do. I know your story, boy, but how bad do you got to deal with shit like this? You can hide from the worst of it behind that watch and behind your friends."

"Not from all of it," Kurt murmured, rubbing a bruise. "Not from *everything*. Maybe not as bad as
you, but I still struggle. Doesn't that count enough?"
Todd wanted to say something sarcastic and cutting to show Kurt that nothing had changed.
"Maybe," he retorted uncertainly. _Yea, fuckin' brilliant._ Feeling flustered, he turned back to the
collage and Kurt seemed content to keep his furry yap shut until the last bell.

---

1) Read Barbara Kingsolver's 'Poisonwood Bible' for class, and Eisenhower reportedly ordered the
assassination of Patrice Lumumba (shoot me if I spelled it wrong) the elected president of the newly
independent Congo. The Belgians and Americans still wanted the diamonds and independent Congo
was going to make it very difficult to capitalize on that. A very powerful book.
2) My high school actually let people do this. If the person had study hall and a friend who was
absent, she (it was an all girl school I attended) could go to that friend's class and take notes and
collect reading material. I don't know about Bayville high, but let's pretend they're liberal.

~

Her eyes may have been better, but they still ran copiously and puffed up to the point where, if she
had had bruising, she would have been called in for being in a fight.
As it was, Mr Kian called her away from music class to talk about the dangers of sexual relationships
and some practices that could lead to nasty diseases in very strange places indeed[1].
Sara held tight to her personal honour and let people think what they'd think anyway. She couldn't
really handle this. She couldn't fight it. Fighting only confirmed people's suspicions. Denial made
them talk louder. Muteness... didn't really work.
And Sara refused to be worse than the rumours.
Let them talk their idle heads off. They had no idea what she'd been through or what she was
actually going through. And better that they didn't know.
The prickling, itchy, irritating sensation under her skin was sharpening into near-agony.
She'd have to take an antihistamine just so she could sleep tonight.
Sara wiped her eyes and found a place to stand very still in near the gates. If anyone actually
bothered to look at her, she'd have appeared very upset with the world indeed.
Not that many people bothered to look.
Just the ones that counted.

Aw geez, she was crying. "You okay, sugarcakes?"
"Believe it or not, I'm actually fine. My eyes just happen to leak a lot."
"Yo, you an' me, we goin' chat with the doc." Todd decided. "This eye thing is just too fucked up, yo."
Sara blushed.
"Oops," Todd managed a sick grin. As far as he remembered, Sara hadn't actually sworn about
anything. "Sorry 'bout th' french."
"I should be used to it," she wiped her eyes again. "But I never am. I always blush. Silly girl."
"Naw yo' ain't," said Todd. "it's just a thang, y'know? People got thangs."
"So where is this infamous physician?"
"Online," Todd found Eileen and made himself comfortable on the seat. "C'mon. I show you my
setup."
Sara went beet red, but she unlocked the chain and started on their way, regardless.
"Sure yo' okay to drive?"
"Yeah. Tears only blur vision temporarily. I've driven and cried before."
_Ow._

Pietro came to a screeching halt when he heard someone unfamilliar in Todd's room.
Todd never had any visitors. Ever.
"No offense, dear, but I'm going to have to call in a hazmat team on your lounge," said the stranger.
"And possibly hire a skip per room."
"Yeah, we kinda let things slide fo’ a while. It's cool, yo. The room we're lendin' yo' is empty. Swear."
"Darling, I couldn't let this slide if I was comatose."
_Darling?_ Pietro boggled and peeked in. There, sharing PC-junkpile space with Toad, was Adrian Essel.
"There. See? I run several small enterprises, some toons, and a rather small film company."
"Rather? Yo, I seen more crew on PBS." Some strange sounds played. "Funny as shit, though."
Essel grinned. "You know... there's no-one about and your doctor friend is offline..."
"Yeah?"
"Maybe we could continue our -er- lunchtime discussion?"
"You serious?"
"Are you... Yes. I must confess I rather quite liked it."
They kissed.
_FUCK!_
Pietro had to look five times. Toad "straighter than an arrow" Tolenski and Adrian "fucked in the head" Essel. The Toad and the guy with the silicone breasties[2] under his shirt.
EeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEE*eeeeeuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
She touched the mirror, and the reflective silver spread all over her. "I'm a pale, sad mimic, dear. A thin imitation of what others want."

"Hey... yo... Don' think like that, sugarlips," Todd was over beside her and holding her hand. "You don't gotta be like nobody else but yo'self, sweetie. I seen who you are, okay? An' I like that you. You don't gotta be nobody else wit' me."

Half of her was a mirror. Half of her was Todd's colouration. All of her was irritable and her eyes were leaking again.

"What a strange, twisted lady, you've won a favour from[1]..." she whispered.

Todd snuggled up beside her. "Yo' perfect just the way you are, doll. Don't let nobody say nuthin' different."

Now she was crying. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I dunno what's happening... I'm not normally this - this - uncompanionable."

"Yo' changin', sug'," he soothed. "That's gotta do sumpin' to ya." He guided her to the chair least likely to collapse, and gave her some more water. "Just ride it out, it's coo'. You gonna be fine."

"I don't *feel* very fine... I'm sure - I'm *sure* part of me wants to hurt things... And I'm not like that."

"So ignore it. *You* know who you are... just stay that way."

The next thing she knew, she had him in a death grip and was babbling about not wanting to eat the innocent little birds. Todd had one hand free and was trying to send an IM.

FrogPrince: Yo! Doc! SOS!

[1] Paraphrased and turned around from _The Mountains of Mourning_ by Lois McMasters Bujold.

~

Dammit, he wasn't on yet. Todd hit the capslock.

Frog Prince: LOOK AT THE SCREEN

Sometimes that actually worked, most times it didn't. But it would leave an impact on the seriousness of the situation; Todd rarely wrote in all caps.

Sara was trembling violently and issuing thin little cries between babbled apologies. Each sound of misery tore at him like the beak of some carrion bird. Todd turned from the computer to wrap both arms around her and hold her close. She buried her face in his arms and after a moment, though she barely moved, Todd was sure she was sobbing.

It hurt to see how well she'd taught herself to be subtle about it. Todd kissed her hair. "I'm scared too, yo," he whispered. Great, now his own eyes were stinging. He couldn't fall apart, not when she needed him.

He *was* scared. What if Sara was like one of those unlucky ones Magneto had talked about? The ones who didn't survive their powers manifesting? Not for the first time, he sorely missed having an adult around.

_Ding!_

Todd turned back hurriedly to the screen.

Big Blue: What's the trouble?

Frog Prince: Saras in a lot of pain. Scales coming out and all that plus her eyes are burning no matter how much she cries. I thought tears were supposed to help

Big Blue: Sometimes there are negative reactions

Frog Prince: But this is fucked up. I wanna help her. All I can do is hold her and be useless. She's so *scared*

Big Blue: Actually, holding her is probably helping more than you know

Ding!
Sara hiccuped. Todd's hand left the keyboard and offered her more water. She downed the rest of the bottle in one sitting.
"I must look wretched."
"Impossible," Todd stated. "Yo ain't lookin' like no wretch. You're my *Sara*."

Big Blue: You said her eyes are itching and weeping?
Frog Prince: She 'splained to me that she was sheddin' skin off her eyeballs
Big Blue: Stay with her. I'm going to look up a few things

Todd's eyes were already back on Sara. Gently he stroked her scalp with his fingers, trailing them softly across her poor inflamed skin. She closed her eyes and curled closer against him. Unsure of himself, Todd pulled his hand away intent upon wrapping it safely around her shoulders. She took it and pressed it to her cheek again.
"That felt good. Please?"
They stayed like that for a while, wrapped around each other in the armchair as both the world outside and the room they were in grew steadily dark.

All Lance wanted to do when he got home from work was collapse on his bed. No extra baggage, no phonecalls, no homework until six in the morning. No crying teenaged girls in Todd's room either.

Waitafuckinminute.
Lance walked backward and stared into Todd's room. He could dimly make out two figures nestled together, one much taller than the other. Though the features were barely highlighted by the computer screen, it wasn't hard to determine who Todd's guest was.
"Todd?" Lance asked in his 'I promise not to hurt you very *much* so long as you tell me exactly what's going on' voice. "Why is he here and why is he crying?"
A pair of amber eyes opened and peered angrily at him from within the huddle. "Her name's Sara Essel. She's a mutant and she's stayin' until she sorts some things out. She's my guest. We'll stay outta your way if you don't bother us."

Lance gawked. Todd was using a no-nonsense tone with him. Up until now, Lance didn't even know Todd *had* a no-nonsense tone. "Okay," he muttered after a brief staring contest. "We'll talk in the morning. You and... Sara... sleep tight..."

Lance started to stagger off to bed. "Wait?" came Todd's voice. "Lance? Could you please . . . nevermind, yo."

The older boy's head appeared in the doorway. "Yeah?"
"Get us some water?" Todd finished sheepishly. "She needs it more than I. Goin' through her first shedding."

Lance immediately winced. "Oh hell. That's gotta be rough. She's like you?"

Todd was too exhausted and worried to take offense at the way that had sounded. "Yeah, I guess you can say we're from the same family, or branch or whatever."
"Yeah. I'll go downstairs and get a couple of glasses."
"Nah, don't bother with downstairs. Fill this up." Todd handed over the undertow mug. Lance boggled at it.
"She drank how many of these already?"
"I'm not sure, but not enough. You know how *I* get."

Sara was trying to form a sentence. "Pleased to m-meet..." She struggled to think of what came after. Her mind was clearly muddled. Todd put a cool hand against her flushed skin.
"Don't worry, Lance's cool without a formal intro. Yo can talk in the morning. Just relax, sugarlips."

His words probably fell on deaf ears, but it felt good to reassure her.

Lance took one look at Sara, then at Todd's tired but wary features and knew sleep wasn't coming for the younger boy tonight. "You skipping tomorrow?"
"Probly. Don't got nothin' of importance to do," He yawned and muffled himself with a free elbow.
Idly he looked over at the screen. Big Blue was still online but he'd been quiet. Maybe some other emergency had come up.
Lance returned with a brimming mug of water. Todd made Sara drink at least five inches before stealing a few gulps for himself. Lending body heat was dehydrating work. "Thanks," he breathed, noticing Lance was still watching them. "Yo a lifesaver."

"Sara Louise (hic) Adrien," she sobbed. "...s my name..."
"Aw man... I'm sorry, hon. I got confused."
"It's okay," she squeaked. "I test high on forgettability..." her voice dwindled into a squeak and she crumpled against him again.
His skin was so *cool*. He was soft and he wanted to hold her. But that didn't stop her crying. She was in deep sobs, now. The sort that were soundless but for the various attempts to breathe. The occasional squeak escaped her as her breath hissed out.
She was trapped in her own misery.
"Shh... Shhh..." Todd kissed her, holding her close. "It's okay, baby. It's gonna be okay."
"...i don' wanna hurt anybody..." she managed. "...i *like* th' li'l birds t' fly..."
Todd began to rock her. "It's okay. You can leave the birds alone if ya wanna." {Cuckoo!}
"There's th' doc. What's he sayin'? 'Eyes may still have scale remnants near th' optic nerve.' Yo' got any of that eyewash stuff?"
Sara nodded. "Medkit. Down near th' bottom."
"Bottom?"
She sniffed. "Of m' bag."

Todd brushed her face and kissed her. "I'm'a get it, hon. You hang on, 'kay?" He dived over to the bag. He tried to haul it over to her, but couldn't pick it up. Never mind, he un-packed it in situ until he found something with a red cross on it.
"Here it at," he cried. He opened it on her lap. Lots of gauze and mysterious tubes, bottles and sachets. He found the eye cup and put it in her trembling hands. "Which one's th' eye stuff?"
Sara reached automatically for a largeish bottle under the top layer. A generous, practiced squirt and she filled the thing.
"Yo, you done this befo'..."
"I'm rather accident prone." She placed the cup on her eye and tipped her head backwards. "Neee... ow... ack, it burns..."
Todd read the label. "Ain't this th' stuff they use to wash contacts?"
"Yeah. It's a very good eyewash, too." She tipped herself back down. "Something's moving in there..." She blinked, stretched her eye at the corner.
Something milky and white appeared on her bottom lid.
Todd carefully flicked it out. It was a ragged circle-like shape with a neat hole in the middle.
"Whoah."
"At least we know it works."
"Hey, yo' over yo' shakes!" Todd grinned.
"Not quite, dear. I put them away so I could handle this. I'll get back to gibbering annon."
"Please don't think like that?" he begged.

Sara put the cup over her other eye and bent herself backwards over the chair.
{Krickledy-kract-pop-snap-krakle} went her back.
"Yo, that's *gotta* hurt."
"Nah. Happens all the time. I can snap every joint in my body if I want to."
"Dare you to do it near Pietro," Todd laughed. "Dude'll have a fit."
Her eye was burning in the chemicals. She could stand it for another few. "I like to think I'm not that
mean, despite my subconscious impulses to eat live prey."
"Uh. What?"
"I dreamed of eating *birds* last night."
"*Oh*..." said Todd.
Sara straightened up and removed both cup and leftover scale. "Nnggh... That has to be the single most peculiar sensation ever."
Todd was typing. Sara peered over his shoulder.

FrogPrince: Eyewash did the trick. Huzzah
BigBlue: V Good. Monitor over the next few hours. Be alert for extra mucous or rapid swelling. Bathe for former, ice for latter
FrogPrince: K

"Ask him what works when calamine doesn't," said Sara.
Todd handed her the keyboard. "Go fo' it, hon. You need t' know what to expect.

FrogPrince: Is Sara, borrowing KB. Calamine not helping some lge irritations on back
BigBlue: What's the sensation?
FrogPrince: Prickly-heat plus crawliness plus raw skin plus pins and needles. Ick.

"*Ow*... Mah po' honeybuns..." Todd soothed her skin with his hands.

BigBlue: Tried that aloe stuff for sunburns?
FrogPrince: Trying now.

Sara dived into her medkit and liberated another bottle of blue gunk. A generous squeeze into her palm went right under the back of her shirt. Ah, cool relief. "Oooooohhhhh... Oh *yeah*.

Somewhere outside, someone had a conniption involving every metal object in the house.

~

Todd grumbled some more at Pie and rubbed some of the sunburn lotion a bit further down her back. Sara blushed as his hand went up under the back of her shirt. He hadn't asked. Todd froze, realizing what he was doing.
"Sh - sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't even *ask*." He looked like he was expecting a slap. Sara touched his face, gently.
"You were thinking of making me feel better. I'm not ever going to hit you for that."
"You'd be surprised, yo, what excuses people come up with." He remembered one time when Mystique had gotten sick. He'd walked into her room while she was half-awake to offer her a blanket and nearly got his arm twisted out of his socket.
"You'd be surprised how many people balk at touching me. When I'm *healthy*. Right now I definitely qualify as an untouchable."

"Not to me you don't." Todd couldn't help but ask, "Do I?"
Sara kissed him in response and released his lips from hers only at piercing stab in the back of her neck. "Ow, what was that?"
Todd went around and looked. "Holy shit yo. Yo scales are . . . they're beautiful."
"They're coming out? Now?"
"Just here." Todd stroked one small patch on the back of her neck, smoothing the disks down and gently freeing the skin. "I guess cause the layer of skin is so thin near the bone. Places you got more skin an' muscle might take longer."
Sara started typing.
FrogPrince: A couple of my scales have come out. Todd says they're beautiful.
FrogPrince: Why do I feel like a mommy?
BigBlue: lol! Congratulations. What do they look like?

(1) After the caste system in India, those who are made 'impure' by their very dirty jobs.

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"What *do* they look like?" Sara rubbed at her knuckles, trying to peel away the old skin there. "Yo, this one's icy green... This one's a kinda blue... Yo, this one's the colour o' them green beer bottles."
Sara revealed a cluster of four on a knuckle. The old skin peeled away, but stayed attached firmly to the rest. They were tiny, really, close together and as bright as uncut gems. Where a small mole had been, there was now one in lapis-lasuli blue. The others were varying shades of aqua.

FrogPrince: I think I'm going to be largely green-blue. they're varying between pale and dark greens, blues, and everything in-between.

"Ack! Mom! She's going to be worried," Sara blurted.
"Huggle-bumps... I don't think she miss you that much."
"All the same, I still need a good excuse," She bought out her cellular and began dialling. "I'll call Roy. He'll be out of the flack range."
"Roy?"
"Uh..." Sara bit her lip. "We kinda have a butler." She blushed. When she told people about her family's affluence, they usually started treating her like a human bank and got upset when she didn't have money to spare. "And a cook. And a maid. And a gardener..."
Todd took it in his stride. "Hey, it's coo'. Yo' don't need no dragons, aight?"
"My old grammar tutors would have a *field* day with you, darling."
Todd just grinned.
"Adrien residence?" said Roy.
"*Roy*... I am *so* glad you picked up. Can you tell Mom I'm working on a project with Freddy? Tell her it's extra credit. For..." she blushed. "Biology."
She could hear Roy smile. "I *see*... Good luck with your - endeavors. And remember restraint."
Translations: Have fun with your young man - but not *too* much fun. "Thanks, Roy. You're a dear." She hung up, bright pink and gigglish.
Todd was grinning. "Biology, anh?" He made a complicated gesture. "Yo, you my *bad* girl."
Sara couldn't help hiding her face in both hands as she giggled and blushed.

Meanwhile...
Hank flipped through his books. Aqua scales, were they? Fascinating. According to the available information, she was a class twelve shapeshifter with minor regenerative capabilities. Her skin may even respond to rough treatment by thickening up into some kind of armour.

BigBlue: Feeling better? I'm here if you need to unburden.

He leaned back and sipped his brew and waited. And waited. And waited...
What were they *doing* over there?

~~

"Yo cute when you laugh," Todd grinned. Sara giggled harder but shook her head.
"You don't think I sound like a committed chipmunk on crystal meth?"
"Naw," Todd answered back, straight faced. Then he lost his composure and fell over sideways onto the bed. His laughter was just a bit on the nasal side, but contagious. Soon both of them were
rendered helpless for no clear reason.
Sara stopped laughing only when her throat developed a tickle that would not be coughed away. She took another long draught from her mug.

Todd sat up and scooched next to her. While she drank he busied himself with brushing a few elbow scales free of their dead skin covering. Sara thrummed appreciatively, and by the time she put down the water Todd's fingers were stroking her arm in intricate patterns. She studied him for a moment, watching his amber eyes focused adoringly on her body, following the movement of his hand as it trailed down to her hand.

Sara leaned down and kissed his jaw in a non-distractive way, allowing him to maintain as much focus as possible on his loving task. She didn't want him to stop; ever. It felt . . . *right*. Some other part of her that seemed long ago and far away might have blushed to death, but she was far too happy to die now.

That wasn't to say she no longer doubted her actions; her heart fluttered as she kissed Todd again. This time under the jaw, on the neck. His skin was soft, beautiful. Somewhat dryer than might be normal, but it felt cool to the touch. Sara wanted more of it and that thought scared her. Her eyes sought safer territory and met his eyes. He returned her gaze calmly, but though his hand did not stop stroking patterns on her skin, it trembled and hesitated for the briefest of moments.

Both were too afraid to speak. Neither knew what to *say*. Being loved was such a novel experience and it was too much. Overwhelming. Sara felt the boxes in her mind start to quake a bit. They wanted to open, to spill everything out onto Todd. They wanted him to make it okay. She didn't too, but what if they were wrong? What if she talked too much and scared him away? _Not yet,_ she told them. Ever obedient, they kept their lids on firmly.

Sara didn't want to deal with it anyway, even if there was some remote chance Todd *could* make it all better. The boxes became unimportant, almost non-existent. She could see the future in his eyes. It was full of sandy-haired children with green eyes and scales tackling each other and trying to outjump their father. When they failed, of course, they demanded free froggy-back rides and defiantly turned invisible when he dared to claim tiredness.

She chuckled softly, now back in the present. He smiled back, the light in his eyes speaking of what he'd seen in hers.

~

She could weather the pain of the scales' final emergence. It was only like being stabbed with a sharp pencil. Sara had had plenty of those wounds in her time.

Todd, she couldn't help noticing, was flaking, too. She carefully pulled at a strip of skin until she met resistance. "Does it - hurt for you?"

"Naw. Not any mo'." He took over pulling the ghostlike veil from his face and neck. The skin underneath was a pale, pale green that quickly darkened to his usual sallow hue. "I mean, sure, th' first coupla times were pretty rough, yo. Itched like fury, but it hurt like a bad sunburn." He shrugged. "Idunno. Either I got used to it or-- you okay?"

She must have been wincing. "Five patches at once down my spine. Oofa."

"Ow... poor baby," he soothed. "I used t' find a cold shower kinda helped."

"How about *more* showers?"

"Shaddup, Tabby."

She didn't. "The fuck you doing with Essel the Perv?"

"Hey, just because *you* can't lock a bathroom stall--"

"Just because *you* always walk *in* on me, dumbass..." She lobbed a little glowing ball at her. Sara reacted instinctively, batting it back where, shockingly, it exploded in the blonde's face.

"*HEYYYYY!*"

Todd cracked up. "Whassamatta? Can dish it out but yo' can't take it?"

Tabby gave him a dangerous glare, decided that she had to be elsewhere, and stomped off in a huff. Sara still had both hands over her mouth.
Todd prised her fingers away. "I'm sorry, Ididn't mean it..." spilled out of her mouth. "It was an instinct. Something gets thrown at you, you bat it away... better my hands than my shirt... *UNH*. Ow." She hissed. Now she was getting cramps under her skin. She rubbed at the hurt on the back of her hand.

Freddy poked his head in, "I got dinner an' I did some washin' up so there's even clean plates." "...definitely a hazmat team," Sara muttered. "Todd... is your room some kind of public thoroughfare?"

"It must be *today*," he said. "I oughta sell tickets. Or show you th' spare room."

It was, as he'd advertized, not much. There was never a bedframe. Just a mattress and a couple of boxes of random crap. And a sheet with little duckies on it. "I know, it ain't a lot, but at least it ain't trash, right?"

Sara put her bag down. "It'll suffice for sleeping. Not that I think much of that will be done." She hissed and rubbed at another spot. "I think my skin's cramping."

Todd couldn't do much for that, and it hurt to watch her hurting. It also hurt to see her get that strange, blank look - almost as if she wasn't herself - for a couple of seconds before returning to normal. Whatever she was doing when she did that, he could tell it wasn't healthy.

And there'd been that weird moment when a whole world of hurt had turned up in her eyes... then vanished into the eery blank look. Todd ached to ask her what was up... but daren't. The poor kid had enough troubles with the scales.

Indeed, Sara was looking ragged in more ways than one. Parts of her skin had split, revealing gemlike, tiny scales underneath, but it clung fast and was too thick to rip, so it hung off her in tatters. Her colour - where she was still pinkish - wasn't good. She'd gone very, very pale. "Maybe you should - y'know... have some dinner an' take somethin' to help yo sleep?" he suggested. "Yo're already havin' a rough time... Sleepin' it off's better'n bein' awake."

"Better than," corrected Sara. "I'm going to need the energy, yes. Dinner and an antihistamine. Lovely."

"What? No painkillers?"

"Asprin makes me sick," she said. "Acetominophen kills the pain but makes me slightly whack. Ibuprofen just makes me see things, and Nurofen just plain doesn't work. And I overreact to sedatives."

"Yo' kiddin' me."

"Seriously. Mom gave me a sleeping pill once?" she said. "She meant well. I needed to be rested up for the competition... Anyway, when she checked on me, I wasn't breathing."

"Whoa."

"It was, apparently, a very scary five hours in ER." Sara shrugged, absently holding his hand on the way back to the kitchen. "I don't even remember the time between tuck-in and life support. It's very weird waking up and finding out that a machine is helping you breathe."

Todd made a tiny little strangled noise. "Don't worry about it, dear. I'm fine *now*." "Yo, what frikkin' competition, doll?" he begged. "It shoulda been on the news."

"Oh, it was. I was three years old at the time. Little Miss Bayville charity beauty pageant. Ironically, we were funding a campaign against animal testing for makeup."

"Day-umn, yo." He shook his head. "Where have you *been*?"

"Lots of boarding schools. Some national competitions back when I was still cute enough to win prizes... you know how it goes."

Todd appeared confused. "I do?"

"It is the duty of a daughter to make her mother proud. A duty I rather failed when I was six and won 'best effort' instead of anything near first prize. I try... but all I am is trying." Twitch. Blankness. And then Sara was back. "Sorry, dear. You don't need to hear about it."

"Somebody's gotta," he said.
"If I wanted to torture someone with my problems, I wouldn't pick on you. Seems you have enough problems," started Sara. She stopped in her tracks at the sight of a smirking Pietro leaning against the wall adjacent to the kitchen entrance.

"Heya, Essel. Stayin' for dinner?" He caught sight of Essel's scales and loose skin. "EWWW! Did ya come down here to make me sick?"

"Go stare in the mirror s'more. You ain't happy enough yet," Todd snapped and escorted Sara past into the kitchen. He glanced up at her. She was doing 'it' again... the empty look in her eyes gave it away.

"Hey, Sara, you want grilled cheese with your soup?" Fred asked. All they had left were twenty-cent cans of soup, wonderbread, and Velveeta cheese.

"What on earth?" Sara prodded the loaf of Velveeta with one finger. "I wasn't aware plastic cheese existed."

Pietro was on her in milliseconds. "If you don't like it, don't eat it! Who invited you for dinner anyway?"

As usual, Sara returned rudeness with civil manners. "I never said I didn't like it. Just that it was odd."

"An' if you must know, I invited her," Todd piped in.

"And so did I," thundered Freddy, brandishing his spatula in a threatening manner.

"The bread's burning," Pietro retorted, taking a step backwards nevertheless. Freddy turned back to the stove, grumbling. Pietro decided he would rather claim the remote before Tabby did and sped to the living room.

"Sorry about him, sweetheart. He's territorial."

"I figured."

Freddy fixed both of them plates of grilled cheese and tomato soup to take upstairs. Todd carried the sandwiches while Sara amazed Todd by carrying both bowls of soup up the stairs without making the surface so much as ripple. "Lady Favisham's was all about daintiness and good form. No wonder I dropped out. Figuring out silverware placements and not spilling the soup were about the only things I didn't perform miserably."

Sara's eye twitched ever so slightly as she placed the bowls on the table inside of the spare room. Todd put the sandwiches down close by and shut the door. "Yo, it's all cool," he said gently. "That must've been a very boring school. At least it's behind you."

"Only because I was expelled."

"Oh." Todd blinked, not quite knowing what to say. Sara didn't seem the *type* to get expelled.

Sara sat down and picked up a sandwich. "No big surprise. Mom always did have high expectations of me. It's money she'll never get back and she doesn't hesitate to remind me whenever I ask for something. That's when I learned to earn my own allowance."

"Shit, yo. That ain't fair."

"Maybe not," admitted Sara, "But it does make sense. I cost her money that she can't get back, so I shouldn't really ask for any more."

"No, no, she's the one who forced you to do something you didn't want."

"Didn't want? If I was any *good* at it, maybe I would have enjoyed it. I flunked. I didn't try hard enough."

Sara bit into the sandwich. She blinked. "Plastic cheese tastes good when melted. THIS is the stuff!" she exclaimed, waving the sandwich at Todd with sudden enlightenment. Utterly confused at the sudden change in subject, and unsure whether he should bring it back - the boy tilted his head to the side.

"Ray made it for me once over some pasta I hated and had to eat. Company was present. Mom wanted me to clean my plate. The pasta she wanted served had the ickiest sauce ever. It was the color of cheese, but tasted like apricots and mayonnaise. Ray fixed me a cheese sauce and brought some out for me. I think I found out what he melted down. Todd was looking lost and somewhat bewildered. Oh dear."
"Sorry. I tend to go off like that a lot."
Todd smiled and gave a little shrug. "Hey, always glad to hear of a happy memory. Go off as much
as you want." _Rant, rave, babble. I don't care, yo. If it helps you to talk, then *talk*. I'm always
here._

~

Sara went crimson. It was, as she tended to joke, her default response. "I'm afraid I might have to
reorganise your lounge room and kitchen at the very least, tomorrow," she said. "Even if I'm half-
crippled, I *have* to be able to see the floor in there. And the benchtops, for that matter." She
shuddered as a mass of cramps came over her. Ugh. After all this, she should find childbirth a snap.
Todd kind-of cringed. "We kind of got behind everything. It was always someone else's job an'...
y'know... Ya don't gotta."
Sara giggled. "You've yet to understand the soul of an obsessive tidier, dear. I'm - compelled, almost,
to pick up a snow shovel and start bailing."
"Uh. Some of our stuff's in there y'know."
"All the more reason to help me out," Sara grinned around her pains. "The last time I had to hazmat a
place, I taped garbage bags to the windows and just shovelled things-- *unh*..."
"Yo, you better eat up, hon," Todd encouraged. "Li'l nutrition... lotta sleep. Do yo' good."
They weren't just sharp, now. They *burned*. Sara could see the wisdom of sleeping through it.
"Yes, dear," she muttered. "My plans to take over your living zone can await elementary treatment."
Todd took her sandwich-holding hand and waved it under her nose. "*Eat* first."
Sara took an obedient bite. "I'm sorry if I'm interfering, but I feel I have to do *something* to repay
for my visit. Sooner or later, I'll be a burden. It happens."
"Sweetie?" Todd begged. "Quit lettin' yo' Mom do the talkin', okay? It ain't good fo' yo'."
Sara made herself eat some more. "Give me a while," she said. "I've been thrown out of more places
than I care to count. I believe my record was -uh- two months."
"I still don't think yo' the type to get expelled, sweetums."
"You *want* the litany?"
"Sho'. Enlighten me."
Sara took a breath. 'I started at Lady Favisham's at age four. I was expelled at the tender age of
eight... I believe the charge was 'conducting Pagan rituals'. It involved woad and flowers. My next
school was Mistress Tildworth's, where I lasted precisely four months. I had too much fun with Latin
for everyone's own good. After that, I spent a spell at Ms Elizabeth Kranchick's School for Young
Ladies. A three month spell. Next on the list was The Reverend Jacob's Strength Through
Righteousness School for Young Ladies - my famous two-month record. The Head Girl took more
than a fair shine to me. I blacked her eye and ruined her orthadonty."
Todd's mouth was hanging open.
"Did I mention that I was wasn't yet nine years old at the time?"
"Someone made a *move* on yo'!" he yawped.
"Yo, frog-breath," came Tabby's distant shout. "We don't wanna know about Essel gettin' lucky!"
"Her name's Sara *Adrien*, yo! Not Adrian Essel!"
"Fuck you anyway!"
Todd sighed. "Sorry about her. You said sumpin' about Ben Gay in her shorts?"
"Becoming more and more of a temptation as time passes, dear," said Sara. She munched on more of
her sandwich. "Do you want to hear about the rest of them?"
"There's more?"
"Oh yes," she chirped, feeling slightly punchdrunk. "I *said* it was a litany." She hissed at another
rash of scales. "After that was Professor Martinson's School for unpaid white-collar labor - oops... I
mean - School for Technological Learning. I lasted a little bit over the two months' record, there.
Then there was Grafingle's Academy for special learning - my scholastic records, you know... They
sort of doomed me. I lasted six months there before being shoved bodily into Filis' Institute for
Academic Correction. I broke their counsellor at the end of *that* year... Then there was Babel Towers, where I lasted two years before I nearly blew up the chem lab."
"*DAY*umn..." coughed Todd.

"Montague Acres, one year," Sara began ticking them off on her fingers, in-between bites of her dinner. "Saquenaya private school, two years... and after a whole bunch of counselling - here at dear old Bayville. The two-year anniversary of my admission is coming up, so you may want to be wary of fireworks."

Todd was shaking his head. "Yo, that is *whack*... I mean - yo’ so *nice*. How’d you get thrown outta so many places?"

Twitch. "Mother asks me exactly the same thing."

"Sorry, sugarlips," he said, "but I'm dyin’ o’ curiosity over here."

Sara shoved the last of her sandwich in her mouth, chewing as daintily as one could under the circumstances. "I think," she announced, "that the key ingredient was boredom. My mind wanders when I'm bored, you see... and I think up these *experiments*."

"Like?" he prompted.

"What would happen if I got the school computers to all act like HAL from 2001?"

Todd cracked up.

"Or mayhap, 'Is it *true* about ordinary household chemicals?' or 'This hallway is always *wet*, so perhaps I should draw it to more obvious attention'... That one resulted in indoor ice capades on a lovely July afternoon."

Todd thumped their table in his paroxysms of laughter. Then he stopped cold. "Whoa. Wait, wait, wait. *July*?"

"I always *said* the air conditioning in that place was something else. I just happened to prove it."

Todd winced with her, the very next time she moved to protect an area of pain around her ribs. He literally leaped over to her bag and produced the medkit. "I know this has got whatever yo' need, babycakes. Take it, yo."

"Thank you dear, but I need to get changed, first. When I said they knock me out, they knock me *out*.*"

"*Oh*." Todd went beet red for a change. "I'll just - uh..." he gestured at the hall. "I'll just -er- I'll just guard th' door."

She kissed him. Slow, sweet and gentle. "Thank you, darling. You're the sweetest gentleman I've ever met."

Todd's feet didn't touch the floor until he hit Pietro and Tabby in the hallway. Both had their arms folded across their chests. Though in Tabby's case, it was done so as to accentuate her bosom.

"You're the sweetest gentleman I've ever met," mocked Pietro. "*Jesus*...."

"Hey, I thought yo' were Jewish."

"Lapsed years ago," he said. "And that's beside the *point*, swamp-shorts."

"What the hell is up with you and Essel?" said Tabby. "You *have* a real woman right here, you know."

"Yeah, if I like soakin' my thing in Lysol," Todd muttered. "Her name's *Sara*, yo."

"This is pretty much fucked up, right here," said Tabby. "You and a *transie*?"

"She's a *GIRL*, dumbass," Todd was trying desperately to keep his voice down, to give Sara the illusion of privacy. "Born female, *is* female, goddamn it. Just shut up!"

"Yeah yeah yeah," said Pietro. "He's a female on the inside. What. Ever. What I don't get is why he has such a thing for *you*.*" He preened. "*I'm* obviously the one everybody desires."

"Wait. You *want* a transie lustin' after yo'?" Todd wondered. "How fucked up is that?"

"So he *is* a transie!" Tabby crowed.

"I never said that!" Pietro went pink. "It's just that I'm obviously superior and you're obviously not."

"SARA IS NOT A TRANSIE, GODDAMN IT!" Todd screamed. Then he realized what he'd done and clapped his hands over his mouth. "...ohfuck..."
"It's all right, dear," said Sara, behind him. She'd opened the door to watch the fight. "I'm quite used to rampant and erroneous speculation from my..." her glare raked over Tabby as if looking right through her, "contemporaries."

Tabby gave her the finger.

"Ah yes," Sara grinned. "Always the automatic response from the slow of mind." Both her hands were occupied in holding an oversized shirt down at the hem. It was pink and several years out of style, and bore the face of Hello Kitty. "Todd, dearest, I'm going to need about a swallow's worth of water. Any more and there's going to be a bit of a mess."

"Washing your falsies?" sniped Pietro. "Don't bother covering up. Nobody wants to look at *you*." "I can name at least three people. How about you?" Sara challenged. "Shaddup and fuck off," said Todd. "Both of ya." He ushered Sara back into her temporary room. "Just ignore 'em, hon. I'll be back wit' some water soon."

"...mi mi mi mi mi mimi mi..." echoed Pietro as Todd hopped past. _That does it. I'm sliming his hair gel._ He found a clean glass and half filled it from the tap. What in hell was a 'swallow' of water, anyway? He shook his head and gave the finger to Pie-pie and Tabby on his way back.

"Hey, if he's with a transie, does that mean he's 'dick-whipped'?"

"Maybe it's 'future-pussy-whipped'?" speculated Pietro.

Todd fumed internally but said nothing.

Sara had arranged herself on the mattress, the duckie sheet covering her legs and hips. A small pill rested in one hand. "Ah. Thank you." Pill into mouth. One swallow. Two. She very carefully attempted to put the glass down—

And went out like a candle.

Fft.

Just like that, she lapsed from consciousness into an apparent coma. The glass of water spilled on the floor as she fell into the mattress.

"Damn," he said. "You *weren't* kiddin'." He pulled the sheet up to cover most of her, then straightened her hair and kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, sweetie." He did his best to mop up most of the spill with his over-vest. He could deal with being a little chilly for one evening. Then he had to face a decision.

Guard her all night, or risk having her ransacked and who *knew* what else by Pie-pie?

As it turned out, Freddy was in the hall, instead of Pietro and Tabby. "It's okay," said the giant boy. "You need sleep, too."

So she had two grotty guardian angels on her side, at least. Lance didn't really want to care, and preferred to leave it alone and as for the other two...

Meh. They could go fuck 'emselves.

Only when in the privacy of his own room, digging Kermie out of his hiding place, did Todd realize how rotten *he* actually felt.

How *about* that?

~

"So like I said, if he's a she, I'd be getting quite a bit more attention than Tolensky," Pietro concluded for about the fifth time that night. Lance was already irritated and *trying* to work on a new song. Pietro's rant about Essel was just throwing off his groove.

First of all, he didn't want to think about Essel. Second, he definitely didn't want to think about Todd and Essel together. And thirdly, Pietro complaining that Essel should go after him instead of Todd was just plain WRONG and it was bringing the previous two subjects up again.

"Why don't you go whine to someone who cares?" Lance asked, idly strumming a chord. "Todd's business isn't yours."

"Maybe not, but don't you at least agree? There is no frikkin' way Essel can be a girl! I would have noticed!"
"Just wondering. You remember that guy at the Gut Bomb walking past you? He bumped into you and said 'Pardon me, ma'am?' You nearly had a heart attack."

Pietro glared. "WHAT does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything. Just because a girl is a girl doesn't mean she's gotta wear short skirts and wonder bras. If you could pass as a flat-chested broad at Gut Bomb, Essel could pass as a boy in a public high school. And maybe he has tried to pass everyone, maybe he or she just doesn't give a damn.

Makes sense to me."

Pietro was sputtering. "Are you saying you believe Toad?! Look at Essel... there is no way with THAT hair and THAT..." Pietro almost said 'flat chest' and decided for argument's sake, to skip over it. "Utter lack of feminine accessories, clothes, or whatever, that Essel could be a girl!"

"So now you're saying females are only identifiable by hair, knockers and accessories? I wonder how many drag queens *you've* gone out with lately."

"Shut up!!" Pietro ranted, face turning pink. "Essel's not a girl, end of discussion."

"Good. That means you'll leave me alone now?"

"Rrrrrrr! Fine!" Lance felt a sudden breeze and the door slammed upstairs. Fred could be heard shouting for Pietro to keep it down. Lance sighed and set down his guitar.

"Fred?" he asked upon reaching the top of the stairs. "Aren't you going to sleep?"

"Someone's gotta make sure nobody bothers her. Toad didn't look so well."

Lance grimaced. "That time of month?"

"Think so. I told him to go to bed."

"Good. What about you? We've got school tomorrow. Can't stay up all night."

"I can least stay up 'til everyone else's asleep," argued Freddy. "Pietro sleeps like the dead."

And Tabby, once snoring, wouldn't be woken before six if the Bayville marching band paraded through her room. Toad usually was up before then, especially when shedding. Lance couldn't count the number of times he'd woken to the sound of retching in the bathroom before five.

He glanced at his watch. It was half past ten. "At least try for midnight."

Lance walked downstairs to find his guitar in Tabby's lap. She broke into caterwaul as soon as Lance stepped back in the living room.

"Am I not pretty enooooough? Is my heart too broookeeeen? Do I cry too muuuuuch? Am I too outspoooookeeen - HEY!" Tabby cried as Lance yanked away the instrument.

"There's plenty of feral cats in heat around the boarding house if I want to listen to *their* yowling," Lance snapped.

"Fuck you!" Tabby threw a bomb which bounced off Lance's guitar into the wastebasket. Acting on pure instinct, Lance kicked the basket and it rolled toward Tabby's retreating legs.

*BANG!*

"AAAGHCHRISTFUCKITTOHELL!" Tabby screamed, jumping three feet in the air from pain and surprise. "Twice in one fuckin' night!"

She flipped Lance off over her shoulder and stalked into the downstairs bathroom to inspect her wounds.

Todd moaned and curled around Kermie, holding the stuffed frog against his stomach as if it could relieve his pain. It felt like his stomach was chewing on his nerve endings. He hoped it didn't try to send back the meal he'd last eaten. Cautiously, he touched a sweaty palm to his upper arm.

Everything was dry and flaky with sharp pieces that hurt if he brushed against them the wrong way. The itch wasn't unbearable yet, but it was building up for a doozy. What he needed in his room was a freakin' tree to rub against.

And how the hell did a person manage to be hot and cold at the same time? Soon as he kicked off the covers making him sweaty, his feet would start freezing and the cold feeling would move up to his legs and shoulders. He'd burrow back under, convinced being too warm was better than being too cold. He was never gonna get any sleep this way.

Todd closed his eyes and tried to distract himself. While it was hard to sleep now, it would be impossible later. He had to take what he could get. Besides, if he passed out from exhaustion, who'd
protect Sara? Freddy wouldn't be around tomorrow, and Pietro could cut school for ten minute breaks of harassment whenever he felt like it.

Todd forced himself to close his eyes and not move. Beads of sweat tickled unmercifully down his face and back, irritating the parting skin. He groaned softly, but didn't move. At last he felt the curtain of heavy sleep come across him, separating him from his tormented senses. He dove into it gratefully, imagined himself sinking into a deep pond of cool soothing water.

His body wasn’t very happy being left behind with no-one to make suffer, so it set about preparing the mother of all cramps with which to wake him in the morning.

But until then, Todd could dream about Sara all he wanted.

~

Sara moaned, rolled over, and awoke, just as dawn was beginning to colour the sky. One thing to say about no-brand, non-drowsy antihistamines - they certainly did *not* live up to their labelling. Her dreams had been vague and slightly musical. A piece from Avril Levine had sneaked into her head somehow, and she hummed it under her breath as she sought a place for her sunbathing.

The backyard, fenced in and secluded by neighbouring shrubbery, would do.

Sara skinned out of her ill-fitting shirt and slipped out of her undies. Her loose skin flapped around her like strange, beige pennants, and pulled uncomfortably at her skin.

The sun was a perfect balm.

Someone was singing. It wasn't too bad. Clear voice. Held a tune.

The choice of song could have been better, though.

The only thing wrong was that the singing was happening at bumblefuck in the morning.

Pietro, despite boasts to the contrary, was a slow mover when woken up from his usual near-coma.

"...nnrrrrrggh..." he muttered, stumbling to his feet. "I'm'a fin'na bast'rd whose singin' an' rip out their fuckin' windpipe...."

He could distinguish words, now. He was getting close.

"...gloop glooby, nibby nabba nooby lalala low low... Sabba sibby saba..."

There was Essel's Hello Kitty nightshirt. There was Essel's underpants. Little pink daisy pattern.

_OmiGod... Essel wears girlie underpants._

And there was Essel. Naked as the day he was born, facing the sun and dancing to the music inside his head.

Shocked into full wakefulness, Pietro took a quick tour.

All right.

Okay.

Nobody could tuck *and* stand like that without some kind of glue.

_Shit shit shit shit shit shit fuckketty shitty shit shit *DAMN!*!

He was next aware of watching Essel - no, Adrien. Sara Adrien was her name. Her name. *HER* name. And she had clothes on.

Adrien was taping a gigantic garbage bag to the kitchen window and furling it so that it hung outside. Next was the repetitive movements of scraping various things out into the bag.

She was clearing out the sink.

Someone had paid the bills to such an extent that they had heat *and* water, so Sara filled the sink with hot, soapy water. Still humming under her breath.

Pietro's brain supplied the words.

_Am I not pretty enough... Is my heart too broken... Do I cry too much... Am I too outspoken..._ Somewhere, he was certain, there was a mutant who just heard his cerebellum fuse.

~~

The mother of all cramps made a wakeup call at precisely 5:34 am. Todd's reaction was to grab his pillow and press it to his mouth while his body curled into a ball. He waited patiently for it to pass,
too used to this routine to hope for a fast recovery. The cramp continued steadily for ten seconds and then broke off into pulses. Todd knew better than to move.

Once free from pain enough to move, Todd was allowed to focus on the nausea. He had mere seconds to make it to the bathroom. His feet hit the ground unevenly and he banged his shoulder against the doorframe on the way out. Todd made it with barely enough time to slam the bathroom door behind him.

"Aw, jeezus, puke quieter!" he heard someone complain down the hallway as he gulped for air. Todd flushed before the barf smell could make him sicker. He leaned against the sink and splashed his face with cool water. His hands felt scaly and rough, but they felt good going across his face.

What he needed now was a shower, but he was going to have to go back to his room for his clothes and then find a clean towel somewhere. His body didn't want to move that much, but it did want to be soothed, so it let Todd stand up and walk back to his room.

He didn't expect to see Pietro standing in the hallway, listening at Sara's door.

"What the FUCK are you doin'?"

Pietro jumped. "Oh."

"I don't care. Just get the fuck away and leave her alone."

Quickie didn't move. Now he was staring at Todd. "Did... did you...? How could you tell? Lucky guess?"

"Huh?" Todd was in no mood for babble. "I don't CARE what yo' doin', I said get the fuck away from her door, foo."

Oblivious to anyone else's discomfort save his own, Pietro got directly into Todd's face. "Hey, YOU'RE the one who brought this freak to this house, and I for one would like some fuckin' answers. What kind of freak IS she?"

"Oh, so she's a 'she' now?"

"I SAW her. I saw EVERYTHING."

It took a moment for it all to sink in.

"Yo *spied* on her while she was *naked*?!!" Todd growled dangerously quiet, all previous illness forgotten in favor of red-hot rage.

"Ain't my fault she's a fuckin' exhibitionist --"

"Yo punk ass is goin' DOWN!" Todd pounced before Pietro had any warning. Both went crashing to the floor and Pietro threw his hands up under a flurry of blows. He managed to grab Todd's wrists and tried to roll over and pin him, but the smaller boy wasn't having any of it. Todd and Pietro wrestled across the floor cursing loud enough to wake the dead. Lance's door burst open just in time to watch the quarreling mutants disappear over the top step. From there it was a long series of bumps and screams to the first floor.

And even then it didn't stop. Pietro managed to get up, but only half way; Todd grabbed onto his legs and caused him to crash back down again. Lance cursed and jumped down the stairs two at a time to stop them. Pietro was alternately clawing Todd's face and hands, which were locked around his throat by the time Lance reached bottom. Lance grabbed Todd around the waist and lifted, shaking him until he let Pietro go - which was no easy feat.

Lance dumped Todd onto the ground and planted his feet on either side of Todd's waist. This effectively pinned the boy in place and left Lance's hands free to keep Pietro away until this was settled. Pietro was currently curled up into a ball, massaging his throat and wheezing.

"What," gasped Lance, "The hell did Pie do to make you freak out like that? Huh?"

Todd was also gasping from effort, and shuddering as his body filed complaints for the heavy abuse it had taken to do battle. "He... he spied... pervert. On Sara." Todd was ready to add plenty more, but he'd depleted his energy resources. "Guh..." Todd's eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out on the floor.

~

Sara had adjourned from washing up to find the threatened snow shovel, then recalled that bare feet
weren't the wisest thing to have when clearing out a mess of *this* magnitude. She had special collapsible boots for that kind of thing, somewhere in the depths of her bag. And some gloves. The rest would bide for a while, and it wasn't as if anyone actually *cared* what she looked like, right now.

"Yo punk ass is goin' DOWN!" Todd shouted to someone outside. There were screams, thumps, crashes, and the unmistakable sound of live bodies tumbling down the stairs.

The boots, for all their pliability, had amazing traction. She was out of the door in a second or less, snow shovel and work gloves still in her hand.

There, at the bottom of the stairs, was Todd. Unconscious, bruised and battered. Leaning over him was none other than Lance Alvers, known thug.

It was common knowledge that he beat up a large number of Remedial Ed. kids in order to gain their lunch money.

Sara saw red.

Some part of her that was still calm and rational watched the following events as if watching a movie through a fog.

The shovel became a handy weapon.

A hideous, shrieking ululation issued forth.

The vision of Alvers' horrified face became larger as charging footsteps thundered in her ears with her heartbeat.

"NowaitIdidn't--!

{CLANNNNNNNGGGGGGGG!}

Vibrating metal transferred into the wooden handle and thence into her hands. Her vision included Maximoff, huddled on the floor. Close to Todd. Entirely. Too. Close.

The shriek turned into a snarl.

In retrospect, Pietro was extremely lucky that he had the wits to scrabble away. He was also lucky that Freddy arrived, sized up the situation, and neatly trapped Sara in a surprisingly gentle hug.

As soon as Sara came back to herself, she stopped resisting outwardly, and fought that mighty rage down into a box inside her mind. It was still prone to fight, so she piled it over with some of the heavier boxes already sealed tight and fortified against outbreaks.

When she opened her eyes, she was standing on her own two feet, Freddy hovering nearby. She still had a death-grip on the shovel.

Todd was still out of it.

She couldn't make herself let *go* of the shovel, darnit.

Sara picked Todd up with her free hand, cradling him on her legs and the crook of her shovel-wielding arm.

She was shaking.

Hand, be still,_ she commanded, forcing her hand into stability as it felt for Todd's pulse.

Strong. Even. A little fast, perhaps, but strong and even were good signs.

His breathing was even and clear. Pupils unresponsive.

Mutant abilities, from what she was told, required an increase in energy intake. She had been craving far more protiens, herself, of late.

And the fight... sudden energy expenditure in a time of metabolic need...

Oh dear.

"Freddy? Do you have any honey?"

"Nope," he said with absolute certainty. "We don't got a lot of nuthin'."

"You don't have much of anything, dear," she corrected. "That will not *do*, Freddy, I'll need my cellular. You know where I keep it." A remembered remark about feminine products made her glare at Pietro. "And I'm certain someone *ELSE* does, too."

Pietro whimpered and attempted to cram himself further into the wainscotting.

Tabby woke up grumpy. First, someone was awake at fuckit-past-sparrow-fart in the morning and
*SINGING*, for fuck's sake. Second, someone had had a minor fit up and down the hallways. *THEN* Todd fucking Tolenski had had to have his morning puke session until she'd had to yell at him to shut the hell up.

And to top it all off, someone had evidently decided to declare a freakin' *WAR*. Tabby managed to stumble into her clothes and ricocheted off Freddy on her way down. There was no other word to describe the scene below but - scene.

Essel was cradling Tolenski and hanging onto a snow shovel - of all things - and sending glares of death off at Alvers and Maximoff. Alvers was recovering his senses and sprouting a lovely goose-egg of a bruised lump on one temple. Essel's shovel had a Lance-sized dent in it.

"This," Tabby announced, "Has *got* to be one *fuck* of a story."

~

Sara didn't even bother to answer her. She was watching Todd with a blank expression. Her mind was in another realm.

Freddy returned with the cellular and not a moment too soon. Tabitha had grown tired of chanting "Earth to Eeeeesseeel1l, Essel phone home?" and was now prepared to toss a bomb to get a reaction out of *someone*.

The thought had never crossed her mind to pester Alvers or Pietro for information, and they weren't about to offer themselves as distractions. Alvers was still moaning about goats eating his jeep. Freddy handed Sara the cell. He then stepped between her and Tabby to serve as a living bomb shelter.

"Hey, Freddy! What's the big idea?"

"She's gotta make a call. Shhhh!"

"Whatever." Tabby pouted, but she was all ears.

[Beepboopboopbeepbeepbeepbeep] The call went through and was picked up after the first ring.

"Bernie's Bargain Basement Delivery Service, how can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Sara Adrien. I'm putting in an order. I need the Express delivery."

"Allright ma'am, regular address?"

"No, I'm at the Brotherhood Boarding House, 6426 Pikers Street." Damn, at least she *thought* that was accurate. "How fast can you get here?"

"Within twenty minutes or free of charge. What do you need?"

"I need Sue Bee Honey, Lysol Disinfectant spray - better make that three bottles..." Sara rattled off several more items including foodstuffs that Freddy wasn't swift enough to protest, then checked Todd's skin. "And calamine lotion. *Definitely*."

"Will that be that all?"

"Yes."

"Delivery will be there soon. Have a nice day."

"Thanks."

Sara hung up and started to stand up, attempting successfully to juggle Todd, the shovel and the cell phone all at once. Fred helped her out by prying her fingers off the shovel. It was a far easier task than relieving her of Todd.

"You can set yourself down on the couch while we wait."

"No, Freddy. I have to get into something more presentable within fifteen minutes. They *say* twenty, but if Steve's behind the wheel and coming for me *here*, he's going to be exceeding highway speed limits. He worries too much."

"Uh, who's Steve?"

"He works there as a bagger and delivery boy. If it's him, you'll like him. He's a dear."

"So you're really going to pay for all that stuff?" Tabby wanted to know.

"Yes, is it such a surprising concept?" Sara replied, eyelashes fluttering.

"Hey, fuck you!"

"No thanks for the offer." Sara shifted Todd in her arms and began walking up the stairs.
"Wait a second, you haven't even told me what's going on!" Sara kept walking. Tabby whirled on Lance who was just now recovering back to coherency. "What's going on, Lance?"

"Uhhhh..."
Fred sighed and helped Lance up. "Let's get some ice for ya." He walked Alvers to the kitchen. Pietro broke out of his whimpering state as soon as Sara reached the top of the staircases and disappeared around the corner. Tabby stared down at him expectantly.

"Weeelllll?" she drawled, rolling two glowing time bombs around in her fingertips.

Sara arranged Todd on the mattress as comfortably as possible, then dabbed at his face with water. "Nnnnhhhnnn..."

"There we go. Come back to me." She planted a little kiss on his lips, and nestled her face into his shoulder. Two shuddering breaths later and she was up and donning loose sweatpants and a long sweater to hide the flaps of skin. She'd be hot and scratchy for a bit, but it was a necessary evil. There was a good enough chance the delivery person was not going to be Steve.
She looked at the clock. Five minutes had passed. She dabbed at Todd's face some more and was rewarded with an eyelid flutter. Then his head moved to the side as he fought his way back to consciousness.
"Mother o' fuck," he squeaked, "Who went an' dropped th' house on me?"
Sara felt both relieved and giddy. She laughed and burst into tears all at once, gathering him up for a bone-creaking hug.

~

"Don't let her *near* me, she's a freakin' *maniac*!" Pietro shrieked. "She's a goddamn valkyrie dyke nudist frigid exhibitionist *freakshow*!"
Tabby was so distracted that one of her little boom-bombs went off in her hand.
"GODFUCKINGDAMNIT!" She flapped the others into random places, where they promptly went off and scattered bits of detritus all over her. "I just want some fucking *ANSWERS*! Who the *FUCK* are you talking about, Pie?"
"Adrians[1]," Pietro panted. "She's a fucking *psycho*! She just played golf with Lance's frikkin' *head*.
"It's true," said Fred. "I guess she musta thought he'd tried to beat Todd up or something. It *did* look that way."
"Waitaminute, waitaminute. Are we talking about *Essel*?" She boggled. "Weedy guy, 'bout yae high," she gestured, "busts in on my quickies on a regular basis? Carries feminine things in his bag[2]? Essel the *transie*?"
"Oh, she's not a transie," said Pietro, shaking his head. "Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. No way in heaven or hell. She's *definitely* a born-in-the-body *girl*.
"The fuck?" said Tabby.
"Saw it all this morning," Pietro whispered.
"I'll have the apricot pie, Ma," Lance burbled on the couch. "I like pie."
Freddy was concerned enough to just hand him the bottles of painkillers.
Pietro siezed her attention by way of her messed shirtfront. "You can't tuck *and* stand legs akimbo when you're naked," he confided into her ear. "She's definitely a she."
Tabby could see it in her mind's eye, now. Essel - or was it Adrians? - was the early-morning singer. The sight of hi-- *her* drove Pietro into the shocked fits up and down the hall. Then, somehow, he let it slip in front of Todd, who declared war.
Todd, never the strong fighter, fell in the fracas and, just as Lance was trying to find out if he was okay, Adrians decided *Lance* was the aggressor and went off the deep end. That was, of course, assuming that Adrians wasn't off the deep end *already*.
"Saw it all..." Pietro was muttering. "Oh. My. Fucking. God... Tabby... I *touched* a girls - *girlie* things! They were Maxi pads! EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEUUWW!
Tabby decided to wait for her retroactive revenge by proxy. The guy was suffering enough already.
For now, at least.
Then the crimson tides of mortification welled up in her as she realized - she'd been seen in action by
another female. *Ick*. Did that make her a secret lesbian? Showing off to another woman?
Part of her mind started running around in circles and going, _OmiGod, OmiGod, OmiGod,
OmiGod, OmiGod, OmiGod, OmiGod..._

Meanwhile, Sara made Todd comfortable on her vacated mattress. He was in no state to get up. Not
yet.
But she couldn't worry about that now. She had an incoming delivery to sign for and she had to
appear human.
Her sweats and jumper covered most of it. The forgotten work gloves sufficed to hide her hands...
but what to do about her face?
Sara dug in her bag, looking for solutions and finding one in the rest of her hazmat kit. Face mask.
Safety goggles. Head scarf.
She'd be covered from head to toe.
All she'd need was a decent glop of foundation around the eyes.
Yes.
Sara put away her shakes so she could apply the makeup, and cover up reliably. She even triple-
checked her concealment in the handiest mirror before heading back down and resuming her refuse-
eviction as if nothing had happened.
Pietro dissolved into shrieking hystericcs when she came near him and zipped into the furthest corner
he could find.
{ScrreeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEet! HONKHONK!}
That *had* to be Steve. Nobody else could pull up along half the length of the street.
An anaemic rattle that could have been a doorbell, followed by agitated knocking.
"Oh, *Stephen*, stop being such a wet hen," Sara chided as she opened the door.
"Whoah," said Steve. "This place *seriously* needs a visit from the cleanup fairy," he judged. "Too
bad I have to work today."
"They'll have to settle for the cleanup androgene," said Sara, scratching her name in the allotted place
on Steve's clipboard. "One box or three?"
"Four. I decided to add some basic vitamins and herbal uppers, given your order on the bulk
foodstuffs. Looks like I should have included a pound of plaster and some of the spring paints.
Maybe some gauzy curtains..."

Pietro stared as the delivery man prattled. This guy was solidly classified in Pietro's brain under the
word "Rival". He possessed all the best features of the African and Asian races, finely-toned muscle,
astounding taste in clothing and the sort of Fabio-esque locks that had the girls drooling.
What the hell was Adrians doing talking to *HIM* and kissing *TODD*?
Bound by the chains of morbid curiosity, he followed the strange duo out to the truck, where he was
*noticed*.
"Pie-pie!" Cooed Steve. "I haven't seen you since I had to let you down. Why didn't you *call*?
You're not still put out about the age difference thing are you?"
It was at that precise moment that Pietro noticed that Steve was wearing pumps.
A little bit of mental arithmatic added a cocktail dress and a lot of alcohol one fine May evening.
This time, he was certain, Xavier himself would have heard Pietro's mental scream.
"Okay," he announced. "This is just *WAY* too fucked up for me. I'm going to school." He ducked
out of sight and lay on the speed.

"But you're still in your--" Sara sighed. "--jammies."
"Aw, don't fret," said Steve. "He's bound to find out soon enough."
"Knowing him, he'll pull it off as a fashion trend," said Sara, hefting a box. "Come on, ducks. I'll
show you where the clean spot is."
"Sounds like a fortnight hazmat to *me*," Steve tisked. He had a box under each arm. "I *must* say, you're an excellent workout, darling."
"I do my little bit," said Sara. "Stacking those shelves has to work, too, you know."
Lance, still nursing the egg on his temple, moaned and tried to sit up. "...the fuck...?" he warbled.
"What happened to *him*?" boggled Steve. "I mean, aside from the horrendous mullet."
"He messed with the wrong woman's man," said Sara.
"Hey," said Tabby, buffing her nails against the staircase. "What did you *mean*, 'slow of mind'?"
Sara just grinned, though no-one could see it under her mask.

[1] Also a common misconception of Sara's last name.

~

Lance was starting to come around. Freddy could tell things were going to become geologically unstable when he recovered. His face had gone from vacant to vacantly pissed off. Lance was mad, but at the moment, not quite sure he knew who to be mad *at*. Either way he was dangerous. Freddy decided to head him off. "Hey, Lance? You feelin' any better?"
"Rrrgh... tell me again who took the sledgehammer to my skull. Then hold them still while I rip them in *half*."
Fred blanched. "Even if they thought you was attackin' their friend when it was really Pietro's fault?"
Lance gritted his teeth and readjusted the icepack on his forehead. "I'll kick his ass too then."
"C'mon, Lance, don't blame Sara. She was jus' --"
"Yah, I *know*, okay? Doesn't mean I ain't pissed. Make the headache go away and I'll *think* about letting this slide."
"Here," Sara tossed Freddy an economy sized bottle of Advil. Then she glared at Lance. "You ever touch Todd or any student at school for money, personal kicks, or otherwise again, you'll be needing a truckload."
"Whatever," Lance moaned pitifully and held his hand out to Fred for Advil.
"The members of this household definitely have MAIDS. In the most advanced stages."(1)
"MAIDS?"
"Male Acquired Incapability Disorder Syndrome. Read about it on someone's rant page."
"Ah. No female around to pick up after them."
Steve dove into one of the boxes and started putting them in the refrigerator. Opening the fridge may have been a mistake. Steve stared, one hand of mayonnaise in his hand. "I have never seen so many hues of mold in all my life."
"I didn't order any perishables, so they all can sit safely in the cupboards for now," Sara said, rummaging around in search of something. "Aha!" She produced the honey and slipped it into the pocket of her sweatpants. "I need to go upstairs and see a patient." She handed Steve the cash due plus a nice tip.
Tabby, who'd come up to watch in the doorway, stared. She was ignored by both.
Steve was trying to hand back the tip. "You might need this for something later."
Sara waved his hand away. "No, you've been a big help. And your mom always needs stuff for the cats."
"I don't like leaving you with mullet-head, especially after his threats."
"Fred and Todd are on my side, and Pietro would sooner shave his head and dip it in lye than touch* me. I'm relatively safe. Alvers isn't a threat to worry about. Go on now, shoo. I'm *fine*.
Steve left only after making sure she had his cell phone number and having extracted a promise that she'd call at the slightest wrong look. She waved from the porch and walked inside to find Lance looking decidedly more aware of his surroundings. "Hey," he started. "I wasn't going to hurt Todd.
He passed out because he pushed himself too hard. It was Pietro's fault."
"Relax," Sara said dryly, heading up the stairs. "I no longer *have* the shovel. You're safe until next

...God *dammit*." If it was one thing Lance hated, it was being held responsible for something he

(1) MAIDS is from Internutter's rant page. Had to, it was too tempting. You can find it here:

~

Sara waited until the van's tires screeched at the corner, indicating that Steve was on his way back to

the store, before she shed so much as one scrap of her guise.

Gah, it was hot in that get-up.

And getting out of it was skin-snaggingly uncomfortable.

Todd barely opened his eyes when she jostled his head onto her lap. No matter. He was bound to

recover. She dipped a plastic spoon into the honey and drizzled most of it off before offering it to

him.

"Just suck on the spoon, dear," she instructed. "It should help you feel a little better."

"Wh't happ'n'd?" he croaked.

"You were unconscious," said Sara. "My best guess is that your reserves were completely depleted

fending off that *thug* Alvers."

"Whoa. Wait. *Lance*?"

"He *does* have a predilection towards preying on those younger and weaker than him - no

offense."

"Yo, he was pryin' me off'a Pie-pie, hon," said Todd. He pulled the spoon out of his mouth and gave

it to her. "Pie's the scuzzo."

Sara considered the honey. The jar was one of those little itty bitty samplers favoured by single

people living alone. No doubt that Todd would consume all of it before he was well enough to move

under his own steam. Sara re-used the spoon for the next dose. "How so? I know the boy's some

kind of pickpocket-slash-pervert, but--"

"Yeah, an' he's also a peepin' tom," growled Todd.

The hot hordes of embaressment flooded over her face, ears and some of her chest. One of her most

secret of nightmares had come true. Someone had *seen* her early-morning ritual. Mother was going
to know.

Mother was going to go *spare*.?

Todd's voice was a distant, vague hum to her ears. All she could hear was her world tumbling into

ruins around her.

Mother would send her off to some kind of obscure convent school for sex-crazed Bad Girls who

would try to convert her to bisexuality for their own entertainment.

Certainly not *Sara's* entertainment.

Oh dear, oh dear, oh *dear*.

"Yeah, an' he's also a peepin' tom," Todd growled. "Scuzzbucket just thinks he can zip in an' out an'

not pay any consequences, he got another think comin', yo. He ain't gonna treat *YOU* like no free

show an' get away wit' it, I'm'a see to that m'self." Honey cleaned off the spoon, he tried to give it

back to Sara.

Sara, however, had vanished into some kind of funk. The parts of her skin that were still pinkish

were -well- pinker than normal. The scales - her new, beautiful scales - were darker than her normal

pale tone.

Poor girl. She was mortified into a statue. Todd gently helped himself. "It's gonna be okay, I swear. I
ain't gonna let nothin' hurt yo' if I can help it, yanno? I'm'a have a li'l *chat* wit' the guys, yo. An' lemme tell ya, *nobody* wants a fresh case o' revenge a ala Toad, yo. I gotta be *home* today. They don't want me leavin' 'em little unwelcome gifts if yo' get mah drift." He grinned around his spoonful of honey. Sara looked even more upset and embarrassed than ever before.

"Sara? Hon?"

Her eyes shed a tear. "Mother's going to *know*.

"What, that some dude barged in on you inna shower?"

Sara's head - twitched... something like watching a bobble-head doll in a car going over a speed-bump. "I have something of a secret vice," she confessed, her voice a whisper. "I love the feel of the dawn's first sunshine on my skin. *All* of my skin..."

A sudden vision of Sara - tall, proud and beautiful in her new scales, soaking in the first rays of a new day - paraded across Todd's mind. _Man, if I were some Manga dude, I'd have a nosebleed._

He deliberately stopped himself from asking any naughty questions. Or anything related to a naughty question. This was Sara's most secret ritual, something that gave her something to wake up for. The thing that got her out of bed every morning, to begin yet another day that would, inevitably, be full of her misery.

Something she kept from everyone.

Except him.

And - by force - Pietro.

"...and now he's headed off to school and he's going to *talk*," Sara blubbed. "Mother's going to know before the day's out. She's going to *find* me - like *this*... Oh Todd... darling, I'm so sorry... It's all going to blow up... It's all my fault..."

_Oh *fuck*._ He hugged her. "Shhh... It's gonna be okay, yo. Shhh... We'll think of somethin', I swear."

And there was Lance, sporting a huge lump on his temple. "Awright, Essel,

"Sara Louise Adrien," quavered Sara. "Doom of mutantkind."

That confused Lance enough to blink. "Okay. You get points for supplying painkillers, so I'm not gonna kill ya *just* yet... but if you so much as *try* that again, you'll see a whole new meaning to the words 'rock and roll', got me?"

Todd rolled his eyes. _Damnit._ "Lance... shut the fuck up, okay? We need a plan."

"Huh?"

"Brief skinny," said Todd. "Pie saw Sara naked. He's gonna *talk*. Which means her Mom's gonna go nuclear an' hunt her down. And find her."

"Oh *fuck*," said Lance. "I'm getting in the Jeep *now*.

"I'd put some pants on, first," said Sara, apparently still in her misery coma. "I think the school board frowns on boxer shorts as much as they do pyjamas."


She blinked at him. "I... don't get it."

"You won't *BELIEVE* what I just saw," said Pietro, accosting the first person he could find. "Lemme guess," said Evan. "A mouse came outta your closet before you did?"

"What?"

"Cute outfit, Maximoff," said Summers.

"Like, *love* the new look," giggled Kitty.

"Thefuckyou'retalkingab--" he looked down. "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Of all the nights he had to wear the AbFab flannies, *last* night had to be it. He'd completely forgotten.

He was at school and he'd completely forgotten that he was still in his PJ's. His pink, glitter-painted _Absolutely Fabulous_ flannel jammies. And the gathering crowd had *noticed*.

"*FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK*!"
"GODDAMMITDAMMITDAMMITWHYMEEEEEI'MTOOCUTETODIESOCIALLY!" Pietro ranted at the top of his lungs while speeding home. The use of oxygen meant he was slower than usual while getting home. He sped up the stairs, slammed his door and dressed on some normal clothes. If he hurried, he could get back before word spread too far. Nobody would be able to match the story up if he was suddenly in clothes by first period.

Unbeknownst to Pietro, Lance had positioned himself in front of his room and was holding the linen closet door open. Pietro never suspected that there was a second door to go through when he opened the first and sped through it. *WHHHAAAM* "FFFFFFUUU~*-* *THUMP* Lance picked the dazed boy up by his shirt and dragged him into Sara's room. Pietro was deposited unceremoniously on the ground in front of Sara and Todd. He shut the door behind him and stood in front of it. Lance was going to watch and if Pietro didn't catch it from Sara, Lance would be more than happy to share the punishment he had unfairly suffered at her hands.

Todd was still in Sara's arms and feeling too woobly to stand, but he turned on the death glare. Pie was still on the ground moaning about his social life and aching nose. They waited until he became aware of his surroundings.

Pietro saw Sara come into focus and screamed. He looked around wildly, noticing with horror that Lance was standing guard at the door. Left without another choice, he scrabbled for the only available shelter. The closet. Pietro jammed himself inbetween boxes and managed to close the sliding door only half way before the wheels got stuck.

"Calm *down*, fool. Yo makin' this harder than it has to be." Todd's voice had a strange calmness to it.

"Stop being such a wuss," Lance agreed. "We need to talk."

~

Sara stood and brushed herself off. Her heart was calmer than death as she stepped up to Maximoff's hiding place. It was as if every emotion she possessed had gone into hiding in her mental warehouse. "Mister Maximoff," she said, the crisp tones of Boston invading her voice. "Whilst I normally believe that every being on the planet deserves a second chance... *you* had worn yours out when you elected to become a *quidnunc*[1]."

Pietro whimpered in his place.

"Furthermore, you've lead me to believe that our mutual security was at risk thanks to your flapping maw... so..." Sara cracked her knuckles, then her thumbs, then her wrists, elbows, shoulder blades, neck and - with a surprisingly graceful arc of her back - her spine. Pietro quivered in place and made a bizarre, nonverbal noise of disgust. She continued, cracking her hips, knees, ankles and toes. Pietro did a marvellous impression of someone with epilepsy.

Sara bent and picked him up by the neck of his jammies, adding a little twist that cut off his air supply. "Breathe so much as one *word* about my early-morning activities to another soul and I swear by all that is Holy, I will find a way to make your life synonymous with dwelling in Hades. My vengeance will be long and compound. You will become my new hobby. And I further suspect that Todd will never forgive you, and pursue a similar plan."

Pietro coughed. "...need... tobreathe..." he gasped.

"But since you and your ilk only understand physical violence..." She carried him to the top of the stairs, wound up, baseball style - and then hurled him wholesale down the steps. "Don't even *think* of so much as *breathing* incorrectly around either of us. Are we *clear*?"

[1] It's synonymous with Peeping Tom, according to www.dictionary.com
Pietro's body traveled down the stairs in five solid whumps and a lot of screaming for the second time that morning. Only this time, Todd wasn't sharing the brunt of it.

Sara glared down at him as his body came to rest upside down against the front door.

"Don't even *think* of so much as *breathing* incorrectly around either of us. Are we *clear*?"

Pietro managed a squeak. He moved his legs to the west, tipping himself out of his crash-landed position and onto his side. Once right-side up, he looked up the stairs. The she-demon was beginning to remind him a *lot* of Mystique, only Mystique never needed a *reason* to throw anybody down the stairs - at least not a good one.

It was going to be a very long time before Pietro went back into provocation mode. For now, surrender was the only clear way out of hell. He held up his hands. "Whatever you want, Essel."

"Sara," Todd snapped, coming to stand by her. "You can at *least* get her name right, yo."

"Sara Essel?" Pietro tried again.

"Sara Louise *Adrien*," she corrected icily.

"Sorry. Well, anyway..." He brushed himself off, putting on a cool act though his hands were shaking. "You've made it perfectly clear what'll happen if I talk, and I'm impressed with the way you handled yourself. So yeah, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Yo sure you *can*, Quickie?"

"Positive," Pietro snapped. "If I want to keep a secret, I'll keep a secret. It's not like *everyone* wants to know about Ess--" Killer death glares from Todd and Sara made him bite his tongue.

"*Adrien's* weird morning ritual... which by the way I saw by *complete* accident."

"So ya nose just happened to become glued to the window overnight?"

Pietro stamped his foot. "I wanted to see who was *singing*, dumbass! Getting an eyeful was the last thing on my mind!"

"You may have *seen* by accident, but what the hell gave you the right to keep watchin'?" Todd glowered.

The speedster's mouth opened and closed, momentarily lack of wit. "Whatever. I said I wouldn't say nothin', and I won't. If I gotta live with *another* psychobitch, I'd better play by her rules."

Todd's hackles rose and at precisely the same time his legs gave out from under him. "Awww, this is whack, man," he complained from the floor. Sara gathered him up and escorted him back to the room.

"*Please* don't try to move until you're better?"

~

Todd, currently snuggled against her chest, in close proximity to her scent and in prime cuddling position, mumured, "Whatever you say, sugarlips."


"Aw, don't pay no 'tention to him, yo. I tole yo'. He's an ass."

"Todd, dear, the company you keep has some deplorable habits," Sara said as she nestled him back down into the matress that had served as her bed. "Theft, thuggery, *spying*... which by the way I saw by *complete* accident."

"An' I guess you heard stuff about me, too."

"I've worked out who was responsible for the wholesale display of my belongings around the school campus," said Sara. "Theft was possible, but he'd much rather arrange things for maximum mortification. He wasn't out to survive, dear. He was *hunting*."

"Dayumn..." "An' I guess you heard stuff about me, too."

"What I hear and what I know are two different things. I *hear* you'd rip off anyone for a dollar, but I *know* that you've been through my bag several times, and all my wallets are intact."
"You know that?"
Sara grinned. "I can tell when my belongings have been disturbed. It's routine for me to check my funds. I don't even think of it." She blushed. "Sorry."
"Naw, you were right to," he said. "Time was, I mighta ripped yo' off... but not no mo'." His hands, now that they had nothing to do, drifted towards hers. "I... I like yo'. A lot."
There was a small emotional battle across her face. A small army of tic's controlled her, but only for a moment. "You need something more solid in you than honey," she said. "I've cleared enough things to make some hearty meals..."
"Yo, chicken soup be fine," he smiled. "Honest."
"Then chicken soup you shall have."
Their lips met again, telling the truth of their emotions, deeper than 'like', for certain. There was fear there, too. Fear of screwing things up. Fear of loss. Fear of breaking this one, fragile good thing that was going between them.
"I'll be back," said Sara. She was flushed and smiling.
"I'll be waiting," he panted. He couldn't stop the goofy smile on his face.

~

Pietro had vanished by the time Sara reached the kitchen. Several foodstuffs had been rummaged through, not unexpectedly. It would have been nice, though, if they'd thanked her for supplying it. Fred had left a note.

Hey Sara,
Lance + me went to school. I packed lunches + Tabby took sum of the drinks when I wasn't looking. Sorry. Hope you don't mind. I put the good stuff on high shelves.
See you later:
Freddy

Sara opened the cupboard door and saw that Freddy wasn't kiddin'. Pietro and Tabby would have a hard time reaching anything up *there* considering that the only chair strong enough to stand on was the heavy armchair in the living room. That armchair was *Freddy's* and darned near impossible to move.
She was tall enough however, and brought down a can of chicken soup and the bottle of multivitamins. Sara turned on the stove and set to work, feeling an odd sense of irony. She'd always cooked elaborate breakfasts for her mother and had to sneak the gift in, else it would be thrown out. This time she was cooking for someone who *wanted* it. And it was naught but chicken soup.
Sara stirred the mixture to smoothness and taste. When it was hot and good, she ladled it into a bowl, turned off the stove and placed the offering on a tray along with a pitcher of water. The salt in the soup would make Todd thirsty and amidst all the excitement, he probably hadn't gotten any water. She walked upstairs to find him still on the bed with eyes closed. "Missed you, yo."
"As did I." She set the tray down and offered some water, which he took gratefully. Todd downed half the pitcher in eight seconds flat. With a sheepish grin, he set it back down on the tray.
"Yo, you been drinkin' water too, right? Sometimes yo body don't *tell* you it's thirsty. It just reacts." He was speaking from experience. Magneto had put them through four hours out in the desert of drilling, sparring, and endurance building with small breaks for water in between. Todd had seriously misjudged how much he needed to keep up with the others. After they revived the boy, Magneto had been furious with him for not knowing his limit - regardless of the fact that he had denied the young mutant coldly when he begged for more water.
"I'll keep that in mind," Sara promised. She caught sight of the dry flakes on his upper arm and brushed them off. Todd moved into her touch gratefully.
"Feels good, yo," he whimpered. Her hand moved around to his shoulderblade, eliciting another whimper. There were several patches of dry skin on his back in unreachable places, which made her
itch in sympathy. Sara touched the hem of his shirt.
"Er, may I?"
"Sure," Todd said. "Yo don't have to though - it's kinda gro--" Sara's hand lifted away the fabric and her fingernails provided instant relief, peeling away the excess epidermis. Todd turned into a virtual puddle, forgetting he had started a sentence. "Oooohhhh... thank youuuuuu..."

~

Sara giggled and blushed in spite of herself. Todd was turning into a very happy puddle under her fingers. His expression of bliss was almost - comedic, in its way.

_If mother ever heard that I was in a bedchamber with a shirtless male..._ Mother! Aw *crap*. She still had to impersonate her mother and call the school.

Sara let go of Todd and dived for her mobile, punching numbers.
"Mwf?" said Todd.
"Shh. I need to be my mother for a minute. Hush, I beg you." Sara sublimated herself and let the character and voice of her mother rise.
"Bayville High, please hold."

Phone tag. Mother sneered and rolled Sara's eyes. The hold music was some static-y radio station playing things designed to give people migraines. She kept the phone a little distant from her ear until she heard, "Bayville High, how can I help you?"
"This is Mrs Adrien," she said in her mother's voice. "My useless *daughter's* gone and caught some kind of influenza. She won't be in today."

Clicking carried over the line. "Uh... Are you sure your daughter attends this school Mrs Adrians? I can't find any records..."
"Try spelling it A-D-R-I-E-N, dear," said mother sweetly.
"A-D-R...", intoned the secretary. "I-E-N-S."

"No S, sweetie," corrected Mom.

"Oh," Clicketty tap tap... She had to re-enter the spelling. "I have an entry for an Adrien, SL..."
"That's her. Sara Louise. She's ill and won't be in, today."

"Thank you, I have those details down."
"Thank you so much," she almost sang the words, then hung up and became the Dragon. "Stupid illiterate little *slattern*. Barely worth anything at all. I should write a letter to the education board about the people they hire. *My* tax money goes to--"

_Away_, thought Sara. _This is still *my* body and you don't own it yet._ Sara flickered to the surface. "Sorry you had to see that, dear."

"...whoah..." squeaked Todd.

~

"I didn't know you could channel *demons*, sweetheart," Todd said, trying to relieve the tension. Sara looked like she was suffering a migraine. He reached forward to rub at her temples.
"I wouldn't call it *channeling* per se. We're the Adrien family. Her genes are my genes, and she's part dragon so I must be too."
"Yo, I only known you for a short time, but I can tell you that you ain't *nothin'* like yo momma."

_Ignorant trash._ Mother sneered. _Can't even speak proper English and he smells like he's been living in a garbage truck. Of course *you'd* find him charming._

Sara shuddered. _Off with you. Now._ "She's already imprinted on me. Someday I'll be at least a little bit like her. Either that or I'll be a schizophrenic," she laughed. It had a wavering hollow ring to it. Todd stroked her cheek.

"I used to think I'd be like Pops. He hurt me and Momma a lot." Todd moved his free hand to cover hers. "I was scared of doin' that to anyone *I* cared about, so for a while I closed myself off to people. Better to be alone than a monster, y'know? See you ain't gonna become your momma 'cause you're too worried about hurtin' people like she hurt you. I *been* there, b'fore. I think you're gonna
"be okay."
"Just promise me you'll leave if she makes me hurt you," Sara whispered.
Todd held her.
"She couldn't hurt me enough to promise somet'in like that."

"I know *I* couldn't, but..." Sara tried to steady her breathing. "Have you ever known someone so well that you have a sort of copy of them inside your head?"
Todd shook his head.
"It's a kind of telepathy by osmosis," she explained. "One absorbs everything they say, the patterns of their speech, the way they act... until you can know exactly what they're going to say about something, down to the last inflection."
Todd's eyebrows vanished into his hair. "Yo, I *never* wanna meet yo' mama."
"She *is* a dragon for me," Sara managed, "but Dad loves her."
"*WHY*?" boggled Todd.
"She's a completely different person with him. He's the realisation of her dreams... the best thing that happened to her. I'm the one who's the nightmare."
"Sara..." he chided.
"I know. I know. I shouldn't talk like that... Mother's still ascendant." A few tic's shivered across her face. Todd helped her still them. "I honestly don't know why Dad loves her. I can't see it. It's as if I'm permanently eclipsed from all the good in her. Kept in the dark." She sighed.
"Yeah," said Todd. "I never got why Mom stayed with Pops, neither."
"Either," corrected Sara. "At least you've 'met' Mother in a way... Perhaps you can tell me when she's coming out..."
"Easy as," he soothed. "Ain't no way I ever wanna see her again." He snuggled up beside her and gave her a gentle squeeze. "Ain't gonna let her get yo'."
It was such a relief to have someone to rely on, Sara didn't know how tense she'd been about the entire mess until she let it out in one, deep, breath-long sigh of relief. "*Thank* you, darling."
"Be my pleasure," cooed Todd.
She winced at a cramplet under her wrist. "Nng. Sorry, dearest, but I must get back to work."
"Aw, man. Yo' don't gotta..."
"I need to *do* something, darling," she explained. "It keeps my mind off the cramps, you see."
"Just promise me you drink something before you get back to it?"
Sara kissed him. "You're cute when you're being a mother hen."

Todd followed her downstairs and gave himself the task of supplying her with water. She guzzled the first five mugs without taking a breath.
"Tole yo' so," he said.
"Noted and logged, darling," Sara said, fetching herself another mug-full. "Watch. I'm being a *good* girl."
Todd found himself grinning like a fool as she chugged it. Even when desperate for water, she had a kind of grace to the way she knocked it back. Poise. If there was a polite way to chug a drink, Sara had found it.
He even wound up helping her sort through the piles of stuff she had found under the topmost layer of takeout containers and loose papers. "Dayumm, yo. I never knew we had so much shi-- uh... *Stuff*.
"You *can* say the words, dear," Sara giggled. "I have heard them before."
"Yo, but-- I don' wanna embaress yo'." He grinned as he chuckled out a rat-worried magazine. "I like it better when yo' blush from *compliments*, y'know? Yo' get this cute little smile..."
She gave him that very smile as she evicted a bundle of empty envelopes.
_Wow_, thought Todd. _I got a girl who likes me and I'm voluntarily cleaning this place *up*. I be
takin' *baths*, next._ And somehow, that thought wasn't all that very alarming. _I must be in love._

Wow._

~~

The grin didn't go away all through the cleaning cycle. Todd realized he could clean very well when he didn't realize he was doing it. Anything that looked salvagable like clothes went into a wicker basket (which had previously held prechewed gum, old newspapers, and splinters of wood from logs for the fireplace). Todd worked on picking debris off the floor, unconsciously clearing paths to be near Sara whenever she moved to a new spot.

By the time the living room looked liveable to Sara's standards, it was already noon. She moved to the kitchen just as the phone rang. "I'll get it, yo," Todd said hopping toward it. "Brotherhood Boardin' House, wassup?"

"Can't wait to hear the outgoing," giggled Sara from the kitchen.

"Hey, it's me Lance. Everything cool?"

"Yeah, why?" Todd asked, glancing in Sara's direction. Lance sounded nervous. Not good.

"The X-geeks just approached me asking if I happened to know where Essel was."

Todd cleared his throat meaningfully.

"Yeah, I know. Sara. But they asked if I'd seen Essel. I told them to fuck off but I know Jean tried to pry. Todd, if Sara loses control of her powers, they're gonna be all over you. Xavier can pull all the strings he wants to let them out of school early if he wants to make things convenient for himself, you get my drift? Be careful. Don't goof off."

"Gotcha," Todd said meekly. Lance hung up. Todd returned the phone to its cradle, feeling his stomach lurch. The X-geeks knew. They didn't know very *much* but they at least knew she was a mutant and they knew her school name. *Fuck.* Sara was in the doorway, looking at him quizzically.

"Something wrong?"

He looked at her, trying not to appear as worried as he felt. "We might be expectin' some company is all. From the X-men." He gulped suddenly at a new thought. "At least . . . after they try yo momma's place."

~

Sara fumbled for her cell. Redial. _Please, Ray... answer?_

"Adrien residence? How may I assist you."

"Ray... Everything's going nuts."

"Oh dear, What's the problem, miss?"

"There might be some people coming by," she began. "They'll be looking for my male alter-ego *or* me, I'm not sure which... Mom can't know where I am. Mom can't know I'm not at school. They can't know I'm not at home."

"You're unwell?"

"Ray? Do you have anything against mutants?"

A moment's silence. "Oh."

"Yeah. I'm changing... Right now I'm not exactly presentable for company... or the press. *Nobody* can know. Please..."

"I'll do my best to send them along, then."

"Where *is* Mom?"

"The lady is out of the house for the day. I believe she was going to a gallery."

Ah. So she'd be coming home shickered and incoherent. If she didn't spend the night at a friend's place.

That meant twenty-four hours where they wouldn't get anything out of the family.

"Bless you, Ray. I have to go and concoct a plan B."

"Best of fortune, miss."
She hung up, trying to control her breathing. A small experiment revealed that - although she could hide herself, her dead skin refused to blend. Damn.

"If they come anywhere near us... I'll have to wear hazmat gear or bunk and hide in the shrubbery or-"

"Or come clean," said Todd. "We could surrender?"

"But--"

"Yo, if we head 'em off at the pass, nobody gets hurt, yaknow?" he said. "Xavier can pick yo' up wit' that machine o' his an'..." he sighed. "He can handle yo' Mom."

Her stomach rumbled. "We have to think *and* eat, dear. Is there any place we can see the school?"

"Hey, yo, up on the roof." Todd grinned. "If we see them X-geeks leavin' for school ends, we can get ahead of 'em, yo."

Sara offered him a handful of meusli bars. "Doing the rest of the house can wait," she said, "this takes priority."

"And how," added Todd.

The climb onto the roof was only slightly tricky when they came to the loft ladder. Sara had to psyche herself up it.

"Ironic, don't you think?" she quavered. "Someone like me... afraid of heights."

"Ain't gonna let yo' fall, sugarlips," said Todd. "I'd never let yo' get hurt." He reached down for her. "You can do it, babe."

"I have to," she breathed. Her face went blank again and her trembling stilled. Blank and empty, like some horrible automaton with Sara's face, she climbed up, paced away from the hole, and then collapsed, shaking, as Sara returned.

Todd moved to comfort her. "It's okay. It's okay, hon..."

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry... there's no box big enough for a phobia... I'm sorry."

"...uh," Todd managed. "What?"

"It's just mental compartmentalisation," she said. "You take something that's - inconvenient - and put it in a box in your mind. And you seal it off. Contain it. Put it away." She shuddered and grabbed at him in spasms. "The really big things can't be contained permanently. I have to put them away, but it only works for a moment..."

_Okay... the woman I love is in serious need of professional help..._ "It's okay, baby," he soothed. "It's okay. I don't think worse of ya for it. Shh... 'S awright."

Sara breathed raggedly. "I..." she managed. "*Hate*. Heights."

"Just a li'l further, now," he encouraged. "We get onna roof an' we can see whassup. 'Kay?"

Sara nodded.

"It's cool. Ain't gonna let yo' fall."

Sara whimpered in assent. Her hand held his in a death grip.

As it turned out, they didn't actually get to the roof, because Todd could see all he needed to from the hatch.

"Aw *fuck*, no..." The black van was at the gates, and several little dots were piling in.

"Honey?" he said, patting her hand. "We gotta go back *down* the ladder..."

"So his name's Adrian Adrians?" said Scott.

"Nein, you're not *listening*," argued Kurt. "From the top, okay? One. There is no such person as Adrian Essel, ja?"

"Rrrriiiigght..." he said. "The person we *think* is Essel is actually a girl, ja?"

"*Oh*... we musta got her name backwards," said Scott. "It's Isselle Adrians, right?"

"*Nein*! Wait. Listen..." Kurt persisted. "Her name's Sara Adrien."

"So why'd she go by 'Isselle'?" Kurt rolled his eyes. "You know," he said. "I'm beginning to see why she doesn't bother correcting
anyone any more." He produced a piece of paper. "Here. Just read her record summary."
Jean took it off him as the van started down the road. She telepathically shared the information with
everyone aboard.
"Kicked out of a lot of schools, lots of behavior demerits... fighting... random absenteeism... Are we
sure we want to talk to him?"
"Her," corrected Ororo.
"Whatever," said Jean.
"Uh. Jean..." said Kurt. "A lot of those schools were for girls only? I think they'd *know*, ne?"
"The Professor says that there's a blip at the boarding house," said Ororo. "They might be holding
her captive."
Scott started swearing and taking off his shoes. "Damnit. I *hate* changing in the van."
Kurt just turned off his holowatch. "Don't know *what* you're complaining about."
"I hate it when he does that," grumbled Kitty, seizing her uniform and beating everyone else to the
girls' cubicle in the back[1].

[1] I don't know about you, but I was always creeped out when they left a place in civvies and turned
up somewhere else in uniform. Yes. I *do* think about things way too much

~

Sara clung to him even tighter at the prospect of going down, especially since she'd have to do it
backwards. Todd went first with the assurance that he would at least cushion her if she slipped. It
was a long struggle for Sara to lower her legs into empty space and climb by feel, but she did with
Todd's support and coaxing. Soon they were back on the landing of the second story just in time to
witness the front door banging open.
Cyclops walked in followed by Ororo, Kurt, Jean, Logan and the others.
"What a pleasant surprise," Todd said sarcastically. "Doorbell busted?"
"We didn't see one."
"Did you look? Normally it's by the door."
Scott reached for his visor. "Just let her go, Tolensky. We don't want any trouble."
Todd walked down the stairs with Sara, allowing those assembled below to see the grip that she had
on his arm. "I don't want no trouble either. Yo can talk to her all you want, long as yo civilized and
don't talk a lot of bullshit. But fuck you if you think I'm gonna let you kidnap her for 'her own
good.'" He really didn't want to cuss in front of her, but he was upset and old habits were hard to
break.
Sara was trembling and fighting to keep it under control. Her eyes had filled with emptiness again.
Todd glanced at her nervously. He needed her here. She needed to be here so she could speak her
mind.
"Isn't dishonesty and kidnapping generally a Brotherhood tactic?" Scott said coolly.
"Mystique ain't here no more, yo. Sara came here of her own free will. I invited her." Todd glared
meaningfully at Scott. "When we invite people, it means they can hang out with us. See what we're
about. No harassment. No prying." He shifted his glare over to Ororo. "No tests."
Logan growled softly. Todd ignored him and looked up at Sara. "Sara? Hon? I'll speak for you as
much as I can, but you gotta stay with me. Please?" He sighed. He didn't want to play devil's
advocate, but she looked so frightened. Todd couldn't bear it. "Don't be afraid, yo. They won't hurt
you. I won't let them hurt you. They just gonna talk."

~

Sara fought the shakes. The trip up and down the ladder had made her aware of the potential fall
down the stairs. She could feel it pulling at her like a ghost.
Her tic's fought for control of her face, albeit briefly.
_Nobody wants to look at a spastic wreck like you,_ said her Inner Mom.
Go back into your box, she ordered the phantom. Nobody needs *you* here.
She clung tight to Todd and used his assistance to descend the stairs. "You'll have to pardon us," she said, Boston controlling her voice. "As you can see, we're quite unprepared for visitors. Alas, the furniture has been freshly cleaned and is still damp. If we decide to take tea, we shall have to take it standing."

The one in orange had a complete posture change that clearly read _What the *hell*?_ while the dark-skinned woman in the cape simply raised an eyebrow.

Sara spotted the famous Jean Grey in amongst the costumed crowd and repressed an ironic smirk. _If they do take me away,_ she thought, _I may finally have something in common with Mom's favourite girl._

"Todd spoke the truth. I was invited here. As a place of shelter while I--" she gestured at her peeling face, "--changed. He's been... a very valued friend. I'll thank you all not to pursue any grudges you may have during this parley."

One of them moved - for a blue fuzzy entity with demonic features, he certainly knew how to vanish when he wanted to. Nothing as overt as Sara's gift, no. Just the simple trick of fading out of notice. Were it not for his posture change, Sara might not have noticed him at all.

"He's helped you out, ja?" he said. "Told you about mutants... Told you about us?"

"Quite," said Sara. He was reading her as much as she was reading him. It was fascinating to watch his yellow eyes jink from indicator to indicator.

Jean made to step forward, her mouth opening to speak, but the fuzzy German fellow shot out an arm without looking and stopped her cold. They shared meaningful glares and the German stepped forward in her stead.

"If you don't mind me saying so," said Sara, "you're the most physically fascinating fellow I've met." He actually grinned. "Ja. I'm pretty unique." He preened, gaining confidence when she didn't react as he expected. Given his physical resemblance to a woodcut demon, Sara could easily guess what the expected reaction was. "My name's Kurt," he offered his tridactyl hand.

"Sara Louise Adrien," she returned, politely shaking. Now *there* were some working hands. She could actually feel trained muscles and tendons. "The unsolved mystery[1]."

"*Babe*..." chided Todd.

"Sorry, darling... I can't help doing that for the meantime."

"If you don't mind *me* asking," said Kurt. "What exactly were you told about us?"

"That you would help," she said. "If there was nothing that Todd and his friends could do for me."

Kurt shared a look with Todd, a puzzled one that attempted to work everything out anew. "You told the truth?"

"Yo, it's such a shock?"

"I take it you two have a history," said Sara.

[1] The show _Unsolved Mysteries_ periodically has pieces about paranormal happenings and cryptozoological sightings.

"Eh... yeah. We got some things in common, but it's not always enough, y'know? Certain personalities tend to collide and go boom."

"Especially those that make a habit of lying and stealing," Scott added.

"Scott," Jean admonished, and gave a smile that was all damage control and very little sincerity. Kurt could have told her it wouldn't have worked on Sara, but his eyes were on Todd. Todd was different somehow. His lights were prettier... stronger. And they were mingling with Sara's like will'o'th'wisps. Kurt understood.

He smirked like the proverbial cat who had caught the canary. It was a bemusing revelation, but one that couldn't be well explained to his teammates without attracting a lot of confused stares. Kurt wasn't the type to blurt out things like this anyway. Far better to leave it be.
Of course that didn't mean he was above a little teasing. "So, you do occasionally put others before yourself."
Todd bristled. "Yo, what you sayin'? That I'm a coward or somethin'?"
Kurt raised his hands in a peaceful gesture. "Easy, liebhaberjunge(1). You asked for peace remember?"
"Yeah, did I fail to ask fo' respect?" he grumbled.
"Ja, but you're earning it. Slow and steady." Kurt winked. Todd snorted softly and crossed his arms.
He could talk all he wanted about Kurt, but the elf could suck tension out of a room like nobody's business when he tried.
"A'ight. Go on then. I'll keep it shut if you keep it real."
Logan grunted, the closest articulation of satisfaction he could muster.
Ororo stepped forward and took Sara's hand. "My name is Ororo Munroe. I wish to apologize for assuming the worst and for our resulting behavior. Since you already know our intentions are to help out fellow mutants," here Ororo smiled at Todd - who all but ducked under it in surprise. "I invite you to visit us at the Institute and have a look around. Professor Xavier would like to meet you. We can provide a supportive and safe environment where you can learn to harness your powers until you are ready to interact socially again."
Sara nodded her understanding and glanced at Todd to gage his reaction. He returned her gaze solemnly. "They're keepin' it real, hon," he confirmed. "You wanna ask questions, now's the time."
Scott stared and managed a squeak. Logan reached over casually to pop Cyke's jaw back in place.
"Well, if you don't mind questions, Ms. Munroe, how do you propose introducing me back into society with my current differences?" Sara gestured once more to her face. "I was popular enough before," she commented wryly. "As the travelling drag-show."
"Sara," Todd nudged her gently.
"Sorry, dear. Anyway, it's going to be a while before I can make myself look normal enough to pass as human. Or something closely resembling." Todd sighed. Kurt watched carefully, observing both.
Ororo smiled at her. "We have ways of making it possible to mask our differences from those who are not yet capable of understanding them. Kurt attends school with the aid of a holowatch, for instance. But we do not require you to mask yourself among fellow mutants. Your powers are nothing to be ashamed of. You are normal, Sara, no matter what anyone else might think or say of you."
"Damn straight, yo," Todd added, earning himself another round of blinking stares. Kurt bit the corners of his bottom lip to keep from grinning himself into certain doom.(2) Nobody was remotely trying* to understand Todd's oddly cooperative behavior - not even the telepath, judging from Jean's stuipified expression.
Todd ignored them and took her hand. "I agree wit most of what she's sayin'. But it's not gonna be easy to figure yoself out, no matter where you go. Some people never do. What the X-men are tryin' to say is, they want to be there for you like I am and like Freddy is. Plus they got a lot of extra resources an' shit. Like a medical lab in case yo get injured or somethin. Not to mention real food, clean beds, and probably even clean bathrooms."
Scott looked indignant and about to speak, but Jean elbowed him from one side and Kitty elbowed him from another, so he kept his mouth shut.(3)
"So it's there if you wanna go. Y'know, if things get outta control here." Todd's hand wrapped tighter around hers, despite the assuring smile on his face. It had hurt him to say that. But he loved her.

(1) Quite literally mashed together the words 'liebhaber' (lover) and 'junge' (boy) to come up with 'loverboy'. I speak Spangrish, not German. *pats her German phrasebook*
(2) Ever wanted to laugh at something in a situation that wasn't really the best for laughing? And you know that if you even smile, you're *that* much closer to losing your self-control? That's what Kurt's going through right now.
(3) I love picking on Scott. XD But really, the bathrooms in the X-mansion plus all the teenagers
living there... who save the world, do schoolwork, participate in Logan's training sessions, and are seen doing chores only when they get into trouble... you do the math.

~

Sara had no idea what a 'holowatch' was, but she could guess. The fuzzy-blue Kurt had most of the same features as Kurt Wagner, German class clown and campus acrobat extraordinaire. Replace the fur with pink skin, edit the ears, hands, feet and tail... and the similarities were more than remarkable. It certainly explained his infamous "thing" about not touching people who didn't "feel safe".

Sara rubbed idly at her creepy-feeling scalp with her free hand. They could hide the peeling. Hide the shedding.

 Heck, they could explain things to her *Mother*. Things Sara personally dreaded. Sara quelled the small tic under her right eyelid, and refused to let go of Todd's hand. She cleared her throat. "Might Todd come with me? I have no doubt that he might need more than a modicum of medical attention himself."

"Hey, *whoah*," Todd almost jerked out of her grasp. "I ain't about t' go there... I'm fine, yo. I be fine."

He was *afraid*... genuinely afraid of the place.

"But you're hurting as well," she murmured. "That won't *do*.

He battled with himself, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Yo, I only been there once or twice... It - didn't go well...

"Automatic defense system," said the tall one in the wraparound specs with a shrug.

"Which, I presume, will not be activated in our direction if I come in?"

The burly man in the orange outfit flinched at the 'if'. So. Someone at least, was listening.

"Yo... sweetie... you don't gotta drag me along..." Todd wheedled.

"It'll be fine," she soothed. "I won't let you fall."

All of Todd's arguments evaporated in his throat with a small gargle. Now he could see why a flick of her fingers and a few small words from her could move Freddy so. It was the power of her eyes. Sara saw things in a unique way. She saw virtues in those who were assumed to have none. She saw potential in the chronic loser.

And when she spoke, that sight inspired whatever small part she admired to come forward and rally to meet her expectations.

Anything to avoid her disappointment.

"A'ight," he said at last. "I'm'a help you get yo' stuff, 'kay?"

Her smile dazzled his world. "It's a deal."

They sat in the back of the van, holding hands as if glued together. Their exchanges were soft, cryptic, and sporadic.

They knew they were being watched.

Kurt, certainly, made no secret of it. He sat backwards and rested his chin on his forearms as he observed them. Things made a lot more sense now that he knew the tall girl's true gender. The character of "Adrian Essel" had been - off... and certainly his lights weren't very *male*. But then, neither were the school's other individuals famous for their allegedly warped preferences.

Now that he *knew*, for certain, that Sara was guaranteed female, a lot of little things made a world's worth of sense. The hairstyle, the affection for pretty things, the neat little artworks she occasionally doodled on the handouts at morning assembly... the distinctly feminine way she walked - even if it was with a pronounced stoop.

And it definitely explained the delicate way she removed the dead rat someone left in her locker every morning.

It certainly explained the burning wafts of crimson shame he'd observed one afternoon when she'd been collecting her lost articles under the supervision of Mr Hinkley.

Those size eight flower-print underpants replacing the American flag outside Kurt's classroom had
been her spares.

Kurt, who had three younger sisters at home, knew all about some discrete feminine practices[1] and felt that he probably owed Pietro a few lumps for it. And he certainly owed her alleged 'friend', Janine Wiltshire, a scare in a dark alley for all the evil she'd wrought with her metal-bound mouth. She was the first person - besides the Professor - who hadn't reacted in one way or another when they saw him for the first time. He owed that quality of character something.

Part of his debt would be repaid in not haranguing her boyfriend.

Kurt was distracted from his observations by the sensation of someone else sharing his eyes. _Relax, Jean,_ he thought to the team telepath. _They're not stealing our emergency rations or putting athlete's balm in our spare uniforms[2]._

Jean's mind flitted away from his, then attempted to ease more subtly back.

_She's not sabotaging our equipment, either._

This time, her mental presence departed for good with a growl.

Kurt smirked, but kept it hidden from their guests' view.

"Don't worry about yer bag," said Logan as they piled out of the van, "I got-- *umph*."

Charles resisted the temptation to snort at his friend's shock. Logan had clearly been expecting something a lot lighter.

Logan tried again, lifting it with both hands. "You pack like this every day?"

"I'm not in the habit of unpacking it," she said.

Logan grunted. "Explains a lot."

"Well, it is *one* kind of anti-theft device," Sara explained. "Are you all right, dear?"

Todd Tolenski was broadcasting foreboding. "Yeah. I be fine..."

"I *will* be fine, darling."

"Sorry."

They rounded the open door of the van, and Charles got his first look at Sara's physical body. Her skin could be said to be literally hanging off her, and she rubbed at itches or cramps. "Sara," he smiled. "Welcome. And you, too, Todd. You've done a commendable job of helping her."

Well, that threw *him* for a mental loop. Charles allowed them to approach.

"Was I correct in reading the name of your establishment to be an institute for *gifted* youngsters?" said Sara.

"Yes. That's quite correct."

"Ah." Her gaze lowered and her skin darkened. "Then you might have a time explaining my presence."

"*Sara*..." chided Todd.

"I *am* in Remedial Ed., dearest. You can explain me as a Savant but not--" a shiver of facial tic's overcame her, "--g-g-gifted."

"That is among the things I wish to discuss," said Charles. "I have tea waiting for us in the library."

Sara relaxed. She knew where she was with tea. Her mind filled with a sussuration of rules on how to sit, stand, hold cups, plates, forks and whatnot... as well as polite conversational subjects. All of this, Charles could pick up without any effort. Sara's mind, like so many others knew to the world of strange mutant powers, was broadcasting at a very 'loud' level... and none but other psychics could pick it up. It was the principle behind Cerebro, in fact.

There was more than tea in the library. Hank had laid on a number of high-protein, high-calorie treats. Evidently, he knew something.

Sara sat primly and served up some pate on a cracker, then passed it to Todd. "Try some," she said. "It might do you a power of good." She did the same for herself. Demonstrating that it was safe.

"Mmm... *very* rich. Not that I'm going to object..." she smiled, quite charmingly. "My horrendous physical adaptations are demanding richer foods of late."

Todd's nibble was far more tentative than any attempt at daintiness. "Hey, yo, this *is* good." He ate the rest of the cracker and pate in one go.

Sara almost glowed. "Try the camambert," she suggested. "It's rather sweet."
"Uh..." Todd surveyed the array of foodstuffs. Sara blushed, selected the proper knife, and cut him a portion for another cracker. "Pardon, darling, I quite forgot. It's cheese."

[1] My mother always told me that it never hurts to carry a pair of spare undies in case of unexpected menstruation.
[2] I figure Kurt might not know all the brand names, but you can think "Ben Gay".

"Oh... right." There were only three types of cheese in the Brotherhood house. Kraft, Swiss, and moldy-beyond-recognition. Todd located the yellow food and spread a bit on a cracker. It was damn good, despite his qualms about eating in front of an enemy. You were vulnerable while eating and drinking in the tenements. To protect yourself, you'd have to drop your food and risk losing it. Todd made short work of the snack and did not take his eyes off the Professor. "We have had some experience with varying levels of metabolism. Mister Wagner for instance, has set the record."

Todd grinned. "Him? Bet he don't eat as much as Freddy or Pietro."
"You'd be surprised, Mr. Tolensky." Charles looked at Sara. "More tea?"
"Please."

Both men observed Sara's perfect posture and grace while she held the cup steady beneath the stream of green tea. _She's like a whole 'nother person, yo. That can't be healthy._ Charles could hear Todd fretting. The boy had another cracker in his hand and was distractedly flipping and rolling it around his fingers as if it were a coin.

Sara glanced at him and looked pointedly at the cracker. "Todd, dearest..."
He blushed. "Ah, sorry. Nervous habit." Sheepishly, he spread some cheese on it. "Quite allright." She turned back to Charles. "What exactly do you wish to talk to me about?"

Charles leaned back in his wheelchair and folded his hands. "A number of things. I wish to answer any questions you may have about the X-gene, the Institute, or anything at all. I want you to relax, tell me about yourself. I know there's a great deal more to you than meets the eye."

Sara glanced at the skin hanging off her left wrist. "What meets the eye is probably displeasing enough. You don't have to do any digging to find my faults. I can list them from memory."
"Sara..." Todd whimpered. "Please -"
"Let her talk, Mr. Tolensky," Charles interrupted gently.
"But --"

Xavier glanced at Todd. There was understanding and sympathy. And a desire to help. Charles needed to understand Sara without prying. He needed her to talk. He needed her to open up and speak freely. For her to know she *could*.

Todd hung his head and remained quiet, nails digging into his palm at nearly every word his love used to describe herself. He was going to make her mother pay for every *syllable*.

Sara was a study in juxtaposition. Her posture and pose came from a textbook in etiquette, knees close together, ankles crossed underneath the chair, back straight, elbows in, and a teacup perched in its saucer, held delicately in one hand.
It was as if her mind conjured a lace-trimmed hat and a matching garden frock for herself, instead of the ratty, paint-stained shorts and the ill-fitting _Hello Kitty_ T-shirt. There were even delicate, open-toed sandals instead of the collapsible boots.

Xavier had to shake off the mental picture and focus on the real one.
"Well," said Sara. "At first, and foremost, I'm a great disappointment to my mother and her family. I grew out of being cute and never quite grew out of growing." She took a sip of her tea. "I've made it something of a career over the years. Mom always wanted the best, but - no matter what the school, I
managed to get myself thrown out of it."
"Were you *happy* in them?" said Xavier.
Sara seemed startled by the question. "I - I - uh..." Confusion drew her worried gaze to Todd.
He nervously swallowed his mouthful of cracker-cheese-pate-cracker mini sandwiches. "Don' look
at me, babe. You'd know better'n me."
The tea came to rest in her lap as Sara stared into her memories.
Xavier received the impression of quite a lot of boring corridors, the heady smell of boiled cabbages,
and unmitigated, stultifying boredom.
"No," she said at last, her tone wondering. "I suppose I wasn't very happy in any of them. I suppose
the whole of them were rather... boring."
"How so?" he said, sipping his tea.
"Well, Lady Favisham's was a nice enough place. After a while, I was simply going to visit the
horses..." A clear, vivid image almost inundated him. A gentle giant of a creature, not a classic
beauty in horse terms, but brilliant in his own way. Sara called him Sergeant Bothari, and taught him
dressage. Together, they were something of a hit at Renaissance fairs.
She also remembered the laughter from her contemporaries still at Favisham's.
An ugly horse and an ugly rider, they'd said, a perfect match.
The whole mental flood took but an instant. Xavier made himself listen.
"I suppose I put up with it all for Mom..." a slight tremor shivered across her face. "If I could make
her proud, if I could make her smile... If I could be *worth* something again..."
Todd began radiating anxiety, and flinched to comfort her.
Xavier stilled him with one upraised hand. Stop. Wait. There was something... off... Altogether off,
entirely, about her thoughts.
...never worth anything to *ANYONE*... Useless gawk of a girl!
It took all his control not to flinch at the mental presence.
Then Sara's true-self trapped the gorgon and filed it away... a glimpse of a mental warehouse like the
final scene in _Raiders of the Lost Ark._ Other errant things were caught and packed away. Feelings,
mostly.
"Sara... please stop that."
"Hmn?" Her outside demeanor was shockingly blank. "What do you mean?"
"I can sense you putting your emotions aside. It's very dangerous to bottle up your feelings like that."
"They're not bottles, they're boxes," murmured Sara. "It's far better that I put them away. I simply
won't be fit for company if I let them loose..."
Xavier unconsciously echoed Todd's expression of worried concern. "How do you mean, unfit for
company?"
A pastiche of memories. Mother yelling at her until her body was barely her own any more.
Twitching and spasming helplessly. Wanting to stop it, but being unable...
"Nobody wants to look at a spastic wreck," Sara murmured.
"Are you epileptic?"
"No, no... I don't know..." Once she shook her head, it continued tic'ing 'no' as she spoke. A blush
rose slowly over her face. "There *was* one episode when I cracked my head on a tile by accident. I
was ten. Ray took me to the hospital and they ran some tests... Awful business. The end result was a
handful of stitches, a small investigation, and the conclusion that I didn't exhibit any symptoms of
epilepsy, cerebral palsy, or any other kind of neurological disorder whatsoever. Then Dad came
home and it all cleared up, and nothing more was said."
Another mental flood. Sara clearly adored her father.
The memory served to still her tic's too... Odd.
"And you never cracked your head again?"
"Mother always stops when I begin to cry, now," said Sara. She kept control by Polite Conversation.
The odd tic would escape, but they remained mostly facial ones. "She's always concerned that I
never get hurt."
_On the outside, anyway,_ Todd's thought was clear and loud. _Fuckin' bitch._ And the echo of
"I see," said Xavier. This warranted further investigation. Later. Right now, he had to lead the subject onto more comfortable ground. "Tell me... is there anything you particularly *like* pursuing? Something you're proud of?"

"I find great peace in books and harps. Oh. And Chuckie."

Tickling whiskers and soft fur... the pinpricks of tiny claws. A little creature in plastic tubes. "Oh. A *hamster*..." he blurted.

Sara got a startled look. "Yes. He is. How--"

"Sorry," he said. "I'm a telepath... and sometimes - thoughts can be very clear. Even when I have my guard up."

"Umm..." Sara wondered just how many of her other thoughts had gone through Xavier's guard. "Just how badly was I 'projecting'??" She blushed crimson. _The way you went on, you stupid girl, he's probably ready to send you back to that rat's nest you lied to me to spend the night in. Nobody wants a wreck like you in their home._

But Xavier waved a hand to waive her concern. "You needn't worry. There was nothing at all embarrassing, I'm sure." _Disturbing and alarming, however..._ "Even if there was I'm not inclined to gossip."

"Do you ever lower your guard on purpose?" Sara asked carefully. Xavier appeared to pause in thought.

"I will not disagree that while unethical, I have used my powers to gain an edge over adversaries," he answered, just as carefully. "I'm sure Todd can tell you if he already hasn't."

The amphibian boy flushed and appeared to critique the rug pattern. "He can erase memories," Todd muttered. "And tell when somebody's lyin'. Dunno if he can do any Vulcan tricks like puttin' someone to sleep, but I do know he's the main reason Mags wears a bucket on his head."

When all else fails, crack a joke. That was Todd's way of dealing with stress. Xavier felt a twinge of guilt for adding to it. Sara was looking at him, head tilted gracefully in concern.

"What happened between you and the Brotherhood?" she asked. There was an awkward silence. Sara guessed she'd stepped onto very uncomfortable turf.

"We just different, yo," Todd spoke. Xavier appeared to relax, obviously he'd been waiting for Todd to go first. "I don't think they're all bad, though, just jerks sometimes. This ain't one of those times," he said quickly, looking up at Xavier cautiously. Todd fidgeted, trying to come up with a way to better explain why the two teams were divided. "It's not just that we have different opinions 'bout humans... guess it's first impressions too."

"Me, well... I came here that one night for two reasons. One 'cause Mystique told me if I didn't steal for her, she'd kill me, and two, Summers invited me. Well, not really, I guess I sorta badgered him into inviting me. Still, he did. So I went. I expected them to be all nice and stuff, even if it was just forced - just to be polite you know? Maybe then I coulda told them about Mystique. Instead they decided they didn't really want to talk to me unless they liked my powers or somethin. I was tested and offered a chance to stay, but at that point I felt I'd been yanked around on my chain enough. I tried getting them back, got my ass kicked, and left."

Todd wasn't meeting Xavier's gaze. He was guessing it was less than pleased. "Since then it was always like they was too good for me. For all of us. Lance never got talked to at all and Freddy had this thing with Jean that ended badly. Pietro just doesn't like Daniels period. We don't belong with them. But it's not like we really wanna kill 'em or nothin'. Well, most of the time. Maybe irritate them once a day..."

He looked at his sneakers, surprised at himself. He was admitting the truth for once about his feelings toward the Xmen - to himself as much as anyone else. All because he wanted to be good... to not scare her away from someone who could help her.

Love indeed was a powerful thing.
"Very many mistakes were made," said Xavier. "Cerebro was - quirky... at the time. When you came to us, Mr Tolensky, I had to be sure my readings were accurate. The rest..." he trailed off, looking distraught. One hand flinched in a memory, reaching minimally out for an event that was no longer happening. "It was a cascade of errors. I deeply regret it."

Sara watched Todd, now, as he sized up Xavier's body language. "A'ight," he said. "Plus the whole thing of sneakin' in to steal yo' stuff didn't do no good. Over an' gone, now. Nuttin' to be done." He helped himself to some more pate and crackers.

Sara felt uniquely jealous of his ability to leave the past where it stood. Perhaps she could learn it from him, one day. As it was, her nightmares were plaguing her. "I don't like hurting people," she said. "Especially my friends. I have so very few of them, you see... I--" her throat stuck. Sara had to sip her tea. "(hem) I don't have to fight - if I don't want to, do I?"

"No," said Xavier. "However, I would like to make sure that you could defend yourself... should an event arise where peaceful intentions are... inadequate."

"Of course. 'Be prepared' is a motto of mine." Her tic made her mouth twitch a grin. "Were it not for a quirk of genetics, I could have been a scout."

Todd's face was easily readable. It said, _Not funny, babe._

She changed the subject after another sip of tea. "The question remains, Professor... how are you going to pass off someone like *me* as gifted?"

His look was one of sympathetic pain, as if she'd just maimed herself for all to see. How odd. "I do believe that there will be no need for any 'passing off'," he said. "I haven't been prying, but you are a very intelligent young lady and--"

Sara burst out in laughter, and tried to quell it with rising desperation. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Perhaps you didn't pay attention. I'm in Remedial *Ed.* I fail at everything I try to put my hand to," _Including pleasing my Mom,_ "I'm *adequate* with the harp, but that's *it*:"

"You're wrong, yo," said Todd. "I seen your site. You do brilliant stuff every day, sweetie. Yo' make movies, an' you make toons, an' you design stuff alla time. Hell, yo; you runnin' five businesses in yo' spare time. That's gotta take *some* smarts."

"Just bookkeeping," she murmured. "...following the instructions. Anybody can do it."

"I can't," he argued. "Sho' I can draw a bit, but - I ain't got no patience to try a flip-book, let alone script, draw and animate no flashtoon. I can't make no *zombies*... no scale models o' Bayville fo' no monster flick... You got mo' in there--" he tapped his head, "--than I do. I know it. I *seen* it."

Sara started shaking from her toes to her head. It rose over her like a tide. Her head started tic'ing 'no' and her limbs rose of their own volition to ward off some ghost attacker. All her boxes were trembling... giving way...

And some fuzzy blanket descended on her mind, wrapping her in comfort and a haze of pleasant feelings. The outside world and its stresses were oddly distant.

"HEY!"

"Do you recall... Sara mentioning a Grand Mal type episode? It's nearly happened again." "...shit..."

"She's dangerously close to a nervous breakdown, Todd. She has to vent her -ah- boxed feelings gradually over a long time in order to heal safely. Any direct breach at this stage... could hurt her."

Strange, that she didn't feel anything on hearing this.

"Can yo' help her?"

"Not tonight... and definitely not by force. I can only place a stopgap measure, for now. I can't truly begin until she's adjusted to her physical change. That alone is trauma enough." _I'm traumatized... anaesthetized... pretty close to philosophized... part of her mind sung. Damn. She needed a harp._ _And I just now realized... things ain't exactly harmonized... in my psychological paradise._
"Sara... come back to us."
The blanket lifted from her head. "Are you quite certain there's nothing remotely Psycorps[1] about this operation?" she said.
"I had to help," he said. "You were at risk of hurting yourself."
"I suppose I need quite a few years of therapy, hm?"
"You wouldn't be the first of my students to do so," Xavier's smile was warm and relaxing. "If you'd like to play a harp to blow off steam, I believe there's one in the music room. May I show you?"
"A real, orchestral harp?" Her fingers twitched. "Can I meet her?"
"Of course," he said. "I'd love to hear you play."
Sara finished her tea. "Then by all means, lead on."
The music room was dominated by a grand piano, beautifully maintained. The harp, however, was lurking in a neglected corner by a potted aspidistra. She was the first Roccoco[2] harp she'd ever seen. Sara laid her hands on the strings. "Untouched since she was bought here," she murmured. "The strings were slackened, thank goodness, but she's been kept cold..." Sara tsked. "Some sunshine for you, my dear." Without thinking, Sara moved the harp into the afternoon sun, found a seat, and tightened her strings by feel. A quick strum helped her ensure they were in tune.
She sang *wonderfully*.

Todd watched as her face moved into a calm that was warm, rather than eerie blankness that scared him, before.
"Let's make our introductions," whispered Sara. Then she started to *Play*.
All Todd knew was that it was something by Mozart. Something cyclical and intricate and her fingers never missed a note. She was *amazing*. Her face had taken on an inner glow. _Wow,_ he thought. _This must be what she looks like when she's naturally asleep._
The first number finished, Sara played a chaotically fast piece that was over in a few seconds.
"Twenty-four seconds," said Sara. "I *must* be stressed."
"And quite understandably so," said Xavier.

[1] Babylon 5 "The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father..." and, of course, Bester the bastid.
[2] An era rather famous for putting decoration wherever possible... and in some cases, where it wasn't posible.

~

Todd started with the realization that her music had curled him into a position of relaxation achieved only when vegged out or unconscious. The toes of his sneakers were off the floor and resting on the edge of the piano bench he perched on, wrists comfortably across each other on the smooth polished surface as he leaned forward.
Self-consciously, he straightened, planting his feet on the floor as if it made him appear more solid. "That was beyond beautiful, snookums." He noted how the scars on her arm, though hard to see for all the scales, matched with the direction of the strings. Ah, so the harps were responsible. Always good to be paranoid and doublecheck.
Sara was letting her fingers rest from their effort. Todd's body ached selfishly for her to continue; even if it was to reach up and pluck random strings. People were their truest selves when they were creating. He wanted to see her glow again.
Todd kept his request trapped neatly between the folds of his tongue. She was hurting, falling apart on the inside, stressed from the effects of... hell, everything. Maybe she should lie down? Was it just his imagination or were the scales on her face turning a little grey?
"You need to lie down or somethin?" he asked, walking over to her. Her scales shifted in the light to a healthier colour and he was left feeling overprotective and fussy. Her nervous smile gave him the suspicion that even her colors were being used as a mask to lessen his concern.
"Don't worry, dear, I'm just unwinding. This is good for me right now." Her hand absentely plucked out a tune from Enya. She could play by ear, not just by memorization - as if the spirited display
beforehand had not proven that. There had been nothing mechanical or parrotlike about the way her fingers had moved across those strings. It was as if she'd been rewriting the music in her head as she played it.

~

Xavier was both surprised and impressed. This was Sara when she wasn't trying to be anyone else, or maintain some image impressed on her from numerous rehearsals at varying finishing schools. This was Sara being herself... and she thought of it as becoming the music.

_Of all the mutants I've interviewed,_ he mused, _I had to find one with more layers than an onion._ Sara segued from Enya to a piece she'd composed whilst he'd been helping her. It was a jumpy tune, something easily capable of being something from Ben Folds Five[1]. From there, she moved into _Totacca and Fuge in B Minor_, and then, oddly enough, something by the Beatles. No, by *a* Beatle. _Beautiful Night_ by Sir Paul McCartney.

"Hello, Gladys," Sara whispered, giving the part nearest her shoulder a head-and-shoulder hug.

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance." She shifted into an improv usually suited for the higher class of restaurants and a grand piano. Music to be spoken over. "She really needs someone to play her every day. Such a warm-hearted harp needs love."

The idea of dangling that bait over her flickered briefly through his mind. No. Sara had been manipulated by enough people, twisted and warped via rumour into something ugly and vile. She needed a place where she could bloom. "We don't have anyone here who can play, properly," he said. "You're more than welcome to visit. Anytime."

There was a barely-conscious _Ha!_ from Todd. Self-satisfied and confident.

"If you decide to stay with us," he said. "There will have to be tests. Nothing like the test Mr Tolensky went through, of course."

"Damn straight," growled Todd.

Charles cleared his throat. "We must find the limits of your abilities, what unique needs you may have, and any ideosynchratic reactions to medication... as well as ascertain for certain the true bounds of your intelligence."

"I don't test very well," she said, moving into phrases from _Every Little Thing_ "And as for reactions to medication, I have an entire list."

"Don't give her no sedatives, yo," said Todd. A mental image from a story, transformed into nightmares, flashed briefly into Xavier's head.

"Those tests can wait - except for the physical. It's been my understanding that physical transformations such as your own can be... stressful. Therefore, I must insist that you see our resident physician. And I must warn you that he, too, has been changed by his X-gene."

"You mean the big, burly fellow trying to hide past the door? I can see his shadow." Sara smiled. _Very observant for a girl with her eyes apparently closed,_ thought Xavier.

Todd, of course, turned to look. He'd heard about Mr McCoy's transformation from Tabby, but it was another thing to see the guy knuckle into a room.

"Ah. Hello," he said. "I'm--"

"Dr. McCoy!" Sara stood from her playing and skipped over to greet him. "I'm shocked. The Bayville Herald[2] actually ran a true story." Her hand reached to pet his fur. "Ah. May I?"

"So long as you permit me to inspect those intriguing scales of yours."

"Just don't pull on the skin that's still stuck on. It kinda hurts." She touched him, and her scales turned a uniform blue and sprouted thick fur. "Oh *dear*..."

"Fascinating," murmured Hank. "Complete textural and chromatic adaptation." He carefully selected one 'hair'.

"I can *feel* that," marvelled Sara. "It's like having a fingerprint on a freckle."

"No doubt, your senses are enhanced at the tactile level." He let go and watched as she reverted to aqua scales. Next, he fingered the shed skin. "This was already adapted to change," he murmured.
"It's thicker by far than most human skin."
"I've had an opportunity for comparison," said Sara. "Todd's undergoing a shedding session, too. The poor dear."
Todd relaxed a little. These two were speaking friend-to-friend or doctor-to-patient. There was no 'thing' between them. He rubbed an itch, absently shedding flake-lets around him.
"Ah, then I might want to see both of you in my infirmary, anon. Comparative notes, you understand. You are the only two mutants so far who shed their skin in one go."
"You have my permission, of course," she said. "Any information could help another mutant, later on. Todd? Care to step under the microscope?"
"It ain't as if he can do much," Todd shrugged. "Whatever, yo. I'm wit' you."
It was fascinating to watch Sara. Her entire posture changed depending on whom she was with at the time. Around Todd - when she wasn't having mini-breakdowns - she was nervous, yet at ease, and happy. Near Xavier, she was reserved and cultured. And with Hank - she was companionable and chatty.
"Reports of your transformation have been ludicrously amplified," Sara was saying, "not to mention warped, bent, spindled and mutilated."
Hank chuckled. "I was temporarily incapacitated by my sudden transformation, yes," he said. "That's what comes from trying to inhibit a natural process, alas. Gradual changes are easier on the physique *and* the psyche."
"I can imagine. It's bad enough having nightmares about eating birds. I can't imagine going on any rampages."
"Birds?" Hank raised an eyebrow. "You're lucky it was merely birds."
"Oh *my*..."
He gestured them into the infirmary, which was filling with bizarre gadgets.
Sara was instantly fascinated, probing gently with her fingertips and occasionally matching the surfaces. "Am I right in guessing these are scanning analysis machines, designed to view the inside of a patient in situ? It must work by magnifying ambient radiation..."
_What?_ thought Todd.
"That's exactly correct," said Hank. "Almost to the word what young mister Walkingbird had to say..."
"Who?"
"You might know him better as 'Forge'," supplied Hank.
"*Two* correct stories," said Sara. "How MIB[3]..."
[1] I love that band. And They Might Be Giants.
[2] The Bayville Herald of my mind has *VERY* close ties with the National Enquirer.
[3] In case ya didn't get it - MIB featured the idea that the trash-tabloids are reporting the *truth*.

Hank was bringing out the best in her. Todd couldn't help but feel just a little useless and he chided himself for it. He wanted her to be happy right? To feel comfortable here if here was where she could stay. Lord knew he wasn't going to be welcome to visit as often as possible. Oh he'd visit alright, come hell or soapy water, but at least she'd have company when he couldn't be there.
The doctor was typing up a blank medical document on the computer. Todd glanced over and saw blinking windows on the toolbar. AIM. The guy had time for instant messaging. Who knew? Some small part of him wondered, but theory was disrupted when Hank turned from the document and walked toward him. "Can I see your arm?"
Todd extended it carefully. Hank tucked his hand and wrist beneath his elbow and ran a finger against the flaking skin. He looked like he was just getting over a sunburn, save that the peeling skin was papery and stiff. "Fascinating. It's at least two layers of epidermis that's peeling off, not just the stratum corneum. That's a lot of skin and nutrients stripped off you. Combined with the needs of your
metabolism... have you been feeling faint at all?"
"Well..." Todd started awkwardly, feeling understandably iffy about telling the X-geek doctor about possible weaknesses. Sara filled Hank in.
"As expected," She told Hank, apparently more trusting of the doctor-patient bond than Todd was. "Mr. Maximoff was a very taxing irritant this morning, both physically and mentally. Todd used up his energy defending my honor in a certain incident that proved Maximoff's utter lack of decency. And the Brotherhood's been running low on funds for necessary items, so Todd's energy wasn't up to par in the first place."
"Ah," said Hank, already seeing in his mind's eye the battle which had - for whatever reason - unfolded and the obvious outcome. "He collapsed?"
Todd was a peculiar shade of red that had nothing to do with his powers. "Sara," he murmured plaintively. She touched his shoulder gently and her hand mirrored the fabric. He had a smile for her that was meant to convince he wasn't upset, merely ashamed.
"No need for that," chuckled McCoy, taking a sample of Todd's skin and enclosing it in a plastic dish to look at later. "No power is without its physical consequence. I'm sure you still drove home the lesson."
"Sara did, actually. After she scared him off to school in his pajamas, she cleaned the staircase with him."
Now it was Sara's turn to blush while Hank laughed.

~

"...it was probably hysterical strength," Sara muttered, turning dark with mortification. "Nothing really fabulous."
"Yo, I'd be shocked if Pie's shut up about it, yet." Todd grinned. "*Man* I wish I had video on that. It was poetry, babe."
"No, dear, this is poetry," Sara took a recitational pose[1]. "There was a young man from Calcutta--"
"MISS *ADRIEN*!" Both teachers barked at once.
"It was *clean*..." said Sara.[2] "G-rated, even."
Hank was looking decidedly - poofy. "Nevertheless, you've frightened a few years' growth out of me. I thought you'd spent numerous years in *finishing* schools."
"Quite. I spent a majority of my time correcting the impossible anatomy and mythos." _And_ she added silently, _I knew a few girls who actively dispelled some myths themselves - and paid the price._ Quite a few young ladies in those man-free zones had turned up "mysteriously" pregnant. Sara knew for a fact that it wasn't especially mysterious at all.
Hanks' hair stood on end. All of it. "Oh *my*..."
"...meep..." said Todd.
"I *told* you I knew all the words, dear. I just don't like using them. *OW*..."
"Sorry. I was trying to break some off," Hank indicated the patch of skin in his forceps. "It *did* appear to be hanging by a thread."
"Appearances are deceiving, dear Doctor. I'd recommend industrial-strength clippers."
"Why?"
"Because I tried this morning with ordinary shears. Not a *dent*."
Hank bought out a small board and an obsedian scalpel[3]. "Try not to flinch..."
Both she and Todd held their breaths as the blade swiped over her dead skin.
"Success!" Hank held aloft a small chunk of her skin. "Into the microscope with *you*."
The thing he put it in bore little resemblance to a microscope. In fact, it was tied into the computer, as a window popped up with some intriguing graphics.
"That looks rather like an instructional picture of the entire epidermal system," noted Sara[4]. "Apart from the ragged edge..."
"No wonder you had such trouble," noted Hank. "You've been growing an entirely new epidermal system, more suited to your -ah- gifts."
"Goodness, I hope I don't do this every month," she sighed. "I'll be *ruined*..."
Todd laid his arm across his shoulders. _You'll weather it, babe. You stronger than yo' think._ He
daren't say as much out loud. Not after the last time he'd hurt her with a compliment.
"I doubt if further episodes will be so - extreme," soothed Hank.
"Ngh..."

Todd winced. He'd *felt* that one. Her skin - bunched - under his fingers. "Mo' cramps," he
explained. "Sweetie's been havin' a bad time of it." He tried to soothe it by rubbing with the grain.
Hank - whose hair was finally settling back down - looked appalled. "I think applied heat should
help," he said, "but first, to be certain, a look with the macroscope." He tapped the device that had
fascinated Sara earlier. "How did you divine its purpose, anyway?"
"Nothing special," she said, sliding off the bed she'd been sitting on and making her way to the
center of the thing. "Anyone who reads _Popular Mechanics_ and _Omni_ can do it."
Todd put his hand down where she'd been, and encountered a patch of stickiness. He looked down
and discovered it was crimson. A billion wrong things gallumphed through his brain in a picosecond.
"Uh. Doc?"
Hank looked. "Oh dear. Perhaps you'd like to adjourn, Miss Adrien, to re-adjust yourself? Full
facilities are available."
Sara looked down, twisting her shorts so that she could see the deep red stain. "Well... *SPLAT*,"
she sighed. "I should never have asked myself what else could go wrong."
Hank handed her a packet, a generic grey pair of track-pants, and panties to match. "Surprise
attack?"
Sara was darkening so much she almost looked like a walking shadow. "...first..."
"Oh *fuck*..." muttered Todd. Some swell date this was turning out to be. _I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm
sorry, I'm sorry... Make it all better, *please*... I'm so sorry, babe..._ "I'm sorry." He hid his face
behind his hands. Why did he have to screw things up?
"Hardly your fault, dear," Sara's voice drifted through the door. "Dame Nature (ick) likes to
periodically remind us (oh, charming) as to why she's called a 'mother'. ...nngh..." She sighed.
"Surprisingly, though... this has has been a better day than average."
When she came out, tears were running slowly down her face as she held a bundle that had formerly
been her shorts and underwear. "Uhm?"
"Laundry hamper. We'll take care of things. Free of charge."
She dumped the bundle. "I should feel proud. I'm a complete biological woman as of this moment.
It's a rite of passage in some cultures," her voice was quavering and her bottom lip was quaking.
"Some even have a party." She hiccuped a sob. "Oh, I just feel so wretched..."
Hank sighed. "Most of the girls here prefer a pint of Ben and Jerry's 'cookie dough' ice cream, some
painkillers, and an intense bonding session with chocolates and some of the sappier DVDs."
"...but I hate those movieeeeeeessssssss..." Sara whimpered.
Todd gave off staring at his bloody fingertips, wiped them on the sheet, and literally sprang to Sara's
side. "It's coo'... it's coo'... It's gonna be coo', babe. It's okay. Ya don't gotta do nuttin' ya don't want,
a'ight? It's coo'... just please don't cry? I fix it, I swear." _Whoah. Where'd *that* come from?_ "It's
gonna be okay..."
"It's hormones, dear," she quavered. "There's no fixing hormones." Sara clung to him.
"Nevertheless... you're a supreme help."

[1] Back straight, right hand cupped under the left, so that the fingers form a spiral. This linkage is
pressed up against the diaphragm to help the speaker enunciate.
[2] Apparently, [though I've never heard them] the young man from Calcutta is the source of many a
filthy limeric.
[3] Obsedian blades are *WAY* sharper than ordinary scalpels. I can testify that broken edges are
wickedly sharp - having cut myself open on one. I didn't feel it until *after* I'd bandaged it and
mopped up all the blood.
Yes, Sara reads her textbooks. Usually within the first few weeks of the school year. After that, she pretty much has them memorised or - in extreme cases - corrected with pencil.

~

Todd held her close, running his fingers through her hair and anything he could think of that would make her feel loved and safe in his arms. He looked almost more upset than she was. "Helping? What am I doing to help, yo? I ain't doin' nothin' helpful --" he fretted.

"_Todd,_ Xavier sent to him. _Take a deep breath._"

He did, and then he exhaled and felt a bit calmer. _I'm sorry, yo,_ he felt the need to apologize to Xavier. _There's no need to apologize at all, Mr. Tolensky. You're demanding too much of yourself. It really is enough for her that you're there._

_Ha. You've already admitted she needs more help than just me._ Todd returned bitterly. _What do I do? Just screw things up. Sooner or later if not already._

_Yes, she needs help, but you are part of it. She needs people who care about her. You're one of them._ Xavier told him firmly. _Please try to see that you are important to her, Todd. Leaving her would only serve to reinforce the negative ideas she has about herself._

Todd clung tighter to her. _Who said I was gonna leave her, yo?_ he snapped.

_The implication was there, Todd. Under the layer of thinking she'd be better off with someone else?_"~

The amphibian shuddered. Telepaths just freaked him out.

_Well, that's not gonna happen, n'less she wants me to._ He seemed to come back to himself and didn't hang on so tightly. Instead he walked Sara over to the med-table and tried to coax her to sit down.

Hank walked over to Xavier, seeing the worried expression on the man's face. "Both of them have some things to work out," sighed Hank. "Doesn't take mind-reading to see that."

"_Professor!_" chirped Jamie's voice in the man's head, sounding urgent. No real surprise in itself, the boy thought many a thing urgent - particularly when it came to the matter of the remote control being stolen from him when Teen Titans was on. But there was a different sort of urgency to this tone, something was wrong.

_Yes, Jamie?_

_Professor!_ Xavier's thoughts were already tattling. Mr. Lance is on the phone. I tried giving it to Kitty, but she hung up on him and he called back and yelled at me for giving it to her since he was trying to call you and not her. I think he yelled at her too... ummm... he's still on the phone and wants to know where the 'beep' Todd is._ Jamie conveyed.

="/"_Except he didn't say 'beep'. _"Even his *thoughts* were tattling._

Xavier sighed. _I'll talk to Mr. Lance, Jamie. Leave the phone where it is until I tell you I have it._ There was a phone on the wall. He wheeled himself over to it and picked it up. "Hello, Mr. Alvers." Todd winced. "Oh maaaaaaaan," he complained, hiding his face again. "You have some fucking nerve," Alvers growled. Xavier put up his shields to ward off the level of anger rolling off the young man's psyche. It gave him a migraine dealing with stubborn minds. "Bad enough you come around and kidnap Todd's girl once your fancy machine registers her, now you take Todd too? He finally good enough for you now that he's leverage to keep Sara from running?"

"Hardly, Mr. Alvers. Todd insisted on coming," Xavier said, raising a hand against Todd's wave of panic at these words. "He also did not trust the *invitation* we gave Sara to learn about her *options at the Institute*. But that was a distrust based on how he cared for her, whereas you seem to delight in finding us at fault for as much as possible." His voice was calm and cut like paper. Todd whistled lowly.

)Ladeedah, keepin outta *this* one," he sang quietly.

He didn't have to be an amphibian to feel the temperatures drop.

~

"It's been going around," said Lance, remembering the Snowshovel Incident. And the words Kitty
had had to say when he asked for Baldy. It was going to take more than a posy of wildflowers to get over *that* one. "Look. We know how you guys are for busting in on stuff, okay? And Todd... is not well."

"I know," said Xavier. "That's why Sara insisted he see our physician."

_Ohfuck..._ "No shit?"

"I am not a man given to mistruths, Mr. Alvers."

"Do tell him we haven't been locked in any basements," said Sara in the distance.

"Yo, dawg, we a'ight. Chill!"

Lance actually found himself sighing with relief. That was Todd. Nobody else in Bayville could use so few real words. "Just - just tell the little runt to leave a note, next time, 'kay?"

"You're welcome," iced Xavier.

_...ffffuuuuuuuuuuuck..._

Sara had recovered - or at least, been distracted from feeling upset by Forge's gadgetry. One hand was under the macroscope and the other clung tight to Todd while she twisted herself around to see what was going on.

Currently, they were watching her skin grow. The process of ambient radiation magnification and interpretation made her flesh glass on the screen. Translucent hues layered atop one another could be peeled, magnified, or augmented as the case desired. The formation of an entire epidermis was something to watch.

"Oh, they're not really scales, are they? Look," Sara let go of Todd long enough to tweak a control. "See? They're clusters of pigment cells and some *very* interesting muscle fibres. No wonder I'm cramping."

"Ambient heat would aid the both of you, I suspect," said Hank. He left the controls to turn up the heat in the room.

Todd stuck his peeling hand under the reserve screen, looking at the flaking desert of his own hide. "Cool, yo."

"When you children have *quite* finished playing..." said Hank. "I'd like to complete the physical, if I may?"

Sara blushed. "Terribly sorry." She sat in the middle of the machine. Hank adjusted the dials. A standard anatomical view, gathering vital statistics without touching the patient. "Heart good, lungs clear, liver healthy, kidneys healthy, no sign of disease or congenital defects. Loose ligaments, but one expects that in tall ladies... Excellent teeth."

"I just look after them," said Sara.

"Ahem...?" Todd raised an eyebrow.

"Oh. Uh. Thankyou."

"And now to the brain... The good Professor filled me in on your earlier episodes, so..." The screen filled with her skull.

"You can't see my ears on that thing, can you? Mother always says I look like a loving cup with my ears out in the open."

"...(coughbitchcough)..." Todd muttered into his hand.

Hank was beginning to concur. "I assure you, I'm focussing intently on your cerebellum." Ah. Lovely. Plenty of folds and valleys. All the better for the kind of surface area that made a genius. And, Hank was pleased to note, no sign of any kind of mis-wiring. Which meant that her episodes were of an emotional nature. "You'll be pleased to know you're in excellent health. A tad dehydrated, but easily remedied. I'd also recommend a high-protein, high-carb diet while you're undergoing your transition. Only take sugar if you're craving it."

Sara slid out of the machine. "Your turn, dear."

"Do I gotta?" said Todd.

"It doesn't hurt," she soothed. "And it only looks at your insides."

Todd walked into the machine like a man heading for his execution. _This is it. This is where it all
"Oh, *Todd*..." Sara whispered. "Your poor bones..."

He knew what she was seeing. Lumps and bumps on his skeleton. The long-term evidence of a violent past. Green-stick fractures, spiral breaks, shattered long-bones and bludgeoned ribs... he had it all. Even a crack on his head or three. "It's all in the past," he said. "Been an' gone. Nuttin' to be done."

"Someone tried to *strangle* you," said Sara. "You could still press charges."

"He already in jail fo' worse," Todd said, not wanting to look at her face. Seeing her feeling for him, for his past pains, would be too much.

"To misquote a movie, dear, your body is a map of pain."

"Bygones, babe. It's over, now."

"Don't you want the ones who did this put away?"

"Pops is dead," he said, his voice empty. "He ain't hurtin' no-one, now."

A tiny gasp. "*Oh*... I see."

Clever kid like Sara could put it together, Todd knew. She could envision a brutal man who beat his family finding out his freakish son was more freakish than he could have believed. She could see that man flying into a rage... a protective mother, listening to her instincts...

Todd saw it all first-hand again. He'd been just a boy, barely past ten, watching in horror with his hands clinging to the cheap plastic of the kitchen table - as his Mom put a knife into Pops, stabbing again and again until the monster went down.

She might not have been able to divine the next part, where Mom, in a panic, ran the same knife across her throat - afraid of going to jail.

"Mr Tolensky, have you been eating regularly?" said Hank.

"Yeah?" he answered. _If yo' count bugs._

"Odd..." Hank frowned. "You're showing signs of malnutrition."

"That ain't right," he said. "Bugs are pure protein."

"Darling," said Sara. "You can starve to death on just protein. The human body needs other things. Even a *mutant* one."

_In Pietro, you stupid fuck,_ thought Todd. _I'm'a gettin' even all *over* yo' sorry ass._

~~

The house was quiet. Neither Pietro nor Tabitha were home yet, their absence made all the more noticeable by the lack of an annoying kid brother bouncing off the walls. Lance hadn't bothered to apologize before hanging up the phone. He had thumped his forehead against the wall a few times, in some odd form of penance. Making an ass of himself in front of Kitty was bad enough, but it hadn't been justified even toward Xavier.

The man was a little hoity toity for Alvers' taste, but he'd given him a chance in the past. In Lance's mind that equated to deserving a smidgeon of respect. It was also a question of pride. He was the Brotherhood's acting leader, Xavier was the X-geeks'. That made them more or less on the same level, right? That meant some maturity was expected of him as well. And he'd gone and blown it in one moment of anger and panic.

Lance stalked into the kitchen to find Freddy guiltily staring at the food Sara had left behind. "What's with you? Stop moping." He yanked open the fridge and grabbed a bottled water. Water helped make the headaches go away. "There's no way she'd stay over there. Not if Todd's here."

"What if he stays?" Freddy pondered. Lance coughed on his water and had to turn toward the sink and spit part of it out.

"He won't," Lance croaked. "Todd's not going to lose his head over a girl. And Sara's too smart to fight. How bad do you think Wolverine will scare her? He scared Rogue."(1) Both of them winced; as if by speaking the goth girl's name Lance had jinxed all possibility of Sara's return.

Fred put his chin on the table top, his expression making him look for all the world like a noble wolfhound. "I hope she comes back. I wanted to cook her something nice. She's never tasted my
cooking. It's one of the few things I'm good at."

Alvers looked at him thoughtfully, wondering if he was right in guessing that Todd hadn't been the only one who'd fallen for Sara. She paid attention to both of them, was sincere and female. It wasn't as if they could afford to be picky. And Todd had gotten to her first. Most likely because Freddy was shyer. Being open about his feelings had backfired on him in a big way; enough to make him taciturn about them. Todd's openness had and still did backfire on him horribly, but he was too hopeful and too used to pain to be beaten down. Therein lied the difference.

A door slammed open and a whirlwind entered the kitchen, sending plastic cups rolling and paper napkins in a flurry. The fridge opened, slammed, bounced open again to swing out on its hinges. Lance shut it with a growl as Pietro finally became visible. He leaned against the far wall with a sandwich in his hand. "So I heard all about it. X-geeks get the freako, we get free food. Where's Toad? Passed out still?"

"He's over there with her."

Pietro stopped chewing. He stared at Lance and then swallowed. "He's doing what over there exactly?"

"Dunno," Lance said coolly. "Might be that he's just making sure she's okay."

"Christ, she's a meal and a money ticket. I don't know what else he sees in her. Here." Pietro reached into his pocket and pulled out two thin wallets. One was purple and had a silver clasp, the other was blue with green flowers. "Donations from a few admiring fans of mine. About fifty bucks in each one. I can get more. Tell him we don't need her."

Lance snorted in disgust and anger but Freddy lost his temper and stood up, sending the chair crashing and the table to wobbling.

"Ha! Nice one, Blobbo--ACK!"

Fred had moved with surprising speed for his size, hoisting Pietro up by the neck. "Whoa!" Lance cried and stepped forward, trying to think of how to calm the boy down.

"Putmedown!"

"Sara's a friend, not a meal ticket you dumb fuckhead!"

Lance blinked. It was the first time he, or any of them, had heard Fred use the 'f' word louder than a mutter.

"She may not be your friend, but she is my friend - and Todd's and maybe even Lance's! And she didn't have to do all this for us, even after you went and spied on her!"

_Fuck. Is Pietro turning purple?_ Alvers gulped, feeling lost as to what to do. Freddy was really pissed off.

"I oughta pound your face in for all the stuff you've done to her, but she wouldn't like me to do that. She says it's not me an' she's right. So here's something I think I would do." Freddy grabbed the kitchen scissors. Lance flinched and Pietro squealed like a dying rabbit, squirming even harder to get away.

Snip. Snip. Clatter. With a proud smile, Fred let the scissors drop onto the table as two white pieces of hair fell to the ground. Pietro blinked in shock, one hand going up to feel his shorn forelocks that he so carefully swept back and gelled every morning. They were still gelled enough to stick straight up and back, but short and tufted at the end - giving him the appearance of a severely disturbed owl. Lance stared at Freddy, who was still beaming, at the two tufts of hair on the floor, and Pietro's shell-shocked expression. First there was a moment of immense relief that no-one was dead or in need of an ambulance. Then he leaned against the doorway and burst into gales of hysterical laughter.

"Just how long have you been living on only bugs?" Hank asked.

"Um... about two weeks - no wait, had some dinner last night. There were noodles and rice at that place you and me went, Sara." He'd inhaled that stuff in even more quantities than the bugs.

"You've been drinking plenty of water I hope?"

"Yeah, I ain't makin' that mistake twice," Todd assured him. "I thought I'd be okay on just bugs," he tried to explain. "I mean it would've saved food for the others and they wouldn't have had ta worry about one more mouth to feed."
Hank winced and exchanged glances with Xavier. "I take it you've been having financial problems?"
"Word, yo. Way much. Sara saved our necks when she bought groceries."
"I see," Xavier said, raising an amused eyebrow. Todd desperately hoped he wasn't picking up any of the other charitable activities Sara had done for them. "If I may ask, who suggested this dietary tract for you?"

(1) I'm guessing Mystique never really told them she was 'Wolverine' to Rogue, for fear they'd let it slip. And Rogue probably talked about her experience.

Sara raised an eyebrow as she studied Todd's expression. "I think that's a hot subject, Professor," she said. "Almost - savoury... wouldn't you say, dear?"[1]  

For once, old Baldy looked perplexed. "Ex-cuse me?" he managed.
"Ah, it's just a thing, yanno?" Todd babbled. "It's like, 'what's fo' dinner?' 'Eat a bug.' 'When's breakfast?' 'Eat a bug.' After a while, I got tired o' askin'."
"I *knew* I should have steered you towards some of the duck[2]..." said Sara.
"Ain't yo' fault, babe," he breezed. "I didn't wanna touch nuttin' wit' th' flippers still on. It's coo'. I try to get myself some *good* stuff, a'ight?"
"There should be more than 'try' about it, dear. I know some old English recipes, perhaps..." Sara turned to Xavier. "If I may make a mess in your kitchen?"
Gotta love a girl who'd do so much and say it like that...
Xavier had a let's-see-what-happens look on his face. "Yes, of course. I believe Hank needs some time to gather the intelligence tests."

There were some meaningful raised eyebrows between the two elder men.
Todd got a creepy feeling settling over his spine before Sara extracted him from the macroscope. "Come along," she said. "I'll show you how to make clootie dumplings[3]."
"But--" Todd protested.
Her long strides ate up distance. "It's going to be *fun*."
"But--" Now he was hurrying to keep up.
"I *promise* to share the ingestion experience."
"But--" he gasped. "They *up* to somethin'."
Sara stopped and pivoted in one movement, so fast that Todd collided with her. "I didn't sense anything nefarious," she said. "But then, I rarely do..."
Reluctant though he was to let go in a near-hug situation, Todd forced himself to do so. "I don' *think* it was nasty, but... I still think they up to something."
"If they break their word with me," Sara announced, "they only have one more chance."
There was that thing with second chances, again. "What is it wit' you an' second chances, anyway?"
"Everyone and everything deserves one," she said. "Even if they don't always get it." Some ancient sadness shone in her eyes. Sara blinked, and it was gone. "It's just my little way of giving what I don't have."

_Oh yeah. Her Mom..._ His mental camera youthed Sara down to six, just beginning to get her famous height, and watching with tears in her eyes as her own mother disowned her. She had no-one to cry to, at the very moment she was handed the "Best Effort" award - her Mom turned into a dragon. _Ouch._ It hurt him to say it, but he *had* to. "Hey," he said. "Mebbe gettin' in here might give yo' one..."
She smiled warmly as if he'd told a joke. "Come on," she said. "I'll show you how to make mutton and clootie dumplings, and then we'll make vegetable medly fritters."

Meanwhile...
Pietro fingered the frizzy stumps of his bangs and emitted a weak squeak.
"Hey," said Tabby. "I think you broke him."
Lance waved his hand in front of the frozen speedster's face. "Hell-*lo*? Pie? You still in there?" It had ceased being funny when he realized Pietro had apparently not breathed in, yet.
"...huhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." rattled Pietro.
"Wow," said Freddy. "What a wimp. I never got bent outta shape when Tabby gave *me* a haircut..."
"That's because you're ugly, anyway," said Tabby. "I wonder what'd happen if I drew on his face?"
"Don't," said Lance, possibly on automatic.
Pietro breathed in. At last. It was a long, drawn-out inhalation.
"You... *CUT*... my... *HAIR*..." he anguished.
"You were being an ass," said Fred. "So?"
"You *cut*... my *hair*..."
"I'm'a get a soda," said Tabby. "I think he might be a while."
"YoucutmyHAIR*!
"Okay, that one was on normal speed," said Lance. "He must be getting better."
Pietro took another deep breath. The fires of retribution blazed around his soul. "*NOBODY* MESSES WITH THE 'DO!"
"...ohfuck..." squeaked Lance.
Pietro let loose an anguished howl and flew into a blur around Freddy. There was a sound like a woodpecker in a pillow factory on fast forward. "Youfuckingbastard, youcutmyhair! Nobodycutsmyhairbut*ME*! Youfuckingbastard, whydon'tyoufuckingdieyoufatfuck? You'reafuckingbastarddoyouhearne? Afuckingfatbastard!"
Fred, for the record, just stood there. When he judged that he'd heard enough of Pietro the Broken Record, he simply moved his hand to intersect Pie's face.
"You'reafatfuckingprick, youfuckingbas--" {SPLAT}
Freddy lifted him up, and transferred his grip to Pie's shirtfront. "Diss Sara again," he said slowly, "and I'll get the shaver. Understood?"

[1] Sara speaks in code. It's one of her annoying habits.
[2] Duck is very rich food.
[3] Also a very rich food.

~

Pietro went "Awp," and was silent for one very long minute. "You wouldn't," he finally babbled. "It's too cruel. You couldn't."
"I would too," Freddy said, looking more serious and scary than he ever had. "I ain't no barber, but I sheared sheep before. I'll make you look like Daniels."
The speedster's eyes rolled up in a dead faint. Fred held him in midair and blinked, turning him sideways a little to watch his head flop. Tabitha came back with her soda and a permanent marker.
"Now can I draw on him?"

The kitchen wasn't that clean to begin with. Todd found the remains of a bagel and restaurant style cream-cheese containers on the table and there were several dishes stacked in the sink. It still looked yards better than the Boarding house kitchen, but it wasn't the immaculate room he'd been expecting. It felt kind of homy.

Sara tsked at it and immediately began sorting through the mess. Todd gently took her hands away from it. "Leave it, yo. They got kids here who probly get paid to clean up after each other. You'd be messin' wit their system."
She sighed forlornly at the mess and Todd finally gave in and cleared the table while she rummaged for a cooking pot. The pot was filled and set on the stove for boiling, and Todd was hired to watch it while Sara looked through the fridge. There were carrots, celery, and a variety of meats, some pre-marinated and some not, wrapped and labeled in white butcher paper. Sara chose a cut of mutton that
was tender to the touch. An onion was found in the hanging basket near the window.
The only thing needed next was gravy powder, found in the spice cabinet after a short search. Sara
and Todd took turns chopping the onion since the fumes irritated tears from both of them. The water
was boiling gently by the time they'd finished chopping the vegetables. Sara had already added the
mutton to sear it, having to rescue it from Todd who seemed fascinated with poking it, and the gravy
powder had turned the water nice and dark. The vegetables were added last. Sara placed a lid over it
to let it simmer.
"Now," she said brightly, "We can get started on the dumplings."

Todd boggled at the array of ingredients Sara had found. Flour, cinnamon, ground cloves, mixed
spice, all spice, nutmeg, brown sugar, several dried fruits - what the hell was 'suet'? And why did it
come in a mix? Butter and a solitary egg lurked amidst all the spices.
"Whoah," he said. "You an' me got a whole differen' world, babe..."
"Oh? How so?" Sara weighed some flour into a large measuring cup.
"When Mom used t' make dumplin's, she'd just wet the flour down. Nana Kurbalowitz used t' knead
drippin' in 'em. Ain't never heard o' no 'suet'."
"You're probably lucky," Sara weighed out half as much of the suet stuff. It was yellowish and
smelled greasy. "It's basically concentrated fat. The best stuff is harvested from around the kidneys of
cows. They also used to render it for tallow - which made marvellous candles." Sara dumped the
yellow stuff in and proceeded to work it through the flour with her fingers.
"Yo' puttin' yo' *hands* in it?"
"I *did* wash them."
"...ick..."
Sara reached for the spices and liberally added them into the mixture. "You need to rub the suet in to
make it fluffier, dear," She absently patted her hands clean on her pants. "And besides, part of
adulthood is handling things far ickier than processed cow kidney-fat."
"But still..."
"Need I remind you that you were voluntarily poking dead sheep parts, earlier?"
"That was *sheep*?"
"Peculiar, isn't it?" Sara added a liberal dose of brown sugar and stirred the spices in. The kitchen
filled with the finer particles of the stuff and Todd was instantly taken back to Nana Kurbalowitz's
kitchen. All that was missing was the persistant odour of cat pee. Sara continued, heedless of Todd's
recolletion. "Lamb is lamb until it's a year old, then it becomes a hogget - don't blame me, blame
ancient England... a year or two later, it becomes mutton - old sheep. With cows, it's just beef and
veal." She made a hollow in the brownish powders and seized the egg.

{whp--CRK!} Sara's hand was a blur as she neatly broke the shell. Unlike the TV chefs, though, she
preferred to separate it with both hands.

Todd had to smile as she obsessively placed the shell in the biodegradables bin and washed her
hands again. The entire process was hypnotising.

A spoon and a few, deft movements with the butter added some yellow chunks to the middle, and
then she began to stir. She started from the centre, making sure she broke the yolk, and moved
increasingly outwards until the blob in the middle got too thick.

It was something to watch her manipulate a gigantic milk carton so that it delivered a tiny dose to the
bowl.

"Want to stir? You need to get the feel of it." Sara offered him the spoon.
Tentatively, he had a go. "Man, this stuff's gooey," he marvelled. "Ngh... How do you not break
your wrists, yo?"
"Practice." Sara retrieved the spoon and made sure the bowl was free of errant powder. "Next, the
dried fruit of your choice."

_Oooh, the fun part..._ grinning, he grabbed some maraschino cherries, both red and green, the
apricots, and some red stuff that proclaimed to be mango. "Just show me where to put the faces, babe."
Sara giggled. "It's supposed to go all *through* the dumplings, dear. Would you like some nuts as well? It's sort of a protein kicker, I guess."
An evil idea formed as Todd selected the flaked almonds. "These'll do." _And if fuzzbutt steals any, I'll tell him they're bugs._
"Excellent. A handful each should do nicely."
Todd added generous handfuls.
"Marvellous," Sara cooed, folding them in with a touch of extra milk. "This is hideously bad for you long-term, but (oof) I rather suspect it's got everything you need."
"Man, it's like bread dough."
"Exactly. Technically, it's a scone mix, but, the principal is the same. *Traditionally*, we should wrap these up in little cloaks and steam them in the oven, *but*... since I couldn't find any cheesecloth, we'll have to go with plan B."
"What dat?"
"Pop 'em in the soup." Sara grinned. She measured out more flour into a little bowl and laid out a clean tea-towel nearby. "Now the fun part. We take a walnut-dollop," she scooped one out, and plopped it onto the flour, "Flour it lightly, and roll it into a neat little ball. Careful not to knead it. Put the done ones on the towel and we'll put them all in at once."
"Why all at once?" Todd got a glob and tried to follow her actions.
"They go bad if you open the pot in the first fifteen minutes. They need the heat and the steam, you see." Her movements were quick and well-practiced.
Todd's were slow, but he was improving. "These mighty small dumplin's, sweetie."
"They expand like the dickens, though," she said. Fortunately, we have a glass lid for the pot, so you can watch them try to take over the world."
"Narf," said Todd.
They spent the rest of their dumpling-rolling time riffing from _Pinky and the Brain_ until they'd formed a quasi-episode.
Dumplings done, Sara turned up the heat in the soup and added a generous amount of liquid, watching as it came back to the boil. "Beware splashback, dear," she cautioned as they both lifted the towel by the corners. "Ready?"
"Ready."
"Pour!"
They avalanched into the pot. Sara covered it and set a timer for twenty minutes.
Todd got a stool. "Man, they startin' already!"
The kitchen filled with agonisingly delicious odours.

~ ~

Lance sighed and shoved Pietro's body toward Tabitha, who promptly squealed with glee while dragging him off to the living room couch. He dared to poke his head around the doorframe to see that she'd dragged out Todd's case of coloring pens from its hiding place beneath the couch. What was it about Tabby that enabled her to find and abuse other people's sacred belongings? He turned away as she began painting rainbow swirlies on Pietro's face.
"So what now?" Fred asked, having no qualms whatsoever about watching the art show.
"Well, if they're fine... Xavier can't keep 'em there by force. Todd'll come back, he always does. Even if he stays for a while to make sure she's okay, he'll eventually get sick of those losers giving him grief. Joining them for the sake of a girl doesn't work. I've tried," Lance said wryly. "So what we do now I guess, is just wait."
"If anyone hurts them," Fred growled. It wasn't necessary to finish the threat.
"Yeah, I know," Lance smiled. "We'll be ready to kick ass if they need us to. In the meantime, though, we should be trying to take care of other things. Like food." He looked at Freddy
speculatively, in a new light. "Hey, you ever think of becoming a bouncer?"

Kurt really hated American text books. Especially the history ones. Why bother calling it American History? Why not be accurate and call it Patriotically Biased Fiction? The propaganda was blindingly obvious. "Santa Ana gave them several warnings," he muttered to the sheet of paper in front of him. Assigned review questions on his gullibility. Blah. "He told them they would all live if they surrendered." This was an old textbook. It even had a picture of Santa Ana's portrait scowling darkly in the upper right hand corner. "He did not open fire the moment he got in range," Kurt then told the stubborn sentence in the book that stated the opposite. "Even though he had the right to as they were on his property. Mein Gott." He had enough and slammed the book shut. "Can't wait for when they get to WWII. Won't that be a joy."

Kurt leaned back in his desk chair and drew in a long breath. He held it in, because something smelled - Kurt took another whiff - heavenly. And he was hungry from all this forced reading. Kurt pulled away from his chair and ported downstairs to see what was cooking.

He ended up in the hall upwind from the kitchen; sulfur was a rather disconcerting smell when one was cooking. He stalked down the corridor, taking liberal breaths of what was wafting from the kitchen. It was truly heavenly. Kurt sidled up to the wall and peeked around the door. He blinked at the sight of Todd and Sara sitting by the stove, watching a pot of something. Kurt couldn't determine what it was, but he wouldn't be too proud to beg at this point. He hesitated in making himself known, since both their backs were to him, and they seemed at ease in the kitchen more than he could ever have imagined. Or maybe they were just at ease with each other? Watching them helped take his mind off the food. Kurt read them as they waited.

Todd looked thinner than normal and hungry at whatever was simmering - for that Kurt certainly couldn't blame him. He was leaning close to Sara however, not letting hunger distract him from the fact that there was a girl he liked sitting next to him. Remarkable, so that helped dispel the myth of one-tracked minds in the Brotherhood.

Sara was poised and quiet, her body language had a bit of nervousness to it - also entirely understandable. Kurt had to admit, busting into the Brotherhood house to 'rescue' her had probably not left the greatest of impressions. Todd seemed to be the one having a calming effect on her. His brain immediately went back to puzzling over Todd's eerie calmness. Kurt half expected him to be jumping off the walls, demanding to know when the food was ready. With anyone else, he probably would have been - but no, here he was acting mature. Kurt shook his head, unable to get over how weird it was seeing the frog-boy so still.

Stillness and serenity was Kurt's forte (as if he any extra help in getting noticed anyway), just as being loud and abrasive to grab attention of those he liked, was Tolensky's. Todd wasn't even keeping himself entertained with one-liners he was famous for getting himself smacked for.

Kurt smirked. Being in love changed a person, or so it seemed.

~

If there was such a thing as a double-take of the nose, that's what Logan was doing right now. He hadn't smelled that sort of thing in ages. Rich, sweet, and oozing calories just by odour. _Damn, I thought some idiots had *banned* that..._ He stalked upwind, following the scent to the kitchen window. Damn, that smell took him back. Nobody had made that dish in forever. He entered by the back door, breathing the sweetness deep and wallowing in memory.

"Uh. Hello. I don't believe we've been introduced?"

"Logan," said Logan, internally slightly furious that he had to look *up* at a sixteen-year-old girl[1]. "Got enough o' that to go around, Tallwater?"

"I should certainly hope so," she said.

"Yo, those dumplin's're tryin' to climb out, sweets..."

"They do that. Just hold the lid down if they make a spirited attempt."

"Did I hear the word 'dumplings'? I thought Americans banned them," Elf appeared by some
sympathetic magic at one of the other doors. Stinkboy looked - trapped. Tallwater appeared to be vaguely exasperated. "You have..." she glanced at a clock, "seven more minutes until it's ready. Until then, I'm afraid Todd and I will have to defend the pot against random predations."

Elf chuckled and exaggeratedly put his hands in his pockets. "Jawohl, Fraulein. I'm keeping my knuckles out of range."

Logan took the hint from Stinkboy's guarded stance and backed into a handy corner. "I can wait," he said.

Todd was certain that he wasn't showing how nervous he felt. There he was, in the same room as the psycho and the freako... people who'd kicked his ass and then threatened to chop it off in the past. And he had to maintain a more casual and brave front for Sara, who had enough to deal with already.

And then she took his hand in hers and gave him a reassuring squeeze. He looked up at her looking down at him with a reassuring half-smile on her peeling features, and felt the need to explain the subtext. "Us three got a history."

"It doesn't have to repeat," she assured. "Meals can bring people together, you know."

Todd thought of tomato soup and melted velveeta on wonderbread and grinned. "Yeah..."

Sara felt the blush rising as Todd's face got that gooey smitten look. She didn't deserve this much attention, and kept subconsciously waiting for the trap. The catch. The laughter.

The fluttering under her eye wasn't going away on its own. It was subtly spreading. Her entire skin felt like it was shivering by itself and her scalp was crawling as if she were wearing a skull-cap that was making a break for freedom. She was currently, as Nanna Adrien would put it, feeling three colours of miserable.

But the pot was warm, and Todd's presence was even warmer... but any minute, now, Mother was going to wonder where she was. She was bound to be over her hangover, by now.

_Just try to remain calm._ Xavier's voice rang into the middle of her head like a temple bell. _I'm explaining things to her, now._

She got a mental image, like a dream, watching Ororo watching Sara play the harp, Vlad, in the music room... a medly of classical pieces, for which Vlad took a minor nick out of Sara's hand. That was how his staff were supposed to discover her.

The cover story that Mother would accept.

"Truth is a negligible concept around here, isn't it?" Sara wondered aloud.

"Huh?" said Todd.

"Right at this moment, Professor Xavier is lying to my mother--" twitch, "--about where I've been yesterday. Every day, people leave here and give others the illusion that they're nothing but mundane. So long as everyone has a story to tell, everything is seen to be perfect..."

"For the record," said Kurt, "the last time I went out like this in a strange town? I was nearly burned at the stake."

"Well, yes, some lies are understandable, but--"

{tweeeeeeep!}

"--Oh. Dinner's ready." She found large bowls for four and automatically ladled out generous portions. "I've found that there's a limited amount of lies one can perpetuate until the entire house of cards goes flumph." She shrugged and ensured Todd had a bowl and a spoon. "I keep getting the feeling that I'm very close to an edge." Logan snagged a bowl. "I'd relax," he said. "Chuck can make his lies stand up in a court of law."

Kurt, spoon already in his mouth, began to purr.

_Oh, man, I think I'm puttin' on weight from the smell..._ Todd sank into a chair and tried to mimic Sara's daintiness as he got his first spoonful. What greeted his tongue was a surprisingly sweet and
flavourful brew that warmed him up from the stomach outwards.
"...oh *man*..." he sighed.
"Just what the doctor ordered," Sara smiled. "In this case, literally."
They fell to silence as they fell in.
If Todd had needed any further convincing, this meal would have been it. This was the exact degree of comfort and succour he'd needed. And having her by his side was also way more than a little help. How had she known?
"Miss Adrien?" Hank said, appearing in a doorway. "When you've completed your repast, your written tests have been prepared." Sara sighed. "I suppose it's for the best," she said. "You *do* have to know exactly what I'm incapable of."
Todd winced, and squeezed her hand. "It be coo', babe. You do fine."

[1] Logan's short. Marvel Encyclopedia says 5'3"

Sara squeezed back, and chuckled softly. "It's okay. If I disappoint, at least there won't be unpleasant consequences." It wouldn't matter to strangers how remedial she was, so long as she had powers for them to focus on. But it *would* matter to her.
Todd seemed to pick up on this well enough. "Yo intelligent no matta *what* some piece o' paper says. Dunno why people made those tests anyway, s'cept to prove who was better than who." He really wasn't helping was he? Todd cursed inwardly. "I don't know much bout IQ tests. I know it's a lot of stress yo don't need right now," he amended softly. He smiled up at her. "So long as you don't thinka 'bout it too much, I bet you could ace it."
It had a bit of truth to it. Taking a test you were worried about seldom reaped good marks. The worry clouded your mind and answering questions became akin to navigating a minefield blindfolded.
Todd had encountered far too many tests he wasn't prepared for to not know the feeling. On half of them he would have done better had he been less afraid of failing.
"I don't think you 'ace' IQ tests," Sara smiled. "It's more like making a map of your mind, to see where your strengths lie. Pity the poor cartographer of my map. More dumplings?"
Todd looked down at his bowl to find it nearly empty. His stomach was feeling comfortably lined, and he knew better than to eat himself sick because of sudden abundance. He couldn't help a flash of annoyance when the fuzzy bottomless pit held out his clean bowl and attempted to look cute. Logan was rolling his own eyes. "Elf, if you don't watch it, you're gonna be rolling across the Danger Room floor tomorrow mornin'."

Kurt didn't have time to reply as Amara stormed up to him and pounced on his ear. "What is that smell? Did I not tell everyone I'm on a diet? Kurt, how could you try and sabotage me like this?"
"Nein, I didn't cook anything!" Kurt wailed, as Amara attempted to drag him out of the kitchen by his ear, clearly thinking she would remove temptation by doing so.
Todd snickered. "Looks like there's going to be a mob of angry dieters soon."
"Then I suggest we eliminate the evidence." Sara smiled. "Sure you don't want another one?"
Todd couldn't remember having anything quite so good in his life. He could find room for more, the past week considered. Hell, his stomach was practically begging, especially now that the dumplings were on the endangered list. He could hear voices down the hall. "One more, yo, then we'd better split."
"May as well," shrugged Hank, taking one for himself at Sara's offering. "Mmm, oh my stars. There'll probably be at least a minor explosion over who gets the rest of these. And whoever does the exploding is the one that does the cleaning."
In other words, eat fast and leave soon to avoid cleanup duty. Sounded like a plan. There was the sound of a scuffle and several shouting Jamie clones running toward the kitchen. "Oh no you don't, ya little squirts!" yelled Sam, longer legged and yet unable to pass the small army of ten-year-olds.
Hank maneuvered himself swiftly to block the doorway and let the Jamies bounce off him. "One
moment, leave some room so people can get out," he admonished around a mouthful of dumpling.

~

Todd's stomach was a very happy lead weight[1] by now, so he was eager to help Sara sidle out of the ensuing melee.

"Ew... there's like, *meat* in this..."

Todd rolled his eyes. Better that Kitty didn't know about the suet.

"One day, y' mightn't mind so much," said Sam. "But I'll take your share."

And then they were confronted by Jean. "Just *who* had to cook when *I* was on a diet?" she whined. "Just a *taste* is going to go to my hips."

"So resist," said Sara.

"Essel?" Jean looked down. "*Toad*?" She sighed, waving her hands in mock surrender. "I don't even *want* to know what you're doing here."

"Fine," Todd blurted. "Then we won't tell yo'."

Hank was knuckling his way towards their exit, one large bowl held high above the crowd. "Pardon me. Coming through. Hot soup. Watch your step. Ex-*cuse* me..." He breathed a sigh of relief once free of the crowds. "Are you all right, miss Adrien?"

"I should be more like her and she doesn't even know who I am," Sara marvelled, staring after Jean. "When it comes to miss Grey and diet-breakers, I'm shocked she could recognise *anyone*," said Hank. "I've set up a quiet room, in which there are several tests. They range upwards in difficulty, and the percentage of trick questions."

"Oh dear," muttered Sara.

"I have utmost confidence in you, miss Adrien. I've long suspected you conceal hidden depths... and now I have an opportunity to fully plumb them, as it were."

Sara blushed.

"Just keep coo', yo. You do fine."

"I wish I shared your confidence, dear," said Sara. She had to be stressed. This was one of the very few times when she didn't correct his grammar.

Sara wiped her palms on the knees of her borrowed track pants, re-read the instructions on the board, and opened the first question book.

_A train leaves Denver travelling at 30mph..._

"K-I-S-S, R-T-F-Q," she mumbled, showing all her working and trying desperately not to over-think the problems. This was the one with the fewest trick questions, so she had to keep things simple. She sighed, halfway through the first book, and stared briefly at the camera. Did it help or hinder to know that both Dr McCoy and Todd were watching her in another room?

"Hm! Just as I thought. Trying to conform with the classes as taught, but here--" he

"Keep It Simple, Stoopid," Todd supplied. "'S what it stands fo'." He watched Sara rub her scalp and walk through the problem at hand. "You can do it, babe. Keep at it."

"Kiss?" McCoy pondered.

"This certainly explains a great deal," murmured McCoy. "She's actually making an effort to *restrain* herself from thinking... Amazing."

"Huh?"

The big blue guy smirked. "You've never seen the backs of Sara's school notebooks, have you? I've had that chance, once or twice... Your young lady is more than a diamond in the rough. Ah! Here we go."

Sara, on the monitor, slipped both question paper and answer book into a slot at the front of the room, then got the next question sheet. McCoy opened a little hatch and began examining her answers. "Hm! Just as I thought. Trying to conform with the classes as taught, but here--" he
indicated a page of working that Sara had crossed out. "Genius shines through."
"She crossed that out, yo. It don't count... don't it?"
"I've always found miss Adrien's obliterated answers to be far more educational than the ones she judges to be acceptable." McCoy looked through the book for more. "Our dear lady does like to hide her light in a bushel..."
Todd snorted, watching her work through the second book. "Shyeah. I love her, but she can't take a compliment if yo' gift-wrap it." Was it him? Or was she working faster?
Nope. She stopped cold.
"Question thirty-seven, I presume." Hank smirked. "The one problem that remains the same in every question book."
"It's a trick question all along? That ain't fair!" His poor sweetie...
"It's the trick question to beat all trick questions," he grinned. "And the trick is, that it's carefully calibrated. No two people would be able to answer it the same way. The *trick*, dear boy, is in *how* the testee answers."
"She's gonna make you her hobby when she finds out, yo."
"For a brief while, perhaps." Hank shrugged. "But I suspect she'll thank me in the long run." He retrieved the second answer book and flipped ahead to question thirty-seven's answer. "Intriguing... She's answered it a different way."
Todd looked at the two answers to the same question. It was mostly gibberish to him, but he could pick out the diverging point. He thought of Sara chaneling her mother and shuddered. "I've seen her - Idunno - *be* someone else, once... Would this--?"
"No. Sara always answers as Sara. Her -ah- somewhat spooky impressions have little to do with this..." he tapped the page. "I might have to make her *my* hobby..."
Todd decided to steer the conversation away from anything that involved Sara under a microscope.
"Yo, how do you know about th' impressions?"
He grinned. "I was late to meet her, one afternoon, after school. She was entertaining her -ah- contemporary. That gossipy Wiltshire girl."
Oh. *Her*. *I don't care what Sara says, I'm'a fuck her up one of these days._ "Yeah. Met her."
"You sound rather less impressed than I was," Hank sounded mildly shocked that such a thing was possible. "Sara, however, managed to solidly 'nail' me. I could not, in all good conscience, contain my applause."
Todd could just picture that. McCoy, in his pre-blue body, entering with cheery 'bravo's. Sara's resultant shriek and blush... and possibly what Janine's blabby mouth would turn it into. Maybe he should sneak a few dead rats into *her* locker. See how *she* liked it.
Sara *was* working faster... but the things she was doing to her *face*... Her tongue slid out of her mouth and her face slackened to such a point that she looked moronic... except the eyebrows, which drew down in a frown.
She paused after the latest question to rub her head again, and wound up peeling skin from her hair until a whole piece dangled over her back. *I am *so* glad I don't shed that bad._ Todd thought. "She's gotta be in pain," he said. "But she don't look like she's feeling it."
"Possibly distracted by the task at hand," McCoy reassured. "You'll note that she doesn't -ah- groom until she's finished a problem?"
"Yo, if that's all it takes, I'm'a ask her word math problems 'till my throat goes dry."

Last book. Most trick questions. Sara made a point to prove her proofs backwards and forwards. Question thirty-seven was the same one as for all the others.
_*Shit!_
There was no way to take the others back. No do-overs. She just had to soldier on. Keep going. Do Todd proud.
Love *was* a powerful thing.

[1] Mutton and clootie dumplings tends to fill one up with surprising haste.
Her scales had gone greyish again, indicating, Todd hoped, that Sara was unwinding from prior stresses and not - he feared - that she was building up some more of them.

Todd offered his hand for her to hold. Sara used it to reel him in for a near-bone-crushing hug and an episode of trembles.

_Aw *shee-it*... "S gonna be okay, babe. Yain't gonna fall."

A breath like a sob. "...thank you. I needed that." Hot tears melded with a delicate kiss to his neck. "I want to beg, whimper, plead and whine my way into a do-over," she whispered. "It's like a compulsion or something. Or conditioning. Resistance is... wracking."

Todd tried to rock with her, but the height difference between them was starting to do some wracking things to his back. "Let's siddown, 'kay? I think yo' gonna be surprised when shaggy, over there, gets done."

Sara kind of flopped into her seat, negating their remaining height-difference by slouching. Her fingers twitched, playing invisible harp strings. "I'm so used to do-overs," she confessed. "One fails, one tries again until success is achieved. I didn't *know* it was a trick question."

"It hurt like hell when I found out, yo. 'S part of th' test, to see *how* yo' answer, not *what* yo' answer."

Sara frowned, lost at the concept. "What sort of a question is *that*?" she wondered. "If it doesn't have a right answer, why is it there?"

"To examine your methods, of course," said Hank. He'd surfaced from his reading and still bore the pince-nez spectacles[1] on the bridge of his nose. "It's easy to tell that you have never been educated in the field of higher mathematics," Sara focussed intently on her knees at this, "but the way you've come so *close* to established formulae is remarkable. With just a little aid and attention, I have no doubt that you would be undertaking some university courses by next year, at the latest."

Sara's head came back up. "I beg your pardon?"

"You are a *very* intelligent young lady," Hank clapped her warmly on the shoulder. "At the very least, I would estimate your IQ to be somewhere above one-eighty... but that is an extremely conservative estimate."

Todd glowered at him. _If you break her, I'm'a kill yo',_ he thought.

Sara's head tic'd 'no' as her scales drained to a dull yellowish hue. "But I'm in Remedial *Ed*..."

"Genius, my dear Miss Adrien, rarely conforms to standardized testing. Many a bright spark has been discovered languishing with the bottom-feeders... in fact, the many behavioural demerits in your permanent record are quite the red flag."

"I think..." Sara murmured, "...I think I have to talk to Gladys."

"By all means," Hank released them both with an upturned palm. "Go de gauss."

Upstairs, Professor Xavier exited from his office and possibly the most exasperating telephone call of his life. "That woman," he announced to the waiting Logan, "is an absolute *harridan*."

"That bad, eh?" Logan knew that it took a great deal for the Professor to insult anyone. "Forty-five minutes," he said, rubbing his head. "Forty-five minutes *straight*... of haranguing, harassing, and otherwise muck-raking of Miss Adrien's past sins, real or imagined - and she didn't even pause for *breath*!"

Logan's eyebrows raised at the thought. "Y'know... I think I saw a Scold's Bridle in one o' the basements..."

Xavier thought *very* hard about the idea for five seconds too long. "No. Tempting... but, no. I fear it would fail to teach her anything." He sighed. "I'm afraid I'll have to settle for the best therapy I can find for Miss Adrien."

"Kid's gonna need years of it," said Logan.

[1] I loved Hank with pince-nez specs
Todd was certain he only began breathing again when Sara's usual colour returned. In fact, he was almost to the point where he'd rather cut off his arm than interrupt her, but she needed to look after herself.

"Feelin' better?" he asked when she slowed.

"A little. I don't think the shock's entirely hit me, yet..."

"You need t' drink somethin'," _An' so do I..._ His own thirst was threatening to turn his tongue into sandpaper. And, just as he reached for her hand, one of the X-geeks entered.

Scooter. One-eye. Better known as Scott Summers, the boy every girl on the planet seemed to lust after. He carried a tray of bottled water and sport drinks. "Hank said you might be needing these," he said, setting the tray down. He then emptied his pockets of many, brightly-wrapped bars. "An' these. Kurt swears by 'em as an emergency stash. And *his* metabolism's a furnace."

Sara the social chameleon was remarkably guarded and almost - hostile. "My thanks," she said, cool to the point of growing hoarfrost.

Todd sensed raising hackles, and so did Wonderboy, who backed hastily out of the room. "Yo, what up?" Todd wondered. "I thought he was th' golden boy, far as the ladies were concerned."

"I've had the misfortune of catching a Senior's eye, previously. It did not end well." Sara cracked open a scientifically-approved bottle of bluish liquid and gracefully knocked back the entire litre.

"Do you recall the movie, _Never Been Kissed_?"

"Yeah, guess..." He shrugged, having caught the edges of it when Tabby had control of the TV. Pietro, he remembered, had cried like a little girl in some parts. Tabby had laughed at it.

"The scene with the egging?"

_Oh crap. I think I know where this is going..._ Todd, horrified and unable to stop himself, nodded.

"Imagine it re-enacted with dog feces replacing the eggs. And with four Seniors doing the propelling. Nothing was done." She delicately peeled a bar and took a savage bite. "Apparently, it was an annual practice. I was informed that I was lucky I was plain. Prettier freshmen are allegedly raped. En masse."

Todd had just moved into Bayville at the time, finishing up middle school by mail. The incident had been relegated to a half-minute piece in the "In other news" section right before the weather and sign-off. Mystique had been pissed off, naturally, because it happened to and amongst *her* students; but reprimand and punishment by her was moot, since the Prom happened at the end of the school year. "Goddamnit, I'm startin' to *hate* our school, yo."

"I had considered filing a lawsuit," Sara finished the bar and began on a bottle of water. "Mother insisted that I'd be lucky to redeem the bill for dry-cleaning. She said there were no possible emotional damages, as she'd warned me from the start. My own fault, for not listening." Sara offered him a spectacularly vivid yellow sports beverage.

Todd drank until his air ran out. "No offense meant, babe," he panted, "but yo' mom is a harpy."

"A dragon, certainly," she agreed. "A gorgon, perhaps... But she never swears." Sara paced, rubbing at her peeling skin. "She never hit me, you know."

Faint praise, indeed. _In the unlikely event of my havin' kids,_ Todd thought, _I never want a plus point o' theirs to be 'he never hit me', when they get t' talkin'._ "Din't stop her tearin' yo' up wit' her tongue," he said.

~

"Ah. Jean."

Jean Grey froze when she heard the Professor's voice. She could sense that he wanted something from her - a useless intuition, given the tone of his voice - but his shields wouldn't permit further prying. At times like this, she really missed the Norms. They rarely had any kind of shielding. She turned and put on her best smile. "Yes, Professor?"

"We need to have a talk about your night exercises."

Crud. _"It's not as if I need them,"_ she argued. _"I'm fine."

He sighed, entering her room and gently closing the door. "Jean... I have very good reasons for
insisting you continue with them."
"But I don't *need* them," she said. "I can sleep fine, now."
"As long as you're alone, or in the same room as someone you're familliar with," he said.
"But they're *bo*ring," she whimpered, striking at the heart of the real reason. "They keep me awake more than they actually help me sleep anyhow."
"They wouldn't do that if you kept practicing," Xavier insisted. "And these comfortable circumstances," he waved a hand at her room, "are not going to last forever. You *will* find yourself in a situation where you *wish* you had not ignored my counsel, Jean.
"I'm not ignoring, I'm debating," she said. "And I can't think of a single situation that I couldn't teek myself out of, anyhow. The point's *moot*, Professor."
"If you truly think it is," he said. "I shall have to leave you with the consequences of your inactions."
_What. Ever._ Jean thought.
_Your day shields need work, too._ his thoughts entered her mind without so much as a twitch.
_You're better than bare minimum, Jean._

They'd come to rest in the window seat, watching the sky turn colours with the evening. The companionable silence between them was warm.
Todd personally felt that he could spend forever in this one, perfect moment. It was just right. Sara was calm, happy, and wrapped lovingly around him. She wasn't twitchy, itchy, or otherwise uncomfortable... just enjoying the moment with him.

A soft whir heralded Xavier.
"Good afternoon, Professor," said Sara, only turning her head to look. "I do hope you don't mind us being comfortable."
"Not at all." He smiled amiably. "Have you come to any decisions?"
"Your facilities are remarkable," she said. "Some testing methods - unnerving..." Sara looked over to the harp. Weighing it in the balance, perhaps. "No doubt, if I attempted to strike out on my own, I'd make some kind of botch out of it."
Todd gripped her hand and kissed it, holding it against his cheek. His thoughts were a circle. _Don't think like that. It hurts both of us. Please don't think like that..._
"I'm afraid I'm largely unhinged by - of all things - an IQ test. One hundred and eighty... My weltenschaung is thoroughly shattered... not stupid. Just - inopportuned. The colours of her scales shifted. "I'll need a method of concealment. This..." she examined her hand, "...will not do. And short of a truckload of expensive makeup material, I... quite fail to see how else I could blend." Sara sighed. "Remaining here... is a logical choice."
And how little she considered herself in that choice. Todd tried not to wince.
"I do hope it's a choice," said Xavier. "I will do everything I can to help."
"Todd?"
He half-turned in his place. "If nuttin' else, yo' get away from yo' mom fo' a while."
"Yes. Change equals holiday. And I feel in sore need of a vacation."
Todd hugged her arm, feeling a profound sense of loss. He'd see her, but she'd be leaving his orbit by slow degrees. He knew. X-geeks and the 'hood didn't mix.
"Will Todd be allowed to visit?" asked Sara. "Or any of my friends?"
_Not Janine,_ thought Todd. _Not Janine. Yo' don' need her..._
"Of course," he breezed. "Anyone comfortable with coming here, can. We - just prefer advance notice."
"Quite understood," said Sara. "Professor?"
"Yes?"
"What happens now?"

Well, at least she'd mastered the art of asking perplexing questions. "Therein lies a problem," said Charles. "Your mother... didn't exactly give me much of a chance to inform her of the opportunity you've been given."

"Why th' hell we need her fo'?" said Todd. "Sara's sixteen, yo. She can run off an' go somewhere new any chance she likes. All legal-like." A brief vision of a white picket fence keeping a small horde of lizard-frog children safe flitted through his mind.

...and echoed in Sara's. "You know... that might just work. I can call Ray. He and the staff have always been - helpful." _And why not?_ "You and Jean can run interference and explain the van away whilst we move all my junk. It's perfect. Would you like to come along, dear?"

Todd practically glowed under the influence of the invitation. "He'p you outta th' lion's den? Fo' *sure*, yo."

"And while we're occupied," said Charles, a firm lesson forming in his head, "Logan and Hank can prepare your room."

Sara had thrown a hoodie on, and fiddled with a pair of work gloves. "On or off?" she wondered aloud.


"This can't be right," Jean was murmuring. "We're heading into Snobby Slopes."

Todd snorted at the nickname. "Yes. I guess we are." She grinned like the cat that had found a canary in the cream.

"Most of it's empty space," dismissed Sara. "The how and why of flaunting one's heating bill. Amongst other things."

"You *been* in some o' these?"

"Dear... as you would say - this mah hood, yo."

"Yo, that's just scary."

Sara giggled. At least until she spotted a small convention of matching pink SUVs clustered in a curved driveway. "Oh *no*..." she moaned. "Mom's called a *pow-wow*..."

"*Pardon*?" said Jean.

"Whenever she's in crisis mode, Mom calls in all her relatives for unnecessary counselling. And since it's now after school... there's a high risk of *cousins*.*"

Todd felt his stomach sink. "Somethin' tells me they ain't like you."

"No," said Sara. "They're not. Have you seen _Village of the Damned_ and _The Stepford Wives_?"

"*Oh*." Todd shuddered. "Ick."

"Could you park at the side? That way, Todd and I can nip 'round to the back without a fuss, and you won't get boxed in by Soccer Moms."

"Interesting," said the Professor. "Not many people in this area have had ramps installed."

"And not many people spot *ours*," said Sara. "Good luck with the gorgons, and try not to let them pinhole you about fashion versus style." She opened up the back doors and bailed out.

Todd followed, keeping up with her eager steps at a light jog. "Yo, I knew yo' were loaded, but... *day-umm*, yo."

"Didn't you know? The Adriens are Old Money from Boston. Dad only built here 'cause Mom wanted to be close to her family." She waved at a distant figure on a ride-on lawnmower, who startled, and then waved back. "That was Henry Basilton. He and Mom have had a low-grade war about the gardens since day one... sometimes, I think he only stays on to stop her from taking over."

"He does excellent work," said Todd.

Sara braked at a door and rapped on it. {tap tap tatap tap}

"Two bits," murmured Todd.

Sara grinned.

"Sara! Hola!" The slightly rounded Mexican-American opened her arms wide.
"Consuela!" Sara did the same. They embraced. "Todd, this is Consuela StMartinez. Consuela, Todd Tolensky... my boyfriend."

Todd's heart exploded in happy fireworks. He didn't even know what he was babbling until he realised he'd slid into Spanish.

"[You've found a good one, to be so polite in *here*.]"
"[I'm as surprised as you are,]" said Sara, also speaking Spanish. "[Todd, you didn't tell me you were bilingual.]"

"Never came up," he blushed. "Gotta be good at *somethin*, yo."
"[Ah, we make him *shy*.]" Consuela embraced him and kissed his forehead. "You will be good for her. I approve."

And somehow, this was a better blessing than anything from her biological mother. Todd floated along as they wound through a maze of back passages and corridors.

"Hetty started packing your books the minute Ray told us," said Consuela. "We'll be sad to see you go, miss Adrien."

"I'm not exactly sorry *to* go... I mean, away from *Mom*. I'll miss all of you."

Consuela looked around for errant spies. "Ray mentioned something else," she whispered. "A big change for you?"

"Yeah," Sara eased her hood back a little. "I'm a mutant... and I'm growing scales. Well... sort-of scales."

Consuela hissed in sympathy. "Ouch... Mi niña pobre... You need all the rest you can get. Which means we get you out of here."

"Bless you, Consuela."

Hetty turned out to be none other than the British exchange student, a senior who looked startled to be sharing the same room with Todd Tolensky.

Sara pulled her hood as far forward as it could go and thanked the girl profusely for her help.

"Go downstairs," said Consuela, catching the vibe. "They'll be wanting the finger-food and drinks, soon."

"Yes'm," Hetty bolted.

Sara stepped over a few boxes to greet what looked like a ginger tribble in a plastic tube. "Hel-lo Chuckie," she cooed. "Did 'oo miss mommy?" The apparent tribble unfurled into a hamster and scurried through the tubing to a little hatch. "Aw, yes 'oo did..." She fed him an apple chip and smiled at Todd. "This is Chuckie the Wonder Hamster. Sort of a science project leftover, if you will."

She told the story, how her previous year's class had had a female hamster, who then gave birth to a small crowd of baby hamsters, and subsequently abandoned them. How the entire class banded together - for a change - to save the tiny lives, naming them after characters from Rugrats in the process of nurturing them. And how she discovered that the otherwise intelligent creature was agorophobic.

Todd had never seen a healthier rodent. Chuckie practically gleamed. And Sara had invested a great deal of money into making him comfortable, as he could see from the wide assortment of rodent tubing, toys, and the hand-crafted cardboard 'kennel' in his fishtank home.

"But enough jibber-jabber. We need to get moving before Mom twigs."

(1) My poor little girl.

~

Meanwhile, Jean and Professor Xavier were discovering that Sara rarely joked when talking in shorthand.

The assembled group of women were caught in the middle of a makeover party. Some were curling their hair while others were straightening it. Most wore some kind of facial pack. All glared at the interlopers as if, at any instant, their eyes would start glowing red.

"Terribly sorry to intrude," soothed Xavier. "But we weren't able to conduct a proper conversation..."
on the telephone. I thought, perhaps, if I bought a student representative of my school, it might allay some of your--"_bitching_"--concerns."

"Hi Mrs Adrien," Jean was uncertain which of these gargoyles was which, so she pitched to the assembly. "I'm Jean Grey, one of the Seniors at Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, and--"

"Jean *Grey*," sang a brunette in a pink power suit. "I read *so* much about you in the local news." She stood and took her hand. "You must make your parents *so* proud."

Actually, I scare the living crap out of them_, Jean thought behind her polite rictus. _But that's not a point I'm going to bring up in *here*._ Instead of verbalising a lie, however, she just laughed. Party Laugh number five, which meant, "I'm laughing politely because I haven't got anything nice to say." She rallied admirably, though, and continued from where she left off. "And we'd like to have your Sara join us. Along with her skill with the harp, we've discovered she has a very high IQ--"

"Unless that stands for *idiot* quotient," iced Mrs Adrien, "I find that very hard to believe."

Hetty Smith, replete with a maid's outfit, toured the room with petit fours. "Excuse me, m'm," she said, pretending Jean wasn't there. "M'seur Marchants is very upset. Apparently, someone has ordered *pizzas*, m'm."

"Just take them down to the game room and tell M'seur that boys will be boys[1], and I will compensate him adequately for any distress he's experienced."

"Yes'm." Hetty bobbed and withdrew from the room.

If Jean knew Hetty, the news about Jean Grey visiting Sara's house would be all over the school before the hour was out. Well, Jean had even better ammunition if she *did* blab, and that was *how* Hetty found *out*. "Mrs Adrien, it's very easy for a genius to be misidentified as a troublemaker. I, myself, had a similar problem," _Although *my* problem wasn't helped by hearing what other people thought..._ "When I was much younger, of course. Professor Xavier now has trained staff who can spot a -er- troubled youth and recommend testing." _Is it me, or am I talking *really* fast?_

_It's excusable_, 'said' the Professor. _I had trouble getting a word in edgewise, too._

Mrs Adrien, however, was somewhat rocked by the news that Jean had had 'trouble' in her early life. 

*"You*... were misidentified?"

Jean laughed. Party Laugh number three, "It's funny now, but it sure as hell wasn't funny *then*," "Oh yes," she said. "I was very withdrawn and moody, a situation not helped by the death of a close friend. I was bored with schoolwork and because of my depression, I began to ignore it. My grades slipped startlingly."

Fortunately," Xavier smoothly entered into the conversation, "I was performing a study on intelligent youths and why their grades were sometimes - erratic. I was able to help Jean overcome her difficulties and put her on the best path for her learning."

_I suddenly feel like I'm on a platter with parsley in my ears_, _'said' Jean. _"Here's one we prepared earlier..." Thanks a bunch, Prof._ "Everybody's been very pleased," she said with Party Laugh number eight, "Little miss humble."

"Tell me, Professor," said Mrs Adrien. "Could you work a similar miracle with my *daughter*?" Interesting, how she used that word as an epithet.

More tiny morsels were passed about by an older maid, thus distracting the room from three people carrying boxes down an adjacent hallway. Sara, Todd, and Ray, in that order.

"I have no doubt that Sara will shine," he said, "once given a fair chance."

"And -ah- how *foolproof* are your testing methods?" asked a co-gorgon. "One hundred percent," chirped Jean. "The IQ test is just one of many that we use in order to ascertain if a student is gifted._ And one of them is called the X-gene. If you don't have it, you don't get in._ "We're very exclusive."

Another gorgon spoke. "Still, one can't help but hear things about some of your - alumnus... That Wagner boy, for instance. Always acting up." She pronounced it incorrectly as 'WAG-ner'. Therefore, Xavier stressed the correct pronunciation when he spoke. "Kurt *Wagner* is battling a relatively high number of concurrent stresses. He's coping with a new culture, a new language, a
new routine *and* a lot of new faces, all at the same time." He tented his fingers. "I challenge any of you to move to a different country and continue in a similar vein without - some kind of trouble. And yet Mr Wagner is adapting marvellously well."

There were general murmurings along the lines of, "What do you expect - he's *foreign*," amongst the gorgons.
"How much does this exclusive school of yours cost?" said Mrs Adrien. "And more importantly, can I sign some contract that guarantees her stay will last for two and a half more years?"
"Is it a boarding school?" said a fellow gorgon.
"We prefer our students to live on the premises, so yes, it is a boarding school. As for the cost... whatever you feel comfortable with donating is *fine*." He smiled benevolently and 'pushed' a thought into Mrs Adrien's mind. _Give the man some money._ went the meme. _He's taking that girl off your hands._
"I suppose it couldn't hurt to cut a cheque," she mused. "Just to defray a few costs."
"Anything you donate is fully tax-deductable," Jean added. _God, how could someone so rich be so tight-fisted?_
_One of the mysteries of life, alas._

[1] The official policy on any male wrongdoing in Sara's mother's side of the family.

~

"And the books are *done*," crowed Sara. "Now for my clothes, computer, tchotchkes, hamham, and sundry other bits and pieces. And Eileen."
"Yo' takin' *everythin'*, ain't'cha?"
"Well, I'm not moving my makeup-slash-film lab. That'd take three trucks and I'm *sure* the Professor wouldn't approve."
"Yo'*amazin'*," he said appreciatively. "C'mon, let's book." He turned, only to find his way blocked by what could only be described as a bubbly blonde.
"Sara Louise, I knew it was you," squeaked the girl. She held her arms stiff, but bounced about in such a way as to make Todd search her shoulders for signs of a wind-up key. "My mom said your mom's been feeling *poorly*."
Sara's shoulders drooped. "Hello, Cricket," she said. "What are you doing outside after dark?[1]?"
"Oh, I came by to see why you were sneaking around and all," she chirped. "Are those going to Goodwill?"
"They're certainly going to *someone's* good will," said Sara. "Please, Cricket, I don't have time to dally." She began walking, taking Todd's arm in a firm grip and hustling him along.
Cricket bounced in their wake. "But I have to tell you my good news! I'm going to be working with the Junior-year cheerleaders! Isn't that *fantastic*?"
"And I owe it all to my mom buying me those special silicone bra-stuffers! It's always okay if you just need a *little* help!" Her platinum curls bounced when she did as she followed them inside.
"Everyone uses them, these days!"
"Cricket..." Sara sighed. "Can you please quiet down? My mom shouldn't be disturbed when--"
"Your *mother*," said a creature that could only be Mrs Adrien herself. "Is *already* disturbed. Why are you creeping around through the *servants'* entrance? Who is this young man? And *what* sort of perverted ideas are you selling to poor young Cricket?"
Todd saw Sara's face fall. He could read that expression all too well. _Oh *crap*..._

[1] I can just hear Sara thinking, _There goes the theory about hidden solar cells._

~

There is no feeling as bad as encountering someone or something that one has been attempting to
avoid.
Sara imagined that, if the helmsman on the Titanic knew the ship's fate as the iceberg gently bumped along her side, he would have felt the sick, sinking trepidation that Sara felt now.

No matter what happened, there was going to be a disaster.

One hand reached out, unbidden and spasmodic, for Todd's. He squeezed back.
"Well?" said Mom. "Aren't you going to be feeding me lies about how you weren't doing anything or saying anything? Or are you just going to stand there like a landed fish and prove how much your so-called IQ is pure cock-and-bull? I don't know how much or how badly you cheated, young lady, but you can *bet* I will find *out*!"

"I was just shifting some things out," murmured Sara. "I didn't want to be a bother."
"You were a bother on the day you were *born*, little *miss*! From the moment you started in my *womb* you were a bother! I don't even know why I *tried* to have you! And STOP THAT TWITCHING THIS INSTANT! Do you want other people to *see* you like this?"

Cricket had fled. Todd remained as her lifeline.

"N-nnnnn..." damn stammer. Damn twitching. And bother Xavier for telling her not to box them up.

"Nnnnnn..."

"Jean *Grey* never had trouble like this! Jean *Grey* is a *good* daughter! Even when she was in dire straights, she stood out from the crowd and landed herself a *scholarship*! Jean *Grey* has *always* been a good girl! She never caused half as much trouble as *you*. Why can't you *do* something with yourself? Why can't you accomplish anything? *Why* are you holding that street punk's *hand*?"

Jean Grey did, despite what Mrs Adrien thought, have vices. One of them was being almost fatally curious. Therefore, she'd excused herself to powder her nose, and followed Mrs Adrien to see where she was going.

And now she got an earful.

It was always said that evesdroppers never heard any good about themselves, and it was partially true, here and now. Hearing her name thrown like a weapon, accompanied by the whimpers and moans of Sara, was an ugly, ugly thing.

_I never knew I was an instrument of torture..._ She stepped into the room, clearing her throat and pretending she'd been deaf. "Excuse me?" In a literal flash, Mrs Adrien was cloyingly sweet and kind-natured again. "Something I can help you with, dear?"

"I'm afraid I'm a little lost," she lied. "Can you show me where the ladies' room is?" she added Party Laugh number one, "Aren't I a little silly?"

"Of course, sweetie." Mrs Adrien took her arm. "*This* way."

Jean smiled winningly in the grip of an urban monster. _This must be why they like *pretty* virgins in their sacrifices... to distract them while the heroes can rally their forces._

Ray hustled them into the kitchen, appologised to someone called M'seur Marchants, and made a quick hot chocolate for the both of them.

"Sorry you had to see that," Sara whimpered. She shook violently as she sipped her drink.

"Yo, I wouldn't be no good boyfriend if I left yo' t' face a Dragon alone." Todd found he had more than a few trembles himself. "Y'know, some o' the ole ones from legends spat poison?"

Sara laughed. "Apt. Oh, so apt." Her breath shuddered in and sighed out. "I am *so* glad I'm leaving her."

"Yeah. Change is holiday." Todd hugged her. "It be cool, yo. You get better wit'out no poison Dragons aroun'."

"Oh God," Sara whimpered. "I just realised I owe Jean Grey a favour... What do you do for the girl who already has everything going for her?"

"A week free of Toad slimin's?" he grinned. "I can make up a li'l certificate..."

Sara giggled. "Your sweet, dear, but this is my debt to pay. I'll find something, anon."

"And meanwhile," said Ray, "we have to *get* on."
"And on, anon, anon," joked Sara. "I'll pack, you boys ferry. If anyone asks, Todd's a friend from school."

"Hey, yo. We share Biology class, a'ight?" he grinned.
The joke worked. "Oh yes. That would work. You my bad boy." She kissed his cheek. "Come, love. Away, away..."

~

Some things were easy. Underwear drawer, take out and tip wholesale into box. T-shirt drawers, remove and follow a similar plan. Four or five times. Squish, seal, stack. Onto the next box. Socks, nighties, dressing gown, towelling robe... and from her wardrobe, three long garment covers, where her work clothes - the only three dresses she used - usually rested. Lather, rinse, repeat. Her hidden workbooks - essential for her sanity and sorted by date - went under a pile of toys from atop Vincent. One box held nothing but cables.

Another box contained some of the more resilient and smaller Vincent-bits, whereas the monitor and case would just go along wholesale.

Ray picked up her Lost Hope Chest.

"Oh, and when you get down there, again, could you make sure Eileen can get aboard?"

"It's going to be a tight squeeze, miss."

"I'm easily capable of fitting myself into small spaces," she smiled. "I compact rather well."

Ray gave her his patented I-didn't-think-that-was-very-amusing-and-neither-should-you glare, mixed with a dash of exasperation. But then again, he'd been the one who had to come to school and extract her from the desk cupboard in question.

Next on the list of movables - Chuckie. He would travel with her in his hamster ball, that was the easy part.

The hard part was packing his warren, his toys, and the sundry other hamster paraphernalia.

Especially without squashing his little kennel in the process.

And after she solved that particular problem, she'd have to disassemble her shelves.

Yike.

No wonder the process of moving house was as traumatic as a death in the family.

~

Professor Charles Xavier had been in awkward conversations, before, but this one had turned almost embarrassingly painful when the assembled women had realised he was both Old Money and *single*. Quite a few of them - and he was certain because of his telepathy - were toting up the time and expenditure necessary for a divorce so they could outdo Jaqueline and wed a millionaire.

Jaqueline Adrien, of course, had already married a millionaire, and actually loved her husband with a kind of brutal competitiveness.

Love, for all these women, was a competition.

He could see the pattern with the varying daughters. Girls who excelled at their mothers' rather limited set of high standards were praised and groomed for higher goals. And as for the 'failures'... he'd seen what 'failing' had done to Sara. And the peculiar dynamic of the entire -well- tribe seemed to be that love was only available for one person at a time.

Sara had obviously been taught to have a more encompassing heart by her father's side of the family... but in her mother's eye, she was a rival.

At around this point, Charles actually noticed the room.

It was a monument to faded beauty and fleeting fame. Trophies, carefully arranged according to priority, sat preserved in a display case. News clippings accompanied original photos, and sometimes, more amateur photos in tasteful frames. The more memorable events included enlargements.

In this room, Sara had stopped being mentioned when she was five. She was simply edited out of the commentary.
He realised someone had asked him a direct question. "I do beg your pardon, I was a little distracted. My apologies."

"I said, how are the social functions in your -ah- particular area, Professor?"

"Not very many, I'm afraid," he said. "I'm usually caught up in the day-to-day mundanities of school administration... but I will attempt to make time to attend student recitals." He smirked to himself, even though he was inundated with images of having to watch thirty-so kids fumble ameteurishly through whatever act they had put together. "I actually find them somewhat amusing." And now that he was safely off their little list of potential second grooms... Jean? You've been very quiet, lately._Who? Me? I'm just trying to eat this shit sandwich without gagging._ She broke from her polite smile in order to sip at her carbonated beverage. _Adrians was actually right about something. These women *are* gorgons._ Those thoughts included a play-by-play recollection of an in-house harangue at ground zero.

_Well, say something nice about the Institute before the room gets completely off topic and we have to be subjected to baby photos._

_Eep! Fate worse than death!_ "Speaking of recitals," Jean chirped, "we were thinking about staging a self-defence exhibition somewhere down the line. Logan's courses have been a real boon, especially to some of the shier students." She smiled winningly at the room. "I can definitely say it helped with my public speaking."

"Logan? You allow your students to address their tutors by *name*?"

"Only if they feel comfortable with it," said Xavier. "And Logan... has his ways of making one feel comfortable." _It usually takes the average student twenty-four hours to work out he's something of a marshmallow,_ Xavier added inwardly.

"So what does he teach? Kung fu? Ju jitsu?"

_Ro Cham bo[1]? No..._ "All of the above, and some - unique methods for maintaining personal safety," Jean smiled. "Logan used to be in the army, at one stage."

The room nodded as one to her explanation. Army men knew how to disarm terrorists with a _spoon_.

_Wow. I'm starting to think I sell them a bridge_, Jean 'said'.

_We're all packed_, Sara sent, loud as a bullhorn, but also obviously trying not to be. _Any time you're ready_.

"Do you have any questions, Mrs Adrien?" Xavier prompted. "About my school?"

"What's your policy on expulsion?"

[1] South Park reference. Opponents kick each other "square in the nuts" for possession of a Contended item.

~~

Charles Xavier understood a great deal more about Sara, and why all four of them felt it necessary to breathe a deep sigh of relief once they passed the gates and headed on out of Manor Hill.

"Man*," sighed Jean. "I'm glad my parents are only scared of me."

"Mom's okay when Dad's home," said Sara, in a contorted huddle/tangle amongst the debris plus Todd in the back. "He has a knack for disarming people. Alas, that's why he's somewhere in the middle of Russia..." she sighed. "November eleventh. He'll be home then."

"Yo, you oughta write a book. Be the best tell-all since _Mommy Dearest_," sais Todd.

"Tempting, but I'd get worse." One of her size thirteen trainers appeared in the rearview mirror. "Can you stop by the Brotherhood place? We still have to pick up Eileen."

"Um. Is that some kind of weird pet?" Jean wondered.

"My bike. I saved her, so I have to look after her."

_Sir?_

_We might as well pick it up, rather than test her enginuity, don't you think?_
As long as she doesn't leave engine parts in the common room, I'll be fine. She turned, pulling up at the boarding house, which was looking extravagantly seedy. Mystique was not around, and Magneto had obviously written the Brotherhood off as a bad loss. That, to use a Sara phrase, would not *do*.

Eileen loaded in the back and the van safely underway once more - Todd had leaned out of a portal to assure Lance that he was fine, helping Sara move her stuff, and there was a promise of a skin treatment in the near future - Sara allowed herself to twitch a little as she drank yet another litre of water. She sincerely hoped that setting up again would be enriching, somehow.

"Oh!" Sara blurted. "I entirely forgot. Where exactly am I staying, Professor?"
"Second floor," he intoned, "end of the hallway, on the left."
"No," said the Professor. "You're sharing."
Sara went fugue.

~

For Todd, it was a very scary twenty minutes. Sara just - wasn't at home, and her body twitched in alarming ways. Every now and again, an ugly sound would issue forth as air expelled from her lungs caught her vocal cords.

He didn't even know he was crying until later. "Come back to me, baby, *please*," he whispered urgently. "Come back to me. C'mon Sara... you can't let this beat yo'..." He cajoled and implored in a similar vein for the entire time she was gone. He tried to hold her steady. He tried kissing her cheek. He tried hugging her. He tried brushing her face.

Somewhere on the periphery of his awareness, Baldy and Miss Priss were having an argument.
"All I'm saying is that there are *plenty* of other rooms you could give her."
"I never denied it," said Xavier. "But you no longer have the excuse of your lack of control. You will have to have a roommate, and Sara happens to need a room."
"But she's a newb! She's *loud*!"
"All the more reason for you to maintain your night shields then, wouldn't you think?"
"You're doing this to me on purpose! It's not fair!"
"It's fairer than the alternative of having something similar happen by accident," said the Professor. "I know from experience that getting caught without adequate shielding is - painful."
"Shielding, schmielding... do you *know* what she gets up to?"
"Do *you* truly know what she does?"
"Well I heard--"

"Forget rumour, Jean," interrupted the Professor. "What do you truly know*?"
"Ad-- ah... um. Er."
"Exactly. Perhaps you could research her tomorrow? Separate the truth from the fiction, and produce an analysis thereof."
"We both know there's no 'perhaps' about it," snarled Jean. "You're going to *make* me."
"Now you're just being petulant. Really, Jean. I expected more of you."

The van came to an aggressive halt. "Well maybe you just expect too much!" She left the car and slammed the door.

Sara blinked. "Oh, darn. Did I harm anything?"
"Nuttin' that won't heal, babe," he smiled. "You look way better when you're in charge, y'know."
"Terribly sorry, darling. I didn't mean to scare you. It's just - I never thought I'd be sharing her *airspace*."
Logan opened Baldy's door. "Trouble in paradise?" he asked.

"Jean's merely confronted with the realisation that she's set up her own obstacles," said the Professor. "She'll face up to the reality of it soon enough."
The burly man grunted at that and, after helping the Professor into his chair, opened up the back of the van. "Damn, Tallwater. How'd you fit yourself in there?"
"I believe it required a shoehorn."

Logan merely grunted. He'd come prepared, this time, with a handcart and the 'volunteered' services of a few people who needed to be tired out by curfew. This meant Elf, Porcupine, and the kid. At least the kid was a sort of self-made locust swarm of helping hands... even if one random clone seemed to act a little - funny[1].

Tallwater was the obsessive sort of mover who labelled every box.
"All right. One box per move, carry 'em from the bottom, not the handles, and leave the heavy stuff to me. Got it?"
"Yessir!" The assembled group of prankers saluted.
True to form, one of the kid's clones lifted up a blanket. "What's under here?"
"That's Eileen," said Tallwater, still in the middle of her boxes of stuff. "I sort of rescued her from the junkpile."
The clone made a face, but didn't say anything nasty.
It was Logan that did the double-take. "Good *God*..." he muttered. An L-579... she was still magnificent, even though she was obviously in a very bad way. "How much'd you get 'er for?"
"Well... I sort of found her in a recycling yard. The watchman said if I could make her go and drive her out of the gate, she was mine for free. So... fifteen hours hard labour plus emotional trauma?"
The bicycle afficionado inside him whimpered and bit his fist. Outside, his face was unreadable.
"Sweat equity," he muttered. "Huh." He'd had *dreams*, once, of picking up a bike this rare on sweat equity. Tallwater probably didn't know how much this bike was really worth, to a collector. He laid aside his prejudices, though, and helped wheel the aged scooter into a secure corner or the garage. It would keep.
Meantime, he had an assload of books to cart up to Red's room. Tallwater had gotten cute. Each box was labelled; 'books', 'more books', 'still more books', 'even more books' and so on. There was even a 'books 2.0'.
The minute she and Froggy could extract themselves, they did, each picking a box and hauling it like all the others.
One box, he couldn't help noticing, was labelled, 'shelves'. "Chuck's got plenty of shelvin' if you want it, Tallwater."
"I'd rather not waste the resources," she chirped. "Besides, mother--" twitch "would only throw them out after she discovered my absence. They represent quite a bit of scrounging time, after all."
Even more disturbing was the hope chest, on which she'd added the word 'lost' at some time in her past. _Chuck's gonna have a helluva time with *this* gal._

Sara's cell chirped. Unlisted or restricted number. She hit the talk button. "Sara Louise Adrien."
"WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?" It was Mother in full warpath mode. "How *DARE* you leave this house without my permission! You wait until your *father* hears about this! I'm calling the authorities!"
Sara put herself in Vulcan mode. "The authorities will doubtless repeat that I am well within my legal rights to live where I choose, Mother. Rest assured that I am safe and well, and will come to no lingering harm. Barring the unforseen, of course."
"You have no right to speak to me like this! I am your *MOTHER*!"
"Yes. You are my mother. As for the rest of it... how can you tell that I do not possess recordings of your - diatribes? I'm certain the authorities would love to hear about your regular verbal abuse."
"This is *blackmail*! After I did *everything* for you! You *ungreatful*--"
"I have to go, mother." Sara shed a tear from inside the Vulcan mask. "I'm afraid you're hazardous to my mental health." She hung up and turned the cellular phone off. Only then, did she allow herself to
weep.

[1] Someone, somewhere posited the "one clone is retarded" theorem to Jamie's multiplication. I'm going with it.


There was a clearly delineated border between Sara's space and Jean's, even before the piles of Sara's things had completely been moved in. That line was both clearly visible and sacrosanct to Sara. Even in the depths of yet another mood swing, she stayed on her side of the invisible line.

Todd held her close and brushed her hair, adding the occasional kiss to reassure her that at least one person valued her as a human being and would not easily leave. In fact, the only thing that distracted her from her crying jag was that he tucked her hair behind her ears.

On the third such tuck, and her subsequent dragging of her brown locks back over them, she protested. "Don't. Please. They're perpendicular."

"Ain't," he protested. Todd captured a hand and re-tucked some hair behind the closest ear. "I love all of yo'. Even your beautiful," he kissed her earlobe, "parallel," another kiss, high up on the cartilage, "ears." A third kiss, on the little bump of flesh guarding the aural canal, near to her cheekbone.

And at that precise moment, just as she was beginning to bend to his ministrations, Logan leaned in. "No makin' out in the bedrooms. Both of ya."

"Hey. Yo. I might be scum, but I ain't no asshole," Todd shot back.

Sara scrubbed her hair back into place and blushed furiously. "I suppose I'd better get on with these shelves," she murmured, sorting out pieces from the box.

"Lemme help?" asked Todd. "I'm pretty okay with a hex key."

Darn it, now everything sounded sordid. Sara blushed furiously, but gave him a pile of parts that would eventually turn into a bookcase. She constructed a labyrinth of sorts, guarding her bed - made up and resolutely bland, the only provided furniture besides the dresser and a study desk - and emphasising the line. Sealing her off from the view of Jean "I'm perfect" Grey and any lingering wrath.

People like Jean had always abhorred people like Sara. Therefore, Sara reasoned, the best thing to do was to act like they were in separate, if adjoining, rooms.

Maybe some kind of curtain would aid in that, later. If she needed it.

For all she knew, Jean Grey might actually be a fantastic person. And tonight, she would have a perfect opportunity to get to know her.

_Think of it,_ Sara told herself, _as your first sleepover. Only with more accessories._

Chuckie, still in his hamster ball, was roving around the room and sniffing at things.

"Like, hi," a perky freshman Sara vaguely recalled poked her head in. "You must be the girl Jean's like, totally freaking over. Need a hand?"

_Chaperone,_ thought Sara at the exact same time that Todd said, "Logan send you here as a chaperone?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "Shyeah. Kinda. But he also kinda gave me the idea that you'd like, like to be set up before dinnertime? And he's like, totally nervous about having one of the Brotherhood over."

"Todd's here at my invitation," Sara never stopped working on her shelving. "And under a flag of truce. Besides, I'm not in the habit of abandoning friends because of anyone else's disapproval."

"I'm Kitty," Kitty parked herself near some shelving and began to attach bits to other bits. "Are you and the *Toad* like, going out?"

"Omi*gawd*... You're *Essel*!"

"Sara Louise Adrien, please. Adrian Essel is a fabrication of narrow minds and cloth ears."

"Y'know, the grape vine says you totally--"

"I know," Sara interrupted. "Does anyone bother to check the possible veracity of any of those
rumours? Most of the ones *I've* heard are anatomically impossible... even if I *was* a male."
A moment of supreme confusion. "So you're *really*..." she trailed off, gesturing vaguely at about
boob level, trying to come up with a term.
"Menstruating," suggested Sara. "Yes."
"Euw!"
"It's only our androcentric society that makes it an unpleasant thing," said Sara. "In gynocentric
cultures, it's a rite of passage. A confirmation of adulthood."
"Euw..." Kitty shuddered. "*So* not my thing. Do you like, need this many shelves?"
"Wait until you see my assembled collection. Books, media, hamster, luckpieces, PC guardians... and
some few trophies."
"You *won* stuff?"
"Eons ago, it seems. Ancient history, now." Sara righted a bookcase and placed in the last few
pieces. Almost done building. Almost time to stock the shelves, as it were. At least she didn't have to
hide anything, here.
She hoped.

~

Kurt watched. He was good at it. There was a steady flow of people, one per quarter-hour on
average, from Jean's pity party in the common room to the congregation upstairs. In what used to be
Jean's sanctuary. He was never rude enough to say it, but he'd had the lingering suspicion that she
used her room as a kind of extra shield. Something to rely on and retreat into when her head hurt or
the steady sussuration of minds at work got to be too much.
Curiosity compelled him upstairs. After all, he knew what Jean moaning about something or other
looked like, by now. Only Scott, fiercely loyal and in love to the point of stupidity, actually stayed.
There was music. Something in the tone of it made him think of vinyl. Guitars and banjos. A hymn
of sorts.
"You've got to - prime the pump, you must have faith and believe. You've got to - give a lot of
yourself before you're worthy to receive. Drink all the water you can hold, wash your face, cool your
feet. But leave a bottleful for others, thank you kindly, Desert Pete."
And then Bobby's voice. "How do you skip tracks?"
"*You* don't," said Sara. "It's very technical and requires a delicate touch. So put up with songs you
dislike, if you please."
Only Sara could be that polite while telling someone off.
"Is there a fast forward?" Bobby was still clueless about vinyl.
Kurt decided to intercede. "It's from before fast forward was invented. Leave the record alone, ja?"
"How in hell do *you* know about it?" Bobby enquired.
"Hello? I'm from an isolated whitebread mountain town that *just* got connected to the internet. Of
*course* I know about it." People were swarming, placing books on Sara's shelves and rearranging
the articles of interest, which included the hamster tubing. The hamster in question was barely visible
as a set of whiskers inside a miniature kennel. Kurt decided not to bother the poor creature.
"D'ye think Jean'll mind if we hang these in 'er closet?" Rahne gestured with three long garment
bags.
"Of course she'd mind," said Rogue. "Just hang 'em on the pole over the dresser. 'S what it's there
for."
Todd, Kurt noticed, rarely left a five-pace circle around Sara. Well. If *he* was in - essentially -
enemy territory with a girl he really liked, he'd stick close, too.
The record finished with a minimum of fuss from Bobby, who usurped Sara's computer and queued
up every MP3 he could find. He found out that Sara's musical tastes were both eclectic and strange.
The first song that played was by ELO, which pretty much said it all. The next one, by They Might
Be Giants, filled in any blanks for the slow learners. By Paul McCartney's _Off The Ground_,
certain people who knew about Kurt's own Beatlemania were rolling their eyes and groaning under
their breath.
Kurt just grooved along and joined the 'lala la lalala's and said nothing.
Several of Sara's books were in a fragile state, owing to multiple re-readings. Kurt treated these with
the care that a well-loved book deserves and took note of titles he knew. _The Neverending Story_,
_The Princess Bride_ and the entire Vorkosigan and Discworld series.
Sara was in good company.

~

Hank had come up with a skin potion to soothe his itches and, as an extra added bonus, it acted like
soap without making him ill. And, since Sara had successfully set up all her things, he had less and
less real reason to hang around.
Sara sensed this, even though he hadn't said anything.
Maybe it was Logan, hovering around with Scooterboy, making throat clearing noises and obviously
glaring from Todd to the door.
Their conversation limped along. Are you going to be okay tomorrow? Yes. Do you need anything?
No. And, finally, Guess I'd better call Lance.
"Kitty beat you to it," Scott muttered into his hand.
Sara ignored him. "Don't skip school on my account, darling. That miracle potion of Dr McCoy's
should help slough off any dead skin."
"If *Pie* doesn't steal it."
"Tell him it'll turn his skin green."
He laughed, in spite of the dying-date mood. "Yo, that might actually *work*... yo' cool at stuff like
that."
"It's just elementary psychology, I--"
"Aaaaah?"
She blushed. "Thank you."
Lance's jeep pulled up outside the glass doors and, because Lance was the impatient sort who liked
his little ducks where he knew they were safe, he started leaning on the horn.
"Moovit, Toad!"
"Patience is a virtue," Sara called. "I-- I'll miss you."
"Miss you too." Now they held both hands, staring into each other's eyes. "I'll try to swing by,
y'know. After."
"I'll anticipate every moment."
{Beeeep BEEEEEEEEEEEEELEEP!} "Goddamn it! Hurry the fuck up!"
Sara sighed. "No sympathy in him."
"Jealous as," Todd soothed. "They don' let him make time wit' *his* girlfriend."
"Then we'd best make the best of our overtime," she murmured, leaning in. Todd leaned up into the
kiss, savouring the taste of her. The soft warmth of her lips. Her scent. The fact that she was kissing
him *back*. The tactile thrill of her scales. The feathery tickle of her lovely hair...
"Ah, Mr Tolensky."
They broke to boggle at the Professor.
"Gooseberries[1] to the left of us... Gooseberries to the right of us..." muttered Sara.
_Hello? I was kissing my girl goodbye, here..._ Todd tried not to visibly fume. "Yo. 'Sup?"
"Have you thought of obtaining an afternoon job?" said the Professor. _I know_, he 'said' inside
Todd's head, _but Mr Alvers was entertaining visions of prybars._
_He can fuck himself._ Todd 'said' back. Damn, this was tricky. "I tried, keep tryin', yo. Nobody
likes th' look o' me."
"How would you like gainful employment in an establishment that is notoriously *non*-lookist?" He
gestured around him to indicate *which* establishment he was talking about.
"*What*?" said Scooterboy. "But *sir*--"
"You *ain't* serious," warned Logan.
"I doubt if Mr Tolensky has any lingering motive to damage us," breezed the Professor. "Do you?"
He and Sara looked at each other, hope making sparks in their eyes. Sara mouthed his thoughts, "We could see each other..."
"Hell no, yo. I never wanted t' fight in the first place," he said. "Sides, I keep getting my ass handed to me."
Lance, who had left the jeep and opened the door, gawped. "No bullshit, right? This is a legit thing?"
"As legitimate as you please," said the Professor. "We could draw up a legal contract..."
"Naw, I'd prefer something we can get out of. Y'awna do this, Toad?"
Another look at Sara. "More'n anythin'."
"...fuck..." he moaned. "You have a deal."
Both he and Sara yawped, jumped, and hugged each other in jubilation. At least, until Lance dragged him wholesale into the Jeep.
"You," he announced as they pulled away from the estate, "are entirely pussy-whipped."
"Oh, like you ain't," he shot back.
His reply was the typical finger. Always the automatic response of the slow of mind.
Todd just grinned like a bastard.


---

Sara took a moment apart from the party atmosphere in her half of the room to apply some of the new balm Dr McCoy had applied, and to - well - check the status of certain hygiene products. At least the balm was a pleasant interlude, and guaranteed that she wouldn't have to scratch during dinner.
Sara tucked as much dangling shed skin into her clothing as she could before informing the others that she was going to assist in the kitchen.
"You'll be sor-reee..." sang Bobby.
Sara didn't mind. She rather liked being useful. She followed the delicious smells into the kitchen and found Ororo, bustling to and fro.
"Do you need a hand?"
"No free samples," said Ororo instantly. "I need the table laid, the dishes washed and this mess," she indicated scatters of debris from other impromptu chefs, "taken care of. Not necessarily in that order."
Since preparation space was always a priority, Sara began laboring on the benchtops, cleaning up biodegradables, recyclables, and trash with a kind of cyclic efficiency. Dirty dishes, vessels and utensils were piled near the sink for stage two.
Ororo turned around twice and there was a clean benchtop. A third time, and the central table was bare. She was amazed even further as clean dishes began to pile up in the drainer.
Most teenagers ran a mile when confronted with housework. Sara just dived in as if she'd been doing it all her life. _And considering what I've heard about her *mother*... maybe she has been. _"You're pretty good," she said.
"Just the efficiency of long-term practice," Sara demurred. "A great many of my old schools used KP as a punishment... but now, I'm one of the Cleanup Fairies."
"Whom?"
"The Cleanup Fairies," said Sara. "We go around to houses in desperate need of detoxification and clean them up. There's a sliding scale, according to how desperate the situation is and whether or not we need skips. There was this one time, we were hired to go through an obsessive-compulsive's estate. If you can imagine floor-to-ceiling packrattus for thirty rooms. The poor woman died in an accident, by the way. Not to speak ill of the dead, but I was rather surprised she wasn't buried alive in some of it. Took us a month to get down to the furniture."
Ororo shuddered.
"At least she hadn't kept any pets," Sara breezed. "Those can be hazardous to everyone's health. I won't elaborate."

Alas, Ororo could clearly picture it.

"Most of the time, we do bachelor pads and frat housing," said Sara. "Lots of bottles, cans, and magazines fit for pulping - if not biohazard."

"Ew," said Ororo.

"On the upside, once one's pursued several archaeological cleanups, the better part of human nature looks all the brighter."

"Well... thankyou for helping me with my diet," sighed Ororo.

"Sorry about that," Sara blushed. "I do tend to go on."

"It's my fault for having a vivid imagination," she dismissed.

~

Jean Grey had decided not to blame Sara. After all, the androgynous girl was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Had she, or a different newb turned up a few weeks *after* her argument with the Professor, she might as well have obtained a room of her own.

_Unlikely, Jean,_ chided the Professor. _I have a longer memory than most._

It wasn't *fair*! Just because *he* had standards so high that you got a nosebleed from reaching... _And yet, you've stopped trying to reach._

_I was *happy*!_ she telepathically whined. _I had control and a way of coping. It was good._

_You don't understand your own potential,_ he sighed. _You can be so much more if you just *tried*..._

Jean shut him out, raising her shields.

_You've needed a kick in the complacency for a long time,_ he 'said', and left her mind.

Jean stabbed at her meal and tried desperately not to sulk. She never really liked it when she was shown up as not being as strong as she thought. She never really liked being trapped in a corner, hemmed in, or otherwise left without choices.

Down the table, Sara was making polite conversation with Evan about the nature of homosexuality versus homophobia. "It's natural to be uncertain," she was saying. "There's a certain degree of doubt about social touching and so forth. How much contact is *too* much, which areas are off limits... But choice never comes into it. In the end, one knows what one likes. Fear springs from doubt. The unknown factor. If you *believe* that it's a matter of choice, then you also believe that someone can *make* you change your choice; or try the lifestyle on for size, as it were." Sara's laugh was warm and unforced. "There *are* tales told of predator-types who attempt to force the issue. Fortunately, they're extremely rare - if not easily convinced that force is not an option. If you know your mind - and your heart - you can't fall prey to those people."

"Okay," said Evan. "What about gayness by association?"

"Said he to the accused lesbian," Sara chortled. "I think you mean when people roll their eyes and moan 'ga-aaaay' at whatever suggestion on the table. They mean no slight on anyone's sexuality. It just happens to be supremely unfortunate that the word 'gay' has become a slur and a synonym for 'bad'. It's possible to seperate yourself from the slurs. Just know yourself." Sara blushed. "Something I haven't *quite* mastered."

Kurt surfaced from his perpetual chewing. "Ja, but you're practically buried in rumour. Hearing what people say about you is never a good thing for the head."

Sara twitched, but acted like it wasn't happening. "Hearing it ad infinitum is never good for the head."

"Way I see it," said Rogue, "there's only two ways to go. Be better'n the rumours an' prove 'em wrong... or be worse than the rumours an' shut 'em the hell up."

"Rather difficult in my case, either way. Thank you though." Sara took a sip of water. "I'll just stay true to mine own self. Whoever that may be."
_Just give her a chance,_ Jean told herself. _She's nice to everybody else, and it's not my fault that her mother uses my name as a weapon. Just be nice and polite and try to get along._

Sara was using her dresser as a study desk, having liberated one of those posture stool/chair thingies from somewhere and scratching some notes into a book. A book which quickly shut when Jean approached. "It's... sort of - private stuff in these," she said. "Not that you could read the code, anyway, but - ah... Paranoia's a hard habit to break."

Jean retreated back to her side of the room, cracking her books. "I was just curious," she breezed. "You looked kind of... intense."

"I have a lot to work through," Sara didn't even turn to speak, and resumed her jotting at warp speed. "The Professor said that any catharsis is a good one... so... I'm catharsising." She flipped a page and continued jotting. "I'll be quiet while you study."

And she hadn't even *looked*. "How did you--"

"Jean Grey studies every night," Sara recited as if it were a law of the universe. 

_Thank you very much, Sara's Mom._ Jean rolled her eyes and got on with her homework. Most of it was easy enough, at least until she got to the calculus.

There was an encroaching shadow.

Jean looked up at Sara and remembered to try being friendly. "Hi."

"Seventeen," said Sara.

"Um... What?"

"It's seventeen," she elaborated. "I remember tripping over a formula somewhere and it all wound up internalized. The answer's seventeen."

"Unfortunately, I have to show my working. But thanks." Jean flipped to the answers to check and - surprise - the genius was correct.

"Well, at least cancel the matching X's," Sara indicated the opposites that had been hiding on the page. "They're extraneous."

_D'oh!_ Jean fumed internally, but managed a polite grimace. "Thank you."

"But... I'm distracting you. Back to my lair."

Without the extra X's, the problem was only *slightly* less tricky. This went with that and one fiddled and twiddled... and she got seventeen. Yay.

On to the next problem.

Something was playing in the edge of awareness. Some kind of tinny horror track, judging by the screams. And... an elephant?

"What the heck...?" Jean got up from her homework and followed the noise to an alcove where a computer - and several other electronic entertainment devices - nestled. In the centre of the technotangle was Sara, wearing moth-eaten headphones, and tapping and clicking away.

_What. Ever._ Jean stomped back to her homework and tried to ignore the sounds of weirdness. By the time she was done with homework, she had a minor headache from maintaining her shields and *still* had to study for the pop quiz.

Urgh.

He shields were cracking from the strain. Something of Sara's leaked through. _The sun is a mass of incandescent gas, a gigantic nuclear furnace._

If she was studying the sun or solar phenomenon, it could have been helpful. Alas, she was studying trig. Jean built her walls up, but by then, she had the song stuck in her head.

Double urgh.

In another shield lapse, Istanbul was Constantinople - now it's Istanbul not Constantinople...

If Sara wasn't providing an excellent encouragement for Jean keeping her shields up, she was also providing excellent shielding ammo. Repetative and circular songs made the mortar, as the Professor said, for a decent wall. The problem was, that if a telepath used the same song as someone else, those outside thoughts could leak in.

Sara, getting up from her manufacture of weirdness, opened the windows and let the night air in.
"You can't see the Brotherhood boarding house from here," she said mournfully.
"Toad's hardly a good choice of boyfriend, anyway," Jean didn't look up from the page, trying to
burn it into her brain.
"His name is *Todd*," said Sara. "And up until recently, we've walked similar paths. Reviled by the
popular people. Chattered about behind our backs. Single out as victims... that sort of thing. He
*cared* when no-one else would. That - in my mind, at least - makes him a rather good choice."
"You can do so much better?"
"Like Duncan Matthews?" Sara said. "Handsome gridiron star, can never do wrong in the eyes of
the establishment. His college fees already paid by his mighty thews? Your boyfriend whom,
according to rumour, has three other girls on standby in case you 'flake out on him'?"
"*What*?"
"But rumour is an ever-voracious beast," Sara dismissed. "One can't believe everything one hears...
or I'd be a very confused individual. A lesbian transsexual gay freak who does unspeakable things to
hamsters and harps... according to rumour." Sara smiled. "The lies people make up about each other
are almost as educational as the truth, aren't they?"
"What else have you heard about Duncan Matthews?" Jean wondered.
"I'd better not," Sara held up her hands. "You have this vein in your forehead that just - popped right
out... Besides, I have a rather low opinion of Senior males." A whirl of images and emotions. A
limousine, Seniors standing out of the sun roof. The shock and disgust as they threw something.
Heartbreak and shame. Wanting to burrow into the centre of the Earth and never come back...
All over in a second. Jean shook her head. "Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to studying
for the pop quiz tomorrow."
"Um. Isn't that a contradiction in terms?" asked Sara. "You can't study for a pop quiz, because their
very essence is the element of surprise."
Jean groaned. "So I caught my teacher thinking about one. So?"
"Isn't that cheating?"
"It's not cheating, I'm *studying*."
"Cheating, dear, is using illegitimate means to gain an advantage over the competition. Dipping into
someone's thoughts is just as wrong as breaking into their office."
"One, I did not dip into their thoughts. It slipped out. I just happened to hear it. Two. I am not
cheating."
Sara sighed. "Well. You're the telepath..." Doubt radiated off of her as she retreated back into her
lair.
Jean looked at her watch. Nine thirty. "Only one more hour until lights-out," she moaned. She was
*doomed*. Her A+ average was going to *suffer*.
"*What*? No lights at all?" said Sara, concealed behind bookcases. "They don't *force* one to sleep -
do they?"
Now *there* was an idea... "Eight hours' sleep is the accepted norm - for most people." Only *Kurt*
woke up half an hour before everyone else and replaced the alarm clocks for kicks. "A rested mind is
a ready mind."
"Ah. I'm afraid I have a rather bad case of chronic insomnia. Usually, I can't get more than three
hours. Four, tops. At home, I'd just work on projects or read. Quiet things. I wouldn't make a pest of
myself, I promise."
_Don't bet on it._ "Well, get used to eight hours' of darkness. Logan can get intense if you try testing
him."
Another sigh. "I suppose I could try some meditation techniques. Clear the mind, and so forth. Lord
knows, my mentality is past due for some spring cleaning."
"As long as it's *quiet*, I don't care."
"I beg your pardon?"
"Mutants new to their powers are mentally 'loud'. Part of the panic process or something. When you
get used to it, you'll quiet back down again, but in the meantime... you're worse than a one-girl rock
concert."
"Ouch. I'm so sorry, I had no idea. Is there anything I can--"
"Just try to keep your thoughts *quiet*."  
"Working on it."  
"Thankyou."
Jean went back to her trig, trying to memorise the formulae.
___sunlight comes from our own sun's atomic energy. THE SUN IS A MASS OF INCANDESCANT GAS.__

"*Sara*..."
"It's stuck," she complained. "It's going to take a lot of work to get rid of it."
"So *WORK* on it!"
Logan poked his head into the room. "Half an hour 'till lights-out," he informed.  
"Can we beg an extra half-hour?" implored Sara. "Jean has to study for a pop quiz and I'm - kinda distracting." She huffed a laugh. "My thoughts are loud."
Logan turned his iron glare on Jean. "Pickin' your teacher's brain is cheatin', Red. Chuck's gonna hear about this, and he ain't gonna like it."
_Fuck being nice._ Jean decided. _The lizard girl is going to *die*_

~

Jean made a show of putting her books away and brushing her hair, well aware of the spectator leaning on the bookcases.
Sara had shed her track pants and hoodie, leaving the large T-shirt with Hello Kitty on it.  
"Do you do a hundred strokes or a thousand?" Sara wondered. "It's been a bone of contention between mother--" twitch "--and I for quite some time."
"A hundred," she said, dead-voiced. _Go away and leave me alone._  
"If I did a thousand, I'd never have time to do *anything*.
"I... I'm sorry about telling Logan," she said. "You were acting like it was all right and-- the entire field of mutant ethics and etiquette is new to me."
Of course. Sara was one of those people who, when lost about what to do, took their cue from everyone else. It was her own bloody stupid fault for being everyone else at the time. _Jean Grey, you have always dug your own tiger traps..._  
"Well, I'm officially in for it anyway. And they'll find an excuse to pull me out of that class. I can just imagine whatever 'special exercises' Logan's cooking up for me."
"They are effective as a deterrent, aren't they?" said Sara. "That's kind of the point of them."
"If you weren't here," Jean began.  
"If I wasn't here, dear, you would have continued to cheat. You would have been found out, eventually. Either by the Professor... or someone hazardous to mutants. Can you imagine the bad PR caused by someone finding a mutant who - by implication - cheated their way to the top?"
That bought chills over her entire body. "I hadn't thought of that."
"I've had to once, already," said Sara. She rubbed some more loose skin off herself. "Mother would have either locked me in a basement or... sold me to some lab."
_Kurt, what is it with you and passing your nightmares around?_  
_I didn't say anything!_ Kurt 'said' back.
Maybe it was a spontaneous manifestation. Maybe *Toad* had some nightmares he passed on. Whatever.
"You know, if you braid that, you won't have so many tangles in the morning, and you might get a nice wave in your hair."
"What the hell do *you* know about beauty tips?" sneered Jean.
"One day, I'll surprise you," said Sara.
Jean made no reply, but turned on her bedside lamp, and turned off the main lights. "Good night," she said, rather pointedly.
Sara shuffled about and - by the sound of things, eased herself into bed.
Jean began working on the trance-state that consisted of her night shields. Part of it was the lyric from _Windmills of my Mind._ She focussed on that to begin with. _Round, like a circle in a spiral, Like a wheel within a wheel. Never ending or beginning, On an ever spinning wheel, Like a snowball down a mountain, Or a carnaval balloon, Like a carousell that's turning, Running rings around the moon... Like a clock whose hands are sweeping, Past the minutes on it's face, And the world is like an apple, Whirling silently in space, Like the circles that you find, In the-- sun is a mass of incandescent gas..._

Jean rolled over, punched her pillow, and tried again. Only to fail again. 
"Do you *mind* keeping your *thoughts* down?"
"I'm trying..." _All you ever *were* was trying!_ said the echo of her mother. _Hush,_ thought Sara. A vivid image of a field with daisies and soft, sweet-smelling grass and rolling hills and-- _THE SUN IS HOT, THE SUN IS NOT A PLACE WHERE WE COULD LIVE..._
"*Sa-raaaaaa*..."
"There's only one real way to beat it. It'll get worse before it gets better. Sorry."
Jean put her pillow over her head. _Hurry..._ This night shield stuff was exhausting and unrewarding as ever.

According to Sara's mental jukebox, everyone was older than they've ever been - and now they're even older. Then the thing with Istanbul again. Then a song about a worm who was a drummer but they called him Doctor Worm. Then they all lived on a yellow submarine. Finally, a little number about sleepwalkers. It pattered out, at last, and Sara focussed on the quiet meadow again. Intensely. Jean focussed on _The Windmills of my Mind_ once more. She got to the pictures hanging in the hallway loop - or at least the beginning of it - before Sara's mind began leaking the fibonacci numbers found in the spirals in the centre of a daisy.

"Don't you ever *sleep*?"
"Not a lot."
"Well, I need *mine*.
"Terribly sorr--" 
Jean sent a vicious blast of dreamless unconsciousness at her.
"...unk," muttered Sara as her head hit the pillow.
Peace. Sweet, somnalistic silence. "...yay..." whispered Jean. She put up her shields and finally - *finally* - got to sleep.

~

Sara did not need much sleep, that was true. However, her dreams were almost the same as everyone else's. Her brain - a natural multi-tasking organ - once wrapped in the cover of slumber, dreams quickly and vividly. It condenses the little time Sara needs for rest. ...she was walking through a palace. A gaudy place of glossy white, sparkly gemstones and more gold than necessary. Rich hangings covered any bare space and the ceiling was lit with the rainbows of chandalliers. 

She passed a mirror, finding herself staring at the Lizard Queen of Mars.
"Oh boy," said Crow T. Robot in a passing impersonation of Sam Beckett[1]. She could *sense* them. Three small figures outside the edge of the screen. Flickers in her awareness. She tried to ignore them and examined her face. 

Her scales were beautiful, now that they were free of the ugly, peeling skin she'd tried not to look at all day. And for a change, white looked good on her. 
"Remind me why they had to have this scene?" said Tom. 
"It's a metaphor," said the human.

"A metaphor for *suck*," said Crow.
She glared right at them. "Quiet," she hissed. "I'm trying to do this *right*." She continued through the palace, past a gallery of windows billowing with diaphenous drapery.
"Look, she's checking her laundry," said Tom.  
"Not dry yet," said the human.
At last, she came to a grand chamber, where the previous Queen, her mother, lay awaiting death.
_I don't remember this part,_ thought Sara.  
"We don't remember it either," said Tom.  
"Must be the trauma," said Crow.  
"Mother," she said. "I have fallen in love."
"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah... splat," said Crow.
Her mother was none other than Jaquelline Elsie Adrien - nee Pierce. Still in her pink power suit and still wearing a ludicrously small hat.
"Oooh... looks like the makeup department ran out of money," said the human.
"Either that or they go Caucasian when they're old," said Crow.  
Mother pretended that they weren't there. "You love an *outsider*. You shame us. You shame your entire family... for generations..."
"Those generations are dead, mother," she said.
"As you will be in about... twenty minutes," said Tom, mocking her voice.
"As we are dead - if we do not accept these outsiders into our hearts."
"Uh... is 'heart' a synonym for 'boudoir' on Mars?" said Crow.
"We are a proud people," said Mother. "We will not beg. We will be strong... You do not need this - Earth man."
"How about the other golem I have in the oven?" mocked the human.
"*I* will find a suitable mate for you," rasped Mother.  
"But Mars needs men," objected Tom.  
"Manly men," said the human.  
"Men in tights?" suggested Crow.  
"Naw, that's what did in for the last lot," said Tom.  
"Oh mother," she said. "My heart already beats for him."
"It didn't beat before?" said the human.
"Maybe it whips and flogs as well," said Crow.  
"There goes our PG rating," said Tom.  
"And mine," said Mother, "breaks. It shatters. Your... fault..." and then she expired.  
"Ding dong, the bitch is dead," sang the MST3K crew. "Which old bitch? The wicked bitch!"
She ran away, through the palace, shoving aside diaphenous curtains as she was searching for something.  
"I hate laundry day," mocked Crow.  
"Still isn't dry..." said the human.  
"Damnit, I said 'no starch'," said Tom.  
Sara opened her eyes. Still dark. _Now, ladies and gentlemen, shall we place any wagers as to whether this is one of those nights where sleep comes piecemeal? Or never comes again?_ She checked her clock. 
3:45
_Never comes again, I see._
Jean had voiced her final protest at sometime around quarter to eleven, so that meant...
Four and a half hours. Odd.
Jean was snoring gently on the other side of the room. Best not to wake her, then. Not after the uproar from last night. She found a new pair of underpants, her toiletries bag and fresh -well- supplies by feel and crept out in the darkness towards the bathroom. 
Various people in Sara's history had recommended warm or hot baths for cramping, and the chill of the night was starting to get to her, so she filled the tub and added a generous squirt of Dr McCoy's skin potion to the water. 
Ahh. Bliss. Sara took a deep breath and submerged herself. Oh, *yes*. _Thank goodness the Professor installed the long British bathtubs._ Instead of a nasty itch, it was a mildly pleasant tickle.
So very nice.
A shadow encroached, and Sara opened her eyes and surfaced.
"God, you just scared the livin' crap outta me," said Rogue. "Ah thought you'd *drowned*.*
Sara thought of covering herself, but reasoned that - since she was unembarrassed - Rogue was offended by nudity. "Just enjoying the water," said Sara, slightly out of breath.
"Y'all weren't movin' fo' at least a minute."
According to the clock on the wall, Sara had been submerged for at least three. She decided not to mention it. "It *is* very nice water. Good for the skin. Or my skin, at any rate." She smiled. "What are you doing up at this hour?"
"Nightmares," she said. "One of the drawbacks of absorbing people's mem'ries... ya get their nightmares, too." She sat on the toilet. "When I woke up, I heard the tap drippin' in here, an... well..."
"The rest makes an amusing party anecdote," Sara dismissed. The last fragments of clinging skin on her nose let go, and a whole sheet of dead epidermis flopped against Sara's neck.
"Whoah!" Rogue jumped. "Fo' a minute... Dayumm. Warn a gal, willya?" Sara felt her nose. "All present and correct," she smirked. "With luck, the shedding should be all done by this evening. Which leads to some rather grousome ideas on what to do with the shed skin."
"Dare ya to sew it up an' leave it somewhere," said Rogue.
"You know, with the right stuffing... it could be quite the anti-theft device." They both cackled like witches.
"That's it," announced Rogue. "Ah'm goin' ta hell."
"Do pass a towel before you go," said Sara. "The water - lovely though it is - is growing tepid."
"It's barely stopped steamin'..." Rogue passed the towel anyway.
"Thankyou. I guess I must have a different scale of temperature." She exited, wrapping herself up, and withdrew the plug. "Do you mind standing outside whilst I get at least partially decent?"
"Naw, I shoulda scooted when you woke up." Rogue zipped out in the hallway. "What's it like sheddin' *your* skin?"
"Annoying," Sara summarised, trying not to tangle the growing tatters in the towelling. "It itches, it cramps, it blisters and hurts... and when it gets pulled, I'm in varying degrees of minor agony."
"Ow."
"The eyes are the real nasty business. One has to wash in order to evict the last shreds."
"You shed from your eyes? Eee-eeeuw... Todd didn't know what he was complainin' about."
"You had an opportunity to witness one of his sheds?"
"I weren't always with Xavier. I got sickie-duty once when he had a bad cold on top of a shed... Man that got ugly."
The mental picture for Sara was vivid. "Aw... the poor dear. He did recover quickly, I hope."
"You actually *like* him?" Rogue scoffed. "*Why*?"
"Why not? He has a surprising array of redeeming qualities, you know." Sara slid on her clothes and placed the now-damp towel with her borrowed underwear in the laundry basket. The sanitary napkin went into the appropriately-labelled bin. When she emerged, Rogue was staring at her.
"You're a puzzle," she said. "Ah never got why you hung 'round with that little Wiltshire bitch... she makes *up* half the stuff people say about you, you know."
"I'm well aware," said Sara. "I'm also well aware that I'm the only friend she has."

[1] _Quantum Leap_, in case nobody remembers.

~~

Rogue, after a pint of Ben and Jerry's best concoctions, retreated to snatch a few more hours' sleep while Sara finished putting the kitchen in order. She'd asked a few almost-rude questions, which Sara had answered with her usual skewed logic, leaving the Goth more confused than when she'd started. And now it was only a few minutes until dawn.
Sara crept back to the room she shared with Jean, divesting herself of her clothing to greet the morning sun.
Dr McCoy's lotion helped her dead skin peel faster, so dressing was going to be a logistical problem.
Sara got to the sing sing sings when Jean nailed her with a pillow.
"Shut *uuu-uuup*..."
"I *was* quiet," said Sara, figuring out how to get back into her knickers.
Jean retrieved the pillow by telekinesis and rammed it over her head. She moaned like she had a hangover and whimpered, "How can you be so goddamn *bright* in the morning? You're worse than *Kurt*..."
"Oh? What does he do?"
"He's the Institute's alarm clock," Jean growled.
Sara laughed as she threaded herself into some pants. "Sounds like a pity to miss the spectacle... but breakfast calls."
"...jstfkff..." muttered Jean.
Sara won the fight with a shirt and skipped lightly back into the kitchen. Too many people for her usual omelettes. Scrambled eggs was always a good mainstay. And porridge... a recipe Dad bought back from Germany with some rather silly tales.
She set a pot of coffee percolating while she assembled the ingredients for a veritable morning feast. Porridge, scrambled eggs, bacon... Ooh... They had muffin mixes. Always good for a snack in a hurry... Maybe some flapjacks, too.
She was still peeling the apples when Ororo made her way into the kitchen. "I thought Logan was up. He usually makes coffee..." She helped herself to a cup's worth and woke up the rest of the way. "What are you up to?"
"Porridge," said Sara. "Dad bought the recipe home from Germany." She chopped up the peeled apples into smallish pieces and dumped them into the warming pot. "It makes excellent comfort food."
Ororo automatically began on the muffins. "You're a morning person," she said. "Jean must be annoyed."
"Twice so," said Sara. "Night owl *and* morning person." She bound some cloves together with some string she'd found, and placed the garland in the pot with the apples. The water was beading already. Sara loved induction cooktops[1]. She mixed up the flapjack batter. "I annoy everyone with that."
"Oh. You only need a little sleep," said Ororo, pouring muffin batter into trays. "I've heard of that happening, but I've never met anyone with a lessened need for sleep."
"Hi," said Sara, offering her hand. "Sara Louise Adrien, bane of night-time security measures."
Ororo chuckled. "I know you're going to be the bane of a few diets, around here," she said. "Not that that's such a bad thing, I never approved of the girls starving themselves."
"Mother always said I needed to put meat on my bones," Sara said, with just a flicker in her eye. "Alas, it only put bone on my bones." She added a large portion of rolled oats, then went seeking a spatula for the flapjacks. "Second drawer, in the middle."
"Thankyou."
"Have you had anything to drink, yet?"
"Not yet, mother hen," Sara smirked. "I did have a good soak in the tub, and that seems to have helped with my eternal thirst."
"Drink something anyway."
Sara sidestepped to retrieve a glass of water. She flipped the flapjack while she drank, then set the empty glass down to add spices to the porridge.
Ororo, having set all the muffins to baking, set up a large hotplate and began frying both eggs and bacon. "I love the sound of sizzling in the morning," she sighed. "Thanks for helping with breakfast."
"Oh, I just love cooking. You'll have to install something to *stop* me," she said.
"I thought I smelled porridge!"
"It's not ready yet." Sara brandished a ladle. "Raus."
"Back to work, then," said Kurt. {Bamf!}
Upstairs, someone began screaming at him to get the hell out of their room.
Morning had definitely broken.

[1] Xavier's rich enough to have 'em installed. They're way cool.

~

Hot water soothed a lot of aches and pains, even some that were psychosomatic. This was one of the many reasons why Professor Xavier had an industrial-sized hot-water boiler in one of his many basements.
The other one was that teenagers and mutants both hog the hot water.
Jean finally stepped out of her morning shower and dried herself off. She almost felt *human* again.
At least, she could stand herself, now. Blow-drying didn't count as a hundred strokes. That was just brushing to redistribute the water. No, she had to take care of herself. Keep up appearances. Be the best there was. She had to.
Jean remembered being eight, shortly after Annie died[1]. She was staying with the Professor in his newly-minted Institute and going to a local grade-school for proper classes. At least, after she had some decent shields. She always remembered the jeers of her peers, asking what was so gifted about her.
So she'd proved it.
Throwing herself against her grades until she became perfectly perfect had helped. Physical aptitude, thanks to Logan, had almost come naturally. Confidence made her popular, and she developed a set of coping stratagems to make sure that nobody, ever, could possibly hate her.
She didn't even know that her current roomie was suffering because of that.
All the time she was developing her "don't hate me 'cause I'm bright and talented" persona, Mrs Adrien was rubbing Sara's face in it.
And now they had to get along. Because they were roomies.
That was hardly *Jean's* fault.
She checked her last stitch of clothing, that every hair was in place and her makeup was perfect, then put on her sunny smile. She was prepared to face the world.
She was *not* prepared to face Professor Xavier, who had obviously been waiting for her.
"Jean," he said. Implications hung in the air, suspended on the points of his index fingers, which tapped together while the rest of his fingers interlocked.
"I couldn't even *start* the shields with her mental babble," she defended. Of course this was what this was about. She was already in trouble for everything else. "Do you have any idea what it's like in her head?"
"What *else* was I supposed to do?"
"Think harder," he said. "You remember the super-walls..."
Click. God, she hadn't done any of those since... Yipe. Since that episode in the mall, when she freaked out from hearing what everyone was thinking about her. "But being inside those is like having your head stuffed with cotton," she objected. "What if someone needed me?"
"There *are* two telepaths in this house, Jean."
"What if it was *you*?"
"And what if a comet struck the Earth and wiped out every 'normal' human?" Xavier shook his head.
"Don't hide behind the what-if game, Jean."
"I just - don't like them any more," she confessed.
"Some evils are necessary. Others aren't - like using a combat-grade psychic stun-bolt on your roommate?"
"I'm on parole, aren't I?"
"Physical labour is not going to improve the situation, Jean. Starting - this afternoon... you and I will be involved in intense psychic training."
"But Professor..."
"I'm not very happy about you 'gleaning' information from your tutors, either. Therefore, we will also be covering ethics." His usual amenable demeanor slipped, revealing a simmering ire. "You *will* be missing that pop quiz."
"Yessir."
"And I expect you to complete the task I gave you the previous evening."
Jean couldn't raise her focus from her feet. She felt like she was eleven all over again. "Yessir."

Logan was the next to enter the kitchen, a nasty bruise over half his face slowly maturing and fading as Sara watched.
"Do you need anything?" she said.
"Too late for advance warning, Tallwater." He took a bottle of water from the fridge and slugged down half of it. "What in hell were you playin' up on that balcony?"
Great. Now two men had seen her naked. She blushed. "Um. Sunbathing?" Sara felt her face fly into a desperate rictus. _Please don't say anything nasty. Pleasedon'tsay*anything*... _ "What - did you see?"
"Nuttin' I ain't seen before," he said. "Just got a shock."
And while he was staring, he ran into something solid. Judging by the bark scraps on his exercise gear, it was a tree. "Did the tree fare as well?"
He glared at her. "It's *fine*. I just wanna know one thing."
Sara cringed in the depths of her mortification.
"Is it a regular thing?"
"Daily."
"Right. I'm changin' m' joggin' path."
That was it? No ascerbic comments? No threats? No blackmail? "...huh?" Sara managed.
"We all got our weird li'l habits," Logan shrugged. "Yours is almost normal."
Sara's personal mental imagery slipped a gear.
"Wait 'till you find the Elf asleep on a fan. Or Halfpint dozing halfway through a couch."
"Or Scott counting his Tic-Tacs," said Ororo. "Everything that happens in the Institute *stays* in the Institute. You can relax."
Sara backed into a corner in order to ride out an episode of twitches. "D-don't mind me," she stammered. "Always happ-p-p-pens when I mmmmmm-miss a near d-d-d-d-disaster..." Her body jumped and yawped in a major spasm. "At least... lllll-lately it d-d-does." Ororo and Logan carried on as if all were normal. "Just relax and let it happen. Everything will be all right."
Somehow, she believed it.

[1] Reference to Comic Continuity. Annie was Jean's childhood friend who died by stepping out onto a blind curve at the wrong time. The trauma triggered an early onset of Jean's telepathic ability and she actually spent some time *inside* Annie as she was dying. Deep stumph.

~

"The fuck you wanna know about Essel for?"
Jean tried not to growl. This had been the fifth time in as many interviews she'd been asked that question. "Background check," she lied. "What do you *know* about he-- him?"
"Oh, he's a transie, for sure," said Graydon, one of Duncan's cronies. "Fuckin' *sick* is what it is. Carrying around jumbo tampons? Euw. I disinfect my fists every time I hit it."
Similar to the rest of Duncan's little band. Ugh. "But do you actually *know* anything?"
"Uh... It eats rats?"
"How do *you* know?"
"Lunch in its locker every morning. Duh," Graydon sloped off.
Someone slapped her bottom. "Heeeyyy... baybee..." Duncan preened. "Miss me?"
Jean smiled. "Would you mind answering a few questions?"
"I'll take the personal ones, first," he leered.
Okay. He'd asked for it. "What's this I hear about you keeping three other girls on the side?"
Clipboard - $1.50. Note paper - $2.00. Pen - $5.00. The look on your boyfriend's face when you catch him out - *priceless*.
Jean drank in the moment, preserving it in her head for later dissection and admiration. She'd need it if the rest of today was going to be like this morning.

~

Todd had made himself comfortable whilst leaning against the wall opposite Sara's locker. He'd been there since just after the school gates opened, and he was going to stay there until he found out which particular bastard was responsible for the daily dead rat.
And when he found out who that was? He was going to make their very existence turn into pain. He was going to devote his every spare minute to making sure the fucktard responsible never *had* a free minute - ever again - to deliver any dead rats to a certain locker.
Or he'd just slime-weld them to the rat, the locker, and a nice portion of wall, and see what happened next.
He was easy. You know. Whatever.
It had been a long, unpleasant morning - made less unpleasant by Hank McCoy's magical mystery skin goo - and it promised to be even longer.
So far, no bastard.
Todd exchanged the foot he was leaning against the wall with the foot on the floor, and tried not to blink too long.
_Hurry the fuck up,_ he thought. _I wanna wreak my revenge already..._
And then someone scragged him by the neck of his shirt and hauled him down the hall and into the space under a stairwell. They did it so quickly that Todd's startled noise resembled something from Jerry Lewis.
His mystery attacker let him go and blocked his exit.
"All *right*," said Jean Grey. "Let's get this the hell over with."
"The fuck are you on, Grey?" Todd demanded. "I was *busy*, yo!"
"Just keep it down, answer the questions, and I'll let you get back to falling asleep against the wall."
"I wasn't asleep," he protested. "I was... watching."
Jean did her 'whatever' face. "Okay. How the hell did you get to know Ess-- damn. Sara?"
"She was bleedin' in the office," he said. "I helped her out. 'Cept I didn't know she was a 'she' until a bit later..." he blushed. "And she did that thing wit' her skin, yo. She needed me."
"So... *you* were helping someone out?"
"Like it's a shocker?" He tried to catch a glimpse of Sara's locker, but Jean wouldn't let him. "She was covered in blood, yo. That kinda thing... it gets to me." Vivid, dark red against pale skin... he shook. Was it only a few of days ago? It felt like forever. "And... well... she's *likable*, and... y'know... if people didn't spend so much time talkin' about her, and more time talkin' *to* her... she'd be better off." He looked down. "An' if they did that, she'd have no time for me, I guess."
"And you've known each other - what? Three days?"
"Three days," he said. "Nearly four." That wasn't enough, so he had to elaborate. "She packs information, yo. Sara can put a spin on 'dear' to mean anythin' from I-love-you to fuck-off-and-die.
She makes stuff. She makes people's lives better 'n' yo' can't get 'er to take a compliment if you wrap it fo' Christmas 'n' everyone says she's ugly or she looks like a guy, but she's really pretty an'--" he stopped, an epiphany bloomed in his head like a miracle. "All she ever needed was someone to believe in her first. Guess I'm fuckin' lucky it was me."

Jean was writing quickly, not listening, but taking the words down. She read over what she'd written. "Whoah..." She stared at him. "You really love her."

Todd blushed and looked down at his feet. "Don' really deserve a gal who's all dat," he muttered. "So I'm real grateful fo' what I can get... fo' as long as I got it. Carpe Diem, y'know?"

Jean let him go back to his patch of wall, sort of following along the same path. "She has a friend, doesn't she? Uh... Wiltshire?"

"Janine I-got-a-fuckin'-big-mouth Wiltshire. Yeah. Just look fo' a dumpy chick with copper hair like one o' them metal scourers gone to seed. Or follow the gossip. Whatever." Wait. Was that someone closing Sara's locker? _*FUCK*!_ He picked up speed, trying to dodge through the crowd to find the fiend.

By the time he got there, the crowd had moved on. _Thanks a fuckin' *lot*_, Jean, he thought in her general direction. _Now I'm'a have to do this tomorrow._

Janine Wiltshire was sort of inspecting the general area. "Hey," she said to Todd. "You theen Thara, Thara plain an' tall?"

_One of these days, I'm'a fuck her up..._ "Yo. Brillo-bitch. Plain girls only need makeup to look fabulous. You? You'll always look like a diseased cow."

Jean, taking a position in the background for a change, mouthed, "Brillo bitch?" at him.

Janine choked on her own indignance for a full thirty seconds. It was beautiful to watch. "Jutht you wait," she lisped. "You're going *down*."

"Not on you," he said. "Already got me a girlfriend."

"Excuse me," said Jean, breaking up the bitch-fight. "I'm trying to find out some things about Sara Adrien? I gather you know her..." Janine forgot entirely about Todd. "Let me tell you about *Thara*..." she began.

_God, she's going to be at it for *hours*,_ Todd rolled his eyes and decided to find a quiet place to rest his head for a few minutes.

~

Jean fell into her seat and buried her head in her arms. "Do me a favour," she whimpered. "Kill me quickly and mercifully before that little Wiltshire bitch turns up again..."

"Bad day at the office?" said Kurt.

"What happened?" said Scott, radiating concern.

"Sara happened," Jean wailed. "I have a hole in my sleep cycle that's miles wide, a huge frigging project to complete, psychic exercises this afternoon and Wiltshire will not go away or shut the fuck *up*..."

"Janine Wiltshire?" said Kitty. "Kinda dumpy, sorta like, frizzy hair and braces?"

"Tellmeshe'snothere," Jean blinkered her eyes, possibly on automatic.

"What'd you *do*? Ask her about the gossip?"

"I asked her about Sara. She buttonholed me for a fucking *eternity*." Jean hyperventillated, causing Scott to pass her a paper bag.

Rogue was snickering into her overcooked vegetables. "God, what a newb. Ah found out not to talk to her in mah first *week*..."

"You'll be like, totally lucky she doesn't make up something about you," said Kitty.

"Thank *GOD* I didn't get to say more than 'uhuh'..."

"Don't look," said Kurt. "She's coming this way."

"*SHIT*," Jean hissed. "Quick! Someone says something about Sara."

"I know something," said Evan. "She's totally into Todd Tolensky."

Jean took notes. "Good, good, go on..."
"I caught 'em kissing by that tap near the cafeteria? You know the one they use to hose it out at the end of the day?" Evan sort-of pointed in its general direction. "They were practically on another planet. I never *seen* anybody so blissed out."

"Cool. Roundthetable."

Janine drew in as Kurt fumbled.

"Uh. She's very observant. I think she sees more than she tells about. Open-minded, too. I always like that," he grinned at Amanda, who was happily glued to his left arm.

She kissed him. "I've *heard* a lot about Sara," Amanda offered. "You know the rumours by now..."

Jean twitched.

"But I guess she kinda... orbits in a different level. I haven't had much actual contact with her and I refuse to judge on rumour alone."

Scott was next. "I talked to her for exactly two minutes and I felt like she wanted to kill me," he said. "There's some kind of history going on, I know that much. I guess I'm going to have to work harder to win her confidence. Prove myself, or something."

"She has a Thing about Seniors," said Jean. "It's not you, it's your grade."

"Riiiiiiiggghhht..." he grimaced. "So I either work hard or ride out the hostility for half a year. *Fab*ulous."

"It my turn?" said Janine.

"No. You're not *sitting* at this table," Jean snarled.

"Rude much?" Janine made a face.

"I already *have* ten pages full of things you know about Sara... most of them are physically impossible. Thank you *very* much, but I have to talk to *other* people."

"Geez..." Janine moaned, rolling her eyes. "And I thought you were cool..."

Jean's grip tightened on her calligraphy pen until her knuckles whitened. "Kitty? Anything to add?"

"Like, take *anything* you heard from *her* with a grain of salt. Make that the whole shaker. There's like, three things keeping her from being like, *the* most popular person at school? Her fashion sense, her taste in dinosaur music, and *Janine*. That girl makes *up* most of the rumours you hear about her."

"I must have stretched that creativity, today," Jean muttered, voice full of murder.

"Ah think she's pretty cool," said Rogue. "Takes a brave person to be themselves in high school, an' she's determined ta do it. Most folks hide behind some kinda mask, some public face they use to make everything nicer... she just - handles things. And the one about her eating rats? Fake as. Ah saw her tossin' one straight in the trash last week. Some asshole leaves 'em in there fo' her to find."

"Eeuw," said Kitty.

Tabby sashayed up to them. "You're investigating Sara Essel, ain'tcha?"

"Sara Adrien," corrected Jean. "So?"

"So she stayed overnight. I have some good dirt, between us mutants only."

Jean sighed and turned a page. "Fine. Shoot."

"Okay," Tabby parked herself on the table. "Let's start with the time she decked Lance with a snow shovel..."

Jean used the last five to ten minutes of lunch to beg off the last class of the day - the class with the pop quiz - claiming a more important project concerning Professor Xavier's newest student and a background check into her character. She needed to interview her teachers as the final step.

Something told her it was more honourable in the eyes of Xavier to excuse herself from the bone of contention, rather than be dragged away. Which left her with computer class.

Like most students, she used it as an excuse to relax and kick back. At least until things went pear-shaped with a very elephantine trumpeting and familiar horror-movie screams.

The kid watching the webtoon had his hands stuffed in his mouth, trying not to laugh too loud. Three
neighbours noticed. "Hey guys! The latest _Bayville Wyrd_ is out."
There was a flurry to the web browsers.
"Um," said Jean. "Bayville what?"
"_Bayville Wyrd_," said the classroom news announcer. "W W W dot thylacine enterprises dot com
slash support slash toon. Have fun."
Jean opened a window and entered the URL. The breath left her lungs as the toon played out.
_Oh. My. God._
Today's featured 'toon had a certain overtall, unpopular, androgynous character taking bad ecstasy
and transforming into something akin to Godzilla.
There were also some *mighty* familliar characters, like the Bayville Demon, the Incredible
Frogboy, Lightning Man, Super Ho' and, most irritatingly of all, Princess Perfect.
The voice was almost identical. The attitude was - exaggerated... but she was still recognisable as
Jean.
The Bayville Demon, on the other hand, was nothing like Kurt. He was a wimpy little SNAG who
pretended to be nasty, but just wanted someone to love him... who wasn't a satanist.
All of the characters, in one way or another, were taken from Sara's life, then bent, warped, spindled
and mutilated until plausible deniability was achieved.
But all the same... she was in the Institute now. That meant that there'd be more -well- wyrdness.
Highly *recognisable* wyrdness.
Jean loaded up a 'back issue' and decided to tattle. _*PROFESSOR*! Red alert!_ and she sent him
the URL.
_Yes, Jean. Sara's been showing me. Intriguing, isn't it?_
_It cuts *way* too close to the bone,_ said Jean, watching an episode entitled _Princess Rangers._
Okay, so she didn't have "perfection powers", but *still*...
_You do realise that if we *are* spotted excercising our powers, this quasi-popular webtoon gives us
plausible deniability. And Sara can quickly whip *up* an episode where necessary._
_But I don't like it,_ she whined.
_Sometimes we must face how others view us, and live with it._
Translation, she had to eat this crap and smile.
_Learn to laugh at yourself, Jean,_ 'said' the Professor. _You'll be better off because of it._
Jean learned to laugh at the outlandish headlines Sara transformed into her toons, the 'popular' crowd
of identical yes-people, Janine's alter-ego - better known as "The Mouth", and sundry other foibles
pointed out by Sara's dry humour and sardonic wit... But she couldn't raise a giggle at Princess
Perfect. Not even a smile.
It was very hard to laugh at that particular image of herself. A near-grotesque parody of the sunny
face she wore every day so people would accept her.
Sara's own parody was another thing Jean couldn't even smile at. This was how Sara thought other
people saw her. It was - almost tragic.
_Just when I was ready to kill her..._ Jean thought. _I find this - this - self-mutilation._
If she averaged one a month, then... Sara had been doing this for a little over two years. It had
*started* with strange headlines of the bizarre... and morphed gradually into a catharsis about her life
in hell.
What *else* was she doing to herself?
_Hell, what have I been doing to *me*?_
It was something to think about, at the very least.
The bell rang, forcing her to shut down her explorations of Sara's mental state, and she nearly went
to her next class before she remembered she was supposed to be interviewing Sara's teachers.
The office had given her a list of their likely locations, so she picked the nearest one and readied her
clipboard again.
~
Fred had done his best, but his choices in men's wear were somewhat limited. Plus he was sure he hadn't made a good impression when he refused the chair on the grounds that he might break it. Still, he sat up straight, kept his fiddling down to a minimum, made plenty of eye contact and tried to remain pleasant.
The owner of the nightclub perused his resume - constructed with the help of some of his old truck rally friends - and peered over it. "It says here you're sixteen."
"Yes'm," he said. "I'm not going to go *into* the club, m'am. My job is to keep people *out*."
She thought about this. "True... And you have a truly interesting resume... but, what *qualifications* do you think you have for the job?"
Fred thought about this. "Well... I can pick up an SUV and throw it down the street?"

Todd's heart thumped in his chest. Hell, he should have been beaten up three times already for hanging around the parking lot. Except Wagner did one of his near-infamous, non-teleporting appearance tricks - coming out of nowhere - to vouch for him.
"The fuck bit you, fuzzbutt?" Todd had to ask. "Why you so... *nice* all of a sudden?"
"It's one of my things," he said with a shrug. "Sara's one of the few people who - just didn't react, you know? I have to do *something* for her, and... well... not hassling her boyfriend was the first thing that came to mind."
"Wait... Sara didn't even declare it back then. How did you--?"
Fuzzy grinned. "Let's just say I'm very observant, ja?"
Fred thought about how often they'd been glued together over the past times they'd shared company... and blushed.
Fortunately for his manly honour, Pietro walked by - bearing a bandanna on his head.
"Hey, 'Tro! Get a bad haircut?" Todd catcalled.
"Fuck you!" Pie shot back.
"*God* it was good to get back at the ass for a change. He cackled at the flustered speedster.
"Was? I thought he was trying a new look..."
"Nuh-uh. Freddy gave his antennae a trim fo' dissin' Sara." 
"*RE*ally... This, I must see." {Bamf!} "Yoink!" {Bamf!} "Nice bandanna. *Love*ly 'do."
The remains of his 'antennae' popped directly upwards once freed of their fabric restraint.
{zwip} "Fuckyoubothyoufuckingassholes." Quicker than light, he tied the thing back on. "I oughta trash everything you got except that freak of a girlfriend of yours'd make me her 'hobby'. Gah. Why'd this have to happen to *ME*?"
"Uh... 'cause you're an ass?" said Todd.
"You have an ego the size of Jupiter?" said Kurt.
"It's about time you got some kharmonic realignment?" said Todd.
"Pride goeth before a fall?" said Kurt.
"I don't even know why I'm listening to this," said Pietro. "I don't have to stand here and be insulted." {zwip} He was gone, but with a final flourish of his middle finger.
"Always the default response for the slow of mind," said Todd.
"Where does he usually go to get insulted?" wondered Kurt.
{zwip} "I heardthat, fuzznuts." He spun on Todd. "AndIam*not*slowofmind!" {zwip}
It took them both a full five seconds to start roaring with laughter.

Jean Grey was learning. If there was anything worse than ridicule, she found out, it was pity.
"Ah, yes. The sad case of Mr Essel," Mr Hinkley shook his head. "Very confused boy. No doubt, everybody knows he carries - certain female accessories... around in his knapsack. If you can get him any kind of psychological help while he's with you... I don't gossip, but - I think he needs it."
Jean remembered to use the incorrect pronoun. "I know -er- *his* friend Janine said something about him having a crush on you?"

Hinkley scrubbed his hair and stared out the window. "...oh *God*... That," he sighed, "would certainly explain a lot. He's the most appologetic boy I've ever met, you know. Always embaressed
about something. No attention span at all, either. And now-- wait. Janine? Janine Wiltshire? Biggest mouth in Bayville?" He sighed with relief. "It might not be true. Or very *much* true. Listen, I don't want the education board to think it anything more than a rumour, okay? This is strictly confidential. And besides... even if I *were* attracted to the poor boy, he's under-age. Nothing would happen."

"Okay..." Jean's eyebrows practically achieved orbit. "That's more than I wanted to know...." "Of course," she said aloud. "I *completely* understand. Thank you for your time."

And last on the list, with just enough time to make Scott come and look for her, was Mr Meirs. The committed Remedial Ed. teacher.

Mr Meirs was a balding man with a naturally worried face and an almost permanent air of desperation. His office was decorated with smiling students in graduation gear, most of them with scribbled thanks for all his help in the lower half. He had graphs and diagrams and many, *many* textbooks about various teaching methods lining his shelves.

"Mr Meirs?" Jean asked to get his attention. "Hi, I'm Jean Grey. I'm doing a little background check on Sara Adrien for Professor Xavier."

Meirs frowned. "He runs that - gifted school, doesn't he? What's Sara doing up there?"

"Shedding," Jean thought. "I believe there's some aptitude testing going on, right now," she lied. "One of our tutors, Ms Munroe, found her playing the harp and decided to -ah- check her out. It turns *out* that Sara's very highly gifted, indeed."

Light dawned for Mr Meirs. "Oh, that's *wonderful*! I always had a vibe of frustration from Sara, but she never complained about *why* she was frustrated. Are you considering any further investigation? A frustrated genius can sometimes *appear* to be a poor student, I know, but--"

"*Please*, Mr Meirs. One thing at a time. What do you know about Sara?"

"She needs to be entertained," he said. "If I don't give her a cluster of projects, questions to answer, things to find out... she gets bored. And when she gets bored, she gets creative. I believe the last time, it was a join-the-dots exercise on the ceiling... quite the work of art, but I had to make her clean it up. Such a pity. I should have taken a photograph."

"Does she ever react to the rumours going around about her?"

"No. Her only reaction - if you can call it that - is a studied *non*-reaction. She once told me that rumour mongers delight in shocking people, so she remains unshocked. Remarkable control for sixteen... I've often wondered if she's older inside her head." He paused. "Some things *do* get to her, though. She threw herself into last year's science project with disturbing concern. I'm sure she has issues with her mother."

"I'm fucking positive," thought Jean. "Have you met her?"

"At the PTA, yes. There's something... eerie about her. Like she's wearing a different face. Sara does that, to a certain degree... she adjusts her behaviour for other people, yet she never loses her true self. Fascinating."

Jean felt as if someone was walking over her grave. Different faces. Adjusting her personality... Jean did a lot of that, too. "Anything that worries you?"

"Sara's boxes," he said, cryptically. "I act as a counsellor for my kids, as well. She does this thing where she puts her bad emotions and thoughts away, things that don't *fit* some pre-conceived notion of how she should or should not behave... I asked her about it and she told me about the boxes in her head." He bit his lip. "If something isn't *done* she might just get buried in them... it's why I let her pursue any artistic occupations she desires. She needs to vent."

"Hey, Jean," Scott said from the doorway. "The -ah- others are waiting..."

"Sorry, I have to go," Jean smiled. "Thanks for your time."

"I could send you a copy of my observations on Sara, if you wish?" he offered.

"Would you? Oh *thanks*. That's going to be a *great* help. *Thank* you. Um. See you later?"

"Hope to," he waved at her, and went back to his ceaseless and near-thankless work. Scott propelled her down the now-empty halls. "That was a little... subservient."

"After a whole day of rumour, myth and conjecture, *you'd* be grateful for some solid facts. Or at least unbiased observations," Jean said. "Did you know half this school actually *believes* she eats raw rat?"
"Euw," said Scott. "You can't be serious."
"All here in black and white," she tapped her pages. "Soon to become a *fabulous* report for my sins."
"Learn anything good?"
"Yeah. Don't open my big mouth around the Professor."

Scott was slightly unnerved by the presence of Todd in the back seat, but he gritted his teeth and put up with it, much the same as Jean put up with the slight over-crowding of the car. It was over soon enough, with various passengers leaping, bamfing and phasing out as quickly as they could.

"Treefrog," said Logan, by way of greeting.

"Where's Sara? Is she okay? Does she need anyth--"

"You're here!" Sara's shout was jubillant as she sped out of the front doors. She'd changed into some old, love-worn clothes that did nothing for her lanky figure. "You're here, you're here, you're here, you're here!" She had, Jean observed, also lost the old layer of skin that had made her less than attractive. The new scales, appearing from a distance to be a shade of aqua, shone in the sunlight like gems. Sara scooped him up in a bear-hug. "You're here*..."

Todd laughed in her arms and hugged right back. "Yeah, I'm here," he snuggled his head into her shoulder. "Missed you, too." His feet were dangling off the ground and he gave every sign that he didn't care.

Jean felt more than a stab of jealousy for a relationship like that. For all her popularity... nobody *missed* her in that kind of way.

The moment was ruined by Logan. "Tallwater... put the Frogboy down. He's here to work, this time."


"Yeah," said Todd.

"Knock 'em dead, Sir Leapsalot," Sara grinned.
He saluted. "Yes'm."

Well. If there was one person who knew the most about Sara Louise Adrien, it was the girl herself. "Hi," she said. "The Professor's had me researching you," she began. "Finding out what's true and what isn't."

"Ah," said Sara. "I bet that's been educational."

"I made the mistake of interviewing *Janine*..."

"In that case, ludicrously educational," said Sara. "Let's find a place away from everything and open the floor. I trust I won't be quoted out of context?"

"After the way your *life's* been taken out of context?" Jean shook her head. "No way."

They strolled together until Sara found a sun-warmed bench in a small, isolated flower patch. One of Ororo's little conversation-nooks.

"Having spent--" What was it? A subjective eternity? "--six to seven hours listening to the things going around about you - I have to ask. How the hell do you *stand* it?"

Sara chuckled. A warm, *real* sound. Not like Jean's forced Party Laughs. "There is a subtle distinction between honour and reputation," she quoted. "Honour is what you know about yourself. Reputation is merely what others *think* they know about you. Sometimes, you can even use reputation against those who would hurt you with it." Sara smiled. "Lois McMasters Bujold, _A Civil Campaign_. More or less."

"Has that actually *helped*?"

"Not-- not a lot, no," Sara twitched. "After the shedding, the Professor, Ororo, Dr. McCoy and Logan have all been assisting me with a catharsis regime... one that won't set off any episodes of manifestation sickness. That helped somewhat more. Being a mutant is more complicated than I thought."

"Try having other people's migranes, sometime," said Jean, wry.
"Try feeling every weave and pigment in your clothing," Sara countered. Only now did she notice that Sara was very careful about touching things, and kept clothing between almost everything that -well- wasn't her. "I'm still getting used to the influx of information. The Professor helped *infinitely*, there..."

Oh yes. That was what Professor Xavier was good at. He could help lock or unlock whatever a student needed, aid them in finding - whatever it was that helped them find some fragment of peace. "Back on track," Jean said, more to herself than to Sara. "The daily locker rat... what the hell is *up* with that thing?"

"I only have theories, alas. It's one person's idea of a joke... or it's several people's idea of a joke. I think, though, given the variety of rats, that it's more likely to be one person. A test, perhaps. How long can Adrien - or Essel, of that matter - put up with a verminous corpse? I've yet to spy anybody observing, alas, so perhaps it's all imagination after the -ah- package has been delivered."

"Todd was trying to watch your locker, today," said Jean. "I... wasn't paying much attention, but - I think he was trying to solve that mystery for you."

"Aaawwww... Sweet of him." Sara blushed.

"Okay. So. Why the heck do you hang out with Janine?"

"Hm. You know - I think we were both kind-of waiting until something better came along. She's going to be most vexed when she finds out I got there first."

"You're planning to abandon her?" _Okay, that sounded eager to the degree of wanting to sell tickets..._

"No. Never. I was planning to wake her from her dream. Harsh, yes. Cruel, certainly. Necessary... to the extreme. I can *not* let her persist without suffering my conscience gnawing into my soul."

That was poetic as all hell... _Poetic or not, I still want to sell tickets to the show._

~
A place as large as the Institute has plenty of grunt-work that absolutely *nobody* wanted to do. Most of it, in fact, had to be forced with a set of rosters. There was even a whiteboard with magnetic name tags in one of the hallways, some with post-it notes concerning trades and swaps.

Todd got the bottom-level stuff that was reserved for punishment detail, like tipping the contents of biohazard bins into the furnace. Or lugging wet laundry into the industrial-grade dryers. Or sorting out the layers of accumulated crap in any given basement. Or sweeping up the great clouds of dust from those very same basements and taking them to the trash.

It was when he was mopping up the Danger Room that his career changed forever. Logan, who'd just broken something by accident, was halfway in its guts and swearing vehemently in several languages at once. He emerged. "Treefrog. Over here an' hold th' flashlight, willya?"

Todd was only too glad to abandon the mop. He held the light steady and peered into the cavernous depths of the mechanics and circuitry. "Looks like some o' that solder ain't too hot," he said. "An' one o' yer cams has shifted."

Logan was *extremely* pissed when he emerged this time. "Think you can do better? Go ahead." Todd wriggled into the small space and shifted the cam back to where it belonged. "Yo, I need a three-eighths gripley."

Logan passed the tiny thing, and Todd slotted it into place. "Cool," he investigated the wiring. "I'm'a need some solder an' a solderin' iron."

"Already got it warmin' up." Logan handed over more soldering wire than Todd knew what to do with. "How in hell you know this stuff, Treefrog?" _Do you_, corrected the echo of Sara. Todd shrugged. "It just... Idunno... feels like the right way."

He fixed the soldering and bound the join with electrical tape. He left the interior and replaced the borrowed equipment. "Fire it up," he suggested. "See if it works, yo."

Logan put a panel back on and flicked a switch. The machinery whirred into life, unfolding and manoeuvring as it should. Logan flicked another switch and it folded back up and slid out of sight.

"Not bad," he said.

"Mebbe it's a knack or somethin'," he said.

"Time to find out," Logan took off another panel that revealed a narrow ladder. "Follow me an' bring the stuff."

Below the Danger Room was a veritable labyrinth of machinery and wires. Logan danced around the stuff like he'd been born in it. Todd faked it by hopping from surface to surface.

The neglected part stood out from all the others. Todd didn't know how he knew, since it was clean and oiled, but - he had no other words - it *smelled* of disuse.

"Haven't been able to get it to raise right since Sparky fried it last week," said Logan. "Pro repair job'd be worth seven hundred, minimum."

Ah. So this was the *challenge*.

Sara relaxed upside-down on the couch, watching something animated on the Foreign Language Chanel. Her arms were sprawled out perpendicular to her body and her feet dangled like lead weights in the air.

All the same, that posture did a lot to relax her.

She was body-tired, but her brain was still wide-awake. All that Ororo's hot milk concoction had done was ease her into that peculiar daydream realm where memory eluded one and the fantastic creatures from the back of the mind flickered in and out of her awareness.

Watching the foreign cartoon did a lot to distract her from her childhood phantasms.

There was a kid in the room. Ten, maybe eleven at a stretch. Small for his age, regardless. He was creeping slowly towards her in that foot-shifting walk of the extremely reluctant to investigate.

"Hey?" he said.
"Hay is for horses," Sara muttered, possibly on automatic. The boy turned towards the door. "She's not dead, guys!"
Sara had to laugh. "I do beg your pardon... but if I was dead, I'm sure I'd fall off."
"Um. Are you that new kid?" said the boy.
"Have you seen me around before?"
"No...?"
"Are you accustomed to sharing your training regimes with me?"
"No...?"
"Then I must be new. I *feel* fabulously old at the moment. A side-effect, no doubt, of lurching about the grounds for three hours with weights on my wrists and ankles. Sara Louise Adrien, please forgive the lack of civil motion. You are?"
"Um. Jamie. Jamie Madrox." He scratched his arm. "I - kinda multiply."
Sara summoned a blink. "Three hundred and forty-seven times fifty-eight?"
"Uh..."
"Not that kind of multiplication, then," Sara smiled. "The answer, if you wish to know, is twenty thousand, one hundred and twenty-six."
The boy looked shocked. "It is?"
"Yes."
"Wow. Izzat your mutant power?"
"No. I tend to blend." Sara relaxed her control for a minute and felt her skin match the fabric of the couch. Re-exerting control was too much to ask her tired body at the moment.
"*COOOL!*" He clapped, and then there were four of him before he stopped himself. "Oops." A moment's concentration, and they merged into one. "Um. Why can't you do your clothes?"
"They're not a part of me, of course. Apparently, I'm on the bottom rung of the shapeshifter scale, and then only because my skin changes shape when I blend."
"Whoah. Can you do paisly?"
"Possibly..." she sighed. "I'm worn a little thin at the moment, alas. I'd actually need to touch some."
"You look whipped," said Jamie. "Do you need anything?"
"Possibly a four-course hot meal. Plenty of carbs and protein, regardless."
"Um. I'm not exactly allowed to do stuff in the kitchen, yet. I keep bumping into things."
"Oh botheration," said Sara.

~

Others sidled into Sara's view. "Hi, I'm Bobby," said the boy who knew nothing about vinyl. "Better known as Iceman." He formed an ice skink on his open hand. "Pretty cool if I do say so myself."
"Pardon me if I don't get frosty about your lame pun," punned Sara.
"Euw. Don't encourage him. He'll go on all day," an asian girl swatted Bobby on the arm.
"Jubilation Lee."
"Patriotic parents?" Sara guessed. "With a near-terminal attack of cuteness?"
"Bingo." She grinned. "What's your excuse."
"The initials are hereditary," said Sara. "First-born are afflicted with them."
"Logan got you on the limb weights, anh?" said a tall fellow with punkish hair. "He usually waits a week."
"My fault for getting bored. Would I be incorrect in guessing you're the infamous Ray Crisp? The fellow who shorts electronics? Better known as 'Sparky'?"
"Hey, how'd you know?" said Ray. Sara grinned. "I've been warned - fourfold, mind - not to shake your hand."
"Bus-ted," sang Jubilation.
"Howdy," said a tall blond fellow who just about personified the phrase 'southern hick'. "Sam Guthrie. Aka Cannonball."
"I'd make a hideous pun, but someone's bound to go ballistic."
"*EUW*!"

Sara grinned. Now *that* was a pun well spent.
The remaining individual, someone of vaguely polenesian extraction, sashayed forward. The way
she held herself indicated that she was only slumming with the other proles because she had little
better to actually do. "I, of course, am Princess Amara Juliana Olivians Aquilla of the Empire of
Nova Roma." She extended a hand, palm down and fingers slightly curled. "You may kiss my ring."
Her act was in no way helped by the chorus of unflattering imitations behind her back. Ray, she
couldn't help noticing, mouthed the words 'hairy nutsack' instead of 'ring'. Thank goodness she was
too body-tired to blush.
"Your Highness, I have had a very long and very tiring day. The only thing I plan on kissing in the
near future is my best-beloved... for which I am saving up *all* my energy. "Besides, I was warned
fourfold about you, too. _"Correct me if I'm erroneous, but didn't the Professor strictly stress that
*all* students were equal in this establishment?"
Amara favoured her with an icy glare of doom. "Thank you for rubbing my nose in that," the glare
"Obviously another peasant *far* below my social standing." She swanned out of the room.
"She really *is* a princess," said Jamie.

"The mind boggles," said Sara.

Upstairs, Jean had just finished picking a lock. It was just research, she told herself. The things we
hide from others are more important than the things we put on display. Especially the things we put
on display, Jean amended.
With that in mind, she opened Sara's lost hope chest.
Something rattled, scaring Jean half out of her skin. It was only one of those ball-bearing clocks, now
active on Sara's shelves. Half a second after the rattling stopped a tchotchke-curio clock began a
tinkly version of _Ach Du Liebe Augustine_ and stopped partway through. A quarter past the hour.
Jean remembered to breathe and opened the chest again.
A studio photograph of Sara and a tall, sandy-blond fellow who just *had* to be her father. It wasn't
quite a year old. There was also a photo from the same studio of her mother, looking stunningly
angelic for the camera.
Underneath that was a photo album. Ameteur snaps of life in general. No. Not *quite*. These were
the images that were edited from the public photo albums.
Most of them contained Sara. Or edges of Sara.
There were books, most of them written in code. Some had phenomenally intriguing illustrations and
cramped notes in writing so tiny that Jean had to squint to discern that it, too, was in code.
They all had dates marking the inception and completion of each journal.
The earliest ones were scrapbooks, written in the careful writing of a person just getting the hang of
their letters. Photographs, art, glitter and coloured things all crowded the pages for attention.
Until Sara turned around five. There were hospital bracelets with her mother's name on them, and
pressed flowers from get-better bouquets, all interspersed with the usual beauty-contest furforal of the
previous early journals. Sara's sixth birthday was marked with a tooth taped to the page, a birthday
cake and intricate paper snowflakes sprinkled with glitter. Soon after that was a final pageant entry
featuring Sara - starting to get gawky - in a pseudo-military get-up and the words to the Modern
Major General.
There were some tabulations on entrants' scores, and a page full of the word 'Why' and a lot of
question marks.
Sara had done her math right. She should have won. But she lost.
Immediately after that was a newspaper clipping Jean didn't even remember. An inter-school choir
for some kind of charity.
Jean's young, smiling face had been circled.
Sara's had not, yet she stood out from her age-mates by being a head and shoulder above them.
Twenty pages after this were dedicated to articles about Jean Grey, highlighted phrases and the written words, "study, study, study" over and over again. They stopped when some newspaper mentioned Jean's height. Sara, two years her junior, was already an inch taller. Jean closed the book and found the box. It was a dress from an exclusive and expensive clothiers. Jean opened it. On top of the tissue paper was a bundle of letters tied with a red ribbon, and then tied again with a black one. Jean put those aside. She might be terminally nosy, but she was never rude enough to read someone else's personal *mail*. That was just plain wrong. Inside the tissue was a simply gorgeous red dress. The fabric put Jean in mind of autumn leaves and burning embers. She didn't unfold it to see what cut it was. Some things were just better left alone. There were, however, two pieces of paper with the dress. One was a newspaper clipping. It was one of those columns of little articles that newspapers had to print, but didn't know what to do with. One paragraph was circled.

_15YO attacked on Prom Nite,_ read the title. _A young high school girl was pelted with street debris and dog feces, last night. Witnesses at the scene state that she was waiting for her Prom date on the corner of Twelfth and Main when a rented limousine drove by, and several young men pelted her with organic waste. The girl, name withheld for privacy, has yet to press charges, even though she has stated that she knew her attackers._

The second piece of paper was the cleaning bill, on which Sara had added, 'not worth it' in red ink. Jean sincerely *hoped* it was red ink.

"If you wanted to know the story, all you had to do was ask," said Sara.

Jean looked up. She was standing right next to her. "I can explain," she said.

"I certainly hope you can."

~~

"Huh," said Logan as the machine rose perfectly and with more than a hint of grace. "How 'bout that..."

Todd grinned like a bastard. He could *do* something. He was *worth* something. Wow.

He shouldn't have said it, but he was feeling cocky. "Y'got anythin' else, yo?"

"Garage," said Logan, leading the way.

It was a long walk without many hints of daylight. "Hey, yo... I do get time with my girl, right?"

"Soon enough," said Logan. "We'll only do a few preliminaries on this job. Don't have all the parts, yet."

Cool. Ongoing project. Todd was liking the idea of a hobby that didn't involve making the boiler work.

They entered the garage and there, besides the work bench, was Sara's scooter, huddling under a finger-crocheted rag rug, away from the gleaming, well-kept machines of the Institute.

"We're fixin' Sara's bike?"

"We're fixin' an L-579," said Logan. "Fifties classic, made before scooters became a girlie bike. We're gonna turn this..." he hefted the rug off Sara's much-battered heap, "into somethin' like *this*." Logan gave Todd a calendar, picture side up.

You could tell it was a calendar for people who loved machines, for a start, there were no busty bimbos in the way of the actual bike. Secondly, there were reams of technical data and windowed close-ups of features of interest.

The L-579 in the calendar shot glistened like it knew it didn't need a star filter to look good.

"Whoah..." he whispered. Just like Sara, her bike needed a little care and attention to look absolutely gorgeous.

"Yeah. Ya can see why collectors go nuts for one." Logan pulled a tool chest nearby and parked
himself on the floor. "C'mon, Treefrog. Let's see what needs fixin'."

"Um..." said Jean.
Sara sort-of leaned against the bookshelf-door she'd formed around her personal space, folded her arms, and raised an eyebrow.

"Okay. I admit it. I'm a nosy little bitch," Jean cracked under the pressure of that patient gaze. "I've always *been* a nosy little bitch... and the Professor practically handed me a certificate to be nosy to my heart's content... and... dammit. I *know* the things people hide tell a lot more than the things they display. So I picked the lock and I looked, okay? I wasn't going to steal anything, I was just-- I was trying to see who you are."

Sara knelt and began filing things back into the chest. "Most of the things in there, I put there to keep them safe from Mother," she said. "She'd throw a lot of this out if she knew it was there. This--" she caressed the red fabric of the dress, "--is waiting a second chance at a first date."

Second chances... "I could wrangle something?" said Jean. "Get Todd some time off and -Idunno- arrange an audience-free zone? Hell, I could *guarantee* you won't get... stuff... thrown at you."

"It was dog feces," said Sara. "Do you recall - a Mr James Camron Stiye?"

How could she forget the man who taught Duncan everything he knew? "Yes," Jean growled. "I remember *him*. He got half the cheerleading squad pregnant."

"He pretended to like me. Ingratiated himself. Invited me to the Prom..."

Oh *God*, no. "You were last years' Froshti?"

"If that's what they call it, yes." Sara re-folded the tissue and replaced the love-letters. "I was luckier than some. They gang-rape the pretty ones, so I've heard." She sealed the box again. "Mother warned me about him. Repeatedly. Therefore I can't sue. It's not worth it."

Jean watched her place the box in the chest like someone laying their dreams in a grave. "That," she announced, "is not going to *do*."

"Pardon?"

"You deserve a better first date," she said. "I'm going to see to it that you *get* one." Jean Grey, at Freshman year, had been wise enough not to fall for the Froshie tradition. Besides, she could pick up a liar at fifty feet. She'd warned as many other girls as she could reach, but Tiffany refused to believe that Gordon was anything but sincere.

She'd vanished off the map after that year. Moved away. Whispers in the girls' locker room said she was gang-raped and in such a fragile condition that they couldn't give her an abortion.

The truth about what happened to Tiffany Marde was never known to Bayville.

Jean saw to it that Duncan and his cronies never even *thought* of culling a Froshie... and that awareness leaflets were left in Freshman haunts. It was the most she could do.

But now, tonight, she could do something more.

She knocked on Xavier's study door.

_Do come in, Jean. I believe we have a lot more to discuss, now._

"Suspension's shot," said Todd. "The brakes don't, half of the wiring's misplaced... an' don't get me *started* on the motor. I love Sara dearly, but... she really oughta stop shoppin' at shithole garages. Lookit this metal, wouldja? Pure *crap*!"

Logan chuckled as he continued disassembling the bike. The outer casing had been put carefully aside for some forensic investigation into its original colour. "Can't get parts for an L-579 on the cheap. Guessin' she did her best with whatever fit."

"Well, yeah, I can see *that*. I'm shocked Eileen got goin' at *all*." "Ahem," said Ororo. "I need to -ah- borrow Todd for the rest of the evening."

"Huh?" said Todd. _Yo, that's *so* not smooth._ "But I was almost down to the wheel assembly..."

"I'm sure you want to look nice for your date with Sara, this evening," said Ororo. With an almost audible 'twing', Todd's moral compass swung straight around to Romance. "...date?"

he squeaked. "Sara din't mention nuttin' 'bout no date..."

"Oh, she didn't know it was happening, then. She knows now. Come along, please. I have some
clothes that might suit your colouring - once you've bathed..."
Todd didn't stop grinning. He had some of Hank's marvellous magical skin goo and it worked just
fine as a soap substitute that did *not* make him yak. "Sure thing."
"Don't go near second base," advised Logan, with a meaningful exposure of an adamantium claw.
"Not unless ya wanna get rid of some fingers."
"...meep..." said Todd.

~

Sara took the weights off, placing them with care beside her bed. Logan would be expecting her to
wear them all of tomorrow, no doubt.
Now that Jean was gone, she took out the dress again. Would it still fit? It had looked fantastic on
her, last year... but last year, she'd been 5'9". A couple of inches could make a hell of a lot of
proportional difference.
Except for the bust.
She took it out. A-line skirts made *anybody* look good, and the judicious frill at the v-neck
accentuated what little chest she had. The matching shoes, alas, were too small for her feet, now.
She'd have to make do with the black pumps, and make them match with the cluster clip-ons that
matched the dress.
At least she was more blue-ish than green-ish, so the dress didn't exactly *clash* with her skin-tone,
and the muted, mottled effect did more for her than she would have thought.
_Crunch time._ Sara skinned out of her comfortable gear and slid into the dress. The zipper was
awkward, as always, but it did up without doing anything severe to her ribcage. And no seams
threatened to pop.
The waistline had risen, of course, to something near an empire line, and the hemline encroached on
revealing her hated knees, but that was easily fake-able.
At least she didn't have to wear any kind of stockings. Her legs were already smooth. _I'll never have
to shave my legs. Huzzah. Score one for scales._
Next, makeup and accessories.
Her former colours just would not *do* any more. Reds and pinks were not the best to accentuate a
blue-ish face. Therefore, Sara went straight for her con-box, a toolkit that had been adapted to serve a
more feminine purpose.
Royal blue didn't work. It was disturbing. A more subtle purple-ish tone of blue, on the other hand,
seemed to do the magic. Just eyeliner on the eyes, and her mascara had to be renewed. She threw the
ancient mascara out.
_Hmp. Why did I retain eyelashes and eyebrows when all my other body hair vanished? Why ask
why?_ She was halfway into extending her eyes just a tweak when the wave of anxiety hit.
Dare she trust a Senior? One who had every reason to see Sara stumble, mind. Was she reading Jean
right? Or was she a fabulous actress?
Was Todd even going to know that she was waiting?
Would she be stood up?
Hell, what was she going to do for the actual *date*?*
Well, technically speaking, it was their third outing together, so...
Sara's eyes found the book of Omar Kyam's quatrains. Yes. That would be perfect.
_President... may I borrow a few things?_
_Help yourself, and be sure to return as much as you can._

Black helped Todd a lot. What didn't help was the fact that he was a bundle of nervous energy.
"Should I wear a tie? Naw, we can't go anywhere -y'know- *out*. Is it formal? Informal? D'you
know? Ah, fuck. My hair's gone all shit. I knew I shoulda just let it air-dry. D'you got shoes that'd
fit? 'Cause these sneakers ain't exactly sparklin', y'awmsayin'? Is she gonna be there? Is it a set-up?
What if I freak out? What if I *pass* out? What if--"
"*Todd*," Ororo sighed.
"Yo?"
"Relax. Everything's going to be fine. You'll see." She straightened his garb and nodded. "Yes. Very fine."
Todd regarded his reflection dubiously. Black actually made him look like he had a skin tone. And surprisingly, so did grey. He'd have never chosen to wear black cargos, a grey shirt, and a black jacket, but they - worked.
Ororo had refused to touch the bracers... and they worked, too.
She was brushing his hair. Styling it a little so that it didn't look that much like shit. And then it started to look *better*.
_Dayumm, yo. I never knew I could be - *handsome*._
Hank knocked on the doorway. "The lady is waiting," he announced.
Todd almost wet his shorts.

Sara spread the blanket underneath a spreading chestnut tree, and arranged herself and her props for maximum viewer impact. Skirt covering the knees, leaning back just a little to emphasise her laughable female attributes... make a hip to imply a waist. Warm, sociable smile. Book propped open in her upper hand.
_Sparkle, sparkle..._
"I'm ready for my close-up..." she whispered.

Todd opened the door and forgot how to breathe.
_Whoah._
She'd framed herself perfectly. There were even fireflies sparkling in the background to make it a perfect moment.
He only remembered to breathe in when he got a bit of tunnel-vision, and someone charitably poked him in the back.

Sara ignored the very quick helping hand that sort-of poked Todd towards her. Nothing went absolutely perfect. There had to be a flaw. She cleared her throat. "A book of verse underneath the bough," she recited. "A loaf of bread," she indicated the box of Sugar Toastees™, "A jug of..." she checked the bottle in the basket, purely for amusement purposes, "...carbonated apple beverage... And thou beside me, singing in the wilderness. Ah, wilderness is paradise, enow."
Todd dropped to his knees on the edge of the blanket. "Yo, if I start singin', I be scarin' *bats* outta the trees, babe."
They both cracked up.
"That distant rumbling sound is Omar Kyam turning over in his grave," Sara informed. "I couldn't very well have wine. We're both under-age and I'm allergic to the stuff." She tossed the book into the basket and relaxed into a more comfortable posture. "But a picnic *is* rather appropriate, is it not?"
"Yo, it's *perfect*," he sighed, scootching closer. "Yo' perfect. Dayumm. What I do to get you?"
"You cared, Sir Leapsalot," Sara kissed him, lightly and briefly. "Something for which I'm eternally grateful."

~

"So what are they doing?" said Kurt, who'd arrived at the window late.
"Psh. They're holdin' hands an' talkin'," said Rogue. "Don' waste time... *kiss* 'er!"
"Aw *geez*", moaned Bobby. "Now he's lookin' in the *basket*..."
There was a small chorus of disappointed moans.
"If you all don't *mind*," sniped Ororo. "I'd *like* to make a start on dinner and *you* are all blocking my way. That is, of course, unless you're all volunteering to do the dishes?"
The kitchen cleared like magic, leaving only three members of the senior staff. Hank, Ororo and Logan. 
"Clever," said Logan.
Hank immediately knuckled over to the window. "What *are* they doing, then?" he craned his neck to peek.
"Henry McCoy, *really*," scolded Ororo. "Let them have a *little* time to themselves, at least." Abashed, the big blue mutant forced himself away from the window. "I predict that my espionage has cost me the chore of peeling your vegetables."
"You'd better believe it," said Ororo. She pointed an authoritative finger at the pantry. "Move."

They were looking up at the stars. Sara was pointing out constellations and telling legends.
"...and when Pan leaped into the stars, he turned into the goat-fish thing that we know from our horoscopes. The Gods applauded his ingenuity, and let him stay among the stars."
"Whoah," said Todd. He munched on a Sugar Toastee™ and stared at the bright lights that had never seemed that important before. "It's beautiful... Never saw th' stars much when I was a kid. City lights, yo."
"You haven't missed much. They take thousands of years to move, even the slightest fraction to our eye. Of course, what we see is a lie."
"What? But they're right there."
"What we see is the light sent out by them some hundreds of thousands of years ago. By the time a star's light reaches us, the star's moved or died."
Todd picked a light at random. "So... that one's dead or gone?"
"No dear, that's Jupiter."
"Oooh, look," Todd pointed at a cloud. "I used ta love watchin' th' clouds cross the moon an' the stars. It was like magic. Even in winter."
"Dear, what were you doing out after dark during winter?"
Todd blushed. "Um. Y'know. Stuff."
Sara had gone all serious. "Sweetheart... you don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but - please don't lie?"
"Used t' hide in th' dark 'til Pops fell asleep," he muttered, head down."
"Ah," Sara leaned against him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "You'll never be cold again, love. I'll see to it personally, if I have to."
He huffed a laugh. "Nobody's gonna rag on ya on *my* watch," he vowed. "I'm a fuck 'em up if they try."
They kissed.

Ororo, who was "co-incidentally" doing the dishes at the time, smiled. "Aaaaaawwww..."
"Cheater," said Hank.
"Your fault for not pickin' a good post," said Logan, looking out the little window on the kitchen door. "Thaaaat's right, Froggy. Keep yer hands to yerself..."

~

The moon glowed, half-behind the passing cloud, and the fireflies danced in the air around them. Her scales felt smooth, like textured glass, yet were warm and alive under his fingers. And against his cheek.

{POP!}
They both shrieked.
"Oh. That damned cork..." Sara panted, gesturing at the bottle that was now curling vapours out of its neck. "I loosened it before we -ah- found something to discuss."
"...'kinell," Todd squeaked. "Yo, do teenagers get heart attacks?"
"Unlikely, unless you have a history of heart conditions in your family." She grew concerned. "You don't, do you?"
"Naw. Us Tolenskys are born tough. But *damn*, that scared the crap outta me."
"I'm fairly certain I'd have jumped out of my skin - if it wasn't awaiting prying eyes in my second
drawer."
Todd cracked up, followed shortly by Sara as she poured the carbonated apple beverage into two plastic champagne glasses. Their mutual giggles were only *slightly* tinged with hysteria, but soon warmed over.
"Face up?" Todd asked.
"Of course face up," she handed him a glass. "I briefly considered some other side, but rejected it, owing to the fact that shed skin is more than a little tricky to fold."
More giggles, which turned into guffaws as someone upstairs screamed.
"Yo, to bustin' th' nosy!"
"To breaking bad habits," said Sara, clinking her glass with his.
They drank.
Jean Grey appeared in a balcony above them. "Sara Louise Adrien, that was *NOT* funny!"
"Yes it was," Todd shouted back. "Make yo' think twice, won't it?"
"I was *looking* for a *comb*." Jean snarled as she stormed back inside.
The laughter was infectious and circular. Just as it began to die down, one or the other would remember the scream, or picture Jean's reaction, and would start all over again. They both wound down eventually, teary-eyed, ribs and faces aching.
"Oh dear," Sara sighed. "Pity I can only do that here."
"It'd be *more* than freakin' cool if you could rig it up in yo'r locker, babe. I'd *pay* to see some idjit wit' a rat get all hell scared outta him."
"Of course! My spring-troll!"
"Yo'r whut?"
"There's this springy foam that compacts into a very small space," Sara illustrated wadding something huge into a tiny area. "I calculated that I could create something roughly three cubic metres in volume, and designed a troll. It never got off paper because Mom kept cancelling my orders, but now..." an evil glint shone in her eyes. "One way or another, the rats will stop."
Todd pondered this, a firm desire to see the rat-saboteur get their comeuppance. "I think I saw some... art supplies in one o' the basements," he suggested. "Prof prob'ly won't mind..."
Sara had a very *good* evil laugh.
Every hair on Jean's arms stood on end.
"Trouble?" said the Professor.
"I sensed a disturbance in the force," she said.
"Oh yes. Todd and Sara plotting some harmless prank."
"It better not be on *me*," Jean remembered the skin. Something like that was hard to forget.
"Not unless you're in the habit of leaving rats lying around."
"Oh, *that*..." Jean relaxed. "I might just help." And while she was thinking about that, the Professor got past her shields and delivered a mental sting. "Ow..."
"Focus, Jean," said Xavier. "You have to be able to multi-task."
Jean smirked, and thought of that silly sun song from Sara. Even if it didn't help her, it would certainly give *Xavier* a heck of a time getting rid of it.

Across town, in her room, a girl shuddered in a sudden and inexplicable cold.
"Sup with you, spaz?" said her older brother.
"Thomeone walked on my grave," lisped Janine. "And the latht I checked? Thith wath *my* room."
"Thut up."

"To locker-trolls!"
"To delayed revenge!"
"To gettin' yo'r own back!"
"To having some *fun* at school!"
"To fun!"
"To mischief!"
"To love!"

"Ah, l'amour..." Sara sighed. They clinked glasses and drank. "To the stars above and below?"
"To a beautiful night an' a beautiful girl!"
"To looking forward!"
"Too late ta be out," said Logan.

Sara, in a playful mood, pouted. "Aaaawww.... Ten more minutes?"
"Inside."
"Five more minutes?"
"Both o' ya."
"Three more minutes?"
"Dinner's ready, you two. C'mon."
"One more minute?"
"Tallwater... don't me drag ya."

Sara giggled. She'd been packing anyway, just verbally sparring with the surly mutant. "Did anyone see where that cork went?"
"Yo, I think it's in orbit by now."
Sara snorted and giggled. "Hccchk... Houston - who ordered champagne?"

They laughed all the way to the dinner table.

~

_Ah, they had a good date,_ Kurt smiled as the two entered and found their seats. Even if he didn't have the ability to see their lights, he'd have known. They were both grinning like maniacs and had a definite case of the Sillies, in which 'funny' could be found in everything and zany ideas fissoned. Kurt approved. Sara was exactly the sort of person who needed a good laugh and having the Sillies would certainly see to that.

And was Jean smirking proudly over there? She'd done something... arranged the date? That had to be it. But she wasn't smirking in that proud, look-at-the-good-thing-I-did way, but the secretive, my-kharma's-been-restored way.

_Bless your good works, Jean,_ he thought.

_Are you *sure* you're not a telepath?_ she 'said'.

_Why do I get this question so often? I've been tested. You were there._

Rogue was glaring jealously at the two of them, and merging into wistfulness when she thought nobody was looking. Apart from her, there was a general air of good feeling across the table. Something was going *right*.

Kurt decided to enjoy the atmosphere while it lasted.

Lance arrived to pick the toad up, and was ushered in by a quasi-belligerant Scott.

"They're in basement five. I'll show you the way."

_And fuck you, too,_ thought Lance. "I'm only here to drag his sorry ass home. Me an' Kitty are on the outs, so I'm not interested in any conversation with her or anything else. The end."

"Fine," growled Scott.

"Fine," said Lance.

"Fine."

"*Fine*."

They 'fine'd their way to the elevator and all the way down to basement five, where Sara - nobody else at the institute was nearly 6' tall and covered with scales - and Todd were doing something weird with metal rods, clamps, and clay.

Lance forgot entirely about getting the last word against Summers and gawped at the two of them.

_I'll fucked three ways from Sunday... they actually clean up *good*._ As to *why* they were
playing with clay, rods and clamps in a basement while still duded up for a date... he'd learned from
long experience to never ask.

Scott, still behind on things, did it for him. "What the hell are you two doing?" he asked.

"Locker troll," said Sara.

_"Don't ask,..."_ Lance begged. He knew this was going to cause a migraine. _"Please don't ask. Please,
please, please don't ask. Please, please, please, please, please pl--"_

"A what?" said Scott.

"Great," snapped Lance. "Now they're going to *explain* it."

"It's an anti-rat device, yo," said Todd.

"Locker. Troll," said Sara. "A troll for a locker. Which particular word did you not understand?"

"Don't do it," said Lance. "Do not engage them in any further conversation. You do *not* want to--"

"What the hell is a locker troll for?"

"Goddamnit, Summers!"

Todd glared at them both. "It's for putting in lockers, foo'. *Duh*.

"Allow me to demonstrate," said Sara. She bought out a tiny metal lunchbox of the type that
construction workers used to use in cartoons. "With my lunchbox troll. I made it a few years ago to
demonstrate the concept." She handed it across. "Go ahead. Raid my lunch."

"You're gonna regret it..."

Scooter ignored him as usual, opening the box. He yelped as a surprisingly large demon-thing sprung
out at his face.

"Oh *God*," moaned Lance. The dropped lunchbox, he couldn't help noticing, had plastic food in
it, to demonstrate that one could still enjoy lunch and have a lunchbox troll at the same time. "Okay,"
he announced. "I've had e-fucking-nough. Todd. We're going *home*.*" He scragged the younger
mutant by the collar and physically dragged him away.

"But we were gonna pitch a whole buncha ideas," Todd objected. "Adrien-Tolensky Novelties, Inc.
A whole range o' stuff to get back at fools that get into yo' shit, yo."

"I *don't* want to know," said Lance, even though he knew Todd was going to tell him *anyway*.

He dragged Todd towards the elevator.

"Bye, honey," Sara chirped. "I won't forget the invoice."

_Invoice? No. Don't ask. They just might tell you._

"Yo, we drafted up a whole buncha shit," said Todd, true to Lance's prediction. "We got closet trolls,
fridge trolls, suitcase trolls, diary trolls, pantry trolls, tinned trolls..." He continued chattering until
they were well on the way back to the boarding house.


"Yo, we were even thinkin' o' makeup trolls. Y'know, fo' people that steal yo'r lip balm? But Sara
said th' logistics was tricky an'--"

He pulled up outside their domicile. "WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP ABOUT TROLLS? I
DON'T WANT TO KNOW! I NEVER WANTED TO KNOW!"

[Zwip] "What*this*about*trolls?" said Pietro.

Todd took a deep breath and latched onto Pietro's arm. "Wait'll yo' hear about this, yo..."

Lance stomped into the house and crunched down a handful of Advil. He didn't *need* this shit.

"Off to work," said Fred. "See ya sometime tonight." He was dressed up and put on some shades.

"Do I look bouncer-y?"

"Intimidatingly," said Lance. "Anyone wants me, I'm in a coma." He slouched off to his room.

"G'Night," said Fred.

Tabby was waiting for him. She'd spread cheap glue on her face and allowed it to flake so that she
looked like she was shedding. "Do *I* get some attention, now?" she said.

"Go fuck a Senior," he sighed. "Someone *far* away from here." He'd had *enough* of this shit for
one night. He slammed the door in her face.

"But *you're* a Senior," she said. "And you're cheap and always available."

Way to romance a guy, Tabby._ "Fuck off and die!" he hollered.

Tabby wandered away, crying out, "O, I'm shedding! O, the pain! Someone comfort meeeee..."
Why did he keep fucking doing this to himself?

~

Logan found her, still in her date gear, and still in basement five. She was adding plaster to a lumpish shape in the middle of the floor. At least she’d put down a drop-cloth.

"You're gonna ruin that dress, Tallwater."

"It won't fit for very much longer, anyway," she said, wrapping wet plaster and gauze around some rods between the clay teeth. "It's had its second chance, now. The ghosts are at peace."

And since the only time he'd ever seen a student involved in something this intricate was to pass some kind of project, he asked, "This due in any time soon?"

Tallwater worked her way around a tooth, onto a neighbouring tooth, and around another rod. "I was rather hoping to get this done before tomorrow. I *think* I can wrangle it, even with the bedtime restrictions."

Logan sighed. _There's always one that leaves it to the last minute..._ "Anywhere I can help?"

"You could start on the left side of the mouth," she said. "I'd really like to do this without a minimum of mould-marks, hence the sprues. It means some finishing, but I was prepared for that." She progressed to another tooth. "Usually, for a big job like this, I get a buttload of wax and reclaim it in the fast-dry, but clay was here, so I *have* to break it up. Pity."

She had, he noticed, picked seams that wouldn't be so visible to the casual observer. "Pro job," he said.

"Of course. Something like this, I expect to sell copies. Which means making a *darn* good mould. I've already borrowed every fan, heater and hair-dryer I could get away with so the plaster can set while I'm snoozing, and then it's all the fun of deconstruction, cleaning, reassembly and mixing the stuff." Tallwater grinned. "This is going to be *so* much cooler than my lunchbox troll."

"Your *what*?" Logan raised an eyebrow.

"In the tin lunchbox, over there."

Logan took a break to investigate, and had to stop himself from shredding the fucking thing. "The hell?"

"Anti-theft device," she said. "Some establishments didn't exactly care what happened to one student's lunch, so... I took my own steps. The lunchbox thieves were broken of the habit in less than a week." Tallwater sounded annoyingly pleased with herself. "I'm sure a decent paint job helped."

"Someone stealin' from yer locker?"

"Heavens, no. I have nothing worth stealing *in* there. The daily addition of a rat corpse, however, is more than a tad annoying."

Click. "This ain't for some project, is it?"

"Not the kind that gets graded, no."

He considered the multitude of options, up to and including his own, of finding the bastard who did it and tearing them a new one. Tallwater's solution was... interestingly harmless. Unless the bastard had a heart condition.

But all the same. "Get ta bed, Tallwater. I'll finish up for ya."

"Am I allowed to get back to it when I wake up?"

Seemed a good compromise. "Fine. Just get cleaned up an' get to bed."

Jean set up her night-shields and settled down into a comfortable position. Sara wasn't in yet, so that gave her half a chance at doing this the *right* way.

She let the shield-maintaining excercise run into her back-brain and relaxed into a quasi-slumber.

{ rattledarattledarattle...}
That *fucking* clock.

{Dingledingledingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingding...}
That *other* clock...
Jean tried to ease into slumberland again.

_I can get accustomed to the noise. Heck, I used to sleep soundly next to a friggin' train station. I can get used to one little ball-bearing clock._

_Tune it out. Relax. Breathe._

"Passing through," said Sara. "Just require my night attire. I'll try to come back in the dark after I've cleaned up." _

And I am not fucking asking why she has clay and plaster on her hands... up to her elbows._

_I'm going to shoot that fucking clock._

Changed my mind. I'm going to shoot *that* fucking clock._ Jean sighed, turned over, and tried to get to sleep. She could tune out the five-minute rattles. She could do this.

__I'm going to have a nervous twitch every time I hear "Ach Du Leiber Augustine"...__

The Professor intervened. _You learned to tune out the other chimes of the mansion. You can tune out this as well._

Sara returned, as promised, in the dark. "G'night," she chirped. 

"...the fuck y'need two clocks f'r anyway?" Jean managed.

"They're special gifts from Dad," said the lizard girl. "They help me sleep." _

...urge to kill... rising...._

Sara roamed around her half of the room, adding things to the hamster maze before she tucked herself in.

Wait. Hamsters were nocturnal.

...ffffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuck....

~

"Good morning starshine..."

"...uuuuuuUURRRRRRrrrrggghhh..." Jean rolled over, after dreams tainted with _Ach Du Leiber Augustine_ and the rattling of ball-bearings, and readied a pillow. She aimed by ear.

{Whap!}

"Goddamn it, sing *quieter*..." Jean whimpered.

"And good morning to you, too." Sara gently returned the pillow.

{Bamf!} "Time to wake-- AAAHHHH!" {Bamf!}

Sara yelped. "Not *again*..."

"TerriblysorryIdidn'tmeanithonest," said a rushed German voice on the other side of the door.

"Pleasedon'ttellLoganhe'llskinmealive." _

"As long as you don't tell, I don't have a reason to," said Sara, reaching for her clothes. "Perhaps you should knock before you bamf?"

"Perhaps *you* should kick the nekkid sun-worship," muttered Jean.

{Dingledinglingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingding...}

"Godfuckingdamnit! Does the universe *hate* me?" Jean screamed over the chimes.

"Just think. Today's Friday. Tomorrow, you should be allowed to sleep in," said Sara.
That's what *she* thinks. Jean lurched upright as Sara was leaving. "Hey. You're pink..." She decided not to ask about the small pieces of foam on the carpet.

Sara waved her left wrist. "Holowatch. That means I can return to school." She grinned. "No more rats, soonish. The Professor's taking me early so I can get ahead of the rodent. I hope."

What. Ever. Jean forced herself onto her feet and got her shit together by degrees. A hot shower helped, and by the time she made it to coffee, she was awake and Sara was nowhere to be seen. Kurt was trying to be invisible while he engulfed breakfast and wearing his holowatch to hide his blushes. Mind you, one had to be quite accustomed to the Elf to know when he was blushing. Fur hid a lot of subtle cues... but not all of them.

Todd shook himself and breathed deep in order to stay awake. Someone was coming. Sara. She was wearing a black shirt with green, vertical writing on it. The Matrix? No... the writing was binary. Something he'd have to learn.

He grinned. "Hey, snookums. How's the troll?"
"I managed to make two. You want one?"
"Nah, I got my intercontinental, ballistic sundae launcher. I'm coo',"
Sara opened her locker. "Oh. *Charming*."
"Yeah. One got by me, yesterday. Sorry, yo."
She just whipped a plastic bag out and encapsulated the whole thing. "Infant bait. Ick." The whole lot was dumped in the bin.

Todd shuddered. Even the *mention* of maggots gave him flashbacks. "Euw."
Sara put down her bag and dug out a truncated cardboard pyramid. "Here it is. The first locker-troll in history."
"That big thing in all dat? Whoaah."
Sara placed it and undid the tape holding the business end together, then carefully closed the locker while removing the front piece of cardboard. "*There*," she said. "The next person who opens that is in for a nasty shock."

Todd was grinning from ear to ear. "Wish I had a camera fo' that, yo."
Sara thought. "You know... I have pxt on my cellular..."
It took him a whole minute to learn how to handle it, and then they had to bid each other farewell so Sara could go see Principal Kelly with Xavier.

Now, the waiting was a lot more fun.

"Ah. Mister Essel. I've been having some problems finding your permanent record."
Xavier gave her an understanding look, one that said, "I've been at this for fifteen minutes."
"Is it? Then... has Mister Essel left the school?"
Sara slumped into her chair. "No. Mister Essel never existed. He's a fabrication of ignorance, poor memory, myth and legend."
Kelly seemed to ignore this while digging in the A section of the filing cabinets. "Odd, I could have sworn I saw him on campus, the other day..."
Sara rolled her eyes. "Five-eleven, thin, wears peculiar T-shirts and loose, stiff jeans? Permanently slumped over under a big knapsack? Slightly girlish hair? Like mine?"
"Why, yes. Have you seen--" click. He'd found her file. "*Oh*. Adrien, S. L. Of *course*. I'm terribly sorry."
"And you're getting worse with practice, _thought Sara. "Happens all the time," she said. "I'm almost over screaming into the void."
Kelly put down Sara's file, which took up two, very thick, folders. "Are you *certain* that -ah- Sara is gifted? As you can see, she's -ah- had quite a few problems."
"No doubt, a plea for help from a frustrated genius," said Xavier. "If you care to examine the precise *nature* of the disturbances she's caused..."
Kelly flipped a few pages. "Ice capades in July?"
"Yes. That one does rather leap out."
"Heathen rituals?"
"First of May, sir," said Sara. "I put up a more historically accurate maypole and danced around in woad and flowers."
"Yes. *Just* woad and flowers, I see."
"Nothing else was *working*," Sara complained. "I had to get out of there or my brain would implode."
"Ahem," said Xavier with a sidelong glare. "Obviously, we have to interest Sara, or risk a repeat of... several unfortunate incidents."
"Oh, don't worry, sir. I try not to do the same thing twice."
Kelly gave her a classic I'm-sure-as-hell-going-to-remember-you-now glare of doom. "That," he said, "is hardly reassuring."
"And all the more reason to put Sara into some advanced classes," smoothed the Professor. "After all, we can't afford to risk her boredom."
"What classes were you considering?"
"All of the sciences and intellectual pursuits need to be moved up at least one grade," said Xavier. "More, if she proves apt at the subject. Her capability for Trigonometry is at a Senior level."
Kelly was starting to look at her as if she were a pile of tax-free money.
"But mostly, I'm concerned about her need for some variety of outlet."
"Pardon?" said Sara.
"You need to express yourself," said Xavier. "And since you're a creative genius, you shouldn't have too much trouble with the Arts. I think they'd do you a great amount of good. Especially Drama."
"Drama?"
"To raise your confidence," he said. "To give you -ah- more of an edge with some of your contemporaries."
And give her some much-needed inter-personal skills. "Ah. Will I have to be with Seniors in there, too?" Oops. She didn't mean to sneer the word 'Seniors'.
"You have something against the Seniors, miss?"
"Of course I do. I was last year's Froshtie."
"I beg your pardon?"

The halls began to fill, and Todd bought Sara's cellular out of his pocket. Ready and waiting. A distant roar from the direction of the office. "THEY DO *WHAT*?"
Whoah. Kelly had found out something *truly* heinous, by the sound of things. Oh well, he'd find out in morning assembly, when it became the topic of his morning sermon. Incoming guy with a grudge against 'fags'... nope. Passed right by. Oh *shit*, there was Janine. He did his best I'm-waiting-for-someone-else look by craning his neck to look past her. It worked. She was ignoring him. And she was opening Sara's locker as if it was *hers*... Todd pressed 'record'.

Janine turned the last numbers in the combination, undid the bolt...
{"fooooooont...}"
"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGGGGHHHH!"
Todd started laughing. It was magnificent. A full-colour, larger-than-life behemoth of a foam monster had practically flattened Little Miss Brackets. He zoomed in on her, focussing on the box that held the dead rat.
"So tell the viewers at home, Janine Wiltshire," he said. "Why in hell d'yo' put a dead rat into the locker of the only friend you *got*?"
She was flabberghasted for an entire twenty seconds. Long enough for a crowd to gather. "It' th juth a *joke*," she said. "I wanted to thee what she did about it, that' th all."
"Fo' two whole *years*?"
"YETH!"
"An' yo' tole people she *ate* them, right?"
"Only to thee what she thaid about it..." Janine clambered upright.
"An' you think it's the right thing to do, huh?"
"I can play prankth if I want to. I don't have to juthify mythelf to *you*.", Todd decided to play the nasty card. "By the way. You wet yourself."
The crowd burst out laughing before she even had time to check if it was true.
Todd stopped recording. "This is what *happens* when you treat yo' friends like shit. Get used to it!" He put the phone away and threw the rat corpse at her, where it stuck between her shirt-buttons.
"An' take yo' shit with yo'!", Some members of the audience applauded as Janine bolted for the nearest Ladies' toilet.
"Thankyou. Thankyou." Todd bowed, picking up the locker-troll. "This particular revenge was hand-crafted by Adrien-Tolensky Novelties, Inc. If yo' want to put in an order fo' your very own locker-troll, I'm avaiilable in the courtyard durin' lunch." He waddled up the troll and managed - with only a little difficulty - to cram it back into its cardboard chute, and the locker. Just in case li'l mouthy decided to return. "As fo' the rest o' ya. Watch this locker. Anyone who breaks into it is *guaranteed* a spectacular surprise."
God, revenge was good.

~

Sara latched onto his arm and said, "I needsomewhere to hidet during assembly."
Todd's stomach lurched. "What happened?"
"I thought he knew," said Sara. "I'd never have said anything if he *didn't* know. Honest!"
"What? What? What?"
"I..." Sara looked both ways, then lowered her voice. "I *told* Principal Kelly about the Froshties... I'm doomed..."
"Okay... there's a place we can hang out near th' fire exit. We can run fo' it if things get ugly." He returned her phone. "An' there's a killer movie on that fo' ya."
"Thankyou, darling. Show me your lurking spot, please... I think I'll need it."

Kelly waited patiently for the conversations to die down. "I've just been made aware of a Bayville tradition," he said. "Something called... the culling of the Froshties..."
...murmur murmum murmum... The Seniors looked uncomfortable. The Freshmen, knowing their nickname was 'frosh', looked nervous.
"A freshman is singled out by the Seniors for this process, depending on what the Seniors in question think to be amusing at the time. The freshman is always female. The Seniors, always male. The leader of the Senior group, usually a man considered popular and adorable, procedes to woo the victim under false pretenses. He will ask her to the Prom."
Several Freshman girls squeaked.
"She never gets to *go* to the Prom," said Kelly, stopping them cold before they could get started.
"Depending on the plans, those girls are either publicly humilliated - or *raped*.", Kitty Pryde, famous for her on-again-off-again relationship with Lance Alvers, glared pure liquid death at the Senior. He threw his hands up and said something like, "New to me..."
The rest of the freshman females murmured amongst themselves.
"This - 'culling of the Froshtie'... is *NOT* going to happen on my watch," Kelly said, voice full of righteous anger. "If *any* freshman is approached by *any* Senior, they are *not* to trust them. Report any suspicions you may have to the office, *immediately*.
And I rely on the rest of you. Those who stand between the Freshmen and the Seniors, to keep an eye on the youngest members of our little community. Some of you, I know, were the 'Froshtie' of a prior year. We *cannot* let this evil persist."
Murmur murmum murmum murmum murmum...
"And if it *does* persist," said Kelly. "Rest assured that this school *will* persecute the offenders to
the full extent of the law."
Murmure murmur *MURMUR* murmur... went the Seniors.
"This is not a harmless prank, like rigging one's locker with certain anti-theft devices... you know who you are..." Several reported anti-theft people grinned and a couple hooted. "This is *assault*. A crime for which offenders can be *jailed*. They can be *sued*. It is a black mark which will *never* be covered up. And to that end... I am extending an amnesty. Anyone who has been a previous victim of the 'Froshtie' tradition can come forward under protected anonymity - and this school will aid in the prosecution of their abuser."
Several gasps.
"This alledged tradition. This *evil*... has gone on long enough. I *will* *NOT* allow it to persist!"
A large portion of the ladies in the audience began to cheer and applaud. The men, he noted, were almost universally silent. Some approved, some looked as if their favourite toy had just been taken away, and some were - blank... trying to figure out how they felt about the whole thing.
Kelly let the audience settle down. "That having been said, on to the morning announcements..."

Sara trembled, collapsing to her knees in their little alcove. "I could have *sworn* he'd announce me as the one who told all," she sighed. "I could have been eviscerated... milled into powder by angry fists and feet..."
"Hey, he ain't *that* big of an asshole," said Todd. "Now that he's boring people to sleep, check out th' film I made yo'. Ain't no Frank Capra, but I think I got the vital bits."
Sara got out her phone and played it. "I'll say you did... Testing my reactions, hm? Mayhap, I shall make her *my* lab rat..."
"Yeah, but I think she got enough for today."
"Not yet. She needs a dose from her own spoon..." Sara started pressing buttons.
"Um. What'cha doin'?"
"Sending the whole file to the school gossip board. It'll be all over the campus before lunch. Just like everything she's ever said about me."
"Yo... that's harsh..."
"Once she knows what she's doing to other people when she opens her big mouth... Once she recognises what she's done and apologises... That's when I'll stop."
"No second chance?"
"I already gave it to her when I asked if she knew anything about the rats, last year. Now is the time for lessons." Sara hit 'send' with a quasi-vicious stab. "The worm is turning, Miss Wiltshire. Beware its fangs."
Todd shivered. "Hoo-ah..."
Sara looked almost - beatific. "You know... I suddenly feel so much lighter, now."
This change, from simmering fury to angelic peace, was alarmingly sudden. "Sure you're not playin' with no boxes?" he asked.
"Positive, dear. No more for me. They're bad for my health." Sara listened to the rambling speeches. "Ugh, he's still on sports and pep rallies. We have plenty of time to fix my schedule."
"Um. What?"
"I found last year that the schedule makes much more sense upside-down... and colour-coded for area. I re-write the class so I can do a quick-referral, and then colour-code the rectangles so I know where I have to go. Want to help?"
 Anything to distract me from the vision of your fury, _he thought. "Sure thing."

~

"I thought I'd find you two together," said Jean.
Sara looked up. "Let me guess. My guide."
"Pretty much," said Jean. "You're in about three of my classes, and only one of his, so... What are you doing to your schedule?"
"Making it the easy-read version, yo," said Todd. "Man, I'm'a do this next year. It's awesome."
"Just serendipty and mnemonics, darling..."
"Aa-ah?"
Sara blushed. "Thankyou."
Todd kissed her. "Very good."
"Ooo! Positive re-enforcement. How Pavlovian..."
"Ahem..." said Jean. "You don't want to be late."
Sara sighed. "See you in English, then."
"AP, English." Todd grinned. "Kinda got me upgraded a year 'cause of how I read novels fo' fun..."
Jean propelled her away from her boyfriend by one arm, walking quickly along the corridors. "Come *on*! You have a chance to make a whole new start on things."
"I wouldn't bother," said Sara. "Everyone knows me by reputation." _But not by honour._
Jean dragged her into Trig. "Ms Larimie? This is Sara Adrien. She's been transferred to this class."
"And still no sign of that Essel boy," tisked Ms Laramie. "Well, take a seat... Jean *Grey*, shame on you. That *is* Essel. Sit down. Both of you."
Sara sighed and didn't bother to correct anyone. She opened her new textbook and began flipping through it, scanning the pages. Lots of this stuff was things she'd consulted earlier teachers about... and told she'd never have to worry about it. Sara felt intensely betrayed. Those people had a job to *teach*... not recite from their books and never notice things.
"Mr *Essel*? Page three seventy-four please?"
Sara turned to the page, but kept a finger in her place. This theory had been investigated in her younger years, too. She *knew* this stuff already. Only bits of it were different. Better. She'd have reached these conclusions, too, if *only*...
"*Mister* Essel!"
There was a problem on the board. Sara looked at it. "Forty-seven."
Ms Laramie held out a stick of chalk. "*Show* your *working*, Mr Essel. Or at least show that you've been paying attention."
Reminded too hard of chalking rules of ettiquite on the board, Sara launched herself at the problem. Her hand flew in order to get it over with quickly. "And *therefore*, X is forty-seven. Q.E.D." Sara stomped back to her desk. "I don't *lie*." Ms Laramie consulted the answers, and the proof thereof. "Class? If you consult the solutions on page eleven nine eighty-three... you'll find that the textbook answer is forty-two. This is not so. Please cross out that answer and write in... forty-seven."
Ms Laramie decided not to consult Sara again, and soon dreaded her upraised hand. Sara was fuming by the time she reached the Chemistry class. Almost all of the Chemistry classes had been taken over by Mr Hinkley.
Jean took real pains, this time, to emphasise Sara's true gender. "This is *Sara* Adrien," she said. "*She's* been transferred up to this class."
Mr Hinkley raised a sardonic eyebrow. "I wasn't aware you'd elected to change your identity, Mr Essel... Most wait until their hair grows out a bit."
The males in the room began coughing insults as Sara took her seat. "Pussy."
"Fag."
"Queer."
"Slut."
"Gentlemen," Sara sighed. "Make up your minds. Either I am female or I'm not, in either case, half of your insults do not apply."
"No talking in my class, please."
At least this one didn't require *litmus* to observe... or prove. Sara found the formulae to be interestingly complicated enough to entertain her. And some of it... yes... some of it tied in with her favourite hobby - cooking.
The only really irritating thing was that not *one* of her teachers acknowledged her true gender. Nor even made a nod to it.

Next was AP English, Sophomore year, with Todd. One bright ray of sunshine in an otherwise dastardly day. Okay. Two rays of sunshine. People with pxt were becoming informal theatres for people who didn't.

"Todd!"
"Sara!"

They embraced. "None of my teachers know me from Essel," Sara moaned.
"It's gonna be cool," he promised. "Mrs Gratinski's the understandin' sort. She'll at least *listen*.*" They went hand-in-hand into the class, and found neighbouring seats. Again, she was introduced as Sara Adrien, though Todd added her middle name... and again, she was ignored.

"Mr Essel, I'll thank you to keep your female persona *restrained*.*" Sara sighed as Todd fumed in betrayal. _At least,_ she thought, _That's a new one._ Sara patted his arm and whispered, "We'll try after class. If needs must, I'll have to strip.* That made him laugh. Good.

"Today," said Mrs Gratinski, "We shall be studying Shakespeare."

"*Yes*!* Both Sara and Todd did miniature signs of victory while the rest of the class glared burning liquid death at them.

"This fortnight's work will be on 'Macbeth' - otherwise known as 'The Scottish Play' by the superstitious," Mrs Gratinski handed out booklets to the class. "Many superstitions surround this play, owing to Shakespeare's inclusion of what modern scholars believe to be real magical invocations in his script.* Sara had to restrain herself from snatching her copy, she opened the book gleefully to read-- "The *common LANGUAGE* version?" she shrieked.

"Yo, what the fuck?" said Todd. "Hey, teach, you gave us th' wrong classes' books.*"

"The entire school is learning from the common language version, Mr Essel and Mr Tolenski. Elizabethan English has been deemed too difficult for today's students.*"

"Dear," Sara faced Todd. "I thought this was *Advanced* English. You know, the class for the *bright* kids?"

"Yo' damn right," said Todd. "What's next, teach? Learnin' from the Cliff Notes?"

"Perhaps you two would like a time-out in the hallway," suggested Mrs Gratinski.

"Perhaps we'd like to go to the library and read from the *real* Shakespeare," said Sara.

"Perhaps we will," said Todd. "Ain't gonna let good literature be dumbed down fo' me. I'm outta here.*" He collected his bag, but left the booklet.

Sara stood and followed him, also leaving the book. They walked with all the dignity they could muster until the classroom door was firmly shut. Then they legged it at their highest speed to the library, where they checked out an ancient _Complete Works of William Shakespeare_. They raced back, laughing, and turned to the first page of _Macbeth._

And entertained their erstwhile class with an impromptu two-person performance in full iambic pentameter. It earned them a week's detention, a talking-to by Principal Kelly - in which he *again* forgot who Sara was - but they both agreed that it was worth it. Especially since half the class agreed that *their* version "sounded prettier".

~~

Lunchtime.

They both purchased a portable lunch - or they both ordered it, Sara was happy to pay for them - and found a highly visible spot out on the courtyard.

Sara, already twitchy from the morning's events, tried to keep an eye out in all directions at once.

"Just relax, yo. Act like you own the joint."

"Why? It just leaves a side open for attack.*" Todd soothed her hand as he munched on his sandwich. She was nervously shifting colours,
underneath the hologram, he guessed. Touching her skin when she was changing felt something like putting one's finger on the puckered part of a deflating balloon, and feeling the rubber move beneath. It was a poor analogy, since Sara's skin was alive and warm and lovely... but it was the nearest sensation to the experience. _Ha. I'm startin' to think like her. A bit. Cool._ "Listen up, sweetie," he murmured. "You are Sara Louise Adrien, an' you don't gotta take no shit no mo'."

She twitched. "It isn't paranoia if they really *are* out to get you," she murmured. "Three o'clock west."

Todd looked. Two people were striding over, with a purpose. "Stay cool," he advised.

Sara tensed.

"Told you it was his first name and Toady's second," said one.
"You guys really selling those locker trolls?" said the other.
"Damn straight," said Todd.
"Marty Fallins tried to lift yours after it went off again," said the first. "He couldn't make it work, but it *did* stop people trying to steal his retainer."
"It's jammed in there," said the second. "*Nobody* can get to his retainer."

"No doubt, he forgot an essential element of the packaging," Sara bought out a second truncated cardboard pyramid. "For a locker-troll, the cardboard helps it act like a shaped charge, propelling the troll forward at the attacker." She opened the pyramid's base and a differently-coloured troll popped out. "Each troll can be coloured according to your personal preferences," she added, "and a percentage of our profits is going towards the money necessary to hire a lawyer to persecute former Frosh-tie-cullers."

"Aces," said the second. "How do you get it back in?"

"Todd, you be a locker for a second," she pressed the box into his hands and picked up the troll, folding and wadding and compressing... and finally shoving it into the pyramid and closing the lid.

"Ta-daaaahh..."

There was applause. They'd gathered an audience.

"How much is it?"
"Can I get one in pink?"
"Can I pop it?"
"Can I pop it?"
"Can I pop it?"

"How much for that one?"
"How much to get one *out* of a locker?"
"How long does it take to make 'em?"

"Aren't you that dude who eats rats?"

"Please! *Please*!" Sara held her hands up for silence. "A fully-finished locker troll with folding and compressing instructions and a custom paint job will cost you a total of one hundred dollars. You can elect to purchase an unfinished troll, remove the mould-marks, and paint it yourself with ordinary watercolours - therefore knocking forty dollars off the price. We will accept payment by installation plan, but prefer that you leave a deposit when making your order." She had a ledger book from somewhere in her bag. "I'll need verification of your name and details in the form of your student ID. Please form an orderly queue..."

They formed a disorderly scrum. Sara was forced to take relevant details in shorthand as Todd was almost buried in an avalanche of cash and ID cards. The cash went down his vest and the IDs were handed to Sara.

Janine fumed all the way to the computer room. Where the hell *was* Sara, Sara, plain and tall? And what were people laughing at but wouldn't tell *her*?

All of Sara's usual haunts were empty, and she *knew* that people had seen 'Essel' around, today... hanging out with that Tolensky creep and - of all people - Jean "I'm so perfect" Grey.

The computer room was the last resort, besides the music room, and Janine didn't think Sara had had *that* bad of a day.
People were laughing in there. Cool. Maybe Sara'd finished one of her famous is-she-on-crack games. She opened the door...

Every single screen in the room was full of her humiliation at Sara's locker. Each with a student watching and laughing.

"YES!" Crowed one kid. "About time that little bitch got what she deserved!"

Janine's mouth hung open in shock. She was a *bitch*? But everyone liked her when she had gossip to share... didn't they?

One of the popular kids laughed at the rat landing on Janine's chest. Someone else in the crowd had had pxt, too, and filmed her running off.

"Go, little doggie," cheered one.

"MoooOOOOOoow," said another.

"She so fat, she eat dat rat," said a third.

Janine took a deep breath. "THAT IS SO NOT FUCKING TRUE!"

"Hey look! Rat bitch is going postal!"

Several pxt phones were trained on her. And just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, the chorus started.

"Nananananananana rat-girl! Nananananananana rat-girl! Rat-girl... rat-girl... rat-girl!"

Everyone. Was laughing. At her.

"NOOOO000000000000000000000000000000000000000!" She ran all the way to the counsellor's office, hearing every taunt.

"All right, all right, break it up," said several teachers at once, hussling the still-clamouring students away to their classes. "The bell has gone off... Move along."

They finally whittled their way down to Sara and Todd.

"Mister *Essel*," sighed a teacher Sara didn't even know. "Why am I not surprised to see you in the middle of this? And what the hell is *that*?" he pointed at the display troll.

"Anti-theft device, yo," said Todd.

"You wouldn't *believe* the locker problem this school has," said Sara, still taking rapid notes.

"And it's less messy than *some* I've heard of."

"Put it *away*," he suggested. "I've no doubts if I confiscated it, you'd manufacture another."

Sara rushed to comply, sealing the box up and shoving it in her bag. "Guess I'd better go to class, hadn't I?"

"I'll show you the way," said the new teacher. "I'm your Economics teacher, mister Essel."

"Oh fudge." Sara waved farewell to Todd as she marched smartly to her next class. "I still need to get your textbook from my locker. May I?"

"So long as no trolls are involved."

"And... uh... I might as well tell you, sir. There's no such person as Adrian Essel. My name's Sara Louise Adrien. A lot of people reverse it when confusing my gender."

"I've already heard everything I need to know about you," said the teacher. "I... am Mr Phelps, and I will thank you not to make any _Mission Impossible_ jokes."

"Just out of curiosity - what *have* you heard?"

"That you have gender dysphoria, mister Essel, and a large number of mental problems as a direct result. I'm not in the habit of moralising, but you will *not* let it interfere with my classes."

Sara opened her locker and - surprise, surprise - there was another dead rat. "She must have found a two-for-one sale," Sara muttered, snapping on the glove. It was the work of a moment to fling the rat into the bin, followed closely by the glove.

"Ah. Things become clearer. Isn't that Janine girl your friend?"

"Yes. She isn't."

~

Sara didn't know why she continued to argue her case, but she did. "Adrian Essel doesn't *exist*,"
she protested. "Do I have to provide documentation? DNA? A *physical*?"
"Paying attention in class is more than sufficient, Mr Essel. You are on my rolls as Adrian Essel, and
Adrian Essel you shall remain."

_Joy. A freaking beaurocrat._

They entered the classroom and Jean was already wincing.
"This Adrian Essel, he is new to the class. Do not let that divert you from your studies."
"Cool monster, Essel."
"Were you on crack when you made that thing?"
"Can you score some for me?"
"Hey Essel! Did you *fuck* rat-girl?"
For some reason, she heard one of those old stovetop kettles starting to boil.
"Oi! Essel, I heard you wanted to be a chick with a dick! Fag!"

She threw her bag down on the empty desk. It shattered on impact. "THAT'S E-GOD-DAMNED-
FUCKING-NOUGH!" Sara screamed.
"Mister *Essel*!"
"YOU WANT PROOF? I'LL *GIVE* YOU FUCKING PROOF!" Her hand dived into her bag
and brought out her card collection. "Student ID," she flung it at Mr Phelps. The rest, she tossed at the
class. "Bike licence! Library card! Business Association Membership! Makeup Effects Guild!
Filmmakers' Guild! Girl Scouts of America! Ballet Club! Hacking Association! Animators' Guild!
Anarchonists' Anonymous! All these fucking cards required fucking proof of my fucking identity to
obtain them!" She threw the wallet at Duncan Matthews, nailing him in the middle of the forehead.
She whirled around and pointed an angry finger at Phelps. "What's the name on that fucking card?"

"And what does it say under 'gender'?" Sara shouted.
"F-female?" Phelps squeaked.
"THAT'S GODDAMN RIGHT AND DON'T YOU *DARE* FORGET IT! I! AM! A! GIRL!"
Now she had chalk in her hands and it screeched agonisingly across the board as she etched each
letter as large as she could across the greenish-black expanse. "G!! R! L! GIRL!" She underlined it
with an ear-splitting squeal. "CAN YOU ALL REMEMBER THAT OR DO I HAVE TO GET IT
TATTOOED ON MY FUCKING FOREHEAD?"
"...shit," muttered one of Duncan's offsiders. "Essel's gone *totally* postal..."

Sara's scream drowned out all sound for that room, and the surrounding six classrooms. She had her
shirt in her hands. The test-print of her 'matrix' style binary shirt that read, "If you can read this, you
have no life." She was trying to take it off, but it was refusing to co-operate. The cheap fabric tore,
revealing her laughable bosom. "THESE AREN'T FUCKING IMPLANTS, YOU FUCKING
MORON!" Now she was fumbling with her belt, trying to get it undone. "I HAVE A FUCKING
*CUNT* FOR GOD'S SAKE!"

Someone had her hands. Fighting her. Phelps. Man. Unwelcome man. She couldn't hear what he
was saying, but he was *touching* her.
So she slapped him, like any good Favisham girl would.

_SARA!_ Jean's voice battered through the maelstrom in her head. _What's happening to you?_

_Sara froze, regarding the tableau before her._

_Omigod. I just tore my shirt to shit..._

There were no alternatives. She turned and bolted from the classroom.

Only later, when she woke up, would she find out that she knocked the classroom door right off its
hinges and across the hallway. But right now, she was running. She had wings on her feet like
Mercury and the ground was just vanishing under them. She was flying.
Running like *this*... she could get to Daddy in no time.
He would fix it.
He could fix *anything*.
He'd make it all better and make it go away and all she had to do was keep running and running and
running until she found him and she was almost outside and--
SLAM!
Sara was barely winded, but the shock of running into another person had floored her. Dazed, she stared up at Principal Kelly.
Who said exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time.
"What, exactly, are you doing out of class," he demanded, "Mister Essel?"
This time, Sara's anguished scream could be heard around the block. It was a scream born of eleven years of bitterness, betrayal, disappointment, despondancy, anger, frustration, fury, and a lot of pure, unadulterated, boiling hot *hate*.

Todd knew it instantly. "Shit! *Sara*!" He bolted from the room before anybody could even think of calling out to halt him.
The hall was filling with bodies, with babble, with people recording the event with their pxt phones. Todd got a glimpse of Kelly prone on the ground and tried to guess what he could from what he heard, filtered through the crowd.
"Sara!" bop "Louise!" bop "*Adrien!*" bop. "WHAT'S MY NAME?"
Kelly's voice. "Th's assault is uncall'd for, Ess'l..."
"Sara!" bop "Louise!" bop "*Adrien!*" bop. "WHAT'S MY NAME?"
Todd began squirming through people to get to her. _Ohshít, ohshít, ohshít, ohshít, ohshít, ohshít..._ Kelly mumbled something that sounded Essel-ish.
"Sara!" bop "Louise!" bop "*Adrien!*" bop. "WHAT'S MY NAME?"
"...wzt? Izzit Sara?" said Kelly.
There was blood on the floor under Kelly's head. Not enough for a skull fracture, but a sign of a very broken scalp. If Sara continued, she could very well break his head by sheer persistence.
Todd began squirming through people's legs. _Don't do it. Please don't do it. Take a break. Take a break. Run over their sheepish heads. *Anything*... just don't kill the guy for bein' a fuckin' moron._ Sara threw him down with a final bop. "Damn. Fucking. *Straight*," she said. She had foam on her lips, in the corners of her mouth. Her face... reminded him too damn much of her Mom in the middle of her rant-mode.
The only difference was the tears streaking her face.
"Unlike Essel," someone said. Some people laughed.
Sara got up in a fraction of a second and laid the heckler out cold. "Sara Louise Adrien!" Sara shouted. "WEREN'T YOU FUCKING *LISTENING*?"
He almost made it to the clear area around her when some fuckwad stood on his hand. It was agony, but he managed to stifle the noise of pain. He'd endured broken bones in silence. He could endure this on Sara's behalf.
She was panting, frothing, practically *steaming* with fury. Fists bunched. Coiled stance. Blood in her eye - though not literally, yet - and a constant snarl in her voice.
"Is there anybody *ELSE* who thinks I'm Adrian fucking Essel?"
"Are you fucking Essel?" said one who was not exactly observant.
Sara laid her out, too. "You want rumours, you little mindless babbling *SHEEP*? Let's get ON with the rumours!" She wheeled on a cheerleader. "Trisha Evans, who's had fifteen 'dates' in fourteen days! If 'date' means 'fucking some guy she just met *blind*'... But don't blame her. Blame her divorced mom who's trying to find love by tricking herself out to half the neighbourhood. That's how her Mom got the Clap - and how Mom's last boyfriend gave it to Trisha."
Trisha 'eep'ed and began weeping into a true friend's shoulder. Several guys started subtly edging away from the pair of them.
Not one of them, alas, was the idiot standing on Todd's hand.
"And how about Graydon 'Gaybasher' Trent?" Sara demanded, singling him out. "Did anyone know he purchases frilly underwear? That he regularly browses gay and coloured porn? Frankly, I'm shocked that he has enough intelligence to know how to get online, but that's hardly my point..."
"Fucking *faggot*," Graydon lurched forwards, seizing her bra strap and snapping it in two.
Sara's left breast popped out into the open, much to the shock of the crowd and the elation of the
male pxt'ers.

_Oh *God*, no,_ thought Todd. _Red! Do something!_

_I've been trying for the past ten minutes. It's like a cyclone in there!_

Sara, oddly enough, didn't react with the crack-of-doom slap. "You've seen mine," she said. "Let's see yours." Quicker than a viper, she tore his shirt to shreds, revealing lavender lingerie that was stretched to its snapping-point.

Hoots, cheers and whistles erupted from the crowd.

"JUDGE NOT!" Sara warned. "YOU'RE ALL SO DEEP IN YOUR OWN FILTH YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW YOU'RE DROWNING! Take little miss 'everyone's business' here," she singled out a luckless Patricia. "She always knows who's doing whom and why before the condom's dry! Know why? She likes to *watch*! And that's not all! SHE LIKES TO *FUCK* THE GUY *AFTERWARDS* AND THEN STICK HER TONGUE UP HIS *ANUS*!"

Several men seized their own mouths or spat with retroactive disgust. Their respective *girlfriends* began to look queasy.

It was true that Sara didn't often swear. That did not mean that she didn't know all the words. The following tirade has been bowdlerised according to Jerry Springer standards of decency. We apologise for the inconvenience and leave your imaginations to fill in the expansive gaps.

"YOU'RE ALL GUILTY! You're *ALL* sick {beep}! The lot of you! You're into {beep} and {beep} and {beep} and {beep} and {beep} with {beep} in {beep}... no matter *HOW* physically impossible it is! You all think that you can {beep} and {beep} and {beep} and {beep} and {beep} with a {beep} *donkey*! Well you can all {beep}! The whole *lot* of you!"

It only took her a few seconds to catch her breath, but that lapse was enough. She lost the rythm and the tic's got loose. All of them. At once.

Todd was the only one who moved forward when her legs went out from under her. He caught her head before it reached the cheap linoleum and cushioned it on his lap, trying to hold it steady.

"HELP ME!" Todd screamed at the retreating sheep. "Someone *HELP* her!"

The X-geeks answered the call. Kurt landed on her flailing left arm, careful of her holowatch. Jean managed to snag her right arm. Scott got her right leg and, amazingly, Rogue got the left. Evan jammed a wallet between her teeth. "I'll call the mansion..." he felt his pockets. Swore.

"Anyone got a nickel?"

"Of all the fucking fucktards..." Todd moaned.

"Here," said Fred. "Hurry." He was the one who knelt, reached over her flailing body, and covered her up as best he could. The torn cloth of her shirt refused to meet and slid open again and again. Lance was frozen in the position he'd had in the crowd. It looked a lot like he was having some kind of nasty flashback. Tabby was nowhere to be seen. Pietro was standing there in shock.

At least he was in the 'now', so Todd yelled at him, "Get the fucking nurse! See if she got a spare shirt!"

"Oh. Yeah. Right." He staggered away, down the hall.

Fred had found a safety pin in his pockets and was pinning together some modesty-preserving shreds with shocking delicacy. He pricked himself quite a few times, but didn't seem to care. At last, he snapped the pin shut and sighed with relief.

Now the idea came to him "Can't the Prof do something?" Todd begged Jean. "He did it befo', yo."

"That was a minor disruption," Jean grunted. "This is a full-out cascade. She won't stop until it's released."

Behind the wallet, Sara was trying to curse. Or part of her was trying to curse. The part that had been repressed, boxed in, and otherwise restrained from doing anything was free, and it wasn't letting go.

"C'mon, Sara. Come back to me... please?"
It took a subjective eternity, but she wound down. Her eyes rolled back to where they belonged and she moaned weakly. "Yo' goin' be okay," he promised. "'S gonna be awright."
Sara spat out the wallet. She'd bitten through the leather and some of the cards. "...todd?" her voice was small and raspy. "...'d I really try t' take m' pants off?"
"Uh..."
"Yes," said Jean. "You did. For what it's worth, I managed to stop you."
Sara moaned into a set of pathetic, tired sobs.
Someone - Mrs Ogg, the school nurse - draped a shirt over Sara's front. It was pink. The sort of thing abandoned in the Lost Property box because nobody wanted to admit to owning it. It had glittery writing on it that read, "100% Grrrrrrl!"
Sara, who could read upside-down, broke into gibbering tears. "...'at's th' nic'st thing anyb'dy's ev'r done f'r meeereee..."
Mrs Ogg helped her put it on over the ruined matrix shirt, then turned to Todd. "I need to have a look at that hand."
He looked. It was swollen to hell and throbbing with his pulse because the bracer was now way too tight. "Aw shee-it..." he moaned. "Musta busted somepin' again."
"We'll take it from here," said a newcomer. Logan.
God, he never thought he'd be glad to see *Logan*!
All the same... he latched firmly onto Sara. "Ain't lettin' her go. I'm goin' wit' her."
"Damn straight you are. Poindexter needs t' fix that hand."
"It's just broken again," he dismissed. "Look after *Sara*, damn it!"
She'd curled up around his arm and was whimper-crying. Shaking.
Logan refused to untangle them and sort-of juggled them onto the gurney and wheeled them both out to the X-van.
That was the last thing Todd remembered for quite a while.

~

Mr Kian may have seemed wishy-washy, but that was only because he took pains to be non-threatening. He paid attention like a hawk and, unlike most teachers, knew Sara from several forced visits.
He'd also seen this girl, but only on the video that was doing the rounds at warp nine.
Oh, he knew *about* Janine. Half of Sara's counselling sessions had involved psychologically picking the girl apart to try and work out how she ticked. This was just the first time he was actually *counselling* her.
"...an' they're thaying all these mean thingth about me an' laughing at me an' taking pictureth an' tharing them around an' it' th tho not *faaaaaiiiirrr*..."
"So," said Mr Kian. "Your version of 'fair' allows *you* to repeatedly place a deceased *rat* in your friend's locker... endangering her health and mental wellbeing, m'kay? But it doesn't let your *friend* take far less harmful steps to prevent it?"
"Your twithting my wordth," bawled Janine. "What I wath doing wath jutht a *joke*... people are thuppothed to *laugh*."
"At *Sara*, right?"
"Yeah?" she looked at him as if he were stupid.
"And you tell stories about Sara. Are they jokes, too?"
"Of *courthe* they are. They're *funny*."
"Like, for example... the one about eating raw rats."
Janine froze.
"Or the one about her having *sex* with them? Or maybe the one about how she collects them... and enjoys they're company?"
"You're not being *FAIR*!"
"I'm being completely fair, Janine. At which point, m'kay... is it *funny* when it happens to -say- Sara... but *not* funny when it happens to you?"

"When *anything* happens to me!" Janine shrieked. "I already have enough thhit in my life, I don't *need* any more!"

"Has it ever occurred to you that Sara might have problems, too?"

"Thith iht'n't *about* her! It'th about *ME*! *I* came into your offithe, you should be talking about *ME*!"

Mr Kian steepled his hands. "So tell me about you, Janine... What makes you feel *okay* about the things you do?"

"People *like* me when I have thomething on homebody," she sniffed. "They *listen*. They pathth it on. *My* wordth... not anybody eltheth... *mine*." She wiped her face again. "They all wanna hear about the motht dithguthting thingth, and I gotta keep making it up an' making it better or they'll never listen ever again an' I'll dithappear..."

"If these people are so disgusting," said Kian. "Why is their opinion *worth* anything? Why do you *need* them?"

"Because they're *popular*?" said Janine. "They're all tho perfect an' they have everythin' goin' for them... an' if they like me enough... they might kinda pathth it on... to me."

"It sounds to *me* as if these people aren't perfect at all, m'kay?" Kian steepled his fingers. "It sounds to *me* as if they're using you. Making you ugly so they can be prettier by comparison. Turning you into the very worst person you can be in return for -what- three minute's worth of attention? Two?"

"One an' a half..."

"One and a half minutes' of attention. Ninety seconds. You'd humilliate the *only* person who stands by you, who helps you, who spends more time with you than any of these people combined... for ninety *seconds*?"

"It' th more than I get at home," snapped Janine.

_Aha._ "Middle child?"

"Of theven," she sniffed. "If I wath the only girl, it wouldn't be tho bad... Mom'd defend me... but I got an older thither who'th thmarter an' prettier... an' a younger one who'th cuter... An' four fucking brotherth who make my life hell. It' th not *fair*! Thara hath parenth all to herself."

"Janine... I'm going to play you something, and I'm trusting you to keep it within these four walls. You *can* keep a secret, can't you?"

Janine thought about it. "'kay."

He bought out his spare tape player and selected a casette, spinning forward until he found the right place.

"...about your Mother? You rarely talk about her," said Kian's voice.

"Mom?" said Sara's voice. She snorted. "I don't need to talk about Mom, she talks for herself. All the darn time. In my *head*."

"What's she saying now?"

And now, it was Mrs Adrien, but not the desperately-trying-to-be-polite Mrs Adrien... this was frightening. "Now you've done it. Useless girl! He'll put you in an *assylum*! They'll drug you so much you won't know whether it's day or night, and you'd better believe that any *man* in there would rape you for the fun of it. Certainly not your *looks*... You haven't won me anything *decent* since you were *five*! Why can't you be like Jean *Grey*? Jean *Grey* wins some form of trophy every other *week*! Jean *Grey*--"

Kian stopped the tape. "Are you so jealous of her mother's attention, now?"

Janine's bottom lip was trembling. "...no?"

"So tell me again," Kian rewound the tape. "Is what you've done to Sara over the past two years *fair*?"

"But she--"

Kian interrupted her. "This isn't about her, Janine. It's about *you*. Are the things *you* have done *fair*?"
Janine broke down. "No it isn't," she bawled. "It was never fair but I just wanted people to like me an' it was her or me an' I didn' want it t' be me any mo-or-or-ore...."

Life was tough on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Kian let her have the box of tissues. "I think," he said, "We had better have an afternoon session with your parents."

"Can't tonight," sniffled Janine. "Mom's going to th' gynocologist an' Dad's working late an' I have to look after th' little ones. M' older brothers have *stuff*.

Kian settled for the next best thing for her. The attention she was surely missing. "Then we'll have another session this afternoon. After school. We can discuss - more creative ways of getting yourself noticed."

"Okay," Janine murmured.

It was warm. Something heavy and slightly damp was on his left hand. He couldn't move all his fingers. He felt all floaty...

But something was missing.

Something he'd been holding... in his right hand?

It clenched into a fist. "Sara?"

"Shhh..." Ororo drifted into view. "She's sleeping, now. Drifted off on the way here, remember?"

He was in a bed. In a tiny, tiny hospital. He could vaguely recall holding her and rubbing her back with his good hand. His right hand. He'd held on to her as she relaxed in his arms...

"She goin'a be okay?"

"The Professor says she needs a little rest before he can go in and help her sort herself out," she said, voice pitched low and soothing. "*You*, however, are suffering from shock and a broken hand. You need to rest and keep warm and, when the painkillers wear off a little, we'll take a walk to help you out of it, okay?"

Todd looked at his left hand. It was swathed in plaster and his middle two fingers were banded together with a metal splint. He had also been wrapped in some kind of knitted jacket made with ease of access in mind. It had daisies on it. Daisies like Sara's helmet. "Someone stood on it," he mumbled. "I'm thirsty."

"I thought you'd be," she handed him a hot chocolate. With a marshmallow melting in the middle of it. "Do you want me to help you sit up?"

Felt too floaty to really move. "Sure thing, yo. Hey. Lance know where I'm at?"

"We'll let him visit a little later."

The bed whirred and propped him up. The hot chocolate was sweet and almost scalding. Mmmm... nice... "What happen'a my bracers?"

"We had to take them off," said Ororo. "Don't worry. You'll get them back."

Todd laughed. "Used t' think they were good luck, yo. Never broke a bone when they was on. Silly."

"We're all allowed to be silly," she said.

~

Scott stared. He could guess why Lance was standing on the doorstep, but Fred? The behemoth mutant looked surprisingly timid and Lance... looked shocky. There was no sign of Maximoff or Tabby.

"Um," said Fred. "Are they okay? Can we visit?"

"Todd got some mail," said Lance, waving an envelope as proof. "He's... gonna be okay, right?"

"He broke his hand," Scott informed them. "Sara's still out of it, and I'll have to check if it's okay for visitors."

Lance nodded, looking towards the ground by degrees.

"Okay," said Fred. "Is there somewhere we can wait?"

Scott slumped. They just looked so... *pathetic*. "In the foyer."

Todd had walked off most of his shock in the sterile corridors surrounding the infirmary. Some of it
had come back when he caught sight of Sara.
She was in a hospital gown, free of her holowatch, and mostly concealed under crisp linnens. She looked paler than normal. Almost as if she were fading away.
Sara looked wrong, asleep. Or at least, asleep here. Lying straight on a bed, arms beside her and straight out... that wasn't a natural sleeping position.
But her eyes were moving under her eyelids, and her fingers twitched, ever-so-slightly. She was dreaming.
Todd hoped it was the sleep that knits the ravell'd sleeve of care... not the sort that tore one up from the inside.
"Todd?" said Ororo. "You have some visitors."
He looked from her to Sara, torn.
"We'll let you know when the Professor's going to help her."
"I wanna be there," said Todd. "I dunno much help I can be, but... I wanna be there." He shed the daisy-pattern coat-thingy and managed a slow walk away from her.
Every step was like a wound. He shouldn't be leaving her behind... but what else could he *do*? What choice did he have?
Lance was on another planet when Todd got there. White as a sheet and startled to see him up and around. "Is Sara...?"
"She's asleep," said Todd. "Everyone says it's what she needs, yo."
Lance took several sighs of relief, as if he was learning to breathe again. "There was only one foster home that was good. Mama Liebowitz... She - fell. Like Sara did. The ambulance took her away and we never saw her again and--" Lance shook his head. "They always take people away."
"Does it hurt?" said Fred.
"Like fuckin' hell, yo."
That broke the mood. Laughter was a balm against the funeral mood Lance had dragged in with him.
"Like we could get rid of you," he snorted, punching him lightly in the arm. "Baldy sent you some mail," he handed over the letter. "Beats me why he bothered, you're always over here, anyway."
Todd held it in his right hand, and found that it hurt like fury to try and tear it with his left. And, conversely, he couldn't quite hold it right in his left hand, either. "...fuckit... Could you - ah..."
Lance took it back and levered it open, unfolding the pages.
He went stone white again. "...holyfuckingshit..."
Todd took it gently from his hands.
It was his first paycheque, a cover letter, and an invoice for tax purposes.
Part of the invoice read, "Heavy machinery repairs - $20 000". And Xavier had already removed the taxes he'd have to pay on such a large sum.
The letter explained that, although the repairs he performed were worth six *hundred* thousand, Todd was underage and hadn't earned the professional qualifications in order to be fully paid for the work he did. Xavier regretted that this was the most he could legally pay him for his exemplary work.
There were other credits, like his cleaning chores, 'rigging' - initialled by Sara - and a nebulous 'services rendered' that was also initialled by Sara.
There'd obviously been some debate behind the scenes about how much his work was worth, since Sara's initials had the sharp angles of someone who was slightly seething with anger at the time.
The obverse of the Professor's letter had a note from Sara. "Remind me to help you join some unions." She'd drawn a heart and the letter S.
Todd couldn't help smiling at that.
The final figure was more money than he'd ever known. "Holy fuck on a stick," he muttered.
Fred was next to inspect the paperwork. "Wow. That's enough to fix the boarding house. Reenforce it, even."
And the Prof had handed it to them free and clear. He'd helped them out, but helped them *earn* it.
"...tricky little x-geeks..." he muttered. Todd felt ironically proud of himself for doing it, for being the guy on the spot at the right time. For being *able* to earn it. He'd done something right, and it felt great.

Jean tapped him on the shoulder.

"Anh?"

"The Professor says he's ready to begin."

Todd forgot the cheque and bolted for the infirmary. Sara needed him.

~

She was still asleep. Still motionless and pale. Xavier had positioned himself on one side of her bed. Todd took up her hand on the other side, made himself as comfortable as he could on the visitor's chair, and held her hand against his cheek.

"Be strong, baby," he whispered.

Xavier frowned. "What you're doing could be dangerous," he warned.

"Ain't leavin' her," he said. His voice would brook no opposition.

Charles sighed. "Very well." Careful, he put a wall between himself and Todd before he lay a gentle hand against Sara's brow... and the other on her un-occupied arm.

He closed his eyes, moving into her mind.

And when he opened them again, Todd was with him.

"Whadafuh...?" said Todd's mental projection.

Charles glared. He'd left the chair behind, since his mind didn't need help to walk around. "I was afraid this would happen. Part of Sara sensed you, and used me to drag you in."

"What the hell is this?" Todd dodged out of the way of a passing metaphor.

"This is Sara's mindscape at the moment. Her mental state is in significant disarray. You need to stay close, and be careful."

"Sara wouldn't hurt me, yo," he said, following.

"*Sara* wouldn't. No. Keep in mind that there are other things in here that Sara has little control over at the moment."

"Gorgons and nightmares and fears," muttered Todd. He pointed.

"Oh my..." Charles conjured a shield.

The echo of Sara's mother had teamed up with a shifting, dark, malevolent shape and what looked to be a band of purple ferret-like creatures that were apparently part snake. They were all headed towards the interlopers.

Todd conjured a gun. "FUCK OFF YA BASTARDS!" {Blam! Blam! Blam!} A flicker of motion, and it became a bigger gun. {chk-t Boom! chk-t Boom!} Neither worked.

Charles stopped him before he could go further. "That won't work, though it *is* a valiant effort. We have to *think* against them."

"Huh?"

"Positive thoughts against dark ones."

Todd's projection closed his eyes... he became surrounded by light... that made the phantasms retreat. Charles was frankly amazed. "What *did* you use?"

"A kiss."

_.a kiss is just a kiss... A sigh is just a sigh... The fundamental things apply... as time goes by..._ the fragment of song drifted out of nowhere.

"That's Sara!" Todd leaped towards it, forcing Charles to follow.

Never before had a non-telepath been a guide to someone else's head.

Charles, rarely one to believe in higher powers, began to pray that Todd would prove to be a good one.

Fred had crept away. For a big guy, he had managed to be very good at fading out of notice when it suited him. It had something to do with being bigger than most furniture. People *made* him the
background.
He'd just learned to use that to his advantage.
He'd found the stairs down to the infirmary and then the observation window.
There was Sara. And Todd. And the Professor. They were all asleep.
No. They weren't asleep.
It was something... else.
Something that gave him chills right down to his bones, which took a very long time, indeed.
Fred knelt on the floor and clasped his hands. _God, it's me. Fred. Please help Sara get better 'cause
Todd really likes her and she's one of my real friends... and... she just got her second chance. It's not
fair to take it away after everything she's been through._ The rest of his thoughts weren't as coherent
and contained an awful lot of begging.

Amanda found Kurt on his balcony, perched on the railing and staring out at nothing very much. He
had a piece of jewellery in his hands. Beads on a chain.
As she edged closer, she spotted the crucifix dangling at one side.
A rosary.
"I didn't know you were Catholic," she said.
"Some times, I'm more Catholic than others," he said. "And turning to God is a good comfort when
there is nothing you can do, ja?"
She moved up beside him and gave him a hug. "I'm as worried as all hell, too." Amanda managed a
slightly hysterical laugh. "I hardly even know her and I'm worried about her. Seeing someone fall
apart like that... I keep getting this sick feeling that maybe I was to blame. Maybe I should've tried to
be her friend."
Kurt leaned his head against her. "I know, liebchen. They're very sad words, 'if only'..." His tail
snaked around her waist.
"If only our school wasn't full of fucktards," said Amanda.
"*Amen*," said Kurt.

\---

They found her, the shining core of her, in the middle of a set of fragments. Some shone brightly,
while others were dull, and some were foetid and rotten. Sara sorted through them, adding them to
herself as she went. This part would add a piece to her leg, that part to her torso.
Todd was muchly disturbed by the sight of Sara in pieces like this. "Hey," he joked, "I never knew
yo'r mind needed hazmatting."
Sara looked up and smiled. "Thank you, darling. I can always rely on you for the good ones." She slotted it
neatly into her chest and shone just a little brighter. "I really need to pull myself together, don't I?"
"Yo, I never seen nobody go to pieces like this," he joined in.
"They're memories," said Xavier. "Sara's memories."
Todd carefully found a piece to kneel by her and picked up one. It was an unpleasant memory.
Chalking rules of etiquette onto a board whilst a stern schoolmarm critiqued her hand.
"You can throw that one away, dear," said Sara. "It's gone off."
"But it's still a part of you," he said.
"I don't need the bad parts."
"Yes. You *need* the bad parts. Everyone's got bad parts, yo. I got a *ton* of 'em. If I could just
throw 'em out... I wouldn't be *me* any more. Ya gotta accept the bad wit' the good, hon. It's part of
you... but ya don't gotta let it rule yo'."
There was a thunderclap, and another bright shape formed.
When Sara took it, it was a key. One of those old, victorian ones. Solid gold and glowing from
within. Sara thrust it into the nearest heap and turned...

He was drooling on her hand. He daubed it up with a tissue. Pale green drool. Fun. At least it wasn't
any of his 'special' slime mixes.

Xavier groaned as he returned to himself. He, Todd noted, had not drooled.

"What happened, yo?"

"Sara pushed us out. She's put herself together, without the boxes, and now she's sorting things out." Someone outside gave the rebel yell. Todd looked. "Aw, *geez*, Freddy..."

"That was an interesting experience," murmured Sara, her eyes still closed. She blinked her way alive. "Odd that I feel so exhausted after this much rest... I don't suppose I'd be allowed to roll over and snooze for a while?"

Todd knelt on the bed and hugged the stuffing out of her. "*God*, you scared th' crap outta me, darlin'... Never do that again." Was he crying? Ah, fuckit. He was *entitled*! Her return embrace had lost all of its nervous awkwardness. "There, now. Shhh... It's all right. You rescued me from my Dragon, darling. Rescuing me from *me* is small beans."

"Scary beans," he said into her neck.

Fred picked them both up and hugged them. "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay.... You were under for so long and I was real scared and you're *okay*!"

"Gak..." said Todd.

"*Ribs*, Frederic..." Sara croaked.

"Oh. Oops. Sorry." He put them down, blushed, and covered his eyes. "I'll -um- uh... I'll -ah- I'll just wait until you're dressed, okay?"

Sara looked down, 'eep'ed, covered her knees and sort of sidled behind the nearest curtain. "Could somebody be a darling and pass me some clothing?" she squeaked.

Fred, on leaving for Sara's sake, had to wonder what she had against her knees. He'd have to ask Lance or Pie about it. Probably not Pie. At least Lance *might* have some wise words about female peculiarities. *Pie*, on the other hand, would probably harangue him for half an hour about 'not getting his end in[1] yet', the ass.

He felt almost naked without his bracers. Even if they weren't a charm against broken bones, they were -well- *comforting*. He'd have to find out where they were.

"Hello, there. As you can plainly see, I'm not dead, yet."

Lance blinked. Sara. "Oh. But... they took you away."

"I got better," she smiled.

"You're all green, now..."

"Oh *dear*," Sara sighed. "Yes, dear. I'm all green. Well... I rather consider myself somewhat blue-ish."

"Really? What's a nice blue-ish girl like you doing in this neighbourhood?" said Todd.

Sara cracked up. "I sense a great need for comfort food in the air," she said.

"Ooo! Ooo! Can I help?" Freddy *bounced*. "Please please please can I help?"

"Why of *course*, Freddy. I've had the sneaking suspicion that you've wanted to display your epicurial prowess for quite an age."

"Yay," said Freddy. He did a victory dance.

_Baldy is *really* lucky he has re-inforced floors,_ thought Lance. He followed the rest into the kitchen, still in his daze.

"Um," said Freddy. "What's 'epicurial'?"

[1] Getting one's 'end in' is an Aussie euphemism for having sex. I have no idea if it exists in the US, but Pietro's the sort to pick it up.

Kurt sniffed, then his stomach rumbled. "Someone's in the kitchen, cooking," he said.

"You and your snack senses," Amanda joked. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Uh... Lunch?"

"Then you're overdue. Come on. We can see if we can snaffle something."
"I knew you cared!" He glomped onto her and squeezed. Co-incidentally, his head managed to wind up at about boob level. "Mmmmm... snuggy!"
Amanda extracted him with a, "Silly Elf," and lead him downstairs. The air was full of aromas. A roast, something frying, something boiling... cinnamon combined with heat... It was amazing that Kurt didn't flatten her to get to it all.
"That's right, dear. Nice big ones. We have a lot of people to feed and that's only the first batch." The speaker was from Boston, somewhere. Or near Boston.
"Better step onna gas, yo." *That* was Todd Tolensky.
"How are the vegetables coming along?"
"'kay, I guess." Lance Lavers?
"You're doing marvellously well. *Frederic*... oh, it's going to be a shame to eat that... You're an artist."
"Aw *gee*..." Fred *Dukes*?
The kitchen was a madhouse of creativity. If there wasn't one space full of works in progress, it was full of the finished product.
Todd Tolensky was deep-frying gooey blobs of stuff with funny-coloured bits in it while Lance Alvers processed vegetables and Fred Dukes bustled from task to task with surprising grace. The tall person with the aqua scales in the middle of it all had to be none other than the infamous Sara Louise Adrien.
"Whoah," said Amanda. _Now *I'm* getting hungry..._
"Any chance of snacks?" said Kurt, trying to restrain his drool.
"That way," Sara pointed with a spatula. "Don't mind me, I'm busy with the omelettes."
Fred took a spoon and sampled the soup. "Needs a little something to pep it up."
Sara dipped a finger in the spoon and sampled it. "Just a pinch of tumeric. Baby pinch. It should give it just the right zing."
"Cool," said Fred.
Amanda blinked. Weren't these guys - enemies of the X-men?
"If you're going to take up space, dear, you might as well ferry some peelings and shells to the mulch bin, over there," said Sara. "We're going to need the space."
"*MMMF*..." said Kurt, his eyes had rolled backwards and his mouth was full of half a muffin.
"...leiber gott... das ist gut."
"See, Freddy? The flavour is in the fat. Ergo, a bit of butter makes it better." Sara was whisking whites as she spoke, having added a completed omelette to a platter a few minutes earlier.
"Said Betty Botter to the butcher," said Todd.
"Darling, *please* don't get me started. I may never stop," said Sara.
"Couldn't help it, sweetums."
Okay... that explained Todd... Amanda boggled as she dumped organic waste into the mulch bin.
She found a place near Lance that was reasonably clear of crossing cooks and poked him. "Just why the hell are you all here?" she asked.
"Uh. Came to visit," said Lance. He was vague, but he peeled and chopped vegetables with a singular determination. "Kinda... Idunno... got swept along."
Amanda blinked. Fred was offering her a cookie. She took one. Soft and slightly crumbly and gorgeous, with that stick-to-the-teeth quality that made the taste linger. "And you're here for...?" she said.
"I just wanted to cook something for Sara," said Fred. "She an' I were study buddies in Remedial Ed."
"You can still ask any question you like, you know," said Sara. She never stopped working. "Just be prepared for lots of rambling."
Fred grinned so hard he almost *glowed*.
Amanda looked at the spread, and had a muffin pressed into her hands (Liebchen, you have to try one before they're all gone!) as she did so. "Um. Just how many people are you cooking for?"
Sara paused in the act of folding an omelette. She looked around herself as if seeing everything for
"And they'd look very fetching on you," said Sara.
Jean blinked, shook her head, and threw her hands up in the air. "I'm not asking, you're temporarily insane, and I have better things to do than gain three pounds." Jean marched down the hallway.
Half a minute later, there was an anguished cry.
"Pro*fess*-ooooooooooooorr! Make Sara stop cooking! I'm on a *diet*!"
Sara sighed and put the omelettes aside. "And the moral, dears, is 'never let two feeders[1] gang up in a kitchen'." She took a breath, focussing her mind. "We are going to finish what we have started, and then we are going to stop."
"Aaaaaawwww..." said Fred.
"Aaaaaawwww..." said Kurt.
Sara glared at the fuzzy elf. "You're only in it for the leftovers."
"Of course. Why would you think any different?"
"Honey," said Amanda. "You remember me saying some times that I love you, but I could kill you?"
"Will a cookie make it better?" he offered.
Dang it. He was just so *cute* when he did that.

[1] People who gain emotional benefit from feeding people. The equation goes something like love=care=comfort=food. I see Sara *and* Fred as feeders. Scary combo, given the latter's appetite.

~

It was the first five-course meal the Mansion had had in well over two decades. It was also the first meal with a significant portion of the brotherhood present. Tensions should have been high, yet there was amiable chatter between the two teams.
Fred was talking about some of the fun he'd had in the truck rallies, Lance had struck up a conversation with *Scott* - of all people - comparing foster homes, the food, the amenities, the neighbourhoods, and so on. And they were laughing, mostly, about the dark and evil times they'd both lived through. Todd alternated between tale-telling and making Sara glow or blush with some kind of compliment, trying to teach her to say 'thank you'.
All the Brotherhood stories were sanitized, Xavier noticed, for the younger portions of the audience, and concealed blacker, more malevolent stories that were barely funny at all.
He could help them... if only...
The temptation was strong to implant a meme in their minds. A small thought that gave them the idea that the Institute was a place to come for comfort and succour. But that would be cheating. It would be worse than cheating.
It would be interfering with their long-term thoughts. The very *way* they thought.
The Brotherhood would have to come to its own conclusions, for good or ill.
"And speaking of chores," Sara was saying, "I have a lot to do on Saturday. Is there, perchance, a blank spot in tomorrow's training regimes for me to do some riding around?"
_*SHIT*!_ Thought Logan.
"On Eileen?" Todd stalled.
"She's going to want to ride her frikkin' bike._ Logan 'said'. It was accompanied by the mental image of Eileen's current state. In pieces. Under repair. In progress. _Can't you... change her mind?_
"Of course on Eileen. How else would I get about?"
"I'm sure that would be wrong," 'said' Xavier. "I get the impression it's something Sara needs to do."
"Well... uh... there's a lotta cars aroun' here. Someone could drive yo'. Scott could?"
"I'm fucked..."
"Excuse me?" said Scott. "I'm doing what, now?"
Logan grizzled and rubbed his hand over his face. "Damnit. Might as well come clean."
"Aw shoot," whined Todd.
Sara looked at them both. "Have you fellows been tinkering with Eileen?"
"We've been fixin' her up, yeah." Todd fiddled with his napkin.
"Restorin' 'er," said Logan.
Sara smiled. "Is *that* all?" she said. "My own fault, I suppose. Serves me right for leaving such a good excuse for boys and toys to come together." She sighed wistfully. "And exactly how long did it take you to succumb to temptation?"
Logan, too, was fiddling with his napkin. "Twenty-four hours."
"That long? I admire your restraint. Any chance of her being put back together for an afternoon?"
"Uh... kinda... not," said Todd. "Sweetums... it's about the motor."
"What happened to it?"
"It never belonged in Eileen. Near as we can figure, yo... uh... You turned half a lawnmower engine sideways, added a fridge compressor an' God only knows what else. Um. It's amazin' it worked at all."
"Well... the parts *were* nearby and they *did* fit..."
Logan got a twitch under his eye. "Shouldn't've happened to a bike like that..."
"And every mechanic I consulted never said a *thing*," Sara fumed. "Hmph!"
"How many tried to buy 'er?" said Logan.
"All of them?"
"HA! Rat-bastards."
Sara sighed. "That still leaves the unresolved question of how I'm to work, tomorrow. I need to earn some wardrobe money... since I'm no longer purchasing parts."
"Dragon struck again?" said Todd.
"With a vengeance. She found out about my antoinette accounts and put them under watch. From now on, I'm cash-only... Until I can start an independant account. Or sue for my money back."
"Yo, you could get 'er fo' emotional damages, *easy*.
"Yeah," said Kitty. "It's like, totally all over the web."
A cold silence decended over the room.
"Oops," said Kitty.
Sara sounded extremely mournful, "Plus la change, plus la meme chose..." she dabbed at her eyes.
"Why should I expect anything different just because my life has changed?"
Todd spoke Xavier's thoughts without so much as a nudge. "'Cause yo' deserve it, sweetie. You more'n deserve it."
"Money or not, I'm wearing a dress on monday," growled Sara. "Let them make of it what they will."

~

Jean woke up at one AM to the cacophany of clocks. The ball bearings thundered back to the beginning of their twelve-hour journey and were seranaded by _Ach Du Leiber Augustine_ as they went. The hamster scurried about his labyrinth.
But that wasn't what woke her up.
Even with her night shields on full, she could sense a nightmare in progress. There was a sticky feeling in the air and the leftover sense of phantasms.
Sara was crying.
Jean turned on her bedside lamp - just enough light to see by, by the time she turned a bookshelf and entered Sara's bed-nook - and shuffled over to the lizardine girl.
She was a pillow-hugger and a curler, judging by the way she was almost foetal and crushing her pillow in her arms. "...no... no..." she sobbed.
Jean shook her. "Hey. Wake up."
"...never forgive..." Sara snuffled, yawped in alarm, and bounced upright in bed. One arm never lost its death grip on the pillow. "Gah... *hate* the real ones."
"If you need to talk..." Jean offered.
Sara looked at her clock. "Piecemeal night. Urgh." She rubbed the grit from her eyes. "Mother came and sued for my return... then she decided that all the friends I've made were not only bad for me, but should be eliminated from the world. Serial poisonings with different sources. She kept pumping me full sinus medicine... I get babble-y on that... and making me tell her all the habits of everyone I knew. When you woke me up, she'd got to Todd..." Sara buried her face into her pillow and heaved a few sobs. "But I'm still *here*. It didn't happen."
"That's right," soothed Jean. "It didn't happen." She did a mind-scan to be sure. "Todd's sound asleep in his room and dreaming of butterflies. Anyone else you're worried about?"
"What *is* Mom doing?"
Jean scanned. A bottle. The smell of alcohol, both fresh and stale. A telephone nearby. A photo album on her lap. Half-asleep, half-awake. Pictures of Sara in her prime... when she was beautiful and everybody thought so.
"She's... she's sitting vigil," murmured Jean. A glimpse of blue uniform. Someone slumbering on a chair. Policeman. "She's called the police."
"An act, then," dismissed Sara. "Everyone expects her to be the mourning mother, pining for her lost child. She's very good at those kinds of acts. The put-upon mother. The hard-tested soul. Wailing and bemoaning a fate she made herself..." Sara snorted. "Scan for Ray. He'll have the truth of it." Jean decided against it. "Let's just go back to sleep, okay?"
"Do you mind if I stay up for an hour?" Sara pleaded. "I sort of need to depressurise after a dream like that. Or degauss and depressurise..."
"Do what you need to," she said. _It's not as if I was going to get a full night's sleep anyway._
"Thanks." Sara slid out of bed and made a beeline for her computer. Jean stumbled back into her bed for the tattered remains of rest.

There were crumbs of foam on the carpet. Jamie was only mildly curious about their presence, since he was already pondering why both Kurt *and* Mr Logan had given him the task of waking Jean and Sara up for morning exercises. Maybe he was finally getting big enough to actually be trusted with stuff.

He tripped on his own shoelaces and got up as four. He was too sleep-fogged to remember which one was which, so he proceeded down the corridor as a crowd. It took a little focus to knock, but he managed it without making any more clones.

Someone was singing.
And then the obligatory stupid clone disobeyed orders and opened the door.
"No," hissed Jamie. "Don't--"
"...yeah, yeah, yeah... sing sing song sing song... *EEP*!"
All four Jamies covered their eyes simultaneously. Too late. Far, far too late. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it!" Jamie chorused.
{Whap!} "G'df'ck'n'mn't, Sara..." mumbled Jean.
"That tears it. I'm putting up a *sign*," said Sara, half-muffled by something. "Is there something urgent?"
Jamie, still blinded by his own hands, said, "Logan says it's morning jerks. Everybody's gotta be there or it's an extra hour."
"...rrrrRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRrrrrr*RRRRrrrrrgghhh..." Jean stumbled around her half of the room.
"I. Hate. Mornings."
"Heavy hands. Heavy feet. Trainers double-tied..." Sara was muttering. "Zinc oxide... reliable hat. Done!"

Jamie peeked. Sara was now wearing track pants and a singlet top too large for her. It had a pig on it, and the legend _Sweat Hog_.
Jean was busy braiding up her hair.
"I'll tell him you're coming," decided Jamie.

The stupid clone lingered for a while, until Sara snagged him by the ear, leading him away. "You've
already obtained *one* eyeful, little man..." she lectured. "That does not excuse a second one."
"Sorry," said the other three. "One clone's always a little... uh..."
"Daft?" Sara suggested, following him. She'd let go of the dupe, now that he appeared to be towing
the line. "Don't fret. I refuse to judge a group on the actions of one."
Jamie breathed a sigh of relief. "You're one of the few," he said. "Everyone seems to think I can
control them."
Logan was waiting for them. "Squirt," he greeted. "Tallwater. Where's Red?"
"Still ungumming her eyes, last I checked," said Sara. "She'll be down momentarily, I'm sure."
He pointed them in the general direction of the others. "Warm up."

When Jean opened her eyes at last, stumbling onto the lawn of the Institute, Sara was turning
cartwheels on the spot. And so was Kurt. _Goddamn morning people..._
"Nice of ya ta join us, Red," said Logan. "You know the rules."
Last one in gets twenty push-ups. Complaining got another ten. Jean knew better than to object.
At least she was able to keep count, despite the rest of the crowd cheering on Sara and Kurt.
"Fifteen! Sixteen! Seventeen!"
_Three... Four... Five..._
When Jean was close to finishing, Logan got them to knock it off.
"Awright," he announced. "Since ya got so much energy this mornin', we're doin' a mornin' run with
packs." He'd obviously decided to do it anyway, since Jean had seen them arrayed to one side. He
selected each pack and called a nickname. "Squirt. Slim. Halfpint. Stripes..." and so forth until,
"Tallwater."
Sara buckled the pack on, hiking-style. "Odd. This is far lighter than my daily knapsack..."
Jean glared undiluted doom at her.
"It's what Marines get, it's what you get. Follow me and keep a steady pace," Logan took off at a
jog.
_God, I hate mornings._ Jean mentally grumbled. _I hate pack-runs. I hate chirpy morning people
and I *HATE* losing *sleep*!_

~

After a first few initial stumbles, Sara managed to keep the pace. Exercise seemed to invigorate her
senses, and her feet worked naturally in a ground-eating pace that made it almost easy.
It was going to be a beautiful day.
"Tallwater..." said Logan, jogging next to her.
"Yes?"
"Keep that singing up an' I'll have to increase yer limb weights. Nobody should be happy on one o'
these runs."
"Are you happy?"
"That's not th' point," he growled.
"Well, if you're enjoying yourself, you're breaking your own rules," Sara panted.
"Not any more," growled the Canadian.
"Then I'll just have to enjoy the run for you," said Sara. "The air is clear, the sun is shining, the birds
are singing. Carpe Viva!"
"Whatever," said Logan.
"Isn't that Lance's jeep?"
Logan looked up at the sky as he jogged. "Go ahead. *Make* my day worse. I *like* bein' grumpy."
"Watch out for the trees," said Sara, and increased her pace to the Institute and the visiting jeep.

For Todd, it was like one of those romance movies where the two lovers ran towards each other in
slow motion, calling out each other's name and cheesecloth makers earned a small fortune[1]. Sara
almost glowed in the sunlight, each scale seemed to shimmer and glisten.
For Lance, waiting in the jeep as they ran to each other and collided, it was almost an exercise in
torture. They had what he, at the moment, didn't. Therefore he noticed things like the sweat patches
on Sara's shirt, the way her hair went stringy and everywhere when it was damp, the delicate sound
as both their bony chests collided... and the way Todd's feet hung above the ground when they
embraced.

_That's them,_ he thought, _the long and the short of it._

Okay, so mental revenge was petty. So what. He was the one who had to put up with Tabby and
Pietro whining that they weren't invited to the big pig-out, and then attempting to scare up a plastic
bag so loverboy, over there, could take a shower.

He missed having someone to love. Or at least, hang on to.

Lance stared at the rest of them as they made their way into the grounds. Somewhere in that mass of
bouncing grey tracksuits was Kitty. Not his for now, just hers.

And thanks to Principal "holier than thou" Kelly, he had no chance in God's green Earth of
convincing her that he was sincere.

So he sat and watched and waited until his chances ran out, thinking of the girl he loved.

"Alvers," said Scott.

"Summers," said Lance.

"You've dropped off Todd. You don't really need to be here."

He couldn't stop watching her. "Yeah. I'm goin'."

Kitty pulled Sara aside the instant Logan separated her from her boyfriend. "Are you like, sure going
with him is a good thing?"

"Not just the simile, but also the metaphor," said Sara.

"Huh?"

"That's a 'yes', dear."

"But the toad's totally like, bad news," said Kitty. "Going out with him is like... like..."

"Like you going out with Lance?" Sara said. "And his name's *Todd*."

"That was totally different and I'm like, *so* over him, now. The whole gang of them are nothing
but a buncha thugs."

"Only because most of them see no alternative." Sara walked beside her, heading indoors, towards
the breakfast table like everyone else. "Todd's working for his keep, now, and I believe Freddy's got
a job as a bouncer."

"But they're totally bad news!" Kitty objected. "They're gonna *do* something, To you!"

"At the moment, dear, they're hard pressed keeping scratch and sniff together. They're buried under
obligations with no sign out and, as I said earlier, few alternatives. Now I admit that Mr Maximoff is
a lost cause, and Miss Smith is hardly any better... but I expect they should at least try to be civil now
that fortune's winds have turned in their minor favour."

"Huh?" said Kitty.

"Translated: Give them a chance." Sara sat beside Todd and helped herself to some leftovers for
breakfast.

Kitty vented an exasperated growl and found a place far, far away from them.

The Danger Room.

All of the X-men were assembled, including the new recruits. Todd was sitting offside with a medkit,
some gatorade and a few buckets... and Tallwater was nowhere to be seen.

"She's coming," said Jean. "*Fi*nally..."

Sara edged into the room with a terry-towelling robe on. Her feet bore little olive-khaki slippers.

"Um. Mr Logan? I believe there's some -er- complications with my outfit..."

"Yeah?"

"I couldn't find the rest of it. Just this sort of green one-piece thing and the belt... and the slippers."

"That *is* your outfit, Tallwater," said Logan. "Biomimetic fabric's hard t' come by."

Her voice lowered to a squeak. "...but everyone's going to see my *knees*..."
Todd had asked Lance about the knees. He had been as mystified as Todd and Fred. Even Pietro couldn't figure it out.

Logan was massaging a migraine. "Okay. There's a way we can deal with this. Take a breath. Close your eyes. Relax."

Sara's death-grip on the neck of the robe fell away and her hands hung limp by her side. The robe itself must have stuck closed by Sara's will alone, since it didn't have a tie.

Logan toured around her as he spoke. "Deep breaths, that's right. Picture yourself in a field. Sunshine and daisies an' all that crap. Feel th' wind in yer fingers..."

As she did so, he grabbed hold of the neck of the robe.

"Yoink!" He tugged it down and away.

"*EEEP*!"

Sara's outfit barely covered the essentials. It didn't even have shoulder straps. Just two peaks in the fabric that covered her breasts and stayed on by some sympathetic magic. Her back was completely bare until waist-level, when the belt delineated the change between naked scales and khaki-olive fabric.

There was nothing Todd could see wrong with her knees at all.

"Now everybody's seen 'em and nobody's laughin'," said Logan. "Get in there." And then he swatted her rump.

Todd didn't even have time to flinch.

{SWACK!} "Comport yourself, sir!"

[1] Because cheesecloth is what they used to use to get that smoky, dreamy-soft focus in film. Hence the term "cheesecake".

~

Such a crack could have ended the universe.

It could have very well ended Sara.

Todd stood, watching Logan reel under the force of the blow. His feet were rooted to the spot as the canuck staggered backwards.

Everyone was holding their breath.

Logan regained his footing. Straightened himself. Then, calm and cold as ice, put his jaw back into its socket.

{krik'!* *Krak*!}

"Lady Favisham's girl, anh?" he said.

Sara, her hands over her mouth and her eyes wide, nodded. "...eep..." she managed.

"Got some impressive torque, there," said Logan. "Be careful with it."

Sara blended in fright, and her costume blended with her. So did the belt.

There was a chorus of appreciative gasps.

Logan tossed the robe rather accurately at Todd. "An' *that's* why she's *got* biomimetic fabric fer an outfit," he said. "Can't vanish in spandex. Now form a line, we're workin' on combat skills."

Todd could only pick Sara out with extreme difficulty, when she was blended. Even when she moved, there was only a blurring in the air to betray her existence. And if someone moved behind her, the image she made on the other side was out of synch and out of focus.

And all of that was on pure instinct.

She'd be unstoppable if she wanted to be, once her training came into effect.

As she waited in line, the fear faded and her scales returned to their normal bluish-aqua tone. She watched, intently, what the others were doing on the mats and against the mechanical puppets.

Todd had no doubts that he was cataloguing every move.

At last, she came up against Logan.

"Go get 'im, sweets," he whispered, not daring to shout.

~
Sara stood ready. On guard.
"Solid stance," said Logan. "Block."
She put her arms in his way, angling them so his blow went wide. She had to use a lot of downward sweeps because he was so much shorter.
"Too much flinch. Block."
Sara supposed it was because she was new that she got that much warning. She knew from personal experience - the most recent being the cause of the minor gash in her left temple - that an enemy never warned.
He got faster, the next time, and didn't warn her. There were, though, occasional instructions.
"Stand yer ground. Don't go back."
"Watch yer left."
He got in a 'death' blow. "Never fall for a fake-out. Be ready."
"Don't look at the floor."
"Try to get past me."
So she did. She left her left open enough to invite an attack, blocked and propelled him past, then pirouetted and drove her heel into his neck.
Even though she knew about the adamantium, and why it was beyond stupid to attack his head, it still hurt.
Logan was down on the floor.
"The hell you learn that, Tallwater?"
"Ballet. You *did* say to use everything we knew."
The rest of the class had fallen silent. Staring.
Sara tried not to think about her awful knees and blushed.
Logan picked himself up and cracked his neck. "Guess what you get for knockin' me down."
"The same thing you get for a job well done?"
"Damn straight." Logan got back into his fighter's stance. "I might *teach* Kung Fu, but when ya fight, there's no rules."
And, without warning, he attacked. Sara dodged like a matador and managed to land a tentative kick on his bottom.
"Nice improv, Tallwater. Don't be afraid. *Do* it." Another lunge.
This time, she got a knee into his gut... and lost her footing in the process.
"Don't be scared, damnit. I won't break." He waited until she was up and lunged again, grabbing her.
"Now what'cha gonna do?"
"Stomach! Instep! Nose! Groin!" Each blow was landed with anatomical precision and lightning quickness. She spun out of his weakened grasp and used the torque to deliver the back of a relaxed fist to his temple.
"...better..." he croaked. "Yer still holdin' back."
"I don't like hurting my friends."
"In an all-out fight, there ain't no friends," he barked. "Here an' now, I'm yer enemy, girlie! Picture me as the goddamn *enemy*!"
And that's exactly what she did.
When she emerged from the other side of the red haze, she had two people per limb holding her down, Todd straddling her torso and trying to get her to calm down, and Logan was across the room with Ororo tending his wounds.
Why was she crying? Why was she *shaking*?
And whose blood was in her mouth?
"...todd?" she squeaked.
"She's back. Let 'er up." He sat back onto her thighs. He gave her some water. "Wash yo' mouth out. Spit inna bucket."
Across the room, Logan was panting out, "Kid's a... goddamn... bottle covey... Hot *damn*!"
"That's nice, Logan," said Ororo, "but I need to stitch this..."
Sara swished, gargled and spat. "Wha' happ'n'd?"
"You went fuckin' *NUTS*," entheused Ray. "Laid him out an' kept goin' fit t' *kill* 'im! Coolest goddamn thing I ever laid my eyes on."

"*Ray*!" Jubillation swatted his arm. "Don't encourage it."

"Bottle covey?" said Sara.

"Hol' still..." Todd daubed at a stinging pain near her eye, and added butterfly sutures.

"Logan told me, once," said Scott. "They're always the quiet ones. So cool they wouldn't melt butter. And then someone says something at the wrong time and... they don't stop until they're down."

"What'd he *say*?" said Kitty.

"He told me to picture an enemy," Sara quavered.

"And?"


"Okay..." Jean drewled. "That explains the battle cry..."

"I had a battle cry?"

"Does the phrase, 'shit-flinging monkey bastard' ring any bells?" said Ray. Jubillation swatted him again. "*Ra-ay*..."

"...oh *criminy*..." whimpered Sara.

"And you went *bright* yellow an' black an' blood red," said Jamie. "And it went in *waves*! It was *cool*!"

"Jamie..." scolded Rahne.

"You scared th' crap outta me, sweetheart," murmured Todd. "The *look* you got on yo' face..."

"...much raw, untrained *potential*!" Logan was babbling. "Girl's gonna be a killer."

"Hold. *Still*," insisted Ororo. "*NOW* you can try to get up."

Logan's face was a livid mess of bruises, swelling and an amazing number of cuts. And yet, he was grinning ear to ear. "You an' me, Tallwater. Ev'ry afternoon. I'm gonna teach you how ta *use* that."

"Congrats," said Sam. "You're now his new chew-toy."

Todd let Sara up and helped her stand.

"...i think i need t' go to the bathroom..." Sara quavered.

"But one thing first," Logan got right up to her. She cringed. Blended.

He clapped his hand on her shoulder. "I'm buyin' ya *ice cream*!"

And *that* was when she fainted.

~~

"Are you *sure* yo' okay, sweetums?" Todd pleaded. It had been a terrifying thing to see her that far gone in rage that Logan's claws just failed to register for her. He'd never forget the sight of them fighting to drive one of those talons into the other. And Sara. Thin, young, and untrained... beating him by degrees and bloody-minded determination.

"I just fainted, dear," Sara assured. Even with the holo on, her wounds were visible. Highly visible in the case of the bruises. They'd be completely gone by the next day, but... The sight of her livid with injuries was - *disturbing*. "I was expecting heavy retribution. Or punishment. I never thought I'd be *praised* for hitting a teacher..."

"Logan's his own rules, yo," Todd theorized. "Beat him to a pulp an' he buys you ice cream. Touch his *bike* an' he lops yo' arm off."

Logan, driving the car, snorted. He only had a few fading bruises and some cuts to show that he'd been in a fight. "Remin' me why yer along, Treefrog?"

"In case you make 'er faint again, yo," Todd said.


Todd blushed, but he leaned as far towards her as he could and kissed her back. Aaaahhh... *now* he felt a bit better.

"Keep to yer own sides, you two."
"Rats," sighed Sara.
"Yeah," sighed Todd. "I bought the Troll money over. Din't know what else t' do with it an' Pie'd steal it, yo."

"Oh, *good*. I was running low on the chemicals this morning. How much have we got?"
"Nearly two grand," he whispered. "*Day*umn, yo..."

"Impressive, considering so many orders were for the unfinished trolls," Sara grinned. "Taking off the amount we need for chemicals... labor costs... Do you mind working for minimum wage, dear?"
"Yo, for this cause, I'm a *volunteer*.

"Oh *good*. I won't deduct you your rigging. That was pre-manufacture. So all we deduct is the replacement materials..." Sara leaned back, looking up. Her lips moved. "Excellent. We should have quite the sum to donate on Monday. I finally get to sue that stuck-up little monkey..."

"Don't lose yer fire, Tallwater," said Logan.

"You can relax, Logan. I still want to give him a vasectomy by knee."

Logan laughed.

Todd whimpered. _Do *not* cross this woman,_ he thought. But then again, he didn't have any plans to do so. Why the hell was *he* worried. He *liked* her. She liked him. As long as they were honest with each other, they had nothing to worry about. "Yo. Sugarlips? Um. I don' wanna sound rude or nuthin', but... Did you always have this vicious streak?"

"Somewhat buried, yes," said Sara. "I just don't box it any more. Don't fret, darling. I know where to draw the line. Most of it's solely up here," she tapped her head, "and will rarely express itself here*," Sara made a fist, then relaxed it in order to hold his hand. Her smile was gentle and reassuring. "I *will* learn to control the rage, dear. Make it work for me. This morning... it took over. It won't be taking over for much longer."

Which meant less and less time that the savage Sara would be 'out'. No. That was wrong. She didn't have a multiple personality disorder. This was just - a side of her. One of her facets.

_Why, O *why* do I keep fallin' for the dangerous ones?_ Todd pondered. Maybe because he'd seen too much of what his Dad did to his Mom, and wanted to be absolutely certain it would never happen again. Not that he'd ever felt that sort of belly-burning rage that had fired Sara's demolition demo that morning... but he wanted it to be possible for any woman in his life to defend themselves, should he fall into the bottle like Dad.

"Deep thoughts?" said Sara. They'd parked and got out and he hadn't noticed. She'd had to shake him out of his musings.

"Pretty much, yo." He clambered out of the car and followed them into the mall.

"Do you need a patient ear?"

"It ain't pretty stuff."

"What a co-incidence. My ears aren't pretty either."

Something snapped. It wasn't the rage, but some anger at the people who'd ground her down and made her say things like that. "Damn it. *STOP* that!" He froze. People were staring at them. Drawing their own conclusions from Sara's bruises and his shouting. "Stop *saying* things like that, *please*," he begged. "It ain't *you*. It ain't what you *are*. Yo'r cuttin' yourself t' pieces an'..." His eyes stung. "...damnit..."

Sara held him, guided him to a little table and kissed him. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Years of conditioning."

"I know... I know... It's just-- You can't even see who you really are, no more... and you just echo what people say about yo', an' you're hurtin' yourself more an' more..." He borrowed some napkins and mopped his face. "Me, I *know* where I been hurt. Some o' my injuries are in here," he tapped his head. "Most of 'em... well. You saw the scans." Todd rubbed the cast, trying to scratch an itch he couldn't reach. "You? You're like... the opposite. You're scarred as hell up there," he thought, "feather light, he touched her brow. "An' just 'bout every time you open yo' mouth, you cut yourself again. *THAT* is the only ugly goin' on wit' you. Swear on my soul, yo."

Sara pondered this. "I bought my Dragons with me," she murmured. "I shattered and put myself back together and the Dragons are still there..."
They stared at him.
"We gettin' this ice cream or what?"
"That's our line," said Sara. She retrieved a pair of rubber bands from her voluminous purse and put
one on each wrist. "Negative conditioning time, gentlemen. Every time I make a self-depreciatory
remark... snap me."
"Izzat gonna work?"
"I broke myself of thumb-sucking this way. And nail-biting. Pen-chewing, alas, seems to be
permanent."
That mental image boggled his mind until they'd reached the multi-coloured bins at the ice-cream
parlour.

The sales clerk frowned at Sara's bruises, Todd's cast, and then Logan. Something compelled him to
make up a story.
"Some fuckhead broke my hand an' she beat him up, yo," said Todd.
"You should see the other guy," grinned Sara.
Logan glared at them.
"What? It's not like they'd believe the truth," Todd muttered. "Fuhgeddaboudit. 'T'cha havin',
sweets?"
"Oh, poot, I can never decide... Death By Chocolate? Mango Mayhem? Strawberry Cheesecake[1]?"
"Yo, try the Tijuana Tilt."
"I can't, dear, it has alcohol."
Todd remembered the fumes of her Dragon's breath. "On purpose?"
"By genetic accident. Allergic."
"Ow...
"Anything of me touches alcohol... it jus' swells raht up on me," she joked, replete with a passable
imitation of Jeff Foxworthy for the latter half of her words.
"Yo, that is *scary*," he grinned. "Anybody you can't do?"
"Scooby Doo," she confessed. "I wind up sounding like Marge Simpson with a speech defect."
"Hey. Treefrog. Make up yer mind, willya?"
Todd stayed to the safer flavours out of respect for Sara. "Mint Surprise? Butterscotch Brickle? Aw
geez..."
"Er..." said Sara. "Neither of us made up our minds, did we?"
"Not th' last time I checked, sweets."
"So... why is Logan ordering?"
__Shit!__ Todd looked. "Don't *look* that pissed off..." he pondered.
"True. But he was smiling when we were fighting, too."
He shuddered. "I remember."
Todd watched. The popular people of Bayville High that staffed the Service With A Smile
department were piling on multiple scoops. Generous ones.
"...wow," sighed Sara. "We must've been adopted."
"Huh?" said Todd.
"Only Dad ever got me multi-scoop cones. Mom's kinda... frugal."
"We was always poor," Todd dismissed. "Ice cream was kinda... special celebration food."
She hugged him. "Should I make every day a party for you?"
He grinned. "Thought you were doin' that already."
"Flattery may get you everything," Sara laughed.
__She's flirting!__ Todd mentally celebrated. __That was a genuine *flirt*!__ He wanted to yawp with
joy, but he pulled her down so that their lips met.
Her lips had scales, too. Fine, delicate, almost imperceptible to the naked eye. He could feel them moving as he savoured her flavour and the experience was... fascinating.
"Ya got three seconds before I shove this down ya shirts."
_Damn!_

Sara was blushing, but grinning. She accepted her ice cream with a, "Do you have something against people in love?"
"You two are still kids. Grow up a bit before ya make any big mistakes, eh?" He handed Todd his and dug into a sunday in a little cardboard bucket.
"So. How old were *you*?" said Todd.
"That was different," Logan growled.
"Isn't it fascinating that all the adults say that?" said Sara.
"Tallwater..." Logan growled. "When I was your age, it was a coupla hundred years ago. Things *were* different, then."
"Life expectancy, for a start," she started on the Strawberry Cheesecake. "At one time, it was rare to live past fifty. Hence marriage in the late teens."

Todd couldn't help noticing he had a layer of Death By Chocolate, too. _Logan playing fair? I think my brain spasmed._

"That's enough o' that," said Logan. "Just eat th' stuff an' no wisecracks."

Sara lapped up some dribbles, completely unaware of the effect this visual had on Todd.

_Nosebleed alert,_ thought Todd.

His back-brain, on the other hand, had better ideas. _Fuck the nosebleed, I'm diverting the blood flow..._

Shit. _Margret Thatcher naked on a cold day. Margret Thatcher naked on a cold day[2]..._ He just focussed on his ice cream, eating it before something or someone happened to it, trailing after Logan and Sara...
Sara, who had a very nice ass and an interesting wiggle as she walked...
It's very difficult to walk, eat ice cream and concentrate on *not* getting a boner at the same time.

Todd did his level best.
Mostly because he knew Logan would cut it off if he saw it.

Ohyeah. *That* worked...

Tallwater was sucking blended ice cream melt out of the bottom of her cone by the time they reached Bargain Basement Bernie's Bulk Outlet.
"Awright. The hell're we doin' here?"
"I shop for some people. Home deliveries. It's the best way for me to get some - well - me-money."
"You shop *here*?"
"It has hidden depths."
"That explains the engine parts," he muttered.
"Hello, darling. Were we going too fast?"
"Naw. I just -ah- had some thinkin'..."

Logan sniffed. Heh. Teenaged male thinking. He remembered being that young. God, that was painful.
"Then roll up for the magical mystery tour." Sara lead them into the smallish hall of tchotchkes, plastic things, and widgets with no discernable use... and past it into a cavernous array of shelves.
"What the hell is *this*?" yawped Treefrog.
"The shopping equivalent of Narnia," said Tallwater. "Most people don't go back this far, they think it's the storeroom. But *this*", she gestured at the tall shelves, "is the heart and soul of Bernard's establishment. Everything your heart could desire. In bulk. Sold seperately or by the box, no fancy overheads."
"I could believe it," said Logan.

[1] These are all actual flavours of ice cream down here in the Merry Ol' Land of Aus. We've never
heard of Messrs Ben and Jerry.

~

He should have known he was in trouble when he noticed the trolleys had a step added to the space near the wheels. He should never have said he could keep up.
Tallwater rode the damn things like a scooter, steering by judicious touches of her feet to the ground. And if *he* wasn't in trouble, Treefrog *would* be, 'cause he was riding along with Tallwater. Logan broke into a dignified trot and hurried after them.

Todd whistled. This was the first store he'd ever seen that had mobile ladders. "When they say 'bulk' they *mean* it, yo."
Sara slowed. "Here we go. Cat food. Dry and wet." She clambered up the ladder before he could volunteer. "'Way below!"

{} A gigantic bag of kitty kibble landed nearby. Todd collected it and wrestled it into the trolley. As he did so, Sara descended with a large cardboard box. Bernie's Kitty Delight Assortment. Another scoot and he actually got to help her get some canned food assortments. A little way on down the line, it was him who got to climb the ladder, owing to the fact that the boxes Sara wanted were too high. Boy's training pants, size three. Pampers for a toddler, and an assortment of kiddie munchies.

By that time, Logan had caught up with them.
He insinuated himself between them and growled, "No funny stuff."
And that, of course, gave them giggles for half the aisle cruise.
The other aisles had some things loose, and underneath, the option to take whole boxes was inherent.
"Juice assortment..." muttered Sara, snagging a box. "Prune juice..." she got three bottles. "Long-life milk..." another box.

Some things weren't announced, just seized and added to the array of things inside the trolley. It was quite a pile.
"Yo, how many people you shoppin' for?"
"Four households, eleven people, and roughly two hundred cats." Sara grinned. "Steve's mom runs a cat shelter and the Grunchliks have five kids, all under four."

"Whoah. How'd that happen?"
"That's a funny story..." she began. The Grunchliks had been having trouble conceiving, and were considering the IVF programme when Dave, the husband, hired Sara's finding services to get his wife a fertility god to cheer her up. The idol *worked*, providing the Grunchliks with their first set of twins... and their *second* set of twins a year later. They desperately sold the obje't d'art on Ebay, but not fast enough, since they got a single son the next year. "And now, the poor dears are hard pressed to keep up. It's the least I can do to shop for them."

Logan had a slight twitch by the time he finally dragged those two plus the half-ton of stuff out of the store. He'd thought this was going to be quick. He was wrong. Tallwater had to cruise every single aisle to "see what was what" and picked up objects both random and bizarre.
Then she'd had to take the trolley back to get a badge so she could get a discount the *next* time she was there.
Then she'd had to sort through all the shit she'd accumulated and divide them into packages so it would be easier when they arrived.
At least it couldn't get *much* worse.

~

Lance checked the house. Todd was off working. Tabby was off doing something... or some*one*...
Fred had gone to see if there were any kitchen jobs for the weekend. Pietro was away occupying his
skittish brain with fashion and petty crime.
He had the house to himself!
Lance picked up his guitar and strummed it, fiddling with the tuning. At last, he had some peace and quiet to compose. The dreadful doggerel about 'Pretty Kitty' had been burned, and rightfully so. He couldn't win someone over like that. He had to be... romantic.
"Oh, I know lots of girls go by Katie or Katheryn... dada da dadada... Marlyn or Mary-Anne... But I will always say that there's one girl for meee... And that would be you, lovely little Kitty..."
Yeah. He had a chorus. Well. Most of a chorus. He needed a middle rhyme, and doing another 'Anne' thing wouldn't work. Just how many girl's names ended in 'ine' or something that sounded like it? Not a lot that he recalled.
He tried again. "Oh, I know lots of girls go by Katie or Katherine... Tillie or Tisha-Bren... Marlyn or Mary-Anne... But I will always say that there's one girl for meee..." He trailed off. Okay. That scanned. So what if he only knew one Tisha-Bren, from his old school? It worked.
Now to figure out the way the verses went. Something about how she outshone every other girl he'd ever seen... Yeah.
This was gonna work*. Singing under her window would get him mauled a little by the Wolverine, but it'd be worth it. A moonlight serenade with flowers and junk. Perfect.
He was in the zone*.
Nothing could ruin his moment.
"ROCK STAAAAAARRRRRRRRR!" {Whump!}
The next thing he knew, he was staring at two naked breasts at ground zero.
"Goddamn it, Tabitha, you fucking *slut*!"
"Pay attention to me," she said, dangling her boobs in his face.
"Put'cher *shirt* back on. God..." he wriggled free of her and put as much space between them as he could get. "Don't you ever go for the subtle approach?"
"What? Like fucking you when you're asleep?"
*God* he hoped that wasn't a real-life example...
First, there was the cat house. An actual home for cats that had been recently re-named according to Tallwater. Everyone still called it the cat house and sniggered when they did so.
The van in the drive had *just* pulled up by the time Logan inched to a halt around some arrogantly insolent felines who knew that he wouldn't run over them. The driver hopped out of the van and put on a business smile.
Tallwater and Treefrog were holding hands and giggling a lot.
"Oi! Break it up." _It's going to be hard to marry 'er in white, the way things are goin'...[1]_
"Oop. Showtime." They scrabbled out of the car. "It's only me, Steve!"
And *that* was when Steve went all girly-mode.
"*SA*raa... *dar*ling! Is the grumpy one behind the wheel your infamous invisible father?"
"No, he's Logan. He -ah- teaches at the Institute up on the hill."
"*No*... You've been *spotted*, haven't you?"
Sara blushed. "Caught improvising my scales."
_Ugh..._ Logan winced. _Better hurry this along before she gets worse._
Treefrog was trying to wrestle cat food out of the back and fend off the impatient cats, at least four of which were trying to climb him.
Logan grabbed the tinned food and foot-shuffled his way through the yawping crowd.
"You good with cat," said an elderly asian lady who *had* to be Mrs Tait. "You want buy cat? Very gentle. Very sweet."
"Can't. Friend o' mine's allergic[2]." He scoped the place out. Almost the entire house was a kitty gymnasium. There was even carpet on the ceilings for the determined climber. One of whom landed on his shoulder and gave him the love-in-buckets treatment. He never minded cats. Most of them were better than people... but *why* in God's name did they have to show you, up close and
personal, what their ass looked like?
Tallwater was half-covered in mewling cats, after the bag of kibble she’d rescued from the Treefrog... who followed behind with kittens hanging onto almost every available surface.
"Yo, get offa me. I don't got no kitty food. Honest. This is fo' the people."
"Don't trip," said Tallwater. "There'd be a cat-astrophe."
"...euw..."

[2] Side-fling to _Free to a Loving Home._

~~

Danoz found his partner in the small kitchen, eating a doughnut-shaped pastry. "Hey, Roxy...[1]"
"You should try these. They're surprisingly good... Coffee's the *bomb*."
"Yeahyeahyeah," said Danoz. "I just wanted to ask you something."
"Yeah?"
"Notice anything... *weird* about this house?"
Roxy took a swig as she stared through her partner. The way she stared through people had unnerved weaker men into confessing. "You mean like how we're looking for a sixteen-year-old girl and there's not a single photo around of her over the age of five?"
Danoz nodded.
"And how Mrs Adrien had to call her security company to open her husband's safe to obtain a recent photo... and he's been away for almost half a year?"
"Definitely," said Danoz. He tried one of the pastry rings. It was like going to heaven without the dying.
"And how the help is studiously nebulous when it comes to matters in the home?"
"Yes and *God*, yes," said Danoz.
"And how her room was *completely* cleaned out apart from the _Hamtaro_ bedclothes[2]?
"Genius," said Danoz. Which was code for: You spotted something I missed. The coffee was as divine as the not-exactly-doughnut. He began wishing that this particular posting would last forever. "Then yeah, I'd have to say that something is pretty fucking screwed up around here." She took a savage bite of her pastry. "And until Jackie O in there decides to confess to something, I'm'a have to enjoy my little posting, right here."
"Until Monday, when we have to check out her school."
Roxy rolled her eyes. "It can wait until after lunch."
Danoz grinned. "Sure it can."

Next was the Grunchlick's place, affectionately nicknamed "Munchkin land" by just about everybody who went there, for reasons that became increasingly obvious as one attempted to navigate a yard full of plastic playthings with armloads of groceries.
A toddler, clad only in his pampers and standing in the window, was telling them off for tresspassing in no uncertain terms... if one understood 'scribble'.
The cries of outrage from the baby bought two older toddlers, also boys, who recognised Tallwater instantly.
"Ahnee Sa! Ahnee Sa!"
Then came twin girls. Mean decibel level - about a hundred and fifty. "AUNTY SARA'S HERE, MOM!"
"And where is Mom?" said Tallwater.
"She go poopies," said one of the boys.
"Onna toilet," added his twin.
Treefrog went bright red, but Tallwater just took this in stride and smiled with a *slight* roll of her eyes.
"Do either of *you* guys want to go on the toilet?" she cooed.
"No," they said.
"Aw. Too bad."
There was a flush, and running feet, and an anxious, "Hang on, hang on, hang on..." and then the door was open.
Mrs Grunchlick had the frayed look one would expect for a mother of five pre-schoolers.
"I come bearing pampers," said Tallwater.
"*YES*!" She seized the box and hollered into the house, "DA-AA-AVE! You can stop looking! Sara's here!"
Tallwater ducked back to the car, hopping and skipping over play debris, to get more stuff from the car.
An equally harassed man seized the training pants from Treefrog. "Thank you and *bless*," he turned back into the house. "Okay, kiddies. Time to get your bot-bots[3] clean!"
Which left the girls, and Logan with an armful of heavyish cardboard box.
"Are you Aunty Sara's Daddy?" they said in unison.
Twins. Brrrr...

[1] Yes, Roxy from _Dead Like Me_ is making a cameo. Sniggersnort.
[2] Everybody has a secret crave. Sara’s is _Hamtaro_ and, in fact, just about anything animated.
[3] An ancient synonym for 'bottom' that I haven't personally used since I was in first grade. Heh.
~

Principal Edward Kelly rubbed the sore patch on the back of his head as he watched the local news. His own recall of the events currently playing on the television was fuzzy, owing to a mild concussion, but thanks to nosey students, pxt, and a complete lack of morals concerning personal privacy, almost the entire event was recorded.
All apart from the trigger event.
He remembered... patrolling the corridors, checking for absentees and the occasional on-campus tryst... and there was a sound. A distant bang. And running feet.
Rare indeed was the mid-class escapee, so, suspecting trouble, he'd headed towards the sounds. Only to collide headfirst with that Essel fellow.
No. Kelly rubbed his head. Essel was evidently female. Sara. Louise. Adrein. Oh yes. He remembered now.
He might have remembered that he called her 'Essel' several times during their interview, that morning, but his mind was on other matters.
Assault. At least two counts. Skipping class. Creating a public nuisance... clogging the hallways... There were a lot of things he could get her for. Get her away from those - things... living in Xavier's. Explain that she was in danger.
Kelly reached out and grasped the smooth plastic of his 8-ball. "Should I proceed with my current plan?" He turned it over.
_reply hazy. Ask again later._
He shook it. "Should I proceed with my current plan?"
_reply don't count on it._
What the hell? He shook it again. "Stupid piece of plastic *crap*!"
_reply yes._
He sighed and put it back down. All he'd ever wanted was a straight answer...

Munchkin land was chaos. Dave and Julie spent most of their time talking in three conversation lines at once. The kids insisted on "helping" put the groceries away, which largely consisted of either playing with them or attempting to help themselves. Logan snagged the candies before they could try and placed them well out of reach.
Then there was the fact that he'd been adopted.
Tallwater's namesake had latched on to his leg and refused to let go. One of the boys kept tugging on
his clothing and asking for a 'piddy ack'. The youngest kept climbing into any box that was left lying around and squealing at the top of his lungs.

Tallwater handled everything like a pro. Efficient motions spoke of years of practice avoiding the rugrats, and she even managed to get them to actually *help*.

And then, at max volume, "Do the song, Aunty Sara! Do the song! Do the song!"

"The song?" asked Treefrog. He'd decided to give one of the twin boys a 'piddy ack' and discovered that when you haul one twin, the other twin comes free. Both boys were now struggling to gain a choke-hold and giggling a lot.

"Something that is bound to haunt me for the rest of my days," Tallwater found a clear area and the girls joined her on either side. "Ready ladies?"

The kids took up what they thought to be balletic poses.

Tallwater stood on point. "We represent the lullabye league," she squeaked as she danced, "The lullabye league, the lullabye league... and the name of the lullabye leeeeeeague--" she coughed, which produced a chorus of laughter, "--we wish to welcome you to Munchkin laaaaannnd..." She put her fingers in her ears as the kids went *nuts*, running around and singing 'Lalala' without any hint of rhythm or melody.

"Hon," said Treefrog. "You into some *scary* stuff."

"Try babysitting them, darling."

The girls lit up. "Are you his *girlfriend*? Is he your *boyfriend*? Are you *ma*ried?"

"Yes, yes, and no," said Tallwater. "Married takes a little more time."

They ran to Treefrog. "Are you gonna get a baby?"

"Not on *my* watch," rumbled Logan.

"Not yet," said Treefrog.

"Why?"

"Uh..." he looked desperately at Tallwater. "Babies take time, too."

"Why?"

Dave and Julie had folded their arms and had matching smug, we're-not-taking-this-for-a-million-dollars smiles on.

"Uh... It's a very special thing, yo. It's gotta be done... right."

The twin girls looked at each other, then turned back to Treefrog. "How?" they asked.

...ffffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck... thought Todd. He had to think fast, he had to talk fast, and give all the answers yet be completely G-rated. "Um..." he said. He looked pleadingly at Sara.

Sara was being unhelpful, leaning idly on something and propping her chin up with her hand. Pure spectator mode. The interested smile was not helping.

"Uh..." Logan? Fuck no. "It's gotta be done right," he repeated, stalling. "Well, first you have to really love each other. I mean, so much you wanna marry each other, y'know?" Todd told the twins.

Unless it ain't a planned pregnancy, but I sure as heck ain't bringin' that up. "Then... then you wait for a very special night. Everything's perfect, the sky's full of stars, the crickets are chirping, the nightingales are singing, yadda yadda."

"And...?"

Todd thought for several moments on how best to simplify it for a child's mind. "You declare how much you love each other at the top of your lungs. For the whole world to hear, if you can." Sara patted her hands together in applause. "Well done," she said.

"Are you gonna do that, Aunty Sara?" they chorused as they charged over to her.

"Not yet, my dears."

"Why?"

"It's... a little early in the season," she fibbed. That one had flummoxed her as a child. "Besides, I think Mr Logan would object."

"Darn straight," he growled.

"Why?"

"Ohmylookatathtime," Sara babbled. "We have to run, kidlets. Huggles?"
She was mobbed, giving both he and Logan a chance to get out of the house. Sara extracted herself at length and trotted to catch up, wiping drool patches from her clothes. She flopped into her seat with a sigh. "Heaven protect me from having that many at once," she smiled and waved bye-bye as they pulled away.
"Amen," said Todd and Logan together.

"And just where are *you* going, young lady?"

"Out."

"Out *where*?"

"Out *where*?"

"Not that you *care*..." Janine sighed. "I have to go talk to the school counthellor."

"What? Why wasn't I told about this?"

"You were busy. You're always busy. And you're going to make yourself even busier in about four months and *I'm* going to be stuck babysitting." "I *did* tell you," she lied. "You thaid 'that's nice'."

"Did I? EDWARD CAMRON WILTSHIRE, YOU PUT THAT DOWN *NOW*!"

Janine ducked outside while she was distracted. Dad and her two older brothers were working on Sean's car again... this time, an attempt to get the motor working, instead of tinkering with the cosmetics. A brief jog, and she was around the corner and out of sight.

Out of sight, out of mind.

With Cecilia in college, things had been slightly easier on the budget. Heck, the family was celebrating Sean's attempts to find a place to live on his own... Would it be that hard to hand Justin the crown of Oldest Kid in the House?

She stared at the apartment building going up in the distance. Sean would be able to get a high-ticket flat there. She'd be better off in Povo Towers[1] and finding some job that could pay the measly rent and purchase some food. Especially if she bought in bulk.

"Thank you, Sara, for running off and showing me it *can* be done. Geez. I never thought I'd be greatful for her being more than ammo..."

Another corner, another crossing, and the school was in sight. It looked weird with only a handful of cars in the lot and a scant number of souls in the distance. It was spooky, roaming these empty halls. She passed up the temptation of Sara's locker. Besides, she might have something worse than a monster in there. Like live tarantulas.

Janine found Counsellor Kian waiting for her outside his office. At last. Someone who paid... attention.

The next place was Little Old Lady chic. The entire yard was neater than a pin and bore many, many quasi-tasteless whirligigs on the lawn. Tallwater had informed them both that Mrs Farnsworth cooked preserves, amongst other things, that were truly legend.

The old broad who came out was a natural-born bustler. One of those whip-thin old sticks who did everything they possibly could in every waking moment. Half her shopping was ingredients. The other half was more mundane.

"Ah, Sara," she cooed. "I was a little worried after that ghastly business on the news, last night." "It was on the news?" Tallwater, burdened with groceries, vented a small noise of anguish. "It's not that bad, dear. They censored most of it."

"Whelp..." she sighed. "At least I'm no longer invisible."

"They'll find another scandal. You know they won't remember for long."

"They don't remember *accurately* for long," corrected Tallwater. "Is there a clear space for this?"

"Oh, yes, I've just finished tidying it for you... Oooh, is that your father Sam?"

"No, he's my tutor, Logan."
Was he gonna get this question *forever*? And where the hell *was* Sam Adrien, anyway?

Sam apologised quickly in the local traders' dialect. _Mental note. Never pitch a tent on a Steppe Troll._
"[Little human,]" the creature rumbled, brushing the tent off like it was a minor annoyance. "[What you do so far from your lands?]"
"[I come in peace,]" he began. "[I was told your kind was seeking to establish rights with the humans in this area. I was... I was sent to parley.]
The Troll rumbled and cracked, and several more hillocks came to life.
"[You sent to talk us off our land?]"
"[No! No. I was sent to talk a way *through*... with no fighting.]" He smiled nervously. "[The humans want to travel through your lands... to make quicker trade. What would you like from the humans in trade?]"
One directly behind him murmured, "[We like humans to stay away.]
Okay. This was one he was going to have to *work* on...

Pietro had been staring at the mall crowd for almost fifteen minutes. For someone who could run all the way to Columbia in less time, this was a subjective eternity.
He was analysing gender issues.

Girls were girls and boys were boys, right? Except some... like Adrien... were girls that looked like boys but wanted to be recognized as girls. And some were boys who wanted to be girls and vice versa... and some were just gay.

Could he tell, just by looking, that someone was gay?
He used to think he could.
He used to think he could instantly attract anything female, too.
And now Toad was running around with Adrien.
And Adrien needed to know that he was still the best of the best ever. He was still faster, brighter, smarter... better.

But how to get revenge on someone at the bottom of the food chain?


~

Todd was starting to admire the change. Sara stood straighter, acted with more confidence... okay, so she was a little bit disarmingly honest and had gained the ability to make atrocious puns, but she was getting *better*.
Entertaining visions of Sara in full confidence-mode, with longer hair and him on her arm took most of his full attention for the last delivery.
"Now, I know these ones were pleasant thoughts," said Sara. "You haven't stopped smiling since the jam sampler."
"Thinkin' of good futures," he breezed. "We turnin' things aroun', yo. I just know it's gonna get better." _And seeing you grow on the inside is magnificent._
"Can't get much worse, right?"
"Oooh... skatin' on thin ice, babe. I could snap yo' for that one."
She presented him with a wrist. "Snap away, sirrah. I must to rid mine self of this accursed depreciation streak anon."
He laughed, even when giving her a baby snap and immediately kissed her better.
"No foolin' around back there," growled Logan.
Todd rolled his eyes and they both fell into merry hysterics.

Janine stopped by Povo Towers on the way back. They had a room for Ultra-cheap rent, owing to the bullet holes in the walls. They also had several notices asking for babysitters, dog-walkers, mail-
collectors and sundry other small jobs that would amount to rent money plus food money. And if she could land herself some kind of McJob in the near future, that would help infinitely. Janine took as many numbers as she could, figuring it wouldn't hurt to earn some spending cash before she actually moved in. Sara had always said that nobody ever got hurt by thinking sensibly. Sara, who'd been a true friend despite everything Janine had said or done. And then she remembered turning away to laugh, that day, when Sara had said, "You are now on your second chance, Janine Wiltshire. Heaven help you if I find that you've betrayed me." Oh shit. And that recording doing the rounds... naming her as Sara's friend. Naming her as the one responsible for the locker rat. Oh *SHIT*!
Why did she have to remember stuff like this *after* she'd turned over a new leaf?

At least they were still talking. They'd let him build a small fire and one even stood so that he was on the lee side. Out of the wind. "[Little man give trinkets for peace?]" they said. "[If I must,]" he said. Sam blew on his fingers. Night was cold up here. "[But trinkets do not make a lasting peace. They are just baubles. Playthings.]"
"[Little man give his *knife* for peace?]"
Sam boggled. "[I don't have a knife.]
Trolls conversing amongst themselves sounded like a chaos of Steppe sounds. Cracking ice, creaking ice, blowing wind and sundry other small noises of nature. Apparently, not carrying a knife was a big deal.
"[One more test,]" said the clan leader. "[Little man have big case. We see little man talk into it. Little man give case for peace?]
Sam thought about this. "[If I must, then I will,]" he decided. "[It's my only link to home, but I will give it to you for peace.]
"[Little man travel long way,]" said the chief. "[Little man willing to give most valued thing. Little man carry no knife. We trust little man.]
Sam sighed with relief.
"[Now you show us how this speaking case work.]
Roxy had almost fallen asleep in her chair when the telephone rang. Mrs Adrien leaped on it. "Sara?" a pause. "Oh, *Sam*... you'll never believe it. Sara's gone and ran away. She took *everything*. I don't know where she is and even if the police find her, they say they can't do a *thing*... Oh, Sam, I'm so alone, here." Another pause. "Of course I have the police here, darling. They're keeping watch with me in case she calls."

Sam closed his eyes and saved his tears until after he was out of the wind and the cold. _It's happened. It's finally happened. After all those she-goes-or-I-go fights... Sara took the path of least friction._ "I have the feeling she won't call," he said, trying desperately to remain calm. "This is a desperate move for her--"
"You're always taking her side, Sam," said Jaqueline. "Sometimes I think you love her more than you love me."
And since love was a binary thing for her and her family... he had to say that he loved *her*. "Of course I love you. I always have and I always will...." _It's a genetic curse. Us Adrians love long and love thoroughly. "But right now, we need to think about Sara if we want to find her." A pause. Were the police listening on the extension? "Do you want to find her?"
"Of course I want to find her! Think of how it will *look*. What will the neighbours think?"
_Hardly something to say in front of observers, darling..._ "Good. So we need to think a little like Sara. She must have thought things were tough enough to make her move out... Can you think of a
reason why?"
"Of course not. I gave everything to that girl. Everything!"

_Except what she wanted most,_ thought Sam. _One 'I love you' a day from you could have stretched her stay beyond the realisation that she had somewhere else to go._ He cut off her speech on how hard-done-by she was. "Darling... darling... think, please. There must be something. Did you see anything unusual the last time she came home?"

A gasp. "She was sneaking around with that little street punk! Moving a few things out, my eye! She was eloping with him behind my back! And she gave some pathetic 'Goodwill' excuse to poor innocent Cricket, too! That *girl*! I may have to send her to a *convent*!"

"Jaquelline..." Sam's voice was quiet, but it commanded all her attention. "Sara will only come back if she feels you won't be angry with her. I love you dearly, but you do have a ferocious temper... and being angry is not going to help this situation." _And neither will adding that Cricket is only innocent because she's too daft to pick up on innuendo..._ "You have to be strong for me until I come home. I'm going to try and make it soon, I promise." The signal was starting to fuzz. "Sattelite's going. I'm sorry, darling, but I have to go. I love you. Please be brave... I love you."

She sniffled an "I love you," back before the signal was lost.

Sam sagged and let his tears out.

"[Now we know why little man so good at peace,]" said a nearby Troll. "[He have wars in home.]

"[Yes,]" he sighed. "[I have wars in home.]

Roxy very carefully hung up the extension. Now there was a desperate man trying to keep up a brave front. All those key-phrases thrown at one another.

This wasn't a home, it was a war zone.

Time to grill some other combattants on Mr Sam Adrien, then.

Todd whistled low at the place they'd just entered. This place was top of the line. It didn't even have clothing on display. Just a few falls of exquisite fabric and some flowers in vases that suggested, should one be so crass as to enquire, that clothing would happen by arrangement.

The petite lady behind the counter beamed at Sara. "Ah, miss Adrien," she toured around the counter, stepped even further down, and revealed herself to be very petite indeed. Almost a midget.

"Another wedding performance?"

"No, I'm expanding my wardrobe," said Sara. "I was thinking of some mix-and-match articles. Tops more than skirts. Perhaps a pair of coulottes? Tones and tones of tones; that sort of thing, thanks, Ms Earnhardt."

Ms Earnhardt gave him, and then Logan an appraising glare. "And these gentlemen?"

"They don't have as much trouble buying off the rack," said Sara.

She next tisked at the watch. "And *this*?"

"A temporary necessity, I'm afraid," said Sara. "It's one of those new ones that monitor your pulse and suchlike. They don't *do* a ladies' model."

"I'll make you something to conceal it," offered Ms Earnhardt, "free of charge."

"Oh, and my budget's temporarily a bit of a mess, alas."

"I *quite* understand, dear," and Ms Earnhardt ushered Sara past some gauzy curtains that clearly marked the border into no-man's land.

Logan pulled up a comfy chair. Todd arranged himself in a discrete corner with a magazine from some Ren Fair mob.

"Hey, cool! Sara's ridin' in this one!"

"Imagine my eximent," said Logan, in tones that clearly implied that Todd would have to.

Todd pored over the article and the pictures. So *that* was Sergeant Bothari. In full armour and kitted out for Dressage, he looked magnificent. And Sara didn't do too badly as a random Knight, either. And check out the damage they could do to dummy warriors! Cool!

"Good book?"

"Sara," he grinned. "I thought you were gonna be forever."
"Nah. Just measurements and swatches and some battle plans. The finished product should be delivered next week."
"You set all that up?"
"You were kind of engrossed."
"Gotta admit, yo' pretty cool," he showed her the article.
"No, I--" Sara stopped, snapped a rubber band, and said, "Thank you, dear."
"Can we *go*, now?" rumbled Logan.

~

"Are you psycho, yet? Catch it from your homo friend?"
"Huh?" said Janine.
"Geez, you're such a spaz."

She ignored him and continued into the house. Mom was in the middle of a bunch of younger kids, trying to sort out clean pants, clean clothes, and a cooked dinner all at the same time. Janine dumped her stuff in her room and then did the unthinkable. She volunteered.

"Need a hand, Mom?"

Mom boggled at her. "Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?"
"Or I could go to my room and try to call all the people I want to work part-time for. Your choice," she breezed.
Mom felt her forehead. "Stay out here and help with dinner. I can watch for fainting spells."
"Ha ha ha," Janine deadpanned. "Is it so wrong for me to change my mind about the way I live my life?"
"What bought this on?"
"Counthellor Kian. He thays that I'm bathically training mythelf to be an aththhole when I grow up, so I dethided to turn it around while I had the chantho." She got on with co-ordinated cookery and toddler-shuffling. "Tho we figured out what wath causing the motht thtrethth and I kinda worked on a plan to eliminate it."
"Just like that, huh?"

"Yup. Thetpe one is earn thome extra cash. Thetpe two is find a cheap apartment near thchool. If I can earn enough to live tholo for a while, I won't have that competing-for-attention mindthet that made me... well... you thaw the news."
"I still don't approve of what you did or why you did it. I can *barely* understand the 'why'... Janine, she was your *friend*."
"Yeah. I thcrewed that the hell up and I have a lot of digging to do."
Mom stared at her as if seeing her for the first time. "What happened to 'it isn't fair'?"
"That'th the catchcry of the perennial loser," said Janine. "You play the hand you got and you bluff like thhit."
"#Janine#!"

She grinned. "Thorry... anyway, I can't really uthe gothip againtht my friendth... but I can have a kind of power over those kidth who'd uthe gothip againtht me. I can make 'em fear me? But I can't make 'em like me and that'th thad, but it'th the way the whole thing workth. I'm at the bottom of the food chain until thomething elthe happenth."
"Wow," said Mom. "That's... really mature of you."
Janine smiled. "Thankth Mom."

~

"Okay," said Danoz, "so you paid for her to go to a boarding school, and then you found out she ran away?"

Roxy watched the woman's crocodile tears with a venomous glare.
"Yes..." Mrs Adrien sniffed. "That's correct."
"But you caught her moving stuff while this Professor guy was here," said Roxy.
"Yes. She said she was moving a few things out. I thought she was finally going to burn those awful fairytale books of hers, and thought nothing of it. Of course I had to be a good hostess for my guests..."

"Of course," drawled Roxy in her patented, that-is-so-much-bullshit way. "Ma'am... have you tried contacting this institute?"

"They won't tell me anything!" Mrs Adrien bawled. "All they ever say is that I'm on her do-not-call list. After everything I've done for her!"

Danoz decided to head off that one with a generous pour of liquor into Mrs Adrien's glass. "Just calm down, please, ma'am," he said. "We'll check out this Institute and see if she's there. All we can legally tell you is that we've found her and that she's OK. We can't tell you *where* we found her and who she's with. It's against the law."

"She won't be at the school," said Mrs Adrien, deep into her malt liquor. "She hates everything I've ever done with her... she'd do the exact opposite."

"We'll check out the lead, anyway," said Roxy.

They were almost relieved to walk out the door.

"That," announced Danoz, "is one scary woman. If she was my ma, I'd'a run off ages ago."

"Laying any bets as to whether this is a miscommunication?" said Roxy.

"Nah. It's odds-even."

They had to be buzzed into the estate, and the cruise up the drive was uneventful. Some students practicing martial arts on the lawn broke up, one tall figure dashing inside with long strides.

"Sara Adrien?" guessed Danoz.

"Odds evens," drawled Roxy.

They found her on the telephone. "...standard thing, except add a clause saying she's allowed to go near me in the company of my father. Yes. That's right. Samuel Lyle Adrien. And how soon can this be enacted?" She scribbled some notes. "Excellent. Thankyou very much. Thank you. Bye." She turned away from the phone, notes in hand, and her face fell. "Oh. You're early."

"Early?" said Danoz.

"I figured you guys wouldn't work out I was staying here until tomorrow." She shrugged and blushed. "Must have left out a numeral somewhere. Or I'm currently talking to some more exemplary examples of our -ah- thin blue line?"

"Some glaring inaccuracies popped up," said Roxy, glaring through the girl.

"Did you tell your mother that you were moving in here?"

"Oh hells, no. She'd follow me."

"Mmm-hm*," said Roxy. "Are you aware that she's worried about you."

"I know my mother, officer. She's less worried about me and more worried about what the neighbours will think. If I can be frank? Strictly between us?"

"Off the record," said Danoz.

"My mother is toxic. I'm not just her daughter, I'm everything that's gone wrong with her life since I was six years old."

"So you decided to leave."

"More than that, I've started filing a restraining order," said Sara. "If she gets near me before Dad can defuse her? I'm afraid for my mental and physical wellbeing."

"Does she hit you?" said Roxy. Her notebook was open again.

"No. She never hit me. It's strictly verbal abuse, but that has - side-effects. I spasm under intense stress. There's footage, but Ray has it under guard."

"Ray? The butler?"

"Yes. Ray Dotrice. Obviously no relation[1]."

"Huh?"

"Side-reference. Never mind. You have to tell him my exact words or he'll keep the footage where
"it's hidden. You have to tell him I said, 'it's time for the truth to come from the woodwork out'."
"...from the woodwork... out..."
"So what kind of stress caused that fit on the web?" asked Danoz, never high on tact.
"A complete mental breakdown," said Sara, cheerful. "Born of eleven years of almost pure, unadulterated crap from other people. I snapped, but I'm better now."
"Mmm-hm*," said Roxy.
"Sure, I'm still a little fractured in here," she tapped her head, "but look." Sara showed them her hands. Steady as a rock. "No stress, no twitching. No more near-epileptic spasms. This Institute is the best thing for me. And if mother found out... she'd pull me away from here so fast there'd be redshift."
"I thought you were in Remedial Ed.," said Roxy.
"Were. Past tense. I've been moved up. Apparently, my IQ's somewhere above one-eighty... which means my life has turned a one-eighty!" She grinned. "I can *stretch* in this place."
A red-headed Senior passed by, "...said the girl who boxes herself in with bookshelves."
"Ignore my roommate, we're still getting used to each other."
"Was that... Jean Grey?" said Danoz.
"None other," said Sara. She was still chipper. "On our first night, I discovered that all idols have feet of clay. Mom would never accept it, of course, but the fact remains intact."
"And what about your *father*?" said Roxy.
"Dad's away in Russia, doing some negotiation deal. He goes overseas on those a lot. He... he loves Mom for his own reasons, and none of them have anything to do with the way she acts around me. It's... complicated. When he's home... there's a cease-fire."
"Yo, you still in yo' gi? I thought you were goin' be fast, sweetums."
The speaker fit so neatly into the 'street punk' pigeonhole that no other introduction was necessary. This had to be the boyfriend.
"Does he live here?" said Roxy.
"Nah. I'm a brotherhood boy, yo." He grinned. "Got me mah *own* talents. Hey! Can I look at'cher gun?"
"*No*."
"Dear..." said Sara.
He put his hands behind his back. "I'll be good."
His impression of having a halo wobbled significantly.
"Are we done, officers? I'd like it plainly understood that I won't be going near my former home until Dad gets back and defuses my mother."
"We can plainly understand it," said Danoz. "We have to go *back* there."
"*You* have to go back there," said Roxy, checking a post-it note. "I have a thing on the corner of Fifth and Twenty-second."
"But it isn't four of two[2]," said Sara, checking her clunky watch. "It's rather late."
"Naw, somebody else will be," said Roxy. She snickered at her own private joke.

Sara blinked as she watched the officers leave. "Was that as surreal as I thought it was?" she said.
"You gotta admit you helped," said Todd.
"Yes, but I *like* surreal." She shook herself. "Gi, I must be going."
"Euw," he laughed. "Meetcha at the foot of the stair?"
"I might just slide down the bannister at you."
"Ooo, tempting."
She dashed upstairs. Life was getting better.

[1] *Roy* Dotrice is the man who played Father in the series _Beauty and the Beast_ with Ron Perlman and Linda Hamilton.
[2] Reference to a _They Might Be Giants_ song called _Four of Two_. The corner of Fifth Avenue and Twenty-second street is where the guy waits... and waits... and waits...
"*Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh*..." said Sara. She was prone on the grass and watching the clouds. "I'm a sit here and not move until the grass itchies drive me berzerk."

"Sounds like a plan, yo," Todd had settled nearby. He was mere centimetres from touching her, but he was enjoying her closeness. "How long we got?"

"Well, I could show you how to make your very own spring-foam locker-troll. Y'know... hire you for some after-hours work."

"Heh. Prolly get Wolverine makin' sure no harassment's goin' on."

"True. How about I bore him to death with technical details?"

"He'd heal."

"Poot."

That just made him laugh. "After yo' episode wit' tourettes on Friday, yo... I can't take you *not* swearin' seriously."

"I told you I knew all the words. I just choose not to use them."

"Yeah... but hearin' 'poot' is kinda like... I dunno..."

"Hearing Logan say it?[1]" she suggested.

That one made him laugh a bit *too* hard. "Ow... yo' bust mah ribs open, babe."

"Aw, your poor ribs. Shall I nurse you back to health, sweetness?"

"Ooo. I'm in on *dat*."

A shadow eclipsed the sky.

Sara sighed. "Enter the gooseberry."

"You both looked a little thirsty," said Ororo. "Or shall I put this lemonade away?"

"Does it come in IV?" said Todd. "I did a lot of liftin' today. Mah arms are dyin, yo."

"I'm rather partial to an IV lemonade, too," said Sara. "My first Kata, you know."

"I'm afraid we're all out of the IV option," joked Ororo. "You'll have to sit up."

Sara lurched upright like a zombie. "Lemonaaaaaaade..."

Todd followed her lead. "Lemonaaaaaaade..."

"Oh *dear*," Ororo giggled. "You two are going to make for some interesting times."

They looked at each other at the same moment and burst out laughing.

Hank was peeking through the lace curtains when she returned.

"Henry McCoy, you should be ashamed of yourself."

"Should I have made them Smores?"

She glared at him. "Henry..."

"I just want to be sure of Sara's emotional wellbeing," he said. "I was ever worried about her."

"Relax. She and Todd are good for each other."

Todd snorted lemonade out of his nose and Sara laughed. "Oh my. I wonder what caused that one?"

"Want to make babies?"

{Sk'pnurt...} He coughed and spluttered at the solid mouthful of lemonade that had just gone where no lemonade should go.

Even as she laughed, she clapped him on the back.

"Yo, you tryin'a kill me?"

"Heavens, no. As far as you explained the procedure, it sounded pretty simple."

She could see the penny drop. And then a glare. "I'm'a get you fo' that, one day."

"I shall enjoy seeing the fruits of your enginuity, then," she smiled. "No lasting harm?"

"Yo, that's a given."

"Excellent."

She waited until he had a mouthful of drink again. "So. You never answered my question..."

This time, he swallowed. "You are a mean, mean woman," he teased. "But wit' you? Nuttin' else seems right."

He waited until she was sipping her drink. "'Course, we have t' do it proper one day."
Sara mildly choked. "I see you don't wait for chilled revenge, dear."
He grinned. "'All's fair in love an' war."
"Let's see. A perfect evening," Sara indicated the darkening sky and the colours of the sunset.
"Perfect company..." she scootched closer to him, feeling the gentle warmth of his body. "A toast. To us?"
"To us."
{Clnk}  
They downed the rest of their drinks.
"Ready?"
"Always." He grinned like a fool in her arms, then threw his head back and shouted, "I LOVE SARA LOUISE ADRIEN AND I DON'T CARE WHO KNOWS IT!"
Sara laughed. "Oh dear, we have a problem..."
"Yo?"
"I don't know *your* middle name."
"Mortimer[2]."
"Oh, *Mortimer*[3]," she purred. "Here goes." A deep breath, during which Todd plugged his ears.
"I LOVE TODD MORTIMER TOLENSKY AND THE WHOLE WORLD CAN CHOKE ON IT FOR ALL I CARE!"
Todd popped his ears. "Impressive pipes, yo."
Kitty popped out of a window. Only she hadn't bothered to open it first. "You *guys*! I'm on the *phone*!"
"Has it become surgically attached yet?" asked Sara. Todd cackled.
Kitty snorted and went back inside.
Only to be replaced by Logan. "What are you two idiots up to now?"
"Makin' babies," said Todd.
Sara giggled.
Logan folded his arms, glaring at them. "Better not be doin' it fer real."
Sara faked surprise. "But isn't this how it's done, Mr Logan?"
Todd snorted into his hand.
"Thin ice, Tallwater," growled Logan. "Both of ya inside. Now. Yer doin' somethin' I can keep my eyes on."
"How about making monsters in the basement?" Sara suggested.
"Long as it ain't th' beast with two backs, I'm fine," said Logan.
"Honestly, you'd think he was obsessed," Sara murmured to Todd.
"Yo, th' boy needs to talk wit Papa Freud."
"...why me?" Logan mumbled.

[1] Side-fling to the X-Babies in which Wolvie says things like 'poot' all the time.
[2] ObComicReference

~

Lance was humming his song under his breath as he fidgetted in the elevator. _C'mon... hurry up... You'd think a place built like Fort Knox on crack would have faster elevators, but *noo0oo*... they have to have these slow-ass pieces of sh--_
"Fire!"
{FooontFoooont!}
Two custom-made locker trolls popped out at them.
"D'WAH!"
"See? I told you the paint job was intimidating."
"Hurm. Nice blood colours on the teeth. Adds that certain je ne sais quoi, no?"
"You two..." panted Summers, "are freaking lethal."
"Yo, that's why we printed up the stickers."
_Don't ask. Don't freakin' ask. You really don't want to know. Just don't--_
"Stickers?"
"Damnit, Summers, haven't you learned by now?"
Sara handed them each a yellow sticker. "Ounce of prevention," she said.
The sticker read: _Caution: Security device installed. Opening of this locker is not advised to people with heart conditions._

Todd held up the now-familiar cardboard pyramid that contained a locker troll. "Pound o' cure."
"Uh," said Summers. "Just how long--"
"Two hours," Logan had a twitch under his eye. "Two. Very long. Hours."
"Aw," Sara pouted. "And we thought you *liked* us."

Now that he had a chance to look around, the basement was full of unfinished, half-finished, and pre-packed locker trolls. "Geez," he muttered. "All you need is one of those shrink-wrapping thingies."

{Snap!} "I *knew* I forgot something..."
"Thanks a freakin' lot, Rocky," growled Logan. "Now get the frogboy and get out."
"Heh. Bye-bye sweetums. See ya tomorrow..."
"Counting the hours, darling."
"Missing you from hee-ere," sang Todd.

*_God*...-_ Lance rolled his eyes. "Could you two get any more *sap*, or do you need a sponge?"

Todd cackled. "Ah, mostly we doin' it to piss off Logan. Sure, he's goin' ride her like nuttin' else tomorrow but - we made sure it was worth it."

"Whatever. Listen up, I have a plan."
"A cunning plan?"
"Idunno. Probably."
"Should I be doin' a Blackadder riff?[1]"

Glare.
"Awright, fine. I'm listenin'."

"You have *got* to be kidding me," said Fred. "It's suicide."
"Look, we're not doing anything *bad*," he said. "It's romantic."
"Excuse me, but I heard that song. Romantic ain't it."
"It ain't gonna work," said Todd.

"It's my only chance to win Kitty back. Please?"
Todd sighed. "Fine, but after she blows up at yo', we goin' do somethin' special fo' Sara."

"What?"
"Oh *geez*..."
"I'm in," said Fred.
"You gotta *pay* me," said Tabby.

Kitty rolled over as she heard the strumming guitar and the harmonising.
"There's a Trish on ev'ry corner if you like to watch the view..."

_Lance? Singing?_

"There's Angela or Pamela or Andrea, too. I've seen ev'ry name and I've known how they stay truuuuuuue... But I've always known that there is only you..."

He was trying to do rock riffs on an acoustic guitar.
"Oh, I know lots of girls go by Katie or Katherine... Tillie or Tisha-Bren... Marlyn or Mary-Anne... But I will always say that there's one girl for meee... And that would be you, lovely little Kitty..."

When she got out of bed, Rogue was already holding a large, blunt object. "Here. Give him a
"concussion."
"Thanks."
"Anytime."
"Now I've known an Angeline or two... they're pretty to look at, but not as nice as you... I've even met a Barbra-Ann and--"

{THWACK!}
"BUG OFF, LANCE, YOU PHILANDERING THUG!"

"Ow."
"He's still alive, fork."
"But you already *have* money."
"And now I have yours. Suck it up, yo."
"Wstfgl?" said Lance.
"How many fingers am I holding up?"
"Uh... three?"
"Close enough. Get up, you're crushing a rhododendron."
"...I don' remember eatin' that..." Lance mumbled. The world was spinning.
"Yo, I *said* that song wouldn't work," said Todd. "C'mon. Sara's balcony's this way. You got some harmonizin' you owe me."
And then Freddy said it.
"At least it can't get much worse."

Logan stalked closer, trying to stay out of Tallwater's line of sight as he crept up on the intruders. She was leaning on the balcony, smiling at the music.

Music?
"No matter what we do..." sang Treefrog.
"No matter what we do," harmonized Rocky, Speedy, and Blob.
"No matter what they say..." sang Treefrog.
The brotherhood echoed him.
"When the sun is shining through... Then the clouds won't stay..."
Oh good *grief*. They weren't.
"And everywhere we go... (everywhere we go) The sun won't always shine... (sun won't always shine) But tomorrow will find a way... All the other times..."
They *were*.
"You are beautiful no matter what they say... Yes, words won't bring you down. You are beautiful no matter what they say... Yes, words can't bring you down. Don't let 'em bring you down today..."
"I got one question ta ask, Treefrog," {Snikt} "Do you boys have a death-wish or *what*?"
"Cheesheit," said Speedy. He literally became a whirlwind and spun him around until all the others were gone.

When he recovered his equillibrium and his stomach, Logan shook himself. "Goddamn kids..."

[1] "Baldrick, you wouldn't know a cunning plan if it painted itself purple and danced naked in front of you while singing the 'I am a cunning plan' song!"

~

The horsehair couch itched her bare legs. The clock ticked as Logan paced.
"I honestly don't see what your problem with it is. What Todd did was a romantic gesture. That's all."
"I don't like it 'cause he's another randy male... Brotherhood or not, he's only after one thing."
Ping. The echo of her mother was there. "I could believe that from someone with magazine features, but--"
"Boys his age *use* girls, Tallwater." Ping. "He might be nice, now, but once he gets it, are ya sure
he's going to hang around?" Ping. "And ya never know what they say about you behind your back."
Ping.
Sara closed her eyes, trembling. "Please don't turn into my mother?" Was she shaking? Oh hell. She
was.
Logan sighed. "...guez..." Calloused, rough hands held hers. "I'm *worried* about ya, okay? You
might be bright, but you're *young*... it's easy to fool yourself into thinking something's there, and--"
One hand brushed a tear from her face with surprising care and tenderness. "I don't want ya hurt."
She opened her eyes to see concern on those battle-worn features. "Statistically," she croaked, "the
pretty ones... the cute ones... are more likely to abuse the privalege of a girlfriend." She sniffed.
"They're more likely to roam and seek out girls who--" she could say it. "Who put out. And pressure
reluctant ones to do the same." Thank goodness this was a mansion with a large number of girls in it.
There was always a box of tissues. She lurched to get it with a mumbled, 'pardon', and got rid of the
excess moisture on her face. "I don't think Todd's had much of an opportunity for love and... I get the
impression that he's as nervous as I am about... about losing the relationship."
"You also had the impression that that mouthy little brat with the brackets was your friend."
"Compatriot," she said. "There's a difference. I never trusted her with my secrets."
"You *have* secrets?"
"Not from Jean by now," she muttered darkly, then pinched herself. "We have to get along, Sara
Louise. Make an effort." A sigh. "Yes. I have secrets. Everyone has secrets."
"Huh. I have secrets I don't even know m'self," he muttered. "I still don't trust him."
"Because he's Brotherhood?"
"Because he's a teenaged *boy*, Tallwater. There's incredible pressure, there. Stupid people sayin'
stupid things."
"Like the measure of adulthood is losing one's virginity? It works in both genders, Mr Logan."
He startled. "That one *still* goin' around?"
"It's immortal."
"Guez..." He shook his head. "Just be careful, Tallwater. You two are goin' a little fast for my
likin'."
"Well, I can't exactly introduce him to my parents, yet. That situation remains... volatile."
Glare.
"I *like* him, Logan. I like him a *lot*. When he looks at me... he sees all my fractures and all my
wounds... all the things gone wrong inside my head... and he wants to make it better. He wants to
make *me* better. Anyone seeking to take advantage of me - just wouldn't do that, would they?"
Logan chewed on that problem like a man with something stuck between his teeth. "Awright. Fine.
Just *try* to keep it PG, okay?"
"PG is about all the relationship I can handle."
He ruffled her hair, setting her bangs askew. "Good ta hear."
Sara instantly reached for her locks, smoothing them back down over the vast expanse of her
forehead.
Logan stopped her. "Don't believe what yer mother said about yer looks, Tallwater. She's been hidin'
ya."
It was something she thought about all the way to her bed.
~~
Constant practice with her shields - now that she had a good reason to constantly practice - meant
that they were getting better.
She was learning to tune out those damn clocks and the random noises of someone trying to be quiet
at BF in the morning. At most, she would awake, identify Sara as the source, and slide gratefully
back into slumber.
She was even learning to tune out that goddamn little morning song.
Therefore, it was a surprise of sorts that she was awoken by a shriek.
Jean half-sat up. "Wzt?"
Sara was fumbling into her shirt. "Robert Drake, you are *so* dead!"
Further investigation proved that, while indulging in his illicit hobby of ice-surfing before the adults were awake, Bobby Drake had surfed right past Sara's quasi-illicit dawn worship. He'd compounded the felony by surfing *backward* past it and, while he was distracted by the sight of a naked female, slammed right into a tree.
Sara had known nothing until the slamming part but it wasn't hard to guess, what with the ice slides to and fro in front of the balcony.
Sara was flashing her fury colours. "I put up warnings, they were ignored. I took utmost care and attention to make sure no-one would wake up and investigate... but they *did*. I'm making a paintball pistol and the next motherfucker who ogles me is going to get **NAILED**!"
"You could just quit," offered Jean.
Sara glared at her. "If there was one thing, one little ritual, that made the daily grind seem a little more worthwhile - would *you* give it up?"
Put that way... "Not immediately, no."
"Precisely."
"What is it with you and the dawn anyway?"
"Promise," said Sara. She was rooting around in her clothing assortment for her Gi.
"Um. That was a little - spare," said Jean when no further explanation seemed to be coming.
"The dawning of a new day holds the promise that things don't have to *remain* bad... it's a purity thing. The day's perfect because nobody's had a chance to mess it up, yet. And bathing in that light... makes me feel like I could absorb some of it into me, like that perfection is being absorbed... It's a pure moment."
And the Institute males were interrupting that. Destroying it. "Should we do something to Bobby?"
"Any way we can slow-roast him without getting incarcerated?" Sara really was a mistress at the quick change. It must have come from years of habit.
"Tempting, but I think tying him to a flagpole will suffice."
"Upside-down?" said Sara, hopefully.
"You say that like it's an *option*," said Jean.

{Boooonng...} "Ow." {Boooonng...} "Ow."
Logan appeared in Bobby's field of view. "You're holding up the morning, Frosty."
"Well, I--" {Boooonng...} "Ow. Kinda got a little - uh..."
"Tied up. I heard." He popped a claw. "Now it's up to you whether you get down fast and hard - or slow and gentle."

_Gulp..._ "It was an accident, I swear! I thought no-one'd be awake on the east side at dawn and-- I didn't believe what I saw, but when I did - wham! Watch out for that tree, you know?"
Logan pulled back with the claw.
"I SWEAR TO GOD THAT'S THE WAY IT HAPPENED! PLEASE DON'T CUT THE ROPE! *PLEASE*! I'LL NEVER ICE-SURF WITHOUT PERMISSION AGAIN!"
At the last possible second, Logan withdrew the claw and untied the knots keeping Bobby aloft. Descent was relievingly gradual and gentle. The untying... that was rough.
"Breathe a word about what ya saw an' I'll make your life Hell, understood?"
"Yessir."
"Now get onto the field before I make you do your Kata in yer undies."
Fear put wings on his feet.

After the Kata and the Karate lessons, there was target practice. With thrown objects. Those with more experience in the matter were flinging shurikens with unnerving accuracy. Those with less skill got velcro balls.
Sara kept missing.
Even Jamie did better than she did, and tried to offer advice.
"You shouldn't flinch when you throw. It's not like the target's gonna sue." Or, "Try breathing out when you move your arm." Or, "It's just one smooth movement."
Logan's advice was brief. "Less wind-up," and, "Try underarm until you get it."
Even underarm... she sucked. The best improvement she had all morning was winging the edge of the target so that the ball swung back and flopped to the ground.
She sighed at the fallen projectile and slumped on her way to breakfast.
"You'll get it," Jean soothed. "It's not as if throwing things accurately is emphasised in girls."
That thought cheered her a little. "Yeah, but give us a baton to twirl and we're deadly."
"Especially with glitter."
"Of *course* with glitter. It's essential to dazzle the enemy's eye."
Both laughed as they began to eat.

If there was anything worse than getting over a blow to the head after a failed romantic manœuvre, it was knowing that he had to drive someone back to the scene of the crime, as it were. And if there was anything worse than that, it was knowing that that someone was *far* more successful at romance than him. Knowing that that someone happened to be Todd "not to be touched with a forty-foot pole" Tolensky made it even worse.
And at a nine point five on the richter scale of 'worse'... was *enthusiasm* from the very same Todd Tolensky.
Todd Tolensky who now *burbled* every waking hour about what a gal he had and how flummoxed he was that she hadn't found anyone better. About how she was a catalyst for the people currently reconstructing half of the boarding house while propping and shoring most of the rest.
Todd Tolensky who now *crooned* in the shower.
And showered every day because his gal helped him find a soap replacement that didn't make him want to hurl all the next day.
And none of this was ever helpful knowledge at six o'clock in the morning.
"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon..." Todd was jumping on his bed.
"Wegottagetrolling, c'monc'monc'monnnnnnnnn!" Lance went, "Mnurgh..." and half-opened an eye. "I'm not moving b'fore th's sun's up," he mumbled.
"But Laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaannnnnnnnnnnncce..."
"...no."
"ButI'mgonnabe la-aaaaaaaate."
"Jstfck'ff..." he mumbled into his pillow.
"You're the only one who can drive, yo. How'm I s'posed to get to work. yo?"
"Walk?"
"Or I could jog... Logan's all about fitness, that'll impress him."
"Good idea. 's quicker..." Lance resumed his morning coma. At least it was quiet when he got up. Quiet and peaceful. Calm. Until he saw the note on the fridge.
_Gone joggin' 2 work like U said, Lance. Pick me up @ the usual time. Or a bit later _
Fred found him looking for an old patch of wall fifteen minutes later.
"Uh... what are you doing?"
"Looking for some wall that hasn't been patched up."
"Why?"
"Cause I wanna bash my freaking head out on it."

Sara looked at the small object in her hands. It wasn't precisely *heavy*, per se, but there was a peculiar... inertia to it. No wider than one of those "energy drink" cans, grey, and a little longer than two palm-widths. It featured discrete buttons at either end, and in the middle, around the
circumference of the cylinder without being too near any edge. "What is it?"
Logan was unhelpful. "Click a middle button... but make sure you're holdin' it vertical."
She did so. {Vvt!} Now she was hanging on to a grey staff. "*COOL*! Just like the Rangers[1].
Would I be allowed to pinch this for a con?"
Kurt, part of the audience, frowned. "I understood each of those words, but in context... uh... What are you saying?"
Sara slapped her forehead. "Sorry, I was speaking in tongues. You know the show Babylon 5?"
"Oh, *those* Rangers! Ja, ja!" He blushed. "It's why Logan won't let me have one..."
"Give him certain weapons and he acts possesed," said Jean. "Trust me. You don't want to see him on swords."
"Swashbuckler?" said Sara.
"The worst."
Sara laughed as she gave it an experimental twirl. The inertia wasn't much in the starting, but all in the stopping. "This thing would give out a pretty impressive concussive force," she said.
Logan activated a similar staff and stood ready. "You'll see how much of a whallop it packs in a minute, Tallwater. Hit me if ya can. Keep yer eyes open for any opportunity you can grab."
Sara began turning it in patterns, over arm and elbow, wrist, switching sides. "Aw, but I was just starting to have *fun*..."
Logan sighed, butting his staff on the ground and leaning on it. "Tallwater..."
{Krak!} One little fillip and she tagged him on the unprotected side of the head. She grinned. "A cheap shot, yes, but I *did* follow instructions."
"Less of th' fancy stuff," he said. "This is *combat* training."
"*You've* never seen backstage practice in a Lovely Little Lady competition," said Sara.

Ororo opened the door -again- to discover a red-faced, drenching wet and wheezing Todd.
"What on *Earth* happened to you?"
"...decided..." wheeze, "...t'jog...." wheeze, "...here..." wheeze pant wheeze pant wheeze.
"Wan'ed..." wheeze, "...t'get..." wheeze, "...t'work."
Ororo picked him up from his state of near-collapse. "*You* are going no further than some ice packs, a long, cold, rehydrating drink and perhaps some oxygen."
"But..." wheeze, "Logan's..." wheeze, "d'pendingonme."
"I think he'd prefer that you didn't die," said Ororo. "And besides, Sara would kill me if I let you perish."
"She's up?"
"Since dawn, same as always," Ororo gave him a gatorade straight out of the refrigerator. "Possibly since before dawn."
"Ohyeah..." wheeze, "...theinsomnia."
"Insomniacs are tired, but they can't sleep. Sara just needs less downtime than we do. Some people are like that."
Todd gulped at the drink. "Oooohhhhhman, Ineededthat..." He panted for a bit and muttered, "I'm'a kill her mom one day."
"Join the queue," said Ororo.
He was using both glass and ice backs to cool himself. "Yah? Wohappen?"
Ororo gently took the glass and refilled it. "We've been adopted. Logan was the only one to actually nearly catch her in the act, but this morning, we were all left breakfast trays. Rather exquisite ones."
She sighed. "We wanted to thank her, but she kept acting like it was a criminal act."
Todd surfaced from his second drink. "I'm'a *fuckin'* kill her Mom..."

Ororo had wrapped him in foil and fed him some still-warm leftovers from breakfast before she lead him to the observation deck. He picked out Sara in an instant, and not just because she was the only aqua person in the room.

She was sparring against Logan and holding her ground. Todd honestly didn't know what she had against her body, specifically her knees. He couldn't see anything wrong with her at all.

Two shapely legs, long and lanky... Strong arms that were capable and nimble... a lithe body and a nice ass.

A very nice ass.

Ororo leaned on a button. "Mr Logan, your young hire is here."

He was so startled by the news that Sara managed to knock him down. The audio picked up her chirping, "No distractions, you said."

"I'm busy," said Logan. He allowed Sara to help him up. "My parcels come in?"

"This morning by FedEx," said Ororo. "Several times, in fact. All I've been doing this morning is answering the door."

"Then get Treefrog to put as much of it together as he can. He knows his stuff."

"Yo, promise I won't borrow any tools on a permanent basis," he said.

Sara laughed even as she blocked him.

Todd grinned as Ororo ushered him away. Well... if there was anyone to ask, it was a fellow female.

"Yo, do you know what's up with Sara and her knees? I never got it."

"Probably a remark someone made when she was younger," said Ororo. "Ladies tend to remember something someone said and multiply it out of proportion... sometimes for years."

"Yo, that's whack." He made a face. "Any way to talk her out of it?"

"Not easily."

Logan was rarely impressed, but Tallwater fell into the rhythm of staves as if she'd been there before.

"You learned all this," he said, "at some Little Pretty show?"

"Lovely Little Lady, Little Miss Whatever, Dimpled Darling... you name it." She grinned. "It's easier here, 'cause I don't have to make it seem like an accident."

That raised his eyebrows. "You sabotaged the competition?"

"At mother's behest. It's worse than dog-eat-dog at the backstage arena in those competitions. Mom had triple locks on our wardrobe box and someone *still* nearly managed to break in."

"Yeah?"

"They were somewhat foiled by an application of genitan violet on the handle... and the Mom and daughter with the purple hands got disqualified." Tallwater was smug, but she never got distracted.

It was rare that anyone took instructions to heart like she did, and if there was anything Logan liked, it was a quick study. "I'm gonna have to look at those do's," he said. "Might get some new techniques."

"Look for the long-termers," suggested Sara. "They're *vicious*."

They broke after another handful of minutes so the students could take some time to relax and enjoy themselves... and he could check on the Treefrog.

He had put together a mobile of rods and cams and was trying to figure out how to hang it.

"Treefrog... are you an' Tallwater makin' me your *hobby* or somethin'?"

"Huh? No. I swear. This is all that's in these boxes, yo. I couldn't make an engine, soooo... uh... Ikindagotbored. Sorry."

Logan checked the invoices. "Those fuckin' *bastards*! They sent me part *number* L-579... not parts *for* an L-579. I'm a rip 'em open and--"

Todd had hidden under bench.

"Relax, Treefrog. I'm mad at *them*, not you."

"...'f it's awright wit' you, I'm a stay here 'til yo' stop throwin' stuff, yo."

"Why* did he have to babysit teenagers with messed up heads?
When Ororo returned to the kitchen, there was not a lot to do. Sara the habitual tidier and apparent
housework ninja had struck again. Logan was pacing the kitchen on the phone and there was no sign
of Todd.
The benches were clean. The washing up had been washed, dried, and placed back where the
various items had come from. There was even a helpful list of things they'd run out of on the fridge.
Damnit. She needed to *do* something or she'd strangle someone.
Logan snarled. "Four minutes on hold... I'm gonna wreck 'em..."
"Where's Todd?"
"Hiding in th' garage. *You* try an' sort 'im out. I give up."
Having another talk with a teenager who may or may not actually listen? Why not? It wasn't as if her
day could get any worse.
After all, she'd heard Sara praising the autumn season because it allowed her to conceal all her 'figure
flaws' under warm clothing. It had compelled Ororo to take the girls aside for yet *another* talk
about body image versus self-confidence and how being ashamed of your body was *wrong*.
And, yet again, the talk had fallen on completely deaf ears.
"It's all right for her, she's *perfect*.
"She never had knees and elbows like zepplins, I'm sure."
"Or like, a butt the size of utah..."
And failing to find a nice patch of wall to hit her head on until it felt good to stop, Ororo had turned
to her kitchen for some good, old-fashioned displacement activity.
And now there was someone else in need.
She found Todd under a table in a duck-and-cover position that bespoke of years in an abusive
situation. He'd even shielded his head with his cast first, for the extra protection.
Her gentle touch made him yip and flinch. "Oh. Hey. Is he still mad?"
Ororo summoned serenity from the depths of her spirit. "It's all right," she soothed, "he's not mad at
you, dear."
"Don't matter," he said. "Mad is mad."
"Come on, Ororo. We've dealt with broken people before. Just because it was a long time ago
doesn't mean we've forgotten how to do this..." "How about you and I sneak out to my gardens," she
whispered like a conspiritor. "That way, if he comes looking for you, I can say I borrowed you for a
while."
Todd bit his lip, eyes drifting in the rough direction Logan had gone.
Ororo added the metaphorical cookie. "Sara might be there."
That winkled him out of his hidey-hole. He was still nervous and twitchy until they'd reached a
garden on the other side of the mansion. And, as an added bonus, Sara was apparently enjoying the
breeze on a nearby rise.
Todd's smile was worth a million dollars.
Then he remembered something. "Oh. I got you yer foil blankie here..." he dug it out of a pocket. "I
tried to fold it up, but... uh... It's kinda like a road map, y'know?"
"Thank you," Ororo took it, shook it out, and re-folded it with professional ease. "It takes practice to
fold a space blanket."
"Yo, I was wonderin' where you got that much foil," he said. "It'd make a killer roast, yo."
She laughed, even though she knew his wise-cracks were a defense mechanism. There were worse
ones, she knew, like concealing non-perishable food supplies in one's room. It had taken patient
years to break Scott of the habit, and he still insisted on a can of Spam and three packets of tic-tacs in
the back of a drawer.
Everyone had a mechanism. The Professor was the most in control of his - tapping his fingers - by
developing another habit of tenting them. Jean's was being likeable. Kurt's was clowning. Kitty's was
valley-talk. Ororo's was cleaning or gardening.
"You can go over and say 'hello',' Ororo prompted. "I won't mind." She was mildly surprised that he
spent a whole minute dithering... and then he shot towards his girlfriend like a helpless comet heading straight for the sun.

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Before he'd even taken a breath to say 'hi', Sara said, "Hello, dear. Pull up a tuffet." Her eyes were still shut. Todd swore he hadn't made a noise. "How'd you do that?"

Sara, eyes still closed, grinned. "I have a sixth sense," she said. "My new epidermis has some interesting nerve linkages... I discovered the whole sixth sense thing when trying out Logan's meditation regime."

"So... you saw me coming?"

She chuckled. "Not... precisely. It's hard to explain. It's not like sight-sight... I can 'see' colors and shapes, but it's all out of focus and warped. You, dear, happened to be a blur of the right colour scheme, and... you were moving happily." She opened her eyes. Did they have a twinkle just for him? "I don't even know how I interpreted that, but I did. Somehow." She leaned towards him, her hand slipping onto the grass... and growing lawn up to her elbow.

Todd didn't care. Those lips of hers had missed out on their allotted kisses for quite a long time. He had to help her catch up.

Ororo was aerating the soil and turning in mulch when Logan arrived, took in the couple on the rise and sighed.

"Do they ever quit?" he wondered.

"They're new to love, Logan. Don't you remember what that was like?"

"Painful," he summarised. "They been doin' anythin'... risky?"

Ororo looked up to glare at him. "They've agreed to have a PG realationship. That means nothing more than kisses and cuddles. Unlikely as it may sound, Todd's reluctant to take advantage of her."

"Don't sound like most boys his age," Logan growled.

"Most boys his age have better luck on the dating scene," said Ororo, returning her attention to her garden beds. "They get complacent and begin expecting too much... or their contemporaries pressure them into doing the same with outlandish stories." She found a weed she'd missed earlier and removed it. "I don't believe either Sara or Todd hold many of the values that their peers do."

Logan's reply was a low growl.

"You sound like Marge Simpson when you do that."

"I had it copyrighted first."

Ororo kept her reaction down to a mirthful shaking, even as Logan stalked over to the new couple.

Sara looked up and smiled fit to split her face. Her heart was flying. "Look," she whispered, pointing. "The first autumn leaf." Anticipation of joy made her laugh. "The leaves are turning... isn't that wonderful?"

"Um..." Todd sounded doubtful. "If you say so... I mean. Uh. I don't much like bein' cold, yo. Autumn an' winter just means more layers."

That broke her mood in an instant. "Oh. I'm sorry. It's just... I--" she sighed. "Ever since the Wooden Spoon Debacle, I... sort of anticipate winter. Dad comes *home* in November. November the eleventh, no matter what. And Daddy-Daughter Day's November twelfth. Time apart so each lady of the house can relax a little. It always takes a month to defuse mother... just in time for my birthday."

"Your birthday's December the eleventh?"

"The twelfth," she corrected. "Dad always makes a special effort to remember. Mother... has to plan for the big Christmas bash. It's easy for her to forget. Or economise by combining my birthday and Christmas. They're really too close together, you know."

"No they ain't," said Todd. "It's plenty of time to do both. I mean, yo'r Dad's in *Russia*, an' he's still gonna come all the way home, shut yo'r Mom up fo' a change, *AND* make yo'r birthday sompin' special. Your Mom's right *there*... she used to be in the same damn house, pard'n th'
French. She don't have *no* good reason fo' skippin' out on yo'.

Sara lurched over to hug him, accidentally bearing him down to the ground. "Thank you," she murmured. "I've ever been an apologist for my mother. I need someone to open my eyes."

"Yo... breathing would be nice..."

She let go. "...oops. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I'm so sorry..." Rising panic. Was she another on the long list of people who hurt him for no good reason? Was she going to add to the numerous bone-scars inflicted on his poor body?

"I know. I know," he sat up, guiding her hands away from her mouth and gently brushing proto-tears from her face. "You don't know your own strength."

"Don't-- don't start apologising for me. I hurt you. I should never hurt you."

"I *know* you didn't do it on purpose," he said. "Luggin' aroun' that bag o' yours all week, every week? It's gotta do somethin'. You're stronger than you think you are, yo. In more ways than one."

"Everybody keeps telling me that," she said. "It's just... it's very hard for me to believe."

"So sneak up on it," he suggested. "Lift some barbels or somethin'. Ones wit' the numbers on. See how strong you are."

"I still don't want to hurt you," she said.

"That's good enough fo' me," he said. "I never wanna hurt you, neither."

Someone cleared their throat. Logan.

Todd froze in her arms and got a sort of hunted look. "Yo?"

"Company's sendin' over th' parts we *shoulda* got in the first place," he said. "Their expense. You can do what you like with your little art project. Ain't about to destroy in on ya."

"But I didn't know what else to do an-- huh?"

In spite of herself, she giggled behind a hand. "Why, Mr Logan, I never took you to be an aesthete[1]."

"Whut?" said Todd. "Yo, I thought--"

"I don't take out my anger on people who don't deserve it," said Logan. "It's called 'ethics'."

"There the hell you are," said Scott as he marched right up to them. "Turn out your pockets, *Toad*."

Seething anger at Seniors in general fueled her simmering fury of Scott Summers. "Is there a particular *reason* for this illegal search?" said Sara.

"Frog-boy helped himself to one of my packets of tic-tacs. I mean to get it back."

"...geez..." Todd stood and turned his pockets inside out, revealing a dearth of miniature breath mints. He took off his vest, and then the underlying shirt. "Enough for ya? Or d'you wanna do a complete strip an' cavity search?"

A pause. "Um... no."

He dressed himself again. "Fine."

Sara had stood with him, folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. "The last time I checked, Mr Summers, tic-tacs were cheap and readily avaiillable. Is there anything particularly *special* about yours?"

A longer pause. "Um... no."

"You ask anyone else first?" demanded Todd.

An even longer pause, during which Scott Summers looked down and scratched his head. "Um... no."

"So much for innocence before proof of guilt," muttered Sara. "Let's wait around the front for the Fed-Ex van, dear. It's suddenly become too *stuffy* here." She cut Scott dead and marched away. Todd trotted by her side. "Yo, it's cool."

"No. It is *not*. You're here for a legitimate purpose. By invitation. And you're my *friend*. Don't these count for anything?"

"I'm part of the *'hood*, yo. I used t' pickpocket. Somethin' goes missin' and if I was there - it looks bad fo' me. It happens."

"It has been 'happening' more than usual," grumbled Sara, slowing her pace to match his. "Every time some little thing gets misplaced, I'm asked if 'my boyfriend would know anything about it'...
And it's so *accusatory*. As if I'm to blame for not having you on a shorter leash or something." She sighed. "Human nature has a lot to answer for."
"And a *half*, yo."

[1] One who appreciates beauty, mostly in art and nature.

Sara dandled her fingers in the water, marvelling at how her skin perceived it one way, and her eyes another. The fountain itself was a study in chaos theory... but Todd's gloom worried her more than math.
"So far, the list of suspicious SOB's include practically all of the new recruits, Kitty, Evan, and you know about Scott."
"Mmh," said Todd. He found a leaf and tucked the stem into its body, making a little boat out of it... which promptly sank the minute it encountered a spout of water. He stared gloomily at the sunken vegetation.
"Jamie misplaces things all the time," she offered. "He actually got me to try and help him find things."
"Rmph..."
Now her fingers were fiddling with each other. Picking at her nails and making patterns on their own. "At least the adults know better," she said.
"Don't hear none of 'em comin' to my aid."
"I'm sure the Professor might have some harsh-- oh no..." There, approaching from the mansion, was Kurt. The one person who'd never said a word against Todd. Her heart not only fell, but crashed and burned when it landed.
Todd followed her gaze and moved smoothly into a defensive posture. "Yo?" he said, spinning it into a half-threat.
Kurt soldiered on under their burning gaze. "I don't suppose either of you have seen a comb? Little black plastic thing about yae long," he gestured. "Only I swear it isn't in my room and I've asked *everybody* and I know it's only a thirty-cent comb, but it's verdammt *annoying*, ja?"
Sara felt her life return. "You say you've asked *everyone*?"
Kurt smacked his forehead. "Ach. Dumkopf. I forgot Hank." {Bamf!}
Sara was grinning. "Odd that he would redeem my faith in the human race, isn't it, darling?"
"Hanh? I dunno what chanel you were listenin' to...
"He said he asked *everyone*," said Sara. "We're the last people he thought of... admittedly before I reminded him that he forgot someone, but still... we're at the bottom of the list." One huff of a laugh. "I never thought I'd be glad of being there."
Todd reached over and snapped a rubber band on her wrist. "You ain't there no more. Remember that, anh?"
"Trying," she said. "Although it's a little difficult since I tripped over one of those old psyche texts in the Professor's study... It's amazing how many ways I could be psychologically dangerous." She ticked off the list on her fingers. "Repressed anger, mother issues, completely disturbed body-image... amongst many, many others."
"You'll heal," he said. "I know you will."
"And then there's you."
"What about me?" Now he was guarded again.
"From what I've been able to determine, I believe you have some father issues, abandonment issues, not to mention the fact that you're recovering from several abusive situations... possibly consecutive... You're in danger of exploding, too."
He fidgetted, looking for the Fed-Ex van, at his feet, at his cast. "You don't need to hear it," he said. "It's all... been and gone. It's over. I don't need livin' through it again. You don't need knowin' about it."
"Dear," she covered his hand with hers. "We're a couple. A good couple should be able to poison and cure each other. You've helped me... and you've heard and seen - ugly things. It hasn't changed how your eyes see me..." the thought occurred to her. "Or... don't I have that level of trust, yet?"

Now he looked like he was battling with several ulcers. "You don't need to hear it," he said, his voice edged with tears. "Please. You don't need to hear it."

Sara remembered Cordelia's advice[1]. _You can say a lot, if you stick to words of one syllable._ She put her arm around him, comforting him. "I want to help," she said. "I can't leave you wounded."

"Not yet," he said. "Please... not yet. I just-- I need you to heal first."

"Your sense of triage is rather skewed, I think."

He shook in her arms, and blurted a laugh. "Yo, pro'ly..."

{Beep!}

They both jumped. How did the Fed-Ex van appear there? Sara shook the bad thoughts and cobwebs from her brain and escorted Todd to the van. She signed, he helped her schlep all the stuff to the garage, where Logan inspected it all.

"These look very different from the old motor," she observed. But then, her old motor had been something of a kudge.

"As you kids say," said Logan, "no duh."


~

Sara loved unwrapping things. It was sort of like Christmases or birthdays in that the joy was in the discovery. She tried to allow Todd to get some of the parcels and Logan, somehow, automatically picked out the ones that would need a knife to open them.

It was kind of like the scrum at the mystery toy barrel. Someone always got more than they should, somehow. Sara did her personal best to make sure that someone wasn't her.

Logan, despite his incredible reputation, faded into her background as she stole little glances of Todd as they worked. There was a kind of possessive joy in knowing that there was someone nearby who stuck around either despite or *because* of all the bad things.

Sara stopped herself to snap a wrist. It wasn't all badness, now. She was getting better. Logan's near-constant exercise and meditation regime was giving her a lot more confidence than she used to have. Hank's skin potion and occasional insights made her life a little easier to live. Ororo was fast turning into a close friend and almost hazardously close to a substitute mother... the one Sara had always wanted *her* mother to be.

That left the quasi-enigmatic professor.

She knew he was trying to help her, especially after Friday's meltdown; but there remained the impulse to fight the power, as it were. Sara had never much liked psychologists, people who took one's words as they came out and attempted to infer what was going on inside the head from them. Most had never listened to her. Not really *listened*. They heard what she said, but had no clue of the meaning behind it[1].

And when she got annoyed with the profession in general, that tended to come out at the closest therapist available. Usually in the form of head-games.

Sara had recently found some old psychology texts... and was rather annoyed with the profession again. She sincerely hoped the Professor would catch her before she happened to him. She liked the man, she did. And she owed him quite a bit... but seeing him with his psychiatrist's hat on... It just might get ugly.

"Bad thoughts?" said Todd.

"I have a psyche session with the Professor tonight," Sara absently fit two parts together and worked them. "After reading about how psychologists are taught to think... I'm worried I might try
"Don't worry," Logan took her assembly, separated them, and fit them into other parts that were seemingly unrelated. "Chuck's three steps ahead of everyone. 'S almost impossible to ambush a telepath."

"Not ambush, sabotage." Some obsessive part of her lined up the screws, nuts and bolts according to size, species, and washer availability. "I've wrecked psychiatrists before."

Todd was instantly fascinated. "How'd you do *that*?"

"Well, since he wasn't listening to the truth, I made up a story that seemed to fascinate him. We were 'making progress' for months on end before I announced I was bored with it all and enquired as to whether he'd like a different story or if he wanted to hear the truth, now." She bit her lip and blushed. "I think I gave the poor man a bleeding ulcer."

Todd laughed. "I'm sorry... I shouldn't laugh, but... *dayumn*, yo."

"It never helped that he gave me books to read about the whole phenomenon, either. And the historical library was vastly educational..." Now she was stacking similarly-shaped parts. "I'm sure he had his own book in the works when I made my little announcement. Chapters and chapters of it. I ruined his opus."

"You gave a jerk his come-uppance," said Logan.

"Yo, it was his job t' listen," said Todd. "So he shoulda. You shouldn'a have to have *made* him do it, anyway. Just relax about it, 'kay? You need anyone to listen, I'm it."

"Now her world turned warm again. "The same offer is open to you, too, you know."

Todd went bright pink and gave a goofy laugh. "Yeah. I know."

Logan cleared his throat. "We buildin' this thing or what?"

"Can I stay?" said Sara. "I'm fairly good at passing tools."

Todd winced. "Oooh. Faint praise. Wounded to th' quick, yo."

"But it *was* a positive statement," she argued.

"*Technically*," Todd mock-glared at her. "You can learn this. Yo learned just 'bout everythin' else."

"I know. That's why I want to pass tools."

[1] Side-fling to a Benny Hill song, I believe it was called _We Knew What She Meant_... The chorus went a little like, "We knew what she meant, We knew what she meant, We heard what she said but we knew what she meant." Lots of innuendo-esque fun.

The work would have gone well, if it wasn't for the constant interruptions.

"Sara? Can you like, ask your boyfriend what he did with my hair ties?" said Kitty.

Evan was next, "Hey, your frogness, where the heck are my board tools?"

And then Sam, "Uh. Hate to intrude 'n' all, but has th' Toad seen my plectrum set anywheres?"

And Rogue, "Ah swear, Todd, if y'all been in mah things, you're dead meat!"

"*Marie*," Sara barked. "Todd's been under constant adult supervision all the time he's been here. What *time* has he had for thievery, petty or otherwise?"

"How in tarnation'd you know mah name?"

"I didn't tell her," said Todd.

That earned Sara a glare of doom. "*Nobody* finds out, got it?"

"It doesn't take *that* much enginuity. Especially when you leave your ID on the floor for any idiot to pick up."

"Y'all were in my room?"

"Laundry." Sara had folded her arms. "Investigate the concept. Both you *and* your roommate."

She was positively seething by the time Scott poked his head in. She prepared to launch a spanner with. "*NOBODY* has seen your frelling *TIC TACS*!"

Logan weighed down her wrist.
"Uh. Actually, you have a phone call... Someone from school?"

Sara vented an animalistic snarl, took pains to lay the spanner carefully down, and extracted herself from the engine-in-progress. After a pause to wash the grease off her hands, she was stalking towards the nearest common telephone.

"Look," said Scott, hurrying behind her. "I know we've gotten off to a rocky start."
"Got off," corrected Sara. "Do you always begin conversations with understatements?"
"Um... Okay. I'm trying to start over, here. Will you give me a break?"
"Left or right?[1]"
"I am *not* your enemy!"
"Then stop treating my boyfriend like one, please," she icéd. "I believe we still have due process in this country?" Sara picked up the telephone. "Sara Louise... who's calling?"

Scott was an interesting study in someone who had just had the sound cut off. He was too proper to make any kind of noise while she was on the phone, and too agitated to let the argument lie. The resultant pantomime was very entertaining to watch.

"Pleathe don't hang up?" said Janine.
Sara almost shut down. "Janine," she drawled. "What an *un*pleasant surprise."
"I know I've blown my last chance with you," she said. "And I know I was incredibly dumb and self-centred... I'm just trying to change that. And the first thing I have to do is apologise. I'm thorry for all the nasty things I spread about you. I'm sorry for the rats... and lying about them. I'm sorry for being a jerk when you were my only real friend in the entire school."
"Are you sorry for being caught at it?" Sara icéd.
"I was, but then I talked with Mr Kian and... I realised I was being an aththole about the whole thing. What you did... was long overdue. You should of happened to me thooner, Thara."
"Should *have*," Sara corrected. "Just out of idle curiosity... what do you plan to do now you're alone?"
"Hack it." Sara could almost hear the shrug. "If you could cope for two years, I can. I'm thinking of moving out to Povo Towers and I already have some work lined up. Thoon as I have a month's rent and some food money... I'm going to try re-making myself."
"Remember to shop at Bernie's," said Sara. "And you can do a lot with rice or noodles."
"Um... I thought we weren't friendth..." said Janine.
"Oh, we're not. We're acquaintances. But it wouldn't be civil of me to let you fumble about on your own when I had helpful knowledge to hand."
"Y'know, motht people would've just let me hang out to dry."
"I never was most people. *Most* people would have sued over the rats. I'll just settle for a lesson hammered home."
"Trust me. You an' mither Kian both have sledgehammers. I'm turning all availble leaves. And *if* I manage to thomehow redeem myself... maybe you and the new me could be real friends?"
"Give it a year," said Sara. "I'm still vexed."

Janine sighed. There was a definite note of relief in there. "That'th cool... it's more than I hoped for, actually. I'll um... just... let you get back to your new life. Hope it'th fun."
"May you hear the rumours *before* they spread," said Sara. It was the fairest blessing she could think of. They hung up.

Sara leaned her forehead against the wall and sighed. That was just *one* personal problem squared away.
"...coolest diet *out*," Jubillation was saying as she approached up the hallway. "Every time you get hungry, you just suck on a tic-tac instead of eating a snack. You can enjoy full meals, fine, but instead of browsing you get tic-tacs."
"Aye?" said Rahne. "An' where does the regular exercise fit in?"
"Psh!" Jubillation rolled her eyes. "The *point* is to get *thin*? If you're putting on muscle there's
"So it's just nuts."
"Not nuts... *tic-tacs*!"
Sara tapped her shoulder as she passed. "Pardon me, but where did you *get* those tic-tacs?"
"Oh, Scott's always got a few. He'll never miss 'em."
"Bet a dollar?"
"Huh?"
"He's already harangued Todd and I once. You'd best go find him and gain forgiveness before vowing to obtain permission, next time."
Jubillation stared at her. "What's the big deal? They're just tic-tacs..."
"Tell Scott that," Sara advised. "Preferably from behind some kind of blast shield."
Funny looks from both of the junior recruits before they went on their way.
Sara abandoned her place in favour of seeking out Todd. The one balm for a bad mood.
"Ah, Miss Adrien," Hank beamed. "The Professor sent me to retrieve you. He requests and requires your presence for necessary therapy."

_No..._ Sara slumped, dragging her feet all the way there. Not a psychiatrist. Not right now.
It was only for an hour. She could survive an hour even in a bad mood.
By the time she got there, she was watching her feet drag as she let herself in.
"Make yourself comfortable," said the Professor.

_Hurm... Running straight into Todd's arms for an extended snuggle session and some grass-time. Not, I think, what he had in mind._ She found a chair she could drape in and flopped into the cushions.
"I caught wind of your earlier concerns, Sara, and I thought things might go better if I wore a different hat."
Sara looked up. Then she burst out laughing.
Nestled on his bald pate - and there was no better word than 'nestled' - was an almost perfect replica of a brooding hen[2]. Right down to the look of pulletic determination to hatch his head.
The Professor's own mirth was far more restrained to a merry twinkle in his eye. He waited with impish patience for her to wind down enough to speak coherently.
"It's going to be very hard to take you seriously in that hat, sir."
"Good," he removed the lifelike chicken-hat. "Some times, I also find it very hard to take myself seriously." He petted his hat before putting it away in his desk. "And humour is the best way I know of diffusing tension."
"Translated, I needed a good belly laugh?"
"Precisely." A companionable good-for-you nod and smile. "Now. Shall we begin with the spark to your bad mood?"
"People presume guilt before proof of innocence," said Sara. "It's not only irritating, but *annoying*. And the way they presume, all the time, that one can control one's friends..." she vented a little noise of disgust. "I'm sure I'm nearing the event horizon for justifiable homicide."
"In brief, you could kill them."
"Or throw something. Whichever's the least effort. A perfect murder's remarkably hard to achieve, and I don't think they're really worth that much *work*."
"I've always felt that murder is for people without enough imagination," said Xavier. "And you, Sara, have *bucketloads* of the stuff."
"Bucket and buckets of buckets," agreed Sara. She shifted into song. "I'm a daydream believer... not a - homecoming queeeeen...[3]"
"That's quite enough riffing," he warned. "Let's not have a repeat of spontaneous free-association, hm?"
"Oh, but it's such fun. One has to have *fun*, Professor."
"Preferably not at one's own expense - one way or the other," a playful glare. "You're here for help, Sara. Let me help you."
Meanwhile, both Todd and Logan were torqueing things[1] in the garage. Every now and again, Todd would pause, look in the vague direction of the Professor's study, then return back to his work as if it was something to do.

"Treefrog?" said Logan.

"Yo?"

"You an' Tallwater..." he inserted an engine part. "I don't exactly approve, but..." he shrugged.

"We determined enough ta wear you down?" Todd suggested.

"Near enough."

"Coo'."

"Listen, kid. I know you two are... kinda serious."

"Yo, not serious 'nuf fo' *that*.* "Though lewd thoughts are frequently available..._ "Not *yet*, anyway."

"I heard. I don't believe it, but I heard. Listen. Some times... things happen, right?"

"Uh..." said Todd. He'd *heard* a lot about 'things' happening. None of which were immediately verifyable. "...dunno 'bout that..." If this was happening at school, he'd have faked something plausible. But this was *Logan*. The man who could smell which mood you were in.

"All I wanna tell ya is... if ya can't be good - at *least* be careful?"

_Oh *God*#, no. Not the 'safe sex' speech! Not from Logan!_ Todd went vermillion and stammered,

"Yo, I know about rubbers 'n' all. You don't gotta tell me twice."

"Good. 'Cause I don't like repeatin' it."

Wait. That was *it*? Logan's version of the safe sex speech was 'if you can't be good, be careful'[2]? The last person who pulled him aside for such advice had drawn it into an hour lecture. Complete with helpful hand gestures.

It had done a lot to dispel a lot of schoolyard mythos, but... he spent a year in complete paranoia of toilet seats as a direct result.

"Hey, yo."

"Yeah?"

"You can relax 'bout Sara an' me. I'm the *last* person that'd wanna hurt her."

Logan nodded, satisfied.

And as for the first person... he's working on the fruition of Plan A.

"No."

"Aw, c'mon, Tabby..."

"I said 'no', Speedy."

"But it's all for laughs," he offered.

"Had it happen to me. Wasn't funny." Tabby glared at him. "So... *no*."

"I'll give you a fifty." "No means no, Quickie."

"A hundred?"

"Not for all the money you could steal."

"How about barter?"

"*NO*!"

"Aw, come *ON*... there's gotta be something you want more than anything. Something I could, perhaps, arrange?"

Tabitha stopped walking. "Something I want."

"Yeah."
"More than *anything*.
"Exactly."
She pondered this for all of one second and then, slowly and deliberately, drew it out in order to drive Pietro nuts. "What I want," she said, "more than *anything*... in the entire whole wide world... is... for *my* family... to get back together and be *happy* - just like they *used* to be."

Pietro's face fell.
"And while you're at it, try making my Dad quit being a lying, cheating, stealing scum-bucket. Oh. I forgot 'alcoholic'." She smiled without meaning it. "Can you wrap that for me for Christmas?"
"Um... no," he admitted.
"Then find another 'ho."
"Don't make me pull the big guns, Tabitha Smith!" Pietro warned.
"Oh. And what can *you* do to *me* that I can't blow your nuts off for later?"

[1] And those of you with gutter minds can provide illustrations in the Adults Only section of the forum...
[2] MeMum oft repeated this to me during my teen years. She needn't have been that paranoid. All the guys in my school were complete scungebags.

~~

"...ENERY THE EIGHTH I AM, I AM. I GOT MARRIED TO THE WIDDER NEXT DOOR[1]..."
The rest of the spectators, down the hallway and away from Tabby's door, watched in the idle speculation of men faced with nothing good on television.
"...AND EV'RY ONE WAS AN 'ENERY - 'ENERY! SHE WOULDN'T 'AVE A WILLIE OR A SAM - NO SIR!"
"Not that I want to know," said Lance, "but just how long has this been going on?"
"Uh. Since they came back," reported Fred. "Actually, I think it's since before they came back, 'cause Pie was singing when they came in. I dunno what it's about, but."
"...ENERY THE EIGHTH I AM, I AM. 'ENERY THE EIGHTH I AM! SECOND VERSE - SAME AS THE FIRST!"
Inside her room, Tabby screamed. She screamed, "NO! I'M NEVER DOING IT!"
"That's new for her," Lance snorted."
"Maybe something involving animals?" said Fred.
"...SHE'S BEEN MARRIED SEVEN TIMES BEFORE..."
"This *is* Tabby we're talking about."
Fred pondered this. "Maybe there is someone she won't do. I mean, she likes what she does, that's okay... but maybe she's got standards?"
"...NO SIR! I'M 'ER EIGHTH OLD MAN NAMED 'ENERY... 'ENERY THE EIGHTH..."
"#Tabby#? Fred, the words 'Tabby' and 'standards' are mutually exclusive."
Fred shrugged. "Maybe," he allowed. "Wanna go out an' do something?"
"Sure," said Lance. "Anything to get away from the One Retard Chorus."
"FUCK OFF, PIE!" Tabby shrieked."
"I'M 'ENERY THE EIGHTH, I AM..."

Sara was now mostly inverted on the chair. One trainer's toe pointed to the cornice[2] and the other traced patterns in the air somewhere off the chair's arm. Most of the rest of her was stretched out along the carpet, looking up at the ceiling.
"That's the thing. I'm not antisocial... I just wish people would quit being a bunch of jerks. It doesn't take all that much effort to be *civil*, at the very least. We did invent good manners as a means of greasing the gears of society." One finger made a rotating motion. "But lately, maintenance has been lax. Supremely lax."
"How lately is 'lately'?" enquired Xavier.
"I'd have to say the '60's," said Sara. "That's the marker-point when some people realized that they
could breeze through most of their lives by being a jerk. It was compounded in the '80's when the
biggest jerks won... and people became more interested in spending less time with each other." A
hand lifted to connect with her mouth by tapping her lips. "You know, I think the statistics of human
contact - the number of people who would know any random person by name and face - has
dropped alarmingly over the decades. No wonder nobody cares, any more. They don't know
anybody."
"And your solution?"
"Oh, build a new society after this one's inevitable collapse. Something where the phrase 'love your
neighbour' doesn't mean 'condoms optional'." She grinned. "And in the meantime, I'm preserving
what I can by leading by example. *I*, at least, shall make the effort to never be a jerk."
"But that isn't a real solution," said the Professor. "You're just surviving until you reach a distant
goal."
"True, but it's the only legitimate one, considering the alternatives." Two hands in the air now, to tick
off a list. "Telling them that they're acting like jerks gains them attention for acting like jerks... re-
enforcing the jerkesque behaviour and amplifying it in my direction. Simple revenge is out, too, for
similar reasons and that - ultimately - it makes me the biggest jerk of all. Anonymous writings only
work if someone can be bothered to *read*... not an option in a High School that teaches
Shakespeare from the common language translation, yes?"
"Quite."
"Transforming my few heeded mediums of expression into diatribes against the jerks would make
them preachy, and thus lose the audience they once had... thereby making the point moot. Ergo,
there's very little left, but to survive and be better than the mob." The hands relaxed, interlaced across
her midriff. "Refusing to play their game may encourage more jerkishness, but it's the only moral
choice."
"And I'm quite glad that you made it."
A little bell pinged.
"Sounds like my hour is up."
"Sorry I couldn't help you much, today."
"Oh, venting has always been good for getting problems to lose weight," Sara dismissed, extracting
herself by a series of tangles. "I do have one question, though."
"Yes?"
"Where did you get that *hat*? I want one!"

[1] A side-fling to _Ghost_

~

Sara emerged ruffled from the towel, reaching automatically for the hair treatment that, in
conjunction with the hot iron, removed all traces of unruly and unpredictable kinks in her tresses.
*Wait. Why am I doing this?*_
Mother, being someone with a natural curl to her hair, thought straight hair was lovely. And since
Sara's locks were neither, the morning routine had been there since time immemorial.
The treatment failed the instant Sara got her hair soaked, and it had always been, "Sit still and I'll fix
it for you."
She looked in the mirror. Her hair was *interesting*, now. All over and with fascinating chaotic
directions.
"I don't need fixing, Mother," she said, and shook her head vigorously. This morning, she was going
to air-dry and see what happened next.
The men, this dawn, had heard about her preparing to go to the balcony armed, so her morning
serenade was peaceful for a change. Having Logan recommend paintball guns, with interesting
statistics on the pain factor of each strike, had acted as an effective deterrent.
Airing the facts about Scott's tic-tacs had yet to earn an apology. As had exposing the Institute's
unofficial inter-borrowing scheme to the world at large.
"Mnurgh..." Jean lurched out of bed as Sara aired her black dress. "Y'r not wearin' that are ya?"
"Why ever not? I don't exactly have that many options."
"Th' red thing w's nice..."
"The red thing is currently threatening to go at the seams. Not something I could walk in confidence
with, what?"
"Urh?"
"I'm too big for it."
"Uh." A moment's extracting the gummy deposits from her eyes. "What's wrong with your usual
stuff?"
"I want to positively enforce my status as a female," said Sara. "Dresses are definitely feminine
wear."
"Y' could borrow my stuff?" Jean offered. "A baby-doll an' a skirt... got somethin'd look good on
you..." She fumbled for her things, extracting items of the girly persuasion.
Sara sighed. Some people had *no* idea... but then, Jean wasn't functioning on all cylinders in the
mornings. "Allow me to demonstrate," she said. The skirt looked awkward on her long legs, too long
for a mini and too short for normalacy. As for the shirt... it's hem just managed to touch flesh under
her bra strap. Sara lifted her arms, exposing her underwear.
"Oh," Jean blinked. "Yeah."
Sara removed the borrowed clothes. "I can never wear anything off the rack," she said. "Nobody
makes clothes for truly gangly people."
"Erm... isn't 'gangly' a snap word?"
"Thank you," Sara snapped a rubber band on her wrist. "The point remains that my options are
rather limited."
"Y' got other dresses," Jean pointed at the other two cocooned garments. "C'n I look?"
Sara bowed her in. "Be my guest."
{Zzzzzip...} The navy one, with the scattering of sequins. "Urgh... Not daywear." Jean zipped it
back up. {Zzzzzzzip...} The apricot-cream one. "Not in a school with food fights." Again, Jean
returned the zipper to its original position. "You're screwed."
"At least black can go anywhere." Sara wriggled into the black dress, tweaking it so that everything
was in place.
"Eh. It can. Don' make a habit of it. You'll get red-listed."
"Red. Listed?" Sara paused in the act of fingering through her jewellery.
"Yeah. After Columbine, schools are twitchy about kids with certain traits. Wear black a lot, not
many friends, have exhibited antisocial tendencies... that sorta thing."
"Trust the administration to stop at appearances," muttered Sara. "Doesn't anyone pay real
*attention* any more?"
"They don't," Jean was combing her hair. "It's why there's a *need* for the red list."
"Otherwise known as the witch-hunt. Going after the cause would be simpler."
"There's a cause?"
"Popular people who make unpopular people a hobby, and humiliating them a sport." Sara fastened
a pendant around her neck. The twinkling object came to rest just below her clavicle. "After years
and years of peer pressure like that, anyone would snap." She smiled at herself in the mirror. "Case
in point."
"I'm doing what I can about that," said Jean. "Subtle revenges that seem like bad luck, that sort of
thing."
"You can't be everywhere, alas," said Sara. She turned her hologram on and contemplated her
makeup. "Someone, somewhere, is getting away with it." Rose-coloured lipstick. Just pink enough
to be girly, and just red enough to look realistic. And eye-liner. Just a touch.
Jean was staring at her. "...wow..."
"I told you I have hidden depths."
"QED," said Jean. She yawned, stretched, flexed, and finally slumped. "*God*, I wish I had your get-up-and-go..."
"Try deep breaths and a little physical activity. Sometimes it can jump-start the brain."
"I am *never* dancing nude at dawn."
"I should hope not. There's just enough room on the balcony for one."
Jean giggled at that, waking up at last.

Meanwhile, at the Brotherhood house...
"...I AM, I AM, 'ENERY THE EIGHTH I AM. SECOND VERSE! SAME AS THE FIRST!"
"ALL FUCKING *RIGHT*!" Tabby shrielled. Her voice had cracked on the last word. "Just *shut* *UP*!"
"I knew you'd see it my way," soothed Pietro. "So we're agreed on the plan?"
"Not entirely," growled Tabby. "You owe me *big* time. One day I'm'a need somethin' huge, and when I do... You're it."
"Fine. Cool by me."
Tabby held out her hand. "Against my better judgement..."
Pietro shook it. "Judgement, schmudgement."
Lance glared at them. He had earmuffs on and an extremely hang-dog expression. "*Now* you decide to shut the fuck up. Just fuckin' *wonderful*..."
Todd breezed by. "Good morning, good *mor*ning... you've talked the whole night through..." he sang. "Good morning, good morning to you...[1]"
"Can I shoot him?" muttered Tabby.
"Later," hissed Pietro.
"Yo. Toady! What the hell makes you so happy after last night?"
"Huh?" said Todd. "I spent las' night sleepin' inna tub, yo. My room's bein' done over, remember?"
Lance began hitting his head on the doorjamb. "Bathroom's soundproofed... *God*..."
"Aw cheer up," said Todd. "Freddy an' me? We're makin' *waffles*![2]"
Fred was the next to bounce down the hallway. "Good morning, good *mor*ning... I get to cook today. Good morning, good morning to you..."
"If it wasn't for the waffles, I'd fucking shoot him," said Tabby.
"Waffles first, homicide later," said Lance.

[1] Paraphrased from the _Good Morning_ song of _Singing In The Rain_ fame.
[2] If you don't get this side-fling, you need to see a little movie called _Shrek_.

~

Sara hadn't walked three steps into the schoolyard before Todd's attention was fixed on her. Tabby's muttering and Pietro's cackling fell into a subliminal hum.

_Whoah..._

"Sara!" he called, waving. He launched himself towards her from a standing start.
Or that was the plan.
Someone had a hold of his arm and used it to reel him in. He barely had time to register it was Tabby before the buxom blonde's tongue made a valiant attempt to dive down his throat.
He struggled. Fought. Clawed his way free, hacking and coughing. Staggered a few steps away before bumping into Sara's motionless form.
"Tabitha Brianna Smith," said Sara. "Either this is a new low, or you're a victim of some kind of blackmail."
"Psychological torture," said Tabby.
"...ack... slut germs," croaked Todd. "...must... have... *lysol*!"
Sara's icy glare nailed down Pietro. "Is this the best you have?" she said. "I thought you'd be a challenge." Sara removed her bag, dipped into it, and produced a small bottle. "Here, darling. Don't
swallow."

Pietro zipped over and yowled. His fingers caught in a mousetrap.
Sara smiled. "Try again when you're capable of more than a minute's coherent thought," she
drawled.

Todd swished and swilled. Ah, the tear-inducing burn of undeniable hygiene. He spat blind in
Pietro's general direction. "Ow. It hurts and stings[1]..."
Sara took his elbow in her hand, making it look like he was escorting her. "Shall we see if there are
rats in the locker, this time?" Sara offered.

[1] Side-fling to _Elf-Only Inn_ a fave webcomic of mine

~

Principal Kelly felt an intense desire to apologise for the coffee. He'd sampled the Adrien's selection
exactly once, when interviewing Mrs Adrien about the size of the voluntary donation he'd like in
order to keep Sara in his school.
The female, the one with the unnerving way of looking straight through him, took a sip, grimaced,
and warmed her hands on the mug.
"Budgetary cutbacks," explained Kelly. "We can't exactly scrimp on the kids' education, so..."
"Folger's crystals?[1]" said the female.
"Yeah. Sort of," Kelly withered under her X-ray glare. "It's a cheaper... non-brand alternative."
"Mm-hm," said the female.
Could they arrest you for giving no-brand coffee substitute to cops? Kelly started to sweat. "Now.
Uh. If you don't mind, officers... what, precisely, can I... help you with?"
"We're here to inform you that Mrs Adrien has been served with a restraining order," said the male.
Officer Danoz. "She's not to come within one hundred feet, nor attempt to contact miss Sara L.
Adrien unless in the company of one Samuel L. Adrien. In the case of telephone contact, you'll have
to speak with Mr Adrien before allowing contact with the girl." A copy of the official document slid
across the table.
"We've already verified that she's under the temporary guardianship of a trustworthy adult," said the
female. Why did he have such trouble remembering her last name?[2] "Before we verify these
arrangements officially, we have to ensure that these details remain private and confidential. They
will not leak out, under any circumstances, to Mrs Jaquelline E. Adrien."
The way she said it made it sound as if it were already a fact; and that, if that fact changed, then he,
Principal Edward Kelly, was in for a world of hurt.
"Of course, officer," he stumbled. "I'll mark it private and confidential before locking it in my filing
cabinet."
The female gave the cabinet a glare, sizing it up and determining that there was very little on a school
campus that would hold up against a determined thief. She reluctantly slid another piece of paper
across his desk.
Kelly dutifully stamped it, referring the restraining order, and added them both to Sara's extensive
permanent record. "I'll... uh... send a memo around as soon as possible."
"You do that," said the female.

"I'm just worried, is all," said Sandra Pattele. "I mean, she's wearing *black*, now. She didn't have
all that many friends, the last time I checked, and she's hanging out with that punk kid, Tolensky.
And he has a broken hand? This could all be like, Idunno, some kind of warning sign. Y'know... after
that big spaz attack in the hallway, on Friday, I thought to myself like, 'What if this is going to
turn into some kinda Columbine?' y'know?" She shrugged. "I'm just concerned about my fellow
students. *Especially* Sara Adrien."

While the secretary wrote all this down, Sandra turned and winked to the super-hottie Pietro
Maximoff. He smiled in that extra-sexy way and blew her a kiss.
God. She nearly melted on the spot. This was going to be *so* totally awesome.
Sara frowned at the blood Todd spat out, mixed with his ever-present mucous. "Dear, let me see inside your mouth, please? You're bleeding."

"Yeah," he rasped. "Always happens, yo. There's some hygiene that just hurts." He let her gentle fingers open his mouth.

Ouch. It looked like he'd suffered a rash of mouth ulcers that had all spontaneously burst. Almost the entire surface of his mouth was stripped off. Even his tongue was reddened. She hissed in sympathy. "Shall I make you a saltwater rinse? Do you need to see the nurse?"

"Naw. I be okay in a few minutes. Promise." He wiped the last moisture from his eyes and appeared to focus on her for the first time. "Yow. What'd you do to your hair? It looks all cool an' shit."

"I did absolutely nothing, for a change," Sara smiled. "I figured that if I'm going to be *me*, I might as well do it from top to toe." A mock glare. "But you're distracting me from the important stuff, dear. Why did you *do* that if you knew it was going to hurt you?"

"What would you do if -say- Duncan Matthews frenched yo'?"

"...possibly the very same thing," said Sara. "Point taken." They joined hands to journey to her locker. "Any wagers on the presence of rat?"

"Yo, if there is one, I'm'a see that little mouthy bitch eat it."

Sara turned her combination. "Round and 'round it goes, where it stops, nobody knows... And the winner is..." She opened the door, and yelped as a cascade of paper spilled out. Somehow, she managed to fumble her skirt into an impromptu basket before most of them hit the floor. "Notes? I've never had notes in my locker..." she sniffed. "Especially not ones that smelled of cologne."

Todd had bent to scoop up the ones she'd missed. "Yo, some of these look like *love* notes..."

Together, they managed to stack and pack them into a small bag, which Sara secreted into her backpack.

"Shall we dissect them in morning assembly?" Sara offered. "Could be worth a few giggles..." One small card that had escaped the clean-up was captured and flipped open. "Especially ones that read, 'Will you show me the other one? I have money'. Charming."

"No offense, babe, but yo' coulda picked a better time an' place fo' that breakdown, yo."

"Sadly, breakdowns can't be chosen. Breakdowns are thrust upon one, with malice, but holding the aforethought[3]."

The PA whined into life. "Would Miss Sara Adrien please report to the office? Sara Adrien?"

Sara sighed. "This is probably about the breakdown. You don't have to follow me there."

"Aw, c'mon. You need emotional support." He gave her a sly smile that made his eyes shine. "They make yo' hang aroun' fo' *ages* in there."

Sara had to smile, even though she was blushing. The office waiting room was the most private public place she knew of. So long as one kept decorum, the busy office staff could care less what one actually *did* whilst waiting. She joined hands with him.

Having someone there with her would be a supreme relief.

[1] I've only heard about these. Apparently, they're a decent coffee substitute, but I reckon that substitutes can be discerned by a trained tongue. I mean, I can always tell if something's used artificial sugar...

[2] Because I can't recall hearing it on _Dead Like Me_. Ever. Any help out there?

[3] I think there used to be a legal term, 'with malice and aforethought', meaning the act was not only vicious, but premeditated.

~

Lance sponged the last of Todd's spit off his pants leg and shoe. Ack. Why was it, when Todd *had* to gargle lysol, some of the mixture of slime, blood and disinfectant always landed on *him*? It was fate or something. He might as well give up now and wear clothes that were easy to wipe clean. And when he left the boy's lavatory, there was Kitty. She looked displeased with him and about to harangue him in the hallway.
He stopped in front of her, closed his eyes and sighed. "Please. Don't. Just don't."
"What? Just because you've had a bad day I'm expected to treat you with kid gloves?" She ranted.
"You're *always* having a bad day when you don't want to like, deal with stuff! It's your one
excuse!"
Not the high-pitched shrieking. No. That always bored into his migranes and it was worse in
moments like now, when he wasn't allowed to take any more painkillers. "No," he said, trying
desperately to keep calm with the sensation of an ice-pick in his left temple. "I'm always having a
bad day because I'm holding down four jobs, looking after three fuckwits and trying like *hell* to
avoid the School *slut*; who happens to think it's funny to break into guys' rooms and take
advantage of any boners she sees." Count to ten. Calm down. Anger always made his head worse.
"And to top it all off I get headaches that would *cripple* you. Every. Day. And people that make
those headaches worse. Every. Day. I don't need this level of aggravation and I don't need you
shrieking in my ear."
"Well, maybe you don't need me," Kitty shrieked.
"Like hell I don't!" Stuff being calm. He needed to rant and rave and yell for a while. "You're the
one good thing that's ever happened in my entire fucked-up life and I'd rather drown in Toad's *spit*
rather than give you up!"
"What? So you can *use* me again?"
"Everybody uses everybody else, Kitty," he shouted. "That's what people *do*! Wake up and smell
the goddamn coffee! Everybody has an angle on everyone! It's just that *you* choose not to fucking
*see* it!"
"Well, I'm not ending up being raped in some Limo, Lance Alvers! You can forget using me for
*that*!"
"I NEVER EVEN HEARD OF THAT FUCKING THING!" Ow. Now he was hurting himself.
"Is it so fucking unthinkable that I could actually *like* you?"
"You liked me 'cause I could help you break into that office!"
"I liked you long before that," he hollered. "It's just that you were too stuck-up, too selfish, and too
into your study addiction to ever notice!"
"Yeah? Then what was your 'angle'?"
"I just told you! I *liked* you! I wanted to keep you or whatever. I wanted to spend every possible
moment close to you so maybe - just *maybe* - I could actually feel *good* about myself for a
change!" He had to shut his eyes to make the visual fireworks in front of his eyes stop. Stupid
fucking migranes.
Kitty slapped his face. Hard. "Like I'd swallow *that*," she sniped. "You're nothing but a
possessive, obsessive *thug* and that's all you'll ever be."
"Maybe I oughta just kill myself so you can get back to your perfect little life."
"Like you'd ever *try*," she said. "Forget the threats, Lance. They're not going to work."
"At this stage, anything's better than dealing with this headache," he said. "Let someone else mop
everything up, sort everything out..." Lance sighed. "Sounds nice."
"You're not going to freak me out," she lied. She was already freaking out, but she was going to die
before letting anyone know about it.
"Fine. Whatever. You want me to leave you alone? Soon as I can, I'll be leaving everybody alone.
Forever. It's obviously going to be better that way, right? Nobody needs an obsessive, possessive
thug like me, right?"
"You're *NOT* freaking me out!" Kitty ran away.
Yeah. Go ahead and run. It's how she always dealt with anything. Leave somebody *else* to mop
up the spill.
Sounded like a damn good philosophy, right now.

The Principal was waiting for her at his door, and there were the same cops that had investigated her
vanishing, hanging out and sipping a coffeelike substance whilst pretending to investigate things.
Todd's hand went cold in hers. "Morning Officer Danoz," she chirped, "Officer Harvey."
"Cute dress," said Officer Harvey.
"Thank you," said Sara. She stopped at Kelly, who was looking perturbed that police officers in the office had worked on completely the wrong target. He glared at Todd. "You'll have to leave your..." he searched for a polite word, "associate - out *here*."
Sara let go with a longing glance. "Bread and butter[1], love."
He didn't get it. He was shaken and shocky, so he did what came naturally, which was sit in a cheap plastic chair and make music with his shoes.
He'd be okay. She had to believe he'd be okay.
"This would be about Friday, yes?"
Kelly rubbed his head. "Yes. Amongst other concerns."
"A glance at her - outfit?" "You do realise that assaulting an adult is a prosecutable offense. I could press charges."
"I'm fully aware of that eventuality," said Sara. "I could also sue you for providing the environment which directly lead to my... disturbed state, at the time of the assault. They have video footage of the event, true, but *I* have video archives of the things that happened to me. All because I was unpopular. None of those things were ever pursued - to the best of my knowledge." She lifted her bangs, showing the scar that was still livid from its encounter with the locker. "I photograph and date each of these. I have a file that's almost as thick as my permanent record... So let us call this particular point moot and get on with the next item on the agenda, shall we?"
Kelly had paled. "About your -ah- underpopularity..." he said. "There's been some concerns about your recent - upset. And your startling change in wardrobe."
"I don't own many dresses that fit, Mr Kelly," she said. "Black was the only one available. I've worn it before, in public, and nobody has said a word about my colour choice[2]. All I wished to do was positively re-enforce my feminine nature on the hearts and minds who had forgotten me, previously. I didn't want to vanish into 'Adrian Essel' again."
Kelly cleared his throat. "Um. Perhaps you could try to make some more friends?"
"I go for quality rather than quantity, Mr Kelly. The friends I keep are worth knowing and treasuring for a lifetime."
"We'll -um- be keeping an eye on the situation... but in the meantime, I'd like you to--"
Sara joined in with the chorus. "--visit Mr Kian this lunchtime for an obligation-free counselling session, just so we can allay concerns." She smiled. "I've done this many, many times before, Mr Kelly. The only difference is that this time I think I'm actually getting better."
He sighed, sipped his coffee substitute, and winced. "Please don't do that again. Especially not in my *voice*.
"Sorry. Some times it just comes out that way." She made to leave, and then remembered. "Oh. I have the first donation for Project Froshtie. I'm afraid it's in cash, but I've drawn up all the legal payment documents."
Kelly blinked. "You're doing what, now?"
"Money," said Sara. "I give you money, you help sue the pants off of former Froshtie-cullers. Especially if they'd had their pants off in a previous event."
"But..." Kelly fumbled. "I... was going to... press charges."
"We *dealt* with that, remember? We both have equal and opposite suits and causes to prosecute. Now, I don't have a burning need for school money, but I feel that the school has a burning need for mine." Paperwork and an envelope thick with cash were placed reverentially in his in-box. "Go forth, and wreak vengeance on the Seniors that offended in years past."
His head was obviously spinning. "You could have kept that..."
"Please, Mr Kelly. I *do* have ethics."
He stared at the envelope, jaw slack.
"You could catch flies like that."
"Don't you have morning assembly to go to?" he wondered.
Sara stood. "Try an extra few sugars in your next..." she paused. What was the right word? "...hot beverage. It helps alleviate shock."

He nodded absently. "Yes, of course. Thank you."

It was amazing the damage one could do whilst being civil and perfectly polite. Sara breezed out of his office and sat by Todd, taking his lax, slightly-shaking hand into hers. "Bread and butter, dear."

He blinked, coming back to life at the sight of her. "Yo're okay..."

"They didn't come to take me away," said Sara. "I'm going to have to do something *really* illegal for that..."

"Please don't?"

"It's a deal."

[1] A side-fling to _Monk_. It was Mrs Monk's shorthand for "I have to let go for a little while, but we'll be back together, soon." [I still cry thinking of the end of that episode. Wah.]

[2] Because, in those public events, she was surrounded by people who were also wearing black. They were called 'the orchestra'.

"Corner of twelfth and main," said Danoz. "Busiest corner in Bayville."

"Nothing like a really public place to make things nice and private," said Roxy, stepping out of the car.

There, looking more ordinary but never less presentable, was Mr Dotrice. He had a small valise and the sorrowful expression of someone who knew what it contained.

"Good day, officers," said Dotrice. "Here are all of Sara's... archives. Some are pertinent to the home... some to the school. I trust they'll explain a lot?"

Danoz accepted the valise. "I hope so, too."

"Thank you for all your assistance," said Roxy. "We'll do our best to be discrete about the whole thing."

Dotrice appeared greatly relieved to the point of near collapse. "Thank you. Thank you very much. I really have no desire to see Sara dragged through all of that all over again."

"Sounded to me like she's already got enough to get dragged through," said Roxy, famous listener at doors.

Sara sat primly and properly at morning assembly, Todd next to her. Both were ignoring the usual morning blather and sorting through the quote-unquote 'love' notes from her locker.

"Oh nice. This one's scrawled on a piece of pizza box. Replete with grease and manky cheese." She slid into sarcasm. "And such a marvellous near-haiku. 'Show me the other one, I'll show you the money'. Be still my beating heart..."

"Got another obscene," said Todd, crumpling up the foolscape page. "And worse, the dude can't spell any anatomical terms, yo." He shot it into the bin. It went in effortlessly.

Sara unfolded a page of photocopy paper. "Fascinating," she said. "Some guy photocopied his private parts. 'All this could be yours'... he writes. He misspelled 'could' and 'yours'..."

Todd peeked. "Yo, he nearly misspelled 'all'."

"He nearly misspelled *it* all..." Sara pondered the page. "Should we report this or just burn it?"

"Hon, I'd disinfect yo' hands." "Point." Sara crumpled it up and tossed it at the bin. It didn't even go near. She picked up the next note. "Lovely. Hallmark poetry."

"You can tell?"

"Dear, I've had to pick out hundreds of birthday cards. I *know* Hallmark poetry." She screwed up the plagurist poet. "So far, not an original soul in the pack."

"Yeah, but at least they know who you are."

"Small mercies, love. Very small mercies."
"Hey, cute. This one's writ on a dollar. 'Just a tip for seeing your nip'. Nice."
Sara was still acerbic. "They do teach such wonderful charm in this school." She flipped open another piece of paper. "Aw..."
"What?"
"I found a tentative hopeful. 'Sorry if I ever hurt you, and I'm really sorry that you had to have that breakdown to get noticed. Maybe, when you're feeling better, we could go out sometime?' and there's a locker number."
Todd peeked. "Yo, that's Duncan Matthews' locker."
"Is it? *Fascinating*." There was a dangerous edge to those three, otherwise harmless words. She re-folded the note and slipped it into a pocket in her bag. "Either he's being nice..."
"*Ha*!"
"One has to accept all probabilities, dear. In an infinite universe, all things are possible. Now. Either he's being nice... he's planning to string me along for further attempted humiliation... or he's conveniently forgotten that he's currently dating my roommate. In the last two eventualities, there *will* be fireworks."
"Yeah? You goin'a light the wick?"
"As they say in the patois, 'you can bet your skinny green ass'."
Todd cracked up as he reached for another note. "Damnit. Hearin' you swear is also just dang wrong."
"Whoop. He's onto the sports. We'd better get a wriggle on."
Obscenities were routinely tossed towards the bin. Sara got close enough to hit the rim only once, and then the sad little missile deflected back off the edge and onto the floor.
Sara decided that, at that moment, the only thing worse than doing something and not being noticed for it was *not* being able to do something in front of a crowd.
Beyond the obscenities and the unoriginal were the nebulous ones. The ones that looked optimistic on the surface, but managed to raise Sara's personal hackles. Those and the 'call me's were filed away for later analysis.
The most chilling was from Graydon Trent. It read, _Now I know you're easy... you're mine._ That one, she would have to report to the office.
They barely got the piles cleared before they were dismissed to class.
"Nil illegitimi carborundum, darling," Sara said.
"Uh. Whut?"
"Don't let the bastards grind you down." She grinned. "The latin's somewhat incorrect, but one has to mangle to make it quasi-understandable."
And then Jean seized her arm and pulled her away.
"Are you going to be like this *every* morning?" said Jean. "And what the hell did you do to your *hair*?"
"Uh. What?"
"Nothing. It's all in perfect working order[1]." Sara fell into step. "As for the answer to your first question, I don't really know. I haven't lived every morning, yet."
"...ngh," Jean growled. "I just want to know if you're doing this on purpose. You used to be... punctual."
"I also used to be invisible." She held herself a little straighter when someone wolf-whistled. "Not any more. I think that might be my slogan from now on. 'Not any more'."
"You picked a fine time to not care about what people think."
"Why ever not? I can't change it. Not without a million-dollar advertising campaign. And frankly, very few of the people who go here are worth a million dollars."
Jean gritted her teeth, "But they think you're the school *tart*," she managed.
"I guessed by the photocopied genetalia. They'll learn differently in time. Should they wish to try."
Jean stopped cold. "Someone photocopied their..." an uncertain finger pointed vaguely crotch-wards.
"...Private parts, yes. Atrocious spelling and a shocking hand. I'm rather surprised he was *literate*,
really. Are we going to class or what?"
"Okay. So you can't stand anyone looking at your *knees*, but you fail to blush at a photocopied--"
"There's no need for crudity, dear."
"What is *UP* with you?"
"Standards of personal decency are very mixed. If he's proud of himself, who am I to point and laugh? Besides, it's not as if I plan to see it in person."
Jean was flummoxed. "You--" she flailed for a word, stopping many on the first syllable, "-je-- da--wu--" Jean sighed. "What's with the knees, anyway?"
"They make my legs look like two toothpicks on either side of an olive," said Sara. She entered the class. "Good morning."
The teacher flinched. "Oh. Ah. Yes. *Sara*, isn't it. I'm sorry about the mix-up, yesterday."
"We *did* try to tell you," both Jean and Sara chorused.

[1] The traditional answer to, "What does a Scottsman wear under his kilt?"

~

Sara breezed into her seat and arranged her books. The text had proved some interesting reading. Sara had checked it against her younger self's work and had seriously considered suing the teachers that had told her that she'd never have to worry about such work.

Never say 'never', hm? I wonder what else of my old works was quashed because of a 'never'?-

"Ms Adrien?"

Sara looked up. "Twenty-eight."
An exasperated glare. "The purpose of this exercise is not in the answers, Ms Adrien, it's in the learning of the *method*. Please show us your method."
Gah. Walking through it again. _Think of it as educating a class full of study-buddies._ Therefore, her work sprang into two columns. The actual work on the left, and the formulae by which she derived the next step on the right.

"Twenty-eight. QED." Sara offered the chalk back to the teacher and returned to her seat.
"Who in hell's Kyewie Dee?" said a jock.
"Q E D, Quod Erat Demonstrandum."
The jock grinned at her. "Geez, it's sexy when girls speak French[1]."
Sara levelled a withering glare at him. "You're going to trade sport points for academic ones, aren't you?"
He grinned, a vacant and bright smile just like a light bulb - which required a vacuum to function.
"Yeah. How'd you know?"
"An unlucky guess," she sighed.
"Your attention *please*," said the teacher. "We're going to work though the VanDerrin proof..."

Todd shot out of his desk the second the bell rang. So what if they were in trouble for Friday? He got to see *Sara*. They got to have fun and, at last, the entire school was starting to swallow the fact that Sara was one hundred percent female.
She shone for him when she smiled.
"Ready to tilt at windmills, darling?"
"As always," he grinned. "Yoiks and away, yo."

[1] A side-fling to the Thomas Dolby song, _Pulp Culture_ and the lyric, "Quod erat demonstrandum, baby (ooooh, you speak French!)"

~

The school still found it necessary to teach from the Common Language version, but now the students in the AP classes were free to read the original if they so desired. Alas, all assignments had
"Are we allowed to critique them?" asked Sara.

Todd snickered behind his hand.

A glare. "No. You will focus on the assignments as they are given."

"...poot," muttered Sara.

A junior jock held up his hand. "Does this mean we don't *gotta* read the original? 'Cause I just bought the Cliff Notes, and... well... nothing in the Cliff Notes looks like the book *I* got."

"Nil carborundum, Sara Louise," Sara mumbled. "Nil carborundum."

Todd patted her hand. "Ignore the jocks, yo. Everyone else will once they hit thirty."

That brightened her up. "Oh yes. We're trendsetters in a way."

Janine whimpered at her assignment as it was handed back. D minus. One step above an F. Her work had certainly suffered without Sara offhand to correct the grammar.

Had she ever found it tiresome and annoying?

Now she had to focus and work harder or sink into the depths.

Janine sighed at the red marks all over the page. It had been too much trouble, before, to commit the necessary rules to memory. Now she *had* to.

She had to pass, or face the hassle of summer school.

Janine turned herself away from the window that had usually pre-occupied her for the next in-class work, and tried to remember everything Sara had ever said about good writing.

It was tougher than she thought.

Lunch.

Sara almost sighed with relief as the last of their deliveries was handed off to her customers. So far, things were shaping up. All she had to do was grab a quick snack and then suffer the obligations of the Counsellor.

At least Todd would be waiting for her.

"Hey, beautiful," said a familiar voice - but not a welcome one.

Sara gave Duncan Matthews a sidelong glance, just long enough to ascertain his identity, then flipped her pxt on as subtly as possible. "Salutations, Duncan," she iced.

"Didn't you get my note?" he said, all suave charm.

"I got a lot of notes," said Sara. "Many of them seemed to think I'd put out because of a wardrobe malfunction."

Duncan laughed. "That's a rather stupid assumption, isn't it? All I'd like is a little time to get to know you better. Maybe something sort of like a date?"

The man had *no* idea of the kharmic justice about to head his way. "You'd date *me*?"

"Sure thing," he breezed. "I know you're sensitive and intelligent... I like that in a woman."

"But what about Jean? Aren't you going out with her?"

"Jean and I are having a little... intersocial trouble. We thought it was best if we saw other people."

And now for the switch. "Really? So she won't mind if she sees this recording on her next 'phone call..." {bip} and it was already on its way to Jean's phone.

Duncan was a picture. Possibly by Heironymous Bosch.

"By the way, I'm already in a stable relationship, and I don't appreciate people who are willing to two-time their current partners."

~

"Hey schnookie," Sara cooed as she glommed on to Todd.

"Schnookie?"

"You're allowed to call me things like 'sugarlips' and that. Besides, I'm in a whimsical mood."

Todd knew that grin, now. "Uh oh. Who'd you happen to, babe?"

"None other than Duncan Matthews. He tried to sweet-talk me and I auditioned him for _Cheaters: High School Edition_. Jean should be getting the video now."
There was a distant, outraged shriek.
"Oh yeah. That's gonna hurt next week," Todd laughed all the same.
"The point remains that it's happened to Duncan first, dear."
Mr Kian was waiting. He took one look at Sara and said, "Red-listed?"
"Red-listed," both he and Sara chorused.
"Maybe I should go Goth for a day or two and *really* frighten them," said Sara.
"Let's not," suggested Mr Kian. "You're too cheerful to be a proper Goth."
"Poot."
"You do couple counselling?" joked Todd. "We got some issues over watchin' the other one hurt 'emselves, yo."
"It's the school's half hour," said Kian. "You can do anything legal you like in my office."
"Nice qualifiers," said Sara.
"Let's just say I know you both."
"Our reputation precedes us," Todd mocked an attitude of woe. "O cruel fate..."
"Infamy, infamy... they've all got it in for me...[1]"
"*In*side, m'kay?"
The whole table jumped when Jean viewed the px movie Sara had sent her. Whether this was a side effect of her telekinesis, or because the assembled table-mates leaped in surprise at her howl of fury, no-one would ever know.
"Bad news?" Scott guessed.
"RRRRRRRRG..." said Jean, and passed him her phone.
He watched. After a minute, he let loose a low whistle.
Kitty took the phone next. "Ow. Like, *harsh*."
It went around the table.
"Want something to happen to his locker?" offered Kurt. "I have a few skills Onkel Wolf taught me and—"
"*No*," said Scott. "Everyone knows what happens when we let you do something your Onkel Wolf taught you."
"Or like, don't stop you in time," added Kitty.
Rogue held up a finger. "Tell ya what. I'll just go raht up to him an' knee him in the nuts fo' ya."
"Hmp." muttered Kurt. "Nobody ever lets me have any fun..."
"Dude," said Evan, "not even *Duncan* deserves that much fun."
"When I find him," Jean announced, "I'm going to take his pathetic excuse for a mind and squeeze it out of his *ears* until he thinks he's some kind of macaque."
"No powers in school, remember?"
"Fine. I'll get him *outside* of school grounds. And then I'll punch his freakin' *face* off! And grind his nuts to *powder*! I'll tear him into pieces and trample on the bits! And then I'll get *really* mean!"
"Hi, Duncan," said Scott. "You're too late. We've seen it. We've all seen it."
"Let's just say you're not in friendly territory, right now," said Rogue. "If I was you, I'd just mosey along."
"Uh," said Duncan. "Would anyone believe that was a joke?"
Jean glared pure venom at him. "So you were planning to string along one of my *friends* for a laugh?"
Duncan appeared to realise that there was no earthly way to dig himself *out* of the pit he'd dug himself. "Uhm. Er. Uh. No. Um. You see... it's kinda like... uh... Chinese April Fools? Me and whatshernamename planned the whole thing... haha?"
"You can't even pretend to think that you can lie to me, Duncan Aberline Matthews..."
"Aberline..." Kurt collapsed into laughter.
Jean continued as if the rest of the X-men weren't there. "First of all, her name is Sara. Secondly, she abhors any male senior that crosses her path."
"It's true," said Scott. "She hates my guts and I barely even know her."
"Thirdly, the Chinese calendar has remained unaltered for thousands of years, and their new year never changed - like ours - due to secular arrangement. Therefore, there's no such thing as a Chinese April Fools. Do you want to try shovelling *more* bullshit my way or would you like to tell me the truth, for a change?"
"Dayumn," said Rogue. "Ah should be recordin' this fo' posterity." She fumbled for her phone.
"Way ahead of you," said Bobby. He'd been quiet because of his devotion to his pxt screen. Duncan surrendered. "Okay. I screwed up."
"No duh," said Kitty.
"What do I have to do?"

[1] _Carry On Cleo_, apparently. MeMum sez I missed referencing this,

---

Sara found Kitty on the way to her next class, and literally picked up the Freshman girl and shook her vigorously.
"What the living heck?" said Kitty. "What'd you do that for?"
"I just wanted to see if there were any brains rattling around in there, or if you'd completely lost them all."
"Like, *huh*?"
"Did you have the Froshtie tradition at your old school?"
"No...?" Kitty blinked at the string of non-sequiteurs.
"And Lance originally went to your school, yes?"
"...yeah?"
"So what could possibly make you think he's been indoctrinated into Bayville traditions?"
"...uh..." said Kitty.
Sara patted her on the head. "You can't look a foo' if think things through..."
Kitty was left staring in the direction she'd gone. "But I like, thought I *had*..."

They officially had study hall. What they usually *unofficially* did was hang out at the bleachers and huck random objects at the jocks when nobody was looking. Only this time, Lance was disinterested to the point of near coma.
"Heh. Got another one," crowed Todd[1].
"Blam! Right in the kisser!" Tabby laughed.
"...eh..." said Lance. "What's the point?"
"Kitty dissed yo' again?"
"Pretty much permanently," said Lance. "Made it clear she didn't care if I lived or died."
"So shock, her, yo. Keep on livin'."
"Yeah? And what, exactly, is there to live for?"
"Dinner?" said Fred.
"Fashion," said Pietro.
"Meaningless fucks?" suggested Tabby.
"Shuddup," said Todd. "Look, if Kitty's all you got to live fo', yo, then maybe you aughta think about gettin' another hobby."
"Name one that won't cost me a fuckin' fortune."
"Zen," said Todd.

[1] No prizes for guessing where this line came from

~

Duncan Matthews could feel his heartbeat in his ribcage. He'd be out of here in a split second if it
wasn't for the hot-tempered redhead looming over him in the next chair. "There's no need to worry," said Jean in her dangerously friendly tones. "I'll be *right* with you for moral support."

...yipe...~

They met while Sara was on her way to Drama. "Janine."
"Thara."
"How's life?"
"Thuckth pretty much bad," Janine summarised. "I got a D-minuth in English."
"Start reading those books I gave you. You'll find them helpful."
Janine looked extremely helpless. "Could you... give them to me again? I... kinda threw them out the last time..."
Sara grimaced and fished for a wallet. She produced a card. "Here. This place sells them. I don't re-give non-perishable gifts."
"It'th gonna be painful, isn't it?"
"I'm not exactly economically advantaged at the moment, either, dear. Life for some may be a box of chocolates, but ours--"
Janine joined the chorus, "--ith a box full of wrappers." She sighed. "I get it. Thankth."
"I'll appreciate it if you show learning," Sara called over her shoulder as she made her way to Drama class. "You're late," said Ms Terwillager.
"First time finding the place," said Sara. "This particular area's a labyrinth."
"Nevertheless, latecomers pay the penalty. Pick a task from the Tardy Jar."
As she walked up to it, some students began chanting, "Tar-dy, tar-dy, tar-dy..."
"And the winner is..." Sara unfolded the paper. "Create and sing lyrics to the Hornpipe with a finishing qualifier. One minute."
"You have one minute to think it up, then you have to perform," supplied Jean.
Sara concentrated. Her tongue slid out between her teeth and her brow lowered as she stared at nothing.
"Ding," said an anonymous wag.
"Fries are done," laughed his compatriot.
Sara shook her head. "I can't do it. It's almost lewd."
"You must perform the task," said Ms Terwillager.
Sara cleared her throat. "I appologise in advance for my supreme lack of voice." She took the pose. "It's the hornpipe dance and I'll show you how it goes/ Gents you stand up on one leg/ Ladies take off all your clothes/ And then you hop/ And then you bop/ And don't you stop/ Until you drop/ And that's the hornpipe that you're dancing when you've got a runny nose."
Blushing from her toes, Sara took her seat.
The rest of the class was deathly quiet.
"Dude," said the wag.
"Whoah," said Jean.
Sara curled in her chair. Supplicant's pose. Hands under her thighs, both feet firmly on the floor, knees jammed together... head down, shoulders supporting the weight of her upper frame... and elbows spiritedly attempting to meet in the middle.
Awful. Awful. Awful. Awful. Awful...
Someone started clapping. Someone else joined. Then the whole class...
What?
Ms Terwillager lifted Sara's chin up with her pinkie. "It's called 'applause', darling. A sign of appreciation. You, my dear, are the first Tardy to *ever* accomplish a Tardy Task."
"But... it was awful..."
Ms Terwillager produced a tissue and daubed gently at Sara's proto-tears. "I see you're here for confidence issues," she said, just above the noise of the class. "You'll be *fine*." She turned, slamming her cane on the bare wood floor. "Enough! We shall commence, today... roleplay."

---

Todd found her after class, completely croggled, and actually lead her halfway towards detention before she spoke.
"I think I've been through the singularly most surreal experience of my life... and I get to do it again on Thursday."
Todd nodded. He'd seen her schedule. Crowded was not the word. In order to compensate for Sara's... information capacity, the school had juggled some of her lessons. Today's English class was supposed to be Study Hall, but since her study materials had yet to arrive, she was free to go where she whist.
She still got the homework, of course, every day; but the classes she attended were spread across the board.
_And tomorrow, she's taking Art with me,_ he thought, and practically glowed. Aloud, he said, "So what was this surreal thing, yo?"
"I think it distils as LARPing through time and space," said Sara. "We were given... pieces. Artifacts. The task was to become the character they belonged to for twenty minutes."
Todd could just picture fifteen or so kids dressed up from the Drama department's rag-bag of leftover costumery. "Yo?"
"Military jacket and a sort of beret thingy with a medal on it. I became the very model of a tinpot dictator supreme." A brief, pained look crossed her features. "The character was male and... very crude. I swear he spent fifteen of those twenty minutes *flirting* with Jean because she was playing -er- a lady of negotiable affections."
Todd noticed the very subtle distinction between Sara and the person she'd been for a space of time.
"You okay?"
"Mostly. The perverse little man tried to follow me home, but I sealed him firmly in his box."
His face must have projected the _Uh oh..._ for a mile and a half.
"No, darling. An actual cardboard box. In the storage room." Her eloquent hands sketched the dimensions, but never let go of his hand.
He sighed. "Don't *scare* me like that, yo."
"I swore off boxes, darling. They're bad for me. Except the physical kind." She broke off holding his hand, but only to give him a hug.
_Mmmm... head at breast level..._ Todd felt better about his place in the world. "C'mon. We don't wanna be late fo' detention."
"O yes," Sara agreed. "We can't miss the whirlwind excitement of completely random, yet boring tasks."
"Should we both do the 'what ho' stuff this time?"
"Please?"

~

Jean caught the edge of it when she came to pick them up.
"What, hoe?"
"Hoe."
"*HO-ooooooo*..."
"Hoe, ho!"
They were tilling soil under the supervision of Mr Kian, who seemed to be the one teacher immune to the Tolensky-Adrien comedy duo.
"Ho-ho, hoe."
"What?"
"Hoe."
Jean watched. Evidently, they'd used no more words than variants of 'what' and 'ho' for half an hour. She was personally amazed that Kian wasn't a twitching wreck by now.
"Are they done, yet?" she asked.
"What ho, 'ho?" said Todd.
_Gah..._
"Hoe, what?" said Sara.
"Oh, ho ho..."
Mr Kian sighed. "I'd hoped ignoring it would work... but evidently not, m'kay."
"Hoe, hoe, hoe, hoho, hoe hoe, hoho, hoe hoe - ho[1]..."
{Bedeep.}
"*Now* their time is up," said Kian. "Do you know how to make them *stop*?"
"Joke's over; both of you."
"'Ho, ho!"
Sara leaned over to kiss Todd. "Enough, darling. The aim is to make the punishment reverse. Not spread."
They handed their hoes in and then indicated the egress with a final, "Ho!"
Mr Kian shook his head. "At least they're not destroying property..." he muttered.

[1] To the tune of the Anvil Chorus.

~~
"By the way," said Jean. "I can't thank you enough for that fun little film you sent me."
"I detect the subtle tincture of sarcasm in that statement," said Sara.
"Psh! No duh," muttered Todd at a barely audible volume.
Jean gave them both a glare. "My life," she said, "does not need to be that interesting. I have
*enough* on my mind without needing to obsess over the fidelity of my boyfriend."
"At least this way you know he's untrustworthy," Sara offered. "Would you have preferred a more
scandalous betrayal? Perhaps after years of commitment?"
Jean thought about this. "No. Not really."
"And for the sake of gossip, I kept this as low-key as I could manage. The only people who know
are you, Matthews, and I. And now that he knows that you know that he's -well- been a naughty boy... perhaps you can discuss the degree of relationship you both desire."
"I still didn't need this happening *now*."
"Jean. He was going to use me as a threat so he could use your *body*. You'd prefer I made space
in your busy schedule to tell you? Without proof?"
"It's not like that, it's just--" Jean sighed. "Too many girls want to go out with Duncan Matthews. Both them and him wouldn't much care if I was out of the picture."
"So... Mr Matthews believes in disposable people?"
Todd raised his eyebrows at the shorthand.
"That's one way to put it," iced Jean.
"So why do you stay with him if you know that your disposal is inevitable?"
Venomous glare of doom. "Have you been talking to the Professor?"
"Strictly on a doctor-patient basis. Why?"
"Because you're sounding just like him."
Sara put her tongue between her teeth. She was really, *really* tempted to imitate the Professor at
that exact moment, but it was rude to both the man and Jean. "Perhaps," she offered, "we've both
noticed something potentially damaging in your choice of partner."
"And when *we* tell you about *Todd*... you're allowed to get away with it."
"What you tell me about Todd is changeable behaviour," Sara forced the note of ice from coming
"Habits like Mr Matthews' are harder to break."
"Yo, I ain't lifted nuthin' since I met Sara."
"And after last night's denoument, I think I'd rather trust *his* word," this time, the ice was on in full
force.
"Just because a few of us borrow something--"
"No. Just because nearly all of you accused Todd without asking about." Sara fought to control her
growing ire. "That sort of thing... *irritates* me."
"He *is* a pickpocket, you know."
"*Was*?" they both said.
"Yo, maybe we should walk," said Todd.
"Alas, I can't. Logan's expecting me."
"Rats."
When they got to the car, Scott had a pained expression on and Kitty was babbling in hyper-happy
mode. Apparently, she and Lance had made up and resolved to be way more honest with each other
about thoughts and feelings.
Lance was, according to Kitty, totally re-making himself now that the boarding house was being re-
built. And he didn't have to hold down three or four jobs so he wasn't like, cranky all the time and he
was even cutting down on his cigarettes. It was like, so totally awesome.
Sara relaxed in the back seat. "At least I made *one* person happy."
"Yo, Fred says you picked her up an' shook her."
"Not a hard accomplishment when one's target is a fourteen-year-old vegetarian who diets to stay
thin," said Sara. "She can't weigh more than my bag."
"Yo, *I* don't weigh more than your bag."
Sara thought about this. "Perhaps I should re-examine the contents..."
"Lift weights," suggested Todd. "I like strong women."
Sara giggled. "Perhaps you could come up to the gym and I could bench-press you..." the blush
intruded. "Did that sound--?"
"Out-of-context, maybe." Todd cuddled up to her. "It's cool. Logan trusts us."
"Logan *trusts* us?"
"Well, what he *said* was, 'if you can't be good, be careful', but... yeah. He trusts us."
"Now we have to worry about the *other* chaperones living in the Institute. Five down, twelve to
go. Don't you just *love* wars of attrition?"
"O yeah," Todd drawled. "My fave hobby."

The worst thing about walking a bunch of dogs, Janine decided, was stopping every couple of yards
to pick up poop, place it in a bag, and carry it around for the rest of the walk, searching for some
kind of garbage can.
There was no question of giving it back to the owners and asking them to flush it. They frowned on
that sort of thing.
One thing was for sure, she definately understood proportions now. A dog's poop was proportional
to that dog's size. And the amount of wee that each canine was capable of just boggled the mind.
Sara would probably theorise that the canine body contained a wormhole to a dimension made solely
out of urine. And right now, that seemed a very logical conclusion indeed.
And she was getting better at head-math. Two hours with ten dogs at five dollars per dog per hour
made... one hundred bucks.
So she still couldn't figure the train leaving from Denver, but she thought she was improving.
Having a grammar rule to memorise and a list of words to learn to spell on her extended journey may
or may not help her with her English, but it gave her something to think about apart from bowel
motions.
Right now, she was on phonemes. "Their," she recited. "It is their chair. T-H-E-I-R. There. It is over

She could do that out here, in the freedom of relative solitude and dog messes. At home, she'd be accused of trying to drive people insane and be forced to quit practicing... even if she was only practicing in the privacy of the oldest girl's room.

It was *amazing* what brothers could hear when they wanted to. Any other time, she couldn't *make* them listen to her.

That'd be something to bring up with Mr Kian. The math of family dynamics and what made siblings act like complete and total butt-hairs.

Janine never got any breaks. It was the older ones who were trying to get into college or the younger ones who were still learning better who got away with everything short of murder. Janine, stuck in the middle, had to be invisible with a crowd of fingers pointing at her in accusation.

Half a week ago, she wouldn't have even *thought* a word like 'accusation'.

That pocket dictionary Dad had bought her was worth its weight in gold.

~

"Please," Sam begged. "It's a family emergency."

The young slip at the counter took in his haggard looks and slightly desperate expression - and the way he clung to the counter with white knuckles - and said, "I'll have to talk to my supervisor."

Sam tried to stop the groan. He'd been doing *fine* with penny-ante travel businesses. It was when they converged into the corporate conglomerate of modern travel that delay began to nibble at his ulcers.

All he had to do was get across the Pacific Ocean. From there, the travel options were limitless to a man with money in a hurry.

But a commercial airport ran on delay.

Hurry up and wait.

Somewhere on the other side of that gulf of water, his daughter was alone and without succour. Desperation had finally driven her from shelter to a safety her soul needed... but her body might not be able to survive.

_Sara..._

"Sir?"

"Hm?" Sam came back to himself. "Pardon?"

"What's the nature of the emergency, sir?"

"My daughter. Sara. She's run away from home." Half-scrambled from lack of sleep, he automatically reached for his wallet and produced the last photo Jaquelline had let him keep in there. The beaming, beautiful little girl held preserved under plastic was out of date by eleven years - almost twelve. The *other* picture was in his luggage. Safe. Next to the portrait of her mother.

It was the only way his two lovely ladies could be together, now.

"Aaaawwww..." cooed the ticket-seller. Her eyes were misting up.

Even the supervisor was looking... softened.

Sam felt the evil compulsion to flim-flam them. To let them think that Sara was still five, to allow them to do a good deed for the little girl years lost... just so the nearly-grown one could have the father she needed, right now. He decided that saying nothing to make them suspect the truth was better that baldly lying in their faces.

"She's all alone," he said. "I have to get back to her. *Please*..." he winced as an ulcer kicked up.

"She needs her Daddy." All true statements. Completely true in every regard. _Truth isn't the same thing as honesty, my lad._

"We don't have any seats to New York, I'm sorry."

"Just *anywhere* in the mainland. Canada... Mexico... Pick a state, any state... I can *get* there from there. Please..."

...murmur, murmur, murmur... The desk-jockey typed in a wreath of data at warp speed.

He'd been staring at her name-tag for five to ten minutes, and only now did it register that her name
was Joline.
The supervisor, Paul, handed Sam his wallet back. Sam clung to it with the one hand that was cramping from the edge of the counter.
"We have one flight to Nome, Alaska in a couple of hours," offered Joline. "It's executive class, so--"

"I don't care how much it costs, I'm going home to my daughter." Besides, this was coming out of his *personal* accounts. The red tape that the firm would bury the recompense in was something to be ploughed through at a later date. Right now, every time he closed his eyes, he could see his little girl as the victim of the economic vengeance Jaquelline liked to enact... trying to cope with the pressures of school and society whilst coming home to a dingy little motel with cardboard walls and the sort of night life that could survive an atomic holocaust. But the insects were nothing, compared to the two-legged cockroaches that could prey on a young girl all on her own...

Every day away was a nightmare.
Sam bought the tickets in a dream, asked politely to be gently shaken when his plane was in, checked his luggage and found a place near the gate to hurry up and wait in. One where he could prop up his head and rest his eyes.
_I'm coming home..._

"...and I see - oh! Blue skies... through the te-ears... in my eyes," Sara crooned as she helped assemble Eileen's new engine. "And I realise..."
"Tallwater?"
"Hm?" Sara blushed. "I'm sorry. It's been stuck in my head, lately. Sorry about the voice."
"Yo, you were singing as Tim Curry," said Todd. Grease acted on him like liquid did on Sara. It got around. "Straight off the soundtrack."
Sara's blush went deeper, turning her into a dark, blue-ish shadow in borrowed overalls. "I tend to sing what I hear. A flaw."
"Nah. Cool party trick, yo." He found an excuse to edge closer and help her install a part. Guiding her hands and trying to be coy about the opportunity to hold her a little. "You ever tried singin' as yo'self?"
"Nobody wants to hear *me*," said Sara.
Todd snapped a band on her wrist. "*I* wanna hear you."
"Same here," said Logan. "Damn disturbin' to hear a grown man comin' out of a young girl."
Sara went so dark she was almost black. "...eep..."
"Sing?" pleaded Todd.
That was more than enough for her. She found her real voice and continued with the music in her head. "Everywhere, it's been the same... Fee-ee-ling... Like I'm outside in the rain..."
Todd grinned.
Whenever he smiled, she felt at home.

~

It was a very rare moment for the Institute. One in which there was enough peace and quiet to allow for some entertainment. The only bug in the ointment was that Kurt, through superior effort at school, got to pick the movie.
"His bathwater was tepid," the elf chorused along with the dialogue. "Poor Lolita, I fear her wedded life will be the same[1]... heheheheh..."

The upside, at least for Sara and Todd, was that he was the world's worst chaperone. He was paying absolutely no attention at all to the young couple entwined on the couch and they liked it that way. Sara broke their extended kiss, coming up for air, but not letting go of Todd.
Todd rested his head on her shoulder and squeezed. "Mmmy preciousss," he hissed.
Sara giggled. "Wrong movie."
"Who said we was payin' attention to any movies?"
Sara wrapped her arms around him and snuggled. "Mmmmm... You *are* very wicked. Just what I like."
"Glad you approve."
Sara found her gaze drifting outwards, towards the lobby door. It felt almost like...
"Sumpin' up?"
"The ceiling, clouds, moon, stars... assorted astral bodies..."
"Yo, somethin' *is* buggin' yo. You gone all literal on me."
Sara shook her head. "I don't know. I usually only get like this at the beginning of November... and this is..."
"The middle of September, yo. I know." With a bit of a stretch, he could kiss the line of her jaw. So he did. "Mebbe you got yo'self crosswired? Things're nice so yo' Dad must be home?"
"Maybe," Sara allowed. "But the vibe I'm getting is 'coming home', not 'is home'. Things are far more... at peace when he's at home. Before he gets here, it's all..." she tisked. "You remember anticipating Christmas?"
"Once upon a time, yeah."
"That sort of twanging-tense something-is-going-to-happen feel in the air... you know? Something special is coming, but I don't know what."
Todd laughed. "I just got through tellin' Lance you all *about* Zen an' you turn aroun' and pull this..."
"Sorry, darling."
"Naw. It's cool. We figure it out in time, a'ight?"
"And you thought *I* was Zen. You're mastering the basics at amazing speed."
"One of us has got to be th' control."
Kurt snorted into his drink. "Could you guys not say stuff like that during the ad breaks? You have no idea how that sounded..."
"Serves you right for eavesdropping." said Sara.

[1] Two side-flings in one! Comic!Kurt was watching the very same movie at the beginning of a short tale by Dave Cockrum called _Show Me the Way to Go Home_... which is, incidentally, the first Nightcrawler story I ever read :) It's also a side-fling to the *original* _Mask of Zorro_ starring Tyrone Powell. [See? Fanfic *can* be educational ]

~

Jean had ground her laborious way through her homework while Sara had cursed daintily at hers.
"Show working," Sara had muttered. "Don't they *trust* me?"
"They gotta make sure everyone knows the method," said Jean, not looking up.
"Know it? Dear, I have it hard-wired."
"Yes, but *they* don't know that."
Sara sighed, mumbled, "...fudge..." and got on with the last of it. She got up and dithered around for half an hour before she finally lit one of those candles in a glass pot and set it out on the balcony. This action almost instantly diffused her lingering and incohate anxiety about something.
"Pagan rituals?" said Jean.
"Something of the sort. A light to guide Daddy home. I usually only do this thing in November, but..." a shrug. "It *feels* right."
Jean leaned on her arm and considered her roommate. "You know, I'm starting to think you're pathologically weird. You actually have this condition that prevents you from acting normally."
"Define 'normal'," said the girl with the green scales to the telepathic telekinetic.
"Low blow, Sara Louise."
"Finish your homework, Jean Lisbett," Sara chided.
Which only served to piss her off. "Damnit. How the hell do you find this stuff out?"
"I'm a grey-hat hacker. I only break into places for something to read."
Jean slumped. "God, it's going to be an uphill battle to stop you getting *bored*..."
"Home. Work." She was ensconced in her niche, now, clicking away on her computer. Jean forced herself back to it. "Nnnngh... ow..."
"Headache or muscular twinge?"
"A little from column A, a little from column B." Jean rolled her head. "Ow. And the thing with Duncan doesn't help."
"Ever thought that Duncan, like cigarettes, might just be bad for you?" Sara emerged from her half, placed one hand on either of Jean's shoulders, and *kneaded*.
"Aaaaaaahhh..." Just like that, she somehow *knew* where it hurt and how to fix it. "Ooooh, yeah. Do that forever an' I'll do anything..."
Her hands worked up the sides of her neck. "Even embracing IDIC?"
"I don't 'do' Star Trek."
"But at least you recognise it. Infinite Diversity, dear. That means accepting the little differences in everybody as part of the grand tapestry. There's no such thing as Mr or Ms Average."
"...I think there's an Edna Everage..." Jean mumbled.
"Played by a man in drag," Sara informed. "The point I'm trying to make is that an average person would be as much of a freak as everyone else."
But Jean was barely listening. Sara's ministrations felt so goddamn *good*. "Ooooohhh... right there. *Uh*!
And at that moment, Logan kicked the door in.
"Most people *knock*," said Sara.
He seemed most shocked to see them both in their clothes and far away from their beds. Jean gained the impression that she was a loud moaner... and Logan's cerebellum had shorted directly in the hanky-panky sensors. "You were givin' er a neck rub?"
"She carries a lot of stress," said Sara. "That, and her chakras are almost completely messed up. If I was a therapist, I could make my living off Jean... no offense."
"Just keep rubbing," said Jean.
Logan sighed. "Do me a favour, Tallwater?"
"If possible."
"Quit giving me ulcers."
Sara's smile went impish. "I *do* have a Daddy who loves me, you know. You don't really have to fill in his position."
Logan, uncomfortable with Sara's X-ray vision, changed the subject. "Lights out in ten, you two."

~~

It was midnight when the unsubtle vibrations of a nightmare rang in Jean's head, waking her up.
"No... Daddy, wake up... *please*... *DADDY*!
A jangle of fear, the cold-bath shock of consciousness. Sara's rapid breathing in the night. Jean sat up, too. "Need a shoulder?" God, her shorthand was *catching*.
"Please?"
They both turned on a bedside lamp simultaneously. Jean shuffled into Sara's bed-nook. "Just tell me this isn't going to be a regular thing?"
"Possibly a side-effect of compound stress," said Sara. "Might be a long time wearing off. Sorry."
"So. What was going on?"
Sara's eyes became unfocussed, staring into memory. "There was a plane. Luxury class, near the front. Daddy was sleeping. There was a fight... behind him, somewhere. A man was going to take over the plane and make it crash. If he just woke up he could have stopped it before it got desperate, but... I shouted and shouted and he didn't hear me..."

*DADDY*!
Sam blinked. Still on the plane. There was no way he could hear Sara from here. Even though he'd
just heard her voice in his head, clear as a bell.
There were further noises. Real ones. A small fracas concerning a man and a knife...
He looked. He was fending off the flight attendants with the blade, pacing backwards towards the
cockpit. Sam's fogged brain finally recognized a minor Arabic dialect. Something about the glory of
God and his transcendance through fire...
At which point, he was in range. Sam aimed a blow to the man's neck, turning him off. It was all
over in seconds.
"I'm going home," he said, returning to his seat. "No arguments." He closed his eyes and tried to
relax while the attendants took care of the attempted highjacker.
Sleep came easily.

"...look at this logically, okay?" Jean was saying. "Your dad comes home in November, right?"
"November the eleventh. Regular as clockwork."
"So what would he be doing on a plane in the middle of September?"
"I don't know. He was just - there."
"Well, it's logically impossible, so can you *try* to get back to sleep?"
"Sorry. It's a not-at-all night. I'll be quiet."
Jean sighed, rolled her eyes on the way back to bed, and fell asleep to the subtle mental murmurings
of her roommate through her shields.

~

The males of the school were vaguely disappointed to see Sara appear in her usual jeans and shirt, that
Tuesday, though the addition of some tastefully dangling earrings and a smidge of eyeshadow
worked wonders for the impression that she was female.
No-one forgot her name. A phenomenon that would prove to last through the rest of that year.
Unfortunately for her free time, her mail courses had arrived, relegating her to study hall when her
timetable said she had to be there.
Todd saw her at lunch, which was wasted with frivollous banter about the logistics and history of
etiquette. He laughed all the way through it, as had Fred and the few X-men who decided that their
presence was okay. That lunch made it a good day for him.
That, and Pietro hadn't bothered to turn up.

"All I'm saying, speedy-boy, is that I got enough of my own problems," said Duncan.
"What? Your girlfriend's not putting out?" said Pietro. This earned a nasty chuckle from his cohort.
"Man, she must have you completely whipped."
"No*," said Duncan. "She made me report myself and all the other conspirators I knew about in the
Froshtie thing. All 'cause I tried on that stick of a roommate of hers."
"Meow... wht.*TSH*!"
The cohort laughed even louder. "I didn't even know she knew Jean, okay? I'd have gotten away
with it if she wasn't Jean's fucking roommate."
"Yeah? Well Jean's fucking roommate is also Toady Todd's brand-new girlfriend," said Pietro.
"Harassing *him* is going to effect *her*... it's the ultimate revenge. You can pretend you never
knew."
"Fucking little slut has me on fucking *watch*;" said Graydon Trent. "And I gotta spend three
fucking lunch-hours a fucking week with that fucking pussy *Kian*..." He made a fist, glaring
venomously at the distant teacher who 'just happened' to be passing by. "When this blows over, I'll
fucking turn them into fucking *cheese*."
Nobody laughed at Graydon. They knew better.
"So you can mastermind the thing," breezed Pietro. "Come up with a vengeance both subtle and
gross, as it were. If different people do stuff to them - who's going to connect the dots?"
"Mastermind, anh?" said Graydon. "Like the sound of that. What sorta revenge?"
Pietro put significant effort into *not* rolling his eyes. "Well, Toady's got a girlfriend, right? He's
You been holdin' out on us, Toad.

_Oh fuck._ Todd looked. Simon, one of Duncan's peons, and two other burly guys from the football team. _Fuck, fuck, fuckety *fuck*..._ "What?" he said.

"Heard you found a girl," said the one on the left.

His only recourse was bravado. "Yeah? So what? You guys the Lonely Hearts Club Band?"

"She put out?" said the one on the right. "Or is she a total cocktease?"

Teaching these thugs about the subtleties of their relationship was going to be completely pointless.

"Let's just say we got our ways o' keepin' each other happy," he said.

"..(cough)cocktease(cough)..." muttered the one on the right.

"Hey, yo. I don't wanna do nuttin' stoopid," said Todd. "Like givin' her any excuse to go get herself pregnant. Y'awmsayin'?"

"So you never fucked her?" Simon laughed. "Maybe it ain't big enough to satisfy her."

"Hey, yo. I can keep my girl satisfied." He grinned and poked out his tongue, until it hovered on the edge of human plausibility. Then he waggled it.

"Whoah."

"Dude."

He put his tongue back in. "You guys want hints and tips?" he offered. "I got ways of keepin' 'er comin' back fo' more."

Someone in the background turned off his pxr with a 'beep'. "Aaaaannnmd it's now on the central board. Remember, you guys promised to leave me alone for a week after this."

"Fffffffffuuuuuuucckkk..."

"Nice knowin' ya, Tolensky," said Simon.

~

Art.

He used to love it. The one class where he could - well - do just about anything. He'd daydreamed about sharing time over a sketchpad with Sara.

Now, he was practically pissing his pants.

Sara was going to be *furious*.

He thought he was scared when he saw her rage-face, before. But just imagining it turned against him... Or worse - her cold, icy politeness... It turned his guts into knots.

The thought of losing her forever because of some *stupid* words said to some equally stupid jocks - just aggravated the condition.

He was clutching at his stomach when he finally slouched into his seat.

And there, next to him, was the girl of his dreams.

"...i'm sorry..." he squeaked.

"For fobbing off those brutes with a story they could understand?" said Sara. "My reputation's been worse, dear. The point is that our *honour* is still intact."

Todd closed his eyes and learned to breathe all over again. "Oh man... I thought I was gonna start pukin' blood all over again..."

"Now pay attention, please," said Mrs D'bla. "This week's project is a self portrait. A subject you cannot possibly miss finding."

There was some scattered laughter at that.

"That being said, all homages to Norman Rockwell are not exactly welcome. " Her brows drew in around her Hindu dot. "I expect you to be *original*. You are all original people, and each portrait should reflect the inner you as well as the outer you."

One of the Plastic Pams put up her hand. "Mrs D'Blaa, Adrien's going to need two canvasses to fit herself in."

More raucous laughter.
"...I've got them on my list," Sara sang under her breath. "They ne-ver will be miiiiissssed..."
Todd heard the _Jaws_ theme in the back of his head.
Mrs D'blaa proved immune to the Pams' usual way of gliding out of trouble. "I'm sure miss Adrien will be able to rise to the challenge. Just like *you* rise to the challenge of having a very limited upstairs capacity."
Sara chuckled.
"For the last time, I do not *pad*," she told her compatriots. She gestured at her bosom, "These are like, one hundred percent."
"...silicon?" Sara murmured, just loud enough for Todd to hear. Louder, she said, "Dear... she wasn't implying a *thing* about your bra size."
Todd caught every catty twang in that sentence.
"Who asked *you* for an opinion, *Adrien*?" said a fellow Pam.
"At least I can afford to have my own," she said sweetly.
"Your mind and your eyes on your *work*, now," prompted Mrs D'blaa. "I want to see pencils moving, not mouths."
Sara centred herself and began by drawing some straight lines on her canvas. Todd focussed on his work, ever Aware of her in the corner of his mind. She called him 'Sir Leapsalot' in her humorous moments and he loved it. What if he made a portrait of that for her? Yeah.
He began with the usual circled and lines for his pose. Half-seated and half-crouching on a vague something. A mighty steed? Too flash. A chihuahua? Nah. He wasn't *that* short. He made it a shaggy sheepdog, then changed his mind and turned it into a long-suffering St Bernard. Replete with scribbled indications of foamy drool. He made his feet into froggy flippers, bent his lance humorously... but attatched a favour to it that he fully intended to make beautiful.
Dents in the armour... and a big 'hey, hello there' grin on his drawn face.
"Like, totally psychotic, Adrien."
"Your eyes on your *own* work, miss Tahir..."
"It's all right, Mrs D'blaa," said Sara. "It's not as if she'd *want* my idea in the first place." Sara turned her catty grin on the Pam. "Do you need me to explain the concept of 'art' to you, dear?"
"You are *so* gonna get it, Adrien," threatened the Pam as she resumed her seat.
Todd continued working, but murmured just loud enough for Sara to hear, "Do I sense an incoming kharmic re-alignment?"
"Several," said Sara. She resumed humming from _The Mikado_ again. "I've got them on my list... they neeeeeeever will be miiiiissssed..."
Oh yeah. This was going to be a *poetic* one. He'd be in on it just for the fireworks.
Hell hath no fury, the bard had written, like a woman scorned.
That went double for one that was merely *ticked*.

~~

Detention this afternoon was clearing up the junk from under the bleachers in the assembly hall. Seranaded by Sara, who had _The Mikado_ stuck in her head.
"My object so sublime... I shall achieve in time... to let the punishment fit the crime, the punishment fit the crime... and let each pris'nor pent... unwittingly represent... a source of innocent merriment, of innocent mer-ri-merriment... of innocent mer-ri-merriment..."
Todd had his own tune stuck in his head, as a result of their penance, and saw no reason to join Sara. Especially since two conflicting songs in the echoing hall would seriously tick off Kelly, who'd given them the detention in the first place. "...no phone, no pool, no pets... I ain't got no cigarettes..."
Kelly really ought to see someone about that twitching eye of his.
Sara fell to singing fragments, using and over-using the phrase, 'pah-bom'.
"Ah, but - two hours of pushin' broom... buys an eight-by-twelve... four-bit room, I'm a... maaaannn
of means, by no means...
"...let each pris'nor pent... ba poppa pah-bom pah-bom... tadum ta innocent merriment..."
"KNOCK IT OFF!"
"Three minutes. I'm impressed," muttered Todd.
"You were *marvellous*," murmured Sara.
Kelly seemed to have picked up some of Sara's lost tic's. "Will the two of you at least decide on *one* song before deciding to become the Bayville Glee Club?"
She and Todd shared a telepathic look, and a wicked smirk.
"Of innocent merime-heeeeeeennnnnt..." sang Todd.
"Kiiinng of the rooooooooaaaad..." sang Sara.
"SHUT THE FUCK *UP*!*" Kelly screamed. He was so tense that he actually shrieked like a girl.
"Such pitch," murmured Sara. "Such timbre..."
"Needs t' work on his high notes, yo."
"OUT! Get *OUT*!*"
Sara swept up the last of her litter and dumped it in a bin. "But we have twenty-five minutes remaining..."
"I don't care. Just - *GO*."
Sara imitated Michael Crawford on the way out, "Go now and leave meehee..."
"I still say that's *damn* scary, yo."
Sara giggled, then fell to a thoroughly evil laugh. "Oh dear," she sighed. "We're probably going to Hell for that one..."
"Call it kharmic realignment," said Todd. "Dude's had it comin', IMO."
"...and speaking of come-uppance," said Sara. "How about some subtle sabotage?"
"Getting even on the jerks? You have to ask?"

Jean found them walking away from the last locker and singing bits and pieces from _The Mikado_.
"I don't want to know what you've been doing to whom or *why*," she said. "The Professor *is* going to know and he *is* going to say something about it."
Sara nodded. "Yes. Very likely. On the other hand, I'm no longer boxing up my emotions, so it's technically healthy."

"I'm inclined to disagree," said the Professor. "Revenge may be initially pleasing, but it begins a vicious cycle."
"Only if they find out..."
"*Sara*..." he winced. He'd read her 'perfect crime' journal, an avenue for catharsis when she had little else. Turning her creative energy into something - less harmful; was the problem. "You're in danger of becoming as bad as they are. Do you want to turn into *them*?"
"You can't honestly tell me you were never at least *tempted* to tweak someone who desperately deserved it, Charles."
_Worse than sorely tempted, I know..._ "That sort of revenge... doesn't really fix anything."
"Neither does relying on the alleged 'justice' available. Authority at Bayville High tends to gloss over the misdeeds of the popular and pretty... Hey. That'd be a good title for a soap. _The Popular and the Pretty_. I could set it in hollywood and/or a high school. Or a high school in hollywood..."
"No derailments, Sara," said the Professor. "Think about the long-term consequences of your actions."
"Ultimately, they'll be angry... a potential force without a target."
"And they won't care for proof of guilt before finding one."
Sara winced. She knew too well what it was like to be the focus of an aimlessly angry Jock. "There *has* to be a way to make them think about what they've done... Not only to everyone around them, but also themselves."
"That sort of philosophy can take a lifetime to instill. Longer than you have time for."
"...fudge," she muttered. "Why do they have to be that way?"
"Because people reward the popular and the pretty for being popular and pretty. They do learn their lesson, Sara, but it's often too late. You should pity them."

"Because I learned my lessons earlier? Professor, I wasn't even that nasty when I used to be pretty... I was never mean - unless by specific request. And even then, I arranged things so that they sabotaged... themselves..."

"No. Sara, don't even entertain that sort of thinking."

"But it's the ultimate in poetic justice..."

"*No*."

"But--"

"No. It will only encourage them to be nastier. It may even breed supreme hatred. People like us, especially, cannot afford that."

"So I'm supposed to just sit there and *take* the crap they throw at us?"

"Not in as many words. You can, to stretch a metaphor, stand in front of a fan and duck."

"Why not? It worked for Ghandi... mostly."

~

Showered and dressed on Wednesday morning... it was still four AM and Sara was in no mood to return to her suddenly claustrophobic quarters. Haunting Jean's half of the room meant ducking random objects as her subconscious attempted to defend the telepath from an unknown factor in her personal space.

And such an odd dream... A continuous sussuration and lights... just lights coming towards her and passing overhead. But she was scared all the same.

There were few alternatives and she'd be staring down Logan's claws no matter what. Therefore, she decided to tread softly towards the burly Canadian's room.

He met her on the way.

"Tallwater? You're lookin' a little... frayed."

"No, my hair *always* does that," said Sara. "And in other news, I've had one of those bizarre nonsense nightmares. My feet need to roam. Is that okay?"

Logan fell into step beside her. Odd that he seemed so big until he did *that*... "Third nightmare in as many nights, Tallwater. Somethin' ya wanna share?"

She smirked. "I'm fine... Dah-dah[1]. You have to keep in mind that I've been shattered and reconstructed up here," she tapped her temple, "very recently. That's bound to have lingering symptoms. That, plus continuing upheaval, plus adaptation to the new surroundings, plus lingering shock..."

"Lingering shock?"

"Hank told me my real IQ. It's not one-eighty. It's somewhat *more* than one-eighty. I just got a free magazine from MENSA..." she shivered. "It isn't... what I'm used to."

Logan snorted. "Darlin', they could make a hallmark mini-series over what you're *used* to. Better people'd be in a psycho ward from what ya went through."

"Twitch. "Please... mother would - threaten me with that... whenever I got a little loquacious about a subject that interested me."

"Sounds right up her alley. What were ya *supposed* to be into?"

"Organising parties, knowing the who's-who of the social climber set, keeping up with the latest fashions, etiquette, gossip, telling details, and zen and the art of being viciously catty."

"Sounds like a total nut-job," said Logan.

Sara laughed, embracing him. "*Thank* you, Dah-dah."

"Just don't call me that in public."

[1] You know, that very slightly mocking version of the way a very small child says 'da-da'
"...love when you doooooo that hocus pocus to meeeeee..."
Lance moaned and achieved verticality. Next, he'd have to achieve pants or get mugged by the local slut.
It wasn't that he objected Todd's indulgence in art. He objected to the bit where Todd played songs that helped him 'fit the mood' of the work... and sang along. At maximum possible volume and minimum possible tone.
At... Lance paused to check his clock... four-thirty in the fucking morning.
Four fucking thirty.
A fucking M.
"...it's almost unreeeeeeheeeheeeheeeheeeaaaaallllll..."
Lance made doubly sure his pants were zipped before venturing into the hall so he could pound on Todd's door.
"Inna minute," said Todd.
"Right fucking now, Toad," Lance hollered.
Todd opened the door. Art had evidently happened, since he still bore the multi-coloured spatter. "I'm keepin' the MP3's down, yo."
"You're not keeping your fucking *voice* down," Lance growled. "Do you *have* to sing off-key at four fucking thirty AM?"
"Yo, only one form of art happens at a time, dawg."
Lance sighed. __"Do you have to be *loud*?"
"Does Tabby?"
The pause as he thought about this indicated that, once again, Tabitha had snuck in a 'gentleman' in order to pay for her next pair of shoes.
Either way, he was going to have a sleepless night.
"So whose turn in the bathroom?"
"Fred's."
Damn. So much for that option. When faced with a choice between sleeplessness and a methane-based gassing, sleeplessness looked to be a prettier option. Lance stumbled into Todd's room and turned up the music. "What the hell you painting anyway?"
"Self-portrait. It's an assignment."
"You're doing *homework*? Todd, what the hell happened?"
"It's also a present for Sara."
"Ah," he said. So they weren't having sex, but he was sure as hell pussy-whipped. "Ha."
Todd was busy adding depth and shading to the picture. "So we got an understandin', yo. Mos' people don' get to that. Ever."
"Is it me, or does that helmet look kinda familliar?"
"It's sorta Kermit-esque... Look. If you an' Kitty had an understandin' yo' wouldn't be in so many fights, a'ight? You guys need some ground rules, yo."
"And you've been going out for... what? A week? Two?"
Nearby. He swigged from a large mug with frogs on it, making sure he put it down well away from the mason jar he used to wash his brushes. "Me an' Sara? We're... long-term people, y'awmsayin'? We can deal wit' takin' things easy until we sure we're good an' ready for the next big step. It works fo' us. You? You a short-term guy. You need now an' ask questions later. That's coo'.
But I bet my ass you dunno what sorta person yo' Kitty-cat is."
Lance thought about it as he slumped onto Todd's bed. "I guess... I hadn't really cared."
"Yo, that's just screwed up, G." Todd fiddled with the exact flesh tone he needed, painting samples on his arm[1] to check it. "Lovin' someone means wantin' to do everythin' that's good fo' *them*... 'cause yo' can't stand seein' 'em hurt, yo."
"Toad... You're *fifteen*. You're not *allowed* to be wise."
"Sorry dawg. Us long-termers think about stuff like dat."
Lance surrendered to gravity and let the bed support him. "Love-life advice from a pint-sized weed who's painting a *cartoon* for his girlfriend... What else don't I need?"
"Hey, Sara kinda needs a constant source of funny," said Todd. "And anyway... it's all *me*. What she needs an' what she wants in one, yo."

Todd might have said something else, but exhaustion dragged him down into a relaxing blackness.

[1] Most artists use this shortcut to get flesh tones just right. It is, after all, cheap and always available.

~

"You look like you had a rough night."

Todd blinked awake from his casual lean against the Art department's door. "Mrf? Sara?"

Her clothing *looked* casual. The sort of thing one would wear to a party, or out for an evening of frivolity. Yet Todd *knew* that none of it came off the rack, mostly because it showed her off.

"Of course Sara," she grinned. "Who else would be haunting these hallowed halls so early in the day?"

Todd held up his carry case. "Just droppin' off my assignment," he said. "Kinda had to do it. And Lance snores."

Sara's eyebrows shot up. "Sounds almost sordid. You'll simply *have* to share the details."

She, too, had a carry case.

Todd couldn't resist. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours..." he waggled his eyebrows.

Sara laughed.

Mrs D'blaa appeared by magic. "You will certainly not be-- oh. You were talking about your artworks."

Sara bit her bottom lip and looked ceilingwards for a moment. Todd could almost *hear* the wisecrack. _We *could* have been talking about our art..._

"Yes," said Sara, blushing. "We both think were finished with them."

Todd unveiled his. A rakish froggy knight in armour, replete with a 'noble' steed who had a literal hangdog expression. Everything about him was battle-worn and ill-used... except the favour that hung on the lance. A beautiful scarf with an elegant, delicate design.

"Oh, Todd..."

"I was hopin' to get it back so it could be yo'r birthday present, sweetums."

"I love it already." Sara's blush had gone deeper. "I'm sorry I can't really give this one to you... It's sort of... Cathartic." She took her work out and unwrapped it.

The Sara in her portrait was naked, curled up defensively in a corner, face just visible on one side of her hands, mouth open in a wordless scream. Words covered both her and the walls that prevented her escape. Things she'd been called over the eleven years her mother had tortured her. Words from her peers. Words of hate. Wherever they touched portrait-Sara, she bled. The rich red of the blood and the shine of the single tear on her cheek were the only colour on the canvas. The rest was starkly rendered in black and white.

"Whoa," he whispered. "Yo, that's just - *raw*.

"It had to be said," said Sara. "I just needed a way to say it."

Mrs D'blaa was standing mute, staring at both Saras. Slowly, her hand rose and covered her mouth.

"...rama..." she breathed.

~

{Ring ring... ring ring...}

Charles sent out a mental 'feeler'. _Oh *dear*. And it isn't even nine o'clock..._ He picked up the phone. "Xavier's Institute for Gifted Youngsters. This is Professor Xavier speaking..."

"Ah. Good. I am calling for concern of one of your students... Sara Adrien?"

He was halfway tempted to ask who she'd happened to, *this* time... except that it wouldn't help, and he already had a fairly good idea. "Ah yes. Sara. She's needed an emotional outlet beyond her music for quite some time. A means of expressing herself without harm."
"It is this expression that worries me," said the teacher. "She has finished a portrait... and it is... it is frightening me."

The image came through like a bell. Stark. Raw. Brutal. And above everything else - honest. Todd had described it as raw. Xavier felt that it was *flayed*. "Sara does have a rather large number of repressed issues to deal with. It's only natural she'd express some of them pictorially."

"My pardon, sir, but you have not *seen* this... it is too much at once. It is... too *naked*." She didn't mean that literally. Even though Sara's image was nude, the pose revealed nothing censorable. The pain in that picture - fresh, raw, and still hurting - was the thing left naked to the eyes of a cruel world. "Does she have counselling?"

"Daily," reassured Xavier. "We work together every evening on Sara's... troubles. Alas, not very much can be done about the cause."

"The cause?"

"Unthinking people," Xavier said. "People who say and do things to make themselves look good at the expense of others. Popular people with power... that sort of thing."

"But what are we going to do about this picture?"

"What you do with every other picture you receive, I presume. Collect, grade, exhibit briefly, and then return to the owner."

"It is already in the principal's office," said the teacher. "We cannot ignore what it means."

Which meant another collision with the authorities. Xavier sighed. "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"*Thank* you."

Principal Kelly had an interesting glare for her, that morning assembly. Sara had to wonder what on Earth she'd done to earn it. Certainly, there hadn't been enough time for the - organic substances... to be discovered. They wouldn't even begin to smell for at least a handful of days. Therefore, she returned the glare with a near-classic, _Moi?_ pose and look.

"Yo, he don't know about the--"

"Shh. He can't." Sara whispered, "Poker faces, dear."

The announcements were the usual fare. This and that activity were moved to here and there. Students wishing to participate in the yearbook had so many weeks to complete their submissions, the following people are requested to go to the office immediately... and Sara heard her name. She simply sighed. "Be sure thy sins will find thee out," she muttered "Geez. Anyone'd think you were prime evil or somethin'."

"Prime psycho," said the Pam from art class. "*I* saw her pencils... they're coming to drag her away *for sure*." Her plastic cohort giggled.

"*I* saw the finished work, yo," said Todd. "It's a masterpiece."

The assembled Pams laughed even louder.

"Let them," soothed Sara. Just the butterfly pressure of her hand on his made him keep his seat.

"Empty vessels make the most noise."

"And *what* is that meant to mean?" said the chief Pam.

"Full of sound and fury... signifying nothing," Sara quoted[1]. "You may have to look up each word individually, dear."

_Booyah!_ Todd had to focus hard to keep the grin off his face. "Don't go there, yo," he counselled. "They ain't worth it."

"Yeah, like we need the opinion of a pair of freaks," said a Pam. The rest of them burst out laughing.

"Thith from a girl who's had three nothejobth, a tummy tuck *and* thome theriouth liposuction before coming to Bayville," said Janine. She smiled sweetly at them from her formerly-ignored place.

"I have pictureth. If you want them to thtay away from the photocopier, you'll shut the fuck up."

The Pam gave out a little squeak before putting both hands over her mouth.

"Bra-*vo*..."

"Know the truth, and the truth shall thet you free," Janine lisped. "And pothibly a lot of others..."

Sara considered this. "Just as long as the mud-slinging can't escalate, I suppose. It *could* get
somewhat dangerous..."
"I have contingenty plans," said Janine. "If anything nasty happenth... it *all* cometh out. On every pothible thuspect."

Todd whistled. "You ever considered work wit' the CIA? FBI?"
"With *my* gpa? No way. Private invethitigating, though... That lookth promithing."
"Get yourself a big burly guy for insurance's sake," Sara advised. "Nothing says 'keep away' like a dude with 'love' and 'hate' tattooed on his knuckles."

[1] From Shakespeare, of course.

Sara took in the assembled authorities: Principal Kelly, Mr Kian, Ms D'blaa, Professor Xavier and, propping up a corner, Logan. It was Logan who had the long-suffering expression that said, _I *asked* you not to give me any more ulcers, Tallwater..._

_Professor?_ she thought. _Did I happen to anyone unawares?_

_They're just concerned,_ soothed the Professor.

"Miss Adrien," said the Principal. He still bore a bandage from a minor wound she didn't even remember inflicting. A minor wound caused by her ultimate breakdown. "Once again, we meet in my office." He picked up a familliar rectangle and pivotted it about on his desk so all could see it.

"And this time, it concerns *art*. Tell me, miss Adrien... is there any subject at this school in which you do *not* plan to make trouble?"
Sara only glanced at the picture. She did, after all, know every line as intimately as she knew herself. "I honestly don't see how a painting could be 'trouble', sir."

"The *inspector* is going to see this... this... *psychosis* - next *week*."

"*Ah*," said Sara. "Ah?" quoted Kelly. "*Ah*? All you can say about this is 'ah'? Sixteen-year-old girls should not be insane enough to create works of this callibre! And all you have to say is 'ah'!" The Professor and Mr Kian performed some synchonized wincing. Ms D'blaa groaned under her breath and rolled her eyes.

"You're worried that I'll make the school look bad," she said. "A teenager with *this* much angst and hurt? It couldn't possibly happen because of the *environment* you provide..."

_Ease up on the sarcasm,_ coached the Professor.

_I thought I *had*... _"On the other hand, it *could* be a brilliant example of quality student work, sir. Imagine how *good* you'll look with -uh- some small variety of prodigy recently discovered amongst the ranks. We're all terribly *proud* of our new golden girl - poor tortured soul - it's not as if very *much* can be done about peer pressure anyway... and it's healthier to vent those repressed emotions onto a canvas than -say- through the barrel of a gun."

_Sara..._ Xavier warned.

_Relax. I'm already on the list of potentially dangerous crazies,_ she 'said'. _Made the mistake of wearing black on Monday. Ergo, I fit the profile of a homicidal mass-killing maniac._
"Maybe... we shouldn't mention that last part, m'kay?" said Mr Kian.
"Oh, only as a preventative measure," breezed Sara. "Creative therapy, as it were. Since nothing can be done about the cause, you're initiating a bold new plan to alleviate the symptoms, sir."
Kelly was looking lost. "Cause?" he queried.
Sara lowered her voice to a conspiratorial murmur. "Most of those nasty words on that canvas, sir... they've been uttered openly by the miriad of my contemporaries. Why else do you think I had that -unfortunate episode?"
Kelly thought about this. The poor man was obviously frazzled. "I... made the mistake of... calling you 'mister Essel'?"
"That was only the trigger event, sir. The metaphorical straw. Some of the rest of it... has been said there. It's built up over years, sir. And most of those years, you were not responsible for."
Light dawned for him. She could almost *hear* the man thinking, _Hey, yeah... this isn't my fault! I've only been administrating this school for a month or two, tops. It's the *other* one who wrecked her. *I* discovered her!_ "Yeessss...?" he allowed. "Perhaps if I invite some members of the local art gallery to -ah- view this..."

"Before next week," Sara advised. "It'll look better on your resume."

"I am still having concerns," said Ms D'blaa. "Sara... you feel this way, now? Backed into a corner and hurt by all the things people say about you?"

"I did," said Sara. "Sometimes, I still do. When this is *shown*... maybe I can get some of my former tormentors to *think*, next time, before similar words spill out of their mouths."

"Wait. Wait. We can't show this publically," said Kelly. "It contains slurs and profanities. Small children could read them..."

"...from a man who donates to a gallery featuring the word 'fuck' written in feces across a wall..." Sara muttered. Aloud, she said, "Sir, perhaps a compromise. Curtain off my work. Put a disclaimer to one side saying that the work behind the curtain contains material that could be disturbing to some viewers, and that those who investigate and view it do so at their own discretion. The school is not responsible for those who choose to view and are subsequently offended, and by viewing said portrait, they already agree to the terms in the disclaimer." She smiled indulgently. "Besides... what *is* Art without controversy?"

_Logan says, 'lay it on thicker, you ain't reached the ceiling yet',_ 'said' the Professor.

_Tell him, 'hardy har har'..._

"It *would* work out the best for the school," said Xavier. "You fulfil your obligations without unnecessary censorship... and look good whilst doing so. Sara continues with her..."

"Therapy?" Sara provided.

"*Therapy*," said Xavier, nodding indulgently. "And Bayville High continues on its way with a minimum of - incidents... similar to those in Sara's permanent record." _And we will see to it that you do not get bored enough for any - incidents... to happen._

_I'm washing the X-jet aren't I?_

_Possibly. We'll see this afternoon._

_You do know that time apart from Todd is the worst part?_

_Yes. That's why we'll *see*, _he 'said'. _Do try not to make any *more* trouble for yourself, today?_

_I'll persevere._

~

It was exhausting. Even in the AP classes, there were morons who were only there for the way their attendance would look on their college applications. These 'traders' as Sara called them, were both a source of amusement and migranes.

She began to *live* for Study Hall.

There, Sara would find a corner away from the gossipers and the object-hurlers and delve into the mailed courses from whatever thick envelopes that had arrived for her, that morning. Books, theorem, formulae... all were absorbed with supreme gratitude, and the work filled out, neatly stapled, and wrangled into the return envelope.

And on a more telling note, there was additional correspondance. The people administrating her course-work sent an accompanying letter, this time.

_Sara Adrien,_ the note read, _How much help and assistance are you receiving with these subjects? While it's not unusual for students to finish courses early, we are forced to enquire about your own uncanny swiftness._ It was signed with an illegible scrawl that apparently represented a Professor Montegna.

Sara took out a sheat of looseleaf.

_Dear Professor Montegna,_ she wrote. _I can only give you my word that I'm doing all my own work, since I can't provide a credible witness. I work on the provided coursework whilst in Study
Hall, a 'class' of people with nothing better to do and one sole teacher who appears to be deeply engrossed in the latest work by Jane Austin. If you recall such 'classes', you will intuitively *know* that there is no available assistance in such a morass of mundanity._

Sara chewed her pencil.

_However, should proof be required, I should be able to obtain a copy of the school security tape, both raw copy and one slightly altered in order to highlight myself in action, as it were. Only the latter will be on digital media; so if you do require it, I will need to know your operating system and favoured video player. It should all be ready in a week, plus or minus three days._

_Thanking you for your indulgence,_

Sara signed it, printed her name legibly underneath, and added the folded sheet to the stack of work already inside.

Done and done. In the five minutes left to her before the next *real* class - and the next encounter with a moron-du-jour - Sara delved into her textbooks, eager to absorb all the information therein. Wait. The next class was lunch hour. A positive saturation of morons behind the thin shield of her friends. And the very comfortable insulation of Todd, right next to her, to vent with.

_Don't be so nasty, Sara Louise,_ she told herself. _The rest of the population *chooses* to indulge themselves in petty bickering and surface glamour. They're not morons, they're selectively stupid._

Yes. Always remember that some people chose out of ignorance - willful or not - what others avoided in reason. Which neatly explained the phenomena of smoking, imbibing alcohol, and the partaking of sundry drugs... up to and including the part where they attempted to get one to join in with them.

_Thankyou, Professor, for keeping all those marvellous books on psychology and philosophy,_ she thought.

Todd closed his locker to find Mr Stick-up-his-ass himself, Scooterboy.

"I need your help," he said.

"Yo, I don't swipe no test answers." He glared at the ruby sunglasses. "In fact, I recently gave up swipin' anythin' at all. So whatever it is, I ain't gonna do it."

"You know Sara better than anyone here," he said.

"Duh. Boyfriend."

"How can I get her to like me?"

Todd's hands knotted into fists. "You better not be sayin' what I *think* yo'r sayin' homeboy..."

"Nononono... I mean, I mean... Okay. How can I get her to *not* hate me?"

"Hate you?" Todd snickered. "Yo, my girl *despises* you."

"I know. And I'm supposed to be the *leader*... I just-- can't do anything *right* around her." One hand scrubbed through his hair. "I try. I honestly try to say or do something that'll -Idunno- prove I'm not a badguy. Even Jean tells me I should wait her 'thing' with Seniors out. It's only a couple of months..."

"But?" Todd prompted.

"What if something happens? What if we *need* her on some mission or something and she decides to tell me to go stuff myself? What if people depend on it? What if something goes wrong because I screwed up my one and only chance to settle things out with her?"

"You don't cope with loss well, do you?" said Sara.

Scooter almost hit the ceiling. "Could you not *do* that?"

Todd laughed into his hand. He had his own 'thing' about Scooter, and seeing him jump like that was pure poetry. All the same... "Yo, ease up on the dude, okay, babe? He's *tryin'*.

"Very," Sara iced.

Todd wisely decided to guide her away from the potential fight. "It ain't easy fo' him, y'know? It's like an alignment conflict. He's lawful good, I'm chaotic neutral... the dude's bound to be suspicious of me. It's like he can't help himself, yo."

"We all have the power to help ourselves," said Sara. "It's a supreme effort, I know, but it can be done."
"Supreme wit' cheese, sweetums," Todd hugged her arm as they moved. "Even you an' I needed some momentum." They found the queue for the cafeteria and joined the end of the line.
"True, but the point remains. I had the *power* to stop hurting myself. I had the option of finding somewhere to stay and just - vanishing. I could have - at any time - removed myself from the cause of my problems. I could have *made* time to give release to some of the things in my boxes. I had those choices."
"So why'd you stay with the ol' witch?"
"Because Daddy would be upset if I left." Sara sighed. "I do love my father, but it sometimes seems to me as if he's trapped in a corner. I've made things even more difficult for him, now... but what choices were there? I couldn't have mother dragging me out of the only sanctuary I've found. I couldn't have her finding out about *you*... and if she knew what fun I was having now... She'd sue everyone from here to Sunday and arrest everyone she *could*. Mother *hates* not being in control."
"It's a bad sitch," said Todd. "Somethin' had to give or it'd explode, yo."
"Mother's better off without her favourite detonator anyway," said Sara. "None of her special people can trip over me and embarress her."

Daytime could provide a restful sleep in the right conditions. Sam was an experienced traveller and could arrange those conditions with practiced ease. A night mask, gel earplugs, and a Do Not Disturb sign made all the difference. Like Sara, he needed less sleep than most people, but he wasn't at the extreme end. Six hours was his minimum, and he could go sleepless for forty-eight hours, provided he got his head down for twelve. Exhaustion held him in its grasp, now. Just as desperation had him in the cycle of driving near-ceaselessly for as long as possible, finding somewhere to rest, and then starting anew as soon as he was able. Meals were barely remembered and rest stops blurred into a homogenous whole. The important thing was getting home and battling to defuse the situation before it could get any worse.

A restraining order. That had him worried. Sara had to be in dire straights to give Jaquelline a *restraining* order. And since his wife always rendered a story for maximum sympathy on her side... finding the truth of it was going to be a trial. He just wanted his lovely ladies to get along. Just a slice of peace. But he had to get there first.

~

"What about you?" said Sara. "What held or holds you trapped in a corner?"
"Yo, when I say anythin' 'bout that?"
"Does the phrase, 'puking blood' ring a bell?"
Todd got a classic 'aw, *fuuucck*! expression on his face and attempted to hang it.
"Fifteen-year-olds don't often have bleeding ulcers, dear," Sara genly turned him back up to face her.
"If it's still a problem--"
"Naw. No. No it ain't. Not often, anyway, yo."
"#Darling*...
He sighed. "Home was a bad place, okay? Real bad." Todd fidgetted and looked away. Unable to face her. "Tied my guts in knots."
"How old?" said Sara.
Now he focussed on his feet. "Idunno. 'Bout eight, maybe, when it started. Mystique took me out of it all. I'm mostly okay now, honest."
"I'm guessing that, even with her, you still had stomach pains?"
"...meh... Not a lot." He shrugged. "Not as often as it used t' be."
"Darling, ulcers in someone so *young*..."
"Hey, they don't kick up no mo'," he soothed, wrapping her arm in his. "Not since the ol' bitch got
lost. An' I'm gettin' better. Honest."
Sara drew him into a hug. "Look *after* yourself, please," she begged. "You're the best person who's ever happened to me. I don't want to see you hurt. Even by yourself."


Scott paused in his path between cafeteria counter and the table where the rest of the X-Men seemed to hang, watching Todd and Sara.
The young mutant was leaning on his hand, goofy expression plastered on his face, as Sara lectured absently about ancient philosophers versus modern physics. Sara's lecture, from what he could hear of it, was somehow melded with modern thought-problems.
"Now Xeno," Sara was saying, "he was a gentleman who loved to ignore reality. We *know* you can hit a moving object with an arrow, but the thing with halves? He got *everyone* fixated on that. They were obsessed with the half-distances, when all you had to do was plot a time-distance graph to prove him wrong." Her finger traced two straight lines and two curves on the table. "It's the same deal with Einsteini paradox. He was asked at one stage if one could technically travel faster than light by getting up and walking forward on a vehicle travelling *at* light speed. Einstein told them no, the walker was travelling at light speed - and so was the train." Sara grinned. "It's not impossible. Different wavelengths of light travel at different speeds. No matter how fast you move on that imaginary vehicle, you are always travelling at the speed of light."
"Damn, yo'r gorgeous," said Todd.
"You didn't understand a single word I said, did you?"
"Not a lot of it. But I was listenin'."
Sara giggled. "It's all a matter of thinking in curves, dear."
Scott moved away, heading ever-closer to Jean. She and Duncan were still having a minor war over Sara's tell-all pxt movie, yet there was still the implication that they were a couple. Even if they were a couple having a spat.
He took his seat nearby. Not close enough to be possessive, but near enough to hear and watch everything she said and did.
_Wait. Is this unrequited love or stalker behaviour?_ he thought.
_It's wearing your heart on your sleeve._ Jean 'said'. _Relax. It's cute. I'll let you know if you slide into 'scary'._
Telepaths. He'd never get used to them.


Todd would have liked to stay and stare at Sara for the remaining twenty minutes of lunch period, but the call of nature quite rudely interrupted. She was now explaining light waves in relation to sound waves. Todd might've even understood some of it if he wasn't so distracted. He waited for her to take a draught from her water before breaking in. Even then he hesitated, staring enthralled at the way her mouth curved around the lip of the mug and how her throat moved as she drank. Nature rang again.
"Sorry sweetums, but I gotta use the loo. I'll be right back." He kissed her hand and got up.
Sara squeezed his hand back, blew him a kiss and let him go. Todd passed Scott on the way out, noticing how he was sitting close to Jean. Poor sap. Too in love to move on to another girl and too prudish to do anything about this one. Unrequited love sucked. If anyone asked him, he'd sooner be alone than trapped in a one-sided relationship like that.(1)
The high school had more than one bathroom of course for the convenience of different locations. He skipped the one next to the cafeteria since everyone used it during lunch period and headed toward the opposite end of the hall. It was just one of his quirks that he liked to be alone in bathrooms when he had to go. Todd chose a stall still in working order and idly read what was scrawled on the door. His hands stopped in mid-unzip when his eyes fell on one particular scrawl. It was a question about Sara's number - did anyone have it? Todd glowered, trying to recognize the
handwriting and failing. He scratched at it with the metal part of his bracer, a sound that almost
drowned the noise of the bathroom door opening. Shit, yo. Now he'd have to wait for the guy to
leave before he could go. Damn negative conditioning.
He sighed and waited for the flush. Only there was nothing, not even the sound of a zipper. What
was he doing? Todd cursed under his breath and risked peeking out through the crack in the stall
door to see what the fuckwad was making him wait for. Combing his thin gray hair across a
baldspot, well how lovely. Oh, and humming to himself now. Todd rolled his eyes, stomach starting
to cramp. He gave one last ornery glare in the gentleman's direction and caught his reflection in the
mirror.
It was then that Todd felt his heart shudder to a near stop. He stared transfixed at the reflection's face
and tried to place the nose, the eyeshape and color, the teasing smirk from somewhere else. It didn't
work. That face only belonged to one person - and though it bore close resemblance to the
gentleman's brother, that man was dead. This couldn't be. It shouldn't be allowed. He should not be
here. The man couldn't be a teacher, surely.
The man was slapping something onto his neck now. There was a sharp aftershave smell that left
Todd dizzy from too many bad memories and required him to lean against the wall for support. After
an eternity, the man washed his hands off and left, whistling. Todd turned back to the urinal to do his
business, not caring who the hell came through that door next just so long as he could get out of here.
He zipped back up and stormed over to the sink. Todd used the tiniest amount of soap and ran hot
water over his hands. It wasn't a regular habit to use soap and everything, but he needed time to calm
down before walking out of this bathroom.

"Maybe it wasn't him._ Todd tried to reason with himself. _It could've been someone who looked
like him. They got Elvis impersonators an all this shit, why not Manny impersonators?_ Todd
laughed out loud, with just a touch of hysteria. "Shit yo, I thought I was over this shit." He laughed
again and too late, his eyes fell on an object wedged between the spout and the base of the mirror. A
bottle of Old Spice. The door whooshed open again.
"Heh. Whoops. Almost forgot my stuff."
Todd cringed and didn't dare look up. The gentleman's hand snatched up the bottle and Todd heard
rustling cloth. He could only assume it was stuffed in a pocket. He mindlessly rubbed his hands
under the water as the footsteps retreated back to the door. They stopped a quarter of the
way there. _Shit shit shit no, shit just keep walkin'!_ Todd begged with his mind. He kept his head
down. "Excuse me, young man?"
 Fuck._ Todd refused to answer or look up. He was shaking. Manny was between him and the door.
Not like he couldn't whup the guy's ass if he had to but if he did, he'd be in deep shit. And there were
just some things a person could do to another that kept them helpless no matter how strong they
were.
"Young man, what's your name?" Manny didn't sound curious, he sounded puzzled. Disturbed.
"Kenny Cartman(2)," Todd cobbled together finally, still not looking up.
"Oh. I see." The footsteps resumed once more until he was gone. Todd turned off the water and slid
down to sit, trembling, between the sinks.
"Get a fucking hold of yourself," he hissed after a moment. The empty room made his voice sound
much deeper and more in control than it really was.

(1) Yay irony.
(2) South Park to the rescue.

~

"As for actual FTL travel, there's a possibility that one may have trouble with dimensional
instability... assuming one finds a wavelength boundary defined by the word 'light', of course.
Wormhole travel is far more..." Sara trailed off when she saw Todd.
He was pale. Shaken. Relieved to see her.
"Trouble?" she asked as he slid back into place by her side.
"...meh," he said.
His hands were red-raw and covered in blisters. "Darling... what *happened*?"
He was shaking, glimpsing back the way he had come. He looked like he'd seen a ghost... or a Dragon. "Don't worry 'bout it?" he begged.
"You're hurt," she said. "It's natural to worry." She reached into her bag for the 'carry pack' of Hank's miracle skin goo and, holding Todd's hand as gently as a butterfly, carefully applied the balm. A forensic fragment of her mind took over, cataloguing his injuries. Even as Todd sighed and snuggled up to her, she could guess what had happened.
"How'd you manage to soak your hands in hot allergen?"
"I... I was stoopid, yo. Washed my hands wit' soap."
"In scalding-hot water?"
Todd looked up at her. Pleading. "Don't ask. Please."
"But--"
"There's stuff you just don' need t' hear, sweetness. Not here. Not now."
Sara treated his other hand, where the fingers poking through the plaster just had allergy-blots and minor scalds. "I'm just going to worry until you tell me, you know."
He was struggling with it, turning over and poking a newly-opened wound. "Later," he said. "Just... later. When we safe. Okay?"
Interesting choice of words. What, if anything, was unsafe *here*?
Duncan Matthews and any of the Senior Thug Squad was out. They wouldn't know about Todd's sensitive skin, and they lacked the necessary fine motor control to hold a struggling victim's hand[1] under a hot tap without getting at least partially burned, themselves. Teachers, as a rule, didn't physically torture their students[2]. So who could possibly have a motive for entering a schoolyard and torturing a student?
And what on *Earth* would the motive be?
Alternately, there was deliberate self-injury. Except that Todd had had enough of pain inflicted upon him to not court enduring pain himself. Self-injury was... illogical.
Not *him*.
"All right," she finally decided. "When we're safe. But the *instant* we're safe, I want some answers."

[2] Yay irony

~

Todd chewed a corner of his lip, feeling a distant burning in his gut. "Sure sweetums," he said, though he wasn't really keen on giving those answers, even when they were safe. There were just some things a man should never have to tell his girlfriend. But he'd already said he would and he couldn't bring himself to lie. _What's the problem, yo?_ An inner voice chided. _She trusted yo with all her secrets._ But somehow, this secret among others just wasn't the kind best let out. Todd thought he understood why.
This kind of stuff wasn't supposed to happen to men. And if it ever should, men weren't supposed to talk about it. With anyone. They were instead supposed to track down whoever did it and beat the crap out of them with a tire iron. Then go have themselves a beer.
Whereas it could happen to women. And women could cry, rant, rage or talk about it all they wanted. They weren't just expected to, they were entitled.
Case in point, popular media. Todd had sat through a couple of Lifetime movies when Tabby had control of the remote. Of course he'd focused on his sketchbook while he sat on the floor or couch, but occasional snags of dialogue filtered through to his attention. The Lifetime channel was a network that took real-world issues, from the street and from the domestic apartment, and applied
them to beautiful actors and actresses so the audience would give a shit. And of course after they botched things, they tacked on a superficial happy ending to minimize nasty calls to the network. Couldn't have people thinking the justice system was flawed or anything.

Nothing ever happened to men in those movies (not that Todd sat through a whole lot of them to be sure). On TV, whenever a sex offender hurt a little boy in their family, the parents would magically believe the kid against the grown up's own word. Todd knew for a fact that some parents just didn't want to know. Papa Tolensky had belted him one when Todd had tried to tell him about Uncle Manny, yelling that he didn't want to hear about his son's faggot fantasies in the bathtub. And Todd had approached him in one of his good moods.

After that he'd never told anyone, not until he got sent to the hospital and Uncle Manny was arrested. Todd hadn't wanted to, but he babbled the whole story when it became apparent they wouldn't let him go home until he did. Of course since the police hadn't taken an official statement, had manipulated him for information, and since Todd was too much of a wreck to even sign anything, the testimony was practically useless. They did, however, find a bunch of child pornography and videotapes in Manny's bedroom on a raid. Some of them costarring Manny. Unfortunately, the method the police had gotten this evidence by was against his civil rights and also could be thrown out of the courts. For a while that was the defense's main and only argument. However, since Manny worked part time at a daycare center and since one of his duties involved diaper changing, the parental outcry was louder than the defense. The evidence was not thrown out, and Manny was thrown instead into state prison, where he could be expected to get the full treatment.

And, as he'd expected, Todd got the shit beaten out of him for telling the truth when he came home. _Try to put that on TV._ he thought. _I dare ya, bunch of fucking cowards._ Todd shifted against Sara, and looked down at his hands. "I wasn't even paying attention to the pain back there," he muttered at random. At least they didn't hurt anymore. He looked up at her and smiled. It was faint, but it reached his eyes and it was genuine. "But thanks, sweetums. It don't hurt no more."

"You mean your hands? Or you?" Sara asked, putting her arm around his shoulders. "My hands," confessed Todd as he leaned in to her. He closed his eyes and focused on her voice, only her voice. The echoing clatter and clamor of the cafeteria faded somewhat. "I'll be okay," he promised.

(1) You can tell how much I *love* the Lifetime channel. ^_^;
(2) Most inmates in prison have been molested at some point in their young lives. So when a sexual offender gets sent to prison, he can expect to be either raped, killed, or beaten any day of his sentence. I'm sure Manny had oodles of fun.

~

Dragon wounds. Sara knew the signs. This was something for a private moment away from the maddening world. Just like no-one here could possibly overhear what it was like to be six years old and have one's mother absolutely loathe one. Sara gave him what comfort she could, and felt much relieved to see his usual hue restore itself. Todd's answers - even the thin reassurance that he didn't hurt any more - only lead to the question: what was so awful that he wouldn't notice scalding-hot water?

She knew from personal experience that it took quite a while for the hot water taps in the school to 'warm up', as it were, and deliver anything resembling hot water. It would take *effort* to burn oneself - or someone else - in those sinks.

"If you say so," she allowed. She wanted nothing more than to whisk him away from any trouble and wrap him up and keep him safe... but there were *obligations*. And on a Wednesday afternoon, that meant AP Chem and study hall. Which meant, once again, facing Mr Hinkley.

Who now blushed and stammered a lot whenever he glimpsed her. And appologised when he still accidentally used the wrong pronoun.
Evidently, the fact that she now wore clothes that made her look feminine had him flustered. As had the knowledge that she always had been female. The bell rang, making each of them moan for their own reasons. "See you in detention, love," she said. "As if I'd miss it," Todd grinned.

Mr Hinkley wasn't in AP Chem. There was someone new. He wore the sort of cheap suit that tried valiantly not to look cheap, but couldn't help the unfashionable cut of the inexpensive fabric that gave it away. He was greying, clean-shaven and reeked of Old Spice. His face... struck Sara as being oddly familiar. She'd swear she'd seen him somewhere before...[1] "Good afternoon," he said with a fake Germanic burr to his accent. "I am Mr Haufmann[2]. I vill be your teacher for ze rest of de term."

_Oh boy. I should tell Kurt about this guy. He'd have *fits*_.

"I vill now be calling ze roll."
The rolls had been altered, evidently, to contain the students' first name and last name. No more avenues for confusion - or so they hoped. Sara answered her name with a "Jawohl."

Some students giggled. Jean Grey did her level best to pretend she didn't know her. "Sprechen zee Deutch?" Mr Haufmann mangled the phrase. "Ja, Ich verspreche Deutche," she said in perfect German. "[And how is the weather in Stalag thirteen?]

_Cut it *out*,_ Jean 'said'.

_Aw, come on. Everyone knows that's a fake accent. I can almost hear the _Hogan's Heroes_ theme..._

"Wunderbar, wunderbar," said Haufmann. He had no clue what she'd just said. "Moving along, if we please."

Okay. So he was very bad at pretending to be German. She had to wait and see if he was any better at being a teacher.

[1] Unca Manny doesn't have a broken nose, so that's throwing her off.

~

Todd got into his Algebra class with a sigh of temporary relief. He hadn't seen Manny in the halls upon leaving the cafeteria. His muscles had yet to relax from the tension of walking alone through to class. Mrs. Grear called roll and launched right into upcoming test announcements, including what would be on it. Todd already knew what would be on it - a bunch of math questions that forced one to solve a problem a certain way. Why they were pressuring students to learn this and not something actually useful - like how to budget and understand tax forms - was beyond Todd's ken. But it was something to concentrate on to get his mind off more pressing matters.

He got his book and notepad out of the backpack with one hand. The other didn't hurt as much as it would have without Sara's skin medicine, but Todd was now aware of what he'd done to it. Mrs. Grear took one look at his hands and announced that he needed a partner to help him take notes. "Ke-hrist," Todd muttered under his breath. "No thanks, I can manage alone," he protested. She paired him up anyway, having the insight at least to choose a student who turned in homework and actually passed most of the tests.

"Harley?" Mrs. Grear called into the back of the room. A girl with long blonde hair that most cheerleaders would kill for and a figure they would most certainly not, squirmed down in her seat as heads turned to look. Mrs. Grear smiled at her and motioned her to the empty desk near Todd. "Why don't you come a little closer to the front today?"

She nodded and grumbling, acquiesced. Harley sat beside him amid the teasing hoots and snickers. "Cheating on your boyfriend? Ooops, I meant your girlfriend?"
"With Harley the harlot no less."
"She'll write her number somewhere in those notes you know."
Harley sneered without looking up and muttered something that might've been 'bunch of witless asshats', but Todd couldn't be sure.
"Ey, don't pay them no mind, yo," Todd tried, guilty she had been made the centre of attention on his behalf.
"Easier said than done, you know." She pushed up her glasses and sat with her shoulders hunched, scribbling down notes as Mrs. Grear began her lecture. Todd officially had nothing to focus on now save for the pieces of plaster flaking off of the cast and even those lost appeal. Soon enough he was going to have to explain things to Sara and then came the chore of trying to find out what the fuck Manuel was doing here in his school. Todd figured he could go to the office after school and ask the secretary -

[Plip]
A rolled up ball of paper bounced off Todd's shoulder and landed in front of him. He stared at it. Harley looked over at it, rolled her eyes and bent her head back over her notes. Sighing, Todd opened the ball of paper and read. He boggled and read again in disbelief.

There was something insidiously torturous about being near the front of a classroom when it was this hard to keep a straight face. Noticing his attempts, Harley raised an eyebrow. Todd let out a quiet snicker, wrote something beneath the scrawled stupidity and passed it over to her. She frowned briefly at the fact that he was passing notes, but read anyway. Then she had to look away with a smirk.

Written was:
"Your gf is cheating on you. With some chick named Ilene. I herd her talking about taiking her for a ride. Must have swiched teems. So sorry."
Underneath it, Todd had written:
"(Eileen is her BIKE) XD"
Sometimes a complete fucktard could be a most welcome distraction.

~
"Her bike, or *a* bike[1]?' Harley whispered.
"scooter," Todd supplied. "It's currently resting in pieces, waitin' fo' the last parts to fix it up."
Harley giggled as she wrote.
"Hey lookit. Toady Tolenski's gonna ride the Harley."
_Ah, fuckit._ "No, I'm'a go ride Eileen wit' Sara. Shut up, foo'."
So it'd be all over the school in less than three seconds. Expecially with txt messaging. So. Fucking. What. It wasn't *his* fault that they couldn't handle the truth.
Harley was bright red and meeping behind her hands. "Omigod... Ican'tbelieveyou*said*that..."
"Their fault fo' not list'nin' right," he breezed. "'Sides, last I looked, the only person in this school named Eileen is Mrs Kaydovar[2], th' librarian.

"Isn't she older than dirt?"
"Xac'ly mah point, yo."
"Some silence *please*," said Mrs Grear. Her plea worked for exactly two minutes.
"So what happened to your hand?"
"Which one?"
"The broken one."
"Ah. Someone stood on it. Hardly hurts no mo'."

[1] Aussie slanguage. Bike == someone [usually a girl] who's 'easy' because anybody could "have a ride". If this doesn't work in the US, please let me know...
[2] 'Cadaver' spelled creatively
Mr. Haufman hadn't proved to be such a great teacher at all really. He'd assigned them review questions based on Mr. Hinkley's notes, and passed out some test papers. Watching him try to answer student questions was funny. His stance was casual, resting against the desk and still pointlessly holding the roll book open in his hand. There was a sheet of paper in it that, when rustled, looked anything but a roll sheet. More like an answer key. Sara knew because if an answer wasn't on the sheet, Mr. Haufman would excuse himself saying that they didn't teach that particular theory over in Germany. For most of the students, that answer was completely acceptable. Not for Sara.

It was all Jean could do to keep the girl's mouth shut. _*Please* cut him a break. I know he's a horrible Chem teacher, but substitute teachers can't be proficient in *everything*. And it's not like they know who's class they have to take over before they're told._

_He's still faking that accent._ Sara insisted. However she turned her attention to her notepad and started doodling absentmindedly. Mr. Haufman could jabber whatever he thought passed as Chemistry notes, and Sara could draw caricatures. At length, somebody behind her tapped her shoulder and held up a cell phone so she could see.

Sara read it out of sheer boredom and then giggled. The student hoping to embarrass Sara reread his text message to see why *she* would be laughing. Unfortunately, Mr. Haufman heard the exchange and marched over. "Young Fraulein," he said sternly which didn't help Sara stop laughing. _Stop it_, hissed Jean to no avail.

Mr. Haufman wasn't terribly upset however. Rather relieved since he was running out of things to ramble on about. Being a stern teacher he could better handle. "Let me see that telephone," he said, glaring at the other student. Sara noticed that his accent had dropped. Sheepishly, the cell phone was handed over.

Mr. Haufman scanned over it and frowned. There had to be more than a dozen possibilities in one state with the name Todd T., but he hadn't gotten this far by being careless. His mind went back to the boy he'd seen in the washroom. Familiar and cringy enough, but then he'd been scrubbing with soap. (1) "Who eez this Todd? Last name?"

Sara rolled her eyes. It was ridiculous how many teachers went after somebody for being in a rumor. "Todd Tolensky," the student confessed. Mr. Haufman's face didn't change but he became calm too fast. He put the cell phone down and walked back to the front of the room. "Put zat thing away. I shall talk to him about disturbing zee class," he muttered and picked up a text book this time instead of the roll book. His mistake, the paper wasn't in this one.

(1) I have no idea how long Todd's trouble with soap stretched back to. Tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm guessing childhood since he's a second generation mutant, and that he didn't start smelling too bad until puberty hit.

~

"In his defence, mein Herr," said Sara, "Eileen is my scooter. I'm the Sara."

He glared at her. "You, I have heard enough from. No more interruptions to my class, ja?"

Sara switched to German. "[If you please, I cannot remain silent forever.]"

Not even a *glimmer* of comprehension. At least this time, he sensed the trap. "And since ve are in America, please to be speaking ze official language, fraulein."

Sara snorted, straining herself to keep a straight face. Fortunately, her paroxysms looked like nodding and Mr Haufmann was temporarily pleased.

_"I'm serious, Sara. *Stop* it._

_The man's an impostor. I'm not even sure he's an actual teacher._

"Now..." Haufmann flipped through the book. "Wher vere ve?"

"...vini vidi vichi..." Sara muttered.

Fish-eye glare. "Your pardon?"

"Page two hundred and forty-three."
"Ah. *Ah*. Ze chemistry of organics... Ah..." he fumbled through the book, looking for his loose page. "Er..."

_"Oh brother._ "Carbon," she supplied. "The keystone of organic chemistry?"

"Ah! Yes. Our friend Carbon." flip flip flip. He copied a molecule onto the board. "Now. Who can tell me where ve might find dis particular example of Carbon?"

One of the jocks tentatively raised his hand. "Uh. Sir? I think that's plastic."

"Nylon, to be precise," said Sara. "Bravo, George."

Five minutes later, she was being glared at by Principal Kelly.

"Tell me, miss Adrien... Do *enjoy* making a mockery of this school?"

"Sir, I honestly don't know what you mean... I was merely savouring a mockery that presented *itself*."

Things went downhill from there. Evidently, Principal Kelly didn't want to hear about Haufmann's spurious German origins. Nor did he listen to Sara's suspicions about his credentials and lack thereof. It finally ended up with Kelly threatening a punishment detail instead of Study Hall.

"Fine. I'll do my utmost to restrain myself," she grumbled. "But if he's a genuine High School teacher, then I'm next in line for the Royal Throne."

"That will be *quite* enough, miss Adrien."

Sigh. "Yes, sir."

"You may go."

The bell rang, indicating it was time for Study Hall. At least it was *peaceful* in Study Hall. Just her and the workbook... she tore open the envelope... And the continuing correspondance from Professor Montegna.

Sara picked her seat up the back and in a corner, so that less people would be inclined to bug her.

_Dear Miss Adrien,_ the Professor had written. _Your eagerness to prove yourself is both unnecessary and moot. Surely an intelligent person such as yourself would know a few ways to fake such evidence, since you already know a few ways to procure it in the first place._

"Rats," muttered Sara.

_However, you can rest assured that I will be verifying your prowess independantly, in my own time._

Translated, he didn't exactly trust her, but he was willing to believe she was smart enough to *really* fake it.

Interesting balance.

Sara put aside his letter for later and sought the calm of cold, logical equations and the peace of the text and the theorem they represented. Assuming a world made like *this*, and given *that* information, the numbers behaved *thusly*. Much cleaner and better-organized than Social Math.

Someone was looming.

Sara flinched, going into an automatic defence stance Logan had taught her.

The gentleman peering over her shoulder was apparently transplanted from Hollywood, which churned out pretty people on a regular basis. His smile, however, was one of surprised amazement.

"You really *do* read that quickly," he said.

Sara tried to swallow an instant dislike of the man. He was... too *perfect*. "Is there something I can help you with, mr...?"

"Montegna. Professor Montegna." He offered his hand.

"Sara Louise Adrien," she said, shaking it. "Imitating a paramecium, evidently."

Montegna laughed, easing himself into a seat. "You'll have to forgive me, miss Adrien," he soothed. "I'm far too used to students who are *just* smart enough to fake being smarter. It's a tremendous ruin to the system, our grants, and so forth. Especially when these so-called paragons of education inevitably flounder."

"Believe me, sir. No-one was more surprised regarding my apparent intelligence than yours truly." And, given the recent kerfuffle with Haufmann... "How do I *know* you're the good Professor?"

"Zero to paranoia in twenty seconds. Impressive." He gave her his wallet. "Check the illegible scrawl that otherwise passes for my signature against your letter."
She did. Not exactly the same, but with just enough variation to be genuine. "My apologies, but I've already run foul of one impostor, today. I wouldn't be surprised if they came in threes."

He raised his eyebrows. "Superstition?"

"The human brain likes patterns," said Sara. "Threes are instilled in us from the cradle, re-enforced by dominant religion *and* leftover pagan symbolism, stirred thoroughly into our culture and regurgitated by the masses. In brief, we *look* for threes."

Montegna laughed. "Remind me to send you some sociology material. I think you and Professor Schwartz would spend many an educational hour arguing over miscellany."

"Thanks, but I'm having enough fun messing with my own head."

"First-year psych texts?"

"Bingo."

~

Todd spent the rest of the math class trying to find faces in the wooden desk surface. Mrs. Grear had managed to quiet the class since nobody had txted back a funny Sara reaction. Not funny to them at least. The only message received had been: "She went lol. wtf?" and it had not been shown to Todd, therefore he was unaware of its existence.

He was expecting a reaction like that anyway, so affirmation of it wouldn't have done enough to draw him back out of his retreat. Todd was carefully keeping his mind blank by focusing on multiplication tables. Just simple multiplication that was tedious and yet easy, so he didn't get discouraged enough to let his mind wander back to the real problems. Harley at length poked him in the good arm. Todd blinked and discovered that the bell had rung about a minute ago. People were already clearing out.

"Here's your notes, Todd."

"Thanks," he murmured, taking them and stuffing them one handed in a folder. He put them in his backpack and stood up.

"You okay?"

"End o' the day syndrome," he offered as explanation.

"Ah. I'd hate to see how 'end of the week' syndrome affects you."

Todd smiled wanly. "I wish." He waved goodbye and headed down the hall to P.E. Todd briefly entertained the thought of skipping, but there was little point in it. The teacher was going to let him sit on the bench and at worst make him repair holes in the volleyball net(1) - why get into trouble for nothing?

The teacher had nothing for him to do today. He made Todd a few of the warmup excercises with the rest of the class, and sent him to the bench. After a few minutes of watching a bunch of jocks run around in pointless circles, Todd knew he was going to go crazy unless he occupied his mind. Even walking would help. He *should* have brought a book. Eventually he gave up on not thinking about it when he realized he could take advantage of his injuries to do some office snooping. It would mean he didn't have to put off seeing Sara after classes. The coach was only too passive to the idea of him going to the nurse to get 'that nasty rash' looked at and sent him off with a hall pass.

Todd went, singing 'Reasons to be Miserable' (2) to try and cheer himself up.

His voice echoed in the hall, even while singing quietly, so he stopped. Sara's study hall room was to the left of him. The door was closed. Todd stood there for a while staring at it. _Not now, yo. You got things to find out first. Then you have to explain._

He moved on reluctantly. Past the nurse's office and toward the main. There, the secretary was on the phone but she saw him. Todd sat down and waited. When she'd hung up, she looked at the boy and sighed. "Mr. Tolensky? Why are you in trouble this time?"

"I'm not, yo." He showed her the hall pass. She raised an eyebrow.

"You were supposed to have gone to the nurses' office, it says."
"Yeah, and I'll go, but I just need to ask something real quick."
"Okay, what?" She looked confused.
"You guys hire any new teachers recently?"
"Yes, we've hired several over the week. Why are you asking?"
"Curiosity. Any of them just started today?"
"#Mister Tolensky. Is there a legitimate reason you're here asking these kind of questions when you *should* be getting something for those blisters?" And just like that, her tone became concerned. "Is there something wrong?"

Todd looked confused and then realized his posture. He was now perching in the chair with his arms crossed over his ribs and shoulders hunched protectively as he leaned forward. Old habits die hard. He forced himself to uncurl. "Ah. No, nothing. I'll go to the nurse." And he'd better if he didn't want to get into trouble. On the way, he passed the teacher's lounge. Somebody inside was laughing, walking out backwards at the same time as Todd moved by.

"Ach!" Todd heard as he was bumped off course.
"Oh, sorry-" he apologized, and looked up. Fuck. Twice in one day. _Don't Panic._ he told himself, a few seconds too late. Too late as in tearing down the hall in the opposite direction at warp speed. Usually this time of day the halls were mostly empty. That's why Todd didn't check himself when he zipped around the corner. They both went down hard. The only way Todd knew he'd run into a female was because of the scream and because somebody genuinely German cried out her name in alarm.

Papers were floating everywhere and Todd could taste blood. "Shhiiiit... Sorry..." he croaked, trying to sit up. Amanda was rubbing her head and wincing. There was no blood on her at least. After looking her over, Kurt gave him a less than favorable look. "Sara's not out of class until the last bell rings, ja?" he growled at Todd. At least Kurt was assuming a reason behind Todd running recklessly through the halls.

"Tha's not what this is about," Todd moaned. "I din't mean to hurt yo girl."
"I know that," Kurt sighed. He turned his attention back to Amanda. "Poor liebe. Does it hurt much?"
"Naw, I've had worse in gym," she joked. She let Kurt help her up and looked at Todd. "So where's the fire?"
"Eh." He was crawling around picking up papers and constantly looking over his shoulder. "I think it's out for now. You okay?"

Amanda shook her head. "I already said I'm fine." She took in Todd's pale face and broken left hand. Not to mention his skin. "I should be more worried about you."

Todd was about to answer that when someone walked around the corner from behind him. "Ah, guten tag, Kenny. Bitte(3) you dropped ze hall pass."

"GAaaaAH!" Todd nearly jumped out of his skin. Without turning around, he shoved the papers he'd gathered at Amanda and took off with a whimper.

Amanda stared after Todd while Kurt gawked unabashedly at Mr. Haufman. "What in the world was that about?" she wondered aloud.

(1) Whenever I had to sit out on physical education class because of sickness or that one time I got the shingles across my chest and under my arm, there was always something for me to do. The teacher in my high school could never stand idleness. She'd have me patch up and reinflate rubber balls or she'd have me help correct tests.

(2) Reasons to be Miserable - by Marvin the Paranoid Android. Of HGTHG fame. I've seen the new movie. And adore it. ^^; Such catchy tunes! *hums 'So Long and Thanks for all the Fish'*

(3) Bitte used as 'but'. Classic blunder. I think Bitte means 'please' in affirmation, as in 'yes, please'.

~
Kurt raised an eyebrow at the teacher's mangled German. Something about this man had just scared
the living spit out of Todd... and that meant a lot of fear.
A teacher that still held Todd's hall pass negligently in one hand.
"[Allow me, sir,]" he said, absently swapping to German.
"Hm? Vhat?"
"I can take the pass to him," said Kurt. "No trouble at all."
"You are his friend, ja?"
"A friend of his friend," he laughed. "It works. Some of us are -ah- nervy... around strangers." Thus
neatly slipping in his own anti-touch Thing without making a big deal out of it. "We know each
other, so... it just works better."
With that, he managed to obtain the paper rectangle without touching the teacher and hustled off after
the undelicate smell of Todd Tolenski.
Not that he *stank*, any more... but his odour was distinct and, apparently, it got stronger when he
was under stress. Kurt wasn't as good as Wolverine when it came to nose news, but he didn't need to
be to scent-track a scared Toad.
Kurt found him in a maintenance closet. Surrounded by enough cleansers to strip his skin clean off.
He held up the hall pass. "You might be wanting this, ja?"
Todd was distant from reality. Huddled against the wall in a defensive slouch. "Yeah. Thanks," he
murmured, but didn't move.
His hands were burned and blistered.
Kurt gently pried him out of his hiding place. "Come on, now. That spot's not healthy for you. One
wrong twitch and Sara'd be out after my blood, ja?"
Just a whimper and a flinch.
_OKay... stay away from anything Germanic._ Kurt steered Todd towards the nurse's office, talking
softly all the time. "Something happened, didn't it? You saw a ghost - of bad times, I think. Was it
*him*? *That* teacher? Or does he just look like someone? Talk to me, Todd. Tell me what's
happening. Let me help."
ain't no help."
_Lovely..._
Ms Ogg boggled at the blisters and got Todd to sit quietly on a padded bench with an itchy blanket
around him and his hand in a saline bath. The fingers of his broken hand were simply smeared with
antiseptic cream and sandwiched between two cold packs.
It was the most she could do.
Kurt vowed to have someone pick him up the minute school was done with. Hell, all he had to do
was get Amanda to tx Sara[1] and she'd be there so fast she'd break at least one sound barrier.

Sam dreamed. Almost halfway to Sara and he was in another dinky motel in the middle of fuck-all,
nowhere... as the locals were wont to call it. The real name of the little whistlestop town was
unimportant.
The gear-shifts of the ancient air conditioning put his deams in a Kafka-esque future somewhere
between Metropolis and the entire steampunk genre. The machinery had to keep going. He had a
giant monkey wrench with which he had to fix the machine... and while he tightened nuts and bolts,
he was searching.
Looking for something treasured.
Something valuable.
Echoing clanks became footfalls, and a distant conversation barely made it through the noise of the
giant machine.
"...ridiculous how willing they are to bow to religious beliefs..."
Sara!
She'd know what he was looking for.
Whenever he was tired like this, rat-faced exhausted from stress or a long trip or both, he could rely
on his daughter to help him. He tried to follow her voice, but the walkways were labyrinthine and shaky enough to force him to go slowly.

"...happy medium. I mean, it's obvious that the universe is just too darn organized to be one huge mistake..."

But he could never get closer...

[1] Because Kurt's fingers are too thick for mobile phone keypads.

~

Todd was, currently, trying to convince himself he was in a safe place. A physical safe place as opposed to the distant corner of his mind he'd tucked himself into. The blanket was over his head and eyes, the rest of his face shielded by scabbed knees and ripped denim. Only his hands were forced out of his huddle, needing care and medical attention and his brain classified Mrs. Ogg as 'harmless'. Whoever walked into the office however, may or may not be harmless. They couldn't hurt him in any of the old ways in here, but that just meant they'd be waiting outside. The fear that they were already waiting outside was more or less keeping Todd very still and very quiet. Mrs. Ogg hadn't been able to get so much as a peep out of him, not even when she asked if his hand was feeling any better. Todd had only nodded, staring through her desk and beyond.

Thinking was very bad for him right now. His brain went and did it anyway.

Todd was nine years old. Manny had come into the bathroom after he was done showering. Todd grabbed the towel and shut off the water. "I'm telling the police," he said. "If you don't stop it." He'd gotten the idea from Detective McGruff.(1)

The words were supposed to have warded Manny off like magic. They didn't. Manny snagged Todd's arm, twisting it behind his back, and shoved him counterwards to the steamed mirror. The towel was torn off and thrown into a corner. He saw the outline of his own frightened face panting back at him as Manny's other hand went to the small of his back, slamming his hips into the sink and holding him there. "And you wanna know what the cops'll do?" Manny had hissed in his ear. Todd trembled, shook his head no. "They'll say 'My what an easy little piece of candy. Let's anyone touch his bits. Let's have some fun with him, eh? We already have a suspect.' They'll take some pictures after we're done, put them in a folder and pass them around the station. Cops are allowed to look at those types of things all they want, you know, it's part of their job. And then, they'll need to send you to the hospital, won't they?" Todd was shaking his head no, crying silently. "Yes. Where they'll force you to hold still on your belly," Manny's hand went downwards. Todd squinched his eyes shut and tried to squirm away but there was no place to go. "And inspect you." His hand jerked viciously and Todd jumped forward, letting out an involuntary little shriek. "For evidence, of course. They'll need it for the courtroom. If they successfully convict me, they might take you away. Put you in a new home with worse than you got. I'm gentler with you than some others might be, Toddy." There was pressure then, where Todd wanted it least of all. He hiccoughed, shrieked, and tried to kick him but Manny didn't leave off.

"So, do you still want to go to the police?"

Todd's body twitched with the effort of holding sobs back, and inevitably collapsed over the sink in misery. It had taken so much work to get his courage and hopes up, and now it had become just one more terrible mistake. "N'uhnI'msorryUncaManny -- pleeeeeease I'm sorreeehhhheeeeee!"

"Be a good boy now. Be quiet, yes?"

There was no help coming. Only pain. Papa Tolensky was watching a game. Mama had made a special drink for herself and gone to bed. Todd watched tears streak his face in the foggy glass and wished things were happening to the one in the mirror instead of him.

_Ain't no help. Never ain't no help._ Todd closed his eyes and tried to think of something else. He
thought of Sara. He thought of her leaning against him, hands intertwined with his. Studying her beautiful scales - how they reflected colors when she moved or smiled. Her laughter. Her kisses. "...a kiss is just a kiss," he murmured softly to himself. Although his eyes remained distant, he smiled. _Think about her. There we go, man. Just her and you and nobody else._ There was a safe place now, if only in his mind.

Amanda was dialing now, at five seconds before bell. The message was short, simple. _Todd at nurse's office. Take him home asap. -- Kurt_. She sent it, and watched the screen knowing there'd be no reply demanding what was up. Sara wasn't known to waste time.

(1) McGruff's that cartoon Detective dog. From the 80's or something. He did little scenarios that showed kids what to do or say when a stranger tried to get them into the car, or when a neighbor tried to take off clothes. Of course his advice never failed to work in the scenarios, so kids didn't always know what to do if it failed in real life.

"...the whole concept of EVP is just fascinating, I mean, if one can *verify*--" {Dootet}
Someone had txt'd her. Again. After the highly amusing one about the threesome had gone around, people had just gone *nuts*. _Hey ho. This one's from Kurt's phone..._
"Another crank?" said Professor Montegna. He had an amused look on his face, like someone watching a rare and spectacular show.
"No, a friend." bip bip... Sara felt a cold chill sweep right over her.
"Are you okay? You just went dead white."
"Todd's hurt." Sara abandoned her things. "Please excuse me." Her feet had wings again, eating up the distance between study hall and the infirmary. She didn't pay any heed to what she was doing until she had him in her arms.
He wasn't bleeding. Showed no sign of any breaks, nor fractures. But the look in his eyes...
"Dragons?" she asked. He was trembling, but he managed a mute nod.
"Then we have to get you away from here," Sara decided, patting her pockets for her phone. Now, just where did she leave...?
"Just -uhnf- how many years -oog- have you spent -hhuuufff- weight training, Miss -ow- Adrien?"
Sara looked back. The doors were bent. And there was Professor Montegna dragging her backpack with him. "Sorry," she said. "I've been meaning to edit the contents a little. Er. Would you perchance happen to have my--?"
"Cellular? Last thing I picked up after I saw you almost fly from the room." He waved the thing vaguely between two fingers. "A breach of personal rights, but curiosity and opportunity rarely pay any attention to law."
"Right at this moment, you're more than quite forgiven." Sara dialled up the Institute's number and hit the call button.
"There's already help on the way, Sara," said the Professor. "Try to stay calm and remain with him in the meantime."
"Calm? Sir, this has to be a Defcon 2 Dragon attack. It's *serious*.*" "And it will not be helped by panic, Sara. You need to be the shield for him. And -er- do try to assist Professor Montegna on his way." Oh yes. Stand strong and cope. At least until within a safe haven where she could gibber and wail with all due abandon. "Of course. Of course. Thank you, sir."
Sara hung up and let the phone drop into her pocket. Then, maintaining her air of calm control,
turned to Professor Montegna. "Thanks *very* much for retrieving my things. I happen to know a few doctors who are very good with hernias, if..."

"No, I'm wise enough to know my limits, thankyou, though." Montegna laughed. "You know, most people would be joking about that."

"I'm not in a fit state of mind to joke, sir. However," she began to collect her things from the man's arms. "I do trust your curiosity is sated with regards to my abilities."

"More than satiated," he bowed. "It will be a pleasure and a privalege to see to your further education, my dear."

And, because she was so distracted, Sara actually said, "Thank you," without prompting.

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Todd wasn't listening, but his head turned at the noise of conversation. Part of him felt truly pathetic for reacting this badly. The rest of him was too busy reacting badly to give a damn. Sara was back down next to him and he took her hand, needing contact with her - blisters be damned. "Sorry," he muttered, though he was only vaguely aware of what was apologizing for. It didn't really matter once Sara had him back in her arms. He rested against her, eyes closed. "Do we have to talk later?" he croaked unhappily.

"Not now," Sara soothed. She stroked his hair, perfectly calm on the outside. "You need to be somewhere safe. Then I'd like to know what happened."

"There's some things you'd be happier not knowin' about, yo."

"And there's some things a person can't keep in boxes," Sara answered. "Not forever anyway. They come out."

Todd curled against her. "But I can't," he hissed. "I can't even put it in a box. Not for one second. Don't know how. I see him and I just..." Almost. Todd fought it all back inside.

"Him?" Sara asked.

But Todd shook his head. "Sorry, I... I should, but there's just some things I ain't ready to talk about. I don't think I ever will be either." He was silent for a moment and looked up at her. "You ain't mad at me?"

"My dear Sir Leapsalot." She kissed his temple. "I'm not going to blugeon a full confessional from you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. But a Dragon is a Dragon, and whoever he is, he's wounding you. I want to know who to eviscerate at the very least if he gets within two meters of your personal boundaries. Okay?"

There was a sharp flare of pain behind his sternum at those words. It was a good kind of pain, but it hurt just as much as the bad kind and for variety of different reasons. Todd buried his face in her shoulder, hugging her for all he was worth. "Okay," he barely got out above a whisper. It was all he could manage before his throat closed.

~

Sara wrapped her arms around him, twitching the itchy blanket a little more around him so he was hidden from the world.

Dragon wounds.

Fresh and raw and bleeding.

This was not the time for fear and concern. This was the time for slow-burning rage combined with near-jealous vigilance. If the unidentified Dragon ever dared come close, here, they would find themselves with some heavily determined opposition.

_I am his, and he is mine. We heal each other and support each other. We are one. Attack one, and the other will strike._ Sara thought. _Together, we are not weak, for one of us is always strong. Come. Strike if you dare._
But the Dragon didn't come.
Curse it.
Logan, however, did. "*Tallwater*..." he sighed.
"Todd's the one who ran afoul of a Dragon," said Sara. "It has to be someone legitimately on the premises... since they don't allow random adults to wander where they whist."
Logan raised an eyebrow. "It's gotta be an adult?"
"I know of few contemporaries capable of causing this level of... damage, Mr Logan. Adults have had time to hone their techniques. Ergo, this Dragon is either an adult... or the teenage equivalent of Moriarty. In the latter case, I rather think they'd stand out. Especially if they were new to the school."
Sara disentangled herself enough to coax Todd into awareness. "Come on, sweetie... Help's here. We can hide behind Mr Logan. He's better than a SWAT team."
Never letting go of her, he edged off the bed and sidled into Logan's range of protection.
_Rats. I need three arms._ "Bread and butter, sweetheart... I just need my things, okay?"
A shaky nod. He'd gone pale.
The instant her hand was free, she packed swiftly. Making sure she had everything so she wouldn't have to abandon him twice. Her hand fit neatly back into his. "See, love? Bread and butter."
He clung to her arm like a limpet.
This Dragon was a ghost from his past. A powerful one, at that, to make him do *this*.
_And when I find them, they are *atoms*. _
~

Logan made another of his famous Marge Simpson noises. "Car's out front when we're ready." Mrs. Ogg cleared her throat softly, looked at him and then at the door. Logan evaluated it and sighed.
"Another check for Chuck to write," he muttered. "But it ain't vandalism if it got in her way."
Translation: _Don't get her in trouble over this and we'll foot the bill._ Mrs. Ogg nodded, grateful she didn't have to bring it up to Sara. They were upset _enough._
Todd finally noticed the door as they passed through it. "D-Day-umn," he came back out of his shell to whistle.
"Yeah, somebody loves ya, treefrog. So this dragon... he do *that* to you?"
He meant Todd's hands. "Nn. Used soap n' water. Had ta stall."
"Huh? Why didn't ya just use water?"
Because soap made him blister and Manny would steer clear for a few days if he thought it was contagious. Todd couldn't bring himself to do it all the time though. He blinked slowly, realizing he *hadn't* just been stupid. "Huh. Guess I was tryin' to ward him off."
"Ward who off?"
"...Dragon."
Logan just about slapped his forehead in frustration. "Alright. I get it. We'll save it for another place."
No, Todd thought, worriedly. He didn't get it at all.
~

Sara finger-combed his hair, because holding his hand would hurt him and hair was G-rated. Nobody could object.
Todd was pale and shaking and self-wounded and Dragon-wounded and all she wanted to do was hold him tight and safe and never let him go.
She couldn't do a *thing* to help him get better, except be there for him.
That hurt.

Hot, sweet tea helped with the shock. A better, softer, warm blanket helped a little more. Sara liked
to think the best help was the comfy couch to snuggle on, the warm fire to snuggle by, and herself as the snuggle-ee.
They'd made a little nest of sorts. Finger food here, hot drinks there, medicated skin goo over *there*... nothing had to be got up for and fetched.
Todd's breathing evened out and his colour returned by degrees. He snuggled back after a while and almost fell asleep in her arms.
And cute though that was... she needed to *know*.
"I promised I wouldn't force you," she said. "Just - please... tell me what you can?"

~

Todd swallowed and nodded. He had promised to. Even though he hadn't *said* as much. "His name's Manny. He's my uncle." And that told her precisely squat. Keep trying. "Nn'gh. He did stuff to me that weren't beatings. But it was still bad. Sent me to the hospital once and that sent him to jail, but I couldn't testify. They wanted me to but I just couldn't. I was scared of gettin' in more trouble."
Todd's voice grew a little lower. "Y'know, when you tell yo parents stuff that happens, they get this lovely reaction of blamin' you for it. Like you asked for it or something."
Sara nodded. "Indeed. They do." Inside her mind was looking at the clues and coming up with possibilities. She didn't like any of them.
"And when you get in trouble for tellin' the truth, it becomes harder to do it. I thought the cops were gonna do all that shit Manny told me they'd do if I went. They didn't understand why I wouldn't stop panicking. Didn't look very good for Manny. Dunno how they managed without me testifyin' but they sent him to jail for quite a few years." Todd shrugged. "Pop made me write to him after. Apology letters. He was convinced I been lyin' bout stuff. Screened the hell outta the outgoing, but didn't bother with the replies. I didn't mind as much cause this time he was far away and behind bars. Could only hurt me wit words now."
He was still skirting around what Manny had actually *done* to him. But he'd said a lot - enough for Sara to get a rough sketch of things. A Dragon who hurt without any provocation, who sent a person to the hospital without violence, who had terrified a younger person specifically from going to the police... but she didn't feel as if she could say that yet. She wanted him to keep talking.
"One dragon let another keep contact with you," Sara muttered, imagining perfect crimes. If the man wasn't already dead... Todd could feel *her* thinking. "It's in the past sweetums. Don't be diggin up any graves," he tried to joke.
She hugged him tightly. "It's not in the past if it's still hurting you, darling."
"S'okay. I got over it then, I can get over it now."
"The second time is rarely any easier than the first." _And this time I'm here for you. Please let me help you get better?_

~

Perfect crimes. Dragons grouping together over prey. The image of broken bones healed over, under the macroscope.
"Manny never hit you, did he?"
A pause, during which Todd grew as still as a corpse. "Naw. Not often."
And given the clean nature of most of the breaks... which implied great strength... "Your father beat you."
Flinch. "Yeh."
"Alcoholic?"
"Yeah."
Sara knew too well that there was more than one way to hurt a person. Physical punishment was a rarity for her own childhood... but words could hurt worse than breaks and bruises. And so could other things.
Her own mother had lived in eternal fear of such 'other things' happening to Sara - even when Sara was patently unwanted. Thus, it was a horrific image that plagued her. Manny, an unknown and dark shape looming over a younger Todd... vulnerable.

"This Dragon of yours is in the school," she said. "He *has* to be. Two separate attacks hours apart? If he wasn't in some form of camouflage, he'd have been arrested anew."

"Hon. Please. Don't go diggin' it up?" Some secrets were never meant to be told. If Sara got mixed up over this, Manny would *delight* in telling her. Making her hate him.

"He's here to hurt you. It dug itself up," she insisted. "And given his past, it's illegal for him to be an employee of a school... no matter *what* the position."

"Sweetie...? Please..."

"It's a matter of *law*, darling. It's illegal for him to even *be* there... let alone to be near *you*. And since he's in a school, that puts others at risk. I'm sorry, love, but... I'm honour-bound to find out as much as I can and *nail* the fucking bastard."

Todd flinched. Staring at her. Retreating.

Sara looked at her hands. Fury colours. She turned the holowatch back on. "Yes, I *am* pissed off. At *him*. At a system that lets a man abuse innocents and refuses to seal them away in the closest place to Hell. At this whole - *thing*... and that it had to hurt you so badly you can't--" she wanted to hit something. Anything to stop the tears from springing forth. She got up and paced around the couch, fretting off the nervous energy. Sara fetched up against the mantlepiece, forehead against her forearms. The tears were coming, anyway.

"...i'm sorry..."

Sara stared at him. "How can you be sorry for your own wounds?" she said. "How can you be sorry for someone else's actions? It was never your fault."

Todd huddled under the blanket. "...was," he murmured. "...'s always m' fault."

"Never," Sara said, joining him again on the couch. "Never, ever, ever, darling. Please try to remember that. Dragons *always* try to make it your own fault. It's just not true. They *lie*. They lie abominably... and so sweetly that it turns your head inside out the longer you listen." She sniffed. Damn waterworks.

"Please don't cry?" Todd begged. "Ain't your fault, either, yo."

"I'm not blaming myself, dear. I'm crying 'cause you can't." They held each other as the sunset's colours washed through the room. Each loaning the other what comfort they could share.

~~

After school, Mr. Haufman had clocked out. He'd left his coat, his accent, and had checked out a book of basic German from the library. Then he'd gone home to his flat in the tenements. Actually, it wasn't really his flat. It was his late brother's. Who had been murdered a few years ago, along with his own sister-in-law. Manny didn't know where Todd had gone or what he'd done, but he was hoping for some answers. Answers would be nice. Then maybe he'd repay the favor for giving him a chance to turn his life around in prison. Yes, Manny had really learned his lesson. He'd learned it wasn't fun to be cornered and vulnerable and for nobody to give a flying crap enough to stop it. He'd learned, but he wasn't thrilled at being the student. When he found Todd, the boy was going to answer for it.

Finding him wasn't trouble any longer. There was a limited number of places Todd had to go. Manny already knew he had a girlfriend, and he knew her name. Get to Sara, get to Todd. And that boy, Kenny... he'd looked an awful lot like Todd, but he was too cringy for a boy who'd helped his parents get killed and made it out unharmed. Manny didn't trust police reports as far as he could spit. There was no way his brother had fallen to a street-crazy or random hoodlum. Ted Tolensky(1) was the first to grab the handgun and start shooting when there was trouble. No, it had happened on the
inside. There'd been a betrayal of some kind - Manny could smell a rat. He'd had a lot of time to think about how Todd might've grown up in prison. When he wasn't thinking thoughts that had gotten him there in the first place, he was theorizing possible mannerisms Todd might have developed from home life. His father's temper. He would talk down to women because from what he knew, they stuck around anyway. Maybe he drank or did pot when his dad was too wasted to take inventory. He'd be bitter, ugly, scarred and broken. Complete trash with no purpose and nobody left to care.

Yet, one of those was untrue. He had a girlfriend. Who seemed intelligent and saw right through his German act. Who had a chest as flat as a guy's back. Manny hadn't realized she was a girl until he called roll. Would the Todd he imagined go after a girl smarter and less pretty than his mom? The beauty he could understand Todd having to settle for, but the broad's brains threw him off. Smart women didn't stick around with men who treated them wrong. They thought they were better than men and usually turned lesbian.(2)

But he'd figure it out. He had to. Something had torn apart his family, sad and pathetic though it was it had been the only thing Manny knew to return to. It had been Todd's fault. He was going to find out how and make him pay.

(1) Ted Tolensky sounded like a good name for Todd's father. Cause I forgot Papa Tolensky's name if it's been mentioned. @.@; If it has, just ignore the Ted.
(2) God, I hate men with mindsights like that. --; I know a few too many.

Eventually, they had fallen asleep in each other's embrace on the couch. Logan apparently didn't mind, since nobody ever got into trouble while sleeping. And even if they did, the point was they wouldn't be awake to enjoy it. That and the kids looked like they needed it. Naturally, When Logan discovered them thus, he had the obligatory heart attack (fortunately a manly silent one that Todd and Sara wouldn't wake to) and sniffed the air for evidence. There had been no evidence of anyone having fun, so Logan had draped a blanket over them both and walked out again. He didn't go too far.

Todd was dreaming. Trapped in the exhausted sleep that keeps one firmly in place for whatever is to come. Eventually the dream got deep enough to spin a plot. People always say that when things in dreams defy all reason, they become unafraid because they know it's a dream and that it isn't real. Knowing what's real and what's a dream isn't nearly as easy as some people tend to convince themselves after they've woken up screaming.

Todd was currently being dissected in a classroom. There was no blood, no real wounds, but there was pain and things were opening. Things he didn't want anyone seeing. Every slice, every incision made and something leaked out of it. He couldn't hear the commentary, but he could see their faces. All the faces, all except the one holding the knife, making the cuts. There was no noise other than the ones memories made. Nobody laughed or jeered, nobody even smirked. They just watched. But there was one face that held an expression Todd couldn't stand. More specifically, he couldn't stand it on her.

Sara was over him, dabbing at the cuts, trying to help. Everytime she touched a slit in the flesh, Todd felt her suddenly know things. And the more she knew, the more pitying that expression became. He yelped and he tried to move away from her, but no matter what he tried he couldn't move from the table, from the knife, and out of Sara's eyesight. Todd snapped back to himself in the darkness, panting and shivering. His eyes were wet as he laid curled in Sara's arms. Todd listened as her breath drew in and out in the even measure of deep sleep. Good, he hadn't woken her. Still shuddering, Todd snuggled back down beside her.

He couldn't have known, but at the moment, Sara was in a deep dream of her own in which she was looking for her father. She was on the dock, waving at him as he sailed in toward her on a small boatcraft. Everytime it came close, waves batted it back into the ocean. Sara was calling for him,
holding a candle in the sputtering wind and trying to shield it. She wanted her father here. It had been
too damn long a vigil. The intensity of her dream somehow kept the normally insomnia-suffering
Chameleon locked under thick layers of sleep.

For Todd, this was just fine. He'd rather she not wake to see him cry. _Stupid, yo. Cause you still
hurtin' bout something that happened, she's gotta suffer tryin' t'make it better. The fuck you kiddin,
a'nt nobody should stick around for that shit._ He buried his face against her arms, recoiling from the
truth of his own inner voice. _Ain't worth it. You ain't worth it. She'd just pity you anyway._ His
eyes stung and he had to try very hard to keep hitching breaths from turning into sobbing. The
pressure built up behind them an became nearly unbearable. A few moments later and Todd realized
he was silently but efficiently getting Sara's shirt all wet. _Fuck, you idiot! She gonna wake up from
that!_ It didn't make him stop.

_ PATHETIC._ No matter what he tried, he couldn't stop his thoughts now. _You ain't worth shit. You
can't even trust her. Manny's gonna keep on hurting you, and yo gonna keep freakin' out and she's
gonna go nuts cause you can't fight yo own battles. Worthless._
The word's continued on like that, until something intervened. It was a peculiar sensation; akin to a
soft white arm sweeping the next wave of insults away as if they were papers on a tabletop. There
was a new voice to replace the other, more sardonic version of his own. _You are worthwhile,_ she
whispered. Todd couldn't really hear it, but he could feel the love from those words sweep through
his mind like fingers combing his hair. Fingers he didn't mind touching him - that hadn't ever tried to
hurt him all her life. _I thought so. I thought so the moment you were put in my arms. You were
worth so much to me._ Cool sensation on his skin - a kiss? Todd knew that voice. He ached for it
just as much as he was comforted by it. Never in all his life had he heard her memory so clearly in
his mind. He'd just been hearing the bad things. _She sees you as her match, Todd. Ain't no pity
there, not ever pity. I know there isn't. You treat her right, honey. She loves you._
His tears were drying on his face, though he felt like he had more. _I know, Mom,_ he thought back
to her. A final flare of rememberance - the scent of her perfume and a snippet of a sung lullaby, and
she was gone. Todd lay awake in the darkness, holding Sara close as she held him. _I love her too._

"But are you sure it's not... you know, intruding?"
"Lieber, if it's intruding, Todd has the freedom to flip me the bird. It's just an offer. He needs someone
to talk to. Someone who isn't Sara."
Amanda frowned a little, walking beside him through the dark hall. She hadn't really questioned him
when he tapped on her window, thinking he just wanted to watch the stars with her for an hour out
of the night. She could read Kurt's worry about Todd to the point where some of it was rubbing off
on her. It was good that Todd and Sara had found each other, and seeing them together reminded her
of her own happiness with Kurt. But sometimes she couldn't help but be concerned that Kurt got a
little too worried with others' problems. Especially if he thought he could do help. It was something
he could get (and had gotten) stung by.
It wasn't that she didn't want Kurt to help. Amanda was fretting more that Todd would take things
the wrong way and explode in anger at Kurt. He was right though. Todd did need someone.
"I take it you did your behavior-reading thing again?" she asked Kurt as they rounded a corner. He
remained quiet, but Amanda saw his expression turn sheepish. "What did you find that he can't spill
his guts to Sara about?"
"I might be wrong of course. But trust me, liebe, there are some things a guy just doesn't want his girl
to know."
"You mean when girls don't want their guys to know certain things about monthly woes?" Amanda
smirked.
Kurt rolled his eyes, but he smiled. "Let's leave that one right where it lies. It's close enough." He
stopped in front of the place Sara and Todd were sleeping and listened to the breathing. "Well, one of them's asleep." Not many people were up this early, but it was the only time Kurt would be able to talk to Todd in private without risk of eavesdropping. He took a slight breath and looked at Amanda. She nodded, knowing her task. Kurt pushed the door a little and took a step in. "Allo?" he called softly, not wanting to startle anyone.

There was movement on the couch and a tousled frog-boy sat up, blinking over the back of the sofa to peer at Kurt. "What?" he rasped, sounding confused. Kurt took a cautious step forward. "Sara still asleep?" the elf asked casually, keeping his voice low.

Todd turned to look down for a moment and then nodded. "Yeah. Surprisingly. Guess I been too high maintenance."

Kurt frowned a little at Todd's tone. "You want something to eat?"

Todd was still staring at Sara's face. It looked a bit pale, bluish because of her scales but a lighter shade. And that expression. Was she dreaming? Todd clambered off her and flushed when he saw how wet her shirt had gotten. He tugged a blanket over her and smoothed down the edges around her, stealthy as a cat so as not to wake her.

He still hadn't answered Kurt's question. "Drink?" Kurt ventured.

Todd had the makings of a beautiful dehydration headache. "Sure," he said. "I could use a glass of water. Bet she could too." He got up carefully and walked around the couch. Kurt was able to take in the way he walked, the hunch of his shoulders and the eyes glued to the floor. Todd looked as drained as he had when Mystique still ran things. Dragon-scarred. Kurt offered a smile to the boy as he passed, which Todd neither recognized or responded to. Definitely dragon-scarred. He exchanged a glance with Amanda who nodded and walked into the room to sit with Sara. She'd read there, just so Sara would know where Todd was when she woke up.

Todd was a bit more responsive when he'd had his third glass of water. Judging by the red about his eyes, which Todd probably wasn't aware of yet, he was going to need plenty more. Kurt was in the process of making some coffee. "So... I take it you're declaring holiday from school today?"

"Yeah," Todd muttered. "Wouldn't you if some weird creep you knew tried starting up shit again?"

Kurt blinked. Todd didn't keep things very close to the vest in the early scrambled hours. "That teacher?"

Todd realized his mistake mid-gulp. He grimaced as he swallowed then thumped the glass on the table, sloshing water on his shirt. "Damn. I shouldn't talk to anybody til I've had coffee."

He brought up the dry end of his shirt and tried to mop the water up. Kurt came over with a towel. "Here." He dried the table with a few swipes and tossed the towel to land beside the sink. He sat down across from Todd. "Probably a good idea to stay home for today. But you know, you can't do it forever."

"Wanna bet?"

"You'd let Sara go to school alone with said creep?"

Todd looked up sharply. He hadn't thought of that. "Dude, no. He... he's harmless now."

Kurt looked pointedly at Todd's blistered hands. "Doesn't seem harmless."

He crossed his arms with an exasperated huff, hiding his hands from Kurt's view. "It's me he wants to mess with."

"If that's so, he's not going to just stay at school and wait for you to show up again."

"Look fuzzy, he don't even know who I am. He thinks my name is Kenny!"

"When you stop showing up to school he'll figure it out, man."

Todd groaned in frustration, mostly because Kurt had a point. Several of them. Damn him. "So that means what, I have to go to school and pretend everything's okay?"

"Nein." Kurt took a breath. "It's not easy for me to suggest this, because it's the last thing I'd do if I were in your place. But you have to go to the --"

"What, Principal Kelly? I have to go blabbing everything to the counselor maybe? Or to Xavier? Forget it man! That's more humiliation than I need. I can deal with the creep, I got kickin' powers! He comes one step too close to me or Sara or anybody else, and I'll kick him through the wall! And who
are you to act like you'd know what it'd be like in my place?! Huh? How the fuck would you know?!

Kurt looked at him steadily, keeping eye contact. Todd glared back for a few moments. Then realization hit him, hard. He sat down slowly, still staring at Kurt. "Fuckin' Christ. You know what this is all about, don't you?" Todd asked weakly. "You know what he did...?"

"...I have a pretty good idea."

The silence was awkward and long. Kurt waited it out patiently while Todd wavered between embarrassment, guilt, and fear.

"I know you had dragons too, dawg. But I didn't know any of yo dragons did that kinda shit," he managed finally.

"I didn't always have the inducer," Kurt answered softly. "Certain people took an interest."

"Lemme guess. They wanted something exotic?" The frog-boy muttered.

Kurt shrugged and let the gesture vaguely affirm it. "And you?"

"Well, not really. I'm happy to say that was all before the six-foot tongue developed," Todd said darkly. He'd kept his mouth clean. Manny'd been more interested doing things to him than the other way around. As it was, Todd had bitten Manny's hands more than a few times. No punishment had ever quite managed to beat that reflex out of him. It was therefore a matter of importance to keep sensitive anatomy well out of range of the boy's teeth.

"So... so knowin' all that, you must know that it's gonna be hell if I go to anyone. Especially Kelly. What if he don't believe me?"

"He'll believe you if he can be bothered into doing a background check."

"And if he can't be bothered?"

Kurt grinned without humor. "Trust me. He'll be bothered."

Sara couldn't feel the comforting weight on her any longer, yet her body still felt as heavy and wooden as a log. She had a headache starting and part of her shirt was damp. Sara blinked at it, and noticed the lack of Todd. She sat up too soon and the headache pounced. "Ooogh. Todd?" she called, leaning back slower than she'd sat up. A glass of cold water was pressed into her hand. Sara's eyes refocused onto a smiling black girl's face. "Hey. Todd's in the kitchen. Didn't think you'd wake so soon."

"Todd's in the kitchen?" Sara drank the water and started to return to herself a little. The armchair across from the couch was indented and there was a book overturned across the cushion. A small light was on, filling the room with a rosy orange tint. "Is he okay?" she asked, more awake.

"He should be. Kurt's with him. I haven't heard any explosions yet. I think they might be cooking breakfast." Amanda sniffed the air. "There's the coffee at least."

Sara could smell it too. She took another sip of her water, shaken by the unfamiliarity of waking this far before sunlight. The sky outside was still dark, just barely turning a lighter purple around the edges. Dawn and the sun was far from coming to her aid. "I didn't finish my dream," Sara muttered. She knew she'd had one too, about her father. She couldn't yet remember all of it. Dreams were so frustrating when they turned smoky. She took another few gulps from the water glass.

"So... you're here. You've been waiting for a while. How long ago did Kurt kidnap my poor boyfriend for guy-talk?"

Amanda chuckled. "Todd was already awake. Didn't look like he got much sleep."

Sara looked down at the damp side of her shirt. It no longer looked damp on the surface, but she could feel the difference close to her skin. "The poor dear." She also noticed how Todd had tucked the blanket around her, so carefully to keep her warm. "I should probably go help with breakfast then."

"Let the men cook," Amanda said, curling back onto her chair. "I heard you were banned from cooking anyway on account of making Kitty gain pounds. And Kurt owes you breakfast the way he's been ranting and raving over your porridge."

Sara smirked. "At least gaining weight is the only fault they find with my cooking."

"It keeps Kurt from going to Gut Bomb every morning. I know the boy needs calories, but he needs
Amanda put her legs over the arm of the chair and fiddled pointlessly with the book pages. "Hey. You don't think it's rude of us, do you? Coming in like this?"
Sara read a worry in Amanda that had been trying not to blossom all night. She smiled reassuringly. "If it helps Todd in any way, it's more than welcome."

---

The little girl spasmed violently on the screen, something that could be interpreted - in a charitable light - as "help me" escaped her lips in an ugly garble. She toppled, helpless to stop herself, headfirst into the tile.
The crack was clearly audible.
And it was also obvious that Mrs Adrien was well within flinch-reach.
The woman could have easily caught her daughter.
She didn't do a damn thing.
"Why do you keep watching that, Roxy[1]?" said Danoz. "The statute of limitations is over. There's nothing we can do about it."
"If it was up to me, I'd give that woman a whole new religious experience[2]," she growled. "How can human beings *do* things like this? That's her *daughter*. Her only child... and she betrayed her."

"My daughter..." Jaquelline sobbed. "My only little baby... she betrayed meeeeee..."
The assembled chorus of mother and sisters broke out in sympathetic cooing and hallmark platitudes that, put together, resembled nothing so much as a henhouse crossed with the tide. The clucking rose and fell in volume and tone, washing her over with healing attention.
Love.
How she needed it, now.
Sam was incommunicado, and had been for a subjective age. He'd surely call if he was coming home. In the meantime, Jaquelline had the spotlight of her family.
"That girl's been nothing but trouble," announced Mom. "I keep telling you that you should have taken her in for surgery as soon as you could. If she'd have stayed pretty, then there would have been nothing to worry about." A wash of agreement. "She was nothing but trouble, period," agreed Jaquelline. "Upsetting my nerves, ruining my chances of giving Sam an heir... and those *things* she insisted on doing. It's all too much for a mother to bear!" With a well-timed burst of tears, Jaquelline had all the hugs and sympathy that she could need.
Together, they started in on Sara's accumulated crimes.

Bayville was on the horizon.
If he squinted, he could see the familiar shape of the city on the edge of perception... so long as he was on the rise of a hill.
Almost home.
He felt like he could fly there, right now. But, alas, it was a case of 'so close, and yet so far'. He still had most of the day to actually *get* there.
But soon... *soon*, he could comfort his poor, lonely, abandoned baby.

"Sun is shinin' in the sky... There ain't a cloud in sight," she sang. "It's stopped rainin'... ev'rybody's in a play, And don't you know... It's a beautiful new day hey,hey..."
"That does it," said Jean, panting behind them. "I'm'a catch her up and *strangle* her..."
"What'cha complainin' fo'?" panted Todd. "We slept onna couch, yo."
"I know! And I couldn't sleep for waiting for her to wake me up!"
Sara was still in Bliss Land. Her heart was flying and she'd decided that there was never any good reason to spoil a fantastic mood. "Runnin' down the avenue... See how the sun shines brightly... in the city. On the streets where once was pity... Mister blue - sky is living here today hey, hey!"
Todd joined her at the chorus.
Life was currently wonderful.
It was very nice to live in the Now... so long as Now was nice.

[1] Remember this dangling plotline?
[2] I loved that episode of _Dead Like Me_

---

One of the great things about being a teacher was the right to confiscate. It hadn't taken Manny long to hear about Sara's breakdown or the fact that several people had videos of it. Sara Adrien had a thing going with Todd. The boy would've done either of two things- run from the scene, or stuck around and watched her freak. But if it were the former, Manny would have a better sense of who she was. Her weaknesses, her friends...
He knew Todd wouldn't risk his neck if he captured Sara. But then, women were weak. If he snared someone else close to her, she'd have no trouble ratting out her boyfriend. Manny was counting on it. He dumped his attache case on the table and pulled out a couple phones. The first one only had Sara's shirt tearing. It spent the rest of the scene trying to zoom in on her breast. Non-helpful. Manny put it back in the case. The second was a little more promising - showed the scene with Graydon.
Manny chuckled. Now that was both sick AND funny.
So, Todd had a thing for girls who looked like boys? Hmm. Sadly, the video cut off after somebody ran to her. The somebody in question happened to block the camera as he/she ran and the owner of the cell phone turned tail and retreated with the rest of the student body.
But one other pster had captured something more, from a different angle. A boy held on to her, screamed for help. Manny recognized the boy's face. An out-of-focus body eclipsed the camera for a second and he saw Kenny holding on to Sara's shoulders. She eventually burst into tears. Kenny was comforting her, rocking her gently. Awww. Kenny had a *crush*. And from the way Sara was holding on to him, obviously they were close friends. Close enough friends that Kenny would stand back if he thought Sara was happy with Todd. And he'd wait, probably for years. Pity.
Manny smirked and paused the screen with Kenny holding on to Sara. He wasn't mistaken. There was devotion there. Uncertainty. He was holding on to this girl - who'd just laid out Graydon and others - as if she would break. Anyone else with an ounce of sense would go far away and watch from a healthy distance - like Todd had obviously been. Manny was a little disappointed the camera hadn't captured the boy, but not surprised.
And not *too* disappointed. He did, after all, have his target now.

Even Logan had just about had it with the cheerfulness. Excercises weren't supposed to be *cheerful*. Now Sara had the *elf* singing too. Something vaguely Canadian, no less.[1]
"Ohhh, History is made by stupid people! Clever people wouldn't even tryyyyy! If you wanna place in the history books, then do something dumb before you diiiiie!"
"Tallyhoooo!" Todd sang.
"Tallyhoooo!" Sara echoed.
"Our king and country's honor we will saaave! Tallyho! Tallyho! We're marching into hist'ry and the graaaave!"
"*Someone* is like, marching into their graves," growled Kitty.
Three more laps and they were done for the day. Logan tugged Todd aside while Sara went for
water. "Treefrog, you up for helping me with Eileen today?" he asked. Todd felt a sudden squirm in his gut. Logan probably wanted to have a *talk*.

"Uhhhr..."

Logan sighed. "Yah don't have ta talk right now if you don't want to. Work it out first. Think about things."

Todd looked down. "I don't *want* to think about things. That's the problem, yo."

"Yeah. It *is* a problem." He rubbed the back of his neck. "But you're gonna be thinking about it anyway, aren't ya? Might as well be while yer busy."

Instead of sitting alone in the dark. Yeah. Todd could see the sense in that. And Logan didn't need to say he wouldn't pressure Todd to talk. He didn't have to.

Todd nodded. "Kay. I'll work with you after school today."

Logan looked surprised. "After school? Thought you were taking the day off."

"Ain't no way I'm letting Sara go to school alone." He shook his head firmly. "Hiding ain't the answer."

"Alright. But that goes for askin' for help too, Treefrog."

The boy flushed. "Yeah. I already been told. Seeya after school?"

Logan nodded and the boy rejoined Sara for his own turn at the water-fountain. He sighed again.

And he'd thought it was hard to get the *Elf* to open up about things.

[1] Arrogant Worms - History is Made By Stupid People. Hysterical song. XD Y'all should try it.

~

"So... what's up?" said Kurt.

"What do you mean, what's up?" Sara blinked at the blue mutant in her doorway. This sort of thing always had to happen when she was applying eyeliner. She went back to pulling faces and manipulating the pencil.

"I *mean*, there was all sorts of nastiness, yesterday; and this morning, you're little miss happy feet," his reflection lashed its tail. Agitated. "What's with the good mood?"

"Maybe I'm coming down with a reverse virus[1]," she shrugged. More faces and lipstick. "I can't explain it. I just feel so... *fantastic*. Something brilliant's going to happen. I can feel it." She pressed her lips together and blotted. Lovely. Or at least, her hologram looked almost lovely. A little bling wouldn't hurt.

"Not that I mind the good mood," he said. "I was just wondering."

"Just stop me if I break out in show tunes."

"Done and done."

"...Curtain up! Light the lights," Sara opened her locker. No rat, but someone had broken in and left a posy. "We got nothing to hit but the heights! I can tell, wait and see..."

"*Whoah*."

"There's the--" Sara realised what she was doing and stopped, looking to find the stunned fellow. She grinned even wider. "Freddy! How's the new job treating you?"

He blushed. "Aw. Y'know. Can't complain."

"Not until the second week, anyway."

"What happened to you? You're all... fancified."

She shrugged. "I dunno. I just feel... marvy. Guten morgen Herr Haufmann. Coment ca va?"

"Zat was French," he grumped.

"Hoe bent u?[2]"

Freddy snorted behind his hand. Possibly because of the combination of 'hoe' and 'bent' in the same sentence.

"I refuse to comment," he growled, and struggled upstream against the mob.
"Isn't his quote-unquote accent a gas?" Sara chirped. "I'm going to hum the theme from _Hogan's Heroes_ under my breath when he isn't looking, today. See if he gets worse."
"Sara..." Freddy chided. "You really shouldn't experiment on people."
She closed her locker, giving Freddy the posy. "Here. Surprise someone." She shouldered her backpack. "Honestly, Freddy, my dear... some people truly deserve to be experimented on. Aside from a few forged documents, Herr Haufmann doesn't exist. That means that, whoever he really is, he's up to something." She shrugged. "If I can't be a wrench in his works, I can at least be a fly in his ointment, no?"

[1] Of course Sara watches _Red Dwarf_, so she knows about things like the "luck virus" and so forth.
[2] Apparently, most Germans can understand Dutch, and vice versa. Sara just asked him how he was.

~~

Freddy had History first period and on the way there he carefully stuffed the posy in his overall pocket. He didn't want to crumple anything from Sara, in case she wanted it back. He stopped two doors down from his classroom and looked at his shoes. There were wet books and a puddle on the floor and a girl was muttering angrily to herself as she looked around for scattered belongings. She too was dripping.

"Uh, hey," He said and carefully peeled a dog-eared Economy text off the ground. "What happened?"
"Brainless soriety-wannabe brats, that's what happened," the girl said, teeth chattering. She looked cold, wet, and angry. "Shoved me in the frickin' shower and put my bag in another shower so everything's soaked, then I was late to class cause I tried to dry off and I was still wet so I slipped..." Her voice was sounding strangled. Harley wiped at her face angrily, took the book from Fred and stuffed it in a still-sopping backpack. "Today sucks!" she choke out, shoulders slumping. Fred stood there and fished around in his pockets for a hanky. Or something.

"Hey, don't feel bad, okay?" He murmured, coming up with nothing. "It's just high-school. Lotsa bad things happen to nice people in highschool." Fred's voice was sympathetic and endearingly befuddled as he thought of a way to cheer the girl up. He knew what it was like being big. He'd heard from Sara about extent of pressure on girls to be skinny and slim. It was awfully sad. Especially since most big girls couldn't pound their tormentors into the mat like Fred could.
"I'm not even human by their standards!" Harley spat, wiping at her face again. "Not unless I miraculously drop a hundred pounds or something. Then I'll graduate to classroom geek." Her voice broke but she caught herself before sobbing and swallowed. "Sorry, I... I'm just having a bad day." She was still sniffling a little and her voice sounded slightly watery when she spoke. But her chin was up. Fred had to admire that more than anything.

"I know how it is. It's okay. People say I'm a good listener. So maybe if your day doesn't get better, you can talk to me. Or somethin'."
Harley glanced at him, blinking through her dripping hair. "Um. Thanks. Look, I'm late. Oh heck with it, I have to dry off - I can't go to class like this anyway. Maybe I'll see you at lunch?"
"Sure. Uh... here." Fred took out the posy which already looked a bit wilted. Harley was again looking shell-shocked, so he stuck it in her hair for her.
She touched it, suddenly blushing, and then beamed. "Thanks. S-See you later."
Fred was late to class, but if the teacher said anything about it, he was smiling too hard to care.

The trouble with substitute teachers was that you didn't ever know what class they'd be taking over at short notice. Todd hadn't figured Manny to be an English major - not with his off-German accent especially, so he'd started on to English Literature first period. Pietro was in his face before he reached the corridor.
"SoToddyoverflowoneawhile. When you coming back to the boarding house? Just wanted to know
so I can have all your CDs back in place."
"The fuck you been touchin my CDs for?" Todd growled pointlessly. Pietro touched other people's
belongings because he could. "Thought you didn't wear slime, Tro," he added, looking pointedly at
Pietro's designer shirt.
"Don't even think about it, Toady!" Pietro spat, though he was now a foot farther away than he had
been last second and staring at Todd warily.
"We had a deal, yo. You stay out of my room and I stay out of yours. Did it slip your mind?" Todd
snapped.
"And what are you gonna do about it if it di-- Hi, Mr. Haufmann." Pietro straightened innocently
while looking over Todd's shoulder. Todd froze, blood leaving his face. A hand fell on his shoulder
and his stomach dropped. How much had Manny heard? Had he heard Pietro calling him by his
name?
"I do hope you boys aren't fighting in zee halls," Mr. Haufmann glared. "That would be a detention,
I zink."
"Not at all, sir." Pietro breezed, then gave Todd an odd look, noting his expression. He'd gone stiff
as a board.
"Well, then off to class with you two." Mr. Haufmann said cheerily, whacking Todd on the back. He
nearly fell over. He wish he hadn't - Manny steadied him. "What class do you have next?"
"Art," Todd managed to croak.
"Oh well. I'll catch you later, dear boy." Mr. Haufmann smirked, which sent Todd's stomach to
churning ice, and walked off. Todd glanced at the book in his hand. It was the same English
Literature textbook currently in his backpack. Fuck. Never too late to skip first period. Shit, if Manny
had called roll in there while Todd was seated...
Pietro was waving his hand in front of Todd's face. "Hellooooo?"
"Fuck off, P." He looked like he meant it though he sounded shaken. Pietro shrugged and sped off.
Todd hurried on to the cafeteria, nauseous and trembling. Maybe he should take Kurt and Sara's
advice. Tell someone. He didn't know how much longer he could live like this.
~
Unfortunately for Todd, Sara was in Study Hall. Interesting. Today's package included a handwritten puzzle from the good Professor[1]. She saved it for last, ticking her way through the printed work in record time.

Aha. Just as she suspected. A trick question from a college-level math board. One the Big Kids were having trouble with, no doubt. Sara hummed to herself as she worked. This bit went there... this part cancelled out... if you used one scientist *here*, it went one way, and another, the other. Sara traced the divergent paths. Alternate realities. If things went differently, one way or another... Sara made a note in the margin, _What with mathematical proof, was there any doubt to the existence of alternate realities?_

The bell rang. For the first time in her history in the advanced classes, her work was unfinished. Was she slipping? Was this an indicator of a deficiency somewhere? And yet, the man had *said* to take her time.

Was it another test? How long were the adults expected to take on it?

In this panicked haze, she made her way to Art.

Todd was looking similarly shellshocked. "Bad vibes, dear?"

"Guten Morgen."

Him again. Sara began her experiment, humming the theme from _Hogan's Heroes_ just on the edge of hearing.

[1] Too lazy to dig through my own archives to see who was in charge of Sara's correspondance courses.

His face went blank as he snapped his gaze to the front of the class. Fuck. Was the man *stalking* him? Manny looked at him, surprised to see him there but seemed to recover. He smiled at Todd and began the morning preamble about why the art teacher was out for the day, due to family business. Any second he was going to take roll. Todd's fingers curled under the desk. He couldn't leave. If he left and if 'Todd Tolensky' was the only one absent, he was fucked. If he stayed and 'Kenny Cartman' didn't come up on the roll and Todd Tolensky did, he was fucked. There was nothing he could do but pray that by being in class, Manny wouldn't be able to do a thing. He shot Sara a desperate look.

"Allright then, Herr Cartman?"

Jesus F-- "Yah," Todd said shortly, looking down at his desk. Several students looked at him in confusion. He prayed God to keep their mouths shut. Not that it would matter.

"I thought you were in class first period?"

"Er, I didn't feel well earlier. And my next was free. So I'm just sittin' in this one. Done it before - Mrs. D said it was allright." And he'd just explained why Kenny Cartman wouldn't come up on this period's roll. Wahey. So long as nobody else reacted when he didn't say 'here' to Todd Tolensky.

"Ah."

Students were muttering to each other, wondering where Tolensky suddenly got the cajones to tell a teacher he'd skipped first period. Which was a funny thing - at the moment Todd couldn't give less of a shit about detention. But Manny hadn't even graduated to highschool let alone get a teaching degree, so he didn't know the new rules. He shrugged and looked in his shoulderbag for the attendance roll. Todd locked eyes with Sara. Help, he pleaded.

He took a majority of the roll in a sort of zen fog. Sara Adrien was the girl Todd was involved with,
and she was here. Today would be something of an opportunity to observe her and solve the puzzle of the so-far invisible Toad.

"Todd Tolensky."

"He's here," said Sara. "In my heart."
The class laughed.

"Very amusing," he growled. "Why is he not here?"

"I know nothing," said Sara. "Nothing."

More titters.

Manny sighed. "Where *is* he?"

"My love doth follow in my shadow," she recited, "For he is everywhere with me. My love doth speak in the wind--"

Someone made a fart noise.

"Thankyou... --for every word he whispers follows me. My love doth--"

"Thank* you, Fraulein," he snarled. "That is more than *enough*. Let us get on with this, nein?"

Manny read from the appropriate text, but something mosquito-esque was tweaking his attention. He turned to draw a diagram and, as he did so, the something took shape.

...hum, hum, hum, hum hm-hm-hm humhumhum... hm-hm-hm-hm humhumhum... he looked back at the class and a sea of innocent faces.

...hum, hum, hum, hum hm-hm-hm-hm-hum... hm-hm-hm-hm-hummmmm...

Evidently, this hummer was a master or mistress of circular breathing. He couldn't pick up who was doing it from their breathing patterns.

"Who is humming?" he demanded.

Half the class erupted with, "I know *nothing*!" and fell into fits. Even the nervous Mr Cartman managed a watery smile.

Thereafter, various episodes of humming erupted sporadically about the classroom. Where one stopped, another would start. Always on the edge of hearing. In one turn, it was the theme from _Hogan's Heroes_, in another, it was the _Great Escape_. He'd turn around twice and someone else would be humming music from _Chicken Run_, of all things.

It was driving him slowly insane.

"You are supposed to be vorking," he snapped. "Humming is not vorking."

"Jawohl, herr commandant," said an anonymous wag.

The bell rang and he fled for the safety of the halls.

Sara burst out laughing the instant 'Herr Haufmann' left the room. "That was almost karmic," she chirped. "Don't you just adore the collective subconscious?"

Todd was shaking like a leaf.

"Dear? Are you all right?"

~

That had been way too fucking close. Todd gulped a few times and nodded to Sara's question. It was decided. He was going to tell Principal Kelly about this. There wasn't time to go through the counselor - all he'd need to tell Kelly anyway was that Manny had broken parole and that Todd recognized him - he was related to Todd after all. Surely it should be enough for Kelly to call the police in on his ass? But then again, this was Kelly.

Todd couldn't tell Sara. Not because she didn't have the right to know - quite the opposite in fact. But if she did know, and if Haufmann turned Todd into another nervous wreck, Sara might do something that got herself in trouble. To everyone else, Manny was still Mr. Haufmann. To Kelly, Mr. Haufmann was the teacher he'd hired and Kelly was the last to admit he'd made a mistake.

That left the Professor. Maybe Xavier could straighten this out. And Todd could imagine explaining what had happened to Xavier a lot better than he could imagine himself explaining to Kelly. Kelly would ask questions. Kelly would push for too much information, while Xavier would allow Todd
to be vague and come up with the right conclusions. Right. Xavier it was.
Todd suddenly realized he'd been thinking of all this and that the bell had rung. His hands were still clenched around the edge of the desk and Sara was gently prising them off. She looked at him and he raised his head to meet her gaze. "Ran into him in the hall," was all Todd was able to get out by way of explanation. It wasn't a lie, technically, neither was it the whole truth. He felt awful, but he didn't want Sara getting in trouble on his account.
"Ah," Sara said. It was all she said. Todd didn't know if she'd figured it out or if she was mad at him, which was ridiculous for all that her hands were gentle as she lifted him to his feet. She didn't pry. Todd was grateful.
"So how'd your morning go?" he asked, not letting go of her hands.

~

"He makes you nervous," said Sara. "I know the feeling." She kissed his forehead and wrapped her arms around him. "False identity, blatant lying... the man could be up to *anything*. Is nobody else properly paranoid in this entire school? Or does Kelly just check for police priors and take a resume at face value?"
Todd clung to her like the proverbial drowning man, making a non-commital murmur.
"C'mon, sweetie. We have to get out of here before we get nabbed for loitering."
He laughed at that. It was the ghost of a laugh on a bad day, but at least it was a laugh.
Next up, Advanced English and the joys of studying Common Language Shakespeare. _Ugh_. Shakespeare Lite... She stayed linked with Todd, escorting him to his locker, then allowing him to accompany her to hers, and finally choosing seats together in class.
Only then did she abandon him to buttonhole their teacher.
"Are you familiar with a Mr Haufmann?" she asked.
"Er... vaguely. He's been asking a lot of questions about Mr Tolensky."
"Do us both a favour and don't give him many answers?"
"Ha! He already struck me as having an unhealthy interest. There's something drastically wrong with that man."
"Hmp. Starting with his identity," Sara muttered. A hovering shadow near the door caught her attention. Adult height. Weaving to and fro as if trying to spot something. Now. How to spot him without giving away her magic skin...
Sara turned back to her desk and 'noticed' him. "Herr Haufmann! If you keep following me around like this I might expect a valentines card. Too bad I'm already taken, sir. And not precisely legal..."
The in-flowing hordes laughed and 'Haufmann' turned pink and stormed away.
"Goodnight! Goodnight! Parting is such sweet sorrow," she mocked, then slumped into her seat.
"Get thee to a nunnery," she muttered. Only once they were safe did she reach over and pat Todd's hand.
He was afraid. Of Haufmann or someone just like him... and Haufman had an 'unhealthy interest' in Todd Tolensky. Was he a predator?
"Sara?"
"Hm?" She startled. "There if I grow, The harvest is your own."
"That's not the text we're reading, and it's not the answer."
"I'm sorry, my mind was elsewhere."
"What were the witches prophesying?"
"We're only up to the witches?" Laughter. "Okay. Banquo is going to be the father of a king, and Macbeth will be king, but also lord of Crawdor - despite the fact that the Thane of Crawdor is still alive at this point in the story."
"That's better... And what device is Shakespeare using in this particular scene?"
"Foreshadowing with a mallet?"
More laughter. She was getting good at this 'funny' thing.
Todd was laughing along with the class soon enough as Sara described the sibling rivalry between Thane and Macbeth. The teacher eventually sobered the students by explaining the assignment for the weekend, and it was class reading on the new chapter until the bell rang. Joy. Another class. Next it was biology - Todd had that one without Sara. He wondered if he should skip it. Manny had showed up to every class he was enrolled in so far, asking questions. Todd swallowed. Definitely skip. Just like old times.

"What do you have next, yo?" He asked Sara while students got their things ready.

"Math," Sara sighed. "Which is right next to your Biology class."

"Yo, mind if I check to see who the teacher is first? Until I see if Manny comes or goes?"

"You don't have to ask," Sara smiled, and kissed him gently on the cheek. Feeling better, Todd walked with her down the hall. Harley waved at them from her locker, sharing Biology with Todd. She had a posy in her hair.

"Nice flower," Todd commented. Sara recognized it and was smiling instantly. Harley was tucking hair behind the blossom carefully as she spoke. "Fred gave it to me. He is such a sweetheart. Everyone says he's a bully, you know. Absolute rubbish, I'm joining him for lunch. Oooh, more good news. We *don't* have a pop quiz today, I heard."

"Heh. Tuesday pop-quiz." Todd smirked. It wasn't a really a pop quiz if it came faithfully once a week on the same day, but amazingly most students failed them anyway. All one had to do was take notes at the end of class when Mr. D outlined everything he'd rambled on about. Todd thought of something. Maybe Harley could help. "Ah, Harley - I'm going to sit in with Sara for just a little bit. Tryin' to avoid one of the teachers."

"Mr. Haufmann?" Harley asked. Todd winced. She noticed. "He's been asking students about you, I heard. Jeez, one would think he's your long lost uncle or something the way he's been going on."

Todd winced again.

"Right. Can you um, sneak out for water at some point, come next door and tell me if he's subbing Biology? Or if he visits?"

"Wow. Creep factor?"

"Times ten, yo."

~

Manny, was it? Sara mused. She waved a cheery 'hello' to Jean as she sat with Todd.

_What's he doing here?_

_Stalker trouble,_ Sara 'replied'. _'Herr Haufmann' - if that's his real name - is getting creepy-weird about asking after Todd Tolensky. So my friend here is Kenny Cartman._

_Aha. Riiiiggghht._

_Has anything about a 'Manny' turned up anywhere? I know that isn't Haufmann's alleged first name._

_Sorry. All I'm getting on the subject is low-grade terror from Todd._

_I *meant*, do you remember reading anything in the papers?_

"Miss Adrien?"

Sara looked at the board. "X plus Y equals seventy-nine point three plus or minus two point four three eight recurring."

Again, the math teacher winced. "Can we please see how you *arrived* at that solution?"

_Urgh. Not again._ On her way up to the board Tracy Argomel tripped her.

_"OW*! Stand on my foot next time?"

"Thank you, I'll try that as a method of deterrent," Sara growled. Now that she was maintaining her appearance, she suddenly turned up on Tracy's Victim Radar.

"Everyone hear that? She threatened me!"

"Sara? Appologise, please."
"I'm so sorry your feet got in the way of my walking, somehow," Sara intoned.
Tracy gave her a smile that said, _We've only just begun. You're my new hobby._
Joy.
"Appologise *properly*?"
Sigh. "Do forgive me for not watching where your feet were at all times. Rest assured I will not act on your suggestion unless under the most dire of accidents or emergencies." She picked up the chalk and began working through the problem at hand.
Math was easy. People were complicated. Why couldn't people just fit into a nice, rounded equation? Numbers never pretended to be anything they weren't... they just - existed.
She underlined her answer. "Et voila." She took a different route back to her desk. Tracy laughed. "OmiGod! Are you *scared* of lil' ol' *me*?"
"Just being the river to your rock," said Sara.
"What's *that* supposed to mean?"
"Watch a river and find out." She pointed to the board. "If you don't mind? Some people are trying to learn." Not a complete victory, but a nil-all draw.
When she reached over to find Todd's hand - he was gone.

~

Pietro was no spring chicken when it came to prank-pulling. He'd heard Haufmann call Todd 'Cartman' earlier. Followed by Kenny. There seemed to be an elaborately popular prank going on around the school, confusing this bozo with attendance roll and if Todd was having fun messing with a teacher, Pietro wanted in. So when Haufmann asked Pietro about Todd Tolensky, Pietro had drawled that he didn't know a *thing*. But that his good friend 'Cartman' did. Hold on a sec. He'd go *get* him.
Haufmann was waiting right where Pietro had left him. In the give and take rush of high school and with the spectacle Adrien's making of herself at the board, it had been all too easy to dash in and snatch Todd by the arm, then drag him clear across the school near an empty row of lockers where Haufmann waited. Pietro couldn't let the man see his powers.
Once Todd caught his breath, he looked at Pietro and glared. "What the hell?" He panted. Pietro grinned.
"Sitting in on math classes now? Sheesh, if it weren't for this prank you've got going on I'd almost say you were turning nerd. Go get 'im, Cartman." Pietro shoved Todd out from behind the lockers and nearly into Mr. Haufmann. Todd stumbled, caught himself and looked up in mute terror. Mr. Haufmann smiled in what he thought was the kindest version of the expression. It turned Todd's stomach.
"Hey, Kenny. Pietro tells me you had free period," He oozed, running a hand through his greasy hair. "So you mind answering a few questions of mine? Bout Todd Tolensky? Pietro says you're real good friends with him and Sara. So you probably know where he lives?"
Pietro, who'd stuck around after all, was frowning in mild confusion. He'd thought Mr. Haufmann was just confused about roll. Why the hell would Mr. Haufmann be asking where Todd *lived*? And on second thought, where all of a sudden was Mr. Haufmann's accent?
"Ngk," Todd managed, trying to keep standing. From experience, Pietro knew no time was a good time to start choking on a prank. What was going on?
Mr. Haufmann noticed him. "Ah, Pietro, mind leaving us for a moment?"
Todd shot him a desperate glance. Don't leave me, don't betray me, no, no, not again, not to him... his eyes begged. Pietro felt a sharp stab. He'd never looked at him like that before. Not ever. "Ah... no, actually. I think I'll stay. I need him to tutor me before the rest of free period's over. That's not a problem is it?" Pietro said smoothly. Mr. Haufmann looked rumpled, but didn't say anything. He couldn't say anything. He turned back to Todd.
"Do you know the boy?" He asked Todd. "I don't have a recent picture, unfortunately. But if he's Miss Adrien's boyfriend, you must see him regularly. Is he present today? Or skipping school in
general? Come on, Mr. Cartman. It's for his own safety you know - he shouldn't be out on the streets doing heaven knows what. He won't be getting into any trouble. The school is responsible for his safety. What would his parents say if anything happened to him?" Manny was saying, trying to soothe whatever fear had gripped Todd. "He doesn't have parents," Todd rasped harshly, looking away. Manny's face seemed to shift for a moment, but settled back into a smile.

"Really now? How sad. And he's only fifteen? Who's taking care of him?"

"Taking care of himself nowadays," Todd lied desperately. "Dunno where he lives. Can I go now?"

"Why so nervous?" Manny asked, clapping a hand on Todd's shoulders. Todd jumped and tried to brush them off, but Manny's grip was firm. Todd squeaked and tried to squirm violently away, but his sneakers slipped on the smooth tile and he fell at Manny's feet. Years of conditioning taught him to do only one thing when down in front of a grownup's legs. Curl up, cover your head and beg mercy if you thought it would help. Todd had clearly regressed back to those years, forgetting all the other useful things he'd learned about trapping ankles and knocking attackers down on their asses. "Nyaaah-goaway!" Todd shrieked, shaking uncontrollably as Manny tried to pick him back up to his feet. "Goawaygoawayfuckinggoaway!"

Pietro backpedalled, eyes wide as saucers. "Whoa."

Manny got the same idea and backed off. Curled over, Todd continued to twitch and make noise, waiting for someone to hurt him and too scared to look up and see that they'd backed off. "Go away!" he sobbed, over and over, a pleading devastated mantra. People were starting to come out of the classrooms to see what was going on.

This looked bad for Manny. Who unfortunately for Pietro, as the speed-demon cautiously inched forward to try coaxing Todd out of his panic, thought very fast. As the first teacher rounded the bend, Manny seized Pietro's arm. "What have I told you about zis bullying, Maximoff?!" Mr. Haufmann yelled. Pietro gaped, not only at the betrayal but at the fact that the teacher had grabbed his arm. People generally weren't able to detain him on the first try - Lance was the most experienced and good at it only when Pietro was drunk or too sugar-high to care. But now Manny had and Pietro was going to be in trouble.

"WHAT?" Pietro yawped at him. "But you -- he -- I was--!"

"Zat's enough! The poor boy has enough bullies after him as it is! You leave him alone!"

"Ahem - Mr. Haufmann," whispered another teacher, wincing at the thought of lawsuits for student mishandling, "Let Mr. Maximoff go. We're not allowed to use physical force of any kind. You have to give him detention."

"But I didn't --!!!"

"DETENTION! Now go!"

Pietro stood his ground. "I will not 'go'! You were the one scaring the hell out of him!"

Mr. Haufmann looked scared shitless. But Murphy's Law still frowned upon the unfortunate speed-demon.

"Mr. Maximoff, unless you'd like double detention, you will go back to class now," the teacher snapped and bent to gather Todd who cringed away. Pietro snorted, glaring at Manny venomously before walking away. You try to do the right thing... and look where it gets you, he thought.

~

"Come now, Herr Cartman," said Manny, back in his accent. Todd did the only thing that saved his life. He screamed like he was being murdered and kicked the grasping hand away. "Don't you fucking touch me!" A spasmodic lurch, and he dashed away. Someone caught him, wrapped him in their arms. Red letter jacket.

"I got 'im for you, sir." Duncan.

Fuck.
Trapped rats, it is said, are prone to bite. So did Todd. He tasted blood as he ran away, panicked, down the halls. Had to run. Had to run fast. Had to get away.
The halls were down a long, dark tunnel, but he had to keep running.
Get away. Get away. Get *away*.
He ran into something soft and squishy.

"Nononono*NOOOOO*."  
"Todd... Todd..." Harley tried to gently shake some sense back into him. "It's me, Harley."
His pupils were pinpricks. He was hyperventilating and there was blood around his mouth. He
looked, as Gra'ma was apt to say, like he'd just run straight out of Hell.
"Get away! Getawaygetaway... oGodoGodoGodoGod..."
A hand came out of her peripheral vision and slapped him. A long, slender hand.
"Unf?" said Todd.
"Breathe, dear," Sara counselled. "Deep breaths, now. You were panicking."
He fell out of Harley's arms and into hers. Shaking like a wet dog in winter.
Sara soothed his hair. "There, now. Shh-shh... You're among friends."
"What happened?" said Jean.
"Manny happened, I suspect. Alert security. There's a stalker on campus. Tell them to avoid giving out any information at all about Todd Tolensky."
Todd wept into Sara's shirt.
"There's a stalker after *Toad*?" blurted Tracy. "Why aren't they after *me*?"
Perhaps they have more refined tastes... thought Sara. "I don't know. Why don't you go *ask* them?"
The bell rang. Lunch. The nurse's office would be closed unless one was bleeding or had a broken bone. Just great. Sara waited until the gawkers were gone before collecting both her and Todd's things. Then, under the supervision of Jean, Harley and Scott, she escorted Todd to a table.

The whole school was buzzing about the stalker by the time they found a table in a corner by a door. Speculation and rumour was rife. There were even campus renta-cops at all the doors.
Kelly may not have had a generous view of certain students, but he *did* take the talk of a stalker seriously. He had to. People could sue if he didn't.
Kurt bought a well-packed lunch tray for the both of them. Sara was eternally grateful to him in an instant. The mere logistics of buying lunch in the middle of a gossip-hungry crowd was just...

*brrrr*.
Freddy- bless him forever - positioned himself so that he acted like a bouncer, brooking no admittance. Lance even backed him up.
"Anything?" Scott asked Jean for the umpty-umpth time.
"Just crowd static," said Jean. "I couldn't pick him out of this lot even if he was right next to me."
Kurt, who *was* right next to her, said, "Oh no! My secret is out!"
It was innapropriate, but they laughed nonetheless.
"Not terribly funny, Kurt, dear."
"Ja... but it was such a good straight line."
A renta-cop appeared by Sara's elbow. "Ma'am? You reported the possible stalker?"
"Yes. The very real stalker who may still be on this campus."
"If there was one, he's probably gone by now. We've found no unauthorised personnel on campus."
"Said the bee guard to the wasp," Sara rolled her eyes. "Has it occurred to you that this individual might be masquerading as authorised personnel? Under an... assumed... name...?" The pieces fit so neatly. It very well *could* be him... but no. Just because she didn't like him or his assumed identity, didn't mean he was automatically a suspect. For all she knew, there could be a baker's dozen worth of Bayville High Employees who were working under assumed identities. "Please tell Mr Kelly it would be a good idea to perform *thorough* background checks on all recent hires. I have my suspicions, but no true evidence beyond lingering after-effects."
"Yes, ma'am." He took notes and melted into the crowd.
Todd still clung to her, half in a haze. He would eat and drink, but only if Sara fed him. It was as if he didn't trust anything that wasn't from a source of trust.
"It's all right, dear," she soothed. "Tonight, when we're home, I'll perform some background checks of my own. Whoever's doing this will be incarcerated. And exposed. Who knows? You might be able to file a lawsuit against Kelly for hiring him. Wouldn't that be fun?"
"Mmh," Todd managed.
He didn't even smile.
"We'll get him," she said. "You rescued me from my Dragon. It's only fair that I help you with yours."

~

Manny was livid. There were cops everywhere, he hadn't felt this trapped since back in fucking jail - which he wasn't going to again so help him God. If he left - which everything in his brain was suggesting he do *before* Kelly found out he'd been the one asking about Tolensky - he would never be able to get back in. Tod wasn't here. And if Todd wasn't here, he'd have to take the next best thing. Cartman, that stupid brat had just about ruined everything. Whatever his phobia was, Manny was going to give him a lot more to scream about. He'd liked all the flinching Kenny had been doing earlier, but not so much the screaming. Manny had to make it fast. Had to get Kenny *alone*. He was nestled within an entourage currently, which made Manny's mood even more sour - how was he supposed to get to the little shit now? He'd thought Cartman had no friends? Had to be Adrien's doing. Perhaps she knew Cartman would tell on her boyfriend under torture. That was it - she was keeping him far away from him to protect her man. In a way Manny admired loyalty like that. He also admired the way he imagined her neck might look after he throttled her with his bare hands.
That would have to be another day. Right now, she and her little pet Cartman were his only path towards Todd Tolensky. He didn't have a photograph of his brother, but he could form a figure in his mind from memory. "I'll get him back for you," he whispered into his hands. A passerby might have thought he was praying. They would've had to not seen the look in his eyes. "I swear, I'll get him as good as he got you."

Todd let Sara feed him and tried not to think too hard about how many people had seen his total freak-out. The ones gathered closest around him fortunately were the least likely to judge. Lance was being nice, but not too nice - he didn't do the mother-hen thing and Todd would be more terrified if he started then. Pietro was nowhere. Todd wasn't surprised, but he didn't know what else to feel. Pietro had tried at least to *do* something once he realized something was wrong, but dammit, he had also been the one to take him to *Manny*. Not that he knew it was Manny... but still. It could have been worse. Manny really could have gotten to him alone - could have gotten him while Todd was still trying to be brave, thinking he could handle it on his own. It was one thing when you were in a hallway and you could call for help. Quite another when you were in the seat of Manny's beat up truck and you knew if you weren't quiet, things would only get a lot worse when you got home. So in a twisted way, Todd should actually *thank* Pietro. Huh. Funny old world.

Sara pushed a re-filled undertow mug at him. Todd drank it gratefully and allowed her to stroke his hair. Kurt was glancing at him surreptitiously, but not pityingly. He knew better. Even Summers looked protective. Todd wasn't sure how he felt about *that*. He let his thoughts waver on his earlier decision about telling someone before they retreated hastily back into comfortable nothing. Todd wanted to wait until nobody was looking. There was no way he could make a telephone call to the Professor with everyone holding their breath and *listening*. Best to wait until they got home. It would be alright once they got home.

~
Lunch ended, and Sara escorted Todd to the nurse's office, where he was given a seat and an itchy blanket that possibly dated back to the Conquistadors. Mrs Ogg frowned at it, but once the situation was explained, she allowed Todd to stay under the name of 'Kenny Cartman' and the added benefit of no visitors, since he was in for a 'nervous disorder'. Of course, it meant that he would be subjected to such thrilling tasks as helping Mrs Ogg fill out and stamp paperwork, clean out the sinks, and sort the new first-aid materials, but it was the best sanctuary the school had.

People could go missing from the office very easily. People could vanish from the library. Even the custodian took naps... but Mrs Ogg guarded her territory with the ferocity of a broody hen[1]. She'd only allow Todd out of her sight once in the custody of the person who bought him in, or his legal guardian - provided they had all forms of ID.

The renta-cop outside the office door was just icing on the cake.

_Whatever higher force is available,_ she thought to the sky, _I need some assistance. See us through this crisis safe, alive and whole? Thanks in advance._

Someone had left chocolates in her locker. Sweetheart chocolates with the legends changed to "U R Mine". Fun.

Thus, when she entered Physics class, she shared out the 'stalker specials' with her benchmates.

"Someone's got a budget," one observed. "This is high quality evidence."

"Speaks of a boor with bucks," said Sara. "I wonder if he also has the rest of the zoo?"

"He? How sexist of you. Women can also be stalkers."

"Yes, but they tend to *eat* the chocolates."

Only a few more hours until the end of the day. Something was coming. She could feel it.

Only a few more hours until he was at Bayville High. And, as usual, the traffic was being a jackass. Sam Adrien sighed and fiddled with the radio. Almost there. Almost re-united with his daughter. Almost there for her, to save her from whatever Jaquelline had wrought.

"Mamaaaaaaaa... Oooooooooooooo..." Freddy Mercury sang. "Ah don' wanna die...."

Sam flicked for another channel.

"...and she goes runnin' for the shelter - of her little mother's helper..."

Flick.

"...can't you love me like I doooo."

Sam growled and turned the radio off. Stupid radio.

Only a few more hours until he was there for her.

[1] And anyone who's gone in against a bantam trying to hatch chicks will tell you - those fuckers are *vicious*.

~~

Todd was comfortable with menial tasks. He could fill out names and numbers, could easily sort things, and if Mrs. Ogg had told him to scour beneath the cabinets with bleach and a toothbrush he'd probably would've done it. Anything to keep moving and to keep his mind on something else. Todd was calmer while he worked, she noticed. Not shaking as much and even humming to himself while he inventoried supplies in the cabinet.

Occasionally, someone would walk by the nurse's office and he'd freeze. Mrs. Ogg would always be first at the door. Duncan Matthews had shown up to beg aspirin for his bleeding hand which the nurse had bound right after lunch. He glared at Todd whenever the boy wasn't looking. Todd hadn't even glanced his way, still cataloguing bandaids. Not even when he snarled and Mrs. Ogg had turned around so fast that Duncan's fake coughing fit became quite real.

"Do something about that cold you're getting," she iced, and sent him off with two painkillers. Todd smiled at her and glanced at the clock. A few more hours and Sara would come back for him. Until then, he felt almost safe. And there wasn't even anyone staring at him because the nurse was *busy*. Manny had gone nowhere near the office with the cop around. And he would go nowhere near Sara,
Todd felt sure of it. For the first time all day he could believe that things were going to be all right.

Manny couldn't get to him now. But there would be a later. If not at school, then outside of it. The world out there was only as safe as you made it. He'd wait. He'd watch, and the minute the boy was alone, Cartman was his.

The rumor mill was doing something Pietro never thought it would - slowly driving him insane. The slow part may have been an exaggeration. It was in reality driving him insane rather fast. Pietro couldn't stand it - these morons thought they knew it better than him and he'd *been* there!

"So he has, like, some imaginary girl stalker after him," snorted a Trish. "As *if*. I can't believe they actually called the cops for Todd Tolensky. It would do him a world of *good* to get laid."

"Dude, don't you know? It's not a girl stalker. Some *guy* is trying to stick him up the ass. I'd be freaked out too," said one of her male friends, in a rare moment of thoughtfulness. He quickly nulled it in less than two seconds. "It's all these homos running around. They know not to go after us cause we can whup their asses, so they go after the weaker kids."

Pietro snorted, feathers ruffled. "You don't have to be gay to be a pedophile or a predator," he snapped. "All you have to do is have absolutely no morals or sense of decency keeping you from going after what you like. Dude," he stressed, to a jock who was boggling at him, "You read the paper about that guy in Arkansas who was a married man and ran an underground child slave industry? Married. To. A Woman. Not gay."

They didn't look convinced. "But he had to have been gay. He had boy slaves too."

"No. He didn't touch any of them. He fed them, watered them, and sold them online. They were never people to him. They were never humans. That's the whole mindset of a predator - you aren't a human to them," Pietro sighed, suddenly weary of the anti-gay sentiments flying around the room. Not that he was gay. But he knew he was filed in that category anyway, so he might as well enlighten some people on the subject if he could. "You're prey - something to be toyed with before killed or worse. That's what's after Todd right now. It's not someone who's 'gay'. To be gay, you have to be human yourself first."

There was unexpected applause. His speech had drawn somewhat of a crowd. Pietro turned red, hoping to God that hadn't been taken as an 'out of the closet' act. "By the way, I'm straight *and* human!" he insisted quickly. "And free Friday night!" There was laughter, but it wasn't mean.

(1)...is there anything I could possibly *say* other than -- Denial!

~

The last bell. Time for action. Sara left her seat as if spring-loaded, out of the classroom and zooming down the halls towards the nurse's office. They were free for the day! She felt as if she were full of sunshine. This was very close to the Something Big she'd been anticipating all day.

Sara felt like she could fly. She even leaped over the sidling foot of Tracy Argomel - purely by serendipity, as she'd shut her eyes to leap and yawp for the pleasure of it.

This was just like Christmas Eve. Like her birthday. Like Daddy-daughter day. She even burst into a chorus of _Holiday_ by RatCat[1].

The last bell. Time for action. Manny left the staffroom and placed himself 'on guard' by the school gates. If there was any place where an adult could walk off with a minor, this was it. He watched the fleeing throng, trying to pick up the too-tall girl and her perpetually nervous companion.

"...on a holiday, doompa doompa dooooommm..."

Todd grinned instantly. Only one person he knew could sing someone else's voice, then regress to thier own for the music effects. Sara was coming.

"...maybee just me and you. Set for adventure to the unknoooowwww... Set a course for far awaaaaayyy... It won't be long, untill Iiii'mmmm thheeeeeeerrrrre. Life here's getting me
"down...." Sara showed her ID to Mrs Ogg. "Hello darling. Ready to blow this joint?"
"I am forever and a half ready to blow this joint, babe."
She linked arms with him and began skipping. "Weeeeeeeeeere'rerrrrre *OFF* to empty
lockeerrrrss... and collect all of our homework... Because although the homework sucks, it will
never pay for to shirk... Because if you will shirk homework, you'll find that you become a jerk, who
lives off minimum wage like a buuuuuurrrrrk... barappatta bappatta bum pa-rum!"
"Yo, what's got into you?" Todd boggled. "You actin' like yo' drunk, yo."
"I swear on my love of serendipity that I have not been experimenting with foreign substances." Sara
held up her hand in a boy-scout salute. "Unless you count stalker chocolate. Which I shared with
three other guinea pigs."
"Stalker *chocolate*?"
"Sweetheart chocolates with the legend altered to read 'U R mine'. Charmant." She grinned. "They
were pralines. Swiss pralines."
"Oooooh... *kay*," Todd drawled. "When we get you home, I'm'a gettin' Hank to test yo' fo' drugs."
"Okay," she giggled. "See if he can scan for anti-viruses, too."
"Anti-viruses?"
"You know, like the luck virus, or the sexual magnetism virus, or--"
"*Oh*, Red Dwarf. Gotcha." He shook his head in amusement as he shut his locker and re-primed
his 'security measures'.
"Love the spray-cream guillotine. Simple, *and* effective."
"I tol' you I was set." He linked arms with her again and let her skip and sing to her locker. By the
time she collected her things, he was catching some of her Happy.
"You don't know nuthin' that can make you feel like this?" he said, trotting to keep up with her
merry skipping.
"Well, there *is* one thing, but it's not taken orally," she grinned. "It's a person. The only person
who's ever made me feel like I was filled with gold and sunshine like this is--" Her gaze fell
elsewhere. Her eyes opened in surprise and she took a deep breath. "*DADDY*!" She sprang
forward, and his hand slipped from hers.

Sam Adrien grinned as he stopped humming _We're Off to See the Wizard_ under his breath. There
she was, apparently safe, whole and unharmed. _Thank you, God,_ he thought. And she was with a
boy. Holding hands and skipping alongside him. Evidently happy and full of beans.
Then she saw him.
"*DADDY*!"
Now he was for it.
Sara was renowned amongst the Adriens for her enthusiastic greetings.
Sam braced himself and opened his arms. "Sara!"
Leap. Whump. Squish. He was suddenly wrapped in gleeful daughter. "You'rehere, you'rehere,
you'rehere, you'rehere, you'rehere, you'rehere, you'rehere, you'rehere, you'rehere, you'rehere,*here*!"
"I'm here," he said, hugging her back. Her skin felt... different, somehow - but he didn't care. She
was okay. His feelings of dread at what could have happened to her evaporated like morning mist.
"I can't believe it, you're here!" Now she was bouncing up and down, arms still firmly around him.
"I can't believe it, you only come back in November, and it's only half-past September." She gasped.
"You weren't *fired* were you?"
"No, they heard what your Mom did and gave me leave to sort this whole thing out."
"Omigosh, you gotta meet Todd." Sara dragged him wholesale back inside the gate, looking for her
friend. "Todd? To-odd!" Sara bounced on the balls of her feet, panic beginning to seep into her
features. "*Todd*?" Sara let him go, seizing random passers-by. "Have you seen Todd Tolensky?
Have you seen-- Have you--" Sara started breathing fast. Her movements became flitting as she
jinked through the crowd. "Has *anyone* seen Todd Tolensky? *TODD*?"
Manny took his one chance, smoothly creeping up on Cartman and seizing his shoulder. He leaned down near the boy's ear. "Not *vun* sound, understand?" he said.

Cartman froze, managing the skeleton of a nod.

"Gut." He tightened his grip on the kid's collarbone. "You vill come with me," he announced, "and you are not going to scream. You are not going to allow *anynun* to know you do not vant to be near me." A significant squeeze of his shoulder, until he could feel the bones creaking. "Especially if you like your bones *intact*. Do ve have an agreement?"

It didn't matter whether he had an agreement or not. He'd already steered the boy away from the crowds and into the boot of his car.

He was frozen in fear.

"Very good," said Manny, dropping his accent entirely. "I can see we're going to get along *juuuuussst* fine." He closed the trunk, made sure it was locked, then stepped inside his car and drove away like it was any other day.

[1] Actual band, now believed defunct. They came out with some good tunes, tho'.

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Todd didn't seem able to unfreeze himself, curled on his side in the trunk of Manny's car. Even when he felt the undercarriage shake with the ignition turning, the panic only choked him further and clouded his brain. Think, yo, some small part of him was berating himself. Ain't nobody can help you but yo own self, so fuckin' do somethin, already!

Ever so slowly, Todd felt out with first one leg than the other as to how much room he had to move in. It was a maddening process, flinch reactors were at an all time high. Whenever his foot encountered something he wasn't expecting, he tried to draw it back into the protection of his defensive curl. Todd gritted his teeth against it and felt past the toolbox and all the rope, feeling for where the damn taillights were supposed to be. He kicked once, without much effort. Nothing other than vibrations going through his sneaker. Todd kicked harder, frantic when nothing continued to happen. Weren't these things supposed to just knock right out? He gave one last violent kick, not sure whether he was really giving it all he could be was so afraid. The car halted sharply. Todd yelped as he slid toward the backseat and cowered there, terrified Manny had heard the kicking and was coming to investigate.

Voices. There were voices, asking for ID. Todd almost wept with relief - the rentacops were guarding the parking lot too and asking for validation. He was going to be okay. Manny didn't sound too nervous but Todd could see in his mind's eye how the man would be licking his lips as he lied. The cops were sure to see right through him, he thought giddily. Then his mind seemed to quarel among itself in hushed tones for a moment, before coming back with the embarrassed reminder: Oh, right, these are cops we're talking about. Remember? Whoops. They weren't superhuman. They couldn't detect lies, and if Manny had fake ID that was convincing enough, they were going to let him pass without a search. Todd struggled to get closer to the lid of the trunk. "Help!" he tried calling, and his voice was a pathetic squeak. He forced himself to cough, to try again. "HELP!" he shouted, but the car jerked into movement and Todd banged his forehead against the sharp corner of something as he was rocked forward.

After that was full-blown panic. Manny was getting away with him, there wasn't anyway out of the trunk or to even indicate he was in trouble. Todd kicked at the confines of the small space anyway and managed to dent it. He tore at the fabric to try and find a catch to the lid inside - failing that, cutting his fingers before pounding the lid until his wrists ached. He couldn't get his legs in a good enough position to kick the lid open and he didn't want to get stuck in any position on his back as far as Manny was concerned.

If Manny had been hoping to exhaust him by the time they got to the flat, he was well-rewarded. Todd was curled in rather much the same way Manny had left him except for the cuts and drying blood on his shirt. Manny glanced at the boy while Todd tried to get his bearings. They were in some
kind of garage, concealed from the neighbor's view, which meant...

Todd didn't have time to process the thought of 'dodge' before Manny's fist connected with the side of his head. Partially dazed - he'd had worse - Todd let himself be dragged out of the trunk by his wrists and was dumped on the floor to watch as Manny slammed the lid shut again. The blow would have knocked out Kenny, but Todd was all too aware of being dragged through the garage and up the familiar wooden stairs to the apartment above. His body was limp and the more functional parts of his mind seemed to be far away and useless, leaving him to deal with the rest of it.

It all came back in a cruel rush as Todd recognized where he was and he suddenly froze in the doorway, heedless of Manny's hands on his shoulders which were forcibly steering him to the kitchen. Todd paled remembering blood on the tiles, steak knife in her hand. He tried to twist out of Manny's grip, not wanting to be there and not able to say why. Manny gripped him by the elbow and backhanded Todd viciously. "Give me another reason," the man snarled at him, grinning. "And I'll be happy to oblige again. Sit."

Todd made a noise, thinking Manny meant the floor. He couldn't, he just couldn't sit near that again. Manny forced him into a chair at the table where Todd closed his eyes and didn't look at anything at all. He could still see everything however, and it hurt worse than the blows that had already drawn blood. "Good news for you, eh? I'm a'call the little bitch, Kenny. Your friend can either bring Tolensky here, or she can leave you with me. More of a choice than I give most people. If you don't make me hurt you worse, you'll be walkin' out of here by sunset. Got it?"

Todd choked and nodded, eyes still shut and leaking tears. He crumpled into the chair and hid his face in his arms.

"Good. Stay still and be quiet." Manny picked up the cell phone he'd had charging by the wall and flipped it on. He had her cell number and if not, Kenny would just have to inform him of the correct one. The numbers dialed and he waited.

~

Sara was dithering madly in ever-decreasing circles at ever-increasing speeds - until her cell chirped _Istanbul (not Constantinople)_.. She rushed to answer it. "Thylacine Enterprises... how can I direct your call?"

"Hello, Sara Louise..." said a voice on the other end of the line. "Do you know where your little friend is?"

She went cold in an instant. Sub-arctic. Arctic. The mean temperature of the moon. Zero Kelvin.

"Manny, I assume," she said.
"You're a very clever girl," said Manny. "Unfortunately for you, I am also very clever. I have your friend Kenny."

Tears formed and fell without a blink. "Don't hurt him?"

"I won't - unless you give me a *reason*..." he menaced. "All *I* want is a nice, friendly *chat* with my nephew, Todd Tolenski. You bring him to meet me... and you can have your friend."

"You do realise that I must ask for proof that you have him alive, first. I'm not one to fall for ransom scams of any ilk."

Footsteps. Slight echo... sounded like there was old linoleum present, and rising damp in the walls. A distant, "Talk!" from Manny.

"Don't listen to him, Sara! Forget me. Go *Home* and have a good life with Todd. Don't let him--"

A hard thump. Sara knew the sound of the wind being knocked out of someone by heart. She'd made it all-too-frequently during her days as Essel.

"How sweet of him," said Manny. "But of course you would know about me from Todd. You wouldn't want me to get *bored* and start entertaining myself, now, would you?"

Sara's voice failed.

"*Would* you?"

"How much time do I have?"

A pause. Obviously he was trying to calculate travel times based on a single data point. "I will give
you until midnight to call me back. You will have Todd when you do... or things will become most -
*unpleasant* for Kenny."

Distant, in the background, "Just go home, Sara! Go *home*! Go--" the call shut off.

Go home? Sara quirked her eyebrow. Her home was the Institute. What would Todd want her to do there? Cerebro? No. Cerebro only picked up on mutants using their powers. Todd was currently
ingcognito and at the mercy of a mundane. Outing oneself was not the solution.

Her former home was not the answer. There would be no solutions from the Pierce side of the family.

"Something?" said Dad.

"Todd's been kidnapped by his abusive uncle," said Sara. She was still dead inside. "Something
Todd said... he told me to go home."

"Not your home."

"No. I've eliminated that. But... he used to live at the boarding house."

"We can start there," Dad suggested. "Maybe there's some record there of his old abode."

"...kay," she managed. _Professor... Todd's been taken. See what you can unearth, please?_ She
slouched under her father's arm towards his renta-car. "Daddy... there's something you ought to
know..."

~

Manny shut the cellphone off and dropped it onto the counter behind him. "Go home, Sara! Just..."

Todd trailed off as soon as Manny turned around.

"I didn't give you permission to keep talking, Kenny," he said evenly. Todd cringed as far back in
his seat as he could, but no blow came his way this time. Manny approached him slowly. "Do you
know what kind of person you're even protecting? Todd one of your friends?"

Todd flinched, not sure how to answer that without giving himself away. Manny was close enough
to feel his breath and just that made him want to kick the man through the wall, but he couldn't seem
to gather the nerve. This was far beyond and beneath mutants versus mundane, this was personal.

It wasn't Toad's fight, it was Todd Tolensky's and he was losing. He only hoped Sara would know
what he meant when he told her to go home. His home. The others would know where he kept the
things she needed. She was smart enough to figure it out, he knew. But he was also afraid she
wouldn't be. Not any reflection on her; he was the one who kept all the information to himself.

"No?" Manny smirked. "You know him because the bitch is doing him?"

"Don't call her that, and she ain't doin' nobody!" Todd snapped.

Manny's grin got wider. "You like her," he said.

"No," Todd moaned. It didn't matter, but Manny might find a way to use it against her. Against him.

"You do. How pathetically cute, Kenny. What do you feel like when she has bruises she won't
explain, hmm? Angry? Disgusted?"

Todd's face morphed into something very close to a snarl. "He doesn't hit her."

"Really? I'm surprised," Manny feigned shock. "He's done so much worse, after all. I admit his
father and I were a bit hard on him in his younger days."

"No shit," Todd muttered flatly.

Manny looked at him and Todd felt terror scrabble at the walls of his stomach. "He told you all about
it, eh? Well, I suppose you must think my brother deserved being murdered then."

Todd looked up sharply. "What?" he asked softly.

"My brother. Todd's father and his mother were both found dead in this apartment. From what I've
been told, my brother was stabbed and my sister-in-law's throat was slit like a pig's."

"Ngh," the boy said, not needing the imagery haunting him again. Or to hear Manny likening his
mother to a pig. "I thought it was a suicide," he tried.

Manny was still for a moment, then he moved and the next thing Todd knew he was lying on the
floor, cheek pressed against concrete and bits of glass and dirt. He tried to move and his body
responded with a protesting creak of pain.
"Don't get up," Manny spat. Todd felt hands at the back of his shirt and he was being dragged back into the kitchen by it. Manny let him slump against the lower cabinets and stood over Todd, turning the sink water on. "Don't you ever correct me again, you son of a bitch, or I swear next time I will kill you. My brother was fucking murdered and his body lied on this goddamn floor for weeks with a fucking knife in his chest!"

The hand came into focus again. Todd shrieked and turned his face away, but Manny only hauled him back to his feet and forced a wet towel against his face. He scrubbed at the blood and cuts roughly, hand clamped on the back of Todd's neck so he couldn't pull away. The boy didn't behave through it all, twisting and making noises like a tortured animal until Manny finally let him fall back to the ground. Todd curled up and wept. The combination of water, Manny, and towels was reaching for the uglier memories in the back of Todd's brain and bringing them out for him to look at once more.

Manny left him where he lay, but leaned against the counter and wiped the blood off his hands. "You tell me, Kenny. If somebody ain't a murderer, why the hell they don't call the hospital or the police when they got their own Pop and Momma bleedin' on the kitchen floor? Huh? You fuckin' tell me that."

The boarding house was looking marginally improved since the last time she'd seen it. "Mutant," said Daddy for the fifth time in as many minutes. "Yeah. I'm not exactly... normal... normally." She wound the doorbell and produced an asthmatic rattle. Lance answered the door and flinched.

"I'm unarmed," she announced. "Todd's in trouble, this is my Dad, and I need to know everything you know about Todd and where he's lived."

"Um," said Lance. "How could Toad be in trouble?" A sidelong glance at her Dad.

"He knows," Sara said. "Now. Can we come in and battle-plan, or should we loiter on the doorstep where the rest of the mundanes can hear us?"

"Uh. Oh. Yeah. Right." Lance stood aside. "You know where everything is."

"Afternoon," said Dad. "Where are the records for this establishment kept?"

"Tunno," Lance grunted. "If th' boss-lady had anything like that, it'd be in her room. It's locked. Like, uber-locked."

"Not for long," Dad smirked and jogged upstairs. Lance glared at her. "The fuck's going on?"

"Did Todd ever say anything about unwanted relatives? Specifically an uncle Manny?"

Lance went white. "...shit," he whispered. "*Fuck*..." he scrubbed his hair. "*HE* is in town?"

"You know about Uncle Manny."

"Heard some of the nightmares," said Lance. "Never got a lot out of him about it. Did some digging..." he sighed. "Manny's one sick, twisted fuck, you know? CPS busted his door down 'cause some neighbour filed a complaint, found him an' Todd in bed... naked and worse..." the last three words were a rushed mumble. Lance turned red. "Two weeks later, his folks got into their last domestic, if you know what I mean. The bodies were found something like two months after that."

Sara filled in the sketch in glorious colour. Abusive father who favours both bottle and fist, a mother desperately trying to protect her son. Things get more heated than usual... and suddenly things became irreversably out of hand. Mom either fatally wounded or too terrified to face the law... And Todd, witnessing it all, too scared to do anything because they might just put him with his only living relative.

"Dragon scars," she whispered. "Those wounds run so deep, they're almost invisible."

Lance shrugged. "He doesn't talk about it," he said. "He's happy with the 'now' so we let it lie, y'know?"

"That, sir," said Sara, "was almost a sin."

Dad danced down the stairs with a bundle of folios under one arm. "Found the records," he
announced.
"How the fuck did you get in there?"
Dad grinned. "Ancient gypsy secret. Learned the trick from a fellow named Wolfgang[1]." He
placed the folios down. "It's all here, History, past residences, manifestation episodes..." he held up a
relevant page. "Manifestation episodes?"
"Mutants manifest," said Sara. "There's usually some precipitating stress or something of the ilk..."
she took off her watch, revealing her aqua scales. "Me? I shed my skin and got this lot."
Dad whistled. "Impressive..."
"It has its bonuses," said Sara, finding Todd's file. "Shedding was a pure bovine, alas." Previous
abodes... there. The tenements on the wrong side of the tracks. The flat and the news articles about
the domestic squabble. The gory photos... Damn the Media.
The forlorn picture of Todd in an ambulance next to a suspiciously Darkholme-esque counsellor put
it all together. He hadn't had his nose broken at the time of the photograph. "Haufmann! That
fucking *bastard* was *HAUFMANN*!" Her skin coloured red, black and yellow. "I'm going to
track him down and bash his lying face in! I'm going to tear his arms off and beat him to death with
the wet ends! I'm going to rip his entrails out and feed them to him with a side of fava beans and a
nice Chianti! I'll flog his skin off with his own--"
#Sara#
"..." Dad interrupted, "He's not worth the effort, sweetie."
"As if the *Law* would do anything to him," Sara fumed. "It's time for some *karma*.

[1] Yes, it's Uncle Wolf

---

Manny had left him alone for a few minutes then forced Todd to sit at the kitchen table. The cell
phone was in plain view. Obviously, Manny thought it was a dangling temptation but he didn't figure
Kenny grew up in the tenements. Todd had, and he knew that if he grabbed it and tried to dial for
help, he'd be dead long before the cops showed up. If they showed up. Todd showed only a fleeting
interest in the phone, staring at the knots in the wooden table instead. This unfortunately bored
Manny.

Kenny retreating into the little trauma-induced shell he was didn't put enough pressure on Todd's
bitch to produce Todd. Manny had to appeal to Sara's guilt for getting him involved in this. He had
to make sure Sara would be haunted if she had any thoughts about leaving Kenny in Todd's place.
Couldn't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. Manny walked behind Todd's chair and put
his hands on the back of it. Todd shuddered, but didn't make noise until he felt his shirt being lifted to
the back of his neck. "Wh-What ---?" he yelped, bunching forward until his chest was against
the edge of the table. Manny paused thoughtfully, pressing the sharp edge of a fingernail into one of
Todd's shoulderblades. "How do you feel about tattoos, boy?"
"I -- " Todd swallowed. Random question which didn't mean anything good at all.
"Don't like needles?"
"No, I mean, I don't -- " Crap, he'd sounded desperate. Todd heard Manny latch onto that bit of
information with delight.
"Ah," Manny reached behind him and opened a drawer. There was a safety pin wedged half under
the empty plastic silverware tray and he pulled it out, bending it to stay open. Such a tiny thing. But
Kenny would probably scream anyway. "When I got a tattoo, it was in the war," he mused, testing
the point with the pad of his finger. A lie, Todd knew, Manny hadn't been to Vietnam, he'd faked a
leg injury and got out of active duty. "We had to make do with whatever was available." He put one
hand on Todd's shoulder, pulling the fabric that had slipped down his back up again. Shuddering,
Todd shook his head. It was a mind game. Had to be. Manny would stick him with the pin a few
times, that was all. Don't let him see your fear. Todd tried to make himself go still and failed.
"I don't want one," he muttered, eyes shut tight. Manny wasn't serious. There was nothing to ink the
little marks with, but then that wouldn't matter to Manny. It would hurt. That's what mattered.
"I think 'Twerp' would be cute. 'Pussy Boy' has more letters, but not quite the best ring to it." Todd was silent, shaking under Manny's hand. He grinned, palm going flat to push Todd forward more but not touching the pin to his back. "Come on, help me pick a name. Can't start until you decide."
"I really don't --" Todd whimpered.
Miraculously, the phone started to ring.

Sara got into character. Her name was Tracy, and she was calling from a cubicle hell somewhere outside of Mumbai, India[1], but she'd swear on any given holy book that she was calling from Maine, USA. She was interested in correcting the name and address she was calling, and selling double glazing to the unaware. Just in time. Someone picked up the phone.
"What?" the man barked. Manny. Score.
"Good even-ing sir, is this 555-7982?"
"Yeah...?"
"Am I speaking to a meester Talonskee?"
"That's Tolanski," he corrected. "They don't live here no more. Who is this?"
"My name is Tracy, and I am calling to offer you a bargain rate on Ace Double Glazing. If you accept this offer, we can give you--"
"Fuck off," he growled, and hung up.
"The fuck was that about?" said Lance. Sara chuckled evilly. "Now I *know* where they are. For certain. Same echo, same background theme. Time to lay a little smackdown."
Dad had the phone. "I'll inform the authorities. You'll be done by then, won't you?"
"By the time they get there? Puh*leez*... we all know the response time in that district is teh suxxorz." She crooked a finger at the rest of the brotherhood. "Now, my dears... here is the *plan*..."

Todd tried to focus on clearing his breathing, on staying calm. Which was supremely hard to do when watching Manny rant and rave about fucking telemarketers. Evidently, he whimpered too much and returned Manny's attention to him.
"Oh *yes*..." he cooed. "We had a tattoo date... Which was it? Twerp or Pussy Boy?"
{Bing bong}
"What the *fuck*?" he wondered. He peeked out a window. "Who the hell delivers pizza in this neighbourhood?"
{Knock knock knock...}
Manny groaned and went for the door. Out of sight of the kitchen where he had Todd tied to his chair. "What the fuck *now*?"
"Alphaghetto Pizza," said a familliar voice. *Fred*! Fred was here! Wait, did that mean cavalry, or was he moonlighting on his new bouncer job? Nah... Fred'd eat any pizza he was told to deliver. Pie-pie was the better delivery man. If he ever felt like getting off his lazy ass and earning an honest buck. "I got one hotshot with the lot, a cheezo supremo with anchovies, and a sushi explosion... if you have a docket, the garlic bread and the coke're free."
"I didn't order any fucking pizza," Manny raged. "Can't you see this building is *condemned*?"
"Look, buddy, I just take 'em where I'm told. You take it up with the management if ya got a problem. Now have you got nineteen ninety-five an' a docket, or are you gonna pay the whole twenty-three?"
"Listen, pal--" Manny began.
Usually, when Manny called people 'pal' or 'friend', their teeth had a limited life expectancy. There was the expected 'splat', but *this* time Manny was the one who wound up going backwards and, because Fred was never one to do things by halves, hit the wall opposite the door.
"Oops," said Fred.

{Bamf} "You okay?"

Damn, but he never thought he'd be glad of that sulphuric stench. Todd coughed. "Hey, how you doin'? I'd get up, yo, but I'm a li'l tied up."

"He's fine, Sara!" All the same, he began automatically loosening the knots. "Did he do... anything?"

"Not yet, yo. He was warmin' up to it. I'm okay, dawg."

Sara entered, negligently dragging Manny into the kitchen by one leg. "So... this is where the Dragon bit," she said. "Are you up to lingering in order to make sure he never tries this again?"

"If it means he'll fuck off forever," said Todd. "Then fuck yeah."

Sara got one of her evil genius smiles. "Excellent."

In spite of the gang being all there, Todd felt his heart drop. "Uh," he asked a bit too late. "What'cha got planned?"

"_Silent Hill_ meets _The Exorcist_ meets _Supernatural_ meets _Poltergeist_," she grinned. "With maybe a touch or three of _Blair Witch_. It depends on the improv."

Todd thought of her movie making expertise and swallowed.

"And we have *so* many people who are good at special effects," she chirped.

Jean straightened up from scanning Manny's mind. "Euw," she said. "That man's head is a cesspool."

"He don't know nuthin' 'bout what happened here," said Todd. "I'm th' only witness."

Sara knelt, soothing unknown tears from his face. "We have to know, dear. We have to know to make this work. Share what you can?"

Todd looked away. Torn.

[1] Just about every telespruiker calling me has an Indian accent. MeMum and I joke that they're all calling from there.

~

"..." Todd glanced over to the tiles by the lower kitchen cabinets. Pops had collapsed there. Todd didn't need a blacklight to remember where the blood had smeared. And by the threshold from the kitchen to the doorway had been his mother's last stand. He had laid a blanket over Pops, but he'd tried to work up the nerve to wrap a towel around Mom's throat, lie her straight on her back in a dignified way. That was a day before she had begun to bloat and she could have looked like she was sleeping if not for all the caked blood in her hair. Todd had laid a blanket over her too and kept vigil. Todd wasn't aware how long he'd spaced but when he returned Sara was stroking his hair. He leaned into her embrace and breathed in. There was no point in keeping secrets any longer. She had to know what Manny had done if she'd found this place. She had to know if she'd seen the truth. Todd swallowed and started talking lowly.

"Pops was drunk. He said he was going to call someone to pick me up and then he started hitting me when I said I didn't want to go. Mom came home from shopping and tried to put herself between us."

She hadn't yelled at Pops to quit it. It didn't do much of anything when she had. "He pushed her, broke the booze bottle and we both thought he was gonna cut her. But he charged past and swung the glass at me. Said he wanted to cut out my tongue if I wanted to stay. Mom tried to put herself between us, tugging him off me while he pried open my mouth. I..." This was the part where he was stupid, where he'd instigated the violence to get worse. He'd fought back. "I bit him," Todd said, voice small. "So he started to choke me. Mom couldn't get him off me, so she got the knife."

He remembered her eyes wild, staring down and trying to get Pops to turn around and threaten him off. But Todd began to see more red than any other color and in the next instant, he was coughing and she was on her knees trembling, blood all over her hand. Pops was lying on his back, eyes unseeing. "She killed him. I tried telling her it would be okay, but she didn't want to go to prison. She told me to leave the room, but she had another knife --" Todd gulped. "I stayed n'talked to her. I thought things were gonna be okay when she smiled. Like we were gonna leave and go somewhere
nice and forget it all. She told me she didn't want to go to prison and I told her she didn't have to I
swear I wasn't gonna tell nobody. I thought it would be *okay*. And then she had her hand on my
face and the other was moving..." A line of red that started to spurt and Todd had caught her as she
shuddered. He had yelled, wrenched the knife away from her fingers, threw it aside. She clutched at
him and he couldn't move, couldn't even get a towel to stop the bleeding. It was too deep and too
fast, and soon she'd stopped breathing at all. "I couldn't stop her," he moaned, hiding his face against
Sara. It was a failure. He didn't want to know what she thought of him for it.

~

Sara allowed herself a moment and a shed tear for the child that had been lost in this room. "Not your
fault, beloved. You couldn't stop her."

"But--"

She kissed him. "Calmly, now, dear. You have to act ignorant of everything we're going to do to
him."

Todd looked like his stomach had dropped straight down to the core of the earth. "Uh... What *are*
you going to do to him?"

Now came the evil grin. "Oh, just what four ghosts did to Mr Scrooge."

"Um. It was *three* ghosts," said Evan.

"Three ghosts plus the ghost of Jacob Marley is...?" said Sara. "Enough bickering. Jean, Lance,
Pietro, Kurt, Kitty... you're all special effects. Can you co-ordinate as well, Jean? Kurt and I shall
also be demonic shadowy things in the dark."

"Psh! Typecasting..." muttered Kurt.

"Yes, but very necessary typecasting. If it helps, think of yourself as an avenging angel in disguise."

Once again, she physically supported Todd in preparation for an emotional load. "I'm afraid you'll
have to share your memories of that night with Jean. She's good with certain secrets."

It only took a moment.

"Got it," said Jean. "In technicolour and surround sound. Ouch."

"*Right*!" Sara clapped her hands. "Let's get *to* this!"

Manny woke up. His wallet was lighter by thirty dollars and there was a stack of cold pizza by the
door. There was also a warm coke and some tepid garlic bread. Frankly, he was shocked by the
delivery guy's honesty[1]. Kenny was still tied to the chair, though he'd managed to move it slightly
towards the door. What was the little fuck planning? To somehow hop out onto an uncaring street,
still tied to the chair? He'd be worse than dog food if he succeeded.

"Enough shit," he decided. "Your skinny bitch doesn't think your ass is worth it, I might as well have
some fun." He picked up the needle.

"...mort, *no*..."

Manny turned to where the voice was apparently coming from. That was... but she was dead... She
sounded like she was shouting, but, at the same time, she was a long way away.

"...that god damn son of yours is a fucking *freak*..."

The room shook. A brief wind rose up and then...

He was standing in the same kitchen. Back in time. Young Todd was sitting where Kenny had been,
watching in horror as his parents fought. Mort had a broken bottle, which she dodged, and then he
came at Todd.

"...cut his fucking tongue out..."

"...no..."

A knife. A split second of maternal fury. Mort fell in the corner. Right where the coroner had found
him. Knife still stuck in his ribs.

And then he was back in the present, staring at the dilapidated cupboards, looking for some hint. The
place stank of sulphur.

By the prickling of his hackles, he knew someone was watching him. The unnatural wind flew up
and died once more, just as the floor shook. Manny turned to see a tall demon with all black eyes[2]. Its skin was coloured like a coral snake. It was holding the same knife... The same knife that had killed Mort. And something in his peripheral vision was crawling up the wall. Something dark with glowing eyes... but he daren't take his eyes off the coral-snake demon, for fear of what it would do to him. As long as he kept his eyes on it, he felt, it would not move. "What the fuck?" said Kenny, evidently perplexed. "...cut his fucking tongue out..." raged the ghost of Mort Tolenski. "NO!" Screamed the demon in her voice. It lunged. Manny screamed. The other demon leaped on him. There was a cloying cloud of sulphur, the sensation of being turned inside-out, then right way back again, and he was slumped where Mort had fallen. He instinctively felt his chest. No knife. No wound. So the spreading moistness was... okay. For limited definitions of 'okay'. Blue and red lights flashed in through the windows. "HELP!" Kenny screamed. "The guy's a psycho! Help me!" He frantically bumped away towards the door. Thundering footsteps barely masked the rumbling of the floor. Something human-shaped, with lots of trailing edges, fell through the ceiling, floated across the room, and vanished up the stairs. The murder weapon got itself out of the drawer and danced across the remains of the table. {BAM!} "FREEZE! POLICE!" Just like that, it all stopped. The men in blue covered him while they released Kenny from his bonds. Kenny, for a change, was rattling out a story about this psycho who yelled at thin air and did some weird shit before throwing himself in a corner and pissing his pants. The dude's not right, yo. And upstairs, they found piles of children's clothing on his mattress, and kiddie porn magazines that hadn't been there before. Manny felt the cold chill of shock creep over him as they cuffed him. *Had* they not been there? He had to know better than to leave evidence like that lying around. Didn't he? Or was he loosing his mind? Briefly, the coral-snake demon appeared in a corner. Staring at him. He screamed, trying to get away. By the time they trained their lights on where it was... it was gone. Vanished. Maybe he was insane. That'd make... sense.

[1] Because in this neighbourhood, a pissed-off delivery guy ordinarily takes *all* your cash, credit cards, and the pizza. [2] Of course Sara carries some basic effects gear with her.

~

The police were taking his statement and Todd answered while watching Manny's hands being cuffed behind his back. The man's eyes were manic and glistening and he looked like he was muttering to himself. He was smiling. That alone scared the living shit out of Todd. But it was over now, he told himself. He was safe. The cops had him. Todd folded his arms across his chest and wished Sara was next to him. She was, but not close enough. Explaining to the police why she was there would have been too awkward, but Todd knew she hadn't left. *She's near,* Jean's voice came in his head while the policeman wrote down what Todd had said. *Waiting right outside for you.*

"So I guess the guy's on drugs or something, on top of it. You're real lucky the neighbors called the
police, kid. So what was your name?"
"...Kenny Cartman, you said?" The policeman looked unimpressed. "You think only you kids watch
South Park, son?"
Shit. ShitshitshitshitshitSHIT.
Todd winced. Manny looked over his shoulder, staring at him. "Can't you get him out of here first,
man?" he hissed to the cop.
"We're patrol officers. Our car's downstairs and he looks dangerous enough to try and make a break
for it. We've already called for backup to move him to the car."
Jesus. Todd knew for a fact that if Manny tried to run he would not get away. Even if they were
unarmed and had handcuffed him with plastic soda rings, Manny wouldn't get more than two feet
before he was stopped flat. But he couldn't say that.
"I can't tell you my name right now," he said in an undertone. Manny overheard unfortunately. He
stirred from the corner and the other policeman put a hand to his weapon in warning. Manny stayed
put, but he stared at Todd.
"Come on kid, he's not gonna hurt you where he's going."
Todd looked away, head bent so his hair could obscur part of his face.
"Idon'twannatellyouinfrontofhim," he muttered.
"If you aren't Kenny..." Manny croaked. It made Todd shudder. The cop's eyes narrowed.
"This guy come after you before, kid?"
Todd didn't respond. Manny gave a whoop of laughter and stamped his foot. "It is you! You little
son of a whore, you fooled me good!" Todd dared to look between his fingers and saw Manny
sitting in the corner laughing as if it was all some horrible misunderstanding.
In the next instant, he slammed into Todd.
The cops lunged, grabbing his arms and pulling him, but Manny had acted fast, biting the side of
Todd's neck viciously enough to draw blood. The cops did little good, Manny had clamped down.
Todd's mind had blown into full panic, but cold blue rage forced his legs to tuck under Manny's
body and kick.
Manny let go with a whoomph of air, jaw snapping open as he sailed into the wall. Todd curled over
on his side, hand pressed against his bleeding neck and shaking with anger. With humiliation. One
cop wrestled Manny back to the ground, cursing. "We're sorry," the other said, trying to lift Todd to
his feet.
He felt blood seeping through his fingers and filth. Gagging, Todd broke away from the cop and
turned on the water, frantically washing his throat. He didn't stop, even when the wound stopped
bleeding and his shirt became soaked.
"His name's Todd Tolensky," Manny said, calmly licking the blood from his mouth. Both cops
looked at him icily. "He's my nephew. My little slut." Todd hitched, leaning over the edge of the
sink, fingers curling around the rim. He was going to attack the man and rip him into little pieces. He
had to hold on to something. God, he had to hold on so he didn't kill him.
Another squad car had arrived, crackled one of the cops belt intercoms. "Great, come and help pick
up the trash," he muttered back. Footsteps outside on the staircase. Todd felt a cop's hand on his
back, a voice trying to be gentle, trying to say he was sorry, so sorry. Todd didn't hear much, but he
didn't let go of the sink until Manny was downstairs.

~~

Jean had never seen anything like it. Sara, when in a mood to get something done, proved to be a
queen of quick-changers. The instant she was in range, she practically jumped into her usual jeans
and T-shirt ensemble. Only the shoes really slowed her down, what with the tangle of laces. She
didn't even bother to take the contacts out, just slapped her holowatch on and let it define her
humanity.
"Why get dressed at all?" Jean had to wonder.
"The watch doesn't disguise my clothes - only me." She shrugged. "That... and it's freaking *cold* out there." Then she dashed to the scene.

The cops saw her coming and fielded her with neat expertise.
"Ma'am, you can't go in there, it's a crime scene," one intoned.
"But-- Haufmann... He's the evil uncle and he has Todd and that's his *car*! Is Todd okay?"
"We're not at liberty to divulge that information as yet," said the spokescop.

Sara acted the panicked girlfriend to the hilt, screaming Todd's name at the top of her lungs. They bought Manny out first. He'd been hurt, and yet he was smiling. How the living spit could he *smile* after the stunt they'd pulled? He was cradling his ribs and having trouble breathing, which was why they loaded him into an ambulance - with an escort, of course - before they took him away. Sara redoubled her struggles. "That's him! That's the bastard that hurt my Todd! Le'eat'im! Goddamn you! Don't you fucking smile, you fucking dragon shit!" She tried to throw some street debris, but it was too light and fell far short of her target. And the police were starting to restrain her. Sara turned on the waterworks, calling Todd's name over and over.

At least it was a show for the interesting night people[1].

Todd emerged, grey and harrowed, with a medical pad taped to his neck and a blanket stretched over his shoulders.

The EMT's checked him over as the cops finally let her go.
"Sweetie," she breathed, hovering just outside the EMT's elbow, "What *happened*?"
"Sonofabitch realised who I was. Nosy fuckin' cops. He bit me."
One hand shot out from the blanket and seized hers in a death grip. "He's never gonna let me alone."

Sara regretfully nodded. "I know. The law really sucks in this department."
"Ma'am, we're going to have to take your..."
"Boyfriend," they both supplied.
"...Boyfriend to hospital for observation. Given the circumstances, I think it'd be okay if you rode along."

Sara kissed Todd's hand as she tried to pry him off. "Will we be going to the same hospital as that sleaze?"

"No, we'll make sure we go to a different one." Todd relaxed at that point, falling to shivering and tears. "...goddamn it..." he muttered.
"It's shock, dear," said Sara, parking herself nearby. "The instant you relax, the aftershocks get you."
She couldn't help half a smile. "And we both know holding it off can be hazardous to the health, hm?"

"Heh. Yeah..."

[1] In any other neighbourhood, the phrase would be "*interested* night people". Joke freely liberated from Messirs Pratchett and Gaiman

~

As loath as he was to admit it, Todd probably wouldn't have lasted one minute riding by himself in the back of an ambulance. He kept his hands to himself so he didn't hurt Sara, crossing his arms under the blanket, though he leaned against her for support.

He was quiet for a while, wiping his eyes when he couldn't blink it back.
"I think I really broke his ribs," Todd said, only loud enough for Sara to hear. He didn't sound proud of it.

Sara rubbed his back, able to tell there was more. He swallowed harder. "I..." There was no sense being afraid she'd turn away from him at this point. She'd seen it all. She knew it all. And Sara had still come back for him regardless. "Ever been so pissed y-you seriously thought you were gonna kill someone?" he managed. He took a breath. "Right in front of the damn cops?"

Not that he didn't care about wasting a guy, but he didn't fancy going to jail either. In Todd's spinning mind he didn't know what that made of him.
"The instant I saw him smiling," Sara confessed in a murmur. "Once I've finished with someone, smiling should never be an option. He needs more work."

Todd raised his eyebrows. After the show she'd just been in, he'd have expected Manny to be a gibbering wreck, too. What the fuck was up with that? "Later, eh?" he said. "Survive now. Plot later."

Sara took a deep breath. "I suppose the Professor would tell us it's a natural survival instinct. You know - eliminate the threat?"

"Huh," said Todd. "We both know he's gonna be out again in a coupla years."

"Not with attempted murder on the sheet," said Sara. She pointed to his bandaged neck. "If he bit a little harder..."

"Way t' gimme nightmares, sweets," he said. It wasn't quite a joke.

"Sorry, but it's true. He tried to kill you. If he gets out, he'll try again. He's obsessed and dangerous. Dad could argue him into one institution or another for a very long time. Kidnapping, unlawful restraint, transporting a minor for illegal purposes, attempted murder. If we get a good judge the guy could serve those sentences consecutively."

Todd snuggled in the blanket. "Yeah," he said dreamily. But that was a distant future where Manny didn't escape somehow or some idiot forgot to read him his rights or other shit where the fucktard could legally get off on a technicality. "I hope so." He didn't want to crush Sara's newly found optimism, but he knew slime like Manny got away with it all the time. Pops got away with it, after all. Until he died.

~

They had settled back into quiet, Sara stroking Todd's hair and just being as close as she was helped tremendously. The ambulance stopped and one of the EMT's opened the doors for them. "Okay, if you can step down please," he said, unfolding the steps. Todd took Sara's hand and walked down them, clutching the blanket around his shoulders. He was freaking cold and looked around for Manny, despite the EMT's earlier promise.

There was no sign of the guy, but there were a few cops waiting to question him further. They hung back at the entrance, allowing the EMT's to handle them for now. One of them handed Sara a clipboard. "Family?" he asked her.

"Girlfriend."

"Did you want to get that started for him while we take a look?"

Probably a breach along the lines of privacy somewhere, but it was a mercy breach. Todd didn't look like he was paperwork capable at the moment. Sara nodded and started filling out what she knew. Todd sat on the stool, clinging to the edges of the blanket like it was a forcefield. The EMT didn't try to pull it away. He gently peeled the medical tape back and whistled. "Jesus," he muttered and threw the pad away. The bleeding had stopped but the puncture wounds were there. "I'm gonna have to clean this first."

~

Sara paused in her jotting. "Please choose a gentle antiseptic?" said Sara. "Todd's allergic to the harsher ones."

"How allergic?" said the medic.

"Boils, blisters, sloughing skin if the stuff's really bad."

The medic whistled. "We'll get the chemically inert stuff," they assured.

Sara went back to the forms. Specifically, next of kin. "Uh," she said. "What if Todd doesn't *have* a next of kin?"

"Huh?"

"His parents are dead, and the only relative I know of is going down the river for that bite, at the very
least. Todd, dear, is there anyone...?"
Todd murmured a 'no'.
"Just put in his guardian."
Sara bit her lip.
"Yo, put in Lance," said Todd, husky-voiced. "He's good."
Oh yes. Eighteen. The official adult of the boarding house. And probably going to be laboring under
the medical bills for quite a while. Even *with* Todd's income helping, it would be a weight.
Maybe she could help.
Sara kissed Todd on the forehead. "I'm'a check my finances, see if I can help with the bills a bit,
okay?"
"Come back quick," said Todd.
Sara ducked outside and activated her mobile, quickly dialling up her bank.
"South Bayville Bank, how may I help you?"
"Hi, my name's Sara Louise Adrien, I'm just ringing to check my finances."
Tapping over the phone. "I'm sorry, those accounts have been frozen."
Yeah, she was checking the mundane accounts. "Could you check the ones under the access-code
'Antoinette', please?" She obligingly spelled it.
"I'm sorry, all those accounts have been frozen."
"Who did it?" _Who *knew*?_
"I'm not at liberty to divulge that information, ma'am. We acted under a court order, and that's all I
can say."
Sara sighed. "Thanks anyway." She hung up.
Fucking dragons.
She hurried back to Todd. "Looks like I'm going to have to improvise. Again. And prosecute my
mother."
"You *what*?" Todd yawped.
"I suspect she found my Antoinette accounts and froze them. Now I have to start a new account
somewhere else. Maybe under a different ID or something... And tell Dad... Shit, this is getting
tangled..."
"'S cool babe..." he said. "We make it somehow."
Sara held his hand. "Somehow."
~~
"No, she's not a patient, here," said Sam, "she's *with* a patient, here. Todd Tolenski? Only he's
probably still in the ER and hasn't been registered, yet."
The receptionist took all this in, ignored it, and searched for the both of them on the computer. "I'm
sorry, I can't find either of those patients on our records. Are you sure they went to *this* hospital?"
"We followed the ambulance all the way here," said Scott. "Look, can we check the ER? They're
probably in there."
"I'm sorry, only relatives of patients are allowed inside the ER *with* patients."
"Hi Dad," said Sara. "I got the vibe you were near."
"There she is," said Sam. "Can we go in?"
The receptionist gave up. "Go ahead."
Todd was stitched up and bandaged, from what he could see. He was also being treated for shock,
judging by the copious blanket and the hot beverage clutched in his hands. "+Hate* hospitals," he
said by way of greeting.
Sara explained about the bill, about wanting to help. About the Antoinette accounts and how they'd
been stopped cold by a court order.
Sam just sighed and murmured, "So, it is to be war between us..."
Sara hugged him and whispered, "I'm sorry, Daddy. 'S all my fault."
He caught her up in a fierce grip. "Never, love. *Never*. It's your mother who's broken." Broken
and breaking everything her shattered shards could reach.
What had happened to turn such a dazzling woman into such a mean-spirited harridan? When had been the moment that first fissure appeared, turning mother against family?
Well... whatever and whenever it had happened, it was time now to *do* something. It was very blatantly obvious that Jaquelline could only realise what she was when she hit rock bottom. And that meant... taking everything away, if he had to.
Sam found a payphone and dialled home.
"Hello," he began.
"Sam! Sam! O Sam, it's so horrible..."
"Yes. What you did *is* horrible. Are you going to try and fix it?"
"That wretched girl, she-- what?"
"You've done some very bad things, Jaquelline," he said. He kept his voice even. Calm. "I know what they are. Now. Are confessing, or are you somehow going to turn this into Sara's fault?"
"Of *course* it's her fault! That horrid little creature's been nothing but a burden to me, all these years! Nothing I do *works*! She's willful and weird and she's doing it on purpose to *shame* me!"
Sam took a deep breath. "Sara can't help being herself, Jaquelline. You should *know* that by now."
"Are you taking her *side*?"
"Someone has to."
"And I suppose you want a *divorce*."
Ah, the weapon in her arsenal. Striking out at his one weak point - that he still loved her, even after watching her slowly kill her true self for sixteen years. "If that's what *you* want, dear."
He could just imagine her stunned look of shock and outrage.
"You won't get custody of Sara. Not after the court sees the DVDs of your systematic abuse. They might even make you pay damages out of your own funds." And he knew that she only had a few thousand set aside in her personal account - in case of 'God forbid's. "You won't get the house, since that's Sara's home and the courts take a dim view on upsetting the children any further. I suppose I could let you have a car, but... you're not really in the habit of driving. What with your chronic alcaholism and all..."
Now she recovered. "HOW *DARE* YOU! I GAVE YOU THE BEST YEARS OF MY LIFE!"
"No, Jaquelline," he said. Firm. Enough to stop her bluster short.
"What?"
"You gave me years of watching you kill yourself. I tried to stop you. So hard. So often... and you still did it. I... I can't watch it any more, Jaquelline. You can kill yourself in your own time. I won't be there any more."
"But I *can't* get divorced," she wailed. "Mother would *disown* me!"
"Then I suggest you re-evaluate your actions," said Sam, "and do what must be done to get what you want."
"...i wanted you t' love me..."
"I still love you, Jaqui. Always. And I love you too much to watch you do what you're doing, any more."
"Please, Sam..."
"You need to turn around and look at yourself. And I need to help Sara." He sighed. "You can... join me. When you're back to being yourself."
"Sam! No! *SAAAMMM*!"
He heard her screaming his name as he hung up.
He thought he could save her. He thought he could help her grow.
How was it that she kept chipping away at herself, despite his best efforts?
"I'm sorry, Jaqui," he whispered. "I tried."
Her father was grey when he returned. Not that his hair had changed colour from shock - dreadful old myth, that - he was just... grey.

Grey of spirit.

All the colour had gone out of him. Like he was dead inside.

Sara wept for him. Silently, thank whatever powers controlled such things - but she wept nonetheless. Wept as she watched her formerly vibrant father slump in a plastic chair and sigh away his hopes and dreams.

"I don't think she ever really loved me," he said, voice husky and soft. "She loved... an ideal. A dream husband. Soccer star millionaire from Old Blood. Just the thing to make her mother happy."

Another soul-destroyed sigh. "I wanted to make *her* happy... show her that there was more than lables to the world." He shook his head. "She chose her fantasy over truth... and she's dying of it."

"I'm sorry," Sara found herself saying. Dad had had his heart torn out. Or maybe finally excised after years of painful wrenching and tugging. He'd cut himself away, and it had taken part of his soul with it.

"No, it's my own fault. I let myself be fooled." A third sigh. He turned to the bemused and silent Todd. "We Adriens love thoroughly and we love long. When we commit ourselves to our heart's desire... It can last us the rest of our lives."

Sara moved so she could comfort them both. "In the right circumstances, it's a blessing. In the wrong ones..." Tears filled her eyes and cut off her voice.

Todd did what he could to hug her. "Never do you no wrong, babe. Promise."

Sara barely managed a, "...’nk ‘oo..."

Jaquelline screamed at the dial tone. How could he? Didn't he love her any more? Had he actually chosen the unthinkable? Did he love his own daughter more than he loved his wife?

Traci found her. "What's all the noise?" she said. "Your guests are very alarmed."

Traci, Jaquelline recalled, was a cousin. She, too, had been raised in the way that her own mother had bought her up. Competing for honours and attention.

Nevertheless, she asked, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course, sweetheart," soothed Traci.

"Sam... my Sam... he's *leaving* me! And he says I'm not going to get *anything*..."

The expected soothing coos were not forthcoming. Instead, Jaquelline received only an icy stare.

"Then don't expect *us* to help you. *You're* the one who fucked up... and none of us want to catch any of your shrapnel."

In less than five minutes, her family had abandoned her. The few friends who were left quickly excused themselves thereafter.

She was left alone.

Jaquelline picked up forgotten beverages and downed them, one by one, as she collected the glasses. She didn't care what the drinks were, only that they made the darkness around her a little less painful.

Less and less painful, glass by glass, until the darkness wrapped her in a nice warm shroud.

~~

For the first time in a subjective forever, Jean Grey slept through Sara's usual morning serenade. Then she changed it. Added to it.

"Touch me. It's so easy to leave me... all alone with my memories, of my days in the sun. If you touch me, you'll understand what happiness is... look. A new day... has be-guuuuuuuunnnnnnn."

She threw the pillow on automatic.

"God, don't you *ever* give me a break?"

"Further proof He's on holiday if you ask me," said Sara. "The almighty powers governing our lives are AFK." Sara returned the pillow with a neatening swipe and pat. "Besides, chin up. What with the Furforal over quote-unquote Haufmann, there won't be school today, or attendance will be so low that they'll be forced to cancel. That's a further twenty-four hours without the Idiot Brigade asking
bloody stupid questions and that, my dear roommate, is a positive thing."
"...nnnnnggh," said Jean, knowing that she'd have to get up anyway. "Wha' bout all that stuff with
y'r parents?"
Sara paused in the middle of her shirt. It contained a photo of Edward Scissorhands and the legend
_Eddy Cuts Me Up_[1]. "I suppose," she said at length, straightening herself out as she did so, "that
the worst is over, at long last. I guess it's kind of like waiting for the hurricane to pass. The storm is
over and we survived. Now it's time for mop-up."
"D'you have to put a bright side on *everything*?" Jean moaned.
"I try my best to think of six positive things before breakfast," said Sara. "To paraphrase the Red
Queen."
Jean glared at her, decided better than to head-hop, and just did what she could of Kurt's amazing
ability to read people. Nervous. Upset. Dithering. Distracted. Sara was hurting, too, but she wasn't
going to let it show. "You have to, don't you?"
"Wow, anyone would think you're a telepath," Sara joked. "Yes. I have to. Someone has to.
Otherwise Dad'll sink." Denim coat on over the shirt and a quick drag of the brush through her hair.
"Done. Let's get on with the day."
Jean watched her go. Not a lot she could do to help this. Except... *maybe*...
She reached out her mind, trying to find the tangled knot of anger that was Jaquelline Adrien.

Hurt.
Her eyes hurt and they were shut.
Her head hurt so she tried not to think.
Something nearby smelled truly horrible and her mouth tasted like something had not only crawled in
there to die, but had decided to come back from the dead to throw a party for its zombie friends.
And they all smoked.
And, against all logic, her *hair* hurt.
She was lying front down on something hard and cold. She hurt. And it smelled *really* awful.
She risked a moan.
Ow. That hurt, too.
Jaquelline - yes, that was her name... Jaquelline risked a peek through her unobstructed eye. Table.
Pretty table nearby. Almost covered with glasses. Shot glasses. Cocktail glasses. Tumblers. One beer
stein. The nearest corner had spilled over and shattered glasses on the floor nearby.
She was on the floor, too.
The bad smelling stuff was a puddle of vomit.
She had been sleeping. On the floor. Next to a puddle of vomit.
Correction. *In* a puddle of vomit.
Her automatic reaction of disgust threw her upright before she could realise that this was a really,
*really* bad idea.
Her head wanted to implode. Her eyeballs scratched in their sockets and her hair. How could her
*hair* ache? It defied logic.
Another whimper escaped her throat against her will. It made the pain worse.
And now the sun was in her eyes.
Jaquelline crawled painfully away from the light and found Ray tidying up the detritus in the next
room. "...h'lp me..." she croaked.
"Ah," he boomed, his voice echoing not only through the house, but also through her seemingly-
shattered skull. "Madame is finally awake. Shall I run a bath for Madame? I understand that Madame
has missed a few appointments, but since they failed to ring to voice their concerns, I thought it best
to let you rest."
When the echoes died down, Jaquelline managed. "You let me sleep in a pile of *vomit*?"
"You did leave orders that I was not to disturb you, Madame," he thundered.
"...could you... be a li'l quieter?"
"Quiet?" he roared. "I *am* being quiet, Madame! I AM THE VERY *SOUL* OF
DISCRETION!
"...ow..." Jaquelline whimpered. "Help me, *please*.
The soul of discretion hauled her roughly through the agonising light, all the way up to the master
bedroom, and filled a raucous bath with water.
During this process, Jaquelline caught a good, solid look at herself in the mirror.
Pitiful.
Divorced.
Alcoholic.
And covered in her own mess.
A thought from the depths of her painful head said, _You've always been covered in your own mess.
The only difference is now you can see it._
She wept as she cleaned herself off. How had it come to *this*? She'd had everything... and now it
was gone.
Breakfast was a caraffe of water and some minor painkillers. And Ray left out a clean suit for her.
And a comic book of sorts.
It was titled, _How Did I Get Here?_ and the cover featured an almost stereotypical drunken bum in
a gutter.
It was a tract of sorts from Alcoholics Anonymous.
_This is your wake-up call,_ said the voice inside. _Wake up._
[1] No, this shirt does not exist, but I *want* it to.
~
Janine stared at the ceiling in her new flat. The late owner's blood was still turning up in weird
places, but, thanks to Sara and her somewhat grousomly fascination with all things forensic, she knew
exactly what to do about that.
The landlord sure as hell didn't give a shit.
The bullet holes had been easy. Again, Sara knew where to pick up specific weights of plaster
powder on the cheap.
And then there was the furniture. Most of it had come from the former resident and Janine was in no
position to be picky. She just donned the gloves - Sara's favourite brand - and cleanup-fairied the
place into respectability.
As for employment... it was astonishing how much the little things added up. Dog-walking after
school, babysitting in the evenings, even a fair deal of fetch-and-carry stuff for the older residents.
She was no Sara, but she was paying for rent and food and, once her jar of change was full,
something extra to reward herself.
It was exhausting, it was shitty, her life at school sucked and her grades were circling uncertainly
around the drainpipe of educational doom, but the important thing was that she was improving
herself.
And the strangest thing, Janine would report to Mr Kian, was that Sara was still helping her, even
though they hadn't said more than 'hello' to each other in more than a week. Every time she needed
something, there would be a past tip from Sara Louise in the back of her mind.
Something she'd previously ignored as verbal trivia, while her mind was churning up grousomely
things to say about people.
Her letterbox, this morning, also contained a locally printed pamphlet for a writing competition.
There was a cash prize and no entry fee. If she concentrated on writing it, *then* editing it, she might
have a chance.
All she had to do was remember everything Sara had ever told her.
What the hell? It wasn't as if she'd lose by entering. And if nothing happened, she'd be yet another
also-ran in a writing competition. Big deal.
That morning, in assembly, Janine took out a notebook and started stage one of her entry. It was
Fred smiled at his ceiling. Not a saggy, baggy ceiling any more. No more mornings with plaster flakes in his eyes. Or his hair. Those reconstruction guys knew their work. And they were actually glad he was there to do some of the heavy lifting. And speaking of heavy lifting, he'd have to tell Sara and the guys about that obnoxious A-hole at work last night...

"Do you have *any* idea who I *am*?" The slick suit had wailed. He'd spent his time in the queue either buying the position ahead of him in line or talking non-stop to some guy named Barry, who would not listen[1]. Yeah, you're an obnoxious jerk, _ Freddy had thought. Aloud, he said, "Your name isn't on the list for tonight." It could well have been, but he was allowed to keep anyone out who was being a complete jerk. "I happen to be *with* Desmina Karlyle!"

Desmina had breezed in hours ago, with her entourage. She hadn't said a word to *him* about friends catching up, and everyone previously with her was already checked off the list. Ergo, this guy was a stalker creepazoid. "All people with Ms Karlyle are already in the club. Your name isn't on the list. Move along." "Listen *tubbo*..."

Oh dear. Fred was very sensitive about his weight. Anyone calling him a variation of 'fat' was in for it. His hand shot out and lifted the guy by his front without even thinking about it. "*You* listen," he said. "It's my job to make sure everyone *on* the list has a good time. *You* are the sort of person who makes people have a rotten time. Plus, you ain't on the list."

"I could sue you," he croaked.

Freddy pointed to a sign. "The club reserves the right to eject with necessary force any patrons who are not conducting themselves in a manner conducive to a mutual good mood," he recited, then bought the guy close to his face. "Don't make me eject you with force."
The jerk wet his pants. Freddy let him run away, and basked in the cheers of those still waiting to get in.

All in all, it had been a good night. And it looked like a better day was beginning. Even Lance, stumbling towards coffee, looked well-rested.

Fred started cooking, humming as he did so.

[1] Ancient Yo-go commercial. There's one guy on a mobile phone who's always demanding that Barry "just listen" to him... before disaster strikes.
[2] Kiddie packet-o-pudding line that does not contain any actual yoghurt. Near as I can tell, it's chief ingredients are flour, sugar, water and colours and flavourings.

Sara had fallen asleep in the plastic chair, in the end. It was a good thing for her she only needed a little sleep, since the crick she found in her neck would have been enormously annoying if she needed 'normal' hours of rest. She stretched and sighed, noting the dawn creeping up on the horizon. "Good morning, starshine," she whispered. It was worth missing the new light just to protect Todd from any kind of approaching evil.

She couldn't protect her father from the loss of the one, dearest person who mattered the most. She'd tried, but it had injured her soul to the point where she took the first window of opportunity out of there. _If there is a God,_ she thought, _who I'm currently mad at... it would regain my favour if I
never experienced that kind of loss, myself._ Her soul was just bruised. Dad's was bleeding.

_On the other hand,_ said one of her inner voices, _You've delayed the inevitable for eleven years.
That has to count for something._

"...just made the boot drop from a higher station," she murmured.
"Mmmn?" said Todd, waking up. "D'd you *sleep*?"
"You blinked and missed it," said Sara. "Sorry I woke you, darling."
"Can't never sleep in hospitals anyhow," he said.
"Your snoring to the contrary."

He, too, yawned and stretched. "Man, I'm so dried out..."
"It's the air conditioning. Nasty stuff."

"So what happens now?"

"We wait until nine, check out, and rally the defenses against a world most cruel."

She was holding his broken hand. He moved the fingers he could move so he held her back.
"Trouble happens when we let go, yo."

"I'd posit that we meet said troubles together, but that can't happen with separate classes. Hmmm. I may have to invent a new light, concealable body armour. A force shield, perhaps. Something with an easy panic switch."

Todd laughed. "Sounds like an idea. I wanted one o' those my whole life."

"I figure it should sell well in the nerd quarter."

~Deucalion

Sara had climbed into the bed with Todd and was petting his hair when 9 o'clock rolled around.

"As much as I loathe to suggest moving, I think it's time to get going." She shifted to hold his uninjured hand.

"But I'm comfortable..." To an outsider, the position they were in would not only look uncomfortable but inappropriate. It was, however, very relaxing. Sara liked being this close to her boyfriend. "As am I, dear." Boyfriend. She liked the word as well.

"Yo, can we do this when we get home? It's really nice." He was face down in her meager chest and obviously enjoying it. He squeezed her hand. "It's *really* nice."

~

"Sounds like a plan," said Sara. "Alas, we have to trip merrily through the labyrinthine mess of American Hospital Red Tape, so let's get started, hm?"

"...mmmm..."

"Sooner started, sooner done, sooner home and having... mmm... waffles?"

He almost sprang out of the bed like toast. "Bribery accepted."

~~~

Meanwhile...

It was a very small meeting. Principal Kelly and the few people who had noticed "something odd" around certain people at Bayville High... and resented the possible causes.

"All I know is something is weird with those Boarding house kids," said Graydon.

"I know all those Xavier kids are messed up," said Duncan. "Except Jean."

"I know what *I* know," said Kelly. "They're not... exactly human..."

"How do you mean?" said Jack.

"I mean... strange things happen around them." He dropped a picture of Kurt Wagner on the table.

"He vanishes without a trace. Disturbs electrical surveillance equipment. And what's with his 'no touch' thing? It's bizarre. This one," a picture of Todd Tolenski, "has shown a prowess at jumping that borders on supernatural. Slime happens to appear near his location."

"His stink's definitely out of this world," said Duncan.
A photo of Rogue. "She learns things without apparent research, and possesses knowledge she can't have obtained through normal means." A picture of Kitty. "She never has any problems accessing locked rooms."

"So what?" said Jack. "Lots of this stuff can be explained."

"That's why we need proof," said Kelly. "We need to capture one. Study it."

"Are you kidding? They all flock together," said Graydon.

"That's why we're going after their newest recruit," said Kelly.

He put down a picture of Sara.

~ Weirdlet ~

It wasn't as though he hadn't tried his hardest. But more and more incidents kept piling up - the inspector would be here Wednesday - and it was always that lot somehow right in the thick of it. And now, with Haufmann* having disappeared, after his misconduct in the hallways - no contact with a student, he should have made sure the man understood it belt and bracers and double-underlined contract in blood - it was just too much. Something had to be done, and if his suspicions turned out to be smoke and stress, so much the better.

But in the meanwhile, let the boys handle getting the dirt on that little menace and her friends. Provoke another attack, this one spun properly so that it was the student making trouble, and they could all be out of his hair...

*I don't think Kelly actually knows about Haufmann yet - it's only been a day, and so far as I know the police know him as Manny, not his current alias.

~

"You take over," said Graydon. "I need to take a leak."

Duncan yawned as he accepted the binoculars. So far, the mansion had been a dull, boring nothing happening. How the hell did cops on stake-out *manage*? He shook himself and focussed on his task. Waiting for Essel. Adrians. What the fuck ever it was calling itself.

Stupid tranny whore.

There it came, having an animated discussion with the goth freak.

He wrote the time and the activity in the notebook. Watched the tranny mount a scooter that was *not* its usual hunk of junk. Now he had to wait and watch and time how long it was gone.

"Whaddayadoin'?" Graydon demanded. "We gotta go after it."

"Thought you had to piss."

"So'd I. Let's scrag it."

~

Sara spotted them the instant she finished securing Marie's scooter to the stand. Duncan's crew, but no Duncan. There was Graydon, and Brent; watching from near the closest entrances and preparing to move in. Which meant that Paul Greaves had to be... Sara casually turned, making it look as if she were double-checking the bike. There. Behind her and right where it was difficult to keep an eye on him without looking anxious. The slimy little weasel.

Sara ignored him - he'd never strike first - and watched Graydon and Brent watching her. She faked going for the further entrance before swinging towards the nearer one. They were wise to that. Drat.

_Remember what Logan said. Act casual and prepare to kick ass._

They were moving in typical triangle formation. Isolate the target and let them know they're being isolated. Increase the panic and therefore the hunter's pleasure.

Sara did not panic. She maintained a mien of icy calm and subtly-withheld rage. She also crept a hand into her pocket to activate the trace-caller device that Xavier insisted she carry at all times. Then
she snuck it inside the little hole so it would be between her pocket and the coat lining. Effectively lost to her enemies' control.

_Jean...? I'm about to have some trouble, here..._  
No reply. Typical. All up in one's face right up until the moment she was needed.  
_Professor? Little help?_  
Silence there, and nothing more.  
Sara stopped and let them close in the last few paces. "Graydon Trent, Brent Derby and Paul Greaves. I thought you didn't go anywhere without your keeper. Where is Duncan? Is he feeling unwell?"

"He's around," said Paul in his typical sleazy manner. His voice always made her want to wash the air. "Somewhere."

"Or is he?" added Brent in a way he probably thought was menacing. Poor lamb.

"Is there something you believe I can help you with? Bathing? Abandoning pre-conceived gender roles? Basic hygiene?"

To a man, all three checked their armpits and breath. Only Graydon's face went red. He covered it well, but Sara could read the subtle indications of shame.

"Shaddup freak!"

"Yeah shaddup."

Sara rolled her eyes. "Do you gentlemen -and I use the term lightly- have any awareness of the laws you're breaking right now? On camera?"

"Don't matter."

"Them rentacops can't do nothing to us."

"Ah, so you came to me for English tutoring," said Sara. Goad them. Get them angry. When they're angry, they make mistakes. "I charge five dollars an hour plus a dollar for every grammatical mistake."

"Losersayswhut?"

"You owe me a dollar," chirped Sara. "Enunciation is key. Pour example; Your putrid perfume has a peripatetic penumbra."

"What?" said Graydon.

"Ladies," announced Sara with a flourish, "I give you your loser."

Duncan swung. Badly.

Sara ducked and sent him over her shoulder into Paul, who was doubtless trying to grab her backpack.

Keep in camera range. Keep them in sight. If they swing, make sure they miss. Use everything. Even the rage inside for 'Piggy' Stiye.

Except... she was still learning how to control that part of her.

Sara didn't want to come out of the other side of the red mist to discover she'd hospitalized someone's grandmother. Or even killed one of these three idiots.

They couldn't learn once they were dead.

Right. Keep 'Piggy' for desperate, last-ditch methods.

The three of them charged, Paul a beat behind because he was the sort of fellow to make sure the others were kicking the enemy before he got in to shove his boot in after said enemy was down. Elbows, knees, head. Kicking, scratching and even her high-torque Favisham's Swing got into play.

She was doing quite well for herself until Duncan approached from a seemingly-casual vector with a cloth he held over her mouth and nose.

_Absent Gods, no..._ Instincts and training fought in one vertiginous moment. The elbow she got into him was too weak to make a difference. Her feet could not find his. His grip too fast to even try for the nose.

By the time she thought of digging her fingers into a fistful of groin, it was too late.

Her body would not obey. It went lax. Slumped onto the ground in a heap. Barely breathing. Hard to focus.

Can. Not. Move!
In the drawing room of Xavier's Institute for Gifted Children, Jean felt a desperate tickle against her shields. Then a harder 'sting' from Xavier.

"OW!"

"Concentrate, Jean."

Jean filled her head with some of Sara's cyclical nonsense songs. If he got through, he'd have a head-full.

They'd slung her between Duncan and Brent. Each holding a beer bottle in their inside arms. The outer arms helped her 'walk' by puppeteering her legs. Graydon and Paul mock-staggered behind, also carrying decorative beer bottles.

They didn't smell like they'd emptied them. And Sara knew every smell of alcohol there was.

A little old lady, much like the one she'd briefly imagined in her horror/fantasy of emerging from the red mist, stopped and watched them pass by.

Sara tried to say, "Help, I'm being kidnapped," but all that came out was a breathless, unintelligible slur.

"C'mon, buddy," Duncan re-shouldered Sara's arm, 'co-incidentally' knocking some air out of her.

"We're nearly at the car. Gonna get you home."

"Dude," whispered Brent, "this tranny don' look so good."

"Since when do they ever look good?" he whispered back.

They came to an SUV and, since the little old lady had toddled on, dumped her on the ground again. Someone she couldn't see undid her jeans and wrestled a hand inside her panties.

"Fuck. It *is* a girl," said Paul. "GAH! And it's bleeding!"


Think. Think loud. _JEAN! PROFESSOR! HELP!_

"Euwwie euwwie euwwie... 'Nybody got wet wipes? Disinfectant? Oh Jesus what if it has AIDS? Whaddaya do if you touch tranny AIDS blood? Do you pee on it?"

"Naw, that's jellyfish," said Brent.

"...the fuck did I put my keys...?" pondered Duncan.

"You didn't put them in your jacket, didja? 'Cause you put your jacket in the car so that thing," Boot to Sara's shoulders, "wouldn't spot you so easy."

"...omigodomigodomigodigodomigod... I'm a get AIDS!"

_Help. I'm being abducted by morons._

"If I pee on that hand, are you gonna tell nobody?"

"But you just said not to pee on it."

"Don't listen to me. I don't know nothing!"

_Two dollars,_ thought Sara. Then she got back to concentrating on Jean and the Professor.

"Fuck, I did put my jacket in the car." Duncan must have been leaning against an SUV window.

"Does anyone remember if you're s'posed'a pee on AIDS blood?" pleaded Paul.

"Do we call the boss?" asked Brent.

"I think I heard something about baking soda and soy sauce?" Graydon contributed. "Or was it baking soda and ketchup. I'm pretty sure it was baking soda and *something* you put on fries..."

"I left my phone in my jacket, too," Duncan lamented.

"Anybody got the boss' number on their phone?" asked Brent. "He didn't give it to me..."

"I GOT AIDS BLOOD ON MY HAND! AIDS! BLOOD! SOMEBODY PEE ON IT OR SOMETHING!"

If she were capable of getting a proper breath, she would have been laughing. But she couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Her whole body felt as if it were under severe gravity. And, to be honest, she had to wonder if the whole telepathic element was functioning, right now.

_I wish Daddy was here._

Daddy!
He always knew when she was scared. Still trying to ‘broadcast’ to Jean and the Professor, Sara let the fear ride her. _Daddy, come find me._

Sharing time with Todd, watching Sara's latest cartoons, Sam Adrien stopped laughing and turned away from the screen as if trying to listen to an inner voice. Todd, too, faced the same direction. Both said the same thing at once. "Sara's in trouble."

"Aw, geez. Smart keys!"
"Whut?"
"Smart car. Smart keys." A door opened. "It won't let you lock it with the keys inside."
"I'mgonnadieofAIDS, Idon'wannadieofAIDS, I'Ilcatchgaynessorsomething!"
"Shut. Up. PAUL!"

Paul just kind of whimpered in place. "Okay. Wrap that hand in Wet Ones and stick it in a plastic bag and hold it on with the duct tape, okay? The boss'll know what to do."
"...idon'wannadieofAIDS... 'swaytoogay..."
"And shove the thing in the trunk. Nobody wants to share seat space with it."

Hands gripping her wrists. Hands gripping her ankles. Two more gripped her backpack and helped her wholesale into the trunk.

Spacious, yes, but no space is spacious enough on fractions of breath. If she really concentrated on punching them, she could twitch a random finger on her hand.

Useless. Completely useless. She only started to cry when the engine started.

~

End Notes

This was an interactive fiction at my old site [currently in suspended animation] and I don't know exactly how this site works, yet. I appreciate all help given by the generous souls out there :)

I'd like it to be interactive again.

Please let me know how to do that part.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!