So I Leave It Up To You

by auburn

Summary

An epic tale of mutants, war, future Genosha, scorpions and frogs, starring Gambit, written way back in the day.

Notes

I have this dated as finished 5 March 2005, which means it was actually written in 2004. Do not expect it to be canon compliant to current X-Men comic continuity. I revised it only as far as making the ending clearer and correcting typos (and I may have missed some when my
eyes started crossing). It retains my dislike of Professor Xavier (comicverse) and Rogue (comicverse). So if they are favorites, this may read as character bashing.

I've left the dates in the story alone. So it's a fork in the road alternate universe.

As always, see a mistake, comment and I'll fix it if possible.
Chapter Summary

There's a giant space station in geosynchronous orbit above an island in the Indian Ocean. Human beings have been resolutely ignoring it for hundreds of years. That all changes when one of their space craft blows up and ends up tumbling right at it.

AD 2227, October 17
High Earth Orbit
Mars Expedition Mission Control

The Ares Explorer IV tumbled out of control toward Earth's atmosphere, one thruster still firing erratically, a blackened hole torn in its frame where its second fusion plant had blown out. Mission control, operating from the top of the new orbital elevator, tried desperately to contact any of the crew on board. Telemetry insisted there were still people alive onboard. They weren't replying. They were going to die. Ares was steadily approaching the defensive perimeter of Avalon Station.

Avalon remained as silent as always, vast curves and alien technology looming high in geosynchronous orbit above Earth. Where human technology had the impressive look of things built to the most exacting standards, Avalon appeared seamless, as though its metals and strange ceramics had flowed together.

No human had stepped foot on Avalon in almost three hundred years. Anything approaching it had was destroyed, just as anything trying to pierce the Great Barrier was. Few people thought about New Genosha. Nothing penetrated the opalescent veil protecting island. A few scientists and military thought the Interdict and the barrier that still enforced it were automatic defenses and the ones who created it were gone, victims of the Gene Wars bio-weapons. The rest of the world liked to pretend Avalon and that stretch of the Indian Ocean weren't there.

Ares was a tiny speck even to the cameras at C3. It flickered as it rolled.

Max Parsons watched the image on his monitor in despair. He was in charge but there was nothing he could do. Other sensor readings were displayed, steady cascades of digital data, but he preferred what he could see, though it wouldn't be much. Avalon used mostly microwave and magnetic weapons. There wouldn't be anything to see when it struck the ship, just its destruction.

There might have been time to launch a shuttle and intercept the ship before it hit atmosphere if it hadn't been for Avalon Station. Any second he expected its defenses to wake and destroy Ares as had done many others.

He waited, watching the plot course on another monitor. Closer and closer the ship spun toward the vast space station, closer than anything had approached it in generations.

It stopped.
The ship stopped in place.

Max caught his breath, while several of his technicians tried to make sense of what they were seeing. It violated the laws of physics. It wasn't possible. Outrage and fear colored their voices.

Max thought of the campy videoons he'd watched as kid, wild, silly kid's shows where the good guys defeated the mutant menace. Mutants had strange abilities that could contravene the laws of physics. Later, in school, they'd studied the Gene Wars and he'd been curious enough to learn they didn't negate physics, but manipulated the laws of the universe innately rather than through technology and machines.

He watched as *Ares* turned over and slowly moved toward Avalon. There was no glowing aura or forcebeam locked on it. It just moved through the vacuum.

"Switch to the Spyglass System," Max directed his assistant. Spyglass was a sphere of surveillance satellites placed at Trojan points just beyond Avalon's no-go zone. They watched it twenty-four/seven, three-hundred-sixty-five days a year, monitoring the space station for changes.

"Yes sir."

Alaric input the codes that gave C3 control of Spyglass and brought an image up on the main screen. It switched rapidly as he scanned through various cameras to find the best view. Max blinked and grunted as the image stopped with a clear picture of the *Ares Explorer*. It looked like it would slam into the blank blue metal of the space station.

Then the metal just *flowed* open, accepting the human ship and engulfing it.

"Oh my god," someone blurted out.

*Ares* disappeared and the liquid metal slid back together, flowing into itself and solidifying into the same blank wall.

Nothing.

Nothing for twelve hours, while Max as head of mission control, the military, and the bureaucracy back-and-forthed with the UEN, the UNA, Pan Africa, and the Pacifica representatives that had funded the Mars mission. No one knew what to do or what it might mean. Avalon had been silent and motionless for so long, reacting only defensively, that no one could believe it had absorbed a ship. Spyglass and its predecessors had observed it for over a century and never seen anything come or go.

Now it acted.

The representative from the American Alliances bleated for a military response. Pacifica counseled caution and a watching brief. Pan Africa and the UEN wanted something done, but didn't know what. Max wanted his ship and its crew back. He didn't think loud noises and demands would get anything from Avalon.

He was simply sitting at one of the monitor banks watching the Spyglass feed of Avalon when it frosted over with static.

"What the – ?"
The static dissolved into a man's face. It was a pale yet human face, handsome in sharp fashion. His ears came to elfin points neatly framed by dark hair. He appeared to be wearing a charcoal gray uniform including a quilted or armored jacket. It had a shoulder flash in the form of a black on red X.

Max stared and swallowed hard. He was looking at a mutant. He was looking at an overriding video feed from Avalon Station.

A second later the speakers buzzed to loud life as the unknown man spoke.

"I am Northstar, Avalon Station Prime. I have been authorized by the Triune to inform you that the UN ship Ares Explorer IV has been recovered while trespassing within the Avalon security perimeter. Our scans indicated this was not a deliberate violation, as the ship had sustained a catastrophic failure and the crew were incapacitated."

Northstar paused and nodded as though hearing something that wasn't being transmitted.

"Emergency repairs are being made to ares while medical treatment is given to the crew. Estimated time to conclusion is twenty-three hours. At that point, both will be allowed to leave Avalon. Any interference or attempt to retrieve them before will be regarded as a hostile act and responded to appropriately."

Max let out an explosive sigh.

Another burst of static and the feed from Spyglass resumed.

The UN was going to go batshit. The mutants were suddenly present as they hadn't been for centuries. It had been easy to ignore them and pretend they didn't exist when they didn't communicate. But now they had.

He wondered what had changed or if they always would have responded the same way they had to the crippled ship.

He wondered, almost enviously, what ares' crew were seeing on Avalon.
The X-teams enjoy one perfect day.

AD 2004, August 17
United States
Westchester

Okay, let me get this straight,” Angelo said. Jubilee nodded for him to go on. Angelo stared across the pool at a group of the X-Men which included Jean Grey and her husband Scott Summers. “Cyclops and Phoenix got married last year—in January—and this is their first anniversary, but they went to the future and lived there for twelve years, so it's also their thirteenth. Does that cover it, chica?”

"Duh. This like their belated anniversary party. Parties."

"Wild."

Jubilee stretched a little. Like everyone else, she was enjoy the warm sun and beautiful weather provided courtesy of Storm. She had staked out the lounge chair by the pool after the quitting the basketball game earlier. The players kept coming and going, but the games continued non-stop.

The last two months had been quiet. Americans were distracted by latest election cycle as the Republican Party splintered into two. The rest of the world was watching. The X-Men and all those associated with them were too. But for one day they'd decided to forget their worries and celebrate. Emma and Sean had brought the members of the Massachusetts Academy to Westchester. Members of Excalibur had flown over from the UK, X-Factor took the day off, and even most of X-Force showed up, along with various ex-members, associates and allies had who had shown up for food. Girlfriend, boyfriends, siblings, parents and even a couple of exes mingled among them.

Tensions and disagreements were being ignored for the day. An impartial observer, which Jubilee wasn't, would note how the gathering tended to separate into cliques, though. The scientists had clumped together to talk shop and complain, a few people always orbited Xavier in his wheelchair, and the youngest were either in the pool or playing basketball sans powers – a miracle in itself. The pranksters had suspiciously disappeared and Cynics Are Us had taken over the veranda to drink and smoke away from the kids.

Logan had one of his foulest stogies going and a beer in his hand. Life was, in his estimation, therefore good. The company wasn't bad either. Fury had showed up with a goddamned date, but the Countess wasn't bad. Would have been nice if Rogers could have made it, but Captain America was keeping a lower than usual profile, not wanting to get drawn into the election mess. Logan
thought it was bullshit, but he was Canadian, what did he know?

Domino lit another cigarillo and glared daggers at Cable's back. Cable was mooning at something — or someone down in the gardens — like an idiot.

Logan blew a smoke ring. Let him fuck up. The 'Chosen One' needed to be knocked down off his high horse. Domino was just the one to do it.

Wisdom and LeBeau were shoulder to shoulder, sharing a cigarette — Storm must have taken LeBeau's pack again — and furthering the illusion of intimacy that had rumors flying from Muir to Madripoor. Logan didn't care if they'd shacked up together in London or not. Much. As long as Punkin wasn't bothered.

LeBeau's ex-wife was talking assassinations. Shatterstar was sitting on the terrace stones, in a lotus position, listening. There were worse things he could be learning; Belladonna Boudreaux knew her stuff. Occasionally, LeBeau or Wisdom added their two cents. Fury kept eyeing her like he wanted to either arrest or recruit her.

Logan took a long swallow of beer. Didn't want it to get warm, after all. Speaking of cold… Emma came up the steps and took a seat. "I need some adult company. Drake is planning some stupid joke and I can ~hear~ him right through my shields."

Wisdom cocked his head. "Who's the Popsicle targeting?"

Logan snorted. "Long as it ain't me, 'cause I'll shishkebab his icy ass."

"Be nice, Logan," LeBeau said lazily, exhaling smoke like a dragon through his nostrils. His eyes were half closed, just a peek of scarlet and black showing under his lashes.

Logan angled a look at Wisdom, who seemed undisturbed to have a loose-limbed thief draped against his shoulder. Belladonna didn't seem bothered either. Wisdom sneered at him.

"The whoopie cushion bit gets old quick," Emma commented.

"Whoopie cushion?" Domino snickered. "I'll have to remember that one."

Cable grunted.

Logan's beer was empty.

The warm sun made Remy sleepy.

The people closest to him were some of the few he halfway trusted. He'd let his psychic shields thin down, which meant his empathy picked up more of the happier than normal ambient emotions. He let a little of that seep back out, feeding the loop ever so delicately. Too much and Emma would notice, even if the rest of the X-Men didn't. They thought his 'charm' was a joke most of the time and Remy did nothing to disabuse them. He never used the empathy except in the direst of emergencies, though he wasn't above nudging them into having a better time today. The way Storm was keeping the weather golden.
He stretched lazily and dropped his head against Wisdom's narrow shoulder. Perfect, he thought, almost wanting to purr.

Wisdom glanced at the shiny auburn head now leaning against his shoulder. The thief looked relaxed as a cat. Something about him sent a jolt of attraction through Pete's system. He looked up and caught Wolverine's smirk.

"You think it's bad now," Wolverine said quietly, "you should be around him when he's had about three glasses of champagne."

"What?"


"Ya make it tempting, Gumbo," Wolverine growled. He nodded at Domino. "Ya feel it too, right, Dom?"

She eyed the sleepy thief and sort of shook herself. "You mean the urge to strip pretty-boy's clothes off and rub up against him until he purrs?" she asked.

Wisdom's mouth fell open. That described the feeling he had around Gambit half the time. Especially when the thief relaxed. And that sound Gambit made at the back of his throat, like velvet and smoke, if those were sounds; he did purr. What the hell?

Belladonna laughed and stood up, leaning over to ruffle her ex-husband's bangs. "Remy could get a nun wet." She strolled over to the edge of the veranda and surveyed the grounds, eyes taking in sight lines and cover unconsciously. "He doesn't even need to try most of the time."

"Pheromones," Wolverine explained. "Part of the kid's mutation, that 'charm' he talks about sometimes."

"Hunh," Wisdom said.

"The rest of it's some kind of psi thing," Wolverine added. Gambit held up his middle finger. "Shut up, Logan." Wolverine chuckled. "Gumbo keeps a pretty tight hold of it, unless he gets into the champagne. Think I notice it more than the others do, though."

"Lies," Gambit complained. "All lies. Champagne don't get me drunk."

"You drank it at our wedding, sweetie," Belladonna commented. "Are you saying you weren't drunk?"

Gambit slitted his eyes open and gave her a snarky look. "I'd been drunk, Julien'd have killed me, chere," he said. "Don' know which of us Julian wanted more, mais."

Who the hell was Julien? Wisdom kept his mouth shut and hoped for more. He got it, too. Belladonna grinned wickedly and said, "Considering you'd both had me, t'was probably you, thief."
Gambit shuddered hard enough Wisdom felt it where they were in contact.

"Yeech."

Wolverine started laughing. "Ya got a sick, sick relationship there, Cajun," Logan said over a snicker.

"I do not understand," Shatterstar interjected.

Gambit shrugged and said, "Julien's Belle's brother."

Domino's eyebrows went up but all she said was, "Brothers and sisters are a no-no, Gaveedra."

Wisdom added, "Brothers and brothers-in-law is sort of frowned on, too."

"Which would be why Remy killed him," Belladonna concluded. The laughter drained from her and Gambit. They looked at each other the way people who had something and lost it do, a kind of shared melancholy. But her expression hardened an instant later and Gambit shrugged and said, "He didn't stay dead."

He straightened, sliding away from Wisdom and onto his feet. The air sparked for a tiny second and smelled like lightning, then nothing. The lazy feeling of near arousal hanging in the air disappeared. "I'm gonna get another beer," Gambit muttered and retreated into the mansion.

"Way to kill a mood, Boudreaux," Wolverine remarked.

"We've just got too much past between us," Belladonna said. She gave a sharp nod. "I only came for Guild business. Think it's time I got out of here." She slipped over the veranda rail and ghosted away toward the garage.

He had his head in the big commercial-sized refrigerator, trying to unearth his Black Voodoo beer from behind Logan's Molsons. His spatial-kinetic sense registered her movement as she entered the kitchen before his nose caught her perfume, so he didn't jump when she spoke.

"I saw the ex splitting," Rogue said.

"Hey, chere," he replied, then, spotting the bottles on the back shelf, "Gotcha!"

He bent and retrieved the last two bottles from the far bottom shelf, then straightened up, a bottle in each hand. He bumped the fridge door closed with his hip. It was a show-off move meant to draw attention and it did. Rogue always vocally envied his narrow hips. Nature had given Remy a beautiful body and face. He used both the same way he did his native intelligence. At some point, it had become reflex, especially around Rogue. He did another pheromone burn-off though. He didn't want to torture her–much.
"You fight again?"

"Got the Guild business done yesterday," he said. "She don't have much time to hang out."

Running the Unified Guilds had finally killed any lingering romantic feelings he had for Belladonna. She hadn't accepted any contracts on him since the Guilds unified though, which translated as a good working relationship between a Thief and an Assassin. They both had a nostalgic fondness for the past they shared, but no more, the passion was gone. They'd just grown too far apart.

It was much too pretty a day to be worrying any more about his responsibilities as Patriarch of the Unified Guilds. They'd be Belladonna's headache soon enough if what they'd talked about last night worked out. He headed for the back door. He figured the beer would be enough to bribe Wisdom into giving him another cigarette since someone (Storm, he thought darkly) had slipped into his room and made his own stash disappear.

Meanwhile, it was just too much fun to tease Rogue.

He stopped at the door and glanced back. "You coming with, Rogue?"

"You going to share that beer?"

"Non, this is for Pete."

A grin lit up Gambit's face as he turned around. Let her chew on that!

"Remy!"

"What, chere?" he asked. He glanced over to the shaded bit of terrace and ascertained that Wisdom and the rest of Cynics Anonymous were still gathered there. It looked like Cecelia and Banshee had joined them to talk with Fury. He twitched. Cece was alright, but he'd never been comfortable with the former Interpol agent. He'd just have to fake it.

Rogue hurried after him, letting the kitchen door bang shut behind her, and set her gloved hand on his arm. Remy paused and raised an eyebrow at her. Rogue rarely initiated contact even when she was gloved.

"Remy…? Did you… " Rogue flushed pink. "Did you and Wisdom, um, were you… together?"

"Together?" Remy echoed. He was enjoying this. It was cruel, but he was. She'd had her flings with Joseph and Piotr, but Dieu forbid Remy find someone to keep him warm after she left him to die in Antarctica. He'd run into Pete in North Africa while the ex-Black Air spy was on the outs with Shadowcat. They'd got drunk together and cursed the day they heard of Charles Xavier's dream. They might have passed out in the same bed a time or two, but nothing had happened between them.

"You know… together. "

"Ran into each other in Tangiers and did a little work together, chere, if that's what you're meaning," he teased.

"Oooh!" Rogue stamped her foot. Remy had to fight down laughter. Riling her would always be entertaining. "No. Damn it, Remy, did you sleep with Pete Wisdom!?" she yelled.
Half a dozen heads swiveled around to stare at the couple just outside the kitchen.

"Yeah, Gumbo, did you?" Jubilee shouted from poolside. "Inquiring–non-telepathic–minds want to know!"

Pete bent over and buried his face in his hands, nearly lighting his black hair on fire with his forgotten cigarette. Domino plucked it away. His back shook. From a distance, he might have been sobbing. Of course, from close up, he was sobbing with laughter. Logan just shook his head at them all. Fury smirked. Well, it was amusing.

Banshee looked heavenward. "Jubilee!"

"What!?"

Her teacher clutched his head dramatically.

Remy looked at Rogue with a smirk of his own. Her face had gone beet red. "Oh, my God," she moaned to herself.

He transferred the second beer bottle to his left hand with the first then stretched out his right and, using his gloved middle fingertip rather than his index since it was bare where he'd cut that finger of the glove out, tipped Rogue's chin up.

"Rogue, chere, if I did or if I didn't, I still wouldn't tell. Same as you and me. You understand, some things, they ain't secret, but they are private," he told her seriously. That much wasn't part of the game he'd been playing with her ever since returning from Antarctica.

Rogue blinked those big green eyes he'd adored at him. "Sugar…"

"You want to ask me if I sleep wit' the hommes too, I'll tell you," Remy said seriously. He saw no reason to lie. Nor much purpose since Rogue had absorbed enough of his memories from their disastrous contacts in Israel and Antarctica to know the truth if she were willing to look at them. "Oui. I'm not ashamed. But who? Well, that ain't your right to ask no more." He met her gaze until she lowered her gaze and nodded.

"Remy," she said quietly. "I want it to be."

"Chere, I don't think I can dance this dance again."

"Ah love you, Remy."

"Love ain't ever been the problem, Rogue, and you know it." He let his hand hover within millimeters of her bare cheek. "It's trust. You say you can't trust me, but you really don't trust yourself. Not enough."

"You bastard."

Remy shrugged with conscious grace. He'd realized he couldn't go on letting Rogue use his past and his problems to hide her own. "Probably." His voice hardened, but held no anger. "I'm steppin' off the merry-go-round, Rogue."

He walked away from her and back to the veranda, handing Pete the second beer and twisting the
cap off his own. Rogue glared at them then shot into the air. Remy toasted Fury. "It ain't the X-Men without some drama."

Rogue rocketed into the blue sky. A few people watched, but no one tried to interfere. On the ground, Sam set his hands on Kitty's shoulders, obviously meaning to draw her to him for comfort. They'd all heard Rogue's loud demand, just like they'd heard the rumors.

Kitty shrugged him away and caught Bobby's gaze.

Both of them began giggling. The thought of Kitty's boyfriend (ex-boyfriend? Once and future boyfriend? Friend with boyfriend benefits?) and the X-Men's enigmatic thief in a relationship wasn't so strange, but she and Bobby'd already discussed whether the rumor held water and dismissed it when it first circulated. Then they'd both admitted it was material for some damned hot fantasies. Something they were never going to mention to either man. Bobby put it simply, 'No way am I admitting to fantasizing about either of them. I don't want to end up skewered, blown up, or pancaked by a pissed off Rogue.' He'd stand back (out of the firing line) and admire the pretty.

Bobby loved a good practical joke too. He had to admire the slick way Gambit and Wisdom kept the rumors going without a word. It had certainly stirred up the other X-Men when the gossip started. Once he'd been sure it didn't bother Kitty, he done a little rumor-mongering himself just to fan the flames. It made for an easy test of who in the X-Men was homophobic too, without bringing himself into question.

"I think I better go after Pete. He's already been banged around by one pissed-off ex when Piotr showed up at the Chalk and Cheese that time," Kitty said. She clamped her hand over her mouth to stop any more giggles.

"He's dead meat if Rogue goes after him," Bobby admitted matter-of-factly.

"Poor Rogue."

"Ah don't understand," Sam interrupted. "How can ya'll just laugh?"

"Because if Pete and Remy were shagging each other senseless," Kitty explained, "neither one of them would have ever let it slip. They're just having everybody on."

"Well, Ah don't see what ya could do if Miss Rogue did get mad enough to go after Pete." It wasn't that Sam was naive, not after years with Cable, but he was so very straight. Straight forward, that is. He didn't think outside the box without a little prodding.

Kitty just sighed. "I'd just phase us both and wait for Logan and Remy to get her calmed down."

Kitty just walked through the box.

Bobby gave Jubilee a thumbs-up and went back to plotting how to ice Warren's shorts.
Warren lifted his eyebrows as Rogue took to the air. He turned back to his conversation with Brian and Storm. He addressed Storm. "Tell me they're not starting up again."

"Rogue appeared unhappy," Storm remarked.

"Gambit is all over Wisdom," Brian added. "I know he can take care of himself, but Gambit? Really, it seems very self-destructive.

For who, Warren wondered, Gambit or Wisdom?

Of course, Storm started to protest, "My brother is not – "

"Oh, what would it matter, Storm?" Betsy said, strolling over and interrupting them. "Wouldn't you be happy as long as he was?" She arched one delicate purple brow, making the scarlet lightning strike tattoo over her eye shift.

A clap of distant thunder indicated Storm's displeasure. She straightened up and glared at Betsy. "Of course, I want Remy happy. Nor would I care if he found happiness with another man, I merely dislike this constant gossip about his relationships." And Wisdom. She disliked Wisdom and couldn't hide it. He'd 'seduced' her Kitten.

Warren wisely kept his opinion of that to himself. Kitty was over eighteen and if she'd been a virgin, then Piotr needed his plumbing checked. And someone needed to speak to Kitty about dating men with the same first name. Though it did make it simpler if you called out the wrong name at the wrong time...

"He's having fun having everyone on," Betsy said. "You should try it sometime."

"Storm, it's part and parcel of being with the X-Men," Warren added. "It must be in the by-laws. We have to wear bad spandex and angst at least three hours every day."

"Not to mention watch our various exes hook up with our other friends and keep up a good face," Betsy said with an arch glance at Warren. She smiled wickedly. "I propose we replace the X with a triangle. After all, Scott and Jean are about the only couple around here that has stayed a couple."

"If you forget about Madelyne Pryor."

They all tended to forget Maddy. He certainly had his reasons to leave her out. He glanced up at the veranda. Cable probably remembered though, considering. She'd given birth to him, after all. Of course, she had been ready to sacrifice him to a demon when he was just a baby.

Storm frowned. "This conversation has devolved into old gossip. You'll have to excuse me." She touched Brian's arm. "Tell Meggan how much I enjoyed sharing the gardens with her."

She strolled toward the group on the veranda, her long white hair and the skirt of her light sundress dancing on her personal breeze.
Jean laughed and told her husband,~Those two are having entirely too much fun keeping everyone guessing.~

Scott replied via their psi-link.

~They didn't really, did they?~

~I can't read past Gambit's shields, even if peeking wasn't unethical, Scott.~ A mental giggle made her husband smile with her. ~But considering how crazy Pete is about Kitty, I don't think he'd let Remy rub all over him if it were true.~

~Point.~

~Now, you ought to start the barbecue or we'll have a mutiny on our hands. I can hear Hank's stomach growling.~

He squinted at the sky, knowing it was blue but seeing purple. Jean sometimes let him see colors as she saw them, so he knew he was seeing something different than everyone else. Even without that, he could guess it was a perfect sky, thanks to the warm sun and delicate breeze touching his face. No sign of Rogue. Not that he expected to see her up there, circling like a vulture. ~Think Rogue will be back by the time the steaks are done?~

~As soon as she smells them cooking.~

~She's not really hurting, is she?~

~Just a little embarrassed and frustrated. It looks like Remy really has called it quits.~

~Good. They were on and off so often, I got tired of trying to keep score.~

Jean's expression grew serious for a moment.

~So did Remy.~

Scott kissed her.

~You have a soft spot for him. Should I be jealous?~

Jean touched his cheek. "No. But he was there for me when I thought Apocalypse had killed you." She switched back to telepathy. ~He let me past his shields because I desperately needed that connection. And he was genuinely happy when we learned you were in Akkaba.~

"Probably just happy to stop being field leader," Scott replied. He should have felt some jealousy toward Gambit, but he just didn't. Whatever his faults, Gambit had been good to Jean when no one else had a clue how to help her. He'd gracefully bowed out the moment she hadn't need him any longer.

"Thrilled, I think he said, right before he disappeared in Hong Kong for two months."
"So what was it this time, Gumbo?" Logan asked as Remy sauntered back to them.

He had to admit the kid was just about too beautiful for his own good. LeBeau indeed. Remy had shining, copper-threaded red hair that had been recently cut shorter than he usually wore it, sculpted features, and a lithe body made for sex and fighting.

The red-on-black demon eyes added to Remy's exotic, dangerous aura. Even if all you ever saw was a flat pic of him there was no denying it. The Cajun was too good-looking even in this group—which included some remarkable specimens. Punch it up with his 'charm' and the 'fuck-me' pheromones and no one could resist him – hell, there weren't many with enough strength of mind to resist wanting him period – not if Remy was trying.

Remy sank down at Wisdom's feet. Not between them, beside them, and without fanfare. It still screamed sex. He handed one of the sweating bottles of beer he held up to Wisdom, then leaned comfortably against his legs. It made Logan look twice and he didn't swing that way.

"Need a cigarette, homme," Remy told Wisdom.

Wisdom handed the thief his while he took a swallow of the beer. Remy took it, shrugged, and put it to his lips, inhaling luxuriously. He exhaled a trickle of smoke and came back to Logan's question. "Same thing as always, old man," he said. He sounded a little rough. "If I ain't chasin' her, she's chasin' me."

"Well, if you want her why don't you let her catch you, you stupid git?" Wisdom asked.

Remy leaned his face against Wisdom's knee. "No one catches Remy," he said flatly. Logan guessed he really didn't want to explain all the ways he and Rogue had ripped each other up. Every time they tried to be together they ended up hurting each other. Lord knew Logan loved Rogue like a little sister, but he wasn't blind. She sabotaged herself and her relationship even without Gumbo screwing them up. Remy took his share of the blame.

"So, you let her think you and this sod were doing the horizontal tango a while back?" Domino asked.

Remy closed his eyes. "Maybe she thinks that, maybe she don't. Told her it wasn't her business no more." He rubbed his cheek against Wisdom's slacks. It wasn't a come on. Just a bit of physical comfort. Remy needed touch the way a plant needs the sun.

Rogue hated that.

Logan took another look at Wisdom's face and relaxed. Wisdom wasn't misinterpreting Remy. Logan did not want Wisdom to make a move Lebeau. Kitty would end up hurt and LeBeau would get blamed, and hell, LeBeau might get hurt too, and then Logan would have to gut Wisdom. If Rogue didn't do something stupid; the girl wasn't good at letting go of what she thought was hers. She'd be about as gracious as Petey had been when found out Kitty was dating Wisdom. If Wisdom had been just a little bit slower and not a paranoid git, he'd be dead.

He tipped his head back and enjoyed the sun soaking into his bones. God damn adamantium was always cold. There weren't that many quiet periods in the life they led. He knew it wouldn't last and that meant they needed to relax and appreciate the break while they could.
The five originals, as they sometimes thought of themselves, had wandered over to each other, eventually joined by Alex and Lorna. They'd commandeered one of the pool-side tables with a red-and-white striped canopy. Jean had telekinetically wafted a pitcher of ice tea and glasses over to the table. Bobby chilled the tea to a slush, making Warren and Hank complain about frozen sinus headaches.

Scott tugged Jean down onto his lap. She nestled back against him, smiling.

"We should do this more often," she said

He inhaled the scent of shampoo from her hair, then chuckled. "I plan to have an anniversary every year for the rest of our lives."

"God, get a room, big brother," Alex groaned, shielding his eyes with his hand.

Scott gave him the finger.

"Oh my God, Scott just flipped someone off," Bobby exclaimed. "He's been possessed or infected or cloned or replaced with an android - oh wait, how would we know--"

"Bite me, Drake."

Jean giggled helplessly. Hank chuckled.

"That's Jean's job," Warren said. He fanned his huge, white-feathered wings lazily, creating a cooling draft.

Alex groaned. "TMi."

Lorna stretched her arms over her head, then settled into her chair in comfort. "Jean's right. This is heaven. We should do it more often. I'm sick of Falls Edge and answering to government jackasses. Gyrich makes my skin crawl and Sikorsky is a moron."

"So quit and come back to the X-Men," Warren said.

Alex grimaced then glanced at Scott. He said wryly, "I don't think Scott and I could get along on the same team, aside from both of us being used to being in charge."

Jean and Lorna caught each other's gaze. Alex wasn't wrong. Summers sibling rivalry tended toward major property damage when it got out of hand. They were immune to each other's powers. Their surroundings weren't. But Scott was blissfully oblivious to all of that.

"You know, with all the new people we've taken on and some others coming back, we could field a third team," Scott speculated. Jean could hear her husband thinking. Maybe there was some way to make it work. It would take a little thought to get the details right, of course. They had been getting on better since Alex returned from his sojourn in another dimension, though close proximity might
screw that up.

"Except for Forge, I bet everyone in X-Factor would come with us," Lorna commented.

"Probably," Alex agreed. "But I don't think the NSA or anyone else in the government would be too happy. Plus, X-Factor's affiliation does give us some tenuous influence on the way they deal with mutants. It gives us access to at least some of their information and plans too." Xavier hadn't cared for that argument, but these days he wanted everyone to stay on good terms with the government.

"Point," Scott said.

"One must point out that while today has been most salubrious, indeed an exact example of idyllicism," Hank commented, "it is most definitely not the norm." His eyes crinkled with amusement at his own verbiage.

Bobby formed a snowball in his hands and lobbed into the pool before Jean could stop him. Paige screamed and sent him a foul look before returning her attention to the no-powers water polo game in progress between members of X-Factor and Gen-X. He remarked, "Huh. Yeah. No evil megalomaniacs intent on taking over the world, no demons or Sentinels attacking, no aliens hijacking us to save the galaxy, no FOH demonstrations… I don't think Gambit's ex-wife even tried to kill him this time. Anyone getting bored?"

He conjured up another snowball and looked meaningfully toward the lounges by the pool. Jubilee looked asleep. Next to her, Betsy had stripped down to a minimal crimson bikini and stretched out. Neal was massaging sunscreen onto her back. Jean hid her eyes, but didn't give him away.

"War?" he asked.

"Your funeral, Bobster."

~Do it and I will dice you up and feed you to the polar bears at the Bronx Zoo,~. Betsy's purple-tinted mental voice warned. Everyone heard her and she didn't even open an eye.

With a theatrically disappointed sigh, Bobby let the snowball melt away. "Man, I'm beginning to think the Cajun's right. Telepaths are just no fun."

"I'd have to disagree," Scott said. He gave Jean's waist a squeeze. ~Awww, honey,~ she said into his mind, quite pleased.

"I believe Gambit's words were in fact 'I hate telepaths','', Beast corrected. "Which in no way denigrates their prodigious potential for playfulness."

"Save us!" Bobby responded. "He's alliterating again!"

Warren interjected, "Do you even know what alliterate means, Bobby?"

Bobby got a shifty look on his face. "Uh, no?"

Jean pounced. "Then how could you know what Hank was doing?" She had him at last! She shook her finger at Bobby. "No more pretending to be an illiterate. loutish prankster, Robert Drake. Your cover is blown!"
Bobby dropped his face into his arms on the table top and mock sobbed, "Oh, the shame of it!" He lifted his head and blinked puppy-dog eyes at Scott. "This doesn't mean you're going to expect me to participate in War Room strategy sessions or anything, does it?"

Scott assumed his most serious expression. "It's about time you assumed some leadership responsibility, Bobby. After all, you're one of the original X-Men. The Professor will be so proud that you're finally living up to your potential--"

"Aaaaaah!" Bobby yelled. He jumped up and sped away, nearly knocking Rictor and Siryn off their feet as he plunged toward the mansion.

"You're so mean," Jean said to Scott.

"That's why you love me," he replied.

After the barbecue had been served, a few of those with longer commutes left for home, but most of the party stayed through the long, golden afternoon.

Nick Fury enjoyed the food, enjoyed the company, and never stopped evaluating. Know your enemy and know your friends, because one is as likely as the other to fatally surprise you if you don't. He'd gathered a lot of potentially useful intel just sitting on a terrace smoking one of Logan's awful cigars.

Gambit gave him a lazy smile from where he'd stretched out on the warm stone terrace, looking like a lazy panther. SHIELD didn't do business with the Thieves or Assassins Guilds, but Gambit was known to them through his freelance days. Fury knew beyond doubt the bayou pretty-boy act hid a serious predator. They had a file on the man. Nothing proven, but a hell of a lot of speculation, some of it very, very dirty and dark. None of it pointed to the sort of idealist who would wind up with the X-Men. Nick nodded to the thief. He'd heard and seen a lot today, but Gambit's motivations remained a mystery.

What he was left wondering was if any of the X-Men had a clue either or were they fooling themselves? A man like LeBeau always had something up his sleeve and the X-Men treated him like a cute pet, their sexy pickpocket.

You could take telepathic ethics too damn far. One of them should have taken a look see in the man's head.

"Back for more, Nick?" Domino greeted him. Nick turned away from LeBeau to the merc and her partner.

Cable. There was another question mark. He showed up one day, already in his forties, and SHIELD could find no record of him before he started merc work and put together the Six Pack. Cable called himself Nathan Summers and the X-Men acted like he was part of the family. SHIELD had been after him for years. Every time they caught him, they regretted it. His affiliation with the X-Men meant trouble followed him. If they locked him up without a trial, Nick suspected the X-Men would be knocking on his door before they finished turning the key. And by knocking, he meant blowing it open. He decided to ignore Cable for the rest of the day. He was here as a guest, not a SHIELD agent, anyway.
Nick hated a mystery.

"Looks like this is the designated smoking area," Nick replied. He pulled out a cigar and lit it. He eyed her. Domino had a file of her own. It even had a DOB and a location. Not a damn bit of it was real. Whoever she really was, she'd buried it deep. Someone had, anyway. SHIELD still didn't have a handle on whatever her mutation was, beyond the black patch over one eye, though she could pass as woman in her early thirties twenty years after she showed up on their radar.

"Yup, smoke 'em if ya got 'em."

He pulled out a cigar and lit it.

"Valentina looks marvelous," Domino remarked. Not surprising that Domino knew who his date was. GW had indicated she was a top-notch strategist, much less impulsive than Cable.

He snorted. "Didn't know you did small talk, Dom."

She raised two fine eyebrows. "You want to talk shop? In front of everybody?"

Her gesture encompassed the rest of the group aside from Gambit, Wolverine, and Cable: the White Queen, Kitty Pryde, Wisdom, and the bony psychotic that called herself Marrow. She was picking her teeth with one of her own bone spikes and eyeing Nick like she was picking where to skewer him. A telepathic corporate shark with ties to the Hellfire Club, ex-SHIELD, a Black Air spy, and a terrorist. No, he did not want to talk shop.

Fury gritted his teeth. "So, weather-like weather today."

Wolverine chuckled like a chain-saw and exhaled a stream of smoke. "Smooth, real smooth."

Despite himself, Fury grinned. He found a place to half-perch on the stone railing of the veranda and puffed away.

He wasn't a man who felt intimidated often. The gray in his hair and the eye-patch didn't mean he couldn't hold his own in a scrap. But he was the only human in this group of super-powered beings and it was humiliating to realize that every single one of them could take him—without those powers. They were as impressive for their skills and brains as their mutant abilities and they wouldn't hesitate to pump him for any useful information he might let slip. Well, sauce for the goose, after all.

As a matter of fact, at least one of them wouldn't bother with words…

"Stay out of my head, Frost," he told her. He'd brought a SHIELD developed psi-shield, a modification of a Forge design, but hadn't switched it on. He knew from working with telepaths that psi-sensitives found the devices irritating.

"I'm sure there's nothing interesting in there beyond the latest weather report," Emma replied. She crossed her legs, doing a fair imitation of Sharon Stone.

Fury admired her legs in the white leather as he knew she'd wanted him to. She smirked at him while drawing out a cigarette case and fitting a custom made cigarette into a long, ivory holder. As she put the holder to her lips the cigarette's tip flared pinkish with energy and ignited.
She swung her leg, displaying the spike-heeled boot on her foot. "Thank you, Gambit."

"You're welcome," Gambit replied. He had a glass of bourbon in one hand instead of the beer he'd been drinking earlier, resting it on his lean stomach, but didn't appear to be drinking it.

"How's GW?" Domino asked.

"Good," Fury answered cautiously.

The Six Pack had dissolved under some ugly pressures. GW Bridge had joined SHIELD and set out to hunt down their erstwhile leader Cable, blaming him for what happened. Domino had stuck with Cable, abandoning mercenary work for the mutant cause, helping train X-Force. GW and Domino hadn't been in touch for years.

A whole lot of people, most of them in the government, considered groups like X-Force and the other X-teams to be mutant terrorists just like the MLF. A whole lot of people were absolute jackasses in Nick Fury's experience.

Domino smiled. "Tell him I said hi."

"I'll do that."

He glanced at Cable.

"Any messages?"

The brawny, white-haired mercenary grunted. "Ha. No." Yellow energy flared from his unscarred eye.

Fury shrugged and turned his attention to Kitty Pryde. He certainly liked that girl and wished he could have kept her with SHIELD. He'd heard she'd quit the X-teams shortly after the stint she did with his people in order to go to college. It looked like she'd come back. Not surprising, since she was too smart and far too experienced to just drop back into the normal life of a college girl. Xavier had recruited her when she was thirteen. There was no going back, something she must have discovered herself.

"You know you still have a job with me if you want it, Pryde."

He noticed Wisdom giving him a the hairy eyeball. No, that was actually a homicidal look. The skinny, scruffy ex-spy looked ready to use those 'hot knives' of his to flay Fury alive. Ah, love. It made idiots of all men. Who'd have thought a little girl like Pryde would bring down a reprobate of Wisdom's reputation? Cynics and innocents, though... Brought out the protective side in even the worst of them.

"I don't think so," Kitty told him. She patted one of Wisdom's hands. Wisdom looked a little less murderous. In other words, Fury thought there might be enough left of his body to actually bury.

"It would probably be bad if you did that, homme.," Gambit drawled. He rolled into a sitting position fluidly. The bourbon in his glass didn't even slosh. He grinned at Wisdom. "But I want to watch if you do."

Wisdom glared at him now. Fury started as Gambit winked at him.
"You reading people's minds now, Cajun?" Wolverine asked.

"Non, leave that to spooks like the White Queen and Cable, mais the man got his feelings written all over his face," Gambit replied.

Wolverine snorted. "Keep telling everyone that, Gumbo."

"Why do you persist in denying your psi talents, Gambit?" Frost demanded.

Gambit frowned. "Because I'm not a spook, I'm not going to be one and I told him.–" His expression closed off and darkened. "I'll steal you blind, but I won't touch anyone's thoughts." He tossed back the bourbon suddenly, got to his feet, and stalked away. Clearly, the subject had stirred up something Gambit preferred to ignore. His accent had even disappeared.

Fury squirreled away the information. The present Patriarch of the Unified Guilds was—or had the potential to be—a psi of some sort according to the very knowledgeable Emma Frost. He had a strong objection to telepathic interference, though. Interesting and potentially useful. He was all for ethical psis, unless they worked for him.

Frost shook her head. "I don't understand why Charles lets him go on denying he's a psi."

"Because if Chuck ever pushes Gambit too hard, he'll be in the wind," Wolverine said. "He don't need the X-Men no more. Don't trust us much either anymore. Storm ain't goin' to be able to drag him back if he leaves, either. Not again." He puffed on his cigar. "Hell, she might go with him."

"And Xavier can't get through the shields he's already got in place any more than I can," Cable commented. "That must frustrate him."

"I'd love to know who did teach him to shield," Emma said. "He can keep everyone out because we don't understand what he's doing - part of it is his charge, but the rest is skill."

"He was definitely taught by a telepath at some time," Cable agreed.

Domino steepled her fingers, looking thoughtful. "He's Guild. They train their kids early."

Wisdom nodded. "First time I met him he was already silk smooth and he couldn't have been more than twenty."

"I've run into a few telepaths from the Assassins," Cable said. "They aren't that good. I don't imagine the Thieves were any better."

"Got an idea about that and it's another sore spot with Chuck," Wolverine said. He looked toward where Gambit had stopped by the pool and begun flirting with Jubilee and some of the other girls. "With the Cajun too, I think."

Interest was expressed by Cable and Frost and even Pryde, but Wolverine looked at Fury and shook his head. "This ain't for anyone outside the team. Sorry, Nick."

Fury shrugged. "Classified, I get."

Frost cocked her head, clearly picking a thought from Wolverine's mind. A look of shock crossed the
blonde telepath's patrician features. "Him?" She looked toward Gambit too, narrowing cool blue eyes. "He makes it so easy to forget what he did, doesn't he?"

"He hates telepaths 'cause they're bloody always talking about stuff the rest of us 'aven't got no clue about," Wisdom growled. "Come on, Pryde, there's got to be a private corner somewhere 'round here we can do a little snogging."

Wisdom and Shadowcat wandered away.

Jubilee shouted for Wolverine to join her. With a shrug, he left too, followed by Marrow, who had been so quiet and still Fury had almost forgot her presence.

That left him with Cable, Domino and Frost. He checked his watch. "Time for the Contessa and I to head back to New York."

Frost rose to her feet.

"I'll make sure security doesn't trigger an alarm when you leave," she said.

She linked her arm with his as they started off the veranda toward where Valentina was intent in a conversation with fellow ex-socialites Betsy Braddock and Janet Van Dyne. Of course, what Frost really meant was she'd stay with Fury to make sure he didn't do any snooping around the mansion before leaving. Since Operation: Zero Tolerance had invaded and stripped their home base, the X-Men had been more secretive and security conscious than before.

Fury didn't blame them. He wondered if they were cautious enough. Virtually every X-affiliated mutant had gathered in one place today--a place that was known to enough of their enemies to make it dangerous. Westchester made a hell of a target for the mutant haters. Not that a platoon of Sentinels could take them out, but it was a day of celebration. They didn't want to fight.

Not my monkey, not my circus, Fury reminded himself. The X-Men were big boys and girls. They knew how to take care of themselves.

A portable boombox played old big band classics. Several couples were dancing barefoot on the grass near the pool. Gambit appeared to be waltzing with Storm. Neal Shaara tapped Betsy's shoulder and drew her away from the other women and into his arms. Rogue and Beast were making fun of the other dancers, while Havok and Polaris drifted at the fringe of the group, lost in each other's eyes.

Emma patted Fury's arm and left him to sweep up Warren and demand he dance with her.

Fury wished Jean and Scott happy anniversary quite genuinely before leaving. The setting sun was behind them as he headed the car toward New York. Beside him in the passenger seat, Valentina stretched and smiled. "They are quite pleasant people, Nicholas," she said.

"They are," he agreed. It was too bad Rogers couldn't have come up. He'd certainly have enjoyed the boisterous kids and casual barbeque picnic out on the School's green, green grounds more than the formal dinners he attended as Captain America. But even the hint that Captain America wasn't absolutely neutral on the subject of the mutant agenda would spark a political firestorm. Personally, Fury thought that might not be a bad thing. As Director of SHIELD, he'd ordered Rogers to stay as far away from the limelight as he could.
"If more of the world could see them as they are today, as normal and human as anyone else, there would be no fear of mutants."

"Yeah, but every one of those 'normal' people back there is more dangerous than a cruise missile. That doesn't bother you and me – "

"Because we're dangerous ourselves," Valentina interrupted.

" – but it scares the shit out of Joe Q. Public."

"Still, it was a good day and nice to see Kitty again."

It had been. The air glimmered gold and heavy and warm. Long black shadows stretched eastward as they sped down Graymalkin Lane. Fury drove with the driver's side window down, enjoying the smell of summer on the air instead of the SHIELD helicarrier's recycled, sterilized air.

It was the sort of day that reminded Fury of what he did his job to protect. He hoped he and the X-Men would have many more.
Chapter Summary

One of Genosha's rulers ruminates on what opening contact with the rest of the world will mean for the mutants of Genosha.

AD 2227, October 18
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

He stood in the doorway to a carved stone balcony, high above the glitter of the capitol and stared out into the night. The vast, dark room behind him echoed with emptiness. Heavy, ornate crimson robes of office still hung from his broad shoulders, but he had left his helm behind in one of the three seats that dominated the room.

The wind from the water brought the scent of salt and marine life with it. It teased at short hair that glinted silver by starlight. It whispered with the hum of the city and the crash of waves.

Beyond the city, beyond the land, far on the horizon where the waters were dark as the night sky, sheets of almost intangible energy towered upward.

Veils of color fell across it, chased side to side in oily, iridescent flares of light. By night, the entire expanse was shot with veins of green lightning, flame-gold and rose red. It rose from the ocean floor beyond the edge of the horizon to the limits of the atmosphere.

The Great Barrier.

Seen by a human eye, it was beautiful. Beheld through his mutant senses it was more so.

By day it was an added sparkle against the blue of the sky, a hazy, wavering glow far out on the water. By night, against the velvet darkness, it could be spectacular, an eerie extension of the Triune's will. Electromagnetic, quantum kinetic and psionic forces were merged into each other to form and create the Barrier.

Anything sentient, anything mechanical or technological passing through it was destroyed. A psionic warning spared cetaceans from crossing it. The Great Barrier sustained itself with minimal maintenance, but remained inextricably linked to their psyches, responding to the Triune's moods. Tonight color exploded across it.

It pulsed. It sang to the man on the balcony. It was part of him, part of them, of three minds synched into one force, one intent.

It symbolized the Interdict that kept all humans and their works out of Genosha. It kept his people safe. He was afraid, though, that in time it would only keep them in. He would not let Genosha become a mutant cage.
It wasn't time yet to bring the Barrier down. In time, though, in time... Genosha would not be enough.

He was not the absolute ruler of Genosha. He was one of three and his companions tempered his beliefs with their own. He had intended to slowly sway them to his own vision. They were unaging and undying, he had time to convince them.

Until the *Ares* breached Avalon Station's defensive perimeter.

He was quite tempted to rage at Northstar. It would have been satisfying.

Also pointless.

With his consorts' agreement, he had authorized the Avalon Prime to spare the crippled spaceship. One telepathic scan had revealed its crew were unconscious and in several cases wounded. Another swept unnoticed through the minds of the mission control at the top of the humans' orbital elevator. The incident wasn't a trick or the prelude to an attack.

Northstar wanted to do more than ignore the ship. He wanted to rescue it. He considered the people on it to be innocents.

So did the Triune. They acceded while urging caution.

Northstar had authorized retrieval and rescue, bringing the ship into Avalon. Crews of repair people swarmed over it, thrilled and fascinated to deal with the very different and in many ways backward technology of the human world outside Genosha. A medical team had boarded the ship to deal with the traumatized crew. A surveillance satellite's feed had been overridden to send a message to mission control aboard the orbital elevator.

Human and mutant had officially met again.

The Interdict had been breached.

Perhaps it was time to resume diplomatic contact with the outside world. The Gene Wars and the time before were only history to mutant and human alike. Only the Twenty Constants remained and remembered. Of course, the Triune were among the Constant and the body of the Triune were not best pleased. They remembered and their memories were not pleasant. He anticipated bitter opposition to any suggestion of contact.

"A small delegation," he argued. "In exchange for a seat on the UN Security council. A chance for our people to travel outside Genosha."

"They'll send nothing but spies and fools," the third member of the Triune replied. "They'll never give us a seat on the Security Council."

"Is traveling outside worth the risk?" their second asked. "Should we allow any of them within our borders? How could we protect our own people if they left here?"

His old friend had dreamed of a world where mutant and human lived in peace side by side. He had dreamed of creating a sanctuary where mutants could live in safety from hatred and fear.
The Triune had made Genosha into that haven and erected the Great Barrier to protect it.

Was it time to try to make that other dream real?

"I would hope we wouldn't need to protect them."

"Now you're living in a dream world, mon ami." Words accompanied with a snort of derision.

"You are the ones who used to believe — "

Their second narrowed her green eyes. "Once."

The irony didn't escape him. He, of all men, urging them forward to meet the humans, to perhaps even allow some within Genosha's borders, while the gentler, kinder members of the Triune counseled suspicion and paranoia.

"Why're you asking this of us?" their third asked.

"How long before our haven becomes a stagnant ghetto? How long before the Dissenters become more than an annoyance? How long must we go on as gods?"

That had startled them both.

"What if we could give up the Interdict, dismantle the Barrier?" he asked. "We could be free."

They looked at him and something stirred through the psi-bond.

Maybe it was time. He'd felt their interest and reluctant hope kindle. Despite their doubts, they would agree.

Restless, he reached through the psi-link and touched them. One was alone in her quarters at the Residence. Her husband, one of the architects of their nation and a hero of the Gene Wars, had died in his sleep more than a century past. Her loneliness fed through the link, mitigated only by their third's empathic warmth. The other lay in a lover's arms, wide awake and watchful as ever. His mind was always weaving, and he'd grown wary and melancholy with time, when once he'd been reckless. His fondness threaded through the Triune, soothing them.

The link carried their second's quiet advice, aimed at them both, ~Go to sleep.~

With a sigh, he decided to return to his own quarters.

Her mental voice whispered an invitation.

~Come here. Keep me company. I'm just reading a book. Thinking about them disturbs me.~

~Very well, my dear.~

Tomorrow would be soon enough to decide the great issues.
Spikes and Flatscans

Chapter Summary

Scanner considers the X-Men and the Acolytes and the changes necessary if they are to shift from mutant terrorists to representatives of a mutant homeland.


Their thoughts tap-tap-tapped at Scanner's brain like the irritating drumming of Carmella's fingers on the table. Who knew being one of Lord Magneto's Acolytes would involve so much empty downtime?

Wouldn't want to forget the scintillating company, either, would you?

The only one not sitting around the rec room vegging out was Milan, who had plugged himself into the Net, consciousness surfing the electronic information pathways. His mind felt/sounded like binary code heard through a telephone speaker, a white rush randomly spiked with high frequency squeals. His face had gone blank and slack, eyes flickering behind closed lids. Frankly, it looked creepy.

Carmella was warming up to another bad-tempered fit. The foot-tapping and drumming fingers were a dead giveaway. She was going to start bitching about something in a minute and expect everyone to listen to her because she was Unuscione, Unus the Untouchable's daughter.

Big whoop as that little Asian X-girl would have put it.

Sven and Harlan were glued to the bigscreen TV, watching the bouncing boobs on a high-def rerun of Baywatch. Despising flatscans didn't keep them from drooling over Pamela Anderson's silicone enhancements.

Little Klaus was watching Unuscione out of the corner of his eye, about ready to phase out. Neophyte was one of the smarter ones, but he was too soft. He'd turned on them once.

Scanner didn't trust him. Though she'd learned herself how easy it was to fall for the X-ers oh-so-reasoned arguments. She'd found her ass turned over to the government for trusting Scott Summers and the rest of the do-gooder Uncle Toms, though; she wouldn't make that mistake again. None of them would.

Neophyte was a kid. Then. He still looked like it now. He was better company than the rest of them, though, if you got past the shyness. Scanner supposed you didn't have to trust someone to like their company. He was a hell of a lot better than Katu and Javitz and the rest of the testosterone brigade.

Milan wasn't bad, either, when he wasn't jacked-in.

Bored.
Well, she was too. They hadn't had a real challenge since they threw down with the X-Men in the
Arctic, just before Magneto and his clone just about shredded the magnetosphere. Then the UN
turned over Genosha to Lord Magneto and the X-Men just stepped back.

Scanner flipped her blond hair over her shoulders and got up. If she wanted something to eat, she
needed to fix something. Nobody else would bother making lunch. Or dinner or any other meal, she
reflected. Besides, the kitchen would be empty and peaceful. Did other telepaths end up playing den
mother to their teams?

There was Grey. The original X-woman probably did a lot of psychic care taking with that lot.
Xavier had them all so twisted up, terrified of hurting any flatscans, guilty just for having their
powers, never mind using them, all the X-teams had to be head cases.

Lord Magneto didn't go into anyone's head at least. He really didn't care what the Acolytes did to
entertain themselves so long as they were on hand to slap the flatscans down or go toe-to-toe with
Xavier's lot.

So, she thought as she mooched around the kitchen fixing a plate of sandwiches for herself, what
other telepaths did she know about?

There was Xavier, mutant Daddy Warbucks and all around father figure. From the briefings
Magneto had given them, the Professor was one of the most powerful telepaths in the world. He
spouted off his peace and harmony between human and mutants baloney and talked about his
students as his children. As a father figure, though, she had to figure he sucked: he'd taken in a bunch
of messed up kids and trained them into shock troops to pursue his own personal crusade. She didn't
fool herself that Lord Magneto was much better, but at least the Acolytes had chosen to follow
Magneto and they were fighting for themselves and their people not an abstract concept.

No, she wouldn't accept Xavier as any kind of nurturer.

Psylocke, the other telepath on the X-teams? Psylocke didn't have the sheer power of a Jean Grey or
Xavier, but she used all her discipline and skill to make up for it and Scanner—as another telepath
who used creativity rather than strength–did not want to meet up with the X-woman's psychic knife.
No. The re-embodied telepathic shadow-walking ninja assassin just didn't do maternal.

She found some barbecue potato chips and added them to her lunch tray.

There was really only one thing she envied the X-teams. They might be misguided idiots, but they
stuck with each other. You never faced off against one of them alone. Mess with one, mess with
them all. Once in, never out. The Acolytes weren't like that. They were loyal to Lord Magneto and
they'd gone along with Cortez and Exodus before Magneto returned to them, but they weren't close
to each other.

She took her food back into the rec room considering that last thought.

The Acolytes were ruthless fighters, but the X-teams had defeated them on numerous occasions.
Lord Magneto himself had more raw power than any single mutant, but they'd thwarted him more
than once.

The X-Men fought as a team, supporting and backing each other up. The Acolytes fought each on
their own. If they could work together the way the X-Men did, no one would have a chance against
them.
She sat with a sandwich forgotten in her hand and blinked.

It was that simple.

Her thoughts snapped back to her surroundings as Carmella began shrieking at Sven. Harlan took a swipe at her for attacking his twin. Carmella snapped her psionic exoskeleton into being. Harlan bounced off the flaring green energy. He stumbled back and hit the TV, nearly rocking it off the stand.

"Stop!" Scanner shouted.

What had she been thinking? These jerks couldn't watch TV without fighting each other. The only ones they listened to were Lord Magneto or Exodus. They weren't a team, they were a gang.

The three of them turned and stared at her.

"Stay out of it, Scanner!" Carmella snarled.

She waved her hand. "Just take it outside."

"Yeah, we can take bets on the fight," Frenzy said from the doorway, "and on how soon Lord Magneto gets ticked off by your fighting and gets rid of you."

She looked pissed off and gray with exhaustion under her dark skin. Even stranger, she had on a business suit and not fighting armor.

"Back from the UN?" Scanner guessed.

Frenzy nodded and walked into the rec room. Carmella and the two Kleinstocks slunk out behind her.

"Ambassador," Frenzy snorted. She hovered her hand over Scanner's plate of sandwiches and raised an eyebrow.

"Go ahead."

"It's such a joke. Lord Magneto has me talking to those stupid flatscans, when we should just flatten them," Frenzy went on. She bit into a sandwich, closed her eyes in apparent ecstasy and chewed.


Frenzy swallowed before speaking. "All the damned negotiating gives me a headache. Lord Magneto wants aid packages, workers to rebuild everything that's been smashed in the civil war."

Hateful to admit needing help from non-mutants, but the Acolytes were fighters. None of them had any idea how to fix a country that had been flattened by a decade of war between humans and their rebelling mutate slaves. There was still guerrilla fighting between groups of renegade Magistrates and radical mutate groups despite Magneto's takeover.

Hammer Bay was a shattered shell of a city, though the Citadel where they were ensconced remained in good shape.
Trade embargoes had been strengthened when Lord Magneto assumed control of the country. Most countries were refusing to recognize his government. There were no more camps full of mutates dying of Legacy thanks to Henry McCoy’s work and the sacrifice of the former X-Man and Acolyte Colossus, but the survivors had no homes or jobs to return to. The entire country remained under martial law.

Milan’s voice startled them both.

"Turn on the TV"

Scanner had no idea where the remote was. She went to television and turned it on. "What is it?" she asked.

Milan looked like he’d bit into an unripe grapefruit.

"Any of the US networks, Scanner," he said.

"Republican Governor Edwin Delmyer has resigned from his party to accept a place on the ticket as Friends of Humanity candidate Graydon Creed’s running mate. With the primaries and the Republican National Congress already over, this defection leaves the Republican Party in a quandary. Field another presidential candidate in Delmyer's place or throw their support to the Creed campaign …"

Frenzy set the remaining piece of her sandwich down.

"We can forget any aid from the UN," she said.

Scanner nodded along with Milan.

"Lord Magneto will not be pleased."

Scanner rolled her eyes at Milan.

"Does it really matter to us here?" Klaus asked softly.

It would matter to the mutants in the United States.

"Lord Magneto believes in protecting all mutants," Milan explained.

"Do you think he'll send the Acolytes to do something about it?" Scanner asked Frenzy curiously. Frenzy had been spending more time in Magneto’s counsels due to her post as new Genoshan Ambassador to the UN.

"No. Our faces and powers are too well known the world over. Anything the Acolytes do outside of Genosha now becomes state sponsored terrorism and Genosha becomes an outlaw nation."

"Maybe it will blow over and the FOH will lose the election," Scanner said. She doubted it, though. Frenzy snorted. "Maybe Javitz will start wearing frilly pink mini-skirts, but I'm not taking any bets."

"Ugh, thanks for an image I didn't need," Milan groaned.
Scanner said, "I've been thinking about when we fought the X-Men. I had this idea…"

The TV in the corner droned on.

"In New Genosha, the estimated death toll from the fighting between humans and mutates that has continued under the rule of Erik Magnus Lehnsherr has been estimated at over fourteen thousand. Deaths since the beginning of the human/mutate civil war over a decade ago have been calculated to lie within two point five and three million total. Joanna Cargill, Ambassador to the United Nations from New Genosha, told the Security Council that widespread famine and lack of adequate health care were responsible for a majority of the deaths since…"
Future Genosha from the outside looking in is the kind of assignment that makes a career. Alistair Kelly takes the job.

AD 2227, December 14
European Union
London

"It's the chance of a lifetime."

The Genoshans were offering talks. Limited contact if the UN and the Genoshan government could come to a mutual agreement. A delegation would be allowed past the Great Barrier. The delegation to include representatives of the world's news media.

The chance of a lifetime.

That's what Alistair's editor Nigel said. He had to admit, it sounded like it. The first people to cross Genosha's borders in—count them—two hundred nine years. The first to ever chronicle the reality of a mutant nation behind the Great Barrier. Columbus, Louis and Clark, Marco Polo, Admiral Perry, how many men have an opportunity of that caliber?

"Why me?" Alistair asked.

"Twenty possible names were nominated to the UN by a coalition of world news organizations. Whoever goes will be representing everyone." Jeremiah Jameson's dark eyes narrowed. They were in the publisher's corner offices. Banks of windows on both walls displayed the panorama of London. The International Bugle offices occupied the top floors of one of the highest buildings in modern London. "The UN tossed three of the biggest names—Parker, Russell, and Noriko. They submitted the list to the Genoshans as a courtesy. The Genoshans sent back the list pared down to five acceptable names, with yours on it."

"Oath."

Alistair's fingers itched to pull out his stick case, get out a tran, snap it and suck down the soporific vapors. Jameson didn't approve of reporters using stims or trans on the job, so he didn't.

The ares Explorer crew had been debriefed extensively, while teams of scientists and engineers examined and tried to reverse engineer the methods and technology used to repair the ship.

Interviews with the crew by news organizations had revealed that the Genoshans had been uncommunicative but polite. Rumors that they were monstrous looking aliens were dismissed. The Genoshans the crew meet were human looking.

Only one name had been revealed: Rickman Davies, the captain of the ares Explorer, had been
delivered to the Station commander's compartments to receive the Genoshans' offer to open a diplomatic dialogue with the UN. The offer had been tendered by Prime Northstar and a deputy introduced as Councilor Milan.

Four months of debate in the UN Security Council had been the result. The decision to send a delegation with an official ambassador of the UN had passed by only three votes. The North American Union had been set against it. Threats of withdrawal from the UN were ignored. North America had never recovered its superpower status after the Scourge.

"There's places for three reporters, Kelly," Jameson told him. "Two places go to a holo-man and his videorama operator. The third space is for a text man."

The news that the crippled return-bound from Mars ship ares Explorer had been rescued by crew from Avalon Station–mutants–had echoed around the world. The textfeeds and holo-newsvids had been non-stop with the story. People were scared. People were excited. People were fascinated, hanging on every pundit's words, baying for more. This was better than the Mars Colony. This was the mystery in their backyard.

"The UN settled on Dezane and his vidder Valeriev and wanted Mitch Almondalar as the text reporter--"

"So, again, why me?"

"He's getting married this month and doesn't want reschedule his honeymoon," Nigel said with a quirk to his mouth. Alistair could see his newshound editor didn't understand that. Blowing off the story of the decade--hell, maybe the century--to go on a honeymoon? What kind of reporter did that?

"Three others though."

Jameson nodded.

"One of them will go if you refuse."

Alistair leaned back in his chair.

"Who are they?"

"Obume, Rodriguez, or Skiller."

"Skiller!?"

Nigel grinned.

"I thought that would piss you off"

"That soddin' git," Alistair said through gritted teeth.

"Whoever goes will get a Pulitzer," Nigel taunted. "You want Skiller taking it… again?"

"Shock no."

"I want this for the Bugle, Kelly," Jameson stated. "My family has been publishing this paper since it
was the Daily Bugle and based in New York."

"I - All right," Alistair said.

"Good man."

"I guess I better go do some homework on mutant history and the Gene Wars," he said. He got to his feet.

Jameson shook his hand and Nigel clapped him on the back.

"Unh, how long will I be gone?"

"Six weeks."

He'd need to clean out his apartment a little, pay his urgent bills, and let Gale know he'd be out of town and couldn't attend her parents' anniversary in Ludwell with her next month. There was a bloody relief. Plus getting one over on that worthless arsebite Skiller made it all sweeter too.

Alistair's footsteps picked up as he headed for his cube.

He began to whistle.

________________________
Election Night

Chapter Summary

Mystique regrets sleeping with Sabretooth that one time. And not using birth control. And not having an abortion. And not smothering the wretched little bastard after she had him.

So many regrets.

AD 2004, November 7
United States
Chicago

Chicago by night looked pretty outside the rain-streaked windows, all blurry and brilliant. Black and silver and sparkling colors. She stood by the window and looked out for a while, near enough to feel the cold that leached through the glass, but ignoring it.

She'd come to Chicago to finish a job she'd failed at before, but seen the futility of it quickly. Taking him out now wouldn't do any good. Edwin Delmyer would just take over and the outrage would be as bad as anything Creed could accomplish alive.

She'd walked out of the Convention Center, right past the security, without tripping an alarm. No one had a clue how close she'd been.

He certainly didn't.

She'd been so close… she'd smelt his aftershave. The disposable syringe full of biotoxin had been in her hand. One jab and it would have been over.

Only it wouldn't have been over. Graydon Creed would have been dead, but his poisoned legacy would have been inherited by all the more people if she'd made him a martyr.

She walked away from the window, picked up the TV remote from a glass coffee table and turned on the election coverage. "The polls have closed in the Pacific Time Zone, Tom. By our latest calculations, Friends of Humanity candidate Graydon Creed and his running mate Edwin Delmyer have secured an overwhelming lead in thirty-seven states already…"

The picture showed the Daily Center Convention Hall, glutted with people and hate. All of them milling around like a stirred up ants' nest, waving their red-white-and-blue placards over their heads.

She looked at the bunting and clouds of confetti being shown and sneered. *Humans first, humans first, humans first.* The speakers relayed a thin echo of the crowd's chanting.

"We are humans, you cretins," she muttered at the television screen. Sound and fury, signifying… "And if we aren't, why should we give a damn about you pathetic losers?"
She surfed through the channels in a blur of images, but election coverage had superseded all normal programming. All the same, just different camera angles and talking heads.

She abandoned the remote on the white leather sofa and explored the rest of the apartment. There was a genuine Georgia O'Keeffe on the wall in the bedroom, everything decorated in colors to match, very minimalist. Not quite her style, but not bad. She certainly wouldn't suffer spending the night.

She found a bottle of vodka in the freezer of the apartment and a water glass in one of the cabinets. Both came with her as she wended her way back into the perfectly decorated living room.

Another snappy campaign slogan caught her attention. *Safe in Our Homes, Safe on the Street.* She glanced into the bathroom where she'd stashed the apartment's real owner after morphing into the woman's duplicate.

"Ooops."

Anyway, the woman could have tripped on a curb and fallen in front of a bus or slipped in her roman bathtub and drowned. Didn't they know more fatal accidents happened at home in the bathroom than anywhere else? Running into a shapeshifter that needed a new face and identity for a few days had just been bad luck. These things happened.

She poured herself a generous portion of vodka and saluted the television before swallowing an icy-searing mouthful as the talking heads called it. "Well, it's not official yet, Tom, but clearly Graydon Creed has won this election and will be our next President. What this means for the mutant…"

She laughed in the silence of the appropriated apartment, letting her latest form morph back into her default form: sleek, blue-skinned, yellow-eyed, blood-red hair.

"Oh, you stupid bastards, you should have let me kill him when I meant to," Mystique breathed. "I swear to God he's worse than his father. He knows it's us or them."

What insanity had led her to sleep with Victor Creed? The same insanity that made her carry the murderous bastard's child to term? Then to find out that despite his parents, the baby had no trace of the x-factor. The only thing he'd inherited from them was Sabretooth's vicious nature.

The Gods were evil ironists. Or sadists. She swallowed another mouthful of vodka.

Graydon really was just like his father. Giving him up for adoption to a normal couple had seemed like the kindest choice. How could she have predicted he'd turn out the way he did? Oh, wait, with Victor Creed as his father, even if they never had met?

She should have guessed. She should have strangled him with the umbilical cord.

Mystique finished her vodka and poured another. The more she thought about it, the more getting drunk seemed like the best response to this development.

Her son was about to become President of the United States. Four years ago, she'd stopped him when she shot him, but the X-Men had interfered and her shot hadn't killed him.

On the television screen, he strode up to the podium. He didn't look like her. She could look exactly like him if she wanted, but that meant nothing. Kurt looked like the real her–blue. Yellow eyes.
Graydon was tall, broad shouldered, with short cut blond hair, a sharp planed face and eyes colder than the moon.

"Our next President!" The crowd roared its approval. Red-white-and-blue confetti fell from the ceiling. A fanfare played as he walked onto the stage. He took the microphone off the podium and strode to the front of the stage. The mob of FOH supporters roared. He smiled.

Watching, Mystique flinched.

"Graydon Creed!"
AD 2227, January 5
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

The guards wore red uniforms and blank-faced masks, standing at the great double doors that opened into the receiving hall of the Citadel. The slim, black haired woman who had greeted the UN delegation at the airport stopped at the doors. She looked perfectly human, as had everyone the delegation had glimpsed since arriving on the Mutant nation island. Ambassador Aiken wondered if that hadn't been deliberate, and suspected it was. The Genoshans were making an effort not to disturb their visitors too soon.

"The Triune are within," the woman, who hadn't introduced herself said. She smiled slightly. "Just proceed inside."

"Thank you for your company," Aiken said politely.

She nodded. "It was nothing." Then her body seemed to dissolve into a cloud of smoke and she disappeared. Aiken took in a hard breath, but managed to hide his startlement. His assistants and the other UN representatives were chattering in low tones, shocked by the sudden display. It had been so long since humans had interacted with mutants, but they had all been briefed, all studied the histories of the Gene Wars; they shouldn't have been surprised. They were though, and Aiken was.

He gathered himself though and gestured the rest of his group to follow. "Come along, we don't want to keep the Premier waiting."

The hall was vast, the roof arching several stories above them, the polished black stone floor reflecting like a mirror. Massive columns reached toward the domed roof along each side. At the end of the hall, the floor fell away in steps that curved around to form an amphitheatre of benches that faced the raised dais at the apex of the hall. On the dais, three massive, equal thrones dominated.

Aiken stopped, staring up at the thrones and their occupants, for the first time grasping that phrase their guide had used.

The Triune.

Genosha was ruled by not one mutant, but by three.

The power seemed to pulse from the three figures looking down at the UN delegation. In the center, a regal white-haired man dressed in red and imperial purple robes watched them with cold blue eyes. This was the Premier, the man they had been briefed to expect, and Aiken had read history texts and
psychological work-ups on him. None of them captured the sheer presence of the omega mutant known as Magneto. The white hair hinted at his age, but the imposing physique and features were those of a man in his prime. Only crows'-feet and a deep frown line between his white brows showed anything like age.

Aiken thought he might recognize the other two as well. His briefings hadn't addressed them in particular, but there had been some group photos and they, like Magneto, had not aged since the Gene Wars.

On Magneto's right, sat a woman crowned with a mane of flame-red hair that stirred with a seeming life of its own. Her eyes were electric green, no white, no pupil, and a molten glow shimmered around her green clad form. She was strikingly beautiful and the cold expression on her features frightened Aiken. This wasn't a person who wanted them here. That she had once been a member of a group that believed in co-existence between human and mutant was irrelevant. Phoenix no longer held such beliefs.

To the left of Magneto sat a lithe figure clad in black. His lean, chiseled features were as handsome as Phoenix' were beautiful. He slouched on his throne, head tipped slightly to the side as he watched the delegation's approach. A waist-length braid of russet hair hung over one shoulder, but didn't bind all his hair. Long bangs slipped free, brushing over his eyes, cheekbones, and jaw in copper-shot layers. His eyes were crimson on black, energy flaring from them and from the fingertips of his long hands.

The eyes were what identified him as a mutant recorded in the histories as Gambit. Little else was known about him, beyond that he had been a member of the terrorist group the X-Men before the Gene Wars, had led an even more ruthless group called the Marauders and had once been held in the former United States' most infamous Mutant Relocation Center–The Mojave–and escaped or been rescued.

That last made Aiken doubt the red-eyed mutant would be any friendlier than Magneto or Phoenix.

The three of them were still and silent and inhuman. They were survivors of a war that was long ago history to Benjamin Aiken and the rest of the world. They seethed with power; the air around them shivering like a heat mirage.

Magneto inclined his head and acknowledged them at last.

"Ambassador Aiken."

Aiken swallowed and addressed him. "Premier Magneto. I want to acknowledge how grateful the UN is that your government has afforded us this opportunity to visit your beautiful nation."

A sardonic chuckle came from the black-clad man.

Magneto lifted his hand and Gambit stilled, but the mocking look remained on his handsome face.

"We hope that the humans of the world have progressed enough that you may accept that opportunity," Magneto said in a deep, ringing voice. "There are those among us--" he nodded to the man and woman on each side of him, "--who once believed our two species could exist together peacefully."

"That is the hope we all share, Mr. Premier," Aiken said carefully.
"We were wrong then," Phoenix spoke up. She narrowed those empty green eyes. "Misguided."

"Surely, not wrong, but only ahead of your time?" Aiken offered cautiously.

Gambit waved a long-fingered hand in dismissal. "Maybe things've changed, maybe not."

"We wish only to open a genuine dialogue between Genosha and the rest of the world," Aiken said.

"If you say so, mon ami." He gestured to the neat metal circlets adorning each member of the delegation's heads. "Interesting jewelry, non?"

Phoenix smiled.

"Psi-blockers. They buzz, you know?"

Aiken just hoped they worked. Phoenix, according to the briefings, had been an immensely powerful telepath.

Gambit looked past Magneto to her and smiled. "Irritating, isn't it?"

"Like a gnat."

"I'll make it go away, chere." Those crimson eyes rested on Aiken briefly and he heard a small, dry crack somewhere within the psi-block. Then Gambit's gaze shifted to each of the rest of the delegation. There was nothing else, no sense of an alien mind sifting into Aiken's, but he knew that the mutant had disabled the psi-blocks they wore.

"There."

Phoenix smiled. "Much better." She looked at Aiken. "You can replace them before meeting with us again, but do get them tuned next time." She waved at Gambit. "He has a much more delicate touch than I do. I'd just smash them and your minds."

"Jean," Magneto said.

She patted his arm.

"They're so afraid one of us will mess with their minds. But those little toys could never protect them against a combat trained 'path." She sighed. "I won't bother them, of course. It would be so rude."

"We will see," Magneto said.

Phoenix and Gambit dipped their heads, assenting without necessarily agreeing.

Aiken shivered. Reading about the bizarre abilities of the genetic off-shoots of humanity had been fascinating. That had been theory. He'd begun to think re-opening contact between Genosha and humanity might be a terrible mistake. The Triune were terrifying. They were frightening in their age and their casual, absolute power.

Magneto gestured and another person joined them, a slim young woman with brown eyes, brown hair in a neat ponytail. She looked about twenty and was dressed in blue-black leathers, an X patch
on the shoulders of her jacket, and low-heeled boots. It looked like a casual uniform. She could have been a college girl from anywhere in the world.

Aiken was surprised to note a Star of David pendant around her neck. He had never contemplated whether mutants were religious. That was something the UN might utilize. Theology had been the basis of more internal conflict in countries than anything else but pure power. But then, underneath it all religious conflicts were all about power too, the power to control what people believed and therefore did.

"This is Shadowcat," Magneto introduced the young woman.

She smiled at Aiken in a friendly fashion.

"If you will accompany her, she will arrange you and your delegation's transfer to the UN compound."

"Ambassador?" she inquired in light, pleasant voice. Her accent seemed North American, subtly archaic.

Aiken had already noted that isolation had led to the Genoshans speaking a language that seemed based on twenty-first century English but liberally added to from numerous other languages. Not surprising in a country made up originally from refugees and emigres from all over the planet. Time had done the rest.

"Yes, of course," Aiken agreed. He let the young lady lead him away from the Triune and down a marble-floored corridor.

"The compound was specifically built to house your delegation," Shadowcat told him as she guided Aiken out of the Citadel. His aides and other members of the delegation trailed behind them. "It's psi-shielded and located in one of the very best gamma neighborhoods. For your transportation needs, we've arranged a small fleet of hovermobiles very much like the ones you're used to. There are drivers available if want them, too."

Aiken looked at her. "I don't understand. Gamma neighborhoods?"

"Oh, gammas are mutants with non-active mutations. There are very strict laws about challenging gammas if you're higher ranked," Shadowcat explained.

A group of slate blue hovermobiles waited for them in an airborne stack over the Citadel's landing pad, each painted with a white, stylized version of the UN seal. The first one settled to the ground and the driver exited to open the passenger doors.

Aiken raised his eyebrows as he noticed the driver sported two curling horns in the thatch of black hair on his head and a sheen of scales along his cheekbones.

Shadowcat stepped into the hovermobile with a nod to the driver and settled herself. The driver gave her a very respectful nod then waited for Aiken before closing the door. Aiken settled himself in one of the very comfortable seats.

Shadowcat touched her finger to a holographic control panel. "Jing, take us to the UN compound and don't lose the other cars, please."
"Please explain about the… gammas?" Aiken asked her.

"A gamma mutant is quite helpless against an arena-trained alpha or even a clever beta. Of course, sometimes accidents happen, but that is what the 'paths and truth readers are for, as well as the creches and training houses. All of our citizens learn an honor code when they are taught to use and control their powers. It's very effective. However, when it fails, there is the law itself. The penalties for breaking the law are quite… harsh.

Something in Shadowcat's brown eyes gave Aiken pause. He wondered what 'harsh' meant in this strange society of super-powered beings. She must have noticed as she reached over and patted his arm. "You have nothing to worry about. Diplomatic immunity means no one would dream of challenging any of your people. Besides, even in the other neighborhoods where alphas are more common, none of them would touch a null in any case. It just isn't done."

"Nulls?"

She smiled. "Our terminology for the unfortunate few still born without a mutation or who have suffered a devastating loss of their mutation."

Aiken considered that. Genosha had its ways of dealing with the non-powered and non-mutated. Interesting. No one had factored in the possibility of a non-mutant population within the borders of Genosha. Someone should have, of course, but they had been blinded by the image of the 'mutant nation'. There had been non-mutants who fled to Genosha during and at the end of the Gene Wars, though.

Families had accompanied the genetically different beings who left for a new homeland; parents, spouses, children, sometimes more extended groups and members of the notorious Mutant Underground who feared reprisals and criminal penalties for so-called terrorist activities before and during the war. Some people had been unwilling to accept the draconian laws passed to separate human and mutant, including embryonic testing and mandatory abortions, whether on religious or ethical grounds. Genosha had accepted more than mutants and mutates and aliens during the Exodus.

He wondered what life was like for them and their descendants.

The UN wanted a report of civil rights within Genosha. The status of normal humans, both legal and socially, would be a major interest when he reported.

Aiken leaned forward.

"Tell me all about it, Miss… Shadowcat?"

"Call me Kitty."

"Kitty. Please call me Benjamin. May I inquire as to your status beyond your charming company?"

She kept smiling and he acknowledged to himself that there was a very sharp intelligence behind her sweet looking face. It wouldn't do to underestimate this young woman. If she was young, he corrected himself. Mutants had demonstrated enhanced life spans before the Interdict. The Triune were proof some mutants were very long-lived.

"I'm with the DET. Directorate of Economy and Treasury," she explained.
Aiken was impressed. "What position do you hold?"

Kitty gave him a shark's grin.

"I'm the Minister."

Aiken sat back in his seat and blinked.

The grin got wider, but wasn't unkind.

"Check your history, Mr. Ambassador. Shadowcat may not have been as famous as Magneto, but I was there during the Gene Wars and before."

She tapped his arm with her forefinger, then it literally slid into Aiken's arm. He stared in horror. She withdrew her hand.

"Just thought you might like to know. The Triune aren't the only ones who were around for the Gene Wars. In fact, the government is littered with us. When you send your reports to the UN and whoever else you answer to, don't forget to mention this: Genosha has a very long memory. We take our Santayana seriously."
AD 2005, January 8
United States
Washington, DC

Excerpt from the first Inaugural Address of President Graydon Creed, televised nationally. Transcript courtesy of the Telearchive of the North American Union.

1 January 2004.

'There is a covenant between the citizens of the United States and myself. I will hold myself to that covenant as President. I will do all that is within my power, the power of the office to which I have been elected by the people of this great nation, to protect those people. Our unwavering devotion to our country's greater good has brought us through extraordinary crises. It will again.

We must hold firm to a hard course in order to emerge triumphant and safe from the threats that face us now. As our grandfathers and great grandfathers who served in World Wars I and II sacrificed, so will we – and we will triumph as did they!

Those threats from outside our country have been met successfully during the Cold War and since.

Today we are confronted with a new threat, a more insidious one than Communism or tinpot foreign dictators – because this threat challenges us from within.

Mutants.

We've all seen pictures of them. Creatures with scales, clawed and fanged, with the tongues of flies, the hooves of beasts, things out of our nightmares. Many of them are pathetic, ugly, mentally unbalanced and pitiful. But those are the obvious mutants.

The real threat are the mutants passing among us: the man who lives down your street, the woman who works in the cubicle next to you, the boy your daughter wants to date. Because that man oozes acid from his finger tips,
that woman can twist your mind and that boy may burn down his high school with a mere thought. These creatures are more dangerous than their monstrous kin. They want us to think they are like us, that they are human.

They aren't.

Can you fly or walk through walls? Can you kill with a thought or a touch? No one human can.

They cannot be allowed to endanger our society by walking among us unchecked any longer. That is why I have drafted the Comprehensive Mutant Registration Act. My first act as President will be the introduction of the Bill to Congress.

When mutants are registered we will have taken the first step in protecting ourselves and our country. When mutants are registered they will be answerable to the law and government, not hiding in the shadows or masquerading as normal people.

It is my solemn vow that while I am in office, mutants will no longer threaten the citizens of this nation. Whatever measures are necessary, this growing threat will be neutralized. The Comprehensive Mutant Registration Act is the beginning of my plan to safeguard the United States.'

*Homo sapiens superior exacerbated the situation, not so much with the resentment of the characterization of mutants as superior, but by designating them once again as a separate species. This division resulted in the identification of mutants as The Other.*

**The Other: A Psychological and Political History of the Creed Administration and the Comprehensive Mutant Registration Act** Ed. Annette Hoebling-Mannheim, Paul Galley, Simon de Milleare, Rene Corso and Leisel Wagner. (Small, Tan: Atlanta, GA 2065)
Genosha. A Green and Pleasant Place. New Genosha didn't use that old slogan, but it appeared that way.

Hammer Bay from the air looked much like any other city. Except it didn't, though the differences were subtle. The actual bay gleamed a deep, clean blue-green and the city seemed almost manicured, everything gleaming fresh, new and eerily quiet. That surprised Alistair, though he should have realized it wouldn't be the bombed-out shell he'd found pictures of when he began his research.

He was looking forward to meeting—really meeting and talking to rather than being escorted from place to place by—his first real mutants.

He'd been surprised when one of the Ambassador's staff informed him the Genoshans had provided a hovermobile and driver strictly for him and pretty much set him loose on the city. He'd been expecting something much more controlled and formal. Even now he wondered how free he really was to explore.

Maybe they didn't care where he went because no one would talk to him.

The driver looked and sounded absolutely normal. Just a brown skinned man wearing a suit that wouldn't have drawn any attention on a London street. Alistair felt disappointed.

"What's your name?" he asked. He'd chosen to take the front passenger seat rather than the more luxurious back area.

"Jimmy Adhu."

"Okay, Mr. Adhu—"

"Call me Jimmy."
"Thanks. Can you just drive us around and show me the city?"

"Sure. You want me to tell you about where we're going?"

"That'd be great."

Jimmy piloted them over Hammer Bay, starting at the docks, explaining that since the Interdict meant no outside trade, the docks were used mostly by fishing boats and pleasure craft, along with some military and coast guard boats.

Alistair peered out.

"It's a beautiful city," he commented. Parks and tree-lined streets interspersed the buildings, most of which showed a Mediterranean influence. Few were more than two or three stories high. The shining spire of the Citadel dominated the horizon, matched in height only by a needle straight dark monolith at the far end of the plaza at the center of the city.

"What is that?"

"Tower of the Dead," Adhu replied. He casually steered the hovermobile to let Alistair see it clearer. At the top a great flame wavered in the wind.

"It's what? A war memorial?"

"Aye."

Closer, Alistair could see the stairs that spiraled up the memorial's height. It looked like a long, long climb.

"Everybody in Genosha walks up it at least once. You ought to while you're here," Adhu said.

"I will," Alistair promised.

Adhu took them over a more high-tech portion of the city. A grouping of deep blue buildings caught Alistair's eye. They were unmarked and apparently solid, no visible windows or entrances.

"What's that?"

"Big Blue." Adhu shot him a look then laughed. "Right, how would you know? It's the McCoy BioMedical Research Facility. All the big brains work there." He pointed to another cluster of lighter blue buildings across the wide street. "And that's Muir, the Moira MacTaggert Memorial Hospital. Sometimes called Little Blue. They're associated."

They cruised through Hammer Bay, Adhu pointing out places of interest.

The Munroe Weather Control Offices, a pink pastel villa with extensive gardens around it. The Cable History Center which resembled a small college campus and boasted some brick buildings that did date back to Genosha before the Interdict. A statue of Scott Summers in the center of a plaza where the cobblestones were laid out in a black on red X. A fountain maze where the water walls of the labyrinth changed pattern every day with a flowered oasis at the center and an elegant restaurant Adhu promised him was the best in Hammer Bay.
The Securidat Headquarters, an ominous mirrored black cube with iridescent energy chasing over its face. Adhu gave a little shudder.

"No one wants to know exactly what goes on in there."

Adhu took the hovermobile over the residential parts of the city, comfortable looking neighborhoods that resembled the one the UN Compound had been built in. Again, Alistair noticed the Genoshan preference for buildings that hugged the ground. He asked about that.

"We tend to build underground," Adhu explained. He laughed. "Tall buildings went out of vogue back when alphas still challenged each other wherever they pleased. Too vulnerable. I guess the original city got leveled in the bad old days before the Interdict."

Alistair blinked. "Does that happen much?"

"What, challenges? No. That's what the Pit's for. Once in a while there's an accident, but really it's not a bad life if you keep your head down. They leave the betas and gammas alone anyway."

"Oh."

Alistair tried to fit what he was hearing and seeing into a coherent whole. He needed more information.

"Is it–I don't know the protocol of asking, but you are a mutant, right?"

Adhu laughed. "Sure. I could have introduced myself as Twist, but I thought you'd be more comfortable with my birth name."

"Twist? Uhm, what do you do?"

"Distortion. I can mess with just about anything that's solid. Inorganics only, thank the Bright Lady. I'm a beta, high end though. I spent some time in a sanctuary until I got it under control."

"Oh."

Adhu seemed so normal.

"It's not a particularly useful power, which is why I've got this driving gig," Adhu went on. "Well, maybe in battle. But I have to be in physical contact with whatever I'm twisting. I mean, there's not much point to melting a car into a pretzel. Not like the energy wielders. They usually spend at least a couple years in the sanctuaries getting a handle on their powers, then end up getting paid to feed the power grids or in the military maintaining the Barrier generators. The telepaths tend to go into the psych sciences or the law, except they all train in the Telepathic Corps. Even if they're gammas, they get trained."

"The Telepathic Corps? Is that military?"

"Yeah, but don't get your knickers in a twist." Adhu laughed again. "Everyone in Genosha does a stint when we come of age. We don't keep a big standing army or anything, but everyone gets some experience. Two years, then it's three months every three years, unless you're in the military or the police."
"Even people with families?"

"Hell yes. Thing is, we tend to have extended families, line marriages, there's always someone to look out for any kids. There are the Xavier Schools and crèches too. Kids don't get dumped here."

"What are the Xavier Schools?"

"You don't have them Out There?" Adhu paused. "Well, I guess you wouldn't. Most of us start coming into whatever we've got around puberty. The Xavier Schools are for learning to use your mutant power. They're named for some pre-Founding guy only the Twenty Constant actually remember."

He turned the hovermobile toward the outskirts of the city where what Alistair had taken to be estates of the very rich occupied the low hills. Most were walled and gated. Some had visible energy barriers around them as well.

"Those are the private sanctuaries. If a kid has a power that's kicking too high and no control yet, they move to one of the sanctuaries. That way if they get a spike, they can let rip in one of the buffered training areas instead of taking down part of the city. A lot of alphas spend a couple weeks a year in one, just cutting loose."

"Have you been there?"

Adhu nodded. "Yeah, even though I'm a beta, I could do some serious damage if I started distorting stuff right and left. It only took me a few months to get a handle on it, but you need to practice regularly to stay in control. You can't just dam up powers and not use them either. They bust loose and then you don't have a handle on them."

"Like going to the gym to stay in shape," Alistair offered.

"Pretty much. What else do you want to see?"

"How about some place we can get some lunch and talk to some people?"

"You got it, Mr. Kelly."
The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down

Chapter Summary

Poker night at Domino's goes sour.

AD 2205, May 23
United States
Manhattan

"The mercenary gig must pay pretty good," Remy commented after wandering around Domino's penthouse apartment. He'd spotted several original paintings he wouldn't have hesitated to steal if he'd been on a pinch. The view out the windows merited a moment's admiration as well.

The rooms were decorated in a fashion that reflected Domino: smooth, high-tech, stylish but comfortable.

Domino shrugged. "I've made some lucky investments."

A smile curled Remy's lips at that. He strolled over to the card table she'd set up, where the others were already sitting down to play. An eclectic group of X-types had shown up for the semi-regular game: Gambit and Wolverine had convinced Northstar and Storm to accompany them to the city, Pete and Kitty had shown up to a warm welcome from all but Storm, Psylocke had slipped out of the shadows, while Lila Cheney had ported Sam in then disappeared with a happy wave. The real surprise had been Emma Frost showing up.

"Nathan," Domino directed, "make sure Emma doesn't peek at anyone's cards. Emma, you make sure he doesn't. Betsy - "

Psylocke waved a hand. "I'll be on my good behavior."

Remy stared at the purple-haired woman. "You have good behavior, 'Lizabeth?" he asked incredulously.

She glared at him.

"Elizabeth would not abuse our privacy in such a manner, Remy," Storm reproved.

Remy rolled his eyes and Betsy smirked. Cable grunted. Emma genuinely smiled. "Have you got any white wine, Dom?"

"That bottle you brought a couple of weeks ago." She disappeared into the kitchen on a quest for the bottle.

Logan pulled out a cigar and his lighter with a flourish. Storm frowned and said, "If you light that in the house I will – "
"Do nothing," Domino cut in, returning. "This isn't the mansion, Storm. My place and my call."

Storm looked startled.

Domino waved a hand. "Smoke 'em if ya got 'em, boys," she directed. It looked like thwarting the weather goddess—and her sometime rival for Nathan's affections—had put her in a good mood.

Pete and Remy lit up with sighs of pleasure.

Storm's mouth opened, but she just managed to bite back a comment when Kitty stole a few puffs from Pete's cigarette.

"Good girl," Remy whispered in her ear. He took a seat at the table next to her. "Why you think we move the game here? It's this place or Wolverine's apartment – you remember, the sty?"

Storm's mouth quirked up involuntarily. The last time they'd played at Logan's place in New York, Remy had deliberately thrown a game to Sam. Then things got crazy again. But he remembered an overwhelming desire to invest in disinfectant just from walking through the neighborhood to get to Logan's apartment. Domino's penthouse definitely served as an improvement.

"So, what's the game?" Logan asked.

Domino sat down and picked up the deck of cards. She shuffled expertly and began to deal. "Five card stud, jokers wild, to begin with," she said.

" - So we're in Rhapastan on a job for Minister Fasaud - "

"That fils the putain, " Remy interjected.

" - I'm setting up a security system on the Finance Building and in waltzes this skinny brat—"

"Resent that, chere, just hadn't got all my growth yet."

" - and I hate like hell to admit it, but he walked through everything I had in place like there was nothing there," Domino continued.

Remy grinned, preened and shrugged. "What can I say? Impressive, moi."

Several people rolled their eyes.

"How about you're sorry for blowing that contract for me?" Domino asked sweetly.

Remy cocked his head. "Mais non, chere. My job was to steal the Ruby of Rhapastan. Your job was to stop moi."

"Smart ass," Logan grumbled.

"Okay, you've got a point," Domino admitted. She lit one of her dark cigarillos and blew smoke at Remy. "So who hired you to get the Ruby anyway?"

Remy's smile faded a little. "Candra."
"The External?" Storm asked.

Storm, Phoenix and Gambit had faced off against the former Benefactress of the Thieves and Assassins’ Guilds in Cairo. From what had passed between Candra and Remy there and some things Rogue had let slip about the time she followed him down to New Orleans, it seemed Remy and Candra had a history.

"Oui."

"That bloody twat," Pete muttered, garnering a swat from Kitty.

Domino considered Remy. "How old were you then?"

He frowned then shrugged. "Seventeen or so? I'd just passed my Master's test, mon pere sent me to the Benefactress as part of the year's tithe."

"Your father sent you to that man-eater when you were seventeen?" Pete exclaimed. "Bloody child endangerment that. No wonder Sinister got hold of you later."

Kitty drummed her fingers on on the table. "You know, Pete, I'm getting a feeling you know this Candra person a little too well."

"What? I never–"

"Me thinks – "

"M'sieu Wisdom doth protest too much?" Remy finished, clearly eager to redirect the focus of the conversation.

"Look, it was when I was in Black Air," Pete protested. "Scicluna - "

Storm reached over and combed his errant hair away from his eyes with a gentle touch. His crimson gaze slid to her and for an instant she glimpsed still bleeding wounds in his soul. Then he caught her hand and pressed his lips to her fingers. He'd never talked about the tithing with her, but her experiences with the Cairo Thieves' Guild probably gave her some insight.

" - she weren't important enough to mention!" Wisdom swore.

Remy smiled, lopsided and amused. "She wouldn't like hearin' that, would she, padnat?"

"No, she wouldn't," Storm agreed warmly.

Cable narrowed his eyes and glared at three smug faces blurrily. He pointed an accusing finger at the threesome. "Whrn't 'ou druck-druke-drunk?"

Wolverine finished his latest beer and set the empty bottle with the little forest of them at his elbow. "Healing factor," he explained. "Cleans up the alcohol too fast to get more’n warmed up, unless I drink hundred-proof rocket juice."
"Don't strain yourself, Nathan," Domino commented, half-amused and half-irritated since their psi-link made her privy to his disjointed thoughts. It was making her slightly queasy in fact. His thoughts were like warm mush after trying to match Wolverine drink for drink. So much for his vaunted hard head.

She looked around the room. Nathan was about to do a facedown on the poker table, Kit and Pete had curled up together on her leather couch with the TV light flickering over their sleeping faces, Sam and Storm were making a valiant effort at cleaning up the kitchen and Emma had gone off to repair her make-up for the forty-fifth time. Thanks to Cable, her head was pounding like the drum section of a marching band.

Wolverine, Gambit and Northstar were still playing poker with everyone but Domino's money. She'd held her own, but it had taken every bit of skill she had and her mutant luck. Northstar had been a surprise, since he seemed too quick tempered and impulsive to be a good poker player. The mutant speedster could think fast too, though. He wasn't in Gambit and Wolverine's league, or even Domino's, but he had come out ahead so far.

Domino blinked and realized someone else was missing about the time Psylocke shadow-walked into the room with a bottle of aspirin in her hand. She handed it over with a sympathetic smile.

~Psi-links mean sharing your worse half's hangover,~ she pathed.

~Believe me, I'll make sure Nate pays for it,~ Domino answered.

"Well, what about them?" Cable demanded, nodding toward Gambit and Northstar. Gambit had a bottle of bourbon. Northstar had been experimenting with martinis the last two hours, drinking his failed efforts to create the perfect one. Cable's nod threatened to send him tumbling out of his chair.

Gambit snickered.

"Gumbo can drink all night," Wolverine said. "Nice trick."

"Real nice, homme, 'cept when the painkillers and anesthetic don't work on ya right neither," Remy commented casually. "Ya got a big mouth."

Wolverine just raised his eyebrows. He took more damage than any other X-Man because his healing factor and unbreakable adamantium bones meant he could, but he felt the pain just the same. Painkillers or any other sort of drug got dealt with by his body just as summarily as damage. He didn't think about it a lot, but he felt it loud and clear.

He didn't know that Remy picked it all up just as loud and clear. Wolverine shielded his mind and thoughts just the way Xavier and Jean had taught him. The shields just didn't mean jackshit to an empath picking up emotion and sensation.

Remy didn't bother explaining. He'd never bothered telling anyone why he drank alcohol that didn't get him drunk either: it dulled his psi-talents better than any sedative available. Strong emotions still poked through though.

He spent a lot of time tightening his shields against picking up anything from Wolverine. Especially in battle when an empathic link could be a fatal distraction. He didn't heal as fast as Wolverine--no
one did--and he hadn't even when his powers were spiking past alpha into the omega levels. Tonight he'd spent keeping the charm reined in, trying not to catch any of his companions' emotions as they played.

He realized he had a headache and decided to call it quits for the evening. He glanced at his watch. Morning, rather. He wondered if Domino would spring for feeding them all breakfast. The pizzas they'd ordered in earlier were long gone.

He set his cards down face down and stretched, rolling his shoulders, then letting his head fall back. Without lifting his head or looking he pushed the cards away.

"Fold."

"It's just you and me, froggy," Wolverine told Northstar.

Cable tried one last time. "Why'n't you drunk as me?" he demanded of the French Canadian mutant.

"Perhaps because I didn't drink as much as you?" Northstar asked sarcastically.

"Nope," Cable contradicted. "You dunk-drunk more."

"Jean-Paul gets drunk," Wolverine explained, earning a glare from the other Canadian.

"Rustre."

Remy chuckled at Northstar's muttered insult. Wolverine grinned toothily.

"He just gets drunk fast. Then he sobers up just as fast."

"Salaud."

Emma strolled back in and sat at her place.

Wolverine pushed a stack of chips forward. "Raise."

Northstar sneered. "Check." He pushed forward an equal stack.

Domino dealt the flop. Wolverine kept grinning. Northstar looked disgusted and tossed in his cards.

"Fils the putain."

"Ya got a potty mouth there, Beaubier," Wolverine remarked as he raked in his chips.

Cable laid his head on his arms and began snoring.

Emma smiled at Domino and anted up. "Deal."

A sharp exclamation from Storm sent Remy and Wolverine into the kitchen at top speed. A whoosh of air marked Northstar's passage as he beat them all. Domino followed with a frown she shared with Psylocke and Emma as she heard Sam--Sam of all people!--begin cursing steadily.

She reached the doorway and paused there. Sam and Storm had the little TV she kept for listening to
the stock market reports over coffee in the mornings on. Wolverine was muttering, Northstar was rolling his eyes, and Gambit caught her eye and just shook his head.

"I don't believe it," Storm said.

"What?" Domino demanded suspiciously.

"Americans," Northstar exclaimed with a very Gallic shift of his shoulders.

"They went and flamin' did it," Wolverine snarled. He shouldered past Domino and the telepaths.

"It was on the TV just now, ma'am," Sam explained.

"What?" she repeated.

"Special announcement, chere," Gambit said. "Creed's Registration Bill been passed by the House." He mimed spitting. "You got any champagne?"

Domino raised an eyebrow. Her mind clicked to something Wolverine had said about the thief almost a year before: he got drunk on champagne and nothing else. The incongruous request didn't mean he wanted to celebrate.

"Sorry."

He shrugged.

"Is this true?" Psylocke asked Storm.

"Yes," Storm replied. Rain began spattering against the windows. The localized shower indicated how upset Storm was. The glass rattled as a blast of wind hit. A bigger weather disturbance was forming. New York was about to suffer a dark day.

"Don't these things usually take longer?" Psylocke was a Briton and despite residing for years at the X-mansion, didn't follow US politics beyond mutant issues.

"Oui," Gambit said.

He'd given up on champagne and begun a pot of coffee. Domino kept major supplies of coffee on hand since Cable didn't approach bearable in the morning until he had at least two cups in him. He moved gracefully around the white tile and stainless steel room, finding the coffee maker and filters without difficulty.

Domino glanced at the TV screen but it had reverted to an infomercial for thigh toners. She decided to let Gambit calm himself his own way—the coffee would ease some of Nate's bad temper when he came around. It wouldn't be surprising if Gambit knew that; for all his wily ways, Domino had noted him playing peacemaker among his fellows more than once.

"Come on, Sam," she said.

Except Storm, the others followed her into the living room.

Cable was still snoring at the card table, but Wisdom and Pryde were blinking at the TV screen.
Wolverine had appropriated the remote and switched on an all news channel.

Northstar was mixing martinis again. Domino scooped one up and tasted it. Too much vermouth. She drank it anyway.

"This is Trish Tilby reporting from Washington, DC."

The camera man had her on the steps of the House, white marble glowing in the intense lights. A red ticker on the bottom of the screen displayed the voting record of the members. Trish looked solemn but excited. This was big news.

"In a stunning development, the House of Representatives in continuous session has passed President Creed's Bill to create a Comprehensive Mutant Registration Act. This bill was expected to provoke several partisan fights among various representatives and linger in the House possibly for weeks. Its unprecedentedly swift passage bodes for an equally quick ratification in the Senate."

"Bloody hell," Pete commented. Kitty curled closer to him and he wrapped an arm about her narrow shoulders. "We're heading back to the bleedin' UK on the next flight. You're getting a different passport too, first thing, Pryde."

"COMRA, which mandates registration with the federal government by anyone with the x-factor present in their genome, with severe legal penalties to be levied on those who refuse, has been condemned by the ACLU and mutant rights activists, including Professor Charles Xavier. COMRA also provides for comprehensive testing of children entering school, anyone applying for a social security number, employed in the federal or state government, in the military and those receiving medical aid at hospitals. It proposes a plan to co-opt the Census Bureau as Genetic Testers in order to eventually catalogue the mutant population of the entire United States."

Wolverine growled in disgust.

"It's going to pass, ain't it?" Sam said.

"It's just the beginning, bub, just the beginning."

Gambit and Storm came in carrying coffee.

"What's next, a damned tattoo on our faces like Bishop?" Kitty asked.

Storm tried to reassure her. "Kitten, it will never come to that. People will come to their senses before President Creed can sign this horrible bill into law."

"I suppose these are the same people that elected that cretin in the first place?" Emma remarked.

Gambit perched on the arm of the couch next to Wisdom and sipped his coffee, listening to Trish Tilby natter on about the COMRA and Creed's campaign promises.

Storm drew herself up and glared at Emma. "That is unproductive. We will just have to work harder to achieve the Professor's dream. Once people understand that mutants are not evil or somehow contagious they will accept us instead of fearing and hating us."

Gambit snorted.
"Remy - "

"Chere, you got no idea," he muttered.

Kitty was fingering her Star of David pendant. She looked at Storm.

"I don't believe it," she said quietly. "I don't believe the Professor's dream is ever going to work." Her expression was set.

Wolverine ran his hand through his hair.

"What else have we got to work for, punkin?"

She got up. "I'm not going back to London," she told Pete.

Pete's thin face blanched. "You aren't stayin' with these barmy gits, Pryde," he protested.

"No." She shook her head. "I'm going to Genosha."

"Genosha!" Storm exclaimed.

"Magneto needs people there," Kitty said seriously. "I'm going to join them."

"Kitten, you can't! You--"

Kitty ignored Storm and met Wolverine's eyes. "I know you hate him with good reason, Logan, but I think he's right. Normals will destroy us if they can. If we let them."

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Pete--"

"Nothing to be sorry for, Pryde. Your want to go to Genosha, we're going to Genosha. Never figured on workin' for the bloody buckethead, but he maybe has a point," Pete said quickly.

Kitty gave him a tight, small smile.

She looked around the others in the room. Domino followed her gaze, seeing what Kitty was seeing. Emma's expression gave nothing away, but Kitty's defection from Xavier probably touched the White Queen least; they weren't close. Storm looked horrified and unhappy with a shading of anger creeping into her eyes. Northstar obviously didn't care. Sam was just as obviously unhappy and biting his lip. Pete had already made his declaration. Gambit seemed distracted, but offered Kitty a slight smile and Wolverine just nodded, looking displeased but resigned.

"Kitty, Magneto's a terrorist," Storm declared, trying to dissuade Kitty one more time. "You can't join him. He's a--he's a madman."

"Dunno, chere," Gambit murmured. "Sometimes the buckethead makes sense."

"Remy, you're not helping, so shut up," Storm snapped.

Gambit sipped his coffee and winked at Kitty. She brought her hand up to hide her answering smile from Storm.
Pete glanced at his watch and said, "I need to make some calls."

Domino waved him toward her office. "Feel free."

"Thanks."

Kitty stopped beside Wolverine and kissed his bristly cheek. He responded with a careful hug. "Don't burn any bridges, punkin," he said. He let go and stepped back and Kitty followed Pete out of the room.

"You're just letting her go?" Storm demanded of Wolverine.

"She's an adult, 'Ro."

"It's all that ratty little man's fault," Storm complained. "Kitty never expressed any doubts before she took up with him."

"Before the petite grew up, ya mean?" Gambit murmured. He came to his feet in a lithe move and headed for Domino's office too.

Domino guessed the thief would be making arrangements for under the radar contact with Wisdom and Pryde even after they reached Genosha. With a shrug for Wolverine, leaving him to deal with the sulky Storm and Sam's visible worry, Domino decided she needed to do the same and followed Gambit.

Cable was still passed out among the abandoned cards and chips on the card table, snoring quietly. She patted his head as she walked by.

"We cannot give up on the Dream, Logan!" Storm exclaimed stridently.

"We can't live in a dream world any longer either, Ororo," Psylocke pointed out in her cool, aristocratic tones.

"Miss Storm, the Professor's Dream ain't the only one," Sam said.

"Sam, you've spent too much time with Nathan."

"Kitty wasn't attacking the Dream, Storm," said the British telepath. "But the Professor's way isn't everyone's."

"I'm very disappointed in you, Elizabeth; you and Sam and Logan and Remy. I expect this sort of pessimism from Cable or Wisdom, but not you. We have to hold onto our beliefs," Storm insisted.

"I ain't sure I wouldn't rather be lumped in with Wisdom and Summers," Wolverine replied. He pulled a cigar from his pocket, sliced the end off with one claw, and lit it. "They know the score. So does Gumbo."

"This isn't a game, Logan, that we're playing to keep score on."

"Nope, darlin', it ain't."

Psylocke's was the last comment Domino over heard.
"It's hard not to hate and fear them back, 'Ro. It's hard to believe anything we've done has made a difference."
In Genosha, everyone has an equal say. Of course, some mutants are more equal than others.

AD 2227, January 19
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

"Are we decided?" Magnus asked the room at large. He spread his hands flat along the polished surface of the conference table. They had been debating for hours, his patience with analyzing the same data over and over had worn thin. They were in the small conference room down the hall from the Alphanate's Assembly Chamber, the one with windows that looked out over the meditation gardens, and the shadows outside were growing long.

Gambit and Phoenix were seated on either side of him, but they'd been quiet through the meeting.

He glanced around the caucus of Primes gathered from the Alphanate and the Senate of Genosha. The eclectic group present were the basis of an informal foreign affairs group, most of them involved with civilian intelligence or security. If the talks between Genosha and the UN went on past the delegation's limited visit, then Genosha would need a more permanent diplomacy directorate - and that was the question posed. To continue the dialogue, to invite diplomatic contact from the member nations of the UN and rejoin the global community or not.

It was a moot point. They couldn't close their borders and pretend the outside world didn't exist any longer. Absently, he wondered how Northstar would like being compared to Pandora.

"You've already made the decision," Mystique stated. Her yellow eyes gleamed, filled with knowing amusement.

"Do you object, Raven?" Magnus asked curiously.

Mystique smiled coldly. "No, of course not," she said. "You know I've wanted to end the Interdict for decades."

Magnus considered her and wished he could persuade Jean to push past the woman's psi-shields and read what she really wanted. If Mystique wasn't part of the Dissenters, then she was certainly a sympathizer. Just how far her sympathies went though, that was the mystery.

~That's Mystique's thing.~ Remy murmured in his mind. ~She's always a mystery.~

He smiled in his mind but kept his expression business-like, switching his attention to the member of Congress sitting beside Mystique.
"Prime Compass?"

"I vote aye." The long, fleshy green spike-tentacles that covered Compass' head writhed and knotted. "Many of our people are curious about the Out There."

~They're going to be disappointed if they think it's better,~ Remy commented sardonically.

Jean's mental agreement held the same weary cynicism. Both of them retained politely neutral masks, but as the meeting wore on she and Remy had sniped and mocked telepathically. For a while they'd played a mental version of Hang Man which had given Magnus a headache. They were bored and well aware that all the talk meant very little unless they agreed with whatever the caucus decided. Mystique had been right about that.

Magnus moved his gaze to the woman next to Compass.

"Fugue?"

"Aye."

She didn't sound enthusiastic. But Fugue didn't show much excitement at the best of times. Her black metallic skin didn't flex or shift to show emotion. She had an excellent mind and a ruthless will that had seen her elected to the Congress as a Prime, despite a mutation that was only borderline beta. She also manifested a set of natural psi-shields that kept telepaths from reading her casually.

"Wanda?"

"You're asking me what I think?" the Scarlet Witch asked bitterly.

Beside him, Remy stirred, hiding a flinch. Remy could barely be in the same room with Wanda. Something about Wanda's thoughts sieved through Remy's shields, swamping him in her emotions. Magnus didn't know which wounded Remy more: his own hurt over his daughter's hatred of them or Wanda's instability.

Magnus didn't care much for Wanda anymore. Not since the night of her second suicide attempt, when she had kissed Remy on the cheek, then gone home and slit her wrists. She'd thrown a hex that linked Remy into her mind so deep his body had started shutting down with hers. Even so, Remy (along with Logan—who had counseled letting her finish it) had objected to the telepaths implanting a command in her brain to keep her from hurting anyone, including herself, again.

Wanda had never forgiven them. She had won a position in the Senate rather than taking her place in the Alphanate just to flaunt herself before the Triune and thwart them in any way she could.

"Wanda," Jean snapped. "Yea or nay?" She had no patience with Wanda at all.

"Nay, then," Wanda replied with a sick smile. Everyone knew her vote would contradict her father's.

He polled the rest of the company. Wolverine and Domino voted aye.

"It might shut the Dissenters up for a while," Domino commented. She drummed her fingers against the table. Her eyes rested on Mystique for a second. Mystique smiled back enigmatically.

"They'll send in some spies, we'll send them some," Wolverine added. He slumped in his chair, a
short, dark, hairy man with more experience than anyone in the room. Despite their original enmity, Magnus valued Wolverine's opinion on the matter higher than anyone else's. "It'll mean embassies and consulates, recruiting a whole bunch of people willing to deal with idiots and kiss ass."

"Leaves you out, mon ami," Remy said.

Wolverine chuckled. "You're right there." He stretched and settled back in his chair. "I'd rather be running down whichever Dissenter cell blew up the Number 5 Barrier Station."

"That's another matter for another meeting," Magnus said quickly. One without the presence of Mystique or his daughter.

Transit voted nay, surprising Magnus.

"You've had contact with the Ambassador and his people," Jean said. "Is there something that's influenced you?"

"No, they're all right. But they are diplomats and not the average person on street." Transit shrugged. "I tend to be somewhat skeptical that they're a true representative of nulls Out There. It's wishful thinking to believe they've changed enough to accept us."

"Prime Scope?"

"I'm against it. It'll just stir up the nulls here."

Magnus sighed. The nulls were harmless. Eventually, there wouldn't be any nulls on Genosha. Even now the Havens catered to more mutants who had burnt-out their powers than citizens born without the x-factor. It wasn't legal, but most parents who bore a stock child resorted to one of the mutating processes to ensure their child wouldn't go through life as a null.

"I abstain," Prime Sharps said. He shrugged when Magnus raised an eyebrow. "All the arguments have merit."

"Ice?"

Drake ignored Magnus and stared at Remy.

"No way."

Remy met Drake's gaze and erected an extra wall between his thoughts and the Triune. Drake blinked first and looked away, but repeated mulishly, "No way."

"Sam?"

"Ah really don't think we're ready, sir," Cannonball said. "Ah've got to vote no."

"Psylocke? Oblique?" he asked the last two.

"I'd like to see England again," Psylocke said. She sounded almost wistful. "Without being in disguise."

The Securidat, under the command of Logan, along with Domino's military input and with Remy's
okay, had been infiltrating spies outside the Interdict from the very beginning. Psylocke had been teleporting outside Genosha numerous times. Other times it had been Shadowcat.

"That's right, you and the Securidat have been breaching the Interdict all along," Wanda sniped.

"That's what an intelligence service does," Psylocke replied evenly. She couldn't have meant anyone else to hear, but Jean tapped her telepathic voice and shared it with Magnus and Remy. ~Don't piss me off, Wanda. I might forget my 'ethics' and do a little more work on your pitiful excuse for a personality.~

~And don't even think about leaking anything to the baselines,~ Jean added.

Oblique shifted in his seat, then nodded. "I vote aye too, sir."

"Good."

Even without a vote from himself, Remy or Jean, the vote fell to continued contact. Magnus sat back, feeling pleased. "Tomorrow we'll present it to the Assembly and the Congress."

"As the Triune wills," the younger members of the caucus recited, bowing their heads before leaving. Wanda left with them. The Constants were less respectful. Wolverine snorted out loud. Remy stirred restlessly. "Let's get a drink, get the taste of that out of our mouths," he said.

"I could do with something to eat," Wolverine said.

"One drink," Domino said. "We have to dress for the banquet for Aiken tonight."

"Don't remind me," Bobby groaned theatrically.

"I suffer, you suffer," Remy told him.

"Didn't you used to be the clothes horse, Gambit?" Logan gibed.

"Non, I just made everything look good."

Magnus sighed. He rather agreed with Ice. The robes they wore for formal occasions were a pain, no matter how impressive they looked.

"So, what're we waiting for?" Logan asked. "Let's get."

"I'll pass, thank you," Mystique said.

"You'll be at the reception?" Jean asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it," Mystique purred. "I'm looking forward to meeting the Ambassador and all his people."
Locomotive Breath

Chapter Summary

They're running out of track and no one can find the brake.

AD 2005, November 10
United States
Austin, Texas

A television was on. One was always on, even in the study rooms, and Jubilee usually tuned the noise out. Key words snapped her to attention though.

"At three twenty-seven pm today, President Creed signed the Comprehensive Mutant Registration Act into law."

"It's about time," Lisa muttered.

Jubilee looked over at her study partner. "What?"

Lisa gestured toward the TV playing in one corner of the rec hall. Several other students were watching it. "Someone did something about the genejokes. Don't they creep you out?"

She set her pen down and cocked her head, "No. Why should they?"

"Because they're not human. They're weird, filthy freaks," Lisa snapped. "I mean, some of them might look human, but they should never have been born. They're like nature's mistakes."

"I'll be sure to mention how you feel to Nolly," Jubilee said.

"Nolly?" Lisa looked confused.

"Yeah, your boyfriend? The guy who was born blind?" Jubilee leaned across the table. She had hold of her temper. Barely. But she wasn't frying the little bitch with a plasma burst or even socking her in the jaw. "I guess he should never have been born either. Nature made a big mistake with him, right?"


"What makes him human, Lisa? Because he looks that way? Because he can't do anything you can't do? Are his parents human?" Jubilee ticked the examples off on her fingers, not caring that she'd caught the attention of several others in the room. "No, wait, I've got it. He's human if he can have kids with a human, right?"

She paused then smiled.

"That argument doesn't work either though, because mutants and humans have kids too. And you want to know something else? Sometimes mutants have non-mutant kids. How about that?"

Lisa's chin came up. "I don't care. I don't want the dirty things near me."
Jubilee shook her head, straight black hair flipping around her face. She wiped the strands out of her eyes.

"You're such a bigot, Lisa."

"Oh, fuck you, Lee. You act so high and mighty. You think you have to be Miss PC Liberal because you're a minority. You've got the Asian ethnic thing going. But I bet you'd be with the rest of us if one of those freaks tried to go school here."

"Wrongo," Jubilee snapped back. "And how do you know there aren't mutants going to school here? Have you got, like, some mutant version of gaydar?"

"No. That's why the President's right. Someone needs to keep track of them."

"So, if Nolly told you he was a mutant, what would you do?"

Lisa's lip curled up. "Besides puke?"

Jubilee nodded.

"Report him. Get his ass thrown out of this school," Lisa said promptly.

Jubilee looked around the onlookers listening in. "Well, what about you guys? What would you do if someone you knew turned out to be a mutant?"

"Beat the shit out of him," someone in the back said.

"Yeah."

"They're dangerous. I don't want any of 'em around me. They had that disease, didn't they?"

"I don't know…"

"Man, they're fucking freaks."

"The minister at our church says mutants are damned. He says they're Satan's spawn."

"Oh, I don't know. Have you seen those X-people on the evening news? Some of those babes are red-hot. I'd do 'em, even if they are mutants."

"That's because you're raving pervert, Tony. You'd fuck a ground squirrel if it held still long enough."

"So does anyone here even know a real mutant?"

"There was a girl in high school. She had gills. I heard she dropped out though. She's probably living in the East River now, hunh?"

Jubilee watched and listened, her essay for American Lit forgotten.

"There's a Friends of Humanity rally next week. We could go check it out. Anyone want come?"

"I'm there," Lisa said.

"You would be," Jubilee muttered.

"Why don't you come too, Lee?" Lisa taunted.
"Sure, I'll do that right after I shave my head and get that swastika tattoo," she replied.

– footage shot from a sheriff's department helicopter of a confrontation between X-Factor and a group of superpowered terrorists calling themselves the New Mutant Liberation Front outside Bellington, North Dakota earlier today. Attempts to determine the nature of the government facility under attack by the NMLF were unsuccessful. Several citizens of nearby Bellington were more forthcoming, telling this reporter that the facility was a manufactory for the mutant hunting robots called Sentinels. When contacted, the Office of Mutant Liaisons offered no comment on the incident beyond acknowledging the presence of X-Factor, who were 'executing their official duties' while 'protecting government property.'

United States
Westchester

The drop down holoscreen displayed Havok, Polaris, and Quicksilver. They were all still in uniform and looked the worse for wear. Polaris was picking at a tear in the arm of her outfit and a dark red contusion marked Havok's cheekbone. Quicksilver was slumped in a chair, not even drumming his fingertips, indicating exactly how exhausted the speedster was. In fact, Scott felt pretty sure Pietro had fallen asleep sitting up.

Scott grimaced at the sight of his brother and asked quietly, "How bad was it?"

Havok swiped a lank lock of blond hair back. His blue eyes were bloodshot.

"Pretty bad."

"But you're all okay?" Jean asked.

Polaris shrugged. "Good enough for government work."

"So is the NMLF sporting any familiar faces?"

"Locus, Dragoness, and Wildside were there," Havok said. "Random. Post. A girl we think is one X-Force ran across, but we're not sure."

Scott raised his eyebrows.

"Give me a name, maybe Cable can get something from Sam."

"Sure. She was imploding things, and I thought I remembered hearing that Warpath took off to Florida for a while with a mutant that did something like that. Risque? There's nothing in X-Factor's database, but we don't have a good relationship with X-Force."

Scott laughed.

"They don't tell us much either."

"Look, Scott, I want a hot shower and some liniment and a tall glass of something alcoholic," Havok said. "The best I'm going to get is the shower and a couple of aspirin. I've got a debriefing with Sikorsky in twenty minutes, then I have to write up a report on the incident. So can we wind this up?"

"Fine." Scott leaned forward. "Is it a Sentinel factory?"
Havok offered a tired smile.

"That would be classified, brother mine."

Wolverine, setting in the shadows at the other end of the conference table, snorted.

On the screen Polaris perked up from where she'd been slumping against Havok's shoulder.

"Logan?"

"Yeah, darlin'?"

"Let's just say the official types hustled us out of there as fast as they could. I'll swear I spotted a couple of cooling towers hidden inside some scaffolding."

"So they were hiding something?" Scott said.

Wolverine chuckled.

"They're government, they've always got something to hide."

"Got that right, mon ami," Gambit commented.

Scott started. He hadn't even realized the thief was in the War Room. He must have followed Wolverine in. He just hadn't taken a seat, instead slouching against the wall with his hands in the pockets of his faded jeans.

Jean was frowning. "Cooling towers?"

"For a nuclear plant maybe," Gambit added thoughtfully. His crimson eyes slitted. "Don't they need a dedicated power plant for manufacturing Sentinels?"

Scott nodded. "Yeah, they do."

Havok grinned. "Well, if I were you, I'd think about checking the place out. On the sly."

"Hmn," Scott said, smiling back. "I'll let you get to your paperwork, little brother."

"Wait," Gambit said. He walked forward into the light where the camera pickup would send his image to X-Factor's headquarters in Fall's Edge.

"Hey, Gambit," Polaris greeted him.

"Bonsoir ma doux," he replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

Polaris twirled a strand of green hair in her fingers and grinned at Gambit. She enjoyed his flirting and charm and he enjoyed entertaining her almost as much as he did irritating Scott or Alex. A win-win situation, because Lorna also knew Gambit wouldn't take her seriously the way someone like Bobby might.

"The cooling towers you saw, chere, were they finished or still under construction?"

"Why would it matter?" Havok asked irritably.

Gambit's eyebrows shot up. "Not all of us can absorb the power from a runaway reactor, homme. Be nice to know before we stroll in there if we can blow the place up or not, mais oui."
"One was still under construction, Gambit," Polaris told him.

"Thanks, chere."

Scott cut the connection a second before Havok could snarl something at Gambit.

"Can you get in?" he asked the thief.

"Worry more about getting out, me." Gambit shrugged. "Get in, get out, that I can do. Take the place down, probably. Do it without anyone knowing the X-Men been there, that's something else."

Scott thought about it.

"The only thing that matters is that you don't kill anyone doing it."

Gambit rolled his eyes.

"You want me to evacuate the place before I blow it?"

"Exactly."

"You know, One-Eye, one of these days this kind of crap is going to get one of us dead," Wolverine said.

Scott clenched his jaw. "X-Men don't kill."

Wolverine laughed.

"Deliberately," Scott was forced to admit. There had been casualties among the collateral damage that went with mutants battling other mutants or anti-mutant militias. But acknowledging that meant seeing how unlikely it was that they would ever achieve the Professor's dream.

He lived in fear of the day that trying to uphold all of their principles clashed so hard with reality that one of them died because of it. They'd had their casualties, lost team members and friends, but not because they refused to kill.

Not yet.

He didn't know what the teams would do when it happened. He hoped they would be able to hold it together and see it as another sort of sacrifice. He was afraid it would be what broke them.

"I want you to take a team and check it out," he told Gambit. "If it is a Sentinel factory, get the people out and destroy it. If it isn't... try to find out what it is without drawing any attention."

Gambit nodded.

"Who ya takin, Cajun?" Wolverine asked.

"You, my Stormy, Psylocke and T-Bird."

"Not Rogue?"

"I think Raven forgot to teach that girl how to be quiet." Gambit sighed. "Either that or she just won't use what she learned 'cause it reminds her of who she used to be."

Scott turned to his very quiet wife. "Jean?"
"I'll get them down here," she said.

He heard her mind-voice through the link between them, summoning Ororo, Betsy and Neal.

Gambit had a topographic map of the Bellingham area on the holo display already. Scott decided to sit back and watch him brief and plan the mission. Gambit had done a good job of leading in Russia according to Cable and Jean. Scott was a little curious to watch him work.

"In New Genosha, Premier Erik Magnus Lehnsherr, the mutant known as Magneto, condemned the United States, declaring that President Creed had taken the first steps toward genocide, in an address broadcast globally."

Bobby stretched out on the couch and sighed as he tried to relax the muscles in his back. Someday they were all going to mutiny against Scott and his sadistic five aM. practice sessions in the Danger Room. What did he think, that they had enlisted in the military or something?

On top of that, he was letting Cable, Domino, Gambit and Wolverine script the training scenarios. Gambit might hate rising before noon, but didn't mind making everyone else suffer if he had to.

Warren had slumped down into his favorite chair, the one that let his wings hang over the back.

"I am never moving again," he declared.

"Well I'm not getting up," Bobby said.

"Someone needs to change the channel of the TV"

"But the remote is waaaay over there on the other side of the coffee table."

"Where are the telekinetics when we really need them?" Warren whined.

"It's an evil plan to make us listen to the news."

"How long have you been doing this?" Neal asked. He was sprawled on the carpet in front of the TV, staring up at the elaborate crown moldings. "I end up feeling like a puddle of sore goo after every practice session."

"Since I was about fourteen," Bobby said moodily. "I still feel like sore goo every time."

"I was sixteen," Warren added. "It really was a school when we came here."

"Sort of. The Professor did make sure we studied and got diplomas and all that."

"Bobby's a certified public accountant, did you know that, Neal?" Warren asked.

"No."

"Ya'll are a big bunch of babies," Rogue said as she came in the room with a bottle of cola in one hand.

"Waaah," Bobby whimpered.

"Move over, Bobby, I want to sit down."

"I'm paralyzed."
"You're lazy, sugar, now move your big, stinky feet."

"Hey, leave my feet out of this."

"I'd like to leave your feet out of this house."

"My feet are not moving."

Rogue sat down on Bobby's feet.

"Hey!" he protested, pulling his feet from under her.

She gave him a triumphant look. "Baby."

He stuck his feet in her lap.

She ignored them.

"So what's on TV?" she asked.

"The news," Warren said mournfully, looking at the remote, which still sat tauntingly on the far side of the coffee table, an infinite distance beyond his reach.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, is that Magneto?"

They all perked up and listened.

'There are no measures to protect the privacy of the mutants registered under the American COMRA. Mutants who are, I remind you, also citizens of their country, with the same civil rights as any other American. Is any other portion of the US population required to register themselves? Required. On the basis or political affiliation? No. Religious affiliation? Again no. Would Americans tolerate registration on the basis of ethnicity? Sex? There is no more control over birth with a x-gene than there is over being male, female, Black, Hispanic, Arab or Asian. Yet it would be unthinkable to force anyone to report to their government on those grounds – many Americans protest even the inclusion of questions of just such identification when a Census is taken.

With the best intentions–intentions I cannot credit to President Creed - the scope for misuse and abuse of the personal information gathered as part of COMRA is astounding. To what purpose is this information really being gathered we must ask.

It is an open invitation to target the most law abiding portion of the American mutant population and it is clearly intentional.

Do not let the blue colors and stars they wear fool you. The Friends of Humanity militias are no different than the brownshirts of Hitler's Germany. It is one of the greatest sorrows of this age to see the country that once stood for freedom in the hands of the hatemongers of the world." Magneto lifted his gaze to stare directly into the camera, addressing it rather than the reporters gathered at the press conference. Ask yourselves where Captain America is. It isn't standing with Graydon Creed.'

"Wow," Neal commented afterward the segment.
"Does anyone besides me find it really, really weird that not only is Magneto, our like arch-nemesis, now running a country that used to be worst place in the world to be a mutant?" Bobby asked, "but he's also lecturing the UN on human rights violations in the US?"

"I think the word you're looking for is ironic, Bobby," Warren replied.

"No, no, it's weird, is what it is," Bobby declared. "It's like we slipped into some alternate dimension where Mags is a good guy and the US is bad."

"Hunh."

"Magnus has always been real good at making people think he's right," Rogue commented.

"Yeah, well, we never thought he was right," Bobby said. "Did we?"

Warren hmmned.

"I do wonder where Captain America is, though, don't you?" Rogue said. "No one's seen him since the inauguration. That last big dust up with AIM would've been a lot easier if he'd been with the Avengers…"

On the screen, Magneto went on, "In response to the Americans' choice to victimize, dehumanize and even murder mutants there out of hate and fear, New Genosha condemns the Creed Administration. We renew our invitation to all mutants, everywhere, to come to New Genosha and find their place in a new homeland where they will not suffer under the yoke of human prejudice.

All mutants are citizens of New Genosha."

"I wonder sometimes," she said.

Neal looked thoughtful. "Shadowcat and Wisdom went there, didn't they?"

"Has anyone heard anything from them?" Warren asked.

Bobby shrugged. "I don't know, but don't mention Kitty around Storm. She's still really touchy about the whole 'defection' and 'betrayal' thing."

"You could ask Logan," Rogue said.

Bobby nodded.

"Yeah, you can bet if something happened to Kitty, Wolvie would be on his way to carve his initials in Magneto's guts."

Neal sat up with a small groan.

"It's just, you all talk about Magneto like he's insane, but that sounded pretty sane to me."

Rogue frowned prettily. "He hasn't been ranting and raving and trying to wipe out humanity since he took over Genosha. There's always been a side of him that is a good man, you know."

"That 'all mutants are citizens' thing sounded good."

"Yeah, it did," Bobby admitted. "And Rogue's right, Magneto isn't all bad. He wants to make the world safe for mutants."
"Of course, he's always figured getting rid of humanity would be the easiest way to do that," Warren commented ironically. "He's right too. Ask anyone who lives on land that used to belong to the Indians."

"Right," Bobby went along. "No one ever has any problems with the Neanderthals, either."

"You know, sugar, that probably isn't the best comparison you ever made."

"No, I think it was pretty apt, actually."

Bobby finally gave up and left the couch so he could retrieve the remote. He surfed past the news shows until he found the cartoon channel.

"Yes! Pinky and the Brain." He grinned manically at Warren. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Warren held up his hand. "No, no, I really doubt I am."

Neal just looked thoughtful, while Rogue determinedly shoveled popcorn into her mouth. The subject of Magneto and New Genosha was abandoned.

But not forgotten.

---

"In other news, the White House announced today that the Office of Mutant Liaisons would be shut down following the official disbandment of X-Factor, the government sponsored mutant counter-terrorist force. This follows the administration's recent decision to reclassify all mutants as national security risks under the terms of the new Modified Patriot Act. Several class action lawsuits have been filed 'for cause' in response to the mass firings of registered mutants employed in federal and state agencies, but aren't expected to succeed. The ACLU has promised to pursue the cases to the highest courts in the land, but informed opinions are that the present Supreme Court's conservative make-up will not be well-disposed toward a 'pro-mutant' cause."

---

"How is he?" Scott asked. Bishop loomed just beyond his shoulder, just his presence intimidating.

Cecelia glared at them as she stepped out of the med lab and let the door slide shut behind her. She shivered and pulled her lab coat closer around her. Several stories below the public face of the Westchester mansion that housed Xavier's Institute for Higher Learning, all was indirect lighting and stainless steel. It was always just a little cold too, to keep the equipment running at optimum.

"Alive."

"When can we debrief him?" Bishop asked.

"Listen, you overgrown piece of meat, the man just lost his eye. He had two bullets in his leg and about bled out." Cecelia poked Bishop in the chest. Hard. "Forge's going to be out for a day at least and then he's going to need a lot of recovery time. Even with the Shi'ar tech we've got, which meant I could synthesize replacement blood that's an actual match, he's still in bad shape."

"We need to know exactly what happened at Fall's Edge," Bishop said stolidly.

"We know what happened!" she shrieked. "The government fired X-Factor and confiscated everything in Forge's labs. They tried to take him in and nearly killed him!"

"It's a good thing Forge insisted we have a back-up evacuation plan," Havok interrupted as he joined
them. He had on civilian clothes and looked tired.

"Alex!" Scott exclaimed. He grabbed his brother and hugged him hard, surprising him.

Havok pulled back and looked at the three of them. "What happened?"

"Forge arrived here wounded. We were unable to contact any other member of X-Factor and discovered that the Fall's Edge HQ had been raided and shut down," Bishop stated.

Havok's eyes widened. "Shit." He nodded toward the med lab. "Is he all right?"

"He was shot. He lost an eye," Scott told him. No use sugarcoating it.

His brother's expression hardened. "Okay," he said flatly. "This is what I know. Val gave us a heads up Sikorsky was coming to shut us down. I talked to Forge and we decided since he's on a different contract with the Defense Department, he would stay while the rest of us got out. He had stuff in his labs that he didn't want to leave for just anyone to get their hands on."

He took a deep breath.

"We left everything except a few personal items we could carry and took the long way here. It took a couple of days because we didn't want to leave a trail for anyone to follow to Westchester. We were all on communication black-out."

Scott relaxed a little.

"That was good thinking. Is everyone with you?"

"Yeah, I left them upstairs."

"Okay, that's something."

"Not fucking much," Havok muttered.

"Well, five minutes ago, I was thinking you might be dead."

"You can't keep a Summers down."

"Look, I want to get everyone down to the War Room. You can tell us all what happened, then we figure out what the government may have got out of Forge's lab" He switched his attention back to Cecelia. "Just let us know if anything changes, okay?"

"Nothing's going to change, Summers."

"Bishop, get up to the security room and put everything on full alert."

Bishop strode away without another word.

Havok stared after him.

"Do you think someone surgically removed his sense of humor or was he just born without one?"

"He's not that--" Scott stopped and shook his head. "I think it might be another mutant power. Come on."

'Responsibility for the violent attack on the Texas State House, which resulted in the deaths of
twenty-seven people, has been claimed by the New Mutant Liberation Front. Fourteen more people remain hospitalized as a result of injuries received when the State House's dome collapsed after being hit by an energy discharge directed at it by one of the terrorists identified only as Shellshock. In a taped message, the NMLF claimed the attack was in response to the death while in custody of a mutant arrested for failure to register.'

Mexico
Juarez

Scanner brushed the minds of the two people approaching them at the back table of the dim Juarez cantina, just to be sure there were who they were supposed to be.

They were.

The black girl in the tie-dye shirt and shorts sat down first, without greeting. The dead pale kid in cargo pants and a gray University of Colorado muscle shirt with her glared at Scanner and Milan first. Locus and Shellshock. A lock of blue-dyed hair had slipped out from under Shellshock's baseball cap.

"We're here," Locus said crisply.

"As are we," Milan acknowledged.

"What have you got for us?" Shellshock demanded.

Milan kicked the army surplus duffle bag at his feet into Shellshock's shins. "IDs and some toys that should let you fool the genescanners if you're careful." He looked at the terrorist scornfully. "If you can manage that."

"We can manage," Shellshock snapped. "We've done without Magneto's help before and we can again."

Milan folded his arms and met the younger man's gaze, unimpressed.

"Maybe we should be working with the X-Men, at least they managed to blow the Sentinel factory without getting their asses kicked," he said.

"The fucking X-Men wouldn't have even known about Bellingham if it weren't for us," Shellshock sneered.

Milan shrugged. Scanner caught his thought. The NMLF were kids without a real clue to what fighting was like. They were used to flattening flatscans with their powers and when they'd been faced with X-Factor, another super-powered group, they'd had to run. They were lucky it had been the X types they ran into first. They'd only got their licks in because X-Factor hadn't been fighting to kill. If they'd run into the Marauders or the Acolytes or the old Brotherhood, they would have been a few bloody smears in the dirt.

"What else have you got?" Locus asked.

The teleporter was a little more experienced. She was a veteran of the original Mutant Liberation Front, before Mirage infiltrated and betrayed it. Like a few of them, she'd managed to go underground.

"Money and intelligence," Scanner said. "Open your head."
"No hard copy?" Locus asked.

"Exactly."

"Feed me."

Locus dropped her psi-shields and Scanner downloaded the intelligence reports and background briefings Magneto had authorized them to turn over to the NMLF. She did it with brutal speed and thoroughness, writing the information into Locus' long term memory and bypassing her consciousness entirely. The last thing she transferred were a series of bank account numbers and the passwords to access the money in them.

Locus swayed in her chair. "Shit, what a headache."

"Have fun," Scanner said.

Milan threw down enough money to pay for the drinks they'd had while they waited and the two Acolytes slipped out of the cantina. At the backdoor, Scanner paused and wiped the memory of them from everyone in the cantina.

---

'In St. Louis, four people were killed at a Humans First rally after they were denounced as mutants. No word on their identities or if in fact these people were mutants…’

---

South America
Argentina
Undisclosed location

Nathaniel Essex, known to the mutant underworld as Sinister, frowned at the results of his latest experiment. The subject had expired exactly forty-two minutes ahead of the predicted terminus. He disliked it when variables interfered with his predictions.

He would need to run the experiment again, to ascertain what had sped the reaction.

He checked his clone banks and hissed in frustration. That had been the last clone from Subject #6598 Hartwell, Marian. Another check revealed that Subject #6598's DNA sample had been among the thousands he lost when his wayward Marauder Gambit had blown up his St. Louis lab three years ago.

~Scalphunter. Bring the rest of the Marauders to me.~

Moments later, his handpicked team of mutant killers filed into the lab. Most of them were clones, of course. The originals had perished on various missions against a variety of his enemies, including the sanctimonious X-Men. Gambit, the man who had recruited them for him to begin with, had probably killed some of them more than once since breaking with Sinister.

The only ones he'd never had to replace were Sabretooth, who had a healing factor that made it close to impossible to kill him, and Gambit—who had stolen his own gene sample back before disappearing after the Mutant Massacre. If the thief's genetic potential weren't so amazing —on par with the Summers and Greys—Sinister might have had him killed for all the trouble he'd made.

But Remy LeBeau might still be swayed back to Sinister's side. He was still useful, even with half his powers suppressed and working for the X-Men. Besides, despite it all, Sinister retained a fondness for him.
"What do you got for us, boss?" Scalphunter asked.

Ranged behind him were ArcLight, Blockbuster, Vertigo, Riptide, Prism, Scrambler and Harpoon. A good team now that Sinister had ‘improved’ them with faster reflexes, higher IQs, and telepathically downloaded skillsets that let them work in tandem better. The only missing ones were, of course, Gambit, Sabretooth, and Malice—who was dead. Sinister had never found a way to clone psionic entities.

Sinister typed in a command to his tracking system. Nearly every mutant he’d taken a sample from was tagged and traceable. Subject #6598 was among them. His system located her almost immediately, along with forty-two other mutants.

"There are forty-three mutants being held in Pelleau Military Reservation outside Martinsville, Ohio. I require DNA samples from all of them. In addition, you are to retrieve this woman—" A screen among the wall of monitors before him lit with an ID picture and stats on Marian Hartwell, "—and bring her back here."

He activated the protocols to begin preparing a suspension tube. He would keep Subject #6598 in hibernation rather than risk losing access to her. That would work for now, but he could see that the new anti-mutant legislation would soon interfere with his own plans. The flatscans could very well wipe out his experimental subjects. He couldn't keep all of his subjects in hibernation.

That couldn't be tolerated. Though he had no time for Magneto and his politics, this might be the juncture to explore an alliance. The Marauders wouldn't object to more action. They just got stale waiting around between his assignments for them.

"You got it, boss."

They turned and started to go.

"Riptide."

Riptide stopped and looked at Sinister cautiously.

"Have you been in contact with Gambit?"

"Not since he went back to the X-Men," the lavender-haired mutant said. "They've done a real number on him."

"Hmn."

Sinister considered.

"Resume contact."

The time would come.

"You going to bring him home?"

"Remy will return to us eventually," Sinister declared.

'Sources within the White House report Peruvian poet and diplomat Joaquin Yamara's diplomatic credentials were denied by the US State Department due to his refusal to submit to a genescan to ascertain whether the world famous mutant rights activist is in fact a mutant himself.
'In a stunning development, as Yamara departed for Reagan International Airport to leave the United States after being declared Persona Non Grata, the Peruvian embassy limousine was detained by two Prime Sentinels, which attempted to take Yamara into custody.

'The Sentinels were attacked and destroyed by a faction of the terrorist X-Men in a battle that resulted in millions of dollars of damage to parts of downtown Washington, DC.

'There were three casualties of the engagement between the X-Men and the Sentinels: two District of Columbia police officers and a Pentagon consultant. Their names have not been released.'

United States
Westchester

Ice rimmed the edges of Spuyten Devil Cove, silver on sand, but the water farther out was black. Bare trees clawed the star pricked sky. A pale line marked the eastern horizon, a promise of dawn as cold as the snow on the ground.

There were lights around the mansion, part of the security system, but the boathouse remained dark. Gambit might not even be there. He'd showered, debriefed with the rest of them and taken off on his bike. Wolverine had followed. Frankly, he wasn't sure who was left at the mansion. They'd scattered as soon as they could, looking to each lick their own wounds in their own ways.

The cold insinuated itself under his coat, into his boots and all into the inside of his bones. He wasn't Bobby or Storm and immune to the falling temperatures. He felt it cut into his sinuses with every breath and watched the pale frost smoke of each exhalation as though it held the secrets of existence.

Maybe that was why Gambit and Wisdom and Wolverine liked to smoke. Sucking in slow poison like punishment, releasing all the pain and darkness and secrets inside with each breath.

Which was so stupid, because it all stayed inside.

He couldn't get rid of it no matter how hard he tried.

~Scott.~

~Get the fuck out of my head, Professor.~

~If you wish to talk, I will be in my office later.~

He refused to reply further. What the hell good would talking about it do? There were three people, three innocent people, dead because of the X-Men's actions. He'd been field leader. It was his responsibility. He would deal with it. He would live with it.

So would the others.

Some of them, he worried, wouldn't even have a problem. He was actually glad that Gambit had to go off and get laid, that Storm needed to hide in her attic greenhouse, that Wolverine was off looking for a good bar brawl; at least they felt something they had to run from. He worried more about Warren and Betsy and Bishop. They were the ones who had shrugged it off as bad luck, too bad, who accepted that there would be 'collateral damage.'

He felt along the psi-bond for Jean's mind, wanting the warmth of their connection, not wanting to wake her if she'd managed to rest. She was awake, sitting in a window seat, waiting for the sunrise.
He shivered.

It seemed such a long time until dawn.

---

'A grocery story in Dayton was burned to the ground today. The business had been the victim of harassment and repeatedly vandalized over the last weeks after it was discovered the manager employed two registered mutants. Obscene slogans were spray painted on the walls and glass windows were broken out repeatedly. The escalated destruction and arson followed a Humans First demonstration outside the store…'

Fury turned off the newsfeed. Was everyone wearing blinders? If you put a fuse to a stick of dynamite and a match to the fuse… wouldn't you expect an explosion? Did you really need to know the people involved to see what the results of what President Creed and the government were doing would be?

The answer was not everyone.

Stark had begun moving his assets out of the States, either up into Canada or outside North America entirely. He was pouring money into sites in Japan, Australia, Ireland and Madripoor, along with building a new tower north of London. He'd moved all the mutant, mutate or even Inhuman Avenger members and associates to a secure compound near Ottawa. The man was still a prick, but you couldn't accuse him of not looking out for his own people. And Stark Solutions, along with anything else Stark controlled, were hiring mutants at an all-time high. Nearly all of them were being offered relocation bonuses and sent to work outside the US as well.

Stark hadn't given up his search for Rogers either, though the Avengers had 'officially' stood down on the matter. The report on the latest hack of SHIELD’s systems put the lie to that. Only the Black Widow could have got past the security in place on the isolated network to insert Stark's AI worm. The only reason they hadn't found anything was because nothing was there.

Fury kept the darkest secrets in his head these days. It might make him sick to let the bastards get away with it, but the world couldn't afford for the Avengers to blow up and turn on Creed's damned, duly-elected government. Not while they were still united. If he could only keep the truth hidden until the Avengers broke apart, maybe… maybe by then Creed and his madmen would be out of power.

He'd never felt so ashamed, though, of anything he'd done to keep the peace.

But if the Avengers found out that Creed had ordered Captain America taken into custody and he'd died a victim of their experiments trying to recreate the super soldier serum they would revolt. The only question would be if the Black Widow or the Winter Soldier would kill Creed first.

---
AD 2227, January 19
Hammer Bay
The Citadel

Benjamin Aiken decided that Genosha had a color.

Red.

Red united the Triune.

Magneto's colors were crimson and imperial purple. Gambit's were crimson and black. Phoenix wore crimson and gold and green. The X sigil that symbolized the country: black over red. The heavy draperies and upholstery of the Citadel, the armor and cloaks and masks of the guards, all red.

Driving from the UN compound to the Citadel to attend the formal banquet welcoming him to Genosha, he saw a vast field of scarlet poppies and green grass in the distance. A cemetery, his driver told him, one of the oldest.

The dark-haired woman who had greeted and accompanied the delegation on their arrival met him at the door.

Aiken wracked his brain trying to remember how she'd introduced herself then and realized she hadn't. She had merely identified herself as a Deputy of the Triune. He did remember Magneto referring to her as Transit and her spectacular (to him) exit once he had been delivered.

"Ambassador Aiken," she greeted him.

"Miss… Transit?" he said. "It's delightful to meet you again."

She smiled and placed her hand on the arm he gallantly offered as they walked up the steps into the Citadel entrance hall.

"Transit is my work name, chosen to reflect my mutant ability and my own personality," she said. "We don't use honorifics with work names." She gave him a mischievous look. "It's not 'Lord' Magneto. Just Magneto. But if that makes you uncomfortable, feel free to refer to me as Claire or Miss Moonstar."

She led him forward to where the Triune stood with several other formally dressed individuals.

The Triune wore ornate robes of silks and velvets quilted and intricately embellished by threads of
gold and silver and platinum. Gemstones glittered amongst the embroidery of metal. The cloth cascaded from their shoulders and pooled on the mirrored black marble floors of the Citadel's Great Hall. Beneath the robes, glimpsed when they shifted, liquid shining body armor molded to their forms like second skins.

"Ambassador Aiken," Magneto greeted him. "I hope you will enjoy this evening. Oralux has agreed to grace us with a performance after the dinner."

"I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with the artist, but I'm confident I will enjoy it," Aiken replied.

Phoenix stood between Magneto and a squat, black-haired man wearing a deep blue silk suit. Black sideburns flared down his face to his jaw, framing a hard visage. The man's head barely reached Phoenix' shoulders, but his heavily muscled frame and feral blue eyes negated any humorous comparison. Beside him stood a sleek beauty in solid black that made her unnaturally milky skin almost glow. A black diamond tattoo covered one eye. Platinum and amethyst armlets and bracelets glittered on her arms.

"Allow me to introduce you to Wolverine and Domino," Magneto said. "Respectively, Securidat Prime and Defense Prime."

Wolverine grunted at him, while Domino bestowed a seductive smile on him and offered her hand. Aiken kissed it.

"You'll be amazed by what Oralux does with light and sound," Domino told him.

"I look forward to it."

On Magneto's other side, Gambit had his head bent, speaking quietly with the young appearing man beside him.

He caught Aiken's gaze and returned it. The young man turned. He wore ice-blue and gray decorated with platinum. His blue eyes echoed the cold look of dislike on his face when he saw Aiken.

"Ambassador," Gambit drawled, "this is my friend, Prime Ice."

"A pleasure to meet you," Aiken lied. He held out his hand. "Benjamin Aiken."

Frost was literally forming on Ice's hair and hands. Aiken felt grateful the man didn't accept his hand. After a long moment of staring at it, Ice touched Gambit's arm then strode away.

Gambit shrugged at Aiken.

"I take it Prime Ice was not in favor of contact between your people and humans?" Aiken asked.

Gambit chuckled. "He holds a grudge on my behalf." Inhuman eyes caught Aiken's and held them.

"Do you?"

"Not many diplomats would ask that direct a question."

"Prevarication becomes useless when faced with telepaths, I suspect."
One auburn brow rose and a spark of interest and respect lit Gambit's expression. "I notice you don't have the psi-blocker with you."

"Aside from provoking you into frying its circuits again, I realize it would be rather insulting."

That seemed to please Gambit. Phoenix joined them and insisted they mingle, a much friendlier Phoenix than he'd been introduced to originally, introducing Aiken to a litany of mutants.

He met the lovely Shadowcat again, wearing deep blue and in the company of a tall Asian woman with startling blue eyes dressed in a scarlet ao dai. She had the hardest expression he'd seen since meeting Wolverine, which seemed incongruous with her name: Jubilation. She headed the Homicide Division of the Hammer Bay Police Department.

Shadowcat led him to the head of the McCoy Foundation, Nathan McCoy, a geneticist with indigo skin, long canines, and tufts of fur at the tips of his mobile, pointed ears.

"I'll give you a tour of Big Blue if you give me a gene sample," McCoy offered quite seriously.

Next came several Primes, who Aiken realized were either elected members of the Genoshan Senate or members of the Alphanate, the assembly of alpha mutants. The Alphas seemed to care little for using titles, he noticed, instead preferring their public or war names, while the betas and gammas used birth names more often. Indeed, he was learning that in Genosha that use of a single name almost always denoted an alpha.

As the evening progressed, Aiken noticed how many variations the Genoshans exhibited while retaining a mostly hominid structure.

Prime Compass had mustard green skin. At first, Aiken thought the man had darker green dreadlocks, but they moved. Compass' head was covered with tentacles the diameter of a thumb and his 'hands' were heavier tentacles clumped together. The rubbery, boneless feel of them sent a shudder through Aiken after he shook hands.

At some point, he was left in the company of a tall, brown-haired man introduced as Prime Sharps, who had brown eyes and red pupils, and a lovely blonde called Scanner. Scanner, he gathered, was not technically a telepath but some sort psi, but it was Sharps' deference to her that intrigued Aiken. He eventually realized that she must be one of the Gene War survivors that were referred to as the Twenty Constants.

Dinner consisted of modified French-Indian-Asian cuisine so superior Aiken revised his opinion and decided contact between Genosha and the world would be worth it just for their food. Conversation ranged from classic literature and philosophy to a local soccer league and the difficulties of transporting heavy equipment into orbit. Magneto expressed interest in the orbital elevator, while a blond man called Slipstream explained that teleporters tended to have problems with inorganics and though the artificial teleport technology didn't, it required a nearly prohibitive exchange of energy for high volume transports, though mass didn't make much difference. Strictly a matter of transport area circumference according to Genosha's best scientists.

That discussion confirmed Aiken's suspicion that Genosha's technology and science outstripped the rest of the world.

A whirl of faces, many surreally beautiful, amid the glitter and light and music that followed, like a
conclave of the Sidhe, were introduced: Phantazia, Prime Fugue, a historian named Westfall Scribe, Raindance, Surcease, Milan, Northstar, Prime Scope, Riptide, and finally, Mystique. Dancing with her, Aiken sensed a spirit more predatory than the girl with tiger stripes and fangs he'd met earlier.

"Confused?" she asked.

"Overwhelmed," Aiken said lightly. "What is it you do again?"

The pretty brunette in his arms melted into blue skin and yellow eyes, long blood-red hair, though the body remained svelte and female. He almost stumbled but maintained. She smiled at him.

"Very good."

"Interesting, but I meant what do you do?"

She laughed and melted back into the brunette.

"Why bother?" he asked.

"It matches my outfit better."

They spun around the dance floor. He saw his attaché Heinz waltzing with Rebecca Pryde and Northstar dancing with Phoenix while Gambit glided with his arms around a delicate beauty Aiken hadn't met.

"You never answered my question."

Mystique laughed.

"Persistent. A good quality in a foreign services officer."

She curled one hand against the nape of Aiken's neck.

"That's how I got this post."

"Internal Intelligence, Ministry of Defense," she said. "I report to Domino."

"So you would be in a position to tell me what people really think about ending the Interdict."

Her fingers stroked the bare skin between his hairline and his collar.

"I could."

"Will you?"

"Will you tell me what the average human Out There thinks in exchange?"

She ran her tongue over her full upper lip in an undeniably erotic display.

"Which side are you on?"

Mystique smiled brilliantly.
"Mine."

"Uninformative."

"How do you know I won't lie?"

"A problem we share."

They danced silently for another measure.

"I want the Interdict undone and the Barrier lowered," Mystique said. "I want to be free again."

Aiken felt a little puzzled. Mystique was as free as anyone in Genoshan society, which seemed on the surface very free and affluent.

Mystique's eyes gleamed yellow again.

"I've been very good for a very long time, you see, Ambassador. We all have."

"And without the Interdict you wouldn't have to be good?" He smiled, but inside he shivered.

"It was never meant as a permanent solution," she said. "They--" her gesture encompassed Magneto, Gambit and Phoenix, "--thought that separation was better than annihilation."

"Well, if those were the choices…"

"Believe me, the Scourge could have been much worse."

"Worse than burning out the minds of hundreds of thousands of people along with destroying seventy-five years of technology and infrastructure?"

The Scourge had wiped out the United States as an entity. Everyone in the government and the military had been reduced to mind-wiped idiots requiring constant care. Electromagnetic pulses had hammered the continent, while even the deepest shielded installations were hit with kinetic charges. The devastation had stretched from the east to the west coast, deep into Mexico and into the cities of Canada. Secret bases scattered over the globe had suffered the same destruction in the next few hours. Within a day, nothing had been left of the nation at war with mutant kind. North America had never really recovered; even hundreds of years later they were struggling to return to technological parity with the rest of the world. The population numbers were beginning to rise again, but it remained a land of empty cities and desolate wastes where battles had been fought on titanic scales.

"Much worse."

Mystique shrugged.

"Of course, mutants wouldn't have survived it either."

"Mutual assured destruction is a long outmoded attitude."

"No, it isn't."
"Was that a warning?"

"Of sorts."

"I get the feeling you really don't care much about humans."

"You're not a stupid man."

Mystique tipped her head back, always moving exactly with the music.

Soft light played through the dance floor. On a podium in the center, a slim woman sang for lack of a better word that encompassed one being generating the sound of several orchestras, a chorus, and a light show that seemed to play on mood and emotion along with everyone's senses.

Oralux, the promised performer.

"Why then? Why let us in?"

"To let us out," Mystique said. "To give all of our people choices again."

"I don't understand."

"No, how could you? Genosha… is a democracy on sufferance. As long as we need the Triune to maintain the Barrier, they are our real rulers. As long as Genosha is closed, its people will never grow beyond the vision of the Constant. They are too powerful."

"I can see that, but aren't you one of the Constant?"

Mystique looked briefly melancholy.

"It works both ways. We're trapped too."

The music ended to a round of applause. Aiken joined. Mystique gave him a sultry look. "We'll have to get together again, Ambassador."

"I'll look forward to it."

He looked around the ballroom, easily picking out the Constants from the rest of the attendees. They were the grave faced ones, the still points all others orbited around, drawn to each other by the weight of their experience.

They were as alien, he thought, to their own people as mutants were to humans. All that they saw now, would fall away and what would come after would pass too, while they alone stood witness with only each other to endure it.

------------------
It's called state-sponsored terrorism. The Friends of Humanity target mutants outside the US. In other news, precognition is the suckiest super-power.

AD 2005, December 29
Africa
Gene Nation village

Wolverine slashed his claws through another control cable, sending the Sentinel into a mad spin. He leaped off it as it crashed into the earth. A cloud of choking yellowish dirt rose into the air as the metallic robot impacted. For an instant, he was blinded, deafened by the constant din of battle, his nose assaulted with the reek of bloody death, burning, and superheated metals.

Lightning cracked searing white through the air, directed by Storm and echoed by plasma fire from the Sentinels and the distinct sound of Gambit's trademark playing cards exploding as they hit and then Cyke's optic blast. The hair on his arms had singed off from all the stray voltage flying around. Someone was yelling something he couldn't understand.

Overhead two Sentinels flew straight at each other, despite firing thrusters that should have directed them. One was caught in the grip of Jean's telekinesis. The other had been tossed at top speed by Rogue; she was using the superstrength and invulnerability that she'd drained from Carol Danvers years before all out. The rebel yell she let out cut through the cacophony before it was lost too as she hit another Sentinel like a high speed battering ram.

Bishop carelessly absorbed the plasma fire from the Sentinels, channeling and firing it back. Then he pulled his favorite 'big ass' gun out and began shooting. His face had set into a snarl that wrinkled the black M tattooed over the left side of his face.

Wolverine stumbled over a hunk of burning flesh and sank to one knee. A quick, nauseating whiff assured him it was a goat and not one of the Gene Nation villagers.

Each time a Sentinel reconfigured to compensate for one of the team's powers, they switched or doubled on it, tasking the robot's processors and subroutines beyond their abilities to operate in real time. These were old Mark 3 versions of the Sentinels, not Primes; not many people were willing to let Phalanx-derived nanocybernetics rebuild them into program-dedicated killing machines—even if they did hate mutants. The failure of Project: Zero Tolerance and Bastion had seen a drastic reduction in the production of Prime Sentinels.

The sun shone unmercifully on the battleground. His breath sawed into his lungs and he felt every pound of the adamantium bonded to his bones. Sweat flicked away from him in a spray as he shook his head to clear it.

"Wolverine!" Cyclops shouted. "Down!"
He dove for the earth, rolling and coming to his feet in the tenuous cover of a mud-daubed hut that was still burning.

Cyclops fired at the Sentinel that had been targeting him. A shimmering red beam of light lanced out from the visor he wore over his eyes and sliced through the robot's armor, triggering an internal explosion that tossed one of its arms directly through the chest of another.

Wolverine sprinted forward, vaulted into the air and sank his claws into the tottering machine. He scrambled up it like a cat going up someone's leg, then gouged out its optic receptors. He'd never admit it, but the Sentinels were just humanoid enough that doing that bugged him on some deep level.

Didn't stop him, but sometimes the way the things reacted to being taken down got a little too close to human. They were aware enough to know when they were being taken apart.

Sparks spat and a bolt of electricity found its way up his claws and sizzled through his skeleton. Made his whole body jerk for a second. Lucky adamantium was such a lousy conductor or it would have been worse. He involuntarily pulled the claws back in and that broke the connection.

The Sentinel was falling now and he began looking for a good place to hop off. Its shadow darkened the ground beneath it. He caught sight of a brown duster billowing as Gambit danced his way through the fight.

No time to enjoy watching the way the kid threw himself into creating mayhem, not like the Danger Room practice sessions, when a man could appreciate the sheer artistry of Gambit's moves. Besides, he wasn't laughing his way through this one. He was moving even faster than usual, eschewing some of his flashier style and just doing the job. Putting a little more bang into each charged card he flipped out and keeping his mouth shut. That long, usually smiling mouth set in a grim line.

Wolverine sort of missed the smart ass commentary.

They were all keeping quieter than usual, not even indulging in their usual black humor. There was nothing to laugh about here.

He started to yell a warning to Gambit that the Sentinel was coming down. Gambit cartwheeled away without looking. Maybe he felt the robot's shadow cross over him. Even the cartwheel wasn't for show this time. He came to his feet with his hands full of stones he charged and threw. There was a reason they never let him pitch in the team baseball games. The kid had a better arm and better aim than any major league pitcher alive.

The rocks hit with devastating force, blowing the chest right out of the sixth and last Sentinel. Shrapnel flew everywhere. Lightning strikes followed, frying the remains of the toppled robots until there wasn't enough left to salvage as more than raw, melted metal. No way any of them were going to reboot and come back after the X-Men this time.

Wolverine leaped off the Sentinel he'd disabled at the last second before it hit the ground. He hit the ground running and got the hell out of Dodge while the energy wielders let loose with a little overkill: Cyclops and Bishop zapping the Sentinel's armored body into unrecognizable junk.

Storm floated down out of the sky, looking very much like the goddess she'd once been worshipped as. Hot winds still whipped her white hair into a tangled cloud. She looked regal and still furious.
They all were, but the slaughter affected Storm worse than any of them. The Gene Nation colony near her old African village had been her solution to the problem of what to do with the deformed and bitter descendents of the Morlocks. She still saw them as her responsibility. Their deaths were her failure in her eyes.

Wolverine watched her wrap her arms around her torso as she looked around.

"Rogue," Cyclops called. "Get back to the Blackbird and let the rest of the team know what's happened here."

She took one wild look around the wrecked village and took off, obviously grateful to get away and do anything.

Gambit looked after her then shook his head, turning away. His coat was a shredded mess, one arm charred black from a near miss. He shrugged it off and let it drop in the dirt, something Wolverine had never seen him do before.

Bishop walked back toward them, gun balanced on his shoulder, silhouetted against the pale African sky. Dust puffed around his boots. His head swiveled, watching for any new threats.

Phoenix followed, going straight to Cyclops' side. Her hand on his back seemed to focus their leader again. A sharp stab of light reflected off the metal frame of his visor as he looked around.

Wolverine pulled in a deep breath and regretted it. The reek was getting thicker and the quiet after the battle served as a reminder that this place was dead now. All that was left was wreckage and carrion. When he tipped his head back he could pick out the slow circling specks of the gathering vultures high in the sky.

"Wolverine, you and Phoenix, check for survivors," Cyclops directed. His voice cracked on the last word.

Phoenix closed her eyes to concentrate on a psionic scan for any minds, while Wolverine prowled through the remains of the village, stretching his enhanced senses to the utmost, hoping for the scent of someone living or a heartbeat and the sound of lungs. The only ones he detected were his own team-mates.

Gambit stalked after him, brow creased. Wolverine figured he was doing his own psi-thing. He could smell the anger and pain and guilt rolling off the man, masking any hint of the attraction Gambit usually exuded. Even his movements were stiffer than usual.

He opened his mouth to growl at him for following him when it hit him. If Storm was seeing the Mutant Massacre rewritten in the sun instead of the New York subway tunnels, then so was Gambit. Did his gut ache where Sabretooth had sliced him open? The scars were well healed before Gambit joined the X-Men, four thin pale lines arching across the kid's flat belly, the fifth at a slight angle dragging over a sharp hipbone. They showed up when Gambit had been in the shower and was flushed; Wolverine knew Creed's claw marks, but he'd stayed quiet. A man's past should be left alone unless it threatened the team. Gambit had made no bones about knowing Sabretooth and hating him. They hadn't needed to know why, then thought it was the Notre Dame thing, until Gambit's part in the Massacre came out.

Whatever Gambit's sins, he wasn't to blame for this.
He wouldn't take his own rage out on the other man.

With a growl of frustration and fury that escalated into a howl, Wolverine snapped his claws out and ran them through a wattle and daub wall, shredding it with several blows. He didn't stop until his arms ached with exertion.

Gambit stood just out of reach. He looked relaxed until Wolverine noticed the pebble caught between two long fingers, glowing almost fuchsia with the charge fed into it.

He stepped back with a last growl and shook himself. "Ain't nothing left, Cajun."

The pebble dimmed back to dull stone, but stayed in Gambit's hand.

"Feel better, mon ami?"

"Fuck all's gonna make me feel better."

Gambit cocked his head then nodded. His shoulders slumped faintly.

They looked around, working in tandem now, but without any expectation of finding anyone.

The Morlock village had been laid out in a circle. The buildings were crowded closer together than native Africans would have built. The Morlocks hadn't been used to open skies and space. They'd built a high wall around everything topped with thorns and sharpened stakes. It had kept intruders and predators out, but hadn't given the Sentinels a second's pause.

Despite the kill or be killed lessons the Morlock survivors had learned in the pocket dimension Mikhail Rasputin had kept them in, they hadn't had a chance against the mutant hunting robots. They'd given up fighting to live peacefully in their small colony far from the world's hysteria over the mutant dilemma.

The bodies were everywhere. Thrown down like garbage, in broken piles and scattered pieces, everything they'd ever been reduced to food for maggots.

Mutant threat: neutralized.

Phoenix had ~heard~ their surprise and growing terror as it broadcast on the Astral Plane. She'd ~seen~ the lights of their minds winking out. She'd screamed as she telepathically experienced their deaths and barely pulled back in time to avoid being pulled along with them.

Everyone had been so focused on her they hadn't seen Gambit jolt at the same moment or the way his face went pale and twisted with pain.

They'd already been in the Blackbird, flying cloaked at twice the speed of sound toward Africa, thanks to Psylocke's precog warning that something would happen there.

Smoke, black columns of it twisting into the air, had been their first sight as Cyclops banked the Blackbird toward the site of the village. Then the towering figures of the Sentinels, still busily smashing the remains. Cyke had nearly stalled the 'bird, letting the flyers each grab someone and deplane on the spot. Rogue carried Gambit toward the earth, while Storm buoyed Bishop on her hastily summoned winds and Jean held Wolverine in a TK bubble with her.
Then they'd been in it, going after the Sentinels all out. Cyclops joined the fight sometime after landing the Blackbird.

They'd been too late while they were still over the Atlantic, though.

He shifted a chunk of shattered wood and uncovered another body.

After a moment, he identified the remains as Boost, then realized the limbs were tangled with another's he didn't know at all.

"Shit," he hissed.

Plasma fire had melted their flesh together in a seared black ruin pierced with broken bone. A fat bodied fly, black and iridescent green, crawled over the raw tissue.

He let the chunk of wood in his hand fall and turned away.

Gambit's head hung. His hands were curled into fists. Another fly tried to land on him and he twitched it away unconsciously. His eyes were glued to something in the dirt at his feet.

Wolverine picked his way over to the other man's side then stared down too.

Gambit knelt and brushed the dirt away from the half-buried piece of metal painted with an insignia. He didn't touch it.

Two letters still showed, red over a background of white stars on blue.

**FO**

Wolverine crouched and sniffed. He filtered out everything but the scents still adhering to what looked like part of the casing to a communications headset.

"Human."

Gambit stared at him, hellfire eyes and hunter's patience, still and silent, waiting for more. Wolverine gave it to him.

"Male. Between thirty and thirty-five, meat-eater, probably American." He picked up the broken casing, held it to his face and scented it again. Cologne, soap, sweat, adrenaline and testosterone, hydrocarbon fuel residue from diesel exhaust, gun oil, cordite, and ozone tickled his nose.

He stood and began casting for more clues. Gambit stayed just behind and to the side of him, not speaking. He circled out beyond the splintered, slowly burning fence-wall and found what he'd expected. Tire tracks. Boot tracks. The scent from the headset mingled with others. All fading on the wind, almost lost in the reek of death.

He knelt beside one set of Humvee tracks and stared out across the veldt. Even he couldn't follow
them across the African plains. The grasslands looked eerily empty; the animals had fled from the noise of battle.

Gambit read the tracks too. He wasn't mountain man material by a longshot, but he was observant and fast. He'd watched and picked up things from Wolverine. Sliding through topflight security required the same sort of attention to the tiny details.

"Forward observers?"

"Spotters. Targeted the place for the Sentinels," Wolverine said.

Gambit flinched.

"It ain't the same, LeBeau," he snapped. "These bastards knew exactly what they were doing." He used Gambit's name to emphasize that he meant it. This cut too close to the bone for the other man. Leading the Marauders into the Morlock tunnels had damned Gambit in his own eyes as well as many others.

Wolverine thought the Mutant Massacre had been what saved Remy LeBeau's soul. The horror had wakened the man's conscience and sent him running from Sinister and the killers he'd been working beside. If he hadn't been lied to he wouldn't have turned on them. He might have stayed and become steadily more inured to the things Sinister asked of him, until he became worse than any of them.

"Bastards," he said again with a grunt as he stood up once more.

Gambit nodded.

"Friends of Humanity."

He added an obscene gesture Wolverine agreed with.

"We'd better get back and tell Cyke about that," he said, his eyes on the headset casing.

Wolverine grunted acknowledgement and they headed back to the center of the village.

Phoenix and Storm were gone when they reached it.

Cyclops turned toward them.

"I sent Storm back to the Blackbird with Jean," he said as they approached.

"Good idea."

"This ain't going to be easy for Stormy," Gambit added. He rubbed at his face, leaving a smear of soot along one high cheekbone. "Or any of us," he went on almost to himself. His head jerked up. "Mon Dieu, who's going to tell Marrow about this?"

Cyclops flinched. The already venomous ex-Morlock would blame Storm and Gambit. She would blame all the X-Men. She would be even more homicidal than usual. Keeping her from going after the 'pretty-pretty upworlders' would be a Herculean task. All three of them knew it had been a lucky fluke she'd been out of the mansion with Sam when Psylocke had had her vision.
"Wolverine - "

"Hell no."

Gambit walked away without a word. He stopped within earshot, but kept his back to them.

"Don't even think about asking him to do it, Cyke."

Cyclops nodded.

"Who do you suggest then?"

With a snort, Wolverine said, "Stick her in the Danger Room, lock it down, and let Charlie tell her telepathically. Couple years from now, when she calms down, we can let her out."

"Tempting."

Neither of them had the energy or the will to keep up any kind of banter. Silence set in. The hot, dust-ridden wind Storm had summoned had dissipated into a thing of sporadic gusts that whispered and moaned through broken walls and pieces of Sentinel armor.

Wolverine stirred when another fly landed on him.

"Where's Bish?"

"Walking the perimeter."

"About that… the Cajun and me found something you better see." He lifted his voice. "Gambit, get over here."

Gambit stiffened but started to turn. He paused though and stalked over to whatever had caught his eye. Nothing about him indicated it might be a threat. Wolverine ignored him.

He held up the broken headset casing.

"We found this and I tracked it back to a slug of tire tracks outside the village."

"FOH?"

"Oui," Gambit murmured as he joined them. He had something in his hands now too. It chilled Wolverine when he recognized what Gambit had picked up. It was a child's rag doll, ripped and leaking its stuffing.

"Explains the second rate Sentinels," Cyclops said absently. "Someone must have back channeled the manufacturing specs to them."

He looked around and winced. "We'll have to alert the local authorities."

Wolverine shook his head. "Ain't no point, Cyke."

"Then what the hell do we do!!?" Cyclops shouted at him.
"Find something to dig with and start burying the bodies," Gambit said tonelessly. His knuckles were white on the stained, dirty doll.

He was right. The scavengers would start moving in come dusk. By then the swarms of flies would have laid their eggs. In the heat, if the bodies were left long the job would be a thousand times worse.

Cyclops looked ready to gag. Instead he straightened his shoulders.

"All right. We have to do this as fast as possible. Gambit--"

"I can blow a hole in the ground."

The dull sound of Gambit's normally carefree voice told its own story.

"We'll need two," Cyclops said decisively. "I want to cover up the Sentinels too. Let those bastards wonder what happened here after they left."

Gambit nodded.

"Wolverine, I'll need your help. We'll start gathering the bodies."

You couldn't accuse Cyke of ever sticking anyone with a job worse than what he was willing to take on himself.

They labored through the rest of the afternoon. Bishop joined them, pulling bodies out of the wreckage. Rogue took to the air and kept overwatch, while Jean stayed with Storm. Later, it took Rogue's strength to drag the pieces of the Sentinels into the deep, ugly hole Gambit had provided.

It took all of them, even Storm, to lay the dead into the mass grave. Gambit and Bishop went down in it and laid the bodies out with a terrible sort of gentleness.

Jean used her telekinesis to shift the earth over the grave.

Storm summoned an unseasonal rain to wash the remains of the village clean and douse the still lingering flames. The fragmenting clouds gave the sunset a louring look, as though the sky had been stained by darkness and blood.

They were dirt and blood-stained, hollow-eyed and weary to the bone when they were through. Storm's rain soaked them. The water slid down their faces as though she cried for all of them.

Gambit set the doll on the grave.

"This is it, homme," he said softly. "This is what they gonna do to all of us."
Jean hovered above the roof of the Citadel, arms out-stretched like the fiery ghost wings that haloed them, head thrown back, caught in the heady rush of the Phoenix Force. Her red mane writhed on the hot wind she generated and a white-hot glow surrounded her.

Light flared across the city of Hammer Bay in a blinding flash, limning its buildings in white, erasing every shadow for a terrifying instant. The great Firebird arched its neck back and screamed its defiance at the Universe. Wings wide spread it floated above the city, guardian and threat at once. It would not be tamed.

In another galaxy, the M'Kraan Crystal flared in synchrony. The Shi'ar who watched it shuddered. They remembered tales of time twisted and shattered within the Crystal and of a Dark Phoenix that consumed a solar system in its hunger for more and more power.

She opened her mind and let herself sense every mind on Genoshan soil, then stretched further and scanned those living in orbit on Avalon Station. The myriad thoughts that flooded her would have destroyed her mind and identity once. Now she had grown so strong she knew she could assume control of each and all of them, if she wished, with the exception of Remy and Erik.

Their powers, while different, were equal to hers, their shields as strong, their minds so deeply linked within her own they could match her in any contest. They were her anchor. They kept her sane.

Without them she would have swallowed up everything and everyone then extended her reach and taken the rest of the planet too. The Phoenix was life and death and all belonged to it to command, if Jean desired.

Instead, the Phoenix folded its wings and the light dimmed, and its avatar returned to the widow’s walk that capped the dome of the Citadel's Residence. Jean closed her shields and returned to the suite she occupied when in residence. Tonight she would sleep and tomorrow she would smile and watch silently, while picking everything useful from the minds of the UN delegation. The idiots were all wearing psi-shields that were supposed to protect them against telepathic probing and attacks. At the same time, none of the politicians even grasped what they were dealing with and some of the pathetic fools didn’t even believe in mutant powers.

Jean snorted. Of course, if any of them had been looking out their windows at the sky over the Citadel tonight they might have changed their minds after her little son et lumiére.
It amused him sometimes that she kept her hair cut shorter than his, just a purple-black cap that
outlined the elegant lines of her skull. It left the long line of her neck bare. He liked just touching his
lips to the vulnerable nape and down her spine there.

Tonight she swatted him in affectionate irritability when he did it, so Wolverine walked around the
couch and sat.

Domino was sitting Indian-style, a paper file open on her bare legs, long fingers flipping through the
contents. Wolverine sat a frosted, open bottle of beer on the coffee table in front of her and took a
long swallow from the one he retained. He sat back and savored the tart taste along with Domino's
appearance.

She had stripped out of the dress uniform and now had on only a thin, black satin, spaghetti strapped
tank and matching underwear. Her albino skin glowed fresh as a girl's, the black oval mark over her
left eye stood out in stark contrast.

"Well, darlin'?" he asked once she stopped reading.

Domino scowled at the file.

"You know I'm not an Isolationist, Logan, but I'm damned if I think the UN has changed since the
last time we dealt with them. Partisanship, petty back biting, sheer corruption, noble speeches; none
of it's changed. Remy sent over the latest intelligence estimates. The only thing that will unite them is
an outside threat."

"No argument."

The Securidat mainly dealt with internal matters, but Logan was one of the Twenty Constant, the
oldest of them all; he remembered life outside Genosha, before the Interdict. Even if the head of the
Securidat hadn't rated regular intel briefings, the others would have kept him up. Since the Thief
answered only to Magneto and had authority over every sort of Genoshan espionage, Logan had
only to ask. He didn't need to read the file Domino held to guess the state of the outside world. He'd
been old and cynical before the rest of them had been born.

Domino slapped the file shut and traded it for the beer. She emptied half of it one long gulp and
sighed afterwards. "Well, guess who they'll cast?" she said sardonically.

"Don't have to, darlin', we both know there's more behind the Nulls wanting contact than their new
orbital elevator sharing sky with Avalon Station."

Domino nodded glumly.

"Remy included a note, saying about the same thing."
Logan raised a heavy brow.

"Stuck it on the end," she explained. "I suppose he wanted me to read everything before influencing me, but it wasn't necessary."

Logan sat back on the sofa and kicked his booted feet onto the coffee table. Domino eyed them for a moment, but only shrugged. Another thing he liked about Dom. She didn't have a fussy, housekeeper gene in her entire body. The only thing she obsessed over cleaning were her guns.

"So?"

"So, they need something to rally the troops," Domino sighed. "And the Interdict has been damned successful. They're not scared of us any more. There's no one alive who remembers what fighting Alphas is like. The Gene Wars are ancient history. La Belle's just a bogey monster from the school books. Fuck, Patch, mutants aren't any more real to them than the Greek myths."

Logan finished his beer and set the bottle aside. He popped the claws from one hand, twisting it so the soft light ran down the three almost ten inch adamantium blades. With a snikt they disappeared back into his flesh, leaving only three beads of blood where he had immediately healed.

"Ain't considered if it'd be good thing to tick off ol' Lightnin' Bolts and bring the rest of the gods down off Olympus, have they?" he said.

Domino stretched like a big cat and grinned. "Unh-unh. You know the saying, 'Against stupidity the Gods themselves contend in vain'?" she asked.

"Sure, darlin'. It's Schiller. Used to quote it at Chuck, before things went into the dumper."

They both grimaced, thinking about Xavier. The Imperial Consort of the Empress Lilandra Neramani might still be alive, with Shi'ar technology to keep him healthy, but no one had heard from him in over a century. The last time he had left Earth, he hadn't looked back. It was safe to assume Lilandra still held the throne though. If Deathbird had taken over, a Shi’ar invasion fleet would have gated into the system by now.

Logan picked up the two empty bottles and headed for the kitchen. "Want another?"

"Not really."

The albino mutant headed for the bedroom then stopped and stood hip-shot in the doorway.

"You coming?"

Logan tossed the bottles in the garbage.

"You bet, darlin'"

The file on the coffee table and its predictions could wait until morning. Neither of them paid any attention to the searing light that filled the sky later. They'd seen it before and knew it posed no threat to them.
The Citadel
Hammer Bay
Private Residence

The sleepy weight of the body beside him was some comfort. Two and a half centuries later and he still relived his time in hell if he slept alone, but he could endure that. The only one who had made it better had left and he wasn't selfish enough to beg him to return so he could sleep better. His current companion had her own share of nightmares and kept him from sleeping too deeply anyway. He tried to avoid that since Omega mutant with the power to wrest apart atoms needed to remain in control.

Blowing the planet apart in the midst of a night terror didn't appeal to him.

Sometimes he wondered if immortals could outlive their nightmares eventually. Or maybe, even if the old ones faded into distant memory, there would always be new ones to take their place. He wasn't cruel enough to ask Logan.

He stroked his hand through his companion's pale green hair absently.

Sleep wasn't coming at all tonight. His mind was too busy, his emotions too unsettled by the visitors from outside the Interdict. He'd never hated humans, not all of them, not even after the Gene Wars. They'd been stupid and selfish and short-sighted, but then he'd been all those things himself more than once. Thus his voice had been the one that shifted the balance between Erik and Jean, that counseled for mercy after Second Denver. Yet he found the presence of humans, baselines, plain old Homo sapiens, within Genosha deeply disturbing.

He didn't think he was the only one. Lorna had come to him this time.

Somewhere above, he felt Jean light up the night like a nuclear fireball, her power brushing across his in a rush. His power answered, wakening and expanding past the room, the Citadel, and beyond Genosha's confines.

Once, years before the Gene Wars, even before he joined the X-Men, he had had his power damped to Alpha level. It had been a deal with the devil that left him with blood on his hands and an indelible stain on his soul. He had even burnt himself out more than once only to have his strength return greater then ever.

Ultimately, he had been forced to learn such precise control that he had refined his abilities into something approaching the attributes of a god. Chaos theory and quantum physics met within the variable solutions between potential and actual energy, every possibility existing as a choice within the net of his consciousness. He no longer merely generated his power, using it within those limits. Now he existed as that power, an elemental avatar of both movement and stillness.

Loosed, his awareness moved deeper, encompassing every molecule of the planet, until he was aware of the motion of both primary and then satellite, of circles within circles: planet around its axis, moon around planet, electron around neutron. Within the eye of his element he experienced the precession of Earth around the sun, of Sol spinning around its center. He felt moons and asteroids and planets upon the ecliptic, each of them circling the center, even as some maintained their own rotations. The solar system itself moved along the edge of their great spiraling galaxy, and even it
was only one more dancer within the Universe's pavane.

As always, his own consciousness threatened to dissolve into the endless, vibrating, circling expansion. But the shifting of the body next to his and then the sudden quiet of Jean recalling the Phoenix within her snapped him back to existence as a living, breathing, feeling body. With a small gasp, half relief, half regret, he wrapped himself close round his lover.

"Remy," Lorna murmured drowsily.

"Go back to sleep," he said.

She opened her eyes and gave him a shrewd look. "You haven't slept at all," she accused, but softly. They had known each so long, she understood as well as anyone. They still had a slight psi-link sometimes. He knew when her legs hurt like they were still there and when the constant effort of using her power to move the artificial ones she'd used since Denver left her in tears from exhaustion. "Non," Remy admitted. A smile twitched at his mouth. "Jeannie just let the Phoenix out to stretch and open up its wings. Lit up the whole city."

"Lit up your powers too, I bet," Lorna said. She stroked Remy's shoulder, the faint sense of her magnetic power soothingly like Erik's. He leaned into her touch shamelessly, and let his empathy feed how good it felt back to her.

"She doesn't like the Normals coming here," he murmured. He slid his hand down Lorna's smooth back and up again, just because he could. Lorna disliked any reminder of her lost legs and hid it under skirts, but in bed it didn't make any difference to either of them. He'd made damn sure she knew it made no difference to him. "Makes her restless, I think." His hand stilled and his gaze went unfocused. "Too many memories gettin' stirred up."

Lorna pulled him closer.

"I wish they didn't exist," she murmured.

Remy nodded.

"Won't let nothin' else happen to you either, chere," he promised. "Tear the world down first, I swear."

~And put out the sun,~ came Jean's telepathic promise.

Erik's mind woke within their shared gestalt, called by the connection between the two of them. ~Eliminating the enemy would be more than sufficient, fierce ones, though even I prefer that it not become necessary.~

"Tell Jeannie and Mags to take a hike, okay?" Lorna growled. She had learned to recognize when the other Omegas activated the psi-link binding them. She kissed Remy and smiled. "I want you to myself right now. If we're not going to sleep, we might as well have some fun."

________________________

Hammer Bay
Kitty saw the fiery outline fill the sky and closed her eyes in time to save them from the flare. She and Jubilee were eating a late dinner out on the patio. She turned her face away from the hot wind that followed and laid her hand over her glass of ice tea.

"The natives are restless tonight," Jubilee commented. The brutal light had etched a harshness in her features that matched her voice. The years had made Jubilation Lee cynical and it showed. Kitty remembered her when she wasn't.

"Blowing off steam after spending all day doing the meet and greet at the Citadel," Kitty said.

She picked desultorily at the poached fish on her plate. She'd never bothered much with following an Orthodox menu, but Jubilee always tried not to serve anything offensive. Not that it was difficult. Food was plentiful in Genosha; there was little hunger or poverty.

"Glad I didn't have to be there long."

Jubilee knocked back a slug of her single nightly rum and coke. As usual, it made her grimace. For years, Kitty had thought Jubilee didn't like the alcohol, only to learn that it was the taste of the ersatz Coca-Cola manufactured in Genosha that she disliked. She chuckled now. Jubilee hadn't been thrilled when they'd heard the Interdict would be modified and Norms brought into Genosha to begin political talks. Maybe she'd change her mind if they got real Coca-Cola out of it.

"Maybe if trade opens up again, someone will get a license to market real Coke here again," she suggested.

"Too much to hope for," Jubilee replied sourly.

"Oh, cheer up," Kitty said. "It's not that bad."

"You think so? Hah. You were at the formal dinner at the Citadel, right?" Jubilee stabbed a fish tipped fork at Kitty. "Sure, you were. You always could pass. No one wants to spook the flatscans by bringing some of the more outré members of Genoshan society."

"And that bothers you."

Jubilee stubbornly ate instead of answering for several minutes. Finally, she set her fork down and sat forward, elbows planted on either side of her plate, chin on her folded hands. "It bothers me. It all bothers me. I don't want to sound prejudiced, Kit, but I still really hate them. In the camps, they made us dig mass graves with our bare hands. You never stood at the edge of a great, reeking hole, knowing it would be your grave too. There was always clay under my fingernails and in my hair, I swear I could taste it, like I'd already been buried."

Kitty swallowed hard. Her own ancestors had endured in places like Auschwitz and Dachau and Treblinka. It wasn't supposed to happen again. She'd visited the Holocaust Memorial once. She'd stood at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The world had seen evil well before the Gene Wars. But her own country had decided it was all right to commit those horrors again, because mutants weren't human, just as Hitler had declared Jews weren't.
Never once had she regretted her choice to join Magneto just before COMRA passed, before the Gene Wars even began. But consequently, she'd already been out of the country when the Scouring began. She'd been with Gambit's Striker Unit at First Denver, but she and Pete had been recalled to Europe before the last day. She hadn't lived through the long retreat or suffered in the aftermath the way Jubilee had. She'd never known life in one of the camps. She'd only glimpsed the extent of the horror in the Mojave, but she'd been there undercover and only for a few hours. She hadn't lived it.

Jubilee had and it had hardened her. The SoCal mallrat had endured horrors and the marks were always with her: the binary code tattoo, the scars from the inhibitor collar, and the memories inside.

First Denver had been the end of their innocence for them all, in more ways than any of them guessed then. It cost them dearly and sparked an insurrection within Genosha, saw full scale biowarfare against mutants and an covert betrayal within the X-Men. The chasm between those who believed in peaceful co-existence and those who believed more and more that it was us or them had gaped wider and wider after First Denver. It didn't heal after Second Denver, when the Three proposed and created the Interdict.

Now the Interdict was broken. Small wonder Jubilee was upset. Everyone who remembered the Gene Wars knew it could all happen again.

Now the Phoenix hovered like a fiery herald above the Citadel's tower. The power spike must have registered as far out as Pluto.

Kitty's phase ability pulsed to life, threatening to render her insubstantial as a ghost, and through it she felt the remaining Two rouse. Compasses would be spinning madly, electronics protesting, iron heavy objects shivering under the lash of Magneto's power. Looking to the east, where the horizon met the waters of the Indian Ocean, the Barrier glowed brilliant against the darkness, rising up and up into the atmosphere and arching over the island nation, still refusing the rest of the world entrance to Genosha.

Erik Magnus Lehnsherr was awake.

Gambit's signature was subtler, a soft shiver in the air, a faint tingle of energy smoking off static objects, the palest of glows everywhere. Anyone on Genosha would recognize it though and know the danger was just as great as the others should he loose the reins of power. It felt like a ringing deep in her bones and grew in intensity for several minutes then snapped off, to Kitty's great relief.

She looked at Jubilee, noticing the kaleidoscopic lights flickering in her normally blue eyes. "Every mutant alive must have felt them," she said.

Jubilee looked grim. In the distance a loud boom sounded in the training houses. The green-tinted explosion was bright enough to show over the city lights with the Phoenix' withdrawal. Power called to power and some young mutant had lost control in the aftermath of the massive, three-pronged power spike.

"Hope whoever it was got to a shielded sanctuary," Jubilee said, looking that way. Her cell began ringing and she fished it out of the jacket draped over the back of her chair. She activated it and barked, "Lee here," then listened, frowning.

Kitty sighed and began cleaning up the dishes. She could guess what came next. Whenever Jubilee got a call this late it meant work. Jubilee was intent on her phone call.
She supposed they should have expected it. The tension in the city had been growing for days. Regular crime for profit had dropped but domestic violence and assaults, powered and unpowered, were up. There had been protests and demonstrations when news of the UN delegation's impending arrival aired. The people were unsure of what to think. Most of them were afraid of the world outside the Barrier, though a significant proportion were chafing to reach beyond the island's confines. When mutants, especially Alphas, were disturbed, things often went bang.

Jubilee snapped her cell closed. She clipped it to her belt, next to the holstered regulation plasma pistol and her badge. She pulled on her jacket.

"That was Numbskull," she declared. "Someone just found a hooker gutted just off Magda Square. Gutted and half melted, so they want me down there."

"Too much information, Jules," Kitty said. She walked around the table and hugged her friend close. "I know you're worried, but we just have to make do," she said into the short black hair hiding Jubilee's ear. "Erik and Jean and Remy are strong and smart enough to handle anything the Norms throw at us. We're not alone."

Jubilee hugged her back.

"I know."

A half smile graced her face.

"Logan and the rest of us ain't nothin' to sneeze at either," Jubilee said. Her cell shrilled again. She snarled at it wordlessly, reminding Kitty of their mentor. "Shit. It's gonna be like the fuckin' full moon out there tonight."

Kitty laughed and said, "Go."

Jubilee nodded.

"Yeah, sorry to leave the clean up on dinner, but you know duty calls."

"No problem," Kitty replied with a laugh and a wave.

Jubilee tromped out, muttering into her cell again.

Kitty stared out at the Barrier, now quiescent again, and wondered when it would drop. Change was coming again. She hoped it would be for the better this time.
They Say in Harlan County There Are No Neutrals There

Chapter Summary

Magneto is building a new nation. Graydon Creed is tearing his down.

AD 2005, March 6
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

'We will scour the taint of mutancy from humanity!' Unknown orator, Friends of Humanity rally, Fort Worth, Texas, 2006

They'd taken a flat in one of the mostly intact buildings within a few blocks of Magda Square. The elevators didn't work, but there was water and electricity and the foundations and frame of the five story redstone building were sound. That made it prime real estate in Hammer Bay, despite the damage done to the west side fourth floor by what had probably been a stray plasma blast. A chunk of wall had been burned away, leaving two flats on that side open to the elements.

They didn't bother mentioning to the manager that they were part of the new government. Nor that they were mutants. Their accents marked them as foreigners and the only foreigners in New Genosha were mutants who had answered Magneto's call to create a new homeland. So the man pretty much knew off the bat.

Kitty felt uncomfortable around the building manager, thought he might be one of the old school Genoshans that didn't believe mutants were human, but Pete shrugged it off. Said the man was just as likely prejudiced against the Star of David pendant she wore and to ignore him.

He didn't bother them and they didn't talk to him except once to complain about the cold water. He promised to fix it, but didn't, and Pete went on heating their baths with his hot knives.

Life took on a very different rhythm for them once they reached Genosha.

They flew into the country's only international airport on an Antonov An-70 flying out of Madripoor with every bit of gear they could beg, borrow or steal - knowing there wouldn't be much to work with once they reached Genosha. Thus they had a computer with a satellite link-up that let them stay in touch with the outside world, unlike most of the Genoshan population, but they were still isolated in comparison to their lives before.

Magneto had them met at the airport when they arrived. Two Acolytes—Scanner and Neophyte—were waiting for them, making everyone around them nervous. They had an armored limousine waiting.

The interview in the Citadel was an anticlimax.

Neophyte and Scanner stood by the door they'd all come in. The room had been stripped. The only
thing in it besides them was a metal table salvaged from somewhere and a collection of obviously scavenged desk chairs. There were holes and darker areas on the walls where equipment and pictures had been removed. Even the light fixtures were gone; the only light came through the windows.

Magneto wore his red and purple armor. The distinctive helmet that protected his thoughts from telepaths sat on the scarred tabletop. He stood with his back to the windows.

Kitty and Pete were respectively in grungy jeans and sweat shirt (that rather unfortunately had Xavier's printed across the front) and a crumpled black suit. They did not look impressive.

"Why are you here?"

Pete pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "Pryde here wanted to come."

"And that's enough for you?" Magneto asked. He walked up to the table and casually rested his fingertips on the helmet.

Pete shrugged.

"It got her out of the States and away from that bleedin' pillock Xavier," he said.

A smile almost lightened Magneto's expression at Pete's less than fond description of the Professor. It did when Kitty elbowed Pete hard. "Don't talk about him like that."

"He's an obsessed, unrealistic, manipulative old lech," Pete griped. "Probably gets off peeping in everyones' heads at night."

"I take it you and Charles are not on good terms?" Magneto interrupted.

"I ain't interested in running around in primary colored spandex and lettin' me enemies off with a warning so they can come back and shoot me in the head when I ain't lookin'," Pete said. He took a puff on his cigarette and nodded. "I don't need his money or his so-called training to use m' powers. I ain't been brainwashed by him since I weren't old enough to know what m' balls were for like Summers and the weather bitch. I smoke. I drink. I'm sleeping with Pryde. And I ain't apologizing because I got m' hands dirty a time or two in my life."

Magneto laughed, long and loud. "I see."

Pete pointed at him with the hand holding his cigarette.

"Don't get the idea I'm going to be bowin' down to 'Lord' Magneto, either, Lehnsherr. I'm here for Pryde and no one else."

Magneto didn't appear concerned. "I don't require worship, Mr. Wisdom. Loyalty is sufficient."

Pete shrugged.

"Earn it from Pryde and you'll have it from me, then," he'd said.

Magneto looked at Kitty then.

"And you, Katherine? Why have you come?"
Kitty lifted her chin. "Because maybe you can make something here and… and because nothing the X-Men have done has made any real difference in the way mutants are seen in the States. I don't think the Professor's way is the only way to help mutants any more." She sighed. "I still love and respect him, but I'm an adult now and I realize he isn't infallible."

"And you already knew that about me," Magneto said.

Kitty smiled a little.

"Yes."

"So I ask you again, Katherine Ann Pryde, why are you here?"

"To help."

"Then, welcome."

They didn't have much contact with their old friends, especially those on the X-teams. Too much bad blood. Xavier's followers couldn't really see Magneto as anything other than a supervillain and their seeming arch-enemy. There had been some outright bitterness on the parts of Archangel, Storm and the Professor.

Kitty was surprised by the people who did stay in touch.

Odd and welcome packages would appear care of Landau, Luckman and Lake, the mysterious legal firm that handled Wolverine's business interests out of Madripoor. Scotch for Pete and music for her, along with an adamantium katana and dai katana on her birthday. Those were from Logan. Remy sent cigarettes and the encryption codes for the newest Ariane space satellite, along with a spectacular jade carving of Kuan-yin. Kurt sent her a complete DVD box set of Errol Flynn movies. Bobby sent a prank card with a coded message giving Kitty access to a trust account set up in Liechtenstein for her and Pete. Meggan sent a packet of long, rambling letters describing everything happening at Muir and Braddock Manor—that someone (probably Brian, possibly Kurt, as she couldn't imagine Logan doing so) had gone through with a censor, cutting out any information Magneto might have found useful.

Kitty decorated the flat with things she and Pete liked, without worrying too much about how it looked to anyone else. Pete was an unmitigated slob and didn't care—she'd seen his rooms in London—but the flat was Kitty's first home: she'd lived with her parents, then at Xavier's School and later the Muir Island Research Station. None of those places had been hers the way the flat in Hammer Bay, with its cracked plaster ceilings and the scorched smell that came through the heating vents sometimes, was.

It didn't come easy.

Pete, courtesy of his days as a Black Air operative, had lived in war zones and countries suffering in the aftermath of wars. He'd been in Genosha more than once too. He knew how to move through Hammer Bay.

Kitty's experiences as Shadowcat of the X-Men and later Excalibur consisted of in-and-out missions. She'd been in dozens of countries, but apart from Scotland, England, and Japan, had spent no time getting to know them. There had always been someone trying to kill her. Distracting, to say the least.
It seemed very ironic that she lived a more 'normal' life, one that included paying rent, washing dishes every night and trying to grow daffodils in a pot on the kitchen windowsill, while living in Genosha under the rule of Magneto than she had in the US or UK.

For two years, she hadn't left Genosha. She used her computer and engineering skills to set up networks and operating systems for everything from a new fire department to a rebuilt hospital to the customs and immigrations service Magneto had to reinstitute as more and more American mutants arrived on the island. Not once did she use her mutant powers in a violent confrontation.

At the same time, Pete had taken on the dirty job of unearthing Magistrate sympathizers and even the mutate rebels that wouldn't let go of their enmities toward the regular citizens of the island.

He spent most of his time working with Scanner, while Kitty found herself working beside Milan regularly. She wondered what the X-Men would think if they knew she'd had both Acolytes over to the flat for dinner numerous times? Or that both she and Pete were members in good standing of Magneto's Reconstruction Cabinet? She would imagine Storm's expression of horror and grin to herself.

Her life had become quite insular, devoted to working within her new country, with new friends, filled with the satisfaction of seeing her accomplishments every day and sharing it with the man she loved every night.

She was twenty-two. She was happy.

Of course, it couldn't last.

Pete was still sprawled asleep in their bed and she was in the bathroom, perched on the sink counter and waiting, early on a Tuesday morning in April when her peaceful, content bubble burst.

~SHADOWCAT!~

Telepathic shouts inevitably cause headaches. Kitty dropped the little stick she'd been holding and watching and clutched at her head.

~SHADOWCAT, WAKE UP!~

~I was already awake,~ Kitty responded. ~Ow.~

~Sorry,~ Scanner managed to convey apology and regret along with her words. ~You and Wisdom need to get to the Citadel ASAP. Magneto wants all the Cabinet. Something's happened in America. He's…~

A cold sensation rushed through Kitty. She had so many people she still cared about in America.

~He's what?~

~Furious,~ Scanner replied. Then added, ~Sad. Sick. Determined.~

Kitty shuddered. Magneto in a rage was something no one who had stood against him ever wanted to see again.
Okay, we'll be there as soon as I can get Pete awake and moving.

Just get him dressed, Scanner advised. Voght's going to teleport you. She's bringing in everyone so expect her in the next five minutes.

Amelia Voght's teleportation was even more stomach upsetting than Kurt's and exhausted the older woman. For her to be transporting the entire Cabinet in one morning, it had to be bad.

Kitty slid off the counter and picked up the plastic stick on the floor. She shoved it in her pocket then went into the bedroom.

"Pete, get up."

"Wha - ?"

"Amelia's picking us up. Get dressed or she'll drop you in the middle of the Cabinet conference table starkers."

"Shite," he groaned. "What bloody bastard's behind this?"

"Magnus wants everyone at the Citadel."

"Everyone?"

"The Cabinet."

"Something's hit the bleedin' fan, has it?"

Kitty nodded.

Pete scrubbed his dark whiskered cheeks with both hands. "All right then." He got out of the bed and staggered into the bathroom.

An instant later, Pete came out of the bathroom clutching a small, empty box, his blue eyes wide and his face pale.

"Kit, what the bleedin' hell is this?"

Kitty looked at the box.

"What does it look like?" she asked in a small voice.

Pete looked at the box. He took a deep breath.

"Well, are you?"

She fished the little stick out of her pocket and looked at the window for the first time.

The little plus sign had turned blue.
Hunt Chetley: "We have National Security Advisor Henry Peter Gyrich with us today on Washington World Morning Report."

HC: "Mr. Gyrich, you've held numerous posts within various administrations and worked with the now defunct Office of Mutant Liaisons. How do you feel the Creed administration compares to previous ones?"

Henry Peter Gyrich: "This administration is the first to see and understand the real threat to our country and do something about it."

HC: "You mean COMRA, of course."

HPG: "It's the first step. The first real step since Senator Kelly spearheaded the Sentinel Program."

HC: "What about Operation: Zero Tolerance?"

HPG: "OZT was a renegade operation, but it had the right idea. Mutants are simply too dangerous to be left within the general population."

HC: "You've never hesitated to make your views known, but you've never served in a cabinet that so closely echoes them. Has that changed how you feel at all?"

HPG: "No, not at all."

HC: "What about Ambassador Cargill of New Genosha's accusation in the latest United Nation's session that the Creed Administration means to initiate a mutant 'Final Solution'?"

HPG: The United States government does not recognize New Genosha as a state or the rantings of the madman ruling there. Personally, I find the phrase 'Final Solution' distasteful and overblown. The responsibility of any government is to safeguard its citizens, all its citizens. That is what we are doing."

HC: "Mutant citizens?"

HPG: "Are safer with their own kind than in the general population. Your network covered the St. Louis riots a few weeks ago, where several mutants and one store keeper only suspected of being a mutant were killed. No one wants to see that sort of thing happening."

HC: "The victims were crucified."

HPG: "That wouldn't have happened if people weren't frightened – with good reason – of mutants."
HPG: "I'm not even talking about the justified fear of being harmed physically. Mutant and super-powered crime harm people every day. Just the property damage they do results in lost jobs, lost time and higher insurance rates. That translates into harder times for every working person in this country."

HC: "Some might argue that jobs are generated as well. As an example, there is the New York based construction firm Damage Control that specializes rebuilding and repairing structures destroyed or weakened in various super-powered conflicts."

HPG: "Damage Control serves a purpose, but not one that should exist. Businesses that salvage a profit from picking through the wreckage aren't to be admired. They're vultures. At least, in my book."

HC: "Strong words."

HPG: "I stand by them."

United States
Dayton, Ohio

The black panel van parked along the curb in front of the small suburban house's neatly cut lawn. The two black SUVs double parked in the street, one at each end of the block.

The men who exited the van were too tall, too fit and physically confident to be anything but soldiers, despite wearing dark gray suits. Silver sunglasses hid their eyes despite the hour: nine-thirty pM. The pale orange halogen street lights reflected off the lenses as they walked up to the front step of the small, ranch style house. One of them walked to the side and stationed himself between the house and the minivan parked in the driveway.

They marched up to the door and gave it that cop knock–the hard rap rap rap that says answer the door or have it kicked open. One of them carried a heavy, metal-sided case. Someone looking closer might have noticed the bulges under their jackets from the shoulder holsters. They ignored the yellow plastic kids' toys piled in a bin beside the door.

The man who opened the door had come home from a moderately tiring day at his job managing a nursery. He had on a UCLA sweatshirt he'd held onto since college - the one his wife kept trying to throw out. He eyed the men on his front step with a combination of disbelief and apprehension. Like calls after midnight, men in suits and sunglasses could only mean trouble.

He was polite man. He paid his taxes, came to a full stop at intersections, and gave to the United Way. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Brian Pruett?"

"Yes."
He was becoming increasingly uneasy.

"Federal Marshals."

The man in the lead, a crew cut blond, pulled a badge case out and flipped it open, displaying a Federal Marshal's star. He put it away before Brian Pruett could see if it was real or what the man's name was. He pushed his way past Brian into the softly lit hall.

"Hey, you can't just bull your way into my house!"

The 'marshal' next to the blond pulled out a triple folded paper from his jacket, let it drop open and held it up for Brian to read. The close typed words were a blur without his glasses but he noticed an official seal and a scrawled signature. Judge Marlon Atkins. It looked real enough to Brian.

"This is a warrant to search the premises and detain or arrest Melissa Haines Pruett and Daniel Pruett under the provisions of the Modified Patriot Act, Amendment IV, in accordance with the Comprehensive Mutant Registration Act. Any attempt to interfere will be considered 'obstructing justice' and grounds for arrest, and will result in charges of aiding and abetting, conspiracy and terrorism," the blond recited in a flat voice.

Brian still had his hand resting on the edge of his open front door. He stared at them. His wife was in the kitchen, unloading the dishwasher. His oldest son was doing homework at the dining room table. The two younger children were in the living room watching TV. What did any of that have to do with mutants or terrorism? Sure, Melissa and Daniel had powers but they'd never done anything with them–it was like having an extra toe or red hair, it didn't define who they were or what they did. Melissa worked as an office manager. Daniel was a high school kid. They'd both dutifully registered at the first of the year.

"What - ?" he stuttered out.

The marshals pushed him aside and strode into his house.

"Hey, wait, you can't just--"

Another one of the men drew his pistol from under his jacket and held it in front of Brian's eyes. With his other hand, he shoved Brian's chest.

"Shut. Up."

He sneered as Brian fell back against the wall.

"Mutie lover."

His wife screamed in the kitchen and Daniel began shouting.

Brian surged forward as Melissa was dragged down the hall. Behind her came two of the marshals, frog-marching Daniel. A fifth marshal shoved a vase of flowers off the side table in the hall and set the metal-sided case he carried on it. It was snapped open and two heavy, brushed steel collars were brought out. A telltale light shown red next to locks. Brian stared, guessing what they were: inhibitor-collars. He'd seen pictures on the news, years back, when the Genoshan government broadcast a show trial of the X-Men. The prisoners had all worn manacles and similar collars. But that was in another country.
Daniel saw them and started fighting harder. Spikes tore through his T-shirt as his mutation activated. Another moment and they'd be long enough to launch.

"No!" Brian shouted. "Daniel, don't!"

This had to be a mistake, but if Daniel attacked the marshals, they might not be able to get it straightened out. His spikes were dangerous. The hollow quills held a mild neurotoxin. They paralyzed most people, but someone might conceivably suffer a lethal reaction.

"Brian?" Melissa asked. Her only mutation was levitation. She'd joked that using it to save her feet during her pregnancy had made Daniel a mutant too. The sad thing was she hadn't levitated at all while pregnant with Jimmy or Maggie. Just in case.

"Shut up." snapped the marshal holding her arm. He snapped the collar around her throat and locked it. The red light flickered and switched to green. Melissa gasped and swayed.

Daniel stopped. The organic spikes he generated from his skin retreated back inside.

"Mom? Mom, are you okay? What happened?" Daniel demanded.

The marshal holding the gun set the muzzle between Melissa's eyes. "Be quiet and cooperate or I put a round through this genefreak's head," he threatened.

"Dad, you can't let them take us!"

"Daniel, just cooperate for the moment," Brian gasped. "I'll call our lawyer. You're both registered, you haven't done anything, this is all some kind of mistake."

Daniel shivered and lifted his chin as the inhibitor-collar was locked around his neck.

Brian lifted his hand, not sure what he was about to do, but not willing to see his wife and son dragged out of the house without explanation or reason.

The marshal shoved the muzzle of his pistol against Melissa's forehead. From the corner of his eye, Brian saw the two younger kids standing in the doorway of the living room. He swallowed hard.

"Jimmy, take your sister to your bedroom."

"Dad - "

"Now!"

His younger son caught Maggie's arm and dragged her back down the hall, throwing frightened glances over his shoulder.

"Smart thinking," the blond marshal said.

They started pushing Melissa and Daniel toward the door.

"Where are you taking them?" Brian demanded.
No answer.

He grabbed the arm of one of them. The next he knew he was on his knees, blood dripping from a split eyebrow where he'd been spun and shoved face first into the wall before being forced down.

"Don't ask questions, mutie lover," the marshal told him. "Don't make any noise or cause any trouble, understand? Worry about your normal kids. Who will take care of them, hunh?"

Daniel was yelling again as he was dragged out the door.

Melissa twisted and met his eyes. "Please, Brian," she whispered. "It's all some kind of misunderstanding."

The door slammed shut behind the last of them.

"Dad?" Jimmy whispered from behind him. There were tears in his voice. "Dad?"

He needed to call their lawyer. Shelby Willis would know what to do. He needed to clean the water and crushed flowers and broken glass off the floor. He needed to wipe the blood off his face, get up, and comfort Jimmy and Maggie.

"Dad? What's going on?"

He struggled up to his feet and faced his son.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

"But it's going to be okay, right?"

He lied.

"Everything's going to be okay."

Reports of black vans and SUVs have replaced helicopters among conspiracy theorists this year, Blake. The tabloids are full of wild stories about people disappearing from their homes. Everyone has a theory. What about you? Call us at WDDB News and let us know what you think.'

Alanna Herrard, WDDB News at Five [www.Wddbnews5Com]

Westchester
Xavier's School of Higher Learning

Jubilee plopped down in one of the kitchen chairs and looked expectantly at Logan. She'd followed him, jabbering about bubble gum or boy bands or -

"FOH?"
He turned around and stared at her. Really stared. She'd grown up on him. Nineteen and in college and she wasn't babbling about crushes or new shoes, she was talking seriously about the anti-mutant movements starting to gather momentum on the college campuses.

"So I dropped out," she said.

He clenched his fists. "You. Did. What?"

Jubilee gave him that 'well, duh' look she'd perfected as a kid, blinking eyes that were still startling in their blueness when their almond shape would have looked more natural with brown or black.

"I quit. Split. Walked out. Hit the road. Waved bye-bye, gave notice, skipped, departed, decamped, flew the coop, pulled the plug and basically beat feet in retreat but not defeat back to the ye old X-Mansion," Jubilee explained lightly. Her mouth was smiling. Her eyes weren't. "Home is where when you have to go there they have to take you in, right? So, I'm back."

"You ain't dropping out of school," he told her. Xavier might be Jubilee's technical guardian, but Logan had always considered her his little girl. They'd been 'partners' since she was twelve years old. He'd tried to give her whatever a girl needed growing up without pretending that life hadn't already shafted her twice over by making her a mutant and then orphaning her. He might not be smooth and formally educated, but he knew how important it could be for her to have a college education.

"You're going to go back."

"No, I'm not," she said. No give in her voice at all. "I was wasting my time there; Frosty covered everything they were teaching in our second year at the Academy." She shrugged. "I missed everyone anyway."

"Something else happened."

She shrugged. "Sure. Something always does."

He looked her over keenly. "You okay?"

"My room-mate was a prejudiced bitch who joined the FOH." Like that explained everything. "Had to get away before I paffed her."

He opened the refrigerator and retrieved a Molson absently. He knocked the cap off the bottle and took a swallow, then leaned back against the kitchen counter.

Jubilee rolled her eyes. "Wolvie, don't you get it? I'm not registered."

"And ya ain't going to," he snapped.

"Right, right, like I'm that stupid. But, Logan, it's a state school."

"And?"

"You want to register for classes," she explained quietly, "you get scanned."

He tightened his hand on the bottle.
"Shit."

He wanted to slice and dice somebody, but there wasn't any one person to blame for this. If they'd thought about it, they would have realized some of the kids were going to run into problems with COMRA. They had all just wanted to believe they could wangle some kind of better, normal life for GenX. Emma and Sean had tried to treat them as students and children, not soldiers in training the way Magneto and Cable had with X-Force.

They'd been fooling themselves.

"What're you going to fix?"

"'The hell are ya asking me?" he demanded.

He was thinking about something else. He had his Canadian citizenship. 'Ro was technically from a different African state, but she had a Wakandan passport. Betts had a UK passport, though it had taken her brother Brian exerting some pull through the London Hellfire Club to get it switched over to match the new Asian body. He'd give odds the Cajun had a dozen identities, at least one of them French. Xavier had faked up something for Bishop after he dropped out of the timestream. But the rest of the X-Men were sitting ducks, walking around with nothing but American IDs. He couldn't believe none of them had thought about this before.

It wasn't like he didn't have the contacts to buy passports for all of them. Dom could do it, so could Cable. He'd just never thought Scott would go for it… but things had changed.

"'Cause it's your turn," Jubilee said, snapping his attention back to her.

She pointed to the refrigerator and the whiteboard glued to the freezer door. In blue marker, next to Wednesday dinner it said Wolverine.

He stared at it in disgust. Who the hell put together these schedules anyway? He'd never been to one team meeting that addressed who got stuck trying to cook for however many people were in the mansion on any night. The only ones who could be described as competent cooks were Jean, Sam, Remy and Rogue. Ororo would only fix vegetarian dishes. Anyone else on the schedule and it was a gamble that the food would even be edible.

"We need to a recruit someone with the mutant power of cooking," Jubilee said.

He opened the freezer, hoping there would be the usual stacks of frozen dinners. There wasn't. No one had shopped in a week. Opening and closing the cupboards revealed that–locust like–previous cooks had already scrounged anything easy to prepare. One revealed a cache of canned spinach, prompting him to wonder who in the mansion liked the wet, nasty stuff. Someone must, after all someone had bought it.

The only thing he found in any quantities were cornflakes and a case of Guinness.

"So what's for dinner, Wolvie?"

"Beer and cereal," he growled at her.

"I'm still under age."
"Bread and water."

"Pizza?"

"No one will deliver here anymore," Bobby said, poking his head through the doorway and looking around warily. "Well, a new place opened in Salem Centre. Dinallo's. You could try them. You haven't seen Storm have you?"

"Nope."

Wolverine watched Drake sidle into the room, throwing suspicious looks toward the windows.

"What'd you do this time?"

"I, uh, didn't know she was going to borrow Hank's shampoo." He looked hunted.

Jubilee leaned forward. "This is going to be good."

"She's going to kill me."

"Popsicle," Wolverine growled.

"WellyouseeIputNairinHank'sshampoo," Bobby blurted in one breath.

"And Ororo used it?" Jubilee asked.

Bobby nodded.

"You're dead, Bobby."

Bobby looked at Wolverine.

"Did it work?"

"I didn't stick around after Hank told me Storm had borrowed the shampoo," Bobby admitted.

A shriek echoed from upstairs. Lightning struck outside. The lights in the kitchen flickered.

"Oh shit."

"Got to agree with Jubilee," Wolverine said. He finished his beer and tossed the bottle in the glass recycling bin next to the back door. "Ro's going to fry your ass."

"Please please please help me," Bobby begged. "Just until she gets over the worst of it."

Wolverine thought it over. Then he shrugged. "Come on. We need to pick up frozen pizza in town. You can help. Jubilee, you can come too."

"Oh joy," she said, but got up gracefully.
The Testing and Relocation Units are part of the overarching mandate of the Federal Bureau of Security, President Creed's new agency, which has been given authority over all other federal and state police agencies. The budget for BuSec includes funds to equip the newly minted TRUs with state of the art equipment through a DoD contract with Stark-Fujikawa.

In an interview with Daily Bugle reporter Peter Parker, Tony Stark, CEO of Stark Solutions and former CEO and major shareholder of Stark Enterprises, the precursor to Stark International before its merger with Fujikawa, decried the decision to mass produce battlesuits for the government, pointing out how often other weapons created for the military have found their way to the criminal and international arms blackmarket.

United States
Miami

He ran and Luisa ran with him.

He wished she hadn't.

She was human. She was slower than him, but he couldn't leave her behind.

The black SUVs with the opaque windows were everywhere. Every time they turned a corner, there one would be, streetlights shining liquid off the rain wet paint.

"Stop, mutant!" one of his pursuers shouted from behind them.

They didn't stop. He skidded around corner into a garbage strewn alley, knocking his shoulder into a brick wall. Luisa was panting. She'd kicked off her high heels and was running barefoot. He winced thinking of her feet.

"You are in contravention of the Comprehensive Mutant Registration Act. Failure to register is a Felony crime. We are authorized to use lethal force to secure you!"

Fuck.

Luisa was falling behind him. He didn't know what they would do to her for being with a mutant.

He slowed and grabbed her hand.

Oliver Martin Guitierrez' metabolism ran several times faster than human. He could have outrun anyone except Northstar or Quicksilver without breaking a sweat. He'd had a quiet offer to go to work for Gavin Enterprises as a courier after he got out of school.

He might very well have outrun a bullet.

But he slowed down.

Two bullets hit him in the back. One slewed through his lung, ricocheted off a rib and tore upward, ripping open his inferior vena cava. The second penetrated his spine, paralyzing him from the hips down.
His hand let go of Luisa's.

He fell forward with a single choked cry and died within seconds from the interior bleed out.

He was dead in the gutter behind a Chinese restaurant at seventeen.

Luisa stumbled to her knees beside his body. She rolled him over and tried to give him mouth to mouth. She tasted his blood on her tongue.

"Move aside, bitch."

Luisa came up off the ground with a scream, attacking the closest man. She kicked and bit and caught at his face with her long red nails, tearing away the silver sunglasses he wore.

"Shit!" he shouted, shoving her away as she gouged a deep, bloody furrow in his cheek.

Luisa hit the brick wall and lost all her breath.

"Fucking bitch hurt me!"

In a daze, she looked up in time to see the muzzle of the gun line up on her. The red dot of the laser sight played up over her chest until it glimmered and rested on her forehead.

"I hope it scars, pendejo," she snarled.

He pulled the trigger and she died.

"Hey, I thought he--" the second man kicked Oliver's body carelessly, "--was the only mutant we were after tonight."

The man Luisa had scarred—he would have the scar until he died six years later in New York—sneered at her body.

"She's going to be a mutie when I write my report."

He dabbed at the blood running down his cheek.

His partner glanced at him. "Jesus, she got you good."

"Goddammed bitch."

He spat on Oliver's body.

"They're both good muties now."

In a related issue, accusations that the DARPA designs recently released for bidding by manufacturers were actually illegally obtained from private researchers including Reed Richards, Henry Pym, Brian Braddock, Viktor von Doom of Latveria and several others will be settled in court. Five different lawsuits have been filed in New York. Von Doom, the Latverian dictator, has threatened to take the matter to both the UN and the World Court.
Comfortably Numb

Chapter Summary

Bobby makes his cold, lonely bed.

AD 2227, February 1
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

Bobby was cold.

Ice.

It was his power, his element, but not his nature. Not originally. That came later, during the Gene Wars, when he stopped being a big overgrown kid who played with ice and became it instead.

And now, even was with Remy, inside he was cold.

He loved him. He did, does. It's not that. It's not that Bobby wasn't part of the Triune. He had his own psi-bond. God no. Bobby never wanted power. Still doesn't. It wasn't that Remy didn't love him or wasn't faithful. Nothing was so sure as that love; he knew, he felt how he was loved through their psi-bond, it was always there.

It was the thing he saw from the corner of his eye, the idea that had taken root in his brain, the future he feared might be coming.

No, not the reunification or whatever tripe the newsies were calling letting the flatscans back in, with all their talk about bringing down the Barrier and ending the Interdict. That would happen, sure. The Constants had known it from the beginning.

He used to be called Iceman. Now it was just Ice. The Lord of Ice. Sometimes, he wondered when he became so brittle and cold, but cold was his element. Someday, he knew, he'd be his element. Not Bobby, not a man, just Ice.

Not yet, not for a long time maybe, but not so long as he wanted. Soon enough that he knew he had to get away from Remy, end it before all the feelings he had froze solid, because he already knew he would lose himself first. He had to break their bond while Remy would still have Jean and Erik. Because that was the thing. He saw it happening to some of the others already too.

Sometimes Remy shimmered as though his body could barely contain the kinetic energy that was his essence. Emotion and motion dancing in the balance. Sometimes the Phoenix peered ablaze from Jean's eyes, hungry to burn and fly again. Sometimes Magneto seemed ready to melt into the electromagnetic fields of the entire solar system, to surf the seas of the sun, the way Bobby would eventually dissolve into water vapor and temperature gradations across the planet. Someday they all would be something more elemental than gods.
What of flesh then?

Energy couldn't cradle a cold front in its arms nor make love in the night when the world was strange and old and never ending. Ice couldn't offer any comfort, ice couldn't love or weep. Remy was stubborn, though. He'd hold out longer than anyone else.

Betsy was the Shadow. Milan rode the electron stream of information through a technological net that stretched as far as the Shi'ar Galaxy, Shadowcat was insubstantial as a ghost, while Scanner spends more time on the Astral Plane than in her body and Northstar flickers and vibrates always moving even as he pretended to stay in one place. They would go next. Mystique melted from shape to shape, her only default the memory the rest of them held of her. Mystique was Change incarnate and Logan, Logan was Nature, eternally red in tooth and claw. Logan would forget too, forget again, such was the nature of his beast, it's Nature's law, to live always in the forever now.

Domino, well, maybe Domino would hold onto who she was, because Domino's always been lucky. Or maybe she would be lucky another way and forget. Chance be a fine thing, the right butterfly would always beat its wings for the lady. Things just go her way.

They would all forget, in time, some slower than others, but it would happen, Bobby thinks. Maybe it would be a blessing to shed the weight of memory, to become and let go of all the rest, to be what they were and no longer who they were.

He was afraid though and he was cold.
Robert Lord strode down the halls of the Pentagon confidently.

A pair of chic, European-styled glasses sat on Remy's straight nose. Those glasses concealed a sweet package deal—an image-inducer that gave his distinctive eyes the appearance of being a rather appealing but very normal brown and a constant connection to the computers on the Blackbird circling in a lazy holding pattern above DC, complete with heads-up display in one lens. The HUD showed him a schematic for the for the security and surveillance system in this part of the building.

The image inducer included a false retinal scan. Ten fingertips of Shi'ar artificially generated skin were bonded to his hands, giving him Robert Lord's matching prints. A flat black chip the size of a watch battery rested under the skin of his wrist, guaranteeing that a genescan would read him as nominal human - he stole it from a Hydra R&D lab just for this caper. He'd sell the reverse engineered plans on the blackmarket once he'd done with it.

He carried an exquisitely expensive, custom-made leather briefcase in his hand, Italian, matching his shoes and the slim belt round his narrow waist. The sage-gray suit was Italian too. They loved him in Milan; he could get all his clothes for free if he'd agree to model, but he'll leave the catwalks to Betsy. The chestnut leather was one shade lighter than his dyed hair.

The ID dangling from the handkerchief pocket of his beautifully tailored jacket said he was an agent of the Canadian government. He'd spent three days in Northstar's company to perfect his Quebec accent, picking up a couple of useful curses in Joual French and nearly coming to blows only once.

Northstar had also briefed him on Department H, the Canadian agency originally responsible for the Weapon X Program that had seen Wolverine's skeleton bonded with adamantium and false memories implanted in his mind before he escaped them. Northstar's old Canadian team Alpha Flight had worked for and tangled with the renegade department more than once. Remy had read the briefing files, of course, he always did his homework for a job, whether it was Guild work or for the X-Men, but talking with Jean-Paul had given him the sort of personal insight and details no file ever offered.

Robert Lord was in DC on behalf of Department H. He needed to know who he was supposed to be.

Remy smiled to himself.
This was what he lived for, walking right out on the edge of disaster and laughing. No one could imagine a mutant having the gall to walk in the front doors of the Pentagon.

No one sane, but he very possibly wasn't.

The only thing he regretted about this caper was the necessity of cutting his hair and dyeing it brown again.

Jean had walked in on him with his shirt off and his head in the laundry room sink, dropped her basket and hooted with laughter. She'd picked up the box of Brunette #5 and raised her eyebrows.

"Why?"

"Brown's a lot less memorable," he'd explained. She'd know, with that red-flame cloud of hair that was her signature.

"So why do it down here?"

"Always make a mess doing this, chere." He grinned. "Get this stuff all over my bathroom, on the towels, it looks like I was disposing of a body in there." He gestured to the extra deep, stainless steel laundry sink. "Easier to clean up here, non?"

She set her laundry on the washing machine. "Here, let me help."

"You need gloves, chere."

"Not me," she replied with a lilt in her voice. Then TK hands began working the chemicals through his hair. "Just close your eyes."

"You're awfully good at this," he'd commented. The things Jean could do with telekinesis. He'd sighed. He'd had a taste, for a couple of months, in Moscow. Scott was a lucky, lucky man. "Something the rest of us should know… Red?"

Jean giggled. "Nope. But I bet Emma has a standing appointment every week to hide her roots, with that platinum blonde look of hers."

"I've heard it's the real thing."

"And you haven't found out for yourself?"

"The woman's name is Frost," he'd replied, shuddering theatrically.

Not that he had anything against Emma, he thought as he made the turn to walk down another corridor—the place really was a maze—that would take him to his destination. He'd just had his fill of man-eaters years ago.

One more turn, two more doors, and he arrived at his supposed destination. The Army lieutenant doing a secretary's job recognized the name he gave and ushered him into the next office.

"Robert Lord," Remy introduced himself. He shook hands easily with the man who rose from his desk chair.
"Good to meet you, Mr. Lord, I'm Leland Peterson." He gestured to the chairs arranged to face his desk. "Have a seat."

"Thank you."

He set the briefcase by his feet and sat.

Typical of an interior Pentagon office, this one had no windows. There were overhead lights and Peterson had added his own desk lamp. A picture of Graydon Creed at his inauguration hung on the wall, along with an American flag and one with the white outlined pale blue star on a dark blue background of the FOH. Dark blue carpet, light blue walls, dark furniture.

Peterson resumed his own seat. He looked at Remy with frank interest. Remy kept his expression bland while studying Peterson in return. He was a fortyish man, with a receding hair line and an athlete's body beginning to soften, though he hadn't run to fat.

"So, what can I do for the Canadian government, Mr. Lord?"

Remy smiled slightly. He didn't try to use his charm to read or influence Peterson. There were assuredly monitors in the building tuned to any use of psionic energy. He been trained in the subtle arts of manipulation, deception, seduction and intimidation by the best, though. Psychology and kinesthetic were necessary tools for the Thieves' Guild. He infused his smile with just an edge of ruthlessness, leaned his body forward just enough to signal a likeness with Peterson in their aims and beliefs.

"Department H, actually," he said.

Peterson's eyebrows shot up, but he nodded.

"You're familiar with our work?"

"Canada's response to the Super Soldier program," Peterson replied.

Remy looked sly, letting Peterson see that.

"In part."

"And that part would be?"

Remy gestured to his briefcase. "May I?"

Peterson nodded, looking curious.

Remy set the case of his knees and flipped it open, withdrawing a file in a red folder. It was an actual Department H proposal that had gone 'astray' on its course to the States. As he picked it up, his fingers brushed the silver barrel of a fountain pen, casually tapping the clip. It began pumping out a colorless, odorless trinary gas that according to Forge would bypass the biotox and chemical sensors. The gas catalyzed within the body, while its elements were each under the parts per million threshold the sensors were geared to screen.

The filters in his nose itched. Hank had injected him with an immunizing agent, but he felt better with the nose filters in place, even if they were irritating.
He handed Peterson the file.

"The details of our proposal are inside," he said. "Please, take a moment to read it and I'll answer any questions you have afterward."

Basically Department H was offering to take any 'dangerous' mutants off the United States' hands. The revived Weapon X program needed new subjects. Remy didn't think the present administration would accept the offer; they were too afraid of mutants to want their next door neighbor to have access to them.

He watched Peterson leaf through the folder and hid a wince of sympathy as the man shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Beads of sweat formed on Peterson's upper lip. He swallowed hard. The gas was getting to him. He looked a little green.

"Are you all right?" Remy asked, playing it curious.

"Ah, ye-no, I'm sorry," Peterson blurted out. He stood up quickly. "I - Could you please excuse me for a few minutes?" He'd flushed. Embarrassed as hell, Remy diagnosed.

"Of course."

Peterson rushed into his private washroom, closing the door behind him with a sharp bang.

Remy allowed himself to look at the door with a raised eyebrow. Then he shrugged and reached for another folder in his briefcase. Hidden beneath the Manila folder, his fingers found and touched a set of pressure points in the lining of the case, activating a spoof program that transmitted a looped picture of himself into the room's security cam pickup. Until he disengaged it, it would show Robert Lord casually reading through a file, leaning back, drumming his fingers, looking bored and then irritated, making some notes and killing time while he waited for Peterson to exit the bathroom.

Speaking of the bathroom… Remy wrinkled his nose at the odor seeping out. Forge's gas had an unpleasant and embarrassing effect on the system. Peterson wouldn't recover from the effects for another half hour, minimum. That should be plenty of time.

Remy strolled over to the door into the front office and locked it. Then he opened the briefcase completely and accessed a hidden panel. A set of tools wrapped in black cloth and a belt with various other toys provided by the armorers of the Thieves' and Assassins' Guilds, along with a few things he'd picked up the last time he'd been in Madripoor—where you could buy anything for a price - was revealed. Underneath was a black skinsuit spidered over with pale blue thermal reducers.

He stripped out of his Italian suit and accessories, leaving them on the chair he'd occupied and donned the skinsuit. It too was a custom piece of tailoring, only it reduced his thermal signature to the ambient temperature, rendering him invisible to heat sensors. It included a hood and mask that covered his head and face. A single slit allowed him to see and the mask was porous enough to breath through.

He chuckled to himself. It did resemble a 'full body condom', even more than the spandex and skintight armor the X-Men favored did. The belt went around his waist and the tools into pockets on his thighs and arms.

A shrug and a series of stretches ending in a vertical split made sure everything fit and wouldn't come
loose or bind later and warmed up his muscles. Sweet adrenaline sung through his system. A predatory grin lit his hidden features. He loved this.

He leapt onto the desk light as a cat, reached up to the ceiling and used a multi-tool from his gear to remove the vent cover into the air circulation system. It really would be more secure if it wasn't large enough to allow a body in the system of duct work, but then it would unserviceable too.

One jump straight up let him catch his fingers into the top of the interior of the duct, along a welded seam. He drew himself up and in using only upper body strength, careful to never touch the bottom of the duct. The whole system was booby trapped with weight and motion sensors. A mouse couldn't make its way along the bottom of the ducts without setting off a series of alarms.

Once up, he twisted and braced his back against one side and his legs against the other side. The technique resembled the way a free climber went up a mountain chimney, only turned sideways.

Piece of cake, he thought.

The clock in his head told him exactly how long he had until Peterson would recover enough from the emetic and diarrhetic effects of Forge's gas to exit the washroom. He needed to be back and waiting before them. He kept his shoulders against the side and walked himself toward his target, another office.

He had no doubt it would be empty. He'd spent two weeks charting the target's routine, then sicced Betsy on the man. She would keep him occupied all afternoon if need be. He expected the telepath to make him pay for it too - something *haut couture* from the next Paris showing probably. He'd pick up something for Stormy too – maybe even Jean – both women had the height and style to pull off any fashion. Remy dismissed the pleasant but distracting thought of strolling the Avenue des Champs Élysées with the X-women and concentrated on the pinch.

There it was. No one inside, as predicted. Lights off. Computer off. All failsafes and security measures running. That just made it more fun. He could see the laser grid crisscrossing the room above head height clearly. He'd always thought that aspect of his eyes' nocturnal mutation was handy.

He traced the intricate weave of crimson light. Yes. There. It wasn't the worst he'd ever contended with by a longshot. The best in his Guild could go through it, Yukio could do it and a couple of other freelancers he knew of, but they'd all need a touch of technological help. They'd never manage it as fast as he would without turning off the lasers.

Arrogant, LeBeau? Non, just good.

He dropped headfirst into the air of the office. One heartbeat, bend into a pike, two, a fast spinning tuck, three, turn it into a half salto, four, arch back in a half layout, brush hand against wall to push away and five, drop into a crouch, half kneeling on the desktop. Maneuvering his body through the laser grid and never hesitating for a nanosecond.

Six, snatch the paper that threatened to float to the floor out of the air.

He set the sheet down exactly where it had rested before.

He stayed on the desk top and bent over the computer that sat detached from the rest of the network. Somewhere on the hard drive would be what he wanted. He was as comfortable hacking through the
ice and firewalls to steal secured information as he was lifting priceless works of art from a private collection, but the government had smartened up. They kept all the really hot information on isolated machines. The best the X-Men had been able to discover from the Pentagon network was the location of this office and the man who occupied it.

He didn't need any hacking skills at this point though. Didn't need to even boot up the computer. If there was a monitor on energy usage in the office, it wouldn't show anything, no light switched on, no electronics at all. That was important because the plan was to walk out of the Pentagon just like he'd walked in, no one the wiser to his real purposes. Just plug in Forge's latest invention and count off the seconds until the little yellow light turned green, telling him it had duplicated everything on the hard drive. He tucked it into an insulated case attached to his belt.

He tipped his head up and studied the laser grid again. Not quite so easy going up, of course. Gravity was inconvenient. He'd always envied the flyers. Some of Jean's TK would be useful in situations like this. Wolverine said he was the best at what he did, but Remy was the best at what he did too and what he did was steal. He didn't need to be able to fly to get out of here. Just training, muscle, skill and a natural talent for acrobatics, but that would be more than enough.

He tensed the muscles in his thighs and calves, rested his splayed fingers on the desk, readied himself with a cleansing breath and leapt upward. He twisted his body through the laser maze with precise grace as he reached and caught the edge of the air vent's opening. The muscles in his arms and shoulders and abdomen sang as he pulled himself up and in, curling his legs tight to his torso until he'd hand walked himself around and could wedge his knees against one side.

The countdown he'd been keeping in the back of his mind said he had nine minutes to get back to Peterson's office.

A single trickle of sweat crawled down his spine as he worked his way back.

The rest of it went just as easy as he'd predicted, planning the heist. He descended from the air ducts, swiftly replaced the vent cover, and switched back into his elegant suit with all the evidence safely stowed in his case, exactly one minute forty-three seconds before Peterson opened the bathroom door.

Remy slipped his glasses back on, blinking at the smell that escaped into the office despite the best efforts of the bathroom's fan.

"I'm terribly sorry—" Peterson said.

Remy waved his hand. "No, nothing a man can do."

"Yes, well, I do apologize for making you wait like this."

"Ah, yes." He checked his watch ostentatiously. "I'm afraid I have another engagement. Perhaps I could leave our proposal with you and reschedule this meeting to a time more convenient to both of us?"

Peterson grimaced.

"Maybe that would be a good idea, Mr. Lord."

"Merci." Remy started for the door. "I will have my assistant call. We should do this soon."
"Yes. We can do that. Are you going to be in DC much longer? Maybe you can enjoy some of the city's attractions?"

"Another week," Remy lied absently. He doubted the District of Columbia had any attractions he hadn't already explored, including many Leland Peterson would never dream of, but he had no intention of hanging around to look for more. "I'm afraid my schedule doesn't allow for any… recreation."

"Too bad."

"Until we meet again, Mr. Peterson," he said and offered his hand to shake again.

The door unlocked under his hand as he exited. He nodded to the lieutenant at his desk and strolled into the corridor.

He didn't let his smile escape until he parked his rental car in an empty Maryland field and watched the Blackbird decloak before him. A mild surface charge fed through the car burnt away any DNA traces and fried the vehicle's electronics.

Psylocke and the rest of his team—Black Team—were already onboard, playing poker while they waited, as he climbed into the plane. Psylocke still had on the little black cocktail dress she'd worn to distract Harper and a sullen expression. Remy sighed. He was going to hear about this. Betsy didn't mind using sex as a weapon, but she hated anyone taking her for granted.

"Didn't even break a sweat, mes amis," he declared.

Rictor shook his head, but didn't look up from his cards. "Madre the Dios," he muttered as Shatterstar laid down the winning hand.

Marrow sniffed the air.

"You reek, Cajun."

Jubilee rolled her eyes.

Remy chuckled.

"That gas of Forge's has a strong effect, petite. You're catching a whiff of M'sieu Peterson's discomfort, yeah?"

"Could be, bub," Jubilee laughed. "Come on, Shatty, let's get back so King Creole here can get a shower." She snagged Shatterstar's strawberry blond ponytail and tugged as she went by.

Shatterstar followed Jubilee into the cockpit after nodding to Remy.

Remy plucked at his suit coat and frowned, sniffing too.

"This will have to be burned," he said mournfully. It really was too bad. The suit looked so good on him. Such was life.

Betsy smirked.
He brightened and smiled at her.

"Just gives us another reason to go shopping, chere, right?"

"You're paying, LeBeau," she purred.

He'd been right. This job was going to cost him. He sat down opposite her and leaned back as Jubilee and Shatterstar launched the jet into the air.

"I'm not playing with you, Marrow," Rictor snapped.

"Who said I wanted you to?" Marrow snarled back. "Shaky."

"Loco bitch."

"How'd you like a chunk of femur up your ass instead of 'Star's—"

"Sarah!" Remy snapped. How had he agreed to leading this team of psychotics anyway? Oh, yeah, he had experience. "Enough."

He could feel her sulking across the cockpit, but she did listen. Rictor had sufficient sense to stay silent too.

He closed his eyes, abruptly exhausted, his adrenaline played out.

"Relax, Remy," Betsy told him. "Just think, we get to tell Cyclops our team managed a mission without blowing anything up. You know how rare that is for the X-Men."

His lips twitched up in a smile. "There is that," he agreed. He'd get to push Cyke's buttons.

"Just as soon as I get that shower."

United States
Elko, Nevada

Vertigo sat on the edge of a black Formica lab counter and swung her legs. All around her, men and women, soldiers and scientists, were on the floor, groaning and puking, too sick to coordinate themselves enough to lift their faces. She grinned.

The last time Sinister had cloned her, he'd upgraded her powers again. She had a fine control that let her focus her abilities like never before. She'd disabled every human in the base they were attacking without affecting the other Marauders at all.

Except for Scrambler. She'd let Kim Il Sung have a taste of the rolling nausea and balance disturbances she'd hit everyone else with and smiled sweetly when he complained.

"What do you mean? None of the others feel anything."
She'd glanced at Riptide and Arclight.

"Do you?"

They shook their heads.

"Maybe it was those cabbage rolls you hogged last night."

Right before he used his touch to nullify her powers and tried to drag her into his room for a little 'slap and tickle'. He'd forgotten she had a hand-to-hand skillset now and ended up on the floor, lucky she hadn't put a knife through his throat. This was just a little payback between the two of them.

Okay, she had slept with him a few times, but that was back a couple of clone lives ago, when she was still stupid. She was with Janos now and no one else, unless Remy came back. Remy was fun and had always treated her like a lady, not like some second class mutate. She missed him.

Scalphunter was a good leader, but he didn't make any of them laugh.

They should never have listened to fucking Sabretooth going into the tunnels. Secret orders from Sinister her ass. If she ever ran into Victor Creed again, he was going to need that healing factor. If it weren't for him, Remy would still be with them where he belonged.

"Bitch," Scrambler snarled at her.

"Shut it," Scalphunter commanded. He snapped a clip of explosive ammunition into his favorite gun. "Vee's done her job. Now we do ours. In and out in twenty minutes, people. There will be troops dispatched as soon as someone misses the first scheduled check-in."

With everyone down and out, it was a walk through.

Scalphunter was downloading everything on the lab's network. His mutant ability to convert anything into a weapon allowed him to cobble together an interface that bypassed any security they had. It was just a trick. He shouldn't have been able to, but lately they'd all learned to be creative with their powers. It was just a matter of attitude. If he thought of hacking and information as weapons, his power kicked in. Sort of like a mathematical idiot savant who could only read Ulysses if it was translated into binary.

Arclight and Blockbuster were going through the scientists, picking out the ones Sinister wanted brought back to join his captive research group. A little telepathic conditioning and they'd be pod people, pale nervous creatures that flitted down the dark corridors of whatever base Sinister was using, hurrying to finish whatever experiments the boss told them to do.

As soon as they had all of them, Scalphunter would signal for pick-up. Sinister would open one of his tesseracts, they'd sling the scientists through, blow this Popsicle stand and evacuate themselves.

Blockbuster came in with three bodies slung over his shoulders. Arclight was carrying another and dragging one more by the collar of his lab coat. She looked pissed.

"Tone it down, Vee," she snapped. "These fuckers are puking all over us."

Vertigo shrugged and eased up on the nausea she was pumping out. She kept their heads spinning too hard to think, though. Science wienies could be dangerous. They had Sinister as an example of just how dangerous. The boss was the scariest man Vertigo had ever seen, subzero insane, and she'd
seen some real crazies back in the Savage Land.

"That's all of them," Blockbuster declared, dropping his three in a heap in the center of the room.

"Good," Scalphpunter said absently. He was deep in tinkering with a piece of equipment. "Arc, you want to set up some charges through the place?"

"On it."

"What about the rest of 'em?" Riptide asked.

Scalphpunter looked up. The black Fu Manchu mustache he affected lifted as he grinned.

"Kill 'em."

Riptide laughed, throwing his head back. "All right."

His long lavender hair fanned out as he began to spin, transforming into a human tornado that whirled out and down the corridors, resin shuriken hitting helpless victims wherever he went.

The rest of the Marauders followed.

Fun time.

New Genosha
Krölik Foothills

Scanner stretched herself through the Astral Plane, searching. There they were. Her insubstantial mental form strolled among the insurgent group. She catalogue who was there and what weaponry they had.

An Acolyte team was waiting to attack once she had finished scouting.

Her lip curled.

These were the last resisters, holed up in a makeshift camp in the rough, uninhabited hills of northern Genosha. Living in filth and squalor and spite, running out of food and supplies, united at last in equal misery.

Look at them, she thought. Magistrates and mutates allied just to stand against Magneto, the best thing that had ever happened to this benighted country.

There was Pipeline, the traitor, the mutant who had sold his kind out by becoming a Magistrate, then later sold out the chance Magneto gave him as part of his Cabinet and tried to stab him in the back. Wanted in a dozen countries for participating in the kidnappings of mutants during the Renard Regime. Not in the US, because even before the Creed Administration the bastards in power wanted mutants gone.

Sitting a few feet away was Prodigy, a mutate. He'd used his earth shaking abilities to bring down a
provincial hospital weeks ago for having the gall to treat baseline humans and mutates in the same wards. Scanner could almost sympathize with him. Almost, because the Acolytes started out as fanatical as he is, but they had been forced to move on since Magneto took over Genosha. They had seen Magnus weak, they'd seen him make mistakes and exchanged their blind faith for determination. They’d stopped following and started helping. Prodigy embraced hate instead.

And there, staring into the distance with blank eyes, was old bulldyke President Renard herself. Someone had snatched her out of the nuthatch to act as a rallying point for the humans, but she was too far gone. Even the flatscans couldn't see her as anything but a monster.

Pipeline was sitting on a rock, trying to repair a sat radio. If he could get a transmission going to a satellite, he could digitize himself out of Genosha, go underground again. It was not going to happen. Magneto was jamming everything going out of Genosha: radio, cell and landline. The fiber optic cables leading to South Africa had been severed. Pipeline was trapped on the island.

Scanner ghostwalked through the astral representation of the camp. There was a single tank, Gulf War vintage, with one track off. Even if the rebels had shells for the main gun, the Acolytes could deal with it. Back in a tent under camouflage net, she found a cache of nerve gas, yellow stencils in Cyrillic identifying where it came from. It looked old too. Probably unstable. They’d need a hazmat team to dispose of it. She made a note to suggest Voght take the job of controlling any that escaped; she could teleport a gas cloud into the ocean depths if necessary.

Walking back through the camp one more time, she counted minds. Sometimes physical things didn’t appear on the Astral Plane, but minds always did. She found two she knew, Rem-Ram and Senyaka, two of Cortez’ renegade Acolytes who escaped the attack on Carrion Cove. She was startled to see they were sitting with Philip Moreau, eating beans cold from the can, passing it and the fork back and forth.

Poor bastards, she thought as she let herself fly back to her body, waiting in the assault transport just beyond sensor range.

She snapped back into her flesh and opened her eyes. It was always a shock. She felt too heavy. She was burning, going dark…

"Breathe, pet," Pete Wisdom told her. His deep blue eyes locked with hers. One hand rested light and warm on her breastbone.

Scanner pulled in a lungful of air with a harsh gasp.

"You find them?" he asked.

She nodded.

Katu looked over his shoulder from where he sat in the pilot's seat of the transport. "All of them?"

"Yes," she rasped out.

Her head was clearing as she remembered to breathe. Her heart thumped against her chest. Maybe she’d pushed things a little farther with that last scan. She realized she was lying across a couple of seats and pulled herself upright.

Wisdom kept a steadying hand on her shoulder. She was glad he had command of this operation. He
was–by his own proclamation–a ruthless git, but he never sent his people into a situation blind. He'd taught them all that you can do more damage with knowledge than mere fists.

Obnoxious Brits who drank too much, smoked like chimneys and had worked for the government at one time weren't Scanner's type, but Wisdom could be sweet when he thought no one would notice. He had beautiful eyes and a hard, wiry body. He was completely devoted to Shadowcat too. He never looked at anyone else.

She really envied Shadowcat sometimes.

"How many?" he asked.

"Twenty-three, including Renard."

"Renard's with them? So that's what happened to her."

"She just a flatscan. I don't think she's even there enough to pick up a gun," Scanner said.

"No, it's just bad publicity if it gets out we put her down."

"No one's planning on televising this," Klaus said. His pale eyes were slitted against the afternoon glare through the port holes.

Neophyte twitched and said nothing. He worked almost exclusively on Wisdom's team now. He said Wisdom knew how to use his phasing abilities better than any other commander. He'd learned from Shadowcat. Sometimes he still seemed to expect Wisdom to pussy out the way the X-Men usually did, but Wisdom really was ruthless. His mercies were always pragmatic.

"You do something stinky, sooner or later someone sniffs it out," Wisdom opined. He shrugged. "We'll worry about public opinion some other time. It's time to get rid of these bleedin' pillocks what are screwin' up Genosha for the rest of us."

"I saw Pipeline and Prodigy there," Scanner said. She paused. Wisdom lifted his eyebrows. "Rem-Ram, Senyaka and Philip Moreau."

"The old Genegineer's kid, that Moreau?" Wisdom asked.

Scanner sighed. Wisdom and Shadowcat hadn't arrived in New Genosha until after Magneto's first coalition cabinet dissolved. He'd never met Philip Moreau, might not even have been briefed on the man's history. Philip Moreau was more than the token Genoshan baseline human on the cabinet. He'd been the one to flee Genosha with his mutate girlfriend Jenny Ransome and alert the world to the true nature of Genoshan society. His own father had been the Genegineer in charge of the Mutate Bonding Process. His brother Thomas had been one of its victims, becoming the now dead radical Zealot. If Scanner had ever felt sympathy for a baseline, it was for Philip Moreau, but he'd disappeared after Jenny's death. They knew he'd been held by Sugarman for months before the raid on Carrion Cove that consolidated Magneto's complete control of the country. No one had seen the man after that, no one knew exactly what Sugarman had done to him.

She imagined Senyaka and Rem-Ram had gotten him out. They'd been among the renegades defending Carrion Cove.

He was probably as broken and useless as Renard. Explaining all that daunted her. She said only,
"Yes."

"Guess the apple don't fall far from the tree. No matter. We knew clean up would be a dirty job. He dies with the rest of them." Wisdom's narrow features hardened. "Give Katu the coordinates and let's get this over with."

Scanner sent the exact location directly into Katu's mind.

"Ready, Commander," Katu reported.

Wisdom lit a cigarette with a flare from a tiny hotknife at his fingertip.

"Anything else, Scanner?"

"They've got some nerve gas canisters in the northwest quadrant of the camp, in a tent."

"Voght, that's your look-out," Wisdom directed. "Port it into the bottom of the Madagascar Basin."

He looked around the Acolytes gathered in the transport.

"You all know your jobs. Do 'em."
Everyone in Genosha climbs the Tower of the Dead once.

AD 2227, February 4
Hammer Bay
The Tower

It wasn't like Arlington in the States or the battleground cemeteries of Flanders. No fields of green, smoothly kept lawn, no marble stones, no simple crosses. Alistair had thought there would be something more like the memorials of old. Instead, the mutants of Genosha had placed their memorial to their dead directly in the center of Magda Square.

The Tower of the Dead, they called it.

It spiraled up and up into the sky, a helical spike of red veined black stone. Stairs twined up it to an unrailed platform at the center of which was a hemispherical hollow. A great pillar of flame three men high shot up from within the smooth altar. When the wind rose high enough, the flame flared sidewise like a great banner, but it never flickered out. Upon each step was carved the name of one of the dead.

Alistair felt distinctly disrespectful setting his feet on those names and sick as he looked up at the breathtaking height of the tower. So very many steps led up it.

A voice seemed to whisper within his mind as he started up. Remember us, all of us, all the dead, for this is all that remains of us.

Alistair started to read the chiseled name. Captain America. Alistair shook his head. Steve Rogers hadn't been a mutant or a mutate. He read the inscription. *Let no one forget they killed this man before our war began because he would have stood against them. Not all heroes of Genosha were mutants.* Captain America was more myth than memory now, but this was definitely the sort of thing he wanted for his story. It would be a hell of a scoop to uncover if he'd been killed because he was a mutant sympathizer.

The image startled him, an ethereal ghost that hovered above the step as Alistair's foot touched it. She was huge eyed, a tiny child clutching a floppy eared toy, clearly not quite human. She seemed to stare from those solemn black eyes at him. The breath of voice in his mind returned.

~I was Nina.~

The astral engraving faded, to be followed by the next and the next and the next as Alistair trudged higher.

A white-haired soldier, one arm made of metal, with a star scarred over one eye. ~Cable. Nathan
Christopher Charles Dayspring Askani'son Summers. La Belle Dame sans merci killed me. ~ One eye flashed yellow fire as he balanced a massive gun on one shoulder and turned away, fading.

Some were so clear and real, they could have been alive; others were the faintest whisper of a voice, the mental memory of a perfume. Many were angry or sad, fierce, bitter, or wild. Some knew they were dead. Some didn't seem to be aware of their passing. Most were names no one had ever known beyond their own lives, but they stood with names from history as equals.

~Just Rogue, sugar,~ breathed a beauty clad in green from head to toe, sporting a bomber jacket with the X-Men sigil on the shoulders, a wide streak of white through her mane of brown hair. Mischief and grief showed in her bright green eyes. She looked solid enough to touch, the memories that contributed to the engram obviously strong and focused. ~I went from the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants,~ she laughed there, ~ to the X-Men. I loved a man. I made mistakes. I ran out of time.~

~Sabretooth,~ growled a huge, clawed man with the yellow eyes of a predator and the reek of blood about him. ~First Denver saving the Cajun's pansy ass.~

Then a thin young man, too young to be any sort of soldier, but hard-eyed.

~Neophyte the Acolyte.~

~Elena Ivanova. First Denver.~

Alistair kept climbing, wincing as the faces seemed to become younger, yet harder, their words sometimes murmuring of where they died or how.


And on and on, until Alistair had tears streaming down his face. And he kept climbing, on and on, up and up, past the legions of the dead, and their whispers were a roar he could hardly bear.

When he set foot on the final step and looked around, he could see past Hammer Bay to the limits of Genosha it seemed. The island nation seemed laid at his feet. Looking around, he understood the metaphor of the stairs, the names beneath his feet. Genosha had climbed to this height, of security and civilization, on the backs and bones of its dead. To reach this place and see it was to know and acknowledge the sacrifice that had gone before. Those that died weren't just names in history books for the mutants of Genosha.

The past lived in Genosha. The Triune had lived when these dead lived, had known many of them. Generations had come and gone since the Gene Wars in the outside world, but for the Genoshans it
remained as real and immediate as a dead friend.
The Sea of Faith

Chapter Summary

Ladies' Night at the X-mansion reminds Beast of Kipling's advice, Cable has a cold, Pete and Kitty get good news, but Paige Guthrie doesn't. Sam rejects the Professor's philosophy in the face of the reality of what they've found out.

AD 2005, March 11-16
Westchester
Xavier's Institute of Higher Learning

The mansion rec room had been invaded and occupied. The women were in control. The ladies of the mansion had commandeered the rec room for the evening, driving out their mates, dates, and assorted at loose ends males by dint of telekinesis and the dread threat of chick flicks. They had taken over, armed with junk food, chocolate and booze.

Domino insisted on the booze.

The debris of a long, enjoyable evening were spread around, empty plates and glasses, bottles and bags of snack foods. The kitchen had been denuded as surely as if a cloud of locusts had descended on it. The big plasma TV was playing Moulin Rouge, volume turned down. The stereo was playing Bonnie Raitt and had just hit Something to Talk About.

It seemed like the perfect segue.

"You know, putting Gambit and Shatterstar on the same team is almost too much of a good thing," Dani remarked.

A pillow was thrown at her.

"They're both gorgeous and you all know it. Six foot three of strawberry blond gladiator from an alien dimension, innocent as a baby—"


" - Six foot two of the resident X-Men sex god himself, with those hands and that mouth and that ass… Honestly, Gambit may have the best ass ever," Dani went on, laughing almost too hard to get the words out.

"And that's unfair how?" from Jubilee.

"Oh, you wouldn't complain, would you?" Tabitha groused. "You get to look at them all of the time, you're on Black Team." She grimaced. "Though I suppose having Marrow on the team evens things out."
"You are such a bitch, Tabby."

"That was uncalled for, Tabitha," Storm snapped.

"Besides, Sarah's sort of pretty if she remembers and keeps the bone growth on her face under control," Jubilee said and added maliciously, "At least she can do something about her face, unlike you."

"Oooh, ye've been hit, me girl," Siryn sniped. The Irishwoman was one of the few completely sober people in the room. She sipped on a cola instead and figured she'd have some good blackmail material by morning. She wouldn't be hung over and praying to the porcelain god either. One of the good points of being a reformed alcoholic was knowing the crap she wasn't missing.

Tabitha flipped them both off and reached for another beer.

"So, we all know 'Star's with Ric," Paige said. She'd curled up with her legs underneath her on the main couch. A bowl of caramel corn sat on her lap. Any hands that strayed too close were swatted. Hard. Storm wasn't sure, but she thought the girl had growled once or twice. "All the really good looking guys are gay or jerks."

"Or both," Cecelia added. General laughter followed her sally.

"Who are we talking about now?" Dani asked.

"Bobby, of course."

"Mean, Cece, very mean," Tabitha said, smiling.

"Are we going to gossip about the men?" Psylocke asked.

"Of course, that's why we chased them away, sugar," Rogue declared. She had taken over the rug directly in front of the TV. She'd also wanted to play Gone With the Wind but been firmly voted down by the rest of the women. At least Ewan McGregor had a cleft chin too.

"So, you and Gambit are quits. Give us the goods. Is he as good in bed as he looks?" Lorna asked with a gleam in her eyes.

Rogue flushed red, but grinned and sat up. She just nodded.

"Did you two really do it in a cave in Antarctica?" came from Jubilee.

"Oh Bright Lady," Storm murmured. "Jubilee! Some decorum, please."

She loved her unofficial brother and dearest friend, but the man was like a fox in a henhouse when it came to women. Not just the women either, she acknowledged. When his control went slipshod, that charm snaked out and snagged anyone, male or female, drawing eye and hand and want, all that fey beauty begging to be touched, the wildness in him calling to the wildness in them all. Insouciant and amoral as a cat, promising everything with every graceful movement, but never quite within reach—always that space of aloofness in him except in the arms of another body, lost in give and take, skin on skin, seducing himself as surely as any other.

Why, by the Goddess, had a man so in need of connection and sensation given his heart to Rogue?
Because some part of him knew she could never return what he offered so freely? There was a part of Gambit that wanted to punish himself for his self-perceived sins, that none of them had seen or understood originally, that must have drawn him to Rogue from the beginning. He loved danger like a woman, wanton and reckless as only someone who had never really had anything real to lose, not even himself, and Rogue promised to destroy him, was a sweet poison, another drug to lift him up and sink him down into the depths he thought he deserved. It was Rogue's very nature to take, more a thief than Gambit would ever be; too empty to ever be filled, even by one so carelessly generous in his affection and devotion as Gambit.

Yet he could lie in Storm's bed, under the skylights of her attic greenhouse, both of them stripped, long limbs wrapped in her arms to ward away the demons of his dreams, his every touch utterly chaste. All that he would accept from her, that touch that he needed; a gift of trust that he let Storm see just how much he needed, needed affection, acceptance, needed love that had never been offered without caveat in his life, not in a childhood that wasn't, not by clan, kin or Guild. He looked for it and found only a shadow of affection in the lust he could incite, but took even that for comfort, in the arms of an army of lovers, giving pleasure because it was his nature, it was what he'd learned to offer, believing no one could value the brittle damaged soul beneath the fallen angel's form.

He'd offered himself, heart and soul, to Rogue though; love not sex, emotion not sensation, he'd broken all his own rules, opened his defenses. All of him hadn't been enough for Rogue. For that Storm would never forgive her.

Rogue had never valued what Gambit offered at such cost to himself; never understood that he was prodigal with his body but never his heart. Storm had never, in her deepest self, forgiven the girl for scorning what she herself treasured, the innocent soul hidden in the charmer's armor. That oblivious disdain more damning than any attempted murder, not that Storm had forgotten that either.

It festered, that hypocrisy. Rogue had no place judging anyone.

Storm found herself defending him all too often, when no one else had; despite his very real crimes and darkness, because he wasn't her lover nor ever had been, but always, always her dearest friend and more beloved for that.

It didn't please Storm that now that they had finally parted, Rogue felt free to speak of Gambit as though he were a belonging she had used and thrown away. Jubilee's interest was untainted, embarrassing but not unkind. She did not think Rogue's answer would be so.

Jubilee just giggled and waved her hand at Storm. "Come on, Rogue. Give."

Rogue shook her head. "Jubilee, it was Antarctica. In a cave. We were chained up. And there were other folks in there with us. We kissed. That was all."

"And the next day you let that fake Erik the Red put my brother on trial as though you had never committed a crime yourself; elected yourself judge, jury and executioner and left Gambit, the man you had said you loved, to die," Storm snapped.

"Well, I didn't see you rushing off to find him after you found out he'd been part of Sinister's killing all of your precious Morlocks," Rogue replied with a mulish look. Storm had always suspected Rogue of being sorrier for the way people looked at her afterward than for what she'd done to Gambit. She still insisted it was his memories, his self-loathing and desire to die that had made her leave him alone on an ice shelf outside a self-destructing citadel. He had never contradicted her.
Yet if he had really wanted to die, surely he would have? Gambit had survived that fiercely unforgiving environment against all odds, escaped when it would have been much easier to give up. He'd had to fight to live. He might not care if he lived or died in battle, but he had a survivor's drive that had never faltered.

Rogue lied.

Storm raised her chin. "I wasn't aware he was in need, because you said you left him alive and I assumed that you had done that somewhere he had chance to get out alive."

"And he did, didn't he?"

"Storm, Rogue, stop it," Jean said.

"No, let them go on," Domino told her. "Some of us never have heard the whole story."

"If they go after each other, the repairs to the mansion are coming out of your pocket," Jean replied.

Domino laughed and both quarreling women turned to glare at her.

"You don't know?" Rogue asked.

Domino shrugged. "I've heard bits and pieces."

"He worked for Sinister."

Domino raised an eyebrow.

"Imagine that."

"That ain't bad enough for ya? He led the Marauders into the Morlock Tunnels. The whole massacre was his fault," Rogue said bitterly.

"You're saying Sabretooth and the rest of them wouldn't have been there without Gambit?"

"He recruited them! He admitted it!" Rogue was growing shrill.

"No one else could have done that job, is that it?" Domino was not impressed with Rogue. She could name a dozen mercs and assassins who could have recruited a crew of killers for any sort of wet work and not one of them would have lost an hour's sleep over it. Considering who her foster mother was, Rogue could have done it herself, and might have if she hadn't already turned to the X-Men to help her deal with stealing Carol Danvers powers and personality. "How terrible of him that he made you fall in love with him and turned about to have a less than pristine past."

Rogue glared at her and Storm, who usually found Domino barely tolerable, gave her a friendly nod.

"Hah, well, I'm over him now."

Everyone helped themselves to more drinks and snacks.

"So, like, you haven't answered the big question," Jubilee persisted. "When did you and how was it?"
Rogue brushed her white forelock back and said quickly, "Back when he was working for New Son and had his powers jacked high and when the High Evolutionary turned everyone's powers off. And I touched Belladonna one time and got her memories of their first time." Her lips quirked. "I gotta say, on a scale of one to ten, in bed, Remy's a ten, maybe even an eleven. Just the rest of the time he's a snake slithering bastard."

"Like you've got a lot of experience to compare him with," Lorna said.

Rogue grimaced. "You all act like I was a virgin or something."

"You weren't?" Emma said.

"Oh, please. The Savage Land, Magnus, you think I didn't jump at the chance? And there was poor Joe and Piotr later."

"It's just you're always whining about not being able to control your powers or touch anyone." Emma sniffed disdainfully. She'd mastered her own powers by herself. "Though you do dress like a slut."

"Especially those Daisy Dukes she used to tease Gambit with," Jubilee piped up.

"I do not," Rogue drawled, Mississippi accent thick as mud. "You dress like a cross between a dominatrix and a Playboy Bunny, Emma."

Emma just laughed. "So?"

"You really like showing that much skin or are you just distracting the boys?"

"Both. Ask Elizabeth."

Betsy smiled slowly.

"Bodies are just tools, Rogue."

"I suppose that explains the old buttflloss costume."

"Excuse me, Madame Storm, but haven't you sported a few questionable outfits?"

"Ladies, ladies," Jean tried to pacify them.

"No one's forgotten that mask and miniskirt thing you used to wear, Jean," Betsy responded.

Jean shrugged. "I was a teenager. Besides it was still way better than that shower cap thing Charles designed for all of us to wear originally."

"Goddess, those costumes were awful," Storm agreed. "Charles should never be allowed to design anything but machinery."

"Skintight blue with big yellow 'shoot me here' Xs on the chest spandex," Cecelia cackled. "Geeks. How did he get those boys to wear those horrid things? They looked like great big yellow man-panties."
Jean shrieked and fell over on the couch laughing. "Oh, God, God, please say that to Logan. Please."

"Hey, maybe Chuck really had an endorsement deal going with Depends."

They were all laughing now. Jean clutched at her ribs. It didn't help when Jubilee said, "$I always thought that's what they were. You know, for those times when you're facing off against old Poccy Lips or Galactus or an armada of War Skrulls and you just don't have time to change your pants?"

"Eeeeee!"

"Please, no more, Jubilee," Lorna gasped. "$I'm never going to be able to look at Wolverine or Cyclops the same way again."

"I'm surprised you haven't burnt all the pictures from that era," Domino said.

"I've tried. So have Scott and Warren. The Professor has negatives somewhere."

"Well, I don't think any of ya look worse than Jubilee did in that awful yellow jacket of hers," Paige said.

Jubilee, clad in a red tank top and blue jeans, crunched a potato chip and shrugged. These days she wore a black uniform with dark blue stripes running down the arms and torso and legs. Black Team's gear and uniforms and armor were all geared for covert ops, including chameleon tuned image-inducers woven into the Shi'ar fabrics that blended them into any background.

When she'd swallowed, she admitted, "$Pink and yellow and blue was pretty bad. In my defense, I was twelve and my fashion sense had been formed out of what I could shoplift. But it was a bad fashion statement."


"Yet, amazingly, I still looked good."

"You have been hanging with Gambit too much," Rogue laughed. "$That sounded just like him. Throw him in the lake and he'd tell you he'd just been meaning to take a swim and cool off."

Storm smiled. That was true enough.

"Gambit used to wear pink—"

"Fuchsia!" Storm, Betsy, Jean and Rogue chorused and fell over laughing again.

Domino looked at them and shook her head. She poured herself another vodka and met Emma's equally amused gaze.

"Lightweights."

"Oooh, look, Christian's singing with Satine," Lorna pointed out.

Jubilee scrambled around and found the remote, switching off the stereo and turning off the TV.
"That's so romantic," Rogue said dreamily. "He loved her even after she died."

"Oh, for the love of God," Domino muttered.

"You'd know about that wouldn't you, Jean?" Siryn said.

Domino slapped the back of her head.

Jean just smiled and sighed, shaking her head, long red hair falling forward, loose and heavy over her faded Xavier's sweatshirt. Storm raised a pale eyebrow but said nothing. Domino had been den mother–Goddess help her–to X-Force for long enough to have the privilege. Siryn didn't seem to resent it anyway.

Jubilee wouldn't be deterred.

"So, we have confirmation that Remy's heterosexual and good. Let's talk about the rest of the guys."

Tabitha raised her hand and waved it. "I can give you all a report on Sam and 'Berto and Dom's got the goods on Cable."

"I'm not going to get up and gag you, Tabitha," Domino drawled. She lifted her leg and pulled a small gun out of her boot top. "I'll just shoot you."

"You wouldn't," Paige said.

"Sure'n she would," Siryn said. "There's even a doctor here."

"That's right," Domino said.

Cecelia waved her hands back and forth. "I am officially off duty. Any blood spilled will be Hank's problem tonight."

"Do we actually know about all of the guys, as Jubilee put it?" Monet speculated. She seemed undisturbed by Domino's gun waving.

Betsy looked around the room at the gathered women. "Hmn. Possibly." She unfolded herself from the window seat and poured the last of the wine into her glass.

"So, spill it, Betts," Rogue said. "I did."

Betsy shrugged gracefully. "Warren is talented but arrogant. A solid seven using Rogue's rather tasteless standard–unless you're flying."

"He really does do it in the air?" Jubilee goggled. Her eyes glazed as she tried to imagine the details.

"Rather like an eagle. It's… exhilarating."

"I always thought those wings were sexy," Dani commented.

"Oh, God," Rogue choked. "What if he gets carried away?"
"Apparently flying is fairly autonomic for him."

"So, if it was good, why'd you two break up?"

Betsy sipped her wine before answering. "I dislike being treated like an accessory, something pretty to walk into a room on his arm and be shown off. You can't imagine how many business dinners Warren took me to where I was expected to remain silent and telepathically pick his associates and rivals' brains."

Jean frowned at that. "Warren expected you to do that? That's totally against everything the Professor has taught us about telepathic ethics."

Emma widened her eyes dramatically. "I have been such a bad, bad girl."

"We all knew that, Frosty," Jubilee snickered.

"I found it more insulting that he never once wanted to hear my opinions."

"So you moved on to Neal," Paige said.

"No, Paige," Betsy corrected her, "I broke up with Warren. My relationship with Neal came later."

"And how is Neal?" Emma asked.

"Lovely, sweet, and devoted," Betsy replied.

"In bed."

"As I said."

"Come on, Betts," Jubilee whined. "We want details."

"I will only say that he comes from the same country as the Kama Sutra."

"Who's next on the chopping block?" Rogue asked looking around. "Jean? How is Scott?"

"Exactly like Betsy's description of Neal, only he doesn't need the Kama Sutra, " Jean replied promptly.

Domino laughed in delight. The others joined in. They hadn't expected Jean to be even that forthcoming, not because she was a prude, but out of respect for her husband's natural reticence.

"And moving on," Jubilee said, holding up a finger that wavered from woman to woman, "we come to," the finger hesitated then steadied, "Lorna I'm not really dumb enough to marry a Summers' Dane. How does little brother compare, Ms. Dane?"

Lorna snorted rum and coke, choked and cursed.

"Damn, Jubilee," Paige said.

When she'd recovered, Lorna glared at Jubilee. "How did you know?"
"Know what?" Jean asked.

"Check out her hands," Jubilee said.

Reluctantly, Lorna held up her hand, displaying the pale thin band where she'd recently removed her engagement ring.

"I'm sorry, Lorna," Jean said. "But congratulations, you and Alex must be shielding really well. No one had a clue you were having problems."

"Again," muttered Lorna. She shrugged and slumped deeper into her end of the couch, dabbing at the spots on her rust-colored sweater. "Shit. Alex is such an asshole. He needs to stop trying to be Scott. So, it all blew up on the flight back from today's mission. I ended up offering to magnetically shove the ring up his ass along with his head."

"Oooh, nice," Domino commented.

"Yeah, well, your demented other half was there too, muttering in Askani. Men with metal arms should not piss off women with magnetic powers. How the hell do you stand that enormous ego?"

"I usually ignore him."

"Good. That's what I did. You know what you were saying earlier, Betsy, about wishing Warren would just ask for your opinion? That's Alex's problem. He is so busy being White Team leader, he forgets I've been doing this as long as he has. Today he and Cable spent forty-five fucking minutes trying to figure out how to do a job with teke and plasma that I did in five with my powers. And he was pissed at me for doing it." Lorna picked up the last of her rum and coke and swallowed it. "Cable too and, Dom, he is really hard to ignore."

"True. When he really ticks me off I usually shoot him."

"You know, I believe that," Dani said.

"He throws up a TK shield, but he gets the idea I'm through putting up with his shit and shuts up. Usually, his brain kicks in about then."

"Well, Lorna, now's the time to tell us about dear Havok," Emma remarked in the quiet that followed. "Tell us he's small, he's boring, he's fast. Run him down to the ground."

"Well, he's--"

"Knock-knock, frauleins, " Nightcrawler caroled, ducking his blue face around the doorway.

"Kurt, you're taking your furry blue life in your three fingered hands, coming in here tonight," Rogue told him.

Two more heads peeked around.

"There were great gales of mirth and merriment echoing down the halls, thus we thought it expedient to inquire of you the basis of this laughterious lightheartedness," Beast said. He was upside down, clinging to the doorjamb. The position threatened to send his delicate gold-rimmed glasses tumbling
off his face.

"Hah," said Bobby. "The truth is the shrieks and giggling have everyone else in the house paranoid."

"Perhaps with good reason, Robert," Beast said, looking around the women sprawled on the furniture and the floor, along with the empty bottles and boxes of chocolate. "I sense we may have stumbled upon a secret gathering of Maenad-like excesses."

"Remember what happened to the poor saps that got in the Maenads' way, Hank?" Jubilee warned.

"Be still my heart," Emma exclaimed, "you actually remembered something from school, Jubilee."

"Clue me in?" Bobby asked.

"I believe they were torn limb from limb, mein freund, " Kurt declared. His yellow eyes widened. " Auf Wiedersehen! " He teleported away with a sharp *bamf* leaving behind his typical stink of sulfur.

"Yikes," Bobby yelped. His head disappeared.

Beast gazed at the women serenely. "You wouldn't harm such a bodaciously brazen bouncing and brilliant blue beast such as myself, would you, dear ladies?"

"Depends on hour fast you can run," Jean told him, green eyes twinkling.

"Then, as my cowardly compatriots have already decamped, I bid you adieu," he called, flipping down to his feet and leaving them.

"Now where were we?" Emma said wickedly. "Oh, yes, Alex and his attributes… or lack there of. Tell me, dear, did you ever introduce him to anything beyond the missionary position?"

The wild hoots of laughter and increasingly imaginative insults echoed down the mansion's halls.

The War Room was geared to hold up to three different field teams at once and sometimes saw four. Any larger gathering and they configured the Danger Room into a meeting hall. Banks of monitors tuned to everything from cable news to pirated surveillance satellite feeds and displays from Beast's lab, the mansion security system, and a rugby match being played in New Delhi. A balcony projected along three sides of the room, equipped with operator stations. The main level held a massive black conference table with a holodisplay in the center.

Recessed lights lit built in workstations at each place at the table. Except for the non-stop flicker of bluish monitor light, the room remained ominously dark, filled with shadows, cold to the eye and the skin. Black metal and stainless steel dominated, while the shadows clung to curves and angles never designed by human minds where Shi'ar tech mated with cutting edge equipment scavenged from the far ends of the earth or custom designed by the likes of Forge, McCoy, Richards and a round handful of others, including Magneto himself.

The room almost echoed late at night. The eight men gathered there had taken places spaced around
the table that left them all isolated.

Banshee kept an eye on a monitor high in the bank behind Cable and Sam, desultorily watching a rerun of T2. "D'ye think they'll make it back alive?"

"Not if them women get hold of 'em," Gambit said moodily.

He'd propped his old hightops on the conference table and tipped his chair back so precariously everyone was waiting for it to go over. Instead of a cigarette, he had a pen in his hand, absently spinning and walking it through his fingers. The restless fidgeting was typical of his energy mutation, constant movement necessary to burn off power build up, even three floors beneath the ground, because unlike Havok and Cyclops, he didn't convert from solar radiation. He was nocturnal by nature and inclination.

Wolverine grunted and nodded. "Damn hen parties can be dangerous."

Cable snorted.

"Logan's right," Havok said. "Lorna's probably telling them I'm scum or something right now."

"What did you do this time, Alex?" Scott asked.

"I? I didn't do a damn thing. She's the one that went off half-cocked, then threw a hissy fit when I tried to explain why she should have waited for us to put together a plan."

"Mistake, mon ami, big mistake."

"Anyway, she gave me my walking papers."

"My sympathies," Forge said.

"Feh," Gambit muttered.

Banshee cocking his head to watch one of the stunt sequences on the monitor caught his attention. He lifted his head and watched too. Linda Hamilton picked the locks of her restraints with a paperclip.

"Should have never made that third movie," he said.

"Why's that, Cajun?" Wolverine asked.

They were waiting for Kurt, Hank and Bobby to return, theoretically with the pizzas they'd ordered half an hour ago.

Gambit nodded toward the screen. "'S like that Askani saying Cable always quotin'."

Cable's left eye flared brighter and he looked interested. "'What is, is'?"

"Mais yeah, that one. Figure wit' all the time travelin' and dimensions all of us done, there's only one way to hang on, and that's like the woman in the movie says. 'No fate but what you make.'"

"Sounds Askani," Cable admitted, looking at the screen with new respect.
"T3 just fuck that all up, make it seem like no matter what anyone do, there only one way the future goin' to go."

"Flonq that."

"Sonova - I hate agreeing Cable," Wolverine griped.

"Thanks, Gambit, you just ruined that movie for me forever," Scott added.

"Live to serve, me."

Gambit flipped the pen into the air and caught it blindly. The next time it went into the air it glowed pink only to go dark as he caught and discharged it in the next instant.

"Would you cease and desist, Gambit?" Beast said, entering the War Room with six pizza boxes piled on each other. Behind him Nightcrawler and Iceman carried a case of beer and a box of assorted sodas.

"It's like being in the room with a twelve year that juggles hand grenades," Scott muttered.

"Don't you love being boss of bosses?" Alex remarked.

"Herding cats wearing a blindfold would be easier."

"Meow, meow," Gambit said immediately, long mouth creasing into a self-satisfied smile.

"So are we going to talk about what the Pentagon has planned for all of us?" Sam asked.

Beast set the pizza boxes down. One immediately floated across the wide table to Cable as he used his TK to take possession of his first.

"Swine," Beast said.

"Henri." Gambit said, a low warning in his voice, eyes sparking. "That better not be my pepper and andouille wit' mushrooms Summers just snatched."

"Indeed not, my Cajun compadre." Beast sorted out a box and frisbeed it toward Gambit with a chortle. "Here it is."

Gambit vaulted out his chair to catch it, cursing in mixture of Creole and Joual that he'd picked up with frightful glee from Northstar. The two men had finally bonded over imaginative obscenities, glorying in their ability to insult Cyclops in more languages than he knew. The chair fell over backwards with a clatter.

Gambit checked the pizza, glared at Beast again and righted his chair.

"You do that to mine and I'm going to shave ya bald, McCoy," Wolverine told him. Snikt went one set of claws in demonstration.

Scott watched as the rest of the pizzas were sorted and distributed on flimsy paper plates and accepted a beer gratefully. The teasing and threats of bodily harm were always the same and let them
distract themselves from darker matters.

"What did I do to deserve this?" he muttered to himself as Bobby froze the last slice of pepperoni perfection solid when Alex wrested it away from him.

"You do not appreciate us," Kurt said mournfully. He was unsuccessfully trying to untangle a string of melted cheese out of his deep indigo fur. The cheese threatened to perform an impromptu wax job. "Schiesse."

Cable had finished his and casually wafted all the empty boxes and paper plates to the garbage can placed conveniently by the War Room door. This wasn't the first meal the X-Men had consumed there.

Scott stood and flattened his palms against the tabletop, leaning forward. Amazingly fast, the ten men in the room bent their attention toward him, falling silent and expectant.

"We're all here to talk about what Forge decoded off the hard drive copy Black Team brought back from the Pentagon," he stated.

"Rogue and Storm should be here if this a meeting of team leaders," Sam said.

"Ya want to go get either of 'em, kid?" Wolverine asked.

Sam gave him a dirty look. "Just because I come from Kentucky don't mean I just rolled off the turnip truck. I got sisters."

Chuckles were the response to that declaration.

"We aren't making any decisions tonight," Scott said. "The Professor has called a meeting for tomorrow afternoon. I thought it might be wise to familiarize ourselves with what he wants to talk about though, since for once we are all here. Banshee can brief Storm in on what we're going to talk about."

"Ah, how perspicacious of you, Fearless Leader," Beast commented.

"Hank -"

"This is serious. We all know. Allow us our moments of foolishness, Scott," Beast said. "They make this life bearable."

"Rogue hasn't got a deputy here," Alex pointed out.

"I'll take care of it," Wolverine offered. He raised an eyebrow at Gambit. "'Less you want to, Gumbo."

"She don' listen to this Cajun, y' know that."

"What was on the hard drive?" Bobby asked. Not technically a team leader any more than Wolverine and Cable or Domino were, but he'd run things from time to time since O:ZT and had been around from the beginning. Nightcrawler and Banshee weren't currently heading a field teams either, but they had and might need to again.
"Bad shit," Gambit said and Scott had to agree.

"Operation: Clean Sweep, we've already begun receiving reports on. It started on the sixth," he told them.

Sam looked at the read-out on his table monitor. His still youthful face set. "They're rounding up everyone that registered." He looked up. "Do we know what they're doing with these folks?"

"It can't be good," Alex remarked.

"News flash, Alex, no one has to break in to the Pentagon to find out good things," Bobby said.

Alex rolled his eyes.

"They're arresting them for being mutants, that's what it amounts to," Forge said. The cybernetic eye he'd designed for himself after the raid on Fall's Edge flashed. He'd decrypted and copied the contents to all the field leaders at the same time he sent the contents to the Professor. The possibility that Professor Xavier might censor anything didn't exist.

Professor X could be secretive sometimes. Always with the stated intention of protecting his students. Those students weren't children anymore and preferred making their own decisions based on all the facts. Scott had quietly asked Forge to make sure they got all the data. Another reason he'd rounded up the X-Men leaders and got them in one place to talk. He wanted—he hoped—to forestall the divisions that were festering just under the surface before the Professor faced them all with the latest news.

Everyone would want do something. Scott felt the same way. But he feared that the Professor would council patience and considered responses. Patience and consideration had their place, but even the smartest of the X-Men were hotheaded when it came to seeing something wrong and not immediately trying to stop it.

"Yes," he agreed with Forge, "that is what it amounts to, no matter what spin they're putting on it. It's all going on under the umbrella of the new Federal Bureau of Security.

Cable tapped his monitor. "This is what disturbs me most. Operation Midden."

The others scrolled through their reports until they found the pertinent reports.

Banshee cursed softly in Gaelic as he read. Once his voice rose, threatening to pierce eardrums with the sonic scream he used as a weapon.

"Sean!" Scott yelled. The painful sound cut off.

"Sorry, Scott."

"Watch it, Cassidy," Wolverine snapped.

"Sorry."

"Containment facilities," Gambit muttered. His fine brows were drawn together in a dark scowl. "Nice words for something that ain't so nice, neh?"
"Sonovabitch!" Wolverine exclaimed. "Those bastards are setting up fucking concentration camps."

"According to this report, they already have," Forge said.

"Motherless flonqing bastards," Cable muttered. He coughed painfully hard suddenly, bracing himself against the table until he'd recovered.

"Nasty cough, Nate," Wolverine observed with the superiority of those whose healing factor meant they never got sick. Or even suffered from the beatings their sick comrades wished to heap on them.

Cable hacked through another spasm of coughs.

"Serves you right for hogging that whole Chicago-style," Bobby said unsympathetically. "You're probably choking on it."

Cable sent, ~Flonq you, Drake.~

~You are so not my type. Besides, I changed your diapers.~

~growl~

"Are you okay?" Scott asked.

Cable nodded and grabbed his beer, swallowing twice to clean out his throat.

Concern between Nathan and Scott always turned awkward. The paradoxes of time travel had resulted in a son who was older than his father. Throw in the abandonment issues of sending a child away—even to save his life—the mess with Cable's mother Maddie Pryor turning out to be Sinister's clone of Jean, her transformation into the Goblyn Queen and attempt to sacrifice baby Nathan to merge a Hell dimension with Earth's and all their philosophical differences and it got worse. Much worse. There were reasons the X-Men joked about the Summers family. Despite it all, Scott and Nathan did care for each other. They were just abysmal at displaying it.

"Oath, I'm fine," Cable replied hoarsely. "It's just something I picked up. Can't seem to flonqing shake it."

"Come down to the med lab after this and I'll give you something for the cough," Beast told him. He considered Cable for a moment. "One of the mutants Red Team picked up in San Diego had a similar cough. You were with them for the mission, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Hmn. Probably why it's so persistent. The strain you've picked up is already adapted for a mutant physiology. Was the mutant in question another psi?"

"Beta teke."

"Back to the damned Mucons," Alex said. "What are we going to do about them? It really sounds like Wolverine's right. They are concentration camps. The government has spent billions building them and keeping them secret."

"What do ya mean what're we going to do?" Sam snapped. "We're going to blow 'em up, get all of
them people out. You're talking like there's some question!"

"I think--" cough, "--Alex is more familiar with the way Professor Xavier runs the X-Men than you are Sam," Cable said.

"He means your X-Force roots are showing, Sammy," Bobby added. "When in doubt, blow things up."

"Not that bad an idea," Gambit said. He sat up and spoke seriously, the accent almost disappearing. "The problem is where do the people that've already been sent there go afterwards? You read all of these reports, you might notice BuSec has been authorized to and has confiscated the assets of any mutant arrested or detained. Businesses, bank accounts, even their homes, that's all gone, Sam."

Scott nodded. "This is complicated. We've been running missions to stop the NMLF and the worst radicals of Humans First and the FOH when they've targeted mutant enclaves for the last four months, since merging our groups. We don't have the resources to care for people in the numbers that these Mucons are already holding."

Forge ran a calculation. "According to their own plans, they intended to pick up at least fifty thousand people the first night of Operation: Clean Sweep."

"A thousand people in every state of the union," Beast said.

"A drop in the bucket out of the population of the United States or even the fraction of that population composed of mutants," Forge went on. He held up the finger of his cybernetic hand. Between that and his leg and now his eye, the cyborged mutant was nearly more mechanical than organic, but none of it was as much a part of him as the techno-organic virus that composed Cable's arm. "But, they've been continuing that schedule since the sixth."

"Two hundred fifty thousand people…?"

Forge clenched his fist. "According to BuSec records, slightly less than half a million people registered, which we know is far from the total mutant population in the US, Bobby."

"Shit."

"So, you're suggesting… what, Forge?" Cable said in a hard, low voice. "We just ignore this information? Maybe these poor saps are on their own, because hey, they were stupid enough to obey the law and register as mutants? Survival of the fittest and they've proved they aren't fit?"

"Far be it for any of us to criticize you, Nathan, but I personally take exception to being compared to En Sabah Nur," Beast remarked angrily. "Your methods bear a greater resemblance to Apocalypse's than ours ever have."

"You forget, McCoy. Apocalypse won in my time. Clan Chosen fell. The Askani were wiped out. That's why I had to return to this here/now from the there/then to stop him before he could rise to power."

"Stop it," Scott snapped. "Enough."

"We're not accomplishing anything," Cable dismissed. He sat back and crossed his arms.
Scott rubbed his forehead, cursing the visor he could never do without, wishing he could just rub his eyes for once. If they broke the prisoners out of a containment facility, where could they take them? How could they get them there, in the numbers they were talking about? His head throbbed.

"Beast," Gambit said, "you read this part, about Bioagent LB49873028? Any idea what that is?"

"I hadn't got that far, Remy. I shall peruse it in depth, of course."

"'Cause this says it's already been released in three population centers. Houston and Pittsburgh and Detroit."

"Are you thinking it may be a Legacy derivative?"

"No one in this here/now has the skill to manipulate Legacy. Stryfe made sure of that," Cable stated.

"Oh, yeah?" Bobby said. "He thought he made sure no one could cure it either and Hank did."

"Robert - "

Cable's eyes narrowed. "No, he made sure that the only way to synthesize a cure would be at the cost of at least one mutant's life. He wanted to make us murderers."

"Then he succeeded with you, didn't he?" Alex said scornfully.

"I already was. There are very few people in this room that can claim otherwise," Cable replied evenly. Unspoken but clear to everyone, he conveyed, particularly you, Havok.

Beast scrubbed at his face, combing massive, claw-tipped hands through his mane of blue fur. His ears pinned back, much like the feline he increasingly resembled as a secondary mutation had come into play.

"Stryfe ain't a problem no more," Wolverine said. "Neither's Legacy thanks to Piotr. Whatever blood we've spilt, no one made Piotr do what he did. You sure hell didn't, Hank."

Gambit spoke softly, his voice smoky and edged with something sharp and cold. The shadows limned his foxy, angular face into a devil's mask lit by the glow of his eyes. "Take it from someone that 'as done murder, that was there that night, Henrí, that you ain' no murderer. Ain' got that in you that I can read, mais non. The Russian'd been lookin' for the way out for a long time, I think."

Beast met his gaze and inclined his head. Thank you, my friend.

A brush of that empathy he'd kept hidden for so long, recognized now.

~warmth/acceptance/approval/liking~

"I suspect we are wise to investigate anything the present political administration would approve for exposure to the population at large, considering the context of the information cache this was extracted from," Beast stated.

"Could we get that many people up to Canada, if we had to?" Sam asked. He'd obviously still been mulling over the dilemma of the containment facilities and people being sent there.
"Canadians wouldn't like it," Wolverine said. "Might send in Alpha Flight to stop us if we did and I still don't see how we'd do it. How many planes you figure it would take? Or trains or trucks? No matter what we did, they'd be sitting ducks and us with them."

"Then we need more firepower and we hit the bastards where it hurts, keep them so busy they can't be bothered trying to stop those folks getting away. 'Cause I ain't standing around ignoring what's happening to those people."

Cable nodded at Sam.

"Where do you suggest we get more firepower, Samuel?" Beast asked.

"Magneto."

It should have been unthinkable.

"Magneto," Scott repeated. Not, 'Are you out of your mind?'. None of the faces at the table were open. Banshee opened his mouth as though to speak, only to shake his head and remain silent. Forge looked thoughtful. Alex's face was a careful blank.

Bobby spoke, surprising Scott.

"It's what he always predicted, you know?"

"Unfortunately, Robert," Beast conceded.

"New Genosha has open immigration for mutants," Bobby went on. "The Canadian government might not object so much if the refugees were only passing through."

"Could be," Wolverine agreed.

Cable nodded.

"The Professor will never agree."

"Chuck's opinions ain't what we're talkin' about here, Cyke," Wolverine growled. "I'm the last man to give Mags the time of day, but Sam could probably talk him into taking these people. It's the people we're talkin' about that're important here."

Scott shoved his hand through his hair in frustration over the entire situation.

"I know, damn it."

He looked at Wolverine, stoic as stone, Gambit wearing his best poker face, Iceman uneasy but determined and Nightcrawler, who managed to look neutral while his tail flipped back and forth nervously.

"You all accept allying with Magneto?"

Careful looks were exchanged.

Gambit shrugged and answered in the heavy silence.
"Worked for worse, me. Oui. Got no objections."

His garnet eyes rested on Wolverine.

"M'sieu Serval?"

"Best of a bad bargain," Wolverine growled. "Wouldn't like it, but like don't mean shit. I'd do it."

Beast nodded. "My feelings are the same."

Scott asked Banshee, "Sean?"

"Aye."

"I think I know how Sam and Nathan feel," they nodded, "so… Kurt, Forge, Alex? What do you say?"

"Ja. To save people, I would ally with Magneto," Kurt said. "Remember that Kitty and I were at the school when he took over as headmaster. He has never been evil in my eyes, only misguided."

"Maybe not so misguided or we wouldn't be talking about this, would we?" Alex asked. "I agree with the elf. If working with Magneto is what it takes, I can do that."

Forge sighed. "I don't think so."

Scott raised his eyebrows. Well, well.

"I think the one thing we can take with us from this discussion is that we must investigate these facilities and determine whether they are what we believe them to be," Scott said.

"Wit' out letting anyone know we there or we lose the advantage of knowing what we got from these reports, neh?" Gambit said.

"LeBeau is right," Cable acknowledged. "Black Team is the natural choice to reconnoiter. I'd like to suggest Domino and Wolverine and I replace Marrow, however."

"Non. Sarah stays," Gambit drawled. "Got no objections to you or Lady Luck coming along, though. Wolverine, either."

"Fine," Scott said. "I'm sure the Professor will agree."

"And if these Mucons are full of mutants?" Sam asked.

"We'll decide then."

He didn't reiterate what they all must realize, that the Professor simply wouldn't agree to call on Magneto to attack a government installation.

The quiet looks being exchanged told Scott decisions were being made that the Professor would have no control over.
He wasn’t the most powerful telepath on the planet, despite the reputation that had grown up around him among the secret community of mutants who saw themselves as heroes and villains in the effort to shape their places in the world. He was powerful beyond most and had many more years of experience and skill to rely on. He wasn’t above feeding the rumor, either.

He had taught many of the telepaths who might have outstripped him, Jean Grey, among them.

Quite simply he had never taught them all he knew.

There were times he felt ashamed of that. He hadn’t deliberately crippled her, nothing so obvious as that. She could learn all that he knew. Given long enough, he thought she would. But he preferred matters as they were now.

He had enough trouble controlling the X-Men. There were so many of them now, all strong-minded individuals and even the non-psis shielded against intrusion or manipulation. It was exhausting nudging them back to the path he had chosen for them, often against their instincts.

He did it only for their own good, of course. Personally, he found using his telepathy in such a manner distasteful. It was a necessary evil he resorted to only for the Dream.

The Dream sustained him and through him all of the X-Men. Someday, they would live in a world that no longer feared and hated them. All of their sacrifices would be worthwhile then. They would understand all that Charles had done and approve.

It had to be that way. Magnus couldn't be right.

If he was…

If he was… then Charles had become one of the monsters he fought. The choices he'd made became unforgivable.

Thinking about such things threatened his own determination too much. The reports and operational data that Gambit had returned with could not be accurate. It was simply not acceptable.

Charles considered seriously planting the suggestion in his students' minds that Gambit had altered the data, but dismissed it. Too much chance of outside reality contradicting the implanted thoughts, creating a paradox that would alert them to telepathic tampering. Gambit wouldn't remain with the X-Men through another round of blame and accusations. They couldn't really afford to lose the thief and his skills, not while Storm refused to ply her old trade and Shadowcat had defected.

They were talking about it now, down in the War Room.

Charles slid his mind past the shields he had taught most of them to create, using the openings he had shaped in those shields that would always let him in.

They were filled with anger. Harsh determination and regret dominated their thoughts, the thoughts of soldiers. He roamed through the minds of the men in the War Room, avoiding only Cable—whose raw psi talent outstripped Jean's and whose Askani training was foreign to him—and Gambit. Quite simply, if he had not seen and heard the man through the eyes of the others, Charles wouldn't have known he was in the War Room. On the Astral Plane, Gambit was a shimmer in the corner of the
eye, invisible to a casual telepathic scan. Any probe that did find him found shields around his mind like dense, endless black walls, seamless and unwelcoming. Gambit allowed no one in his mind beyond the most superficial of links and would sense any probe immediately.

They were united in the decision to search for the truth of the mutant containment facilities. Charles grimaced and pressed his hands to his temples. It would tax him to rearrange their natural impulses and prove fruitless, he feared. When he spoke to the gathered X-Men teams tomorrow, many of those present would react even more strongly than these men had.

He would have to dissuade them from any rash actions. The scouting mission, that would be tolerated, but anything more would not be permissible. To turn to Magnus for aid, to admit that matters had come to such a state after so much work, no, he could not allow that.

Not at all.

Hammer Bay
The Citadel

Pete almost threw a fit over Voght teleporting them to the Citadel. All of Voght's assurances that Kitty and the unborn child would be unharmed were ignored. He didn't quit protesting until Kitty stepped up to Voght and told him, "We're going. Come along or not."

"Pryde, yer gonna be the death of me," he muttered.

Voght raised her eyebrows, Kitty nodded, and the three of them dissolved into mist.

They resolved back into flesh in the heart of the Citadel, amidst a gathering of Magneto's most trusted advisors: Scanner, Frenzy, Renee Majcomb, Mystique, Milan, Katu, Verity, Haze, Duslov and Pirouette. Voght materialized Pete and Kitty with her in the middle of the room.

Kitty thought seriously about puking. Voght's teleportals were never pleasant, but she felt particularly nauseous this time. Pete's hands on her shoulders and the warmth of his body behind her steadied her through it.

When she had control, she looked up and found Magnus' hot blue eyes locked on her. Despite the anger that seethed off him visibly in a shimmer of blue-green energy, concern marked his expression.

"Katherine?"

"I'm okay," she said.

"She's not okay and I don't want her being 'ported hither and yon like a bloody ping pong ball," Pete snapped.

"I'm fine," Kitty insisted, straightening and shrugging his hands away.

"She's pregnant," Voght told them.
"Could yer flap yer bleedin' mouth a little wider," Pete grumbled.

Voght's mouth ticked up in an almost smile. "I could try."

"Kitty!" Renee exclaimed, looking concerned. Research scientist, colleague of Moira MacTaggert and Henry McCoy, native Genoshan, and veteran of a human/mutate/mutant insurgent group during the long civil war, before all that she had been a physician. The news dropped so carelessly into the tense meeting room obviously brought that to the fore.

~So that's what had you up so early,~ Scanner commented. ~Sorry.~

Voght crossed her arms and said coolly, "Was it a secret? The way you were carrying on, I imagine the entire apartment building heard."

"Well, I just flippin' found out when you popped in, didn't I?"

Magnus studied Kitty's face.

"Everything is well with you, Katherine? You are pleased?" he asked her.

Kitty smiled at him. "This wasn't planned."

Magnus turned a gimlet eye on Pete.

"'Ere, don't look at me like that," Pete protested.

Kitty laughed and caught Pete's hand, drawing him up next to her. "But we're both happy."

"Then I am as well," Magnus said. Then he surprised her by patting Pete's shoulder before drawing her into a gentle embrace and kissing her forehead. "You remind me on this worst of mornings that there may yet be joy in all our lives, my dear."

Kitty tightened her hand on Pete's.

"What's happened?"

Milan spoke up. "I have been monitoring the information stream. Several days ago, the US government initiated a covert operation codenamed Clean Sweep. Their new BuSec has managed to muffle the news media. The Americans have no idea of what is really happening inside their country or the scope of it."

"If you think it sounds bad," Haze added, "you're right. Before I left the Marines, there were already rumors floating through the military that the Creed Administration had a plan that only began with COMRA. Clean Sweep would be the next step."

"What is Clean Sweep?" Kitty asked cautiously.

"All registered mutants are being 'detained' and relocated," Milan said.

An uneasy rustle of movement ran through the gathered cabinet, movement replacing stifled words. Their eyes moved as one to Magneto at the head of the conference table. It was Magneto the ruler of New Genosha, the most feared mutant on earth too, not Magnus the man.
"Over and over again, I have fought to forestall this," he whispered, the menace in his voice striking through them all. "I sought to make New Genosha a haven for mutants, but it is not enough."

"What will you do?" Pete asked steadily. "What do you want all of us to do? 'Cause I ain't for letting this go on, either."

Magneto inclined his head.

"Have you heard from the X-Men?" Kitty asked. "Do they know about this?"

"Those fools are the reason this is happening," Frenzy snarled. She pointed her finger at Kitty. "How many times have they fought Lord Magneto to save the likes of the government and people that are behind this now?"

"Cargill, enough," Magneto said. He shook his head. "I have no idea what the X-Men know. What they will do… nothing, not so long as Charles remains lost in his own delusion that mutants and humans can coexist without violent conflict."

"They aren't all blind," Pete remarked. He had a cigarette out and in his hand, but after a thoughtful look at Kitty, hadn't lit it. Instead, he played with it, rolling the cylinder between his fingers. A frown marked his unshaven face. "Logan won't just go along and I can't imagine Dom or Cable following the Prof's orders like little lambs. None of X-Force, really, those kids believe in hit first and hit hard, it's why Xavier had so many problems with them after Cable took over training them."

Kitty offered, "I have contact protocols, you know. When Pete and I came here, Remy made sure I had a back channel contact with him and Logan that the other X-Men don't know about."

'A good thief always knows the way out before they go in, Kit,' he'd murmured as he'd drilled her with names and numbers and pass codes. 'These people aren't Guild, but they're beholden to them, and they'll get you what you need if you go to them.'

Pete chuckled.

"Dom did the same with me. Worst case scenario, she said X-Force'd bust us both out of here if we needed." He grinned at Magneto. "No offense, but Dom hasn't had good experiences in Genosha."

"She won't have good experiences in the US if Clean Sweep goes on," Haze said. He slapped his hand against the tabletop. "We don't have the troops or the global standing to go toe to toe with the States. We don't have the kind of proof it takes to get the fucking UN to stand up to them either. Creed and his people have been smart about this, they've let the radicals keep feeding the public's fears and build up their hate, while the administration's talked moderately in public. No one's going to believe the US has set out to commit genocide until they've had the proof shoved in their faces like a handful of shit."

"How many countries will be willing to do anything even if they are confronted with incontrovertible proof?" Renee asked bitterly. "Did anyone do anything when the truth about Genosha and the mutate bonding process was revealed? Other than cut off trade so that everything became worse here for everyone?"

"Milan, Katherine, please obtain whatever information and proofs you may," Magneto instructed. "Use whatever methods you wish, even whatever contacts you have outside New Genosha. You
too, Wisdom."

He stood up and walked to the window. Dawn was still a dim line of lighter gray along the eastern horizon. The lights were on again in Hammer Bay, though. No more fires burned in ravaged rubble. The country had finally begun to rebuild. A rapidly growing trickle of mutants had begun immigrating from around the world.

"I have a responsibility to this country and the people who have come here at my behest," Magneto said quietly. "I have a responsibility to all our people, to mutants all over this world too. I cannot stand by as so many did before. But I cannot simply indulge my rage and strike at the United States, leaving Genosha defenseless."

He tightened one hand into a fist and turned back to the room.

"But when we have a target, we will strike."

United States
Idaho

Wolverine loved this kind of country. The jagged edge of the Bitterroot Range knifing across the sky, the ice cold air rife with the scents of snow and game and evergreen, the freedom and emptiness of it. Soft pine needles gave under his feet and the earth beneath was wet and smelled like peat. He'd spotted the spoor of hares and lynx in the snow, followed the track of hunter and prey to where it ended in a tuft of fur and red spotted white. His feral nature felt at ease among the trees and rocks, the dark cold valleys and the sun touched heights.

It made the installation, built in the harshest isolated valley accessible by wheeled vehicle, even more of an abomination, a foul blot in the clean wilderness. The cruel wind howling down the rocky walls of the valley carried the stench of it.

The buildings were all dark cinderblock cubes. Each one fenced in with electrified razor wire and chain link. The gates and doors were watched by battlesuited guards. Snow dusted the roofs and grounds, scuffed and filthy along the walkways.

A sixteen foot high sheer wall circled the entire facility. Glass shards glinted on top of it. Two six foot deep ditches, each five feet wide, ran parallel to both sides of the wall, filled with foot high spikes and rolls of more razor wire. A swath of earth had been covered in bare concrete beyond that. A single set of heavily guarded gates permitted ingress or egress.

Beyond that were two more high chain link fences. Cybernetically enhanced Alsatians prowled between the two fences.

Watchtowers sat within the walled portion of the compound, each with clear firing zones on the bare concrete open space.

A square-sided black tower rose up highest from the center of the compound, topped with radar and satellite dishes and a single helicopter landing pad. Behind squatted a massive pyramidal structure sunk deep in the earth.
Silent as ghosts, Gambit, Domino, and Cable crawled up next to Wolverine where he crouched at the top of sheer cliff with a clear sight line into the valley. The rest of Black Team waited just inside the tree line. Wolverine's sensitive hearing picked up Rictor griping about getting pine tar in his hair and Shatterstar telling him he should have braided it as he had done his. Betsy told them both to shut up. Jubes and Marrow were quiet.

Gambit snaked closer to the edge and brought a pair of binoculars to his eyes. A soundless intake of air marked his only reaction.

Dom and Cable started their own examination.

"Looks like my old high school," Domino quipped.

"Didn't know you went to high school, Nina," Wolverine replied.

He felt her shrug.

"Do the fighting pits in Madripoor count?"

"Went to the school of hard knocks, neh, chere?" Gambit commented.

"I hear you passed your classes on the street in New Orleans."

"And the Velvet Ministry 'fore that."

"Are we done proving how tough we all are?" Cable hissed.

"Jus' makin' conversation, mon ami," Gambit said imperturbably. "You figure they built that thing to stop any rooftop insertions or they just got Egyptians on the brain like you?"

"Flonq you, LeBeau."

"Don't know. Domino, it be worth it?"

"Nah."

Wolverine snorted while Cable growled his displeasure.

"That's got to be where they have the prisoners," Gambit said.

Cable studied the pyramid through his own binoculars again. "Any clue how many levels it's got?"

"No way to judge from here," Domino answered. "Nate, can you scan for how many people are in there?"

"No, the entire thing is laced with power suppressor fields and psi-shields. If I punch through, it's going to set off all kinds of alarms."

"Damn it," she muttered. "We need to know more before we even think about going in."

"Seven levels, six below the ground," Gambit murmured in a distracted voice.
Wolverine twisted his head to the side and checked the Cajun. Gambit's eyes were unfocused; he was obviously concentrating on another sense. A light sweat broke out on his face.

"Neat trick," Cable said. "How do you know?"

"Spatial sense. Part of the kinetic charge." He hissed out a breath, sounding pained. "Can't charge living things so they feel different, hein? But I can sense them."

"How many are in there?"

"Can't tell, homme. Like trying to count the bees in a hive by touch." Gambit closed his eyes and bit his lip, then shook his head. A drop of blood slid from one nostril. "Non. Too many. Thousands."

"Thousands," Cable said flatly."

"Fits with the Clean Sweep schedule we got," Wolverine said. "Quit pushing, kid."

Gambit opened his eyes. The scarlet irises were a thin line around dilated pupils. He sniffed hard and wiped the drop of blood away carelessly. "Bad feelings coming off that place like stink, mon ami. That's all."

Cable grunted. "It looks like shit on the Astral Plane too."

"Do we go in?"

Domino scanned the fence line and the wall. "What do you bet there's a mine field?"

"Do we look like suckers, Dom?" Cable asked. He frowned fiercely. "It's like the Berlin Wall. Vehicle traps and a free fire killing zone. Stab their eyes."

"My team's good, Cable," Gambit said, "but we're geared to sneak and peek, not search and rescue. 'Star and Marrow are strictly close combat, same as Logan and Domino."

"Hey, I fire a mean gun."

"No doubt 'bout that," Gambit agreed.

"No, Nina," Wolverine added. He could see what Gambit was talking about. "He isn't dissing you. Just laying out what resources we've got with us. Pros and cons."

Cable nodded at that. "Go on."

"Rictor's Black Team's power house. You know what he can do," Gambit went on. "He could bring down a mountain on this place. But we got no way of getting the prisoners out, keeping them safe or getting them away. We need to have a plan before we start something here."

"What do you figure?" Cable said, deferring to Gambit as Team leader and more importantly, someone who knew what he was doing for the moment. He'd respected the thief's instincts and strategic mind since they'd all been taken captive in Genosha. Gambit was a survivor, something Cable appreciated. Ideals were well and good, but they didn't accomplish much if the people who held them were dead and buried.
"Finish scouting in close after nightfall. That's Wolverine's job. Then me and Lady Luck need to go in, no powers, and figure out exactly what sort of defenses this place has against attacks.

Gambit wriggled back from the cliff edge. Dom and Cable followed him. Wolverine trailed them after one last, hate-filled look at the mutant containment facility. The four of them used the cover of rocks and stunted pines to stay out of sight as they returned to the rest of the team.

"It's there, isn't it?" Rictor asked as they filtered into the shadowed clearing where the rest of Black Team waited.

Wolverine didn't see Marrow. A quick look around didn't find her either. It took a closer look and a long inhalation to catch her scent before he located the ex-Morlock. She was high in a scrawny pine, watching. The chameleon cloth of body armor and the gray-white of her bone spikes blended with the bark of the tree. Only the shock of pink-red hair showed up.

Gambit obviously knew where she was too. He didn't even look up, but said, "You can hear up there, petite?"

"Better'n you, Pretty," she rasped from her perch.

A shrug was his only response.

"Yes, it's there," Cable said.

Gambit sank down until he was sitting on his heels. A brush of his hand through the pine needles revealed dark earth. He swept it smooth and began sketching the layout of the installation.

"Cable," he said. "You want to give everybody a picture of what's down there?"

Cable didn't bother linking Wolverine since he'd been the forward observer.

"Done," he said a long minute later.

"Fekt," Shatterstar commented.

"What Shatty said," Jubilee added. "I mean, that place has some seriously bad mojo going."

"Mojo is there?" Shatterstar snapped, surging to his feet and drawing both swords. His silver eyes flashed. He looked ready to rush into the valley and take on anything and everyone he found there.

"Yikes, no," Jubilee exclaimed. "I meant mojo like magic, like bad voodoo vibes, 'Star. Not like giant sleazoid slugs that have enslaved your people in another dimension. Sooorrrry."

"Sit down, 'Star," Gambit said quietly.

Shatterstar sheathed his swords and sank back down, looking vaguely sheepish. Rictor patted his thigh and he began playing with the end of his coppery colored braid.

"Pay attention, kids," Gambit directed. "You're our back-up in this." He began explaining what they'd seen, what he'd sensed, and what while not visible probably existed, such as a mine field and motion sensors. "Wolverine is going to move in closer soon as the sun starts going down. Psylocke, I
want you to link to him, give us everything he gets. If there's trouble, I don't want to find out about it when Wolverine don't check in."

Psylocke nodded. "No problem. Logan and I have linked many times."

Wolverine grunted. He couldn't fault the Cajun's plan so far. Gambit was letting him do his thing without fettering him with someone else to watch out for the way Cyke would have. Betsy keeping tabs in his head wouldn't distract him the way worrying about Jubilee or one of the kids might have. It was a good use of the resources he had on hand.

"Soon as it's dark, Domino and I are going inside." Gambit lifted his head and stared at Cable. "Don't be using that psi-link you got. If they have any sort psi-sensors, you'll trip them."

"Got it," Cable said.

Gambit looked at him another moment and nodded.

"You're not going to tell me not to use it?" Domino asked.

"Non. You aren't the type to rely on anyone."

"Hmn. You know, Remy, you're smarter than you look."

"So what about the rest of us?"

"I want someone in the pilot's seat with the transport warmed up and ready to launch when we go in. The rest of you get to wait and come in hot if something goes wrong." Gambit exchanged a look with Domino. "That happens, then take the place down. Got a feeling none of us want to end up in there permanent."

Wolverine chuckled.

"Just a little understatement there, Gumbo."

"I could break out."

"Of course ya could."

"Jus' don't want have to," Gambit finished. "Master Thief don't want to get caught, non. Embarrassing. Bad for my reputation."

"Whatever ya say, Gumbo."

"So what do we do until dusk?" Jubilee asked.

"Take a nap," Gambit advised.

Jubilee glared at him. "You're as bad as Wolvie."

Gambit was unruffled. "Petite, I take that as a compliment, coming from you." He pulled out a deck of cards. "Poker, anyone?"
"I will take watch after Marrow," Shatterstar declared.

"You do that."

"Let her stay up there, 'Star," Rictor griped. "She likes it and we don't have to look at her."

From her perch in the tree, Marrow snarled quietly. A pine cone whistled down and thumped next to Rictor, who looked up and glared.

"Don't start shakin' that tree, Julio," Gambit said. "Don't use your powers at all until you need them. Understand?" A thread of steel, the voice of a commander, ran through his words. He never even looked up from the cards he'd begun shuffling. "And Sarah? Don't be throwing shit unless you want to be shoveling it in 'Ro's garden when we get back."

Hours later, as Wolverine prepared to descend into the valley, accompanied by Domino and Gambit, Psylocke approached them. Domino was double checking all of her guns and knives and nodded to the telepath but didn't speak. Cable had already slipped up to their observation post on the cliff's edge. He would watch the compound through his night vision binoculars until they were out again.

"No offense to Domino, but why didn't you chose me to go in with you?" Psylocke asked Gambit.

"Because you're my second in command, 'lizabeth. Ric and 'Star would listen Cable, because they used to be in X-Force and they're used to taking his orders, but Jubilee and Marrow are both hotheads. Something goes wrong, you got to keep them from acting without thinking."

Time had eased the tension between Gambit and Psylocke. They still didn't really like each other, but they'd always been able to work with each other. They got along these days. It had still surprised everyone but Wolverine when Gambit requested her as Black Team's telepath. It worked, though.

She nodded at his explanation. "All right. Logan? Do you want establish the link now? It's easier than at a distance."

"Yeah, let's do it, darlin'"

He felt the ~purple~ tickle of her signature psychic presence slide along his psi-shields. He willed them to open for her. Like butterfly wings, her thoughts met and touched his. The link formed smoothly, running along mental channels left by previous contact between them.

~Do you hear me?~

~Just fine, darlin'.~

He glanced at the other two going with him. Domino had pulled a thin, silky black balaclava over her head to conceal the pallor of her face. She pulled her ponytail through a hole in the back. He shook his head. Even Dom had her vanities; long hair on merc was just an indulgence. No wonder she'd never got after Shatterstar for his waist length mane. A set of red-lensed night vision goggles hung around her neck.

The Cajun had shrugged off his heavy parka and handed it Jubilee. Without it, the chameleon cloth of his uniform blurred into the same colors as his surroundings. Even looking straight at him, it was hard to focus. Like looking at something through a heat haze.
"Everybody ready, kids?"

"Always," Domino said.

Gambit pulled his balaclava on. He became virtually invisible except his eyes, the red and black startling even to Wolverine.

"After you, mon ami."

Westchester
Xavier's Institute for Higher Learning

"Sam, I applaud your concern for our fellow mutants, but I can only council patience," Xavier said. "These matters of law are being pursued through the courts. If the X-Men interfere—"

"Ya mean stop innocent people from being rounded up?" Sam interrupted contemptuously.

The War Room held every X-Man it could. They were crowded in, shoulder to shoulder, no one willing to leave the decisions to just their leaders. The final report brought by Black Team from Idaho had been seared into their minds. Cable and Psylocke had linked to everyone in the mansion over Xavier's protests and shown them exactly what they'd found: the containment facility and its surroundings. The processing house, where mutants were sterilized and tattooed, deprived finally not only of any mutant ability, citizenship, or humanity, but even of their names.

Gambit and Domino had hacked a computer in the administration offices and tapped into the security system inside the pyramid. They'd downloaded a disc with footage of the mutants inside. The mutants inside, pale, naked, hairless and collared, already numbered in the thousands. They lay on the bunk slabs or shuffled down the corridors to the feeding station to eat once a day.

Most disturbing had been their silence. The security surveillance didn't include sound, but Shatterstar had pointed out that none of the prisoners spoke. Their mouths never moved. Not even the children.

They had all reached the limits of their horror when they saw the children imprisoned with the same soulless efficiency as the adults.

"The results could be catastrophic for our cause," Xavier continued. "Our dream of co-existence depends on proving that mutants aren't a threat to homo sapiens."

"But we are," Rogue interjected from her place leaning against the railing of the balcony in the War Room. She wriggled her gloved fingers.

"That is the wrong attitude to take," Storm reproved.

Xavier nodded to her in gratitude. She'd taken a station just behind his hoverchair, one of her graceful hands resting on the back.

"We can't break the people in these Mucons out without inflicting and maybe taking some heavy casualties ourselves," Cyclops said. He flanked Xavier on the other side but didn't stand as close.
"We have no place to take them and no sufficient infrastructure to move them if we did."

Wolverine flexed his claws in and out. "So we do nothing?"

"Of course we do something. The evidence Gambit and Domino brought out must be brought to the attention of the proper authorities, perhaps the news media," Xavier replied promptly. He sounded calm and in control. His hands were folded on his lap.

"You've lost it, Chuck."

"Logan -"

"Sir, that just ain't enough," Sam said.

"The alternative is to ignite a war between human and mutant," Xavier snapped. "I refuse to do that. All that we have worked for these years would be lost, all my efforts wasted. That is not acceptable."

"I don't give a damn what ya find acceptable," Sam came back. He stood tall and strong, almost the antithesis of Xavier, at the far end of the conference table. Cable and Domino flanked him on one side. Members of X-Force who had integrated into the X-Men teams stood by them too.

Sam looked around the room, meeting each person's eyes once.

"What's not acceptable is doing nothing!"

A murmur rushed through the War Room. Heads nodded. Others looked uncertain, their gazes returning to Xavier. He was their compass north. If so, then Sam, blue-eyed, blond-haired, soft-spoken Sam from the Kentucky hills, epitomized the southern pole. Too many of them were ready to gravitate to him instead.

He said: "The war's already here, sir. The government has declared it."

"Sam, we can't descend to their level--"

A finger pointed at Xavier.

"You ain't Mahatma Gandhi. We tried it your way. Over and over. Show them we ain't out to hurt them, do it the peaceful way, stay within the law. Every time it's been thrown in our faces."

A dull silence spread through the room.

"Project Wideawake, Sentinels, Nimrod, OZT," Sam said, ticking them off. "None of them stopped because someone suddenly decided mutants were folks too! We stopped them. Just like we stopped all those mutants that thought humans were nothing but nature's slowpokes. We can do that, 'cause we're strong. 'Cause we stand together."

He addressed the gathered X-Men. "I think we all know what it's like to be out there all on our own, with no one to stand for you but your own self. It ain't no good and you got no chance when someone comes after you."

Nods of agreement greeted that declaration.
"Well, that's what all those other mutants that are being trucked off and locked up are facing."

"Sam -"

"I ain't done."

Xavier narrowed his eyes, but there was no chance he could silence or modify Sam's thoughts without someone in the crowd recognizing what he'd done. He could see the suspicion in the way Cable watched him over Sam's shoulder, left eye flaring bright with power. The other telepaths were watching him too, Betsy looking cynical and hard, Emma with chilly scorn, Jono playing with a cigarette but alert, Sage neutral as one of her computers and even Jean, ready to stop anything he did telepathically.

Sam took a deep breath.

"Someone's got to stand for those folks. All this time I thought that's what the X-Men did. I thought we were heroes, even if most folks didn't ever know the truth. We were protecting good people. That was the Dream. That someday no one would need protecting from anyone else, not mutant from human or human from mutant. But someday ain't today!"

He'd only wanted to protect them, Xavier thought. He'd taught them to fight, but he'd tried to instill a respect for the law and life within them. They held so much raw power in their hands. Even the best intentions could go astray if they didn't have limits placed on their actions. Magneto was the best example of that.

It was why he'd chosen Scott as his first student, because the boy had the right set of beliefs and neuroses to shape into a strong leader who still wouldn't waver from what Xavier taught him.

It was why he'd taken in Wolverine—to keep a leash on him. The man was too dangerous to let him be recruited by someone like Magneto. He'd never quite been able to control him, but a nudge here and an infatuation with Jean had kept him close until his own loyalties bound him to the group. Wolverine believed in honor and that would keep him from leaving his team-mates.

He knew he'd crippled their efforts too often by demanding that the X-Men always be reactive, but the dangers of a pro-active stance were too great. The potential for a mistake was just too large. So long as they were defending themselves, they retained a moral superiority. Without that, they became the terrorists the government named them.

"Have you finished now, Sam?" he asked.

Sam met his gaze without flinching.

"Almost, sir. I just got one last thing to say."

Xavier waited, projecting serenity.

"Your way is only going to buy us all an early grave."

Behind him, Storm gasped. Xavier squeezed his eyes shut briefly.

"Samuel, I will not allow the X-Men to be associated with an armed—in this case superpowered—rebellion against a duly constituted government. If that is your intention, then the X-Men will be
forced to restrain you."

"You do what you think you got to do, sir. I would never presume to tell you different," Sam declared.

"Magneto's way is wrong," Xavier stated.

Wolverine stiffened and Gambit looked at him derisively. Cable sneered before beginning to cough. He realized they'd guessed he'd eavesdropped mentally on the War Room discussion that had preceded the mission to Idaho. No one spoke, but Xavier recognized that he'd diminished himself in their eyes.

"I gotta ask, Chuck. Who do ya think is going to help ya throw Sam here in jail for going his own way?"

"I left Alpha Flight and came to the X-Men because I was sick of acting as a government flunky," Northstar startled everyone by speaking. "I have no obligation to the American government and only disgust for the people in power here. I believe Sam is right though: some things are not to acceptable. To stand by, to do nothing, is to assume responsibility for what happens. This I will not do."

He walked through the crowd of X-Men and took a place among X-Force.

Wolverine nodded to him.

Xavier wanted to scream at them, to force them back in line. Everything was shattering.

"Sir, these people want every mutant on the planet dead. They're so full of hate nothing can get through to them. They spread it like poison through other folks. They're mad dogs. Down home, we know that the only way of dealing with something gone rabid is to kill it and put it out of its misery 'fore bites someone else."

"We have nothing more to say to each other if that is the stance you wish to take, Samuel. I would appreciate it you left this house."

Sam's eyes flickered with hurt, but he didn't falter.

"I figured."

He glanced over his shoulder at Domino.

"You mind if I use one of the old safehouses for a couple of days?"

"Why don't I show you where the new ones are?" she replied.

Jimmy Proudstar slapped Sam's shoulder, staggering him.

"You didn't think you were walking out all by yourself, did you?"

Xavier watched, horrified, as Meltdown, Sunspot, Siryn, Rictor and Shatterstar joined Warpath and Northstar in switching their loyalties to Sam Guthrie. The feeling intensified. Psylocke gave him a jaundiced look before smiling at Sam.
"Room for one more, Sam?" she asked.

Sam gaped then nodded.

"I'm with you too," Marrow declared. "I've never thought this make nice shit was going to work. Looks like I was right."

Marrow's defection didn't surprise or hurt nearly as much as losing Betsy Braddock. It was like seeing Colossus join Magneto. The loss of a core X-Man struck at Xavier and infuriated him.

He stared at the vicious little psychotic he'd tried so hard to reform as she paused beside that lawless murderer Gambit, leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. One of the bone spikes growing out of her cheekbone scratched his face. He didn't flinch, instead wrapping his arms around her in a fond embrace.

He let go when she stepped back.

"I always wanted to do that." She reached up and wiped the blood away from his cheek.

"What, make me bleed?"

"Kiss you. Sorry."

Gambit laughed. "Nothing to be sorry for, Sarah. Go on now."

"Come with us, Cajun. You don't belong with these hypocrites."

Xavier thought the thief would go. But Gambit shook his head.

"Can't go, but Gambit won't stop you, chere."

"So long, suckers," Marrow said with sneer toward the remaining X-Men.

Sam and his faction stared across a gulf at the rest of the X-Men.

"We don't have to be enemies."

Xavier dismissed them.

"You've made your choices. Leave."

"You're not our enemies, Sam," Scott said. "We won't let that happen."

They walked out. Marrow paused in the doorway and spat. After a long moment, one more went after them, Dani Moonstar. Cable and Domino went last. Cable exchanged a searching, regretful look with his father and Jean. If there were telepathic words between them it was on a channel too tight for even Xavier to tap.

"Good job, Chuck," Wolverine said sardonically.

Storm laid her hand on his shoulder. "Do not allow this to discourage you, Charles. They are foolish, hotheaded children."
"They ain't kids, 'Ro," Wolverine contradicted. "They ain't been kids in a long time—since Chuck pulled them into the whole New Mutants thing. 'Course this school never taught them nothing but fighting."

"It's Cable and Magneto's fault!" Storm's rarely roused temper seemed about to let loose. "They would never have defied the Professor if they hadn't been taught to by those two."

"Lay off, 'Ro."

"If you agree with them, why didn't you go, Logan?" Xavier demanded.

Wolverine snorted. "You lot need someone like the Cajun or me to watch your backs. Big enough job to take both of us. Those kids'll look after each other."

"Anyone that disagrees with the Professor is wrong, hunh?" Cecelia asked quietly.

"Stop it, all of you!" Jubilee yelled. She had her arm around Paige's shoulders, while the blond girl cried. "It's okay, Paige."

"I should've gone with him," Paige said. "He's my brother."

"I believe I've had enough of this debate," Beast commented. "I'm going back to my lab. Comm me if any decisions are reached." He vaulted over a railing to the floor and left.

"We still need to make our own plans," Cyclops stated. "We may not be as forceful as Sam's group wants to be but that doesn't mean there aren't measures we can take. Correct, Professor?"

Xavier steepled his fingers.

"Of course, Scott."

Rogue sidled over to Gambit. She brushed his shoulder with hers.

"Thought you'd take off with them."

"Did you, chere?"

"Sure."

"Guess you don't know me so well as you think."

"I got a chunk of your memories in my head, Swamp Rat. I know ya better than I ever wanted to."

Gambit gave her an unreadable glance. "Ain't that the truth."

Xavier glared at them as Wolverine said, "Come on, kids. Nothing's getting done tonight. I know a bar in Torytown where they still don't care if you're mutant or Martian, long as you pay for the damages with cash. Let's get drunk."

Jubilee patted Paige on the back again and caught Wolverine's eye. "Do they card?"
Gambit laughed. "The kind of bars Logan hangs out in, chere?"

"Get real," Rogue finished.

"Logan, you are not taking two underage girls to a bar!" Storm objected.

"They want to come, they can come," Wolverine said. "They're old enough to go out and fight and get shot at, they're surer than hell old enough to decide if they want to shitfaced."

Even deep underground they heard the weather let loose. Storm looked self-satisfied. She crossed her arms.

"I do not think any of you will be going out in a hail storm."

"Storm, that's enough," Jean said, speaking up for the first time. "Let them go."

As they started to file toward the War Room door, Storm called out, "Remy."

Gambit paused and walked back to her. They were so close to him Xavier couldn't keep from overhearing them if he'd wanted to.

"What you want, padnat?"

Storm's eyes settled on Rogue in conversation with Wolverine.

"Don't…"

"Fall stupid in love wit' that girl again?" Gambit finished. He shook his head. "Not going to do that, Stormy."

"Don't call me that," she said absently. "Goddess, what a disaster."

Gambit sighed. "Oui."


"Are you ever sorry I brought you to the X-Men, Remy?"

He touched Storm's newly short cap of hair. It looked similar to when she'd returned to the X-Men with Gambit in tow. "I don't think you want me to answer that."

"Rogue."

Another sigh.

"I remember we had so much fun when we were just two thieves helping ourselves to whatever we wished all across the South," she said. It came out wistful. "You used to laugh."

"Only because of you, padnat. I'd forgotten until we hooked up."

"And now I have."
"It's still in you," he assured her.

"There's so little left to laugh about in our lives."

"Just means we have try harder. Come on, 'Ro, let go, live a little. You don't do that, there's nothing worth fighting for."

"So speaks the hedonist."

He smiled brilliantly. Xavier could feel the man using his empathy, wrapping Storm in a cocoon of warm emotion, soothing the jagged edges of her emotions. He narrowed his eyes, trying to analyze the difference between Gambit's elusive psi abilities and the telepathy he was familiar with. He tried to sense Gambit on the Astral Plane again, but the man remained a ghost there.

Gambit's eyes met his.

"Professor."

"Gambit. Most of Black Team just walked out. Will you still be able to--"

"Oui. Prefer working alone anyway, me."

"Well. Good. Perhaps you should hurry, if you mean to join Logan and Rogue."

Unlike Storm, he intended to encourage Gambit's ill-fated attachment to Rogue. It bound him to X-Men and he was, despite his past, useful. Even if he did think the man read him too well sometimes.

As when Gambit gave Xavier that knowing look.

Gambit caught Storm's hand in his and tugged. "Come on, padnat. You come wit' us, you can make sure no one corrupts ma petite or the little Guthrie girl."

Storm balked only an instant then followed him.

Xavier turned his attention back to the remaining X-Men and shoring up the cracks in the teams. They were filled with doubts. Wolverine's acidic comments hadn't helped, another reason he hadn't objected to the man taking off. Gambit's cynicism was equally harmful, but wouldn't shake Storm's dedication to their dream.

He looked at the ones left and tried to summon his old confidence and surety.

"My X-Men…"

------------------------------

Hammer Bay
The Citadel

Sam Guthrie's youthful face was set into the hard lines of a soldier.
He stared out from the videoscreen in the Citadel, addressing Magneto from an undisclosed location in the US. The contact had come through Pete Wisdom, courtesy of the contacts he retained with Domino.

"We need transports or a teleporter, sir," Sam told Magneto. "We've already figured out where we'll take 'em, at least at first. I don't figure it matters much, anywhere's going to be better than the government's damn 'facilities.'"

He spat the last word with a loathing as deep and wounded as Magneto's own words could be.

"I know that I'm asking more than a sane man should, 'cause you got your own country to look out for, but you've always said you stood for all mutants, everywhere. That's what we need now."

"Are the X-Men asking this of me or of New Genosha?" Magneto inquired. His expression gave nothing away.

Sam laughed harshly.

"This ain't the X-Men asking," he said. He lifted his hand to the black on red comm badge clipped to his uniform's throat. He ripped it off and slammed it down on the table before him. "I had enough of the Professor's way. Me and some of the others, we're going to do something about what's going on. Don't matter if you help or not, though there's a lot of people in those containment facilities that'll need more than what just my people can manage."

"You know where these camps are?"

"Got a list, thanks to Gambit. Hell, we got everything the X-Men have. Black Team did a scout on one of them in Idaho." Sam looked sick. "I never thought my country could do something like this. Lord, it's bad, sir. Bad as you can imagine."

"Xavier still refuses to act?"

"Still thinks he can do it his way, never mind who gets ground up while the rest of us is waiting on the shining day."

Such a young man to sound so cynical. Magneto felt real regret over the change. Sam's belief in the good in all men had heartened him many times, foreign as it was to his own experience.

"Will you help us?" Sam asked bluntly.

"What is your plan?"

"A surgical strike on the containment facility in Idaho first. We got the most data on it, thanks to Gambit's team. Four of them are with my people now. Even the folk that didn't come with us won't try to stop us, I think."

Sam leaned closer to the video pickup. "There's seven thousand or more mutants in the Idaho camp, sir. It's way up in the Bitterroot Mountains, the closest town's a wide spot on the road called Shoup. They all been collared and tattooed. Far as we can figure it, they ain't even allowed to talk to each other in there. Those bastards keep 'em inside the main building, don't even give 'em no clothes. So we can't just bust 'em out and leave 'em there in the cold. "
Magneto breathed deeply. The old, ever present rage kindled into life inside him. He'd sought to make New Genosha a safe place for mutants. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough while humans in other countries were free to perpetrate new atrocities on his people. He'd sworn to save his mutant brethren from it, but the horror of his childhood had come again.

"I was hoping you would let us bring 'em into New Genosha."

"Our borders are open to any mutant, from any country, Samuel. Bring them here. We will provide teleporters, ships, planes–whatever transport you consider most practical."

Magneto forced open his fists. "I have been waiting for this."

"I figure this'll mean war between you all and the States."

"Probably," Shadowcat said from where she sat. She waved at the video pickup. "Hi, Sam."

He managed a tight smile toward her.

"Kitty."

She glanced at Pete, who sat next to her, a picture of four temper. Wisdom hadn't smoked a cigarette since they discovered her pregnancy. Thank everything that his drinking couldn't contribute to fetal alcohol syndrome. No one who knew him could imagine living with him if he'd been going cold turkey on two addictions. He was bad enough as it was. Kitty would have had to kill him if it had been both.

"If we go in covert and don't leave behind a standard energy signature or a signed 'Magneto was here' card, we can make them work for it," she said. "Make them declare war on New Genosha. That makes them look like the bad guy instead of us. There are plenty of other countries with no sympathy for the US. We can play on that. They may not do anything because they won't want the truth to come to light, you know."

"Maybe we need to leave our own calling card," Sam said. "Call our selves something."

"Why not X-Force?" Kitty asked.

Sam held up the smashed comm badge. "Xavier don't want nothing X to get dirty with what we do. According to him we'll be terrorists."

He glanced down at his hand, turned it over and let the broken badge fall.

"What do you all think about the Mutant Resistance Force?"

Magneto cocked an eyebrow.

"The Resistance?"

Sam nodded.

"Just like in France. Except we're going to do a hell of lot more. One way or the other, we're going to do what has to be done. Whatever it takes."
Magneto nodded.

"Yes, Sam, whatever it takes. No matter how much we regret it."

"I never held with killing for no reason, sir. It's why I stood against you so many times. But the one thing I know for sure is that I'd regret doing nothing this time a hell of lot more."

Westchester
Xavier's Institute of Higher Learning

Paige Guthrie spent most of the next morning sleeping off her hangover after she spent an hour in the bathroom puking.

The stories about the way Wolverine and Gambit could drink were all true. So too were the ones about their fondness for kicking redneck ass in bar fights. Rogue might have thrown the first punch, true, but Storm had waded right in too after someone made a remark about getting some brown sugar. The fight had been an inevitability the moment their group walked into the bar.

Paige had just backed up into a corner at first, amazed that the X-Men were out-and-out trashing the bar. They weren't using their powers either. Even Jubilee was getting her licks in, using plenty of dirty tricks she'd picked up from Wolverine. Paige had ended up in it when she saw a third guy getting ready to smash a chair leg over Gambit's head while he was busy with two others. She'd grabbed the chair leg, kicked the jackass and started having fun.

After the bar fight, they had celebrated with more drinks and more drinks and finally fluorescent orange cheese nachos from an all-night convenience store on the drive back to the mansion.

Paige felt fairly certain she would never look at another nacho again without feeling nauseous.

When she could move without wanting to shoot herself, she wobbled her way downstairs to the kitchen. Gambit was perched on the counter, sipping coffee and looking absolutely untouched by the night's debauchery. Jubilee was sitting at the table opposite Wolverine, eyes half closed, clutching a glass of very fizzy water close. Wolverine was threatening Bobby over the sports page, while Storm massaged her temples and periodically glared at an apparently oblivious Gambit.

Rogue was frying sausages at the stove, which nearly sent Paige on another pilgrimage to the porcelain god. She still wore a set of flannel pajamas with little teddy bears all over them and her hair was up in a messy ponytail.

"You want some, gal?" she asked Paige.

One glance at the frying pan's contents was enough.

"Uh, no. I'm thinking of turning vegetarian."

"Alka Seltzer and aspirin're in the cupboard next to the glasses," Wolverine said.

Paige helped herself to both and found an empty seat at the table.
"Lordy," she muttered.

"'Ro, you want me to fix you some fruit or toast a bagel?" Gambit inquired.

"I want you and Logan to both die miserably," Storm muttered.

"Show a femme a good time and this is the thanks Gambit gets," Gambit said.

"Ungrateful," Wolverine agreed.

"I'll help bury 'em," Paige volunteered.

"Later," Jubilee said.

"That'll teach you all to go on a bender without me," Bobby said.

"Shut up, Robert," Storm told him. "I have a gravesite ready for you too."

"Come on, it was a joke," Bobby whined.

Storm touched her very short white hair. "This is not a joke."

"Ah, it looks good, 'Ro."

"It does, Stormy. Reminds me of that petite I met in Cairo," Gambit commented with a fond smile.

"Don't think you can charm me, Remy."

Paige looked back and forth between Storm, Gambit and Bobby. No one had mentioned Storm's shorn locks. She tended to do radical things with her hair periodically.

"I think I'll just go see what Scott's up too," Bobby said very casually.

"I haven't forgotten you, Robert Drake," Storm threatened.

Bobby ducked out of the kitchen.

"Ah wish he'd just grow up," Rogue commented with a sigh. She flipped her eggs over in the pan while leaning a hip against the kitchen counter.

"You'll be sorry when he does," Gambit said. He slipped off his perch and picked up the section of paper Bobby had abandoned on the table. The headline blared SPIDERMAN! MUTANT MENACE OR MUTATE HERO?

Paige dropped two Alka Seltzer tablets into her glass of water and watched the bubbles.

After that, Scott Summers insisted they all run through a Danger Room practice session, in some sadistic attempt at punishing Wolverine and Gambit for wrecking another bar and the rest of them for going along.
Consequently, she didn't check her messages until mid-afternoon.

Her sister Joelle's sobbing voice was the first thing she heard.

"Paige, answer the phone. Paige! Paige, where are ya!? I tried to call Sam and I can't get him either. I'm so scared. Josh's dead. The Trues came for Josh. And Jeb and Becky. They're just babies. Mama tried to stop 'em. They hit her and shot Josh – shot him right in front of us. Mama said run. Me and Elizabeth got the babies. Paige, please pick up. I don't what to do or where to go. There's one of those black trucks coming down the road. I got to go. I'll try to call you or Sam again later."

Paige Guthrie kept the message machine tape for years. No one ever found out what happened to the other Guthries. It was the last time she heard her sister's voice and the last time she believed in Xavier's dream.
Playing Silly Games

Chapter Summary

Life in Genosha goes on. Good food, gardening, and graveyards. The still breath between the click of the detonator and the explosion.

AD 2227, February 9
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

"It's beautiful here," Benjamin remarked.

Mystique glanced around the veranda, acknowledging the ambiance. She wore her own form today. Benjamin found it very taking once he'd become accustomed to the indigo skin.

They were lunching outdoors at an establishment that wasn't quite a restaurant or private club. He gathered meals or more complicated functions were provided for approved individuals by reservation. The table was covered in white linen, laid with silver, crystal and exquisite china. The trellis that shaded them on one side supported a wisteria vine so old its twisting gray trunk rivaled a tree's. Green leaves framed the lush, dangling blooms. Beyond the veranda, an Italianate garden dropped down in terraced steps, providing a view of the deep blue Indian Ocean beyond.

The Great Barrier was quiescent. It could have been no more than heat haze along the water's horizon.

The food was superb, the sun warm and Mystique a enjoyable conversationalist.

"Yes," she agreed, "it is."

"Thank you for inviting me here."

"More wine?"

"Yes."

She poured the pale gold vintage.

"This compares to anything from Europa or Pan Africa. Will you—Genosha, that is - offer it in trade? It would bring good prices on the world market."

Mystique chuckled.

"Bonding the globe through alcohol."

"Good wines are hard to find."
"I used to be fond of California wines."

"I've only read of them. The vineyards there didn't survive. A fungus in 2049, I believe," Benjamin said. "Not the Scourge."

"Mutants never had anything against good booze."

Startled, he laughed with her.

"So what was this lunch really about?" he asked her.

Mystique smiled and looked out across the gardens. "It is beautiful here. I wanted you to see that. Don't mistake my desire to end the Interdict with a vendetta against the Triune. I've known more peace here than ever before in my life. They've made this place as idyllic as is possible."

"And there's the rub?"

"I've always enjoyed intelligent men." She swirled her wine, watching sunlight fracture through the crystal goblet, then set it down without drinking. "As is possible. Yes, there's the rub"

Riptide spun. Gambit danced. They used the bottom of an old crater that dated back to the mutate civil war. The sandy dirt made a good fighting floor. A simple line dragged in the dirt by Gambit's bo staff marked the area. Inside, only them, no safeties, no holograms, robots or rules.

They weren't the only ones who did this.

Alpha mutants needed to use their abilities. Sanctuaries and the Pit weren't for two of the Constant though. They preferred some privacy. A hole in the barren, rough hills of northern Genosha provided that.

"You're getting soft," Riptide taunted.

He circled Gambit, weaving and dodging, a whirlwind tenuously anchored to the earth. A swirling haze of dust hung in the makeshift arena's air.

Gambit tumbled and twisted, avoiding him, vaulting into the air as if he would never return to earth.

A fan of lethal shuriken whipped through the air toward Gambit.

Gambit flipped over them.

"And you're getting slow, mon ami."

The hot mid-afternoon sun burned them both, heating them through the skintight body armor they all favored. Good old Reed Richards' unstable molecules mixed with the Shi'ar fabricator and whatever innovations they'd added over the years. It would stop a bullet and bounce a low power plasma or laser hit, it moved with the body, and breathed like a natural fiber, but it was hot. Sweat ran slick
from both men's faces.

They'd been at it a good three hours. Two hours fifty-six minutes more than a real to-the-death fight would have taken. That long only if both opponents were evenly matched. In a real contest, Gambit would either blow Riptide's armor up - and him along with it–with a thought or pull some nasty psi trick picked up from Phoenix. It had been centuries since it was an even contest between them. Even then, when he'd recruited the Marauders, Gambit had been able to take Janos. The sparring only served to keep their reflexes and skills razor sharp.

His bo staff speared through the air at Riptide.

Riptide spun away from its trajectory and into the handful of charged sand that Gambit had thrown, anticipating his reaction. It exploded in his face, stinging and blinding him.

He stumbled and lost the contest in that instant.

Gambit grabbed his arm, flipped him through the air, and landed on Riptide's back as his front impacted the dirt. Gambit wrapped one hand in Riptide's tangled hair and used it to jerk his head back. One knee ground down between Riptide's shoulder blades. A knife pricked at his exposed throat.

"Too slow, mon ami."

Riptide slapped the ground with the flat of his hand three times, signaling he yielded.

Gambit withdrew silently. Riptide couldn't hear his steps or guess exactly where in the circle he'd moved off to.

He pushed himself up on hands and knees and tried to pull a breath or two into his abused lungs. Hitting the ground had forced every bit of air out of him. That hurt more than most people could imagine. Tears burned in his still stinging eyes. The sand had been a very dirty trick. He should have expected it.

"Shit," he muttered.

He braced his arms and hawked bloody spit, letting his head hang. His hair dragged in the dirt. He contemplated getting to his feet and going at it again.

Fuck that. His ego could only take having his ass handed to him so many times in one day.

With a low groan, Riptide sank back onto his heels, hands resting on his thighs. He shook his sticky hair over his shoulder and squinted at the intense blue bowl of the sky over them. Staring into the zenith of the sky on a clear day, into a blue bright enough to hurt, was the closest to infinity he could imagine.

"Y'okay?"

"Oh… yeah… sure," he gasped out.

"Quits for the day?"

He looked over toward the voice. Gambit had retrieved his bo staff and had it planted in the ground.
He was almost leaning against it. At least his armor was dirty too from where he'd hit the dirt a few times during the spar.

Riptide nodded, still breathless.

"D'accord."

Gambit turned and scuffed his boot through the line in the dirt, breaking the circle. He did it casually, yet something formal attached to the gesture. No one stepped out of a closed circle. It had to be broken.

He walked over to the hovermobile they'd flown out in and fished two bottles of water from a cooler in the rear. Riptide straightened enough to catch the one Gambit tossed him.

The chilled water tasted delicious. He sipped it cautiously.

"Too bad we can't get cleaned up and go out, have a beer, kick up some fun," he said, resting the bottle on his thigh. The condensation beaded on the waterproof fabric.

Gambit telescoped his bo staff down to the length of his hand and stashed it in a pocket on his thigh. He shrugged.

"Nowhere on this island somebody don't know me, homme."

Riptide nodded.

"No place to cut loose."

He took another sip of water and grinned.

"No place to do a little property damage, inflict a few casualties and get nice and bloody."

"Mais yeah, it must be pretty boring for you and Vee."

"Boring for you too."

Gambit's mouth lifted in a sardonic half smile.

"Janos, you haven't met boring until you've sat through a preliminary committee meeting on the feasibility of doing a study to consider the economic effects on cocoa plantations in the Eleventh Canton of building a new waste treatment plant," he said seriously. "Not – " he held up a finger, " – mind you, whether to build the plant. No, whether to do a study to decide whether to build it. Merde!"

Riptide shuddered. Committee meetings. Now there was a torture their old boss had never tried on anyone.

"Nasty," he commented.

Gambit laughed and nodded.

Riptide levered himself upright.
"So, if the Barrier comes down, does that mean some of us get to have some fun?"

Gambit looked at him sidelong.

"I know all about your idea of fun, Janos."

"Used to be yours too." He caught Gambit's frown and grinned. "Gotcha."

That surprised a genuine laugh from Gambit.

"Don't worry, Janos," he said, "I think if the Barrier comes down, things will get very interesting very quick."

Riptide cocked his head, grinning wider.

"That's what I like to hear."

She knelt among the flowers, carefully but confidently plucking out the weeds among them. The soil was moist under her knees, the moisture soaking through the fabric of her pants. She'd caught her long hair back in a ponytail and had on a wide-brimmed sunhat to protect her fair redhead's skin. The sun warmed her shoulders.

A shadow moved between her and the sun.

"Hello, Bobby."

He walked around and crouched with his forearms on his knees. "Still taking care of 'Ro's garden."

"It's soothing," Jean replied.

She smiled at him. He'd been spending time in the sun and acquired a tan. Some of the streaks in his hair were almost as blond as Sam.

He tapped her shoulder where her sleeveless blouse bared it. "You will acquire freckles if you're not careful, my lady."

"Scott used to count my freckles."

She still ached for him some nights, but the searing worst of the pain had passed - no, not passed so much as been incorporated into her. Like gravity, grief was constant and she had learned to stand up despite it. She treasured her memories of Scott now and found it pleasing to share them with Bobby, who had known him just as she had.

"Did he? But he didn't tease you, did he?"

"No," she shook her head. "Scott knew redheads could be touchy about freckles."
Bobby smiled back. "I still miss him too."

Jean straightened a little and cocked her head. "You seem at loose ends."

He nodded.

"Remy's off with Janos. They're beating each other up in lieu of committing murder."

"Burning off frustration again," Jean agreed. She could feel a thread of pleasantly tired satisfaction through her own link with Remy. "Why don't you spar with him?" She didn't look and she didn't ask why he and Remy weren't together any longer. She knew Remy hadn't understood when Bobby left. Bobby hadn't explained. It had been fifty years. If Remy knew now, he kept it to himself. He'd always been private. Given their three-way link, Jean tried to honor his boundaries as much as she could.

They hadn't parted in anger, certainly. Bobby seemed to still care as much for Remy as ever and she knew Remy's feelings hadn't faded.

It was their choice, though.

"I never liked sparring or the Danger Room. You remember that." The same boyish grin he'd had since he was fourteen flashed. "Besides, those two like making each other bleed."

Jean nodded, leaned forward and plucked another stubborn weed. Bobby watched, not offering to help. He noticed her eyeing him and held up his hands. "You know if I tried, I'd just pull out the flowers and leave the weeds."

"So you're just going to watch me get my hands dirty?"

"Let's see… Yep. That's the plan."

She telekinetically flipped the last weed she'd plucked into his face.

"So," she asked as she went back to work, "are you going to be polite and talk to Ambassador Aiken at tonight's reception?"

Bobby pouted. "Aw, do I hafta?"

"We would appreciate it," she said dryly.

"How many more of these things are going to be held before we can toss the baselines back out?"

"The official talks begin tomorrow. The entertaining will take a back seat until the last week of their visit."

"Can't be too soon for me," he said. "We lost too many people to the baselines. We can't trust them."

Jean sighed. After all this time… Remy had made peace with this rapprochement, when he had been tortured to the breaking point. They all should. But then, she still missed Warren and Nathan and Alex and Rogue. It wasn't the same grief she felt over Scott and the friends who passed naturally. The friends she'd lost in the war had been cheated. She felt cheated. She always would. Perhaps Bobby would always be bitter.
Simple white stone crosses, rows on rows, rose from the long uncut green grass on the rolling hill. At the crest, a single stone stood silhouetted against the blue afternoon sky. Beyond that, if you walked up the hill, it dropped away in a sudden sheer cliff that faced the Indian Ocean.

Wild roses grew tangled among the graves, the old vines gnarled and thick with age, their rich scent mingled with the sea breeze.

It seemed like an abandoned place. The stones were eroding, battered by winter ice storms and winds. The words on each cross were wearing away.

Kitty sat down in the grass at a grave near the top. She pulled a crumpled pack of Silk Cut cigarettes from her jacket and knocked one battered cylinder out. There were only three left. The cellophane crackled under her fingers, yellowed and brittle with time. The cigarettes were so old they had no scent left.

She took out a battered book of matches, half used, and used one match - just one - to light the cigarette. It burned much faster than it should have, ancient and dry with age.

She set the cigarette on the right crossbar of the stone and traced the still legible name on the face with one finger.

"Hey, Pete. See? I didn't forget."

The wind ruffled through the grass, plucked at the collar of her jacket and fingered through her loose hair. Almost like his hands had, but it was cool and Pete's fingers had always, always been warm.

She caught her fingernail against a small crack in the stone and dug it in until it started to tear. With a curse she'd learned from him, she phased her hand and sank it into the stone, curling it into a tight fist.

"You old bastard."

It didn't make her feel any closer to him. She pulled her hand out and let it return to solidity.

"You'd be laughing your head off right now, I know it."

The cigarette had burned halfway down. She picked it up delicately and stole a puff.

"Yeah, that's right, I'm stealing your fag. What are you going to do about it, anyway?"

He always had tasted like a barroom ashtray. He'd quit smoking while she was pregnant and around the twins, but then started again during the war. Now the taste of tobacco reminded her poignantly of his kisses.

A seagull wheeled in the sky over the hill, screeing loudly before flying out to sea again.

"I think that bird just crapped on Cyclop's headstone," Kitty commented, a small smile edging up her
mouth. "His or Storm's." She snickered. "I bet you love that."

She took another puff on the cigarette and set it back on the stone.

"There."

The sun was sliding down toward the horizon. She stood up and dusted the seat of her pants with her palms. See what you're missing, Pete?

"Next time I'll bring you some scotch."

The path back to where she'd parked the hovermobile was overgrown and narrow, but she passed through it like the ghost she'd come to visit.

"Look, I'm sorry your parents were disappointed, Gayle, but this was too good of an opportunity to pass on," Alistair told the woman on the display screen.

Gayle pinched her brows together and pursed her lips in an expression she got directly from her mother. It usually meant she was going parrot something her mother had said, too.

"You're completely selfish, Alistair."

He shook his head.

"I suppose so," he agreed. "Bye, Gayle. I've got an appointment." He touched the control the cut off the communication. The holoscreen disappeared along with Gayle's visage.

Well, that had gone… not well, he admitted to himself. He felt reasonably assured he wouldn't have a girlfriend waiting for him when he got back to London. But if Gayle couldn't deal with his job by now, maybe they really didn't belong together.

He scooped up his jacket, knowing that the ocean breeze sometimes made Hammer Bay's evenings cool even after a warm, sunny day. He didn't know how long he'd be out and wanted to be prepared.

Jimmy Adhu was waiting with the hovermobile when he got outside.

"Things all set up?" Alistair asked as he got in the vehicle.

Jimmy took them into vertical lift immediately.

"Yeah, I talked to a couple of friends and they hooked me up with someone at the school. It's all cleared for you to come in and talk to the teachers. Even the kids."

"Great. You know, you've made this an easy assignment, Jimmy."

"It's a hell of lot more interesting driving you around than a bunch of stuffy diplomats," Jimmy replied.
He threaded the hovermobile into a east-northeast all speed altitude lane.

The school surprised Alistair, as so many things in New Genosha had, in its normalness. Bright colors, high voices, so much energy buzzing around it made your head hurt even while you had to smile. He stood in a doorway and watched the kids pour out into a play area. Most of them looked exactly like kids he’d seen all over the world and the ones that didn't were still so clearly kids he had to wonder how anyone had justified saying mutants weren’t human.

Their teacher introduced herself as Pash Begra, a pretty woman with caramel skin and a long black braid.

"Flux," Jimmy said and hugged her.

She giggled and pulled away, offering Alistair her hand to shake.

"You're beta?" he asked.

"Alpha," she said, still smiling.

"Oh. What do you--"

"Do?" She gestured to the children. "I teach."

Jimmy snorted. "But she's got a really useful power."

Alistair raised his eyebrows.

Pash nodded. "It is, actually, in the sense I can use it in a helpful fashion with the children. I can influence mutant power levels, fluxing them from higher to nulled. Periodically, a student will manifest early and I can help them maintain control."

"And no one will ever challenge her in the Pit," Jimmy said. "That kind of alpha is hung up on what they can do with their powers. Most of them haven't a clue how to fight without them. Pash just turns them off"  

"Hunh."

Pash laughed and shook her head. "I was never interested in that sort of thing. Luckily, my parents weren't the sort who push for their children to focus their lives on their mutant abilities. I do my best to teach all the children here that they are more than whatever mutation they'll have."

"So you don't think that being a mutant is as important as getting an education?"

"I'm teacher, what do you think?"

"So what do you teach?"

"Come inside and I'll give you an overview. Then we'll go by the cafeteria. I hear the pudding is chocolate today."
La Belle Dame Sans Merci (The Plague)

Chapter Summary

There's a history of using biowarfare against minorities. But viruses have no loyalties.

AD 2008, June 16
United States
New Orleans

"Quarantining Pittsburgh, Detroit and Houston is like locking the barn door. The horses are long gone. The virus is in the population already. This is just another bit of smoke and mirrors on the part of the Creed Administration.‘ Reed Richards (September 14, 2008)

The first human cases were reported in Pittsburgh. While no humans have died of LB49873028 yet, the city has been closed to travelers until it can be determined if the new virus strain is airborne or not. This is Trish Tilby, reporting from outside…'

Remy turned off the TV and looked across the throne room to his ex-wife. Belladonna, the new Matriarch of the Unified Guilds, gave him a wicked, violet-eyed look back.

"I know that look, chere."

"'Course you do, LeBeau, because your mind works the same as mine," she said. She sat back in the throne and crossed one long, mauve-clad leg over the other.

"I think it's ironic, but I'm not gleeful."

"Well, you aren't an Assassin." She made two throwing knives appear from her wrist sheathes and began juggling them. The leaf-shaped lengths of metal flashed silver, a sure sign they were for show. Belladonna's working tools were all matte black to keep down reflections—just like his own.

He shook his head.

"One gene's difference isn't much," Belladonna said. "Viruses regularly make the jump from birds to pigs to humans. That's a lot bigger difference. All it takes is a little time and enough proximity."

"So now more people will die," he agreed.

Belladonna shrugged and her beaded blonde corn-rows swung with the graceful movement.

"You don't think they deserve a taste of their own medicine?" she asked.

"It's just going to make things worse. We saw the same thing with the Legacy virus."
"Too late now, Remy."

He thought of the information she'd given him, the information he had to get back to Westchester with before morning. Warrants. Warrants for the arrest or execution of the terrorist X-Men. People who had fought and bled and died to save this world. For what? For this— for execution orders, internment, genetically mandated registration and deliberately engineered diseases meant to kill them all/

"Guess it is, chere," he said. "You'll take precautions?"

She smiled at him.

"I'll make sure everyone does."

AD 2008, June 16
United States
Washington, DC

"— many of the same precautions health professionals recommend to stop the spread of HIV —"

"Great," Val Cooper drawled sarcastically. She dismissed the news report from her mind and went back to the report she'd been scanning. Sentinel production had tripled in the last three weeks. If the mutants ever succeeded in uniting their various factions, the robotic assault weapons would be needed badly.

She studied the request to upgrade the production quotas on plasma rifles for the security forces, flipped back a couple of papers and checked the schedule for ramped up relocation of registered mutants, then signed her okay.

Stopping, she squeezed the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. Her head was splitting and she still had four more hours of paperwork to finish.

Her gaze strayed to the briefing document that had been delivered to her office only an hour ago. It didn't require her authorization; she only got to see it as a courtesy to her former post as Director of Mutant Affairs and Government Liaison to X-Factor.

It detailed the trials in absentia, guilty verdicts and dead-or-alive warrants issued for the mutant terrorists known as the X-Men.

People she had known and worked beside and respected. She'd gone to Jean and Scott Summers' wedding. Now the government meant to kill them.

God, when had things got this bad?

′— fear that the bioagent which is transmitted through blood or other body fluids during its long incubation period in mutants and through aerosol dispersion during its short, highly contagious active terminal period may spread through the more genetically homogenous human population faster than through the mutant sub-species resulting in wide spread panic and epidemic — ′

AD 2008, August 4
High Earth Orbit  
Avalon Station

Erik Magnus Lehnsherr chuckled without any humor at all.

Isolation would have had its benefits. If he had closed New Genosha's borders, he might have kept the disease out – along with the refugees. Sam's MRF had succeeded in Idaho. They'd moved the prisoners onto two hijacked cruise ships from the Alaskan coast and sailed them across the Pacific, unloading them at Carrion Cove. LB49, already nicknamed La Belle, had hitched a ride and made itself at home in New Genosha too.

None of the raids since then had brought out that many people but some of them made it to New Genosha. Others fled to Canada or Mexico or found another country if they got out of the US. No one wanted the mutant refugees, any more than any country ever wanted refugees. Most of them took them, though, because they knew they could move them on to Genosha. And they feared what retribution they'd face from Magneto if they harmed them.

It was too late to keep La Belle out of New Genosha, but Magneto had made the decision to keep Avalon uncontaminated. Only mutants who tested negative for the disease were going into orbit to work and live.

Efforts to rebuild and expand Avalon Station were going slowly. Funds and materials were constantly diverted toward the New Genoshan Army and handling the influx of mutants from all over the world. It took a great deal of power and effort to keep the space station hidden from all their enemies too.

Humans remained the greatest threat. Precious energy was channeled to monitoring events on the world below, including live feeds from all the global news networks. The news casts were biased, but still useful to showcase what the people in power wanted the average man to think.

The present news cast was a case in point. Apparently objective, it subtly pointed out the differences between humans and mutants, painting mutants as something less than human – a sub-species – sub-human.

La Belle seemed to take some mutants slower than others, leaching away their health without materially affecting the powers, until the final stage hit, devastating its victim. Only a few had died yet, but the numbers of infected were growing. Now the humans were catching it.

He knew, beyond any doubt, that they would find some way to blame that on Homo sapiens superior too.

"Well, Charles," he said to the empty room, "who will you save?"

' – the bioagent LB49873028, best known as 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', introduced into the mutant populace by the FOH – ' 

AD 2008, August 13  
United States  
Manhattan

Fury lit another cigar and glanced at Bridge sitting across the table from him in the back of the ratty bar they both preferred. Both SHIELD agents were in New York to consult with the Avengers over their stance on Operations Clean Sweep and Midden. Would they interfere? Some of their members, like some of SHIELD's agents, were mutants. How would they react? The government wanted
SHIELD weaponry and agents to step in if there was any resistance by super-powered mutants. Of course, the man most likely to have stood against this shitshow was already gone.

Bridge silently took a deep draft of his beer before setting the frosty mug down on the scarred tabletop. The neon from the Coors sign behind the bar glossed over his black skin and dyed his graying hair blue. He shook his head.

"You'd think they'd learn."

"GW," Fury said, "No one ever learns. With that bastard Creed in office, something like this was bound to happen."

"The Legacy Virus wasn't bad enough, some idiot had to cook up another disease and let it loose." Bridge shook his head. "How long did it take for Legacy to start killing non-mutants?"

Fury exhaled a stream of smoke and let his single eye range over the other people in the dim bar. Most of them were oblivious to the news report playing on the small TV mounted behind the bar. The bartender kept his head down, lank dark hair hiding his face as he wiped at the bar with his right hand. He slumped too much to judge his height, but he had a lot more muscle than most day shift bartenders. Fury was fairly sure he was packing, but who didn't in New York these days?

"Legacy was devised by a renegade mutant." He tapped ash off his cigar into the heavy tray on the table. "La Belle wasn't."

"What goes around, comes around, Colonel," Bridge remarked.

"You worried?"

"About catching it?"

Fury stared at him hard.

Bridge sighed. "You know the same people I do. How long you figure before they take a good hard look at what they've been doing and who they've been doing it for, say the hell with it, and join Guthrie's MRF?"

"What the hell do we do when that happens?"

"Our jobs," Bridge said. "Even if we don't like it."

Fury grabbed his own drink and slugged it down.

"No one said we had to like it," he growled. He sure as hell didn't. Stark was going to tell them to die in a fire and politely offer his help lighting it. Creed and Gyrich had really miscalculated there. Tony Stark might be richer than Midas, he might have been the Merchant of Death, and he wasn't a mutant, but Iron Man would stand up for the same thing Captain America had.

What was his job anyway? He'd always seen it as protecting the world. Not supporting genocide because it was being waged by the government of the country he was born to. "We do our jobs," he declared. He didn't let his fingers go back to the thumb drive he'd loaded with everything he'd been able to find on what happened to Rogers.

Bridge didn't look up from his beer when the waitress, a dyed blonde, returned with another bowl of peanuts. Fury politely handed her the old bowl, the thumb drive tucked into the pile of shells. The Black Widow asked in a tired voice, with a Bronx accent, if they wanted another beer and then
walked away when they both demurred. She'd maintain her cover until her shift ended, but the thumb drive would be long gone by then. She'd already broken with the Avengers officially, but she'd pass the information on there to them.

He'd just lit the fuse on a bomb, but Fury couldn't find it in him to feel any regret.

AD 2008
Snow Valley
Massachusetts Academy

‘– it now is confirmed that humans without the x-factor in their genome are contracting the disease. According to this reporter's sources, the bioagent was first developed in the laboratories of Fort Detrich. The version now at large has been re-designed to resist current methods of engineering vaccines – ’

Henry paused with the Twinkie not quite in his mouth. With one dark blue, claw-tipped finger he carefully pushed his wire-rimmed spectacles high up his nose and peered at the television screen.

Bobby took advantage of his distraction and grabbed the Twinkie out of Henry's fingers and gobbled it down unapologetically.

"Oh, my stars and garters," Henry commented.

"Hmmph?" Bobby mumbled around the pastry filling his mouth.

A beep from one of his computers drew Henry's attention from the TV screen. He swiveled his chair and tapped the key for display test results. The monitor flickered and displayed a new screen.

Subject: Cable
Legacy: Virus load: 0%
T/O: Virus load: 9%
Bioagent LB49873028: Virus load: 36%
Stage: 2
Prognosis: Terminal

"Hey, hey, Hank, Blue, you in there, you hear me – ?"

Henry turned to face Bobby, who was waving another Twinkie. Bobby's smile dissolved. He set the Twinkie aside.

"What is it?"

Henry swallowed hard, blinking because he felt like crying. His eyes were hot.

"Cable's cold."

He indicated the monitor screen. Bobby read it.

"Oh shit. Nate. He's got it."

Henry hit another key.
Bobby squeezed his shoulder. "You'll beat it, Blue. You'll figure something out. We won't lose the big, gun-toting Summers to another stupid disease."

"Robert, your faith in my skills is heartening, but I fear, misplaced," Henry said. "Though I will endeavor to unravel this horrendous disease's secrets and provide our mutant and human fellows with a cure."

"You will, Blue."

"I can only hope so." He looked back to the news report playing on the TV. "Before too many more people fall victim to it."

AD 2008, September 23
Snow Valley
Massachusetts Academy

The television report droned on. " – will be working in conjunction the World Health Organization and the United Nations…"

"Like they did so well with the Legacy Virus," Scott said as he turned off the TV and tossed the remote on the bed stand. He rolled onto his side and lifted a strand of red hair away from his wife's face.

Jean sighed.

"Scott – "

"Oh, now it's infecting the humans, it's put the whole weight of the world behind finding a cure," Scott went on. "Just like with Legacy. It didn't matter how many mutants died, but when Moira got it then it was a 'health emergency'. It makes me sick."

Jean's green eyes held his gaze.

"I know."

She reached over and stroked warm fingers over his cheek. Scott caught her hand and held it there. He knew without a doubt that if she died, he would shrivel up and die with her. Once he had endured that pain, thinking she was dead, but that was before their marriage, before the psi-bond that bound them.

"How many of us are going to die before Hank can find another cure?" he asked her. "Jean… what if there is no cure?"
President Creed slammed his hand down on his desk. "Damn it! Who let that leak out? Who's responsible?" he demanded.

"Sir, the director of the CDC refused to bury the latest findings," his domestic policies aide said. "He had already disseminated the report on the third set of double blind tests to the news media and the World Health Organization before turning it over to the White House."

"I want him arrested!" He glared at the others in the room. "Spin this. Issue a goddamn statement that puts the blame on the freaks. And somebody shut that bitch up. She's history, you hear me? Or we shut down the damned company."

'Rumors that this development is the result of a mutant biowarfare effort aimed at exterminating the human species cannot be proven, but – '

AD 2008, November 1
Snow Valley
Massachusetts Academy

State of Emergency. Military Law. Creed had pushed a package of new acts through his puppet Congress. There would be no election that might remove him from office. Sane voices would no be heard.

Charles Xavier buried his face in his hands. How could this be? How could their government, their entire nation, have gone so wrong? How would it survive this?

And La Belle… How could it have happened again? Piotr had given his life to stop the Legacy Virus. What would they have to sacrifice to stop this newest horror?

He allowed himself another minute of despair, then straightened in his chair. This would not be the end of his dream. He would not allow it. He could still rally his X-Men. They would find a way. They had to ally with Magnus for the moment, but it was temporary. The mutants in danger in the US needed a safe haven and Magnus was providing that.

Charles couldn't allow him to become their hero, though. He considered the situation. Yes. He could use La Belle to destabilize Magnus' reign in Genosha. He would encourage his X-Men to rescue and send more afflicted mutants there. It wasn't so self-serving. They needed to be sent somewhere safe.
I Heard the News Today, Oh Boy

Chapter Summary

Assorted Genoshan news headlines, for your entertainment and edification.

AD 2227, February 11
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

From the Genoshan News Service 11 February 2227 text edition:

BUSINESSMAN FOUND DROWNED ON PATIO OF PRIVATE HOME IN GILLEBARA BOROUGH OF HAMMER BAY

HBPD investigating the incident as a 'suspicious' death. Commander Lee, in charge of the case, promises a swift resolution.

TREMBLOR CASE SETTLED OUT OF COURT

Attorneys for the defendant Tremblor, Ramon Richter Schell, reached a settlement agreement with representatives of Bertram Malley in the civil suit filed against the alpha. A undisclosed seven figure sum was decided on as payment for damages and mental anguish suffered. Tremblor will also pay all court costs.

This development followed the deposition of Tremblor and Malley under verity scan by a licensed member of the Telepathic Corps.

Malley commented after leaving the courtroom, 'Thank God for telepaths. He'd have got away with shaking me down if it weren't for the spooks. There was no other hard evidence, but he knew the truth and so did I. I don't think the man meant to kill me, but sometimes they don't know their own strength.'

No word has been given whether Judiciate charges will be filed against Tremblor. If convicted of a crime against a gamma in Judiciate court, Tremblor would be facing execution or mandatory mental restructuring by the Telepathic Corps.

NULL FIELD TO BE BUILT

A new null field will be built on the grounds of Wagner Park to provide a safe and comfortable venue for the Hammer Bay Childrens Sports League. The grounds and stadium will be built using funds raised from the community, from a temporary sales tax on recreational gear and a donation from the Ben Grimm Foundation.

The null field will allow the integration of ferals in the Sports League. Parental concerns over the safety of other children if ferals were introduced into the League have been one of the driving forces behind building a null.
Polly Sevigne, one of the mothers involved with the Sports League said, 'No one liked telling a child or their parent that they couldn't play because they were a danger to the other children and now we won't have to.'

MARRIED LALO TCIMICIECZ AND UHURA MUNROE

The happy couple plans to honeymoon at the luxurious Selkirk Ski Resort in the Ridgeback Mountains before returning to Hammer Bay to begin married life.

IN MEMORY OF SCOTT PARKER JACOBS

Scott Parker Jacobs, beta, 136, Assistant Director of the Barrier Maintenance Agency as well as architect and engineer of Imperial River Dam Project, passed away in his sleep Thursday night of natural causes. The family has requested that all flowers or donations be sent to the Rahne Sinclair Ward of the Ramsey Children’s Hospital.

KINE & PAYGE DEPARTMENT STORES SPONSOR LIBERTY DAY BEACH PARTY

The annual holiday gathering at Anvil Cove next month promises to be bigger and better than ever this year with the promise of a professionally catered buffet and entertainment provided by Kine & Payge.

'The company has held a Liberty Day party for our employees for over a hundred years,' Nils Payge, CEO of Kine & Payge said. 'It's an important day for our country to remember and celebrate. We want to share that joy not only with our employees but our customers. The beach party has been held without any organization until now, but attended by thousands. Combining the two just seemed like the natural thing to do.'

'RAW DEAL' HOLODRAMA OPENS TO RAVE REVIEWS

Monty Got a Raw Deal, Becca Shane Castro's new holodrama from a script by award-winning writer Harold Sirico, based on the memoirs of Elihu Zurow, opened on Friday to universal acclaim. Starring Drew 'Mockery' Byrd in the role of Monty Hayward, a hapless beta trying to make a living in the opening days of the Gene Wars, the story follows the character's increasingly hopeless efforts to survive after being sent to a containment camp.

Originally slated to open next month on Liberty Day, the date was moved up when news of the Interdict breach was followed by the announcement a delegation of baseline humans from the United Nations would be invited to Hammer Bay to begin talks of lowering the Barrier and resuming contact between Genosha and the other nations of Earth.

'I don't think we could have opened at a more meaningful time than right now,' Castro said in an interview. 'The renewed contact with Out There makes this so much more topical. This holo isn't just a historical entertainment, it's a testament to the will of people like Elihu Zurow and the others who lived through sheer hell and managed to come here and build new lives.'

Castro and Sirico collaborated on their previous holodrama Panic In Detroit, chronicling the plights of baseline and mutant citizens caught behind quarantine lines during the height of the Gene Wars. Panic In Detroit won the Allison Blaire Prize for the year's best documentary in 2223.
This Ain't No Party

Chapter Summary

Queue up *Life During Wartime* and sit back, Bobby and Remy are bonding.

AD 2009, January 21
United States
Detroit

'Unregistered mutants have found ways into the quarantined cities of Pittsburgh, Detroit and Houston. Apparently they would rather risk infection with La Belle than arrest and detention under COMRA.' Unknown (circa 2009)

"The van's packed," Bobby said. "Ready to go."

He set a brown paper bag on the Formica topped table with the rickety chrome legs. The Formica had little gold flecks in it and a pattern of cigarette burns where butts had tumbled out of an ashtray. Three chairs with cracked red vinyl seats sat around it. That filled the little kitchen alcove off the main room.

"That's good," Remy replied carelessly. He leaned just as carelessly against the glass of the dirty window. Another clove cigarette smoldered half-forgotten in his hand. His hair needed washing; so did the baggy green sweater that hung to his hips and the faded, ragged jeans he wore along with scuffed combat boots.

Just looking at him, Bobby could list the things Remy LeBeau needed. Even the ones he could get weren't going to help. Remy needed a haircut, a shave, fifteen pounds, a week's sleep, news from Rogue and a sense of hope.

It made Bobby feel hideously inadequate. Remy'd been in Detroit for the last three months. Bobby had arrived only four weeks ago and wanted only to get out.

Water dripped steadily into the stained sink. They ignored it, along with the roaches and the smell from the halls and stairwells. The building still had electricity. They kept a lamp with a broken shade in the single bedroom, along with the TV, where the windows were spray painted black and covered in foil to hide the light from outside.

"I got some peanut butter, jelly and jam, beans and a six-pack of some kind of orange soda," he said. "Even some bread. Couple of people had the bakery in the grocery going."

Remy turned his face toward Bobby. The sound of gunfire, off in the distance, didn't disturb them. They were used to it now, like everyone still caught in Detroit. Anyone could come in, but nothing came out. The only law left in the city came from the end of a gun.
"So we're fixed for a couple of days."

"Merci."

"You shouldn't stand so close to the window," Bobby said. "Someone might see you there."

He began taking the results of his supply run out of the bag. Three fresh loaves of bread wrapped in butcher paper. He sniffed them. Better than gold in this quarantined city.

Remy shrugged. He tapped the ash from the cigarette into a dirty coffee mug on the window sill.

"I was waiting for you to get back."

A shiver fluttered through Remy's frame, strong enough Bobby saw it. He waited, holding his breath, praying Remy wouldn't start coughing. He'd really learned to hate the sound of anyone coughing. It was never just a cold.

Remy inhaled another lung full of smoke instead. Probably smothered any germs determined enough to tackle him, Bobby thought. He'd have to tell Hank about that one.

"I can take care of myself"

"Mais, I know." Remy shrugged again. "This place…"

"Yeah."

He held up a jar of marmalade, admiring the color. It glowed in the dingy afternoon light that struggled past the tenement's windows.

"Was listening to the Radio Free America earlier," Remy murmured.

Bobby glanced up.

"And?"

"Heard about Pittsburgh?"

He set the second jar of jam down. Boysenberry. Seedless. There was dust on the lid, it had been on the back shelf of the nearly empty grocery. "No."

Remy nodded as though that meant something. "People got hungry."

Bobby used his thumb to wipe the dust off the lid, feeling the little indentation that would pop out when it was unsealed. Boysenberry. He'd always liked grape or blueberry, even if they were boring. Funny name. Boy. Son. Berry. Boy son of berry. He'd let Remy have it, Remy was picky but liked odd things. Bobby liked white bread and American cheese and meatloaf, stuff his mother had fixed before he got sent to Xavier's. Yep, all American things, that's what he liked. Not exotic things like crawdads or chicory in his coffee or son of a berry jam or beignets or cloves and bourbon.

Remy's voice was perfectly neutral. "There were riots."

Smoke trickling from his nostrils. He'd stopped smoking for Rogue, Bobby thought. Guess he'd
started again. Remy never really smelled like cigarettes the way most smokers did. Bobby had noticed that. He liked the clove ones anyway. He'd never meant to notice, because guys like Remy weren't for guys like Bobby, who was white bread, all American, almost generic if he hadn't been a mutant. He'd studied accounting, for God's sake!

Remy smelled like vanilla and ozone.

Logan said he just smelled like sex all the time. Maybe he smelled different to different people. Bobby liked the way vanilla smelled. Exotic and comforting at the same time.

"Food riots," Remy repeated.

Bobby blinked. Remy was watching him. He burned. Did Remy feel that?

"People tried to get past the quarantine," Remy went on. "A lot of people. The military got scared."

"What--" Bobby's voice cracked. "What happened?"

Remy flicked the butt of the cigarette into the coffee cup. He didn't care. "Air Force bombed them."

"Pittsburgh."

"Oui."

"Shit."

He left the supplies on the table and walked across the cramped living room, over the dirty brown carpet, past the floral-patterned couch with the sag in the middle, to the window. He scrubbed his hand through his hair. He stared down at the empty street through the bit with no foil or paint over it. Through the grime. A scrawny dog was pawing through the garbage in the gutters. Something moved in the shadows of a doorway and the dog ran.

"Because they were hungry?" he asked incredulously.

"Because of La Belle."

"It's just..."

From the corner of his eye, he caught Remy's nod. Bobby wrapped his arms around himself. He wished for someone to hold him instead. Something in him ached.

"You ought to get some sleep," Remy said.

They usually slept in the daytime and worked in the night, when Remy's mutation let them stay in the shadows and avoid patrols and roving gangs. But there had been no other time they could pick up the weapons the local underground cell needed, so Bobby'd gone out. It had had to be him, because there was a roadblock on the route to the rendezvous and without an image inducer or contacts, Remy couldn't pass.

Even with them, he couldn't blend in with a crowd. He was too beautiful. It hurt Bobby to look at him sometimes.
"I know."

The dog was back, nosing at something wrapped in black plastic. Bobby didn't want to know what it was, but kept watching. The dog tore the plastic open. A rat fled and the dog leaped after it, teeth snapping.

"Jesus," Bobby murmured. "Jesus."

Remy flinched.

Bobby looked at him. "Hey, are you okay?"

Remy shook his head. "You ever been that hungry, Bobby?" he said.

"Like the people in Pittsburgh?" Bobby asked cautiously.

Remy shook his head sharply. His lank hair flipped across his face. He kept his eyes downcast. "Non. Like that dog. Hungry enough to eat a rat. Or garbage."

He replied simply, "No."

Remy walked away. Bobby turned and watched him go to the sprung couch and drop onto it, then lean his head back and stare at the ceiling. It made him shiver, the dulled look in Remy's eyes.

"Gambit would have."

"Gambit would have what?"

"Ate a rat."

"No, you wouldn't have."

"Ate garbage. Parks were good places. People ate lunch there, didn't finish all it, just tossed the food away. Not so good at night. Unless you were so hungry… then sometimes you did other things so you could eat or get inside for a while," Remy said conversationally.

"You're talking about when you were on the street?" He couldn't bear to ask anything else.

"Remy rather eat garbage than go back to the Antiquary."

"Stop talking about in it the third person, Remy," Bobby pleaded. "Okay? Please. You're freaking me out."

"Pardon, Bobby, jus' easier thinking about it like it happen to someone else."

"I wish it hadn't happened to you."

Remy rolled his head sideways and met Bobby's gaze. "It doesn't make you sick?"

"It makes me sick something bad happened to you when you were just a kid, but you don't make me sick. I know we weren't friends for a long time, but even if I hated you, I wouldn't think you deserved that." No one deserved that. No one deserved any of the shit happening. That's why Bobby
stayed with the X-Men, because he believed in the Professor's Dream. Dreams dissolved when you woke up. Maybe they should have had goals instead, something more than the perfect fantasy. What was that saying? Perfect is the enemy of good. How many compromises that would have made the world better had they thrown away because they weren't perfect? When Bobby slipped enough to think about it, it haunted him. It was why he'd always worked so hard at not thinking anything more serious than how to pull off his next prank. Because when he'd been short-sheeting Scott's bed, Remy and too many (any was too many) others had been tossed aside like garbage to live or die on the streets.

Scarlet on onyx eyes narrowed then blinked slowly. "You telling the truth?"

"Yeah." Bobby summoned his nerve and added, "And I do consider you my friend now, Remy."

"I think it bothers Rogue a lot," Remy said, beginning to shiver hard. Bobby doubted it had anything to do with the temperature in the room.

"Rogue's screwed up. I mean, really screwed up if she can't handle that." He joined Remy on the couch and put an arm around those surprisingly broad shoulders. "Who needs her anyway?" he said. "We make a pretty good team."

Remy relaxed against him, snorting out a little laugh. "Oui."

"Yep. Just cuddle up to old Bobby and we can both get some sleep."

"Don't go freezing anything while I'm asleep."

"Nah."

Softly, Remy said, "I never told Rogue about that. Just something else she got when she took my memories in Israel."

Bobby squeezed him closer. "I'll never tell."

Remy's head nodded against his shoulder. It made Bobby feel tender and protective, not something Gambit often evoked, but Remy, the man he'd grown to know in the last few years… that was someone different. He wished he knew if Remy's confidence was an invitation or a gentle warning off. He'd wanted Remy more than once. Not just because of the mutant charm, either. He imagined Remy was used to feeling that from people around him.

He let his hand curl around the back of Remy's head, fingers tangling in auburn hair.

Lust hadn't made him volunteer to join Remy in Detroit, though.

Being given a secret piece of Remy's past wouldn't warm and frighten him at the same time if all he wanted from the man was a few romps between the sheets. It wouldn't leave him with a hard ache in his throat, either.

He slumped lower into the sagging couch and Remy obliging curled closer. Not a come on, Bobby reminded himself. Remy loved contact. He touched everyone. He didn't mean anything by it. Just a casual sort of affection. It was endearing. Innocent.

He took a deep breath. Guys like Remy weren't for guys like him, he reminded himself. Don't fall in
love with him. It was useless. Remy smelled like vanilla.

The heavy throb of the helicopter gunships patrolling the water between Windsor on the Canadian side of the river and Detroit made the window glass shudder. Bobby closed his eyes. Remy twitched and pressed closer to him. He tried to sleep despite the echoes of chain-guns and anti-aircraft from across the border.

Two more nights here, then they would go. With Remy's warm weight held so close, Bobby almost wished they were staying.
AD 2009, January 28
Snow Valley
Massachusetts Academy

Remy strayed around the rec room, unable to settle. Dinner had been something he had already forgotten, eaten out of habit; the same habit had him following the others from the dining room afterward. It would have been wiser to retire, but he'd never been famous for doing the smart thing and he'd progressed past the state sleep could easily mend. He felt restless and wired and conversely weighed down by exhaustion. The very air felt scratchy and irritating.

Nothing had felt like home since the military bombed Westchester. The Berkshires were beautiful, but they were still the X-Men's place of exile. The Massachusetts Academy could never be what the Xavier mansion had been to them. The room he had upstairs didn't feel any more like his than a good hotel room would. Sleeping next to Bobby in that tenement had been better.

Bobby. He wasn't going to think about Bobby tonight. Thinking about Bobby might make him think about the ice and the night and… No. He cut off the thought.

There would be no sleep tonight. If he slept, he might dream.

"Everybody ready? We're going to cross the river now."

"How? There're no boats here."

Bobby gestured toward the water. Ice began forming quickly. "We're going to walk across, quiet as mice."

"How—?"

"Hey, they don't call me Iceman for nothing."

He wasn't the only one. Havok slumped in front of the fireplace, blond head bent, flames reflecting off his distracted features, one arm in a sling. Karma looked stiff and uncomfortable, standing next to
Storm and Forge off to the side of the hearth. One side of her face had a peppering of scabs from shrapnel thrown up in a street fight.

Storm kept her shoulder just subtly turned toward Forge. Remy's lip curled. Good. He'd never forgiven the man for hurting her; he didn't want to see them together again. She deserved better than a man who didn't respect her choices.

Beast was pontificating about something Remy felt too weary to deconstruct. The words were a dull hum of sound. He followed the blurred movement of Beast's big hands as he waved to illustrate something to Bobby, while leaning on the back of one of Emma's heavy red sofas like an erudite cross between a lion and a blue gorilla.

Bobby was listening with apparent interest, curled up on the same sofa, looking fresh and unaffected by everything that had happened. He was folding a paper airplane from a sheet of newspaper. When he finished, he threw it at the back of Havok's head. It didn't reach far enough, wobbled in its flight, and fell out of the air.

Remy watched it fall and flinched. Damn Bobby for being so untouched.

Getting out of Detroit had been a nightmare he never wanted to relive. They'd lost half the Detroit cell of the Underground, pinned down on the ice halfway across the river. One hundred thirty-four mutants to get across to Canada, bundled up and shaking with cold, not a one of them with combat experience – a third of them children of various ages. Forty-four humans who had been risking their lives to smuggle refugees out since the Clean Sweep began. Twenty-one dead before they reached the other side.

He'd worked with the Detroit underground for three months. He could recite their names, every one of them. Remy curled his arm over his stomach.

Flashes from the night hit him. Black water, breath misting in clouds, blue ice, rotor roar and figures paralyzed in the white helicopter spotlights, M16s and miniguns firing from both river banks… Someone sold them out, gave the Border Patrol the time and place they meant to go over. Frost blooming in a fractal mosaic over a blond boy's round cheek, blood like black ink spreading across the snow… Huge ice shafts rose into the night sky and speared the helicopters, walls of it rose into the darkness, ramparts of cold, as veils of snow were rent by tracer flash. The air bit into his lungs as he ran, fingers numb and fumbling. His own power almost had been useless, too likely to explode the ice and send them into the dark, unforgiving water. A small hand turned stiff and blue. Bobby held out his hands. Metal birds flash froze, broke and raining down. The ice shook under their feet; crazy spiderwebs of cracks running away from the impacts. The lazy sweep of a rotor scythed through three bodies.

Restlessly, he moved closer to the fireplace. Havok's eyes flicked toward him, but he didn't speak. Remy felt vaguely grateful. He didn't feel like talking either. Didn't know what he felt like or wanted. He needed something, but couldn't discern what it was.

Movement caught his eye and he found himself looking across the room. Rogue lingered in the doorway, half her face in shadow, one green eye brilliant. He knew he should look away. He knew and he still stared. The firelight traced one cheekbone in flickering gold, made her expression a mystery.

Remy curled his hands into fists. He could almost remember the texture of her skin there, the sensation of running the pad of his thumb down to her lips.

Dieu.

He knew better, but the look in her eye called to him. He squeezed his eyes shut, yet he could still feel her there in the doorway. No one else had noticed her presence. He felt her step inside and join Storm's little group.

He rolled suddenly stiff shoulders.

Without a word to anyone, he strode out of the rec room. He couldn't go on being in the same room and looking at her tonight. He felt too raw and exposed and fucking cold and alone.

The hall was dark and disorienting. A rug slid under his boot. All his normal grace seemed lost to him. He didn't know which shadows hid steps or which places in the floor creaked under his feet in this place. He found a doorknob and pushed the door open, stumbling into the darkened room with a sigh of relief.

A shudder wracked him, a reaction to the room's cool after the warmth of the rec room. A blink and he saw he'd found his way into Emma's office. Glass and stainless steel, white carpet and white leather furniture occupying too much space for comfort.

"Damn," Remy muttered. He turned, meaning to get out of the room that only made him feel colder.

Rogue was there behind him and with the door open, he could hear music dim and distant from the rec room, a bar of bright light falling into the hall from its open door.

The white streak in her hair glowed. One slip. Just one slip.

"One dance, Remy?"

A momentary lapse of reason.

Her hand stretched out and he took it. He let her come into his arms, familiar and freshly unknown at the same time, wishing she would warm him even a little. He rested his cheek against her hair.

The music played and played and he turned with her in his arms, dancing in the darkened hallway. She set one hand on his shoulder and left the other in his hand, fingers fitted together, separated by thin silk gloves. They whirled and whirled without end, until he was lightheaded, until his gaze filled with the spark and fire of the charge that filled every molecule around him.

Spinning off the edge of the world, out of control, out of his mind. This was a mistake, a mistake, a mistake they'd made before…

A glazed look and Rogue was tugging him away down the hall. "I was looking for you," she murmured.

"Chere…"

"Just come with me." She led him to the back parlor not far from the kitchen that no one used except
"I'm tired, Rogue," he said quietly.

"I know," she replied. "Just sit down, sugar."

He sank down into a sofa and she sat next him, curling close, resting her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her out of something like habit. Just as always, he wanted her. A curl of desire, like a thin faint line of smoke, twined through him.

Her hand rested on his chest, less than the weight of bird. A bird’s wings fanning the flame into fire. He'd brave the burns to warm the ice from his bones. Bones in a funeral pyre.

Knowing the consequences, he gave in and murmured, "Chere, let me make love to you," then waited, still and accepting, for her inevitable refusal.

Rogue drew back from him.

"Chere…"

She shook her hair back and stared at him intently. He traced her heart-shaped face with his eyes. He knew those delicate features as well as the image he saw in the mirror. Hers was the image he'd carried in his heart for years. He could never entirely cut her out or obscure her in his mind. All the regret and he could not forget, couldn't erase her mark from his soul.

He knew what he felt, but he'd never known what she thought. Was it love or was she in love with the idea of being in love? Once he would have thought the difference didn't touch him. But she'd bound him to her with rose thorns and razor wire that cut and made him bleed whether he fought to get close or get free.

All he could do was give in.

Delicate hands cupped his face. She stroked her fingers along his temples. He fought the impulse to close his eyes.

"I will," she sighed. "I will."

He knew she just didn't want to be alone. He'd told himself he wouldn't come back to her again. It was the road to ruin.

The noise of a gun butt hammering against the front door snapped his attention away. Raised voices filled the hall. Someone's desperation knocked against his shields. Remy bolted to his feet and out of the parlor. Rogue came behind him.

The hall and front foyer had filled with people. Someone had turned on the overhead light. Behind them the front door still gaped open into the night. The headlights of an SUV slewed to a careless stop at the front steps glared off the brass door handle. Harsh shadows followed everyone's movements.

Remy hung back.

Domino stood at the center of the chaos she'd brought with her, tiny in comparison to the men.
around her. She still clutched the pistol she'd used to hammer on the door.

A step behind her Shatterstar supported a wasted figure Remy briefly didn't recognize. Shock ran through him when he did.

"Cable?" Rogue breathed at his shoulder.

Dieu.

"Look, McCoy, we had a bitch of a time getting here through the roadblocks and patrols without ending up in a firefight," Domino yelled. "Now do something for him!"

Beast pushed Forge and Havok away. Storm backed into the rec room doorway. Bobby's hand locked on her shoulder. Karma must have stayed back out of the way. Remy didn't see her. He felt a small stab of relief that Storm hadn't rushed to Cable's side; it might have set Domino off.

"We have to get him down to the med lab," Beast said. "He's gone into third stage."

Domino cursed and shoved the pistol back into her shoulder holster. Beast started to take Cable from Shatterstar, but his help was silently refused. He nodded.

Shatterstar tightened his hold on the semi-conscious man. Sometime in the last months, he'd chopped off his waist length ponytail. His hair was shorn military tight to his skull now. Rictor probably didn't like that. Remy wondered where Ric was.

"Follow me," Beast directed. "Forge, I'll want you to decontaminate the foyer after we've gone, so come with us. The equipment is in the labs. Everybody else, get back."

"Someone get the doors," Forge said.

Rogue turned and hurried up the hall ahead of them. She reached the concealed elevator and entered the password that would open it and let them reach the hidden, lower levels that held labs and medical facilities along with a duplicate of the Danger Room.

Domino stalked after them, radiating futile anger with no target.

Remy walked down the hall and out onto the steps. The SUV was still running. It took only a few moments to move it into the multi-car garage. He figured it was better out of sight. Someone might be looking for it.

--------------------------------------------------

He walked back in as Forge was setting up a piece of equipment he assumed would decontaminate the foyer and skirted around him.

"Rogue said to meet her in the back parlor," Forge said as Remy passed him.

"Merci," he murmured. He paused. "Did Beast say… ?"

"Not long."

Remy nodded.
"Havok's in the comms room telling Scott and Jean. They'll want to get back here as fast as possible."

Better Havok than him, Remy thought. "Things're just getting better and better all the time, aren't they?" he murmured.

Behind him, he heard Forge snort. "Get out before I trigger this thing or you'll have the equivalent of a nasty sunburn."

"Okay."

He ducked his head in the rec room. Karma and Bobby were both missing. Storm had taken a place in the window seat. As always, she sat with her back perfectly straight, a picture of posture and serenity. Her hands were folded and still in her lap. Remy couldn't tell if she was really looking out or just looking at the reflections in the glass. She turned to face him, lifting her eyebrows.

"You okay, chere?"

"Of course."

He lingered in the doorway. Rogue could wait for him to talk to Storm.

"You sure?"

"Yes. Would you care to join us?"

"Us?"

"Bobby is preparing popcorn in the kitchen. He intends to conduct a movie marathon." She gestured to the TV and the cabinet open beside it. A pile of DVDs rested on the player.

"Non, but thanks, chere."

"Get your ass out of the hall, LeBeau," Forge called from the foyer.

"Got to go."

"Remy…"

"Oui?"

Storm lifted her hand and let it fall. "Nothing. Go."

He slipped down the hall and into the back parlor. Rogue was there. She threw herself at him, rocking Remy back against the door with a thud. He ran his hand up and down her back. Warm, wet tears soaked through his T-shirt.

"He's dying, Remy," she whispered. "Everybody's dying."

"Nobody lives forever."
She hit his shoulder with a small fist and more strength than he appreciated. "It ain't right."

"I know, chere, I know."

A buzzing hum filtered through the door at his back. Forge's sterilizing gadget doing its thing. He closed his eyes and held onto Rogue, tightening his shields against the emotions roiling through the house. That cut him off from Rogue too. All he could feel was the press of her body against his, soft and inviting and whispering of physical pleasure that he could always drown in.

Dieu, he wanted to drown tonight, sink himself in flesh and forget, to be and not think.

Still clutching him, Rogue murmured, "I love you, Remy."

"Don't say that, chere."

Bobby had been heading out of the kitchen, soda in one hand, bowl of popcorn in the other. Two days out of Detroit, back at Snow Valley, debriefed, pretending life was normal for the night. Hiding from loneliness of his bedroom and his empty bed. Movies and mindless chatter to distract him from missing that hole of a tenement, the smell of clove cigarettes, a lanky body curling into his on the couch, and the single bed with the worn chenille cover. Something to obscure the expression in Shatterstar's silver eyes and the tremble in Domino's hands as they brought Cable in looking like he'd already died.

The overheard words paralyzed him. He'd been listening to that voice for a month. He fantasized about that voice.

"Sugar – "

Damn you, Rogue.

He hated her. She was the only one that really got to the man and could make his voice crack with emotion. God, Bobby thought, when had he turned into a cat? That was Rogue, a friend of his, not the other woman in some love triangle that only existed in his sordid imagination.

"Non."

"What do ya want me to say, then, Remy?"

Rogue's voice hardened. She'd always been quick to anger and no one could touch off her temper like Remy.

"I don't know, chere, but not that."

Remy just sounded tired.

Bobby wanted to go into the parlor and interrupt them. He didn't want hear or see Rogue smack Remy around one more time. He knew Remy was in no shape for another go around with his ex-girlfriend. No one was ever in shape to go at it with a powerhouse like Rogue, because she tended to hit things—and people—when she lost her temper. She would conveniently forget she had superhuman strength, too.
He stayed in the hall, leaning against the green silk wallpaper, wishing he could dissolve into the
darkness. It smelled strange, some aftermath of Forge's sterilization. The popcorn abruptly smelted
rancid mixed with it.

He knew he shouldn't be doing this. He'd witnessed too many scenes between Rogue and Remy,
including the ugly scene in Seattle when he first had an inkling that everything wrong in that
relationship didn't stem from Gambit. He didn't move away though.

"I guess you just want me to say yes. Well, I did. I said I will."

"How? How many times have we been over this? I don't want to play this game--"

"With this. I got it out of the armory just now."

"Why now, girl?"

"I want to be with you, Remy."

"Rogue, chere, you know I always wanted this, to be with you… Why now when you never would
try before?"

Bobby's stomach tumbled. The smell of the popcorn nauseated him. It didn't sound like they were
going to fight after all. Jesus. This. She was going to put on a suppression collar. They kept them in
the armory in case someone lost control.

"Because I'm afraid to waste any more time, Remy."

"I never could say no to you."

"Do you want to - "

"Non."

"I'll put it on then."

"You've got a key to get it off?"

Rogue laughed without mirth.

"I've got a Master Thief. You can always pick the lock."

"Upstairs, chere."

"My room or yours?"

Bobby stumbled away from the wall. God, he did not want them finding him eavesdropping.

He looked up as he reached the rec room doorway and flushed. Storm stood there. Somehow, he
knew she'd been watching him the whole time.

"Robert."
"Don't," he said quickly.

Her gaze moved past his shoulder as Rogue and Remy stepped out of the parlor. Remy's hand rested at the small of Rogue's back. Her hand was curled around the silvery hoop of the collar. She saw them and her chin came up. Storm turned her head away as Rogue passed, saying nothing.

Remy paused long enough Bobby thought he might not follow Rogue up the stairs after all. Hope was a weed that almost nothing could kill.

Then, "G'night, Stormy, Bobby," Remy murmured, eyes narrowed, and turned his back to them.

Bobby forced his dry mouth to open and form the words. "Yeah, good night."

Storm said nothing. He couldn't help following Remy with his eyes. The sympathy in Storm's gaze when he turned back hurt.

"I'm so fucking stupid," he whispered.

She drew him into the empty rec room, taking away the bowl of popcorn and the soda. Then she guided him onto the couch, sinking down beside him. He let her take his hands in hers.

"I mean, he's an empath, he has to know."

Storm smiled sadly.

"He shields, Robert. Don't assume."

"But don't get my hopes up, right?" he said bitterly. All Rogue had to do was crook her little finger. No matter how many times they broke up, Remy still loved her. It verged on tragedy, everybody wanting someone they couldn't have, someone who always hurt them. "Why would he want me? He could have anyone he wants."

Except Rogue, but no one ever really had Rogue. Remy came closer than anyone else.

He forced out a laugh. It wasn't like he'd ever have the guts to say something to him. He didn't even know if Remy really swung both ways. He could guess that Remy'd been with men, but whether that had been because he wanted to be… That was something else, something Remy would probably never admit. They had grown close in Detroit, but not that close. Except maybe Bobby did know; Remy had told him.

He swallowed hard, reminded of Remy's oblique reference to things he'd done as a child. Things Remy still found preferable to whatever he had endured before he ran. But still things that had scarred him inside. Nothing he'd want to do again, even with love.

"He, uh, he said something about the Antiquary," he said hesitantly.

Storm looked up, her eyes sharp. "Did he?"

"Uhm, yeah. About doing stuff… " He dropped his own eyes. "Anyway, that it was better than going back. That was all."
"Then he trusts you more than you may guess, my friend. Remy does not speak of the time before his father adopted him often."

"But he's talked to you about it."

"I am his padnat."

"Why does he keep going back to her?"

"Why do any of us do anything, Robert?" Storm gave him a solemn look. "The heart goes its own way."

"Yeah. I guess."

Storm turned her face away.

"I'm sorry. He's your friend."

"I'm hardly blind to his faults," Storm admitted.

Bobby squeezed her hands. "What? He has faults? No, say it ain't so!"

She laughed and withdrew her lovely hands from his. "Oh, yes. But he is a dear, dear friend." Her blue eyes focused on him. "He's your friend too, you know. He would never have mentioned the Antiquary otherwise."

That was something, Bobby supposed. It just didn't seem to soothe the ache under his breastbone.

Maybe it was acid reflux. He could take a pill for that. Wouldn't it be nice if there were pills for heartache instead of heartburn?

"Take what I can get, hunh?"

She sighed.

"Don't hurt him."

He stared at her until it finally made sense. If he pushed for what he wanted, he'd probably screw up what he had now. He'd end up hurting and hurt Remy too. He could see that.

"Okay," he said softly. "Okay."

She stroked his cheekbone tenderly. "Dear Robert, if I could choose for him..."

"Yeah, well, I wish you could." You'd do a hell of a lot better job than he does.

Storm plucked up a kernel of popcorn and turned it over and over in her fingers. "I think that Rogue shares the same... wounds... as Remy."

Bobby pulled in a hard breath.

"Oh." Rogue was so scared of being touched... "Oh."
"It's not—they feed each other's worst tendencies and there is nothing I or you or anyone can do except stand back," Storm said. "Sometimes I despise her for using him." She huffed out a breath, almost indignant. "Sometimes I want to beat my brother over the head for letting her hurt him over and over. Like tonight."

"I could hold him down for you," Bobby offered.

"How very generous of you, Robert," she replied.

He flushed again.

Storm took pity and picked up the stack of DVDs on the coffee table. "What have you here? Ace Ventura, Dumb and Dumber, Animal House and The Blues Brothers. Do I sense a theme in your choices?"

"Yeah. Mindless pratfalls and frat rat humor."

"Hmn. I suppose it's no worse than Scott's beloved Three Stooges."

"He keeps those locked up."

"Well, then," she said. She dropped a disc into the player and started it. "Animal House it is."

"Cool. Toga, toga, toga."

Storm popped open his soda, took a sip and handed it to him. "You would look very well in a toga, Robert."

"Are you coming on to me, Storm?"

A handful of popcorn showered him.

He settled back and concentrated on the movie, pushing the idea of Remy and Rogue upstairs and Domino with Cable downstairs to the back of his mind.

The dim, blue-lit room bristled with machinery. A bank of monitors showed Nathan's heartbeat, blood oxygen, brainwaves, urine output, virus load, kidney function, liver function, and core body temperature. A spidery silver net over his skull provided a meter of his psi functions, charting the steady decline in strength.

A single, institutional green sheet drawn to his waist offered a gesture toward modesty. The man himself was too deeply unconscious to feel either embarrassment or chill. Environmental control kept the room warmed to body temperature.

None of the Shi'ar machinery had done any good. Too much of it was geared to their avian physiology and useless for humans. The Shi'ar didn't have mutants either. Their medical technology didn't deal with the x-gene's presence with much success.
Not for the first time, Henry McCoy cursed the metabolic and physical differences between every mutant. Each time he treated someone he had to invent a new drug spectrum and science.

Scott and Havok became deathly ill without enough exposure to solar radiation, whatever other aspects influenced their health. He'd yet to find a narcotic that worked on Gambit–small wonder the man associated the lab with pain. Jubilee's plasma made her run a constant high temperature. Shatterstar's heart wasn't in the right place because the bioengineers of Mojoverse only approximated external human physiology. It gave Henry a headache thinking about it.

His thoughts were wandering. He had stood beside beds watching patients and friends die before. He'd failed before. Too many times. He knew without doubt he would fail again. Nathan would not be the last to die of this disease. He couldn't escape that knowledge. No matter how he tried, he could think of nothing more to do.

The man's lungs were filling up with blood and fluid. His cells were filled with blocks of virus crystal. His organs were failing. Basically, the only thing keeping him alive was stubbornness, not the tangle of monitors and sensors attached to him just to chronicle his steady decline. The body still fought; weakly, but it fought, to breathe, to keep the heart beating.

The last battle would be lost soon. The final stages of La Belle would hit hard and fast.

The T/O virus Nathan had kept under control since childhood had taken advantage of the rest of his body's weakness. Tendrils of it had infiltrated from his metallic arm and spread through his system, warring with La Belle to see which would kill him first.

It was in his organs now.

It looked like after all this time, Apocalypse's virus was going to beat out La Belle, but only because the second virus had opened the door.

The techno/organic infection was weirdly beautiful in the way it remade flesh into machine. Even now, it was mimicking the processes of the body it was taking over. The Askani taught Nathan well as a child. Weak, drugged unconscious, some deep, nearly autonomic part of his mind still labored to control the T/O in his body, using telekinesis to force the transformed parts of him into a human semblance.

When his telekinesis collapsed the T/O would run wild through Nathan's body, ultimately forming a cocoon around him, while it labored to become whatever Apocalypse programmed it to be. Unless it just died without a host. Phalanx techno/organics would live and try to spread themselves, rejoining or rebuilding the collective. What En Sabah Nur created to stop the Chosen One wasn't truly alive or as adaptive as Phalanx nanites, though. It showed no signs of sentience.

Henry stared at the monitors, letting his thoughts chase themselves round and round.

Survival of the fittest.

This time around that turned out to be a nasty, mindless virus. Sentience, intelligence, civilization, technology, it was all just ways for that virus to spread itself farther, faster. All the grief, all the love, every achievement under the sun, they were all just side effects, alien dimensions to La Belle in its
She watched him breathe.

Not long now, she thought. He wouldn't wake up again, not even on the Astral Plane. It didn't take a psi to know that, just the link between them, steadily stretching and stretching.

She was a practical woman. There was no use to fooling herself. She'd known when he collapsed the last time that it was the last time. She'd known it while they hustled his unconscious body out of the safehouse and into the SUV. Every cough and rasping, gurgling breath he'd fought for as they'd driven through the night to get to the Academy had confirmed it. She'd seen enough dying to recognize when someone was losing to it.

She'd still sat there in the backseat with his head in her lap and a gun in her hand while Shatterstar drove like a maniac, speeding down back roads and once cutting through a stubbled farmer's field with the headlights off to avoid a road block.

'Star knew it too, but he hadn't said a word. He'd ignored Rictor's protests and took the keys from Domino's hand when she'd said she needed someone to drive.

He was a good kid.

Their kid.

More hers than Nathan's. Sam was the one Nathan had felt it safe to love, the one he knew would live, even into his future. 'Star was the one she'd looked out for because someone had to, because she knew what it meant to be nothing but a fighting machine that existed to entertain. Nathan had seen a useful soldier; she'd seen a child.

Closest she and Nate had come to it, anyway. Wasn't that a sorry reflection? But no, it wasn't. They'd done their best to teach Sam and the rest of the kids how to survive intact, body and soul. Some of them would make it.

Fuck it. They'd probably messed them up too. That's what parents did. She didn't have enough memories of her own childhood to be sure, just some vague memories of a mother who hadn't been much of a prize. Nathan was a Summers and their family defined dysfunctional in all new and special ways that made her head hurt just thinking about it. They'd probably been rotten examples when it came to relationships.

But here was Shatterstar with her and that meant something. She could hold it together for him, even if she felt like yelling and screaming and blowing the whole useless fucking lab up.

She wanted to tell 'Star Nathan hadn't just used him and forgotten his promise to help him get back to his own world and free his people. She wanted to curse Nathan because she was sure that would be a lie.

She wanted to tell 'Star to get out and go back to the safehouse and wrap himself around Rictor and never let go. There was never any time to waste.
He wouldn't go.

Stupid.

Stubborn.

He'd learned a lot from Nathan and her.

~I hope you're proud, Nate.~

Domino looked gray, but sat back straight beside the hospital bed.

Shatterstar stood just behind her and Henry had the feeling the warrior would stay at her side no matter what, ready to catch her when she finally folded. They were both in sterile skinsuits to protect against infection. They were wearing masks over their mouths and clear goggles over their eyes. Gloves, of course, reduced like Rogue to a denial of flesh, denied the intimacy of skin touching skin.

Nathan lay on the hospital bed. The flesh had melted from his body in the last week as the disease moved into its final phase. The oxygen mask affixed to his face couldn't disguise the sunken hollows of his eyes and under his cheekbones. Only the rangy frame remained in testimony to the man's once imposing size.

White whiskers bristled along his jaw, unshaven. It made him look unkempt. Abandoned. The short white hair on his head was matted down, dark with sweat. Liver dark bruising where the smaller capillaries had already begun hemorrhaging marked skin otherwise turned a papery, jaundiced yellow.

No glow showed from his left eye and the right, with the six Askani scars in a starburst around it, had been flooded red and blind when she'd watched Henry check it.

Blood seeped from Nathan's tear ducts, his cracked lips and his nose.

Domino disliked being helpless more than anything. Nathan had forced her into that very position more than once in the years they'd known each other. Inadvertently, but she still held a grudge.

~Bastard. Selfish, stupid, stubborn bastard,~ she sent through the psi-link. ~If you think I'm going to cry over your rotten carcass, you've got another think coming.~

The link stayed quiet on his end. He was too deeply unconscious to respond to a verbal communication, even a mental one, unless she pushed it much harder.

~I suppose you think you can just die now. Apocalypse is dead. Your future is fixed. Screw the rest of us, we'll just have to muddle along without the Chosen One to tell us how we're messing it all up.~

She'd never asked for this. Love. Love hadn't got her out of the fighting pits in Madripoor. It hadn't kept her alive through twenty years as a mercenary. She gritted her teeth, watching a trickle of blood slid down the side of Nathan's face. It didn't make a damned bit of difference to a virus.
"You don't have to stay here for this, 'Star," she said.

A soft scuff of a foot on tile indicated Shatterstar's uneasiness. Normally he could be remarkably still.

"I will stay."

Domino shrugged. "Fine. Whatever." Her attention switched back to Nathan. She'd already tuned out McCoy's dithering around the med lab. She pushed Shatterstar's presence out of her thoughts too.

~Nathan.~

Through the psi-link, she reached for him. It felt thin, dim and strained. His self already receded into the Astral Plane, the ties to his body unraveling as it failed. "Shit." She wasn't a psi; her mind couldn't anchor him or follow him there.

~Nathan!~

~Dom?~

His mental voice sounded wrong, faint and so tired.

What the hell was there to say at this point? ~Stick around a little longer, you big jerk.~

~Cut the link, Dom.~

~No.~

~Too tired.~

~I'll remind you that you said that when you're better, old man.~ She tried to inject a mental smile into that.

~Let go, Dom.~

~No. I'm a possessive bitch. You know that.~

She'd been with him all of these years. He didn't get to run out ahead of her. Figure it up and she'd had him longer than Aliya had. He didn't get to dump her and go cavort in the afterlife with his wife's ghost.

~Still hard as nails.~

~You betcha.~

Maybe he had caught some of those thoughts, because he sent, ~You were never second to her or anyone.~

A series of coughs wracked his body so that he fought for air even with the oxygen mask on. The fragile hold on consciousness he'd achieved winked out. She felt the psi-link spin out thinner and thinner.
The heart monitor stuttered and Domino held her breath until it steadied again.

She hated feeling helpless. She hated being helpless. But here she was.

~Thanks a lot, Nate.~

"Domino," Henry said.

She turned her head toward him, but stayed beside the hospital bed. Shatterstar stiffened, but he didn't shift from his place guarding Domino's back.

"Domino," he tried again.

"What is it, McCoy?"

"We have to put him in the containment chamber now."

She stared at him through the shield of the goggles. Violet eyes could be cold and harder than steel, he realized. Though the fabric of the mask, he saw a muscle twitch along her jaw.

"I'd like to stay with him," she said in a low, controlled voice.

"I'm sorry."

Shatterstar lifted his hand as though to clasp Domino's shoulder, but didn't touch her.

"He's in the third stage of the disease. When the seizures begin, he'll hemorrhage violently. His blood is saturated with the virus and aerosol infection is--," Henry swallowed hard, "--very possible. Even in a hazmat suit, it is just too dangerous, my dear. There is the T/O virus to worry about as well; it could breach a suit very easily."

"I understand," Domino said.

She stood and leaned over Cable's still form.

"G'journey, Nate," she murmured. "We had a good run. Target's down, money's in the bank. Time to cut loose."

"I can give you a sedative to ease the shock when the psi-link breaks," Henry offered.

"No."

He bit back his protest, knowing Domino would ignore him anyway.

"Do you require assistance, McCoy?" Shatterstar asked as Domino stalked out of the room.

"Thank you, but no." He inclined his head in the direction Domino had taken.

Shatterstar's silver eyes flickered. He gave Henry a nod of acknowledgment. "It is not a warrior's death, this," he said. "There is no honor to killing your enemy with a disease."
Henry grimaced.

The young man started for the door, to follow Domino, but paused. "There is nothing…?"

"I'm sorry."

The color of Shatterstar's eyes didn't change, but he bowed his head before going.

Domino stripped out of the skinsuit in the locker room attached to the med lab, not caring what Shatterstar saw. Vat grown, raised to fight in the arenas of Mojoworld, he had no body taboos and she'd lost hers a long time ago. He certainly didn't lust after her, though if he had it would have been a nice compliment.

"Domino, where are you going?" he asked after she'd showered and dressed in a combat suit.

"I'm going to shoot something. A lot of somethings," she snapped. She shrugged on her shoulder holster and double-checked her pistol.

He followed her to the Danger Room doors.

"You can wait in the control room," she told him, then slapped her palm onto the reader and waited for the heavy doors to slide open. They'd barely parted a foot before she stalked into the room.

"Domino Program Omega Three Twelve," she commanded. "Safeties off"

Before the Shi'ar solid holographs materialized, she spotted Shatterstar at the window of the control room.

Then a spidery mechanical thing erupted out of the ground at her and she began shooting.

~Fuck you, Nathan. I'm not going to stand outside a goddamned containment chamber and weep and gnash my teeth like some spineless Victorian virgin. Scott and Jean will probably show up soon anyway and God knows I don't want to deal with them.~

Spider thing went down in a shower of parts and sparks and Domino spun, hunting a new target.

She didn't want to talk to anyone, just pull the trigger.

Alone with the dying man, Henry began disconnecting the monitors and IVs.

He worked swiftly, but kept his touch gentle. "Nathan, my friend," he spoke as he worked, "perhaps you hear me. Scott and Jean are on their way from Muir Island. They'll be here within an hour, two at the most. I want to tell you to hold on until then, but truthfully it might be better if they weren't here to see the end."

He scooped Nathan into his arms rather than waste time and energy maneuvering a gurney.

"Does that sound unkind, Nathan?" he asked as he carried the wasted figure down the corridor to the adamantium-reinforced containment chamber that had been fitted as an infirmary room. "It's not meant to be. I venture to say that assuredly both you and they would take comfort in each other's
presence in these last hours. But, Nathan, as your physician I can also predict the unfortunately painful aspect of third stage La Belle and I cannot believe that a man such as you would wish either to be seen or to have anyone endure seeing such. I fear it will scar Scott and Jean."

The motion sensor on the unsecured door triggered it to iris open.

Henry stepped through smoothly and settled Nathan onto the already prepared bed.

"Then there is Domino. The woman is a rock, but you must know, with your psi-link, that she is suffering most heinously. I suspect you have spent precious energy and concentration in blocking much of your pain from her. As a doctor, I must think that is foolish, but as man, Nathan, I approve. Pain shared is pain halved, they say, but not genuine physical pain. Perhaps not even emotional pain. Where's the ease in knowing anyone is suffering the same agonies as yourself?"

Soft fans force circulated sterilized air in the room. The sound was so much part of life in the underground levels that Henry didn't really hear them.

He set about making Nathan as comfortable as he could be. Soft, padded, but steel mesh reinforced straps buckled together so that they would hold his body to the bed. Soon they would be necessary.

"My apologies, Nathan. I regret the indignity heartily."

The top of the bed cranked up. It would only help for a little while, but it was a kindness and Henry tried to be a kind man. His huge hands—they were outsized even as a child - had a delicate touch every X-Man had known at one time or another and appreciated.

"Bobby and Remy made it out of Detroit. Did you know that? I was deeply relieved to see them both. Their blood tests are still in the works... I've been a bit busy. They're both resistant. Lucky La Belle doesn't like temperature variations, isn't it?"

La Belle was an ugly, evil looking construct. Henry had stared at it on his monitors for hours; he had come to hate the very look of it. The shepherd's crook of a fila virus was simple and lovely by comparison. La Belle was a bastardized monster in the shape of a barbed caltrop that twisted and moved by itself. There was nothing of randomness to its hunt for cells to infect. It had adapted to its baseline human vectors. It went on adapting.

Mutating.

"Now there's irony for you, Nathan."

Distracted, Henry wondered if La Belle wouldn't mutate again, adapting to hosts with extreme temperature variations like Robert and Remy.

Nathan groaned.

"Ah, Nathan, I have been remiss, have I not?"

Henry prepared the cocktail of painkillers and hooked the IV up to the stand by the bed. Three weeks ago he had inserted a port in the back of Nathan's flesh hand to make it easier for Domino and Nathan himself to administer injections. He worked swiftly now, habit forcing him to take the care that wouldn't matter to Nathan much longer.
"There," he said, dialing the valve regulator to deliver a strong dose into Nathan's blood stream. "That should provide some relief"

He couldn't give Nathan enough drugs to stop the pain, only take the worst edge off. A stronger dose would kill the man in his weakened state. The thought to do that, to save them all so much pain, crossed his mind. He dismissed it. If it had been another man, perhaps he would have considered it, but not Nathan. Nathan Christopher Charles 'Cable' Dayspring Askani'son Summers would rather endure the pain than give up an inch.

The containment chamber was warmed to the same 98° F as the room in the med lab. He'd programmed it himself. He tucked the sheet up over Nathan's legs, wincing at the way the cloth draped over the sharp projections of knee cap and hipbone.

The temperature made it uncomfortable for Henry. His fur was matted down and itchy beneath the skinsuit he too wore. His claws continually threatened to tear through the tips of his gloves. He envied the feline ferals that had retractable claws. His were more like a dog's or a bear's.

He wished Cecelia were with him. His greatest skills lay in research. Cecelia was the better physician, even if she did have the bedside manner of an angry bull. But Cecelia was on Muir, laboring to take over all of Moira's work there.

He attached a simpler set of monitors to Nathan.

"There."

He stopped and listened to the rasping, labored breaths patiently. The coughing would begin again soon. Unless the T/O virus reached Nathan's brain and killed him before La Belle set the seizures in train. Either the coughing or the seizures would trigger the final hemorrhaging through his body. The seizures would also, in Nathan's case, include his psi abilities flying out of control.

From there it would grow worse.

Henry had seen three final stage alpha mutants. Each had completely lost control of their power as they began hemorrhaging in the brain. One died so swiftly, the hemorrhage so severe, that there had been little time for him to do any damage. The other two had wrecked most of the Muir Island Research Station's infirmary.

With a psi of Cable's strength the containment chamber seemed the only choice.

When it began, Nathan would have to be left alone, locked inside.

Until then, Henry would remain with him. Domino would have too, but Henry didn't want her there when it began. He feared he wouldn't be able to drag her out of the chamber.

"Sam is still searching for the rest of his family, you know," he said. He sank down in a tailor's squat and rested his arms against the side of the bed. "Of course, you know. He's in Kentucky again. Husk is with him. Apparently his MRF squad liberated one of the newer, smaller camps BuSec have begun using."

He sighed.

"I fear the rest of the Guthries are dead. The Trues are not above burying them in some unmarked
grave and concealing the truth."

Henry turned his thoughts away from the assumed fate of the Guthries. He brightened as he considered other news.

"Did you see the pictures of Kitty and Pete's twins? Harry and Moira. There's talk of evacuating all the younger children to Avalon Station in case of a Sentinel attack on Hammer Bay…"

He went on and on, filling the room with his voice, eschewing his more erudite and polysyllabic vocabulary for simpler words, playing the gossip game, waiting for the end to come as it would.

Nathan breathed, the gurgle in his chest audible in the silences between Henry's words, growing louder.

________________________

No matter how Remy tried, every touch or caress seemed to lead him back to that damned, fucking collar. With it locked around her neck, he could touch her. With it locked around her neck, it was all he could see.

He had said he wasn't going to do this anymore.

He was just lying to himself.

She hated that thing. He knew. It left her powerless in ways that had nothing to do with being a mutant. It reminded her of being a captive in Genosha and what the guards did to her there. There were other, older memories too. He knew.

He knew about being helpless too. He'd always been able to read the secret in her eyes. It was his secret too and older than her first time in Genosha, older than what he did on the streets.

Somewhere in Rogue's fragmented, shattered past that she had never spoken of to anyone was her own Velvet Ministry.

They never talked about it.

The things he said to Bobby in that tenement the other day were the closest he'd come to confiding in anyone except Storm in many years.

He assumed Jean-Luc knew. After all, the thief who stole a baby from the hospital nursery for the Antiquary had to know what happened in the Velvet Ministry. All the love he'd felt for his adopted father was ashes now. He knew he had been used; used from day of his birth to play out a prophecy, given to the Antiquary, sent into the streets, adopted into the Guild, all to play out a prediction, to unite the Guilds and bring about the return of the Old Kingdom. It was bitter, knowing the truth. The lies were comforting and warm. He missed them, wished he could still tell them and believe them, keep his secrets even from himself.

Storm guessed. She'd held him through his nightmares enough times. They weren't all of the Mutant Massacre. She loved him enough not to speak of it except when he did.
Rogue knew.

She had his memories. The worst, the ugliest, the things that had shamed and burned him, those were the memories her fickle power stripped out of him and into her head. He hated that.

Rogue knew.

He couldn't go through this. Selfish much, Scott mocked himself. Of course, he could go through it. He wasn't the one dying.

Nathan was the one doing that.

Nathan. Damn it. Part of him felt angry with his son for doing this. Again. As if Nathan had had a choice in the matter. Scott walked down the med lab corridor, his footsteps echoing along with Jean's. It was easier to be angry than to feel helpless and useless and utterly lost. He could do nothing. He reined himself in. Jean would feel the backlash of his anger through their bond if he didn't. She didn't deserve to suffer too.

Who was he kidding?

Jean was already suffering.

He could feel her echoing his own emotions and had been all the way over from Muir. Three hours across the Atlantic in the Blackbird–fast as the fastest Concorde ever–while he distracted himself with piloting, Jean locked her own sorrow away and was just there with him. She was afraid too.

He tightened his hand around hers. She squeezed it back.

All he could think about was there would be no Askani sister appearing to whisk Nathan away and save him this time. The Chosen One had succeeded and that future would never come to be.

Apparently, you could be too successful.

Right now, Scott thought, he could give a shit for what happened in the 38th century. Bring Apocalypse back and to hell with them all if it would save his son.

Only it wouldn't.

He hoped, no, prayed that Nathan wasn't suffering consciously. He couldn't remember what Hank had told them on the phone. Was it painful? He was afraid to see his son hurting when there was nothing he could do to stop it.

If he could just take Nathan's pain and endure it himself…

They reached the doors to the containment chamber and he leaned against them, pressing the sides of his fists and his forehead against the reinforced viewing window. Nathan was a scarecrow laid out and strapped down on the bed inside.

His stomach threatened to eject anything he'd swallowed in the last three days. God, that couldn't be Nathan in there. All that the disease had left were the big, rangy bones that let him tower over Scott
and just about everyone but Bishop.

Metal gleamed where it shouldn't. Traceries of the T/O covered his chest.

No parent should watch his son dying. It was too cruel. Wrong. How many times did he have to lose Nathan? How many times did Nathan have to suffer and sacrifice? His son had already endured this once, when Apocalypse first infected him with the T/O virus. Not all Beast's skills could save him then either. When the Askani came with her offer, Scott had sent Nathan with her.

Losing him to the future had been better than letting him die.

But Nathan hadn't understood that or forgiven it. Scott had never been able to give him the things he needed from a father. Now it felt like failing him all over again. Hank had told them he couldn't let them go into the containment chamber.

It was so wrong that Nathan had to die in there, alone, without even someone to hold his hand. Someone should be there. Maybe Nathan wouldn't want him, but Domino or… someone. Jean. Jean could reach him on the Astral Plane.

He hadn't said good-bye.

The glass against his forehead felt cool. Scott pressed harder against it. Maybe Nathan would hear him.

~Nathan, I love you.~

He'd never been comfortable saying things like that. He knew Nathan wasn't one for emotional declarations either. No apologies, given or received. The Askani didn't encourage regrets.

What is, is.

~I'm here.~

Jean caught his thought and sifted it into Nathan's unconscious mind. Scott hoped it helped. He hoped it was some comfort.

~I'm here, son.~

~love flowing into anticipation melding with ache and regret and weariness swirling into sickness and sorrow sliding together with want and lust cutting through with sharp blades of anger and denial~

– what wasn't his, what was someone else's? Remy bolstered his shields, pushing everything that wasn't him outside his head.

He brought Rogue's bare fingers to his lips and kissed them. Her hands were the softest he'd ever known. Perfect. Smooth and manicured and cared for the way the thieves kept their hands.

He wouldn't look at the collar, heavy and metal and rigid around her neck.
Through his eyelashes, he looked up and saw her watching him, green eyes glittering. Her breath came deep and fast. He had figured out long ago that Rogue's hands were her greatest erogenous zone. She seemed almost oblivious to much of her body as a body beyond its surface. Sex was almost an afterthought, a chore to be done so Rogue could get what she wanted: skin.

Whether it was because of her power or some twist in her psyche, something rewired wrong in her broken, never mentioned childhood. It didn't matter. He could almost understand it. His empathy made him crave contact. Remy loved sex for itself, but wanted it for the other things it provided him, emotions and sensations that weren't muddied by thought. He didn't mind doing what pleased her.

Pleasing her pleased Remy. What he gave, he got, and if he felt especially generous, he could feed that sensation back to his partner and establish a feedback loop that would ruin them for anyone else.

Rogue didn't want to touch the heights. What Rogue wanted was simple. Hands and mouth.

Remy caught one of her hands and held it, palm to palm, with his. His fingers were longer, the palms broader, for all he had a slender hand for a man. Rogue's hands were tiny. Tiny, pretty hands that he had grown almost obsessed with; it was a shame they were always hidden under her gloves.

~Sorrow sinking into mourning slipping over a twinge of breathless distress cloying copper taste catching on the tongue bleeding into anger again into bitterness disbelief guarded a stitch a throb a sting~

– the sting from his fingernails cutting into his own palms. Remy checked his shields but they were still solid. The bleed through of emotions and sensation came from Cable picking up everything around him and rebroadcasting. Even dying, the man's mind held incredible power.

He could sense the man was dying too. If he had any sense he'd get out, get as far away as possible before it happened. But there was Rogue in the here and the now and he wouldn't leave her. He could handle a little bleed through.

Her body was cream and petal soft against the white sheets of her bed. Hair spread in a wavy fan over it. The pillows with their delicate eyelet lace edges were on the floor, along with the stuffed animals she collected and kept on her bed. It was a feminine room, but not as girlish as the one she had had at the mansion. Making love there would have been impossible for Remy; he'd have felt like a pedophile. That room had been destroyed. Another childhood taken away. This room didn't have the feeling that one had: it wasn't a sanctuary.

He knelt between her legs, admiring her. She looked inquiring and he smiled.

"You look pretty, chere."

Her mouth twitched. "That's all you can say?"

He nodded. Words. She didn't trust his words or his voice anyway.

"So much for all that smooth talk."

Rogue looked all pale and flushed pink. The color deepened over her chest, rose tinted. The collar on her neck looked blocky and obscene. Remy tried to ignore it.

He laced his fingers through hers and kissed his way up her arm to her shoulder, pausing at the bare
cap, carefully averting his gaze from the collar. No escape from the blink of the telltale light in his peripheral vision though.

Rogue's free hand slid into his hair. He barely felt it. Without powers, she touched only tentatively, the habit of reining back her super-strength too ingrained to throw off for a few brief hours.

He wanted to tell her she could let go, but didn't. Too easy to shatter her mood; anything he said would be taken as a criticism. He wanted to make the night perfect for her, to give her a fantasy in reward for the compromise she'd made by putting on the collar.

Remy wished he could whisper in her ear, tell her navel it was the loveliest navel he'd ever kissed, to murmur promises and compliments and eager instruction against her skin. He swallowed back all the words. Afterward, he knew he would be relieved that they had said nothing. Rogue didn't like him to talk when they made - had sex–love. She was always quiet, muffling any sounds against the sheets, wordless, even biting her own hand to stay silent. She'd been that way since the first time and he knew better than to ask about it.

No declarations. He'd told her not to say it. She didn't. Maybe she wouldn't have anyway. This time was precious, but it wouldn't last. They weren't real anymore.

Jean started counting down after Alex's call.

She counted down miles across the Atlantic, hours in the air, how many times Scott flipped the autopilot on and then off. She calculated how many gallons of aviation fuel they burned every thirty seconds. She catalogued every dial, switch and gauge in the cockpit of the jet. The Blackbird was surprisingly analog.

She would have counted all the stars in the night sky if she could have.

She counted every step to the elevator and every second in it, sinking down, after they arrived in Snow Valley. She counted the buttons on Scott's shirt. (Six down the front, two on each cuff, two smaller ones holding down the collar and an extra sewn to an inside seam: thirteen; she decided the collar buttons didn't count, they were different: eleven. Not that she was superstitious.)

She counted how many tiles filled the floor of the hall from side to side and how many strides it took Scott to reach the door of the containment chamber.

Counting helped her focus. Professor Xavier had taught her to use it as a tool early on as a way of controlling her telepathy. Concentrating helped her block out the voices. She doubted he'd approve of the way she'd learned to use it over the years as an avoidance technique.

Counting could always be counted on, she quipped grimly to herself. No matter where she was, even locked in her mind, something could be counted, if only a litany of every mistake she'd ever made.

She counted the minds in the house, recognizing them all. Ten people, not counting Scott and herself, to shield when Nathan slipped away. The headblind might be safer than the psis.

Rogue was relatively psi-resistant. That was good. Jean located her upstairs in bed concentrating on… Oh. Jean didn't want to eavesdrop on that. She didn't need to look to see who was with Rogue. She could barely discern his psychic presence, quicksilver mind and black shields. Remy had the
best shields in existence; he could shrug off the Professor's probes. He should be all right.

Karma had strong shields and not much in the way of ties to any of them. She'd probably be all right. Forge had a mechanical psi-shield he'd developed. She didn't worry about him at all. Shatterstar would need to be protected. He didn't have the experience or the psi-strength to protect his mind.

Storm and Bobby and Beast were all veterans of psi attacks. They knew how to weather the storm. So did Alex, but she'd keep a closer eye on him since he was Summers and closer to Nathan because of that.

Nathan.

She could count the ways they were bound together or just as easily those that always held them at a distance from each other. They'd found a common ground with each other, the respect of two powerful psis for each other, and not much more. Her son that never was. Not quite her child, not of body, she'd never carried him or given birth to him, even in some future timeline. Her clone's son then, her husband's son, her adopted son, possessor of her genetics, but no, not quite her son.

How much longer did he have?

A subtle scan of Henry's mind told her time had run out. She could count the grains of sand Nathan had left as his life trickled away.

Domino was still tied to him. The psi-link had stretched to the breaking point, but it was there. Jean recoiled from Domino's mind, flinching from the roiling emotions the other woman had hidden behind her cool mask. She didn't know what would happen when it snapped.

Jean bit her lip. Scott's shoulders were shaking. The bond between them told her how much he hurt, how much he despised waiting and doing nothing. Hot wet salt slid onto her tongue and threatened to run down her chin; she'd drawn blood with her own teeth. Pain could be a focus too. She pressed close against Scott's back, let her cheek rest between his shoulder blades and her arms wrap around him.

She closed her eyes and felt for Nathan's mind on the Astral Plane, but he had faded too far to touch psionically. Her own survival instinct yanked her away from following him into the dissolving grayness of not being.

She counted breaths: hers, Scott's, Nathan's.

~In out in out five hundred thirty-four, thirty-five in out thirty-six thirty-seven blood on a lip ribs under hands harsh sobs thirty-eight thirty-nine pressing close~

Remy licked his lip, tasting blood that wasn't there.

Time was running out.

Was that his thought? He couldn't tell and it frightened him.

He was thinking too much. Too much had passed between Rogue and him, too many tangled emotions, knotted tight enough to pull painfully. He didn't dare just open his shields and experience
what she wanted. Not now and here.

He couldn't share what he felt with her anyway. She had always rejected that vehemently. One touch of his empathy and Rogue would be out of the bed, on her way out of the room, cursing him.

Sharing was too risky anyway. Rogue had hurt him too many times. It would be easier to open up to a Bourbon Street whore than to her. He couldn't untangle his bitterness from his love any longer. It was the old, tired dilemma. Remy did his best to ignore it. Take what you can get was an old lesson they both knew by heart.

One crack in his shields and he'd drown. There was a flood of emotion just outside his mind, seeping into his head despite his every trick and effort.

He didn't really want to know what Rogue felt or thought anymore anyway, he realized. Which didn't speak well of his reasons for being with her, he knew.

Rogue's hands played over his shoulders. Practiced and knowing in ways Rogue shouldn't have been. He'd always, always longed for her touch. Typical thief wanting what he couldn't have, what didn't belong to him. Now he wanted her hands off because he knew that wasn't her touch and hated it.

He moved down following the flush to Rogue's breasts. She moaned softly and pressed his head closer. One long, white leg bent up along his hip. Her foot ran down the back of his thigh.

She had pulled up someone else's memories to play the part she thought he wanted. She'd done it before; it was something that he hated. Remy had seen strangers staring from Rogue's eyes when he was inside her, but never, at least, his own eidolon.

"There," she murmured when his other hand found its way between her legs, "there."

Mouth and hands.

That's all she wanted.

Not him.

He withdrew into himself, the way he had learned in the Velvet Ministry. Just a body. It even felt good.

He wasn't sure, but he thought he might hate her.

Despite his best shields, he still felt the others in the house. He hurt and it wasn't his pain. This hurt but not so much. He could still discern the difference. He blocked it out determinedly. There was just his body. Physical sensation. Hands and mouths, harsh breaths and sweat and completion. That was all.

Domino methodically mowed down another Sentinel.

This was the second program she'd run. This one let her scavenge weapons from the scenario, so she
lofted a grenade into a foxhole full of True Blues.

"Fire in the hole!"

The body parts riding the fireball filled her with satisfaction.

He was going. The black pull on her consciousness made playing without safeties suicidal, but she didn't care. She had a safety net anyway. Shatterstar was still in the control room. He could stop everything with a single command.

Domino knew very well that the time it would take to give that command might see her dead.

She didn't care.

Afterward, Remy dressed wordlessly, intent on getting out and away. His head was throbbing from the pressure against his shields. He felt disconnected. Something should have hurt, but everything was turned off.

Rogue drew herself up and pulled the sheet around her. Her elbows rested on her bent knees. She just watched him as he sat on the edge of the bed to lace up his old trainers. She still wore the collar; she could still touch him. She didn't. That said something about their relationship.

Their non-relationship.

Remy was the one everyone had always called a slut, but Rogue was the one who had reduced everything to just sex.

He couldn't stop sensing the emotions running through the rest of the occupants of the house. Everybody hurt. It made his breath catch in his chest. His mouth filled with the taste of blood again.

"Fire in the hole!.."

He was getting words now too. He shuddered.

Jean and Scott were so wound together they seemed to be one psychic entity united in grief. Beast was filled of unfounded guilt. Storm's sorrow had the serene, gentle feel of warm rain, but ran deep. Bobby sat with her; his emotions were a tangle of conflicts Remy didn't want to examine. He knew Bobby to be more than the laughing slacker he pretended, but couldn't face dealing with the man's true face today. Not while he had to brace himself against Domino's silent fury and grief and 'Star's bewildered unhappiness.

"Did you ever really love me?"

Remy didn't look at her, his head bent, knotting laces. He really wanted a shower now.

Domino had taken over the Academy's version of the Danger Room. She was running a combat simulation with the safeties off. Pain and rage pulsed off her in waves so strong Remy barely picked up Shatterstar nearby, watching over her helplessly.

"You came to me, chere."
"Fuck you."

"You just did." That's exactly what she did.

He rose from the bed.

Remy's head throbbed with Domino's pain. He would go ask Henrif for a sedative, something that would work for him, but didn't want to run into Jean or Scott. A bottle of bourbon would do the trick. He'd be able to bear it if he could just dull the edges.

He looked back at Rogue. Still beautiful. He knew why she was the way she was. He knew her secret though she had never uttered it. Why he thought he could heal her when he couldn't even save himself was a mystery. Some damage became part of a person forever. She wouldn't be Rogue without her secrets.

He used a length of sheet to insulate his bare hand and hold the collar while he released the lock. She held still, her head turned away. A strand of hair stuck to her temple. The skin so fine there he could see a tracery of blue vein.

"Leave it," she said of the collar. "I'll put it back in the armory."

"Did you think anything had changed?" he asked.

Remy felt his control thinning, his shields eaten away by exhaustion and the amount of psi energy threaded through the house.

He didn't want Domino's pain. He didn't want anyone's pain or any of their emotions. Nothing else scared him the way that losing his sense of self in someone else's mind did. He had fought Sinister over learning to use his psionic abilities because that. How could he tell what was him and what wasn't if he felt someone's emotions and thought their thoughts?

In another moment, Domino would collapse and begin weeping. Shatterstar wouldn't know what to do. Remy didn't either. He wished he could shut her out. Wanted to shut everyone out. Instead, he knew that:

Domino skidded to a stop, clapped her hands to her head and shouted, "Nate!" Shatterstar slammed his hand down on the wide red Emergency Program Stop pad. The Sentinel bringing its hand down on Domino froze and dissolved. Domino had crumpled to the ground and didn't see.

He flinched physically. Rogue ignored him.

Remy sighed and walked out the door.

Nathan Summers coughed and choked on his own blood. The heart monitor charted as his heart lost rhythm, slowed, then beat faster and faster. His body thrashed against the restraints then seized. He stopped breathing.

Blood splattered against the viewing window, followed by a piece of the IV stand, both flung by a TK explosion. Scott flinched back. Nathan's brain, dying, used his TK to tear his body apart.
"Oh God. Nathan."

The glass cracked and shattered, pieces slicing into Scott's face. Only his visor saved his eyes. Jean jerked him back with her telekinesis and formed a protective bubble around them both.

"Henry, stay back!" she screamed.

A storm of released psionic energy ripped through the containment chamber, destroying everything around Nathan's seizing form, the last animal panic of his failing brain.

Flatline.

Agony sucked Domino down into hell and she convulsed, blood pouring from her nose and eyes and ears. A high keening scream ripped out of her throat. She felt half her soul being ripped loose and clawed at the darkness in her head before the blackness swallowed her.

High in the corners of the containment chamber a set of fiber optic camera eyes recorded everything.

Scott knew when his son stopped breathing, though he couldn't see into the room from the floor. He knew because Jean's breath hitched and stilled and the psi-bond between them writhed and torqued under a wave of psi energy pouring into Jean. Her mental scream echoed through his head even as she pinched the bond down to almost nothing.

"Jean!"

He flipped her onto her back and began trying to breathe for her.

~Jean, don't leave me!~

Karma whimpered in her sleep, blood seeping into her pillow, and slipped into a deeper unconsciousness.

Halfway down the hall to his own room, the whipsaw raw agony of Cable's last choking breaths shredded Remy's shields. It was a lizard brain scream of protest at death followed by Domino's lacerated emotions and took Remy down to his knees. It slewed through him, mind and body, far too strong to block.

He couldn't breathe to scream.

He curled into a fetal ball, overwhelmed, dissolving, helpless to stop the endless tsunami of emotion flooding into his brain, disappeared into it and was lost.
The screaming didn't go away for six days.

AD 2009, February 19
Snow Valley
Massachusetts Academy

"Do you know I'm the one that found you in the hall?" Bobby asked.

Everyone in the house had felt it, headblind or not, the white-hot whip of mental pain that left their heads throbbing for days. Psis up and down the eastern seaboard had complained of migraines and even burn-out after Cable's death.

The psis in the house must have got something much more, much worse. Karma had been unconscious for days. Jean and Remy both stopped breathing. Scott was with Jean and began rescue breathing immediately. Bobby found Remy by accident and it still stirred a sick feeling in his gut.

What if he hadn't gone upstairs? His head had been throbbing. He'd just wanted to lie down on his bed in the dark.

"Come on. Do you know how scared I was? You weren't breathing."

When he'd dreamed of his mouth on Remy's, Bobby hadn't been fantasizing about doing CPR. He didn't know if Remy started breathing again on his own or not. It felt like his own heart would stop. He hadn't known he could feel worse than he did when he found Remy on the floor, not until he carried him into the med lab and saw Beast and Scott hooking Jean up to life support.

When Beast saw them, he'd cursed fluently and commed Forge to check Karma. Not long later, she'd been in a bed beside Jean and Remy. Professor X flew back from Muir and checked the three of them and said they'd be okay. They'd wake up when they were ready. As a reassurance, it had been less than successful.

Karma woke up first.

Then Remy.

He'd been afraid Remy wasn't going to wake up. Scott said he could still feel Jean through their bond, but Remy didn't have anything to anchor him. Bobby understood that instinctually. But Remy had clawed his way out of a coma before and after six days, he opened his eyes, took one look around the lab and crawled out of there.

Beast wasn't willing to restrain him to keep him down there, so Bobby had volunteered to sit with him in his bedroom.

Remy stared out the window. It was raining, a steady gray curtain of water darkening the afternoon. He probably wanted to go out the window and climb up on the roof, but no one was going to let him do that until he was steadier on his feet. He couldn't keep much more than soup down without puking. Remy already had his shields back up, though.
"Domino didn't stay for the funeral."

She had taken off before any of them had thought to look for her. No one knew where she'd gone to
ground and no one wanted to be the one to find her. Domino was always an enigma. Maybe she
would act like nothing had happened or maybe it would be like poking a wounded tiger with a stick.
Bobby figured letting her do her thing her way was the best bet. No one else seemed to feel
differently.

Remy cocked his head then nodded.

"'Star went with her." Bobby hesitated. "I guess that's good. Rogue came down to the med lab once,
while you were still unconscious."

Remy's eyes slid sideways to study Bobby's expression. He shifted uncomfortably under skeptical
pressure of that look.

"She said she got a call from Mystique. Something she needed Rogue to handle. Beast said you'd be
okay, so… you know… she went."

Bobby fidgeted some more.

"So, yeah, Beast and the Prof said you're going to be okay after a while. A couple of weeks and it'll
all come back, even though you're headblind right now. You don't get to claim you're not a telepath
anymore either. It was just the psis that got really pancaked and you went down like a ton of bricks,
so…"

Remy gave him the finger and Bobby laughed a little unsteadily.

"Okay, okay."

He plucked at a loose thread at the bottom of his shirt.

"Jean's supposed to wake up tomorrow. I guess she got the worst of it."

Remy shrugged.

"Do you--do you want me to get out of here? I could get Storm. She'd stay with you if I'm bugging
you."

"You're not bugging me, Bobby," Remy rasped out. He grimaced and massaged his temples.

"Beast left some pain killers. He said it was something that would work for you. Do you want
some?"

"Oui."

"Okay, I'll get them." He bounced up and ran to the attached bath, coming back with a glass of water
and the prescription Beast had left for Remy. Something to do at last. He should have mentioned
them before. "Here."

"Merci."
Remy swallowed the pills and pressed the glass against his forehead.

"Remy?"

Remy turned his face toward Bobby.

"Did you know something like that could happen to you?"

Remy swallowed hard.

"Did you – "

"Oui."

"But it'll come back," Bobby tried to comfort him.

Remy gave him a disbelieving look.

Bobby blinked. Oh. "You don't want it to," he said slowly.

A headshake.

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

Remy turned his back to him and went back to watching the rain. It made everything look soft and far away. The muted light through the window glass made rain shadows run down his face like tear tracks.

Bobby settled himself opposite him in the window seat and stared out too.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Character Death
Don't Stand So Close to Me

Chapter Summary

News from Out There, for your entertainment and edification. There's nothing new under the sun.

AD 2227, February 16
Earth
Various Countries

"And in tonight's report, we ask the man and the woman on the street what they think about reopening contact with New Genosha and mutants. ENN reporters spoke to people all over the globe to gather their opinions.

Billy Harper (United Nations of America), hovermobile mechanic:

"It's a bad idea. They need to be locked up on that island. My great granddaddy fought in the Gene Wars. Folks in Europa and Pan Africa got no idea the kind of damage done back then, but you fly over Old Nashville sometime and it's still rubble where the Pures and the Muties fought. The Lord above never meant for good folks to do the things mutants could do. I ain't saying that they need to be killed or nothing, but things'd be better if their kind stuck to their kind and humans to humans and we just stayed away from each other."

Holle Otake (Pan Africa), travel agent:

"I suppose that living here in Jo'berg, we are a touch more aware of New Genosha than in many countries. Shipping and pleasure craft are forced to steer altered courses to bypass the Great Barrier. Aside from that, we know nothing about the mutants that live there. In that way, they are very good neighbors. Better than New Rhodesians, certainly. They never bombed their own people, did they?"

Alan Winston-Pierce (United European Nations), financier:

"I venture to say that few people have considered the legal and financial implications of inviting New Genosha back onto the world stage. Massive amounts of funds and properties were seized from mutants during and after the Gene Wars. All of that ended
in government hands. I grew up near a lovely estate called Braddock Manor. It's presently being used by the UEN Ministry of Defense, but everyone in the area knows it was an MRF station during the Gene Wars; the Braddocks were mutants. What happens when their heirs and assignees want it back?"

Sayid Ali Maktoum (Pan Africa), hydrologist:

"I don't care. I don't see how it will make any difference to me or anyone in the Sudan. Tell me they can bring water to the desert and I'll be interested. I'll be ecstatic. Other than that, it just seems silly to worry about a country that has obviously been taking care of itself without the rest of the world's help."

Bai Suong (Pacifica), geneticist:

"Ah, this is actually of great interest to me. I am hoping to open a dialogue with some of the researchers in New Genosha. Before the Gene Wars, some incredibly cutting edge work was being developed among geneticists working with the x-gene. But it isn't accurate to characterize New Genoshans as the only mutants in the world. Many, many people, animals, and plants are mutants. All it takes is a tiny change in the genetic map. Evolution is the product of mutation as much as natural selection. They work in tandem. The people who went to New Genosha after the Gene Wars were all possessors of the x-gene, which proved to be a dominant genetic package. However, there are plenty of other mutations that don't involve the x-gene. Without mutations, we wouldn't have the Cally-DaCosta Treatment that cures twenty-three different varieties of cancer—it's a synthetic version of a set of immuno-enzymes from a single person with a tiny mutation."

Noel Penford (UNA), tree farmer:

"I don't want them around. Things have been good. The UN lets them off that island, who knows what's going to happen? I don't want mutants in my backyard."

Eugene Morris (Pacifica), ENN news anchor:

"Well, Marilyn, people seem to have a lot of different opinions, don't they?"

Marilyn Cho (UEN), ENN vidreporter:
"Yes, Gene, they do and we still have no idea what the New Genoshans think and won’t until the UN delegation returns from the preliminary talks being held in Hammer Bay. Our embedded colleagues with Ambassador Aiken's delegation are surely working hard to find that out, though."
And the hits keep coming. Rogue does a shitty thing and Remy hits the breaking point.

Please read the end note for this chapter for a trigger warning.

Sometimes, coming back to the Snow Valley headquarters was a relief. It felt like an oasis of safety. Lately, though, that safety felt like an illusion to Remy. Things weren't all right and hadn't been in years. It was a place to lay his head, better than the MRF safehouses he used most of the time and that was all. Just a place where he didn't need an image inducer or sunglasses to hide his eyes.

Not home.

He wished Logan were around. They'd find a nasty biker bar, play pool, drink too much and race their Harleys back. Forget everything else for a while. Instead, he slumped in a desk chair in front of his laptop, checking his e-mail. He highlighted a message, hoping it would distract him from the thoughts chasing themselves through his mind.

From: sconaway@popmail.net
To: rlebeau@xav.edu.co
[Fwd from: creoleking@bontemps.org]
Date stamp: 23 March 2010
Subject: you'll never guess

I was at Elysian's new headquarters in Geneva and ran into Courier. We got to griping about you and all the trouble you've got us in and the next thing we knew we eloped! We're going to honeymoon in Crete. No mad scientists, cursed jewels, time travel or gendermorphing allowed. Exquisite, expensive wedding gifts welcome—if they're legit!—send them to Geneva though.

I know things are bad in the States. Jake's father is moving the business from DC to London. We won't be coming back either. Jake's not registered.

Watch out for yourself, okay?
He chuckled. Jacob Gavin, Jr. and Sekmet Conaway were married. A smile lit his face as he thought about it. Damn. He'd have to send them something. Something ridiculously expensive. Something ridiculous. Maybe something nice too, he didn't have that many true friends, friends who had stood beside him while he tried to work for New Son, fulfill his Guild obligations and be an X-Man at the same time.

He moved on to the next message. From his stockbroker, Jeremy, trying to persuade him to invest in Trask Industries. They had five confirmed contracts with the Defense Department to manufacture more Sentinels. He wasn't quite mercenary enough to want a profit made from that. He sent a brusque reply, but didn't explain why he wouldn't put money into Trask or companies like Osborne, the Brand Corporation, Roxon Oil and Stark-Fujikawa. He instructed Jeremy to start moving his accounts and investments into off-shore banks and businesses in the same message.

None of the accounts Jeremy managed were in Remy's real name, but if the authorities were ever to connect investor Stephan Francis with the terrorist Gambit, they would freeze and seize everything. That wouldn't break him, but he had no intention of letting them have any of his money. Moving everything out of the US was a precaution he'd been putting off too long.

It might be time to close his accounts with Willitts, Stanis & Montgomery entirely. Stanis had never displayed an anti-mutant prejudice, but it was almost mandatory among humans, as if professing hate would prove their own genetic purity. Curse the muties and keep BuSec and the Trues away.

He logged off the account and erased the electronic trail back to the Academy with absent ease. Shadowcat and Douglock had been the electronics hackers extraordinaire within the X-Men, and he knew Magneto's Acolyte Milan was some sort of cyberpath, but he wasn't a Guild Master Thief for nothing. He'd acquired a more than passing expertise with computers themselves as well as security systems and programming. Stealing information was just another sort of theft. No one would ever connect Stephan Francis with the Massachusetts Academy.

Finished, he decided the rest could wait until he went down to the kitchen and got something to drink.

He soft-footed past the rec room, smiling at the unmistakable sound of Bobby parroting the lines of a Saturday morning cartoon.

"Kill the wabbit, kill the wabbit…"

Ah, a classic. Bugs Bunny. One of Bobby's favorites.

The kitchen, recently redone in cool yellow and white-checked tiles, had already been cleaned up after breakfast. It shined. Open windows filled it with brilliant morning light. He blinked until his eyes adjusted, pausing in the doorway, then headed for the refrigerator.

He smiled at Ororo sitting at the table sipping chamomile tea from a blue-green ceramic mug he'd given her. She had on a thin tank top and faded jeans. Her long white hair was drawn up in a ponytail. The light on her skin turned it the color of cocoa.
"Remy."

"Ro," he said.

He pulled a bottle of Starbuck's mocha out and leaned back against the counter by the sink while he
opened it. The sun on his shoulders loosened tight muscles he hadn't been aware of until then.

A shout from outside made him check the window. Some of the younger kids, students rather than
fighters, were on the back lawn, playing softball in the spring sunshine. One side of his mouth turned
up. At least someone was still having some fun.

He lifted the bottle of iced coffee to his lips and drank.

Dieu, let them have their fun. Soon enough they'd be on the front lines. Soon enough this place
would be the front lines. Things had been quiet the last two months. His instincts told him that
wouldn't last much longer.

But just for this moment it was easy to pretend there wasn't a war going on.

Ororo finished her tea. She brought the empty mug over to the sink and rinsed it out, standing next to
him, her hip brushing his. He slipped his arm around the front of her waist.

She turned her face and smiled at him, cat-pupiled translucent blue eyes like jewels in the bright light.

"You've been away too long, Remy."

She leaned into his hold; he relished the feel of warm muscle under sleek skin and thin cloth under
his hand. Ororo understood that his need to touch didn't always translate into sex. He loved the
connection, the contact with another living body. He reveled in the serenity and depth of her
carefully controlled emotions that he sensed when he touched her. Better than meditation for clearing
his own murky feelings.

"I've missed you."

"Missed you too, padnat," he admitted. He flashed her a tired grin. "Could have used you on a
couple of the Prof's jobs."

"You know I have left the thief's life." She smiled gently. "Everyone is home but Rogue, Logan,
Jubilee, Forge and Kurt."

He let his head loll forward, long bangs falling over his eyes. "Where's Kurt?" he asked.

"He and Forge are on Muir, upgrading the installation's defenses against the current model Sentinels'
weaponry."

Ororo stroked his head.

"Hmmn." He could almost purr when she did that. "Don't stop. Ever."

She laughed gently as she plucked the Starbuck's bottle out of his hand. "You need to get some
sleep, Remy, not consume more caffeine." She set the bottle beside the sink.
"Come sit with me for a while?" he whined.

She caressed his cheek fondly. "I must go oversee the children, brother."

He twisted to face her and leaned his forehead against hers. "Oui, my Stormy."

"Do not call me that, Gambit."

He grinned at her again, pressed a lightning quick kiss to her lovely nose, and danced back. "Oui, Oui."

"Go, go," she responded.

He laughed and headed back upstairs. Maybe he would nap in the window seat in the library later. The sun would make him sleepy and none of the children would bother him there. He'd finish going through his e-mails first, then nap, then attend the daily briefing in the Assembly hall that had become their new War Room.

He expected Scott would assign him to one of the retrieval teams going out to help the mutants newly registered by Trues in Alabama and Arkansas. He knew the latest genetic census from those two states had been on the disc he brought back.

He slipped up the stairs and back into this room, then sat back down at his desk.

He looked at the list of messages still waiting in his Inbox.

Firecracker - head's up, bub
Dervish – why not?
Poison – exit strategy
Beast – check-up time, my friend
Sylvester – this one is right up your alley
Ronin – mine

With a grimace, he highlighted Beast's message.

From: hmccoy@xav.edu.o
To: rlebeau@xav.ed.cCo
Date stamp: 23 March 2010
Subject: check-up time, my friend

Gambit,

I know you hate the lab and physicals with a fine and fierce passion—though what I myself have ever done to exacerbate your apparent phobia is a puzzlement—but it has been six months since you last consented to a check-up.

Considering your less than sterling care for your own health and the dangers currently present for all mutants, as your physician of record, I must insist you allow me to examine you.

I have scheduled you to make your appearance at the med lab tomorrow morning at
10:00, knowing as I do your dislike of arising early. Do not make me come and get you.

Henry

PS – Rogue has been even more delinquent than yourself—extraordinary!—if you are in touch with her, please remind her that I am not a blood-sucking vampire and these exams are for my compatriots’ sake.

He did not have a phobia… he just started feeling trapped and panicky whenever Beast got him alone down in the stainless steel and tile. The stench of disinfectants always reminded him of going under Sinister's scalpel. Unconsciously, he brushed his hand over his temple. The inhibitor was gone, dissolved when he had Sinister restore his full complement of powers after being trapped in the past.

The omega level abilities that had once terrified him as seventeen-year-old with failing psi-shields and chancy control had let him manipulate reality at a sub-quantum level. He'd timeported forward to the present. In that state, he was more a living potential charge of energy than flesh and blood. He'd been able to touch Rogue… But he'd burnt his powers back to Alpha level fighting with New Son.

At the time, he'd been half-relieved. Nothing like killing your insane double from another timeline to rock you —especially after discovering the damned Guild prophecy that had shaped your life since you opened mutant eyes in the hospital nursery had been the same one that led to New Son destroying his own world. These days, he missed the sheer power of it. They'd lost a powerhouse with Cable.

He missed being able to touch Rogue.

These days, since Cable died, they were careful with each other, keeping a critical distance to save hurting each other any worse. Fairytale endings and happily ever afters were for other people, not them, not for thieves and murderers. They couldn't let themselves be happy.

He shifted in the desk chair, stretching his long legs out until his feet hit the wall behind the desk. Stormy was right; he was tired, too tired to be replaying it all in his mind. He'd just end up depressed.

She was calling herself Anna Raven lately, but that was just an alias. She was a Raven like he was a LeBeau. Raven for Raven Darkholme, just another name for another infamous mutant terrorist. Who just happened to be Rogue's foster mother. Dieu, maybe they were just too much alike to ever get along, both lost, both adopted and eventually used and betrayed by their 'family', both criminals as well as mutants…

He shook the melancholy off. He kept this up, he'd be up on the roof, chain-smoking clove cigarettes and ‘angsting’ as Bobby called it. Not that the Academy had a high enough roof to make it very satisfying. A flicker of a grin crossed his face. Even thinking about Bobby and his harebrained tangents and midnight Twinkie runs lifted his spirits. The man kept the rest of them sane with his pranks.

Speaking of pranksters…

He opened the e-mail from Firecracker.

From: Firecracker@xav.mass.co
To: rlebeau@xav.edu.co
Date stamp: 21 March 2010
Subject: head's up, bub

Hey Gumbo,

I got a strange call from Rogue. She wanted to know if I had a number for you. Are you two on again? Off again? I gave her the number for your cell anyway. Hope it won't be a prob.

Wolvie and I are heading out for Carter, Wyoming. Brrr. He'll be happier than a pig in poop. There's something called the–get this–Henry P. Gyrich Facility being built out there. I mean, anything named for that asshole isn't going to be good, is it?

Love,
Jubilee

Rogue again. If she was trying to get in touch, why hadn't she checked in at the Academy? Dieu knew she always got a warmer reception than he did.

He shrugged. Rogue operated by her own rules these days. Truth was he hadn't seen her face to face in… eight months. Mon Dieu. There was always another mission to go on or recover from. They weren't on the same teams any more. He hadn't realized it had been quite so long.

The next mail came from his fixer, offering ten million for a job retrieving an encrypted disc from a Hydra lab. Sylvester knew Remy was still the best. He was tempted. One more pinch and a nice pay off, even after Sylvester took his cut as broker. If he said no, the job would go to Yukio. That made it even more attractive. Thwarting Yukio was always fun.

Regretfully, he sent a quick note. He hadn't done contract work unless it converged with X-Men duties or was a Guild obligation for five years. He had enough danger and adrenaline in his life. He didn't need more. Didn't need the money either. Let Yukio have the pinch.

He opened Ronin's message next and chuckled.

From: punkronin@hanzo.org.uk
To: rlebeau@xav.edu.co
Date stamp: 19 March 2010
Subject: mine

Gambit

Keep your sticky paws off my pinch or I'll serve you your balls for breakfast. Stick with the spandex brigade, jerk.

Yukio

PS – my love to Storm.

The next message was from Belladonna. Poison. He shook his head. What had Marius Boudreaux been thinking? Even for an Assassin, naming his girl child for a deadly plant had been a little cracked. Luckily, she found it amusing.
He opened the message curiously. Belle hadn't been in touch much since he handed the Guilds over to her. Being Matriarch of the United Thieves and Assassins' Guilds of New Orleans and running Clan Boudreaux didn't leave her much time to send chatty letters to an ex-husband.

From: datura@atheneum.net  
To: rlebeau@xav.edu.co  
Date stamp: 21 March 2010  
Subject: exit strategy

Remy,

I’ve begun exfiltrating everyone in the clans with a mutation or enhancement. The Guilds have remained inviolate until now, but the Trues grow more ruthless every year. It has become the Inquisition you warned us of when you were Patriarch. I’m sending them to the other Guilds in Kyoto and Marseille for now. Their families and other potential targets will follow. If you have need of them, they will answer to you through the contact codes I’ve included in the attachment.

The pipeline will stay in place once everyone is out of the country. Feel free to use it for your purposes. That is the only amends I can offer for not believing in your warning before.

Be well, King of Thieves.

Belle

He read it twice and blinked hard, his eyes burning. He knew how hard it was for her to admit a mistake.

"Merci, ma Belle, merci beaucoup."

If they could start smuggling refugees out through the south using the Guild pipeline, it would make things easier on a lot of fronts. The underground had been funneling everyone north so they could cross the Canadian border, but BuSec had been shutting down the crossings. If they didn't have so many people, they could pass on trying to cross when the patrols were too close. Activity in the south would draw some of the BuSec numbers away from the north too.

Still feeling that wash of nostalgia for the beautiful Assassin girl that had been his first love, he opened the last message.

From: jundertow@sinlab.net  
To: rlebeau@xav.edu.co  
Date stamp: 20 March 2010  
Subject: Why not?

Hey Bayou,

Been a while since we fucked anything up. V misses you. Fuck, I miss you. Gray Crow
won't admit it, of course, but him too. Even Flip would be happy to see you back. This shit hasn't been as much fun since you bugged out, you bastard.

The Marauders need you back. We need your sneaky brains. Doc has us running search and destroy ops. Targets are government labs, research centers, holding facilities and experimental stations. You know that means flatscans. You can't have a problem offing them. Or has that loony Professor rotted your brain with his goody-two-shoes philosophy?

Just so you know, Sabretooth'd be taking your orders if you came back. Kind of cool, right? Or are you two getting along? I heard you did a job for Doc and got the Tooth's adamantium back a while ago.

Anyway, think about it. Don't you want to cut loose like you used to?

You know where to get in touch.

Janos

He almost deleted the message, but at the last second saved it instead. Part of him did want to forget everything but the thrill of destruction and death. He hated acknowledging that he had liked life as a Marauder. No doubts, no regrets, no painful conscience torturing him at night over every mistake, just the blood and the rush of absolute freedom. The group of psychotics and psychopaths he'd put together at Sinister's behest had had only one answer to any question, any action, any transgression. Why not?

When he was with them, their craziness and blood thirst seeped through his shields and tripped his own survival instincts. To lead them he'd had to be just as amoral, just as vicious and ruthless and carelessly violent, and he had been. He hadn't had any reason not to be. Why not? Dieu, it had felt good.

In some ugly corner of his damaged soul, he was worse than that animal Sabretooth. He had never been compelled to kill. Compared to Sabretooth, he was sane; he could choose. He'd chosen to be a killer, consciously chosen in his bitterness and anger over his exile from New Orleans.

Until the night of the Mutant Massacre, until he found himself in the tunnels under New York, watching his team slaughter innocent, helpless mutants, he had glared in the atrocities. The world had hurt him and he had wanted to hurt it back. But the Morlocks didn't have a chance against the Marauders. They weren't a threat, they weren't fighters; they were victims, hiding from the world above because they couldn't pass for human there. He'd been horrified in that second, sickened inside by what he'd let himself become.

In an instant of clarity, he saw himself as no better than the Antiquary or the human monsters who had victimized the mutie freak when he lived on the street as a child. He hated himself.

One man couldn't stop the Marauders. He'd tried, but Sabretooth had sliced him up. His shields had failed from the pain, letting in every bit of the Morlocks' terror and agony. He'd felt every one of them suffer and die, had it seared into his memory, and screamed to anyone who might hear for forgiveness.

Then he'd staggered to his feet, snatched a child up before the others could find her and fled. He'd fled the tunnels, the Marauders and Sinister. He'd fled from himself and hadn't looked back until he
found himself saving another child on another night. Stormy had given him someone to live for and then she'd brought him to the X-Men where he'd thought he could atone.

And he'd met Rogue.

Loving her had been his heaven and his hell.

"Merde!"

He shut the computer off and stalked over to his window. Wearily, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. He was tired to the bone; Storm was right, but Riptide's message had stirred up too many memories. He wasn't sure which frightened him more: the nightmares reliving the Mutant Massacre or dreams where he played his part and didn't care.

He'd never admitted to the X-Men that he still stayed in distant touch with some of the Marauders. Wolverine might guess, but no one knew it for a fact.

The trill of his cell phone, set carelessly on the nightstand by his bed, jerked him out of his thoughts. He picked it up reluctantly.

"Oui?"

"Hello, sugar," Rogue breathed in his ear.

He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Bonjour, Rogue."

"I got some things I need to say to ya, Swamp Rat. Things I should have said before."

Oh, Dieu, they weren't starting this again! He let himself fall back against the dark navy duvet on the bed. The mattress bounced a little under him. He was too tired for this.

"Rogue, chere - "

"Oh, don't worry, Gambit, I ain't talking about getting together with ya again," she assured him. He noticed a rough rasp to her voice as she spoke. She sounded as tired as he was. Her Mississippi antecedents still echoed in her sweet southern drawl, though. He'd always enjoyed just listening to her.

She began coughing, a hard, uncomfortable cough, that made him frown and sit up.

"Chere?"

She gasped out a laugh that held little humor.

"Listen, Gambit, where are ya right now?"

He drew his brows together. "At the school. Rogue, are you bonne? M'sieu le bête, he sent me an e-mail saying you been giving him the slip."

"Well, that's convenient, ain't it?" Rogue observed, seeming not to pay attention to his question. "I'm
at the Super Eight in town."

His frown tightened. Something was not right about this. Why stay in a motel in town instead of the Academy with the people that had been her friends for so many years? She hadn't even known he was here. No reason to avoid it, unless she didn't want to deal with the telepaths.

"Chere, you're hiding something."

"Got it in one, Remy. But then you've always been real good at hiding and keeping secrets."

Unseen, he flinched.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that," she said swiftly.

"S'okay."

"I owe ya another apology, too," she went on. "I took something of yours."

He raised an eyebrow. She'd taken something? His room looked the same. He hadn't noticed anything missing. He hadn't looked before. He'd arrived at a quarter to four, left the discs on the Professor's desk, gone upstairs, shed his boots and duster, then collapsed on his bed until the morning bustle had woken him.

He reached out with his spatial sense, trying to feel anything different in the arrangement of the room. A weight of dense metal was missing from the drawer of the nightstand. The ammunition always glowed to his senses, rich with energy almost vibrating to be released. Any sort of explosive felt like mental candy to his senses. It was gone too.

"You took m'Beretta?" he exclaimed. "Why?"

"Well, I need it, sugar. That and the suppression-collar I swiped from the armory," she told him.

That led to only one conclusion. "Who you planning to kill, chere?"

She muffled another cough. He felt a cold pain run through his heart. The pieces weren't hard to fit together.

"Rogue."

"Sorry, sugar."

"Don't do this - "

"I gotta. I got it. That stupid disease, just like Cable did." A sob broke loose from her. "Remy, I just can't go through what happened to him at the end."

"No! Listen to me, chere, you come back here. Beast, he'll find some cure. You just got to give him enough time-"

Laughter and sobs.

"Remy, I ain't got no more time. This thing's eatin' me alive. Cable, he fought it tooth and nail, the
same way he did the T/O virus. It still killed him."

He threw himself off the bed and bolted out the door. He knocked his shoulder against someone he
didn't even recognize as he sprinted down the hall. Where was Kurt? Muir Island. Merde. Was there
another teleporter at the academy?

He still had the phone in his hand. He didn't yell, but he kept talking, as intensely as he could.

"We'll find Wolverine. Damn it, I'll find fuckin' Creed and drag him back here. You can absorb his
healing factor. Don't be stupid!"

He reached for Storm with his empathy. Even now, he was closer to her than any of the other X-
Men. All his fear and panic and desperation got thrown in to the touch; too much, he realized,
sensing her stagger in distress.

"Don't ya be stupid, Cajun," Rogue snarled on the phone.

Angry. He always made her angry. He wanted her angry. He wanted her fighting, not giving up.

He vaulted the polished teak guard rail along the second floor landing and dropped to the foyer with
his knees flexed just enough to let him sprint for the front door without pausing. An Olympic caliber
gymnast could have made the same move–provided with enough training time and preferably some
tumbling mats to land on. Remy did it as casually as breathing, utilizing another physical aspect of
his mutations: enhanced reflexes, flexibility and inhuman agility mated with lighter than human
bones. Beast and Essex had both told him his muscle groups attached to different places on his
skeleton than normal.

"Remy?" Bobby said from rec room doorway.

"Don't you give up, girl!" he shouted into the phone. He ignored Bobby.

"Don't ya get it, Remy," she snapped back. "I already got Logan's healin' factor. It ain't helpin'!
Nothin' is going to help me!"

A flash of white in the corner of his eyes resolved into Bobby icing up.

"Can't believe that, chere. I won't believe that!" he replied. He was through the front door and on his
way to the garage where he'd left his bike.

"Remy, sugar, I - I don't want to fight with ya no more," she whispered. She was crying. He could
hear the tears in her voice, in the way it hitched and broke.

"Don't do this, chere, please don't do this," he begged.

Bobby had caught up to him. A frozen chill rolled off his iced up form as he leaned close, trying to
catch whatever was being said on Remy's phone. It wasn't right that the sun was shining on green
grass, that 'Ro's flowers were blooming, the scent of them on the air. He closed his eyes to block it all
out.

There was only her thin voice on the phone he clutched with white fingers. "Rogue, please," he said,
afraid to stop talking to her.
"I've got to. I love ya, Remy, I always loved ya and I'm sorry for all the hurt, I'm so sorry." She began coughing, choking as she sobbed. He could barely make out the words she gasped out between spasms. "Just say ya forgive me? Please. It's so bad already and it's goin' to get worse… "

"Rogue--"

"I don't want t'die in a containment chamber, Remy! Convulsing and out of my mind, pouring blood from every part of me, spitting and screaming and not even knowin' what's happenin' t'me!"

She'd seen the tapes of Cable's last hours. Nothing had helped him.

He caught his breath.

"I can't stand it," she choked out. "I just can't stand it, Remy."

His voice sounded very distant to him as he answered. "It's gonna be okay, chere."

He didn't believe that. Nothing would ever be okay again. He'd felt this way just twice before: on his wedding day, when he'd slid his sword past Julien's blade and felt it sink deep and fatal into his brother-in-law's flesh, and in the Morlock Tunnels.

"Say ya forgive me, Remy."

"I forgive you, ma chere," he said. "Everything."

"Thank ya, Swamp Rat."

"Could never stay mad at my River Rat."

Bobby's hand was locked around his wrist, freezing him. Across the yard, Storm was racing toward them. The temperature had dropped so far his exhalation turned to vapor.

"Say ya loved me, Remy."

"Je t'aime. Toujours et pour toujours, je t'aime."

The click of a hang-up and silence.

"Remy?" Bobby asked.

"She said she was at the Super Eight," he said. Was that his voice? He sounded hoarse. He shook Bobby's icy hand away. "Let go."

"No. What's wrong?"

He stared toward the gates to the grounds. Spread around him he felt Storm moving, almost close enough to speak. There was the main house, three stories above ground and four more hidden deep below the earth. Movement and the different potentials of living matter translated into people inside. Beast in his lab. A group training in the Biodome—one of them was an energy wielder like Cyclops. The Professor in his office formed a psionic bright spot. Movement beyond the house would be the kids still playing baseball. The trees in the distance, the high walls that surrounded the estate, the molecules of dust and oxygen dancing in the air, the gasoline in the tank of his Harley… it all sung
with energy waiting to be released with just a touch of his talent.

He didn't have the keys to his Harley. He started it with a fractional charge that probably burnt out
the starter solenoid, but didn't care.

"I'm coming with you," Bobby declared. He de-iced, returning to the form of a young man in jeans
and a faded Xavier's sweat shirt with a torn-out collar.

He didn't protest as Bobby straddled the bike behind him and set his hands on Remy's hips. He didn't
offer any warning as he hit the gas and roared the Harley to the gates. The gates opened
automatically for anyone cleared into the security system. They moved ponderously however and he
had to swerve and steer the bike at an angle to fit through them.

He paid no attention to speed limits or traffic law, slewing the Harley around anything in the way,
opening the throttle to the max. Bobby wrapped a well-muscled arm around his waist and leaned
close, offering no protest. His worry and concern soaked into Remy through the close contact. It
acted like an anchor.

They reached the suburban edges of town five minutes later. Remy felt the Beretta—a familiar
arrangement of kinetic potential—fire as he turned the bike into the Super Eight's parking lot. It jolted
all his senses. He didn't even finish braking the Harley before leaping off. Bobby followed him,
saved from serious injury only by his own trained reflexes.

The bike fell to its side and slid in a screeching spray of white hot sparks into a concrete planter.

He was already at the door of the room. Bobby was behind him. The gunshot echoed in his head. He
registered the Harley destructing, but didn't care.

He stopped with his hand on the door knob. It wouldn't be locked. That wouldn't have stopped him.
There wasn't a lock he couldn't pick. He stood still there in front of a door painted dull brown.

Bobby touched his hand lightly just between Remy's shoulder blades.

"Remy?"

He opened the door. Bobby walked in behind him and stood with him, just to the side, whispering,
"Oh God."

Remy swayed then walked forward to the bed. She'd lain back with her head against the pillow. The
phone sat on the bed next to her.

She was wearing green gloves. Green gloves, a green fuzzy sweater and faded jeans. Dark green
socks on her feet, feet turned limply at the ankle, still resting together. One hand rested over her
waist. The other still held his Beretta. The dark metal gleamed against the plaid coverlet.

An old-style, heavy Genoshan-manufacture suppressor-collar was locked around her neck. Still
doing its job. A green telltale blinked by the lock. Rogue had thought it all out. She'd needed the
collar to negate her invulnerability, otherwise the bullet would have just bounced off her.

She was thinner than he remembered. She'd let her hair grow long again. The white streak looked
wider than ever.
"Oh God, oh God, oh God," Bobby kept repeating.

She'd made a neat job of it. Mystique's daughter. Of course, she had. She knew all about guns and how to use them. Blood soaked the pillow under her head, but her face looked almost peaceful.

Je t'aime, toujours et pour toujours, je t'aime.

He closed his eyes.

"Remy..." Bobby tugged him away from the bed, away from the scene. "Come on."

He blinked his eyes open and the scene hit again.

Rogue.

"Gimme your phone," Bobby directed.

Remy pulled the slim cell out of his pocket and handed it over. He walked out of the motel room as Bobby was calling the Academy. He leaned against the wall, fished in his pocket and found a crumpled pack of clove cigarettes. A traffic cop was standing over the mangled remains of his bike at the other end of the Super Eight's parking lot.

The cop had on silvered sunglasses. Remy didn't have his with him. Anyone looking would see the telltale scarlet irises and black sclera of his eyes. Since keeping a low profile seemed pointless, he lit the cigarette with a charge from his index finger.

He'd told her he forgave her. He'd lied. He would never forgive her for this.

Bobby slipped out of the room. He was white-faced. Tears trickled unchecked down his face. He plucked the cigarette from Remy's fingers and took a fast puff. The smoke made him choke.

Remy reached out and traced his fingers over the tear tracks. He envied Bobby that release. He was dry-eyed. Dry. Nothing but scorched earth left inside.

"I--Jean and the others'll be here soon," Bobby said. He let Remy rest his fingers on his cheekbone.

"That's good," Remy whispered. "That's good someone's coming. Good someone's cryin' for her."

"You're in shock."

He lifted the still burning cigarette from Bobby's hand and puffed on it. "Oui."


Remy let his hand fall away from Bobby's face to hang limp at his side.

"She killed herself"

"Why?"

Remy watched the traffic cop writing something in his little ticket book, then radioing in using the microphone strapped to his shoulder.
"Didn't want to wait," he said. "She had La Belle Dame. She said."

He finished the cigarette and charged the butt until it dissolved into dust. The bell in the clock tower in the heart of town began tolling. Twelve times. He laughed raggedly. "Ask not for whom the bell tolls."

Bobby stared at him until Remy sobered again. Bobby's eyes were getting red. He looked wild and lost and scared. "Don't do this," he told Remy. "Don't do this."

"Do what, homme?"

"Pretend you're not hurting, that nothing can touch you."

He nodded. "I don't want to pretend, Bobby."

He didn't stay for the funeral. He didn't stay the night. He packed his duffle bag while the rest of the X-Men were still in shock.

He walked down the stairs with the bag slung over one shoulder.

Storm and the Professor were waiting just before the front doors.

Jean and half the present teams were gathered in the library. He could feel their movements, hear the subdued babble of their voices, touch the sucking drag of their steadily deepening pain. No one noticed the three of them in the foyer.

Storm slipped past the Professor in his hoverchair and hugged Remy tightly. He let her wrap her arms around him, but stayed rigid and still.

"Don't go, brother," she whispered in his ear.

He turned his head just enough to whisper back, "Can't stay here."

She let go and stepped back.

"Gambit," the Professor said. He looked properly serious, pain etching new lines in his visage, but stern as well. "This is not the time to indulge in personal grief. Rogue wouldn't want you to walk away from your responsibilities to the teams and our goals out of mourning for her."

Remy laughed.

"Rogue don't get no say in this."

"Where will you go? What will you do if you leave the X-Men?" Xavier demanded. "Will you return to your life as a thief? Surely working toward a world where such things as the La Belle virus and the hate that inspired it are no longer is a better choice."

Remy shook his head. "That's your dream, Professor. Not mine."

"You need to have faith, Gambit."
"Non, I'm wide awake... and all out of faith."

He walked past Xavier without another word and out the front doors for the second and last time that day.

Bobby was sitting on the front steps. "I guess I knew you'd go," he remarked.

Remy nodded.

"Just don't go so far you can't find your way back to us."

"Can't make any promises, Bobby," he said.

Bobby tossed a set of keys to Remy. He caught them easily, but looked at them quizzically.

"Keys to my car," Bobby said. "Your bike's history. Take it."

"I'll leave it behind the police station," Remy promised.

"Whatever."

Two hours later, Remy was in Boston at a cybercafé. The coffee didn't have chicory the way he liked it, but it wasn't really coffee anyway. MRF strikes and the closed borders were starting to effect supply networks, creating shortages of imported goods like coffee and chocolate. Just inconveniences so far, but the average people were starting to realize the MRF and mutants weren't going to softly and silently vanish away.

The ersatz coffee had a special savor.

He typed in the addy he'd memorized and a short message, then clicked send.

From: rlebeau@xav.edu.co
To: rundertow@sinlab.net
Date stamp: 24 March 2010
Subject: Re: Why not?

Why not? Tell Essex I'm ready to come back.

Gambit.

He drummed his long fingers on the table top and smiled bitterly.

'How can ya go back to the Marauders, Gambit?' he imagined Rogue demanding. 'Why do ya want to be lying and stealing and killin' folks?'

Once a Marauder, always a Marauder. He didn't believe in anything anymore. No reason to try to be any better than he'd been before. He should never have left them.

"Why not?" he said out loud.
Trigger warning: Rogue commits suicide, Remy and Bobby find her body.

If you skip this chapter, the other notable things in it are: mentions the Henry P. Gyrich Facility in Carter, Wyoming, Sekhmet Conaway emails Remy she's marrying Courier and Courier's father is moving their business to London, and Riptide contacts Remy. The Marauders want him back leading them. Despite knowing what bad things that does to his head, after Rogue's death, Remy leaves the X-Men and takes the offer.
Night Moths

Chapter Summary

The Matriarch of the Guilds has a type. She used, they amused.

AD 2227, February 19
New Orleans
Garden District

The boy in her bed had russet hair and a sleek body that still and always would bear the mark of early deprivation. He sprawled face down on the black sheets, face turned away from her. She considered waking him and tossing him out. Instead, she ran an absentmindedly possessive hand down his flank and tossed the sheet over him before leaving him to sleep. The New Orleans night wasn't even cool, but there was something vulnerable about the bare line of his back she wanted to cover.

She'd keep this one, turn him over to the Guild trainers. He'd probably make a better assassin than thief. He had razors in those sloe eyes—survivor's scars. That had been what made her bring him to her bed.

The bed in the Garden District mansion that once belonged to her ex-husband. They'd never lived there together. One of many regrets she had accumulated. Most of them revolving around him.

There had been many pretty, pretty boys in that bed. This one wouldn't be the last. If they didn't try to trade on the bed games, she arranged something for them afterward. A place, an education, a job, sometimes even the Guild if they showed promise like the latest one. Many had done well in the centuries she'd been doing that.

If they tried to use her, she cut their throats. Simple rule: she used, they amused.

She picked up a tangerine silk robe from the chair where she'd tossed it earlier and wrapped it around her. The streetlights lit the room through the open French doors. She padded into the next room and sank down on a chaise that afforded her a sight line into the back garden.

She activated the house computer with a murmured word; it was keyed to her voice and monitored every room. Another word had a holograph screen appearing directly in front of where she lounged.

Files on business she needed to authorize appeared as glowing amber script hung in the air. A muffled voice in her data implant relayed her assistant's comments on each one. The pinch in Liverpool fit Etienne Ishikawa's skillset; the thief was in the Paris House. Belladonna nodded to herself. The hit in Madripoor Hightown needed someone better than the Tokyo House had. Diego in Buenos Aires would be perfect. The plant manager of the Hydra arms factory in the Urals was backdooring a percentage of the new design to the Gurkha Freedom Front; Vazhiniya in Moscow wanted authorization to remove him. A freelancer was lifting El Grecos from museums all over Europe, someone needed to kill him or her. She made a note to see if they couldn't recruit the rogue thief. The casino in Nuevo Las Vegas were reporting a two percent drop in earnings in the second
quarter. Someone was marketing a new designer derivative of Kick in Montreal.

She issued instructions and made oral notes that would go out to the rest of the Guild immediately. Some functionaries would be forced out of their beds to deal with them. Belladonna didn't care.

She'd taken the boy to her bed, now she had returned to her duties. Time meant nothing. No one dared question her amusements when she dealt with Guild business.

If her mind drifted to a different russet-haired boy as she worked, there were none to know.

The Guilds had prospered under the hand of Belladonna Boudreaux, both Thief and Assassin, despite losing so many of their members during the Gene Wars. She still ran the Motherhouse from New Orleans, but the Houses in Moscow, Paris, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Calcutta and Cairo all answered to her.

After all, she'd had the time to consolidate them all.

Wearily, she wondered if she should have accepted the invitation to go to New Genosha after the Scourge. Psylocke had found her in Baton Rouge and tendered the invitation. But the Guilds were in disarray and she'd chosen her duty as Matriarch over following her ex-husband and his people to Magneto's land.

He'd given her the choice at least. She doubted he'd been surprised by the one she made.

She hadn't really grasped that the Interdict would mean never seeing him again. It wouldn't have changed her mind if she had known. Not then. She'd only anticipated living a lifetime. Not twice and thrice and more than that; she'd forgotten that Remy defied the Thieves' Guild to use their Elixir of Life to save her. The Elixir that conferred near immortality on those that took it if it didn't kill them.

She'd lived.

Well, she'd gone on.

She'd built the Unified Guilds into the most powerful criminal organization in the world. She'd had the time to take down and absorb the Hand and Hydra and a hundred lesser organizations. That wasn't exactly ashes in her mouth, but it would have been better if she'd had someone with her.

She'd made do.

The Guilds didn't exactly see her as a goddess, but she wasn't human to them either. They revered her skill and age. None of them remembered a time before Belladonna ruled them.

That was why she took her lovers off the streets. The element of nostalgia played its part, she had a type, but unlike members of the Guilds, the boys she chose didn't look at her and see someone that should have been wizened and dead. That look that saw something not human held no appeal to her in bed. She wanted her partners to see a woman, not the Immortal Matriarch of the Guilds.

The boy in the bedroom had no idea who she was.

She thought about the last briefing report that had been pinched from the offices of the chairman of the UN's offices. If the Barrier came down, she would see Remy again.
Something to look forward to.

In the meantime, the sloe-eyed boy had wandered out of the bedroom and was watching her with a familiar knowing wariness. She beckoned him over to her and put the Guild work aside.

The Guild would abide and the Matriarch ageless with it, but pretty boys were ephemeral as night moths.
Chapter Summary

Back with the Marauders, Gambit is enjoying himself. Cats, clones, and killing, what more could any amoral ex-X-Man ask for?

AD 2011, April 5-30
United States
Undisclosed Location

"Plastic tubes and pots and pans, bits and pieces and bits and pieces," Remy sang under his breath as he worked. "and bits of my creation…"

"Shut it with that singing shit," Blockbuster growled.

He narrowed his eyes and concentrated on the delicate connections he was making. The forcefield cracker held a rough one point three million dollars of stolen electronics, the rest of it either Shi'ar tech he'd helped himself to while with the X-Men or was out of Sinister's labs and he wanted to finish it before anything else came up.

Once he'd finished, it would all be encased in a ceramic shell the size of a cue ball.

"It's my creation, I do not know, no hesitation, no heart of gold," he went on. He could have been singing 'ankle bone connects to the leg bone' just as easily. It was just a way to block out anything but his work. "Just flesh and blood…"

It wasn't working perfectly because Blockbuster knew how to annoy him just by looming behind him. He was almost done though. Threads of gold and glass knit together in a pattern intricate as Celtic knotwork.

Blockbuster threw something small and light at his head. He could feel it moving through the air behind him. Remy moved his head aside and it sailed by and hit the wall. Paper wad. He grinned nastily. Juvenile, Michael, very juvenile. The big brainless bastard had forgotten who was in charge.

He picked up the paper wad, charged it and flicked it over his shoulder. It hit Blockbuster in the chest and exploded with enough force to knock him off his feet.

Blockbuster scrambled to his feet, swearing in German, with every intention of tearing Remy's head off. Remy didn't look up.

"The next time you interrupt me, I'll ignite the air molecules in your lungs," he said. "Then Sinister can give your next clone a brain. If he bothers replacing you at all."

Blockbuster hesitated, breathing hard, while Remy went on with his work. In one hand, he held a sharp, stainless steel probe. If Blockbuster tried anything, he would put that probe through the man's
It was remarkable how easily he'd fallen back into the mindset of a Marauder.

Blockbuster grunted then left the lab. Remy reveled in the nasty sense of satisfaction he got from intimidating the bigger man.

"From my heart and from my hand, why don't people understand my intentions… oooh, weird… Weird science!"

He finished the last connection, checked his work and closed the shell, letting it seal. With a wide grin he picked it up and juggled the sphere along with two expensive tools he'd been using. Sleight of hand sent the cracker sphere into a pocket, he caught the tools and set them down carefully.

The cracker would be useless to anyone but him. It had no energy source, just an inert lump of plastic. Remy would feed a biokinetic charge into the plastic when he used it, enough to activate it, once that dissipated it would become inert once more. No one else could do anything with it.

~Gambit. Main lab.~

Sinister's telepathic voice always cut through his shields. It mentally sounded more British than the man's actual voice did.

~Coming, Master,~ Remy 'pathed back along with the accent and image of himself—complete with humpback—as Igor from Frankenstein.

Something like amusement returned from the scientist. Nothing cowed Remy for long, though Sinister came as close as anyone ever had. That pleased Sinister.

Remy grinned and strolled into one of the dim corridors that twisted and turned with a maddening lack of logic, still humming the Oingo Boingo song. It had been a while, but he still had no trouble navigating any of Sinister's labs. Unlike most of the other Marauders, he liked the low lighting and sometimes speculated to himself that Sinister's red eyes were as light sensitive as his own.

He walked into the central lab without flinching. The fouled green light, the columns of twisting cables and conduits and floating disks supporting work areas were familiar. His worst memories were focused on the white ceramic and stainless steel surgical bays. Those were elsewhere. Even the banks of hibernation tubes, many of them filled with unconscious subjects, didn't bother him the way they once had.

All it had taken was a small tweak to the way he thought; he'd dialed his empathy into Sinister and let that cold concentration sweep away all his own emotions. Such sweet relief to stop caring; no wonder Essex had chosen to become Sinister and give up his humanity. He assuaged any loneliness in Crow, Vee and Janos' company. And if he wanted sex, Vee and Janos were happy to oblige with that too.

He didn't think of the X-Men at all.

Sinister himself stood on one of the floating disks before a half-sphere of hexagonal monitors. Remy made his way up without hesitation, skipping from disk to disk until he stood beside the scientist.

The sardonic look on the pale, diamond-marked face just made Remy grin wider. He held out his
hands wide. "Here I am, M'sieu Essex"

"Indeed."

Sinister turned his attention back to the pictures and information cycling through the monitors. He gestured to one that displayed a view of a nondescript industrial complex.

"You see."

"South America?"

"Caracas."

Remy nodded.

"What's there?"

"A laboratory built and funded by one of the Colombian drug cartels, in this case," Sinister said. "The chief scientist is a former researcher of mine. He left with the plans to my cloning process."

Remy sighed. He could guess what came next. No one crossed Sinister.

"Take whichever Marauders you want, kill Dr. Sienciwitz and destroy the lab"

"Anything else?" he asked.

"I'll have another task for you when you return."

The Caracas assignment felt almost too easy. He let Sabretooth have some fun with the guards and assigned Scalphunter and Arclight to setting the explosives. Since they weren't there to fight mutants, he'd left Scrambler and Blockbuster behind. Riptide and Vertigo were visiting the homes of some of the off-site scientists. Earlier, he'd slipped into Sienciwitz' apartment and cut the man's throat as he slept. Remy decided to do some exploring himself.

He could feel people moving through the darkened halls, but they didn't move like scientists or security guards.

The second lab was all black equipment shadows and electro-fluorescent green light. The wide eyesearing crimson streak that reached across the room with its strange, familiar zark audio accompaniment flashed the contents in super relief for an instant. Remy dodged the blast and just stopped himself from sending a volley of cards with a lethal charge at the man in the lab's doorway.

"Cyclops!" he yelled. "Lay off" Blotchy red-orange-green afterimages overlaid his retinas. "C'est moi."

"Gambit?"

"Oui."

Cyclops scanned the room and found Remy in the shadows. The rich rose glow of energy wreathed around his hand probably looked white through the ruby quartz visor. To Remy, the other man shimmered with heat energy and movement, a haze of kinetic potential.
Remy ostentatiously discharged the fan of cards he held in hand.

"Fancy meeting you here," Remy said, smiling.

"Are you alone?"

"Non."

"Neither am I," Cyclops cautioned him.

He glanced at Scott. "Wolverine with you?"

"No."

"Makes things easier." He spoke into his comm mic. "The X-Men are here. Don't fight them if you don't have to. Chat, no cutting anyone up."

He kept a careful eye on Cyclops. Simply because they had been team-mates once didn't make him trust the man automatically. Remy's renewed affiliation with Sinister and the Marauders might push Cyclops into considering him an enemy. He had a lot of respect for the man's abilities; he didn't want to kill him.

Cyclops folded his arms and dipped his chin.

"What are you doing here, Gambit?"

Remy shrugged.

"Scientist here is using one of Le Doctor's cloning processes. He doesn't like that. Sent me to take care of things."

"Blow the lab," Cyclops interpreted. "What about the scientist?"

Remy ran his index finger across his throat.

"Dead?"

Remy narrowed his eyes at him. "What do you think, Cyke?"

Cylops shrugged this time. "I know it should bother me, but I've got no problem with that."

"That's such a relief, homeme," Remy drawled sarcastically.

Cylops chuckled once. His head moved and Remy guessed that behind the obscuring visor, Cyclops was looking past him at the lab.

"Can you give us twenty minutes?"

"All the time in the world, mon ami," Remy said.

"Good. We're here to recover a couple of mutants as well as take the place down."
"No reason we can't do this together, then," he replied amiably. "You want to tell the rest of the X-Men to leave my team alone?"

"Jean's taken care of it."

"Psi-link's handy."

Cyclops nodded absently, heading over to one of the computers. "Hack this for me since you're here?"

Remy laughed and followed. He booted one of the computers up, using what appeared to be the main terminal for the lab. "What am I looking for, Cyke?"

"Our intelligence says there's another lab somewhere in Brazil where they're doing more experiments. I'd like the location."

"This ain't exactly hacking," Remy commented. The keys clattered softly under his fingers. The security on the lab's internal network was laughable. He had the location of the associated lab without difficulty. He loaded it and a good portion of the classified files kept by the lead scientist onto a thumb drive and tossed it to Cyclops. "Here. Old times sake, mon ami."

Cyclops tucked the thumb drive away. "Jean says hi."

"Bonne nuit, Jeannie," he replied, knowing she'd ~hear~ it through her link with Cyclops. He surprised himself by asking, "Bobby with you?"

"No," Cyclops replied, giving him an odd look.

Remy grinned at him. "I know Stormy isn't with you, so who else am I gonna ask 'bout 'sides the Iceman?"

Cyclops shrugged.

"No Beast, no Wolverine." He raised an eyebrow. "Ange or Betsy?"

Cyclops snorted out a breath. "Not here either."

"Jubilee?"

"She's going to swat you," Cyclops predicted.

Remy chuckled.

He'd heard that the X-Men teams were broken up, most of them operating in smaller groups within the MRF staff structure. He wondered who besides Jean that he did know would be with them. Not Stormy. He'd made a point of hacking Sinister's tracking system and kept a tag on Storm's mutagenic signature. She was on Muir with Xavier. He'd have tagged the rest of the X-Men if it wouldn't have alerted Sinister.

Scalphunter and Arclight appeared in the doorway.
"Everything cool, boss?"

"Mais yeah."

Scalphunter nodded to Cyclops.

"Charges are set," Arclight added.

"Better tell the X-Men to get out now, Cyke," Remy told him. He trailed a hand over equipment and counters as he headed for the door, leaving behind a shimmer of energy waiting to detonate. When it did, it would trigger the packets of explosives spaced throughout the facility and bring it down, leaving nothing but rubble and dust.

"Scalphunter, Arclight," Cyclops acknowledged the two Marauders.

"What, no speeches?" Arclight mocked.

"Why bother? We're not even fighting this time around."

"So how do you like working for Magneto instead of the Cueball?" Scalphunter asked. All of them trailed after Remy, while he walked through the halls, fingers just brushing the walls, leaving behind trails of leashed energy.

"I wish it wasn't necessary," Cyclops answered.

Scalphunter raised an eyebrow.

They exited into a parking lot. The sweet cloying smell of blood mingled with the moist night air. Two security guards lay near the door. Remy stepped over them. Sabretooth was lurking beyond the edge of the lights. The rest of Cyclops' team surrounded two kids in hospital scrubs. Jean had a TK bubble around them. Bishop was standing watching, not so coincidentally placed between the group and the shadows hiding Sabretooth.

He fingered the safety on his plasma rifle when he saw Remy.

"LeBeau."

"Pup."

Bishop scowled and deliberately turned his back on Remy.

The two other X-Men with them both smiled at him. Polaris offered a careless wave. Jubilee's smile was accompanied by a swift, tight hug Remy returned after a rigid instant.

She swatted the back of his head. "Stupid Gumbo!"

"Good thing I'm pretty, neh?"

Jubilee grinned at him, her arms still locked around his neck. "Who told you were pretty, bub?"

Close by, Sabretooth growled.
"Shut up, Chat," Remy told him. He kept one arm around Jubilee's waist as he turned to Cyclops.

"Everybody out, Cyke?"

"Yes."

"Then let's take a walk before this place goes boom, hein?"

"When are you coming back?" Jubilee asked him in a low tone.

"I had enough of the professor," Remy replied just as quietly.

Jubilee pursed her lips.

"Lot of people miss you, Gumbo."

"Miss you too," he said and meant it. He missed the X-Men and the feeling that what he did made a difference—a good difference. He didn't miss Bobby's pranks or the five aM. Danger Room exercises. He certainly didn't miss Xavier or the sensation that if he ever dropped his shields the telepath would slip into his head and reprogram him. No point to explaining that part, he knew.

"Bobby is going to be so torqued he didn't get in on this mission. He's driving Beast crazy, you know."

"Bobby's always driving someone crazy."

"You could join the MRF, you know," she murmured.

He flicked his gaze to the side, subtly indicating the Marauders flanking them.

"Them too."

Sabretooth laughed. His enhanced hearing had let him hear Remy and Jubilee's soft words, Remy knew. He'd been careful to say nothing he didn't want Sabretooth to know.

The two mutants the X-Men had pulled out remained silent as they moved out of the parking lot. They both flinched when the lab building groaned and exploded with a series of booming thuds.

Remy finally, reluctantly, released Jubilee after bestowing a last kiss on her cheek.

"Time for us to go," he said. "Au revoir, mes amis." He activated the tesseract recall. Sinister's trans-dimensional doorway opened, blindingly bright along the edges, offering a glimpse of steel and darkness beyond. "You tell my Stormy Gambit wish she'd been with you, hein?"

Sabretooth brushed past Remy and Jubilee. A low rumbling comment was aimed at Jubilee. "Hey, frail. How's the Runt?"

"Ready and willing to rip you a new one, Creed," she snapped back.

"Chat, scat," Remy said.

Sabretooth laughed and headed through the tesseract.
"I can't believe you're working with him."

"He's good at what he does."

Jubilee gave him a speculative look. "Okay."

Arclight and Scalphytnodded toward the X-Men and disappeared through the doorway. Remy knew it wouldn't stay open much longer.

"Take care, petite."

"Don't call me that."

He laughed despite himself. "That's Stormy's line."

"Well, I can kick your ass too."

He turned away and stepped through the tesseract an instant before it snapped out of existence.

The power monitor tracking LeBeau's energy signature spiked. Sinister smiled. LeBeau claimed he'd burnt himself back down to alpha fighting New Son. But each time he stepped through one of the tesseracts, his abilities were registering an increase. In time, LeBeau would be an omega class again; this time in complete control.

Time, though, even for himself, was growing short.

The red hologram of a barbed caltrop revolving in the center of his lab might symbolize the end of his long view. La Belle had proved as stubborn and frustrating as Legacy before it and much more opportunistic. It had killed Cable, the ultimate product of a century of waiting to cross the Summers and Grey genelines.

More and more mutants were dying, either of the disease or in the containment facilities.

Another monitor lit as Riptide and Vertigo returned from Venezuela. He watched LeBeau speak to them but didn't bother activating the audio.

One of his experiments demanded his attention after that. He abandoned the dilemma of La Belle until another time.

When his mind returned to it, Sinister sought out LeBeau again and found him stretched, one leg bent at the knee, upon the green velvet-covered sofa in the recreated Victorian library, reading a copy of Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. Candles burned in several silver candelabra around the room. Warm light traced gilt lettering on leather bindings and gleamed off polished wood. One of Sinister's oldest experiments, a blue-eyed black cat he'd been cloning for over fifty years, had found a comfortable perch on LeBeau's lean stomach.

He morphed his body into its most human appearance, one that echoed the form of Nathaniel Essex, pale Victorian gentleman, except for the sharpened teeth and diamond mark between his brows.
LeBeau lifted his head, but otherwise remained motionless and indolent. One long finger marked his place in the book. The cat looked up too. Their unblinking gazes were remarkably similar.

"M'sieu Essex," he said.

"I require access to Henry McCoy's work on the La Belle virus. You will obtain it for me."

The cat watched Sinister. Like its predecessors, eventually he would dissect it to discover any discrepancies between it and the original. He'd done too much modification on the Marauder clones to judge whether the base code showed accumulating errors or not. The cats were simple clones. They should have been the same each time, but Sinister had observed an eerie awareness about them that grew with each clone generation. The cat seemed to remember him.

It hissed when he approached too near, hair standing up.

LeBeau stroked it absently.

"Is that all?"

He sounded indifferent. Sinister doubted he was, but felt a mild stab of pride that LeBeau had grown so skilled he could hide whatever emotion he felt so well.

Sinister studied him.

"It may become necessary to exchange data with the good doctor McCoy, in which case I trust you would act as our go-between, and it is time Polaris was brought back into the fold. Seduce her."

"Wit' pleasure," LeBeau agreed lazily.

"And McCoy?"

"Henrí would work with the devil himself to cure La Belle," LeBeau said. He smiled at Sinister and added, "Might take a little work to convince him to work with you."

"Perhaps you should tell him I have seen the error of my ways and reformed?"

LeBeau raised an eyebrow. "Didn't know you still had a sense of humor."

Sinister permitted himself a chuckle. He had learned it took skill to command LeBeau. Power did not awe him. "All humor is based on pain. It pales with time."

LeBeau blinked at him. "The humor or the pain?"

"Either."

"You want me to do this tonight?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't be a problem. I designed the security system at Snow Valley. Bishop may have added a
few tricks, but nothing I can't get by. I'll need to find out where Polaris is serving and arrange an
'accidental' meeting," LeBeau said. He ran his hand over the cat's spine absently. "Which one is this
one?"

"Ten."

LeBeau chuckled. "Then he's living on borrowed time, neh? Already got his nine lives."

"Number Eight showed a marked fondness for you as well."

"His eyes are paler this time."

Sinister nodded. He'd noted the divergence while the clone developed. He suspected a spontaneous
mutation. The cloning vats were shielded against outside radiation, but DNA often changed during
development. A tiny difference in the hormone levels in the embryonic solution could have resulted
in the cat's lighter hued eyes.

"Replication drift."

He plucked a scientific journal from one of the shelves and seated himself in a wingback chair he
favored. A few pages into the journal, he set it aside in disgust. Pap. Sloppy, derivative work that
managed to perpetuate mistaken ideas and concepts without advancing science in the least. If he
thought it would result in any improvement, he would write a letter pointing out all the errors in the
article. It wouldn't. It would be more satisfying to dispatch the Marauders to assassinate the idiots
who wrote and published the journal.

LeBeau was watching him, expression curious rather than sardonic. "You've changed," LeBeau
said.

"Have I indeed? Perhaps you did not know me so well as you thought, LeBeau."

"Maybe."

LeBeau sat up. The cat stalked away in disgust at being disturbed from its place on him.

"Apocalypse. He's gone. That's what you always wanted. What all the work was toward, wasn't it?"

"In part," Sinister agreed, "but I was a scientist before En Sabah Nur made me as I am now."

He watched LeBeau pace restlessly to the door. "I should check my equipment."

"Everything changes, LeBeau. Even you. Even I. What doesn't... dies."

Like Xavier's dream, he thought, and the girl LeBeau had been so disastrously fond of. The girl...
Rogue had held LeBeau to the X-Men more than any belief.

Rogue. How apt a name she had chosen.

A remarkable mutation, certainly, but ultimately not viable. Her body had incorporated too many
disparate genetic templates. Any product of her geneline would have been chimeras and sterile or
producing only the genetics of whichever template provided the generative organs. Sinister had not
wasted his time studying her extensively once he ascertained that LeBeau's genetics would never
cross successfully with hers. It pleased him to see LeBeau recovering from the depression her death had left him in, despite knowing that meant he would grow restless soon.

If he had been aware of Jean Grey's propensity for returning from the dead, he would have let matters between her and Scott Summers proceed naturally and mated LeBeau with the Madelyne Pryor clone. He could have eventually bred the child back to the Summers-Grey line or out to one of the elemental or feral genelines and produced a mutant of even greater power than Cable.

There were so many more possibilities to explore with Apocalypse defeated. Yet at the same time, those possibilities were being closed off with every mutant that died. He would send LeBeau back to the MRF soon, along with the Marauders, allying himself with Magneto, an indulgence he could never afford before. If he wished to have mutants to continue his work with, though, it seemed necessary. He'd allowed himself to become too fond of his subjects. He wanted them to survive.

LeBeau, perceptive creature, had noticed.

"What do you believe in, LeBeau?" he asked.

LeBeau stilled, stopped with his back to Sinister. The line of his shoulders betrayed an uncharacteristic tension. "Surviving," he replied in a low voice.

"Yes, I thought so. No wonder you left Xavier."

"Like you said, everything changes."

The cat was weaving around LeBeau's legs. He bent and picked it up.

"Unless you're a Marauder, hein?" he said, gazing back at Sinister. "Then you come back and back and back. More lives than a cat."

With that, he walked out.

"Indeed, indeed," Sinister murmured. He would be sure to obtain a memory template from LeBeau before he left. Should something happen, he wanted to be able to clone and recreate him as he was now.

____________________
Necropolis

Chapter Summary

Dinner at Chez Drake for two, post break-up, with bonus slanted news stories.

AD 2227, February 20
Anderson Beach
Hammer Bay
Private Residence

Apricot light fell through the French doors open to the west facing terrace, throwing long shadows. The Ridgeback Mountains were etched mauve and blue against a horizon saturated molten white that dimmed into tints of chartreuse and lavender north and southward. Ragged cirrus clouds faded into gray above gilt and rose edges. The pine trees whispered with the evening breeze and inside the house, a typical Genoshan villa with most of the building and its tech hidden beneath the surface, a holonews show played softly from the kitchen. Time had softened the villa's edges, worn the dusty-rose native stone to a mellow shade and encouraged the vines along the walls, until they were solid green and dark in places, shading the windows, luxuriant with heavy-headed blooms.  

"This is Tristan St. Edwards reporting for European News Network. Tonight, we bring you a special report. New York: City of the Dead."

"I am standing here on the Jersey Shore. Behind me, you can see the quarantine barriers that still surround the island of Manhattan. Tonight, we will be taken past those barriers."

"Two hundred ten years ago, New York was a thriving city. Some said the greatest city in the world. A center of business, art, and unfortunately, of mutant and mutate activity. Mutant terrorism and crime were considered a part of life." 

Bobby rolled his eyes and went on preparing dinner. The infotainment feeds from outside the Barrier were filled with documentaries and historical holodramas that had as much in common with what he remembered as gnats and gnus. He tended to watch them with a horrified fascination. This what the baselines thought the Gene Wars had been like?

Remy didn't like them either, but had always tolerated the newsfeeds when Bobby insisted. Mostly he ignored them, as he was doing now. All the information he needed came through the Securidat intelligence briefings he handled every day, Bobby supposed. He kept his own secrets, while winnowing out everyone else's. That was just Remy. He glanced at him, wondering exactly what had brought him to Bobby's house tonight. It had been decades since he expected Remy to be there.

Something had been going on with Remy for a long time now. Years. Bobby was still close enough to him to recognize it, but far enough to notice the changes too.

"A steady artillery barrage on several mutant strongholds within the city began on the second day. Collateral damage from refracted explosions devastated Times Square and Wall Street within hours."
Archival news footage shows Four Freedom Plaza pitted with massive craters from continuous bombing.


Through the open archway into the living room of their residence, he glimpsed Remy lift his head.

"Something, Bobby?" he called.

"Nah."

Remy nodded and went back to his work. Running the Securidat had always taken a lot of his time, along with the Triune's duties. Even when he should have been relaxing, Remy was always thinking. That hadn't changed; Bobby wasn't surprised that he'd showed up and then withdrawn at the same time. He was jacked into the house computer – it still had a secure connection – and connected to the systems at the Citadel. The holographic screen and keyboard he used were just a haze of color from Bobby's side. A frown drew Remy's brows together while his long fingers danced in the empty air. He opened a comm call to an almost familiar face.

Bobby watched him for another minute, never tired of the line of his back, the perfect proportion of shoulder and leg, the turn of his wrists, the sweet vulnerability of his bared neck. The light burnished Remy where it touched. Bobby missed touching him.

"Yes, thank you. Don't send the data. I'll come to you, McCoy," Remy finished the call and the picture on the holographic display winked out.

"Nathan McCoy?" Bobby asked.

"Oui."

"Don't tell me you're sick."

"Don't get sick, cher. You know that."

"So?"

"So?"

"So, what did you want from him?"

"Just something about a research project of his."

"And you don't want him to send the data? Worried your systems are tapped?"

Remy shrugged fluidly. "Of course, they're tapped. Securidat monitors everyone, including itself."

"You are up to something."

Remy lifted his eyes and smiled a bone melting smile. Breathe, Bobby told himself. Sometimes his heart still stuttered when Remy looked at him like that.

"Fine, don't tell me."
He ducked his head and heard Remy laugh softly.

The pan on the stove had begun to sizzle so he turned back to the kitchen.

"Four Freedom Plaza was the headquarters of a terrorist group known as the Fantastic Four, a group composed of mutates—humans that had been genetically transformed. Even more so than mutants, mutates are anathema to our present society, but this group had at one time held close ties to the US government and even the Un."

He finished chopping the onions.

"You're kidding me. The Fantastic Four were not terrorists. What a crock."

The onions went into a warm pan to sauté. Bobby gave them a casual stir, letting the olive oil coat each piece. He checked the heat seating; he didn't want it too hot.

He cleaned up the cutting board, then pulled the rest of the ingredients for the dish from the refrigerator, chicken in a deep blue bowl and cream and fresh herbs he'd diced earlier. The kitchen's smooth tiles were cool beneath his bare feet and he curled his toes into the faint grooves of the grouted joins. The house computer dialed the lights up automatically as the daylight slipped away.

A glance over his shoulder showed Remy was intent on his work once more.

He stirred the onions again. They weren't quite transparent yet. He wanted them just turning gold, only a instant away from caramelizing.

He stepped into the pantry and retrieved the bottle of wine he wanted, poured out the measure he meant for the sauce and, with a shrug, a glass for himself and one for Remy.

"The North American Union Quarantine Force has graciously arranged for our ENN documentary team to fly over what was once downtown New York. Even after over two hundred years, New York remains a hot bed of active bioagents and poisonous toxins. It is necessary to wear protective gear even in the air above it."

Curious, he halted in front of the holoplayer and watched. He'd known New York, but nothing looked familiar; it was just another bombed out, broken Babylon. It could have been Denver or Dresden or Sarajevo. It could have been Hammer Bay, once. But Hammer Bay had been restored. Only New York had been… abandoned.

Two hundred years meant the rubble had weathered. No life had re-established itself yet. Bobby forgot the wine glasses he held, ignored the narration and watched the picture swoop and race over the ruins of the city. Nothing lived there.

"Efforts to clean up New York have been slowed for decades due to the precautions still necessary in the underground portions of the city. Historical documents obtained from the archives of the old US government record that numerous disenfranchised mutants, unable to pass as human in society, lived beneath the city in its infrastructure’s tunnels."

The hiss of the onions snapped Bobby back to the present. He set the wine glasses down and turned the flame down. He finished the chicken and the sauce, pictures of New York now playing before his mind's eye.
Snapped girders red with rust shot upward from piled concrete rubble, mountains of it, jagged and brutal as a mouthful of broken teeth. From the air, the traceries of streets were still visible. Graying tarmac gaped open and crumbled in abyssal cracks. All of it pocked with craters like a poisoned moonscape. Impact hollows overlaying each other, glazed into glass, cataract blind eyes sanded white. Everything dissolving under the acid scour of winds that swirled endless dust over the dead island.

It impressed the reporter. His voice lost its commentator smoothness and broke as he narrated the fate of Manhattan.

Bobby was pulling hot rolls from the oven when Remy joined him in the kitchen.

"Let's eat in here, cher."

"Fine with me."

Remy looked at the holoplayer. "That still on?" he asked.

"Yeah."

He felt Remy tense.

"You want me to switch it off?"

"Non."

"Okay."

He would, if he thought it was bothering Remy.

"So… I cooked. You set the table."

Remy slipped past him to the antique hutch that held their silverware. His hand brushed the back of Bobby's head as he passed, more caress than mock slap.

He shivered pleasurably, completely distracted from the documentary showing.

He had to force himself to finish putting together the meal instead of watching Remy's hands as he laid out forks and knives and spoons on the kitchen table. He wondered if Remy had ever stolen a set of silverware and doubted it. That would have been déclassé for a member of the Thieves' Guild.

"What are you smiling at?"

"You."

Remy raised an eyebrow. "I can't have food in my teeth yet, so, what?"

"Just, Warren used to worry you'd pick his pocket and you were probably more interested in casing the Louvre."

"He should have worried about Stormy. She had a fair hand at lifting wallets."
"Warren wouldn't have minded having her hand down his pants."

Remy chuckled.

"Feeling reminiscent tonight, cher?"

"Yeah."

He handed Remy the glass of wine he'd poured earlier. Remy eyed it skeptically. Not without reason. Bobby still hadn't quite got the hang of choosing or appreciating wines.

"Is this the good stuff?"

"Nope, I was cooking with it."

"– convicted mass murderer Sabretooth."

Remy jerked around and stared at the jerky archival videotape of Sabretooth. The wine in the glass sloshed dangerously close to the rim. He set it down carefully.

"Merde."

Bobby stared too.

"I didn't know anyone managed to film that."

"They must have had a satellite uplink and recorded it," Remy replied distractedly.

"– terrorists only identified as Polaris and Gambit associated with a group that called themselves the Marauders and inflicted high casualties at Four Freedom Plaza before – "

The film showed Four Freedom Plaza and a scattering of uniformed bodies. Sabretooth lobbed one at the camera. The picture jerked and yawned crazily, providing glimpses of the sky, tanks on the street, the green glow of a building under a domed forcefield and sharp, bloodstained claws swiping uncomfortably close. Another flickering shot showed a figure floating in the air and then a series of familiar, cerise-tinted explosions.

A last frame showed the ground and even the air taking on the same energetic glow before going to static.

"The same man may have been part of the Scourge at the end of the Gene Wars. Conflicting reports place him at first and second attacks on Denver – "

"Remy…"

Remy drained his glass of wine. "I lost my appetite, cher." He walked out of the kitchen, through the main room and out onto terrace.

"Since the Gene Wars, Manhattan Island has been kept under tight quarantine. Clean up efforts have been repeatedly derailed by economic factors. However, in the last year a proposal that renewed diplomatic contact with the mutant nation of Genosha might include reparations has…"
Bobby sighed. He thought of turning the broadcast off, but the damage was already done.

He began putting their untouched meals away. Afterward, he slipped out the French doors and joined Remy, who was using his phone.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Raven," Remy said. "You know why I'm letting you go with this plan." He ended the call and slipped the phone into his pocket.

He sighed.

Bobby said, "No one remembers what it was really like, Remy. They can't judge. Don't let it get to you."

"It seems like nothing changes, Bobby. Not me, anyway."

"You changed."

"Are you sure?"

Bobby shrugged. "Dunno. But if you're the same, then you were never as bad as you thought you were."

The silence between them was comfortable, not born of a lack of things to say, but instead the lack of need to say any of it. Remy slowly relaxed against him. Remy tipped his head back. Bobby peered up too. The Barrier blurred the stars, making it difficult to pick out even familiar constellations.

"Would you go somewhere with me?" Remy asked.

"Now?"


"Sure."

"You'd just come with me?"

Bobby pulled him closer. "Yeah."

He could feel Remy's heart beating fast and hard as they pressed closer. He felt the frantic speed slow once he answered.

"No questions?"

"No questions."

Remy sighed as if he knew it would never happen. They weren't very good at lying to themselves after so long. Bobby said, "I trust you."

"Sometimes that's foolish, cher," Remy whispered.

"I've been told that," Bobby said. "I don't believe it."
"You may change your mind."

"I reserve that right."

"I didn't fight when you left," Remy said.

It had hurt. Bobby hadn't wanted it to turn ugly, but he'd thought Remy would try to change his mind. He cocked his head. Of course, Remy had had a reason. He asked, "You want to tell me?"

"Oui. Non." Remy looked so uncertain Bobby wanted to hug him. "I've done something."

Bobby took stock. It had to be bad. "Go ahead, tell me."

________________________
Underneath a Sky of Dust

Chapter Summary

Beast gets a visit in his lab.

AD 2011, May 20
Snow Valley
Massachusetts Academy

Henry had fallen asleep in the lab again. He hadn't even made it to the cot Bobby had installed in one corner for him.

No matter how many hours he devoted to his work on La Belle, he never made enough progress to satisfy himself. Every day the numbers of mutants reported infected and dying of the disease rose.

He knew he was wrecking his health and possibly his sanity working non-stop in the laboratory, but he couldn't stop. Only complete exhaustion would let him sleep.

His nightmares were of vast plains underneath a sky of dust. The wind whipped ash off blackened earth and everywhere he turned the mounds marched away from him in lines of graves that stretched to the white edge of the horizon.

Something woke him. Not a sound. The only sounds were the same ones as always. Just something. The air stirring in a different current than the environmental system maintained. Something.

The fur on the back of his forearms and his neck stood up.

Shadows filled the lab interrupted by the blue glow of various monitors and telltale lights on some of the equipment. The soft hum of the fans along with the ventilation system was the only sound.

He pushed himself back from the desk. The chair under him protested with a creak and a squeal from one of the wheels.

He slid his spectacles back up and wondered if the imprint of the keyboard showed through his blue fur.

Between one blink and the next, a steel-cased flash drive appeared on the keyboard before him. He looked at it dumbfounded, then spun the chair, looking for the man who had delivered it. Nothing. The shadows didn't even flicker.

"Gambit?" he murmured.

How like the thief to waltz through Academy security, drop the disc and disappear.

"Bonne nuit, M'sieu le bête," Gambit breathed from just behind his ear.
Henry spun, but the thief had disappeared again, out of reach, out of sight. Playing games, but an edge existed that hadn't always been there. Gambit the Marauder didn't play by X-Men rules. The cool danger had always been present beneath Gambit's flamboyant charm; they'd had glimpses of the killer he'd been in the past, but now that part of his personality ruled.

"And good evening, or rather -" Henry glanced at the clock, "–good morning, my evasive, elusive and irritating ally."

"Ah, are we no' friends, Henri?" Gambit purred, cat-cruel and seductive.

Henry turned back to his desk and found Gambit half-perched on the edge of his desk, impossibly long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle. As usual, it gave Henry a shiver to see him dressed in the black bodysuit and armor he'd assumed since rejoining the Marauders. No more flashy colors and trench coat, not even a flash of metal. Except for the red diamond communicator clipped to the tight closure at his throat and diamonds on the shoulders of the leather jacket he wore, he was a shadow incarnate.

Sharp red eyes watched him warily through a drape of shaggy auburn hair. He had the look of a beautiful demon sent to seduce souls for his devilish master. All his edges were planed sharp enough to cut.

Meeting those eyes had been hard since Antarctica and harder since Rogue's death and Gambit's defection, because Henry blamed himself for so much of that, but he forced himself to do it.

"I consider you a friend, Remy," he stated firmly.

A wide, brilliant smile rewarded him. Gambit gestured to the disc. "This is everything Essex has on La Belle since the last time. This thing's frustrating him worse than Legacy."

Henry rolled his chair closer, only stopping when he saw Gambit begin to tense. The casual pose didn't fool him. Gambit hated labs. Somewhere in his past, maybe during his first sojourn with Sinister, the thief had endured something horrific in a lab. It went deeper, of course; like a wild thing, Gambit loathed even an appearance of weakness, as though he knew weakness would be attacked. His instincts were as feral as Wolverine's. Somewhere in his psyche, everyone was evaluated as a threat. Wounds were to be licked in private.

Sneaking into Henry's lab was an act of bravado more personal than breaching the Pentagon's defenses.

He reached over and picked up the drive. It was larger than the commercially available drives and held tremendous amount of information. More of Sinister's work. It reflected a flash of blue from one of the monitors. Beneath it an ace of diamonds fluttered and slid toward the floor.

Gambit caught the card and offered it to Henry with a flourish. Henry accepted it uncertainly.

"Gambit, does Essex know you're providing me with his research?" he asked. It had bothered him since the first time the thief had appeared in his lab in the middle of the night offering him the fruits of Sinister's research. He didn't want to think of his friend taking careless chances crossing that man.

"Oui, Henri," Gambit replied. "Were you worried?"
"Very much so." He busied himself with plugging the drive into one of his isolated computers.

"You don’ need to worry about Gambit."

"Have I mentioned I loathe that habit of referring to yourself in the third person, Remy?" Codenames were bad enough, he felt, though they often expressed an internal concept of their user's persona as well as their power. Gambit–Remy's - distancing of himself through third person spoke of a dissociative reaction none of them had been brave enough to explore.

"Non." Gambit sounded amused.

Henry hrmphed and Gambit chuckled, subtly relaxing. Henry scanned the information on the flash drive, skimming over the file descriptions. Gambit waited patiently. Henry rolled over to a different computer, connected an empty flash drive of his own and started copying a set of files with his own work.

"The data you've been passing on has been highly useful," he said while he typed in commands. "I think I can save your Dr. Essex time and work as well. I would appreciate your delivering this–" The files finished copying and disconnected the flash drive, "–to him." He held it out to Gambit and raised his eyebrows.

"No problem, mon ami."

The drive disappeared with a flicker of long fingers. Gambit slid to his feet. The smile disappeared. He tipped his head, long bangs flipping over his eyes again. "Now, you go upstairs, eat something more than a Twinkie, mais oui, and make the acquaintance of your own bed. You're too tired to be making much sense of anything."

Henry looked at the monitors full of information despairingly. Every moment he took to rest, some victim of La Belle was closer to death.

"Come on, Henrí," Gambit said.

This time Gambit put some of his charm into it; Henry could feel the soft tug of it slipping right through his psi-shields. Not the way a telepath would insert a thought or information. Gambit's touch operated on a subtler level, delicately strengthening emotions that were already there, masking or soothing others. Empathy was harder to block than telepathy–from both sides. It made Henry want to please the thief in return for his concern.

He didn't overwhelm with it, just applied the equivalent of Bobby's puppy dog eyes. Yet Henry suspected Gambit could push almost anyone into doing what he wanted. Emotion could be more overwhelming than the most logical arguments.

Gambit offered his hand as though he could lever Henry out of his chair, despite being outweighed three times over.

Henry locked his big hand around Gambit's deceptively slender wrist and held it still while he counted his pulse. After the first, startled instant, Gambit relaxed, not pulling away.

Gambit's pulse had always been steady and slow at rest, even under remarkable stress. It fluttered faster now. Not speeding, not for anyone but the singularly controlled thief, but faster than usual. Some of that came from being in the lab, but not all.
"You're underweight," Henry said.

Gambit grinned lopsidedly and said, "Essex tells me the same thing."

And of course, Essex was the reason Gambit was here in the lab, having slipped through mansion security effortlessly to deliver the disc full of information from the renegade scientist. Henry had never considered the man might take an interest in any one individual's health. He found himself hoping Essex did look out for Gambit. Someone needed to do it now that he'd left the X-Men.

"You've lost your accent," he observed.

The grin got darker. "That accent was always a put-on, mon ami, but then the X-Men never thought Gambit was too smart."

"And you never trusted us enough to drop it?"

Gambit slanted him a crimson look. "I got real cold in Antarctica, homme."

The X-Men had lodged a piece of ice in Gambit's heart that nothing had ever quite thawed.

"Well, my friend," Henry said, forcing cheerfulness, "I will do as you advise, if you accompany me to said kitchen and share in the bounty of our commodious commissariat."

"Don't think that's such a good idea," Gambit muttered, but allowed Henry to draw him out of the lab and upward to the first floor.

They kept their voices low and quiet as Henry prepared a simple meal of melted cheese sandwiches, fruit and Oreos. Gambit looked askance at the tall glass of milk Henry set before him but nodded on sight of the cookies.

Henry dug into his meal, realizing he was hungry after all. Gambit ate about half his sandwich and started soaking a cookie. Big bad mutant terrorists dunk Oreos too, Henry thought.

"You should stop by Storm's attic," Henry said.

Gambit closed his eyes. "Non."

"She misses you."

Gambit shook his head, eyes still closed.

Henry laid a hand on Gambit's arm. Muscle went taut beneath his touch. "Don't cut yourself off from your friends."

Gambit pulled away and shot to his feet. "I'm with my friends, M'sieu le bête," he snapped.

"The Marauders?"

"Oui." His eyes narrowed. "You think Riptide and Vertigo and 'Hunter are just monsters, neh? I knew them before I knew the X-Men. They never lie about what they are. They want you dead, they kill you; they don't leave you in hell, tell you it's your fault, you made them do it, you deserve it!"
Henry flinched back. "I'm sorry, Gambit, how many times can I apologize for what we did? It wasn't your fault. What you did for Sinister, the Morlocks, part of that was your fault, but judging you, letting Rogue leave you, that wasn't. That was our fault. Our guilt."

Gambit shoved a hand through his hair then seemed to shrug his anger away.

"Think I had enough milk and cookies, Henrí," he said. His gaze shifted beyond Henry to the kitchen doorway. He nodded to someone there. His voice went perfect neutral, while a throwing spike appeared between the fingers of one hand.

"Cyclops."

"Remy," Scott Summers greeted him, padding into the kitchen and ignoring the way Gambit had tensed like a cat ready to defend himself. He slumped down into the seat Gambit had left and helped himself to a leftover Oreo. "I'd offer to turn off the security system to let you get out easier, but I doubt you need me to."

Gambit snorted.

"I probably don't want to know why you're dragging Henry out of the lab in the middle of the night," Scott went on. "I just want to tell you, as far as I'm concerned, you don't need to sneak in. You're still one of us."

"Merci, Scott."

The words were a whisper left in the air as Gambit slid away into the shadows.

"So, what did bring Gambit back here?" Scott asked curiously after he'd gone.

Henry told him.
It's not awful being a null on Genosha. Better than being a burn-out.

AD 2227, February 21
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

"I hate this place."

"We all know, Zile," Bird told him wearily. He had heard it before, in fact heard it every day.

"Well, I do. It sucks."

Bird's temper finally snapped.

"Then get out! Go back out into the city and find yourself a flonqing job that doesn't take mutant powers, God knows there are plenty of those," he yelled. He threw down the dish towel he'd been using and walked out of the restaurant kitchen. The push doors slapped shut behind him.

Two sous-chefs and the pastry chef stared at Zile. No, glared. He hunched over and held up his soapy wet hands.

"You don't know what it's like!"

"Oath, Zile," Killian, the pastry chef, muttered, "just shut up. We're all sick of listening to you whine."

"You're all crips."

The manager, Murphy, poked his head through the push doors. "All of you get back to work. Now." He glared impartially at everyone. "Verice is not the best restaurant in Hammer Bay because its employees spend their time chatting."

Zile rolled his eyes and went back to the dishes. A busboy was dispatched in from the front rooms to take over Bird's dish drying duties. Nothing was said of where the null had gone. Work went on.

Late, after Verice closed, the kitchen staff were taking their own meal. Zile leaned against the counter, sucking the cream off his fork from one of Killian's desserts.

Killian sidled over to him.

"You know, you're the crip, not us," he hissed.
"What?"

"We're nulls, baselines, okay?" Killian said.

"Yeah, so?"

"There's a whole world out there of people like us and we're the normal ones. You, though, you're the one that burnt out his powers snorting Jumpstart."

Zile flinched at the memory.

"So, you're the crip."

Everyone was glaring at him again. Then Killian patted his shoulder.

"When the Triune open the Barrier, we're getting out of the havens. You'll still be stuck as a fuck-up."
Genosha gets a wake-up call, New York gets an obituary. Betrayal sprouts from the smallest seeds.

AD 2011, August 8
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

Kitty phased before she was fully awake, her hand locked around Pete's wrist, taking him with her, before the echo of the first explosion had even faded.

Pete went with her without protest. The building shook, dust springing into the air from things Kitty had thought were clean, other things toppling off dressers and tables and shattering. The noise of explosions mixed with earsplitting sirens. Kitty paid no attention.

She took Pete straight through the wall into the twins' room. Still holding Pete's wrist with one hand, she scooped up Moira from her bed, dephasing just long enough to grab the four-year-old before going insubstantial again. Six fast steps crossed the room and Pete used his free hand to hug Harry close to his side. Kitty phased them all again.

Another explosion came from near downtown. She shared a wild look with Pete.

Phased, he didn't have any air to speak with, but he mouthed the words and she read them, "Someone's bloody bombing the city."

She hitched Moira higher on her hip and nodded.

"Downstairs," Pete mouthed.

They headed out of the apartment and down to the basement where the foundations were reinforced. There were also entrances into an underground system built from the remains of the city's original sewer system. Shortly after Moira and Harry's birth, Pete had checked the tunnels out and put together the plan to take cover there if anything happened. The old tunnels were used by the mutates during the civil war and included sections that shielded mutant power signatures from sensors. Meant to shield runaway mutates from the Magistrates, the holes would hide mutants from Sentinels too.

Kitty had made gentle fun of him. What idiot would ever attack the capitol of a nation ruled by Magneto? She hated tunnels and sewers anyway.

She'd live in the damned things if it kept Harry and Moira safe. They were bombing Hammer Bay. Could Sentinels be far behind?

They went with bare feet against cold stairs. Pete in his ratty boxers and Kitty wearing a faded blue
T-shirt with holes around the collar. Harry and Moira at least were in comfy flannel pajamas that Jubilee had sent on their birthday. Kitty de-phased them periodically so they could breathe and Moira whimpered against her neck.

Kitty patted her daughter's head. "It's okay," she whispered. "It's okay."

The building shook from another explosion, this one closer.

Pete cursed. "Move your arse, Kit," he snarled when they could hear again.

"It's dark!" Harry wailed.

"Right, I'll take care of that, Harry me lad," Pete said.

He tugged his hand loose from Kitty's and ignited one of his hot knives. Five inches of white hot plasma shot out from his index finger, lighting their way down the dirty stairwell.

Harry wrapped his arms around Pete's neck and clung tightly. Kitty hoisted Moira higher, whispering, "Hold on tight, Mo," and wrapped her free arm around Pete's waist, ready to phase them again in an instant.

The warmth of his bare flesh against her inner arm calmed her, reminding her they were still alive and whole. The anger would come later.

AD 2011, August 10
France
Mont Saint Francis

"What the hell was he supposed to do!?" Scott shouted. His voice echoed off the stone walls of the old monastery. Two techs busy installing a communications console in the southern apse jerked their heads his way.

"He hasn't changed since attacking Cape Citadel," Professor Xavier insisted.

"The circumstances have."

"You think the circumstances justify Magneto using his powers to kill innocent men and women?"

Scott stepped back and just stared at Xavier. The hoverchair in no way took away from the force of Xavier's personality. He appeared as controlled and powerful as ever. The sorrow on his face and in his voice communicated his vast disappointment in Scott. Scott knew every nuance of every expression Xavier showed the world.

Despite that, he wondered if he knew the man at all.

"Innocent?" he echoed. "Professor, they were members of the military. They'd just launched a cruise missile attack on Hammer Bay."

He waved, indicating the ancient gothic edifice they were in. Workers swarmed through it, converting the monk's cells into quarters, the cellars into hardened shelters, chapels into conference
rooms and offices. The Monastery of Mont Saint Francis sat on the windswept coast of northern France. Once it had been an Acolyte base. Now it would serve the MRF, hiding them within a sixty-mile sensor dead zone.

"We're setting up the MRF headquarters here because it's too dangerous to the average Genoshan citizen for us to operate out of Hammer Bay—because of that attack." He pointed at Xavier. "And don't say they were just following orders. That's not good enough. Orders that are wrong should not be followed, damn it."

"You can see that and not see that Erik's actions were wrong?" Xavier asked him. He started his hoverchair and floated down the center of the nave. That forced several workers to detour around him. Scott followed him, fuming and frustrated.

The shattered wreckage of the Acolyte's equipment had been cleaned out, leaving the main church building empty. Jeweled light from several still existent stained windows colored the gray, cut stone floor and flashed off the polished metal of Xavier's chair.

Scott caught up with Xavier and circled the chair to confront him face to face.

"You're so busy playing mutant hall monitor, handing out demerits to all of us 'students' for running with fucking scissors you haven't looked up and seen the guy with the machine gun getting ready to shoot everyone!"

"Scott. Manners."

"Am I insulting you, Professor?" he snapped. "Then consider why. Wake up. I'm not a child. I don't agree with Magneto on a lot of things, but sinking that fleet may save more lives—on both sides—than it cost. Can you honestly say he should have stood by and let what they did pass without responding? What would stop them from shelling Hammer Bay again? How many times can anyone turn the other cheek?"

He ran his hand through his hair then rubbed the back of his neck. "New Genosha is the last true safe haven for mutants in this world. We have to defend it."

"Defend, yes. But not attack, Scott. Not kill. There are other ways. You used to understand this." Xavier leaned forward, speaking in earnest. "If you still believed in our dream of co-existence you would see what a terrible mistake Magneto is making. He has just reinforced the fear of all mutants."

"I'm not terribly concerned with co-existence anymore, sir. Existence seems to be a trifle more important."

Xavier slumped back in the chair. He looked drained. His hands were clenched into fists, resting on the arms of the chair.

"These last years have made you a hard man, Scott. Much harder than the boy I first took in. It's a terrible shame."

Scott shook his head. "Professor, I'm one of the lucky ones and I know it. I have the power to act. The worst thing I can imagine now is to not act."

"I see you making the same choices and mistakes that Erik made and I'm filled with despair," Xavier told him.
"Have you ever, even once, considered that you might be the one who is wrong, sir?" Scott asked. He snorted. "No. Not once."

"Of course, I've doubted, Scott. Anyone human doubts. Erik is the one whose certainty has succumbed to insanity and now I see you and my other students ready to follow him into that madness."

"So be our voice of reason, but don't try to dictate our choices."

"I feel as though I am losing you, all of you, to him."

"With all respect, sir," Scott said, "you talk like the X-Men are your belongings."

"I saved you. I raised and taught you. I gave you all a home. I gave you a purpose."

Scott stared at him.

Xavier stared back.

"Are you saying we owe you?"

"I–no–not as such," Xavier blurted.

"Yes, you were," Scott said slowly. He lifted his gaze to the chancel and the crucifix high on the wall behind it. Someone would take it down, he hoped.

"Scott, somehow humans and mutants have to learn to live with each other," Xavier stated. "What other option is there? Segregation? That is unacceptable."

"It's better than annihilation. That's the reality, sir. What is, is. As much as I believe in the Dream, I won't sacrifice any more people to it. Maybe when this war is over we can try again."

"I'm afraid that will be too late," Xavier said.

"So be it."

AD 2012, February 10
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

Genosha – New Genosha, Charles corrected himself—shared the physical beauty of another southern hemisphere island: New Zealand. He had never had the opportunity to appreciate the landscape in any of his visits before. Civil wars don't encourage tourism. His own responsibilities would have precluded travel for pleasure in any case.

The Ridgeback Mountains rose high into a deep blue sky, still snowy and sharp-edged in summer. Greeneries bloomed everywhere, swiftly covering over the old scars on the land. As the private jet had brought them over the north end of the island, Charles had noticed exquisite black sand beaches and
nearly tropical flora.

Riding in the back of an armored limousine from Hammer Bay's airport to the Citadel offered him a few moments to glimpse the oft-devastated city through the windows. Even after the cruise missile attack, he could see that many changes had been made since Magneto assumed power.

The latest destruction was already being repaired.

A line of saplings along the center of the boulevard they were on were obviously intended to replace the adult trees that had been burnt or cut down during the war. Flower boxes in the windows of the apartment buildings offered bright colors in contrast to the old scorch marks and unevenly colored repairs to the walls. One lot held dump trucks, trailers and bulldozers cleaning up the rubble of a demolished building. The man in charge of the site was clearly a mutate, but wore work coveralls and a bright yellow hardhat over his hairless skull.

Charles frowned and sank back in his seat.

Hammer Bay looked… alive. The minds he felt in the city held worry and anger over the bombing by the US, but not the ugliness of despair and fury that had once hung over the entire island. He sensed satisfaction and determination.

Magneto had done well by the country. The attack by the US Navy had cemented a new fellow feeling through the people, united them against the arrogant superpower. The sinking of the US fleet in retaliation had set Magneto up as a protector of them all.

Turning the populace against him would take time and effort. It was going to be much harder than Charles had anticipated.

He looked at the woman in the seat across from him.

"Wanda, my dear, have I thanked you for coming here with me?"

The Scarlet Witch smiled at him. "You don't need to, Professor. I understand your trepidation over dealing with my father. No matter what face he wears now, I share your distrust of him."

"I would understand if you had doubts over deceiving him in the manner we've discussed," he said.

He touched her thoughts delicately as he spoke. It took almost no effort to convince her Magneto had to be removed from power in New Genosha. She had so many issues with her father he had only to remind her of them. Even a clever psi would have a hard time uncovering the little tweaks he’d made in her mind.

Magneto would welcome Wanda to New Genosha and his side. The man wanted his children by his side. His own hopes would blind him to any questions over why his daughter had joined him.

It wasn't the way Charles liked to operate, but his options were limited. The X-Men had committed themselves to the MRF and by extension to New Genosha and Magneto. He couldn't manipulate their thoughts too blatantly without alerting them to his actions. All of them had been brainwashed and conditioned and possessed so many times they were quite sensitive to any mental interference. They'd never quite trusted him the same way since the Onslaught debacle either. That and his history with Magneto made it impossible to use his telepathy against Magneto directly as well.
But he wasn't without resources.

He could be patient. In time, he would discredit Magneto. Once that had been done, he could persuade his X-Men to turn on the man. They would see Charles was right.

"I won't fail you, Professor Xavier," Wanda assured him.

Charles nodded, satisfied.

"I know you won't, my dear."

He wouldn't let her.

AD 2012, April 4
Madripoor
Lowtown

They say you can buy anything in Madripoor Lowtown. Courier figured it was true. He was watching three separate deals, variously for drugs, bodies and guns, being negotiated while he sipped imported Scotch that had never had any duty or tax paid on it. The Princess Bar looked like a hole, but it served good stuff and Tyger Tyger had told the bartender, O'Donnell, to serve him on the house.

He'd stopped to have a quiet drink after making a delivery before catching the next flight back to London.

There were others watching too. Waiting for some free entertainment if something went wrong or just that bit of gossip that could turn out to be the difference between life and death somewhere along the road. Knowing who was working for who and where always had value.

Half the mercenaries who usually made the Princess the best place to recruit soldiers for hire were already gone, of course. The metahumans, mutant or otherwise, were flocking to the MRF while a dozen brushfire wars in the Third World had sucked up the human mercs, leaving slim pickings even at the Princess.

The recognizable faces there tonight were probably working some angle or just too fucked up to hire anymore. Courier had never quite been part of that world, but he'd made it his business to know the players after working with Gambit a few times. He spotted Kane, Cash, Lynch and Judd spaced around one table. Cash was the one watching a strung-out beauty score Kick in the shadows, looking like someone was twisting a knife in his guts. Lynch looked too far gone to even notice a knife or anything else that didn't come in a bottle. Those were two of the no hires. Judd and Kane were sticking to beers. Working probably, letting the Team 7 vets offer some cover.

Craven and Pike were each drinking alone, glares keeping even the bar girls away. A redhead in a black exoskeleton was typing into a laptop down the bar from Courier. The one guy fool enough to bother her stumbled back bleeding, though Courier didn't see what she'd done.

Nottingham and Constantine were tracing arcane symbols in red wine around a jeweled dagger on a tabletop. A spate of harsh Russian came from Winter, drawing attention from around the bar, but
only briefly. He was arguing with Lucien Barnes over something that went down in Afghanistan thirty years before.

The Mengo Brothers were talking with a representative of the Hand. When Courier sharpened his hearing, the name Elektra floated from their table.

Courier shuddered when he recognized one more killer for hire sitting at a corner booth, this time from experience not files. He knew those heavy shoulders and that coarse blond mane. Sabretooth looked a lot healthier and meaner than when Gambit dragged him and Courier from South America to Madagascar. The big man hunched in opposite him looked just about as dangerous as the feral, with the cybernetics peeking out from under his clothes and his drooping black Fu Manchu mustache.

Courier blinked. That was Scalphunter.

The last time he'd seen that man, he'd been dying on the floor of one of Sinister's labs, warning Gambit they had about an hour before his next clone came after them. Scalphunter was one of Sinister's cloned Marauders.

He swallowed a generous gulp of Scotch.

That was a clone. Maybe Sabretooth was too. It gave Courier the heebie-jeebies.

He signaled O'Donnell to pour him another shot and ducked his head, otherwise he might not have been quite so surprised when Gambit murmured, "Bonjour, Jake, how's married life treating you?" in his ear.

Courier twitched, sloshed good Scotch on his Hermes tie and cursed. "Shit, don't do that–oh, hell, what's the use?"

Gambit raised his eyebrows, looking perplexed. "Do what, mon ami?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

Gambit lit a clove and settled elegantly onto the barstool beside him. As usual, he made whatever he wore look good. This time it was leather pants that molded to every muscle and a skintight tunic that laced over his ribs and up his arms from wrists to shoulders. A heavy buckle closed the throat. He looked like a fetishist's wet dream.

"How's Sek?"

"Fine," Courier said sourly. "You never answered her e-mail."

"Pardon, neh? Things got messy and I left the X-Men about then," Gambit said.

"So, what brings you to Madripoor?"

"Tesseract."

"Hunh?"

"A job, just like you."
"Oh."

Courier glanced around the bar again and stiffened. Oh shit. Sitting down at a shadowy table were a blond woman, Viper, Wisdom and Wolverine.

Wolverine.

Sabretooth.

Gasoline meet match.

Gambit waved languidly at them.

"Don't do that," Courier hissed.

"Do what?" Gambit said and Courier knew he was fucking with him.

"Draw their attention."

"Relax, Jake." He stripped off his leather gloves and signaled O'Donnell. "A Sazerac, please." He had black polish on his fingernails.

"Relax?"

"Yeah, that thing where you stop being so tense you twang," Gambit murmured. O'Donnell brought him a Sazerac and he raised it toward Wisdom.

"I hate you."

"Oui, Jake, I know." Gambit sipped his drink.

"Really, really hate you."

"Uhhuh."

Courier eyed Wolverine, who bent closer to Viper, speaking intently. His gaze flickered over to Sabretooth. Who was staring straight at him over the mouth of his beer bottle. Sabretooth inclined his head toward Wolverine's table. His lip curled up, revealing a sharpened canine. A small headshake from Gambit triggered the realization that Sabretooth was looking at Gambit and not Jake. It didn't really improve his mood. "You know, I have a plane to catch. I think I'll just be going," he said. And fuck you very much, Remy, I don't want to be in the middle of whatever scam you're running now.

"You worry too much, Jake."

"Oh, excuse me, I worry too much?" he snapped. "Just because I don't want to hang around at ground fucking zero for the next big feral mutant throwdown? It's going to look like the cage fight from hell in here once they get a glimpse of each other. I just got this suit. You should know it's a bitch getting blood out of good wool."

Gambit rolled his eyes. He had on the blurred remnants of eyeliner. A ruby gleamed at one ear. Not his usual thing so he'd probably been up to something before stopping into the Princess. "Jake, Jake,
they know. They can smell each other."

"Yuck."

Gambit shook his head, chuckling.

"So why aren't they fighting?" Courier couldn't help being curious.

"Logan's negotiating an arms purchase for the MRF with Viper. Mystique and Wisdom are Magneto's money men. No one's going to queer the deal just to indulge in a bar brawl," Gambit explained. "And Vic and Crow are just kickin' back. We've got about a half day before Polaris shows up and we hit New York."

That was Mystique? Courier didn't know if he'd met her before or not. Genuine metamorphs—like Mystique and himself—changed down to their cells. That meant distinguishing them could be a real problem. Personally, he could fool a genescanner, but the real trick lay in maintaining a personality. Mystique had done it for years as Raven Darkhölme, he didn't doubt she could have fooled him if they'd encountered each other.

Wait. Gambit had said we. "Oh, man. We? You're with them?"

A fluid shrug was Gambit's only response. He sipped the Sazerac and watched the people in the bar. Courier followed his gaze.

The Von Strucker twins were making small talk with an Asian in a crimson silk suit. Flanking him was a Bondi Beach blond. Andrea Von Strucker kept giving the kid hot looks, even while she was virtually in her twin Andreas' lap. Major creep.


"What's Fenris want with the Tongs?"

"Haven't a clue, homme."

Wisdom and Mystique left their table and strolled over. As she crossed the room, Mystique morphed into the heart-shaped face and distinctively streaked hair of Rogue. Once she'd reached Gambit's side, she looked exactly like her adopted daughter.

"You play dirty, Raven," Gambit said. His face had gone blank. He watched her the way a man would a snake, with respect and every intention of killing it.

"So do you, LeBeau," Mystique said in a husky drawl.

"You're slipping. She never called me that."

Wisdom pushed between the two of them and flagged O'Donnell. "I need a bottle here." He nodded to Courier, dug out a crumpled pack of Silk Cuts and lit one. "Act civilized, you two."

"You didn't even show at her funeral, you bastard," Mystique hissed. Her features flowed back into the form she'd arrived using.
Gambit swallowed the last of his Sazerac. "I saw her dead. I didn't need to see her buried."

O'Donnell set a bottle of Scotch in front of Wisdom. He hefted it. He said, "Come on, Raven. Logan should have everything but the price worked out by now."

Mystique paused in front of Gambit. She leaned close, whispering, "She was my daughter. I wish it had been you."

Gambit said tonelessly, "At least I wouldn't have made her find the body."

She nodded and walked away.

Wisdom paused and addressed Gambit. "How long are you going to go on playing silly buggers for tall, dark and gruesome?"

"One more job, Pete," Gambit said quietly.

"Good. Kit's worried as hell about you."

Courier waited a beat after Wisdom left them and said, "Rogue?"

"Oui." Gambit's mouth twisted into a smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Better get out of here, Jake, if you're going to catch that flight back to London. Kiss Sek for me."

Courier pushed back from the bar and stood. "I'll kiss her for me," he said.

Gambit's expression softened into something with some life in it. "Au revoir, Jake."

Courier extended his hand and they shook.

"So long, Remy."

A glance back from the door made Courier stumble. Gambit had left the bar and now stood in close conversation with the Fenris twins and the man he'd called Slipstream.

AD 2012, April 9
Regina, Canada
Queen's Camp

Mendoza watched the MRF major and two sergeants walk through the streets of Queen's Camp. The officer didn't look like much, just this petite girl–woman–with dandelion blonde hair chopped brutally short. The men flanking her were a foot taller and broader. The dark gray uniform made her look even smaller, despite the clunky boots and the heavier armor on the knees, shoulders and arms. A set of goggles rested on her hair like a headband.

All three of them had heavy plasma pistols holstered at their waists.

He watched her stop and talk with men and women, sometimes pulling someone out into the street to show what they could do. One of the sergeants would encompass the mutant in a blue-tinged
forcefield sphere that usually contained whatever they did.

Once it didn't, and the big sergeant ended up on his ass in the street and whatever glass remained in the windows of the buildings for a block around blew out. He noticed the blonde major ride the same blast like a sailor on the deck of ship.

She laughed.

Most of the time, she handed the people she talked to a silver dollar-sized disc and pointed down the street. A few, she shook her head at and shooed away.

He was still sitting on the steps of an apartment building that had become part of Queen's Camp when she reached it.

She stopped and looked at him, her hands planted on her hips.

Up close, he could see she was both younger and harder than he had imagined. The sort of pretty he'd have hit on if he'd seen her in a club before. Nothing about her screamed mutant. Of course, nothing about him did either.

"So, who are you and what you do?" she asked bluntly.

"What's it matter?"

"You want to keep sitting here in Hicksville rotting away while the big honchos decide what happens to you…? Nothing. You want to join the MRF and do something, then we want to know what kind of mutant you are."

Mendoza rolled his eyes.

"Fine."

He got up from the steps and walked over to a pothole in the street. A kick dislodged a cracked off chunk of tarmac. He picked it up, brought it to his mouth and began chewing. When he'd finished it, he held stuck his tongue out at the major.

"Real useful, right?"

She snorted. "Well, you won't go hungry."

"I'm no superhero," he said.

She pulled the plasma pistol out and held it muzzle up.

"Can you pull a trigger?"

Mendoza stared at it.

"Yeah. Yeah, I can do that."

"Good. The MRF wants soldiers, not heroes."
She flipped one of the shiny discs at him. He caught it. Nothing on it to indicate what it did.

"Keep that and show up at the intersection of Delaney and Birkle Streets tomorrow at noon. You get one bag of personal stuff, no more than ten pounds. You'll get uniforms and shit at boot camp. Say your goodbyes, get laid, get drunk or wasted or whatever tonight. Boot's six weeks. You'll go straight to the PNW from there."

He fingered the disc.

"That's it?"

"What do you want? A moving, impassioned speech about freeing our mutant brethren? Screw it. You can run and hide or stand and fight. Personally, I couldn't give a shit. You're the one who has to look at himself in the mirror every morning."

"Yeah, okay, I get that."

She reholstered the pistol.

"See you tomorrow, recruit," she said before starting away. "If you show up."

"Hey, who are you, anyway?" Mendoza called after her.

She turned and walked backward.

"Major Smith."

"I'm Rey Mend - "

"Save it. After tomorrow, we probably won't see each other again. You'll be going to the grunt units not the strikers. Be thankful," she snapped, spinning again and striding away determinedly.

One of the sergeants paused by Mendoza.

"She's taken anyway, kid."

"By who? She doesn't look old enough to vote."

The sergeant laughed. "None of us get to vote anymore, remember? Besides, Meltdown's an X-Force vet. She's the Commander's girlfriend."

Mendoza blinked and looked at the blonde major walking away from them.

He fingered the disc. All he had in the world was sitting in the backseat of a rust-red El Camino. He'd traded his mother's silver set and the diamond engagement ring his girlfriend had handed him back when she found out he was a mutant to get it. The El Camino had kept up with the rest of the convoy the MRF had run up the CanAm highway through Border Patrol lines so he figured it had been a good deal.

Joining the MRF seemed like a stupid thing to do. He'd just got out of the US because he didn't want to get shot or locked up. Still, like Major Smith had said, he had to look himself in the mirror sometime.
"Fuck it."

Noon the next day, Rey Mendoza joined the mixed crowd of mutants waiting at the intersection. He blinked as a woman he recognized as Lila Cheney, the rock star, blinked into existence with a flare of light.

"This it?" Cheney asked the blonde major.

"It would be you," the major replied sourly. "Yeah, this is it. Impressive… not."

"Well, darlings, hang on to your stomach contents," Cheney addressed the crowd. "This may be a bumpy ride!"

"If any of you have changed your minds, drop your discs!" the major shouted.

Mendoza's stomach lurched and he wondered if he wasn't making a huge mistake, but he tightened his fist around the disc he'd been given.

Light flared around them and the streets of Queen's Camp disappeared as the teleportation field activated.

AD 2012, April 12
Washington, DC
The Oval Office

Graydon Creed stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking out the window at the White House Rose Garden. Behind him, Henry Peter Gyrich re-entered the office after escorting the Canadian Ambassador out.

"How dare he?" Creed said. "Expel him. Expel the entire Canadian legation." The ambassador had called his administration illegal and flat out declared his government go on offering safe haven to any Americans 'fleeing persecution' as well as withdrawing from any and all previous support agreements. Gene traitors and collaborators. When he had the US cleansed of those freaks, Canada would be next.

Gyrich chose to remain silent.

"Do they really think that the United States, the greatest and most powerful nation on this planet, will let them go on defy us? The goddamn MRF free rein to base their raids on us from across the border? Mutants, goddamned mutants. The gall – "

"Sir, I think they believe the United States is already over-committed with the internal unrest stirred up by the MRF and a war with New Genosha."

"We'll teach them." Graydon's heavy shoulders rolled as his clenched his fists. Lines of protestors filled the street beyond the fences and anti-terrorist barricades, protesting the cancelling of a second Presidential election. They waved signs calling for everything from Mutant Rights to his
impeachment. He smiled viciously. Every one of them would be a face in the database before the end of the day and could look forward to 'visits' from BuSec. His smile faded. After eight goddamn years, they still hadn't learned to obey. But they would. Harsher directives would be necessary and the fucking Canadians would have to be taught a lesson too. He repeated it, "We'll teach them."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Creed spun around and stabbed a decisive finger at Gyrich. "Get the Secretary of Defense in here and someone from the JCS. I want a plan put together to strike one of those so-called refugee camps."

"Sir."

"The one that bitch Tilby was broadcasting from. Queen's Camp. I wanted that place wiped off the face of the earth."

"Yes sir. – About New York?"

"Dust it. Dust the whole damn city if you have to, the vermin are burrowed in underneath it."

"And if the Avengers defend the city – "

Creed waved his hand. "If any of them are left, dust them too."

AD 2012, April 14
United States
Manhattan

The sick-sweet smell of decay hung in the air. Something close by was dead, rot well set in.

Sabretooth lifted his head as they stepped out of the tesseract doorway into the Manhattan street. His nostrils flared. Polaris gagged and waved her hand in front of her face.


Sabretooth scented the air again. He announced, "Human," with a pleased curl to his lip.

Remy grimaced.

"Let's go," he said.

The rest of the Marauders fanned out, moving with easy swinging strides, always within sight of each other, moving from cover to cover. Polaris stayed at Remy's side, not as experienced at covert work and still uncomfortable around the rest of their killers' band.

The city felt already dead. Too quiet by half, the constant din of business and crowds hushed and instead the hornet buzz of helicopters audible along with the growl of tanks moving into place. They glimpsed troops patrolling down eerily emptied streets. Sentinels stood at rest in the larger intersections, powered down and waiting for their next orders. They detoured around outside their
"If you see a body stay away from it," Remy said. "They've already dusted with two biotoxins and even if they've been shot, the bodies may be hot."

"I'm so scared," commented Sabretooth.

Remy bared his teeth at him. "Healing factor doesn't seem to do much good if you pick up La Belle."

Sabretooth growled.

"What about the rest of us?" Prism whined.

"We'll all decontam when we get back to the base."

"We're fucked," Riptide said. He didn't sound bothered.

Vertigo laughed.

As they moved, they sometimes felt eyes on them from darkened windows and doorways. But if there was a population on the planet that knew to stay out of the affairs of metahumans, it was New Yorkers. No one bothered them as made their way to their first target: the offices of InterGeneCo.

Power to the skyscraper was out.

Blockbuster looked at the directory in the empty, refuse littered lobby and crossed his arms over his massive chest. "No way am I going up thirty-four flights of stairs," he declared.

Remy turned to Polaris. "Can you--"

"Get in the elevator."

"You're a peach, frail," Sabretooth said as he shouldered past Polaris and into the elevator. A small frown of concentration was the only indication that Polaris and not the regular power source was lifting the elevator upward.

"Nice," Arclight commented as they exited onto the empty thirty-fourth floor. "Express service."

Polaris blew on her nails. "That was nothing."

Remy started digging plastic explosive from his pack. "Everybody take a room, everything gets checked out and trashed. Essex doesn't want anything left here for BuSec or Brigade intelligence to reconstruct. Got it?" he said.

"Search and destroy with an emphasis on destroy, just our kind of mission."

Remy ignored Riptide to address Vertigo. "Hit the offices with a disorientation wave and keep it on until we're out of there, Vee."

She nodded.

"Prism, stay here with Vertigo," he told the glass man. "Watch her back and the stairwell exit. Comm
us if anything jumps up."

"Your wish is my command."

"I wish," Remy muttered. "Try not to trip and shatter yourself on something."

"One time," Prism said. "One damn time."

Scalphunter chuckled as he walked by. "That's all it takes, isn't it?"

As Remy blew the doors open and took them into the offices, he reminded them, "Find anyone alive… don't leave them that way."

Twenty minutes later the entire thirty-fourth floor of the building blew out. Glass from the windows rained down to the pavement as the sixteen floors above settled into the imploded space. A high wind tore the black smoke and dust away through the concrete canyons.

The Marauders were already blocks away, loping through the streets toward their next target, a safehouse belonging to the Kingpin, where five weapons scientists were stashed. After dusting the scientists, they moved on to an armory hidden under the vaults beneath the Mineral Bank. The weapons there were an interesting collection, but Remy blew the entire building sky high without hesitation. Sabretooth didn't get to have much fun until they'd hit the autodestruct on one of Sinister's safehouses and were making their way into the old Avengers' headquarters.

Remy held up his hand as they came within sight of the three story, Fifth Avenue townhouse. Purity Brigade troops were guarding the entrances and spaced around the entire block. They could assume more were inside, trying to salvage all the technology left behind when the Avengers split down the middle, one group relocating to Canada to fight alongside the MRF and the other leaving for London.

He pointed to Sabretooth, Scalhunter, Riptide and Harpoon.

"You, you, you, and you - take out the guards. Start outside and move in."

Sabretooth flexed his claws.

Riptide flipped one of his shuriken in the air, grinning widely. "Oh, this will be fun."

Harpoon scowled and hefted one of his spears, biokinetic energy beginning to run up and down it. Scalhunter checked the energy reservoir on his plasma rifle and reseated the clip with a soft click.

"Polaris. Vertigo. Arclight. Coordinate. I want an EMP at the same time Vee knocks them to their knees. Phillipa, rock the ground out from under them. I don't want anyone getting the chance to recover or call in backup."

He pointed to Prism and Scrambler. "Sniper. Spotter. Officers first then fire for effect."

They nodded. Scrambler's abilities were next to useless except against other mutants, while Prism was too fragile for hand to hand combat.

"Blockbuster, with me."
"Ja."

Remy met each set of eyes one by one. "I want to level this place."

They nodded.

"So, when I comm you to get out...?" He raised an eyebrow.

"We amscray or go up with the show," Arclight replied.

"Oui. We finish here and take out Four Freedom Plaza last."

He nodded to Scalhunter.

"Go."

The four killers smiled, hard and hungry, and stalked out of the shadows toward their prey. The sound of gunfire and screams followed. Scrambler and Prism disappeared into a nearby building, hunting high ground to fire from. Minutes later a blinding flash of light signaled Prism had begun his attack. The laser he could generate seared line after line into the soldiers scuttling for cover. It intersected a personnel carrier's fuel tank and fire flared into the air.

Remy started forward.

"We'll be right behind you," Polaris promised.

Sometime during the destruction of everything in the once beautiful edifice, Remy was reminded that he'd been there before during the crisis with Onslaught. Things had been too critical back then to look around. High above the marble floored foyer a crystal chandelier shook, chiming crazily. He looked up, caught by the way the light flashed through the dangling prisms and felt a wash of regret rush through him. The Avengers and their home had stood for something good and it was gone.

He paused and glanced around, catching Polaris' gaze. She looked wan and as disturbed as he felt. "We're just the demolition team," he told her.

She flipped her hair back and headed up the stairs.

He sighed and headed for the second subbasement to take out the computer systems and check Pym's robotics and electronics foundry for anything potentially useful. The Purity invaders hadn't made it past the remaining security systems, but they weren't a problem for him. It looked like Stark had used something new to salt the ground; the labs weren't trashed, they were melted down to puddles.

Within an hour they were staring at the headquarters of the Fantastic Four and cursing. The building was surrounded by Purity Brigade tanks and troops. They were shelling it. The helicopters they'd been hearing all afternoon swarmed around it.

The shells were exploding against a blue-green forcefield that surrounded the building. The force of the explosions reflected from the forcefield. The buildings surrounding it had were half destroyed as a result. Four Freedom Plaza was pitted and cratered. A pall of black smoke rose in a wind whipped plume against the leaden sky.

"Sonovabitch," Sabretooth said.
Remy laughed and laughed until he thought he'd be sick. The mirrored sides of the building Reed Richards designed and built weren't even cracked. Polaris caught his wrist and spun him toward her then grabbed his chin with her other hand. "Stop it! What the hell is wrong with you?"

He choked back the laughter.

"They're human."

"What?" Riptide asked.

He gestured at the target of the Purity Brigades' fury. "They're human. The Fantastic Four. Were anyway. Metas, not mutants. 'Cept Franklin."

Riptide giggled.

Men with blood still dripping from their hair shouldn't giggle. It disturbs the people around them. Unless they are as bloody as their companion. In this case, Scalphunter thumped the back of Riptide's head. "Sober up, Quested."

"But it's fuuunnnny," Riptide whined.

"Well, it looks like we're through here," Sabretooth said. "Looks like the do-gooders are still in residence. Let's hit the recall and grab a couple beers after we decontam."

Remy looked at the tanks prowling the streets, rocking back on their tracks as they launched shell after shell at their target. The ground rumbled and shook under their feet. He cocked his head.

There were bodies out in the plaza, not all of them military.

He pulled an ivory ball out of his trench coat and held it up.

"You know, M'sieu Essex said destroy the building and its contents," he said. He began flipping the ball into the air and catching. "Didn't say anything about whether there was still someone inside."

"Sometimes I forget what perfect bastard you can be, LeBeau," Scalphunter commented. "How do you suggest we get in there? Richards isn't going to invite us in, you know?"

"This."

Remy held up the sphere.

"In the meantime, let's have some fun."

"Yeah?" Vertigo asked.

"Mais yeah. Anything's fair game, chere."

She grabbed Riptide's arm and danced them forward. "Come on, baby."

The rest of the Marauders poured forward after them.
Remy caught Polaris' arm.

"Lorna. These people aren't going to trust the Marauders, so when we get in there, you take the point."

"I'm not too keen on Franklin Richards ending up in Essex's hands either, Remy."

He shrugged. "Better than the alternative, chere, don't you think?" He nodded toward the military forces ranged against the Fantastic Four's headquarters.

She didn't look convinced.

"Fine. We'll get them to the MRF instead."

Polaris gave him a skeptical look. "Exactly how?"

Remy grinned and pulled out a sat phone. He held it up for her to see and tapped in a number.

"'Lo, Davis? This is Gambit," he said. "That business we talked about? Looks like I'm going to need you to pick us up in New York."

He chuckled and said, "You already got the retainer in your account, homme. You get the rest when you get me and my people out. There'll be at least eight of us. I'll call you again when we're ready. Bonne."

He closed the phone and made it disappear.

"You had this planned?" Polaris accused him.

"Not this, chere. Just always like to have a backdoor. I hired Slipstream in Madripoor. He'll teleport us out."

Polaris decided he was telling the truth. Probably. At least he wasn't blindly trusting Sinister. She kissed his cheek. "You're such a smart ass."

He caught her closer and bent his lips to hers, kissing her with all his skill and intensity, riding the adrenaline thrill of going against terrible odds and stretching his powers. A touch from his empathy redoubled the pleasure they both felt and a light, non-verbal psi-link formed.

That shocked Remy and he let her free and stepped back. "Sorry, chere—" he blurted.

"Leave it," Polaris said. "Rogue was right."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're a bastard… and a great kisser."

"I'm going to find out what you're talking about later," he said, then plunged into the maelstrom of the Marauder's engagement with the Purity Brigade.

Polaris brushed her fingertips over her lips, then took to the air, following Remy into the fight.

The first time he used his power, she felt it resonate through the light psi-link and mesh with her own power. The explosion amped higher than normal.
"This could be interesting."
Say No to Drugs

Chapter Summary

The long arm of the law, Genoshan-style.

AD 2227, February 24
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

Wolverine nodded to Numbskull as he walked past the man's desk. Jubilee's deputy replied with a wordless grunt and the glazed look of the utterly exhausted. His fingers rested on a keyboard but weren't moving. Wolverine grinned. Kids these days. No endurance.

He knocked on the door to Jubilee's office and walked in without waiting for an answer.

The smart windows on two sides of the office were tuned opaque against the bright morning light outside, with one pane left clear to illuminate a strip of the otherwise dark room. A single desk lamp lit the large desk that sat cater corner to the windows and the door.

Jubilee was at her desk, apparently dictating one report while typing a second. A comm set dangled around her neck. The jacket she'd stripped off and draped over the back of her chair showed a suspicious black burn along one arm.

He sniffed and confirmed the smell of scorched fabric.

She gave him a flat, cop look before returning her attention to the reports holo projected in front of her. From his vantage, amber shaded words scrolled in reverse over her features. Her choppy cut hair stood out in several more directions than it was meant to, ruffled by her fingers numerous times.

Wolverine settled himself comfortably into one the chairs opposite her desk and pulled out a cigar.

Without looking up from her work, she said, "Light that and I'll fry all your nose hair."

"Darlin'"

"Don't waste your breath."

"Can't hurt either one of us."

"I'm sure the nose hair will grow back."

With a snort, he rolled the cigar through his fingers one last time and tucked it away for later. He could have it at home. Domino wasn't a smoke nazi. He smiled thinking of her. They got along damned well. Lived and loved and lost and let it go. Kept moving and doing and got used to the pain until it all scarred over.
"How's it going, darlin'?" he asked.

Jubilee stabbed a key and the holoprojection dimmed into nothing. She kicked her chair back so she could prop her feet on the desk.

"It bites."

He looked quizzical.

"Want to talk about it?"

"It'll be in the news texts tomorrow."

"I never believe half of what I read."

Jubilee let out a harsh, short laugh. "This was pretty cut and dried. Just ugly."

She scrubbed her hands through her hair again, standing it on end. Multi-colored plasma sparkles lit the ends.

"Well, I'm here." Wolverine settled deeper into the chair. It groaned under his weight. He sighed. "I don't suppose you have any whiskey?"

Jubilee smiled reluctantly.

"No."

"Talk fast."

She chuckled then sobered and said, "Are you sure you want to hear this? It's the same old shit."

"I'm here, right?"

She rocked her booted feet from side to side.

"It started with a neighbor complaint in the sixth district. Noise. A couple of foot patrol guys went upstairs to check it out. By then things were quiet again, but they caught a good whiff of honeysuckle so they called it in as a possible Jump lab."

He bit back a growl. Jumpstart was the latest in a long line of designer derivatives of Kick. Kick had been around since before the Gene Wars. It seemed like no one ever learned. Jumpstart didn't addict its users as fast as Kick had, but it made up for that by triggering psychotic episodes and randomly burning out the powers it boosted. Neither of which discouraged the young gammas and betas who used it; they always figured they'd beat the odds.

"Drugs squad business," Wolverine commented. "How'd homicide end up with it?"

"The two cookers had a fresh batch of Jumpstart just finished when Drugs went into the apartment," Jubilee said tiredly. "You know Drugs uses depleted impact slug throwers instead of plasma pistols so they won't punch through an apartment wall and slice some citizen, right?"
She tipped her head back and closed her eyes.

"So, a slug hits a brick of fresh, just packaged Jumpstart and throws it everywhere in the apartment when some rookie panics. Our guys are wearing armor and nose filters, so they're fine, but the two cookers get a mega dose."

He could imagine the rest. Repeated use or exposure to the drug enhanced its uglier side effects.

"Cooker number one was a fairly useless gamma who could project microwaves from his hands. The Jump hyped him to alpha level and triggered a psychotic break. He fried four cops, burned his way through the outer wall of the building and jumped."

Jubilee illustrated with a diving hand motion.

"He wasn't a flyer?" Wolverine asked.

"Splat."

"Cooker number two?"

"Four of ours dead and a suspect would have been enough to get me to the scene anyway," Jubilee said, "but Cooker number two was a beta pyrokinetic. The Jump gave him enough control to light up the whole building and keep it burning without touching him. He took some hostages, including the neighbor's kid, and holed up."

"Does this have a happy ending?"

Jubilee lifted her head and glared at him again. "Oh, what do you think?"

"Fuck. I asked."

"That's right, bub"

"Go ahead, darlin'"

"Not much more to it. Everybody and their asshole shows up at the scene. Fire Department has their own PK keeping the fire from spreading—that was smart thinking - Telepathic Corps is dithering over trying to get in the prick's head without a warrant," here Jubilee rolled her eyes, "Drugs is baying for his blood and the flonqing Minister of the Directorate of Health shows up with a bee in her dreads over all the Jump still floating around in the air."

"Typical clusterfuck."

"Yeah and about that time Cooker number two starts coming down from the Jump. He loses his grip on the fire, panics, does another hit and drops stone cold dead on the spot."

He didn't think that would bother Jubilee much, so there had to be more.

"The hostages?"

"The fire took the whole building in about a minute after that. One of the firemen 'ported right into it and grabbed the kid. They're both in the hospital now. He'll make it. The kid's questionable. Burned
bad. The mom and dad are dead. Case closed except for the reports."

Wolverine got up. He walked over to her desk, pushed Jubilee's boots off it, before taking her hand and pulling her to her feet.

"Go home, darlin'"

She looked at him.

"This job sucks."

"No arguments."

"I'm tired of it all, Wolvie. The job, the Pit, the politics, all of it," she said.

He nodded.

"Go home, get some sleep and quit tomorrow if you still feel the same way. HBPD will manage without you." He hesitated then added, "We won't be here for them forever."

"It just feels like it, right?"

She kissed his cheek, ignoring the perpetual five o'clock shadow. "What did you want, anyway?" she asked when she pulled back.

"You ain't going to like it, Jubes."

"So what's new?"

She picked up her jacket and shrugged it on.

"Request straight from the Citadel. They want you to give one of the baselines, a reporter, a guided tour of the HBPD. Some guy named Kelly. Wants to see the Judiciate side of things here."

"You are fucking kidding."

Wolverine shook his head. "When did you get such a filthy mouth?"

"When I became a cop," she answered absently. "Is this an official request?"

"It's from the Citadel."

"And?"

"You'd be doing everyone a favor by keeping an eye on this guy."

She opened the door and waved Wolverine out of the office ahead of her. "Kind of hard to quit and still play police tour guide. Tell Remy he owes me if I do this."

"You got it, darlin'"

Jubilee glanced at her deputy. Numbskull had fallen asleep at his desk.
"Numskull!"

He jerked awake and to his feet in a single jolt, looking around wildly and blinking. "What!?"

Jubilee slapped his shoulder. "Home. Sleep."

"I've got reports to finish--"

"That I'll have to read. I'm your boss. Go home."

"Better listen to her, bub," Wolverine added.

Numskull looked sheepish. "Thanks."

Jubilee nodded and swept out. They emerged from the HBPD building onto the sunny morning street. Jubilee fished out a set of sunglasses and perched them on her nose.

Her comm began beeping. She pulled it out of her jacket, glanced at the caller ID and sent a spark of plasma through it. The smell of burning electronics burst into the air.

"Damn," she said. "Another comm bites the dust." She tossed it into the nearest garbage bin.

"who was that?" Wolverine asked curiously.

"Newsies."

"Bloodsuckers."

"And you want me to entertain a human one," Jubilee griped.

"Only for a day or so."

"Well, I think I'll show Mr. Kelly some things about Genosha that will open his eyes," she said.

Wolverine's steps hitched.

Maybe sending Kelly to Jubilee wasn't the brightest idea after all.
Prodigal

Chapter Summary

Gambit's back in the fold and hunting a wolf in sheep's clothing.

AD 2012, April 15
Scotland
Muir Island

Slipstream teleported them all onto a promontory outside the Muir Island Research Station on an icy gray morning. A cold wind slapped North Sea rain into their faces immediately. Proximity alarms began shrieking inside the buildings.

"Someone knows we're here," Arclight commented.

Riptide staggered as they came through. Remy caught his arm and steadied him, cursing teleporters silently. Even Lila Cheney always left him feeling like he'd left his stomach somewhere along the way. Riptide took a deep breath and shook off the disorientation. Remy released his arm.

A gust of wind spattered him with face full of water.

"Merde," Remy muttered. It would be raining.

Poor Franklin went down on hands and knees and began retching. Remy looked away, his stomach lurching in sympathy for the kid. His mother crouched beside him and rubbed the back of Franklin's neck.

"Ugh, I hate the rain," Johnny Storm commented.

Ben Grimm stretched and grumbled, "I'd've rather walked."

"This is Muir," Reed Richards said from beside Remy. Remy rolled his eyes. Did Richards think Remy didn't know that?

The sirens kept screaming. He expected a greeting party to boil out any minute. With any luck, someone would be willing to talk before they did the usual mutant meet-and-greet brawl for supremacy. It got a little tired after you'd done it enough times.

Remy raised an eyebrow. "You thought I was lying?"

Reed shrugged. "That red diamond you're wearing doesn't inspire confidence."

"I thought it was just my charming personality," Remy said.

Reed chuckled.
Sue helped Franklin to his feet and hugged the boy to her side. When did the kid get that big? They both looked exhausted. They'd probably have nightmares about what they'd left behind in New York. Remy knew he'd added a new variation to his own collection.

A group of mutants rushed out of the station's front gates. They were ready for a fight. Two flyers took to the air. Remy groaned under his breath.

"You'll probably want to stay out of this if things get messy," he told Reed.

The rest of the Marauders, except Polaris, tensed into readiness for a fight.

"Stand down."

"You never let us have any fun, Remy," Vertigo complained. She folded her arms but made no other move. "And I'm getting soaked." Rain glued her normally pale green hair to her head. It reminded Remy of cooked spinach. He bit his tongue. Polaris' hair was green too. He didn't want to piss off both women.

Reed murmured in an undertone, "I don't believe it's my imagination. The Marauders seem different."

"Upgraded," Remy said.

Reed's eyes narrowed. "And you?"

"Never been stupid enough to get myself killed."

"We owe you our thanks for getting us out of New York. " He studied the oncoming mutants. "If there are difficulties, I'm sure I can explain that to whoever is in charge.

Remy shrugged. "Tres bien, mon ami."

"I take it they didn't know you were coming?"

"Non. I know, I know. It's tres gauche to just drop in without warning," Remy laughed.

The wind whipped stronger. Remy recognized the woman rising on it, her white hair like a cloud, lightning crackling at her fingertips. He smiled.

Slipstream tapped Remy's arm.

"Oui?"

"I'm outta here."

Remy nodded. "The rest of your money's in the account."

"Good doing business with you, Gambit," Slipstream told him then teleported out.

Remy strolled ahead of the rest of his group and lifted his face to the wind. "Stormy, you're getting everyone wet, chere!" he yelled.
The winds whirled around him, focused and fiercely strong, lifting him into the air like a toy. Remy hated that. Storm shook him like a ragdoll. He grinned anyway. He did love stirring up her feathers.

"Not exactly the greeting I was hoping for, Stormy!"

She set him down and came to earth beside him. Remy smiled rakishly. Storm glared back.

"I have told you not to call me that," she said sternly.

"Really?"

Her lips twitched into a smile. Relieved, Remy swept her into an exuberant hug. "Ah, Stormy, I missed you."

"I have missed you too, brother," she replied, hugging him back.

He spotted Forge at the head of the other mutants, staring in shock at the Marauders and the Fantastic Four. The shock on their faces made Remy laugh. It seemed that no one had been expecting him, despite the hint he dropped to Pete in Madripoor. He was lucky Storm had been here or things might have gotten sticky.

No knockdown drag-out today.

A cold trickle of water slid down his neck.

"Chere, could you turn off the rain?"

AD 2012, April 17
France
Mont Saint Francis.

"You've parted ways with Sinister?" Magneto asked.

Remy took a deep breath. "He's released me from any… obligations. The Marauders too."

"But they still answer to you?"

"Oui."

Magneto looked to Scott and then Sam. "Gentlemen?"

"He's got a place with us," Sam said. "We can use the others too." His expression darkened. "The Lord knows we need every trained fighter we can get."

"It's not like he was working at cross purposes with us," Scott added.

"I'm not sure I trust you," Magneto said to Remy.
Remy grinned.

"Lot of people tell me that, homme."

Sam stood up. "Come on. I'll brief you on the changes."

"Thanks, mon ami," Remy murmured, joining him as they left the conference room.

"Don't. I'm not sure I trust you either. Someone will be watching you."

So, that was the way the wind blew these days. He couldn't fault Sam for being cautious. Sam had no way of knowing what Remy would do if Sinister jerked his chain again. Remy didn't either. He always did what seemed best for him and the people he cared for at the time. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it bit him on the ass.

"That's life," he commented lightly.

He glanced over his shoulder at Scott and Magneto. The visor hid Scott's eyes, but he half-smiled and waved Remy off casually.

"It's good you're back, Gambit."

Remy raised his eyebrows. Unlike the relieved greetings offered to Polaris, he'd been starting to think only Storm was happy to see him again. He didn't say anything.

AD 2012, April 19
France
Mont Saint Francis

"So you're back," Wolverine said the next day before a high command meeting.

They were in one of the drafty halls of Mont Saint Francis and Remy thought he must have been downwind, because Wolverine hadn't sensed him as fast as usual. He'd caught a spurt of surprise from the man when he'd sighted Remy. It had only been a week since Remy let Storm 'persuade' him to come back to the fold and Sam made him a Striker Unit officer. Wolverine apparently hadn't heard.

Remy looked at him cautiously. "Looks like it."

"Good. Take off again and I'll hunt you down and gut you."

Remy laughed.

Wolverine popped a claw and shoved it under Remy's chin. The tip just broke his skin.

"I ain't kidding, Cajun."

Remy didn't look down at the razor-sharp metal threatening his throat. He focused on Wolverine's eyes. After a heartbeat, Wolverine pulled back the claw.
"Storm would cry," Remy said.

"She already did, bub"

Remy touched his throat and pulled back a finger smeared with red. "I'm sorry for that."

"I figured."

Wolverine rolled his shoulders, releasing some tension.

"That's settled. There's tavern down the hill. Let's round up whoever else is around and hoist a few bottles after this damn meeting."

That was one of the things he liked about Wolverine. He could go from threatening your life to sharing a beer in a split second.

He hesitated. It wasn't just him now.

"I better check on my… team first."

Wolverine narrowed his eyes and snorted. "Team? Right. You just had to drag that murdering furball Creed back with you along with the rest of the Marauders."

"They only come as a set," Remy offered, smiling.

Wolverine growled.

"Just keep him on a short leash, Cajun."

"Oh, oui, I'll do that," Remy agreed easily.

"Have you actually done this, Herr Professor?" Nightcrawler asked. He sounded very doubtful.

"Yes," Jean answered. "Storm volunteered. It worked exactly as the Professor predicted."

Remy turned in his chair and glared at Storm. Dieu, those arrogant spooks could have fried his padnat's brain. He wanted to charge something and let it blow. They were all so stupidly confident they knew what they were doing in someone else's head and it blew up in their faces half the time. He could have lost his best friend.

"Chere, are you crazy!?"

She replied, "I trust the Professor, Remy."

He wanted to shout at her that you don't trust anyone that much. Not that much, not as a damned experiment.

"Storm is all right, Gambit," Jean said.
Remy's jaw clenched and a muscle ticked along it. He half came out of his chair. Wolverine clamped a heavy hand on his shoulder and pulled him back down. Red light flared and bled from his eyes.

"Gambit, the test was performed right here in Henry's laboratory," Storm assured him. "The conditions were controlled. The effect was, I admit, disconcerting, but not painful."

"Once Jean and I had scanned Storm's mind and affirmed that the failure cascade did in fact wipe out all memories, we restored Storm's memories without difficulty," Xavier stated. "An alpha class telepath is necessary to implement the procedure, of course."

Of course, it took an alpha class. Of course, it took Charles Xavier himself. Remy glared. The bastard was so damned arrogant. Didn't anyone else see it?

Northstar snorted. "You won't see me letting you stir my gray matter, Xavier. Keep your damned Lethe Procedure."

"Same here, Charlie," Wolverine said. "I've had my brains and memory mucked with too often as it is."

"That is, of course, your prerogative, Logan." He looked put out by the two men's refusal.

"I'll do it, Professor," Cyclops said.

No one was in the least surprised.

Remy sank back into his chair and stared at Storm. She seemed all right. It worked. He still resented like hell that the Professor had used her as a guinea pig.

Wisdom exhaled a stream of smoke and nodded. "Yeah, me too."

Remy blinked at him. From the corner of his eye he saw Magneto lift a white brow.

"Why?" Wolverine asked.

Wisdom had always been chary of Xavier. His agreement did surprise.

"Everyone's got a breakin' point," Wisdom replied, "and I ain't goin' to kid me self they wouldn't find mine."

Remy had to admit, Pete had that right. He still didn't like the idea of this Lethe Procedure. It made his skin crawl though likely none of them would ever need to use it. But all the knowledge he had in his head, the damage it could do... Pete was right. He'd always believed in making sure he had a back-up plan, an escape route or a card up his sleeve.

He looked hard at Storm, then Jean. "Frost and Jean. I might let you two to do it. No one else," he said slowly. He laughed harshly. "Been plenty of times I wished I could erase some of my memories, anyway."

"Anyone willing to undergo the Procedure should do so," Magneto decided. "Contact the Telepath Corps. The rest of the staff and command groups will need to be informed of the option, too."

"I'll take care of it, sir," Cyclops said.
"Thank you."

Magneto seemed to gather his energy before moving on to the next subject.

"Hydra is trying to leverage a bigger payment for the latest shipment of plasma rifles by holding the shipment off Vancouver…"

Everyone but the three of them, even Storm, had gone back to the Monastery.

"I missed you sooooo much. Really, really, really missed you. Soooo much," Bobby slurred, leaning his head against Remy's shoulder.

"Kid's toasted," Wolverine commented.

Remy nodded and left Bobby's head where it was, slouching down a little in the dark booth. Bobby had been matching them beer for beer, which meant Bobby was drunk and they weren't.

"'M gonna jush close m'eyes for minute," Bobby muttered. He snuggled down closer to Remy's side.

Remy flipped off Wolverine and his sharp-toothed grin.

"Didn't know you two were so close, Cajun."

Sometimes Wolverine was a pain in the ass. He'd managed to forget that. Amazing.

Bobby sniffled and settled into the sleep of the passed-out. Remy reminded himself to feed some aspirin and orange juice to him when they returned to the Monastery. Otherwise Bobby would wake up suffering even more than he had to.

"I didn't come back for that," Remy said quietly. He'd known about Bobby's thing for him before he left. Ignoring it had been the kindest choice. It still was. He wasn't going to get into anything with Bobby, who would expect more than Remy had left to offer. He didn't want to screw up a good friendship for sex.

Sex was easy. He could find someone for that.

"No?"

"Non."

He'd had enough. From now on he meant to keep things light. No deep involvements, nothing that might hurt either person if the other disappeared without warning. He had kept things at the flirtation stage with Polaris until they linked in New York. He still didn't know what to feel about that. She had been keeping her distance since, had said, "Let's keep it friends." Friends he would allow himself; he couldn't deny Storm her place in his heart or the other X-Men, including Bobby. Love, however, the heart searing, obsessed to madness emotion he'd known with Belladonna and Rogue, that he could and would live without.

Bobby would only get hurt if Remy forgot that, no matter how nice the weight of his head felt on
Remy's shoulder, with his moist breath warm right through his sweater.

Wolverine grunted, apparently accepting Remy's statement.

"Because of Rogue?"

"I never thought you'd start psychoanalyzing people, Logan," he snapped.

"Never thought you were a coward."

Remy picked up his beer and took a sip, letting the insult slide off. "Does 'All my lovers end up dead or trying to kill me' ring a bell?" he asked. "Or, eventually, both?"

Wolverine choked on his beer and nearly spit it up. He slammed his mug down the stained, scratched wood of the table then wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. "Jesus Christ, Cajun."

Remy smirked at him.

"You swearing off women?"

He shrugged his free shoulder, careful not to dislodge Bobby, who had begun to drool. "Just love, cher," he murmured.

Wolverine eyed him for a moment then shrugged, picking up his beer again. "You'll get over it, kid. Give it time."

Bobby snuffled.

"I know I could, if I wanted to," Remy said.

"Your choice."

Remy finished his beer.

"Exactly."

"Hm. So how are we getting the icecube back up to the base?"

"I don't care as long as it doesn't involve teleporting."

"In that case, let's have another beer."

Two beers later, Remy's shoulder had gone to sleep and he a wet spot on his sweater under Bobby's mouth.

"You going to do it?" Wolverine asked.

"The Professor's thing?"

"The Lethe Procedure."

Remy shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't like letting spooks in my head. You know that."
"But?" Wolverine quirked one brow up.

"Stormy already tried it. It works."

"Ain't a good enough reason for me."

"So you aren't...?"

"Hell no. Might as well just kill myself"

"I'm going to think about it."

"Your funeral."

Remy made a noncommittal sound. He thought he'd end up letting Jean and Emma download a memory template and the rest of it. He wanted the option of being able to wipe out all his secrets if he couldn't keep them.

AD 2012, May 16
New Genosha
The Citadel

Remy slipped into Wisdom's office just before sunset, when most of the Citadel had cleared out.

Pete was sipping a Scotch while he waited for him. His suit coat hung off the back of his chair and his shirt sleeves were rolled up. His thin black tie had been stripped off entirely and hung from the doorknob.

"About time."

Remy raised an eyebrow.

"You did say discreet, homme."

Pete nodded at the half empty bottle of Scotch sitting amidst the mess on his desk. A water tumbler sat next to it. Remy poured himself a measure and took it with him over to the broken-down couch shoved against one wall.

He sprawled on the couch and waited, surveying the office between sips of the cheap whiskey.

They were twenty stories up on the east side of the tower. The blinds were only half drawn. A single incandescent floor lamp burned in one corner. Opposite stood a rickety coat stand dangling a beat-up black trench coat. The gray industrial carpet underfoot had begun to fray. Mismatched filing cabinets stood against the wall behind Pete's chair.

The plain metal desk supported a messy array of files, print-outs and loose computer discs interspersed with dirty coffee cups and full ashtrays. He spotted half a dozen snapshots, pictures of Harry and Moira and Kitty, taped haphazardly to the edges of the computer monitor. An empty
Kalashnikov clip played paper weight on one stack of papers, while a fully functional plasma pistol sat next to the computer keyboard.

Pete had managed to imbue his office with all the dank atmosphere of a dilapidated British cellar. Remy doubted Kitty had ever set foot in the room.

Pete finished his drink. He set the empty glass down on a blue file folder.

"I need someone with a dodgy reputation."

"Viola," Remy muttered. "Here is Remy LeBeau."

"Right."

"You're the spy, homme. Why tap me for whatever this is?"

"Because you're the X-Men's black sheep, the Marauder, the one with no reason to love Magneto. Prime to get recruited by whoever is out to get him."

"Someone's out to get Magneto?" Remy laughed. "Someone's crazy in the head."

"Yeah, you'd think so, but I swear something is going on. I don't know if it's politics or personal, but someone wants him out."

"Out out or out of power?" Remy asked.

In the Guilds one was the other, but politics in New Genosha weren't old enough to be as Byzantine as that. He thought about Fabian Cortez and revised that thought. Cortez had tried to kill Magneto and assume control of the Acolytes, ruling in the name of their martyred leader. Someone might be trying the same gambit again. He narrowed his eyes. Magneto was too important to lose. There was no one else that everyone would follow.

Pete peered at him through lank black bangs. He needed a shave worse than Remy usually did. Dark bruises underscored his eyes. Genuine worry, Remy judged.

"As far as I'm concerned, one is as bad as the other," he said.

"Lay it out, Pete."

"I need to know who is behind what's going on. I can't move until I can hand the whole thing to Magneto in a gift-wrapped package."

"Why?"

"Wanda Maximoff"

Remy kept his expression neutral. Inside, he cursed. If Magneto's daughter was involved in a plot against him, he could see why Pete didn't want to move until he had absolute proof.

"You can get next to her, LeBeau. She's the key. Use her to find out who else is involved. Look at it like a pinch. You're good at that sort of thing."
Remy swallowed the last of the Scotch, grimacing at the taste.

"Will you do it?"

He stared into the bottom of the empty tumbler. Seduce another woman, lie to her, use her, take what he wanted and leave her to face the consequences. Pete was right. He was good at that. Maybe he could have Sabretooth drop her off the top of the Citadel when he was finished with her.

He got up.

"LeBeau?"

"I need another drink."

Pete poured a generous measure into the tumbler Remy held.

Remy drank it in three jerky swallows. He noticed the window for the first time. Midway up, at eye level, an opaque spiderweb of cracks marked where something had impacted the armored glass recently. Someone had tried to take out Pete. But then, someone always wanted to kill Pete. He did right now.

The whiskey burned in his stomach. Polaris. Wanda. That would be a clusterfuck. He didn’t want to do it. But New Genosha needed Magneto. He set the tumbler down hard and met Pete's blue eyes.

"Nothing happens to the femme when this is over, hein? Nothing. I'll find out what you need, but not that way."

He couldn't deal with Wanda Maximoff on his conscience too.

AD 2012, September 3
France
Mont Saint Francis

"This won't hurt a bit," Jean assured him.

~Yes, it will.~ Emma 'pathed.

Remy believed Emma.

"Just relax and open your shields."

~Whatever you do, don't think of pink elephants.~

He glared at Emma.

"Gambit?" Jean said.

He cracked open his shields. Jean slipped into his mind like a warm wind followed by Emma’s acid presence. He fought the impulse to toss them both right out of his head.
~This may be a trifle uncomfortable,~ Jean warned him.

Pressure. Remy could only compare it to being deep underwater, under pressure. He could sense Jean and Emma condensing everything he knew into a dense ball of self. His instincts were screaming at him to make them stop, but he breathed through it.

Then they tore the compressed ball of memories free of his mind.

That hurt.

The arm of the chair he sat in creaked under the hold he had on it. He just barely kept from charging it up.

Jean and Emma wove a net of psionic commands through the ball of memories in Remy's mind. They didn't read the memories, just tagged them, until each was attached to an intricate knot that ended in a single string formed of a single word that only Remy could speak. His memories were no longer anchored in himself, but held together by the knotted net the telepaths had made. Without it, the memories would be gone. If he spoke that word, then everything came undone. Everything that made him Remy would be gone.

"Well, that's it," Jean said.

Remy opened his eyes. He hadn't known he'd closed them. His head throbbed like having a concussion on top of a champagne hangover.

"Merde."

Jean brushed his forehead with cool fingers. "The sensation should fade in a few hours. The easiest thing to do is sleep it off."

"Won't hurt a bit," he muttered as he stood up. "A trifle uncomfortable. Sapriste."

Jean and Emma both laughed.

"Gambit, you didn't believe that?"

"Merde," he repeated. Dieu, what a headache. "Why did I agree to this again?"

He noticed that his hand was shaking as he lifted it to his temple. "I should at least get a kiss out of this, chere," he told Jean with a mock leer.

She pecked him on the cheek.

"Chere, you can do better than that."

"But Scott will drop a truck on your head if I do."

"Feels like he already did."

He walked carefully back to his cubicle in the old cloisters. The narrow bed looked good. He flipped the door lock closed behind him.
When he closed his eyes, he could see it in the darkness of his mind: a dense sphere of energy, color and darkness chasing through it, threaded through with a golden tracery of telepathically emplaced commands. It felt sticky and pulled at his thoughts, making strange connections.

Tentatively, he tried charging a card. The power came easily, the five of spades between his fingers lighting the dim room with a lurid pink glow. The impulse to just let it go and release the energy in a small explosion tickled at him. It always did. With a sigh, he slowly withdrew the charge, absorbing the energy. It left the card charred. He blew on it and it dissolved into ash.

The extra energy fizzed through him. So much for sleeping off the headache.

Remy sat up on the bed Indian-style, fished three new decks of cards from the bedside table - he stashed decks within easy reach of any place he slept—that also held the Glock that had replaced his old Beretta, and laid out an intricate game of solitaire.

He thought about what he'd learned from Wanda Maximoff and her associates. She seemed… off. He didn't know if she'd always been unstable, but he thought someone had been messing with her mind. When he'd indicated some doubt about Magneto's policies, she'd snatched the bait blindly. Not like Mystique. Mystique had taken some convincing before accepting him. Of course, she was still bitter over Rogue.

He wouldn't mind seeing Mystique brought down. He'd found evidence of her fine hand in the formation of the Genosha Alone group and the gangs of thugs making life hell in the refugee camps. He wasn't sure what motivated her, other than dissatisfaction with her place in the New Genoshan government, but she wasn't the mastermind.

He'd have the name of whoever was running Mystique and Wanda soon. Then Pete could take over. He hoped it wasn't who he suspected.
Down the Dolce Vita

Chapter Summary

Magnus has his suspicions, but what can he do?

AD 2227, February 25
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

"Walk with me."

Jean and Remy followed him out into the Residence gardens. Her gaze was distant. Remy's was dark, shadowed with some secret. It disturbed Magnus. The Triune hadn't kept secrets from each other since they linked. Something had changed even before the ares incident. He'd just been too complacent to recognize it.

Remy paused and watched as Jean ran her fingers over the petals of a large white bloom. She smiled at him when she looked up and caught him watching.

They both turned toward him when Magnus cleared his throat.

~Erik?~ Jean asked.

He caught them both in a magnetic bubble and shot them straight into the air to hover far above Hammer Bay. Brilliant sunlight reflected off the spike of the Citadel and a strong wind teased the constant flame atop the Tower of the Dead.

~Don't drop me,~ Remy 'pathed with a tinge of amusement.

~Would I do that?~

~I'd catch you,~ Jean added.

~Because you love me. I know, chere.~

~Because Bobby would be upset. I don't really give a damn about you at all.~

~Of course not.~ A mental smirk accompanied that.

~Look,~ Magnus told them both and swept his arms out to encompass all of Genosha. The patchwork of cultivated fields stretched green and rolling toward rough hills. White glittered ice pale on the mountains to the south. Blue green water lapped with endless foam edged waves at the shore. Rivers glittered in silver traceries across the land.

Jean stretched out her hands as though she could touch it all, pleasure sparkling in her green eyes.
Remy narrowed his eyes, ignoring the strand of copper hair the wind teased free of his braid and whipped over his face.

~Something in particular or you just decided we needed to admire things?~

~Remy.~

~Okay, Jeannie, I'll be serious. What is it?~

~Mystique is up to something.~

Jean's frown colored her thoughts ~Domino keeps Mystique on a short leash.~

~Does she?~ Magnus replied. ~We rely on Domino rather heavily.~

~Are you saying you don't trust Domino?~ Jean asked in disbelief.

Remy folded his arms and glowered at Magnus.

~Merely that she isn't infallible. Nor is Mystique to be underestimated. Recent events have disturbed old patterns of behavior. Something more may be going on.~

~You're being paranoid.~

~Comes with the territory, chere,~ Remy said. ~Uneasy lies the head and all that, non?~

Magnus tested the psi-bond, trying to feel Remy's real reaction. Only a trickle came through it, an amalgam of amusement, irritation, worry and affection. On a second level the lines between the three of them hummed with a deeper connection, flexing and dimming by turns to keep each of them always in balance. That reassured him, but Magnus knew he couldn't really know what Remy thought unless the other man let him.

Remy was keeping that to himself, shielding against the bond so skillfully Magnus hadn't noticed until now.

It disturbed Magnus more than it might have. He hadn't considered that breaching the Interdict might sunder the Triune eventually. He'd grown dependent on Jean and Remy. Since the humans had come to Genosha though, he'd felt them subtly withdrawing part of themselves from the bond.

He wanted to ask Jean if she had noticed Remy shielding, but feared she had... and had foregone mentioning it. Equally disturbing would be that she hadn't been aware of anything different.

Maybe he was just paranoid.

~I want you to keep a closer eye on her movements and associates,~ he told Remy, reverting to business and masking his own uneasiness.
~I could scan her,~ Jean offered.

~Not without her knowing,~ Remy pointed out.

Magnus looked at Remy and wondered if he wasn't covering for Mystique and if so, why? Remy stared back, his thoughts completely unreadable.

Jean caught the sudden flash of hostility running through the bond.

~Stop it, both of you.~

~He doesn't trust me, chere.~

"Erik?" her voice startled them all.

"He's keeping secrets."

"Don't try it, Jeannie," Remy warned her in a hard voice.

~Let me in.~

~Non.~

~What's wrong?~

He flung his arm out.

"This fucking power play!" The air sparked and shivered around Remy as his eyes bled to solid red.

"It's not a power play, Remy," Magnus said. He reined his own power back. "I wanted to remind us all of what we have to protect."

"I don't need reminding!"

"No more!" Jean shouted.

Her telekinesis wrapped around Remy and they both moved out of Magnus' magnetic hold.

He started to tighten it and stopped himself.

This wasn't a battle.

Remy wasn't an enemy.

Jean had her arms wrapped around Remy's waist and was staring at Magnus. The flaming outline of the Phoenix avatar shimmered around her. The air chimed and shivered with explosive energy so strong it tugged seductively at the magnetic field of the planet. The Great Barrier blazed with colors chasing across it.

Through the psi-bond, Magnus could feel their defensiveness. One more aggressive move and they would react. If Jean thought he meant to harm Remy she would unite with him to strike Magnus down. The Triune would tear itself apart.
Considering the magnitude of the energies the three of them could summon, they would render New Genosha and even the rest of the planet uninhabitable if they turned on each other.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Stop." He held up his hands, open and empty. ~Stop.~

"Don't push me, Erik," Remy told him.

~WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT!?~ Jean sent.

"Alpha posturing?" Remy offered.

~Omegas can't afford to play those games,~ she returned in scorn to them both.

~You're right, chere.~

"Yes," Magnus agreed.

He still thought Remy had something hidden from them, but he'd acted foolishly. He would have to watch and wait. Remy would reveal his secrets when he was ready. He wouldn't compromise Genosha for them, Magnus felt comfortable assuming that.

"My apologies for presuming too much," he said.

Remy nodded once.

"Accepted."

~Let's go back,~ Jean said.

Magnus nodded.

"Oui, chere. It's cold up here."

~It's going to be cold down there too. Bobby's bound to have seen that little display,~ Jean replied.

~He's going to kill us all.~

Remy caught Magnus' gaze and sent, ~Don't worry about Mystique.~

Leaving Magnus to wonder who he should be worrying about.
Rocky Mountain High

Chapter Summary

The First Battle of Denver. The mutants take the city, the humans take it back, and Gambit is betrayed.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning in end notes.

AD 2013, October 1-9
United States
Denver

They air-dropped three MRF battalions on Denver–Carnelian, Viridian and Cobalt–under the overall command of General Hayes.

Striker Units of experienced alphas led the assaults, targeting military and paramilitary infrastructures. The Strikers moved like wolf packs, tearing into any resistance. Earthshakers brought down buildings. Elementals turned air and water and fire into merciless weapons. Energy wielders provided more focused attacks in conjunction with the psis spot targeting them through the city. Ferals ripped bloody swathes through anyone who fought back.

Fires burned unchecked through the cracked open shells of shattered skyscrapers by nightfall. Omnium armored tanks riding grav repulse fields hovered through the streets, shouldering aside abandoned vehicles with bone shuddering crunches. Platoons of battle-armored MRF soldiers followed in APCs, carrying plasma pulse rifles, setting up strong points and sentry posts.

Jets screamed far overhead as the US Air Force bombarded Denver International Airport in a futile attempt to breach the defensive forcefield dome erected over the occupied installation. The missiles exploded against it, their force refracted back, while energy weapons and plasma were simply absorbed. The eerie blue light filled the horizon to the northeast of the city, lighting into sparking brilliance with each impact. Each hit made the ground shudder as it rolled through the night like a thundering, uneven heartbeat.

In Denver itself, the tanks growled. Periodically, one of the main guns would swivel and lift, firing a stream of blinding plasma into the air at an attack helicopter or VTOL still in action against the invaders. The night would strobe white with an ear shattering crack. Lost in the din were the screams of victory and terror whenever the invaders found with anyone still fighting back.

By the end of the second day, the city and its suburbs were under nominal MRF control. A cloud of gray dust and dirty smoke hung over it. The bombardment of the airport continued nonstop, rare
shells making it through when the forcefield opened to accept incoming transports of troops and equipment. Operations were staged out of DIA, while command posts were set up in the city itself. Only MRF soldiers patrolled the empty streets, while the people of Denver huddled in their homes.

Striker Units Blue Five and Six hit the Colorado Mutant Containment Facility before dawn. Led by Scalp Hunter and the Acolyte Katu, the alphas took no prisoners among the installation's staff. When they were done, only the high concrete walls surrounding the pens remained whole. Harpoon and a Genoshan mutate named Lift impaled the guards all along those walls--some of them still alive and screaming.

The mutants held there were trucked back to DIA. Those who wanted the chance were loaded into empty carriers that had flown in troops and airlifted to Seattle. Most of them would be evacuated from there to refugee camps in Genosha. Others turned back to the city to exact their own restitution.

The bloodied walls of the CMHF weren't the worst atrocity committed in Denver in the next days.

The Creed Administration responded by bringing up the 3rd and 5th Marine Purity Brigades in a counter-offensive. Artillery poured down on the city and the MRF entrenched positions.

The third day icy rain dropped from a black overcast generated by the weather elemental Storm, concealing most of the Rocky Mountain Range and Pacific Northwest from satellite coverage. The MRF made no move to stop the human refugees slipping out of the city in a steady stream. Instead, they slipped their skirmishers among them to conduct a campaign of setting booby traps, ambushes and sabotage behind the enemy lines.

Striker Units hit beyond MRF lines while the trained Marines pushed hard against lighter-armed and less experienced mutant ground troops--only to find the MRF fighters were as determined and fanatical as they were. No quarter was given. Both sides saw the war as a fight for their ultimate survival.

Casualties escalated on both sides, but were absorbed and ignored.

The siege would last nine days. Both sides would lose.

Striker Unit Red One made it back to Denver and through the MRF lines in the predawn darkness of the seventh day. They moved silently, in synch with the psi-link maintained by their ‘path Ivanova. They were bloody and tired and stank of smoke. Behind them a convoy of supplies had been reduced to burnt wreckage and bodies, a target of opportunity afforded on their way back in from their real assignment.

Deep in the Rocky Mountains, Fort Marcy Powell, sitting above the supersecret Vault, echoed the hollow howl of the October winds through broken open doors and blasted halls. Beneath it, metal boiled and bubbled, superheated by the force of the time delayed explosions the Strike Leader had left behind them.

They came out of the wet black night into the security post without warning. The Strike Leader lifted a plasma rifle out of one dozing private's hands and murmured whimsically, "Don't shoot, mes amis."

"Sleeping on the job," growled the huge man who locked a dark clawed hand around the second soldier's throat, "will get you dead." His eyes refracted bright and yellow as a wild animal's and long fangs glinted as he spoke.
The sergeant in charge, Mendoza, started to demand, "Who the hell are–"

The rest of them filed into the post. A glimpse of one shoulder revealed a red triangle flash with the black lightning insignia. Carnelian Battalion Striker Unit. Mendoza swallowed hard. These weren't just any alphas. These were Red One.

"Tut tut," the Strike leader said, shaking his head. "Chat got it right. You be dead if we wanted you dead, mais oui." He laid the rifle aside, patted Private Vulpes' shoulder and then lit a cigarette.

The flare of light from his finger tip revealed a saturnine face to go with his demon's eyes. The shifting shadows behind him resolved themselves into seven other intimidating figures, each in MRF gray and black battle dress. Steam rose from their soaked uniforms.

Sabretooth released Private Miller and shoved him back down in his seat.

"Christ," Miller choked, clutching at his throat. Runnels of blood ran down from the punctures Sabretooth's claws had left in his neck.

"Wrong direction, tovarisch," a hard-faced older woman murmured.

"Sir," Mendoza said. He came to attention. He'd spotted the double upward chevrons of a colonel on the arm of the red-eyed man.

"Relax, mon ami, we just want to step out of Stormy's rain for a few minutes."

"'Here, Gambit, gimme a fag, you selfish wanker," someone else demanded in an East London accent.

The Colonel, Gambit, flipped the pack cigarettes over his shoulder to the slight, black-haired man.

"Never say I never gave you anything, Pete."

"As long as it wasn't a social disease," the slender woman next him cracked.

Sabretooth laughed along with the two identical, muscle-bound men who had squeezed in last. Pete wrapped an arm around the girl and grinned. Gambit shrugged. "Figure Shadowcat need to be worrying about that, not you, 'Deathfinger"

"Bloody stupid - I've told you not call me that."

Gambit grinned. "That's why I do."

"Bastard."

"You're all giving me a headache," complained the woman with the Russian accent.

Gambit leaned a hip against the keyboard shelf. He gestured the woman over. "You got enough juice left to hook up with one of the spooks at HQ, chere? Let them know we made it back?"

"Of course, Gambit."

"Try for Phoenix - she'll get it straight to Summers," he directed.
Ivanova’s gaze went blank as she concentrated. A frown pleated her forehead. She gasped and shook her head.

"Sorry. She must be at HQ in Europe. I need a boost," she said.

Gambit sighed. "Jubilee?"

An Asian woman slid between the two bruisers. She linked hands with Gambit and Ivanova. "Gimme a sec, Gumbo, I'm too low level to do much, but I do shield," she said. "Gotta drop 'em."

"Speaking of shields," Ivanova added, "you can't help if you don't let me in yours, Gambit."

Gambit grimaced. "First level only, chere. You go deeper, things're gonna bite."

"Da."

The three paused, concentrating, then relaxed.

"Done."

"Merci, chere."

He turned those hellfire eyes on Mendoza. "Stay awake, homme. We're pros at this, but Purity got Special Forces that are pros, too. Next time someone come sneaking in the backdoor, they might not be as nice as us, n'est-ce pas?"

Mendoza caught the hungry gaze of the blond feral laughing at him behind Gambit and winced. Nice? The rest of the Striker Unit laughed too. They knew very well they weren't nice.

Gambit straightened up, burnt the last of his cigarette into dust with a small charge and nodded to Mendoza. "Let Command know Red One is coming in, will you?"

"Yes sir."

"We'll be waiting for a pick up and ride to the airport at RD Charlie Whiskey."

Charlie Whiskey was halfway across the city, only a few blocks from where SWAT had made a last ditch stand against Striker Unit Green Four days earlier. Rictor had shaken the building down on their heads. The rubble pile was still settling.

"Watch out for the downed high tension wires," Mendoza told him. "Some of them are still live."

Gambit nodded and gave him a sloppy salute.

"Skirmish positions, everybody. Polaris, take the air. Kleinstocks, left flank. Sabretooth, right. Pete, you and Shadowcat with Ivanova. Jubilee, you and me are drag."

"Boring," Jubilee remarked. "When are you going to give me point?"

"When Logan retires."
"I'm not a kid, Cajun."

"Sorry, petite. 'Lena, link us again."

Sabretooth licked Miller's drying blood from his claws then mockingly waved his fingers at the three soldiers before ducking out the doorway. His cat-eyes flashed. He left a disturbing scent of mingled musk, blood and wet hair.

Gambit followed out last, silently vanishing the instant he stepped out of the light.

They all moved in that eerie coordination the psi-linked displayed. Mendoza thanked the Virgin Mary every morning that his mutant ability to eat and digest anything including concrete, plastics and silicon didn't qualify him as an alpha, since he really didn't want anything or anyone like Sabretooth merging into his psyche. Psi-links weren't supposed to be any deeper than any other telepathic contact, but the Striker Units he'd seen all seemed to have leaked into each other.

Red One slid back out of the post into the night, leaving Mendoza grateful they were on the same side and sorry for anyone human they ran across on their way.

The airport restaurant had been converted into a cross between a mess and officer's club catering to the Striker Unit alphas. Cooks offered meals twenty-four/seven because mutants burned more calories using their powers than normals did. Some of them tapped into outside energy sources or absorbed and converted energy other ways, but most of them fueled their abilities with food.

The airport had its own hotels and these too had been taken over by the MRF.

Remy sauntered into the converted business after scrounging a hot shower and a dry uniform.

He blinked tiredly around the dim, wood-paneled room. Exhaustion weighed him down but he felt lightheaded. He'd pushed himself too far breaking into the Vault then attacking the Marine convoy. The temptation to just collapse on his temporary quarters' bed and sleep had vied with his need for food and lost by the barest of margins.

He didn't see anyone he knew. No surprise. It was past three-thirty in the morning and people were either on patrol or catching as much sleep as they could.

He was still standing stupidly in the doorway when a familiar presence did approach.

"Move it, Cajun," Domino growled behind him. She breezed up and gave him a friendly push. He staggered rather ungracefully and allowed her to link her arm with his.

"Charming as ever, chere," he muttered.

Domino chuckled and gave him a once over with shrewd eyes. "When the hell did you last eat, anyway, LeBeau?"

Remy blinked back at her and tried to think. "Yesterday?" He frowned. "Maybe." If an energy bar bolted down at a temporary bivouac just before Red One infiltrated the grounds of Fort Marcy Powell counted.
She tugged him toward a corner booth. "Come on, then, let's get something inside you before you keel over." She shook her head. "Nate used to do the same thing. Men are such idiots."

"If you're comparing me to Cable," Remy started to respond.

Domino pushed him down into the booth's red cushioned seat. "Sit. Stay."

Sitting seemed like a wonderful idea. Closing his eyes did too. Just holding his head up seemed like a chore. He decided to stay in the booth and didn't even notice Domino's absence until she set a cup of something steaming and hot in front of him.

"Hot chocolate?"

"Sugar," Domino declared. "Drink up. It'll hold you until our meals get here."

He wrapped his hands around the mug and paused for an instant, just enjoying the heat soaking through the slick ceramic into his fingers. He loathed cold weather, the ice and rain and snow, reminded always of the unending, frigid expanse of Antarctica. He had a boyish impulse to blow on the top of the chocolate, to see his breath wisp into steam.

Why the hell did he always end up in cold places? Antarctica, Tajikistan, the Arctic Circle, Russia, and now Colorado in winter. He shuddered. It even snowed in Massachusetts sometimes and Muir Island was in the middle of the damned North Sea. The whole X-Men gig should have come with a frostbite warning. Not that he was technically an X-Man anymore… unless it was possible to be a Marauder at the same time. Or whatever the hell he was now. Never figured to be a soldier.


Domino waved a hand in front of his eyes.

"Earth to LeBeau. Drink."

He burnt his tongue on the first gulp, but the warmth inside and from Domino's company felt good. Things started coming back into focus. He smiled lopsidedly at her, noticing she looked almost as tired as he felt.

Domino waited until he had half the hot chocolate in him and his tensed muscles were beginning to relax before asking, "How did it go?"

"Place was made to keep folks in not keep 'em out," he replied. He shrugged one shoulder. "I let Creed and the Kleinstocks loose on the upper levels after Lorna and I opened up the Fort. Pete and Shadowcat handled pulling the computer records, Jubes and I did the demolition."

"No casualties?"

"Non." None among Red One. He shuddered at the memory of what they'd seen in the cells.

"What?" Domino demanded.

"They were testing their new bioweapons there. The mutants there..." He met her eyes. Maybe she could give him absolution. "This stuff was too infectious. We couldn't bring them out. Had to burn out the whole place. You understand?"
His stomach twisted. The mutants in the cells had been dying already, but the guilt was still there. He had stood in the main control room and looked from Jubilee to Wisdom and Shadowcat, waiting for one of them to stop him. He trusted their morals more than his own, but they didn't stop him. Then he'd hit the button that gassed the cells, before initiating the facility's self-destruct option. All the while, he'd been feeding a charge into the stubborn adamantium-laced walls, carefully judging the timing to make sure it didn't release until they were all out. No one said a word, even after they were out and running down the mountain.

Domino stared at him before nodding. She sipped her own chocolate. He noticed the mauve shadows under her eyes and wondered how bad things were in the city. He didn't kid himself he'd had the only hard assignment.

"You do what you have to do, Gambit," she said. "That's why they put you in charge of Red One."

Not much comfort, but he could trust Domino to never sugarcoat anything. The ex-merc understood hard choices. He drank the rest of the chocolate, moodily wishing the music system would play something less suicide-inducing than country.

A private with four arms came to the table with the food Domino had ordered. Steak and eggs, strawberry waffles with strawberry syrup, sourdough toast, extra hash browns, a slice of pecan pie and another of apple with cheddar cheese, along with two tall glasses of orange juice. Domino's order came next, making Remy blink. Double cheese bacon burger, poutine, Caesar salad, a bowl of chili, pineapple and cottage cheese, and a slice of Chocolate Cream pie with ice cream. The waiter came back with a carafe of coffee and cups.

"Chere, I don't know if that's impressive or disgusting," he said.

Domino shrugged and picked up her burger. Remy's stomach woke and began growling. He averted his eyes from her side of the table and started with his eggs.

When they both began on their pieces of pie, Domino began talking again. He'd realized she was on the far side of exhaustion too, wired and tired and afraid of lying in a cold, empty bed with her eyes wide open wishing for someone who wasn't there.

"Magneto pulled Storm out yesterday."

Remy sighed. If Storm had been around, he would have shared her bed. She'd always let him sleep with her when the nights got too lonely. He loved her fiercely and completely platonically. Because of that, it relieved him to know she had gone. Denver would not be a good place to be soon.

"Anyone around we know?" he asked.

He ate the apple pie first, saving the pecan for last. Empty plates littered the tabletop.

Domino sucked chocolate custard off the tines of her fork then gestured with it. "Jean-Paul and Aurora. Provenzano with Cobalt–do you know him?"

Remy shook his head. "Came and went while I was busy with New Son, I think. Invulnerable?"

"Yeah, that's him. Arrogant little prick. Joined the Marines, got kicked out when they started testing for the x-gene."
"And now he's back in the soldiering business for the other side," Remy remarked.

Domino snorted indelicately. She had her hair in a ponytail. It slithered over her shoulder. A few strands caught against the collar of her jacket.

"Let's see," she said. "Sam, Logan, Drake and your pal Scalphyunter are up on the Saskatchewan Front. Psylocke's on TDY in New Orleans to take over the Underground pipeline from your ex-wife's people."

He nodded. The last he'd heard, his cousin Lapin had taken over the Guild end. Belladonna had disappeared, hunting President Creed. She still tested as genetic human, which meant she might just get the bastard. Remy wasn't worried about her.

"They're sending Xavier to Australia. There was a Sentinel attack in Canberra. One of the bystanders got killed and it turns out she was the Prime Minister's favorite niece. Magneto and Xavier both think it might be enough to bring the Australians over on the MRF's side. They'll at least get them to acknowledge New Genosha."

"He taking the Camerons with him?"

"Probably."

"Anyone else?"

"I saw Worthington breeze through after a briefing with General Hayes. Some Marauders and Acolytes: Mellancamp, Javitz, Prism, Blockbuster. Someone from the Guilds… Gris Gris?"

He raised an eyebrow. Gris Gris had joined? That surprised him. He wouldn't bother looking him up, though. They'd never got along.

He slumped back in the booth. A forlorn chunk of pecan pie remained on his plate. He'd abandoned his fork beside it. He hadn't really experienced the taste of anything he'd eaten; his body had just been taking on fuel.

"Domino," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for this."

She shrugged. "You're not the worst company, LeBeau."

"Damned wit' faint praise." He pulled out a new package of cigarettes and offered her one. She shook her head. He lit one.

A group of five alphas entered the restaurant, talking to each other, voices higher and faster than normal, obviously still riding out the adrenaline of whatever operation they'd returned from. They started toward where Domino and Remy were sitting. He nudged them away with his empathy and they veered off.

Domino raised her eyebrow. He shrugged. She looked past him at the other alphas and commented,
"It's getting bad out there."

"Pretty sure we saw some Sentinels in the Marine camps when we were coming back through the lines," he said.

"Yeah."

"Plenty of us have fought Sentinels before, though."

"Hayes should start withdrawing troops tomorrow."

"Think he will?"

"Not until something makes him."

"Something worse than Sentinels," Remy stated.

"Nukes."

She waited for him to deny the possibility. He didn't. "Like New York," he agreed. "Maybe."

Biotoxins were more likely than nukes. Easier for the White House to deny using. Turned out the government had learned something from the Middle East. Whatever they did, they'd blame it on mutants.

"Yeah."

"Merde."

They lapsed into silence, watching the newcomers joke and tease each other. Their waiter came by and cleared the table, asking if they wanted anything more. They shook their heads. After he'd gone, they just sat for some time, unable to summon the energy to leave.

Remy finished his cigarette.

Domino looked away and asked, "You want to sleep with me?"

He didn't speak. She turned back and looked at him, silently demanding he answer. He tried to read her face and when that failed, opened his shields enough to touch her emotions. What he found felt very familiar. Deep black sucking emptiness where Domino had shared a psi-bond with Cable until he died. A wound in her head. He'd felt the same sort of thing from Jean in Russia, after she'd lost the psi-bond with Scott. He pushed his empathy into the hole left by the severed bond with Cable, soothing the rawest edges.

What he was doing wasn't enough to make her feel any better, not yet. Any of the telepaths could have done as much, but Domino probably wouldn't let any of them past her shields. His head began pounding, protesting the effort. He let it go. The ripped place in her mind would heal a little faster. Anything more would be interference she wouldn't want and more than he had the strength to offer anymore.

"I know you do that with the weather witch."

Slowly, he nodded. Sleep. That's all he did with Ororo. But Domino didn't know that.
"Let's get out of here," she said.

He followed her back to her quarters. She set one of her guns under the pillow and another within reach on the floor. He dropped a stack of cards on the bed stand within easy reach. They undressed without words and slid into bed together. The sheets were stiff and chilly. She pulled him close and hid her face against his neck. Her hair caught in his beard stubble and on his lips. It smelled of raspberry shampoo and, faintly, of gun smoke. He thought if he tasted her skin, Domino would taste like cordite and snow. He held her tightly until the sun rose and they both slept.

He woke as she pulled away from him and left the bed. The curtains were still pulled closed and the room was dim. Domino didn't turn on a light, but Remy didn't need it.

She moved quietly. He didn't speak. She picked up one of the guns and went into the attached bathroom. The shower came on. He put his uniform back on and pocketed the cards from the bed stand.

She exited the bathroom with wet hair and a towel around her. "Go ahead and use my toothbrush."

"Merci, chere," he said. He didn't try to touch her when he walked by her.

The bathroom mirror was steamed over and the towels smelled of raspberry. He used her toothpaste too, rinsed and spit, and didn't look at the blurred reflection of his face.

She'd dressed in fatigues and a black tank when he came back out.

"LeBeau," she said.

He waited.

"I figured you'd try something."

"Wasn't what you wanted," he answered.

He leaned back against the wall and watched her while she checked each gun before sliding it into a holster and that into place on her. Once she'd pulled on her jacket, he asked, "So why me, chere?"

Domino pulled her ponytail free of her collar.

"Because you don't look like him, or sound like him, or feel like him."

"Okay," he said.

He started for the door.

"LeBeau?"

"Oui?"

"You okay?"

He paused. "Let's not do this again, chere, okay?" He just wasn't up for standing in for another
Summers. The thing with Jean had been enough of that.

"That's probably a good idea."

"We're okay, then."

The Sentinel assault began on day eight. Prime Sentinels that required trained teams of alphas to stop. The 2nd and 7th Purity Brigades had arrived from California and Texas and joined the attacks. Every Striker Unit available engaged as the MRF troops pulled back to DIA, slowly abandoning the city.

Red One took point, only falling back as Ivanova assured them their own people had cleared out of the area they were defending. Polaris threw up a magnetic shield as they retreated out of range of the human's guns.

The ground shuddered and leapt beneath both sides' feet. Just west of Downtown, Amara Aquilla opened a vent through the earth's crust and brought forth a seething spew of lava and directed its flow toward the advancing Marines. The city began to burn. Smoke and ash darkened the sky and chunks of cooling rock fell everywhere.

Remy ducked into the same surveillance post Red One had sheltered from the rain in the night they returned to Denver. The MRF troops were gone. He dragged Jubilee behind him, trying to communicate to Ivanova she needed to take cover too. He could feel the stones falling out of the sky, still sizzling hot.

The psi-link failed.

He felt Ivanova's presence still in his mind, the connection maintained by his own psi-talent.

"Merde!"

Rock rain slammed against the roof, making him flinch along with Jubilee. He ~reached~ and flinched back from Ivanova.

~hit/burning/falling/hit/screaming/scrabbling/grit/blood/agony/crawling/hit/breaking/darkness/agony/dimmin

Her pain slammed through him, taking him to his knees. Jubilee caught at his hands, pulling him back up.

"Snap out of it, Cajun!" she screamed at him over the racket from the roof, the roar of the eruption and the constant artillery barrage.

Instinct snapped his shields shut, shutting Ivanova's death throes out.

"'Lena's dead," he gasped out.

"God damn it!" Jubilee cursed. "Stupid, slow Russian!"

Pencils and pens and a clip of ammunition vibrated off the table. A deep, bone juddering rumble filled the air, punctuated by the sharp cracks of plasma guns and rattling gunfire. Remy found his balance again.

He focused outside his head again and caught the eyes of two more Strikers also sheltering in the
post, Unuscione and Northstar. A third figure, a woman, lay on the floor, dark head resting in Northstar's lap. Blood covered the floor, the copper-salt scent thick.

"Carmella," he greeted the brunette.

"Gambit," she snarled back, wincing as the ceiling above them groaned. Her psionic exoskeleton surrounded her in a green glowing cage. Bits of plaster and part of a shattering light fixture skittered off it.

Northstar grimaced at him. Blood smeared half his face and his pale eyes were dilated, shocked, like dark holes. Something—maybe a bullet—had passed close enough to rip one of his delicately pointed ears half in two. One hand clutched at it. Part of his uniform had burned away on the other side, but he didn't seem aware of it. His other hand rested on the woman's head, fingers twined through silver streaked hair.

The French-Canadian felt like a void. His emotions were shut down.

Remy's communications headset spat static and a thin voice.

"You still breathin', Cajun?"

He hit the button that enabled his throat mike.

"Had to take cover, Chat."

"Link's down."

"Lena didn't make it."

"Ya got the Runt's frail with ya?"

Jubilee used her own mike and headset.

"I'm still around, Sabes. Sooo sorry."

Another burst of static blurred through the headsets. Remy hated using them. He knew the Sentinels could tap radio communication and microwave too.

"Just hold in place," he snapped. "I'll try to get a new psi-link going."

"I'm not that much of a telepath," Jubilee warned him.

"'S okay," he assured her and to Sabretooth, "You seen the others?"

"Got the other frail and Magneto's Double Mint Twins with me."

Jubilee snickered at Sabretooth's contemptuous description of the Kleinstocks.

Remy looked from Northstar to Unuscione. "The rest of your unit?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Gone."
"Damn."

He braced his hand against the wall as the earth shook again, catching Jubilee's arm to keep her from being thrown off her feet.

"What the hell is going on out there?" Unuscione demanded.

"Magma's making Denver into the heart of a new caldera, I think," he told her.

"Mary Mother of God!" the Acolyte exclaimed.

"Better make that Hera or Hephaistus," Jubilee quipped.

"You mean Juno or Vulcan, chere," Remy said, "Amara's Roman not Greek."

"Big whoop, Gumbo, like anyone but da Costa gives a fig." Jubilee rolled her eyes.

He sent her tight smile, knowing without needing empathy or psi-link that Jubilee was doing her best to keep any of them from focusing on the corpse in Northstar's arms. Because there was only one person it could be: Aurora, the man's identical twin.

He jerked his head at Northstar and asked Unuscione, "What about the rest of their unit?"

"Sentinels hit on the left flank. Three Primes. That's where I lost my people too. Aurora caught a plasma blast straight through her chest just before he got the last one," Unuscione said in a low tone.

"Is anyone left to cover the flank?"

"No."

"Merde," he muttered, "the whole thing gonna collapse." He pushed his hair out of his face and listened. The hail of lava spatter seemed finished. "Carmella, can you get him back to the evac point?"

"I should go back to the flank."

"Non. Just get Jean-Paul out of here," Remy commanded. "Use that exoskeleton of yours to carry him, if you have to."

She nodded.

He triggered the throat mike again.

"Chat. Drop your shields for a minute."

"Ready and waiting, Cajun."

He ~reached~ for Sabretooth's familiar mental landscape, suppressing a flinch at the bloody hunger and rage that characterized the feral's thoughts. His head was already pounding. This needed to be more than an empathic connection. He'd let his telepathy lie almost completely latent for years. It hurt trying to use it now. He pushed and felt the link click into place.
~You hear me?~ he sent.

~Gotcha, Cajun.~

~Tell Polaris to drop her shields and I'll link her next.~

He stretched his mind wider, finding Lorna's equally familiar mind near Sabretooth's. He'd linked with her before the one time, plus she'd trained under Xavier and that made the synch easier. His thoughts met and matched with hers and the link snapped into being.

Lorna's mindscape showed the damage of psychic possession by Malice and the Shadow King, but she merged with Remy without hesitation.

~We're heading for the left flank to shore things up, chere,~ he told her.

~Got it.~

He drew back, leaving just enough contact to communicate. He didn't try to link with the Kleinstocks. Sabretooth could relay to them.

He looked at Jubilee, wishing he could send her back with Unuscione and Northstar. She wouldn't go.

"Ready, Firecracker?" he asked.

"Always," she said. She pulled a tattered pack of cinnamon gum from a pocket and offered him a stick. "Gum?"

He grinned and took it, remembering a time he charged a mouthful and spat it in Agent Denti's face. Blowpop makes a bigger bubble. And bang. Everything seemed possible then, back when he'd got his ass out of Antarctica and been stealing for New Son, though there had been darkness already on the horizon. "Thanks, petite."

"I ain't your petite, bub," she grumbled, sounding like Wolverine.

He knelt beside Northstar. "Jean-Paul?"

Northstar took a heaving breath. His voice cracked as he spoke. "LeBeau. I–she–I always wanted to take care of her."

"Gambit know, homme," he said gently. "But you got to get out of here now. Don't want to leave Jean-Marie here, mais non."

Wincing at the burns on Northstar's side, he helped him rise, still cradling Aurora's body. He steered the man over to Unuscione.

"Get 'em out of here, chere."

Unuscione's exoskeleton energy twined out and helped support Aurora's weight.

Remy caught Jubilee's eye. They went out first.
"You go on, get out of here, 'tite," he told Jubilee.

She lifted her chin, staring back at him defiantly.

"I ain't budgin', bub"

"You've got to go, damn it! Someone has to make it out of this mess!"

They were crouched in the bombed wreckage of a suburban house in the outskirts of Denver. The ground shuddered regularly as Purity artillery kept up the bombardment. The walls shuddered with every hit, plaster dust coated everything. A cracked picture frame dropped to the floor. Someone had lived here. He wondered if they were among the stream of humans that had fled the besieged city. They hadn't found any bodies inside when they took cover.

Sven and Harlan had gone for the kitchen, looking for something they could eat. Creed was around somewhere. Polaris–Remy looked up as she joined them, sliding down the wall to sit on the other side of him.

"What about you, Cajun?" Jubilee demanded.

"I got a job to finish," he said. He turned to Polaris, crouched beside him, green hair tangled and dirty, uniform ripped in less than strategic places. "Chere, you get her out of her for me, Oui?"

Polaris grimaced. "No way, Gambit."

He glared at her until a huge, clawed hand clamped down on his shoulder. He turned and stared into Sabretooth's molten yellow eyes. "Creed?"

"No one gets left behind, LeBeau," Sabretooth growled. "Including you." He snorted. "You hung out with those X-idiots too long and picked up some bad habits–like playing hero."

Remy blinked at him tiredly.

"Someone got to get back and make a report," he insisted. "Jubilee is the only one that can pass."

"Until they scan me."

"Still get the minute more than the rest of us. They shoot me or Lorna or Chat on sight, mais sure."

"Shit. Okay. But I'm not going until there's no other choice," she said.

"You'll go when I tell you to," he snapped. "Swear, Jubilee."

"Promise. Bastard."

"Probably."

"Look, we're going to get out of this," Jubilee said. "We always do. We're X-Men, right, Lorna?"
Polaris picked up a pair of scissors spilled on the carpet from an upended desk. "Sure. And Creed's got his healing factor. That's like a get out of death free card even if he isn't a Summers or a Grey." She very calmly began cutting her filthy, tangled tresses off.

"Hah," Remy gibed. "It's all your fault anyway, Chat. If you hadn't screwed Raven…"

Sabretooth bared his teeth. "Good times." He didn't sound like it, though.

Remy sighed and thought he would have liked to get laid a last time before he died. He'd always enjoyed sex even when it was just a physical exercise. Too bad he'd decided to play gentleman with Domino the night before. He glanced at Polaris and sighed. Not the time, not the place. She didn't understand the thing with Wanda either. The thing with Wanda… That was a shitshow for the future.

They left the empty house behind, moving out before a Sentinel peeled the roof off, tracking their mutant energy signatures.

Remy and Jubilee ambushed it when it followed, her plasma burning out its sensors, while he leaped onto it and used the contact to send a kinetic charge into its main processor that blew its robotic brain to bits. Unfortunately, he didn't have claws to hold on with and his ankle twisted viciously when he jumped off and landed clumsily.

There was no time to curse as he fell forward through a somersault, bullets kicking up chips of tar and grit from the street around him as he rolled. His hand locked around a handful of leaves and acorns in the gutter. He charged it and threw it toward the armored fighting vehicle full of Marines rolling up the torn-up street toward him.

The charged pieces of garbage hit and exploded weakly. One Marine screamed and clapped his hands to his face though, dropping his rifle, blinded. The rest scrambled for cover, giving Remy the instant he needed to vault a low stone wall and take cover.

His ankle sent shooting needles of agony up his leg every time he put his weight on it. "Damn, stupid, stupid thing," he cursed to himself.

Jubilee hopped the wall and joined him.

"Hey, Robby the Robot just bit the dust, Gumbo," she joked. She took in the way he sprawled inelegantly in someone's crushed flower plot. "You okay?"

"Think we need some back up, petite," he gasped.

Sabretooth ignored the bullets that hit him and ran toward the Marines. He tore out the throat of the first man he reached with one swipe of a clawed hand. He ripped those claws through the next man's belly, eviscerating him. A snarl distorted his face into a mask of berserk delight.

Polaris began tearing the armored vehicle apart.

The Kleinstocks were in among the Marines now, using their size and enhanced strength with brutal abandon.

One Marine struggled to his knees and leveled a fat cylindrical-bodied weapon at them. He fired it with an ear popping hupff.
The nanite bomb hit and burrowed into Sven Kleinstock's left leg, spreading and multiplying through his system at an incredible pace, eating his flesh to fuel itself. He screamed and fell to the ground.

Harlan dropped to his knees on the pitted sidewalk next to his brother.

"Sven!"

The Marine that had fired the nanite bomb struggled to load another into the bazooka-like firing mechanism.

Jubilee hit him with a series of plasma bursts that flung him into the air and detonated the second bomb in his hands. The nanites infected and consumed him, uncaring that the flesh they ate didn't contain the x-gene. Their programming consisted only of using organic material to build a bomb that would detonate immediately.

Sven tore at his leg, trying to rip the nanite infected flesh away. Harlan grabbed at his hands.

"No!" Remy shouted. "Harlan, don't touch him--"

The nanites spread into Harlan's flesh from Sven, their twin genetic codes indistinguishable to their simplified sensors.

Harlan gagged and tore his hands away, holding them up in horror as they went black and bloated. Skin peeled away from muscle. Dark streaks ran up his arms. Biomechanical blood poisoning.

The flesh on Sven's chest began to bubble and split open. Thick sputum-like fluid oozed from the cracks. Blood poured from his mouth. He writhed, rolling into the gutter, high thin sounds of agony and horror still escaping him. One leg kicked and drummed against the dirty asphalt.

"Help me, help me," Harlan wailed.

Polaris hovered in the air above the bomb cratered street in a bubble of magnetic force.

~Polaris,~ Remy sent, ignoring the stabbing pain through his head. ~Contain the debris when they blow.~

~On it, Remy.~

An invisible magnetic hand picked up the convulsing, screaming Marine and threw him carelessly into the gutter next to the Kleinstocks. An instant later, the twins stopped making any noise or movement. A visible aura of green energy formed a sphere around the three bodies.

Beside Remy, Jubilee flinched. "Did she just--?"

Use the iron in the Kleinstocks' hemoglobin to stop the blood flow to their brains and knock them out? Remy didn't answer. He hoped so, but he knew Lorna didn't have the fine control Magneto had. She might have tried the Master of Magnetism's trick, but she'd probably killed them doing it.

The last Marine in the squad from the Bradley screeched as Sabretooth snapped his spine and threw him down.
Remy locked his hand onto the top of the wall and pulled himself to his feet. His eyes were on the Kleinstocks.

Sabretooth loped down the street then bounded up onto a tumbled sideways, half-crushed SUV, crouching on all fours on the door. Blood smeared his mouth and he laughed. His head swiveled, every sense searching out another threat, another victim.

"Gotta keep movin', kids," Sabretooth growled from his perch.

His grin and easy movement made it look like Sabretooth was enjoying the bloodshed. Remy felt the exhaustion the feral killer just ignored. Even Sabretooth's healing factor and blood thirst were being stretched to their utmost. Since taking up their position on the left flank skirmish line, they had fought three Prime Sentinels and one older version, along with holding back three platoons of Marines as they steadily fell back through the streets of the city. Bombed out skyscrapers and businesses had given way to an abandoned residential neighborhood.

Remy was tired too and, unlike Sabretooth, his body didn't heal damage almost immediately. Some place along the way, his ribs had ended up bruised, maybe cracked, aching with his every breath. The muscles in his legs and arms burned. His fingertips were raw and bloody from charging whatever came to hand, the skin literally burnt away by his own power. Blood and sweat stung his eyes. Something in his ankle shifted unsteadily, threatening failure soon.

He bent over and braced his hands against his knees, struggling to fill his lungs and find his second– or twenty-second–wind.

The nanites detonated. Pink-tinged goo, rotted bone fragments, and a black mist of nanites expanded in a cloud that slapped against Polaris' magnetic containment field. The remains of the three bodies deliquesced in one indistinguishable puddle.

Remy was too tired to flinch.

Polaris collapsed the field inward.

"Yeeuch!" Jubilee commented. "Totally gross."

Sabretooth chuckled. "Ya ain't been hanging around with me long enough, frail."

Jubilee snaked her arm around Remy's waist and took some of his weight.

They were reduced to voice communication or his fragile psi-link. The Marines were using radio and microwave jammers. He didn't know how far in front of the collapsing MRF lines they were, but they were all running on empty, even Sabretooth. If he hadn't been exhausted, he would have landed right and had time to save the Kleinstocks. If they'd had Ivanova psi-linking them, Polaris would have seen the threat and stopped it.

If, if, if.

Now they were down to four. He could hear more Bradleys rolling down the streets toward them. Polaris landed and waited silently for his next order. Her raggedly cut hair was plastered to her head and dark with sweat. Blood trickled from her nostrils.

He hugged Jubilee one armed.
"Gambit?"

"It's time, Jubilee. You promised. Get out of here, petite, ditch the damn uniform and run," he told her fiercely.

"What—"

He kissed her dirty forehead.

"Go!"

He pulled her arm away from him and goosed her with a low charge. She stumbled away from him.

"Go!"

Jubilee hesitated an instant. Sabretooth growled. The Bradleys were getting closer, the diesel engines rumbling from only a few streets away. She turned and ran.

He met Polaris' green gaze and then Sabretooth's. They were calm. They were ready.

"You could go too, chere. Fly."

"Stop being an ass, Remy," she said.

He scooped up a handful of ornamental gravel and tucked it in a pocket then added another. It would charge and throw well. He'd run out of his playing cards sometime during the fight with the third Prime Sentinel. It was scrounge as he went now.

"You ain't going to offer me a chance to bug out?" Sabretooth rasped out.

Remy chuckled. "You know I hate you, Chat."

"Same here, Coon Ass."

The first Bradley turned the corner onto their street. Sabretooth cracked his knuckles.

"Everybody on their own after this," Remy said. "Get back to our lines however you can."

He let the psi-links with Sabretooth and Polaris fray into nothingness. The thread to Jubilee clung to his mind, strengthened and maintained by her own low level psi talent. He left it.

He sent, ~Remy love you, Jubilation. Remember that.~

He opened a hole in his psi-shields and sent out a wordless shout for anyone on the Astral Plane. The three of them weren't going to make it without some back-up. He sharpened and strengthened his sending, focusing on the strongest telepath he knew.

~Professor! Professor, we're hanging hellfire here!~ he shouted mentally. ~Professor!~

~Gambit?~
He sent a gestalt of their situation.

~Tell Hayes we can't hold on any longer. The flank's going to collapse if he doesn't reinforce us. ~

The Bradley was close. Polaris levitated into the air. Sabretooth started running down the street toward the first Bradley full of soldiers. A heavy machine gun was mounted on it. They began firing it at him. The bullets ate away his flesh.

~Professor?~

He sprinted forward after Sabretooth.

Xavier's mind surged into his, brushing past the present and rushing through his memories. Remy snarled. The bastard was taking advantage of his dropped shields. He tried to concentrate enough to re-erect them. He couldn't afford for Xavier to find out -

Xavier plucked the thought from Remy's mind. He gritted his teeth. He should have told Pete when he’d begun to suspect the truth. But he’d needed more proof. He hadn't wanted to believe it until he had no choice. Xavier was behind Wanda Maximoff and Mystique's conspiracy to oust Magneto from New Genosha. Remy had no idea why. He'd hoped there was some good reason, something he had yet to uncover. He'd held his tongue and let Pete leave.

~I'm sorry to do this, Gambit,~ came the sorrow-laced mental voice.

~What–?~

The contact snapped out of being.

Remy gasped. "Connard!" He tried to reach out for anyone, any other telepath with the MRF in Denver. He shoved all his mental strength behind the ~reach~, letting all his shields crumble because they took too much strength on top of that effort.

~Jean! Betsy! Jono! Anyone!~

His wrenched ankle turned as he ran and he went down. One of his fingers broke against the pavement. He lifted his head and saw:

Sabretooth stumble. The Marines poured more fire into him. Blood flew as the bullets hit. He kept moving forward. Polaris picked up a second Bradley and dropped it on a third one. She wavered in the air, her magnetic field fluctuating, energy flagging.

~Emma! Monet! Somebody!~

Another Bradley turned the corner and began firing at Polaris. Remy saw her concentration faltering. He rolled behind the broken arm of the Sentinel he and Jubilee had killed. Bullets ricocheted off its armor. Sparks sprayed over him. He'd bitten his tongue. Blood poured over his chin. He pulled the handfuls of gravel from his pockets and began charging and throwing the pieces as hard as he could. His ankle wouldn't hold him up at all. He no longer thought about whether his charges would explode hard enough to kill. That was what he wanted.

~Professor!~ he screamed telepathically ~Damn you, cul, answer me! ~
A fifth Bradley rolled into sight.

Sabretooth reached the first one and began killing, howling in pain and rage. The Marines in the fourth vehicle divided between shooting at Polaris and firing their mounted automatic machine gun at Sabretooth. They were shooting their own people in the first Bradley, but didn't seem to care.

~Professor!~

His link with Jubilees was gone. Broken. He didn't know when, but he was almost grateful. He didn't want her to experience this.

~Jean! Betsy!~

Polaris screamed, blood blooming as bullets stitched through her magnetic bubble and uniform armor into her legs. A flare of power flashed green from her flailing body as it plummeted to earth, engulfing a Marine holding a pale, ceramic-looking rifle, the explosion taking him and a nearby house down, the wreckage tumbling over where she'd fallen.

"Lorna!" Remy threw everything he had left at the Marines. The explosions lifted the wreckage of the two Bradleys Polaris had destroyed into the air and dropped them on the Marines position. She was down, but she might still be alive. "Lorna!".

He was screaming telepathically. Xavier was blocking him from reaching any of the other telepaths. Sabretooth went down. A Marine at pointblank range fired a nanite bomb into his torn open gut. He screamed. The pain flooded past Remy's non-existent shields and he doubled over. He tried desperately to close his mind to the agony of Sabretooth's healing factor keeping him alive and aware as the nanites ate him.

~Xavier! XAVIER! Answer me!~

~Forgive me, child.~

Remy didn't hear the bomb explode, ripping Victor Creed into so many pieces of flesh nothing could survive and rebuild itself. Xavier's psi-blast lashed through his unprotected mind, shattering his consciousness, the psionic equivalent of a tactical nuke. Telepathic fire scoured neural pathways. His empathy spiraled out of control and synched with dying Marines' last sensations. His scream echoed through the Astral Plane.

His body collapsed, blood pouring from his nose and eyes and ears. Consciousness blinked out, replaced by protective catatonia.

He never felt the inhibitor collar snapped around his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Character Deaths. Violence.
Chapter Summary

Even the Securidat doesn't know everything - yet. But they will. They're always listening. So keep your mouth shut and your shields up.

AD 2227, February 26
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

"That purple-haired mind witch came in here like she owned the place," complained one of the sound men.

"Was it really that bad?" asked one of the men who hadn't been at the News Service building when the bomb went off.

"No, it was worse," another technician, Pablo, said. "They just came in and probed everyone. I thought the Telepathic Corps needed warrants to scan someone's mind."

"She was Securidat not just Telepathic Corps. They give a sweet fuck all about warrants."

"Oh?"

"So who was it?"

"Psylocke."

"One of the Constants?"

"Yeah."

"Oath."

They were all gathered at The Hanged Man for a beer or two and a gripe session since the offices of the Genoshan News Network were still closed off due to bomb damage.

"That is one scary woman," Pablo commented after a while.

"Scary or not, she didn't find anything on the Dissenters," the sound man said.

Pablo shrugged. "So? I'm glad. Now I know I'm not working with some bomb happy nutjob"

The third man smiled into his beer. "Anyone feel like having a sandwich?"
"Yeah, sure, the food here isn't too bad. Let's eat."

They ended up at a table with a variety of plates and half-eaten sandwiches before them along with new beers.

Pablo said, "What do the Dissenters think bombing a news organization is going to accomplish, anyway?"

"Damned if I know," the sound man replied through a mouthful of turkey on rye. The other two turned away from the sight.

"I overheard one of the forensic guys talking," Pablo went on. "The bomb was a quickie, just something slapped together, not like this was something the Dissenters had been planning for a long time."

"So, they bombed our building on a whim?"

"Nah."

The third man raised an eyebrow at the other two.

Pablo leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Maybe they needed to hide or get rid of something that was on vidfeed, you know? They got the core, so every bit of data that came in today after the back-up was lost."

"You going into investigative reporting now, Pab?" the sound man asked.

"Why not? If we could figure it out, it would be a hell of a story."

"Yes, it would," the third man agreed quietly, marking Pablo as someone who might become a problem for the Movement.
Lethe

Chapter Summary

Betrayed, captured, imprisoned, tortured, and alone, Gambit takes the only way out.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning in the chapter end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

AD 2013, October 10-December 14
United States
Mojave Desert

They called it The Mojave.

It squatted in the center of the lowest point in the United States, surrounded by miles of barren sand, protected by hunter-killer Sentinels, its fused ferro-silicon walls laced with suppressor-field generating matrices. Glittering coils of razor-glass wire crowned the walls like hot ice. Most of the facility was buried deep beneath the earth, floor after floor of cells descending toward the Pit.

Once there had been the Vault, before it became a biowarfare research station, a prison built to incarcerate super-powered criminals. The Vault had been part of the judicial and penal systems; its inmates deserved--on the whole--to be there. No one wanted them to get out.

The Mojave existed to imprison mutants. No mutant left it alive.

Remy never saw it from the outside. He remained unconscious through his arrival and in-processing.

The cells were white; the walls slick, ceramic-coated, faintly angled inward from their bases. An extruded bench served as bed and seat. A drain in the floor and a daily cold water drench served as the only hygiene.

He woke up in one; naked, cold and hurting from the beatings he'd already taken. The temperature in the cell seemed to hover around 65° F. Harsh, cold light poured down from ceiling panels too high to jump to, hurting his eyes.

He rolled on to his back with a moan. A power-inhibiting collar was locked brutally tight around his neck. His ribs and collarbone were cracked and his head throbbed not only from a concussion but from the remains of a vicious psychic backlash. Dried blood caked his upper lip and chin from the nosebleed. One knee and ankle hurt so much he knew he couldn't stand on them. One of his fingers was broken.
He couldn't find any weak points. There were cameras in the cell, monitoring every inch. No blind spots. The door was adamantium.

Biting back another moan, he curled into himself, arms protectively around his ribs, legs bent, trying to conserve some body heat. Once, as a child on the streets of New Orleans, he would have rocked himself for comfort. He couldn't comfort himself now.

He concentrated, remembering the last few hours in Denver. Aurora had been killed. He'd lost Elena and the Kleinstocks. Victor was dead. Lorna had been down, wounded. He didn't know if Jubilee had made it. That hurt, but he held onto the fantasy that she had and that Lorna was alive, that she'd survived somehow. The others, he knew what had happened to them, he couldn't pretend he didn't.

He squeezed his eyes shut and hid his face against his knees. Tears squeezed out. Who the fuck would have ever believed he'd cry for Creed? Elena, Jean-Marie, yes, but not for Sven or Harlan, not for a murdering, insane monster like Creed. How many times had they tried to kill each other? But they'd worked together too–Remy had recruited him into the Marauders–and Creed had died fighting on the same side, trying to give Remy a last chance to get out.

Mon Dieu, the last time he'd cried had been in Antarctica when Rogue left him to die.

He'd seen a world dissolve into war, witnessed atrocities and massacres that made his own sins pale in comparison, he'd seen too many friends die badly, victims of hatred and disease. He'd walked into a room and found his lover dead by her own hand. He thought he'd long been beyond tears.

It was the concussion, he told himself, making him weak. He let the salt water trickle down his face and catch in his stubble and concentrated on remaining silent. He had to maintain an appearance of strength. He'd let himself cry just this once for everything and everyone that had been lost. He wouldn't cry again.

He would mourn the final death of a beautiful dream betrayed from within.

He'd mourn a man named Remy LeBeau, an X-Man, Master Thief, Marauder and MRF Strike Leader known as Gambit, just this once. He'd hold out until he couldn't, but he knew he was going to die in this place.

Drugging Gambit was always disaster – his mutant physiology never reacted as expected to what they gave him. Twice he arrested. After that they reverted to pain and isolation, the white room with blinding light, no food and no water.

Time flaked like a scab. It turned slippery in the white glare, counted out by the fade of purple to red-spidered maroon, sick green to jaundice yellow.

The flash tattoo and prisoner number took away his name.

The collar locked him in his own skin and the cell held him. Even his body stopped belonging to him when the guards made it into their toy.

Before, he'd always been able to twist lust into a kind of affection. Without his empathy, he felt more objectified than he had ever been. What they did had nothing to do with him. That made it worse
than he'd ever imagined.

He began splintering.

Sleep ran through his fingers like water, broken in arbitrary places when the guards came in, while his stomach hollowed out and forgot to ache. There were fists and questions; he eventually welcomed both as reminders of his existence.

They left him on the floor and he would stay there, cold seeping into his skin, into the solitude of his own mind. Doubts crept in. Were any of the people hurting him real? Without his empathy, he couldn't feel them; he couldn't even sense the volume displacement and energy potentials of an android or robot without his kinesthetic sense.

He needed connection like an addict, even the pitiful connection of a fist with his flesh.

A seesaw of eagerness and apprehension, wild anger and euphoria greeted every appearance of a guard or an interrogator. Anything to remind himself he still existed when he couldn't feel or touch except with his brittle body. Remy recognized the pathology but that didn't mean he could stop it, only remain conscious of the alteration in his mental state.

They were good, they knew what they were doing, exactly how to methodically break any man. But they were hurried too, because the sort of information Remy held had a short half-life and they needed to extract it before its usefulness expired. If they'd kept to the slow progression, they would have succeeded. He might have slipped past the point of no return and learned to please his interrogator, placate his guards, even given up who he'd been and everything he knew before he even realized it out of gratitude just for their presence.

Nearly everything had gone. He had given up thinking he would be rescued. No one would come. He had stopped fighting. Escape was impossible. No smart alec remarks, even in his head, and no more taunts; without those, Remy gave up talking at all. Even hating the guards and his interrogator took too much energy. He learned to cringe. Every touch became a threat of worse to come. He learned that the raw echoes of his screaming would stay in his head after his throat bled and his voice gave way. He learned to welcome the pain as proof he still lived and that horrified him.

They used the sensory deprivation tank. Losing his empathy had deprived him of the feedback mechanisms that had formed his personality, destabilizing his sense of self. The sense of others' emotions against his shields had always unconsciously defined what was just him. Without that, then deprived of even his body, reality imploded.

The Antiquary ran a finger down his cheek. The tile was cold under his cheek. The merciless Katabatic scored his face with ice crystals. A crystal tear darkened the finger of his glove, caught from Rogue's eye. A handful of emeralds spilled from his frostbit fingers. He felt nothing.

Isolation was a vulnerability Remy had never anticipated. The reverse of what had always frightened him about his empathy, that he'd never be able to keep himself separate from what others felt. He was voiceless and helpless, buried alive in his own head.

His old demons crawled out of the corners of his mind and held court, gibbering and pointing, immediate as the instant he'd first faced them. Thought and thing were one, indivisible to his uncertain mind. Past and present bled together. The walls leaned in and compressed him into nothingness, but he could not reach anything. He screamed and there was no sound, no voice, no mind echoing back anything, no anyone or anywhere or anything that was not him and he was…
empty.

He couldn't muster any connection to the body lying on the cell floor. Sensation only existed on the other side of a thick glass wall. Nothing came through. The questioners and the questions were far away.

In the hollow white spaces, he broke his fingers against the collar cutting into his neck and even the pain didn't feel real.

That was when they brought in the telepath.

It should have been the moment he broke.

"This is John Kitano," his interrogator introduced the new man.

Remy stared at the green wall beyond Kitano's shoulder. It could be a hologram. Everything could be a hologram. He had always been blind to those if he closed his eyes. He slid his eyes closed. Nothing. Nothing there and he was falling. He swayed then jerked his head up, blinking at the wall and the cutout men.

"He's our pet freak."

Freak. One of the better things the guards called him. He was far too tired to wonder why they called someone else that.

The chief interrogator waved his hand in front of Remy's eyes. He ignored it. The slap that followed rocked his head back. He focused on the man that had hit him. Anderson. Sometimes he confused Anderson with the Chief Magistrate from Genosha. Other times Anderson seemed like the only real thing in Remy's constricted world.

"Are you listening to me, Remy?"

Anderson called him by name. Such a small thing to make Remy feel so grateful.

"You're making things so hard for me, Remy," Anderson went on. "That makes things hard for you, too. I don't like doing these things, you know. You make me."

He could see his insubstantial reflection in the glass front of the drug cabinet. A thin dark line ran down that man's chin from a split lip. He didn't feel it. Anderson's voice was a buzzing from the far end of a tunnel.

"You see why they want you to go into his head," Anderson addressed Kitano. "We can't waste any more time doing this with conditioning. He doesn't respond appropriately to all of the protocols, especially the drugs."

The words rattled around in Remy's thoughts. Freak. Into his head. Thinking had become so hard that understanding came slowly.

Kitano's expression betrayed nothing. His eyes were dead. Remy understood that he could expect no mercy from the other mutant. Very distantly, he wondered what Kitano did.

"He'll have shields," Kitano said in a toneless voice. "All of the captured MRF officers have."
Telepath.

"Not any more, I'd bet."

"What did you do?"

"Sensory deprivation. He hasn't made a peep since. That's why you're here."

Kitano considered Remy clinically.

"I see."

"Well?" Anderson demanded.

Remy jerked. The sensation of another mind groping into the crumbling edges of his consciousness felt invasive and foreign and so clearly not him he wanted to weep with relief at the division. It hurt and took every bit of mental strength he had to reinforce the wreckage of his shields. They were still there, a permanent part of his mindscape, and they held Kitano out.

He almost laughed hysterically.

His shields held. He knew who he was again. He knew what was happening.

"He still has some shields," Kitano reported. "But I'll get through them."

Anderson smiled at Kitano then Remy.

"Look who woke up," he murmured.

Remy barely heard him; his attention was narrowed down to just Kitano. The telepath was still feeling along Remy's shields, finding the weak places, the cracks all through his psyche.

After the void of input, it scraped and poked at his mind. Kitano had no finesse. He pushed and pressured and tore at Remy's shields.

It felt exquisite.

Dirty and tainted and real. Kitano was real. He made Remy real.

Remy wanted to let him inside his shields.

He fought it for five days. It took more determination to stop himself giving in than to keep Kitano out. His will kept faltering. In the white cell, he longed for Kitano's mind touch. In the interrogation room, he could feel Kitano seeping through the cracks, tearing his mind apart, and he no longer had the strength to push the man out.

The sixth day - oh, and how ironic he found that in some corner of his mind that still remembered going to church—he was strapped down in the interrogation room again. Limbs stretched wide like a crucified sacrifice waiting for the executioner. His eyes were taped open, tearing and burning from the merciless light above him. He would be blinded for hours afterward. A scream of denial bubbled in his throat, unvoiced. Desperate thoughts ran after each other helplessly.
Can’t hold out no more, can’t stand this, can’t let them find out what’s in my head, can’t stop him, can’t keep him out, can’t stand it, can’t hold out, just want to let go, just want it to stop –

Want it to stop –

Want it to –

Want to –

Stop.

White bandages wrapped tight around his wrists. The night before, he’d curled into a ball and used his own teeth to tear his flesh open, ignoring the pain. Blood, shocking scarlet in the colorless cell, had smeared his body and seeped toward the drain in the center of the cell. Blessed darkness had beckoned, drawing him down and away. The omnipresent cameras had seen; the guards came. They pulled him back into the awful light.

Instead of dying, he'd been sewn up and transfused.

He couldn't even die.

He felt Kitano's presence in the room like a viscous toxin seeping over the outlines of his own mind. His shields were dissolving, eaten away as though by acid.

Kitano didn't bother questioning him audibly.

Remy's breath came in fast, shallow pants. His heart raced adrenaline and a dozen by-products of his fear through his system. Sweat beaded on his skin chilling him further. The lab reeked of his own terror and all the others that came before him, of blood and disinfectant and metal. He braced his mind against the telepath's.

His shields bowed under the constant pressure.

He'd never wanted to do this. It seemed worse than death to him. It always had, yet he'd gone along with the idea. He'd never thought he would be reduced to the last resort. His suffering wouldn't end. That was the worst of it. He didn't know if it would be him suffering but it would still be his body.

He couldn't even close his eyes to concentrate. He didn't need to. They had known when they discussed the possibility that anyone desperate enough to use this final resort wouldn't be in good shape.

On the seventh day, he rested.

Stop.

In his mind, he said a word.

Lethe.

He felt Kitano in there with him but it didn't matter now. The telepath was surprised and intrigued, unable to see yet what Remy meant to do.
On one level, Remy remained in the room, his naked, emaciated body in restraints, collared, helpless and hopeless. Unforgiving light pinned him in the center of a green-tiled room, surrounded by enemies.

In his mind's landscape, he was as he had been, clad in his Thieves' armor and that old duster he'd treasured. He stood at the edge of a grassy cliff, wind whipping his long hair under an overcast sky. No sun or moon lit this place. Beyond the cliff, gathered from a river greater than the Nile and the Amazon and the Old Mississippi together, a waterfall poured in a quicksilver torrent into infinity. Behind him, when he looked back, was a greasy shadow that he knew was Kitano's mind.

He conjured the image of her, of her green eyes, one last time, the ghost of a ghost. Once he had held to the hope that he would find her again beyond death. But this wouldn't be death. It was worse. Yet he chose it.

With a wild laugh, he caught the arm of Kitano's eidolon and dragged the telepath close as he stepped off the cliff.

For an instant, he heard Kitano's scream in his mind.

Then the water spilled through him, washing away his memories and his self, dissolving the man who had been Gambit and Remy LeBeau and Le Diable Blanc. The greatest telepaths on the planet had implanted all of the MRF's leaders with this last-ditch option: to wipe away all their memories, their very selves, rather than have them broken and violated. Kitano fought it, but the memory wipe swept away the weaker telepath's mind along with Remy's.

His past dissolved into an oil-slick of color on the surface of the silver water, emotion and history and self all gone. Horror flashed through him before even that was gone and then nothing. A pool of water, a blank page, a hollow that filled with light and didn't understand.

Pain was his first experience. He was. He had no name, no sense of self. Just the knowledge of physical pain.

From the pain came fear.

He hurt. He didn't know why. He didn't know anything. He tried to remember anything, tried to understand why, and found himself empty.

Nothing.


Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Attempted Suicide, Torture.
The Disappeared

Chapter Summary

Max Parsons begins to think nothing is an accident, especially what happened to the Ares.

AD 2227, February 28
High Earth Orbit
Mission Control Director's Compartment

His lords and masters wanted him to come down the beanstalk, preferably with some treasure gleaned from the giant's table—in this case the repair work done on the ares Explorer by Avalon Station. Max Parsons didn't mind telling them nothing had been found yet, but he went through every report one more time so he could back his statements up.

A single discrepancy in the crew casualty report bothered him. Alyse Anouk, a French engineer returning from Mars after four years, had died when the ares's fusion plant blew and the ship corridor she had been in explosively decompressed. Her body, frozen and desiccated by exposure to complete vacuum, had been returned with the other dead after repairs were finished at Avalon Station.

Alyse's body had been autopsied and identified using DNA.

Max had known Alyse during the days when they worked together constructing the orbital beanstalk. She'd spent the night with him before leaving for Mars. He remembered very clearly the accident that had sheared off the first joint of her left little finger in a malfunctioning airlock hatch.

The autopsy report didn't mention the missing part of a digit.

Sixteen people had died on ares. Every one of the bodies had been recovered and documented. There were flatpics and holos of each of them. He sorted through a dozen files and found the autopsy printouts.

Max slipped out the flatpics of Alyse Anouk's remains.

He winced.

Explosive decompression did terrible things to a body and looking at the picture he couldn't see anything of Alyse.

One of the pictures showed the corpse's left hand clearly.

A left hand with a little finger that clearly still possessed all its joints.

Max swallowed hard.
That was not Alyse Anouk no matter what the DNA test said.

Whatever his superiors had hoped he’d find, Max knew it hadn't been a mystery. This was not good.
Feet of Clay

Chapter Summary

Professor Xavier scrambles to cover his tracks.

AD 2013, December 17
United States
Snow Valley

Snow drifted up against the cold stone crosses and weighed down the wet black limbs of the trees. It drifted down and down like down through the short, dark winter afternoon from clouds the color of a gray goose. It muffled everything, as though it numbed more than fingertips and feet, insulating everyone from the feelings that brought them out in it. It caught in Bobby's eyelashes when he lifted his face to the sky, trying to find a brighter spot in the overcast where the sun might be.

There was no sun.

No bright spot.

All the shades of black and white and nothing left of life; the trees mere bare outlines and the earth frozen hard and unforgiving beneath its pale shroud. He didn't like cemeteries, wasn't one of those who appreciated the austere beauty found in stone tombs and stillness. Wished this day done or never begun and himself still asleep, deep in the dark and dreamless.

He wished…

He wished…

He dipped his head, lowering his eyes like everyone else gathered around the gravesite.

He wished Remy was standing there with the rest of them. He'd be next to Storm, one hand at her elbow as though she needed steadying. He'd be wearing one of those incredibly expensive black suits that were so good you didn't really see them, just how fine he looked in them. There wouldn't be any snow on his shiny hair or the shoulders of his suit because Storm knew how he hated getting wet or cold. He'd keep his head bowed, even his eyes cast down and he'd recite all the prayers very, very softly.

But he wasn't there.

No bright spot.

No eyes of embers.

No body.
Bobby felt as hollowed out as the black hole in the frozen ground.

Too many people weren't there and it scared him how even looking at the people that were, he only saw the empty places by them. The faces that were missing, the ghosts of absence.

He missed Remy already, missed just knowing he existed in the world, that there was some chance of turning a corner, opening a door, walking into a room and just seeing him: copper and carnelian, all impossible grace and sardonic edges, something incandescent in the dull existence of all others made of less fiery materials. He'd miss him forever.

All the color had gone out of the world.

Even Jean, there on the opposite side of the grave, looked faded. She hadn't worn a hat and the snow had melted into her hair, darkening it, snuffing out the fire. There was an empty space beside her, that made Bobby sad for different reasons, because Scott hadn't come. Scott was in New Genosha with Magneto, trying to figure out what they all did now.

He should have been there. No matter what, Bobby thought bitterly, Scott should have come for this funeral, for this one time that had to stand in for all the others who would never have even the grace of a grave.

Bobby bowed his head a little more, picking out faces and places through his eyelashes, ignoring the words being spoken as much as he could. In his experience—which he had too much of already—all funerals sounded the same. People said the same things and very seldom were they: he was an arrogant prick most of the time, felt sorry for himself too much and had an abominable temper, but I'll miss him anyway.

"... in this time of pain and hardship... a deeper blow... the first... a symbol of hope and belief for us all..."

Jesus, the Professor could lay it on thick. If Warren were here, he'd be snickering.

Of course, he wasn't. Only he was. Right over there and good night, sweet prince, golden slumbers sing thee to thy rest. Or some such. Bobby couldn't remember if that was from some poet he hadn't paid enough attention to in school or a Beatles song. Who was to say it couldn't be both, really?

Golden slumbers... not quite, not on a day like this, more like tarnished silver. All the color had gone away from the world. Bobby's world, anyway. All sorts of things had gone away, not just one good friend.

Warren, at least, they knew for sure. The others were so many question marks after Denver. Missing in action. Empty spaces. Gone, baby, gone.

There, next to Wolverine, that spot on the right should have been Jubilee's. He could imagine the pink pop of her bubble gum and the sarcastic way she'd widen her eyes if someone reprimanded her for her lack of respect. Bobby felt a little surprised Wolverine had bothered to attend the funeral; he'd made his opinion of Warren clear many times. But Wolverine had that thing about his honor and he'd respect the way Warren died, going up against a Sentinel, no matter if they'd liked each other or not.

Shadowcat had her hand on Wolverine's arm, standing at his left. She'd flown in with Jean from Mont Saint Francis. Wolverine didn't shake her off at least, the way he had anyone else fool enough to approach him since the news reached them of the final day of fighting in Denver. He stared
straight ahead, past everyone, a muscle in his cheek twitching.

Over on the far side, with Sunspot and Meltdown in their gray and black MRF uniforms, Shatterstar should have been standing with Rictor next to him, not with that extra space between him and his friends. He was staring too, past a thousand yards into a thousand empty years.

Bobby caught his breath against the ache in his throat, that feeling that he had to swallow the pain down and close it away. 'Star had lost what he'd only dreamed of having. That had to hurt worse. Maybe Domino could have helped, but she had her own wounds and she didn't do funerals.

Maybe she had the right idea, Bobby acknowledged.

Jean-Paul looked like he was still in shock after losing his twin. Havok had that stoic Summers' mask on his face, as though he didn't notice Polaris wasn't there, wasn't shattered, still in an artificial coma while her wounds were knit together.

Jesus, Jesus, just let me get through this so we can get back to the house and I can pretend everything's all right. Just for a little while.

Storm had asked him if he would help her go through Remy's room.

He hunched over, even though the cold couldn't touch him, his fingers curled into painful fists inside his coat pockets. He wasn't sure he could do it.

She had to feel as bad as he did; Remy had been closer to her than anyone else, the one she confided in when she hurt. Everyone else expected Storm to be the serene Goddess, the dedicated follower, the responsible leader and perfect mutant role model. Maybe she wanted his help for her own sake, because she needed his company to face giving up or maybe she thought it would help Bobby, but he honestly thought it was the worst idea ever. He didn't need a reminder of how much of a part of Remy's life he hadn't been. He knew he wouldn't find anything that marked Robert Drake as meaning anything to Remy there or anywhere.

The truth was you wouldn't find that evidence anywhere with anyone. Bobby Drake, mutant slacker, just didn't count for much really. He was like the poster boy for wasted potential. Sure, plenty of people would be sorry for a while if he just dissolved into a puddle of cold water one day, but no one would be devastated. No one's life would be irrevocably and utterly changed without him in it. After a couple of days, no one would even notice the difference without him.

No one would look like they would cry with gratitude if someone would just shoot them, the way Shatterstar did.

No one would look like someone had just shot them, the way Remy had when they found Rogue's body.

His throat felt so tight he wondered if he could go on breathing.

Henry's huge, claw-tipped hand locked onto his shoulder. "Robert."

Bobby straightened his posture. The hand stayed on his shoulder, radiating warmth, and he felt grateful.

Later, the snow fell onto Warren's coffin, dusting the flowers there, mingling with the clods of earth
that eventually covered it. Gray clouds scudded across the sky as the short dusk rapidly gave way to the winter night.

Bobby scooped up a handful of loose white stuff, unmindful of his bare skin, savoring it really. It was the best sort of snow, powdery and fine, each tiny flake delicate and separate from all the others. He let it sift between his fingers into Warren's grave.

Bye, War.

Henry was still there beside him, saying his own good-byes to their old team-mate. He looked up, eyeglasses glinting and faintly fogged up, feeling Bobby's gaze on him. One ear flicked, knocking a dust of snow off it.

"Let's go back, Robert."

He let Henry lead him away from the gravesite.

Up ahead of them, Wolverine walked beside Kitty, her hand still locked on his arm, black outlines against blue snow in the dimming of the day.

New Genosha
Hammer Bay
The Citadel

The noise rushed into the highest office in the Citadel. Voices raised in anger, wanting blood. The armored glass windows shuddered. Some of the mutants in the crowd in Magda Square were using their powers.

"Demonstrations."

Magneto seemed a bit taken aback. The reports of unrest and civil disobedience coming from New Genosha had been disturbing, but he'd dismissed them as a home populace's normal dissatisfaction with any war. He didn't understand this reaction. His white brows drew together as he read the reports and listened to the crowd gathered below.

The three people in the office with him remained calm, but weren't happy either.

"Why?"

"The failure at Denver appears to be the obvious cause," Scott said cautiously. He was watching a newsfeed from the streets of Hammer Bay and frowning. The crowds moved with an organized purpose.

"Denver served its purpose."

"Casualties were high," Scanner commented. She frowned too. "Most people don't realize that the MRF succeeded in its goals."

"Blithering idiots, all of them," Pete said.
Scott made a sound that had to be suppressed amusement. Pete rolled his eyes.

Magneto lifted his head and stared at him, eyebrows lifted. Scott waved a hand. "Sorry."

Pete scrubbed at his face, hands rasping over unshaved whiskers.

"Crap. Something's going on."

Scott looked up, nodding. "I'd have to agree. This all seems... organized. The reaction seems too strong."

"Manipulated," Scanner said.

Pete grunted. He'd been catching little clues for weeks now. Someone had something dirty going on in Hammer Bay, something being planned, but he couldn't quite pin it down. No suspects that he could interrogate. He'd stayed silent except at home with Kitty. She knew his suspicions.

Scott walked over to the windows and stared out.

"It sounds like they want your head." His forehead wrinkled. "It doesn't make sense."

"No," Magneto replied. He turned to Scanner. "Could a telepath or an empath be behind this?"

She shrugged. "I can't scan mobs. But if I had to guess, I'd say there's at least one projective empath amping the hostility down there."

"It's...," Scott searched for the right word, "so improbable."

Pete jerked.

Magneto saw the reaction.

"Wisdom? What have you thought of?"

Pete shook his head.

"What?"

Magneto's gaze sharpened, the clear eyes narrowed and intent on Pete. "Do not think you can conceal anything from me," he declared.

Pete's eyebrows shot up. "I told you when Pryde and me arrived here that I wouldn't bow down, your Worshipfulness," he snapped. "Don't pull that crap. If I wanted to, you can bet I could conceal plenty from you."

"Pete," Scott said. "Think for a second. What are you feeling right this instant?"

Scanner looked confused then enlightened. She studied Pete. "Something..."

"What?"
"The hostility you just expressed, is that really how you feel? Think," she said.

Pete pulled a pack of Silk Cuts out of his pocket then just turned the cellophane wrapped package in his fingers. "Fucking hell," he muttered.

"Whatever it is can affect us up here too," Scanner said. "I can... There. Better?"

Pete blinked at her then glanced over at Scott. Scott looked like someone had just told him 'at ease'; he'd relaxed subtly without moving at all. Pete flicked his gaze toward Magneto and realized what had changed. A moment before just looking at Magneto had set off a flare of anger through him. Now that was gone.

"Bollocks."

Scanner arched a brow. "I'll take that as a yes."

Magneto strayed toward the window, only to be stopped by Scott's arm. "I don't think that's a good idea, sir. Someone might notice you and with the way they're stirred up..."

"Perhaps."

Pete lit his cigarette, eyes narrowed against the smoke, thinking.

"Someone wants you gone, mate. Out. Maybe dead. I'll bet the head games are just part of it. Gambit was supposed to have something on them. Never told me what."

"You know more than you're saying."

"Er, yes, but it's pretty improbable," he admitted. "I don't want to say anything until I've done a little checking."

"Very well," Magneto said.

"Whatever you did, will it hold up away from here, Scanner?" Pete asked.

She shook her head. "No. I'm projecting a psionic interference wave. Something like a white noise mask."

Pete cursed fluently.

"It shouldn't matter once you're away from here. Even an alpha projective empath has a limited range."

"There's a bloody relief"

He exhaled a trickle of smoke. "I need to do some nosing about."

Magneto waved a hand. "Go."

Pete sauntered out, trailing smoke, a frown back on his face. He kept thinking about the improbable. The Scarlet Witch specialized in probability. Gambit had gone all squirrelly a month or two back. Pete knew the man had uncovered something about whatever Maximoff and Mystique were up to,
something he'd held back. But Gambit checked out at Denver, sod him. That left Pete starting over from scratch.

He was still cursing himself and Gambit when the bomb went off.

United States Snow Valley
The Massachusetts Academy

Emma's library offered a gathering place afterward. A fire in the hearth warmed the dark room. The remnants of the X-Men who had managed to gather for the funeral trooped in and settled around the room quietly.

Charles tried to hide his own weariness. Just shielding against the thoughts of his students on this day took more strength than anyone could imagine. They hurt and they questioned and their thoughts spun in circles of guilt and sorrow.

Wolverine stood at the French doors, glaring through the glass at the snow-covered grounds. He'd stripped off his suit coat and flung it over the back of a club chair. Heavy muscles shifted under his shirt, bunching and releasing as he fought to control a berserker rage that had no target.

Kitty had taken a seat on one of the sofas with Henry and Bobby. Jean had curled into a nearby loveseat, while Neal and Betsy hovered uncomfortably near the fireplace. Storm stood in the middle of the room facing Charles.

Emma had opened her liquor cabinet and poured herself a whiskey. After gulping down a large measure, she'd gestured carelessly toward the bottles. "Help yourselves." No hint of expression touched her features.

Northstar walked stiffly over to the sideboard and made himself a large drink. He stared into it, then said, "I'm going to the comm room," and walked out.

Except for Emma, who wore white as always, everyone wore black or gray and not their battle armor. They'd looked like a murder of crows against the snow at the cemetery.

~White is the color of death in many cultures, Charles,~ Emma murmured in his mind, her mental voice like ice and acid. ~You should know that.~

"Professor, have you found any sign of any of them?" Storm asked.

"I wish I had better news," he said.

He felt ill over the results of Denver. The losses had been horrific, many of them striking into the family the X-Men had formed before this war began. So many casualties. Then to lose Warren too, it had cut him to the heart. Scott's absence from this gathering struck home all the changes Charles loathed most.

He hadn't anticipated that the backlash from attacking Gambit telepathically would knock out the other telepaths in the area. He'd simply panicked when he discovered Gambit had uncovered his connection to the unrest in New Genosha. His military service had been too long ago. He'd crippled
the MRF's secure command and communications network with a single blow without even meaning too. Losing Red One opened up their entire flank. The consequence had been the deaths of many more fighters than just Gambit and his unit.

So many casualties were on his head and the only thing he could do was turn the animosity everyone felt toward a useful target: Magneto. Whether he could forgive himself or not, the facts remained and to turn from his path at this point would render his deed into something even worse.

The guilt ate him when he was alone. The only way he could live with it was to blame it on Magneto. The war, the atrocities, his own mistakes, all were Magneto's fault. Therefore, anything Charles did to stop him became justified. It had to be. He couldn't have been wrong, couldn't be the one who condemned their world to this war.

He'd felt like this before. Suffered the same thoughts, driven by rage and pain. Every dark emotion he'd ever repressed to present a facade of control and acceptance had been let loose when he became Onslaught. He'd been insane then, of course, because he'd had pieces of Magneto's psyche in his mind and hadn't let himself know it. He was perfectly aware of what he was thinking and doing now.

He was, he assured himself. He was also perfectly aware that no one else would agree.

"What news is that, Professor?" Storm asked softly.

He sighed. "I can sense no sign of Gambit, Ororo."

Tell the truth and lie by omission. Tell the truth and entertain the devil. Telepaths were particularly good at that skill. It was a matter of choosing his words. He couldn't sense Gambit. He had been able to find his mind signature up until the day before. Then it had dissolved. He hadn't sensed the man's death on the Astral Plane, but his consciousness had blinked out and hadn't returned. He suspected the cause, but had no way of confirming it.

He couldn't tell Storm the kindest thing, that Gambit was dead, because he might yet be caught in that lie.

She seemed to sway then to draw herself up even straighter. "But Remy is notoriously difficult to see telepathically, is he not?" she murmured.

Bobby lifted his eyes from the carpet.

Charles acknowledged that with a slight inclination of his head. "Yes, but a careful scan by someone familiar with his lack of a psionic signature should have found him."

He looked at Jean, who nodded. Psylocke shrugged and Emma pursed her lips.

"I've spent hours with Cerebra, searching for our missing. There has been no trace of Gambit, I'm afraid, and in the circumstances… It was a miracle Tether recovered Polaris." The poor girl would be months recovering enough to leave the medical suite in New Genosha and then she would face reconstructive surgery and adapting to a prosthesis.

Storm shook her head. "I do not believe he is dead. I would feel it."

"Gambit is a psi," Charles said. "If he were in need, do you not believe he would reach out to us? To
As he had.

*Xavier! XAVIER! Answer me!*

*Forgive me, child.*

Despite his best efforts to shield, he couldn't block Bobby's thought. Shit, shit, shit. I know you hated it, but couldn't it have done you some good just this once? He kept his face blank, startled by the depth of emotion Bobby felt toward the thief.

Wisdom had recruited Gambit to help him track down the anti-Magneto movement in New Genosha. They'd found Mystique and Wanda. He'd seen the sly look in Gambit's eyes and known the man guessed already. He could manipulate Pete Wisdom's thought patterns, but he couldn't get past Gambit's shields without revealing himself. Not until Gambit had deliberately dropped them. The chance to be rid of him in Denver had been too tempting to pass up.

If anyone ever were to learn of that exchange, none of them would forgive him. They wouldn't forgive him for any of the lies he'd told, no matter how well intentioned. Of course, if Gambit had been forced to use the Lethe Procedure... Charles was safe. The only other who had known no longer had any memory at all, nor ever would.

"I–I am sorry, Professor," Storm replied. "I know that you have done your best to find him for us."

Bobby got up from the couch to go to Storm's side. He pulled her into a hug. Charles gave him a nod. Bobby did have a good heart. He would help Storm get over losing Gambit and she would keep him on an even keel. He had always been a trifle wary of seeing Bobby truly exercise his power; for that same reason, he had allowed Bobby to underachieve while encouraging his shallow, destined for failure relationships over the years. A committed Bobby might have become dangerous. Yet he'd missed the feelings Bobby had for Gambit, dismissed them, since Gambit had been focused on Rogue to the exclusion of anyone else.

Just as well Gambit was gone. Without Rogue, he had walked away from the Dream without a backward look. That sort of thinking had damaged the teams, just as Cable had by encouraging Sam to become more and more proactive and militarized.

Emma poured herself another drink. The alcohol impeded her abilities just enough Charles could read through her shields. She had been fonder of Warren than she showed and considered Charles to blame for his death. She also had suspicions about his activities in New Genosha.

Mentally gritting his teeth, he rerouted a memory trail in her mind. Now when she thought of Warren's death and the ones responsible she would unconsciously link that to Magneto. The effort left him sweating beneath his black suit, because he'd had to conceal it from both Jean and Betsy. If he hadn't long since trained them to turn a blind eye to his mental work, they would have noticed. He certainly wouldn't have tried it with Emma if she'd been at the top of her game.

"What about Jubilee?" Wolverine didn't turn to face any of them.

"I was able to ascertain that she is alive, Logan," Charles said quickly. "I do not know where. But we will find her."
"That ain't good enough."

"What else can any of us do?" Jean asked. "The Professor is doing all he can. You know that."

"I could gut Mags for screwing up in Denver and getting a lot of good people killed." Despite the harsh words, Wolverine didn't sound so much angry as tired. Charles had hoped for a stronger reaction from his former students. Perhaps he had waited too long to make his move against Magneto. Were they already too inured to warfare and death to feel any outrage?

"Violence isn't the answer, Logan," he said.

Wolverine grunted.

"Denver wasn't Magneto's fault," Kitty spoke up. "I was there until the last couple of days. So was Pete. General Hayes was in charge, not Erik. You can't blame him for what went wrong at the end."

"Katherine. Of course. Thank you for reminding us," Charles responded. "You were with Gambit's Striker Unit, weren't you?"

"Yes."

A sharp, sudden spike of urgency in the mind of someone outside the library made Charles and the other telepaths turn toward the door long before it opened. Northstar brushed through it, trailing a breeze from his speed.

"Jean-Paul, what - ?"

"There's been a coup attempt in New Genosha."

Charles flinched.

Northstar shied back a step from the combined force of everyone staring at him.

"A bomb was set off in the main conference room of the Citadel. There's a report of two dead."

"Pete?" Kitty asked.

"No. No one we know. Cleaning staff," Northstar explained. "Magneto and his people were already out."

"Bright Lady be with them," Storm murmured.

"How'd anyone get in past security?" Wolverine demanded.

Northstar rolled his eyes. "How would I know? The report said there had been some arrests. Nothing more."

Damn Mystique. Had she gotten so sloppy or had she deliberately let the coup attempt fail? Charles had had no time to peel away the layers of shielding and discover the true reasons she'd volunteered her services to their fifth column before he'd left Genosha again. She'd made a much better leader than Wanda Maximoff and he'd been grateful for her skills, but he should have known using Mystique was a mistake. Even when they had agreed on a purpose they had never agreed on means.
A bomb, for God's sake.

Kitty had crossed the room to Jean's side and they were speaking quietly. "Scott says they are all fine," Jean murmured. "They've caught the bombers, but they don't know anything."

Kitty relaxed visibly.

"Mercs," Wolverine growled. "Whoever was behind it will have hired them through a series of cut-outs."

Mystique, covering her trail, would cover Charles' involvement too. He could be grateful for that. "Two things?" he prompted Northstar.

"One of the taps monitoring incoming calls to the New Pentagon flagged a message from the Mojave," Northstar said. "They've got Gambit there. They wanted a background check, looking for anyone they could use as leverage to get him to talk."

"The Mojave?" Bobby whispered. "Oh, shit."

"You're sure he's there?" Wolverine demanded.

Northstar nodded emphatically. Silver-streaked black hair flipped over his eyes and he pushed it back impatiently. "You can check the transcript. They haven't got an ID on him beyond his codename, but it is him."

A collective shudder ran through everyone in the room.

"You with me to get him out?" Wolverine asked.

"Of course."

"We are all with you, Wolverine," Storm declared.

Charles caught Emma frowning at him and realized he had to do something quickly. If he was mistaken over why Gambit's mental signature had disappeared, then he couldn't be allowed to inform the rest of the X-Men of what Charles had done at Denver. A rescue mission was out of the question. The Mojave was too dangerous a target for a few X-Men to assault.

"Why didn't you know he was there, Charles?" Emma asked.

"Perhaps he has been unconscious," he said cautiously.

Even Jean looked skeptical of that.

"Will you go too?" he asked Emma, seeking to distract her.

"I'll be with them," Jean declared before Emma could answer.

"I knew you would, darlin'," Wolverine said.

Everyone's attention focused on Wolverine for that instant. Charles struck. A mental command froze
their conscious thoughts into a simple loop. He couldn't have held so many strong minds if they weren't already conditioned to obey him. He slipped back into Emma's mind first, because she had already begun to fight the telepathic hold.

He wiped the memory of the last minute from her mind and replaced it with a short loop of guilty musings on her relationship with Warren, tagging it to a well of depression that would make her avoid the memory.

He edited Northstar's memories next, learning that no one else had been in the comm room when the flagged message showed. Charles wasn't a computer genius, but it wouldn't take more than a few minutes to wipe the records. He might leave an electronic trace, but no one would be looking for it. News of the coup attempt in New Genosha would effectively distract anyone from checking anything else.

The knowledge that Gambit lived and was incarcerated at the Mojave was wiped from the minds of everyone in the room shortly. Charles took the time to alter thought patterns that would lead any of them to thinking of Gambit at all. It was crude work, because he had so little time and so many minds to alter, but he finished it. He told himself that this would save all of them from the grief they would have felt otherwise.

When he released their minds, the X-Men thought they had been discussing finding Jubilee and rescuing her for the last few moments.

"I will keep searching," Charles promised. "We will get her back, Logan."

"I ain't quitting until we do."

"Of course."

"We are all with you, Wolverine," Storm said.

Jean and Emma both frowned, hearing those same words again, and Charles shuddered. He had crossed the line and knew it.

Bobby couldn't sleep. He tried to read and then to watch TV and neither held his attention. It felt like an itch in his brain. Giving it up as a bad job, he slipped on a pair of shoes and left his room.

One look in the rec room and then the library proved that no one else had given up though he'd be willing to bet there were others just as sleepless as him in the house. He hesitated by the door into the parlor and frowned, feeling an odd pang.

With sigh, he wandered into the kitchen. He didn't bother with a light. Maybe he needed something to eat. Staring into the open, brightly lit refrigerator for ten minutes didn't reveal anything he wanted. He closed the door. In the darkness that followed, he blinked and let his eyes readapt, noticing the moonlight shining through the window over the sink.

It drew him over and he ended up staring out at the empty grounds. The overcast had blown away. Cold crystal stars and the pale eye of the moon glowed off the blue snow. The trees were painted in
sharp, black lines against the night sky and the shadows were limitless and deep.

Bobby leaned his forearms against the counter. It was beautiful out there. He could go for a walk. The cold wouldn't touch him. It wouldn't comfort him either. What was so empty about moonlight?

He didn't feel like disabling the security system just for a stroll. He wasn't like—His thoughts skittered away from that. He wasn't like anyone. He was Bobby Drake. He could turn himself into snow and ice. He could probably turn himself into water vapor and sieve right out of the house without even opening a door or window.

He would have to tell –

He frowned. What had he just been thinking?

A sharp stab of something like pain ran through him. He'd known someone who laughed at security systems once. A thief. Someone who was gone; someone lost.

Bobby's breath caught. How could he have forgot–His thoughts jumped off track as he watched a shadow chase across the snow as a cloud scudded over the moon. Things turned strange to the eye by night, familiar sights seemed foreign.

He wished he could sleep. He missed something.

Someone.

He missed someone.

It occurred to him he had a headache. He'd probably be able to get some sleep if he found a couple of aspirin and went back upstairs. That lonely feeling in his chest came from losing Warren and worrying about Jubilee.

He fumbled through a couple of cabinets before giving up and returning to his own room, where he found some aspirin in the bathroom and washed it down with water from the sink.

The face in his mirror looked red-eyed and weary. He needed a shave. He ran a wet hand over the blondish whiskers.

He couldn't remember what was wrong, but something was. He'd lost something.

He wished he could figure out why he hurt so much, when he knew it wasn't over Warren or anyone he could think of. But every time his mind turned toward what was missing, it slipped away like moonlight.

The thought that some of his memories might have been played with uncurled like a poison blossom.

Bobby clenched his hands on the edge of the sink.

That couldn't be. The Professor would have noticed. The Professor would have stopped anyone from messing with them.

The Professor could have done it.
He pushed the suspicion away.

Can't trust anyone, cher. Remember Onslaught? Remember?

Who had said that?

Remember me?

He didn't.

He thought he might throw up the aspirin and water.

If they couldn't trust the Professor -

Bobby rubbed at his face. Something. How long had he been standing staring into the mirror? What had he been thinking?
Prayers to Broken Stones

Chapter Summary

Alistair Kelly talks to Jean Grey about clones.

AD 2227, January 21
Hammer Bay
New Genosha

'When I made the request, I had little hope of actually being afforded to opportunity to talk to any of the Triune. The New Genoshans, both the officials and the citizens, had been remarkably generous with their time, but the Triune were deeply involved with the Talks with Ambassador Aiken and running their country. A little checking had shown me that they didn't offer interviews to or welcome much in the way of publicity from Genoshan news services.

Once again, I was surprised by the New Genoshans' mixture of casual friendliness and formality. Shortly after I made the request, I received a message from the Citadel from Phoenix' secretary inviting me to spend an afternoon with her.

I accepted with alacrity, of course.

The Constants, and particularly the Triune, are both the essence and the living history of New Genosha. Fascinating for the wealth of time they have experienced, they are also the architects and authority of their present country. I meant to make the most of my once in a lifetime opportunity.

By that time, I had done my homework. Before arriving in New Genosha, I'd read everything I could on mutants and the Gene Wars, but I hadn't focused on the actual personalities. None of us who arrived there in 2227 anticipated meeting historical figures from before the Interdict. We quickly learned differently. I had taken advantage of the New Genoshans' open door policy and read as much of their own version of their history as possible, including any available biographic texts on all the Constants.

Phoenix, born Jean Grey and later married to Scott Summers, fascinated me from the first. I had entire lists of questions I meant to ask her.

Instead of seeing me in one of the offices of the Citadel, her secretary brought me to the Residence and a comfortable room that opened out into one of the many gardens that are prevalent in New Genosha. We were left alone.

Holo, video and still media do not do Jean Grey-Summers justice. The force of her personality, the knowledge in her eyes, and the aura of power that surrounds her strike you silent in person. Despite her quiet manner and obvious effort to make me comfortable, I found her intimidating at first. Though she had dressed casually and invited me to use her first name, I was always conscious of her Phoenix persona and
Yet, as the interview continued, I began to see her as an individual, a woman, and a fascinating one.'

New Genosha: First Encounters Alistair Kelly. (Brot, Levi & Vane: Singapore 2230)

"I was bitter," Jean said. She smiled at the reporter. "Not surprising. I was lucky though, I had my husband and my daughter and many friends who did survive. There was work to do, to make New Genosha a place fit to raise our children. That didn't leave me time to stew over the past."

"Your husband was Scott Summers," Kelly said. "Cyclops."

Jean nodded, pleased. She didn't want Scott forgotten. She considered scanning the reporter's mind and decided to be good. It had become all too easy to look in other people's heads over the years.

"I saw a statue of him in one of the plazas."

Her smile widened. She knew that statue. She'd approved it. "It's not bad, though I wish the artist had shown him without the visor."

"But he was forced to wear it all his life, wasn't he?"

"That or a suppression collar which simply wasn't acceptable."

Jean gestured toward a side table and a framed picture there. It floated over to her and she handed it to Kelly. He'd been in Genosha long enough his eyes hadn't bugged out at a bit of TK, but she noticed the pulse in his neck speed up. It amused her. He looked down at the flatpic of Scott and her taken a year before the war. Scott wore special sunglasses rather than his visor, but they still obscured his eyes. They were laughing at the camera. If she remembered right, Henry had taken that picture.

Kelly's gaze strayed to her hand and the wedding ring still on her finger.

Jean held it her hand up. The worn gold band gleamed softly.

"I loved him through everything. I still love him."

"That sort of devotion seems almost painful," Kelly said.

Maybe Kelly had a little more depth than most reporters.

"It could be, if I were alone."

"Do you mean the Triune or just… ?"

"The bond between the three of us kept me sane after Scott died, but I meant my friends as well.
Telepaths rarely feel alone."

"But you still miss him."

"Always."

She took the photo back and traced a fingertip over Scott's pictured face. "I don't know if he'd like what we've made here," Jean said. "Parts of it, that he had a hand in, but not the segregation or the Pit fighting."

"You were both part of the X-Men."

"Yes."

"I don't imagine you thought of yourselves as terrorists." Kelly softened his words with a smile.

Jean laughed. "No. We certainly didn't. We thought we stood for the Dream."

"The Dream?"

"Co-existence. No more prejudice, no more hiding or fighting. I think we had it confused with world peace and happily ever after. Turns out mutants just love to fight."

Kelly grinned at her. "Doesn't sound like such a bad idea."

"No, but it didn't account for human nature."

"Or mutant."

Jean gave him a dirty look. "They're the same."

"That was part of Xavier's argument, wasn't it? That mutants were human, that mutant powers were no different than skin color, just a little something extra."

"Simply put," she said.

"Do you still feel the same way?"

"You've been here several weeks, Mr. Kelly, do you really see us as that different?"

He sat back in his seat and cocked his head. "You know, my first impulse is to say no. Even with all the big, showy differences and powers, the people I've met seem just like people I'd meet other places. But that's just the surface. I think there are some real, deep differences in the way you think and maybe they come from being mutants."

"Hardwired," Jean agreed.

"Maybe. None of you are willing to live without using your powers. It's just unthinkable for you."

"Could you open your eyes and not see? Maybe go through life under a blindfold knowing you could see if you just took it off?"
"No, I don't imagine I could."

"That question may be why humans and mutants couldn't survive each other before, despite our best intentions." The memory of Graydon Creed and his hate rose to the surface. "Though it seemed we all had the worst intentions by the end."

"The Scourge. Tell me about that. You were part of it, weren't you?"

"I did say I was bitter, didn't I? By that time, we all were. We wanted it to end and didn't much care what we did to manage that. We--"

"When you say 'we' you mean yourself, Magneto and Gambit?"

"Yes." Jean hesitated. "We had been betrayed from within. The man who taught us all our ideals, of ethical use of powers, had broken faith. In retrospect, I'm amazed we were as restrained as we were."

Kelly choked. He blurted, "Restrained?"

Jean eyed him then said baldly, "Restrained. Between the three of us we could have wiped all life off this planet."

"That—that seems unbelievable. That any individuals could hold so much power."

"Why? The heads of government, the men with the codes and the keys to nuclear arsenals and biotoxins have held the same power for decades. Power is power. Technology may provide an insulating layer, but ultimately it is about choice."

"Maybe. I don't know."

"In the end, we struck only at those who would have continued the conflict," Jean said. "Even so, I think we frightened ourselves as much as the rest of the world."

"You crippled a continent."

She smiled.

"The man who betrayed you… who was that?"

She considered evading the question. But what was there left to protect? Memories. Kelly couldn't touch those.

She could have forgiven the Professor for most of what he'd done, but not for the pain Scott had felt or the torture Remy had endured—things Charles hadn't even deliberately caused. Ironic. She'd read his very real regret in his mind at the end. She'd read every dirty secret and unconscious wish he'd ever had, everything he'd hidden from them all, even the things he'd hidden from himself. Her teacher had been a man, flawed and fallible as any other. Only that realization had kept her from killing him.

"Charles Xavier."

"Xavier?" Kelly sounded surprised.
"That didn't make it into the text books, hunh?"

"No."

She decided she wouldn't mention the long history of small mental adjustments he'd made to the X-Men that they'd discovered only afterward. The political betrayal would be explanation enough, something Kelly could publish that wouldn't denigrate the sorrow and disillusionment they'd all endured.

"He was behind a coup meant to depose Magneto here in New Genosha."

"That's amazing."

"It was an… amazing time," Jean agreed. She floated the photo of her and Scott back to the side table where she kept it.

Kelly's gaze followed it and fastened on the other photographs there.

"May I?"

Jean nodded.

He rose and went to the table to exam the other photographs. None of them included Charles Xavier. There was one of Rachel as a young girl and a second of her with her family. A third showed a gathering of the X-Men, snapped during one of the happy times. Not one of the posed pictures of the teams in uniform, either. It showed nine of them draped around the rec room at the mansion. Such a long time ago and so much had changed, so many of them were gone.

"These are amazing. And you knew these people."

"I still do. Several them are alive," Jean said dryly.

"Yeah. That's hard for someone like me to get used to."

A cool smile curled Jean's lips up.

Kelly asked a few more questions about the X-Men, then zeroed in on another issue, one Jean could have done without exploring.

"What about the clone armies New Genosha used toward the end of the Gene Wars?"

That was a touchy subject even now. None of them had liked what they'd done with Sinister's cloning process. It was fundamentally wrong to create life to spend it on war. They had created clone soldiers as cannon fodder and used them like objects. New Genosha had been faced with overwhelming numbers. They'd needed the clones, so they'd used them and worried over the morals of it later.

"All cloning stopped after the Interdict," she told him.

"What happened to them?"

"They had the same citizenship rights as everyone else."
It hadn't cost them anything to throw that bone to the surviving clones. There weren't that many of them. Their help had been immeasurable during the rebuilding process. They had been the last generation of clones too. The technology and factories were mothballed after the Barrier went up. The last clones lived out their limited lives in apparent satisfaction.

They hadn't been designed to live out normal lives. Genetic degradation showed up after seven years and increased from that point. Few of the clones lived past thirty.

"You have a military now that doesn't include clones?"

"Yes."

"Wow. Most of the rest of the world would love to be able to field armies without drafting or recruiting any citizens."

"They can. It's called hiring mercenaries. Then you just need to convince them not to turn on you after they win," Jean said.

Kelly huffed out a laugh. "I guess. Why get rid of the clones?"

"We chose not to become slavers."

Kelly goggled at her.

"We still have the cloning technology, you know," she said. "We could create more clone armies. Sentient individuals brought to life just to fight and die, with no right or even will enough to object. After the Gene Wars, we had to face what that meant. We had to decide what New Genosha stood for and that wasn't anything we wanted to do again. But you can't stuff the knowledge back into Pandora's box. We still could. The temptation will always be with us."

"Temptation?"

Jean nodded at the pictures of her dead friends.

"We could have cloned them. Our friends, the ones we loved... we could have made them live over and over."

Kelly glanced through the rest of pictures curiously before asking, "Why didn't you?"

"Where do you stop?"

"What?"

Jean brushed her hand over the pictures.

"Scott knew it was possible. Toward the end of his life he made it very clear to me and everyone else that he did not want to be cloned. I had to honor that."

"Still."

"Still." Jean looked up. "I might have done it anyway."
"But?"

"Where do you stop? My husband asked me that. With my friends? Their friends? Who gets to live again? How many times? Who decides?"

"But you did decide. That had to be hard."

"Yes."

"Hard for your husband too."

"Not for Scott. He saw things very clearly."

They'd all debated it as the end approached. Jean had never liked the thought of clones until she was faced with losing Scott to something as simple and inevitable as old age. Then she'd started grasping at straws. They'd clone Scott and download his memory template into the clone. She wouldn't lose him.

Not just Scott either, they could clone Beast and Storm and Pete. Everyone they loved and couldn't do without. Even some of the dead could be brought back. Everyone who had a memory template done for the Lethe Procedure.

She'd started making plans.

Vertigo had stopped her.

She'd strolled in one day and told Jean she should make a list. Because if you were going to clone someone against their will, you might as well change that will and while you were at it, get rid of the annoying things about them. That mole that had to be burned off or the way they snored when they slept on their back could go. Might as well get rid of the tonsils and appendix up front too. No use replicating that scar from a childhood tumble or that nasty allergy to strawberries, either. Make a few improvements. Fix Scott's brain so he didn't need a visor anymore. Of course, he might not be happy with them for cloning him, but that could be fixed in the next iteration. Sinister had improved all the Marauders, made them better, smarter, more obedient. Jean could have the perfect Scott.

And if at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

Jean had held onto the idea though until Scott died. When the psychic link between them snapped, she'd understood. She wouldn't have that with a clone. She might build a new link with the clone, but it would be a new thing with a different individual. That had been what Vertigo wanted her to understand.

"If you clone Scott, that's what you'll have, Jean. A clone of Scott. Not Scott."

Afterward, she'd been in the forefront of outlawing the cloning of individuals after death.

"So, no clones?" Kelly asked.

Jean shuddered, remembering how tempted she had been.

"No clones."
"Forgive me if this is too personal, but have you been involved with anyone since your husband died?"

"You're right, that is too personal."

Too personal and too painful. She'd learned her lesson when Scott died. No one who would age and die on her would ever be allowed inside her heart again. Losing them hurt too much. She had Erik and Remy to keep her company in her mind, along with the other Constants, and they would be enough. She did love them, though not as she had loved Scott.

She had been lucky, she thought. Lucky enough to love and be loved, something that death and time couldn't take away from her. Each day, she reminded herself. That and did the best she could, just the way Scott always had.

"Sorry."

Jean touched her wedding ring.

"It's still Scott. It always will be."
Screwed, Blued and Tattooed

Chapter Summary

Jubilee, rescued, figures out something is badly wrong but not what.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning in the chapter end note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

AD 2014, July 12
Mont Saint Francis
Personal Quarters

Rachel Ororo Summers had a soft, wispy cap of red hair, chubby fingers and green eyes.

Jubilee was almost afraid to pick the baby up, afraid her horribly gaunt fingers would sink into Rachel's tender flesh and hurt her. Before she could protest, Jean had settled the baby into Jubilee's arms and stepped back.

Jubilee brushed her fingers over Rachel's hair. The silky strands caught at her rough, callused skin. She hefted Rachel higher in her arms, appreciating the healthy weight of her. The happy snuffy sound she made. Her very existence. There hadn't been any babies at the camp.

She still got sick when she wondered what happened to the babies.

"Hey, there, Rae," she whispered, brushing her lips against the top of the baby's head. She could smell baby shampoo, powder, and that sweet milky baby scent that went straight to her heart. "I think we got the same hair style going."

She heard Jean choke and looked up. Jean had her hands over her mouth.

"She's gorgeous," she said. She managed a watery smile. "The half-bald look really works for her, you know?"

"Oh, Jubilee," Jean exclaimed. Tears were slipping from her green eyes. "Were we insane to have her?"

Jubilee shook her head. "No, no, no, she's perfect," she said fiercely. "She's what makes it all worth it."

Her arms were starting the tremble.
"I think—I think you better take her back, though," she added.

Suddenly, Rachel's weight became feather light. She realized Jean was using her telekinesis to support the baby.

"Better?"

"Better," she agreed, but walked on shaking legs over to the couch and sank down.

Jean sat beside her, head bent, hands twisted together on her lap. "I'm so sorry we couldn't come for you before," she said softly.

Jubilee rubbed the baby's back.

"I can't say it's all right, because... well, I'm not," she replied just as quietly. "But what happened to me, the camp, that sure as hell isn't your fault."

"Do you—can you talk about it?"

Rachel blew a spit bubble that soaked into Jubilee's top. She didn't care. She didn't see the comfortably decorated rooms Scott and Jean had made their own, despite the weird mixture of medieval stone architecture and advanced technology that characterized the Mont St. Francis Monastery HQ.

"The wind never stopped blowing, you know?" Jubilee shivered.

Jean telekinetically floated a blue and green afghan from the bedroom and settled it around Jubilee's thin shoulders. She pulled it closer with one hand.

"Every day I was there. At night... It sounded like someone screaming." Jubilee shrugged. "Sometimes it was. When some of the guards came in." She turned her head and stared into Jean's eyes. "I've never quite understood that. If mutants aren't human, then wouldn't it be like fucking a dog?"

Jean blanched. Her lips firmed though and she sat up straighter. "I don't think they pick their guards for the sort of philosophical bent it would take to figure it out. Most of them aren't good enough for a dog. Even if they are sons of bitches."

A rough crack of laughter escaped Jubilee. Rachel squirmed sleepily against her shoulder. She swallowed the faint bubble of hysteria, not wanting to disturb her.

"Did they - ?"

Jubilee stared past her again.

"Oh, yeah. Some of them did anyone that looked vaguely normal."

She reached up and ran her hand over the thin blush of black hair returning to her shaven skull.

"First night, after I'd been tattooed and doused with that foul blue sterilizer they used to spay us there were four of them. I was still in good enough shape to fight them back then and I did. But it still happened."
It hurt. Not just physically. It hurt inside because she couldn't stop them and she couldn't stop fighting them and they hurt her worse because of it. No one came to save her and she knew why. They were dead or they didn't know she wasn't.

Then after a while, she understood that even though she still had a heartbeat, she was dead. Everyone in the camps was dead. Half of them had La Belle, but the disease wouldn't have time to finish them.

Logan had taught her to fight long ago. She knew how to use her gymnast's body like another weapon, even without her plasma bursts. Back when she'd first come to the X-Men those paffs had been nothing more than multicolored bursts of light. He'd taught her and she'd learned because she idolized him. She'd just been twelve then, but Logan had known that wasn't enough to save her from the things that could happen. The things that had happened, anyway. Unfortunately, knowing how to fight hadn't been enough either.

Not his fault, but she'd seen the look in his eyes when he'd spotted her among the prisoners the MRF was evacuating out of the Gyrich Facility a week ago. He blamed himself. She hadn't seen him since. Of course, he had responsibilities as an MRF commander. Things were heating up along the Canadian border again, she'd heard while she was in the med lab. But she knew why he hadn't come.

She waited for Jean to say she was sorry or cry or tell her it would be all right. Jean didn't. Jubilee nodded. Jean was a harder woman than she had been. Smart too. She realized the first didn't two didn't help and the last was a lie. It wasn't even a new story. With the number of refugees and prisoners that came out of liberated camps, Jean had seen and heard it all before.

"I kept fighting for about a week, not that it did any good, and I was black and blue all over. I wasn't too pretty by then. That's when it stopped." She didn't need to explain that there had been other rapes later or that not all of them had been by the guards. By then she'd learned not to fight or care. "One of the guys they had in there had all his teeth knocked out for biting down."

She paused.

She'd never known the man's name, but she'd recognized his body. She'd been on burial detail, scratching holes in the frozen Wyoming earth every day. He'd been handsome as a movie star once. Not when they buried him, of course. She'd only recognized his eyes because they were the same startling blue as her own.

They'd rolled the body into the hole with the rest and it landed face up. The eyes were open wide, staring up at the gray overcast sky. She'd wanted to jump down and close them, but knew if she had she wouldn't have had the strength to climb out of the grave.

She pushed the memory away. Another one pushed in to replace it, almost as bad.

"Do you know what happened to Remy?" she asked.

She didn't blame him for her capture. He'd wanted her to go sooner. She'd been the one who thought she was invincible. She'd turned back when she heard the fighting behind her.

She'd seen the soldiers snap an inhibitor collar on him then one of the larger Sentinels picked him up and blasted off. She stayed down. God, she'd stayed down, and prayed the flatscans and Sentinels
would miss her.

Three days later, she'd been picked up by a Tester sweep, but by then she'd shed her MRF uniform and scrounged some civilian clothes. The false ID Gambit had insisted she carry let her get away with pretending to be just another mutant running for the border. They'd sent her to the Gyrich Facility instead of wherever they'd have taken her if they'd known she was an X-Man or part of the MRF.

"Remy?"

Jean looked confused then vaguely horrified. But as Jubilee watched, her face smoothed over and she smiled at Rachel. It was as though she had forgotten Jubilee had said anything.

Jubilee frowned. "Jean. Hey, Jean!"

Jean blinked and looked her.

"What is it, Jubilee?"

"What happened to Remy?"

That same look of confusion crossed Jean's face and Jubilee began to feel sick and alarmed.

"Remy?"

"You know, Gambit? Gorgeous guy, red eyes, stupid accent?" Jubilee heard her voice begin to rise. "Remy LeBeau? Fuck. Led the Marauders for Sinister and got blamed for the whole damned Mutant Massacre!? What the hell is it with him and the X-Men? I'm not stupid. I'm not going to break. I saw him get captured. You can tell me if he's dead."

Rachel woke up with a wail, a real screech that went through Jubilee's ear and right into her skull. Christ, the kid was a psi and already active. Desperately, she bounced the baby and sent soothing thoughts at her while crooning, "Hey, hey, it's fine, it's okay, it's cool, kid. You're just peachy, you can stop screaming blue murder, okay? Yeah, there, see, life is good when you got everyone around you twisted round your finger, hunh?"

Jean reached over and took Rachel. "I'd better take her."

She left the room and Jubilee pulled the afghan closer over her shoulders, one hand fisting the edges closed over her breastbone. What the hell was that? Jean had acted like she didn't know who the hell Jubilee was talking about.

Rachel's cries petered out and she could hear Jean humming to her. A few minutes later she returned and sat down again.

"I put her down for her nap."

"Yeah, sorry, if I got her upset."

"No, she was wet. She starts up immediately when she needs a new diaper."

"Okay."
Jean pushed a lock of red hair behind her ear. She looked uncomfortable.

"Jubilee, did you ask me something? I can't quite –"

"I asked what happened to Gambit, if anyone got him out."

Jean's eyebrows drew together. "I should know this."

"Yeah."

"He died, didn't he?" She blinked, frowning harder, and unconsciously touched a finger to her temple. "The Professor scanned for him. Storm was insistent that we try to find him… I'm sure the Professor would have known if he was alive. How strange. But that was just before they bombed Snow Valley. We were evacuating… so much information was lost. We lost Kurt." She shook her head. "I can't believe I haven't thought of Remy in so long. We never even had a memorial."

"He wasn't dead when they collared him," Jubilee said. She glared at Jean stonily. "He could be in some place even worse than I was and you don't even know. You don't care –"

"We care! Jubilee, there's only so much we can do, only so many of us," Jean protested. Tears slid down her cheeks. "You think we've had it easy?"

"No! I think something's wrong with you! You didn't even know who I was talking about!"

Jean sat back and stared at her.

"You're the fucking telepath, Jean. Take a look in your head," Jubilee told her.

She pushed the afghan off and got up.

"Jubilee."

"I'm going back to my quarters."

"Don't."

"I'm going to call Kitty and see if she can't help find out what happened to him. Because he was a friend and I don't forget about my friends."

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Reference to Rape.
AD 2227, March 1
New Genosha
Prenova Province
Aquila Army Base

Sam looked at the papers that had been messengered to him. There it was, all summed up in legalese, the end of a couple hundred years of commitment. Their life together rendered down into a stack of printed pages sitting on the blotter of his desk.

The note that came with them was short.

Sign the fucking papers, Sam.

No signature, but he recognized Cecelia's cramped chicken scratch.

"Nice, Cece," he muttered.

He checked the clock. He had an officer review scheduled for two o'clock. Not that he needed that long. He'd already read through the settlement once.

This was just... a moment of silence.

He set the note aside and nudged over a page.

Did she think he was going to start fight at the late date? He hadn't protested when she filed. Neither of them had fooled themselves their relationship was starstruck destiny. More like safety in numbers or misery loves company. He supposed she had grown as tired of it as he had. The separation only made official what had ended a long time back.

He scanned the page again. It was all straight forward. Cece wanted to split everything fifty-fifty. Fine with him. There really wasn't anything left between them to fight over, certainly not mere things. They shared the apartment in Hammer Bay, but didn't spend any time there.

As far as he was concerned, Cecelia could have it. He'd just change his mailing address to the BOQ at Aquila Base and call it done.

So.

No home. No kids. Not even a dog, since neither of them had the time for a pet.
He picked up the pen and scrawled his name at the bottom of the page.

No marriage.

Cecelia always paused outside pediatrics. She did the same thing at the doors into the maternity ward. No one ever so much as noticed, the pause existing more in Cecelia's mind than in her stride.

No one was privy to what she thought each time she passed those doors or a school or a playground. Why should they be? The only ones who might understand were the other Constants and while she had a temper and a reputation, she'd never enjoyed hurting other people. If they could understand, if they did feel the same regrets and emptiness, well then posing the question would be as painful for them as for her.

Would she take it back if she could? What would it gain her if she did?

If Drake had never showed up and she'd gone on and finished her residency without ever admiting she was a mutant, then she might have been one of the ones sent to a camp.

If she hadn't contracted La Belle during the desperate years of the war she would have gone on with her life much the same as she had anyway. Though she doubted she would have married Sam. That had been a reaction.

If she hadn't married Sam she might have married someone else.

If she could have had children… Well, there, that was what hit her outside pediatrics and maternity every time. Ironically, she hadn't wanted children or a family. Sometimes she wondered if having them would have helped her marriage, but she doubted it. It was just another in a long line of what ifs?

The whole thing only served as a reminder of what she couldn't be any longer. When she thought about it she felt a certain sympathy for Wanda Maximoff. Just by living, they'd become outsiders.

She used to rub her thumb over her wedding ring when the thought ran through her head. She took it off eventually. She couldn't see any point to wearing it. The marriage it stood for didn't mean much either after a while.

Back when they still cared enough to fight, Sam tried to convince her love could be forever. It devolved into a screaming match eventually but before that he threw Scott and Jean, Kitty and Pete, and every other long term couple he could think of in her face.

But Scott and Pete were dead. Cecelia had to wonder if their fairytale romances would have survived all this time or if they would have crumbled away like her relationship with Sam had. Maybe all the star-crossed lovers would have grown tired of each other. Bobby and Remy hadn't made it. Maybe love wore away.

Maybe not.

She didn't know.

It just wasn't bearable to be around Sam any more. He spent all his time at the military reservations
anyway, virtually lived on base, so it wasn't a problem. After a while it just seemed like they could drift on that way forever.

Breaching the Interdict had been the jolt that woke her up.

It had been time to call it quits.

But seeing the returned envelope waiting on her desk, knowing from the swift return that Sam had signed the papers, that made her pause inside, the way she did at the maternity ward and outside pediatrics. Since she was alone in her office, she didn't have to hide the hitch in her breath or the break in her stride that went with that little stab of regret for things that wouldn't be.

What if…

What if when Beast offered her the potential cure she'd known what it would give and what it would take away?

Well, she would have still made the same choice.

Cecelia shook her head at herself. Of course, she would have taken it. The choice hadn't been between lonely immortality without children or family or love and having those things. The choice had been assuredly dying of La Belle or maybe dying of the cure. None of them had cared about side effects or consequences then.

Still, sometimes she thought what if… she could have had it all… and if she had, would she still be dissatisfied?

It didn't pay to ask what if.
The Devil keeps his word and Sinister wants his favorite back. An alliance is forged.

Fluorescent light glowed through the viscous green pseudo-amniotic fluid that filled the clone tank at the center of the otherwise unlit lab. Oxygen bubbles slid upward through the thick liquid. A pale drowned figure floated within it, suspended by IV and monitor leads. Long hair drifted in dark arabesques, tangled in the lines, obscuring the clone's features. Telltale amber lights next to a control pad indicated its status.

Sinister stood in front of the tank and considered its contents. The monitors set before the tank told the story. He doubled checked the results.

Integrating the memory/personality template had failed.

The clone showed no brain activity beyond autonomous functions. Even those were regulated by the life support provided by the tank.

The taptaptap of keys almost echoed in the quiet of the darkened lab.

Discontinue life support.

The monitors flatlined and the oxygen pumps stopped. The last bubbles gradually reached the top and dissolved. The status lights blinked red then out. The clone never opened its eyes.

Sinister typed another command, then watched with folded arms as the pumps gurgled and emptied the tank. The clone sank to the bottom in a tangle of limbs and leads. He opened the tank, disconnected the monitors and feeds and lifted the body out.

It was already cool to the touch. One limp arm slipped from Sinister's grasp on the still wet, dead weight. Green fluid dripped onto the floor from long fingertips and poured from the hair that had never been cut since the clone's inception. He set it on an empty gurney.

An autopsy would be necessary. Even a failed experiment might provide some answers. Sinister did not expect them however. The flaw did not originate in the flesh.

This clone had been his third attempt and his third failure. Frustration ate at him. He wanted his thief back.

He could grow the body, even imbue it with further abilities than the original, download memories
and skillsets, but each time he tried to integrate the personality matrix, it overloaded and created a terminal failure. He suspected LeBeau's brain pattern had been interfered with before the last template had been recorded.

There was nothing left but to retrieve the original. His cloning process had worked faultlessly for years with the other Marauders once he'd compensated for replication drift. It was necessary to discover why LeBeau's clones failed. He'd triple checked the gene samples for contamination or sabotage. It could only be a flawed personality matrix that introduced a fatal error on integration.

Sinister paused and frowned.

A curiosity.

Why had the X-Men themselves not retrieved LeBeau? Could they or Xavier himself be responsible for the interference? He'd never imagined LeBeau would let any of them inside his shields.

He contemplated the clone. The features were LeBeau's, but even unconscious he'd been animated, dreaming, breathing, never absolutely still. The shell was unmarked and empty, an effigy of a man defined by his damage.

Could they not know LeBeau had been captured? He had considered them better than that. It seemed he would have to offer some sort of incentive.

Absently, he wiped the wet hair away from the failed clone's face.

If they had left LeBeau to suffer in the Mojave… How much more damage would have been inflicted by now?

He didn't not like being thwarted. LeBeau was his; he would have the man back. There would be a way.

Sinister had no doubt.

When he'd finished dissected the dead clone, Sinister had a plan.

It began with speaking to Scott Summers.

"He's dead."

"My scans have located his bio-signature in the Mojave."

Scott scowled at the video monitor image of Sinister. "Then why haven't our telepaths been able to scan him? The Professor--"

"Lethe." Sinister bared his sharpened teeth. "Your Professor's last resort."

"Intelligence - "

"You might look to your own intercept records from shortly after the Denver fiasco, Scott, you'd be surprised at what's there. That is, if you don't wish to take my word for it."
"Oh, we'll look into it," Scott replied. "I don't trust you."

"Such a shame. I've always had your best interests at heart."

The old Brotherhood base they were operating out of had no heat without the power generators. They'd dragged a mattress into an otherwise barren room for some privacy. The only light came from a battery lantern sitting on the floor next to the mattress. The room felt cold, thick with shadows in the corners.

Vee's pale green and white hair spread across the rough sheet and spilled over the edge of the mattress onto the floor. Janos' lavender locks tangled with it. She curled closer. The sweat drying on their bodies had started to turn chill.

"Do you think we'll make it?" she asked in the quiet.

"I don't know."

She stroked her small hand over his shoulder. "Essex will clone us if we don't, right?"

"Right."

"Nothing to be afraid of"

Janos caught her hand in his and held it. "Not while we have each other."

"Because he hasn't cloned Sung or Mike. Or even Creed."

Janos snagged the top sheet and a blanket and pulled it up over them. Vee rolled on top of him and tucked her face into where his neck met his shoulder. Her warm breath moved over his skin when she spoke again.

"Creed's clones fail."

"Creed's healing factor messes them all up, remember?"

Vee nodded.

Janos played with her hair. She liked him like this. No one else ever saw the quiet, thoughtful side of Janos Quested. He hadn't always had one. A murky memory of how they'd been when Remy recruited them told her how different they'd become.

"I wish Remy were here."

Janos tightened his arms around her.

"Essex will make them get him back," he promised.

They arrived at Sinister's base in time to see a failed clone sliced open on the table. Sinister had
interrogated them while taking samples from all its organs. He'd wanted to know why the X-Men had done nothing to rescue the real Remy. They'd had no answers.

Sinister hadn't said what went wrong with the clone.

It bothered Vee. She could guess that it disturbed Janos too. They were both products of Sinister's cloning tanks. Something could go wrong with them too.

"I guess."

The first moments after waking in a cloning tank were the worst. Lungs labored to take a breath and expel the last of the foul green goop the body had developed in. Sometimes a monitor lead shorted out, sparking electricity through skin and muscle. Efficient, oblivious techs manipulated weak, uncoordinated limbs while disconnecting her from the IVs. Returned to another life, naked and shivering under the cold lights of the lab, Vertigo knew but never remembered that she must have died again. She'd grown used to it, in the way of things, and it was better than the alternative, but the horror never quite left.

Horrible or not, she could imagine worse.

The thought of the other things they'd glimpsed in the tanks lingered too. Sometimes it was a body with a familiar face, while others held monster things grown wrong. Vee had seen her own clone once, waiting in suspension to replace her.

It wasn't her. She knew that that Vertigo might be close, but it would never be her, any more than she was the original Vertigo. That Vertigo was lost in the long darkness between a template recording and that first conscious memory of gasping for air as the tank drained.

Vee whispered, "I'm afraid."

"Yeah."

"What if… "

"Don't do that, Vee. Your team and Wisdom's are going to get everything Essex needs from the CDC, no problem. You'll probably beat Crow and me back from BuSec HQ," he said.

She kissed him fiercely.

"Don't get caught, Janos. Essex doesn't care about you or me the way he does Remy and the Summers. Even if he cloned us, there'd be no guarantee we'd fall in love again."

It wouldn't be us, she thought.

He rubbed his hand over the small of her back while looking at the shadows on the ceiling. Vertigo watched him through the fall of her own hair.

Sinister had failed at cloning LeBeau. Something had gone wrong. Something could always go wrong.

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on dying," Janos told her. "Not tomorrow. Not ever. Not while I've got you."
Vertigo shivered. She knew better. There were no guarantees. One of them could die. Both of them. Any night could be the last one they had together. Take your fun where you find it and don't waste time on regrets, she had decided long ago. Live until you die. There was nothing else for a Marauder.

"You've got me right now, baby," she said, sitting up astride Jano's hips. "How about you do something about that?"

Magneto shook his head.

"I regret this, but a rescue mission is not practical, Scott."

"You want to leave Gambit there?"

Scott shook his head in disbelief and disgust.

"Knowing what they do to mutants there? You can just–"

Magneto held up his hand.

"What I want - Scott, I don't want to leave Gambit there. I don't want to leave any of the prisoners held there. But I can't sanction risking more lives," he explained. "You've read the report the Marauder teams brought out of the BuSec raid. If attacked, an auto failsafe executes every prisoner in the Mojave."

"Pete has a plan put together. A covert op."

"I read the proposal. Wisdom, Katherine, Emma Frost and Robert Drake. Four alpha mutants at risk, all of them possessing current information on MRF and New Genoshan plans."

Magneto's shoulders slumped.

"The risk isn't worth the return. I'm sorry."

Sinister spoke from a shadowed corner of the conference room. "What would be?"

"What are you doing here?" Magneto demanded.

Sinister stepped forward. The ribboned cloak stirred and moved differently than it ought to have, twisting on air currents that weren't there. The red diamond on his forehead looked like blood.

"I anticipated your decision and have come to offer an… inducement," Sinister said.

"What could you offer?" Scott asked suspiciously.

"My aid in designing a cure for La Belle? I am a geneticist of some ability."

"You're already helping Hank."

Magneto looked interested and Sinister nonplused. Scott almost smiled.
"What? You think I didn't know Gambit was funneling information between you? Since nothing we could have done would have stopped you conducting your experiments, why not take advantage of your work?"

"I've underestimated you, Scott."

"People do that."

Sinister nodded.

"Then I shall offer a solution to the difficulty you discussed with Magneto earlier."

"What?"

"Casualties. The MRF needs numbers. Soldiers. There are not enough mutants willing to fight and fill your ranks." Sinister waited a beat. "I have the solution."

Scott sucked in a breath.

"Clones," Magneto stated.

"Indeed."

"We're not letting you clone our people and then use them for cannon fodder," Scott said.

"I am not suggesting that," Sinister replied, unruffled. "Exact duplicates require time and care that would not be necessary to create soldiers. It is far simpler to force grow bodies and download a simplified personality matrix and a tailored skillset. They would all be essentially the same at decanting, though divergent experience would inevitably result in differentiation eventually."

"Perfect soldiers." Scott tried to sound as scornful as he felt.

"Dangerous," Magneto said.

"A potential problem in the future is preferable to not having a future."

"I don't like it." Scott was watching Magneto and had to say it.

"How many could you provide? How long would it take?"

"From inception to decant date, nine months. To build a tank factory, six months, perhaps."

"How many clones?"

"Five thousand every three months? It would depend on the size of the factory. I would advise building more than one factory."

Twenty thousand clones every year. Scott did a swift calculation. "Two hundred thousand clones by 2017 if we built ten cloning factories."

"Enough to fight your war."
"What happens to the clones afterward?" Scott asked. He felt sick.

"The accelerated growth results in radically shortened lifespans. Use any survivors as labor until they degenerate," Sinister suggested. "Free them. Kill them. It would be your choice."

Magneto seemed to weigh Sinister's offer.

"You've killed to keep anyone from copying your cloning process before," Scott said.

"For stealing it."

"Why offer it for Gambit? Why not rescue him yourself?"

"My reasons are mine."

Magneto nodded. "Numbers." He sounded entranced. "We have always been overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of humans. If we changed that…"

Scott winced. The New Genoshan Army was a fraction of the size of the US forces. Technologically, they were better off. They had the science and could produce weaponry. There just weren't enough mutants to use it. Meanwhile, the alphas were stretched to the breaking point making up the difference. Casualties hurt them much worse than the baselines. Every mutant casualty was someone they knew.

The chance to change that, in exchange for doing something he, personally, wanted to do anyway, was seductive. He could see that Magneto meant to agree and couldn't muster an argument. If Magneto agreed, the rest of the Joint MRF and New Genoshan Army command would go along. No one would stop to consider the implications.

"Sir, you're making a deal with the devil," Scott protested but only halfheartedly.

Magneto's lips thinned in a hard expression.

"So long as this devil honors his bargains."

"Extract LeBeau and you have my fullest cooperation," Sinister promised.

Magneto nodded. "Agreed."

Sinister smiled at Scott. "I assure you, Scott, my intentions are only in the best interests of all mutants."

"Why doesn't that make me feel any better?" Scott muttered to himself as Magneto and Sinister shook hands. He shoved his hands through his hair, ruthlessly focusing on what he could do next. Let Magneto carry the weight of this ethical dilemma.

It was the lesser of evils, he told himself. Better a live jackal than a dead lion. Right. The lesser of evils was still evil. But there was good too. Magneto and Sinister could do whatever. He was going to drag a friend back from Hell.

"I'll tell Pete the mission is a go."
AD 2227, March 1
Hammer Bay
Havershaw Heights
Private Residence

She'd try pills again. The last time hadn't been a true test, Cecelia and the doctors at the hospital had pumped her stomach too quick to find out if they would have worked.

Wanda laid flat on her bed and stared at the ceiling. She spread her arms wide and dug her fingers into the red coverlet. There were birds outside, singing. That was unfair.

She hated them all.

She hated Magneto, her dear father, for everything she and Pietro had suffered as children without him to protect them and, oh yes, for making them part of the Brotherhood later. She hated Phoenix for surviving, Gambit for helping her, Lorna, mustn't forget fucking Polaris, the daughter Magneto would have wanted, Northstar and Milan, Riptide and Vertigo, Wolverine and Domino, all of them; all of them for finding some peace when she hadn't any. She hated herself for living when Pietro died. Most of all, she still hated Charles Xavier because she always wondered if what she felt really was her or some remnant of what he'd done to her mind.

Shadows moved across the ivory ceiling, the afternoon sun shining through the tree outside her bedroom. Motes of dust hung in the air. Her mouth was dry. It always felt dry, some side effect of the medications Cecelia made her take.

None of it did any good.

She couldn't remember being happy. Maybe for a short while, as part of the Avengers, when she'd been with Vision. She'd been in love. She could remember that and the loss of it. She hadn't been happy, just not unhappy, she decided.

Pills.
She could cast a hex on the meds, turn them into something lethal. Just as likely they'd turn into something harmless as sugar. Some internal limiter kept her from turning her powers on herself for harm.

Wanda pressed her head back against the mattress. She could scream. She wanted to. She gritted her teeth against the sound. Tendons stood out along her neck.

She hated being helpless.

If Xavier were here, she'd kill him.

Who was she kidding? The bastard would reach into her head with a thought and stop her. He'd stop her even thinking about killing him. That's what the damn spooks did. Headfucks. Rage bubbled through her. That's what he'd done to her when he convinced her to come to New Genosha. He'd played with her head.

She hadn't understood until later, when the X-Men made Xavier leave.

They should have killed him. The Avengers wouldn't have agreed, but what did they know? They'd all given up, gone away, died. They were the dust hanging in the air now. She thought that if Xavier hadn't left, she could have stayed away from him and thought of way to get him.

A bomb like the one they'd used to try and get rid of her father. Xavier couldn't read the mind of a bomb.

She still remembered Mystique teaching her how to make one.

Of course, Xavier had to be dead by now anyway. It didn't change how she felt.

If she couldn't kill him, she'd settle for killing herself. Why did everyone have to interfere? She'd do it. They couldn't keep stopping her.

She'd take a kitchen knife and -

That thing the telepaths had done to her head triggered and she went limp. The dull litany ran through her thoughts that she couldn't kill herself.

She mustn't kill anyone. Killing was wrong. She didn't want to kill anyone. She wasn't depressed. She didn't want to hurt anyone. She wasn't unhappy. She wouldn't use her powers. She would take her medication. She would talk to Cecelia.

It left her wrung out and somehow dulled, emptied of any real emotion.

It wasn't worth it, living, feeling like this. She always knew after the telepathic command had triggered. She knew it had reset her thoughts. She could think around it. It didn't help her; it was a damn leash. She'd tried again and it had stopped her cold. She knew what it was. She would find a way around it someday.

For fucking ever.

She didn't know why she'd opposed her father about lowering the Interdict, except that she always had to take the opposite side from him. If the Interdict came down, then maybe she could get away
from Genosha, get away from the prying eyes and minds and finally find a way to end it.

If the pills didn't work, then she would find someone to do it. Someone who wasn't in awe of the Constants and terrified of crossing Magneto by killing his daughter.

If that caused a war, so much the better.

She hated them all.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Suicidal Thoughts, Attempted Suicide, Mind Control.
The Mojave

Chapter Summary

They rescued someone, but Gambit will never be the same.

AD 2014, October 7
United States
California
The Mojave Desert

Bobby thought they had the wrong man at first. He opened his mouth to object, to say they'd got the wrong prisoner. Emma stepped on his foot deliberately and he remembered he was undercover. He snapped his mouth shut and assumed as cold and vicious an expression as he could. It wasn't hard.

They didn't have to worry about the prisoner recognizing and betraying them. He didn't know them.

They really didn't have to worry about the prisoner at all, unless it was that he would collapse and die before the transfer was complete. Bobby didn't let himself share a glance with the others. He had to concentrate on keeping himself controlled. Looking at the man the guards in powered body-armor had dragged into the room left him ready to kill them. He wanted to kill everyone who had a part in this hellpit and raze it to the ground.

Instead, he had to stand at ease, looking faintly bored with it all. Pete was scowling, but scowling looked natural on him. Kitty kept her eyes on the floor and followed behind Emma.

Emma had on a black wig and a bad suit dress, the sort of thing a federal employee wore because it was the best they could afford. When Bobby had seen the disguise first, he thought how amused the man they were about to rescue would be by the White Queen's transformation.

Emma sneered at the Warden of the Mojave Mutant Internment Center. The forged papers Pete had obtained through the old Unified Guild contacts, along with a phone call to a mind-controlled New Pentagon general, had them well on their way to walking out of the most infamous mutant prison on the planet with the man they'd come to rescue.

Bobby just wondered if there was anything left of him to rescue.

Bobby was an easy-going man. He'd never been bitter over how his life had turned out, though he'd realized it would have been very different if he hadn't been a mutant. He'd never been inclined to stretch his powers or use them against anyone unless forced to. He seldom got deeply angry.

He'd never really hated before.

But the figure before him made him hate.

Emma ignored the guards, despite how they towered over her, and walked up to the prisoner
standing on shaky legs between them.

"Careful, Ms. Keyes," one of the guards said.

Emma's mouth tightened.

"This is Prisoner MA92193-X?" she said scornfully.

One of the guards grabbed the prisoner's jaw and jerked his drooping head up. The flash tattoo with the number and a binary code overlaid his eye and cheekbone in harsh black lines. It had been a handsome face, before. Starvation and illness drew the gray-toned, pale skin tight over the prisoner's bones. Blank, dulled red-on-black eyes, the brand of mutancy more visible and more damning than the tattoo, looked at nothing.

Bobby stared because he could not look away, but he kept his outrage and pain hidden. They'd shaved MA92193-X’s head and dressed him in a disposable paper jumpsuit the color of old newspapers.

"Very well," Emma said. "My assistant has the transfer papers."

Kitty opened a metal-sided briefcase and withdrew the counterfeit documents. She handed copies to the warden, the security director, and one of the guards.

"Please sign on the appropriate lines," Kitty said primly. She had dressed in a dull brown, boxy pantsuit, horn-rimmed glasses, and harsh, uncomplimentary make-up. She'd even dyed her hair an unflattering reddish-orange and drawn it back in a merciless bun. She looked like a normal human, one reason she'd been tapped for this mission and, just as importantly, she looked nothing like mutant terrorist and guerrilla fighter Shadowcat.

Emma gestured to Bobby and Pete. "Mr. Eiss and Mr. Wiseman will handle him."

They were all in disguise, disguises that didn't rely on mutant powers or special technology to function. Pete had done the set-up work, relying on his old espionage skills. They had to do this job right under the eyes of the humans, relying on no more abilities than a human would have. The Mojave was the ultimate mutant prison. Suppressor fields were built into its very walls. If their covers were blown, they would never be able to fight their way out.

MA92193-X had an inhibitor collar locked viciously tight around his long neck even though the entire prison suppressed mutant abilities. As broken and fragile as he looked, he had fought long and hard once; the guards remembered. Besides the collar, they had manacled him hand and foot—bare foot—and gagged him and they still wore that powered armor that could break bones like matchsticks.

Bobby forced himself to move forward and clamp a hand around MA92193-X's arm, shocked by the way his fingers wrapped around what felt like no more than skin and bone. Pete took hold of the prisoner's other arm. He prayed the prisoner wouldn't fight them. He couldn't bear the thought of hurting this man even to maintain their covers.

Emma lifted her chin, wished the warden a good day and marched out. Kitty scrambled gracelessly after her - as far from the ninja-trained physical ease of Shadowcat as MA92193-X was from the Master Thief he'd once been. Pete and Bobby marched him after the women.

Before they reached the door into the helipad where they'd left their transport, they were dragging
him. They couldn't help him, not without arousing suspicions. Bobby focused on their goal. They would get out of here. One last trip through the gauntlet and they would be out of here.

He pulled a harsh breath of relief as they cleared the last door. Free of the suppression fields, he could feel his mutant abilities come back online. It was like opening his eyes after walking around with them taped shut. It took an effort not to ice up.

MA92193-X raised his head as they came out the door. He was trembling, looking at the blue sky under the harsh desert sun in complete bewilderment.

Bobby and Pete secured him in the transport. Kitty and Emma were already inside, waiting. They sat down on the bench beside him and waited silently as the VTOL lifted and then sped east.

~I've contacted the rest of our team. Milan is interrupting satellite coverage. Kitty, if you will redirect our route to Saskatchewan?~ Emma's telepathic voice spoke in all of their minds.

"Got it, Em," Kitty said.

Thank God. In a few hours, they would be past the Canadian border. A safehouse without connections to the MRF or any of the underground networks had been arranged.

MA92193-X jerked and looked wide-eyed toward Emma. She'd opened a link to him as well. He said nothing.

"Let's get these soddin' chains off the Cajun, then," Pete snarled. He twisted around and manifested one of his hot knives. The controlled plasma extension sheared through the omnium chains and released MA92193-X's restraints like they were butter.

Bobby reached up and unlocked and removed the gag. He winced at the marks it had left. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of the prisoner's mouth where the gag had split his skin.

"We're taking you to a safehouse, then we'll get you across the pond to the MRF HQ," Pete said gruffly.

MA92193-X closed his mouth with a faint wince and blinked at them. He didn't even move his hands despite being freed of the restraints.

"You're safe now, Remy," Bobby promised.

It killed him to read the absolute incomprehension in Remy's eyes. This man didn't know what safe was.

"That's your name, you know," Bobby said. "Remy LeBeau. Your codename was Gambit. That's who you were before."

"Shut it, Drake," Pete snapped.

Remy flinched.

"Hey, I'm just - "

"You're not helping him, 'cause he don't remember none of it." Pete turned steely-blue eyes on
Remy. "Look here, we know you don't remember nothing, but we knew you before you got captured and stuck in that stinking hellhole. We're going to take care of you, get you your memories back."

Remy closed his eyes. He didn't move through the rest of the flight. Bobby exchanged an angry look with Pete, but didn't say any more. They weren't helping.

Remy didn't remember them. He didn't believe them.

The place they took MA92193-X–he thought of himself as Nine–to was like nothing he'd ever experienced. Walls were painted in colors, furniture had soft cushioning and fabrics in more colors. There were openings–windows–onto the outside. The doors didn't lock automatically. He could leave the room they left him in. The room itself had a covering on the floor and a large bed with blankets and thicker, pillowy blankets instead of an extruded ceramic slab.

He could turn off the lights or turn them on. He could go into the attached bathroom, that had a shower and tub that gave warm water. He was afraid to explore further, but he wondered at the lush towels and sweet smelling soaps set out.

When he came out, he found that clothes–real clothes–had been set in a folded pile on the bed. He fingered them in disbelief. On top was a soft gray T-shirt with the name of a school on it: Xavier's Institute. Next was a dark blue, hooded fleece sweat shirt with a zip front. Underwear still in a plastic wrapper. A pair of olive-green cargo pants. Heavy gray athletic socks.

Nine was afraid to put any of it on.

Kitty stopped in the doorway and watched Gambit. She'd gone to her own room in the safehouse and washed the dye from her hair, then changed into more comfortable clothes, while Pete and Bobby took Gambit to his room to settle. Emma had gone straight to the communications room to report the success of the recovery mission and arrange the next phase.

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Gambit?" she said softly.

He froze.

"It's okay, you don't have to be afraid," she tried to reassure him. "No one will hurt you here. We're your friends. We just want to take care of you."

He was so pale and thin that really the only resemblance to the cocky, cool as ice thief and fighter was his height and his tell-tale eyes. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, but it was terribly clear that would only frighten him further. She had to remind herself that he didn't remember anything.

"I'm Kitty," she told him. "Kitty Pryde. We knew each other before your memories were taken away."
Before you triggered a brain bomb in your own head to save the secrets of the MRF, she thought. None of them had ever stopped to think what it might be like to be imprisoned and tortured for something you couldn't remember—no, to remember nothing. The memory wipe didn't just take away a few things; it was all or nothing. All that the Lethe Procedure left was autonomic functions, reflex, and basic language. No past, nothing that could be used by their enemies.

"The others you met are Bobby Drake, Pete Wisdom and Emma Frost."

He blinked at her, looking confused and apprehensive.

"It's okay, you don't have to keep it straight. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

Kitty gestured to the clothes.

"They're for you, but you don't have to wear them, okay? We just thought you might like them better than that prison jumpsuit. It won't hold up anyway."

The paper would dissolve if it got wet and tore easily. He looked at the jumpsuit in confusion, fingering one sleeve that had already begun to fray.

Kitty took a step toward him and he stumbled back, running into the bed and almost falling. She stopped, shocked again. Gambit swayed and she could see the shakes running through his gaunt frame.

It made her furious to see him so starved. The Professor's dream had come to this. She wished she'd followed Magneto from the beginning. War had been inevitable, but if they'd fought to win from the beginning, maybe it wouldn't have gone this far.

She pushed the bitterness away.

"If you're hungry, we could make you something to eat…"

Gambit had wrapped his arms around himself and was rocking from side to side. He looked overwhelmed.

"I'll bring you something later." He wasn't in any shape to make the decision to eat or not. They'd have to go so slowly, so carefully with him until his memories were restored.

She hesitated. Maybe he wouldn't understand yet, but she had to say it, if only for herself.

"It's going to be okay, I swear."

She left him because she knew her presence was distressing him.

Emma walked into the kitchen once more kitted out in her White Queen regalia—high-heeled boots, opera gloves and an ivory leather bustier and pants. Her white blonde hair was free of the ugly wig and swung past her bare shoulder blades.

She smirked at the three others in the room. Pete, from his station leaning against the counter, flipped her off, then lit a cigarette. Kitty didn't notice, as she was morosely opening and shutting the cabinets,
looking for something that would appeal to Remy. Bobby sighed.

"Uhm, do you think we should just leave him alone?" he asked.

"Feel free to play babysitter, Drake," Emma said.

Kitty pulled out a can of soup and set it on the counter by the stove. "I'm going to make him something to eat." She rummaged in another cabinet and found a pot.

"Poor git needs more'n a bowl of bloody soup to fix him up, Pryde," Pete commented. He scrubbed at his face, now sporting dark whiskers. "Black Air had some interrogators that could break a man down and make him give up anything. They didn't need telepaths, just enough time. Could be the Trues did the same thing to LeBeau."

"Essex and Logan will be here by tomorrow night," Emma said. "Essex is prepared to re-integrate Gambit's memory template as soon as he's examined him. Triage will be coming with them."

Great. Sinister, Wolverine, and that nutcase healer all in one house. He'd given Lorna her legs back, but Bobby wished Hank could have come instead. Hank was locked in a lab still desperately trying to create a cure for La Belle, though. Triage couldn't do that. Triage could rebuild a body from the DNA up, but he didn't understand viruses. From what Bobby understood, Remy wasn't strong enough to have the Lethe Procedure reversed. Fixing him up to Sinister's standards would be Triage's job.

"Can't believe it took that pasty-faced wanker to get a rescue mission green-lighted." Pete exhaled a stream of smoke, frowning. "LeBeau's one of you bloody X-ers and you lot are usually like pitbulls." He raised his eyebrows at Bobby.

Bobby shook his head.

"I've never understood it either." He rubbed his fingers over the tabletop. "God, if we'd only known…"

"There is no benefit to torturing ourselves over what's already happened," Emma declared.

"I don't understand how anyone could treat anything—even if they don't think mutants are human—the way Remy's been treated," Bobby said.

Kitty set her hands on the edge of the stove and just stood. The line of her back betrayed her tension. "They don't see it that way."

Pete reached over and rubbed her shoulder.

"The can won't open and heat itself," Emma remarked.

Bobby rolled his eyes. He decided that smart remark or not, someone did need to baby-sit Remy. He pushed his chair back and rose.

"I'm just going to check on—"

Emma waved her hand at him. "Go."
"I wasn't asking permission."

"That's all right, Drake. You have it anyway."

Bobby rolled his eyes at Pete.

He ducked his head through the doorway, looking for Remy. A jolt of alarm hit him when he didn't see anything.

"Remy?"

He stepped in the room. The sound of running water drew his attention to the attached bathroom. Two more strides and he could see a slice of the bathroom past the half open door. Remy was at the sink, stirring his hands through a stream of running water. It must have been on hot. Wisps of steam were fogging the mirror.

Remy had donned a pair of sweatpants and a dark T-shirt. Bent over the sink, his spine curved. Bobby could count every vertebra and rib through the blue fabric.

"Damn it," he said to himself.

Remy heard. He lifted his face from the steam. His eyes reflected crimson in the mirror, watching Bobby's reflection watch him, the only familiar note in his hollowed-out face.

Remy shut the water off. He shuffled back into the bedroom and stood waiting. His hands hung open and limp at his sides. He was waiting for Bobby to tell him what to do. He flinched when Bobby approached him, then squeezed his eyes shut, braced for whatever punishment he thought Bobby would administer.

Up close, undistracted by danger, Bobby examined the tattoo disfiguring Remy's features. He saw bruises on his arms and back. Marks and scars, a knob along his collarbone, twists in his beautiful fingers from breaks that were never treated. Each one he found filled Bobby with guilt.

"I am sorry," he said uselessly. "I am so sorry."

Remy sucked in a fast breath. Bobby had to remind himself Remy didn't remember anything. He wouldn't remember anyone ever apologizing before.

"Look, maybe you better lie down."

He looked like he would fall down otherwise.

Bobby waved at the bed. Remy docilely seated himself at the edge then stretched out supine. He watched Bobby. His throat worked as he swallowed.

~He won't fight, Drake.~

~Emma?~

~He won't fight. It just means more punishment. That's what he knows. All he can remember.~

Remy had his arms at his sides, his hands pressed flat against the coverlet. Bobby bit his lip. Remy's
hands, his beautiful, beautiful hands that Bobby had dreamed about, were ruined.

~God, Emma. This so fucked.~

He sat at the edge of the bed and picked up Remy's closest hand. He stroked his thumb over the back. The long fingers were limp in his grasp. How could he have pushed the memory of those hands into the back of his mind and just forgotten Remy for a year?

Still, stroking Remy's hand, he thought:

~Emma? I want shields that will keep anyone out, even the Professor.~

~You're not a telepath, Drake. You can't keep him out.~

~Then I want to know if someone is doing something in my head.~

~All right. We'll work on it. There are some holes in your shields, but you've always been sloppy.~

~Thanks, Emma.~

Her dry mental voice closed their conversation. ~I'll make you pay one way or another.~

He turned Remy's hand over and caught his breath at the knot of scar tissue along the inside of his wrist.

"Did you do this… before?" he asked in a choked mutter. He looked up. Remy was watching him, rigid and stressed as a trapped cat. "Do you remember this?"

Remy didn't answer.

Bobby brushed his fingertips over the scars. When Triage arrived, Remy's body would be healed. Sinister and Emma would restore Remy's memories. The scars would fade into the past.

A quiet knock snapped him back to the present.

Pete opened the bedroom door and let Kitty precede him into the room with a tray holding a bowl of soup and crackers.

Remy didn't move.

"It ain't that bad, even if it did come from a can," Pete said. He'd doffed his suit coat and pushed up the sleeves of his white shirt. He fumbled in his trouser pockets for his cigarettes, then just held the package.

"Remy, aren't you a little bit hungry?" Kitty coaxed.

Remy looked at the ceiling. Only his soft, fast breaths betrayed his awareness of them.

Kitty stood, holding the tray.

"Bloody hell," Pete swore. "Just set it down, Pryde."
"Remy," Bobby said. "Come on. Eat a little."

"It ain't poisoned, mate."

"Please," Kitty added.

Bobby tugged Remy upright. Remy followed him over to a chair and table near the window.

"Eat," he said.

Remy ate like an automaton, stopping when the bowl was emptied. Bobby was reminded of a clockwork toy.

Kitty and Pete shared a glance.

"Are you going to stay?" Pete asked Bobby.

"Yeah."

"We'll be in the next bedroom if you need something," Kitty said.

"Okay."

"I'll just get this out of here. " She picked up the tray with a last sad look at Remy then walked out.

Pete lingered, lighting a cigarette.

Bobby guided Remy back to the bed. He could have picked him up and carried him.

"You know, even if everything goes right tomorrow, he won't be the same," Pete said, exhaling blue smoke.

Bobby perched himself on the edge of the bed again.

"We've got him back. That's what matters."

"If getting Sinister's clones is all that matters, sure. If he's what matters… that's different."

Bobby stroked his hand over Remy's shaven skull.

"Stupid bastard," Pete growled under his breath.

"I can't believe he did it," Bobby said.

"Sinister's going to dump all his memories back into his head and Emma's going to integrate them with everything that's happened to him since," Pete said. "That's going to change him, Bobby. It's been a year. That's a lot to absorb. He won't be the same man."

Remy was going to remember everything that had done to him, that had left him like this.

"I talked to Frost," Pete went on.
"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Pete finished his cigarette.

"Just don't count on him being the same LeBeau."

Bobby nodded and looked down into Remy's wide, empty eyes.

"That's okay. It's all okay. However he is, at least he isn't back there." Not like all the others they'd left behind. Someday, Bobby promised Remy, someday we'll go back in there and get everyone out. Then we'll raze that place down to the ground and salt the earth. "We've all changed, you know."

Pete shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. Bobby ran his hand over Remy's shoulder. It would get better. Nothing was okay, but it would be better. He'd take care of Remy until he wasn't needed.

He barely noticed when Pete left the room.

____________________

Pete and Bobby grabbed Triage the instant he stepped out of Sinister's tesseract into the safehouse's living room and fast marched him to the bedroom.

"What the hell?" Wolverine remarked. He sniffed the air, trying to pick out the Cajun's scent. "I thought the extraction went clean?"

Behind him, Sinister, pale as a corpse, silver-armored form towering over Wolverine's stubby height, closed the tesseract and said, "LeBeau needs to be stabilized before we can begin the memory download." A faint tinge of disapproval tinged his British-accented, almost emotionless voice. He looked at Emma. "Allowing this to happen to one of your own was quite careless."

She sneered back at him.

"We thought he was dead. What's your excuse?"

"Zip it, Frost," Wolverine commanded.

Emma narrowed her eyes but stopped taunting Sinister.

Wolverine's mood darkened. "How bad?"

He'd had been through enough, some it wiped from his memories, other parts still and always close enough to relive in his nightmares each night, that he understood more than most. Even hate couldn't sustain a victim forever. Once he'd been Weapon X, the product of Department H's experiments and the agony had never ended. He'd sworn he would kill them all, but in the end? He'd have traded revenge for escape, even if that escape was death.

~I've been in his mind.~ Emma's cool mental voice kept the conversation private between Wolverine and herself. ~It's worse than any of us could have imagined. Without memories… his entire life was that cage and pain. If he remembers it all once his memory is restored, he may very well hate us for
what he has experienced.

Wolverine shook his head and dug out a cigar to light. "Maybe."

Sinister glanced at Emma and Wolverine. His scarlet eyes were incurious. "LeBeau is a survivor. Given an opportunity he will turn his efforts to living." It wasn't possible to tell if he had been telepathically eavesdropping or not.

"Why are you here, instead of Jean or Xavier?" Emma asked.

"I know LeBeau's mind. I taught him to control his own psi-abilities. He's always had impressive natural shields, but I know how to get around them. That should make things easier for you."

"Don't worry, Essex, I'll do my part," Emma said.

"Yes, I believe you will." Sinister's sharpened teeth glinted in a humorless smile. "Now, I believe we can begin our repairs."

Wolverine tagged behind them. He'd always figured Sinister for the one who taught Gambit his mental tricks.

Triage staggered out of the bedroom and ended up sliding down the wall to sit on his butt on the floor. He dropped his head into his hands. His abilities had been stressed beyond belief since the first time he used them to save a life. Too many dead and near dead mutants depended on him. More and more often, he couldn't save them, or if he did, he couldn't heal them beyond that. Triage could bring the recent dead back to life sometimes, but La Belle thwarted even his mutant ability, resurging within each victim he'd tried to heal. At this point, everyone knew to leave him alone after he'd done his part or he'd start complaining. Sinister and Emma swept past him without pausing. Wolverine walked over and peered into the bedroom. Bobby sat on the edge of the bed, holding onto the thin form that his nose and only his nose told him was the Cajun. Wolverine exhaled a stream of smoke and glanced over at the other two. Pete had his arms around Kitty and was patting her back awkwardly.

Bobby traced his fingers over Remy's face. Remy barely twitched at the touch. His eyes were blank.

"Triage took away the scars and tattoos," Bobby told Wolverine.

Wolverine shook his head. Jesus, Gambit looked bad. Triage had repaired the worst damage, but he couldn't restore muscle mass any more than he could replace lost limbs. Usually, the mutant healer used a patient's own reserves, but Remy had obviously had none. He could count the kid's ribs right through the over-sized T-shirt he had on and his hipbones were far too visible through the sweatpants hanging on him. If this was what Gambit looked like after being healed, Wolverine was surprised they hadn't just buried him before.

"Ya feelin' better, Gumbo?" he addressed Gambit.

Red-on-black eyes blinked at him.

"He hasn't said a word, not even a sound, since we picked him up," Bobby said. He rubbed one bony, narrow shoulder unconsciously. It probably soothed him more than Gambit.

Wolverine met Gambit's eyes directly. "Just hang on a little longer, kid. Trust us."
Another blink was his only answer.

Sinister examined him. "Deplorable."

"Let's just do this," Emma said. "Wolverine?"

Wolverine pulled an adamantium pyxis the size of a jeweler's ring box from inside his jacket. Jean had't trusted Sinister to carry it. It took his thumbprint and Emma's to unlock it and reveal the quicksilver sphere it encased.

"Don't touch it," Sinister commanded. "It's a psi-sensitive medium and you'll contaminate the template."

"Pretty small thing to hold a man's soul," Wolverine commented.

Sinister opened the case he'd carried with him since leaving Mont Saint Francis. He unfolded a silvery net that went onto Gambit's head. His fingers were deft.

"Souls, Wolverine, are intangible and untouchable even by my science. I will leave them to the concern of other men."

Contacts were positioned carefully. Gambit remained still, but Wolverine could smell the fear pouring off him. Finally, Sinister took the pyxis from Wolverine and delicately let the sphere inside drop into its receptacle. Pale golden energy ran out from it through the net.

Gambit flinched and Bobby caught hold of him.

"Calm yourself, LeBeau." Sinister folded his arms. "Proceed, Ms. Frost. His shields are disabled."

Gambit shuddered as Emma approached the bed and caught his face in her hands. The golden energy flared brighter along the threads of the net and Gambit tensed and arched, a breathless, raw sound escaping his throat.

Emma released him and stepped back, swaying on her high heels so that Wolverine caught her elbow to steady her.

Gambit had gone limp.

"That's it?" Wolverine asked.

Emma nodded.

Bobby looked worried and demanded, "Is he okay?"

Sinister began removing the delicate equipment. "Ms. Frost and I restored his memories, Drake. The state of LeBeau's mental processes is yet to be seen." He returned the net to its case. "He should return to consciousness shortly. Your question will be answered then."

Another thing about spooks that irritated a man, Wolverine thought. They'd do something so important the world turned on it but the average headblind person wouldn't even pick up that something had happened. They were only about half in the real world. The rest of them lived on the
Astral Plane, where the only rules were imposed by the strongest mind.

Emma put her hand to her temple. Uncharacteristically, she didn't shrug away Wolverine's support. "I never want to do anything like that again," she declared. "That wasn't at all like what Xavier did in the lab. He has a year's worth of memories that weren't part of the template. I'm not sure he'll be able to integrate it all."

"What's going to happen?"

"I don't know," Emma admitted.

______________________________

He blinked unnoticed tears out of his eyes and concentrated on the worried face above him. He recognized it.

Bobby.

He let his gaze stray around the room to the others gathered around the bed. He didn't recognize the room really. It was a bedroom, middle class, somewhere in North America, he judged by the furnishings and decor.

A wiry black-haired fellow in a limp black suit, loose tie, and five-o'clock shadow leaned against one wall with a brown-haired woman next to him. A sort of double vision hit him. He saw one of the guards who took him out of the Mojave. At the same time, another memory clicked into place and he saw Pete Wisdom standing next to Kitty Pryde.

He rolled his head the other way and caught sight of two more figures. The blond woman in white resolved herself into another known face.

Emma.

He could still feel the cool touch of her mind in his. His shields began snapping back into existence, higher and harder than they'd been before. Emma was a ruthless bitch, the kind of spook who would re-write someone's thoughts because it was convenient and she could.

Wolverine stood next to her, watching him with keen eyes over the stub of a smoldering cigar.

A voice in his head laughed. A voice that was not Emma's, but also familiar. A mind presence strong enough to drag him into the Astral Plane as an awareness without his own psionic abilities' cooperation.

~Welcome back, LeBeau.~

In the Astral Plane, he stood before Sinister. He manifested as a Marauder, wearing the black bodysuit and armor. Sinister's crimson diamond marked one shoulder. Sinister wore his true, inhuman face and form. His strange cloak of metallic ribbons stirred and moved of its own accord.

~Back?~ Remy narrowed his eyes at the man with the red diamond on his forehead. ~What you done to me this time, connard?~

~Look at your own memories, LeBeau.~
He opened his mind's-eye. Memory, experience, emotion, all that he had ever been, felt, done, or known flooded through him in one gestalt.

"Gambit?"

Bobby's uncertain voice snapped him into awareness again. Bobby. Iceman.

Remy jerked himself away from Bobby's hands in a panic. He scrambled back across the bed, wanting to get away from all of them. They'd left him in hell. He couldn't trust them. He couldn't trust anyone. It made him shake, Nine's terror mixing with his own panic. He didn't remember, he still didn't remember, he didn't know what happened. He'd been wiped away like the sand when the tide ran out.

The suppressor collar was still locked around his neck. He choked and flung himself off the bed, backing away from them, trying to watch them all, his legs so weak he could barely stand. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to think. If they'd come to save him, why was the collar still on him? He couldn't fight, he didn't dare fight, it was always worse if he fought, Nine had learned that. He'd learned not to scream because that just made them angrier.

"Easy, Gumbo, calm down there," Wolverine said gruffly. Just the words made Remy flinch. He was in no shape to fight Wolverine. Not now.

Remy stared at him. Did they know what had happened to him? Did Logan know how he ended up in that place? Did any of them? What if they put him there? Left him there? No. He couldn't trust them. Couldn't trust anyone. He didn't know what happened after last memory upload. He'd meant to join the Strikers dropping on Denver. They had a mission to take out the Vault. Dieu, he didn't know if they had or not. It was too much. It was all too much. His memories were drowning him and none of them were what he needed. His shoulder blades hit the wall and he slid down to the floor still watching them. He couldn't stop shaking.

He opened his mouth to say something and felt the constriction around his neck. He clawed at the collar. He wanted it off. He needed it off now. Now. He felt his fingernails tearing as he tried to tear it off. He'd never been this panicked, this desperate before. Nine hadn't known any of these people. He'd been terrified of them, but he hadn't known them. Remy recognized them and still felt the same overwhelming emotions Nine had felt and more.

"Damn it, Gambit," Wolverine snarled.
No. They had him collared. He had to stay silent. He had to watch and listen and find out what happened to him. He couldn't say anything. Talking made them angry. He wasn't supposed to talk; he'd been punished for it until he learned. Deiu, what if they wiped him again? What if they sent him back to that place? They wouldn't let him die. He couldn't... he couldn't... he couldn't stand it again. Better to die.

"Ease up, mate," Pete objected.

Better yet, to get away, he had to get away from all of them. Lie. Lie. He was good at that. Let them think he didn't remember, make them think he'd given up. They'd broken him already. Do whatever they wanted. Charm them, then escape. But he couldn't stop shaking, couldn't stand the thought of anyone touching him again. He was wrecked, ruined, contaminated by what had been done to him, the memories tangled together with the Antiquary and the streets. His heart hammered against his chest wall painfully. He was headblind and crippled, half his senses still muted to nothing, no charge, no empathy, no sense of the space around him or the saraband of atoms, as if it was all an illusion, a mad dream while he still lay in his cell.

Wolverine stalked over to Remy, who tried to edge away only to be stopped by one hard, heavy hand on his shoulder. "Hold still and I'll have that damned collar off ya."

He froze.

Snikt.

One adamantium claw extruded from Wolverine's hand. Remy watched him as Wolverine slid the silvery metal blade next to Remy's face, along his jaw and under the collar. With a sizzling crack and a spark of electricity that ran up the claw into Wolverine's flesh, the sharp metal cut through the suppression collar. The hinges opened.

He looked straight into Wolverine's blue eyes. The Canadian mutant was so close Remy could smell cigars and beer on him. Some of his panic eased away. Wolverine didn't play head games.

"Got it," Wolverine said in satisfaction.

Remy tore the collar off. His psi-shields finished rebuilding as his psionic abilities came back. His spatial awareness reached out and encompassed the house and far beyond it. He felt the dance of protons and electrons in every atom of everything around him. He sensed mass, volume, and energy potentials. Empathy brought him a welter of emotions from the people around him and he shut it all out and concentrated on one thing.

He tightened his hands around the broken collar and channeled a year's worth of agony and anger into it, charging it so fast and hard it went white hot with only an instant's flare of his normal pinkish-red energy. With a grimace, he flung at the opposite wall, just missing Sinister in the bedroom doorway.

"Holy shit!" Bobby yelled.

"Cover!" Pete shouted in the same instant. He tackled Kitty to the floor, only to have her phase them both into insubstantiality.

Bobby dived over the bed, dissolving his form into super-chilled water vapor. Emma turned to diamond. Wolverine reacted immediately, pushing Remy to the floor and covering him as much as
possible. The collar hit the wall and exploded. The wall exploded. The roof exploded. The basement supports beneath the wall exploded. Debris rose in the air and passed through Sinister's body. Torn pieces of wood, plaster and lath whipped through the air and finally fell to floor.

A fire started briefly only to be put out by Bobby's water vapor.

Sinister reformed himself. "I hope that is the only temper tantrum you decide to throw," he said. "Though it is rewarding to note your resting power level seems to have jumped, LeBeau. Testing will be necessary to chart the difference."

Remy gasped for breath, on the edge of panicking worse. He scrabbled at Wolverine's shoulders. Wolverine went still then lifted his 350 pounds of adamantium-weighted body off Remy. "He ain't your experiment to play with, Sinister."

Able to breathe and move again, Remy curled into a fetal ball with his arms wrapped tight round his knees and his eyes squeezed shut. Shields, shields, shields, he chanted to himself. Wolverine's outrage and anger and concern waterfalled over his psyche, the connection enhanced by proximity and contact.

"Is he okay?" Bobby asked in concern. The voice came from a center point in the devastated room and sounded like a woodwind instrument since he was still in vapor form.

Bobby was a net of psionic energy suspended in every temperature gradation in the room. In Remy's mind, he glowed, shaded by fierce loyalty but pure compared to any other psyche he'd encountered. Touching Bobby's feelings was like immersing a raw burn in cool, soothing water.

Kitty phased them back solidity and Wisdom rolled off her. "Hey, what about the rest of us?" Pete asked indignantly. White plaster dusted his black hair and puffed into the air when he shook himself.

Remy's empathy ghosted over him and withdrew--Pete was as full of darkness, doubt and regret as he was - then brushed past Shadowcat's mind. Oh, she was so much harder than she'd been the first time he saw her. Harder than she'd been in Seoul too, and it wasn't Pete's presence that had made her that way. There was still kindness and softness in her though, balancing the hard pragmatism time and war had taught her.

Bobby shrugged. "I knew Kitty could take care of you, Pete."

"Thanks a bloody lot, wanker," Pete muttered as he managed to get to his feet again.

Emma was a carbon deep freeze, her emotions under her own lock and key. Remy could feel the weight and existence of her, but not access it. Most telepaths only shielded their thoughts, leaking emotion as profligately as non-psis. But in diamond form, Emma was as psionically dense as her carbon body. She felt the same on the Astral Plane as she did to his spatial sense. He could ignore her.

"Wow," Kitty remarked, looking around the ruined bedroom.

"Yeah," Bobby said. "Gambit made the house go boom."

His mind swept past the burning cold sink that symbolized Sinister on the psionic level. Another mind was in the kitchen, humming to itself, unconcerned. The healer, Triage, Remy decided. The explosions hadn't bothered Triage because the man was mad as hatter anyway.
Sinister crossed the room to where Wolverine still crouched next to Remy. Remy could feel the
scientist's mind trying to probe his. He strengthened his shields automatically. "LeBeau."

Remy shuddered but didn't open his eyes.

He didn't want anyone knowing exactly what he remembered and didn't. Part of him insisted he
could trust, but he'd been burned too many times. He certainly knew better than to trust Sinister—he'd
sold his soul to the devil once. Once burned, twice shy. He trusted his X-Men team-mates even less.
Essex always kept his word. Better to let them all think he was a basketcase, maybe they'd
underestimate him. It wasn't far from the truth, anyway. He'd made sure they underestimated him,
underestimated his powers, his education, his skills and his intelligence. He'd let them see him as a
cocky, reckless, feckless light-fingered slut, not a Guild-trained Master Thief ranked second in the
world with all the knowledge that took. He'd used their distrust to remind himself to stay on his toes,
to always keep some piece of himself back. It had paid off. That edge had kept him alive when
Rogue and the others left him to die in Antarctica after his part in the Mutant Massacre was revealed.
Betrayed again, he'd done what he always did: he played the cards life dealt and survived. The
lessons he'd absorbed as a street rat had kept him alive.

When all else fails… and all else failed.

He remembered that now. Bitterness shuddered through him. He wanted them all to go away. He
wanted to crawl in a dark hole and die.

Remy desperately projected an empathic wave at Sinister and Emma. He didn't want Sinister in his
mind. ~Outoutoutoutoutoutoutout.~

Sinister staggered back, unconsciously raising one hand toward his head. "Cease this childishness,
LeBeau. You have your memories, your ability to shield and manipulate your powers proves that the
memory transfer was successful," Sinister said.

Remy slammed another wordless psionic wave into Sinister's mind. More emotion than the scientist
had experienced in a century, a tsunami of hate and shame and fear and disgust and helpless and
absolute rejection.

to waver, as though his ability to hold its molecules in cohesion had faltered. "LeBeau, stop."

Bobby resolved into a fluid figure, the temperature in the room dropped drastically and he froze into
solidity then back into a warm flesh form. He knelt beside Remy. "It's okay, it's okay, you don't have
do anything, Gambit," he said soothingly. "I swear. I promise."

Remy slitted his eyes open and thinned his shields just enough to taste Bobby's emotions. Concern
seeped through, genuine caring, untainted by any hidden agendas. It warmed him. He uncurled
enough to latch onto Bobby's hand. Another memory was there, of Nine's, of only the night before:
Bobby holding him all night. He couldn't stop shaking, but he held onto to Bobby's hand like a
lifeline.

"I swear, it will be okay," Bobby said.

Wolverine sank down next to them. He snagged the cover off the bed and dragged it over, then
draped it around Remy.
"He doesn't feel like talking, so leave him alone," Wolverine told Sinister.

"We got him out and he's got his memories back," Pete said. "That was our part of the bargain."

Sinister turned away from Remy. "Very well," he agreed. "As LeBeau could tell you, I follow my agreements to the letter. If you will gather yourselves, I will transport us to your headquarters via tesseract."

Emma smiled. "I'm sure Magneto and Charles are just waiting for you to show up."

Kitty rolled her eyes. "I'll get Triage."

Bobby tugged Remy to his feet. "Come on, we're going home. To Mont Saint Francis anyway. No one can touch us there."

Remy straightened and pulled his hand away from Bobby. He raised his head. He wrapped his arms around himself, radiating 'don't touch me'. He struggled but found his game-face. Show no fear. He nodded to show he was ready.

"That's it, kid," Wolverine approved. "They ain't broke ya."

Remy slanted a glance at the shorter man. He lifted his lip in a sneer. Inside, he was shaking. They had broken him, whoever he had been before. Wolverine answered him with fanged grin. Remy flinched.

Bobby touched his shoulder. He shuffled away from the contact. He didn't want to know what Bobby felt. He didn't want their concern. They were too damn late. He wasn't whoever it was they wanted back. He wasn't that strong any more.

He wasn't Gambit. He wasn't Nine. But he wasn’t Remy LeBeau.

He didn't know who he was.
The Last Beautiful Girl

Chapter Summary

Alistair gets a taste of how different the Genoshans are. He doesn't like it.

AD 2227, March 3
New Genosha
Hammer Bay

"This is just to first blood, right?" Alistair asked. "Just to satisfy honor, like in the old Code Duello?"

The lean woman with the choppily cut black hair, Asian features, and incongruously blue eyes, shook her head. "If two Alphas meet in the Pit it's to the death, Kelly." She flashed him a grin that never touched her eyes.

"But – but that's murder. Genosha has a court system. I saw coverage of a case were someone sued for damages after their store was blown up."

Commander Lee shrugged.

"That's for betas and gammas and nulls, kid. The laws are to protect them from alphas, 'cause if they went up against them they'd be mincemeat." She gestured to the adamantium-walled room beyond the observation glass. "The rest of us take care of ourselves. Homo superior's supposed to be the next evolutionary step, right? When alphas meet in the Pit, it's survival of the fittest."

Alistair couldn't believe it. He was standing next to the head of the Hammer Bay Police Department's Homicide Division and she was talking about murderers going unpunished. It was just so alien. The three Omegas, Magneto, Gambit, and Phoenix, radiated so much power no one could mistake them for human. Power was a hot, shimmering glow around them, bleeding their eyes to solid color; Magneto's blue-white, Gambit's crimson, and the Phoenix, green-eyed and cloaked in a restless golden fire in the outline of a great hunting bird. But Lee seemed normal. She had a normal job, one that had nothing to do with mutant powers, and normal looks. She didn't even have that bewildering Genoshan drawl which was the legacy of two hundred fifty years of isolation and linguistic drift.

"Does someone always die?" he made himself ask.

"Naw, just most of the time," Lee said. "It's up to the winner, but leaving an enemy alive to come after you later is just plain stupid." She noticed the horror on his face. "The Pit's the last resort, kiddo. You can't lock alphas up unless you collar them and none of us will ever let that happen. That's the fuckin' Genoshan national motto: Never Forget."

"It couldn't be that bad," Alistair protested. "Wearing a inhibitor would just make you normal - "

Multi-colored sparkles flared at Lee's finger tips. She took a hard breath and they disappeared. "Only a damned flatscan could say that," she snapped. She pulled the collar of her uniform aside with a
jerk, exposing a long, rather nice, ivory-gold neck and the heavy white scars running around it. Alistair stared and swallowed hard.

"Are those?"

Lee looked at him scornfully.

"I was collared after First Denver, way back in the Gene Wars, Kelly. When I say never again, I mean it." She tapped the block pattern of thick and thin black lines on the back of her left hand. "I still have this binary code tattoo that every mutant sent to the Gyrich Facility got, too."

The reporter blanched. Commander Lee was anything but normal. He'd thought she might be gamma, maybe even a beta mutant, but the tattoo meant she was hundreds of years old and only alphas had that sort of longevity.

"You're one of the Constants?"

Lee snorted.

"Yeah, I've had the pleasure of watching my friends and lovers and their kids get old and die, while I just went on ticking. There's maybe twenty of us who weren't already dead of La Belle when Hank McCoy came up with his cure. We were all so sick by then the only way to save us from dying was to change our DNA so we couldn't."

Alistair back away and Lee laughed, a grating, unamused laugh. "What, kiddo, you worried it's catching? You're so damn null you couldn't catch La Belle if I still had it." She gestured to the reinforced viewing window. "You want to watch? Tell your readers all about the bloody mutant death matches?"

Alistair stepped to the window and looked down at the white ground of the arena. Adamantium walls rose on all sides of it, earning it, he guessed, the name Commander Lee had called it: The Pit.

Two figures entered from opposite sides of the arena. The walls closed seamless and solid behind them, displaying the disturbingly high level of advanced and alien technology Genoshans took for granted. The Gene Wars had set the rest of the planet back almost fifty years in terms of progress, but not the mutants. Their abilities let them bypass so much of the manufacturing and foundation technology humans had to create first.

Lee tapped a few commands into a holographic command display. Information screens displayed data on the two combatants in the arena.

"Here we go," Lee said.

She raised an eyebrow.

**Subject: Psylocke**

Class: Alpha

Rank: Colonel, Senior Staff, Security Directorate

Abilities: Psi, telepathy, psi-knife, limited precognition; other: shadow-walk teleportation

Challenges: n/a
Alistair read the same screen. He looked down and studied the two figures. One appeared to be a young man wreathed in orange-gold flames from head to toe. The air shimmered around him from the heat. The second was a Asian woman with purple hair, a crimson tattoo over one violet eye. She wore skintight purple-black leathers and the hilt of a katana protruded over her shoulder. She was small and delicate looking and should have looked overwhelmed by the large man, but she didn't. She stalked across the arena floor swathed in shadows, circling the burning man like a big cat playing with its prey.

Lee chuckled. "Betsy is going to put a hurtin' on that hot-top."

Salamander tossed a ball of fire at Psylocke. She slid away from it with swift, inhuman grace. A faint purple glow flickered at her eyes. The shining blade of her katana suddenly appeared in her hands.

Salamander threw more fireballs, trying to keep Psylocke at a distance. Psylocke flipped and ducked and glided between the burning missiles. Her hair fanned out behind her as she swept in close. The katana struck once. Salamander bled red. His blood ignited and burned black in his own flames. He screamed and clutched the wound in his belly. Psylocke spun and brought her katana down in a lethal blow.

Steel sheered through flame and flesh alike. Salamander's head tumbled off his neck. The flames guttered out, leaving his body charred red and black. His head lay cheek down. Salamander's eyes had been blue. His pupils were orange diamonds.

Psylocke flicked the blood from her blade and sheathed it. Her face lifted to the observation window. The purple glow brightened into a butterfly mask.

~Jubilee. Who's your nauseous friend?~

Alistair heard the words in his head too, though he'd turned away, trying not to gag up the bile he could already taste.

"A little rough there, Betsy?" Commander Lee remarked, faintly questioning.

~The little pig thought he could take on one of the Twenty Constants.~ Psylocke's psi-voice sounded like a proper British lady of the twenty-first century. She laughed cynically. ~He relied on his powers far too much. I could have snuffed his mind out with a thought, but I needed some exercise.~

Lee flipped a pair of sunglasses over her eyes and subvocalized a command to her departmental database comm. Her eyebrows shot up, "Salamander, you naughty, naughty boy," she murmured. "Run visual display criminal record."

A holographic screen sprang into being where Alistair could read it, just in front of Commander Lee.

**Subject: Jason, Klaus-Maria aka Salamander**
Alistair still felt sick. Psylocke had killed the man as casually as he would swat a fly. She hadn't even used her mutant abilities.

"I scanned him when he challenged me," Psylocke informed them with a mental smirk. "He plead guilty to lesser charges to keep the 'paths out of his head. He'd killed two girls, including a hooker he left in Magda Square the other night. If I hadn't disposed of him the Hammer Bay PD would have had to hunt him down like a diseased dog. He was escalating."

"Records, file for Ann-Louise Atkins, homicide, save 'Note: perpetrator terminated in Challenge this date, guilt authenticated by Colonel Braddock, Securidat, telepath. Perp identified as Klaus-Maria Jason aka Salamander.' Close file."

Lee waved her hand and the hologram collapsed.

"Thanks, Betts. Now I can get back to proving Ping-Jei Mao didn't drown in his pool."

"How did he die?"

"His aquamorph business partner took a dive into his lungs and stayed there until he ran out of oxygen, then she dumped the body in the pool."

"Inventive."

"Unlike this jerk."

"He certainly was no Pyro."

"Pyro wasn't so bad."

"Poor St. John. Well, love, I have some Dissenters to hunt down. Have fun down at city lock-up, Mr. Kelly."

Psylocke waved before walking out of the arena. An automatic system began cleaning up the arena, picking up the pieces of Salamander.

Lee looked over at Alistair. "I suppose you'd like to look around police headquarters, see how the Hammer Bay PD works outside Alpha Challenges?"

He managed a nod.

She shrugged. "Come on then."
It wasn't easy to come back to life. He'd stared into the sun, the blinding light of not being, and it left an afterimage burned into his eyes, as though he still saw everything through the floating, fluorescent imprint of emptiness.

He didn't know himself anymore. Nine wasn't Gambit and Gambit wasn't Nine and he couldn't be either of them now, but they lived in his head, confusing him with their memories. He woke, breathless and soundless in the night, from dreams that should have left him screaming.

He preferred the shadows and dim rooms and stayed away from mirrors. He didn't need reminders. He didn't want company. He was barely surviving, brittle as frozen glass; feeling pity from anyone else didn't help.

Sometimes moving hurt, when he'd stayed still too long, sitting in a dark corner watching the door or looking out an open window, dazed still by any view that wasn't a white cell wall. From his room, he could watch the gray Atlantic punish the shore and lose himself in the endless wash of the tide. He spent a lot of time there, breathing in the salt spray on the wind.

He drifted through the days, shying away from anyone who came too close. Most of the time he felt dazed, numbed by the overload, but he had moments of shattering bitterness, when he wondered where everyone had been when he was broken and helpless.

Where were you?

If he could have made himself speak, he would have asked that.

Only he couldn't. Or wouldn't. He didn't remember what his own voice sounded like and when he tried to speak, it felt like drowning. He forgot how to breathe. His lips parted, but his throat closed, and the words he formed in his head dissolved into silence.

Silence surrounded him. It spread from his own wordlessness to everyone around him. He could feel them searching for something to say and all their intentions, all their guilt and confusion stifling them until they left him alone. Sometimes that pleased him, sometimes it infuriated him. Part of him wanted everyone to suffer with him.

Bobby stayed with him most of the time, alternating with Jubilee, Storm and Jean. He figured out that they weren't leaving him alone because they thought he was unstable. Suicidal. He was. He
tolerated their presence while keeping them at a distance. Lorna came once, but wept until she was sick and unable to work the 'legs' Forge had built for her. He wished she wouldn't blame herself; she was among the few he absolved.

Fractured glimpses of his eternity in the Mojave kept him from letting anyone too close. Emotions that over ran his defenses made him reject even the most comforting touch, even from people he had–still–trusted. Blurred bits and pieces replayed in his nightmares. Enough that he felt sure no one should want to touch him even if he could stand it.

He let his eyes slide to the side and considered the man on the bed making a cat's cradle of dark red beaded garland, the sort usually hung on Christmas trees. Bobby deserved his trust, just the way the others did, but he couldn't give it to him. Bobby believed in the Professor and the only two outcomes of talking to him he could imagine were no good. Either Bobby would refuse to believe him or Remy would succeed in finally and irrevocably disillusioning him.

There was nothing between the last memory template, the one Elena Ivanova updated two days before Red One went out and when he 'woke' as a amnesiac prisoner in the Mojave. He would never know exactly what happened. The telepaths were knocked out at Denver. Jubilee had told him what she could, her voice cracking. The scars on her neck were still livid and her words grim. I came back and no one even remembered you; someone blocked them. Remy didn't have to remember what happened, to guess who and why. Xavier had already conspired with Maximoff and Mystique. Why not sabotage the MRF retreat? Remy wished he hadn't remembered what he'd found out investigating the unrest in Genosha.

If he hadn't remembered that, he might almost have been happy. Rescued. Safe. Trusting. Memory came with a price, it seemed. Trust had never come easy to him, not earning it and not giving it; now he had none.

More than anything, that kept him quiet, his shields built around his mind so thick no one could breach them.

Because with Professor Xavier, you didn't just worry about him. It was everyone the Professor could have got to.

And that was everyone.

Bobby sat Indian-fashion on the end of Remy's bed and Remy sat by one of the windows, staring out at the storm. Bobby watched him while playing with a plastic Christmas garland. He ran the beads through his fingers, rolled them round and round, twisted and tangled them into knots that he then had to pick apart. They made tiny tick-tick noises against each other.

A small lamp by the bed burned, the warm incandescent light painting Remy with false color, a cameo profile colored in ivory and amber. Three months had seen a lot of improvement in how he looked. Three months hadn't changed anything else. He didn't touch, he didn't laugh or tease or speak at all, and he flinched from every fast movement or loud noise. He woke up from nightmares that were nearly silent seizures. He had to be reminded to eat. He showered until the hot water nearly burned his skin red.

The more anyone, from Storm to Kitty to Bobby pushed, the more Remy pulled back. He wouldn't let Jean or any of the other telepaths in either. It didn't take a telepath to see he was afraid all the time,
Since he couldn't wrap Remy in a fluffy blanket and hug him better, Bobby went back talking. He figured no one had talked to Remy in the Mojave and tried to avoid mentioning anything that would remind him of it. He'd run dry of topics, though. So he said the first thing that fell out of his mouth. "You used to talk to me."

He peered at Remy. Remy ignored him and stayed curled into the cushy chair covered in brown corduroy Bobby had dragged into the room for him. He'd propped his chin on his hand, elbow on the arm of the chair. His hair had grown out some, into a tight cap of russet, since they'd brought him back, but it didn't look like him. He had always had longish hair. Bobby missed it.

"You talked to everyone. You talked to Warren when you hated each other's guts. I know you never really said a lot about what you were really thinking or feeling, but you'd twit Scott or tease Wolverine or flirt with someone."

"You talked to everyone. You talked to Warren when you hated each other's guts. I know you never really said a lot about what you were really thinking or feeling, but you'd twit Scott or tease Wolverine or flirt with someone."

He'd put on that over the top Cajun accent, thick as molasses and sweeter than honey and turn on the charm. Or he'd mock whoever was being an ass so hard everyone united against him. For someone with such a talent for insinuating himself with someone, he could irritate everyone without even trying. That's how Bobby knew Remy had never been manipulating them; he hadn't been willing to make nice or pretend he agreed with anyone he didn't. "I miss your voice."

Another look, but Remy was still ignoring him. Maybe he really was oblivious, locked inside his head where no one could reach. Beast talked about the Shakes, speculating about neurological damage done by uninterrupted, long term exposure to the inhibitor collar. Wolverine growled and said leave him alone, the man would talk when he was ready. Even Storm had stopped talking to her brother much when she sat with him. Bobby couldn't stop trying. They owed it to Remy to keep trying.

"I miss you."

The glass rattled with the force of the wind and Remy twitched. Loud noises bothered him.

Why won't you talk to me? Talk to someone, say something, scream, break things, blow something up, cry. Bobby looked down at the beads. You make me want to cry.

Wind-driven rain spattered against the window glass. The weather reminded Bobby of the first time he'd seen the Monastery of Mont Saint Francis, when it had been an Acolyte base. It had been winter then too, a black rain sheeting down and the X-Men had come in at night. Fabian Cortez had kidnapped Moira MacTaggert. The fight blurred in his memory, just one more among too many. What he remembered was an unkind exchange with Colossus in the Blackbird before they reached France and the Professor using his telepathy to convince a mob of hate-filled villagers the X-Men weren't standing right in front of them. Portents of things to come if they'd only known it.

Bobby never felt the cold but he shivered anyway and rubbed his arms. "You could at least talk to Jubes. You can't blame her."

Remy blinked.

"Yeah, I know you must be mad under there somewhere, Remy. I would be. But Jubilee was locked up too. She couldn't come for you."

"Yeah, I know you must be mad under there somewhere, Remy. I would be. But Jubilee was locked up too. She couldn't come for you."

And she'd raised hell when she came back, woke everyone up, even if it had been Sinister who found where Remy was. Sinister. It made Bobby want to curl up in a ball of shame. It made him worry too. If the monsters and madmen, like Sinister and Magneto,
weren't what he'd thought they were, then were the heroes?

The monastery guesthouse and cloisters had been converted into officer housing. The temp quarters weren't much bigger or more luxurious than the old monk's cells had been, but some of the rooms in the guesthouse were better. Jean and Scott rated a couple of rooms because of the baby. The Professor had extensive private quarters in deference to the extra equipment he needed to compensate for his handicap. They'd thought it would be quieter there, better for Remy too, but he wouldn't step foot in it.

They had installed Remy in one of the larger rooms in the cloisters after Jubilee pointed out he'd just spent a year in a seven by seven cell. Bobby had insisted on a room with windows that opened. The windows were narrow, gothic slits, set back deep in the stone outer wall, but it was a hell of a view. He'd been right though. The first thing Remy did was open one.

"I wish you'd just say something."

Remy shook his head slightly.

"Well, fuck you too," Bobby muttered, still pleased to have got that much response. He twisted the bead garland absently. The corner of Remy's mouth tipped up, just enough to hint at the crease in his cheek. "You're a jerk, you know that?"

He flopped back on the bed and stared at the whitewashed stone ceiling. He ran the beads through his fingers, the rest of them sliding off his chest onto the coverlet.

"I didn't really mean that." He sighed. "Well, I guess I did. Because you are a jerk a lot of the time, but I still--I mean we--still love you and I don't know what to do or what you need."

His hands clenched. The string holding the beads together snapped.

"Aw, crap."

Red beads rolled and bounced everywhere. Bobby scrambled around trying to catch them. He ended up on his knees on the shaggy rug beside the bed, staring a few forlorn dust bunnies in the eye underneath. He just knew the beads would be as bad as marbles. He'd end up stepping on one, fall on his ass and break his tailbone. These things happened to him.

He fished out five or six renegade beads and shuffled backward on his elbows and knees, hoping he'd get out without conking his skull against the underside of the bed. A muffled sound distracted him. He twisted around, trying to see, and jerked his head up when he glimpsed Remy shaking.

"Ow. Ow, ow, ow, shit," Bobby exclaimed as a little white starburst of pain spread over the top of his head where it had just hit the bed frame. "Damn it."

He backed the rest of the way out and resisted the urge to rub the sore spot.

Remy had his hand over his mouth and was rocking. The muffled sound was a snicker turning into all out laughter.

Bobby glowered at him. "Oh, yeah. Laugh, hyena, laugh." He got to his feet. "You have dust bunnies, you know."
Remy shook his head, still chuckling. Bobby stalked over to him and dumped the beads into his lap. He felt sure Remy didn't care about the dust bunnies. Seeing him laugh was worth the lump forming at the back of his head anyway.

He turned away to clean up the rest of the mess and felt a distinct ping against the back of his head. A bead bounced off his hair and dropped to the floor.

Bobby swung around.

"You didn't -"

Remy flicked another bead at him. It hit Bobby on the chest, dead center. He absently noted Remy had his perfect aim back.

"You did."

Bobby took a step forward, half meaning to play tackle Remy. "This means war."

Remy's smile faded and he looked so wary and tense Bobby immediately hauled himself up and stopped. He assumed a haughty expression. "I'm above that, I'll have you know," he said. "Never let it be said that Bobby Drake is childish -"

Remy's eyes widened at that.

"–or irresponsible -"

Something rolled under Bobby's heel.

So, that was what slipping on his ice felt like for others, he thought in the instant before his balance failed and he tumbled backwards.

"–oof!"

He landed on the bed, sending more beads tumbling off it.

Remy was hysterical.

"Or clumsy," Bobby finished, grinning at the ceiling.

It was working. Remy was still in there somewhere. Bobby knew he could coax him back from wherever he was hiding. He just had to keep trying.

AD 2014, December 30
France
Mont Saint Francis

Once a month, Henry took blood and tested for La Belle. At the beginning, it had been every six months, then after every mission if they could have been exposed. When they had abandoned Snow Valley and relocated to MRF headquarters, he had instituted the monthly checks. The schedule was
less oppressive.

He stared at the results of the latest round of tests and tiredly realized he'd need to take time to brief every one of the people with positive results. The disease hadn't become any more infectious, but the odds were catching up with them. They were tired, stressed, their immune systems pushed to the limits, and regularly exposed. La Belle was an opportunist.

A New Year's Eve party had been put together for the night. If Henry knew his old team-mates and friends, more than a few of them would spend the night together. Anyone infected would need to take precautions.

He twitched his ears in tired frustration.


Too late to lock the door on this dance.

Too more positives integrated onto the list on his laptop's screen.

Lehnsherr.

This would break them, Henry thought.

He scanned the list for the other name. Read the newest victim of the disease he couldn't cure. Drake. With an inarticulate cry, Henry threw the laptop at the wall. It shattered; black plastic, metal, circuits and chips no match for a stone wall centuries old and the strength of his arm.

"Bobby."

He closed his eyes and slumped down.

"Bobby."

If he didn't find a cure, Henry realized, this would break him. He could endure many losses, but not Bobby, not his best friend. He levered himself back to his feet. The wrecked laptop was cleaned up with regret. He had no time for throwing tantrums. He had bad tidings to bear and work to do.

He opened the communication link with Sinister's lab.

"Nathaniel, we need to begin the next series of vaccine tests," he said, "and I have some bad news..."

-------------------

AD 2014, December 31
France
Mont Saint Francis

Remy snaked through the crowd, reflexively avoiding any contact with anyone, unnoticed because he didn't want notice. He wore a black tuxedo that let him blend with the rest of the formal crowd.
He had a flute of champagne in one hand and a headache from shielding against so many half-drunk minds. The champagne was just a prop; he knew better than to drink it. The emotions flowing through the room were too frenetic, bright and wild enough to suck him into the fun, but with an undertow pushing it all along that held a taint of desperation. Toxic currents of despair and fear swelled under the bright surface. He needed to keep his mind to himself and all of that out.

He wanted to find Bobby. Bobby was the only reason he'd forced himself to put on a fake smile and endure so many people.

Bobby had been scarily quiet all day, the change obvious enough that it jolted him out of his own inward distraction. It was like waking up. He could feel Bobby's unhappiness right through his shields as though they were linked. He caught another shock from someone farther away later in the day. Lorna, he thought, but she shielded immediately. Each jolt hit him harder. When he felt Jubilee's thin mental cry, it mattered to him. He wanted to find her and do something. Not much had seemed to matter since being brought out of the Mojave except never going back there again and protecting himself. Sometimes it felt too surreal to believe he wasn't still there. He hadn't been moved to do anything that might wake him up.

He surprised himself. Bobby mattered whether he was Nine or Gambit or just Remy, the man with pieces of both finally starting to fit together in his mind. Lorna and Jubilee mattered, enough for him to do something, though he didn't know what. His Stormy mattered. Vee and Janos, because no one else gave a damn about them.

There were too many people. He couldn't spot Bobby's sandy head among them. He sent out an empathic feeler for the familiar aura that was Bobby. He found him, the usual light that he thought of as Bobby dimmed enough to make him worry. He followed the feeling until he glimpsed Bobby with Jubilee, Wolverine and Jean. A glimpse of silvery-threaded black hair and a delicately pointed ear tip identified the fourth figure with them as Northstar.

The first hint of real amusement Remy had felt since forcing himself to leave his room came when he noticed someone named Jubilee had managed to get Wolverine into a monkey suit. He met Wolverine's gaze and nodded slightly, sidling up next to Bobby. Jubilee and Jean noticed him next. Jubilee wiggled her fingers at him. Jean's green eyes widened then filled with warmth. He felt a wordless telepathic acknowledgement ghost against his shields, a noninvasive greeting. He almost returned it, but caution won out.

"Oh, hey, Remy!" Bobby exclaimed when he realized Remy was there. His face lit with a real smile. "I thought I'd have to drag you here kicking and screaming." He bumped his shoulder against Remy's without thought and Remy didn't flinch. Wolverine noticed. Remy shrugged a little stiffly. "I thought he'd become blissfully mute," Northstar commented with a raised eyebrow.

He stared stone-faced at Northstar until the supercilious expression melted from the man's face. Bobby frowned at him. "Hey—"

"Can it, Jean-Paul," Wolverine said.

Jubilee distracted them by tipping her head and looking Remy up and down. "You look good again."

He raised an eyebrow and gave her a similar look-over. She'd got out of her hell sooner than him and recovered enough only someone looking for the marks would see them. The blue-and-silver
embroidered ao dai she wore emphasized her slenderness and the high collar hid the scars on her neck. The short cap of black hair made her look elfin. Jubilee had obviously been working at getting back into fighting trim, while he'd been wallowing and forgetting to eat unless Bobby made him. He only looked good when compared to the broken scarecrow that he'd been three months before.

In short, she looked good. Until he met her gaze and found it as despairing as his own in the mirror. Something had happened today. Something terrible.

"You ain't drinking that, Cajun," Wolverine said. He plucked the champagne flute from Remy's hand and gave it to Jubilee. Remy shuddered, but just once. Wolverine moved aside and revealed the reason this table and corner had been staked out: a cache of long-necked bottles. Wolverine picked one up, twisted the cap off and ceremoniously handed it to Remy. "Beer."

"Hey, what about me?" Bobby protested.

Wolverine tossed him a bottle. "Here. It's good beer, don't freeze it, Icecube."

"Thanks, Wolvie."

"Don't call me that." Wolverine looked from Jean to Northstar. "You two want one?"

Jean held up her own champagne flute and shook her head. Northstar nodded and accepted the bottle Wolverine handed over. Remy waited to drink until Wolverine had a bottle in his hand too.

Wolverine looked at each of them.

"Here's to us."

Remy let his bottle clink against the others before taking a swallow. It tasted good. He began to relax, though he still wondered what had sunk Bobby's spirits earlier and what had hit Lorna and Jubilee. The same sense of something wrong came from Northstar and even Jean once he looked, though since they were both worriers, it didn't stand out so much.

"We're still here."

Northstar laughed too loud. The bitterness Remy felt from him laced his tone. "For how much longer?" His jerky gesture encompassed them all while he addressed Wolverine.

"Ya got something to say to me, Jean-Paul?"

"The great Logan, with his healing factor, you're always the last man standing. La Belle Dame can't touch you." Northstar's voice dropped. "We're none of us so permanent."

Wolverine flinched.

The stab of pain and fear that went through Bobby and echoed through Jean and Jubilee made everything clear to Remy. Henrí had given him his diagnosis earlier, but it had come as no surprise. He hadn't connected it to the others. The disease had been Nine's greatest hope for escape in the Mojave. The irony that he should contract it after he'd left that place hadn't bothered him much. When death came, he'd embrace it as a lover, but he wasn't the only one facing it, he realized. He swayed and felt Bobby's hand at his back, steadying him. He didn't shrug off the touch the way he would have only the day before. Not fair, not fair, that it could touch them too.
"We're all dying," Northstar finished. His fingers were locked white around the beer bottle.

"Ya got something I can do about it, damn it?" Wolverine demanded, rough and quiet and as agonized as Northstar.

Jean's hand was on his shoulder. "It's not your fault--"

"Like, a little less with the buzz kill, Speedie," Jubilee drawled in her most bored, Valley girl tones. She gulped down the last of the champagne and giggled afterward. "Some of us want to par-tay tonight." She hugged Wolverine one armed, batted her eyelashes and declared, "I want to dance tonight."

"Darlin', your idea of dancing and mine don't belong on the same planet."

Jean laughed at that.

Jubilee turned big blue eyes to Remy. "Gambit? Come on, dance with me?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"Oh, come on."

He stepped even closer to Bobby. Jubilee's eyes narrowed. Then she smiled beatifically. "Well, no one wants to dance with Bobby. We all know he has two left feet -"

"I do not."

"-so, you'll just have to dance with me, Jean-Paul." She snatched the beer from Northstar, handed it back to Wolverine, and pulled Northstar away from the corner and onto the dance floor.

"Serves ya right," Wolverine grumbled when Northstar gave him a wide-eyed, desperate glance.

Remy snickered, his shoulder bumping with Bobby's again. He could feel the pleasure and happiness pouring off Bobby at his behavior. He could feel so much from Bobby… He thought again it felt like a link, but not the shallow, conscious thought link that was all he'd ever allowed.

"I do not have two left feet," Bobby insisted. "It's not my fault no one can keep their shoes out from under mine."

"Of course, not, Bobby," Jean agreed. She brightened. "There's Scott and Storm." She lifted her hand.

Wolverine chugged the rest of his long-neck without bothering to crane his head and look. "Are they coming over?"

"Yes."

Remy felt the approach of more than just Storm and Cyclops. The space displacement told him Xavier was there in his hoverchair too. He stiffened.

"Gambit," Cyclops greeted him as he went to his wife's side. "Good to see you here."
Remy nodded jerkily. He could sense Xavier's eyes on him, the interest, the phantom telepathic fingers groping over his shields. He felt ill and panicky. The room had gone gray at the edges and begun constricting. Pain needled through the orbit of his left eye and into his brain. He concentrated on breathing slowly.

Bobby's hand ran up and down his tense back. He focused on it tightly, on the waves of concern and… love… pouring from that touch. Warmth and strength shoring up the fractured pieces of him. He took another breath. He'd been so careful to not let himself know what Bobby was feeling for so long while still letting Bobby be there. He couldn't think about it now, not with Xavier right there. Maybe there would be a later.

Wolverine's nostrils flared and his head came up. Wolverine had scented his fear. He could maintain the perfect poker face, he could regulate his heartbeat, but he couldn't stop the mixture of chemicals flushing through his system. A cocktail of adrenaline and norepinephrine ran through his veins, upping his blood pressure, pumping extra oxygen to his muscles in preparation for fight or flight. Nothing could hide that from Wolverine's senses.

The need to move made him almost vibrate in place the way Northstar did sometimes. The tingle in his fingertips came from his charge. It took a conscious effort to draw it in and muffle the cerise glow that characterized it.

He turned his head slowly and took in Xavier and Storm. Storm stood just behind Xavier's chair, one slim hand resting gently on the man's shoulder. She looked splendid, wearing something silk with African patterns printed on it. She looked pleased to see Remy out of his room; her eyes were luminous with love and pride in him.

He faked a smile.

It killed him to see her there with Xavier. She believed in the Dream, in Xavier himself, more than any of them. She'd given more of herself to it than even Scott, who at least had his love for Jean to support him. She didn't doubt, she didn't deviate or compromise and she would never ask anyone else to. She never gave up, not even on Remy, even when he had himself. He knew without any doubt that Xavier had interfered with her. He knew it because she hadn't fought to find him.

He swept his gaze over Xavier quickly, barely acknowledging him. Inside he was trembling. He tasted bile at the back of his throat.

Storm slipped around the hoverchair. Her hand came up and hovered by Remy's face. He saw that she wanted to touch, to give him a hug, but respected his discomfort and wouldn't until he invited it again. He met her eyes and inclined his head until his cheek rested against her palm.

"Padnat," she murmured and stepped into his arms. She smelled of flowers and the wind, was a solid weight of strength and steadiness, and he held her tightly for a brief second. When he stepped back, he turned his head and brushed a kiss against her palm.

How could he hurt her? No, not while he had a choice. As she stepped back, Xavier caught his gaze over her shoulder. Remy narrowed his eyes.

"Gambit," Xavier said, "I feel quite guilty that I haven't been here to help you since you returned to us. Storm tells me you have been reluctant to speak." He smiled at Remy. "If you open your shields,
I believe I could aid in your recovery."

Remy sneered. Open his shields? Did Xavier think he'd ever be that stupid? He swayed back toward Bobby. No. The question was what did he remember, what would he tell the other X-Men. If he didn't remember, he would let down his shields. When he refused, Xavier would know Remy did remember enough to distrust him. He didn't have to remember, though. He knew something had, because Xavier had tried to bury him to bury it.

He braced himself, heart trip hammering in his chest.

"You have nothing to feel guilty over, Professor," Storm told him, earnest as always. "Your work convincing the Australian government to recognize and begin trade with New Genosha is important. Remy understands."

"Good news. Hah, I'd forgotten what that sounded like," Scott muttered. His head inclined toward Jean's. Clearly, he was aware she had contracted La Belle too. The iron control hadn't cracked, but it shivered under that blow, like a bell sounding. "God knows I could use some."

Jean had her hand wound tightly in Scott's. Storm looked from Scott to Jean, sensing something wrong. She had her blind spots, but she wasn't insensitive, especially with her friends.

Xavier's telepathic probe began prying at Remy's shields, searching for a weakness that would let him crack them open. Remy gritted his teeth and stiffened the shields. He locked himself in and prepared to mentally brick over the door. He closed off the empathy, shutting Bobby and all of the world of emotion around him out. It leached the color out of his surroundings, as though his vision had faded into shades of sepia. Sounds seemed muffled and at a distance. Every thought took more effort. Even movement seemed slowed. It wasn't healthy, closing his empathy down so tightly. Minds could smother too.

He stared at Xavier, refusing to let him in, knowing it gave away his distrust and suspicion.

Xavier watched Remy back, that mild, professionally concerned expression on his face that had so often made Remy want to slap it off. He thought that this wasn't the man who had formed the X-Men and earned the unquestioning loyalty of Scott and Storm. This wasn't even the Professor who Remy had first met in the Shi'ar Galaxy and who had guided them for years. He was reminded that Onslaught had been born of Xavier's mind and actions. This man had lost himself and didn't even know it.

The force of Xavier's mind constricted vise-like around Remy's shields. A hot tickle in his nose presaged a nosebleed. He sniffed it back and tasted salt-hot blood at the back of his throat. In a minute, he was going to start swaying again and then fold up like a house of cards in a high wind. He'd never felt the full force of Xavier's talent turned on him before. He had to do more than just endure.

Furious, because all he'd wanted was to be left alone, because he'd already decided to keep his silence, Remy began to marshal his own counter-blow. Xavier was the master of telepathy, but he had little grasp of how projective empathy could be twisted into a weapon with no one the wiser. Fear could stop a man's heart. Despair could pull a trigger. Apathy couldn't be bothered to step out of the way of a speeding truck. Remy had only to find the emotion in his own psyche and project it into another mind. Of course, he'd reap the wind he sowed when the feedback backlash slammed into his own mind, but he could take Xavier by surprise.
He drew in a harsh breath through his nose, tasting blood again, and readied himself.

Xavier frowned, his expression had to reflect the effort he was expending.

"Professor," Jean said.

Remy realized she was just to the side of him. He hadn't noticed her move.

A sharp psychic blow snapped Xavier's telepathy away from Remy. The mind attack ceased so suddenly, he stumbled backward into Bobby. Arms came around him.

"Remy? Remy?"

Xavier's head snapped toward Jean. His mouth opened but he said nothing. Remy couldn't guess if they were communicating telepathically. His shields were still too high. He let Bobby go on supporting him and with a mental sigh of relief began releasing some of those shields. As he did, a wave of emotion coursed from Bobby into Remy's mind. An empathic link snapped into place so naturally he gasped. Bobby loved him. Bobby loved him.

"What's wrong?" Scott asked, eyeing Remy and Bobby.

He probably wasn't aware of it, but he'd taken a step between Jean and Xavier. Those two still wore the blank, distracted faces telepaths showed while conversing mentally.

Remy leaned into Bobby's hold and flooded Bobby with a wordless wave of ~away/urgency/need/weariness~. He wanted to get away and he wanted Bobby to come with him. He wanted Bobby out of Xavier's reach. If he could have grabbed Storm's wrist and dragged off with them, he'd have done it in an instant.

"I don't know," Bobby said, "but I think Remy needs to get out of here now."

Remy nodded emphatically. Pain shot through his head. The edges of his vision kept dissolving into gray or sparkles of white. Despite that, he felt a rush of euphoria. He'd held Xavier off.

He felt more like himself than he had since Sinister flooded him with his own memories. Bobby's love wrapped around his soul and soothed every wounded, raw place Rogue and Belladonna and too many others had left.

"Do you need help?" Storm asked.

Bobby had begun tugging Remy away from the group. Remy let him. "Nope. We'll be fine."

"Robert, are you sure?"

"Oh, yeah. Positive. Not a problemo," Bobby assured her. He was worried, but he was also elated by the way Remy was staying so close to him, even leaning closer. It all came through the link.

Remy turned his head briefly and found his eyes locked with Jean's gaze. The green sparked with fire. He realized it had been she who broke Xavier's assault on his shields. He sent a soft wave of emotion, ~gratitude/relief.~

~Charles overstepped his bounds. No one will force you to open up, Remy,~ Jean sent with a feather
light touch that didn't try to penetrate his shields. If he hadn't opened them slightly, he wouldn't have caught the words. ~I swear it.~

He accepted that for what it was worth, the intention at least well meant, wondering if she didn't somehow suspect more. In any case, he'd never scorn the protection of the Phoenix.

He let Bobby guide him though the crowd, ignoring the questions and Bobby's answers. His head throbbed. The lights were too bright, voices were too loud, and the music ground at his nerves.

He glimpsed Jubilee on the dance floor and Henrí in deep conversation with Magneto and Sinister. He didn't care. The press of Bobby's arm around his waist, steadying and supporting him, occupied him to the exclusion of all the rest. The dim stone corridors came as a relief. He lifted his head from watching the floor pass under his feet as he felt two figures in the hall ahead of them.

Pryde and Wisdom.

Pete had already reduced his black tuxedo to the same state of careless dishevelment that characterized all his suits. The coat hung unbuttoned, his bow tie dangled undone over a dress shirt boasting a whiskey stain in the place of two shirt studs. Lank black hair fell over his saturnine features. He was leaning back against the wall, casually smoking, with his head tipped back, while Kitty paced back and forth, intent on the cell phone held to her ear.

Remy and Bobby dragged to a halt.

"No. No. Do not let Harry pull that again," Kitty instructed. She absently twisted a curl of hair around her free hand. "Don't let him tell you it's for Moira either. Absolutely not."

Pete blew a smoke ring.

Remy's fingers twitched. He wondered if he could steal Pete's cigarettes. Just as an exercise. He mentally laughed at himself. Sure.

Pete exhaled another tendril of smoke. Remy's eyes followed it. He snapped his eyes back to Pete's face as the other man chuckled. "Here, LeBeau, catch."

Remy snatched the half-empty package of Silk Cuts out of the air, propped his shoulders against the wall and immediately tapped out a cancer stick. He rolled the cylinder between his fingers, ignoring Bobby and Pete in favor of savoring the tactile experience of just holding the cigarette. He walked it through his fingers just for the pleasure of it then lifted the cylinder and ran it under his nose, inhaling the scent of it unlit.

"It's a fag, mate, not a bint you're about to bag off"

Remy bared his teeth at Pete before lighting up with a spark of his charge.

"So, he's still off his nut?" Pete asked Bobby. He waved his hand, along with the cigarette, at Remy. "Still keeping mum?"

Bobby rolled his eyes. "Yeah, so what? What about you, what are you two doing hiding out here?"

Remy concentrated on inhaling his first blissful cloud of nicotine and carcinogens, even closing his eyes. The air moved as Pete gestured to Kitty, who remained in intense conversation. His headache
eased enough to notice.

"Checking on the rugrats."

"Oh, man, Harry and Moira aren't here?" Bobby said. "Too bad."

"I'm sure everyone's sorry you don't have someone your mental age to hang out with," Pete sniped.

Remy's lips twitched as he suppressed a grin.

"Bite me," Bobby returned. "I thought Remy'd like to see them."

Remy still had his eyes closed, but he nodded.

"Yeah, I can see it's killing him."

Kitty's voice rose. The midnight blue skirt of her gown swished and flared as she paced in a tight figure eight. "No, I'm not being paranoid, Paint. I don't want my kids exposed too. I'd rather they miss me than kiss me and catch La Belle."

"Oh, shit," Bobby whispered.

Remy blinked his eyes open and looked at Kitty. She'd covered it expertly with make-up, but he saw the pallor and blotchiness that said she'd cried hard and long recently. Her eyes were still puffy too. She was murmuring into the phone, talking to the twins.

"Kitty?"

Pete nodded.

Remy thumped his head back against the wall. Who next? Henrí must have had the day from hell, telling everyone. Smoke burned the back of his throat and he fought back a cough. No one wanted to hear anyone coughing. His eyes stung.

"You?" Bobby asked.

Pete gave a raw little laugh. He snarled, "I'm clean as fucking whistle according to McCoy."

"Listen, Pete, Hank will find a–"

Remy touched Bobby's shoulder and shook his head. Don't. Henrí would have given Pete and Kitty every assurance he could—the same ones he'd recited to them. None of that would comfort Pete.

Bobby shoved his hands in his pockets. "Crap."

Pete watched Kitty with a soft, aching look, a look full of fear that he would lose all he loved in the world.

"It's just—just you aren't alone, okay?"

"Bugger off, Drake," he snapped.
Bobby's soft ragged laugh snapped Pete's attention back to him. "I got a visit from my best friend today too," Bobby said. "So did a lot of people. It sucks. You ever think what a bitch it is for the rest of us?"

Remy hadn't lifted his hand from Bobby's shoulder. He squeezed it. Bobby sent a flickering glance back to him. The shoulder under his hand straightened. "To hell with it." He caught Remy's hand and tugged him down the corridor past Pete. Remy charged the rest of his cigarette into dust. Neater than dropping the stub.

As they passed Kitty, Bobby leaned close and kissed her cheek. "See you soon, okay?"

Kitty nodded.

Remy pushed his sorrow aside for a moment and used his empathy to soothe some of the worst anguish she felt. Kitty had been fighting since she was thirteen. Very little scared her to her bones. But she didn't want anything to happen to her kids and she worried about Pete. Remy did his best to bolster her confidence that they would all muddle through.

Bobby pulled him onward until they reached Remy's room. Inside, Remy locked the door. Bobby hadn't let go of his other hand. Remy caught his breath. Bobby turned to face him. He looked solemn. "Hank told me to stop making a martyr of myself"

Remy raised an eyebrow.

"Hank's always right, you know?" Bobby nodded along with his own words. "Besides, the martyr gig, the angst and the guilt, that's your thing really, not mine, isn't it?"

Remy shrugged but smiled too. He felt easier away from Xavier's oppressive presence. He let the link that had formed between him and Bobby flower open and absorbed every emotion Bobby felt for the first time.


He'd known Bobby wanted him sometimes. It wasn't something that could be controlled. But he'd kept himself from ever looking to see more than the surface of what Bobby felt toward him. He had been afraid to know. Afraid that he'd hurt Bobby just by knowing if he couldn't return the same emotions. As much as he'd let himself think about the situation after the time they'd spent working together in Detroit, he'd thought that it would be kinder to not know than to reject him. After Rogue died, he'd rejected even the thought of loving anyone again. He'd meant to lock his heart away.

It should have worked. It had worked. Something had been growing between Lorna and Remy after New York, but it foundered when he took on the job of seducing Wanda. But Bobby pulled him out of the Mojave and held him through that long night of nightmares and uncomprehending terror before Sinister and Emma shoved his memories back inside. Bobby had been there with him through every night since. Somehow, when Remy hadn't been looking for it, Bobby had unlocked the feelings he'd sworn he wouldn't let out again.

He couldn't bear to think of hurting Bobby any more than his Stormy. He wouldn't do it.
Bobby made him smile. Bobby made it all better. Endearing, uncertain, kind Bobby could make him laugh in the worst situations, make him remember there was joy in life. Bobby could make him happy if Remy let him.

"I have to say this," Bobby went on. "I won't ever bother you again, we'll still be friends, you know, but it's time to take a chance. Better than never trying at all. Besides, I know you won't hate me or anything. I just hope you don't feel sorry--"

Remy laid his finger over Bobby's lips, stopping his babbling. The link sang between them. It went both ways. If he let it, Bobby would feel what he felt. He brushed his fingers across Bobby's lips, along his cheekbone, around the curve of his ear and into his hair. His hand came to rest at the nape of Bobby's neck. He stroked the pad of his thumb over warm skin.

He could do this.

"Remy?"

Bobby's need ratcheted higher. Remy smiled at him. He wanted to do this. It was going to be all right.

"You know what I want to say, don't you?"

He nodded.

"Is it okay?" So quiet and unsure.

He pulled Bobby into his arms and let his end of the empathic link open.

"Oh."

It was okay. It was fine. It was Bobby's mouth, sweet and warm with beer still on his breath. It was Bobby's hands plucking away their clothes, Bobby's eyes smiling, crinkling at the corners. It was both their bodies tangled on soft sheets, given and embraced, sweat sheened, careful and gentle and hungry. It was Bobby's heart open to him without reservation or regret. Remy let go the last of his defenses and let Bobby in. He wouldn't say the word out loud. The women he had loved romantically tended to leave him, try to kill him or die. Usually at least two of those. He wouldn't say it, but he'd show Bobby what he felt.

He sent his emotions down the link, all them, not a projection, all that he felt. The empathic link gave it all to Bobby, perfectly and absolutely without doubt or question.

~Love.~

Bobby smiled at him.

"Hank is always right." He smoothed his palm down Remy's back with shy delight. Remy sighed and pressed back into the touch. He didn't want to talk about Henrí. "I owe him a box of Twinkies."

Remy laughed soundlessly against Bobby's neck.
Frogs and Scorpions

Chapter Summary

A chat between conspirators.

AD 2227, March 4
New Genosha
The Citadel

Electronics and telepathy were both too easily tapped by outsiders. In New Genosha, secrets were best kept spoken. Their strongest defenses were their mental shields, their status and the others' ethics. Conveniently, Psylocke spent most of her time in the field, so they didn't have to obviously avoid her. The rest of the telepaths had better manners.

An invitation for a stroll in the meditation gardens during a lunch break or to share a drink after a long session in the Alphanate raised no eyebrows. They had known each other a very long time.

The paths through the gardens were paved in irregular white stone laid out in curves to form a spiraling labyrinth. In the late afternoon, a sleepy heat filled the air with the fragrance of heavy-headed flowers and the buzz of nectar-drunk bees. Gulls soared against the robin's egg blue sky. Blackbirds, the males shining onyx and females dusty and duller, hopped along the paths.

They strolled together and if someone had asked he might have said he just couldn't stand another moment in the same room as Wanda Maximoff.

Mystique wore her own shape. Her skin darkened to an indigo shade where the sun touched, unconsciously adjusting. He stayed in the shade as much as possible and protected his eyes from the glare with a pair of dark shades.

They were both old pros at this game. Their voices stayed low as they spoke but weren't whispers and their body language remained relaxed. Nothing said they were hiding anything.

"What kind of game are you playing with Aiken?" he asked idly.

"I like him."

Mystique tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled at him. Her hair looked like heart's blood in the sunlight. He regarded her in return with cynical affection. "You're already putting together an exit strategy." Of course, she was.

"You're the one who pointed out we need to take the long view."

He looked back at the Citadel. It was beautiful as a cathedral.

"Why did you decide to do it this way?" she asked.
"I'm like a scorpion. It's my nature."

It seemed like he'd been asleep all these decades, lulled into a comfortable doze by the peace of this idyllic garden they'd built on the bones and blood of the past. He shouldn't have been surprised to discover canker in the rose. Nor should anyone be surprised by his response if they discovered it. He could have told the others, confided and debated and let the public know. They would know, eventually; he didn't fool himself that the secret would stay within the circle of conspirators he'd drawn together.

The Dissenters were doing a good job of distracting attention so far. That bought them some more time. In the Alphanate and in private, he played devil's advocate over dropping the Barrier. The people who knew him thought they understood his feelings. After over two hundred years, they did, but only if they had all the facts. He was careful they didn't.

"Not for power?"

He smiled without humor.

"For good or evil, we already have the power." He brushed a dozy bee from the bell of a tangerine-striped flower. His eyes followed its uneven flight away. Bees were necessary, amazing, and so fragile. "He'll die."

"Poor Benjamin."

"Did you have to kill the woman?"

"What?"

"The woman you impersonated coming back from Mars," he said impatiently. "The report Milan and Northstar presented to the Triune was edited, but I know the details. They provided you with an old, SHIELD-manufacture life replica so the ship's passenger manifest would match after you got off at Avalon."

Mystique seemed undisturbed.

"I needed to take her place on the ship. Mirror couldn't go on impersonating me after the Alphanate began sessions. One of the telepaths would have noticed."

"Why her?"

She shrugged. "Just her bad luck she ran into a shapeshifter that needed her face for a while."

These things happen. Except they didn't. Not in the world outside the Barrier. Not even in New Genosha, in their green and happy little playground. That French engineer had no reason to think a shapeshifter would steal her face and life just to hitch a ride back to Earth.

It hadn't been part of the plan.

Slipstream's unfortunate concussion following a Pit challenge had upset their careful schedule. He'd been slated to retrieve Mystique from the hidden base they'd set up but the head trauma had interfered with his ability to teleport over the distance to Mars and back. Mystique had been forced to
She'd infiltrated the humans' research installation in time to slip aboard ares Explorer before it started home. The repairs Milan had overseen at Avalon Station had made sure no one would realize the blown fusion plant and potentially fatal trajectory into the station's defense perimeter had been Mystique's doing.

"What happened to the real body?" he asked.

"I kept a sample of DNA to salt my decoy and put her out an airlock. Every gram of mass on that ship had to be accounted for or it wouldn't have ended up where it belonged," Mystique replied. "Besides, bodies have a nasty way of getting found. They start to stink."

Bodies and secrets.

The rot had set in. That woman's death belonged to him. He'd made the decisions that led to it, along with the other innocent scientists and crew members who died on the ares.

At least the Dissenters' bombing campaign had been calculated to avoid any casualties. Their concerns were real. Mystique and he had just co-opted their movement to mask their own work and maintain control over their actions.

The gulls wheeled and cried, white and gray. The blackbirds were quiet, too shy to stray within reach, too accustomed to them to abandon the garden. He'd always wished his powers included flight. Flying away seemed so much better than running.

Maybe Mystique had the right idea. They would have to go somewhere. There would be nowhere to run in New Genosha for him. It would have to be Out There, with the baselines. Whether what he'd set in train on Mars worked or not, the consequences would mean exile at best. It had been a long time since he'd been called traitor.

Mystique could slide under the radar and disappear for a while. The Dissenter shapeshifter Mirror could impersonate her for a day or a week. He couldn't. Everyone he was tied to would notice. It frustrated him. He liked attention, but he hated being a public figure.

He looked up from the white stones and asked what he had wanted to ask since Mystique returned. "Had either of them made any progress?"

"They're close," Mystique admitted.

"We're on a time table, they need to finish it." They had to. The future of New Genosha counted on it.

The division bell began to ring. Time to return to the Assembly Chamber and the Alphanate for the second half of the afternoon session. He lingered. No one would say anything if he was late.

"They're both still getting over the idea that they died."

Mystique started along the path back toward the Citadel.

"No one else could do it," he said to her back.
"No one else would do it," she replied.

He stepped back onto the white path and followed her, his shadow trailing behind him. He left the garden to its bees; it held no peace for him. The woman who had planted it would not have approved of what he was doing.
Scott wanted Gambit to start talking again. He never wanted this. The X-Men learn what Professor Xavier did.

AD 2014, March 8
France
Mont Saint Francis

Scott had been hoping to have just a half hour alone to get some work done before someone needed him again. The monastery's library seemed like a good choice to hide—work-alone. Aside from wiring it and adding climate control, it had been left pretty much alone. The furniture consisted of a mishmash of pieces that didn't fit anywhere else. Pale sunshine poured in through the high windows.

He thought he had it to himself until he glimpsed the cat and stopped in his tracks. If the cat was there, Gambit was somewhere close. Scott despised the cat. It disturbed his sense of the universe. Bobby swore—seriously—that Sinister had given Number Ten to Gambit. In turn, the cat seemed to delight in irritating Scott.

It sat like a carved coal statue on the big, scarred refectory table that dominated the library next to Gambit's laptop, tail wrapped around its paws. Just the tip twitched. It yawned insanely wide, displaying needle sharp teeth and a curling pink tongue.

Scott glared at it. He knew the instant he set his laptop down next to Gambit's, one of the paws would lash out and open a bloody, stinging scratch over the back of his hand. He—seriously—believed Sinister had given Gambit it. The cat was evil.

Jean—of course—adored the cat. So did Jubilee. He had had seen the creature casually leap onto Magneto's lap and stand, steadily kneading the Master of Magnetism's legs, with its tail wafting under the man's chin. Storm was less enthusiastic, but tolerated it. Scott thought it had something to do with her garden and litter boxes, but made a point of not asking. The only one who hated the cat more than Scott was Emma. Even Scott had to admit the day she stood up from a chair with her newest all-white outfit covered in black hairs had been worth quite few cans of sardines.

"Shoo," he told it. It looked at him like he looked at something stuck to the bottom of his boot. "Scram."

Twitch went the tail.

"Vamoose."

Fingers snapped. Scott jumped. Jesus. He'd forgotten Gambit was probably in the room. The cat casually jumped off the table and strolled into a shadowy corner of the room. Scott would have sworn the little jerk of its upright tail was a feline version of 'fuck you.' It bounded up onto the arm of
the wingback chair in the corner. Gambit tended to find the shadows, the corners and margins, to stay along the fringes these days.

Scott set his laptop on the table where the cat had been. Hah. No scratches. He considered that a signal triumph. "I'm not bothering you, am I?" he asked.

Gambit shook his head once and stayed curled up in his chair.

Scott felt Gambit watching him, though his eyes were hidden behind a fox-colored fringe. His hair still wasn't near the length he'd always preferred. They couldn't forget the wraith they'd pulled out of the Mojave. He was still all angles and sharp bones. He looked painfully fragile.

He went ahead and opened his laptop, then pulled a chair around to where he wanted to sit with the light not quite behind him. His e-mails were almost all MRF related.

He glanced at Gambit. The cat had parked itself on Gambit's lap. A half-smile lightened his expression as he ran his hand over its back. Thanks to Hank and Triage, his fingers weren't crabbed and crippled any longer. Emma and Essex had sworn everything went right when they restored Gambit's memories, but Scott had been damn worried anyway. He still hadn't said a word since they'd retrieved him, though around New Year's, he'd begun improving. Sometimes people just broke. He knew how close he had come himself, with Jean's diagnosis. He'd hated thinking that had happened to Gambit.

He skimmed through the rest of his e-mail then opened a file with a report from Canada. "More good news," he muttered.

It could be worse. The Purity Brigades were stalled at Estevan just north of the border. Canadian troops had been brought in to stop the incursion. The CanAm Highway had closed, but there hadn't been many new refugees coming into Regina anyway since the US missile strikes. Another week and they'd finish transporting the rest of the mutants there to the transient quarter in Hammer Bay. Maglifters were flying in and out every six hours. The Canadian government hadn't declared war with the US, but it was a close thing, and they no longer had any problem with MRF bases being established and troops staging from them. When they had all their non-combatants out and weren't endangering the civilians of Regina, they could open the Saskatchewan Front again. The MRF hadn't gone on the offensive since Denver. They'd needed to rebuild their command and communication network so it didn't rely on telepaths, in case the Pures knocked them out again. Wolverine and Domino were champing at the bit.

Denver made him think of Gambit. Oddly enough, Gambit made him think that Jean, despite their psi-bond, had been keeping something secret from him. He'd noticed after New Year's Eve. To be precise, the second day of January, after he'd recovered from his hangover. If he really thought about it though, he realized she'd been holding something back before that. Since about the time they got Jubilee back. Whatever it was it connected to Jubilee and Gambit, which translated to either the mucons or Denver. Sore spots either way.

He glanced at the second laptop sitting on the table. Gambit's laptop. For the last two months, Gambit had been analyzing raw data provided by their intelligence network and his ex-wife. The good will of the Thieves and Assassins' Guilds had turned out to be a godsend as the war went on. The Guilds were trained for covert work, had their own networks, and had no loyalty to nation or species, only their guilds. Having worked with them now, he understood the Gambit he'd first met much better.
He'd been surprised by just how good Gambit's reports were. He shouldn't have been. Sinister hadn't made Gambit his favorite just for his genetics. Gambit and Wolverine had used their contacts to gather information for the X-Men for years. The Professor kept that from most of the X-Men. The Professor had explained his reasons when Scott confessed his worries and doubts. Maybe he just hadn't liked being left out of the loop. It was petty to resent Professor Xavier for keeping his own counsel. But the questions kept creeping back.

Scott made use of Gambit's skills now that he knew about them. He wished they'd done more of that: low profile actions with big impacts that didn't lead straight to panicked headlines. They'd wasted a lot of chances. No wonder Gambit had been such a pain to command. He'd seen the same thing. That had to be part of why he'd left after Rogue died. There was only so much you could take. Scott had left a couple of times himself, though it never stuck. He'd always come back when he felt relatively sane again.

Relatively sane being the operative words these days. Some days that felt like too much to ask of any of them. He had an ache in his gut that he'd grown accustomed to since the first time they'd cracked open a Mucon. It never really went away; he got used to it. Things got worse: Nathan died, Warren died, and Jean had La Belle. He could see it in his friends' eyes too. They'd failed.

Or maybe they'd never had a chance. The game was rigged. Fate had it in for them and nothing they did would have changed anything. The Dream was a gamble they'd lost. The Professor still believed. He insisted it was still possible to live side by side with the baselines. Scott tried, but it was hard.

If Gambit would talk, he'd probably say, 'I told you so,' with that maddening smirk. Because he had, years ago, at a mass grave on an African plain. Scott shook off the depressing thoughts. He had work to do. There was always work to do since he accepted overall command of the New Genoshan Army.

He looked toward Gambit. "Have you looked at the raw take from the Guilds this week?"

Gambit glanced up from the cat. He nodded, then he surprised Scott by setting the cat onto the chair's arm, rising and joining him at the table. He moved as gracefully as ever, whether in today's faded jeans and sweater or in battle armor, but there was a tiny hitch to his movement, a legacy of expecting pain more than its present reality. Scott wondered if he'd ever go out in the field again.

He opened his laptop and quickly brought up a file on screen, then swiveled it to face Scott. Then Gambit stood with his head cocked to the side, waiting for Scott to read the analysis.

Scott grinned. "Smart ass."

Gambit rolled his eyes, which looked disconcerting when only black sclera showed.

"I can't believe I used to tell you to shut up all the time. Bishop was a chatty Kathy compared to you now."

Gambit flashed a lopsided smile, shadowed by the knowledge that Bishop hadn't come back from his last mission.

"Yeah, I bet if you ever do start talking again, I'm going to be looking back on this period fondly," Scott said. "Right?"

Gambit shrugged. The oversized sweater he wore slid to the side, showing a black t-shirt underneath,
a too sharp collarbone and the fading, obscene scars on his neck.

Scott concentrated on reading what Gambit had written. Gambit tapped his fingers against table top.

"That doesn't make me read faster."

Gambit stilled his fingers.

Scott continued reading to the end. He spun the laptop back to Gambit then shoved his hands through his hair. His head ached. He squeezed his eyes shut and pulled off his visor so that he could knuckle the lids, as though he could rub out the pain.

"I would have been happy to be wrong. The Professor is going to use this as an argument for peace talks and we aren't in a good place for that. Not yet."

He noticed Gambit's sudden stillness, but didn't have a clue what it meant. He leaned back in his chair for a moment, easing his back, letting his head fall back then groaned and groped for his visor. Gambit set it into his hand.

"Thanks."

Scott went back to his own work. Gambit carried his laptop back to the wingback chair and began typing something. The quiet rattle of keys provided a sense of company while not interrupting his own reading. Gambit's presence demanded nothing. He didn't notice when the typing stopped, intent on his own work. When he finished, he looked over to the corner. Gambit slumped sidewise in the chair, asleep, the laptop perched precariously on his knee and the chair's arm. The light had shifted and reached his knees.

Scott knew better than to startle the other man. "Gambit," he said quietly. "Wake up." Gambit's eyes snapped open. He pulled in a harsh breath but didn't even twitch otherwise. Once he seemed aware of where he was, Scott said, "Your laptop's about to fall."

Gambit caught it and set it aside, then scrubbed a hand over his face. He opened his mouth, closed it, then spoke in raspy, barely audible whisper.

"Cyke."

Scott froze. "Baby's first words," he joked when he found his own voice. A wide grin plastered itself over his face. Gambit ducked his head. "Come on, is that all you're going to say?"

Scott kept grinning as Gambit flipped him off.

"It's okay. Take your time."

An intent look answered that. Scott could see Gambit debating whether to open his mouth again. He waited, wondering idly what had prompted him to break his silence.

Gambit folded his arms around himself and scooted back deeper into his chair. He looked unhappy. Sad. Worried. Conflicted. Hurt and in pain. A dozen other emotions flickered across his face, none of them the sort anyone wants to experience. None of them anything Gambit would normally let show.
"Gambit…"

Third person. Crap. Scott had noticed the tendency to refer to himself by his codename as a distancing mechanism. Gambit used it more than anyone else, but he'd caught the others doing it too. As though using a codename distanced their real selves from their own actions. Gambit had folded his arms tight to his body. The joints of his fingers were white where he'd dug them into his elbows.

"Go ahead," Scott prompted.

"'Bout the Professor…"

Soft, so soft the words; Scott could pretend he hadn't heard. If he wanted to. If he could justify playing deaf. He didn't want to hear this. He knew it. Somehow, he knew anything Gambit said would only reveal something horrendous. It had to be bad, to crack Gambit's perfect poker face. Enough to keep him mute for months. Did he have to speak now? Scott pushed the petty resentment down.

"Okay." He knew if he didn't listen now, there wouldn't be another chance. Gambit was shaking. He said, "Just tell me."

Gambit wouldn't try again.

He turned his chair around and sat, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. A tendril of inquiry extended into his mind from Jean's end of the psi-bond. She'd sensed both his delight when Gambit spoke and his rising unease. ~Scott?~

Scott focused his own thoughts and sent back words ~Remy's talking to me. I think it's going to be bad.~

~Do you need me?~

~I don't want to spook him.~

~He's still fragile.~

~And he's never trusted telepaths much, not even you.~

~I'll be here if you need me. And I'll find Bobby.~

Of course, Bobby. The two men seemed to be joined at the hip. They were friends; if they were more it didn't invalidate the friendship that came first. It was none of his business. Jean's warm mind voice whispered, ~You're right.~

~They're lovers?~

Scott hoped nothing went wrong for the two of them. He wasn't as oblivious as people thought. He'd known Bobby was in love with Gambit for years. He'd watched Gambit treat Bobby as gently as he could without pretending any stronger feelings than he'd had and known the best thing was to stay out of it. Rogue had been gone a long time. He knew Bobby would never have taken advantage of Gambit's vulnerability since coming back. If they were together, Scott wished them both whatever happiness they could find.
"It's sweet."

"Tell me you don't peek," he chided with a mental smile.

"Bobby doesn't mind."

"Bobby doesn't know, I'd bet."

"Busted."

"You telepaths. You're all perverts."

"Bobby's on his way." 

The psionic conversation lasted only seconds. Scott focused on Gambit again. He hoped Bobby came quickly. Gambit seemed to fold in on himself. But his chin came up. Scott hoped to hell this didn't have to do with Denver. Sometime after the taking and loss of the city, they'd all begun calling it that. Just Denver. Everyone knew what it meant.

The last day everything fell apart. The Marine Purity Brigades pounded MRF lines as they pulled back toward DIA. The Marines were using new nanite bombs, along with experimental grenades that detonated a neural scrambling pulse that temporarily disabled some mutants' powers. Electronic and radio comms were unreliable, either compromised or jammed, when the Sentinels attacked. They could have regrouped, retreated in order and evacuated, even then, with the telepaths were linking command and control. The backlash of a psi-blast took out the entire Telepathic Corps. No one reinforced the left flank and it caved in. That was the end. The remaining Striker Units waded in against the Sentinels, working to hold them back long enough for the rest of the troops to get out, and they had paid the price in brutal casualties. Without coordination, it was every unit for themselves or as in Domino's concise after-action report: a colossal clusterfuck.

Viridian Brigade was wiped out. They didn't even know everyone who was dead, wounded or captured until weeks later. The lists had been too long and filled with familiar names. Unuscione, Prism, Blockbuster, Gris Gris, Haze, Bolt, Mellancamp, Sabretooth, Katu, Rictor, Sven Kleinstock, Harlan Kleinstock, Bedlam, Javitz, Aurora, Banshee, Siryn, Monet. Gambit, Polaris, Jubilee, MIA, WIA, captured. Too many others he'd never known to count.

The casualties alone almost broke them. He remembered trying to punch Pete and only stopping when Magneto caught his fist. They were lucky Betsy recovered fast enough to find Lorna and get to her. They were lucky to have gotten Jubilee and then Gambit back. Lucky. Yeah. Luck was relative term, wasn't it? Jubilee was alive. She'd never be the same girl she'd been, but she was back. Sinister was their ally now. Gambit was back. Gambit and Bobby were lovers. Gambit and Bobby and Jubilee were all dying. La Belle would manage what the flatscans couldn't. Lucky. Oh, yeah, Scott felt lucky.

Any luckier and he'd have to shoot himself.

He was thinking of all this, horrible as it was, because Scott just knew Gambit was about to tell him something worse.

"It'll be okay," he said. Whether he meant to reassure himself or Gambit really made no difference. They knew a lie when they heard it. Gambit certainly did. He shook his head in denial. "Okay. Yeah. Tell me anyway."
"Before Denver – " Gambit's voice was rusty, unused, rougher and lower than Scott remembered it. He had to sit forward and listen closely to hear him. "When I joined, Pete asked me to find whoever was stirring up people in Genosha against Magneto."

Scott took a chance and scooted his chair forward close enough he could touch Gambit's knee. Touch carried so much freight for an empath. More for Gambit, who had issues on top of issues with it going back to his childhood, wanting it, rejecting it, all nicely screwed up by whatever had happened to him in the Mojave. For once the gamble paid off. Bobby and Jubilee had been gentling him to accept contact again. It must have worked. He didn't pull away from Scott.

"I started with Wanda."

Oh, crap, this was going to fuck up Magnus.

"Nothin' to be proud of," Gambit murmured, "using someone like that, but it's what I do. She was lonely, hated Genosha, wanted to go back to London, to what was left of the Avengers."

Scott didn't have any time for the Avengers. The Avengers had called the Creed Administration on what happened to Captain America, not what they were doing to mutants. They'd never given a damn about mutant rights, too holy high and above that to interfere. Captain America had disappeared before the Scouring began, though. He'd been held prisoner and experimented on until it finally killed him. No coincidence that: he would have stood up and condemned it. Stark had released the information, wherever he got it, to the whole world and then used everything he had to take out any facilities devoted to Super Soldier development. Since Thunderbolt Ross had been in charge, that meant a lot of military bases. Stark was Madripoor now, on the run from SHIELD and wanted dead in the US, with a bounty on his head. Sometimes the MRF exchanged data and intelligence with him. The Winter Soldier and the Black Widow remained in the States, killing their way up a list of people involved in Steve Rogers' death. Most of the Avengers had simply relocated, though. They wouldn't take Wanda back; the UK wouldn't welcome Magneto's daughter. She was safer in Genosha.

Whether Genosha was safer with her there was a different matter.

"Before I left for Denver, she told me who was behind it. Who she was working with besides Mystique." Mystique being involved didn't even merit a blink. It certainly wasn't something Gambit would worry over revealing to the X-Men. She always had her own agenda. There had to be more. Gambit curled up tighter. "I thought Pete would believe me, but… Wanda wasn't enough. I wanted to get proof it was really him."

"Him."

"The Professor."

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. No. Scott opened his mouth to deny it. His thoughts raced the psi-blast that sabotaged them at Denver. The way they'd 'forgotten' Gambit. Little things. Little digs. Big things like the Professor's anger that they had to work with Magneto or that he was building something good and necessary in Genosha. The lies Scott had caught him in more than once and always let slide. How many had he missed? Because the Professor lied beautifully. Fluidly. Repeatedly. And he'd carried out a campaign to turn the X-Men against Magneto and depose him after Denver.
He'd excoriated Magneto for the casualties they'd taken when the Marines broke through their lines. He'd only let it lie after the riots and the attempted assassination in Hammer Bay. Even then, he suggested a vote of no-confidence might be the only way to avert worse. It might have come to that if Pete and Mystique – Mystique again! – hadn't broken the back of the malcontents trying to remove Magneto from office. And they'd done while the Professor was in Australia… No wonder Gambit hadn't spoken. Magneto wouldn't thank him when Wanda was implicated and none of the X-Men would thank him for fingering the Professor. All of them would rather believe he was lying, wouldn't they? Scott would. But Scott had a responsibility to everyone who had died or might be endangered if it was true. He had to act if it was.

"You think he had something to do with the telepathic blackout at Denver?" Scott groped for another explanation but nothing fit as well. Somewhere locked away from his own thoughts, he'd known this, recognized it. "Motherfucker." There had been nothing about the telepathic attack in the intelligence intercepts. It hadn't been used against them again and it would have, if the Pures had such a weapon.

"Don't know about that," Gambit said. "but you can't trust him."

"Not if he did that," Scott agreed. Gambit could still be wrong. Scott wanted that, but wanting wasn't enough.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. It just got worse the more he thought about it. The Professor had told them he didn't know what happened to Gambit, that he couldn't find Gambit searching telepathically. They accepted it, because if the Professor couldn't do it, no one else could. Things had been so bad, no one had questioned what happened. Then they'd just forgotten Gambit and Scott knew that hadn't been natural.

At New Year's, Gambit had looked sick when he saw the Professor, when the Professor offered to 'help' him. Help him 'forget' more like. Scott couldn't comprehend how the Professor could justify what he'd done. He was going to find out. The Professor was due back at Mont Saint Francis from Australia the next day.

Scott's hand clenched on his knee. "Gambit–"

"Sorry," Gambit whispered. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have–"

Scott felt the shudder that ran through Gambit's still thin frame. His body was braced for a blow, waiting for it. He thought Scott was going to hit him and he wasn't going to fight back. He loosened his fingers. He'd been clutching Gambit's knee hard enough to leave bruises. Jesus. He wasn't going to hit the man for telling the truth. He wasn't that much a fool, even if he had trusted the Professor all this time. "It's better you told me."

Not good, but better. He needed to know if the Professor couldn't be trusted. He might hate it, but he'd had to know.

He hesitated for an instant then pulled Gambit into a loose embrace, rocking just a little the way he did to reassure his baby daughter when she needed it. He rubbed his hand up and down Gambit's back, wincing at the way he could feel the bones of his spine even through two layers of fabric. Unlike Rachel, Gambit remained rigid except for a faint tremble. Thinking of Rae spiked rage through his chest. If the Professor had interfered with Scott and Jean, then why wouldn't he do the same to Rae someday? Gambit shook in his arms and he wished Bobby would get to the library. Bobby could reassure Gambit. Hell, Bobby could reassure him.
What the hell did he do now? Confront the Professor? Warn Magneto and everyone else? Stay silent? No, not the last. Scott couldn't ignore what Gambit had told him. The Professor was too dangerous. God, he was so angry. He so felt betrayed. The Professor was more his father than Corsair had ever been. What the hell was wrong with him?

Gambit twisted in his arms. His whisper was accompanied by the silken soft mental feel of his empathy, delicately soothing away Scott's pain and rage. "Sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

"No. Don't do that. Don't blame yourself. Don't mess with my emotions either," Scott snapped.

The warm ease dissolved leaving Scott's emotions drained. Gambit pulled away and he let him. It was an awkward position anyway and his back had begun to hurt. The mundane did insist on intruding.

"Didn't mean to say anything," Gambit said. "Just–earlier–when you said he would try to open peace talks… I had to tell you. Don't let him in your head."

"You didn't trust us."

Gambit shrugged. "Didn't trust he hadn't…"

Scott finished the thought bitterly, "Adjusted us?"

"Oui."

"I wonder how many times he has." Wasn't that a bitter pill?

He stuffed his emotions down inside to be taken out and examined or indulged later. He couldn't be angry with Gambit. Maybe if he'd smirked, even once, or mocked, but not when the damage was staring him the face.

Gambit was one of his own. They'd fought side by side. They'd both worn the X. Gambit was his, damn it, his team-mate, his responsibility, his fellow mutant, just the same as Wolverine, Bobby, Hank and the others. No matter what their differences were, Gambit had never failed to follow him into a fight. It didn't matter who left or came back. Once an X-Man, always an X-Man. Scott took that seriously. He took care of his own.

The Professor hadn't taught him that. He'd always known it. How dare the Professor betray that? He'd made a mockery of everything the X-Men had believed in by misusing his powers and made it worse by turning one of them.

"No wonder you don't trust us," he murmured.

"Trust you as much as anyone except Bobby and Storm," Gambit murmured. "You're too decent to screw anyone over that way. Same with Henrí and Jubilee."

"Jean too. You can trust Jean. She didn't know about this."

"Okay, Jean too."

"I have to tell her this. I need her to make sure the Professor doesn't make me forget or… anything
else. Let me tell her?"

"Oui."

Scott closed his eyes and concentrated on Jean. He guessed she'd be waiting, worried by the firestorm of emotion he'd been sending through the link.

~Jean?~

~What is it, Scott, what's wrong? Are you and Remy all right?~

~Yes and no~ he replied wearily. ~Could you come to the library too? I think you should both hear what Remy told me. I need you.~

~I'll be right there.~

~We'll be here.~

"You think he's lying?" Bobby demanded.

Jean shook her head.

"No. But there is the possibility that Sinister could have implanted a false memory."

Remy hated what he knew was coming next.

"Let me scan your memories, Remy."

He closed his eyes and turned his face away. Jean's mind rushed around him like a river over a boulder in its midst. Power. Her rejection/anger/denial/shock swept everything before it. Remy shuddered and snapped his eyes open.

Jean crouched before him, her hands were locked around his, her green eyes burning like chemical flames. Bobby's hands were on his shoulders, holding him the chair–no, just steadying him, smoothing down his arms in a comforting touch.

"Jean," Scott kept repeating. "Jean, Jean, Jean."

~Let me in. Let me see,~ she commanded, her power beating at his shields. Not hostile, he thought dreamily, just urgent. It was too late to hide anything now. He'd opened his mouth to Scott. He might as well open his mind to her. He dropped his shields.

She threaded into his memories, swift, clean, a green-gold presence pressing for what she wanted to find but careful. Remy had to concentrate to keep his shields from snapping back into place. It didn't quite hurt. It just felt unnatural. There was none of the blending he always loathed. Jean kept herself separate, for which he felt grateful.

Delving, she found his guilt and misery over the Morlocks, his reasons, and passed on. She brushed past the tangle of sepia sorrow, singed love and raw red grief that framed his memory of Rogue, past Belladonna and Jean-Luc – warped bright loyalties – Essex – another knot of affection and horror–
and forward. Storm – cool clean blue sky flight – fighting Skrulls, Brood, reckless delight, ozone burn, Magneto – Avalon falling, burning through atmosphere – Genosha, New Son – white terror bright –

– Terror.

The collar.

Jean backtracked from those naked memories of the cold cell, his hollow head, the static noise of despair.


Remy was breathing hard. He’d closed his eyes again. Jean drew out the everything he’d charmed from Wanda Maximoff, the evidence he’d assembled against Mystique and then Xavier. Even his own disbelief. He'd wanted an explanation before he told Pete. He'd never had the chance to ask for it. She traced the scar of the psi-blast, recognized Xavier's signature, but didn't recoil. The damage was slowly healing. Her hands squeezed his.

~Remy.~

~Oui?~ Stutter of relief spreading through him. He wasn’t crazy. It had happened. His memories weren’t false. ~You believe me.~

~Yes.~

~Merci, chere, merci.~

~I need you to do something for me now.~

~What?~

~Find the pieces of my mind he's stolen and steal them back.~

~I don't understand.~

A green-gold mental smile soothed him with approval and confidence. Underneath, he felt a heaving sea of lava hot fury, a thermal furnace powered like the heart of a sun, the Phoenix wakening.

~Pieces of me he's locked away to keep me from thinking about them. I can't find them, but I know they're there.~

~I'm not good at this.~

~Link with me. Use my talent.~

Uncertain, but willing, he meshed his empathy and slight telepathy with Jean's vast ability. The link began as a thin tendril of cerise winding into a helix with Jean's green glow. Power poured through it into him.

Remy blinked.
He was in the infinite shared mindscape the telepaths called the Astral Plane. This time it appeared as an endless forest crowded up against the briar-entwined walls of a mansion of many rooms. He squinted. It was the Xavier Mansion, almost, but it shifted. Pieces of it looked like what might have been Jean's childhood home and the cabin in Alaska where she and Scott had lived once. A gothic spire came from Mont Saint Francis and the sleek-chased metal looked like X-Factor's Ship.

The briars folded away, green roses opening in the place of thorns. Jean was inviting him inside.

Remy stepped forward and was at the wall. Lovely, gold-tinged stone as though it had the sun caught in its matrix, rough and pieced together with perfect hand and toe holds. He flexed his fingers then brushed them over a dewy velvet rosebud, the green a surreal emerald shade, where the vine clung to the wall. It seemed to nod into his touch.

He went up the wall effortlessly, never disturbing a single vine or bloom. Inside, were orderly gardens. Outside, the forest was dark and dense. Birdsong filled the air.

He stepped off the wall onto a path through an herb garden, wondering which of them had provided that imagery, since Jean couldn't cook and he couldn't garden. A grin crossed his face. She'd probably lifted it from someone else. The wall disappeared behind him.

The doors were locked, of course. Not that that would stop a thief. Remy found a vine and a hand hold and almost flew onto a second floor balcony. The French doors made him smile again. The burglar's best friend, they called them down in the South.

Lock picks appeared in his hand with a thought and a flare of golden energy different from anything he'd known before.

A glimpse of himself in the glass of the doors showed a shadow outlined in red, wrapped in glowing wings, fire running through his hair. The phoenix sigil was etched over his left eye, burning gold.

His eyes were still his eyes, scarlet on black, glowing with his own power, he noticed, and felt better.

He knelt and picked the simple lock on the French doors as easily as he breathed, then stepped inside the room, closing the doors gently behind him.

Where would the Professor hide something from Jean? Remy began his search in the basement. Jean didn't like the basement. But this basement resembled the buried floors beneath the X-mansion, with corridors of stainless steel and tile, labs and an amorphous cavern he suspected represented the Danger Room. He bypassed it.

He snooped through dark passages and picked the locks of closed rooms, silently apologizing to Jean for the invasion of her privacy. One held a thousand images of a woman he recognized as her sister. They bled into each other, each one another memory of Sara Grey. If he looked too long at one, from the corner of his eyes he could see the other pictures shifting, screaming, traceries of Phalanx shifting under the faces. He shuddered and hovered in the doorway. Jean wouldn't to look in here long. Still, his instincts insisted nothing but Sara stayed in the room.

He backed away and locked the door.

A long line of doors stretched down the hallway he stood in. He wasn't in the basement, he noted. A window at the end of the hall shone as a white square. He blinked against the glare and glanced back. The door he'd just locked had become a blank wall.
Treading more cautiously now, he checked the next rooms. One opened onto a great calm lake, clearer than glass and deeper than he’d ever imagined. The water was warm when he tested it with his finger. It rippled faintly and splashed him. The drops that hung in the air glowed green. It murmured against the shore, Scott, Scott, Scott. His feet left no footprints in the sand. He smiled and slipped out.

He found a room that opened into an inferno of fire and hunger and screaming, guilt and horror that wrapped insidious chains around him and drew him inside. He burned and ached for more. The Phoenix unfurled its wings, shrieking, poisoned and warped. It consumed a sun, snuffed it from existence and every soul on the planet that circled it and it still wasn't enough. The brand on his face flared blinding bright and he soared across the galaxy.

The brand burned him. He stumbled backward, flames wreathing around him, until he passed the doorway and slammed his shoulder blades into the wall. The rose-flowered wall paper began to burn.

Remy reached forward and grabbed the doorknob. His gloves burned away into ash as he pulled the door into the Phoenix itself shut. Shuddering, he sank down onto his knees and rested his forehead against the closed door. It felt hot. Tremors ran through him. How did Jean withstand that? No one could harness that much power and remain sane. If he hadn't been linked to her talent, he knew he would have burned up in just that memory.

Still shaking, he levered himself back onto his feet and stood with one hand braced against the singed wall.

~Sorry, chere,~ he murmured mentally. He smoothed his hand over the burn mark, using his own talent to smooth the pain away until the damage faded and the faded roses were there instead.

He kept searching through the rooms of her mind, riffling through desks and closets, checking every hideyhole a thief knew to look in.

Nothing.

He found a closet under a back staircase, locked, the key hanging from a string over a nail. Cautiously, he used it. The door opened onto a hellish vista he recognized after a moment: the view from the top of the Empire State Building. The city spread out before him had become a demon's hunting ground. Pterodactyl-like creatures soared through the sky, riding thermals from the cold flames consuming the other skyscrapers.

Remy stepped into the memory cautiously. He hadn't been an X-Man when this happened, but he recognized that the Goblyn Queen offering baby Nathan to the Demon lord N'Astirh. She might look like Jean, but she wasn't. He cocked his head. He hadn't realized Jean had Madelyne Pryor's memories. He'd bet she didn't visit this room often.

With that thought he turned and looked around.

There were the demonized X-Men, including Wolverine and Stormy, fighting X-Factor. There was the real Jean confronting her clone. And there, watching from the shadows, red eyes and red diamond bright in the darkness, stood Sinister. The shiver of fear that went through him came from Madelyne–Sinister had made her and meant to kill her after all.
Remy stepped through it. He didn't fear this memory of Sinister. He had his own. He stepped through Sinister's shadow and grinned: there in the wall was an old-fashioned safe.

Oh yes. He'd broken into one of these blindfolded before his thirteenth birthday. He spread his fingers against the door and felt the molecules that made it conducting their tidy dance. Another part of his mind reminded him that this wasn't a real safe. He was still on the Astral Plane, where his biokinetic charge meant nothing. But within the construct of Jean's mindscape, his own mind translated her talent into the terms of his.

Feeling the shape of the tumblers in his mind, he spun the dial, finding the combination almost as fast as if he'd already known it. "Still the best, mais oui," he murmured, feeling smug as he swung the heavy door of the safe open.

There they were, the pieces of Jean's mind, memories, inclinations, a strand of sheer mental power tied into a Möbius strip, all of it shaped by his own perception into jewels that he scooped up and into a velvet bag.

Laughing, he left the safe hanging open like a taunt and headed for the door. He had what he'd come for.

Sinister's ghost eyed him as he passed, but it was an empty shell. Remy waved at it as he danced by. He closed the closet door behind him and hung up the key. He loped down the hall toward the ever distant white window, singing La Vie En Rose under his breath as he went. One stride took him to the end of the hall.

He levered the window open and went out onto the convenient ledge that twisted under his feet into the worn stone at the center of the Thieves' Guild Hall.

Remy almost stumbled. The hall was empty except for him. He held a jewel-encrusted coffer in his hands. He turned in a circle, watching fire chase along the floor to the columns and the ancient tapestries and pennants hung on the walls.

Phoenix fire.

The sigil over his eye tingled. He finished his turn and found himself face to face with Jean. He held out the coffer.

~This is yours, chere.~

She smiled and held out hands gloved in gold to take it.

~Thank you, Remy.~

He set the coffer into her hands. The lid opened. A green glow spilled out, illuminating Jean's face. It limned her features for an instant, then settled into her flesh. Her eyes seemed even brighter.

~Oh, that bastard,~ she murmured to herself.

~This too,~ he said.

The coffer disappeared as his hands caught hers. Flame poured from inside him into her as he let go of her talent. As the last of it left him, everything around him dissolved into gray then black. Only the
grasp of her hands and a finer than a molecule link between them remained.

Jean squeezed his hands.

"Remy? Are you okay?" Bobby asked in his ear.

"Jean?" Scott said. Remy could feel Scott's concern for her.

He smiled as he opened his eyes. He squeezed her hands, then let go.

"Everything is fine, Scott," Jean said. She stood up.

"Is it?"

"Oh, it's true," she told both Scott and Bobby. "And there's more, much more, I think." She bent and kissed Remy's forehead. "He's been in my head, playing games, but never again."

~You a very good psi, Remy.~

~I'm a very good thief, chere,~ he corrected her, unthinking. Realizing he'd used telepathy, he twitched and began hurriedly rebuilding his shields. They went up around the thread that still connected him to Jean and the deeper link that bound him to Bobby.

"What next?" Scott asked, worried and angry and uncertain all at once.

Remy sympathized. He'd felt the same way since uncovering the Professor's links to Wanda and the New Genosha insurrection.

Jean hugged Scott, reminding Remy of that bottomless reservoir of feeling for Scott he'd found in her mind. When she let go, she said, "Now I find what he's done to the rest of us. When I've finished, we'll face him."
Chapter Summary

The Judgment of Xavier.

AD 2014, March 21
France
Mont Saint Francis

Emma met them in the courtyard, wrapped in a long fur coat whiter than the snow lingering in the shadows of the church's stone walls. A high wind whipped her blonde hair over her face. The two MRF guards with her put up their plasma rifles when she waved them off. Charles shivered at the image they presented in the gray-and-black powered armor, faces hidden and anonymous behind the mirrored-black face shields of their helmets.

Lila patted his shoulder. She yelled over the wind, "I'm off again, Professor. Schedule to keep. Ta."

"Thank you, Lila," Storm said.

Charles added his own warm appreciation of her efforts telepathically.

Lila waved at Emma and teleported away. A clap of sound followed as air imploded into the vacuum bubble she left behind.

"How was Canberra?" Emma asked. She clutched the throat of her coat closed. A dusting of snow glittered in her hair and on the fur.

"Warm," Charles replied. The wind never touched him, thanks to Storm.

Emma waved toward the main building of the church. The guards retired to their watch posts. "Jean and some of the others are in one of the shielded conference rooms. She asked me to bring you there straight away."

Charles tried to probe her thoughts, but Emma's shields were tightened down and diamond hard.

"There's no time for the Professor to rest or refresh himself?" Storm asked.

Emma shook her head.

"As soon as he got here, Jean said."

Charles steered his hoverchair along between the two women as they made their way inside and along the hall.

Emma held the door open for them at the conference room. He glimpsed Jean's red hair among
several others. Storm followed him into the room.

He noticed Gambit and Scott, Wisdom and Kitty, along with half a dozen telepaths; every face was familiar, each someone who had once worn an X. A sudden sense of distress filled him. He couldn't look at Gambit without feeling guilty. Charles shivered.

Emma closed the door behind them then engaged the anti-bugging gear.

All eyes were on him.

"What is this--?" he heard Storm exclaim.

Then the power of a half-dozen skilled minds swept Charles Xavier onto the Astral Plane in a dizzying rush that left him like tide-washed flotsam lost amidst a vast, dry cinnabar sea bed, beneath a sick, sallow yellow sky.

Charles blinked in confusion. They'd bound him. They were in control here instead of him and a jolt of alarm hit him.

In the Astral Plane, he retained the use of his legs. Thus, he stood, he thought he stood, but his legs dissolved into the sand and cracked stone. A fence of seven swords driven into the sand surrounded him. Turning only revealed the exact same picture. Möbius vistas that showed him only his own back.

He didn't understand.

Crimson scores slashed across the sky, fading and reappearing, repeating, running over the jaundiced dome that held neither moon nor sun nor stars. A butterfly mask of violet floated nearby, two slanted purple eyes reflecting a green hedge maze. Acetylene blue lightning walked along the infinite horizon. A smooth round column of ice-white diamond glittered on the top of a wind-warped mountain of dry, brain-gray coral reef. The uneven sea bed stretched out and out beyond Charles' vision, pillars marching away to Brunelleschi's vanishing point; cracked stone monuments surrounded by piles of broken rock at their bases, history incised on them with mineral stains and flood marks.

A cloud the color of brushed steel and builder's plastic rained a cascade of tiny numbers that melted into runnels of quicksilver metal which sank into the endless reddish dust. The wind smelled of diesel and disinfectant.

He couldn't lift his feet free.

The screech of a hunting bird filled the universe, echoing back and forth, sending shivering cracks crazing over the columns, pieces shattering off to fall and fall and fall. Charles waited for them to reach the earth but they never did. The sound cut off. In the absolute silence, the brightness flaring over the sky resolved into an avian outline, its fiery feathers stretching from horizon to horizon. It plummeted down, something caught within its talons that it released before Charles.

Cards scattered through the air, tumbling to earth by the base of the column that caught him in place. The cards flickered cerise and fuchsia at the edges, flipping over and over, backs then faces, jokers and jacks, the ace of diamonds, the ace of spades, then the suicide king winked up at him with a scarlet on black eye.
The Phoenix cocked its head, unblinking bird eye brighter than any sun.

He tried to reach for the lines that he'd long ago established into her mind. His hand stretched out toward the hovering bird, but caught nothing. The flames seared his fingertips and he jerked his hand away, as the Phoenix spread its wings wider and wider, rising in the sky. The jesses that had been there so long, that only he had been able to see, were cut. Jean was free. It was her talons in his brain this time.

The wind from the Phoenix' wings tossed the cards into the air again. The joker spun through the air, growing larger and larger until Charles could see the Harlequin smirking at him with Gambit's mouth. It was closer and closer and a wave of panic crested through him. He snatched up the sword closest to him by the hilt, swung the blade up and thrust it through the center of the card just as its face rotated away.

The blade pushed through the patterned pasteboard with a loud rip, accompanied by the Harlequin screaming. Horrified, Charles jerked the sword free. He wondered where he had lifted the experience of steel spearing through flesh, the suction with which that flesh clung to the metal communicated back up its length to his hand, the distinct wet sound when the body finally released it, until he remembered he'd taken that memory from Gambit himself. Gambit's body crumpled face down into the dust. Charles stared at the blood welling from the wound in his back.

He watched as Gambit's body dissolved into more of the ruddy dust, sifting free of ivory bones and the wildly patterned silks and satins of the Harlequin's costume. One point of the madcap he'd worn flopped over. The silver bell at its tip rang in the quiet.

Blood from the sword dripped on his trapped feet and ate the stone away. It freed him.

It hadn't been like that, he insisted to himself. It hadn't.

The wind picked up and threw dust in his eyes. He flailed, dropped the sword and stumbled back. The skeletal Harlequin rolled over, the bells on the cap ringing, ringing. The skull's loose jaw opened. Charles turned and ran.

He sped across the sea bed, past fossilized dragons, past the flocks of flying fish, past pastel-pale anemones combing their tentacles like mermaids' tresses, past driftwood bones and pearl-eyed ghosts. Faster and faster, running as he could no longer run in his body, sand churning beneath his feet. He ran toward the lightning dancing down the horizon that receded constantly, until the butterfly mask opened its long, slanted eyes before him and he leaped, diving into the green reflection in one pupil.

Into a verdant, cool maze. The black-leafed hedges towered over his head. When he turned, he found only a wall of dense branches and leaves. He could only walk forward through the twists and right angles, the cul-de-sacs and dead ends.

He cringed over an abandoned doll in a hospital gown and robe. It opened its hinged mouth and said, "Daddy." He sped his steps past it. "Daddy," it called in another voice. And another and another and another. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy. Daddydaddydaddy." A legion of voices crying until it was just noise. No, no, it wasn't his fault. He walked faster and almost didn't see the broken sparrow on the path before setting his boot down on it. With a stumbling lurch, he managed to avoid stepping on the feathery corpse, disturbed by the glimpse of an oval gold ring on its breast.

He hadn't seen it fall.
He turned a corner and beheld a vast rose garden laid out in neat straight lines, each vine trained onto a trellis, all of it surrounded by a wall. At the center was a statue of white marble. The sun shone blindingly on it. Charles squinted but couldn't make out the face. A white warhorse grazed beside it. Pennants on high poles waved at every corner, emblazed with an black X.

His garden. He admired the perfect roses. Whites and yellows and pinks. Blooms the size of his spread hand, unblemished, scentless, all the thorns snipped away from the stems. Beyond the wall, more grew, but they were bug-bitten, stunted, the vines strangling each other, with saw-toothed leaves and vicious thorns. Yet their colors were rich and vibrant, the wild mutant roses of crimson and jade, azure and lavender, striped and spotted, tangerine, aquamarine, citrine and amber.

A violet-winged butterfly rested delicately on a still closed green bud. It fanned its wings open languidly. Slanted eyes marked them.

The warhorse trotted over to him. Without considering it, Charles mounted. With the reins in one hand and a jousting lance in the other, he trotted his mount down the center of the garden. When he glanced down, he saw he wore white armor.

Then his mount topped a hill. Before him lay a tourney ground. A hundred colorful tents stood with flags of yellow, blue, orange, red and green waving against the azure sky above them. A crowd gathered to watch. At the far side of the grounds, another knight sat upon a black horse. His helmet hid his face.

He started his horse down the slope while the other knight kicked his mount forward.

They galloped at each once and again, lances impacting against ringing armor, but never unhorsed. At the end of each run they wheeled their mounts and charged again. Hooves thundered over grass pounded into muddy dirt. The crowd was a bright blur. Applauding and cheering. A Harlequin in red-and-black stripes peered over the shoulder of the queen in white.

A horn sounded.

The black knight pulled up his mount. Charles followed suit. They trotted side by side away from the tourney, up the slope and into Charles' garden. The black knight dismounted by the too bright statue and sank down to the earth wearily.

Along the path they'd rode in, the domesticated roses twisted and changed, growing wild again. Charles grew disturbed. The black knight was ruining his garden. The roses were out of control.

Blue-white heat lightning snapped down from the distant clouds. He waited for the thunder that never came.

The black knight had gone to sleep. Charles drew a deep pink rose close and trained it to grow over the black knight. He urged the vines to wind tighter and tighter around the black knight, tight as chains, tight enough to strangle, while the pink blooms withered and fell away from it, while thorns sprouted like poisoned barbs. Clouds built on the horizon.

A wide crack split the base of the statue and ran up it.

Charles coaxed the rose vine tighter still, not caring as it lost the last of its leaves.

A hawk screeched high in the arc of the sky. He jerked his head up and faced the Harlequin
silhouetted against a wall of flames. Charles gaped. The Harlequin nodded. The bells on his madcap rang like laughter. A graceful hand gestured toward the black knight. Charles watched in horror as a cigarette butt dropped onto the knight's chest and lit the rose vines on fire.

The black knight woke with a loud cry. He tore free of the burning rose vines. Furiously, he ripped the vine free of its roots.

Charles staggered back. He looked around. His garden was gone. The black knight was nowhere to be seen. He stood in the dead sea bed again, among the crumbling stone columns and constant dust. The Harlequin was gone, the hedge maze, and the butterfly.

Two ravens strutted over the ground between him and the nearest column. They croaked at each other. Caw. Caw. Caw. The ravens flapped heavily and flew away, their cries echoing back from the jaundiced sky.

Charles frowned and wondered what he had to do next. With the ravens gone, there were only the rock pillars.

One step.

He was facing the russet-shaded stone, so close he felt his breath wash back from it. He took a step back and studied the column. It wasn't—quite—symmetrical. It could be. He realized he held a hammer and chisel in his hands. When he looked closer, he could see the chisel marks on the pillar where he'd already carved away pieces of it.

Charles lifted the chisel.

The Phoenix screamed.

Deafened, he fell to the rock-strewn base of the pillar. The chisel fell from his fingers and burned. He clutched at his ears. Finally, he uncurled and sat up. His fingers brushed something beneath the dirt and detritus. Curious, he wiped away more dust and found a plaque. A neat brass plaque.

With an inscription.

Scott Summers.

Charles raised his eyes to the pillar. It was Scott.

Scarred with chisel marks where Charles had knocked pieces of him away. He looked across the plain and saw telamons and caryatids holding up the sky. Every one of them marked by him, the holes left by the pieces he'd chiseled away weakening them, surrounded by crazed cracks.

What had he done?

What had he done to them?

The Phoenix swept across the sky from horizon to horizon. Each sweep of its wings stirred the red dust higher and higher until it swirled into a tornado threaded with golden fire. Charles stared. Within the vortex, he glimpsed a violet eye, an ivory mask, playing cards and red diamonds, rose petals and swords, whirling compasses and broken bones. It spun across the sea bed, engulfing each pillar and leaving it still marked but restored, each one different, leaning, uneven and flawed.
"No!" Charles screamed.

~Yes,~ Jean said in his mind, implacable, terrible.

~Please,~ he begged, ~please.~

"–about?" Storm finished asking.

Charles couldn't face any of them. He bowed his head and coved his face.

He felt them weave a net through his thoughts, twisting and knotting pieces of his being, using his own skills against him, a net that hid that facet of his talent away from him forever. He fought, clawed for the weakness and strings he'd found in each of their minds, but they were too many, Jean, Betsy, Emma, Jono, Sage, Scanner, even Gambit, and they were too strong. The Phoenix had undone all his work. He couldn't control any of them.

~You may listen. You may speak,~ Jean said. ~But you may never change anyone again.~

"Please," he said hoarsely. He looked up and found Scott among the crowd. "Scott? Scott –"

Scott shook his head. "We all know what you did."

All? All? Everything. Charles shuddered, imagining their judgement would be cruel. He couldn't move as most of the remaining X-Men filed out. None of them spoke to him. Their faces offered him no hope.

Wanda and Mystique walked in and Magneto followed them. He was going to die. He swallowed, dry-mouthed, and tried anyway. He couldn't 'persuade' them, but he could still read them and tailor his words to best convince them. He whispered, "Forgive me."

Wanda's spiteful voice rang through the room. "Forgive you, old man!? I want to kill you! What you did to me–" She shrugged free of Mystique, but Magneto caught and held her. Fury contorted her features. Madness. Undoing all Charles had done in her mind had shredded her.

Storm interposed herself.

"Stop, child."

"You know what he did!"

Storm caught Wanda's wrists an instant before she would have shaped and thrown a hex at Charles. "We all know now, Wanda."

Emma stepped up to Wanda's side and pulled her away. "Come with me, Wanda. Listen to me. Forget him. Forget… everything. Let us help." With a small nod, Magneto let her go into Emma's care. Through the constraints that had been placed on his own powers, Charles could sense Emma working on Wanda telepathically. Gambit joined them, helping to calm her. She whimpered, but finally murmured, "Yes." She was completely aware of what they were doing. He squeezed his eyes shut briefly, only to open them and face Storm's cool, cat-eyed gaze.

"Thank you, Ororo," he said.
"Do not," she commanded.

"Ororo –"

She turned her back then walked away, her carriage as exquisite and upright as ever, head high.

"Dear God, he muttered. Mystique laughed at him silently and he wondered if this hadn't always been her goal when she agreed to work with him.

His mouth tasted of salt, blistered and dry.

----------

Storm wasn't surprised to find him there, on the highest spire of the church itself, sitting within the curve of a gargoyle's wing. He'd always retreated to high places.

She summoned a warm wind to sweep away the patches of snow on the carved stone, then settled beside him. She let the warm air swirl around them both. He was always cold and hated the wet so much, she'd sometimes chided him that his mutation must contain some feline component.

She saw well by night, though not so well as he did, but the quarter moon on the horizon couldn't penetrate the shadows he huddled in. Only the red glow from his eyes showed.

The moon, at first a warm yellow, steadily lost that color, rising into the night sky until it became sickle-silver and cold. They did not speak. Westward, behind them and far below the gargoyle guarded heights, the Atlantic rushed against the rocky beach, the steady sound filling the space between them.

The shudder that ran through him communicated itself through his shoulder to hers. Storm scooted closer. With a sigh, Remy slipped his arm around her waist before leaning his head against her neck.

"Won't you say something, padnat?" she murmured. She wanted to hear his voice again. He'd been silent through the entire confrontation with Xavier. Afterward, he'd slipped away before she could bear to speak to anyone.

His cheek was cold against her neck. Whiskers scratched at her skin; he needed to shave again. She felt his smile and the shaky exhalation that followed. "We still padnats?"

"Always."

"Merci, chere."

He was beginning to shiver harder and she couldn't warm the air around them further without causing a consequent effect on the weather over a greater area. Storm hugged Remy closer.

"Let's go inside."

He nodded.

She let him draw her to her feet then followed him as he made his way from shadowy gargoyle to a stone ledge. The ledge disappeared, but Remy simply vaulted to the narrow overhang above a
narrow window. Without hesitation, he cartwheeled into a handstand with his back to the stone, then a pike position that he lowered himself through, curling his spine forward until his legs were parallel to the window below. Then he kicked his legs through the window, followed by the rest of him in one graceful, perfectly controlled motion. He did it so swiftly, it didn't even look impossible.

She took the same route, a little slower, not as sure-footed, and needed a gust of wind to push her in the window when she attempted the flip and toes forward dive. He smirked at her when she landed, crouched, in the room, backed by the rush of air.

The wind set the single, unshaded light bulb handing from the ceiling swinging, chasing wild shadows over the empty room.

"Show off."

He laughed, white teeth flashing in the old, sexy smile. "Never can impress you, chere."

She straightened and stretched, releasing tension from all her muscles. Remy reached up and caught the wire suspending the light bulb, stilling its gyrations.

She asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Immediately wished she hadn't when he sliced his eyes away from her. She read his tensed body and withdrawal. The answer she found, constructed from the man she knew and the friendship they shared, didn't hold much comfort. He read her so well; he knew her dedication to Charles Xavier and the Dream. He hadn't spoken because she would have failed him. She wouldn't have believed him.

"I didn't want to hurt you, chere," he said. His voice remained rough, hoarse with disuse and damage.

He'd known it would hurt her to hear the truth, but that alone hadn't kept him mute. Jean and the other telepaths had shown all of them the truth in the Professor's own memories. Jean had swept through their own minds and undone all the loops and locks Xavier had insinuated into their thoughts, so there had been no room for denial.

If Remy had told her, simply told her, Storm knew she would have called him a liar. She would have rejected him and very possibly broken their friendship forever. Facing the truth after that would have been worse even than this day.

He'd saved her from that.

He wouldn't say that to her.

It was bitter enough anyway. Thinking of the Professor only led to too many questions. Acid doubts and second thoughts. Every decision she'd made since meeting Charles Xavier came into question. The immensity of the betrayal would haunt her.

She forced a smile. She said, "You aren't the one who caused the hurt, Remy."

He slid his gaze toward her then relaxed after a moment.

After another heartbeat, she went to the door. He followed her this time, down the narrow hall and the winding staircase. She missed his teasing and joking. Maybe it would come back to him in time.
She took them down to the kitchen. Storm opened cupboard doors until she found the canister of tea she wanted. Green tea in a jade green canister. She set it on the counter then put the tea kettle onto the stove to heat. She found a teapot and a strainer. His eyes were on her as she prepared. It was a familiar task, one she enjoyed, one that soothed her. She'd made tea in the middle of the night many, many times for herself and Remy. So many that he had eventually started bringing her exotic blends from all over the world. Tonight, she opted for simplicity.

Simple green tea. Gunpowder. Remy had laughed and made a joke about saltpeter when she told him its name many years ago, but he'd drunk it.

She opened the canister and inhaled the strong, almost smoky scent of it. "Do you remember the tea you brought me from China?"

The kettle began hissing, almost jumping on the burner with the force of the water boiling inside. Storm switched it off.

"Oui."

"Ti kwan yin."

"Tea of the Iron Goddess of Mercy. Perfect for my Stormy, mais non?"

"What were you doing Fujian Province?"

"A pinch for New Son," he replied easily.

Storm laughed. She should have known. Remy chuckled too, slanting her a mischievous look through dark lashes. She finished preparing the tea then left it to steep while she returned the canister to the cupboard. Anything to occupy her hands.

She waited until her hands were steady again, then poured.

"Do you forgive me?" she asked.

Remy looked at her solemnly. "Do you?"

Storm held out the cup of green tea. Remy accepted it. No more would be said.

He perched on a clean, bare counter cradling the plain white cup in both hands. She felt his eyes on her again, the soft brush of his concern against her shields.

Halfway through her own cup, savoring the strong, honeyed copper taste of the tea, she realized that Remy had been alone on the heights.

"Won't Bobby wonder where you are?" she asked.

Remy smiled into his own cup. "Non. He knows."

"He knows you're having tea with me?" She raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged. "Not that. Just… I'm okay. He's… the empathy… We're linked."
They were linked? She hadn't realized. "Like Jean and Scott?"

He nodded then shook his head. "Not words. Feelings." He hesitated. Added quietly, "It's good, 'Ro."

She smiled down at the pale, greenish tea in her cup. He ducked his head, smiling too.

"It's really… good."

They both sipped the tea after that.

"He'll be gone soon," she said eventually. She didn't mean Bobby. She didn't need to say who. It seemed awkward now to refer to Xavier as the Professor or Charles. She wouldn't think of him that way again.

"Where?"

Storm swished the dregs of her tea around the bottom of the cup. No tea leaves there. No hints of the future revealed themselves.

"Lila will take him to Chandilar."

Remy nodded slowly. "Exile," he murmured. He cocked his head, obviously thinking about that. Then his mouth turned down.

"He's Lilandra's Consort."

"Shi'ar Galaxy's still a long way from home. From everyone."

She sighed. "None of us want him here." Wanda hadn't been the only one angry enough to kill.

"Chere, you'll forgive him--"

"No, I won't, Remy."

Remy stared at her, startled by her vehemence. Storm set her cup down with a sharp click. She said, "He made everything a lie."

"Not everything, chere."

"Yes, everything. He made us a lie. The X-Men. Every choice we made, everything we believed in, every sacrifice, it's all false."

Undoing the adjustments Xavier had made to some of their recent memories, then uncovering the old implanted imperatives only made it all too clear. Everything they believed reflected who they were. Each of them was shaped by their experiences, the things they had endured, the decisions they had made, what they thought and felt in response. The sum of who the X-Men were had evolved from seeds Professor Xavier had planted. Not what he'd shown them or taught them. They had only thought it was their choice to believe. He'd forced them.

Everything that followed that was tainted, fruit of a poison tree.
She would never make a choice again without questioning if it resulted from what Charles Xavier had once made her think. It would color the rest of her life. Even the good things, even the bravery and decency of her friends, all of it came from a wrong. She hated that.

She had loved Charles Xavier, as a teacher, a leader, even as a second father. He hadn't had a right to any of those emotions. He'd made a mockery of her entire life. He'd stolen her belief, her years, and her chance at love. He manipulated her into delaying her answer to Forge's marriage proposal and fed Forge's insecurity. It had been a subtle mental suggestion from Charles Xavier that sent Forge away with Mystique before Storm could tell him yes. Xavier hadn't wanted to lose his field team co-leader.

Remy slid off the countertop to cross the kitchen in three quick strides. He knelt beside her. One hand rested on her knee. The other caught hers and held it. "My poor Stormy," he said.

Storm began to weep. She wept for herself. For all the disillusionment. For the friends who died, unknowing, and the others left to face this new pain. The tears slipped down her cheeks quietly, while she fought to control her emotions and not release them through the weather outside. She cried because it hurt so much, it hurt to breathe. So much was lost, wasted, wrecked. Reduced to sand.

Remy pulled her into his arms and held her, whispering half heard reassurance. She held onto him and wept harder.

She even wept for Charles Xavier, for what he'd tried to be and what he'd been and all the loneliness he would endure, alone, among the Shi'ar so very far from home.
Revertant

Chapter Summary

What Gambit has been up to all this time.

AD 2221, July 9
Hammer Bay
Big Blue

Hundreds of years attending political receptions, charity balls, and holiday celebrations. Hundreds. They were always the same. The thought hovered at the back of his mind. He considered calculating how many parties that had been and cringed. "

Remy leaned against a wall at one end of the brilliantly lit reception hall, nodding as he listened to his companion, and wondered exactly how soon he could leave the latest fund raiser for the Muir Institute. Not too much longer, he thought. He missed the days when he would have grabbed Bobby and they would have gone together. "

He might explode these stiff, formal robes once he was home, too. He hated them. "

Not that anyone would say a word if he showed up wearing holey jeans and a moth-eaten sweater. The designers would just begin turning out pseudo-fashion versions that would make his eyes bleed. He reluctantly admitted Erik and Jean were right to settle on something traditional that the fashionistas wouldn't muck with too much. "

He was getting out of them as soon as he could, however. "

"I'm sure you're familiar with what my ancestor called 'secondary mutations'. Which was a misleading term, since the 'mutations' were always present, albeit latent, within the genome of the person in question. Secondary mutations and the changes brought with them were merely those latent factors becoming active," Scope droned on. "

Remy nodded though he was vaguely bored. Genetics had never been a fascination of his. "

"It's still a common mistake among lay persons to refer to the x-gene or x-factor as through it was a single gene," Scope continued. "Homo superior possesses a constellation of genes that interact to create our abilities. These have proved to be hereditary. Psionics have psionically gifted children; energy converters, elementals, ferals – each mutant sub-type 'breeds true' to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the 'gift' each parent possessed."

Obviously, Remy thought. What was Scope getting at? It seemed clear the research scientist had cornered him with intent. Remy didn't mind exactly. He liked Henrī's descendent, who reminded him of his old friend, he just wished he'd get to the point. He sipped his wine and wished for a beer.

What each of us has in common, the x-factor, is a single gene that activates the others. Without it, it
isn't accurate to say that someone is even a latent homo superior."

"Uhm hmn."

He scanned the crowd. Bobby was over by the buffet table. He was talking with Shadowcat and a couple of people from the Directorate of the Interior. Meanwhile, behind him, the ice sculpture center piece—which might have been a slightly melted Kali or a very large bug—was dancing. Remy suppressed a grin.

His ex-lover could initiate an ice age but spent his time playing at parties. He'd bet the two betas were watching the ice, while Bobby talked like nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

Scope glanced at him.

"I don't imagine you're really interested in any of this?" he asked.

Remy smiled and shrugged.

"It's more interesting than the latest movie gossip or debating funding for a new waste management project," he replied. "Just don't get too technical."

Scope grinned back, fangs glinting. He really did resemble Henrí. His skin was the same vibrant shade of blue, his hands were massive, and his ears had little tufts of fur at the pointed tips.

"I've found lacing my conversation with references to codons, introns, RNA, transcriptase, enzymes and retroviruses chases away eavesdroppers."

Remy snorted. "You start with that, you'll chase me away too."

"I'll keep it simple."

"Then continue."

"I was afraid you'd brush me off," Scope admitted.

"I have a feeling you've got a point you're getting to."

"I do."

Scope gathered himself and continued. "I started out mapping the inheritance patterns of different sub-types four years ago."

He paused and Remy nodded. "I found something."

He wasn't a genetic rocket scientist, but he could read between the lines. He didn't move, but his muscles tensed. That almost unconscious awareness of everything around him sharpened into the feel of every molecule he could charge. He thinned his shields and tapped Scope's emotions.

"Something you didn't expect to find?"

Scope sent him a sharp look. It matched his mixture of sincerity and worry. "Numbers. A pattern."
"Of?"

"A falling birthrate."

Remy shook his head. That wasn't right. New Genosha had a comfortably steady birthrate. The infant mortality rate was less than one percent of all births. Excellent health care was provided to anyone and everyone by the state. What technology couldn't handle, mutant healers usually could. Kids were treasured, kept safe and cared for by more than just their biological parents. Homo superior wasn't wildly fertile, but there weren't any real problems. A child per person was the average, but enough people, especially in the line marriages and polyfides, chose to have more so that the population showed a small but steady increase each year.

"Can't be," he said. "I've seen the numbers."

Scope pursed his lips.

"You've seen the overall numbers. That's still steady. It may even be increasing in reaction."

A burst of laughter from down by the temporary bar made him look away briefly. A glimpse of wildly curling blonde hair and he had identified Phantazia playing with a couple of the doctors from Big Blue's staff. The string quartet in the back of the room had started again. Schubert, Remy thought. Something old before his birth, whatever. Nothing new at one of these gatherings.

"Reaction?" he repeated, swinging his attention back to Scope.

One tufted ear twitched back.

"To?"

"Some people want a boy. When they have a girl, they have another child, hoping for a boy this time. Right?"

"Wrong. I told you I'd seen the population numbers and the sex break down is around fifty-one/forty-nine."

"It's an example of a behavior. We don't let parents chose the sex of their children here, because we'd end with a skewed ratio." Scope's ears pricked forward again. "You should know this, you and the others were around when all this was being figured out. Scott Summers was behind half the laws that define ethics in New Genosha."

Remy knew about the laws. Scott had pushed and pushed, fighting just about everybody to put together a system that could be fair and forward thinking and flexible enough to give when someone innocent got caught up in the gears. He knew New Genosha wasn't perfect; it wasn't even what Scott had envisioned. It was at least a place where you didn't have to be powerful to have rights. The Pit fights, the Securidat, the Triune, none of those had been part of what any of them had wanted. But they'd grown into the fabric of their society too deep to be wrested out. Scope had grown up with them. But he still believed in ethics.

Scope took a deep breath. "Yeah. So… So sometimes, parents 'try, try again'"
been with anyone, there would never be any children for him. He remembered thinking he might like some, someday, before the Gene Wars. After the Second Denver and the Scourge it had been too late.

Remy felt a stab of envy toward Scope, who still had that effortless connection to a more normal existence, but it was brief. He wouldn't trade his choices for a fantasy.

"The thing is, people want to have an alpha. They want a kid who is going to grow up and have an automatic seat in the Alphanate. If their kid is an alpha, hey great, that's it. But if they have a beta or a gamma…"

Remy put it together. "Try, try again?"

"Yeah."

A psychological chill shivered through him. He automatically reinforced his shields against broadcasting his emotions, tightening the links between him and Jean and Erik down to nearly closed off. Shutting it down entirely would alarm them, so instead Remy filtered everything going out. His expression remained a mask of polite, mild interest.

He sipped his wine again. It tasted bitter.

Patterns. Falling birth rates. Alphas, betas, gammas. Nulls. Remy stared at Scope narrow-eyed as he put it together. Reactions. No one wanted a null kid. Securidat had shut down a blackmarket mutate enhancement operation last month. Jumpstart labs popping up everywhere, supposed to up a mutant's power by a class. Empty chairs in the Alphanate. He swept an empathic scan over the crowd, checking for undue interest. This wasn't something that they should be talking about in the middle of a fundraiser.

"Have you got an office here?"

"Yeah."

"Let's finish this there."

Scope glanced around the room. "Sure. Of course. Just, ah, come with me."

Remy nodded and began projecting ~not interesting/nothing here/no one to see~ to anyone who glanced their way.

Scope hustled him into a cramped office, equipment and books fighting for space on the wall shelves, the desk and any other horizontal space. A line of tiny potted cacti filled the single window's ledge. Night time Hammer Bay glittered with lights seen through the pane. Remy lifted a stack of print-outs and heavy book on Viral Engineering off a chair while Scope nervously flipped through the papers on his desk.

"Actually, I'm glad we're here," Scope said. His plate-sized hands spidered over the desk top. "I've got breakdowns of the numbers I can show you—"

"The alpha birth rate is dropping. The over-all population hasn't changed because people are having another child or two," Remy interrupted. Genius, no, but two plus two, he could do. He couldn't keep the harshness from his voice.
Scope went still, then nodded. He slumped down into his desk chair. His hands rested heavily on a pile of papers.

"Is it just alphas?"

"No, it's across the board. Betas. Gammas. But there are more of them to begin with, as there always has been. Alphas are the point of the pyramid."

"So whatever is happening showed up there first, like poison accumulating and killing predators first."

"Close enough," Scope admitted.

Remy shrugged off the heavy formal robe and slung it over a stack of old style file boxes occupying the broken-down sofa shoved against the nearest bookcase. That left him in his regular black, armored skinsuit and allowed him to slouch down in the chair he'd cleared.

He tipped his head back and blinked at the ceiling.

Fucking hell.

He started thinking about causes. Disease? Environmental contaminants? Some home-grown supervillain the Securidat had missed.? They had had a few of those since establishing New Genosha. One alien invasion and a group of dimension hopping slavers back in 2154 and 2056. The Securidat had disappeared the slavers. Sam and the Army dealt with the invasion force's troops. Erik and he had popped the starships piloted by rogue Kree like kids playing with bubble wrap. They'd let a couple of scouts escape to spread the word. The Shi'ar had mostly stayed away since Xavier's exile.

All the big bads had steered clear of Earth since then. Every few decades, a Shi'ar research and scout ship would bring greetings from the Imperium. The M'Kraan Crystal was inextricably linked to the Phoenix; its keepers liked to keep track of its avatar, in case Jean snapped again and decided to wipe out a few more star systems. They tended to walk on eggshells with the Triune.

None of those threats seemed to fit the bill.

"Is it just the pattern you've got?" he asked. "Or do you have the cause?"

"I know, sir," Scope said.

Remy lifted his head and looked at him.

"It's a mutation."

"Random or engineered?"

Scope shrugged. "Random."

"Ah." He lifted both hands and ran them through his hair, pulling at the tips lightly. "That's good. No evildoers plotting… whatever." No one to find and force them to undo it. No one to just kill, damn it.
Scope chuckled.

"What? The X-Men used to fight bad guys every day of the week and Magneto on Sunday."

"It's difficult to imagine you or Phoenix fighting Magneto, sir. You… you're the Triune."

Remy rolled his eyes. "Believe it."

He tugged his hair again then dropped his hands onto the arms of the chair and his head back again. The ceiling was very interesting. Very… blank. He let that run through the links to Jean and Erik. ~Bored/tired/impatient.~ What they expected from him while attending one of these things. No point to wrecking their evening too.

"Lay it out for me, Nathan."

"It's a second site reversion, suppressing the effect of the mutated gene that activates the gene clusters that create our gifts. It's hereditary."

He nodded, flicked his fingers to say 'go on'.

"You know how it is with our kind. Two alphas have children, those children are almost always alphas or high-end betas."

It kept ratcheting up. Every generation with, if not more power, then more powers. First generation mutants had one power. It might manifest in more than one way, but it had one basic form, one subtype, psionic, elemental, feral, energy converter or metamorph. Maybe a few other odds and ends that didn't quite fit those descriptions. Second generation mutants with two mutant parents generally inherited both powers to a greater or lesser degree. Energy converter with a side order of psionics. Metamorph with a feral's healing factor. Mix and match, usually with one power at alpha level and the other merely beta or gamma. Triple powers had been showing up the last hundred years, but damped down, mostly gammas. Remy knew because the Securidat reported to him and kept an eye on all high powered mutants. Alphas were still the minority, but put two together and they usually produced alpha offspring.

"But if one parent carries this x-suppressor and the other parent doesn't, only one child out of four may be an alpha, two out of four will be betas, one will be a gamma. All of them will carry it. If both parents carry the gene, their children will be nulls – who will also carry it - even if both parents are alphas."

Alpha to beta, beta to gamma, gamma to… nothing. Nulls. Like gravity. All down hill. Remy blinked at the ceiling and clamped down on his reaction. Going retro. He fought the urge to laugh and asked a question instead. "What about omegas?"

"The Triune and Prime Ice are the only omega mutants on New Genosha, sir. There haven't been any omegas born since before the Gene Wars. But it wouldn't make much difference. One more generation in the regression pattern," Scope said.

Not quite, Remy corrected Scope silently. There had been five omegas born in New Genosha since the Gene Wars. Two died of natural causes, consumed by their own out of control powers. One geo-elemental triggered a series of volcanic eruptions along the Ring of Fire, along with an earthquake that reduced the original Citadel to rubble. Phoenix wiped Shakerjack's mind; he spent the rest of his life losing count of his toes in one of the havens built for burn-outs with brain damage.
The last two omegas had been killed early. The quantum telekinetic had ripped its mother to pieces during birth, spread pieces of her from the Milky Way to the Horsehead Nebula, already in possession but not control of its powers. One of the nurses in the birthing room smothered the child before it could do worse. The other had triggered Psylocke's limited prescience at conception. She'd flashed on a frozen asteroid ring orbiting the dead cinder of their sun. The Securidat had located the mother and aborted the child three weeks later, authorized by the Triune.

Not their shining best.

"I've been afraid to publish anything on this," Scope said.

Of course he had.

"When I saw you at the party, I hoped that you would give me a chance to talk about it, if only because of my family name."

"Lucky me."

"The government or... or someone needs to know. Something has to be done."

Done? Fucking hell. There was nothing to be done. It already was. What is, is. A few more generations and the x-suppressor would be present in every single citizen of New Genosha. When it was, no more mutants. Back to the baseline. Mother Nature had sounded a recall. Homo sapiens superior was done for as a species. An experiment gone wrong. Not even a dead end, just a detour that would be lost in the dust of evolution. Made and unmade by the same unseen hand.

His throat hurt when Remy spoke.

"What a joke."

Of course, that wasn't the end of it.

He met Scope quietly a few days later and went over everything with him. The numbers. The gene map with the x-suppressor highlighted. Explanations until his ears bled. More meetings. He slipped into the Securidat datacore and pulled up information Scope didn't have access to just to double check the man's results. It kept adding up the same way. All he found was more corroborating evidence that Scope was right. The trends were there, buried in the statistics.

When he brainstormed with Scope, trying to find some solution. Scope wasn't positive they should do anything. Remy was.

He realized that was why he'd kept the information from Erik and Jean or anyone else. They might take the same position as Scope. If they did, it would stop him from doing anything.

"This damn thing suppresses the x-activator," he said one day.

"Yes," Scope replied.

"Why can't we come up with something that suppresses it?" Remy speculated. "What happens
"Another forward mutation?"

Remy shrugged. "Whatever you call it."

"The science to do that has been outlawed here since the ratification of the national constitution," Scope said. "The techniques used to exist, but all of that is classified information. Even the equipment it would take is restricted."

"Leave that to me," Remy told him.

"No one alive today would know how."

Remy lifted his head and stared at Scope. He'd known people who could. "Think you can run a cloning tank?"

Scope's eyes dilated.

"Sir?"

"Clone tank," Remy repeated. He sat up, thinking about it while drumming his fingers on the table. Fuck it, he could do it on his own. He remembered enough of Sinister's business. If he got it wrong the first time, he'd just try again. Try, try again.

Scope's alarm flashed against his mental shields. He reached out and casually dialed down the doctor's emotions. Unethical. Just like pumping a trank into someone. He'd worry about it another time, when he wasn't considering doing something much, much worse.

"Yes," Scope said quietly. "The factories were virtually automated by the end of the Gene Wars. I don't understand what benefit there would be. Clones would carry the x-suppressor."

Not if they were clones of people who didn't have it, but that was another option.

"Not the men I mean to clone," Remy told Scope.


At least one of them would not be happy with him.

Nor would anyone else.

He recruited Mystique first. If she didn't like it, he could blackmail her with her part in trying to kill Magneto during the insurrection, a small datum that had fallen through the cracks when Xavier's duplicity was revealed. Pete and Scott had known, but they were both dead.

Together they found and cultivated the Dissenters, encouraging and supporting the restless and dissatisfied members of New Genoshan society. It didn't prove difficult. The movement quickly grew on its own.
They used the Dissenter attacks to mask their own activities. Bombings on mothballed clone factories hid the removal of critical equipment.

Mystique recruited Milan, Northstar and Slipstream into the Dissenters. The cloning equipment went to Avalon Station.

Remy walled the part of his mind dealing with the Dissenters, Scope or the clones away from Erik and Jean, while running interference whenever the Securidat came too close. Domino, Wolverine, and Psylocke were the best, but they were crippled because they reported to him.

There was no place on Earth Jean wouldn't sense Henry McCoy's familiar mind. That would be a problem. Even Avalon was too close.

Mars, though. Mars was far enough that shielding would hide him from her. Mars it would be and no one the wiser. After all, the Great Barrier was unbreachable.

Unless a thief had spent a century or two contemplating how to slip through it without alerting his consorts. Just for kicks. Because a thief always plans his exit first.

Remy opened a door in the Barrier and let Slipstream and Mystique through it with him. It was delicate work, maintaining his connection with the rest of the Triune from the far side. He let the other two handle most of the information gathering portion of the op, except for when they needed a telepath.

Slipstream 'ported through to the base of the orbital beanstalk and the baselines' Mars mission control. Mystique found where crew hung out and picked up one of the pilots. All the man ever remembered was going back to a hotel room with a gorgeous space groupie and getting lucky. Luckier than he ever knew: Mystique didn't kill him. It had been child's play to telepathically pluck the memory coordinates of the new Mars base from him while he necked with Mystique. Remy showed them to Slipstream.

With coordinates, equipped with a vacuum suit, Slipstream was able to 'port from Avalon to the fourth planet. It took months for the teleporter and Mystique to explore far enough to find the site for a hidden base. Mystique took over after that, establishing the basic installation with programmed construction nanites that were still considered too dangerous on Earth.

When that was done, the tanks went in and Scope took a short vacation to oversee the growth of new bodies for Essex and Henry.

It took five years to reach that point.

When Remy had doubts, he listened to the news feeds.

Gammas and betas dead or burned out from using Jumpstart. A null haven firebombed. Babies abandoned or murdered because they were born baseline. An expensive hydroelectric dam built to replace the power provided by three retiring energy converters, because there was no one to replace them. The subtle slide accelerating.

He began noticing the buried information and was darkly amused that bureaucracies were still the same. The problems were being hidden. Statistics were massaged before they reached the Triune.
He read reports and analyses. New Genosha's economy and society were based on mutant abilities. They needed energy converters to provide power, weather controllers and elementals to maintain their agricultural output, healers in the hospitals, telepaths in the judiciary, ferals in law enforcement and teleporters to transport people and goods. Everything would fall apart without them. They didn't have the infrastructure to support themselves without their innate gifts.

New Genosha wouldn't survive without mutants.

It took time to build an underground movement and a hidden base on another planet while concealing every trace from Domino and Wolverine along with the rest of the Triune.

It was done by 2226.

The clones were ready to be decanted and receive the memory templates Remy had kept.

In February, he visited Avalon Station, far enough the bond between the Triune was attenuated. From Northstar's private, psi-shielded quarters, Slipstream took them all to the Mars lab.

Remy brought the memory templates for both men.

He'd kept them since the Gene Wars. He never had an intention of using them, but destroying the templates and the samples from people he had known had been more than he could bring himself to do.

Most of the templates were from people who had undergone the Lethe Procedure, but he had one more. He'd stood by as the man, in the last days before dying of La Belle, made it, then secured it and a clean gene sample in a hidden vault, known to no one else. He'd relocated several other sets there after the laws against cloning were passed, lest they be destroyed.

Remy uploaded the first set of memories into an empty body and let Scope handle taking it from the tank, while he finished the job with the second clone.

First one and then the other were transferred to gurneys and brought around. Scope stripped wires and sensors off their bodies while they heaved and wheezed the last of the support fluid from their airways.

"Oh, dear lord," coughed the first man. He clutched at Scope's arm and drew himself up. Fluid still dripped steadily to the floor from his soaking wet fur. "What have you done?"

Remy picked up one of the large towels folded neatly and resting on the counter behind him. He slung it toward the first man.

"Don't blame him, mon ami."

The towel was caught and used roughly then deployed strategically.

"Why?"

The second man finished coughing and raised baleful scarlet eyes toward Remy. "I imagine he needs our shared expertise in genetics, McCoy," Nathaniel Essex said. "Isn't that right, LeBeau?"

"Oui."
Remy tipped his head, listening to Erik and Jean telepathically. He had to get back to Avalon. He ’pathed Slipstream, ~Davis. Time to return.~

~There in a second.~

He picked up a second towel and handed it to Sinister. "Mystique will explain. If I stay any longer, I'll be missed."

"Missed by who?" Henry asked.

Remy shook his head. "Mystique can tell that too."

Slipstream 'ported in. "Ready?"

"Oui."

Remy glanced back at the two men. "You have to do this. You're the only ones who can."

"What do we get?" Sinister asked.

"To live," Remy answered. "Again. – Davis, now."

They teleported out.
Don't Fear the Reaper

Chapter Summary

Beast and Cecelia indulge in an uplifting game of good news/bad news with the rest of mutant kind.

AD 2015, October 21
Scotland
Muir Island Research Station

"Oh, my stars and garters!"

Cecelia was coughing again and didn't look up at his exclamation. She looked well otherwise. The disease hadn't begun its most destructive phase in her. The red and yellow beads in her hair clicked against each other with each jerky breath. She hunched her shoulders under her white lab coat.

Henry looked at her expectantly then back to his monitor. The results stayed the same. A wonderful gibberish of words and numbers, black text on glowy blue. Formulas. He double-checked them again. A huge bubble of relief floated up behind his breast bone.

"Cecelia," he croaked.

She lifted her head from her own work. "What?" She pushed her cornrows away from her cheek then muffled another cough against the back of her hand.

"Come look at this."

"What?" she asked again. Her brows drew together.

Henry gestured to the monitor.

Cecelia rolled her chair back. "I've got my own work, you know," she complained as she rose. "Until you and Essex find a cure, someone needs to work on slowing the damn disease down."

"I know," he said. He gestured to the monitor again, inviting her to join him. She did.

Too many of his friends were living with La Belle. Dying with it, hurrying its course forward by remaining on the front lines, instead of guarding what health they retained. Cecelia was the one faced with helping La Belle's victims.

She set her hand on his shoulder and leaned over, reading from the screen. Her fingers tightened, digging into the heavy muscles under his fur.

"This is the latest test result from your work with Essex," she said.
"It most indubitably is." He turned his head to the side and met her warm brown eyes.

"Does that say what I think it says?" she asked.

"I had hoped you would confirm my interpretation of the data."

Cecelia smiled brilliantly. "You've done it." She bent and kissed his cheek. "It's a vaccine. You and Essex have done it!"

Henry let her grab his hands and dance him around the lab, until Cecelia doubled over, coughing again. Tears ran down her cheeks. He guided her into her chair again.

He knelt in front of her, holding her delicate hands in his huge paws, while the bubble of happiness in his chest popped. Her hands were much warmer than they should have been. It wasn't just the cold fluorescent lights of the lab that leached the color from her skin.

Cecelia whispered, "It's a vaccine." She pulled her hands free and wiped angrily at her eyes. "That's wonderful. I still have to get back to work."

"Perhaps working from the vaccine we can—"

"Don't let me stop you from trying."

Henry walked back to his own work space and the computer with its magical formula. He looked at it. A vaccine against La Belle. Every test he'd run indicated it would work. Once vaccinated, no one would catch La Belle. They could end La Belle the way smallpox had been finished.

It was wonderful news. Even unlocking the secrets of the Legacy Virus hadn't been as remarkable.

But it was still only a vaccine. It wouldn't help anyone who already had the disease.

AD 2015, October 21
United States
Unidentified Location

The base was half empty, equipment stripped and shipped to Muir and Hammer Bay. The corridors were unlit and dead silent. The unconsciously present hum of ventilators and whatever source powered it had gone silent. When they left, the self-destruct would insure no one ever salvaged anything else from it.

Remy didn't feel much about it. Essex's labs were all the same. This wasn't even one of the bases where the Marauders had lived or trained. He was only along to accomplish one thing at Essex' request. Everything else had already been removed or done. All but this last task, a matter the scientist trusted to no one else.


More than that, of course, Remy knew. Essex' altered genetic code seemed particularly vulnerable to La Belle. Since Henry diagnosed him, it had moved much faster than normal. Essex had to be feeling the chill breath of mortality at the back his neck for the first time since he accepted En Sabah Nur's
Faustian bargain and abandoned all humanity. He wanted to take out a little insurance.

"It wouldn't be you," he pointed out.

Slit-eyed, Essex glared at him and replied at his haughtiest, "We are the sum of our knowledge and experience, LeBeau. It will be all that I am at this moment."

Maybe it would be in Essex' case. Remy didn't want to say. He owed the man, a debt he would pay in whatever coin Essex chose. This bothered him far less than some of the things he had imagined being asked.

Essex arranged himself on the polished steel table. He folded his hands over his waist and waited. Remy fitted the delicate net of sensors over his head, adjusting the fit. His hands were steady.

He followed Essex's instructions exactly and finished the template download without much difficulty. He'd been working with Jean, stretching his very minor telepathy beyond anything he'd done with it before. That and the scientist's own skill helped. Even so, he stepped back from the process with fragments of Essex's memories still clinging to his mind, many of them things he would rather have never known. Others were answers to questions he had never asked.

Essex wasn't his father, but Remy's genes still carried pieces of the scientist. After finding Remy in Seattle, tests had proved the distant connection between them. Not a Summers or a Grey, so of no interest. Essex had never spoken of it to him.

He used a set of psi-inert tongs to remove the little golden sphere from the machinery and placed it in an insulated adamantium case next to the gene sample. The lock on the case was of his own manufacture and required not only his genetic code but his psi-print and a password to open it.

It would go somewhere safe, where no one could find it. They were allied with Essex for now, but no one trusted him. No one else would want a clone of him made. Remy felt sure he himself didn't, but he liked options. He'd keep the template and sample safe.

"Done," he said as he moved to Essex's side. His shoulders felt tight.

Essex opened his eyes but held himself carefully still while Remy detached the equipment from his body. He transferred each piece into its case meticulously.

He watched as Remy stopped, bracing his hand against a counter, and waited out a brutal coughing seizure. A faint pink glow spread from his white knuckled fingers.

"Blood?" Essex asked when Remy straightened up.

He shook his head. "Non."

A seared black hand print remained on the counter, testament to his shaky control. Remy looked at it and flinched.

"A good sign."

Remy shrugged. No blood yet, but his lungs burned with every breath. Nothing, no matter how long he slept or skipped work-outs, beat back the fatigue that dogged him. La Belle was winning, slowly but surely.
He saw it in half the faces he worked with too. Worst of all, Bobby had begun getting thinner. Begun coughing, though he tried to hide that from Remy. Remy could lay his finger in the hollow under his lover's cheekbone. He saw its marks on Essex too.

Essex sat up slowly. From the corner of his eye, Remy caught the way he winced. He'd eschewed the armored form for several months in favor of a slighter, human look that didn't remind people of old enmities. It wasn't an attempt to remake his image. It was mass loss. Essex couldn't maintain the more intimidating Sinister form any longer.

"I will trust you to secure that somewhere safe," Essex said, nodding to the adamantium case.

Remy tucked it in a pocket while summoning his old, cocky grin. "No one will ever find it."

Essex regarded him. "If I succumb to this disease before a cure is found, then you will need to clone me and use that. Henry McCoy is brilliant, but lacks the essential objectivity of a great researcher. My expertise is still necessary."

Remy sighed and shrugged. "Might not be around to do anything, me."

"I realize that."

"So maybe you should - "

"No," Essex stated. "You are my… heir. Everything I've discovered, everything I've created, I've keyed it all to you."

It didn't seem possible. Remy's mouth went dry.

"You'll guard it well, I think." Essex opened a tesseract. "It amuses me to contemplate Magneto forced to turn to you for access to my work."

That made Remy laugh and cough again. Magneto, who bowed to no man, coming to him. Sure.

Essex smiled at him. "Wicked creature."

That made Remy laugh too. "You've been talking to Scot, mais non?"

"Henry. He noted that you do listen to Scot, at least."

"Sometimes."

"Something was said about you being hardheaded too."

"Now that sounds familiar."


The last of the lights in the lab snapped out. A distant siren ululated under a computerized voice, announcing:

Essex gestured to the glowing rectangular opening awaiting them. Remy raised an eyebrow and stepped through first. Essex followed him.

They watched the tesseract opening until a blurt of flame and sound rushed through it, signaling the destruction of the abandoned base.

AD 2015, October 22
Muir Island Research Station
Main Living Quarters

Various former X-Men, Acolytes and associates arrived at Muir and straggled into the big main room in Excalibur's old living quarters throughout the afternoon. The huge fireplace Moira MacTaggert had insisted on held several logs that burned steadily. As people got in, they sprawled around the room on the comfortably beat-up furniture.

Bobby had staked out one of the couches. Remy joined him, curling onto his side and resting his head upon Bobby's thigh. Bobby slipped his hand into Remy's hair, stroking the silky stuff absently. Remy made a humming sound, almost a purr, and rubbed his cheek, stubble rasping softly, against Bobby's ancient brown corduroys.

"So you and Essex finish up whatever it was you went off to do?"

"Oui."

"Good."

"Do I want to know what you were up to?"

"Non."

Remy turned his head far enough to open one eye and peer up at Bobby through a curtain of russet hair. "You know why Henrí insists everybody come freeze their bones here, cher?"

"Not a clue," Bobby admitted.

Remy scooted closer and patted Bobby's knee. He was wearing the sage green sweater, the one that was two sizes too large with the raveled cuffs, and the sleeve slid back from his wrist. "S'okay."

"Gah, you two are going to burn my eyes out," Jubilee complained from the doorway.

She joined them on the couch anyway, scrunching into the corner opposite Bobby. Remy obligingly drew his feet out of the way. How someone six foot one could curl up that small was a mystery. Remy was flexible, though. Bobby had found out just how flexible more than once.

Henry arrived a half hour later, when noises about food were starting to circulate.

Cecelia followed him in. They both carried cases they set up on a table. A toothy grin split Henry's visage. Even Cecelia looked in better spirits than usual.
Bobby looked at the cases and smiled. "Twinkies?"

"Something much better, Robert," Henry replied.

"Oh, yeah?"

Scott and Jean wandered over to the table and peered at the cases.

"What's that, Hank?" Wolverine asked. He'd been leaning against one of the windows, staring out, while rolling an unlit cigar through his fingers.

Henry unsnapped the catches and opened the first case, revealing a foam-lined trays holding rows of ampoules filled with amber fluid.

"You see before you the product of the combined genius of Nathaniel Essex and Norton and Edna McCoy's only child, yours truly, the brilliant and bodacious Beast!" Henry declared cheerfully. "Indeed, such work is worthy, dare I say it, of a Nobel Prize."

Remy sat up and leaned his shoulder against Bobby's, a slight smile lifting his mouth.

"Not Twinkies?" Bobby kidded, putting on a sad face.

"Indeed, not." Henry paused thoughtfully. "Though the first creator of that cream-filled golden confection is without doubt most deserving of a Nobel, as well."

Bobby folded his arms over his chest and pouted.

Cecelia opened her case and revealed a pressure injector.

"This, my dear, my good friends, is a vaccine against the La Belle virus!" Henry announced.

Cecelia loaded the injector with one of the ampoules.

"Scott, step right up and allow me to administer your immunization," Henry went on. "You have the honor of being the second person to receive a dose. I did take the added precaution of trying it first, merely to assure myself there were no untoward side effects."

The babble that followed filled the room, while Henry and Cecelia immunized everyone they could.

Bobby and Remy stayed on the couch with Jubilee and watched. Jean joined them, perching on the arm.

Kitty pushed and pulled Pete over to the table while he complained, then left him as Cecelia threatened to give it to him in the ass if he didn't shut up. She sent them a haggard smile when she noticed them.

"We'll begin manufacturing the amounts we need to immunize everyone in New Genosha immediately," Henry said afterward. "Essex has provided the equipment to produce it in mass."

"You've done the impossible, Hank," Scott said.

"Oh, merely the improbable," Henry demurred. Some of his ebullience drained away. "It wouldn't
have been possible without Nathaniel's assistance and data."

"Never thought we'd be grateful to him," Havok said aside to Domino.

"The question remains," Henry said, "do we provide the formula for this vaccine to the rest of the world?"

An uncomfortable silence settled through the room. Uneasy glances were exchanged.

"Magneto won't want to," Psylocke said.

Several of them nodded agreement.

"Pretty tempting to let them find their cure the hard way too," Wolverine remarked.

"They wouldn't share with us," Bobby said.

"But we're not them."

Wolverine smiled at Jubilee. She shrugged at him.

Scott cleared his throat and waited until everyone was looking at him.

"We have to share the vaccine."

"Why?" Havok asked.

"Because it's the right thing to do."

Storm nodded.

It slowly sank in. Havok got a sheepish look on his face.

"Yeah, okay. You're right."

Agreement spread through the group.

Wolverine growled, cutting everyone off again.

"That why you got us all here, Hank? You need us to back you with Mags?"

Henry's ears twitched. "In part. I truly did wish to share this wonderful discovery with my friends first."

"There are other, more practical reasons to share the vaccine," Cecelia interjected. "The vaccine protects against La Belle as it is now. We have a chance to wipe it out. But only if we share with the rest of the world. The disease has already shown it can mutate and jump from mutant to baseline human. It could easily mutate again into another vaccine resistant form if we let it go on in the baseline populace."

Havok chuckled.
"So, sharing is just enlightened self-interest?"

"That's what we're going to tell Magneto," Scott declared. "Just in case."

"But we will do it because it is right," Storm stated firmly. "So that no more innocents die than already have."

Bobby caught Remy's hand in his and held on tight. "Let's get out of here," he whispered.

He stood up and Remy followed him. Around the room, the others were waking up to the rest of the equation. Some of the joy drained away. For everyone who already had La Belle, nothing had changed.

He caught Henry staring at them both and saw the bruised look in his friend's eyes. 'It's okay,' he mouthed.

"We will go on working on a cure," Henry promised.

Remy squeezed Bobby's hand back. "We know, mon ami," he said.

Henry's shoulders slumped and he looked away as Bobby and Remy left the room.
The Suicide King

Chapter Summary

Wolverine pieces it all together and confronts Gambit.

AD 2227, March 11
New Genosha
Myrmidon Installation 8

Their footsteps echoed back from every direction, the sound magnified by hollow silence of the vast building. Only one out of ten of the artificial lights lit the black depths, emphasizing the distance between, oceans of darkness stretched between the bars of wavery blue light. The entire installation shared that almost underwater aspect, subtly disturbing the senses.

Only the faintest traces of chemicals and steel tinged the scent of dust and abandonment.

Steel gridwork glinted above them; maintenance catwalks paralleling massive, corrugated conduits.

Whichever way they turned empty, columnar tanks stretched in parallel lines that disappeared into the darkness. Pipes fed into the top of each clear cylinder. A mare’s nest of wires and sensors dangled inside each tank. Crazy mosaics of dark mold marred the interior of more than one. A control panel at eye level adorned each cylinder, monitors blank, telltales unlit.

Dust clung to the cylinders' sides and stirred beneath their feet.

Benjamin Aiken stood in the disused clone factory with two aides, two New Genoshan guards and Wolverine. Prime Domino had stayed in the security contingent's operations center while they toured the deactivated factory.

"It's hard to conceive," he murmured. "The sheer size."

Wolverine angled his head up and considered Aiken. Only a glint reflected from his deep-set eyes. "Never liked it," Wolverine said.

"You disapproved?" Aiken asked.

"Didn't trust the bastard that gave us the technology."

Aiken raised his eyebrows. "I thought the cloning process was a invention of someone in New Genosha?"

Wolverine snorted and started down the line of cylinders again. There would be no more answers. Aiken and the rest followed him after an instant. No one wanted to left alone there.

"How large is this place?" he asked once he'd caught up with Wolverine.
"Five thousand tanks per unit."

The heavy steel doors they'd entered through had been stenciled with Unit 3. It was overwhelming to realize the actual factory contained several more units of the same monumental size.

"It's reassuring that the factory has clearly been abandoned," Aiken said.

"Not abandoned. Closed up," Wolverine corrected him. He stopped just short of one the bars of watery light and turned. His stubby hands rested on his hips. A jerk of his dark head indicated something beyond the unit they stood in. "You saw those big cisterns coming in? Stuff in them is still good. It wouldn't take a week to power this place up and pump all these tanks full. Someone could open up the gene repository and start a new generation of clones by the end of the month."

Aiken considered that. The government of New Genosha was no different from any member of the UN. They wouldn't give up any weapon in their arsenal; no matter any avowals that they would never use it.

"You have laws against cloning individuals here."

Wolverine grunted. "Look, we could tear down the factories. Censor the science that goes into creating them. Sure. But the genie is out of the bottle, Ambassador. What someone knows was done can be done again. What is, is."

"Don't you and the other Constants take the long view?" Aiken asked. There was that saying again. Genoshans used it with a number of different inflections. He was thinking of his conversations with Mystique. Information could be buried if you could wait long enough for everyone who knew it to pass away and keep them from passing it on. "Eventually, no one would know that it had been done. Would they?"

Wolverine shrugged. "Maybe. Things get lost and forgotten over time. But we'd still know."

"We. The Constants.

"Would any of you know how to rebuild the technology?"

"Magneto's smart enough to do it." He didn't say the others weren't.

They walked on, several paces ahead of the guards and Aiken's two aides. Despite his extra height, Aiken had to walk swiftly to keep up with Wolverine.

Things did get lost. The history books Aiken had read didn't portray Magneto as a genius of the caliber Wolverine had just intimated, though certainly Aiken had been aware of the man's acuity along with his power. The combination accentuated Magneto's imposing aura.

"Then there's Gambit," Wolverine said thoughtfully. "You never know. He probably knows as much or more about this technology as anyone still alive."

"Really?"

The third member of the Triune remained an enigma to Aiken. Amiable, cynical, deceptively casual about the power he wielded. He didn't seem hostile toward non-mutants, but that meant nothing.
Gambit gave nothing away, sitting silently and observing through each meeting. Sometimes a cock of the head or a turn toward one of the other Triune made Aiken think they were speaking telepathically. Aiken wouldn't have pegged him for knowing about cloning technology. He understood Gambit handled the security and intelligence parts of the government.

Another grunt.

Wolverine turned them down another aisle of tanks. An exit, dimly lit, lay at the end of the aisle. When they reached it, it opened into corridor and more doors. Wolverine opened them as they passed, displaying emptied offices and monitoring stations. Dust drifted up from the horizontal surfaces, caught in the suddenly moving air stirred by the doors.

Where the corridor crossed with a second in an intersection, Wolverine paused and sneezed.

"Ya want to see more of the same?"

Aiken's feet were starting to hurt. Philips and DeAndretti looked even more miserable than usual. The guards were expressionless.

"Is it all like this?"

"Take my word for it," Wolverine replied.

"This is enough."

"Good."

Wolverine stretched his legs into a faster walk, guiding them through a maze of corridors that brought them back to the security post without passing through Unit 3 again.

Domino took over the tour after that, while Wolverine disappeared. "Going to check the perimeter," he muttered as he left them. He didn't return until Aiken was leaving.

Wolverine stood in the empty room and sniffed, but it was too late. Whoever had bypassed security was long gone, their scent too faded even for his hypersenses.

He couldn't say a word. Not in front of Aiken. Aiken hadn't seen the marks of passage through several of the equipment rooms. Wolverine was grateful for that.

No one should have been in the mothballed tank farm. Security should have stopped any randomly curious citizen.

Not that whoever had been here had been random. They were too good. They'd had inside knowledge. They'd known exactly what they meant to take, found it and gone without disturbing anything else. Only his senses would register anything out of the ordinary. Whoever had passed through had been good. Very good.

Some of the Dissenters were good. Not this good.

Wolverine was. Psylocke, Shadowcat, Mystique, Gambit. Gambit. It made him think of what he'd
said to Aiken. Mystique had Dissenter ties, but Gambit….  

Gambit would know how to run the cloning equipment; the man was cat curious enough to learn what Sinister did just to know. He collected secrets. What he'd need it for now, when the Barrier was coming down soon, that was another mystery. It begged the question of whether Magneto or Jean knew about what he was up to as well, if Gambit had been behind this theft. If it was theft if the Triune were behind it.

But Wolverine's instincts were sounding alarm bells. It felt like he finally had a chance to find the source of the undercurrent of wrongness he'd felt for the last five years. Gambit might be the key.

He needed an inventory. He needed to find out exactly what was gone. Domino could handle Aiken from here on out. While he would have to figure out who had taken two advanced system individual cloning tanks from Installation Eight.

Why would come eventually.

AD 2227, March 18  
Hammer Bay  
Anderson Beach  
Private Residence

Bobby opened the door for Logan, then stood in the way, just looking at him. His eyes narrowed.

"Out of the way, Icecube."

"I don't think so."

Wolverine flexed his fingers. "Tell me you ain't part of whatever he's up to."

Gambit sauntered into the hall. One hand rested for an instant on Bobby's shoulder, then gently guided him out of the way. "Let him in, cher," he said. His gaze met Wolverine's. "He isn't part of this, Logan. I'm just visiting."

"Remy – "

Bobby's breath smoked white with cold, cold coming from him so pure it condensed moisture out of the surrounding air.

"Sh, cher. Let the man in. We have to talk."

"I ain't here to make trouble, Drake," Wolverine growled. "Yet."

He shouldered past Bobby, then Gambit. His skin tingled. Every particle in the hall hummed with a subtle charge. Gambit's power. He could feel it sink into his bones and claws, a thrum in the adamantium. He doubted even his healing factor could save him if his skeleton detonated like a bomb.

Gambit followed.
Bobby closed the door. Behind him, the door and the hall flash-froze for a heartbeat. Frost coated every surface. The cold cracked plaster and wood, glass and plastics. A deep breath and the air normalized again. The two of them might not fuck any more, but they were linked. Drake didn't take to any threats to Gambit.

The lights came up as Wolverine stepped into the comfortable living room. Dim light, adjusted for Gambit's eyes. More than enough for him. Fierce cold radiated from the hall. Drake was pissed.

Good. Wolverine was pissed too. The only one who didn't seem pissed was Gambit. He didn't know what Gambit felt. Something in the deliberation of his movements told that he had expected Wolverine and his confrontation, if not here and now. He wasn't playing with Wolverine's emotions at least. The anger Logan felt was genuine.

Gambit walked in silently behind him. "Have a seat, mon ami," he invited.

Wolverine turned. "Not just yet."

Bobby arrived behind Gambit.

Wolverine said, "You want him to hear this?"

Gambit's eyes flickered though his expression remained calm. His scent disappeared, replaced by the ionized burn that characterized the use of his powers. He didn't want Wolverine using those involuntary indicators, so he was charging every particle surrounding him into sterile dust. The faster flutter of his pulse couldn't be concealed, however.

Bobby took a step closer to Gambit. He said, "He already told me."

Blindly, Gambit reached back and caught Bobby's hand. Long fingers closed tight around Bobby's. His heartbeat slowed.

"You knew I was coming."

He was getting angrier now, because Gambit was playing it calm and cool. He wasn't going to offer an apology for running the Securidat in circles after the damned Dissenters for years. He wasn't even going to offer an explanation unless Wolverine pushed, not that anything would be good enough. If he smirked, just once, Wolverine was going the rip his handsome face off.

Gambit nodded.

"Since I found out you took Ambassador Aiken through Number Eight. You've never been slow."

"Bad luck."

A slight lift of one shoulder indicated Gambit's agreement. "As good as you and Dom are," he said, mouth lifting into a half-smile, head tipping in a nod to her skills, "and Betsy, I knew one of you would come knocking sooner or later. No luck about it."

"You covered your tracks slicker than snake oil. Too smooth. No one else on this island could have lifted everything you did without tripping an alarm somewhere." He stopped and pulled together the rest of what he wanted to say. "Smoke and mirrors, Gambit. That's all the bombing campaign has
been. Just something to keep everyone's eyes looking one way, while you picked our pockets."

"Oui."

"The thing we should have seen was the lack of casualties."

Gambit flinched but didn't look away. "There have been casualties," he said quietly.

That didn't help Wolverine's mood. He'd held onto the thought that whatever Gambit had been up to, he'd kept it clean. But he hadn't. He was admitting that.

Bobby shifted restlessly. Wolverine couldn't scent him either. Just the smell of ice on a winter wind.

"Then you've done a hell of job covering them up," he gritted out, "because I looked."

A shake of that russet head. "Non. You were looking here, in Genosha, I'm thinking."

Gambit gave the impression of someone who wanted to close his eyes, but was too wary to stop watching Wolverine. Smart man. Wolverine's temper was rapidly fraying into nothing. He knew it wasn't all what Gambit had done or his attitude. It was something in his nature, the nature of alpha mutants, that went beyond competitiveness. It felt like Gambit had exerted a kind of dominance over Wolverine by fooling him for years and on a primal level he needed to win his place back. It wasn't in him to roll over and show anyone his throat. It made his hackles rise and a snarl lift his lip from his teeth.

"You've been going through the Barrier," Wolverine breathed out, his voice gone to gravel, coming deep from his throat and chest. What other rules had Gambit flouted?

Fucking hell. He'd grown so used to the impermeability of the Great Barrier that he hadn't thought of the simple fact that Gambit was one of the three who created and maintained it. The Securidat had sent spies through periodically, but that had been with the full Triune lowering the Barrier for a timed instant. Gambit had done something different.

"Oui."

"You want to tell me why?"

Gambit liked playing games, but not this much. "Drop your shields and I'll give it all to you."

Gambit's expression challenged Wolverine to trust him, to believe he wouldn't pull an Xavier and do more than just send him information telepathically. He wasn't going to do it. He'd had enough spooks in his head to last all his lifetimes. When Wolverine hesitated, Gambit laughed and made a dismissive gesture. "I'm not that good a spook, Logan. I'd never mess with your head. But I've got files you can read. It'll just take longer." He waved toward a low table. A stack of paper files and data discs sat next to the control panel for a holographic computer display. "I put it all together earlier this week."

"That when he told you whatever this is about?" Wolverine asked Bobby.

Bobby nodded.

"Why don't you give me the short version."
"Two, three more generations and there won't be any mutants left," Bobby snapped. "Scope figured it out and brought it to Remy. He figured there was no one left who knew what to do to fix things, so... he had to clone someone."

"Someone?" Wolverine studied Bobby's conflicted expression, the excitement and happiness and apprehension mixed up in his open face. "Someone who?"

"Hank."

"Not enough."

That didn't explain the secrecy, the conspiracy and double-dealing Gambit had set up. Much as the idea of cloning people went against the grain, there was no one who would object to bringing back Henry McCoy for a good enough reason. There had to be more. There was a second tank missing.

"Too short for you, mon ami?" Gambit asked. He pointed again. "It's all there. It's a new mutation. Suppresses the gene that activates all mutants' powers, even though the mutation is still there." He let go of Bobby's hand, shut up and paced across the room to the French doors, where he spun and flung his arms out wide. "I've got enough power to crack a planet open, but I can't do anything about this myself."

"Who else are you going to clone?" Wolverine demanded. He had an idea, because this was Gambit. Gambit lifted his head defiantly.

"Essex"

The flash of fury that name still quickened wiped away all of Wolverine's intentions to listen to Gambit's reasons.

"I should've fucking known."

"It's already done," Gambit said. "Henrí and he can engineer a forward mutation and introduce it into the population with a virus vector."

Should have never trusted the duplicitous bastard after he defected the second time, Wolverine thought, growing angrier with each breath he took. Gambit hadn't cared that Wolverine had found him out, because he'd already accomplished his sick trick. Mother of Christ, he'd cloned fucking Sinister, one of the X-Men's greatest enemies, a goddamned madman who murdered and maimed without an ounce of conscience. Gambit never learned, he never stopped being Sinister's red right hand.

Maybe even everything with Xavier had been a lie. A cruel game of Sinister's that made the X-Men turn on Chuck and send him away. Nothing could be believed.

Bastard. He'd thought he'd known Gambit, known the good and the bad in the man. He'd just had to betray them again. With a snarl of crimson-tinged fury, he launched himself at the trickster, popping all six claws.

A cage of ice formed around him. Bobby. He slashed through it. The excruciating cold ran through the adamantium and into his flesh. The pain just inflamed his temper. He was on the edge of the first feral rage he'd experienced in two centuries.
Gambit was moving now. He scooped up a candlestick and sent unerringly at Wolverine's chest, where it exploded.

"I'm going to carve your guts for garters, Cajun!"

Bobby yelled, "No!" as Gambit flipped into the air over Wolverine's shoulder. One hand braced against Wolverine's shoulder as he went over. The other slapped something against the back of his skull that exploded and sent him staggering forward into the glass doors. They shattered around him as he fell to his knees, dazed and out of it from the concussion.

A windstorm of sleet and ice-edged glass followed him out into the sunny courtyard. The flowering vines along the walls froze and withered to black in seconds. Wolverine's claws screeched against and cut long white gouges in the warm, golden stones of the terrace. Then the stones glowed pink-white and exploded under him, throwing him into the air like a piece of confetti. Shattered chunks of stone tore through his flesh.

He came down on another stretch of the terrace, blood splattering over the worn stones. The old healing factor did its thing. Wolverine whipped his head from side to side, shaking off the concussion as his flesh knit together again.

As he surged to his feet, a vise of ice caught him tight. He tried to jerk his head around. The cold froze the membranes in his nose and open mouth as he struggled to draw in a subzero breath of air. He tasted and smelt his own blood, triggering only berserk fury that made him howl mindlessly. The ice began cracking as he surged and struggled against it, unaware of the damage he did to himself, all of it healing instantly. Before it broke, Gambit was in front of him. Wolverine snapped viciously at Gambit's hands as they closed around his face.

"Not like this, Logan, not like an animal," Gambit murmured. His eyes had bled to brilliant scarlet, the black sclera obscured by the glow of power.

Through the rage blanking out his thoughts, Wolverine felt something slide through his shields as though they were porous. It felt contradictorily warm and cool, soothing away the mindless anger. His breath came slower and easier. His emotions drained away leaving only clear knowledge. He blinked as the last haze of anger left his thoughts. Gambit's devil's eyes met his gaze. It wasn't at all like having a spook in his head, but he knew Gambit was doing something with his empathy. Lulling the beast to sleep.

"Let the fuck go, Cajun," he ground out through clenched teeth. He had to force words out. He knew he hated having his mind fucked with, but it just didn't feel important. He couldn't get excited over it. Everything he experienced felt two dimensional and set at a distance.

Gambit's finger tips stroked along Wolverine's temples. They were hot as hell. The charge. The power held in his body seemed to seethe at the edge of control. The air shimmered and almost smoked off him. "I do, you still try to kill me, hein?" Gambit said meditatively.

Wolverine's teeth began chattering in belated reaction to the ice still encasing him.

"Maybe."

The deadened, numb effect began easing off.
Bobby approached from the side.

"You want to get the damned ice off, Drake?" Wolverine appealed.

Bobby folded his arms over his chest. His light blue eyes were narrowed and his expression set. "Pull the claws in, Wolverine," he said. "Remy probably won't blow you up, but if you touch him, I'll freeze every cell in your body. Ninety-eight percent water, remember? You know what water does when it freezes?"

Water expands when it freezes. Tearing apart cell walls. Killing the cells. If Bobby froze him, even his healing factor wouldn't be enough to save him.

They always had underestimated Drake. Bobby just didn't use his power as ruthlessly as the rest of them had. He would for Gambit. It took a lot to push Bobby but hurting anyone he loved was the surest way to do it. He still loved the fucker.

Wolverine should have remembered. "Yeah," he grunted.

The ice dissolved off him. His claws slid back into the backs of his hands and into the channels inside his forearms. Three beads of blood on each hand marked the wounds they left coming out and returning.

Gambit still rested his hands on Wolverine's face.

"Why Sinister?" Wolverine asked.

Gambit let his hands fall away. Softly, so softly, he said, "Because he is the only one who could and would do this. Henrí alone might have refused, but with Essex he will help to try to rein him in."

"You ever think maybe the reason no one would do what you want to do is because you're wrong?"

"Only every day, mon ami."

"Christ."

"Henrí looked at me like I betrayed everything when he understood what he was, what I'd done," Gambit admitted. "I could feel his… horror."

"But you were already committed to your course," Wolverine said.

"Oui."

Too late to turn back even if he'd wanted to then. It came clear. The clones were awake and aware, even if they had never wanted to be. Sinister was probably as pleased as Beast was sickened, but what was Gambit to do? Kill the clone?

Gambit had that damn ruthless streak. Maybe he could do that, kill both clones, but he wouldn't, because he still needed those two to do what he'd wanted from them. He was ruthless enough to wait. Ruthless with himself as well, living with that sort of decision. Great in a fight. Maddening because he acted so easy-going it shocked you each time something uncovered the sharp steel underneath. Hardheaded enough to do what he thought had to be done and damn any consequences to himself. They'd all been lulled into forgetting.
Gambit looked around the trashed terrace, real regret showing. Power still leaked off him in waves. It stirred the hairs on Wolverine's arms and the back of his neck. Incandescence lit his flesh from within. Energy potentials. More than this confrontation should have made him call up.

Bobby touched Gambit's face. "Stay here," he said. Some of the power finally bled away. Gambit's eyes reverted to normal. Wolverine cleared his throat, drawing their attention back to him.

"You're playing God."

This time, Gambit did close his eyes for a long moment, before sighing and answering. "Oui, I'm playing God, Logan. That's what we've been doing here for centuries. This country, the people here, to them that's what the Triune is. That's what this is all about. What do you think it's going to be like in a world of nothing but baselines when there's just the twenty of us, just twenty of us who are still alive, who don't age or die, who still have all this damned power?"

A spark of anger colored his voice now. Wolverine flinched just thinking about it.

"Erik's the one who wanted to open the Barrier now, not me." Gambit's face set into a grim expression. "Every generation that carries the x-suppressor gene has children who are weaker. No new alphas. Projections show the birth rate for betas is plummeting too. They'll be lucky if any of their kids are even gammas."

Wolverine stared at him.

"This country can't exist without mutants, Logan; the infrastructure relies on powers. I've modeled it over and over. Without a minimum number of energy converters alone, everything collapses." Gambit shrugged. "I don't care if you call it playing God or playing with our genes. We've been screwing with evolution since the first time someone gave a sick kid medicine and saved them so they lived and passed on their genes."

"I think I need to read those files you put together."

"Oui, mon ami. You do that. You tell everyone. I don't care."

"Remy," Bobby said.

"I'm sick of it," Gambit murmured. "I'm sick of it. I don't want to be Raven or Coyote or Eshu. Fuck that. I don't want to be The King of Thieves, the Triune's third, the Constant. I don't want to be trapped here, taking care of people who don't remember we are real, flesh and blood, not gods. They should remember that gods aren't benevolent." His head jerked up. The air around him glowed with too much power. "If they insist on giving up responsibility for themselves, then they'll have to live with what we become when we forget too."

"No one's forgetting, Gambit," Wolverine said. He'd thought Gambit was playing games, playing god, fucking with them all. That wasn't it. He was going mad.

Gambit laughed. The turn of his wrist replicated Adam and God in the Sistine Chapel as his gesture encompassed the wreckage around them. "Gods at play."

Bobby glared at Wolverine.
"Fuck it," Gambit said. "I brought the devil back. Every pantheon needs one."

Bobby indicated the blown-out doors. "Just take the files and go, Logan. We'll still be here when you're done."

"There's nowhere to go, after all," Gambit added bitterly. "We built our own cage."

"I want to see them. Essex and McCoy."

"Non. Not until they've finished." There was no give in Gambit's voice. It was the voice of the man who helped rule their entire nation. He wouldn't be shifted on this point. He didn't trust Wolverine not to simply kill the two clones.

"How long?"

"Another week or two."

He sounded weary now.

"The vector virus needs to infect baselines too. Scope's work with gene samples from the UN delegation shows the x-suppressor in their make-up too."

When the Barrier came down, mutants and baselines would begin mingling. There would be children eventually. When Aiken's people went home, they'd take a flu bug with them that would spread harmlessly across the globe.

"Thought of everything, hunh?"

"Get out," Bobby said.

Bobby hugged Gambit from behind, whispering to him. Gambit let his head hang. Wolverine headed inside. He'd get the files Gambit had put together and go over them with Domino before he did anything else.

If he did anything.

Gambit was the third of the Triune. What could or would be done to him for any transgression? Was it a transgression? The Triune were the law of New Genosha, ultimately responsible for making all the hard decisions and keeping its people safe. It made Wolverine's head ache, trying to figure it out.

Before he walked away, Wolverine saw Gambit turn into Bobby's arms and lean his face against the other man's shoulder, shoulders shaking. Bobby pushed him away.

Punishment enough.
Chapter Summary

The war grinds on, but the tide has turned. They need to finish it though, before they run out of time.

AD 2017, February 4
California, Idaho and Wyoming
Southern and Eastern Push

The clone armies staged out of the Pacific Northwest strongholds, pushing the fronts south and east. Oregon and California, populated by sympathizers after years of living in amiable proximity to the mutant controlled PNW gave way easily. Only the Federal troops manning military bases offered any real resistance.

San Francisco, the new state capitol, already subjected to martial law under the New Emergency Powers Act of 2013, welcomed the MRF as liberators. Two election cycles had passed since Graydon Creed was sworn in with no elections held. Instead, the United States had martial law and the Special Security Act that set aside the last attempt at impeachment. Draconian laws and brutal taxation along with the renewed draft to support the war had sparked one attempt at secession in northern California. Radiation from the ruins of Sacramento poisoned everything south of it to the Delta.

Two days later, grav-repulse tanks hovered into the LA basin, leading ground troops who all had the same face. Satellites picked up pirate news feeds showing the MRF's army and showed them all over the world. The expressionless face of all the clones sent shudders through men and women in as various of places as London, Calcutta, Beijing and Pretoria.

The myrmidons kept coming and coming like army ants. The MRF let the news feeds go out, sending the message. They had the numbers now.

The war had changed.

The night before the MRF crossed into the first outskirts of Los Angeles another operation commenced.

In the Mojave Desert, in the last cool hour before dawn, a kangaroo mouse returning to its home to wait out the searing heat of the day leapt into the air as the earth came alive. Sand shifted and stones fell. A rattlesnake was crushed before it could slither into the open. An owl left its nest with a screech, lofting into the still dark, star speckled sky as the cactus it called home shuddered from side to side. Miles away, needles graphed ink over paper in tight, violent spikes recording an event happening where it didn't belong.

Within the line of sight of the Mojave Prison, a strike force in stealth suits and armor lay prone in the sand. A temperature elemental hid their heat signature while a portable holo inducer displayed empty
desert to any bare eyes.

The officer in charge held up her hand, five fingers splayed, watching her time piece at the same time. Tick. One finger down. Tick. Another finger. Tick. Tick. When she made a fist, she pumped it once and her assault team slithered forward.

Behind them, 'Stat extended the plane of cooled air over the advancing unit's bodies.

Two more mutants counted down to their part in the operation.

When the infiltration unit was fifty feet from the first wall, Magma acted. The earth parted beneath the walls of the prison, swallowing them into lava filled fissures where the suppressor matrices imbedded in them melted in seconds. Sparks and steam shot straight into the air.

At the same time mark, an electrokinetic called Circuit concentrated on his power and willed every electronic device within the prison into absolute stillness, blocking every circuit, killing the technology of anything hooked into it.

The fissures slammed shut. 'Stat super-cooled the earth over them.

The special forces trained infiltration unit made up of ferals, betas and gammas in powered armor and power suppressors bolted forward on the next time mark and swept through the prison. Plasma pistols, rifles and combat knives still worked just as well as mutant powers.

Forty-three minutes after the operation began, Marrow's lieutenant arrived in the private quarters of the warden with a word:

"Clear."

Marrow left the warden still in his bed. Despite the blood soaking through his pillow, the mattress had begun to smolder, ignited by the stray heat from the plasma blast she'd used to kill him.

She opened radio contact with the second element of their operation.

"Begin evacuating prisoners."

Forty-seven minutes after the operation began, maglifters appeared over the western horizon, glittering as the rising sun touched them. Dawn light gleamed off the black ring of cooled lava and stretches of sand melted into glass surrounding the prison.

One hour thirty-three minutes later, the last living prisoner was brought out.

The strike unit loaded onto the last maglifter, followed by 'Stat, Magma and Circuit. Marrow stepped in last.

The maglifter ascended into the air.

"Do it," Marrow told Circuit and Magma.

Circuit released the electronics in the prison. Alarms wailed through its echoing halls and empty cells.
Deep beneath its lowest level, the earth parted again. A superheated bolt of lava boiled upward melting through the foundations of the prison. The Mojave Prison burned and melted and filled with liquid stone from the Pit up. The conflagration in the warden's quarters was lost as the rest of the prison collapsed from the heat.

In moments, only a bubbling pit of magma marked that anything had ever stood there.

Marrow watched through the open side door of the maglifter.

"I hope someone got that on vid for Remy," she said.

On the valley floor, the kangaroo mouse crept the rest of the way to its nest and a buzzard circled lazily before settling to the earth and tearing open the dead rattlesnake's belly. It soon hopped aside as another of its kin joined it and the desert returned to normal.

In the harsh, empty western states they encountered grass roots resistance, but the low population couldn't mount any real defense against the army the MRF had this time. The Federals weren't interested in defending range land and wild mountains and fell steadily back before their advance. Their greatest enemy in the west would have been the fierce weather, but the MRF handled it with weather elementals, turning it into a weapon against the Army and the Purity Brigades marshaled against them.

"So where are we again?" Bobby asked. The cold wind that had everyone else hunched into the subzero parkas and chattering their teeth feathered his hair. He'd stripped down to his basic uniform.

"Montana, cher," Remy grumbled.

They stood in a field behind a rural town's sole bar and restaurant, waiting for the armor to catch up with their skirmish group. Two light tanks and an APC were settled onto the frozen slush of dirty snow, mud and dead yellow grass. Except for a perimeter watch, the crews were huddled inside their vehicles, hiding from the cold while the striker unit officers conferred and complained.

Remy lifted his gloved hands and blew on them. His breath smoked. He'd pulled a black watch cap over his hair. Stubble darkened his gaunt cheeks.

"You know any pissed off local with a fucking deer rifle and a deathwish could take a shot at us here?" Domino said. She didn't sound bothered.

Remy stamped his feet.

"Mais, I wouldn't care. Warmer in hell, that's for sure."

"Are we supposed to be in Montana?" Bobby inquired.

Domino and Remy glared at him.

"Hey, we've been on the move for the last two, three months," Bobby protested, "I've lost track."

Remy snorted and began to cough hard. Bobby took a half step toward him, but Remy held up an open hand, miming stay away.
Domino turned away, watching the western horizon for the line of tanks and personnel carriers that needed to catch up with them. Snow glistened on the peaks of the Wolf Mountains. The afternoon was sliding away. If someone didn't get their thumb out, they'd still be sitting here waiting after sundown.

Remy was still coughing.

She kept her back to him and Bobby, trying for some tact. Her eyes prickled. She needed her damned sunglasses. It was too bright out here. Nathan had been hacking like that toward the end. Crap. Why couldn't Major Fox keep his people moving? She hated waiting. She sniffed hard. The cold was making her nose run.

She listened as Remy took a rattling, uneven breath, the seizure over for the moment.

"Do you think that idiot Fox has gotten lost again?" she asked. Nothing on the horizon, no sign of the characteristic cloud of dust grav repulse vehicles stirred up.

Bobby laughed. It was a little ragged at the edges, that laugh. "God, maybe."

Jean's telepathic voice interrupted them, sounding in all three minds.

~Thought you'd like to know, Marrow's team took down the Mojave this morning. All the prisoners were extracted successfully. Bobby, we didn't salt the earth, but it's pretty seared.~

That was the kind of news Domino loved to hear. She would have liked to have gone on that op. Sounded like Marrow had done well with it.

"Yes!" Bobby shouted. "Yes, yes, yes! Whooo hooo!"

She turned around.

Bobby was doing a little victory dance, kicking up clods of dirt and snow, pumping his hands in the air. Remy was shaking, trying not to laugh too hard and trigger another coughing attack. Bobby danced over to Remy, shimmying his hips, grabbed Remy's shoulders and kissed him. Remy returned the kiss with interest.

Domino had to grin at them. Bobby was flushed and dark-eyed when he pulled away from Remy. He took Remy's watch cap with him, leaving Remy's hair sticking up in many directions. Remy just smiled at him, a heated smile full of promises that made Domino wonder if she hadn't missed out on something good that night in Denver.

She sniffed again at the hot trickle in her nose and swallowed, the feeling disgusting at the back of her throat. "Break it up, guys," she said. Her voice rasped unpleasantly to her own ears.

Remy raised his eyebrows at her.

"Cher, that's as warm as I've felt in days."

"Yeah, but it doesn't do anything for me. What do you say we duck in there," she nodded to the bar, "and have a celebratory drink to warm ourselves up until Fox gets here?" And when he did, the first town they rolled through, she was finding a pharmacy to loot and snagging a case of cough
suppressant. Remy wasn't the only one barely holding onto functionality.

"At least we'd be out of this damned wind," Remy agreed easily.

Domino headed for the door. Remy fell into step with her.

"Hey!" Bobby yelled.

Domino turned and walked backwards.

"Come on, Drake," she called.

Bobby cast one look to the still empty horizon. He shrugged then pelted after them as Remy reached the bar's door and opened it.

Remy stepped to the side and swept Domino a deep bow, indicating she should proceed him, only to have Bobby dodge through ahead of her, laughing.

"Idiot," Remy murmured fondly.

Domino waved him to go first.

With a shrug, Remy did so.

As soon as he had, Domino caught the edge of the door to support herself and coughed long and hard. She swallowed what came up, gagging, and wiped the scarlet stain from her lips with the back of her hand before walking into the dark bar head high.

She called to the bartender already serving Remy and Bobby.

"Whiskey Ditch."

At least it would wash the taste of her own blood out of her mouth. "

Flying over Idaho, Sam detoured over a mountainous gorge and pointed down. He had to raise his voice. "That was the first one we cracked. The Idaho State Mutant Containment Facility."

He angled the airplane onto one wing so Magneto could peer out the passenger window.

"I see only boulders and snow, Samuel."

"Yeah, when we finished, Ric took down half a mountain on the place."

Julio, who was gone now. 'Star had never been the same, as though pain and innocence couldn't coexist in one body. Only duty kept 'Star going. No one called him Gaveedra now or even 'Star, except Sam and Domino. He was going through the motions and if they got him killed, Sam knew 'Star wouldn't mind. Sam understood, but he couldn't let himself act that way, even after losing Tabitha at Pelican Narrows. He had to stay strong, at least on the outside.

Sam returned the plane to its original flight plan. They skimmed over snow-capped rocks and dark
pines, rushing eastward through the almost luminous air.

"A few more years and you won't be able to tell anything was under there."

Magneto leaned back his seat. He closed his eyes.

Sam risked a quick look at him and grimaced. Magneto was trying to conserve his strength. So was Sam, otherwise they wouldn't be in the small plane since they both could use their power to fly. But the disease was taking its toll on the older man visibly. He'd begun to look older. Lines scored his face. He'd lost too much weight.

From his morning glimpse in the mirror as he shaved, Sam knew damned well he didn't look too much better. He'd spent the night before sweating with a fever, every muscle and joint in his body aching miserably. His breakfast had come up.

He blamed some of it on the news about Tab. She'd been in the forefront when they turned the tide on the Saskatchewan Front. He hadn't known what happened to her after that until he saw her name on the casualties list. Whatever pleasure he'd felt at the news of that battle won had disappeared.

"You really think we need to open a salient to take Denver?" he asked.

"NORAD and Cheyenne Mountain are closer to Colorado Springs, but taking the city would be more symbolic," Magneto said. He didn't open his eyes. "This time we'll will hold it." He sighed. "What's left of it."

Sam couldn't think of anything to say.

Magneto stared out the passenger window, apparently entranced by the clouds the plane skirted. Turbulence bounced the plane suddenly.

Sam laughed.

"Never get that with the maglifters,' he commented.

"But they have the glide ratio of a three-ton brick if the generators fail."

"Yeah, lose it in one of those and you're up shit creek," Sam agreed. His mama would have washed his mouth out with soap for using that phrase, he reflected. It still hurt, thinking of her and the rest of his family, all gone. He'd never found a trace of his missing siblings and Paige was long gone too.

Magneto ran his eyes over the instruments. "We have to keep moving, Sam. We have to do this now."

Sam nodded, making a tiny course correction.

Magneto and the rest of them with La Belle didn't have much more time. They needed to end the war while they were still around to take the weight for the hard decisions and spare the survivors that much. Let the guilt for the wrongs they'd done in the name of species survival be buried with the last of La Belle's victims. Then the innocent could build their new world.

He liked that thought.
Didn't necessarily believe it would play that way, but at night when the specters of the dead populated his dreams and he woke sweating and sick, he held it up like pretty jewel in the sun. Sam understood Shatterstar better than he ever let on. Yet his Daddy had taught him a man did his duty. He couldn't give up until he'd finished a task or fallen down dead trying. He didn't have to say any of that to Magneto.
Roll the Dice

Chapter Summary

Beast and Essex think they have a way to save La Belle's victims.

AD 2017, April 1
Muir Island
Scotland

Henry hated Essex's lab. Most of the equipment had come out of his hidden bases in the US. It filled the smaller space allotted to the scientist at Muir, crowded and looming always too close. The tesseract technology and gravity generators let every surface become down. Floating discs unfolded onto whole other spaces when stepped on. From both sides. Pulsing conduits twisted and braided around each other to provide most of the light, a tainted chemical green glow emitting from the fluids within them. Henry's sensitive ears always caught a sub-audible whine in the air that scraped his nerves raw.

The entire lab projected a claustrophobic effect simulating a hybrid of architecture by MC. Escher after a psychotic break and H. R. Giger on crack. Half-organic, alien, hostile and subtly wrong, dimensions just off in some way the eye saw but the mind couldn't quantify. A sense of movement at the periphery of vision perhaps or the feeling that reality twisted whenever you looked away.

He spent most of his days there anyway. That same technology that disturbed him so viscerally provided the best tools to engineer a cure for La Belle.

None of the others, not Cecelia or Renee or Triage, would spend more than the barest minimum in his lab or with Essex. Sinister. Reed Richards would, but his expertise didn't lie in molecular biology and biochemistry.

Except for Henry, Essex worked alone. The only person who visited otherwise was Remy.

Henry had given up on understanding that interaction. He doubted Remy understood the mélange of emotions he felt toward Essex. Whatever its basis, Remy couldn't or wouldn't cut all ties toward the scientist, not even when he'd seemed to hate and blame him for everything wrong in his life. In despair, it was Essex Remy had run to every time, not the X-Men.

And, shamefully, when Remy had been lost in the Mojave, it had been Essex who offered his skills and knowledge in trade to save him. While the X-Men obliviously followed Charles Xavier in a straight line that took them from the light into darkness.

Today there would be no visit from Remy, no quick, wry smile that dismissed his own failing health and any guilt Henry held for his lack of success in finding a cure. Remy and Bobby and most of the MRF high command were in North America. The clone armies were on the march. On the Saskatchewan Front, Wolverine had finally succeeded in expelling the last US troops from Canada. It finally felt like the end was approaching.
Not the only end, Henry knew.

Essex was bent over a holograph table, studying a series of DNA strands. Fever flushed his hollowed cheeks. His otherwise pale face looked skull-like rather than demonic. He didn't look up as Henry approached, instead stabbing a long, bony finger at one of the DNA strands.

"McCoy, look at this."

Henry studied the holographic depiction of the familiar strand.

"Wolverine's," he identified it.

"Indeed." Essex nodded to another display. "His healing factor is superior to any other I have encountered. Sabretooth's did not compare."

No surprise that Essex still had samples from Creed. Henry did wonder when he'd found one from Wolverine, then chided himself for stupidity. Essex could have accessed Henry's own collection of medical records on the X-Men. He'd passed on everything he thought might be useful through Gambit years before.

Essex murmured a command and another holograph flickered into being beside the first. A virus carrying a long, complicated tail of RNA and DNA, including the infamous x-gene activator section.

"What in the name of heaven is that monstrosity?" Henry exclaimed. He peered closer at it. As unnatural a creation as La Belle. He shuddered to think of what effect it might engender if it infected anyone.

"An interesting experiment of mine," Essex replied. "Your unpleasant doppelganger, Bishop, and LeBeau destroyed my St. Louis lab before I could perfect it. It had the interesting effect of temporarily mutating baseline humans. LeBeau fooled me into believing he had been infected at one point… It occurred to me that I had never ascertained whether it would effect a mutant after all."

Henry grimaced, remembering his imprisonment at the hands of the version of himself known as Dark Beast. A psychotic monster who had escaped the collapsed Age of Apocalypse timeline, that McCoy had impersonated Henry with the X-Men for months with the aid of the nascent Onslaught persona living in Charles Xavier. He'd beaten and nearly killed Henry, then left him chained in a bricked up underground tunnel to starve to death in the dark. His escape had been a minor miracle.

So many events had overtaken them after the defeat of Onslaught that Henry had never familiarized himself with any of the missions Dark Beast had accompanied the X-Men on. They'd lost many of their records during Operation: Zero Tolerance. The reports might not have told him much. They were probably sketchy or even falsified by both Dark Beast and Remy, who had been still determinedly concealing his old ties to Sinister.

He'd never heard of the mission or this virus of Essex's.

"Does it?" he asked.

"The computer models indicate it will," Essex confirmed.

"Ah, and the purpose of finding out that your virus will infect mutants too, aside from random
scientific curiosity, is… ?"

"I used it as a vector to graft the x-gene activator into baselines. I can use the same basic virus to vector Wolverine's healing factor into mutants. The effect is temporary, but sufficient to allow it to cure them of La Belle. Afterward, they can be immunized."

"Wolverine's healing factor didn't save Rogue."

"It very well might have if she had absorbed it more recently than she had," Essex disagreed. "My own studies of Rogue's unique physiology indicate that her body generated an analog of those abilities she 'absorbed'. In her case, the analog was too attenuated to defeat the virus. Wolverine's healing factor was not part of her genetic make-up. My virus will incorporate it into the patient's own DNa."

"And very probably kill them," Henry pointed out. Essex shrugged narrowed shoulders. His scarlet eyes glittered in the dimness, reminding Henry of Remy again.

"They're dying anyway."

Henry had no answer for that truth.

"If you are not going to add your skills to this endeavor, Henry, please feel free to leave," Essex said in a dust dry tone. "I will proceed in any case."

Henry nervously combed his claws through the fur on his forearm. If it worked… Perhaps there were ways the cure might be made somewhat safer. Something to improve the odds. Certainly, the effort was worthwhile.

"I shall stay, Nathaniel," he declared.

Essex nodded once.

"Excellent."

"Do you really trust him, Remy?" Bobby asked. "Hank isn't sure this thing will work." Just that if it doesn't, it will kill us, he didn't add.

Remy's eyelids lowered, dark lashes brushing shadows over already bruised skin.

"Oui."

They were lying facing each other on a narrow bed in an occupied building, temporarily camped a hundred miles outside Laramie, Wyoming. The wind moaned against the walls and windows, sneaking in through any crack, piling snow against the walls. Bobby had found extra blankets and an oil stained canvas tarpaulin to huddle under, anything to keep Remy warm.

He was holding Remy's hands between them, pressed to his chest. The long narrow fingers curled into his grasp were frighteningly cool.

A salvaged lamp burned on the dresser, running on electricity provided by a rumbling generator. All
the power lines had been long since cut.

Over the sound of the wind and the generator, the basso pound of artillery split the night like a metronome, shelling the distant city. The shriek of an airstrike split the darkness irregularly, missiles splashing against the forcefield surrounding the camp futilely. Each hit made them flinch as the building they were in shook. They held each other tight as plaster rained down from the cracked ceiling.

Bobby pressed his lips to Remy's mouth, sweeping his tongue over chapped, fever dry lips until they opened. Remy's eyes were open, watching him while they kissed. He stroked his tongue along the smooth palate of Remy's mouth, savoring the way Remy responded with a tremor that ran through his long body down to his elegant toes. He kissed him until they were both shaking with pleasure, the sound of the war too distant to touch them while they held each other tight.

Let this never end, Bobby thought selfishly, let it never end.

Afterward, sprawled dissolute and sweaty beside each other, Bobby wondered at the strange road that had led him to this moment. The empathic link fed him more than Remy's sensations while they made love. It was a constant glow of deep, warm emotion at the center of his being, golden and vibrant whenever Remy's thoughts were on him. He couldn't imagine existing without Remy's presence in his mind and heart. How twisted was he to think he might miss the war, miss how it made every good thing brighter and sharper and more precious, the lucent truths only revealed at the edge of death?

He wasn't ready to let go and step over the edge, unless Remy went before him. Better to live long and find out that he wouldn't miss anything, because the good things would stay. That's what the empathic link told him. Remy loved him, not the war, and he loved Remy, not the danger.

Even if Hank did have doubts, Sinister's cure was their best chance to have a future. Sinister had to be right. The cure had to work. Their kisses had tasted of blood.

He turned until he could rest his face against the crook of Remy's wide shoulder, breathing in the scent of him, sweat and cedar-scented soap, while absently tracing his hand down Remy's sternum. Gilt and ivory skin drawn over spare, hard bone and sinewy muscle. Remy stretched sinuously under Bobby's hand, broad ribcage rising and falling with a deep breath.

"You got some rabbit in you or something, Drake?" Remy rasped.

"I like petting you. Being together." Bobby grinned and added, "The sex is pretty spectacular too."

Bobby angled his head up to watch Remy's reaction. Remy blinked at the ceiling then smiled. Not a smile Bobby thought even his other lovers had seen. A lovely smile, luminous with emotion.

"Remy been told that before," he said lightly. "The spectacular thing."

But not that someone could love just being with him, without him doing anything but being himself.

"Do you believe in destiny, Remy?"

"Non."

Bobby lifted his head and frowned.
"No? You don't think we were meant to be together?"

Remy wasn't still pining for Rogue and their doomed, star-crossed romance, was he?

Remy sat up. "Non." He looked serious, fine auburn hair falling around his sharp face.

"Hey, guess I know how I rate."

Remy's hand snaked out and snatched Bobby's wrist to hold him in place. "It's better," he said, low-voiced and intent. "Better that we both decide, cher. Better than being puppets for fate, mais non? This, we make. Us. We choose."

Bobby slowly relaxed. Remy's hold on his wrist loosened and became a caress against his pulse point.


"Consequences," Remy added.

"Yeah."

Bobby scooted up until he was sitting Indian-style, knee to knee with Remy. "What about the Prophecy and the Chosen One and all the other crap we've seen?" he asked curiously.

Remy waved one hand.

"Just time travel tricks, cher. All of it. Le Diable Blanc was my père setting things up to Unify the Guilds after meeting me in the eighteen hundreds. The Chosen One, that was a crock of Askani bullshit, trying to give folks in the future some hope they'd get out from under Apocalypse." Remy grinned. "Look at Bishop, coming back from the future, telling everybody that Gambit was going to be the Traitor that took the X-Men down from inside 'cause he lived to be the Witness, hein? All the times I wondered and it turns out it was the Professor turning into Onslaught that killed the X-Men in that timeline."

"Did anyone ever apologize for that?" Bobby asked.

Remy laughed loudly.

"Cher, there were times I wondered if it weren't going to be me, too." Again, the sharp, fox grin lit his features. "Especially when Angel or Cyke ticked me off so bad, I wanted to blow them up."

"So, no destiny."

"Just choices, cher."

Bobby liked that. No fate. Remy was with him because he wanted to be.

"So, we go back to Muir and drink the mad scientist's potion?"

"Think it's an injection, Bobby."
"No bubbles or fumes?" He tried for disappointment.

Remy looked disconcerted then thoughtful. "It is Monsieur Essex, there might be." A wicked look took over his face. "He might even stick you in a tank for a while."

"Ack, no!"

A closer than usual airstrike rocked the earth. The bed juddered across the floor. Bobby grabbed at Remy and held on. "Hey, it's like a free ride or one of those vibro beds," Bobby exclaimed. "Got a quarter?"

Remy threw his head back, highlighting the long line of his throat, and laughed. When things settled, his arms had wound round Bobby and his hands were doing obscenely wonderful things to the muscles at the base of Bobby's back.

"Oh, God," Bobby moaned.

"How 'bout we go for another kind of ride now?" Remy teased.

"Yeah, sure, okay, let's–let's–"

Remy pushed him back and straddled him. He was all lethal grace and masculine beauty, leaning close to lick a line from Bobby's throat to behind his ear then pulling back.

"Okay," Bobby said. "You know me. My body's just a regular amusement park."

"Mmmn," Remy breathed, leaning in for more kissing.

Kissing was good. Kissing was better than good. And nipples. Remy had given Bobby an all new appreciation for nipples. Remy's were small and dark, surrounded by a dusting of copper hairs. Bobby found them with his hands, while Remy sucked on one of his.

"All aboard for fun time," he managed to croak as Remy scraped a tooth over a sensitive peak.

Remy reached between them and touched Bobby with that perfect knowing that his empathy provided and coherency disappeared with a last thought: Remy had a lifetime pass for all the rides in Bobby's amusement park.

Then he forgot everything but the man taking him for a ride.

Remy gave the hibernation tank a jaundiced look. He'd been kidding when he told Bobby Essex might put him in one. Turned out the treatment required immersion in the thick liquid that was used to heal burn victims as well as nurture clones. It accelerated new cell production in a completely sterile environment.

The tank had been specially modified, he noticed. It was hooked into a Shi'ar healing pod that could provide complete life support.

He thought it looked like a glass coffin. His muscles seized up at the thought of being trapped in it.
"It's merely a precautionary measure, my Acadian friend," Henrí assured him. He jumped in surprise.

"Merde," he muttered, ruffled as a startled cat.

His gaze flickered around the room, passing over Bobby to Henrí and on to Essex. He counted exits. There was the door behind them and another at the far end of the room. The ventilation grid high on one white wall might offer a third possibility.

Everything in him screamed to get out. He couldn't be put in a cage again. The thought of the tank lid closing over his face was infinitely worse than drowning in support fluid. His mind would snap.

"LeBeau," Essex snapped.

Remy looked back to him.

"Control."

Abruptly, he recognized the almost panicky expressions on Henrí and Bobby's face. He was projecting his unease. Unease. He laughed at that in his mind. More like sheer panic.

He concentrated on firming up his shields and that let some of the fear slip away. He drew in slow, deep breaths. The tickle in his throat wanted to become a cough. He willed that away too. If he began coughing, he'd end up on the floor and scare Bobby.

That was it.

Terrified or not, he had to go through with this. If he didn't, Bobby wouldn't. He couldn't let Bobby die.

"Bien," he murmured and forced a smile.

Henry clamped his big hand down on Remy's shoulder. He had that skittish look again, the one he'd worn for months after the Mojave. Ready to bolt.

Henry projected as much confidence as he could. "It won't be locked, I assure you."

A minute tremble in the sleek muscles under his palm revealed how little Remy liked the prospect anyway.

"Hey, just think of it as going to the spa and getting some gooey, sticky treatment to make you feel all beautiful and relaxed," Bobby said.

Henry smiled at his friend, appreciating his easy going manner more than ever. Remy rolled his eyes.

"It isn't like getting a mudbath, Bobby."

Bobby chortled.

"I'd give good money to see you all naked and muddy."
"You're sick, cher," Remy replied, but he was smiling too.

"Oooh, and the thing with the silk scarves and the fruit wasn't kinky?"

Remy shook his head. "It wasn't messy."

"Image, Robert, image," Henry protested. "Spare me, my friends."

Bobby grinned at him.

"Ah, come on, Hank, live a little. Vicariously, at least."

"Vicariously, Robert? Such a big word. It surely has more than two syllables." Henry raised an eyebrow. "I must congratulate Remy. Your association with him has at least expanded your vocabulary. Also, I can assure you I have sufficient excitement in my life without a blow-by-blow account of your amatory hijinks, Robert," he reproved.

He returned his attention to Remy, who was still tense as a strung wire.

"I can give you a mild sedative before we start, Remy."

Remy gave an all over shudder.

"Merci."

"You'll have to strip and go through decontamination before entering the tank," he explained. "At that point, I can knock you out and finish hooking up the life support equipment before closing the tank. We'll have to let you return to consciousness once every six hours. That's what's working best with Riptide, Vertigo and Float."

The first three La Belle victims to start the cure were doing well in Henry's estimation. Float's life signs were more erratic that he'd like, but Essex's virus seemed to be writing Wolverine's DNA into their cells. Suspended in the modified life support chambers, none of them were in danger of dying of La Belle at least.

"The entire treatment should take nine days from the initial injection to the natural reversion."

Remy sighed gustily.

Henry chuckled. He said, "Come along, Remy. I promise we'll set up the tank where you can see Bobby's tank the whole time."

Bobby jerked his thumb at the third tank in the room.

"Who's that for?"

"Jean," Henry replied.

"Whoo," Bobby exclaimed. He grinned at Remy. "Now aren't you sorry you're going to be unconscious most of the time? We are going to be naked in those tubes, right?"

"Robert, I will pretend I didn't hear that."
"Hey, Jean's a babe and I'm not blind." Bobby shaped an hourglass with his hands and mimed panting.

Henry patted Remy's shoulder. Then he reached over with one massive paw, gripped the back of Bobby's neck and lifted him into the air.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Bobby blurted out. "Leggo. What'd I do?"

"You leched after a married woman, a dear friend may I add, and did it in front of your significant other, then invited him to share in your adulterous and obnoxious behavior," Henry lectured him with a slight shake.

"Oh. Okay, leggo. I always do that."

Henry set Bobby back down. Unfortunately, Remy didn't look any more relaxed. His effort at distraction hadn't worked.

"Let's just do this, Henrí," Remy said.

"Mr. Drake, we can begin with you too," Essex declared, reminding all of them of his presence.

Bobby muttered, "Oh shit," and Remy finally cracked a slanted, amused smile at Bobby's wide eyes.

Fifty tanks in the bowels of Muir Island Research Station were already filled with the victims of La Belle closest to death.

Day after night, IVs pumped nutrient solutions and plasma into each patient, as they floated in the hibernation tanks, steadily being rebuilt cell by cell. They pumped Essex's virus into the bloodstream in massive doses to help it proliferate faster. A virus to thwart a virus. As it spread through the body, it began its work.

Unlike a normal virus, Essex's mutation virus did not use the cells of its host to reproduce itself in great quantity. Each individual strand of protein-coated nucleic acid attached and bored its way inside an uninfected cell. Within the cell, it hijacked the cell's own reproductive mechanisms to accomplish two acts: it built a new cell that included the strand of DNA from Wolverine in its genetic code and then the virus duplicated itself. The original cell was destroyed, its place taken by the modified version, while the new viral particle was free to find another unmodified target.

A team of engineers was working on converting hundreds more tanks taken off line from the clone factories in New Genosha. A pharmacological factory had been restored and retooled to incubate the incredible amounts of virus they would need.

By the fourth day, Henry began to believe the cure would work. He walked from room to room, checking tanks with their nearly comatose contents, every few hours. He talked to them, though they couldn't hear.

He stopped in front of the fiftieth tank, which held Nathaniel Essex.
"Even you," he murmured, "even you, Sinister, are like all of us, more than just the fragile bodies we inhabit. I know this. It's beyond science. It's faith, something you disdain, I suppose."

He waited as if he imagined Essex would answer. The X-Men's old enemy remained slack-faced and still within the hibernation tank. A few steps away, Magneto drifted within another tank. A third held Amelia Voght. A fourth contained Lorna Dane.

He checked in the next room and the next. In the fourth, he found Pete Wisdom sleeping in an untidy huddle at the base of Kitty's tube. He considered rousting the man out, but left him after studying the read-outs for Kitty, Wanda and Arabesque.

He stopped in the room holding Scanner, Northstar and Folia, then the next one with tanks containing Milan, Phantazia, and Cecelia. It amused him when he saw that even unconscious, Cecelia still had a frown line between her brows. The rooms after that held Psylocke, Domino, and Jubilee. Beyond that were Rooms 1 and 2.

In the corridor between them, Wolverine, Cyclops, Arclight, Frenzy and Scalphunter were playing poker while sitting on the floor.

Cyclops looked up. "Storm was here earlier, but they needed her back at Hq." He checked his watch. "I'll have to get back there soon too. Sam's going to fall over if he has to go on handling everything without someone to back up his decisions. And Rae already misses her mother. I need to be there for bed time."

Scalphunter gestured to the floor.

"Sit in for a hand, Beast."

"Did you learn poker from Gambit?" Henry asked.

White teeth flashed in a grin that split the normally dour mercenary's face. "I know some of his tricks."

"I think I'll just keep my skin," Henry demurred.

Arclight chuckled and tossed in her hand. "You've played poker with him."

"And lost."

He looked at all of them.

"You intend to stay until the treatment is finished?"

"When we can," Wolverine said.

Frenzy rose to her feet and stretched. "I have to get back to Hammer Bay. Tell Scanner I'll be back in a day or so, would you, Beast?"

"Certainly, Joanna."

She nodded to Scott. He nodded back.
"I'll see you soon."

The non-infected high command would be working closer together until the treatment was finished. Then Magneto and the others would return, relieving Scott and the others of part of the burden. Five more days didn't seem like too long.

It was.

On the fifth day, Float returned to consciousness screaming. Henry looked on in horror as the young man thrashed weakly against the viscous fluid surrounding him. Pieces of his flesh peeled away with every contraction of his muscles. Blood clouded the liquid, darkening it and obscuring Float's panicked, agonized face. Alarms began screaming.

Henry activated every life support option of the Shi'ar pod attached then used the intercom to yell for Triage and Anodyne, the only two mutant healers on Muir. Any others were either on New Genosha or with the army in North America.

It didn't matter.

Float had bled out before Anodyne skidded into Room 1. The teenage healer gaped at the ruined body in the tank. Henry had to shout at him to catch his attention. Two more alarms had begun wailing.

"Stabilize Riptide!"

At the same time, Henry was sending more sedatives into Vertigo’s system, desperate to keep her from waking and tearing herself apart.

Anodyne moved and began duplicating his efforts at Riptide's tank.

In the chaos that followed, Storm and Wisdom arrived following the alarms. They moved out of the doorway to let Triage in. Henry noticed their movement.

"Pete, get back to the other rooms, take Storm with you and program in a higher sedative dosage on all the other tanks. Override is McCoy Six Four One, pass word is 'Comrade, look not on the west.' Go!"

Wisdom and Storm turned from the doorway and ran.

Day six ticked over in an exhausted blur as Henry struggled to keep his patients alive long enough for the virus to finish its work. Reed Richards had joined him when called on. Triage and Anodyne kept working too, though they'd both exhausted their powers.

Henry didn't have time to check each room's patients any longer. He stumbled from crisis to crisis, watching with increasing despair as even the Shi'ar machinery failed to save mutant after mutant.

The alarms would begin shrieking and he would bolt into a room to find that the virus hadn't spread fast enough and reversion had begun before the healing factor could take effect. It tore their bodies apart at the cellular level. There was nothing Henry could do except administer near lethal doses of painkillers and watch as one after the other, La Belle's last victims died of the cure.
Others still survived. One cylinder would be darkened and the next still humming its life support as its occupant hung inside, limp and helpless.

The end of the week saw Henry listing the dead: Folia, Esme, Switch, Selby, Sage, Grind, Copycat, Surge, Tempo, Random, Float.…

In Room 16, Nathaniel Essex twitched, seized, and began to bleed from a thousand cracks in his skin. His crimson eyes flashed open despite the level of sedation mainlining into his veins. He scrubbed helplessly at the glass, mouth stretched wide, then began pounding at it with his fists. Pieces of him broke off. Finger bones still trailing sinew sank through fouled fluid toward the bottom of the tank.

Alarms went off again.

He was dead before Henry bounded into the room.

By the eighth night, Amelia Voght had gone, followed by Andreas and Andrea Von Strucker, Forge, Sunpyre, Bedlam, Wildside, Barnacle, Authier, Questa, Tom Corsi, Scribe and Fred Dukes.

Sleepless and helpless, Henry stumbled into Room 2. He sank down on the floor and stared at the three cylinders still holding life inside. He thought his friends looked slightly better. The life signs looked relatively steady after crashing almost simultaneously the day before. Bobby had iced up inside the tank and Remy had fried most of the sensors inside his with a stray charge. Jean had come awake and held still through some superhuman feat of self-control. Anything loose in the room had been thrown around in a violent telekinetic fit instead. But none of them were reverting early.

His eyes burned. God, Henry prayed, let these three friends pull through. He offered no promises, no deals or sacrifices he would make if they did, only his heartfelt love for them and the need for them to live. Faith and hope were all that he had left.

Henry pulled off his spectacles and rubbed his eyelids, scraping the pads of his fingers over them. Scott found him still there hours later, dozing uneasily, waiting and wondering when the next alarm would sound.

Scott went to Jean's cylinder and laid his hand against the cool, curving glass. He simply stood there for several minutes. Then he sat down on the floor with Henry.

"She's still there," he said. "I can feel her through the rapport."

Henry summoned a weak smile. His vocabulary had deserted him. All he could say was, "That's good."

Scott just sighed and nodded.

"I know she's going to be all right, Hank."

Henry nodded gravely. He lifted his head tiredly and watched the fluctuating bars on the main readout for Jean's tank. Her cellular production rate was accelerating. The bars went from yellow to green. Normal rate. Wolverine's were naturally much faster than that, showing on the monitor as a deep blue that went almost purple when he was wounded or sick as his healing factor kicked into high gear. His gaze drifted from Jean's tank to Bobby's; it was edging from yellow into green too. Remy's was in perfect synch with Bobby's, probably some side effect of the psionic link between
"You should go to sleep, Hank," Scott said in a tone of voice that conveyed his knowledge that Henry wouldn't--couldn't--in the circumstances.

He just shook his head.

"I didn't think so." Scott twisted his neck and looked at Jean's tank again, or rather at his wife, floating pale and nude within it. The ruby quartz glasses he sometimes wore in lieu of the heavy visor to control his optic blasts reflected the monitor read-out. They made it a challenge to read his expressions. A muscle twitched in his jaw. "What went wrong?"

What went wrong? They'd just miscalculated. They'd meant to temporarily graft Wolverine's healing factor into La Belle's victims and let it attack and kill the virus from within. It worked in the cells the treatment affected. It worked too well. The new cells with the healing factor did attack La Belle. They attacked Essex's vector too, killing it before it could finish the job on the rest of the body's cells. Then they went to war with the body.

It was just too bloody slow. When the cells with the healing factor reverted, the job was only half done. As Yeats put it, albeit in a far different context, things fell apart.

Ironic that the sickest patients were the ones still holding on to life. Their bodies hadn't had the strength to slow down Essex's virus while fighting La Belle too.

Henry opened his mouth to explain some of this.

"It's killing them. It doesn't--"

He stopped, jaw hanging.

The monitor on Jean's tank showed her cell reproduction rate leaping. The bar graphics shot upward, shading into deep, dark blue. Remarkable how fast it suddenly worked, as some invisible line was tipped over and the healing factor took over, rebuilding flesh into perfect health. Perhaps some prayer had found an understanding ear.

He leaped into the air, brushing a hand against the ceiling, then dropped down to the floor. With a smile that was probably frightening, he pulled Scott to his feet and spun him to face Jean's tank again.

"Look!"

"Hank?"

"Rejoice, my friend, your beloved is delivered from the veriest gates of hell, snatched from death's fell clutches," Henry exclaimed. "In other words, and to wit, it's finally working!"

"What?" Scott exclaimed. He returned to Jean's tank. Inside it, Jean was visibly improving with each heartbeat. Scott's shoulders loosened. He plastered himself against the cylinder and hugged it in lieu of Jean herself. "Oh God, thank you."

Henry switched his attention and studied Bobby and Remy's read-outs, waiting as they hovered in the normal rate for five minutes, then ten, then fifteen. His stomach sank sickeningly. Would Jean be
the only one who survived?.

"Come on, Robert," he murmured unconsciously. "Come on."

The read-outs stubbornly stayed the same.

~Hank, I want out of this stupid tube,~ Jean's voice sounded in his mind.

He looked at her wide-eyed, seeing her eyes open and watching him from inside the hibernation tank. It shouldn't have been possible. He programmed the sedative dosage himself; Jean was receiving enough to keep an elephant unconscious.

The healing factor, he realized. It was impossible to keep Wolverine doped for long. His body adapted to and cancelled out anything. Jean's was doing the same thing.

She smiled.

~Let me out?~

"Yes, yes, of course, my dear. Scott, if you would help me with this, we'll drain the tank and release—"

~You'll want to let Remy and Bobby out too.~ Her mental voice is so warm and happy Henry could only gape at her for a moment.

"Blue is good, right?" Scott asked.

Dreamily, Henry nodded. He looked at the read-outs he'd been watching and saw the bars rising with breathtaking speed. The clock told him it was just past midnight. They had reached day nine.

Remy's eyes blinked open first. Then Bobby woke and grinned at him from his tube. As he watched, Bobby pursed his lips and began blowing bubbles.

He spared a second to think, Thank you, Lord, for their lives, then hurried to begin pumping the support fluid out of the tanks so that they could open.

The fluid was down to Jean's shoulders when another alarm started.

"Hank, take cover," Scott yelled.

The pink glow throwing Henry's shadow against Jean's cylinder identified the source of the danger. It grew brighter and brighter. Henry dived for cover, pulling Scott under his greater bulk, as Remy's cylinder detonated with an ear-shattering blast.

Glass, metal, and sticky green fluid showered across the room. None of it touched him; Jean had encased Scott and himself in a protective telekinetic bubble.

Still sprawled on the floor he peered at the remains of Remy's cylinder. A seared circle was all the remained, surrounded by debris. Some of that debris had lodged in the walls and ceiling. Liquid dripped messily everywhere. Henry's ears were still ringing. A painfully high-pitched fire alarm ululated through the complex. Parts of the walls were torn open, revealing conduit and wiring. The smell of burning insulation and hot metal filled the room.
Henry carefully rolled away from Scott then peered toward the cause of the explosion.

Remy knelt in a fetal huddle at the center of the blast radius, apparently in perfect health, other than the blinding corona of power burning out of his flesh. At the edges, it faded into the familiar pinkish glow that always accompanied his charge, but this was far, far stronger than anything Henry had ever seen Remy generate. This was the power that had leveled a large part of Manhattan.

It was spreading through the room via the floor, out of control. When a droplet of hibernation fluid splatted down onto it, it sizzled into steam instantly.

He'd never seen Remy's power out of control. Never. Everyone had power spikes, days when their mutation demanded to be exercised, but Remy had never slipped in Henry's presence. Remy had come to the X-Men expert in using his charge. More than expert enough to hide that he was an empath for years, though they'd all guessed he had some psi ability. No one had shields that good without reason. Sometimes there might even have been some resentment, that he hadn't come to the school because he needed it when so many of them had.

But before Remy had come to the X-Men, he'd gone to Sinister—or been found by him, Remy had never been forthcoming on the subject—to help him damp his powers. They'd only learned that after the Trial. Even after that, Remy had been reticent—honestly, secretive—refusing to answer questions. When his association with New Son had revealed itself as a threat, he hadn't turned to the X-Men. He'd gone to Sinister again instead.

All he'd ever said about that was that Sinister had 'jacked' his powers back to original level and that he'd burnt them out defeating New Son. Even so, he'd still been alpha level.

Henry gasped.

Wolverine's healing factor hadn't just cured La Belle and returned Remy to good health. It had restored the full potential of his mutant ability. Remy was going Omega.

"Oh my stars and garters," Henry murmured in wonderment and awe.

Bobby's tank iced over and shattered, chunks of emerald ice falling to the floor.

Scott scrambled to his feet, looking shocked. Shock didn't stop Scott from evaluating the situation and taking command, though. "Hank, get out and start evacuating the station—"

"I can't, I have patients who can't be moved yet," Henry protested.

Remy lifted his head. His eyes had bled to pure, brilliant crimson. Wet, dark strings of hair hung over his face. A face set in a rictus of painful effort.

"Go," he gritted out.

His entire body was clenched, fighting to rein in the power coursing through him.

Jean's tank wrenched open, untouched. The remaining liquid inside flooded out onto the white-hot floor, spitting and boiling as it hit, adding to the stench in the room. She stepped down in a nimbus of golden fire, unconcerned by her nudity.
~Take Scott and go now,~ she 'pathed.

Bobby had iced up. He jumped out of the cracked open tank he'd occupied and started toward Remy.

Remy held up one hand. "Get out," he hissed. "Get out while I can still hold on to it."

Bobby was already shaking his head. "Not going anywhere, Rems," he said and slid over a frozen path of ice to Remy's side.

"Jean," Scott said. He looked at eyes. She smiled at him and Scott nodded. He grabbed onto Henry's hand. "Let's go."

Jean was already levitating her way to Remy too.

With a last look back, Henry picked up Scott and heaved him across the room and through the blown open doorway into the corridor. He bounded after Scott, leaping over the charged floor. His ears were starting recover a little. He could hear voices and yelling from the rest of the complex.

In shock, he looked up and spotted Magneto coming down the corridor. A half dozen others followed him. Magneto was stripping metal molecules from the walls, creating his usual armor with just the aid of his mind and magnetic power. Kitty walked just behind him, her arm around Pete's waist. She was wearing Pete's crumpled black suit jacket.

Magneto came to a stop before Scott, who had struggled to his feet.

"Status?"

"We must evacuate," Scott stated.

"Gambit's powers are spiking past alpha," Henry added. "He could blow the entire station."

Magneto's eyes widened minutely at that. An omega himself, maybe the first, he understood exactly how destructive an out of control mutant could be. He nodded and began issuing orders to the fifteen mutants gathered behind him.

"Northstar, alert everyone within the station to remove themselves. Milan, jack into the datacore and copy everything from the labs to Mont Saint Francis. Slipstream, start 'porting everyone there as soon as they're outside the station perimeter. Everybody else, out, now."

Northstar nodded then blurred away.

"Let's go, people," Scott yelled when some of them hesitated. The glow from within Room 2 had brightened considerably.

"I shall go with Milan," Henry said. He had passwords that would speed the data transfer.

Slipstream, an Australian Henry barely knew, glanced around counting heads then laughed. He 'ported out, taking everyone but Scott, Henry, Milan, and Magneto.

Scott said, "Hank, move it. Jean wants Magneto in there with her and Remy."
"Shall we?" Henry asked Milan, gesturing for the cyberpath to proceed up the corridor ahead of him. He blinked and wondered why Milan looked different before realizing that the transplanted healing factor had erased the peculiar tattoo of a wide red arrow pointing down that had marked Milan's forehead.

Milan went, his bare feet silent on the tile floor.

Ten minutes later, Scott virtually pushed the two of them out the doors into the cold, wet Scottish night. Rain splatted against their faces, carried almost horizontally on a strong wind off the North Sea.

"Keep moving."

The air in the station had taken on a pinkish sparkle. It was going to blow big when it went.

Scott chivied them inland, twice as far as Henry would have gone, stumbling in the dark. The rain matted Henry's fur down.

Henry looked back.

"Do you know what's going on?" he asked.

The buildings were getting brighter and brighter.

"Jean's linked Gambit to Magneto. The Phoenix power is different enough that showing him how to control it isn't helping him."

"You're an energy converter," Milan said quietly.

Scott turned back toward the station too. His mouth twisted into bitterness. He tapped the ruby quartz lensed glasses covering his eyes with one finger. "I'm brain damaged. I wear this thing because I don't have any control."

Henry laid his hand on Scott's neck. Milan, never talkative anyway, wisely fell silent. They watched in wonder as the Muir Island Research Station, built in and on the remnants of Clan MacTaggert's ancestral hall, glowed brighter and brighter, walls and spires incandescent with a brightness that hurt the eye.

In a final eyeblink, it detonated. The night flashed white and shadowless. Rain heated to steam off the long grass laid flat in the first instant. A breath later, the wind reversed itself rushing back into the empty space, whipping the grass back toward the center of the blast. The force of the explosion was thrown straight up, channeled toward the stratosphere by a wall of meshed magnetic and telekinetic power. Even so, all three of the men outside the installation were bowled off their feet. The sound hammered at their eardrums while the earth rolled and humped under them. Along the coast of the island, craggy cliffs calved off boulders that fell into the sea sending up great spumes of spray.

Henry wondered how deep the charge had plunged into the earth to rock the entire island. The satellites watching were getting a hell of a show. It would look like they'd tested out a new weapon.

Milan cautiously got to his feet then tipped his head up. Curiously, despite being naked other than a thin set of surgical scrub pants Henry had grabbed for him on the way out, which were now soaked, he didn't even shiver.
"No debris," Milan remarked.

He was right, Henry realized. No pieces of the wrecked installation were tumbling down. It had been reduced to dust.

"Scott," he said quietly, deeply disturbed. That explosion must have killed the four people left inside.

Scott was unperturbed.

"They're fine."

"Fine?" Milan echoed.

Scott shrugged then nodded. "Jean's still linked to them. She says that Gambit's back in control. They just had to release the charge."

"Amazing," Henry breathed. He wished he had a portable Geiger counter with him. He suspected Remy had been tapping energy at an atomic level.

A blue-green sphere of energy rose out of the crater left by the explosion, brilliant in the rain-soaked darkness, and sped toward them. Henry squinted. It held them all, Magneto, Jean, Bobby and Remy.

They were perfectly untouched, perfectly healthy, as Magneto brought them to earth.

Henry frowned looking at them, then Milan. Perhaps it was just that he'd grown unconsciously used to seeing them ill and worn, but they looked… brighter… glowing with a new, energetic health that seemed at odds with the circumstances.

Jean walked into Scott's embrace and a kiss that made Henry turn away, almost embarrassed, to afford them some privacy.

He would have to examine all of them later. When they were at Mont Saint Francis. There wasn't anything left of his labs on the island. For now, there was just relief that they had survived again. Relief and irritation as a cold trickle of water found a way into his ear. Henry shook his head hard.

Bobby, in ice form, turned and looked back at the steaming crater.

"Wow. That was—wow. Big boom."

Remy flipped wet hair off his forehead and winced. "Pardon, mes amis."

"I hardly believe you destroyed the station deliberately," Henry told him.

That earned him a weak version of Remy's usually cocky smile.

"Second time, no?"

"What—?"

"Triggered the auto-destruct on Moira's lab one time, trying to lift the datacore. Long time ago," Remy said.
He was still jaybird naked, but like Storm, Remy had never been bothered by nudity. They were all just dim outlines of wet limbs in the night anyway. The overcast made the night darker than ever. Only the nimbus of bluish-green light generated by Magneto lit them, highlighting a cheekbone here or a shining flank.

"Jean," Magneto said. "Could you contact--"

"Slipstream's on his way back," Jean interrupted. She turned her head to face them, but stayed in Scott's arms.

Bobby laughed.

"Good, because I'm hungry enough to eat one of Wolverine's extra-large Hungry Man-style meals. Or three."

"Oui."

Jean laughed.

"Clothes or food first, guys?"

Magneto chuckled.

"Since I have dressed myself, I am inclined to have Davis take us straight to the kitchens."

"I'm all for naked lunch if you are, Jeannie," Remy leered. "We got nothing to be ashamed of"

Bobby thwapped him in the back of the head. "Clothes. People ogle you enough as it is."

"Not lately, cher. Now, though, I'm back in fighting trim, hein?"

"Hank, do you have any way of treating that overinflated ego?"

"I believe that is your department, Robert," Henry said.

"Clothes first," Scott said firmly. "We're all going to get dry and get dressed. Then you can raid the kitchens."

Remy stuck his tongue out at him.

"And I'm the one they call immature," Bobby groused, in high good humor.

Henry noticed even Magneto was smiling. They were all flying on a post-adrenaline high, suddenly well after so long. Even the destruction of Muir couldn't dampen their spirits.

Slipstream arrived with a small pop from the displaced air. He'd found time to don a skinsuit and carried a handful of clothes in his hands. A green plaid flannel robe floated toward Jean, while Bobby and Remy snatched the sweat pants and t-shirts the Australian teleporter had brought. There was even a set for Milan.

"Merci," Remy muttered.
Jean had obviously told Slipstream what to bring.

"Ready, mates?" Slipstream asked.

"Hey, I'm always ready," Bobby said good-naturedly.

Remy snorted and Scott added, "Keep it in the bedroom, for god's sake, Bobby. The rest of us don't want to know."

"Your loss."

"We are ready," Magneto told Slipstream.

Slipstream grinned and snap/slide/blur/snap they were in the main kitchen of Mont Saint Francis with a crowd of others busy decimating the food supply.

Jean thoughtfully used her telekinesis to remove the water on them all, then Bobby froze it into a sink full of ice cubes.

Abruptly bereft of any energy, Henry sank into an empty chair and just watched, soon joined by Scott and Pete.

Riptide tossed Remy two apples, one of which he handed to Bobby, before biting into the other. Jean began floating pots and pans from the cupboards. Wanda was browning ground beef and onions in a huge frying pan. Phantazia was busy dumping huge cans of ingredients into a massive stockpot, while Scanner chopped fresh vegetables. An assembly line of sandwiches was being prepared by Mystique, Northstar and Cecelia in turn and consumed nearly as fast by Jubilee, Milan, and Vertigo, who took a second and fed it to Riptide while he - to Henry's amazement–fried chorizo with eggs, cheese, salsa and tortillas. The scent mingled with the tomato sauce being prepared at the other end of the kitchen.

Remy snatched a sandwich out of Domino's hand and joined Phantazia at the stove, auburn head leaning close to curly blonde. The faded gray Xavier's t-shirt stretched taut over his broad shoulders, clinging to the hollowed line of his spine then falling loose as his ribcage ended and the line of his body narrowed into a lean waist and narrow hips.

Everyone talked at once, energy almost boiling off them. The ancient kitchen's stone walls echoed with the noise.

"That isn't normal," Pete declared.

Kitty phased into the walk-in freezer and returned with her arms full of packages of meat, followed by Psylocke using the shadows and carrying frozen pies and casseroles. Bobby defrosted them all instantly.

"Hank, care to explain?" Scott asked. One of his brows arched enough to be seen over the edge of his glasses.

"Theoretically, their bodies need fuel after replacing their entire cellular structures."

"Then they're aren't going to stay like this?"
"No, Pete. They'll revert to normal soon. Even Wolverine doesn't eat this much all the time, only when his healing factor has been stretched to the limit."

Pete cuffed him on the shoulder. "You did good, McCoy." He was smiling at Kitty across the kitchen as he spoke. "You did real good."

Henry had counted the survivors. Including Remy, Bobby and Jean, there were just eighteen out of fifty. The equipment he'd used was gone. He could rebuild that. He could recreate the work he'd done with Essex, though the man was dead, but the cure had killed more than it saved. Only the sickest, yet strongest alphas had survived it.

He had a lot of work to do before he tried the treatment on anyone again, but the people who needed it most had no time left.

There were others in the kitchen, drawn by the news and the noise. Storm pushed her way through the crowd and hugged Remy from behind. His laughter lifted above the other voices. Nightcrawler had appeared with a whiff of brimstone and a toothy smile to kiss Kitty's cheek exuberantly. Neal had found Betsy and they were oblivious to the kitchen hubbub, entwined.

Slipstream popped in and out, ferrying in people. Courier and Magma, Marrow, Karma, Arclight, Frenzy, others he knew couldn't afford to linger long. The teleporter didn't seem to feel any energy drain, despite retrieving people from as far as New Genosha, North America and Avalon Station. A shriek of delight cut the noise for an instant as he arrived with Harry and Moira Wisdom. Pete left his spot beside Henry and Scott then and joined his wife and children, united for the first time since Kitty had been diagnosed.

Scott got up.

"I'm going to get Rachel," he said. "She should here too."

Henry agreed. Despite everyone who hadn't come back with them, this was becoming an impromptu celebration. He just didn't have the heart to join in.

He felt very, very tired. He folded his arms on the table before him, dropped his head down, and shook it. He'd failed so many and now he had to start all over again.

Jean's presence in his head was familiar enough he didn't jump when she spoke telepathically.

~Stop it, Hank. You've done everything you could, more than anyone else.~

Her words were accompanied by other presences. Remy was there, sending affection/belief/warmth that soothed the rough edges of Henry's sorrow, along with words. ~You're a good man, Henrí. Everyone knows that. You expect too much of yourself.~

~You give us miracles,~ Jean added.

~You warned us going in.~

~Not your fault I blew up Muir Island or that Sinister miscalculated.~

~We love you, you know.~
~Oui.~

Their mental voices were so twined together they formed a mental harmonic, but there were other
elements there. Scott's steady friendship and support came through as part of Jean's voice. Bobby's
loyalty and love were part of Remy's empathic immanence.

There was one other there too, that made Henry lifted his head and stare.

Jean was still on one side of the kitchen. Remy remained at the stove, adding spices to a bubbling pot
of spaghetti sauce, Storm beside him, her arm around his waist, her head against his shoulder. Bobby
had perched himself on a counter and was working his way through a box of Twinkies. He looked
up, met Henry's gaze and grinned before tossing one of the Twinkies over the heads of the crowd to
Henry. Henry snatched it from the air without thought, his eyes moving to the final presence in the
telepathic/empathic connection with Jean and Remy.

Magneto leaned against the ancient hearth that had been part of the original monastery. That leonine,
snow-fair head swiveled toward Henry. Someone had provided him with a plate that held a slice of
pie and a massive sandwich. Magneto was consuming it at a steady pace. He hesitated and raised a
white brow at Henry. His blue eyes crinkled at the outer edges as he smiled too.

~Once only the X-Men were family, but look at us all now, Henry McCoy. Enemies and allies all
brought together. All mutants united. This is what we've fought for in our different ways, even
Charles—no, especially Charles.~

In Henry's head, Magneto's voice blended indescribably with Jean and Remy's.

~But so many are dead,~ Henry protested.

~Not because of you,~ Magneto said gently. ~I mourn them too. But we will live and go on and
now we can look forward to ending this war, because of what you've done.~


~Vérité, mon ami.~

Henry asked, ~You're all still linked?~

~The three of us are.~

~Feels strange,~ Remy added. ~Mais not bad.~

Magneto agreed, ~Comfortable actually.~

~It will probably fade in time,~ Jean said. ~Now take a nap or I'll put you to sleep myself.
Everything will make more sense in the morning.~

Henry laid his head back down.

~Considering my hirsute and bestial appearance, Jean, the idea of being 'put to sleep' is extremely
distasteful. I bow to your wisdom however and admit that I am, perhaps, at less than my stellar
intellectual best. The body and mind perform far more efficiently given proper rest and nutrition.~
~Rest, McCoy.~ Magneto commanded.

~We'll save you something to eat when you wake up,~ Bobby said. ~Say, if you don't want that Twinkie, can I have it back?~.

~Indian-giver.~

Bobby laughed.

A wave of drowsiness too strong to fight swept Henry under, accompanied by Remy's smoke and honey mental voice.

~Sleep, mon ami. Let us take care of you this time, hein? Sleep.~

He slept.
Endgames

Chapter Summary

The Barrier comes down, the Triune is dissolved, and Gambit has the key to saving Genosha in his hand.

AD 2227, March 24
Hammer Bay
The Citadel

Snap/slide/blur/snap.

Hammer Bay to orbit.

Snap/slide/blur/snap.

Avalon Station to Mars.

Long distance teleports still made him want to vomit. The only things worse were Shi'ar stargates and time travel. He hadn't had to endure either of those in a very long time. It would be nice if he could add long distance teleports to that list.

Slipstream headed for the base's small galley. Remy leaned against a wall until his stomach settled back into its accustomed place. It took a few minutes for his spatial sense to recalibrate his place in the solar system.

With a sigh, he straightened up and headed for the lab.

The two cloned scientists were intently studying a rotating holograph of a strip of viral nucleic acid. It looked like a colorful, computerized Lego construct. Essex stood with his hands clasped behind his back, head tipped to the side. Henrí hung upside down from one of the reinforced conduits running over the ceiling. Both had their backs to the door.

Remy paced into the room silently. Part of the virus looked familiar. His memory wasn't eidetic but it had been trained and though it had been a long time, he had good reason to remember this virus. It was the virus Essex and Henrí had used to cure La Belle. He frowned. Part of it, anyway. It didn't appear identical.

The holograph showed the new virus entering the model of a cell. It apparently went dormant at that point until the cell reproduced itself. A time read-out showed the model's accelerated speed in contrast to normal. As the new cell took form, the virus neatly inserted a portion of itself into the DNA. No muss, no fuss, no harm to the host.

"That it?" he asked.
Henrí fell off the conduit, twisted in mid-air then landed on his feet with a solid thud. Essex merely
turned and regarded Remy with a raised eyebrow.

"It is," Essex said.

"Are you trying to induce heart palpitations in me, Gambit?" Henrí asked. He patted at his chest.

Remy looked at him quizzically.

"You're fine looking, Henrí, but me, I've sworn off relationships." If he and Bobby couldn't make it,
then it was impossible. He'd loved Bobby, but it hadn't been enough. The fault lay in him, not
Bobby, and so, the best course was to steer clear of emotional entanglements.

Henrí's smile faded to nothing. "And how is Robert?"

"Impatient, to see you again," Remy said, "of course."

"Then he knows… about this," Henrí replied. He gestured to the holograph display.

"Oui. Told him. Logan figured it out too."

"You're not still with Drake?" Essex asked. "Has he ever utilized that talent of his to its potential?"

"Non, still hasn't irritated Wolverine enough to pop the third claw on him."

Not like Remy had. He didn't feel like replaying the confrontation in the courtyard of Bobby's house.
Wolverine had calmed down in the end. If Bobby hadn't been there, though, he might not have
stopped Wolverine. If Jean and Erik came after him for this, he wasn't going to fight. He couldn't
face the destruction they'd inflict on each other and the rest of Genosha. Bobby would try to defend
him and then it would civil war. No. Remy wouldn't be responsible for that.

Henrí chuckled.

Remy nodded toward the holograph again. "So, is it ready?"

Henrí grimaced, a truly intimidating expression on his bestial face, drawing his brows down and his
lips up, baring long canines and pinning his ears back. "It is indeed complete and tested to
Nathaniel's satisfaction if not my own. I remain in great doubt over the ethics of this proposition." He
catched Remy's bicep in his hand. "Are you sure this is the right course, my friend?"

"Non."

"Then you are reconsidering."

"Non."

Remy stared at the holograph, bright blues and greens and reds. He could, if he concentrated hard
enough, manipulate bonds as refined as DNA, but only to destroy. It frustrated him sometimes. He
did have doubts about this and that frustrated him too. Was he doing what Xavier had done, denying
people the right to make their own choices? Probably. With that in mind, he'd chosen the course of
conspiracy over manipulating anyone's response. They might come to hate him and the fiat accompli
he'd engineered, but at least no one would end up doubting their own minds.
Henrí wanted to know this was right course.

He wasn't sure there was a right course, one path that led to good and good only. Good intentions certainly weren't enough. Xavier had taught that means were more important than the end, that it was better to fail than dishonor your code. But he'd betrayed just that code at the end. Magneto took the other tack. One did distasteful things, even wrongs, in the service of greater ultimate good. The problem there lay in deciding what comprised that ultimate good. Remy had come to believe life fell somewhere between those two extremes. It was a personal thing. Free will was more than positive and negative numbers. Two wrongs didn't make a right, but neither did two rights, always. How was it better to hold to a course of personal virtue, to refuse to do wrong, when you knew that such a refusal would result in worse? You made a choice and sometimes the choice was sacrificing peace of mind. You balanced idealism with practicality, made a decision and dealt with the consequences as they came.

He glanced at Essex.

"How will it work?"

"Aerosol dispersal. It shouldn't do more than make everyone sick for a day or two. It's only long term effects will be to any children conceived afterward. They'll carry the new gene to turn off the x-suppressor."

"But the mutated suppressor will still be there too?" he asked.

"Yes," Henrí said. "In the children and all further generations. Whatever abilities are encoded in their genes will be active. World without end, amen." He stretched his arms wide, rolling his shoulders, muscles rippling under blue fur then settled himself. "I wonder, though…"

"Leave it to the precogs, mon ami," Remy advised him.

Henrí pursed his lips. "What have your precognitives seen?"

Remy gave him a feral smile.

"Rien."

"Curious," Essex said. "Do you take this to indicate your plan will be successful?"

"Maybe. Won't be some big disaster."

Of course, precogs were very rare. Psylocke's nebulous ability usually kicked in if an event would affect her personally. Seer, the only other precognitive talent this generation, was a beta and part of the Dissenter movement. Her ability was triggered by questions. Since she hadn't been asked the right question, she couldn't predict whether Remy's plan worked out or not. In any case, her vision only extended from six to eight months into the future. Remy didn't consider that useful enough. He'd learned to plan hundreds of years into the future, since he was going to be there.

Remy looked at the holograph again.

"If it's done, then give it to me. Slipstream will get us out of here."

Essex complied without protest.
"Where will we all be going, if I may be so bold?" Henrí asked.

"Avalon Station. Northstar and Milan are in charge there. Whatever happens after this, you should be safe enough."

"They are part of your… underground?"

Remy nodded.

"As well as Mystique." Henrí shook his head. "You play a dangerous game, Remy."

"Always have, Henrí," he said. "Always will."

He found the intercom and asked Slipstream to get down to the lab.

Essex handed him the product of his plot.

Snap/slide/blur/snap.

Mars to Avalon Station.

Remy had the case with the virus in a pocket.

His head and stomach swam in protest. He blinked and tried to ignore it. Avalon wasn't so bad. It had its own spin and moved around Earth, but it moved with Earth in the old familiar solar orbit too. It just took a breath to adapt to the artificial gravity within the station when he could sense the real force of it pulling from the planet below and the star they circled.

Northstar looked up from his desk in his private office and considered the four men who had appeared. His pale eyes only widened slightly at the sight of the man he'd known best as Sinister. Behind him, a viewing screen displayed the curvature of the Earth beneath them, swirls of white over blue and green and brown.

Henrí walked over and contemplated the view.

"Magnificent."

Essex joined him.

"It does show up to good effect."

Remy pulled in a deep breath and turned on the charm. "Jean-Paul, fix Henrí and Nathaniel a place to stay for a little while, mais oui?" Remy asked winningly.

He knew Northstar hadn't been expecting this. Northstar was clever; he'd surely put together the presence of two clones with their original incarnations' specialties. If he objected, it would be now.

Northstar raised an eyebrow.

"How long?"
"A week." Remy shrugged gracefully. "Or until the UN delegation leaves Hammer Bay."

He'd been uncertain how Northstar would react to the clones. Northstar answered to the Triune, but he controlled Avalon Station. Had he refused point-blank, Remy would have taken Henrí and Essex elsewhere. They were in a very real way as much his responsibility as a child. They lived because of him. He owed them.

After this week, there would be no more Barrier, no more Dissenters and, if he released the virus as planned, it would already have propagated over the globe. There would be no reason to hide the two clones then. Any backlash would focus on him and Mystique, but he wouldn't waste time worrying about her; she could take of herself.

As could Essex and Henrí, once they adapted to the time displacement.

Northstar rose and smiled at Henrí. He offered his hand to Henri. "It's good to see you… again, Beast."

"For me, it does not seem so very long, Jean-Paul." Henrí shook hands with him.

"But it has been," Northstar said.

"I was surprised you are part of Gambit's plan."

"I am not the man you knew then."


"And I, LeBeau?" Essex inquired.

Remy gave him a sardonic look. "Would you follow my orders if I gave them, Nathaniel?"

Essex' mouth twitched.

"Mais oui, I know you too well," Remy said. "Entertain yourself quietly for the next week, then as you will. Please."

"I will spend my time acquainting myself with events of the last two hundred years."

"You do that." Remy rolled his eyes. "Davis?"

"Where to, mate?"

"The Citadel."

_Snap/slide/blur/snap._

Avalon to his private rooms in the Citadel.

He waved Slipstream off. The teleporter popped out of the room.

Remy staggered into the attached washroom and emptied his stomach. He could feel a faint pressure
against his thigh; the case of virus in the pocket there.

He cleaned up and changed into formal robes.

The Triune were scheduled to meet Ambassador Aiken and his delegation.

He picked up the case from where he'd set it on the counter and weighed it in his hand. The weight of the world or its fate, all in one little metal container holding half dozen ampoules of gene-engineered super-virus. The psi-sensitive lock would only open to his thought.

He could feel Bobby somewhere in the Citadel. Talking with Scope. He nearly ignored the conversation, because Bobby wasn't paying much attention and eavesdropping through their psi-link was something he had avoided since Bobby left him. Bobby was excited. Happy at the thought of seeing Henrí again, pleased Remy had told him what was going on and relieved the UN delegation would be gone by the end of the week. A little concerned because he felt Remy's unsteadiness through the link. Remy reassured him before skimming Scope's thoughts. He'd continued his work on the x-suppressor and found another ironic aspect: when the x-suppressor was present, the x-genes and activator were always there too. Genetic irony.

Elsewhere, Jean and Erik were preparing too. Erik was cautiously pleased. Jean was worried; Remy hated that. He sent a wave of assurance/support/affection through the upper level link they shared. Beneath, like a heartbeat, the part of the link that generated the Great Barrier hummed between the three of them. It was always there. Like a heartbeat. Like air. Like gravity.

There wouldn't be any reason to maintain it after today. The thought disturbed him deeply. What would it be like, to suddenly be cut off from them?.

~Still unsure, Remy?~ Jean sent.

He knew she didn't mean anything by it other than his apparent opposition to lowering the Barrier.

~Of course not,~ he lied.

It took real talent to lie to an omega class telepath, but Remy did it. He'd been in Jean's mind. He knew exactly how to distract her, because that was the key. He couldn't hide anything from her, but he could keep her from looking. He'd been doing it for six years now and the ironic part was he'd learned how from looking for things in her mind.

Her conscious presence faded from his mind.

He waited a heartbeat.

The mirror showed him the same man it had since he'd recovered from La Belle. Physiologically in his mid-twenties thanks to the healing factor. Too handsome for his own good, Tante Mattie had said, a scruff of beard, red-on-black eyes, and long red-shot hair tied into a braid.

He touched the lid of the virus case and thought, ~Open.~ The lid folded back.

The contents were bright blue and so infectious that he could open one and the ventilation system would spread it through the entire Citadel in less than twenty minutes. Within twenty-four hours, all of Hammer Bay would be a hot zone. From there it would spread on the wind, maybe even as far as India and Africa. Should it get that far, then it would find its way around the rest of the globe before
anyone guessed there was something to stop.

He picked out one ampoule and slid it into a hidden pocket in his skin armor under his robes.

Then he pulled a small knife he always carried in his boot and sawed off his braid at chin length.

----------

A replay of that first day, Aiken thought to himself as he walked down the long corridor.

He'd foregone the psi-shield this time.

The great doors into the main hall, five times his height, opened untouched before him. Technology, telekinetics, it didn't matter; it looked like magic and the effect was impressive as hell.

Click clack of boots on stone. Black marble floors under his feet, towering ceilings held up by huge columns, scarlet pennants hanging from the ceiling to the floor between them. The weight of unseen stares from behind helmet face shields as they passed between the guards standing before each column.

It took forever to reach the end of the hall, where it fell away into an amphitheatre facing the Triune's dais.

They were waiting there just like the first time he'd seen them.

The amphitheatre had been empty before. Not this time, this time the benches were filled. The mutants on them turned to watch as Aiken made his way forward to the dais.

They weren't speaking, but just the rustles of their movements, the susurrus of their breath, filled the vast room with a low sound. They were a blur of brilliant colors glimpsed from the corner of his eye as he walked down the main aisle.

The Triune were waiting. Magneto in the center, flanked by Phoenix and Gambit. Green, gold, purple, scarlet and black. There were others with them this time, names and faces he'd become familiar with, the other Constants.

Shadowcat smiled at him from beside the Commander of the Hammer Bay PD.

"Ambassador Aiken," Magneto said. He lifted his hand in an imperious gesture. Aiken felt himself lifted onto the dais. His stomach dipped exactly the way it did in an express elevator.

"Welcome."

Aiken began his part of the formal greetings.

It was all posture. The final agreement had been reached in a comfortable office two days before. Papers exchanged and signed and couriered back to Geneva and the UN. This was a photo-op. The videoramas were recording from all over the hall, preserving the formal signing of the return of New Genosha to the global community and a seat in the UN. All of it witnessed by the combined Alphanate and Senate of New Genosha.

Aiken signed first.
He looked up as he set down the antique fountain pen. On Magneto's left side, Gambit watched him. The man looked different. Aiken realized the long hair had been cut. He wondered what it meant. Then his gaze was caught by the blue-skinned figure just behind Gambit.

Mystique smiled like a carnivorous Mona Lisa. Aiken couldn't read her yellow eyes at all. This was what she had intimated she wanted, though, the lowering of the Barrier and the reintegrating of mutants with humans.

Phoenix signed with a quiet smile.

"My husband and my teacher would be pleased, I think," she said to Aiken quietly.

"I hope so."

He took her hand and kissed it, making her laugh.

Gambit smiled at Aiken sardonically as he signed. Then he surprised Aiken by offering his hand. "Genosha is a pretty place, yes," he said, "but I think you will be happy to go home?"

"I admit it."

Gambit nodded, something sly sparking in his eerie eyes. He sounded perfectly genuine though as he spoke again.

"I wish you only well, Ambassador Aiken."

"Thank you."

Gambit stepped aside to stand beside Phoenix again. Magneto picked up the pen. He looked at the agreement one more time then wrote out his signature in bold, looping script.

Aides swooped in and retrieved the papers.

Magneto raised his head and gazed at the mutants gathered in the amphitheatre.

"It is done."

The hall sank into the silence of a thousand people holding their breaths.

"Today, we have agreed to lower the Great Barrier."

Aiken sucked in his own breath.

Phoenix and Gambit joined Magneto. Power flared around the three, iridescent streamers of it bright enough to blind. Aiken blinked and wished he wasn't on the platform with them. He shuffled back and heard a hoarse chuckle. Shadowcat caught his arm and guided him further back to stand with Wolverine and the other Constants. Wolverine chuckled again.

"They're putting on a good show."

More energy poured into the hall to writhe around the three omegas. They'd caught each other's
hands to form a triangle. Phoenix' hair flew up like flames as the power whipped around them. The gloomy hall was illuminated flashbulb bright. The look on their faces was of pain and finally release. Their bodies shuddered and jerked.

The hall became uncomfortably hot, stifling. It felt like the oxygen had been burned from the air by the stray power boiling off the Triune. A crack crawled up the shining side of one the columns rising to the roof far above them. The crimson pennants twisted and blew on a superheated wind.

Snakes of brilliant electromagnetic and kinetic energy sparked over metal and stone, played over the hair and clothes of the gathering. It seared the hair on the back of Aiken's hands for an instant. He thought he could feel it like a deep hum inside his bones, like being caught in a vice of force that would crush him in another breath.

But it eased away instead and he could breathe again.

The searing light dimmed, retreating into the three bodies. Something invisible sundered. Hands let go of hands. Then they were separate. Heads bowed.

Three, not one.

Far out on the Indian Ocean, the sun hit the water. No strange haze interrupted the horizon. Beneath the surface, an inquisitive dolphin pod explored waters remembered only through their ancestors' sonar songs. The great generators in stations along the coast of Genosha sank into silence and stillness all together for the first time since they were built. An orbital surveillance satellite picked up the first pictures of the island. In his office at the top of the orbital beanstalk, Max Parsons stared at a viewscreen picture of Avalon Station and dictated a letter containing his suspicions. In his newly assigned quarters aboard Avalon Station, Nathaniel Essex read a modern medical journal and sneered, while a corridor away, Henry McCoy contemplated the vagaries of genetics and free will while eating a hydroponically grown banana.

In the main hall of the Citadel in Hammer Bay, the mutants gathered there let loose their relief and approval in shouts and applause that rocked the foundations, while the Triune stared into each of others' eyes and wondered for the first time in centuries what the others felt and thought.

Magneto clenched his fists by his side. His chest heaved for breath. A smear of blood marred his upper lip. Perspiration matted darkened locks of red hair to Phoenix’s temples. She lifted her hands to her tangled mane impatiently, pushing it away.

Gambit touched Phoenix's cheek lightly, brushing back a strand of hair. She looked surprised before catching his hand and holding it there for a heartbeat. He left his hand in hers for another moment, then drew away, separating himself from her and Magneto.

Magneto moved and, for the first time, Aiken saw Phoenix and Gambit not in concert with him. They responded the way everyone else did.

The Master of Magnetism faced his people and declared:

"It is done."

Phoenix repeated it.

"It is done."
Gambit stared out at the amphitheatre.

Cerise light flashed between the fingers of his fist. He opened his hand and a fine dust sifted toward the floor. Aiken wondered what it had been.

"It's done."
Unforeseen Consequences

Chapter Summary

When Graydon Creed was a child, he'd break his toys before he'd share them. He hasn't changed since then. The mutants are winning. There is nothing he won't do to stop them.

AD 2017, April 26
United States
Cheyenne, Wyoming

There were days he thought of himself as Remy. Most of them. There were others when he was Gambit. It was Gambit who waltzed into the Pentagon, Gambit who led the Marauders, Gambit who became an X-Man. Gambit was the Master Thief. Remy LeBeau was a man. Gambit was the armor he drew around him when he went into battle.

Gambit laughed at danger. Gambit wasn't afraid of dying. Remy LeBeau had sometimes not cared or even wanted to die. Those weren't the same at all. That had been despair and Gambit didn't despair. Gambit didn't quit.

He'd thought for a time after the Mojave that he'd lost that; the ability to be Gambit. But Gambit was a part of him, not the other way around. The first time he took a reckless risk in a firefight with a Sentinel just outside Boise, he'd known he still had it. He'd ended up standing astride the smoking wreckage of the robot, while Storm scolded him and he grinned at her, before making a salacious remark about some of the rips in her costume and lighting a smoke.

After all, he'd figured La Belle was going to kill him, not cancer.

He'd thrown himself back into fighting with a will after that.

Gambit wasn't afraid of dying.

Gambit wasn't afraid.

Remy was.

He had a chunk of pipe stove through his chest, pinning him to the wall of a bombed out factory in the industrial neighborhood of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Shrapnel from one his own explosions, because he'd slipped again, still not used to accessing his full range of power. More pieces pierced his left leg and arm. Pinned like a bug, pain shrieking through his system, what blood wasn't pooling on the dirty floor under him filling up his lungs.

If he could just concentrate, he could discharge the shrapnel and pipe. Pull every bit of kinetic energy out of even the atoms that make up something and it turns to less than dust in a flash of cerise light. The energy has to go somewhere. The easiest thing to do with it is let it convert to heat. He could use
some heat right now. Bleeding to death, shock, he felt so damned cold.

If he could, hah; he couldn't. Hurt too much. He was still bleeding out, pieces of his ribs broken off in his own internal organs. Far too much damage to make it if he did free himself and crawl out of here. He didn't know why he was even still conscious.

It was just too damn ironic. After everything he'd gone through, it all came around to this again, dying in his own little deathtrap, killing himself with his own power. The way he had come so close to doing in that theater in Seattle before Sinister found him. Stupid, so damned stupid.

At least this time the people dying with him were the enemy and not innocents.

No use screaming for help telepathically either. He'd started shutting down the link to Bobby and the finer ones to Jean and Erik and Lorna and Jubilee. No use making them endure this with him. They were clamoring in his head, trying to reach him, but he wouldn't listen. Lucky it was easier to break something than make it. Lucky, because he'd never thought he'd die knowing anyone cared.

He fumbled and clutched at the chunk of pipe lodged in him. Blood coated his hand. It felt like his broken ribs were shifting inside his chest wall. His head hung.

Dim light illuminated him from the broken windows on the far side of the old factory. It looked like he'd run out of blood. No more was welling out next to the pipe.

Someone was crawling out of the wreckage thrown against the wall with him. Metal and chunks of concrete from the floor shifted, screeching. He'd wiped out a platoon with that last explosion, but it looked like there was at least one survivor. Maybe he had on battle armor, was tougher than the rest or just luckier. Not that he was unscathed; half his uniform had been blown off, but he was staggering to his feet. Gambit watched as the soldier shook his head in a daze, looked around at his dead comrades and finally spotted him, pinned to the wall.

Soldier boy wavered on his feet then grinned with bloodstained teeth at Gambit.

"Fucking mutie."

He fumbled at his belt and drew an old Browning pistol.

Gambit didn't have any breath for a smart remark. He regretted that. If you had to go out, best to do it with a quip on your lips. The only thing better was taking your enemies with you.

That sounded like a good idea.

He bared his teeth. This was going to hurt. He wrapped the fingers of his good hand around the shaft of the pipe. Mon Dieu. Agony sheeted through him. How did Wolverine do this kind of thing?.

The connard was laughing at him.

Bec mon chu, Gambit thought. He jerked the pipe forward, out of the wall, and again, out of him. The world went away in a haze of red and black accompanying the wet slide of metal out of flesh. Blood filled his mouth. Without the pipe holding him to the wall, he went to his knees.

He slitted his eyes open again, trying to keep them on the soldier.
The soldier who stared at him, wide-eyed. Gambit spat blood and grinned at him. Maybe he did have enough breath after all. It took a lot to kill him. Mutants didn't die easy.

"Take your best shot, mec," he rasped out.

The pistol came up to aim at him. Black muzzle opening like Soldier Boy's dilated pupils. His finger started to squeeze the trigger.

With the damned pipe out of his chest, he felt better than he had any right to. Gambit charged and threw it. He followed the move with a less than fluid dive and roll. He ducked into a ball and covered his head as the pipe hit the pistol.

Crack-boom!

Gambit rolled onto his side and peered through the smoky, dim air. Filthy air filled his lungs as he gasped hard.

The explosion had thrown Soldier Boy across the crater-pitted floor of the warehouse and into the opposite wall. Concrete dust hung in the air, turning everything pale, dirty gray. Gambit could taste it at the back of his tongue, mingling with his own blood.

He made it to his hands and knees and began to hack and cough. The pain was easing away. Each breath came easier. He sank back on his heels, hands resting on his thighs.

He should be dead now.

Instead, he felt better with every moment that passed.

His armor was still torn and soaked with blood. Tentatively, he fingered the tear where a chunk of metal had sunk into his left thigh, ripping through muscle. Drying blood flaked away from smooth, unmarked flesh.

He checked his arm next. Perfectly sound. He looked down at his chest last. He could see exactly where the pipe had skewered him. There was no sign of a wound. It had healed.

He ran his hand from throat to belly. Nothing. No scar. No pain.

He'd healed the way Wolverine did.

"Mon Dieu," he said out loud.

Henrí had said the effect of the treatment for La Belle would fade. He shouldn't still have Wolverine's healing factor.

Gambit got to his feet.

His head was full of telepathic and empathic demands from Jean and Bobby and even Erik. He dusted futilely at his stained and ripped armor.

~GAMBIT, WHERE ARE YOU?~ Jean demanded.

~Warehouse,~ he answered absently. The wonder of surviving what should have been fatal still had
him in its grip.

~Warehouse where?~

That was Erik and another wonder. Why hadn't the temporary link between the three of them dissolved?

He felt Jean ruffle through his memories and snatch the location of the skirmish from him. His shields didn't register her as outside of him any longer. They just blended into hers, both of them encompassing Magneto's non-psionic mind in a protective armor.

~You were in such pain,~ Jean 'pathed. ~Bobby thought you were dying.~

~Oui,~ he agreed. ~Me too.~

A mental raised eyebrow was an interesting effect. Gambit laughed.

~Tell you later, chere.~ He opened the empathic link and poured reassurance down it to Bobby, smothering the worry and questions coming back from his lover. ~Gambit is fine now.~

A stuttering series of explosions and gunfire from nearby served to remind him the battle wasn't over. Erik and Jean chorused that he would explain and soon. He agreed easily.

He scraped his sweat wet hair off his forehead, stretched his arms over his head briefly and headed toward the fighting again.

A feral grin lit his features as he loped out of the warehouse, stretching his senses to their limit, finding where Domino and the rest of their unit were engaged with a Brigade tank group.

Time to get back to it.

AD 2016, April -May

North America
United States

The clone armies marched east. From Los Angeles, they moved forward to take the population centers and military bases in New Mexico and Arizona, Nevada and Utah. In the north, veteran battalions of the MRF, freed up after securing the Saskatchewan Front, joined the drive through Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The main force of the armies crossed the Rockies and joined up with the Striker Units that had speared forward ahead of them weeks before.

Nanite bombs dropped like rain on Scottsdale, Flagstaff, White Sands, and Phoenix, visiting the same horror on mutant, clone and human alike. Nothing lived in the bombed ruins when the US Air Force and MRF were done.

Massive troop movers lofted over the Sierra Nevadas and then the Rockies. If their stealth tech failed, fusion-pumped plasma beams stabbed down from orbital weapons emplacements, searing them out of existence in a blinding eyeblink. On the east coast, new platforms would launch minutes later to take their place as microwave and magnetic weaponry lashed out from Avalon Station to destroy
anything that revealed itself as hostile.

In Nevada, a series of EMP strikes hammered the desert and the neon dream of Las Vegas flickered out between one breath and the next.

In Utah, Salt Lake boiled dry when Sentinels sprang an ambush and the Phoenix manifested through Jean Grey. All it left behind were the black, melted metal skeletons of the mutant hunting robots strewn over white salt pan.

The campaign continued, city after city cracked and ruined between the invaders and the defenders, until the armies turned toward Denver.

They reached the outskirts of the city on May Day.

Everything paused, a strange lull in the months of fighting that had passed. It wasn't a truce. Hostilities hadn't lessened. The two sides were just still for single, long day, waiting for the next move, bracing for impact.

"Tomorrow," Magneto told the mutants gathered in a barn on an abandoned ranch outside Denver, "we take the city. This time we will keep it."

The ranch house was burnt to the blackened foundations. The animals had been turned out to fend for themselves, other than a crotchety old dog that had attached itself to Sam. He sat on a hay bale, absently scratching behind the hound's ears.

The combined armies, clone and mutant, were bivouacked on the ranch, quietly resting and readying themselves for the assault. The barn had become a temporary HQ, still smelling of alfalfa hay, manure and leather. Half the high command had bunked down on beds of sweet straw in the empty stalls the night before.

Beast had been picking bits of the golden stuff out of his fur all morning, much to Wolverine's amusement.

One by one, Magneto looked each of them in the eye.

"You all know where you're supposed to be and what your responsibilities are."

Heads nodded.

"Some of you have healing factors now. Don't take stupid chances just because of that."

Gambit's rich chuckle answered that.

"This isn't the final battle," Magneto warned. "Once we secure Denver, the east coast waits."

"If they take Denver, we've lost."

Creed stood before a wall-sized screen displaying a computerized map of the United States, his short-cropped blond head tipped back. He clasped his hands loosely behind his back.
His cabinet of trusted advisors sat at the conference table he'd turned his back on. The low light hid the marks of exhaustion.

"We cannot allow that."

Gyrich looked up from the laptop screen in front of him. He'd shaved, but his suit was rumpled and he'd stuffed his tie in his vest pocket. His buzz cut hair had gone mostly gray. He pursed his lips.

Across the table from him, Val Cooper tapped blood-red nails on it. Her eyes were hard. Two lines scored parentheses around her lipsticked mouth. "What do you suggest, Mr. President?" She kept her voice smooth, but the sneer showed in her expression.

Creed turned around. The faint glow from the map on screen silhouetted him. He dipped his head.

"If it becomes apparent that these mutants have won, Ms. Cooper…"

She shuddered. Gyrich clenched his teeth. One hand tightened on the arm of his chair. The others in the room seemed to hold their breaths. Eyes glinted white. The ventilation couldn't disperse the stench of fear coming off them, even while their faces remained impassive.

"You can guess what fates will await everyone in my administration." The thing he did with his mouth showed his teeth. It wasn't a smile.

"Magneto will make examples of us," the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

"That's all you can think of?" Cooper snapped. She wasn't worried about Magneto. The Winter Soldier was still stalking them. They'd been forced to abandon the White House. It wasn't defensible enough.

The Vice President's convoy had been taken down outside Silver Spring on the way to the bunker. When the Secret Service pulled him from wreckage of his armored car, a sniper shot Delmyer in the head. The assassin used a .50 armor piercing round fired from a Barrett rifle at an impossible distance. No one had the guts to say it, but it was the work of the Winter Soldier. He and the Black Widow had finished with the scientists and the soldiers. They were coming for the ones who had given the orders now.

"Don't scorn him too much, Val," Creed said, smiling and malevolent.

She pressed her lips together. She'd seen the pictures of what the Black Widow did to Thunderbolt Ross. They could win this war and those two would just keep coming.

Gyrich muttered under his breath, "Not too much."

Creed swiveled his gaze to Gyrich.

"We will not surrender to Magneto's abominations."

He stepped forward and braced both hands on the tabletop. Dead eyes took in each of the men and women at the table.

"Should our military fail to hold Denver, I will personally authorize the use of orbital weaponry and
nuclear devices to destroy the city and every other occupied population center. If necessary, we will implement a scorched earth policy that encompasses this entire planet."
Simplify the Landscape With Darkness (Second Denver)

Chapter Summary

The Second Battle of Denver goes very differently. This is the way their war ends.

AD 2016, March 27
United States
Denver

They took the city in one long day of fighting. Sometime during the afternoon, Remy realized he could add Denver to Paris on his list of places he never, ever wanted to see again.

Snow began dusting down before nightfall.

The ground quivered in sympathy with the heavy growl of tanks and maglifters that filled the air interspersed with the pulsing throb of attack helicopters. The vibration reached into his bones.

Gunfire still rattled in the distance. Firefights in the suburbs. Small arms fire and the crack of plasma bolts. Actinic flashes silhouetted broken buildings against the blue dusk. Brigade artillery. The clap and boom always followed a half beat afterward, like thunder after lightning. Black smoke welled up in billowing clouds from the remnants of downtown. Plasma fire melted through most fireproof material, lighting whatever else there was. The smoke mixed with the cloud cover and sank back down as black snow.

Denver was burning.

Remy sat on a cracked, empty concrete planter outside the still intact office building housing their temporary HQ. He had a cigarette burning between his fingers, but he'd forgotten it.

He was watching three kids, not quite teenagers, skulk down the gray street. The streetlights were out and they were sticking to the shadows, but good instincts couldn't hide them from his eyes. Baselines, he decided, trying to find some place safe for the night or a way out of the city. They'd taken a bad turn somewhere. He doubted they had any idea they were within a block of mutant HQ.

He was uncertain what to do about them. They weren't combatants. He'd already scanned them. He could just let them go their way. The odds weren't good for them. He could catch them. He didn't have the faintest idea what he'd do with them if he did, but he could. Just letting them go their own way seemed wrong. They'd probably get killed. That bothered him. They were just kids.

Kids, yeah, but they were old enough that they knew mutants were the enemy. They wouldn't trust him to help them.

The horizon to the north lit bright enough to reflect red off the overcast clouds briefly. An eyeblink that left everything darker in the aftermath, as the rolling roar of a Sentinel's power plant blowing followed. The clones did well against the robots. They all had the same genetic and energy signatures. It confused the Sentinels' sensor processing.
The three kids hadn't seen him, even though he was out in the open, because he'd gone absolutely still. The first lesson he'd learned, even before he fled the Velvet Ministry for the street, was that movement drew the eye of predator and prey alike. Only the wisp of smoke rising from his cigarette moved. Toxic snowflakes settled on his hair.

One after the other they darted across the street. The first kid ducked between two abandoned cars, kneeling in the slush filled gutter. Then came the next two. They were leapfrogging, resting as much as possible between dashes. They had coats and packs. Remy thought that might mean they had a destination.

A tank turned the corner down the street. The growl of the grav repulsers echoed off the broken windows and walls of the buildings. A black X was painted over its low, beveled forward section. It was buttoned down, the personnel hatches closed. The plasma cannon mounted on top tracked back and forth.

The three kids froze.

Remy lifted his cigarette to his lips and inhaled. One of the kids jerked and stared, suddenly seeing him there across the street. The terror and hatred that rolled off him were familiar.

The tank hovered up the street.

The kids didn't move.

Remy exhaled through his nostrils, twin streams of smoke. He imagined their hearts trying to slam out of their chests. The taste of panic in their mouths, like bile crawling up their throats. He remembered the fear.

It made up his mind. He was going to leave them alone.

The tank went by without pausing.

He stubbed out his cigarette in the barren, frozen dirt of the planter and went inside. He could feel the three kids wait another heartbeat then slink away after he turned his back. Then he pulled the door open and stepped inside where it was dry and almost warm and the air smelled of burnt coffee, sweat and adrenaline.

He ignored the din of voices and electronics and dodged deftly through the crowd of soldiers and staff. High command had commandeered a conference and break room in the rear of the offices. He headed there.

He passed a half closed door to what had probably been a manager's office, glimpsing Storm asleep on a couch, white hair spilling over the dark cushions onto the floor. He took a step back and poked his head in. Several others were sacked out on the floor, including most of his striker unit. He withdrew silently.

The next room yielded dim light, drawn blinds and the command center. Familiar faces glimpsed in the half-light among others he'd never gotten to know. Remy nodded to Scanner and Pete. Pete flipped him off. Maps were pinned to the walls and spread over most flat surfaces.

Scott and Magneto were bent over a laptop. Remy couldn't see the screen. He shrugged and made
his way to the coffeemaker set up in the far corner of the room. Jean was there, so he raised an eyebrow at her.

"Why do I have a bad feeling, chere?"

Jean handed him a blue ceramic mug that said Accountants Do It By the Numbers on the side.

"Because optimism would ruin your image?"

He chuckled as he poured himself a cup of dark liquid.

"You let them go," she said sotto voce.

He twitched.

"You hitchhiking in my head, chere?" he asked just as softly. The link was still there, strong between the two of them, binding them both into Magneto too. Erik, he corrected himself. Jean could probably waltz past his shields without him even feeling it now. It should have bothered him more.

"No. I'm scanning the area periodically for hostiles. We don't have a sensor net out or much of a perimeter watch. Scott wants to keep the electronic presence to a minimum. Scanner's coordinating comms, so I'm handling security surveillance for the moment."

Remy tasted the coffee and grimaced. Fake decaf. The war had made it impossible to import coffee into the US for years now. That was an inconvenience. The food shortages were worse. Years of warfare that included elementals using weather as a weapon had resulted in droughts and floods that wrecked the growing season through much of the agricultural portions of the entire continent. The effect would be global soon. There were countries staring famine in the face thanks to this war.

They had bumper crops in New Genosha. The same elementals made sure the weather was perfect for the growing season, creating micro ecologies for the plantations. Not everyone was part of the fighting. Mutants who could manipulate plant growth and others who could control insects made sure the crops reached full potential.

He nodded an acknowledgement of Jean's explanation, absently admiring the way even the dim and flickering lights in the occupied office lit embers in her hair. She'd braided it again. She sent him a minatory glance that communicated she'd caught his impulse to tug that braid. He hid his smile behind the coffee mug, swallowing more of it despite the taste.

"Lot of people in and out," he commented.

The industrial carpets were already wet from the snow and irretrievably stained with dirt and in some cases blood from the boots tromping in and out. Monitoring everyone in the vicinity while filtering out the people in the building would have stressed most telepaths. He knew Jean could handle it effortlessly. The healing factor they shared with Wolverine now helped.

"I inserted a subliminal suggestion they head for the refugee camp at Cheesman Park."

Little spikes of escalating worry were shooting off Scott. Secondhand words crept through from what Jean heard through their link. Launch sequence. Targeting. Missile. Boulder.
Remy frowned, not liking any of it.

Scott jerked back from the laptop.

"Bastard," he breathed.

Panicked shouting echoed from the rest of the offices. Scanner cried out and clutched her head.

The energy release at ground zero burned Remy's senses with a hammer stroke of power. Lightspeed brought the flare on the next breath, radiation particles riding with it. The air seared, pushed outward then sucked back into the vacuum, rushing upward.

The floor bucked and rocked beneath them.

Remy tightened his hand on the handle of the coffee mug, squeezing his eyes shut. He'd felt the same sort of energy sometimes at his fingertips. All that power called to be used.

The power flickered and died, except in a few of the laptops and other MRF equipment that was EMP hardened. In the west, a telltale shape towered into the clouds, dirty with radiation and hot debris.

"That was a nuke," Remy remarked unsteadily. The power released still sang through his cells, a siren call of ultimate destruction. He wanted to do that, tap all the potential circling between electron and proton and nucleus. He could feel it. He could do it.

"That was Boulder," Scanner said. Tears shined down her cheeks, turning bloody red where they ran through the hash marks she'd painted on in place of her tattoos. "Our base."

Pete clutched her shoulder, shaking his head. He looked dazed.

"Creed," Scott declared. "He doesn't care who suffers or dies."

Jean had gone porcelain white and was swaying. Remy slapped the coffee mug down without looking. He caught her elbow. She'd felt the deaths, the minds disappearing from the Astral Plane like lights going out. Worse for her than Remy; none of the dead had had time to feel what was going to happen.

He felt the waves of emotion and reaction from everyone seeing the mushroom cloud burning in the sky, though.

Magneto still bent over the desk, arms braced on either side of the keyboard of the laptop. His back bent and his neck bowed.

Remy raised his voice. "Scott."

"That bastard," Scott said, but his head jerked around, his attention finding Jean. He let Scott take Jean's arm.

An officer—a major - stumbled to a halt in the doorway.

"Sir, Boulder's gone."
"Yes," Magneto said. He didn't look up.

"It's a nuclear incident, sir."

"We know," Scott snapped.

"S-sir," the major stuttered, "we have launch confirmations from North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Arkansas. Confirmed targets in Genosha. Second wave targets cities in China, the Russian Federation, France, India, North Korea, Australia, and South Africa."

"They will respond, of course."

"They'll blame us," Scott said.

Pete laughed. "Summers, there isn't going to be enough left of the world to care."

Magneto twisted his head to the side. His gaze met Remy's.

"Can you sense them?"

Remy stared at him in incomprehension. "What, the warheads?" he asked.

"Yes."

After a long beat, he said, "I don't know."

"Try," Magneto insisted. His eyes stayed locked on Remy's, along with everyone else's.

He stretched his spatial sense farther and farther out, trying to find speed and something that tasted like the potential for that ringing, ripping, ruinous detonation. He didn't have the reach. Didn't know what he could do if he could touch the missiles with their armed payloads, except set them off ahead of time. He wasn't aware of closing his eyes. He sank into the molecular level, dissolved his consciousness into the atmosphere, thin and lacking in kinetic potential.

Oxygen. Nitrogen. Carbon dioxide. Trace elements, chemicals released into the atmosphere. Hydrogen promised to burn, cracked from the oxygen pairs. Methane. Gases were nebulous, hard to grasp. It felt like fragmenting, falling into his own power, deeper and deeper, wider, dissolving outward. He didn't feel Pete holding him up. Didn't see Storm enter the room. Ignored the distant call of his link with Bobby to detach himself from his own flesh.

Jean interlocked her mind into his, buoying him, tying him into Magneto's grasp of the magnetic field of the entire planet. She forced the link wider and wider. They melded from three into one and imploded inward.

Dancing.

Dancing through a scruff of dust, of black snow slush and dead, dry grass. The clearing was ringed by glass trees and strangling, blood red vines. A ring of golden toadstools is at the center. Remy tumbled and flipped through cartwheels and twists into handstands and spins, spiraling out from the center, mapping the killing ground. His breath burned in his lungs, but he couldn't stop.

He didn't know if it was the Astral Plane or a hallucination.
The first knife dropped from the sky like a droplet of razored rain. He needed to catch it before it reaches the ground. But he couldn't just hold it because there were more knives raining down. He tossed the blade into the air and caught the next and the next. It was catch and release and release and catch. He juggle the knives, breathless, tracing an endless pattern over and around the clearing, until his bare feet were bleeding on the back of the world.

He danced past Jean, unsurprised to find her there too, and passed her one knife after another, spinning away to catch more. When he turned and returned, Erik is equidistant from them both. His hands were open and he wore a crown of keys.

Remy juggled and danced and tossed knives to Erik.

Back and forth and up, juggling, passing from him to Jean to Erik to him. None of the knives could touch the ground. Sharp edges cut his fingers, cut their palms, the blood mingling into one. Back and forth they passed, weaving a net, a cat's cradle of color around the center of the clearing.

He charged one of the blades as he tossed it up. At the top of its arc, it exploded soundlessly. All he could hear was the heartbeat of the world beneath his feet.

Erik flipped a knife outside the clearing. It sunk into one of the red vines strangling the glass trees. Blue flames licked the twining, tangled stalks.

Jean threw a blade straight up. The tip punctured the black canvas sky and tore another star from its warp. Now with each pass, they each threw away another knife. The vines were burning blue, star shine lit the fairy ring. Remy could breathe once more. The air tasted of ozone and ice. The glass trees grew together, limbs weaving into a shining wall, a rainbow kaleidoscope glittering through crystal leaves.

Remy charged the last knife and threw it into the center of the fairy ring. He reached out. They stood around the ring and clasped hands. The knife sood driven into the earth. It glowed fuchsia then brighter. White. The light spread to the edge of the ring. Everything faded into its brightness, whiter than light, until there was only Jean and Erik and himself.

Whiteout.

Remy remembered the room and the faces but felt detached from them. Vertigo of the identity. He saw himself from Erik's eyes and Erik through Jean, still tangled in each other. Scott's touch and Magda's smile were as real as Belladonna's sleek thighs locked around his hips the first time.

Pete's hand was still locked around his arm. He smelled bitter, of stale cigarettes and fear. Scott had his arms locked around Jean, holding her up. Storm braced Erik.

Strange, soupy orange light seeped past the blinds into the room. Remy stared into Jean's eyes for a heartbeat then staggered to the window and yanked the blinds aside.

It was red.

He could still feel it, the three of them merged and holding that glass dome over Genosha, as far from them as it was.

Little suns still burned closer than stars, warheads detonated outside the envelope of the atmosphere.
after Jean threw them there.

Mushroom clouds grew above half a hundred cities and many more military bases, where Erik turned back his share of the ICBMs to drop on the country that launched them.

The rest of the world was red, a tide of fire sweeping across the sky. The high atmosphere was burning, lit by the warheads he triggered before they reached their targets.

"Mon Dieu."

"Genosha?" Storm asked.

She looked sick. The bombs would translate into weather disturbances that she felt as an illness in the planet's ecology.

"Safe," Jean said. "We've saved it." She leaned back against Scott.

"How?" he asked.

"A barrier." Erik groped for and found a chair to sink down into. "We can maintain it indefinitely."

Pete looked skeptical. He glanced at Erik, then Jean and Remy.

"We?"

"The three of us," Jean said.

"Oh."

Remy stared out at the red, radiated night.

He felt Jean's eyes on his back. A multitude of minds blinked out with every passing second, the dead and the dying howling denials as they burned. The terror clawed at his mind. All he could do was project it back. Jean channeled it into a weapon that flailed their enemies' minds, sweeping them into madness and emptiness.

The darkness that followed would never lift.

Pete lit a cigarette and handed it to him.

"Here, mate."

"Merci."

"World's on fire."

Let it burn.

He felt Erik's approval urging Jean on. Not Jean. Phoenix. It was the Phoenix that wanted to sear away every life on the planet. No one else in the room had a clue what the three of them were doing.

They were winning the war.
They were ending the war.

Someone said, "Enough."

Enough. Good. Let it be done. He was so far away from himself, he wondered if he could ever be just Remy LeBeau again. Pushing Erik and Jean away was like cutting off his own limbs. He did it anyway. Left only the link that let them hold the barrier over Genoshia.

~Enough.~

He thought that was Scott.

Remy leaned his forehead against cool glass. Done and done and done.

He wanted Bobby.

What would they call this day? He thought of Genosha and all the lives they'd safeguarded there. He hoped they could build something there that made what they'd just done worth it.
'Cause Logan is a Johnny Cash kind of guy.

Wolverine wished he could get really genuinely drunk and not just the brief buzz that his healing factor eradicated almost as fast as he could drink.

Domino had already left the apartment when he woke, sprawled face down on the couch with a mouthful of upholstery. Empty bottles sat on the coffee table, the floor and in the couch cushions with him. His mouth tasted of lint. He found his way into the kitchen and opened another beer for the hell of it.

He lifted it toward the window with a sneer. No drunk, no hangover, at least.

"Jesus," he muttered to himself after swallowing about half the contents of the bottle. He shook his head. "Sunday morning."

Call it breakfast.

The apartment held that empty silence that ate at a person, making him restless. With another curse, he wandered back to the bedroom. He finished the beer while he found some clothes.

After a shower and shave, he dressed then lit a cigar and had another beer.

No sign of Domino and he finally remembered Sunday meant going down to Magda Park and meeting with the rest of the Constants and the families of their old friends' descendants. Sometimes it was good and sometimes it was just plain depressing. There would be large amounts of food. Good enough reason to go, he figured.

Better than staying in the hollowed-out apartment by himself all day.

He'd told Domino what Gambit had done the night before. Her face had been unreadable afterward. She'd lit one of her dark cigarillos and gave a little shake of her head. "The sonovabitch is good. Right under our noses the whole damn time."

That had been it. The rest of it hadn't bothered her in the least. Wolverine had been more disturbed by that than anything else. Long after Domino had gone back to their bedroom, he'd sat on the couch, drinking.

He stomped out and down stairs to the street. The morning sun made him squint.
He started walking, the sidewalk clean and unbroken under his feet. He'd never quite got used to living in the southern hemisphere. It should have been spring, not autumn. His footsteps seemed to echo. Leaves were coming down, brown and gold and orange. They scuffed and crackled under his cowboy boots.

Halfway to the park, the neighborhood switched from apartment buildings to single level houses. Family places. He watched a couple of kids in a front yard, playing. One of them was flipping a can around telekinetically. The other was hanging off the roof of a porch, upside down and oblivious, clinging naturally with the suckers that lined his arms and legs. He watched them a minute longer. Happy kids, not afraid or hiding what they were.

He crossed the street at the end of the block. His nostrils flared. He could smell frying chicken. His stomach grumbled, wanting something more than beer and cigar smoke.

He wished he was drunk.

It was just something about a Sunday. The sleepy way the city felt, like everyone had settled into a life and a family but him. It made him feel alone and lonely, like the ringing of a distant bell.

He'd lost something along the way, he thought. Hell, they all had. Nothing short of dying was half as lonely as living when everyone else went away. Like that Wellington said about battles if you saw life as a battle, which Wolverine did. He could understand Gambit. The fucker had always been bright; he'd seen the way things were before most of them, before they lost Scott and 'Ro and Pete. Wolverine didn't like it, but he understood why Gambit was willing to go to any lengths to make sure there were still people like them to keep away the loneliness.

He kept going.

The park had plenty of people in it. He could hear familiar voices and turned toward them. The sun was warm on his shoulders through the old plaid flannel shirt he'd pulled on. The grass gave under his feet. He paused and watched one of the Munroes spinning round and round, with his daughter on his shoulders, shrieking in delight. A wind-devil danced with them, bright leaves held aloft, like crimson and bronze and copper confetti. He knew the man vaguely, but didn't want to talk to him. Let him have his moment.

He blinked and walked on. Tomorrow that little girl would be grown. The next day she'd be nothing more than a memory fading into all the other Sundays.

They were all gathered at the top of small rise. In the afternoon, the Citadel's shadow would fall over the pretty picnic tables and open meadow.

They shined.

He admired the loose red banner of a Jean's hair for a heartbeat before his gaze found Domino's dark head.

Someone saw him and called his name, welcoming him among them. He started up the hill, listening to their chatter as he approached. Jubilee handed him a piece of fried chicken. Riptide tossed him a beer.

"Logan," Psylocke greeted him.
He grunted and looked around until he found Gambit. The Cajun was leaning against one of the tables, long legs crossed at the ankles. He wore a pair of faded jeans that looked old enough to predate the war. Slipstream and Mystique were with him. When the breeze shifted putting Gambit upwind, a wave of pheromones hit and tugged at Wolverine’s senses.

Wolverine growled under his breath.

"You're just in a peachy mood, aren't you?" Jubilee commented. "Eat your chicken."

She didn't have either badge, phone or plasma pistol at her belt. Jubilee noticed his gaze. "I quit."

He hadn't really expected that.

"It's time to do the next thing," Jubilee explained. She shrugged with a smile that reached her eyes for the first time in years. "Whatever that is."

He tore into the chicken and chewed.

Jean and then Magneto joined Gambit and his conspirators. Slipstream teleported out with a quiet pop. If he listened, Wolverine could hear their conversation though they kept their voices low. Gambit had begun talking about Scope and the mutated gene suppressor.

"I suppose he's telling them now," Psylocke said.

"What?" Jubilee asked.

"Cajun's been playing a deep game."

Jean's voice spiked high enough to draw attention from more than Wolverine. "You did what?"

Jubilee's eyebrows shot up. "What?" she repeated.

Wolverine opened his mouth, only to stop when Psylocke held up her hand. "He and Mystique are behind the Dissenters."

Jubilee opened her mouth. She gave Psylocke a disbelieving look. Psylocke nodded.

"Sonovubitch." She began laughing, the laughter getting louder as Wolverine gave her a sour look.

"That ain't all of it," he grumbled.

"I know," Psylocke said.

Bobby had joined the group at the picnic table. He stood just far enough from Gambit to flank Magneto. Jean was half way between Gambit and Magneto, talking fast.

"I followed up when you began checking into what he and Mystique had been doing last week. I just don't know who he cloned."

The pop of Slipstream 'porting back in provided part of that answer. Slipstream had brought Beast with him. A clone, Wolverine reminded himself, but even the scent was the same.
Jean took one look at the blue-furred scientist then was hugging him so tightly Wolverine thought he heard Beast's ribs squeak.

Jubilee squealed like the twelve-year-old Wolverine had first met and abandoned them.

"Beast!"

She jumped onto his back in full body hug.

Psylocke smiled too. "Hank." She glanced back at Wolverine. "Fond as we all are of Beast, if Gambit had done this for selfish reasons, 'Ro is the one he would have cloned."

"Yeah, I know, I got that after I thought about it for a while." It left a bad taste in his mouth though, the whole thing. Gambit hadn't trusted them. "He cloned Sinister too."

Psylocke shrugged.

"So he needed geneticists."

"Yeah."

He finished his beer. Time to join the party, find out just what was going to happen next, he figured. He arrived in time to hear Magneto face off with Gambit.

"Get out of Genosha."

"Erik, don't-" Jean protested.

"Shush, chere," Gambit replied. His eyes glittered. "What's eating you worst, Erik? What I did or that I fooled you?"

"Sinister."

Gambit laughed bitterly. "Non, I don't think so."

"Remy, don't antagonize him," Jean snapped.

"I'm not going to bow to him." He sighed and stepped back. "I'm not going to fight him either. We'd do too much damage."

Jean looked troubled and sad. "Why did you do it this way, Remy?"

Gambit sighed. "Just the way I am, Jeannie. You know that." A half-smile creased his cheek. "Maybe I just got bored?"

"I don't think so."

"You shouldn't have made that decision for us," Shadowcat said.

She'd joined the rest of them ranged around Magneto, Gambit and Phoenix. Invisible lines connected them all, drawn taut with the tension between the three rulers of Genosha. No way to predict the way
anyone would jump if it all went bad. Old loyalties and allegiances weren't enough; they'd all spent more time as allies than they ever had as enemies before.

"But aren't you really, deep inside, grateful he did?" Mystique asked, her voice dry and cold as a winter wind. "Because who of you would have wanted to make this choice?"

"Ever the betrayer, Raven," Magneto observed.

She offered no rebuttal.

"Maybe I am," Shadowcat said to Mystique. "But I shouldn't be, none of us should be."

Gambit looked at Shadowcat. "That's why it's time for us to go, chere," he told her.

"Where're you going to go, Cajun?" Wolverine asked. He angled himself enough to keep an eye on Magneto, who was still glowering, but still faced Gambit.

Gambit nodded to Slipstream. "Davis is going to 'port me to Marseilles first. He already took Essex to London. Port cities are always the best for getting lost."

"I'm going to go somewhere too," Bobby said. He gave Beast an apologetic look. "Sorry to cut out on you, Hank. Last night wasn't long enough to say hello again."

The ties holding all of them together were suddenly loose. The Barrier was gone. Nothing held them to Genosha any longer. Speculative glances were exchanged. A wave of excitement ran through the group. A kick of adrenaline slipped into Wolverine's own system in response.

They could go. He could. It was a hunger he hadn't even known he felt. Damn Gambit for being right anyway.

"I shall be leaving too," Mystique said.

No, he wasn't the only one.

"Sounds like you've had this planned a while."

"Do you think we didn't know how this would end, Logan?" she asked.

"Three steps ahead, Raven."

Jean was hugging Bobby. "I'll miss you, you doof."

"Yeah, me too."

She pulled away and faced Gambit. He looked at her uncertainly. Their eyes flickered as they spoke telepathically. Gambit pulled two ampules from his pockets and held them out in his palms toward them. Magneto made a choked sound, took the ampule, and turned away. His shoulders hunched for a second.

He looked as alone as any man ever had.

Jean and Gambit stared into each other's eyes. Wolverine felt a stab of the old jealousy he'd felt
toward Scott, knowing they were sharing something that no one else could share.

She plucked up the other ampules. "Good-bye, Remy," she said at last. "Take care of yourself."

Gambit smiled devilishly as he caught Jean in his arms, dipped her deep and kissed her with sizzling intensity. "Au revoir, Jeannie," he murmured afterward as he released her and stepped away.

Riptide whistled while Vertigo clapped.

"Hey, can we tag along as far as Marseilles?" Vertigo asked Slipstream.

The teleporter grinned. "Sure, no problem."

"London?" Psylocke asked.

"London sounds good," Shadowcat said thoughtfully.

"Soon as I get back," Slipstream promised. He closed the distance between him and Gambit.

Slipstream 'ported them out.

It was so fast, so unremarkable, that it didn't seem real. Gambit, Vertigo, and Riptide had just left New Genosha, left behind everything without a backward look. Wolverine had no doubt Gambit had made preparations. Even if he hadn't, Gambit was a survivor. The old world didn't know what was about to hit it, especially with the last two Marauders in tow.

Slipstream took Bobby next. He waved and said, "So long, folks," and then was gone.

Wolverine told himself they would all see each other again. Even if it was on opposite sides.

Domino tapped his shoulder. "Looks like everybody just realized the gate's open." Her mouth quirked into a smile. "Better watch out for the stampede."

"What about you, Nina?"

"They still have Carnival in Rio." She waggled her brows. "Want to come?"

"Not my scene, darlin'."

He fished out a cigar and lit it. Over a puff of smoke, he said, "I'm thinking of Madripoor."

Jubilee joined them. "Lowtown?" she asked. "See if the Princess is still there?"

"Yeah, kid."

"Mind if I tag along?"

"Partners again?"

She grinned at him. She looked better than she had in decades, a terrible weight gone from her shoulders. "Yeah, something like that, Wolvie."
"Love to have you along."

Slipstream reappeared long enough to pick up Psylocke and Shadowcat and leave with another pop. They'd be fine. One by one or in twos, Slipstream 'ported the Constants out of Magda Park. Beast's clone went with Cecelia.

Mystique murmured, "Geneva," before she went. Maybe she meant to look up Aiken. Sam spent half an hour talking to Magneto, then walked away out of the park.

Finally, it was just Magneto, Jean, Jubilee and Wolverine.

"Don't stir up too much trouble," Jean told him.

"You stayin' here, darlin'?" he asked her.

She glanced at Magneto, standing separate from them all. "For a little while longer. Then I'll go too." Her hand was still locked around the vial Gambit had given her. "He left it up to us after all."

The morning had slipped away from them. The sky was still as clear and blue, the sun as bright, but the direction it shown from had changed. The Citadel cast its shadow across the park like a slim, dark sword. On the far side of the shadow, Magneto stood in silence. His head had bowed as everyone left, even when Wanda laughed for the first time anyone could remember. He hadn't tried to stop anyone. A cool, sea scented breeze that came with the afternoon ruffled his white hair.

"You need me, darlin', all you got to do is yell," Wolverine told her. "I'll always be there for you."

"I know, Logan. You always have been."

Slipstream arrived and waited quietly. Jean hugged Jubilee.

Wolverine stubbed out his cigar and tucked the stub in his shirt pocket. There wasn't anything back in the apartment he'd shared with Domino that he had to have.

"Well, kid, guess it's just the two of us again."

"Ready, mates?" Slipstream asked.

Jubilee fluffed her hair.

"Let's get this show on the road."

Snap/slide/blur/snap.

A last glimpse of sun and shadow on the green, green grass and Magneto alone on the hill stayed with Wolverine as they arrived in the seething, reeking streets of Madripoor Lowtown. His boot settled into something soft and stinking. Fingers groped for something to steal and he caught them in an iron grip. He grinned fiercely at the kid that had tried to pickpocket him. He pushed the image of Magneto out of his thoughts.

"Oh, I am so out of here," Slipstream muttered. "I always hated this dump."

Pop.
Jubilee laughed.

Wolverine let the kid go, losing sight of him almost immediately as he slid back into the crowd. He declared, "I feel like a good bar fight."
Here Comes the Flood

Chapter Summary

Epilogue

AD 2545, October 29
United North America
Spittin' Devil Cove, Wester Hold.

Wester Hold used to be called something else. So did Spittin' Devil Cove. No one living there remembered what. There had been fire and rain, war and flood enough to erase every marker and memory. Instead there were trees and hills green with long grass the rippled at the wind's touch.

The village made its living from farming and fishing and offered an inn and a tavern to those fools traveling into the Broken City.

The forest growing beyond the small fields and farms was new by nature's timekeeping, but no one living there remembered it otherwise.

Wester Hold people kept to themselves. None of them would tell a traveler to stay away from any particular place, though their children knew there was a place that might have been magic once.

Not that anyone believed those old stories in the tired world they'd inherited.

Gramkin Lane wound through the trees. Tumbled stone walls still marked its borders in places where the thick scatter of years' of fallen leaves would have obscured the way otherwise. Few people passed up it. There were whispers of hauntings or old poisons like the ones that still sometimes rode the winds from the Broken City.

At the end of the over grown path that still sometimes turned up chunks of false stone and tarry black pavement, even the rubble was gone. A vine-choked, crumbling pillar marked what might have been a gate. Nothing else. The ruins were dug up long ago, salvage picked through since even twisted pieces of metal had value in this lesser age. The junkpickers and tinkers hadn't passed through the great hollow where a fortress–according to legend–once stood in generations.

Night cloaked it all in mystery and silence. The golden gibbous moon that rose traced only the outlines of things, shining off the patterns of crystalline frost that grew across colorless leaves, mirrored on the water.

Black trees threw shadows too deep to penetrate. The long grass undulated silver as the dark waters of the cove. The sound of the wind ruffling it and rustling the autumn leaves sounded loud. There were no other sounds beyond the distant chuckle of the water and the sharp bark of a dog fox.

Late, later, a woman walked down the hills into the clearing, the long grass wet against her leather boots, down to the hollow. Her hair looked dark by moonlight, floating loose and long. There she
waited, looking north to the water, her breath turning to white mist as the cold hours passed.

The shape of the land remained as it had been.

A pale, winged shape passed against the star shot sky's darkness and into the impenetrable blackness of the trees, soundless. The small scream of a mouse caught in the owl's talons followed.

The wind from the cove grew colder. The scent of wet leaves and earth mingled on air that tasted of coming winter, a wild scent that mingled with the distant wood smoke from the town.

Another shadow shifted beneath the trees. It resolved into the shape of a tall man. He wore a long coat and silver-toed boots that left no prints on the frost-sheened leaves and made no sound. The King of Thieves with blood in his eyes, handsome as the Morningstar, drawn from the shadows to bow to the Destroyer of Worlds. That's what the legends would say.

He joined woman where she waited in the open and smiled and didn't bow.

"Remy," she greeted him.

He smiled sardonically. "Jeannie."

He took her hands and kissed her forehead, his lips warm and dry, a benediction. It had been years since a man touched her who knew her. She almost hugged him, but there was a distance to him that forbid it.

"I wondered if you'd come," she said.

He asked, "Am I the only one?"

She shook her head once.

"Who else is left?"

"A few of us."

She touched his arm and he drew in a sharp breath.

"It's been a long time," he murmured. Long enough to forgive, but she didn't say it.

He didn't move, yet it seemed he would in the next breath. Something would break and he would take a step toward her. Something would spook him and he would retreat, back into the shadows and away. Gone for another hundred years.

Or forever, like too many others.

It was easier to say something than to wait. "So it has."

"I got your message just yesterday morning."

"You make it hard. I couldn't find you on the Astral Plane."

"I stay away from it. It's a lonely place these days."
The baselines manifested only as the dimmest lights too distant to ever touch the Astral Plane. It had become a terrible barren place, too empty to wander in long.

"So is everywhere else," Jean replied. "Is it time?"

Time to spread the virus Hank and Essex had created for him, the one he'd handed over to her and to Magneto, unwilling at the last stroke to play God alone.

Magnus had never used it or maybe he'd never had the chance. She didn't know. The final strike on Genosha had shredded the magnetosphere and Erik Magnus Lehnsherr had given himself up to restore it. The same strike, meant for him, had killed Lorna too. Jean wasn't proud of what she'd done then.

Maybe it was finally time. They were the last mutants on the planet. The x-suppressor had spread until it was part of the global population. That had been why Remy stayed his hand. The Second Gene War had been bloodier and longer than the first, a long drawn out dying. But with the x-suppressor went the x-genes. If she opened the vial she still carried now, it would do what it had been designed to do. There would be no more baselines, no more humans. The chaos of a planet of people coming into mutant powers would be stunning. The Third Gene War would be mutant against mutant, not us against them.

Remy didn't answer.

"No one else is coming, are they?" He looked at her sidelong. She added, "I hoped Logan would, at least."

"He's in the north," Remy said. "I found him once, after."

After the Shepard Beanstalk fell during the Mars Rebellion.

There were still bodies frozen in orbit with the upper half of the wreckage and the garbage of three centuries of space-going; Jubilee was among them. Hard vacuum trumped even a healing factor. The bottom half of the beanstalk had devastated Sri Lanka where it fell. It marked the end of Earth's space age, though Avalon Station wasn't abandoned for another decade.

That war had ended long ago. Others had come and gone. But Wolverine had not been seen.

"He'd gone feral."

"Could you find him again?"

Remy looked away. "He didn't remember, Jean. He's happier that way."

She closed her eyes. He set his hand lightly on her shoulder.

She'd glimpsed Domino on a Shanghai street once. They had barely acknowledged each other and moved on. Too many ghosts. What could they say to one another? Should she say she'd seen a man with a shiny metal arm, but he'd had pale, bruised eyes and wasn't Nathan? Sometimes loneliness was better than reminders of who they'd been.

"Bobby?"
"Gone."

"I didn't feel—"

"He didn't die. He's… just ice now." Remy's hand fell away from her shoulder. "Just ice."

A whisper of pain threaded past his shields, echoing abysses inside, emptiness Jean had known even longer.

~Everyone goes away.~

Sometimes she wondered how any of them made it through another day. She wondered if that wasn't why he'd come when none of the others had been willing to face this place, the plundered grave of so many dreams.

She always came back here in the end, the way Remy went back to his drowned city. Not home, not in so long, but their home no longer existed. No one could go back to Genosha, not since the Collapse. They'd witnessed too much. They couldn't bear to see what had become of it. There were some wounds better left alone.

Remy paced restlessly away, striding up the hill to stand silhouetted there. His hair had grown long again and stirred like a flag on the wind. Foxfire burned at his fingertips.

Jean watched him.

He stalked gracefully along the crest, the moon riding high over his shoulder. Dawn was a pale line in the east. The people of Wester Hold would rise soon to go to their labor. It would be best to be gone then.

~Come with me, chere,~ Remy whispered through the old, frayed remnants of the Triune link. ~Come with me for a while, keep me company, keep away the cold.~ Warm yourself at my fire, he offered, but she was afraid. While she hesitated the fire guttered out.

He lifted his hand.

~Adieu, Jean.~

He walked over the crest of the hill and disappeared.

~Remy!~

He had shut the link down and refused any further contact. She ran to the top of the hill, but couldn't find him. He'd gone.

Good-bye.

She'd always thought she'd see him again.

But no.
The King of Thieves ate a stolen apple as he walked down to Wester Hold.

Maybe this year the Phoenix would open Pandora's box.

They could rise from their ashes.

Fin
Auburn, March 25, 2005

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!