

X-MEN[®]

THE CHAOS ENGINE TRILOGY

STEVEN A. ROMAN



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X-MEN® DOCTOR DOOM™

X-MEN® MAGNETO™

X-MEN® RED SKULL™

STEVEN A. ROMAN



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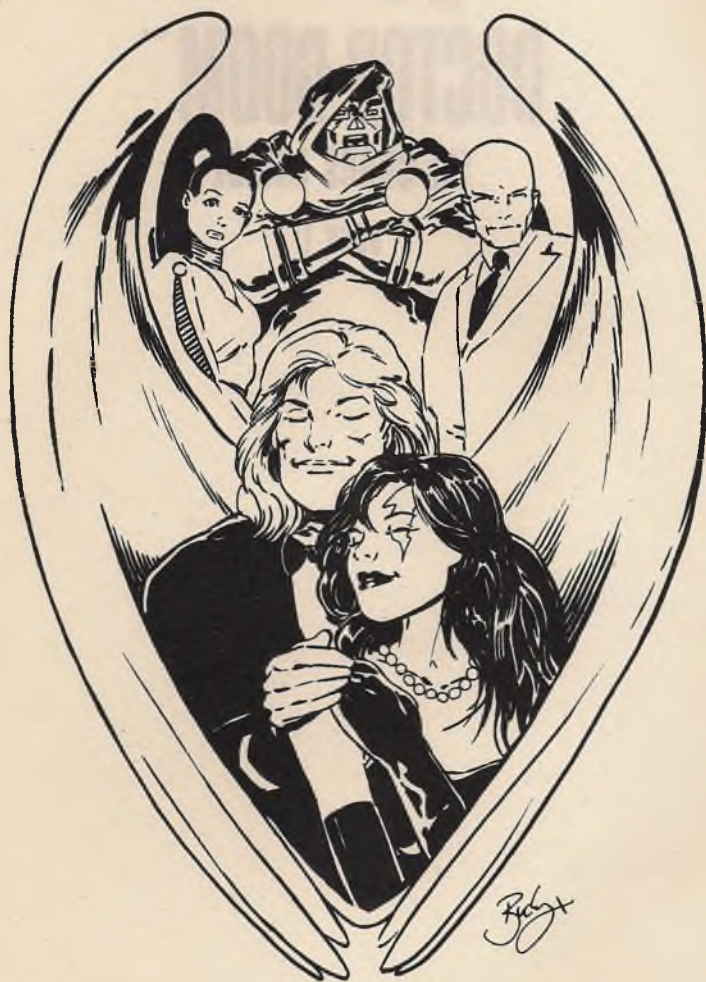
X-MEN

DOCTOR DOOM TM

THE CHAOS ENGINE

BOOK 1





THE FORCE of the explosion roared outward from the lobby of the General Electric office tower, toppling the gigantic lighted tree that stood before the building's glass doors, then continuing across the expanse of Rockefeller Center and through the wide walkway that led to Fifth Avenue; on the opposite side of the street, the windows of Saks department store imploded, showering the colorful Christmas displays inside with shards of flying glass. Decapitated and amputated mannequins and dummies collapsed in plastic heaps among the bright ribbons and tangled blinking lights.

For a moment, a disturbing silence hung over the streets and sidewalks that, just moments before, had been congested with holiday shoppers and rubbernecking tourists—or was the quiet merely a result of the temporary loss of hearing caused by the blast? Whatever the reason, the icy December air was soon filled with a mind-numbing cacophony: the screams of the injured; the keening for the dead; the wail of sirens in the distance; the ear-piercing screech of car alarms.

And the peal of insane laughter.

For the few souls not suffering from shock or crippling injuries, the sight of the madman responsible for the debacle was more than enough to send their minds spiraling into a dark pit from which they might never recover.

Floating above the skating rink—which was now filled with the shattered remains of the mammoth Norway spruce tree that had, just moments before, towered above it—clad in garments of the bloodiest red, seemed to be none other than the devil himself, given human form. His yellow eyes fairly glowed with arcane energy from beneath the shadows of a gladiator-like helmet—shadows that did well to hide the

features of this spawn of hell. Looking from one side of the plaza to the other, then out toward Fifth Avenue, he surveyed the damage wrought by his handiwork: the broken bodies; the blood that flowed like a river down to the skating rink, where it quickly congealed; the lopsided buildings and overturned vehicles.

And found it good.

Slowly, his lips split open to reveal yellowed, dagger-like teeth flecked with bits of blood . . . and flesh.

“ ‘And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death,’ ” he said, voice rumbling like storm clouds. “ ‘And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.’ ”

“Not here they don’t, Magneto!” shouted a male voice from behind the costumed terrorist. “Not now, not ever!”

A predatory smile chiseled onto his features, the self-proclaimed Master of Magnetism turned in midair and looked down at the group of colorfully-garbed men and women gathered at the spot where the one-hundred-foot Christmas tree had stood. Six in all, they comprised the membership of Earth’s greatest team of super heroes: Storm—a tall, beautiful African woman, her flowing white hair in sharp contrast to the black leather outfit she wore, a billowing satin cape attached to her shoulders and slender wrists; Wonder Man—the world’s greatest superpowered adventurer, garbed in a black-and-red bodysuit, a stylized “W” emblazoned across his chest; Spider-Woman—a mysterious heroine dressed in black and silver, scarlet hair streaming out like a fountain of blood through the open top of her mask; the incredible Hulk—the green-skinned, gamma-spawned monster whose short temper was as well known—and feared—as his tremendous strength; and Iron Man—the Armored Avenger, resplendent in his red-and-gold battlesuit. Standing in front of the group was their leader—a man unafraid to put his life at risk in order to attain his ultimate goal of creating a world in which all men and women might live in peace. Clad from head to toe in gleaming armor, wrapped in a cape of the darkest green velvet, he was the world’s foremost scientific genius—and its all-powerful ruler.

“Doctor Doom,” Magneto said, the words spilling like curdled milk from between his rotted teeth. “I was wondering when you and your little band of merrymakers would show up to spoil my fun.”

Doom extended an arm and dramatically swept it across the plaza to indicate the chaos created by his enemy. “Fun?” he roared, the anger

in his voice amplified by the speaker built into his helmet's faceplate. "You injure and kill hundreds of my subjects, cause hundreds of thousands of dollars in property damage, make a mockery of this festive season—all for your amusement?"

Magneto shrugged. "What can I say? I was bored."

Doom started, as though he had been slapped.

"Oh, come now, von Doom," Magneto replied. "You of all people should know how it is ruling over lesser beings—keeping the rabble in line, constantly guarding against possible invaders, oppressing personal freedoms. Sometimes a monarch needs to find a way to fight off the tedium." He nodded toward the injured and dying below him. "This is mine."

"Monster!" Spider-Woman cried, her cheeks almost as red as her mane of fiery tresses. "You'd destroy innocent lives *just to pass the time?*" Her hands clenched into fists, and she snarled. "I'll give you something to fight off!" She tensed, preparing to leap at the red-hued villain.

A gauntleted hand gently placed on her shoulder, though, halted her ill-considered attack.

"No, Spider-Woman," Doom said calmly. "We will not allow Magneto to force us into careless actions. Only a level head will prevail against such a madman."

Behind them, the Hulk grunted. "Yeah, but I'd *still* like to smash in that bedpan he's wearin' on his skull," he mumbled.

The black-and-silver-clad heroine glared at Magneto through polarized lenses, then turned to face Doom. Slowly, her muscles relaxed, fists unclenching. She exhaled sharply.

"All right, Doctor," she said, almost in a whisper. "Sorry."

Doom consolingly patted her on the shoulder, then looked toward his old enemy. "You're wrong, Magneto. Latveria under my rule, as the rest of the world is today, has ever been governed with a caring, yet firm, hand. My subjects are as dear to me as my own children—" he glanced toward Storm, who smiled beatifically "—or my loving wife. What I do for them is no more than any father would do for his family, or a true monarch for his people: providing for their comfort, ensuring their safety, guiding them towards a bright future. But then, I am not surprised by your attitude—I have *heard* of the atrocities you enacted on the fair people of Genosha . . ."

"Lies! All lies!" Magneto barked. "I, too, did what was necessary for my subjects. I, too, provided for them, gave them safety and a future—"

"You gave them *death!*" Wonder Man interjected. "You took away their hopes, their freedom, their very lives!"

"Hope. Freedom." Magneto sneered. "Mere *words*, you muscle-bound ape. What use has the typical man or woman for such concepts? Feed and clothe them, and they are happy. Protect their homes, and they are content. I did all that, and more, for my followers, yet still they turned against me. All I asked in return was—"

"Their children as fodder for your body banks?" Iron Man shouted. "Yeah, that sounds like a *real* fair deal to me." Even through the metal helmet encasing his head, the sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable.

"Armored fool!" Magneto spat. "With but a thought, I could crush that tin can in which you hide, until flesh and bone ooze out upon the ground like the juice of a freshly squeezed orange. And *then* where would your much-vaunted technological strength be?"

"Good God, who *writes* this crap?"

Sitting in the darkened movie theater, Elisabeth Braddock turned to face the commentator to her left—her boyfriend, millionaire Warren Worthington III.

"Warren, please!" she whispered.

"Oh, come on, Betsy," Warren muttered, leaning over to speak into her ear. Her skin tingled as his lips gently brushed the lobe. He pointed toward the movie screen, where Magneto continued to face off with Doom and his team. "*Nobody* talks like that! And besides, when's all the hitting gonna start? This is supposed to be a big action blockbuster. It isn't *Shakespeare*, for crying out—"

Betsy placed an index finger against his lips to quiet him. He smiled and kissed the tip of it, and she had to bite her bottom lip to keep from giggling; she settled for smiling back. Silently, she gazed at the man sitting beside her.

Silhouetted by the flickering images cast from the projector at the back of the theater, his handsome features and shoulder-length blonde hair made her think of all the times they had lain by the fireplace in his Battery Park City apartment, staring out at the starry sky that was draped across New York Harbor like a velvet curtain. They were times she always wished would never end, even as the rising sun washed away the indigo color of the night, replacing it with the rosy pink of dawn.

It was on one such night, as the fire crackled and the city slept around them, that she realized she was truly in love with this man. A man who was always supportive, and understanding. Who let her live her own life, with no strings attached.

Who kissed her fingertips in dark movie theaters.

Apparently uncertain of what to make of her silence, Warren cocked his head to one side, a quizzical expression etched on his face.

"What is it?" he asked.

Her smile widened. "You're incorrigible," she said breathlessly.

"And *you're* a regular chatterbox," said the man to her right. With a start, Betsy turned to face him. She recognized him as J. Jonah Jameson, publisher of the New York *Daily Bugle*. Clad in an ill-fitting tuxedo, his stern features, salt-and-pepper crewcut, and Charlie Chaplinesque mustache contrasted sharply with the softer visage and stylish attire of his wife, Marla. "If you two lovebirds are more interested in each other than the movie," Jameson continued, "get a room. Otherwise, let the rest of us watch this in peace." His beady eyes narrowed. "All right?"

"Sorry," Betsy mumbled. She turned back to Warren, who stuck out his upper teeth and crossed his eyes in a moronic expression. Betsy placed a hand over her mouth to suppress a laugh, then rested her head against his shoulder. He responded by placing his arm around her and drawing her even closer.

And there they remained until the end credits had rolled and the house lights had come on.

"I'm tellin' you, Betsy, *Doom's Patrol* is gonna be *the* movie event of the summer! I *guarantee* it's gonna blow *Titanic* outta the water . . . figuratively speaking, of course."

Smiling politely, Betsy gazed up at the chiseled features of Simon Williams, who, in both his personal and professional lives, was better known throughout the world as actor and box office darling Wonder Man. Standing well over six feet tall, dark hair dramatically swept back from his forehead, Williams was garbed in his traditional red leather safari jacket, with tight black slacks tucked into a pair of red boots; a pair of thick, red-lensed sunglasses covered his eyes so completely that Betsy had trouble telling if he even *had* eyes. He certainly cut an impressive figure, she thought—a combination of Arnold Schwarzenegger's body, Kevin Sorbo's face, and Antonio Banderas's hair.

Not that she was anything to sneeze at, though. Waist-length, lavender-colored hair piled stylishly upon her head, Betsy was clad in a body-hugging black velvet cocktail dress that accentuated her curves to the point of distraction for every man in the room. Her Japanese features were just as striking: high cheekbones; button nose; full lips; jade-green eyes that shone with the fires of life.

And having shapely legs that seemed to go up to her neck didn't hurt, either.

But even in three-inch stiletto heels, the top of her head just even with Williams' powerful jaw, she looked like a child in comparison to his larger-than-life appearance.

"I'm glad the picture turned out so well for you, Mr. Williams," Betsy said. "Have there been any reports on what the Emperor thought of it?"

Williams grinned broadly, flashing an impressive set of capped teeth. "Not yet, but how could he *not* love it? Besides, von Doom had total script approval—even took the time to work with Val Kilmer on how to play him. He's *gotta* be happy with the finished product. I gotta tell you, though," he said in a conspiratorial murmur, "I thought Chris Walken spent a *little* too much time chewin' the scenery as Magneto." He shrugged. "But Naomi Campbell as Storm?" He exhaled sharply. "Talk about your major hotties! Man, I'd give my right arm for a chance to do a love scene with her!"

"Er . . . yes," Betsy said, continuing to smile as she nodded. "An inspired bit of casting, I thought—I'm certain the Empress is pleased. Not that you were so bad yourself."

"Thanks," Williams said. The grin widened further, until it practically threatened to split his head apart. The image suddenly made Betsy think of a child set loose in a toy store on Christmas day.

"I've got one question, though," Betsy said. "Don't you find the whole thing somewhat . . . propagandist?"

Williams's smile faded, and he tilted his head to one side. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I know Emperor von Doom's had his share of problems with Magneto over the years, but would he really act so incredibly infantile, blowing up Christmas trees in the middle of New York and spouting lines from Edgar Allan Poe? I'd say that's being more than a tad ridiculous with dramatic license—wouldn't you? And the Emperor preserving the spirit of the holidays for all the good little children of the world—a bit much, don't you think?" Before Williams could respond, Betsy continued. "And isn't Magneto supposed to be a survivor of the Holocaust? What could really make a man like that—who's already experienced, first-hand, the kind of horrors the human race can create—lower himself to the very depths of cruelty enacted by the Nazis, in order to terrorize the Empire? Now, *that's* the sort of story I would have liked to have seen, not some senseless knockabout with flashy effects."

Williams's head slowly swung from side to side. From similar conversations she'd had with other people over the years, Betsy knew he was looking for any sign of an armor-clad Guardsman—a number of them had been assigned as a security detail for the party—or a none-

too-casual observer in the service of von Doom. Of course, Williams would be wasting his time if the stories Betsy had heard of the Emperor's psychic watchdogs were true—with their mental powers, the Psi Division could be miles away and still eavesdrop on their every word.

"I-I wouldn't know about any of that stuff, Betsy," Williams said, a slight hitch in his voice. "I'm just an actor."

A wicked smile played at Betsy's lips, but she fought back the urge to let it transform into a full-out Cheshire Cat-like grin. It was childish, really, but seeing the massive actor squirm a bit almost made up for having to tolerate his overbearing personality.

Any sense of victory quickly faded, however, with the next words to spill from his mouth as he quickly changed the subject: "So, where'd you two meet—Tokyo, right?"

"I beg your pardon?" Betsy asked, startled.

"You and Worthington," Williams said. An easy, knowing smile crept across his face. It was clear from his expression that he enjoyed catching Betsy off-guard—returning the favor for her Magneto comments, obviously. "Way I've heard it, you and Prince Charming met during one of his fact-finding tours of the Orient. You were working in some karaoke bar, cranking out 'I Will Survive' and 'Boogie Nights' for the locals, and he was meeting with some potential investors for his company. But he took one look at you, and it was love at first sight." He shook his head. "You must feel like the luckiest girl in the world, meeting a guy who sweeps you off your feet and brings you to America. Even sets you up as the A-Number One singer in his nightclub."

"B-but . . . I-I'm British . . ." Betsy said, voice trailing off. "A-and it never happened like that . . ." She felt her cheeks grow hot. How had this conversation taken such a bizarre turn? And, more importantly, when would this annoying man go away?

Williams shrugged. "Oh. Guess you can't believe everything you read in the *Enquirer*, right?"

"I-I should say not . . ." Betsy stammered.

Williams looked back over his shoulder, then turned to Betsy. He smiled his winnigest smile. "Hey, look—I've gotta go. My publicist hates it if I don't try to mingle with every person in the room. Gets the idea I'm not doing enough of her job for her." He grabbed Betsy's hand, shaking it so hard she half expected it to snap off at the wrist. "Nice talking to you."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked off, the crowd parting around him like the Red Sea.

Betsy's eyes narrowed as she watched him stomp away. "Wish I could say the same . . . you *git*," she growled softly.

Betsy closed her eyes and sighed. She'd forgotten all about those stories—the rumors of how she and Warren had met. Looking back, she had to admit that it *had* seemed the unlikeliest of pairings—the azure-skinned millionaire playboy, and the purple-tressed British chanteuse who had been struggling for years to move beyond the small West Village clubs and Alphabet City bars in which she had been performing. “Worlds apart” was a mild description for the situation.

But then, Warren had never been a typical millionaire—as comfortable with old college friends in a smoky bar as he was when in control of Worthington Enterprises' boardroom. And the fact that wings sprouted from between his shoulder blades, giving him the power of flight, also tended to make him stand out from the other CEOs listed in *Fortune* magazine. As for Betsy, she had never been a typical British singer—especially when one considered she was actually a member of the House of Braddock, one of Britain's most prestigious families . . . though she tended to keep that information to herself. Only Warren and her brother, Brian, knew of her real origins.

Over the past three years, friends often said that she and Warren had been destined to meet from birth, even though they lived an ocean apart. And Destiny must certainly have been holding Warren by the hand, leading him on that night when he and two friends showed up at The Gilded Cage to hear a lavender-tressed nightingale sing.

And, she thought contentedly, her song had yet to end . . .

With a smile, Betsy opened her eyes and made a slow pirouette, hoping to catch a glimpse of Warren, wherever he might have gotten to in the spacious room. After the world premier of *Doom's Patrol* at the cavernous Ziegfeld Theater in midtown Manhattan, the attendees had traveled uptown to a major celebration being held here at Tavern on the Green, a sumptuous restaurant on the western edge of Central Park. Despite her natural tendency to avoid large gatherings of people she didn't know—and, therefore, people with whom she'd be completely uncomfortable—Betsy had put on her most supportive face and accompanied her beau to the festivities. Unfortunately, being one of the world's foremost powerbrokers meant that anyone and everyone wanted to be Warren's friend, so it was only moments after they arrived that Betsy suddenly found herself alone . . . and, thus, an easy target for Simon Williams and his inappropriate questions.

“Is he gone?” said a voice off to one side. Betsy looked out of the corner of one eye to find Warren standing a step behind her, tilting his head back just enough that his face was hidden from view by her sky-scraping hairstyle.

“And who would that be?” Betsy asked without turning around.

“Man-Mountain Marko over there,” Warren replied, pointing past her shoulder. She followed the direction of his index finger; it led straight to Williams, who was involved in another pointless conversation with some other poor soul unlucky enough to have lacked the speed to avoid him. With a bemused smirk, Betsy recognized the actor’s new sounding board: Jean-Paul Beaubier, the famed Canadian skier. She’d noticed the lithe athlete casting furtive glances at Williams from across the room while she was trapped in her conversation with him.

Poor dear, she thought. I’m sure “Wonder Man” doesn’t seem half as attractive now as he did before he opened his mouth. . . .

“You’re referring, of course, to the annoying Mr. Williams,” Betsy remarked to Warren. With a start, she saw the actor glance in her direction, as though he had heard her from across the room. She waved to him and smiled, silently praying he didn’t think it was an invitation to return to talk off her remaining ear. Thankfully, he only waved back and continued toying with his victim.

“Yeah,” Warren said, his voice slightly muffled by her hair. “That’s the guy.”

Teeth still locked in a sardonic grin, Betsy turned to face her boyfriend. “Warren, *dear*, how long have you been standing there?”

“Well, I’ve only been *here* a few seconds.” Warren gestured back over his shoulder, toward a gigantic ice sculpture of a swan, its long neck bent gracefully so that the bird’s beak could touch the surface of the large punch bowl beneath it. “But I was standing behind that swan, talking to Mary Jane Watson-Parker—she’s the actress who played Spider-Woman—and her husband for about five minutes. A really nice couple—no pretensions, unlike what you’d normally find in most Hollywood marriages.”

“And were you aware of the *hell* you were putting me through while you gabbed the night away with your new friends?”

“Oh, it couldn’t have been *that* bad, honey. Right?” Warren paused. “You know, you’re starting to freak me out with that death’s-head stare you’ve got going. Didn’t your mother ever warn you your face could freeze like that?”

“That’s not the *only* thing that’s going to be cold tonight,” Betsy said in a warning tone.

Warren cocked his head to one side. “Huh?” Then his eyes widened as the realization hit him. He winced. “Ouch. Am *I* in trouble.” He flashed a warm smile, and lowered his head until his chin touched his chest. “What if I said I was sorry, and it’ll never happen again?”

The muscles in Betsy’s face slowly relaxed. “It’s a start.”

Warren beamed brightly, and raised his head. “That’s what makes

me such a great warrior in the arena we powerbrokers call 'global finances,' Betts." He leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the forehead. "Like any smart businessman, I know when to let the other party establish the ground rules for negotiations."

Betsy smiled, and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You mean you'll take what you can get."

Warren nodded. "Exactly."

"Glad to be out of there?"

Staring off into space, Betsy started, then glanced around. She and Warren were walking hand-in-hand along Central Park West, the tree-lined, four-lane avenue that extended from Columbus Circle in the south to 110th Street in the north. To their left, the park—with its architectural symbiosis of nature's rocks and trees combined with man's winding footpaths and brass-plated lampposts—stretched out into the darkness; to their right, on the other side of the street, elegant, cream-colored, Art Deco-designed apartment buildings pierced the night sky, reaching up toward the heavens. For a Saturday night in late June, traffic—both vehicular and pedestrian—was surprisingly light in this part of Manhattan; occasionally, Betsy and Warren were passed on the sidewalk by another couple or the odd bicyclist.

And echoing in the night, the sounds of merrymaking from the restaurant could still be heard, even though it was blocks behind them.

"I asked if you were glad to get away from the party," Warren said.

"Umm . . . yes, actually." Betsy bit her bottom lip. She hadn't meant to be that brutally honest, but there it was, out in the open with just two words. She gazed at her beau, then cast her eyes downward. "I'm sorry, Warren. I know how important it was for you to make an appearance tonight, what with the movie and all—"

"And I did," Warren commented. "I showed up, shook some hands, let some wannabe movers-and-shakers suck up to me, made it clear how much I *loved* the movie . . ." He rolled his eyes toward the night sky. "I've done my part for the Empire tonight." He gently took her chin between thumb and forefinger and lifted it so she could look directly into his cool, blue eyes. "And my reward for such dedication is to spend the rest of the evening with the most beautiful woman in this—or any other—world."

Betsy's lips parted, but she suddenly found herself at a loss for words. It was one of those moments when Warren was so completely serious—so confident in expressing his feelings for her—that she wasn't quite certain what to say in response.

But really, though—there's only one thing that needs to be said, isn't there? she thought, reaching up to stroke his cheek.

"I love you," she whispered, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

"And I, you, Betts." Warren smiled and shook his head. "You know, a few years ago, I would've been surprised to hear me say that. But when I first saw you, that night in the bar . . ."

The light in Betsy's eyes suddenly dimmed, her brow furrowing.

"What's wrong?" Warren asked.

Betsy looked away. "It's—"

"*Don't* say it's nothing," Warren said. "You *know* it makes me crazy when you try to avoid discussing something that's bothering you. So, out with it."

Betsy took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then slowly released it. There was no point in avoiding the issue, now that she'd allowed it to spring back into the front of her mind; Warren would just keep nagging her until she cracked. The best thing to do was to just say it, get it out of the way and move on.

"It was a comment someone made at the party," she said at last.

"Who?" Warren asked. "Was it Stark? He tried to come on to you, didn't he?" He paused, then snapped his fingers. "It was that Rasputin guy, right? Wanted to show you his 'etchings.'" He nodded, as though agreeing with himself. "Yeah, I've heard about *him*."

"It doesn't *matter*," Betsy said, a tad too brusquely. "Besides, it's the *comment* that bothered me, not the person who said it."

"And that comment would be . . .?"

Betsy stopped walking; Warren immediately halted.

"About us," Betsy said. "About me. About my place in your life. In life in general."

Warren exhaled. "Sounds pretty intense. What exactly did this anonymous person say that got you thinking about all this?"

Betsy grimaced. "He mentioned the rumors . . ."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Warren exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. "Betts, we've been through all of that before! It didn't bother me back then what people were thinking, and it sure as hell doesn't bother me now. Remember all the things I had to deal with even before I met you, just because I was, you know, *different* from all the other kids?" He shook his head in resignation. "They're *always* gonna talk about us, hon—it comes with the territory when you're a public figure." He placed his hands on her shoulders. "You've gotta put that kind of nonsense behind you, Betts," he said gently, "before it destroys you."

"I *have* put it behind me," Betsy countered. She paused. "At least, I *thought* I had." She gnawed on her bottom lip for a few moments;

Warren patiently waited for her to continue. "It's just that . . . ever since we met, I stopped being Betsy Braddock; stopped being *me*. I had a career, a good bit of word of mouth going, a life that had its share of problems, but I was able to handle them." She frowned. "Now, I'm just 'Warren Worthington's gal pal,' jetting around the world, eating at the finest restaurants, doing five shows a week at the Starlight Room."

"And that's a *bad* thing?" Warren said sarcastically.

"You know what I mean," Betsy replied. "It's wonderful—I wouldn't trade the time we've spent together for anything in the world. But . . ." *Go ahead, get it all out.* "But the public doesn't take me seriously as an artist; the press, too. They treat me like I'm some bit of Page Three fluff you'd find posing for the tabloids back home—just a pretty face and a nice pair of . . . legs." She sneered. "As far as they're concerned, I'm nothing more than window dressing for your arm."

"That's not how *I* see you," Warren said.

"I know that, and I appreciate it. I really do. You've always been there for me, always been respectful of my wishes, never interfering with my decisions, never using your station to force other people to do things for me." Betsy looked up to meet Warren's warm gaze. "But it all comes down to perceptions—how the public sees you. You know how important that can be."

"True," Warren said.

"And what people think of when they see *you* is a man who overcame adversity and prejudice, who rose to become the head of an international corporation." Betsy's head slowly dipped, until she was staring at her clasped hands; the knuckles were white from the pressure. "But when they see *me* . . . when they see me, they think of a hanger-on. An oriental . . . 'golddigger,' I think is the term. Anything but a singer."

"Betsy . . ." Warren began.

She shook her head. "I've never made my mark, you see. My place in history. Never made people stand up and pay attention to me. I've always been relegated to the background—first with my brother, Brian, and his athletic awards. . . . That's why I've never told too many people about my heritage—then I'd just be 'Brian Braddock's sister.'" She glanced at Warren. "And then it happened anyway . . . with you." Betsy laughed curtly, a small, trembling note, as tears formed in the corners of her eyes. "Pretty silly, wouldn't you say? The luckiest woman on two continents, with the most beautiful man in this—or any other—world, and she's worried about having future generations remember her." She sniffed loudly.

Warren reached out to brush away her tears. "I don't think it's silly at all," he said softly.

Betsy reached into her small leather purse and took out a pair of Kleenex from a small portable dispenser. Wiping her nose, then dabbing at her eyes, she managed a small smile. "Oh, you're just being kind," she said in a phlegmy half-whisper.

"No, I'm entirely serious," Warren said. "So, what do you want to do about it?"

"Do?"

"About making your mark in history."

Betsy was confused. "I really hadn't—" she began.

"What's the matter—you talk a good game, but you never took the time to figure out how to make it happen?" Warren playfully pressed the tip of her nose with his index finger. "Come on, Braddock—what's it gonna take for you to smack around all those half-wits to get their attention and then rub their faces in it?"

For the second time that evening, Betsy was at a loss for words.

"I . . . I don't know," she said softly.

Warren nodded. "Okay, okay . . . there must be *something* we can do about this . . ." He stared off into space, pinching his bottom lip between thumb and forefinger. Betsy silently watched as his face underwent a series of comical expressions, the smooth, blue-tinted skin contorting and stretching as he reviewed whatever options were running through his mind.

"*He puzzled and puzzled, until his puzzler was sore . . .*" she thought, remembering a line from Dr. Seuss's classic children's book, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. She bit her tongue to keep from laughing.

Warren's face suddenly brightened. "I've got it! How would you like an opportunity to perform for von Doom himself?"

"And how would I do that?"

"Well, next week is the tenth anniversary of his rise to power. And the celebration's going to be held in Washington, right?"

Betsy slowly nodded in agreement. She had a feeling she knew where this was going, but decided to say nothing for the moment.

"So, what if you were picked to be on the entertainment bill that night?" Warren continued. "The ceremony's going to be televised around the world—that's over three billion people watching. And with your talent, they'll have no choice but to see how wrong they've been about you. You'll *never* have a better showcase in your entire life. Would *that* qualify as making your mark?"

Betsy frowned, then pursed her lips.

"What?" Warren asked.

"It's a wonderful idea, Warren," Betsy said hesitantly, "and I appreciate the offer, but it's not the kind of thing that could happen to just any cabaret singer living in the West Village . . ."

Warren smiled. "Oh, I get it. Not without her well-respected boyfriend pulling some strings, is that it?" He drew an X across his chest with the point of an index finger. "I swear—" he glanced up at the night sky—"as God is my witness, I will in no way influence anyone's decision to give you a shot at the anniversary performance. The Minister of Entertainment is in town for a couple of days to check out potential acts for the gala. All I'll do is invite him to the Starlight Room; then we'll see what happens after he's heard you sing." His smile widened. "You know me, Betts—I only use these powers of mine for good, not evil."

Betsy raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Really?"

Warren patted the pockets of his tuxedo. "Well, I don't have my Bible with me," he mumbled, "but I *am* telling you the truth."

Betsy stared at him for a moment, then walked over to a nearby park bench and sat down; the wood felt wonderfully cool against her legs. Hunched forward, elbows placed on her knees, she rested her chin in the palms of her hands to think.

He was right—performing for the Emperor on a worldwide telecast *would* be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. She'd be an utter fool to pass it up, even if Warren went back on his promise . . . which she half expected him to do, anyway. It was just that, when one came right down to it, she had always been reluctant to accept help from anyone—family, friends, even lovers. It made her feel beholden to them, even if they expected nothing in return for their actions; made her feel as though she were incapable of achieving her goals on her own. And Warren was no exception.

Still and all, it *was* the Emperor. And three billion TV viewers . . .

"All right," she said at last. "I'll do it."

Warren clapped his hands. "Excellent!" He strode over and helped Betsy to her feet, then embraced her. "But it's all going to be up to *you*, hon. I'm just gonna take a seat in the back and watch."

Suuuure, *you will* . . . Betsy thought, her chin happily resting on his shoulder. But she didn't mind at all.

"Warren?" she said softly.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Do you *really* consider me the most beautiful woman in the world?"

Taking a step back, Betsy smiled wickedly as she stared at her lover. Her eyes narrowed, daring him to change his earlier comment.

"Well . . . sure," Warren slowly replied. "With the exception of Claudia Schiffer, of course." He started to look away, then paused. "And Cindy Crawford." A boyish grin slowly spread across his face. "And—" He tapped the side of his head with the knuckle of one finger, as though trying to shake loose a hidden memory. "What *was* the name of that cute little red-headed waitress in Glasgow . . . ?"

The scarlet lips that playfully covered his mouth to silence him soon made him forget about any woman but the one in his arms.

MORNING IN America—and another work day for the citizens of Washington, D.C.

At Union Station, the first trains were arriving, full of high school students—and their teachers—excited about leaving behind the familiar surroundings of their New York and Philadelphia and Boston neighborhoods for an opportunity to tour the district that had become home to the undisputed leader of the world. Government employees hurried to their jobs at L'Enfant Plaza and Federal Center and Judiciary Square, while tourists lined up to visit Ford's Theatre and the Smithsonian Institute and the Jefferson Memorial. On The Mall—the expansive parkscape that stretches from the Capitol building in the east to the Lincoln Memorial in the west—Parks Department workers moved across carefully-tended fields of green in small hover-vehicles; from the bottom of the craft, whirring blades dipped down to trim the grass to a uniform height, while water and nutrients were pumped directly into the soil from large drums built behind the drivers' seats.

At the Latverian Monument—once a monolithic structure named in honor of George Washington, and now referred to as “The Monument of Doom” only by those who ran the risk of punishment for their disrespect—armed guards dressed in deep-blue armor patrolled the grounds, occasionally stopping people—even small children—to run quick scans for weapons or explosives. Golden Age of Mankind though it might be, these were still times for caution—one never knew when one of Emperor von Doom's cowardly enemies—few though they were—might come out of hiding long enough to threaten the lives of the noble citizens who lived under his protection. And a child—even one possessing the sweetest of smiles and the face of an angel—was

just as capable of carrying a bomb as any crazed adult bent on destruction.

Cautious times, indeed.

And at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, in the master bedroom of the White House, in private living quarters once occupied by forty presidents and their families over a 193-year span, the planet's Empress slowly awoke to face the new day.

As resting places go, the room was somewhat at odds with what one would normally expect to find in a mansion that, for nearly two centuries, had been a representation of the hopes and dreams of the country's population. Its walls a deep blue, its carpeting a lush red, the sanctum's furnishings were a strange mixture of antique fittings—French settee, Viennese crystal chandelier, Louis XVI-era chairs and sofa—and hi-tech gadgetry—viewing screen, holographic projector, a cell phone or three—though, oddly enough, the combination seemed to go well together. To the left of the Empress's oaken four-poster bed, on the western wall, hung an ornate tapestry of the coat-of-arms of Latveria—a golden eagle, wings spread wide, beak open as though it were shrieking a cry of victory over its fallen enemies; below it, an ornate “L.” And all set against a blood-red background. On the eastern wall was a 4' × 6' oil painting of Victor von Doom, his strong, handsome features those of a stern, but loving, father—a likeness of the subject perfectly recreated by the artist who had been assigned the daunting task of capturing the power and majesty of the Lion of Latveria on canvas. Indeed, there was almost a lifelike quality to the hypnotic brown eyes that stared out at the room—watching, always watching.

Rubbing her own sleep-cruste eyes with the edges of her hands, Ororo I—the sovereign formerly known as Ororo Munroe—blinked three times to clear her blurry vision, then sat up in bed. But even before she could look up to face the northeastward window that stood across from her to greet the sun, she was plunged into darkness once more as a mountain of white hair cascaded down over her face.

I really should start tying it back before I go to bed . . . she thought with a chuckle. But then, Victor always preferred her hair loose.

Throwing back her head, Ororo kicked away the white satin sheets that covered her and sinuously stepped onto the lush carpeting; her feet sank deep into the pile. She crossed the room quickly, stepping into the light that poured through the window; the warmth of the rays made her skin tingle.

She smiled. Mild, bright mornings like this reminded her of her years as a “goddess” on the plains of Kenya, in East Africa—back when she really thought she might be some sort of Earth-bound deity, pos-



Reddy



sessing an innate ability to control the weather; how this might be so, considering both her parents had been "mortals," had never troubled her. But whatever the source of her powers, if drought threatened the land, it only took a single thought to summon a modest-sized storm that prevented the crops—or her faithful worshippers—from dying; too much rainfall, and she could banish the clouds before the precious topsoil was washed away. It was a simple life, with simple responsibilities—one light years away from the days she had spent as a child on the streets of Cairo, Egypt, following her parents' deaths.

Ororo frowned, her thoughts turning dark from the unbidden memory. And above the streets of Washington, a thundercloud suddenly formed, its icy fingers reaching out to block off the sunlight; it was quickly joined by another. The sky filled with an ominous rumbling.

A knock at the bedroom door snapped Ororo out of her reverie.

"W—who is it?" she asked.

"Paterson, Your Majesty," replied a deep, male voice. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Joseph," Ororo called back. "Why do you a—" Her attention was drawn to the dark clouds that continued to form in the skies directly above the historic mansion, threatening to wash out the streets of the world's capital in a deluge of biblical proportions. Wincing slightly, she realized that she'd allowed her wandering mind to affect the weather patterns in the area. "Oh. I see what you mean."

Closing her eyes, the dark-skinned maharani cleared her mind, letting her psionic powers reach out, beyond the mansion, to the farthest edges of the district, searching for—

There.

A jet stream of air coming down from Canada. She could practically feel the cool wind playing across her skin; goose flesh prickled its way along her arms and legs. It would miss Washington by a few miles . . . unless it had some help.

All it took was a thought.

Outside the White House, trash receptacles overturned, spilling their contents; papers and food containers fluttered down Pennsylvania Avenue, then leapt skyward like a murder of crows taken flight. Caught in the sudden gale, the storm clouds swiftly retreated from the capitol, bound for the Atlantic Ocean.

Eyes still closed, Ororo smiled as warm sunlight once more bathed her face.

"Ma'am?" Paterson asked.

"It is all right now, Joseph," Ororo replied, opening her eyes. "I

have taken care of the situation. And please—stop talking to me through the door. You know how much I find it distasteful. Come in.”

“Sorry, Ma’am,” Paterson said. The door opened, and Ororo’s personal bodyguard entered the room. At six feet, five inches, and 240 pounds, forty-year-old Joseph Paterson cut a dashing figure in his emerald Guardsman armor, which shone brightly in the restored sunlight. The protective helmet that normally covered his head was tucked under his arm, allowing Ororo to see his rugged features: squarish jaw, piercing blue eyes, a slightly off-center nose that showed signs of having been broken a time or two, and closely-cropped dark hair. A former field operative of the international law enforcement organization called S.H.I.E.L.D.—an acronym for Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistic Directorate—he had been assigned to the Empress by Doctor Doom himself on the basis of Paterson’s service record, having fought against such terrorist groups as Hydra and A.I.M.—Advanced Idea Mechanics—when they had attempted to overthrow the Emperor on more than one occasion. It also didn’t hurt that Paterson had been recommended for the job by S.H.I.E.L.D.’s beautiful and oh-so-deadly director, Viper . . . though she had wisely neglected to mention to von Doom that she and the handsome agent were lovers.

Neither the Emperor, nor Joe’s wife, Maria, would have understood that to refuse the director’s bed was to invite an early retirement—at the wrong end of a gun.

But for all the dangerous situations in which he’d been involved, none had prepared Joe Paterson for the sight that greeted him when he walked into the master bedroom: his Empress *in puris naturalibus*. And facing him.

“Ah, jeez!” he cried, eyes wide and cheeks turning a bright red. He quickly averted his gaze, concentrating instead on the portrait of von Doom to his left.

Ororo raised a hand to suppress a laugh. No matter how long she lived in the United States, she would never become used to its conservative climate. Back in Kenya, no one worried about such inconsequentials as modesty, not when there were far more important concerns to address. Certainly, her people would never have asked their goddess to cover herself up with strips of cloth—it would have been an insult.

Of course, her attitude toward clothing had eventually changed, once she had met . . .

Had met . . .

Ororo frowned. How odd that she couldn’t remember the name of the man who had come to visit her in Kenya four years ago; who had explained that she was no deity, but a mutant—a “child of the atom,”

as others of her kind were later referred to. A human being, not a goddess, gifted with wondrous powers that could help shape the future of the world. Her brow furrowed as she struggled to conjure up a mental picture of the strange man who had changed her life. But none came.

"Umm . . . bad dreams again, Ma'am?" Paterson kept his eyes fixed on the painting . . . and the stern face that seemed to glare down at him.

Ororo shook her head to clear her thoughts. The identity of her visitor back then didn't really matter; he was probably just one of the many Imperial bureaucrats working for Victor. There were so many of the annoying little drones—constantly hovering around the White House, eager to please their master—that one face just seemed to blur into another.

"In a way," she said to Paterson, shrugging into a floor-length silk robe that was draped over a chair by the bed. "I have to stop letting my thoughts run away from me like that. After all, how can the people feel secure when their Empress has such trouble keeping her emotions in check?"

"It doesn't happen *that* often, Your Majesty, but you've got a point," Paterson said. "Then again, it *does* keep the weathermen on their toes. And it lets everybody know when it's a bad time to ask you for something."

Ororo laughed. "So, *that* is why the staff avoids me on rainy days." She tied the robe's belt tightly, then smoothed the flowing garment with the palms of her hands. "You can turn around now, Joseph."

Paterson hesitantly pivoted on one foot, momentarily staring down at his feet before working up the nerve to look at her. When he at last saw the robe, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"I apologize for making you feel uncomfortable, Joseph," Ororo said, smiling warmly. "It will not happen again." Paterson smiled sheepishly, and glanced back at the painting of von Doom. Being the wife of the most powerful man on the planet, Ororo knew what *that* look meant. "And don't worry. This is the only room in the house that *isn't* monitored by Security, so no one will have to know of my . . . indiscretion. I *certainly* would not think of ever mentioning this to Victor."

Paterson visibly relaxed, a smile lighting his face. "Thank you, Ma'am. You have *no* idea how much I appreciate that."

Ororo nodded benignly. She also knew what *that* comment meant. For all the good things he had brought to the world—the abolishment of crime, an end to homelessness and hunger and war—still was Victor von Doom a man to be, not just respected, but feared . . . even, sometimes, by his own wife and children. His rage could be a terrible thing to see when unleashed—a roiling, thunderous darkness that rivaled the

most powerful storm she could create; to be caught in its fury was an experience few survived. And not even a former S.H.I.E.L.D. agent would be foolish enough to tempt fate by openly gazing at the undraped form of the wife of such a man.

"Leave me now, Joseph," Ororo said. "I have much to do for my people today, and I need time to prepare. I will summon you when I am ready to depart for my first appointment."

"Yes, Ma'am," Paterson said, clearly grateful for the dismissal. Bowing sharply, he marched backward to the hallway, exited the room, and closed the door.

Chuckling softly, the image of her bodyguard's shocked expression still fresh in her mind, Ororo slipped out of her robe and headed for the shower.

Outside, Joe Paterson drew the thumb of a gauntleted hand across his brow, wiping away the sweat that had accumulated there. He felt drenched inside his armor, and his left eye had suddenly developed a nervous twitch—a tic that hadn't bothered him since he'd left behind the world of international espionage for what he'd always thought would be far less strenuous palace duties.

"More thought, less reaction, moron," he said, quietly admonishing himself. "That'll teach you to go barging in to the Royal Chamber." He tightly squeezed his eyes shut and gently rapped his forehead with a metal-encased fist, trying to force the vision of the breathtakingly beautiful woman in the next room from his thoughts. The Psi Division could be making one of its periodic mental sweeps of the grounds for possible intruders at any moment; it would only end in tragedy if one of the "mentos" happened to detect any impure images playing on the projection screen of his mind.

What the Empress probably had not realized was that it wasn't his own life for which he had been concerned; rather, it was for the lives of his wife, Maria, and their son, Gregory. Joe had heard the stories over the years—stories of what had happened to some of the unfortunate souls punished by von Doom for perceived transgressions: their children abducted, never to be seen again; wives or husbands forced to watch helplessly as their spouses were killed before their eyes; entire families slaughtered. He had the feeling that the Empress was aware of the severity of some of the punishments her husband meted out, but chose not to question them; after all, any doubt shown by the royal family toward its monarch's decisions would be seen as a sign of weakness—and neither von Doom nor Ororo could ever be described as "weak."

But as terrible a man as Magneto might be—and based on his ac-

tions in Paris, “terrible” was a mild description for the international terrorist—his most savage reprisals paled in comparison to those inflicted by Victor von Doom upon his enemies. If anyone doubted that was so, they had only to ask of the fates of the Thing, or the Human Torch. Or Captain America.

Or Susan Storm-Richards.

The Invisible Woman. Joe felt a shiver run along his spine. He’d heard that her husband lost his mind when he saw what von Doom had done to her.

And the Emperor had laughed.

Rumor had it that Reed Richards was locked away in a nuthouse back in Latveria, scribbling jagged 4s on the walls and floor of his cell—and on himself—with a broken blue crayon all day long; his nights were spent screaming his wife’s name over and over until he finally cried himself to sleep.

Could something like that be his own fate, for such a harmless mistake as seeing the Empress unclad?

Yes . . . if the Emperor were ever to find out.

For a moment—one that seemed to last an eternity—Joe formed a mental picture of arriving home at the end of the day, only to find his modest apartment in Georgetown wrecked, his family missing.

And one of Maria’s severed fingers on the kitchen table; the blood seeping from the digit was still warm.

Joe violently shook his head, trying to dispel the nauseating image. Where had *that* come from?

And then he felt it—an itching at the back of his mind, like a spider crawling along the base of his skull. An involuntary tremor ran through his body, and he listened in horror as a small, sinister voice quietly echoed in his mind.

It “said” only two words, but they were enough to make him fall to his knees and weep, body hitching uncontrollably as tears streamed down his cheeks. Two words that let him know he should never have allowed his thoughts to wander, as his Empress had done before. Two words that made it clear that, even if he abandoned his post now and raced for home, he would still be far too late.

Two words—that heralded the end of his world.

We know.

It was a good day to be king.

Strolling through what had once been known as the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden, located on the east side of the White House, Victor von Doom paused long enough to feel the warmth of the sun upon his bare

face—a rare moment of pleasure for a man whose days were normally spent constantly tinkering with the smallest parts of his near-perfect world, trying to smooth over the imperfections, few though they were. Dressed in a dark, pinstriped business suit—o, to at last be free of that damnable armor!—the purple silk sash of royalty draped from his right shoulder down to his left hip, he looked every part the strong leader that he was; after all, it was more than a mere suit of metal that made the man—it was the strength of his character, his sheer determination to overcome adversity, his constant drive for perfection . . . and the satisfaction of knowing he could thoroughly destroy his enemies.

A slight breeze ruffled his dark-brown hair; he smoothed it back into place with a well-manicured hand. Each finger of that hand contained a ring, as did the other; ten baubles in all, possessing an amazing variety of powers, despite their outward gaudiness—prizes recovered from the corpse of the Chinese warlord called The Mandarin after von Doom had stripped the flesh from his bones with an earthshaking blast of cosmic energy collected from the spent bodies of alien creatures like Annihilus, the self-proclaimed ruler of the anti-matter universe called The Negative Zone, and the brutish Blaastar, “the Living Bomb Blast.” In the early days of von Doom’s regime, a great many of Earth’s so-called “super-villains” had made various bids to depose this modern-day Alexander the Great; all had failed, their rotting corpses raised high for all to see. Matters had quieted down quite a bit after that, though every now and then some misguided fool had to be reminded of his or her place in this brave, new world.

More often than not, that place was a grave.

Dispelling the pleasant but utterly useless memory of his many victories with a slight wave of his hand—for only the weak-minded lived in the past—von Doom turned his attention to the work that his wife had done on the garden in just a few short months: rose and oleander bushes were bursting with color, the sweet fragrances of their blooms mingling with those of hyacinth and hibiscus and gladiola; and somehow, despite the severity of Washington’s summers and winters, Ororo had even found a way to maintain a row of megaflores normally found only in the hothouse-like environment of the Savage Land, that bizarre world beneath the snow and ice of Antarctica where native tribes still fought for survival each day, and all manner of dinosaurs still roamed, apparently unaware that they were supposed to be long extinct.

The Emperor nodded, pleased with what he saw. It was an orderly garden, one that quietly reflected the world around it.

His order. His world.

“Master?”

Von Doom turned. Just inside the doorway of the Garden Room stood a skittish, unassuming little man in a charcoal-gray suit. Of average height and build, thinning brown hair plastered across the top of his egg-shaped skull, he had about him the look of a frightened animal normally accustomed to hiding from the predators of the world—a non-entity destined to forever remain in the shadows. The Emperor made no attempt to recall his name.

“What is it, lackey?” he demanded. “Who are you, to disturb Doom in his hour of contemplation?”

“I-I m-meant no disrespect, Master,” the man stuttered. Head bowed, eyes lowered, beads of sweat started to form across his brow, but he made no move to wipe them away. “I-It’s just that your military advisers have arrived.”

“Excellent,” the Emperor said. “Tell them Doom will meet with them in the war room.”

“Very good, Master.” With a quick bow, clearly overjoyed that he had been given permission to leave, the aide backed away until he had stepped from sight.

Off to one side, an auburn-haired young woman dressed in a black leather bodysuit—one of a half dozen similarly garbed men and women who skirted the edge of the garden, ever alert for any sign of trouble—touched a hand to a small receiver tucked into her left ear, listened for a few moments, then nodded.

“Speak, Lancer,” von Doom said.

Lancer—who normally went by the less dramatic name of Samantha Dunbar—turned to face her liege. “It’s Phillips. They’ve responded to the tip from the Psi Division, and they want to know what they should do now.”

Von Doom paused, considering his options. “Have the child taken to the Academy. He’ll make a passable future soldier for Ms. Frost to shape.”

Lancer fell silent. From the corner of his eye, von Doom watched her nervously chew on her bottom lip for a moment.

“The wife?” she finally asked.

“She is of no use to Doom,” the monarch replied immediately. “Kill her.”

Lancer winced, as though she had been struck. It annoyed von Doom that, after all her years of service, this woman, whom he had taken from the Earth of an alternate reality, to whom he had gifted incredible powers, in whom he had given a modicum of trust, could still be so weak. So . . . imperfect.

He might have to do something about that situation one day. . . .

“And Paterson?”

A half smile came to the Emperor’s lips; a contortion of facial muscles that seemed as uncomfortable for him to assume as it was for an observer to look upon. There was no warmth in the expression—only a burning malignancy. “He has seen the elegance and beauty of his Empress—a magnificent sight reserved for Doom, and Doom alone. Let that be the *last* thing he ever sees.”

Lancer swallowed, hard. “You want him killed, as well?”

Von Doom shook his head. “Not at all. He is to be released, unharmed—” he slowly opened the palm of his hand “—*after* his eyes have been presented to me.”

Without waiting for an acknowledgment of his commands, the Emperor strode from the garden, knowing that not even Lancer would be foolish enough to consider defying him.

Truly, it *was* a good day to be king.

When Ororo exited the master bedroom—dressed in a flowing burgundy gown that swirled around her long legs, an ornate, black metal tiara holding back her hair—she was surprised to discover that Paterson was absent from his post outside her door; in his place was another armored guard, one who smartly snapped to attention at her approach. Ororo could immediately tell that it wasn’t her constant companion—the new man’s body language was too stiff, too formal, and his powerfully-built upper torso looked as though it had been crammed into the emerald-hued metal suit.

Another S.H.I.E.L.D. agent? Perhaps, but more likely than not he was a former “super hero” or “super-villain”—the kind of gaudily-attired individual whose practices had been outlawed by Victor a year after he came into power. The smart ones had registered their powers with the government and joined the Imperial armed forces; the rebellious ones had been eliminated by their own kind, per von Doom’s mandates. As for the majority, most had gone into early “retirement,” never to be seen again. It all worked out in the end, though—no longer would cities be transformed into battlefields by testosterone-driven egotists bent on flexing their overly-developed muscles for all to see, nor would the people of the world live in fear that some madman might one day destroy the planet as an act of revenge for some perceived slight. Nowadays, the only costumed men and women on display for the public were those featured in movies, like the one that had premiered in New York the night before.

“Your Majesty,” the guard said, equally as stiff, through the speaker in his helmet. There was a heavy Japanese accent to his voice.

"I do not see Agent Paterson," Ororo said. "Can you tell me why he is not at his post, Agent . . . ?"

Eyes front, back ramrod straight, the guard hesitated for a brief moment before responding. "Kenuichio Harada, Your Majesty. Agent Paterson was . . . called away."

"By whom?"

Again, a hesitation. "By the Emperor, Your Majesty."

Ororo frowned. She didn't know which she found more annoying: the fact that Victor would call away her personal bodyguard without telling her, or the way in which this new guard seemed to be hiding something.

"And why was that?" she pressed.

"I-I do not know, Your Majesty," Harada replied. Ororo could almost see the sweat pouring down his face inside the helmet as he fought to remain composed. "I was merely told to take his place until further notice . . . and to notify you that the members of the Emperor's council have arrived. They will be meeting with him in the war room."

Ororo arched an eyebrow. All right, then—if she was going to learn anything, she would have to ask Victor directly . . . but later.

She turned on her heel. "Very well, Agent Harada, come along. I have duties of my own to which I must attend today. I shall speak with my husband when he next makes himself available." Head held high, Ororo strode down the hallway, bound for the private elevator that would take her to the ground floor.

Like a well-trained dog, the metal-garbed bodyguard hurried from his post and fell into step behind his mistress.

As the Empress made her way downstairs, her husband's war council was already convening.

Constructed in a sub-sub-basement of the mansion, the war room was a two-level, block-long bunker constructed of adamantium, the hardest, strongest metal on Earth. The lighting was intentionally kept low, so that the dozens of technicians and systems operators working there could concentrate solely on the monitors and computer stations at which they sat, processing data collected by the Langley, Virginia-based Psi Division—formerly the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency—and the hundreds of international agents around the world who kept the peace established by the Emperor a decade ago. There was no camaraderie here, no gentle buzz of office chatter, no personal items adorning the work areas; the only buzzing came from the banks of computers that lined the walls of the upper level, the only personal

item belonged to the Emperor: a large, round, marble table adorned with the coat-of-arms of Latveria, sitting in the center of the lower level.

Seated around this table were two men and three women of widely diverse backgrounds—so diverse, in fact, that it would normally have been impossible to imagine them gathered in the same room, had it not been for the man who had brought them together.

First, there was Dorma, the Minister of Defense. A blue-skinned, red-haired amazon clad in green-and-gold battle armor that revealed far more of her body than it concealed, she was the former queen of Atlantis, hailing from the same parallel Earth on which von Doom had found Lancer. As a denizen of the ocean, Dorma could not survive long above water, so a clear plastic mask covered her nose and mouth, constantly recycling the sea water contained in her lungs. Her strength was as impressive as her temper was short—each fearful to behold, especially in the heat of battle, when her bloodlust would often build to such levels that she would become possessed by what in Norse legend was called a “berserker rage”: a mindless, relentless, savage attack that would not end until the last of her enemies had been eliminated, and her desire for blood had at last been sated. Though there were times when she thought of von Doom as a weak man—why create alliances with former enemies when it was far easier to kill them and then take possession of what they had owned?—she respected him . . . and his power. The Emperor, she knew, was not afraid to dirty his hands by personally slaying anyone foolish enough to challenge his rule, as the Wizard, and Attuma, and the Master had learned. And his Psi Division allowed him to know of any future attacks before they developed beyond the planning stage, as so many others had discovered over the years—before they died.

Dorma was also well aware that, should the day come when she might attempt to cross swords with von Doom, there was no certainty that she would be the victor, for though she might find a way to best the Emperor, there was still his wife to contend with . . . and *she* commanded the elements. A difficult problem to consider, but Dorma had always enjoyed a challenge. . . .

Possessing the ability to absorb kinetic energy—thus making him virtually indestructible in any fight—Sebastian Shaw was the Emperor's expert on Earth's mutant population . . . not that he thought of himself as just another child of the atom, though. Born into a poor family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Shaw was the Horatio Alger of mutantkind, pulling himself up by his bootstraps from the depths of poverty to become a millionaire by age twenty, then parlaying that fortune into the creation of Shaw Industries, a multinational corporation contracted by

the pre-von Doom U.S. government for the development of cutting-edge weaponry. Though there was no real need for a munitions designer—for, after all, who could create weapons superior to those built by Doom himself?—it was Shaw's contacts in the mutant communities scattered around the globe that made him invaluable to the Emperor. Often, they had provided better information about any superpowered dissenters among them than that gathered by S.H.I.E.L.D., especially when it came to the doings of the man who called himself Magneto; over the years, they had tipped off Shaw to the fugitive's various plots to strike against the government, which were then nipped in the bud by the Avengers, or even by von Doom himself.

Except for that one instance, in Paris, of course.

Strangely, though, there had been no reports about the "Master of Magnetism" for some time now. . . .

Industrialist Anthony Stark originally made a name for himself as a weapons manufacturer for the United States government long before von Doom had taken power, or Shaw Industries had signed its first contract with the military. Unlike Shaw or the Emperor, though, he had been born into money, which seemed to naturally result in Stark's eventual transformation into a millionaire playboy, jetting around the world, dining at the finest restaurants, dating the most beautiful women. These days, when he wasn't overseeing the work performed by his company, Stark Solutions, he was von Doom's expert on the super hero community, having overseen the formation of the Avengers just before the Emperor's rise to power; he had even gone so far as to donate the Stark family mansion on New York's Fifth Avenue to the group as their headquarters. Because of his involvement with this team of "Earth's Mightiest Heroes," it was the millionaire industrialist's job to keep the Emperor apprised of all government-sanctioned super hero activities, and to make him aware of any new superpowered individuals who might pop up; in a world in which radioactivity seemed to trigger a recessive gene in some unsuspecting man or woman every other day of the week—and who knew what even sitting too close to a TV set might do?—it was only a matter of time before that person got up the nerve to sew together a formfitting costume of some eye-catching hue and parade around in public to demonstrate their powers—illegally, of course.

Oddly enough, though it was the kind of work one would expect to see performed by a flunky, interviewing these new "Marvels" was a job that Stark actually enjoyed. Then again, considering his handsome, Errol Flynn-like features, and the fact that nine out of every ten new "super heroines" were young, pretty, and had the kind of perfect figure made

for skintight spandex, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that "growing up" to become the CEO of a worldwide corporation had done nothing to affect the playboy's charm . . . or his libido.

And speaking of sexual drives . . .

As the director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Viper was the expert on international espionage, having been the leader of Hydra for a few years before switching her loyalties to von Doom—and then helping him to destroy the organization. A combination of femme fatale and superspy, she was the living embodiment of the type of woman Hollywood movies once referred to as "the bad girl": clad in an emerald-hued latex jumpsuit and opera-length gloves that seemed spray painted on her, she was tall and sleek, with flowing, jet-black tresses that cascaded over her right eye in a Veronica Lake coiffure, and the kind of smoldering, high-cheekboned Asian features that one would expect to find on the cover of a fashion magazine. It was widely known that if Viper couldn't use her "feminine wiles" to obtain information, she wouldn't hesitate to kill to get what she wanted. No one trusted her, not even von Doom, for anyone willing to switch sides so quickly in order to rise to a higher position of power could only be biding their time until their next upwardly mobile strike. The downside to such a situation, though, was that von Doom could have her killed at any time once he no longer needed her services, either by his own hand—the Mandarin's rings weren't just for show, after all—or by ordering her own agents to do the deed. She could easily name a dozen men and women under her direct command who wouldn't hesitate to complete that assignment, though none had been stupid enough to move against her . . . yet.

Still, she counted herself lucky whenever she thought about that ugly encounter with von Doom six months ago, when she had to report to him that her best agents had lost track of Magneto just outside of Marrakesh. Then, he had merely settled for crippling her, using just a fraction of the power contained in his armor to shatter every bone in her right hand.

Even after it was surgically repaired, she would never have full use of the hand again, and she was constantly reminded of that fact—and the penalty for failing the Emperor—every time a cold spell swept through the capital. There never seemed to be enough painkillers to dull the ache in her bones . . . or her mind.

Finally, there was Wanda Maximoff. Although born a mutant, gifted with a probability-altering ability that gave the appearance that she could perform incredible feats of magic—at least, that had been her initial understanding of her powers—she was not one of Shaw's subordinates. Instead, having studied various forms of magic under the tutelage of an

ancient witch named Agatha Harkness, Wanda had been appointed von Doom's adviser on all things supernatural. Not to be overlooked, of course, was the fact that she was the daughter of the Emperor's longtime enemy, Magneto, which meant that she could always provide some insight into her father's habits . . . and weaknesses. Though she was just as attractive as the S.H.I.E.L.D. director, with a bounty of curly, reddish-brown hair framing somewhat angular features, Wanda preferred to dress far more conservatively than the other women, opting for a dark-blue jacket and matching full-length dress. A dozen charm bracelets encircled her left wrist, each gold chain adorned with trinkets of various shapes and sizes—astrological signs, mystical symbols, even a tiny toy animal or three—and a pair of gold hoops hung from her ears. Though she and her brother, Pietro, were essentially gypsies like von Doom, born in the mountains of eastern Europe, Wanda carried herself with the air of a noblewoman, tending more often than not to look down her nose at the savage Dorma and the over-sexed Viper. Clearly, she felt superior to them both . . . and, perhaps, to Stark and Shaw, as well.

Five individuals. Brought together once more at the Emperor's command, they sat and waited for their monarch to appear.

And waited.

And waited.

Arms held above her head, Viper yawned and arched her back, stretching with an almost feline grace over the top of the plush leather chair in which she sat. It was an unnecessary, overly dramatic gesture to smooth out a kink in her back, but it had the desired effect she'd wanted, causing both Stark and Shaw to openly stare at the way the low lighting of the war room played off the colorful rubber material of her jumpsuit.

Dorma grunted, annoyed by the men's idiotic gaping. "Children . . ." she huffed.

Across from her, Wanda frowned and rolled her eyes, disgusted more by Viper's sex kitten act than the attention it was getting. "Oh, please . . ." she muttered.

Viper eased back to a more natural sitting position and, rolling her head to one side, turned to look at Wanda. The director sneered, bright white teeth forming a shark-like smile; it looked even more disturbing set against the bright green of her lipstick.

"Feeling a bit outclassed, Wanda?" she purred, with a haughtiness that women always found downright infuriating, but men found incredibly sexy. "Maybe if you dressed less like a peasant and more like you did in the old days, you'd have men reacting to *you* the same way." The smile widened. "I've seen the pictures of you back when you were

Daddy's Little Girl, you and big brother Pietro helping him with his plans to take over the world. Did he *really* approve of that whole swimsuit-and-body stocking look, or was that just a simple case of a teenaged girl rebelling against her father by dressing provocatively?"

"If it were, at least I grew out of that phase," Wanda replied evenly.

Viper laughed—a sharp, mocking sound without any trace of warmth. "I'm certain Daddy must be very pleased . . . wherever he may be."

Wanda glared heatedly at the raven-tressed woman, then glanced at her left hand, which was suddenly aglow; unconsciously, she had formed one of her "hex-spheres." She stared for a few moments at the chaos energy dancing around the tips of her fingers, then casually waved her hand in a dismissive motion.

Without warning, the base of Viper's seat collapsed as its metal supports suddenly twisted out of shape and snapped. Unable to react in time, the S.H.I.E.L.D. director yelped loudly as the chair fell backward, tossing her to the floor. In an instant, she was back on her feet, assuming a combat-ready position.

Wanda, however, remained seated. Picking off an imaginary piece of lint from the sleeve of her jacket, she looked up at the "unfortunate" recipient of her hex-bolt.

"I am *so* sorry, Viper," she said, smiling sweetly. "That's the problem with a power like mine: who knew that the odds of you making me angry enough to cause your seat to fall apart could be so great?"

Viper hissed through clenched teeth. "I'm going to *enjoy* breaking you, little girl . . ."

"Enough!" Shaw bellowed, slamming his fist down on the table. A powerful vibration ran through the marble, immediately bringing everyone's attention to bear on him. "If the two of you want to engage in a catfight, I'd be more than happy to arrange the event at my Hellfire Club in New York. I'm certain the members would find it . . . stimulating. But for now—" he glared at each woman, almost daring them to challenge him "—try acting like the professionals you are."

"Well said, Sebastian," said a voice from the upper level of the bunker. The quintet looked up to find von Doom, accompanied by Lancer, standing on the platform above them—but for how long? The four seated councilors jumped to their feet.

Gripping the railing, the Emperor lowered his gaze to lock eyes with his espionage expert.

"Viper," he said, voice rumbling with barely controlled anger, "there are times when you test the limits of my patience. Do you need *another* reminder of what happens to those who anger Doom?"

Glancing from the corner of her eye, Wanda was startled to see the instantaneous change that came over Viper: one moment, she was a confident, powerful woman skilled in a hundred different ways of destroying a man's very soul; the next, her one visible eye had widened in horror, and an uncontrollable tremor ran through her body.

"N-no, Y-your Majesty," Viper said, quickly lowering her gaze to the floor. She clutched her right hand with her left, holding it close to her chest, then winced slightly, as though more from recalling an unwanted memory than from any actual pain. Around her, the other war councilors did their best to avoid looking at her . . . or von Doom.

"Excellent," the Emperor said. Signaling Lancer to remain where she was, he stepped over to the end of the platform; the part on which he stood quietly detached itself from the main section and floated down to the main level. Once it touched the floor, von Doom stepped off and walked over to join his advisers. One of the guards seemed to suddenly materialize near him, just in time to pull back the chair reserved for the Emperor. Von Doom eased into the seat, then motioned for the others to join him. And, as quickly as he had arrived, the guard moved back to his position.

"What news?" Von Doom asked.

The advisers glanced at one another, then Stark turned to face the monarch. "I gather from the way we're all staring back and forth across the table that the situation remains the same: there's now been no sign of Magneto for a year. The Avengers, the Thunderbolts, even Excalibur—none of the super heroes who are still active have seen hide or hair of him, not since the destruction of Paris." He frowned, clearly upset by the memory. "We've sent search teams into the Mole Man's realm, even worked with Prince Namor of Atlantis—" Dorma emitted a sharp, short laugh at the mention of the sovereign's name "—and Lord Plunder to plumb the depths of the oceans and the Savage Land, respectively. Nothing."

"He also hasn't used his powers in all this time," Viper added, regaining her composure. "If he had, we would have detected it with the network of satellites we have orbiting the globe. And he can't be off-world—there have been no recent signs of extraterrestrial vehicles in our solar system to allow him the possibility of hitching a ride, and no unauthorized spacecraft have been launched—at least, none that haven't been shot down within minutes of liftoff. His body wasn't in any of the wreckage."

The Emperor waved a hand in a dismissive manner. "Nor would I have expected you to find it, Director. Lensherr is a bold, clever man, in his own way . . . though still a child in comparison to Doom. Escape

might be his plan, but he would not go about it in such a way that he would face the possibility of capture or death." He shook his head. "No, he would find some other means of avoiding the punishment due him . . ."

Von Doom's eyes narrowed as he turned to Wanda.

"Ms. Maximoff?" he asked.

Wanda drew a deep breath, held it for a moment, then slowly released it. Though she had cut all ties with her father years ago, and had been horrified by the destruction of Paris—how could even Magneto have brought himself to crash a nuclear-powered space station onto the City of Lights, killing millions of innocent people?—she was still hesitant to respond whenever she was asked to provide information about him. A case of blood being thicker than water, she often surmised; even though he was now a mass-murderer, on the run from the citizenry of an entire planet, she was still his daughter, and a small piece of her—one she constantly fought to ignore, often failing—continued to love him for the gentle man he had once been, continued to hope for the day when they might be reunited as a family.

A futile hope, Wanda knew. She had been drifting away from her father even before his most infamous act against the Empire, growing increasingly disenchanted by his continuous plans for striking out at von Doom, in some misguided bid to seize power for himself. Eventually, she just walked away, fearing that, if she did not put distance between herself and her father's obsessions, the madness would overtake her as well.

To her surprise, Magneto had allowed her to go. She had never looked back.

On the day he wiped out one of the most cherished cities in the world, though, he died in her heart for all time. Now, for Wanda, he truly *was* the monster von Doom had once proclaimed him—an uncaring, remorseless brute who had to be put down like a rabid animal before more people were harmed.

Still, he *was* her father . . .

Wanda shook her head to clear her thoughts, then looked to von Doom.

"He's not dead," she finally said. "His . . ." She paused, licked her lips, which had suddenly become dry. "His spirit has not passed on to the astral plane, nor have any of my spies in the higher dimensions detected his presence, which eliminates the possibility that he might have employed someone with magical abilities to escape *this* dimension."

Von Doom sat back from the table, slouching regally in his chair.

Frowning, he rested his chin in his left hand and stared off into space, deep in thought. His advisers sat quietly, glancing at one another while they waited.

"Not dead," he muttered, "yet not active, either." The hint of a malevolent smile played at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes sparkled with mischief. "What are you up to, my old enemy? What dark thoughts run wildly through your mind each time you are reminded that Doom is master of all, and there is nothing you can do to make it otherwise?" The smile broadened. "Had I the opportunity to look into your eyes, to see what such knowledge can do to a man's soul . . ." Von Doom chuckled softly, then straightened in his chair, eyes clearing. He fixed each of his advisers with a steely gaze.

"*Find him,*" he commanded. "Lenscherr is clever, but not so clever that he can eliminate *all* traces of his movements. I will tolerate his existence not a moment longer, nor will I tolerate failure from any of you. On the night that all the world celebrates the glory and majesty that is Doom, I have every intention of presenting to my beautiful wife a gift that no other but Doom could give to her on such a momentous occasion:

"The head of the Empire's most infamous villain, resting on a silver platter for the world to see."

Von Doom smiled then, and to Wanda Maximoff, it was an expression that she found disturbingly familiar—one she had often seen etched on the features of her father many times.

It was the face of madness.

HALF A world away, the target of the Emperor's ire shivered uncontrollably—an unconscious reaction to, as the old saying went, the feeling that someone had just walked across his grave.

An odd sensation, considering he was standing at the edge of a desert.

Body wrapped in a thin, coarse blanket, head covered by the red-and-purple-hued, metal, gladiator-style helmet that was his trademark, Erik Magnus Lensherr—the man more infamously known to the citizens of the Empire as Magneto—pulled the makeshift cloak tighter around his shoulders and gazed at the world around him. He stood on the outskirts of a village called Araouane, in the West African state of Mali—less a proper village, really, then a scattered collection of rough, mud-brick buildings now worn smooth and half-observed by the constant ebb and flow of the dune sea around them as it washed against the decades-old constructs. Beyond the village was the vast wasteland called the Sahara—nothing but miles of sand stretching off to the horizon, the monotony of the less-than-impressive view occasionally broken by a blast of hot, dry air that created dust devils that danced and swayed across the landscape as though moving in time to a beat that only they could hear. If any spot in the world could truly be considered the last place in which one would expect to find the Empire's greatest enemy, it was here, in this former oasis 160 miles north of Timbuktu.

And yet here he stood, and it was here that he had lived for the past year.

But it hasn't really been a year, Magneto thought. *At least, I do not think it has . . .* He frowned. Time in the desert was meaningless—the sun rose in the morning and set in the evening; what you did in between

was pass the hours not so much living as merely surviving. But could enough days have passed to equal an entire year? Magneto shook his head. *No, it's less than that—I'm sure of it. But how long, then?* Seeking some sort of proof for his belief, he opened the blanket and looked down at his body, and wasn't pleased at all with what he saw: the chiseled, weightlifter's form he once possessed had grown soft with disuse, and he had lost some weight. The washboard-like abdominal muscles and rock-hard pectorals that once had looked so striking coated in red spandex had lost their well-defined edges to a diet of coarse meats and rice, and a lack of exercise brought about by the fact that there was really nothing to *do* here.

"Perhaps it *has* been a year, then," he muttered softly, then sighed.

He turned his gaze to the oasis, if only to take his mind off his current state of decay; it was in no better shape. The village was a far cry from the elegant splendor he had once enjoyed when he had been headquartered aboard an asteroid that he had forced into geosynchronous orbit around the Earth with his awesome powers. Christened "Asteroid M" in honor of its owner—for Magneto was never known for his humility—the hollowed-out rock had served as a space station of sorts . . . as well as a launching point for some of his most ingenious plots to seize control of the planet. Floating high above the Earth also had its defensive advantages, as his enemies had learned, since it was next to impossible to launch a counterattack when the mutant overlord could clearly see it coming and take measures to stop it. Sadly, though, that sense of luxury and security had come to an end the day the asteroid fell from orbit.

Lensherr shook his head. *How the mighty have fallen, indeed . . .* he thought ruefully.

He wiped away rivulets of perspiration that trickled down his face from beneath his helmet, reached up to remove it so he could run a hand through his matted, shoulder-length white hair, then stopped. No matter how uncomfortable it was to wear in the constant heat, the helmet was probably the only protection he had against von Doom's much feared Psionics Division, its delicate micro-circuitry creating a "barrier" that shielded his thoughts from any unwanted mental probes. An ironic situation, he had come to realize, since he had originally created the circuitry to subjugate the minds of his own enemies, wiping hatred and bigotry from their subconscious as part of his ongoing efforts to make the mutant race the dominant species on the planet. He'd managed to create similar circuitry for the small bedroom of his house, which allowed him to remove the helmet so he could sleep with some sense of

security, but he had run out of supplies before he could extend the barrier to encompass the entirety of the building.

A sharp wind from the east suddenly ripped through the village, threatening to tear the blanket from his grip. Lensherr tilted his head and body into the superheated gale, fighting for possession of his meager cloak—his only protection from the airborne grains of sand that punished his exposed skin with what felt like the sharp pricks of a million needles.

Gritting his teeth—a movement that afforded the desert sand yet another opportunity to try and pour into his mouth like an ocean rushing to fill a pitcher—the Master of Magnetism once more fought down the urge to use his powers to create some sort of barrier that would separate him from the granules that coated him in ever-thickening layers, even if only for a short time. Tempting as it might be—just to be able to breathe clearly for a few minutes!—he knew that *any* use of his mutant-spawned abilities would result in death; he was well aware of the satellites that orbited the globe, waiting for him to slip up and provide von Doom with his precise location. And once the “Emperor” had that, it wouldn’t be long before S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers and the other countless lapdogs who served von Doom would be sweeping across the dunes, like hounds bearing down on the lonely fox.

But this fox, as Magneto had been more than happy to demonstrate in the past, was a most dangerous animal when cornered . . .

Nevertheless, as frustrating as the wind and sand and oppressive heat were, he was willing to tolerate them, if such resignation meant that he would have one more day to survive, if only to spite his enemy.

One more day, he thought darkly, to plot his revenge.

As suddenly as it had sprung up, the wind abated, and Lensherr was at last able to relax, the muscles in his arms now twitching uncontrollably and burning like fire after their battle with the elements.

I really do need to get back into shape . . . he thought wearily, rubbing his limbs to alleviate the spasms.

A scraping sound from just behind him caught his attention, and he glanced over his shoulder. As he had expected to see, the source of the small noise was no villain or Guardsman creeping up to attack, but a dark-skinned woman in her thirties, using an oversized bowl to dig away at a pile of windblown sand that had accumulated on her doorstep. She was wrapped in a flowing, colorful blanket of yellow, blue, and green patterns set on a red field. Wordlessly, the woman lifted her filled bowl, walked a dozen paces from her home to dump the load, then walked back to start the process again; this would continue until she had cleared the entrance to her satisfaction, then she would head over to one of the

other houses to do the same. She was one of the village's three "sand women" who labored from dawn to dusk, clearing the doorways and courtyards of the thirty buildings that had not yet been swallowed by the desert, as more than a hundred other homes—plus a mosque—had been over the years. It was a never-ending battle, and one they were ultimately destined to lose, but that knowledge did nothing to dampen their spirits, nor did it deter them from their task—not when the payment for such work was a small bag of rice or sugar. Enough food to go on working for another day; to keep their families alive for one more day.

Just past the woman, her daughter—a girl of three or four years—stood in the open doorway, sucking on a piece of raw lamb fat and doing her best to shield it from the grainy particles that still swirled in the air. Like her mother, the girl looked older than her actual age, eyes bright but somber, body as worn down by the elements as the building in which they lived. It was a sobering sight, this child with the eyes of an adult, and one that forced even the mighty lord of magnetism to turn his gaze elsewhere. He focused on the mother.

"Good day, Abena Metou," Lensherr said pleasantly.

The woman looked up from her labors and smiled warmly. "A good day to you, as well, John Smith. The Bright Lady must smile upon us, for two things have now occurred: the wind has stopped so that I may work, and I see that you have begun to master our language."

Lensherr shrugged. "Not as much as I would like, good lady," he admitted. "But enough to hold a . . . um . . . a . . ." He paused, suddenly unable to recall the right word for—

"A conversation," Abena said.

Lensherr smiled lopsidedly. "Yes. That."

Abena nodded in understanding and raised the sand-filled bowl, turning her attention back to the work; one never knew when the next gust of wind might race through the village and force her to start the cycle all over again, so she tried to move as quickly as the heat would allow. Lensherr watched in silence as she carried the pile from one spot to another, making no offer to help, for this was how the woman made her living and, as meager as the pay was, it still provided some comfort for her family. To interfere would have been akin to taking the food from her daughter's mouth.

At least it would provide some exercise, he thought, his gaze drifting down toward his softened body. Grunting harshly in disgust, he pulled the blanket tighter around himself.

Besides, he reminded himself, performing such menial labor was beneath the great Magneto, a man who could move entire *buildings* with the merest application of his powers, let alone a mere pile of dust. A

man who dreamed of the day when all *Homo sapiens* were down on their hands and knees like this sand woman—though, under his rule, such a submissive position would be a sign that humanity had at last recognized him as their undisputed ruler, and that they had acknowledged the fact that they were an inferior race.

But as he observed Abena's struggles against the desert, Erik Lensherr couldn't help but wonder if his own efforts—to wrest power from von Doom, to establish *Homo superior* as the dominant species—might also be ultimately doomed to fail.

Lensherr grunted. It did no good to think that way—a man who had survived the Nazi death camps, who had eluded capture for years despite the best efforts of the Empire, should have no place in his mind for dwelling on negative thoughts; they merely wasted precious time better spent formulating a plan of attack. Now angry with himself, he shook his head to clear his mind and tried to focus on more important matters.

Like the dark form taking shape on the horizon, its features distorted by the waves of heat rising from the sands.

"Visitors," Lensherr muttered, eyes narrowing. "Perhaps I might get some exercise today, after all . . ."

It took another two hours for the phantom-like shape to solidify into something far more recognizable: a silver-and-white-robed man—shoulders hunched, turbaned head resting against his chest—seated upon a camel. Even from the doorway of his home, Lensherr could see that the rider was dozing, more than likely lulled to sleep by the swaying motion of the beast as it lurched over the dunes.

Of course, it could be a trick—an apparently harmless wanderer on his way, perhaps, to the salt mines of Taoudenni, nine miles to the north, who feigns sleep in order to close in on his intended mutant prey before finally revealing himself to be one of von Doom's superpowered hounds, come to run an equally-superpowered international terrorist to ground. It wouldn't be the first time such a deception had been attempted.

Then again, it just *might* be a harmless wanderer seeking a brief reprieve from the searing heat. After all, Araouane had once been a regular rest stop for the trans-Saharan camel caravans that had moved through the area, before the desert began to extend its boundaries and consume everything in its path.

A grim smile etched itself across Lensherr's weather-beaten features as an old joke flitted through his mind: "Just because I'm paranoid, that doesn't mean they *aren't* out to get me." He'd never figured out exactly who "they" were supposed to be—he'd always had trouble understand-

ing humor—but after years of dealing with Victor von Doom and his government, he had a good idea of who “they” *might* be . . . at least, in his case.

As the camel and its charge drew nearer, Lensherr stepped from his home, intending to meet it before it entered the village proper; though the oasis’s inhabitants were not of his own kind, the mutant terrorist had grown somewhat attached to them . . . despite their inferiority. They had given him shelter, shared their food, treated him with respect, and had accepted him for the person he appeared to be—John Smith, a wanderer in search of a peaceful existence—never questioning him about why he had come to Araoune, or why he had remained.

In Magneto’s case, however, that sense of attachment was more along the lines of the feeling an owner would have for a loyal, obedient pet.

They *were* just humans, after all.

Truth be told, it was not for any fear of destroying the crumbling houses around him or accidentally wiping out the village’s small population that caused the master of magnetism to approach the new arrival—casualties and property damage were just small parts of the larger game being played between the mutant terrorist and the Emperor he sought to overthrow, and Magneto had long ago stopped being concerned with the consequences caused by each roll of the dice; the winning of the game mattered far more than broken homes or shattered bodies. Paris was a prime example of *that* philosophy. Nor was it some misguided belief that he could reason with the man before matters turned ugly. What drew him out was a desire to avoid any prolonged battle that would force him to use his powers and give von Doom’s forces time to zero-in on him.

Of course, as Lensherr had come to realize long before the Emperor had come to power, it was that the use of his magnetic abilities should always be a last resort when it became necessary to eliminate an enemy; using common weapons, or even his bare hands, made tracing his movements around the globe far more difficult. And if there was one thing he had learned from the guards and staff at Auschwitz—as he had watched each member of his family slowly starve to death, or march into the infamous “showers,” or scream in agony and terror as they were used as part of some horrific eugenic experiment—it was the variety of ways available to kill another person without resorting to superpowers. The Nazis had been excellent tutors, and the boy who had become a man behind the guard towers and barbed wire fences of the camp had been most eager to demonstrate all that he had learned after the war . . .

on each and every one of them that he could find. Over fifty years later, some of those "lessons" still stuck in his mind.

The rider was closer now, and Lensherr quickened his pace. If he could get close enough before the man made his move, dismount him from the camel and slice his throat with the dirk concealed within the folds of his robes . . .

The man suddenly raised his head, and stared at him. Lensherr stopped, eyes narrowing as he tried to imagine who it was he was facing. It was impossible to figure out, though; the man's features were covered by a pair of dark-lensed goggles, and a strip of cloth that concealed the lower half of his face.

The camel continued its slow pace, now angling toward the mutant fugitive. Acting nonchalantly, Lensherr raised a hand to wave to the rider, as though in greeting; the gesture concealed the movement of his other hand, which had slipped to the back of his robes, and the dagger that lay sheathed there.

As the beast finally drew alongside him, Lensherr's hand closed around the blade's handle. He smiled pleasantly at the man, who was now within striking distance. The fugitive's hand started to come around with the dirk as he crouched, preparing to leap at the mysterious visitor—

And then the man was suddenly standing at his side, the dagger now in *his* hand.

Caught by surprise, Lensherr could not help but stand agape as the rider removed his headgear to reveal a younger version of the mutant criminal—or so it would seem to the casual observer: the same white hair, but cut short and spiky; the same angular features, but less lined, and pale in skin color, as opposed to the older man's sun-darkened complexion. But this was no android built by von Doom to look like him, no laboratory-created clone dispatched to eliminate him and take his place.

This was Lensherr's own flesh and blood—a son known by the more colorful codename "Quicksilver," gifted, not with his sire's magnetically-based abilities, but with the power of moving at incredible speeds; so fast, in fact, that Magneto's attempt to attack him had seemed, to his eyes, to play out in slow motion. Dismounting from the camel and removing the weapon from Lensherr's hand had all taken place in a fraction of a second—no challenge at all for someone capable of breaking the sound barrier, or performing a dozen or so tasks at the same time.

"Hello, Father," the visitor said evenly. He held up the dirk. "Still

lacking the basic social skills necessary for greeting a guest properly, I see.”

Slowly, Lensherr's shocked expression dissolved into a broad, friendly grin.

“Pietro . . .” he said.

Night fell on the Sahara, and, after a veritable banquet of delicacies from around the world provided by Pietro—Lensherr had almost forgotten what knishes and caviar tasted like—father and son at last sat down in the psionics-protected bedroom to talk.

“So, Pietro,” Lensherr began, easing himself into a wicker chair, a glass of merlot in one hand, “how is your family?”

Pietro flopped down onto an assortment of oversized pillows piled near the door and stretched his legs. “My family? It's only been six months since my last visit—not all that much has changed. Aren't you more interested in what your Emperor is up to these days?”

Lensherr grunted. “‘My’ Emperor. Bah.” He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. “There's time enough to talk of that tinheaded despot. For now, I'd rather hear about more pleasant matters.” The look of anger carved into his features softened to a small smile. “So—how is my granddaughter?”

Pietro smiled, clearly beaming with pride. “As pretty as her mother, and growing more beautiful with each day. She misses her grandfather, you know.”

Lensherr's eyes sparkled with joy. “Misses her grandfather . . . or the presents he brings her?”

Pietro laughed. “Well, she *is* a child. Sometimes choosing between the two can be difficult—especially when one considers the number of gifts you've showered her with over the years.” He shook his head disapprovingly. “You *do* have a tendency to spoil her.”

“As is my right as a grandparent,” Lensherr said firmly. He paused and stared into space for a moment, picturing Luna's smiling face, then sipped at his wine before continuing. “And Wanda? Any word on her?”

The white-haired speedster's gentle expression suddenly transformed into a look of disgust. “Wanda is still one of von Doom's lapdogs, from what my contact in Washington has told me,” he said with a sneer. “She's become quite the authority on you, Father—von Doom has come to rely on her knowledge of your motivations, your probable hiding places, the people to whom you might turn for help . . . although the information *has* become dated over the past year.” A mischievous smile played at the corners of his mouth. “They don't know *what* to

make of your prolonged absence. They'd like to believe that you're dead, but with no physical evidence . . ."

Lensherr chuckled. "It must drive von Doom to the point of distraction, knowing that I must be out there somewhere, keeping to the shadows, avoiding the probes of even his most powerful telepaths, biding my time until the slightest opportunity presents itself to—what? Destroy another city? An entire country, perhaps?"

Pietro snorted. "You could start with his homeland. I doubt anyone would even notice the loss of such an insignificant spot on the map."

The mutant terrorist smiled wickedly. "I can almost imagine how that armored buffoon must have spent the past year, waiting for the moment when I might tip my hand and allow him the opportunity to strike me down and at last claim victory—only to realize with mounting frustration *that that day has never come.*"

"Which is why he's gathered together Wanda and his other advisers," Pietro added. "With the anniversary of his rise to power being celebrated next week, I think it's safe to assume that the entire world—von Doom included—is holding its collective breath, wondering if that is the time when the dreaded Magneto will at last reappear and resume his campaign of terror."

Lensherr raised an eyebrow. "His anniversary, you say?"

Pietro nodded. "It will be ten years next Wednesday."

"Ten years . . ." Lensherr frowned. "Ten years of attack and withdrawal; of hiding from superpowered dolts, prying telepaths, and armored buffoons wielding plasma weapons; of having my name made synonymous with the kind of atrocities perpetrated on my people by the Nazis." His lips peeled back in a feral snarl. "All because of *him.*"

The mutant overlord rose from his seat and began pacing the room. "Well," he mused aloud, "if von Doom is so certain that I will try to eliminate him at his celebration, who am I to disappoint him . . .?"

"Are you *mad*, Father?" Pietro angrily snapped, leaping to his feet. "Do you think you can just step off a plane in America—let alone try to enter any airport around the world—and *not* expect to be assassinated the moment your identity is revealed?"

Lensherr nodded. "You are right, my son. I am all too aware of the dangers involved in this desire to confront the spider in the center of its web." He sneered. "But I have had my *fill* of Victor von Doom and his much-lauded empire, and wish to bring a swift end to both. And now that you are here, I can proceed with the plans I have been formulating over these long twelve months." He gestured toward the doorway. "Go forth this very evening and start contacting those mutants who are still loyal to the cause. Tell them I have said the time has come to

excise the cancerous growth that sits upon the throne; that they must join me to at last bring to reality the dream we have held onto for so long."

"And if they refuse to sacrifice themselves for the 'dream'?" Pietro asked, a slightly sarcastic tone to his voice.

Lensherr eyed him warily. "If I did not know you better, my son, I would start to think that you were not raising that question as though you were playing devil's advocate, but as an excuse to avoid joining your father on his—" he smiled—"quixotic crusade."

Pietro said nothing.

"It *is* true, though," Lensherr continued. "Not all of them will be willing to put their lives on the line, no matter how important the prize; that is to be expected. Regardless, there must be someone out there willing to join us in opposing that pompous, steel-faced egotist. Other members of our race who know that what von Doom has done to this planet is wrong, and are as eager as I to remove him from power." He clapped Pietro on the shoulder, certain in his beliefs. "They *are* out there, my son, and they *will* answer the call to arms."

"We shall see, Father . . ." Pietro replied, clearly unconvinced.

"Tell your contact in Washington to make the necessary arrangements for my entry to America," Lensherr said decisively. "The time has come for Magneto, Master of Magnetism, to step from exile and finally put an end to the tyranny of Victor von Doom.

"And this I swear," he continued, his voice rising with a fanatical fervor. "Before the last hour of his 'anniversary' has passed into history, before the last drop of his blood has seeped into the ground, there will be a new order to the world, and humanity shall at last bow before the superiority of mutantkind, and acknowledge us as their true masters!"

Not even Pietro could question *that* statement.

IT WAS like looking out on an alien world.

Actually, it was more a case of looking out at the nexus of all reality—a point where Time and Space swirled and eddied like two streams merging to form a mighty river—and realizing how small and insignificant you were, compared to the awe-inspiring majesty of Creation.

Humbling, to say the least.

Not that such a realization bothered the yellow-and-blue-costumed man who gazed at the roiling forces from one of the observation suites of the Starlight Citadel, that magnificent, city-sized construct that was home to the Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse. Arms folded across his broad chest, the man known only as Logan—who more often than not preferred being addressed by his codename of Wolverine—watched the perpetual clash of temporal and spatial energies with all the interest of someone who had visited a familiar tourist site they'd been to before, had seen all there was to see the first time, and was now eager to move on.

And since he was a member of the international group of super heroic mutants called the X-Men, it was a safe bet to assume that he *had* seen far more interesting sights.

Logan reached up and pulled back the mask that covered the upper half of his head to reveal sharp, weather-beaten features seemingly etched into a permanent scowl, and an unusual hairstyle that started as a widow's peak above his furrowed brow and then expanded out to form a pair of immense tufts that stood up from the sides of his head, each tapering to a fine point; the mask had been constructed to fit around those tufts. It was a distinctive look, one as distinctive as the man him-

self. Standing just over five feet tall, in what appeared to be his mid-forties—although some people thought his real age might well be over a hundred, since he could recount tales of his world-spanning adventures that went at least as far back as World War II—Logan was a born scrapper: the kind of man who would start a fight at the drop of a hat . . . or in retaliation to someone calling him “Shorty.” And he’d win every time, no matter how many opponents he faced, or how many beers he’d downed beforehand. As he often liked to say, “I’m the best there is at what I do,” and if what he did was brawl with a savagery unparalleled in the Great White North, then the owners and patrons of a vast number of roughneck bars and tumble-down saloons across his native Canada could attest to that fact.

Now, though, he was as far from the familiar streets of Vancouver and Montreal as one could possibly imagine; not just beyond the rim of the Milky Way, but beyond the boundaries of Time itself. A spot where an infinite number of alternate dimensions coalesced, all monitored by the Guardian who was also acting as host to Wolverine and the other members of his troupe.

And in one o’ those alternate dimensions, Logan considered darkly, some other Canucklehead’s gettin’ the beer an’ stogie I oughtta be havin’ . . .

Slowly, Logan’s eyes narrowed as he suddenly felt something intrude upon his thoughts, like a gentle tickle in the back of his mind. Tilting his head back slightly, he sniffed the reconstituted air that circulated throughout the citadel, then grunted softly in recognition of a familiar scent.

A few moments later, the door behind him irised open, and a tall, red-haired woman in her twenties entered the suite. She was clad in a form-fitting, green spandex bodystocking and gold opera-length gloves and thigh-high boots; a golden sash—its ends trailing around her ankles—was tied around her waist and held together with a bird-shaped clasp. Completing the outfit, set against a deep-blue triangle of cloth attached to the upper half of her costume, was a golden bird-shape, similar in design to the clasp, its wings spread across her chest, along the length of her collarbone. The stylized avian symbol was meant to be a representation of an Egyptian mythological bird known for its ability to live for five or six hundred years and then consume itself through the ritual of fire in order to start the cycle anew; a creature so powerful that not even death itself could hold sway over it for very long.

The Phoenix.

An appropriate codename for the woman—whose real name was

Jean Grey—considering the many times she had cheated death, either on her own or while standing beside her teammates in battle.

“Mornin’, Jeannie,” Logan rasped, his voice made husky from a lifetime of cheap alcohol and even cheaper cigars.

“I hope I’m not interrupting, Logan,” Jean said.

Logan shrugged. “Just contemplatin’ my navel . . . which you already knew.”

Jean nodded in agreement, though his back was still turned to her. As a telepath, she had the ability to scan the minds of others, even from a distance—a talent she had possessed since turning fourteen. And after years of dealing with power-mad super-villains, renegade mutants, hate-filled humans, and a race of insectoid monsters that made the creatures in *Aliens* look tame in comparison, she always mentally probed any room she was about to enter; such precautions often spared her the painful experience of having a hidden enemy bring a metal pipe crashing down on her head, or being surprised by a psi-powered individual like herself.

Occasionally, though, it meant that she might accidentally stumble into her friends’ most private thoughts.

“I’m sorry about that, Logan,” Jean said. “Force of habit.”

“No big deal,” he replied. “Even without you rappin’ on my chamber door proper, I picked up the smell o’ yer perfume while you were still comin’ down the hall.” He sniffed again. “Wings?”

Jean smiled. “It’s Scott’s favorite.”

Logan nodded, then turned to face her. “We ‘bout done here, Red? I ain’t had a beer in a month—” he waved a hand at the room around them “—and this place don’t even have a minibar.”

Jean laughed softly. The sound sent a pleasant shiver up Logan’s back. He’d fallen in love with that laugh when they’d first met at Xavier’s School for Gifted Mutants. Back then, he was the rough-and-tumble Canadian spy that the school’s director, Charles Xavier, had recruited to join his academy; she was one of the original students, using the less attractive name “Marvel Girl” during her exploits with her four fellow students—Scott Summers, Henry McCoy, Bobby Drake, and Warren Worthington III. It had been a long time since he’d felt like a nervous schoolboy around a pretty girl, but Jean Grey had had that effect on him, almost from the moment he laid eyes on her. And like any man who suddenly finds himself tongue-tied by the sight of someone so beautiful that he can’t bring himself to speak for fear of looking foolish and forever ruining the moment, Logan was never able to work up the nerve to tell Jean how he really felt for her; in fact, he made the situation even worse by eventually cutting himself off from the other X-Men, keeping to his own company, often leaving the school for long periods

of time without telling anyone where he was going, or when he'd be back.

It was better that way, he often told himself. In his eyes, Jean was an unreachable goal; a woman who shone with the brightness of a sun. And he? He was Icarus, forever reaching for that shining star, basking in its warmth, only to be violently hurled to the ground, his once-lofty wings no longer able to support his weight.

Or his dreams.

An almost laughable situation, considering Logan had never been so hesitant—or outright smitten—during a lifetime of fighting and loving and, when the moment required it, killing.

The final, fatal blow to his heart had come on the day that he had found himself unable to hold back the truth—the hurt—any longer. It had been a brief conversation, for Logan had always been a man of few words, but the outcome had been as he'd always known it would be: she cherished his friendship, but her heart belonged to another.

To Scott Summers, in fact.

It had come as no surprise to Logan. Summers was the team leader, a twentysomething mutant with an ability to project powerful, destructive beams of force from his eyes. It had been determined through years of testing that he was actually drawing upon the energy of a “non-Einsteinian universe,” whatever the blazes that meant; Logan had never done well with science courses. Whether the power was a gift or a curse could only be determined by Summers, who had no control over it—merely opening his eyes when he awoke each morning would be enough to unleash an explosive force strong enough to level a good-sized hill . . . if he hadn't trained himself to keep his eyes closed in such situations. The only way to harness the wild energy, he had learned early in life, was through the use of ruby quartz, which was why he wore specially-designed sunglasses wherever he went, day or night, and why, when he was dressed in his flamboyant costume of blue and yellow, his eyes were covered by a slitted visor—one that had thus provided him with an appropriate codename: Cyclops. Tall and handsome, soft-spoken yet confident, with an air of tragedy that seemed to constantly hang over his shoulders like a stifling cloak, Summers hadn't pursued Jean—like Logan, he considered himself beneath her—but that hadn't stopped her from going after him. They'd been through too much together through the years, she'd insisted, had shared too many secrets to treat their relationship as nothing more than a by-product of a lengthy working environment. Slowly, she reached the poetic soul that lay hidden beneath the stoic exterior he had always projected, cracked the shell of professionalism he had used as a barrier to protect himself from an often cruel world.



Budyx

But, with Jean's help, the walls around his heart eventually crumbled. Love followed soon after.

Logan never had a chance.

He'd gotten over the hurt, eventually. Showed up for their wedding day—though he'd kept to the shadows, away from the ceremony—even went so far as to pull her aside one day and utter "The Oath," that dreaded special occasions' pledge that has gotten more men into trouble over the centuries than any build-up to a war: wherever she was, he told her, whatever fix she might find herself in, all she had to do was call him, and he'd come running to her side. And being a man of his word, he'd meant every syllable of that promise.

Then he'd left to drown his sorrows.

After that, he'd given up any thoughts of trying to take Jean away from Scott—honor demanded it. But the ache was still there, sometimes, when he looked into her bright green eyes and saw the lively sparkle that had won his heart.

Or when she laughed that throaty little laugh of hers . . .

"Penny for your thoughts, Logan?" Jean asked.

"Huh?" Logan started, then shook his head to clear it. "Nothin' special, Red—my mind's just wanderin'." He glanced around the room. "Must be this smoke-free environment; all this clean air is messin' with my head."

A small smile played at the corners of Jean's mouth. "Then I guess it's even *more* important that we start heading for home. I wouldn't want you passing out before you've had the chance to refill your lungs with the nauseating smoke of those carcinogenic materials you love so much."

"That's the beauty of havin' a healin' factor, Jeannie," Logan replied, referring to his mutant ability to recover quickly from any illness or injury. "Can't get sick from tobacco, can't get too drunk from alcohol." His facial muscles twitched into an approximation of a smile. "All the vices, none o' the consequences."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I see you praying at the porcelain altar after one of your more . . . self-indulgent evenings," Jean said sarcastically. She gestured over her shoulder, toward the hallway outside. "Right now, however, we're needed in the throne room. Roma wants to speak with us one last time before she sends us back to Earth."

"If it's so flamin' important, how come you just didn't beam that message into everybody's noggins, like you and Charlie usually do when you want our attention?"

"Because I didn't want to come blaring into everyone's minds like some overactive clock radio with the volume cranked to ten," Jean replied. "Even though we're outside the time stream, our bodies are still

attuned to Daylight Savings—it's about seven A.M. back home. Rogue and Gambit are still fast asleep, Scott was lightly dozing when I left our room, and the Professor was just sitting down to breakfast. But knowing *your* habits, I figured you'd already be up and about."

"Where's the elf?" Logan asked—his nickname for their blue-skinned, pointy-eared teammate, Nightcrawler.

"Kurt's been up for hours; actually, I'm not even sure he went to bed. He found a screening room on one of the citadel's lower levels, and a collection of first-generation movie prints. He's been holding his own, private classic film festival." She shook her head in mild disapproval. "If he doesn't wind up gorging himself on hot, buttered popcorn, it's a certainty he'll still get sick from all the jujubees."

Logan grunted. "Let 'im have his fun. After all the fightin' we've had to do against that crazy fascist broad, Opul Lun Sat-yr-nin, ever since we got here, catchin' some downtime ain't a bad thing. If the elf wants t'eat like a five-year-old an' stay up all night watchin' movies, that's his prerogative . . . long as he don't wind up gettin' sick all over my boots."

Jean wrinkled her nose and grimaced, clearly imagining what that scene might look like. "Anyway . . ." she said, quickly changing the subject, "I told him to save me a seat if he comes across a copy of *Casablanca*—especially one with Ronald Reagan as Rick. I've always wanted to see how his performance might stack up against Humphrey Bogart's, since Reagan had been the original choice for the part back on our world." She smiled. "One advantage of having access to the omniverse, wouldn't you say? You can check out all the alternate versions of your favorite films." She pinched her chin between thumb and forefinger, an idea obviously springing into her mind. "I wonder if there's a lending library here? I've never seen Buddy Ebsen's performance as the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. Jack Haley might never have gotten the chance to play the part in the final version if Ebsen hadn't been allergic to the silver makeup . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she gazed at Logan. "I'm babbling, aren't I?"

Logan shrugged. "I don't mind. Never knew you were such a big movie trivia buff, though."

"One of my few vices that Scott has learned to put up with. Sit me down on a couch with a bag of nacho-flavored corn chips and a TV tuned to American Movie Classics, and I won't even realize the world might have come to an end until the cable signal goes out." Jean shook her head, a few scarlet strands of hair drifting down between her eyes. "Oh, well—there are more important things to deal with for the moment. We'd better wake the others and get to the throne room before Roma thinks we're taking advantage of her hospitality."

"Then, let's not keep the lady waitin', darlin'," Logan said. "You know how cross these goddess-types can get if us 'mere mortals' don't come runnin' at their beck an' call."

"Logan, you're . . . you're incorrigible." Jean wagged a disapproving finger at her teammate, but her broadening smile belied any hint of anger she might have been trying to show.

"That's one'a my better qualities, Red," Logan replied. "You oughtta know that by now." He bowed slightly, and dramatically waved a hand toward the open door. "After you, darlin'."

Jean politely curtsied, fingers delicately holding up the hem of an imaginary skirt, then turned to go. Instantly, the smile faded from Logan's features as he mentally kicked himself. Letting his mind wander like it had in the presence of a telepath was a rookie mistake—one that would have cost him an advantage—or his life—had they been engaged in battle, and not in polite conversation. And considering the fact that the telepath in this case was Jean Grey, who was all too aware of how strongly he still felt for her, allowing his thoughts to bubble to the surface where she could easily detect them was almost certain to result in her avoiding any social contact with him for a couple of days.

It wouldn't be the first time it happened; nor, probably, the last.

Jean, however, had acted as though she *hadn't* "heard" them, for which Logan had been grateful. But, he now wondered, was that because she had consciously tuned down her power before his mental slip, so as not to intrude on his thoughts again . . . or had they come streaming into her mind, and she was trying to avoid discussing them, in order to keep from having to revisit the whole messy issue of the emotional triangle that had once existed among the two of them and Scott? He'd never know for certain, unless Jean mentioned it, but she was far too sweet a person to do that and possibly run the risk of embarrassing him.

Slipping his mask back over his head, Logan stomped out of the observation suite after Jean, hoping that an opportunity would eventually present itself so that he could unleash his self-directed anger on the nearest handy object.

Or person.

Located on the uppermost level of the Starlight Citadel, the throne room of the Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse was as opulent as it was immense. Containing sweeping stone arches and two-foot-thick marble columns that stretched so high that the ceiling could not be seen, the room seemed less like a seat of multiversal power and more like a vast gothic cathedral whose nave ran the length of two football fields, and whose transepts were as wide as a city block. On closer observation,

visitors to this awe-inspiring place often wondered aloud how a room so huge could exist in such a finite area as the citadel; the answer they were given was that the citadel was, in scientific terms, “dimensionally transcendental,” which, roughly translated into English, meant that it was bigger on the inside than the outside. Truth be told, it was really built that way because Roma—like her father, Merlyn, before her—liked having a lot of space in which to think.

At the moment, Roma was doing a *lot* of thinking.

By human standards, she was an attractive woman in her early twenties, with an oval face and large, dark eyes. Her waist-length black hair was tied into a ponytail with a golden band, the better to display delicately-formed ears that tapered to small points at their tips. But referring to the Guardian in human terms would have been as insulting to her as someone making a vulgar comment about a friend’s mother. Roma was, in fact, an immortal, an inhabitant of the higher dimensional plane called Otherworld, from which her father also hailed. As immortals go, Merlyn was the grandest of manipulators, often going so far as to fake his own death in order to bring his plans to fruition, as he had done centuries ago, when it appeared he had been slain at the hands of the dreaded sorceress Morgana Le Fay, as the legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table have depicted. The strategy worked again hundreds of years later, when he put into play his greatest scheme: to turn an unassuming man named Brian Braddock into Captain Britain, the superpowered champion of the omniverse, and, in turn, influence Braddock to create a superteam called Excalibur—comprised of British heroes like himself, as well as former members of the X-Men—in preparation for the day when the omniverse would be threatened by a powerful sorcerer called Necrom. The plan had ultimately proved successful, and Merlyn had departed for other realms, leaving his daughter in charge of the Starlight Citadel as the new Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse.

It also left Roma as the focus of Braddock’s anger when he finally learned the truth about his role in Merlyn’s plans, and about his own real identity: that his late father, James, Sr., had actually been an inhabitant of Otherworld—had, in fact, been one of Merlyn’s chosen guard, sent to a specific Earth to set the Master Plan in motion. That Brian—like his sister, Elisabeth—was really *half*-human, born with a genetic makeup that, in his case, provided him with tremendous strength and the power of flight.

The best that Roma could do when Brian and Betsy eventually confronted her with this information was to shrug and say that it had all been for the greater good of the omniverse.

Not quite “I’m sorry”; not quite “You’re welcome.”

But enough of a reply for an immortal.

Now, lounging in a corner of one of the throne room's transepts, in a small, rock-lined pool that was constantly replenished by a quiet little waterfall that descended from the inky blackness high above, Roma stared intensely at an elaborate chessboard that floated in front of her, six inches above the churning, pale-green liquid. Its squares were made of ivory and black onyx, and scattered across them were a number of objects made of the same materials—not the traditional pieces of kings and queens, knights and pawns, but startlingly accurate representations of various individuals—both superhuman and nonpowered—from the world designated as "Earth 616." The X-Men who were here as her guests were included in the collection; they comprised the set of white pieces on one side of the board. On the other side were half-a-dozen black figurines: scaled-down versions of Victor von Doom—with armor—Magneto, Quicksilver, Wanda Maximoff, Sebastian Shaw . . . and Ororo.

And in the center of the board stood a very odd piece. From a foot away, it appeared to be a representation of Betsy Braddock, dressed in a dark-blue swimsuit and matching thigh-high stockings, a Japanese sword—a *katana*—gripped in one hand; a garish red mark—possibly makeup, possibly a scar of some sort—glowed hotly under her left eye. On closer inspection, though, Roma could see the figure flicker and fade and change appearance, from lethal femme fatale to cabaret singer, the swimsuit changing into a full-length evening gown, the sword becoming a microphone. Then it would shift again, constantly in a state of flux, moving back and forth from one version to the other.

"This is not right," Roma mused aloud, eyes narrowing to slits as she stared at the morphing game piece. "None of this is right . . ."

Rising from the water, she stepped from the pool and shrugged into a full-length, white silk robe; the chessboard automatically moved to remain in front of her, floating to a halt at chest-level. A deep frown creasing her flawless face, Roma quickly strode across the transept toward a platform near the apse which contained her throne. The board kept pace with her.

Sweeping up a short flight of steps to the platform, Roma stopped before a pulpit-like stand, into which was set an assortment of long, oddly-shaped white crystals. It was one piece of quartz in particular that immediately caught her attention—and sent a slight chill racing up her spine.

There was a spot of black in its center.

Roma's eyes widened in surprise. Each crystal contained the life-force of an entire dimensional plane—millions of worlds, billions of lifeforms, all condensed to a single, six-inch-wide sliver of quartz. As

such, the clarity of each piece reflected the fact that that segment of the omniverse was in complete working order—no flaws, no chips, no worn edges, so to speak. To have an imperfect crystal—especially one possessing such a disturbing bit of discoloration—was unacceptable.

One last thing to check.

Leaving the platform, Roma moved over to an immense, clear globe that floated above the highly-polished floor nearby. It was a scrying glass of sorts, used to peer into the events of any world, any dimension that Roma wished to observe. Waving a hand before its surface to activate the device, the dark-haired woman waited for an image of Earth 616 to appear and, possibly, confirm her worst suspicions.

But no image was forthcoming; in fact, the glass turned completely dark, not even providing a general overview of the dimension.

Roma frowned again, a knot of concern taking form in her stomach. Blocked from observing a part of the omniverse? Such an occurrence should have been impossible, given the powers possessed by a Supreme Guardian.

She touched a small contact on her robes. “Saturnyne?”

“Yeeesss, m’lady?” muttered a sleepy female voice.

“There is a . . . problem . . .” Roma said slowly.

“I will be there immediately, m’lady,” the woman responded, all traces of weariness quickly wiped from her speech by the call to duty.

Roma broke the connection, then glanced at the scrying glass once more. After all the X-Men had just done for her, how was she going to break the news that their world faced possible destruction . . . again?

“You wished to speak with us, Your Majesty?” asked a deep, male voice from behind her, the sound echoing and reechoing in the vast chamber.

Roma turned. Standing at the crossing—the part of the throne room where the nave and transepts met—was an odd collection of costumed men and women, grouped around a baldheaded man wearing a conservative business suit: Professor Charles Xavier, teacher and spiritual guide in their ongoing quest to create peace and understanding between mutantkind and humanity. He was seated in a machine that resembled a wheelchair; it silently floated a good foot and a half above the floor, supported by a series of small, but powerful, anti-gravity beams projected from the underside of the seat. Among the group were Wolverine and Jean Grey; her hand was lightly resting on the arm of Scott Summers, the tall, sandy-haired man beside her, whose eyes were hidden from view by a gold-colored visor that partially wrapped around his head. Just behind Jean and Scott was another twentysomething couple: a ruggedly handsome man with scraggly brown hair, and an easy smile;

and an attractive woman with waist-length hair, its dark-brown color offset by a large patch of white that started just above her forehead and ran down the center, giving the flowing locks an almost skunk-like appearance. His codename was Gambit—real name Remy LeBeau, a former member of the Thieves Guild, back in his native home of New Orleans, Louisiana—and he was dressed in a black-and-maroon costume, over which was worn an ankle-length leather coat, its wide collar turned up. She was Rogue—whether or not that was her real name had never been determined—and she wore a form-fitting yellow-and-green bodysuit—an “X” emblazoned over its left breast, as well as on the buckle of the leather belt that hung loosely around her waist—with bright yellow leather boots and matching kid gloves; a brown leather bomber jacket, its sleeves rolled back to her elbows, completed the colorful ensemble.

“Yes, I did,” Roma replied to Xavier’s query. “I *had* wanted to thank you once again for providing Captain U.K. with assistance in bringing an end to the reign of terror perpetrated on Earth 794 by Mastrex Opol Lun Sat-yr-nin—” she glanced toward the chessboard “—but far more troubling matters have arisen of late. Matters that involve your world—and, quite possibly, the omniverse.”

“Somethin’ dat needs de X-Men to set right?” Gambit asked in his Cajun drawl. “Well, just point us in de right direction an’ let’s get to fixin’. Dat’s what we specialize in, y’know.” He grinned broadly. “Just ask yer ol’ pal, Opol.”

A trace of a smile whispered across Roma’s face. “I wish it were as simple as that, my friend.” She gestured toward a set of chairs that had suddenly appeared at the foot of the steps leading to her throne. “Please, be seated, and I shall explain the situation as best I understand it.”

As one, the group moved forward to take their seats, an intense look of concern shared by them all.

Well . . . all but one.

With an explosion of air and a burst of brimstone-laced smoke—a peculiar sound that registered to the eardrum as a loud *BAMF!*—the final member of the X-Men made his appearance. Tall and lean, with an acrobat’s physicality, Kurt Wagner was the most unusual member of the team . . . and an almost perfect, living definition of the word “mutant”: his hair and skin were a deep blue, the sclera and irises of his eyes a bright yellow, and he sported a set of sharp, white fangs in his mouth; his hands and feet each contained but three digits, and a prehensile tail—like those found in certain species of monkey—had grown to a three-foot length from a spot just above his buttocks. From a quick glance, a casual observer might mistake him for a demon straight out

of a devout Roman Catholic's nightmares of hell; in reality, though, he was a kind, loving man, and a well-respected member of the group.

When he didn't show up late for an important meeting, that is.

"Nice'a you t'join us, elf," Wolverine grumbled.

Nightcrawler bowed deeply, then straightened. "I apologize for my tardiness, my friends," he said in his clipped, German accent, "but it is extremely difficult to tear oneself away from the radiant beauty that is Hedy Lamarr to attend a farewell party." He glanced at his teammates, and immediately noticed their somber expressions. "Or is something far more sinister in the works . . . ?"

"You got *that* right, sugah," Rogue said in her husky, Southern voice. "Pull up a chair—we were just about to get the lowdown from Roma."

Nightcrawler quickly joined the others, and turned to face their host.

Roma looked at each of them in turn, saw their bodies already tensing as though they were preparing for battle.

"I have detected an . . . abnormality in your home dimension," she began.

Gambit, who had been using his feet to rock his seat back and forth, groaned loudly and set the chair down with a sharp *clang* that reverberated across the throne room. Everyone turned to look at him, especially Xavier, who glared at him with an intensity that could melt steel.

Clearly wishing to avoid eye contact with his mentor, Gambit quickly lowered his gaze to the floor and shrugged. "Sorry," he muttered. "It's just annoyin' as hell that, after de mess we done finished cleanin' up here, we don' even get a chance to just go home an' relax a spell."

"I understand your frustrations, Remy," Xavier said, his rich baritone voice seeming to fill the vast space around them. "We all do. But our duties as X-Men often require that we put aside our disappointments, our grievances, and concentrate on far more important matters."

"In other words, Cajun," Wolverine harshly translated, "'Stuff Happens.' *Live* with it."

Gambit sighed and turned to Rogue, who sat beside him. "So much for dat Harry Connick, Jr. concert tonight, *chere*."

"You can make it up to me another time, Remy," Rogue said, and gently patted him on the arm.

Xavier turned back to Roma. "Please, Your Majesty—continue."

The dark-haired woman nodded. "As I was saying, something has occurred with Earth 616 that I am at a loss to explain." She gestured toward the chessboard, which hovered within arm's reach. "It is the custom of the Supreme Guardian—my father before me, and now I—

to use this board in our work. It is set with pieces representing those mortals from across the multitude of dimensions with whom we are currently dealing.”

“Manipulating, you mean,” Logan grumbled softly.

“When your work was completed on Earth 794,” Roma continued, choosing to ignore him, “the board automatically reset itself to begin the next . . . game. New pieces then appeared, replacing the previous set. All was as it had been for countless millennia.

“But then I noticed *this*.” She pointed to the Betsy Braddock piece, which was still shifting between its torch singer and female ninja forms.

The X-Men rose from their seats and moved to gather around the board. Jean leaned forward to stare at the morphing figurine.

“It’s Betsy!” she said in astonishment. “But why is it doing that? Is something wrong with her back on Earth?”

“I do not know,” Roma replied. “I have attempted to determine the cause of the abnormality—and the reason for the unusual effect it has had upon the board—but for reasons I cannot fathom, I have been unable to look upon Earth 616. Nor can I determine the length of time the abnormality has existed, since I have been more concerned with events on other worlds as of late.”

“So, you have no idea what might be happening back home,” Cyclops said.

“None,” Roma admitted.

“Has this ever happened before?”

“It has *never* happened before, Scott Summers. Despite the increasing number of omniverse-threatening events that have taken place on your world since the first appearance of superbeings like yourselves, *never* have I, nor my father, Merlyn, been prevented from gazing upon it when we desired to do so.”

She paused, letting her words sink in. The X-Men looked at one another uneasily.

“Okay, so we know the questions,” Wolverine said finally. “How do we go about gettin’ some answers?”

Roma pursed her lips and silently gazed at the chessboard for a few moments. Even though she was an immortal—someone who had lived a lifetime even before Dimension 616 had been born, and would continue to exist long after the X-Men had turned to dust—she suddenly felt the first disturbing twinges of fear. It was a sensation she had not felt in . . . well, a very long time.

The Supreme Guardian studied the expectant faces of the X-Men. They were all looking to her for answers, but she had none to give. The only comforting thought she had was that Merlyn almost certainly would

have been stymied by the same predicament, though he would likely have settled for a more direct solution, like unleashing the full complement of the multidimensional Captain Britain Corps on Earth 616 and letting them tear the planet apart until they found the cause of the disruption.

Not very practical, but such a plan *did* have its charms . . .

"If I may be so bold, m'lady," said a female voice from the shadows of the nave, "I *do* know of a solution to the problem." As the group turned to face her, the speaker stepped into the light.

Dressed in flowing robes that were as white as her shoulder-length hair, Opal Luna Saturnyne was a stunning figure to behold—a flawless combination of icy professionalism and red-hot sensuality. Her official title was Omniversal Majestrix, which meant that she was responsible for maintaining order and reality throughout all dimensional planes . . . under the direction of Roma, of course. It was one of the many alternate versions of Her Whyness that the X-Men had been recruited to battle, and Saturnyne had been pleased by the outcome.

It cut down on any possible competition for her job.

"If I may remind the Supreme Guardian," Saturnyne said, "you have at your disposal the means to end this . . . imperfection before it can spread across the entirety of that reality, and thereby threaten the omniverse." She gestured toward the black-tinged quartz on the dais. "All it would take is to shatter the crystal containing that dimension's life-force; remove the entire plane from existence—"

"You mean *destroy* our reality?" Jean interjected, barely controlling the anger in her voice. "Isn't that like killing a patient in order to stop a cancerous growth from spreading throughout their body?" She shook her head emphatically. "No. There *has* to be another way."

"I agree, Jean Grey," Roma said. "But there are few options. I *could* isolate the plane of Earth 616, let the 'infection' run its course; it would ultimately result in your dimension collapsing in upon itself, eons before its natural end. Or I could set into motion forces that would destroy your world without harming the rest of reality; using your medical analogy, that would be akin to amputating a diseased limb to save an otherwise healthy patient."

"But think of the billions of lives lost!" Jean insisted.

"Think of the countless billions more *saved*," Saturnyne countered.

"An' what would happen to *us*, Roma?" Rogue asked, her voice strained. "Would *we* just up an' disappear when any of that happened?"

Roma shook her head. "No, friend Rogue. The state of temporal grace generated by the citadel ensures that no harm would come to any of you, should either your world or dimension cease to exist."

"And then?" Nightcrawler asked. "Not to sound ungrateful, but where does one go, Your Majesty, when one no longer has a home to go to?"

"You could work for me," Saturnyne replied. "The responsibilities of my office often require me to use superpowered agents, like the Captain Britain Corps, or the mercenary band Technet, to handle the more—" her nose wrinkled with obvious distaste—"physical solutions often required to readjust the inconsistencies that tend to pop up throughout reality. And you've already proven your effectiveness against one of my more . . . embarrassing counterparts."

"Sure you don't want a couple references to check before giving us the job?" Gambit muttered. Rogue playfully punched him in the upper arm to silence him. She just managed to avoid breaking the humerus with her incredible strength.

Nightcrawler frowned. "I appreciate the offer, Saturnyne, but after the brief run-ins the two of us have had during my time with Excalibur, I find it a bit difficult to trust you—you work far too hard at manipulating people to make me all that comfortable in your presence." He flashed a brief smile. "No offense."

Her Whyness said nothing, a mischievous gleam in her eye. Clearly, she considered his words to be more complimentary than critical.

"There's another solution, Roma," Cyclops said. "You could send us in to find out what happened. With your help, and a bit of luck, it shouldn't take long to track down the source of the disturbance and find a way to correct it."

"It makes sense, Your Majesty," Xavier said. "If the trouble our world is experiencing is, in a manner of speaking, some sort of disease, then the logical course of action is to fight that disease from within—like antibodies rallying to overcome an infection."

Roma paused to consider this option, then slowly nodded in agreement. "You are right, Charles Xavier, but I can offer no aid. Since I am blocked from viewing the events taking place in your dimension, I cannot determine the point of origin for the disturbance. The most assistance that I can provide is to open the gateway that will send you back to your world." She smiled thinly. "After that, you shall have to rely on your 'bit of luck.'" The smile quickly faded. "I am sorry."

"No need to apologize, Yer Highness," Wolverine said. "We've been in tougher scraps 'n this. We'll make do."

"I would expect no less of you, my friends," Roma said.

"Then the matter is settled," Xavier stated. He looked to Cyclops. "Scott, you will lead the mission. Start at the mansion; see what information you can gather using Cerebro. Try to discover the locations of

the other X-Men if they are not there—I imagine they're already working on their own to find the source of the disturbance. If they're not . . ."

Cyclops nodded. "Then we're on our own." He flashed a brief smile. "We'll get the job done, Professor. Don't worry."

"Sure you don't wanna come along fer the ride, Charlie?" Wolverine asked, a trace of a wicked smile splitting his rugged features.

Xavier shook his head. "No, Logan; my presence is not required." He gestured down toward his high-tech wheelchair. "Besides, since a certain degree of stealth may be required, it will be far easier for all of you to move about without having to see to my needs." He smiled broadly as he gazed at Wolverine. "I imagine, though, Logan, that you in particular will have difficulty staying out of trouble without my guidance."

"That's what I'm *countin'* on, Charlie," Wolverine replied with a wink.

"A final warning, X-Men," Roma said. "Given the severity of the situation, and the effect it will soon have upon the omniverse if it is not checked, I can only allow you a limited amount of time in which to resolve the matter."

"Here it comes . . ." Gambit mumbled. "I was *waitin'* for de other shoe to drop."

"*How* limited?" Cyclops asked.

"One week, by your standards of time," Roma answered.

"And if we haven't made things right by then?" Jean asked, though it was clear from her expression that she already knew the answer.

"Then," Roma said slowly, "I shall have no choice but to shatter the crystal and remove your reality from the omniverse." She smiled warmly, reassuringly, pausing to gaze at each of them.

"Move swiftly, my friends," she said. "There are forces at work here beyond even my ken, and they cannot be allowed to extend their influence to other worlds. The safety of the omniverse rests squarely on your shoulders."

Nightcrawler raised an expressive eyebrow, then looked to Jean.

"No pressure, eh, *mein freund?*" he asked, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Jean smiled uneasily. "No pressure, Kurt," she replied. Her gaze drifted toward the ever-changing game piece that represented one of her closest friends, and her smile faded. "No pressure at all . . ."

Interlude

THE MAN in the Moon was angry.

It could be considered a certainty that, in an age of telecommunications, superpowered men and women, extraterrestrial visitors the size of mountains, and time travel, not many people still remembered the classic fable; knew that he did, indeed, exist on that airless satellite that constantly circles the Earth like an eternal dance partner; or that he was an actual man. Nor were they aware that he did not really spend his time moving about *in* the moon, but on its surface, in an area of what is referred to as its "dark side," because it cannot be seen from Earth. And, contrary to fanciful beliefs, he lived, not in some brick-and-mortar castle with flying buttresses and colorfully-draped minarets, but within the metal walls of a half-dozen drab, nondescript buildings. Oblong in shape, their surfaces pitted and scored by hundreds of microscopic meteorites pushed along by the solar winds, they were linked by a series of long metal tubes, the top halves of which protruded from the gray, barren ground; seen from space, the overall shape of the grouping was somewhat akin to that of a starfish, the extended "arms" connected to a central hub.

This was—as one could readily determine upon seeing it—a man-made installation; a military base, built by human hands at the peak of one man's overwhelming desire to conquer first his own planet, then the trackless void, laying claim to worlds beyond number in his mad dream to create a star-spanning empire. That dream had never come to fruition, of course—not yet, anyway—but the base still had a full complement of workers, well-paid to work in such an inhospitable place and perform the duties assigned to them without question.

And, just to prove that he was prepared to greet any potential in-

terlopers from Earth, or one of the many celestial visitors who tended to see the people of this magnificent blue-and-white planet as either guinea pigs for scientific experiments or appetizing hot lunches, the installation also had a full complement of weapons, from conventional handguns to laser projectors—so-called “death beams” powerful enough to annihilate large sections of the planet even from this great a distance. At the moment, every single one of those projectors was trained on a different location around the globe, their targeting systems automatically recalibrating to zero-in on new strike zones with each rotation of the planet.

The Man in the Moon hated unexpected guests.

Far more important than the potential offensive uses of the installation, however, was the fact that it was located two hundred and fifty thousand miles from the world ruled by Victor von Doom—and therefore unaffected, for the moment, by whatever forces had transformed Earth 616 into the hazard it now presented to the continued well-being of the omniverse.

The Man in the Moon, of course, knew nothing of the danger presented by these very same forces that now threatened to destroy an entire dimensional plane, but he *was* very much aware of the current status of the world that was oh so far away, yet tantalizingly still within striking distance.

Truth be told, he was not even the beloved figure depicted in the children’s fairytales, but he had lived on this cold, barren planetoid for so long, plotting his nefarious plans and continually stoking the boilers of his undying hatred for all those he considered lesser beings, that he often felt as though that *had* become his true identity. He half expected to see a cow leaping above him some day.

He found such thoughts troubling—a sign of weakness that could not be tolerated. He would have to do something to counteract this feeling of complacency that threatened to wash over him and pull him down into the depths of despair.

Not yet, though. Not yet.

But soon. When he did, at last, move to strike down his enemies, it would be a killing blow—one that would leave no doubt as to the identity of the final victor in this cosmic game of chess. And once victory was his, once he again held the reigns of absolute power, then the world would truly come to know the level of strength he possessed . . . and come to fear it.

An approximation of a smile twisted his grotesque features with that consoling thought.

His spirits now buoyed by the mental image of his enemies laying

beaten and bloodied, life flowing from their shattered bodies to momentarily quench the eternal thirst of the ground beneath them, the man known only as "The Controller" gazed at his surroundings. He was seated on a plush leather chair in his private office, which was located in the command center, the largest—and connecting point—of the six linked buildings; not exactly a spot from which one would expect to launch an empire, but it was a start. The lively strings of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* softly issued from the speakers of a small entertainment center, providing a touch of Old World civility amid the New World Order's sterile technology and artificial environments. The music did wonders for him, soothing his tensions as he forced himself to heatedly glare at the wall-sized viewing screen across from his desk; the crisp, almost three-dimensional image being broadcast on it was of the Earth, provided by cameras on the side of the moon closest to the planet.

Von Doom's planet, the Controller reminded himself with a snarl.

"But not for much longer," he whispered. "Soon. Very soon . . ."

A knock on the door harshly shook him from his reverie.

"Enter!" the Controller barked.

The door opened, and a young man hesitantly stepped inside the office. Garbed in a dark green uniform, black leather jackboots polished to a glaringly bright shine, he was in his early twenties, tall and athletically built, square-jawed and straight-backed, his blond hair cut short and stylish—all in all, the very model of a proper Generation-X toady. Under one arm he carried a large stack of papers.

"What is it, Lawrence?" the Controller asked.

"I have the latest intelligence reports, sir," his assistant replied, eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Let me see them," the Controller said. He waved Lawrence over, and his assistant placed the stack of printouts on his desk. Red-rimmed eyes studied each page, scanning the pages of information that had been compiled by his computer experts—men and women of Lawrence's age, who had hacked, first into the Empire's vast satellite network, then into the very heart of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s top secret files and defensive systems. With such limitless knowledge at his disposal, there was *nothing* that the Controller did not know about the world of Victor von Doom.

"Fascinating," the Controller said, glancing at one report in particular. "I had no idea the mongrel could maintain this level of influence over the planet for such a lengthy period of time. It cannot last, though, for he is a weak man, and like all weak men, he is destined to fail." He grinned, lips pulled back in a feral snarl. "I, however, am *not* a weak man; I am his better, as von Doom well knows. *That* is why he has feared me all these years, why that gypsy pig has never been able to

truly defeat me in battle, though he would never admit to it. But he *will*, in time . . . just before I end his worthless life." The Controller nodded, as though in agreement with himself. "What a sight that will be, eh, Lawrence? The oh-so-mighty von Doom, brought to his knees by a true warrior, forced to call him 'master' and beg for his life, only to choke on his own blood, his pleas for mercy unheard, as my sword slices through the pale skin of his throat."

"Yes, Controller," Lawrence agreed. He gestured toward the reports on his superior's desk. "Your orders?"

"All in good time, Lawrence. All in good time." The Controller eased back in his seat, placing his elbows on the padded armrests and steepling his fingers in front of his face. Closing his eyes, he listened as the CD player replaced Mozart's soul-stirring violins with even sweeter, though far more melancholy, strains. The music seemed to flow through him, and a faint smile split his thin lips.

"Do you know what this is, Leonard?" he asked, eyes still closed.

"Umm . . . no, I don't, Controller," the young man admitted. A faint sheen of sweat suddenly appeared on his brow.

The Controller chuckled—a dry, mirthless note that sounded like swatches of sandpaper being rubbed together. "I imagine they did not teach 'Music Appreciation' in whatever backward *Englischer* school you attended in your youth."

"No, Controller," Leonard responded.

"It is called *Kol Nideri, for Violoncello and Orchestra, Opus No. 47*, by a composer named Max Bruch. You did not *know* that, did you?" The Controller's eyes suddenly opened, and he stared coldly at his assistant.

"N-no, C-controller. I d-did not," Leonard stammered, unconsciously taking a step back. His gaze shifted to the office door; he appeared to be measuring the distance from his superior's desk, as though contemplating the possibility that he might need to move quickly in the next few seconds.

The Controller ignored Leonard's panicked expression and slowly shook his head. "That is the trouble with your generation—no desire in your meaningless, pathetic lives to try and appreciate the finer things: Art. Music. Dance." His eyes sparkled. "And finer still: The chill that runs up the spine as you feel the life slipping away from an enemy, your fingers clamped tightly about his throat; feel his last breath whistle softly through stilled lips to brush your cheek like a shy lover's kiss. The sight of freshly-spilled blood on virgin snow, its warmth spiraling like a fine mist in the cold, mountain air.

"But, no; your generation has no time for such pleasures. Always flitting about from place to place like hummingbirds, never taking the time to slow down long enough and discover what it is to truly *live*. It is these moments, these sensations, these testaments to man's creativity and destructive powers that keep us from falling to the level of the beasts; and it is these very things that we must strive to preserve, after we have destroyed our enemies, and I have taken my rightful place as master of the world.

"For now, though," the Controller continued, "we shall wait and see what develops in the days ahead. Patience, it is said, is a virtue; and it is the patient man who learns to spot his enemies' weaknesses, and know the right moment to exploit them." He raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes, Controller. You're right," Leonard said quickly, nodding his head.

The Controller gazed at his assistant for a few moments, and knew that he had been wasting his time talking to this cipher. Like the other men and women of his generation, sage advice gathered from a lifetime of experiences did not seem to interest him. All the young fool understood were his own pathetic yearnings to attain power of any kind. No, that was not entirely true; he also understood that his superior possessed power in abundance—so much, in fact, that he could declare unquestioned mastery over even life and death themselves. The Controller nodded silently. He had been like that once, ages ago—an intellectual midget, destined for a lifetime of menial labor and mindless toil—until his eyes had been opened to the world around him by a man of seemingly infinite power.

Such comparisons, though, meant little to the Controller. Unlike his own mentor, he had no time to waste on trembling lackeys. The fool wasn't even worth wasting a bullet on to put a quick end to his meaningless existence.

"Continue to monitor the situation," the Controller replied gruffly. He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Now go. Do not disturb me unless you have something *important* to tell me."

"Yes, Controller," Leonard said, clearly pleased for the opportunity to exit the office under his own power. "Thank you."

The Controller watched his assistant scurry from the office, and a look of unbridled disgust contorted his already twisted features.

"Bah," he muttered. "Idiots. Everywhere I go, I am constantly burdened with idiots." With a contemptuous sneer, he swiveled his chair around to gaze at the wall-sized projection of the Earth. His eyes nar-

rowed to slits as he studied the contours of a world that should belong to him, and would . . . in the end.

"Soon, von Doom," the Controller said softly. "Soon, the dreamer must awaken, and it shall be *I* who takes the greatest pleasure in rousing him from his slumbers—before sending him to his *final* rest. . . ."

LOCATED IN New York's Westchester County, about an hour's drive from Manhattan, Salem Center had always been a quiet, suburban village—the kind of place Norman Rockwell immortalized in paintings of small town America, and Ray Bradbury waxed poetic about in short stories that spoke of the magic of childhood, and the wonders that could be found right outside one's front door. Its greatest appeal was that it was close to the hustle and bustle of New York City for stockbrokers, fashion models, and housewives wanting to spend a day shopping in "The City," yet it was far enough away so that the Big Apple's perceived "bad influences"—crime, drug trafficking, a proliferation of trendy coffee houses—were kept at arm's length by miles of wilderness and quaint, two-lane roads that seemed to lead everywhere but the center of town.

But, as was true with most small, populated areas—like Arkham, Massachusetts, and Blackstone, New Hampshire, and Castle Rock, Maine—Salem Center had its fair share of secrets, and they were not the typical, two-old-biddies-gabbing-over-a-picket-fence kind of hushed whispers that involved penny-ante scandals about who was sleeping with whom, or what kind of double life that charming—but strange—young man who lived alone in the corner house might be leading when he pulled down the shades at night.

These secrets were as black as the heart of Satan himself, and as chilling as the grave.

And their roots all led back to what lay along Graymalkin Drive, that winding country road just outside of the village proper.

No one ever talked about what was on the Drive, or about the black trucks that rumbled along it in the dead of night, or about the inhuman

wails that drifted into the otherwise quiet hamlet when the wind was blowing in the right direction. It was best to leave things be, the older folk often said; some things were just better left not knowing about. Such logic seemed perfectly agreeable to the rest of the populace, so they decided it was, in the end, less stressful for them all if they just let the whole matter drop. Thus, their minds eased, the people of Salem Center continued to live their lives and raise their families and make their daily trips to "The City."

And did their best to ignore the evil that lay draped over their quaint little village like a burial shroud.

Unfortunately for the people of Salem Center, that ignorance was not going to last much longer.

A mile outside of town, a tiny pin-prick of light suddenly formed in the air above the dreaded Graymalkin Drive, just as the Salem Center town hall clock struck midnight; the chimes echoed clearly across the quiet countryside. The spot of light wasn't much to look at—merely the smallest of disruptions in the Space/Time continuum—but it shone like a beacon in the darkness. Barely a second after it had formed, the pin-prick widened to a hole, then to a large, oval-shaped portal from which light poured, pushing aside the surrounding blackness.

And through this portal walked Cyclops, then Phoenix, then the rest of the X-Men. A split second after Nightcrawler stepped from it, close on Wolverine's heels, the portal quickly closed with a soft rush of air, leaving them standing beneath a breathtaking, velvet-lined canopy of millions of stars.

For what it was worth, the X-Men had finally come home.

"Dis ain't de school," Gambit commented, looking around. They were standing in the middle of the road. "Somebody screwed up on de directions."

Beside him, Nightcrawler was nearly invisible in the darkness, his dark coloration acting as a natural camouflage. "That's the problem with celestial beings, *mein freund*," he quipped. "They're not nearly as infallible as they'd like to think."

"Want me to take a gander from up top, see where we are?" Rogue asked. Slowly rising in the air, she was about to soar higher when Cyclops waved her down.

"Hold up, Rogue," Cyclops said. "I *know* where we are." He pointed to a nearby sign that stood beneath a lamppost. The sign was wood, painted a bright green and trimmed in gold leaf:

WELCOME TO THE VILLAGE OF
SALEM CENTER, N.Y.

POPULATION: 500
DRIVE SAFELY!

"We're on Graymalkin Drive," Cyclops continued. "The school's just around the next bend. There's no need for aerial reconnaissance—not yet, anyway. Besides, until we find out what exactly is wrong with the world, I don't want us attracting any undue attention."

"Dat means no flyin', *chere*," Gambit pointed out.

Pouting slightly, Rogue floated down to stand beside the handsome Cajun.

"Is that a fact?" she asked sarcastically. Claspng her gloved hands against the side of one cheek, she batted her eyelashes. "Why, suh," she cooed in a saccharine-sweet imitation of a stereotypical Southern Belle, "I simply don't know *what* I'd do if a big, strong man like yuhself wasn't around to explain such complicated terms to little old me." She lowered her hands and frowned.

"Knock it off, you two," Cyclops ordered. "Everyone spread out. Wolverine, you've got the point."

Logan nodded and moved forward, crouching low and stepping lightly along the edge of the road, relying on the stealth techniques taught to him ages ago by ninja masters in Japan. Behind him, the X-Men took their positions, creating a triangular formation as they followed him.

Wolverine tilted his head back and sniffed the cool night air.

"Hold up," he said, raising a warning hand. "Somethin' ain't right."

The team stopped immediately and assumed combat-ready positions, their eyes sweeping across their moonlit surroundings, alert for the slightest indication that they might be about to face an attack at any moment.

"Trouble?" Cyclops asked.

Wolverine shook his head. "Worse'n that."

"What is it then, Logan?" Phoenix asked. "What do you smell?"

Wolverine eyed her somberly. "Death, Jeannie. The stench is everywhere."

The X-Men looked at each other, as though hoping that one amongst them might have some idea as to what could have happened to the world they had departed from just a month past. But no answers were forthcoming.

"Betsy . . ." Phoenix whispered, her thoughts immediately flashing on the image of the shapeshifting chess piece back in Roma's sanctuary.

"All right, people," Cyclops said calmly. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves." He looked to his wife. "Jean, scan the area. The school is

just around the bend in the road—see if you can pick up any stray thoughts that might allow us to get a handle on the situation.” Phoenix nodded, and he turned to face the others. “I want this played by the numbers, all right? The last thing we need to do is go charging in half-cocked because we’re concerned for our friends’ safety, only to do someone a favor by conveniently walking into any traps that might have been laid for us. Agreed?”

Slowly, the remaining team members nodded; Wolverine, however, still looked ready for a fight—head lowered, body tensing like a spring about to be released.

“Oh—oh my God . . .” Phoenix suddenly wailed softly.

Cyclops was at his wife’s side in a split-second, steadying her trembling body as she clutched the sides of her head in agony.

“Jean!” he yelled, unable to keep a note of panic from creeping into his voice. “Jean! Let it go! Whatever you’re picking up, just let it go!”

“They’re dying . . .” Phoenix cried, her eyes brimming with tears. “They’re all dying . . .” Her voice trailed off, but her lips continued to move silently as she mouthed the word “dying” over and over again. She blankly stared straight ahead, clearly unaware of Scott’s gentle grip on her shoulders, or even the worried expressions etched on the faces of her teammates, who clustered around her. Whatever thoughts she was tapping into, though, seemed to be providing her with a vivid display of what it might be like to stare into the pits of hell.

Tenderly, Cyclops pushed aside Jean’s fiery locks and placed his mouth beside her ear.

“Jean,” he whispered. “Please. Let it go.” He reached out to stroke her cheek, then turned her head so that he could look into her eyes. “Come back to me. Please, Jean . . .”

It took an agonizing moment or two, but, slowly, Phoenix’s numbed expression softened; her trembling muscles relaxed.

But the haunted look in her eyes remained.

“Scott . . .” she whispered. She reached up to wipe away the tear that had slid down his cheek from under the golden visor.

Cyclops smiled warmly. “Welcome back.”

Jean’s eyes sparkled. “It’s good to *be* back.” Gathering her strength, she straightened and stepped back from her husband, letting her hand slip down to hold his.

“You all right, Jean?” Rogue asked. “Y’all had us worried there for a minute.”

“I’m fine,” Phoenix replied, though the strain in her voice said otherwise. “I just wasn’t prepared . . . so much sorrow . . .”

“You said, ‘They’re all dying,’” Cyclops said. “Who did you mean?”

Is it the other X-Men?" It was apparent from his expression that he regretted having to press Jean for information so soon after she had recovered from her ordeal, but it had to be done.

"I didn't detect *any* of our friends," Phoenix replied. "Ororo, Betsy, Warren, Hank—either they've left the area, or . . ." She paused, then shook her head, pushing the unpleasant alternative from her mind. "They're not there."

"Then who—?" Nightcrawler began.

"I don't know, Kurt. When I scanned the area, I ran into . . . I can only describe it as a 'psychic tidal wave.' A culmination of powerful emotions—anger, fear, despair—created by a large group of minds nearby. It was like opening a door and finding a wall of water bearing down on me. I wasn't able to erect a stronger mental shield fast enough to block it before it struck."

"And it was coming from the school?" Cyclops asked.

Phoenix nodded. "Or some place very close to it."

"All right, then," Cyclops said. He glanced at each of the men and women under his command. "Same positions as before, but let's double-time it. And be ready for anything."

As before, the X-Men spread out as they moved down the road, but now there was a nervous energy that seemed to hang in the air around them—an electricity formed of worry, and anger, and, yes, even fear.

Cyclops frowned. Fear had its uses in battle; it kept the edge on, kept you moving, as long as you didn't allow it to overwhelm your thinking. But fear could also be a deadly distraction, especially considering the amount of danger involved in their line of work. He risked a quick glance at his wife. Phoenix was trying to appear stoic, doing her best to focus on her job, but from the way she was chewing on her lower lip, it was clear that she was still haunted by the mental images left by the psychic assault.

We'll get through this, honey, Cyclops thought. *I promise.*

Phoenix looked to him and smiled—she'd "heard" him. Two words suddenly formed in his mind, projected by Jean for him alone: *Love you.*

"Cyke," Wolverine said, interrupting their silent conversation. "You better come see this." The Canadian was standing just a few yards ahead, where the road curved toward the gravel driveway that led to the school. Cyclops smiled reassuringly at Phoenix, then jogged up to join his point man—

—and stopped dead in his tracks.

"What in God's name . . . ?" Cyclops whispered. Behind the ruby quartz of his visor, his eyes widened in shock.

The mansion—the home for these colorfully-garbed students of the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning—was gone.

In its place, spread across the acreage that once contained a wide, two-story building, Japanese gardens, a small airfield, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool, was a collection of wooden bunkhouses—about two dozen or so—surrounded by twenty-foot-high chain link fencing, the top of which was wrapped in lethal razor-wire. Thirty-foot-tall guard towers were spaced ten yards apart, their searchlights continually sweeping across the muddy grounds, their uniformed occupants walking a slow circuit around the steel-and-cement parapets, formidable-looking rifles clutched tightly in gauntleted hands.

“Oh, no . . .” Phoenix moaned softly.

Rogue gasped, clearly stunned by the unexpected sight. Beside her, Gambit said nothing, any sarcastic remark he might have been about to make lodging in his throat.

“*Mein Gott . . .*” Nightcrawler muttered, yellow eyes flashing brightly in the moonlight.

As for Wolverine . . . well, Logan had seen something like this decades ago, in Europe; it was the type of nauseating sight that one could never completely wipe away from the mind’s eye after witnessing it, no matter how much time passed. He growled softly.

“What’s goin’ on here?” Gambit finally asked. “Dat looks like some kinda mil’itary installation.”

“That ain’t no soldier base, Cajun,” Wolverine said, his lips pulled back in a savage snarl. “It’s a death camp.”

If there was one truism about being an inmate in Detainee Camp #1879, it was this: Life was cruel, life was harsh, life was what you tried to hang onto as long as possible in those rare moments between beatings, and only the dead were the lucky ones.

Lucky enough to have escaped their torment.

Carol Danvers had learned that lesson a long time ago, at the end of a guard’s truncheon, or the boot heel of a matron, or from the fist of one of the savage prisoners who were allowed to mix with—and terrorize—a general population consisting mainly of writers, musicians, and an odd politician or two. Some of the brutes she recognized as former second- and third-class “super-villains” who had been swept up by von Doom’s growing reserve of super heroes during the early days of the Empire; she had spotted the Trapster, Electro, and Titania her first day in the camp. Sentenced to life imprisonment, their powers negated by neural inhibitors that “rewired” their brains’ synapses so they were unable to use the mental “on-switch” that activated their powers,

they were more than willing to vent their frustrations on the “normals” who cowered in their presence. Carol had tried to do something about the situation when she first arrived, but that selfless dedication to helping others had soon been beaten out of her, along with two teeth and a pint or two of blood. And for each day she spent here—she’d lost count of the exact number—there was always someone more than eager enough to take advantage of any opportunity to provide her with a refresher course on the perils of getting involved in other people’s business.

After all, it’s often been said that one teaches by repetition.

Life hadn’t always been this bad for Carol Danvers, though. By the time she turned twenty-five, she seemed to have had it all: an Air Force captaincy, a modest apartment in Manhattan, even her first stable relationship in years.

But then, one day, she made the mistake of questioning the government’s policy of imprisoning political radicals in what appeared to be work camps—a policy enacted by Emperor von Doom soon after taking power. She couldn’t understand how a man who seemed so benevolent to his subjects could be so willing to recreate the gulags of Stalinist Russia, just to silence his more outspoken detractors.

Her fall from grace didn’t take long after that, for only a fool questioned the orders of the Emperor—a suicidal fool, in fact. In the span of two days, Carol lost her rank, her apartment, her short-time boyfriend . . . and her freedom. It still horrified her, knowing how quickly, how easily, the foundations of her life had been shaken apart: One minute, she was a decorated officer, a respected member of her community, a woman deeply in love; the next, she was just another nameless victim—attacked on the street by a half-dozen black-suited men, drugged, tossed into the back of a nondescript van, and presented with the unwelcomed opportunity to experience first-hand just what life was like in one of the camps. Her family, she later learned, had been told that she had committed suicide, choosing to hang herself rather than face up to the shame she had brought them by her dishonorable discharge.

Her “ashes” had been left on her parents’ doorstep in the middle of the night, so they’d be sure to find them when they went to retrieve the morning paper.

Carol still shuddered whenever her thoughts flashed back to those first few days following her abduction: the crippling beatings, the maggot-infested food, the psychological torture. But, thankfully, when enough new “guests” had arrived at the camp to momentarily sate a seemingly endless hunger for doling out abuse, the guards and the once-powered prisoners eventually grew tired of using her as a punching bag and went hunting for fresher game. She knew that wouldn’t last forever,

of course—even a grown child would go back and play with an old toy just for the sake of nostalgia—but she considered each day that they left her alone a blessing.

Now, one year later, she was twenty-six but looked forty-six, her smooth complexion and bright attitude replaced by callused skin and a bitter cynicism. There were streaks of gray in her blond hair, and her pale blue eyes always seemed to be bloodshot—brought on by a severe lack of sleep, no doubt. But that was to be expected in a place where death could come swiftly, silently, as a dagger in the belly, or a thin piece of wire pulled tightly across a frail windpipe if one slept too soundly.

Such was the glamorous life at Detainee Camp #1879.

Lying on her bunk in one of the “girls’ dormitories,” as they were known—as though anyone would mistake the drafty, wooden structures for some kind of college campus apartment complex—Carol tossed fitfully, unable to sleep. Her stomach ached fiercely, her bladder felt like it was going to explode, and she was starting to run a fever; more than likely, there had been some kind of bacteria in the water—possibly as part of a government experiment, if the rumors she heard whispered around the camp were true—and her body was demanding that she do something *now* to purge it from her system. Carol gritted her teeth and tried to ignore the pain coursing through her, but the fetal position into which she had drawn herself was as tight as it was ever going to be, and that had brought no relief.

There was no way around it: she *had* to go to the bathroom.

Slowly uncoiling her aching body, Carol slid out from under the coarse blanket that covered her bed and unsteadily rose to her feet. A wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm her—she could taste the bile burning its way up her throat—but she fought the sensation and ordered her body to move forward; it responded, to a small degree, and she quietly shuffled across the rough, wooden floor in threadbare slippers. She glanced around the darkened room, but none of the other female prisoners seemed to have heard her movements, nor did any of them appear to be exhibiting any signs of the illness that now forced her to walk doubled-over. Carol swore under her breath; she’d probably been used as an unwitting test case—*again*—for some new strain of virus with which the government was experimenting. That would make three in the last year for her alone. Not for the first time, she wondered if there were any real uses for the bugs, or whether her jailers were just trying to discover what it would take to finally kill her.

“Better men than you have tried, jerkface . . .” she muttered to an

imaginary scientist, just before another river of bile tried to force itself through her lips.

Moving to the front door of the bunkhouse, Carol paused to look around. Prisoners were not allowed out of the dormitories after "lights-out," no matter the reason. If she were caught by one of the guards now, an upset stomach would be the least of her worries. The burning lava flow that seemed to be rolling around in her gut, however, insisted that she had to take the chance. The women's bathroom was only twenty yards away, so even with her shambling gait, she should be able to reach it in under a minute.

Carol scanned the area from the dorm to the bathroom once more to make certain that no one was around, then set off for her porcelain salvation.

Unfortunately, she neglected to check around the corner of the bunkhouse. . . .

"Get outta my way, Summers . . ." Wolverine growled. Teeth bared, he glared menacingly at Cyclops, who was standing between him and the camp.

"No, Logan," Cyclops said. Arms folded across his chest, he stared down at the feral scrapper, never breaking eye contact. "When I said we weren't going to just charge into a situation without a plan, I *wasn't* just saying that because I like the sound of my own voice. It would be bad enough for the team if you tipped our hand too soon by rushing in there, but what do you think might happen to the *people* in that camp if you started a fight with the *heavily-armed* guards who are protecting it? Do you *really* want to put that many lives at risk?"

Wolverine said nothing. His teammates watched silently, breaths held in anticipation, waiting for Logan to make the next move.

"All right," he finally said. "Point taken." He pointed a warning finger at Cyclops. "But quiet or loud, with or without yer permission, I *am* goin' in there."

"Agreed," Cyclops said. "We *all* are—but working together, as a team. Understand?"

Wolverine grunted.

"So, what's the plan?" Rogue asked.

"First, we need information," Cyclops replied. He pointed to Night-crawler and Wolverine. "Kurt, Logan—you're our stealth experts. Get inside the camp, get a lay of the land, then *come right back*. Once we've got a handle on the situation, we can form a strategy."

"I'll maintain a telepathic link with the two of you," Phoenix said. "If there's any trouble, give a shout."

Cyclops glanced at Wolverine. "Hopefully, that won't be necessary."

"Don't worry, Scott," Nightcrawler said cheerfully. "We'll be as quiet as church mice." He stepped beside Wolverine and placed his hands on the shorter man's shoulders. "Ready, *mein freund*?"

"Do it," Wolverine said gruffly.

And with a burst of brimstone-laced smoke and an implosion of air, they were gone.

"What now, Cyclops?" Gambit asked.

Cyclops glanced at the wry Cajun, and frowned. "Now, Gambit," he said, "we wait . . ."

Seconds later, their fellow X-Men reappeared within the grounds of the camp, just beyond the chain link fence. Wolverine immediately dropped into a crouch—presenting the smallest target possible for any rifle scopes that might be trained their way—and surveyed the area. Nightcrawler, however, staggered back a few steps, into the shadows cast by one of the bunkhouses. Against the inky blackness, he was virtually invisible, but his labored breathing gave away his position.

"You all right, elf?" Wolverine muttered softly.

Nightcrawler nodded. "I'll be fine. It's just the strain of teleporting two bodies over such a great distance . . ." He glanced at Wolverine. "Have you put on weight?"

"Funny," Wolverine said. "Real funny." He pointed an accusatory finger at his teammate. "Little more time trainin' in the Danger Room, little less time bein' a couch potato watchin' movies, bub." He raised his head to sniff the air, then grunted in surprise.

"Something?" Nightcrawler asked.

"Familiar scent," Wolverine replied. "Can't get a good read on it yet—" he jerked a thumb over his shoulder, toward the center of the camp—"but it's comin' from this way."

"Then, let's go see what it is," Nightcrawler said.

Moving quietly, staying in the shadows, the two heroes began making their way through the camp.

Carol Danvers was just stepping from the lavatory, grateful for having regained the ability to stand erect again, when a callused hand clamped over her mouth; before she could pull away, a powerful arm wrapped around her waist, pinning her arms to her sides.

"*Don't make a sound,*" a coarse, male voice whispered into her ear. Carol recoiled from the stench of cheap alcohol that seemed to explode

from his mouth. Twisting her head to one side, she caught a glimpse of dark-green material and shiny brass buttons.

It was one of the guards.

"You're a pretty one," the man continued. "A lot better lookin' than some of the others they bring in here. Don't know how I missed you before, but we can always make up for lost time . . ."

Carol's eyes widened in fear. As the guard started to pull her back into the lavatory, she twisted violently, trying to pull away, digging her heels into the muddy soil to slow their progress, but the burning fever and her roiling stomach had drained away most of her strength. In desperation, legs flailing wildly, she raised one foot, then drove her heel into the top of his booted foot, just below the ankle, with all her might. Thankfully, it had the desired effect: the guard yelped in pain and loosened his grip, enough for her to tear herself away from him. Carol spun around quickly and lashed out with her hands clasped together, throwing her strongest punch. She was lucky; the blow caught him across the nose—his low moaning caused by the injured foot leapt a few notches in volume to a high-pitched shrieking amid the sound of delicate bones breaking.

Carol turned and started to run, but the man was still quick enough to lash out with the injured foot, catching her just below the right knee with the steel toe of his boot. She cried out in agony and crashed to the ground.

The pain was blinding; multicolored spots of light danced before her eyes, making it difficult to focus on the guard as he hobbled toward her. Teeth bared, the lower half of his face smeared with blood and snot, he reached down and grabbed a handful of her hair and savagely yanked her to her knees.

"Forget about gettin' to know each other better, baby," he hissed. "I'm just gonna *kill* you." His free hand dropped to the wide, brown utility belt around his waist. Moonlight glinted along the serrated edge of a foot-long knife as it was pulled from its leather sheath.

Carol closed her eyes. She knew that, even if one of the other guards, or even another prisoner, should happen to stumble upon this scene, no one would try to help her. That's just how things were done here: every person for themselves. Trembling, she waited for the end.

But, surprisingly, the killing stroke never came.

And then a new sound reached her ears: a noise not unlike that caused by a sword being drawn from a scabbard—that sharp, clear *snikt!* of metal on metal.

The guard moaned, and warm blood splattered Carol's face like a gentle rain. She started, not knowing what to make of this, yet afraid

to look to find out. Curiosity, however, soon got the best of her; slowly, she opened her eyes.

Her attacker was still in front of her, but his head was now tilted back, as though he were looking at the night sky instead of his intended victim. He also seemed to be standing off-balance, like he was about to collapse.

Carol didn't know what to make of it.

But then she saw the reason for his unusual posture, and shivered, despite the warm temperature of this June night.

Three sharp, metal spikes were protruding from the guard's chest, their pointed tips coated with blood. Not only had they skewered the man, but they also seemed to be the only things holding him up, for it was plain to see that the man was dead.

Suddenly, the spikes retracted—*back through his chest*—and the guard collapsed, face first, onto the muddy field. His eyes, eternally frozen in surprise, stared blankly at Carol.

"You okay, darlin'?" a gruff voice asked.

Carol's gaze shifted from the corpse to another man, who had been standing behind the guard; his killer, obviously. He was short and hairy, and dressed in the kind of colorful costume she might have ordinarily expected to see in a circus. To her surprise, there was no trace of whatever weapon he had used to dispose of the human trash now lying beside her.

"Who—" she began to say.

"*Mein Gott, Wolverine,*" interjected a voice from the darkness. "Was killing that man really necessary?"

The man called "Wolverine" turned to someone she couldn't see and frowned.

"Yeah," he said simply.

His companion stepped from the shadows, then, and Carol had to fight the overwhelming urge to run and hide—he looked like some kind of blue-skinned demon!

"W-who are you people?" she whispered.

Wolverine turned to face her, and tilted his head in a quizzical fashion. "What're you talkin' about?" he asked.

Carol started; she hadn't been expecting *that* kind of reaction. From his tone of voice, and the way he was staring at her in total confusion, it seemed evident that the man had expected her to recognize him. How that might be so, she hadn't the faintest idea, but if she could just talk her way out of this situation . . .

She glanced toward the women's barracks; its door was so tantalizingly close. If she somehow managed to get a good head start on running

for it, and if her stomach would hold off from making any serious efforts to double her over with an unexpected wave of cramps as she made her escape, there was a chance these two lunatics would leave her alone once she got inside—a slim chance, granted, but one she was willing to accept. Slowly, she rose to her feet, trying to avoid making any sudden moves that might upset these newcomers—and considering the dangers she had often faced during her time in the camp, it wouldn't come as any surprise to find herself going from a bad situation to an even worse one.

"What's the matter, Ace?" Wolverine asked, flashing what appeared to be his idea of a friendly smile. "I ain't been gone all *that* long fer ya t'go fergettin' me."

"I . . . wish I could help you," Carol said slowly, doing her best to keep her rescuers calm. "It's just that I don't remember meeting any . . . umm . . . circus performers since I was a little girl." She tried to smile politely—an ultimately futile effort, since it came out looking more like a sickly grimace—while keeping her hands away from her body to show she posed no threat. "Not that, you know, there's anything *wrong* with being in the circus," she added quickly.

"We mean you no harm, *fraulein*," the demon said.

"I'm sure you don't," Carol replied in a gentle, soothing tone of voice—the kind one would normally use when speaking to a child . . . or a dangerous criminal. "Look, it's not that I'm ungrateful for what you've done for me—" she nodded toward the dead guard "—but it's not gonna be too long before one of the other guards stumbles across him, and I *really* don't want to be standing right next to a corpse when it hap—"

Wolverine took a step forward; Carol immediately moved backward. He looked surprised by her behavior.

"Carol, it's *me*," he said, hands held palms up to show he meant no harm.

"Me *who*?" Carol replied. "Look, friend, a lot of things have happened to me in my life—*especially* more than my fair share of bad stuff ever since the day I got thrown into this pit—but I don't *ever* recall meeting you—" she pointed to his companion "—or your running buddy over there, either in this dump, or in the real world. *Trust* me—I'd remember."

Wolverine and his blue-skinned companion looked at one another for a moment. The demon frowned.

"First, the school disappears," he said. "Now, an old friend doesn't recognize us . . ." His voice trailed off, and the two men stood silently,

as though they were listening to a conversation that only they could hear.

Carol slowly began to step back, preparing to make a dash for the bunkhouse. If these two clowns could just stay zoned-out for a few more seconds . . .

"Ahh, this is *nuts*," Wolverine finally said. Carol froze as he pulled back his mask. "Look, Ace, it's *Logan*. Yer old drinkin' buddy? The guy who used t'work with you in Intelligence, back when I was workin' outta Department H in Canada? The guy who's saved yer bacon more'n once? *Now* do you remember me?"

Carol shook her head. "I'm sorry. I really am."

His sidekick sighed. "Well, this *is* bad," he commented.

Wolverine sniffed the air, his body suddenly tensing. He slipped his mask back on as he stared at the center of the camp. "It's about t'get a whole flamin' lot worse . . ."

Following the direction of Wolverine's steely gaze, Carol looked over her shoulder, in time to see a pair of armed guards—one male, one female, both with rifles slung over their shoulders—turning the corner of the bunkhouse. The duo came to an abrupt halt, startled by the unexpected appearance of a prisoner breaking curfew, a blue-skinned demon, and a circus midget.

"*DON'T MOVE!*" the male guard ordered. The female guard quickly unslung her weapon, bringing it to bear on them.

Carol turned back to the costumed men, to see what they were going to do about *this* problem, and her jaw dropped in shock as she saw *a half-dozen foot-long spikes come shooting out of the backs of Wolverine's hands*.

Now, at last, she knew how he'd killed the guard.

The realization that such weapons had to be sheathed within the skin of his bare arms, however, only made her stomach problems re-surface.

In the woods on the far side of Graymalkin Drive, Phoenix turned to Cyclops, her face full of worry.

"Trouble," she said simply.

"Pull them back," Cyclops ordered. "Tell them to grab Carol and get out of there right now!"

Phoenix nodded, and her brow knitted as she telepathically conveyed the message. She knew, though, that it was too late for their teammates to escape without a fight.

“No!” Nightcrawler said. “No more killing, Wolverine!”

With that, he disappeared in a puff of smoke, to reappear an instant later beside the male guard, who looked more than a little surprised. A three-fingered, white-gloved fist lashed out, catching the man across the left temple. Knocked senseless, the guard stumbled back, into his partner. Out of reflex, the woman’s finger tightened on the trigger of her rifle; the gun barked three times, the shots ricocheting off the lavatory’s outer walls.

The reaction to the gunfire was immediate.

Around the camp, an ear-piercing alarm began to wail. Searchlights that had originally been sweeping the camp as part of their computerized programming now started swiveling in the direction of the altercation. Before Carol and the costumed men could seek cover, they found themselves awash in beams of the purest, whitest light.

“Oh, *great*,” Carol muttered sarcastically. “That’s just . . . great . . .”

D AMN IT . . ." Cyclops murmured.

Pinching his lower lip between thumb and forefinger, he watched as the camp came to life—dogs began barking, armored soldiers poured from barracks, and every light in the compound snapped on, illuminating the camp with the intensity of daylight.

Once, Cyclops thought. *Just once I'd like something to go without a hitch . . .*

He turned to his team. "All right, people," he said somberly. "It's a little ahead of schedule, but we have a camp to liberate—the quicker, the better."

Nightcrawler quickly knocked out the female guard before she could make any more trouble, and tossed her rifle onto the roof of the bunkhouse. Carol and Wolverine raced to join him.

"Nice work, elf," Wolverine said sarcastically.

"Er . . . yes," Nightcrawler conceded. "That *could* have gone better."

"What now?" Carol asked.

"First order of business is t'get you outta here," Wolverine replied. He pushed her into Nightcrawler's arms.

"But, what about you?" Carol asked.

"I'll wait for the next bus," Logan said. He looked at Nightcrawler. "Go."

The blue-skinned X-Man nodded. "I'll be right back."

A burst of smoke, and he and Carol were gone.

"Take yer time, bub," Wolverine muttered, as the sound of heavy boots striking the ground reached his ears. "I got *other* things t'occupy my time till ya get back . . ."

Logan smiled grimly and raised his foot-long, adamantium-sheathed claws as a half-dozen armored soldiers came charging at him from across the main yard.

"Step right up, boys an' girls!" Wolverine called out. "I got plenty o' hurtin' fer everybody!"

And with a roar like a wild beast, he ran to meet them.

Nightcrawler and Carol reappeared on the edge of Graymalkin Drive. Taking the point, Cyclops led the other X-Men across the road to meet them. The blue-skinned X-Man was bent forward, hands resting on his knees as he sucked in lungfuls of air. Standing beside him, Carol looked slightly confused—not just by the growing number of costumed characters suddenly appearing in her life, but by the fact that she was actually outside the camp.

"Wolverine . . ." Kurt gasped between breaths. "I had to . . ."

"I know," Cyclops said, reaching his side.

"Give me another minute . . ." Kurt wheezed.

The night air suddenly filled with the sounds of gunfire bursts, the clash of metal on metal, and the pitiful screams of the dying and injured.

"We don't *have* a minute," Cyclops said. He turned to his teammates. "Rogue, Gambit—get in there. Take out the guard towers first—I want their high-ground advantages eliminated. Kill the spotlights and the radio transmitter, too."

"What about Wolverine?" Gambit asked.

"Logan can take care of himself for the moment," Cyclops replied. "Now, go!"

"You got it, Cyke!" Rogue said. Grabbing Gambit around the chest from behind, she shot into the air and zoomed toward the camp.

Cyclops turned back to Phoenix. "Jean, you're with me." He looked to Nightcrawler. "Kurt?"

"Ready to go, Scott," the blue-skinned mutant replied. He was standing erect again, having finally caught his breath.

"Go back and give Logan a hand," Cyclops ordered. "Try to keep him from getting out of control."

Nightcrawler nodded. "Easier said than done, but I'll do my best." He teleported away.

Cyclops looked to Jean. "Let's go."

"Hey, what about me?" Carol asked.

Cyclops stared at her for a moment, as though he had just focused on the fact that she was standing there.

"You stay here," he said, and gestured toward her emaciated frame. "You're in no shape to help out."

"The hell I am. You think that, just because I don't have a flashy costume, I'm gonna miss out on the opportunity to pay those animals back for everything they've done to me?" Carol asked, cheeks glowing red with anger. "Not a chance, pal."

Cyclops considered his possible choices—they weren't many: he could have Carol join them and help in some limited capacity in liberating the camp, and try to keep her out of harm's way; or he could leave her behind, which more than likely meant that she'd go back to the camp on her own anyway and run the risk of getting killed.

"All right," he said. "But stay close."

Carol nodded in agreement. Cyclops looked to Phoenix, who flashed a brief, warm smile.

"'Once more unto the breach, dear friends,'" she murmured. "'Once more . . .'"

And with that, the trio began heading toward the battlefield.

High above the camp, Rogue made a quick circuit of the facility, holding tightly to Gambit as she zigged and zagged through the air, evading the gunfire that was now being directed at them from the towers.

"You plañ on doin' something *soon*, Remy?" Rogue asked. "Or should I just throw you at them an' see what happens?"

"Don' you worry, *chere*," Gambit said casually. "I got de situation under control."

Reaching into one of the voluminous pockets of his duster, Gambit pulled out a deck of ordinary playing cards and fanned it out as though he were about to perform a magic trick. Selecting two cards at random, he concentrated for a moment, and the pieces of wax-coated white paper suddenly turned a pinkish-red, glowing brighter with each passing moment as a haze of crackling energy formed around them. Gambit had just brought his unusual mutant ability into play: the power to charge any inanimate object with kinetic energy—in other words, he could turn just about *anything* into a bomb. Being a thief and gambler, he naturally opted to use playing cards as his means of delivering an explosive payload.

"De man wan' de high ground taken away," Gambit said, a sinister smile playing at his lips. "Den dat's exactly what he gon' get." And with that, he flung the cards at the nearest tower.

The results were staggering: as the cards struck the metal walkway, they exploded with all the force of a howitzer shell, disintegrating the tower and flinging its occupants high into the air. Small bits of twisted metal rained down on the camp.

"Nice goin', sugah," Rogue commented, watching the guards tum-

ble to the ground. Though the impact produced some broken bones, and a lot of pain and suffering, she was still glad to see that none of them had been killed by either the explosion or the fall. "You ready for another one?" she asked her teammate.

"Let's get *to* it, Rogue," Gambit said. He fanned the cards out again. "I still got most'a a full deck."

"That's *your* opinion . . ." the Southern Belle said dryly.

Before Gambit could think of a witty comeback, she headed for their next target.

The first impression that Nightcrawler had upon his return to the camp was that he had just stepped into the middle of some updated version of a *Conan the Barbarian* movie.

Amid the sounds of adamantium claws clashing against—and then slicing through—rifle barrels and body armor, Wolverine was standing on a mound of bodies ten or twelve feet high, the upper half of his costume torn to shreds, exposing his hirsute—and blood-spattered—chest. He was bleeding from a dozen or more entry wounds—high caliber bullets, judging from the look of the holes in his body, as well as knife thrusts—but his mutant healing factor allowed him to continue fighting without missing a beat. His mask was gone, making it easy to see the wild, chilling look of bloodlust in his eyes. Lips pulled back in a feral snarl, he was more animal than man now—a shark revelling in the throes of a feeding frenzy. Below him, a quintet of guards, their rifles sliced in half by Logan's far deadlier weapons, tried to get at him with bayonets, but the thin steel of the blades was no match against claws fashioned from the strongest metal on Earth—or their owner.

"*Mein Gott*," Nightcrawler whispered, eyes widened in shock. "All the blood . . ."

From the corner of his eye, Logan spotted his teammate standing off to the side. "Jump right in, elf!" he called. "Wouldn't want ya t'miss out on all the fun!"

And with that, he leapt off the pile of bodies, throwing himself at the guards, who now looked like they were more interested in running for their lives than defending their place of employment. Not they had a choice, though; Wolverine wasn't about to let any of them escape.

That didn't mean, however, that Nightcrawler was about to just stand there and watch as his fellow X-Man slaughtered five people, no matter how cruel their actions might have been in the past. Teleporting himself across the short distance, he caught Wolverine in mid-leap, then 'ported again, despite the strain it was putting on his body. They landed



in a heap five yards from Logan's intended victims. The guards immediately lost no time in vacating the scene.

With a howl like that of a lost soul consigned to the pits, Wolverine leapt to his feet and prepared to go tearing after his quarry.

"Logan, stop!" Nightcrawler said, stepping into his path. He looked winded, but not enough that it would keep him from preventing another murder. "The killing must end. I know how you feel about all this, but you *must* find another way to handle the situation."

"You don't know how I feel, elf." Wolverine retracted his claws—the metal-sheathed bones quickly sliding back into his arms—and pointed a gloved finger in Kurt's face. "Why don't ya wake up an' take a look around you, bub?" he growled. "We ain't mixin' it up with the Acolytes or the flamin' Brood. We're bustin' up a *death camp*, like the kind that used to exist back in the bad ol' days o' your country. Remember those? I bet you read all about 'em in school, right? Well, I was *there*, bub, an' I've had my fill o' malnourished bodies an' mass graves. I'll be *damned* if I'm lettin' any o' these monkey-suited sadists escape the punishment they got comin' to 'em." He glared up at Nightcrawler. "You ain't got the stones to do a job that needs doin', then stay outta my way an' go help the people that *need* helpin'." He snarled. "An' I *don't* mean the flamin' guards."

Not bothering to wait for a response from his stunned teammate, Wolverine pushed past him and, extending his claws once more, went hunting for fresh game.

All hell was breaking loose.

Guard towers were exploding—courtesy of Gambit and his deck of kinetically-charged cards. Armored troops tore across the compound, some of the soldiers still struggling to put on boots or cram shoulder-length hair into battle helmets. In their pens, German shepherds were barking wildly, eager to attack the enemy, but in the confusion, no one had the sense to release them. Somewhere deep on the grounds, gunfire erupted, only to be silenced moments later.

And in the midst of all this chaos, the inmates began to stream from the bunkhouses; some joined the battle, attacking whatever guard was handy. Most, though, stampeded in the opposite direction, only to be brought to an abrupt halt by the high fencing designed to keep them in.

Scott, we've got to get the prisoners out! Jean's thoughts were brimming with concern, yet she kept her emotions in check.

I'm on it, Cyclops replied. He turned to the chain link fence and the wave of humanity that was surging against it. If he didn't act now, the people in front would be crushed against the links by those in the

back who were too panicked to realize that they weren't going anywhere.

"*STAND BACK!*" Cyclops shouted above the din. But either no one heard him, or they weren't paying attention to his plea.

Raising his hands, he touched two small contacts on each side of his visor. Immediately, the ruby quartz lens rolled back, into the upper half of the metal shell, exposing his eyes—just for a second.

But it was time enough for two beams of bright red energy to lance forward from his pupils, to strike the ground in front of the fence with all the force of an exploding missile.

That got the inmates' attention. They froze, clearly uncertain of what to make of what had just transpired. As one, they stared, wide-eyed, at the blue-and-gold-garbed X-Man standing before them.

"Move back from the fence!" Cyclops yelled. "I'll have you out in a second!"

They did as they were told this time, and the mutant's visor flashed again. Instantly, an entire section of the fencing came crashing down. Before the broken metal had even touched the ground, though, the prisoners began pouring through the hole, frantically climbing over one another in their haste to be free.

"Single file, people!" Carol barked. "Plenty of fresh air and freedom to go around!"

The joyous occasion, however, was soon disrupted by screams of terror from the back of the line. Using her amazing mental powers, Phoenix pushed off from the ground and gently floated into the night sky. Her eyes narrowed in anger as she spotted a dozen armored soldiers stomping across the yard, in the direction of the crush of prisoners. The air filled with the sound of laser weapons cycling to full power.

"This one's *mine*," Phoenix said. Her bright green eyes flashed a deep crimson color and, with but a thought, she telekinetically grabbed hold of the collapsed fencing and flung it at the guards. In seconds, they were securely pinned to the ground, and no longer a threat.

Cyclops turned to Carol. "Help the other prisoners as they come through. Jean and I have to get inside." Carol opened her mouth, probably to argue about being left behind, but Scott gently placed a hand on her shoulder before she could say anything. "Please," he said.

Carol seemed to consider this for a moment, then nodded.

Cyclops smiled briefly. "Thank you." He glanced at Jean, who was still floating above them. Her eyes flashed again, and he rose up to join her. Together, they flew over the inmates and into the camp, as Carol struggled to create some sense of order in the midst of hysteria.

Now, I get to have some fun, Rogue thought, a malicious smile spreading across her face.

Having completed her bombing run with Gambit, she had dropped the wily Cajun onto the roof of one of the barracks to help out Wolverine—and Nightcrawler, who was probably back in the thick of things—and then had taken to the air again. Below her, the camp was in chaos as fires burned, shots rang out, and the prisoners turned against their captors, attacking them with whatever weapons they could find—table legs, metal folding chairs, their bare hands.

And speaking of captors . . .

From what appeared to be the commandant's office, a group of armed men and women came running out, followed by someone who was more than likely the man in charge. Considering the conditions of the camp and its prisoners, Rogue had expected someone who looked like the devil himself to be in charge—dark and sinister-looking, powerfully-built, with neatly coiffed hair and a pointed goatee, his uniform crackling with each confident step that he took. What she saw instead was a man with all the physique of a scarecrow, possessing bulging eyes, unkempt, thinning hair combed across a sunburned scalp, and a uniform that was badly in need of pressing.

Guess there must've been some pretty slim pickin's down at the employment agency . . . Rogue thought.

Forming a double-line across the main yard, the guards raised their rifles and pistols and took aim on the inmates, clearly intent on using deadly force to stop the riot.

Not if I can help it, Rogue thought grimly. With a burst of speed, she bore down on the firing squad.

"FIRE!" yelled the commandant.

Twenty-five fingers squeezed back on twenty-five triggers to begin the massacre—

—only to close on empty air.

Nonplussed, both guards and commanding officer stared at their hands, obviously wondering what had become of the weapons they had just been holding.

"Y'all lookin' for these?" Rogue asked. She serenely floated twenty feet above them, a Chesire Cat-like grin lighting her attractive features. As they watched in astonishment, the skunk-haired mutant crumpled the guns into a ball with her gloved hands, and then, like a major league pitcher delivering a fastball to home plate, wound up and threw the oversized paperweight into the middle of nearby Breakstone Lake.

"Lemme ask y'all somethin'," Rogue asked, standing in midair with

her hands on her hips. "Without those peashooters, how y'all think you'd do in a *fair* fight?"

"Against a freak like *you*, who can do something like what we just saw?" the commandant replied with a sneer. "How is *that* a fair fight?"

Rogue wagged a disapproving finger at the annoying little man. "Now, there's no need for name-callin', sugah. Y'all don't see *me* climbin' up on my high horse an' callin' *you* a wall-eyed, turd-sniffin' polecat with delusions of bein' a *man*, do ya? 'Course not." Her grin widened. "'Sides, I wasn't talkin' about *me*." She pointed over her shoulder. "I was talkin' about *them*."

The commandant and his men looked past her to see the very prisoners they had been targeting now rushing toward them. Before the little man could bark an order, the inmates were upon them, knocking them to the ground and giving them a not-so-healthy dose of their own brutal medicine.

Rogue chuckled as she saw the commandant scramble to his feet and run screaming, a group of inmates hot on his tail.

"I love this job . . ." she said with a sigh.

Her work, however, was far from complete.

A flash of moonlight on green metal off to one side caught her attention, just before a powerful laser beam struck her below the collarbone, knocking her out of the sky. Semi-conscious, Rogue soared across the yard and slammed hard into a black-painted truck parked near the main entrance, crashing through its roof with her indestructible body and collapsing in a heap on the cold, metal flooring of its container. Dazed but unhurt, she groaned and slowly sat up, in time to see a quartet of airborne soldiers in what seemed to be modified Guardsman armor—at least that's what it looked like, based on the pictures she'd once seen on the Xavier Institute's computer files . . . when the institute had been on these grounds, that is—hovering a few yards away.

"Blast that freak!" one of the soldiers yelled. As one, the Guardsmen raised their hands, palms held forward. Rogue saw flashes of light erupt from the center of each hand as the laser generators built into the armor released their deadly energies.

And then the truck exploded around her.

Nightcrawler had lost sight of Wolverine in the middle of the fray.

The last glimpse he'd had of the hotheaded Canadian came just before a green-armored soldier had swooped down from out of the night sky to backhand Kurt into the side of a bunkhouse. An exploding playing card that connected with the soldier's boot-jets—courtesy of Gambit—had shorted out the man's flight systems and sent him wildly

careening over the fence and into the lake. Then, side by side, the blue-skinned teleporter and the dark-haired thief had joined forces with the hordes of angry prisoners to finally turn the tide of battle against the seemingly endless swarms of armed guards who opposed them.

Now, the ground suddenly trembled as a new explosion rocked the camp. Flames and thick, black smoke shot up from a transport truck standing near the camp entrance. Gambit frantically looked up into the night sky, then gazed at the burning vehicle and the armored figures swarming around it.

"Rogue?!" he yelled.

"She'll be fine, *mein freund*," Nightcrawler assured him. "Rogue is quite resilient, you know. It will take more than an explosion to knock her out of the game. For the moment, however, we must concentrate on the matter at hand."

"I guess . . ." Remy said, though it was clear from his tone that he was distracted by his concern for his beautiful teammate. That didn't mean he wasn't still capable of fighting, though. Pulling three cards from his ever-present deck, he tossed them at a trio of guards clad in body armor; the cards detonated on impact with the steel plating, the force of the released charges throwing the now-unconscious men across the yard.

Gaining a small respite, Gambit stole a quick glance at the burning vehicle.

"Come on, *chere*," he whispered. "Don' let ol' Gambit down now . . ."

At the main entrance, the Guardsmen touched down on the muddy field, forming a rough semicircle around the truck; the smoke was thickening, fueled by the melting rubber tires, making it difficult to see the wreckage. One of the armored figures turned to the others.

"Okay, that's one down," she said. "Fan out and eliminate the rest of her bud—"

Her order was cut short, however, by the scream of metal scraping against metal.

As the Guardsmen watched, the pile of debris shifted, then fell to one side, and Rogue staggered out. Her hair was in complete disarray, her costume was in tatters, her ears were ringing like school bells from the explosion, and she was covered from head to toe with oily smut, but she was very much alive.

And very, very angry.

"Now," she said, glaring at her attackers, "it's *my* turn."

Creeping around the corner of a bunkhouse on the far end of the camp, the commandant pressed up against the rotted, wooden slats of the wall and tried to become as one with the shadows. He'd managed to evade the prisoners who had bolted after him, though it had taken a masterful series of twists and turns to finally put some distance between himself and his pursuers. The window-shattering explosion from the front of the compound had also helped to buy him time enough to hide. For the moment, he was safe.

That moment, unfortunately, ended all too soon—shattered by the vise-like grip of the hand that now closed around his throat from behind.

"If I ain't mistaken, based on how popular you are with the inmates," Wolverine growled, "then *you* must be the piece o' trash runnin' this hellhole. Am I right?"

The commandant opened his mouth to cry out for help, but Logan's grip viciously tightened, thumb and forefinger pressing down on the man's Adam's apple. A low gurgling sound issued from between the commandant's lips, and he began turning an unhealthy shade of blue.

"The *last* thing you wanna do is get me *really* honked off by makin' any trouble, bub," the feral X-Man warned. "The only reason you're still breathin' is 'cause you still got a use or two. But you try *anything* guaranteed t'raise my blood pressure even a *little*, an' you'll be wishin' I'd let yer 'guests' work ya over instead. You understand?"

Though his eyes were starting to glaze over, the commandant frantically nodded his head.

"Good."

Wolverine released his grip, and the commandant fell to the ground. The little man alternately coughed and gasped for air as a copious amount of drool poured from his mouth. When his breathing seemed to have stabilized, and his skin tone had returned to a more natural color, Logan grabbed him by the collar of his uniform and hauled him to his feet. Eyes wide with fear, chin slick with lines of spittle, the commandant stared, open-mouthed, at the X-Man, clearly afraid of what might happen next.

"Here's the deal," Wolverine said. "You're gonna order yer men to stop fightin' an' lay down their weapons. If they don't, I'll *kill* ya."

"A-all r-right," the commandant stammered.

"Then yer gonna free the rest o' the prisoners. I know you mighta gotten confused an' all, with everybody runnin' around like chickens in a barnyard, but I'm sure you got some folks locked up in solitary, or a punishment box, or whatever you sick freaks use to break a man or woman down. If ya *don't* set 'em loose, I'll *kill* ya."

"Y-yes. Im-immediately."

"Then, you're gonna burn this place t'the ground."

The commandant's eyes widened even further. "*B-burn* the camp—?"

"*Shut up*," Wolverine snapped. "Yeah—burn this whole stinkin' hellhole. Don't leave a beam standin'. Burn the armor an' the uniforms, too. If I see one trace o' those goosesteppin' monkey-suits after to-night—"

"You'll k-kill me."

Wolverine nodded. "Smart boy. Now, get t'work."

And with that, he shoved the commandant forward, directing him back to the center of the camp.

Phoenix and Cyclops touched down in the main yard just in time to avoid a collision with a Guardsman who was *not* flying under his own power. His armor riddled with fist-shaped dents, flight systems rendered inoperative, he soared across the camp and crashed head first into what was once a mess hall. The structure collapsed on top of him.

"That would be Rogue's doing . . ." Phoenix said, watching as the mess hall roof buckled, seemed to hang in the air for a moment, then dropped onto the rest of the wreckage.

"That would be *my* guess, too," Cyclops replied.

They turned to look in the direction from which the soldier had been sent flying. Looking worse than she probably felt, Rogue was happily cracking Guardsman armor like lobster tails, then reaching in to scoop out their contents; men and women clad only in camouflage-hued skivvies were roughly yanked from their protective shells and deposited on the ground, deprived of their weapons and their dignity.

"The situation seems to be under control," Cyclops mused aloud.

Phoenix didn't respond, pausing instead to lightly touch the tips of her fingers to her temples. "Kurt and Remy could use a hand, though," she said, having picked up their mental call for assistance.

"Let's not keep them waiting, then," Cyclops said.

"You'd think with all that's going on, these *verdammt* guards would have surrendered by now," Nightcrawler commented between gritted teeth.

The strain of fighting without pause was beginning to tell on both X-Men, as well as the prisoners standing beside them. Kurt had pushed himself to the limits of his powers, 'porting to and fro around the compound, throwing a punch to the jaw here, a kick to the groin there, but finally he had to give it up; his body felt like it would tear itself apart if he tried one more spatial jump. Gambit had run out of playing cards

a while ago, and had to settle for basic fighting skills until he could get his hands on something that he could use as a weapon.

Unfortunately, there seemed to be no end to the guards. Apparently having conceded the loss of the camp, they had put all their effort into taking their frustrations out on whomever had been left behind during the mad dash for freedom, thus forcing the remaining prisoners back toward the chain link fence enclosing the eastern side of the camp, near the lake. Luckily, though, either the guards were out of bullets, or they'd crazily decided to settle the matter with knives and bare hands; either way, it would account for why no one had started firing into the crowd.

A mixed blessing, to be sure.

"Don' you worry none, Kurt," Gambit said, cheerfully breaking the nose of a guard who had gotten within striking distance. "You heard Jeannie—de cavalry's on its way."

"I do not hear anyone blowing a 'charge' on a bugle," Nightcrawler said sarcastically.

That's because my parents paid for piano lessons, friend. I could knock out a quick "Mapleleaf Rag" for you later, if you'd like.

Kurt broke into a huge grin as he spotted the redhead. *Jean!* he replied telepathically. *Nice of you and Scott to join us! Cutting it a little close, wouldn't you say?*

I thought you liked it that way, Nightcrawler. It was Cyclops; Phoenix had linked their minds for easier communication. *A last-minute save is more in line with those movie serials you like to watch on Saturday mornings, isn't it?*

Not when it comes to real life, Nightcrawler replied. *I prefer to restrict my cliffhangers to the small screen.* He gestured toward the guards, who were pressing their attack. *Would the two of you mind . . . ?*

Just like a man, Phoenix replied. *Always expecting a woman to clean up his mess.*

Green eyes flashed, and the guards in the back of the horde suddenly found themselves airborne, bound for Breakstone Lake. Their indignant cries of protest were soon drowned out by the loud splash they made when they hit the water.

If that's how you feel about things, Cyclops pondered, *I'll start picking up my socks when we get back home.* He glanced around quickly, and frowned. *After we've managed to restore our home, that is.*

Raising the lens of his visor, Cyclops fired a series of short, powerful bursts of energy that scattered the guards like tenpins, tossing them high into the air so that Phoenix could telekinetically grab them on the fly and send them to join their compatriots in the chilly waters. Soon

enough, they had cleared a path all the way up to the beleaguered Nightcrawler and Gambit.

"You two all right?" Cyclops asked.

"Better, now dat we seen a friendly face," Gambit replied, smiling as he looked at Phoenix.

"Hey, that's my *wife*, mister," Cyclops said. Though he didn't smile, the trace of humor in his voice was quite apparent.

Gambit shrugged. "I'll keep dat in mind."

Around the X-Men, the few guards who hadn't been sent to the showers moaned as they lay on the ground, some dazed, most semi-conscious. Arms folded across her chest, Phoenix gazed down at them.

"If any of you are planning to get up to try this again," she said coolly, "*don't*."

Wisely, they heeded her advice.

"Looks like I missed out on last call," said a gruff voice from nearby. The X-Men turned in its direction.

Still pushing the commandant ahead of him, Wolverine entered the main yard. "I didn't even get to throw any o' the bums out," he said, glancing toward the lake.

Phoenix gazed at the scrappy X-Man's blood-streaked and tattered appearance and frowned. "It looks like you've done more than enough for one night, friend."

Logan smiled grimly. "Ya should see the *other* guys."

Phoenix grimaced. "Thanks, but I'll pass. I've already *had* my fair share of seeing the kind of stuff that runs around inside your head."

"Who's yo' friend, Wolverine?" Gambit asked.

Logan gave the commandant another shove. "This is the turd responsible fer runnin' this dump. We were just havin' a little heart-to-heart about some changes he's gonna be makin' around here." He glanced at the commandant. "Ain't that right?"

The commandant's nervous head-shaking seemed to be about the only answer he was capable of giving at the moment.

Logan gazed at Nightcrawler. "See, elf? I can be a reasonable guy . . . when I wanna be."

"For which I am always most grateful, Wolverine," Kurt replied, though his dark expression made it perfectly clear that he had not forgotten Logan's earlier actions—or his words.

"Could y'all gimme a hand here?" Rogue asked, as she walked over to join the group. "I'm feelin' a little . . . well . . ." She gestured toward the remains of her costume; most of it hung in tatters, though some parts, like her gloves and leather jacket, had survived more or less intact.

Not exactly a scandalous appearance, given the costumes worn by some of her female peers in the superhuman community, but the fact that *any* of her skin had become exposed to the night air seemed to make her incredibly nervous as she approached the X-Men and their charges.

With Rogue, however, her concern didn't stem from any overwhelming sense of modesty—she'd worn bathing suits that involved far less material than she was wearing at the moment; no, her concern was for the other people around her—and herself. As strong as she was, as invulnerable as her body might be, Rogue's powers had one disturbing drawback: if her bare skin touched the flesh of any man, woman, or child, she automatically absorbed their thoughts, their memories, even their skills, whether they be as simple as bricklaying or as complicated as a mountain-leveling superpower. The absorption was an unconscious action over which she had absolutely no control, and one that had first manifested itself during her teenage years, while she was kissing a boy.

He was plunged into a coma as a result. The response to the accident had been immediate: Rogue was banished from her community, scorned by even the people who had been her closest friends.

The activation of her powers during such an innocent moment—and the unrelenting feeling of shame that resulted from it—left deep emotional scars on the young woman.

Not surprisingly, it had been a long time since Rogue had a real boyfriend.

She had tried various methods to counteract the unwanted power since that traumatic experience, but the only thing that seemed to negate the process was, simply and amazingly enough, clothing. Thus, always fearful that she might wind up harming someone with the slightest touch—tapping a shoulder, brushing against a bare arm on a busy street—Rogue tended to wrap herself in outfits that did wonders for complimenting her figure, yet nonetheless kept her leech-like abilities from inadvertently coming into play at inopportune moments.

Now, exposed as she was, and as nervous as she seemed—based on the small, furtive glances that she stole at the prisoners who stared at her from behind the other X-Men—it was painfully apparent that Rogue was afraid of the nightmarish memories she might have to “re-live” if she came into contact with any of the poor unfortunates they had just rescued.

“Here y’go, *chere*,” Gambit said, stepping forward and removing his duster. He draped it over Rogue’s shoulders. “Wouldn’t want ya t’catch yo’ death.”

“Thanks, Remy,” Rogue said, gratefully pulling the warm leather around her body.

Cyclops gazed around the smoldering camp and saw the fright that was evident in the eyes of the former prisoners; they didn't seem to know what to expect from these costumed men and women standing before them.

"Thank you," Cyclops said softly. "For all your help."

Some of the prisoners murmured responses, but most of them just stood quietly.

Scott . . . Jean's thoughts "sounded" clearly in his mind. I ran a quick scan of these people, just to see if anyone knew why the school wasn't here. He glanced at her with concern, and she shook her head slightly. I'm fine. Jean flashed a brief smile. Don't worry—I'm not going to get caught flatfooted by another psi-wave. But we do need information, and what I found so unusual, though, is that it seems none of them recognize us.

Cyclops turned to face his wife; behind his visor, an eyebrow rose in a quizzical fashion. *How could that be possible? I know we've always tried to keep a low profile, but considering some of the situations we've been involved in, and the way most people react to us just on principle, I'd think at least a few of the prisoners might have started backing away from us "muties."*

I thought so, too, Jean responded, but that might explain why Carol didn't recognize us, either, despite her history with Logan. She gestured toward the prisoners. All I get from their thoughts are confusion and worry and an intense fear that the rescue might be some kind of trick to get their hopes up about finally escaping, and that any second now they'll be forced into trucks and transported to another camp.

Another? Nightcrawler's thoughts interjected. Mein Gott, how many of these godforsaken things are there? And who's responsible for them?

Phoenix stared at each of her teammates, her features darkening with anger as she provided them with an answer:

"Doctor Doom," she said aloud.

Wolverine growled softly—a sound which automatically sent a new wave of panic coursing through the commandant. A small puddle formed around his feet.

"All right, we need answers," said Cyclops. He pointed at the commandant. "And you're going to provide them."

IT WAS a sobering history lesson, to be sure.

"Ten years?" Phoenix asked. "That's impossible!"

The first pink rays of dawn were just edging over Westchester County as the X-Men and Carol Danvers assembled on the shore of Breakstone Lake, where the soothing beauty of Professor Xavier's Japanese gardens had once flourished; with the construction of the camp, the ground had been turned into a graveyard for the prisoners who had died while under the care of their cruel hosts. Behind them, under the watchful eye of the now well-armed former inmates, the commandant, his guards, and his soldiers were standing in a circle in their undergarments, setting fire to their uniforms, per Wolverine's non-negotiable demands. Green-tinged smoke rose high into the early morning sky.

Phoenix looked at each of her teammates; they were all finding it difficult to accept what they had learned first from the commandant, and then from Carol, who had provided a more truthful explanation of how the world of Victor von Doom was run.

"I'll say it's impossible," Rogue said, agreeing with Jean. "We've only been away a *month*, an' Doom sure wasn't in charge of the place when we left. An' for ten years?" She grimaced and shook her head. "Ain't no way."

"Could Roma have made a mistake?" Nightcrawler mused aloud. "She *did* mention before we left that she had not been paying all that much attention to events on our Earth. Perhaps she sent us into a possible future timeline by mistake, or—"

"Or dropped us on an alternate Earth instead?" Cyclops said, completing Kurt's thought. Nightcrawler nodded in agreement. Scott paused for a moment to mull over the possibility, then shook his head. "I can't

see that happening. Roma would *never* be that sloppy. And, given her powers, I doubt she's even *capable* of making such a monumental error. But, even considering the possibility that such a mistake might have occurred, there still exists a threat to the omniverse—one we already agreed to handle.”

“No argument dere, boss,” Gambit said. “A job’s a job.” He gazed at each of his friends. “I jus’ t’ink we’d all rather know fo’ sure if dis be our world—fo’ peace o’ mind, if nothin’ else. ‘Cause if dis *is* our Earth—” he looked over his shoulder at the camp, then turned back to Cyclops “—den I’d say it’s a whole lot more screwed-up den e’en Roma was thinkin’. An’ if Doc Doom’s involved, it’s fo’ sure we gon’ have some battle on our hands tryin’ t’clean up his mess.” He glanced at Rogue, flashed a brief smile. “He one big ol’ puppy dog to be runnin’ ‘round loose wit’ no proper paper trainin’, y’know.”

Rogue turned her head and raised a hand to her lips, to cover a smile that seemed so . . . disrespectful in such a tragic place. She knew Remy was trying to lighten the mood in the midst of a depressing situation—that was one of the charms that made him so damned appealing to her—but it just didn’t feel right to be laughing when their world was suffering under the oppressive thumb of a madman like Doctor Doom. There’d be time enough for her and Remy to share a laugh or two later, when their work was done—she’d see to it. Suppressing her chuckle by clearing her throat, Rogue turned back to face the group.

“All right,” Cyclops said, “our objectives are clear: we find Doom, discover the means by which he’s transformed the world, and either destroy it or force him to tell us how to shut it down.”

“And just how to you plan to convince him to do *that*?” Carol asked.

“Leave that t’me,” Wolverine said, a dangerous gleam in his eyes. For dramatic effect, he popped his claws. Carol’s eyes widened as she stared, momentarily transfixed, by the way the morning sunlight played along the edges of Wolverine’s bio-weapons. “By the time I’m done carvin’ through that leftover Renaissance festival outfit o’ his,” Logan continued, “he’s gonna be hopin’ that *all* I’m lookin’ for is the shut-off switch, an’ not his heart.”

Carol grimaced as she watched the metal-coated bones slide back into Logan’s arms. “Oookay,” she croaked, looking a little pale. She quickly turned to Cyclops. “Well, you won’t have to look hard to find him. He and the Queen are living in the White House.”

“Yeah, an’ that’s somethin’ else I don’t understand,” Rogue said. “How is it that Ororo’d be willin’ to marry that tin-plated nut, let alone

agree to go rulin' the world with 'im? I don't see the connection between 'em."

"Before yer time, darlin'," Wolverine replied. "First run-in the new team had with Doom, he invited her t'dinner at his castle upstate while the rest o' us were dukin' it out with his goons in the basement. Some foolish attempt t'rescue that grinnin' jackass, Arcade—the reasons *why* are too complicated t'get into right now. Least we *thought* it was a rescue mission; shoulda known better. Turned out to be a flamin' trap he set up for us with ol' metalhead."

Phoenix nodded. "Ororo confided in me about that once. She was . . . embarrassed by how she'd allowed herself to be drawn to Doom's power and . . . well, charisma, I guess, in the middle of a mission. And although he tried to kill her and our friends, she and Doom parted on civil terms—he even . . ." Jean paused, then shrugged. "Well, from the way Ororo described it, it sounded like Doom was hitting on her."

"*Hittin' on her?*" Rogue asked incredulously. "This *is* Doctor Doom y'all are talkin' 'bout, right?"

"Well, that's what it *sounded* like when Ororo told me," Jean replied. "He said he found her 'fascinating,' and wanted to get to know her better. And Ororo—for some reason—was actually open to the idea, though she never took him up on the offer."

"Jus' like a woman, eh?" Gambit quipped. "Say she gon' call de next day, den never does."

The icy stares directed his way by Jean, Rogue, and Carol did wonders for wiping the smile off his face.

Nightcrawler turned to Cyclops. "So, Scott, what is our next move?"

Cyclops pinched his lower lip between thumb and forefinger, then stood silently for a few moments, considering their options.

"Allies," he finally said. "We need to find out if there are any heroes in this world still opposed to Doom, and whether they'd be willing to throw in with our lot. Having to take on him *and* an entire planet under his rule without some back-up—well, let's just say I don't like the odds."

"Good luck to you, pal," Carol said sarcastically. "You're certainly gonna need it, considering most of the super-types are working for Doom, and the ones who don't aren't gonna want to get involved."

"We've got to try anyway," Cyclops insisted. "If nothing else, we need someone to create enough of a distraction that will allow us to get to Doom directly."

"Makes sense, if you can actually *find* someone nuts enough to run interference for you at the risk of having their own head blown off," Carol said. "I gotta tell you, though, when it comes to costumed types

like you folks, the pickings are mighty slim among the ones that are still operating.”

“Well, what about *you*, Carol?” Phoenix asked.

“What *about* me?” Carol replied.

“Why can’t you help us? We know how powerful you are as Warbird—you’d certainly be able to help shift the balance in our favor.”

Carol stared at Jean as though the X-Man was crazy. “What in God’s name are you *talking* about? Don’t you think that if I had some kind of powers like you people, I would’ve torn down this suburb of hell a long time ago?” She snorted and waved a hand toward Rogue. “What, are you telling me I can go around benchpressing trucks like *her*?”

Rogue’s cheeks flushed a deep red, and she quickly turned away from Carol. Although the blond-haired woman didn’t recognize her now, Rogue was all too aware of the past they shared: of how Carol, in the pre-Doom-ruled world, had been a super heroine named Ms. Marvel, and Rogue had been a member of an organization called the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants; of how Rogue, following the orders of the Brotherhood’s leader, Mystique, had ambushed Carol one night in San Francisco and used her powers to leech away not only her cosmic-spawned powers, but part of her psyche, leaving her body a nearly empty shell; and of how, after draining her enemy, Rogue had tossed her off the Golden Gate Bridge in an attempt to kill her. Though Carol had eventually recovered both her mind and her powers—a slow, painful process that took years—and changed her super heroic codename to the more aggressive Warbird, she had never forgiven Rogue for stealing away her individuality, and could barely stand to be within spitting distance of her former adversary to this day.

“Carol,” Phoenix said softly, “I’d like to try something, with your permission. I’m a telepath—”

Carol’s lips pulled back in a sneer. “You’re a *mento*?”

Phoenix started. “A *what*?”

Nearby, Gambit turned to Rogue. “I t’ought dat was some kinda candy,” he whispered.

“Sshh!” Rogue replied, her raised index finger pressed against her lips.

“One of Doom’s mind readers,” Carol said, practically spitting out the words. “He’s got them stationed all over the world, running their little mental scans, taking leisurely strolls through the minds of every man, woman, and child on this planet, making sure no one’s going to try and overthrow their fearless leader.”

"The Thought Police," Nightcrawler murmured to Wolverine. "George Orwell would be proud."

Wolverine grunted. "Or Hitler."

"I understand how you feel, Carol," Phoenix said. "Believe me, you're not the first person to react so strongly to what people like I can do. But I swear to you that I'm nothing like Doom's enforcers—a polar opposite, you might say."

"Right." Carol snorted. "And your friend Ororo is really a kind, loving soul opposed to the dictatorial rule of her husband."

"Actually, she is," Phoenix replied. "But that's besides the point. What's important right now is getting to the bottom of this whole maddening situation."

"And you want to go rooting around in my head to find out why I don't know any of you—" Carol smiled slightly as she looked at the team's costumes—"colorful folks, or where these alleged superpowers of mine might have gone to. Right?"

"Yes," Phoenix replied. "And that's *all* I'll be looking for. I promise I'll avoid any part of your subconscious that you don't want me to see." She fell silent, then, not wanting to push her friend too hard for a decision.

Carol stuffed her callused hands into the pockets of her prison jumper and stared at the ground for a few moments. Even without reading her thoughts, Jean could tell how hard she was wrestling with the idea of someone sifting through her mind for information. Carol took a deep breath, released it slowly between gritted teeth, and kicked at a small rock by her feet; she watched it skip across the water three times before it sank with a small splash.

"All right," she finally said. She wearily ran her hands through her hair, then lifted her head to lock eyes with Jean. "But if you make me start clucking like a chicken, so help me, God, I'll rip your head off and punt it like a football."

Wolverine chuckled. "Now, *that's* the Carol Danvers I know."

Phoenix smiled at Carol. "Deal."

"Okay. So, what do you need me to do?"

"Just relax and try to clear your mind," Jean replied. "I'll do the rest. And I promise this won't hurt a bit."

Carol closed her eyes. "That's what my dentist used to say just as he started drilling a tooth. That was usually the exact moment when the shot of Novocain wore off." She opened one eye to gaze evenly at Phoenix. "Having a low pain threshold tends to mean whoever's handy gets to suffer right along with me."

"I'll keep that in, er, mind," Phoenix said.

Carol nodded and shut her eye again.

Reaching out with both hands, Jean lightly placed her fingertips on Carol's temples, then closed her own eyes as well.

"More waitin', eh, boss?" Gambit muttered.

"Yes, Remy," Scott said quietly. "More waiting . . ."

She was seated on a quilt-covered waterbed in a blue-walled, white carpeted bedroom, an issue of *Tiger Beat* laying open on her lap; she glanced at the article: "My Dream Date With Simon LeBon." Sitting next to her on the bed—keeping her company, it seemed—was a collection of stuffed animals: teddy bears of varying sizes and colors, wide-eyed yellow lions, a sky-blue porpoise, even a rainbow-hued unicorn. Across the room, in a corner, stood a large potted plant that looked like a miniature palm tree, but she knew that wasn't the actual species; unfortunately, unlike Ororo, she'd always been bad with plant names. On the walls and ceiling were posters of various rock stars from the 1980s—Rick Springfield, The Thompson Twins, Duran Duran, Culture Club. Beside the bed, a small clock-radio was softly broadcasting the Eurythmics' "Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)." Early morning sunlight streamed into the room through two windows across from the bed, and the pleasant chirping of birds from the trees outside seemed to fill the room.

As mental images went, Jean thought, it was a surprisingly original one—most people's psyches tended to create vast, desolate landscapes of blinding sandstorms or Salvador Dali-esque shapes, or a crossroads suspended in a void, its winding paths meeting at a nexus where a sign usually stood, its infinite number of arrows pointing in an infinite number of directions, leading the traveler to whatever memories were being sought.

The setting wasn't a complete surprise to Jean, however; she'd been in Carol's mind quite a few times during the course of their friendship, back when the world was sane. What always amazed Jean, though, was how well-ordered the woman kept her subconscious—no stray thoughts barging through like a bull in a china shop, no dark, menacing shapes standing just along the edge of your vision, no monsters from the id the size of mountains looking to destroy her sense of identity.

In terms of pop psychology, this was Carol's "happy place"—the spot she went to relax when the pressures of the world became overwhelming; in this case, happiness was found in the mental recreation of the bedroom owned by a teen-aged Carol Danvers, who had spent a good deal of her time hanging out in the real-world version while living with her parents. And considering the horrifying experiences she must

have undergone while in the camp, it was a testament to the adult Carol's sheer force of will that she hadn't chosen to retreat into the bedroom for good and lock the door behind her.

Speaking of doors . . .

Jean looked up from the magazine as the bedroom door opened, and the grown-up Carol entered. She was dressed in black tights, white low-topped sneakers, and a gray sweatshirt with a frayed collar; it hung on her body at an angle, exposing her right shoulder.

Somebody's *seen Flashdance one too many times* . . . Jean thought.

Carol started when she realized Jean was sitting on the bed. "Hey, how did you . . . ?"

Jean smiled. "I've, um, been here before."

Carol gestured toward Jean's legs, which were stretched out on the comforter. "And you thought you'd make yourself at home?"

Jean's smile widened, and she raised a booted leg. "My feet were killing me." She chuckled as she caught her friend's confused expression. "I know: in this place, we're just psychic representations of our real selves. But right now, the real me is in a heck of a lot of pain from running around in high heels all night long."

Carol raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And I suppose in your profession, sensible shoes are frowned upon, right?"

Jean shrugged pleasantly. "It's the price one pays for looking good."

Carol snorted. "Thanks, but I don't need to look *that* good."

Jean smiled. "You say that now . . ."

"Oh, I get it," Carol said, slowly nodding her head. "That whole 'Super Carol' thing you were talking about before." Her brow furrowed. "You mean I actually dress up like a stiletto-heeled circus acrobat—no offense—and fight crime, like Wonder Man or She-Hulk?"

"None taken," Jean replied. "And yes, you do. Actually, you weren't off the mark when you mentioned being able to benchpress trucks—you have incredible strength. And that's just *one* of your abilities."

"You don't say . . ." Carol said, clearly intrigued.

"I do." Jean smiled wickedly. "And when it comes to dressing up like a 'circus acrobat,' honey, *your* heels are even higher than *mine*."

Carol whistled through her teeth. "Where did *my* dignity go . . . ?"

"Care to see everything I've been talking about?" Jean asked. She patted the bed, beckoning Carol to join her. Her friend quickly complied.

Instantly, the room faded away, until only the bed remained. Carol gasped in surprise and bounced across the water-filled mattress toward the center of the bed, trying to get as far away as possible from the void that had suddenly appeared beneath them.

"Don't worry," Jean said soothingly. "I've got everything under control."

"Glad to hear it," Carol said. "Now what?"

Jean grinned. "You like movies?"

"I haven't seen one in a long time, considering my previous situation," Carol replied sourly. "But if you plan on showing me *Stalag 17* or *The Great Escape*, I'll have to hurt you."

Jean shook her head. "How about *The Carol Danvers Story*?"

Carol wrinkled her nose in mild reluctance. "I don't know . . . I hear parts of it are kind of depressing."

"Ah, but this is the special widescreen edition," Jean countered, "with never-before-seen footage and big-budget special effects." She paused. "Well, never-before-seen by *you*; I'm already quite familiar with it."

Carol shrugged. "So, let's see it, then."

Jean smiled and dramatically waved a hand. A movie theater-sized projection screen suddenly appeared before them.

"Not bad," Carol commented.

"It gets better," Jean said. "Watch."

From the darkness behind them, a light began flickering, casting indistinct images on the screen.

"Focus!" Carol yelled over her shoulder to the imaginary projectionist. Jean giggled.

Slowly, the images took solid shape, becoming a shot of up-close faces happily staring at the "camera." A handsome, dark-haired man in his twenties, eyes sparkling with tears, was beaming proudly. Beside him, propped up in what looked like a hospital bed, was an attractive—though exhausted—blond-haired woman, who was also crying. It was immediately clear to see where Carol had gotten her good looks.

"That's my mom and dad!" Carol said. She paused, and turned to Jean. "Hey, wait a minute—are you saying I can remember the day I was *born*?"

"Uh-huh," Jean replied. "It's long been theorized by psychologists that we can recall events that far back, though, like most memories, they tend to fade away as we get older. But the subconscious retains just about everything."

Carol shook her head. "That's just . . . freaky."

"I'll speed things up—get to the good parts," Jean said. "And I'll shift to . . . well, I guess you could call it an 'external camera'."

Carol nodded. "You mean a third-person point of view—like when I'm dreaming, and I'm watching myself doing something."

"Exactly."

The screen darkened for a moment, then was filled by an image of Carol, wearing a dark business suit, standing on New York's Fifth Avenue, across from Central Park. Behind her stood an impressive-looking building that Jean immediately recognized as Avengers Mansion, home and headquarters of what was regarded as Earth's greatest team of super heroes. Carol turned from the "camera" and started walking toward the building—

And then the image was abruptly replaced by *another* "scene": this one of Carol in her Air Force staff car as she drove to work one morning, happily singing off-key to Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" as it blared from the vehicle's radio.

Jean glanced at Carol, who was staring, transfixed, at the screen.

"Did you see that?" she asked.

"See what?" Carol replied. "Proof that I'm tone-deaf?"

"No. That—that jump-cut."

Carol shook her head. "No." She gestured toward the screen. "So, when do I get to see me changing the course of mighty rivers?"

"That's what *I'd* like to know . . ." Jean mumbled softly.

As movies go, this one was poorly edited, with frames deleted in a haphazard fashion, causing scenes to end abruptly and jump to the next segment of the reel: Here was Carol at her tenth birthday party, where Robbie McDowell gave her her first kiss; here she was graduating from the Air Force academy, throwing her cap high into the air alongside her classmates; and here she was as head of security at Cape Canaveral where, Jean knew, Carol was destined to meet the alien super hero Captain Marvel—a meeting that would forever change her life.

But *that* memory wasn't there. There was no denying it, then.

There were definitely gaps in Carol's memory. But, more surprisingly, *she didn't know they were there.*

"So, do I look good in spandex?" Carol asked.

Brow furrowed, Jean turned to face her. "Hmm? Oh. Well, yes, I suppose," she said, still distracted by what she *wasn't* seeing in her scans. "Black one-piece, opera gloves, and thigh-highs. Little domino mask. Red sash around your waist." She turned back to the screen. "The guys have always thought you looked good in it."

Carol giggled. "I didn't know I could be such a *tramp.*"

Jean nodded, not really paying attention to her friend's musings, and probed deeper. More images appeared on the screen, the speed at which they moved increasing as Jean flipped through them, in the manner of someone hurriedly thumbing through a book: a succession of lovers—some good, but most bad; vacations and spy missions and

birthdays and holiday parties; Carol's rise to captaincy; then memories of her fall from grace, and her years in the camp.

But her experiences as Ms. Marvel? As Binary? As Warbird?

Gone—tossed aside like a bunch of discarded frames lying on a cutting room floor. What they were seeing now was some soulless movie studio executive's cut of *The Carol Danvers Story*. And its star seemed to be completely unaware of the hatchet job done to the last reel.

Jean gritted her teeth. This was unacceptable.

All right, she thought. One last time. Let's try something big . . .

As difficult as it was to force Carol to relive a traumatic experience, perhaps the shock of one might jolt her memories back into play. True, it was akin to trying to fix the reception on a television set by slapping it repeatedly with your hand until the picture settled, but Jean was running out of options. But which—

Rogue's attack.

Jean hated herself just for considering it. As traumatic experiences went, it was as bad as—possibly even worse than—anything Carol had had to endure during all her time in the death camp. Jean knew that there were other bad memories lurking in the darkness behind them—a few that might even make a temporary loss of identity seem like a slap on the wrist—but not even she was willing to draw upon those.

So, Rogue's attack it was. Steeling herself, Jean started the "projector" again, and began searching for that bleak, rainswept night in San Francisco.

And found nothing.

It was a stunning revelation, to say the least. Anything that had to do with Carol's powers, her career as a super heroine, as a member of the Avengers, as a friend of the X-Men—all gone. Replaced with false memories of an armored madman rising to power without resistance, taking Jean's dearest friend as his wife, and lording it over the planet for an entire decade.

Sheer insanity.

It was as though Doom's dream of one day conquering the Earth had been stamped onto Carol's mind and carved into her subconscious as incontrovertible fact.

It was also one of the most horrifying examples of psychic butchery that Jean had ever witnessed. And if this had been done to Carol, she wondered with mounting horror, did that mean the same thing had happened, not just to the super hero community in general, but to all their friends?

To everyone on the planet?

Jean's eyed widened in shock. Where in heaven's name could Doom have gotten such power . . . ?

"Well?" Carol asked.

Jean started, roused from her musings, and, still wide-eyed, turned to face her friend. "W-what?"

"I'm still waiting for you to show me how I look in spandex," Carol replied. "So far, I've seen the stuff I already know, followed by a lot of nothing." She waved a hand toward the projection screen that floated in front of them. "If I want to stare at a blank screen, I can always stand in front of a broken TV."

"I, um, ran ahead already," Jean said quickly, and tapped her head. "It's kind of like watching a videotape on fast-forward. There was, um, nothing else to see." Her fingers began nervously picking at the polyester threads of the comforter and she focused her gaze on the work, unable to look Carol in the eye.

"What do you mean by 'nothing else'?" Carol asked, folding her arms across her chest.

"Just what I mean," Jean said, still looking at her busy hands. She turned her head slightly—just enough so that her fiery mane fell forward to hide her face. "The information I was looking for wasn't there. Maybe I was wrong about this whole thing—it wouldn't be the first time it happened." She stopped picking and smoothed out the comforter. "I think we'd better get back to the others before they start to worry."

"They're not the *only* ones . . ." Carol said, an edge in her voice.

And with that, both women faded away, leaving the waterbed construct to float away into the troubling darkness.

Jean and Carol snapped back to reality, gasping for air as metabolisms slowed by their shared trance suddenly kicked back into high gear.

Cyclops placed his hands on Phoenix's shoulders as she stumbled back a step. "You all right, hon?"

"I'm fine, Scott," she replied, steadying her breathing. *It's Carol we should be worried about*, she added through their psychic link. Cyclops stared at her, and she quickly shook her head. *Later*.

Carol moaned. "I thought you said that wasn't gonna hurt," she said, massaging her temples with her fingers. "I've had sinus headaches that felt better."

"Sorry," Jean said, still avoiding eye contact. "An unexpected side-effect of the link. I ran through your memories a little too fast for your brain to keep up."

Carol grunted. "Seems like a whole lot of trouble just to find nothing." She winced in obvious pain and rubbed her head with the palms

of her hands. "I've gotta sit down for a little bit. Then we better start making plans for getting as far the hell away from here as possible—I wouldn't be surprised to find out that somebody in town had already called for the Guardsmen once the shooting started." Waving off any help, she wandered away to join the other freed prisoners, who were in the process of binding their former captors.

Once their friend had gone, Phoenix quickly filled in her teammates on what her psychic scans had revealed about the absence of Carol's powers, and her missing memories.

"That don't explain why Ace don't remember *me*," Wolverine commented. "I knew her *before* she got mixed up in this whole spandex lifestyle."

"I think it does, Logan," Jean replied. "Carol's had more contact with you during your time with the X-Men than while you were both working military intelligence; in some way, she associates you more with super hero activity. Therefore, when her memories of having been involved in that 'lifestyle,' as you put it, were removed, her memories of *you* were likewise deleted."

Wolverine grunted. "When did *you* become a psychologist, Jeanie?"

"You go bouncing around inside people's heads as long as I have, friend, and you don't need a shingle hanging on the wall." Jean smiled and wagged a disapproving finger at him. "And that's *Dr. Jean Grey to you.*"

Cyclops frowned, and rubbed his jaw with a gloved hand. "All right, so Carol's powers aren't available to us, and Jean's probably right about the rest of the world being unaware of our existence. But, that doesn't mean we just throw in the towel, go back to the citadel, and let the world go hang. If there *are* superpowered individuals who are opposed to Doom, it's vital that we find them and convince them to join us."

"An' where we gon' find us some o' dese 'individuals'?" Gambit asked.

Cyclops tilted his head to one side and stared at Gambit for a moment like he was some kind of circus oddity. "Where anyone *else* would go when they're looking for super heroes, Remy," he replied slowly.

"New York City."

It was the kind of day that made you glad to be alive.

Outside, the sun shone brightly, a cool breeze from the east drifted across lower Manhattan, and, on the balcony, birds could be heard chirping happily as they ate a breakfast of seeds and bread crumbs from a Roadrunner-shaped feeder.

Lying in bed in the apartment she shared with Warren Worthington III, Betsy Braddock grinned broadly as she listened to the sounds of the city as it geared up to meet the new day.

Her day. The day she took her first big step toward immortality—starting with that night’s performance at the Starlight Room. Warren had made all the necessary arrangements to convince the Minister of Entertainment that he should check out Betsy’s act—give her some serious consideration for a possible spot in the Emperor’s anniversary celebration.

The rest was going to be up to her.

She stretched, arms extended above her head, back arched, then turned to gaze at the man beside her. Warren was sleeping soundly, arms folded against his chest, head tucked under one of his magnificent white wings, in a manner reminiscent of the way in which birds doze. Betsy propped her head up with one hand and silently watched him for a while, wishing that this moment could last forever. Tenderly, she reached out to stroke one of the primary feathers of the wing that lay closest to her. Warren shifted slightly, his wing flapping gently in reaction to her touch; he mumbled something incoherent in his sleep.

It sounded like “Love you.” She was more than happy to settle for the rough translation.

Trying not to disturb him, Betsy quietly stepped from the bed and slipped on a black satin robe. Then, running her hands through her hair to clear her vision of the disheveled lavender locks that had cascaded over her face—how she hated “bed hair”!—she stepped lightly toward the drawn curtains. She pulled them aside to reveal a spectacular view of New York Harbor. The sky was a brilliant blue canvas, stretched out to the horizon without a trace of clouds. To the east, the Brooklyn shipyards were already bustling with activity, as tugboats led massive tankers to and from the docks; to the west, New Jersey was also off to an early start, its highways already beginning to clog with traffic bound for the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, and, through them, into Manhattan.

And out on the water, sunlight glinted off the polished metal of the Statue of von Doom. The four-hundred-foot-tall armored figure stood proudly at the entrance to the harbor, like a modern-day Colossus of Rhodes, its right hand holding a fifty-foot-long Latverian broadsword as though challenging God Himself to a fight. It was an impressive sight, especially when seen from the ocean, and it had been designed at the Emperor’s request by a gifted, world-renowned sculptor named Piotr Nikolievitch to replace the far less imposing French-created statue that had stood there for over one hundred years. Betsy had had the pleasure

of meeting the handsome, though somewhat shy, Russian artist at one of Warren's bashes a year ago.

"Is this heaven?" Warren mumbled from under his wing.

"Close enough," Betsy said, turning to face him. "Why?"

"Well, I think you tried your very best to kill me last night," he replied, "so I was expecting to wake up and find myself standing in front of the Pearly Gates."

"Well, you've already got the wings," Betsy said, "but that *wasn't* any sort of murder I was attempting." Her smile widened. "That was what we British call 'unbridled passion.' Perhaps you Yanks have heard of it?"

Warren stuck his head out from under the feathered appendage; his blond hair looked as though it had been subjected to the full power of a wind tunnel. "Oh, is *that* what that is?" He shook his head. "And here I'd always heard about how *restrained* you English ladies are supposed to be."

Reaching behind her, Betsy told hold of the curtains and drew them closed, plunging the room once more into darkness.

"Darling boy," she purred seductively, "who *ever* said I was restrained . . . or a lady . . . ?"

It was well after ten o'clock before Mr. Worthington made himself available to his business associates.

Sitting alone on a plush leather couch in the living room, Betsy sipped at a mug of Earl Grey tea while she sorted through a small pile of sheet music that she had spread across the teak wood coffee table before her; from the stereo speakers around her, the soft music of a jazz radio station filled the apartment with the sounds of Miles Davis's trumpet rendition of the Michael Jackson song "Human Nature." Clad in one of Warren's dress shirts, hair tied back in a ponytail, Betsy focused on the matter at hand: looking for just the right pieces to perform that night—ones guaranteed to convince the Minister that she should be included in his roster of acts.

Nothing too up-tempo, she thought, *but nothing too melancholy, either. Something Cole Porter-ish, maybe, or Stephen Sondheim.* She picked up one arrangement: "Someone to Watch Over Me." An appropriate number, perhaps, considering that's pretty much what the Emperor did—watch over the entire world—but it was a tad too clichéd; leave that one to Audra McDonnell or Bernadette Peters.

She nervously chewed on her bottom lip. So many choices, so many sets to consider, so many songs that could express to the Minister exactly how she felt about her world, her life, her love for Warren.

So many opportunities to screw up and bore him if she picked the wrong ones.

Betsy shook her head. "That's no way to be thinking, you cow," she muttered. "You'll be fine. In fact, you'll be better than fine—you'll be *tremendous*."

She nodded, pleased with that incredibly positive assessment of her talents. This was no time to be dwelling on negative thoughts anyway, she reminded herself. Warren had presented her with the opportunity of a lifetime, and she wasn't about to just let it slip away by conceding the battle before she had even fought it.

Forget any ideas about screwing up, she told herself. You're a Braddock, remember—and a Brit. We don't do "screwing up." You will pick the right songs, you will be great, you will impress the hell out of the Minister.

And you will get your name on that talent list.

Betsy smiled broadly. By the time she was finished with her set, she'd have the Minister practically *begging* her to be part of the gala.

All she needed was a chance.

BEFORE SHE knew it, that chance was upon her.

Night descended over Manhattan, and with its arrival a different New York City began to come to life. Office workers and bike messengers and street vendors and sales clerks streamed out of the city at the stroke of five o'clock, to be replaced by leather-and-lace-clad Goths and trendy club hoppers and hunters and huntresses on the prowl for companionship, and even the occasional transvestite dressed to the nines like Tallulah Bankhead or Bette Davis.

It was also the time when The Beautiful People—the rich, the powerful, the noses-eternally-stuck-high-in-the-air elite—came out to play. And to be entertained.

Located just off Times Square, high atop the fifty-four story Osborn Enterprises office tower on Sixth Avenue and Forty-fourth Street, the Starlight Room was one of the city's hot spots where The Beautiful People gathered—a place where one went to spend an evening if one wanted to be considered among those “in the know.” On any given night of the week, and especially so on a busy weekend, the spacious restaurant/theater was often jammed to the rafters with celebrities: power-brokers like Donald Trump and Tony Stark often dropped by with their fashion model dates of the month, as did politicians and actors, musicians and playwrights, poets and authors; even the Emperor and Empress von Doom had visited while celebrating their seventh wedding anniversary.

It was also the spot where, for the past two years, three nights a week, critically-acclaimed songstress Elisabeth Braddock had been “knockin’ ’em dead,” to use an old Broadway phrase. Show tunes, torch songs, ballads—if there was a song written in the English language in

the past fifty years, odds were more than just good that Betsy knew it by heart, and could find a way to perform it as no one else had ever done before. It had often been mentioned in the sterling reviews the New York critics had lavished upon her that her show wasn't simply entertainment—it was an emotional experience.

And tonight, she needed to focus those emotions and yank hard on the heart-strings of one very special audience member.

Standing in the center of her private dressing room—not as small as a closet, but a far cry from the almost Grand Canyon-esque dimensions of Warren's apartment—Betsy was in the midst of her warm-ups, fine-tuning her voice before the show, working her way up and down the musical scale as she watched herself in the large makeup mirror over her dressing table. That afternoon's rehearsals had gone surprisingly well, considering she had sprung a few numbers on the band that they'd never performed, and, even better, her dry cleaner had delivered her "good luck" dress—a red satin, floor-length, off-the-shoulder gown with a thigh-high slit along the right leg. The plunging neckline was provocative without being tasteless, and, in a room that was intentionally dimly lit to create "atmosphere," the fire engine-hued material tended to draw the eye far more than the curve of bosom it revealed. What made it special was that she had first worn it last year, when Warren suggested they move in together. And though the style might be a bit slightly behind this year's fashions, it still seemed to bring her a measure of good luck whenever she wore it in her performances.

And considering the odds at stake tonight, she needed all the help she could get.

A knock on the door caught her attention.

"*Cooooommmme iiiinnnn*," she sang, maintaining her concentration.

The door opened, and Paul Miller poked his head into the room. In his late thirties, his shoulder-length brown hair neatly tied back in a ponytail, Paul was the bespectacled band leader of, and pianist for, The Starlight Orchestra—which, truth be told, was not really an orchestra, since it only consisted of ten members. On the other hand, their original name, the Paul Miller Jazz Group, never really had the *zing* Paul had wanted when they'd been made the house band five years ago, so he had settled on something more upscale and more in line with the elegant setting in which they played.

Paul's eyes widened as he caught sight of Betsy. In the mirror, she could tell by his gaze that he definitely liked the way the gown hugged her like a second skin.

"Hey, kid," he said, nodding appreciatively, "you look *fantastic!*"

"*Thaaannkk yooooou*," Betsy replied.

Paul stared at her for a moment more, then shook his head, apparently to focus on other matters. "Oh. Just wanted to stop by and let you know the house is *packed* tonight. Word is the Minister of Entertainment himself's supposed to be putting in an appearance." He smiled. "Try not to embarrass me, okay?"

Betsy stopped singing, and smiled at Paul's reflection in the mirror. "Oh, get out," she said playfully.

Paul laughed. "I'll see you inside. Break a leg, kid!" And with a small wave of his hand, he closed the door.

The Starlight Room was even busier than usual, since word of the Minister's visit had quickly spread through the ranks of the glitteratti—everyone wanted to meet him, to touch the hem of his garment, to suck up to him in the worst way possible.

It had taken an appearance by the Minister's personal—and well-armed—guard to dissuade them of *that* idea.

Now, sitting in a corner of the room—one drenched in shadow so that people would stop staring at them—Warren glanced across the table at his guest, who had moved as far back as possible from the small lamp that shone between them. The Minister of Entertainment was not a tall man, but he carried himself with the arrogance of someone the size of a mountain—self-importance always *has* tended to bring out the worst traits in insecure people. He was high enough in the government to be considered a mover-and-shaker, yet far enough removed from the Emperor to be recognized for the embarrassment that he was.

"Your girlfriend *better* be as good as you say she is, Worthington," the Minister warned. "I'm not about to hire some karaoke singer to stand in front of a jukebox and warble 'My Heart Will Go On' to the Emperor on such a special occasion as his anniversary." He chuckled without mirth. "Although I wouldn't mind doing that to Vic for his next birthday . . ."

"Don't worry," Warren said. "Betsy's everything I've promised, and more. Besides, she was good enough for the Royal Couple when they visited here a few years ago."

The Minister grunted. "That's not exactly a ringing endorsement, friend. Vic's musical tastes tend to swing somewhere between 'The Ride of the Valkyries' and the high-pitched keening of people being ground under his boot heel. And as for Ororo . . ." He shook his head in disbelief. "If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: The Partridge Family does *not* make for good, get-down-on-the-ground-like-a-hound party music at an Imperial function." He shrugged. "Hey, but what do I know? I'm just the freakin' Minister of *Entertainment!*"

Moving out of the light so his face was concealed by shadow, Warren rolled his eyes and groaned softly. This could turn out to be an *extremely* long night . . .

The noisy buzz of chatter in the room died down as Martin Perkins, the restaurant's manager and emcee, stepped onto the stage. He was greeted with polite applause. In his mid-fifties, his short, dark hair peppered with gray, he cut a dashing figure in a tuxedo as he smiled at the audience, then lightly tapped on the microphone at the front of the stage; thankfully, there was no feedback from the speaker system.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "the staff and management of the Starlight Room are proud to present, now in her second year of exclusive engagements, that stylish chanteuse, that critically-acclaimed British songstress: Miss Elisabeth BRADDOCK!"

A spotlight shone on Betsy as she stepped out from backstage, to be greeted by a hearty round of applause. Smiling brightly, she walked over to Perkins, shook his hand, then moved to the microphone.

"Thank you," she said to those gathered. "I'd like to start tonight with a new number, called 'Spring Rain'. It's an early twentieth century poem by Sara Teasdale that—" she gestured toward Paul, who sat at the piano—"Mr. Paul Miller was gifted enough to set to music." A smile played at her lips. "It's a very special song for a very special man in my life."

There was a smattering of applause, and even a few shouts of approval directed toward Warren. Betsy chuckled as he stood up, politely bowed to the room, then sat down.

When the applause and laughter had died down, Betsy glanced over her shoulder and nodded to Paul. His fingers danced over the keys as he began the musical introduction.

Betsy took a deep breath. Then, eyes closed, fingertips lightly resting on the microphone, she began to sing:

I thought I had forgotten
But it all came back again
To-night with the first spring thunder
In a rush of rain

Slowly, she opened her eyes, and, a glowing smile lighting her face, could almost picture the scene she was describing, Warren in her arms:

I remember a darkened doorway
Where we stood while the storm swept by,

Thunder gripping the earth
And lightning scorched the sky

Betsy inclined her head slightly, just enough so she could gaze at Warren, who smiled back; his chiseled, azure features were fairly glowing with pride. She felt her pulse race with exhilaration, and she turned to sing directly to him:

With the wild spring rain and thunder
My heart was wild and gay;
Your eyes said more to me that night
Than your lips could ever say . . .

Three minutes later, the applause that greeted the end of the song was more than appreciated, but it was Warren's warm, beatific smile that meant the world to her.

"Thank you," Betsy said softly to her audience. "Thank you so much."

She glanced toward Warren, and saw him huddled forward across the table, speaking in hushed tones with the Minister. Warren was smiling and nodding her head. Betsy gasped softly, feeling as though her heart was about to explode. Then, drawing a deep breath, she slowly released it as she stepped back from the microphone, and turned to Paul. He smiled and winked at her.

"Go get 'em, tiger-lady," he said quietly, so that only she could hear him.

Betsy smiled and nodded, and the band began playing the next number. As she turned back to the audience, she couldn't help but glance toward the shadowy outline of the Minister. A wicked smile played at her lips.

Let the begging begin . . .

To the east, the bells of St. Patrick's Cathedral tolled midnight. To the south, the bright lights of the Empire State Building's upper floors snapped off, their work done for the night. And inside the Starlight Room, the Minister of Entertainment and his entourage departed for his rooms at the Waldorf Astoria, while another singer—a young woman named Alison Blaire—took the stage, hoping to win over the same audience that was still abuzz over Betsy's incredible performance.

As for Betsy herself, she was walking on air, both figuratively and literally—such things were possible, of course, when you had just captivated an audience of New York's elite, and your boyfriend had decided to celebrate the occasion by unfurling his wings and carrying you off into the night sky.

At the moment, they were in a world of their own, one hundred feet above Central Park, slow dancing to a tune that only they could hear.

"Warren?" Betsy asked, chin resting comfortably against his chest, arms wrapped around his waist.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"For what?" he asked.

"Everything."

"You're more than welcome, Betts," Warren said. He paused. "You know, you haven't asked about what the Minister said to me."

"I didn't have to," she replied.

"Oh?" Warren asked. "What are you, psychic now?"

Betsy chuckled. "You don't have to be able to read minds to tell when you've won someone over." She tilted her head back to gaze into his dark eyes. "I knew I'd won *you* over when we first met."

"True," Warren agreed. "But my mom always used to say she could read me like a book, too."

"Yeess," Betsy replied, "but why is it that whenever *I* do the reading, it turns out to be *Fun With Dick and Jane*?"

"Hey," Warren countered, "some books of just too *good* to read only once."

Betsy giggled softly and grinned. "So," she said, changing subjects, "when does your dear, old friend the Minister want to see me?"

"Noon," Warren said. "At his office in the World Trade Center. And he's *not* my 'dear, old friend.' You have *no* idea of the sacrifices I had to make tonight, Betts."

"Like what?" Betsy asked, suddenly concerned. "Warren, we agreed that it was up to me—"

"And it *was*, honey. It was," Warren said. "But if I *ever* have to sit through another *second* of his whining about how 'Vic' never listens to his suggestions to 'improve' the Empire's image, make it more fun-oriented . . ." He grunted, as though in great pain, and shook his head.

"Poor baby," Betsy said soothingly, reaching up to caress his cheek.

Warren stuck out his bottom lip and pouted. "Yeah. Poor me."

"Well, if he's as bad as he sounds, then I should get my rest," Betsy said. "So I don't show up looking like some worn-out old hag and wind up falling asleep in the middle of his whining."

"You know, *I* was just going to suggest we turn in," Warren said, feigning surprise. "You *really* must be psychic."

Betsy sighed. "If only that didn't mean that my head was filled by the deviant thoughts you're always broadcasting."



Budyx

She smiled, and pulled him into a kiss that made it clear how very grateful she was that he was in her life.

They soared higher, then, and, laughing like children, chased the stars until the morning sun arrived to send them to bed.

Unfortunately, not all the world was filled with lovers.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, the noonday sun was relentlessly beating down on the harbor city of Nouadhibou—a strip of land, really, jutting out into the water like a sand-covered index finger. It was here that deep sea fishing vessels from around the Empire docked after trawling the coastal waters, and it was from here that massive freighters would carry off shipments of iron ore, bound for the Empire's factories. It was not a large city, as major ports-of-call go—the population was only around 60,000 inhabitants—but it certainly drew its fair share of world-weary travelers.

And it was through the streets of Nouadhibou that one traveler in particular walked.

Stopping for a moment beneath the welcomed shade of a shop awning, Erik Lensherr removed a bright-red handkerchief from a pocket of his voluminous white robes and used it to dab at the sweat that was pouring down his face. Not for the first time, he cursed the necessity of wearing his battle helmet in such a stifling climate, and for lacking the foresight to have designed the damned thing with some sort of air-coolant system. Glancing around quickly to make certain that he wasn't being observed too closely by anyone on the busy street, he adjusted his cloth hood to conceal the helmet once more, and then continued his journey to the docks.

The trek from Araouane had been uneventful—most of it spent crossing the desert at night in a jeep “acquired” by Pietro before he had departed to begin making arrangements for his father's suicidal return to America. Packing what few belongings he considered essential, all Lensherr had to do was get to the Spanish city of Barcelona without alerting authorities to his whereabouts; not all that difficult a task, since he had been successfully avoiding the Empire's law enforcers for over twelve months. And once in Barcelona, he would be provided with false identification, plane tickets that would hopscotch him around the globe before bringing him to America (just as a precaution to throw off any potential “shadows”), and the means to trick any security systems that might have a record of his unique biological makeup.

What he needed right now, though, was a ship so he could get there.

A slight breeze was blowing off the water, and its gentle touch sent an exuberant chill up Lensherr's spine; at last, after spending a year in the middle of the Sahara, he had found some relief from the withering

temperatures. The cool air seemed to strengthen him, and he pulled himself up to his full height, allowing just a trace of a smile to show his pleasure.

The docks were extremely busy, with workers helping the crews of deep sea fishing vessels to unload a percentage of their catches and load food and fuel; Lensherr recognized the flags of Russia and North Korea—accompanied, as always, by the flag of the Empire—flying from the masts of some of the ships.

Looking around, he spotted what appeared to be the captain of one of the Russian vessels—a bear of a man, standing a few inches over six feet, with a barrel chest and powerful arms folded across it. Dressed in black despite the heat, his unkempt black beard flecked with gray, he was an imposing figure, to be sure. And it was simple enough to tell that he was in a position of authority: he was the one yelling the loudest at his crew.

Lensherr strolled over to the man. “Excuse me, Kaptain,” he said in perfect Russian.

The scruffy man-mountain slowly turned to face him, then, frowning, looked his visitor up and down, twice, before finally responding. “Da?”

“I was wondering: when you set sail, are you, by any chance, stopping off in Barcelona before returning to the Motherland?”

The captain raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

“I would like to book passage on your ship, if there is room.” From beneath the shadows of his hood, Magneto flashed a gentle, disarming smile.

Again, the captain gave him the once-over and frowned; clearly, he didn’t think too much of the robed figure standing before him. Reining in his mounting anger over the man’s annoyingly condescending behavior, Lensherr forced himself to remain silent and wait for an answer.

“And why should I be so disposing?” the captain rumbled.

“Because I would be more than happy to compensate you for your time,” Lensherr said pleasantly, “and, say, a small, *private* cabin in which to stay?”

The captain grinned—a mildly grotesque expression, considering he was missing four front teeth. “You wouldn’t be running from something, would you, my friend?” he asked. “Like agents of the Empire?” His eyes narrowed, and the grin quickly faded. “Or perhaps you *are* an agent of the Empire, eh, come to make trouble?”

Or perhaps I’ll risk being detected by von Doom’s satellites and use my powers to turn you inside out, if only to spare myself having to put up with any more of your insolence. . . . “my friend,” Magneto thought darkly. But instead of lashing out, he simply said:

"No—to all of the above. I merely wish to visit friends in Spain, and travel by ship is still the easiest way to leave Mauritania." He smiled again, feeling as though his face might split in two if he had to maintain this saccharine-sweet façade for much longer.

The captain ran a meaty hand through his thick, oily beard for a few moments, considering his options. Finally, he said, "All right. But it will be a *costly* trip, my friend. And I will expect *half* the money the moment you set foot on my ship."

Magneto nodded. "Of course. Thank you, Kaptain."

The captain grunted. "We sail at dawn—if you're not here on time, we won't wait for you. My men and I sleep on the ship; you'll have to find your own accommodations in town for the night." He grinned. "You *are* paying for just the *voyage*, after all."

Gritting his teeth, Lensherr forced a smile, muttered his thanks again, and turned back toward the town, not bothering to point out that the captain had not mentioned exactly how one should define "a costly trip" in monetary terms. No matter—whatever the price, the end result of this circuitous route to the United States was worth it.

As the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu had once said in the sixth century B.C., "A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step." For Erik Lensherr—for Magneto, Master of Magnetism—that first step had now been taken.

The first step on the path to revenge.

HUH—PLACE don't look all that different. I was half expectin' all the skyscrapers t'be replaced with flamin' castles."

Turning from the spectacular view he had of Manhattan as it appeared just over the treeline, Wolverine adjusted the wide brim of his darkly tanned Stetson and shot a glance at the other X-Men and Carol. They were seated in a Metro North railway car, seven (hopefully) ordinary-looking passengers among a dozen others spread out around the air-conditioned compartment, inconspicuously making their way down from Westchester County to the center of Manhattan. After spending the night in a Bedford Hills motor lodge, to heal their injuries and get a much-needed rest, they had arose this morning to find an assortment of clothing, a wide variety of breakfast foods, and a small pile of cash, all gathered by the industrious Gambit while they'd slept. He explained that some of the shops and Automated Teller Machines in town had been more than happy to make "donations" to their cause, even though such "contributions" had been received between the hours of one and five A.M. Cyclops had thought of chastising his thievish teammate, but opted instead to let the matter slide since they *were* in need of everything Gambit had provided. The X-Men quickly sat down to feast on sweet rolls, sticky buns, pancakes and sausages, toast and marmalade, and hot coffee and tea. (Never let it be said that, despite their great powers, mutant super heroes are immune to the lure of copious amounts of sugar and caffeine.)

When they were finished gorging themselves and had changed into their "civvies," the team at last settled down to discuss the first order of business: getting into Manhattan. Carol had shot down any ideas of commandeering a transport truck from the camp since large, black ve-

hicles on public roads had a tendency to draw unwanted attention to their occupants; she suggested they make the trip to The City by rail.

Boarding the train at the Bedford Hills station, they had been able to see the aftermath of their night raid when they passed through Salem Center: it appeared that some concerned citizens had alerted the authorities about the rather large explosions that had scorched the night sky and rudely tossed them from their beds—the town, and Graymalkin Drive, were aswarm with hordes of armored soldiers, crisply-uniformed guards, members of the New York State Police, and construction crews apparently dispatched to rebuild the torn and pitted facility. Logan had had to be psychically rendered unconscious by Jean when he realized that, despite his demands to the commandant, the camp had not been leveled; he'd almost managed to leap from the moving train before she was able to send a psi-bolt shooting into his brain to shut him down. When Wolverine finally regained consciousness and calmed down enough to hold a civil conversation, Cyclops reminded him that it was far more important that they get to Doom—if they could reverse what he'd done, then the camps, the tortured prisoners, and the tyrant's position as master of the world would all fade away like the last remnants of a bad dream. Scott's argument had been a sound one, and even Logan had to agree with it. That didn't mean he had to like it, though; he'd sat, brooding, for the last fifteen minutes before at last uttering his remark about the New York skyline.

Now, as the train stopped at the Mt. Vernon station and its doors slid open, Rogue stood up to stretch her legs, taking care not to disturb Remy, who snoozed peacefully beside her. It was clear to see that Rogue was acting more like her old, outgoing self, now that her bare skin was again protected from any casual contact with passersby—somehow, in his nocturnal foraging, Remy had managed to locate a new leather jacket and a bodysuit to replace her tattered outfit; this one, though, was colored red and black instead of yellow and green, and lacked the distinctive "X" emblem. Upon first seeing it, Nightcrawler had quipped that, with the darker clothing, she was perfectly attired for operating in "stealth mode" when she flew at night.

Unfortunately, unlike the rest of his teammates, Kurt himself was a major problem when it came to the matter of avoiding detection. With his blue skin tone and unusually-shaped hands and feet, he more often than not stood out like the proverbial sore thumb in a crowd, so finding something for him to wear in increasingly warm June temperatures had been a challenge for Gambit, but one the Cajun had been willing to meet. His solution: dark clothing all around—slacks, shirt, a knee-length raincoat worn open, large military-style boots—and a pair of circular

sunglasses to hide Kurt's yellow eyes. "If anyone asks 'bout why you got blue skin, or why you wearin' all dis in de summer, *mon brave*," Gambit had said, "you jus' tell 'em you one'a dem Anne Rice fans."

As it had turned out, Gambit had done an admirable job of assembling a wardrobe for the team. Sneakers, jeans, and a crimson blouse for Carol. A light, flower-print summer dress and open-toed sandals for Jean—Scott had decided not to pursue the question, for now, of how the wily ladies' man could know his wife's exact sizes—and tan shorts, green Polo shirt, and low-topped canvas sneakers for Scott; Jean carried their costumes in a large canvas beach bag. Shopping for Wolverine was even easier: work boots, jeans, plaid work shirt, and a cowboy hat. Gambit had settled for sneakers, bicycle shorts, a white muscle T-shirt, and his ever-present duster; like Kurt, his eyes were covered by sunglasses.

The public address system speakers crackled loudly as, somewhere on the train, the conductor made his latest announcement: "Next stop, 125th Street. 125th Street, Harlem. Following 125th Street, this train will be making its last stop at 42nd Street, Grand Central Station. 125th Street, next stop."

A bell chimed pleasantly, and the doors slid closed. With a slight lurch, the train pulled out of the Mt. Vernon station.

"Won't be long now," Rogue said, leaning down toward Jean and Scott. "I just hope somebody's home when we come a-knockin'."

Scott nodded grimly. "That makes two of us . . ."

Warren had already left for his office by the time Betsy awoke.

Unfortunately, he had forgotten to rouse her from her coma-like slumber before he departed. When she finally got around to rubbing sleep-encrusted eyes and rolling over in bed to glance at the alarm-clock on the side table, it was already 10:30.

"*Oh, bollocks!*" she screamed, now fully awake, and clawed her way out of sheets that seemed to have purposely wrapped themselves around her like a mummy's shroud to impede her attempts to get out of bed. She eventually won the battle, though, and was soon racing for the shower.

Moving with a speed she'd never known she possessed—a curiously welcome effect born of equal parts adrenalin and sheer panic—she danced quickly through the shower, blow-dried her hair (noting that she would have to pick up a new bottle of lavender dye, since the color was starting to fade), and began a nerve-racking juggling act that involved running from bathroom to closet and back again, trying to divide her time between applying the proper makeup while searching for the right

kind of outfit one should wear when meeting the Minister of Entertainment for the first time.

She was ready to go by 11:45.

Made-up perfectly, perfumed so just, hair done up in a stylish twist, and clad in a dark blazer and matching miniskirt, Betsy stopped to admire the stunning image she presented in the hallway mirror. She arched a delicate eyebrow and, haughtily looking down her nose, cast a withering gaze at her reflection.

“Beg for me, little man,” she purred in an overly dramatic Russian accent. “Beg for me, and perhaps I shall perform in your charming, little show.” She giggled wildly.

Then, with a joyful laugh, she bolted from the apartment as another adrenalin rush kicked in.

Fortunately, it was a short distance from Battery Park City to the World Trade Center; so short, in fact, that Betsy could have walked there . . . if she had the time. Luck was with her, though—another tenant was just stepping from a taxi cab as she arrived in the lobby. In less than a minute, she was on her way to meet her destiny.

The New York office of the Minister of Entertainment was located on the seventy-fifth floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center. It was not open all year round, since the Minister rarely visited the city, preferring to stay at his Washington, D.C. estate. When he did visit, though, a cleaning crew moved in with all the precision of a military strike team several days before his arrival and scrubbed the place down until it literally gleamed.

Today, of course, was one of those rare occasions when he opened the doors of his office and made himself available to the few people in town he was interested in seeing. Those he was trying to avoid were escorted back to the elevators that led down to the lobby—with or without all their teeth.

The Minister didn't mind fawning sycophants. He just hated it when they did their fawning during business hours.

Betsy stepped onto the main hallway of the seventy-fifth floor, pausing a moment to recover from the pressure on her ear drums created by a higher altitude and an elevator that rose at a speed of 1600 feet per minute. Pinching her nose closed with her thumb and forefinger, she blew hard, then opened her mouth, and was rewarded with the sensation of having her full hearing restored.

And that was when the butterflies in her stomach began flitting about.

“Oh, give it a rest,” she muttered to herself. Taking a deep breath,

she held it for a moment, then released it, and pulled herself up to her full, spike-heel-assisted height. "Right," she said. "Let's *do* this."

Confidently, she strode down the tiled hallway toward a set of oak-paneled doors; gold-leaf lettering was set into the wood:

MINISTER OF ENTERTAINMENT

OPEN:
WHENEVER

BUSINESS HOURS:
DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH WAITING

Betsy's eyes were drawn to another line, inscribed above the door frame:

ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER

"Wonderful . . ." Betsy murmured. Screwing up her courage, she grasped the doorknob, turned it, and walked into the office.

It was like stepping into a child's version of how an office should be designed. Instead of the typical furniture one would expect to find, the reception area was a mass of candy-colored tables and chairs with intentionally twisted legs and seat-backs. Above the receptionist's desk hung ceiling-mounted monitors, on which were being broadcast cartoons and situation comedies and the classic movie *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Betsy smiled, feeling a pleasant chill run up her spine as she watched actor Gene Wilder as Wonka bend down to whisper to the child actress playing the obnoxious Veruca Salt. "*We* are the makers of music, and *we* are the dreamers of dreams," Wilder said softly. Betsy mouthed the words along with him.

On the other side of the room were a collection of pinball machines and old-style video arcade games, their bells and whistles and electronic music battling for attention and combining to create a white noise that rumbled across the black-and-white checkered carpeting to send a tingling sensation through Betsy's toes. And at the far end of the reception area was a wall constructed with a false perspective, so that it appeared the office continued on for another hundred yards. Betsy raised a quizzical eyebrow. Despite what Warren had told her about the man in advance, it seemed that the Minister was an odder egg than even her beau had known.

Her eye was drawn to hung an immense, framed poster hanging on a wall near the front door; it was a promotional item for the hugely-

popular animated television show *Obnoxio the Clown*. Sitting curbside on a cobblestoned street, holding a fishing pole that dangled above an open manhole, the star of the show, repugnant in his grotesque green-and-white makeup and costume, glared out at the viewer, as though angered that he was being observed; either that, or he was annoyed by the fact that a dog standing behind him appeared to be urinating on the back of his costume. A word balloon hung above the clown, its tail leading to yellowed teeth sunk into the end of a smoldering cigar: "There ain't no free lunch!" Obnoxio was saying—an infamous, and incredibly overused, catchphrase that he often muttered on the show.

Betsy slowly shook her head. She'd never understood what was supposed to be so humorous about the violent, often vulgar, program, though Warren seemed to think it was outrageously funny. He'd once commented that her reaction was a prime example of the differences between men and women. He called it "Three Stooges Syndrome": a condition in which men thought Moe, Larry, and Curly were the be-all and end-all of slapstick comedy, and women thought it was all incredibly stupid. She just thought it was a lack of ingenuity—though it was to be expected in a country that had never possessed the sophistication to create a *Blackadder* or a *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

Americans . . . Betsy thought, and shrugged.

"Can I help you?" asked a strong, feminine voice from behind her.

Betsy turned toward the source of the question, and found herself facing an attractive Japanese woman; clad in a bright red dress that seemed two sizes too small, she was in her mid-twenties, dark hair cut in a shoulder-length pageboy style. Light green eyes coolly studied her from beneath inky bangs.

Betsy smiled. "Good afternoon. I have a twelve o'clock appointment with the Minister."

The woman looked her up and down for a few moments. "Brad-dock," she finally said. A sneer creased her perfect, pale-white skin. "Worthington's little songbird."

Betsy started. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, surprised by the venom in the woman's tone. "And just who the hell are *you*?"

The woman's eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward, locking eyes with Betsy. "I am Miss Locke, the Minister's personal assistant," she said, almost growling, "and I am not impressed by pathetic little nobodies who must rely on their boyfriends to suck up to government officials to give them work."

"Oh. Slept *your* way to the top, then, did you?" Betsy asked tersely. The butterflies in her stomach were quickly forgotten, replaced by a roiling surge of anger-laced bile that made her throat burn. She folded

her arms across her chest and planted her feet squarely on the carpeted floor, almost daring this uppity secretary to try and throw her out of the office.

The intercom on Locke's desk suddenly buzzed, breaking the tension. Clearly angry that she was forced to break eye contact with Betsy, Locke hurried to answer the summons.

"Yes, Minister?" she asked.

"Miss Locke," said a voice that sounded to Betsy like a cross between singer Paul Williams and a young Mickey Rooney, "do I hear the beginnings of a cat fight out there?"

Locke glared at Betsy; the heat between them was almost palpable.

"I'm sorry, Minister," Locke finally said.

"Oh, don't apologize," the Minister replied. "I *love* a good cat fight—gets the blood racing. Unfortunately, I need to speak with Miss Braddock while she still has a throat to sing with. Could you send her in?"

"At once, Minister," Locke said, still staring at Betsy. The lavender-tressed "songbird" grinned broadly like a Cheshire Cat. Locke sneered and gestured toward the wall behind her desk. "This way."

Betsy followed her around the separation, down a short corridor that ran behind the reception area, and to another set of double-doors. Locke rapped softly on the dark wood.

"Come on in! Don't be a stranger!" shouted the Minister.

Locke opened the doors and, with one last heated look at Betsy, stepped aside to usher her into the office. Once Betsy had crossed the threshold, Locke closed the doors—*just* managing to avoid clipping Betsy on the funny bone.

Now rid of her surly escort, Betsy took a moment to look around. The office was much like the reception area, decorated in the same Wonka-esque style; Betsy half expected an Oompa-Loompa to come sauntering out of a hidden panel in the walls. On the far side of the room stood the only piece of "adult" furniture: a long, wide, oaken desk, on which sat telephones, a personal computer, toy figures—"action figures," she believed they were called—an assortment of papers, and issues of *Daily Variety*. Beyond the desk was a large, black leather chair, its straight back turned toward her; past the chair was a spectacular view of upper Manhattan and the New Jersey Palisades standing proudly across the Hudson River, all on display through windows that stretched from floor to ceiling.

Betsy smiled whimsically as she gazed at her bizarre surroundings. She had heard of the "Peter Pan Syndrome"—a psychological term for

men who refused to grow up—but until today she had never seen evidence of anyone who actually suffered from it.

“Quite a view, innit?” asked the Minister. With a start, Betsy realized he was sitting in the leather chair, with his back to her.

“Yes, it is,” she replied. She softly cleared her throat and approached the desk. “I’d like to thank you for coming to see my act, Minister—I know we didn’t get a chance to speak at the theater, what with your busy schedule and all—and for taking the time to see me today.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Braddock,” her host said cheerfully. “Any friend of ol’ bird-boy Warren is a friend’a mine, right? Besides, if you didn’t have the kinda pipes I heard last night—and the kinda looks I got a gander at—we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.” He swiveled the chair around to face her.

When she laid eyes on him, it was all Betsy could do to keep from laughing.

The Minister wasn’t very tall, and his suit was as brilliant a white as his unruly mop of hair was red; Betsy was reminded of a dish of vanilla ice cream topped with a maraschino cherry. His lack of sartorial tastes went even further beyond belief, as evidenced by an off-putting pistachio-green shirt and an oversized, clownish bowtie with red polka-dots. All in all, he looked less like a high-ranking government official and more like a circus ringmaster—or a used car salesman.

And yet, there was something familiar about the man, though Betsy couldn’t quite put her mental finger on it—something that made her wonder if they had met before . . .

Eyes sparkling with dark mischief, he practically leapt from his chair to greet her.

“And please—don’t call me ‘Minister,’ ” he said. “The name is *Arcade*, sweets.” He smiled broadly and extended his hand in greeting.

“All right, if you call me ‘Betsy,’ ” she replied. Betsy reached out and clasped his hand in hers—

And stiffened as something akin to a powerful electrical current suddenly surged through her body, pinning her to the spot.

She screamed in agony—a short, brief note—just before darkness overwhelmed her.

“**BETSY!**”

Standing on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, Jean Grey came to a sudden halt, eyes widened in shock. Beside her, the other X-Men and Carol Danvers gathered around as Jean stared off into the distance, her fingertips touching her temples. They did their best

to ignore the lunchtime crowds who jostled and bumped into them, though Nightcrawler clearly felt uncomfortable by the open-mouthed stares directed his way.

Scott moved closer to his wife. "What is it, Jean?"

"It's Betsy," she replied. "For just a second, I detected her thoughts—but they were jumbled, confused." Jean turned to gaze at her husband, her bright green eyes filled with concern. "She was in pain, Scott—terrible pain. And . . . *Arcade* was with her." She paused, and turned her gaze downward. "And then she . . . stopped sending."

The X-Men silently looked at one another, their expressions grim.

"And what does that mean?" Carol asked.

"It means," Kurt explained through tightened lips, "that Betsy is either unconscious, or . . ." His voice trailed off.

Carol didn't need a further explanation.

There's an old chestnut that claims that, just before you die, you see your entire life flashing before you, from childhood all the way to your last moment on Earth.

If such were the case, Betsy Braddock could not understand why, then, she was seeing the life of the Minister of Entertainment being played out before her.

It wasn't his complete life story, thankfully; more like a highlights reel of his career. But what made the situation even more peculiar was that she was seeing events that could not possibly have happened—at least, not the sort of events one would associate with a member of Emperor von Doom's cabinet. Scenes of costumed men and women, like those in the "comic book" movies, running through mazes and avoiding movie serial-like death traps and being bounced about in giant pinball machines.

And all of the devices were being controlled by *Arcade* himself.

I don't remember ever hearing about the Minister playing at being a cinema villain, Betsy thought. *Although with that suit of his he could almost have stepped straight out of one of Roger Moore's James Bond movies . . .*

But now other images—not images, but *memories*, she realized with a start—began to form: of herself a few years ago, in a different—and decidedly non-Asian—body, shopping in London (she could tell it was supposed to be her—the lavender hair was a dead giveaway); of a handkerchief being pressed over her face, and the smell of a powerful anesthetic; of that snooty cow Miss Locke carrying her from a van into something called "Murderworld"; of her brother, Brian, dressed in a bright red costume with a yellow, lion-shaped silhouette emblazoned

across the chest—like an outfit worn by one of those outlandish super heroes—calling himself “Captain Britain,” and coming to her rescue.

And above it all, like a giant, grotesque sculpture of a demonic head displayed at the entrance to an amusement park funhouse ride, hung the sinister, leering face of the Minister of Entertainment.

What’s all this about? Betsy wondered. *How could any of these be my memories, especially when—thank God—I’ve never even met the Minister’s “personal assistant” before today? And that nonsense about looking Caucasian—when did my imagination get so bloody colorful?*

But, more importantly, if I’ve died, then why is it that my head hurts so . . . ?

“Hey, you okay there, Betsy?” It was Arcade’s voice, but it sounded as though it was being broadcast through a bad transmitter, like the muffled sound made by someone speaking into a telephone with a handkerchief over the mouthpiece.

Slowly, Betsy opened her eyes. She was lying on a sofa shaped like a pink-colored carp, her head resting on a pillow that looked like a giant lobster from some children’s cartoon; a dampened handkerchief sat coolly on her brow.

“I-I’m not dead . . .” she whispered, partly in disbelief.

“Not by a long shot, sweets,” Arcade said, “though you had us going there for a minute.”

Looking up, Betsy saw him standing beside her, bent forward, hands resting on his knees. Behind Arcade, Miss Locke sneered at her—

“Try not to cause us too much trouble, little girl,” she said, reaching forward to tie a paisley-colored handkerchief over Betsy’s mouth; the cloth smelled faintly of lilacs. “Arcade prefers that all participants play the game in their own way, without outside assistance.”

She checked to make certain that the gag was knotted securely, then stepped back to look at her employer. Arcade, leaning on a thin, bamboo cane, a straw skimmer sitting at a rakish angle on his head, flashed a wicked smile.

“Now, the fun begins . . .” he said.

“Back again?” Arcade asked cheerfully. “You know, Warren didn’t tell me you were a narcoleptic.”

Betsy blinked twice and stared blankly at Arcade, who was now sitting on a chair beside the couch. Obviously, some time had passed since their last brief exchange.

With a start, she realized that she had blacked out again.

But why had it happened? What had caused it?

She was certain it had everything to do with that surge of electricity she had felt when she touched Arcade's hand—but was it something he had done intentionally? If so, for what reason?

And what were these visions she was having during her bouts of unconsciousness—these melodramatic scenes of facing dire peril at the hands of the Minister and his assistant? She *had* had the odd feeling that they'd met once before, but surely it must have been at a party, or at the ballet, or a movie premier she had attended with Warren—not as a helpless kidnap victim being used as a prize in a bizarre game intended to trap her brother. Maybe it was just her fear of failing Warren—of failing herself, really—at play here, and her subconscious mind was causing her to see the Minister and Miss Locke as a threat to her desire to finally make a name for herself.

Couldn't *that* be it?

And yet, there was something about the visions—something that her mind was insisting was real; that they were not fanciful manifestations created by an overactive imagination, but actual suppressed memories of an actual terrifying event in her life.

But why, then, couldn't she remember experiencing it?

What in God's name was going on with her?

A soft grunting noise drew her attention back to reality and over to Arcade's assistant. Clearly disgusted at the sight of a woman who appeared to have had a fainting spell brought on by all the excitement of meeting the honest-to-God Minister of Entertainment himself, Miss Locke turned on her heel and left the office.

"W-what is happening to me . . . ?" Betsy asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea, sweets," Arcade said. "Soon as we shook hands, you went stiffer than Tony Stark on a three-day bender and keeled right over. And then, just as I was about to explain all that to you after you woke up, you plopped down again and took another catnap."

Betsy paused to replay the initial event in her mind. She nodded slowly as it all came back to her. "But, didn't you feel the shock when we touched? The electrical shock?"

Arcade stared at her, obviously confused. "Shock?" He chuckled. "Well, I left my joy buzzer in my other pants, so that couldn't have been the cause of it. But I might've accidentally rubbed my feet on the carpet before we touched . . . although that's not the kind of thing that can knock you out, you know?"

"No, I suppose not . . ." Betsy said slowly. Pushing off from the lobster-pillow, she sat up and removed the cold compress from her fore-

head. "I'm sorry for all the melodrama, Minister. That's never happened to me before." She shook her head. "God, I feel like such an a—"

"Hey, it's all right," Arcade said, waving his hands in a dismissive gesture. "No harm, no foul. Besides, you've just provided proof positive of what I've always suspected: I've got a real *electric* personality." He reached out a hand to her and smiled, and—

"I hope your brother gets here soon, ducks," the leering gamesmaster said to her. Betsy tried to lash out at him, to claw at that insipid, arrogant face, or kick him in the groin to wipe away that infuriating smile, but bound as she was, hand and foot, to a gleaming white wooden stallion on a merry-go-round, such actions were impossible.

"I'd hate to see such an exquisitely beautiful woman—such as yourself—wind up splattered across ten square meters of Derbyshire," he continued, "because their super heroic sibling was off rescuing cats from trees when he should have been watching out for his loved ones." He reached out to stroke Betsy's cheek with a gloved hand, and—

"—your boyfriend can attest to *that* fact," the Minister was saying.

Betsy started. "W-what . . . ?" She looked up to find herself sitting in front of Arcade's desk on one of the candy-apple red chairs scattered about the office. The Minister was back in his big leather seat, white-booted feet resting comfortably on the desk's ink blotter.

Betsy shook her head to clear her thoughts; her cheeks reddened. "I-I'm sorry, Minister. My mind must have . . ."

"Taken a little stroll?" Arcade asked. Betsy bobbed her head once without looking at him. Arcade shrugged. "Happens to me all the time." He eyed her suspiciously. "Are you *sure* you're okay?"

Betsy nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes, I am. I'm *fine*." She saw Arcade's eyes narrow as he studied her face. "*Really*," she insisted.

"All right. Just checking," Arcade said. "Anyway, I was just saying that Warren can back me up when I say that I thought your stuff was outstanding last night. You put a lot of heart in your performance, and it really showed."

Betsy blushed. "Thank you."

"And that little number you threw Warren's way. That poem?"

"'Spring Rain,' by Sara Teasdale?" Betsy offered.

Arcade thumped a fist on the desk. "*That's* the one! *Fantastic* number! I saw how the audience was just eating it up with a spoon—wasn't a dry eye in the house by the time you were done yanking on their

heart-strings. A regular Celine Dion ballad.” He shrugged. “Not exactly Wayne Newton, but hey—it’s a helluva lot better than ‘I Think I Love You,’ and it’d have the Empress crying all over her party dress, and *that’s* what’s important.” He paused. “You have permission from this . . . this . . .”

“Teasdale.”

“Right. Her. You have her permission to use that song?”

Betsy suddenly found it difficult to catch her breath. Was this conversation going where she *thought* it was heading . . . ?

“Well?” Arcade asked. “*Is* this Teasdale going to cause any trouble?”

“Uh, no,” Betsy replied. “She passed away quite a long time ago.”

“Perfect!” Arcade exclaimed. “I *love* quick and easy solutions to potential problems—they make my life *so* much simpler.”

“Umm . . . excuse me, Minister . . .” Betsy began.

“*Arcade*,” the Minister happily insisted.

“All right . . . Arcade.” Betsy paused, part of her brain screaming at her to ask the question, the other part warning her not to back him into a corner and force him to make a decision too soon. She *had* to know, though. “I don’t mean to be too forward,” she said slowly, “but are we talking about me actually *participating* in the anniversary gala?”

“Well, for *now*, we are,” Arcade admitted. “But I can’t set anything in stone until I hear back from some of the other acts I’ve been talking to. Believe you me, the last thing I’m about to do is tell The Wayouts that I’ve gotta bump ’em from the schedule so some unknown chanteuse from a midtown Manhattan lounge can take their spot and serenade the Royal Couple instead.” He shivered. “Those guys would rip off my legs and beat me to death with ’em before I could choke out an ‘I’m sorry, and I’ll make it up to you.’ ”

“But you *are* saying I have a chance?” Betsy asked. Her heart was pounding so loudly in her ears, she wasn’t even certain she had put forth the question.

“Sure—*everybody’s* got a chance, sweets, but I really won’t know for sure about the line-up for another day or so.” Arcade shrugged. “You’ll just have to bear with me until you hear back one way or the other. Fair enough?”

Her mind suddenly a blank, Betsy found it difficult to do anything more than simply nod.

“Any luck?” Scott asked.

Jean shook her head. “I can’t detect any other activity from Betsy.

It's like her 'signal' was cut off in mid-transmission. And without knowing the direction it came from, I can't get a fix on her location."

Depressed, she glanced at her husband, who smiled encouragingly. After receiving Betsy's psychic SOS, the X-Men had elected to move to the opposite side of Fifth Avenue in order to get away from the constant flow of pedestrian traffic that crowded the busy intersection; for the past fifteen minutes, they had been sitting quietly on the stone steps of the New York Public Library, waiting for Jean to track down their missing colleague. Off to one side, Carol and Nightcrawler sat at a small table, conversing quietly as they sipped at cans of soda; his unusual skin coloration was concealed, for the time being, by the shade of the open umbrella that jutted up from the center of the table. Rogue and Gambit were also sitting together, snuggled close, heads almost touching as they talked in hushed whispers. They looked like any other couple gathered on the steps: two people—not mutants, not super heroes—deeply in love and enjoying their own company.

As for Scott, Jean, and Logan, they were still focused on the matter at hand: trying to reach Betsy. Scott was sitting back, elbows resting on the step behind him, watching the nonstop hustle and bustle that was New York at lunchtime; it seemed that not even the machinations of Victor von Doom could do much to disrupt the faster-than-life speed of the Big Apple. Beside him, Jean looked thoroughly annoyed, chin resting in the palms of her hand as her elbows balanced on her knees; she stared into space, brow furrowed. Slouched on the steps on Jean's other side, Logan was doing his best not to look like a third wheel as he sat beside the happy couple.

Groaning softly, Jean leaned forward to grasp her sandaled feet and hang her head in frustration between her legs, allowing her hair to flow down and conceal her features. Scott reached out a hand to gently rub her back.

"I don't understand it," Jean muttered from beneath her mountain of crimson locks. "Even if Betsy were unconscious, I should *still* be able to pick up *some* trace of her subconscious—a random thought, a brief replay of the last few seconds before she blacked out . . . *Something*."

"You *sure* she's in the immediate area, Red?" Logan asked, his cowboy hat set low over his dark eyes. "If her mental hollerin' was as loud as you say it was, maybe she's someplace *else* in the five boroughs. Hell, she coulda been sendin' that message from *Hoboken* fer all ya know."

Jean's head snapped back up and she stared at Logan for a moment. Then, wincing as though in pain, she growled softly, and sharply rapped

the sides of her head with her knuckles. "Dumb, dumb dumb," she muttered. "The image of Arcade that she broadcast was so clear, the sensation of his threat so evident, I just assumed Betsy was somewhere in our vicinity." She looked at Wolverine. "Thanks, Logan."

"No charge fer the service, darlin'," he replied with a half smile.

"Any news?" Carol asked as she and Nightcrawler walked over to join them. She glanced at a large clock suspended above the entrance of a cigar shop of the corner of Forty-second Street—it was 1:30 P.M. "Time's a-wastin' if you folks want to try and track down some of your long-john brethren."

"That can wait for the moment," Scott said. "Right now, we've got a friend who appears to be threatened by one of our most dangerous enemies. She might be in need of our help and, Doom-controlled world or not, the X-Men always take care of their own."

"Pretty words, Summers, but ultimately useless," Carol said, with the tone of someone who no longer believed such sentiments. "Try saying them again with the same conviction if you ever wind up in one of von Doom's camps like I did. I promise you: one week of beatings and starvation and fighting for crumbs of food, and that 'all for one, and one for all' Musketeer crap will become just a faint memory as you focus on more important things—like battling each day just to keep *yourself* alive."

"Well, Carol," Scott replied slowly, clearly avoiding being drawn into an argument, "if we succeed in our mission and set everything back to the way it all should be, it'll be this version of the world that becomes the faint memory. And locating another X-Man is just as important as contacting the Avengers for help now—it's one more ally lending her powers to our cause." Not bothering to wait for Carol to respond, he turned to Phoenix. "Jean, I want you to run a telepathic scan as far out from this spot as you're able to go. Start with the island, then sweep the other boroughs. If that fails—" he glanced at Wolverine, and smiled wryly "—follow Logan's suggestion and try Hoboken."

"All right, Scott," Jean said. "It might take a while, though."

"You take all de time you need, Jeannie," Gambit piped in. "We not goin' nowhere till you finished with what needs doin'." Jean turned in his direction and saw that Remy was lying on one of the steps, head resting comfortably in Rogue's lap; he grinned broadly as his Southern Belle ran slender, gloved fingers through his dark, unruly hair.

Jean smiled. "Thank you, Remy. I appreciate your patience."

"My pleasure," Gambit said.

Jean's grin broadened. *Dat Gambit, he a suave one, no?* she thought.

Drawing her legs up, Jean assumed a meditative lotus position and closed her eyes. Slowly, she willed herself to tune out the ear-throbbing urban sounds around her, then slowed her breathing and cleared her mind.

Betsy, are you there? she broadcast. *Betsy? It's Jean. If you can "hear" me, please respond. Betsy . . . ?*

Down at the World Trade Center, Betsy had just stepped into the elevator that would take her back down to the lobby when the screaming started in her head.

BETSY! PLEASE ANSWER ME! IT'S JEAN! BETSY, YOU'VE GOT TO RESPOND!

It was sudden and demanding and so completely overwhelming—like an icepick being driven through her eye and into her brain—that the pain temporarily blinded her. She stumbled forward into the car and slammed against the far wall, clutching the sides of her head. Thankfully, the elevator was empty, so she didn't need to try and mutter some lame excuse for her behavior to a fellow passenger; not that she could have said anything at this point—the throbbing in her brain was so intense she could barely form a coherent thought.

"S-stop i-it. P-please st-stop i-it . . ." she mumbled pitifully, tears streaming down her cheeks. But the pain didn't let up, and her legs were suddenly unable to support her weight any longer; she slid down along the wall to lie in a heap on the cool, tiled floor.

And now a torrent of images pounded at her mind: a concerned, redheaded woman; a man with claws like an animal, but the heart of a warrior; a black-costumed man with a goatee, raking razor-sharp fingers across her eyes; an obese, yellow-skinned *thing* with eyelids held open by metallic pincers that sunk deeply into its flesh, and a smile like that of Satan himself; the English-woman version of herself, trapped in a room filling with water as the Minister of Entertainment—but not the Minister of Entertainment watched, her cries for help cut off by a colorful strip of cloth; the correct, Japanese version of herself, but dressed in a dark blue swimsuit and leggings of some kind, a swash of red color—like paint, or a tattoo—running from just above her left eye down to her left cheekbone; a blue-skinned demon with a pointed tail, leaping at her; a peaceful world that looked nothing like Earth, watched over by a kindly, dark-haired woman in white who lived in a floating citadel; a baldheaded man in a wheelchair.

What did it mean? What did *any* of it mean? And why wouldn't the flood of indecipherable visions stop? Why wouldn't they get out of

her head before she was driven to the brink of madness, for surely that wasn't long in coming?

But *still* the images formed and dissolved, moving faster and faster, and *still* the voice echoed through her mind, growing louder in volume, demanding that she respond. . . .

A few blocks away, in a building on Pearl Street, an alarm began sounding.

The offices of the Imperial Agency for Superhuman Activities, New York Center, were located in a forty-story, Art Deco-designed building that, from the outside, looked no different from any of the hundreds of other glass and steel and stone structures that towered above the thin, winding streets of lower Manhattan.

Unlike the other structures, however, the glass was capable of withstanding a point-blank burst from a laser cannon, the stone was thick enough to shrug off a blow or two from the Hulk, and the beams that supported the building were composed of steel mixed with adamantium and a variety of other super-strong elements. In short, the building could withstand anything short of a nuclear strike on Manhattan, or a gathering of hell-raising Norse gods intent on having a memorable night on the town.

It was almost as strong, some often pointed out, as the woman in charge of its personnel.

In her early thirties, blond-haired and blue-eyed, Dr. Valerie Cooper was that rare kind of person who possesses good looks, an incredible intellect, and an annoyingly superior attitude that, in this case, meant she considered herself God's gift to science (and there where those in the scientific community who would actually agree with that assessment). For the past decade, she had made a career of keeping superhumans in line, coordinating her office's activities with those of Anthony Stark's and Sebastian Shaw's, and, on the rare occasion, even reporting directly to Emperor von Doom himself. Her rule of thumb in dealing with the superpowered men and women who tended to pop up over the years was simple: you either worked for the Emperor and wore your leash and collar like a good little obedient dog, or you were put down before you posed a threat to the civilian population. After all, nobody liked a bad dog.

A *lot* of bad dogs had been put down on her watch.

Nine years ago, it had been the good doctor's people who, at von Doom's command, had eliminated a good portion of the super-villain community so that the Emperor could focus on more important matters of state. And though some people might call her a killer, and some

might consider her a saint, the bottom line was that Val Cooper enjoyed her work, was proud of her work, and wasn't the type to allow even the lowest Morlock to escape her scrutiny.

Such dedication to her profession, of course, made being assigned to her division akin to a sneak preview of what it might be like to be consigned to the blackest pit of hell . . .

"Kill that damn noise!" Cooper bellowed as she entered the thirty-first floor monitoring room. She turned to a brown-haired, female technician as the alarm cut off. "What's the situation?"

"TK meters, Ma'am." The tech—whose nametag said BURROUGHS—pointed to a monitor at her station. "We're picking up an incredible surge of psychic power—it's off the scale!"

Cooper folded her arms across her chest and raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Location?"

"Midtown Manhattan. Forty-second and Fifth." Burrough's eyes widened as she glanced at another screen. "Ma'am, the sender isn't registered in the systems."

Now it was Cooper's turn to register surprise. "An unknown psitalent? How can that be possible?"

"I've no idea, Ma'am," Burroughs replied. "Your orders?"

Cooper tapped a slender index finger against the tip of her nose as she paused to consider her next move.

"Scramble the Hunters," she finally said. "Fill them in on the situation, and have them load for bear; we don't know *what* we might be up against here. Then notify Psi Division—have them send one of their people over so our team's got someone capable of warding off a mental assault." She pointed a demanding finger in the technician's face. "And make sure they're *all* aware that the target's in the middle of a *densely populated* area. I don't want them tearing up half of Manhattan in some senseless donnybrook if they can convince the target to surrender peacefully." She frowned. "I sure as hell don't want to have to explain the cause for massive property damage and incalculable civilian injuries to the Emperor."

Burroughs nodded in understanding, then paused. "And if the target refuses to cooperate, Ma'am?"

Cooper's eyes glittered with unbridled malevolence. "Then the Hunters are to *terminate* the target—with extreme prejudice."

IF EVER there was one specific person for whom Extra-Strength Tylenol had been created, that person would have to have been Elisabeth Braddock.

Hair and clothing disheveled, feet set squarely on the warm asphalt walkway, she sat on a bench at Battery Park, head down, looking for all the world like someone who had just been trampled by every bull and bear that had ever run rampant through the Wall Street area. Above her, a flock of seagulls made slow circles in the afternoon sky above the harbor; every now and then, one of the birds let loose a piercing cry that rang through Betsy's skull like a fire alarm. A few hundreds yards away, a tour group was lining up to board a boat that would take them to the Statue of von Doom, where they would be given a brief history lesson on the Emperor's rise to power. Betsy had taken the tour once, last year, when Warren had been out of town on business; it had been a pleasant way to spend an afternoon, with the smell of salt water in the air and a cool breeze blowing in from the Atlantic Ocean.

Now, though, just the act of elevating her head slightly to look at the beaming faces of the children as they ran wildly across the boat's twin decks was enough to send daggers into the base of her skull. Dully, she wondered how such a day laden with promise could have gone so terribly wrong. Not expecting a reply, she hung her head down to lessen the pressure building behind her sinuses and fished in her purse for the small bottle of Tylenol she had purchased after staggering out of the elevator back at the World Trade Center.

She'd certainly been a sight to see, then, hadn't she? The impression she must have left on the minds of the Doom Youth Scout troop when

the elevator doors had opened to reveal an attractive, purple-haired woman sprawled in a corner, mumbling for someone to "stop"!

Thankfully, the voices and the barrage of images *had* stopped, just before she had resorted to banging her head against the elevator's walls and floor in the desperate hope that unconsciousness would bring a blessed end to the torment. Why they had stopped, she didn't know; nor did she really care.

Fighting the child-proof safety cap, Betsy eventually managed to shake out a couple of tablets from the bottle. With a grimace, she shoved them into her mouth and dry-swallowed. Now, if she could just manage to get back to the apartment without passing out again . . .

Man, could I get lost in all'a that hair . . .

Betsy raised her head—a little too quickly, as her throbbing temples pointed out—and looked around for the speaker. Her gaze fell upon a young black man in his early twenties seated on a bench across from her. He was dressed in a tightfitting white T-shirt—emblazoned with the logo of the New York Yankees—and a pair of black spandex shorts. One sneakered foot rested idly on the support bar of a mountain bicycle. A walkie talkie was strapped to his waist, and a large, black portfolio was propped against the edge of the wooden seat, within arm's reach. A messenger of some sort, obviously taking a break from his errands to admire the feminine scenery.

"I beg your pardon?" Betsy asked him.

The messenger looked back at her, clearly caught off-guard by her question. "Huh?" he replied.

"You said something about my hair?"

The messenger started, as though he'd been caught at doing something bad. But instead of apologizing, he vigorously shook his head. "I didn't say nothin.'"

Betsy frowned; she wasn't in the mood for this nonsense. "Of course, you did," she said. "I clearly heard you say you'd like to get lost in all my hair." To emphasize the point, she tugged at a few lavender strands. "Not that I'm not flattered—I am—but I think it's somewhat inappropriate to just go blurting out things like that in public."

The messenger's eyes widened in surprise, and he slowly rose to his feet. "B-but," he stammered, "I didn't *say* it. I was just *thinkin'* it."

Now it was Betsy's turn for shocked expressions. "But, that can't be," she insisted. "I heard you plain as day."

Holy—she's some kinda freaky mutant or something. or maybe one of those Imperial probe types I heard about—Readin' my mind an' stuff. I gotta get outta here!

Betsy froze. She had heard that, too. But this time she had been facing the man—and *he hadn't spoken those words aloud.*

Oh, my God, she thought, feeling a horde of butterflies being released into her stomach. *It's starting again. But, how am I doing this? What's happening to me . . . ?*

"Look, lady," the messenger said, as he straddled the seat of his bicycle, "I'm tellin' you the truth. I didn't say *nothin'* out loud, and I didn't say *nothin'* to *you*. All I was doin' was checkin' you out, an' thinkin' about what fine hair you got. But I *never* said *anything* out loud. An' if that ain't good enough for you, then that's *your* problem. Me—I'm outta here." And with that, he began pedaling away.

"Wait!" Betsy said, waving at him to stop. "I'm sorry! Please, I don't understand why this is . . ."

But the messenger was already riding out of the park, not bothering to look back.

"Please . . ." Betsy whispered, feeling tears well up in the corners of her eyes. Her head was beginning to ache again, and she squeezed her eyes shut to try and stave off the next wave of pain before it broke. She needed to get home, lie down, and—

Wow. Check out those legs, another voice said. *Go right up to her neck, don't they? I'd sure like to—*

She wheeled around to find a thirtysomething police officer standing a dozen paces behind her, an admiring smile plastered on his face as he openly gazed at her. With a start, he realized that he was being observed by the very object of his keen interest; cheeks blushing, he quickly averted his gaze.

"You'd like to *what?*" Betsy asked angrily, rising to her feet. She took two wobbly steps toward him, but then—

Can't believe Doom's raising the price of gas again. You'd think he's already got enough money . . .

Yet *another* voice? Confused, Betsy turned from the policeman and saw a business-suited man walking by, not looking at her at all; he was too busy reading a newspaper.

Reading. But his lips weren't moving. Yet she could still "hear" him as he continued scanning an article on pending price increases announced by von Doom's cabinet.

But it wasn't like what had happened in the elevator. There were no images this time, no suppressed memories suddenly leaping to the front of her brain—this was nothing less than a deluge of other people's thoughts. It was as though her head had been turned into some kind of enormous receiving dish for every random idea, every dark secret

scratching at the corners of someone's mind, every hidden desire being unconsciously broadcast by the people around her.

And it wouldn't stop; in fact, it only got worse with each passing second.

been meaning to tell Barbara how I feel like to tell old man Ferguson where he can stick it how can I tell Kevin I'm infected gotta be a way to get out of this freakin' lowpaying job why doesn't anybody understand never should've let Jack talk me into that weekend in Atlantic City Mets better get some good pitchin' soon can't let Sandra go and ruin my marriage bet nobody'd care if I stepped in front of a bus wonder if Bill's interested in going to the cabin this weekend can't believe I have to reschedule another dental appointment they'll never find the body NOT WHERE I HID IT why can't I be as thin as those supermodels a shame a looker like her turns out to be such a nutjob GREAT LEGS THOUGH AND MAN JUST LOOK AT ALL THAT HAIR

"STOP IT! STOP IT!" Betsy screamed, her hands pressed to the sides of her head. "JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Around her, passersby came to an abrupt halt. She could "hear" each of their thoughts—some of them feeling concern for her, some annoyed by the antics of the crazy woman melodramatically clutching her head, some wondering what she might be like in bed when the "voices" weren't talking to her. Most though, spared her only a moment's glance before continuing on their way—a typical New York reaction to an atypical situation: *Not my business*, their thoughts said. *Somebody else's problem. Move on.*

Fighting to regain control of her mind, Betsy realized that she had to get out of the park, back to the apartment. She couldn't remain here any longer—at any moment, the police officer who had been admiring her legs might call for

Dispatch, I need an ambulance at Battery Park. Possible psychiatric patient causing a disturbance. request assistance.

Frantically, Betsy looked around. The policeman was standing far enough away so that she wouldn't have been able to hear him under normal circumstances, but now . . .

Before the officer could react, she was pushing through the crowd and racing through the park, trying to see through bleary eyes as she looked for an exit. All she needed to do was get to the apartment complex—get to the complex and she'd be safe. But it seemed so very far away . . .

"Warren . . ." she cried softly, tears streaming down her cheeks, head pounding like an incessant drumbeat. "Help me . . ."

With a heavy sigh, Jean Grey shook her head and turned to her husband.

"I'm sorry, Scott," she said. "It's no use. She's just not sending."

With a slight nod of his head, Scott Summers reached out to rub Jean's arm consolingly. "It's all right, hon. You did your best." He smiled encouragingly at her, but Jean's expression made it clear she was disappointed in herself for failing to locate Betsy.

"We movin' out?" Logan asked from beneath his hat.

"No other choice," Scott replied, a frown creasing his handsome features. "We can't afford to wait any longer." He ran a hand through his dark-brown hair and kicked at a loose piece of concrete near his feet in frustration. "Damn it."

Now it was Jean who offered the comforting gesture, sliding her right arm around his waist and pulling him close. "I know how you feel, hon," she said quietly. "None of us want to leave a team member behind, especially in the middle of a crisis. But we don't have a lot of options open to us, and reversing Doom's handiwork *has* to remain our top priority."

"I know," Scott said. "But still . . ."

Jean moved her arm from his waist and reached up to gently tousle his hair. "I'm sure Betsy will be fine, Scott," she assured him. "She's an X-Man, after all, and it'll be a sorry day for us all when one of our people can't handle a third-rate loser like Arcade." She smiled, and reached up to stroke his cheek with her left hand. "We have to keep telling ourselves that, have to maintain a positive outlook, or we won't be able to complete this mission." Her smile broadened as she leaned close to whisper in his ear. "As a wise man once said: 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.'"

"'Or the one,'" Scott said, completing the quote. He turned to look at Jean, a half smile playing at his lips. "Since when did AMC start running *The Wrath of Khan*?"

"They didn't," Jean replied. "*Star Trek* movie marathon on the Sci-Fi Channel. I caught it just before we left to help Roma."

Scott shook his head in mild disbelief and leaned forward to kiss her; Jean met him halfway.

Love you, Red.

Love you too, "Slim."

Beside them, Logan suddenly sat bolt upright, batting his Stetson away with one hand. He jumped to his feet and cocked his head to one side, obviously straining to hear something above the noise and traffic on Fifth Avenue.

"Logan?" Scott asked. He and Jean rose to their feet.

"We got company," Logan said. "I'm pickin' up some weird kinda

turbine sound, comin' from—" he turned around and pointed to the sky above the public library "—there."

Its hull gleaming brightly in the midday sun, the armored transport sliced through the air, moving swiftly from the west toward Fifth Avenue. As it drew closer, the sound created by the powerful turbines that kept it aloft drowned out every other noise in the area and rattled windows for blocks around. And then, as quickly as it had flown, it came to an abrupt stop just above the library and remained there, hovering.

As one, the other X-Men and Carol moved to stand beside Logan, Scott, and Jean, assuming combat-ready positions.

"How you wanna play this, Cyclops?" Rogue asked.

"Let them make the first move," Scott replied. "And when it comes, try not to let them draw any of you away from the rest of the team."

"I'll try keepin' that in mind when the explosions start goin' off," Rogue said. She glanced at Gambit. "Can't be a proper fight *without* somethin' explodin'—right, sugah?"

Gambit flashed an easy smile. "Couldn't've said it better myself, *there*."

With a hiss of pressurized air being released, a hatch opened on the bottom of the craft.

"All right," Scott said grimly. "Here it comes."

Slowly, a large metal platform descended from the transport, occupied by a half-dozen costumed men and women. As it moved closer, they were able to get a better view of the group: a dark-haired woman in a tight leather outfit, a gun strapped to her right thigh; a blond-haired man in a red leather jacket, green buccaneer-style boots, and a black costume trimmed in green—the upper half of his face was concealed beneath a mask that was green on the left side and black on the right; a blond-haired woman in an identical costume to his, though the display of colors on her mask were reversed, and her thigh-high boots were golden; behind them stood a cloven-hoofed cyborg of some sort, another dark-haired woman in a red-and-gold costume, and what appeared to be a sentient oil slick, on top of which floated an inky-black approximation of a human face.

"Looks like somebody left the door open at the Legion of Losers Hall," Wolverine said.

"You *know* these people?" Carol asked.

"Some of 'em," Wolverine muttered, his eyes narrowing in anger. "Don't recognize the three in the back, though." He pointed to the leather-clad woman. "*That* one calls herself 'Mastermind.' The Cajun an' me ran into her a couple years ago. She's a telepath, like her old man—tried messin' with our heads, makin' us think I was some kinda

serial killer." His lips pulled back in a feral snarl. "An' she was workin' with Arcade then."

"All roads seem to lead back to that little sociopath, do they not?" Nightcrawler commented.

"Just a small cog in a giant machine, Kurt," Jean replied. "Besides, our kind of business *thrives* on coincidence."

"The brother/sister act in the matching costumes," Scott explained to Carol, "call themselves 'Fenris,' after the wolf in Norse mythology. They're mutants, with an ability to generate concussive blasts."

Behind him, Rogue looked over to Gambit and smiled.

"See? I told you," she whispered. "Explosions."

"*Big time, chere,*" the Cajun agreed. He slipped a hand into the pocket of his duster to pull out one of the six new decks of playing cards he had purchased after getting off the train at Grand Central Station.

"All right, people, I'll only say this once," Mastermind stated, her voice amplified by a hidden speaker on the platform. She pointed a commanding finger at the X-Men. "By order of his royal majesty, Emperor Victor von Doom I, and under the authority vested in me by the Imperial Agency for Superhuman Activities, Psionics Division, you are to surrender the telepath and then submit to arrest without incident. Failure to comply with these orders is punishable by death."

"Well, at least now we know how they became aware of our presence," Carol said. She glanced frostily at Jean. "Between poking around in my so-called 'memories' and this, you've got a helluva track record going, sister."

"Knock it off," Scott snapped. "You have a grievance to air out, do it *after* we've gotten out of this situation."

"What's your answer, boys and girls?" Mastermind demanded. "I don't have all day to stand around while you pick at your navels."

"The answer is *no*," Scott replied. He raised a hand as though to scratch his chin; he was actually placing it close enough to his visor to flip open the ruby quartz lens when needed.

Mastermind smiled; at another time, in another situation, it would have almost seemed pleasant. "No big surprise there, huh, handsome? Well, Cooper's going to have my head on a platter for this, but . . ." She shrugged, and glanced over her shoulder to her team. "Do it."

The brother and sister team of Fenris shared the same crazed expression, lips pull backed in a half smile/half snarl; to Jean, they looked like wild beasts scenting blood and wanting their fair share of it. They clasped hands, and immediately their bodies began to glow as a pow-

erful charge of energy took shape between them. Mastermind stepped to one side, allowing them the pleasure of the first strike.

As the platform touched down on the plaza outside the library, Wolverine triggered his claws.

"Bring it on, chumps," he said with a growl. "I still got some frustrations to work out from this mornin' . . . an' I'm *more'n* willin' t'work 'em out on *you* . . ."

At last, she was safe.

Huddled in a corner of the living room, Betsy finally allowed herself to relax, to uncoil from the fetal position she had assumed in an effort to silence the voices running rampant in her head. Her head didn't ache quite as much as before, but every muscle in her body felt like a limp noodle after being held in so tight a position for so long. If only she could get the droning voices out of her thoughts, she could—

With a start, she realized they were gone.

The voices—the endless torrent of other people's thoughts that had driven her to the brink of madness during her blind race from Battery Park—had stopped their continuous chatter; in their place was nothing but sweet, blessed silence.

No, she thought, not silence—just a return to the types of *normal* sounds she was used to hearing: the hum of the central air conditioning system; the tick of the clock above the mantelpiece; the beat of her own heart. No strange visions of another life she couldn't remember living, no incessant buzz enveloping her mind about what to buy for dinner or who to get to mind the kids tonight or how expensive dating was getting or the racket created by those blasted kids upstairs with their 'N Sync CDs or how much someone hated her for being so beautiful and so damned skinny—only the sounds of her little corner of the world, assuring her that all was right and good, and that she could be at peace here.

But, how long *would* this peace last? How long before the thoughts of her neighbors in the complex began invading her mind?

"Don't dwell on it," she told herself. "Just take advantage of it."

Slowly, pressing her hands against the walls, she raised herself to her feet and smoothed out her miniskirt; looking across the room, she realized that, at some point, she had kicked off her shoes, but couldn't remember doing so. Using a wall to support her, she used a cuff of her jacket to wipe away the tears and snot that had crusted on her face.

Some sight I must be, eh? she thought. *Thank God there are no mirrors handy.*

Gathering her strength, she pushed off from the wall and, moving at a snail's pace, shuffled toward the bedroom.

Betsy had just enough energy left to shrug out of her jacket and skirt before flopping across the bed. As she gratefully drifted off to sleep, she prayed that she would awaken free of any further pain.

"You think *this* is pain, darlin'? Just *wait* till I get my hands on you—*then* you're gonna know what *real* pain is."

For a man with half a clip of .45-caliber bullets in him, Wolverine was doing surprisingly well, considering he should have died after the first three tightly-spaced rounds penetrated his chest. However, not only was he *not* dead, but he had advanced on Mastermind to put her within striking distance of his claws.

Such were the wonders of a mutant healing factor.

"This wasn't how it was supposed to work," the dark-haired woman muttered. "*You* were supposed to go after the big guns while *I* twisted your gal pal's psyche inside out like a corkscrew."

"Stop it," Wolverine replied. "Yer gonna make me cry. Anyways, you an' me got some old scores t'settle."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about, you little psycho," Mastermind said, stepping back and reaching for another clip of bullets. "Not that that matters to you in the least, I'm sure."

Sunlight glinted on adamantium as his claws slashed out, cutting the barrel of Mastermind's gun in half. "Hope ya weren't too attached t'that thing," he said, and took another step toward her.

But instead of turning and running from the pint-sized engine of destruction, Mastermind stood her ground . . . and smiled. "Hope you're not too attached to your *brain* . . . Shorty." Her brown eyes flashed.

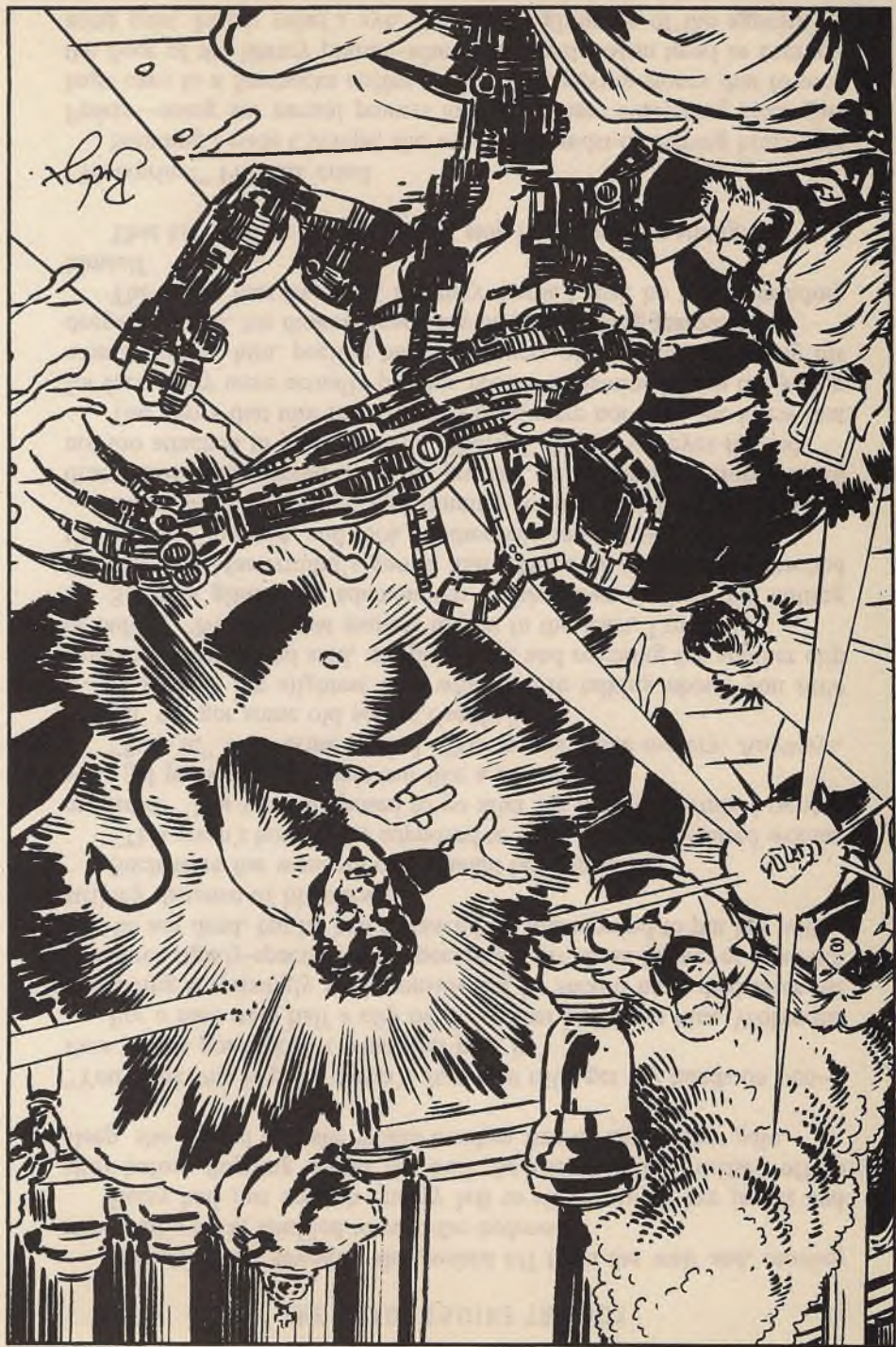
The claws that tore into Logan's head were not real—he knew that for fact. They were actually psychic probes transmitted from the young woman before him, peeling back the layers of his mind, exposing his deepest secrets, his darkest fears, his most unsettling jealousies.

The claws hurt like hell, but they weren't real, he kept reminding himself.

That knowledge, though, didn't stop him from screaming.

"Wolverine!" Phoenix cried.

Standing beside Cyclops, she was in the midst of helping him battle Fenris—using her mental powers to hurl at them everything from garbage cans to a Starbucks coffee kiosk to the paving stones that formed the floor of the library plaza—when she heard Logan howl in excruciating pain. In her mind's eye, she caught glimpses of the agonies he



was being forced to endure under Mastermind's psychic assault: images of sinister-looking laboratories and flesh-searing explosions and the sociopathic villain Sabretooth gouging out huge chunks of his body with the assassin's own sets of claws and Magneto using his incredible powers to literally strip the adamantium coating from Wolverine's bones *through the pores of his skin* and then enduring even greater levels of searing pain as the indestructible metal was once more bonded to him a year later.

And, most surprising of all, of the moment when she and Scott had stood on the altar at their wedding and first kissed as husband and wife. That image seemed to be stuck on playback, moving forward and then rewinding, to start the process over again without any end in sight. Of all the memories being used against him in Mastermind's vicious attack, *this* was the one causing him the greatest pain.

Oh, Logan . . . Jean turned to her husband. "Scott, I've—"

"Go," he said. "I can handle this."

"I'll be right back," she promised.

"And I'll be counting the moments till then, love," Cyclops replied. He triggered his visor once more, and the ground beneath Fenris shattered in a blast of crimson energies, tossing the siblings high into the air.

Bright green eyes flashed, and Jean took to the air, rushing forward to aid her fallen comrade.

Carol Danvers was completely out of her element.

For a moment, when these costumed stormtroopers of von Doom's had stepped from the levitating platform, she felt certain that she could provide some help to the X-Men—try and draw one of the combatants after her to cut down the odds.

That opinion had changed once the brother/sister team of Fenris loosed the devastating energy that they had formed by simply holding hands. The blast had scattered the X-Men like tenpins and shattered one of the stone lions that stood guard at the entrance to the library plaza. Carol had been tossed a good twelve or fifteen feet into the air, and it was only through sheer luck that she had landed in the row of hedges that lined the perimeter of the library grounds; luckier still to have survived the short flight with no broken bones.

Now, as she watched the battle being waged in the center of Manhattan from the relative safety of a hot dog cart that had been abandoned by its owner at the first sign of trouble, Carol began to wonder why she just hadn't run for the hills after the camp was liberated. True, she was grateful to these strangers for helping her escape from a living hell, but

whatever had possessed her to *join* them on their quixotic campaign, instead of melting into the shadows and trying to create a new life for herself? Was it really because she shared their desire to oust von Doom from his throne? Or was it because they had treated her as one of their own?

Watching the X-Men working in unison—covering one another's backs, gently chiding one another in the heat of battle—she began to understand that these people functioned not just as a team, but as a *family*. And, despite the fact she didn't know them from Adam (though they insisted otherwise), despite the hostility she had felt toward Jean Grey for obviously withholding information from her after their trip through her mind, despite the fact she had thought them insane for wanting to confront Victor von Doom on his home turf, they had welcomed her into their hearts and made her feel a part of that family.

An old saying sprang to Carol's mind: Friends may come and go, but family is forever. In the middle of a crisis like this, could she really just run off and abandon her new family?

Near the main set of steps leading to the library's main entrance, Phoenix made a perfect two-point landing, positioning herself between Mastermind and Wolverine. Carol was suddenly struck by the absurdity of the scene: a leather-clad *femme fatale* facing off against a redheaded fury in a pretty, yellow summer dress, while a short, hairy man with foot-long pitchfork tines sticking out of his hands writhed on the ground, claspings his head in agony. For a moment, she wondered where the movie cameras might be hidden.

That ridiculous question was quickly tossed aside as she spotted the red-and-gold-dressed woman from the platform—Carol had heard Mastermind refer to her as "Shakti"—cast a spell that caused a gale-force wind to send Rogue flying across Fifth Avenue and into the sixth floor windows of an office building. Bystanders who had stopped to watch the fight now scrambled for cover as glass, masonry, and office supplies rained down on them. Momentarily free from attack, the dark-haired sorceress turned her attention to Phoenix, who appeared to be in the midst of some mental catfight with Mastermind. To Carol, it looked like the two combatants were quietly standing their ground, eyes locked, though Lord only knew on what kind of psychic battlefield they were waging their private war.

What Shakti seemed to see, on the other hand, was an invitation to strike down an unwitting enemy.

Well, two can play at that game, Carol thought. *But first, I need a weapon . . .*

She spotted a heavy, gray paving stone lying nearby. Without hes-

itation, she leapt from her hiding place, grabbed the object, and charged straight at Shakti's unprotected back.

She didn't even realize she had stepped in an oily patch on the ground until it sprang to life, slithering up her legs and over her body before she could cry out in surprise.

"NO!" Carol tried to scream, but the oily film covered her face, flowing into her nostrils and tear ducts, pouring into her open mouth like a living river of ink. Her body convulsed from the panicked sensation that she was drowning, a half mile from any body of water. In horror, she felt the entity taking control of every nerve, every muscle in her body, forcing it to ignore her mental commands.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

Nor could she stop the entity from changing the direction of her attack, then raising the paving stone above her head, to bring it crashing down on the back of Phoenix's skull. Jean stiffened for a moment; then, with a whisper of a sigh, she collapsed in a heap on the warm gravel.

Mastermind smiled at her. "Thanks for the assist, Divinity. Not that I couldn't have handled the witch by myself."

"Too much time, your method takes," Carol heard herself say in a voice that was not her own. "Time should not be wasted so."

The entity called Divinity kept talking to Mastermind, asking what the telepath planned to do with Wolverine before he regained consciousness, but Carol was no longer listening. There was another odd sensation beginning to flow through her body, one that had started in her toes and was slowly creeping up her legs, her torso, into her very thoughts. It was an icy chill, of all things—something she never would have expected to feel in the middle of June, with the sun shining so brightly and not a cloud in the sky. But even as it reached up to caress her mind with the gentleness of a lover, she recognized it for what it was—a terrible thing she had held at bay for years, denying its touch; something she thought she had managed to finally elude when she saw the sun rise on a day filled with such promise.

It was Death.

And she had come to take Carol home.

Cyclops staggered back a step as he felt his wife being struck down from behind—a disadvantage, to be sure, of sharing a psychic link with a loved one in the midst of a battle.

"J-Jean . . . ?" he muttered, one hand rising to massage his pulsing forehead. In horror, he looked over to where she lay on the ground. Standing over her was Carol Danvers, a heavy, blood-smeared stone in her hands; she was covered from head to toe in an oily substance, eyes

widened in shock, her mouth opened in a silent scream. Next to Carol was Mastermind, who prodded Jean's unmoving body with the pointed toe of a leather boot.

"JEAN!" Cyclops screamed.

A flash of ruby quartz in sunlight, and Mastermind was propelled up the library steps and into the antique wooden framework above the main entrance. She collapsed in a heap on the landing.

Despite the dangers presented by turning his back on an enemy—even though both members of Fenris were lying, dazed, on the ground—Scott couldn't stop himself from doing so; Jean was lying so still, so lifeless. He had to know if she was merely unconscious, or . . .

He took one step toward Jean—

And was blown across the length of the plaza as Fenris—groggy, but still functional—unleashed another burst of destructive energy.

Amid the splintering of every bone in his right arm as he crashed into a used book kiosk, Cyclops heard one other sound: Carol Danvers' death rattle as the oily creature that had enveloped her flowed off her body, leaving behind a desiccated, lifeless husk that crumpled to the ground.

And then darkness claimed him.

"Now, y'all went an' got me *mad!*" Rogue shouted as she soared above Fifth Avenue.

It had taken her a while to dig her way out of the five offices through which she had crashed after being hurled away from the battlezone by Shakti's miniature cyclone—five offices and countless walls that had crumbled like papier-mâché before she had finally come to rest in the break area of the law offices of Stern, Mantlo, Moench & McGregor. To say the partners, their employees, and the few clients seated in the waiting room had not been pleased by her unexpected—and highly destructive—visit would be an understatement; suffice to say, there had been enough derisive expletives and angry promises of lawsuits aimed her way to make certain that Rogue would avoid entering even the airspace above a courthouse for years to come.

Mad as hell, her hair drenched in half-and-half cream and smelling of used coffee grounds, Rogue had done her best to ignore the threats and insults and quickly exited back the way she had come, eager to dole out a little payback to the villainess who had caused her all this trouble in the first place.

But as she returned to the plaza, she was greeting by the sight of Fenris striking down Cyclops—and Divinity draining the life-force from Carol Danvers.

“Oh, God . . .” Rogue whispered. “Carol . . .”

Any further concerns for her erstwhile teammate were smashed from her mind as a devastating bolt of energy blew her out of the sky.

Tumbling head over heels, Rogue dimly realized that seeing Carol being murdered had distracted her long enough for Fenris for launch their attack. Unable to regain her equilibrium, she could only brace for the impact just before she crashed into the sidewalk, hard enough to create an eight-foot-wide crater.

Rogue slowly struggled to her feet, unable to clear her addled thoughts. Something warm dripped into her eyes, and she recognized it as blood, seeping from a deep cut in her forehead—possibly the result of a hairline skull fracture. The shock of seeing herself bleeding began pumping adrenaline through her system, and her mind slowly cleared. Her head was spinning, her eyes couldn’t focus, and her legs felt as though they were made of gelatin, but she knew that if she didn’t stand up, didn’t strike back, she was more than likely going to join Carol on her trip to the afterlife.

But she wasn’t prepared to die—not yet.

Unfortunately, she never saw the remaining stone lion at the entrance to the plaza come to life under Shakti’s direction, never saw it rise on its haunches and eye her hungrily—at least, not until it had sprung at her. But by then, it was too late.

Before she could leap out of its path, the lion was upon her, driving the air from her lungs and smashing her head against the pavement with the full weight of its body.

As the world dimmed around her, Rogue wondered if Carol had felt any pain in her last moments of life.

She also wondered if she was about to be able to ask Carol that question directly.

“Things are not going well, *mein freund*,” Nightcrawler commented as he and Gambit clashed with the cloven-hoofed, technology-based life-form that had identified itself as Technarx. Despite a rapid series of well-placed kicks and blows delivered by quickly teleporting around his foe, Kurt had been unable to find a weakness in its armor.

“You can say *dat* again, ‘Crawler,’” Gambit replied. He spared a glance over his shoulder to see Rogue being dragged over to Shakti by the animated stone lion; it held one of the unconscious mutant’s arms in its granite jaws.

Don’ you go lettin’ yo’ feelin’s for dat girl get you killed, Remy, he sternly warned himself. *Dat Rogue, she a tough one—she’ll be fine. ‘Sides, you got problems of your own t’deal wit’.*

As if in response to his thoughts, Technarx swung in his direction, its right arm shooting forward. Gambit leapt to one side, striking the metal-and-circuit-sheathed limb with a charged playing card. The resulting explosion made the techno-organic mutant screech loudly and reel back in pain.

"Maybe you oughtta *BAMF!* on outta here while I cover you," Gambit said to his teammate while they had a momentary breather. "Give you some time to go contact de FF, or de 'Vengers, an' get us some back-up."

"And leave you in such dire straits?" Nightcrawler asked. "I think not, Remy. Besides, in case you have not noticed, if our little tête-à-tête with Doom's flunkies has not drawn the attention of such well-respected heroic groups, what makes you think they would be willing to come to our aid *now?*" A slight movement seen from the corner of his eye caught Kurt's attention. He glanced past Gambit, who turned to look in the same direction.

Fenris was staring back at them.

"Now, we shall wash the last of this *scum* from our streets," said Andrea Strucker, the female half of the team.

"Indeed. The Emperor will be *most* pleased with our work, dear sister," replied her brother, Andreas.

Smiling malevolently, the siblings joined hands.

"Perhaps, friend Gambit," Nightcrawler mused aloud, "discretion *is* the better part of valor. But if I am to fight another day, I shall not do so *alone*." He reached out to grab his friend, preparing to teleport them both away from the battlezone—

—only to be roughly pushed aside by his teammate. The reason why became immediately clear: Technarx had recovered, firing a stream of techno-organic circuitry at the blue-skinned X-Man in an attempt to snare him. Remy had not hesitated in shoving Kurt out of the way.

Much to his own misfortune.

As Nightcrawler watched, circuits and wires and metal plates began to take form, spreading over Gambit like an infection gone wild, transforming him into a creature that was only partly a man. Remy's one remaining eye swiveled toward Nightcrawler, the sorrow in it unmistakable.

"*Kurt . . .*" he/it rasped, in a voice that sounded like two pieces of metal being rubbed together.

And then the Gambit-thing collapsed.

"Oh . . . oh, my God . . ." Nightcrawler said huskily. He jumped for-

ward, all thoughts of escape pushed aside by his blinding desire to do something—anything—to help his friend.

He hardly felt the impact of the Fenris-created energy blast that sent him hurtling into unconsciousness.

WHEN BETSY finally awoke, it was to Warren's gentle kiss on the nape of her neck. She uttered a soft, appreciative moan.

"What time is it?" she asked groggily.

"A little after eight," he replied. "I just got home a few minutes ago. I called around five-thirty, to tell you when I'd get in, but you didn't pick up." He paused. "You feeling all right?"

Betsy rolled onto her back and gazed deeply into his loving, concerned eyes, not knowing what to say. Should she tell him about her strange episode in Arcade's office, or her collapse in the elevator, or the multitude of voices that had been running non-stop through her head until she thought it would burst from the pain? As her sleep-addled brain began to function again, she suddenly realized that the voices still hadn't returned—maybe, God willing, she was free of the madness.

She doubted that, though.

But, what would he say if she *did* tell him about everything that had happened? How would he respond?

She knew *exactly* how he'd respond: the same way he always had in the past when she had a troubling experience—with compassion, and understanding, and that boyish smile that used to make her feel that all was truly right with the world again.

Unfortunately, the kind of trauma she'd undergone this afternoon could not be made better with just a warm smile and a peck on the cheek. Something had happened to her today—something had been awakened inside her mind, and now that the beast had been freed, there was no putting it back in its cage.

And with that realization, Betsy also knew, though she wished it

weren't so, that *nothing* would ever be truly right from this day forward . . .

"I'm fine," she lied.

Warren stared into her eyes for a few moments, as though searching for some kind of evidence to refute her claim; he found nothing. Slowly, he smiled.

"Okay," he said, and brushed away a few loose strands of lavender hair from her eyes. "You hungry?"

Betsy's stomach gurgled in response, and she giggled as she placed a hand over her mouth. "I'm absolutely famished." She rolled off the bed and onto her feet. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know," Warren replied. "What do you feel like?"

Betsy rolled her eyes. This was the same conversation they always had whenever they decided to stay home for an evening, and she knew how it would end: with her foraging through the kitchen for whatever food could be turned into a quick and easy meal. One of these days, Warren was going to have to learn how to cook . . .

"You know," Betsy said, wrapping an arm around his waist to lead him from the bedroom, "dining would be much simpler for us both if you'd kept the servants around."

"Oh, so *now* you think I should've kept the staff here," Warren shot back, slipping an arm around her in kind. "What happened to all that talk about wanting to avoid living the oh-so-clichéd pampered existence of the rich and famous?"

Betsy sighed. "Well, that was before I realized you were forcing me to live a life that revolved around an almost steady diet of Ramen noodles and grilled cheese sandwiches."

Warren's face slackened, and his eyes glazed over as he stared into the distance. "Mmmm . . . grilled cheese sandwiches," he moaned, in a fair approximation of Homer Simpson.

Betsy laughed, and they exited the bedroom, bound for the kitchen. As they passed through the living room, she spotted the MESSAGE light blinking on their answering machine.

"That your call from before?" she asked.

"One of them is," Warren replied. He changed the course of their direction to bring them over to the machine, then pushed the REPLAY button.

"You have . . . TWO . . . messages," the answering machine stated in its flat, mechanical voice. "Message One: 'Hey, Betts, it's Warren. I'm running a little—'" Warren pressed the ERASE key.

"Message Two," continued the machine. "Betsy, sweets, it's your old pal, Arcade. You there? Pick up, please." Pause. "Betsy? Hello?"

Pick up pick up pick up!" Pause. "Okay, so you're not there. I won't hold that against you. Probably whooping it up with Studley over there, right? Anyway, here's the reason I'm calling, and you ain't gonna believe it: Purely by the greatest coincidence, it turns out ol' Vic von D wasn't exactly thrilled by the thought of the Wayouts trashing the stage at the Arts Center during their act—at least, that's what his Press Secretary was telling me. So, here I am, stuck with a gap in my events schedule and nobody to fill it." Pause. "Or am I wrong . . . ? Gimme a call, babe, and let's make some magic! Later!"

For some odd reason, Betsy found it incredibly difficult to catch her breath. The reason for her condition, though, became readily apparent—she'd been holding it throughout the playback of Arcade's message.

Smiling, Warren leaned close to her ear. "Betts," he whispered, "it's okay to exhale."

The air came flowing out of her in a rush, and her knees quivered. She latched onto Warren before she wound up doing a header into the carpet.

"Did . . . did he . . ." she said breathlessly. "Did he just . . . just say . . ."

"Say what?" Warren asked. From his expression, it was clear he was taking some sort of sadistic pleasure in watching her reaction.

Betsy inhaled deeply, summoning all her strength. "*Did he just say I'm in the show?*" she blurted out.

"Sounded something like that," Warren replied with a shrug. He reached for the REPLAY button. "Want to hear it again?"

"No!" Betsy cried, slapping his hand away. "Not just yet." She placed a hand over her heart; it was galloping like a racehorse. "I don't think I could take the strain." She stepped away from Warren as a warm feeling—a sense of tranquillity—slowly spread through her body. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she placed a tremulous hand over equally trembling lips to try and calm herself before she collapsed in a nervous heap.

It had finally happened.

After all the years of struggling with her career and trying to make a name for herself and swallowing insults about her relationship with Warren, she had finally gotten a chance to prove her worth—to make her mark on history. And she had gotten that chance by using her strengths, her determination, and her talents.

Her talents.

Betsy began to grin, and the smile was so wide, so full of joy, she was almost afraid it would cause her face to split.

And then, with a scream of sheer delight, she ran through the apart-

ment, turning cartwheels and bouncing off the furniture like a giddy child on the first day of summer vacation.

"I think," Warren commented, "this calls for *more* than a grilled cheese sandwich . . ."

The Emperor was not in the mood for dining.

Slouched in a high-backed leather seat behind his desk in the Oval Office of the White House, Victor von Doom sat alone in the dark, brooding.

Spread across the executive desk were over two dozen color photographs, and a set of reports compiled by S.H.I.E.L.D., the Psionics Division, and the Imperial Agency for Superhuman Activities—all of them documenting the attack on the Salem Center prisoner center from the night before, and the battle that had erupted in midtown Manhattan that very afternoon between Imperial Hunters and a group of unregistered, superpowered men and women. It had been during a cursory examination of the pictures—when, to his great surprise, he had recognized the faces of the I.A.S.A. prisoners—that the Emperor had lost his appetite.

"The X-Men . . ." von Doom muttered to the darkness. "To think that—for all the preparations made, all the minor details attended to, all the potential . . . problems that were eliminated at the very start—a group of self-righteous cockroaches like Ororo's former teammates could have escaped my notice is unconscionable, for Doom is not a man given to mistakes." He frowned, staring off into space. "How, then, could they have avoided being affected by the improvements that I have brought to the world?" He mulled this question over for a while, chin resting in the crook of one hand between thumb and forefinger. Then his eyebrows began to rise as a theory slowly took shape in his mind. "Unless they were not *on* this world when the transformation occurred . . ."

A soft knock on the door roused him from his reverie. He turned toward the portal, teeth bared in anger.

"Who *dares* disturb the thoughts of Doom?" he barked loudly.

"His loving wife," came the reply from the other side of the door.

"Ah." Slowly, von Doom relaxed, and a pleasant smile came to his face. He rose to his feet, adjusting his red silk tie and smoothing out a wrinkle in his dress shirt as he did so, and pressed a button on the desk that activated the room's lights. The Oval Office was bathed in a soft, white glow.

"Enter," he said, with a gentleness that would have shocked even those who knew—and feared—him well.

The door opened, and Lancer stepped aside to allow Ororo entry to the room. The Empress looked resplendent in a black gown that complemented her figure as well as her snow-white hair. A tiny smile bowed her lips as she met the imperious gaze of her husband.

"My liege," Ororo said, with a slight bow of her head.

Looking past his wife, von Doom nodded to Lancer, who quietly shut the door. Now alone with Ororo, the Emperor smiled broadly and stepped around the desk to properly greet her, embracing her and pulling her into a deep, loving kiss.

When they at last parted, Ororo paused a moment to regain her composure.

"I was not away from you all that long, Victor," she said breathlessly. "A mere two days while I visited the children at their school in Switzerland."

Taking her hands in his, von Doom lightly kissed her fingertips. "Each moment without your shining presence, my beloved, is an eternity spent in Hades."

Ororo placed a hand to her cheek as the blush of embarrassment colored her face, then smiled broadly. "If that is true," she replied, "then I shall have to see how receptive the great Victor von Doom is to his Empress if he is left to his own devices for an entire *week*."

The Emperor laughed heartily. "The Earth itself would tremble from the strength of my longing." Tilting his head downward, he kissed her on the top of her head.

"Then, if only for the sake of the world," Ororo said solemnly, "I shall do everything in my power to never leave your side for any lengthy period of time."

"A *wise* choice," the Emperor replied. He smiled. "But enough about the safety of the world—surely it can run properly without the need of Doom's guiding hand for *one* evening. Would you care for a drink? I have recently received an excellent Latverian Merlot from my mother; we can speak of the children as we share a glass."

"All right," Ororo replied.

With a slight bow, von Doom strode across the Oval Office to a small cabinet set into an oak-paneled wall. Opening its door, he reached in to extract the crimson-hued libation and two crystal goblets.

"What are these, Victor?"

Von Doom froze at the sound of papers being shuffled, his hand still resting on the bottle of wine. Slowly, he turned to find Ororo standing at his desk, a look of mild interest on her comely features as she inspected the photographs.

"Simple affairs of state, my dear," he replied quickly, walking back

to join her. "A band of misguided souls who had foolishly allowed themselves to be swayed by the inflammatory propaganda of that murderous scum, Magneto. My agents have already taken them into custody."

"Then, they are mutants?" Ororo asked. "Like myself?"

Von Doom waved a dismissive hand. "They are *nothing* like you, My Lady. Mutants they may be, but Magneto's rebellious curs are no more your equal than a lump of coal is to a diamond. Mark my words, though: One day soon, they—and their cretinous master—shall learn the price for opposing the rule of Doom."

"Still," Ororo said slowly, gazing down at the pictures, "there is something about these people that I find . . . hauntingly familiar." She picked up a close-up photograph of Phoenix—her head bandaged, her normally pale skin looking deathly-white from the loss of blood caused by her head injury—as she was being loaded into an ambulance. "This woman in particular—I *know* her from somewhere . . ."

As he watched his wife struggle with a memory she could not quite bring to the surface of her mind, von Doom's lips curled back in a fearsome snarl. This sort of behavior on her part would not do at all . . .

"Ororo," he said firmly, "*look at me.*"

The Empress glanced up from the pictures to discover, much to her surprise, that her husband's eyes were *glowing*. "Victor, what is—" she began.

"*Silence,*" von Doom commanded. Immediately, Ororo became quiet, standing stock-still as though rooted to the spot. A glaze settled over her eyes as she found herself unable to look away from those troubling orbs that blazed hotly from beneath knitted brows.

"I *know* what is happening to you, my queen," he growled. "Now that you have been confronted by reminders of the rabble which whom you once associated, your mind is struggling against my control, attempting to make you aware that, in days past, we were *not* the closest of lovers, but the bitterest of *enemies*. Warning you that all you have experienced of late, all that you have come to know as fact in this world of my making, is but a *sham*."

Von Doom frowned. "You are a strong-willed woman, Ororo; in time, you *would* be able to free yourself from my influence. But, having at last made his dream a reality, Doom will not allow anyone—not even his lovely bride—to awaken." His dark eyes flared even brighter. "You will forget having seen these photographs, forget we have discussed anything but the welfare of Kristoff and Qadira." He pointed a commanding finger at her. "But always remember this: Your will belongs to Doom. Your mind, body, soul—all these belong to Doom." He ges-

tured toward the bay windows of the office, balling his hands into fists. "This entire *world* is Doom's, to do with as he sees fit. And there is nothing you—or any of your former meddlesome associates—can ever do to change that." He leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "*Do you understand?*"

"Yes," Ororo replied softly, eyes wide but unseeing. A slight tremble ran through her body.

The Emperor smiled malevolently. "Excellent, my love . . ."

By the time Ororo's mind cleared, the photographs and reports had been locked inside a bottom drawer of the executive desk; the Emperor possessed the only key.

"And Qadira?" von Doom asked pleasantly. "She is doing well, also?"

Ororo opened her mouth to answer, then stopped. She looked around, to find herself seated on an leather couch, Victor sitting beside her. Two glasses of wine stood on the table before them.

"Is there something wrong?" the Emperor asked.

"I-I am not certain," Ororo said hesitantly. She was obviously confused; it was also obvious that she couldn't quite figure out just what exactly was troubling her. "What were we talking about . . .?"

"You were telling me of our children's exploits in school," von Doom prompted. "I was pleased to hear of Kristoff's excellent grades and high intelligence quota—the future of the Empire rests squarely on the boy's shoulders. You were about to tell me of our daughter."

Ororo nodded slowly. "Oh . . . yes." Her knitted brow relaxed as she turned to focus on their conversation. "Qadira is quite well, though she seems to have something of a rebellious streak in her, according to the headmaster."

"Like her mother," von Doom commented, with a hint of a smile.

Ororo laughed softly. "And her father."

The Emperor nodded solemnly, and opened his mouth to reply—only to be interrupted by the unkingly rumbling of his stomach.

"Victor, have you dined yet?" Ororo asked. Her tone was somewhat akin to that of a mother worried about her child's eating habits.

Von Doom shook his head. "No. But, now that you are here—" he smiled, a wicked sparkle in his eyes—"I find myself absolutely famished . . ."

"You call this slop *food*? I've had roasted *camel* that tasted better!"

With an angry growl, Erik Lensherr sent the gold-trimmed serving plate flying across the dining room. It shattered against a pale blue-colored wall on the far side, just missing the fiery-tressed head of his

hostess—a blue-skinned woman named Raven Darkholme—as she stepped from the kitchen. Bits of tuna fish and pasta curls stuck to the wall as canned peas and smashed pieces of pottery rained down on the stark-white carpeting. Raven stared at the mess, then turned to her guest.

“I am *not* cleaning that up,” she said coldly.

As one of the mutant overlord’s field agents, Darkholme was more often referred to by her codename: Mystique—an appropriate name for a woman whose past was as mysterious as the unique powers she possessed. Clad in white leather boots, white gloves, and just enough white, gauze-like material to provide a modicum of attire for when she stepped out in public, she was every bit the modern-day equivalent of Mata Hari—beautiful, strong-willed, deceptive, and not above using her sexuality as a lure to get what she wanted. She was an expert in her field, able to create explosives from simple household items, crack any government computer system, slip undetected into some of the most secure military facilities in the world, eliminate any target from as close as five feet away and still manage to escape some of the Empire’s most highly-skilled Hunters, and wire every inch of her home to keep prying “mentos” from eavesdropping on her thoughts.

Unfortunately, her years of hard work as a secret agent meant that she had never had the time to master certain skills—like the basics of Home Economics.

“How can one of my finest operatives *live* like this?” Lensherr muttered over the rim of his wine glass.

“What do you *expect* from me, Magneto?” Mystique snapped, pointing to the mess hanging on the wall. “I’m a *spy*, not a gourmet chef—I’m rarely here in South Beach most of the time. If you want a five-star meal, go down to Ocean Drive—I’m sure one of the restaurants there would have a board of fare suitable for your delicate palette.” She paused, and a shark-like grin slowly crept over her features. “Oh, but you can’t *do* that, can you?” She nodded, in complete agreement with herself. “That’s right—you’re a wanted man. The ‘Butcher of Paris,’ I believe the Ministry of Information has tagged you. Were you to set a single foot outside this modest home, it would only be a matter of seconds before one of my less-than-trustworthy-but-always-nosy neighbors notified von Doom’s stormtroopers that you were back in the States.” She tapped a slender index finger against her chin and gazed at the ceiling, deep in thought. “Mmmm . . . I wonder what they’re serving as a last meal at The Vault—” her eyes lowered to fix on Lensherr “—if you were to *make* it that far without ‘accidentally’ being killed while trying to escape.”

Lensherr said nothing, opting instead to meet Mystique’s haughty

gaze with one of cool indifference. Idly, he wondered how quickly he could smash that look from her face were he to cause the iron in her blood to form a clot in her brain—and then have it burst.

“I, on the other hand,” Mystique continued, “have no such fears of being discovered.” Instantly, her face, her body, even her clothing, began to blur and twist and assume a new form; within seconds, she had become the spitting image of Victor von Doom, right down to the Mandarin power rings worn on each finger. “When one is a shapeshifter,” she said, her voice a perfect imitation of the Emperor’s, “who can say *what* one’s true face really is?”

Lensherr applauded without any trace of enthusiasm; obviously, his roundabout trip to Florida from Mauritania hadn’t done anything to improve his mood. “Bravo, Mystique, bravo,” he said sarcastically. “I’m certain such useless displays of your abilities make you extremely popular in the circles in which you travel; as for myself, I refuse to be goaded into childish brooding by false images of a man who will soon be slain by my own hand.”

The faux von Doom wagged a disapproving finger at “his” guest. “You *really* should work on your sense of humor, Erik. All this talk of dead men and retribution—it makes you incredibly soporific at times.”

“Is that so?” Lensherr replied, raising an eyebrow. “My plans for overthrowing von Doom make you drowsy, Raven?” Now, it was his turn to smile menacingly. “Well, if you feel fatigued by my company, then perhaps you should retire for the evening. I shall be more than delighted to tuck you in—permanently.”

A knock on the front door put a swift end to any further verbal jousting. In the time it took Lensherr to glance from the portal back to Mystique, she had undergone another transformation—a wrinkled, hunched-over, white-haired woman in her eighties was now standing before him. Arthritic fingers smoothed out the dark-blue dress and white apron that had replaced von Doom’s pressed business suit. Slowly, the octogenarian moved toward the front of the house, pausing to reach into a closet and pull out a formidable-looking handgun; Lensherr recognized it as an Israeli-made Desert Eagle .45.

“Who is it?” Mystique called out in a quavery, high-pitched voice.

“Pizza delivery,” replied a male voice from the other side of the door.

Still moving forward, the old woman slowly, quietly, pulled back the slide on the top of the gun to chamber a round. Lensherr followed her out into the hallway, grabbing his helmet from the top of a coat rack, prepared to go into battle. By the time Mystique reached the door, the Eagle’s hammer was cocked, and the gun was hidden behind her

back. She unlocked the deadbolt, released the security chain, and slowly opened the door.

"Oh," Lensherr heard the old woman say in Mystique's normally silky voice. "It's you clowns." She stepped back, and a pair of men entered the front hall. Both of them carried pizza boxes; the air in the hallway filled with the aroma of tomato sauce and melted cheese. One man was tall and thin, with sharp, hawklike features and a Julius Caesar hairstyle that had gone out of vogue with the demise of gladiator movies in the late 1950s. His name was Forge, and he was both a Cheyenne Indian shaman *and* a mutant gifted with an ability to create incredible—and frequently deadly—mechanical devices from the smallest piles of spare parts and wiring.

What Forge possessed in sheer brain power, the other man more than matched in sheer physicality. Powerfully built, with movie star looks and shoulder-length red hair tied back in a ponytail, Fabian Cortez, like his associates, was a mutant. Unlike his fellow conspirators, though, Cortez's unique ability was that he was able to amplify *other* mutants' powers, often beyond their control; thus, if a member of *Homo sapiens superior* could fire energy blasts from his or her hands, that person, under Cortez's influence, would be able to level mountains—with the unfortunate side effect that the recoil would more than likely help provide enough velocity to put them in orbit around the Earth.

A mixed blessing, to be sure.

Mystique closed the door and shifted back to her natural, midnight-blue form, then cautiously uncocked the hammer of the Desert Eagle and placed it on a small table nearby. "What've you got in the boxes, boys?"

Forge lifted the top of the one he held; inside, a vegetable-laden pizza quietly bubbled, fresh from the oven. "Having already sampled your culinary skills, Raven, we decided to bring our own food." He sniffed the air, and his features twisted in disgust. "Tuna casserole again, huh?" He shook his head. "How can one of our finest operatives *live* like this?"

Mystique grunted in reply and strode back to the dining room, ignoring Lensherr's amused expression. The three men followed her.

"So," Lensherr began as they convened at the table, "has my son told you of my plans?"

"A small portion, lord," Cortez replied. "Merely that you wish to put a swift end to the rule of that annoying flatscan, von Doom."

"Flatscan." A term coined by Cortez ages ago to define humans—"those genetic dead ends unblessed with our mutant abilities," as he had put it. Lensherr allowed a trace of a smile to crease his face. What

better way to describe the bottom-most rung on man's evolutionary ladder?

Lensherr nodded. "I understand that the tenth anniversary of that braggart's rise to power is to be celebrated shortly, and that his aides fear I will take that opportunity to try and strike him down." He smiled maliciously. "I do not wish to shatter their expectations."

Mystique glared at him. "And why am *I* just hearing this for the first time? You've been here two days, Magnus, and you never once hinted that you were planning something so incredibly . . . *foolish*."

"I keep my own council, Raven," Lensherr replied curtly. "*Your* function is to provide me with information and support my actions—not voice your opposition. I have made my decision—" his eyes narrowed—"and the matter is not open to debate."

"Well," Forge said around a mouthful of pizza, "the timing couldn't be better to start making our preparations. From what I've heard through the grapevine, some major dust-up in New York that happened today has got von Doom's nose out of joint." He paused. "That reminds me . . ." He stood, bowed to Lensherr. "Excuse me for a moment—I need to check on something." Lensherr waved a dismissive hand, and Forge headed for the living room.

"As I was saying, Cortez," the mutant overlord continued, "the concept of destroying that armor-plated scum before an audience of billions has great appeal for me. I'm certain my . . . performance will be the talk of the entire planet the next day—the *first* day of the Age of *Homo superior*."

Cortez nodded eagerly, eyes shining brightly with undisguised passion, as one would expect from an acolyte devoted so completely to a cause—and a charismatic leader.

"Uh, folks?" Forge called from the living room. "I think you all better take a look at this."

Stepping from the kitchen, the trio were greeted by the machine-smith, who waved them toward the couch.

"What—" Lensherr began.

"Just watch," Forge replied. He pointed to the television, on which could be seen an image of a dark-suited, blond-haired woman in her mid-twenties, holding a microphone. She was standing before the cordoned-off battlezone that had once been the New York Public Library plaza; police officers and Guardsmen kept curious passersby from getting too close to the crime scene. Forge pressed the volume control on the remote.

"—high-ranking official at the Ministry of Information reported that the unprovoked attack on a group of Hunters that took place here in

midtown Manhattan this afternoon was initiated by sympathizers of the notorious Magneto, the so-called 'Butcher of Paris,' " the woman stated.

"You see, Magnus?" Mystique said, glancing at Lensherr. "The media just *loves* you."

"*Silence*," Lensherr snapped.

"Despite severe injuries to some members of the team," the reporter continued, "the Hunters were able to apprehend the superpowered terrorists before they could carry out their plans to detonate a small nuclear device that they had smuggled into the city. It is now expected that, with the assistance of anti-terrorist experts from the government organization S.H.I.E.L.D., information will soon be acquired from the prisoners that will ultimately lead to the capture of their infamous leader.

"Joy Mercado, CNN."

Forge lowered the television's volume as the broadcast cut to a commercial for the upcoming release of the *Doom's Patrol* motion picture. He turned to Lensherr. "Pietro didn't mention anything about you sending in an advance team to stir things up."

"Because I did not order one to do so," Lensherr replied. "Whoever these 'terrorists' are, whatever their motives may be, they acted without my knowledge. Do you really think I'd be so foolish as to have any use for a bunch of sycophantic bomb-carriers idiotic enough to openly confront a group of highly-skilled Hunters?" He pressed his lips together in a firm, straight line and sat back on the couch to think. "Yet, such actions—whether they be true, or mere fabrications created by von Doom's propaganda machine—demonstrate that there *are* still those who share our opposition to that Latverian windbag; perhaps we even share the same dream of making our race the supreme form of life on Earth." He nodded slowly, settled his chin between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, and stared into space. "And if these individuals are powerful enough to have injured a pack of von Doom's bloodhounds . . ." His voice trailed off, and he sat silently.

After a few moments, Forge politely cleared his throat. "Uh, Erik? You want to clue us in as to what you're thinking?"

Slowly, Lensherr's glazed-over eyes cleared. He leaned forward, then turned to Cortez. "Contact my son. Have him speak with his associate in Washington. I want to know where the prisoners were taken, and how much time remains before they are to be executed."

"It will be done, dread lord," Cortez said immediately.

"Just a moment. What sort of scheme is running through that devious mind of yours, Magnus?" Mystique asked, arms folded across her chest.

"An inspired bit of devilry," Lensherr replied, a mischievous smile

curling his lips. "If these alleged 'followers' of mine are as opposed to von Doom as we, perhaps an alliance is in order."

"And how, pray tell, do we go about signing up these new recruits to the cause?" Mystique shot back.

Lensherr's smile broadened. "It's quite simple, child. All we need do is get to them before they're killed during their interrogations . . ."

YOU HAVE a lovely frontal lobe,” an unknown male voice commented.

“W-what . . . ?” Phoenix asked. Her head was pounding like a drum beat, making it extremely difficult to focus her thoughts. She licked dry lips and opened her eyes, then quickly shut them as a blinding light momentarily seared her retinas. Wincing in pain, she tried to raise a hand to shade her eyes, only to find she was unable to move her arms.

“I wouldn’t bother moving around too much,” her unseen companion said. “You’re still on the mend from that concussion you received, and the restraints on your chair are locked in place.”

Slowly, cautiously, Phoenix half opened her eyes; just enough to provide some vision and give her an idea of her surroundings. She tried to move her head, but it was held in place by some sort of device she couldn’t see; a coarse leather strap bit into the flesh of her throat when she made the slightest movement. She was in the center of a room with metal walls and large glass observation windows, the lighting low except for the halogen lamps shining directly on her. By turning her gaze downward, she could see that she was sitting in a high-tech chair of some sort, her arms and legs held fast by massive clamps.

And that she was wearing her costume.

Now, her eyes opened fully, all traces of her headache vanishing in an instant; her lips pulled back in a snarl. Looking around, her gaze fastened on a bear of a man, standing just off to one side. He was close to seven feet tall, with a build that rivaled the Hulk’s; like the green-skinned behemoth, the man’s closely-cropped hair was a bright emerald hue, but his skin tone was a normal pink coloration. Dressed in dark

slacks and shoes, a starched white dress shirt, and an even whiter laboratory coat, the man studied the redheaded mutant with an even stare.

"Who are you?" Phoenix demanded.

"My name is Dr. Leonard Samson," the man replied. "I'm one of the assistant directors here."

"And where is 'here'?"

"Psi Division Headquarters. In Langley, Virginia."

"And are *you* the one who dressed me in my costume?" she demanded. To her surprise, Samson actually blushed.

"Uh . . . no," he replied. "The nurses did that some time after you were brought in."

She frowned. "Any particular reason for that, Doctor?"

"Well, you and your friends have made us all curious . . . uh . . ."

"Phoenix," Jean replied. "Like the bird."

Samson nodded. "I understand the mythological reference. As I was saying, Phoenix, your group—and you in particular—have piqued our interests. It's not often we come across unregistered telepaths who also possess telekinetic abilities. Or who can single-handedly mind-sweep an area the size of Manhattan."

"I'm glad you're impressed," Phoenix replied sarcastically.

"By dressing all of you in those colorful uniforms of yours," Samson explained, "we were hoping that the Imperial Identification Network might be able to recognize you in your costumed identities, since there seem to be no records of your civilian lives." He shook his head. "No luck there."

Having quickly grown tired of the conversation, Phoenix closed her eyes and focused her thoughts at him. *All right, Doctor, I've had enough idle chatter for one day. I want you to tell me everything about this place, and where my friends are. Then you're going to release me and show me a way out of here.* She paused, waiting for his mind to respond, to provide her with information.

But, for some reason, nothing happened.

Samson gazed at her for a moment, then slowly nodded in understanding. "Ah. You're probably wondering why you can't get inside my head." He smiled, then shrugged when she didn't respond. "Sorry—professional humor. There's a neural inhibitor attached to the base of your spine; basically, it shuts down the synapses of your brain that allow you to activate your powers. Your friends have also been tagged with them." He flashed a boyish grin. "We can't exactly have you people running around the facility fully-powered, possibly damaging billions of dollars of delicate equipment, can we? The taxpayers would kill us—not to mention the Emperor."

Phoenix paused to mull this over. No powers, trapped in a building full of telepaths, telekinetics, and armed guards, and no immediate means of escape . . .

All right—stay calm, Jean told herself. You've gotten out of tougher scrapes—against Magneto, the Brood, Apocalypse . . . Hell, you've even come back from the dead once or thrice. All you need is some time to figure a way out of this. She frowned. But I don't have time—none of us do. Not with Roma getting ready to destroy this plane of reality, and Saturnyne probably still egging her on to do it . . .

"Where are my friends?" she asked.

"Elsewhere in the facility," Samson replied. "Being questioned by other members of the staff." He paused. "Except for the one who died, of course."

Jean's eyes widened in shock. *Scott . . . ?* she thought.

"Who—who was it?" she asked hesitantly.

"A woman," Samson answered. He picked up a clipboard from a nearby control console, studied the sheets of paper attached to it. "Carol Danvers, according to the fingerprint match."

Jean allowed herself to breathe again, grateful to learn her husband still lived, but now a feeling of guilt swept over her. What right did *she* have to feel contentment, knowing that one of her friends had been lost, knowing that she had withheld information from her—information gathered from her own mind?

Oh, Carol, I am so, so sorry . . .

"Says here she was a guest at the Westchester detainee camp," Samson continued. He glanced up from the clipboard. "I imagine, then, it was your group that was responsible for the camp's destruction two days ago."

"Just what are you planning to do with me?" Jean asked, ignoring his leading comment. She rolled her eyes upward, to indicate the device into which her head was strapped. "I doubt you intend to experiment with hairstyles; if you are, though, I like mine just the way it is."

"I am not planning anything, Phoenix," the green-haired assistant director replied. "But there are some people from S.H.I.E.L.D. on their way here to ask you questions."

A nervous shiver ran through Jean's body, and she forced herself to remain calm. Back when the world was normal, she and the X-Men had had more than a few run-ins with the members of the super-secret intelligence organization. They weren't exactly the most likable people in the universe—or the most trustworthy, given the fact that the Psi Division of this reality was based on a much smaller version that operated from the depths of the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier.

"The Cerebrum Scanner," Samson continued, pointing to the machinery above Jean's head, "serves two functions: The first is to break down any psychic barriers you may have erected around your mind—that's done through a combination of electroshock treatments and telepathic contact with a number of our agents. The second is to extract memories that you may have been trained to suppress. I understand Magneto has taught his followers well in ways to resist psi-probes. Rest assured, though: it won't take the machine very long to break through that kind of conditioning."

"This is a *mind ripper*?" Phoenix said angrily. "You're just going to *tear out* my memories and paw through them, rather than ask me questions that, I assure you, I don't have any answers for?"

Samson shook his head. "Not me—the S.H.I.E.L.D. people will be running the interrogation. And I certainly *hope* it won't come down to them forcibly extracting the information they're seeking from your brain." He shrugged. "But that, as the saying goes, is entirely up to you." He glanced at his wristwatch. "Look, I hate to chat and run, Phoenix, but I have a Board of Directors meeting to attend—your group's presence has started a great deal of buzz around Washington, what with all the renewed talk of Magneto possibly coming out of hiding to attack the Emperor. We've been on alert since you were brought in."

"Well, don't let *me* keep you," Phoenix said sarcastically.

Samson grunted. "I'm sure the S.H.I.E.L.D. people will be along any minute." His lips curled into a half smile. "Try not to go wandering off before they get here, all right?"

Jean stared daggers into the back of his head as he walked away.

Alone with her thoughts, Phoenix nervously chewed her bottom lip, and wondered exactly what kind of techniques were used by *this* version of the espionage organization to extract information from their prisoners . . .

It was the closest thing to having a red-hot poker shoved into her eyes.

Strapped to an examination table, her powers deactivated by a neural inhibitor, Rogue screamed in agony as the psychic probe slowly burned through each layer of the complex mental defenses that Professor Xavier had created for all his students, for exactly these kinds of situations.

For Rogue and the other X-Men, as it had been for Carol Danvers, the key to the defense was in finding a "happy place"—the center of calm that existed in the subconscious—and building protective walls around it. In Rogue's case, that sanctuary came in the form of a small brook that ran near her home, though she hadn't been back there in real

life for years. Still, it was the perfect setting to which a troubled mind could find some measure of tranquillity—the soothing murmur of the water, the gentle whisper of a soft autumn breeze that prickled the skin, and a glint of golden sunlight that shone brightly from between the mountains in the distance.

And it was on the edge of that imaginary brook that Rogue now huddled, trying her best to ignore the tremors that ran through her mental landscape, to shut out the pain that caused her real body to convulse as each layer of her mind was peeled away. She knew it was a losing battle, though—prior experience with psi-powered opponents had made it quite apparent that if they wanted information, not even barriers created by the world's most powerful telepath would stand in their way for long.

That didn't mean she was willing to just hand over information to spare herself any further torture—the last thing she wanted to divulge was that the X-Men's goal was nothing less than the total destruction of Doctor Doom's worldwide empire. Fortunately—or rather, unfortunately, given the mounting fervor with which they relentlessly battered her mind—the type of information her captors were seeking was related to another, though related, matter: the whereabouts of Magneto. That knowledge wasn't in her possession; she had told them that from the start.

Of course, they hadn't believed her.

Sitting by the brook, Rogue watched with increasing horror as the sunlight began to fade, and the air grew colder.

A storm was brewing, just over the horizon . . .

Standing beside the mutant, her gloved hands savagely pressing against the prone woman's temples, Psi Division Director Emma Frost was quickly losing patience. She had decided to start with the skunk-haired powerhouse because she appeared to be the weakest link among the prisoners, what with her wealth of insecurities lying on the surface of her mind, all just waiting to be turned against her by a highly-skilled telepath.

Unfortunately, after forcibly creating a psychic link with this "Rogue" in the first stage of the interrogation, matters had become far more complicated than Frost could have imagined. Now, an hour later, the armpits of her white blouse were soaked with perspiration, and her white, shoulder-length hair was a damp, disheveled mass of tangles.

"It doesn't matter how long this is going to take," she snarled through gritted teeth. "Eventually, I'm going to break through . . . and then I'll scoop out all your lovely thoughts like the finest sherbet—and devour them." Taking a deep breath, she focused her incredible psychic

powers on the next "wall" in Rogue's mind and drilled away at it like a jackhammer cracking through stone.

TELL ME WHAT I WANT TO KNOW, YOU LITTLE BACKWOODS WITCH! she screamed through the psychic link. *TELL ME ALL ABOUT MAGNETO—WHERE HE'S HIDING, WHAT HIS PLANS ARE—OR I'LL BURN OUT EVERY SYNAPSE IN YOUR BRAIN, AND LEAVE YOU A DROOLING VEGETABLE!*

Tears streaming from her eyes, Rogue whimpered as the attack continued, and tried to focus on a bubbling brook that she could only see with her mind's eye.

Jean, where are you . . . ?

Cyclops's entire body was a mass of bruises and broken bones. His head was pounding from a hairline fracture, his torso ached from a half-dozen purplish welts scattered across his chest and abdomen—a dull, throbbing pain, made worse by the leather straps that bound him to the metal chair in which he was sitting—and the bones of his right arm were just about held together by a thread. The shattered limb had been fitted with a cast on the trip down to Langley, but it wouldn't be of any use to him for at least six to eight weeks—not counting the additional weeks of rehabilitative treatments . . . should the universe live that long.

Yet, despite his massive injuries, his concerns were centered on his wife. He remembered how the attack at the library had started because Doom's thugs had come for Jean. And after that terrible blow to the head she had taken, was there a chance she might be—

Scott shook his head. No. He refused to believe she was gone. Their psychic link had been broken, but that only meant they were unable to communicate for the moment. Jean *was* in this place—somewhere—and if he ever got the chance to find her, hold her, smell the sweet fragrance of her hair once more, then no one—not Doom, not Magneto, *no one*—would ever be able to keep them apart again.

Just hold on, Jean. Hold on . . .

"This is the leader?" a male voice asked from behind him.

Cyclops started. He recognized that voice.

"Shaw!" he shouted. "Sebastian Shaw! Where are you?"

With surprising quickness, Shaw stepped around to place himself within Cyclops's range of vision, then yanked the visor from the younger mutant's head. Instinctively, Cyclops shut his eyes, prepared to hold back the torrent of destructive energies that were sure to follow, but the burning, rushing sensation that always accompanied a surge of optical power never came about—the neural inhibitor at work, he surmised. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

Shaw was standing in front of him, his attention focused on the visor, turning it every which way in his hands; clearly, he was trying to figure out how it worked.

"Where are the others?" Cyclops demanded.

"I'd be more concerned for my own well-being, were I in your position, young man," Shaw replied. He placed the visor over his eyes. "Ruby quartz, eh? I imagine that allows you to see the world through the proverbial rose-colored glasses." He chuckled at his little joke. "Don't worry about your friends—they're receiving the same sort of hospitality any traitor to the Empire would get after they've been brought in for questioning."

An image of Jean—lying face down on the plaza, being kicked by Mastermind—formed in Scott's mind's eye, but he fought down the urge to uselessly struggle against his bonds and snarl impotent threats at his captors. Better he remain calm and play for time.

"And when does Doom plan to show up?" he asked. "It wouldn't be like him to miss an opportunity to gloat over a fallen enemy—especially when they're old friends of his wife."

That got Shaw's attention. He lowered the visor and raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Friends of the Empress, are you?" He slowly shook his head and made a "tutting" sound. "I never would have imagined Ororo could be so desperate for companionship that she would resort to trawling amongst the rabble." He shrugged. "Ah, well—such are the eccentricities of the rich and powerful. As for the Emperor, he couldn't be here—he has far more important matters to address than what to do with a poorly-organized group of mutants who've lost their way and forgotten their stations in life." Shaw smiled maliciously. "*That* particular topic, I'm pleased to say, has been entirely left up to *me* to resolve."

Handing the visor over to a young man wearing a lab coat, Shaw removed his jacket and began rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"You're probably wondering what I'm doing," he said. "Well, I know the Psi-Division enjoys poking around in people's mind, flipping through their memories like magazines on a newsstand, but I've always prided myself on being a bit more hands-on with my questioning—especially when it comes to matters involving Magneto."

Scott was nonplused. "You're going to *beat* the answers out of me?" he asked. "While I'm tied to a chair with a broken arm?"

"Not at all, my boy," Shaw replied. A fire burned in his dark eyes. "I'm going to thrash you to within an inch of your life, and *then* I'm going to ask my questions. It spares us both that whole annoying process of raising the level of punishment each time you refuse to answer, and dispenses with the time-consuming work involved in stripping away the

psychic barriers protecting your mind. This way, by using my power to increase my strength kinetically, each blow I land becomes more powerful than the last, until I am literally grinding your bones to paste. With such excruciating pain coursing through every fiber of your being, the matter of mental barriers becomes a non-issue." Shaw handed his jacket to his assistant and stepped toward Scott. "Shall we begin . . . ?"

The first blow pulverized Scott's already shattered humerus.

After that, his mind burning with pain, he could only pray that Shaw's arms would begin to tire long before the Black King wound up killing him.

He was dying.

Lying on a cot in the darkness of his cell, Remy LeBeau breathed laboriously, each inhalation and exhalation an effort of almost Herculean proportions. The circuitry and machinery that had started growing on his body back in New York had continued to spread until he now looked more like a robot pretending to be a man.

And he felt so very, very cold . . .

He'd awakened shortly after arriving at the facility, to be greeted by the sight of a dozen or so men and women huddled around him, all of them covered head-to-toe in yellow Hazardous Material protective suits. There had been a lot of talk about "techno-organic viruses"—whatever those were—and the dangers of exposure and a lot of other scientific mumbo-jumbo Remy didn't understand. Some Asian woman in green latex, standing in an adjoining observation room, had inquired as to his chances of survival. She'd been told they were nil—he had only hours at the most left to live, a day if he was lucky.

"Then I have no use for him," she'd said angrily, and walked away.

He'd been dumped in the cell soon after that brief exchange, isolated from the rest of the facility while his captors waited for the final stages of the metamorphosis to run their course. They wouldn't have all that long to wait.

Remy shuddered. His heart was beating much slower now, his skin icy to the touch. He didn't even react as the latest strands of monofilaments forced its way through his pores, tearing through his flesh like razor-sharp hairs.

He couldn't really feel much of anything, as a matter of fact.

Death was close now. Her chilly hand was pressing down on his chest, drawing away what little warmth remained in his body. A feeling of loss washed over Remy, and he choked back a sob. It wasn't that he feared death—Lord only knew how often he'd played "tag" with her since his days as a young pickpocket on the streets of New Orleans.

It was because he knew that he was going to die, alone, without ever having given his heart completely to the one woman who had found the soul of a poet deep within the breast of a simple thief.

A tear trickled from his remaining eye; it smelt of machine oil.

"Ah, *chere*," he mumbled, his voice sounding more like an electronic burbling. "I'm sorry we didn't make dat concert . . ."

Heavenly Father, grant me the strength to survive this ordeal . . .

Kurt Wagner had always been a devout Roman Catholic; in his younger days, he'd even considered joining the priesthood. An ironic situation, given his demonic appearance.

Of course, the lure of the seminary had been ultimately replaced by a higher calling of sorts—the chance to aid Professor Charles Xavier in bringing about his dream of humanity and mutantkind one day walking, hand in hand, down the path to everlasting peace. It had been the right choice to make, Kurt had always been certain of that, and up till now he had never been proven wrong. Thus, secure in mind and spirit, he had devoted his life to The Dream, rarely feeling the need to bother the Almighty with pleas for assistance.

But if ever there was a time he truly needed the Lord's help, that time was right now. He couldn't teleport, couldn't melt into the shadows—there were none, the room being filled with blinding light—and the drugs he'd been given were wearing down his resistance to the psychic probing of the two people sitting across from him.

The woman was *Wilhelmina*—tall and willowy, with the face of a supermodel and the kind of condescending attitude one could only find in a follower of a despot like Doctor Doom. The man was *William*—broad-shouldered, powerfully built, with a head that seemed attached to his body without the benefit of a neck. Both wore dark blue uniforms with high starched collars.

"Talk, Wagner!" the woman demanded. "That bucketheaded leader of yours can't be worth all this pain and suffering! Do you *like* working for a mass-murderer? Was the bombing of Paris just another 'acceptable loss' for the realization of his precious 'dream'?" She pointed a commanding finger at him. "You *will* tell us everything, you blasted freak, or I'll reach into that feeble little mind of yours and rip out every memory you've got!"

"Please, Kurt," urged William. "Just tell us what you know, and we'll end the interrogation right now—" he glanced at his partner—"before it gets out of control."

Kurt's mouth slid into a lopsided grin. "This must be . . . the 'good cop/bad cop' scenario . . . I've seen so often . . . on American televi-

sion . . ." He rolled his head around on his shoulders to look at the woman. "You are far too . . . attractive . . . to play the . . . 'bad cop,' *fraulein* . . ."

William slapped his hands down on the table and jumped to his feet. "This is ridiculous!" he barked. "I'm *tired* of playing around with this freak!" He leaned forward and punched Kurt in the face with a meaty fist, almost pitching him from his chair. The wiry X-Man chuckled softly as a thin line of blood—a bright red streak against a midnight-blue field—trickled from the corner of his mouth.

"Now . . . who's the . . . 'bad cop' . . . ?" he said.

Wilhelmina rose to her feet and walked around the table. She grabbed Kurt's chin and forced him to look into her eyes. "You like movies, don't you, Kurt?" She smiled as his eyes widened in surprise. "Didn't think I'd gotten in there, did you? But I *did*." The telepath chuckled. "It seems Miss Frost was wrong about which one of you was the weakest link—and won't *she* be angry when she finds out." Kurt tried to pull his head away, but she held on fast. "I'm not all the way in, of course—that will take some time. But I *have* been able to sift through the thoughts lying on the surface of your mind—quite an eclectic bunch of images, I must say: movies you've seen recently . . . your friends . . . religious icons. Are you a religious man, Mr. Wagner?"

"Why should *you* care?" Kurt growled.

"Actually, I *don't*," Wilhelmina replied. "But reading your personal messages to the Almighty for help gives me such . . . wonderful ideas. William?"

The big man's eyes flashed, and Kurt was suddenly airborne, tossed across the room by the sheer force of William's telekinetic powers. He slammed hard against the far wall, the breath crushed from his lungs, and hung there, arms spread wide, two feet above the floor.

Wilhelmina reached into one of her boots and pulled out a pair of throwing knives—a gift from her grandfather when she had turned sixteen. Fluorescent light played along cold, thin steel as she gazed at Kurt's prostrate form.

"Such wonderful ideas . . ." she purred.

Like the man said, "I can't be dead—I'm achin' too much all over."

Logan opened his eyes. He certainly couldn't be dead—not unless St. Peter now operated his *This is Your Life on Earth* review of prospective heavenly candidates in a sterile examining room. And not unless St. Peter had been replaced by a group of gibbering scientists, dark-uniformed psi-agents, and heavily-armed guards. Their backs were turned to him; obviously, they thought he was still unconscious.

As they yammered away about who he might be, and how poorly the other interrogations were going—at least, that was the talk around the facility—he heard one of the scientists mention the neural inhibitors that had been implanted in the prisoners, and how well *they* were still functioning. What his captors hadn't realized, though, was that, in Logan's case, the inhibitor had shut down his heightened senses, and his mutant healing factor—but, hopefully, not his claws.

An' that's the big mistake that's really gonna cost ya, boys an' girls, he thought, eyeing his captors. *The kinda mistake that can kill.*

Of course, such dark thoughts could not go unnoticed in a facility crawling with telepaths and telekinetics.

"The prisoner!" one of the male telepaths cried. "He's awake!"

Logan couldn't wait any longer. Knowing what would happen if he *did* release his deadly bio-weapons without an active healing factor—he'd gone through *that* painful experience a few times too many during his missions with the X-Men—Logan nevertheless prepared himself for the ordeal. He gritted his teeth, tensed the muscles in his forearms, screwed his eyes tightly shut.

And then triggered his claws.

The inhuman howl that filled the examination room sent a chill up the spine of everyone standing around him—and those passing in the outside hallway. Before the scientists or telepaths could recover from the shock, Logan had torn through his restraints and leapt at them, lashing out with deadly precision.

He crashed through the door and out into the hallway, ignoring the burning sensation in his arms, and the blood pouring from the open wounds created by the claws when they broke through the skin on the backs of his hands. Normally, his healing factor would have handled the damage already, stanching the bloodflow and repairing the torn skin, but the inhibitor was still functioning, still denying him

If I don't make this jailbreak count for somethin' an' find a way outta here 'fore my injuries get t'me, Logan thought, *I'm gonna feel pretty damn stupid passin' out from loss o' blood.* He staggered around a corner—

And was struck by a volley of tranquilizer darts.

They pierced his arms, his legs, his throat—close to two dozen feather-tipped missiles, each filled with enough sedatives to bring down an elephant. Yet the man known as Wolverine remained standing.

"That the *best* you losers can do?" Logan snarled.

A rush of adrenaline surged through his body and, roaring like a maddened lion, he rushed toward the guards, fully intending to dispose of as many of them as possible before his brain was disconnected from

the control of his muscles. He got within striking distance of his first target—

And then the sedatives finally kicked in. So powerful was the dosage that Logan didn't even feel his nose break as his face violently struck the linoleum flooring.

"Well," one of the guards remarked, "that oughtta keep the midget from makin' any more trouble for a while . . ."

Two hours.

They'd left her alone for the better part of two hours.

Phoenix closed her eyes and tried for the tenth time to slip into a meditative trance. Unfortunately, as before, she wasn't able to attain a higher level of consciousness due to some physical matters beyond her control: her stomach rumbled with hunger; there was a maddening itch between her shoulder blades that couldn't be soothed even by rubbing against the back of the chair; her left calf muscles twitched slightly—the first signs of an oncoming cramp from having remained in one position for too long. And her butt had fallen asleep.

The door opened, and Phoenix opened her eyes to see a woman clad in skintight green latex stride into the room. She was accompanied by a tall, wiry man in his fifties with short, graying hair and a pencil-thin mustache; he was dressed in the black leather uniform of an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. Though she didn't know who the man was, it only took Jean a moment to recognize the woman.

"Viper?" she said.

The woman smiled, without warmth. "You know of me," she replied, clearly satisfied with that knowledge. "Good." She gestured toward her associate. "This is Agent Maynard Tyboldt—he's going to assist me while we indulge in a little girl talk. I'm sure you know what I mean: You tell me how a group of Magneto's superpowered bootlickers can move about the Empire freely for who knows how many years, without being detected by either the Psi Division or S.H.I.E.L.D.; where your cowardly leader has been hiding himself for the past year; and what his plans are now that the White House has started releasing details about the Emperor's anniversary celebration. Maybe then I'll be able to get von Doom off my back." She snorted. "Tell *me* I don't know how to do my job . . ."

"Look," Phoenix said. "I don't *know* where Magneto is; I haven't had any contact with the man for quite a while. And even if I *did* know, what makes you think I'd be willing to assist you in killing him? Besides, there are far more important things at stake than providing a salve for your wounded pride."

“Ah. Insulting your captors to start things off, eh? That’s *really* not a smart move, love.” The Director sighed. “And here Samson was convinced you were the most intelligent among the prisoners—I’m beginning to think his opinion was influenced by nothing more than a pretty face. So much for the cool detachment of scientists.” She pursed her lips. “Of course, you’re not the only plaything available to me. I wonder what that hunk with the eyebeams could tell me—given the proper stimulus . . .”

Though she knew better than to allow herself to be baited so easily, Jean couldn’t stop her lips from pulling back in a snarl.

Viper raised an intrigued eyebrow. “Well, *that* certainly produced my first response of the day.” She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Tell me, dear, are you two more than friends? Lovers, perhaps?”

“Please, Viper, you’ve got to release me—you’ve got to release my friends,” Jean urged. “The world is in terrible danger.”

Viper slowly shook her head in mock sadness and stepped back. “You know, I was hoping that, after a year in hiding, Magneto would have provided his followers with a better script, but you’re still spouting the same old rhetoric: the Emperor is bad, the Emperor is evil, the Emperor will destroy us all in the end. I will admit, though—you’re much more passionate in your beliefs than most of the other traitors I’ve . . . talked to.” She shrugged. “But we’ll have plenty of time to discuss ideologies—after we’ve ripped yours from your mind.” She turned toward Tyboldt. “You may begin the extraction process, Doctor.”

Tyboldt nodded and walked out of Jean’s view; she heard him moving around behind her, flicking switches and pressing buttons. The chair began to hum, increasing in volume until the vibrations made the fillings in Jean’s teeth rattle.

“Viper, pl—” she began, only to be silenced as the beautiful S.H.I.E.L.D. director gently placed a latex-encased finger against her lips.

“Sshhh,” Viper said gently, and smiled—like a mother reassuring her daughter that the only monster she needed to fear . . . was the one right in front of her. “The time for civil conversations has passed.” She gently stroked Jean’s cheek. “Now I don’t want to hear another word from you, young lady. You should save your strength—” the smile became a shark-toothed grin “—you’ll need it for screaming.”

“No!” Jean cried. “You’ve got to listen to—”

Any further protestations were cut short as Viper jammed a rubber ball-like device between Jean’s teeth and secured it to the straps holding her head in place.

"Can't have you biting your tongue off, love," the S.H.I.E.L.D. director explained. "We wouldn't be able to talk later—and we *are* going to have oh-so-much to talk *about*, correct?" She looked past Jean, to Tyboldt. "Level One."

The first electrical shock surged through the chair, causing Jean to jerk spasmodically against her restraints for three or four seconds. When the power was shut down, she slumped back against the chair, feeling dizzy and nauseous, unable to think clearly. Instantly, she felt the touch of a dozen minds—prodding, probing, trying to worm their way past her psi-screens.

She wouldn't let them.

"Level One no good," Tyboldt said. "She's resisting."

Viper glanced at Jean; a tear was running from the redheaded mutant's right eye. "Putting up a fight? Good—I despise weak people." She gestured to Tyboldt. "Level Two."

Now it felt as though every inch of her body was on fire; she could smell strands of her hair burning. The shock lasted a few seconds longer this time, making it difficult for her to focus her eyes, making the pounding in her head start up again as the momentarily forgotten effects of her concussion washed over her consciousness, threatening to drag her into darkness.

And again the probing bored away at her mind, stronger this time—or was she beginning to weaken . . . ?

Whatever was happening, she refused to give Viper her satisfaction. She wouldn't scream.

"Still unable to break through," Tyboldt reported, glancing at his monitors. He shook his head in wonderment. "Amazing. Even with the inhibitor running, even with a head injury and two doses of electroshock, she's still able to hold off a dozen of our best agents." He looked up from his instruments. "Director, if these readings are correct, I'm beginning to think this young woman might be the most *powerful* telepath on the planet." There was an almost reverent tone to his voice. "If we could somehow convince her to work for the Empire . . ."

The head of S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn't as impressed. "I'm a spy, Tyboldt, not a recruitment officer—in my line of work, this redheaded bimbo is one of two things: a source of information, or a threat to the Empire that needs to be eliminated. Telling me she's the most powerful *anything* on the planet just guarantees a quick trip to the morgue for her. If you're so completely awestruck by the workings of the mutant brain, feel free to take her apart at the autopsy when we're done here. I'd *also* love to see what makes her tick . . . but only *after* I've gotten what I want."

Tyboldt said nothing, wisely choosing instead to return his attention to the monitors before him.

Viper leaned close to Jean; snot and a few spots of blood had crusted along the edge of Phoenix's nose, and she was breathing heavily. "Just thought you'd like to know," the Director said quietly. "There are thirteen levels of extraction. I understand no one has ever made it past the fifth level . . . without becoming a catatonic vegetable in the process. I wonder how high *you* can go . . ." With a smile, she stepped back from the chair.

"Level Four."

The lights in the room dimmed as blue-tinged electricity crackled across Phoenix's body, violently snapping her head back. A thin line of blood trickled out from beneath the straps securing her chin.

And then, despite her gag, despite her every effort to deny her captors gaining any pleasure from her torture, Jean Grey howled like one of the damned.

Viper sighed dramatically. "'Listen to them—the children of the night. What music they make . . .'"

IF I may be so bold as to ask, Supreme Guardian, exactly how long do you plan to allow this nonsense to continue?" Saturnyne asked.

Sitting with perfect posture on a straight-backed chair in the throneroom of the Starlight Citadel, the Omniversal Majestrix turned to gaze at her superior. Roma stood beside the scrying glass, her eyes narrowed as though she were trying to peer into its pitch black depths. Despite the fact that she had been able to place the X-Men on their home planet, she was still denied viewing the events on that world. With a sigh, the Supreme Guardian stepped back from the large glass globe and turned to speak with her highest-ranking multidimensional agent.

"One week was given to the X-Men to set matters aright, and one week they shall have," Roma said. "I gave them my word, Saturnyne—I cannot go back on it now."

"I understand, m'lady—your word has ever been your bond. But three days have already elapsed on Earth 616, and no changes have occurred," Her Whyness pointed out, rising to her feet. "In fact, the Chaos Wave is now beginning to spread *beyond* the planet's boundaries!"

"The 'Chaos Wave,' Saturnyne?" Roma asked, one eyebrow raised quizzically.

"I thought perhaps the effect might need an official title, Supreme Guardian," the white-haired Majestrix replied. "It certainly sounds better than 'that reality-threatening thing that could destroy us all.'"

"Quite so." A small smile played at the corners of Roma's mouth. "Once more your categorical gifts have served me well, Saturnyne."

Her Whyness gave a small nod. "Thank you, m'lady."

The soft hum of an antigravity device echoed in the vast chamber, and the two women turned to face the main entrance. Seated in his hoverchair, Charles Xavier glided into the throneroom, telekinetically bringing the device to a halt at the crossing. He nodded respectfully to them both.

"Am I interrupting, Your Majesty?" he asked.

Roma gestured for him to approach. "Nothing of importance, Professor. Saturnyne and I were just discussing the use of . . . labels."

Xavier looked confused by Roma's peculiar response, but clearly was too polite to ask for an explanation.

"Have you received any word from my students?" he inquired. "I've tried on a number of occasions to make telepathic contact with Phoenix, but it appears that the same forces which prevent you from viewing my Earth through your scrying glass are also blocking my mental probes."

Roma sadly shook her head. "I am sorry, Professor, but there has been no contact with them since I sent them through the carrier portal. And the more time your students take in locating the source of the disturbance, the more advanced

"Which is exactly why we cannot wait for them any longer, Supreme Guardian," Saturnyne said. "I know how much your word means to you, but I urge you to think of the omniverse—the safety of innumerable dimensions far outweighs the lives of a—" she waved a hand in a dismissive gesture—"mere handful of mortals."

"You say that as though my students and I were nothing more than disposable items to be used and discarded at your whim, Majestrix," Xavier countered, eyes narrowing in anger. "Cannon fodder in your eternal quest to maintain order in the cosmos. Yet we 'mortals' were the ones you turned to when neither your Technet nor your Captain Britain Corps were able to end the destructive tendencies of your—dare I say—'evil twin,' Opul Lun-Sat-yr-nin."

Saturnyne's lips formed a thin line as she scowled at the Professor. The Omniversal Majestrix did not like being reminded of her failures by lesser beings.

Xavier chose to ignore her heated gaze and turned to Roma. "Your Majesty, I am well aware of the risks you are taking by allowing my X-Men this chance to repair the damage that has been done to our home dimension. But they did not go blindly into this mission—they, too, knew what was at stake, and were more than willing to risk their lives in this attempt to set matters aright, rather than stand idle and watch our world die." He maneuvered his hoverchair closer, placing himself between Roma and Saturnyne. "I beg of you," he said to the Supreme Guardian, "do not let that effort be for naught. Think—as my students

did—of the countless billions of innocent life forms across the universe who would be sacrificed without ever knowing why they had to die.”

“Sometimes, Professor,” Saturnyne said coldly, “it is better to *not* think of such things.”

Xavier stared at her for a moment. Although he would never consider scanning Saturnyne’s thoughts, there was something about her attitude in this entire matter that he could not understand—it was as though she were holding back vital information.

“If I may be so bold as to ask a question of *you*, Majestrix,” he said, “I would like to know why someone so dedicated to the preservation of order and the elimination of chaos is so adamant about depriving my students of their chance to save our home dimension. I should think you’d be on *our* side, supporting our efforts to the bitter end.”

For a moment, the stern, icy features of the Omniversal Majestrix softened; a blush of embarrassment bloomed on the perfect, pale-white skin.

“You *would* think so . . .” Saturnyne murmured. She turned her gaze from Xavier, to focus it instead on the scrying glass, took a deep breath, then slowly released it. Xavier waited patiently for her to continue.

“Several years ago,” she finally said, “I faced a situation not unlike the problem we have today. I was heading the Dimensional Development Court, an offshoot of the Supreme Omniversal Tribune. It was my duty to travel to certain variants of Earth—the ones whose slow development was holding back the progress of all other Earths throughout reality—and orchestrate the ‘push’ that would set them on the proper track.” She frowned. “One of the transformations didn’t go as planned—there was an unexpected outside influence that twisted The Push. It drove the inhabitants mad, eventually caused the entire planet to collapse in upon itself—it was unlike anything we had ever seen. But it didn’t stop there; it continued to spread beyond Earth, to the stars. Entire planetary systems were warped by the effect—billions upon billions of life forms screaming in horror as they watched their universe die.”

Saturnyne paused, nervously chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “There was no natural way to stop it, you see—this retardation of reality that became known as ‘The Jaspers Warp.’ In the end, the Tribune was left with no other choice but to wipe that dimension from existence, before its sickness could spread to other levels of the omniverse.” Arms clasped across her chest, the Majestrix hugged herself, as though a chill had suddenly run up her spine.

“Then, you’ve seen this happen before,” Xavier said. “If that’s true,

Saturnyne, then *you* of all people should be eager to see my students succeed. Given enough time, I am certain they will find a way to—”

“You don’t *get* it, do you, Xavier?” snapped Saturnyne, turning back to confront him; she was once more the ice queen. “Having lived through this sort of nightmare, I already *know* how it will all turn out: *badly*. They won’t slow the infection, they won’t stop the infection, and it will continue to spread unchecked throughout the universe until Roma is ultimately forced to destroy that entire plane.” She paused, her cool façade slipping once more.

“Don’t you see, Professor? Your X-Men were doomed to fail right from the start,” she said quietly. “No matter how mightily they may struggle, no matter how noble their efforts, they are going to *fail*. And *that* is why I am so adamant that Roma end this charade—for why should others have to live with the knowledge that their actions were directly responsible for billions upon billions of deaths . . .”

Xavier gazed silently at the Majestrix, and his heart went out to this woman, this agent of order who would always be haunted by the memory of the one time she had lost to the forces of chaos. “Saturnyne . . .” he began.

Rather than let him continue, Her Whyness drew herself up to her full height, head held high, and turned away from him. Disheartened, Xavier looked to Roma, who had quietly watched this exchange with great interest.

“Your Majesty,” Xavier said, “I implore you: do not give up on my X-Men now. I understand the Majestrix’s motivations, but the next four days could be critical to their efforts. To destroy an entire dimension without giving it every opportunity to go on living . . .”

The Supreme Guardian clasped her hands behind her back and walked toward the scrying glass. “My father, Merlyn, has always thought the people of your world hold great promise, Charles Xavier—that, one day, they will rise above their petty differences and live in harmony.” She paused. “He has never mentioned if he feels that way about any of the countless other Earths in the omniverse.” Roma reached out to stroke the surface of the glass. The darkness within swirled for a moment, then grew still once more. “I have come to understand that you and Merlin are of like minds in this matter, Professor.”

“Universal peace has always been my dream, Your Majesty,” Xavier replied. “My goal—and that of my students.”

Roma nodded. “Dreams are such fragile things, my friend—so quickly forgotten with the rising of the morning sun, so easily dispersed by the harsh light of day.” She turned to face the Professor. “But *you*, Charles Xavier, have ever held fast to your dreams, to your hopes,

despite the hatred and mistrust directed at your kind, despite the long years of struggle to create a lasting peace between human and mutant.” A gentle smile came to her lips. “With so powerful, so compelling a dream as that . . . who, then, am I to rouse the dreamer from his slumbers?”

“Supreme Guardian . . .” Saturnyne began. Roma quickly raised a hand to quiet her before she could continue her protest.

“To honor that dream, Professor, I shall not change my decision,” Roma said. “Your X-Men shall have all the time remaining to them—but not a moment longer. Not even *I* am willing to further jeopardize the structure of all reality for such noble beings as your students. Four days—and then I shall have to, as you mortals say, ‘take matters into my own hands.’” She glanced at Saturnyne. “There shall be no further entreaties for reconsideration of my judgment until then.”

Her Whyness choked down whatever she had been about to say, nodded once in curt acknowledgment, and remained silent.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Xavier said gratefully. “You will not regret this decision.”

“I pray that you are right, Charles Xavier,” Roma said solemnly. “For if I have chosen wrongly, yours is not the *only* dimension that will suffer from my poor judgment . . .”

It was a dream come true.

Standing on the roof of the Von Doom Center for the Performing Arts—a building formerly dedicated to the memory of the late U.S. president John F. Kennedy, long before the rise of the Empire—Betsy Braddock pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t still napping onboard Warren’s private Lear jet; the sharp, brief pain on the flesh of her forearm proved that she was wide awake. She really *was* in Washington, she really *was* gazing out on the spectacle that was the world’s capitol at night, she really *was* a scheduled performer for the anniversary gala in honor of the Emperor.

But if this really is a dream, and pinching myself is just part of that dream, she thought happily, then I don’t ever want to be awakened . . .

Around her, a party was being held in honor of the performers—champagne flowed, caviar was consumed, and the air was filled with the strains of a string quartet performing classical music; Betsy had recognized one piece as a Max Bruch composition for violin. But there was more to the celebration than just good food and good music. With Warren at her side, Betsy had even had the opportunity to meet some of her idols in the entertainment industry; as to be expected, some were

gracious, some were pompous, and some were surprisingly uncomfortable with their celebrity. Everyone, though, seemed determined to make an impression with their carefully-chosen attire—the women wearing expensive gowns, the men in tuxedos—and Betsy was no exception, wearing sparkling gold jewelry and a black, full-length silk dress. Her lavender hair billowing in the slight breeze coming off the Potomac River behind her, she gazed at the lights of Washington, D.C. and smiled like a little girl on Christmas Day, eager to open all the wonderful presents laid out beneath the tree.

“Some view, huh?” Warren asked, wrapping his arms around her waist, and resting his chin on her shoulder. Betsy turned around to face him.

“I like *this* one better,” she said, gazing into his eyes.

Warren chuckled. “You sure know how to stroke a guy’s ego, you know that?” Betsy smiled. “So, how did rehearsals go?”

“A little awkward,” she admitted. “I’m not used to the acoustics of a place as big as the Concert Hall—that thing is huge!” She paused. “It’s a little daunting, too. I mean, I *know* I’m in the show, but still . . . to step out on that stage and realize that this is all really happening . . . that I’m actually going to sing for the Emperor . . .”

“And how about the headaches?” Warren asked, clearly concerned. “Still having those?”

Betsy nodded hesitantly. “But they’re not as bad now,” she lied. “It’s probably just nerves—once the show actually starts, I’ll be fine. It’s just *getting* there that’s driving me half-mad.”

Warren eyed her suspiciously, but didn’t press the matter.

Unable to make eye contact with him any longer, Betsy turned around and rested her head against his chest, then clasped her arms around his. For all the clichéd, stiff-upper-lip British exterior she was maintaining around her one true love, she began to wonder just how long she could keep her secret from Warren. Although the remainder of the night when Arcade had left his congratulatory phone message had passed quietly—meaning she had been spared any more attacks by thoughts not her own, and did not suffer from further visions of the Minister of Entertainment acting like some melodramatic movie villain—the “voices” had returned the next day, when she had stepped from the apartment complex to buy some groceries. By concentrating almost to the point of causing a migraine headache, she had been able to block a majority of the thoughts of her fellow shoppers, but she had still returned to the apartment as quickly as possible, fearful that she might lose control at any moment. Since then, Betsy had continued to work on suppressing her mind-reading abilities, often times relying on

her musical talents, repeating song lyrics in her head to “shout down” the voices; it had, surprisingly enough, worked wonders to quiet the intrusive thoughts, but if she had to listen to one more rendition of Englebert Humperdinck’s “After the Loving” . . .

This party was a test of sorts for her: if she could block out as much of the psychic chatter being generated by the hundred-odd people around her—including the thoughts she was starting to pick up from Warren—then there was some hope that she’d be able to get through her performance, when the Concert Hall below her would be filled with close to a thousand of the Emperor’s most famous (and most fawning) subjects and ever-watchful security personnel.

“Some view,” she finally said, gazing out at the Washington skyline. Wordlessly, Warren tilted his head downward, to eye her plunging neckline.

“I like *this* one better,” he commented.

Betsy laughed. She didn’t need to read *his* mind to know what he was thinking. . . .

“You *can’t* be serious about this,” Mystique said.

“Oh, but I am, Raven,” Magneto replied. “Quite serious.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, Mystique looked around the hotel room in which had gathered the mutants who had answered the call of their master—men and women who shared the dream of destroying Victor von Doom and placing their lord in the seat of power. A lofty goal, and one Mystique shared, but she wasn’t all that certain that these were the people who could bring that dream to reality . . .

Lounging on a loveseat was Scanner—a blond-haired woman in her early twenties, bright-eyed and eager to show her leader that her bio-electrical powers would make quick work of his enemies in a fight. Seated beside her, Unuscione, on the other hand, was dark of hair and mood, forever angry at the world; her talent was in the creation of psychokinetic forcefields that operated on both defensive and offensive levels—an appropriate power, for someone used to keeping people at arm’s length. Vindaloo, munching on a stick of beef jerky as he leaned against a table, was a lanky, dark-skinned Indian, his waist-length black hair tied in a loose ponytail; his was the power to emit a gel-like liquid from his hands that he could turn into napalm-like blasts. Mellencamp was a broad-shouldered, lizard-like mutant, his scaly hide gleaming as though polished, his snake-like tongue drilling through the apple he was noisily chewing at the moment. Sitting next to him on a couch, trying to ignore her comrade’s grotesque eating habits, was Amanda Voght, a quiet, dark-haired woman with the ability to turn herself into mist—a

useful talent, when one required a fogscreen to move about undetected. Rounding out the group were Magneto's son, Pietro; the sycophantic Cortez; and Forge, who was fiddling around with the innards of the lone television in the room, making who-knew-what out of its wires and circuits.

And seated in the center of the room, looking incredibly regal in his crimson-and-purple costume, his battle helmet polished until it gleamed, was Magneto, Master of Magnetism. Their leader. Their god.

An eclectic gathering of mutants, to be sure, but one that could give even the deadliest Hunters of the Empire a good drubbing.

Still . . .

"Let me see if I have this straight," Mystique said. "You want us to break into Psi Division Headquarters, of all places, and rescue a bunch of melonheads *stupid* enough to have gotten themselves caught and interrogated by Doom's psychic stormtroopers."

Magneto nodded. "That *is* the plan."

"That's not a plan—that's *suicide!*" Mystique objected. "Absolute suicide! Who's to say they'll be of *any* use to us after a day of having every thought in their heads ripped out and put under a microscope?" She shook her head. "I know you want to rub your superiority in Doom's face, Magnus, but I thought the idea was to do that at the celebration, in front of a live audience. We shouldn't be doing anything that would tip our hand this early, like blundering through a spur-of-the-moment rescue of people you don't even know! Doom doesn't even know you're in the country—we should use that to our advantage. Our best bet is to keep a low profile, make all the necessary preparations, and then catch him unaware. The party is in two days. We don't have all that much time to get ready, you know."

"You did not seem so reluctant to carry out the mission when my father first presented it," Pietro said.

"That was before your friend in D.C. told us *where* they were being held!" Mystique replied. She looked around at her fellow conspirators. "None of you have the *slightest* idea of what I'm talking about, do you?"

The blank stares she received more than answered her question.

"Look, this isn't like Valhalla Mountain," she explained, "where hopping into the trunk of someone's car automatically gets you past their defense grid. And it's not The Vault." She snorted. "I've walked in and out of that place a *dozen* times without being detected. But *Psi Division?*" She shook her head. "That's just insane. Its security measures *alone* make the White House look like it's being protected by two sharp sticks and a rubber band. And do you know why it's insane to attack it? *Because the damned mentos can tell when somebody's going*

to strike, even before the first stages of a plan have been implemented." She looked around at the group. "Do you know how *dangerous* it is for us to even be *this* close to the compound? If it wasn't for the psi-screens Forge and I set up in this room, we would've had Hunters and Guardsmen banging down the doors already!"

The acolytes glanced at one another, then gazed toward their leader for guidance.

Mystique grunted in frustration; she wasn't getting anywhere by playing to the audience. She turned to Magneto. "Please don't do this, Erik. Remember Paris, when you tried to devise a similar attack against Doom, and tipped your hand too soon? Remember the lives it cost you—Drake, Dane, Neophyte, Kath, Callis—"

"Are you *done*, Raven?" Magneto asked. His eyes shone with unbridled anger from within the shadows of his helmet.

Mystique's golden eyes narrowed, and her lips pulled back in a snarl; clearly, her arguments had fallen on deaf ears. "*Yes*," she replied through gritted teeth.

"Good," Magneto said curtly. "Then please be seated."

Mystique stomped over to the couch and sat down hard at one end, forcing Voght and Mellencamp to move side; then, she folded her arms across her chest and glowered silently at their leader.

"Thank you," Magneto said. He rose to his feet and looked around the room, making brief eye contact with each of his acolytes. "My friends, for all her histrionics, Raven *is* correct: this *is* a dangerous mission—though far from being as suicidal as she makes it sound."

"That's *your* opinion," Mystique muttered under her breath.

Magneto chose to ignore her. "However, it is my firm belief that these people who were captured by the Psi Division—people who appear to be mutants like you and I—may hold the key to victory for our cause. It is apparent that they share our opposition of von Doom and, based on the information provided to us by Pietro's contact, we now know that one member of that group—a young woman called 'Phoenix'—could be the most powerful psi-talent in the world, which makes her feared even by von Doom's scurrilous Thought Police. Adding her talents alone to our ranks would make us impregnable to anything the Empire might throw at us; adding her fellow members' abilities would make us unstoppable." He paused. "I know I am asking much of you. Failure on our part could result in losing our chance to strike at von Doom—" he glanced at Mystique "—or, yes, even death. If any of you wish to back out, do so now—there will be no feelings of enmity toward you, by either myself, or any member of our group.

"But know this: What I plan to do this night is something I would not hesitate to do for any of you—for *any* of our kind.

"It is a risk I am willing to take . . . for The Dream."

The mutant overlord stood silently as each of the acolytes looked at one another, each searching the other's eyes for a sign that would indicate a lack of faith in their savior. Yet, not even Mystique seemed ready to back out now.

It was Scanner who finally spoke for them all.

"Dread lord," she said without hesitation, "how may we serve you?"

HE HADN'T told them anything, much to his captors' dismay.

In the darkness of his cell, Nightcrawler lay curled in a fetal position on a broken-down cot, trying his best to ignore the painful throbbing in his palms. The bleeding had stopped some time ago, but the burning sensation hadn't lessened at all—he could still feel the superheated metal of Wilhelmina's knives piercing his flesh, still remember the way in which she had used her telepathic powers to increase the level of pain he felt by a factor of ten, and still prevent him from passing out.

It had been the longest four hours of his life.

Despite the damage to his hands, Kurt believed he could still consider himself lucky—the blades hadn't sliced through any nerves. "Lucky," of course, was a relative term in this hellhole: lucky to still have the use of his hands; lucky that he hadn't bled out as he was dragged through the halls to this cell after his interrogation; lucky to still be alive.

It was a momentary respite; he knew that. The Psi Division was waiting for the pain to wear away at his resolve, waiting for it to slowly bore through the psychic defenses that had withstood even the worst physical and mental punishment he had ever endured. When they felt he had been sufficiently weakened, he would be dragged back to the interrogation room, and the process would begin again.

He wasn't sure if he could survive a second round of questioning.

Staring into the darkness, Kurt wondered how his friends were holding up to the torture. During the trip to his cell, he thought he had seen Rogue being dragged from another room, eyes wide with horror, yet seeing nothing. Then, one of the guards had told him to mind his own

business, and a metal club came crashing down onto the back of his head; he awoke on the cot.

And what of the others? Where were they in this madhouse? Were they even still alive?

Kurt angrily shook his head. Giving into despair would do him no good. He *had* to believe there was a way to endure; had to believe that an opportunity for escape would present itself soon, before time ran out for everyone in this dimension. Right now, faith in such intangibles was the only thing keeping him sane.

What is it that Paul the Apostle says in the Bible? he thought, then nodded in remembrance. "*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*"

Ignoring the pain, Kurt clasped his hands together and began hoping for a sign.

The soft rapping on his chamber door came five minutes later.

She was alive—that was the only thing of which she was certain.

Slowly, Jean Grey opened her eyes. She was still strapped into the torturous Cerebrum Scanner, still gagged—but still strong enough mentally to have held off the psychic probing of the facility's best agents, right up to the moment before the tenth level of electroshock treatments had smashed her down into darkness.

Much to her surprise, she discovered that she was alone. Viper and Tyboldt were gone; more than likely, they had departed after failing to revive her. That didn't mean they wouldn't come back, though, eager for another chance to break her.

The door suddenly opened, and Jean had to fight the urge to cry out in panic. But it wasn't Viper, this time—rather, it was a statuesque African-American woman in her twenties who stepped into the room. She was wearing a lab coat and a simple gray dress, and carrying a small metal tray; on the tray were a small bottle of colorless liquid, and a syringe. Behind the woman walked a guard; the man was in his thirties, sandy-haired and deeply tanned, with a scowl seemingly etched onto his face. He swept the room with the automatic rifle he carried as he entered, then brought its muzzle to bear on the phoenix emblem on Jean's chest.

"That's right—keep an eye on her," the woman said mockingly to him. "She looks like she's about to bust out of that chair any minute now." With a soft snicker, she placed the tray on an arm of Jean's chair.

"Yeah, well, you techies might think it's pretty funny," the guard shot back, "but I heard one of these freaks broke out of his restraints and ripped up a few of your people earlier today. Bet you wouldn't be

laughin' if some guy with Ginsu knives comin' outta his hands was comin' after you."

"Ginsu knives, eh?" the technician asked. She picked up the syringe and the bottle. "Does that mean he can cut through an ordinary person, yet his blades are still fine enough to slice a tomato?" She chuckled at her own joke.

Jean's eyes widened as she watched the woman sink the needle into the bottle, pull back the plunger, and start to fill the barrel of the hypodermic.

"What's that stuff?" the guard asked.

"Phenobarbital," the woman replied, tapping the side of the needle with a finger to remove any air bubbles. "It's a sedative."

"And what, exactly, is that gonna do?"

"Well, if it's a *sedative*," the woman said, with more than a trace of annoyance, "I'd imagine it's going to put her to *sleep*."

The guard scratched his head in confusion. "But, she was sleeping just a little while ago. Why would you want to put her out again?"

The woman turned to face him, a sneer on her lips. "Look, don't you have something else to do—kick in another prisoner's teeth, maybe slap around somebody *else* who's tied to a chair?"

The guard shook his head. "My orders are to remain with the prisoner until Viper gets back. That includes any time you spend getting Bird-Girl here ready to go sleepy-bye."

The woman gestured with her chin past the guard's shoulder. "Then you can start taking your coffee break, soldier-boy."

Clearly confused, the guard turned around, expecting to see Viper approaching—only to cry out in surprise as the woman clamped a hand over his mouth and plunged the syringe into the base of his skull. Convulsing wildly, he crumpled to the floor for a few moments, then lay still. A thick cloud of mucousy foam billowed from between his lips, and his glassy eyes rolled up in his head. A few more twitches, and he lay still.

"Idiot," the woman muttered. "Oldest trick in the espionage handbook."

As Jean watched, the woman's features blurred, her clothes changed color and style; within the space of a heartbeat, she had turned back into Mystique. Jean almost said her old enemy's name aloud, then remembered the rubber ball in her mouth. Holding her breath, she waited for Raven to make her next move.

To her surprise, it was to remove the gag and unfasten the straps that held her head in place. Jean started to whisper a thanks, only to

wince in pain as her jaw muscles cramped from the strain of being held in an open position for countless hours.

"Don't try to talk," Mystique said. "You're going to be in some pain for a while, so just listen: I'm here with friends to get you and your teammates out of this torture chamber." She moved to a control panel and pressed a sequence of buttons; with a soft clang of metal, the restraints around Jean's arms and legs retracted. "I still don't know why Magneto thinks you're so important to the cause, but just the fact that you're still alive, as he had believed, makes me start to think I shouldn't question him as much as I do."

Jean started. "M-Magne—" She whimpered as a bolt of pain shot through her jaw.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut," Mystique said scoldingly. "Yes, Magneto. And you have *no* idea how much effort it took on my part to keep him from just barging in here and tearing the place down around our ears." She dragged Jean from the chair, since the fiery-tressed mutant was too weak to stand on her own. "If you have any questions, I'm sure he'll be more than willing to answer them—*after* we've gotten away from here."

Slowly, Jean tested her legs; she was unsteady, like a new-born filly trying to find its feet.

"Just a second," Mystique said. She reached into a pouch attached to her skull-decorated belt and pulled out a metal band like the one she was wearing around her head, and placed it around Jean's. "It's a psi-scan blocker—it should hold up long enough for all of us to get out of here before any of the mentos start picking up our thoughts." She grabbed Jean around the waist. "Let's go."

As they stumbled toward the door, Jean pointed to the guard lying on the floor.

"W-what about t-that m-man?" she asked, though the pain caused by talking made her quickly wish she had remained silent.

"Oh—him." Mystique shrugged. "He's dead."

Jean stared at her in shock. "Thought you s-said 'pheno—' "

"Phenobarbital?" Mystique asked. Jean nodded, and the shapeshifter softly laughed. "Hell, no—that was window cleaner. Why waste a perfectly good sedative on a piece of trash like him?"

Stepping outside the interrogation room, Mystique shifted into a perfect replication of Viper, checked to make sure no one was in the hall, and then guided Jean away from the interrogation room.

Two corridors away, a pair of guards slammed open the door to Rogue's cell. Their names were Morales and Poe. The former was a hulking

Latino in his mid-thirties, with short, wavy, black hair and a chilling smile; the latter was a Caucasian in his late twenties, not as muscular as his partner, with dark-brown hair and a severe case of acne-scarring. From the way in which they barged into the cell, it apparently could never be said that they did not enjoy their work.

"Rise and shine, sweetness!" Morales barked, and hauled the exhausted mutant to her feet.

"Wh-what're y'all doin' . . . ?" Rogue asked sleepily. Her legs felt like mush, her head like a punching bag leaking sand.

"Miss Frost wants to have a word with you," Poe said. There was just enough of a hint of malice in his voice to get his prisoner's attention.

Rogue snapped awake, eyes wide with fear. "N-no . . ." she gasped, and started struggling. Despite her mental anguish, she managed to find the strength to push the men into the hall, kicking and lashing out with her fists in a vain attempt to break free.

"Get the stun gun!" Morales yelled to his partner, just before a hastily-thrown elbow broke his nose. He cried out in pain and stumbled back, blood pouring from his nostrils.

The second guard managed to catch Rogue in the right temple with his fist. As she staggered into a wall, momentarily stunned, he reached down to his utility belt and unclipped a small, black device. He pressed an activation button on its side, and a jagged bolt of electricity rippled between two metal contacts on one end. Poe stepped forward, intending to jam the stun gun against Rogue's waist.

"What are you idiots doing?" demanded a sharp female voice.

Rogue and the guards turned to find Viper standing a few feet away, a disgusted sneer on her emerald lips.

"Umm . . . Director," Poe said, with just the proper tone of fear. "We were ordered by Miss Frost to bring this prisoner—" he gestured toward Rogue, who was slumping against a wall "—to her office for interrogation."

"Well, you can disregard that order," Viper said. "*I'm* taking charge of the prisoner."

Both guards looked confused. "Ma'am . . . ?" replied Morales, trying his best to look respectful while keeping his head tilted back to staunch the flow of blood from his broken nose. From the corner of his eye, he glanced at his partner.

"No disrespect, Director, but that goes against Psi Division regulations," Poe said. "I shouldn't have to remind *you* that S.H.I.E.L.D. has no claim to our prisoners—not without a direct, written order from the Minister of Defense." His hand was hovering near his utility belt—and

the gun holster attached to it; the shiny black handgrip of a .9mm pistol could be plainly seen.

Viper's dark eyes narrowed. "Are you refusing my command, you worm?"

Poe shivered in undeniable fear for a moment, but he stood his ground. "Yes, Ma'am."

Viper sighed. "Very well."

The throwing knives that suddenly appeared in her hands—and then in their throats—silenced both men before either could raise an alarm.

Viper looked over her shoulder. "You can come out now, Red."

Using the wall for support, Jean staggered from the adjoining corridor to join her. "Is all this killing really necessary, Mystique?" she asked; it was becoming a little easier to talk.

The faux S.H.I.E.L.D. director grabbed her around the waist. "You know, if I were in your position, I'd do my best to see every last one of these soulless buzzards burn in hell for what they'd done to me and mine."

"That's the difference between you and I," Jean replied. "You see them as 'soulless buzzards.' I see them as innocents, twisted by the hate-filled dreams of one man."

"Von Doom." The shapeshifter grunted. "Maybe we *do* share the same goal, after all." She gestured toward Rogue. "Let's collect your friend and see how the others are doing."

They were doing just fine, actually.

Making use of the information provided by Pietro's contact, Mystique's fellow acolytes had moved quickly through the facility, aided, as it turned out, by some of the contact's highly-paid spies—psi-agents, surprisingly enough. They had allowed the group entry to the complex, and had even provided the locations of the prisoners. It seemed that Pietro's mysterious friend was networked throughout the Empire, making deals and gathering information behind von Doom's back, without any apparent fear of reprisal.

It had also made Mystique wonder if someone other than Magneto was, perhaps, vying for possession of the throne.

Of course, the X-Men themselves weren't much help in carrying out the escape. Wounded, broken, their psyches ravaged and mutant abilities deactivated, they could only rely on the kindness of people who would have otherwise been their bitterest of enemies, solely dedicated to their extermination. For the moment, the concept of the entire world being unaware of their identities was a blessing in disguise for the half dead super heroes.

Now, the acolytes and their charges were assembled in an interrogation room, waiting for the last of their group to join them.

"Somebody give me a hand," Mystique said as she entered with Jean and Rogue. Scanner and Vindaloo stepped forward to remove Rogue's weight from her shoulders, then guided the weary Southern Belle toward a chair.

Jean's worried gaze swept across the faces before her, glancing briefly at Kurt and Logan as they nursed their injuries, looking for one face in particular. It only took her a moment to find it—much to her horror.

"Oh, my God! Scott!" Jean cried.

Scott sat on the floor against a wall, his right arm wrapped in a metal brace, his left hand gripping the ruby-quartz visor—a device useless to him at the moment. His face and bare chest were covered with fist-sized bruises and deep cuts. The swelling around his eyes made it impossible for him to see, and blood had crusted around his nose and mouth.

"Jean . . . ?" Scott tried to rise, but the effort was too much for him. He sank back to the floor.

"God . . . oh, God . . ." Jean gasped hoarsely. With Mystique's help, she staggered over to join her husband. Gingerly, she touched his swollen face. "Who—who did this to you, honey?"

"It was . . . Shaw," Scott gasped. "Sebastian Shaw."

Jean's lips pulled back in a snarl; a low growl issued from her throat. "*Where is he?*" she asked.

"What's *this?*" Mystique asked in mock surprise. "Miss Peace-and-Harmony turning into a lioness protecting her mate? What happened to all that talk of how everyone in this place is an 'innocent'?"

Jean sneered. "That was *before.*"

Mystique smiled. "I'm starting to *like* you, Bird-Girl. Unfortunately, much as I'd like to see you cut loose, *you* don't have any powers, and *we* don't have time for vendettas." She looked to Cortez. "All right, Fabian, we got in—now, how do we get out? We're going to look a little conspicuous trying to walk through the main gate with the Emperor's favorite new guests. And the mentos have probably already spent the entrance fee they were paid, so I doubt they'd be willing to show us the back door for free."

"I've already worked that out." Cortez pointed to Nightcrawler. "This one is a teleporter, normally capable of moving himself and a passenger across short distances. By providing him with additional energy, I should be able to increase that range by a factor of three."

Mystique nodded. "I see. So, if we all join hands, and you boost

Blue Boy's jaunting power, he might be able to take all of us along for the ride."

"That is the plan," Kurt said.

Mystique shrugged. "No crazier than any *other* plan I've been hearing these days. Let's get to it."

"Remy!" Rogue suddenly exclaimed. "Where's Remy?"

Mystique looked to Cortez. "We're missing one?"

"Ah . . . yes," Cortez replied slowly. "There were . . . unusual complications. We can't take him with us."

"Then we're not leaving," Jean said. "*No one* gets left behind."

Jean and Mystique stared hard at one another, neither batting an eyelash. Both were unwilling to back down, so it became a waiting game as to who would give in first.

Jean won.

"All right, Cortez," Mystique finally said. "Why don't you just show us these 'unusual complications' so we can get out of here?"

Cortez nodded and headed for the door. "Follow me."

I'm gon' miss dat smile, Remy thought.

Lying on his cot, he gazed into the darkness, his mind's eye forming a picture of Rogue as he waited for the end to come.

Dat smile . . . De way de corners o' her mouth turn up just so t'make her dimples show, de way her nose crinkles up an' twitches, de way her eyes sparkle like de Mississippi under de full moon. I'd give jus' 'bout anyt'ing t'see dat smile one mo' time . . .

That wasn't entirely true, though. All he *really* wanted was one last opportunity to *speak* with Rogue, and let her know how he felt about—

"Remy . . . ?"

It was her.

Remy smiled. Maybe he *was* about to die, but maybe the man upstairs had decided to throw a little mercy his way before the end, and provide him with that last chance he had so desperately wanted. If so, he wasn't about to screw it up.

Gambit forced his lips to move, to form one word that came out in a gasp of air from metal-coated lungs: "*Chere . . . ?*"

Remy tilted his head upward, just enough to see the door to his cell open, and Rogue start to enter.

"No, you little fool!" shouted a male voice. A powerful hand gripped Rogue's shoulder and pulled her back into the hallway. A brief struggle followed

Remy struggled to a sitting position on the edge of the cot, then to his feet. It was hard to move—most of his flesh was gone, replaced by



Rudy Wappeler

cold, lifeless metal and plastic circuitry. Vaguely, he wondered if this is how it would have felt to be an old man—the aching body, the shortness of breath, the strain on a weakening heart to move atrophied limbs.

Not that he would ever have the chance to find out, of course.

“Let me go, Cortez!” Rogue shouted. “I’ve got to help him!”

Slowly, painfully, Remy dragged himself to the door and opened it all the way. He was greeted by a chorus of stunned gasps and the wide-eyed, fearful stares of his friends and a group of people he recognized as enemies of the X-Men in the “real world.”

“*Bonjour, mon braves,*” he gurgled electronically.

“*Mein Gott . . .*” Nightcrawler whispered.

“Look at him!” Cortez said to Rogue, pointing at Remy. “Your friend has been infected with a techno-organic virus—you lay a *finger* on him, and the same thing will start happening to you! *That’s* why I had decided to leave him behind.”

Rogue seemed to be in a daze. “I . . . I can’t touch him?”

Cortez shook his head. “I’m sorry—it’s a highly contagious pathogen. And from his condition, I’d have to say he’s in the last stages of the infection. He . . . doesn’t have much time left.”

“Ironic, *non?*” Remy said to Rogue, leaning against the door frame for support. “All dis time we been wantin’ t’have de chance t’kiss wid-out de fear o’ your powers absorbin’ mine—you always worryin’ ’bout what it might do t’me—an’ now, when it don’ matter none anymore, it’s *me* who can’t touch *you*.”

“No, Remy!” Rogue said. “We’ll get you outta here, find a cure—”

Remy sadly shook his head. “No, *chere*. Ol’ Gambit, he done played his last hand—now de time has come t’call it a night, I t’ink.”

Desperately, Rogue turned to Cortez. “We can come back for him, right? After Kurt has gotten us out of here, we can come back—we can take Remy with us. Can’t we . . . ?”

Somberly, Cortez glanced at Nightcrawler; the blue-skinned teleporter looked as though his soul was being torn from his body.

“Kurt . . . ?” Rogue said softly.

Nightcrawler looked up at her with haunted eyes. “I . . . I . . .” he began, then fell silent.

“I think any more than one jaunt would tear your friend apart,” Cortez said gently. “He’ll be lucky if the strain doesn’t kill him the first time.”

Rogue’s mouth moved, but no words would come out. Her panicked eyes refocused on Gambit. The Cajun shrugged and flashed a small smile.

"Dat's okay, *petite*," Remy said. "Somebody got t'keep dese pigs distracted while you get away. Sound like de perfect job for de Six-Million-Dollar Mutant, *non*?"

The quivering of Rogue's lower lip made it clear she didn't find his comment humorous in the least.

"And what are you going to use for weapons?" Mystique asked. "They confiscated anything you were carrying when you were brought in."

Gambit chuckled softly. "But, I got *one* t'ing dey ain't got," he burbled electronically. He tapped on his stiff metal wrappings with his remaining hand. "I got *me*."

He looked around at his friends as they began to realize—in horror—just what he was saying. "You jus' make sure you stop dat crazy tinhead Doom, *mon braves*. De whole universe is countin' on you—" he winked his one eye "—an' ol' Gambit, too."

"No, Remy—you can't *do* this!" Rogue said. "Remember what Cyclops was sayin' before: If we can find a way t'change everything back, then we can cure you, too—make it like this never happened! All you've gotta do is hang on till then!"

Remy shook his head. "I wish it was dat easy, *chere*, but de plain an' simple truth is I'm dyin', an' no amount o' hangin' on is gonna stop it." He turned to Mystique. "Can we have a minute?"

"Only a minute," Mystique replied, but there was no caustic bite to her tone of voice—it actually sounded tinged with sorrow.

Gambit stepped back into his cell, and motioned for Rogue to join him.

"Remy, you've got to—" Rogue began, but soon fell silent as Gambit gestured for her to be quiet.

"Please, *chere*—let me say what I need t'say while I still got de time t'do it. Jus' hear me out, okay?" Rogue nodded, and Remy took a deep breath to steady himself—as much of a breath as the constricting metal would allow—then began:

"Rogue, I always wanted t'tell you how much you meant t'me, how much I cared 'bout you, but ev'rytime I tried, I couldn't find de right words, an' den I'd wind up chasin' you away." Remy paused. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for puttin' you t'rough all dat heartache. Sorry for all de pain I caused you over de years. Sorry I could never find de courage to say . . . to say, 'I love you.'" A warm, easy smile came to his lips.

"I love you, Rogue," he said gently. "Always have, always will. You de only woman I ever met who could beat a t'ief at his own game; you did dat t'me de first time we met—when you stole away my heart. I jus' wanted you to know dat."

Rogue stared at him for a moment, clearly uncertain of how to reply.

"An' you waited until now to tell me?" she finally said in a quiet voice.

Remy flashed a lopsided grin. "You know me, *petite*—always de master o' timin'." He gestured toward the others, and turned away from her. "You . . . you better get goin'."

Rogue stood there, quietly trembling, unable to say anything, until Jean gently placed her hands on her shoulders and led her back to the group.

"God be with you, *mein freund*," Kurt said to Gambit.

"I'd 'preciate it if you'd put in a good word or two for me, Kurt." Remy flashed a melancholy smile. "I got me a feelin' I'm gonna need all de help I can get when I meet de Big Man."

"It would be my honor to do so," Kurt replied.

"Take care'a yerself, Cajun," Logan said.

Remy smiled. "I'll see you on de other side some day, *mon ami*—we'll drink a toast t'de wild ol' days."

"Don't be lookin' fer me *too* soon, Remy," Logan replied. "I still got plans."

Gambit chuckled.

"Come *on*, people," Mystique urged. "We've got to go *now*."

Reluctantly, the X-Men turned from their friend to join the acolytes. Placing their hands on Kurt and one another, the group watched as energy crackled around the teleporter and Cortez, then around themselves.

Immediately, alarms began sounding as the build-up of teleportational forces was detected.

The clatter of boot heels on linoleum caught their attention. A platoon of armed guards dressed in riot gear was pounding down the corridor; behind them charged Samson, Viper, Tyboldt, and Miss Frost.

"Well, what d'you know?" Remy said. "De gang's all here." He turned back to his friends. "Go. *Now*."

For the briefest of moments, Rogue and Gambit made eye contact; it was clear her heart was breaking. He almost asked her to stay, then forced himself to say nothing; instead, he smiled encouragingly.

"I love you, Remy," she said softly.

And then, with a massive burst of brimstone and imploding air, the X-Men and the acolytes were gone.

"Good-bye, *chere*," Remy whispered.

"Damn it! They got away!" said Frost.

"You! Put your hands above your head and lie flat on the floor!" Viper yelled at Gambit as the guards assumed firing positions.

Remy chuckled—an eerie, electronic sound that issued from between icy lips. “I only *got* de one hand, *fille*—but I’ll do what I can wit’it.”

With the last ergs of his dwindling life-force, Remy triggered his powers; his hand began glowing with building kinetic energy. He placed it on the metal casing that had become his body, and it, too, began to glow.

“Hope y’all packed for a trip,” Remy said, flashing a wicked smile. “I’m sure St. Pete’s gonna have a *lot* t’say t’*all*’a us sinners. . . .”

THE FIRES from the chain of explosions that leveled Psi Division Headquarters were still burning when the morning rush hour began. There had been no sign of either the prisoners or their rescuers since the first report of their escape. Magneto's whereabouts were still unknown.

It was not the sort of news the Emperor wanted to hear on the day of his tenth anniversary in power. Nor was his reaction to that news something the remaining members of the war council had been eager to witness.

"*Imbeciles!*" he bellowed, slamming his fists down on the top of the war room conference table. "Incompetents! To think that that worm's sycophantic followers were within my grasp, only to have them slip through my fingers because of such gross negligence, and then to have them destroy the very facility in which they were held . . . !" He pounded the table again. "And *then* to be told that the pain and terror experienced by the agents as they died created a psychic backlash that traveled around the world, crippling or killing over ninety percent of those linked to the telepathic network at the time!" He threw his head back and roared in anger.

"*Must Doom forever be surrounded by bunglers and idiots?!*" he cried to the heavens.

It was a rhetorical question of sorts, and one that no one was willing to answer . . . though Stark, Shaw, Dorma, and Wanda cast furtive glances at one another, silently daring their fellow councilors to say something in reply.

And as smart a man as he was, never let it be said that Sebastian

Shaw was not up to a challenge—no matter how great the risks. It was a trait one often found in the most egomaniacal.

“Well, it’s not all bad news, Your Majesty,” Shaw commented. “At least that libidinous psychopath Viper paid the price for allowing them to escape.”

“Yeesss . . . Viper,” von Doom said as he took his seat. “How unfortunate that I was denied the opportunity to personally teach her that lesson.” His eyes narrowed as he focused them on Shaw. “But tell me, Sebastian—I understand that you had personally conducted one of the interviews with the prisoners. How is it, then, that *you* were not present when the facility was sabotaged?”

“I had no desire to spend the night there, Your Majesty,” Shaw replied. “Not when there were far more comfortable lodgings to be had in the apartment I keep in Richmond.”

“Where, I am certain, you spent the rest of the evening?” von Doom said, never breaking eye contact.

Shaw began to answer, then started. “Your Majesty, are you insinuating that *I* had anything to do with the prisoners’ escape?”

Von Doom sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “I have not risen to this level of power by being trustful of those who serve me, Sebastian—you are no exception.”

“B-but,” Shaw sputtered, “what possible reason could I have for betraying you, my lord?”

“A few reasons come to mind,” von Doom replied. “The prisoners were mutants. *You* are a mutant. You are also responsible for keeping your kind in control. Perhaps, with all this talk of Magneto striking me down at the celebration, you felt it was time to switch allegiances and throw in with that dog, Lensherr. Promise him that the very mutant population you oversee would be more than willing to offer up their lives in a vain attempt to place him on the seat of power.”

“Your Majesty, I assure you—”

“It is also no secret that you disliked Viper—with her death, there is one less voice of dissension to be raised against you at these sessions . . . although I am certain Lady Dorma would be happy to stand in for her fallen comrade on that count.”

Shaw looked across the table at Dorma. She glared at him from above her breathing mask; her eyes shone with open hatred.

“And, not to be forgotten, you have always been a man in pursuit of power. I’m certain Magneto’s ceaseless banter about creating a world in which mutants are the ruling class must appeal to you on quite a number of levels.” Von Doom raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Including

the position you would receive as a reward for your efforts in a coup, perhaps?"

"Your Majesty, *please*—"

"But, even more importantly, Sebastian—you have not answered my question."

"Yes! Of course I was in my apartment!" Shaw bellowed. "Your Majesty, I swear I am loyal to y—"

"*Silence!*" von Doom barked. He glared at his councilor. "You think me a fool, Shaw? Or that I would not have you under surveillance twenty-four hours a day—as I do all members of this council?" Shaw noticed he wasn't the only councilor to have a surprised response to that question.

"I know all about your pathetic little affairs," the Emperor continued. "*Especially* those concerning your trysts with the so-called 'Black Queen' of the Hellfire Club!" He leapt to his feet, thrusting an accusatory finger in Shaw's face. "And yet, despite the fact that you were derelict in your duties to the Empire, thereby aiding in the death of a member of my war council, you have the unmitigated *gall* to sit there and *lie* to your Emperor!" He leaned forward, eyes practically burning with rage. "I'll ask you once more, before I tear out your miserable throat with my bare hands: Did you spend the rest of the evening in your apartment?"

Shaw shifted in his chair, trying to break eye contact with von Doom, yet unable to do so; it was as if he had been hypnotized by a cobra about to strike.

"No, Your Majesty," he said quietly.

A low growl issued from von Doom's throat. "Were you not a close friend of the Empress—" he held up his hands, to display the Mandarin's deadly rings—"it would give me the greatest pleasure to show you what each of these baubles is capable of doing to a man."

"Th-thank you, Your Majesty," Shaw replied. "You are most generous."

"Do not be so quick to offer me your thanks, mutant," the Emperor said. "Until you have given me irrefutable proof that you have not, as they say, 'gone over to the other side,' you have no place in this war council. Leave now, before I resolve the matter . . . with a public execution."

Shaw rose from his seat, glancing to the side just in time to see Dorma grinning broadly. There was nothing friendly in her shark-toothed smile. He was certain, though, that she was sorely disappointed in the Emperor for not ordering his immediate death.

The sound of approaching boot heels momentarily diverted attention away from the disgraced councilor.

Agent Harada—Ororo's new personal bodyguard—stopped a few feet from the table and stood at attention. "Excuse me, Sire."

"What is it, lackey?" von Doom rumbled.

Harada looked as though he wanted to turn and run—a thin layer of sweat was already forming on his brow—but he stood his ground, back ramrod straight, eyes respectfully averted from the royal presence. "Sire, the Empress requests your presence. The guests are beginning to arrive for the celebration."

The change in the Emperor's mood was instantaneous. "The celebration . . ." A small smile played at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes shone with merriment. "Very well—I shall join her shortly."

Harada bowed, turned smartly on his heel, and quickly headed for the exit.

Von Doom turned back to his councilors—and found Shaw standing in front of him. His joyous mood of a moment before was immediately forgotten.

"Why are you still here, Shaw?" he growled.

"I was just leaving, Your Majesty," the mutant councilor replied quickly. With a small bow, Shaw left the table, heading for the elevator at the far end of the war room.

"Oh—Sebastian?" the Emperor called after him.

Shaw halted and turned around. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Did you *learn* anything from the prisoner you interviewed?"

Shaw opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and stood silently for a moment. "No, Your Majesty," he said at last.

A satisfied smile played at von Doom's lips. "I thought as much." He waved a dismissive hand at Shaw. "Now, leave—your continued presence sickens me."

Ignoring the smug looks of the others, Shaw turned on his heel and, head held high, proudly strode toward the elevator.

"Well, *that* could have gone better."

Sitting on the edge of a coffee table in a Bethesda, Maryland hotel suite, Mystique looked to Magneto for a response. Grouped around him, like spandex-clad members of a cult, stood his followers, eager to hear his every word.

"I suppose so," he replied slowly. "But at least it was a successful mission."

Magneto looked around the room. Across from him, the costumed ones called Cyclops and Phoenix were seated on a couch, his legs com-

fortably stretched across her lap as he lay back on the cushions. From the ways in which they touched and gazed so intently at one another, it was clear they were more than friends—lovers, perhaps, or even husband and wife. On the far side of the suite were Wolverine and Nightcrawler. The gruff Canadian was the only member of his group not in costume, having scrapped the tattered remains of his yellow-and-blue outfit in favor of jeans, boots, and a red plaid shirt. The team appeared well-rested after a few hours' sleep, their injuries having faded in the short time since their escape. All in all, the former prisoners looked a great deal better than when the acolytes had first brought them before their dread lord.

Such accelerated healing had not come easily, though—not without some degree of pain. There had been a short, yet extremely torturous, period during which Scanner had used her bioelectrical talents to short out the neural inhibitors blocking their mutant powers. Had the mutant escapees not been made of sterner stuff, the treatment might have proved as fatal to them as any punishment to which the late Psi Division could have subjected them. Nevertheless, they had endured, and then these “X-Men” had been introduced to a rather plain-looking woman named Harmony. She was, as Magneto had explained, a mutant gifted with the ability to heal the most serious injuries within the space of minutes. With a simple laying-on of hands, she had treated Jean's electrical burns and cramped muscles; Kurt's damaged hands and the crippling exhaustion he had suffered as a result of the group teleportation; and Scott's bruises, cuts, and broken arm.

Unlike his teammates, though, Wolverine had had no need of Harmony's ministrations. Once the neural inhibitor was deactivated, his mutant healing powers had kicked in, instantly healing his injuries.

As for the one called Rogue . . .

Looking past Scott, Jean gestured toward a closed door at the far end of the suite; it led to one of three bedrooms. “I think I should check on her. She hasn't slept since we escaped, and sitting alone, replaying their last moments together over and over in her head, is only going to continue eating away at her.” She glanced at Scott. “I think we *both* know what *that's* like.”

Scott nodded in agreement and swung his feet back onto the floor.

“That yer expert medical opinion, ‘Doctor’ Grey?” Logan asked with a small smile.

Jean smiled warmly at him, then rose from the couch and walked toward the bedroom door.

Scott turned to Magneto. “You're wrong, you know,” he countered.

"It *wasn't* a successful mission—we lost Gambit. Even *one* death was too high a price to pay for our escape."

Magneto nodded. "One more life for which von Doom must answer—and he will, my friend."

On the other side of the room, Nightcrawler leaned over to whisper in Wolverine's ear. "Why is it that, each time he calls one of us his 'friend,' I get a chill up my spine?" he asked.

"Pro'bly 'cause we know what a snake he really is," Logan replied. "A snake lyin' in the brush, waitin' for the right moment t'strike . . ."

"Rogue?"

Stepping further into the sizable bedroom, Jean spotted her friend sitting in a chair by a window, legs drawn up against her chest. Rogue was hurriedly wiping away tears with the heels of her hands, turning her head away from Jean so she wouldn't see her crying. Jean closed the bedroom door, but made no move forward.

"Hi, Jeannie," Rogue muttered. "You feelin' okay now?"

"Yes, thank you," Jean replied. "Magneto was right—Harmony *does* have a wonderful gift for healing. Between her touch, and the deactivation of the neural inhibitor, I almost feel like my old self." She paused. "How are *you* doing?"

Rogue laughed curtly—a short, phlegmy sound without any humor. "I been better," she replied, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her bodysuit. "Too bad that girl can't do nothin' for healin' a broken heart, right?"

Jean nodded, even though she knew Rogue couldn't see her.

"He's really gone this time," Rogue said quietly, gazing out at the bright Maryland sunshine. "After all the times he used to disappear on us, goin' who-knew-where, and then showin' up at the front door like no time had passed, with that big, ol' stupid-lookin' grin on his face . . ." She looked to Jean, a haunted look in her red-rimmed eyes. "He's not comin' back, is he, Jean?"

"I honestly don't know, Rogue," Jean replied. "I certainly pray he will." She walked over to join her friend. "Maybe Scott is right—maybe all of this will disappear once we've corrected whatever Doom has done, and we'll wake up in the mansion, thinking it had been nothing more than a bad dream." She smiled encouragingly. "And Remy will be standing at the front door, with that stupid-looking grin on his face."

Rogue nodded her head, but it was obvious that she didn't really believe it would happen. She turned back to stare out the window.

"I miss him so much," she said quietly.

Jean placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I know."

* * *

"How's your friend holding up?" Scanner asked Wolverine, tilting her head toward the closed bedroom door.

"How'd you *expect* her t'be holdin' up?" Logan replied gruffly. "She just watched her boyfriend die, an' with all the powers we got in this group, none o' us could do anything t'help 'im." He snorted. "It ain't the kinda thing ya just shrug off, kid."

Scanner nodded in sympathy. "So, what was that whole thing about him not being able to touch her?"

Logan grunted. "Gambit an' Rogue never had what ya'd call a 'stable relationship,' but what they *did* have was somethin' special—some-*thin'* the rest o' us can only dream about havin'." He glanced at the door with a melancholy expression. "That girl's gonna be a long time hurtin'. I just hope she's got the strength t'get through it."

The door suddenly opened, and Jean stepped from the bedroom; she closed the door behind her. Both acolytes and X-Men turned to face her.

"She's sleeping," Jean explained. She looked troubled. "I... thought it might be the best thing for her."

Logan grunted, but said nothing. He knew what Jean meant: she had used her telepathic powers to temporarily "shut down" Rogue's mind. He'd experienced the same thing done to him a time or two—usually by Professor Xavier—on those rare occasions when the blood-lust that arose in the heat of battle overwhelmed all rational thought. Logan didn't like being on the receiving end of a psi-blast—not one bit—but in Rogue's case, he had to agree that it was for the best. It was obvious Jean didn't like herself too much right now for having placed her friend in what amounted to a short-term coma. But without sleep, Rogue would more than likely become a liability in a fight, unable to focus her thoughts on her work. And they'd *need* her abilities in their strike against Doctor Doom—in this desperate bid to make things right once more.

To put an end to this madness.

Logan turned to Cyclops. "So, what do *we* do while we're waitin' fer Rogue t'wake up?"

"We make plans," Cyclops replied. He turned to Magneto. "Jean and I have been discussing your part in all this, and we're curious as to why Doom has allowed you, and your followers, to run free this long when he controls the world so completely."

"*Allows*?" Magneto replied between gritted teeth, leaning forward in his chair. "He has made my life nothing short of a living hell for these past ten years, his lapdogs always snapping at my heels, always

trying to run me to ground, torturing and killing my loyal acolytes—and you consider that ‘running free’? Are you *insane*, boy?”

Scott shook his head. “Not in the least. But if Doom is as powerful as he clearly seems to be—even possessing the ability to ‘rewire’ the minds of every man, woman, and child on this planet, both human *and* mutant, and then create false memories—then he should have been able to capture you years ago . . . by *your* time.”

“What are you talking about?” Magneto said. “And what kind of nonsense is this you’re spouting—Doom being able to tinker with my thoughts?” He snorted derisively. “No one—mutant *or* human—controls the mind of Magneto!”

Jean gently placed a gauntleted hand on Scott’s shoulder before he could continue the argument. “I think that’s my cue,” she said, and stepped toward Magneto. “I know you don’t believe this, Magnus, but we’ve fought on the same side, in the past, many times—and fought against each other, as well.” She gestured toward her teammates. “Against all of us.”

“More of these ‘false memories,’ Phoenix?” Magneto asked skeptically.

“Not false,” Jean replied. “True ones—of how the world should really be, without Doom in control. Of how we know all about you and your followers. Of the real reason it’s so important that we put an end to Doom’s empire. If you’d allow me to show you . . .” She reached forward to place her hands on his temples.

As one, the acolytes tensed, clearly expecting this to be a trick of some sort—a chance, perhaps, for a traitorous mutant to strike down their leader and prove her worth to the Emperor.

“I wouldn’t do that, Magnus,” Mystique said; a gun was in her hand, its muzzle pointed directly at Jean’s head. “The girl’s a mento—you *know* they can’t be trusted. And after what we went through last night . . .”

On the other side of the room, Cyclops, Wolverine, and Nightcrawler were on their feet. Scott’s fingers rested lightly on the visor buttons that, when pressed, would unleash his powerful force beams.

The term “Mexican standoff” skipped through Jean’s mind as she looked at both teams.

“This is asinine,” she said in disgust. She glared at Mystique, then nodded toward the gun that was trained on her head. “Put that thing away before I make it part of your anatomy.”

Mystique smiled wickedly. “You *are* just moving away from that whole peace-and-love nonsense, *aren’t* you, Bird-Girl?” The gun didn’t move from its target.

“Put down your weapon, Raven,” Magneto ordered. “*This instant.*” His tone was that of an angry father scolding a rebellious daughter.

Mystique looked from Magneto to Phoenix, then back again. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Jean, she lowered the pistol, snapping the safety back in place.

“Fine. *Fine,*” Mystique said angrily. “I wash my hands of this whole mess.” She glared at Magneto. “But don’t come stumbling over to me, drooling on the carpet like an idiot, after she fries every synapse in your head. You’ll get no sympathy from *me*, ‘dread lord.’” Turning on her heel, she stomped away and entered one of the other bedrooms, slamming the door behind her.

Magneto snorted. “Children.” He turned back to Jean. “You may proceed, Phoenix.”

Gently, Jean placed her fingertips against his temples. “This is going to hurt a bit when I trigger your memories, so be prepared.”

“Do what you must,” the mutant overlord replied. “I am ready.”

“All right,” Jean said. “Then, close your eyes, and clear your mind.” Magneto did as he was told, settling back in his chair.

Jean closed her eyes. “Contact,” she whispered.

And then she let loose with a psychic pulse that traveled deep into his subconscious—stirring memories long forgotten.

A startling transformation suddenly came over the Master of Magnetism. The weather-beaten skin tanned to a leathery toughness by the harsh environment of the Sahara dissipated, becoming softer. Atrophied abdominal muscles tightened. Ten years of hardship and excruciating injuries and crippling despair drained away. He almost seemed larger now, prouder, regal in bearing.

He remembered it all now: His shattered friendship with Charles Xavier; his numerous confrontations with the X-Men over the years; the times he fought von Doom and a dozen other power-mad tyrants for possession of the world; even his brief relationship with Rogue.

But most of all, he remembered Genosha—a tiny island-nation off the east coast of Africa. A place where, for decades, humans had ruled, openly oppressing the rights of the mutants who also lived there, treating them no better than the lowest of animals—it was a form of apartheid based not on the color of one’s skin, but on their genetic makeup. That scurrilous policy had come to an end the day the United Nations handed rulership of the small country over to Magneto, in exchange for his guarantee that he would never again attack one of its members. As far as Magneto had been concerned, such promises were always made to be broken, but he had accepted the offer, if only to momentarily allay the U. N.’s fears and lull the humans into a false sense of security—

while he planned for the future. He wasn't about to abandon his goals, not in the least: Genosha was to be just the first step toward making his ultimate dream of worldwide mutant rule a reality.

Until Doctor Doom had *recreated* the world—and him . . .

"He took it from me," Magneto said softly. His eyes snapped open, and lips pulled back in a snarl. "My memories! My triumphs! My dreams!" He leapt to his feet, brushing Jean aside, and shook mighty fists in the air. "*Damn him, he took it all away from me!*"

"I'm beginning to think this was not a good idea . . ." Nightcrawler muttered to Scott.

"You may be right, Kurt," Cyclops replied, "but we need Magneto at full strength, with all his memories intact—that way, he's completely aware of what's at stake here." Scott flashed a brief smile. "Besides, having Magneto angry and focused on Doom might give us the chance to find the source of the anomaly." He paused, noticing his friend's skeptical expression. "I *know* it's a risk, Kurt, but we're running out of options . . . and time."

Kurt sighed. "I hope you're right, *mein freund*," he said. "For all our sakes."

"So am I . . ." Scott admitted.

On the other side of the room, adamantium claws extended from the backs of callused hands. Logan was prepared for Magneto to lash out at his old enemies, now that his memories were restored; given the opportunity, the scrappy warrior wouldn't hesitate to carve out the heart of the mutant overlord before he could launch an attack.

Instead, Magneto's histrionic display came to an abrupt end, and a small smile played at his lips as he gazed at Jean.

"Thank you, Phoenix," he said gently. "You have made me whole again, and for that I am grateful."

"You're . . . welcome," Jean replied, uncertain whether she actually meant it. She stepped back to join her teammates.

Hands on hips, Magneto looked at Cyclops. "So, Summers—I understand from Miss Grey's telepathic primer that you are in need of my aid."

"Yes," Cyclops replied slowly.

"And what do you offer in exchange?" he asked.

"How 'bout the chance t'go on breathin', ya piece o' filth?" Wolverine replied, brandishing his claws. "I shoulda put you outta my misery while we were all buddy-buddy, Lensherr. Woulda spared us all a lotta trouble after we got done kickin' Doom's metal butt."

"Logan—stand down!" Cyclops ordered. He and Wolverine ex-

changed heated stares, but the feral mutant eventually sheathed his claws.

Cyclops turned back to Magneto. "What do you want?"

"Simply an understanding between us, X-Man." Magneto folded his arms across his chest. "Doom is *mine*. You may want him stopped, but I want his *head*."

"Magnus, you know I can't—" Cyclops began.

"You will not raise a hand in his defense," Magnus continued. "Nor will you prevent me from delivering the killing blow. If you wish to save the universe—an action I'm sure that you and the rest of Xavier's malcontents have grown used to doing—you will do *nothing* to keep me from exacting my revenge. Also, any attack made against me—or my people—by any member of your team in the so-called 'heat of battle'—" he glanced at Wolverine "—and you will be on your own. No one will come to your assistance, no one will provide you with the distractions you'll need to find the source of Doom's power. Are we agreed?"

Cyclops locked eyes with the mutant overlord, trying his best to ignore the concerned expressions on the faces of his friends. Then, his lips slowly pulled back in a sneer. "Agreed."

"Cyclops . . ." Kurt began.

"*I said we're agreed!*" Cyclops said sharply. "You have my word, Magnus," he added softly.

"A wise decision," Magneto hissed. He smiled, eyes alight with an undisguised look of triumph. "Then . . . welcome to the revolution, X-Men."

The quintet of heroes found nothing amusing in the statement.

With a hearty laugh, Magneto turned to his acolytes. "My friends, we strike—tonight! At the height of all the self-congratulatory back-patting, Doom and his fawning lackeys shall learn what it means to play Magneto for the fool! I shall tear the heart from his breast and hold it high for all the world to see! And then, my friends, then shall begin the glorious reign of *Homo superior!*"

On the far side of the room, Scott Summers glanced at his fellow X-Men. He knew that what he had set into motion was for the good of the mission; reversing Doom's work before time ran out was the greater threat—far more so than any betrayal Magneto might be planning for later on. No matter how distasteful it had been to ask Magneto for help, the mission *had* to be completed—billions upon billions of lives were at stake.

And yet . . .

And yet Scott couldn't help but wonder if, in order to save a universe, he hadn't just bargained away his soul to the devil himself.

THE TIME had come.

For weeks, every major city in the world had been festooned with banners and signs heralding the pending arrival of this day. Green-and-silver bunting—reflecting the colors of the Emperor's battle dress—hung from every government building and every household. In schools, children rehearsed plays and sang songs that detailed the Emperor's rise to power and the elimination of his enemies. Memorabilia designed to commemorate the occasion—from flags to buttons, T-shirts to posters, magazines to comic books—flew off store shelves as the citizens of the Empire snapped up little pieces of history. Like the days and months leading to the end of 1999, another countdown had been put into motion, though this one would culminate not in a new millennium, but in the party to end all parties—the tenth anniversary of the Rule of von Doom.

Now, hundreds of television cameras lined New Hampshire Avenue, broadcasting images to every household around the world. Paparazzi struggled against one another behind police barricades, trying to get the arriving guests to look their way for a photograph, and convince them to flash a quick smile and, perhaps, a bit of flesh, before entering the Von Doom Center for the Performing Arts on this, “the grandest night in the history of the world” (at least, that's how the Ministry of Information had phrased it). Thousands of cheering spectators gathered on the far side of the avenue, trying to catch a glimpse of the Imperial guests as they stepped from their limousines.

And keeping a watchful eye over all was the single-largest concentration of Guardsmen, Hunters, soldiers, and police officers ever seen since the first days of the Empire. The Emperor, after all, might be an

arrogant, prideful man, but he was no fool. If there was any chance that Magneto might actually have the nerve to attack him on this of all nights, he would not find von Doom unprepared to properly greet him.

As for the people who were actually attending this extravaganza, they had come from all corners of the globe to pay their respects to the Royal Couple. There were politicians and publishers, athletes and artisans, supermodels and Broadway stars, all of them there to see and be seen, to utter embarrassingly-gushing statements about the awe and spectacle that were Victor von Doom, how honored and thrilled they were to have been invited to participate in such a momentous occasion as this, and how the Royal Couple's reign deserved to be celebrated in such a high-spirited fashion, considering how they had brought peace and prosperity to the Earth—this was mankind's true Golden Age. The crowds "oohed" and "ahhed" as celebrities such as Simon Williams—co-star of the box office smash *Doom's Patrol*—arrived arm-in-arm with Imperial Enchantress Wanda Maximoff, and millionaire playboy Anthony Stark was accompanied by model Tyra Banks. And, as each guest walked up the block-long red carpet to the main entrance of the arts center, security forces directed them to the Grand Foyer, where they were to greet the Man of the Decade when he arrived.

The setting was an impressive sight for those few chosen hundred who been invited to personally celebrate the greatness that was Victor von Doom—a setting meant to inspire both awe . . . and fear. Before the occupancy of the White House by the current administration, this six-hundred-foot-long gathering place had simply been a means by which to access the center's three main auditoriums. Now, though, it served as a tribute to the might of Latveria—the postage stamped-sized country that had given birth to the future king of the world. Lit by ten massive, crystal chandeliers, its tiled floor gleamed with the sort of brightness that only human hands could have accomplished—no machine could match the almost religious fervor with which the janitorial staff had applied themselves to their work in ensuring that their master would always be pleased by what he saw when he entered this nexus of entertainment. Wood-paneled walls—not part of the building's original design—proudly displayed the works of some of Latveria's finest artisans. A plush, blood-red runner stretched from the main doorway to the far side of the foyer, above which hung a large replica of the Latverian coat-of-arms. Replacing the spectacular bronze bust of John F. Kennedy that had stood to one side was a massive, marble sculpture of von Doom clad in his battle armor, helmet tucked under his left arm, right hand holding a large globe representing the Earth. Its powerful

statement of complete dominance over all was not lost on anyone in the foyer.

But then, subtlety had never been a strongsuit of the monarchy.

Along with dozens of celebrities from every level of the entertainment industry and the fine arts, the members of the Senate and the House of Representatives—officials whom von Doom regarded as being no more than toadying vassals who tended the lands he owned in exchange for the honor of serving him—had assembled here at the Emperor's command, joining their spouses and the White House staff to show their allegiance to their master. Though none of their ilk had existed in his native Latveria—for Doom shared his power with no one—the Emperor had to admit that these lick-spittle politicians, with their slick appearances and nauseating talent for speaking in television broadcast-ready sound bytes, *did* have their uses, if only to continue spreading the word about how marvelous, how incredibly awe-inspiring was the man who had transformed the planet into a veritable paradise.

Nevertheless, if the opportunity ever presented itself when he no longer had need of their services, von Doom would waste no time in ordering speedy executions for each and every one of them. Politics, he felt, was a time-consuming game for fools and old men, and von Doom was neither. Nor had he the patience for such trivialities as peaceful negotiations when a swift, decisive action would resolve any conflict and immediately reestablish the indisputable fact that the Emperor was now, and always would be, in control; he had been trying to make *that* point clear to that bothersome flea Magneto for the past year. As a leader—first of Latveria, then of the world—von Doom had always ruled under the same belief as that expressed by the 19th-century German statesman Otto von Bismarck: “The great questions of the time are not decided by speeches and majority decisions, but by iron and blood.”

And if blood is what it took to keep the Empire running, then let it be shed by others in the service of Doom.

A hush fell over the assembly as a tall, thin man dressed in a tuxedo stepped just inside the main doorway.

“Ladies and gentlemen, King T’Challa of Wakanda,” he announced.

The gathered throng began applauding, welcoming the ruler of the small African nation. Dressed in the flowing, colorful, traditional robes of his people, T’Challa—once known to the citizens of the world by the more colorful name “The Black Panther”—strode into the room, accompanied by his five-member personal guard. Standing over six feet tall, dark eyes constantly sweeping the room, he moved with the grace of the animal from which his alter ego had taken its name, muscles

rippling with each step that he took. Unlike von Doom—a gypsy who had clawed his way to power and appointed himself the ruler of Latveria—T'Challa was a true monarch, the son of T'Chaka, Wakanda's greatest king.

"Prince Namor of Atlantis," came the next announcement.

Again, applause, though this time its tone was somewhat muted. Namor—the hybrid son of an Atlantean princess and a human sea captain, known far and wide as "The Savage Sub-Mariner" ever since his first recorded appearance during the darkest days of World War II—had never entirely gained the trust of the human race, nor did he really care to. And considering the fact that he had tried on numerous occasions to rule the world on his own before von Doom took power, it often amazed the powerbrokers of Washington that this hawk-faced, belligerent egoist should be one of the Emperor's most trusted allies.

He was clad in a formfitting, black outfit of some rubber-like material that covered him from shoulders to feet; his arms, though, were bare, but for a large, golden bracelet around each wrist. An open panel in the front of the outfit exposed his chiseled torso from collar bone to abdomen; his ankles were also left uncovered, to allow a quartet of small, delicate wings to jut out to provide him with the power of flight. Around his waist hung a black belt held fast by a golden, trident-shaped buckle. A pair of small, golden rings adorned the lobe of each of his pointed ears, the cartilaged tips just brushing the edges of his black hair, which was forever shaped into a crewcut that rose shallowly from a widow's peak just above his brow. Namor gave no indication that he was even aware of the formal welcome; he merely stomped his way up the runner.

"Lord and Lady Plunder of the Savage Land."

Of all the royalty assembled in the great hall, the couple who now entered—to a smattering of applause—were the least formal . . . and the least respected by all but the Emperor. In his late twenties, Kevin Plunder looked more like a movie star than a sovereign, with his squarish jaw, piercing blue eyes, deep tan, and shoulder-length blond hair, strands of which constantly bobbed in front of his face. He was dressed in a tuxedo that, even though it was tailor-made, still seemed too small for his athletic build; from his expression as he pulled at the collar of his starched white shirt, it was evident that he would have felt more at ease in the customary animal-skin loincloth and boots that he normally wore back in his Antarctic realm.

His wife looked equally uncomfortable. Dressed in a stunning, dark-green gown that complemented her mane of red hair, the former veterinarian-cum-jungle goddess known as Shanna O'Hara-Plunder had

a look about her that resembled an animal sniffing around unfamiliar surroundings—head slowly turning from side to side, ears alert for any hint of approaching danger.

The royal guests were directed to their spots at the end of the line, closest to the Concert Hall doors, joining such dignitaries as the ever-silent Black Bolt, king of the Inhumans, and his fiery-tressed wife, Medusa; the Minister of Entertainment, Arcade, and his assistant, Miss Locke; and the gnomish Mole Man, who had all arrived before them.

War Council member Sebastian Shaw, however, was noticeable by his unexplained absence.

The announcer delicately cleared his throat for attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said loudly, “Emperor and Empress von Doom.”

As one, the guests began applauding, the sound of flesh striking flesh rising appreciably as the most powerful couple in the world entered the foyer arm-in-arm. The Empress looked dazzling in a black, full-length ball gown, snow-white tresses styled fashionably. The Emperor, on the other hand, wore his traditional battle armor—*sans* mask—and flowing green velvet cloak; the metal gleamed brightly in the well-lit hall. Ororo smiled warmly, nodding slightly in acknowledgment to each of the people she knew; von Doom, meanwhile, strode arrogantly down the carpeted pathway, ignoring everyone around him . . . except the wizened old man standing off to one side, his weight supported by a gnarled, wooden cane.

For the first time that day—perhaps for the first time in quite a while—a genuine smile came to the face of Victor von Doom. Stepping away from Ororo, he opened his arms wide and heartily embraced the visitor.

“Boris!” he said. “It is good to see you!”

“The feeling is mutual, Master,” the old man said.

In his late seventies, hair and flowing beard a dazzling white set against the deep blue of his suit and the red of his silk tie, Boris was the closest von Doom had had to a true friend before his courtship of Ororo. Like the Emperor, the old man was a gypsy, one of a band of wandering free spirits who had settled in the small European country of Latveria. He was the best friend of Victor’s parents, and had been appointed ambassador for the country after Victor took control of the planet.

Still clasping Boris’s shoulders, Von Doom stepped back to gaze closely at him. “You are looking well, my friend.”

Boris smiled warmly. “I have my good days, Master; some bad, but mostly good. Seeing all you have accomplished over the years keeps

me going—I'm always afraid I'll miss out on some new wonderment of yours if I were to go and die without your permission."

To the amazement of everyone in the foyer—except, perhaps, Ororo—the Emperor actually joined the old man in a laugh.

Von Doom clapped Boris on the shoulder. "Excellent! Well said, faithful Boris! And how are my parents?"

"Strong like bulls, as ever," Boris replied. "Latveria could not have been left in more capable hands, Master. The regent sends his regards, both to you—" he nodded to Ororo, who had joined them—"and your lovely wife." The old man bent forward, leaning close to von Doom's ear so that only he could hear his next words. "But your mother worries about your health. She thinks you looked far too thin on your last worldwide broadcast. 'A homecooked meal, Boris,' she said to me. 'That is what my son needs, before he wastes away to nothing.'"

Von Doom compressed his lips and nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Then I shall have to schedule a visit to my homeland before it is too late," he said, with just a trace of humor. He glanced at Boris, and smiled. "It is good to see you, my old friend," he said softly.

"It is, Master," Boris agreed. He smiled. "But now, I think it is time for an old man to leave his sovereign so that he may get on with celebrating such an important night as this. We shall talk again later, at your convenience."

"Indeed, we shall," von Doom said. He turned to one of his aides, a young, round-faced man in his early twenties. "Escort the Latverian ambassador to his seat, and see to his every need."

"At once, Your Majesty!" the aide said. He looked to Boris. "If you'll follow me, sir . . ."

With a bow to the couple, Boris was led away, the tip of his cane tapping loudly against the tiled floor. Von Doom and Ororo watched him until he had stepped from sight, then proceeded toward the Concert Hall.

As they passed their friends from Antarctica, Ororo noticed the dark look that Shanna cast at the Emperor; Victor was completely oblivious to it. Though the rulers of the Savage Land had long ago reached an alliance with von Doom, still it was clear that Lady Plunder did not care for the man in the least.

Such opinions, Ororo knew, mattered little to her husband, though he was well aware of them; after all—he was *Doom*. How could he *not* know of them? But Shanna—like all his subjects around the globe—was allowed to have free will (within limits), to have her differences from the Emperor . . . as long as such convictions did not interfere with any of his carefully-tailored plans. "I have no use for slaves. What I

require are loyal and devoted subjects," Victor had once said, according to Lancer. What *did* matter to von Doom, though, was that Shanna—like her boyish husband, and Namor, and T'Challa, and everyone else on the planet, *including* the Empress—should know her place.

It made for some . . . interesting discussions around the dinner table.

Reaching the entrance to the Concert Hall, the Emperor stopped to turn around and gesture to the crowd.

"Come, my friends!" von Doom said. "It is time for the celebrations to begin!"

"I think I'm going to be sick."

Backstage, in one of the dozens of dressing rooms that lined the lower halls of the arts center, Betsy Braddock sat on a loveseat, tightly hugging one of the throw pillows. Clad in bra and panties, she stared numbly at the elegant black gown Warren was holding.

"Come on, Betts—you'll be fine," Warren said, ignoring the fact that her skin had gone as white as a sheet of paper. "Look—you got this far, right?"

Betsy grimaced as her stomach made a troubling gurgle.

"Right!" Warren said, answering himself. "So, if you've made it all the way to the Big Night, it shouldn't be any problem to get through one song." He waved the gown at her. "Now, come on—get dressed."

"But, what if I forget the words?" Betsy asked, eyes suddenly wild with panic. "What if I trip on my way to the microphone? What if—"

"What if you don't get ready for the show?" Warren interjected. "I think that's the far more *pressing* issue, don't you?" He flashed a sly smile. "Or do you plan on going out there *décolleté*? You'd certainly make your mark in history *then*—although I'm not sure how the *Empress* might respond to you serenading her husband in your underwear . . ."

A wisp of a smile came to her lips. "You're terrible," she said.

"That I am," Warren agreed. "Which, may I remind you, is one of the reasons you're so head-over-heels in love with me."

Betsy tossed aside the pillow, rose to her feet, and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close.

"Quite true," she said. "But I think I'll keep my clothes on, anyway."

Warren shrugged. "Von Doom's loss . . . but I can live with that."

They stood like that, gazing deeply into one another's eyes, until a knock on the door brought their attention back to more earthly matters.

"I'd better get that," Betsy said.

"All right," Warren replied.

"But you have to let go of me first," she pointed out.

"Oh, very well," Warren sighed. He removed his arms from around her waist.

Betsy quickly shrugged into a full-length terrycloth bathrobe and opened the door.

Standing in the hallway was Tommy Grunfeld, one of the art center's assistant stage managers. In his early twenties, medium of height and build—at five-foot-eleven, Betsy towered about two inches above him in her bare feet—he sported sandy hair tied back in a ponytail, and a tiny spot of facial hair—often referred to as a "soul patch"—just below the center of his bottom lip. He wore a powder-blue tuxedo that looked as though it had been rented twenty-five years ago by his father—when wide lapels were all the rage—and never returned, only passed along to the next generation of Grunfelds. A small earpiece and attached microphone were held fast to his head by a wide plastic strap, and he carried a clipboard containing what appeared to be the run-down of the show.

Tommy let out a high-pitched wolf whistle. "Wow, babe! You look like a million bucks!"

"What . . . ?" Betsy gazed down at her frumpy garment, which had opened just enough to provide a hint of cleavage. "It's a *bathrobe*, Tommy."

"Oh." Grunfeld shrugged. "Hey, what do *I* know from fashion? All *I do* know is it's got more material than anything Tina Turner is wearin'." He made an appreciative face. "Looks nice on ya, though." Looking up, he caught sight of Warren standing just beside her. "Uh . . . no offense, sir."

Warren raised a quizzical eyebrow and stuck out his bottom teeth in a vague, caveman-like expression. "You . . . *like* Worthington woomahn?" he grunted.

"Don't mind him, Tommy—he's had a little too much caffeine today," Betsy commented. She elbowed Warren in the stomach without turning to look at him. Grunting once more, he shambled over to the loveseat and flopped down on its cushions.

"What did you want to see me about, Tommy?" she asked.

"Just checkin' in with everybody, lettin' 'em know what the final order for the acts is gonna be." Grunfeld glanced at his clipboard. "You go on around ten, just before the Intermission."

Betsy smiled. "That's not bad at all. Who am I following?"

Another glance at the schedule. "Umm . . . The Senior Class of The Massachusetts Academy in *The Fall of Attuma: An Epic Tale Told in Song and Dance*." Grunfeld sucked in his breath through clenched teeth.

"Whoa—talk about your spots that really *bite*." He glanced up. "Sorry, babe."

"Don't be," Betsy said, a twinkle in her eye. "Going on before Intermission means I'll be the first act everyone remembers when they get together in the Foyer."

Grunfeld raised an eyebrow. "Just so long as they're talkin' about you in a *good* way, babe. Keep that in mind before you go out there, okay?"

Betsy chuckled. "Oh, I will, inde—"

A phalanx of Guardsmen suddenly stomped by in the hall, catching her attention.

"What's with all the security?" she asked. "There weren't that many guards rushing about when we got here this afternoon."

"S.O.P., babe, when the Big Man's in the house, although it's usually not *this* many goons." Tommy glanced around to make sure no one but Betsy could hear him. "Must be all that talk about Magneto wantin' to blow the place up," he said quietly.

"*What?*" Betsy cried.

Tommy gestured wildly with his hands, motioning for Betsy to lower her voice. "Hey, keep it down! You wanna get me in trouble?" He nodded. "Yeah—word is he had somethin' to do with that big explosion in Virginia last night." He tilted his head to one side "What, you didn't hear the blast? It was so loud, they say you could hear it in Pittsburgh."

"We were . . . busy," Betsy replied, glancing at Warren. "But I heard about it on the news this morning. I just didn't think it had anything to do with—are you *sure* he's going to try and blow up the arts center?"

"Hey, it's no big deal, babe," the assistant stage manager assured her. "With the kinda firepower we got around us, that bucketheaded maniac would *really* be outta his nut to try an' take on the Big Man on his home court—y'know what I mean?"

"I . . . guess," Betsy replied.

"Primo!" Tommy said. He patted her on the shoulder encouragingly, then glanced at his watch. "Oh, jeez. Look, I got a few more people to see. Don't worry about a thing—just concentrate on knockin' 'em dead out there, okay?"

"Okay," Betsy said.

"Break a leg, babe!" Tommy said, then hurried down the hall.

Betsy crossed her fingers and glanced up at the ceiling. "God willing, that's *all* that will be broken tonight . . ."

"All is in readiness, dread lord," Cortez reported. "We await your command to strike."

"Excellent," Magneto said.

Behind them, the X-Men and acolytes were gathered around the suite's television, watching the live broadcast from the arts center. Rogue, having awakened from her "nap," had joined them, but she sat in a corner, ignoring all attempts to draw her into a friendly conversation. Slumped in her chair, she stared at a spot on the carpet—never blinking, never moving a muscle. And though each of her teammates had tried their best to talk to her, it seemed that nothing would bring her out of her crushing depression.

Wolverine was right—she *would* be a long time hurting . . .

"Lotta security," Forge noted, pointing to the TV screen as the cameras outside the building showed glimpses of the grim-faced forces that stood guard. "Looks like von Doom's getting ready for a war."

"It appears we are expected, Father," Pietro said with a wry smile.

"Then, who am I to disappoint our host," Magneto replied with a false smile, "after he has gone to such lengths to make me feel so welcome?"

A sinister chuckle rippled through the acolytes and their leader—a sentiment not shared by the X-Men.

"Just remember to hold up your end of the bargain, Magnus," Cyclops said.

"You have my word that no innocents shall be harmed in this endeavor, Summers," Magneto said. "It's Doom I want, not his slaves." His eyes narrowed. "But should any of them become foolish enough to delay my vengeance by even a fraction of a second—"

"That's when I cut yer heart out," Wolverine interjected with a sneer. "An' have it bronzed."

"Focus on the *mission*, Logan, not your anger," Cyclops ordered. "Let Magnus run off at the mouth as much as he wants—stopping Doom is what's important here." He glanced at Magneto, and shrugged. "Besides, he can't *help* posturing—it's his nature."

"You're beginning to sound like your mentor," the mutant overlord sniped, "although I wonder how the saintly Charles Xavier would feel about his favorite student agreeing to allow their greatest enemy the chance to murder a common foe, even for the good of the universe." A vicious, arrogant smile twisted his lips. "Doesn't such behavior go against the tenets of his precious Dream—that petty, saccharine-sweet vision in which all life—even that of an armored tyrant—is sacred, and man and mutant live in ever-lasting harmony? How do *you* think he would react, Summers?"

Cyclops fell silent, trying to ignore the disappointed expressions of his teammates.

"Yakyakyak," Unuscione said angrily. "We just gonna stand around talking, or do we get around to ripping off Doom's head and stuffing it with garlic?"

"The latter, dear child," said Magneto. "Most definitely the latter." He looked around the room at his fellow conspirators. "Now, my friends, the moment is at last upon us to strike! Once Doom has fallen, this world—and everyone in it—will be changed forever!"

"I hope he means that in a *good* way," Nightcrawler whispered to Phoenix.

"I hope we survive long enough to find out . . ." she replied.

The voices were back—with a vengeance.

With Warren having gone off to take his seat in the auditorium—after making certain she wouldn't appear on-stage in her unmentionables by helping her into her gown and matching opera gloves—Betsy had been sitting alone in her dressing room for the past hour, with only her thoughts to keep her company. She was waiting for Tommy to eventually come by and rap on her door to let her know it was time. Unfortunately, as the minutes passed, her pre-show jitters became so intense that she allowed her concentration to slip.

The sound and fury that suddenly exploded in her mind was akin to waking up in the center of the New York Stock Exchange on a frantic day of trading—there were screams, shouts, even bells ringing. The intensity of the "noise" had driven her to her knees, and momentarily blinded her.

There were too many people around her, she realized as she staggered over to the loveseat; too many "voices" demanding to be heard. The thoughts pounded her mind in unrelenting waves, each breaker more powerful than the one before it, until she was sitting, doubled-over, the heels of her hands pressing against her temples.

Get outGetOUTGETOUT! her own thoughts screamed at the unwanted voices.

And, to her amazement, the voices obeyed; all was suddenly calm and quiet in the mind of Elisabeth Braddock—the very same woman who, a few short days ago, had feared for her sanity.

Betsy opened her eyes, uncertain of what had just happened. True, she had been working hard to block outside thoughts for the past few days; her success at the party last night was proof that she had been getting better at it. But now, it was as though she had angrily confronted a group of guests who had overstayed their welcome and forced them

out of the cluttered apartment that was her mind, then locked the door behind them.

Could her control be *that* good, in so short a period of time?

"Well, don't *question* it, you git," she scolded herself. "Just be *thankful* for it."

Nodding in complete agreement with herself, Betsy slowly eased back in the loveseat, expecting the "guests" to return at any moment, prepared for the worst. When it didn't happen, an easy smile came to her lips, and she began to enjoy the feeling of serenity that flowed through her mind. Maybe Warren was right; maybe she *would* get through this evening without any problems . . .

A fog bank was rolling in from off the Potomac River.

It was a complete surprise to the security detail of D.C. police officers on the river side of the arts center—the weather forecast had called for clear, moonlit skies and a cool breeze from the east (all due, of course, to Ororo's influence). And the fact that it had appeared without them noticing it before this second made them incredibly suspicious.

Unfortunately for the officers, the fog was upon them before anyone was able to notify the command center—and then all it took was a strong telepathic "push" from Phoenix to "shut down" their minds and render them unconscious, as she had done with Rogue.

After scanning the fallen officers to make sure none had suffered brain damage, Phoenix took to the air, heading for the roof.

Across the river, on Theodore Roosevelt Island, the X-Men and Magneto's acolytes had gathered to launch their attack. Now, they watched as the fog bank continued to move from the river to envelop the arts center; the building was quickly lost from sight.

"That is a most impressive ability of Ms. Voght's," Nightcrawler said. "I didn't think she was capable of covering such a large area in her mist-form."

"It ain't gonna work fer long, though," Wolverine commented. "All these bully-boys in one area, watchin' out fer trouble—*somebody's* gonna get wise an' let Doom know what's goin' on."

"True," Forge said. "But that tyrant's such an incredible egomaniac, he'll probably want to meet us head-on."

"I certainly hope so . . ." Magneto said, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"It's Phoenix," Cyclops suddenly said; he was receiving information from his wife through their telepathic link. "The first obstacle's been removed—she's moving on to Target #2."

Magneto turned to his fellow conspirators. "We move—quickly."

Gathering everyone in a magnetic field, the mutant overlord flew

them across the river, to land in front of the arts center. Phoenix drifted down from the roof to join them.

"Mission accomplished," she said. "All the guards on this side of the building, as well as the roof, are sleeping like babies. But we've got to move quickly—I heard some chatter over their walkie-talkies: they know we're here. It won't be long before they start heading this way."

"All right, Summers, this is where we split up," Magneto said to Cyclops. "You and your people are the first line of defense. Try and hold off Doom's lapdogs for as long as you can."

"Giving you time enough to get to Doom," Cyclops replied.

Magneto smiled without humor. "And all this time I used to think you were quite the dullard." He turned to his acolytes. "Come, my friends—we mustn't be late for the final act . . . especially when *we* are the ones who are going to write it." An evil smile twisted his features. "I wonder how the story will end . . . ?"

Moving quickly but silently, the band of rebellious mutants disappeared into the mist.

"I'm gonna enjoy carvin' my initials in that puke's face when the time comes . . ." Wolverine muttered.

"Don't bother with your initials, Logan," Cyclops said through clenched teeth as he gazed into the living fog that undulated around them. "Write your full name."

Nightcrawler turned to the young woman standing beside him. "Feeling up to this, Rogue?" He waited for her to reply, but the beautiful powerhouse only stared at the arts center, fidgeting as though eager to be somewhere else. "*Rogue?*"

The red-and-black-clad X-Man started, as though awakened from a trance. Slowly, she turned toward Kurt. "What?" she asked heatedly.

"I was asking how you felt," Nightcrawler replied.

"I'm *fine*, Kurt—just *fine*," she said curtly. "Couldn't be better—for a woman who just lost the man she loved, that is." She glared at her teammate. "That answer your question?"

"Indeed," Kurt replied softly. Rogue grunted and went back to staring at the wall in front of her, as though she were capable of seeing through it.

But looking for what? Kurt wondered, as he gazed at Rogue's heated expression. It was obvious the girl was running on auto pilot; it would be a miracle if they could actually count on her in this fight, but excluding her from the mission had not been an option—they needed her powers.

But there was something more to her silent rage—something that went beyond mere depression. All that anger, all that grief she was so

clearly bottling up inside ever since she had stepped from the hotel bedroom—Kurt knew they had to be released at some point, or they'd eventually destroy her. It was *how* she would release those emotions when the time came that was beginning to worry him.

Could she be waiting, perhaps, to get her hands on the one person she held responsible for Gambit's death? The one man who had changed an entire world to suit his twisted needs, thus forcing the X-Men to set out on this nightmarish mission that had cost them so dearly already?

And, if so, would one of her friends be forced into stopping Rogue, before she did something she'd regret for the rest of her life?

Silently, Kurt prayed that he and his fellow X-Men would not have to be placed in such a position. In his heart, though, he knew it was just a matter of time . . .

Inside the Concert Hall, the woman known as Lancer sat bolt upright in her seat in the Royal Box—there was a loud buzzing in her ear. It took her a moment to recognize it as the alert for an incoming call on the combination receiver/transmitter she wore clipped to her right ear.

She touched a small contact on the earpiece. "Go."

"Sorry to disturb you, Sam, but there might be a situation brewing." The voice that crackled through the receiver belonged to Peter Garibaldi, the White House Chief of Security. He was also one of the few people Lancer allowed to address her by her real name.

"Hang on a second," she whispered. Moving quietly so as not to disturb the Royal Couple, Lancer rose from her seat and moved to the rear of the box.

"All right, talk to me," she whispered into the tiny microphone.

"Security detail on the roof spotted a fog rolling in from the river—big one, too."

"One not scheduled by the Empress to remind her of her last trip to London, I imagine," Lancer said.

"You got it. Then we lost contact with them." Garibaldi paused. "The detail on the roof, too."

Lancer sadly shook her head. "You'd think that walking magnet would've had the decency to wait until the show's over."

"Some people, huh?" quipped Garibaldi.

"Yeah." Lancer sighed. "All right, go to full alert—nobody in, nobody out. I want this place locked up so tight Reed Richards couldn't squeeze in here through a crack in the plaster. And if somebody *does* spot Magneto, I want to know from which direction he's coming, which wall he's probably going to blow up to get inside, and how long it'll take him to get to the Concert Hall."

"Hell, I'll even give you his aisle and row numbers if I can find my copy of the seating arrangements," Garibaldi replied.

Lancer chuckled softly. "You do that. And Peter?"

"Yeah?"

"The first person who falls asleep at the switch will answer to *me*—and they *better* hope their medical insurance payments are up-to-date when they do. Make sure you pass *that* bit of encouragement along to the troops, would you?"

"It'll be an inspiration to us all, Ms. Dunbar," replied the security chief.

Cutting the connection, Lancer turned around to find von Doom and Ororo watching her.

"Damn . . ." Lancer muttered. Crouching low, and pulling up the hem of her dark-blue ball gown so she wouldn't trip, she moved to speak with them, motioning to Harada to join in the conversation.

Von Doom turned back toward the stage to watch Bernadette Peters as she soulfully performed "Someone to Watch Over Me." The Emperor nodded politely as she looked toward the Royal Box. "Is there a problem, Lancer?" he asked softly.

"Could be," she admitted, and glanced at Ororo. "An unexpected fog bank that just rolled in from the Potomac—Security's having some trouble seeing."

"He comes," the Emperor murmured. "At last, he comes." The tone of malicious joy in his voice was unmistakable.

"That would be *my* guess, Your Majesty," Lancer said. "But this really isn't the time or place for a knock-down/drag-out—not with all these people here probably getting caught in the middle."

"What would you suggest, Lancer?" Ororo asked.

"It might be best if we were to leave, Your Majesty," Lancer replied.

Miss Peters finished her last song to an energetic round of applause. Von Doom and Ororo joined in, the sound of his metal-encased hands coming together ringing loudly throughout the auditorium. When the applause at last died down with Miss Peters' exit from the stage, the Emperor turned to his bodyguard, a sneer on his lips.

"You think I should *run* from him, Lancer? Should I cower in fear, and allow others to snatch from my hands the victory over that wretch that should be *mine*, and mine alone?"

"Now, you *know* I didn't mean it like that, Your Majesty," Lancer replied. "But you pay me to watch your back, and that's *exactly* what I'm trying to do—if you'll *let* me."

"There will be no talk of running, Lancer," the Emperor stated flatly. "*Let* that mutant dog come. Doom stands ready for him."



Lancer sighed. "Somehow, I just *knew* you were going to say that . . ."

"Ladies and gentlemen—Miss Elisabeth Braddock."

A polite smattering of applause greeted Betsy as she stepped out onto the stage of the Concert Hall and nodded in acknowledgment to the orchestra conductor; he smiled and did likewise. The "voices" greeted her, too—mostly blasé comments about her being "Worthington's songbird" from those who recognized her, or questions about who she was, and how in the world she had wound up on the evening's card from those who didn't—but she forced them down and out of her mind. *Nothing* was going to spoil this moment for her. Somewhere, out there in the seemingly endless rows of seats, she knew, Warren was watching her, probably holding his breath and crossing his fingers, trying to look calm while his heart nervously pounded in his chest.

She felt the same way.

Yet, knowing that the most important person in her world was out there, confident in every way that she would have no trouble in getting through what could be the most important *moment* of her *life*, she wondered how she could even have *thought* about disappointing him . . . or herself, for that matter.

She reached the microphone without tripping over the stand, or bumping into its foam-covered diaphragm and causing a screech of eardrum-rattling feedback to echo throughout the hall. So far, so good. Now she just had to make it to the end of her set . . .

"Good evening," she said to the crowd. "Although I'm certain others before me have expressed these same sentiments, I'd just like to say what an honor it is to be here tonight, on such a special occasion." She glanced toward the Royal Box. "And for such a special honoree."

The audience applauded enthusiastically, less for her sentiment and more for the man in the iron suit, who smiled politely and nodded in approval.

Betsy smiled demurely. *Never let it be said I don't know how to suck up big-time to royalty . . .*

When the applause died down, she turned to the conductor. He nodded and signaled for the orchestra to begin playing the introduction to her first number.

For the next twenty minutes, Betsy opened her heart to the people around her—and the billions watching across the world—singing of hopes dashed and dreams realized, of bitter disappointments and wondrous expectations, of tragic losses and soaring victories.

But most of all, she sang of love. Of its magic and its miraculous

healing powers. Of its inspirations and wonderments. Of how she had found its true meaning in the touch of the one man in all the world who meant everything to her—the man who was her life, her heart, her soul.

And when she had finished, when the last sweet note had faded into the shadows around her, an unusual silence enveloped the Concert Hall.

Nervously, eyes tightly shut, Betsy bit down on her lower lip for a moment, wondering what could have gone so wrong that the audience wouldn't even respond. And if the audience hated her singing, then what must the Royal Family have thought of her? Slowly, she opened her eyes and glanced toward the Royal Box—

—and was stunned to see the Emperor and Empress rise to their feet and applaud.

Following that cue—apparently having been waiting for the Royal Family's reaction—everyone in the auditorium did likewise. They cheered loudly, the sound growing in volume until the arts center seemed to vibrate.

And as the house lights came up, Betsy looked out into the audience, to find Warren standing front row, center, beaming proudly. He pointed to her and silently mouthed the words, "You *did* it, Betts. Nobody but *you*."

She stood there, tears of joy running down her cheeks, soaking up the cheers and applause that made the years of frustration, the snide questions about her talent, even the voices in her head seem worth all the struggle; reveling in this moment that she wished might never end—

And then the first explosion rocked the building.

ROGUE! CLEAR a path!" Cyclops yelled. "Get those people out of there before they get caught in the crossfire!"

Nodding in acknowledgment but saying nothing, Rogue flew toward the south side of the arts center and began hammering away at the marble wall.

Cyclops turned to the other male members of his team. "Wolverine! Nightcrawler! Keep an eye out for more of those Hunters. Magneto warned us about—we don't need a repeat of a few days ago."

Nightcrawler watched Rogue as she tore away great chunks of the arts center's façade, her lovely features now contorted with rage. To Kurt, it looked less like she was creating an emergency exit for the guests trapped inside, and more like she was tunneling into the building to find the true target of her anger. If she made it inside alone . . .

"Cyclops," Nightcrawler said, "I think, perhaps, I should help Rogue instead . . ."

Cyclops shook his head. "She's a big girl, Kurt—she can take care of herself." He turned to Phoenix. "Jean, you're with me. We have to find Doom before Magneto does."

"What *about* Lensherr, Summers?" Wolverine asked. "If I see 'im, ya want me t'escort 'im t'Doom's private box?"

Cyclops glared at him for a moment, then thrust a warning index finger in Wolverine's face. "Don't push me, Logan—not now."

Wolverine snarled. "Point that finger somewhere else, one-eye—before I go upsettin' yer wife."

"Stop it!" Phoenix snapped. "We don't have time for this!" She stared heatedly at Wolverine. "You want to take your aggressions out

on someone, Logan?" She pointed over his shoulder. "Take it out on them!"

Wolverine turned. The artificial fog that was Amanda Voght was lifting, presumably because she was joining Magneto's forces on the other side of the building. Their position exposed by the light of the full moon, the X-Men had known it wouldn't take very long for trouble to find them—and now it was here.

Stomping their way was a group of Hunters—a quartet of men and women who, even in a normal world, the X-Men would have considered enemies.

In her mid-twenties, The White Rabbit was an attractive woman who looked more like a disgruntled Playboy Bunny than a super-villain, dressed in white go-go boots and one-piece bathing suit, over which were worn the sort of plaid vest, gold pocketwatch, and blue velvet waistcoat that might have attired her anthropomorphic namesake in the classic story *Alice in Wonderland*; a ridiculous pair of artificial bunny ears protruded from her shoulder-length blond hair, and a fluffy tail was sewn onto the back of her swimsuit, just above her posterior.

Diablo was a green-and-purple-clad sorcerer of indeterminate age. Thin as the proverbial rail, with a pencil-thin mustache and a sharp, hawk-like beak for a nose, he was a master of the black arts, conjuring demons and bewitching his victims with but a wave of his hand and a few simple words. Unfortunately, having to rely on oral spells was a terrible drawback for the sorcerer, since he possessed what is commonly referred to in boxing as "a glass jaw." A swift shot to the molars, and Diablo would wind up kissing the ground as though it were a long-lost lover.

The assassin known as Deadly Nightshade was an African-American woman in her early twenties, wearing thigh-high, black leather boots and the briefest of black leather bikinis, a pair of gunbelts wrapped around her shapely waist; her head was framed by an immense Afro, the size of which made one immediately think of the R&B group The Commodores at the height of their musical careers. However, despite the fact that she looked like someone who had spent far too much time watching female "blaxploitation" films of the 1970s during her formative years, Nightshade was as talented a marksman as Cyclops was with his power beams.

A bunny. A pantywaist. A Pam Grier wannabe. Not exactly the kind of group normally expected to provide serious trouble for any *single* member of the X-Men, let alone the entire team.

The man *leading* the pack of Hunters, however, was an entirely different story.

He was a bear-sized man with a wild mane of golden hair, deadly fangs, and an even deadlier set of claws. A raving sociopath who lived for the thrill of the hunt, for the pleasure of the kill. A mutant, who, *on his own*, had come close to wiping out the entire complement of the X-Men's roster on quite a few occasions.

His name was Sabretooth; in this, or any other reality, he was Logan's oldest—and most lethal—enemy.

And Wolverine always looked forward to the next opportunity when he could literally wipe that malicious grin off his inhuman sparring partner's face—usually by dragging it along the side of a building.

With a malicious smile, Logan triggered his claws.

"You folks head in," he growled to Cyclops and Phoenix. "I might be here a while." And then, with a lion-like roar, he charged at his adversaries.

Cyclops turned to Nightcrawler. "Kurt—"

Torn between aiding his colleague and teleporting into the building to track down Rogue, Nightcrawler froze, his thoughts racing over what to do next. Against Sabretooth and his three accomplices, his rational mind argued, it was a certainty that Logan could handle the situation; Rogue, on the other hand, was in the midst of severe depression. For all Kurt knew—and the good Lord knew he wasn't a psychologist—she might not be looking to punish Doom for Gambit's death; rather, she could be planning to force him to end her suffering—so she could spend the rest of eternity by Remy's side.

And yet, the image of Logan, standing atop a pile of corpses in the center of the Salem Center death camp, flashed through his mind. He couldn't allow such carnage to happen again.

The piercing scream of the White Rabbit as she leapt away from Wolverine's slashing claws helped Kurt come to a quick decision.

"All right, Scott," Nightcrawler replied. "I shall try to keep him out of trouble . . . though it would be far easier to ask me to stop the Hulk from tearing down the towers of the World Trade Center."

"Next time," Cyclops said with a wry smile.

Nightcrawler nodded. "Good luck with your help, *mein freuden*." Turning on his heel, he raced over to help Wolverine, though it was obvious that it was the Hunters—with the exception of Sabretooth—who were the ones in most need of aid, if only to provide them with any chance of surviving this encounter with the feral X-Man.

Cyclops looked to Phoenix. "Let's go."

A flash of bright-green eyes, and Phoenix hoisted them both into the air. They flew quickly above the stampeding crowds that poured

through Rogue's hastily-made side exit, moving deeper into the arts center.

Of Rogue herself, there was no sign.

"Where is he?" Magneto bellowed to the panicked patrons as they raced for the exits. "Where is your 'beloved ruler'—that tin-plated madman who dared to toy with the mind of Magneto?"

As to be expected, no one stopped to answer him; within seconds, he was alone.

Standing in the lobby of the arts center, hips on hips, Magneto hurled destructive bolts of magnetic energy at the walls, the ceiling, the fine *objets d'art* that had represented all that was best in Latveria. Everything shattered beneath the devastating volley. The building shook violently, as it had when he had fired the first volley that blew in the north wall, throwing aside subterfuge for a line of attack more suited to his personality: direct confrontation.

It had certainly gotten everyone's attention.

"DOOM!" he shouted. "Your executioner has arrived! Come forth, so we may put a swift end to this nonsense you've created!"

"Y'all can't have him, Erik," said a familiar, Southern-tinged voice from above.

Magneto looked up. There, on the second floor landing, was Rogue. As he watched, she took to the air, floating down to land directly in his path.

"What's this?" Magneto asked. "Summers and I had an agreement, Rogue: *none* of you are allowed to interfere."

"Cyclops can go *hang* for all I care," Rogue said. "This here business is just between Doom an' me."

"And what sort of 'business' would *that* be, child?" Magneto asked, clearly annoyed by this interruption.

Rogue snarled. "Me *killin'* him."

"Is that so?" Magneto said, raising a quizzical eyebrow. He seemed more amused than threatened by this young woman, as he gazed at her smoldering, hate-filled eyes. Slowly, though, he came to an understanding. "Ah. I see. He killed your—" he sneered—"boyfriend, Gambit, and so he must pay the ultimate price. 'An eye for an eye,' yes?"

"Somethin' like that," Rogue said. Her voice was flat, emotionless.

Magneto chuckled. "If only your idealistic teacher could see you all now. *You* want to kill von Doom. *Cyclops* is willing to step aside and allow me first blood. How Charles's heart would break." He shook his head. "But I'm sorry, child. While I empathize with your situation—truly, I do—and would dearly enjoy seeing you take that first step to-

ward darkness, I cannot allow it. Doom is *mine* to punish." He moved to one side, to go around her and continue on his way.

"No," Rogue said flatly. She stepped into his path again, hands curled into mighty fists.

"Don't force me to kill *you* as well, X-Man," Magneto warned.

"Take yer best shot," Rogue growled.

Razor-sharp claws suddenly raked across her back, and Rogue cried out in pain. Blinking back tears, she turned to face her cowardly attacker, only to be bludgeoned with a hundred blows across her face and body, delivered within the space of a heartbeat by the super-swift Quicksilver. She staggered back, dazed, into the arms of the reptilian Mellen-camp, who wasted no time in sinking his powerful teeth into her left shoulder and clamping down tightly, like some saurian pit bull. Rogue screamed and thrashed wildly, but could do nothing to pull herself free.

Quicksilver came to a halt beside Magneto. "Having some trouble, Father?"

"A momentary diversion, my son," he replied. "Though I had no need of assistance, I am still grateful for your timely intervention." He looked around. "Where are the others?"

"Unuscione and Cortez are dealing with the Hunters. Mellencamp and I have already confronted the Guardsmen; they have momentarily withdrawn—" Pietro smiled—"probably to repair all their damaged armor. Vindaloo and Scanner are handling the armed forces without."

As if on cue, a wall of fire erupted in front of the building—Vindaloo's napalm-like flames at work. The screams of those caught in the blast were cut short by the window-shattering explosions of limousines and police vehicles as their gas tanks ignited.

"Forge and Voght are providing cover for us," Pietro continued. "And Mystique has already been here for quite some time."

Magneto nodded, clearly pleased with the report. "And the X-Men?"

"Like *this* one—" Pietro gestured toward Rogue, who was trying to pry open Mellencamp's jaws—"they're starting to make their way inside."

"To be the ones who reach Doom first," Magneto rumbled, a sneer on his lips. "To keep me from my vengeance."

"Then, go, Father," Pietro said. He lashed out with a booted foot, ending Rogue's struggles with a swift kick to the head. "Mellencamp and I shall deal with this . . . minor annoyance."

"As ever, my son, you do your father proud," the mutant overlord said. Without looking back, he moved deeper into the building, determined to find the man who had dared to toy with his mind.

"Your Majesty, we should leave," Lancer said.

Around the Royal Box, the guests were in a panic, stampeding for the exits as the building swayed from an almost continuous series of explosions created by the powerful, destructive energies being unleashed both inside the arts center and outside the grounds. Bits of plaster began to rain down from the Concert Hall ceiling, and the lights started flickering.

Von Doom glared at his bodyguard. "You think I fear a handful of traitors and their cretinous leader? Doom fears *no one!*"

"I didn't say you did, Sire," Lancer replied. "But my job is to keep you and the Empress safe from harm, and I can't very well do that in a place the size of an aircraft carrier. Too many spots in here for someone to hide and wait for that split-second when Security might become distracted by an attack made just to draw our attention away from you. I wouldn't put something like that past Magneto."

"Lancer is right, my love," Ororo said calmly. "This space is too confined for a confrontation with your enemies, and too many innocents would be caught in the crossfire. But if we were to lure him away, perhaps to The Mall, where there is far more room in which to maneuver . . ."

The Emperor paused to consider the logic of his wife's explanation. After a few moments, he slowly nodded in agreement, and smiled warmly. "Once more, my love, you demonstrate why Doom chose you as his mate—not only for your ravishing beauty, but your intelligence."

Von Doom rose to his feet and held out his hand. Ororo gently took it, laying her fingers across his gauntleted palm.

"Come, my dear," the Emperor said. "We must prepare to—" a wicked smile came to his lips "—properly greet our guests."

"Warren! Warren!" Betsy cried. "Where are you?"

Stumbling through the uppermost floor of the arts center, Betsy had spent the better part of a fifteen minutes searching for her missing beau; they'd become separated after the initial explosion, during the audience's mad dash for the exits. Betsy had been swept away on the tide of humanity that had surged across the stage, barely saving herself from being trampled to death by ducking into a women's bathroom before the hem of her gown had the opportunity to trip her up as she ran.

"Aero-taxi service, Ma'am?" a male voice asked, from just behind her.

Betsy turned and looked up. Warren was hovering in the air just past her left shoulder. He had tossed aside his jacket and undone the harness he usually wore that kept his wings hidden under his clothes;

now, they were spread wide, flapping gently, their feathers a magnificent white against the shadows of the darkened hallway and the moonlit sky outside.

Betsy ran to him and threw her arms around him as he settled to the ground. He gently stroked her hair and hugged her back.

"I was starting to think I'd never find you," Warren said softly. He kissed the top of her head.

"You can't lose me *that* easily, Mr. Worthington," Betsy said, her cheek pressed against his chest.

"Well, I never *want* to lose you that easily, Ms. Braddock," he replied.

The chatter of gunfire from outside drew their attention to a giant picture window at the front of the building. Down on the street, and around the arts center, man and mutant clashed, and man was clearly losing. The air was rent by the screams and moans of the injured and dying. Half a dozen cars were aflame, the thick, black smoke that wafted up from their smoldering husks lifting high above the district, blocking the light of the moon.

"It feels like the world is coming apart at the seams," Betsy said quietly, looking out at the chaos unfurling below them. Warren gently placed an arm around her waist.

"Don't worry, hon," he said reassuringly. "Doom will have all this back under control by morning." He winced as he saw a limousine explode. "I just wish we were able to tell what's the safest way out of here so we could *make* it to the morning."

"There . . . might be a way for me to find out," Betsy said hesitantly, turning to face him.

Warren raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And how, pray tell, Ms. Braddock, would that be possible?"

Betsy paused, chewing on her bottom lip for a moment, trying to find the right way to explain her . . . peculiar situation. Or at least a way that wouldn't make it sound as though she'd lost her mind.

Well . . . the direct approach is usually the best way, she thought. *Just go ahead and tell him.*

"You remember that night after my performance for Arcade?" she asked.

A wolfish grin lit Warren's handsome features. "How could I forget?"

She playfully slapped him on the arm. "I meant *before* that, you big, blue idiot—when we were in Central Park, and you asked me if I could read your mind?"

Warren paused, obviously searching his memory for that particular

conversation; then, his eyes widened in surprise. "What? You mean you really *are* a mind reader?"

Betsy flashed a small smile. "Something like that. But only recently."

"Oh, great," he replied sarcastically. "It's bad enough I have to watch what I say out loud around you—now I've got to be careful about what *thoughts* might be running through my head." He smiled and tapped the end of her nose with his index finger. "That's not fair, you know."

"Darling, you're a *man*," Betsy said playfully, reaching up to stroke his cheek. "I could read your mind *long* before this happened." She smiled. "You know, you're taking this much better than I expected."

"Hey, hon, you're talking to a guy with *blue skin* and *wings*," Warren replied. "When you wake up every morning and get reminded of that little fact by your reflection in the bathroom mirror, everything else seems kinda run-of-the-mill after that. Besides, there are certainly *worse* things you could have told me than that you're turning into a budding mento—like you're really some trained assassin who used to work for the Japanese mobs." He smiled. "Now, *that* would surprise me." He paused. "Well, at least it explains those headaches you were having. Still having them?"

Betsy nodded. "Yes, but they're not as bad as before. I seem to have some influence over them—at least for now."

Another explosion—close to their position—rocked the building, and they held tightly to one another.

"I believe you said something about finding us a way out of here . . . ?" Warren urged.

"I'll do my best." Betsy stepped back from him and closed her eyes. "Now, be a quiet little bear and let Mother find us a way out of here."

"I'll try to keep the gunfire down to a minimum," Warren said sarcastically.

Taking a deep breath, then slowly releasing it, she reached out with her mind, scanning the floors above by allowing the thoughts around her to filter in, giving her some indication of where the forces of Magneto and von Doom were currently clashing. She eventually made contact with the unconscious minds of the security detail stationed on the roof—exactly *how* she was able to do *that* she didn't know—and discovered they were all in some sort of deep sleep. That was good, in a way—it meant she and Warren wouldn't be shot while trying to make their escape.

"The roof seems to be the safest bet," she told Warren as she opened

her eyes. She pointed toward a nearby EXIT sign that hung above a door leading to the fire stairs. "This wa—"

—and then her thoughts were suddenly touched by another mind.

It this wasn't like her other, horrid experiences, though, with voices raging in her head and tearing at her sanity; these were the thoughts of a woman like her—someone with similar abilities, though Betsy could immediately tell that this other person was in complete control of the psychic madness they shared.

And there was also a familiarity to this voice that had inadvertently entered her mind—a gentle tone that gave her comfort, calmed her fears, made her feel as though everything would be all right. A name suddenly formed in her thoughts:

"Jean . . . ?" she whispered uncertainly.

"Scott—it's Betsy!" Phoenix cried. "She's here—" her eyes widened in surprise "—and so is Warren!"

Standing beside his wife in the Grand Foyer, Cyclops opened his visor to release a devastating stream of energy that scattered the riot gear-clad police officers charging their way.

"Where?" Cyclops asked. "We could certainly use their help!"

Phoenix concentrated for a moment as her husband continued to hold at bay what seemed to be most of the cops in the district. "They're—No! They're leaving—flying away!"

Cyclops grunted. "Just as well—they probably wouldn't have recognized us, anyway. Where's *Doom*?"

Another psychic probe went forth, searching the building for their adversary. "He's also on his way out—two floors down, heading north." Phoenix started. "Scott . . . Ororo's with him."

"I guess that's to be expected, hon," Cyclops replied. "They *are* the Royal Couple, after all."

The two heroes' discussion was interrupted by the arrival of a coterie of National Guard troopers, armed to the teeth and ready to take on all comers.

"Take 'em out!" ordered a man wearing sergeant's stripes. More than a dozen M-16 rifles swung around to target the young couple.

"Well, *this* is bad . . ." Phoenix muttered.

Cyclops grabbed her arm and pulled her into the abandoned Concert Hall just as the shooting began.

"Let's find an exit, all right?" he said as they dashed down the center aisle. "Hopefully, it'll be the same one *Doom* winds up at . . ."

Lancer never expected—in a world where men and women flew under their own power and unleashed incredible, destructive energies stored within their own bodies—that something so commonplace as a bullet would end her life.

Leading the Royal Couple from the Concert Hall, through the back stage area, and toward an underground garage in which the Emperor's limousine was parked, every step of the escape had been a major hassle. It seemed that, each time the arts center was rocked by another explosion, von Doom would move to run off and go in search of the very mutants who were trying to find *him*. It was only the logical arguments of the Empress—ones guaranteed to play directly to her husband's mountain-sized ego—that had stayed his ill-considered actions, and kept the line moving.

But, as Lancer, Harada, and another male bodyguard—recruited during their exit from the Royal Box—escorted the Emperor and Empress to the exit leading to the garage, she was surprised to find Arcade waiting for them, a big grin etched on his face.

"What are you doing here, Minister?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well, I was running for my life from all those crazy mutants attacking the place, sweets, when I heard you folks tromping this way," he explained, and turned to von Doom. "Are you all right, Your Majesty?"

"I am unharmed, Arcade," the Emperor replied, clearly annoyed by the man's presence, "but I am most eager to show these loutish mutants the error of their ways. Now, remove yourself from my path."

Arcade ignored the command and nodded toward the EXIT sign above his head. "Taking them out the back way, Lancer?"

"Exactly why are you so curious, Minister?" Lancer asked. "And if the way out of this war zone is so clearly marked, then why haven't you made use of it?" She raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Unless, maybe, you're not looking to escape, but merely delay *us* from doing so . . . ?" Her hands crackled with energy. "Step aside, before I—"

And then one of the bodyguards standing beside her pulled a gun from inside his tuxedo jacket, and calmly shot her in the head.

Lancer was dead before she hit the floor.

Harada joined her a moment later, cut down by Miss Locke as she stepped from the shadows behind him.

As the Royal Couple watched, the remaining bodyguard changed shape, instantly becoming a blue-skinned, red-haired woman in an abbreviated white gown.

"Mystique," von Doom said with a sneer. His gauntleted hands clenched into fists. The gems of the Mandarin's rings flared brightly.

"Now, just hold off with flashing the costume jewelry, Vic," Arcade warned. "I know you've got enough deaths for everybody on those fingers of yours, but keep this in mind: the odds're good that, before you get a chance to take all three of us out of the picture, one'a us will *still* manage to help the Empress gain some unwanted weight—say, a few ounces of lead in her brain pan?"

"Do not hesitate on my behalf, Victor," Ororo said, head held high.

"But I must, beloved," the Emperor replied. "What sort of ruler—what sort of *man*—would I be if I were willing to sacrifice my very heart . . . even for the good of the Empire?" Von Doom shook his head. "No. The time to strike will present itself . . . and soon. Fools such as these *always* err when they are most certain they possess the upper hand."

Mystique kept her eyes on the Emperor, her gun aimed squarely at the center of his forehead. "I take it, Arcade, this means *you're* Pietro's Washington contact," she said to the Minister of Entertainment.

Arcade nodded. "Since Day One, sweets. How else could Petey have managed to smuggle his old man around the Empire without gettin' caught, or find the best route t' get him back to the States?" He chuckled. "Y'know, if it hadn't been for Viper—God rest her *gentle* soul—and her overactive libido, I never would've found out *half* the things I did about all those war council meetings." He sighed. "Too bad she had t' go an' bite the Big One, huh? Cost me my best source of info."

"You are a *worm*, Arcade," Ororo said, a look of disgust contorting her features. "An ugly, little worm, without a shred of decency."

"*Ouch*." Arcade laughed sharply, and acted as though he were wiping a tear from the corner of his right eye. "Sticks and stones, babe. I've been called *worse* in my time." He turned to von Doom. "Looks like you and the Missus have a problem here, Vic—what with a revolution going on, and the two of you about to die, I mean. I'm not surprised, though—you keep stepping on the little people on your way to the top, and eventually they're gonna start wanting to step on *you*." He smiled. "And I got some pretty big boots in the car, just itchin' for the opportunity to stomp a mudhole in your—"

"I will *enjoy* destroying you, maggot," von Doom said evenly; it wasn't a threat—merely a statement of fact.

Arcade shook his head in mock sadness. "See? It's *that* kind of attitude that makes a man rethink his alliances and go with a winning team. And to be quite honest with you, Vic, odds are Mags is gonna do a *much* better job of takin' care of your ol' pal, Arcade, than *you* ever did. And *that's* the kind of employer/employee relationship I like." He snorted derisively at Ororo. "And as for you, Miss High-an'-Mighty,

Miss Partridge-Family-makes-for-great-music—hope you don't mind me playin' 'Tiny Bubbles' for your funeral procession." He grinned. "You know *I'll* be lovin' it."

"Oh, just shut the hell up, Arcade," Mystique said curtly. She turned to glare at him. "Enough talk. Let's just kill them and—"

Her order, however, was cut short as a blast of frigid energy—fired by the power ring on the Emperor's right index finger—enveloped her, coating her in a substance akin to liquid nitrogen.

Oro-ro reacted as well, summoning a powerful blast of wind that slammed Miss Locke against a wall. The comely woman's face suddenly unhinged and dropped off, to reveal the circuitry and memory chips that had given her artificial life.

"I seem to have broken your toy, Arcade," Oro-ro said, her eyes flashing angrily.

The Minister of Entertainment was no longer smiling.

The blast of fire that shot forth from the ring on the Emperor's left thumb put a swift end to any useless pleas for mercy he might have been about to voice. The hallway quickly filled with the stench of melting polyester and burning flesh.

Then, a sadistic grin lighting his features, von Doom lashed out with a gauntleted fist and shattered the frozen remains of the shape-shifter that stood before him. Separated from her body, Mystique's head bounced twice off the tiled floor, then snapped in half.

"Cretins," von Doom rumbled. He turned to leave.

"My husband, what of Lancer?" Oro-ro asked, pointing to the lifeless body at their feet. The young woman's hair was soaked with blood, the blond locks now a ghastly crimson hue. "And Agent Harada?"

Von Doom watched dispassionately as the life fluid of his security people pooled around his metal-booted feet.

"True heroes of the Empire," the Emperor said curtly. "They gave their lives in the service of Doom—that is reward enough for anyone." He took Oro-ro by the arm. "Come, my dear—our people have need of us this night."

So saying, he led her toward the garage entrance, leaving behind a trail of bloody footprints.

"Come on, punk!" Wolverine bellowed. "Whattaya waitin' for?"

Teetering on unsteady legs, clothing torn, body bruised and bloodied, Logan flashed his claws, waiting for Sabretooth's final charge. Around them lay the unconscious bodies of the other Hunters in the bear-like mutant's team. Nightcrawler had taken care of them all on his own—they really *had* been no serious threat for a solitary X-Man—

while Wolverine had had his time occupied with just keeping his old enemy at bay.

"Get inside, elf!" Wolverine had ordered when he saw that Nightcrawler had completed his work. "Go help Cyke and Jeannie find Doom 'fore Roma decides it's time t' turn off the lights!"

Nightcrawler hadn't been happy about leaving his friend behind, but Wolverine was right about time running out for the universe, and, knowing the countless decades of animosity toward one another that Logan and Sabretooth shared, it was perhaps best to stay out of their way and concentrate on completing the mission. He had hurried off to assist Cyclops and Phoenix, confident that Wolverine wouldn't be too long in resolving this matter.

Unfortunately, with all the madness the X-Men had experienced in this topsy-turvy world, Logan had made the mistake of forgetting that the feral villain *also* possessed an adamantium-laced skeleton—and claws.

Logan slipped on a patch of his own blood as Sabretooth rushed to meet his challenge. Sparks flew as metal-coated bio-weapons clashed.

"That the best you got?" Wolverine hissed, ignoring the pain that ripped through his body when the animalistic sociopath had raked his claws across his abdomen.

"Wait for it, runt," Sabretooth growled. "It gets *better*."

And then, with an ear-to-ear grin splitting his haggard face, he unexpectedly broke off the attack and jumped back.

Before Wolverine could go on the offensive—or even question his foe's motives for a sudden withdrawal—a fusillade of armor-piercing bullets tore into his back, his neck, his legs. Sabretooth's military support, it appeared, had finally arrived.

The rounds rattled around inside him, glancing off the super-strong metal that protected his bones—but not his organs. Logan staggered about in blinding pain, unable to see, unable to stand.

Then something slammed into his chest—hard. Flesh tore. Blood spurted from his wounds, coating his eyes, filling his mouth.

Blinking his eyes rapidly, wiping the heels of his hands across his face to wipe away the arterial spray, Logan finally succeeded in clearing his vision—just in time for him to see Sabretooth plunge his adamantium-tipped claws into the Canadian's chest.

Logan howled.

The Imperial limousine tore out of the arts center parking garage like the proverbial bat out of hell.

As it rounded the north corner of the building, heading for New

Hampshire Avenue, the car plowed through a group of superpowered combatants clashing on the driveway to the main entrance where, a few hours before, guests had begun arriving for what had promised to be a magical evening—instead of a mind-numbing Caught off-guard by the charging automobile, Scanner and Vindaloo were the first to fall beneath its wheels.

The front of the arts center suddenly exploded outward, showering man, mutant, and Hunter alike with chunks of masonry that crushed bones, and shards of glass that tore at flesh and sliced through arteries. The force of the blast carried across the avenue, tossing aside cars, emergency vehicles, and anyone who had been foolish enough to remain behind to view the spectacular battle.

And from the rubble of the shattered building stepped Magneto. Lips twisted in a hate-filled snarl, he gazed at the destruction spread before him and roared.

“*DOOM!*” he shouted. “Where are you, you steel-shrouded maggot?”

His eyes narrowed as he caught sight of a limousine fleeing the scene, its roof emblazoned with the seal of the Empire.

“Run all you like, human!” Magneto cried. “You only race all the faster to make your appointment with Death!”

He took to the air, flying high above the carnage he had wrought, and pursued the Imperial limousine as it rocketed through the streets, turning onto Constitution Avenue. To the right, along the edge of The Mall, crowds that had gathered to cheer the Royal Couple as they returned to the White House after the gala now ran in blind panic to escape the conflict heading their way.

With a burst of speed, the limousine tore up the avenue, heading for the mansion; another minute at the most, and the von Dooms would be safe.

But then the car was torn asunder by powerful magnetic forces.

The Royal Couple and their driver were thrown from the remnants of the vehicle, to land in a heap on the asphalt. The driver died instantly, his neck snapping as he struck the pavement. The Empress cried out in pain, the weight of her body falling fully onto her right arm as the limb swung beneath her; the snap of her ulna as it broke could plainly be heard.

Clad in his battle armor, the Emperor, of course, was unharmed.

“It is *over*, von Doom!” Magneto bellowed at the Emperor. “This fantasy world you have somehow created comes to an end *tonight*, with your death!”

“Try your best, mutant!” the Emperor shouted. “Doom stands ready!”

Magnetic forces and ring-generated powers tore the air between them, filling the night-drenched city with the light and heat of a small sun. Buildings suddenly caught fire. Automobiles exploded. Those people unfortunate enough to have been standing close to the energy burst internally combusted. Heedless of the damage they were causing, neither mutant overlord nor tyrannical genius wavered in their resolve to destroy the other.

The phrase “Hell on Earth” flashed through the mind of more than one person that night.

And then a momentary lull in the battle came when the energies unleashed by the Mandarin’s power rings proved to be too much for the Emperor’s armor to handle. Roaring with frustration, he tore the smoldering gauntlets from his burned hands and threw them to the ground.

Taking advantage of his enemy’s weakness, Magneto lashed out with a powerful magnetic bolt, ensnaring von Doom and pulling him high into the night sky. As the Emperor fought to free himself, Magneto closed his hand—and von Doom’s armor collapsed inward, crushing flesh and bone.

The Emperor screamed; Magneto, on the other hand, found it all quite amusing.

A bolt of lightning suddenly tore through the sky, to strike Magneto full in the chest. He cried out in pain, releasing his hold on the Emperor, who tumbled toward the ground. Before von Doom impacted, though, a powerful wind gusted beneath him, carrying him a hundred yards from the mutant overlord, then gently setting him upon the grass.

Summoning another gale-force wind, Ororo used it to lift herself into the air. Eyes literally flashing in anger, cradling her broken arm against her chest, she flew directly toward Magneto, who was dazedly floating above The Mall, wheezing for breath. The center of his crimson outfit was charred through to his chest; the exposed skin was likewise blackened.

“*You dare?*” Ororo shouted. “*You dare* to lay hands upon the greatest man the world has ever had the privilege to know? Even more, you dare to attack the husband of one who controls the very *elements?*”

Above the battlefield, an angry storm was beginning to take shape, its strong winds and ominous rumbling mirroring its mistress’s dark mood. The air filled with the strong odor of burning ozone.

“Ah, my dear Storm,” Magneto said, shaking his head sadly. “If you but knew the truth about your ‘beloved’ mate, and the ways in which he has deceived you. I am certain you would be quite angered—

and, perhaps, greatly embarrassed.” He sneered. “However, I have neither the time nor the patience to educate you. But I will say this: because we have, in the past, had occasion to fight as allies, I shall give you the opportunity to remove yourself from my path—” he gestured toward her broken arm “—without further injury.”

“And allow you to murder my husband?” Ororo snarled. “Never!” The air around them shook mightily as a massive thunderhead boomed just above them. It sounded as though a bomb had been dropped in the center of the capitol.

“I thought as much,” Magneto said; he almost sounded melancholy.

With but a glance, he caused the iron in Ororo’s blood to form a clot at the base of her brain. Ororo screamed in agony for a moment, left hand claspng the back of her head, eyes squeezed shut tightly; then she moaned pitifully and blacked out. Magneto caught her before she could fall, cradling her gently in his arms as he descended to ground level. He touched the back of her head with the tip of a finger, dispersing the clot, then placed her on the grass.

Glancing up, he saw Cyclops, Phoenix, and Nightcrawler racing toward him. The mutant overlord rose into the air once more.

“Magnus, wait!” Cyclops shouted. “If you kill Doom, we’ll never find out how to repair the damage he’s done!”

“See to your comrade, X-Men,” Magneto called down, ignoring Cyclops’s plea. “You may question what remains of that maggot after I am done with him.” He flew off to finish his work.

Cyclops knelt beside his wife as she delicately gripped Ororo’s left wrist between thumb and middle finger. *Jean?*

Phoenix breathed a sigh of relief. *She’s all right, Scott. There’s a broken arm that needs a splint, but I’ve got a strong pulse. He wasn’t trying to kill her, thank God. She gazed at him, eyes filled with concern. But what are we going to do about Magneto?*

I know exactly what to do . . . Cyclops thought.

“Kurt!” he barked. “To hell with my agreement with Magnus! If we don’t stop him from killing Doom, we’ll never find out what he used to change the world—or how we can change it back!” He pointed toward the Emperor. “Grab him and bring him back—Jean and I will hold off Magneto!”

“Wait!” Nightcrawler shouted, pointing to the western sky. “What’s that?”

“DOOM!”

Rogue appeared to come out of nowhere, streaking like a missile toward the Emperor. Her outfit was shredded, her face speckled with

blood, but nothing had removed the look of utter hatred that seemed permanently etched into her features.

Before anyone could react, she punched von Doom in the chest with enough force to send him careening across The Mall, to land at the steps of what had once been the Lincoln Memorial. Circuits in his armor sparked and smoldered; the odor of burnt plastic wafted into the air.

"You're the reason Remy's dead!" Rogue shouted hysterically, hovering above the grassy field. "If it hadn't been for *you*, the world wouldn't have changed, an' we wouldn't have tried to fix it, an' Remy wouldn't have been infected with that stinkin' virus, an'—"

"Wh-what are you prattling on about, stripling?" von Doom gasped—clearly, the blow had injured him. "How is Doom responsible for the actions of some costumed imbecile he has never met?" Slowly, he staggered to his feet. "Were it not for the constant interference of cretins such as yourself and your churlish band of misfits, Doom would not have to—"

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" Rogue screamed, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I don't wanna *hear* anymore of your stinkin' lies!" She flew toward him again, picking up speed as she drew closer. "All I want is t'see you *dead!*"

She drew back her fist, prepared to deliver the fatal blow—

—only to be smashed aside by a surge of magnetic energy that sent her flying past the monument, toward Independence Avenue, to slam, hard, into the side of a fuel tanker-truck as it moved along the thoroughfare. The powerful shockwave generated by the resulting explosion violently shook the ground for miles around, and sent the gathered combatants tumbling in all directions.

Lying in the center of the blast crater, unconscious but otherwise unharmed, Rogue would be out of the fight for quite a while.

"Doom is mine!" Magneto shouted, to no one in particular. "*Mine* must be the hand that slays him!"

The mutant overlord turned back to his target as the Emperor rose to his feet, preparing to meet the attack.

"And now, your reign of terror comes to an end, human!" Magneto shouted. "Tomorrow's sun shall rise over the new empire of *Homo superior!*" Powerful magnetic forces crackled around his hands, and he prepared to loose them on von Doom—

—only to be blindsided by another airborne mutant. The impact sent him tumbling through the night sky.

"Watch those hands, friend!" Warren said. "The Emperor doesn't know where they've been!"

Before the mutant overlord could react, Warren had grabbed him

underneath the arms and hauled him into the storm-lashed sky, pulling him as far from the Emperor as possible.

"Damn all you infernal do-gooders!" Magneto raged. "Even with your minds rewired by that tyrant, *still* do you constantly find ways in which to interfere with my plans! Well, no more, I say! Von Doom *dies* this night, and no man—no *mutant*—shall keep Magneto from taking his revenge!"

His hands began to glow brightly. Bolts of magnetic energy crackled between his fingertips, becoming more powerful by the second. Wrenching himself out of Warren's grip, Magneto turned in mid-air—and placed both hands flat against the winged mutant's chest.

Warren screamed—a high-pitched keening that could be heard even above the rumble of the storm. His shirt started to burn, then the azure flesh beneath it. His body convulsed spasmodically; his wings stopped beating.

And then, like Icarus cast down from the heavens, Warren plummeted toward the ground so very far below.

"WARREN!" Betsy cried. "Oh, my God, my God . . ."

They could have escaped all this insanity; could have kept flying and put themselves far and away from any danger.

But when Warren had looked back in time to see Magneto tear apart the Imperial limousine, he had insisted on going back. It was madness, she had said—sheer and utter madness for him to think he had any chance against such a man as Magneto; a man who could match the Emperor strength for strength, and decimate the ranks of the finest soldiers in the Empire.

But he wouldn't listen. Dropping Betsy off on the far side of Constitution Avenue, in front of the National Academy of Science, he had soared away to protect his leader, ignoring her pleas to come back.

And now . . .

Paying no attention to the war being fought around her—or the level of danger in which she was placing herself—Betsy raced across the battlefield, watching his descent with growing panic. He was falling faster and faster, wings fluttering uselessly; above him, Magneto sneered, then floated away toward his original target.

Betsy screamed when Warren struck the ground near the Reflecting Pool; the sound of bones breaking was unmistakable.

Hands pressed over her mouth, she slowly walked toward him, not wanting to see his condition, but unable to stop herself. Warren lay on his back, arms and legs splayed at unnatural angles, wings spread wide on the grass. His clothes were smoldering, and the stench of ozone and

burnt flesh that flooded her nostrils almost made Betsy retch. A small scream escaped her lips, the sound muffled by her gloved hands, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

And then Warren moaned; his wings gently fluttered.

He was still alive.

Betsy gasped. "Warren . . . ?" She ran to his side as he struggled—and failed—to sit up.

"Hey . . . Betts . . ." he said weakly. He inhaled shallowly, and something rattled within his chest. "Guess this is . . . what I get for . . . trying to impress . . . my girl, huh?"

Despite her tears, Betsy forced herself to smile encouragingly as she knelt beside him and cradled his head in her lap.

"You stupid, stupid man," she said, gently stroking his face. "A nice bouquet of flowers would have been just as impressive."

"I'll . . . remember that . . . next time . . ." Warren replied. Each word, each breath was a labor for his damaged lungs. His face suddenly contorted horribly, and he gasped, unable to breathe.

"*Help us! Someone please help us!*" Betsy cried. She frantically looked around for a paramedic, or a police officer—somebody. *Anybody*. But her pleas were lost amid the clash of mutant energies that crackled across the night sky, and the dull thud of flesh striking flesh. From off in the distance, the high-pitched wail of sirens could be heard as emergency teams raced to the scene.

"Guess everybody's a . . . little busy . . ." Warren muttered. The pain appeared to have subsided, but the azure color of his skin had noticeably paled, and his handsome features looked strained.

"Shhh," Betsy whispered, placing a finger to his lips. "Don't speak." She leaned forward to gaze into his glassy eyes, and her lavender hair descended like a curtain over both their faces. She angrily swept it back, draping it over her right shoulder. Warren laughed softly, brushing aside a loose strand that lay across the bridge of his nose.

"You sang like . . . an angel," he said, grinning lopsidedly. "You know that? So beautiful . . ." He grimaced as his body was wracked by another painful spasm; it subsided after a few agonizing moments. "Kinda funny, don't you think . . . since *I'm* the one . . . with the wings . . ."

"Please, baby—*don't talk*," Betsy insisted. "You've got to save your strength."

"You British women . . ." Warren gasped. "Insatiable . . ." He chuckled—a weak, phlegm-drenched sound that rattled up from his lungs.

"Oh, God . . ." Betsy moaned. She was in a panic, her thoughts

jumbled as each screamed to be heard over the others, until her mind was filled with white noise. After what seemed like an eternity of confusion, one thought was able to force its way to the front of her mind: *GET HELP.*

"Warren, I'm going to find a doctor, or a paramedic," she said. "I'll be right back, okay? Just please, *please* hang on."

She started to rise, but Warren grasped her hand and pulled her back down. "No . . . don't go . . ." he said, slowly shaking his head. His voice was growing fainter.

Betsy opened her mouth to say something—some words of encouragement, or even anger, telling him he had no right to give up, not when they still had a whole lifetime ahead of them to explore—but in her heart, she knew it was too late.

Too late for anything more than good-byes.

So did Warren. Tenderly, he reached up to stroke her cheek. "You really *are* . . . the most beautiful woman . . . in the world . . . you know . . ."

Betsy took his hand and brushed her lips against his fingers. "Warren, I . . ." she began, then fell silent, unable to speak. A tear dropped from the corner of her left eye, to splash on Warren's cheek.

"Don't leave me . . ." she sobbed.

Warren smiled. "Love you, Betts . . ." he whispered.

And then he was gone.

"Die, you worm! In the name of all that is holy, why don't you die?"

Floating a dozen feet above The Mall, Magneto unleashed another blast of energy that caught von Doom squarely in the chest. The Emperor skidded across the grassy field, then lay still for a moment.

"What is the meaning of this?" Magneto bellowed, pointing at von Doom as he struggled to a sitting position on the grass.

As one, both mutants and humans stared in shock at the sight before them.

Armor smoldering, velvet cloak burned away, the Doombot looked down to see the tangle of wires and circuit boards that protruded from its chest.

"Damn . . ." it muttered in an electronic gurgle.

S HE WAS going into shock.

Kneeling on the grass, Warren's lifeless body cradled in her arms, Betsy stared blankly at the tableau laid out before her.

The battle had come to an abrupt halt with the startling revelation that the man who had ruled an entire planet for a decade—or, far more truthfully, for only one short month, in the “real” world—was in actuality an automaton.

And then the rain began to fall.

Betsy didn't feel the drops striking her exposed skin, or soaking her expensive gown, or drenching her hair, washing some of the lavender color from her locks. Her makeup began to run as well, exposing a bright red tattoo that extended from just above her left eyebrow to just below her left eye; it looked like a stylized “J.” In all the years she'd possessed it, Betsy could never remember how or why she had chosen to have such a noticeable mark etched onto her face, but Warren had always liked it.

“Warren . . .” Betsy whispered, and looked down at him. Now that he was no longer troubled by pain, he looked so peaceful, as if he were resting. She bent down to kiss his lips one last time, and was shocked to discover how cold they felt.

“Oh, my God . . .” said a small voice beside her.

Slowly, Betsy lifted her head and looked up. A red-headed woman and a dark-haired man, both clad in colorful spandex costumes, were standing next to her.

“Oh, Betsy,” the woman said, eyes brimming with tears. “I am so very, very sorry.”

Betsy stared at the woman; her glassy eyes began to clear.

"You," she said softly. "Yours was the voice I heard inside my head."

The woman nodded and knelt beside her. "That's right, Betsy. I'm Jean. Do you remember me?"

"I . . ." Betsy began; her eyes started to glaze over once more. "Did you know Warren?"

"We *both* did, Betsy," the costumed man replied. "He was our friend—as you are, too."

"I—I don't remember . . ." Betsy said hesitantly. Her gaze drifted back toward Warren; staring blankly at his stilled features, she gently stroked his hair.

"Betsy, I . . . I know it might sound a bit . . . *cold*, given the circumstances, but I could *help* you remember," Jean said. "Would you like me to do that?"

Betsy's eyes cleared, the fog that shrouded her thoughts suddenly lifting; her body began to tremble with uncontrolled anger. She turned to glare heatedly at this costumed woman kneeling beside her. What in God's name was *wrong* with these people? Couldn't they see she was consumed by grief? Were they blind to the fact that she was cradling the dead body of a man who had meant the world to her—and who had been needlessly taken from her by the same superpowered madman who was leading them? Hadn't they a *shred* of decency, or was it some sort of requirement among Magneto's followers to be able to so callously ignore the suffering they caused?

"Haven't you people done enough already?" she said, her features contorted with hate.

Jean started. "What . . . ?"

"*You're* the ones who started all this fighting, aren't you?" Betsy snapped. "Magneto's superpowered toadies? Didn't any of you have the *slightest* idea about what might happen if you attacked the Emperor at a public event? About what the cost in human life might be once all the shooting started?" Her lips pulled back in a snarl. "Or was your precious revolution all too damned important for such considerations? So *what* if lives are lost, so long as your master's blasted dream of mutant superiority comes *true*, right?" Her eyes blazed with anger. "Perhaps if you'd taken the time to put a little more *thought* into your plans, figured out a way that wouldn't have involved laying waste to half of Washington, then Warren wouldn't have had to . . . wouldn't have . . ." She closed her eyes to blink back tears, then turned her head away.

Jean placed a consoling hand on her shoulder; Betsy shrugged it off, her attention focused once more on Warren. She angled her head

above his face, using her darkening hair as an awning of sorts to protect it from the rain.

"You're wrong, Betsy," Jean said gently. "I know how it looks, I know how you feel right now, but you're *wrong* about us. *We're* the ones trying to put an *end* to all this madness."

Betsy laughed—a sharp, bitter note—and wiped away the raindrops that had collected on Warren's stilled features. "I'd say you're a little too late for that, then—wouldn't *you*?"

"I . . ." Jean began, then stopped. "Yes," she said softly.

Betsy glanced up as the man's bright yellow boots came into view. He crouched down in front of her.

"Warren was my friend, Betsy," he said, his voice strained with grief. "I valued his friendship, as I have yours. Please believe me: I didn't want this to happen. I just did what I thought was right, for the good of the mission." He shook his head. "I don't know—maybe if I'd reacted faster when Magneto was helping Ororo, gone back on my word earlier . . ." His head lowered. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen," he whispered.

Betsy opened her mouth, ready to discharge a stream of choice invectives and tell him what he could do with his sympathy, but the pain that was so clearly etched on his features made her stop and reconsider.

"No," she finally said. "I imagine you didn't."

The man slowly looked up. "Betsy, it's *important* that you remember who we are, and what you mean to us," he said. "What Jean and I, and the other X-Men, are up against is too big to tackle on our own—we need our friends by our side. We need *you*. Will you help us?"

Betsy shrugged; she didn't care one way or the other.

The man turned to Jean and nodded. Gently, she placed her fingertips against Betsy's temples. "This may sting a bit . . ."

"*How?*" Magneto roared. "How can this be? To have come so close to having my revenge, only to have it stolen away by a . . . a *robot*?"

He landed beside the faux von Doom as it sat on the grass. Sparks tumbled from its shattered casement, to be quickly extinguished by the heavy downpour, and the rosy complexion of its face and hands had faded; its skin now looked like white candle wax. The automaton looked up at him, and flashed that same infuriating, condescending smile that had haunted the dreams of Erik Lensherr every night of his long exile in the Sahara—which, as it turned out, had been a dream of sorts itself.

"You have *lost*, mutant," the robot burred. "Though you have caused your fair share of trouble this night, and revealed to the world

that its beloved ruler has been living vicariously through this metal shell, *still* is Doom triumphant." It waved a gauntleted hand at the fiery ruins around them—at the lifeless bodies, and the thick smoke, and the decimated field. "By morning, Washington shall be restored to its full glory, and all this shall be but a distant memory—the fading remnants of a dream lost upon awakening. You, as well; now that you have played your final hand, I find myself quickly growing tired of this game. You have led me a merry chase, Magneto, but the time has come for Doom to put away his toys and move onto far more important matters." The android chuckled. "Despite your best—though ultimately pathetic—efforts, mutant, it is *my* dream, *my* empire, that shall endu—"

Magneto savagely ripped it apart with a bolt of magnetic force, then threw back his head and roared.

"Come out and face me, you mind-twisting worm!" he screamed to the heavens.

But the rumble of the storm was the only reply he received.

Jean had been right—having her memories jump-started hurt like hell. But the pain was worth undergoing the process in order to have her true life fully restored to her.

Betsy remembered everything now: her brother Brian's costumed identity as the super heroic Captain Britain, and the knowledge that both siblings had gained extraordinary powers from their father, a former citizen of Otherworld; her kidnapping at the hands of the "real" Arcade and Miss Locke, and Brian's efforts to free her from Murderworld; then her days as a fashion model in London, and her months as a S.H.I.E.L.D. Psi Division agent; from her time as the X-Man called Psylocke to the moment when her life had changed forever—the Siege Perilous, an event of cosmic proportions that, somehow, had transferred the mind and soul of Elisabeth Braddock into the body of a Yakuza-trained assassin named Kwannon.

And Warren; she remembered everything about Warren, as well. Their first awkward dates, when he would try to impress her by playing the suave millionaire playboy, and she would act the part of the *femme fatale*, all slinky body movements and sensuous gazes—that sort of behavior hadn't lasted long, mainly because he wasn't all that suave, and she had run out of double-entendres to spice up her conversation; they'd settled for just being their true selves, and seeing where that would take them. The time he'd encouraged her to sing in public for the first time, draped across the grand piano in the center of the Starlight Room like Michelle Pfeiffer in *The Fabulous Baker Boys*. Their moonlit

flights above Manhattan, his arms secure around her waist, giggling hysterically as she felt the cool rush of air against her face.

There was more: Their adventures with the X-Men. Their attempts to live a normal life together in a world of spandex-clad madmen and alien invasions and universe-threatening disasters. Her brush with death, after Sabretooth had gravely wounded her, and Warren's subsequent, perilous journey to the mystical realm called The Crimson Dawn to retrieve the Ebon Vein, an elixir that saved her life and granted her the power to teleport through shadows. His battle with Kuragari, the self-proclaimed "Shogun of the Shadows," who later captured Betsy and tried to use her as his pawn in his quest to take control of the Crimson Dawn.

And his offering of a portion of his own life-force to the Dawn in order to free her from that living hell. He had been living on borrowed time since then, never knowing whether he might "wake up dead"—as Betsy had put it—in a year, a month, a day. "But, if it means that for another year, month, or day I'm with *you*," he had said, "then it was *worth it*."

Her heart ached from the memories. So many experiences together; so much love they had shared; so many sacrifices made—for their friends, for each other. And to have it all restored now, when it was too late . . .

Sobbing gently, Betsy turned away from Jean—only to spot Warren's murderer standing beside the shattered remains of the Doombot.

"Magneto . . ." A low growl issued from her throat.

She leapt to her feet, face flushed with uncontrollable rage. Before Phoenix or Cyclops could move to stop her, she was racing across the field.

"Betsy—don't!" she heard Jean say.

But hate had added wings to Betsy's feet; they'd never catch up to her in time to prevent her from avenging Warren. As she closed on her target, anger growing with each step, she focused her mental powers, creating the special weapon that had become her trademark as an X-Man. Rose-colored energy crackled around her right hand, forming a stylized knife that jutted six inches from her fist.

It was called a psychic blade, and it could do terrible things to an unprotected mind.

"*MAGNETO!*" Betsy screamed.

The mutant overlord turned to meet the challenge, and looked surprised to find another of Xavier's students bearing down on him. Before he could react, she leapt forward, pouncing on him, screaming unintelligibly as she pushed him backward with her left hand.

Betsy raised the dagger high above her head—and then plunged it deep into his skull.

Magneto screamed as the blade sliced through every synapse in his brain. His body shook, hands clenching and unclenching; flecks of bloody spittle flew from his open lips, staining his crimson and purple outfit.

Betsy thought it was all quite amusing.

She held the dagger in place for a few seconds, watching as Magneto twisted in agony, unable to free himself from the mental assault to which he was being subjected. Then, opening her fist, Betsy made the blade vanish, as though it had never been there.

Eyes widened in shock yet unseeing, Magneto moaned loudly and collapsed, landing on his back. He began twitching spasmodically.

"I hope you burn in *hell* for what you've done," Betsy said with a satisfied sneer.

And then she vanished from sight.

Cyclops and Phoenix reached the spot where Betsy had been standing a moment after her sudden disappearance.

"Psylocke?" Cyclops called out. "Where are you?"

"Could she have used her shadow-powers?" Phoenix asked. "Teleported somewhere else?"

Cyclops nodded. "Possibly. But why?" He glanced down at their unconscious enemy; the terrified look on Lensherr's face sent a chill up his spine. "She had Magneto right where she wanted him, and you know Betsy—she's never been the type to leave something half-done. She's got to be around here."

Phoenix glanced around the area, her face lined with concern. "Yes, but where could she have gone . . . ?"

She was standing in a vast, dark space.

Confused by her new surroundings, Betsy looked around, but could see nothing. She could tell the room was large, though, from the way the echo carried when she moved her foot across the floor.

"Greetings, X-Man," said a raspy voice from the darkness. "I welcome you to the Royal Mansion."

Betsy started; it sounded as though it had come from just over her shoulder, but she hadn't heard anyone moving about.

"The White House?" she asked. "But, how did I get here?"

A few feet away, a spotlight clicked on, illuminating a throne-like chair, its back turned toward her. It took her a moment to realize that someone was sitting in it.



"You are here because I *wished* you to be here, Psylocke," the voice ordered. "Now, approach. We have much to discuss, you and I, and a short amount of time in which to do it."

Hesitantly, Betsy moved forward, stepping around the chair to face its occupant. Her attention, however, was caught by a brightly glowing object that floated a few inches above the open hands of her host. It was shaped like a small box, measuring approximately six inches on each side, and shone with the brightness of daylight.

"Dear God . . ." she gasped. Though she had never seen such a device first-hand, Betsy immediately recognized it from descriptions in the Xavier Institute's computer files.

It was a Cosmic Cube.

Small in size though it might be, the original Cube had been designed years ago by the scientists of the infamous organization A.I.M.—under the watchful eye of their living computer, MODOK—as the source of ultimate power: capable of rewriting the laws of physics and turning fantasy into reality with just a thought. Shortly thereafter, it had been stolen by the Red Skull—an insane villain trained during the blackest days of World War II by none other than Adolf Hitler himself to become the ultimate Nazi. The Skull's plans for creating a "Fourth Reich," as well as his goal of achieving world domination, had ultimately been ruined by the timely intervention of Captain America. The Cube had been thought destroyed during their battle, but that was never the case: Though *one* Cube might be destroyed, *another* always seemed to pop up somewhere in the world, allowing whoever possessed it to make their dreams come true.

Like the dreams of an armored madman who had wished to become the emperor of the world.

Betsy took a step backward, wanting to put as much distance between her and the device as possible.

"Cease your trembling, mutant!" the Cube's owner snapped. "I have no patience for your paltry fears."

Forcing herself to look away from the Cube, Betsy turned to face the device's owner. He was a wizened old man with sharp, sunken features; the light of great intelligence still burned from beneath shadows cast by bushy eyebrows. His thinning, unkempt hair was a brilliant white, his face lined and creased with incredible age. Betsy figured he had to be at least a hundred years old, give or take a year, but the familiar silver armor and green velvet cape in which he was clad were brand-new—though a month's worth of dust had accumulated on the battle dress, dulling their original shine.

"Who—who are you?" Betsy asked haltingly.

"I?" the old man said softly. "Do you not *recognize* me, mutant?" Betsy slowly shook her head.

The old man shifted in his chair, sitting up straighter; he almost looked regal in stature now.

"I," he said proudly, "am Doom."

"*Zum teufel!* Where did Psylocke go?" Nightcrawler asked.

He stood beside Cyclops and Phoenix on The Mall; all three of them were soaked to the skin by the unrelenting weather. Lying on the ground in front of them were Magneto and Rogue, Kurt having rescued the insensate Southern Belle from the blast crater in the center of Independence Avenue.

"I haven't the slightest idea, Kurt," Cyclops responded. "One minute, Jean and I were running over to stop Betsy before she might have killed Magneto, and the next . . ."

"A greater disappearing act than any *I* could come up with," Nightcrawler said.

Cyclops nodded and turned to his wife. "Jean, is there any chance you could scan the area, see if you can pick up her thoughts, like you did back in New York?"

"I'll let you know in a minute," Phoenix replied. Closing her eyes, she placed her fingertips to her temples; her brow furrowed with intense concentration.

While they waited, Cyclops pulled Nightcrawler aside. "Any sign of Wolverine?"

Kurt shook his head. "*Nein.* I have not seen any sign of our feral friend—or Sabretooth—since we split up at the arts center." He frowned. "I tried to search the area around the building, but the escalation of the fighting between the guards and Magneto's acolytes forced me to withdraw." He looked around. "Where is Ororo?"

"We had to turn her over to Doom's security forces," Cyclops explained. "She'd been injured and, rather than get into a shooting match with a bunch of soldiers over who had the right to take care of the 'Empress,' Jean and I elected to let them get her to a hospital."

A distant explosion caught their attention; fires were still raging near the arts center, despite the downpour. Nightcrawler sucked in his breath between gritted teeth.

"It should not be taking Logan this long to rejoin us," he noted, a look of concern plainly etched on his face, "even if it *was* Sabretooth he was facing . . ."

Their conversation was interrupted by the soft sound of moaning

from below. Looking down, they saw Rogue start to awaken. Nightcrawler crouched down and helped her to a sitting position.

"How do you feel, *mein freund*?" he asked.

"I—" Rogue began, then lowered her head. "Like a damn fool, Kurt. I shouldn't've lost my head like that, an' let Magneto sneak up on me." She pounded the ground with her fist. "An' now I done lost my chance t' get at Doom . . ."

"You mean *him*?" Nightcrawler asked. He sifted through the shattered remains of the android and picked up its head. The infuriating smile of Victor von Doom shone brightly in the flashes of lightning.

"He's a *Doombot*?" Rogue asked.

"A stand-in for the real one," Cyclops said. "But we'll find him."

"And there will be no more talk of 'getting' him, yes?" Nightcrawler asked. "Remember, Rogue: You are an X-Man, not a killer. Remy would not want to see you throw away your life in some blind quest for vengeance. Such behavior would despoil his memory, and the love he had for you."

Rogue grunted in reply and looked to the side, to find Magneto lying beside her. His eyes had closed, the mask of horror he had earlier worn now faded away with his consciousness. "What happened to Magnus?" she asked.

"Betsy," Cyclops replied. "There was an . . . accident . . ." He stepped to one side, to allow her an unobstructed view of Warren. Scott had folded his wings around him, to provide some protection from the rain.

"Oh, Lord . . ." Rogue whispered in shock, a hand to her mouth. "Where is she?"

"We do not know," Kurt said. "She just . . . vanished—" he gestured toward Magneto "—after venting her frustrations on our friend here. Jean is trying to scan for her."

Phoenix's eyes popped open. "I've found her!" she announced. She glanced at her teammates. "She's with Doom—the *real* one."

"*Unglaublich*," Nightcrawler muttered under his breath.

"Where is she?" Cyclops asked.

Phoenix pointed to the east, along Constitution Avenue—and the world famous home that stood just off from it.

"The White House—of course," Cyclops said. "Let's move, people!"

Sprinting across the storm-soaked Mall, the quartet of heroes raced toward the great mansion, unaware of the vaporous cloud that slowly drifted around Magneto.

"You're Doctor Doom?" Betsy asked, nonplused. Her head was spinning from the revelation. "But—" she gestured at his aged appearance—"but how . . . ?"

The Emperor grunted in disgust. "Why is it that all you so-called 'heroes' must stammer and needlessly prattle on whenever you are confronted by events so clearly beyond your ability to comprehend? Can you not merely accept what is before your eyes?"

"But you're so *old*," Betsy replied. "And you're holding the *Cosmic Cube*, for heaven's sakes! How would you *expect* me to respond?"

The old man smiled wolfishly. "Ah. You *recognize* the Cube for what it is—the ultimate power in the universe. Therefore, you must realize that only Doom is capable of controlling such forces; that only Doom could have used them to create the perfect world you had come to accept as fact—until the meddlesome antics of your misanthropic teammates proved to you otherwise."

"Yes, I know all about you, 'Emperor,' and what I *realize* is that Doom is responsible for turning my whole world upside down, solely to placate his precious ego," Betsy replied with a sneer, "and, therefore, is directly responsible for the death of the only man I have truly ever loved."

"Ah, yes." Von Doom shook his head in mock sadness. "Poor Worthington—cut down in the prime of his youth, all because he sought to defend a man with a 'precious ego' from assassination. A wasted effort, of course, but clearly a heartfelt one." He pointed a warning finger at Betsy. "Do not seek to shift blame where it does not belong, girl. *I* did not cause him to attack Magneto; what he did, was done of his own volition. Such has always been the downfall of you costumed fools." The old man smiled. "I assure you, however, that he will be remembered as a hero of the Empire."

"Why?" Betsy asked. "Why do that, when you could just *wish* him back with the Cube?" A rose-colored light suddenly filled the darkened chamber as she formed her psychic dagger. "*Do it*," she ordered, grabbing him by the throat. "Bring him back."

"Have a care, mutant—you address *Doom*, not some petty street thug," the Emperor replied with a snarl.

"From what I hear, you cheeky little monkey," Betsy replied with a similar snarl, "there are times when people who are dealing with you can't tell the difference between one and the other, either."

"Such insolence!" Von Doom chuckled. "You have *spirit*, girl, to dare pit your meager telepathic abilities against the might of Doom—when he holds the very powers of Creation *itself* in his hands." He laughed—a short, barking noise laced with phlegm. "If I so desired,

stripling, I could flay the skin from your bones, plunge you into the Earth's molten core—all with merely a thought. And you threaten Doom with a mental *toy*?"

"I'm *willing* to pit my blade against your little gift box," Betsy replied sharply. "Think you can wish *fast* enough to beat me, Doctor?" She drew back her arm, preparing to drive the blade deep into his mind.

"I do," von Doom said. In his hands, the Cube flared brightly.

Without warning, Betsy was stunned to find herself floating in space, hundreds of miles above the Earth; the planet stretched out far below her. She gasped involuntarily, and the void rushed to fill her lungs. The icy coldness quickly seized upon the areas of her flesh not protected by her gown and opera gloves, draining her strength, her consciousness. Slowly, her struggles ceased; her eyes rolled up in her head—

And then she was back in the chamber.

Gasping for air, she dropped to the floor, coughing and wheezing until she was certain her windpipe would tear from the abuse, rubbing her bare skin to shake off the chill that gripped her. Eventually, forehead pressed against the cool tiles, she was able to regain her breath; the burning sensation created by the void's frigid embrace left her body.

"I *trust* you have learned your lesson, child," the old man said menacingly. "Enfeebled though he may be, Doom is ever your superior."

"I'll . . . keep that . . . in mind . . ." Betsy rasped, wiping away tears. A thin line of drool ran from her gaping mouth to the chamber floor; her throat felt as though it was on fire. Yet, unwilling to remain prostrated before this man whom she hated so much, she wiped the spittle off her chin with the back of her hand, and slowly rose to her feet.

"Do not delude yourself into thinking Doom is a benevolent man, mutant," the Emperor warned. "Were you of no use to my plans, I would banish you to limbo, wipe you from the minds of every man, woman, and child on this planet, as easily as I shall soon do to that upstart, Lensherr. It would be as though you had never existed."

"But that's something I don't understand," Betsy said, ignoring the pain that shot through her larynx with the utterance of each syllable. "Why in heaven's name, if you had complete mastery over the world, would you *allow* someone like Magneto to run free? With the power of the Cube, you could have simply wished *him* out of existence before all this madness was set in motion."

Von Doom shrugged. "Merely for entertainment purposes. With the accursed Fantastic Four finally eliminated, I found there were often moments when I grew bored with this perfect world; my enemies were

either dead, or had been fashioned into willing, unquestioning followers—there were no challenges left to face.”

His eyes lit up with malicious joy. “And then I came upon a most *wonderful* idea: I would take my greatest rival and set him loose in my new world, to see what he would do—much like a laboratory rat placed in a maze. True, I could have located him at any time merely by using the Cube, but, through his remarkable ingenuity in finding ways by which he, time and again, could elude the Hunters that were dispatched after him, he kept my interest piqued. After that, I allowed him to form his underground network of spies and saboteurs—such additional levels to the game kept the chase from becoming dull.” A trace of a smile came to his lips. “I must admit, the destruction of Paris was truly inspired—I never would have thought Lensherr capable of such widespread slaughter.” He chuckled softly.

“I’m so glad you find senseless death something to laugh about,” Betsy said sarcastically. “It adds a whole new layer of slime to your already-sparkling personality.”

Von Doom ignored her. “But then, something . . . unplanned occurred,” the old man said with noticeable hesitation.

Betsy’s eyebrows rose. From what she had heard about the villain, the great Victor von Doom was not the type to ever come right out and admit he had made a mistake. To hear such an admission now . . .

“What happened?” she asked. Despite her situation, von Doom’s comment had made her curious.

The old man frowned. “A slight . . . miscalculation by one of my technicians created an imperfection in the Cube—one I have been unable to correct.”

“Is that why you’ve aged as much as you have?”

Von Doom nodded. “Unlike the previous versions of the Cube designed by A.I.M., this particular device operates by absorbing the life-energies of its possessor—the more detailed the reality, the more tampering done to the timestream, the greater the drain on the individual. As you can probably surmise, I have been *quite* detailed in the construction of my world.”

Betsy started. “You mean you’re *dying*?”

“That is so,” von Doom replied. “At my current rate of deterioration, I estimate that I have no more than thirty days left in which to live.”

“And what will happen when your time is up?”

“Before I draw my last breath, before Death comes to lead me into her realm of never-ending darkness, I will order the Cube to destroy this world, and everyone on it,” von Doom replied.

"That's insane!" Betsy said. "Isn't there some way for you to turn it off *now*, before it ever comes to that?"

"And why would I *want* to do that, girl?" the wizened Emperor replied; his tone was that of an adult addressing a child. "If *Doom* cannot rule the Earth for all eternity, then *no one* shall."

Betsy shook her head emphatically. "No—there *has* to be another way."

"There *is* an alternative . . ." von Doom said slowly.

Betsy eyed him warily. "What are you talking about?"

"It is the very reason I summoned you, girl: to offer you a rare opportunity," von Doom said, a sinister gleam in his eyes. "Take possession of the Cube, and your lover will not have to die. Take the Cube, and this night and all its madness need never have occurred."

"Why me?" she asked. "Why not Ororo, or one of your superpowered lapdogs? I'm sure they'd be more than willing to help you."

"Indeed. But you have lost so much more that they ever have—so much, in fact, that I believe you would be willing to give up almost *anything* for the opportunity to restore your precious Mr. Worthington to life." The old man smiled wolfishly. "Is that not so, Ms. Braddock?"

A chill ran up Betsy's spine as she realized what von Doom was saying. "And what do you want from me in return?"

Von Doom shrugged. "Merely a small service: That you take my place and maintain this reality, in exactly the same form in which I recreated it, under my guidance. You will do as I tell you, and, in exchange, you are free to resurrect Worthington, even start your lives over with new identities, if that is what you wish. The Cube can make it *all* a reality." He paused. "Of course, you will never leave this chamber again, but you can still exist outside these walls, by placing part of your consciousness within the shell of an android created in your image—as I had been doing, until tonight. In this way, you will be able to move about the world, sharing your days with your handsome mutant as the mighty empire of von Doom continues to flourish."

"But then, *I'll* be the one who dies in a month's time," Betsy said.

"Of course," von Doom replied. "And then I shall find another troubled soul to take *your* place; then another, and another, ad infinitum." He leaned forward in his chair. "But it will be a month that you would otherwise be unable to spend with Worthington, would it not? A month that could seem like an entire lifetime of happiness, with your lover by your side—alive, unharmed, ready to take you in his arms once more." He raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Are you *willing* to make such a sacrifice, Ms. Braddock? Are you willing to risk your life, your world . . . for love?"

Betsy suddenly trembled and turned away, placing a hand to her mouth so Doom wouldn't hear her choking back a sob. He was the devil incarnate, she realized—a sadistic old man reveling in the torment he was putting her through, offering her her heart's desires in exchange for her soul.

As for the Cosmic Cube . . .

It was a Monkey's Paw; she knew that. Like the fictional talisman in the short horror story, it was a device created to give its bearer whatever their heart desired—money, power, the return of a loved one, long dead. But there was always a terrible price to be paid for its use—the Paw always perverted the wish, turned it against the one who uttered it, made a dream into a nightmare.

But, she was *already* living the nightmare, wasn't she? Her world had been turned upside down, restructured by one of mankind's greatest enemies with just a tiny box and a dream. And she had lost the only man she had ever truly loved, seen him taken from her by another egomaniacal dreamer who, if he ever learned of the Cube's existence, would only use it to rewrite history to suit his own needs and place himself in power.

In one evening, everything she had come to accept as fact had been revealed as a lie—her life, her career, her history. A façade created by her subconscious, and an unusual combination of mystical and mutant super-powers—an eye of harmony in the raging storm that was the mind of Victor von Doom.

A dream that, even now, was fading into memory.

But no, she suddenly realized—not everything had been a lie. Even before the world was turned inside-out, she had had Warren's love, and he, hers. Despite Doom's machinations—perhaps even because of them—their love had endured, grown even stronger. Though they had forgotten their friends, their dedication to the visions of Charles Xavier, their lives as “super heroes,” not even the villainy of an all-powerful tyrant could keep them apart.

Was it *wrong* to want things to go back to the way they had been, Betsy asked herself—even if it meant putting the world back under the control of a tyrant?

At least with Doom in control, there would be a world of order, where there were no more half-mad mutant overlords tearing across the countryside, destroying the lives of innocent people—she'd see to that herself, without Doom's tutelage. A world of peace and prosperity, where a blue-skinned, winged romantic and a British noblewoman trapped in the body of a Japanese karaoke singer could live Happily Ever After.

Would it really be so bad, Betsy wondered, to—just this once—be selfish enough to have *her* dream—to hold Warren in her arms again, run her fingers through his golden hair, giggle uncontrollably when he flashed his boyish grin, feel the warmth of his body beside her late at night?

To learn the answer, she would only have to pay a small price: her immortal soul.

A worthy exchange, she told herself, for love.

"Damn you, von Doom," she said at last, her voice barely above a whisper. "You know I can't live without him . . ."

"That is so," von Doom replied. "And that is *why*, in the end, Doom is always the victor. Now—step forward . . . and take hold of the Cube."

Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself, then reached for the small, glowing box. She felt its hypnotic pull, calling to her, whispering to her enticingly like a lover. Urging her to open Pandora's Box and release the demons that savagely plucked at her heartstrings.

All it would take was a gentle touch, and a simple wish . . .

Warren, please forgive me. . .

B ETSY—*NO!*” cried Jean Grey from behind her.

She turned. Gathered on the far side of the chamber were Cyclops, Phoenix, Rogue, and Nightcrawler. Her fellow X-Men. Her friends.

Her saviors from eternal damnation.

“Bah,” the wizened Emperor growled, and spat on the floor.

“It’s *over*, Doom,” Cyclops said. “Shut down the Cube, or we’ll shut it down *for* you.”

“Imbecile!” von Doom sniped. “You think restoring the world is as simple as flicking a light switch—I order the Cube to deactivate itself, and you awaken in your beds as though from a dream, wondering if any of this ever happened?” He snorted derisively. “At this point, the Cube is so unstable that it would require the full life-force of its possessor to calm its increasingly uncontrollable energies, if only to provide them with enough time to change back all that I have done—to ‘lock in’ the matrix, so to speak, so that all will become as it had been, before my great plans were set into motion.”

“And when were you going to mention *that* bit of information?” Betsy snapped.

Phoenix looked to her husband, her features etched with concern. “Scott, unless someone else takes control of the Cube and puts everything back to normal, Roma will have no other choice but to take action herself.”

“And wipe out the entire universe to stop it,” Cyclops said. “I know.”

Betsy’s eyebrows rose dramatically. “I beg your pardon?”

“We are, as the saying goes, ‘racing the clock,’ ” Nightcrawler ex-





plained. "By recreating the world in Doom's image, the Cube has created an instability in the omniverse that we must correct before—"

"Before the universe is wiped out by Roma in order to stop it," Betsy concluded. "Yes, I heard that part."

"How very interesting . . ." von Doom muttered, clearly intrigued by this information. "I had *no* idea the Cube could be that powerful."

"Still set on destroying the world before you die, Doctor?" Betsy asked. "Or are you going to hand over the Cube now?"

"Regained your spirit, have you, now that your friends are here?" von Doom replied. He shrugged. "Perhaps I shall set events into motion myself, rather than wait for this Roma to rob me of such a grand opportunity." He reached for the Cube—

—only to be yanked back by Nightcrawler as the blue-skinned teleporter suddenly appeared beside his chair, pinning the old man's arms against the throne.

"I believe you have had *enough* fun with your toy, *Herr Doktor*," Kurt said sternly. "Now, it is time for the adults to put your things away and tidy up what you have so callously broken while we were away."

"I will see you *dead*, mutant," the Emperor spat, struggling to free himself. "Crushed beneath my boot heel."

"Would that be before or after you have chased me down the hallway with your walker, Grandfather?" Kurt asked sarcastically. "Now be still, before I forget you are a doddering old fool and turn you over to Rogue. She is most eager to speak with you in private—if you understand my meaning." There was a sinister tone to his voice that surprised even Betsy.

Von Doom gazed evenly at Betsy. "It appears that we are back where we began, Ms. Braddock. Since I am unable to use the Cube, the world—and, quite possibly, the safety of the universe itself—is now yours for the making . . . *if* you have the strength of will to control it."

"*I'll* do it," Cyclops said without hesitation. He took a step toward the throne.

"*No*," Betsy said.

Cyclops halted; he looked confused by her reaction.

"Oh, stop playing the noble martyr, Scott, and think of your *wife* for a change," Betsy said, with more than a touch of anger. "You and Jean have struggled enough, *suffered* enough, to help the Professor try and realize his dream for a better world. You're always putting the team ahead of yourselves, constantly giving of yourselves—" she glanced at Phoenix "—but I know that, in the backs of your minds, you're always wondering when the day will come when one of you doesn't come back from a mission. And whether you'll have had the chance to say how

much you love each other before that happens." She shook her head. "That has to *stop*."

She smiled at them both. "Don't you see? You should be *happy* for once in your lives; enjoy the times you have together." A trace of sadness crept into her dark eyes. "They're so precious, and they pass so quickly. What the two of you have is something *special*—as special a love as the one Warren and I have—" she winced "*—had . . .*" Her voice trailed off for a moment, then she cleared her throat. "You shouldn't be so willing to just casually toss it aside everytime there's a crisis."

"Betsy, I know how badly you want to be able to bring Warren back with the Cube," Cyclops said, "but there's more at stake here than that."

"I know that now," Betsy said. "And I *still* want to go through with this."

"But, you *don't* have to," Cyclops argued. "Would Warren *really* want you to sacrifice yourself just because you feel lost without him?"

"It's *my* choice, Scott," Betsy replied. "My decision. *Someone* has to be willing to give up their life for the safety of the universe—why does it always have to be you or Jean?" She smiled. "You shouldn't have a monopoly on saving the world, you know. It gives the rest of us terrible inferiority complexes." Not wishing to discuss the matter any further, she turned to face the Cube. "All right—let's get this over with."

"Betsy—" Jean began.

"Be *happy*, my friends," she said softly, and stepped forward. Her hands began to close around the Cube—

And the far wall of the chamber suddenly exploded inward, sending chunks of concrete and adamantium hurtling through the darkened room with missile-like speed. The X-Men dove for what little cover was available; von Doom was protected by the Cube's power.

Then, Magneto strode into the room.

He struck quickly, wordlessly, immobilizing Phoenix with the same blood-controlling defense he had used on Ororo, rendering Jean unconscious before she was able to defend herself. As Phoenix collapsed, Cyclops moved to open his visor and unleash his power beams—only to be attacked by Pietro, who ran past his father to rain a furious series of blows upon Scott's head; the insensate leader of the X-Men soon joined his wife on the floor.

Rogue raced forward to aid her fallen comrades, but the Southern Belle was intercepted by a powerful forcefield—courtesy of the arriving Unuscione—that slammed into her, then crushed her against a wall of the chamber and held her there. As Rogue struggled to free herself, a

thick fog flowed into her nostrils and mouth, cutting off her breath. The red-and-black-clad powerhouse gasped for air for a few moments, then went slack.

Unuscione deactivated the forcefield, and Rogue pitched forward, unconscious, onto the floor. A moment later, the same fog that had stopped her breathing flowed out of her body, to solidify into the form of Amanda Voght.

Nightcrawler was the only one who succeeded in reaching the mutant overlord, by teleporting across the chamber. But his attack was ended before the first punch had been thrown, cut down by the powerful electrical charge of an amplified taser fired by Forge as he and Cortez joined his master.

And then Magneto turned to face Betsy.

"You," Betsy growled. "How could you have—" She shook her head. "It doesn't *matter* how you survived. It just means I'll have to be sure I *finish* the job this time." She stepped forward, a newly-formed psychic blade glowing around her right hand.

"It seems, my dear Psylocke," Magneto explained, "that the circuitry lining my helmet which had long enabled me to avoid detection by the dreaded 'Psi Division' is also capable of protecting my mind from serious mental injury . . . though the *pain* I experienced at your hands was quite overwhelming." He sneered. "Allow me to return the favor."

He waved a hand in her direction, and a bolt of magnetic energy caught Betsy full in the chest, tossing her backward and slamming her against a wall. She collapsed in a heap onto the chamber floor, mind and body wracked with blinding pain; the psychic blade vanished.

Apparently satisfied that the X-Men would not present him with any further trouble, the mutant overlord continued his approach toward the man he had come to destroy.

"You *dare* to step unbidden into the palace of Doom?" the armored tyrant said in a reedy voice to his longtime enemy. The Cube began to glow brighter. "With but a thought, mutant, I shall—"

"Be *quiet*, you impotent old worm!" Magneto shouted, and struck von Doom across the face with the back of his gauntleted hand. The former Emperor tumbled from his throne, to lie in a heap on the floor, his breaths coming in short, labored gasps.

Separated from its master, the Cosmic Cube merely floated in mid-air, as though certain that a new owner would soon come along to take possession of its wondrous gifts.

Magneto, of course, was more than willing to fill that position. Kicking von Doom aside, he sank into the soft-cushioned throne and placed both hands around the source of ultimate power.

"Somebody havin' a party an' ferget t'invite me?" shouted a gruff voice.

Everyone but Magneto and von Doom turned to look as Wolverine staggered into the chamber through the hole created by the mutant overlord. He was covered from head to toe in blood, and his street clothes hung in tatters on his hirsute frame. His arms, legs, and face were a mass of scar tissue, and there was a particularly nasty gash across his chest; if it weren't for his unique healing factor, he obviously would have been dead quite some time ago.

"Logan," Betsy whispered gratefully as the magnetically-generated pain she was suffering began to abate. Gazing upon her blood-soaked teammate, an old punchline came to mind: "If you think *I* look bad, you should see the *other* guy." She could only imagine the sort of condition in which Logan had left his unknown sparring partner; it sent a chill up her spine.

Using the wall for support, she pulled herself back onto her feet. "Wolverine!" she shouted. "Doom's been using a Cosmic Cube to create all this insanity—you've got to stop Magnus from trying to take possession of it!"

Logan looked across the chamber to see Magneto cradling the Cube in his hands, staring into its milky depths as though hypnotized. The device pulsed with a blindingly-sharp, white luminescence.

"Glad t'be o' service," Wolverine said with a sinister smile. He triggered his claws—the tips were tinted a disturbingly bright crimson—and ran straight for Magneto.

"No!" Pietro yelled. "My father shall not be stopped now—not when he is about to make his life's work—his long-cherished dream—a reality!"

"Then I'm *just* the guy t'be givin' 'im a wake-up call!" Wolverine barked, and charged at the mutant overlord, claws raised to strike a killing blow.

But Quicksilver was too fast. In the blink of an eye, the white-haired speedster was upon him, unleashing a flurry of blows that rocked the scrappy Canadian. Frustrated and angry, Logan snarled and blindly lashed out with his claws, but Pietro managed to stay just outside their range, ducking and weaving with blinding speed as he continued his assault.

It was only a matter of time before one of them fell.

The Dream was alive.

Seemingly unaware of the battle being fought mere steps away from

him, Magneto continued to stare at the Cube, an odd smile bowing his lips.

This was the moment for which he had lived—and fought—so long to see happen. The moment when he possessed absolute power over the universe itself—the kind of power that would at last make *Homo superior* the dominant species on this planet. The moment when humanity faced its possible extinction—and trembled at the realization.

And now that he had such inimitable control over the universe—even more, over the very forces of Creation—no one would ever take it away from him.

A quote sprung unbidden into his mind—something Pietro had told him had been attributed to the mutant overlord by Hollywood screenwriters apparently hoping to curry favor with the Emperor:

“‘And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all,’” he whispered.

No truer words had ever been spoken.

The Dream was dying.

Lying on the floor of the chamber, von Doom gazed longingly at the Cube as it floated ever so tantalizingly close to his outstretched hand. But it belonged to Magneto now; he could see the hungry look in the mutant's eyes—the same look *he* had possessed when he had come to realize just how much power was at his command. Knowing that, with but a thought, he could become a veritable god, re-fashioning the world as he saw fit.

A heady experience, to be sure.

And von Doom had been the first to do it—something no one else had ever accomplished with lasting success: become absolute master of the world. He had eliminated his greatest enemies. Punished the accursed Reed Richards and his three fellow meddlers for their many years of insolence. Recreated the world in his image in less than a day, and ruled it for one brief month—but had made that month last for an decade. The rapid aging, the isolation, the realization that death was imminent—they had all been worth the struggle, the suffering, just to attain his life's ambitions.

But now, he was going to lose it all—including, quite possibly, his very existence . . .

The Dream was dead.

Even from a few feet away, Betsy could hear the siren call of the Cube in her mind; for a moment, as an image of Warren appeared to form in front of her, she considered answering it, taking a tentative step

toward the device. She wanted Warren back so badly; even now, as Magneto surrendered to the hypnotic song, she still had the opportunity to seize control of it, use its awesome powers to—

No, she told herself.

The longing was there, the need to have Warren by her side in this most dire of situations, as the world came apart around them, but Scott had been right—there *was* far more at stake here than an overwhelming desire to be reunited with a loved one, no matter how painful it was to face that truth. She had to be strong—for her friends; for herself. It's what Warren would have expected her to be.

It's what an *X-Man* would be.

No, she told herself; *she* wouldn't use the Cube. But she could still try to take it away from Magneto before *he* did.

Activating her psi-blade, she rushed forward, praying she could end this living nightmare before it became even worse. She backhanded Forge as he moved to intercept her—breaking his nose as she pushed him aside—then drove a fist into Cortez's sternum before he could defend himself, leapt over one of Unuscione's deadly forcefields, never breaking stride, and drew back her dagger to strike at the mutant overlord newly perched on the throne—

But she was too late.

"Now, at last," Magneto said softly, "the Age of *Homo superior* begins!" He closed his hands around the Cube—and screamed.

Tendrils of energy suddenly erupted from the tiny box, wrapping around him, bonding to his flesh, to his mind. Magneto twisted violently, eyes bulging from their sockets, mouth moving soundlessly, his body clearly wracked with terrible pain.

Halting her attack, Betsy dropped to the floor, narrowly avoiding a stray bolt of cosmic power as it lanced across the room. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end; the air was alive with the unleashed energies of Creation.

And then, with a high-pitched keening like the wail of a thousand lost souls, the Cube flared even brighter, its cosmic lightning flowing outward, spreading across the chamber in an ever-expanding wave of chaos force—a wave that, Betsy realized with mounting horror, would ultimately overwhelm the entire planet.

"Warren . . ." she whispered.

It took Cyclops and Phoenix first, flowing over them—consuming them. They vanished in a burst of multicolored light. Rogue, Nightcrawler, Unuscione, Wolverine, and Quicksilver were next, followed by Forge, Cortez, and Voght; one moment they were there, then . . .

Momentarily frozen with fear, Betsy could only stare helplessly as

each of her friends were taken, absorbed by the power of the Cosmic Cube to be reshaped, recreated, by whatever dark urges lurked within the mind of Erik Lensherr, driving him ever onward to attain his perverted dream of world domination.

And now it was her turn. Every fiber of her being was screaming at her, telling her to run before it was too late—but where could she run *to*, when no place on Earth was safe from the effects of the Cube?

As the wave approached, Betsy took a step back—and gasped as a gauntleted hand closed around her ankle. She looked down to find von Doom staring back at her. His eyes burned with anger.

“Doom *never* concedes defeat, girl,” the old man said. “Not while he still has one last hand to play.” He pressed a hidden stud on his armor’s chestplate—

And then the Chaos Wave enveloped them, too.

“Supreme Guardian!” Saturnyne cried. “Look!”

Standing beside the scrying glass, she pointed at its surface—the darkness that had long obscured their view of Earth 616 was beginning to clear. As she, Roma, and Professor Xavier watched, a crystal clear image of the planet, as seen from space, began to take shape.

“They’ve done it,” Xavier said. He turned toward Saturnyne, trying—and failing—to keep a smug expression off his face.

But the Omniversal Majestrix wasn’t looking at him—she was staring, mouth agape, eyes wide, at the glass. Confused, Xavier turned back—

—in time to see a massive wave of energy roll across the planet, its destructive forces tearing across land and sea, changing the entire surface of the world in the space of a few heartbeats.

And then the scrying glass went dark once more.

“Dear God . . .” Xavier muttered. Eyes wide with shock, he slowly turned to the Supreme Guardian; her features were stretched tight with fear. “Your Majesty—”

“They have *failed*, Charles Xavier,” Roma whispered hoarsely. “They have failed, and now matters are even worse . . .”

X-MEN[®]

MAGNETO[™]

THE CHAOS ENGINE

BOOK 2





Flashback

WHAT I wouldn't give for a cold beer right about now." Teetering on unsteady legs, the man known only as "Logan"—though what few friends he possessed more often referred to him by the colorful codename "Wolverine"—licked his dry lips, the metallic taste of fresh blood mingling with salt-tinged sweat on his tongue. Exhaling sharply, he drew himself up to his full height of 5' 3" and gazed around the battlefield on which he stood.

The grounds of Washington, D.C.'s John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts had definitely seen better days—but, then again, so had the building itself, even before it had been renamed to honor the tyrant currently residing in the White House. The formerly gleaming marble façade was now pitted and blackened by heavy weapons' fire and a variety of powerful forcebeam projectors. The south wall lay in a crumbled heap, the unfortunate recipient of angry blows delivered by the fists of a woman named Rogue—a teammate of his—as she created an escape route for the patrons of the arts who had gathered at the Center this evening. As Logan watched now, a dozen or so opulently-dressed people streamed through the hole, running in a blind panic to escape the war zone behind them, apparently unaware that the path of their flight was taking them through yet another. The sounds of gunshots and energy bolts echoed inside the building as armed guards rushed to protect the so-called "Emperor of the World" from a band of super-powered revolutionaries led by a charismatic man named Erik Magnus Lensherr—or, as he was more widely known, Magneto, Master of Magnetism. A man who had dedicated himself to one goal: the subjugation of mankind by him and others of his kind—the species *Homo sapiens superior*. Genetically-gifted individuals whose unique abilities

made them both admired and feared by a world that still found it difficult to accept them.

“Mutants,” as they had become known to the general public.

Like Lensherr.

Like Logan.

The fact that Logan had been forced to help this revolution in order to stop a greater evil, to give aid to someone he regarded as a bitter enemy, left a knot in his belly. But he knew he'd learn to live with it, as he had come to grudgingly accept a great many other unpleasant moments he'd been part of over the years.

Near Logan, on what had once been a well-manicured lawn that faced the Potomac River, were the unconscious bodies of a trio of lower-tier costumed villains named The White Rabbit (a blond-haired woman dressed like the character in *Alice in Wonderland*), Diablo (a rail-thin sorcerer with a glass jaw), and Deadly Nightshade (a bikini-clad refugee from a “blaxploitation” film festival). Arriving first on the scene, they had made the mistake of trying to stop Logan and his fellow revolutionaries when the attack began, rather than withdrawing and sparing themselves the painful beating that had left them scattered about like tennpins.

His attention was drawn to the far side of the lawn, to the man who had led the trio, before breaking away to directly confront the scrappy Canadian intruder. A man Logan knew all too well . . . and hated with every fiber of his being.

At 6' 6", Victor Creed—a bloodthirsty, mutant sociopath who preferred going by the name Sabretooth—stood more than a foot taller than Logan, and outweighed him by at least one hundred pounds. Under normal circumstances, this sort of match-up would have appeared decidedly one-sided, with the bear-like Sabretooth having the advantage over his smaller enemy. And that didn't even take into account his metal-encased skeleton, coated with adamantium, the strongest man-made metal on the planet, or an accelerated healing factor that allowed him to recover quickly from any kind of wound he might suffer.

Or the two dozen well-armed men and women who comprised part of the Emperor's worldwide security force, their rifles and energy weapons all aimed at the smaller man.

But Logan had advantages of his own; not the least of which were the half-dozen, foot-long adamantium spikes that protruded from the backs of his hands, just above the knuckles. And, like his adversary, Logan possessed a metal-hardened skeleton and a special healing factor that restored him to full health, even after receiving potentially fatal

injuries. Combined with an all-consuming anger, Logan could be an unstoppable engine of destruction once he started handing out punishment to his enemies . . . as those few lucky enough to have survived an encounter with him could attest to.

Unfortunately for Logan, Sabretooth was one of those fortunate handful, despite the diminutive Canadian's best efforts to rectify that problem over the decades. Today's confrontation would be the latest round in their on-going battle . . . at least in theory.

What made this particular life-and-death struggle so unusual was that, although the snarling, blond-haired, orange-and-brown-garbed figure before him was clearly Sabretooth, it wasn't the *real* one . . . or, at least, not the one Logan knew so well. This was a doppelganger, an alternate version of his oldest foe, one who seemed unaware of their long-standing feud; either that, or Sabretooth—and the rest of the world, apparently—had been brainwashed to a degree Logan couldn't even begin to fathom.

A crazy idea, perhaps, but when one considered that an honest-to-God madman had apparently done exactly that, it didn't seem quite so bizarre a notion. . . .

Less than a week had passed since Wolverine and his fellow X-Men—a group of superpowered men and women dedicated to protecting the world from all manner of threats, including those posed by mutants like themselves—had returned from a mission beyond the boundaries of Time and Space, to discover that Earth had fallen under the rule of a man named Victor von Doom—or “Doctor Doom,” as he had started calling himself years ago, when he first began trying to take control of the planet.

The self-proclaimed monarch of a small central European country called Latveria, von Doom had long been a proverbial thorn in humanity's side, his attempts at world domination often resulting in dozens, if not hundreds, of lives lost and billions of dollars in property damage. And yet, no matter how grand his schemes, no matter how momentarily successful he might be, von Doom always lost in the end. Whether it was at the hands of the X-Men, or one of the other super hero groups that called the New York area their home, Doctor Doom had never had a clear victory over his enemies.

But those days were past, it now appeared. In the period of just a single month—the time in which the X-Men had been fighting in a parallel dimension to put an end to the dictatorial rule of a woman named Opul Lun Sat-yr-nin—von Doom had somehow, in some way,

finally succeeded in doing what no other power-hungry villain had ever been able to do: create a world-spanning empire, and make every man, woman, and child—both human and mutant—his willing subjects.

That included some of the people who had been important parts of Logan's life, like Carol Danvers, one of his oldest friends, who had worked with him in the Intelligence community. She had died recently, when von Doom's forces had captured the X-Men for questioning. Logan had been unable to do anything to save her, and the guilt he felt for failing her still gnawed at his soul. And then there was Ororo Munroe, the weather-controlling mutant called Storm. Before the nefarious Doctor had seized control, she had been a member of the X-Men; now, she was Empress of the realm, von Doom's devoted wife.

Given the opportunity, Logan would have relished the chance to teach von Doom the price for messing with the people closest to him. And yet, he knew there were more important issues to address. There was still the matter of discovering how von Doom had managed to take control of the planet, and then finding a way to reverse the process. Taking a piece of the "Emperor's" hide would have to wait until things were back to normal.

But that was all right. The time for retribution would come—Logan was certain of it. And he could be a patient man . . . when he wanted. Until the opportunity presented itself, though, he was more than willing to take out his anger for von Doom on whoever was handy . . .

"Ready to give up, runt?" Sabretooth asked. He smiled, revealing twin rows of sharpened teeth that gleamed like miniature daggers in the glow of the security floodlights under which he stood. "Ya look a little run-down."

It was true, though Logan would be the last to admit it, especially in front of an adversary. Experience had taught him long ago that showing any weakness in a fight could be fatal. He was bruised and bloodied—even a mutant healing factor took time to work—and the yellow-and-blue costume he'd been wearing had been reduced to tatters that flapped and twisted in the light breeze coming off the Potomac.

"What's wrong, Creed?" he shot back. "You gettin' tired already?"

"Yeah. Tired of kickin' yer sorry butt," Sabretooth replied. "My foot's gettin' sore."

Logan clenched his fists, and raised his lance-like claws. "Got a cure fer that right here, bub." He smiled, though there was no warmth in it. "Might sting a bit."

Above the battlefield thunder rumbled, and black stormclouds began

to take form, obscuring a night sky that only moments before had been filled with stars. The light breeze that had been drifting across the area now became a stiff wind.

Must be Ororo's doin', Logan thought, feeling the hair on his arms and chest tingle with the static electricity that was building in the air. *Gonna be a pretty big blow, too.*

He snapped his head to one side, flinging away drops of sweat that had obscured his vision, then turned back to glare at Sabretooth. The wild-maned killer had eased into a combat-ready stance, but hadn't moved from his original position.

"Well, punk?" Logan bellowed. "Whattaya waitin' for?"

"Just fer you t'say the magic words, runt," Creed answered.

Logan slid his claws against one another, creating a sound not unlike that of fingernails being drawn across a blackboard. The security guards moaned loudly, hands pressed to their ears, trying to block the sound. It didn't appear to work.

"Come get some," Logan growled through clenched teeth.

"Those're the ones!" Sabretooth hissed. Then he charged.

Logan slipped on a patch of his own blood as Sabretooth rushed to meet his challenge. Sparks flew as metal-coated bio-weapons clashed.

"That the best you got?" Wolverine hissed, ignoring the pain that ripped through his body after the animalistic sociopath had raked his claws across Logan's abdomen.

"*Wait* for it, runt," Sabretooth growled. "*It gets better.*"

And then, with an ear-to-ear grin splitting his haggard face, he unexpectedly broke off the attack and jumped back.

Before Wolverine could go on the offensive—or even question his foe's motives for a sudden withdrawal—a fusillade of armor-piercing bullets tore into his back, his neck, his legs. Sabretooth's military support, it appeared, had finally decided to join in.

The rounds rattled around inside him, glancing off the super-strong metal that protected his bones—but not his organs. Logan staggered about in blinding pain, unable to see, unable to stand.

Then something slammed into his chest—hard. He couldn't breathe, couldn't speak. Blood spurted from his wounds, coating his eyes, filling his mouth.

Blinking his eyes rapidly, wiping the heels of his hands across his face to wipe away the arterial spray, Logan finally succeeded in clearing his vision—just in time for him to see Sabretooth plunge adamantium-tipped claws into his chest. Sharpened metal raked across his heart.

Logan howled.

"What's the problem, midget?" the wild-maned sociopath asked as his victim thrashed about, unable to pull free. "Need t'get somethin' off yer chest?" He grinned. "Well, spit it out—I'm all ears."

And that's when the transformation happened.

There had always been a darker side to Wolverine—a savage, bestial part that he always fought to control; often winning the battle, but sometimes giving into it wholeheartedly. In Norse legends, it's referred to as a "berserker rage": a situation when a Teutonic warrior, inspired by the god Odin, momentarily lost his sanity in the heat of battle and gave into an unquenchable desire for bloodshed, for destruction. Possessed by such drive, the warrior would feel no fear or pain. Logan was all too familiar with the sensation—it was what gave him the advantage in a fight, and made him so deadly an opponent to his enemies . . . and sometimes even his friends.

"His friends." Even now, Logan still found it hard to believe that he could regard *anyone* as a friend, let alone a group of do-gooding men and women like the X-Men. And yet, it was among the X-Men that he had at last found acceptance—of his mutant powers, of his acid-tinged personality, of his savage nature. If not for people like the X-Men's leader, Professor Charles Xavier, Logan might have given into the darker, bestial urgings that made him so dangerous. But with the help of Xavier and his students—especially Jean Grey, the redheaded beauty who had once stolen his heart—he had been able to rediscover the man who still existed within the hard-edged warrior. To face the monsters that lurked in his psyche, and defeat them. To avoid taking that last, fatal step into the depths of madness.

But now, he gave into the madness, even welcomed it.

With a roar that took even Sabretooth by surprise, Logan raised his arms and swept them in front of his body, raking his claws across Creed's face and throat. Sabretooth cried out in pain and staggered back, loosening his grip on Wolverine, who dropped to the ground and immediately rolled to his feet. Logan sprang forward, giving his opponent no time to recover. He slashed back and forth, time and again, at Creed, cutting deep swatches from his legs, arms, and body, then reopening the wounds when the larger man's healing factor started closing them. There was no logic to the assault, no plan of attack considered—this was simply a case of a smaller animal trying to bring down a larger one.

Around them, the security force froze, as though uncertain of what to do now. Some members looked on in horror, some in admiration of the two opponents, while others, sickened by the savageness of the battle, moved away to disgorge whatever meal they'd had earlier in the

evening. A few turned and ran, joining the throngs of attendees who were fleeing the area.

Wolverine continued pressing forward, claws moving so swiftly that they only registered as a flash of white to the naked eye before striking their targets. Sabretooth tried to fight back, but it appeared that the severity of the pain he had experienced at the outset of the attack, coupled with the surprise he'd shown when his victim had somehow summoned the strength to continue fighting, had cost him any chance of duplicating the smaller man's mindless rage. The best he could hope to do was put some distance between himself and Wolverine, and allow his body a few moments to heal before starting the next round.

But then Creed stumbled over the prone form of the White Rabbit, lost his balance, and fell to the ground.

It would prove to be the deciding factor in this struggle.

With a triumphant roar, Wolverine pounced, landing on Creed's chest as the larger mutant started to regain his feet, driving him back down onto the neatly-trimmed grass. Adamantium-sheathed claws flashed in the moonlight, then swept downward, slicing across Sabretooth's throat—one of the few areas on Creed's body not protected by metal-encased bones. A geyser of blood erupted from the carotid artery and jugular veins, coating Wolverine's arms and face, coloring his gleaming metal bio-weapons a deep crimson.

The fatal blow had been delivered—one that not even an advanced healing factor could repair in time to save Creed, considering it had already been overtaxed by Wolverine's continuous assault.

Stepping back from his prey, Wolverine cracked a malicious smile and licked the blood from his lips, savoring the taste of the kill.

And as Sabretooth watched his life pour out onto the ground, Wolverine raised his head . . . and howled in victory.

It was a bloodchilling sound that made the remaining soldiers gathered around the combatants turn on their heels and start racing after their teammates.

Then the storm broke, and rain began to fall.

It came down hard, big drops that fell like miniature missiles to impact on Logan's skin; in less than a minute he was soaked, the blood of his kill washed away to pool at his feet before being absorbed by the thirsty grass. Slowly, a genuine smile came to his lips, and Logan closed his eyes, then sheathed his claws; the bio-weapons slid back under the skin of his forearms with a gentle *snikt*. He tilted his head back, allowing the water to douse the fire that burned in his soul, to ease the tension that had knotted his muscles.

To calm the beast, and return it to the cage from which he had released it, deep in the recesses of his mind.

He inhaled deeply, momentarily reveling in the tangy scent of the air—the mixture of a storm-tossed sky laced with ozone as lightning flashed high above, and the sweet, cloying odor of damp earth as the water worked its way into the ground. But then the stench of death filled his nostrils, a reminder of the carnage around him, and he opened his eyes.

Sabretooth still lay at his feet, lifeless eyes staring at the blackened sky. Raindrops splattered against the widened pupils, then streamed down the sides of his face to collect on the grass under his head.

Logan grunted, still not quite ready to believe Creed was dead, but the evidence was right there in front of him. But it was a hollow victory for the feral X-Man—this wasn't *his* Creed, his lifelong enemy, no matter how much he had sounded, and acted, and smelled like the genuine article. This was just some poseur dreamed up by Doctor Doom.

Or was it?

Logan shrugged. He was too tired to figure it out, too angry to really give a damn. All he wanted to do right now was get his hands on von Doom and force him to put things right. After that, he'd down a few beers and contemplate his victory over Sabretooth; maybe he'd even like the answer he finally came up with when he was done.

The sounds of the battle between von Doom's troops and Magneto's forces were beginning to diminish, the echoes of weapons' fire replaced by the moaning of the injured and dying, and the wailing of survivors for those lost in the fight. Logan glanced through the hole in the south wall of the Performing Arts Center and sniffed the air, but could detect none of the scents that would tell him whether Magneto or any of the X-Men were still inside the building.

They'd moved on, then, probably in pursuit of von Doom.

Logan jogged around to the front of the Center. Out on New Hampshire Avenue, fires were burning, created by limousines and troop transports that had exploded. Emergency vehicles were just arriving on the scene. Firemen moved quickly to control the blazes, while paramedics saw to the injuries of soldiers and policemen—and the dozens of innocent bystanders caught in the middle of the war zone. He pushed his way past the few humans and mutants still clashing in front of the arts center's main entrance, and made his way to the street, then paused to sniff the air.

"Where the flamin' hell did everybody go?" he wondered aloud.

And then an all-too-familiar scent filled his nostrils. A particular mix of pheromones and perfume—Wings—that could belong to only one person.

“Jeanie,” Logan muttered.

Ignoring his still-healing injuries, he set off at a full run, heading toward Constitution Avenue to the east and, further along it, the White House.

The Present

S O *THIS* is how the world ends, thought Betsy Braddock. Not from nuclear warfare, or an asteroid strike, or even from a world-devourer like Galactus dropping by because he felt a bit peckish—but from a wish. A simple wish, and a scientific Aladdin's lamp to make it come true . . .

The Earth was literally coming apart at the seams—or at least that was how it appeared to the lavender-tressed telepath who was usually known in super heroic circles by the more colorful codename “Psylocke.” Dressed in a glamorous, black evening gown and opera gloves that had never been designed for combat conditions, she was standing in a sub-chamber of the White House, amid the rubble created during a clash between opposing bands of superpowered mutants—one, a group of villainous renegades called the Acolytes; the other, the heroic X-Men, to which Betsy belonged. Nearby lay the unmoving bodies of her teammates: Cyclops, Phoenix, Rogue, and Nightcrawler, all rendered unconscious by their enemies before they had a chance to defend themselves. On the far side of the chamber, the only other conscious X-Man—the always deadly Wolverine, who had arrived only moments ago—was engaged in battle with the green-garbed speedster called Quicksilver. Moving almost too fast for the eye to follow, the swift-footed mutant easily evaded Wolverine's claws as they sliced through the air near his chest. It was clear to Betsy—and, more than likely, to Quicksilver as well—that the feral Canadian scrapper was doing his best to gut his enemy and bring a decisive end to their fight.

Momentarily transfixed by the savage ballet that was being performed in front of her, Betsy shook her head to clear her thoughts. What

was she doing, just standing around while her friends had fallen around her?

She turned from the conflict, her attention brought back to the blindingly brilliant wall of light that had suddenly formed in the center of the room. Beyond that wall, she knew, was the device responsible for the madness unfolding around her. A device that—though small in size—contained enough power to transform an entire planet and its population into anything its owner desired. A device that, she had learned only a short time ago, threatened to tear asunder not only the Earth, not just the dimensional plane in which the world existed, but the length and breadth of the omniverse—an infinite number of parallel realities, each stacked one upon the other, separated by only the thinnest of celestial energy curtains.

A device called the Cosmic Cube.

But the Cube was not a living entity capable of restructuring reality on its own . . . at least, not to Betsy's knowledge. Rather, it was a tool whose energies were directed by whoever happened to be holding it. A paintbrush in the hands of an artist, as it were, if such an artist possessed the sort of vision and creative dedication needed to transform a simple canvas into an awe-inspiring masterpiece.

Of course, the quality of the final product would depend on who the artist was, and what their perceptions of beauty might be . . .

At the moment, that particular artist was a man known more for his acts of terrorism than his appreciation for the fine arts. A man who, like Betsy, was gifted with extraordinary powers, but whose all-consuming goal in life was nothing less than the total subjugation of humanity at the hands of mutantkind. A man by the name of Erik Magnus Lensherr, who, more often than not, preferred being addressed by his far more impressive—and fear-inducing—codename: Magneto. The self-proclaimed "Master of Magnetism."

Just moments before, Betsy and her fellow X-Men had failed to stop Lensherr from taking possession of the Cube; failed in their mission to put an end to the threat posed by the device before it resulted in the destruction of all realities.

And now the entire world was going to pay the price for their mistakes.

The energy wall surged forward, consuming everything in its path as it flowed across the chamber. Betsy could only stare helplessly as each of her friends were taken, absorbed by the power of the Cube to be reshaped, recreated, by whatever dark urges lurked within the mind of Erik Lensherr, driving him ever onward to attain his perverted dream of world domination.

Though it was difficult to see him clearly through the cosmically-charged barrier, Betsy could just make out the distinctive form of Magneto as he sat upon an elaborate throne, his hands wrapped around the Cube.

The throne, however, was not a construct of Lensherr's mind, but of the mind of another power-hungry villain—the infamous Victor von Doom, dictator of the small European nation of Latveria, and the bane of almost every hero and heroine on the planet. It was his twisted genius that had created this latest version of the Cube, his mad desire to rule the world that had provided the Cube with the raw psychic material it required to fashion a suitable approximation of von Doom's dream. Unfortunately for the super-villain-cum-Emperor, creating such a world had come at a terrible cost . . .

The wave moved closer. Betsy took a step back—knowing such a reaction was pointless, since there was nowhere on Earth she could go to escape the chaos forces bearing down on her—and gasped as a gauntleted hand closed around her ankle. She looked down to find von Doom staring back at her.

He was a disturbing sight to behold, this man who had, only a short time ago, held the power of a god in his hands. His body was withering away inside the gleaming, silver-hued battle armor that was obviously keeping him alive. The degree of physical decay he was suffering was plain to see just by looking at his face—the skin was wrinkled, waxy, and paper-thin; blue-tinged veins pulsed frantically, just below the surface. The villain had been aged at an alarming rate by the Cube, drained of his life-force by the device in order to maintain the reality he had created—a “perfect” world in which von Doom had defeated every one of his enemies, and taken Betsy's fellow X-Man, Storm, as his bride. For a time, his plan had worked: for the past ten years (or so it had seemed to Betsy, and everyone else in the world) he had reigned supreme as Emperor, his long sought-after dream at last made reality by a device no bigger than a Jack-in-the-Box.

The dream, however, had come to an abrupt end when the X-Men had returned from a mission in another dimension and set out to put things right. At least, they had *tried* to put things right, and would have, if not for the untimely intervention of Magneto and his followers.

As she gazed down at von Doom, it was immediately clear to Betsy, just by watching how he labored for every breath, how he struggled to raise himself up on one elbow, that the strain placed on his body by the Cube—not to mention the abuse he had suffered at the hands of Magneto when the mutant overlord forcibly took possession of the device—was too much for the man once known as “Doctor Doom”; he was

almost at death's door. But in spite of his failing health, the anger, the sheer hatred he obviously felt toward those who had robbed him of his victory seemed to give him strength. Tightening his grip on her ankle, he glared up at the Asian telepath.

"Doom never concedes defeat, girl," the prematurely old man said, eyes burning with rage. "Not while he still has one last hand to play." He pressed a hidden stud on his armor's chestplate.

The air around the villain and Betsy crackled with electricity. Her nostrils filled with the smell of burning ozone, and her skin began tingling as a powerful current ran through her.

A transportation device? she thought with some surprise. *But where could Doom be taking us? And why me?*

Before she had a chance to voice those questions, however, the room and everything in it—her colleagues, her enemies, the Cosmic Cube itself—faded into darkness.

And then, her ankle still held fast in von Doom's grip, Betsy was yanked into infinity.

SUPREME GUARDIAN, we *must* destroy the crystal!”

Sitting on her throne in the highest level of the Starlight Citadel—a city-sized collection of soaring metal towers and minarets that floated at the exact center of all Time and Space—Roma, the Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse, closed her eyes and tried to ignore the impassioned—and increasingly loud—pleas of her lieutenant, Opul Luna Saturnyne.

She wasn't having much luck.

“*Enough*, Saturnyne,” she finally said, fatigue evident in her voice. “Your point has been made—emphatically so.”

“I apologize, Supreme Guardian,” replied Saturnyne, speaking at a more tolerable volume. “I don't mean to belabor the obvious, but under the circumstances . . .”

Letting her voice trail off, the white-haired, white-gowned woman gestured across the throne room toward a large crystalline globe that floated a foot above the highly polished marble floor. This was a scrying glass—a device Roma used to monitor the countless dimensions that fell under her protection. At the moment, the glass was dark, but not because it had been deactivated; quite the opposite, in fact. Humming softly, the cosmic viewer had been running nonstop for the past ninety-six hours (Earth time), tuned to events on the dimensional plane numerically designated as “616” by Roma's father, Merlyn, the former Supreme Guardian who had created the citadel millennia ago.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to see. For reasons unknown to either Roma or Saturnyne, something was preventing them from gazing upon the dimension that was home to an unusually high number of superpowered beings. Men and women like the members of the uncanny

X-Men had spent the past month aiding the Supreme Guardian end the reign of terror perpetrated on the inhabitants of Earth 794 by the mad dictator Opu! Lun Sat-yr-nin, an alternate reality version of Roma's second-in-command. The very same group of heroic mutants who had unhesitatingly volunteered to return to their home dimension in order to learn the source of the interference.

But it wasn't just the poor reception on her scrying glass that troubled Roma. There was the crystal, too.

Twelve inches high, six inches wide, it should have looked like an ordinary sliver of quartz—one among hundreds of similar pieces that jutted up from a podium-like structure that stood near Roma's throne—and normally would have, were it not for the disturbing imperfection that had formed just below its surface only days ago: a black spot that continued to grow with each passing hour.

A black spot that only hinted at the chaos that had been unleashed upon the inhabitants of Dimension 616.

There was nothing ordinary about *any* of the other crystals, for that matter. Each contained the life-force of an entire dimension—a creation of Merlyn's father, back when the omniverse was still young. Why her grandfather had done this Roma had never been able to discover; his son, Merlyn, liked to have his secrets, and there were some—far too many, in her opinion—that the technomage refused to pass on to his daughter, even after he had turned his duties over to her. And yet, despite Merlyn's always infuriating silences about his reality-affecting schemes, it hadn't taken long—a century at most—for Roma to truly understand the power contained within the crystals . . . and what might happen if one were broken.

Such a tragedy had only happened twice in her lifetime, and both occasions were set in motion by unforeseen circumstances. The first came about when her father had made a poorly chosen move in "The Game," the cosmic chess match Merlyn often played when he was in the mood to manipulate the lives of mortals. Sometimes, Roma was his opposing player; more often than not, he chose to play alone, as he did so in that particular instance, when Merlyn had focused his attentions on the Skrull Empire of Dimension 4872. As with most of their counterparts in other continuums, the Skrulls were a warlike race, constantly expanding the boundaries of their territory by conquering other worlds and enslaving their inhabitants. *Unlike* their counterparts, though, these Skrulls were more highly developed on an intellectual level, their scientists working round-the-clock on the development of new and more powerful munitions that would aid the war effort.

One of these weapons was called the World Ripper.

Not a terribly original name for a weapon of mass destruction—in any dimension, the reptilian Skrulls had never been known for possessing a flair for the dramatic—but it was an accurate name, nonetheless . . . if it worked according to specifications. Truth be told, the scientists hadn't been certain the device would ever work, since testing it would have required tapping into the Skrull homeworld's molten core; a successful activation of the Ripper would have essentially turned the core into the most powerful bomb ever created and atomized the planet. Nevertheless, the technicians completed their work on the weapon, silently praying to S'Igurt, their god of war, that they would never have to learn first-hand if they'd done their work properly.

But then Merlyn moved one of his pawns—a green-and-white-garbed warrior named Mar-Vell, who belonged to the race called the Kree, the Skrulls' oldest enemy—further across the game board, influencing the alien captain's decision to infiltrate the research and development laboratories where the World Ripper was housed. A battle between the Kree soldier and a Skrull battalion soon erupted. So heated was the exchange of blaster fire that no one—not even Merlyn—was aware of the weapon's activation by a stray bolt that hit its firing mechanism . . . until it was too late.

The resulting explosion not only shredded the Skrull homeworld, but the force of the blast tore apart the protective barrier separating Dimension 4872 from its neighboring realities. A ragged hole was created in time and space, causing the formation of a vacuum that began to suck in large sections of Dimensions 4871 and 4873, thus destabilizing their barriers, as well.

All too aware that this collapse of realities might become an unstoppable domino effect that would ultimately destroy the omniverse, Merlyn wordlessly removed the crystal containing 4872's life-force from the podium—then smashed it on the floor.

And somewhere within the depths of time and space, a continuum died.

Billions of sentient creatures were wiped from existence within the space of a heartbeat. Merlyn spent the next two decades in a state of depression so deep it seemed as though he might never recover. Yet recover he did, and was soon hard at work on his next plot, acting as though nothing had happened. Watching her father return to his old form, Roma was never certain if his ennui had been caused by the realization that he had just destroyed an entire dimensional plane . . . or because he never got to see his intended plan—whatever that might have been—come to fruition.

The second catastrophe took place shortly before Roma became

Supreme Guardian, when events on the Earth of Dimension 238 had gone horribly wrong. Surprisingly enough, Merlyn was not the cause of the trouble . . . this time. His attentions were focused elsewhere.

As Omniversal Majestrix, Saturnyne had been—and still was, to this day—the one to maintain order throughout all dimensional planes, answering only to her superior; in this instance, Merlyn. Traveling to Earth 238, she was assigned the task of helping the planet reach its evolutionary potential—to give the inhabitants of this world “The Push.”

A less than awe-inspiring title, this Push—one would almost believe the Skrulls had a hand in assigning it its name—and yet, the procedure itself could affect entire populations. It was rarely used, though, since a Push carried out incorrectly might cause the inhabitants to go mad from the strain of having their consciousnesses expanded so rapidly. Nonetheless, there *had* been times when forcing a world to “grow up” virtually overnight became necessary for the good of the omniverse.

And so it was with Earth 238.

The “Earth series” —as the multitude of similar-yet-different planets became known—had always been Merlyn’s pride and joy, for the people of these alternate realities had always shown great promise as they constantly strove to attain enlightenment and peace. His 50,000-year program for the omniverse—the details of which had never been given to Roma—depended on all variations of the Earth achieving this goal by the year 2000, and almost all had managed to make significant headway along this path . . . with the exception of 238. It was the most primitive version of all the planets, with its focus on greed and war, its repression of basic human rights, and blatant misuses of power. With such a staggering amount of negative energy flowing through that dimension, the progress of the other Earths was being retarded. The master plan was in jeopardy of failing.

But Merlyn had a solution: Saturnyne and her team would go to 238 and pour drumfuls of a special life-enhancing fluid into the drinking water. When the populace sat down in the morning for their first cup of coffee, first glass of water, first bottle of formula, every man, woman, and child in this nation would automatically leap up a few rungs on the evolutionary ladder. Within a year, the DDC would have done the same with every other city around the world, and 238 would have at last been able to join its counterparts at the dawn of a new Golden Age.

Unfortunately, it hadn’t taken long for matters to spiral out of control, almost from the outset.

It all started with a man named Jim Jaspers—Sir James Jaspers, to be precise. A member of Parliament, a man of great influence, a powerful, psycho-kinetic mutant . . . and a lunatic. It was he who initially

turned the world against its super hero population. Earth 238 was his plaything, and he didn't care much for people who tried to spoil his fun.

Yet even with all the troubles caused by Jaspers, the DDC partly succeeded in their goal. Earth 238 was on its way to enlightenment.

And then Jaspers pulled the plug on the operation by using his powers to turn the world inside-out.

It was called a reality storm. As Saturnyne looked on in horror, the laws of physics were rewritten around them. Men burst into flame. Women turned into pillars of salt. Children melted into puddles of goo. Gravity ceased to function. The streets and buildings of London twisted into the sort of landscape one usually found in a Salvador Dali painting. And within the calm eye of the storm sat "Mad Jim" himself, calmly watching his universe tear itself apart.

It was all too much for Saturnyne. Gathering her few remaining colleagues around her, she ordered the Avant Guard to teleport them all back to the Starlight Citadel.

Arriving at the citadel, Saturnyne was immediately placed under arrest by the Supreme Omniversal Tribunal. The Majestrix was charged with negligence on a cosmic scale: the Tribunal insisted that she had been the cause of the trouble; that, under her command, The Push had gone wrong, and her only (cowardly) solution had been to cut her losses and escape before Earth 238 came apart at the seams.

It was a short trial, to be truthful—Saturnyne never had a chance to mount a proper defense. It took but a moment for her enemies to come to a decision about the fate of Earth 238.

With the simple turn of a crystal key, the dimension was eliminated, and whether the Tribunal's judgment was brought about by a deep-rooted sense of duty to protect the other continuums before the "reality-cancer" spread, or simply to destroy any evidence that might have aided in Saturnyne's acquittal, was never made clear. Not that it mattered in the end—the inhabitants of 238 were still very much dead . . .

And now, as she gazed at the darkened scrying glass, Roma knew she was faced with the possibility of having to condemn yet another reality to extinction. The difference this time was that her final decision would shatter the lives of people she knew personally—mortals, true, but ones unlike the majority of the beings on their world. Hated by most, misunderstood by all, feared because of their incredible abilities, the X-Men had never shirked responsibility, never refused to come to the aid of even those who so often sought to destroy them. Mortal they might be, but they possessed the kind of spiritual dedication to a dream of universal peace that was normally only found in more highly developed races. Even a celestial being like Roma could not help but admire

their resolve, given the magnitude of the dangers they faced every day. To destroy such enlightened creatures was unthinkable . . . at least in her opinion.

For the first time since becoming Supreme Guardian, Roma wished that someone else would have to pass judgment on the inhabitants of Dimension 616.

"I, too, hope you will not be forced to make a decision you will come to regret, Your Majesty," said a deep male voice.

Roma started, her pale green eyes snapping open. Looking up, her gaze settled on a man seated a few feet in front of her. It was difficult to determine his age, since his head was completely bare, but there was a distinguished air about him that made him seem far older than his years—although, to an immortal like Roma, he was more like a child when measured against her own age, which could be counted in centuries. His expression as dark as the conservative business suit he wore, the telepathic mutant called Professor Charles Xavier, leader of the X-Men, sat—back ramrod-straight, hands folded across his lap—in the antigravity unit-propelled device in which he traveled: a hi-tech version of the sort of wheelchair to which he had been confined since losing the use of his legs, many years ago.

"I assure you, Your Majesty," Xavier continued, "although the outlook seems bleak at the moment, my X-Men will yet prevail."

Roma frowned. "I do not appreciate prying minds, Charles Xavier. My thoughts are my own, to be shared with no one else."

"I understand your anger, Your Majesty," Xavier replied politely, "but I would *never* presume to scan your thoughts without permission. However, in point of fact, you were broadcasting your concerns with such intensity that I could not *help* but detect them."

"I . . . see." Roma's lips twisted into a brief half-smile as she brushed aside a strand of dark hair that had settled across her high forehead. "Then, in the future, I shall endeavor to 'keep my thoughts to myself,' as you humans say." The smile quickly faded. "I admire the resolve you show for your students, Charles Xavier, but even you must admit that they have failed in their mission. In truth, they have exacerbated the situation through their attempted—though well-intentioned—intervention." She gestured toward the scrying glass. "You have seen the evidence for yourself: Not only were they unsuccessful in reversing the effects of the anomaly created on Earth 616, but your world has undergone yet *another* change, further weakening that universe's dimensional barriers." She turned to face him, eyes full of life but devoid of emotion. "My father toyed with the fates and futures of worlds and peoples. Thousands of realities. Billions upon countless billions of sen-

tient beings . . .” Her voice trailed off. “I played his games because he compelled me to do so . . . but the gameplay must now come at an end.”

Slowly, Roma shook her head. “I am sorry, Charles Xavier—not just for you, or your students, or even the people of your world, but for the untold billions of souls I must eliminate in order to save billions more. I *must* destroy the crystal, rather than allow the anomaly to spread to other dimensions.”

Behind the Professor, Saturnyne suddenly cocked her head to one side, and placed a hand to the tiny receiver/transmitter that dangled from the lobe of her right ear. A finely-shaped eyebrow rose in a quizzical fashion. “Is that so?” she muttered to the person at the other end of the transmission. “All right, then—stand by.” She looked up to find Roma and Xavier gazing at her.

“You have an update on the situation, Saturnyne?” Roma asked. There was an unmistakable tone of hope in her voice.

“Indeed, Supreme Guardian,” Her Whyness replied. “I’ve just been informed by the DDC that their sensors have detected a signal being transmitted from Earth 616. *A transportation beam.*”

“A traveler,” Roma whispered, her eyes widening slightly. “Tell them to intercept the beam. I would speak with this being.”

“At once, Supreme Guardian,” Saturnyne said.

As the Majestrix conveyed Roma’s order to the Dimensional Development Court, the raven-tressed Guardian turned toward the professor. “Now, Charles Xavier,” she said, “we may at last have the answers we seek to the madness that plays out before us.”

Xavier nodded. “Indeed, Your Majesty. Answers . . . and perhaps a solution to our problem. . . .”

I haven’t the slightest idea what I’m doing here, Betsy thought as she and von Doom shifted across realities, moving away from their home dimension and the transmutational curtain of energy generated by the Cosmic Cube that had enveloped their world. *I’m certain, though, I’ll learn why Doom wanted me to accompany him . . . eventually. Just as I’m also certain I won’t like the answer a single bit . . .*

Looking around, Betsy stared in awe as time and space flowed around her like a surging river, giving her quick glimpses of the true length and breadth of the omniverse. In one reality, she saw the costumed adventurer Spider-Man as a member of the legendary Fantastic Four—or, rather, Fantastic Five, to be precise; in another, her fellow X-Men were engaged in a battle royal with the Hulk and members of Earth’s mightiest heroes, the Avengers, at the base of Niagara Falls. So many different versions of her own planet, most of them varying only

by the slightest of degrees: the Confederacy winning the War Between the States in America; a World War II-era test detonation of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos, New Mexico, that—as the scientists on the Manhattan Project had feared might happen—ignited the world's atmosphere, turning the Earth into a massive cinder hanging in space; a reality in which ninety-nine percent of the super hero population had been exterminated, and the major cities were controlled by their killers: giant robots called Sentinels; a certain type of butterfly accidentally stepped on at the dawn of mankind. Openly gawping at the sights, sounds, and colors flowing around her, Betsy couldn't help but be reminded of the penultimate moment of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, when astronaut Dave Bowman rushed along a special effects corridor to find himself within the world of the mysterious, alien-constructed Monolith. Not one of her favorite movies—Stanley Kubrick was always a little too “out there” for her tastes, though she *had* enjoyed seeing Tom Cruise's bare bottom in *Eyes Wide Shut*—but it was the first thing that popped into her mind as she struggled to take in the spectacle of everything whipping past her.

The flow of the images began to accelerate, the windows to the various realities opening and closing so quickly that Betsy could no longer tell what she was looking at—it all became one blur leading into the next leading into the next, moving faster and faster until she felt her mind starting to close down from the visual overload—

And then it all disappeared, and Betsy suddenly found herself sprawled across a white-tiled floor. She panicked for a moment when she was inexplicably plunged into darkness; then she realized it was caused by her voluminous, lavender-hued hair falling in front of her eyes.

Wonderful, she thought dryly. *Abducted to who-knows-where by one of the deadliest villains in human history, cut off from my friends and teammates, and I'm frightened by a curtain of “bedroom hair.” Well done, Betsy . . .*

Brushing her hair aside, she looked up to get her bearings. She was in a large, white-colored room; how large was impossible to say—the walls, floor, and ceiling were all curved and evenly lit, blending together to create an illusion of a chamber that seemed to stretch off toward infinity. If, that is, it really was an illusion, or even an actual room; for all she knew, she and von Doom could have materialized within the heart of the Cosmic Cube.

Betsy started, an unwelcomed chill suddenly working its way up her spine. Could *that* have been what von Doom meant when he said

he still had one last hand to play? Could he have been that *mad* to think he could regain control of the Cube from the inside?

Well, yes, he could, she knew all too well. After all, hadn't he elected to continue using the reality-changing device that he had created, fully aware of its defective assembly—that, because of a miscalculation by one of his technicians (or so he had said), the Cube now relied on the power of its possessor's life-force to maintain the vision of the world they so desired? Of course he had, even though his aging process had been accelerated at an alarming rate, even though each moment he selfishly held onto the Cube brought him that much closer to death. And what had been his ultimate wish for the Cube to carry out just before he died? To destroy the world, so that no one else would be able to rule it.

Mad enough to wrest control of the Cube from within? There was never a doubt in Betsy's mind. She was more surprised by the notion that he might actually be able to pull it off . . . if, indeed, that's where they had landed.

Not to say his madness wasn't catching, Betsy had to admit. It wasn't all that long ago—ten or fifteen minutes at most, by her reckoning—that she had been willing to take von Doom's place; to take possession of the Cube and maintain the reality he'd created, in exchange for the chance to bring Warren back to life.

"Warren . . ." Betsy whispered. She closed her eyes, fighting back the tears that now burned so hotly behind the lids.

Warren Worthington III had been *her* world: best friend, confidante, lover. A founding member of the X-Men, Warren had started out in life as the quintessential playboy—rich, handsome, and quite full of himself—but he had taken to the role of costumed adventurer like he'd been born to it. When he wasn't busy saving the universe, or trying to spread Charles Xavier's message of peace and understanding between man and mutant, he dined in the finest restaurants, drove the fastest cars, traveled everywhere he went in style. Between battling supervillains and living the high life, it was a wonder he'd ever found time to sit still for a moment.

But then he had met Betsy—a British telepath whose big brother, Brian, happened to be England's premiere super hero, Captain Britain, no less—and his life had changed. Hers, too. For Betsy, merely being around Warren made her feel as though her chaotic life at last had some sense of stability. She drew strength from him, and he from her. They'd started out as teammates—kindred souls facing constant peril from an intolerant world—but soon had become so much more. There had never been a man in her life like him.

And yet, her love for Warren was never to last. Dashed to pieces with the impact of his body on the grounds of The Mall in Washington, D.C., all because of a misguided, stupidly heroic attempt to protect von Doom—*Emperor* von Doom, Betsy angrily reminded herself—from an attack by Magneto. The mutant overlord had blasted Warren with a powerful bolt of magnetic energy, then moved on to refocus his attentions on his intended target. Warren had died in her arms, in the middle of a battlefield, and she'd been grateful that he'd never seen the futility of his efforts, for the man he'd tried to save had been nothing more than an android stand-in for the real monarch. A pretend emperor, through which a pathetic creature huddled in a sub-basement of the White House could vicariously live his life. A handsome, department store dummy that took the place of a withered, angry old man who ultimately sought to destroy the world, rather than see his dream come to an end.

Nevertheless, her thoughts in chaos, consumed by grief, Betsy had been more than willing to sacrifice herself if it meant that Warren might live one more day. She had foolishly agreed to von Doom's proposal, had even gone so far as to reach for the Cube. If it hadn't been for the timely arrival of the X-Men . . .

A loud groan from behind caught her attention. She glanced over her shoulder to find von Doom lying face-up on the floor, his metal-encased hand still gripping her ankle. A bit too tightly, Betsy realized—her foot had gone numb.

She pulled back on her leg to get von Doom's attention, then pointed to her restrained ankle. "Do you mind?"

The old man stared blankly at her for a moment, as though he didn't recognize her, then followed her gaze down to her foot. "Ah," he said, and opened his hand.

Sitting up, Betsy reached down to restore the circulation to her leg. She winced as the first pins-and-needles sensation of a properly working bloodstream raced through her foot.

Struggling to a sitting position, von Doom looked around, his rheumy eyes widening with surprise. "This is not my castle," he said with more than a trace of indignation. "What is the meaning of this?" He pounded his gauntleted fists against the floor; the room echoed with the hollow sounds of his feeble protestations.

"*Who dares meddle in the affairs of Doom?*" he demanded.

As if in response, a doorway suddenly appeared a few feet away, and a phalanx of Union Jack-garbed men and women poured into the room. Wordlessly, they formed a rough semicircle around the two travelers.

"The Captain Britain Corps?" Betsy said in astonishment.

The guards by the door stepped aside to admit a willowy, elfin-faced woman dressed in flowing white robes, her waist-length black hair pulled back in a severe ponytail. She came to an abrupt halt as she spotted her lavender-tressed "guest," and a shapely eyebrow rose in mild surprise.

"Elisabeth Braddock," she said evenly.

"Hello, Roma," Betsy replied, a smile slowly coming to her lips. "You have *no* idea how glad I am to see you. . . ."

FROM BEHIND Roma stepped another woman, wearing a white gown that accentuated her curves as much as Roma's attire hid hers. White hair cascading over the right side of her face in a Veronica Lake fashion, she peered at Betsy with her one visible eye; the pupil seemed to burn with cold, blue fire.

Betsy's smile quickly faded. "Saturnyne."

The Omniversal Majestrix haughtily looked down her nose at the X-Man. It was the sort of disgusted, look-at-that-grotesque-little-bug stare that suddenly made Betsy extremely self-conscious of her appearance, with her rumpled evening dress and disheveled hair. *I must look a sight*, she thought grimly.

"*The sister*," Her Whyness said with a sneer. "Given the circumstances, I should have *known* you'd somehow be involved in the thick of things." Saturnyne practically spat out the words, which came as no surprise to Betsy. There was no great love lost between the two women, considering all the trouble the former had caused Brian/Captain Britain over the years (at least, in Betsy's mind), and Lady Braddock had never been shy about reminding Saturnyne of that fact . . . as often as possible. The thin layer of civility projected by tyrant and telepath whenever they met tended to transform lively parties into tension-filled evenings. Simply having them in a room together caused the temperature to drop.

This occasion was no different, though neither woman was foolish enough to start an altercation with the Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse standing right in front of them.

"May I enter, Your Majesty?" asked a familiar—and most welcome—male voice.

Roma motioned for the guards to move from the doorway, and Charles Xavier glided into the room, his hoverchair humming softly.

"Professor!" Betsy exclaimed, and leapt to her feet. She stepped over to join him—hobbling a bit on her tingling foot, the blood flow not yet fully restored to her insensate toes—and clasped his hands in hers. "I didn't know you were here. When Jean and Scott briefed me on the details of their mission, it must have slipped their minds."

A flicker of hope shone in Xavier's eyes. "You've seen them, then." He looked to Roma. "There is *still* a chance, Your Majesty, that my students might succeed. All they need is time."

"Time the omniverse can ill afford, Charles Xavier," the Guardian replied. "As much as I respect the sacrifices that your X-Men have often been willing to make in the cause of justice, despite the fact that they did not hesitate to place their lives in my hands, my foremost duty is to the protection of the omniverse. I allowed your students an opportunity to set things aright, and they have failed. Now—"

"I implore you to wait just a little while longer, Your Majesty," the Professor insisted. "Now that Psylocke has joined us, we can use her knowledge of events within the anomaly to formulate a new plan of attack." His steely gaze locked on the Guardian's dark eyes. "Need I remind Your Majesty that you gave your *word* to my students that they would have one standard Earth week in which to stop this terrible threat, yet only four days have elapsed. Would you now go back on it, before learning the nature of this destructive force that threatens us all? Would you deny them the chance to set things right in the time that remains?"

Roma's eyes flashed with unbridled anger. "You play a dangerous game, Charles Xavier, with one who has learned everything there is to know of games from her father, the greatest player of all. The word of Roma has ever been her bond, but the daughter of Merlyn was not raised without the understanding that there is a time and a place when a bond can be broken. Know this: To preserve the safety of all creation, I would be willing to do *whatever* is necessary." She paused, the anger draining from her face. "But I hope it will not have to come to that unfortunate conclusion. For now, I would be willing to listen to any alternate plan you may devise after you have spoken with Elisabeth—but be quick about it."

A nauseating weight suddenly settled in the pit of Betsy's stomach. Until now, she'd been under the impression that, given Xavier's presence, other members of the X-Men might also be on board the citadel. But to realize that the success or failure of this mission—more than that, the safety of the universe itself—might depend on her alone . . .

"Who's your friend, Psylocke?" Saturnyne asked, gesturing toward

von Doom. "Some half-dead geriatric paramour you picked up along the way while you were fleeing your Earth?"

"What insolence!" the old man snapped. "You *dare* speak of your betters in such disrespectful tones, woman?" He struggled to his feet. "Though Doom is well known for his benevolence towards the most *ignorant* of creatures, not even *he* should have to tolerate such an affront." At last standing erect, the monarch raised a gauntleted hand and pointed it, palm forward, at the Majestrix.

But nothing happened.

"Sorry to disappoint you, *Grandfather*," Saturnyne commented dryly, "but the Starlight Citadel exists in a state of temporal grace. Any weapons your armor may possess won't function here."

The former emperor raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "Indeed." Slowly, he lowered his arm, and a sly grin illuminated his sharp features. "But do not delude yourself into thinking such measures will protect you for long, woman. Doom has ever been resourceful—he *will* find a way to instruct you in proper etiquette . . . and soon."

Saturnyne sniffed. "I shall count the—" She halted, eyes narrowing with suspicion. "*Who* did you say you are?"

The armored tyrant drew himself up to his full height, head held high. "I am Doom the First, you cretin—the Lion of Latveria, and rightful ruler of the planet Earth."

The Majestrix turned to Betsy. "Does he mean to say that he's *your* Doom? The one from Earth 616?" She snorted. "Impossible."

"He *is* Doom," Betsy replied. "His rapid aging is a side effect of using a defective Cosmic Cube."

"Cosmic . . . ?" Saturnyne glanced at Roma, who looked surprised by this news—and terribly worried. "M'lady . . ."

"Yes, Saturnyne," Roma said. "At last we know the source of the anomaly." Her brow furrowed. "And yet, never in the history of the omniverse has such a device caused the amount of damage we have witnessed." She turned to Betsy. "You said this Cube was defective—how so?"

"Tell them nothing, mutant!" von Doom ordered. "The true genius of Doom's work cannot be comprehended by lesser beings such as yourself." A thoughtful, condescending smile cracked his withered features. "However, hearing your explanation might, indeed, prove interesting—though purely for entertainment value, of course, since it would irrefutably prove your lack of understanding."

Betsy snarled in disgust. "I've had all I can stand of you, 'Your Highness.' Without your weapons, without the Cube, you're no threat to anyone. And as for comprehending the 'true genius' of your work,

if that included having Magneto backhand you onto the floor of your chamber so that he could take possession of the Cube, then you're absolutely right—I *do* fail to see the 'wonder' of it all."

Von Doom sneered. "Bah," he muttered, then fell silent.

Betsy turned back to Roma. "To be quite honest, I haven't the slightest notion what's wrong with it. Doom mentioned a miscalculation of some sort that was made during the Cube's creation, but beyond that . . ." She shrugged. "I *can* tell you *he* doesn't know, either." She cast a heated glance at the old man. "At least, that's what he *claims*." A disturbing light suddenly shone in her eyes. "I'd be more than willing to find out the truth for you, though."

"Elisabeth . . ." Xavier said, his tone low and warning.

Without taking her eyes off von Doom, Betsy said, "Don't lecture *me* on the abuses of power, Professor. You don't know what this monster did while he held the Cube—no idea of the lives he ruined, the misery he caused, the . . . the . . ." She bit her bottom lip as she turned to face him. "The people he allowed to die . . ." she whispered.

Xavier's eyes opened wide in surprise. "The X-Men . . . ?"

"I . . . I don't know for certain," Betsy admitted. "Before we teleported, they'd been captured by the Acolytes, and the Cube was in the hands of Magneto." She ignored the Professor's shocked expression. "But . . . Warren . . . Warren . . ." She drew in a deep breath to steady herself, slowly released it through her nostrils. "Warren was . . . killed—" she waved a hand at von Doom "—trying to protect this filth."

Xavier said nothing in reply. He just sat quietly, eyes closed, gripping the edges of his seat until his knuckles turned white.

Betsy knew it wasn't the first time the Professor had received such disturbing news. In his years as founder and leader of the X-Men, he had watched far too many of his students die "on the job," as it were. Like firemen or police officers, they faced risks each day of their lives, never knowing if their latest mission would turn out to be their last.

Warren, however, was special. Like Jean, and Scott Summers, and Hank McCoy, and Bobby Drake, he'd been one of Xavier's first—and still greatest—successes. Those original five members were not just part of a team, they were the closest the Professor had to a family.

"Elisabeth . . . I'm sorry," Xavier said at last. "I know how close you and Warren had become over the past year." He opened his eyes, and Betsy saw the fires of determination that burned deep inside them. "But we shall have to put aside our grief for the time being. Although Roma has managed to entrap the man responsible for our predicament, we still lack the *means* by which he twisted our universe to suit his purposes. The Cosmic Cube is our focus now. And with someone as

powerful as Erik in control of such a device, with his desire to live in a world run by mutants blinding him to the dangers involved in operating the Cube—not just to himself, but to everyone in our universe—there’s no telling *what* further damage he might cause.”

“Which brings us back to my original argument, m’lady,” Saturnyne said to Roma. “If that destructive little box continues moving from one owner to another, each use of its power restructuring 616 to suit the whims of whichever costume-draped buffoon happens to be holding it at the time, then it’s *imperative* that you remove that continuum from existence before the reality-cancer spreads.”

“Fascinating,” von Doom commented. “Then, Xavier’s costumed whelps *were* telling the truth.”

“Of *course* they were, von Doom,” the Professor replied. “Unlike *you*, my students feel no need for subterfuge. What Saturnyne has said is accurate: Our universe is quickly unraveling, and your Cosmic Cube is the cause of it.”

“And now you’re going to tell us how to counteract its effects,” Betsy said. “You didn’t actually believe for a moment that I swallowed your story about not knowing what’s wrong with the Cube, did you? The great and powerful Doctor Doom, a man who *claims* he’s the intellectual superior of Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four—” she ignored the warning growl that issued from the monarch’s throat “—at a loss to explain the flaw in his most fantastic creation? Don’t make me laugh, von Doom.” She took a step toward him, teeth bared. “Now, tell us what to do to repair it, or—”

“Or *what*, mutant?” von Doom asked. He smiled malevolently. “Your tiresome hero’s code of ethics prevents you from forcing me to provide whatever information you think I might possess—though, I assure you, I have none to give.”

Betsy glared at him, reining in her growing desire to use her martial arts skills to shatter every bone in his body—without allowing him to lose consciousness. “What you say is true, Doctor,” she finally said. “Most members of the super hero community *would* be loathe to sink to your level, to pay such utter disregard to basic human rights that they’d be willing to blacken their souls by crawling into the dark corners of your mind and tearing out the knowledge they seek.” A disturbing smile slowly twisted her beautiful features. “However, I fancy that none of them are former members of Britain’s S.T.R.I.K.E. Psi Division, trained to extract information by *any means necessary*.” Her lavender eyes flashed brightly. “But *I* am.”

Von Doom suddenly cried out in great pain and clutched the sides of his head.

Tell me what I need to know, Doctor, Betsy ordered through the telepathic link she had created. Tell me quick . . . before I burn out every synapse in your twisted little mind.

ELISABETH—STOP! roared a voice in her head.

Betsy staggered back as though she'd been slapped across the face, her link with von Doom shattered by the sheer force of Xavier's mental command. The Latverian monarch groaned and sank to his knees; he was kept from striking the floor only by the timely assistance of two members of the Corps. One was a woman with a shock of white hair erupting from the top of her mask, whom Betsy instantly recognized as Linda McQuillan—the Captain U.K. of Earth 794, the world to which the X-Men had been summoned by Roma, in the days before von Doom's reign of terror in their home dimension had started. Their task had been to aid Linda against Opol Lun Sat-yr-nin, a goal which the team ultimately achieved. Betsy had wanted to assist them, if only as a way to thank Linda for all the help she'd provided Brian over the years as he became acclimated to his role as Britain's foremost protector, but the Professor had ordered her to stay behind so that his school, the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning in Westchester County, New York, would not be without a telepath in residence . . . in case of any trouble.

Linda's teammate was a bear of a man, his bare chest and arms covered with a matting of hair that curled around the edges of his white gauntlets and the stylized "X" formed across his pectorals and over his shoulders by the arms of the Union Jack. The bottom half of his face was exposed beneath the mask he wore, although it was hard to tell at a distance, considering his jawline was hidden beneath a thick, brown beard and mustache. Though she didn't know him all that well, Betsy knew he was Captain England from another of the multitudes of Earth; it was difficult to keep them all straight. He clearly required no assistance in handling the weight of von Doom's armor, yet he politely allowed Linda to help him lower the tyrant to the floor.

Xavier ordered his hoverchair forward, placing himself between his student and her victim. "I empathize with your situation, Elisabeth—your anger, your sense of loss—but such actions will *not* be tolerated, for *any* reason." His eyes narrowed. "Do not place me in a position where I would be forced to *shut down* your powers—and you *know* I am quite capable of doing that."

Eyes closed, Betsy slowly massaged her temples, head still aching from the psychic blast. "My TK powers, perhaps, but not the abilities I acquired from the Crimson Dawn." She opened her eyes, and immediately saw the stern look on her mentor's face. "Not that that was meant

as a *challenge*, Professor," she added coolly. "Merely a statement of fact."

Xavier frowned, then turned his chair toward von Doom. The tyrant lay on the floor of the chamber, wheezing hoarsely with each breath. Wisps of snow-white hair were plastered across his deeply creased face, soaked in sweat that had beaded across his forehead and poured down in rivulets to the collar of his armor. Beside him knelt Captain U.K., gloved fingertips lightly touching the carotid artery in his neck.

"What's his condition?" Xavier asked.

"Not good," said the Captain. "His pulse is erratic, breathing is shallow. From what I've been overhearing, his body was already starting to break down as a result of the Cube's influence." She cast a withering glare at Betsy. "That mental attack only made things worse. He needs immediate medical attention."

"Take him to the infirmary on Level 492," Roma commanded. "Have the physicians stabilize his cellular and psychic damage, and then post guards outside his door. Severely aged though this one may be, the Victor von Doom of *any* reality is neither a man to be trusted, nor left to his own devices. He is *not* to leave the infirmary without a direct order from myself or the Majestrix."

"Understood, Supreme Guardian," both Captains responded.

"Then, go. I shall speak with him once he has sufficiently recovered." Roma waved a delicate hand at them. They and their charge vanished in a burst of light, presumably teleported to the medical center by the Guardian's immeasurable power.

"M'lady," Saturnyne said. "The crystal . . ."

Roma gazed at her lieutenant for a moment, then slowly nodded; she suddenly looked extremely fatigued to Betsy. "Yes, Saturnyne. I have not forgotten." She turned to Betsy. "Elisabeth, I ask that once you and the Professor have drawn up your 'new plan of attack,' as it were, you both join me in the throne room. But do not take too long in doing so. Clichéd though the saying may be, time truly *is* of the utmost importance . . . and it is running out for your world." She paused. "For all of us."

"I understand, Roma," Betsy said solemnly.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Xavier said. He turned a heated gaze toward his former headmistress. *We shall discuss your reckless behavior another time, Elisabeth*, he warned her telepathically. *For now, though, take some time to rest. We have a great deal of work ahead of us.*

Yes, Professor, Betsy thought sullenly. Head bowed, she watched Xavier follow Roma from the room. The coterie of Captain Britains fell in step behind them, and soon Betsy was left alone with her thoughts . . . and Saturnyne.

"So . . . did you learn anything?" Her Whyness asked.

"Not much," Betsy admitted. "Nothing helpful to our problem, at least . . . Doom really *doesn't* know what's wrong with the Cube. But I *did* find out why he brought me along." She slowly shook her head in bemusement. "A crazy idea, really."

"And that would be . . . ?" Saturnyne prompted.

"Well, his transmat beam was aimed at his castle in upstate New York. He was planning to use the time platform he keeps there to send me back to prevent Magneto from getting his hands on the Cube."

Saturnyne grunted, her perfect teeth gnashing loudly. "Oh, you *fools* and your notions of time travel!" she bellowed. "When will the people of your dimension come to realize that, when you try to affect past events, you don't change your present, you only create a divergent time-line. You have *no* idea how mind-numbingly *tiresome* it becomes policing every new reality that's created because someone tried to go back and prevent John F. Kennedy's assassination, or because they wanted to warn the captain of the *Titanic* to watch out for icebergs." Saturnyne paused, then glanced sideways at the Asian mutant. "Do you have *any* understanding of what I was just saying, Braddock?"

"I'm not an *imbecile*, you bleached-blond cow, despite what Doom might say to the contrary," Betsy sniped playfully. She smiled broadly. "I saw *Back to the Future 2*. I know what you're talking about."

The Majestrix sighed. "You're as frustratingly obtuse as your brother, Elisabeth."

Betsy turned her nose up at her chic adversary, imitating Saturnyne's haughty attitude. "Sticks and stones, old girl. You're really just angry because having me around reminds you of all the times Brian refused to sleep with you . . . which, if memory serves me right, was about as numerous as the ways in which you *threw* yourself at him."

Saturnyne frowned. "You *are* aware that I absolutely loathe you."

"And I, you. With every fiber of my being." Betsy smiled.

The Majestrix nodded. "All right. Just so we're clear on that point." She gazed at Betsy's disheveled appearance, and wrinkled her nose. "Well, the best thing to do now is make you look *somewhat* more presentable for your meeting with m'lady in the 'morning.' Sleep would be a good start; I'll escort you to one of the chambers formally occupied by a member of your group. After that . . ." Saturnyne shrugged and smiled beatifically. "Well, let's just say I'll keep you in my prayers tonight." She gestured toward the doorway. "Follow me." Without waiting for a response, Saturnyne turned on her heel and strode past her, into the adjoining corridor.

Delicately grasping the folds of her evening gown between her index fingers and thumbs, Betsy politely curtsied. "Why, *thank* you, Your Whyness," she said happily.

Your Whyness. Not for the first time, she wondered about the origins of that ridiculous-sounding title. She *had* asked about it, though, and why it applied equally to a man as much as a woman—it's just that no one seemed willing to give her an answer. Saturnyne had simply turned up her nose on the last occasion the question had been put to her and walked away—one of those cases, Betsy had assumed, where, if you had to ask, you simply weren't part of the right social circles. And Brian had been no help whatsoever because he'd never given it a moment's thought; but then, that was Brian—he'd never really been one for details. However, based upon her dealings with the Majestrix, the sole conclusion Betsy had been able to reach was that the title must be given to only the most conceited members of Roma's staff—if so, Saturnyne was more than qualified for the position. Betsy shrugged. Titles had never impressed her, but it probably looked quite impressive on a *résumé* . . .

"Are you coming, Braddock?" Saturnyne called back from the hallway. "Some of us *do* have more important things to do, you know."

"Egotistical cow," Betsy muttered, and grinned.

Holding her head high, determined to look every bit the manor-born English lady that she was, Betsy set off, ready and eager to engage in another battle of wits with her guide. It was childish behavior, she knew, but she always enjoyed seeing the bright shade of red that painted Saturnyne's cheeks when the right buttons were pushed. . . .

One hundred levels below the women, in the medical wing of the citadel, the former emperor of Earth 616 and his guards materialized to find a battery of physicians awaiting their arrival. The infirmary was roughly the length and width of an aircraft hanger, with rows of empty beds stretching off in all directions as far as the eye could see. Captain U.K. had been here only once before, when she and Brian Braddock were recuperating from injuries received during the chaos created by "Mad" Jim Jaspers, in the days following the annihilation of Dimension 238. She wrinkled her nose in disgust—the place still smelt heavily of antiseptics and pine-scented cleaning solutions.

"Who's in charge?" she asked the men, women, and various creatures assembled before her.

"I imagine that would be *me*, young lady," answered a smallish, wide-eyed man wearing green surgical scrubs and gray, checkered pants,

his voice tinged with an unmistakable Scottish burr. "I'm the Chief Physician." He gestured toward a diagnostic table. "If you'd be so kind as to place the patient on the bed, we can start treatment immediately."

Scooping von Doom into his arms, Captain England carried the tyrant to the bed and placed him on the soft mattress. The weight of the despot's body immediately activated sensors in the table that began monitoring von Doom's vital signs. The doctor watched the readouts for a few moments, then pinched his lower lip between thumb and index finger and nodded slowly.

"Yeessss . . ." he muttered. "Very interesting." He turned to a tall, balding, stern-faced man who was watching him with a measure of disdain—it seemed that, even at the center of time and space, such a concept as the "disgruntled employee" was not an unfamiliar one. "Doctor Stanton, we have a man here suffering from severe mental trauma. Be a good chap and run down to the Psionics Wing—tell them we need a Level Two empath to help ease the man's pain."

"And what would you like me to do for the *patient*?" Stanton asked cuttingly.

The Chief Physician slowly smiled. "Still working on our sense of humor, I see, Doctor. Well, keep at it—I know you'll be successful one of these days." He waved his hands at his colleague, shooing him away. "Now, off with you, and don't come back until you have an empath by the hand . . . or tentacle."

Lips pulled back in a sneer, Stanton turned and stomped off toward the exit.

"A good chap, that Stanton," the doctor said once he had left the room. "A bit on the unapproachable side, though. Terrible bedside manner."

"He's a troublemaker, that one," commented Captain England. "I can tell right off. Best keep your eye on that one, Doctor—he's got a bit o' the devil in 'im."

"Oh, I shall," the Chief Physician replied. "Thank you, Captain."

Lightly grasping an elbow on each Captain, the doctor gently moved them away from the patient. As he did so, a half-dozen nurses—some human, some not, but all attired in full surgical gear—moved in and started removing von Doom's armor, while the other physicians began administering the first stages of treatment.

"Now then, if you don't mind," the doctor explained, "I think it would be best for all concerned if you were to step into the observation lounge, where you'll have an unobstructed view of your prisoner—I assume this man *is* a prisoner, given the nature of his escort?" Captain

U.K. nodded in acknowledgment. "Yes, an unobstructed view of your prisoner without—"

"Getting underfoot?" asked the Union Jack-clad heroine.

The doctor smiled broadly. "Precisely."

The captain nodded. "The observation lounge."

"Two-and-a-half levels up, one level sideways," said the doctor. "We'll see you in a bit, then." He reached up to his head as though to politely tip a hat, realized he wasn't wearing one, and slowly lowered his hand.

Chuckling softly at the strange behavior of the little man, Captain U.K. cast a bemused glance at Captain England, then turned and led her teammate from the infirmary.

Almost immediately, a soft, chiming alarm began sounding.

"Doctor, I think you may want to look at this . . ." burred one of the nurses, an octopoidal creature with thick tentacles and a rheumy eye the color of runny egg yolk.

Turning his attention back to the matter at hand, the Chief Physician walked back to join his team. "Yes, Nurse, what is it?"

The caregiver gestured toward the monitors displaying von Doom's vital signs. The doctor's eyes widened in surprise as he stared at one in particular.

"That can't be right . . ." he murmured, then stood silently for a few moments, pulling at his bottom lip and watching the stream of data that flowed across the monitors. "This man *is* human, isn't he?"

"All evidence—genetic, psychological, chonal, dimensional—indicates that he is," replied a fresh-faced, blond-haired physician. "Except . . ."

"Except we shouldn't then be seeing what we are seeing," interjected the doctor. "Yes . . ." He grimaced, scratched the top of his head, and sighed. Then, hands clasped behind his back, he turned to face his troops. "It seems as though we have been presented with a riddle, doctors . . . and I'm quite certain our esteemed Supreme Guardian, Roma, will not be gladdened by our answers . . ." He slowly shook his head. "No, she won't be pleased at all . . ."

Dr. Henry P. Stanton was *not* a happy man.

As he stomped through the corridors of the medical center, heading for the Psionics Wing, his mind swirled with dark thoughts—about his life, about his work, about the pompous attitude of that grinning jackass called the Chief Physician. Not for the first time, he grumbled over the decision that had led to the comical little Scotsman being appointed to that lofty position, and Stanton being left standing by the side of the

road (metaphorically speaking, of course), wondering how he could have lost a job that was supposed to have been his from the start. At least, that had been his understanding when Merlyn recruited him, taking him away from a lucrative medical practice on Earth 1629.

It had been shortly after the events of the "Jaspers' Warp" incident, when Merlyn had appeared in Stanton's Los Angeles office to make his offer. After dealing with Henry's volatile receptionist, Helene—for Merlyn had tried to barge in without an appointment—and then making a suitable display of the powers he possessed in order to prove he was for real and not some lunatic wandering in off the street, the Guardian of the Omniverse began interviewing his job candidate. *Why* he wanted Stanton in particular was never made clear; as the doctor later found out, Merlyn never bothered to tell *anyone*, including his daughter, the details of any of his plans. That didn't mean Henry didn't have his own ideas about the selection process, of course. Always willing to fall back on his overinflated ego, he eventually came to the conclusion that he had been picked because he was just too good a physician to ignore, even among the millions of other Henry P. Stantons in the omniverse.

Whatever his reasons, the technomage had made it quite clear that Stanton was his choice for the position—once he'd been properly trained in treating the illnesses and injuries of the myriad races that visited the citadel. No surprise there—after all, what good was a Chief Physician to his patients, or his staff, if he knew nothing of their physiology? And so Stanton willingly, eagerly, abandoned his practice and plunged into his studies, determined to answer this higher calling.

But then one day, seemingly out of nowhere, that infuriatingly smug little man had appeared, and Stanton saw the prize quickly slipping from his fingers.

It had all been Roma's doing, of course. Apparently dissatisfied with her father's candidate, she had found one of her own, and called him in from whatever godforsaken corner of the omniverse in which he'd been living. The bothersome gnat had even managed to charm Merlyn with his encyclopedic memory and smug wit in record time.

So what if he could rattle off the symptoms and treatments for a hundred different ailments that were commonly—and not so commonly—found in a handful of dimensional planes? Given enough time, Stanton would have been able to do the same. Who cared if he had a superior bedside manner? Patients were supposed to be healed, not coddled. Where was the logic in talking to the staff as though they were his friends? Nurses and orderlies, medical interns and administrative workers—they weren't peers, they were subordinates, and should be treated as such.

Stanton should have seen it coming, should have taken steps to prevent the Fates from abandoning him in his hour of need. But he was so absolutely certain that he was the only sentient being for the job that he hadn't even considered the possibility that Roma might take advantage of her closeness with her father to turn him against the physician.

It could have been avoided. Perhaps if he hadn't insulted her, calling her a "child" in the heat of an argument over the treatment of a visiting Z'Nox dignitary from Dimension 8158 who'd mysteriously fallen ill, he wouldn't have fallen so far out of favor, and caused her to go looking elsewhere for a suitable applicant. Come to think of it, the doctor had to admit to himself, labeling her a "naive little girl" on one occasion because she obviously didn't understand the intricacies of medicine probably hadn't done anything to help his case. But, so what if he'd momentarily forgotten that she was older than he by *centuries*—physically, she looked barely mature enough to have graduated college yet. Besides, neither of those unfortunate incidents would have come to pass if she hadn't tried to second-guess his diagnoses—"I don't tell *you* how to run the universe," he'd commented sharply during the second contretemps. "Don't presume you can tell *me* how to practice medicine."

She'd reacted as though he'd slapped her across the face, and stormed out of his office. Given the power she possessed, he was lucky that she hadn't wiped him out of existence right there on the spot; instead, she'd settled for knocking him down a peg or three, and denying him the chance of becoming Chief Physician.

Stanton had never gotten over that snub. After all, was being truthful about Roma's lack of medical training any reason to cheat him out of a job? Of course not. However, as the doctor had quickly come to learn, despite their immortality and seemingly limitless wisdom, despite their mastery over the forces of time and space, despite the power they held over every living creature throughout the omniverse, both father and daughter tended to let their emotions get in the way of important decisions.

Damned unprofessional, in Stanton's opinion—not that anyone ever asked for it.

And now, here he was, running errands for that blasted Highlands jackanapes—a menial task that an orderly could have carried out. His vast medical talents going to waste, while the Guardian's pet caregiver grabbed all the glory for himself.

This nonsense—this indignity—had to end. There had to be *some* way to prove his worth, to show how wrong Merlyn and his spiteful little whelp had been in slighting him. Some method that could be used to hurt them as much as he had been hurt.

Admit it, Doctor, he told himself. You're just looking for a way to get back at Roma and her favorite clown. You don't want an apology from them—you want revenge.

Or retribution; either one was good. Such thoughts were certainly foremost in his mind while he made his rounds each day. How many hours had he spent replaying the same scenes over and over again in his dreams? The Chief Physician misdiagnosing a patient, and Stanton coming to the rescue at the penultimate moment, before death could claim its latest victim. Roma apologizing for her behavior and awarding him his rightful position, while that Scottish buffoon was run out of the citadel in disgrace.

The doctor sighed. If only there really *was* a means by which he could find the sort of justice he'd only been able to have in his dreams. At least, there were no means to be found on the citadel; he'd searched long and hard, to no avail. Perhaps he just needed to look elsewhere.

Stanton smiled mirthlessly. Daydream though it might be, he'd still give just about anything to see the look on the Guardian's youthful face if the opportunity to make it a reality ever presented itself. . . .

"I feel like bloody hell," Betsy muttered as she and Saturnyne walked along one of the countless beige-colored corridors that ran throughout the citadel. "It's like my mind is racing a hundred kilometers an hour, but my body can't get past the starting gate."

"It's called 'universe lag,' " Saturnyne explained, coming to a halt before one of the many doors lining the corridor. She waved a hand in front of an electric eye, and the door irised open with a soft hiss of air. "A few hours of rest, though, and you'll be back to your old, insufferably-annoying self."

Since her head was aching so, Betsy decided to ignore the playful jibe and stepped into the room, Her Whyness close behind. The chamber was roughly the size of a loft in a New York commercial building, its walls colored a mellowing cream shade, the lighting globes scattered about the spacious area dimmed to a pleasant softness. To the right of the door, at the end of a short corridor, stood a bathroom, complete with shower; to the left were the living quarters proper, complete with chairs, couch, writing desk, oval-shaped bed, and a large, wall-mounted view-screen that received the over one hundred and seventy-nine billion (and still growing) television channels that were broadcast throughout the omniverse. On the far side of the room, running the length of the suite, was an enormous observation window that allowed a staggering view of the powerful, multi-hued energies that comprised all of time and space as they swirled around the citadel.

But it wasn't a front row seat to the wonders of Creation that caught Betsy's attention as she looked around the room.

"Ororo stayed here," she said softly, and smiled.

Saturnyne cast a sideways glance at her.

"I can sense the remnants of her thoughts," the lavender-tressed telepath explained. "Like a lingering trace of perfume in the air." Catching sight of the Majestrix's suspicious expression, she gently patted her verbal sparring partner on the arm. "Don't worry, Saturnyne, I have no interest in scanning *your* mind to gather information. With all the clutter in there, I'd be afraid of stumbling over some unpleasant memory and stubbing my toes." She smiled. "Metaphorically speaking, of course."

Her Whyness snorted.

Betsy closed her eyes as she stepped into the room, allowing the essence of her teammate to drift into her mind. It was a pleasant sensation, sending an invigorating chill up her spine. "I've never known anyone so at peace with everyone—with every *thing*—in the world like Ororo. Her thoughts, her feelings, her outlook on life—it's all so . . . refreshing."

"Then you should have no trouble sleeping," Saturnyne commented sarcastically. "With all that love and happiness permeating the air, I'm certain you'll soon be dreaming of cherubs and puppy dogs."

Betsy gazed evenly at the Majestrix. "Don't you ever grow tired of making snide comments all the time?"

"I only make them when the opportunity presents itself," Saturnyne replied haughtily. She smiled frostily. "It just so happens that practically every word that tumbles from your mouth makes for such a delicious set-up line." She snorted. "I imagine your boyfriend considers that one of your more endearing . . ."

A melancholy expression darkened Betsy's features; she suddenly looked twice her age.

". . . qualities . . ." As Saturnyne's voice trailed off, it was obvious from her shocked expression that even the Majestrix realized she had gone too far with her caustic remarks. "E-Elisabeth . . . I'm sorry," she said haltingly. "I-I didn't mean to . . ."

Slowly, Betsy reached out to take Saturnyne's right hand, then gently clasped it in both of hers. "Saturnyne, I know we've had our differences of opinion over the years—it's to be expected, I imagine, when a sister tries to protect her brother from what she perceives to be the 'wrong sort of woman.' " A wisp of a smile came to her lips as she saw the Majestrix wince as though lightly slapped. "But I also know that, beneath that cool, professional, infuriatingly superior attitude you constantly throw in everyone's faces is a caring, loving woman."

"Not according to your brother . . ." Her Whyness muttered.

"I truly *do* hope that, one day, you'll find someone special," Betsy continued. "Someone you can share your hopes, your dreams, your love with, as I did with Warren. And when you do, don't *ever* let a minute pass without letting them know how wonderful it feels to have them in your life . . . because you never know how little time you may have together, in the end."

For what must have been the first time in years, the Omniversal Majestrix suddenly seemed to be at a loss for words. Her one visible eye widened in surprise, she stared at Betsy for a few moments; her lips moved, but she appeared to be unable to form any words.

"Umm . . . I'd . . . I'd best be going," she finally stammered.

Betsy nodded and released Saturnyne's hand. Then she headed across the chamber toward the bed, pausing only long enough to slip out of her opera-length gloves and once-elegant gown before climbing under the covers.

"Good night, Elisabeth," Saturnyne said as she walked to the doorway. She paused for a reply, but received none, and the door irised shut behind her.

Alone in the dark, Betsy pulled the gown close to her and buried her face in the material, inhaling the few traces of Warren's cologne that still clung to it. She'd been able to maintain a cool façade in front of everyone—well, except for that momentary display of anger toward von Doom, of course—but only through the greatest of efforts. It was expected of her, she knew—wasn't she the mighty *Psylocke*, telepathic femme fatale who was as deadly as she was beautiful? Who never allowed personal matters to cloud her judgment?

Absolute rubbish, of course, but it wouldn't have done any good to allow the weight of her grief to overwhelm her in front of a roomful of people and force her to go running to Professor Xavier for support. No—now that she had some understanding of the severity of the situation, she had to concentrate on helping Charles; he needed her to focus on the mission that lay ahead. So, for the time being, she would "keep a stiff upper lip," as the old saying went . . . at least in public. Warren would have been proud of her.

Warren . . .

Betsy squeezed her eyes tightly shut, and the tears that had been building for the better part of an hour at last found release.

And as she drifted off to a troubled sleep, Betsy couldn't help but wonder what sort of horrific punishments her *other* friends might even now be suffering at the hands of their oldest enemy . . .

S COTT, I-I'M not sure I can take much more of this."

Glancing at her husband, Jean Grey nervously chewed on her bottom lip. Smiling warmly, Scott Summers reached over and brushed away a strand of bright red hair that had draped itself across her left cheek.

"It'll be all right, hon," he said assuringly. "We've been through tougher situations; we'll get through this one, too."

Jean tried to flash a confident smile, but could only succeed in twisting her lips into a rough, sickly approximation. She glanced past Scott, to the huddled shapes in the darkness around them; the creatures barked and growled and gesticulated wildly at one another and the handsome couple. Jean could only understand some of the hand gestures that were being made; the blinding glare of the spotlights that shone on Scott and her made it difficult to clearly see much of anything beyond ten or twelve feet.

Her gaze drifted to the man who sat before the Summers. He was not a particularly impressive figure physically—with his gaunt features, receding hairline, and sallow skin tone—but Jean knew all too well that he possessed an intellect almost second to none. He was agile enough to be three steps ahead of her in an open confrontation, despite her own prodigious mental abilities; wily enough to twist her own words against her; powerful enough to leave her beaten and bloodied if she faltered for even a moment on the field of battle.

"Deep breaths, Red," Scott whispered in her ear. "Stay focused, and everything will turn out fine."

Jean nodded, not really agreeing with her husband, but unwilling to allow her fears to overwhelm her in such a perilous situation. From the

corner of her eye she spotted one of the creatures pointing toward something next to it. And then, from the darkness, a blood-red eye began to glow ominously . . .

"Welcome back to *Viewpoints*," Archer Finckley said to the television camera trained on him; his voice was rough and somewhat nasal, and he delivered each word with the force of a roundhouse punch. "For those of you just joining us, our guests tonight are Scott Summers and Jean Grey, directors of the Erik Lensherr Institute for the Genetically Gifted, an academy for special children named after a *very* special man."

The red light above a second camera winked on, and Jean caught a glimpse of herself and Scott on a nearby monitor. They made an attractive couple—he with his strong jawline, toned physique, and dark, slightly-ruffled hair, she with her supermodel looks, bright green eyes, and flaming red tresses—which was the main reason they'd been included in *People* magazine's "Fifty Most Beautiful People" two years running. But they were more than mere window-dressing; together, they ran one of the most successful schools for young mutants in the world, with a student enrollment recently topping five thousand. And it was because of that commendable success—plus the fact that the school, on the eve of its fortieth anniversary, was about to open "satellite" branches in other countries—that they had been invited by renowned journalist Archer Finckley to appear on his program—the most watched talk show currently on the air. Scott had jumped at the chance, always eager to spread the good word about the institute and its founder. Jean had reluctantly agreed to join him; few and far between though they had been, television interviews made her nervous, and this one, she was certain, would prove to be no exception.

They had dressed conservatively for their appearance on *Viewpoints*: Scott in a dark, double-breasted business suit, charcoal-gray shirt, and solid red tie, his eyes perpetually covered by a pair of sunglasses, its lenses carved from ruby quartz—the only substance on Earth strong enough to contain the powerful force beams that continually threatened to erupt from his eyes; Jean in a black, knee-length dress that complemented her hair, which had been pulled back into a ponytail in the hope that it would make her look more like a serious-minded headmistress and less like a giggling pin-up from the pages of *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Edition. The choice of clothing had been at her insistence, given that their everyday attire consisted of formfitting red-and-purple-hued work clothes based on the costume design of the school's founder—a man named Erik Magnus Lensherr, who was known to everyone on the planet by a far more colorful nom de guerre: Magneto.

The self-proclaimed “Master of Magnetism” and leader of the *Homo sapiens superior* rights movement. A loving father and devoted husband. A Nobel Prize-winning peacemaker.

And the man who just happened to be master of the world.

Jean and Scott had not been among the first of his followers—they hadn’t even been born yet when Lensherr had begun fighting for equal rights for mutants in the 1960s—but once their own powers had started to manifest, it hadn’t taken long for them to join his cause. Here was a man who had led a march on Washington, D.C. in 1967, culminating in his famous “Children of the Atom” speech at the base of the Washington Monument; who had been given an audience with President Richard Nixon in 1971 to protest the use of mutants as advance troops (“cannon fodder,” Lensherr had called them) during the Vietnam War; who, in 1980, single-handedly overthrew the government of the island-nation of Genosha, where mutants were treated worse than animals—beaten, starved, used for sport. A man who had been feared by a vast number of enemies, true, but a man whose message had been heard. Meeting him had been the moment of a lifetime for Jean and Scott—one they would have remembered the rest of their lives. But Lensherr had gone even further than simply shaking their hands; he invited them into the fold, asked them to help him in his ongoing campaign, and they had jumped at the chance, their heads full of youthful idealism.

And yet, the struggle had never ended, despite Lensherr’s numerous successes. In most parts of the world, the United States included, mutants were still treated as second-class citizens. By the time Jean and Scott had become acolytes, their kind was still living in secrecy, always dreading what might happen should they accidentally reveal their abilities in public. And as for non-powered *Homo sapiens*, the very mention of the word “mutant” brought forth mental images of Sissy Spacek’s bloody night of psychokinetic terror at the climax of the film *Carrie*, complete with exploding cars, burning schools, and buckets of pig blood.

As the past forty years had shown, it was *never* a good time to be a member of *Homo superior*.

But then, five years ago, everything changed. One morning, the people of the world awoke from a particularly pleasant, shared dream—in which the nations of the world had come together under one rule, and man and mutant lived in harmony—to discover there was no more hatred, or prejudice, or fear. It was as though those feelings had been expunged from their minds—a cleansing of negative energies, as it were. Some called it a miracle; others thought it the result of a harmonic convergence, though the planets of the solar system had been nowhere

near alignment; a few even thought it might be an early sign of The Rapture, that moment when God summons to Heaven all the truly devout just before the arrival of the End Times. Whatever the supposition, however, somehow, in the depths of their subconscious, they all knew they had one man to thank for this incredible event.

And Erik Magnus Lensherr had never been the type to let an opportunity slip through his fingers . . .

Finckley turned to Jean. She felt her throat tighten automatically. "Now, before we went to commercial, Jean, you were about to give us some background on your mentor and his world-renowned school."

Jean politely cleared her throat, trying her best to ignore the eye of the camera that stared unblinkingly at her, putting her on display for the people of the world—all six billion plus. "Well, Archer, I'm sure just about *everyone* knows the story by now, but . . . all right. The institute was originally founded in 1985 by Erik Lensherr, a Polish immigrant whose parents had died in World War II, during the Holocaust; the Lensherrs had been prisoners in the Auschwitz concentration camp, and Erik had been the only one to survive. By the time the Allies finally liberated the camp in 1945, Erik had fallen in love with a woman named Magda, who'd also been a prisoner; together, they left Poland, hoping to put behind them the nightmarish experiences they'd endured, and traveled to America."

A frown creased Jean's flawless features. "Unfortunately, once they reached the streets of New York, they were confronted by the same sort of foolish intolerance they had fled in Europe." She slowly smiled, starting to feel more at ease as she continued with the story. "But, after surviving the horrors of the Nazi death camps, Erik and Magda weren't about to let something as petty and annoying as mere prejudice keep them from turning their dreams of a fresh start into reality—especially now that they had a new member of the family with them: a baby daughter named Anya, who'd been born during the voyage across the Atlantic.

"But Erik had an even more difficult time than most, considering the unfavorable factors he was faced with when he arrived on our shore: he was a mutant, true, but, even worse in the eyes of others, he was an immigrant, a Pole, and a Jew. No one cared if he and his family had escaped extermination; here, he was just another unwanted outsider, trying to take away someone else's job. He was harassed at every menial job he could find, beaten, kicked—he was even stabbed once. Putting food on the table became a daily struggle, and then, when Anya almost died of pneumonia . . ." She shook her head sadly. "The strain of it all came close to destroying him."

"Obviously, it didn't," Finckley noted wryly.

"No, he wasn't broken—he *persevered*," Scott said, a triumphant tone in his voice. "And once Anya was well again, he vowed that the hatred in this country that was being directed toward him—the same kind of hatred that had nearly killed him in Auschwitz—had to end. *Something* had to be done to change people's minds before our nation turned into another Nazi Germany." The rugged headmaster frowned. "At that time, though, he didn't know how that could be accomplished. All he had was his family to keep him strong—his family, and his dreams."

"And yet, he *did* ultimately find a way—his greatest dream has been a reality for the past five years," Finckley stated. "Mutants no longer have to live in secret, as was the case when the institute first opened its doors; they now live in the open, as equals of mankind. In fact, we humans have willingly embraced your people—'*Homo superior*,' as Lensherr has called your race—with open arms ever since 'The Morning of Unity,' as it's come to be known." He turned back to Jean. "So, with that in mind, in an enlightened society such as we now have, do you find it's still necessary to *have* such a place as the institute, which is solely devoted to working with gen-active children—or even to open other branches—when there are school programs already in place around the world that have also been set up to help them come to terms with their powers? What makes *yours* so special?"

"Well, Archer," Jean replied, "I think you should remember that, if it hadn't been for the Lensherr Institute, those very programs you mentioned would never have been created in the *first* place. I hate to sound like a walking promotional brochure, but the Lensherr Institute has always been at the forefront of gen-active training—we have the best facilities, the best faculty, and the friendliest environment. And, since most of our staff have powers of their own, we have a better understanding than non-gen-actives of how chaotic life can seem during the stages of early development." She smiled. "You could say that ours is *still* the ruler by which all other schools are measured." She leaned forward, her voice dropping in volume just enough to make Finckley—and the audience, hopefully—"prick up their ears," as the saying went, and pay more attention to her words. "You see, Archer, despite the 'enlightened society' we live in, kids are still kids, and children can be very cruel with their comments, even if they're meant to be in jest." Her smile faded, lips drawing together in a thin line. "I can't tell you how many times I'd been called a 'gene-joke' by the time I got into college."

"I imagine it made growing up all that more difficult," Finckley commented.

Jean's right eyebrow arched dramatically. "Archer, if you think having your first period is a traumatic experience for a young woman, try waking up in the middle of the night to find you're floating three feet above the bed, and every object in the room is orbiting you like you're the sun." She snorted. "No, growing up wasn't difficult—it was sheer hell."

Finckley nodded, trying to look sympathetic, and failing miserably.

"That's why the work we do at the institute is so important," Jean continued. "We help the students through those tough times, and encourage them to celebrate their differences from *Homo sapiens*. Our race has made great contributions to the world, and it's always been important—not just for Scott and myself, but the entire staff—to constantly remind our young men and women that they're the ones who are going to be shaping the world in the future, and they're the ones who are expected to carry on the legacy of Erik Lensherr when the rest of us are sitting around, playing mah jong, down at the retirement home." She smiled, eyes sparkling. "And *that*, getting back to your original question, is what makes our school so special."

Finckley flashed a brief smile, clearly pleased with her answer. *Thank God for that*, Jean thought. "Now, getting back to the *formation* of the school," he said. "Did the idea for that come around the same time Lensherr decided to reach out to help people like himself, or was that a by-product of his work in the mutants' rights movement?"

It was Scott who answered. " 'Mutant' is such an outdated term, Archer. We prefer to think of ourselves as 'genetically gifted.' 'Children of the Atom,' as it were." He smiled. "Actually, the word 'mutant' didn't really come into vogue until the late 1950s, when Hollywood filmmakers latched onto it and turned it into a buzzword." He sighed dramatically. "We're *still* trying to live down the 'Metaluna Mutant' from *This Island Earth*."

Jean laughed softly—it was a joke Scott often used during interviews—and glanced toward their host. Finckley merely smiled tightly and nodded; obviously, he'd heard it before, and didn't find it all that amusing. The laughter quickly died in her throat.

"Ummm . . . getting back to the point . . ." she continued, breaking the awkward silence. "When Erik first began exhibiting his powers of magnetism—just after puberty—he'd never heard of the word 'mutant'; there were so few of them at the time, no one knew exactly *what* they should be called—" she grimaced "—other than 'freaks' or 'monsters.' What he *did* know was that he was different, but he saw it as a blessing,

not a curse. And once he learned there were others in the world like him—once he knew that he wasn't alone any more—it gave him back the sense of hope for the future he thought had been beaten out of him by his captors during the war.”

“So, what would you consider to be the ultimate turning point in your mentor's life?” Finckley asked. “What was it that made him the man he is today?”

Scott . . . ? Jean telepathically said to her husband, cueing him to jump in with an answer as she reached for a mug of water near her chair. The image of a ventriloquist taking a drink while still speaking through a dummy briefly flashed through her mind, and she had to fight down the laugh that threatened to bubble up through her lips.

“Well, in the early 1960s, with the civil rights movement in full swing,” Scott explained, “Erik *found* the ‘something’ he'd been looking for. While watching the evening news one night in 1963, he saw a replay of Martin Luther King's ‘I Have a Dream’ speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and his eyes were suddenly opened. There, right in front of him, was proof positive of the power that one man with a dream could possess.” A brief smile flickered at the edges of Scott's lips. “Erik says he wept that night because he was so moved by Dr. King's words—each and every syllable struck a chord deep within his soul. And having felt the power of that message, he wanted the same opportunities for himself—for his family. So, with Magda's support, he dedicated his life to his own dream: of the genetically gifted co-existing peacefully with man, no longer afraid to hide their special talents, but rather accepted by society as equals.”

“And he thought he could best do that job wearing tights and a cape and calling himself ‘Magneto’?” Finckley asked incredulously.

Scott chuckled softly and shrugged. “Well, you never know *where* inspiration is going to come from. You see, one day back in the late 1950s, Erik had taken Magda to the movies, and he saw how enthusiastically the audience responded to newsreels of Captain America and Bucky in action during the war—the image stuck in his mind. That, combined with the success of a comic book featuring another ‘mystery man’—as super heroes were called in those days—who wore tights and a cape, made him realize that, perhaps, the best way to get people's attention was to be as—”

“In-their-face?” Finckley interjected.

Scott smiled. “I *was* going to say ‘as flamboyant as possible,’ but, yes, ‘in-their-face’ is just as good.” He shrugged. “Whatever you want to call it, it worked—Erik got their attention.”

“In spades, some would say,” Finckley replied. “He wasn't exactly

greeted with open arms by the public when he made his first appearance, was he?"

Scott's easy smile dissipated, and he nodded morosely. "Unfortunately, it's human nature, Archer—people *always* react poorly at first to anything different; anything they don't understand."

"Anything that could be potentially *dangerous*," Finckley added. "Not knowing what to make of a magnetically-powered mu—'genetically gifted' person showing up out of the blue—"

"As I said, an unfortunate example of *human* nature," Scott quickly interjected.

"—and the fact that superpowered beings hadn't been seen since the close of World War II—"

"—which he felt would only help create the kind of impact he wanted to make—"

"—in addition to Lensherr's less than . . . tolerant reaction to the jeers of a lunchtime crowd in the middle of Times Square on the first day he wore his costume—"

"—a crowd that tried to silence his message—"

"—and the way in which he lashed out with his powers against the police officers arriving on the scene—"

"—who had their *guns drawn* when they approached—"

"—then I think you can understand how 'Magneto' originally wound up being classified as a criminal by law enforcement agencies around the globe," Finckley concluded.

"And Dr. King and Malcolm X and Ghandi were all considered dangerous troublemakers by *their* enemies, too." Scott waved a hand at his host, dismissing Finckley's argument. "It's all a matter of perspective, Archer—perspective, and the petty fears of those unwilling to really *listen* to the message. But, as you and everyone watching this program well know, Erik overcame those obstacles and gained the respect of the world's leaders—they listened, and *they* understood." He leaned forward, jabbing the end of an index finger against Finckley's desk to emphasize his point. "The bottom line is that, without Erik Lensherr, this world would *never* have achieved the level of peace we enjoy today."

Finckley shrugged. "Well, there's no denying that, despite his initial setbacks, Lensherr *has* accomplished quite a lot since he first went public forty years ago—"

"Archer, the man has eliminated hatred and intolerance across the planet—in our lifetime!" Scott shot back. "There are no more wars, no more deaths, no more senseless shows of force caused by petty differences. But, even more, he's helped change the very shape of the world—"

there are forests growing where there once were deserts; freedom where there'd been oppression; lawfulness where there'd been chaos. Most importantly, through his efforts, both *Homo sapiens* and *Homo superior* have learned to co-exist, without fear, without mistrust, working together to better the Earth—not just for generations to come, but for *right now*.” Slowly, he smiled and shook his head. “After all that—after the life of every man, woman, and child on this planet had been changed forever by the power of one man’s dream—is it any *wonder* we made him our emperor?”

His point made, Scott fell silent and slowly moved back in his seat, then looked to Jean. Beaming with pride, she reached out and patted his arm in a congratulatory manner; after all, it wasn’t every day that Archer Finckley was beaten at his own game.

Finckley grunted, clearly conceding the argument. “I think it’s time we took some calls,” he mumbled, quickly changing the subject. He glared at his stage manager, who stood to one side of the camera that was trained on the sour-faced host. Above the camera, a TelePrompTer flashed the location of the first person calling the station. “Hello, Saskatoon. You’re on the air . . .”

“Well, *there’s* two hours of my life I’ll never get back . . .” Jean muttered one hour later, relieved to have finally escaped the hot studio lights and even hotter glare of their host.

All in all, it hadn’t turned out to be anywhere close to the traumatic event she’d been expecting, since she and Scott had continued to hold up their end of the interview, even managing to sneak in a plug or two for interested parents to get more information by either calling the institute’s toll-free number (1-800-GEN-PRIDE) or by logging on to its Internet Web site (www.childrenoftheatom.com); and, much to her surprise, Finckley had concluded the show with an open invitation for them to come back another evening. A gracious move, and one Scott was sure to follow-up on, but one that Jean felt she could, hopefully, decline. Let her run the school and have Ororo or Rogue make the next appearance, she figured; they’ve always been better at this Public Relations stuff, anyway.

Right now, though, the only thing Jean was interested in was a warm bath, some scented candles, and a cup of jasmine tea to soothe her frazzled nerves. And a massage—*definitely* a massage. If there was one thing that had convinced her that marrying Scott Summers was a good idea, it was the fact he had *great* hands, and an incredible knack for loosening up the tightest knots.

But all of that would have to wait, much to Jean’s growing annoy-

ance. Standing outside the side entrance of WSLP-TV, from which *Viewpoints* was broadcast, she and Scott huddled under a gold-trimmed, maroon-colored awning, trying to stay dry. Just beyond the protective canopy, rain was falling in a heavy, perpendicular downpour, turning the intersection of Tenth Avenue and Fifty-seventh Street in Manhattan into the closest approximation Jean had ever seen to the canals of Venice, Italy. All four street corners had disappeared beneath a small lake caused by backed-up sewer drains, and the streams it created stretched toward every point on the compass. Walking anywhere was completely out of the question, since the rushing waters looked more than capable of grabbing a careless pedestrian in an under-current and sweeping them into the Hudson River, which flowed just a few blocks to the west.

And there wasn't a taxi cab to be seen—an unfortunate, though quite typical, situation for New Yorkers to find themselves in on a dark and stormy night.

"I thought Ororo guaranteed a clear evening," Jean said, watching a bolt of lightning rip across the darkened sky; the resounding boom of its thunder two seconds later rattled windows and set off what seemed to be every car alarm in the neighborhood. She sighed. "Well, *that'll* teach me to trust a weather goddess. Wouldn't surprise me if she caused it in the first place so she could water her plants properly." She glanced at Scott, and jerked a thumb toward the downpour. "What do you think—should we chance it?"

Scott, however, seemed to be in his own little world. He laughed heartily and turned to face his wife. "Did you see what happened back there, honey?" he asked, motioning toward the studio. "I walked right into the lion's den, and I'm still alive to talk about it!"

Jean smiled. "I know. I was there, remember?" She pointed a warning finger at him. "But don't let it go to your head, 'Slim.' You caught Finckley on a bad night—even without scanning his thoughts, I could tell he was trying his best not to say anything derogatory about Erik; it'd be like badmouthing the Pope. And *being* that overly cautious threw him off his game." Jean's eyes went wide. "Believe me, hon, if you ever saw the replay of the show where he tore Strom Thurman apart over budget cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts, you'd realize just how *lucky* you were in there." She shook her head. "No, if Finckley had been running on all cylinders, he would've found a way to chew your butt right off." Leaning back, she peered around her husband, and smiled. "Well, maybe he *did* get a little piece of it . . ."

An eyebrow rose above the ruby quartz lenses of Scott's sunglasses. "Is that so?"

Jean nodded, still staring at her husband's posterior. "Mm-hmm.

Must've happened when you got a little heated over him questioning the need for the Children of the Atom Museum that's opening in Paris next week—you *did* come off as a little too fawning over Erik." She shrugged. "But it's hardly noticeable."

"You can see it," Scott noted.

Grinning broadly, Jean turned to look at him in the eye. "Honey, I'm your *wife*. There isn't an inch of that butt I'm not familiar with—who *else* would know what to look for?" Her eyes narrowed. "And if there's an answer to that question other than 'my mom,' I don't want to hear it."

Scott grunted and folded his arms across his chest. "I notice he didn't chew any of *yours* off," he said with mock indignation.

"That's because I'm the *cute one*," Jean replied, green eyes sparkling with mirth. "You think people would still respect the great Archer Finckley tomorrow morning if he'd been seen knoshing on a redheaded school marm tonight?" She patted her hips. "Besides, my butt's so small, it'd only be an appetizer for him." She glanced at Scott. "It *is* small, isn't it?"

"Of course, it is," he quickly replied. As Scott had learned early in life, there were certain questions that arose in any given relationship—it made no difference whether it was human or mutant—that, when lobbed like grenades by the female half of the couple, had to be expertly defused with fast, straightforward, and *always* positive answers; there were no alternatives if the participants wished to remain happy together. And in *this* particular relationship, with the love of his life *literally* able to read his mind, Scott knew how easily he could be caught in a lie—and how dangerous would be the repercussions.

Truly, hell hath no fury like a telepath/telekinetic who can hurl a roomful of furniture at you when she's provoked, *and*, at the same time, give you a migraine headache while you're busy trying to dodge the chest-of-drawers.

"Speaking of appetizers . . ." he said, changing the subject.

Jean laughed, all too aware of his ploy. "My husband—the master of the segue."

"Speaking of appetizers . . ." Scott continued, clearly choosing to ignore her comment, ". . . I'm starving. How about you?"

Jean's stomach responded on her behalf, rumbling ominously. The redheaded telepath laughed. In point of fact, she hadn't had anything to eat that day, beyond a buttered, cinnamon/raisin bagel and a large espresso in the morning; her nervousness over the impending interview had made her too nauseated to contemplate eating anything else . . . well, except for that handful of Hershey's Kisses she'd found in the

bottom right-hand desk drawer in her office. A girl's gotta have her chocolate fix, she'd told herself, even if she's about to get her head handed to her, and soon the ink blotter had been covered with discarded silver wrappings. But now, looking back on her time in the studio, Jean was amazed that her stomach hadn't voiced its protest earlier. Now, *there* would have been something for Finckley to seize on!

"I'll take that for a 'yes,'" Scott said, nodding toward Jean's outspoken digestive cavity. "Well, there's an all-night diner on the corner of Fifty-sixth that's open; I've eaten there with Hank a few times."

"That's fine," Jean said, raising her voice to be heard above the rumble of thunder. "Now, all we have to worry about is *getting* there."

Scott stared past her, at the rain that seemed to sizzle as it struck the pavement around them. "Okay, so, what do you want to do?"

Jean stared thoughtfully at the canopy. "Well, you could always use your power-beams to snap the awning posts, and we could try carrying it . . ." She caught his look of disapproval. "Just a thought. What do *you* propose?"

Scott smiled and shrugged out of his jacket, then handed it to his wife just as another crack of thunder shook the blackened sky directly above them. "Run for it?"

Jean grinned broadly and draped the coat over her head like a hood. "Sounds like a plan."

And then, laughing and screaming with joy, they raced out into the storm, trying to dodge between the raindrops.

An ocean away, another member of the "genetically gifted" was just as pleased with how the *Viewpoints* interview had gone . . . though he might have used his fearsome powers to turn the narrow-minded little human inside out for daring to question the awe-inspiring accomplishments of the master of the world. Even so, he had to admit that Jean and Scott had handled their parts admirably, reminding the home audience time and again of the wondrous Golden Age in which they all lived—and the man who had made it possible.

With a wave of his hand, Erik Lensherr turned off the wall-mounted flatscreen television that hung in his salon. "Excellent," he murmured. "The reprogramming of Summers and his wife has gone even better than I could have imagined—one would almost believe they had *never* been tainted by the influence of Charles Xavier. . ."

Rising from the couch on which he'd been sitting, Lensherr stepped across the room and drew back the red velvet curtains that hung in front of the windows. Outside, the streets and buildings of Paris still blazed brightly in the wee hours of the morning, the sprawling, Old World

metropolis truly living up to its reputation as “The City of Lights.” Along the banks of the Seine, couples—human and mutant, some intermixed—walked hand-in-hand, enjoying the warm summer air and each other’s company. Silhouetted against the bright, full moon, a man and woman, powerful wings sprouting from between their shoulder blades, gracefully danced through the air around the Eiffel Tower.

Lensherr smiled. Here was Paris as he had always wanted it to be: the cornerstone of modern civilization; the gateway to a new era in history. A shining example of *Homo sapiens* and *Homo superior* living harmoniously—under his rule, of course.

It had been a shame to have destroyed it in the first place—more von Doom’s fault than his, of course. Back when that Latverian imbecile had controlled the world—was it only hours ago? It felt like years—his lackeys had cornered the mutant overlord in the capital, where he and some of his followers had been making plans to overthrow the armored dictator. The resulting battle cost Lensherr his most devoted acolytes, and was brought to a swift, and bloody, conclusion only when he used his magnetic powers to pull a spy satellite from its orbit and bring it crashing down on the city, obliterating millions of innocent lives and centuries of irreplaceable art and architecture.

Or had he?

As Lensherr had discovered—with help from, of all people, his oldest enemies, the insufferable X-Men—none of the events had taken place; or, rather, none of it had taken place in the *real* world, the one in which von Doom was merely the monarch of a Latveria, and not the omniscient ruler of the Earth, and Magneto was lord of the island-nation of Genosha. No, it had all occurred in a fantasy realm—a construct formed from the dreams and ambitions of Victor von Doom, made real by the use of a Cosmic Cube. And in this topsy-turvy reality, Magneto had become Emperor von Doom’s plaything: memories altered, allies scattered around the globe, constantly on the run from Imperial forces. A genetically superior mouse set loose in a danger-filled maze solely for the amusement of its owner.

The realization had galled the mutant overlord—to think that a *human* should dare to abuse someone who was his evolutionary better!

The abuse had ended, though, in Washington, D.C., when Lensherr’s gauntleted fist smashed against the right cheek of his rival, savagely disconnecting von Doom from his power source. Lensherr hadn’t stopped to think about how or why his enemy had been transformed into a feeble old man incapable of defending himself—he was only interested in taking his pound of flesh from the lowly human who had wronged the great Magneto.

But then he had heard the siren call of the Cube, whispering softly in his mind, enticing him with dreams of power, with worlds for the making, and von Doom was all but forgotten. With the X-Men incapacitated and the mighty “emperor” sprawled across the floor, wheezing for air like some dying animal, there had been no one to stop the mutant overlord from taking possession of the most powerful reality-generator in the universe and . . . correcting the situation.

In the space of a few moments, the Cube restructured the world to suit Magneto’s tastes, removing all traces of von Doom’s authority, restoring Paris to its former glory, and replacing the despot’s police state with images from his own dreams: of a world ruled by *Homo superior*; of he as its master; of the X-Men, their wills reshaped, becoming his unquestioning servants. All of it had come to pass, in some fashion; he couldn’t fathom why the Cube hadn’t followed his instructions to the letter, as it appeared to have done for von Doom, but he was learning to live with the differences. So *Homo superior* was not the dominant race, but had come to live peacefully with humanity—at least he was still master. And if Scott Summers and Jean Grey wished to spout drivel detailing his fictitious accomplishments—though he had no idea where *those* had come from (the depths of his subconscious, perhaps?)—then, by all means, let them; it only added further detailing to the fantasy and proved beyond a shadow of a doubt how completely the X-Men were under his thrall. No, not everything he’d desired had been laid at his feet, but when he stepped back and took full view of what his dreams had made possible, only one word came to mind to describe it:

“Perfection,” Lensherr said. “Absolute perfection . . .”

“Are you talking to yourself again, Erik?” asked a feminine voice from behind him.

Lensherr turned, his deeply lined face practically glowing with joy as he gazed at the woman standing before him. She was beautiful, as she always had been, as she always would be. Tall and lithe, in her mid-forties, but looking ten years younger, Magdalena Lensherr stood in the doorway, hands resting lightly on her hips, one eyebrow raised questioningly. At her husband’s silent invitation to join him, she walked across the salon, taking care to avoid the documents, communiqués, faxes, and requests to which the master of the world was expected to respond—at his leisure, of course—that he had allowed to accumulate. Her dark brown, curly hair, normally worn in a short, stylish bob, was a mess—the result of what has commonly come to be known as “bed hair”—and she delicately placed a hand over her mouth to stifle the yawn that was building; she failed. The floor-length, blue satin negligée

that hugged her figure made subtle, sweeping sounds as it brushed against her legs.

In his mind, he knew she wasn't real—nothing more than a simulacrum of the woman he had once loved and lost, decades before, culled from memories he had thought long faded. A dream-figure, given life by the power of the Cube. And yet, in his heart . . .

In his heart, she was everything he remembered: the light brown eyes that always seemed to shine with joy; the bubbling laugh that sent a pleasant thrill up his spine; the sway of her hips when she walked; the touch of her skin; the way she tilted her head to one side when she smiled.

Yes, in the “real” world, Magda had been lost to him on the night Magneto was born; the night their daughter, Anya, had died in a fire, and Lensherr had slain the humans who had kept him from rescuing her. Magda had run from him then, terrified of the monster her husband had become; and he, too consumed by grief and hatred, had allowed her to go, choosing instead to focus his anger on punishing all mankind for the actions of a few, prejudiced fools.

But here, in *this* world, Magda had never left him, and Anya had grown to become a beautiful woman. In *his* world, Erik Magnus Lensherr had never suffered such tragic losses; instead, he had found the man buried deep within the blackened soul of the arch-villain Magneto. Had rediscovered the joy of being a father and husband.

Had learned what it meant to *love* again.

“I apologize, my dear,” he said with a smile, “but speaking aloud is a habit I find increasingly difficult to break.” He shrugged. “I imagine it comes from those occasions when, as the saying goes, I was the only person with whom I could have an intelligent conversation.”

Magda looked at him sternly, but he knew there was no real heat in her gaze. “A fine thing to say to the woman who supported your efforts for so long.”

“For which I have always been grateful,” Lensherr replied graciously. He placed his hands on her hips and drew her into a deep kiss. The scent of sandalwood in her hair and dewberry soap on her skin was intoxicating.

When they at last parted, Magda reached up to gently stroke his cheek. “I accept your apology,” she said softly.

Lensherr chuckled. “Now, my dear, you see why I was honored with the Nobel Prize, for Magneto has always been able to find a peaceful solution to any potential conflict.”

“Unfortunately,” Magda said playfully, “he’s never been able to stop referring to himself in the third person.”

The mutant overlord raised an eyebrow in amusement. "You *did* know what you were getting into when you married me, dear lady."

His wife nodded. "Including all your little eccentricities—yes, I know."

Lensherr's eyes widened in mock surprise. "I thought you found those 'little eccentricities' attractive."

"*Charming*," Magda said. "I *never* said they were attractive."

"I stand corrected," he replied humbly, and smiled.

Magda reached up to playfully tousle his snow-white hair. "Come to bed, Erik. The sun will be up soon enough, and you wouldn't want to miss the chance to see your oldest daughter when she returns from her trip to America because you overslept." She paused, and her smile slowly faded, then, as she stared deeply into his gray eyes.

"What is it?" Lensherr asked.

A troubled look darkened Magda's features, and she gently placed her hands along the sides of his face. "You look so tired, Erik. Are you all right?"

Lensherr put his hands atop hers, and smiled reassuringly. "I'm fine, Magda—really. I imagine it has to do with these late hours I've been keeping; they can be quite debilitating." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "In fact, if I'm not careful, I'm liable to nod off to sleep at any moment."

And with that, his eyes snapped shut, and his chin dropped onto his chest. Then he began snoring lightly.

An instant later, he opened his eyes, to find Magda glaring at him, arms folded across her chest.

"I don't find that the *least* bit amusing, Erik," she said curtly.

"A small joke, my love," he replied with a smile. He bent forward to kiss her lightly on the forehead. "But now, please don't let me keep you up any longer. I will be along in a little while."

It was obvious that Magda understood she was being politely—but firmly—dismissed; the annoyed frown that bowed her lips couldn't be missed. "All right, Erik . . . but do not wait *too* long, all right?" A playful light came into her eyes. "You know how I hate to sleep alone."

The master of the world nodded, a wolfish grin creeping its way across his rugged features. With a peck on the cheek, Magda turned and left her husband, swaying her hips *just so* as she walked, making it quite clear that he'd be a fool to remain cloistered in a drawing room for even a moment longer when a beautiful woman awaited his "charming eccentricities" on the next floor.

Lensherr sighed contentedly and glanced at the gold-trimmed mirror that hung above the salon's fireplace. Magda had been right—he *did*

look tired; older even than his true age. And considering the fact that he had been alive long enough to be able to provide first-hand accounts of the Nazi atrocities during World War II, that was saying quite a lot.

But still, he had managed to stave off any signs of aging for years: he didn't suffer from arthritis, or osteoporosis, or rheumatism; still had all his hair and teeth; still possessed the healthy constitution of a man one-third his age—all, more than likely, were benefits of his genetic "gifts."

And yet, despite his genetic superiority, he was slowly dying.

It had something to do with the Cube—of that he was certain. Something that was causing him to age rapidly, as von Doom had while the device was in his possession. But what? And how could he stop the process before it killed him? He'd tried "wishing" it away by using the Cube, but that hadn't worked, and he'd quickly dismissed the idea that von Doom might have created some sort of "fail-safe" mechanism that would turn the Cube's power against its owner; a man capable of constructing a reality-generator never would have allowed its protective systems to backfire on him. There *had* to be a way to fight it, though; now that Lensherr had achieved his life's dream, he wasn't about to let it fade away with the exhalation of his last breath.

The mutant overlord strode across the salon, stopping before a painting hung in an elegant, gold-leaf frame—an original Matisse, given to him by millionaire industrialist Anthony Stark on the thirtieth anniversary of the "Children of the Atom" speech. With a touch of a hidden button, the frame swung out from the wall, revealing a safe constructed from adamantium—the hardest-known metal on Earth. Small in design, yet impervious to any explosive, the safe's most unusual design was that it had no door—no means of entry . . . for anyone but Magneto.

A slight gesture from his hand, and the metal rippled, then flowed in two directions, creating a gap—one that shone with the brilliance of the Cosmic Cube contained within. Lensherr had discovered, through experimentation, that he did not have to hold the device all the time in order to make it work; he merely had to be within close range of it. And by sealing it away in a block of damage-resistant metal, he had made certain that only he would have access to it, for he knew that, despite the wonders of the "enlightened society" he had created, he still had enemies. Not on Earth, of course—the Cube had given him the power to neutralize all the so-called "super heroes" who originally existed simply by making them forget they had ever possessed superpowers, or had ever worn a costume outside of a Halloween party.

But Charles Xavier was still out there, somewhere; he, and the remaining slack-jawed sycophants he called "students" who hadn't jour-

neyed to Earth with the X-team that had ultimately been forced into aiding Magneto and his acolytes in their attack on von Doom. He had learned that much from Jean Grey, when she had used her telepathic abilities to repair the damage done to the mutant overlord's memories by the armored tyrant. And knowing Charles as well as he did, it was only a matter of time before his former friend elected to send a second team after the Cube, to put an end to some alleged threat to the "omniverse," about which Grey and Summers had been constantly prattling.

Well, *let* them come, Lensherr decided. They would find Magneto ready. This was *his* world now. And fantasy-construct though its origins might be, it was still real, still vibrant, still the sum of everything he had ever desired, and no one—human *or* mutant—was going to deprive him of his dreams . . . even if he had to die for them. . . .

HE WAS dying, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

Betsy knelt on the grassy expanse of The Mall in Washington, D.C., her thoughts in turmoil, her body growing numb. A steady rain was falling, drenching her clothes and hair, but she was unaware of it. Around her, people were shouting, screaming, running in panic, but she couldn't hear any of it. Her attention was focused solely on the man lying in front of her, his body broken, his beautiful white wings fluttering limply.

Warren coughed hollowly, phlegm rattling in lungs hard-pressed to draw in air. Kneeling down, Betsy gently raised his head and cradled it in her lap. She slowly stroked his blond hair with a gloved hand . . . and tried her best to ignore the smell of burnt flesh that assailed her nostrils.

"Warren, I'm going to find a doctor, or a paramedic," she said. "I'll be right back, okay? Just please, *please* hang on."

She started to rise, but Warren grasped her hand and pulled her back down. "No . . . don't go . . ." he said, slowly shaking his head. His voice was growing fainter.

Betsy opened her mouth to say something—some words of encouragement, or even anger, telling him he had no right to give up, not when they still had a whole lifetime ahead of them to explore—but in her heart, she knew it was too late.

Too late for anything more than good-bys.

So did Warren. Tenderly, he reached up to stroke her cheek. "You really *are* . . . the most beautiful woman . . . in the world . . . you know . . ."

Betsy took his hand and brushed her lips against his fingers. "War-

ren, I . . ." she began, then fell silent, unable to speak. A tear dropped from the corner of her left eye, to splash on Warren's cheek.

"Don't leave me . . ." she sobbed.

Warren smiled. "Love you, Betts . . ." he whispered.

And then he was gone.

Betsy awoke to the sound of screams ringing in her ears. It took a moment to realize they were hers.

The screams subsided, giving way to ragged sobs as she buried her face in her pillow, tears staining the satin casing. Eventually, this, too, passed, and she slowly sat up in the bed, body trembling from the effort. She felt drained, unable to think clearly. Looking back on it, sleep had originally seemed like a good idea—an escape from the unsettling memories that she'd fought to keep buried in the back of her mind since arriving at the citadel; a momentary respite from the grief that threatened to overwhelm her if she didn't maintain control over her emotions.

But there had been no escape, no solace, from the images that played and replayed on the projection screen of her subconscious: Magneto using his fearsome powers to tear apart the limousine containing Emperor von Doom and his wife, Ororo; Warren, ruggedly handsome, wings bright against the storm-tossed sky, swooping down to protect the tyrant; the blinding crackle of magnetic energy as it erupted from the mutant overlord's hands, enveloping Warren; his limp body dropping to the ground, landing with a sickening, bone-crushing impact on the grass as she raced to join him; the smile that had won her heart twisting into a pain-racked grimace as he drew his last breath. No, sleep hadn't been an escape—it had been a chamber of horrors.

Betsy swept lavender-hued tresses back from her eyes, her gaze immediately falling upon the velvet evening gown. A wisp of a smile played at the corners of her mouth as she gently ran her fingertips over the material. It had been a gift from Warren—one among many she'd received during their time together—for her "Big Night": a solo singing performance at the Von Doom Center for the Performing Arts, part of a celebration held in honor of the Emperor's tenth anniversary in power. He'd convinced her to wear it in place of the red "lucky dress" she'd often worn at his New York nightclub, the Starlight Room, by explaining that if she was going to make an impression on the Emperor she should at least do it in a gown befitting the occasion. He'd been right, of course, but, as eye-catching as the dress was, it had been her singing that really caught the attention of von Doom—his, and that of the hundreds of attendees at the gala that night.



Bucky

But then, Magneto and his followers had attacked, and Warren had gone to von Doom's aid, and—

Betsy bit her bottom lip to stifle another sob—hard enough to draw blood—and angrily threw back the sheets, forcing herself to step from the bed before she could allow herself to collapse into another crying jag.

"Lights—fifty percent," she said hoarsely, throat raw from the screams that had awakened her. The citadel's computer responded instantly, and the room filled with dimmed lighting—bright enough to see by, yet low enough that it didn't cause her to wince as her eyes became accustomed to it.

Now that she was awake, Betsy decided that the only thing to do was to get ready for the day ahead; by keeping active, by focusing on the mission, she'd at least be able to escape the memories that haunted her. She hoped.

She stalked across the suite to the bathroom, the lights automatically snapping on as she stepped over the threshold. The lavatory was similar to that found in any home or apartment, its floor and walls tiled—the alternating blue and white pieces of ceramic forming intricate Celtic symbols—its facilities consisting of a toilet, sink, and shower.

Betsy looked at herself in the mirror above the sink, and grimaced. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy. Her lower lip was swollen where she'd bitten it. Her hair was tangled, wispy strands floating around her hair like cobwebs caught in a slight breeze. And at some point during the night, her mascara had gotten smeared from all the tears she'd shed. All in all, she looked more like a bloody purple-haired raccoon than a glamorous super heroine.

"Oh, *pants*," she muttered. She waved a hand under the tap, activating the hot water, and cupped her hands in the flow so she could splash her face and wash away the ruined makeup. But then, gazing at herself once more, a slow smile came to her lips.

She remembered being awakened one morning by the gentle prodding of Warren as he poked her in the shoulder, asking if she were awake in that playful, wolfish tone he affected whenever he was feeling particularly amorous. But, considering the celebrating they'd done the night before—in honor of a recent victory over Kuragari, the self-proclaimed "Shogun of the Shadows," who had tried to make Betsy one of his followers—and the night of passion it had ultimately led to, every muscle in her body ached. It was hard to try and put even two coherent sentences together with her brain so addled. Nevertheless, she had rolled over in bed to point out that not everyone had the stamina of a man

who could fly cross-country under his own power, only to see him draw back in horror, yelping sharply like an injured dog.

For a world-renowned playboy, one would almost think he'd never seen a woman with her makeup in disarray; not that she'd remembered to take it off, of course, given the heat of the moment. But then, he'd smiled, and commented that he'd never slept with a raccoon-woman before, and . . .

And this time, Betsy couldn't stop the tears that ran hotly down her cheeks. Her knees buckled, and she slipped down to the tiled floor. As her sobs mixed with the sound of running water, she wondered when the ache in her heart would finally subside.

It was going to be a bad day.

Charles Xavier knew it—the weight in the pit of his stomach told him so. The last time he'd felt that weight was only a few months ago, when he and Piotr Nikolievitch Rasputin—the Russian-born, armored X-Man whose codename was “Colossus”—had been trapped in the realm of a nightmarish creature called the Synraith. True to form, his stomach had been right: it *had* been a bad day.

A *very* bad day.

And so, the Professor now sat on the edge of his bed, buttoning his starched, white dress shirt while he listened to the gurgling of his abdomen, staring out at the forces of Creation that endlessly roiled beyond his windows, wishing the new day wouldn't come . . . yet knowing it was unavoidable.

He'd slept poorly, his dreams peppered with images of Warren in happier times, and what might be happening to his other students with Magneto in possession of a Cosmic Cube: Scott's force beams raised to such an intensity that his body could no longer contain the energy; Jean's mental powers turned against her, driving her insane; Nightcrawler's teleportational powers run amuck, until the strain ultimately tore him apart; Gambit's kinetic energy making him avoid touching anything or anyone, for fear of causing them to explode; Rogue's “power-leeching” ability gone wild, her slightest contact instantly killing whom-ever she was near. And as for Wolverine . . .

Well, Logan had already undergone painful torture at Magneto's hands once before, when the mutant overlord used his powers to seize control of the adamantium that coated the feral X-Man's skeleton—and draw out every ounce of it through Logan's pores. If it hadn't been for Wolverine's mutant healing factor, the process would have killed him. But Magneto would be well aware of that, and find some way to com-

pensate for that ability—perhaps by killing Logan, only to resurrect him time and again, never allowing him the peace of oblivion.

As Xavier knew so well, Erik Lensherr was a man with an *extremely* vivid imagination . . .

But the fate of his “advance team” was not the only thing on Xavier’s mind. What also troubled him was the unknown—specifically, what might have happened to the other members of the X-Men, the ones left on Earth 616 while he and his hand-picked group had gone to aid Roma against Opul Lun Sat-yr-nin. Psylocke’s arrival on the citadel made it clear that she and Warren—Archangel—had been “restructured” to reflect the changes made to the world under Doctor Doom’s rule, but what had become of Colossus and Shadowcat? Iceman and the Beast? Storm and Marrow? The members of Generation X? And where would *they* fit into the schemes of Erik Magnus Lensherr?

Xavier felt the threads of his life unraveling. For so long, he had fought the good fight, striving constantly to find a way to bring peace between mutants and humans; sacrificing any chance of having a normal life, a normal relationship, as he focused all his energies on that dream; putting at risk people who trusted him with their lives, who believed in his cause even though they were despised for what they were; watching as friends, even family members died around him. But now, apparently, it had all been for nothing—the lives lost, the battles won, the selfless dedication. Once Magneto had placed his hands on the Cube, Charles Xavier lost his chance to realize his own dream, lost the opportunity to create a world of equality, based not on the genetic composition of an individual, but on their strength of character, their willingness to use their talents—whether superhuman or not—to usher the races into a new Golden Age.

But now, though, there would only be *Homo superior* in control, with mankind looked upon as something akin to offal; a reversal of the situation before then, true, but Xavier had always believed in a peaceful solution to the problem. He *never* would have resorted to forcibly changing the world to get his way.

Would he?

Here, then, was the real question that puzzled—and deeply disturbed—the world’s greatest telepath as he considered it. When he figuratively stepped back to look at the “big picture,” was he bothered by what Magneto was doing with the Cube . . . or jealous that Erik had succeeded where he had failed . . . ?

A soft chiming sound interrupted his thoughts; he had never been so grateful for an interruption.

“Come!” he called out.

The door to his suite irised open, and Psylocke stepped inside. She was dressed in her X-Man uniform: a dark-blue, high-necked, one-piece outfit that resembled a swimsuit, with matching thigh-high stockings and gloves that ran from her upper arms to her wrists; a red belt was cinched around her waist, its buckle a stylized "X." The Professor realized that, since she hadn't been wearing it when she came aboard, Elisabeth must have used the citadel's matter replicators to create it. Her hair was drawn back in a severe ponytail, allowing the lights of the room to accentuate her Asian features . . . and the blood-red, J-shaped tattoo that ran down the left side of her face, from her temple to just below her cheekbone—a side effect of her acquisition of the mystical powers of the Crimson Dawn. Equally as red as the tattoo were her eyes; it appeared he hadn't been the only person unable to sleep.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, Professor," Psylocke said quietly.

Xavier smiled warmly as he tucked his shirt into his dark trousers. "Not at all, Elisabeth. I was just getting ready for the day." He reached for his tie. "Do you feel up to talking?"

Psylocke nodded. "Yes, but . . . first, I'd like to apologize for my earlier behavior. You were right: I *shouldn't* have attacked Doom like that. It was wrong, and pig-headed, and unquestionably stupid."

"Unquestionably," Xavier said. His smile widened. "Apology accepted."

That seemed to relax her. "Thank you."

The Professor nodded and completed the Windsor knot in his tie, then shrugged into his dark blazer. He cast a quick glance at his hoverchair, broadcasting a mental command to its computer system. The machine floated forward from its place by the observation windows, the top half of the chair quietly swinging open on well-oiled hinges to reveal the padded leather seat within. As the device pulled alongside the bed, Xavier grabbed hold of its sides and hauled himself into the seat.

"Now, then," he said to Psylocke as he settled in, "why don't you fill me in on the situation . . ."

He hadn't liked what he'd heard.

Psylocke had told him everything—well, at least as much as she knew from the brief contact she had had with Jean Grey's mind, when the redheaded X-Man linked with Elisabeth in an effort to restore the latter's memories, which had been "rewritten" by the Cube to reflect the changes in von Doom's world. She knew of the team's mission to find and correct the anomaly that threatened to unravel the omniverse; of their alliance with Magneto (a particularly upsetting revelation for the Professor); of the events leading up to Warren's death, though that took

some effort to get through. She described her confrontation with von Doom in his hidden chamber beneath the White House, where the armored dictator had admitted to the flaw in the Cube's construction and the drain it now placed on its owner's life-force in order to maintain his chosen reality. And then, hesitantly, she talked about his offer to resurrect Archangel in exchange for her promise to take possession of the Cube under his command, so that he could continue ruling the planet without the fear (her word, obviously) of having his remaining life-force taken away.

She wouldn't say if she had agreed to his terms.

Instead, she related the final moments, when Magneto and his acolytes had burst onto the scene, just as the X-Men were on the brink of victory, handily defeating the heroic mutants and claiming the Cube for their leader. Then, von Doom's hand had clamped around her ankle, and—

“—here we are,” Psylocke concluded.

“Indeed,” Xavier murmured.

She watched him in silence for a few moments, obviously waiting for him to say something further. When he didn't—mainly because his brain was still processing the information she'd provided—she softly cleared her throat. “Any suggestions as to what we should do next?” she asked.

“Not at the moment,” Xavier admitted. “And you're certain von Doom has no cure for this reality-cancer he's created?”

Her lavender eyes sparkled with mischief. “I could always go down to the infirmary and ask him again.”

“No, that's quite all right,” the Professor replied. His voice was laced with just enough of a warning tone to let Psylocke know she was treading on dangerous ground.

The conversation once more lapsed into silence.

“You know,” Psylocke remarked quietly, “on my way over to talk to you, I was thinking about all the times Warren and I spent together; all the fun we used to have.” A melancholy smile slowly tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Warren mentioned a few of those occasions in passing,” Xavier said. He smiled warmly as he saw his student blush. “Nothing risqué, however—he was always too much the gentleman for ‘locker room talk.’ ”

Psylocke nodded. “Always. Even in the most uncomfortable of situations.” She gazed past the Professor, as though looking through a window, into the past. “I remember that one night, when I was singing

down at the Den of the Night Wolf in the Village, while Warren was stuck entertaining Doom's little toady, Sebastian Shaw—"

Xavier raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Entertaining'?"

"Oh, you know what I mean, Professor—show him the sights, take him to a Broadway show, introduce him to a celebrity or three . . ." Psylocke paused. "Oh, that's right. You weren't there for that." She shrugged. "I'm certain you would have enjoyed it, though." A bright smile lit her exotic features. "You should have seen the look on Shaw's face when Warren brought him to the club, and I sat on his lap and sang 'I Want to be Loved by You.'" She chuckled softly. "I thought the poor dear was going to have a stroke, his face had turned such a ghastly shade of red."

Xavier nodded, but said nothing. From what he knew of Elisabeth's background, however, she had never been a nightclub singer in New York's Greenwich Village; in fact, she had never even been to the United States before joining the X-Men a few years ago. He *was* aware of her time as a much-sought-after fashion model—when her name had often been spoken in the same breath with such notables as Naomi Campbell, Claudia Schiffer, and Mary Jane Watson—and her short and thoroughly unenjoyable time as a Psi Division member of S.T.R.I.K.E., the British spy agency equivalent of America's S.H.I.E.L.D., not to mention her first brush with super heroics, when she had filled in for her brother, Brian, as Captain Britain—a well-intentioned but nearly fatal action that had cost her the eyesight of her original body at the hands of the superpowered assassin Slaymaster.

But a career as a cabaret singer? Never.

And as for Warren having to "entertain" Sebastian Shaw for an evening? Preposterous. The man was the notorious Black King of the equally infamous Hellfire Club, a hedonistic organization that believed in the pursuit of pleasure above all other endeavors in life. An organization that had caused more than its fair share of trouble for the X-Men over the years, from subtle psychic manipulation to outright blatant attempts at killing Xavier and his students, including Warren. Like Magneto, the upper echelon of the club were mutants bent on world domination, though Shaw and his cronies preferred pulling puppet strings from the shadows rather than do anything that would draw attention to themselves. No, Warren spending time with Shaw would never have happened in the real world—it must be a fabricated memory; a remnant of the Cosmic Cube's influence.

But why, then, did Psylocke fail to see that as well? There had been no hesitation in her voice, no sign of confusion as she'd told her story, so clearly she must regard the event as part of her life experiences.

Xavier frowned. If, indeed, Jean had restored Elisabeth to her proper self, why should she now be casually speaking of such an evening as though it had been real? Could von Doom still be controlling her mind without her knowledge, even though he'd been separated from the Cube? Or could she be allied with the tyrant, as part of the agreement he'd offered, but about which she refused to discuss further?

A far more troubling question, though, now crept into his thoughts: Could Psylocke truly be relied upon to complete the mission? Knowing the amount of grief she must be bottling up inside over Warren's death in order to concentrate on the work ahead, combined with whatever promises she *might* have made to von Doom, her ultimate goal might not be to deactivate the Cube, but to *use it herself*. As much as the Professor hated to admit it, Elisabeth *had* had her moments over the past few years when she'd been working under her own secret agendas, sometimes to the detriment of her fellow X-Men.

Could she be doing the same right now?

Xavier's lips set in a thin, firm line. He could ask her straight out, but he knew she'd deny having any ulterior motives; she'd probably act surprised at his question, say her duties as an X-Man took precedent over her private life, that she'd never even considered using the Cube for personal gain, whether or not that involved the possible restoration of her lover, and how could he ever think that she would? And unlike Elisabeth, the Professor was unwilling to claw his way into her mind in order to find out the truth.

His shoulders sagged. There was only one thing to do, then, to ensure the success of the mission . . .

"I think, perhaps," he said slowly, "it's time we spoke with Roma."

Psylocke's eyes lit up. "You have a plan?"

Xavier nodded. "I'll tell you on the way."

Quickly rising from the bed, Psylocke smiled at her mentor and headed for the door, clearly eager for them to be on their way.

Behind her, the Professor grimaced; the weight in the pit of his stomach seemed to be growing heavier with each passing moment. He sighed softly, and slowly shook his head. Only fully awake for the better part of two hours, and it was *already* turning out to be a *very* bad day. . . .

Interlude II

WITHIN THE confines of Dimension 616, however, matters were much worse . . . at least in the opinion of one particular inhabitant.

"*No! This is unacceptable!*" roared The Controller. He lashed out with a gloved fist, scattering the contents of his desktop: report folders, paperweights, pens, pencils, computer disks, music CDs, and other personal items went flying onto the floor. He slapped the palms of his hands against the dark green ink blotter on which the articles had been resting and shot to his feet. The backs of his legs collided with the edge of his leather-backed chair, sending it hurtling into the dingy gray wall behind him, and the room echoed with the sound of wood striking metal. "I will *not* allow my carefully-laid plans to be upset by the saccharine-sweet dreams of a . . . a *sub-human!* Not when I am so close to success!"

He stepped out from behind the desk, fists clenched, and stomped over to a nearby window. Beyond the protection of the three-inch-thick glass lay the airless landscape of the moon. The satellite's pitted and scarred surface was barely visible past the glow of the perimeter lighting that ringed the edges of this secret base of operations, here on what was known as the planetoid's "dark" side. It had been constructed years before, away from the prying eyes of Earth's super heroic population, as the first step toward stellar domination; a launch point for a planned invasion of other worlds. And, although that proposed attack never got beyond the early stages of development, the Controller had never been the type to admit defeat. So, rather than abandon the base, he had turned its resources toward a simpler—though no less lofty—goal: ruling the Earth.

Yes, he had to admit to himself, it was true that he had made similar

overtures in the past, and most of those attempts had been quickly disrupted by men and women garbed in outlandish costumes, the retina-damaging colors of which were usually found only in a child's box of crayons. It was also true that there were countless others who shared the same goal as he—for their own purposes, of course. Von Doom and Magneto, for example, could be counted among those hapless dreamers, who sought to impose their sense of order upon the world, only to wind up tasting the bitter ashes of defeat, their dreams ground to dust under the boot heels of the Fantastic Four, or the Avengers . . . or the X-Men.

But the Controller was different—at least in his own opinion. He was not one of those bumbling cretins like the Master or Count Nefaria or the Mandarin, who only focused on the game at hand, and not the big picture. It was that sort of tunnel vision that resulted in them always being outmaneuvered by lesser intellects who, unlike their villainous counterparts, were able to think quickly on their feet. No, the Controller saw himself as a chess master, sweeping his pieces across the board with unrivaled skill, always three or four moves ahead of his opponents, always thinking of how those moves might aid him in his next match. His enemies might think he was on the verge of being checkmated each time he found himself in conflict with them, but the Controller always had a pawn or two that he kept on reserve, to be used only at the last possible moment to grasp victory from what seemed to be certain defeat.

Von Doom had been one of those pawns, allowed to make use of the Cube only so long as such use fit within the scope of the Controller's plans. Of course, he had been completely unaware of it, and the Controller had been denied the chance to bring it to his attention. No matter; the gamesman would make up for that lost opportunity—of that, he was quite certain. Soon enough, it would be the illustrious "master of magnetism," the great peacemaker, who would know what it was like to face him across the field of battle . . .

On the other side of his desk, the Controller's assistant, Leonard, stood rigidly at attention, eyes fixed on a point on the far wall. His uniform was not as crisp it had once been, the armpits now stained with sweat, the toes of one jackboot coated with ink from a pen that had shattered during the Controller's tirade. It was obvious he was doing his best to remain calm, to show no emotion in front of his leader, but the glimmer of terror that shone in his eyes, the slight tremors that threatened to buckle his knees, could not be missed.

It pleased The Controller; at least *one* lowly creature in this metamorphosing universe still knew its place. "I allowed that gypsy pig von Doom the opportunity to play out his trifling fantasies while I studied the effects of his Cosmic Cube. Once that had been accomplished—

once I learned that that armored cretin had somehow managed to create a version of the Cube more powerful than anything the scientists of A.I.M. had ever devised—I knew it must be mine. For what use to me are a gypsy's pathetic dreams of empire, when the stars themselves are for the taking? *That* is why mine should be the hand that holds the Cube—for only *I* understand the nature of its incredible powers! Only *I* have the limitless vision to make use of its full potential!"

His feral snarl appeared even more disturbing in the room's low lighting. "But then, just as I was finalizing my plans to strike, those *verdamm*t X-Men and that *Juden* dog Lensherr robbed me of the chance to take possession of the Cube. And *look* at what those genetic inferiors have done with it!" He grabbed a remote control unit from the pile of items scattered on the floor and pressed a button, activating the wall-sized monitor across the room. The screen filled with static, then slowly cleared to reveal a view of Earth from space, provided by one of a series of cameras that his followers had placed on the "bright" side of the moon. Adjusting the controls, he replaced the full view of the planet with a collection of smaller images: aerial shots of its major cities. Another flick of the remote, and one of the cameras zoomed in on Paris. The sun was shining brightly, the streets were busy, and all seemed right with the world—because one man had *made* it so.

"The power of a *god* in his hands, and he *wastes* it creating a harmonious society, when he *should* be crushing his enemies, or building an *empire*." The Controller sneered. "So much for the great dreams of *Homo superior*." He cast an even glance at his assistant. "Do you not agree, Leonard?"

"Yes, Controller!" Leonard replied immediately. "As you have often said, such lack of vision is to be expected from members of an inferior race."

The Controller nodded, pleased with the response. "Indeed. And Magneto is *truly* an inferior, for he clearly has no understanding of the power he possesses. I doubt he is even aware that the effects of the Cube have spread beyond the confines of the Earth." With a grunt, he switched off the viewscreen, then glanced at a clock that was mounted on another wall. "The gas should have dissipated by now. Come with me—we have much to do before this day is over."

He stalked across the room, heading for the door, and Leonard hurriedly moved to open it for him. Not bothering to acknowledge his assistant's action, the Controller pushed past him . . . and stepped into a slaughterhouse.

The command center of the base was littered with the bodies of technicians and soldiers. Blood and gore stained everything, coating the

floor, the walls, even the ceiling in some spots. Some of the staff—their skin liquefied so thoroughly that the floor was slick with the remains—were piled around the bottom of the door to the Controller's office; it seemed they'd tried to break down the door before the end, to no avail. Others had died where they sat, or where they'd collapsed onto the floor. And although he could not see the balance of the hundred or so members of his staff, scattered as they were throughout the base, the Controller knew that every corridor, every laboratory, every sleeping quarter would look the same.

The gas that had been released just minutes earlier was an extra security measure personally installed by the Controller years ago; no one on his staff, including Leonard, had been aware of the canisters hidden inside the air ducts. But with a press of a button, the commander had made them *all* aware of their existence . . . and what they contained. In seconds, every square foot of the base—excluding the Controller's office, of course—was flooded with a combination of lethal chemicals that dissolved flesh and bone, yet left machinery unaffected. So well-protected was the Controller's office that neither he nor his aide had heard the pitiful screams for mercy that strained to be heard through the sound-proofed walls and door.

Looking back at those moments, the Controller felt disappointed. It seemed that in designing his base *too* well, he had robbed himself of a small pleasure.

He glanced around the nerve center of his base, ignoring the grotesque sight stretched out before him. "Even here, a quarter of a billion miles from Lensherr's peaceful little world, the Cube's energies have taken their toll." He frowned. "The work of years, wiped out in a surge of cosmic forces. Had it not been for my prior experience with—and mastery over—the power of similar devices, everything within my office might have also been transformed into tools of that magnetically-charged freak—" he gazed at his assistant "—including *you*, my sweat-stained lapdog."

"I am honored, Controller," Leonard replied.

His leader grunted. "Do not seek to flatter your master, lackey—your life means nothing to me. I may have spared you from the mutant's taint, but that doesn't mean I would not hesitate to sacrifice your worthless soul in an instant if the situation required it . . . as it did with these others." He dramatically waved an arm around the room, gesturing to the bodies. "They were not as fortunate as you, changed as they were by the Cube to become 'productive members' of *his* new society. Once that happened, they were of no further use to the cause—or me—since there was too great a risk that they might inform their new master of

my whereabouts. And with all things that lose their value, they were easily discarded." He chuckled softly at his own joke. "But even had these dolts *not* been transformed, they would have met the same end for not informing me of the energy wave before it struck." He glared at his assistant. "Remember this sight well, boy—*this* is the price of failure."

Leonard's Adam's apple bobbed up and down furiously for a few moments. "Y-yes, C-controller," he finally stammered.

The Controller grunted and moved over to study the computer screens at one of the monitoring stations. To get a better view, he roughly pushed aside the corpse of a man slumped there. The top of its head was missing, skin, hair, and bone all eaten away by the gas.

"Come here, Leonard," the Controller said. The blond-haired young man leapt to obey, trying not to look down at the gelatinized flesh that pooled about the floor. His superior pointed to a series of readouts displayed on one screen. "You see this? The Cube's power has not faded one iota, even though the energy wave it created has moved beyond our solar system." His eyes widened in mild surprise. "There are now signs of life on Mars—" he glanced at another readout "—and an atmosphere on the Jovian moon Europa." His eyes glinted with desire. "Fascinating. A single release of energy, and worlds are being recreated right before my eyes. And with no indication that the wave will dissipate at any time soon, who knows *what* will happen as it spreads across the stars . . . ?" He turned to Leonard. "The Cube *must* be mine. It *will* be mine."

"What would you have me do, Controller?" Leonard asked.

The Controller clasped his hands behind his back and walked away from the console, head bowed in concentration. He came to a stop before one of the vast observation windows, and stared out at the depths of space.

The stars themselves for the taking . . .

"We go to Earth," he said, his back still to his assistant. "Together. This mission is far too important to trust to a mere boy." He caught sight of Leonard's expression in the reflection on the three-inch-thick glass: the youth was clearly angered by the comment, but wisely kept his mouth shut. "And when the time comes, *I* shall be the one who pries the Cosmic Cube from that sub-human's lifeless hands—no one else. Is that understood?"

"Of course, Controller," Leonard replied quickly.

The Controller sighed—was he ever that toadying in his youth? He shook his head sharply. No, of course not. If he *had* been, he never would have been selected for the honor bestowed upon him by his own, dark master so many years before; never would have had his eyes

opened by a cause he could finally believe in, or been given the means to carry forth its inspiring message of bringing order to a chaotic world; never would he have had his long-repressed dreams of becoming someone *important* made a reality.

In the old days, someone as ineffectual as Leonard would have been placed on the front lines of the battlefield—the sooner he died, the sooner he would cease being a liability to the cause. But today, with so few qualified people available . . .

Turning from the window, he strode toward another console; this one was connected to a raised platform large enough to accommodate two people. It was a teleport device, often used in the past by the Controller to evade his enemies, whether heroic or villainous, whenever his latest plan for world domination started to fray at the edges. Although the Controller would deny it, the teleporter had been activated quite a bit during the past few years.

He gestured to his assistant, then set about activating the device. “Get onto the platform while I enter the coordinates.”

Leonard did as he was told, stepping gingerly over the bodies of friends and co-workers—with whom he had built what they’d all thought would be lasting relationships—as he made his way to the teleporter. He *just* managed to avoid falling as he slipped in a puddle of gore that had formed around the half-dissolved corpse of what had once been a very pretty young woman named Kate Ashbrook. She had been a twenty-three-year-old computer hacker Leonard had dated for a short time; her identification tag was still pinned to her uniform. Her eyes had melted inside their sockets; the gaping holes in her skull seemed to stare accusingly at him. Why should *he* be allowed to live? What made *him* so special?

Unable to come up with an answer, Leonard turned quickly and walked away. When he finally reached the platform, he found the Controller gazing heatedly at him.

“I have no patience for weak men who quake with fear in the presence of death,” the gamesman said, his voice low and tinged with menace. “Are *you* a weak man, Leonard?”

“N-no, C-controller,” Leonard replied. “I-it’s just that I’ve never seen this much blood before . . . you know, outside of the movies and TV shows.”

The Controller shook his head sadly. “That is what is wrong with your generation, Leonard—your minds have been poisoned by fantasies. There are no ‘commercial breaks’ in combat, no computer-generated ‘special effects’—only death and destruction. Back in my homeland, the *battlefield* was all the entertainment I craved: to smell the sweet, coppery

tang of blood in the air; to feel the pulse of your enemy slowing as he died by your hand; to hear the screams of the dying as their bodies were torn apart by bullet and mortar and bayonet; to know that *you* will live another day, while those lying broken and bloodied around you have become nothing more than carrion for the vultures. *That* is far more awe-inspiring than a bunch of flickering images cast on a screen, *because it is real.*" He poked a gloved finger into the chest of his assistant. "You, too, will learn to appreciate such things, Leonard—if you live long enough."

"Yes, sir," Leonard muttered.

The Controller nodded. "Excellent. Now, we go." He pressed a button on his belt.

As the hum of the teleporter filled his ears, Leonard took one last look around the command center, then closed his eyes, trying to block out the image of the twisted, melted bodies that lay at his feet, trying to ignore the smell of death that clung to his clothing, that filled his nostrils.

But then he forced his eyes to open, forced himself to acknowledge the carnage displayed before him. He had chosen to serve the Controller, as had his unfortunate peers. What had happened to them was to be expected, since they had failed in the service of their master.

He would not.

HAVE YOU gone completely mad? What kind of plan is that?"

Walking alongside Xavier's hoverchair as she and the Professor made their way down one of the seemingly endless corridors in the Starlight Citadel, Betsy threw her hands in the air in utter exasperation. "It's *insane*, Professor!"

"No, Elisabeth," Xavier replied. "It's the best possible plan . . . under the circumstances."

Betsy shook her head. "I'm sorry, Professor, but placing yourself in harm's way by accompanying me to Earth is *not* the best possible plan. In case you've forgotten, Magneto and you haven't exactly seen eye-to-eye in decades . . . except on those rare occasions when the two of you share a common enemy—like the Sentinels, or The Brood, or a roomful of Congressmen discussing the Mutant Registration Act."

"I understand your concern, Elisabeth," Xavier countered, "but we're running out of precious time. By speaking with Erik directly, I may be able to make him come to his senses before it's too late." He paused. "I know it's a longshot, but with the other X-Men incapacitated—"

"What about the Captain Britain Corps?" Betsy interjected. "Why can't *they* come with me? After all, my brother is a member—they should be *eager* to help one of their own."

The Professor shook his head. "I already discussed that possibility with Roma. She refuses to place any of her people at risk, now that the reality-cancer has started to spread throughout our universe. She doesn't want to risk the chance of 'infecting' either the citadel or another dimension with the Cube's taint."

Betsy sucked on her bottom lip for a few moments, brow furrowed

in concentration. "The Technet, perhaps? With the proper incentive, those disgusting little mercenaries could be quite an asset, especially Gatecrasher's 'porting abilities; she could take me straight to Magneto. I could grab the Cube from him and have everything set right in time for brunch." She frowned. "Oh, but they answer directly to Saturnyne, don't they? And *she'd* never allow them to accept any offer from *us*."

"Not to mention she's quite adamant that the only solution to the problem is to destroy our dimension. I also seriously doubt their teleportational powers are greater than Roma's; if *she* couldn't place Scott and the others at the heart of the anomaly before, due to the interference created by the Cube's energies, it's unlikely the Technet would have any better luck." Xavier flashed a wry smile. "And *that*, my dear Miss Braddock, brings us full-circle—"

"To a plan that relies far too much on you being able to reason with a man who has dedicated his life to making *Homo superior* the dominant lifeform on the planet . . . and who, now more than ever, has the power to *annihilate* anyone who dares to oppose him." Betsy grimaced and rubbed her throat, remembering the moment back in Washington when she'd tried to attack von Doom while he held the Cube—only to suddenly find herself floating miles above the Earth. She would have died from lack of oxygen within seconds if the tyrant had been in the mood to end her life, and not merely teach her a lesson for her foolish action. She swallowed, hard. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I *can't* let you take that sort of risk."

"It is not *your* decision to make, Psylocke," Xavier replied sternly. "In case *you* have forgotten, I have faced my *own* share of dangers as the founder of this group, from the N'gari to the unleashed fury of the Dark Phoenix, long before you were ever invited to join us." He tapped the armrests of his hoverchair. "Just because I need to travel about in *this*, do not think for a moment that I am helpless."

"'Helpless?' *You*, Professor?" Betsy smiled. "Of all the words that come to mind that I could possibly use to describe you, I'd find it *very* hard to include *that* one." She traced the edge of one armrest with the tips of her fingers. "I'm not questioning your ability in the field . . ." She paused, catching sight of his bemused look. "All right, perhaps I *am*. Despite your incredible telepathic powers, even *you* would have to admit that your handicap *does* add a complication or two to the mission. But I'm *more* concerned about the danger you'd be putting yourself in by walking into the lion's den—we *both* face the possibility that we could be killed long before we even get close to Magneto. I'd just like to better your chances for survival." Betsy closed her eyes, tight enough to create flashes of color in the darkness; she imagined she could see

Warren's face among the multi-hued lights that burst like fireworks. She drew a deep breath, then slowly released it and opened her eyes. "I've already lost *enough* people who are close to me."

Xavier reached out to pat the back of her hand. "Elisabeth, if we fail, if we can't prevent the Cube from destroying the protective barriers around our dimension, there will be no place to hide from the destruction, no place to call a safe haven. It will be the beginning of the end, not just for our world, but for *every* world across the countless dimensions. And if that were to happen, we *both* know I'd be in as much danger here on the citadel as I would on Earth." He shook his head. "No, I'd much rather go out fighting, doing my best to end this perverted dream of Magneto's once and for all, as I've tried to do for so long." He smiled. "Besides, if Erik runs true-to-form, as most of his fellow would-be conquerors do, he won't kill me . . . not right away, at least. After all, where would the glory of the moment be if he didn't have someone to gloat to about his victory over mankind—*especially* if that someone happens to be his greatest foe?"

Betsy returned the smile, her brush with death at von Doom's hand now cast in a new light. She slowly shook her head in amusement. "You'd think, with all those James Bond movies available on video and DVD, they would have picked up on the flaw of talking the ear off your enemy instead of killing him outright." Her smile widened. "Not that I'm not grateful for their little egomaniacal rants, of course. Letting someone like Doom or Magneto prattle on about how insignificant we all are in relation to their vast intellects *does* give one more than enough time to think of an escape plan." The smile faltered. "But, seriously, Professor . . ."

"Your objection has been duly noted, Elisabeth," Xavier replied evenly, "but this discussion has reached its conclusion. We could debate the issue all day long, with arguments and counterarguments about the dangers involved in this mission, but I *have* made up my mind." His chair slowed, then came to a soundless halt; Betsy stopped as well. The Professor pointed ahead of them. "And now, it is time to inform Roma."

Betsy turned in the direction Xavier indicated. With a start, she saw that they had arrived at the entrance to the Supreme Guardian's throne-room.

Three white marble steps, each ten feet wide, lay in front of them, leading to a set of ornate doors twenty feet high, made of solid gold; both were decorated with the image of a blazing sun, rays of light streaming out to all the edges of the panels. In front of the doors stood a quintet of male guards—the first line of defense between Roma and anyone foolish enough to attempt seeing her without permission. All

were garbed in golden armor, white, ankle-length capes, and sky-blue tunics, the latter bearing the Guardian's symbol: three golden, interlocked ovals surrounded by a white circle. It always reminded Betsy of a "Hazardous Materials" symbol. In addition to the uniforms, the men shared a common background: all had been members of the Captain Britain Corps, promoted to their current stations by Roma for services above and beyond the call of duty.

One of the guards—a man with a lantern jaw, and shoulder-length red hair tied in a ponytail—stepped forward. "Good morrow, Professor," he said pleasantly, then glanced at Betsy. The smile he had shown Xavier flowed off his handsome features like ice melting under extreme heat. "Miss Braddock."

"Good morning, Alecto," Betsy replied, being overly polite. "Always nice to see you." She grinned devilishly, well aware of how much he disliked members of her family. "How's your hip? Still aching from the last time my brother came past here unannounced?"

The Captain of the Guard looked at her in disgust, then turned to the Professor. "Her Majesty is expecting you." He glanced over his shoulder and nodded to his men. They responded immediately, pushing on the massive doors, which opened soundlessly, and with surprising ease.

Betsy and Xavier mounted the steps, the guards moving aside to let them pass.

"I'll tell Brian you said 'hello,' the next time I see him," she said softly, just loud enough for Alecto to hear. She turned and blew him a kiss as she followed the Professor across the threshold.

If she hadn't been a hardened warrior, a woman trained in the ways of the ninja, and a powerful telepath who had been inside the minds of some of the world's deadliest villains and survived to tell the tale, the choice invectives that filled the captain's thoughts might have made her blush.

Inside, Betsy came to a sudden halt, mouth dropping open as she gazed in wonder at the throneroom. It had changed a great deal since the last time she had visited—when Brian had finally gotten around to marrying his shapeshifting girlfriend, Meggan—and she couldn't help but be impressed by the sheer size of the place. Clearly, Roma had picked up a sense of the dramatic from Merlyn, what with the massive design, cathedral-like atmosphere, and a ceiling that was lost in shadow. It gave the impression that you were about to have an audience with God.

She certainly is her father's daughter . . . at least in tastes . . . Betsy thought dryly, willing her feet to start moving again. She trailed along

behind Xavier, stealing glances at the shadows around them. If she looked out of the corners of her eyes, she could just make out the faint movements of creatures that lurked in the darkness—a second line of defense against the uninvited, it appeared. It seemed that Roma had upgraded, not just her private area, but her personal security, as well. A smile played at the corners of Betsy's lips. *I wonder if Saturnyne knows about this . . . ?*

Xavier stopped his chair at a respectful distance from the Supreme Guardian, who was standing at the darkened scrying glass, her back to them. It was the set of her shoulders that suddenly made Betsy feel uneasy—they hung loosely, as though slumped in defeat.

At Roma's side was Saturnyne, whose scarlet lips seemed chiseled into a permanent frown. She turned to face teacher and student, and grunted—a *very* un-Saturnyne-like response.

An inexplicable chill ran up Betsy's spine. Instantly, she created a telepathic link with Xavier. *Something's wrong, Professor . . .*

I surmised as much, Xavier replied. *But I don't think it's the right moment to press for answers. We'll just have to wait until—*

"It's all gone to hell!" Saturnyne said loudly, her words reverberating around the chamber.

"I beg your pardon?" the Professor asked; Betsy could tell he was surprised by her comment through the link. She quickly disconnected it, not wishing to intrude on his thoughts.

"I *knew* this was going to happen!" Her Whyness replied, ignoring his question. She snarled, and pointed an accusatory finger at Xavier. "I *knew* it would happen, but you *refused* to listen! You'd rather sacrifice all of Creation rather than destroy your precious world, *wouldn't* you? And *now* see where your selfish actions have—"

A hand lightly touched her shoulder. Saturnyne turned, eyes flashing with anger, only to see it was Roma who gently held her arm. Although Betsy couldn't see the expression on the Guardian's face, it seemed to quell the fire that raged within Her Whyness' breast. The Majestrix fell silent.

"Saturnyne, what are you talking about?" Betsy asked.

The white-haired lieutenant glanced at her superior; Roma nodded her approval, but said nothing. Saturnyne stepped forward, boot heels clicking loudly as she made her way across the transept to join the X-Man and her leader.

"See for yourself," Her Whyness said icily, gesturing toward the podium containing the omniversal crystals. Betsy and Xavier exchanged confused glances, then followed the Majestrix as she walked over to it, quickly mounting the short flight of steps right behind her.

As she reached the top step, Betsy saw Xavier's eyes widen in shock. His skin took on a sickly-white hue as she watched the blood drain from his face.

"A *very* bad day, indeed," he whispered hoarsely.

Seeing him like this made Betsy shiver; in all her time with the X-Men she couldn't remember ever seeing him act in such a manner.

"Professor . . . ?" she asked haltingly. When he didn't respond, she followed the direction of his unblinking gaze, to the collection of crystals that, as Brian had once explained to her, contained the life-forces of every dimension in the omniverse. These, too, she had last seen on his wedding day, and she had marveled at the purity of the quartz pieces.

But something was wrong with them now. A large number of the crystals—normally a brilliant white in color—were dotted with inky black spots.

"That doesn't look right . . ." Betsy said.

"Of *course* it's not right!" Saturnyne roared. "The Cube has infected a hundred realities already, and the taint is spreading to others!"

Now the reason for Saturnyne's hostile behavior, for Roma's solemn attitude, for Xavier's shocked expression, became clear to Betsy—and it terrified her. Back on Earth, Jean and Scott had told her of the threat the Cube posed to the omniverse, of how Roma might be forced to destroy their universe to save others, but the impact of that statement hadn't really struck her until now.

She began nervously chewing on her bottom lip as she gazed at the crystals. It was almost impossible to believe: a device no bigger than a child's toy, capable of wiping out whole dimensions? It was like something out of *Star Trek*, or *Doctor Who*.

And yet, she had seen for herself what the Cube could do in von Doom's hands, had fallen under the spell it had cast without even knowing it had happened. Was it so hard to believe, then, that the same wishbox that had so effortlessly made the villain's dreamworld a reality could just as easily tear apart other continuums, exterminate billions upon billions of innocent souls as its cancerous influence penetrated dimension after dimension, until the omniverse was thoroughly consumed?

Unfortunately, no, it wasn't.

The stains continued to spread across the infected crystals, further marring their once-pure facets. "Which is the one representing *our* dimension?" Betsy asked. She suddenly felt unable to breathe.

Saturnyne snorted. "Does it really matter? At the rate the reality-cancer is spreading . . ." The Majestrix slowly shook her head. "There's no point in destroying 616's crystal now. The damage is done. We've

lost." She gazed coldly at Xavier. "Are you happy now, Professor? *Your* world has been spared, for the moment . . . but millions *more* are now suffering because of our hesitation."

"Saturnyne, please believe me—this is *not* what I had in mind when I asked for the opportunity to send the X-Men back to Earth," Xavier replied. "All I wanted was a chance to put things right. If I had known what might occur—"

"You *still* would have fought for the continued existence of your dimension," the Majestrix interjected. She turned away from Xavier, head bowed. "I don't fault your intent, Professor," she said in a lower tone. "I have nothing against your world. I wasn't looking to punish it for some perceived slight against the cosmos, and I took no pleasure in petitioning the Supreme Guardian for the eradication of your dimension. But it is my duty as Omniversal Majestrix to maintain order throughout the length and breadth of time and space. *Your* universe was a threat to that order, and it should have been dealt with immediately, instead of being turned over to a bunch of costumed do-gooders whose intentions were well-meant, but inadequate to the task." She sighed. "I *wanted* your students to succeed, Professor. Unfortunately, they did not, and now we must pay the ultimate price for their failure."

Betsy stared at the crystals, her mind still reeling from the realization of what the Cube was capable of doing to the fabric of reality. "But . . . how can this be possible? Doom said the flaw in the Cube only affected its possessor."

"I thought you said you didn't believe that," Her Whyness responded, her back still turned to her and Xavier.

"I said I didn't believe he couldn't fix it," Betsy shot back. "But the mind-scan proved me wrong." She turned to Xavier. "Is it true, Professor? *Are* we too late?"

"No," said Roma, mounting the steps to join them. A look of fierce determination was etched on her exquisite features. "There *is* still time, my friends, but we must move quickly . . ."

He was alive; he knew that much. And for Victor von Doom, living meant there was still time. Time enough to learn all he could about this place to which he'd been brought; to learn about his captors, and how they had become involved in his affairs.

Time enough to plan his next strike.

The mutant telepath *had* come close to killing him, however; far too close for his liking. He hadn't felt death's gentle touch, coaxing him toward oblivion, in quite some time—not since his final battle with the Mandarin. What a glorious day *that* had been! The two longtime foes,

soaring high above the Great Wall of China, unleashing the full power of their weapons upon one another: von Doom, with his armor's death beams and concussive blasts; the Mandarin with his ten alien rings, each jewel-encrusted bauble capable of laying waste to an entire city. The war had gone on for days, neither combatant willing to concede defeat, neither side giving quarter, for both knew that only one man could rule the world. And in the end, that man had been Victor von—

But wait. That conflict had never actually happened. Von Doom knew this to be true—after all, it had been part of the history of the world he had formed with the Cube; a tiny bit of detailing added to fill a spot on the canvas on which he had created his masterpiece.

Why, then, should he be recalling some minor fantasy as if it were a true memory, when he already had a lifetime's worth of them from which to draw? Why did it seem so . . . so *real* . . . ?

"And how are we today?" asked a lilting male voice close by.

Von Doom slowly opened his eyes. A physician was standing over him, a broad smile lighting his elfin features; the tyrant surmised it was meant to be comforting.

He took an immediate dislike to the man.

"Doom lives," he said, his throat thick with phlegm, "despite the best efforts of his enemies to alter that situation."

"Excellent," purred the physician. "I must admit, it was a bit touch-and-go there for a while, when you were first brought in—" his smile broadened "—but from what I've been told, you're an extremely difficult man to kill."

"Where is the mutant?" von Doom demanded.

"The mu—? Oh, you mean the young lady who caused your mental seizure." The Chief Physician shrugged. "I imagine she's with the Supreme Guardian." His voice lowered to a friendly, conspiratorial murmur. "I understand there's some sort of omniversal crisis going on that requires Roma's undivided attention."

"Doom is aware of that, you fool," the monarch replied testily.

The physician stared at him thoughtfully for a few moments. "Hmm . . . I wonder if Doom is aware of *other* things . . ." he said mysteriously, then flashed a bright smile. "Tell me, would you mind chatting with one of our specialists? We had some . . . unusual readings pop up during our examination of you, and we're hoping you might be able to shed a little light on the matter."

The elderly despot glared at the man. "I will tell you nothing."

"I . . . see," the physician said slowly. "Perhaps later in the day?"

"*Leave me*," his patient said with a sneer. "And do not return unless I have summoned you."

The physician's eyebrows rose dramatically. "Ah. I see. I'm being dismissed, is that it?" He chuckled softly. "You humans—your heightened sense of self-importance never ceases to amaze me." He winked slyly at his patient. "I'll check in with you in a bit, after you've had a spot of breakfast." A wicked smile crawled across his features. "I'll ask the nurse to increase your dosage of bran—considering your advanced age and increasingly overbearing demeanor, you could probably use a—"

"*GET OUT!*" the tyrant bellowed.

Laughing softly, the physician turned on his heel and hurried off, presumably to continue his rounds.

"Cretin," von Doom muttered. He closed his eyes and rolled onto his right side, groaning softly at the momentary pain that flared up in his hip.

He was growing tired of this body, of its frustrating limitations—the slower speed, the blurring vision, the aches and pains in every joint. His mind was still active, still capable of orchestrating grand schemes, but the Cube had robbed him of his youth, his vigor. At the time, it had seemed a fair exchange—world domination for advanced aging—but that was before Lensherr and Xavier's meddlesome students had disrupted what would have been his last order for the Cube in the coming days: to destroy the world the moment after he had drawn his last breath. After all, why allow the dream to die, to let others tear down what he had worked so hard to build, just because the dreamer had departed on his final journey?

The chance had been stolen from him, though, and he had been forced to withdraw because he could not defend himself—yet another damnable limitation of this withering husk in which his mind was trapped. Had he been at full strength, von Doom would never have left the field of battle; he would have fought Magneto for possession of the Cube . . . and won. Instead, he had been struck across the face, cast aside like a piece of refuse, at the hands of a genetic inferior. The former emperor growled softly and pounded his fist once on the edge of his bed, more angry with himself for letting the Cube slip from his grasp than from any pain Magneto had been able to inflict upon him.

Patience, Victor, a voice suddenly whispered in his mind. You should not exert yourself so—not when there is still so much left to do.

Von Doom's eyes flew open. He raised his head and looked around, but the physicians—including that Scottish-voiced buffoon—and nurses were quite a distance away, at a monitoring station, and the beds around him were empty.

"Braddock?" he rumbled softly. "Is that you, mutant, picking up

where you left off? Invading my mind once more, seeking answers I do not have?" He closed his eyes, focusing his energies on erecting a mental barrier. "You will not find Doom unprepared this time."

Listen to me, Victor, the voice insisted; on closer examination, much to his surprise, it sounded exactly like his own. *Conserve your—our—strength; such actions will only weaken us further.*

Who are you? von Doom demanded.

Were I to tell you, the voice responded, *you would say I am lying. I am quite familiar with the workings of your mind, you see. But heed my words*, it said sternly, *or all will be lost. I am no creation of the Cosmic Cube, no figment of your imagination. It is only now, as this body slowly heals, with pain dulling your senses, that I have been able to pierce the layers of your mind and succeed in contacting you.*

The despot grunted. *And now that you have, phantom, of what use is a disembodied voice to me?*

A soft chuckle echoed through the depths of the former emperor's subconscious. *A great deal, when that voice can relate information concerning a certain palace that floats at the center of time and space, and the Guardian who resides there—a god-like being whose powers give her complete mastery over the forces of Creation itself. . .*

A sinister smile split the reed-thin lips of the elderly despot. *Continue, then, phantom. I am listening. . .*

"Pardon my ignorance, m'lady," Saturnyne asked, "but if the Cube has already begun ravaging the omniverse, *how* can you say there still may be time to combat its influence?" She glanced at the crystals, the one eye that was visible beneath her mountainous white hair widening in fear. "Unless you mean to destroy *all* the infected realities. . ." she whispered.

"Not at all, Saturnyne," Roma replied. "But my plan, you see, requires the use of the flawed Cosmic Cube." She turned to Xavier and Betsy. "I will need one or both of you to return to Earth and retrieve it for me."

"No, m'lady!" Saturnyne interjected. "You'd only be worsening the dilemma! By bringing the source of the reality-cancer here, to the very heart of time and space, you run the risk of complete omniversal destruction!"

"I am all *too* aware of the possible repercussions, Saturnyne," the Guardian replied. "Unfortunately, if I am to have any chance of excising this cancer, it must be done here, where my powers are greatest, where I will be able to draw upon the energies generated by the countless dimensions and, hopefully, use them to destroy the Cube."

“And if you’re *not* able to destroy the Cube?” Betsy asked, though she really didn’t want to hear the answer.

“It will be the end of everything,” Roma said. “The omniverse will collapse in upon itself, and in its place shall be . . . nothing.”

“Un-space,” Saturnyne said cryptically.

Betsy nodded morosely. It suddenly felt like some massive weight had settled in the pit of her stomach. “I . . . thought as much . . .” she murmured.

Roma turned to the Professor. “Are you ready to begin the journey, Charles Xavier?”

Betsy noticed that the color had returned to the Professor’s cheeks—a welcome sign in this troubling time. “You have merely to open the portal, Your Majesty,” he replied, “and Psylocke and I shall do as you ask.”

Roma nodded, a gentle smile bowing her lips; clearly, she was pleased by his enthusiastic response. “Then, my friends, let us begin . . .”

ONE HOUR later, they were ready to go.

Clad in black, bootcut leather pants, black Doc Martens, a white silk blouse, and round-lensed sunglasses, Betsy looked more like a resident of Manhattan's trendy Upper West Side than a member of the X-Men. That was the idea, of course—the last thing she and Xavier wanted to do was draw attention to themselves by having Betsy walk around Magneto's dreamworld in her eye-catching costume. Stealth was required for this mission, so plain clothes were the order of the day.

"Plain clothes." Betsy smiled. She'd been watching *Law & Order* reruns once too often, it seemed. If she wasn't careful, she'd soon be referring to super-villains as "perps" and "skells."

She'd thought about washing out the lavender dye in her hair as part of the disguise, going with her natural dark color, but found she didn't have the heart to do it. After having worn it that way for so long—a curious affectation she'd acquired during her brief career as a model—it was now as much a part of her identity as the crimson tattoo splashed across her left cheek—and *that* wasn't about to wash off. Besides, she still had four or five bottles of the hard-to-find dye under the bathroom sink, back in the apartment she shared with—

Betsy paused.

Say it, she told herself. With Warren. The apartment you shared with Warren. She exhaled sharply. *There. That wasn't so hard to do, now was it?*

Actually, no, it wasn't—which surprised her. She'd expected the ache that had torn at her heart to flare up again and send her spiraling once more into depression . . . but it hadn't happened. Maybe she was

starting to heal, after all. Or maybe it was the mission; focusing on it, as she had surmised, was deadening the pain . . . at least for a while.

Or maybe she was just holding back her emotions, waiting for the right moment to release them—like when she'd have her hands clasped around Magneto's throat, finally able to make him pay for his crimes . . .

"You look marvelous," Xavier said, gliding up to join her.

Betsy shook her head to clear her thoughts, and smiled. "Thank you." She noticed that he wore the same suit he had put on a short time earlier. "And *you* cut quite the dashing figure."

"What? In this old thing?" Xavier asked, feigning modesty. He smiled warmly. "Thank you."

The sharp sound of boot heels ringing on the tile floor caught their attention. They turned to see Saturnyne approaching. In one hand, she held a metal box no larger than a pack of cigarettes, its surface dotted with small lights, and one very large red button. She handed the box to Xavier.

"It's a recall device," she explained. "The temporal engineers at the Dimensional Development Court assure me it will work, even in the heart of the anomaly. Press the button, and a portal will open, bringing you back here."

"Simple enough to operate," Xavier said pleasantly.

The Majestrix snorted. "Only at my insistence. I know how little boys are with their toys, and this mission is delicate enough without some giddy technician adding unnecessarily complicated bits to it, like racing stripes, or a death ray generator, or a mini-toaster oven. It's a recall device, after all, not a Swiss army knife."

Betsy eyed her suspiciously. "I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop," she commented. "Simple the device may be, but what trouble might we be getting into once we use it?"

"Oh. Well, it's only good for one jaunt," Her Whyness said. "So try to refrain from activating it until you've got the Cube."

"And you don't consider *that* a complication?" Betsy asked.

The Majestrix shrugged.

Xavier cast a warning glance at Betsy; he obviously didn't want her to pursue the issue. "Thank you, Saturnyne—for both the device *and* the word of caution."

"Seeing that you have returned to the citadel, successful in your mission, will be thanks enough, Charles Xavier," Roma said as she joined the trio. "And now, it is time."

She raised her arms, then closed her eyes in concentration. A pinpoint of light appeared just beyond the tips of her fingers. As Betsy watched, the point became a swirling, kaleidoscopic vortex that grew

progressively larger until it was approximately the same size as the set of double doors leading into the throne room.

"Now, as I explained to your comrades when they embarked upon their mission," Roma said, "I will be able to return you to your world, but the energies of the Cosmic Cube have created a great deal of interference—it prevents me from controlling the entry point of the portal. You might emerge right beside the Cube when you step from the vortex . . . or find yourself on the wrong side of the planet."

Behind the dark lenses of her glasses, Betsy rolled her eyes. *Marvelous*, she thought.

"Regardless of where we make our arrival, Your Majesty," Xavier said, sounding cheerfully optimistic, "Psylocke and I *will* find the Cube. We *will* end this madness."

The Supreme Guardian nodded appreciatively, and waved a hand toward the blindingly-bright vortex. "Then step through the portal, my friends . . . and good hunting."

Xavier glanced at Betsy and smiled. "Are you ready to step through the looking glass, Alice?"

Betsy reached down to grab hold of the black carryall by her feet; it contained a few changes of clothes for them both, as well as a few choice weapons she had "borrowed" from an armory located near the citadel guards' barracks. She had insisted on bringing them, despite Xavier's protests about violence begetting violence; he was hoping to accomplish this mission through peaceful means. Betsy saw his point—really, she did—but, as she explained, she would have felt naked racing into battle without a razor-edged *katana* in her hand and a pair of *sai* hanging from her belt.

Of course, the Professor hadn't understood—he was a man. The importance of properly accessorizing one's outfits was lost on him.

Betsy's eyes narrowed, and her jaw set in fierce determination. "Let's finish this."

Together, they entered the portal. An instant later, it closed behind them, and the throne room was once more plunged into semi-darkness.

"I sincerely hope you know what you're doing, m'lady," the Omniversal Majestrix remarked.

"As do I, Saturnyne," Roma said softly. "As do I . . ."

"If *this* is as close to the Cube as she could get us," Betsy snarled through gritted teeth, "then we're in very big trouble . . ."

"I think you should be grateful the portal did not open above the Atlantic Ocean," the Professor replied. "After all, Roma *did* warn us of her inability to control it."

Betsy grunted, not really satisfied with that answer. While it was true the portal hadn't placed them in any danger, they'd stepped into a situation that was just as bad . . . in her opinion, at least. She snarled, and gazed in disgust at their surroundings. The vortex had deposited them on the deck of a barge that was being pulled down the East River by a tugboat.

A garbage barge, to be specific—one filled to capacity.

In the middle of a hot, humid, summer day in New York.

"I'd wager this type of thing wouldn't happen to one of the Avengers," Betsy muttered, doing her best to breathe through her mouth. She sighed. "We'll never get the smell out of these clothes."

Xavier wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Indeed. But we have much greater concerns at the moment than the odor of rancid fried chicken settling into our wardrobe."

Betsy nodded. "The Cube." An inquisitive eyebrow rose above the frames of her glasses. "Well, since you're mission leader, Professor, how do you think we should begin our search?"

"Well, I think the first order of business is to get off this barge—" Xavier grimaced as a gust of thick, hot air blew a moldy scrap of toilet paper past his nose "—as soon as possible. Then we'll need lodgings, so we can set up a base of operation from which to work."

"What about the mansion?" Betsy asked.

Xavier shook his head. "It may not exist in this reality, and we can't spare the time to find out. But even if it does, I'm certain Erik has taken steps to pervert its use in some way, if only to spite me." His lips drew together in a thin, bloodless line. "I . . . don't really want to find out."

Betsy saw the haunted look in Charles' eyes. The Westchester mansion—and the school for mutants that it housed—meant a great deal to him; probably more than she could imagine. It was the center of his universe—the place where he felt most secure; the launching pad from which his dreams of mutant equality had first taken flight. Having already lost his students to his greatest enemy, just the very *idea* that the school might have become a mockery of that dream seemed to have the Professor poised on the brink of a severe depression.

She loudly clapped her hands together, just once, to get his attention.

"*Right*, then," she said. "Time we were on our way."

Placing her hands on the Professor's hoverchair, she mentally summoned forth one of the powers she'd acquired from her exposure to the Crimson Dawn: the gift of teleportation. Tendrils of dark energy flowed from her pores, seeping through her clothing to pool at her feet. The substance spread outward, forming a perfect circle around her and the Professor as it pushed aside the foul-smelling trash that surrounded

the duo. Betsy noticed, with some amusement, Xavier's mildly concerned expression as he watched a midnight-black portal open beneath his chair. It was impossible to tell where it might lead—or what might lurk within its depths.

"Don't worry, Professor," Betsy said with a smile. "You won't feel a thing."

Xavier gazed at her suspiciously from the corner of his eye; clearly, he didn't believe her. "You know, that's exactly what my dentist said the time I went in for a root canal. I didn't believe him, either—and I was right, unfortunately."

They were moving downward now, sinking into the chilly darkness, Betsy glanced around at the garbage piled around them once last time, then turned back to the Professor. "Fried chicken, eh? I *wondered* what that was." She grimaced. "Now I know why I had that sudden urge for mashed potatoes and gravy. . . ."

Saturnyne's stomach growled.

Having left the Supreme Guardian in the throne room—per Roma's request for privacy—Her Whyness was on her way to her quarters when the rumbling had started. She looked around to see if any of the staff or visitors passing her in the corridor had heard the sound; if they had, they were apparently wise enough not to comment on it. That lack of reaction—caused, more than likely, by the fear she generated among them—pleased Saturnyne. It wouldn't do for an Omniversal Majestrix to have the citadel buzzing with talk about how, though she could command legions of soldiers in battle, she had no control over the noises made by her internal organs. It might make her seem fallible. Commonplace. Mindnumbingly ordinary. Like she was one of *them*. And that would *never* do . . .

"Special Executive?" called out a voice laced with more than a touch of the Scottish Highlands. "May I have a moment of your time?"

Saturnyne turned. Hurrying down the corridor after her was an odd little man in a surgical blouse and checkered pants. She recognized him as the Chief Physician from the medical wing, but couldn't remember his name—she had far more important things to do than try to remember the names of everyone who worked for the Supreme Guardian.

"I haven't gone by the title 'Special Executive' since I left the DDC, Doctor," she said, drawing herself up to her full height and looking down her nose at him. "You must address me as 'Your Whyness' now."

"Ah!" The physician smiled broadly, grabbed her right hand, and began vigorously pumping it up and down. "Congratulations! It couldn't have happened to a nicer Majestrix." As Saturnyne pulled her hand free,

he bowed his head slightly. "I apologize for my *faux pas*. It's just that it takes so long for news of anything to trickle down to the medical wing these days . . . I must never have received a copy of the notification."

Saturnyne frowned. "What did you wish to speak with me about?" she asked, hoping to move the conversation along before her stomach made another demand for food.

The Chief Physician unclipped a small, hand-held computer from the belt he wore under the green scrubs. "Now, I realize you don't have a full understanding of medical procedures, beyond whatever unnecessary bits of information the lads at DDC might have filled your head with when you worked with them . . ." He grinned broadly, seemingly unaffected by the icy stare he was receiving. ". . . but I'd like you to take a look at these readings, before I bring them to the Supreme Guardian's attention, and tell me what you see."

Saturnyne took the device from him and scanned the Information displayed on the small screen. "Who's the patient?"

"That *charming* elderly gentleman Roma sent down to me for treatment," the doctor replied sarcastically.

The Majestrix's visible eye widened in surprise. "*Doom?* These are *Doom's* readings?"

"Yes." The doctor smiled slyly. "Quite interesting, wouldn't you say?"

"You have a gift for understatement, Doctor," Saturnyne replied dryly. She pointed to one finding in particular. "Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"I really can't say that I have, Your Whyness," he replied. "But then, I've never met a man with *two sets* of thought patterns." He pointed to the computer screen. "And if I'm right—which I am invariably am—then, based upon these readings, which, before you ask, my staff has already checked and rechecked a number of times, it would appear we have a case of *two* versions of the same man sharing *one* body." He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Do you think the Supreme Guardian might be interested in this rather intriguing situation?"

The only response to the doctor's question came, unexpectedly and decidedly unwanted, from the Majestrix's burbling digestive tract.

"Well, *this* is something I never expected to see," Betsy commented.

From their vantage point on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, she and Xavier could see most of the island of Manhattan stretched out before them in the bright, noonday sun. The city didn't look all that different from how it normally appeared in the "real

world”—its streets congested with far too many vehicles, its sidewalks jammed with tourists, bike messengers, and food vendors—but there *were* changes, if you knew where to look for them. About the biggest that came to mind, once Betsy had focused on it, was the absence of superpowered beings. During the day, the skies were usually full of them—heroic men and women soaring high above the streets as they raced off to answer a call for help, or power-hungry villains recklessly zooming toward a confrontation with their most hated enemies. Now, though, the only occupants of the air were an assortment of birds and a number of traffic helicopters, the latter emblazoned with the logos of the television stations for which their crews were reporting.

The people were different, as well. Having lived in the city for a while now, Betsy had always been struck by the blasé attitude of New Yorkers toward the unusual; not even the first arrival of Galactus years ago had closed down Wall Street. But now, it seemed, even the *tourists* were taking everything in stride—those gathered on the observation deck hadn't reacted at all to the unexpected appearance of two mutants emerging from a pool of oily darkness right within their midst.

It was almost unnerving.

“I have to tell you, Professor,” Betsy said, “that, after all the clashes the X-Men have had with Magneto over the years, after hearing his endless diatribes about how *Homo superior* should be the dominant species on the planet, I was expecting concentration camps and armed stormtroopers, not clean streets and a harmonious society.” She glanced at her companion, and chuckled softly. “If I didn't know better, I'd think we were standing in the middle of *your* dream.”

“It *is* strange,” Xavier agreed. “Erik has been set in his ways for as long as I have known him. Based on our discussions, I never would have thought him capable of creating such a world.” He paused, and scratched his jaw, obviously deep in concentration. “However,” he said slowly, “now that I stop to think about it, there *was* a brief period, long before you joined us, when his views about dominating the world began to change. I had asked him to run the school during an extended leave of absence I was forced to take for health reasons.”

Betsy was nonplussed. “Just a moment. You put *Magneto* in charge of the school?”

Xavier nodded. “And he did an admirable job, from what the others told me . . . although it *did* take him quite some time to begin earning their trust.”

“No surprise there,” Betsy commented sarcastically. “It's amazing, though, that Wolverine didn't try to kill him, considering his intense hatred for the man.”

The Professor grunted. "Nevertheless, despite his initial setbacks, Erik was eventually able to work alongside Cyclops and the others. It seemed to have a beneficial effect on him—he changed. His obsession with punishing humanity for its harsh treatment of our kind began to dwindle, and, with the help of the X-Men, he focused his energies on finding ways to bring about peace between the races." A wisp of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "I imagine it had a great deal to do with having to interact with the students on a daily basis, with coming to better understand the very men and women he had been trying to destroy for so many years, and the dream in which they so strongly believed." The smile quickly faded. "Unfortunately, it was not meant to last." He sighed deeply, and gazed off into the distance.

Looking at his pained expression, it was obvious to Betsy that he somehow felt responsible for Magneto's return to his old ways. That, maybe if he'd tried harder, his former friend wouldn't have abandoned the slow, difficult path toward universal harmony that he'd started walking in favor of a far easier shortcut that led him back to violence as the best solution for eradicating prejudice toward mutantkind. She'd heard the Professor express similar thoughts over the years—absolute rubbish, in her opinion. Some people just couldn't help being what they were, including super-villains. If subjugating humanity was the only way the mutant overlord believed that peace could be achieved, then that would forever remain his focus until he reached his goal, no matter how many times Charles Xavier tried to convince him otherwise.

"And yet, Professor," she said, gesturing toward the city around them, "it's clear your arguments about trying to find a peaceful solution to the man-versus-mutant problem *didn't* fall on deaf ears." She shrugged. "Maybe all it took was some time for him to eventually realize that you had been right all along. Maybe, once he had the Cube in hand, he realized he didn't need to take out his aggressions on mankind; that he could do better than that. Maybe he just grew tired of all the fighting. The bottom line, though, is that he actually used the Cube's powers to do some good. Magneto might be the one in charge, but this is the closest realization of *your* dream that I've ever seen."

Xavier sighed. "Yes. And now, here I am, ready to tear down that dream because it presents a far greater danger than anyone could ever have imagined." He glanced at his lavender-haired companion. "There's a certain irony to the situation, don't you think?"

"It's not the *dream* that's dangerous, Professor," Betsy said, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. "It's the *dreamer*. And this isn't *your* dream, remember, no matter how close to it this world might appear;

good, bad, or indifferent, it's all *his*. And *that's* what's endangering the omniverse—not anything *you've* done."

The Professor reached up to pat the back of her hand. "I suppose you're right." He looked up at her, and smiled. "Thank you, Elisabeth."

She grinned. "Better you hear an encouraging speech from *me* than, say, from Wolverine. Logan would just tell you to 'get over it.' "

Xavier chuckled. "Indeed."

"Now, let's see about setting up that base of operations, shall we?" Betsy said. She dramatically waved a hand at the metropolis below them. "Somewhere down there is a hotel room waiting to be booked, and a hot shower guaranteed to wash away both our troubles *and* the nauseating stench of rotted food that has worked its way into our pores." She pointed to the crowd of tourists gathered around them. Both humans *and* mutants had drawn back as the hot summer sun warmed the X-Men's clothing, increasing the eye-watering odor that wafted up from the garbage-stained material by a factor of ten.

Xavier nodded. "We appear to have overstayed our welcome."

"Then, we're off," Betsy said. Instantly, another portal began to form beneath their feet.

The Professor grimaced. "If you don't mind my saying so, Elisabeth," he said uneasily, "perhaps a taxi cab might be an easier mode of transport—"

Any further words of mild protest that he might have been about to utter were quickly lost as the duo plunged into darkness.

The Stuyvesant Arms was not the type of hotel one would find listed in a visitor's guide to New York. Located on East Houston Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side, it had not yet benefited from the sweeping changes of gentrification that were slowly transforming its surrounding neighborhood. Once known for its high crime rate and drug trafficking, the area had become a mecca for trendy coffee shops, exclusive nightclubs, and chic, hole-in-the-wall art galleries. But the Stuyvesant—named after Peter Stuyvesant, the first mayor of New York, though no one on the hotel's staff was aware of that fact, or even cared about the man's place in history—was a throwback to an earlier time, when the city was a tad less civilized, and it wasn't out of the ordinary to hear gunshots ringing in the hotel's hallways, or hear of guests awakening in the middle of the night to find a rat the size of a mountain lion sitting on the edge of their beds, watching them with hungry eyes.

But that, of course, was back in the days when New York was nicknamed "Fun City." Times were different now . . . or so the city's administration often said. And yet, the more things change . . .

Sitting behind the registration desk in the hotel's dimly lit lobby, safely protected by a wire cage that kept some of the more . . . colorful denizens of the neighborhood from getting too close to him, Marty Keeler was a man who liked to dream of a better life—one where he dined in the finest restaurants, owned three or four mansions around the world, and traveled in style wherever he went. And women—there were always plenty of beautiful women populating his dreams, and each and every one of them thought he was the hottest guy on the planet. It was all a big joke, of course; he never really expected to see those visions become a reality. But for someone who used to be a lowly Morlock—a mutant who once lived with others of his kind in the abandoned subway and maintenance tunnels that ran beneath the city—dreams of power and wealth were all he had had in the years before Magneto's ascendancy to world leader.

Not that things had improved all that much for him *since* then.

That was another joke, that whole "equal partners" thing that Magneto and his followers espoused. The world might have become a much better place to live in, but that really only applied to the "beautiful people." Morlocks like Marty Keeler—with his pustule-covered face, sallow skin tone, and grotesque lack of dental hygiene—were still struggling to eke out a living, taking whatever jobs were available. After all, what kind of high-paying gigs were out there for someone whose genetic "gift" was spewing forth a corrosive acid from the boils that rose like tiny volcanoes above his unhealthy-looking complexion? It wasn't exactly the sort of power that got you a lot of dates; actually, Marty couldn't even remember the last time a woman—human or mutant—had even just gone to dinner with him.

But he could always dream . . .

"Excuse me," said a male voice from the other side of the cage.

Marty looked up from the tiny black-and-white television secreted under the desk . . . and found himself looking at the type of woman that, until this very moment, he thought only existed in the more creative recesses of his mind. He didn't care much for the purple dye in her hair, but, suprisingly enough, the unusual coloration didn't detract from her beauty; in an odd way, it actually enhanced it. There was something familiar about her; he could swear he'd seen her someplace before, but couldn't remember exactly where or when. A men's magazine cover, perhaps? Or maybe on an MTV awards show? She was a looker, though, whoever she was—long legs, supermodel face (he wondered what color her eyes were, behind those dark glasses), and a *great* body. If only she didn't smell like she'd been sleeping in a dumpster for a week . . .

"Can I help you?" he asked, leaping to his feet, his attention com-

pletely focused on her. *Where* had he seen her? Not knowing was starting to bother him, but he didn't think it'd look cool to come right out and ask. Besides, from the way she kept glancing over her shoulder, checking the front entrance as though she expected someone she didn't want to see to walk through the door, it was pretty clear she didn't want anyone to know she was here.

Had she been on a TV show? Yes, maybe that was it. But which one . . . ?

"We'd like a pair of adjoining rooms, if they're available," her male companion said.

Marty continued to stare at the woman, to the point where she began to appear uncomfortable. He couldn't help himself, though—he knew he was close to figuring out her identity, if he had a few more seconds . . .

"Sir?" the man said, a bit more pronounced.

Reluctantly, Marty forced himself to glance toward the guy. He was bald and middle-aged, with piercing eyes and sharp features. The suit he wore looked as expensive as the woman's outfit, and he was seated in some kind of wheelchair; the thing looked like it was actually floating a foot or so above the threadbare carpeting. Marty figured some women might consider the guy handsome; his sister, Estelle, certainly would want to have his baby if she met him. Still, he was nowhere as pleasing to the eye as the woman standing beside him.

"Huh?" Marty grunted.

"He said we'd like adjoining rooms," the woman replied, her voice low and throaty. She removed her glasses and smiled. "Can you help us?"

"Uh . . ." Marty said, suddenly at a loss for words. She had the most incredible lavender eyes—he could almost feel himself getting lost in their depths . . .

"The rooms?" the woman asked sweetly.

Marty shook his head to clear his addled thoughts. "Umm . . . sure, I can give you two together," he finally managed to say. Actually, after the last sweep the police had made on the hotel, clearing out the few remaining drug dealers in the area, he could have given them half a *floor* to run around in, but why bring that up? As Jerry Mardeck, the surly manager/owner of the Stuyvesant often pointed out, telling guests about the hotel's less than sterling reputation didn't do anything good for business—it just sent them heading for the nearest Salvation Army shelter as quickly as possible. "Will that be for an hour, or do you plan on staying longer?"

The man blushed slightly, which looked even more amusing to

Marty because the entirety of his bare head turned a light shade of crimson. "We'll be staying overnight, at least."

"Cool," Marty said. He pushed a well-worn book through the slot on the cage. "If you'll just sign the register . . ."

The man did the honors while Marty treated himself to another eyeful of the Asian beauty. She'd slipped her glasses back on, and returned to her door-watching duties. Now that he really thought about it, he was sure she was some kind of actress on an action series—he'd seen it at least once . . .

"You *do* have running water, correct?" she asked without turning around.

Marty nodded, then realized she couldn't see his response. "Yeah."

"Wonderful." The woman turned to face him, sliding the glasses to the end of her nose with one shapely finger. "I'm absolutely *dying* to toss off these clothes and climb into a nice, *hot* shower." She smiled wickedly. "I'm feeling *ever* so dirty."

Marty felt his knees go weak. He *just* managed to grab hold of the edge of the desk to keep from collapsing.

"Elisabeth . . ." her companion said in a warning tone.

Elisabeth? With a start, Marty suddenly knew where he'd seen the woman before. The hair color should have been a dead giveaway, but he hadn't been able to put two and two together until now—after all, why would a woman of *her* caliber be lurking around a skanky flop house just a few short blocks from The Bowery? But now it all made sense: the nervous glances at the front door; the sunglasses worn even in the semi-darkness of the lobby; the male "friend" who signed the register instead of her.

She was having an affair.

He didn't know who the man was—her manager, maybe?—and he didn't really care about his identity. What he *did* care about was the woman—now that he knew who *she* was, her presence here was *definitely* big news. Maybe it was even worth a few dollars to someone . . .

Flashing a shark's-tooth smile, Marty unhooked a pair of keys from a set of hooks mounted on the wall behind him, and slid them across the desk. "Here you go. Rooms 524 and 526. That'll be forty-five bucks."

The man, of course, was the one who paid and took the keys. "Thank you."

"Enjoy your stay," Marty said brightly.

The man nodded pleasantly and turned to his companion. Together, they crossed the lobby and entered the dingy elevator—there was just enough space in the car to accommodate the bald guy's wheelchair, or

whatever the contraption was supposed to be. With an ear-piercing grinding of gears, the door closed, and the car began its ascent to the fifth floor.

As soon as the new arrivals were on their way, Marty reached for the phone and quickly dialed a number.

"Thank you for calling WSLP," said a prerecorded female voice, "home of *Viewpoints* and the hard-hitting WSLP News Team. If you know the extension of the party you wish to contact, please dial it now. If not, stay on the line, and an operator will answer your call as soon as possible. And please be sure to watch *Viewpoints* with host Archer Finckley this Friday night at 9 P.M. on the East Coast, 6 P.M. on the West Coast, when his guest will be—"

"WSLP, how may I direct your call?" another female voice cut in; this one was live.

Marty looked over his shoulder, half expecting to find the woman standing on the other side of the cage. Thankfully, she wasn't. "Yeah, I'd like to talk to somebody in the newsroom," he said to the operator. "I think they might be interested in a story I've got to tell. It's all about a major TV actress—who's *married*—who's doin' the nasty with a guy—who's *not* her husband—in the hotel where I work *right now*." He grinned broadly. "I'll hold, if you want—I don't think the lovebirds are goin' anywhere anytime soon. . . ."

SHE FELT almost like a new person.

The shower had been an absolute godsend after that unexpected visit to the garbage scow; she hadn't even been bothered by the brown-colored water that spewed from the showerhead when she first turned the faucet. Now squeaky clean, lightly perfumed, and with a fresh shade of lavender applied to her hair, Betsy was ready to face the world once more . . . even if it wasn't really *her* world. Tucking a new silk blouse into the leather miniskirt she now wore, Betsy slipped into a pair of black leather high heels and headed for the door, grabbing her sunglasses along the way. She didn't really want to leave her belongings in a room with a lock on it that a child with a safety pin could open, but carrying around a bagful of weapons all day had become a burden—the muscles in her back had already started to protest, and her hands were reddened and tender from the straps cutting into her palms. She could do with some time off. Besides, she and the Professor would only be gone for a few hours while they did their research—the bag should be safe enough under the bed until she got back. And if anyone *really* wanted to steal from her, she *had* been nice enough to leave her previous outfit draped across a weatherbeaten armchair in a corner of the room—that should fetch a few dollars. She doubted anyone would *want* something that odorous, but then, this *was* New York . . .

She stepped into the hallway to find Xavier also exiting his room. His skin was still a little rosy from the heat of the shower, and he had changed into a light gray linen suit, white shirt, and dark blue silk tie.

“Ah,” he said. “I was just coming over to see if you were ready.”

“As ready as one can be, considering the conditions of this place.” Betsy waved a hand toward the worn carpeting—it may have been bur-

gundy in color when it was laid down, but it was hard to tell from the decades of dirt and food ground into its fibers—and the faded, peeling wallpaper. “*Really*, Professor—I know you wanted to avoid the more expensive hotels that would have required credit cards, and I know you want to avoid running into a situation that might make Magneto aware of our presence . . . but I think *this* is going too far.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” Xavier replied, “once you get past the cracked plaster and roach droppings. I’ve stayed in far worse surroundings. Remind me sometime to tell you about my lodging experience in Marrakech—you may wind up thinking this place is a paradise by comparison.”

Betsy wrinkled her nose in disgust. “No thanks—*this* experience is quite enough for me.” She looked up and down the corridor. “So, now that we’ve showered and changed our clothes, what’s the *next* plan of action?”

“Intelligence gathering,” the Professor replied. “We need to know how this world functions, where Erik is keeping himself, and how we might be able to get to him.”

“Well, I doubt this cozy little hostel has Internet access,” Betsy said, “so our best bet is a library or some sort of cyber-café. And given the neighborhood we’re in, there are probably a half-dozen of the latter within walking distance.”

“Excellent,” Xavier said. “I’m in the mood for a latté and a bit of web-browsing.”

They walked to the elevator, and Betsy pressed the DOWN button. A few moments later, they were rewarded with the familiar sound of gnashing gears that heralded the car’s arrival. Thankfully, no one was inside, so Betsy was able to squeeze into the tiny space left unoccupied by the bulky hoverchair. She pushed the button for the lobby, and the car began its slow descent.

“I hope that desk clerk has gone off-duty,” Betsy commented. “Did you *see* the way he was staring at me?” She shivered. “I was beginning to feel like a prize mare on the auction block. I’m amazed he didn’t ask to see the condition of my teeth!”

“I would imagine the notion of a woman of your obvious beauty coming into such a disreputable place such as this is unheard of,” Xavier said. “And, given the poor man’s physical condition, having such a woman carelessly throw double-entendres his way must have been a shock.” He frowned and shook his head. “‘I feel *ever* so dirty.’ It’s a wonder you didn’t send him into cardiac arrest.”

Betsy flashed that wicked smile of hers again, and chuckled in a *most* sinister fashion.

Xavier sighed. "It seems I can't take you anywhere . . ."

With a jolt, the elevator came to a halt at the first floor. Poorly greased rollers moved along their tracks, opening the door—and plunging the two X-Men into madness.

Lights flashed. People screamed. Momentarily blinded by the explosion of a strobe close to her face, Betsy staggered back, shielding her eyes with one hand while she fumbled in the breast pocket of her blouse with the other to grab her sunglasses.

"W-what's going on?" she stammered as she bumped into the back wall of the elevator.

"It appears we've been discovered," Xavier said morosely.

Blinking rapidly to clear her vision, Betsy began to make out a group of hazy shapes huddled in the lobby, all pushing and pulling and straining against one another. It reminded her of the strange creatures she had glimpsed lurking in the shadows of Roma's throne room. As her eyesight slowly returned to normal, she realized these shapes were actually dozens of people holding photographic and television cameras—and they were all calling her by name.

"Reporters . . . ?" Betsy muttered.

Beyond the legions of press and paparazzi, out on the sidewalk, was what seemed to be a street full of people. Like the news folk, they pushed and fought for the best position that would allow an unobstructed view of the hotel interior. Someone pressed up against a picture window pointed in Betsy's direction, and the crowd cheered.

Close the door! Xavier told Betsy through the mind-link.

She stabbed at the button, and the door started moving. But before it could separate them from the howling mob, a dozen arms slipped between the frame and the padded emergency panel that prevented the door from trapping passengers halfway in or out. The door opened wide, and the press corps poured in, pinning the two X-Men against the wall.

"Betsy! What brings you to New York?" asked a man with thinning hair sculpted into a hideous comb-over—a vain attempt to hide his increasing baldness.

"Aren't you supposed to be in New Zealand right now, working on your series?" a woman with collagen-injected lips demanded, shoving a microphone in Betsy's face.

Another man pointed an accusatory finger at the Professor. "Is it true that *this* is the man you're sleeping with?"

The question was like a slap in the face. Startled, Betsy looked to Xavier—*he* seemed to be in as much a state of shock as she.

"Does your *husband* know you're having an affair?" the reporter asked, following up his first unexpected question.

Betsy started. "*Husband?*"

"Get back, all of you!" Xavier roared. Much to Betsy's surprise, the mob complied, moving back a couple of steps. *Elisabeth, get us out of here!*

But what about—

If Erik doesn't know we're here by now, he will soon enough, Xavier interjected. Now, do as I say.

All right, Betsy replied, and triggered her 'porting ability. This should make for some interesting headlines . . .

It also made for interesting television, especially when the broadcast was seen by members of the teaching staff at the Lensherr Institute for the Genetically Gifted.

Unlike Charles Xavier's Westchester-based facility, this school was not only public knowledge, but after Jean Grey and Scott Summers' appearance on *Viewpoints* only a few days past, its web site and toll-free number had been flooded with an astonishing number of requests for more information from parents of mutant children. The institute was located on Ellis Island, near the New Jersey shore at the entrance to New York Harbor, and the buildings now housing its classrooms and dormitories had originally been used—from 1892 to 1954—for processing newly-arrived immigrants who had come to America in search of a new life. Erik Magnus Lensherr, his wife, Magda, and their daughter, Anya, had been among those "huddled masses, yearning to breathe free," as Emma Lazarus' 1883 poem "The New Colossus"—inscribed on a plaque on the nearby Statue of Liberty—had described these travelers arriving on a foreign shore. And when Lensherr eventually became the world's leader, he had commanded his "subjects" to transform the island into a learning center for his kind, partly from a sense of nostalgia, but mostly to send the message that the institute was a gateway, as Ellis Island had once been, to an amazing and wondrous new life; *this* entry point, however, would be used solely for ushering the genetically gifted into a wondrous new *world*.

A world controlled by the one mutant who had made it all possible.

Classes ranged from the basics—reading, writing, and arithmetic—to advanced Physical Education and science levels, all of which were designed to help the students understand what they were and how they could best reach their potentials in using their new powers. Based on their individual abilities, students were taught to fly, or run faster than the speed of sound, or teleport short distances with just a thought, or even read minds.

And then there was the final test. Ten levels below the Main Build-

ing was an area called the “Danger Room,” where the most advanced students were expected to show how well they had learned to control their abilities during their time at the institute. It was a two-hour session in the Danger Room at the end of four years that separated the graduates from those who would be left back. An inexperienced mutant, the faculty often pointed out, was a danger not only to the mutant, but to the rest of society as well, and a student who didn’t learn that lesson the first time would not be allowed to graduate until it had fully sunk into their minds.

Dozens of powers to work with; thousands of young minds to mold. It was a terrifying responsibility, but Lensherr knew *just* the mutants for the job. He had personally selected the staff members—*why* he had chosen the people he had was a topic he refused to discuss—and was pleased to see how well they responded to his orders, and how successful they were in keeping the spirit of his dream alive.

Cyclops. Phoenix. Nightcrawler. Rogue. Storm. In the past, they had all sided against him as members of the X-Men, causing him no small amount of trouble over the years. But now, their codenames forgotten, their identities reconstructed, their minds reconditioned, they worked for Magneto—their greatest enemy—and followed his instructions with blind obedience . . . because he willed it to be so. And the Cube had made it all possible.

Ah, he often wondered, what would Charles think of his most trusted followers now . . . ?

The answer would not be long in coming.

It was just after four o’clock that the day became *really* interesting. Classes had ended. And as the students filed back to their dorm rooms to eat and begin their homework assignments, some of their teachers headed for the staff lounge to unwind, catch up on small talk with their peers, and watch a little television before heading for their apartments on the other side of the island, or traveling to Manhattan for a quick dip in the nightlife.

Acrobatics instructor Kurt Wagner was one of those teachers. In his mid-twenties, dressed in a skintight uniform—consisting of a red bodysuit, over which were worn purple gloves, boots, and trunks—he was one of the more unusual members of the staff, and it had nothing to do with his clothing, since all the teachers wore the same type of outfit. It did, however, have everything to do with the fact that his hair and the short, fuzzy fur covering his body were colored a deep blue, his hands and feet only had three digits each, and he possessed a three-foot-long, prehensile tail, which had grown from a spot just above his buttocks. Combined with bright yellow eyes and sharp, white fangs, his overall

appearance was less like that of an educator, and more like that of a demon set free from hell.

Oddly enough, it was a look that made him incredibly appealing to women—something about “good” girls being attracted to “bad” boys, he’d once been told. He’d never understood that particular psychological aspect of dating, but he *did* know that his sinister appearance seemed to fill all the requirements. And, even though he was really the epitome of an old-fashioned gentleman—well, who was he to disappoint a lady and her expectations?

He was a rare catch, indeed: suave, well-mannered, highly romantic, he had an adorable German accent, and, most importantly, he was single. What woman *didn’t* want to bed him?

Well, for one, there was the woman he found sitting on the leather couch in the lounge. Boot heels resting comfortably on the teak coffee table in front of her, a bag of barbecue-flavored potato chips in her lap, Rogue—no one had ever been able to find out if that was her real name—thought Kurt was cute, maybe even sexy, but she just wasn’t attracted to him; and he, being a gentleman, never pressed the point.

Like her blue-furred peer, Rogue wore a red-and-purple uniform, but hers was complemented by a worn, brown leather aviator’s jacket, befitting her title as “Flight Instructor” for those students capable of defying the laws of gravity, but still getting used to their powers. Her waist-length mane of dark-brown hair—its color offset by a large patch of white that started just above her forehead and ran down the center—was in a state of disarray, which was to be expected, considering the amount of time she spent during the course of the day zooming through the skies above the island with her classes.

Shoveling another handful of chips into her mouth, Rogue chewed noisily, her attention focused on the flatscreen television mounted on the wall across from her. There was some sort of courtroom scene being played out in the broadcast she was watching, the cameras focused on a female judge who was yelling at one of the two litigants standing before her.

“*Hey!*” the judge barked. “You think I was born yesterday?” She pointed to her forehead. “Does it *say* ‘STUPID’ here?”

“Catching up on the latest adventures in jurisprudence, *meine freunde?*” Kurt asked with amusement.

Rogue turned from the set and smiled wearily. “Hey, Kurt—how’d it go today?” she asked, her normally throaty Southern drawl sounding unusually flat. Picking up the remote from the cushion next to her, she lowered the volume on the television. As he drew closer, Kurt could

see her features were strained, a dull light shining in her eyes. She looked exhausted.

“Better than it did for *you*, it seems,” Kurt replied. He sat down beside her. “What happened?”

Rogue brushed broken pieces of chips off her uniform and, groaning softly, shifted position to face him. “Well, a couple’a the kids decided to have a race t’see who was faster when my back was turned. I didn’t even notice they were gone ’til they were almost halfway t’Manhattan, an’ then I had t’go an’ chase ’em all the way to Battery Park.” She reached up to rub the area between her shoulder blades; the pain was apparently severe enough to make her bite down on her bottom lip and grunt. “Got so focused on gettin’ my hands ’round their scrawny little necks I didn’t even see that freighter comin’ down the Hudson ’til it was too late.”

Kurt raised an eyebrow in surprise. “I would not think something as large as a *ship* would be difficult to miss.”

Rogue glared at him. “I *told* you I wasn’t payin’ attention.”

“So you did,” Kurt said hastily. He knew all too well that flight was not the only mutant power his friend possessed: she was also virtually indestructible, and had enough strength that, if she became angry with him, could easily result in him being thrown through a wall—and into the harbor. “Are you in much pain?”

“It only flares up when I’m movin’ around,” Rogue said through gritted teeth. “Or breathin’.”

Kurt smiled warmly, and waved his hands at her, indicating she should turn around. “May I?”

Rogue grinned and nodded gratefully, then moved to turn her back to him. Kurt began easing the walnut-sized knots out of her back with the skill of a trained masseur. She moaned softly in appreciation.

“So, what did your hellraisers say when you finally caught up with them?” Kurt asked.

“‘We’re so *sorry*, Mistress Rogue,’ ” she said in a whiny, nasally voice. “‘We’ll never do it again.’ ” She snorted. “Like I’d believe the little polecats after this.”

Kurt’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “‘Mistress Rogue?’”

“Yeah,” she said wearily. “It’s somethin’ the boys started callin’ me, an’, y’know, I’m gettin’ kinda tired of that crap. Makes me sound like a dominatrix or somethin’.”

Kurt playfully hung his head over Rogue’s right shoulder to gaze down at the latex-like uniform she wore, and the way it hugged her considerable curves. “I do not know where they’d *ever* get *that* idea.”

Rogue laughed. “*You’re* one t’talk, Kurt Wagner. I’ve *seen* the way

the girls in your classes look at you when you're hoppin' all over the gymnasium." She reached back to poke his knee with her thumb. "That outfit don't leave a whole lot t'the imagination, either."

"Yes, I know." Kurt sighed dramatically. "But if I am to be objectified by young women, then it is a burden I am willing to bear for the good of the school." Still working on her shoulders, he shifted his gaze to the flatscreen television. "What exactly are you watching now?"

Rogue turned her head in the direction of the set. "Hey, that ain't *Judge Judy*."

A ruggedly handsome, sandy-haired man sitting at a news desk had replaced the courtroom scene. In the upper right-hand corner of the screen, near the reporter's head, was a publicity photograph of a woman with light purple hair and a jagged, J-shaped mark across the left side of her face, dressed in what looked like a blue swimsuit, and holding a pair of samurai swords, the blades crossed in front of her chest to form a razor-edged "X."

Kurt leaned forward, his attention focused on the story. "Could you raise the sound, please?" Rogue pushed the volume control on the remote.

"—we'll have a story about television star Elisabeth Braddock's unexpected appearance in a Lower East Side hotel this afternoon, and her mysterious disappearing act before a roomful of reporters," the broadcaster was saying. The newsroom shot cut to a videotaped replay of a bald-headed man and the same, lavender-tressed woman in an elevator; they were trying to conceal their faces from the camera, but there was nowhere for them to hide in the cramped space.

Rogue pointed at the screen. "Hey, it's that girl from that . . ." She paused, waving a hand as though encouraging a memory to come to the front of her brain. After a couple of seconds, she snapped her fingers. "Yeah, I know—that *Kwannon*, *Bushido Mistress* TV show! The kids are always talkin' about it."

"*Freeze that picture!*" Kurt yelled, gesturing wildly at the television.

Rogue punched another button on the remote, and the jumpy image recorded by the hand-held camera providing the shot came to an abrupt, slightly unfocused halt. "What's the matter?"

Kurt slowly rose from the couch and moved toward the television, staring hard at the screen. "That man . . ." he said quietly. Eyes widening in surprise, he pointed to the grainy image of the man in the hi-tech wheelchair. "It *is* him!"

"Him who?" Rogue asked.

Kurt turned to face her. "Don't you remember the man Erik warned

us about? The mutant terrorist he said would try to tear down everything Erik has spent a lifetime building? The one who'd send us plunging back into the old days of prejudice and hatred?"

"Xavier . . ." Rogue whispered.

Kurt nodded. "We'd better inform Scott and Jean of this. If Xavier *is* here, in New York, then it must mean he's getting ready to strike." His jaw set in determination. "*We'll* have to strike first. . . ."

K WANNON, *BUSHIDO* Mistress? What sort of nonsense is *this*?"

Betsy stared in annoyance at the computer screen at the station in which she sat beside the Professor. After escaping the madness in the Stuyvesant Arms lobby, she'd directed the exit point of their spatial jaunt to the rear of the main branch of the New York Public Library, on Fifth Avenue, deciding to forego any cyber-café appearance that might result in another riot. A quick trip to the ladies' room after their arrival, and Betsy had concealed her attention-getting crimson tattoo beneath a layer of makeup, tied her hair back in a severe ponytail so the strands would look a little darker grouped together, and slipped on her sunglasses. Minor changes, but hopefully they'd be enough to conceal her identity.

Maybe I should have washed out the dye . . . she'd thought glumly.

A short time later, they'd gotten access to a computer with Internet capabilities and started researching the world of Magneto. They'd been quite surprised when they'd discovered the reason for the wild scene at the hotel.

"Well, it *does* explain why all those people were camped out in the lobby and the street—you're a television star with a highly successful syndicated series, and legions of fans across the globe," Xavier replied.

Betsy sighed. "So much for traveling incognito . . ."

Xavier nodded. "Indeed. Our pictures must have been broadcast via television and the Internet three times around the world by now." He frowned, and pinched the tip of his chin between thumb and forefinger. "However, it *doesn't* explain why you should have a duplicate on this world. Based on what you've told me, you departed with von Doom *before* the Cosmic Cube had an opportunity to restructure you to fit

within the scope of Erik's plans. Therefore, there shouldn't *be* another Elisabeth Braddock in existence, beyond the possibility that another woman would have the same name . . ."

"But it certainly doesn't explain *this*." Betsy gestured toward the screen, and the picture displayed on it. The full-color, digital photograph had been taken, according to its accompanying caption, at a party in Santa Barbara, California, just two months ago. There were a number of celebrities in the shot, mingling with politicians and their families. A bright red banner, strung across the back of the hotel ballroom in which they were all gathered, read HAPPY 40TH, HENRY! in canary-yellow letters.

And standing in the center of the picture, an arm comfortably wrapped around the waist of TV star Elisabeth Braddock, was a ruggedly handsome, blond-haired man in his twenties. He cut an elegant figure in his dark-gray Armani suit, but he looked more like an angel than the multi-millionaire that he actually was, his smile bright and boyish, his wings a brilliant white, spread wide like a feathered backdrop against which he and the *Kwannon* star stood.

His name was Warren Worthington III, and he was—as evidenced by the golden bands encircling the third fingers on the couple's left hands—Elisabeth's husband.

He was also, it appeared, very much alive.

"That sick monster," Betsy said through gritted teeth. Her eyes flashed with unbridled anger. "Not only does he *kill* the only man who ever really meant anything to me, but then he goes so far as to *resurrect* him—and for what? So he can have the chance to do it all over again?" She fell silent, then, and just sat there for a while, staring at the photograph. Slowly, her expression softened. "I remember this party—it was for Senator Gyrich's fortieth birthday, and it happened last year, not two months ago. Warren asked me to sing a couple of numbers to get the party going. . . and then Gyrich pinched my bottom as I headed for the stage." She snorted derisively. "The little toerag."
"Elisabeth."

Betsy turned from the monitor to face the Professor. "Yes?"

"That's the second time now you've mentioned an event at which I *know* you were never present," Xavier replied. "Or, to be more accurate, an event I know never happened at all."

Confused, Betsy stared at him for a moment. "What are you talking about?" she finally said.

The Professor pointed to the picture on the monitor. "This party you remember. Henry Gyrich isn't a United States senator—he's a government liaison who, as much as he likes to remind people that

he despises superpowered beings, usually works with the Avengers from a Washington, D.C. office. I'm certain the man has political aspirations—what person living there *doesn't* have them?—but right now he's nothing more than a glorified pencil-pusher."

An inquisitive eyebrow rose above the frames of Betsy's sunglasses. "Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely," Xavier replied. "And these singing engagements you keep mentioning—I know you've performed once or twice at Warren's nightclub in Manhattan, but you've never made a *career* out of it. You've been far too busy with your duties as an X-Man."

Betsy's mind was reeling. "But, then . . . why do I remember them so clearly?" She shook her head. "No—you're wrong. I *know* that they happened—"

"*On von Doom's world*," Xavier interjected. "Don't you see, Elisabeth? You're recalling events that were essentially works of fiction—minor details among millions of others that helped to flesh-out von Doom's fantasy realm. Your love for Warren was real—everything else was fabricated by the Cube as it reached into your subconscious and brought forth a personality that would be more in line with the world it was creating. An Elisabeth Braddock with no psychic abilities, no memory of being an X-Man, no knowledge of the depths of evil to which von Doom is capable of sinking in order to have his way."

"But *Jean* was the one who restored all my memories," Betsy insisted. "Are you saying she didn't do a complete job of it?"

Xavier shook his head. "No, but I *am* saying that these false recollections may be a sign that you're still under the Cube's influence." He frowned. "Perhaps you shouldn't have come . . ."

Betsy glared at him. "You were *not* leaving me behind. Your 'friend' has done quite enough damage to all our lives—it's time he's stopped once and for all."

"This is *not* a mission of *vengeance*, Psylocke," Xavier said sternly, "but one of *mercy*. The dimensions the Cube has infected need our help—and I need *you* to focus solely on the task set for us." His eyes narrowed, and he leaned in close. "You may have been able to attack von Doom by catching me with my guard down—my error, for expecting *better* of you, even under such trying circumstances—" Betsy flinched; the heated comment had struck her like a slap to the face—"but do not think that I will allow it to happen a second time when we confront Magnus." He paused.

"I loved Warren like a son, Elisabeth," he said softly. "I *know* the pain you're suffering; there's a heaviness in *my* heart, as well. But

the chances of failure here are too great for us to allow vendettas to distract us from our goal. I realize you're angry, and you're hurt, and you'd like nothing better than to lash out at Erik and make him pay for the atrocities he's committed . . . but you *know* that's *not* how we do things in the X-Men." He gently placed a hand over one of hers. "And it's not how *Warren* would want you to act."

Betsy slowly nodded, unable to look him in the eye. "You're right, of course. It's just that . . . it's just so damn hard to . . ." She inhaled sharply, then slowly exhaled through her nostrils, forcing herself to remain in control. "I apologize."

"As do I," Xavier said. "I didn't mean to take such a cheap shot at you. I *know* what to expect of you, Elisabeth—and you've *never* disappointed me."

"Thank you," Betsy said softly. Slowly, she raised her head. "Shall we continue?"

Xavier nodded, and smiled. "By all means. However, the source of these strange memories, and any reasons Erik may have for creating twins of you and Warren, will have to be examined later—right now, we still have a great deal of work to do." Fingers skipping across the keyboard, he entered the `LOCATE` field of the search engine they were using and typed in a request for information on the mutant overlord. "Let's see what *else* we can learn about this world . . ."

It was certainly an education. The end of wars, famine, racial intolerance. Mutants and humans living side-by-side in harmony. The building of a worldwide community dedicated to the sanctity of peace and understanding for one another.

"Incredible," Xavier muttered, hours later. He rubbed his tired, red-rimmed eyes. "He's accomplished so much with the Cube, changed so many lives for the better." He shook his head in astonishment. "It's absolutely amazing."

"But let's not forget, Professor," Betsy pointed out, "that, in order to bring about such peace and harmony, he's *also* used the Cube to take control of everyone on the planet . . . *including* our friends." She pointed to an article from *Time* magazine that glowed brightly on the computer screen. "This shared, worldwide dream mentioned in everything we've read is obviously Magneto's explanation for how he started manipulating their minds. It's easy to think of him as a great peacemaker when he's eliminated hatred towards mutants by rewiring everyone's brains." She sneered. "*We're* the only ones who know what a monstrous, murdering creature he truly is."

Xavier nodded slowly, but it was clear he was saddened by having

to agree with that description of his once-friend. He exhaled sharply. "And yet, if there was only some way to preserve part of what he's done. To lose so much, after we've seen what heights the people of the world are capable of achieving, once they've come to understand our kind . . ."

Betsy gently placed a hand on his arm. "Professor . . ." she said quietly.

Xavier fell silent, then slowly smiled. "Yes, I know—now, *I'm* the one who's lost focus on the mission." He sighed.

"It happens to us all, you know," Betsy said, and grinned broadly.

Xavier chuckled. "I suppose."

"All right, so we know Magneto is living in Paris with his family," Betsy said. "Now, all we need to do is force him to give us the Cube, and take it to Roma so she can sort out this whole bloody mess."

Xavier nodded in agreement.

"But first we'll need to recover my gear from the hotel."

The Professor frowned. "That might not be possible. Knowing how the media works, I would imagine the hotel is literally crawling with representatives of the Fourth Estate by now."

"It will only take a minute," she politely insisted. "Come on, Professor—I didn't load up that carryall with the tools of my trade and drag it around the city so I could leave it behind now." She grinned broadly, like a child excited about what she found in her Christmas stocking. "Besides, I was just getting used to the *katana*—it's got an incredibly delicate balance. I've never held one like it. I'd hate to lose it before I got a chance to try it out."

Xavier shook his head. "I really don't think it's wi—"

An elderly man in the next booth leaned back. "Hey! Pipe down over there!" he whispered hoarsely. "This is a library, not a bar—ya wanna yak it up, go outside!"

Betsy leaned over to speak with him. "Sorry," she said quietly, and smiled. "We didn't mean to disturb you."

The man stared at her for a moment, then his gaze began a slow descent, taking in her tight-fitting clothes and the hourglass shape of her body, finally lingering a bit on her legs. Slowly, he looked up and grinned. "'Sall right," he whispered.

Betsy gently patted the man on the shoulder. "Thank you."

He nodded, then turned back to his computer. As she moved to rejoin the Professor, Betsy caught a glimpse of the man out of the corner of her eye—he was leaning back to get another appreciative look.

She chuckled softly. *What's that saying the Americans have?*

"Take a picture—it'll last longer?" *Bet he wished he'd brought along his Nikon . . .*

"Very well, Elisabeth," Xavier said. "We'll recover your 'gear.' But we can't stay too long—there's a far greater chance now that Erik may have dispatched his minions to capture us. I'd rather we meet him on *our* terms."

"I'll be quick about it," Betsy replied. "In and out before anyone even knows we've been there." She looked over her shoulders in both directions—no one was paying them any mind, and the old man had gone back to surfing the Web, or whatever it was he'd been doing before he became involved in their conversation. "Let's go."

And with that, they plunged into darkness.

Somewhere beyond the boundaries of time and space, another darkness of sorts was forming.

In the medical wing of the Starlight Citadel, for the first time since Merlyn had created the facility hundreds of years ago, the staff received an unusual—and most welcome—visitor: Roma, Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse. She was accompanied by a retinue of guards and the always tension-creating presence of Saturnyne. It wasn't some kind of surprise inspection, or any sort of annual physical Roma needed to undertake. She was here to examine the facility's lone patient, and to learn the meaning of the strange test results gathered by the physicians.

She was grateful for the distraction. Anything that could pull her away from the throne room and the constantly depressing sight of the reality-cancer spreading unchecked throughout the dimensions she was no longer able to protect was most welcome, indeed. A medical mystery was as good a diversion as anything else that might pop up while she waited in agony for Professor Xavier and Elisabeth Braddock to complete their mission.

The odd little man with the checkered slacks and the wide, friendly grin bowed dramatically as Roma and her party approached. "It is an honor and a rare privilege, indeed, Your Majesty, to have you visit our humble facility."

Saturnyne rolled her eyes in disgust and snorted.

"I understand you are in need of my assistance, Doctor," Roma said pleasantly. "And so, here I am." She glanced at von Doom, who was propped up in his bed, arms folded across his chest, staring at her with as much open contempt as she was staring at him. There were straps binding his arms and legs to the sides of the bed—obvi-

ously, he'd tried to escape. "Saturnyne has shown me your findings, and you were correct—they *are* quite intriguing."

"I thought you might agree." The little man sidled closer. "And since you do, Your Majesty, I was hoping to obtain your permission for a small experiment. It might aid in our quest for answers to this most puzzling situation."

"It would depend upon how 'small' your experiment is, Doctor," the Guardian replied. "I am not of a mind to allow you to do anything that might jeopardize the well-being of the citadel and its citizens."

The doctor shook his head. "Oh, no—nothing quite that grand, Your Majesty. No, what I have in mind involves our patient, Mr. von Doom—"

"Lord Doom, you nattering jackanapes," the elderly dictator snapped.

The doctor nodded obligingly. "Yeess . . . Lord Doom, and a multiphasic crystal accelerator."

Saturnyne raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Planning on a bit of vivisection, Doctor? Shouldn't you have permission from your patient before you go slicing him up like a loaf of bread?"

"Believe me, Your Whyness," the doctor replied testily, "I *have* tried to get it. But if what I suspect is true, we won't need it. The accelerator should provide the answers we need, while still leaving the patient unharmed."

"And your patient was less than willing to comply with your initial request for his participation?" Roma commented. She smirked. "I find that sort of response hard to believe, coming from a man so dedicated to science as he."

The doctor rolled his eyes dramatically. "The patient, Your Majesty, has been less than willing to do *anything* more than bark orders at my staff, and the only *dedication* he's shown has been toward tapping into the depths of his mental thesaurus to come up with new and increasingly complex combinations of invectives to hurl at me. I dare say some of them might even make a *sailor* blush."

"I see," Roma said. She gazed at von Doom, and a wicked smile turned up the corners of her lips. "Well, Doctor, we would not be assembled here this day, wondering if the omniverse can survive one more hour, were it not for the unmitigated *arrogance* of our guest in thinking that he can play at being a god." She turned back to the physician. "Therefore, I am *more* than willing to give you permission to conduct whatever experiments you think are necessary. Please proceed."

"*Spawn of the devil!*" von Doom roared, pulling at his restraints.

He pointed a bony finger at her. "Listen well, daughter of Merlyn: Doom *will* have his revenge upon you, *and* that white-haired lackey of yours! Before this day is done, *all* of you shall be begging for your worthless lives!"

"Dear me, m'lady," Saturnyne quipped. "You seem to have gone and upset him."

Roma smiled maliciously. "A pity." She glanced at the physician. "Doctor?"

The doctor bowed once more. "Thank you, Your Majesty. We'll begin shortly."

"And *I* shall be there to watch," Roma said. "*Every* moment of it." Her smile broadened. "After all, we would not want anything to happen to our guest before we learn the truth . . . would we?"

The ominous tone in which she made that statement caused even Saturnyne to feel a chill race up her spine.

The multiphasic crystal accelerator was another invention of Merlyn's. As a multidimensional being who traveled from one continuum to the next, he had been surprised to discover that there were forces in existence that could harm even *him*, in those centuries before he learned to control all his god-like powers. Using the crystalline technology developed by his father to contain the life-forces of the different dimensions, Merlyn constructed the accelerator as a means to repair the various injuries he receiving during some of his early adventures. Essentially, the energy released by the device would open a minor ripple in the space/time continuum, which would then be directed at the wound in need of repair. The rift separated the damaged tissue from Merlyn's body and shunted it elsewhere, leaving behind healthy tissue. It had worked wonders for him over the course of millennia.

However, it had never been used on a *human* before . . .

A short time after the conference in the infirmary, the players involved reconvened in one of the medical wing's larger laboratories—larger, in this case, meaning it was roughly the size of a warehouse. Roma and Saturnyne sat in an observation booth one floor above the work area. They were joined by the doctor, who was there to monitor the patient's vital signs, and to make certain nothing went wrong with the powerful device they were about to activate.

Down on the floor, the other med-staff members were busy finalizing preparations, lining up the pressure tube of the accelerator and consulting its pre-ignition checklist. In the center of this hive of activity, an angry von Doom stomped back and forth across the glass chamber into which his guards had placed him—none too gently. His

lips were moving, but at this height, it was impossible to hear what he was saying; more colorful phrases about his captors, no doubt.

"Now, then, Your Majesty," said the doctor, "everything has been made ready. The procedure won't take all that long—by its conclusion, we'll hopefully have an answer to our intriguing little mystery of the twin brain patterns."

"Splendid, Doctor," Roma said. "You may begin."

At a cue from the physician, the medical technicians below activated the device. Switches were thrown, buttons pushed, and the room filled with the sound of the accelerator cycling up to full power. As the Supreme Guardian and her entourage watched, a series of emerald-hued lightbeams shot from the pressure tube and began playing across von Doom's body, head to toe, first vertically, then horizontally. He was being scanned.

"All right," the doctor said, checking the readings from the accelerator, "everything looks normal... given the circumstances. I think we're ready for Phase Two." He nodded to the technicians.

Further calibrations were made to the controls. The roar of the accelerator increased in volume.

The chamber in which von Doom stood filled with light. The former emperor stiffened, his head snapping back as the energy of the crystals poured through him, building in intensity until the bright green illumination not only surrounded him, it also poured from his open mouth and eyes.

And then von Doom split in two.

It wasn't that his body fell in twain; it was that a *second version* of the tyrant—a more powerful-looking version, whose face was obscured by a metal faceplate—separated from the old man. With a shared groan, both Doctors Doom tumbled to the floor.

Immediately, the technicians shut down the accelerator. At the direction of Dr. Stanton, his fellow physicians rushed over to help the men from the chamber and onto stretchers, where they began monitoring their vital signs.

"By the blackened soul of my father," Roma whispered, eyes wide with shock. "Now it all becomes so clear..."

"M'lady?" Saturnyne asked, clearly worried by her superior's attitude.

Roma turned to face her. "Do you not understand, Saturnyne?" She gestured to the semi-conscious figures. "Two Victor von Doods—one contained within the body of the other. One in his prime, one long since past."



"I can see that, m'lady," Her Whyness replied. "Obviously, one of them is the *real* von Doom, but whi—"

"No!" Roma shouted. "Both are real, Saturnyne!" She pointed to the new arrival. "This is the Victor von Doom of Earth 616, as he has always been, unaffected by the power of the Cube." She gazed at the older version of the despot. "And *this* man is an alternate von Doom, whose body has been ravaged by the cosmic energies he tried to control."

It took a few moments for the realization to sink in, but, slowly, the Majestrix began to understand what Roma was talking about. "Mitrast wept . . ." she muttered in astonishment. "But then, that would mean . . ."

"Yes," Roma said. "It would mean that we have uncovered the *true* flaw in the Cosmic Cube, and it is more than a minor mathematical error." She stamped her foot in a very unregal manner. "Merlyn take me for a fool! I should have realized what was taking place sooner!" She turned on her heel, and began pacing up and down the room, deep in thought.

Standing beside Saturnyne, the doctor quietly cleared his throat, in an obvious attempt to get her attention. "Pardon me for asking, Your Whyness, but what exactly *is* this flaw you're talking about?"

"Are you familiar with the concept of a search engine on a computer, Doctor?" Saturnyne asked. "It seeks out the type of information you've requested, and then presents the appropriate files for you to download onto the computer's hard drive. It may take a while for it to compile that information because it will essentially 'flip' through hundreds, even thousands, of files before it gathers everything together for your use."

The doctor pinched his bottom lip between thumb and forefinger, and gazed thoughtfully at the floor for a few moments. "So, what you mean is that this Cube you keep mentioning is acting as a search engine of sorts."

"Exactly," Roma said, joining the conversation. "However, a normal, fully-functional Cosmic Cube does *not* work in that manner. Once its possessor has activated its powers, the Cube's energies physically restructure everyone and everything on the planet, all the way down to the molecular level." She glanced at the twin dictators. "Von Doom's Cube, though, was formed incorrectly. And because the device is flawed, it did not transform Earth 616 when he activated it. Instead, it scanned the worlds of the omniverse, located the version that closest resembled von Doom's vision, *and pulled it across time and space to layer it on top of the original.*"

"That, I take it, would be the equivalent of downloading a corrupted file," the doctor commented.

"Indeed," Roma concurred. "When the Cube's work was done, every being on Earth 616 had been absorbed into the bodies of their otherworldly counterparts, their identities lost, their psyches forced into the subconscious of their 'hosts.'" The Guardian frowned. "But that is not the reason the omniverse faces its greatest hour of peril; given enough time, I would have been able to correct that situation, with no ill effects to either world. But by plunging in and out of realities as it searched for the right world, the Cube's energies infected an untold number of dimensions with a reality-cancer. The device has caused the protective barriers to weaken, and soon, worlds that occupy the same space, yet lie in separate dimensions, will collide as they phase into existence in one spot."

"And now Magneto has exacerbated the situation," Saturnyne added. "By creating his own world, he's caused the Cube's taint to spread even further."

The physician turned to Roma. "Is there anything that can be done to stop it, Your Majesty?"

"There is nothing that *we* can do, Doctor," the Supreme Guardian replied. "Unless the two remaining X-Men are able to retrieve the Cube before the damage to reality becomes irreparable, the only function we will still be able to perform is to act as observers. To watch as the omniverse collapses in upon itself—just before we die. . . ."

THE SUN was just rising in the northeast when Betsy and Xavier stepped from the jump portal, and into her room.

“Now, as soon as you collect your belongings,” Xavier said, “our next stop is Paris. We can’t lose anymore time getting to Erik—we’ll have to confront him directly.” He looked around the room, peering into the darkness. “Where’s the light switch?”

“Lemme get it,” said a slightly raspy, but all-too-familiar voice from the shadows.

The ceiling light snapped on. Betsy and Xavier turned. Standing by the door was Rogue, clad in her trademark leather bomber jacket. The green-and-gold bodysuit she would normally wear under it, though, had changed—now, it was red and purple, and its style was similar to that of Magneto’s costume. One gloved hand rested comfortably on her hip; the other held the carryall.

“Y’all lookin’ fer this?” she asked, holding it up. “Y’know, it’s kinda heavy for an overnight bag, but I guess that’s t’be expected . . . what with those weapons an’ all.” Taking her other hand off her hip, she gestured for them to approach, and smiled malevolently. “Why don’t y’all come on over here an’ get it?”

Betsy groaned softly. “Well, *this* day could have gone better . . .” she muttered.

The hairs on the back of her neck suddenly stood on end—someone was behind her. She glanced over her shoulder. On the other side of the room, Nightcrawler clung to the wall, barring access to the windows. He, too, was dressed in a Magneto-like outfit.

“Much, *much* better . . .” Betsy murmured. She stepped away from Xavier, flowing easily into a combat-ready pose, her attention shifting

from Rogue to Nightcrawler and back again, waiting for one of them to make the first move. "Professor, I think it's time we were going. *Now.*"

"Just a moment." Xavier tried what appeared to be his most comforting smile. "Now, Rogue, Kurt—I'm certain Erik must have told you a wild tale or two about Elisabeth and me, but I can assure you they're not true. We're your friends, not your enemies. We only want to help."

"Y'know, you're *right*, Baldy," Rogue said, and dropped the carry-all. The small room reverberated with the sound of heavy metal objects crashing to the floor. "Erik *did* tell us some pretty incredible stories 'bout you, an' the stuff you can do." She stepped away from the door, balling her hands into fists. "An' y'know what?" Her smile faded. "*I believe 'em.*"

That was enough for Betsy. Focusing her incredible mental powers, she concentrated on a weapon—a very *special* weapon. Her right hand began to glow with rose-colored energy, the light solidifying and elongating until it extended a foot in length from her fist.

It was called a psychic dagger, and it was Betsy's most devastating armament—greater than her martial arts skills and sword-wielding capabilities combined. By plunging the blade into an opponent's skull, she was able to "shut down" their mind, overloading their synapses with pure psychic energy. And it was accomplished without inflicting any physical damage. The effects it had on the person on the receiving end were temporary, but memorable—once they had felt the blade's power, they were never quite the same.

"Come on, then, you two," Betsy said, kicking off her shoes. "The Professor and I have places to be, and no time for your silly posturing." She tensed, preparing to spring at Rogue—

And then psychic claws tore into her mind, sending her reeling in agony. The dagger quickly dissipated as she lost control of her powers; the room's lighting returned to its normal, dull coloration.

"It's . . . Jean . . ." Betsy gasped, fighting to remain conscious. The room was spinning wildly, and she felt her knees weaken. She looked to Xavier. His hands were clasped to his head, his mouth moving in a scream she was unable to hear.

The bathroom door opened, and Jean and Scott emerged. Betsy threw herself to one side, barely managing to avoid the blast of Scott's optic beams that struck the spot where she'd been standing—it left a hole in the floor a foot wide. Her jump to safety, however, brought her right in line with Kurt's fist. A three-fingered hand smashed against her jaw, and she crashed to the floor, her head glancing off the edge of the coils of a large metal radiator standing in a corner. Blood trickled down

from a cut just above her left temple—if she didn't staunch the flow soon, it was going to make seeing out of that eye impossible.

She rolled to the left, hearing the whistle of air that streamed around Rogue's fist as it rocketed toward her head. The punch connected with the radiator, shattering the rusted metal and sending shrapnel flying through the air. Betsy gasped as a half-dozen pieces plunged into her right thigh like miniature harpoons.

This fight was not going well *at all*.

And *still* Jean continued her psychic attack, though the pain in Betsy's head had lessened a bit—it meant the red-haired woman was concentrating the assault on Xavier, who was trying, in turn, to overpower her *and* her husband. Betsy caught a glimpse of Scott being thrown against a wall as the Professor struck him full-force with his hoverchair. The former leader of the X-Men slumped to the floor in a daze.

An azure-hued tail suddenly wrapped around her neck, cutting off her air as it pulled the lavender-tressed mutant to her feet. Kurt wasn't giving her time to collect her scattered thoughts. Just the opposite, in fact—he was trying to choke her into unconsciousness before she could think of escaping.

"Hang onto her, Kurt!" Rogue said. "I'll finish this!"

Lightheaded and off-balance, Betsy managed to grab hold of Kurt's tail and pull with her remaining strength. Caught by surprise, the blue-furred mutant was torn from the cheap plaster wall, to collide with Rogue as she charged at Betsy. Both teachers struck the floor, their faces lightly brushing against one another on the rebound.

It was enough of an accident to create chaos.

Rogue, Betsy knew, was a mutant with an unusual—and unwanted—power: she was an energy leech of sorts. Anyone who made contact with her bare skin would momentarily be robbed of strength, of consciousness, of memories—they would all flow into Rogue. She would absorb their talents, their mannerisms, their personalities; in essence, for a brief period of time, she would *become* the other person, while her unintended victim lapsed into a short-term coma. And she had *no* control over this ability.

Such encounters tended to leave her an emotional wreck.

And that's *exactly* what Betsy had been counting on when she hurled Nightcrawler into her friend. As cruel an action as she knew it to be, she'd had no other option—winning a battle meant relying on your enemies' weaknesses . . . even if the enemies, in this case, were normally your friends. Had their positions been reversed, and Betsy been

the one under Magneto's control, she had no doubt that the X-Men would have done the same to her.

Rubbing her sore throat and wheezing for air, Betsy slumped against the wall behind her and watched Rogue. The brief contact had had a startling effect on the Southern powerhouse: her skin was now the same deep-blue shade as Nightcrawler's, her eyes fairly ablaze with the same golden glow.

"Oh, God," Rogue gasped, her attention now focused on her fallen teammate. "Kurt, I'm sorry!"

"Elisabeth . . ." Xavier croaked. Betsy turned to him. His head slick with sweat, shoulders hunched, eyes screwed shut, he was doing his best to push back Jean's psychic attack, but the effort was taking its toll on him. "You must . . . escape . . ."

"No!" Betsy cried. "I won't leave you!" She leapt across the room and frantically grabbed her carryall, reaching inside the canvas bag for her *katana*.

"You *must* . . ." Xavier gasped. "If this mission . . . is to succeed, you *must* get to . . . Erik . . . stop this madness . . . before it is . . . too late . . ."

A loud groan from the floor near the Professor alerted Betsy that Scott was beginning to stir. With his remaining strength, Xavier reached into a compartment in his chair and pulled out the recall device. He tossed it to her.

"Remember what we discussed . . . about the Bond films," the Professor said. "I'll . . . be all right . . ."

Gritting his teeth, Xavier suddenly cried out, as though in terrible pain. Jean staggered back, clutching the sides of her head, and dropped to her knees. The Professor slumped in his chair—he'd obviously put all his remaining psychic strength into that countermove, and now he was both physically and mentally exhausted. For him, the fight was over.

"Go . . ." he said weakly. "Now . . ."

Betsy knew he was right—she *couldn't* remain. With the Professor incapacitated, she couldn't even *consider* the possibility that she might be able to hold her own against four of her teammates—between psi-powers and sheer physical strength, she was hopelessly outmatched and outnumbered. Add to that the fact she was cut and punctured in a dozen spots and growing weaker from blood loss with each passing second; her head was still aching from the combination of Jean's psychic assault, the blow from Kurt's fist, *and* the collision with the radiator; and her windpipe was now swollen and inflamed from Kurt's attempt to throttle her with his tail, making it difficult to breathe properly, and it wouldn't

take all that much for the group to finally overpower her—or kill her, if that was their goal.

“Damn it all . . .” she muttered.

Pushing herself to the limit, Betsy moved as quickly as her injuries would allow. She leapt over Rogue and the comatose Nightcrawler, shoved the recall device into the carryall, and bolted for the door . . . only to stop short as, in a burst of brimstone-laced smoke, Rogue suddenly appeared in her path.

Kurt, as Betsy well knew, *also* possessed the ability to teleport. Now that she had momentarily inherited his powers, Rogue could, too.

“I never *did* like your stupid TV show,” Rogue said, flashing her newly-acquired fangs.

Betsy leapt away from the leather-jacketed mutant, executing an impressive but slightly off-balance backflip that caused her to land on one instead of both feet halfway across the room. Fire seemed to shoot up her left leg—she’d twisted her ankle. Ignoring the pain, Betsy turned and dove for the window, just as another of Scott’s power-blasts blew apart the wall behind her. Glass and termite-weakened wood shattered as she catapulted herself through the window.

Luckily, there was a lower-constructed roof on the building next door that broke her fall . . . and almost her neck, if she hadn’t dropped the bag and concentrated on landing safely. Considering the alternative, scraping off the top layer of skin on her hands and knees as she rolled across the rough concrete didn’t seem like such a bad trade-off. Unfortunately, her expensive clothing hadn’t survived as well as she—the blouse was tattered and torn, and the leather skirt had split along one seam.

“She’s down there!” she heard Scott yell. Betsy looked up to see him pointing at her. “Rogue—”

Before he could finish giving the order, the skunk-haired Flight Instructor soared through the broken window frame and took to the air. Her skin color was now a pale blue, which made it clear to Betsy why she hadn’t simply teleported to the roof—the powers she’d “borrowed” from Nightcrawler were fading.

Retrieving the carryall, Betsy hobbled her way across the roof, ignoring the whistle of air that grew louder behind her as Rogue started her attack run. She needed to concentrate on escape, getting as far from here as possible.

Paris, she told herself. *Think about Paris. About getting to Magneto.*

The scream of rushing air filled her ears.

She dropped down quickly, her chin bouncing off the concrete roofing; it caused her to bite the tip of her tongue. Betsy groaned, annoyed

at herself for adding another to her growing list of injuries. And yet, although it seemed to her that she was doing more damage to herself than the X-Men had tried to do, she *had* managed to avoid having her skull smashed open by Rogue's granite-like fists. Based on the speed at which the Southern powerhouse had borne down on her, it was all too clear to Betsy that, under Magneto's Cube-powered influence, her former teammate was set on killing her.

Looking skyward, Betsy spotted Rogue turning sharply, like some sort of red-and-purple-hued heat-seeking missile. She wouldn't miss her target twice—unless . . .

Betsy closed her eyes—it was now or never. *ParisParisParis*, she thought quickly, and was rewarded with the icy sensation that always crept through her bones when her teleportation power was starting to kick in. She felt herself sinking into the concrete as the darkness flowed over her and pulled her into its murky depths.

Rogue crashed into the roof a half-second later, her momentum carrying her all the way down to the building's second floor.

Of her intended target, there was no sign.

He was lost in darkness.

Unable to move, the Victor von Doom of Earth 616 struggled against the infinite blackness that surrounded him, that held him immobile. How that could be possible, he did not know; it was more than likely the work of those two infuriating women and that insufferable little physician. What he *did* know, however, was that he needed to escape from it, so that he would be able to enact his revenge upon them. There was no doubt in his mind that he would—he *was* Doom, after all, and he *had* vowed to punish his captors for their lack of respect. In the end, their deaths were as certain as his escape. It was merely a question of time—time, and opportunity . . .

Forcing himself to cease his struggles, he tried to recall how he might have ended up in this situation. The last thing he remembered was a brilliant green light flowing over him, *through* him, the voice that had spoken to him from the depths of his subconscious suddenly crying out in pain, and then . . .

And then, nothing. He had found himself here, alone with his thoughts, the other voice silenced, perhaps forever.

It had served its purposes, though. From it, he had heard the stories of the Starlight Citadel and its master, Merlyn; of the cosmic schemer's daughter, Roma—the dark-haired woman who would be the first to bow before von Doom and acknowledge his superiority; and of Saturnyne, the white-haired cow who had shown the greatest disrespect for the man

who would have her put to death soon enough. All this information, the voice had explained, came directly from the mouths of Roma's own servants—members of an organization called the Dimensional Development Court, who had been captured while visiting another Earth in order to initiate a process called "The Push."

The agents, once the depths of their knowledge had been fully plumbed, had not lived beyond their last moment of usefulness.

What interested von Doom the most, of course, was the power contained in both the citadel and its mistress—power, according to the voice, over the forces of time and space themselves. Power that made the world-transforming energies of the Cosmic Cube pale by far in comparison . . .

To von Doom's surprise, the darkness began to fade, its limitless depths giving way to a spot of light that grew brighter as the former emperor watched. An image began to form before his eyes—hazy, at first, devoid of color, but it quickly solidified into a familiar white shape:

A laboratory coat.

"Awake at last, I see," said a terse voice. "Excellent."

The former emperor opened his eyes fully. He was still in the medical ward, lying once more in bed, his battle armor removed—for security purposes, no doubt. But the man standing above him was not the annoying little fop who always seemed to be hovering around him. This person—another physician, from the looks of him—was taller, balding, and perpetually scowling.

Von Doom opened his mouth to speak; his tongue felt bloated and extremely heavy.

"If you plan to launch some colorful stream of invectives my way, I'll be more than happy to sedate you," the physician said sternly. "Unlike the Chief Physician, I'm not nearly as patient of verbal abuse as he is, and I've already had my fill of such language from your counterpart."

Counterpart? Von Doom turned his head to the right, though the sudden movement caused his temples to ache. Lying on the bed next to his was an older version of himself—a face with which he was intimately familiar, since it had stared back at him every time he looked in a mirror during the time he controlled the Earth with the Cosmic Cube. It was the face that had constantly reminded him of how quickly the flawed device was killing him, minute by minute.

How, then, could he be staring at that face, when it was his?

Wasn't it?

"What is the meaning of this?" he mumbled around his leaden tongue.

The physician gestured from one tyrant to the other. "Victor von Doom of Earth 616, meet—" he leaned forward to consult the old man's chart, which appeared on the monitor above the bed—"the Victor von Doom of Earth 892." He grunted. "It took the DDC some time to track down his point of origin—since *you* moved it."

The former emperor forced himself to speak—he had to know more. "What are you talking about, you fool?" he rumbled.

The doctor folded his arms across his chest and frowned. "I'll thank you to address me as 'Dr. Stanton,' not 'you fool.' And from what the Supreme Guardian has *deigned* to tell those of us she sees as 'lesser beings'—not counting the Chief Physician, of course," he added bitterly, "it would appear that, in the course of whatever experiment you were running, you succeeded not only in abducting one of your counterparts from an alternate reality and taking control of his body, but you brought along *his entire world* and layered it on top of your own." He snorted. "Not exactly what I'd call a well-thought-out scientific endeavor."

The news was a genuine surprise for von Doom. If what this smug cretin was telling him was true, then it would explain a great deal, from his advanced aging to the false memories he'd been experiencing—like the one involving his conflict with the Mandarin—to the "voice" in his head. The memories weren't false, they were the recollections of his alternate, and the voice had been that of his counterpart, providing information about Roma while fighting to regain control of the body von Doom had taken over when the Cube was activated. It would also explain the reality in which he had lived as emperor: not a physical reconstruction of the world, as he had commanded the Cube to perform, but a transfer of the closest approximation of the world he desired, shifted from one dimension to another.

It was beyond belief. It also meant that the device he had held in his hands not so long ago was probably the most powerful reality-influencer ever created—and he had allowed it to slip from his grasp. Now, the Cube was in the hands of that mutant dog, Magneto, and he was powerless to stop him.

Or was he? If the withered body and sagging face actually belonged to the Doctor Doom of another Earth, if it was *that* von Doom whose body had been ravaged by the Cube's life-absorbing flaw, then—

"A mirror," he ordered.

Stanton clearly didn't seem to understand why the request had been made, but he did as he was told, and handed von Doom a small mirror from a portable equipment cabinet that stood nearby.

The scars, the mottled flesh, the ghastly complexion—they were all

there, but on a face that, though severely disfigured, still bore the features of a man in his early forties, not late eighties.

The face of Doom.

The Latverian dictator was pleased. He reveled in what he saw in the reflection, no longer bothered by his grotesque appearance as he had been in his youth, when a scientific experiment gone horribly wrong had forever scarred the face of a teenaged Victor von Doom. Now, he saw only the power, the majesty, the nobility that were carved into the visage of this man, this conqueror, this intellectual giant known far and wide as "The Lion of Latveria." True, while holding the Cube, he had allowed his vanity to get the best of him, causing him to place part of his consciousness in the electronic brain of a Doombot—an android replica of the emperor, but one with the handsome features of that younger Victor—so that he could travel across the length and breadth of his brave, new world at the side of his wife, Ororo—the white-haired, African, elemental-controlling mutant known as Storm . . . or, had she actually been the wife of his counterpart?

It didn't matter anymore—that was another time, another dream, lived through the eyes of the decrepit old man lying in the next bed. And through those eyes, von Doom had ruled the world; now, though, he wanted so much more . . .

He looked at the straps binding his limbs, then to the physician. "Release me."

Stanton shook his head. "I can't do that. Beyond the fact that you've just undergone a traumatic, multiphasic transformation from which your body is still recovering, you're . . ." He paused. "Well . . . you're a very dangerous man . . . or so I'm told."

"Dangerous only to my enemies, physician," von Doom replied. "Do you wish to be counted among them . . . or among my allies?"

"I'd rather not be counted at all," Stanton said.

Muscles twitched in von Doom's face, approximating a smile. "Ahh, I see. You would prefer anonymity."

Stanton nodded. "Something like that."

Von Doom chuckled softly. "You surprise me, Stanton—I would have thought a man of your station would desire more from your life."

"How so?"

"I have seen the way in which you look at your superiors, Stanton," von Doom replied. "You stand in the shadows, your skills unappreciated, your opinions ignored, while that buffoon you call a 'Chief Physician' orders you about and makes infuriating asides to your peers about your apparent lack of medical abilities. Were I in your position, I would take steps to show the Supreme Guardian my true value—and

prove to her the poor administrative choice she made in passing you by for the position that should have been yours, and not that prancing clown's." He paused, then shrugged. "But perhaps you are right, Stanton—perhaps it *is* far better to remain in the shadows, rather than to be ridiculed in the light."

The former emperor fell silent, waiting for a response. He had played this sort of game before—many times—and he knew when it was time to speak . . . and when it was time to let the other player make the next move.

Stanton stared at him, his face slowly reddening, his teeth pulling back in a feral snarl—and with that, von Doom knew that he had won. With just a few well-chosen words, he had shattered the physician's thin veneer of detached professionalism, and reached the enraged, insecure, easily manipulated egotist lurking beneath the surface.

"I can end all that, Stanton," von Doom purred. "The anonymity, the disrespect . . . I—*we*—can make it right. Together." His eyes blazed with a cold, hypnotic fire. "All you need do . . . is join me."

The moments passed slowly, and von Doom waited—*tried* to wait—patiently. Push too soon, too hard, he knew from experience, and Stanton might back down, the heat of anger raging in his heart replaced with a mindnumbingly cold fear—of Roma, of Saturnyne, of losing his job. And then all would be lost . . . at least, until the *next* opportunity presented itself. The Lion of Latveria, however, had never been known for having *that* much patience . . .

"What . . . *kind* of steps would you take?" Stanton asked haltingly.

Scarred lips pulled back in a Cheshire Cat-like grin. "Free me from this bed, provide me with my armor, and I will show you . . ."

"How many guards are on-duty?" von Doom asked one hour later, fitting his mask into place. The seals along its edges closed with a satisfying click. Clad once more in his armor, he at last felt complete—and ready to set his plans into motion.

"Two members of the Captain Britain Corps are stationed right outside the door at all times," Stanton replied. "But if they suspect anything is wrong, they'll be able to summon reinforcements within seconds."

"Then they must be rendered incapable of raising such an alarm," von Doom stated. "*You* will call them in—then *I* shall deal with them." He glared at Stanton. "Do not fail me, physician—or Doom shall make certain it is your *last* mistake."

Stanton swallowed, hard. "I . . . understand."

"Very good. But first . . ." Von Doom turned to face the other bed. His counterpart slept soundly, deep in the throes of a drug-induced

coma. It appeared Stanton had been quite serious about his intense dislike for being the target of verbal abuse . . . and his ability to put a swift end to it.

“Umm . . . what are you doing?” the physician asked as von Doom moved to stand near the top of the bed.

The Latverian dictator raised a gauntleted fist above his head. “In the chessgame of power, there is only room for *one* king.”

The sound of metal smashing through bone and brain was quickly swallowed by the vastness of the infirmary.

Von Doom wiped his gore-slickened hand on the bedsheet, then turned wordlessly and walked across the infirmary to stand at one side of the entry portal. He looked around for something with which to attack the guards; after a few seconds of searching, he found it. He nodded to Stanton.

“Um . . . guards?” the physician called out. “Could you please lend a hand? I’m having some . . . trouble with the patients.”

The door irised open.

Projectile or energy weapons were useless on the citadel, as Saturnyne had explained when von Doom had attempted to use his armaments. “A state of temporal grace,” she had called it, which prevented them from firing. That security system, however, had no effect on the syringes he plunged into the bases of the guards’ brains as they stepped through the door—syringes filled with nothing but air.

He rammed the plungers home as the guards, panicked, reached back to pull out the needles.

They were dead before they hit the floor.

Stanton looked ill. “Is all this killing really necessary, von Doom?”

A gauntleted hand shot forward, to grasp the doctor by the throat. “Doom does as he pleases, lackey—and it *pleases* him to eliminate *all* who stand in his way.” His grip tightened, cutting off Stanton’s air. “Are *you* at Doom’s side, physician—or have you chosen to stand in his way as well?” He opened his hand, and Stanton staggered back, rubbing his reddened throat.

“At . . . your . . . side . . .” the doctor gasped.

“You show a glimmer of intelligence, worm,” von Doom commented. He relaxed his grip, and Stanton staggered back a few steps, rubbing his tender throat. “My counterpart told me of a ‘stasis chamber’ that may prove useful to my needs,” the dictator continued. “You will take me to it.”

“There’s only *one* prisoner being held there right now,” Stanton said, finally able to breathe normally. “Someone who’s supposed to have been no end of trouble for Roma, and her father before that. I’ve heard

it said that just her *presence* in the citadel makes Roma nervous—even though she's been sealed away since her arrest."

Behind the gleaming mask of Doctor Doom, an eyebrow rose in an inquisitive fashion. "How . . . interesting. And what is the *name* of this individual whom the Supreme Guardian fears so greatly?"

"Opul Lun Sat-yr-nin," Stanton replied. "She's the Majestrix's counterpart from Earth 794. The X-Men of your Earth aided in her capture not too long ago."

"Indeed?" A malevolent, electronic chuckle burred out from the mask's mouthpiece. "Then, I should like to *meet* this extraordinary woman. It would appear we share similar tastes in enemies. . . ."

Interlude III

IS PARIS burning?' No, but soon enough it *will* be—when I am in control of the Cube . . ."

In the light of early morning, two figures stood at the railing on the observation deck of the Eiffel Tower, and gazed down upon the quaint homes and magnificent palaces that comprised the centerpiece of Magneto's world. To the east, the sun was just beginning to climb above the horizon, painting the landscape in soft pinks and yellows. On the streets below, a lone jogger—it was impossible to tell whether the person was a human or a mutant from this altitude, or even if it was a man or a woman—hurried along on what must have been their daily regimen. And from the girders somewhere high above the watchers, the sound of doves cooing softly could be heard.

The start of a new day, on a new world.

The Controller sneered. "I think I liked this place better in von Doom's version, where it was nothing more than a smoking pit devoid of life. A killing ground that stood as testament to the destructive abilities of a sub-human allowed to run free, when he and all his genetically-inferior brethren should have been long dead."

"Have you ever been here before, sir?" Leonard asked. "I mean, before Magneto destroyed it and then rebuilt it?"

The Controller nodded. "Oh, yes. Many times. And each time I have been reminded of better days, when the people of the world trembled in fear at the might of the empire that was taking form then. Awestricken by the sheer power of the dedication we had to the dream of a great man, of the lengths we would go to make that dream come true." He sneered. "But that was before the dream began to fade. Before the dreamer was murdered by an inhuman creature that dared to think of

itself as a man." His teeth ground together noisily. "Before I was swallowed by the mists of oblivion and trapped there for decades, lost within the trackless depths of my *own* dreams."

"Like what they say happened to Captain Ame—"

"I have *heard* the story," the Controller snapped. He grunted. "Fanciful, overly romanticized *lies* told to impress a gullible public—" he gazed coolly at his young assistant "—and children."

Leonard's cheeks turned a deep crimson shade, but he declined to respond to the insult. Clearly, he understood how foolish it would be to talk back to his superior—especially when they were so very high up . . .

"I remember a night in June," the Controller murmured, his voice surprisingly soft, "when the air was filled with the sounds of merriment. I stood beside the leader at the top of the Eiffel Tower, as we do now. There was a cool breeze gently blowing from the east—from the homeland. A good sign. We stood there, that night, and watched our men celebrate their recent victory over the once-mighty French forces. There was song, and laughter, and a sense of fulfillment. We realized then that the world truly *was* ours for the taking. We felt—no, we *knew* we were . . . invincible." An approximation of a smile cracked his grotesque features. "It was an . . . inspiring moment."

"So, what happened?" Leonard asked.

The Controller snarled and lashed out with a gloved fist, savagely backhanding the young man across the mouth. Leonard fell back onto the platform, his head rebounding against the metal flooring.

"*Dumbkopf!*" the Controller roared. "Has your entire generation become so lost in decadence that you now take some sort of perverse *pride* in your ignorance? Do you know *nothing* of history?"

Leonard slowly sat up, rubbing the back of his head. He spat out a wad of bloody phlegm; sunlight glinted off the enamel coating of a premolar that floated in the crimson-hued mucous. "I know your side *lost*," he said sullenly.

The Controller flashed his death's-head grin and chuckled. "Ah. Then you are *not* the imbecile I feared you might be." Arms folded across his chest, he watched as his assistant struggled to regain his feet. "Pay more attention to history, Leonard," he said sternly. "A wise man once remarked, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' *I am always* aware of my past, though I see no need to dwell on unpleasant memories. It is the *future* that holds the greatest promise; the future . . . and the Cube."

The Controller looked at the rising sun, a half smile twisting a corner of his mouth. "Yes . . . the Cube . . ." he said quietly, as though he had lapsed into a trance. He closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, then

slowly released the breath through his nostrils. "I feel it. It calls to me as a lover would, caresses me with tendrils of the purest energy, entices me with dreams of ultimate power. Dreams of godhood." He chuckled. "It promises nothing I have not already experienced." His eyes suddenly opened, and his relaxed expression flowed into one of confusion. "But there is something wrong . . ."

"Is it Magneto?" Leonard asked. A handkerchief was clumsily stuffed into one corner of his mouth, to staunch the bleeding of the empty socket from where his broken tooth had originated.

"No. It is the Cube." The Controller looked to the lightening skies. High across the stratosphere, stretching off in all directions to disappear beyond the horizon line, multihued bands of energy flowed and sputtered, draping the world in colors that only the Controller could see with the naked eye. "The wave patterns are different. They are not in keeping with those normally associated with a Cosmic Cube." He casually waved a hand, as though to dismiss the topic. "It is an unforeseen complication, but one that will not delay my appropriation of the device."

"You can *see* the Cube's energy?" There was a tone of astonishment in Leonard's voice.

"Of course, I can," his master replied testily. "Just as I was able to redirect that same energy so that you and I were not transformed when it struck the command center." He poked a thick finger into Leonard's chest. "Remember, lackey, you speak to a *superior being*—a man who has been as one with the universe itself through the power of the Cube; who once walked the Earth as a god; who has slipped free of death's cold embrace time and again to take revenge upon his enemies. And once the Cube is mine, there will be *nothing* I cannot do. Nothing."

The Controller glanced over the railing. Far below, Paris was beginning to awaken, as a few early risers appeared on the sidewalks, and the first signs of vehicular traffic took to the roads. "We must go. I do not wish to tip my hand yet and, given my . . . *striking* appearance—" he gestured toward his hideous face "—it would not be long before Lensherr received word of my presence in his precious city." His eyes glimmered with the fires of intense hatred. "But we *will* return later, when the city sleeps once more, to set my plans in motion. And *then* Magneto will know I am here, as his dream begins to die around him. . . ."

B ETSY HAD always had a fondness for Paris.

She'd visited it often during her short modeling career, when she'd been in demand for spring runway shows, fought over by practically every fashion designer in the world. The charming cafés, the cozy little streets, the museums and galleries . . . If she hadn't been on the run from people who had once been her friends, and on her way to confront a man who could turn her into a glistening, gore-drenched paperweight of shattered bone and tattered sinew, either with or without the aid of the glowing little box of cosmic energy that had caused all this trouble, she might have been able to enjoy the trip. As it was, she was more than willing to sacrifice the lure of sightseeing just for an opportunity to survive this adventure in one piece.

After her narrow escape from the ex-X-Men, Betsy had awakened the following morning to find herself draped across a wooden bench in Place Jean XXIII, near the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. She'd felt stiff and sore and woolly-brained, and the curious stares she'd received from the couple sitting across the path from her made her all too aware of the sad state of her appearance, even if she hadn't detected those particular thoughts when she scanned their minds to find out if they were working for Magneto. Bruised, bloodied, tattered and torn, with nowhere to go and no one to call upon for assistance, she'd left the square as quickly as possible, hobbling off into the early morning sunlight on her injured ankle before anyone had a chance to ask questions.

After that, matters had definitely worsened. She'd tried to enter a streetside pay toilet to clean her cuts, assess her situation, and change clothes, only to realize she wasn't carrying any money—having escaped von Doom's crumbling world with only the clothes on her back, she

hadn't even thought about needing cash when her focus had been on getting to Magneto. It was the reason why Xavier had been the one to pay for their rooms at that nasty little flophouse in New York. Much to her distaste, it meant that the only way she was getting inside the lavatory was by using her teleportational power for a short jaunt.

Why is it I can't see the Scarlet Witch or Warbird finding themselves in this type of situation . . . ? she'd thought darkly.

Once inside, she'd gazed at her reflection in the mirror above the small sink, and immediately wished she hadn't. She literally looked like bloody hell: her eyes were puffy and red; chin and hands caked with dried blood; the left side of her face horribly bruised from where Kurt's fist had struck; a bright red ring around her neck, created by Kurt's tail; arms cut in a dozen or so places from her encounter with the hotel window. The bottom half of her was no better—both knees scraped raw, a thick patch of dried blood running along her right leg from thigh to calf, left ankle swollen and stiff.

"Was this the face that launched a thousand clothing lines?" she quipped bitterly, disgusted and depressed by the haggard face that stared back at her. "And climbed the topless towers of Lagerfeld?" She sighed. "What would Gianni Versace think of me now, God rest his soul?"

Cleaning up had been a slow, deliberate process. Since she couldn't go to an emergency room for treatment (again, too many questions would be asked), she had to do the best she could with the first-aid kit she'd remembered to pack—an essential item in her line of work. So, in lieu of sterile pads and yards of gauze, it was cotton balls and *Flintstones*-decorated Band-Aids (courtesy of the Chief Physician); instead of tetanus shots and witch hazel, iodine and Bactine. She'd used a pair of tweezers to remove the shards of metal from her right leg, and the glass from her arms, and then, pleased with her adequate field dressings, set her sights on tackling the clothing issue. Unfortunately, beyond the first-aid kit, all that remained in the carryall were her dark-blue X-Men uniform, a *katana*, a pair of *sai*, a small makeup bag, and the recall device. No other clothes, no money, no credit cards . . . and no food.

Her stomach rumbled.

"This *proves* I was right," Betsy had muttered sullenly. "This *never* would have happened to the Avengers . . ."

Now, hours later, as a brilliant, noonday sun blazed overhead, she wandered the streets of Paris, waiting for night to fall so she could begin her siege on Palace Lensherr. Her body didn't feel quite so much like she'd been run over by a train, and her head was much clearer than it had been earlier in the morning. The acetaminophen capsules in the

first-aid kit had helped her aches and pains, but it was the baguettes, diet sodas, and chocolate-covered marzipan fruits she had “appropriated” from a closed market during the wee hours that had gone the longest way toward helping her organize her thoughts.

Such are the amazing restorative powers of caffeine and sugar, she thought happily.

As she strolled along the bustling sidewalks of Rue Saint Jacques, contentedly munching on the small confections, she glanced at the people around her. Much to her surprise, no one had paid the slightest attention to her unusual appearance, with her oddly-colored hair and provocative clothing and children’s bandages. Perhaps, in this “enlightened” society created by Magneto, super hero uniforms didn’t seem all that unusual. Or perhaps she was on the cutting edge of fashion, with her latex clothing and purple hair—this *was* Paris, after all; styles might have changed to reflect the New World Order. Or perhaps the Parisians were just more tolerant of strangely-dressed young women who hummed Cole Porter songs while their mouths were full of bread.

Of course, it just might have to do with the possibility that *Kwan-non, Bushido Mistress* wasn’t broadcast here. In America, based on the reactions from the press and her “fans” in New York, taking a stroll in an outfit that looked exactly like the one worn by her television counterpart would have probably started a riot.

More than likely, though, the reason for the apparent disinterest of passersby was due to Magneto’s control over their minds—if the tourists at the Empire State Building hadn’t reacted to her arrival with Charles from the dark portal, why should the citizens *here* pay her any mind?

Gazing up at the brilliant blue sky, Betsy stepped to one side to get out of the flow of pedestrian traffic and stopped in front of an antiques shop, reveling in the sunlight that warmed her face. Maybe, she thought, there was a *little* time for sightseeing—perhaps a walk in the tree-lined lanes of the Jardins des Plantes to help ease the tension in her body. After all, it was *such* a beautiful day—who knew if she might live to see another after tonight . . . ?

Slowly opening her eyes, a winsome smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. *I just wish Warren could be hear to enjoy it with m—*

She froze.

That face on the man who had just passed her. The boyish smile and sparkling blue eyes. The shoulder-length blond hair. The powerful build that not even a dark business suit could conceal. She knew them as well as she knew the contours of her own body—they could belong to only one person.

It was Warren.



Well, it was, and it wasn't. The man certainly *looked* like Warren, *walked* like Warren, was humming a Brian Wilson tune off-key like Warren, even wore the same cologne, but it wasn't *really* Warren.

Not *her* Warren, that is. The one who had fought beside her as a fellow X-Man against the toughest odds. The one who had won her heart with an unbeatable combination of charm, humility, and irresistible sexuality. The one who had sacrificed part of his soul in order to bring her back from death's door, after her particularly fatal encounter with the sociopathic mutant assassin called Sabretooth.

The one who had died in her arms on a storm-swept grassy field in Washington, D.C.

This man was an impostor; she knew that. His skin wasn't blue, as Warren's had become as a result of a run-in with the creature called Apocalypse, who was one of the X-Men's deadliest enemies. And his thoughts must have been focused a million miles away, because he had brushed past her without even noticing—something Warren never would have done. He'd always been too much the lady-killer to miss the opportunity of spotting a pretty girl on a crowded street. And considering

the fact that Betsy was a) standing in the middle of the sidewalk in a formfitting, latex swimsuit, and b) supposed to be this man's wife in this reality, being so completely ignored by her faux-husband was saying a lot.

Not that it really mattered, of course. She wasn't in the mood to play "Twenty Questions" with a doppelganger of her dead lover, try to explain what she was doing in Paris, or find out why he was here, for this one-in-a-million chance encounter. Seeing this man only reminded her of the beast who had so callously shattered her world, and of her resolve to make him pay for it, no matter what Xavier had said. The Professor wasn't here now—*she* was, and this mission would be accomplished on *her* terms, hero's code of ethics be damned.

And yet . . .

And yet, despite the fact it couldn't be him, no matter how hard she might wish it were so; despite the fact that Warren had died right in front of her only days before; despite her initial anger at Magneto for creating a duplicate of that same man, she found herself unable to resist the impulse to follow him.

Just to be certain, of course, that it *wasn't* him . . .

Somewhere on the edge of Creation, a different sort of quest was coming to an end—a journey along the road to ultimate power, traveled by two men. One was a ruthless dictator whose machinations had resulted in nothing less than the weakening of the entire space/time continuum. The other was a physician who was just now beginning to think that allying himself with an armored tyrant had *not* been such a good idea after all . . .

Located at the bottom-most level of the Starlight Citadel, the stasis chamber—constructed for the incarceration of only the most dangerous criminals in the omniverse—was contained within a high-security area manned even when there were no prisoners to guard. Access to this level was restricted to a select few: Roma and her personal guard, Saturnyne, certain high-ranking officials of the Captain Britain Corps . . . and medical technicians charged with monitoring the vital signs of the inmates.

The Chief Physician was counted among the last group. So was Dr. Stanton.

He stood beside von Doom at the entrance to the innermost room, trying to ignore the broken, lifeless bodies on the floor behind them—med-techs and guards caught unawares and quickly dispatched by the villain before they could call for help.

"Proceed, physician," the tyrant snapped. It seemed his patience had

finally come to an end, annoyed as he had been with the constant delays they'd encountered along the way—traveling along rarely used access tunnels to throw off any pursuers, hiding in shadows whenever a member of the Corps headed in their direction. So far, they'd been fortunate enough to remain undetected for this long, and it appeared that the corpses in the medical wing hadn't been discovered—yet. Soon enough, though, Stanton knew, the entire citadel would be ringing with the sound of alarms, alerting the staff to von Doom's disappearance.

Right now, however . . .

Stanton stepped in front of an electronic eye; it lit up immediately.

"Identify," demanded a synthesized voice. It sounded very much like Saturnyne's.

"Stanton, Henry P.," the physician replied. "World of origin: Earth 1629. Starlight Citadel Xenobiology Division, Level 817. Access Code 5-1-9-8-2-6. Password: Einstein."

A light flashed from the eye, bathing Stanton in a pale green aura. The beam faded after a few seconds, the computer's scan of his DNA structure completed.

"Identity confirmed," the computer stated flatly. "Stanton, Henry P. World of origin: Earth 1629. Starlight Citadel Xenobiology Division, Level 817. Access Code accepted. Password accepted. Please state the nature of your visit."

"Medical examination of prisoner Opol Lun Sat-yr-nin."

The computer paused, obviously running a check on the infirmary's medical records. "Examination performed at 2930 hours, Citadel Standard Time. Next examination not scheduled until—"

An armored fist shattered the electronic eye.

Stanton raised an eyebrow and turned to the glowering despot beside him. "I *would* have found a way around that problem."

"Silence!" the former emperor barked. "Doom has no use for time-consuming protocols—not when there are worlds to be won!"

Roughly pushing past Stanton, the tyrant stepped over to the door leading to the heart of the chamber. Gripping the section of the circular portal where the two halves met, he used the full strength of his incredible armor to force the door open. He stepped inside the next room, not bothering to see if Stanton was following.

There were no furnishings here, no cots or chairs or tables—merely row upon row of medical equipment and monitoring stations.

And one very special occupant.

There, in the center of the room, was the object of von Doom's quest, and the cornerstone of his plan:

Opul Lun Sat-yr-nin.

She floated serenely in a large tube—a crystalline structure filled with an azure liquid that glowed faintly—her shoulder-length white hair drifting lazily around her stunning features. Features that perfectly matched those of the woman who was second-in-command to the Supreme Guardian.

To see her at rest like this, sleeping so peacefully, one would never know she was completely insane.

As Mastrex of Earth 794, Sat-yr-nin had ruled her world with an iron fist. But she had always desired more than a mere planetary empire, when she knew there were countless other planes of reality out there in the omniverse, all waiting to be conquered. She might have succeeded in attaining her goals, someday, if it hadn't been for the intervention of Brian Braddock, the Captain Britain of Earth 616 who, it turned out, was an alternate version of her royal consort, Byron Brah-dok—her world's Kaptain Briton.

Sat-yr-nin eventually escaped the prison into which her people placed her, and journeyed to Brian's world seeking revenge. Unfortunately, he'd joined up with a group of England-based heroes called Excalibur by then, and it had been his shapeshifting girlfriend, Megan, who ultimately upset her plans and forced the Mastrex to flee back to her homeworld. Of course, things had worked out for the best, anyway—she'd still had followers on 794 and, with their aid, she was soon back in power, gleefully staging public executions and constantly reminding her subjects that she was here to stay.

Or *had* been there to stay, that is, until the combined might of the X-Men and the Captain Britain Corps changed the situation . . .

"Release her," von Doom commanded.

Stanton didn't comment this time. He simply stepped over to the tube's controls and began the extraction process.

A pump at the bottom of the crystal began siphoning out the suspension fluid, revealing the flawless contours of her body. Once the liquid had been drained, the crystalline glass slid upward. Stanton crossed over to the opened tube and quickly removed the monitoring devices attached to Sat-yr-nin's skin. With a soft groan, the Mastrex slowly started to revive.

The physician turned to von Doom. "It may take a few minutes for—"

Before Stanton could grab her, Sat-yr-nin suddenly pitched forward, her body heaving uncontrollably. Dropping to her knees, fingers splayed to keep her head from crashing down onto the cold metal beneath her, she opened her mouth wide, and spewed onto the floor a fair amount of the azure liquid. She gasped for air as, for the next minute, her lungs

continued to pump out the dark fluid that filled them in order to make room for oxygen. When that was finally accomplished, she fell into a severe coughing fit that made her double-over, clutching her sides in obvious pain.

And all the while, von Doom watched in silence, arms folded across his chest.

Eventually, the Mastrex's breathing problems ceased, and she eased into a steady rhythm of inhalations and exhalations. Wiping away the traces of spit and blue-tinged snot that hung from her lips and nostrils with the back of one hand, she slowly looked up at the armored figure towering above her.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Opul Lun Sat-yr-nin," the monarch said. "I am Doom—and I bring you an offer you would do well to accept. . . ."

THE DRUGS were beginning to wear off.

Moaning softly, Charles Xavier tried to open his eyes, but each lid felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds. He attempted to raise his arms so he could rub at the ponderous folds of skin with the edges of his hands, but his limbs were just as heavy. Whatever the dosage he'd been given, it had obviously been meant to keep him unconscious for quite a long time.

"Scott, I think he is waking up," said a voice in a clipped German accent. The Professor immediately recognized the speaker: Kurt Wagner. It sounded as though Kurt was standing a mile away, but Xavier knew that, as dazed as he was by the sedative, his student could be right beside him and still sound distant.

Though as yet unable to focus his thoughts, he was aware of a dull roar that filled the air around him, and felt pressure building in his ears. Were they on a plane? A sealed aircraft cabin *would* account for his limited hearing. But where were they heading? Even through the drug-induced fog, one possible answer came to mind: He was being taken to Magneto for interrogation—and, more than likely, a round or two of gloating about how he'd finally won. If the Professor had been able to coax his facial muscles into forming a smile, he would have done so.

Good old Magnus, he thought fuzzily. *I can always count on his predictability . . .*

There was the sound of footsteps approaching—more than one set.

"Already?" That was Scott Summer's voice; he sounded angry. "I thought you said he'd be unconscious for the entire travel time."

"I'm a *gymnast*, not a doctor," Kurt snapped. "I was only repeating

what Dr. MacTaggart told me before we left. How was *I* to know his constitution might be strong enough to shake it off?"

"Boys, boys, calm down." Xavier recognized the soothing tones of Jean Grey as she entered the conversation. "Getting huffy with one another is just going to make this trip seem twice as long. I realize we're all a bit on edge, having this killer in our midst, but Erik will take care of everything once we get to the palace. Now . . . just relax."

The two men muttered in agreement. Xavier felt the cool touch of Jean's delicate fingers on his face, felt her hands tilting back his head, and then light blazed into his exposed left eye as she pulled up the lid. He groaned in mild discomfort. The pupil instinctively rolled upward, and he found himself blearily staring at some sort of metal ceiling. Jean released the lid, and it snapped shut, plunging him back into darkness.

"He's still out of it," Jean said. "Between the phenobarbital in his system and the neural inhibitor shutting down his psi-talents, I *really* don't think we're going to have any problems with him."

Xavier felt a brief wave of panic surge through his body. They'd robbed him of his telepathic abilities? He concentrated as best he could, attempted to sweep the room with his mind, to see if he could detect the thoughts of his former students.

Nothing. Even the soft buzz of voices that normally crackled in the back of his mind—not even a telepath as powerful as the Professor could block out *every* thought being broadcast by six billion people around the globe—was gone. The inhibitor he'd been fitted with had taken away his most powerful weapon, and he suddenly felt . . . ordinary. And very helpless.

"But, if *you* think he's still a danger to us, Scott," Jean continued, "then I could always put him under again with a psi-bolt."

Xavier started. He *couldn't* let them knock him out again—he needed a chance to talk, to convince them to help him find the Cube. If he lost consciousness now, he knew he wouldn't reawaken until he had been brought before Magneto. He tried to move his slackened jaw, tried to open his mouth to speak, but his tongue felt as heavy as his arms. He grunted, attempting to create the guttural sound closest to the word "no."

It came out as "goo."

"Did you hear that?" Scott asked. "I think he's trying to say something."

"Not very well . . ." Kurt commented.

"Oh, stop that!" Jean chided. "*You* get shot up with enough sedatives to slow a bull elephant and see how well *you're* able to form words." Xavier felt a ticklish sensation as strands of hair drifted across

his face; his nostrils filled with the fragrance of perfume and apple-scented shampoo. She was leaning down close to him, only inches from his left ear. "Would you like to tell us something, Professor?" she asked in a low, breathy tone.

"Yes" was a tad easier to pronounce, since the "ess" sound only required him to blow air through his cheeks.

"Then, let's find out what it is, shall we?" she said. Fingertips settled against the sides of his temples. "Contact."

It was like having a SWAT team kick down to the door to his mind.

In an instant, Jean was in his thoughts, forcing her way into his subconscious, effortlessly crashing through the few minor psychic defenses that the neural inhibitor hadn't managed to disrupt. The pain created by her violent entry sizzled across his synapses, and almost caused him to black out.

When she finally burst through the final layer of consciousness, she found him waiting for her, seated behind the desk in his study. Well, not *really* his study, but rather a mental reconstruction of his inner sanctum, back at the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning in the pre-Cube world. In pop psychology terms, this was his "happy place"—the refuge that existed deep in his subconscious, to which his tired mind would go to seek some measure of relief whenever the pressing burdens of his responsibilities became too taxing. There was mahogany furniture and plush red carpeting. Framed paintings hung on the walls. A pair of high-backed lounging chairs with big, fluffy cushions were positioned to face a large, brick fireplace. Logs burned in the hearth, warming the room and providing most of the lighting. It all felt incredibly . . . cozy.

The room itself was immense—oak-paneled walls that seemed to stretch into infinity, lined with bookshelves filled with volumes. Between the cases stood sets of double doors, each portal leading to a different memory. At one end of the room, the main doors leading to the study lay in large, jagged pieces on the carpet. Standing just inside the entrance, hands resting on her hips, Jean turned her head from side-to-side, then up and down. She looked impressed by her surroundings. *I like what you've done with the place, Professor.*

Thank you, Xavier replied. But you've been here before. Many times, in fact.

Jean frowned, and tapped a finger against her chin, as though searching her memories. *Have I? I think I'd remember being here if I had. It's so . . . different from all the other minds I've traveled through. So well-organized.*

The Professor smiled. *It makes it easier to find things when I need to.*

No doubt. Jean's eyes widened as she turned in a slow circle, gazing at all the portals. *That's a lot of memories you have here, Professor—and a lot of secrets, as well. I'd very much like to see what lies behind them . . .*

Her bright green eyes flashed, and Xavier suddenly found the arms of his chair closing around him, pinning him to the seat. He squirmed mightily, but the wooden and leather restraints only tightened even more, forcing the air from his lungs. He gasped as the unyielding arms scraped against his rib cage.

Don't get up, the fiery-tressed telepath said, smiling wickedly. *I can find my way around.*

Jean—no! You don't have to do this— Xavier tried to push up in the seat to free his arms, his face turning beet red with the effort, but it was no use. He was held fast.

His former student concentrated, and, one by one in rapid succession, the doors of his mind began opening, revealing memories both joyous and haunting, and all seen from the Professor's point of view:

—the smiling face of a twentysomething Moira MacTaggart (who looked exactly like the physician who worked at the Lensherr Institute with Jean and the others), lying in the grass beside Xavier, staring up at the puffy white clouds high above, head resting comfortably on his chest. The feel of warm sunshine on Jean's/Charles' face. The smell of honeysuckle and freshly cut grass wafting through the cool spring air, mingling with the scent of jasmine in Moira's flame-red hair.

"D'ye have t'go, Charles?" she asks, her lilting voice echoing with the sounds of the Scottish Highlands.

"It's not as though I've been given a *choice*, Moira," Xavier replies. "Once that letter arrived in the mail, the decision had already been made for me. I've been *drafted*, and there's nothing I can do about it. My unit is being shipped off to Korea in the morning."

"But, what about yer doctorate? Ye're still in school—shouldn't that give ye some sort o' special dispensation t'keep ye from goin'?"

Xavier chuckles. "Well, I *did* try giving the Draft Board a note from my mother, asking to excuse me from combat, but they recognized my handwriting from the forms I had to fill out."

Moira turns her head to face him; her dark expression shows she's not amused by his attempt at humor. "Tis nae somethin' t'be jokin' about, Charles," she says sternly. "Ye could be killed."

A hesitation. "Yes," he says softly. "I know." He reaches out to

stroke her cheek, then quietly clears his throat. "Moira . . ." Another hesitation. "Moira, there's something I've been meaning to ask you—something I've been putting off for far too long. But now, with my departure in the morning, never knowing when I'll see you again . . . it can't wait any more."

"An' what would that be, dear heart?" she replies sharply, her beautiful features drawn taut with concern. "Would ye like me t'take notes fer ye at yer classes while ye're away, so ye can continue workin' on yer doctorate while ye're crouched in some muddy foxhole, wi' bullets whizzin' past yer head?"

"No, nothing like that." A pause. Nervous energy runs through him; his heart beats wildly, pounding against the wall of his chest. Sharp intake of breath as he tries to steady his nerves, then:

"Moira MacTaggart . . . will you marry me?"

Her eyes open wide in shock. She blushes, and places a hand to her cheek as though she's trying to hide it. Slowly, surprise gives way to a warm, dimpled smile.

"Aye," she says simply.

A surge of adrenaline races through the Professor's body. It's the happiest day of his life.

Sitting up, Moira reaches out to pull him towards her. The sun is blotted out by her fiery tresses as she draws near, and there's the warm sensation of her lips pressing against his . . .

—a disgustingly obese man dressed in an ill-fitting white suit, a maroon fez perched haphazardly on the top of his bald head. Beautiful, but extremely sad, Mid-Eastern women in expensive jewelry and low-cut gowns fearfully hover around him—they're his slaves. The man introduces himself as Amahl Farouk, and he runs the Thieves' Quarter in Cairo, Egypt. Like Xavier, he is a telepath. Unlike the Professor, he only uses his powers for personal gain, destroying the lives—and minds—of anyone who has ever dared oppose him. He is the first telepath, and the first evil mutant, Charles has ever faced.

Xavier eyes his opponent across the length of the bar in which they sit, the air foul with the stench of sweat and stale tobacco and human misery. "I swear I will not rest until you're brought to justice for your crimes!" the Professor declares, though he knows he's out of his league.

A sinister smile ripples the cheeks of the fat man. "So be it."

And then the psychic battle is joined . . .

—Erik Magnus Lensherr floats high in the air above the Professor, years before the world will come to fear him as the mutant overlord

called Magneto. It is this defining moment in the two friends' relationship that will affect the lives of every mutant on the planet.

"You are far too trusting, Charles—too naive," Magnus says, his voice laden with sadness. "You have faith in the essential goodness of man. In time, you will learn what I have learned—that even those you love will turn from you in horror when they discover what you truly are." The morose expression flows quickly from his face, replaced with one of fierce determination. "Mutants will *not* go meekly to the gas chambers. We will *fight* . . . and we will *win!*"

—a younger Jean, dressed in a black sweater and matching beret, white kid gloves, and knee-length blue skirt, standing before a wheelchair-bound Xavier. Four men enter the room; one of them is a teenaged Scott Summers, wearing a ridiculous pair of green checkered slacks and a dark green pullover. She recognizes one of the others as Warren Worthington III, the multi-millionaire gen-active who's now married to that TV star, Elisabeth Braddock.

Worthington steps forward to shake her hand. "Welcome to the X-Men, Miss Grey. . . ."

—Jean, Scott, Worthington, and one of their teammates (the *Beast?!?*), all wearing costumes of bright yellow and dark blue materials. They're trapped inside the gondola of a weather balloon, rising toward the upper layers of the stratosphere as their oxygen supply dwindles. Hands in front of her face—they actually belong to Xavier. He reaches up to touch the sides of his temples. A moment of concentration, then—

"It's the Angel's parents!" Xavier blurts out. "Magneto has captured them!"

Jean! Stop! Please! the Professor cried out. He lurched in his seat, pushing against the restraints. *You're hurting me!*

Just looking for any hidden booby traps, Professor, Jean replied, throwing wide another door. There was a momentary flash of another memory—

—a bedroom in the Israeli port city of Haifa, ceiling fans slowly turning to dispel the heat of the day, a beautiful, dark-haired woman named Gabrielle Haller lying beside him—

—then the door slammed shut, and Jean moved on to the next. *Neural inhibitors only affect active powers, after all, not latent abilities. And after seeing what you could do back at that transients' hotel, I wouldn't be surprised to find out you've got a psychic land mine or*

three hidden in the back of your mind, squirreled away on the off-chance that someone might go poking around your thoughts without permission. It's what I would do.

There are no "land mines," I assure you, Xavier said, gritting his teeth. Now, if you would please stop doing this . . .

I hope you'll pardon me for not taking your word for it, Jean said wryly. After all, a girl can't be too careful when she's dealing with her mentor's greatest enemy . . .

The search continued for another ten agonizing minutes—at least it felt like minutes, though it might have only been seconds, time being relative in the dreamscape—before Jean finally closed the last door, and Xavier was able to relax.

Are you finished? he asked, breathing hard.

Jean shrugged. *I suppose so.* She stepped across the office, and gracefully lowered herself into a seat across from him. Then she plopped both feet on the edge of his desk, and crossed her ankles. *Now, what did you want to talk about?*

Pulling himself together, Xavier decided to ignore her discourteous action—and the chair arms still crushing against the sides of his body—and concentrate on more important matters. *First off, I was hoping we might be able to discuss finding a way to free you and the others from Magneto's mind control.*

The corners of Jean's mouth curled up in a half smile. *And here I'd always thought Erik was pulling my leg when he told us that that would more than likely be your opening line.*

Did he, now? Xavier smiled politely. *Well, Erik and I have quite a bit of history between us. If anyone could be said to know my methods intimately, he would be the obvious choice. But that doesn't change a thing—you and I still need to talk about it.*

Jean stretched, arms above her head, and stifled a yawn. *Of course we will. Eventually. And your second topic of discussion?*

The smile faded from the Professor's lips. *I need your help.*

Jean looked amused. *Shouldn't you ask for that after you've freed us from being—she held up both hands, using her index and middle fingers to form quotation mark symbols—the "mindless thralls" of the "villainous" Magneto?*

This is no laughing matter, Jean, Xavier insisted. What I am about to tell you affects the lives of everyone—including Magnus's.

The redheaded telepath grinned. *Then, by all means, do continue . . .*

It was an arduous task, as Xavier did his best to explain the full scope of the situation, giving the smallest details—including highlights of their entire history as members of the X-Men—and speaking almost nonstop, allowing her no opportunity to make some snide comment and attempt to change the subject. He talked about Magneto's background, which greatly deviated from what Jean knew when he reached the part about the mutant overlord dedicating his life to crushing humanity and making *Homo superior* its masters. She chuckled when the Professor mentioned the death of Lensherr's daughter, Anya, and how revealing his magnetically-based powers had resulted in Magda fleeing in terror, horrified by the knowledge that she had been married to some kind of monster.

Undeterred, he pressed on, and was soon bringing her up to speed about the Cosmic Cube and the disastrous effects it was having on the omniverse. And when he had finished, his face red from the effort, he slumped back in his chair and waited for her response.

She laughed.

Oh, my God—this is the best example of a raging psychosis I think I've ever seen, Jean said, grinning broadly. *Cyclops? Nightcrawler? Phoenix?* She chuckled. *Well, at least Rogue gets to use her own name.* She shook her head. *Really, Professor—I think you've been reading too many comic books. "The Cosmic Cube?" Wasn't that in an old Space Ghost cartoon? And come on—no one in their right mind would go around talking in codenames, or strut about in public dressed like you've described—* She caught his annoyed expression, as he gazed at her form-fitting outfit, with its ornate collar and three-inch boot heels. *This is a school uniform, designed to honor a man we greatly admire, not some crimebusting "super hero" costume, if you must know. I'm dressed for teaching, not marching around in a Halloween parade.* She paused. *I must admit, though—I do like the green-and-gold one I saw in one of your "memories." It would go so well with my hair . . .*

Jean—please, Xavier said. *I know this all seems highly amusing to you, but I am quite serious. You and Scott, Kurt and Rogue—you are all my students. We have worked together, fought together, faced death side-by-side countless times. You and I have been the closest of friends. Search your feelings—you'll know that I am right.*

Jean arched a delicate eyebrow. *You're not going to tell me next that you're my father, are you?* Xavier blankly stared at her, confused by the question. She waved a hand dismissively. *Never mind. Pop culture reference.*

The red-haired telepath rose from her chair, smoothing the wrinkles in her clothes with the palms of her hands. A bright spot appeared in

the center of her forehead; as the Professor watched, it began to grow, blazing with a pale yellow light. She was preparing to unleash a psi-bolt. *It's time for me to leave, Professor; I think I've learned everything I needed to know. Thanks for the chat—it's been . . . interesting. We'll have to do it again soon—after you've had time to fully recover, that is.*

Xavier struggled against his bonds, trying to break free, but Jean had made them much too tight. He cursed, the veins prominently standing out on his neck, wishing he could draw upon his telepathic powers for strength, but the drugs and the neural inhibitor made that impossible. All he could do was wait for the inevitable to happen.

The psi-bolt lanced forward. It flared brightly in his mind, painting the walls of the study with harsh shadows—and then darkness descended.

"So, did you learn anything?" Scott asked.

"Well, he's certainly got a vivid imagination," Jean replied, taking her hands away from Xavier's head. His head lolled onto his chest; a thin line of drool seeped out from his slackened mouth, soaking into his dark blue tie. "He's convinced himself that *Erik* is the real menace, and that we're actually *his* followers." She shook her head in amazement. "You should have *seen* the outfits he dreamed up for us. And *then* there were all the colorful little codenames he had for each for us!" She snorted. "I don't know *why* Erik would want us to bring him to the palace. This man is *permanently* out to lunch."

"And yet, he considers Xavier the greatest criminal mastermind in the world," Kurt said.

"Well, y'all know what they say 'bout his type, Kurt," Rogue called back from the cockpit. "It's always the ones who seem t'make the most sense who turn out t'be the craziest."

Jean suddenly rubbed her temples and winced. "Ow," she muttered.

Scott looked at her, clearly concerned. "You okay, hon?"

His wife nodded. "A little psychic feedback, I think. Guess I shouldn't have stayed inside his head as long as I did, but I—" she smiled—"just couldn't pull myself away. I'll be right as rain after I've had a little nap. Do we have the time?"

Scott walked up through the cabin of the Blackbird transport jet to join Rogue, who was seated in the pilot's chair. Just beyond the cockpit windshield, the waters of the Atlantic Ocean flashed beneath the plane, the water sparkling with flecks of golden sunlight. "What's our ETA?"

Rogue checked a series of gauges and dials. "At present speed, we oughtta be over France in another couple hours or so."

"Great!" said Jean. "I'm going to stretch out in the back, all right?" She turned and headed for the rear of the Blackbird. "I'll see you guys in a bit . . ."

And deep within the mind of Jean Grey, a tiny voice screamed in frustration.

No, damn it! I almost had her! Almost got her attention! Damn it, I was so close!

Locked away in the darkest corner of her subconscious, held fast by psychic chains that bound her from neck to ankle, the owner of that voice struggled to break free, but was unable to find the strength. Garbed in a form-fitting, green spandex bodystocking and gold opera-length gloves and thigh-high boots, bright red hair framing a face that contained the exact same features as those possessed by the co-director of the Lensherr Institute, the X-Man the Professor had referred to as "Phoenix" during his discussion with Jean shouted as loud as she could, trying to penetrate the layers of the telepath's consciousness. She tried to let her know that Xavier *had* been telling the truth, tried to make her aware of the threat to countless dimensions posed by Magneto and the Cube, tried to convince her that she had to help put an end to the mutant overlord's reign. None of her words, though, traveled very far.

Jean Grey—the Jean Grey of Earth 616, this is—didn't know how long she'd been trapped here in the darkness. What she *did* know was that she'd only started to regain her senses as soon as she'd heard the familiar voice of Charles Xavier ringing in her duplicate's head.

Yes, she remembered. Her duplicate. The woman who'd taken over her body, forced her consciousness into the deepest recesses of her own mind so that the doppelganger could become the dominant personality.

But, how had that happened? She vaguely remembered a room somewhere, and costumed men and women fighting. Now that she thought about it, *she* had been one of those combatants—until there had been an explosion of pain in her mind, and then she hadn't known anything else before she awoke here.

And now I'm a prisoner in my own head, she thought angrily. *I'd almost consider this a telepathic cliché, except I've never had another me try slipping into my skin before.* She struggled to a sitting position, grunting in discomfit as the chains bit into her arms and chest. *All right, Jeannie—one more time. You've got a lot of psychic barriers to pierce—you should know, you put them there—so just bear down and push through. If the Professor is in any kind of danger, you've got to convince the bodysnatcher to let you out of the dungeon.*

Phoenix took a deep breath, held it, slowly released it through her

nostrils. Then, screwing her eyes shut and gritting her teeth, she concentrated as hard as she could.

Jean—please! she cried out. *Listen to me! You've got to listen to me. . . .*

MY DEAR child, I hope you will not take offense at this question, but . . . are you trying to kill us all?"

Eyes widened in mild panic, Erik Magnus Lensherr gripped the limousine's dashboard with both hands and held on for dear life, fingernails dug deeply into the rich Corinthian leather. To his right, in the driver's seat, was a beautiful young woman in her late teens; *her* fingers were wrapped around the steering wheel. Her clothing choices were as wild as her driving skills: She was dressed in a short, white T-shirt that exposed her abdomen, baggy green pants that hung low on her waist, and short black boots with inch-thick soles. The window beside her was rolled down all the way, and the blast of cool air generated by the vehicle's slipstream was whipping her shoulder-length, dark brown hair around her high-cheekboned face. Beyond the window, Lensherr noted with some concern, the vineyards of the Loire River Valley looked like nothing more than one big, never-ending, green-and-brown blur.

"Anya—please! Slow down!" Lensherr cried in exasperation. "This is a limousine, not a Formula-1 racer!"

"Father, you have spent *much* too much time flitting about the skies with your magnetic powers!" his daughter chided. "You know *nothing* of defensive driving!" She slapped the horn with the palm of her hand, and stuck her head out the window. "*Get out of the way, you moron!*" she yelled at the driver of the car in front of them.

Lensherr sighed. "I should *never* have agreed to letting you take your driving lessons in New York . . ."

Anya giggled, and pressed harder on the accelerator with her foot. The limousine jumped forward in response.

For a moment, Lensherr considered taking control of the situation, either by demanding that she stop the car *this instant*, or by using his gen-active abilities to lift it from the road and fly it toward their destination—at least that way, the chances of them getting in an accident would be greatly reduced. But when he looked at her joyful smile, heard her light, bubbling laugh, he saw in her all the unfettered, pure joy of life that had never been his. How could he deny her *any* pleasures, so soon after the Cube had enabled him to reunite them?

The glass partition behind them slid down with a soft whir of gears. Seated in the back of the vehicle were Magda Lensherr—who, based on what Erik saw reflected in the rear-view mirror, clearly did not share her daughter's enthusiasm for the methods of the LeMans School of Driving—and Anya's two older siblings: Wanda and Pietro. Like her mother and younger sister, Wanda possessed the striking beauty and chestnut-brown hair of all Lensherr women, though her tresses were curly, and hung past her shoulders. Pietro, on the other hand, was the spitting image of his father, right down to the silvered hair and sharp features—and brooding personality.

Both children had inherited their father's mutated genetic structure—a trait not shared by Anya. Exactly why that was, Lensherr didn't know; he hadn't ordered the Cube to create that imperfection. Wanda possessed an almost supernatural ability to affect probabilities; with a wave of her hand, she could change the odds that a certain building might collapse during an earthquake, or that a rain of fish might pour from the skies on a sunny day. Magda had once commented that her daughter should use her talents to affect the odds that she might finally find a man good enough to marry; so far, it hadn't worked.

Pietro was a speedster, capable of running fast enough to break the sound barrier. At the moment, he looked extremely annoyed by the family's predicament. But that, Lensherr knew, was more likely due to the fact that, despite the car's high rate of acceleration, to Pietro's eyes, it appeared to be moving in slow motion. On his own, he could have outraced the limousine to its destination—the family's castle on the river Cher—eaten lunch, run five laps around the whole of the Loire River Valley, and jogged back to the car, all before his family had traveled another two miles. To sit here quietly, growing increasingly impatient with this excruciatingly long trip from Orly airport that *never seemed to end*, must have been maddening for him.

Sitting beside Pietro was his beautiful wife, Crystal. She was tall and blond-haired, with a rounded face and sparkling blue eyes, and was also a mutant of sorts—a member of the House of Attilan, a royal family that benevolently ruled over a race of uniquely mutated men and women

known as Inhumans. Her powers were derived from the four elements: with but a thought, earth, air, fire, and water were hers to command. She and Pietro had married some years ago, and had gifted his parents with a granddaughter: Luna. Considering the wild ride they were currently experiencing aboard the “rocket sled” that normally functioned as a 1999 Mercedes Benz limousine, it seemed that Crystal had made a wise choice in leaving the child with the servants at the Lensherr’s country home.

Noticing her husband’s dour expression, Crystal gently patted him on the arm, clearly attempting to console him. He grunted.

Crouched in the farthest corner of the rear was the final member of the party: the family’s personal chauffeur—a grotesque little man known only as “The Toad,” who was wearing an ill-fitting black suit, a black velvet Greek sailor’s cap perched ridiculously on the back of his football-shaped head. The blood drained from his face, the corners of his mouth were pulled down in a lipless scream.

“I’m sorry, Master!” The Toad screeched. “I *know* I shouldn’t have let Miss Anya drive the car back from the airport, but she *insisted!* And now we’re all going to *die!*”

“*Silence, you sniveling worm!*” Lensherr roared. “We are *not* going to die, but I *am* tempted to throw you from this vehicle, if only to put an end to your incessant whining!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Erik!” Magda shouted. “Don’t yell at The Toad—tell your daughter to stop driving like a lunatic!”

Taking a moment to glare at his cowardly lackey, Lensherr turned back to address his youngest child. “Anya, my sweet . . .” he said gently.

His youngest child sighed. “Very well, Father,” she muttered. Her foot eased back on the accelerator, and the limousine began slowing to traffic speed.

“Thank you,” Lensherr said. He decided to ignore the joyous whimpering of the terrified chauffeur that drifted up from the back seat. “Now, then, do you think you could get us home without causing your mother any further worries?”

He couldn’t help but smile when Magda’s indignant snort reached his ears.

The remainder of the trip passed uneventfully. Once she had gotten past her initial urge to navigate the limousine like a New York City cabbie, and her short period of brooding had ended, Anya turned out to be quite the skillful driver. An hour after their perilous journey along D751, the limousine was pulling through the ornate, iron gates that led to the grounds of Castle Lensherr.

It was a magnificent sight, this towering, two-hundred-room, white-and-silver edifice built over the Cher River, its grounds extending across ten thousand acres of vineyards, grassy fields, woodlands, and Japanese gardens. The castle had been constructed under Lensherr's supervision, the gardens under Magda's. The accommodations were so grand that, if they wished, each member of the family could have, not their own room, but their own apartment. That never happened, of course—the family preferred staying in close proximity to one another—so the balance of rooms were either left unoccupied, or were used by the occasional guest. Most of the time, though, since Erik and his family preferred the comforts of Paris, the only people living in the fortress were a skeleton staff of servants who maintained the upkeep on the numerous rooms and sprawling landscape. But every now and then, the Lensherrs liked to get away from the pressures of a metropolitan lifestyle, and retreat to the country—and *that* was when the castle truly came to life.

Anya brought the limousine to a halt before the towering white oak doors that led to the gallery. As she turned off the engine, the doors of the fortress opened, and a coterie of servants filed out to greet the family. At the head of the line was a dark-haired, forty-year-old human named Batroc, whose powerful legs could propel him incredible distances; he served as the Lensherrs' butler and the head of the household staff. Behind him trailed Slither, a green-skinned, humanoid lizard with a long neck and snake-like head—he was the gardener; Lifter, the handyman—a bear of a mutant in his thirties, with a powerful build and a small head covered with deep-brown hair and a coarse beard; Shocker, his fortysomething assistant, whose arms and legs ended, not with hands or feet, but with pincer-like extremities capable of delivering strong blasts of electrical current—a handy power, on those stormy nights when the castle's generator failed; Burner, the other chauffeur, who was in his mid-thirties, and possessed the ability to cause fires with just a thought; and Jeanne-Marie Beaubier, the Lensherrs' beautiful, white-haired maid, who could fly as fast as Pietro could run—and who, at the moment, was holding Pietro and Crystal's daughter, Luna. Following Jeanne-Marie were a number of other servants, totaling a staff of thirty in all.

At the end of the line was Peeper, a diminutive, bald man with unusually large eyes—so large, in fact, they actually protruded beyond the sockets in his skull. His job was . . . well, no one knew exactly *what* his job was, other than apparently trying to get under everyone's feet while they carried out their own duties. The family liked him, though, so the other servants—except for The Toad, of course, whom no one really liked—were willing to put up with his annoying behavior.

"Welcome home, Miss Anya!" Peeper said in a high-pitched, Peter Lorre-esque voice. "I saw you coming from fifty miles away!" He put his hands to his face. "Oh, you were driving so fast, I was worried for your safety!"

"*Quiet*, you fool," Batroc said heatedly, and turned to the new arrival. "Miss Anya, it is *so* good to 'ave you 'ome a-gain." He spoke pleasantly to her in English, in a broad French accent that was reminiscent of the late Peter Sellers' Inspector Clouseau character in the *Pink Panther* movies. A gentle breeze from the east made the ends of his pencil-thin, waxed mustache quiver slightly.

Anya grinned, clearly amused by the comical antics of the two servants. "Thank you, Batroc. It's good to be home again." She glanced at his much shorter sidekick. "And thank *you* for your concern, Peeper. It's nice to know that someone is looking out for my safety—literally."

Peeper blushed and, giggling nervously, hid behind Jeanne-Marie.

The other members of the family stepped from the car, with The Toad bringing up the rear. He cringed and shook visibly as he realized that Lensherr was standing next to him. The mutant overlord glared down at him.

"Get the bags, you cowering oaf," Lensherr muttered, his voice just audible enough for only The Toad's serving platter-sized ears to detect. The chauffeur literally jumped to carry out the order.

While The Toad started unpacking Anya's bags from the limousine's trunk, Lensherr led his family into the narrow, three-story, white walled gallery that stretched across the river to the castle proper. The first floor of the gallery was just over three hundred feet long, with a dozen windows on each side that looked out over the gentle waters of the Cher, toward the north and south; the two upper floors of the building were used as servants' quarters. The floor was covered with alternating gray and white ceramic tiles. The walls were bare of decorations, though small alcoves had been built into them at regular distances, each recess containing a statue or bust—some, traditional works of art; others, representations of the Master of the World and his family. Low, marble benches stood in front of the alcoves, so that admirers could sit and enjoy the pieces at their leisure.

"You know, Father," Anya said, "you didn't have to go to the trouble of bringing us all the way out here. I would have been more than happy to stay at your apartments in Paris. That's where all my friends are, after all . . ." She smiled. ". . . and the clubs."

"I believe you've led *enough* of a wild life away from here, Daughter," Lensherr replied, gently tapping the end of her nose with a stern index finger. "Now is the time for you to spend a few days with your

family.” He smiled, and draped an arm around her shoulders. “Once you’ve settled in, I want to hear all about your adventures in the United States over dinner this evening.”

“Better put Story Hour on hold fer a while, bub,” said a gruff male voice from behind a bust of Pallas that rested on a pedestal just ahead. “You an’ me, we got more *important* things t’ discuss.”

The Lensherr turned to face the speaker as he stepped out to meet them. He stood just over five feet tall and appeared to be in his mid-forties—although, based on the weather-beaten features he possessed, it was very possible he was much older. Just how *much* older, no one knew, and he wasn’t about to say. He also seemed to take perverse pleasure in being at odds with his surroundings. Unlike the Lensherr, who dressed in the finest European fashions, the man wore clothing more suitable for a farm worker—or a backwoods hunter: a bulky, brown leather jacket, red plaid shirt, black jeans, and black hiking boots. He clasped a battered, black Stetson cowboy hat in hands covered by thick, brown gloves. His hair was shaped in a highly unusual style, beginning as a widow’s peak just above his forehead, then expanding outward to form a pair of tufts that protruded from the sides of his head, each tuft tapering to a fine point. The tufts, in turn, were joined to a thick set of sideburns that ran down the sides of his face and past his ears, ending at the jawline. Seen at a glance, a casual observer might mistake this exceedingly hairy individual for some sort of humanoid lion.

Or a wolverine.

Anya’s face lit up with sheer delight the moment she spotted him.

“Logan!” she cried, and rushed forward to throw her arms around his neck. He responded with a gentle, affectionate hug. “Father didn’t tell me you were here.”

“Father did not know he *was*,” Lensherr commented evenly, “although he *did* expect him to arrive sooner or later.” He nodded pleasantly to his guest. “It’s always a surprise to see you, Logan.”

“That’s the *idea*, bub,” Logan replied. “Then, they never see ya comin’ . . . ’til it’s too late.” Disengaging himself from Anya’s warm embrace, he stepped forward and extended his hand to Lensherr in a show of comradeship.

Lensherr watched this action with more than a touch of amusement. Here, standing before him, was a man who had tried innumerable times to kill him over the years. Yet now they greeted each other as though they were old friends. It was all he could do to keep from laughing in the diminutive Canadian’s pug-ugly face.

Tried? Lensherr knew better than that. As a member of the X-Men,

the feral little mutant codenamed “Wolverine” had come damn near close to *succeeding* on one or two occasions. His last near attempt, in fact, hadn’t been all that long ago—for Lensherr, only days had passed since the events that unfolded on von Doom’s World . . .

He had just brought together his closest followers—his acolytes Mystique, Forge, Fabian Cortez, Amanda Voight, Scanner, Vindaloo, Mellancamp, Unuscione, and his son, Pietro—and dispatched them to von Doom’s Psi Division Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to rescue the X-Men, who had blundered in from some other dimension. The mission had *almost* gone according to plan—until somebody tripped an alarm. As von Doom’s troops bore down on the mutants, left with no other options, the X-Man called Gambit sacrificed his life to save his teammates.

Rogue never quite recovered from the shock of losing the only man she had ever loved.

A short time later, when the two groups sat down to organize a plan of attack against von Doom, Logan had tried to eliminate the Master of Magnetism, rather than allow his friends to ally themselves with Magneto and his acolytes. His intended actions, however doomed to fail they might have been, were cut short by an order from the team’s leader: Scott Summers, who, in his costumed identity, was known as “Cyclops” because of the visor he wore over his eyes to harness the destructive power of his eyebeams. Despite the checkered history between the heroic mutants and their longtime enemy, Summers had agreed to the alliance, if only because von Doom and the Cosmic Cube presented the greater threat to the continued stability of the omniverse. Wolverine hadn’t been pleased with Summers’ decision, and made it clear that, once the mission was completed, the alliance would come to a quick—and bloody—dissolution . . .

But now, though, things were different; the Cube had changed all that. A simple command given to the device, and Logan was as loyally committed to the mutant overlord as his once-bothersome teammates. In fact, his former would-be executioner was so ensorcelled by the Cube’s power that he might even lay down his life for his new master, if Lensherr so desired.

It’s all so deliciously . . . ironic, Magneto thought. He reached out to clasp Logan’s hands in both of his. “Thank you for making the trip. I imagine it was a long flight from Canada.”

Logan shrugged. “Hopped on a plane from Québec soon’s I got Jeannie’s call. Yer just lucky I was done huntin’—a week earlier, an’ I would’na been anywhere near a phone.”

“Where are the others?” Lensherr asked.

"Still in-flight. I talked to 'em a little while ago." A savage snarl split Logan's lips. "The dirtbag's with 'em, but he ain't givin' 'em no trouble . . . yet. Jeannie mentioned somethin' 'bout an accomplice o' his givin' 'em the slip: Asian girl, 'bout twenty-five, pretty good scrapper, 'cordin' t'Rogue. Purple hair, if ya can believe it."

Lensherr started. That sounded suspiciously like Psylocke, if he wasn't mistaken, but he was *certain* he'd dealt with her—and von Doom—when he unleashed the chaos storm back in the White House. In fact, wasn't she the star of some television program in this world? If that were true, then she should have had no knowledge of Xavier's existence, or even a desire to join him on whatever quixotic journey he'd been planning before his capture.

The mutant overlord frowned. Something was definitely out of sorts here . . .

"Is something wrong, Father?" Wanda asked, concern evident in her voice. "For Logan to travel all this way . . ."

"Is merely in response to a courtesy I extended him," Lensherr replied, turning to face her. He smiled. "I simply thought he might wish to be present when our guests from the institute arrive with . . . an old acquaintance."

"And who might this 'old acquaintance' be, Erik, since you've neglected to mention him until now?" There was an edge to Magda's tone that made it clear she was far from pleased with her husband's subterfuge. "Might he have anything to do with these 'important matters' Logan mentioned?"

"He does," Lensherr replied. "And his name is Charles Xavier."

His wife's eyes widened in shock, and her jaw dropped. "*Here?* You'd bring that murderer *here*, to our *home*, with your *family* present? Have you lost your mind?"

Lensherr smiled disarmingly. "I assure, you, Magda, you and the children have nothing to fear. Charles has been outfitted with a neural inhibitor, so there will be no psychic trickery on his part. He's also being accompanied by some of my most powerful followers, including Jean Grey, who is more than capable of dealing with any remaining telepathic abilities he might possess." He clapped a hand on Wolverine's shoulder. "And, with our Chief of Security present, even *Charles* would know how foolish it would be to upset his hosts by causing us any difficulties."

Beside him, Logan grunted in agreement. "But if he *does* try makin' any trouble—" a half-dozen, foot-long metal spikes suddenly protruded from the backs of his hands, the sharpened tips slicing through his

leather gloves as though they were made of paper “—I’ll convince him how bad an idea that is, real quick.”

“Down, boy,” Anya said, clearly trying to break the tension that had suddenly filled the air. “We’re all friends here.”

Logan gazed at her for a moment, the heat of anger quite evident on his fuzzy cheeks, then sheathed his claws. “Sorry, darlin’—got a little worked-up there.” His attempt at a smile was well-intentioned, but a tad on the grotesque side. “Thanks fer the reality check.”

“My pleasure,” she replied, and slipped an arm around one of his. “Now, let’s forget about Father’s guests until they get here, all right? We’re supposed to be here to *enjoy* ourselves.”

Lensherr chuckled. “As ever, my child, you are the voice of reason.”

Anya took hold of Lensherr’s arm with her free hand. “Not true, Father—that’s *Mama’s* job. *Mine* is the voice of reckless youth.” She grinned broadly. “And the voice of reckless youth says it’s time we stopped standing around a drafty old gallery and got ready to receive our guests. If Kurt Wagner is one of them, I want to look my best.”

“I’d stay clear o’ the fuzzy elf if I were you, darlin’,” Logan said. “That kinda guy’ll break yer heart in the longrun.”

Anya chuckled. “I’m certain you’ve done a fair amount of heart-breaking yourself, Logan.” She nodded toward his rough-and-tumble appearance. “Women go for that rugged look—it says so in *Cosmopolitan*.”

Logan’s soft laugh sounded like the growl of a hungry lion stalking its prey. “Can’t argue with facts like that, I guess.”

Pulling the two men along the gallery, her mother and siblings close behind, Anya guided the family toward the castle proper.

“Come along, now, everyone,” she said. “I can’t *wait* to tell you about the wonderful tattoos Paige Guthrie and I got in Greenwich Village . . .”

As he allowed his daughter to pull him down the tiled corridor, Erik Magnus Lensherr couldn’t help but openly stare at her, marveling at the brightness of her smile, the life that shone in her eyes. Here, at last, was the daughter he hadn’t been able to save on that horrific night, decades past, in the Soviet city of Vinnitsa. *That* Anya had only been ten years old then, and completely unaware of the blinding hatred humans felt toward mutants, of the fear they showed toward anything that was different.

Fear that had cost her her young life.

He still remembered it all vividly: Magda and he going to the market, leaving Anya to play with her dolls; the unexplained fire that trapped her in the small, third-floor apartment they called home; his

public display of his mutant talents in order to protect Magda and himself from burning debris; the mob's vicious attack—hands pulling at his clothes, his hair. Fists pummeling his body and face; cries of “freak” and “monster” ringing in his ears.

Cries of a child as the fire consumed her.

A body falling from the window, arms and legs pinwheeling in slow motion—a fiery, human-sized comet, blazing crimson and gold against a black velvet sky.

And all the way down, the screams.

Screams of agony; of hellish torture.

Screams for her mother and father to save her.

Screams cut short by a sickening impact . . .

Lensherr started, his nostrils suddenly filled with the sickening odor of burning wood and plaster—and flesh. A phantom smell, culled from the deepest recesses of his darkest memories—ones that had haunted him for a lifetime . . .

“Father?” Anya asked, eyes wide with concern. “Are you all right?”

“I’m *fine*, child,” Lensherr replied sharply, then winced, angry with himself for acting so brusquely. All she had done was ask about his well-being; he shouldn’t be so upset. If only it wasn’t always the most painful memories that refused to fade away . . .

“I’m fine, Anya,” he said gently, and stroked her chestnut hair. “My mind was just wandering.”

He smiled brightly—and why not? Thanks to the Cube, he had her back now—her *and* her mother. There *was* no fire; there never *had been* a fire. It was all nothing more than a nightmare—a disturbing figment of his imagination; “an undigested bit of beef, a blob of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato,” as Charles Dickens put it so eloquently in *A Christmas Carol*.

Erik Lensherr’s nightmares were ended, the weight on his soul finally removed. His wife and daughter were here, the two people who had always mattered more to him than life itself, as vibrant and young and beautiful as he wished them to be, in a world where they would never know the true meaning of fear . . . or terror . . . or death . . .

The Cosmic Cube had been his savior . . . and the means of his redemption. And having found redemption, Lensherr silently vowed that nothing—not even the sudden, but expected, reappearance of Professor Charles Xavier—would ever take away that sense of wholeness, or deny his daughter the peace and love he had at last been able to give her. . . .

WHAT DO you mean, 'he's missing'?"

The Omniversal Majestrix was *not* in the best of moods. It seemed like she had just put her head down on her pillow, after retiring to her quarters for the "evening," only to be rudely awakened by the shrill tone of the comm-set she'd forgotten to remove from her right ear. Being told that the von Doom of Earth 616 had escaped from the infirmary, *and* that he had killed two guards and his elderly alternate along the way, had only made her normally acerbic tone that much harsher.

Saturnyne ordered a full alert, then glanced at the chronometer near her bed—according to its readout, she'd only been asleep for roughly twenty-five minutes. She unclipped the comm-set and tossed it on the bed, savagely threw back the sheets, and stepped onto the carpeted floor.

"Lights!" she snapped. Responding instantly to her command, the computer activated every bulb in the suite, filling the darkened bedroom with brilliant illumination. Momentarily blinded, Saturnyne stumbled into a chair, barking her shin against its legs; it elicited a heated growl from her slender throat.

"Oh, I *knew* that tin foil-coated worm was going to be trouble, the moment I laid eyes on him," she muttered, now hobbling toward her closet. "Should have had him thrown from the highest tower and into the vortex as soon as Braddock told us about the Cube . . ."

Selecting her wardrobe choices—white satin floor-length gown, white cape with fur trimming, white leather belt bearing the large, rose-colored jewel that denoted her station as Omniversal Majestrix—Saturnyne laid them across the bed, then stepped into the shower, letting the cold water shake the last vestiges of sleep from her tired body.

A few minutes later, now fully awake, powdered and perfumed, she exited the bathroom—and came to an abrupt halt.

Standing before her was Doctor Doom, arms folded across his broad, armored chest. Dark-brown eyes stared evenly at the Majestrix from behind the emotionless metal mask he wore. His gaze flickered briefly over her body, taking in her state of undress, then moved back up to lock on her cool blue eyes. For a moment, Her Whyness wondered if she should be insulted by his lack of response.

But, as strange and unnerving as that completely unexpected sight was for Saturnyne, it wasn't von Doom who had truly surprised her—Mitras knew it wasn't the first time a man had been in her quarters—but rather the woman standing next to him. *The woman who was wearing her clothes.*

She had the same features as Saturnyne. Wore the same choice of blue eye shadow and matching lipstick. Possessed the same shoulder-length white hair parted above the left side of her face, to cascade down in a snowy wave that concealed the right eye. But unlike Her Whyness, the one visible eye of her doppelganger shone brightly with the fires of hate—and madness.

"Hello, 'sister,'" her duplicate said, lips pulled back in a malevolent sneer. "I'm certain you never thought you'd see *me* again."

The Majestrix's pale blue eyes went wide in shock. "Sat-yr-nin . . ." she gasped.

Before she could say more, a hand clamped tightly over her mouth, and Saturnyne felt the sharp pinch of a needle as it pierced the base of her neck. Her limbs suddenly grew heavy, her thoughts becoming clouded, as the drug she'd been injected with took immediate effect. An arm circled her waist to keep her from falling to the floor.

"What are you doing, Stanton?" von Doom asked ominously.

Stanton? One of the physicians from the medical wing? Saturnyne tried to pull away from him, but it was taking all her remaining strength just to stay conscious. Her hands fluttered uselessly at her sides as the doctor pulled her toward the bed.

"There's been enough killing, Lord Doom," Stanton replied. "I'd like to avoid raising the death toll any higher than it's already become." Gently, he lowered Saturnyne onto the thick mattress, removing his hand from her mouth as he did so. She moaned softly, eyelids growing heavier; oblivion wasn't too far away. "The sedative I've given her will keep her unconscious long enough."

"Long enough for what?" the Mastrex asked, glaring at him.

"For us to transport her down to the stasis chamber," Stanton replied, "where she'll take your place." When Sat-yr-nin didn't respond,

he continued, as though lecturing a student. "At this point, citadel security is focused on locating Lord Doom and, therefore, is more than likely unaware of your . . . early release from their good graces." He gestured toward Saturnyne. "If Her Whyness is secured in the suspension tube before they realize what's occurred, then the guards will never suspect that you've switched places with her. Thus, you'll have free reign to roam the citadel unmolested—" he glanced at von Doom "—and there will be no need to kill her. *That's* why I suggested we come *here* once the Mastrex had recovered from the stasis effects, rather than attempt an open confrontation with the Supreme Guardian."

"How deceptively clever." The monarch chuckled. "Congratulations, Dr. Stanton—you have at last proven your worth to Doom . . . for one more day."

"I'm so glad you approve," Stanton muttered sarcastically.

Sat-yr-nin sat on the edge of the bed and playfully stroked her double's hair. "And once dear old Opal Luna here has been tucked in for the night, we can turn our attention to more important matters—like removing that witch, Roma, from power." She sneered. "I owe her a *great* deal of suffering for having me shoved into that claustrophobic little tube and left to pickle—" she snorted "—simply because she disagrees with the way I run my world." A wicked smile slowly split her lips. "As Roma will discover, much to her dismay, I have *always* believed in repaying my debts . . . *in full.*"

As if on cue, the comm-set lying on the bed near the semi-conscious Majestrix chirped loudly.

"I think that's for me," Sat-yr-nin commented cheerfully, and picked it up, clipping it to her right ear. "Yes?" She sat quietly for a few moments, nodding her head as though in agreement, the person on the other end of the communication doing all the talking. "Of course, Supreme Guardian—I shall be there shortly."

Sat-yr-nin rose from the bed and turned to her partners. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I have been summoned to the throne room. It appears that some armor-clad dictator from another Earth is running about the citadel without a proper escort, and Roma has asked for my assistance in tracking him down." Eyes glittering with unbridled hatred, she gazed down at her helpless duplicate. "And it wouldn't do to keep m'lady waiting, my first day on the job."

"M-Mitras, no . . ." Saturnyne said weakly. She tried to rise, but she couldn't even turn her head. Or open her eyes. Or—

And then the drug finally overwhelmed her senses, and she was falling into darkness.

She'd lost track of him somewhere along Boulevard Saint Germain. And considering that, as a warrior, she had been trained in the arts of Nin-jitsu, and should have been able to track him from one side of Paris to the other without being detected, even *she* had to admit that it was an incredible—and highly annoying—feat on his part.

As the late afternoon sun shone brightly above the streets of the Left Bank, Betsy stood at the intersection of Rue de l'Université and Rue des Saints Peres, hands on hips, tapping her foot in mild annoyance as she mentally scolded herself for being so incredibly stupid. For someone with an interest in American police television programs, it seemed she hadn't learned a great deal about the finer points of tailing a suspect.

So much for the educational power of television . . . she thought.

For a moment, she considered psi-scanning the area—the faux Worthington couldn't have gone that far on foot—but the prospect of tapping into a mind that might so closely mirror that of her lost love's set her nerves on edge. She was afraid—of what she might find there, of what she might not, of what touching on familiar, shared memories might do to disrupt the tight control she'd been able to maintain over her emotions since returning to Earth. Still, despite her reluctance, she couldn't deny the fact that she wanted to learn the reasons for Magneto's decision in recreating Warren and her as part of this Cube-fashioned world. And the answers, quite possibly, might be contained within the mind of this doppelganger.

Not for the first time, she began to wonder what she'd do when she finally caught up to him . . . and why she'd want to put herself through such a traumatic experience.

Around her, the citizens of Paris streamed by, still oblivious to her unusual appearance—but more than aware that she was standing in the middle of the sidewalk. She flinched as yet another shoulder slammed into her side, this time courtesy of a sour-faced, white-haired old man with hawk-like features—*actual* hawk-like features, right down to the layer of small, light brown feathers that framed his face—who clearly wanted her out of his way. As he passed, Betsy heard him mutter a few choice words in his native tongue—something about her parentage, if she wasn't mistaken.

Betsy growled.

"Excuse me, Miss," a pleasant male voice suddenly called out, "but has anyone ever told you you look *just* like my wife?"

Startled, Betsy looked around, turning quickly in a tight circle. The voice had come from somewhere close by, but she couldn't see any sign of the speaker. So, if he wasn't standing on the sidewalk . . .

She looked up.

Warren Worthington III—the *other* Warren, she quickly reminded herself—was standing on a small balcony three stories above the street. Behind him were an open set of doors leading to an apartment; the sweet notes of a jazz recording could just be heard above the sounds of the bustling city. Worthington had taken off his jacket and shirt, revealing a chiseled body and lithe, powerful arms; with his square jaw, shoulder-length blond hair, and bare chest, he looked more like a male model posing for the cover of a romance novel than a millionaire playboy. Then again, with his brilliant white wings folded around him, and the way in which the sun outlined them in a dazzling golden glow, she could almost believe she was looking at an angel.

At Warren.

But, this isn't Warren, you stupid cow, she scolded herself. *He's just Magneto's blasted carbon copy.*

"You saw me following you," she said flatly.

Worthington shrugged. "Well, babe, you *are* talking to a guy who doesn't only fly like an eagle—he's got its eyesight, too." He gestured toward her dark-blue outfit. "Besides, you *do* tend to stand out in a crowd—not that that's a *bad* thing." He smiled, and gestured toward a street-level door on Rue de l'Université. "Come on up—the door's open."

Betsy smiled in return; she couldn't help herself. Just seeing that boyish grin again—even on another man's face—made her heart beat a little faster.

She mentally kicked herself.

What's wrong with you, Braddock? You've seen duplicates of your friends before—it wasn't all that long ago the Skrulls tried that very trick. Why, then, can't you get it through your stupid, thick skull that you're getting all weak in the knees over a cheap imitation?

She knew why. Because she wasn't ready to admit to herself that this man wasn't really her lost love; wasn't yet ready to give up hope.

Wasn't yet ready to let go.

The pain in her heart was still too fresh, the wound still too raw. She would heal, in time, she knew, but right now . . .

With a start, Betsy suddenly realized that she had already entered the apartment building.

You see? she thought. *You see what happens when you let your mind wander? Nothing but trouble!*

She couldn't argue with that—but then, if she'd been thinking clearly from the start, she never would have followed Worthington through the streets of the Left Bank; she would have ignored his presence entirely and focused on her mission. But it was her heart that had

been directing her body for the past few hours, not her head; all she could do was hold on and hope that things would turn out for the best.

The strains of Dave Brubeck's classic composition "Take Five" drifted down along the stairwell from the third floor. Ignoring the insistent warnings of her inner voice, Betsy began mounting the steps. On the second floor landing, she flashed a weak smile at an elderly woman who was coming down the stairs. The woman gave her a stern looking over, and sniffed loudly—apparently, she didn't care much for Betsy's choice of clothing.

I'd like to see you look this good in it, Grandmother, Betsy thought. The image of what that might look like flashed across her mind's eye, and she laughed. The old woman huffed as though insulted, and continued on her way.

Reaching the third floor, Betsy followed the music to its source. The door to the apartment had been left open—an invitation from a hungry spider to a lovelorn fly, perhaps? Taking hesitant steps, she pushed the door wide open and entered, half wishing some kind of deathtrap would be sprung so she could be faced with a problem she knew how to handle.

But there were no traps, no villains seated comfortably in the living room, waiting to attack—just an immense apartment in a fashionable Paris neighborhood. It was almost a disappointment. Worthington was nowhere to be found; presumably, he was in another room, doing whatever he felt was necessary to prepare for her arrival. The high, crystal-line note of glasses clinking from a room off to the left confirmed that suspicion—it sounded like he was making drinks. *How positively domestic,* she thought with a slight sneer. Setting her carryall on a fluted mahogany pedestal near the door, Betsy paused to take in her surroundings.

For someone living in a city as rich in tastes as Paris, Worthington's sense of décor seemed to come straight from the pages of a furniture catalog—there were Seville chairs and leather Tacoma sofas and Indio-Tibetan area rugs and teak trays and mahogany tables. There were expensively framed paintings scattered about the place, offset by a framed, six-foot-tall poster that hung in one corner of what she assumed was the living room. It was an advertisement for *Kwannon, Bushido Mistress*—the kind of large format poster normally found hanging behind large glass panels in Urban American bus stops. The full-color image on the poster was of her duplicate, teeth bared, *katana* raised high above her head—a warrior charging forward in the heat of bloodlust. The background was filled with a ghostly representation of the Crimson Dawn tattoo both Betsy and her double sported; the X-Man was willing

to bet good money that the other woman's mark was nothing more than makeup. Across from the poster, one wall was occupied by an immense home entertainment system—the source of the slick musical tones that filled the air. All in all, it certainly didn't strike Betsy as the sort of place in which one would find a multi-millionaire and an international television star living together; perhaps it was Worthington's private apartment. That made sense, in an odd sort of way, given his taste in furniture; if it wasn't for the gold wedding band she'd spotted on his left ring finger from the street, she might have mistaken him for a bachelor.

As he entered the room carrying a pair of fluted champagne glasses in one hand, Worthington used the remote control in his other hand to lower the volume on his stereo system. Coming to a halt before Betsy, he held out one of the glasses, and she obligingly took it.

"Welcome home, Madame," he said in a broad French accent that was pure John Cleese in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. "It is always a pleasure to have your beauteous form besmirching this 'umble abode."

"*Merci*," Betsy replied pleasantly.

Worthington looked her up and down, but there was not even a trace of sensuality to his gaze; he acted more like a man examining a prize mare at an equestrian auction. "You look good, hon," he said. There was a tone in his voice when he said it, however, that made it sound as though he was leading up to something more than a casual compliment.

"Thank you," she said.

Worthington nodded. "Yeah, real good," he muttered, then turned to walk over to one of the couches. Not bothering to sample the wine, Betsy set the glass down on a magazine table beside the entertainment center. She remained standing, waiting to see where the conversation would lead.

"You're turning out to be quite the world traveler, aren't you, hon?" Worthington asked, settling down on the soft leather cushions. "Two days ago, you were in New Zealand. Then, you were in New York yesterday, and now, suddenly, you're here in Paris." He smiled, and raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Trying to cash in all your Frequent Flyer miles before the week is over?"

Betsy flashed a brief smile. "Something like that."

"Well, I think that's great." He sipped at the wine, then placed the glass on a coffee table in front of him. "I just wish you'd told me you were coming—I would've made plans."

She shrugged. "That's all right. I've plans of my own for the evening."

Worthington sneered. "With a certain baldheaded cripple, right?" The change of expression that came over him, going from boyish charm to seething anger in an instant, was a startling one.

"'Cripple'?" Betsy frowned—now *there* was a word the real Warren never would have uttered; she doubted it was even in his vocabulary.

"Come on, babe, I saw the pictures on *E! News Daily* this afternoon. Once the story broke, I spoke with your producer. *He* said you were down with him in New Zealand, working on the show, but *I* think he was just covering for you—and doing a lousy job of it, based on the amount of press coverage you've been getting. And then this afternoon, my office was flooded with calls asking about our impending divorce." Worthington eyed her suspiciously. "Is there an impending divorce? Because if there is, I would've thought you'd have the class to at least e-mail me before you started posing for photo ops with your new lover."

Betsy grimaced. *There* was a mental image she'd never needed to have floating around in her head. "Oh, good Lord. He's *not* my lover, he's—"

"What, a stopover between flights?" Worthington snapped. He rose to his feet and thumped his bare chest. "Are you trying to tell me *this* isn't good enough for you—you have to go looking elsewhere to have your fun?"

"This is ridiculous," Betsy said. It was more than that, she had to admit—it had been an utter mistake to come here. She'd known that even before she walked through the door, but, romantic masochist that she was, she'd ignored the voice of reason that echoed in her thoughts and found herself walking right into a scene from an Aaron Spelling soap opera. And she absolutely *loathed* soap operas.

"I've got to go." She turned on her heel and headed for the front door, grabbing her carryall along the way.

"Damn it . . ." she heard him mutter. There was a soft flutter of wings beating, and a gentle breeze tousled her hair.

He reached the door ahead of her, wings spread wide to bar her exit.

"Get out of my way," Betsy said. If the warning tone in her voice wasn't clear enough, she was willing to give him another five seconds to think it over before she snapped one of his arms.

"Elisabeth, come on," he said softly. "I apologize. I shouldn't have mouthed off like that, and I'm sorry. I *really* don't want to fight."

Two seconds.

He flashed that boyish grin again, and brushed aside a lock of lavender hair that had draped across her right cheek with his fingertips, and she stopped the countdown. Damn him, why couldn't he have an

overbite, or bad teeth, or a missing incisor—*something* that would distinguish his smile from the one she knew so well, so she could hate him?

She quickly lowered her gaze so she wouldn't have to look at it. *Let him speak his mind, and then leave, you stupid git—get out before something happens. Something you'll regret.*

"Look, Elisabeth," he said, "I know this long-distance relationship has been hard on both of us, what with you spending half the year in New Zealand and me shuttling between our places here and in the States, but I thought we could always work things out. If there's a problem, if there's something I've done that makes you think you need somebody else in your life, then tell me what it is. I don't want us to break up—I just want to make it right."

He gently placed a hand under her chin and tilted it up, then moved forward to kiss her. For a second—just for a second—she wavered in her resolve . . . but it was enough time for her to finally give in to the temptation.

His lips brushed against hers, and a pleasant surge of electricity raced through her body, prickling her skin. She shivered slightly, feeling her defenses start to crumble . . . yet she did nothing to stop it from happening.

A fake . . . he's just a fake . . . her mind called out, but she wasn't listening anymore. She dropped the bag, wrapped her arms around him, and pulled him close, losing herself in the smell of his skin, thrilling to the touch of his hands as he ran his fingertips down the length of her spine. It all felt so right, and she just wanted—so desperately needed—the pain to end.

But then the memory

wings fluttering helplessly, his handsome features stretched tight as searing pain wracked his body, the odor of burnt flesh in her nostrils flashed brightly across her mind's eye, and she pulled back.

"N-no, this is wrong . . ." she whispered. She pushed him away, roughly, and he fell back, staggering for a moment before he regained his balance.

"What are you talking about, Elisabeth?" Worthington demanded. "What's wrong?" His eyes flashed with anger. "You're my wife, damn it—"

"I'm not your wife!" Betsy roared. "And you're just a lie!"

She was angry now—more at her own actions than by anything he had done—and hurt, and wanted to do nothing more than blindly lash out at the monster who had compounded her suffering, who had used his damnable wishbox to trivialize the death of the only man she had

ever truly loved. Unfortunately, that monster wasn't available . . . but she was willing to settle for the next best thing.

Unbidden, her right hand suddenly began to glow with rose-colored energy—instinctively, she'd called forth her psi-blade. Her eyes seemed to blaze with the same energy as she menacingly closed on her prey.

Worthington backed away; *his* eyes sparkled with the growing light of fear. Maybe he was coming to the realization that the woman advancing on him really *wasn't* his wife.

"What the hell is *that*?" he asked, his voice a few octaves higher, and pointed to the foot-long dagger.

"*My wrath*," she said coldly—and plunged the blade into his skull.

She found herself standing on a beach on a hot summer day.

The sky was ablaze with color as the sun set in the west; looking toward the east, Betsy could see stars twinkling brightly against a midnight blue curtain. Judging by the fact that the constellations were different here than those she normally saw above the lights of New York, she came to the conclusion that she was in the Southern Hemisphere.

She remembered this place, but not as a psychic construct floating around in someone's mind. It was an actual island, owned by Warren, that was located in the Bismarck Sea, about one hundred miles off the coast of New Guinea. She'd been here with her beau, a year or so past, along with Bobby Drake and his non-mutant girlfriend of the moment—a pretty, blond-haired artist named Cindy Appleton. The quartet had traveled there to unwind after a particularly grueling battle the X-Men had fought against one of the group's oldest enemies: Kukulcan, an ancient Mayan deity. Warren was bruised and battered from taking the brunt of one of the sun god's solar bolts—at one point, he'd commented that he ached so badly that even his *hair* hurt. Betsy's soothing ministrations, however, made him soon forget all about his pains . . .

A low moan caught her attention, and she looked down to find the "other" Worthington lying face-down in the golden sand. Planting a stockinged foot firmly against his rib cage, she pushed hard, rolling him onto his back so he could breathe. It wouldn't do to have him suffocate while she was inside his mind. The last thing she needed after the horrors she'd recently experienced was to be trapped inside the subconscious of a dead man.

Betsy gazed at her surroundings. Out on the ocean, a pair of dolphins leapt from the water, playing tag in the turquoise waters. Behind her, palm trees swayed in the gentle Pacific breezes, the broad leaves rattling softly with a sound like sails unfurling. Beyond the trees, rising majestically above the island, was Mt. Pindalayo, a dormant volcano

she had tried to climb a number of times during the brief vacation. She'd given up after twisting her right knee on the third attempt, and had grudgingly settled for a quick trip to the top courtesy of Air Worthington.

Everything here was just as she remembered it—except that Warren wasn't with her now to enjoy the view.

Forcing herself to ignore the prostrate form spread out by her feet, Betsy started walking toward the jungle, knowing that any answers she sought would be found there, in the depths of Worthington's subconscious.

The path through the jungle wasn't a real path, of course—it was merely a representation of a psychic conduit that allowed her easy access to Worthington's memories; the further she traveled along it, the more information she'd be able to gather. If she wanted, she could even interact with those memories, and peel back their layers to discover what really lay at the heart of this creation that had been formed by Magneto's black sense of humor. For now, though, she settled for simply playing observer, glancing from side to side at a brief scene here, a childhood fantasy there, with all the mild interest of someone strolling through the Central Park Zoo on a pleasant Sunday afternoon.

As she continued her journey, however, mild interest quickly grew to open-mouthed astonishment. She was shocked—and a tad frightened, she had to admit—by how so many of Worthington's memories were the same as Warren's. The night he'd coaxed her into singing at the Starlight Room in New York. Their first moonlit flight above the city, arms wrapped around one another, chasing the stars as they flitted across the night sky. Vacations in Rio de Janeiro, in Switzerland, in Venice. That wild, passionate night in New Orleans when he'd finally admitted his love for her.

But how could this be possible? If Worthington and everyone else on the planet were just constructs of Magneto's mind, then how could this version of Warren possess memories that Lensherr would never have been privy to? Was the Cosmic Cube so powerful it could even reconstruct the thought patterns of a *dead man*?

Unfortunately, she couldn't find any answers to her questions—not in Worthington's mind, at least.

Betsy shook her head; this was getting her nowhere. It was obvious that Worthington didn't know anything else about Magneto beyond what the rest of the world had been duped into believing. As much as she hated to admit it, this detour from her mission had only succeeded in accomplishing one goal: killing a few hours before she had to face the

mutant overlord. She'd been a fool to put herself through all this trouble—all this misery. It was time to move on.

But then, just as she prepared to withdraw from Worthington's subconscious and return to her own body, she felt the presence of *another* mind, and a familiar voice called out to her from the darkness:

Betts? Betsy? Is that you?

Her breath caught in her throat. No—it couldn't be, she told herself. He was gone, and no matter how much she wished otherwise, there was nothing she could do to bring him back. It had to be some part of Worthington's mind, another memory she'd stumbled across. It would be best to ignore it; better to go now, before she caused herself any more grief by poking around where she didn't belong. She'd be an utter fool to remain here a moment longer.

So why, then, did she find herself venturing further into the jungle, into the shadowy depths of Worthington's mind, hoping to find the source of that voice . . . ?

THE FIRST sensation Saturnyne had was of being cold and wet.

Her feet were numb, for some inexplicable reason. The chill spread to her ankles, then up along her legs. It was around that moment that she also lost all feeling in her fingertips.

She struggled to open her eyes, but it turned out to be a difficult task—her body refused to respond to her mental commands. No real surprise there, she thought dimly—she'd been going nonstop almost from the moment the Cube-created anomaly began to warp reality in Dimension 616. If *she* were her body, she wouldn't want to get up, either . . .

But then why did she feel so blasted cold? And something else: hadn't she been in the process of responding to some sort of alert in the citadel?

The numbness continued to spread; she couldn't feel anything below her waist or elbows now. Cold this intense should have made her joints ache, but she couldn't feel those, either. Had she gotten out of bed in the middle of the night and passed out on the bathroom floor?

Slowly, the heavy eyelids began to rise, and she was able to catch brief, hazy glimpses of her surroundings through gummy, crust-covered lashes:

A dark area—a room of some sort?

Colored lights twinkling like stars.

A flash of white moving across the darkness.

Her mind fought hard to process the information provided by her eyes, but her thinking was all muzzy; if only she weren't so cold . . .

She vaguely remembered a hand over her mouth, the stab of something sharp penetrating her neck—then nothing.

No, there was more. A woman. There'd been a woman in her quarters—one with snow-white hair like hers; a face like hers. A mirror image. An evil twin.

Sat-yr-nin.

That psychopathic little git from Earth 794. *She* was the one who'd been in her quarters, wearing her clothes, her jewelry—

Her identity?

But, wait a moment. Wasn't Sat-yr-nin supposed to be locked away in the bowels of the citadel? Of *course*, she was—Her Whyness had seen to that herself, supervising her insane double's placement in the stasis chamber shortly after the X-Men had captured her. Roma had been uncomfortable with the idea of putting the Mastrex to death, no matter *how* severe her crimes against humanity might have been; all life was sacred to the Supreme Guardian.

There were days, Saturnyne had thought darkly at the time, when she missed having Merlyn in charge. A right buzzard he might be, a schemer, a liar, and a callous manipulator, but at least he understood the need for swift, decisive actions—like summary justice. If only Roma could be a little more cold-hearted, like her father . . .

Nevertheless, the Mastrex of Earth 794 had been sealed away, hopefully forever—or at least until Roma saw the light of reason, and had her atoms scattered across the length and breadth of the omniverse. But if Sat-yr-nin *had* been in Her Whyness' rooms just a short while ago, then obviously she had escaped. And if *she* was now wandering about the citadel, impersonating the Omniversal Majestrix, then *where*, in turn was the *real* Majestrix . . . ?

Saturnyne's eyes snapped open, a sudden adrenaline surge providing her with the strength she needed to throw off the lingering effects of the sedative. She was in a crystalline tube, medical sensors attached to various points on her head and body. She went to touch the glass, but found herself unable to move her arms. Or her legs, for that matter.

Forcing her head to tilt downward, she saw a viscous, azure liquid filling the enclosure from a hole in the bottom of the tube. The level of fluid had already risen above chest level, and as it climbed higher, more and more of her body became numb. It took her a moment to realize what was happening.

Suspension fluid, her mind told her. *You're in the stasis chamber. Being cryo-sealed.*

"Mitras, no!" she cried. Panicked, she looked through the crystal wall, to find a sour-faced, balding man in a white laboratory coat watching her.

A doctor, she thought. *He's a doctor—but if he's a doctor, then why isn't he trying to help me? Doesn't he know who I am?*

Of course, he did, she realized with growing horror. Because he was the one who had drugged her; the one who had freed Sat-yr-nin; the one who was working with von Doom.

Stanton, she thought hazily as the cold seized her around the collarbone, digging its wintry talons into her flesh. *His name . . . is . . . Stanton . . .*

It was getting harder to think clearly—her mind was closing down, her heart stopping, the flow of blood to her brain inching to a halt. All she could focus on was the chill that had seized her body—the icy fist that held her immobile in her crystal coffin, its grip tightening to such a degree that each remaining breath felt like shards of broken glass were being scraped against the back of her throat. She was cold . . . so very cold . . .

She opened her mouth wide, to scream one last time in defiance—

And then the thick, blue liquid was flowing down her throat, filling her lungs, and a numbing rime closed over her thoughts.

Stanton watched with a sense of relief as the suspension fluid reached the top of the tube, and Saturnyne's vital signs settled down to normal—well, normal for cryo-sleep, that is. It had been a close call, transporting her to the stasis chamber before the sedative wore off; the job might have gone easier, and much faster, if von Doom hadn't abandoned him to go off on his own.

"Doom is no man's lackey," he had said in that annoyingly imperious tone of his. "It is *your* plan, Stanton—see it through to its conclusion. I, meanwhile, have more important matters to which I must attend." Then, turning on his heel without waiting for a response, he'd exited Saturnyne's suite, leaving the dour physician to the task of dragging an unconscious Majestrix back through the service tunnels they'd used to gain access to her quarters.

The return trip to the stasis chamber had taken twice as long to travel, since Saturnyne was nothing but dead weight in his arms, and he'd had to hide from citadel security patrols at least a half-dozen times. Nevertheless, his supposition *had* been correct: no one had thought to check on Sat-yr-nin, so focused were they all on locating von Doom. The bodies, the broken doors—they were all still there when he arrived with his charge, all lying exactly as they had been when he, von Doom, and Sat-yr-nin had departed for the upper levels. He'd just managed to bundle the insensate Majestrix into the crystalline holding cylinder as the first soft moans of returning consciousness escaped her lips.

Stanton leaned back against the monitoring station, and used the sleeve of his coat to wipe away the perspiration that had accumulated on his bare scalp. He was a doctor, not a dock worker—he wasn't built for all this heavy lifting. His back ached, his head pounded, his arms felt like lead ingots; there were moments when it hurt just to breathe. As shapely as the Majestrix was, one hundred and fifteen pounds was still one hundred and fifteen pounds, whether on Earth or the citadel, and carrying all that weight up and down access ladders, through service tunnels, and across numerous corridors had certainly taken its toll on him. All he wanted to do right now was collapse into bed and sleep for a week. But then an image of von Doom floated before his bleary eyes, and Stanton was quickly reminded of the armored fist that had crushed the skull of the elderly counterpart from Earth 892; of the splash of blood and bone that had turned the white bedding a disturbing crimson hue; and of von Doom's ominous comment about the expendability of his pawns. Perhaps it might be better to stay awake and keep busy . . .

Still, Stanton's plan had worked to perfection . . . so far. Saturnyne was alive, her alternate was moving freely about the citadel, and no one was the wiser. And, as long as von Doom didn't tip their hand too soon, the masquerade could continue undetected.

Stanton smiled. Could the Chief Physician have done anything this masterful? Highly unlikely—the man could barely dress himself properly. Such precise planning could only have been accomplished by someone possessing a great mind—an intellect so vast it staggered the imaginations of lesser beings. An intellect like the one that resided in the mind of one Henry P. Stanton.

Now, he just had to put that intellect to use, and think of something to do with all the bodies outside, before anyone took notice . . .

With a heavy sigh, Stanton pushed off from the monitoring station, and headed for the outer chamber, his back already complaining. Behind him, Saturnyne floated in azure tranquillity, her beautiful features twisted grotesquely with fear, her mouth locked in a scream that would never be heard . . .

"How's the head, Professor?" Jean Grey asked. It was clear from her tone of voice that she didn't really care one way or the other about any ill effects he might be suffering from her psi-bolt.

"Oh, *much* better," Xavier replied politely. It was true—now that the phenobarbital had worn off, and Jean had taken to trusting the neural inhibitor to keep his mental powers in check, rather than continue rooting around in his memories, he almost felt like his normal self. "Thank you for asking. And yours?"

Jean started, then eyed him suspiciously. The Professor could almost hear the wheels turning in her head—was he using some telepathic ability he'd managed to hide from her scans? If so, another psi-bolt might be in order . . .

"I've noticed you've been wincing in pain a great deal since we landed in Orly, *and* you've taken to consuming aspirins as though they were after-dinner mints," he explained quickly, and smiled. "You don't have to be a telepath to recognize the signs of a headache."

Jean grunted, and turned her seat around to face the road.

Xavier sighed. It looked like nothing he could say or do would be able to break through Magneto's control. Jean had seemed to be the obvious choice among the X-Men for him to try and bond with, given their closeness in the past, but that had turned out to be the wrong assumption—if anything, she was probably the one *most* able to resist his attempts at rekindling their friendship, since she already knew his true intentions. Scott was even more difficult to reach—his devotion to Magneto bordered on fanaticism. As for Kurt and Rogue, while their personalities were essentially the same as always, they tended to remain silent in his presence, preferring instead to simply glare at him with undisguised hatred and loathing.

How complete was the Cube's effect of them? he wondered.

Through the windows of the mini-van that his former students had requisitioned at the airport, Xavier could see the sun setting in the west, its rays painting the Loire Valley landscape in brilliant hues of blue and gold, crimson and purple. It was peaceful here, positively serene, much like it was in the rest of the world, as he'd learned while he and Betsy were doing their research back in New York. Mankind and mutants living in harmony—thanks to Magneto. Again, Xavier felt a pang of jealousy stab at his heart—

But it wasn't *just* jealousy, though. He felt sadness, as well. Yes, he knew that the people of the world had been transformed into living puppets, with Magneto pulling the strings. Yes, he knew this world was nothing but an illusion, the creation of a—what had Psylocke called it? A "Monkey's Paw." A device that would give its owner whatever their heart desired, only to savagely turn that wish against the dreamer at the last moment, and plunge them into the midst of a nightmare from which there might be no escape. Yes, the Cube was all that and more, capable even of tearing apart the fabric of reality if its power wasn't shut down, or its flaw corrected.

But still . . .

Did he really have the right to destroy *everything* Magneto had created? *Could* he destroy it all, given the opportunity?

What if Roma could repair the Cube so that it would return to its original function of physically restructuring reality? What if the damage to the omniverse could be repaired, with no ill effects to any dimension? What if the Cube's powers were then used for good, by the right person, with the right vision?

Was it wrong to want to live in a world where there was no more fear, no more hatred, no more war? Was it wrong to finally have man and mutant living in harmony, not under a dictatorship, but freely, walking hand-in-hand towards a brighter future?

Then again, was it wrong for *only* Charles Xavier's dreams to be the foundation upon which that world was built?

These, and many other questions, continued to swirl about his mind, all the way to the front gates of Castle Lensherr.

Unfortunately, he couldn't come up with a single answer.

Minutes later, escorted by his "honor guard"—comprised of Scott, Jean, Kurt, Rogue, and a few mutants who obviously lived here as servants—Xavier directed his hoverchair through the labyrinthine corridors of Magneto's fortress. The Professor was mildly surprised by both its rural location, and its design; again, as with the manner in which he ruled the world, here was a gentler side of Erik Lensherr he had never seen before. Maybe Psylocke *had* been right—finally taking control of the world may very well have mellowed the most notorious of supervillains . . .

Xavier glanced at the people around him—these talented, caring men and women whom he had trained, admired, considered his own family for so long. The same fierce dedication they had once shown him still burned in their eyes, but they were dedicated to Magneto's cause now, and he . . . what was *he* to them? Erik had turned them against him—he'd been expecting it, to be quite honest. As the X-Men's greatest foe, could he have passed up the opportunity to use the Cosmic Cube to control their minds, and convince them that their mentor was some kind of inhuman monster? Of course not; the temptation would have been too great.

That didn't mean, however, that the ache in the Professor's heart was any less painful . . .

A heavy, oaken door opened at the end of the hallway down which they traveled. The group moved through it, and Xavier found himself in a large, oak-paneled drawing room, its ceiling twenty feet above him, the floor covered in thick maroon carpeting. Bookcases lined the walls, their shelves holding collector's editions of some of the planet's greatest literature. To the left of the door, immense windows looked down upon

the sprawling gardens that lay to the west side of the castle; to the right of the door, an immense stone fireplace took up the length of a wall.

He was startled to find Wolverine waiting for them, but it made sense, in a strange way. Who better to protect Magneto from his enemies than the man who had tried the most often to kill him? It was a Cube-derived example of the old saying about keeping your friends close, and your enemies closer.

Charles glanced around the room, but saw no sign of Gambit, the wily, dark-haired Cajun who had accompanied the other X-Men on their mission to locate the source of the reality-cancer infecting their home dimension. No doubt he was on some mission for his master, Xavier surmised.

“Welcome, Charles. I’ve been expecting you.”

Erik Lensherr turned from the window at which he’d been standing. He was dressed in his familiar, red-and-purple Magneto uniform, complete with flowing cape and gladiator-style metal helmet. It looked extremely out of place in such an opulent setting—the armor of a space-age knight, worn amidst the genteel trappings of a sixteenth century-styled palace.

“If I had known formal wear was required,” Xavier commented, eyeing the costume, “I would have chosen a more appropriate suit.”

Lensherr smiled. “I wore it for old times’ sake, my friend. After going to all the trouble of popping back into existence from wherever it is that you’ve been hiding, I thought the least I should do to honor your arrival here was to be attired in the sort of outfit you’d expect the Master of the World to be wearing.”

Xavier’s mouth twisted in a wry smile. “I’m flattered.”

Logan stepped forward, moving with the grace of a panther. “So, *this* is the piece’a terrorist trash who’s been givin’ you so much trouble all these years, Erik?” He snorted. “Don’t look like such a threat t’me.”

The Professor smiled pleasantly. “Appearances, as the saying goes, *can* be deceiving, Logan.” If the diminutive Canadian was surprised to discover that Xavier knew his name, he hid it well. Xavier turned to Lensherr. “‘Terrorist’? Wouldn’t you say that’s a case of the pot calling the kettle ‘black’?”

Lensherr said nothing, but it was clear from his amused expression that he had enjoyed the opportunity to reverse roles with his former friend.

“Charles, I *know* why you are here,” Lensherr finally replied. He reached up and removed his helmet. “I know all about your great mission of mercy, and the alleged threat the Cube poses to the multitude of alternate dimensions that exist beyond the pale.” Handing the helmet



to Wolverine, he leaned down close to the Professor's ear, so that only he could hear him. "Miss Grey was kind enough to telepathically bring me up to speed on von Doom's world."

"Then you also know why *your* vision of the world can't continue to exist, either," Xavier said.

Lensherr shook his head and stepped back. "I know why *you* say it cannot continue—that does not mean it is the *truth*." The Professor glared at him, but the mutant overlord merely snorted in response. "Really, Charles, I *hate* it so when you play at being the outraged victim. You cannot tell me that this would be the first time you have not told

your X-Men the complete truth about one of their missions, or that you have never manipulated their actions—used them as pawns in some grander design of which they knew nothing.” His eyes narrowed. “If I remember correctly, you *did* once convince them you had died, solely for the purpose of furthering one of your plans.”

Xavier quickly waved a hand through the air, dismissing the accusation. “I am not attempting to deceive or manipulate you, Erik. The Cube *is* a danger to us all—its influence over the world, over our universe, must be ended, and quickly.”

“Even if it meant returning to the old days of hatred and mistrust and fear, Charles?” Lensherr asked. “Even if it meant the end of The Dream?”

Xavier shook his head. “The Dream will not die, Erik, simply because the Cube is deactivated and the world returns to normal—it will continue to live on, in our hearts and minds. Removing this ‘shortcut’ von Doom has created just means that we will have to work twice as hard—together—to make it a reality once more.” He paused. “*Without* the self-centered fixations on world domination, of course.”

Lensherr chuckled. “Of course.”

A knock at the door suddenly interrupted their conversation.

“Enter!” Lensherr barked.

The door opened, and an attractive, dark-haired woman poked her head into the room. “Father, dinner is almost—” She stopped, realizing that Lensherr was not alone. Her eyes almost immediately settled on Wagner, who was standing near the Professor’s hoverchair.

“Good evening, Anya,” Kurt said. He flashed a winning smile.

The young woman blushed, and turned her gaze to a spot on the floor. She was clearly embarrassed, and Kurt seemed to find that amusing.

Wolverine growled, and stared heatedly at the blue-skinned mutant.

Xavier’s eyebrows rose. Anya? That was the name of the daughter Magnus had lost decades ago—the one who died in the fire. The realization of what was going on here struck the Professor like a blow to the head: Magneto hadn’t recreated the world solely to end the increasingly violent disputes between humanity and mutantkind; he’d recreated the world so that he could reunite the members of his shattered family—including his late daughter.

Suddenly, convincing his old friend to give up the Cube had become a *much* more complicated issue . . .

“Come in, child,” Lensherr said, beckoning her forward. “You’re among friends.” She stepped inside, and walked over to join her father, trying not to make eye contact with Kurt. Smiling proudly, the mutant

overlord turned to Xavier. "You've never met my daughter, Anya, have you, Charles?" There was a warning flash in his eyes that was all too clear: *Say nothing about the Cube, nothing that will upset my daughter, or you will not live long enough to regret your mistake.*

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure." Xavier smiled and nodded toward Anya. "How do you do, Miss Lensherr?"

Anya stared at him, eyes wide as saucers. "Father," she whispered, "is this the man you were telling us about today?"

"It's all right, child," Lensherr said gently. "He doesn't bite—at least, not in polite company." He chuckled at his own joke. "Now, what urgent matter requires my attention?"

"Dinner is just about ready," Anya replied, "and your presence is required."

"Ahh—a *most* important matter, then." Lensherr smiled, and kissed her softly on the forehead. "Tell your mother we shall be joining you soon enough." He slapped her playfully on the backside. "Now, off with you—my associates and I still have business to attend to."

Anya kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Don't be too long, Father—you know how Mama gets when you let your food get cold."

"Fifteen minutes—no more," Lensherr promised.

Anya nodded, accepting his terms. Then, sparing a moment to take a quick glance at Kurt, she turned on her heel and exited the room, closing the door behind her.

"She's a lovely young woman, Erik," the Professor commented.

"She is my light and my life, Charles," Lensherr replied, his voice surprisingly soft. "The part of my soul that had been lost for so very long. And now that I am whole once more, I find myself unable to even consider for a moment a world in which she does not exist." He gazed evenly at his old friend.

"I . . . understand," Xavier said simply.

"You always *were* highly perceptive, Charles," Lensherr said, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. He stared wistfully at the closed door for a moment, then shook his head as though to clear his thoughts. "Now, then—my acolytes have informed me about your traveling companion, and how she managed to evade their good graces. You would not happen to know where our dear Miss Braddock might have gone to ground since you were separated, would you?"

Xavier folded his hands on his lap, and smiled politely. "I'm sorry, Erik—were you actually expecting me to answer that question?"

Jean stepped forward, a sneer on her lips. "I *could* find out for you, Erik, if you'd like."

Lensherr gently waved her off. "There's no need for psychic torture,

Miss Grey; Charles doesn't know. I'm certain, however, that she is not all that far away from her master." He glanced toward his former friend. "But even if you *did* know her location, you would not tell me—is that not so?"

Xavier's smile broadened. "As I mentioned to Miss Grey earlier today, you *do* know my methods quite well."

"Quite . . ." Lensherr chuckled. "And, as so often has occurred in the past, we find ourselves at another impasse." He shrugged. "No matter—once you and I have finished our conversation, I will simply call upon the power of the Cube and have her appear before me."

"Are we going to converse, Erik?" Xavier asked. He couldn't keep a sly grin from lighting his features, as images from James Bond movies flitted across his mind's eye. Magneto *was* running true to form . . .

Lensherr nodded. "Oh, most definitely, Professor. I am not the sort of host who would be so callous as to invite you into his home, and then kill you immediately—that would be . . . uncivilized. But, rest assured, there *will* be more than enough time for such unpleasanties—for both you *and* Miss Braddock—later." He smiled disarmingly. "Tell me one thing, though, if you would be so kind, Charles: If Miss Braddock accompanied you on your mission, does that mean that von Doom is here, also? Or has that aging windbag finally been sent on his way to his final reward—in Hades?"

"You are not so far behind him, old friend, from what I can see," Xavier replied. He gestured toward the signs of advanced aging that were so clearly evident on Magnus's face. "The Cube's influence, I take it?"

The mutant overlord nodded somberly. "I did not think much of it when the process started—I attributed it to the strain of battle, when I led the attack against von Doom and his forces. But it appears I made a . . . misdiagnosis." A wisp of a smile curled the corners of his mouth. "I am no longer the man I once was, Charles—soon, I will have been alive for three-quarters of a century." The smile faded. "I did not need von Doom's help in reaching—and then passing—that milestone any faster."

"Erik, there still is time to reverse the process . . ." Xavier began.

"By handing you the Cube?" Lensherr smiled and shook his head. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, old friend, but I will have to decline your offer for assistance." He turned from the Professor to face his acolytes. "Leave us now, my friends. Charles and I have some . . . catching up to do, and I wish to do so in private."

"You sure about that, Erik?" Wolverine asked, eyeing Xavier.

"I am in no danger, Logan," the mutant overlord replied. "Although

Charles may possess the greatest telepathic abilities on the planet, they pale in comparison to the powers *I* wield—as he well knows.”

Logan shrugged. “Awright, you’re the boss,” he said, though it was all too apparent that he didn’t like the idea of leaving the world’s greatest peacemaker alone in a room with his deadliest adversary. “But watch the wheelchair. Scott tells me Baldy here drives it ’bout as well as Anya does when she gets behind the wheel o’ the limo.”

Lensherr winced dramatically. “I shall keep it in mind.” He smiled. “When Charles and I have finished our discussion, I will ask you to rejoin us.”

“Just give a holler.” With a final, heated glare at Xavier, Wolverine spun on his heel and followed the other acolytes from the room.

Once the door had closed, Lensherr slowly turned to face the Professor.

“And now . . . ?” Xavier asked.

“And now, Charles, I think it is time you experienced the power of the very object you sought to destroy,” Lensherr said in an ominous tone. A darkly sinister light burned in his gray eyes. “It should be an . . . enlightening experience for you. . . .”

IF HE hadn't been so focused on formulating his plans for revenge, he might have been impressed by the vast collection of medical technology around him . . . though it was doubtful.

In a darkened supply room—one roughly the size of a parking lot—located some twenty levels below the infirmary, was Victor von Doom. The former emperor of the Earth sat at a workbench, disassembling the very device that had been used to free him from the atrophied body of his now-deceased counterpart. It hadn't taken him long to find the device—a layout of the citadel, obtained by tapping into its main computer systems, had led him unerringly to his destination . . . eventually. He'd had to avoid a number of armed guards who were obviously searching for him along the way, and sift through the contents of two other vast supply rooms before he'd found the device. But once he had, taking apart the multiphasic crystal accelerator had been child's play—although he still wasn't quite certain of half the functions of the alien technology contained within its housing. It didn't really matter to him, however; the items he'd chosen were more than suitable for his needs.

Laid out across the table in front of him was a small collection of parts, alongside components he'd removed from his battle armor—including his gauntlets. Using an array of tools he carried in a pouch on his belt, von Doom opened a small panel in each metal glove, exposing the delicate circuitry of the energy discharge mixing chambers—the source of power for the charged particle projectors that were built into the palms. He ran a quick diagnostic on both, and was surprised to find them functioning perfectly. By all rights, then, the blasters should be able to fire. Yet some outside influence had succeeded in penetrating his armor's defenses and shutting down the plasma flow between the

mixing chambers and the particle accelerators. It had to be the by-product of a forcefield of some kind, he surmised, one generated from deep within the citadel. He refused to believe Saturnyne's childish explanations about a "state of temporal grace" that prevented most weapons—mainly those that fired projectiles or plasma-beams—from being used. But whatever the reason for the limitations on his armor's offensive capabilities, whatever technology might be in use by Roma and her people, it hadn't taken long for von Doom to think of a solution to the problem.

Beneath the cold metal of his mask, the tyrant's scarred lips twisted into an approximation of a smug grin. Once again, he had been underestimated by his enemies, and now they were beginning to learn just how great a price they were to pay for their brashness. He had already fulfilled his promise to Saturnyne that she would be punished for her lack of respect, and Roma would soon follow. Of course, there *had* been one minor deviation from his plans—if it hadn't been for Stanton's intervention, he would have snapped the Majestrix's neck and ended her life, rather than settle for simply tucking her away in a darkened alcove at the bottom of the citadel. Still, the doctor's suggestion had been a sound one—though the proud monarch would never admit it to the man's face—and one better suited for the current situation. Giving Sat-yr-nin a chance to get close to Roma, and perhaps even divert the witch's attention away from the hunt, would provide him with the time he needed to properly prepare for his confrontation with the Guardian—so long as his scheming ally didn't do anything foolish . . . like attempt to seize control herself.

But allowing an enemy to live—even one trapped in a state of suspended animation, like Saturnyne—was not a wise move, in the long run. Von Doom had lost count of all the times he'd left a battlefield, wrongly presuming that Reed Richards and the rest of his Fantastic Four were dead, only to have them rise up once more and strike him down in his moment of triumph. In *this* circumstance, however, there was a simple solution to the problem: Once Roma had been removed from power, and von Doom sat upon the throne, he would order her lieutenant's death, and eliminate any chance that the Majestrix might eventually find a way out of her liquid prison.

And then, perhaps, he would do the same with her wild-eyed counterpart . . .

"Ah. *There* you are," said a soft, Scottish voice from behind him.

Von Doom turned. The Chief Physician stood just inside the doorway, leaning against a tall metal cabinet. He did not look at all happy to see the monarch.

"I must say, you're looking rather fit," the doctor commented icily. "Kill any other helpless old men while you've been wandering the corridors unsupervised?"

Von Doom glared at him. "Not yet . . ." he said ominously.

Surprisingly, the doctor didn't seem taken aback by the threat. He merely frowned, and sniffed derisively in response, showing more backbone than Stanton had ever displayed in von Doom's presence. There had to be some reason for his courage . . .

"Tell me, physician," the former emperor inquired, "how many of Roma's lapdogs are on the other side of that door, waiting for your signal to attack?"

Now the doctor looked uneasy. He nervously cleared his throat, as though stalling for time until he could think of a suitable answer. "Ummm . . . none, actually," he finally admitted.

Behind the ion-implanted titanium facemask of the dictator, a single eyebrow rose in an inquisitive manner. "Really?" von Doom said. "So, am I to understand, then, that you took it upon yourself to track me to my lair, and offer your terms for my peaceful surrender?"

"Nothing of the sort," the Chief Physician replied, "although I wouldn't be adverse to the idea. It's just that, from time to time, I like to check on the equipment I have stored here—make certain it's still functioning properly. *You* just happened to pick the very same supply room for your hideout."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

The doctor shrugged. "Coincidence *is* one of the guiding forces in the omniverse."

"Bah," von Doom spat. "More metaphysical tripe. Must *everyone* in this accursed place speak in ridiculous axioms?"

"Only those with the proper understanding of the forces of order and chaos," the Chief Physician replied haughtily. "It's not a subject for everyone, though."

"Bah," the tyrant repeated. He turned his back on the little man. If the physician wasn't going to attack, or run off screaming to notify Roma's dogs of his location, then the monarch no longer felt the need to acknowledge his presence. There were far more important matters to occupy his time.

"Hmmm . . . Judging from the way you've taken apart one of the multiphasic crystal accelerators, I see you have some experience with electronics," the Chief Physician commented. "I wonder what sort of project you might be working on . . ."

Von Doom ignored his attempt to draw him into a conversation and continued with the job at hand.

"You *were* made aware of the temporal state of grace that envelops the citadel, weren't you?" The doctor paused. "Yes, I'm sure you were. And yet you continue to tinker away with those parts you've . . . acquired from the accelerator."

Von Doom heard the soles of the physician's shoes scuffing across the floor. The wretch was actually moving closer—and without permission! The tyrant didn't know whether to admire the man's courage, or strike him down for his foolhardiness.

"So, if you already knew that any armaments built into your battlesuit wouldn't function in this setting," the doctor continued, "then you *couldn't* be constructing a weapon—at least not a *conventional* weapon."

Von Doom paused in his work, intrigued by the physician's line of reasoning. It was becoming clear to him that the little man might not be the imbecile he appeared to be . . .

It never ceased to amaze her just how incredibly *stupid* most people were.

In the time it had taken her to travel from the Majestrix's chambers in response to the Supreme Guardian's summons, Sat-yr-nin had passed hundreds of people in the corridors, spoken to at least a dozen citadel guards about von Doom's disappearance, had even barked orders at a couple of members of the Captain Britain Corps, and yet no one had caught on to her masquerade. But as she strode purposefully down one of the gleaming, white metal hallways that led to the throne room, it slowly dawned on the imposter why that might be—and exactly how much power Saturnyne had enjoyed. Passersby cast furtive glances at her, quickly averting their gazes when she looked their way. Staff members did their best to avoid her, flashing uneasy smiles as they speedily walked past, as though they were afraid she might address them. And then there was the manner in which anyone she *did* address would stiffen—backs ramrod-straight as they stood at attention, a sheen of sweat forming on their upper lips.

It all reminded her so much of the reactions she received from her subjects during her reign over Earth 794 that she actually felt a twinge of homesickness.

It was obvious what was going on, though. As Omniversal Majestrix, Saturnyne was not only respected by the occupants of the Starlight Citadel, she was *feared*. Saturnyne didn't have to order her people to carry out their duties—they accomplished them quickly and efficiently, if for no other reason than a simple desire to avoid the sort of reprisals her station allowed her to mete out if they failed.

The Supreme Guardian should have learned a lesson or two from that sort of iron rule, Sat-yr-nin thought, but she had never seen any evidence that Roma had even bothered to pay attention. The dark-haired technomage might be the one who controlled the tides of time, and commanded armies from her lofty multidimensional tower, but she was still the weak-willed and naive immortal child Sat-yr-nin had been battling for years; still the little girl who allowed her emotions to direct her actions. She wasn't a leader; a leader should be powerful, decisive, hard-edged—like the Mastrex. Or Saturnyne. Or Merlyn.

Merlyn. What would *he* think of his daughter these days, if he even still bothered to check on her progress? Roma hadn't been able to bring herself to order Sat-yr-nin's execution after her capture by the X-Men, preferring instead to indefinitely place her enemy in suspended animation. Sat-yr-nin knew all too well from her numerous conflicts with father and daughter that Roma had not been raised to be so . . . so . . . well, "pathetic" was about the best way to describe her.

She was also inexperienced in the ways of the worlds. Her father had walked the length and breadth of the omniverse, if the legends had any basis in fact, influencing lives, even whole civilizations, on a one-to-one basis. Roma, on the other hand, rarely left the protective cocoon of the citadel. She relied on Saturnyne far too much to keep her in the know, trusting her to help her reach the right decision in crucial matters.

Sat-yr-nin shook her head in disbelief. Why her counterpart had never tried to overthrow the child was something the Mastrex had never been able to fathom. It couldn't have anything to do with friendship—it was highly unlikely that the two power brokers were close; Roma was the Supreme Guardian, after all, and Saturnyne her subordinate. And when it came to relationships, Sat-yr-nin and her counterpart were very much alike in their beliefs: people were tools, to be used as necessary and quickly discarded before you became attached to them—no more, no less.

So, if not friendship, then there could be only one reason for the Majestrix to postpone staging a coup: She was biding her time, waiting for the right moment to strike. Well, Sat-yr-nin thought happily, that decision was no longer up to her double. It was the Mastrex's to make now, and she wasn't about to wait all that long to seize the throne.

Of course, there *was* one obstacle that threatened to stand between her and the chance to realize her dreams of ultimate power: that armored cretin von Doom. She didn't fear the man and really didn't consider him much of a threat, no matter how much effort he put into his blustering. He was just another tool—one used to free her from her icy cell

and who now provided a suitable distraction for Roma. Sat-yr-nin just had to find the right moment to dispose of him . . .

She came to a halt before the entrance to the throne room. Here, more than at any other location she had passed along her journey, security had been dramatically increased: a baker's dozen of guards stood rigidly in front of the doors, each man clad in full battle armor. If such a display of force had been deemed necessary because one man was running loose in the citadel, then Sat-yr-nin couldn't help but be impressed. Maybe von Doom was far more formidable than she'd believed; if so, he still might have his uses after she had taken possession of the throne.

Sat-yr-nin moved up the steps, head held high, mouth set in a firm line, ignoring the guards as they moved aside to allow her passage to the doors.

One guard, though, did *not* remove himself from her path. He towered over her by at least a foot, and possessed a jaw that seemed large enough to be used as a bludgeon; from the way he carried himself, he could be none other than the Captain of the Guard. Sat-yr-nin liked what she saw—on her world, she wouldn't have hesitated to consider him a candidate for the position of Royal Consort. Nevertheless, good looks didn't count for much if the man lacked the sense to move out of the way of his betters—although any uses she might have for him in the near future certainly wouldn't require a great deal of intelligence . . .

"Stand aside," Sat-yr-nin ordered. "I have business with the Guardian."

Slowly, the man looked down at her. A few wisps of bright red hair drifting out from underneath the golden helmet he wore. "Her Majesty has asked that she not be disturbed."

Sat-yr-nin's eyes narrowed in suspicion. Were they on to her already? "But she just summoned me, no more than ten minutes ago."

"And now she is not yet ready to receive you." There was a tone in the man's voice that sounded almost condescending, as though he actually relished the opportunity to deny her entry to the throne room.

Sat-yr-nin opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it. Her counterpart, more than likely, would not have argued the point, and doing so might serve to give her away. So, instead of snapping at the captain, she turned up her nose at him and snorted derisively. "Very well, then. I shall wait."

The soft groan of displeasure that issued from the guards brought a malicious smile to the Mastrex's lips.

Betsy groaned in disgust as she gazed at the immense structure that stood before her.

She couldn't help it, though. She'd never seen the Great Wall of China reconstructed in anyone's head before.

After what had felt like days of traveling through the jungles that grew so wildly in the depths of Worthington's subconscious, she had at last come to a clearing, and a welcome sight it had been. Although she might only be the psychic representation of a woman sitting on the floor of a Paris apartment, her fist closed around the hilt of the psi-blade that penetrated the forehead of a semi-conscious, alternate version of Warren Worthington III, to Betsy every bug bite, every palm frond that whipped across her face, every toe she stubbed as she tripped over rocks in the darkness felt just as real as they would in the real world. Finding an exit from the dense growth that pressed in around her had been a godsend. She just hadn't expected to be confronted by a wall that seemed to extend into infinity.

It wasn't going to stop her, though. She'd followed Warren's voice this far; a few tons of stone and mortar weren't about to put an end to her quest—not until she learned the truth. Now all she had to do was screw up her nerve enough to find out what that was . . .

Warren? she called out hesitantly. *Are you there?*

Betts! he cried out. *You made it!*

Well, you didn't think I was about to give up, did you? she asked.

Of course not, he replied. *But I hadn't heard from you in a while, and I'd started to get worried.*

It was true she hadn't spoken to him for some time after their initial contact, but that was because she needed to gather her wits. Discovering that you've suddenly made contact with your dead boyfriend's psyche in the body of his Cosmic Cube-spawned twin was unnerving, to say the least. She didn't remember Jean Grey or Charles Xavier ever mentioning anything like that happening to *them* during any of their adventures with the X-Men.

She had also wanted to be certain that this really was Warren she was talking to, and not some manifestation of the other Worthington's subconscious; it wouldn't be the *first* time she'd entered the mind of someone suffering from a Multiple Personality Disorder. From what she could tell, though, this wasn't the case. Warren—*her* Warren—was here, somehow, trapped in the mind of his duplicate, and nothing was going to keep her from him. Now she just had to find a way to get past this last barrier . . .

Can you fly over the wall? she asked. *After all, you are the one with the wings.*

Good plan, hon, but I've already tried that. She could almost see him shaking his head, his wavy, golden hair sweeping back and forth across his shoulders. *Everytime I got close to the top, I'd hear a voice telling me to turn back, and I couldn't stop myself from obeying it.*

Telepathic suggestion, Betsy surmised.

You're the expert, Warren said. Well . . . one of them, anyway, next to the Professor and Jean, of course.

Of course. Betsy pinched her bottom lip between thumb and forefinger, considering her options. *All right. Hang on, luv. I'll think of something.*

For the next minute or so, Betsy paced the ground in front of the wall, trying to come up with a plan. The obstacle couldn't be walked around because it was too wide, and it couldn't be climbed, because it was too high and there weren't enough places on its surface that could be used for handholds. That left her with one choice: She would have to go through it.

And how do you plan on doing that, Braddock? she asked herself. *I think you left your high explosives in your other costume.*

You wouldn't be carrying a spoon, would you? Warren suddenly asked. *You could use it to tunnel your way to this side. It used to work in all those World War II prison movies.*

Betsy winced. One of the dangers of being on the psychic plane was that anyone connected to you psionically could overhear your thoughts if you concentrated too hard. She'd have to be more careful; she didn't want to run the risk of dashing his hopes for freedom.

Sorry, luv. I usually don't pack eating utensils in my kit when I'm off adventuring out of my body. But thanks for the suggestion.

With a sigh, Betsy looked once more at the Great Wall—and it suddenly dawned on her what it actually represented.

From the accounts she had read of the "Morning of Unity," during the visit she had made with the Professor to the New York Public Library, it had been painfully obvious to a trained telepath like Betsy that Magneto had used the Cosmic Cube to rewire the minds of every man, woman, and child on the planet and impose his will on them. And there *had* been times during his battles with the X-Men, she remembered, when the mutant overlord exhibited limited psionic powers. He'd certainly been able to shake off the effects of her psi-blade without a great deal of difficulty, on the two occasions when she'd managed to get close enough to him to ram it through his thick skull. So, with the aid of the Cube, he had obviously been able to boost his psi-powers, and use them to subjugate the populace.

The wall, then, was the permanent barrier that Magneto had placed

around the minds of his subjects to ensure their continued cooperation. It limited their freedom of choice, directed their thoughts in such a way that it had seemed quite logical to make the super-villain Master of the World.

But none of that concerned her for the moment. Right now, the only thing she was focused on was that *this* particular wall was keeping her from reaching the man she loved. *Not for much longer, though*, she thought with a smile. Magnus might be all-powerful because he held the Cube, but he was still out of his league when it came to matters of the mind.

And the heart.

Lips set in a firm line, Betsy called forth her psi-blade; the weapon immediately formed around her right hand. Focusing her powers, she refashioned it into a more formidable weapon: a *katana*. It was hard work—she'd never really tried to do this before—but she knew that only a strong enough tool would work against the psychic barrier enclosing Worthington's mind. And when she was done, she held a sword that was as fine as any blade she had ever used in the real world.

Raising the *katana* high above her head, she let loose a scream of utter fury and struck at the wall. The rose-tinted energy bit deep into the stone, gouging out a large section of the masonry.

And then a hand poked through the hole she'd made.

In a Paris apartment currently occupied by two silent figures, the body of Warren Worthington III suddenly stiffened, and a look of intense pain twisted his handsome features.

No one in the neighboring flats heard the high-pitched whine that escaped his lips.

Warren? Betsy cried. She leapt forward, grasping his hand as though fearing it might suddenly disappear. He gently squeezed her hand.

None other, honey, he replied. *What kept you?*

Betsy smiled. *I had to go to the front desk to get a spare key. But don't worry—I'll have you out of there in a few seconds.*

Great. And maybe once I'm out, you can tell me what the hell is going on. Feels like I've been locked away in someone's basement for ages.

Betsy laughed tremulously and patted the back of his hand. *As soon as I figure it all out myself, luv, you'll be the first to know.*

That's my girl, Warren replied sarcastically. *Always trying to cheer me up . . .*

She giggled at the comment, then had to fight to regain her com-

posure. *Focus, you git*, she scolded herself. *You won't be any bloody use to Warren if you go carrying on like a giddy, purple-haired simp.*

Still, she couldn't stop a nervous spasm from running through her body; her legs were like jelly, knees threatening to buckle at any moment and send her tumbling to the ground. Her heart was beating so fast, it felt as though it was about to burst from her chest, and she suddenly found that she had trouble breathing properly.

Releasing his hand, she gripped the hilt of the *katana* and mouthed a silent prayer that this would work.

All right—stand back! she ordered. The hand immediately withdrew, and Betsy swung the psychic sword one last time.

The wall exploded, much to her surprise. And before Betsy could move out of the way, she suddenly found herself in the center of a deadly hail of masonry. One piece the size of a microwave oven caught her across the back of the head. The psi-blade dissipated immediately, her concentration savagely broken, and she dropped to her knees, legs suddenly unable to support her weight. She did her best to try and remain conscious, to at least find out if she'd been successful in freeing Warren, but she could already feel thick, black tendrils closing over her mind, pulling her down into darkness.

And then she felt nothing further.

Matters were about to become even worse than a psychic bump on the head, though.

In an apartment on the Left Bank of Paris, Warren Worthington III, jet-setting multimillionaire, winged mutant, and husband of Elisabeth Braddock—the international star of *Kwannon, Bushido Mistress*—shrieked in agony as every synapse in his brain short-circuited. His hands flew to the sides of his head, palms pressing against the temples as though to prevent his skull from exploding. His body spasmed, jerking his head away from the psi-blade that formed the bridge between his subconscious and Betsy's, and breaking the connection. Then he collapsed onto his expensively carpeted floor.

And died.

Countless dimensions away from the eerily silent Parisian apartment, other minds were also about to lock in a life and death struggle.

"I don't believe it," the Chief Physician said in astonishment. "It's a dimensional destabilizer." He looked from the small, cigar-shaped device attached to the circuits of von Doom's gauntlets, to stare at its armored creator. "I take it, then, that you figured out that the state of grace prevents weapons from firing—but *not* the particle accelerators

used in medical technology. And by hardwiring components from the MCA into your armor, you're hoping that the citadel's sensors will think you're conducting a procedure, and not a coup."

"Fascinating," von Doom said, closing the access panel on the remaining gauntlet. "You have shown far more intelligence in the past twenty minutes than your feckless colleague has in the six hours I have come to know and detest him."

"You idiot!" the doctor shouted. He pointed to the gauntlets. "Don't you know what might happen if you go around shooting those things in here? You'll destabilize the citadel's integrity, and send everyone hurtling into the vortex!"

"The path to ultimate power cannot be walked unless risks are taken," von Doom replied. "And they are risks I am willing for others to take on my behalf."

"Can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, is that it?" the Chief Physician shot back. He snorted. "Ridiculous. I've heard enough—I'm certain the Supreme Guardian will want to know what you've been up to, *before* you start destroying her home." And with that, much to von Doom's surprise, he turned on his heel and headed for the door.

The monarch grabbed him by the collar and lifted him off his feet. "Now who is the 'idiot,' physician?" von Doom asked. "Did you think Doom would allow you to just walk out of here so you could raise an alarm?"

"Then why don't you kill me and be done with it?" the doctor demanded. "Once you start firing that destabilizer, I'll be just as dead, anyway."

"Because I see potential in you, physician," the tyrant replied. "More so than in that imbecile Stanton."

The doctor started, eyes widening in surprise. "*Stanton?* He's working for *you?*" He growled softly. "Captain England was right—I should have watched him closely."

"Why bother yourself with that worm, physician," von Doom asked in silky tones, "when *you* could take his place by my side?"

The doctor shook his head. "Sorry. I've never been very good at taking orders from dictators." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Too much bowing and scraping involved in the process for my liking. Tends to wear out the knees of my trousers."

"Then you are a fool," the former emperor stated.

The Chief Physician smiled. "I've been called *worse* things in my time, Doctor . . . and by far greater megalomanics than you."

The tyrant snorted derisively and released the bothersome gnat; the

doctor tumbled to the floor. As the little man picked himself up, von Doom reached back to the workbench and picked up one of his gauntlets. He slid it over his left hand, pointed it toward the physician—and activated the firing mechanism.

A burst of green-tinged energy lanced forward from the palm of von Doom's gauntlet, catching the Chief Physician square in the chest before he could leap aside. He screamed in agony as the power released by the Crystal Accelerator circuits opened a space/time rift *in the center of his chest*, splitting him in two from head to pelvis. The rift widened, and von Doom could actually see the swirling forces of Creation through the hole in reality, just before the suction pulled both halves of the doctor's body into the vortex. His dying screams echoed throughout the cavernous room, then quickly fell silent.

With a soft rumble like the first signs of an approaching storm, the rift closed, and von Doom was alone once more.

Interlude IV

The Cube was close now. Its siren call filled his mind, blotting out all thoughts but those related to seizing the device from his longtime enemy.

The Controller quickened his pace through the night-shrouded streets of the Left Bank, paying no attention to the direction in which he was being pulled, or the startled gasps of passersby who stared in horror at his grotesque features. Close behind him trailed Leonard, who was doing his best to keep up with his master's frenetic steps.

It had taken all of the Controller's strength of will to force himself to wait for nightfall, after he'd made that initial contact with the Cube's energies from the top of the Eiffel Tower. Since then, he had been unable to sleep, or eat, or sit still for a moment, constantly pacing back and forth through the small set of rooms he and Leonard shared, in a hotel located just off Rue de Babylone. He had cursed the daylight a hundred times or more, impatiently waiting for the sun to set so he could venture forth, yet receiving no satisfaction for his efforts. Eventually, realizing the universe refused to obey his commands and the day would pass no faster than normal, he had sat in a corner and settled into a meditative state. He knew that his success would depend entirely upon his ability to reign in his emotions.

But now that night had finally come, he was unwilling to wait a second longer to claim his prize. When Leonard had asked if his master intended to hide his unnerving features in order to avoid drawing unwanted attention, the Controller had scoffed at the notion.

"Let these sheep stare all they want, until they have had their fill," he had said. "Once the Cube is mine, I shall make certain that my face

is the last thing they will have ever seen—before I wish them out of existence.”

They strode past the Hôtel des Invalides now, with its ornate, golden dome, then across the Quai d’Orsay and onto Pont Alexandre III, the magnificent bridge that spanned the Seine, ending just before the Grand Palais, the glass-roofed, stately building that had been constructed for the Universal Exposition of 1900. Never breaking stride, the Controller hurried across the bridge, ignoring the late-nineteenth century blown-glass lamps and spectacular statuary that decorated the length of the structure. He continued on, stomping west along the Cours Albert 1er, in the direction of the Palais de Chaillot, then came to an abrupt halt at the corner of Avenue Montaigne.

As on most nights, the avenue was filled with people out for an evening of pleasure. On one side of the street, patrons of the arts were filing into the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, while passersby on the other admired the displays in the windows of trendy *haute couture* shops.

But it was the entrance to a small courtyard just off the avenue that captured the Controller’s attention. A dozen or so feet high and about eight feet wide, flanked on both sides by guardstones that once prevented drivers from attempting to squeeze their horse-drawn carriages through the small space, the entrance led to a cobblestoned courtyard that seemed no wider than twenty feet. On the far side of the courtyard were the front doors of two apartment buildings, their red brick walls draped with ivy.

It was from one of those buildings that the siren song of the Cube emanated.

The Controller was stunned by what he saw—or, rather, didn’t see—as he stared at the courtyard. There were no guards posted, no colorfully-garbed freaks lounging about, no security measures of any sort that he could see. Was Magneto *that* certain of his power over the lowly creatures he ruled that he felt safe enough to leave the Cube unattended—or was he arrogant enough to think there was no one to oppose him? Whatever the reason, he was about to learn how costly such inattention could be . . .

Slowly, the Controller stepped into the entrance, expecting some hidden trap to be sprung at any moment, but pleasantly surprised when nothing happened. He reached the courtyard unmolested and then, closing his eyes, began to tune out the background noises of the city, opening his senses to the cosmic energies flowing around him.

There. It was coming from the building on the right. The Controller opened his eyes and smiled. Had defeating his enemies *ever* been this

simple? With colorful dreams of a New World Order flashing across his mind's eye, he stepped toward the front door—

—and then the song was cut short.

“No . . .” the Controller whispered. “No!”

He threw himself at the front door, shattering its lock with a savage kick, and ran into the building. It was dark inside, but he didn't bother looking for a light switch—not when he could still feel the Cube's energy around him, leading him onward. He vaulted up a marble staircase, taking three steps at a time, until he reached the uppermost floor and burst into a drawing room, the windows of which provided a magnificent view of the Seine River and the Eiffel Tower.

Here. The song had come from this very room . . . but its remnants were already fading, the final notes echoing in the recesses of his mind.

And then he couldn't hear it any more.

The Cube was gone.

He staggered from the building, body trembling with rage.

Cheated. He'd been cheated out of his prize once more. Denied the opportunity to take what rightfully belonged to him. Robbed of his moment of triumph. And it was all the fault of Magneto.

Throwing his head back, he roared in anger at the heavens. “*Damn your soul to hell, you mutant swine! You play games with the wrong man!*” He lashed out with a booted foot, shattering a large flower pot that stood to one side of the building's entrance.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, the storm passed. The Controller inhaled deeply, slowly released the breath through his nostrils, and forced himself to regain his composure. Throwing childish tantrums was a waste of energy, he told himself, and a man who exhibited such behavior could never truly be a leader—a truism his mentor had come to learn, in the dark days when his world had started falling apart. His protégé, though, as the Controller proudly reminded himself quite often, was made of stronger stuff.

Leonard politely cleared his throat to get his attention. Apparently, the youth had followed him inside with a stealth the Controller had never known he'd possessed. “Sir . . . perhaps we should leave,” he said quietly.

The Controller whirled to face his assistant, prepared to either verbally or physically vent some of his frustrations on the blond-haired youth. But he stopped short when he realized that Leonard was not looking at him, but *past* him. Curious as to why his follower was acting in such a manner, the Controller looked back over his shoulder, toward the entrance to the courtyard.

A small crowd had gathered out on the street, drawn to the scene by his histrionics. From the dark expressions on their faces, and the comments that were being uttered, it was clear they were angered by the use of the word "mutant" as part of his hate-filled diatribe.

"Umm . . . sir?" Leonard asked, his voice just above a whisper. "You *did* say you wanted to maintain a low profile until you were ready to strike, didn't you? Perhaps we should go now, before the crowd gets any bigger."

The Controller glared at the bystanders, his contempt for them growing with each passing second as his gaze flicked from one face to the next. Gathered before him were the pride and joy of the Master of Magnetism—shining examples of a world that had at last found peace. Men and women of various nationalities and races, young and old, human and mutant. They felt no animosity toward one another, saw no need to judge their neighbors solely on physical appearance or philosophical differences. In the world of Magneto, they were all beautiful.

Flawless.

Perfect.

The Controller sneered in disgust. How he longed for the opportunity to crush this saccharine-sweet world; to watch those beautiful faces contort with pain as he lashed out with his mighty fists, delivering unto them exquisite suffering, the likes of which only he could imagine; to thrill in the vacant looks that would come over their eyes as they drew their last breaths.

But now was not the time to indulge in fantasies; that would come soon enough, when his work was done and he could savor his victory.

"Yes," he finally said to his assistant. "It *is* time to leave. But we will keep watch over this place. Sooner or later, the Cube—and its master—will return, and then the moment shall be at hand. The moment when I fulfill the destiny for which I was trained, when I take my rightful place as the Earth's master. And then, how these sheep shall tremble with fear. . . ."

THE CUBE appeared in the palm of Magneto's hand as if by magic. It wasn't really magic, of course—merely a case of the villain summoning it with just a thought.

Erik Lensherr smiled, clearly pleased with the look of mild astonishment that appeared on the face of his old friend. "Impressed with my mastery over this little wishbox, Charles? Perhaps if von Doom had taken the time to experiment with it, he might also have discovered that it's unnecessary to carry this upon your person in order to make it work." He sneered. "Then again, that tin-plated egomaniac has never been known for his patience."

"I wouldn't say that I'm impressed, Erik," Xavier said, "given the fact that the Cube is stealing away your life with each passing second, and there is obviously nothing you can do to retard the process. *I'd* be more inclined to think it is the *Cube* that masters *you*."

Lensherr sighed and waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Have it *your* way, Charles. It has *always* been your nature to focus on the negative."

"Not always," the Professor gently countered. A trace of a smile curled the corners of his mouth.

Lensherr paused; then he, too, smiled. "No, not always, my friend," he agreed. There was a melancholy tone to his voice—a feeling of regret, perhaps, for days long past, when their relationship hadn't been as strained, their meetings not so confrontational. They *had* been friends—a lifetime ago, it seemed—but the barriers that had come between them over the years had ended the closeness they once shared.

It was a loss that had always troubled Xavier, too. The dreams they had for the future of their race were not all that different. Both believed

that their people shouldn't have to live in the shadows; both believed in creating a better world in which those mutants could exist in peace. But while Charles knew that humans tended to learn from their mistakes, and hoped that one day they would see beyond the "tunnel vision" of prejudice and come to accept mutantkind, Lensherr's experiences at the hands of the Nazis had only shown him the worst aspects of *Homo sapiens*, had permanently scarred him, both physically and emotionally. For the frightened child who had grown into the vengeful adult, there had only been one course of action to take in order to prevent his race from suffering the same kind of horrific treatment that led to the extermination of six million Jews: he had to use his powers to bring about the total subjugation of humanity.

That obsession created an irreparable rift between Charles and Erik—the two good friends became the greatest of enemies. It had been that way for years and, despite Xavier's best efforts, it seemed it would always be that way.

Until, that is, the Cosmic Cube somehow created a mid-ground that reflected *both* their dreams . . .

Xavier gestured toward the Cube. "I take it you did not summon this infernal device merely to impress me with parlor tricks." An inquisitive eyebrow rose. "Perhaps you've come to your senses, and you're just going to hand it over to me without a fight?"

The mutant overlord chuckled. "Nothing of the sort, Charles."

Now it was Xavier's turn to sigh melodramatically. "I expected as much." His mouth set in a firm, straight line as, eyes narrowed to slits, he glared at his captor. "So, where does that leave us? Am I expected to make some sort of half-hearted attempt to battle you for possession of the Cube, deprived of my telepathic abilities as I am by the device your followers attached to my spinal column . . . or do you plan on using it to brainwash me, as you've done with my students?"

Lensherr snorted derisively. "For an intelligent man, Charles, you *stagger* me with your foolish assumptions. Even were you not crippled, I would not expect you to go leaping from your seat and attempt to wrestle the Cube from my hand—physical solutions to problems have always been beneath men of intellect such as you and I." He sneered. "That is why you have come to depend so greatly on smaller-brained creatures like Wolverine—using brawn instead of brains is the stock-in-trade of such buffoons. I came to that same conclusion years ago, first with the Brotherhood, and then the Acolytes. I'm pleased to see you agree with that approach." He seemed amused by Xavier's stern expression. "And insofar as 'brainwashing' goes, had I so desired, I could have ordered the Cube to tear your mind apart the moment you

came out of hiding, then sew it back together . . . with some alterations made, of course."

"Of course," Xavier agreed.

Lensherr pointed an index finger into the air to emphasize his point. "If that had occurred, you would have arrived here as my most devoted acolyte, and not merely as a guest."

"And yet that did *not* come to pass," the Professor said.

Lensherr smiled. "Ahh. Now, at last, we arrive at the moment of demonstration."

With that, the Cube flared brightly, and both men disappeared in a flash of light.

They materialized on the crest of a grassy hill at dawn. It took a few moments for Xavier to realize they were no longer in France.

He tilted his head back and inhaled deeply. The air was different here, heavy with the smells of wild animals and the fragrances of plant life, all mingling in the warm, comfortably humid breeze that blew across the land. From somewhere off in the distance, the rush of water could be heard—a stream or river, coursing mightily through the valley below them.

"Africa?" he asked.

"Very good, Charles," Lensherr replied. "The West African state of Mali, to be precise."

"I passed through the region once, during my travels across the continent," the Professor said, "although I do not remember ever hearing of a river valley being located in such an inhospitable place. I take it this was your doing?"

"Indeed."

"And I imagine there was a purpose in bringing me here?"

"Of course." The hand that held the Cube swept dramatically across the mist-covered land. "What do you think of my greenhouse, Charles?" Lensherr asked. In the early morning sunlight, it was difficult to see his face clearly, but there was no mistaking the prideful tone in his voice.

"It's lovely—what I can see of it," Xavier said. "I had no idea you possessed such a green thumb."

"I don't consider myself a gardener," the mutant overlord replied, "but rather an artist, challenged by a blank canvas." He gestured toward the landscape. "All this was desert—the sterile wastes of the Sahara. Mile upon mile of endless sands, with little protection from the blistering heat of the relentless sun. This was a place of death, of despair. I have changed all that."

The sun was higher now, the light of its corona cresting the horizon,

decorating the valley below with streamers of yellow and red. Leaning forward in his hoverchair, the Professor's eyes narrowed as he peered down into the thinning shadows. The morning mists began to dissipate, and the blocky shapes of man-made constructs slowly appeared among the lush greenery. Rising majestically above the treeline was a brick-and-mortar tower on which a pair of balconies had been built; pink-hued sunlight shone through the half-dozen arched openings at the top of the edifice.

"Is that a village?" Xavier asked.

"It is called Araouane," Lensherr replied. "Forty years ago, it was a thriving oasis that served as a way station for the trans-Saharan trade routes. Then, just a decade later, drought struck the land, and the sands began creeping forward, reaching out with dead fingers toward this one bright spot in the midst of nothingness. Reaching out, then clutching in an unbreakable grip what little life existed here, refusing to let it go. Killing all it touched, then continuing onward, never satisfied until it had claimed everything in its path."

"You make it sound almost human," Xavier commented.

"Possessiveness? Destruction? Death?" Lensherr paused. "Yes, it *does* sound almost human, doesn't it?"

"That's not what I meant."

"I'm certain it wasn't," Lensherr said. "It still applies, though."

Xavier said nothing.

Down in the village, the first signs of activity were taking place. A silhouetted figure appeared on the topmost balcony of the minaret, and an ululating sound filled the air—the cry of a muezzin calling the Moslem faithful to morning prayers. Below the tower, doors opened, and the men of the village exited their modest homes and began walking toward the mosque.

Lensherr turned toward his companion. "Before you ask, *no*, they do not worship me. I have no aspirations for godhood, Charles, though I'm certain the Cube could provide me with that if I so chose."

"I'm relieved to hear you say that," Xavier said. "It tells me you haven't completely taken leave of your—"

"Being Master of the World is reward enough for my efforts," Lensherr interjected. He smiled.

The Professor groaned softly and shook his head despondently. The man could be so insufferably one-tracked in his thinking when he wanted . . .

Ignoring Lensherr's infuriating grin, Xavier turned his attention back to the village. The streets were full of people as Araouane came to life, its inhabitants dressed in brightly-colored robes and more modern

clothing. Not all were answering the call to prayer, though—there were shopkeepers opening their stores.

And then his gaze settled on one villager in particular: a woman who was standing on a rooftop at the outskirts of the village. His eyes widened with surprise. Even from a distance, even though she was clad in an ankle-length gown dyed in hues of green and gold and not in form-fitting black leather, her regal bearing was unmistakable—that, and the flowing mane of white hair that cascaded down her back to her waist.

“Ororo,” Xavier whispered.

As he watched, the African-born woman raised her hands above her head. Instantly, she was enveloped by a strong gust of wind that she had summoned by using her mutant ability to control the weather. It carried her high into the air, then toward the rising sun. It was an act that Xavier had seen her perform countless times at the school: she was going forth to privately greet the new day and give thanks for it to the Bright Lady, the African deity she worshipped. She would return in an hour or so, when her period of glorification had ended.

“She settled here shortly after I transformed the land,” Lensherr commented. “At the time, she insisted that I’d done more harm than good—that I’d thrown the ecological balance of the planet slightly off-kilter . . . though I have yet to see any real proof of that to bolster her arguments.”

“And what did she say once you had . . . changed her mind *for her*?” Xavier asked pointedly.

Lensherr sighed. “Charles, I wish you would at least make an *effort* to understand all I have done. While it is true that I . . . helped the world come to an understanding about the importance of my role in their lives, I didn’t completely abolish free will. That includes your former students, as well.” He waved a hand in the direction of the white-haired mutant, who was now no more than a dark speck against the rising sun. “Ororo *still* argues with me, *still* warns me of the ‘irreparable damage’ I may ultimately cause to the planet by correcting environmental changes wherever I see fit. The very fact that she has chosen to live here, keeping a watchful eye over the environment, rather than accept my offer to be a teacher at my New York school should be evidence enough that I am no longer the puppet-master you once knew. She has *always* been a strong-willed young woman, and will *continue* to be so—I would not wish her to be otherwise.” The mutant overlord paused. “As for your other former students . . .” He shrugged. “Well, Summers has always been a tad sycophantic when it comes to following powerful leaders, wouldn’t you agree?” He pressed on, not giving the Professor the op-

portunity to answer the question. "After all, considering the level of devotion he'd shown you in the past, given the fact that he hung on every syllable you uttered with the intensity of an acolyte—"

He stopped suddenly, a slow, easy smile coming to his lips. "No, not an acolyte. More like a son forever seeking approval from his father, risking all, even his very life, for just a few words of encouragement." He nodded, clearly pleased with the comparison. "I must admit, Charles, you broke him in quite well." The smile broadened. "You've broken *all* of them in quite well. Sons and daughters of the atom, trained to sacrifice themselves for the glory of their species, rather than allow the dreams of one man to die." An eyebrow rose in an inquisitive fashion. "Sounds familiar, does it not?" He snorted. "And you dare call *me* a villain. Wouldn't you say that's a case of the pot calling the kettle 'black'?"

"That's not true!" Xavier snapped, slamming his fists down on the canopy of his chair. He was surprised—and troubled—at the fury in his voice. This was not the time to allow Magneto to goad him into some senseless argument. There were more important matters.

Lensherr chuckled. "My, how quick we are to defend our actions, especially when we know we are in the wrong!" He reached out to consolingly pat Xavier on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Charles—I won't tell a soul."

The Professor glared at him.

"Now, then, Charles," Lensherr continued, "I'm quite certain you're burning with curiosity about why I brought you here, and what my plans for you might be. For the moment, all I will say is that there is a reason for everything I do—even something as simple as . . . *this*."

The Cube flared again—a modest glow this time, rather than a full-bore burst of light—and a warm, tingling sensation ran through the Professor's body. The feeling of pins and needles pricking his flesh intensified along the base of his spinal cord; it felt as though a strong electrical current was being run through it. Xavier screwed his eyes tightly shut and gritted his teeth against the pain, forcing himself not to cry out. He couldn't help but wonder if his former friend had brought him all this way just to kill him after proudly showing off one of his accomplishments—such behavior would not be out of character for Magneto.

But then the big toe on his right foot suddenly twitched. Xavier gasped.

His legs. He could feel his legs.

Startled, he looked to his old friend. "Erik, what—"

The hood of the hoverchair swung upward as if on its own—another

Cube effort. Xavier reached down to rub his legs, to ease the mild burning sensation running up and down the atrophied limbs as damaged nerves repaired themselves and weakened tissue strengthened. Tentatively, he tried raising his left leg, and couldn't help but smile as it responded to his mental command.

"Come, Charles—walk with me," Lensherr said. "There are some people here I would like you to meet. By the time we reach the village, we should be just in time for breakfast." Not waiting for a reply, the mutant overlord turned on his heel and began making his way down toward the village.

Slowly, the Professor eased out of the chair. His legs trembled slightly, the muscles taking their time becoming acclimated to receiving orders from the brain again. First one foot touched the rich soil; then the other. Gripping the edges of the chair, he pushed up with his arms, allowing them to handle the weight of his body until he felt that his restored limbs could support it. The chair suddenly shifted forward, and he *just* managed to keep himself from falling face-first onto the rich soil. He chuckled softly, reveling in every tremor that ran through his body as he took his first steps onto the surface of this new world.

It was a trick—he knew that the moment he realized what was happening. Tattered friendship aside, there had been no reason for Erik to repair his damaged nerves—unless he had an ulterior motive. The Professor had a feeling he knew what it was: to entice him into letting Lensherr retain ownership of the Cube. If Xavier couldn't be convinced to side with him through philosophical debates or threats, then what better temptation to win him over than by giving him back the use of his legs?

But *why* Magneto was going to all this trouble—*that* was the maddening question gnawing at Charles' thoughts. Why not simply destroy him with the Cube and be done with him, instead of trying to continually demonstrate what good it could do?

Taking small, hesitant steps, Xavier slowly made his way down the hillside, determined to obtain the answers he sought.

According to Lensherr, Araouane's population had dwindled to a mere handful of inhabitants following the long periods of drought; when he lived here, there had been no more than twenty-five or thirty families. Now, more than three thousand people called the village their home. What had once been a sand-covered ghost town was now a thriving—and growing—city on the edge of Paradise.

As they strolled through the busy streets, Lensherr would stop and point at some shop where he knew the owner, or a structure—like the

mosque—that had originally been eaten away by the corrosive sands, until he had restored it to its former glory. For all the terrible powers at his command, the Master of the World carried on like a tourist on holiday, speaking loudly and quickly as something caught his attention, marveling at something the villagers clearly considered quite commonplace, before moving onto the next attraction.

“So, what is your opinion, Charles?” Lensherr finally asked.

“Of what?”

Lensherr waved his arms around, gesturing at their surroundings. “Of the village, of course!”

Xavier glanced at the smiling faces of the bustling crowds around them, at the fertile soil beneath their feet, at the clear sky above. “It’s very nice.”

Lensherr laughed—the first genuine laugh that Xavier had heard since being brought before him at the castle. “You have *always* been a master of understatement, Charles! I think that that is one of your most charming—and oftentimes frustrating—qualities. *Nothing* seems to faze you.”

The Professor smiled, but remained silent as they continued their walk. After a few minutes, they came to an intersection. The mutant overlord paused a moment, then set off down a connecting street, the Professor close behind.

“Tell me something, Erik,” Xavier finally said. “What was it that changed your views toward humanity? Why did you give up your grand scheme for making *Homo superior* the dominant species?”

“I never gave it up, Charles,” Lensherr replied. “I simply came to the realization that perhaps that vision of the world was far too narrow in its scope.”

Xavier’s eyebrows rose. “Really.”

“Surprised that I’ve actually shown signs of emotional growth, Charles? You shouldn’t be—you’ve known me long enough.” Lensherr smiled. “If I could find the wherewithal to run your school and lead your churlish students into battle without turning against them, then the notion of me controlling the world with a velvet glove instead of an iron fist shouldn’t be *that* hard to believe.”

Xavier frowned. “Still, it didn’t take all that long for you to revert to your old ways, once you had left the school.”

Lensherr shrugged. “We are who we are, Charles. At the time, lashing out in anger seemed like the best approach to dealing with the problem of hatred toward our kind.”

“And yet, you eventually moved beyond that belief . . .” Xavier said, encouraging his old friend to explain his actions.

"It was this village," Lensherr began slowly, his voice once again taking on an uncharacteristic softness. "I lived here for a time, while von Doom held the Cube. A hellish place—I have already told you it used to be an oasis, thriving with life, but the sands eventually swept across it, killing almost everything . . . except the people." He smiled as a boy and girl no older than nine or ten years ran across their path, giggling merrily at the sight of the two strangely-garbed men. "There were no mutants among them; they'd never even heard the word before I arrived. They merely accepted me for what I was. I made friends with them, over time. They hid me from von Doom's superpowered bloodhounds, shared their food, taught me their language, and, for all their acts of kindness, they asked for nothing in return."

He suddenly stopped before one of the mud-brick buildings. On a grass-covered lawn fairly bursting with wild flowers, a little girl, three or four years old, sat playing with a hand-crafted doll, its dress as bright and colorful as the girl's. Eyes sparkling with glee, she talked to the doll as though it were her own child, gently brushing its hair with her hand while cooing into its ear.

From the corner of his eye, the Professor quietly observed Magneto's actions. The white-haired mutant was positively beaming, his attention completely focused on the youngster. It appeared he understood everything she was saying.

As the two men continued watching, a door on the side of the modest home opened, and a tall, stately woman in her thirties emerged. There was a slight bounce to her steps as she walked toward the child, calling out to her as she approached.

"Do you see that woman, Charles?" Lensherr asked. "And the little girl?" Xavier nodded. "The mother's name is Abena Metou; her daughter's is Jnanbarka. On von Doom's world, Abena was one of three 'sandwomen' whose livelihood was sweeping the sand that accumulated at the doors of the villagers' homes during the night. It was a foolish notion, that she could prevent the vast Sahara from one day swallowing her village beneath its relentless silicon waves; a battle she was destined to lose, even before she first picked up a broom." A trace of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "That knowledge did nothing to deter her, though—in fact, it made her more determined than ever to continue fighting. As she often explained to me, she was doing it not for herself, but for her daughter. A day battling the sands meant food on the table."

Lensherr paused. "It was the child's eyes that haunted me, even when I slept—those dull, lifeless eyes that had seen nothing but death and decay and starvation. I had seen eyes like those before—in Ausch-

witz, after my parents were murdered. They stared back at me every time I looked at my reflection in a puddle of muddy rainwater." For the briefest of moments, the fearful eyes of a child of the Holocaust glittered in the blue-gray depths of his pupils. The mutant overlord shuddered slightly. "Even now, I cannot rid my mind of that image."

He fell silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on a spot on the ground. "I once swore that no other living being would suffer the kind of atrocities I had endured at the hands of the Nazis. And after looking into that child's eyes, it was as though a caul had been lifted from my own. For so long, I had boasted of the superiority of my race, demanded that it should be recognized as the dominant species, looked down my nose at those who so often opposed my actions, as though they were beneath me." Lensherr slowly shook his head. "I was acting no better than the Nazis. And though, in my heart, I knew I was wrong, my blinding hatred toward humanity for all it had done to our kind kept me from facing the truth. Terror tactics; threats of nuclear Armageddon; warring against the nations of the world—there had to be *another* way, a far more humane way, for me to force mankind to improve this planet for all people. And once the Cube was in my hands, I knew what had to be done . . ."

Xavier shook his head. "You may have used the Cube to better the world, Erik, but it was only accomplished by tinkering with the minds of six billion people—including my students. Call it whatever you like, convince yourself that you have changed your ways, argue night and day that the 'dream' you placed in their minds was for their own good, but the bottom line is that you are *still* Magneto. And no matter how noble your intentions might be, in the back of your mind, you never stopped pursuing your *true* dream: the final, lasting defeat over my X-Men, and the subjugation of the human race." He sneered. "Well, congratulations, Erik—you've finally gotten your wish."

"No, Charles," Lensherr insisted. "Don't you see? By using the Cube, I have brought *peace* to the world. There are no children starving, no families living in poverty, no mutants who feel they must hide their marvelous gifts from the world to avoid being ridiculed. *This* is the Earth as we always dreamed it should be." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Charles, but there is nothing you can say or do that will change my mind—what I've done here is *right*, and you know it."

"No, old friend—it is wrong, and *you* know it, though you refuse to acknowledge your mistakes. And mark my words, I *will* find a way to make you see the truth and end this madness," Xavier said, jaw set in determination. "God help me, Erik, I will do *whatever* it takes to set things right. I must, if countless universes are to be saved."

Lensherr raised an amused eyebrow. "Would you *kill* me, then, Charles, to complete your mission? *You*, who once defended me before the World Court for my alleged 'crimes against humanity'? Are you *that* set on destroying all the good I have done?"

Xavier lowered his gaze. "I . . . hope it will not come to that, Erik," he said softly. "But this falsehood, this fantasy world you have created, cannot be allowed to continue. I appreciate your efforts, my friend, but there is far more at risk here than a clash of philosophical differences between two visionaries." He raised his head, then, and stared heatedly at the mutant overlord. "Do not force me to choose between sacrificing billions of lives for a dream, and sacrificing *your* life so those billions can go on living. I assure you, you would not like my decision."

Lensherr pursed his lips. "Interesting. I must say, this is a side of you I don't think I've ever seen before. It's a refreshing change—over the years, I'd grown exceedingly tired of hearing the same soporific speeches from you about the abuses of power." He smiled, and gestured toward the mother and child. "Now, come—the time for empty threats and useless posturing is over; I want you to meet my friends. And once we have eaten, I think you'll be in a far more appreciative mood for the other wonders I wish to share with you . . . before we get to the heart of the matter. "

And with that, he strode away, calling out what seemed to be a greeting to the woman in her native tongue.

Left standing in the street, Charles Xavier pondered what his old friend had meant by his last words. "The heart of the matter." Words that could mean just about anything, from a peaceful resolution to their Cube-related problems . . . to the destruction of the world itself.

HE WAS surprised when they returned from their travels, not to the sprawling Loire Valley castle, but to an opulent apartment in the center of Paris.

In the space of a few hours, Charles Xavier and Erik Lensherr had traveled across the globe, each stopping point along the way used to illustrate how Magneto had used the Cube to better the world and its peoples. The trip had also been used to put the Professor's mind at ease about the well-being of the other members of the X-Men—the ones who were *not* guests staying at the mutant overlord's castle.

After Ororo had joined them for breakfast in Araouane, the two men had continued their journey. First they visited the Ust-Ordynski Collective Farm in Siberia, where they had been greeted by Piotr Rasputin. In the "real" world, he was the armored X-Man called Colossus; here, though, he was just a simple Russian farmer, as he had been before Xavier had recruited him. Then it was on to Seattle, Washington, the home of Hank McCoy—the blue-furred Beast—who worked for a Seattle-based genetics laboratory. The Cajun-born Gambit, mysterious as always, could not be found in New Orleans, though there were rumors he now ran the notorious Thieves Guild. Bobby Drake, who went by the codename "Iceman" because of his frigid powers, was the manager of a Miami hockey team. From Florida, they crossed up the East Coast to visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., where the current Assistant Director was a young woman named Kathryn Pryde; as an X-Man, she had been called Shadowcat, possessing the ability to shift slightly out of sync with her surroundings, which allowed her body to phase through solid objects. Then it was on to the Lensherr Institute on Ellis Island, followed by a brief inspection of the grounds of what had

been the Professor's school (now a summer camp for troubled teenage mutants) in Westchester County, to prove to Xavier that a generation of "genetically gifted" soldiers were not being trained to help Magneto. They moved on to Glenfiddich, Scotland, to have a chat with Sean Cassidy—formerly the mutant named Banshee, because of the sonic cry he could emit—and his wife. To Xavier's deep regret, that woman had turned out to be his former love, Moira MacTaggart. Finally, their exhausting session of globe-hopping had ended in Lensherr's Parisian apartment.

As much as Xavier hated to admit it, all his X-Men had appeared to be hale and hearty, content with their new lives, and much happier than the Professor could ever remember seeing them while they had been under his tutelage. Yet, knowing that Magneto had influenced their minds with the Cube, making them forget Xavier's part in their lives, it was difficult to gauge how much of their happiness was heartfelt—and how much had been forced upon them.

Now, resting his weary legs as he sat in his hoverchair, the Professor contemplated Magneto's next move.

The Cube had been put back into its protective adamantium casing, behind a highly expensive Matisse original. Xavier had been left alone in the salon, while Lensherr had gone into one of the other adjoining rooms. From the sounds of clattering dishes and running water, it appeared Erik was . . . making tea? Xavier raised an eyebrow in mild surprise and chuckled, amused by the thought of a domesticated Magneto bustling about the kitchen. Family life apparently *had* had a calming effect on his life—one more wondrous change brought about by the Cosmic Cube, it seemed.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Lensherr exited, a silver tray containing a large silver tea pot, cups, saucers, and milk and sugar dispensers hovering before him. Using his magnetic powers, he set the tray down on a table in front of the wall-mounted flatscreen television.

"I apologize for the lack of biscuits," Lensherr said, "but since my family and I are supposed to be vacationing at the castle for the next few weeks, the house here was closed, so no shopping has been done." He poured tea into two China cups, handing one to the Professor. "Now, where were we?"

Xavier took the proffered beverage, and sniffed at the vapors rising from the heated brown liquid. Earl Grey—his favorite. "Well, *I* was asking you to come to your senses and surrender the Cube willingly, and *you* were about to explain the real purpose for our travels today. And why you decided to restore my legs."

"Why *not* restore your legs?" Lensherr countered. "You weren't

always a paraplegic, Charles. Is it wrong to want to be able to face an old friend eye-to-eye, rather than constantly have to look down at him? I thought I was doing you a favor." He tried to look hurt by the Professor's suspicions, but he could only manage a deeply wrinkled scowl.

"Favors always come with a price," Xavier said, a dark tone to his voice. "Giving me back the use of my legs at the cost of countless lives is too high a price to pay, no matter *how* tempting the offer."

The mutant overlord smiled. "You have been and still are a difficult man to bargain with, Charles."

"And one not easily distracted from obtaining answers to his questions," Xavier replied, a bit forcefully. "Now, the reason you wanted to show me all you've done with the world, why it seemed so important to you for me to meet your daughter, is because . . ."

"Because I am dying, Charles," Lensherr said, matter-of-factly.

Xavier started. It suddenly felt as though all the air had been driven from his lungs. "Erik . . ." he began.

Lensherr motioned him to silence with a wave of his hand. "Please, Charles—no mawkish words of sympathy. You and I have seen our share of death over the years; mine is just one more among millions that pass each year. Besides, I was well advanced in my years *before* the Cube began stealing away what few years remained to me. Even now, I can feel the strength ebbing from my body—in a month, perhaps less, there would be nothing left of me to sustain this world, this dream. But from what you keep telling me, the planet does not even *have* a month left to live."

"Yes," the Professor replied.

Lensherr nodded. "And that is why I want you to take the Cube."

His vigilance had finally been rewarded.

Slumped in an armchair just one floor below the two men, the Controller suddenly snapped awake from a light slumber. He'd been sitting in this very chair, in this third floor parlor, since the wee hours of the morning, when he and Leonard had forced their way in through a garden entrance at the rear of the building. A careful search of all five floors and basement had confirmed the Cube's absence, but the Controller could still feel the lingering presence of its addictive power; it hung in the air, seeped into the walls, floors, furnishings.

It was different, though. He'd known something was wrong with this version of the device almost from the moment he and Leonard had arrived on Earth, but here, in the heart of Magneto's fantasy world, that feeling was even stronger.

Normally, the energy field generated by a Cube gave off a com-

fortable, even calming, buzz that tingled the skin and sent a pleasant chill up the spine. But the cosmic forces that pulsed from this particular device felt more like sharp pricks that jangled the nerves and caused his joints to ache. It was not a sensation that could be experienced by someone who had never held a Cosmic Cube; only a select few, like the Controller, had ever had the privilege.

And then there was the double vision. Again, it was something undetectable to the eyes of the uninitiated, but having been the possessor of quite a number of the devices over the years, the Controller knew what to look for in a restructured world. And when he closely examined his surroundings on *this* world, there seemed to be a soft focus to everything around him, except for Leonard. It was as though he were staring at a three-dimensional picture without the special glasses required to combine the two separate images in order to create the illusion of depth.

It gave him a mild headache.

Stiff joints, headaches, and blurred eyesight had been quickly forgotten, however, the instant he realized that the Cube had returned. Its song seemed to fill the air around him, and his pulse quickened, heart beating in time to the music only he could hear. He'd waited so long—too long—for this moment.

And now, at last, he could answer the Cube's siren call.

He slowly rose to his feet, tapping Leonard on the leg to rouse him from his sleep. The youth, who lay sprawled across a flower-patterned sofa nearby, started to mumble a response—only to come fully awake as the Controller gripped his throat with one gloved hand to cut off his air, while the other clamped down tightly over his mouth to silence him.

"Not a sound, my little mouse," the Controller hissed through gritted teeth, his face mere inches from his assistant's, "or it shall be the last you ever make. I will *not* be denied my prize because of some drowsy imbecile mistaking me for his mother. Do you understand?"

Leonard quickly nodded his understanding, and the Controller released his grip. The youth shakily rose to his feet, rubbing his sore throat as he tried to catch his breath. His master studied his movements for a few moments, making certain that his blond-haired follower wasn't going to stumble into the furniture, then moved on cat's feet across the room. He paused at the entrance to the third floor hallway, peering around the molding to steal a glance at the staircase just outside. The hall was empty, but he could hear the sound of voices drifting down from the next floor. One he immediately identified as Magneto's; the other he didn't recognize, but from the general tone of the conversation, the speaker appeared to be a friend of Lensherr's.

He turned to find Leonard standing beside him. Clearly, the youth

understood the need for stealth; the Controller hadn't even heard him draw near. Leonard looked to his superior for instructions, but wisely remained silent. The Controller held up his hand, signaling for him to remain here. Leonard nodded, and stepped back into the shadows of the darkened room.

Reaching around to the back of the wide black belt he wore around the waist of his dark-green uniform, the Controller withdrew a six-inch-long blade attached to a handle made of hard, black plastic; it slid noiselessly from its leather sheath. The blade was of a special design, because it wasn't made of metal, but rather sharpened obsidian—when dealing with a man who called himself “The Master of Magnetism,” the last thing a potential assassin needed was a metal-based weapon that could be turned against him.

Keeping close to the floor, the Controller stepped into the hallway, then quietly crossed to the staircase. He could hear one of the men moving about the room on the next floor, his booted footsteps muffled slightly by thick carpeting. As long as they kept talking, the Controller considered, it should be child's play to get within striking distance well before they ever became aware of his presence; and by then, of course, it would be too late for them to do anything—but die.

Dagger at the ready, the Controller began moving up the stairs. A malevolent smile twisting his mangled lips, he was already imaging the shocked expression that would be etched on Magneto's features in his last moments before death claimed him, as he gazed upon the face of the man who had killed him—and his dream.

Xavier cocked his head to one side, unable to believe what he had just heard. “Would you mind repeating that, Erik? I think the neural inhibitor your followers fitted me with is affecting my hearing.” He rubbed the base of his spine, feeling the lumpy shape of the device that kept him from using his telepathic abilities.

Lensherr grunted. “You understood me quite well, Charles. It's your *telepathic abilities* that have been hampered, *not* your hearing.”

Xavier raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “You're going to hand the Cosmic Cube to me.”

Lensherr nodded.

“Without any histrionics? Without any fighting?”

“Yes.”

“No death threats? No tricks? No booby traps designed to scatter my atoms across the cosmos once I touch it?”

“None whatsoever.”

The Professor eyed the mutant overlord suspiciously. "You're going to give it to me—just like that?"

A wisp of a smile played at the corners of the mutant overlord's mouth. "Now, Charles, what sort of super-villain would I be if there wasn't *some* requirement for my assistance in helping you reach the end of your great and perilous quest? After all, you *did* say so yourself: Favors *always* come with a price."

The Professor nodded. "Yes. How silly of me to think otherwise. What did you have in mind?"

Lensherr shrugged. "A simple request—one I am *certain* you will not hesitate to accept, given your altruistic nature. *And* your word, as a man of honor, that you will carry it out. Do we have an agreement?"

A gentle smile came to Xavier's lips. "Now, Erik, what sort of leader would I be if I blindly agreed to offers made by a man who refers to himself as a 'super-vil—' "

"It's Anya," Lensherr interjected, an unmistakable trace of desperation in his voice. "I want her to live."

The Professor tilted his head to one side, confused by the statement. "I'm not certain I understand what you're asking of me."

"I want you to *promise me*, Charles," Lensherr insisted. "Give me your *word* that, no matter what may happen once I have turned the Cube over to you, you *will* preserve and protect my daughter's life."

Xavier's eyes widened in surprise. Out of all the favors he'd imagine Magneto would ask of him, *this* request had been the farthest from his mind.

"Erik, I . . ." he began slowly. "I'm not certain I can *make* such a promise. There's a risk that anything remaining from this world—even Anya—might exacerbate the situation, might cause irreparable damage to the omniverse—"

"*Damn you, Xavier!*" the mutant overlord bellowed. "Are you so dedicated to your view of what must be that you would destroy all I have done—the dream we *both* hold dear—that you would sacrifice the one thing that has finally healed my soul?"

The Professor's gaze lowered. It was hard enough saying words even *he* didn't want to say without having to look his old friend in the eye.

"Erik, you must believe me," he said softly. "I wish there *was* another way to restore the cosmic balance, some way to keep even a small portion of the wonders you've created . . . but there *isn't*." Slowly, he raised his head. "I'm sorry," he whispered, "but *no* trace of this world can remain, if the omniverse is to survive."

Xavier steeled himself for the inevitable. He waited for his oldest

friend—his oldest enemy—to lash out in anger, using either his magnetic powers or the cosmic energies of the Cube to wipe him from existence. Waited for the killing blow he knew would come—and prayed silently that his death would be a quick one.

But then, slowly, the lightning faded from Lensherr's eyes. His shoulders sagged, and the feral snarl into which his mouth had seemed permanently set just a moment ago faded into a deeply furrowed frown. The transformation was startling—gone was the Master of the World, the master of the Cosmic Cube, the terrifying mutant overlord called Magneto; in his place stood a tired, beaten old man.

Lensherr sighed, and his entire body shuddered from the effort. Wordlessly, he turned from the Professor, and walked over to a window. He stood there, silently watching the lights of the city, for a number of minutes. Xavier remained where he was, not sure what to do next. Magneto's sudden fit of depression had taken him by surprise, but he knew that, if he pushed too hard about the dangers posed by the Cube, the ennui that gripped the scarlet-clad villain could quickly become a murderous rage.

"I thought, perhaps, you would act differently about this, Charles," Lensherr finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Threatening me with harm, as you did last night—such words come as no surprise. You and I have had similar exchanges, far too many to count . . . although it has usually been *my* role in those little dramas to be the one who delivers such ominous declarations, and you and your students the ones facing extermination. Heaven knows I've come close enough to killing all of you on a number of occasions, so I can understand your reluctance to help me on *any* level.

"But Anya is . . . not like you or I. She . . . her life has never become a vicious circle of hatred and prejudice and despair. She's never experienced the horrors of a cruel, fearful world; never had her innocence savagely stripped away; never been torn from her mother's arms, knowing she will never see her parents alive again." He turned from the window, a haunted look darkening his blue-gray eyes. "You were my last hope, Charles—the last chance to preserve a part of my legacy. Anya was—*is*—the one truly *good* thing I've ever done in my life. Why should she be made to suffer for the sins of her father?"

"Please, Erik . . ." Xavier said quietly. "You're not making this decision any easier—"

"*It's not supposed to be easy, damn you!*" Lensherr roared. He pointed an accusatory finger at the Professor. "You keep talking of the lives of countless billions threatened by the Cube's power—*faceless* billions you don't even know, who shall never know you, and to whom

you owe nothing! But you've *met* Anya, you've *seen* how much she means to me. You *know* the guilt I've had to live with, the emptiness in my soul I've felt since the day she died."

Xavier nodded in agreement, but said nothing.

"Then, *why*, Charles?" Lensherr demanded, stepping toward him. "Why can't you make this one exception?" He gestured in the direction of the Cube, hidden behind the framed painting on the other side of the room. "I'm going to die soon—the dream will follow me into oblivion once I have drawn my last breath. I'm willing to accept that fact, willing to turn the Cube over to you now, *before* that happens, while there's still time to preserve a tiny piece of it. Why, then, can't you find it in your heart to do this one thing for me? For *us*? Can you only see Anya as some sort of example of the singleminded goals I once pursued, instead of the embodiment of all the good I have achieved?"

Lensherr sighed. "We were friends, you and I, long before our philosophical differences caused us to drift apart . . ." His voice trailed off, and he stood silently, eyes closed. His hands clenched into tight fists, and a slight tremor ran through his body. It looked as though he was fighting a battle with himself, forcing his next words through stiffened lips: "I have never been one to beg, Charles . . ."

"Erik, listen to me," Xavier replied. "It's not that I don't *want* to help you, but with the very fabric of reality unraveling around us, even a small piece of your fantasy-realm might prevent us from reversing the destruction caused by the Cube. If there *was* some way for me to protect Anya, I would not hesitate to take advantage of it." He shook his head sadly. "It's true that we've had our differences over the years, but I would *never* seek to cause you misery by striking at your family—you *know* that."

The mutant overlord opened his mouth, as though to argue the point, then stopped. He frowned, then gently nodded his head. "Yes. Yes, I do."

Lensherr inhaled deeply, slowly releasing the breath through his nostrils. "All right, Charles, all right," he said wearily. "You win. I have made my arguments, and you remain unmoved." He lowered himself onto a nearby sedan and closed his eyes, resting his head against the cushions. "Nevertheless, I gave you my word, and I shall honor that promise." He waved a hand at the large oil painting on the far side of the room, behind which the Cube lay hidden. "Take the damnable device—and may God have pity on your miserable soul for what you do with it."

The heated comment was like a physical slap to the Professor's face, and he flinched from the blow. Ignoring the Cube, he remained seated,

staring at the colorfully-garbed man lying before him. It was a sobering sight for Charles—he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Erik look so vulnerable. *Had* he ever seen him look this vulnerable? The man had been a powerhouse for as long as Xavier had known him—a force of nature that not even death itself had been able to stop. “Vulnerable” had never been a word the Professor would have ever used to describe his former friend. But now . . . now, though, he looked drained—of energy, of life, of the will to live. Fantasy though she might be, Anya's presence in Lensherr's life had greatly affected him, and having at last come to the realization that he could do nothing to save her . . .

The weight of his decision sat heavily upon Xavier's shoulders . . . and he hated himself for the choice he had been forced to make. Knowing that he was right, that there had been no other conclusion to reach given the severity of the situation, did nothing to ease the burden.

“Tell me, Charles,” Lensherr suddenly asked, his eyes still closed, “are you familiar with the writings of Christopher Dawson?”

“Not as much as I would like,” Xavier admitted.

The mutant overlord nodded, as though in understanding. “He was a British cultural historian and educational theorist, born at the turn of the twentieth century. A gifted, insightful man—you might even consider him a visionary. As Hitler's jackbooted animals marched across Europe, as my family and I were rotting away in that squalid hellhole called Auschwitz, Dawson saw the direction in which the world was heading. There is a line in his *Judgment of the Nations* that proves how well he understood the dark days ahead—a line that, based upon your responses this day, I consider all too appropriate for this occasion: ‘As soon as men decide that all means are permitted to fight evil, then their good becomes indistinguishable from the evil that they set out to destroy.’ ”

Lensherr opened his eyes, and gazed evenly at his old friend. “How does it feel, Charles—being the *villain* this time?”

For perhaps the first time in his life, Charles Xavier could think of nothing to say.

IT WAS becoming a nightmare from which she seemed unable to awaken.

As she gazed down at the chessboard that floated before her, Roma felt a cold weight settle over her soul. In the center of the black onyx and white ivory squares were two white pieces: miniature representations of Charles Xavier and Elisabeth Braddock. The Professor—the king—sat in his hoverchair, his finely detailed features set in an expression of fierce determination. Beside him, the female warrior called Psylocke—one of the knights—was garbed in her traditional costume; one gloved hand was tightly gripping the hilt of a *katana*. Roma stared at them despondently, for they were the *only* white pieces on the board. Surrounding them were a collection of black pieces, posed menacingly as if to strike: Magneto, Doctor Doom, and the X-Men who had traveled to Earth, only to fall victim to the very madness they'd tried to end: Phoenix. Cyclops. Nightcrawler. Rogue. Wolverine. For some reason, she could not locate the piece representing the last member of the team: Gambit. Its absence only served to increase the feelings of anxiety that plagued her thoughts.

Much to her surprise, however, there was one other black piece on the board—one she couldn't identify; one she hadn't placed. Its features were indistinct, half-formed, and it stood off to the side, as though waiting for . . . what?

Roma picked up the Psylocke piece and studied it in the dim, gloomy lighting of the throneroom. It had been this figurine that had given her the first inkling of serious trouble in the omniverse. While Elisabeth had been under the controlling influence of von Doom during the time he'd held the Cube, she had come to believe that she was not

a mutant, or even a member of the X-Men, but rather a cabaret singer. As Roma now knew, that second life actually belonged to an alternate version of the lavender-tressed telepath, who lived on a von Doom-controlled alternate Earth. But the Cube's restructuring of Elisabeth's psyche had not just changed the X-Man; it had caused her chess piece to morph, from warrior to chanteuse and back again. That peculiar instability had repaired itself, it seemed, the moment Psylocke materialized within the walls of the citadel.

Frowning, Roma wished Merlyn had bothered to explain why the board and its pieces seemed to know more about what was going on in the omniverse than the Guardian who protected it. It could be most frustrating at times.

Behind her, the main doors to the chamber opened slightly, and a figure dressed in a flowing white gown slipped inside. From the outside corridor came the brief sounds of shouting and feet scuffling, but they were sharply cut off by the closing of the doors.

"Did you grow tired of waiting, Saturnyne?" Roma asked, putting just enough emphasis in the question to make it clear her lieutenant shouldn't make a habit of disobeying her orders.

"Forgive my impertinence, m'lady," the Majestrix said, "but you *did* summon me earlier, and—" she glanced over her shoulder—"I have had my fill of arrogant children for one day."

A faint smile crossed Roma's lips. "I do so wish that you and Captain Alecto would reconcile your differences, Saturnyne."

"If m'lady commands it . . ." Saturnyne replied, ". . . although I am certain you have more important things on your mind than how I interact with the staff."

Roma nodded and sighed. "Yes. After much soul-searching, I have made my final decision—the crystal must be destroyed *now*. Charles Xavier and Elisabeth Braddock have had more than enough time to reverse the Cosmic Cube's effects—" she gestured toward the darkened scrying glass—"and yet the situation remains unchanged."

Her Whyness shrugged. "If you think that's best, m'lady."

Roma paused, and glanced at her trusted aide. For someone who had so eagerly campaigned for her to end the threat posed by the Cube, Saturnyne seemed strangely unconcerned about so grave a matter. Perhaps she was just being polite, not wishing to appear disrespectful now that Roma had at last come over to her way of thinking. Perhaps she no longer cared. Perhaps—

The Guardian shook her head. There had been enough contemplation on her part; now was the time to take action.

"Come, Saturnyne," she said, and gestured toward the collection of

life crystals. "Let us put an end to this madness." She moved across the transept, heading for the platform, with the heavy tread of someone being led to their execution.

And then the main doors burst open, and Captain Alecto came flying into the throneroom.

He crashed down onto the cold, stone floor and bounced twice before coming to rest in the center of the main aisle. A low moan escaped his lips, and he made a feeble attempt to rise, only to sink back down and lie still.

As the Supreme Guardian stared in disbelief at the sight of her finest warrior lying broken and bloodied, virtually at her feet, his attacker entered the throneroom. Candlelight gleamed off the parts of his armor that were not concealed beneath dark-green cloth. Behind a facemask of gleaming metal, dark-brown eyes glared at her in triumph.

"Von Doom!" Roma snapped angrily, lips pulled back in an uncharacteristic snarl. "You *dare* enter my chamber in so bold a manner, after all the chaos you have unleashed upon the omniverse?"

The dictator strode across the vast room, boot heels ringing sharply against the flagstones that lined the floor. "Doom dares much, woman, when the prize he seeks is within his grasp!"

"Prize?" Roma's eyebrows rose in an inquisitive fashion. Did that mean he had come to try and depose her? That he was challenging a Guardian of the Ominverse—a celestial being with limitless power—for possession of the throne? Could he truly be that arrogant, that foolish, as to think he stood a chance against her in battle?

It was utter nonsense, and she had no time to waste on a power-hungry madman suffering from delusions of grandeur—especially when she had far more important matters to attend to, like trying to repair all the damage he had caused to reality with his scientific blundering. But if it was power von Doom craved, Roma decided, then let him have his fill of it—at the center of the vortex. Let him experience the terrifying forces of Creation, and know what it means to anger the protectress of the omniverse—before the temporal and spatial currents tear him apart. She raised her hands, prepared to rid herself of him once and for all.

Her intended attack was cut short, however, as a sharp, unfamiliar sensation exploded across the back of her head. She staggered forward, surprised at having temporarily lost her sense of balance. It took her a moment to recognize what she was experiencing.

Physical pain. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt it, but she definitely recalled its unpleasantness. Was the dull ache at the base of her skull *supposed* to be this intense? Did it have any connection

to the black spots that danced before her eyes, making it difficult to see?

She'd seen how the limitations of the flesh had affected Merlyn, when one of his cosmic chess matches had gone wrong—his hands had been burned while he protected a piece from harm. So she knew that, immortal though she might be, her unusual longevity did not guarantee protection from injury. But still . . .

Dazed, she turned to face her attacker, and was shocked to discover it was her dearest friend and confidante. The Majestrix had unbuckled the heavy belt she always wore around her waist and now held it in two hands, wielding it like a club. Roma noticed the gleaming jewel in its center was speckled with drops of blood. Placing a hand on the back of her head, the Guardian was surprised to find her scalp was disturbingly moist and tacky.

"S-Saturnyne?" she stammered. "But, why . . .?" Her voice suddenly trailed off, as she saw the mad gleam in the woman's visible eye—and then she *knew*. This wasn't her friend, but an imposter. Yet, the only alternate version of her trusted aide who could be so bold as to openly confront a Guardian of the Omniverse would be . . .

"No . . ." she whispered hoarsely.

Sat-yr-nin grinned broadly. "Oh, *yes* . . ."

Any other thoughts Roma might have been about to express were lost in a spasm of incredible pain, as a burst of charged particles struck her in the back, spinning her around before roughly slamming her to the floor.

"I-impossible . . ." the Guardian said through gritted teeth as the energy discharge continued to burn its way into her brain's pain centers, overwhelming them. "N-no w-weapon can function inside the c-citadel . . ." She struggled to regain her feet, but could only succeed in balancing on one knee.

"So I understand," von Doom replied coolly. "But then, this is *not* a weapon—it's one of the medical devices you used to separate me from my elderly doppelganger, modified for my armor." He fired again, and Roma stiffened, mouth agape, head snapped back, eyes wide as saucers. The pain this time was so intense she was unable to make a sound.

And then another Roma suddenly peeled away from her body, and dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Von Doom stepped forward, and gazed down at the prostrate Guardian and her insensate twin. The second woman looked exactly the same as her "sister," but this one's hair was cut short, the ends frosted a cool pink color, and her clothing consisted of leather pants and boots, and a

cut-off T-shirt emblazoned with the word MEGADEATH, whatever that meant. Her left ear was punctured with a dozen or more metal studs; another two pierced her left nostril.

“Interesting,” the dictator commented, like a scientist who’s discovered a new species of bug. “The beam has a different effect on you than it did on that bothersome little man.”

Roma found she didn’t have the strength to ask who he was talking about. It was taking all she had just to remain conscious.

“I think our Guardian truly is only as good as the sum of her parts,” Sat-yr-nin quipped. “And she’s just lost one of them.” She put a hand over her mouth and giggled, amused by her little joke.

Von Doom stared heatedly at the Mastrex, but then a look came over his eyes that seemed to indicate he was giving serious consideration to her passing comment. “That *does* make sense, if one considers the situation multidimensionally,” he said slowly. “If the Guardian protects all realities, and there exists an alternate version of her in each of them, then it would stand to reason that her powers are derived, not from this citadel, but from the collection of all variations in one body.” He glanced from one version to the other. “Fascinating. I wonder exactly how many there are . . .”

“You must . . . stop this . . . madness . . .” Roma weakly demanded of the tyrant. “You have . . . no idea . . . what harm you are . . . doing . . .”

Von Doom snorted, and pointed to her duplicate. “The only harm, woman, is to *you*, for you are all that stands between Doom and his ascendancy to the throne. The X-Men are either prisoners of Magneto, or are dead. Your lieutenant has been sealed away until I have decided upon her execution date, and your guards have been . . . incapacitated. You have no allies here. And once *you* have fallen, there will be *no one* to stop Doom from taking up the mantle as the new Guardian of Reality.” He adjusted a dial on his gauntlet, and the hum of the accelerator circuits increased to a teeth-rattling howl. “First, though, there is the matter of *finalizing* your removal from office.” He raised his hands, palms forward, and pointed them in her direction.

Roma could see the build-up of energy in the gauntlets’ projectors. She tried to use her powers to teleport herself to safety, but the strain placed on her body by the removal of one of her alternates kept her from focusing her thoughts.

The light from von Doom’s hands flared brightly, and Roma was enveloped in a brilliant green haze that tore into her, disrupting every cell in her body. Another variation of the Guardian fell to the floor.

And for the first time in millennia, Roma screamed.

* * *

He sat there in the gathering darkness, suddenly uncertain of what he should do next.

Charles Xavier hadn't moved from his hoverchair for the past ten minutes, his mind continually replaying Magneto's last scathing remark. Was it true? he wondered. Could it really be possible that, in his zeal to carry out his mission, he had crossed some moral boundary—the one that had always separated him from the villainous members of the mutant community?

His reverie was shattered as he suddenly noticed that Magneto was heading for the door.

“Are—are you leaving?” Xavier asked.

“Yes,” Lensherr replied brusquely. “I wish to be with my family . . . when the end comes. The Cube is yours, Charles—I have already ordered it to obey your commands. All you need do is take possession of it.” He turned to go, then paused. “Farewell, Charles,” he said quietly. “I fear that, when next we meet, it shall not be so civil a reunion.”

“No,” Xavier murmured. “I would imagine not.”

Lensherr turned, then, and opened the door to the hallway—and suddenly cried out in pain.

Startled, Xavier leapt to his feet, in time to see Magnus stagger back into the room, clutching weakly at his chest. “Charles . . .” he gasped hoarsely, and turned to face him.

The hilt of a large, black stone dagger was protruding from Erik's chest.

The hallway door opened wide, and a man entered the drawing room, pushing his way past the dying mutant overlord. He was tall and powerfully built, clad in a slightly baggy, dark-green jumpsuit, and polished, green leather jackboots. To the men and women who had served under his command on a now lifeless moonbase, a quarter of a million miles from their homes and families, he had been known as The Controller. For the past fifty-plus years, though, he had been known by a far more sinister name—one that, even now, was still spoken only in the softest whispers. A name that had been given to him by none other than his cherished mentor, now long deceased—a mentor named Adolf Hitler.

He was the scourge of life itself. A monster who had sacrificed countless lives in the continuing pursuit of his mad dream of recreating the glorious days of the Third Reich. The first man to not only possess a series of Cosmic Cubes over the years, but to become as one with their incredible energies—and, thus, the universe itself.

He was the devil given form. He was a perpetually-grinning angel of death.

He was the Red Skull.

And he had come for the Cube.

"No . . ." Xavier whispered.

The Skull crossed the salon, apparently unconcerned by Xavier's presence; either that, or he was so intent on what he was doing that he hadn't even realized the Professor was there. He came to a halt before the Matisse, staring at it with far more interest than one would normally have, even for a work of art.

He *knew*, Xavier realized with growing horror. Somehow, he knew the Cube was behind that painting. And once he possessed it, no one would be safe . . .

"Charles . . ."

Xavier turned. Erik was still alive, but it was obvious from the severity of his wound that he did not have much time left. He fumbled at the handle of the blade that had sliced through his costume to pierce his heart, but he was unable to remove it from his chest; his hands were too slick with blood. The Professor hurried to his side.

"*Promise me, Charles,*" Lensherr gasped. "Promise me you'll save her." He gestured toward the Skull. "Don't let that monster do to Anya what his kind did to my parents. *Please, Charles.*"

Inwardly, the Professor cursed. Why did the man insist on doing this? There were more important matters involved in this Cube-created insanity than maintaining a small facet of Magneto's fantasy life—the Skull, for instance. If he wasn't stopped before he took possession of the device, *no one* would be safe. But he had to say *something* encouraging to his old friend before he died . . .

"I . . ." Xavier began, then slowly nodded. "All right, Erik."

Lensherr slowly reached up, and gently placed the palm of his hand against his friend's face. He smiled. "I knew I was not wrong about you, Charles. You have always been a good man—a hero. It was something I had aspired to become, a lifetime ago, but it was not meant to be." He patted Xavier's cheek. "Take good care of her, Charles."

"I will," he lied.

"Thank you . . . my friend . . ." Lensherr whispered.

And then he was gone.

On the other side of the room, the Red Skull ignored the death of his rival and concentrated on the matter at hand. His only thought was of obtaining the Cube, of claiming his prize, and now there was no one to



stop him from doing so—he had swept his opposition from the chessboard with just his first move.

He swung the painting aside on its hinges—and found himself facing a smooth metal wall the size of a small safe. There was no door, no access panel, no traditional means of entry. A container that could only be opened by someone possessing magnetically-based powers.

“Ingenious,” the Skull murmured. “I would not have expected a sub-human like Lensherr to have thought of such security measures.” His lipless mouth stretched wide in a hideous approximation of a smile. “Still, opening it is no effort for one who has touched the face of eternity.”

He closed his eyes and concentrated, sending out a mental command. Calling the Cube to *him*.

Slowly, the block of metal began to open. A brilliant, white light filled the drawing room.

And then the Cosmic Cube floated out of its prison, and toward the Skull’s outstretched hand.

“No!” the Professor shouted.

He leapt toward the murderer, and actually succeeded in knocking him away from the Cube; both he and the Skull went staggering around the room, locked in a deadly embrace. But Charles Xavier had spent most of his time as a man of peace, pursuing intellectual solutions to the problems he ordinarily faced. The Red Skull, on the other hand, was a sadistic killer who reveled in the amount of pain he was able to inflict upon his victims.

A gloved fist shot out, catching Xavier across the jaw; it was followed by the sharp stab of an elbow connecting with his left temple. Knocked off-balance, the Professor staggered to the side, missing his target and stumbling into a table. Before he could focus his thoughts, the Skull lashed out with a booted foot, driving the steel toe into the Professor’s right knee. The air was split by the sound of bones snapping, and Xavier screamed in agony. A savage chop to his carotid artery cut short his cries, and he crashed to the floor, unconscious, to lie beside the body of his friend.

The Skull, however, wasn’t quite done punishing his foolish would-be assailant. He didn’t conclude his brutal session for another five minutes.

The Cube, meanwhile, floated quietly in the center of the room—as though patiently waiting for its next owner to come along. It didn’t have long to wait.

Stepping over the bodies of his enemies, the Skull at last claimed

his prize. The Cube's light grew brighter, as though responding to his touch—and welcoming it. And as he held the ultimate power in the omniverse, his eyes sparkling with the flames of madness, a quotation crept into the Skull's mind—a passage from a short story composed by an American writer named Edgar Allan Poe that seemed darkly appropriate for the occasion:

“‘And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death,’” he said, his death’s-head grin growing wider still. “‘And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all . . .’”

And, once more, the world was filled with a terrible, harsh light. . . .

TO BE CONCLUDED

X-MEN[®]

RED SKULL[™]

THE CHAOS ENGINE

BOOK 3





HAAL'ITHOR WATCHED in horror as the walls of the city crumbled around her.

The sky had rained death across the hiveworld for ten deenahl, bolts of multihued lightning streaking down from the heavens to obliterate all they touched. Many believed it was the work of the goddess J'raal, who had apparently decided to punish her children for some unknown transgression, though no one was able to discern exactly what that might be. And perhaps it appeared so to the most devout, for the ground trembled with the force of her mighty blows, and the air shook with the high-pitched wail of her war cry. But as a member of the High Council, Haal'ithor knew better. The "lightning" was a continual barrage of laser beams fired by warships in orbit around her world, Ishla'non; the tremors were caused by explosions when those same beams struck their targets. No, this was not the retribution of an angered storm goddess—at least with celestial beings, you had some chance of understanding the motives for their actions. An unusually dry season? More than likely the wrong beast had been sacrificed during the winter months, and the god to whom it was presented was offended. Flash floods that stripped the topsoil of nutrients?

Obviously too many offerings of nectar in thanks for a bountiful harvest—enough to heavily intoxicate even a deity like J'raal.

But what had transpired these past few days involved no matters of divine judgment—even an over-zealous high priest could see that. There was no logic to the destruction being caused, no perceptible reason for why so many of her fellow Ilon had to die. This was far worse than any punishment the Old Ones could deliver.

This was the work of *man*.

Haal'ithor shuddered. Everywhere she looked there were signs of their handiwork—in the marketplace, on the fields outside the city, in the lofty towers of jade and golden thread, their gleaming surfaces now blackened by smoke, scorched by the fires that raged out of control. The streets were littered with the bodies of young and old, their limbs bent in unnatural positions, lifeless eyes forever fixed on points in infinity. Haal'ithor's olfactory array twitched uncontrollably as the stench of burned flesh wafted up to her, more than a dozen levels above the market, carried on winds that scorched her carapace and stung her multifaceted eyes.

Behind her, the terrified wails of her three grubs echoed through the apartment, and she heard her mate scuttling across the room to ease their fears. Haal'ithor trembled slightly—they would have far more to be frightened of in the days ahead, she was certain . . . if they survived that long.

A shadow swept over her, large enough to plunge the entire city of Cle'rak into darkness. Fearfully, Haal'ithor looked up, already knowing what she would find.

It was a warship, the largest she had ever seen, more than a half-mile in length, and three city blocks wide. Hullplates bristling with weapons—all trained, no doubt, on the most populated dwellings—the cruiser hung low in the sky. Too low, in fact—its belly scraped the roofs of Cle'rak's highest towers, threatening to topple them. Haal'ithor's carapace tingled as ionized air swirled around her, the charged particles cascading from the anti-gravity engines that held the ship aloft. For a moment, an image formed in her minds' eyes: She a young grub, standing with other Ilon children beside their sac-mothers at the spaceport, watching elegant starliners and short-hop flyers landing and departing, the wash from their anti-grav beams tickling her antennae—

Haal'ithor, a voice suddenly called, startling her. *Your presence is required.* It was Geer'lak, president of the High Council, contacting her through the hivemind.

Understood, she replied, glancing upward. With a loud hiss of escaping air, a mammoth bay door opened on the cruiser, and a metal platform began a slow descent toward the council chambers on the west side of the city. A large number of figures stood on the anti-grav lift, but Haal'ithor couldn't distinguish one from the other—bipedal creatures all looked alike to her.

At a brief mental command, a pair of plates on her carapace slid open, and a set of light, ochre-colored wings unfolded. With a final

glance at her family, and a silent prayer to the Old Ones that it would not be her *last* view of them, Haal'ithor pushed off from the balcony and flew away to join the other councilors.

No one could remember the last time a full assemblage of the one hundred-member High Council had been called, but everyone could agree to its necessity, given the circumstances. As she lightly touched down on the turquoise and white-tiled floor of the main gathering place and retracted her wings, Haal'ithor spotted a number of Ilon lawgivers she hadn't seen in years: El'zelius of the Southern Plains; J'laan of the Hinterlands; Kre'ssh of Ta'la'mor. Under normal conditions, there would have been time for pleasantries—how well the harvest season was going, the progress of their grubs—but with invaders apparently dedicated to destroying their world without provocation, time was the one thing the Ilon could not afford to waste.

J'laan and El'zelius scuttled over to Haal'ithor, their antennae lightly brushing in greeting. Haal'ithor was taken aback by the scarring on J'laan's carapace, and the unbalanced gait in his walk. Rumors had spread through Cle'rak of the decimation of the Hinterlands by the off-worlders, but Haal'ithor had hoped—and often prayed—they were just wild speculations. But the accuracy of such stories was now proved by J'laan's injuries, and Haal'ithor began to fear that Cle'rak would soon suffer the same fate as her sister habitation. Haal'ithor glanced back, in the direction of her dwelling, and wondered if there was still time to reach her family before the end came.

I understand the invaders are sending an envoy to meet with us, El'zelius said, matter-of-factly. *Perhaps your fears for your grubs are unfounded,* he added, clearly detecting her concerns through the hive-mind.

Old Ones willing, Haal'ithor said reverently. She turned to face her old grubmates. *And it's true about the aliens. I saw them descending from their warship as I made my way here. Have they given any indication for why they've attacked?*

J'laan's antennae twitched angrily, and she held up an injured leg. *Bipeds don't need a reason for causing destruction. It's just their way.*

Haal'ithor and El'zelius nodded. It was a lesson most races in this sector of space had learned ever since the loathsome two-legged creatures had mastered interstellar travel: Whatever man doesn't understand, he destroys. Whatever man desires, he takes—usually by force. The Ilon had never had occasion for many contacts with such a brutal, warrior race, but Haal'ithor had heard stories of some of the atrocities pepe-

trated on the Lundeen, the B'tash, the Kree. If even *half* of them were based on fact—

They're here, J'laan said tensely.

Haal'ithor turned. The transport platform had landed in the courtyard, depositing what looked like a good harvest-load of aliens—all clad in gleaming black armor, all but one carrying weapons in their upper limbs. Not for the first time, Haal'ithor dimly wondered how such creatures managed to function with so few appendages.

The unarmed biped stepped from the group and approached the council. He—at least Haal'ithor *thought* it was a “he” (she'd never been good with gender classifications)—was smaller than the others, skin lightly colored, as opposed to the greenish cast of the majority of warriors surrounding him, with a closely-cropped layer of brown fur on the top of his head. He wore a metal visor over his eyes, making it impossible to see into his soul, and that set Haal'ithor on edge. It was a firm belief among the Ilon that the eyes of any living being allowed another to judge the purity of that being's life-force. To cover one's eyes was an insult—and a sign of distrust.

>Nil r'stror g'laarnasrkkliia Sommers < the being said, pointing to himself. *>yllrinkastral p'rol uulltrekskannrrr ne oobra* <

A long silence followed the proclamation. Haal'ithor glanced around at her fellow councilors; she didn't need the connection provided by the hivemind to tell her no one had understood a single word the biped had uttered, beyond identifying himself as “Sommers.” Obviously, the man attached some level of importance to the rest of his speech—the tone, if not the meaning, was unmistakable. Were it not for the unconscionable destruction he and his kind had caused, the lives they had so callously exterminated, Haal'ithor might have been amused by his efforts at communication.

The Sommers-man stared stoically at the members of the High Council, his facial muscles shifting beneath the pale skin to bend the corners of his speaking-hole downward. He grunted, then turned to the warriors behind him. *>ooll! ooll re vaes karell!* < A command of some sort, given the speed with which two of the warriors moved to carry it out. They pushed their way through the cadre of bipeds, heading for the rear of the group.

Moments later, they reappeared, dragging another small biped between them. Like the Sommers-man, the . . . woman(?) was not as physically developed as the soldiers who held her in a terribly strong grip, as though they were concerned she might try to flee. Unlike the Sommers-man, however, this creature was attired in a black, formfitting garb that completely covered her skin, leaving only her eyes and

speaking-hole exposed. Manacles impeded the movements of her limbs, the short chains connecting them slowing her step enough that the warriors literally dragged her in front of the High Council. The short fur that grew from her head was a darker shade of brown, with a white streak running down the center of it. Haal'ithor wondered if this was an elder of their hive—did not white fur denote great intelligence and wisdom among the bipeds?—though the woman did not look old enough to have seen that many harvest seasons. On closer inspection, though, Haal'ithor could see the fear in the creature's eyes, hear the quick, ragged gasps she made as she drew breath through her speaking-hole. The woman was terrified, but Haal'ithor could not imagine why—was she not among her own kind?

The Sommers-man barked another order, this time at the woman. She frantically shook her head and tried to pull away from her bearers. One of them responded by jabbing her in the side with an energized baton he had taken from a clip on his armor. A sharp scream emanated from the woman as blue-white lightning crackled around and through her, and she slumped to the floor.

Barbarians, J'laan commented. They even torture their own.

Old Ones preserve us, El'zelius said. Have they so little respect for life?

Again, Haal'ithor's thoughts turned to her grubs, and she shuddered. No more than a few teek'lan into their first meeting with these creatures, and the aliens had already shown a disturbing level of intolerance for a fellow biped that had refused a command. What would they do to the Ilon if they continued to be frustrated by a simple lack of communication?

What man doesn't understand, he destroys . . . she thought darkly.

The warriors pulled the woman back onto her lower limbs, but then had to hold her upright; she appeared ready to collapse again at any moment. The Sommers-man stepped over to the group and savagely gripped the sides of her speaking-hole with one of his armored claws; the woman moaned in obvious suffering. The edges of his speaking-hole turned upward, and the biped bared his teeth, much like a wild saarlat when it was hunting. Haal'ithor started. Could it be the creature enjoyed inflicting pain on his own people?

Poor creature, El'zelius said. Why doesn't he leave her alone?

The man snarled something in his gutter-tone language, and the woman's eyes widened in terror. Then he waved a claw at the council, and the warriors began dragging the woman further into the chambers.

They're coming over here! J'laan said, panic in her voice. The thoughts she now had of suffering directly at the claws of the very

invaders who had decimated her homeland not more than five deenahl ago, clearly transmitted through the hivemind, set the entirety of the council in a near-frenzy. It was a powerful sensation, detected even by the bipeds—the air was suddenly filled with the sound of safety-catches being deactivated on the weapons they held.

Order! Geer'lak shouted through the telepathic link. *There will be order!*

The command was strong enough to shatter the almost overwhelming feeling of dread that had taken hold of the council. Slowly, calm was restored. Even the Sommers-man motioned to his soldiers to lower their weapons.

Geer'lak scuttled forward. More than a century old, his frail legs growing steadily weaker but still able to carry him where he needed to go, the president of the High Council approached the man.

On behalf of the High Council of Ishla'non, Geer'lak said slowly and cautiously, *I welcome you to our chambers*. He paused, and Haal'ithor knew he was waiting to see if the creatures could at least understand the Ilon on a telepathic level, if not a verbal one. It had worked with other races.

The Sommers-man tilted his head to one side, as though attempting to hear Geer'lak's greeting, then shook his head. He turned to the woman and grasped one of her claws. As she struggled to pull away, he peeled off the material covering it; the dying sunlight of the day reflected off pale-white skin. With a brutish yank, he tugged her forward, slapping her bared claw against Geer'lak's antennae.

The woman screamed again; this time, her cries of anguish were joined by those of the entire High Council.

Haal'ithor reeled in pain as the biped absorbed the memories and communicative abilities of not just Geer'lak, but of *all* Ilon in the chamber—a flood of thoughts and emotions that poured through the telepathic link into a brain too small to contain it. The agony shared by all only worsened as the psychic backlash created by the intrusive mental contact tore through the hivemind. The High Council was overwhelmed with images of death and destruction projected from the woman's tortured subconscious—of planets laid to waste; of civilizations wiped from existence; of entire races enslaved. And above it all hung an immense vision of a biped's head: a giant, grinning skull, the color of dried blood.

The woman—her name was Rogue, they all now knew—groaned loudly, eyes rolling back in her head. She loosened her grip on Geer'lak and staggered back, into the arms of her guards, who quickly slipped the black material back over her exposed claw.

"No . . . no more . . . please . . ." she gasped, and Haal'ithor suddenly realized she could understand her words.

The man barked a few garbled words at her.

"Yeah, Major . . . I can . . . talk to 'em," Rogue replied, breathing hard. The biped stood uneasily on her . . . feet (?); the guards' strong hold on her upper limbs seemed to be the only thing that kept her from collapsing onto the chamber floor. "So many thoughts . . . all runnin' 'round in my head . . . too many voices . . ." An odd noise burbled out of her speaking-hole—"laughter," it was called, Haal'ithor remembered, from her brief contact with other races, though she could never recall it sounding quite so hollow. "They . . . don't know *what* . . . t'make outta y'all . . ."

She swooned then, and the guards tightened their grip as her lower limbs lost their strength. Haal'ithor couldn't help but feel pity for the creature. Obviously, she wasn't capable of handling unshielded contact with the hivemind, yet her fellow bipeds had forced her to do so. The fact that her mind hadn't been destroyed during the process was an impressive enough feat, but to realize that the woman's companions now expected her to hold a conversation without giving her time to recover from her psychic ordeal filled Haal'ithor with dread. J'laan was right—the invaders were barbarians all; the past dee'nahls' worth of planetary destruction had more than proven that observation. And if one of their own bipeds could be made to suffer so, just as a way to establish communication, there was little hope that the Ilon could simply *talk* their way out of any further unpleasantness . . .

The Sommers-man stepped forward and slapped Rogue across the face with the back of one claw; linked to her through the hivemind, the entire Council flinched from the blow. She stirred, and he leaned in close, inches from her material-encased features, muttering something that immediately brought her back to full consciousness; the rush of fear she felt while looking at her own terrified expression in the reflection of her superior's quartz visor swept through the Ilon. Geer'lak's soothing words, though, immediately brought a sense of calm to the hivemind, preventing another tense situation between invaders and inhabitants. Even Rogue began to relax, though the haunted look in her eyes never quite diminished.

She shakily regained her footing, then turned to Geer'lak. "On behalf of His Majesty Johann Schmidt, grand ruler of the *ryylllj'kkksrr* (another of those strange, guttural words that remained unintelligible, even through the psychic link) Empire, we demand the immediate surrender of all enemies of the Empire t'our forces." She glanced at the Sommers-man, who nodded his head once. "Y'all have one *hllrshh* (a

measure of time, no doubt) t'urn them over . . . or suffer the consequences," she added, voice barely above a whisper.

A tremor of fear passed through the congregation, only to be quickly overwhelmed by even stronger feelings of anger directed toward the invaders. Haal'ithor's antennae bobbed with indignation—how *dare* these four-limbed monsters attack a peaceful civilization without warning and then issue demands upon making planetfall! Her mandibles scraped together with a sound like cutting blades being sharpened.

As always, Geer'lak was the voice of reason.

Friend Rogue, he replied evenly, *there is no need for threats. We understand the severity of the current situation, and have no desire to antagonize your people—even if you were the ones who struck first. But tell me: why must you communicate aloud? Through the hivemind, we can speak without words—the irises of one multifaceted eye flickered toward the Sommers-man, then back to the woman—or unwanted participants.*

Rogue's surprise flowed through the link; she'd never even considered that possibility. *Y'all can hear me?*

Indeed, Geer'lak said. He slightly inclined his head toward the other councilors. *We all can. As well as understand your . . . relationship with your superior officer. The president paused. He enjoys causing you pain, does he not? It was apparent in the thoughts we detected when you made your . . . unconventional method of connecting with the hivemind.*

I'd . . . rather not talk about that stuff . . . Rogue stole a glance at her superior. But with the visor covering his eyes, it was impossible to tell if he was actually watching her. *Are y'all sure the Major can't hear none'a this?*

Correct. Since you were the only creature to make contact, this conversation is strictly between you and the members of the High Council. Unless you wish to translate it for the Major as we talk, that is.

No, that's okay, Rogue said quickly. *This set-up'll do just fine. I can always fill 'im in on some'a the details later.*

The president nodded. *As you wish. Now, how may we be of service?*

Geer'lak . . . The warning tone from J'laan was unmistakable.

He rolled a stern eye toward her. *What would you have me do, J'laan? The bipeds have already laid waste to our world. If providing them with the information they seek will bring a quick end to their hostilities, then we should make every effort to be accommodating. He turned back to the woman. Is that not so, friend Rogue?*

I s'pose . . . she replied, though hesitantly. *I can't really speak fer Major Sommers, but I could try t'convince him t'lay off the attacks . . . if y'all do as he asks.*

And what would that be? J'laan demanded. *What could the Ilon possibly do for a race of starfaring miscreants like yourselves? Perhaps polish the blades of your swords before you run us through with them?*

Enough, J'laan, Geer'lak said wearily.

We're lookin' fer a terrorist faction, Rogue explained. *A bunch'a bad apples that've been causin' trouble along the edge o' the Skrull territories.* She inclined her head toward the group of green-skinned creatures standing behind her. *That's why these boys are here—the ullrkk'yllon (some kind of military organization, Haal'ithor imagined) thought havin' a squad o' Skrull warriors tramplin' through yer back yard might make y'all more willin' t'help.*

Was that decided before or after your commanding officer ordered the attack from space? El'zelius asked. *As you've no doubt noticed, we have precious little "back yard" left for them to "trample through" at the moment.*

Rogue shifted uncomfortably on her lower limbs and turned her gaze to the floor.

And what do these "terrorists" look like? Geer'lak asked.

They're, er . . . Rogue paused, searching for the right words, then looked up. *They're . . . bipeds like us, 'bout the Major's height, with yellow hair an' blue skin.*

They're Kree? J'laan asked, surprised. *There are Kree spies hiding on Ilon?*

That's what Skrull Intelligence says, Rogue replied. *We're hopin' y'all might be able t'tell us where we can find 'em.*

What makes you think we even knew they had arrived? Haal'ithor asked, no longer able to remain silent.

Rogue silently stared at her; then, slowly, the muscles around her speaking-hole twisted downward. *I didn't say y'all did. But if you folks are s'posed t'be the rulers of this planet, it's kinda logical t'think you'd be the ones t'ask, right?*

And you could not have done so without first laying siege to our world? Haal'ithor asked.

I ain't the one who makes policy . . . Rogue said, and looked away. It was a poor answer, a bureaucrat's answer, one apparent to all—especially to the woman who had just uttered it with more than a trace of embarrassment.

Major Sommers suddenly stepped over and grabbed her by the upper limbs. He shook her for a moment, snarling in their native dialect, apparently dissatisfied with her progress.

"I'm workin' as fast as I can, Major," Rogue said nervously, "but I had t'make our intentions clear before I could start pumpin' 'em fer

information. *You* know protocol.” For just a moment, the flames of defiance burned in her eyes—only to be quickly extinguished by the icy glare of her superior.

Slowly, the Major’s lips drew apart in another unnerving smile. He turned to one of the Skrull warriors and growled an order. The green-skinned soldier nodded once, raised his weapon to eye level, and brought it to bear on his target.

It took Haal’ithor a moment to realize the weapon was aimed at *her*.

“*NO!*” screamed Rogue. She leapt forward in an attempt to stop him, only to be halted by her restraints. The butt of a plasma rifle smashed against the side of her head with a sickening *crack*, and she fell to her knees.

Closing her eyes, Haal’ithor disconnected herself from the hive-mind, to spare her fellow Ilon from sharing in her agony, and whispered a quick prayer to the Old Ones to watch over her grubs and her mate.

And then the world burst into flame around her.

“I think our intentions have been made *very* clear, Citizen Rogue,” Reichsmajor Scott Summers declared with satisfaction. He waved a hand in front of his face to dispel the scent of burning carapace that filled the chamber, irritating his sinuses. “*Ooff*. These vermin certainly make quite a stink when they’re set alight, don’t you agree?”

Rogue didn’t respond. She lay on the tiled floor, curled up in a fetal position. Tears streamed from her eyes, mingling with the small pool of blood that had collected under her head; more continued to flow from the wound delivered by the rifle butt.

“Get up, citizen,” Summers ordered. He prodded her with the toe of his boot. “Get up and do your job, or you’ll have *another* death on your conscience.”

Slowly, Rogue struggled to her knees, the bulky manacles making it difficult for her to rise unassisted. She wiped her tears on the shoulders of her bodysuit, then gazed at the Ilon. The creatures had drawn back, giving her—and the smoldering corpse of their comrade—a wide berth.

The Major was pleased. With the proper display of force having been made, these vermin would now be more than willing to divulge any information they possessed about the Kree strike force. He smiled tightly. No matter where one traveled in the universe, the old saying remained true: fear *was* the great motivator—even among bugs.

“Telepathic cockroaches,” Summers muttered, shaking his head in wonder as he stared at the Ilon. “I’m sure that, somewhere in the universe, Franz Kafka must be laughing.”

Beside him, the Skrull who had executed one of the bug-like things smiled broadly. Then his mouth went slack, as though he had been about to make a witty reply, only to realize he had no idea what his superior was talking about. Instead, he merely said, "Erm, yes, Major."

Grasping Rogue by the arm, Sommers hauled her to her feet. "Talk to them, citizen. Make them understand we're only here for the Kree; once they've told us what we need to know, we'll be on our way."

"I'll . . . do my best, Major," Rogue said huskily.

Sommers patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. "I know you will." As Rogue shuffled forward to try to regain the Ilon's trust, the Major pulled aside the Skrull warrior. "I'm returning to the ship," he said quietly, then gestured toward Rogue. "Watch her, Sub-commander. If you think she's trying to make friends with another race she hopes will help her escape, kill two of them." He smiled. "I need her focused on her work."

The Skrull nodded. "Understood, Major. And when we have the location of the Kree?"

"You hunt them down, Sub-commander," he replied, as though addressing an idiot. "Your orders *are* to eliminate all enemies of the Empire, correct?" He pointed at Rogue. "And while you're doing that, have some men bring her back to the ship for a . . . *full* debriefing. Make sure they understand that under *no circumstances* are they to touch her skin." He sneered. "I don't need another Bloodstone Crater on my hands. I lost a dozen soldiers on that attempted break-out—I'll be damned if she's going to cost me any more."

"And the High Council?"

Sommers considered the question for a moment, then shrugged. "Exterminate them. The Empire doesn't need any more vermin infesting it than it already has."

Turning on his heel, the Major walked off, trying to ignore the smell of death that filled his nostrils.

Flashback

WELL, *THAT* could have gone better . . ." Elisabeth Braddock commented dryly.

A groan forced its way through her lips as she struggled to sit up. It was taking considerable effort—her leg muscles felt like soft taffy, her arms appeared to have lost their strength, and her head ached as though some tremendous weight was pressing down on it.

And that, she dimly realized, was because there *was* a tremendous weight pressing down on it—a large stone block that rested on her skull, pinning it to the ground on which she lay.

How she'd gotten into this particular situation she couldn't exactly recall, but she knew it would come to her . . . eventually . . . once her head stopped throbbing . . .

Her problems began, as far as she could remember, only a few days past, when her fellow members in the mutant super hero group called the X-Men returned to Earth from a mission offworld. They'd been gone for a month, helping an old ally—Roma, Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse—with a troublesome other-dimensional tyrant named Sat-yr-nin. Short on humanity but disturbingly long on hostility, Sat-yr-nin was the dictator of the fascist Great Britain of a parallel reality, and a woman who had caused the X-Men—and Betsy, in particular—quite a bit of grief over the years. For this mission, it had been decided by Professor Charles Xavier, the leader of the X-Men, that only a handful of his students should accompany him; Betsy and their other teammates would remain behind, to watch over the Institute for Higher Learning he ran in New York's Westchester County.

Wishing the group "good luck" before they departed was the last

memory she had had of the X-Men, or even the life she led with them, until their recent return. The time between the two events was a jumble of conflicting recollections and psychological digressions. All she had known was that, while she was still a purple-haired, Japanese-featured British woman in her twenties, she was no longer a mutant—no longer genetically gifted with the telepathic abilities that had made her such a formidable member of the team. Somehow, those memories had been stripped from her mind, replaced with new ones of a world without the X-Men, or even most super heroes for that matter. A world in which Victor von Doom—the armored super-villain known as “Doctor Doom”—had expanded his dictatorship of the small, Eastern European country of Latveria to encompass the entire planet, and the X-Men’s greatest enemy, Magneto, had become a fugitive. How any of this had been accomplished hadn’t been of concern to Betsy. In this Brave New World of thought police, mutant revolutionaries, and enforced global harmony, she had been far more focused on her career as a cabaret singer.

That was another aspect of this bizarre reality in which she had found herself: Of all the possible career choices she might have considered in her life, being a smoky-voiced chanteuse warbling love songs and show tunes for a roomful of nightclub attendees wouldn’t have even made it onto her list. True, she had made an appearance or two at the Starlight Room, the midtown Manhattan hot spot owned by her boyfriend, Warren Worthington III—who, as the winged Angel, was one of the founding members of the X-Men—but she’d never thought of pursuing it on a professional level; she preferred thinking of herself as a gifted amateur.

Still, a singer is what she had been, and it was as a singer that she was personally chosen by Arcade, von Doom’s Minister of Entertainment, to perform at a Washington, D.C., gala celebrating the Emperor’s tenth(!) year in power. The invitation had come as a total shock, but she hadn’t hesitated in jumping at the chance to entertain a worldwide television audience that could be counted in the billions (viewing the broadcast being a mandatory requirement for all citizens of the empire).

But then she’d started hearing voices, and life didn’t seem quite so rosy . . .

It wasn’t a sign of mental illness, she later came to realize, but rather a slow return of her telepathic abilities—the “old” Betsy Braddock re-establishing her identity, forcing her way out of the subconscious to take control of her mind and body. Unfortunately, the process had been a painful and increasingly disturbing one—for a while, she’d begun to fear she was going mad. And yet, despite this unwanted com-

plication in her life, she still managed to put on a performance that brought the house down—both figuratively and literally, though the latter was no fault of hers . . .

Having returned to Earth to find von Doom in charge, the X-Men formed an uneasy alliance with Magneto and launched an attack on the arts center, just as Betsy concluded her last number. In the chaos that followed, she and Warren fled the battlefield, any memories of their involvement with the team still eluding them.

That didn't mean they weren't still heroes, in their own way. Shortly after their departure, von Doom and his bride, Ororo—who, under normal circumstances, would have been fighting alongside the X-Men as the weather-controlling mutant Storm—had also exited the hall, only to be confronted by an enraged Magneto. Without pausing to consider his own safety, Warren had flown to aid his emperor, only to be cut down by the mutant overlord. His body crashed onto the grassy fields of the Washington Mall, giving Betsy only a few last moments to comfort him before his life slipped away. He died, never knowing he'd sacrificed himself for a Doombot—a robotic replica of the dictator. The *real* von Doom had been safely holed up in a subbasement of the White House, as Betsy discovered a short time later.

Before that revelation, however, came her reunion with the X-Men, and the restoration of her memories through the aid of Jean Grey—the fiery-haired telekinetic called Phoenix. It was Jean who finally freed the real Betsy from the darkest corner of her own mind, releasing the woman warrior the X-Men knew better by the codename “Psylocke.”

But the reunion turned out to be short-lived, as Betsy disappeared from the war zone, transported against her will to von Doom's sanctuary. It was there she learned of the means by which the tyrant had seized control of the planet: The Cosmic Cube.

Originally created by the scientists of the international terrorist organization A.I.M.—an acronym for Advanced Idea Mechanics—the Cube was a device no bigger than a jack-in-the-box—but what it lacked in size, it more than made up for in power. Containing the energy of a “gray hole,” the Cube gave its possessor the ability to alter reality, to change the world however they wished to suit their needs. But, as was often the case—both with the original Cube, and the others that followed—the problem with using a “wish box” of infinite power was that, like the legendary “monkey's paw” of short fiction, it usually created more trouble than it was worth—sometimes with deadly results.

On “Doomworld,” the problem was even greater. Having fashioned his own Cube, the tyrant had neglected to confirm the accuracy of the mathematical equations used in the creation process; thus, the final prod-

uct contained a dangerous—and deadly—flaw. As the “Emperor” explained to Betsy, this Cube relied on more than just cosmic energy to power its reality-changing properties—it also drew upon the life-force of its possessor. For von Doom, that meant it had leeches years from his life, reducing one of the most feared super-villains in the world to a frail old man barely able to raise his chin from his armor-plated chest. And yet, despite the fact he knew that the Cube was slowly killing him, von Doom refused to give up his “perfect” world, refused to surrender the device—unless, he off-handedly commented, the distraught X-Man was willing to accept the terms of an unusual offer . . .

It was a simple proposition: von Doom wanted to go on living, before the Cube could strip him of his remaining years, yet also wanted his planetary empire to continue. Betsy, who had just lost the one, true love of her life, desperately wanted Warren resurrected, his deadly encounter with Magneto cast from their minds. Why not combine the two? von Doom asked. Why not take possession of the Cube and restore Worthington to full health, in exchange for becoming caretaker of the world—under the villain’s direction, of course. It wouldn’t last for long, though, as evidenced by his deteriorating physical condition—within a month’s time, Betsy would be just as frail, just as wizened, as the Cube stole her youth, her vitality.

But for the chance to bring Warren back to life, even for one more month . . .

“Are you *willing* to make such a sacrifice, Ms. Braddock?” von Doom had asked. “Are you willing to risk your life, your world . . . for love?”

She *was*, as the tyrant had known all too well, and almost *did*—if not for the timely intervention of her teammates. Tracking Betsy telepathically, Phoenix had led the group straight to von Doom’s lair, preventing Betsy from making a decision she knew in her heart she would have later come to regret.

But the danger was far from over. The X-Men explained their real reason for hurrying back to their homeworld: The Cube was not only affecting Earth—its influence was spreading across the innumerable parallel dimensions that comprised the omniverse, destabilizing the space/time continuum. If the device wasn’t shut down, the barriers separating those dimensions would weaken, allowing opposing elements of one to leak into the next, ad infinitum, until all—as well as the countless billions upon billions of sentient beings living in them—were destroyed. Sent by Roma to stop this “reality-cancer” before the damage became irreparable, the X-Men closed in on von Doom to complete their mission.

And that's when Magneto and his band of revolutionaries barged onto the scene, their non-aggression pact with Professor Xavier's students dispensed with once the mutant overlord recognized the power that could be his if he seized the Cube . . .

Betsy groaned as the stone block shifted its position, pressing down harder on her left temple. The pain was excruciating; bright flashes of light strobed behind her closed eyelids, growing with such intensity she half expected her brain to explode.

And yet, despite the constant throbbing in her head, she was still able to hear the sound of one stone scraping against another—was the pile moving? Was that a good thing? For all she knew, the stones above her were about to come raining down, crushing the life from her bruised and battered body before she had an opportunity to figure out what she was doing here. Her heart began beating wildly, and she suddenly found it difficult to breath.

But then another sound reached her ears—a calm, soothing voice that whispered through the cracks and crevices around her to slow her racing heart, ease her troubled breathing.

“Hang on, Betts,” the voice said. “I’ll have you out of there in a minute.”

She willed herself to relax, then—becoming agitated would do nothing to alleviate her situation, and that voice sounded so familiar, so reassuring—and concentrated on blocking the pain from her mind. She turned her thoughts once more to the days leading up to this predicament . . .

A short battle had followed in the White House, as the X-Men did their best to prevent Magneto's acolytes from getting to the Cube, but the outcome was never in doubt—at least to Magneto, that is. Smashing von Doom aside as the X-Men fell around him, he took hold of the Cube and activated it, rebuilding the world as *he* thought it should be.

But von Doom wasn't out of the fight just yet. Grabbing Betsy with a gauntleted hand, he activated a matter transportation circuit on his armor. With a crackle of energy, they were whisked away from the lair before the “chaos wave” generated by the Cube could restructure them to suit the needs of Magneto's self-imposed reality—to suddenly reappear within Roma's Starlight Citadel. That hadn't been part of von Doom's plans, however—he had been attempting to teleport himself and Betsy to his castle in Upstate New York, in order to make use of the time platform secreted in its subterranean levels. Once there, he intended to transport Betsy to a moment before the assault on the White

House, so that she could prevent Magneto from acquiring the Cube. Of course, following through on that desperate act became a moot point once the Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse interceded—it was her technicians who diverted the transport beam to the citadel, so she could interrogate the only people to escape the world that lay at the heart of her most recent problems.

Betsy explained the situation to Roma and her lieutenant, Saturnyne—a far saner, alternate version of the villainous Sat-yr-nin, hailing from yet another Earth in the multiverse—as well as Professor Xavier, who had been devastated by the news of Warren's death. Yet, despite his anguish, Xavier had made an impassioned plea to Roma to not carry out her plans to destroy the X-Men's home dimension in order to protect the rest of the omniverse—not while there was a chance that he and Betsy could succeed where the others had failed. Much to Betsy's surprise, Roma had acquiesced. Soon enough, she found herself back on Earth, with Xavier at her side, equipped with a recall device provided by Saturnyne's technicians that would transport the two mutants back to the citadel once they had secured the Cube.

Their plan was fairly basic in its scope: find Magneto, learn the location of the Cosmic Cube, and confiscate it. However, what neither of them had taken into consideration was the possibility that Magneto might have used the Cube to *better* the world, to establish peace between the long-warring races of *Homo sapiens* and *Homo sapiens superior*. But that's exactly what had happened, and Betsy could only imagine the shock—and, perhaps, jealousy?—experienced by Xavier upon seeing the actualization of the dream he'd spent so many years struggling to bring to reality. It was a startling revelation, especially when one considered the countless attempts Magneto had made over the decades to rule the world, constantly voicing his ideals of humanity as second-class citizens—or, worse, as slaves to their mutant masters. To see that just the opposite had happened, that perhaps Magneto had come to realize just how wrong his beliefs had been, quickly turned the X-Men's task from one of saving a universe to one of destroying a potentially better one.

Not surprisingly, that wasn't the only complication Betsy and Xavier faced. It wasn't too long after their arrival on Earth that their presence was detected by their teammates—who had become devoted followers of Magneto. During a confrontation with them in a Manhattan hotel, Betsy had been forced to abandon her mentor in order to avoid capture, using her own powers of teleportation to transport her to France, the research they had conducted before the attack indicating that the mutant overlord spent most of his time living there with his family.

Unfortunately, any plans she might have been formulating for a counterstrike were soon forgotten when Warren happened to walk past her on a busy Parisian street.

It wasn't *her* Warren, of course—she knew that. The man she had loved more than any other in her life had died in her arms only the day before, so this—this imposter had to be some duplicate created by Magneto with the aid of the Cosmic Cube; for what reason that might be, Betsy couldn't even begin to fathom. What she could understand, though, was the ache she felt in her heart as she watched him go by, oblivious to her presence in that half-distracted-by-other-thoughts way of his. Yes, she knew he was some sort of imitation, a Cube-generated fantasy given form—but it didn't stop her from following him to a quaint little apartment that stood in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower . . . and then confronting him.

That turned out to be nothing short of total disaster. In this world, Elisabeth Braddock and Warren Worthington III were a happily married couple—he a much-envied multimillionaire, she the star of a popular action/adventure television series syndicated around the world. Having thought that his wife was filming an episode in New Zealand, Worthington had been stunned to see a report about her on an entertainment news channel, the story detailing an apparent tryst between Elisabeth and a bald-headed, wheelchair-bound man in a New York City flophouse. That man, of course, had been Professor Xavier, but Betsy had felt no compunction to explain the situation to an overly jealous duplicate of the soulmate she had just lost—especially when that duplicate had been created by the same monster responsible for Warren's death. Her anger got the best of her, then, and she summoned forth her psi-blade—a foot-long dagger of mental energy that she often used in battle against her opponents, capable of overloading every synapse in their brains.

Worthington had partly experienced that first-hand, as Betsy rammed the blade into his skull, forcing her way into his mind. She'd wanted answers—for why Magneto felt the need to re-create Warren, what other plans the self-imposed Master of the World might have, now that he possessed the Cube—but it quickly became apparent that Worthington knew nothing of any value.

Well . . . that wasn't *entirely* true. As she explored his subconscious, Betsy couldn't help but wonder exactly how much of this reality had been fashioned by Magneto—and how much by the Cube. The question continued to nag her as she studied Worthington's memories—they were too complete, too detailed for a simple doppelganger created out of cosmic energy. Magneto could never have known so much about Warren that he could guide the Cube in creating flawless recollections

of every moment of his life from childhood on up—and why would he, for that matter? But if Magneto was incapable of that task, did that mean the Cube was therefore capable of reconstructing the thought patterns of a dead man? It was a disturbing consideration—and one she'd preferred not to dwell on for too long. Pulling herself together, she prepared to exit Worthington's mind and resume her mission—

And then Warren—*her* Warren—called out to her from the deepest recesses of Worthington's subconscious.

He was alive.

She'd wasted no time in pondering the hows and the whys of the situation before plunging into the depths of this foreign yet hauntingly familiar mind—if there was any chance that Warren's mind was trapped within the body of this Cube-construct, she would do whatever was necessary to free him.

She wasn't going to lose him again.

The journey seemed to take days, but time was subjective on the psychic plane, as Betsy well knew; based on prior experience, no more than a few minutes would have passed since she entered Worthington's mind. But no matter how long the passage of time, every moment was sheer agony for her as she tried her best to rein in her emotions, part of her almost giddy with excitement at the prospect of being reunited with her lost love, part of her fearing this might be some trick of Magneto's.

It turned out to be a combination of both. Arriving at a clearing in the jungle-decorated landscape of Worthington's subconscious, Betsy had been confronted by a representation of the Great Wall of China—or, at the very least, something close to it. After spending some time examining it, Betsy realized that the barrier must have been the method by which Magneto ensured the “cooperation” of the populace, using the Cube to enhance his limited psychic powers so that he could reconfigure his subjects' thoughts in such a way that they would never question his authority. A clever application of cosmic power—as long as Magneto possessed the Cube, humanity and mutantkind would continue to live harmoniously—but it was still wrong, no matter how well-intentioned his motives. Nevertheless, she wasn't about to let a bunch of psychic building blocks keep her from reaching Warren—not when she was so close.

Focusing her mental powers, Betsy created a sword that she used to attack the barrier, slicing away huge chunks of mortar and stone; in a short amount of time, she had carved out an opening. But before she could step through it, before she had a chance to be reunited with the man who meant so much to her she had been willing to risk her very

soul for an opportunity to hold him just one more time, the blocks around her had collapsed. One struck her across the head, sending her tumbling into darkness . . .

A pinpoint of light shone through the blackness, the beam striking Betsy in the left eye. She winced and turned her head to the side—as much as the stone holding it down would allow, that is.

“Betsy?” the voice called out—and she remembered.

“Warren . . .” she whispered, suddenly afraid for some reason that, if she spoke his name too loudly, he might disappear, this time forever. Or maybe it was just that she still couldn’t believe it was really him.

As more bricks were shoved aside, the pinpoint became a beam, became a widening shaft of blinding luminosity so brilliant Betsy was forced to squeeze her eyes tightly shut, her light-sensitive pupils seeking protection in the artificial darkness. And then she felt a hand brush the side of her face, fingertips delicately stroking her cheek to sweep away dust and grit and suddenly welling tears. Her skin tingled from the familiar touch, and a small, pleasurable gasp escaped her lips.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Kneeling beside her, shoulder-length blond hair rimmed by the last rays of a tropical sunset, giving the impression that his head was wreathed in a halo, bright wings spread wide behind him, was an azure-skinned angel. He looked much the same way she remembered him from just before the world had literally turned inside-out under the influence of the Cosmic Cube: ruggedly handsome features and powerful body, attired in the dark slacks, blue polo shirt, and brown leather casual shoes he’d put on for their aborted night out at the movies. The very man whose brutal death she’d crossed time and space to avenge, risking annihilation every step along the way, only to discover—quite happily—that she’d never really lost him at all.

“Warren . . .” Betsy sighed, and an easy smile came to her lips—the first true smile she’d had in she couldn’t remember how long.

“Hey, Betts,” he said softly. He pointed to the destruction around them, and smiled slyly. “I always said you were good at bringing the house down.”

She laughed—perhaps a bit too shrilly, but, given the circumstances, quite understandable—never before so grateful in all her life to hear one of his poor attempts at a pun.

He helped her to her feet, supporting her weight as she stepped from the mound of rubble, then led her to an uncluttered spot in the jungle clearing. Together, they sank down onto the rich soil, and Betsy threw her arms around his neck, pulling him into a deep, passionate kiss that lasted only moments but felt like an eternity, thrilling to the elec-

tricity that coursed through her body at his touch. And when at last they drew apart, Betsy silently vowed that nothing would ever separate them again—not even death . . . if it were in her power.

If it were in her power. A bold thought, she considered, as she lay on the grass, gazing at the sky. The sort of empowering statement one tended to voice when facing overwhelming odds, or vowing to avenge a death, although she tended to shy away from making such melodramatic speeches—they always sounded so disgustingly pretentious, unless they were coming from Professor Xavier. Still, she had to admit, there was some comfort in the thought that not even death could distance her from Warren ever again . . . although, when one examined the statement, it really only meant that she was willing to die beside him.

Such thoughts, however, were quickly forgotten as Betsy stared at the brilliant sky, her eyes slowly widening in surprise.

There was something wrong with the color. It was a subtle change, one that required a second glance before it became apparent that the vibrant blue that had been there a moment ago had suddenly paled. The clouds, too, seemed strange—they had thinned dramatically, the whites now tinged with a dirty gray tone.

She sat up, and gazed at the jungle around them. Here, too, the colors looked washed-out, leaves and trees and grass all spotted with the same gray tint that darkened the clouds. The bright greens and reds and purples had faded to ghostly shades, and as she watched, some of the plants began to turn an ugly brown.

The land was dying.

Lying beside her, Warren turned to face her. From the concerned expression that quickly darkened his features, it was obvious he could tell something was bothering her.

“We should go,” she said before he could voice the question, and rose to her feet. “Now.”

They walked quickly back through the jungle, Betsy filling Warren in as best she could, bringing him up to date on the events of Magneto’s world before she had confronted his doppelganger. To say Warren was surprised by the accomplishments of Magneto the peacemaker would be an understatement, considering all the times the X-Men had almost been killed by the mutant overlord over the years. Hearing that their teammates were still alive in this new reality eased his fears considerably, but knowing that they were now dedicated followers of their greatest enemy only created new worries for him, especially when Betsy recounted her confrontation with the X-Men, and Xavier’s subsequent capture.

Unfortunately, Betsy could do nothing to comfort him, for she had greater concerns at the moment—namely, watching the slow dissolution of the mental landscape in which they walked. Warren hadn't noticed it, still couldn't even after she had pointed it out to him, most likely because he lacked the sort of telepathic abilities that made her more aware of changes on the psychic plane. But *she* had no such trouble seeing the transformation, or realizing what it meant as the jungle turned ashen, the grass turned to dust, and the South Pacific horizon became an indistinct band of pale hues and muddy browns.

They needed to find a way out of the other Worthington's mind—and soon.

They found Worthington exactly where Betsy had left him before setting out on her journey to locate Warren: He was sprawled on his back, wings spread wide beneath him, laying motionless on the beach that formed the edge of the dreamscape. Just beyond the beige sands, waves gently lapped against the shoreline, while a flock of off-white gulls soared in graceful figure-eights above the gray-blue water.

Warren slowed, turning in a slow circle to admire the view. His gaze fastened on the dormant peak of a volcano rising high above the jungle from which they had just emerged. "That's Mt. Pindalayo, isn't it?"

Betsy nodded. "I imagine this is where he goes to 'get away from it all' when the pressures of the day become too great."

Warren shrugged. "Well, I can't fault the guy's tastes. It's the same place I think of when I need to relax."

"No," she replied with a frown, "but I can certainly fault him for having the temerity to snatch your . . . body . . ." Her voice trailed off as she gazed at Worthington; even at a distance, she could tell something was wrong. True, he had suffered a fair degree of psychic trauma when Betsy had bulled her way into his mind, but he should have recovered by now, should at least be sitting up instead of looking so motionless. So still.

So . . . transparent?

Without pausing to explain the situation to Warren, she charged across the beach toward his duplicate. Her progress was slowed by the loose sand, stockinged feet sinking past the ankle as she forced her way through the dreamscape. Each step sent up a small plume of beige-colored grit that stuck to her dark-blue latex outfit and lavender hair like a sprinkling of pixie dust, but eventually she reached her goal.

She dropped to her knees beside Worthington, her worst fears confirmed by the evidence before her. His eyes were wide, irises shrunken

to mere pinpoints against the sclera, a fine dusting of sand turning the once-brilliant whites a dingy brown. His mouth was frozen in a silent scream, his hair a wild tangle of blond locks. But it wasn't the death mask replacing his once-handsome features that chilled her to the bone—it was the fact that she could see *through* him.

Like the landscape around them, Worthington was fading away. And once he was gone, any chance of escape would fade with him.

And she and Warren would be trapped in the mind of a dead man.

She knew, now, what must have happened. In her zeal, her blinding obsession, to free Warren from the psychic prison that had separated them for so long, she had attacked Worthington's mind with the full force of her mental abilities, without giving any thought as to what effects such an assault might have on the man. She'd broken down the barrier, yes, freed Warren, true, but more than that, she'd broken Worthington's mind.

"Oh, God . . ." she muttered.

There was a flutter of wings from above, and the sound of shoes touching down on the sand beside her. "Betts?" Warren asked. "What's wrong?"

Betsy felt numb. How could she tell him? How could she admit to him that this man—who had never done anything to harm her, who had never meant to harm her, who had simply had the misfortune to be an exact duplicate of her greatest love, thought lost forever—had been psychically ruined by her own hand?

Slowly, she rose to her feet, the words coming hard to her lips. "He's . . . dying, Warren." She turned to him, mouth moving soundlessly for a few moments before she was able to regain her voice. "I . . . I didn't mean . . . I didn't want this to happen . . ."

He stepped forward, gently wrapping his arms around her. Betsy pressed her face tightly against his chest, finding comfort in the strength of his touch, the warmth of his body. He reached up to stroke her hair. "I know, Betts," he said soothingly. "I know . . ."

He fell silent, allowing her time to deal with her grief, letting her hot tears soak into his shirt. Of course he knew; of course he understood, she realized. They'd been through so much, both separately and together, as individuals and as X-Men, risking their lives on a daily basis. Always living with the uncertainty of whether they'd ever see each other again, dreading the day when one of them wouldn't be coming home—fearing that it might be Warren, dreading that it might be her . . .

Not so long ago, she suddenly realized, she had uttered those very sentiments to Scott Summers—the X-Men's field leader, Cyclops—when he had been willing to give up his life in order to shut down the

Cosmic Cube. Betsy had pointed out that he and Jean had given so much of themselves over the years that it was about time someone else had a go at it, that someone else should take the point while they enjoyed what little time they had together between missions. In actuality, Betsy had been talking about Warren and herself, but she hadn't quite come to realize it yet—not until this very moment. Before she had joined the X-Men, she'd never thought herself capable of giving so much of herself to anyone, or of caring so much for anyone that she'd be willing to make such a sacrifice. But now . . .

Was that how Jean and Scott felt for one another? she wondered. If so, then she had finally found such a love in the person of Warren Worthington III. He knew her. Understood her. Accepted her for what she was, who she was, without question, even in her darkest moments.

How had she ever become so blessed as to have him in her life?

"Umm . . . Betts?"

"Yes . . . ?" she answered hoarsely.

"There's something I'm not quite understanding," he said. "If my double was—is—a creation of Magneto's, something he dreamed up with the Cosmic Cube, like the TV-star twin he made of you . . . well . . . how can you be sure he really existed in the first place?"

Now it was Betsy's turn to have trouble comprehending. "What do you mean?"

Warren stepped back to look into her eyes. "Well, if Worthington didn't really exist, how could you kill somebody who wasn't living to begin with?" He pressed on before she could answer. "I mean, you said it yourself: he borrowed my body. So that would lead me to believe that Magneto used the Cube to shove *me* to the back of my own mind and stick in a replacement personality that would be more in line with the world he's fashioned."

Betsy hesitated. In a way, it made sense, if she considered the hollowed-out appearance of Worthington—reestablishing Warren as the primary personality *would* cause the other to dissipate. But if that were true, then it would mean that the same psychic "overhaul" had been performed on her as well, when von Doom possessed the Cube; it would certainly account for why another set of memories—a lifetime's worth of experiences in a world controlled by Doctor Doom—were still floating around her subconscious. They were as much mental constructs as Worthington.

And then another thought struck her: If she and Warren had been "reimagined" by von Doom, then it was possible that it had been yet another duplicate who had died at Magneto's hands . . .

"And that leads to my next question," Warren said, interrupting her

train of thought. "If my . . . double is dying, then his brain will die too, right?"

Betsy paused, unsure of where he was going with this. "Yes . . ." she said slowly. "Once the body dies, the brain continues to function for a short while, but eventually it shuts down as well."

Warren nodded, as though expecting that answer. He gestured at the environment. "Well, if his brain is dying, they why are we still in his dreamscape?"

For a moment, Betsy's mind blanked; then her eyes widened in surprise. "Of course! The passage of time is subjective on the psychic plane—it feels as though we've been here for days, but in the real world, only minutes may have passed. His brain functions haven't ceased yet!" Smiling brightly, she stood on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Warren, my love, I do believe you've found us a way out of here!"

"Glad to be of service, ma'am," he replied in an easy drawl. He looked past her, to the body of his duplicate, and his smile faded. "But how do we find the door?"

Betsy turned to follow his gaze. "I have an idea . . ." she said uneasily.

She again knelt beside Worthington, forcing herself to not look into those lifeless eyes. She gestured for Warren to join her, took several deep breaths to calm her nerves, then nodded to herself when she felt ready to continue. "All right, here's the plan: I'm going to 'hardwire' your consciousness to his body, allowing you to have control over it. Once that's accomplished, we'll have to reestablish a psychic connection with my body so I can get back where I belong—since I can't 'feel' myself, I'd imagine the link was broken when . . . Worthington collapsed."

"Sounds good to me," Warren replied. "How do we start?"

Betsy closed her eyes and reached deep inside herself, summoning the full strength of her mental abilities. As she opened her eyes, she channeled the power into her hands, to form a pair of rose-tinged daggers of pure psychic energy. She placed the point of one just above Worthington's forehead, then positioned the other in front of Warren's.

"Well, *this* is gonna hurt," Warren muttered.

"I know it will," Betsy said, "but we've no other options." She glanced at him. "Trust me."

A warm smile lit Warren's features, and he reached out a hand to stroke her cheek with the tips of his fingers. "No one else I'd trust more," he said gently. "Let's do it. We've got a universe to save, after all."

Betsy nodded. "Contact," she said, and plunged both daggers into their targets.

Two pair of eyes gazed out through Worthington's orbs as his body suddenly lurched into motion, arms and legs jerking spasmodically for a few moments as its new owners became acclimated to controlling its movements. With a start, the body slowly rose to a sitting position as its heart began pumping anew, warming flesh that had started to grow cold.

Inside, Betsy did her best to keep her mind at the job at hand, and not dwell on the fact that she was sharing mental and physical space with this man—a loss of concentration at this stage would more than likely result in both Warren and her becoming trapped in Worthington's mind when it finally shut down. And that would mean spending eternity in darkness, forever falling in shadow until madness claimed them both.

Kinda cramped in here, wouldn't you say, hon? Warren asked, startling her. *I mean, two minds in one brain—not exactly a lot of mental elbowroom, if you catch my drift.*

Oh. Yes. Sorry, she replied. *I'll try to be quick.*

Betsy shook his/her head, dispelling her troubling thoughts, and gazed at their surroundings. She was back in the third-floor apartment Worthington owned on the Left Bank of Paris, France, near the intersection of Rue de l'Université and Rue des Saints Peres, just a few blocks from the Seine River. Its décor was bachelor-like in its choice of furnishings—expensive "toys" like a fully stocked home entertainment center set against priceless *objets de art* that were scattered around the living room—though Worthington was, at least in this reality, married to a duplicate of Betsy. A low whistle slipped through Worthington's lips; Betsy sensed Warren's admiration for his twin's tastes—apparently, playboy millionaires were all alike across the multiverse, no matter how different their environments.

Worthington's neck muscles were stiff, but, by working in concert with Warren, she was able to turn his head enough so she could locate her own body. It was crumpled in a heap nearby, like a rag doll tossed in a corner. Again, by working together, the two X-Men were able to drag Worthington's body over to Betsy's with his hands, his legs not able to support the weight for the time being. Worthington's hand reached out to brush away the strands of purplish hair that had fallen over her face—Warren's doing.

Step Two? he asked.

Step Two. Betsy called on her psychic powers once more, and this time it was Worthington's right hand that began to glow with focused

mental energy. As his hand closed into a fist, the psychic dagger formed, coming to a sharpened point inches from her head.

Contact.

"How do you feel?" Warren asked.

"Like someone just rammed a spike into my skull," Betsy replied with a groan. "Oh, wait—someone *did* just ram a spike into my skull."

He smiled. "Don't blame me. Some crazy, beautiful woman took control of my body and made me do it."

Betsy sighed. "That's the story of your life, luv—crazy, beautiful women are *always* taking control of your body. You just happen to enjoy it."

"Well, a man has his needs . . ." He reached down to help her to her feet. "The important thing, though, is that your plan worked."

She arched an eyebrow and gazed at him. "Well, not all of us are Jean Grey, but we do have our moments. How do you feel?"

Warren frowned. "Like I'm wearing another man's suit, only it's made of skin, and the fit feels kinda strange. Creepy." He shook his head. "I don't get it—this *is* my body, right?"

She gently squeezed his shoulder. "We'll have to figure it out later, luv. Right now, we need to help the profes—"

Betsy froze. Something was wrong—she could sense it; her psychic senses were screaming a warning that threatened to overload her senses. Rubbing her legs to restore the circulation, ignoring the pins-and-needles sensation that stabbed through her limbs, she staggered toward the windows.

"Betts?" Warren asked. "What's going on?"

She inhaled deeply, catching the scent of ozone that hung so heavily on the slight breeze coming off the Seine; the fine hairs on her arms stood straight up as the air filled with static electricity. Either a major storm system was brewing above the city, or . . .

But, no—it wasn't a storm; rather, it was the confirmation of her worst fear.

A curtain of brilliant energy was forming less than a mile away, the top of it lost among the gathering clouds. It hissed and crackled noisily as it began advancing through the streets, gaining speed with each passing second.

"Oh, my God . . ." Betsy whispered. "The Cube . . ."

Waves of guilt swept over her. She'd failed in her mission—too busy chasing the doppelganger of a dead lover through the alleys and avenues of Paris when she should have been trying to find the Cube and getting it to Roma so she could put things right. She'd wasted

precious moments, and now time had run out—for her, for Warren, for the entire universe.

“No.” A look of steely determination suddenly set on Betsy’s features. “There’s *still* a chance.”

As Warren watched in bewilderment, Betsy raced across the room to the apartment’s front door, snatching up a black canvas carryall from the floor. She ran back to him, rummaging through the bag with one hand while she held it with the other. With a cry of triumph, she pulled out a small metal box, the center of which was dominated by a very large red button.

“Saturnyne’s recall device!” Betsy explained. “It’ll take us back to the Starlight Citadel, and then, perhaps, Roma will be able to help us formulate another plan of attack.”

Warren glanced out the window. The Cube energy was drawing closer; in a matter of seconds, they and the apartment would be consumed. “I like the plan. How does it work?”

Betsy slipped an arm around his and held up the device. “Like this.” She stabbed the button.

Instantly, a bluish glow enveloped them, and they both gasped as a powerful current surged through their bodies.

“Saturnyne didn’t mention anything about it feeling like *this* . . .” Betsy said through gritted teeth.

And then, with a *pop!* of displaced air, they were whisked far away from a world being remade in the image of its new master.

A world about to be shaped by the dreams of a fanatic.

JOHANN SCHMIDT had never been one for dreams.

Dreams were for the weak—pathetic fantasies designed to inspire hopes and a sense of well-being in the minds of the very louts who conceived them. But hopes for what—a better life? A world existing in harmony? An end to pain, to struggle, to hatred?

Lofty aspirations, perhaps—for those who chose to pursue them—but as delicate as bits of spun sugar in a carnival confection . . . and as easily dissolved.

Dreams were for those who lacked direction, lacked steely determination. A man might desire a better life, but how hard will he work to achieve it? He might wish for an end to misery, but what would he be willing to sacrifice in exchange for it? He might long for a better world, but what steps would he take to create it? Those were the questions that made all the difference—the ones that separated the dreamer . . . from the visionary.

It was the visionary who devised ways to end suffering, fashioned the methods by which other citizens' lives were enriched, blueprinted the architecture of a harmonious society. Direction, determination, sacrifice—these were the tools with which a man of true vision shaped a better world.

And Johann Schmidt—the man known to the world by the far more chilling name of the Red Skull—had always considered himself a visionary.

Of course, that was not entirely true, though Schmidt would never admit it. But before the “visionary,” before the world-beating supervillain whose name had struck fear in the hearts of men and women everywhere for the better part of six decades, there was “Schmitty,” the

street urchin and petty thief, who had no place in his life for dreams or visions—unless they were dreams of power, and visions of his rivals and enemies lying dead at his feet . . .

As an orphan growing up on the streets of Hamburg, Germany, Schmidt had been an outcast among outcasts—a brooding, often violent youth who prowled the streets and back alleys of the port city in search of potential victims. Shopkeepers, artisans, sailors, even police officers—no one was safe from the crippling blows and savage kicks Schmidt administered when the lust for money—or blood—overcame him. But his most brutal attacks were reserved for the Jewish community of Hamburg. In Schmidt's mind, the Jews, more than any other ethnic or religious group in the city, deserved his ire. They had the best jobs, didn't they? They had all the money, didn't they? The fact that the targets of his anger just happened to believe in working honestly for a living, rather than accosting people on darkened streets, then running from the police, never penetrated his mind. Besides, the day would come, he was certain, when he'd be in a position above them, and then he'd spend as much time as possible rubbing it in their faces—and enjoying every moment that he did so.

And yet, despite his beliefs, despite his over-inflated sense of self-worth, Schmidt never rose above the rank of a common criminal, arrested time and again for practically every crime from theft to vagrancy—a faceless nobody destined to die in prison . . . or the gutter. The fact that he managed to survive long enough to reach adulthood should have been a sign to him that it might be possible to turn his life around—to make something of himself.

But that was too much effort for Schmidt, who firmly believed that opportunities should come to him, rather than seeking them out. It wasn't until he was in his early twenties that he finally had to face reality: he was a failure. Of course, that was no fault of *his*; the entire world had been against him since the day he was born. His parents, the police, the Jews, his fellow criminals—each in their own ways, they had all worked together to keep him from bettering his life, all plotted to deny him the power he so richly deserved.

Power—that was all Schmidt had ever truly desired. Power to take whatever he desired without consequence. Power to crush his enemies, to grind their faces into the dirt with the heel of his boot, to hear the sweet music of their death rattles as they drew their last breaths. And somewhere in the world, he knew, there was just that kind of power for the taking—power to destroy anyone who had ever crossed him, to let him finally claim what should have always been his.

Unfortunately, he lacked the motivation to go out and find it.

The passing years found him moving from town to town as he wandered across Germany, performing one menial job after another: gravedigger, floorsweeper, farmhand, manure hauler. Lacking a formal education—beyond what life on the streets had taught him—and barely able to read or write, Schmidt spent his days laboring to eke out a living and his nights, more often than not, in a jail cell.

He committed his first murder in 1935, when he was thirty.

He had been working for a Jewish shopkeeper in Magdeburg, sweeping floors and stocking shelves, angry with himself for allowing hunger and a need for shelter to force him into taking yet another low-paying position, when he spied the shopkeeper's daughter, Esther, watching him. She was a pretty girl, no more than nineteen or twenty, and it had surprised him that anyone, let alone this dark-haired angel who could have her choice of any suitor in town, would show such interest in him.

But he had mistaken her look of pity for one of desire, and, for the first time in his life, fell in love—or what he perceived to be love. Unable to properly express himself, he settled for forcing himself on her. Esther had been horrified by his savage advances and pushed him away.

Smashing her skull with a shovel had been a reflex action for Schmidt, the anger that had been building inside him for three decades at last finding its release point.

But that brutal act did more than momentarily quell his burning rage. As Schmidt stood over her body, the gore-drenched shovel held tightly in trembling hands, his face and clothes slick with her blood . . . he smiled. He had never known such ecstasy . . . such pleasure. It was intoxicating.

For the first time in his life, he suddenly realized, he knew what *real* power felt like—the power of life and death.

Still, his crime went unpunished—the victim was a Jew, so the local constabulary wasn't about to trouble itself by launching a full investigation; they quickly closed the case as “death by misadventure”—allowing Schmidt to flee Magdeburg and continue his travels without fear of prosecution . . . travels during which more than one innocent passerby expired from similar “mishaps.”

Eventually, Schmidt found himself in Berlin, where he somehow managed to talk—or coerce—the manager of the most prosperous hotel in the city into offering him employment; the only position available, however, was that of bellhop. Down to his last marks, Schmidt had no choice but to accept, galling as it was to once more find himself per-

forming menial tasks for another boorish cur—this time in an overstarched, gaudily-colored uniform that made him feel like an organ grinder's monkey, tipping his cap and forcing himself to show gratitude for the handfuls of change tossed at him by the very sort of wealthy louts and tarted-up women he'd spent his entire life despising. Here, again, he became just another faceless drone—a pack mule suitable for nothing more than carrying bags from room to room, taking the abuse doled out by short-tempered guests and his overbearing employers like any other dumb animal being disciplined by a harsh owner. What few dreams he might have possessed—if he'd ever cared to dwell on them—had long been taken from him by the cruelty of the streets during childhood, the harshness of his adult life, the constantly roaring flames of his misplaced anger.

Until that fateful day, that is.

The day he met Adolf Hitler.

Schmidt had heard stories of the man's meteoric rise to power as the leader of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*—the National Socialist German Workers' Party—and the title of "*Der Führer*"—Leader of All Germany—that had been bestowed upon him by his followers, but hadn't paid them much attention; he'd never been one for politics, and talk of such matters bored him. Still, after Hitler attained his goal of becoming Germany's true leader in March 1933, even Schmidt had to take notice of the changes taking place around him.

The turmoil and hyperinflation collapse of the German economy following the First World War had taken an awful toll on the Weimar Republic and its citizens, both financially and spiritually. It was Hitler and his Nazi Party members who rebuilt the nation, brought pride back to its people, and re-energized business.

For the first time in his life, Schmidt had been awestruck. Here was the sort of power he had longed for, the type of respect he had always desired. He couldn't help but admire the man. To have come so far, achieved so much, in so little time, apparently! What did it matter if these changes were often brought about by brutal force? So what if others had to suffer, so long as the country was healed with their sweat and blood?

But *why* this man Hitler? he'd often wondered angrily. Why had Fate chosen a one-time beggar—someone no better than he—to lead Germany to a new Golden Age? Even *God* was against him, it seemed!

But if it was Fate that had chosen Adolf Hitler to become one of the most feared—and hated—men in history, then it was also Fate that had decided to bring together that same Fascist dictator and an embittered

tered, nondescript bellhop in an encounter that would forever change the world . . .

Soon after Hitler and his followers had checked into the hotel, Schmidt had been ordered to deliver refreshments to their suite. He found the leader of his nation screaming in frustration at one of the higher-ranked officers in the *Geheime Staatspolizei*, or Gestapo—the Secret State Police.

“Why have I no one to turn to?” Hitler cried to the heavens, clearly upset by some failure on the part of his subordinate. “None to depend on? Must I create my *own* race of perfect Aryans?” In disgust, he had turned away from his henchman—and come face-to-face with a uniformed baggage-handler whose eyes blazed with jealousy, who did not look away as his *Führer* stared back at him.

“I could teach that *bellboy* to do a better job than you!” Hitler snapped, looking over his shoulder at his aide. A wicked smile slowly came to his lips as he turned back to Schmidt; clearly, an idea was forming. “Yes, I could . . .”

He could—and did. Hitler himself trained the former street urchin, taking this lump of clay and shaping it into something far more useful; giving it life, meaning, purpose. Teaching Schmidt to focus his anger, his burning hatred for all humanity, and use it as a weapon.

Giving him the power he’d always believed he deserved.

And when the demagogue had finished tutoring his protégé on the tenets of National Socialism, on the blueprint of his master plan for world domination, on the particulars of his “final solution” for dealing with the “Jewish problem,” when he was at last satisfied with the results of his labors, this modern-day Frankenstein loosed his monster on Europe and, soon after, across the Atlantic to the United States. He even had a colorful name for this personification of evil he had created:

The Red Skull.

Wearing a bizarre mask that matched his new codename, the monster went forth to spread his master’s doctrines, secure in the knowledge that he—*he*, Johann Schmidt, petty thief and vandal, brutish thug and murderer—had been chosen by the one true leader of all Germany to bring further glory to the Third Reich.

Now, at last, he had the chance to punish the world for all it had done to him. Now, at last, he would show everyone that he wasn’t a failure, wasn’t a nonentity. And, through his exploits, he would never let them forget his name—his *new* name.

His *true* name.

No, Johann Schmidt had never been one for dreams, but for visions. And the Red Skull had enough for them both—visions of spilt blood

and torn flesh, of continents to win and worlds to conquer, of fire and smoke and the all-pervading stench of death . . .

“A glorious morning, is it not, Dietrich?” the Red Skull asked.

Standing upon the western tower of Wewelsburg Castle, an imposing stronghold that towered above the village of the same name in Germany’s North Rhine Westphalia, he gazed at the peaceful countryside around him. Dawn had broken, and the Alme Valley was awash with color, the edge of the cloudless sky laced with warm pinks and lavenders, the first rays of sunlight tinting the forest with a flame-like glow that brought a faint, appreciative smile to even the Skull’s lipless gash of a mouth.

And the faint wails of the damned that drifted up from the death camp at the foot of the mountain were as sweet to his ears as the cheerful twittering of the songbirds in the trees.

“Indeed, Herr Skull,” his assistant replied. “A *most* glorious morning.”

According to historical documents, Wewelsburg Castle had originally been constructed during the early twelfth century, eventually falling into a state of disrepair once it had been abandoned by its occupants. It was restored five hundred years later under the direction of Prince Bishop Dietrich von Furstenburg, and became the secondary residence of von Furstenburg and the prince bishops of the nearby town of Paderborn from 1603-1609. But it wasn’t until 1934, when it caught the eye of Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS—the elite guards assigned to protecting Hitler and other high-ranking Nazis—that the castle truly made its notorious mark on history, as a place of religious zealotry . . . and death. The Skull could have chosen to live anywhere in the world—England, France, even the United States, as distasteful as the notion had been—yet he had decided to settle here, in his native Germany, in what had been the mystical center of Adolf Hitler’s proposed “Thousand-Year Reich.”

A sense of nostalgia, he imagined. Within these walls, the plans for creating an occult Vatican were born, with Himmler and twelve “apostles” at the center of the neo-pagan religion that was to replace Christianity. It was here that the quest was initiated for mystical artifacts that the Reich could use against the Allied Forces: artifacts like the Ark of the Covenant, said to contain the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were carved by the hand of God, and the Holy Grail—the cup from which Jesus Christ had drunk at the Last Supper, and in which His blood had been caught during the Crucifixion. And it was here that Himmler formed his variation on King Arthur’s fabled Camelot, with

the SS serving as a new order of Teutonic Knights—a tribute, of sorts, to the German warriors who had fought in Palestine during the twelfth century Crusades in an attempt to reclaim the Holy Land from the Moslems.

The Skull had always considered Himmler something of a madman, attaching religious significance to the most basic troop movements, sending out memoranda listing holidays to be celebrated under the new religion. But Hitler had tolerated his *Reichsführer's* eccentricities, even supported them, so the Skull remained silent and concentrated on more important matters.

Sixty years later, however, the Skull had to admit there might have been something to Himmler's ramblings. He could feel the power of this place—it rippled through his muscles, tingled along his bones like a mild electrical current; what caused it, he could not say. Perhaps the self-imposed high priest of the Thule Society had recognized it, too, in those prosperous years before the Reich fell. Perhaps . . .

Perhaps nothing. Himmler was dead and buried, as were his religion and his *Führer*. Their dreams for a global empire, for an end to all religions but one? Dissolved like so much discarded cotton candy in a rainstorm.

Now there was only the Red Skull, and his own plans for the world.

He glanced at his aide. In his late thirties, head and face shaved clean to indicate his unquestioning loyalty to his death-masked master, Dietrich had, for a time, served as the Skull's right-hand man, always at his side, always ready to defend him from his greatest enemies—and his closest allies. Standing smartly at attention, his dark gray uniform crackling with a heavy application of starch, its buttons and decorations gleaming brightly in the morning sunlight, Dietrich had always been everything the Skull expected in a Nazi: devoted, determined, willing to sacrifice everything to help the Reich rise again. Had it not been for his untimely demise at the hands of Nick Fury, the one-eyed, gravelly-voiced leader of the law enforcement agency S.H.I.E.L.D.—an acronym for Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage, and Logistics Directive—Dietrich would have continued to serve his master's interests, and the Skull would not have had to look elsewhere for followers.

But Dietrich *had* died, and the Skull *had* sought followers. He found them among the sullen, self-absorbed youth that seemed to be everywhere these days—so-called “loners” who kept to themselves, relying on computer chatrooms and Internet web sites for companionship rather than the teenaged classmates who scoffed at them, shunned them, berated them because they were “different.” Youths obsessed with death, with hatred, and, in many cases, with the vision of a charismatic German

leader long dead before they had even been conceived—a vision that gave them direction, and purpose, and a way to empower themselves, and encouragement to strike out at anyone they perceived as an enemy. At anyone who had ever laughed at them. At anyone who had ever treated them as a nonentity.

And deep within the mind of the Red Skull, just behind the flames that burned so hotly within the eyes of one of mankind's greatest enemies, Johann Schmidt knew that he had found others of his kind.

Here was clay to be molded, clay to be fired in the kilns of a revived National Socialist movement, clay upon which a foundation could be built—the foundation of a new Reich. All it needed was an artisan to give form to it—a gifted sculptor who could transform these disaffected young men and women into warriors dedicated to his cause.

Was the Red Skull that skillful? True, he might be a patron of the arts—he had learned to appreciate them during his sessions with his beloved *Führer*, who was a failed painter himself. And he was an aficionado of classical music—although somewhere along the way he had developed an unhealthy obsession with Chopin's "Funeral March." But an artisan who could shape young minds and inspire them to create the "perfect" world he and his former master had once envisioned?

Of course. There was none better for the task . . . at least in his opinion.

The goal he set for himself had not been an easily attainable one, but he knew from the outset that it would take time to achieve it. The first step had been the development of a web site that would appeal to today's youthful outcasts; this was accomplished through the use of skilled twentysomething technicians who were part of the Skull's worldwide network of neo-Nazi and other White Supremacist organizations—the source of his seemingly-limitless supply of muscle during his many attempts to take control of the planet, though that supply had begun to thin out over the past few years. There had been some setbacks along the way—most recently involving encounters with his arch-nemesis, Captain America, and the group of mutant super heroes called the X-Men—but the Skull never lost track of the progress of his plan, never allowed those he left in charge during his absences to deviate from it.

And when he finally revealed his part in this drama, when he at last stepped from the shadows to welcome these wayward children into the movement, he felt like a proud parent—or what he imagined a proud parent felt like, considering he had only brought one child into the world, and a daughter at that. Of course, there had been some dissension among his initiates when they realized who their leader was—it was to be expected, given the headstrong nature of children and their resistance

to authority figures—but those who objected were never seen again. The world is full of missing teenaged runaways, after all . . .

As for those who remained—the ones dedicated to the vision of a world under his rule, who would sacrifice all, destroy all, to make it a reality—they and a handpicked group of the Skull's most devoted followers retreated to a base their "Controller" maintained on the far side of the Moon. There the Red Skull sat and waited, biding his time until the proper moment presented itself for him to strike at his enemies; considering the growing racial tensions in America and Europe, the escalation of hostilities in the Middle East, and the schism among United Nations member countries over granting the Jewish mutant Magneto—the self-proclaimed "Master of Magnetism"—control of the mutant-ridden island of Genosha, he didn't expect to wait too long for a sign.

He was still waiting, just beginning to lose his patience, when a powerful flare of the purest energy exploded from the vicinity of Latveria, the postage stamp-sized, Eastern European country ruled by Victor von Doom—an armored dictator better known to the people of the world by a far more ominous name: Doctor Doom. As the Skull watched, the image transmitted to his base from a number of satellites orbiting the Earth, the energy rapidly spread out from the epicenter to envelop the globe. And when it finally subsided, a new world had been born—one in which von Doom had become its master.

The Skull knew instantly what had happened, for only one device could have been capable of transforming the Earth into von Doom's private playground within seconds; a device that he, himself, had held on a number of occasions. It was a wish box of limitless energy, a scientific Philosopher's Stone that gave its possessor the ability to transmute, not just base elements, but reality itself—to change the entire planet, as well as its population, into whatever—whomever—they desired.

An object called the Cosmic Cube.

The Skull knew all about the Cube, for he had been the first to tap into its power; the first to know what it meant to be a god, holding the power of Creation in his gauntleted hands . . .

It had been an accident of birth, this cosmic genie fashioned by the renegade scientists of A.I.M., the result of the organization's attempts to pierce the fabric of space-time in an ongoing pursuit to devise a weapon that would finally allow them to rule the world. After much trial and error, they had succeeded in forming a meta-singularity—a "gray hole," in layman's terms—that produced an element never before known on Earth. Through the use of overlapping forcefields, the rogue scientists trapped the element in the perfect form of a cube and began

to run a seemingly inexhaustible series of tests, hoping to uncover the nature of what they had discovered.

They never were able to reach a satisfying conclusion, for their tests were interrupted when the Cube was . . . acquired by the Skull, with whom A.I.M. had made a decidedly unwise alliance. But the Skull's dreams of a star-spanning Fourth Reich were quickly shattered by the intervention of Captain America, who tricked the death-masked war criminal into relinquishing possession of the Cube.

There were other Cubes, though, over the years, other opportunities for the Skull to mold the world to his liking. And he took advantage of each of them. But it always ended in frustration, his dreams perhaps too large for the Cube's abilities, his enemies too quick in taking advantage of a lapse he might have made in concentration.

After all, not even "God" is perfect.

But when he saw what von Doom had created in fashioning a Cube of his own, when he looked down upon the world from his safehouse on the dark side of the Moon and realized how limited his armored rival's scope of vision had been—why rule just one planet when you could make the entire universe your own?—he knew this Cube, too, must be his.

However, before he could formulate a plan for obtaining it, the Cube changed hands, falling under the control of one of von Doom's greatest enemies: Erik Magnus Lensherr—the mutant overlord known as Magneto. That, more than anything von Doom had done during his short reign as emperor, angered the Skull the most, sending him into such fits of rage that his followers feared for their very lives. To think that a . . . a *Jew* should possess such power! And what did he do with it? Squander it on wasteful fantasies of a peaceful, beauty-enriched world!

It was an action that the Skull had to admit even puzzled him, given the records he had gathered detailing Magneto's background. As a youth, Lensherr had been an inmate of Poland's Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II; had watched as his parents were marched off to the gas chambers; had seen the worst humanity had to offer—or so he thought. And yet, in spite of the daily horrors he faced, he managed to survive long enough to reach that day in 1944 when Allied forces liberated the camp. After that, the accounts of Lensherr's activities were spotty, until, decades later, the gaudily costumed villain Magneto made his first public appearance, espousing his philosophy that mutantkind should become the dominant species on the planet, and that humanity should be harshly punished for decades of alleged mistreatments—a philosophy that quickly rallied other mutants to his cause. With such a background, with such a passionate hatred expressed toward

all *Homo sapiens*, the Skull had expected Lensherr to create a veritable hell on Earth for the non-powered population, using the Cube's energies to form internment camps, slave auction houses, possibly even extermination centers.

Instead, he created a veritable paradise in which humans and others of Lensherr's kind—the genus he had dubbed *Homo sapiens superior*—lived in harmony . . . under his benevolent rule.

It had turned the Skull's stomach.

The taint of Magneto's dream had even pervaded the Skull's stronghold, as the Cube's energies swept outward from the Earth, adapting his once-loyal staff to fit this new reality. It was only by releasing a deadly gas through the air-processing units of the base that the Skull was able to keep the men and women who had served under him from betraying his presence to their new master. Only one lackey survived the purge: a blond-haired youth named Leonard, who served as the Skull's personal aide. He had been safe inside "The Controller's" office, avoiding death behind foot-thick walls and sealed entrances, while his peers collapsed at their stations, lungs boiling, drowning in their own blood. Leonard's continued existence had not been part of the Skull's plan, but he wasn't about to open the door to throw the youth out, only to subject himself to the poisoned air.

Besides, there was no point—no real pleasure—in gloating about one's genius in having a plan in place for an emergency such as this if there was no one around to agree with him.

As for why the Cube had had no effect on him or his assistant, the Skull attributed that to his contact with, and mastery of, previous Cubes—in particular, his most recent encounter with one, in which he had absorbed the wish box's energies and used them to change the world . . . momentarily. Again, as always, it was Captain America who found a way to defeat him, in spite of the near-godlike status the Skull had attained. Nevertheless, though he had lost in the end, the grotesque villain managed to retain some of the Cube's power—not enough to rule, or even to alter reality, but enough to prevent him and his aide from becoming wall-eyed followers of Magneto's.

Soon after, he and Leonard teleported to Earth to seek out the Cube. They found it in Paris, in Lensherr's private apartments. Claiming the prize hadn't taken too much effort: merely stabbing Lensherr with an obsidian blade with a plastic handle—a weapon designed to prevent the mutant overlord from using his magnetically-derived powers to destroy it—and then beating to a pulp some bald-headed imbecile who tried to come to Lensherr's aid. With one enemy unconscious and the other

bleeding to death, there had been no one to stop the Skull from seizing the Cube—and making some much-needed changes to the world . . .

Dietrich softly cleared his throat to get his master's attention. The Skull started, then shook his head to clear his thoughts. Letting his mind wander was a bad habit, one he'd never been able to break despite his best efforts; had he still any enemies, they might have seen such wool-gathering as a sign of weakness. Slowly, he turned around to face his aide. "I imagine you are here for a reason . . ."

"Your knights have gathered in the North Tower," Dietrich replied, "and—"

"And you have come to tell me they are eager for my participation." The Skull glanced at him from the corner of his eye. "I am a poor host, am I not, Dietrich—to make my guests wait until I am ready to make an appearance?"

The blood drained from Dietrich's face as he fumbled for an answer that would not sound insulting to his master. Say the wrong thing, and he would bear the scars of the Skull's volatile response for the rest of his days—were he allowed to live that long. Eyes wide with fear, lower lip trembling, he had the appearance of a doomed soul waiting to be cast into the pits, knowing he had been judged by an angry god—and found wanting.

The Skull knew that look well—practically the entire global population wore it on a daily basis; a look of horror shared by every inhabitant on every world his star-sweeping armies had conquered. Knowing that he had served as its inspiration brought him a feeling of . . . elation.

The corners of the Skull's lipless mouth curled upward in a hideous fashion—the closest approximation of a smile he could manage, given the fact that, years ago, an accidental exposure to a chemical agent had turned his features into a flesh-and-blood replica of the mask he had worn for decades. He reached out to place a hand on his assistant's shoulder—and chuckled as the man drew back.

"Calm your fears, Dietrich," he said. "It was a rhetorical question; I expected no answer." His eyes narrowed. "Still, the next time a question is put to you, I expect an answer—immediately."

"Y-yes, Herr Skull," Dietrich stammered.

The Skull nodded, then brushed past his aide and started down a carpeted hallway. "Inform the knights and my advisors that we will convene in ten minutes' time," he called back. "The empire continues to grow with each day, and I must know that it runs efficiently. For without order, there can be only chaos—but only if the Red Skull commands it!"

"I shall notify them at once, Herr Skull!" Dietrich replied, but his master had already rounded a corner.

As he strode through the hallways, boot heels ringing sharply against the marble tiles, a satisfied grin contorted the Skull's grotesque features. Here, at last, was the world he had always envisioned. One of order and fear, of unquestioned discipline and swift punishment, of immeasurable power and one man's iron will.

A perfect world. But not a perfect universe.

Not yet.

But with the Cosmic Cube his to control, with his armies sweeping across the stars like armored locust, the Red Skull was certain it soon would be. If not, he reflected darkly, he could always wipe it from existence and start over.

IF THERE ever came a time when someone invented a way to wipe all dirt from existence so she could maintain a sparkling clean household, Jean Sommers would be the first on line at the store to purchase it.

Dirt, grime, dust bunnies—there were days when she felt she'd been waging guerilla warfare with the filth invading her home, battling it from room to room, winning the bathroom but losing the kitchen, seizing the kitchen only to lose possession of the master bedroom. It was maddening and frustrating and repetitive and . . . well . . . so damnably *boring*. But it wasn't a sentiment she could express to anyone—not her parents, not her friends, and *especially* not her husband. As a highly decorated commanding officer in the Reich's space force, Scott Sommers was the poster boy for obedient National Socialists, ready, willing, and able to give his all in the name of their glorious leader, the Emperor Schmidt. His face was plastered on recruitment banners from Times Square to Moscow to Mars Station. His exploits were reported on news broadcasts. For the wife of one of the Party's most respected and admired warriors to whine to friends or family about the dullness of her life—true though it might be—would have been considered scandalous—and an embarrassment.

Still, it wouldn't kill Scott to pay for a maid. He certainly made enough money as a commissioned officer . . .

Sighing, Jean brushed a loose strand of bright red hair away from her face, tucking it back under the green kerchief that covered the top of her head, and gazed around her latest war zone: the library. As beach-heads went, it wasn't the hardest to defend—that honor was reserved for the living room of their split-level apartment on Manhattan's Upper

East Side, mainly because its colorful indigo-and-red Persian carpeting was so tempting to their two miniature dachshunds, Sturm and Drang, they of the bottomless stomachs and overactive bladders. Still, the library presented enough problems of its own, since the mahogany bookcases and leather-bound editions acted as magnets for every dust particle on the lower floor, and the shelving ran from floor to ceiling, as well as along the length of the room. As for the liquid plasma television set mounted on the northern wall, it had already accumulated a fine coating of motes on its thirty-six-inch screen after this morning's wipedown. So many nooks and crannies for dirt to gain a foothold in her stronghold . . . It also smelled of the cigars Scott and his fellow officers often indulged in after a hearty meal when they entertained, in spite of Jean's numerous attempts to scrub the odor from the carpet and drapes, or the fact that Scott hadn't been home in almost two months.

But Jean wasn't the sort of person to give in so easily. Dressed in her traditional combat gear of one of Scott's old T-shirts—this one emblazoned with the washed-out logo of Beer Hall Putsch, one of his favorite East German rock bands back in his college days—knotted just above her bared midriff, faded blue Capri pants, and low-topped sneakers, armed with an assortment of cleaning products and the most powerful vacuum cleaner in five boroughs, she stepped forward, prepared to launch a first strike against her archenemy—

—and came to an abrupt halt.

Slowly, she gazed around the room—at the towering bookcases, piled high with volumes; at the antique desk, its surface covered with congratulatory telegrams from Scott's admirers and paperwork from the Ministry of Space to be addressed upon his return; at the plaques and framed medals and autographed photos—shots of him standing beside some of the most respected members of the Party. There was nothing of her in this place, she realized with a start. No evidence that Reichsmajor Scott Summers had a wife; no sign of any sort that she even existed. This was a shrine to his world, his life—the accomplishments he had achieved, the victories he had won, the glories bestowed upon him.

Jean looked down and stared at the yellow rubber gloves covering her hands, the fingers of one oversized mitt grasping the vacuum cleaner hose, the others clasped around a red plastic bucket brimming over with polishes and sprays and paper towels. A tremor ran through her body, and the bucket and hose slipped from her hands, to clatter mutely on the thick carpeting, as the reality of her situation finally struck home. Cooking. Cleaning. Trying to make babies. Following the commands of her husband without question. Doing everything expected of the good

housewife, as outlined by the tenets of the Nazi League of German Women—principles created almost six decades ago, but still in effect today. Giving everything she had, without question, without hesitation, until there was nothing left of herself to keep *for* herself.

This was her world, then. Her life.

A wave of depression suddenly swept over her, and she allowed its undercurrent to pull her down, not even bothering to put up a token struggle against the black thoughts that now flooded her mind. When she eventually opened her eyes, she discovered that the tide had cast her upon the leather couch in the center of the room.

Jean stared at the darkened television screen across from her, and at the fiery-haired young woman with the dour expression who looked back at her from the glass. There was a sadness in that woman's eyes, a haunted expression that marred her otherwise beautiful features; you could see it in the way her lips bowed, in the dull gleam of light on once-bright green pupils, in the sag of her shoulders. Here was someone without direction, without meaning being given to her listless days and solitary nights, without hope. A woman to be pitied.

Jean hated that woman.

It wasn't her—never should have *been* her. The Jean Grey who existed long before she ever heard of Scott Summers had been an energetic woman, eager to do her part for the Reich as a science teacher at the prestigious Frost *Akademie*, located just outside Boston, Massachusetts. It was one of a baker's dozen of such Political Institutes of Education scattered across North America, though this facility differed from most in that it focused on shaping the minds of the *Jungmaedel*, or "young maidens," of the Reich. Like the girls she instructed, Jean had spent her formative years in such a school, learning all she could from her teachers and military instructors, then spending a year working on a farm as part of the Labor Service, followed by a Household Year, in which she provided domestic service for one of the Empire's more prosperous families. And all the time, it was made clear to her that it was her duty—both morally and as a patriot—to marry and bear children for the Empire. It was a lesson she carried into adulthood, as she so often reminded her students: serve the Reich to the best of your ability—whether you're a housewife or a warrior, all are doing their part for the Empire, and their Emperor.

And when Scott Summers entered her life, it seemed as if she'd at last have her chance to do hers. Unfortunately, she hadn't taken into consideration the very real possibility that, in order for her to serve her Emperor well, she would have to abandon the life she had once so happily led.

Now, five years later, her hopes and dreams—her very life—had apparently reached a dead end. Oh, there was no doubt in her mind—or heart—that she truly loved Scott, and that he felt the same toward her. She enjoyed every moment of their time together, made even more precious because of his frequent trips to the front line, as the Empire continued to expand its boundaries. And she understood his commitments and responsibilities to the Reich and his Emperor; she just wished there was more time for themselves. The longer Scott spent away from Earth, the more distant they had started to become as a couple—first, the love letters he used to send via hypermail had dwindled to nothing, then the daily conversations they used to have at the end of his watch—brief to begin with, so the transmissions couldn't be used by enemy vessels to track the movements of his fleet—became weekly, became. . . . She hadn't heard from him in almost a month now, and, not for the first time, she'd started to wonder if she'd made the right choice in putting her life on hold indefinitely in order to show support for Scott while his military career took centerstage.

Maybe if they'd a child by now, she often thought, there wouldn't be such a sense of division between them. They'd tried—Woden knew they'd tried often enough—but nothing seemed to work, no matter how passionate their lovemaking, no matter how many specialists they had seen. As far as the Reich was concerned, the problem lay not with Scott—he was a virile, able-bodied warrior, after all—but with Jean. Obviously, it was decided—from doctors on down to her own parents—that something must be wrong with her. No one had thought to consider Scott's background, for that was one of the darker secrets of the Empire, one that only Jean seemed to be aware of: that Reichsmajor Scott Sommers, the poster boy of the space fleet, the living embodiment of the "true German," was a *mutant*—a filthy, bottomfeeding aberration. A freak of nature, unfit to live among the genetically pure—or so press releases from the Ministry of Science often stated in newscasts, in the papers, on billboards and the Internet.

Perhaps it had something to do with the amounts of radiation his parents had absorbed while working in the Chicago munitions factories, preparing weapons for the Empire's starships—the same radiation that gave him the ability to project force beams from his eyes; an uncontrollable ability, however, which was why he was forced to wear ruby quartz lenses in order to harness the destructive power. But it wasn't something Jean could ever discuss with *anyone*—not unless she wanted to risk both of them facing an execution squad for what would certainly be considered an embarrassment for Emperor Schmidt. And so, for both their sakes, she had no choice but to quietly live with the stigma of

having failed her husband and her Reich—a useless trophy wife suited for nothing better than dusting bookshelves and mopping floors . . .

Jean sighed, feeling the strength drain from her limbs, and flopped bonelessly against the couch cushions, letting her head roll back and forth across the metal support bar. She gazed up at the ceiling, noticing for the first time a spider's web that had formed across one corner. Idly, she wondered if the step ladder in the kitchen would provide enough height for her to reach it with a broom . . .

Her eyes snapped shut, and she moaned softly. Couldn't she even stare into space anymore without having thoughts of housekeeping fill her mind?

Opening her eyes, she immediately turned her head downward, before the dust particles collecting on the TV screen drew her attention, and spotted the glossy cover of a magazine laying on the teak end table beside the couch. It was last week's *Der Television Guide*, its cover story an interview with Elisabeth Braddock, an Asian actress who starred in one of the Reich's more popular programs: *Kwannon, Bushido Mistress*. Then again, any program that showed the Empire cannily destroying its enemies in a display of gaudy, cheaply-produced special effects could be considered popular. Jean wrinkled her nose; she'd never been one for fantasy shows, especially when there were far better reality-based ones to watch, like *The West Brandenburg Gate* and *Crime and Punishment: Blitzkrieg Unit*.

And yet, there was something about the photograph of Braddock on the cover that held her attention. The deep-blue latex costume, the so-obviously dyed lavender hair, the strange, blood-red-colored symbol that ran along the left side of her face, from just above her eyebrow down to her cheekbone—there was something . . . familiar about them. She couldn't put her finger on just why that might be—she'd never given any mindfulness to the show, never seen more than a few seconds of any episode beyond what she caught while switching channels—but she was suddenly struck with the sense of having seen them, and Braddock, too, in a different setting. In person.

Jean frowned. She hated when something like this happened—now she'd probably spend the rest of the day driving herself crazy, trying to remember where she'd seen them before. It was almost as bad as getting a lyric from a particularly bad song stuck in her head, having it repeat over and over again; it'd taken her the better part of a week to get the words to Gilbert O'Sullivan's "Alone Again . . . Naturally" out of her thoughts the last time this annoying little problem cropped up. Had she ever met Elisabeth Braddock? A possibility. Maybe at one of the functions Scott was always dragging her to, when the Reich was eager to

congratulate its most photogenic officer on yet another victory. When exactly that might have occurred she couldn't say—they'd been to three such extravaganzas in the past year, and so many people were in attendance it was difficult to keep track of them all. Or maybe it was at one of those youth rallies the *Akademie* often held while she was teaching—those usually drew a number of celebrities as guest speakers, their words meant to bolster the spirits of the students, preparing them for a bright future as productive members of the Empire. Or . . .

Jean exhaled sharply. No, it was no good. She just couldn't recall where she'd seen Braddock before, and trying to force herself to remember wasn't going to help. She'd have to let the question linger in the back of her mind; the answer would probably pop up when she least expected it—usually when she was distracted by something else.

Unconsciously, her eyes drifted back toward the ceiling—and the spider's web hanging in the corner. It taunted her, nagged at her, whisper-thin strands swaying hypnotically in the slight breeze that billowed from the vents of the building's central air conditioning unit.

With a groan, Jean rose from the couch and headed for the kitchen to retrieve the step ladder. Any potential memories of an encounter with Elisabeth Braddock were soon forgotten as another thought loomed large in her mind: whether anyone's life could be as incredibly, frustratingly dull as her own. . . .

Dust.

Dust and sand and grit as far as the eye could see, covering everything. It was a view Ororo Munroe had grown so tired of gazing upon she'd often wondered why, every morning, as she dragged herself from bed, she still managed to have hope that something—anything—of even minor interest might appear to divert her attention from the wearying monotony of her days, and the endless wastes that surrounded her.

Taking residence in Araouane, a village in the West African state of Mali, had not been her idea—Ororo had always been, for all intents and purposes, a city girl at heart, born in a New York hospital, raised among the manmade cliffs and valleys of that hectic metropolis for the first six years of her life, then moving to Cairo, Egypt, with her parents—her father, a photojournalist named David Munroe; her mother, N'Dare, an African princess. For a six-year-old child, the thought of living in a two-room, mud-brick shanty on the edge of the Sahara Desert, like the ones that comprised the village, might have sounded like a great adventure—for a time—but the initial excitement would have quickly faded, once it was made evident that there was really nothing to *do* there. However, for a twentysomething woman used to com-

manding weather patterns across the globe and soaring through the skies, borne aloft on winds she controlled—a woman who had been worshipped as a *goddess* for a few short years—the thought of such “adventure” wouldn’t have even been a consideration, not when there was an entire world to explore.

Unfortunately, being black on a world for which racial equality usually meant having the same white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes of your neighbor, the notion of traveling freely *anywhere* was out of the question, especially once the *Schutzstaffel* Race and Resettlement Bureau had begun forcibly instituting its policy of “repatriating” most of the planet’s black population to Africa during the 1980s—“the better to keep an eye on them, having them all in one place,” as the Emperor Schmidt had commented at the time. Being a black woman had its own complications, especially since the female population was seen as nothing more than property to be bought and sold by the Empire’s wealthiest families—or to be used as mistresses for some of the Reich’s more lascivious powerbrokers. And, of course, as Ororo had learned over the years, having been born a mutant was the greatest sin of all: a genetic defect no better than the “untouchables” of Hindu beliefs, whose very touch was considered a form of pollution—although, based on the “evolutionary chain” once devised by the Reichminister of Health, Arnim Zola, and his assistant, Dr. Henry McCoy, in order to give students a clearer understanding of the tenets of “genetic purity,” even *that* lower caste ranked higher than Ororo and her kind.

No, settling in Araouane hadn’t been her idea; it was where the SS had forced her to go after they had stripped her of her powers, to keep her from “infecting” any large centers of population. Why they hadn’t just killed her was a question that still haunted her from time to time. Was she to be part of some Nazi plan to be implemented in the future? Was she considered too valuable to eliminate?

Or was it that she just hadn’t been worth the effort of killing?

The memories of her fall from godhood still tore at Ororo’s heart: the betrayal by worshippers she’d come to think of as friends; the blast of sonic power emitted by the villain Klaw that had knocked her from the sky, and into the hands of the SS; the pain of the surgery she’d had to endure—performed without anesthesia—that had forever stolen the skies from her. Unconsciously, she placed a hand at the small of her back, feeling the ever-present, gumball-sized lump of the neural inhibitor that had been welded to the base of her spine. Small it might be, but it was powerful enough to shut down her element-controlling abilities—and it couldn’t be removed without killing her.

Would that be so bad, though—to die at least in trying to free

herself before this sand-washed purgatory could finally claim her soul? She couldn't help but wonder. She had felt empty enough when she'd lost her powers of the storm, but when she'd been robbed of her gift of flight . . . For someone who had soared with the birds, played tag with the clouds, chased the moon through nights ablaze with the light of billions of stars, being confined to the ground was the worst sort of punishment imaginable. There were days when the sense of loss became almost too much to bear. Days when her heart ached as she watched the lowly vultures spinning in lazy circles through skies so blue it seemed as though the Bright Lady herself must have painted them. Days when the slightest of breezes gently ruffled her waist-length hair and she heard the winds softly call her name, the clouds urging her to come play with them . . .

Ororo shook her head, angered by allowing herself to fall into yet another pitiable bout of useless reverie. Yes, she missed the freedom she'd once taken for granted, the powers she'd possessed, but pining for their return was a waste of time. This was her life now, and she had never been the sort who gave in to bouts of depression for long. She tightened the sash of her once-white robes and held her head high, determined not to lapse into any further periods of morbid daydreaming.

"A good day, is it not, my lady?" asked a pleasant female voice.

Ororo turned. Standing beside her was a tall, narrow-waisted African woman in her thirties, wrapped in a blanket emblazoned with yellow, blue, and green patterns set on a red field. Her face alight with an infectious smile, she ran a hand through her short, dark hair, shaking loose the particles of sand that had settled in it, carried by the humid breeze; in her other hand she held an oversized bowl.

Ororo smiled. "And what makes you say that, Abena Metou?"

Her companion gestured at their surroundings. "A blue sky, a light wind, a desert at rest, allowing me to spend time with my family." Her smile widened. "Is that not proof enough that the Bright Lady blesses us?"

Ororo slowly nodded. "Indeed . . ."

Abena Metou had been a resident of Araouane long before Ororo had arrived and—so far as the former goddess could tell—had apparently never set foot outside its boundaries. For her, the world was a sand-covered oasis no more than a mile in circumference, in which life was lived through an endless progression of stiflingly hot days and chillingly frigid nights, where having pantries stocked with sufficient amounts of water and food for one's family was considered far more important than amassing wealth, and where the only sort of war that mattered to its inhabitants was fought between the slowly advancing

dunes of the Sahara and a handful of women armed with nothing more than large bowls to sweep them away—primitive weapons, to be sure, but more than effective in holding the line. And yet, Abena accepted this existence without protest, happy enough that, no matter how frustrating her daily skirmishes with the desert might become, she would still receive small payments of rice and sugar from the other villagers for her efforts—enough for her family to live on.

With a slight bow, Abena turned and headed back toward her home. Before she reached it, the door opened, and her four-year-old daughter, Jnanbarka, came racing out. The child galloped across the sand, barefooted, and began dancing in a wide circle around her mother, who made playful attempts to grab her, but the girl always remained just out of reach. Then, as Abena spun to one side, Jnanbarka ran in and grabbed the bowl from her hand, turning it upside-down and placing it at a jaunty angle on her head. Proud of her pottery-hat, Jnanbarka marched ahead of her mother, chin up, leading her back inside the house.

Ororo laughed softly. Abena was right: it *was* a good day—one to enjoy, not waste moping. Smiling brightly, she began walking back to her own home, eager to get on with her activities. Perhaps, she reflected, her life *wasn't* as bad, *wasn't* as boring, as some other's might be. . . .

He stood on the bridge of the battlecruiser *Valkyrie*, narrowed eyes locked on those of his Kree counterpart, whose azure-hued features filled the main screen.

“For the last time, Captain,” the Kree warned, “drop your shields and surrender your ship, or prepare to make peace with whatever god you worship.”

The Captain merely smiled and slowly shook his head in exasperation. No matter where he and his crew traveled among the stars, it seemed that one Kree commanding officer was as ignorant as the last he'd encountered, and more than likely as the next he'd run into. Hadn't any of these fools heard of his victory over the N'garai on Goering's World? How he'd broken through the Goa'uld blockade of Andromeda, allowing a hundred-odd worlds the honor of joining the Empire? Of the destruction of the Shi'ar munitions factory on Arkonides?

Didn't these blue-skinned idiots realize who they were messing with?

“What say you, Captain?” the Kree demanded. “I assure you, if you surrender peacefully, we will treat your crew with the utmost care.” A wolfish grin twisted his upper lip, revealing yellowed teeth. “Especially your women.”

The Captain snarled, and glanced around the bridge, noting how

expectantly his crewmembers sat at their stations, looking to him for guidance, relying on him to find a way to beat the great odds against them, as he had done on countless other missions: His gaze drifted to his yeoman, standing close by as always, ready to support her captain in whatever decisions he might make, no matter how perilous the situation in which they might find themselves.

Of all the women he'd loved on dozens of worlds, Sharon Carter was still the most beautiful in the galaxy—the sort of plucky, desirable girl with whom any starfaring officer worth his spacedust wouldn't hesitate to settle down and raise a family. Unfortunately, there was another love in the Captain's life, one that received his full attention at all times, one not even the most ravishing female in twelve parsecs could compete with: his ship. Amazingly, though, Sharon understood, and was more than willing to settle for second-best in his heart. There were times when he thought he didn't deserve to have someone that special in his life—and then immediately cast aside such a preposterous notion. *Of course* he deserved someone like that—he was the Captain, wasn't he?

And yet, he couldn't help but feel sorry for her, as she trembled under the lustful gaze of his enemy, nervous fingers pulling at the hem and plunging neckline of her micro-miniskirted uniform. It was clear she knew she was being mentally undressed by a barbaric member of a notoriously degenerate race. He'd have to put an end to that quickly—no mongrel-raced alien filth ogled *his* crew!

Sharon turned to him, eyes full of pleading. "Oh, Captain," she whispered.

He reached out to brush away a tear that rolled down one perfect cheek, then gently ran his fingers through her golden, shoulder-length hair.

"Ev'rythin' will be all right . . . *petite*," he said softly.

Doe-like blue eyes grew wider, and a warm smile lit her delicate features. He'd always enjoyed that smile.

"I know it will," she sighed, pressing her cheek against the palm of his hand.

With a wry grin, the Captain turned to his weapons officer, Lieutenant Sean Cassidy. "Quantum phase-shifters at maximum," the red-haired officer said quietly, so as not to be overheard by their opponent. His voice was tinged with a brogue born of the Irish countryside. "Standin' by."

"Engage," the Captain said.

One moment, the viewscreen had been filled with an image of the Kree warship's bridge, its captain clearly running out of patience; the next, it showed the flank of the enemy vessel. In the blink of an eye,

the quantum phase-shifters had teleported the *Valkyrie* away from its position under the Kree gun emplacements to a spot just over two kilometers *behind* them.

"Fire," the Captain said.

Cassidy's fingers flew across his console with the dexterity of a concert pianist, and death in all its various manmade forms—lasers, guided missiles, nuclear torpedoes—leapt from the *Valkyrie's* weapons batteries to tear apart its target. In less than a minute, the battle was won.

The crew cheered its victory, and the Captain swept Yeoman Carter into his arms. The kiss they shared was long and passionate, and left her gasping for air when he finally released her.

"Oh, *Captain . . .*" she purred, lips pursed and eyes half-closed in a seductive expression he knew all too well. She threw her arms around his neck. "Take me, Captain! There's nothing I'd like more in the entire universe than for you to—"

"WAKE UP, *LEBEAU!*"

The high-pitched shriek that rattled Remy Lebeau's eardrums wasn't half as painful as the slap across his face that accompanied it a moment later—the hefty ring worn around one finger struck his jaw with the force of a small club.

With a groan, Remy slowly opened his eyes—to find himself looking at the most beautiful woman in twelve parsecs. He grinned, still half asleep. "Sharon . . ." he sighed.

The delicate fingers that had been poised to gently stroke the Captain's rugged face now closed around the lapels of Remy's uniform jacket and roughly hauled him from the chair in which he'd been "resting his eyes." A quick twist of the wrists, and he was flying over his desk, scattering folders, reports, packs of playing cards, and various and sundry office supplies around the broom closet-like space that served as his inner sanctum. He crashed against the far wall, between a battered file cabinet and a plant of some kind that had seen neither sunshine nor water in a dog's age, and slid to the floor in a contorted heap amid the stacks of faded pulp magazines and weathered paperback novels that served as inspiration for his fanciful daydreams. From his sprawled position on the warped wooden floorboards, Remy pushed away leafs of multicolored papers that had settled over his face and glanced sheepishly at the hardened features of his superior officer.

As *Obergruppenführer* of Ernst Kaltenbrunner Spaceport—a facility based in Queens, New York, named after the late head of the *Reichs-sicherheitsamt*, the Reich Security Office, during World War II—

Sharon Carter might well be one of the most desirable women in the empire, but she was hardly the sort who could be described as “plucky.” Her blond hair tied back in a ponytail so severe it made her eyes bulge from their sockets—a look made even more disturbing by the way her blood-red-colored lips were pulled back in what seemed to be a perpetual snarl—Carter looked every bit the “she-wolf” the staff at Kaltenbrunner had dubbed her . . . behind her back, of course. She was dressed in a leather jumpsuit so tight it appeared as though it had been spray-painted on her, covering every inch of her body from neckline to toe. It was complemented by highly polished leather boots and a gunbelt worn low on her hips; the pistol grip of a Luger protruded from the holster strapped to her right thigh. Remy took note of the way her right hand hovered above the weapon—clearly, she was deciding on whether to reprimand him for napping without permission . . . or shoot him.

“Err . . . *Gutten tag, Herren Obergruppenführer,*” Remy muttered in an easy drawl born of the Louisiana bayous. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Of *course* you didn’t, Lebeau,” she snapped. “You were too busy dreaming your pathetic little dreams again to notice when an officer entered the room.” She flashed a lipless smile that made Remy think of a shark opening its jaws, preparing to take a bite out of its prey. “Were you fantasizing about *me* this time, Lebeau?”

Remy felt his cheeks reddening and quickly cast his gaze to the floor. “No, *Obergruppenführer*. ’Course not. Dat’d be ’gainst regulations.”

Carter snapped off a laugh—one that sounded like a short burst of gunfire. “Well, I’m pleased you know *some* of the laws governing this facility, Lebeau,” she said icily. “But perhaps it’s slipped your tiny Cajun mind that sleeping on the job is *also* against regulations.” Her eyes narrowed. “Need I remind you of the punishment for dereliction of one’s duties?”

“I’m *real* sorry ’bout dat, ma’am,” Remy said. “I won’ let it happen again. I promise.” He started to pick himself up off the floor, but a stiletto-heeled boot jabbed him in the chest, forcing him back.

“Did I give you permission to get up, pig?” Carter growled.

“Umm . . . no, ma’am,” Remy said quietly. “You’ll . . . uh . . . lemme know when I *can*, d’ough, right?” He flashed his winningest smile at her, hoping to defuse the situation with charm before he got into worse trouble. It always worked in his dreams . . .

Carter’s upper lip curled, and she grunted in disgust. “You’re a sad little man, Lebeau. When you first joined my staff as a clerk two years ago, I thought you had potential . . . but I see now that I misjudged you.

You're lazy, you're irresponsible, and you lack discipline." She grabbed one of the dog-eared paperback books he'd landed on, sneered as she glanced at the gaudy cover, and flung it at him. *Perry Rhodan: Death Waits in Semispace*—one of the better books in the series, Remy noted. "You sit in this sty all day, reading garbage that brings a note of excitement to your otherwise meaningless existence, while avoiding your duties as much as possible. Asking you to perform the simplest task is like making demands of a wall—but at least the wall has an excuse for not following through on the assignment." She pointed an accusatory finger at him. "I bet you haven't even looked into who's behind those recent thefts of office supplies."

Remy cleared his throat and looked at the floor again, finding it hard to look her in the eye. "Well, findin' de t'ief ain't all dat simple a task, ma'—"

She ground her boot heel into his chest, grinning at Remy's painfully sharp intake of breath. "You're a piece of offal, Lebeau—a pile of excrement stinking up my spaceport. And if you're not careful—" she dragged her foot sharply across his torso, and he yelped "—I'll scrape you off on the curb. Do you understand?"

"Yes, *Obergruppenführer*." Remy rubbed a hand across his sore flesh, trying to ease the pain. He was somewhat grateful she hadn't drawn any blood—she might have punished him for wearing a dirty uniform.

Her nostrils flared angrily. "And didn't I tell you to get a haircut?"

Remy's other hand unconsciously slid to the back of his neck. He'd been letting his dark brown hair grow far beyond the parameters of the regulation crewcut for the past three months, despite two previous warnings from Carter about the "shabby" appearance he was cultivating. The ends now reached just past his collar. "Yes, ma'am."

"Then do so at once. I won't tolerate anyone under my command looking like . . . like some gypsy! You're an officer of the Reich—start acting like one!" Without waiting for a response, Carter turned on her heel and stormed out of the office.

Remy waited until he heard the door to the outer hallway slam shut before he dragged himself to his feet. His chest still burned where Carter's boot had scraped it, and he had a bump on the back of his head the size of a golf ball, courtesy of the wall he'd slammed against when she tossed him across the room. Not such a bad start for a Wednesday morning, considering he was still feeling the bite of her riding crop on his legs and back from the week before. He limped around the desk and collapsed into his chair.

A small smile came to his lips as he gazed at the door, and he

sighed. "Dat *fille* . . . she crazy 'bout ol' Remy—she just playin' hard-t'get . . ." The smile froze, then slowly melted into an embarrassed frown. "'Least dat what I *wish* it was . . ."

Leaning back in his chair, Remy closed his eyes and let his thoughts carry him away—back to the depths of space, where the kind of power and respect he so sorely lacked in reality could be found simply by wrapping his strong arms around the shapely waist of the most beautiful woman in twelve parsecs. . . .

IF THIS is what it was like to rule infinity—sitting idly by, deep within a city-sized construct that floated at the center of Time and Space, waiting for something to do—then Victor von Doom was sorely disappointed.

Slouching on the ornate throne previously occupied by Roma, she who was now the *former* Supreme Guardian of the Omniverse, von Doom rested the chin of the metal helmet that encased his head on a gauntleted fist and gazed at the voluminous interior of Roma's private quarters. Designed in the style of a gothic cathedral, the throne room was a marvel of sweeping arches, polished stone, delicate wooden fixtures, and a ceiling so high it was lost in shadow. On the far side of the transept, tucked away in a corner, was a small wading pool, its cool waters provided by a fall that flowed from somewhere above; von Doom hadn't been interested enough in it to determine the source. Most of the lighting came from hundreds of candles set in tall, elaborately designed holders spaced about the area around the throne and crossing, which meant that most of the sanctum was bathed in darkness—and within the depths of that black curtain, *something moved*. What it might be, von Doom wasn't certain; he could only see it from the corners of his eyes, since gazing at it straight-on proved ineffective. Presumably it was some kind of defensive system Roma might have unleashed on him, if he hadn't struck her down before she could activate it. Without its mistress to command it, the creature—creatures?—remained in shadow, apparently content to leave von Doom alone with his thoughts.

In one way, with its brooding architecture and Olde Worlde charm and potential deathtraps, the throne room reminded the armored tyrant of his own castle, in his native Latveria—a stronghold from which he

ruled his tiny nation with a just, but fair, hand. In another, it reminded him of a prison—for, though it had not taken a great deal of effort to secure this place, he had soon realized that he couldn't leave its environs.

An annoyed frown twisted the scarred features hidden beneath the armor. Yes, it was a prison, von Doom reflected darkly, and he its sole inmate.

There was nothing that actually kept him there—no powerful force-field to restrain him, no fail-safe mechanism that might have been created by Roma to trap an invader on the chance that someone might succeed in taking control of the Starlight Citadel; if he wanted to leave, all he had to do was step through the main doors and into the adjoining hallway. But it wasn't as simple as that, as von Doom well knew. For before he had barged in here and overpowered the Guardian with a makeshift technological weapon, the citadel had been placed on high alert after it had been discovered that he was running loose through its corridors. That alert was still in effect and, although von Doom feared no one, he knew his enemies' strength lay in their numbers—a dozen foes he could deal with, perhaps more, but there were hundreds of sentient beings living in the citadel, as well as the legions of superpowered warriors that comprised the Captain Britain Corps. Not even von Doom was foolish enough to think he could beat those kinds of odds.

That wasn't to say, however, that he was simply willing to sit comfortably in the shadows, trembling with concern that his presence here might be detected, when there was ultimate power for the taking.

Of course, it was his search for ultimate power that had led him to this maddeningly dull situation in the first place . . .

The scientists in his employ had never planned to create a Cosmic Cube; it had been a happy accident—if one could consider stumbling across the means to fashion a Jack-in-the-Box-sized device that would allow its possessor to rule the world a joyous occasion. Much like the specialists of Advanced Idea Mechanics, they had tapped into a "gray" hole during an experiment, though this one involved penetrating the Negative Zone: an anti-matter universe first discovered years before by von Doom's rival—and arch-nemesis—Reed Richards, the leader of the cosmic ray-powered super hero group called the Fantastic Four.

Once the scientists realized what they had discovered, the project leader, Dr. Nils Browder, wasted no time in informing their employer. The news had pleased the dictator: After all the times the Red Skull had made use of such a device to transform the world into numerous recreations of the Third Reich—the limitations of the man's mind were

almost beyond belief!—only to have his dreams shattered by Captain America or some other brightly-costumed do-gooder, it should only be right that Victor von Doom be the one to show Schmidt, and every other pathetic, superpowered, would-be emperor grasping for power, what a true visionary could do with the Cosmic Cube.

All other projects were put on hold, as von Doom's subordinates threw themselves into attaining their goal—especially when the risk of failure on their part brought with it a death sentence. Forgotten were plans for the tyrant's latest strike against the accursed Richards and his team—at least temporarily. Work was suspended on the mind-control gas meant to enshroud London; strategies were postponed for the invasion of Washington, D.C.; halted were batches of a deadly neurotoxin to be released above the undersea realm of Atlantis—an act of revenge against his former ally, Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner, for opposing him once too often. For von Doom, crafting the Cube became his overriding ambition—nothing would deny him the opportunity to create a world of his own.

Unfortunately, all the ambition in the universe wasn't enough to prevent what happened next.

It was during the creation of the cube-shaped container that the trouble began. Not a true, physical box, the container was, instead, formed through a combination of forcefields, the overlapping of their diverse energies calibrated in such a precise manner that there could be no room for error; the slightest miscalculation could result in the "gray" hole's power spilling out of the cube, contaminating the laboratory with unknown levels of radiation. Such a warning meant nothing to von Doom—he was paying his staff handsomely; they should be honored to sacrifice themselves in his name. Browder, however, cautioned that the danger might be even greater than that—who could say that the radiation wasn't powerful enough to spread out across the planet? The scientists at A.I.M. might have known, but the original research team had been murdered by their leader, shortly after the first Cube had been fashioned—and then the Red Skull had stolen it before anyone could properly monitor it. Perhaps, Browder suggested, they should slow their efforts, make certain that all precautions were taken; given enough time, maybe four to six months, they would be able to create a flawless container, one that would properly—

When the high-pitched whine of von Doom's gauntlet-mounted laser projectors finally died down, there wasn't enough of Browder left to sweep up from the laboratory floor.

The rest of the team finished the work ahead of schedule.

On the day von Doom took the Cube in hand, he knew his destiny had arrived: to be lord of the planet. To become Emperor.

To become a god.

And as he listened, the Cube sang to him—of worlds to be shaped, masses to be led, dreams to come true. A wondrous song, full of pomp and grandeur, that told the awe-inspiring story of a Gypsy youth, an orphan, who fought and clawed and struggled against insurmountable odds to become the ruler of a great nation, then moved on to make his mark on the world as a man to be respected, to be admired.

To be feared.

But there was more to the song than the mere recounting of a marvelous life lived. There were promises of infinite power, of empires to be built, of future generations of charismatic leaders who would proudly carry the name of von Doom across the stars.

And all it would take to make them reality was the simplest of wishes.

So von Doom wished—for power, for glory, for a family to share his triumphs. He wanted his ruined face restored to its former beauty; wanted a monarchy where his rule was unchallenged by any of his former allies or enemies; wanted a strong, beautiful woman at his side, one who would bear him children worthy of their father's name. And in a burst of light, the Cube responded, bringing him everything he desired . . .

Well . . . *almost* everything. When the light faded, Emperor von Doom ruled a world in which his enemies and allies were either dead or loyally serving him. He had two healthy children and a strong, beautiful wife: Ororo Munroe, the white-haired, weather-controlling, African-American member of the mutant hero group the X-Men—a woman he had always found attractive, both in mind and body. But when it came to the tyrant's vanity-driven wish, something went terribly, horribly wrong.

He had awoken in a body ravaged by age, lungs straining to draw breath, heart beating weakly against the withered, almost translucent skin of his chest. His eyesight had grown dim, and his limbs had barely been able to support his own weight, let alone the three-hundred-pound armor he wore. And yet, his thought processes were as sharp as ever; at least he hadn't lost control of his faculties. Still, his was the mind of a man in his forties, trapped in the flesh of an octogenarian.

The realization of his predicament had almost driven him mad.

Nevertheless, he persevered—he *was* von Doom, after all—and eventually he found ways to make peace with his situation: transferring part of his consciousness into the body of an android Doombot so that

he could enjoy some measure of this world he had created; using Erik Magnus Lensherr—the villainous mutant Magneto—as a pawn in a global game of hide-and-seek with the Emperor’s armed forces, in order to pass the time; preparing himself for the day he would die, when he would make one last wish with the Cube: to destroy the world before it returned to normal, rather than allow anyone else to rule it.

It was while he was making those plans that he at last figured out what had gone wrong with the Cube: Somehow, one of his scientists had botched the calculations, and that mathematical error had caused a breakdown in the cube-construct’s integrity. The Cube had worked, true, but it was flawed—damaged enough to give him a world of his choosing, only to seal him inside a dying body with no means of escape.

Von Doom, of course, overlooked the fact that it was *he* who had provided the final round of computations before the Cube was activated, not trusting such an important task to a roomful of lackeys—even though all were world-renowned experts in their field. To anyone who knew his background, it would have appeared to be a case of history repeating itself, for the last time he had ignored someone’s advice about mathematical errors had been decades before, while he was attending an American college. Back then, he had been experimenting with matter transmutation and dimensional warps, in an attempt to contact his late mother’s spirit in the afterlife. Despite the warnings given by fellow student Reed Richards, von Doom proceeded with his work, only to cause an explosion that wrecked a sizeable portion of the dormitory—and permanently scarred his face. One would have thought, perhaps, that he might have learned from his costly mistake . . . but Victor von Doom never *made* mistakes . . .

And so, although the errors were different, the results were fairly the same: von Doom received the brunt of the backlash.

Worse still, as the newly-appointed Emperor came to deduce, the reason why his body was failing could be traced directly to the Cube: It was drawing upon his life-force in order to stabilize the faux reality. At the rate at which he was deteriorating, he estimated that he had no more than a month to live, unless he could find someone to take his place—someone willing to sacrifice their own life in exchange for maintaining von Doom’s world. He thought he had found such a prospect in Elisabeth Braddock, who had been pining away for her lost love after his brutal death, but her fellow mutant miscreants had interceded before they could come to an agreement.

And then that imbecile Magneto and his mindless followers had barged in, quickly overpowering the X-Men so that there would be no one to stop the mutant overlord from claiming the Cube for himself.

A low, feral growl spilled from the armored dictator's lips as the unpleasant memory filled his dark thoughts. To think that a genetic inferior would dare to touch the royal personage of Doom—to have the temerity to strike him down with the back of his hand, as though he were some disobedient child! But, at the time, von Doom could do nothing more than moan in pain and collapse bonelessly to the floor, too weak to prevent Magneto from wrapping his hands around the Emperor's prize possession—and ordering it to recreate the world in *his* image.

Yet, despite his loss, von Doom was not defeated; not while he had other options available to him. True, having his teleportation beam intercepted by Roma and her minions had not been part of his plans, but he had always been able to make the best of any situation—especially when the alien technology of the Starlight Citadel at last freed him from his elderly prison. Much to his surprise, it turned out that the Cube had not really aged him; rather, it had apparently placed his consciousness, and his soul, in the body of another Doctor Doom: the true dictator of an already existing world that von Doom thought he had fashioned with his wish box. A replicant who told him all he knew of the citadel and its god-like mistress, encouraging his younger self to make use of the information before they were both imprisoned.

Von Doom rewarded the old man by making his death a swift—though not altogether painless—one.

And then, by making use of a self-aggrandizing physician named Stanton—a pathetic little man with an axe to grind against the Supreme Guardian—von Doom was able to escape the medical ward and secure an ally: the dictator Sat-yr-nin, who was being held in stasis until Roma had passed sentence on her for numerous crimes perpetrated against the citizens of an alternate Earth. By capturing Sat-yr-nin's alternate—an annoyingly haughty young woman who acted as Roma's second-in-command—and placing her in the stasis chamber, no one, not even the Guardian, was aware that the coolly efficient Saturnyne had been replaced by an equally coldhearted madwoman.

It was that last bit of subterfuge that ultimately led to Roma's downfall, and von Doom's rise to power, for Sat-yr-nin had been able to get close enough to the Guardian to attack her. Apparently unused to physical combat, Roma had been distracted long enough by the unexpected assault to fall prey to the armored tyrant's improvised weapon: a variation on the same multiphasic crystal accelerator that had been used to separate him from the wizened Doctor Doom. In this case, though, the device was used for a far more sinister purpose, stripping layer after layer from the Supreme Guardian, weakening her as a number of alter-

nate versions of herself were peeled away by the scalding radiation. Apparently, Roma derived her considerable power from being a collective of sorts, her physical form housing every variation of herself that was possible, from an infinitude of parallel dimensions, all combined to create a single celestial being.

Roma was, truly, the sum of her parts, as von Doom had wryly commented, watching with some degree of amusement as she and her "sisters" writhed in intolerable pain at his feet. But now, with some of her parts amputated, if she wished to avoid further "surgery," then she would have to prove her usefulness to the self-appointed Master of the Omniverse—or join his elder self in oblivion . . .

Von Doom rose to his feet and stepped down from the apse on which the throne stood. The time for introspection had passed—now was the moment to take action. Although he might be confined to the throne room until he was prepared to face his enemies, that didn't mean there weren't matters that needed his attention.

Like learning all the secrets of the Starlight Citadel and its mistress.

Striding purposefully, he began walking across the transept, pausing only long enough to glance at a platform, and the pulpit-like stand upon it. Protruding from the latter were an infinite number of crystal shards; from what his elder counterpart had told him, during the brief time their minds had been linked while they shared the same body, each six-inch-wide shard contained the life-force of an entire dimension. How, exactly, the older von Doom had known this was something he would never understand—perhaps if he hadn't acted so rashly by brutally ending his life before he could impart all his knowledge . . .

But, no. Victor von Doom needed no one's help; in time, he was certain, he would come to learn everything the old man had—and take full advantage of the information. He had already come to understand the reasons for Roma's concern about the effects of his Cosmic Cube on the omniverse simply by accessing the citadel's computers . . . although that had been accomplished with Stanton's aid, now that he remembered it. Still, he would have eventually located the terminal on his own, disguised though it was as a series of stained-glass tableaus along one wall, the half-dozen panels depicting some of the accomplishments of Roma's father, Merlyn, over the centuries. And he would find a way to walk the corridors of this magnificent stronghold unmolested . . . even though he had to rely on Sat-yr-nin's intelligence reports for the time being, since no one had yet realized her true identity; it gave her a degree of freedom to roam the citadel temporarily denied her ally.

Turning from the crystal-lined pulpit, von Doom walked around and

behind the apse, to enter a small, semi-circular corridor hidden within the shadows behind the throne. At the center of the passageway was an elegantly-carved oaken door; he pushed it open and stepped into a large chamber—what would, he imagined, be considered Roma's private quarters. Like the throne room, her chambers were of a gothic design, with sweeping stone arches and dark-toned wood paneling and the somber lighting of hundreds of candles. The air was tinged with the perfume of jasmine and incense, the tiled floor adorned with colorful Persian rugs and oversized cushions. A large, four-poster bed—its framework hung with silken draperies of such varying hues that the cloth appeared to continually change colors as he stared at it—stood at the far end, its blankets and top sheet turned down in anticipation of its mistress' use, though von Doom doubted a celestial being would truly have need for rest. And, all about the room, ten-foot-high tapestries and elaborate woodcuts half that size hung from thick chains on the walls. Von Doom noted with some surprise that Roma's likeness appeared in most of the artworks—he had not thought the woman vain enough to collect images of herself. But then, all women were driven by vanity, he considered; unlike Doom, they were unable to rise above pursuing such trivial obsessions as immortalizing their beauty.

Unconsciously, he touched a hand to his mask—and the scarred features hidden behind the cool metal.

He found two men waiting for him, both seated near the door in large, white, egg-shaped chairs that were completely at odds with the rest of the chamber's furnishings; a personal touch of decorating by the Supreme Guardian, no doubt. One was a tall, broad-shouldered man with bright-red hair tied in a ponytail, dressed in ceremonial garb: golden armor, sky-blue tunic, and a white, ankle-length cape; a sword hung loosely from the wide, golden belt that held his tunic in place. The other man was only a few inches shorter than his companion, but seemed like a child in height by comparison. He was also much thinner, and possessed far less hair. His attire consisted of green surgical scrubs, a white laboratory coat, and a pair of wingtip shoes.

The former was Alecto, the top officer of Roma's handpicked personal bodyguards, whose primary occupation was ensuring that no one bothered the Supreme Guardian unless she wished to see them—a job von Doom had now made obsolete. The latter was Dr. Henry P. Stanton, one of the many physicians stationed on the citadel, now von Doom's highly-strung lackey. There was a nervous look in Stanton's eyes, but the armored tyrant ignored it—there *always* seemed to be a nervous look in the man's eyes. Alecto, on the other hand, merely stared blankly at his new master—the result of a small mind-control device implanted

on the back of his neck, one von Doom had easily fashioned from his battlesuit's spare parts. The other members of Roma's elite guard wore similar mechanisms, and had been ordered back to their posts at the entrance to the throne room so that he could remain undisturbed by the citadel's other residents.

"How fares your patient, physician?" von Doom asked.

Stanton rose quickly. "I was just waiting for you to arrive, Mr.—" He froze, recognizing the fire that suddenly blazed in the dictator's eyes. "*Lord. Lord Doom,*" he quickly recovered. "I . . . apologize for the error." The fire burned low behind the mask, but did not go out. "I—I thought you'd rather see for yourself."

Von Doom nodded, pleased by his lackey's groveling. He allowed Stanton to lead him a side door that, on first glance, appeared to be for a closet. The physician opened the portal and quickly stepped aside, so that his master could enter first. As the dictator crossed the threshold, he felt a mild tingling, even through his armor, that forced his lips to curl. Before he could question what was happening, or, better yet, wring the neck of the doctor for leading him into a trap, he was suddenly through the electrical field, coming to a halt in a void of the brightest white.

It took a moment or two for his senses to stabilize, for his eyes to regain their focus so that he could see that he was standing in another room, whose depths were impossible to discern as floor, walls, and ceiling all blended into a continuous field; the color of the room and the even lighting—which seemed to come from all around—made it difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. It had to be a room, hadn't it? he thought. What else could it be?

"What is this place?" he asked slowly.

Stanton suddenly appeared beside him, his stern features twisted into a grimace; apparently, he disliked the electrical field as much as his master. "This is Merlyn's personal chamber—although it hasn't been used since his last departure for parts unknown," he replied, and sniffed. "Not much of a taste for decorating, wouldn't you agree? But then, he preferred spending his time wandering the omniverse—he never really stayed here for very long." He motioned back the way they had come, though von Doom couldn't find any indication of a door; the wall was as smooth as the others. "From what I understand—and I'm no physicist, mind you—this is a pocket dimension of some kind, where he could test out some of his more . . . hazardous experiments without accidentally blowing up a few hundred realities." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Perhaps you should try that next time."

Von Doom ignored the comment and eyed him warily. "And how do you know of this place?"

Stanton sneered. "Before Roma sweet-talked her father into hiring that annoying little Scot as the citadel's Chief Physician," he said, in reference to the man who had been his superior in the Medical Wing, "Merlyn had offered the position to *me*. The two of us got along quite well, and he let me in on one or two of his secrets. Obviously, he understood my—"

A gauntleted hand suddenly snapped out, grasping Stanton by the throat. As he struggled to breathe, fingers slipping helplessly along the polished metal in a futile attempt to free himself, von Doom pulled him close, until the doctor's face was pressed against his mask.

"Then you must *also* know how to exit this 'pocket dimension,' physician," von Doom said heatedly. "Is that not so?"

Stanton bobbed his head frantically. "The . . . electrical field we . . . passed through . . . registered our bio-data. All you have to . . . do is . . . walk in the direction . . . of the field—the . . . stronger the . . . tingling gets . . . the closer to . . . the doorway . . . you are. It will . . . open . . . automatically . . . when you're . . . close enough . . ."

The armored despot tightened his grip, cutting short Stanton's labored response. "What *other* 'secrets' have you been withholding from Doom, you miserable cur?" he growled.

"Not . . . many . . ." Stanton wheezed. "Nothing . . . of importance . . ." His eyes were beginning to bulge from their sockets, his face turning a bright shade of crimson. "I . . . I *did* say . . . only one . . . or . . . two . . . remember . . . ?" The veins in his forehead were pulsing strongly, pushing against the reddened skin as though trying to force their way out. "Do you . . . really think . . . Merlyn . . . would have . . . trusted *me* . . . with anything . . . of value . . . ?"

With a grunt of disgust, von Doom tossed the gasping physician on the floor. He stood impassively as Stanton lay in a heap, massaging his injured throat while doubled over in a fit of coughing that lasted for some time. Finally, the spasm subsided, and Stanton shakily raised himself to his hands and knees.

"Remember this moment well, you pathetic wretch," the armored tyrant warned, a metal-encased index finger pointed at Stanton. "Each moment you continue to draw breath, every second your heart continues to beat, passes only because Doom wills it. Conceal any further information from me, and that privilege will come to a swift—and brutal—end. Do you understand?"

"Y . . . yes, L-Lord Doom," Stanton wheezed. He wiped his spittle-covered lips against the right cuff of his lab coat, then used the other

to absorb the tears that filled his eyes. "I'll . . . let you know . . . if any more . . . come to mind . . ."

Von Doom nodded. "A wise decision. Now, take me to the woman."

Stanton pushed himself to his feet, staggered for a step or two, then regained his balance. Still rubbing his throat, he pointed in a direction away from where they stood, although it was difficult to have any sense of direction in this seemingly endless void. "The Guardian is . . . right this way. If you'll . . . follow me . . ."

As they started on their journey, von Doom looked back, to the point from which he and Stanton had entered. This time, however, he wasn't trying to locate the entrance; rather, he was pondering what might be happening beyond the boundaries of this pocket dimension—specifically, what actions Sat-yr-nin might take, should she learn of his absence from the throne room. Would she risk discovery, and use her masquerade as Roma's second-in-command to rally the Captain Britain Corps behind her? Would she stage a coup, destined though it might be to failure? There were too many possibilities to consider, too many variables to take into account, and von Doom cared for none of them—yet was concerned by *all* of them.

For him, though, there were no other choices. He had to obtain Roma's power, strip her of her control over the forces of Time and Space. And once that power was his to command, his alliance with Sat-yr-nin—as well as the madwoman herself—would be terminated soon enough.

Pleased with his decision, von Doom quickened his pace, heading deeper into the void.

Toward his destiny.

EVER SINCE childhood, Opul Lun Sat-yr-nin had been a great believer in destiny—that she was fated to become a powerful figure, a great leader, possibly even Mastrex of the Empire of True Briton. And once her mind had been made up, even at such a young age, she was determined that nothing was going to keep her from reaching that goal. Ultimately, nothing could.

Mother and Father would have been so proud to see their baby realize her potential—if their precious little girl hadn't killed them when she turned eighteen.

She'd developed a taste for death long before then, of course—all murderers have to start someplace, after all—but she'd become tired of the puppies and parakeets, the kittens and gerbils and bunnies and tropical fish and . . . Looking back, she'd never been able to understand why Mother had ignored her disturbing inability to keep a pet for very long. Maybe she had thought it was just a childhood phase, one her daughter would eventually outgrow when something new attracted her attention. Maybe she had been too embarrassed to address the issue, for fear of others learning of her little girl's macabre hobby—imagine, the eldest child of one of the most well-respected families in the Empire an animal killer! What would their friends in high society say?

Or maybe she had simply been terrified that, if she openly confronted Sat-yr-nin about the matter, her child's interests might turn from household pets . . . to larger prey.

How was she to know that had already happened?

Mother and Father were the first to fall by her hand, but they were certainly not the last—there were all those bothersome siblings to dispense with, for one thing. And then, as she climbed the political ladder,

first making use of Father's government connections, then building her own, the Lady Sat-yr-nin never failed to leave at least one or two rivals literally broken and bleeding on the rungs beneath her. Within five years, she had become one of the most respected—and genuinely feared—politicians in the Empire, her swift ascent through the ranks catching even the eye of the Emperor. Recognizing her talent, he made Sat-yr-nin the head of the Office of Imperial Security, where she would command the Warwomen, an army of Amazonian soldiers dedicated to protecting the boundaries of the Empire against its dwindling number of enemies. It didn't take long, however, for Sat-yr-nin to become bored with all the death and destruction her troops caused, primarily because she wasn't able to take an active part in the carnage she created. But if she wasn't happy enough with her current position—one of the highest in the Empire—then what more could she possibly want?

Well, there was always that childhood dream of becoming empress . . .

The coup didn't take all that long—less than a year, actually. It might have taken longer, if she hadn't already been provided with the finest warriors in the Empire—warriors who'd been willing to do whatever she commanded, even lay down their lives for her as she directed the final assault on the palace. Seeing all the blood and gore staining the marble halls, the blasted flesh and broken bones scattered around the carpeted chambers, Sat-yr-nin had become so giddy that she couldn't help herself from joining in on the fun. With a single cut, she separated the Emperor's head from his shoulders, using the same sword he'd presented her with when assigning her the very position that ultimately led to his downfall.

The Emperor was dead—long live Opol Lun Sat-yr-nin, Mastrex of Briton!

It was the sort of moment that might have brought a tear to her eyes if she hadn't been otherwise preoccupied, dancing about the throne room with the Emperor's head in one hand and her sword in the other, her hysterical laugh echoing throughout the palace.

Thus began a new chapter in the history of the Empire of True Briton.

The Mastrex's reign, however, would not be without its complications . . .

Her troubles began a few years later, with the arrival of a man named Brian Braddock on her world. On an alternate Earth, he was a costumed superhero named Captain Britain; as it turned out, he was also the spitting image of Byron Bra-dhok, her Royal Consort. When the two exchanged places—without her knowledge—and Braddock wound

up in her bedchamber, Sat-yr-nin soon discovered just how different the two men were: he'd actually led a revolt against her! And as she watched her empire begin to crumble, as she realized that the fates had turned their backs on her for reasons she couldn't even begin to fathom, Sat-yr-nin's mind took the final step into madness.

Much to her surprise, she found the sensation . . . comforting.

But the onset of insanity didn't make her any less dangerous; in fact, it made her more so. She became far more cunning, far more ruthless, than she had ever been, her thoughts of empire replaced with an overwhelming obsession to destroy Captain Britain and everyone he held dear. She had come close to succeeding a time or two, but her plans had always fallen apart before she could deliver the killing blow. Eventually, she had tired of such games and returned to her homeworld to rebuild her powerbase. The task was simpler to achieve than she'd first thought, mainly due to the efforts of loyal supporters who'd been appointed to the new government and the ineffectiveness of the interim Mastrex, who hadn't known how to respond to the sudden reappearance of her predecessor—beyond dying after being shot in the head, that is.

At last, Sat-yr-nin was back in power, and she had quite a few plans for the future of the Empire. Maybe, with all those myriad realities out there in the omniverse, it was time for True Briton to start expanding its boundaries . . .

But then the X-Men had popped up outside the palace, courtesy of Roma, accompanied by row upon row of members of the Captain Britain Corps, and she had found herself right back where she had started from—deposed, debased, and detained. Facing a possible eternity locked away in stasis, while Roma decided on what to do with her. But how the tables had turned once von Doom had freed her! Now, it was the Supreme Guardian who was the prisoner, and Sat-yr-nin the one free—to plot, to plan, to rule . . . after her armor-clad ally had been dealt with, of course.

After all, it only made sense that a woman destined to rule an empire should now turn her thoughts to ruling all of creation . . .

Sat-yr-nin strode through the halls of the Starlight Citadel, noting with pleasure the manner in which its citizens either scattered to get out of her way, or hurriedly bowed their heads in respect, muttering worthless compliments about the stylish cut of her shoulder-length white hair, the smartness of her wardrobe choices—a white satin, floor-length gown with matching fur-trimmed cape that trailed behind her; one among dozens of similar outfits hanging in the closets of her dimensional twin, Opal Luna Saturnyne—or wishing her a good morrow when temporal

measurements of night and day were useless on an edifice floating at the center of Time. Pathetically transparent attempts to stay on her good side—or, to be more accurate, the good side of her smarmy doppelganger. Not that either of them truly had a *good* side, per se—just rare moments when they were willing to tolerate the imbeciles with whom they had to interact. At least they had *that* much in common.

Well, that, and an overwhelming desire for power.

Of course, no matter how much satisfaction she might derive from all the bowing and scraping and fear-driven scampering going on around her, Sat-yr-nin's current position was far from what she considered a powerful one. She was the deposed leader of a world-spanning empire, locked away in a suspension tube to keep her from causing Roma any more trouble, only to be released so she could play at being Omniversal Majestrix and take orders from a tin-suited dictator from another Earth who had the infuriating habit of referring to himself in the third person. If Sat-yr-nin had her druthers, she wouldn't hesitate to find the nearest available gun and use it to punch very large holes in her ungrateful ally's armor, and then seat herself upon the throne as the new Supreme Guardian. Unfortunately, there were no energy or projectile weapons at her disposal, due to the citadel's "state of grace": an all-encompassing field that rendered such munitions ineffective. True, she might have no trouble in obtaining a sword or battleaxe—at least *those* would still work in this environment—but they'd more than likely shatter against von Doom's metal encasement.

Her assessment wasn't entirely accurate, though, she had to admit upon further reflection. There was *one* energy weapon that still functioned aboard the citadel and, naturally enough, it was in the possession of von Doom, which was the only reason Sat-yr-nin was willing to put up with his commands. Having seen what sort of lash-up the dictator could assemble with just a soldering iron and a few parts from a multiphasic crystal accelerator, and the effect the beam it emitted had on Roma—slicing off cosmic layers of the Supreme Guardian like so much meat in a butcher shop—she had no desire to wind up being similarly turned inside-out after making an ill-conceived attempt to seize the throne. She might be mad, as so many of her opponents had accused her of being over the years—in their last moments, just before she had them executed—but she certainly wasn't stupid.

Perhaps what she really needed wasn't a weapon, but an alliance—with someone, *anyone*, other than von Doom. Not Stanton, certainly—the man was spineless and lazy, doing just enough to make himself useful to his new master, but no more. He might agree to help her, but once he sensed that von Doom might gain the upper hand—even for a

moment—he'd cut her loose and side with the good doctor. And she couldn't turn to the Captain Britain Corps, not without risking the chance that one or more of the costumed do-gooders might tumble on to her charade. Roma? Saturnyne? Not bloody likely. They'd caused her enough strife over the years; she wasn't about to give them another opportunity, no matter how badly she wanted von Doom out of the way. Besides, any pain they were currently suffering paled in comparison to what she'd had to go through at their hands whenever they felt the need to single her out for punishment. No, it had to be someone she could control, who could be used just as effectively against him as a gun, who—whether willingly or unwillingly—could take the brunt of von Doom's counterassault, giving her the opportunity to steal behind him and stick a blade through one of the unprotected areas in his armor. Sat-yr-nin's blue-colored lips grew back in a rictus-like grin as she imagined von Doom's anguished howls when the point of her dagger slipped through the eyeholes in his mask and punctured the soft corneas that lay just beyond the metal . . .

It took a few moments for her to realize that the sound she heard was coming, not from von Doom's tortured vocal chords, but from the miniature communications set built into the teardrop-shaped bauble dangling from her right ear. Slowly, her grin settled into a snarl of annoyance. She'd never liked it when someone interrupted her in the middle of a daydream, especially one that made her feel so . . . tingly inside.

She came to a halt and tapped the end of the comm set with a sculpted fingernail. "Yes?" she snapped.

"Your Whyness," came the response from a hesitant male voice. The title was used to acknowledge the real Saturnyne's station as Omniversal Majestrix, a job that required her to maintain order throughout the infinite dimensions. "This is Supervisor Troughton of the Dimensional Development Court. I apologize for disturbing you, but our four-dimensional scanners have detected movement in the vortex."

Sat-yr-nin frowned. "And why should that be of concern to *me*? I would imagine there's always *something* flitting about between dimensions."

"Umm . . . yes," Troughton mumbled. There was a tone in his voice that made it clear to Sat-yr-nin that the flippancy of her response was not one he would have expected from Roma's lieutenant; she'd have to be careful about that, before she gave herself away. "Yes, that's very true, Your Whyness, but the temporal signature of the traveler is consistent with that of the recall device we provided for the humans from Earth 616. It appears to have been activated."

Sat-yr-nin paused. Earth 616—that was von Doom's world . . . and

the X-Men's. And now someone else from that bothersome dimensional plane was coming here, it seemed. It wouldn't surprise her if it was that dunce Captain Britain, come to spoil von Doom's party.

"Your Whyness? Are you there?"

"Yes, Supervisor Troughton," Sat-yr-nin replied drolly, putting just enough of a bored tone in her voice to make him dismiss any thoughts he might have that she wasn't who she was supposed to be. "Have you any indications of who might be using the recall device?"

"None so far, m'lady," Troughton said. "But I *can* say that there are *two* beings in transit. They should be arriving at the debarkation suite shortly."

"Good work, Supervisor," Sat-yr-nin commented. "I shall meet with them once materialization is complete."

"Shall I have some officers from the Corps report there as well?" Troughton asked.

Sat-yr-nin bit down on her lower lip before she could say "no." Bad enough the Corps had been blocked from seeing Roma with reports that she wished to remain undisturbed; denying their presence at the debarkation suite would only further any suspicions they might have that something was wrong with the Guardian. She'd just have to bluff her way through the situation. Not a terribly difficult task when she thought about it, since most members of the Captain Britain Corps had a tendency to think with their fists, not their brains. They probably wouldn't even notice any differences in the Majestrix's behavior that might pop up if she momentarily slipped out of character.

"Well, of *course* you should, Troughton," she said, with more than a trace of annoyance. "You don't expect me to stroll into a meeting with unknown sentients without *some* sort of protection, do you?"

"Certainly not, Your Whyness!" Troughton replied quickly. "I shall inform the Corps at once!"

Sat-yr-nin grunted and switched off the comm-set before the man could continue his bothersome chattering. She needed time to think.

Two beings from von Doom's world, equipped with a recall device fashioned by Saturnyne's technicians: An emergency matter transporter that no doubt came with instructions that it should only be used in the direst of situations. But that would mean the travelers originated from the citadel. If so, to whom would Roma have given such a device?

"The X-Men . . ." Sat-yr-nin whispered. It made sense: They had come to Roma's aid when she asked them to lead a strikeforce on Sat-yr-nin's world. But now it appeared there were troubles on their own Earth, and two of them were hurrying back to report to Roma. She couldn't help but wonder if von Doom was aware of this, then dismissed

the thought. He was locked up in the throne room—how could he be aware of *anything* occurring outside its walls? And if he knew nothing about the travelers—

About her new *allies*, she thought darkly.

Sat-yr-nin smiled. It could only be destiny that would deliver two of the X-Men—the very group that had robbed her of an empire—into her hands, so that she could use them to create a new one.

What else could it be . . . ?

For Betsy, this was the second time in less than a week that she'd found herself shooting across infinity on a transmat beam; she didn't find this trip any more pleasurable than the first.

She could sense Warren's thoughts through the mental link she'd established a moment before they'd left Earth, and was amused to discover he didn't care much either for their unusual mode of transportation. That surprised her—after all the adventures he'd had as a founding member of the X-Men, one would think he'd become used to such forms of travel.

Just because I've done something a lot, hon, doesn't mean it gets any easier over time, he commented.

I . . . float corrected, Betsy replied as the omniverse went whipping past them like so many multicolored ribbons—ribbons that, as she watched with growing horror, began to turn a mottled brown along some of their lengths; a few had even turned black. Was *that* the effect the Cosmic Cube was having on the other dimensions? Seeing it in this manner, Betsy began to understand Roma's fears . . . and Saturnyne's insistence that the Guardian destroy the source of the "reality-cancer" before its taint became incurable.

But there had to be a cure for this bizarre disease; she was certain of it. If the Cube-virus was man-made, there was a chance that something could be created to counteract it; perhaps von Doom could even be coerced into working on it, despite the fact that he had no idea what had gone wrong in the first place—beyond the faulty mathematics involved in the construction of the Cube, that is. And yet, as disgusted as she had been when she'd forced her way into his mind to get at the truth after they'd arrived on the citadel, Betsy wouldn't hesitate to do it again, if that's what was required to force him to help. All she needed was Roma's permission.

What, though, if the "cancer" *wasn't* man-made? What if it was a result of the gray hole energy contained within the device—something for which there was no apparent "cure" . . . ?

Don't think like that, Betts, Warren said. *We have to remain positive*

about this situation, otherwise we might just as well give up once we get to the citadel. As long as there are even two X-Men free to act, the Earth still has a fighting chance. And if Doom's not the answer to the problem, then there must be somebody out there in all these dimensions who might be able to point us in the right direction.

Betsy couldn't help but smile. Warren, *luv*, what would I—

“—ever do without you?”

Betsy blinked. The vortex was gone, replaced with gleaming white walls, floor, and ceiling—so white, it was difficult to see where one ended and the other began. She'd been here before, or in a room very much like it, when she and von Doom had been plucked from the space between the dimensions by Roma's technicians. Apparently it was meant to be a debarkation suite of some sort; a cosmic version of an airport lounge where travelers were shunted after a dizzying flight through eternity. It also meant that they'd just have to wait until someone came to greet them, since there was nothing resembling a doorway that she could find.

Her attention turned to Warren, who was laying beside her, wings spread out beneath him. He glanced at her and flashed a boyish grin. “I think we've arrived.”

Betsy smiled. “You always *were* a master of the obvious.”

“Just one of my many abilities,” Warren replied, sitting up. He tapped an index finger against the corner of one eye. “When you've hung around the X-Men as long as I have, one of the things you pick up is the power of keen observation.”

Betsy raised an eyebrow. “And that would explain your uncanny knack for losing five sets of apartment keys in three months in *what* way . . . ?”

Warren grinned sheepishly. “I said the power of keen observation, *not* the power of long-term memory. *That's* the one you get when you hang around the Fantastic Four.”

“Does that mean, then, I should have your tailor sew little ‘4s’ on your clothing in order to better focus your attention on the contents of your pockets, or just have him attach the next key ring to the cuff of your jacket?”

Before Warren could come back with a witty response, a small hiss of escaping air cut short their conversation, and an oval-shaped portal suddenly appeared in one of the walls. Through it stepped a quartet of Captain Britains—two men, two women—looking ready for action in their Union Jack-themed costumes. Behind them trailed Saturnyne, who looked somewhat surprised when she caught sight of the two arrivals.

"The sister . . ." she heard the Majestrix mumble.

It was an odd response, considering she had seen Betsy and Professor Xavier off when Roma had sent the two X-Men back to Earth; she had even provided the recall device that lay smoking and twisted on the floor beside Betsy, its circuits overloaded by the trip, its single function now at an end. For a moment, suspicion gnawed at Betsy's mind—what sort of game was Saturnyne up to?—but then she quickly dismissed the notion. With the omniverse facing total destruction, it was perfectly understandable for Saturnyne's thoughts to be focused elsewhere, and then for her to be a trifle confused by Betsy and Warren returning to the citadel; most likely, she had been expecting Professor Xavier to be with her—along with the Cosmic Cube.

Betsy jumped to her feet, Warren beside her. "Saturnyne, I need to speak with Roma immediately."

The Majestrix shook her head. "Out of the question. The Supreme Guardian has sealed herself in the throne room and left instructions that, under no circumstances, is she to be disturbed. For *any* reason."

"'Any reason'?" Betsy was stunned. How could Roma lock herself away at a time like this? "But what about the Earth? The threat to the omniverse? She needs to know what's happened—"

"*When she is ready*," Saturnyne snapped, emphasizing each syllable. She flashed a smile that tried to appear friendly, but it was too wide, too false, to be anything less than mildly disturbing. "In the meantime, you can relate anything you would have to say to her to me. Should m'lady be willing to allow me access to the throne room, I will then take your information to her and ask for a decision."

Nonplused, uncertain how to respond, Betsy slowly turned toward Warren. He shook his head violently. "This is crazy. From what Betsy has told me, Roma is counting on every scrap of information she can get, since her equipment is on the fritz."

Saturnyne raised an eyebrow and looked down her nose at him. "'On the—' "

"The scrying glass," he explained curtly. "That device she uses to observe worlds. Betsy said it stopped working when von Doom's Cosmic Cube transformed the Earth."

The one visible eye—the left—that could be seen beyond the sweep of Saturnyne's Veronica Lake-styled hair widened in obvious surprise. "The . . . Cosmic Cube . . ." she said haltingly. "Yes . . ."

She suddenly turned on her heel and began hurriedly walking away. "I will speak with the Supreme Guardian," she called back. She glanced over her shoulder and gestured to the costumed guards. "Escort them to one of the suites. I will be along shortly to debrief them." Before either

Betsy or Warren could call her back, the Majestrix had turned the corner.

Warren turned to Betsy. "Well, *that* certainly got her moving."

Betsy frowned. "Yes . . ." she said slowly. "But something feels very wrong around here. I'd hate to disobey a directive from Roma, but—"

A polite cough interrupted her thoughts. She glanced over at one of the male officers, who smiled sheepishly and gestured toward the doorway. "If you'll just accomp'ny us, miss, we'll take you an' yer gennelmen-friend t'one o' the guest suites, jus' like the Majestrix ordered. I'm sure she'll get this all sorted out soon enough."

Betsy sighed. "Very well." She gazed at Warren, the corners of her mouth twisting downward with concern. "I just hope Saturnyne has some good news for us when she finally comes down from the mountaintop . . ."

"That . . . that toad! That miserable little armored subhuman!"

Sat-yr-nin stormed through the corridors of the citadel, ignoring everything and everyone around her as she muttered softly to herself. So, *that's* why Roma had been so preoccupied when she and von Doom had attacked her in the throne room! *That* was why she'd allowed her guard to drop! Somehow, von Doom had created a device that could alter reality—a detail he'd neglected to mention when he'd suggested that they form an alliance. It was also one she'd failed to focus on when von Doom and Roma openly discussed it in the moments before the Guardian had been overwhelmed by their two-pronged assault, simply because no such device had ever existed on Sat-yr-nin's world. But if what Braddock's sister and her lover had said was true—and what reason would they have to lie to their dear, trusted friend, Saturnyne?—then this "cube" contained power enough to potentially destroy not just a planet, but the omniverse itself!

On the one hand, Sat-yr-nin wasn't all that surprised that von Doom had withheld such information—if their positions had been reversed, she wouldn't have told him, either. On the other, though, she was incensed by his lack of trust; just because she wouldn't hesitate to slit his throat if the opportunity presented itself was no reason to keep her in the dark about such an important matter!

And yet, one thing was clear to her: von Doom no longer possessed the Cube. It was the only explanation she could conceive of that would account for his desire to seize the throne and gain a new powerbase. It also meant that someone else now controlled the Cube. Someone equally

as dangerous, no doubt, otherwise Braddock wouldn't have come to the citadel, begging to see Roma.

Sat-yr-nin smiled, her fevered pace slowing. Perhaps she'd been looking in the wrong direction for an ally—why bother with freaks of nature like the X-Men when there was someone out there in the omniverse who'd already shown they were capable of putting von Doom in his place? Who now held ultimate power in their hands? She slowly nodded, pleased with her assessment of the situation.

But before she could put any plan into action, she needed to know more about the Cube—how it functioned, what it was capable of doing, how it could be controlled. And there was only one handy source of such information, though she would have to be careful in her inquiries so as not to tip her hand.

A Cheshire Cat-like grin twisting her features, Sat-yr-nin resumed her pace, heading for the throne room. She would get the answers she sought, and then, perhaps, she would be able to show the infamous "Doctor Doom" just how the Mastrex of the Empire of True Briton rewarded her allies for their efforts.

Interlude V

THE RIFLE butt came down in a sweeping arc, and Prisoner #937881 howled in agony as his left cheekbone shattered.

For a few moments, he thought he had been struck blind as well by the blow, his vision suddenly plunged into total darkness, the inky blackness occasionally broken by kaleidoscopic flashes of color that shot across the void. Slowly, though, his sight began to return. He heard the thin fabric of his workclothes tear at the knees as he collapsed to the hardpacked ground, felt the warm stickiness of blood gush from the abraded skin. Somewhere off in the distance—or so it seemed to his ringing ears—a gruff voice taunted him for his weakness. It was hard to think clearly, even harder to form words to respond. He tried to open his mouth to speak, only to hear an unaccustomed moan issue from his bruised lips. It was quickly followed by a ragged gasp as a razor-sharp piece of bone sliced across the lining of his mouth.

Why? he thought bitterly. Why won't they let me die . . . ?

Standing above the prisoner, the two guards who had been escorting him across the compound roared with laughter. They watched with amusement as blood spilled from his mouth, to be hungrily absorbed by the eternally parched soil.

“What’s wrong, Jew?” one of them hissed. “I thought you were supposed to be powerful. Why, you can’t even make it across the yard without tripping and injuring yourself!”

The other guard chuckled. “Better watch out, Carl,” he warned, voice dripping with sarcasm. “This one could tear you in half.”

Carl looked surprised. “What—this one?” He lashed out with a booted foot, delivering a savage kick to the man’s ribs; an evil grin split

his lips as he heard one snap beneath his heel. The prisoner tried to cry out, but his lacerated mouth could only produce a soft whimper. "No, Wilhelm. You must be thinking of someone else."

The second guard rubbed his chin, as though deep in thought. "No, no, I'm certain this is the one." He reached down to grasp one of the prisoner's wrists, which was tattooed with an identification bar code. He unclipped a laser-scanner from his belt and swept it across the small black bars, then glanced at the readout. He nodded in satisfaction. "It's him, all right."

Carl clucked his tongue. "Amazing." He sighed melodramatically and slowly shook his head. "How the mighty have fallen." He bent down, leaning close enough to place his mouth beside one of the inmate's bloodied ears. "I guess that's what happens when you wrong the Emperor, isn't it?"

Wilhelm glanced at his watch. "We'd better get him to the infirmary, have that cheek and rib repaired. He's no good to the facility if he's unable to work." He looked up to exchange malicious smiles with his partner. "Besides, we can always pick up where we left off. He's not going anywhere."

"That's why I enjoy working with you, Wilhelm," Carl said, beaming. "Always thinking of the big picture."

"Makes the day go faster," the other guard replied. "You should try it sometime."

Carl shook his head, his oversized ears wagging slightly. "Not my style. You know me—live for the moment, get what pleasures you can while you can get them." As if to emphasize his point, he jabbed the toe of his boot into the prisoner's side, and smiled as the man coughed up blood-flecked spittle.

The guards grabbed their charge by the arms and roughly hauled him to his knees. The prisoner moaned again as he was dragged through the dirt, leaving behind a bloody trail.

"Don't worry, freak," Wilhelm said. "We'll have you back on your feet soon enough . . . just in time for our *next* session."

The trio set off for the medical center, weaving through the throngs of prisoners clustered in the main yard.

"You know, I was just wondering," Carl said in a conversational tone, lips twisted in a savage sneer. "When we see you again, how would you like us to address you? 'Jew'? 'Freak'?" The sneer quickly transformed into an animalistic snarl, and he practically spat out his next words. "Or do you prefer . . . 'Magneto'?"

Head lolling against his chest, blood continuing to seep from his pulped features, Inmate #937881—the mutant overlord who once went

by the name Erik Magnus Lensherr—mercifully slipped into unconsciousness before he could hear their cruel laughter.

The pain kept him from sleeping.

Lying on a worn, rusted metal bunk, Lensherr stared at the ceiling, his gaze drifting along the hairline cracks that ran through the cheap plaster. Beside him, his bunkmate—a half-starved, scar-covered younger man named Jean-Paul Beaubier—shifted around in his sleep, pulling more of the thin blanket they shared over himself. For a moment, Lensherr considered reclaiming his half of the covering, then decided not to—if wrapping himself in a makeshift cocoon brought some comfort to the hideously thin mutant in his final days, then let him enjoy it; Lensherr would have it all to himself soon enough.

Gingerly, he touched his reconstructed cheek with the tips of his fingers, and winced. The medics had told him the pain would linger for days, but he had refused medication—partly because he had no use for drugs, but mainly because he wasn't going to give his tormentors an opportunity to make him dependent on narcotics.

One of the broken slats in the bedframe shifted under his weight and dug into the small of his back . . . and the sizeable lump just under the skin there. Lensherr grunted. Like most nights, the neural inhibitor hardwired to his spinal cord was making him more than a little uncomfortable, though the pain it gave him was nowhere near as great as that caused by his current injuries. Not for the first time since his arrival in this hellhole, an unnamed concentration camp deep in the Canadian woods, he wished that he could find some way to remove the cursed thing that kept him from using his mutant powers, but he had already learned first-hand what would happen if he tried to disconnect the device without a proper medical procedure: It took him an entire day to regain the use of his paralyzed limbs—agonizing hours during which he was unable to walk, or eat without assistance, or speak clearly. The inhibitor had shut down most of his motor functions, leaving him a crippled, drooling idiot confined to his bed, unable to shut out the derisive comments hurled at him by the camp's guards.

For the first time in his life, he had prayed for death, to a god he had turned his back on when he was a teenager, after his parents had been killed by the Nazis. But, Lensherr knew, the Red Skull would not allow him such escape—not after he had used the Cosmic Cube to reanimate him, moments after the Nazi had sunk the obsidian blade of a special combat knife deep into his heart . . .

He had just turned over possession of the Cosmic Cube to his one-time friend, and long-time enemy, Professor Charles Xavier. In the moments before he did so, Lensherr had made an impassioned plea to the X-Men's leader to save one tiny piece of the world he had created: the life of his daughter, Anya.

Xavier had said no.

It was a crushing blow to Lensherr. In the "real" world, before he had ever held the Cube, before the Red Skull had used the device to turn the planet into a living hell, Anya had been the first child that Erik and his wife, Magda, had conceived during the years that followed their escape from Poland's notorious Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz. But though the war had ended a short time later, humanity's hatred for, and fear of, anything different never completely went away, and not even a ten-year-old girl was immune from their effects. The fire that took her life could have been prevented, had not the people of the town in which the Lensherrs had settled turned against the family, delaying Erik from reaching Anya before it was too late. As he watched his daughter's fire-consumed corpse tumble from their apartment window to land at his feet, Lensherr had felt his mind switch off as he slipped into madness. When he finally recovered, it was to find everyone around him dead, the air heavy with the stench of static electricity and burned flesh.

That had been the night Magneto—and his relentless quest to punish humanity, no matter the cost—was born.

But with the aid of the Cube, Lensherr had been able to reunite with Anya and Magda, to heal the wound in his soul that had lain festering for so long. All he wanted was a chance to keep what little goodness he had managed to create.

Xavier had clearly been torn by the unusual plea, considering all the times his old friend had tried to kill him. And yet, though his heart obviously went out to Lensherr, he had to reject it, explaining that, with the Cube threatening the existence of multiple dimensions, nothing of Magneto's world could remain if order was to be restored.

Lensherr hadn't known what to say in response. Instead, he had directed Xavier to take the Cube, then set off to be with his family in the last moments they would have together before the Professor changed everything back to normal.

But then a dagger had pierced his chest, and the Red Skull pushed past him to steal the Cube. Xavier had come to his aid, but Lensherr was more concerned with what might happen to Anya in a world overrun with Nazi butchers. He begged Xavier to protect his daughter, and, as consciousness began to fade, he dimly heard his friend agree. Secure

in the belief that Charles would honor his pledge, Lensherr ceased struggling against the chill that was spreading through his body. The world went dark—and yet he did not die. When he again opened his eyes, it was to discover that he was, astonishingly, still alive . . . and in a far worse situation than he could have ever imagined.

One that was horrifyingly familiar.

One that made the grave seem preferable to having to relive a nightmare from which he had barely escaped the first time . . .

But death was a luxury denied him. For all the beatings he received, for all the cuts, bruises, and broken bones he suffered, the guards were under the strictest orders to not deliver the fatal blow that would free the mutant overlord from his punishment. No matter the severity of his injuries—including the occasion just the day before, when his skull had been split open by a shovel wielded by another prisoner—he would always find himself back at the medical center, being tended to by sadists and drunkards whose pathetic ministrative skills had landed them here because they were more hindrance than help to the Empire's soldiers. And yet, such poor performance meant nothing at this camp—if a Jew or a gypsy or a mutant died at their clumsy hands, what did it matter?

Nor was he spared the memories of what had come before the Skull had shattered his dreams of a peaceful world. Under the control of its previous owners, Doctor Doom and Magneto, the Cube had altered the minds of every man, woman, and child on the planet, modifying them so that the population never questioned how such infamous supervillains could become their exalted monarchs; they simply accepted them as benevolent dictators and went on with their lives. But for what must have been purely personal reasons, the Skull had apparently decided to allow Lensherr use of his full faculties. No doubt it was his way of constantly reminding an old enemy of all he had lost when the world changed—friends, family . . .

"Anya . . ." Lensherr whispered, blinking away tears that had suddenly formed. "I'm sorry."

He swung his legs onto the floor to sit, hunched over, on the edge of the bed. Slowly, he stood up, ignoring the slight crackle of electricity along his spine that the inhibitor spat out whenever he moved. The soles of his wooden shoes scuffing against the equally worn wooden paneling, he stepped over and around the men curled up on the floor—a difficult task, given that there were 400 people crammed into a room meant to hold, perhaps, no more than sixty or seventy—and made his way to one of the small windows built into a far wall.

Through the wire mesh, he could see that the yard was empty, the remainder of the camp's 15,000 inmates having long since been hustled into the surrounding barracks to settle into troubled sleep. In the pale moonlight, guards moved along the watchtowers, their silhouettes occasionally merging with those of the structures as they walked a circuit around their stations. Straining his hearing, he could just make out some of their words as they passed the time conversing—mostly talk about the Empire's latest campaign, or thoughts of home, or vulgar and explicit comments about one of the female prisoners.

Lensherr sneered. He'd heard similar talk before, at another concentration camp in which he'd been locked away more than six decades ago. The guards here were no different than those at Auschwitz, or from any other jackbooted thug he'd ever encountered in his life; the only thing that separated them was the passage of time.

Time. If what Xavier had told him about the Cube was true, time was something that was swiftly running out for the universe. He didn't know how much was left, but he was certain it couldn't be a great deal. If he remembered correctly, the world run by von Doom had existed for at least a month; his own, less than a week. The Skull's Nazi paradise couldn't be more than a few days old, though, under the Cube's influence, it felt as though it had existed for decades. Which left—what? Days? Hours? Minutes, perhaps?

And where was Anya in all of this? Or Magda? Or his other children, Wanda and Pietro? Had they been scattered across the globe as the Cube took the world apart and restructured it to fit the needs of its new master? Could they have been transformed, too?

Or were they dead?

Lensherr shook his head. No. He couldn't believe that, *refused* to believe that. He had had much taken away from him over the years—his powers, his freedom, trusted allies and devoted followers—and had come to accept it as part of life; over time, they could be replaced or restored. But to have finally reclaimed the missing pieces of his heart, his soul, only to possibly lose them forever . . .

"I *will* escape from here and find you, Anya," he vowed, gazing at the stars that filled the night sky. "We *will* be reunited, though the gates of hell might be thrown wide open and every demon set upon me." His lips twisted in a sinister smile. "And then the Red Skull will discover just how much pain Magneto, Master of Magnetism, can inflict—before I tear him limb from limb . . ."

Lensherr turned from the window, made his circuitous way back to the cot, and sat down. He huffed out a mighty breath, only to tremble spasmodically as racking coughs punched their way out from his lungs.

Slowly, the coughs subsided, and he spat out a thick wad of yellow-tinged mucus; he noticed traces of blood in the phlegm. With a grunt, he roughly wiped his mouth with the cuff of his black-and-white striped prisoner uniform.

“This was *not* how I expected my retirement years to pass . . .” he muttered.

IT WAS the sight of the invaders, more than the staggering numbers of them, that shook Phoenix with uncontrollable fear.

From a distance, they looked like giant insects, their dark-green, chitinous bodies propelled by a half-dozen segmented legs, each of which ended in a deadly, pointed barb. It was only as they drew closer that it became evident they were far more than oversized cockroaches—the death’s-head grin naturally formed by their horrifyingly large, razor-sharp teeth, and the malevolent gleam in their multifaceted eyes, were proof enough of that.

They were members of an alien race called the Brood—and they were all heading in her direction.

From her vantage point on a small hill, Phoenix could see thousands upon thousands of the invaders as they advanced; they covered the ground as far back as the horizon, possibly even beyond that.

A hand gently touched her shoulder, and she almost jumped out of her skin. She turned to find her husband, Scott Summers, standing just behind her, a grim smile etched on his rugged features, looking handsome and determined in his blue-and-yellow costume. With his eyes hidden behind the single-piece ruby quartz visor that kept his destructive forcebeams under control, it was easy to understand why he went by the codename “Cyclops.”

“Don’t worry, hon,” he said reassuringly. “We’ve been in tougher scraps than this. All we have to do is hold off the Brood until the rest of the X-Men can get here.”

Phoenix tried to return the smile, to put on a brave face in the shadow of overwhelming odds, but could only manage a sickly grimace. She cast a furtive gaze at the swarm that was bearing down on them,

then turned back to her husband. "Nothing *too* demanding, right?" she replied.

Cyclops nodded. "A walk in the park." He reached out to brush away a few strands of her bright-red hair that had fallen across her equally bright green eyes, then kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"You lovebirds just about done?" asked a gruff voice nearby.

Phoenix pivoted, then tilted her head downward, to make eye contact with a man a few inches shorter than she. Like Cyclops, he wore a costume of blue and yellow spandex, but the sleeves of the yellow tunic were missing, exposing thickly-muscled arms covered with an equally thick matting of dark hair, and the mask covering the top half of his face sported two unusual protrusions that resembled bat-like ears. He stood in a half-crouch, as though that was his normal stance, lips pulled back in a permanent snarl, head cocked to one side, apparently listening to some sound only he could hear; it all reminded Phoenix of a wild animal, ready to spring to the attack.

She frowned. "Is there a problem, Wolverine?"

The snarl flowed into a smile that was obviously meant to look friendly, but Wolverine's sharpened canine teeth only made his expression look more threatening. "Nah, Jeannie," he replied in a rough-edged voice. "Just makin' sure you an' Scottie are focused on the job."

"Don't worry about us, Logan," Cyclops shot back. "We'll be fine." He flashed a quick smile. "But you'll let me know the minute *you* need any help, right?"

Wolverine clenched his fists, and a half-dozen, foot-long spikes suddenly protruded from the backs of his hands. He scraped the edges of the deadly bio-weapons against each other, with a sound like that of a sword being drawn from its scabbard. "*That'll* be the day."

"They're getting closer," said a woman standing near Wolverine, each syllable wrapped in a cultured British accent. She was Asian, possibly of Japanese origin, in her twenties, and she stood as tall as Phoenix, dressed in what appeared to be a dark blue latex swimsuit with matching stockings and fingerless, full-length gloves. Lavender-hued hair tumbled down to her waist, and her supermodel features bore an unusual, j-shaped tattoo that covered part of the left side of her face.

"Den let 'em come, Psylocke," replied a handsome, brown-haired man in a black-and-maroon outfit and brown leather duster. His eyes glowed as brightly as the playing cards he held between the thumbs and index fingers of both hands. "Ol' Gambit, he an expert when it come t'killin' bugs."

"You *oughtta* be, considerin' that pigsty of an apartment you keep in New Orleans," quipped the woman beside him. She wore a green-

and-yellow spandex bodysuit, accented with yellow leather kid gloves and knee-high boots; a black "X" adorned the left breast of the bodysuit, as well as the buckle of the loose-fitting belt that rested on her hips. A battered, brown leather aviator's jacket, its sleeves pushed up past her elbows, completed the outfit. Her hair was a lush brown and fell past her waist, with a white streak that ran down the center, starting from her forehead and ending at the tips.

"Dat's cold, Rogue," the one calling himself Gambit said. He sighed melodramatically. "An' here I always t'ought o' dat as our special place . . ."

A sharp gust of wind brought a quick end to the discussion before Rogue had a chance to comment. Phoenix looked up, to see a dark-skinned, white-haired woman descending from the pink-and-purple-tinted sky. Her black leather outfit was highlighted by a large cape that swept outward like a great pair of wings, allowing her to navigate effortlessly through the weather systems that were hers to command. She lightly touched down in the center of the group.

"Nice'a ya t'join us, Storm," Wolverine said. "Thought the flamin' party was gonna get started without ya."

Storm flashed a warm smile. "I had left my invitation in my other costume, Wolverine. I did not think I would be able to attend the gathering without it."

Wolverine laughed—a sharp, barking note. "Always room fer one more, darlin', with or without an invite." He nodded toward Cyclops. "Right, Scottie?"

Cyclops grunted in reply. He pointed at the advancing lines of invaders. The Brood was picking up speed, the tread of millions of legs sending a tremor through the blasted and burned earth that set Phoenix's teeth to chattering.

"Here they come!" Cyclops yelled. "Get ready!"

Phoenix drew in a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then slowly released it, forcing herself to calm down. Lose your head during combat, she knew, and you stood a very good chance of losing your life. Her gaze drifted down from the battlefield, and for the first time she realized that, like her teammates, she was also attired in a colorful costume: a green spandex bodysuit, accessorized with gold opera-length gloves, thigh-high boots, and a sash that trailed around her ankles, the latter held together by a bird-shaped clasp. The emblem adorning her chest represented her namesake: a mythological creature always fated to die in fire, only to be reborn in order to start the cycle anew.

What an odd choice of clothing to wear to my death, she suddenly thought.

And then the Brood swept over her, their war cry filling the air like the wails of the damned as they burst out of the gates of hell . . .

Jean Sommers awoke with a start, a scream caught in her throat. Eyes wide, breathing hard, she looked at her surroundings in a blind panic, head whipping from side to side, waiting for the monsters that lurked in the darkness to claim her. Eventually, when no attack came, she realized that she was no longer on a battlefield but in her bed, safe from the claws and teeth that had been trying to rend her flesh.

Slowly, her labored gasps subsided, her racing heart eased to a normal pace, and she sat up. Ignoring her chattering teeth, she used the heels of her hands to wipe away the tears that had streamed down her cheeks, then smoothed back her sweat-drenched hair, away from her face. A tremor ran through her body, and she pulled the bed sheets tighter around herself, seeking some comfort from the soft touch of the silken layers.

The dream—the nightmare—was still fresh in her mind, and she knew it would be some time before she was able to get back to sleep. She pounded the bed with a fist—why was it always the *bad* dreams that had to be the ones that lingered, the ones that could be remembered with crystal clarity even hours later, when the cloying darkness had been replaced with bright sunshine?

But where had *this* particular nightmare come from? she had to wonder. What would make her conjure up such grotesqueries as that . . . “Brood,” was it? And those ridiculous clothes she and Scott had been wearing! They weren’t regulation combat uniforms—at least none she had ever seen during her brief visits to the military bases at which Scott had been stationed; they looked more like fanciful costumes from a newspaper scientfiction comic strip. Despite the heart-pounding fear she’d just experienced, she had to laugh at the vision of herself dressed in an outfit so scandalous it left little to the imagination, fighting alongside her husband, who wore his own like a second skin, even though the color scheme was nothing like what he normally wore—mostly blacks and browns and dark grays. She had to admit, though, that it made him look quite sexy . . .

That woman had been there, too, she suddenly realized; that Asian actress from the cover of *Der Television Guide*. Elisabeth Braddock, she remembered. But that name had she gone by in the dream—

Psylocke, a small voice whispered from the back of her mind.

Jean shook her head. It was a name that meant nothing to her, and yet . . .

And yet, somehow, she felt that it should. Exactly *why* that might

be was as much a mystery to her as the source of the bizarre images—and individuals—that had populated the dream. Wolverine? Storm? Rogue? They sounded like characters from a children's story, but something in the depths of her mind insisted that they were familiar names, *important* names, as important to her as her own.

Phoenix, said the voice.

“Ridiculous,” she muttered, and kicked the sheets aside. Ignoring her slippers, she stepped from the bed and walked to the bathroom, enjoying the cool feel of the plush carpeting between her toes. She flicked on the vanity lights lining the mirror, wincing as the oversized bulbs filled the room with blazing fluorescence, then ran cold water in the marble sink while she tied back her hair with a large scrunchie. She splashed her face a few times, hoping to wash away the last remnants of the nightmare along with the sleep-crust stuck to her eyelashes, and dried herself on a black cotton towel hanging from the shower curtain. As she lowered the towel, she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror.

She was still young, still attractive—no denying that. But there was an emptiness in her eyes, as though the life had been drained from them.

And that was when the apparition appeared in the mirror.

It wasn't a real apparition, not some ghost that suddenly popped up in the silvered glass, its dead hands reaching out to grasp her. No, this was a strangely alternate reflection of her own features: one of a vibrant-looking woman with a mane of fiery hair, eyes filled with a pale-green light that glowed as warmly as the smile that dimpled her cheeks. It was her, and yet it wasn't. She knew this woman, she suddenly realized—it was the Jean Grey she'd once aspired to be, full of life, ready to take on the world.

It still could be, her reflection said. *If you're willing to take a chance.*

Jean raised her hands, intending to rub her eyes so she could make certain that she was actually seeing this, to convince herself that she wasn't still asleep and possibly entering another layer of the nightmare. But she stopped short when she saw that her reflection was wearing golden, opera-length gloves . . . and a bright-green costume.

She screamed, and stumbled back, her right elbow glancing off the towel rack before she finally came to rest in an awkward sitting position on the clothes hamper. She moaned loudly and rubbed the funny bone, gritting her teeth as waves of pain traveled up and down her arm.

Are you all right? asked the voice in her head.

Jean clasped her hands over her ears, though she knew that would do nothing to block the sound, and screwed her eyes tightly shut. Maybe if she didn't look at the mirror, she considered, then the strange vision

would fade away. Better yet, maybe she should just walk out of the bathroom . . .

She rose unsteadily and cautiously opened her eyes, training her sight on a framed movie poster hanging on the far side of the bedroom: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—one of her favorite German Expressionist films of the early twentieth century. By focusing her attention on the painted image of the stern-faced “somnambulist,” she was able to ignore the growing urge to look at her reflection—or, rather, the costumed duplicate who now lived in the glass.

Jean, please, the voice said. *We need to talk.*

“No!” she cried, and bolted from the room. She slammed the door behind her, then threw herself into a reading chair that stood near the foot of the bed. She sat in darkness, hands still pressed to her ears, rocking back and forth on the edge of the seat, wondering why this was happening to her.

She’d never displayed any signs of mental illness—at least, none that she could ever recall. She didn’t talk out loud to herself, didn’t think anyone was out to “get” her, didn’t hear hidden messages in songs playing on the radio. Oh, there was the occasional bout of depression—what housefrau *didn’t* suffer from them? When your life was an endless succession of boring days and—in her case—lonely nights, when the colorful fantasies you’d once dreamed of becoming *somebody* in the world degenerated into finding ways to better serve your husband’s dreams instead, who *wouldn’t* get depressed?

But to hear voices? To see things that weren’t there?

It was madness.

No, it’s not, Jean. You’re not mad—you’re fine. If you’d just let me explain—

“A nervous breakdown,” she whispered. “That must be it. I’m having a nervous breakdown.”

A tremor of fear ran through her body, and she ran shaky hands through her hair. She couldn’t begin to fathom why it might have happened, or what could have caused it. Was her life *that* terrible? Was her mind *that* desperate for escape from crushing boredom? Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, obscuring her vision, but that was all right—it meant she couldn’t see the costumed woman who had suddenly appeared in the poster frame.

Jean—listen to me! You’re not going crazy—I’m really here, in your mind. I don’t know how it happened, but you have to help me! At the sake of sounding overly dramatic, there are literally billions of people depending on it!

Jean laughed, a slightly hysterical note she didn’t even try to con-

trol. "What about your friends in the . . . 'X-Men,' is it? Why not ask 'Storm' or 'Gambit' or—"

Scott, Phoenix said. *What about Scott, Jean? Should I ask him?*

Jean froze, an image of her husband popping into her thoughts. She missed him so much, right now. "Scott . . ."

That's right, Jean, Phoenix said gently. There's a Scott Summers where I come from, too. You saw him in the dream.

"My dream . . ."

My memory, actually, the reflection said. One you unconsciously tapped into while you were sleeping. She shivered, and hugged her shoulders. A replay of a particularly unpleasant moment in my life—one I never would have survived if I didn't have a man I love more than life itself, and who loves me just as much. The only man I've ever felt that way about. I'd do anything, sacrifice everything, for him, without hesitation. She paused. You know that sort of feeling, don't you?

"Y-yes . . ." Jean said slowly, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Yes, I do."

He's out there, somewhere, Jean, Phoenix said. Possibly even trapped inside your Scott's subconscious, as I am here. I want to free him; I want to free all my friends, before time runs out for everyone on the planet. But I can't do that without your help.

Jean drew in a shuddering breath, then released it. "Why me?"

You're the only person I can speak with. No one else can hear me because . . . well, because I've become a part of you.

Jean blinked. "You're . . . me?"

Phoenix wagged a gloved hand at chest height. *Not exactly. More of a . . .* She glanced upward, as though she could see the picture frame, then shrugged. *Well, more of a reflection of you than actually being you. An alternate Jean Grey from a different reality.*

"And how did you get inside my head?" she asked after a few moments.

It's kind of complicated, Phoenix explained. She tapped the side of her head with an index finger. Let's just say that I got trapped in your subconscious. It's taken a while for me to free myself and get your attention.

"Uh-huh. And that doesn't sound crazy to you?" Jean asked sarcastically.

Phoenix opened her mouth to reply, then paused. *I see your point. But I swear to you, she added hurriedly, you're not going insane. Just hear me out, all right?*

"If I help you," Jean replied, with a considerable amount of hesitation, "then what?"

Her glamorous twin smiled. *Well, if it all goes correctly, and my friends and I are able to put things back the way they should be, you won't even remember I was here. It'll be as if I never existed.*

"And my Scott?"

The same for him. With luck, we'll be out of your . . . hair before you even know it. The smile broadened. *What do you say? Helping save the Earth sounds a lot better than chasing dust bunnies and cobwebs, doesn't it?*

Jean paused. "I won't have to wear anything . . . scandalous, will I?"

Phoenix chuckled. *I thought you liked this outfit.*

"In the privacy of my bedroom, perhaps," Jean replied with a small smile, her cheeks reddening considerably. "But it's nothing I'd care to be seen wearing in public."

Jean stared quietly at the woman in the glass. It would be so easy to turn and walk away and pretend none of this conversation had ever occurred. Well, not so easy, she considered; if Phoenix really *was* taking up space in her mind, it would mean she'd still have her buzzing like an annoying fly in her thoughts, insisting she be heard. Still, what the woman said *felt* sincere . . . and true.

Is *this* how madness begins? Jean wondered. With a belief that something so totally outrageous is undeniably true? If so, she decided, better to suffer a madness borne of pursuing a crazy dream of saving the world, than spend the rest of her mundane life wondering what might have happened if she'd only *listened*.

It was certainly better than formulating plans for assaulting the plaque buildup on the shower tiles in the morning . . .

"What do you need me to do?" she asked.

"If it were up to *me*, I would turn this craft around and return to England."

Kurt Wagner folded blue-skinned arms across his chest and glanced around the cramped cabin at his fellow travelers, almost daring them to respond to his complaint. Beside him, the blond-haired shapeshifter known simply as "Meggan" grunted in disgust and pulled her swastika-adorned headband down over her eyes. Wagner smiled, flashing sharpened fangs, admiring—not for the first time—the manner in which her skintight uniform hugged her exquisite curves, the eagle-like emblem of the shoulderless top displaying a copious amount of cleavage. Wagner sighed. If only she wasn't so enamored of her thuggish boyfriend . . .

"For the tenth—and last—time, Nightcrawler, shut your mouth," ordered the hulking brute of a man seated in front of him, as if on cue.

“Whether or not we continue this mission is not *your* decision to make, we are *not* returning to England until we have completed it, and I am tired of your constant whining.” He gazed over his shoulder at Wagner, lips drawn back to bare his teeth, blue eyes narrowed beneath the black-and-white headband that matched Meggan’s. “And if you continue leering at my woman, *freak*, I will have no other recourse than to crush your thick skull and toss your carcass from this ship. You may be of true German descent, unlike the rest of us, but it will be a cold day in Hades before I allow a genetic mishap like *you* the opportunity to sully a warrior maiden of the Reich with your foul touch.” With that, Hauptmann Englande, one of the Empire’s premiere superpowered heroes and Wagner’s commanding officer in the team codenamed “Lightning Force,” turned back to the controls of the V-winged jet he was piloting. Apparently, he considered the discussion over; wisely, Wagner decided to agree with him.

Chin resting on a three-fingered balled-up fist, he gazed out one of the observation ports in the craft’s hull, his frown deepening as he watched the endless wastes of the Sahara Desert streak by below. Even though the jet’s cabin was air conditioned, he was certain he could feel the waves of heat rising from the sands, and this was supposed to be one of the *cooler* days in the region. He wasn’t looking forward to stepping into such a blast furnace when he and his teammates arrived at their destination.

He shifted a bit in his seat, taking some weight off the three-foot-long prehensile tail that protruded from just above his buttocks; sitting too long like this often caused it to cramp, and he was uncomfortable enough in the small cabin as it was without suffering from muscle spasms. But changing position caused the high, starched collar of his blood-red-colored uniform to bite into his neck; twisting around to fix that problem resulted in his knocking off his mirrored sunglasses, exposing his light-sensitive, pupilless yellow eyes to the harsh desert glare. Retrieving his glasses from the floor, Wagner sat back in a huff—on his tail.

A soft chuckle reached his pointed ears, and he turned to find Meggan gazing at him, a gloved hand holding up an edge of the headband so she could watch him with her right eye. A small, wicked smile played at the corners of her mouth, and she glanced at the back of her boyfriend’s head, then back to Wagner. For just an instant, her body shimmered, like the heat waves outside the jet—she had activated her shapeshifting abilities. When the effect ended, her skin was as deep a blue as Nightcrawler’s, her eye just as yellow, her waist-length hair just

as black; the tip of a pointed tail flexed sinuously behind her as she playfully stretched, arching her back.

Wagner felt his heart pound within his chest, unable to hide his attraction for her, even at the risk of sending his commander into a murderous rage . . . should he become aware of what was happening behind his back. Smiling broadly, encouraged by the come-hither gesture of Meggan's now three-fingered hand, he reached out to place his own on her thigh—and was rewarded with a slap across the face by her tail. He reached up to touch his burning cheek, and was surprised to find blood on his white glove.

“What is going on back there?” demanded Hauptmann Englande.

“Nothing, my Captain,” purred Meggan. Wagner noted with surprise how quickly she had shifted back to her normal appearance. “Kurt was merely . . . stretching his tail.”

Englande grunted. “Well, keep it in your pants, Wagner,” he said with a snarl. “I don't need that damnable thing strangling me because you can't control it.”

“I will . . . endeavor to do so, Captain,” Wagner said glumly. He cast a heated glance at Meggan, who laughed silently and pulled the headband back down over her eyes. Once again, she had played him for a fool, and he had willingly allowed his overactive libido to put him in harm's way.

Wagner folded his arms across his chest and sneered at the blond-haired vixen. One day that blasted tease was going to get him killed . . .

The V-wing touched down less than a half-hour later, settling onto the hot sands with a burst of Vertical Take-Off and Landing jets. Wagner stared out through the windshield, repulsed by the ramshackle appearance of the village just ahead—what sort of barbarians would choose to live in such a manner, withering away on the edge of a vast desert, when the Reich offered so much in more civilized locations? But then he saw the dark skin of the village's inhabitants as they came out to greet the new arrivals, and he quickly understood. They were blacks—genetic inferiors in relation to the pure Aryan makeup, exiled to their “mother country” so the Empire could keep them all in one place. The realization sent an involuntary shudder through him. The situation reminded him of Lightning Force's last visit to Genosha, the island-nation just to the east of the African coast that served as the dumping ground for most of the world's mutant population—and the prime source of Reichsminister Arnim Zola's material for genetic experimentation.

“What is this place?” he asked.

"It is called Araouane," Englande explained, rifling through the contents of the mission pouch he held.

"And *this* is where the Ministry of Health wanted us to go?" Wagner said incredulously. "What could they possibly want from such a worthless ruin? And why should the Empire's most celebrated strikeforce be wasted on a task that could be carried out by some lowly errand boy?"

Englande glared at him. "I do not know, Nightcrawler. Perhaps you can ask Reichsminister Zola yourself when we meet with him later."

"M-meet with him . . . ?" Wagner stammered, unable to keep the fear from his voice.

Meggan suddenly wrapped her arms around his shoulders and playfully hugged him. "What's wrong, little elf?" she whispered in his ear.

"*Nothing*," Wagner snapped, a little too forcefully.

Meggan laughed, and roughly tousled his closely trimmed hair. "I think the Reichsminister *frightens* you, little elf," she chided. "Why *is* that, I wonder?" She smiled brightly. "Perhaps you fear he might take an interest in you, make you the focus of one of his . . . research projects?" She stroked his cheek, reopening the cut with a quick slice of a fingernail.

"*Enough*, Meggan," Englande snarled. "We're wasting time." He turned in his seat and pointed toward a door at the rear of the cabin. "Go retrieve the little Jew from her cell and meet us outside. There's work to be done, and we may have use for her talents, although I doubt there will be any trouble."

Meggan pouted, bringing a small, satisfied smile to Wagner's lips. "All right, Brian. You don't have to be so brusque."

"*Go*," Englande said.

She sniffed derisively and headed for the cargo bay, slamming the door behind her as she left the cabin.

Wagner flashed an uneven grin at Englande, hoping his friendly act would distract his commander from focusing on the attention he had paid to the fluid motions of Meggan's exit. "Women, eh?"

Hauptmann Englande sneered at him. "Shut up, freak." He shoved Wagner aside and headed for the cabin door that led outside.

Luckily for the blue-skinned mutant, the stream of German invectives he muttered as Englande climbed from the jet apparently went unheard.

The group reassembled a few minutes later in the shadow of the V-wing, Wagner's dark coloration making him almost invisible as he clung to the cool underbelly of the craft.

The trio had been joined by the remaining member of Lightning

Force: a gaunt, frightened-looking young woman named Katheryne Pryde. She was usually addressed only by the codename "Shadowcat" by her teammates, if for no other reason than it kept her at an emotional distance from them; calling her by name, even allowing her to sit in the cabin rather than in the tiny room she occupied in the back of the jet, would mean they considered her one of them, and that wasn't about to happen. For although she might be a mutant like Wagner, she would never be treated as his equal—he was a German, at least, a proud warrior of the Fatherland; she was a Jewess, her left wrist tattooed with an identification bar code, head shaved bare, forehead emblazoned with a six-pointed Star of David. She wore a light-blue shift with billowing sleeves and a hood that served to hide the haunted look that constantly filled her brown, doe-like eyes. At a glance, from the way she hovered a few inches above the ground, her body almost transparent in the brutal sunlight, one might think she was a ghost—and, in fact, that is exactly what she was: a woman forever trapped between life and death, between light and shadow. A victim of her own mutant power to phase through solid objects, gone horribly, fatally, wrong, courtesy of experiments conducted by the Ministry of Health.

Hands on hips, Hauptmann Englande looked every bit the posturing *übermensch*, every bit the epitome of Aryan superiority, and Wagner was certain he knew it, too. His skintight uniform—the bottom half white, the top half red, decorated with a representation of an eagle—swelled as he puffed out his chest, the better to make an impression on the villagers as they drew closer. Sunlight glinted along the edges of black leather boots and gauntlets shined to a brilliant polish. A coarse desert breeze ruffled the top of his closely cropped blond hair. No man—no warrior—could look better.

A man in his late sixties or early seventies, skin toughened to dark leather by decades spent under the powerful rays of the sun, hunched his way over to them, his weight supported by a thick, gnarled staff; Wagner couldn't help but wonder where he could have obtained the wood from which to fashion it in this endless dune sea. Presumably, this was a village elder, sent to greet the quartet, although the fear that shone in his eyes was all too evident.

"Good day, my friends," he said in halting German, stopping directly in front of Englande. He smiled, revealing a wide gap where the right-side row of his upper teeth should have been. "How may we of Araouane be of service to you?"

"First off, old man," Englande said, his anger barely contained, "we are *not* your friends, and I will turn what few teeth you have left to a fine powder if you insult us with such unwanted familiarities again."

Hidden in the shadow of the V-wing, Wagner rolled his eyes. *Hauptmann Englande*—as always, *the master of tact* . . . he thought sarcastically.

“Secondly,” the costumed warrior said, gesturing at his companions, “we are Lightning Force, the Empire’s greatest band of decorated agents, here on a mission for Reichsminister of Health Arnim Zola himself.” He gazed past the elder, at the crowd of villagers who were standing well back from the jet. “We have come for the mutant—the one called Ororo Munroe!” he bellowed.

A loud murmur ran through the crowd as the citizens of Araouane talked amongst themselves. And yet, when the garbled conversation died down, none of them made a move to either point out the mission’s target, or move aside to allow her passage.

Englande frowned, and turned to the elder. “Tell her to step forward, old man, or we will be forced to find her ourselves . . . in the rubble of your village.”

“There is no need for threats, Captain,” said a strong female voice from within the crowd. “These kind people merely sought to keep me from harm.”

The congregation parted, and a lithe, white-haired woman moved forward. She held her head high as she walked toward the team, as though she were royalty, or the goddess she had pretended to be for a time. Wagner had heard reports about this Ororo Munroe, and the mutant powers she had once wielded, but none of them had ever mentioned the obvious strength of her will . . . or her incredible beauty.

“And what sort of harm might that be, girl?” quipped Meggan. “You should feel honored that the Reichsminister has requested your presence.” It was clear to Nightcrawler from both her attitude and body language as she stepped closer to Englande that Meggan had been expecting to find a wizened hag instead of this dark-skinned lovely; now, she felt threatened. After all, Nightcrawler wasn’t the only one in Lightning Force with an eye for the ladies . . .

“I have already experienced Zola’s . . . hospitality on one occasion,” Munroe replied, “and hoped never to do so again.” She gestured at the small of her back, where Nightcrawler knew a neural inhibitor had been surgically attached. “He has already crippled me—what more could he possibly want?”

“It is not my place to ask such questions, mutant,” Englande said curtly. “Nor is it yours.” He jerked a thumb at the V-wing. “Get in the craft before I lose my patience.”

As Munroe approached the ladder that led up to the flight cabin, Wagner released his grip on the hull, executing a perfect three-toed

landing. Ignoring the heat of the sand as it permeated through his leather boots, he stepped from the shadows to greet her, adjusting his sunglasses so they rested midway down his nose. He wanted the best possible view of her as she drew close.

The sight of a yellow-eyed demon materializing from beneath the plane obviously took her by surprise. Munroe gasped and stepped back, losing her balance as the sand shifted under her foot. Wagner's tail flicked out, encircling her waist and pulling her into his arms.

"*Gutten tag, Fräulein Munroe,*" he said, gaining some pleasure from her touch, even though she was trying to push him away. Her skin was smooth, not yet weathered by the sun and sand, and he detected a hint of jasmine in the locks of her flowing mane. She really *was* an exquisite creature, even if she was—

He froze suddenly, then pulled her closer, until their noses were almost touching. He stared into her pupilless eyes, studied the curve of her cheekbones, the fullness of her lips, the cut of her hair. There was something about her, something familiar . . .

"Do I *know* you, Fräulein?" he asked.

"Of *course* you know her, Wagner," Englande said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "She's a *freak*—like you. Your kind *always* recognizes each other. You're much like the Jews in that—" he quickly rounded on the wraith-like Pryde "—isn't that so, Shadowcat?"

The spectral woman flinched. "Y . . . yes . . . Hauptmann Englande . . ." she said quietly. "That is so . . ." She acted as though afraid that the hulking brute might strike her, as impossible as that would have been, given her constant state of intangibility.

Wagner released their prisoner and took a step back. He shook his head, unable to make sense of the thoughts now racing through his head. "Strange as it may seem, Fräulein, I somehow feel as though I should know you. Have we met before—Tangiers, perhaps? Or Cairo?"

Munroe shook her head. "And yet I feel the same," she said with a mixture of surprise and confusion. "But why should that be?"

Before Wagner could reply, Meggan stepped forward and gave the white-haired mutant a brutal shove between the shoulder blades, sending her bouncing off the armored plating of the V-wing. The woman turned to face her attacker, but wisely made no attempt to retaliate.

"I am certain we will have plenty of time to discuss it on our way to Genosha, as fascinating a topic as it may be," Meggan said caustically. "But the Reichsminister is a very busy, very important man, and should not be kept waiting, Nightcrawler—" she pointed an accusatory finger at him "—while you try to determine in which port of call you may have picked up this African trollop." She gave Munroe another

shove, and pointed at the ladder. "Now, get into the *verdamnt* plane, cow, before I finish the job of 'crippling' you that the Ministry started!"

Wordlessly, Munroe clambered up the rungs, Meggan close behind. Not needing to be told what to do, Shadowcat quietly floated upward, phasing through the V-wing's hull on her way back to her cramped quarters, apparently eager to put some distance between herself and their volatile leader.

Wagner turned to face him. "What about the others?" he asked, pointing toward the villagers.

Englande shrugged. "My orders say nothing about razing this sty, or exterminating the filth living within its walls. No doubt the Emperor has some use for these dregs, astounding as it seems."

"And what that might be—"

"Is none of our business."

Wagner nodded. "I thought as much."

The sound of Meggan barking orders at their prisoner caused both men to look at the cabin's hatchway, as though expecting one or both of the women to come tumbling out of the craft, locked in combat. There was a loud *crack*, as from someone being brutally slapped across the face, followed by a throaty chuckle.

Englande smiled. "I believe Meggan has matters well in hand," he commented. "Women, eh?" he added with a wink.

The smile that had started to form on Wagner's face was wiped away as his superior officer pushed him aside and began climbing the ladder.

Sitting on his tail on the hot sand, feeling the coarse grains working their way into his uniform, Wagner vented his frustrations by pounding the ground with his fists. Aware that the villagers were watching him with a degree of amusement, he stood up and adjusted his clothing, only to scrape his jaw along the starched collar. He grunted angrily, turning his back to the crowd, and made his way up the ladder.

"If it were up to *me*, I would turn this craft around and return to England . . ." he muttered.

SHE WAS burning.

Flames licked at her body, her face, scorching her hair and flesh, filling the air with the pungent odor of overcooked meat. She rolled across the tiled floor, beating at the fire with her hands, trying to extinguish it as it charred her skin, melting the leather bodysuit until it was welded to her, the metal zippers branding her with small serrated patterns as they bonded with bubbling flesh through torrents of blood. She pulled frantically at the material, shrieking in agony as each piece she tore came away with another layer of blackened skin, a small part of her mind begging, praying, for the torment to end.

Her ears filled with blood, her eyes began to boil away. And yet she could still hear the laughs of the green-skinned monsters standing around her, still see the oversized weapons they carried—the bringers of flames, of death.

And then the fire roared higher, brighter, hotter, consuming all she was, all she had been . . .

Rogue sat up on the cold deck where she had collapsed, her screams still echoing along the smooth metal walls of the small chamber. Her breath caught in her throat—the nauseating smell of burnt flesh still clung to her clothes, her hair, still filled her nostrils—and she coughed raggedly. She spat black-flecked phlegm into a corner, the taste of bile thick on her tongue, then yanked at the leather hood encasing her head until the zipper finally gave.

Her face was dirty and streaked with tears, her eyes thoroughly bloodshot; she hadn't stopped crying until fatigue had gently, finally,

wrapped her in darkness soon after she'd been returned to the battle-cruiser.

She'd failed them: the High Council of Ishla'non. Watched in horror as the Skrull warriors butchered them, using flamethrowers to exterminate the pacifistic creatures instead of the powerful sidearms they wore strapped to their thighs—all the better to prolong their victims' pain . . . and the Skrulls' pleasure. She had still been linked to the hivemind when the one called Geer'lak was set alight; theirs had been a shared agony, one that continued to build with frightening intensity until it consumed every member of the Ilon assembled in the council chamber.

And then the slaughter began . . .

Rogue shivered, rising uneasily to her feet, using a wall to support her. She had experienced every one of their deaths, unable to disengage herself from the psychic connection until the last councilor had succumbed to the terrible flames, leaving her once again broken in mind and spirit. But the pain hadn't ended there, for the images continued to replay again and again in her thoughts until her mind had finally shut down. She couldn't even remember how or when she'd been returned to her cell.

She stumbled over to her bunk—a small metal platform bolted to another wall, its furnishings nothing more than a tattered mattress, a lumpy pillow, and a threadbare sheet—and sat on its edge, waiting for the tremors running through her body to come to an end. She rubbed her sweat-drenched face with leather-wrapped hands, grateful that at least one of the brutish Skrulls had taken a moment to put back the glove Reichsmajor Summers had removed when he forced her to have direct contact with the Ilon. Without it, she would have spent every moment fearful of making even the most casual of contacts with anyone on the ship—human, Skrull, or mutant. And after her nightmarish experience on Ishla'non, she could never handle accessing someone else's mind—not right now. She'd go irrevocably mad; she was sure of it.

"Contacts with anyone." She almost had to laugh. Here she was, locked away on the lowest level of the starship *Nuremburg*, allowed to step outside the confines of her cell on the rare occasion when she was needed for a mission—and only under the heaviest of guard—and she was worried about accidentally touching someone and leeching both their memories and their strength. The chances of that under normal circumstances were pretty much nil: the humans treated her like she carried a plague, while the Skrulls looked upon her with contempt, so neither were about to come anywhere close to her unless ordered to do so. And, following the events on Bloodstone Crater six months ago, when her last escape attempt had almost succeeded, the life-forces of

twelve Skrull warriors coursing through her supercharged body, even the few mutants among the crew had taken to giving her a wide berth.

A freak even i'my own kind . . . she thought darkly. If it wasn't so outright pathetic, it'd almost be funny—in a mean-spirited sorta way.

Rogue sighed and lay back across the bunk, staring at the ceiling, listening to the hum of the hyperdrive engines three decks below. Ordinarily, the sound lulled to her to dreamless sleep, providing her with some peace of mind. Now, though, each pulse of the warp system was like the roar of a Skrull flamethrower to her ears, each squeal of the deckplates like the anguished cries of a hundred Ilon as death claimed each of them. Sounds that would be with her for the rest of her life.

Placing her hands over her ears, Rogue curled up on the bed and screwed her eyes tightly shut, wishing, hoping, for it all to just go away.

It did nothing to clear away the awful smell that lingered in her nostrils—or ease the screams that echoed and re-echoed in her mind . . .

Reichsmajor Scott Sommers reclined on the bed in his quarters, pillows propped up behind his head, and studied a copy of the latest mission report—his idea of light reading before turning in for the night.

He had exchanged his battle visor for a far more comfortable pair of glasses fitted with ruby quartz lenses, though the lighter spectacles did nothing to alleviate the dull ache in his eyes that was always present during his waking hours—a constant reminder of the terrible power that lay just behind the corneas. The only times he no longer felt the nagging pressure of the extradimensional energy that sought release whenever he opened his eyes were when he slept, and when his thoughts were focused on other matters—like a mission gone well.

The one on Ishla'non, as the report indicated, had gone exceedingly well: the Kree spies had been hunted down and executed, the High Council exterminated like the bugs they so grotesquely resembled, the planet secured as the latest colony of the ever-expanding Empire. And with the task of setting up a new government left to the warships of the Ministry of Imperial Bureaucracy, Sommers and his crew had been rewarded for their latest victory with an early shore leave—back home on Earth.

Sommers closed the report cover and tossed the folder on his desk, pleased with the summation of the mission; if there was one thing his yeoman, Gwendolyn Stacy, was good at, it was finding just the right dramatic tone for mission statements that were guaranteed to impress his superiors. He swung his feet onto the deck, stood, and stretched, smiling as his vertebrae popped back into place. He should be resting, he knew; the voyage home, even at maximum hyperspatial speeds,

would still take more than a day to complete. The problem was, he didn't feel tired; in fact, he felt just the opposite. But that was to be expected—as with any successful mission, the hours afterward were never spent sleeping, but in finding ways to burn off the adrenaline still coursing through his system.

He considered his options. He could turn off the cabin lights and lie down, try to fall asleep, but he knew he'd only wind up either staring at the ceiling or, should he remove his glasses, watching the bursts of energy that exploded like fireworks within his closed eyelids. He could dress and go up to the bridge, but then he'd start hanging over his officers' shoulders, checking their readings, adjusting courses—generally getting in the way; not that he cared how they felt about the intrusion, but it would only show the men how restless he was, and a fidgety commander runs the risk of losing his crew's respect. He could go to the gymnasium on E-Deck, to challenge Security Chief Horst Buckholz to a game of racquetball, or perhaps get a good rubdown from masseuse Wanda Maximoff—the woman might be a gypsy, but she *was* a lovely creature, he had to admit; her touch would certainly help him to relax!

Or he could call Jean.

Sommers smiled—now *that* was an idea! A glass of schnapps, a bit of conversation with his wife to discuss the day's efforts . . . If hers was anything like the last time they'd spoken, she'd probably lull him to sleep with some boring tale of what dresses she'd bought and the conversations she'd had with her girlfriends while buying them, or how she spent hours scrubbing the kitchen and they really should hire a maid . . . Why, he could almost feel himself nodding off already!

He glanced at the ship's chronometer: It should just be after eight A.M. in New York; Jean would have been up for at least an hour by this point.

Sommers opened the mini-bar that was bolted to the wall on the far side of his cabin, and withdrew a glass snifter and a small bottle of mint schnapps. He poured himself a liberal dollop of the liquor, then locked up the decanter and settled into the plush leather chair situated before his desk.

Pressing a small stud built into the mahogany surface, he activated a ten-inch-wide screen that rose from the desk. As it hummed to life, he used a built-in keypad to enter his personal identification code, making certain the signal would be scrambled so no one would be able to eavesdrop on his conversation. With that accomplished, he punched in the transmission coordinates that would connect him with the communications set in the apartment, then hit SEND.

It took some time for the call to go through; longer than he would

have imagined, since Jean was usually so prompt in answering the signal. He drummed his fingers on the desk, gazing at the screen through narrowed eyes, as though daring it to remain blank. It wasn't that he felt any sort of concern over her lack of response—after all who would be foolish enough to attack the wife of a high-ranking Imperial officer? Besides, where would that silly woman go to put herself in any danger? She hardly ever left the apartment when he wasn't there! No, he wasn't concerned for her safety; rather, he was angry for being kept waiting.

Finally, though, there was a small spark of light within the depths of the screen, and an image began to take form, growing larger as it sharpened, until it filled the frame. Jean stood just to the left of the picture, the camera mounted on the bureau in their bedroom; behind her, through the open windows, he could see the sun rising above the Manhattan skyline. Her face was hidden by her bright-red hair as she bent over to put on an open-toed, high-heeled shoe.

"Just a minute," she muttered, adjusting the ankle strap. That done, she snapped her head back, allowing the hair to billow around her face as it settled onto her shoulders. Sommers noted the high-collared white blouse and black leather skirt she was wearing—she looked as though she were getting ready to go out.

"Yes?" she said, picking up a small diamond earring from the bureau and pinning it to her right lobe. When no answer was forthcoming, she stopped primping and leaned forward, until her face was mere inches from the camera. Her eyes widened in surprise. "Scott?"

"Of *course* it's Scott, you imbecile!" he snapped. "Who *else* would it be, calling at this hour?"

She stepped back from the camera, as though she'd been slapped. "I... I..." she stammered. Then her eyes narrowed, suddenly filled with a fire he'd never seen before, and she leaned forward again. "Who the *hell* do you think you're talking to?" she demanded.

Now it was Sommers' turn to recoil. His mouth hung open, midway to giving a response, yet unable to believe what had just happened. Had she really said what he thought he'd heard? Was she actually *talking back* to him?

His lips pulled back in a snarl. "What did you just—"

"If all you're going to do is sit there and chastise me for not picking up the call on the first ring, Scott," Jean interjected, "then don't bother. I have things to do today, and I'm already running late." She paused, obviously waiting for an answer, but he was still trying to figure out exactly when she might have developed a backbone. Then: "Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

"Yes," he replied, using his anger to focus on the situation before

it completely slipped from his control. "I'm on my way home. We should be making planetfall by tomorrow evening."

Her turn to look surprised again. "Tomorrow?"

He nodded, pleased by the look of fear that momentarily flashed in her eyes. "And when I get there, I think you and I should sit down and discuss this new attitude you're suddenly displaying towards your *husband*—and what you're doing that is so important you're running out of the apartment this early in the morning."

Jean's mouth worked silently for a few moments, then she swallowed. Loudly. "I . . . look forward to it," she said quietly.

"As do I," he said the coolly. "I'll see you tomorrow night, then." He reached out to touch the screen, ran an index finger down it, as though stroking her cheek. "Count the moments until then, my love. I'll be with you before too long."

He stabbed the DISCONNECT button before she could reply, then sat back in his chair, elbows resting on the arms, fingers steepled in front of his face. He stared at the blank screen for a number of seconds, then punched another number on the keypad.

Almost immediately, an image formed of a wizened, white-haired frau in her seventies or eighties, the angle of her sunken cheeks almost as severe as the hawk-like nose down which she stared at him. She wore a dark-colored shawl, one that almost gave the appearance that her head was disconnected from her body, so well did the material blend in with the black velvet curtains that hung behind her. She gently stroked the back of a large black cat that lay across her lap.

"You have reached the League of German Women," she said, with just a trace of the dramatic in her intonation. "I am Frau Harkness. How may I be of—" Her dark eyes, hidden within the depths of swollen eyelids, suddenly opened wide; obviously, she recognized the caller. She smiled. "Reichsmajor Sommers! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Sommers frowned. "I wish I *could* consider this a pleasure, Frau Harkness, but I'm calling on a matter of some urgency."

She nodded sagely, as though already aware of his problem. "Your wife," she said.

An eyebrow rose behind ruby quartz lenses. How could the woman know that? He shook his head slightly, dismissing the flash of suspicion that ran through his mind. It didn't take a scientist to figure out how that could be—he was contacting the League of German Women; who *else* would he be calling about, if not his wife?

"She's acting strangely . . ." he began.

Again, a nod. "You desire to know why that is." She smiled frostily, and scratched the cat behind its ears; the creature purred happily. "Fear

not, brave Major—the full services of the League are at your disposal. We shall find the answers you seek—with or without your lovely wife’s permission . . .”

“*Damn it!*” Jean Grey barked, staring at the blank screen. She hadn’t meant to lose her temper like that, but she wouldn’t have taken that kind of garbage from *her* Scott Summers, even before the Cosmic Cube turned the world upside-down. She certainly wasn’t going to accept it from some fascist counterpart intent on putting her in her place.

Unfortunately, she probably just gave herself away with that display of anger, she quickly came to realize. The Jean Sommers of this world would never have acted in such a defiant manner, especially with her husband.

She sighed. It had all seemed simple enough, when the woman codenamed Phoenix had formulated her plan hours ago: Convince her alternate to allow her control of this body, then set out to locate the remaining X-Men who had accompanied her to von Doom’s world: Rogue, Nightcrawler, Wolverine—and Scott. Unfortunately, the sixth member of the team, a Cajun thief named Remy Lebeau—Gambit—had died during that mission, sacrificing himself so his teammates would be able to escape the facility in which the armored dictator’s flunkies had imprisoned them. The loss had been especially hard on Rogue—she and Remy had been as close as lovers. There would be time for mourning his tragic death later—if the world, and the universe, had any time left, she thought glumly. And there was still a team to reassemble.

Of course, getting to the point where Jean Sommers would even listen to her hadn’t been the easiest task to accomplish. Not long ago, Phoenix had been trapped in the subconscious of yet another version of herself: a Jean Grey fanatically devoted to following the X-Men’s old enemy, Magneto, as he used the Cosmic Cube to reshape the world into one in which humanity and mutantkind lived in harmony—under his rule, that is. Phoenix had found herself locked away in the deepest levels of Grey’s psyche, unable to break through the many barriers that stood between the two telepaths. She had made a number of efforts to contact her alternate’s conscious mind, but hadn’t been able to accomplish anything more than giving her a slight headache.

That situation changed, however, when the Cube apparently switched hands yet again, this time winding up in the possession of the Red Skull, as she had been able to gather from the thoughts of this latest surrogate. Gone was Phoenix’s villainous counterpart, replaced by a kinder, gentler Jean Sommers—one lacking telepathic abilities, or psychic defenses to overcome.

It hadn't taken too much effort to get Jean to accept the idea—after easing her fears that seeing a costumed woman in her mirror wasn't a sure sign of oncoming insanity, of course—but the last thing Phoenix expected was for Nazi-Scott (she couldn't really think of him as anything else; he certainly didn't act like *her* husband!) to call out of the blue, then snap at her for not answering fast enough. He should have been pleased that she took the call in the first place; if it wasn't for the other Jean guiding her along, she never would have found the blasted communications set hidden in the bureau. But then, when he called her an “imbecile,” yelled at her in a way meant to intimidate the woman he thought was his wife . . .

The nerve of that pig! If she didn't know better, she never would have imagined the “real” Scott Summers could be trapped somewhere in the depths of that bully's subconscious. But having experienced it first-hand on two occasions herself, it wasn't so hard to believe—just frustrating.

Jean angrily snatched a purse from a table in the foyer and stomped her way to the door, throwing on a short black jacket as she went. She unlocked the door and pulled it open—to find a stern-looking young woman standing in the hallway, one hand raised as though she had been about to knock. She was in her mid-twenties, give or take a year or two, but the frown that twisted her features and the crow's feet that creased the corners of her eyes—apparently she spent a great deal of time glowering at people, Jean imagined—made her look ten years older. Her light-brown hair was cut in a pageboy style, bangs framing the tops of pencilled eyebrows, ends just brushing her shoulders. The severe cut of her black suit—tight jacket with wide lapels, equally tight, knee-length skirt—made it clear she wasn't here to sell her some appliance.

“Frau Sommers?” the woman asked.

“Yes . . . ?” Jean replied slowly.

She reached into a black leather handbag, withdrew an identification badge. She held it up so Jean could read it. “I am Fräulein Jennifer Walters, of the League of German Women.”

Jean smiled, trying to act polite. “What can I do for you, Fräulein Walters?” she asked pleasantly. But a quick psi-scan of the woman's mind told her all she needed to know: Scott had reported her to the League. The realization took Jean by surprise—just how quickly did the secret police move on this world? She'd only spoken to him no more than five minutes ago!

Walters also smiled, but it looked as though it was taking a great deal of effort to force her facial muscles to curve upwards. “Your pres-

ence has been requested at League Headquarters,” she said. “Frau Harkness herself would like to speak with you.”

Jean nodded, willing to play along—at least for a few moments. “In regard to . . . ?”

The smile faltered a little—obviously, the muscles weren’t used to maintaining the façade for too long. “She thought that, although your husband is often lauded by the Reich for his accomplishments, perhaps his significant other should also be recognized for her own work. After all, ‘behind every good man there is an equally good woman’—don’t you think so?” She nodded, either pleased with her logic or just used to agreeing with herself. “Frau Harkness was contemplating a dinner in your honor, and wished to discuss the details.”

Jean shook her head, beginning to lose her patience, but careful not to have another caustic outburst. “Perhaps on another occasion. But right now, I really must be going, Fräulein Walters.” She moved to step around her unwanted visitor. “Please give my thanks, though, to Frau Harkness.”

The woman would not be denied, though, placing herself directly in Jean’s path again. “You can give them to her *yourself*, Frau Sommers,” Walters snapped, the smile having at last collapsed under its own weight. “If I haven’t made myself clear, let me do so now: You *will* accompany me to League Headquarters.”

“For what reason?” Jean demanded.

“Your husband has expressed some . . . concern about your recent behavior.” Walters reached into her purse, coming up with a small handgun clenched tightly in her fist. “This is *not* a request.”

Jean glared at her, and snarled. “I don’t have time for this.” Her eyes glowed with a bright-green light. “And I *especially* don’t like it when people point guns at me.”

Walters took a step back, her usually dour expression suddenly replaced by one of fear. “What—” she began.

And then she collapsed at Jean’s feet. The gun slipped from her hand and bounced into the apartment, landing with a clatter on the hardwood floor of the foyer.

Jean glanced up and down the hallway; thankfully, there was no one around to witness her telepathic display. Having to shut down any other minds would have just complicated matters—one was more than enough.

Making use of her telekinetic abilities, Jean scooped up Walters from the floor and levitated her into the apartment, placing her gently on the living room couch. The gun and handbag went into a foyer closet, next to a pair of yellow galoshes her faux-husband hadn’t worn in years.

With a final glance at her unconscious guest, Jean closed the apartment door and headed for the fire stairs—her previous sweep of Walters' mind had revealed the presence of three other League agents in the lobby, all lurking near the elevators. As she hurried down the steps, heading for the delivery entrance on the other side of the building, Jean reached into her handbag and pulled out a page she'd printed out using Sommers' computer. It was from an online edition of a Westchester County phonebook she'd accessed when she began the search for her teammates. The familiar listing made her heart beat a little faster:

XAVIER, CHARLES
15 GRAYMALKIN DRIVE
SALEM CENTER, N.Y.

I hope you'll be happy to see a familiar face, Professor, Jean thought. Otherwise, considering Scott's suspicions and the group of overzealous femiNazis he's sent chasing after me, I might find myself in deeper trouble—if that's even possible. . . .

AND WHEN Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer . . .”

As he strolled through the German countryside, the Red Skull couldn't help but be reminded of the old saying—never before had it seemed so appropriate than right at this moment. Granted, it wasn't entirely accurate—not with an entire universe to conquer, and untold hundreds of thousands of planets still to be offered the full attention of the Empire's resources. But the thrill of the hunt, the satisfaction he once felt when he held the life of an enemy in his hands, saw the terror on their eyes, smelled the fear that clung to them like the sweetest perfume—those days were long past, much to his regret. Replaced by thoughts of strategies and campaigns, of paperwork and electronic reports, of countless speeches and endless meetings.

The Cube hadn't made him a god. It had made him a bureaucrat.

The Skull snarled, disgusted with himself. When he had seized the Cube from Magneto, he'd thought ultimate power had finally been within his grasp, never to be taken from him. He had learned from the mistakes that developed with previous versions of the device, made certain he avoided repeating them. True, there were still superpowered men and women in his world, but they were under his complete control, as loyal to him now as dogs were to their master. Old enemies had been eliminated with just a thought—here one second, gone the next, all memory of them erased from the minds of his subjects. There was no one to oppose him.

Perhaps that's what he missed most of all. There were no more challenges—no need to be concerned with attempted assassinations by secret agents, or power plays enacted by some costumed buffoon look-

ing to make his mark in history by calling himself a “villain” without having any real understanding of the term, or struggles against a colorfully-garbed do-gooder while explosions tore apart the ground under their feet. He had beaten them all, kicked their faces into the dirt of their graves with the heel of his boot, seized everything he had ever desired—all without ever having to dirty his hands.

But now, there were no more worlds to conquer . . .

“Your Majesty . . . ?”

The Skull looked up, surprised to see where his wanderings had taken him: He was standing before the metal gates of the concentration camp that stood in the shadow of Wewelsburg Castle. Back during the war, Niederhagen had been a small but productive facility, the 3,900 prisoners housed within its barbed wire fences used by the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*—the Reich Labor Service—as construction workers during the castle’s renovations in 1939; their efforts were rewarded with barbaric living conditions, undernourishment, and death. American soldiers eventually liberated the camp in 1945, but by then more than 1,285 of the inmates, among them a large number of Soviets and Jehovah’s Witnesses, had died.

To the Red Skull, seeing the camp restored to its former glory, its barracks packed with the lowest of the low, its gas chambers and ovens working at peak efficiency when required, was like stepping into his past.

Like coming home again.

The man who had addressed him stepped forward, a welcoming smile lighting his features. He was tall and broad-shouldered, blonde hair cut short, yet stylishly, blue eyes sparkling with obvious joy at seeing his Emperor. In appearance and demeanor, from the gleam of polished leather and pewter on his crisp black uniform to the swagger of his step, he was everything an Aryan should be—yet his roots were in the East Coast of America. A tragic mishap of geography, really—despite his intense hatred for him, even the Skull had to admit that the man made an excellent Nazi . . .

“Commandant Rogers . . .” the Skull said evenly.

Here, at least, was something from which the Skull could take a measure of enjoyment. For decades, Steve Rogers had been a thorn in his side, constantly interfering with his plans for world domination—no, that wasn’t true; it wasn’t Rogers who had been the problem, but his costumed alter ego: the American flag-draped super hero known far and wide as Captain America. “The Sentinel of Liberty,” he had been called, a shining example of everything that was good and decent and patriotic about his country, everything the Skull was not. A living legend

who had fought for the Allies in World War II, and then again, many years later, alongside some of Earth's mightiest heroes. A man who had fought for peace, for democracy, for harmony, no matter how staggering the odds he faced, even at the cost of his very life.

Who better, then, to be the commanding officer of a death camp?

The irony of the situation had been too delicious for the Skull to pass up. How Rogers' soul must be screaming in anguish as it watched the horrors of the prison through eyes grown cold with hate! Even now, the thought of it brought a smile to what remained of the Skull's lips . . .

Rogers looked mildly flustered by the sudden appearance of the Emperor at his gates, but tried to hide it by broadening his smile. "Your Majesty, had I known you were coming for an inspection—"

The Skull shook his head. "There is no inspection, Commandant; I merely wished to be alone with my thoughts. My arrival here was unplanned." He glanced past Rogers, toward a pair of brick smokestacks that towered above the far end of the camp. Smoke billowed from the structures, the black clouds thick with the pungent odor of burnt flesh and powdered bone. "Perhaps I was drawn here by the pull of old memories . . ."

For a moment, a flash of nervousness glittered in Rogers' eyes. "Then, I apologize for . . . disturbing you, Your Majesty. If I've offended you . . ."

The Skull waved him to silence. He studied the man for a few moments, not quite certain why he didn't feel some sense of satisfaction at having finally bested his old enemy. Was it because Rogers didn't remember their numerous clashes in the past? Was it because he was *too* subservient—programmed to obey too well? Or was it simply because he wasn't dressed in that gaudy, red-white-and-blue uniform the Skull was so used to seeing him in, sunlight gleaming off the tiny links of chainmail that protected his upper body, right hand gripping the straps of the large, round shield that was his only weapon, its center decorated with an oversized star?

Yes, the Skull thought. That was *exactly* the problem.

Captain America had been the one constant in his life—ever vigilant, ever strongwilled, ever standing between the Skull and his destiny. He could always be counted on to make an unwanted appearance, just as victory was within the Skull's grasp; was always able to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of defeat to win the day. But the accursed shield-slinger was gone now, replaced by an obedient servant who presented no opposition—no challenge—to him . . . and *that* was what kept the Skull from gaining complete pleasure from the situation.

For a few seconds, he considered calling upon the Cube's cosmic

power, using it to restore Rogers to the man he had once been—just for a little while, at least. A momentary diversion, to chase away the sense of ennui that had overcome the Skull of late. But then he dismissed the notion, recalling that a similar train of thought years ago, with another Cube, had caused him to resurrect his foe in order to crow about how he was now Captain America's master. He'd ended up losing four teeth and the Cube, and stumbling off the edge of a cliff as he tried to make his escape.

Some things, he reflected, were better left alone . . .

"Well, as long as you're here, Your Majesty," Rogers said, "would you and your aide care to tour the facility?"

"My . . . ?" The Skull looked back, over his shoulder, expecting to see Dietrich standing beside him.

It was Leonard he spotted, however, standing ten yards away, skulking as always in the shadow of his master. He'd forgotten the boy had accompanied him on his stroll through the countryside; then again, it wasn't too difficult for that to have happened, given the youth's quiet, fearful nature. Perhaps the boy should have trained as a Ninja assassin, rather than as a National Socialist—his talent for stealth would have served him better.

"Come along, boy!" the Skull barked. "I have no patience for dawdlers!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Leonard trotted over obediently, coming to a halt beside the Emperor.

The Skull nodded, pleased that his former aide was still capable of responding to a command, but uncertain as to why he should have ordered the boy to accompany him, rather than Dietrich. He supposed it didn't really matter—one lackey was as good as the next. With a mental shrug, he turned to Rogers, and gestured toward the camp.

"After you, Your Majesty," Rogers said pleasantly. "I think you'll be quite pleased with what you see."

"I shall be the judge of that, Commandant," the Skull growled. "Remember that as we proceed."

Rogers nodded quickly and moved aside, to allow his master access to the main yard. The Skull brushed past him, angered by the way Rogers fought to keep his bottom lip from trembling.

Weakling, he thought heatedly.

Perhaps his world *was* better off without Captain America . . .

When he first saw the gates of the camp through the tree line, Leonard had felt a lead weight settle in his stomach. Ever since the Skull had changed the world, using the Cube to transport them both to the Fa-

therland so he could set up his power base, Leonard had done his best to avoid having to see any of the horrors his master had created; the camp had been high on his list of places to steer clear of. He'd also tried to remain quietly in the background—after all, now that the Skull had reached his ultimate goal, what need did he have of lackeys?

He knew the Skull detested him, considered him unfit to be called a Nazi. But what he couldn't figure out was, if the grotesque villain hated him so, why did he keep him around? With the Cosmic Cube in his possession, the Skull could have anyone he wanted as his right-hand man; he'd demonstrated just that by resurrecting his previous aide, Dietrich. And with that task accomplished, Leonard's role had been rendered obsolete; if the Skull wished it, he could be wiped from existence, never to be seen again—or even remembered.

Maybe the Skull needed someone to gloat to, he considered. With all his enemies defeated or dead, there was no one to acknowledge the power he now possessed. Maybe he needed someone who knew how the world had been just over a month ago, before the Cosmic Cube and its trio of owners had each torn it apart and rebuilt it to their specifications. Someone who could appreciate the accomplishments he'd achieved, and who could respond with the right amount of awe. Well, there was Magneto, but Leonard couldn't see any reason why the Skull would even bother—the super-villain was so far beneath his notice, it had apparently skipped his mind that he'd allowed an enemy to live, locked away as he was in the depths of the Canadian wilderness.

Maybe he'd just forgotten all about his former assistant, as well; Leonard certainly hoped that was the explanation. And by keeping to the old adage of “out of sight, out of mind,” he had managed to keep the Skull from focusing on him for too long, perhaps even from reaching a decision that Leonard dreaded he would make one day: that he no longer needed anyone around to remind him of the “old days” . . .

His life had never seemed this complicated—certainly had never been filled with such perils—during his childhood in Chicago, long before the Red Skull entered it.

No, that wasn't entirely true. His parents had tried to impress upon him the dangers that existed in the world as he was growing up, but Leonard Mathias Jackson had been a typical kid back then, unwilling to take the advice of adults, secure in the belief that he was invincible. The only dangers he had to face were avoiding old Mrs. Mendelbaum next door when he and his friends played on her stoop, or getting his butt kicked by some of the older kids at school. He knew about super heroes and super-villains like the Fantastic Four and Doctor Doom—

those costumed types were pretty cool!—but wasn't interested in hearing about boring stuff like job security and "affirmative action" (whatever that was) and how minorities were stealing positions that should be filled by honest (white) Americans. Unfortunately, it was all his old man ever seemed to talk about during Leonard's pre-teen years, which made it difficult to block it out entirely, and which only widened the gap between father and son—not that they had ever really been close to begin with. Eventually, though, Nathaniel's hate-filled diatribes began to sink in, and Leonard began to listen. There was some truth in his father's words, he realized, once you got past the heat of the message. But it wasn't until Nathaniel was passed over for a promotion, and the position was given to a black man who had worked under him, making him Nathaniel's supervisor, that Leonard began to wonder if his father might have been right all along . . .

It was about that time that he learned of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich.

It was part of his high school history lessons: an examination of World War II. It was meant to impress upon the students the horrors of war, and the monstrous actions a society could enact on its citizens only because they were different—actions directed by a single individual on an insane quest to dominate the world. Most of the kids in his class were only interested in the exploits of the costumed superpowered men and women who'd fought on behalf of the Allied Forces: Captain America and the Invaders. Miss America and the All-Winners Squad. The Destroyer, The Patriot, and dozens of others.

But it was the villains who caught Leonard's eye. Master Man. Baron Blood. The Red Skull. Bad guys were always cooler, because they were willing to take the sort of risks good guys were afraid to. They would go anywhere, do anything, destroy anyone who got in their way. And it was because they were so "cool" that Leonard began doing his own research on them, and their cause—the Internet was full of web sites dedicated to both, with links to even more URLs. Gradually, he even began to join in on the chat rooms for some of the sites, which led to connections with people his own age—people whose philosophies he eventually made his own.

He went to Auschwitz, once, just after he'd turned twenty-one. His parents, oblivious to the kinds of friends he'd acquired, had paid for the trip to Europe as a late graduation present; Poland was just one of the stops on the tour. The concentration camp had been nothing more than a curiosity to him—a tourist attraction where guides somberly spoke of the more than one million Jews, gypsies, Poles, and Russians who had been put to death within its fences. The number was just too big to get

his head around it, but his friends certainly found the figure impressive. "A good start," he'd heard Kevin Boyer mutter. They'd all had a good laugh over that.

And then they went dancing.

The club in which they'd partied the night away was as unusual—and disturbing—a location as one could possibly conceive. It stood in the nearby town of Oswiecim, in a building that had been used by the Nazis to sort the hair taken from Jewish prisoners after extermination—hair used for, among other things, stuffing mattresses and insulating the boots of U-boat crews. But he hadn't known about that when they burst through the doors, nor would he have cared—he was there to have fun, and that's exactly what he found. The heavy-metal music had gotten his pulse racing, the vodka had loosened him up, and the women had been incredibly beautiful . . . and amazingly accommodating.

It was there he first learned of "The Controller" and his plans for re-establishing the supremacy of the white race. Not that Leonard was interested in hearing recruitment speeches—far from it—but it was apparently the price one had to pay for enjoying the charms of their hostesses. So he sat and listened, and the words he heard made sense to him. More than made sense—they sounded true, accurate. Whites *were* losing power in the world—he had only to look at his father to see proof of that. Given enough time, they would find themselves in the minority—and that could not be allowed to happen. Not, as it was so clearly explained by him, and the others in that noisy, smoke-filled club, when there was a man ready to lead them against their enemies. A man who knew how the world could be, *should* be, if they were willing to follow his lead.

A man with a vision . . .

Now, as he walked in the shadow of his master, Leonard could only stare in horror at what that man, that vision, had wrought.

Death was all around him. He could see it in the terrified expressions of the prisoners as they huddled together, forced into small groups by the guards; could smell it in the air; could feel it settling into his bones like a winter chill. Waves of despair roiled across the yard to break against him, threatening to drown his soul in a tide of darkness. A tremor ran through his legs, but he remained standing, hoping his master hadn't seen that moment of weakness. And as he screwed his eyes shut to block out the sights and sounds and smells, he began to understand why it was that the Skull treated him with such scorn.

He felt sorry for his enemies.

He knew he shouldn't; in fact, he should have been feeling elated.

Here were prime examples of the very minorities he had come to hate, who had tried to destroy his country from the inside, like a cancer. He should be laughing in their faces, taking pleasure in their fear. And yet . . . and yet, he could only feel pity—and shame.

Gazing at the hollowed eyes and gaunt faces of the women behind the fences, he suddenly found himself thinking of Kate Ashbrook, the computer hacker he had once dated when they'd first begun working for the man they came to know as The Controller. She'd given her life for the Skull's dream, hadn't she? She and all the others whose skeletons would continue to circle the Earth until they eventually crumbled to dust. Dead people on a dead planetoid—orbiting a dead world?

That, more than anything else, was what deeply troubled Leonard: the thought that, if the Skull grew tired of his new world—as he was starting to show signs of, by his recent bouts of melancholy—he might destroy it on a whim. If the Cube made him so powerful that he didn't even need to hold the wish box to call upon its cosmic energies—as Leonard had seen with his own eyes after the planet had been reshaped—if he could mold reality to fit his needs with just the force of his own mind, then he was virtually a god. And even a god could become weary of his creations . . .

A small gasping sound pulled him from his reverie. A few feet ahead, the Skull and Commandant Rogers had come to a stop near the administrative offices; they stood beside a frail-looking woman who cowered in their presence. Leonard hurried to join them before his absence was discovered.

" . . . this is Anya Lensherr, the lead violinist of our orchestra, Your Majesty," Rogers was saying with a note of pride as Leonard quietly approached the Skull.

"Yes . . . I have heard their talentless assaults on the classics each day, from the castle," the Skull commented, fixing the woman with a hard stare. He turned to the commandant, his expression the same. "You were not planning to assail my ears with an off-key rendition of the 'Funeral March,' were you, Rogers?" His eyes narrowed. "It would be a grave error, to insult your emperor in such a fashion."

Rogers blanched. "Of course not, Your Majesty!" he responded immediately, snapping to attention. "I merely thought—"

The back of a gloved hand whipped forward, striking Rogers across the face. Remarkably, the man managed to take the blow without either flinching or stumbling backward.

"You thought *nothing!*" the Skull barked. "I am the one who does the thinking *for* you—for *all* the pathetic sheep of this world! The one who guides your worthless lives, gives them meaning. Who allows you

to *continue* living only because I wish it! Before me, there was nothing; after me—" He paused. "After me . . ."

A chill running up his spine, Leonard watched as a disturbing gleam lit the Skull's eyes. This is it, he thought. This is where he ends it all . . .

"After me . . ." the Skull said slowly, ". . . there is only oblivion. For without me, nothing would exist—not this world, not this universe. It is only by the strength of my indomitable will that the forces von Doom has foolishly unleashed are kept at bay." He looked skyward, and Leonard followed the direction of his gaze, expecting to see whatever it was his master was observing. But there was only brilliant sunlight and clear blue skies above them; if the Skull saw anything else, it was beyond Leonard's ability to perceive it.

"No," the Skull finally said. "I have labored too hard, created too much, for my vision to be torn apart because of the ill-conceived planning of some gypsy filth. *I* control the Cube now, and only one who has known its true powers, who has touched the face of Eternity itself, could hold together a cosmos that strains to tear itself apart. *ONLY THE RED SKULL!*" he bellowed, shaking a fist at the heavens. "I have sterilized your virus, von Doom, corrected the flaws your bungling scientists had made! Your failsafe device has been rendered inoperative! This Cube—this universe—is *mine*, now and forevermore!"

And as he watched his emperor Leonard couldn't be sure if he should feel relieved that the Skull had apparently abandoned thoughts of destroying the planet on a whim—or dread what he might do with it now. . . .

THE TAXICAB dropped Jean off before the padlocked wrought iron gates of Xavier's estate. As the yellow-and-black vehicle roared away, she made a telepathic sweep of the area, just to make certain there were no Nazi Women's League members lurking in the bushes.

Satisfied that she was alone, Jean took one last glance up and down the well-paved country road, then telekinetically raised herself into the air, floated over the gates, and gently landed on the estate grounds. Gazing at her surroundings, Jean couldn't help but feel depressed. The driveway that wound from the road to the mansion's front door was pitted and potholed, and the acres of well-mown lawns hadn't seen a groundskeeper's touch in a dog's age—the grass was almost at eye level, patches of it turned a hideous shade of brown. The air was thick with flies and mosquitoes, the former drawn to the trash scattered around the gates—rotting food, half-empty plastic containers and greasy boxes from take-out joints, discarded bottles and cans of soft drinks and alcoholic beverages—while the latter had taken residence in puddles of stagnant water somewhere in the overgrowth; Jean couldn't see the fetid pools, but she could certainly smell them. With a sigh, she set off down the driveway, dreading what she would find at the end of the road.

Given the poor conditions of the grounds, she wasn't all that surprised by the sight that greeted her minutes later, when she pushed her way through the last rows of weeds, wildflowers, and mottled grass. And yet, as she stared in dismay at the crumbling, weather-beaten edifice standing before her, she was suddenly struck by the notion that there was no hope to be found in this place.

The facade was as pitted as the driveway, the plaster cracked and crumbling, revealing the bare brickface just underneath. Most of the

windows on the first floor, and more on the second, were broken, the splintered frames holding nothing more than jagged shards of glass. A number of spray-painted messages covered the walls and front door, the words blazing in red, orange, and green Day-Glo letters:

**DIE FREAK!
MUTEE SQUIM!
NAZI SYMPATHIZER BURN IN HELL!**

A flutter of wings caught her attention, and Jean watched as a trio of pigeons flew inside, quickly disappearing in the darkness of what had once been the library; apparently, the once prestigious mansion had turned into an aviary over the years.

But those were phantom years, Jean knew. Time that had only passed in the minds of the people inhabiting this world—people living fictitious lives, as she and the other X-Men were leading; as they had on the Earth of Magneto's making. Not to mention those members of the group who had fallen prey to Doctor Doom's tyrannical visions. Members like Psylocke, or Archangel.

Jean frowned. Betsy and Warren. Where were *they* in this madness? Could Betsy—or at least her duplicate—really now be the star of some adventure series, as that television magazine had reported? She shrugged. Anything was possible when the Cosmic Cube was involved—she was still finding it hard to believe her previous alternate had been a staunch supporter of Magneto's twisted philosophies.

And there was another concept that took some getting used to. It was odd to think of a different yet similar Jean Grey in such terms: "alternate," "duplicate," "doppelganger." The Jean Grey of Erik Lensherr's domain was every bit as real as the woman who called herself Phoenix. Jean knew that all too well—she could feel her . . . double still lurking in the corners of her mind, enraged that she was as much a prisoner in the depths of this Nazi-born body, as Jean had been in hers. If it hadn't been for Phoenix's greater mental abilities, she might have been trapped in Summers' subconscious, instead of being able to push herself out and lock her evil twin behind her.

There has to be a way to put an end to all these overlapping personalities, Jean thought with a grim smile. *I'm not sure there's any room left for more me's in this brain . . .*

Well, if anyone could help her find a solution, there was no one better than Professor Charles Xavier . . . at least, she *hoped* that would be the case.

She'd felt Xavier's mind brush hers back on Magneto's world, when

her alternate had psychically interrogated him. At first, Jean had been surprised to realize that the Professor was on Earth—she and the X-Men had left him back on Roma’s Starlight Citadel, while they traveled to von Doom’s reality; Xavier had known the group would be better able to gather intelligence without having to worry about their wheelchair-bound mentor. Obviously, he had taken matters into his own hands when his students failed in their mission, but he must have known the trouble he’d get into once Magneto’s followers became aware he was on Earth. Still, Jean had been comforted by his presence; just knowing he was there had given her enough hope that the X-Men would ultimately succeed. She hadn’t been able to contact him, to let him know that she could telepathically “hear” him, but the desire to do so gave her the strength to overcome a good deal of her alternate’s mental defenses as she fought her way to the front of the brain, determined to wrest control of what she had thought was her own body from the usurper who had stolen it from her. Given enough time, she might have succeeded—but then all hell had broken loose once more, and she’d awoken on another Earth, trapped in another version of herself. No doubt the same had happened to her teammates, and Xavier as well; like her alternate, they would all be followers of the Red Skull now, their personalities submerged in the depths of their counterparts’ minds.

Would Xavier help her to free them—for that matter, would she be able to help him free *himself*? Or would he turn against her, maybe even notify her hunters, who were probably scouring every inch of Manhattan to locate her at this very moment?

Good questions, all, but she would never find any answers . . . if she didn’t ring the doorbell first.

Hesitantly, she stepped through the weeds that sprouted across the cracked asphalt, the toes of her shoes occasionally jarring the stem of a dandelion, or scraping the top of a wildflower. And then, before she knew it, she was at the door, index finger pressing against the rusted button to the left of the frame.

Nothing.

No clanging of chimes, no grating buzz—just silence.

Well, I can’t say I’m all that surprised, Jean thought. *There’s probably not an electrician in Westchester County who’d be willing to navigate that jungle back there just to fix a doorbell.*

She stepped back and considered her options. She could try climbing through the library’s shattered windows, but the tight fit of her knee-length skirt ruled that out; she’d never be able to lift her legs high enough to clamber over the molding wood. She could use her mental

powers to lift herself up to the second floor, but someone passing by on the road might see her.

Or I could just give the door a good telekinetic shove. Given the state of this place, what's a little more property damage . . . ?

She braced herself, feeling the power build within her mind—
And then the door opened.

It swung in on well-oiled hinges—quickly, silently. And standing on the other side of the threshold, one hand holding the edge of the door, was an attractive woman in her twenties. She wore a black, knee-length dress, with a wide leather belt cinched tightly at the waist, making her look like a human hourglass. High-heeled shoes—and a formidable-looking handgun—completed her ensemble. Her shoulder-length blond hair hung loosely, parted on the left side of her head to flow over the right side of her face, in a style like that adopted by 1940s movie star Veronica Lake. And although Jean couldn't see the woman's right eye clearly, its icy-blue pupil more than likely matched the heated gaze that shone brightly from the left eye.

But it wasn't the sudden appearance of someone at the door that took Jean by surprise—it was the fact that she *knew* this woman.

"Carol Danvers?" she exclaimed.

To say it was a shock seeing her old friend would have been an understatement. The last time Jean and Carol had been together was on von Doom's world, where Danvers had been one of countless political prisoners held in work camps around the planet because their views differed from that of the much-exalted emperor. The difference, however, was that this particular camp had been built on the very grounds upon which Jean now stood—the location of the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning. As an enemy of the state, Carol was facing a life of hard labor and harsher abuse, at the hands of both camp guards and other inmates. The X-Men had put an end to those barbaric conditions, though, when they liberated the camp, and Carol had elected to join them on their mission to locate other superpowered men and women who could aid them in overthrowing von Doom's regime. The group reached New York without any problems, but once Jean had started psi-scanning for possible allies, her efforts had somehow been detected, and the X-Men suddenly found themselves facing off against a team of super-villains who worked for one of von Doom's security agencies. In the midst of the battle that erupted on Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, Jean had lost track of Carol, then forgotten all about her in the chaotic events that followed.

But now, here she stood, staring at Jean as though she were a

stranger—and looking none too happy about having an unexpected visitor.

Of course she wouldn't recognize me, Jean realized. To her, I'm just another citizen of the Reich . . . one trespassing on private property. Her glance momentarily moved to the gun in Danvers' hand, its barrel pointing at her chest. She didn't doubt for an instant that this woman was as deadly a marksman as her friend—not that she'd give her any chance to prove it if the time came . . .

Danvers frowned. "What is it you want?" she demanded.

Jean's smile evaporated under her heated glare. "I'd . . . like to see Professor Xavier."

The frown became a teeth-baring sneer. "No."

And with that, she slammed the door—or, at least, tried to do so. Unwilling to be stopped this early in her quest, Jean caught it in a telekinetic grip and shoved—hard. The door flew back, catching Danvers across the temple and knocking her to the floor. As the gun flew from her hand, Jean caught that, too, with a mental snare, and tossed it deep into the weeds behind her.

Smiling sweetly, she stepped around the stunned Danvers. "Don't get up—I know my way around." Not waiting for a reply, she proceeded down the main hallway.

The interior of the manor house was only slightly less depressing than its exterior. The main hall alone was an interior decorator's nightmare: paint faded and chipped, blue-and-gold runner beneath Jean's feet dirty and threadbare, furnishings coated with a thick layer of dust; she could only imagine what the rest of the house looked like. From within the recesses of her subconscious, Jean felt her Skull-world alternate practically quiver with the urge to shriek in horror and run for the nearest vacuum.

Well, I think it's safe to assume that whatever job Carol has here, it certainly doesn't involve housework, Jean thought, fighting a sudden urge to sneeze as dust particles swirled around her.

She continued down the hall until she came to a familiar door—one that, on her world, she had walked through a thousand times. This was the portal to the calm eye of the storm of prejudice and intolerance that had constantly threatened to destroy every mutant on the planet, in the years before von Doom had activated his Cosmic Cube. A place of refuge for those seeking to understand what they had become, why they were so hated; a place of security, protecting those same lost souls against the forces that hunted them down like wild animals. The very spot from which a dream had been born: of humanity and mutantkind living in harmony, their differences forgotten, their hatreds banished.

A birthing chamber Jean knew better as the private study of Professor Charles Xavier.

Swallowing hard, she reached out and lightly knocked on the door.

"Yes?" replied a coarse, tired voice.

Slowly, Jean opened the door and stepped inside the room. And immediately wished she hadn't.

"Oh, my God . . ." she croaked.

Her breath caught in her throat as she glanced around—at the mountainous piles of yellowed news journals and scraps of paper; at the half-eaten meals, around which flies buzzed; at the chipped cups and cracked glasses crusted over with the thick film of various beverages, long since evaporated. The air was thick with the stench of decay, the noxious odor a jarring counterpoint to the gentle ballet of dust motes that danced across shafts of morning sunlight spilling through the torn velvet curtains that hung over the windows.

But it was the sight of the man sitting behind the mold-encrusted mahogany desk on the other side of the room that almost brought Jean to her knees in despair.

He was scrawny and thin-limbed, his bald head looking immense in comparison to his body. His scalp and hands were dotted with liver spots, his cheeks and eyes so sunken as to resemble a death-mask, rather than the sharp, hawkish features of the great leader he had once been. A charcoal-gray suit now a size too big for him hung on his frame, its dark color broken by a once-white dress shirt, frayed at the collar, and a bright red tie. He sat slumped in his wheelchair, hands folded on the blanket covering his legs, staring blankly through the grime-covered window that faced the weed-covered grounds and, beyond that, the deserted stretch of Graymalkin Drive outside the main gates.

"Professor Xavier . . . ?" Jean said softly.

"I felt you coming," Xavier said. He turned to face her, tapped the side of his head with a gnarled index finger. "In my mind. You're a mutant." A wizened smile split his creased features. "Have you come to kill me?"

The question took Jean aback. "N-no . . ." she stammered.

Xavier's smile brightened. "Why not?" he purred. There was something about the sudden gleam in his eyes that made Jean take a step back; something about the way his lips pulled back to bare his teeth . . .

She cleared her throat. "Professor, I'm here because I need your help."

"My . . . ?" Xavier stared at her for a moment, then suddenly burst out laughing; the sound reminded Jean of a worn bellows expelling a puff of air. She stared at her hands, feeling extremely uncomfortable as

the laugh degenerated into a brief coughing spell. Eventually, the coughing subsided, and the professor chuckled mildly. "You want *my* help. Are you absolutely *certain* of that, Frau Sommers?" He smiled as her eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, yes, I'm well aware of your identity. I try to keep up-to-date on current events." He waved a hand at the newspapers around him; some of the piles looked dangerously close to crashing down on him. "Perhaps you should have done a bit of reading yourself," he said, the smile fading, "before you wasted your time coming here."

"I . . . I don't understand," Jean said.

Xavier sneered. "Not a student of history, Frau Sommers?" Gripping the tires of his wheelchair, the professor rolled himself out from behind the desk and maneuvered his way through the debris, coming to a halt before his visitor. He studied her for a moment. "You *really* have no idea who I am, do you?" When Jean found herself unable to mouth an answer, he shook his head in disgust. "Then allow me to enlighten you."

The assault on her mind was sudden—and brutal. Without warning, Xavier forced his way into her thoughts, ripping through her psychic defenses as though they were tissue paper. The room swayed, blurred, disappeared, to be replaced by a flood of sound and images: smoke filled her lungs, heat reddened her skin. Her eardrums vibrated with the wails of the dying and the damned.

She was standing in the middle of a street littered with waste, the asphalt cracked and discolored, the air heavy with the stench of rotting garbage and stagnant water. It was late at night, but the sky was awash in hues of red and gold, cinder and ash, making it appear more like twilight. Thick plumes of black smoke obscured the stars, and the full moon that shone high above was painted a hazy, burnt orange.

With a start, Jean realized that the tenement buildings around her were burning out of control. She glanced up the block to see a group of men and women clad in black leather uniforms and thick-soled boots, all moving in her direction. Each was equipped with a long-nozzled flamethrower, which they triggered seemingly at random, igniting the buildings on both sides of the street.

She knew that she was standing in the midst of a psychic projection—she'd been in similar memory-created environments countless times during her life with the X-Men—but she couldn't remember the last occasion when she had been in one so tangible, so . . . real. Her throat burned from the acrid smoke; she couldn't keep her eyes from watering. Not even "her" Charles Xavier was capable of creating such a powerful mental landscape . . . at least not to her knowledge.

A sharp cry of anguish caught her attention, and she wheeled around. Behind her were gathered the residents of the block: hundreds of people surrounded by armed guards attired in the same type of uniform worn by the flamethrower brigade. And behind the soldiers, towering over the scene so high that Jean had momentarily thought they were office buildings, were two gigantic humanoid constructs, their metal-plated chests emblazoned with huge, black swastikas.

Jean gasped. "Sentinels . . ."

On her world, Jean—and just about every mutant on the planet—knew of the robotic monsters. Originally created by a man named Bolivar Trask, the Sentinels' duty was to protect humanity from the growing "mutant threat" by either capturing or exterminating the members of *Homo sapiens superior*—no matter how young or old their targets, no matter how weak or harmless their victims' powers might be. To see that such emotionless hunter/killers had been incorporated into the Red Skull's empire sent a chill through Jean; she wondered if mutants were *all* these Sentinels had been constructed to persecute . . .

She looked back to the crowd, and saw the fear etched into the features of the residents, all roused from their homes in the middle of the night and forced to watch as lifetimes' worth of memories were destroyed. They were all mutants in one form or another, most possessing the appearance of "normal" humans, though there were also quite a few unusual-looking individuals scattered amongst the hundreds huddling together. As she gazed at the haunted expressions of these frightened members of her race, Jean suddenly realized why there was such a high concentration of them in one place.

She was in a ghetto—a neighborhood into which mutants had been herded so a watchful eye could be kept on them. From the memories of her Skull-world counterpart, Jean saw that the same had been done with other races—at least those for which the Empire still had a use. It was a policy applied to the Jewish community, initiated under Adolf Hitler in World War II; apparently, the Red Skull had widened its parameters when he became emperor.

The roar of an approaching engine from behind made Jean glance over her shoulder. Down the street, the flamethrower brigade had stepped aside to allow passage to an armored transport, the manned cannon on its roof aimed directly at the crowd. The vehicle ground to a halt, and one side of it rolled back to reveal a metal platform, which slid out to reveal two passengers. One was a horrific little man whose face appeared on a viewing screen in the middle of his chest, rather than on a head he apparently didn't possess; Jean had no idea who he was. The man's companion, however, she knew all too well. He was a

few years younger, handsome, arrogant in his bearing. Moonlight played across the top of his clean-shaven head.

Professor Charles Xavier stared at the frightened crowd, nodded in satisfaction, and leaned in close to the little man. He muttered something, and the abomination laughed loudly. A shared joke, perhaps. The professor gestured at the residents. "Your men work quickly, Minister Zola. I expected it would take them at least until morning to gather everyone together."

Zola smiled—a grotesque twisting of facial muscles made even more disturbing by its appearance behind the glass screen. "Fear can be a great motivator, Herr Professor—especially when one's home is burning down. It tends to add wings to one's feet." The smile slowly drained away. "Now, then: Where is this 'special' freak you pulled me from my laboratories to see? The one you detected with that mutant-location computer of yours?"

"Cerebro," Xavier corrected politely. "It first detected her powers in the American southeast, but she fled her home before she could be picked up for questioning. The delay was a temporary one, however; nothing remains hidden from Cerebro for long—not even when the subject tries to hide like the proverbial needle in a haystack of mutants." He nodded toward the residents, who were moving aside to let someone through. "I believe your men have found her . . ."

A pair of soldiers marched past Jean, dragging a semi-conscious woman between them. She couldn't be older than seventeen or eighteen, bundled up in layers of clothing even though it was a warm summer night. A chill played along Jean's spine as the light of the burning buildings highlighted the white streak that ran through the girl's dark-brown hair.

"Minister Zola," Xavier said, "allow me to introduce you to . . . er . . . Rogue."

"'Rogue'?" Zola said with a snarl. "What kind of insipid name is that?"

Xavier shrugged. "Who can understand the ways of today's youth, Minister? I have long since given up trying."

The soldiers dropped the girl on the ground, then stepped back to cover her with their weapons.

"From what you told me, Herr Professor, I thought she would be more . . . animated," Zola commented.

"She put up a struggle, sir," one of the soldiers replied. "We had to sedate her."

"It doesn't matter," Xavier said with a wave of his hand. "What

we're interested in is the extent of her powers." He pointed to the soldier who had addressed Zola. "You. Barton. Remove one of your gloves."

Jean could tell the man was surprised—and worried—by the ease with which Xavier had plucked the name from his mind. He turned to Zola. "Sir?"

Zola chuckled. "Do as he says, Sergeant. The Professor might be a mutant, but he likes to think of himself as one of the higher-born. Humor him."

Barton pulled off one of his gauntlets and tucked it into his belt.

"Now, touch the girl's face," Xavier ordered.

"NO!" Jean cried, though she knew she would go unheard. She was a phantom here, out of synch with the dreamscape around her, unable to alter the course of events being played before her—events that had transpired years past. That didn't stop her, however, from racing to the girl's side.

Barton knelt beside Rogue and rolled her onto her back. Hesitantly, he reached down, pausing only long enough to register the stern look he was getting from Zola before brushing his fingertips against her cheek.

The reaction was instantaneous. Both Rogue and Barton screamed in agony as she leeched his thoughts, his strength, his very essence into herself. But while the woman Jean considered a teammate and close friend would have been able to break contact with the soldier, this girl was still years away from controlling her powers. The air crackled with static electricity as the transfer continued, the process causing Barton's body to slowly dry up, to shrivel away, until there was nothing left but a desiccated corpse in a baggy leather uniform.

"Oh, Rogue . . ." Jean whispered.

And then, with startling speed, the girl was on her feet, scooping up Barton's weapon before anyone could stop her. The muzzle flashed with a staccato rhythm, and soldiers around her collapsed in a hail of bullets. She spun around, to level the rifle directly at Zola's faceplate. Her finger tightened around the trigger—

—but nothing happened.

"I think that's enough of a demonstration," Xavier said dryly. He turned to Zola. "As you can see, Minister, the subject has absorbed the strength of the late Sergeant Barton—which accounts for her ability to throw off the effects of the drugs in her system—as well as his martial prowess. It is only because I have seized control of her mind that she is unable to fulfill her desire for slaying you."

Zola grunted. "And the point of all this, Xavier?"

"Imagine, if you will, Minister: An agent capable of stealing away

knowledge, strength, identity from any given target; absorbing language, information, with just a touch.”

Zola nodded, although it required the movement of his entire armored body. “Such a mutant *would* have their uses.”

“I thought you would agree.” Xavier’s eyes closed for a moment, and Rogue suddenly collapsed; he’d “switched off” her mind, rendering her unconscious. He watched as some members of the flamethrower brigade moved in to collect her. “Yes, I expect some great things from our Rogue . . .”

The feral smile that Xavier suddenly leveled at her sent Jean fleeing into the darkness, in spite of herself.

Zola was right—fear *did* add wings to one’s feet.

Wrong—it was all so horribly wrong; Jean knew that now, as she finally managed to break free of Xavier’s mindscape. Wrong of her to come here, to expect Xavier to help her, to venture all this way on a fool’s errand when time was running out for countless dimensions. Wrong to think that the decent, caring visionary she loved as much as her parents could possibly exist in such a hate-driven, fearful world as this. She withdrew from his mind, sickened by it all, wondering where she could turn for help now—

And then something exploded against the base of her skull, and she crashed to the floor.

Groggily, Jean turned her head to see Danvers standing over her, a leather-encased blackjack in one hand. She attempted to rise, but Danvers bent down beside her, driving her knee into the small of Jean’s back. She then grabbed a handful of her prey’s fiery mane and pressed her head to the moldy carpeting.

“Try any other tricks like the one with the front door, Frau Sommers,” she warned, “and I will not hesitate to snap your neck. It wouldn’t do for the wife of such an esteemed Reichsmajor to be accidentally killed while running from a simple interrogation.”

“No fear of that, Fräulein Danvers,” Xavier said quietly. “Frau Sommers won’t be doing *anything* unless *I* will it.”

Jean gasped, feeling psychic talons dig deeply into her mind—and close tightly. She hovered on the edge of consciousness, her eyes rolling back in her head, unable to do little beyond whimper softly as Xavier forced his way through her memories with all the subtlety of one of the Skull’s stormtroopers. He was rooting around for information—learning who she was, where she came from, why she had come to him.

And there was nothing she could do to stop him.

"You surprise me, Herr Professor," she heard Danvers say. "I didn't think you capable of subduing her."

"Lucky for you that I did, Danvers!" Xavier snapped. "She might have killed me at any moment, and *then* what would your leaders have said about your efficiency as an agent? What the devil *kept* you?"

"I would appreciate it if you kept your tiresome barking to a minimum, Herr Professor," Danvers replied evenly. "Nattering on so makes you sound like an old woman. *And* it gives me a headache."

Jean heard a tiny *pop* just above her ear, as though the covering was being removed from a small container. "What . . . ?" she began to say, only to yelp as a needle penetrated her neck. She moaned softly as a powerful sedative raced through her veins, turning her muscles to rubber. Dimly, she became aware that Danvers and Xavier had released her. From the sound of the woman's voice, she was back on her feet and heading for the door.

"Now, if you will excuse me, Herr Professor," Danvers said, "I must inform the League of Frau Sommers' capture."

"Perhaps we should inform the Ministry of Health as well, Fräulein Danvers," Xavier commented. "Apparently, we have an unregistered mutant on our hands . . ."

The scream building in Jean's throat forced its way through her numbed lips as a hoarse rattle—one that only she could hear. And then the drug took full effect, pulling her into darkness.

ARNIM ZOLA lived in a box.

Literally.

Oh, he might possess arms and legs like any other man, but there was no head to be found resting between his shoulders—only a small, rectangular, metal box packed with miniature electronics. He had a face, but if you wanted to gaze upon it, to stare into the cold, hazel eyes of a monster who had sent millions of innocent men, women, and children to their deaths, you had to look through the glass screen housing it—the one framed by the metal box that served as his torso.

He hadn't always looked like that. Once, he had been a normal human being—quiet, unassuming, rather plain in appearance, rather unremarkable in personality, but far from the glass, metal, and plastic construct that continued to use his name, seven decades later. A lifetime ago, he had been human, but that was before his interest in genetics became an all-consuming obsession, ultimately leading him to experiment with dark forces that man was truly never meant to know . . .

Locked away in his Swiss castle, Zola shunned contact with other humans unless absolutely necessary, preferring instead the company of test tubes and Bunsen burners, microscopes and Petri dishes . . . and the grotesque creatures to which he gave life. Creatures that roared and mewled, crawled and shrieked—in fear, in anger, in despair over the humanity that had been stripped from them at the hands of a soulless monster.

He regarded them as his children; over time, they came to call him “father.”

Arnim Zola, you see, was quite mad. But just *how* mad no one

could have ever suspected—until the day a power-hungry German warlord took his first steps toward conquering the world . . .

When Germany launched its first attacks in 1939, refugees flooded across the Swiss border, many of them begging Zola for shelter from the Nazi war machine—and he suddenly found an inexhaustible supply of genetic material to use in his studies. Material that enabled his experiments to become far grander in scale, more hideous in design, until even the Führer himself was made aware of his work, and set him to work alongside another notorious butcher: Dr. Josef Mengele.

They learned much from each other, Auschwitz's "Angel of Death" and his "bio-fanatic," and the fruits of their labors helped their master conquer half a world.

And years later, when the atom had been split, and Germany had harnessed its power in a bomb used to decimate Washington, D.C., thus winning the war, there were new opportunities for Arnim Zola to explore. The effects of atomic radiation had gone relatively unexplored during the decade-long conflict—Hitler was more interested in the power of the explosion being unleashed, rather than any lingering genetic calamities its power source might cause in years to come. But in the 1950s, stories began spreading of bizarre-looking freaks—mutations—wandering the blasted streets of America's former capital. It was while investigating these claims that Zola himself contracted radiation poisoning; his only cure lay in constructing a new body, one that would have none of his weaknesses, and more than enough strength to last for a hundred years or more.

Thus it was that Arnim Zola finally became the monster outwardly that he had always been within—a hideous body to match the diseased soul it contained . . .

Zola was immersed in his latest experiment when the visi-phone call came in. For a time he tried to ignore its nagging bleating—its discordant tone interfered with the melodic strains of the death rattle that was forcing its way through the tracheal tube of the young mutant strapped to his worktable. Eventually, though, he had to turn his attention to answering it, if for no other reason than to silence the infernal sound.

He punched the RECEIVE button on the control panel, and was greeted by the sallow-skinned visage of a man whose existence he hadn't even thought about in the past year or two. "Charles Xavier! What a pleasant surprise this is!" he bellowed, his electronically enhanced voice dripping with false sincerity. He winked slyly, as though sharing an old joke—one from which only he still found some degree of humor. "How is my favorite collaborator?"

"As well as can be expected, Minister," Xavier said gruffly, "given the circumstances."

Zola flashed one of his grotesque smiles. "Is Fräulein Danvers giving you any trouble? You know she is only there to protect you from the more . . . outspoken members of your race."

"And a pitiful job she's been doing of it!" Xavier snapped. "A young woman barged in here today, could have used her powers against me if I hadn't taken steps to prevent it."

Zola frowned. "And so you have called upon me to register a *complaint*?" He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Contact the League of German Women, then—I am certain they will give you a new referral."

Xavier shook his head. "No, that is *not* why I am calling, Minister." A sly grin inched its way across his features. "Aren't you curious as to the *identity* of my would-be assailant?"

Zola huffed. "I have neither the time nor the patience for games, Herr Professor. Kindly get to the—"

"Jean Sommers."

Zola paused. "Sommers. Are you referring to the wife of . . ."

Xavier nodded. "Indeed. Reichsmajor Scott Sommers. The woman is a mutant."

The Minister frowned. "Impossible. I examined her personally, before she was even allowed to start dating Sommers. There was no trace of the x-factor detected in her genetic structure then, or in subsequent examinations. She is a pure-bred German maiden."

"Then you should have your machines recalibrated, Minister, because something, somehow, has triggered the gene in Frau Sommers," Xavier replied. "She now possesses psychic abilities that might even be on a par with my own."

"I must see her—immediately."

"I thought as much, which is the reason Fräulein Danvers and I are already en route to New York City. I was hoping you would be able to arrange passage for us on the first available flight from there to Genosha." Xavier paused. "But there is more to this situation than just a case of latent mutagenic growth, Minister. From what I have been able to glean from scanning Frau Sommers' mind, she is on a mission that might spell disaster for the Reich . . . and the Emperor. And she is not working alone."

Intrigued, Zola leaned closer to the screen. "Tell me more, Charles . . ."

Ororo sat beside one of the jet's windows, gazing enviously at the clouds that drifted by.

She'd made no attempt to escape, or shown any sign of resistance since peacefully surrendering to Lightning Force, but that, apparently, meant nothing to the team member named Meggan. The blond-haired shapeshifter had taken an almost perverse amount of pleasure in shackling her prisoner to the seat, securing the ankle and wrist clamps tightly enough to make Ororo gasp. From the heated stare she directed at the back of Hauptmann Englande's head, then toward Ororo, it was obvious she felt extremely territorial where her lover was concerned. Not that it mattered in the least to Ororo—just the thought of possibly being attracted to a pompous, overbearing fascist made her stomach turn.

A small motion at the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned her head—as much as the metal collar would allow—to look at the blue-skinned mutant sitting across the aisle; Nightcrawler, she remembered. For someone who vaguely resembled a demon, she wouldn't have thought him to be so fidgety—and yet, ever since the jet had departed Araouane, there hardly seemed to be a moment when he wasn't squirming in his seat. Ororo mentally shrugged. Maybe he just didn't enjoy air travel. Or maybe it wasn't the flight that upset him . . . as much as the destination.

Genosha.

Just *thinking* the name sent shivers down her spine. The memories were still too fresh, the nightmares still too raw, for her to maintain her normally cool demeanor, even in the face of her enemies. The fact that Nightcrawler was so visibly shaken did nothing to calm her fears.

Why was it, she wondered, did she think she knew this man . . . ?

He twisted in his seat again, becoming aware that she was staring at him. He smiled weakly, apparently more to put himself at ease than his prisoner; it didn't work. "Enjoying the trip, Fräulein?" he asked.

Ororo frowned. "Not particularly."

He nodded, as though in understanding. "I would imagine not."

"Nor are you, I take it." She gestured toward his feet; one was tapping the floor to a nervous rhythm only his tensing leg muscles could detect.

Another sickly smile. A shrug. "I have had more pleasant ones, I must admit."

She sneered. "And why is that? I thought you would look forward to showing off your prize to your master."

A look of unease flashed in Nightcrawler's eyes. He stole a quick glance at the cockpit, where Meggan had joined Englande at the controls. They appeared to be deep in conversation.

"Zola is not my master," he whispered hoarsely. "But he is our—" his lips curled in disgust "—genetic superior. He, as well as the rest of humanity, must be treated with all the respect due their evolutionary station."

Ororo sniffed derisively. "He is *your* superior, perhaps. But never mine."

Nightcrawler grinned. "Defiant to the last, eh?"

"No. Simply unwilling to play the part of the faithful mutant lapdog. Unwilling to spout Party doggerel in a pathetic and futile attempt to fit in better with the hatemongers that call themselves our betters." Ororo ignored the warning growl issuing from Nightcrawler's lips, and leaned toward him. "You will *never* be accepted by the humans; you *must* realize that. To them, mutants like ourselves are to be hated and feared—never to be their equals, always to be treated as an inferior race. We are the monsters they warn their children about—perversions of the evolutionary chain whose very touch is as deadly as any virus." She shook her head sadly. "You are no valued member of this team, Nightcrawler. You are a mascot—an oddity to be paraded around to delude mutants into thinking they have a place in the Empire." She sighed. "And I think the one person fooled the most by this reprehensible tactic . . . is you."

A white-gloved hand flashed across the aisle, catching Ororo across the mouth.

"And *I* think you had best keep your opinions to yourself, Fräulein," Nightcrawler growled, "else I shall be forced to muzzle you."

Ororo used the tip of her tongue to wipe away the blood that trickled from the corner of her mouth. She studied the way Nightcrawler shifted around in his seat, preparing to deliver another blow should she make any further comment. He relished the opportunity to do so—she could see it in the set of his jaw, the tension in his arms, the tightness of his clenched fists. She'd struck a nerve, though he would never admit it; all he needed was an excuse to vent the anger building within him.

She refused to give him the satisfaction. Sniffing haughtily, she turned away and returned her attention to the clouds that streaked past her window—and the island that lay below.

Even from the air, Genosha looked like the devil's playground. The south end of the island was a jumble of dilapidated buildings and weatherworn tent cities: housing for the unfortunate mutant population that had been gathered from all corners of the world. "Unfortunate" because the housing was only meant to be temporary—none of its occupants were expected to live for too long after passing through the electrified fencing that separated the two hemispheres of the island. Anyone who

tried to convince themselves otherwise had only to glance toward the southernmost tip, and the red brick smokestacks that rose high above the internment center. The stench of burning fat that hung thick in the air and the minute pieces of bones scattered across the ground—ones not consumed by the blast furnaces at the bases of the towers—were constant reminders to all of the ultimate fate of Arnim Zola's playthings.

To the north lay Hammer Bay, the island's capital—a collection of gleaming marble buildings that served as both headquarters for the administrative offices of the Ministry of Health and medical research facility for Reichsminister Zola and his staff of engineers. "Medical research," however, didn't quite accurately describe the sort of work performed within the antiseptic-white walls and polished glass; "experimentation" might be a better word.

Or even "butchery," as Ororo knew first-hand. For it was here that Zola and his acolytes continued the sort of horrendous operations and biological tests begun by Mengele in the darkest days of World War II, and developed further in the decades following the notorious doctor's passing by his most talented disciple. And it was also here that her mutant powers had been stripped away, at the brutal hands of human monsters that dared call themselves physicians. Ororo clamped her teeth together as a chill ran through her body, images of scalpels and clamps, demonic smiles and blood—*Bright Lady, so much blood!*—flashing before her eyes. It was a miracle she had survived the surgery, let alone the callous treatment of the guards and nurses as they bundled her weakened, scarred body aboard the last shuttle bound for the Sahara.

And now she was returning—for reasons she could not fathom, for tortures she had no doubt she would soon experience . . .

The jet touched down a few minutes later, on one of the landing pads that jutted out from the sides of the Ministry's main building. A coterie of armed guards rushed out to meet the Lightning Force members—and their unwilling passenger—and stood at attention on both sides of the team, forming a corridor that led from the plane to a door at the far end of the platform. Ororo noticed how Nightcrawler tensed up as the guards approached—no doubt he momentarily feared that they were coming for him.

"The Minister is waiting for you in his apartments, Hauptmann Englande," one of the soldiers said.

"Then, let us not keep him waiting a minute longer!" Englande replied. He nodded toward Ororo. "Bring the prisoner." Without waiting to see if his command was obeyed—more likely confident that it would

be—he set off for the end of the landing area, boot heels ringing against the metal surface.

Meggan attached a length of chain to Ororo's collar, and gave it a sharp tug. The white-haired former skyrider stumbled forward, almost colliding with her captor, and fell to her knees. Meggan snarled, eyes shifting from pale blue to blood red, and yanked harder.

"Up, pig!" she roared. "*Get up and walk!*"

For the first time in her life, Ororo wondered what it might be like to kill someone, to have some measure of revenge against all those who had ever wronged her, all those who had treated her as filth, as a pariah, from the day she had been born right up to this moment. And given the situation, there seemed no better target for her anger, for her blinding hatred, than the blond-haired witch happily trying to strangle her.

She repressed the urge to find out, though—this was neither the time nor the place for an attack; not with so many guns that could be leveled at her if she made the wrong move. There *would* be a time, however; Ororo was certain of that. All she had to do was wait long enough, and the Bright Lady would provide . . .

As she struggled to her feet and shuffled after Meggan, Ororo had to bite back a tiny laugh that threatened to bubble past her lips. Just a day ago, she had been consumed with thoughts of suicide, pining away for her lost powers. And yet, here, now, she had become focused on staying alive . . . at least long enough to strike back at her captors.

Tilting her head down so her ghostly mane would hide her smile, Ororo followed Meggan into the building, making a mental list of all the possible ways in which the haughty shapeshifter could die by her hand.

She'd thought of more than twenty by the time they passed through the doorway.

The Mastrex was in a similar mood when she barged into the throne room of the Starlight Citadel. She was so consumed with rage, in fact, that she ignored protocol, shoving aside the guard standing watch in the hall when he moved to intercept her. Allowing von Doom the satisfaction of making her wait until he was ready to receive her was not on her agenda of things to do.

Wringing answers from him, however, was at the top of the list.

"Von Doom!" she roared, stomping up the main aisle. She noticed the throne was vacant of his slouching figure. "Where are you hiding? We need to talk!"

Her strident voice echoed around the immense chamber, the only reply a chattering laugh from the darkness around her; apparently,

Roma's little shadow-pets found her outburst amusing. Given half a chance—and a Level-12 phosphorgun—she would have demonstrated to them in great, fiery detail that the Mastrex of the Empire of True Briton lacked a sense of humor.

A deep frown tugging at her features, Sat-yr-nin continued across the transept and came to a halt at the base of the steps leading to the throne. The lack of response puzzled her: given von Doom's inflated sense of ego, he should have reacted immediately to her unannounced arrival—threatened her, tried to strike her, even ignored her in a bid to reestablish his superiority, to remind her of “her place.” Not that a small part of Sat-yr-nin wasn't grateful he didn't answer her challenge—while his armor still possessed circuitry from the medical wing's multiphasic crystal accelerators, open displays of hostility toward the super-villain would probably be handled by a quick burst of lethal energy from his gauntlets.

And those gauntlets were the *only* functioning weapons in the entire citadel, Sat-yr-nin reminded herself, given the “state of grace” that enveloped this fortress, rendering all other devices useless. Perhaps, she considered, it was for the best that von Doom apparently wasn't around to hear her outburst . . .

But where could he have wandered off to, then? It was unlikely he'd grown tired of sitting around the throne room and gone stalking the corridors outside; she would have been alerted to his activities by the security forces who thought she was the “real” Saturnyne, instead of her more . . . foul-tempered counterpart. So, if he hadn't left the throne room, then he must be somewhere in its depths; it wouldn't surprise Sat-yr-nin to learn there were hidden rooms behind the walls, with passages leading to all points in the citadel. It was the sort of tactic she would have expected from Roma's secretive father, Merlyn; she had done the same thing in the stronghold on her world. His offspring, however, would never have been so duplicitous—or so clever.

Sat-yr-nin turned in a slow circle, then set off toward a pulpit-like structure near the throne. As she moved across the chamber, a large chessboard floated out of the shadows to join her. Sat-yr-nin halted, and the board did likewise, hovering at chest height.

“Lost without your mistress, little toy?” she addressed it with a snarl. She didn't expect an answer. From what she knew of Roma's machinations, and Merlyn's before her, the chessboard was primarily used by the Supreme Guardian to direct the lives of sentients at crucial junctures in the space/time continuum—games played by a pair of celestial beings who imagined themselves gods. The board fashioned

pieces that resembled the unsuspecting “pawns,” and play began once father and daughter had chosen sides.

Not many pawns usually survived long enough to learn who had won the match.

The Mastrex studied the ivory and black onyx squares, and the few pieces standing on them. There were representations of Braddock and her winged lover, Worthington, in white, at one end of the board; at the other, black pieces that matched the features and costumes of the X-Men who had invaded her world and carted her away as their prisoner. She could have sworn there had been another piece in place of Worthington’s when she’d first entered Roma’s chamber, before von Doom attacked: a baldheaded man in a wheelchair. But it wasn’t there now, and Sat-yr-nin couldn’t be bothered with trying to work out how the board could have made such a substitution without direction.

Turning from the chessboard, she climbed the short set of steps, her gaze drawn to the almost hypnotic fashion in which the light of the hundreds of scented candles decorating the platform glinted off polished crystal. This, in a way, was the true source of Roma’s—and, ultimately, von Doom’s—power: the life-forces of countless parallel universes, contained within slivers of quartz. Billions of worlds, countless billions upon billions of inhabitants, each just slightly out of synch with its counterpart so as to keep realities from literally colliding, each separated by a thin vibratory curtain that prevented two bodies, or two planets, from occupying the same position in Time and Space.

At least, that was what was supposed to be happening, to Sat-yr-nin’s understanding. But, based on a quick review of her alternate’s computer records, the harmonic curtains were now apparently decaying, the spaces between parallel worlds growing smaller with each passing hour. And von Doom himself was the cause of it all—or, rather, the Cosmic Cube he had cobbled together.

Her attention was drawn to one crystal in particular. Unlike those surrounding it, the surface of this sliver was darkened, as though covered with a thick layer of soot—from the inside. A fair number of its neighbors were showing similar discoloration. It didn’t take a Supreme Guardian to realize that the blackened quartz must be the source of the trouble—the “threat to the omniverse,” as Braddock had put it.

Earth 616. Home to von Doom, the X-Men, Captain Britain, and hundreds of other superpowered beings who, if they hadn’t already caused Sat-yr-nin grief at some point in the past, might very well do so in the future. But not if she ended the threat in a simple, direct manner . . .

Sat-yr-nin ran a shapely finger along the polished sliver, an unex-

pected smile lighting her features as a mild charge of electricity ran through her. Then, giggling softly, she plucked the crystal from its setting, and held it delicately between thumb and index finger.

“All it would take is a slight accident—” she released the crystal, then quickly caught it in her other hand, and laughed “—and the ‘threat’ would end . . . along with so many bothersome lives . . .”

She took a step back from the pulpit, attention focused on the darkened sliver—and suddenly lost her balance.

As she thudded to the floor, cursing the proverbial blue streak (a most un-Mastrex-like display of profanities), the crystal slipped from her hands and went skidding across the pulpit. Sat-yr-nin watched as the container for Universe 616 slid underneath a decorative iron grating, and into the darkness beyond.

In frustration, she pounded the floor, and yelped as her hand struck a piece of ivory—the very thing that had upset her balance. She picked it up and stared at its features: they were those of a man in a long coat and form-fitting costume, with unruly, shoulder-length hair. In one hand, he held a long staff; the other grasped a playing card between two fingers. Sat-yr-nin remembered the man it was based on quite well—he had used a similar playing card to detonate her stronghold’s armory during the X-Men’s final assault.

“Gambit,” he had called himself, in that annoying way that some costumed fools—von Doom among them—had of referring to themselves in the third person.

With a start, Sat-yr-nin glanced up to find the chessboard hovering beside her. Did the damnable thing follow *Roma* around this closely?

“Here!” she said, and slammed the figurine down on the board. “Now you have a third white piece. Why don’t you go somewhere and play a game against yourself?”

Rising to her feet, Sat-yr-nin dusted herself off and headed down the steps, renewing her search for her partner.

She never saw the blue-white crackle of electricity that surrounded the restored chess piece.

Remy Lebeau was just closing up his office for the night when the change came upon him.

He’d managed to survive another day without any further run-ins with *Obergruppenführer* Sharon Carter, had even succeeded in looking like he was actually doing work whenever she or one of her lackeys passed by. The search for the supply room pilferer was still an ongoing investigation, he assured her; it was only a matter of time before the thief was caught. It was the best he could offer, under the circum-

stances—surrendering himself and confessing that the missing items (staplers, paper hole-punchers, pens, pencils, note pads, even two laptop computers) could be found in the basement of his apartment building was not an option. Nor would he be able to explain just *why* he had felt compelled to “acquire” the supplies during the past few weeks—it was as much a mystery to him as it would be to any potential interrogator. Except Remy wouldn’t have to beat himself about the head and body to arrive at that answer.

All in all, then, it had been one of his better days—slow, dull, meaningless, but still better than having Carter slap him around while venting her frustrations about his slacker mentality. Maybe now he’d even work up the nerve to knock on the door of his neighbor across the hall, ask her out for drinks, or a cup of coffee.

Remy smiled awkwardly and shook his head—now he was going *too* far. Susan Storm was a beautiful woman, too good for a lowly spaceport clerk; she must have dozens of suitors lined up at her door every night. No, better to avoid the situation, rather than run the risk of rejection. Maybe some other night . . .

And then . . . *it* happened.

There was nothing subtle about it—no trembling of limbs, no pounding of his head or heart, no sense that something was about to befall him. One moment, he was reaching for the light switch by the door; the next, he was facedown on the linoleum tiles, groaning as consciousness slowly returned. He rolled onto his back, and opened his eyes.

Fluorescent lighting glinted off pupils so black they looked more like glassy portals than eyes—but then, it has long been said that the eyes are the windows to the soul.

In this case, they were the windows to one *very special* soul.

With some effort, Remy sat up. There was something different about him, though, beyond the unusual coloration of his eyes—a slyness in the way he looked around the room. An almost cat-like grace as he leapt to his feet. An almost comical expression as he came to an abrupt halt, confused by his surroundings.

“*Dis* sure don’ look like Heaven,” he muttered. “So, where d’hell did ol’ Gambit wind up *dis* time . . . ?”

Interlude VI

HE WAS in hell. He knew that now, for nothing else could explain the nightmare in which he was living.

It was the stench of burning flesh that finally brought him to his knees as he stumbled through the woods, the bile forcing its way up from his stomach and past his lips. In all his years since Auschwitz, Erik Lensherr had never forgotten the smell, or the crackling tone of the flames, or the ear-piercing screams that assailed his ears as the fire consumed the last of those still alive in the pit.

No, he had never forgotten them, but he had often prayed—if such an unrepentant terrorist as the man he had been before he touched the Cube had any right to call upon a deity for help—that, for a time, he could at least block the memories. Shut out the smells and sights and the sounds, if only for a little time.

Shut them out, just as he was praying he could do right now . . .

He had been assigned to a work detail at the crack of dawn, roused from bed along with the one hundred or so other inmates he joined as they stumbled from the barracks. Marching in twos, they were prodded toward the farthest part of the camp, where an assortment of shovels, picks, and hammers had been assembled, then directed to proceed outside, beyond the fences.

The procession moved through the gates, under the watchful eye of the tower guards. Lensherr paid them no attention—his attention was focused on the wasteland that lay just past the confines of the camp.

What had once been a lush forest that towered over the rear of the camp had, over time, been bulldozed flat and transformed into a scarred, dead No Man's Land, containing acre upon acre of irregularly shaped

hillocks—too many to count. There was life to be found here, though: numerous displays of wildflowers that sprouted in clumps on and around some of the larger earthen bumps—colorful splashes of violet and red, blue and gold, that broke up the browns and grays and blacks of this manmade canvas.

On the edge of the forest, about two miles from the camp, they were told to start digging. Lensherr's stomach had turned over, then, for he knew exactly what the purpose of their task was.

They were digging their own grave. Adding yet another hillock to the twisted landscape, as other groups of inmates had done before them.

He could tell by the expressions on the faces of the prisoners immediately around him that only some realized what they were doing; the rest were either too broken in spirit or too exhausted by their labors from the day before to give the work any consideration. It was an order, and they were there to simply carry it out.

A woman in her sixties had begun wailing, then, only to have the man beside her—her husband, perhaps—quietly beg her to fall silent before the situation grew worse. How that might be possible not even Lensherr could imagine, but he said nothing. What *was* there to say, after all? There could be no words of comfort here, no soothing phrases that sprung to mind that might ease their fears. They were going to die, and waxing poetic before it happened would be a waste of breath—a departure from old habits for someone like Magneto, who had never been short on words, but then much had changed since the Cosmic Cube came into his life. Maybe he was becoming wiser with age. An ironic situation, he considered, that such wisdom should come to him just as he was about to face Death.

And he had no doubt that this would be the final time. The mutant overlord had had many appointments scheduled with her since beginning his crusade to make *Homo superior* the dominant species on the planet, yet he had been lucky enough—or clever enough, in his opinion—to miss all of them. After a while, it had become almost standard operating procedure for him to find her waiting nearby as he battled the X-Men, or the Avengers, or countless other heroes and villains, all of whom would have cheered—privately, of course—if he hadn't escaped from that exploding island stronghold, or avoided that solar eruption, or pried himself loose from some deathtrap or other; he felt the same way about them. But he had no mutant powers on this world to call upon to avoid her this time, only the strength of a body well into its seventies. And no matter how well-sculpted his musculature might be for someone his age, no matter how sharp his mind might still be, without his powers he was only a man.

Only a *human*.

Another irony, he thought glumly. *All those years of fighting, of struggling for a dream, and I face the end of my life on the same level of those I sought to subjugate. How the mighty have fallen, indeed . . .*

The work started immediately, Lensherr angrily stabbing at the hard soil with the point of his shovel as others fumbled with the tools. He kept to himself; the last thing he wanted before Death claimed him was to get to know any of these people. Occasionally, the sound of sobbing could be heard over the digging, but he was able to tune it out by focusing on the task—and on his own thoughts. It was difficult, though. Humility has a way of opening the mind, of making one more aware of how their actions affect those around them. And between Doctor Doom and the Red Skull, the great Magneto had learned a good deal from being humbled . . .

His thoughts turned back to the village of Araouane, in Africa, on von Doom's version of Earth. It was there he had met a woman named Abena Matou, one of the "sandwomen" who fought daily to keep the edge of the Sahara Desert from enveloping what few homes remained. He had been surprised by her buoyant spirit, even more so by her unflinching dedication to what he considered a useless exercise—eventually, despite her efforts, the desert *would* win. And yet, still she battled, moving the sand from one place to another, day after day, comforted by the fact that her work put food on the table for her family. To see that even a lowly human could give so much of herself for a thankless task, not to mention the genuine warmth she had shown him when he joined the village, made even Magneto begin to reconsider his harshness toward her kind. So much so, apparently, that when he gained possession of the Cube, one of his first acts—after laying claim to the planet under his leadership, of course—was to transform the desert around Araouane into a paradise, and to restore the village to its former glory. It was an act he was still bewildered by, given his unbridled hatred for humanity in general, but one he soon stopped questioning as he focused on running the empire he had built. In the back of his mind, though, he knew why he had never used the Cube to create internment camps, and force the humans to live—and die—in them, as so many of them wanted mutantkind to do: It was because it would have made him no better than the Nazis—the same monsters who had murdered his parents. And having seen what such a world might have been like, as it was now under the reign of the Red Skull, Erik Lensherr had begun to wonder how he could have fallen so far from grace in pursuit of a dream . . .

The hours passed quickly. As the pit widened, whispered explanations of what they were really doing began to spread among the prisoners. Some suggested fighting against their captors; others simply resigned themselves to their fate. Lensherr knew it would be a hopeless battle, if it came to that—the guards would cut them to pieces with their weapons once the first fist was raised in defiance. An odd belief, coming as it did from someone from who had not only survived, but escaped from, Auschwitz. Yet that escape had only come about near the end of the war, because American G.I.s were in the midst of liberating the camp, fully occupying the guards' attention so he and another prisoner—later his wife—Magda could slip away. Had it been attempted any other time, he had known even then, neither of them would have survived.

But there would be no distractions this time, no last-minute rescues that might mean salvation for prisoners for whom the Nazis apparently no longer had a use. There would only be the chill of the grave, and then blessed oblivion . . .

The pit was completed all too soon. It wasn't very deep—no more than four or five feet—due to the hardness of the ground; to go any deeper would have required earth-moving machinery. More guards arrived, and the prisoners were lined up along the edge of the shallow grave—all except for Lensherr, much to his surprise. Instead of joining the ranks, he was hustled off to one side by Carl and Wilhelm, his tormentors from the yard, who had accompanied the other soldiers.

"Don't worry, freak," Wilhelm muttered to him. "You're not scheduled for extermination—yet. But you'll come to wish you had been, soon enough." As if providing a preview of things to come, he punched him in the stomach, driving the air from his lungs. Lensherr collapsed at his feet, gasping for breath—

And then the shooting began. Bursts of gunfire that seemed to go on forever, loud enough to rattle his teeth, but not enough to drown out the screams that pierced his eardrums. Then came the impact of the last bodies as they tumbled into the pit, on top of those already fallen. It was a wet sound, of boneless flesh squelching onto pools of blood and bits of brain, and not even covering his ears with his hands prevented him from hearing it. And when the shooting was over, one of the camp's officers called for the flamethrowers.

"A waste of fuel," the man commented to one of his subordinates, "but we've had some trouble with animals these past few weeks." He chuckled hollowly, and gestured at the fresh corpses. "I guess even *these* wretches might be good for a meal or two . . . if the creatures are that desperate."

“Or the Wendigo,” the soldier replied.

The officer glared at him. “Listening to old wives’ tales, corporal? I wouldn’t think a soldier of the Empire would pay any attention to a bunch of backwoods talk from rabble such as this.” He waved a dismissive hand at the bodies clustered beneath them. “There aren’t any ‘cannibal men’ stalking the Canadian wilderness, corporal. And if I hear you’ve been perpetuating this ridiculous myth among the prisoners, you can join the next group out here. *In the pit.*” He leaned in close and bared his teeth. “Understood?”

“Y-yessir,” the corporal stuttered.

It was at that moment that the moaning began.

Weakly, Lensherr dragged himself to his feet so he could look over the lip of the grave. There, trapped under the weight of two corpses, was a young woman—she couldn’t have been older than nineteen or twenty; somehow, she had survived the slaughter. She was struggling to get free.

The clatter of footsteps drew Lensherr’s attention to the guards. A quintet of men dressed in fireproof gear had arrived, each of them carrying a large flamethrower. In horror, he looked from them to the girl, then back again. A blue-white jet of fire sparked at the end of each nozzle.

“God, no,” he said. “*NO!*”

He leapt forward, only to be beaten to the ground by his captors. Unable to rise, he could only stare mutely as sheets of flame erupted from the devices, setting alight everything—and everyone—in the pit.

The girl shrieked as her hair and clothing caught fire, as her flesh began to sizzle. And then she turned her head, and Lensherr suddenly found himself staring into her eyes. They were so bright, so light brown in color; so like Anya’s.

Anya.

The memory of her tore at his soul. Like this girl, he had had to stand by and watch as his daughter burned, kept from aiding her by barbarians who feared what they could not understand. Had to watch as she tumbled from the apartment window, her cries of pain melting his heart. Had to watch as she died in his arms . . .

“*NO!*” he roared. “*NOT AGAIN!*”

And then he was on his feet, lashing out at his two tormentors, snatching the weapons from their hands and bludgeoning them to death. There would be no more punishments at their hands.

As the other guards rushed forward to attack, Lensherr felt his anger building, *building*, until it demanded release. He snarled, calling upon the power that was his to command, ignoring the crackle of electricity

that shot through his body as the neural inhibitor acted to override his nervous system. The pain was unbearable, and he fought the urge to stop this foolish act before the device killed him.

The guards halted mere feet from him, clearly uncertain of what to do as tendrils of electrical energy spun away from his body, growing more intense with each second. At the center of the storm, Lensherr forced himself to remain on his feet, to remain conscious, refusing to allow anything to keep him from taking his measure of revenge.

He felt one final stab of agony from the inhibitor, one that almost caused him to black out—and then the pain ended.

He was free.

A slow, feral smile came to his lips as he raised his hands, reveling in the familiar way his fingers tingled as the power built in his hands, seeking release. He glanced up, to find the guards staring at him, their faces chiseled with blood-drained expressions of terror. His smile widened.

“Die,” Magneto said.

“THERE HE IS!”

Lensherr looked over his shoulder. In the bright moonlight, he could see the surviving guards from the camp charging through the woods, rifles and flashlights clutched tightly in their hands. The man who had spotted him was a bumpkin named Faust, a rotund sergeant with a bushy mustache who was always nosing around the prisoners, looking for troublemakers; his dark gray uniform was stretched tightly across a belly that was intimately familiar with all the meat-and-potato pleasures of German cuisine.

Using the back of his hand to wipe away the last traces of bile on his chin, Lensherr staggered to his feet and lurched deeper into the woods. He breathed sharply through clenched teeth, rubbing the base of his spine, where the lump of the neural inhibitor reminded him of its presence. Although he had shorted it out, he was still feeling some lingering effects of the damnable device: He was too exhausted to fight now, too weak to tap into the severely depleted reserves of his mutant abilities. The release of all that pent-up magnetic energy at the gravesite had placed too great a strain on his tortured body. He would need time to recover—time the guards were not about to give him as they closed in. But, he had to admit, exterminating their fellow vermin before the chase began had been worth the effort. Watching their bodies writhe as his magnetic powers tore them apart had felt so natural, so . . . *exhilarating*.

He flinched as a bullet tore into a tree trunk, at a point level with

his head. They were shooting to kill, then; whether or not it was being done with the Skull's permission, however, wasn't a subject he wished to discuss with them.

More bullets, and even a few particle beams, began exploding around him, and suddenly the once-peaceful area was transformed into a war zone. Bushes around him burst into flame, and the ground was torn up by rifle fire. He zigged and zagged, ducked and jumped, pushing his body to the limit.

For a man who had resigned himself to dying, he thought with a grim smile, I certainly seem to be putting up quite a struggle to do otherwise . . .

He vaulted over a fallen tree, then cried out in surprise as he saw there was no ground on the other side—just an embankment, which he slid and tumbled down, until coming to rest in a clump of bushes. Bruised and bloodied, he fought his way out of the thick vegetation . . . to find himself facing a quartet of soldiers. All of them were pointing rifles at his head.

"Damn it . . ." Lensherr muttered. For a short while there, he had even convinced himself that he might succeed in escaping. It was depressing to think he'd been right about his fate all along.

The rest of the guards made their way down the embankment to join their comrades, Faust huffing and puffing as he brought up the rear. They formed a rough firing squad, standing in a semicircle around Lensherr. He glared at the men, then at their metal weapons. Had he been able to call upon his overtaxed magnetic powers, he thought darkly, he would have shown these scum exactly what he thought of their guns and rifles—and what *he* was capable of doing with them. But there *were* no powers to call upon, no strength to fight back left in his pain-wracked body—and no chance of escape.

"Have you anything to say, Jew, before the men fire?" Faust asked after he'd managed to regain his breath.

Lensherr sneered. "Not to any of you pigs."

"A man of few words, eh?" Faust smiled. "*Sehr* *güt*. I hope you will be as equally accommodating, and have the courtesy to die quickly after you've been shot." He turned to his men and nodded. A dozen weapons were leveled at the mutant overlord—

—and then all hell broke loose.

A . . . thing leapt down from the trees, landing in the middle of the group and lashing out with thick fists—and something metallic. Lensherr dove for cover as the soldiers fired wildly, seeking to hit their attacker, but succeeding in only cutting down their comrades.

Was this the "Wendigo" he had heard other prisoners talking about?

Lensherr wondered. If so, he was surprised—from the descriptions he'd been given, he had expected the flesh-eating monstrosity to be well over seven feet tall, and covered with thick, white hair. The man-like animal he saw before him didn't seem nearly that tall, and there wasn't a trace of white hair to be found on its body. Still, it certainly growled and roared and cut men to pieces with its claws well enough to possibly be related to the legendary "cannibal man," if it wasn't the actual beast.

The fight was over in seconds, the last of the guards grasping his throat to try and staunch the blood that was flowing from the brutal gash across his neck. His efforts didn't last for long.

Slowly, Lensherr rose to his feet to face the assailant. With widening eyes, he watched as the creature stepped from the shadows and into the full light of the moon.

He was not a large man, barely just over five feet in height. His dark hair and sideburns were overgrown and unkempt, as though he hadn't seen a comb or brush in years, and there was an almost animalistic look to his features—the sharp angle of his nose, the wild gleam in his eyes, the feral snarl that showed abnormally long incisors. He wore combat fatigues and boots—both black, both obviously tended to with pride. But it was the weapons he had used to dispatch the soldiers that caught Lensherr's attention: a half-dozen, foot-long metal spikes that jutted out from the backs of the man's hands. If he were truly as close to being an animal as he seemed, one could almost consider them his claws.

"Logan . . . ?" said Lensherr.

The man stepped closer, raised his head slightly, and sniffed the air. "This ain't the time or place fer jawin', bub," he growled in English. "More soldier-boys're on their way." The claws retracted into his hands with a sharp *snik!*, and he pointed down a thin footpath. "Got a safe-house a few miles down this way—we can yak all ya want when we get there." He glared at Lensherr, and frowned. "An' then ya can tell me how it is ya know my real name. 'Specially since I ain't gone by it in almost forty years."

"No?" Lensherr asked. "How are you addressed, then?"

He gestured toward the corpses scattered around him, and flashed a chilling smile. "Most of 'em—least the ones who manage t'survive long enough t'mention their run-ins with me—call me 'the Wendigo.'

"But *you* can call me 'Wolverine.'"

THIS IS ridiculous," Warren complained loudly, not for the first time in the past three hours or so. "You'd think with the kind of crisis we're facing, Roma would drop whatever it is she's doing and have us rushed in for an emergency meeting." He flapped his wings sharply in frustration. "Damned inefficient way to run an omniverse."

Draped across the cushions of a mahogany settee, Betsy couldn't help but grunt in agreement. Since being escorted to one of the many suites dotted throughout the Starlight Citadel, neither X-Man had been allowed to leave. Their numerous requests for an audience with the Supreme Guardian, more often than not, had been met with a noncommittal shrug or an uncomfortable shuffling of feet as their guards muttered excuses for why they couldn't do anything to help. Generally, their responses fell into three categories: "I'm just doing my job, Sir/Madame"; "I wouldn't know anything about that, Sir/Madame"; "If you'd care for a swim, there's a pool in the room behind the master bedroom." That last one was aimed at Betsy, whom the trio of male Captain Britains concluded was wearing a bathing suit, rather than the (admittedly scant) working clothes of a former Ninja assassin. She'd picked up their thoughts about it the last time she'd stuck her head out the door to ask for (what seemed) the hundredth time about Roma's availability.

She let out a sharp breath. "Maybe Saturnyne is debating with her again over the merits of destroying our dimension before the Cube's reality-cancer spreads further. It seems to be a favorite topic of hers these days."

Warren gazed at her in alarm. "Are you serious?" Betsy nodded grimly. "Wait a minute—I thought she was supposed to be our ally! Is that the *best* solution she could come up with?"

"Well," Betsy replied, "given the severity of the situation, and the limited time we have left to reverse the Cube's effects . . . yes."

Warren frowned. "Not very big on putting a research group on the problem, or having her techs run simulations to devise some alternate plans, is she?"

Betsy shrugged. "Well, not everyone has your business acumen, luv. Most of us have to get by on our instincts—and Saturnyne's are telling her that eliminating the problem at the source is a great deal easier, and far less time-consuming, than trying to fix it."

"Not very practical, though," Warren commented. He paused for a moment, eyes narrowing as he tried to work out the problem.

A small smile tugged at the corners of Betsy's mouth as she watched him gently pull at his lower lip—an unconscious habit of his, one reserved for only his most serious thinking sessions. He stared into space while he considered potential options, frowning occasionally as he discarded those less likely to succeed. She didn't need her telepathic abilities to tell her what was going on inside his mind—his body language alone spoke volumes.

Eventually, Warren's eyes widened, a broad smile lighting his features. He pointed at Betsy. "How about this? Roma isolates our dimension until we've found a solution, then we—"

Betsy shook her head. "It's too late for that—the infection has already spread to other realities. So, either we find some way to repair it, or . . ."

"Or we get a front row seat to the death of the multiverse." Warren blew out a sharp breath, then rubbed the back of his neck. "Sounds so weird when you say it out loud, you know? It's just so . . . big a concept, it's hard to get your head around it."

"That's putting it mildly. And it's not going to get any smaller unless we do something to prevent it." Betsy rose from the couch. "I don't know about you, luv, but I think we've been more than respectful of Saturnyne's request that we wait until Roma calls for us."

Warren grinned slyly. "And . . .?"

"And I think we've waited long enough—so long, in fact, that I can't help but worry about what Roma and Saturnyne might be up to right now."

The grin quickly dissolved. "You don't think they destroyed the crystal while they stuck us in here, do you?"

"I'd like to think Roma's above that sort of duplicitous behavior, but Saturnyne . . ." Betsy frowned, then waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Regardless of my suspicions, though, this situation has become positively ridiculous, as you've said. Roma might want nothing more

than to seal herself up in the throne room and brood about all the destruction being caused by the Cube, but *we* still have a job to do—and I, for one, am eager to get back to it.” She nodded sharply. “She’s *going* to hear what we have to say, and that’s all there is to it.”

Warren gestured toward the door. “What about getting past the Three Stooges outside?”

Betsy grinned. “They won’t even know we’re gone.”

“How so?”

She walked over to join him, then took his hand in hers. A gray haze flowed across her eyes, and tendrils of black energy suddenly began streaming from her pores, to collect on the floor. The pool of darkness spread outward in a perfect circle, then stopped when it had surrounded the area around both X-Men. It was not a natural ability of hers, this power to open portals that led to whatever destination she desired; rather, it was a byproduct of an adventure that had nearly cost her her life. Some time ago, Betsy had been kidnapped by the minions of a creature named Kuragari, who wished to make her one of his “undercloaks”—servants dedicated to carrying out the orders of Kuragari, and the master he, in turn, answered to: the Crimson Dawn. With Warren’s help—and at the risk of his soul—she had managed to break free of the conditioning she had undergone, and ultimately defeat Kuragari. The victory, however, had come with an unexpected benefit: she retained her undercloak’s powers, among them the ability to teleport across distances. It had come in handy on more than one occasion since then.

“Decided to zip us over to the throne room?” Warren asked. “So, why didn’t you just do this *before* I started wearing a hole in the carpet with all my pacing?”

“Well, for one thing,” Betsy replied, “I was trying to abide by Roma’s wishes. Just popping into her chambers uninvited might have only put her in a cross mood—” She cut him off with a gesture before he could say anything. “Yes, I know we’re facing a crisis, and circumstances being what they are, following protocol seems like a waste of time. But I’ve had a little more experience with Supreme Guardians than you or the rest of the X-Men—especially since my father was one of Merlyn’s personal guards. And if there’s one thing I’ve come to learn, it’s that celestial beings like Roma and her father resent people barging in when they’re . . .” she shrugged “. . . doing whatever it is that celestial beings do. It makes them feel as though they’re not in control.”

Warren grunted. “Yeah, I can imagine having lower lifeforms running in all the time with *real* problems to solve can put a real crimp in your chess games.”

Betsy chuckled. "You're beginning to sound like Wolverine."

"I guess that would be why I have this sudden urge for Canadian bacon and a bottle of Molson's." He shivered melodramatically. "I'll never be welcomed in a country club again."

As they spoke, they slowly began sinking into the black pool, the icy touch of the magical energy sending a pleasurable chill through Betsy's body. Beside her, Warren simply smiled, and tightened his grip on her hand.

"Hope we don't pop in while Roma's in the shower or something," he said.

Betsy laughed. "You wish."

"Hey, a guy can dream, can't he?" Warren sighed. "Oh. You said respecting Roma's wishes was *one* reason for not jumping there sooner. What's the other?"

Betsy smiled. "Well, you just look so *cute* when you're fuming. It brings out the color in your eyes . . ."

And then the darkness swallowed them, and they were on their way.

They materialized moments later in the center of the throne room, rising up through a pool of shadow near the pulpit containing the omniversal crystals.

Warren glanced around. "Looks like nobody's home."

Betsy nodded, frowning. "How strange . . ." Her eyes were drawn to the pulpit, and before she knew it, she was climbing the steps.

Warren trailed behind her. "What's up?"

"I want to check on something . . ." Her voice suddenly trailed off as she reached the top step, and she came to a halt, eyes widening in shock. "Oh, God, no . . ." she whispered hoarsely. "It's gone."

"What is?" Warren asked.

"The crystal . . ." Betsy muttered.

"What crystal? *Our* crystal? The one holding our dimension?" Warren couldn't keep his voice from creeping up an octave or two as he joined her at the edge of the platform. He followed her line of sight, and immediately spotted the gap among the quartz slivers. Gently, he eased Betsy aside so he could inspect it more closely. "This is where Roma kept it? You're sure?"

Betsy nodded dumbly, suddenly unable to speak. To have gone through all the heartaches, the terrors, the torments, only to discover it was all for nothing . . . "We failed," she said, her voice drained of emotion.

"Now, let's not get ahead of ourselves, Betts," Warren said. "Jumping to conclusions is only going to drive you nuts." He looked over the

spot where the crystal had been, ran a hand along the edge of the setting, then felt around inside it. He stepped back, and glanced at the floor, then bent down on one knee and looked under the collection of slivers. With an interested “Hmmm . . .” he rose to his feet and turned to her.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“The crystal.”

She shook her head. “I just told you: If it’s not there, then—”

“Then it’s just not here,” he interjected. “That doesn’t mean it’s been destroyed.” He held up a hand to silence her before she could argue the point. “Look, Betts, you said the easiest way to stop the Cube’s infection from spreading was to smash the crystal—at least in Saturnyne’s opinion, right?” She nodded. “All right, then.” He gestured at the area around him. “Well, I didn’t see any broken shards or specs of quartz, either in the setting or on the floor; that, to me, indicates the crystal’s still intact.”

“Maybe she had it taken somewhere else and had her people destroy it,” Betsy said. “Or used her powers to disintegrate it. Roma’s not the most physical person, you know.”

“Not when the hired help can get their hands dirty instead?” Warren shook his head. “You really think she’d turn over a job like that to just anyone, with the lives of billions of people at stake? I don’t think she’d even allow Saturnyne to do it. It’s *her* responsibility as Supreme Guardian, and hers alone.”

“You’re right,” Betsy had to agree.

“One of the disadvantages of being the boss,” Warren commented. “You have to take the blame for the disasters, as well as the praise for the successes. And this is one hell of a disaster she’s got to balance on her shoulders. And as for zapping it with her powers . . . Didn’t you say something about she’d given her word to the professor that she wouldn’t do anything to the crystal until the X-Men had used up all the time they had to fix the problem?”

Betsy nodded. “Yeeess . . .”

“And have you ever known Roma to go back on her word?”

“No.”

“And how much time do we have left?”

Betsy paused. She’d lost track of time with all the hopping between Earth and the Starlight Citadel she’d been doing, and the currents of the temporal stream moved differently here—sometimes slower, sometimes faster. “I . . . I’m not sure. A day? Less?”

“Well, however long it is, I’d rather play it safe and say she’s still honoring her agreement than focus on the possibility she was jerking our chains. For all we know, she stashed it somewhere to keep Satur-

nyne from 'accidentally' dropping it on the floor when her back was turned."

"And where might that be?"

Warren shrugged. "Hey, *you're* the one with all the experience with Supreme Guardians, remember? Does Roma have an apartment, or does one of the walls in here swing out into a Murphy bed?"

"I'm not even certain she *sleeps*," Betsy replied. "And I've never seen any indication of living quarters during my previous visits."

"Well, she has to have *someplace* to hang her robes." Warren gazed into the shadowy depths of the chamber. "Wouldn't surprise me a bit to find out she's got a *mansion* tucked away in a closet somewhere. With a full staff." He shrugged. "Well, we're not going to find it standing around here. Start looking for a door or a hatch or a secret panel. Let's just hope we don't catch her in the middle of a nap or something . . ."

Roma awoke slowly, her head throbbing dully. A soft moan escaped her lips—a decidedly un-Guardian-like sound to make, she thought hazily.

"She's conscious, Lord Doom," she heard someone say. The voice was familiar, but her head ached too much for her to focus her thoughts.

"Perhaps *this* time she will be wise enough to provide the information Doom seeks," replied a deep, electronically enhanced voice near her. A voice that sent unaccustomed shivers along her spine.

She forced her eyes to open, then groaned as brilliant, white light assaulted her pupils. She tried to raise a hand to shade her eyes, only to discover it was restrained—as was her other hand, as well as both feet. Tilting her head to one side, she opened them again, though no more than narrow slits this time, giving her vision time to acclimate itself to the lighting conditions. The process was a slow one, but eventually she was able to see clearly—although what she saw when that happened made her consider shutting them.

There was a multiphasic crystal accelerator pointed at her. And standing beside it, arms folded across his broad, armored chest, was the invader who had forced his way into the throne room, who had used a variation of the technology in the medical device to strike her down, with the help of his mad ally, Sat-yr-nin.

An invader who called himself "Doctor Doom."

"I trust you slept well, Guardian?" he asked, though the tone in his voice made her title sound more like a distasteful curse than a sign of respect.

Roma pulled at her restraints, noticing that she had been secured to

an upright metal platform—one of the surgical tables from the medical wing's operating theater. "What have you done?" she demanded.

"Seek not to question your better, woman," von Doom replied coolly. "Focus, rather, on the ways in which you might serve him."

"Serve *you*?" Roma snapped. She laughed sharply. "I'd sooner leap into the vortex and allow the time stream to tear me apart than even *consider* recognizing a . . . a *human* as my superior."

Apparently, that wasn't the sort of answer von Doom was expecting. With a low, electronic growl, he stabbed at a button on the accelerator's controls. The tip of the pressure tube glowed brightly, and an emerald beam shot forth, stabbing into Roma's chest. She howled as she felt her molecules being pulled apart, felt her life-force depleting—

—and then an alternate version of herself peeled away and collapsed to the floor.

She was a willowy thing, with gray-green skin and short tufts of dark hair along her arms and legs, and a fairly equine look to her features. This was how she appeared to the sentients of Earth 5127: the goddess Dallentré of the House of Fallon, who offered compassion and wisdom in times of need. One more aspect of herself, savagely torn away by a metal-adorned creature that imagined itself an enlightened being.

The accelerator powered down, and Roma slumped back against the table.

Through a haze, she watched as a pair of her once-loyal guards carried away her unconscious alternate—to where, she knew not.

The clang of metal boots drew her attention back to her tormentor. Von Doom was standing beside her, staring coolly at her. Though she could only see his dark brown eyes through the slits in his mask, she knew that he was smiling in triumph.

"I trust there will be no need for another lesson in manners," he said evenly. "When one invites a guest into one's home, it is expected that the hostess will make every effort to make her guest feel welcome." His gaze hardened. "You are not fulfilling your obligations, Guardian."

"If by doing so, you mean that I should open every door in the citadel to you," Roma said through clenched teeth, "then you are sorely mistaken. I may have allowed you to remain here, when I could—and, perhaps, should—have annihilated you for the destruction you are causing, but I will never allow you to control the citadel, or to use its powers to rule your world."

Now it was the armored monarch's turn to laugh. "For a child of the cosmos, Roma, you are staggeringly naïve. Why would Doom be

interested in ruling one world . . . when he could become master of them all?"

It took a moment for the words to sink in, but when they did, Roma's eyes widened in shock. "You seek to possess the omniverse?" Her lips pulled back in a sneer. "Ignorant mortal!"

Von Doom reached out, seizing her face in one gauntleted hand. Roma didn't know what was worse—the pain he inflicted as he squeezed, or the revulsion she felt at the physical contact.

"We shall see which of us is ignorant, woman," he hissed, "when Doom claims his destiny."

"And . . . which destiny . . . would . . . that be?" she managed to ask, though it was an effort to move her lips between his tightening fingers.

He leaned in closer, voice dropping to a whisper. "Why, to become the *new* Supreme Guardian, of course . . ."

It was Betsy who finally located the entrance to Roma's apartment, behind the apse of the throne room. She'd been surprised to find it—she'd always thought Supreme Guardians lived on a higher plane of existence, or at least in another dimension. Knowing that they actually had a need for living quarters seemed so . . . so disappointing. And yet, it was probably necessary

Betsy hesitated for a moment, feeling rather awkward at the thought of bothering the Guardian in her private chambers, then rapped sharply on the oaken door with her knuckles; when no answer came, she knocked again.

Still nothing.

Betsy drew a deep breath, and sighed. "Well, old girl, 'in for a penny, in for a pound' . . ." she muttered, and pushed open the door.

The first thing that caught her attention when she stepped inside wasn't the opulence of the furnishings, but rather the hulking, red-headed man sitting in an egg-faced chair—Roma's Captain of the Guard, Alecto. He was facing the door, staring blankly at her, a rather formidable-looking sword resting on his lap.

The second thing that caught her attention was Saturnyne, lying in a heap in the middle of the room. From the rise and fall of her chest, Betsy could tell she was still alive, but the large bump on her left temple showed she had been unconscious for some time . . . which, to the lavender-haired X-Man, explained why Her Whyness had never returned to fetch her guests.

Betsy took two steps toward the Majestrix, and Alecto was suddenly on his feet, gripping the sword in both hands.

"No one enters these chambers," he said, though the tone of his voice was devoid of emotion.

"I just want to check on Saturnyne," Betsy said slowly, moving in an arc that would keep her out of any sword thrusts.

"She refused to obey me," Alecto said hollowly. "No one enters these chambers."

"Yes," Betsy agreed. "You've mentioned that." She kept walking to one side, maintaining eye contact with the guard—if he decided to attack, she'd see signs of it there, before he made any move. "I imagine you're going to be in quite a bit of trouble when she wakes up, though."

"She should have heeded my warning. No one—"

"—enters these chambers.' Yes, I know," Betsy said. "You know, Alecto, you've always been something of a boor, but I've never known you to be so . . . short on conversational skills. Is everything all right?"

Alecto stepped toward her, sweeping the air near her throat with the sword; if she hadn't hopped back, he might have cut off her head.

Betsy glared at him. "All right—that's enough of that." She eased into a combat-ready stance, feet apart, hands at chest level, balancing on the balls of her toes. "I'll give you one chance to drop that oversized representation of your manhood—before I take it from you."

The guard lumbered forward, holding the sword above his head to deliver a killing blow.

She easily avoided the downward arc of the blade, then stepped inside Alecto's attack to deliver a quick series of jabs and chops to his arms and neck, seeking the pressure points that would cut off the flow of blood to his limbs and brain. But the armor worn by the burly guard deflected most of the blows, and a brutal elbow smash to the side of her head sent her stumbling away from him, and into a dressing table. She yelped as a corner of the burnished wood dug into her back, then instinctively jumped forward—and into a meaty fist that caught her across the jaw.

Another blow exploded into her stomach, driving the air from her lungs, and a boot heel caught her in the ribs. The impact sent her airborne, to crash heavily into one of the woodcuts hanging on the walls. Splintered oak and bruised Ninja rained onto the oversized cushions scattered about the room.

Betsy forced herself onto her knees, clutching her aching stomach as she sought to regain control of her breathing. The inhalations were short at first, but soon she was able to draw deeply on the candle-scented air. She looked up to find Alecto bearing down on her, holding the hilt of the sword in both hands; for some reason, his form reminded her of a rugby player, winding up to deliver a smash to a pitched ball. In this

instance, though, his follow-through would result in her head being separated from her shoulders.

She rolled out of the way, the blade cutting through the air where she'd been a moment ago, though she didn't escape completely unscathed—a few strands of lavender hair floated to the floor. The dark-clad X-Man, however, had more important matters on her mind to pay it any attention. As Alecto spun around on the balls of his toes to renew his attack, she lashed out with a stockinged leg, catching him behind the left knee; the sweeping kick took him off-balance, and he stumbled into one of the stone columns supporting the ceiling. Betsy smiled as his head rebounded off the unyielding rock, and he staggered drunkenly around the room, apparently unable to focus his vision long enough to locate his target.

She used the opportunity to get behind him. "I'm over here," she said in a stage whisper.

Alecto lurched around to confront her, but she blocked his sword arm with a wrist strike delivered with her left hand; the heel of her right hand, at the same moment, connected with his nose, breaking it at an odd angle. The guard's first instinct was to staunch the blood that gushed down his face, and she moved in quickly to disarm him; the sword went spinning across the room, impaling the headboard of Roma's four-poster bed. Before Alecto could respond, Betsy followed through by igniting her psi-blade and ramming its glowing point into his skull. With a loud groan, he staggered back, eyes rolling around in his head, and crashed, face-down, to the floor.

"Well . . ." Betsy said as she stopped to catch her breath. "Now I can understand why Brian never liked you."

A glint of candle light on metal caught her attention, and she bent down beside the unconscious guard to inspect the back of his neck. Some sort of device had been grafted to the skin, at the base of the skull; exactly what its purpose might have been she couldn't say, for the psychic dagger had fried its miniature circuitry. Still, based on Alecto's bizarre behavior, and his single-tracked insistence that he had to keep her out of the chamber, she had a fairly good idea that it had been controlling his mind. But as for who might have implanted it, well, that truly was a mystery to her. Roma seemed out of the question—she'd never been the type to rely on mechanical constructs like mind-control chips, not when she possessed the powers she did. Saturnyne? Perhaps, but the Majestrix wouldn't have used something that could malfunction in such a way that it would cause her own pawn to turn on her.

But if not them, then who . . . ?

“Betts!”

Betsy looked to the front door. Warren was standing just inside the room, grasping a long metal candle stand in both hands like a staff. He looked from her to Alecto, then to Saturnyne, then back to her. His eyebrows rose.

She pointed to the insensate Majestrix. “I had *nothing* to do with that.”

“Didn’t say you did, hon.” Warren placed the stand in a corner and glanced at the damage around him. “But forgive me for thinking this was all your handiwork.”

Betsy sniffed haughtily. “And I suppose *you’ve* never trashed a room or two in your time.”

“Well, never on my own. But, then, I don’t have your talents.” Warren moved across the room to kneel beside Saturnyne. He placed the tips of his right-hand index and middle fingers against the carotid artery in her neck. “Her pulse seems pretty strong, but she’s gonna have a helluva headache when she wakes up.”

Betsy gestured toward Alecto. “Not as bad as the one *he’s* going to have, I imagine.” She pointed to the mind-control device, and explained her suspicions.

“So, who else might be a sus—”

“Von Doom!” Betsy interjected. “If there’s anyone in the citadel capable of doing this kind of work, it’s that tin-covered worm.” She paused, scratched her chin with bright-red nails. “But he should be confined to the medical wing . . .”

“Then, I guess that’s our next destination,” Warren said as he joined her. “We can turn your playmates over to the doctors there.”

Betsy shook her head. “No. For some reason, Alecto was determined to keep out any and all intruders, including Saturnyne; I want to know what that reason is. It might explain where Roma has gotten to.”

“All right,” Warren said. “But I don’t think we’re going to get any answers from him anytime soon.” He glanced at the smoking metal patch. “Psi-blade?”

Betsy nodded. “Psi-blade.”

“Well, that’ll keep him napping for a couple of hours.” He stared at the unconscious warrior, sprawled across a trio of floor pillows, then shrugged and ran a hand through his blond hair. “Too bad.”

Betsy shrugged, too. “Couldn’t be helped, luv. It was either that, or give him a chance to cut off my head.” She paused, waiting for a response, then frowned when none was forthcoming. “Now you’re supposed to say, ‘Well, I’m glad he didn’t *get* that chance, Betts. I like your head just where it is.’ Or something like that.”

"Uh, sure, hon," Warren said, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. He was looking across the room, at a door on the far side.

"Find something of interest?" She playfully tapped him on the side of the head. "Don't make me come in there again to learn what it is."

"I was just thinking," Warren replied. "If Sleeping Beauty here was left to guard something, then it stands to reason it must be that door. It's the only other way out of this room, and the only place Roma could have gone if she passed through here. And if Doctor Doom was controlling him—"

"—then Roma must be with von Doom," Betsy concluded. "And I rather doubt it was by her choice."

"If that's true, we've got some catching-up to do," Warren said. "But first . . ." He walked over to Saturnyne, picked her up, and carried her to Roma's bed. "Might as well make her comfortable while we're gone. Not that I think it'll do anything to improve her opinion of us when she wakes up."

Betsy smiled. "Ever the gentleman, eh?"

He walked over and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Well, if there's one thing we Worthingtons know, it's how to treat a lady—even an acid-tongued one."

"I hope you're referring to Saturnyne . . ." she said playfully.

"Sure," Warren replied quickly. "Of course, I am. Who *else* would I be talking about?" He nodded toward the door. "So . . . you ready?"

Betsy bent down and picked up Alecto's sword. She took a few practice swings, spun it with one hand a few times, then nodded in approval of the weapon's balance and heft. "Now I am."

Walking side-by-side, they headed for the portal—not certain what might lie on the other side, but more than willing to face it together.

THE FIRST indication Reichsmajor Sommers had that something was wrong came just after the *Nuremberg* touched down at Kaltenbrunner Spaceport. Instead of the standard honor guard sent to greet the crew as it disembarked, Sommers and his people were met by close to one hundred armed soldiers—and a Sentinel.

An armored jeep roared up the runway from the control tower and screeched to a halt at the bottom of the ship's ramp. As Sommers and his second-in-command, Lieutenant Johan Ledyard, came down to meet it, the passenger door on the vehicle opened, and Sharon Carter stepped out.

"Good evening, *Obergruppenführer*," Sommers said, warily eyeing the giant robot. "Would you care to ex—"

The gun was in her hand and leveled at his head before his mind had even registered her movement for it.

"*Down on the ground!*" she commanded. "*Schnell!*"

Behind the ruby quartz lens of his visor, Sommers' eyes narrowed in anger. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

A bullet was her reply; it *pinged* off the hull of the ship. Close to his head.

"Do as I say, Major," Carter warned, walking up the ramp, "or the *next* shot will be the *last* you ever hear."

As if in response to an unspoken command, the soldiers trained their weapons on him. The air was filled with the click of rounds being chambered, and the hum of pulse rifles building a charge.

Sommers glared at her, but bent forward anyway, as though to sit on the ramp. "Very well, Carter. But there had better be a *damn* good reason for this embarrassment, or I will see to it *personally* that you

wind up scrubbing toilets on some backwater planet near the Kree border." As he spoke, one hand hovered near a hidden stud on the left side of the visor; he felt the power he always fought to control increase in intensity, straining for release. Given the circumstances, he couldn't think of a better time to do so . . .

And that was when the Sentinel spoke.

WARNING, it stated loudly through amplifiers built into its humanoid head. PRESENCE OF MUTANT BIO-ENERGY FORCE DETECTED.

It stepped forward, the ground vibrating with each footfall, and came to a halt beside the jeep. Summers' hand immediately dropped away from the visor as the robot pointed its own mammoth hand at him; its palm glowed with a buildup of energy that signaled the activation of a repulsor beam projector the size of a bank vault door. If it were fired, there wouldn't be enough left of the Major to sweep into a dustpan.

This was it, then, he suddenly realized. His dirty little secret had finally been exposed. They all knew now—knew he was nothing but a lowly mutant, masquerading as a human. He could tell by the expressions on the faces of Carter and her men: some were angry; others, disappointed. Most, though, wanted him dead—he could see it in their eyes.

Slowly, Summers sat down and placed his hands on the back of his head. Resistance at this point would have been futile; discounting the Sentinel, he was still outnumbered by a factor of 100:1. He fought the urge to leap up and attack, to force them to kill him before news of his "secret identity" became public knowledge; at least that way he'd be spared suffering through the humiliation. But, no—despite the exposure of his true nature, despite his embarrassment, he was still, first and foremost, an officer of the Reich, and would act accordingly. And no self-respecting officer of the Reich would ever consider suicide a solution to his problems.

Carter turned to a group of soldiers clad head to toe in body armor. "You men—find the other one: Rogue. She should be in a cell near the engineering section. And take all precautions—she's a power-leech. If she attempts to make contact with your skin, shoot her immediately, or she'll drain you like a battery."

The men nodded their understanding and hustled up the ramp. They pushed aside the members of the *Nuremberg's* crew that had gathered at the entry portal—men and women clearly stunned by the revelation that their commanding officer wasn't human—and disappeared inside the ship.

“Of what *possible* interest could that blubbering sack of meat be to you, Carter?” Sommers asked. “Woden knows she’s been more hindrance than help ever since she was foisted upon me at Farpoint Station.”

“Silence, *freak*,” she snapped. “Playing the wide-eyed innocent at this stage will only earn you a private interrogation session with my security officers.” She flashed a toothy, shark-like grin. “I was never told what condition you had to be in for the transfer—only that you had to be ready.” The grin widened. “I’ll make sure they leave enough blood in your broken body to keep your heart beating.”

Much to her apparent surprise, he returned the smile. “And people say you lack compassion, *Obergruppenfuhrer*,” he said sarcastically.

She sneered. “Abomination,” she hissed. “Were it in my power, I would see to it that you and all the other freaks onboard your ship were lined up and shot.”

“Then I am grateful that it’s *not* in your power, Carter,” Sommers replied. “Although, I must confess, being shot *would* be preferable to listening one moment longer to that harpy-like shriek you call a voice.”

Carter bit back whatever reply she’d been about to give—it wouldn’t have been a wise move, to lose control of her temper in front of the troops. She settled, instead, for rapping him across the jaw with the butt of her gun, then turning on her heel and stomping down the ramp, back to her vehicle. She barked an order to one of the soldiers to keep an eye on the prisoner.

Chuckling softly, Sommers rubbed his bruised chin and turned his head to face Ledyard, who had been quietly standing beside him the entire time. “Two sides of the same coin,” the Major had once referred to them—Sommers, dark and brooding; Ledyard, easygoing and full of life. They worked well side-by-side, complemented one another, serving their Emperor to the best of their abilities as they conquered new worlds and annihilated his enemies. And in facing death numerous times over the years, in adventures that had become legendary throughout the Reich, they had become fairly close—as close as Sommers dared ever let anyone get, that is. But as the Major watched him now, it was obvious by the lieutenant’s horrified expression that their friendship had come to a swift end. The distance he was giving his commanding officer was proof of that.

Sommers raised an eyebrow, flashed what he considered a warm smile. “Come now, Johan—I don’t bite.”

Ledyard stared at him, wide-eyed, but made no move to approach him. “I—I’m sorry, Major. It’s just that—”

“Ah,” he said sagely. “The ‘mutant virus.’” He shook his head

despondently, and sighed. "You know that's just an old wives' tale, Johan."

Ledyard nodded, but his bottom lip was trembling. "I have . . . heard that. It's just . . . I have two children—"

"Franz and Greta," Sommers said coldly. "And a beautiful wife, as well." He sneered at his officer, angered by this betrayal, from someone he considered a friend. "I *know*, Lieutenant; I have met them—on many occasions. Held them in my arms—on many occasions."

A thin sheen of sweat suddenly appeared on Ledyard's forehead, just below the hairline. "*Gott in himmel* . . ." he whispered. "You held them . . ."

"On *many* occasions." A vicious smile twisted Sommers' features. He couldn't help himself—it was a small measure of payback for the indignity he was experiencing. "You'll be certain to give each of the children a kiss from Uncle Scott when you see them later tonight—won't you?"

His callous laugh was cut short by the heavy tread of boots vibrating through the ramp. He turned around to see that Carter's men had carried out their errand: Rogue stood in the center of the group, her mask once more covering her face, the chains she was often fitted with again impeding her movements. Head bowed, she marched down the ramp, not even sparing a glance at her former commanding officer.

An armored transport vehicle rolled up to the base of the ramp, and Rogue was shoved into the rear. The soldiers followed, closing the door behind them. The transport roared off as another came to take its place.

Carter stepped from her jeep and approached Sommers. "Your turn, freak. And if you try anything, my men have orders to shoot to kill." She shrugged. "It's entirely up to you."

Hands still on his head, Sommers rose to his feet and silently walked down the ramp. A quintet of soldiers followed, rifles brought to bear on him, while another opened the rear hatch.

Sommers paused in the doorway, and turned to the spaceport commander. "Exactly when do you plan on telling my wife what's happened to me, Carter? She and I were supposed to have a little talk—"

"About the League of German Maidens?" She laughed sharply. "Why, she already *knows* about your predicament, Major." She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "You see, *she* was the one who told us all about you . . ."

"Well, *dis* don' look too good . . ." Gambit muttered.

Standing on the roof of the spaceport's administration building, he watched the circus-like goings-on around the *Nuremberg* through ma-

crobinoculars he'd found in a desk drawer. As for what they'd been doing in his doppelganger's office when the man had had no prior use for them . . . well, only a thief knew the forces that propelled him to "acquire" things he didn't need. Gambit knew *that* all too well.

He adjusted the magnification by running a thumb along a grooved wheel on one side of the viewer, and zoomed in for a better look. He saw someone who looked like his team leader, Cyclops, start down the ramp, only to be met by a veritable army, accompanied by a Sentinel. When the big robot had passed the main building on its way toward the starship just moments before, Gambit had ducked back down the stairwell, then breathed a sigh of relief as he realized its sensors hadn't detected him.

He ducked again, though, when the Sentinel went into protection mode, and stepped toward the ship. But it was Cyclops the robot was after, not him—or, at least, the guy who *looked* like the man he knew as Scott Summers. It was all hellishly confusing, and Remy hadn't a clue as to exactly what was going on around here.

The last thing he remembered was the explosion—one that had leveled Psi Division Headquarters, just outside Washington, D.C. It was a facility that used powerful telepaths to scan the globe, seeking any negative thoughts anyone might have toward the armored tyrant who ran the world—the notorious Doctor Doom—and then reporting them to the proper authorities. The X-Men had been brought there for interrogation, after their capture by von Doom's agents in New York—a battle that had resulted in Remy being infected with a deadly technovirus. An infection that, bit by bit, transformed his flesh and bone into circuits and wires. It was a slow death sentence—one from which there would be no last-minute reprieve.

What had scared him more than watching his body turn to metal, though, was working up the nerve to finally come right out and say how he'd always felt for Rogue, while there was still time to say it. He'd never been so honest with anyone in his life, not even with himself, and it had torn him apart to see how deeply his heartfelt sentiments affected her.

And then they'd had to say good-bye.

As Nightcrawler, aided by some of Magneto's followers, teleported the X-Men from the facility, Remy stayed behind. He was no good to the team now—the pathogen racing through his system made him too infectious for anyone to touch, especially Rogue—but he was still able to provide them with enough time to escape. All it took was using his biokinetic mutant energy to detonate the metal parts of his body, and blow up the building. There was a flash of light and heat—

And he'd suddenly found himself sprawled on the floor of a broom closet-sized office, wearing another man's uniform—and, apparently, his body, as well.

It took a while for him to come to the conclusion that this place wasn't Heaven, Hell, *or* Purgatory—although the idea that he might be a desk-bound bureaucrat in this reality made him reconsider the Hell part. But the truth of it was, he was alive; the why and the how of it he was willing to leave to the experts. Maybe Roma could explain it to him when the mission was completed.

The mission. He couldn't be sure, but he had a sinking feeling that, if the world had changed as much as it apparently had, then the X-Men had failed to save the day. He ignored the thought that popped into his head that, if that were the case, then his sacrifice had been for nothing. But it *hadn't* been for nothing, he sternly reminded himself—by destroying Psi Division Headquarters, he'd at least given back to his teammates their freedom; given them another chance to try and reverse whatever it was Doctor Doom had done to the planet.

Now, it was *his* turn.

He'd spent the next few hours becoming acclimated to this new world, using his alternate's computer to get a handle on things. Or as much a handle on things as one could manage, when they wake up to discover they're on an Earth where the Nazis won World War II, and the Red Skull is now its king. He was just grateful that he'd somehow absorbed enough knowledge from his twin to understand German, since there didn't seem to be a whole lot of people around who still spoke English—or French. Through the computer, and its Internet access, he'd tried to locate the other X-Men, but the task was made impossible to accomplish because of variations in the spelling of surnames he typed in—too many for him to wade through—and the fact that most government agencies regarded their files as classified information, and thus were inaccessible.

It was only when he tried "Rogue" that his luck changed. There was only one listed, and that was in the listing of crews for the Empire's spacefleet. And when he saw that her ship, the *Nuremberg*, was scheduled to make planetfall later that day, he knew the cards were in his favor. Even better, the ship's commander was named Scott Summers—too close a coincidence to be anyone but the X-Men's leader, under a similar name.

But any plans he'd had of trying to contact either of them had just been trashed, courtesy of the port's she-wolfish commander.

He watched as someone—a woman, by her figure—was led in chains from the ship, and something told him it was Rogue. Perhaps it

was the style of her outfit that alerted him—no one else he knew would have every inch of skin covered to avoid making contact with the people around her. Or perhaps it was just that streak of white hair poking out of the top of her mask. His heart sank when he saw how cruelly the soldiers were treating her as they bundled her into the back of an armored car. Yet he held his anger in check, forced himself to remain where he was, and not go foolishly rushing headlong into danger. It would do neither of them any good if he got himself killed coming out of the gate.

A wry smile turned up the corners of his mouth. He'd always known hanging around the X-Men might be good for something—he just hadn't expected it to be for gaining wisdom. Well, he surmised, even a street-smart thief could learn a trick or two from those around him—if he was willing to listen.

The transport pulled away from the *Nuremberg*, and headed for one of the exit gates.

"Damn," he muttered. "Dey're splittin' 'em up." Now, he had a decision to make: Go after Rogue, or wait for Cyclops' transport and follow that instead.

It wasn't that difficult a choice.

"Sorry, Cyclops," he muttered. "But dere's a certain *fille* needin' a helpin' hand right 'bout now, an' Gambit . . . well, he's always had a soft spot fo' de ladies. Hope you understan'."

Tucking the macrobinoculars into one of the deep pockets of the black trenchcoat he'd appropriated from another office, Remy paused to watch the direction in which Rogue's vehicle was heading—west, toward Manhattan. Then he sprinted for the stairs, and the employee parking garage.

Jean Grey was getting awfully tired of waking up with a headache.

She never used to have them with such frequency, but then, before she joined the X-Men, she never had to worry about blows to the back of her skull, or psychic attacks on her mind, or being injected with powerful sedatives. It was getting so she was starting to forget what it felt like to sleep normally, without outside influence.

On von Doom's world, she'd been struck in the head with a paving stone wielded by one of his super-villainous government agents; it had left her with a mild concussion. When she was shunted into Magneto's reality, though, she'd been too engrossed in freeing herself from her duplicate's mind to worry about being knocked unconscious. But now, on the Red Skull's Earth, it seemed she was making up for lost time: first, Xavier's unexpected mental assault; then, the drugs Carol Danvers

had injected her with. Her condition had been made even worse by Xavier's ransacking of her thoughts and memories; her mind was now a confusing jumble of sights and sounds, all scattered across the floor of her subconscious during his brutal search for information. It was difficult for her to think clearly, even more so for her to remain awake, but she wasn't willing to give in to the cool, inviting waters of the dark tide that washed over her mind.

"She is conscious, Commander," she heard someone say, and dimly recognized the voice as Xavier's.

Slowly, Jean opened her eyes, and found herself gazing into the cold, dark orbs of someone she'd hoped never to see again. "Lady Viper . . ." she whispered hoarsely.

The last time Jean and the beautiful—and very deadly—femme fatale had met was on von Doom's world, shortly after the X-Men's capture. There, the former leader of the international terrorist organization Hydra (in the real world) had been assigned the task of running "Emperor" von Doom's high security agency S.H.I.E.L.D., and Jean was just another prisoner to be interrogated. The electroshock therapy Jean had undergone at her hands wasn't something the X-Man was going to forget anytime soon. However, she didn't expect Viper to remember that encounter—the world *had* undergone a change or two since then, courtesy of the Cosmic Cube.

Yes, the world might have changed, but Viper certainly hadn't. She was still clad in a bright green latex catsuit that accentuated every curve, still wore the same garish lipstick and eye shadow, still styled her shoulder-length hair—also tinted green (did the woman only know of *one* color in the spectrum?)—in a Veronica Lake fashion. Her Asian features were as striking as ever, and her lips bore the same perpetual snarl her counterpart had displayed. She regarded Jean quietly for a moment, then turned to the side. "Is she—"

"Going to cause any trouble?" Xavier replied. "Not at all."

Jean raised her head to glance at her surroundings, but it was taking all her strength. It felt as though a large weight had been placed on her head.

Not a weight, child, Xavier's voice suddenly echoed in her thoughts. Just a few psychic barriers to keep you in check. If you try to break them, I'm afraid you'll only wind up crippling your mind. Permanently.

The pressure eased a bit, and she was able to lift her head. There was an Art Deco influence to the design of the office, one she never would have expected to fit Viper's style, given the woman's obvious tastes for all things rubber and leather. Beyond a massive mahogany desk covered with paperwork and some of the commander's personal

“toys” was a trio of soaring windows. On the other side of the glass, city lights sparkled brightly against the night sky, and her attention was drawn to a familiar skyscraper in the southwest that stood high above the others: the Empire State Building.

I . . . think we're in . . . the Chrysler Building, she realized, with some effort; it still hurt to focus her thoughts. *So that means . . . we're back in . . . midtown Manhattan. But . . . why? And . . . what happens . . . next . . . ?*

She tried to turn in her seat, only to discover she was held fast by a number of broad leather straps that confined her to the wheelchair she was sitting in: her wrists were secured to the arms of the chair, her legs to the hangar brackets supporting the footrests, her torso to the stiff wooden back. She tilted her head to the right, and saw Carol Danvers seated on a leather couch nearby, glaring back at her. The blow to the left temple she'd received when Jean telekinetically shoved open the front door at the mansion had turned into an ugly bruise; the black-and-blue coloration did wonders for bringing out the anger in her eyes.

To the left sat Xavier, who was deep in conversation with Viper. That didn't mean, however, that he wasn't aware of her watching him.

“When do you expect to hear from Minister Zola, Commander?” he asked. “I would have expected him to have us flown to Genosha on the first possible transport.”

“The Minister moves at his own pace, Herr Professor, and for his own reasons,” Viper replied. “It is my understanding that we are waiting for a prisoner transfer before we begin the trip.”

Xavier chuckled. “Ah. Some of Frau Sommers' colorfully named friends, I imagine. Well, given the information she's provided—” he flashed a satisfied smile at Jean “—it shouldn't be too difficult to round up the rest of them.” He frowned. “I must admit, however, that I was surprised by some of their identities.”

“As was Berlin, when I informed the Ministry of Security.” Viper sneered. “Perhaps mutants have outlived their usefulness, if we have to start worrying about revolutionaries in our midst.”

Xavier started—Jean could feel waves of fear radiating from his mind—but he quickly recovered. “Nonsense, Commander,” he said with a forced smile. “I have no doubt that, once Frau Sommers' fellow conspirators have been rounded up, things will return to normal.” He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. “‘Cyclops.’ ‘Rogue.’ ‘Wolverine.’ ‘Storm.’ ‘Psylocke.’ ‘Archangel.’” He huffed mightily. “In time, each and every one of these rogue mutants will be brought to justice.”

Jean glanced at him. *I notice . . . you've left yourself . . . off the list . . . “Professor X” . . .*

The pressure on her mind suddenly increased. *Indeed, Frau Sommers. And if you wish to avoid becoming a mindless, drooling idiot, you will keep such information just between us.*

Her eyes narrowed, and she coaxed her lips to form a sly smile. *What's wrong, Professor—afraid of being exposed as a "conspirator"?*

A cruel smile contorted his features.

She knew it was coming, then, but could do nothing to stop it. Jean screamed and twisted in her seat as a psychic pulse raced through the link, shattering her consciousness.

And then her mind went blank.

"Is there a problem, Herr Professor?" Viper asked.

Xavier smiled beatifically. "None at all, Commander. Why do you ask?"

Viper stepped forward and grasped Jean's chin in a gloved hand, then tilted back her head. The redheaded mutant's eyes had rolled upward, showing only the whites. A thin line of spittle oozed from a corner of her gaping mouth. "Well, it's just that I usually don't see prisoners react in such a manner until *after* I've completed my questioning."

"A mild seizure, no doubt caused by the stress induced by her current situation." Xavier shrugged. "Nothing more."

Viper frowned, and let Jean's head fall back on her chest. "Such a condition isn't listed in her medical records."

"Neither is any mention of psychic powers," he commented.

She paused to mull that over. "True. But . . ."

"Please, Commander, don't worry so!" Xavier said pleasantly. He motioned toward Jean. "You see? She's recovering already."

It was the closest she'd been to death in . . . she couldn't remember how long. And it had been accomplished with all the ease of flicking a light switch.

Jean shuddered. Was there *nothing* of the real Charles Xavier left in this monster? Or had his Nazi twin "switched" him off permanently, as he had almost done with her?

Feeling better, child? Xavier asked, startling her.

I . . . got the message . . . Professor, she said, her heart pounding in her chest. *There was . . . no reason for . . . a demonstration . . .*

I believe in teaching by example, Frau Sommers, he replied. *It often eliminates the need for me to repeat myself.* He turned to face Viper, who was talking on a cell phone that had been clipped to her belt. "Any news from Minister Zola, Commander?"

She ended her conversation and nodded. "Not yet. But I was just

speaking with the commander of Kaltenbrunner Spaceport. Two of the other conspirators are on their way, via armored car." She raised an eyebrow, and glanced at Jean. "One of them is Reichsmajor Sommers."

Xavier turned to Jean and patted her reassuringly on the knee. "There—you see how helpful you've been to the Empire, Frau Sommers? If you hadn't revealed your powers to me, no one would have suspected that one of the spacefleet's most respected officers was actually the ringleader of an underground mutant revolution. And once we have all the other key members of your rebellion, the citizens of the Empire will be able to breathe a little easier, knowing such rabble are off their streets." He smiled wolfishly. "I'm sure the Major and you will have much to discuss when he gets here."

"Oh, yes," Jean muttered sarcastically. "It'll be one big, happy family reunion . . ."

WELL, NOW *this* is what I call a pretty big hall,” Warren commented as he and Betsy walked through the limitless depths of the pocket dimension. “Bet you could throw one hell of an X-Men reunion in here, and still have room for the Avengers and the FF . . . and the entire Shi’ar Empire . . . and a hundred-piece orchestra or five . . .”

“I wouldn’t want to be responsible for the catering bill,” Betsy added.

They’d been exploring this unusual side chamber for what felt like hours, guided only by an inner compass that Betsy seemed to possess—part of her birthright, apparently, as the daughter of one of Merlyn’s former guards. It would explain, she’d commented to Warren, why she never got lost whenever she visited the citadel. Still, no matter how well developed her sense of direction might be, they’d seen no evidence of the Supreme Guardian—or her unwanted guest, for that matter.

Warren came to a halt. “Okay—stop.” He looked around at the endless white field, then turned to Betsy. “Hon, there has *got* to be a better way to do this. I mean, we could wander around this place for a hundred years and never find Roma—not unless we come across a signpost pointing the way.”

Betsy flashed a small smile. “Your next stop: *The Twilight Zone*.”

He shrugged. “Hey, at least then we’d know we were *going* somewhere.”

She nodded, then fell silent. Her brow furrowed, and she started tossing Alecto’s sword from one hand to the other, then put the point of the blade on the ground and idly twirled the weapon.

"I can hear the gears turning in your head, Betts," Warren said. "Anything coming to mind?"

"Maybe," she replied. "I was thinking of my teleport ability. Unlike our friend, Nightcrawler, I don't necessarily have to know the exact location I want to go to in order to get there. So, perhaps, if I just focus on finding Roma, instead of where she might be—"

"We might be able to jump right to her." Warren smiled. "Have I ever mentioned how much I admire you for your brain?"

"For my *brain*? No," she replied sarcastically. "You're usually too focused on my other . . . winning attributes."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Well, I'll make a mental note to do it more in the future."

"If we *have* a future . . ." she noted darkly. She took him by the hand, and a portal formed beneath them.

They emerged, seconds later, in the center of a medical nightmare.

A dozen glass-and-metal cylinders towered in a circle around them, each connected to a control unit that monitored the vital signs of the female figures locked inside. The women floated in a thick, blue-colored liquid—a fluid so cold Betsy could feel its chill from six feet away. Some of them had serene expressions on their faces, while others stared at the X-Men in wide-eyed horror.

"I think they're frozen," Betsy said with a shudder. "Some kind of suspended animation."

"I feel like I just walked into the middle of a Robin Cook thriller," Warren said, "and some crazy doctor's started harvesting organs from unwilling donors." He stepped toward one of the cylinders, and looked closely at its occupant. "Is that Roma?"

Betsy joined him. Yes, it was, but a vastly different version of the woman she knew as the Supreme Guardian. Her dark hair was short, and frosted a bright pink color at the ends, and the robes Roma normally wore had been replaced with black leather pants tucked into black boots, and a white T-shirt emblazoned with the logo for the heavy metal band Megadeth. Her left earlobe and nostril were pierced by a number of small metal studs. All in all, the woman looked more like a resident of New York's St. Mark's Place than a cosmically aware goddess.

With a growing sense of unease, Betsy moved on to the next cylinder. Here, too, was another Roma, blond-haired and elfin in appearance, dressed in what looked like a collection of tree bark, twigs, and leaves. Slowly, she gazed at the cylinders, then turned back to Warren.

"They're *all* Roma," she concluded.

“How can *that* be?” He gestured at the cylinders. “Are you saying they’re clones, or replacement bodies, or something like that?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m saying they’re all *her*—parts of her, at least.” She saw the confusion on his face. “And before you ask, no, I don’t know how I could know that. It’s just a . . . feeling.”

“Like knowing your way around the citadel?” Warren nodded. “Well, your feelings are usually right, so I’ll take your word for it. Question is, if these are just parts, then where’s the actual body?”

“Away from any of your possible meddling, mutant,” replied an all too familiar, electronically enhanced voice.

“Looks like somebody tripped a silent alarm,” Warren muttered.

Betsy sighed. “Yes. I wonder who those ‘somebodies’ might be . . .”

They slowly turned around. Standing behind them was three more guards—all dressed similarly to their now unconscious captain, Alecto, all brandishing swords. Behind them, arms folded across his armored chest, was the very tyrant the X-Men been looking for—and unconsciously hoping not to find.

“What have you done, von Doom?” Betsy demanded, gesturing at the cylinders. “And where’s Roma?”

“Doom answers to no one, mutant,” the dictator replied. “Least of all to genetic inferiors like you and your lover.”

“And here I’d always been under the impression you were too intelligent to be a racist,” Warren said heatedly. “Guess you’re not as smart as you think.”

Von Doom ignored the jibe. “Dispose of them,” he ordered the guards, “*without* damaging the equipment, or your lives will be forfeit. Then toss their corpses into the vortex. Doom has more important matters to which he must attend.”

And with that, he turned and walked away. He soon disappeared from sight over what appeared to be an artificial horizon, although Betsy was fairly certain it was just an optical illusion.

“Why, that arrogant—” Warren began, but she cut him off.

“Warren, luv, I think it would be best if you concentrated on the matter at hand,” she suggested, just before the guards rushed forward.

She parried the first attack from the guard closest to her—Gorka, if she remembered his name correctly. He was a heavyset man in his thirties, with dark hair and a pencil-thin mustache, and he used his sword as though it was a natural extension of his arm. Betsy, on the other hand, was more comfortable with a Japanese *katana*, a weapon much lighter than the two-handed broadsword she’d appropriated from Alecto. This blade took greater strength to control, which meant she spent more time blocking Gorka’s attack than she did in pressing her own.

Stumbling back as she just managed to avoid a thrust aimed at her throat, Betsy caught a glimpse of Warren. The other two guards were concentrating on him, one feinting a charge while the other circled around.

It sounds rather strange, but I don't know if I should feel grateful that I have only one of these idiots to fight, Betsy reflected as she blocked another strike, *or insulted that they apparently consider me the weaker of the two . . .*

Chauvinism aside, however, it was clear by the force of Gorka's assault that he didn't care whether she was a man, a woman, or the incredible Hulk—all he was focused on was killing his opponent to please his master. Not exactly her sentiments—she was more interested in incapacitating von Doom's drone than decapitating him—but she could understand his mind-controlled point of view.

"Warren!" she cried. "Behind you!"

He glimpsed over his shoulder, saw the second guard running at him, and took to the air. As the armored duo passed beneath him, he lashed out and kicked them both in the head. The men lost their balance, crashed to the floor, and then immediately rolled back onto their feet, looking for their target.

But Warren had used the time to get behind them. He swooped down low, almost skimming the floor, and slammed into their legs, like a football player throwing a low tackle. The men cartwheeled through the air, then bounced hard off the floor; their swords went spinning away. Wings flapping, Warren dove in for another pass.

Gorka's sword cleaved the air where Betsy had been standing a moment before, and she spun on the balls of her toes, inside his attack, to deliver an elbow strike to his ribcage, at a point where the front and back halves of his chestplate were joined by thin leather straps. He grunted and staggered back, and she followed through with a high heel kick that caught him below the left eye, then slammed the flat of her blade against his skull. As he tried to remain standing, she swung in low and delivered a scissors kick to his legs that toppled him like a redwood. He crumpled to the floor in a heap and lay still.

Dropping her sword, Betsy turned and launched herself toward Warren's attackers. As she vaulted into the air, she summoned forth her psychic dagger, and then plunged it into the back of one guard's head as she landed on his back. He moaned loudly and collapsed, smoke trailing from the mind-control device attached to his neck.

Using the distraction created by Betsy's attack, Warren delivered a haymaker to his opponent's jaw, followed by a combination of blows to the man's face and ribs that quickly put him down for the count. As

the guard fell bonelessly onto the floor, the winged mutant glanced at Betsy, who stood over her prey, smiling.

"Hey," he said, pointing at the man and trying to sound hurt, "I *was* gonna take care of that."

She smiled. "Never said you couldn't, luv, but time waits for no one."

"True," he agreed. His eyes narrowed. "So, now that we're finished with the preliminary bouts, I'd say it's time for the main event—and I'm just in the mood to make Doom tell us everything he's been up to since he got here."

"Yes. And if we're *very* lucky," she added coolly, "he'll even tell us how to free these other Romas—*before* I'm forced to tear that knowledge from his mind . . ."

It wasn't the first time Gambit had ever freed anyone from a jail cell—but for the life of him, he couldn't remember trying it at 60 mph, on a crowded highway.

Following the armored car containing Rogue hadn't been too difficult, considering every other car on the road gave it a wide berth. But following it and catching up to it without drawing attention to himself were two different things, and Remy had never learned to be much of a conservative driver when he was growing up. Of course, that was usually because the cars he'd driven then had been "boosted" from parking lots and curbside spaces so he could go joyriding through the streets of New Orleans. He'd always considered courteous driving and speed limits as things created for cowards and blue-haired old ladies, to keep everyone behind them as they slogged along on the interstate for ten miles or more, with the left turn-signal blinking the whole time. For him, there were two ways of driving: fast, and airborne; the latter only came into play when he was cresting a hill, with his foot crushing the accelerator to the floor—or when he lost control while negotiating a bad turn on a country road (he'd learned to stop doing *that* over time; keeping his hands on the wheel helped). Unfortunately, possessing all that questionable driving experience wasn't doing him any good, under the current circumstances—his LeMans approach only alerted the driver of the transport to his presence.

And when the shooting started, Remy wasn't all that surprised—but he *was* annoyed that such a fine-looking ride was being torn apart by automatic fire.

Sure glad dis ain't my car, he thought with a wry grin. *Den I'd really be in a bad mood . . .*

Any other thoughts were shelved for the moment—he needed to concentrate on driving.

He roared across two lanes, swerved around a Sports Utility Vehicle, then stomped on the gas. His best bet was to get close to the transport, away from the gun ports that had opened on the rear of the car. After that . . . well, he'd figure out something; if there was one thing Remy Lebeau was good at, it was thinking on the fly. He knew better than to try ramming it, of course—the vehicle's armored plating would tear apart his borrowed sportscar on first contact.

With a sharp twist of the wheel, he swerved back toward the transport, grimacing as he heard brakes locking behind him, followed by the squeal of tires and the impact of metal against metal. He glanced over his shoulder, and breathed a little easier when he saw that no serious accidents had occurred—there were a lot of bent fenders, but no injuries.

Turning his attention back to the transport, it took him a moment to realize that, while he'd been averse to sideswiping the armored car, its driver had no such reluctance.

"Aw, damn . . ." he muttered.

The front left-side tire banged off the edge of the sportscar's bumper, and Remy found himself fighting the wheel to keep from slamming into an eighteen-wheeled semi passing on his other side. He regained control—just as the transport swerved over again.

This time, the car *did* bounce off the semi, too close to the cab's right-side fuel tank for Remy's comfort. He gulped as the front bumper was stripped away by one of the oversized tires, to be flattened by the ones behind it. The left headlight shattered, spraying glass at him; idly, he wished he hadn't put down the sportscar's retractable roof before setting out on his rescue mission.

He spun the wheel, and smashed the convertible against the transport's side—not trying to overturn it, but just to give him some breathing room. The armored vehicle shuddered, then slid over a hair, and Remy stomped on the brake, making the transport overshoot him on its next pass. It collided with the semi, its bumper punching a hole in the truck's fuel tank, then screeched back into its lane. But not before the momentarily entwined metal scraped against each other—and created a spark.

"*Merde!*" Remy shouted, as a wall of flame suddenly erupted in the middle of the road.

Spinning the wheel, he stomped on the gas and swung the sportscar toward the transport's right side—just as the semi's cab and remaining fuel tank exploded. The trailer it had been hauling spun high on its rear

tires, then crashed down, across the width of the highway, and detonated as well. The fireball it created could probably be seen from Manhattan.

"How'd I know *dat* would happen?" Remy asked himself with a smile. "Now, all Gambit needs is Sandra Bullock, an' we got ourselves an action/venture movie."

More bullets *pinged* off the car, smashing through the windshield, and he ducked below the dashboard for cover. Steering with one hand, he felt in his pockets of his trenchcoat for anything that he might be able to use as a weapon.

But not something to shoot. Something to *throw*.

His hand settled on a hard plastic case, and he pulled out the macrobinoculars he'd used at the spaceport.

"Yeah, dese'll do jus' fine," he said. "Bet dey was 'sensitive, too."

Falling silent, he concentrated on summoning forth the kinetic energy his body's cells were constantly generating. First his hand, then the binoculars, began to glow with a pinkish-white light—one that grew stronger with each passing moment. When it had reached a certain level of intensity, he glanced at the transport.

"Rogue!" he called out. "Don' know if you can hear me, *chere*—but *DUCK!*"

And with that, he hit the brakes and flung the binoculars at the transport's rear doors as it passed.

The kinetically-charged explosive detonated on contact, blowing both doors off their hinges and sending the guards inside flying through the air as though shot from a cannon. It also sent the vehicle skidding across three lanes before the driver managed to regain control—perhaps, Remy considered, he'd made the charge a little too strong. But when the smoke cleared, he knew he had done all right, for he saw only one figure huddled on the floor—one with the most beautiful streak of white running through her hair he'd ever seen. He pounded the steering wheel and laughed uproariously as he saw her slowly pick herself up and look back at him. He knew that look of hers all too well—she thought she was dealing with a lunatic.

He pushed the convertible to its limits, bringing the edge of its hood as close to the blown-out rear of the transport as possible. "Rogue! You have to jump!"

She pulled off her mask and stared at him in disbelief. "Are you *crazy?*" she shouted back, and gestured to her chains. "I can't do *anything* with these on!"

The wail of sirens in the near distance caught his attention. Looking to the right, he saw the familiar flash of red and blue lights just above the top of the highway's concrete sound barrier. Glancing ahead, he

realized that they were coming to an on-ramp; in a few moments, the road would be filled with police and armed forces vehicles.

"*Chere*, you gotta jump!" he demanded. "*NOW!*"

She glanced at the approaching lights, and he could tell she knew she had to do it, no matter how insane a stunt it might be. She looked skyward and muttered something—a prayer, probably, if he knew Rogue—and then she leapt from the transport.

He caught her with one hand as she bounced off the hood, then hauled her in. Once she was settled in the passenger seat, he hit the brakes, swung the car around, and tromped the accelerator. The sports-car bounced over the lane divider, then roared across the five east-bound lanes, away from Manhattan. In its wake were left one of the largest traffic jams in the city's history—and a pursuit force now unable to catch up with the escaping felons.

Maneuvering the convertible through the streets of Queens a short time later, Remy grinned broadly at Rogue. "Now, *dat's* what I call a jail-break, eh, *chere*?"

She nodded noncommittally. "I s'pose."

His smile faded as he took a closer look at her. She looked as though she'd been through all the tortures of hell, and was still suffering their aftereffects. When they stopped at a red light, he reached out to place a consoling hand on her arm. She pulled away from him so quickly, it took him by surprise.

"Hey, now, *chere*," he said soothingly. "No need t'get all jumpy. Gambit didn't mean no harm."

"I . . . I just don't like t'be touched," she said hoarsely.

He smiled warmly, and nodded. "I know, *fille*. Sorry."

The light changed, and he guided the car down another street.

"Better ditch dis thing, 'fore we wind up gettin' into any more trouble," he said. "By now, de police've pro'bly got a good description of it from 'bout half de drivers in de state." He pulled into a darkened alley between two factories, then hopped out, and motioned for her to do the same.

"Ain't y'all forgettin' somethin'?" she asked, her voice a bit stronger, and held up her chains.

"Oh, right." He scratched his chin for a moment, thinking of a solution, then: "Can ya open de glove compartment? Might be sometin' in dere I can use t'open de locks."

Rogue popped open the small hatch and rooted around for a few seconds. She tossed the contents on the driver's seat. There wasn't much.

Remy picked up a slip of paper and opened it—a statement of ownership. He whistled when he saw the signature at the bottom. “Commander Carter’s gonna be mighty angry when she hears ’bout dis . . .” He shook his head sadly. “An’ it’d just rolled outta de factory, too.”

He tossed the paper aside, then retrieved a small packet of thin, curved metal rods from the collection of items on the seat. “Bobby pins?” he asked. “T’ought *filles* didn’t use dese t’ings anymore.”

“Course, they do,” Rogue countered. “Jus’ like garter belts an’ silk stockin’s—” she sniffed derisively “—if yer inta those sorta things.”

Remy’s eyes sparkled, and he flashed a wolfish smile. “You ever meet a man who’s not, *chere*?” He awkwardly cleared his throat when she glared at him, and held up the packet. “Uh . . . dese’ll do de trick jus’ fine.”

The work went quickly, and Rogue was soon rubbing the circulation back into her wrists and ankles. Remy tossed the chains onto the back seat and pocketed the bobby pins. He walked to the alley entrance, looked up and down the street to make certain no one was around, then nodded to Rogue. She hurried to join him.

Remy shrugged out of his trenchcoat and held it out to her. “I t’ink it’ll draw less attention den dat outfit o’ yours, *chere*,” he explained. She hesitated, then accepted the offering and draped it over her shoulders.

They walked slowly down the street, trying to act nonchalant, though neither of them could resist occasionally glancing around to make sure they weren’t being followed.

“Some night, eh?” Remy commented, smiling.

Rogue nodded solemnly, but a hint of a smile was pulling at the corners of her mouth. “Never had one like it, that’s fer sure,” she said.

“Bet you never t’ought you’d see ol’ Gambit again, eh, *chere*?” He chuckled. “Tell ya de truth, ol’ Gambit never t’ought he’d see ol’ Gambit again.” He gazed at her, and saw the confused expression that was furrowing her brow. “Bet you got a lotta questions on yer mind, huh?”

“Jus’ one,” Rogue said. “Who the hell *are* you . . . ?”

Interlude VII

SO, THE name Erik Magnus Lensherr means nothing to you.”

Wolverine shrugged. “Didn’t the first time ya said it, when we were runnin’ through the woods. Still don’t.” He raised an eyebrow in an inquisitive fashion. “Is it s’posed ta? You some big-time Jewish leader I shoulda heard of that got locked up ’cause ya honked off the ‘Emperor’?” He gestured at the few furnishings of the cabin in which they stood. “If ya ain’t noticed already, I ain’t exactly got a radio or one’a them television sets everybody else has t’keep up with world events.”

“I gathered as much,” Lensherr replied.

He gazed at their surroundings. It was an old, one-room log cabin that Wolverine used as his sanctuary, one he had crafted by hand, as he’d explained when they arrived. The furnishings were, indeed, sparse: some chairs—including a musty-smelling, weather-beaten easy chair that must have been thrown out with the camp’s refuse—a long table, a bookcase with a number of military titles on its shelves, and a bed. The kitchen consisted of a pot-bellied stove, a sink, and some cabinets attached to a wall. Water came from a nearby spring. As for the lack of a bathroom, Logan’s only comment was, “Y’know where a bear does his business . . . ?”

“So . . . you’ve been living here since the end of World War II?” Lensherr asked.

Wolverine nodded. “Built it *before* the war, but—yeah. After D.C. got hit with the bomb, it was pretty clear the fightin’ was over. An’ then the squad I was with got butchered in Poland; we were tryin’ t’liberate one’a the big camps there.”

“Auschwitz,” Lensherr said hollowly.

"That's the one. 'Cause o' my healin' factor, I was the only one who survived, an' then I was stuck behind enemy lines. Hadda take the long way 'round t'get back t'Canada—through Russia, 'cross the Bering Strait into Alaska, then through the Yukon."

"I imagine it took you some time to complete the journey."

"'Bout a year or so. Spent most of 'em dodging patrols when Hitler an' his bullyboys started expandin' the Reich's borders, even in Siberia. They were everywhere—like cockroaches." He grunted in frustration. "I finally make it back t'home sweet home, and y'know what happens 'bout ten years later?"

"They started building the camp."

"Practically right at my flamin' front door!" He sneered. "Turned my stomach when I saw the first bunch'a prisoners bein' brought in. I'd seen what those Nazi thugs were capable o' doin' . . ." His voice went flat, the heat slowly dying in his eyes. "But what could I do 'bout it? Didn't have no troops t'back me up, no weapons—" he held up his hands—"other than these pitchforks I'm carryin' 'round from the 'Super Soldier' experiments back in '43. I'da only wound up gettin' everybody in there killed."

"So you didn't even try to free them."

Wolverine shook his head. "Nope. Don't even get too close t'the place 'less there's somethin' big goin' on—like some crazy fool blowin' up part o' the burial grounds."

"So, then, there is no truth to the rumors that you—"

"What, dig up an' eat the prisoners after they're buried? Hell, no! I'm a hunter, bub, not a flamin' cannibal. I want meat, I can always bring down a buck or two for venison." A sly smile lit his features. "But I've heard the stories—all that talk 'bout 'the Wendigo.' 'Long as it keeps those creeps from venturin' too far into these woods, I can be any boogeyman they want me t'be."

Lensherr raised an eyebrow. "I thought you didn't get too close to the camp anymore."

Wolverine grunted. "'Sides, I think those poor devils back there go through *enough* sufferin' while they're livin'—no reason to go desecratin' their graves once they've finally escaped that hellhole."

Lensherr started. "You consider cold-blooded murder a form of 'escape'?"

"I consider *anything* that puts an end t'the kind o' inhuman treatment those prisoners get at the hands of those Nazi buzzards an 'escape.' Climbin' over the fences or bein' cut down by a firing squad—if it means yer sufferin's at an end, it's all'a same t'me."

“So, if you are so concerned about the mistreatment of the prisoners, why have you done nothing to stop it?”

Wolverine shook his head. “I done my share o’ fightin’, a long time ago, bub. Didn’t do no good back then, wouldn’t do no good now.”

Lensherr sneered. “You disgust me, Wolverine. The man *I* knew would have waded into that camp without hesitation. *He* wouldn’t have allowed any of those humans to endure such tortures.”

“Yeah? Then mebbe ya oughtta track down yer ol’ pal, an’ get *him* t’help ya out.” Wolverine’s eyes narrowed as he stared hard at his guest. “‘Humans,’ huh? What’s that make you—a mutant?” His lips curled back in a feral snarl. “I *knew* there was somethin’ different about you; just couldn’t figure out what it was.”

Lensherr stood tall, looking down his nose at his host. “You act as though being a member of *Homo superior* is something to be ashamed of.”

“‘*Homo su*’—is *that* what you people go callin’ yerselves these days?” He snorted. “Well, it don’t matter what kinda fancy names you go throwin’ around t’make yerself feel better, bub—yer still bottom o’ the food chain in *this* world.”

“Yes. My point exactly,” Lensherr replied. “‘This world’ shouldn’t exist at all. It’s a fabrication of the Red Skull’s. An actualization of his mad desire to create a Thousand-Year Reich.”

“So you were sayin’ on the way here.” Wolverine grunted. “Feels pretty flamin’ real enough t’me.”

“Because you were made a part of it, Logan, as was I. As were your teammates when the Skull took power.”

“An’ what ‘teammates’ would those be? ‘Case y’hadn’t noticed, there ain’t too many clubhouses in these woods.”

“The . . . X-Men,” Lensherr explained, although he found it somewhat distasteful to utter the name.

“‘X-Men.’” Wolverine paused, then shook his head. “Nope. Never heard o’ ‘em. They friends o’ yers?”

He *just* managed to stop his upper lip from curling. “Not . . . quite. But they *are* friends of *yours*.”

“On this other Earth, right?” Wolverine replied. “This ‘real’ world you keep mentionin’. Which is how ya know my real name.”

“Exactly.” Lensherr mentally sighed. It seemed that, no matter which version of Earth he might be on, one feral mutant was as dense as the other.

“An’ what’re *we* in the ‘real’ world?” Wolverine asked, eyeing him warily. “We buddies, too?”

Lensherr paused. "Let us say we possess enough . . . dissimilar beliefs for our relationship to transcend the limitations of friendship."

"Mortal enemies, huh?" A throaty chuckle issued from Wolverine's throat, and he flopped down into the easy chair. A cloud of dust rose from the faded leather as he settled in. "Figgered as much. Yer too highbrowed fer us t'ever get along." A sinister smile came to his lips. "I ever try t'kill ya?"

Lensherr frowned. "I've lost count of the attempts you've made on my life," he said dryly. "But, then, you could probably say the same about me."

"Anytime y'wanna get froggy, bub, just say, 'Jump,'" Wolverine said coolly, yet he made no move to get out of the chair.

"What I *want*, Logan," Lensherr replied, "is your aid, as distasteful a notion as that may be."

Wolverine shook his head. "Already gave ya my answer, bub. I'm outta the hero business. 'Case ya forgot, we lost the war."

"*No!*" Lensherr roared. "You imbecile, don't you understand? There *was* no war where the Nazis were the victors! There are no death camps in Canada, no fleets of starships sweeping across the cosmos, no mutant ghettos! It's all a lie, a dreamscape made real by the accursed Skull and that damnable wish box!" His eyes suddenly glowed with a golden light. Electricity crackled around his body, painting the cabin in harsh blues and whites. "You *will* aid me in stopping him, Wolverine . . . even if I must force you to do so."

"Is that a fact?" Wolverine leapt to his feet, claws extended. He tensed, preparing to attack. "Don't be shy, bub. Just say the w—"

"*Sit down,*" Magneto ordered.

He raised a hand, and with a simple gesture, Wolverine was slammed back into his chair, his claws gouging deep grooves in the floorboards. The feral mutant turned and twisted, but he could no more raise his hands than he could stand.

Beads of sweat broke out on Lensherr's forehead. It was too soon to be trying this, he knew—his body hadn't had time to heal, to throw off the effects of the neural inhibitor. But he had neither the time nor the patience for pointless conversations—not when he was in need of allies in his planned war against the Red Skull. Even if such allies included one of his deadliest enemies among their number. For now, he had to concentrate on the matter at hand, and ignore the dull aches and blinding stabs of pains that threatened to rob him of consciousness. There would be time later for rest—when the Skull lay dead at his feet, and the Cosmic Cube was once more in the hands of Magneto . . .

"*What're you doin'?*" Wolverine demanded.

"Your bones . . . are coated with a metal called . . . adamantium, are they not?" Lensherr answered as he labored for breath. "With the powers I possess . . . all metals are . . . mine to command. So, if I wish that you . . . remain seated, unable to move, then you . . . have no choice but to . . . obey."

"An' *then* what? Kill me?" Wolverine snarled. "Gonna be hard t' get me t' help ya if I'm *dead*, ain't it?"

"I have no desire to . . . kill you, Logan—at least not at . . . the moment." Lensherr sat on the edge of the table, and wiped away the perspiration with the back of his hand. It was easier to catch his breath if he was off his feet. "You see, in addition to my magnetically-based talents, I possess a certain level of psychic power. It's what keeps the telepathic members of your team—Phoenix, Psylocke, your mentor, Charles Xavier—from invading my mind."

"Well, good fer you, whitey," Wolverine said with a snarl. "Must make fer one helluva party trick."

"What I plan to do," Lensherr continued, ignoring the comment, "is attempt to use it to reverse the Skull's conditioning, and restore you to the bothersome little savage I've come to know and loathe over the years." He smiled coldly. "Although, I have to tell you, distinguishing the differences between the two of you once the process is completed might be impossible."

"The only difference, bub," Wolverine replied, "will be which one's us gets the pleasure o' killin' you."

Lensherr sighed dramatically. "My point exactly. No difference at all." He stepped forward, and placed his hand on the sides of Wolverine's head, spreading his fingers wide to encompass the top of the X-Man's scalp. The mutant overlord took a few deep breaths, then closed his eyes to concentrate. "I feel I must warn you, Logan—this may hurt. Quite a bit. Are you ready?"

"Get stuffed," Wolverine growled.

"Excellent." Lensherr paused, then: "We begin."

And with that, he sent a psychic probe from his mind into Logan's, looking for the source of the Cube-created reprogramming.

The anguished howl that was torn from Wolverine's throat could be heard for miles around.

Hours later, Lensherr stumbled back, barely able to make it to one of the other chairs before his trembling legs collapsed under him. He'd done all he could with the resources he could draw upon—the rest was out of his hands.

He gazed across the table at Wolverine. The feral mutant had lapsed

into unconsciousness during the process, which was a blessing unto itself—it had finally put an end to the excessive roaring and screaming that had threatened to deafen Lensherr as he forced his way deep into Logan's mind.

Accomplishing what he'd set out to do turned out to be a greater task than he'd ever imagined. There were numerous twists and turns on the journey through the psychic plane, but he couldn't imagine there being as many divergent paths in the average mind as there were in Wolverine's. There were so many conflicting memories, in fact, that not even Logan seemed to be aware of who he was anymore. He'd twice come close to trapping himself in the X-Man's subconscious; it was only by carefully retracing his steps that he'd managed to find a path back out.

Despite his philosophical differences with his former friend, Charles Xavier, Lensherr couldn't help but feel a grudging respect for the man's mental prowess—he made this sort of work look so blasted simple! Still, the mutant overlord had always considered himself Xavier's superior, so whatever the gifted "Professor X" might be able to do, Magneto could do even better.

Sometimes, though, it just took a little longer to get it right . . .

Eventually, though, he reached the core of Wolverine—or what he thought might be the core of his being—and did his best to draw it out behind him as he withdrew from the X-Man's mind. But had he succeeded in his mission, he wondered—or just reinforced the Cube's influence? With Logan unconscious, there was no way to tell; he would just have to wait to see what developed.

And with that thought, Lensherr drifted into a dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, it was to find Wolverine standing in front of him, their faces inches apart.

"Rise an' shine, sleepyhead," Wolverine growled.

Lensherr opened his mouth to reply, then became aware of a pressing weight just under his jawline. He glanced down to find Wolverine's fist nestled there. A sense of familiarity struck the mutant overlord, and he turned his eyes from side to side—sure enough, his face was framed by two of Wolverine's adamantium claws. The third spike—the middle spike—was still sheathed, but all it would take was a mental command from Wolverine, and the remaining bio-weapon would lance out, to slice through Lensherr's skull—and into his brain.

"So," he said calmly, "have you decided which version of you is the one who gets the pleasure of killing me?"

"The only one that *matters*, ya turd," Wolverine said with a sinister

smile, before his expression hardened into a teeth-baring snarl. "Now, what'd ya do with the rest'a the X-Men? An' ya better hope I like the answer, bub, or . . ." He pushed upward with his fist, to remind Lensherr of the third claw.

Lensherr stifled a yawn. "Under different circumstances, Logan, I might say, 'Welcome back,' " he commented dryly. "But since you have never been a welcome addition to my life, I'm certain you'll understand if I don't consider this reunion nothing more than a necessary e—"

"WHERE ARE THE X-MEN?" Wolverine roared.

Lensherr stared silently at his longtime enemy—at the wild look in his eyes, the flecks of spittle on his chin as he breathed noisily through gritted teeth—and softly cleared his throat. "I am more than willing to tell you, Wolverine, but you may have some trouble believing it—or the offer I am going to make. . . ."

DON'T BELIEVE this!"

Lady Viper's roar of outrage couldn't be heard beyond the confines of her soundproofed office, but those who witnessed her display of anger couldn't help but think of a predator that had been denied its prey.

"*What do you mean she escaped?*" she shrieked into the cell phone. She paused, listening to whoever was on the other end of the conversation—possibly the driver of the armored transport carrying Rogue, from what Jean could surmise. "An accomplice? A *mutant*? And none of you imbeciles thought to call for a Sentinel?" She stomped back and forth across the office, her free hand waving dramatically to emphasize her words. "Understand this, you slow-witted worm: You will find those two freaks, and any others who may have been involved with the escape, *tonight*, or there won't be enough of you left for your family to identify once I'm through with you!"

She snapped the phone shut; then, in frustration, threw it against the wall. Plastic shards and bits of microcircuitry rained down on the carpeting.

"Go through a lot of those?" Jean asked sarcastically. She suddenly winced, and shot a heated glance at Xavier—the sharp pain in her head was his telepathic way of telling her to shut up.

Viper stalked up to her, and leaned in close. "Joke all you want, Frau Sommers. It's true that one of your friends may have escaped—for the time being—but she was a minor cog in the wheel, so to speak. But we still have your husband. He, at least, is being escorted by a Sentinel—I wasn't going to take any chances with the ringleader of this foolish conspiracy."

"Why do you keep calling it a 'conspiracy'?" Jean asked. "Whatever gave you that impression?"

"What would you call it, Frau Sommers?" Viper shot back. "Both you and your husband are mutants, yet you withheld that information from his superiors and the Ministry of Health. You fraternize with others of your kind, using codenames to conceal your identities." Her eyes narrowed. "Isn't that true . . . 'Phoenix'? And why hide your identities? So you can secretly plot the destruction of the Empire!"

"It's nothing like that," Jean said testily. "There's more at stake than you could ever imagine, Viper—not that you'd ever believe me. I could care less about the Red Skull and his power fantasi—"

The back of a latex-sheathed hand swept out, catching Jean across the right cheek. The blow snapped her head to the side, bouncing it off the back of the wheelchair seat. With one side of her face almost as brilliant a fiery shade as her hair, and the other aching dully, she slowly turned back to glare at her captor.

"I owe you for that," she said with a sneer.

Viper laughed. "And you accuse the Emperor of having power fantasies?" She made a grand gesture of pulling on the back of her glove to tighten its fit on her fingers. "Perhaps you should take a moment to reexamine your current position, 'Phoenix,' and then tell me who is less likely to achieve their goals: a lord of the universe, who can destroy worlds with a single command . . . or a smart-mouthed housefrau seeking retribution for a well-deserved slap in the face?" She leaned in close again. "One, I remind you, who is strapped to a wheelchair, and on the verge of a severe beating if she continues to cross me?"

"It won't always be this way, Viper," Jean said.

"Ah. Should I be expecting more of your friends to come and free you, then? But which will they be—freaks like yourself . . . or normal citizens of the Reich?" Her emerald lips pulled back in a predatory grin. "Don't think for a moment that we haven't started looking into the backgrounds of both you and the Major with a fine-toothed comb, Frau Sommers. A movement like this couldn't have gotten as far as it has without the aid of people outside your community . . . 'flatscans'—isn't that the term?" She sneered. "The one you mutants use to describe those of us not 'gifted' with abilities like yours?"

"It's not one I've ever used," Jean replied.

"At least not in polite company, I'd imagine," Viper said. "A slip of the tongue in front of the wrong people would've made us aware of your organization all that sooner. And then we might have been spared the embarrassment your husband has now brought down on all of us." She frowned. "Deceiving the Ministry of Health, allowing an abomi-

nation like him to rise to the level he has in the spacefleet—clearly, Major Sommers has some . . . influential friends in high places. But they, too, will be punished for their part in this revolution. The Empire has no use for race traitors.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Soon, we’ll have all the players in this little drama gathered together. And we have the professor to thank for that.” She turned to glare at Xavier. “Although he failed to mention how well-informed your network might be, if its members could pull off a rescue within minutes of this ‘Rogue’s’ arrest. I hadn’t even issued the order to detain her and Major Sommers until just before the *Nuremberg* touched down.”

“Because I detected no such information in her mind, Commander,” Xavier replied. His eyes narrowed. “Are you accusing me now of withholding information? Should I consider myself under suspicion, simply because of my mutant status?”

There was something in his eyes, in the tone of his voice that made Viper pause. Perhaps, even without psychic abilities, she could sense the sharp increase of mental activity in Xavier, like the buildup of static electricity in the air before the onset of a major storm—Jean could certainly feel it. Or maybe she realized that she’d stepped across an invisible line of sorts by questioning his loyalty. Whatever it was, it caused the dark-haired security commander to avert her gaze, and take a step back from the professor.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” she said slowly, even cautiously. “I was merely suggesting that—”

“I should have conducted a more thorough search of Frau Sommers’ subconscious?” Xavier asked. It was clear by Viper’s expression that he’d plucked the thought from her mind. He smiled, but there was still a degree of anger evident in his eyes. “Fair enough, Commander. Perhaps my eagerness to contact Minister Zola about my discovery distracted me from completing my investigation.” He cast a glance toward Jean. “I could rectify the situation, if you like . . .”

Jean ground her teeth together in agony as the psychic buildup began again. The pressure in her skull was overwhelming; black spots began dancing before her eyes.

Scott . . . she thought, just before darkness descended.

Jean, he thought, I wish you were here beside me, right now. Then I could see the fear in your eyes as I wring your pretty little neck for betraying me . . .

Sitting in the back of the second armored transport, Major Scott Sommers shifted uneasily on the metal bench to which he was chained. The manacles encircling his neck, wrists, and ankles were painfully

tight—far tighter than they needed to be—but he refused to show any sign of discomfort to the three shocktroopers sitting across from him in the cramped rear compartment. The control studs of his visor had been disabled, preventing him from sliding open the ruby quartz lens and using the force beams contained behind his eyes. Right now, the worst he could do to his captors was fix each of them with a heated stare, and snarl.

Apparently, they didn't care for that.

"Eyes down, mutie!" ordered one of the soldiers.

"Why? Do I frighten you, private?" asked Summers. "Afraid the monster might break free of his chains and come for you?" To emphasize his point, he rattled his restraints and lurched forward, as though attacking. He laughed as the younger man yelped and drew back.

"Calm yourself, Zumwald," said the man's superior. "He's not going anywhere. Without his raybeams, he's just another citizen." The woman—Hildebrandt, according to the nametag bolted to the breastplate of her armor—was in her fifties, with a perpetual scowl etched into her hard features. Her once-dark hair was shot through with veins of silver, and cut into a severe crewcut—the better for her helmet to fit, though right now it rested on the floor by her feet. She eyed Summers, and flashed a wolfish smile. "Good thing your wife warned us about that visor of yours, eh?"

Summers frowned. "She told you about that, too?"

Hildebrandt shrugged. "That's what I've heard. I understand she's been fully cooperating with the brass." She chuckled. "You know, Major, I'm not an expert, but it looks like the love has gone out of your marriage."

Summers sneered and sat back, fuming. On further consideration, perhaps alerting the League of German Women about his wife's odd behavior hadn't been the wisest course of action to take; apparently, the talkative cow was spilling her guts to his superiors, telling them everything about him. No doubt she was hoping to cut some kind of deal that would lessen her sentence—it's what *he* would have done, were their positions reversed. Still, he was curious to know just what it was she had been doing that morning, and why. Perhaps they'd have a chance to talk about it—before he got his hands on her . . .

"Hard to believe it now," the remaining guard—Adler—commented. Like his commanding officer, he was a battle-hardened veteran whose years of service to the Reich could be seen in the creases and hard lines of his face.

"What's that?" Hildebrandt asked.

Adler nodded toward Sommers. "My kid looked up to this trash—can you believe that?"

"A lot of kids did," Zumwald interjected sullenly. He gazed at the major for a few seconds, then cast his eyes downward.

Adler shook his head, and sighed. "It's gonna break Horst's heart when I have to tell him his big hero's a monster."

"Oh, I doubt he'll be surprised," Sommers replied. He grinned slyly. "He *lives* with you, doesn't he?"

The butt of the plasma rifle the guard swung caught him in the stomach, driving the air from his lungs. Sommers pitched forward, gasping for breath, only to be brought up short by the manacle around his neck, and the short lead of the chain connecting it to the wall behind him. It almost cut off his air for good.

"If you know what's good for you, freak," warned Hildebrandt, "you'll keep your mouth shut for the rest of this trip. Nobody said you had to be in one piece when we deliver you to Lady Viper."

Gritting his teeth, Sommers drew in a ragged breath. Slowly, his breathing returned, and he eased back on the bench, staring daggers at his captors. "I am an officer of the Reich," he growled. "You will treat me with the respect afforded my rank, and—"

"And *nothing*, you piece of trash!" Adler shot back. "Didn't anyone tell you back at the spaceport, *Citizen* Sommers? You don't *have* a rank anymore. You think the Ministry of Defense would allow a *mutant* to call itself an officer, when everybody knows your kind isn't fit for command?"

"If you've heard of my exploits, Sergeant—as I'm sure you have," Sommers replied heatedly, "then you know I've proven that belief wrong on dozens of occasions. *No one* is better suited for such a position than I; the Emperor himself said as much when I was given command of the *Nuremberg*. And once he has been made aware of this travesty, he'll no doubt step forward in my defense." He smiled viciously. "And then I'll see to it that all three of you are transferred to the front lines on the next available cruiser."

Hildebrandt exchanged glances with her men, and all three burst into laughter.

"You actually think the *Emperor* is going to come to your aid?" she asked, wiping away tears. "Well, you're nothing if not confident, I'll give you that."

"Don't you get it, freak?" Adler explained. "You're an embarrassment to the Reich. If he's lucky, Emperor Schmidt won't even hear of this until long after you're put down—and by then, I'm sure, your name will have been erased from all combat records. It'll be like you never

existed." He grinned. "Just another faceless mutant, dumped into a unmarked grave with all the others."

Sommers looked at each of the soldiers—at their cruel smiles, at the hardness of their gazes—and, slowly, Adler's words began to sink in. It was true, he realized. He was an embarrassment to the Reich—one who couldn't be allowed to live. Deep down, he knew he couldn't be surprised by this revelation; knew that, one day, his secret would be revealed. He'd always thought it would be one of the physicians or officers he routinely paid off who might betray him—those few who were aware of his true nature. He'd been threatened by one or two of them in the past, when they felt his . . . contributions weren't enough, but he'd settled with each of them—he'd had no choice.

But his *wife*? Who would think *she'd* turn on him so quickly? Not for the first time in recent months, he wondered what he had ever seen in her in the first place—beyond her obvious physical attributes, that is. Until recently, she'd always seemed so weak, so dependent on him, so . . . *plain* in the way she presented herself, in the way she lived. But now, suddenly, she'd developed a backbone, started skulking around for some reason or other in his absence—had even talked back to him! Where had *this* Jean Grey been hiding all this time? And if she had been following some foolish notion that she should take charge of her life *now*, why start by reporting him to the Ministry, when doing so would only cause *her* trouble as well?

Frowning deeply, Citizen Scott Sommers sat back and focused his thoughts, trying to figure out exactly when everything in his life had gone so completely wrong. . . .

"Something is wrong," Xavier said.

Viper turned from the window through which she had been gazing at the Manhattan skyline. "Explain."

Maneuvering the controls of his wheelchair, Xavier rolled back from the semi-conscious Jean Grey and approached the green-tressed commander. Behind him, Jean moaned softly as he withdrew from her mind; her head lolled onto her chest.

"In conducting a deeper investigation, I've come across some extraordinary findings," the professor replied. He gestured at their captive. "This woman possesses more than one ego state!"

"You mean she suffers from a split personality?" Viper frowned. "That wasn't in her medical files, either."

Xavier shook his head. "No, Commander—it's more complicated than that." He watched the look of confusion that momentarily contorted her features, then held up a hand before she could voice her next ques-

tion. "In general, a person suffering from a Dissociative Identity Disorder has undergone a series of traumatic experiences, usually during childhood, usually through repeated physical or sexual assaults, that result in the creation of a cerebral defensive mechanism that allows them to deal with the trauma. Originally, that form of escape was thought to create different 'personalities' that the person would adopt in times of crisis—identities separate from the core individual, with their own ways of thinking and acting and remembering. However, the Reich's psychiatric division has come to a better understanding of the condition over the years; they now know that these 'personality states' are simply manifestations of the same person, not separate states of consciousness."

"So, what makes Sommers different?" Viper asked.

"Unlike 'normal' DID sufferers," Xavier continued, "Frau Sommers—from what I have seen in the course of my psychic examination—has never experienced any such trauma, and, therefore, has no reason to create alternates of herself. And yet, they exist; I have made contact with them, examined their minds, as well. These other personalities are so completely separate and distinct from her own, in fact, that I would go so far as to consider them more than just submerged states of consciousness—they are living entities. Other versions of herself, to be precise."

Viper's eyes narrowed, and she stared silently at him. Xavier could hear more than the figurative wheels turning in her head as she considered all he had just said—he was reading her thoughts. Still, he concluded, it would be better if he allowed her the opportunity to voice those thoughts, if only to give her some sense of satisfaction. A way of justifying her job, as it were.

"You're saying there are two other versions of herself living in her head?" she finally said.

Xavier forced himself to flash what he considered a patient smile. "In a manner of speaking."

Viper huffed. "Preposterous."

The professor frowned, although he shouldn't have been surprised by her reaction. The military mind was often too rigid to accept unusual theories, and Viper's was no better—as he'd seen when he first moved through her thoughts. With an inward sigh, he continued. "There's more."

An eyebrow arched. Emerald lips pulled back in a condescending sneer. "Don't tell me—she's from outer space. A Kree spy, perhaps, genetically altered to live among us?"

Xavier politely chuckled, then dropped the false smile. "No, Commander, but you are not too far off the mark." He turned to glance at

Jean. "Frau Sommers—or at least the woman we believe to be Frau Sommers—does, indeed, come from another world." He paused, for dramatic effect, and turned back to Viper. "Another Earth."

She scowled. "Another Earth," she said flatly. "Well, that explains everything, then."

"I'm quite serious, Commander," Xavier replied evenly. "And were you capable of peering into the deepest recesses of her mind, as I am, you would know that everything I have said is true. There are three versions of the same woman, all living in the same body, as unbelievable as that might sound, and the one currently controlling it is not from our world. As I mentioned, I have been in contact with the other entities currently occupying her subconscious. One of them is the wife of Reichsmajor Sommers, her personality submerged so another's—this 'Jean Grey'—could make use of her body. The other believes she is an acolyte of someone named 'Magneto.'" He paused. "Magneto . . ." His voice suddenly trailed off, and he fell silent.

Why, he wondered, did that name sound so . . . familiar to him? So important? Like hearing of an old friend, one not seen in a long time, but still remembered with fondness, or . . . regret? Slowly, he turned back to gaze at Frau Sommers. She had insisted during the interrogations that they knew one another, as well; he had even seen memories of a man who looked like him in her mind. But that Charles Xavier was a far different man—one of determination, of strength. One dedicated to a dream of peaceful coexistence between mutantkind and humanity. The leader of a group of men and women as dedicated to him as they were to his dream, who were willing to sacrifice their very lives in order to make it a reality—a group called the "X-Men." A man who commanded respect, even from his enemies.

He didn't exist on this world, though. The man who lived here might possess his features, but not his spirit, and fanciful dreams of universal peace had no place in the Thousand-Year Reich. They were as dead as the X-Men soon would be—by providing Viper and her people with the information from Jean Sommers'—Jean Grey's—mind, the professor could see no other outcome.

Had he *always* been so quick to condemn his own people? he wondered. So willing to betray other mutants to the Nazis in order to preserve his existence? Was his life really that important?

It was to *him*, he thought somberly. And yes, he *had* always been quick to point a finger, to notify his keepers of any thoughts of revolution he detected when he'd lived in the mutant interment camps. The survival instinct had been strong in him, then, and he did what he had to do in order to go on living. At least that's what he often told himself

in the decades that followed—it made the guilt he constantly lived with a somewhat lighter burden, if only for a short time.

“Magnéto?” Viper asked, shaking him from his reverie. “Sounds like another of their codenamed agents.” She shrugged. “Well, he can join the other conspirators she’s told us about when we start rounding them all up.”

Xavier nodded. “Now, concerning her true identity, Commander . . .”

Viper sliced a hand through the air to cut short his next comment. “Don’t bother me with wild tales of parallel worlds and multiple personalities, Professor—I stopped reading scientifiction by the time I reached puberty.”

“Still, Commander, I feel this matter should be pursued,” Xavier insisted. “From what I have just seen in this woman’s thoughts, the Emperor himself may need to be informed.”

Viper laughed sharply. “You want me to approach the *Emperor* with this nonsense?” She sneered at him. “Have you any idea of how difficult it is for a woman to rise to a position such as mine in this society, Xavier? Do you think I’m going to throw away everything I’ve fought to achieve by asking for an audience with the Emperor, just so I can spin fairy tales for him about alternate realities and a woman with three brains?”

“Not three brains, Commander,” Xavier replied. “Three brain *patterns*. And I realize how difficult all this is to believe, but keep in mind that space travel and contact with alien races were considered just as fanciful, and yet we have come to accept them as part of everyday life. And the notion is not as strange as you make it sound—Minister Zola once told me of a series of experiments conducted by the Reich’s top scientists during the late 1970s to mid-1980s, the purpose being to create gateways to other dimensions. Another method of expanding the Empire’s borders, I’d imagine.”

“And did any of these ‘gateways’ actually lead somewhere?”

“Not to my knowledge. But,” he added quickly, “that doesn’t mean that all I have told you should be so casually dismissed.” He smiled. “You know, Commander, it might be best if I just showed you everything I have learned from Fräulein Grey.”

“Calling her by her other identity, now, are we?” Viper asked condescendingly.

Xavier nodded. “All it would involve is you allowing me to link our minds to hers, and—”

“Absolutely not,” Viper interjected. She pointed to her head. “No

one gets in here, least of all some mentalist—even if he *is* the Health Minister's favorite pet mutant."

Now it was Xavier's turn to scowl. He'd tried to be patient with this woman, tried to provide her with all the information he had acquired, but she refused to take it seriously. And now she was only making matters worse for herself by sniping at him like a child.

Well, he'd seen the real reason for the Grey woman's arrival on his world, came to understand the importance of the mission she and the other "X-Men" had set out on, came to realize what might happen should they fail to accomplish their task. Yes, it all sounded like some bizarre fantasy when one stepped back to take another look at it—there was no denying it—but it all felt too real, too *true*, to be the mere fabrications of a disturbed mind. The world, the Empire, was facing perhaps its greatest crisis, but nothing could be done to prevent it unless steps were taken to bring the matter to Emperor Schmidt's attention.

And so, having reached a decision, Xavier took the figurative first step: by switching off Viper's mind.

With a soft grunt, the latex-clad officer crumpled to the floor at Grey's feet—much to the surprise of Carol Danvers. She jumped from the couch, looking in shock from Viper to her employer.

"*What did you do to her?*" she whispered hoarsely, then glanced at the front door. "Are you trying to get us both killed?"

"Don't be so skittish, Fräulein Danvers," Xavier replied. "This office is soundproofed. I assure you, no one in the hall outside has heard a thing since we came in here." He gestured toward Viper. "Now, then, let us see if I can get this to work . . ."

He fell silent, focusing his thoughts on the unconscious commander, slipping through the corridors of her mind until he found what he was looking for. Beads of sweat formed on the professor's bare scalp as he set about flipping mental switches, turning psychic dials. He felt a small surge of pride as he saw the woman's fingers twitch, felt her leg muscles tighten.

And then Viper suddenly lurched to her feet, her eyes snapping open. The pupils were dilated though—evidence that she was not the one in control of her body.

"What are you doing?" Danvers hissed. Apparently, she didn't believe him about the thickness of the office walls.

Viper turned to face her, but it was Xavier's words that came tumbling out through numbed lips. "It was painfully apparent to me that the Commander was never going to bring the information I gathered to the Emperor, and time is of the essence. Therefore, I will have to do so myself—*through her.*"

A soft moan caught their attention, and all three turned to look at Jean Grey. Her head had tilted back, and her eyelids were beginning to flutter open.

"I can only maintain control over one of them," Xavier explained to Danvers through Viper. "In order to place myself inside the Commander, I have had to withdraw a majority of the psychic barriers I erected within Fräulein Grey's mind. She'll be fully conscious shortly."

"Not necessarily." Danvers went back to the couch to retrieve a large handbag that sat between the cushions. Placing it on Viper's desk, she rifled through the contents, coming up with a small vial and a syringe.

Xavier had Viper shake her head. "No sedatives, Danvers. I *want* Fräulein Grey awake—we have much to discuss." He/she paused, then gestured toward the needle. "But have it ready, just in case the conversation becomes . . . volatile."

As Danvers prepared the shot, Xavier directed Viper's body to the desk. It was difficult work—he'd forgotten how to walk, in all the years he'd been confined to a wheelchair—but he managed to keep her from tripping over her feet long enough to drop her into her chair. A quick examination of her mind told him the location of her main communications set; pressing a hidden stud to the right of her seat caused a viewscreen to rise from the center of the desk. He keyed in a specific transmissions code—one only to be used in cases of emergency—and hit the SEND button.

Moments later, a man in a security uniform appeared on the screen. "Yes?"

"This is Commander Viper, in New York." Her eyes, Xavier knew, were still wide and unseeing, but the low quality of the picture being broadcast should make it difficult to tell, except on close inspection. He hoped. "I need to speak with the Emperor—immediately. . . ."

S HE'D BEEN dreaming of empires again.

Dreaming of lavish palaces and sculptured gardens, of legions of armies marching under her banner and immense monuments carved in her image, of enemies crushed and cities burned.

So it was a bitter disappointment for Sat-yr-nin when she suddenly realized that none of what she was seeing—the throne room, the ladies-in-waiting, the viral young guards anxious to comply with her every order, the heads of her enemies perched so decorously on their pikes—was real.

And that was when the agonizing pain in her head erupted.

With a groan, she slowly opened her eyes; thankfully, the room was just dark enough for the lighting to not blind her. She attempted to sit up, but the pain in her head only intensified, and she settled back. Gingerly, she placed her fingertips to her head, and sucked in a sharp breath when they came into contact with the huge welt on her temple.

She remembered, now. Remembered finding the passage behind the throne, which led to Roma's chamber, which led to an unexpected confrontation with the Guardian's hulking captain, Alecto. Knowing he was under von Doom's thrall, she hadn't thought twice about brushing past him as he warned her that no one was allowed in the chamber—she was the doctor's ally, after all. But then, he'd had the temerity to place his hands on her—*Her!* The Mastrex of the Empire of True Briton!—like the oafish commoner he was, and she'd let her temper get the best of her. Slapping him across the face hadn't done much good for breaking his vise-like grip on her shoulder, but making a grab for his sword, so she could separate his head from his shoulders, had certainly gotten his attention. He let go of her, all right, but only so he could deliver a

swift blow to her head, one made even more staggering by the weight of the big metal gauntlets he wore. The floor had rushed up to meet her, and . . .

Sat-yr-nin gazed at her surroundings, and was surprised to find she was lying on Roma's bed. Placing her here wasn't something she would have expected from a brute who had come close to crushing her skull, but she was at a loss to otherwise explain her position. Maybe it was just his addlepat way of apologizing for the assault. Whatever the reason, she'd still see his head on a pike—no one laid hands upon the Mastrex and walked away unpunished.

That, however, would have to wait. Right now, she still wanted to talk to von Doom about this reality-changing weapon he'd created.

Moving slowly, so as not to increase the strength of her headache, she rolled over to the edge of the bed and swung her feet onto the floor. Then, hesitantly, she raised herself up into a sitting position, keeping her head down and her hands placed on either side of it. Gritting her teeth, she raised her head, and was startled to discover that the bedchamber looked as though a battle had been fought in it. Smashed furniture, a broken woodcut and snapped candles—whoever forced their way in had obviously encountered the mind-controlled warrior, but what had been the outcome?

As she rose from the bed, her foot brushed against hard metal. She looked down, to find Alecto lying in a heap, a thin whisper of smoke curling upward from the nape of his neck. Apparently, not only had the mysterious intruder overpowered the guard, but they had also found a way to short out the device that made him obedient to von Doom.

Sat-yr-nin glanced around. There was no other body to be seen, so the intruder had moved on—more than likely through the open door on the other side of the room: her original destination, before the altercation. When all of this might have happened she couldn't say; to begin with, she had no idea how long she'd been unconscious. But she did, however, have a notion as to who might be responsible for the damaged room, and the sleeping guard.

"The X-Men," she hissed. "Braddock, and her insipid winged lover."

She started toward the door, then stopped, and walked back to Alecto. A quick search of his body revealed no weapons, and his sword had been taken. A pity, really, she thought—she'd been hoping to use it on him before she left. She settled for delivering a brutal kick to his face with the toe of her boot, and knocking out one of his front teeth.

Sweeping her hair back from her face—and then wincing as her hand brushed against the lump on her head—the Mastrex picked her

way across the room, and stepped into the pocket dimension beyond the doorway.

"It is time," von Doom stated.

He made a final calibration to the inner workings of the machine before him, then stepped back to admire his creation. It had taken time to acquire the materials, but by sending the physician, Stanton, and the throne room guards back to the citadel on several trips, the dictator had been able to get everything he needed, even the more unusual selections on his list. As Stanton had explained, with as many levels as the citadel possessed, and as many different kinds of machinery there were to be found on them, from hundreds of worlds and dimensions, there was no shortage of equipment storage bays, or replacement parts. Von Doom had been satisfied with the physician's responses since their last discussion; now, the man was almost *too* forthcoming with information.

The doctor was standing beside him right now, the only member of von Doom's entourage still in attendance. Being all too familiar with the ways of the so-called "super hero" community, he hadn't really expected his warrior drones to prove much of a challenge for the two X-Men pursuing him. But they would serve their purpose well enough—delaying the duo long enough to provide him time to finish his work was all he required.

And now it was done.

Softly, Stanton cleared his throat. "Um . . . Lord Doom . . . I don't wish to sound ignorant, but . . . time for what?"

"For the next stage of my plan, lackey," von Doom growled. "The stage in which Doom ascends to his rightful place . . . as a god."

"Oh," Stanton muttered, and smiled nervously. "*That* stage."

"Bring the woman over," von Doom ordered.

As Stanton walked away to retrieve the Guardian, the dictator turned back to regard his machine. It stood five feet tall, in a columnar shape with eight control sections cluttered with switches, dials, and buttons around a central core. Attached to the center by lengths of cable and fiber optics were two sets of metal handgrips, each placed on opposite sides of the construct. Von Doom began flipping switches and punching buttons, and the machine loudly hummed to life.

The squeak of hard rubber wheels caught his attention. He turned to see Stanton pushing the medical bed to which Roma was strapped. The physician brought it to a halt beside the console.

"Place the grips in her hands," von Doom ordered.

Stanton did as he was ordered, using clamps on the ends of the grips to secure them to her wrists so she couldn't just cast them aside

if she awakened during the process. Completing the task, he stepped back and looked to his master.

Von Doom activated another set of controls, moving around the console to set a sequence of dials, then toggled a quintet of switches. The humming sound given off by the machine grew louder, causing Stanton to place his hands over his ears.

"Exactly what are we—you—doing here, Lord Doom?" he asked. "Some of this equipment is familiar—parts from some of the medical equipment I gathered, and so on—but I've never seen them used quite this way."

The tyrant paused in his work. "Not that you could possibly grasp the genius that is Doom's, physician, but I will tell you nonetheless. A number of years past, in my homeland of Latveria, I once lured the alien known as the Silver Surfer to my castle with promises of friendship. The fool accepted my invitation, only to learn my true purpose: to take from him his cosmic powers, and use them to strike at the accursed Reed Richards and the other members of his insipid Fantastic Four." He raised a metal fist in the air. "And I succeeded! As none before me had ever done!" He frowned, and the fist slowly dropped to his side. "But the victory was a hollow one—for while I had absorbed the sky-rider's strengths by using a device only Doom could create, I had also absorbed his weaknesses." He paused, grinding his teeth as he recalled the events that followed. "It was an energy barrier that reversed the process—one invisible to any form of detection, even those created by Doom. It had been erected by the Surfer's previous master, Galactus, the world-devourer, as a means of imprisoning him on Earth. To deny him any further chance of traveling among the stars. But when I became the possessor of the Power Cosmic, the barrier worked against me, as well. Colliding with it drained my newly acquired strength, and returned it to the Surfer." His eyes narrowed. "Such an occurrence will never happen again."

"And now you're planning to do the same thing to the Guardian?" Stanton asked. "This machine is going to drain her powers?" He pursed his lips, as though stopping to choose the right words. "Is that . . . possible? I mean, she *is* a Supreme Guardian, and—"

"Silence!" the armored dictator barked. "*Everything* is possible, lackey, when Doom is involved." He gestured toward the console. "This assemblage of parts and circuitry is crude, but should work effectively enough for the task at hand." His hands played across two of the sections, setting a final combination of relays; then he grasped the hand-grips on his side of the console. "Now, we begin."

He stabbed at one last button near him, and the hum reached a teeth-rattling pitch.

And then the process began. A bright, multihued light began playing around Roma, growing brighter with each moment. As it reached its peak, when the light became too unbearable to gaze at, it suddenly flowed from her hands, into the grips. The pulse continued onward, streaking through the connections leading to von Doom's machine, then into the console itself. Without pause, it flashed upward, through the connections on the other side of the machine—and into von Doom.

The incredible power surge coursing through him initially caused him to stagger back a few steps, but he remained standing. The light grew brighter around him, even as it dimmed around Roma.

"Soon, physician!" he bellowed triumphantly. *"Soon, Doom shall achieve his ultimate destiny—and then how the cosmos will tremble!"*

Dr. Henry Stanton was not having a good day.

It hadn't started out that way, of course. But once things started happening—particularly when his former patient tried to crush his larynx for withholding information about the citadel—it didn't take very long for it to turn sour.

As the physician watched the transfer of energy going no between von Doom and Roma, he couldn't help but wonder what had possessed him in the first place to ally himself with such a madman, or with that psychotic witch, Sat-yr-nin. Actually, when he thought about it, "ally" wasn't the proper term to describe his relationship with the two power-hungry villains—"slave" was probably more accurate. He retrieved what he was told to fetch, bowed and scraped before them so neither would think he was trying to act as their equal, and therefore feel the need to remind him of his "place"—probably via swift execution—and generally kept his mouth shut unless told to speak. Not exactly the position he'd hoped to be in when he'd agreed to aid in their plot against the Supreme Guardian.

He'd *hoped* to have been promoted to the position of Chief Physician by now, one currently occupied by someone Stanton considered to be an annoying little man—a Scotsman whose name no one could remember, with a know-it-all attitude when it came to making diagnoses. A grinning jackanapes who had been given the job by Roma, even though her father, Merlyn, had been considering Stanton as the man he wanted in charge of the medical wing. The fact that the caustic doctor and the female celestial didn't care much for one another probably had a lot to do with her decision—and his, in turn, to join von Doom's campaign.

His, however, had turned out to be an awfully stupid decision; those born of anger and jealousy usually were. He had gotten his revenge on her—so what? Watching the tortures to which she'd been subjected at von Doom's hand, trying to ignore the screams that seemed to fill the pocket dimension as yet another part, another version, of her self was torn away by the multiphasic crystal technology—it wasn't how he'd imagined things would turn out. He'd thought sealing her in a cryogenic chamber, as he had done with Roma's lieutenant, Saturnyne, would have been punishment enough—von Doom would still be able to rule the citadel without interference. But the tyrant seemed to take an almost sadistic pleasure in his efforts to break the Guardian's will. And now, rather than force her to tell him all the secrets of this palace at the center of time and space, he'd apparently decided to take a different, and far more inhumane, approach, by using his infernal machine to steal her powers—and her life.

There was nothing Stanton could do about it now, though. He'd already damned himself through his selfish actions; now, all he could do was pray his master would still have a use for lowly servants—once he became a god. . . .

“God, I'm really starting to hate this . . .” Warren muttered. “You'd think we would've found Doom a few seconds after we took care of his zombie squad—but no, we're back to wandering the great white nothing again.”

A more accurate description of their situation Betsy couldn't imagine. Almost immediately after the last of the mind-controlled guards had collapsed on the ground, the two X-Men had hurried to catch up with the armored tyrant. She'd even left behind Alecto's sword, so its weight wouldn't slow her down—besides, her arms were still aching from swinging the heavy blade (something she should have taken into consideration before bringing it in the first place), and she was glad to be rid of it. But no matter how swiftly they moved in pursuit, von Doom was long gone from view.

“I think it has to do with Time and Space being relative,” she commented.

“Lunch time doubly so,” Warren replied.

She raised an eyebrow, and playfully jabbed him with her elbow. “Thank you, Douglas Adams. What I mean is, distances probably have no way of being measured here; time, as well. It only *looked* like von Doom walked away a few minutes before we banged up his thugs—at least to our eyes—but he actually could have been gone for more than

an hour. *And* he could have traveled *miles* with just a few footsteps. It all has to do with perception.”

“Riiight.” Warren gave a sarcastic, lopsided smile. “And everything you’ve just said makes complete sense to you.”

“About as much sense as anything else around here,” she replied.

He shrugged. “Well, *you’re* the expert on this place.”

She nodded. “As much as one *can* be, I suppose. And *as* the expert, I can think of only one solution for locating him.”

Warren frowned. “Another cruise through the shadow realm?”

She smiled and patted his arm consolingly. “Well, it beats walking, *luv*. I’ll just concentrate on von Doom this time, rather than Roma. That should keep us from accidentally teleporting back to that lashed-up cryogenic facility of his.”

He nodded his head forlornly. “I just wish there was some kind of mass-transportation system in this pl—”

And that was when the tremor hit.

Actually, it wasn’t so much a tremor, as a wave of energy that surged across the wasteland, causing the ground to twist and sway, and knocking the feet out from under the couple.

Betsy had barely enough time to realize she was going to be in some degree of pain when she woke up—before the floor smacked her in the face.

Sat-yr-nin had been stomping across the endless, featureless tundra—still fuming, still groaning from the bump on her head—when the wave slammed into her.

It swept her along in its wake, depositing her some distance from where she had been, although just how far was impossible to tell, given the limitless *sameness* of this place she’d crossed into. Regardless of distance, or even what might have been the cause of the energy wave, however, she was certain of one thing: She was in an even fouler mood than the one she’d been in when she awoke in Roma’s chamber.

“Some further meddling on the part of that tin-plated fool, no doubt,” she said to herself. “I just hope he hasn’t gotten himself killed—although it would be just *like* the selfish brute to deny me the pleasure of killing him myself.”

Picking herself up off the ground, she smoothed out the most noticeable wrinkles on her flowing white gown, patted loose strands of white hair back into place on her coiffure, and adjusted the sheath of the dagger strapped to her right thigh, close to the slit in her skirt. She wanted to look her best for von Doom . . . just before she cut out his eyes.

* * *

The wave continued beyond the aching Mastrex, across the Starlight Citadel and down through its many levels. Wherever it traveled, it left chaos in its wake. Delicate machinery exploded. Artificial gravity momentarily cut off, causing residents to go rocketing down hallways, or bouncing off the ceilings. Time momentarily froze, then resumed at twice normal speed. Accidents were widespread, destruction almost as much.

And at the bottom-most level of the structure, within a special room located there, a monitoring system connected to a cryogenic chamber shorted out, activating an emergency medical program. A pump switched on, draining the tube of suspension fluid; once the process was completed, the chamber door swung open. At last released from confinement, its sole occupant pitched forward, onto the floor.

She lay still for several seconds, then began to cough—loudly, violently. Spasms shook her body as she raised herself onto her elbows and knees. And then a veritable ocean of blue suspension fluid came flooding from her nose and mouth.

Eventually, the vomiting ended, and she collapsed onto her back, rubbing her sore throat. She stared at the ceiling for what seemed to her like hours, slowly feeling her frozen body warming, slowly regaining the ability to think straight. Images flashed through her mind: von Doom in her apartment; the attack by Dr. Stanton as he drugged her, then stuffed her inside the cryo chamber. But most of all there was the memory of the madwoman who wore her features, her clothes; who'd taken her place as the Supreme Guardian's trusted lieutenant.

Who was going to *die* as soon as she got her hands on the little witch.

Her mind filled with rage, her eyes practically flashing fire, Opal Luna Saturnyne, the true Omniversal Majestrix, staggered to her feet and lurched out of the makeshift prison, in search of revenge.

"Why do I get the feeling something like that *isn't* supposed to happen around here?" Warren asked as he rubbed his sore left shoulder.

"Because I don't think it is," Betsy agreed. She swept her lavender hair away from her eyes and climbed back to her feet. "I'd lay even money von Doom had something to do with it, though."

"No bet," Warren said, joining her. "And I've got a bad feeling it's only gonna get worse from here."

"Then we'd better hurry," she said, and took his hand. Again, a midnight-black portal opened beneath them, and they entered the shadow realm.

* * *

This time, when they stepped from the portal, Betsy had the overwhelming impression they'd just dropped into a war zone.

The sky—or ceiling—was ablaze with powerful bursts of light. The ground constantly shook from a series of explosions—some minor, some strong enough to almost knock her down. The air was tinged with the stench of burnt ozone and acrid smoke.

And right in the center of this pyrotechnic display was Doctor Doom, looking as though he was in complete control of the forces of Armageddon that raged above and around them all.

"Well, *this* doesn't look good . . ." Warren said.

The armored tyrant stood beside some sort of hexagonal control console, holding tight to a collection of wires. Power was flowing from the console into him, and Betsy turned to look at the source of the energy he was absorbing. Her eyes widened in horror.

"ROMA!" she cried.

The Guardian was strapped to a medical table that was tilted upward, her hands bound in the opposite ends of the wires von Doom held. Golden energy poured from her, into the console, and her head lolled against her chest. From this distance, Betsy couldn't tell if she were still alive.

"We should hit him now, before he's aware we're here," Warren suggested. "Knock him down, and then we can figure just what the hell he's trying to do."

"Warren," she said in amazement, "I think he's . . . draining her energy. Stealing it for himself. That might be why the citadel started shaking before—he's interfering with the natural order of things here."

"All right," he replied after a moment. "Then, Roma first. Disconnect her, and Doom's cut off from his power source. And maybe, with luck, that stops the citadel from tearing itself apart."

"Sounds good to me," Betsy said. "Let's get to it, then."

She charged forward, pounding across the floor toward Roma, now wishing she hadn't left Alecto's sword behind—it would have made cutting the wires and cables much easier. The flapping of wings nearby told her Warren was joining her in the rescue. She'd almost reached her objective—when a bolt of lightning suddenly exploded directly in front of her.

Thrown to the side, Betsy immediately rolled with the shockwave and came up standing, although she couldn't see clearly, for all the black and multicolored dots swimming before her eyes. But she could certainly hear well enough.

"So, mutants!" von Doom bellowed above the storm. "You have

arrived at a most fortuitous moment—when you shall witness Doom's ascension to godhood . . . before you die!"

"Great. Like he doesn't act holier-than-thou already." A hand lightly touched her shoulder. "You okay, Betts?" Warren asked.

"Nothing a seeing-eye dog couldn't help with right now," she replied dryly, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. She patted his hand with her own. "I'll be fine."

"Okay, change of plans," he said. "You help Roma. I'll face off with Doom, try to buy you some time to get her out of here."

"No!" Betsy snapped, a little too forcefully. Watching him die once, at Magneto's hands just days before, had been almost more than she could bear; she wasn't going to let it happen again. "He's *mine*."

And before Warren could protest, she charged at the armored tyrant.

Unfortunately, she didn't get very far. A bolt of energy erupted from the palm of his gauntlet, and she wasn't quick enough to avoid it. She screamed as it struck her square in the chest and smashed her to the floor. The sensation was agonizing—like a million fire ants were crawling over her body, sinking their mandibles into her flesh. She tried to rise, only to discover her limbs refused to work; she could only thrash helplessly on the ground as the pain intensified. The green light that engulfed her grew brighter, and she screwed her eyes shut. The illumination could not be denied, though; she could see it even behind her eyelids.

A loud gasp reached her ears, and she forced her eyes to open. Warren was lying a short distance away. He, too, was suffering under a similar energy beam, wings beating feebly as he twisted and turned, mouth contorted in a silent scream.

Her mind suddenly filled with a kaleidoscope of images. She saw her life before the X-Men had ever entered it—her time as a world-renowned fashion model, then, later, as a telepathic secret agent in the British counterterrorist organization S.T.R.I.K.E. Then came snippets of her years with the X-Men—some good (especially where Warren was concerned), some bad, but all quite memorable. And there was her career as a cabaret singer in New York's Greenwich Village, just before she met Warren—

But wait. She'd never *been* a cabaret singer, had she?

No, of course not. She'd barely been able to work up the nerve to perform a time or two at Warren's mid-Manhattan nightclub; she'd certainly never made a career out of it.

So, why, then, she wondered dimly, did she possess memories of a life she knew she'd never had?

The answer wasn't long in coming. For, just as it seemed the light beam was on the verge of boring through her, it suddenly switched off.

And when she opened her eyes, there was another Elisabeth Brad-dock lying beside her.

"W-what . . . ?" she stuttered hoarsely. "H-how . . ."

She looked beautifully elegant, her doppelganger, even sprawled unconscious on the floor. She was dressed in a strapless black evening gown, with matching opera-length gloves; a string of white pearls adorned her neck. It was, Betsy realized, exactly the same outfit she had been wearing when she'd performed for "Emperor" von Doom, at the Washington, D.C. celebration commemorating his tenth year in power.

But it hadn't really been *her*, had it? Not the one-time fashion model, nor the former psi-agent, nor the current X-Man known as "Psy-locke." It had been this woman who had sung her heart out for a world-wide audience—she knew that now. She just couldn't fathom how it could have happened—although it might explain the odd recollections she'd been having of late . . .

"Interesting," von Doom said. "Like the Guardian, and myself earlier, these mutants also harbored surrogates of themselves within their bodies. An influence of the Cosmic Cube's, no doubt."

The Cube. Of course. What else, given the current situation, could account for one person possessing two sets of memories, only to discover that she'd actually been *two* people all along? And if the Cube had fused her with an alternate of herself . . .

Slowly, Betsy turned on her side to look at Warren. There were three versions of her winged lover across from her: one, the poor unfortunate from von Doom's world, who had sacrificed himself to save his former emperor; the second, the husband of her counterpart on Magneto's Earth. In the center, barely conscious, was the true Warren Worthington III—the man she had crossed dimensions and mental landscapes to recover.

But now he was going to be taken away from her again, as she would be from him. She looked up, to see another charge of lightning building. There'd be no way to dodge it—von Doom's weapon had weakened her too much to even roll out of the way.

He'd won after all, it seemed—loosed chaos upon the Earth with his damnable Cube, then struck down Roma so he could take her place, and her power, as Supreme Guardian. And because of Betsy's failure to stop him, the omniverse—and her friends—would suffer the consequences.

She hoped they'd be able to forgive her when the end came.

I'M SORRY, sugah, but I don't have the *foggiest* idea how I'm s'posed t'make *any* sense'a outta this mess."

Rogue ran a gloved hand through her close-cropped hair, and shrugged. "Mutant heroes, worlds where the Nazis didn't win World War II, an' the Red Skull is just some run'a-the-mill bad guy 'stead'a bein' emperor . . ." She shook her head. "It's just a li'l hard t'believe, if y'all don't mind me sayin' so."

Remy smiled. "You not de only one havin' trouble wit all dis cosmic mischief, *chere*. Parallel dimensions an' de like—dey just a bit outside de experience of a simple t'ief, too. But I swear ev'ry word o' it is de truth." The smile widened. "Ol' Gambit, he'd never lie t'you."

She smiled, too, her pallid cheeks turning a warm shade of rose. It was the first time she'd shown any emotion other than fright since his suicidal rescue attempt back on the highway. It looked good on her.

He suddenly realized how much he'd missed that smile. When he'd laid, dying, in a cell on von Doom's version of Earth, it was all he had thought about—the way it made her cheeks dimple, the way her nose wrinkled and her eyes shone so brightly. He'd regretted never having the chance to see it again once he died, and in that regret had finally found the strength to come right out and say to her what he'd so often avoided saying since they'd first met: that he loved her. They had been hard words to admit to—as much of a romantic as he considered himself, the idea of committing his heart to one woman had always been a foreign concept to Remy. But no matter how many times their relationship fractured over the years, no matter how often he'd recklessly chased after other women—whether to punish her over some stupid misunder-

standing, or, more likely, as a way to punish himself—he'd always come back to Rogue.

At first, it had been difficult for him to acknowledge the possibility that they were meant to be together. Remy had never been a great believer in fate; chance was his game, and Lady Luck the card dealer. Things happened simply because they happened—you just went with the hand you were dealt, and tried to bluff your way through. No mystical forces directed *his* life.

But where Rogue was concerned, the deck had been stacked against him even before he sat down at the table. As he'd said to her in their last moments together—just before he'd sacrificed his life to give the X-Men a chance to escape from von Doom's intelligence headquarters—she was the only woman who had ever beaten a thief at his own game . . . by stealing his heart. And by admitting that to her, to himself, he had finally come to understand just how much he loved her.

Theirs had never been the easiest of couplings. Because of the uncontrollable nature of her powers, they had never been able to consummate the relationship—she was terrified of absorbing his life-force, perhaps even accidentally killing him, should their bare skin touch. It was a bizarre complication Remy had never had to deal with before—and he had known quite a few women in his time. In his younger, wilder days, he would have just shrugged his shoulders and moved on, in search of a less . . . stressful love connection.

But there was something about Rogue that drew him to her side, that made him *want* to be with her, no matter how many odd twists and turns the relationship might take. Maybe it was her naiveté that had caught his attention—she was not exactly someone you'd consider wise in all the ways of the world, and he knew all about them . . . or so he kept telling her. Maybe it was her down-home, Southern charm, which appealed to his bayou upbringing.

Or maybe it was because her powers made her feel so alone in the world, and he wanted—perhaps even needed—to comfort her. As a member of New Orleans' Thieves Guild, Remy had always been surrounded by an extended family. Rogue, on the other hand, had been cast out from her own when her powers manifested, leaving her with no one to turn to when she needed help the most. She'd found a certain degree of acceptance when she joined the X-Men, but Remy knew she still felt like an outsider, even among her own kind—able to fight beside them, able to share in their brief moments of fun, but never able to really *be* one of them. Not when she could steal their memories, their powers, their lives, with just a touch.

He could understand how she felt. Becoming a member of the

X-Men had never been a direction he'd ever expected his life to take, but he'd gone along with it, if only because he was curious to see how things would turn out. Unfortunately, he'd never been welcomed with open arms into the group, and later was even suspected of betraying them to their enemies.

Yes, Remy could understand Rogue's sense of aloneness, all right. And maybe that was what drew them to one another.

They made one hell of an unusual pair, he knew: the worldly thief and the lonely Southern belle. Sharing a love that went beyond physical boundaries, finding comfort in their differences, accepting whatever cards fate might deal and making the best of them—together.

But he wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Penny fer your thoughts?" she asked, shaking him from his reverie.

Remy grinned. "Jus' glad t'see you smilin' fer a change, *petite*. T'ought maybe you'd forgot how t'do it."

Her smile faded, and a dark cloud passed behind her eyes. She shivered, as though recalling a particularly unpleasant memory. "Haven't had much reason *to* smile these days," she said quietly.

"Dat ain't hard t'believe," he replied. "What wit' de world all turned upside-down an' inside-out, an' us cut off from de rest o' de X-Men."

He rose from the metal folding chair he'd been sitting on, feeling the need to stretch his legs, and surveyed their surroundings. A room-sized storage facility in a Queens warehouse was a long way from the plush accommodations of the Xavier Institute of Higher Learning, and it only reminded Remy of how strange things had become since the X-Men returned to Earth, only days before.

As strange as the woman sitting in front of him. A woman who wore the features of someone to whom he had opened his heart only a short time ago, but who was now as foreign to him as he was to her.

He needed to find that other woman, the one who meant so much to him. Needed to talk to her, hold her, touch her. But in order to do that, in order to find her, and the rest of the X-Men, he first needed an ally. Even if it meant turning to a stranger.

"Rogue, I . . . need your help," he said slowly.

"What *kinda* help did you have in mind?" she asked in a guarded tone. "I mean, I'm grateful for the rescue an' all, but . . ."

"I need you t'understand what I was talkin' 'bout," he explained. "De parallel worlds, an' de X-Men, an everyt'in' else dat's important. I'm gonna need somebody t'show me around dis city if I'm gonna find my friends, an' it'd go easier if you knew what I was doin'."

"An' how're you gonna make me understand?"

"By makin' contact wit you," he replied slowly. "If you'll let me."

"You want *t'touch* me?" she asked, eyes wide with surprise. "That's crazy! Don't you know what'd happen if you did that?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I been down dat road before. But it still be de quickest way t'get you up t'speed I can t'ink of." He eased himself onto the chair beside her. "Please, *chere*. It's important."

She stared silently at him. There was so much hurt in those eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was be the cause of any more—but there was no other way to do it.

"All right," she finally whispered. "If'n it's *that* important. Just . . . don't hate me for what happens."

He smiled. "You, *petite*?" He shook his head. "I could *never* hate you."

Her cheeks colored, and she smiled. "Thank you," she said softly.

He nodded. "Anyt'ing for you, *chere*."

Slowly, he raised his hand, to touch her face. She instinctively drew back.

"It's all right, *chere*," he said quietly. "Ol' Gambit, he knows what he doin' . . ." He smiled. ". . . 'least he *t'ink* he do . . ."

She gazed into his eyes for a few moments, most likely trying to see if his expression would reveal whether it was a trick, or a trap. Then, apparently satisfied with what she saw, she slowly nodded.

Gently, he reached out, and placed his fingertips to her cheek.

It was like sticking a wet finger in a light socket.

Lightning crackled around his body, overloading his nerves, cramping his muscles. It became hard to think, impossible to move. He was stuck to Rogue as surely as a fly was stuck to flypaper, and could only hope that the contact would break before it killed him.

A wave of nausea seized him as he felt Rogue begin to drain him of his strength, his memories, his life. Her eyes turned black, with red pupils, even as his dimmed to a cool brown. He, in turn, felt her panic and horror. She tried to pull away, but somehow he found the strength to pull her closer with his other hand.

Close enough to kiss.

Their lips brushed together—

And then the change began.

It started with her body—it filled out, skin and bones transforming into solid flesh and powerful muscle. Then her hair began to grow at a lightning pace, becoming fuller and longer, until it reached her waist. The skunk-like streak that ran down the center was even more prominent now. Her face became softer, less angular.

Weakened considerably, Remy at last managed to slide away from her, and collapsed against the seat. He watched in amazement as the

woman before him shifted and morphed, becoming less a stranger and more someone he knew—quite well.

“Huh,” he said with some amusement. “Gambit’s kissed a lotta *filles* in his time, but *dat* never happened before . . .”

And when the process ended, and she finally looked at him, the light of recognition—and shock—shone in her eyes.

“R-Remy . . . ?” she whispered.

He smiled, though the effort of forcing his facial muscles to move taxed what little strength remained. “Hello, Rogue,” he said smoothly, casually. “It’s been a while, *non?*” The smile broadened. “So, tell me . . . you miss your Remy while he was gone?”

She choked on her reply, and tears began running down her cheeks. She sat there, shivering, staring at him, apparently not knowing what to do next. With some difficulty, he opened his arms wide and drew her close. Grateful, she buried her face on his chest, and cried long and loud while he stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. He could feel the warmth of her tears soaking through his shirt.

“I . . . I thought you were gone forever,” she said.

Remy chuckled and rubbed her back. “You know me, *chere*. I’m like *dat ol’ bad penny*—I keep showin’ up when you least ’spect it.” He shrugged. “Maybe de Big Man upstairs figured my time wasn’t up yet.”

“Or maybe He was afraid’a what you’d do t’his place when ya got in there,” she murmured into his chest, “an’ figured it’d be less trouble sendin’ you back down here.” She slid her arms around him and hugged him tight. “I don’t really care *what* the reason is, ’long as you’re back t’stay.”

Remy hissed, feeling his ribs scrape together under the pressure of her overzealous show of affection. “Easy, *chere*. Give a man some time t’recover. What wit’ de rescuin’ and all de runnin’ tonight, an’ den . . .” He waved his hands in the air, trying to find the right words. “. . . what happened jus’ now, ol’ Remy’s had one *tirin’* day.”

She apologized and drew back, her face creased with concern. “Sorry,” she said quietly. “I shoulda waited ’til your powers came back. It’s just that—”

“It’s okay, *petite*,” he said with a strained smile. “Jus’ lemme get my second wind, an’ den I’ll be happy t’give you a proper greetin’.” He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around, so she could lean back against him. She snuggled close as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and he sighed. “Dis is nice, *non?* Jus’ lyin’ here t’gether like dis, wit’out a care in de world.” A frown bowed his lips.

"Too bad we *do* got a care in de world, tho'. A *lotta* worlds, for dat matter. An' we still gotta do somet'in' t'fix it."

"The Cosmic Cube," Rogue said with a nod.

"Yeah, de . . ." He paused, suddenly feeling totally confused. "*Chere?*"

"Yeah?" she asked, turning her head to look up at him.

Remy scratched the top of his head for a moment. "What de *hell* is de 'Cosmic Cube' . . . ?"

"*Haven't either of you listened to a word of what I've been saying?*"

Kurt Wagner—Nightcrawler—pounded his fist on the metal table in front of him. "My loyalty to the Party is beyond questioning!" he barked. "I will *not* stand by quietly and allow some . . . some *verdammt housefrau* to tarnish my good name!"

Standing on the other side of the table, Hauptmann Englande pointed a thick finger at the heavy, metal chair next to the blue-skinned mutant. "Sit down, Wagner," he growled through clenched teeth. "Any further outbursts, and I will take the greatest pleasure in silencing you—permanently."

Wagner opened his mouth to continue voicing his outrage, but paused, fist poised in mid-arc above the table, when he saw the fire burning in Englande's eyes, took note of the stance the costumed warrior assumed. One more word, he realized, and the captain would be across the table, crushing his throat in hands powerful enough to twist steel. Slowly, Wagner's mouth closed, and his fist opened. He lowered his hand to his side, then threw himself into the chair with a huff and folded his arms across his chest. He glared at a spot on the floor, knowing better than to direct the heat of his gaze at his superior.

"Preposterous . . ." he muttered sullenly.

Beside Englande, Arnim Zola sat in another chair, hands folded on the tabletop. "Not so preposterous that the Reich isn't looking into the matter, Herr Wagner," he said. "Serious charges have been leveled against you, and others of your kind. Perhaps if you just told me what your group had planned—"

Wagner rounded on him. "*I have done—*" he began, then caught sight of Englande as he took a step forward. "I have done nothing," he said quietly. He looked imploringly at the Health Minister. "I am no traitor to the Fatherland, no mutant revolutionary seeking the Emperor's destruction. My record in service to the Empire should be proof of that." He shook his head. "This is all a mistake."

"If that is so, Herr Wagner," Zola said, "then you should help us to resolve the matter, not make it worse by pounding tables and shouting

about character assassinations. This is a medical facility, not a beer hall."

"I . . . apologize, Minister. I *want* to be helpful. I *want* to clear this up." Wagner drew a deep breath, then released it. "*Um Gotteswillen*, how can the Ministry of Defense take the word of . . . of some civilian trophy wife over that of an officer of the Reich? It's madness!"

Englande grunted. "'Madness' was ever letting abominations like you join the ranks of normal men and women. You should have all been exterminated, a long time ago. Before your kind began to multiply . . . like cockroaches."

Zola waved a hand at him in annoyance. "Captain, please. You're not helping." He turned to Nightcrawler. "What would you expect the Ministry to do, Herr Wagner? When the wife of an officer as highly decorated as Major Sommers is provides information concerning a revolutionary movement among the mutant population, an investigation must be launched."

"But I have never even *met* this woman!" Wagner replied. "How can I be part of something if I don't even know what this woman looks like?"

"That is why it's called a 'network,' imbecile," Englande snapped. "You don't have to physically meet someone to be an active member in their organization." His eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward, placing the palms of his hands on the table. The metal groaned slightly under the pressure. "But you *do* know the *other* one. The black one we brought in. *The mutant*."

Zola turned to him, one gigantic eyebrow raised in a quizzical expression. "Fräulein Munroe? How so?"

"If you recall, Minister, Frau Sommers' list of conspirators included the black as one of the revolutionaries—Nightcrawler, as well." Englande looked to Zola. "But, as for how they might know one another . . . I'm really not the one to ask." He pointed toward Nightcrawler with his broad jaw.

"What are you talking about?" Wagner asked.

"You said so yourself," Englande replied. "You thought you had met her before, but couldn't remember where." He flashed a sinister smile. "Perhaps at one of your underground plotting sessions?"

"That . . . no. It was nothing like that," Wagner said, though he knew they could hear the hesitation in his voice. "It was just . . . a feeling . . ."

"That *maybe* she looks like someone you knew before," Englande commented. It was clear from his tone, however, that he didn't believe it. "A coincidence, then."

"Something like that," Wagner admitted, staring at his hands.

The brawny captain grunted. "A coincidence that your paths should cross again on this mission, you mean."

Wagner looked up, panic in his eyes. "No!"

Englande sighed and looked to his superior. "With all due respect, Minister, I don't see the point in standing around, wasting precious time, acting as though this traitorous freak—"

"*'Traitorous'?!'*" Wagner cried.

"—were one of us. Not when we both know he won't say anything we need to hear about the plans for this proposed insurrection." Englande smiled grimly. "Not when you have the means at your disposal of wringing the truth from him."

Zola paused, then cast a glance at Wagner. A sly smile creased the aged features that appeared on the viewscreen. "There *is* some work I've been doing recently—a variation on a series of psychic experiments started by the Russians during the war. Most of the test subjects haven't survived past the initial brain surgery . . ."

Wagner leapt to his feet. "*No!* I won't allow it!"

Englande glared at him. "You won't *what?*"

"*I won't allow it!*" Wagner repeated. "I am not some animal to be led to the slaughterhouse! I am a *man*—a decorated officer of the Empire! I have rights!"

"Not true, Herr Wagner," Zola said. "As a mutant, you have *no* rights. The laws of this monarchy were written for the true sons of Woden—the genetically pure. *Your* kind are no better than the very animals you obviously consider yourself above, to be used however I see fit—including 'leading you to the slaughterhouse,' if that is my wish." He rapped his knuckles on the tabletop. "This piece of furniture has more right to exist than you. At least *it* serves a useful function."

Wagner staggered back and grasped the back of his chair for support; the strength had suddenly drained from his legs, and it was difficult to stand. "But . . . but I am a valued member of Lightning Force . . ."

Englande laughed sharply. "Who ever told you *that?* The only value you ever had to the team was as comic relief—the freak who considered himself a human being! What a fine joke that was! And to watch your pathetic attempts to romance my Meggan!" He smiled coldly. "I must tell you, there were times I thought I'd split my uniform from laughing so hard."

Wagner shook his head. "No. You're lying. You trusted me in battle—"

"I'd sooner trust a *Skrull* to watch my back," Englande shot back. "I simply knew you would allow no harm to come to me, or Meggan,

to avoid being reprimanded should you fail to protect your superiors. Acts of courage, born of fear.”

Wagner trembled; his head began to ache. Why were they doing this to him? What had he done to make them turn on him so quickly? Why did they refuse to believe his innocence?

He should have known something was wrong the moment the V-wing jet touched down in Genosha. But he was so intent on proving just how wrong the African mutant, Munroe, was in her summation of his place in the Empire that he ignored the warning signs: the icy stares from the soldiers that came to meet Lightning Force; the whispered comments as he walked through the halls; the way Englande and Meggan had been ushered into Zola’s office, alone, when they arrived at their meeting with the minister. If only he’d been paying closer attention—but no, he’d merely grinned smugly at the prisoner, strolled casually into the office when called . . . and been placed under arrest.

According to information Zola had received shortly before the team’s arrival, Wagner was part of a plot by mutant revolutionaries to destroy the Empire—or so it had been explained to him as shackles were placed on his wrists and ankles. The ringleaders were Reichsmajor Scott Sommers and his wife, Jean—two people he had never met in his life, though he *was* familiar with the major’s service record. Munroe and the remaining Lightning Force member, Shadowcat, had also been named, but theirs, apparently, were minor roles. The others who had been implicated went by codenames he didn’t recognize: Wolverine. Gambit. Psylocke. Archangel. “Rogue,” he was told, was a mutant “translator” who served under Sommers on board the starship *Nuremberg*. It made no difference—he didn’t know any of them, and said so from the outset. But no one was listening, and he had been hustled into this cinderblock cell, to spend the next few hours fielding questions to which he had no answers. . . .

“Talk, damn you!” Englande roared, and slammed his fist on the table. The thick metal cracked along the top. “Where are the rest of your group? How many others *are* there? When do they plan to strike? How long have you been plotting against the Emperor?”

“Go to the devil!” Wagner snapped, a slight tremor in his voice.

Slowly, Zola rose from his seat. He looked at Nightcrawler, and sighed. “Very well, Herr Wagner. I had hoped we could avoid further unpleasantness, but your lack of cooperation leaves me no other choice.” He turned to Englande. “Captain, escort the prisoner to the psychiatric laboratories.”

“With pleasure,” Englande said. He took one step, to move around the table—

—and watched in surprise as Nightcrawler vanished from the room, in a burst of brimstone and a sharp implosion of air. The chains he'd been wearing clattered to the floor.

Hauptmann Englande snarled. "So much for the loyal member of the Party . . ." he muttered sarcastically.

Kurt Wagner ran for his life through the corridors of the Ministry of Health. His career was over now—any idiot could see that—and the longer he stayed on Genosha, the better the chance of recapture. He had to find a way off the island, but that was far easier said than done. His teleportation abilities were only useful for traveling short distances, and even then he had to know exactly what his destination looked like, or he might wind up materializing inside a wall, or an object—or a person. He'd considered 'porting—or *bamfing* as he'd come to think of it, since that was the sound made by the displacement of air during the transition—to the Lightning Force jet, but he'd been led down so many corridors and hallways and stairwells after his arrest he'd lost track of where he was. For all he knew, the jet could be one level above him, or a hundred.

An alarm sounded. He'd been expecting it from the moment he fled the interrogation room, but the loud, bleating noise still made his heart jump into his throat. Fighting panic, he glanced up and down the corridor in which he stood—it was empty, but wouldn't remain so for long. He began trying doors, but every one he came to was locked. He considered breaking one down, but then worried that the broken lock might be discovered, and then he'd be trapped in close quarters.

He settled for teleporting to the stairwell at the end of the hall, and scrambled through the door just as the first heavy footfalls of the security forces begin ringing through the corridor.

Now came another decision: up or down? Down would take him to the lobby, and a footchase through the winding streets of Genosha was something he preferred to avoid. Up led to the landing platforms—and the jet. He paused, waiting to find out from which direction pursuit might be coming, but the ear-splitting klaxon made it impossible to determine.

Up, then, he decided. At least that way he had a better idea of where he wanted to go.

Cautiously, he stuck his head out, over the railing, and looked upward. He didn't see anyone above him—which accounted for why the bullets streaking past his head were coming from below.

Not waiting to see who exactly was shooting at him—or how close they might be to his position—Wagner *bamfed* as high as he could go.

A wise decision, because it moved him away from the guards who'd been charging down the hallway in his direction; they burst into the stairwell in time to get a good whiff of the brimstone cloud he left behind.

Wagner reappeared a dozen levels up, in mid-air. With a cry of disbelief, he threw his arms out and succeeded in grabbing hold of the railing with one hand before gravity could take hold of him. He pulled himself over, cursing the literalness of his powers—only being able to see the railing but not the steps past them was the sort of limitation that could get him killed, without anyone's help. He'd have to be more careful . . . but at least he'd been able to put some distance between himself and his pursuers.

Or so he'd thought.

A roar of air and a strong draft, like that of a subway car traveling through a tunnel, moved up the stairwell. The hairs on the back of Wagner's neck stood on end—he knew what that rush of air meant, but he couldn't help himself from looking over the railing to see it with his own eyes.

Hauptmann Englande was flying up the center of the stairwell. Their eyes met, and the captain's lips pulled back in a predatory smile.

More bullets sang past Wagner's head, both from above *and* below now. He pressed against the wall to remove himself from the line of fire.

"*I'm coming for you, traitor!*" Englande bellowed, still some floors away.

"You and half the Empire, it seems . . ." Wagner muttered.

He opened the door to the corridor outside, dove through, and started running again. The portal shattered behind him a moment later, as Englande crashed through it.

"Stop running, cur!" he ordered, hovering a few inches above the tiled floor. "There's no escape from here!"

Much to his own surprise, Wagner came to a halt. And turned. And smiled. An idea had popped into his head—a crazy one, to be sure, but it was the only one he had at the moment.

"I know why you are *really* angry with me, Captain!" he shouted over the annoying klaxon. "You know I am the only man capable of stealing away your woman!"

Englande laughed. "A pure-bred woman, running away with a freak like you? That will be the day!"

"Ah. But she is *not* a true German maiden, Captain, as you well know! She is of the fairy realm—a changeling left in place of a human child! She is a shapeshifter, a 'freak' like me, and yet you continue to

sleep with her—in direct violation of the Eugenics Laws! I may be a mutant insurgent, but *you're* a race traitor, mein Captain!" The smile widened. "Tell me—what does she look like when *you* make love to her?"

A shadow fell over Englande's eyes, then, and he roared. He surged forward, picking up so much speed as he flew down the corridor that the walls shook.

And yet, Nightcrawler stood his ground. His foolhardy plan had to be timed perfectly, or his headless corpse would hit the floor about a split-second after Englande reached him.

The gap between them closed quickly. Englande drew back a mighty fist, preparing to deliver the fatal blow. But just as he reached Nightcrawler—

—the mutant jumped to one side, grabbed the captain's other hand in both of his own—

—and teleported.

Once. Twice. Three times. More.

Short, quick jumps down the length of the corridor, dragging Englande along for the ride. The strain on Wagner was considerable—the more he 'ported, the greater the pain he felt, like his insides were aflame. But he also knew what the process, combined with the high rate of speed at which he'd been traveling, was doing to his former team leader.

With a final *bamf!*, Nightcrawler reached the end of the hallway and released his unwilling passenger. Englande continued on, to crash headfirst into the wall. He bounced off the cracked plaster, rolled onto his back with a groan, and lay still.

Holding his sides as he waited for the pain to subside, Nightcrawler cautiously approached the captain. The man's head was a bloody mess, and his face was going to need some reconstructive surgery, but he was still alive. Wagner breathed a sigh of relief—as much as he hated him, the last thing he'd wanted to do was kill the idiot simply because he was following orders.

However, he *could* take some pleasure in knowing he'd ruined the captain's movie star looks. Meggan was far too vain to be interested in a swaggering buffoon with the face of a punching bag, no matter how godlike his physique might be.

But now was not the time to revel in the misfortunes of others. Now was the time to get out of the building, as soon as possible.

With a final glance at Englande, Wagner ran down an adjacent corridor. Somewhere around here, there had to be another fire door. . . .

SOUNDS LIKE something big is going on,” Meggan commented over the blaring alarm.

“Shouldn’t you see what it’s about?” Ororo asked. She rattled her chains. “I will wait here for your return.”

Meggan sneered. “Funny girl. I’m sure you amuse all the villagers with your jokes, back at that sandpit you call home.”

“There is little cause for amusement in Araouane,” Ororo replied. “Not when each day is a struggle just to survive. Although . . .” She paused, and a hint of a gentle smile played at the corners of her mouth. She thought of the sandwoman, Abena Metou, and her daughter; remembered the love they shared—one that not even the hot winds of the desert could wear away. Recalled with fondness the way the girl placed her mother’s bowl on her head and marched along like a little soldier, and how it had brought some levity to an otherwise oppressive day.

Perhaps there *was* a need for laughter, even in this dark world. *Especially* in this dark world, she considered.

Meggan strolled over from the only door to the small room and perched on the edge of the metal table at which Ororo sat. “Now then, Fräulein, let us talk, you and I—a friendly chat just between us girls.”

“What would you like to talk about?”

The blond-haired vixen shrugged. “Oh, perhaps about the weather—you used to control it, didn’t you?” She smiled coldly, but Ororo said nothing. After a moment, the smile widened, and Meggan snapped her fingers, as though she’d suddenly had an idea. “I know! We can discuss your part in this alleged mutant uprising.”

“I have no part in any such thing,” Ororo replied evenly.

“That is not what *I* have heard . . .”

"Perhaps you should have your hearing checked before you leave Genosha," Ororo said. "Then you might actually be able to *listen* when people speak the truth to you."

The false smile quickly curdled. "I'm going to enjoy tearing out your heart when we're done, mutant."

"You are too late, Nazi," Ororo said. "The other monsters here tore it out long ago."

The sullen tone of her voice returned the smile to the shapeshifter's lips. "Poor little goddess. You've lost everything, haven't you? Your family, your worshippers, your powers. You've been thrown into the wastelands, then shackled and abused and dragged through the halls of your enemies' stronghold. Is there no one to take pity on you?"

"*You* are the one to be pitied," Ororo replied sharply, lightly fingering the chains. There was just enough slack in them . . . "You have dedicated your life to following a man who is the personification of all that is evil, who has destroyed countless worlds and lives just so history will remember his name. A man who thinks himself a god, yet is unworthy of praise—unless it be the kind of mewling adoration he receives from zealots or sycophants."

Meggan laughed. "Spoken like a former deity . . . or a true revolutionary."

"There is *no* mutant revolution," Ororo said. "At least, none of which I am aware. But if there were, I would not hesitate to join its ranks."

"No underground movement, and yet the wife of one of the Reich's formerly most-respected officers names you as one of its members."

Ororo shrugged. "I do not know why that is. I have never met this Frau Sommers—"

"But you *have* met Nightcrawler, eh?" Ororo opened her mouth to reply, but Meggan wagged a finger at her. "Don't try to deny it. Back at the village, you admitted that you knew him from somewhere."

Ororo shook her head. "I said I *thought*, perhaps, we had met, but that would have been impossible. It's just that . . . he reminded me of someone . . ."

"Ah. Some *other* blue-skinned freak, then." Meggan slapped Ororo across the face, the sharp cracking sound echoing off the walls of the cell. "Don't try to play the fool with me, little goddess. We have you and your co-conspirator, and soon enough we will have the rest of your merry band. And once you've all been rounded up, I'm certain Minister Zola will have some . . . special treats in mind for each of you." She grinned savagely. "I hope he'll let me watch when he gets to *you*."

"You are rather bloodthirsty, are you not, Meggan?" Ororo com-

mented, tightening her grip on the chains. "Is that because you enjoy inflicting pain on others in general . . . or because you are jealous of the attention Hauptmann Englande paid to me during the trip here?"

Another slap, this time hard enough to leave the impressions of Meggan's fingers on her cheek.

"More one than the other," Meggan replied, leaning in close. "*You* can decide which it is later—when our session is done, and I'm ready to end your miserable life."

The chains suddenly swept upward, catching her across the face and snapping her head to one side. She staggered back, raising her hands in a weak defense, and bumped into a corner of the table. Dazed, apparently confused by the obstruction, she lowered her hands slightly and turned to glance at it, allowing Ororo the opportunity to lash out again. This time, the chain cracked against the shapeshifter's left temple; with a soft groan, she slumped to the floor.

Instantly, Ororo was upon her, searching her uniform for the key to the shackles. She found it tucked inside the woman's belt, and wasted no time in making use of it.

Softly, she crept over to the door and opened it a crack. There were no guards standing in the hall, since Meggan had ordered them away. She'd felt completely confident in her ability to interrogate her prisoner, especially when said prisoner was chained up and being questioned by a superpowered foe. Typical Nazi arrogance, Ororo thought. No wonder they had been unaware of a mutant insurrection until now . . . if, indeed, there was one forming—it simply never would have entered their minds that mutants were capable of banding together for such a cause.

She opened the door wider, and stepped into the corridor. The alarm was still sounding, so whatever had caused it to be raised was still in effect. It would make escape difficult, if the halls were filled with security personnel running about in response, but there was no way she was going to remain where she was until the emergency ended. Especially if it meant she had to stay in the same room with her tormentor.

The thought of Meggan made her look back inside the cell. The shapeshifter was still unconscious, her face bloody and bruised from the attack. But Ororo knew she would not remain insensate for long; superpowered individuals never did, when their metabolisms allowed them to heal quickly. And if she awoke and raised another alarm, before Ororo had time to put some distance between them . . .

She stepped back into the room, and closed the door. Moving quickly, she dragged Meggan behind the metal table, then grabbed the discarded chains and wrapped them around her ankles and wrists. The

neck manacle was slipped around one of the table legs, then fastened around Meggan's throat to keep her from moving around. A gag was fashioned by tearing a piece of material from Ororo's clothing and shoving it into Meggan's mouth, then using the woman's own swastika-adorned headband to keep it in place.

Ororo knelt down beside her unconscious prisoner, and smiled. "Long live the revolution," she whispered in her ear.

"Revolution." An odd word to describe what was supposed to be a mission of mercy, Jean thought. How Xavier had ever come to think of it in such political terms was beyond her. Maybe presenting it that way to his superiors made him feel important—the Nazi-sympathizing mutant turncoat, proving he was of still some value to them. It was sad in a way, when she thought about it. But considering the hell he'd put her through since she arrived at his estate, it was impossible to feel any kind of sympathy toward him. She would have preferred getting her hands on a blunt instrument and demonstrating to him just how much one's head could hurt after receiving a good, solid whack on the noggin.

Of course, she'd first have to get out of her current predicament in order to do that. One thing at a time, she decided.

She paused. *Wait a minute. I just put a coherent thought together, and the professor's evil twin hasn't even said "boo." What's going on?*

And then it dawned on her: She couldn't feel Xavier in her head.

That was a surprise. He'd been spending so much time in there she'd half expected him to set up an apartment in her subconscious. He would have had to share it with a couple more versions of herself, though . . .

Jean shook her head a tiny bit to dismiss that notion. Images of *Three's Company* episodes aside, she needed to focus on taking advantage of the situation. With Xavier no longer poking around, his psychic barriers had weakened, and that meant she could think clearly again. The drugs in her system had apparently run their course, too, which left her with only the nagging throb at the back of her skull, where Danvers' blackjack had connected.

That should be the worst of my problems, as Mom always used to say, she thought. A couple of Tylenol can take of that later—right now, I need to worry about my "hosts."

She opened her right eye to a narrow slit. Nothing new to see there—she already knew what her chest looked like. Slowly, she rotated her head—hopefully, just enough to make it look like she was still out

of it. Through the strands of red hair that had fallen over her face, Danvers rolled into view. She was standing near Viper's desk, nervously chewing on a thumbnail as she stared past Jean, toward the front door.

Hope this doesn't mean someone's standing behind me . . .

For a moment, she considered probing the area telepathically, to learn if there was another presence in the room. But the realization that its use would alert Xavier to the fact she'd woken up halted her. She wasn't ready to confront him—not just yet. Not until she'd had time to regain her strength. Her only option, therefore, was to just hope nobody was there and move on.

She opened her eye a little wider, and caught sight of the syringe and bottle lying on the desk, close to Danvers.

And right there is exactly the reason why I didn't just sit up straight when I started to wake up. I've had one too many "naps" imposed on me during this mission already; I'd like to stay conscious at least long enough to try and complete it. The corner of her mouth curled up in a brief smile. But that needle does give me an idea . . .

Jean tilted her head back, ever so slightly, to get a look ahead. What she saw made her stomach turn over, and sent a chill up her spine.

Viper was standing on the far side of the room, facing a giant viewscreen that must have been hidden behind the wall; Jean didn't remember seeing it before. And projected on the screen was the image of a blood-red death's-head, with eyes that burned with hate. But this was no icon Jean was looking at; rather, they were the grotesque features of the Emperor of the Fourth Reich. A madman who held the powers of Creation—and destruction—in his hands, via the properties of the cosmic wish box he now controlled.

The Red Skull.

"Am I to understand, then, Commander, that the Empire has been . . . invaded by a group of mutants from an alternate world," the Skull was saying, "here to prevent the world from being destroyed?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, as Professor Xavier has explained to me," Lady Viper replied. "By a threat greater than any the Empire has ever faced."

His eyes narrowed. "And you *believe* this story?"

She paused. "Yes, Your Majesty. That is why I thought it imperative that you be informed, as soon as I was notified." She turned to point at Jean, who quickly shut her eyes. "In fact, I have one of them here now; another of her group is en route from the spaceport."

Something was wrong with Viper; Jean could feel it. Her movements were too stiff, her verbal responses too slow. It was as though

the words were being chosen for her, and her body was being controlled—

Like a puppet on a string . . . she realized.

Now she understood why Xavier had vacated her mind—he was too busy setting up shop in another. She let her head roll to the other side so she could look out through her left eye. Xavier sat motionless in his wheelchair, hands gripping the ends of the armrests. A thin sheen of sweat was beaded on his brow, and his facial muscles twitched noticeably. It was taking a great deal of effort to do what he was doing—so much that he'd had to release his hold on Jean.

I wonder if Viper slapped him, too, and he just lost it. Doesn't explain why he's playing ventriloquist with her, just to have a conversation with the Red Skull, though.

"What is the name of your prisoner?" the Skull asked. "I do not recognize her."

"She calls herself 'Phoenix,' Your Majesty," Viper replied. "The one arriving shortly is her husband: 'Cyclops.'" She paused. "You may know him better as Reichsmajor Scott Summers."

Cautiously, Jean opened her eyes again. The Skull's lipless mouth curled downward. "Are you telling me, Commander, that one of the most respected officers in the Reich . . . is a mutant?"

"It would . . . appear so, Majesty."

"*Unacceptable!*" the Skull roared, and pounded the large, oaken desk at which he sat. "**UNACCEPTABLE!**"

Viper nodded solemnly, though stiffly. "I understand your disappointment, Majesty, but this threat—"

"'Disappointment'? *'Disappointment'?!'*" He pointed an accusatory finger at her. "A genetic aberration has penetrated one of the highest levels of the Empire, has somehow managed to keep his true nature a secret during all the time he rose through the ranks, was given the honor of commanding a starship, and you consider it a 'disappointment'? No, Commander, this is far worse—it is an insult to my genius! A black mark on all I have created! A flaw in an otherwise perfect gem!" He slapped the desktop with the flat of his hand. "Have the mutants exterminated—both of them! Immediately! I will not tolerate their existence one moment longer! And when you find the rest of the group, do the same to them!"

"But, Your Majesty, what about—" Viper began.

"*Immediately, Commander!*" the Skull bellowed.

That sounds like my cue, Jean thought.

Gently, she reached out telekinetically and grabbed hold of the sedative-filled syringe on the desk.

"*She's awake!*" Xavier suddenly cried out. Even as he spoke, Viper collapsed to the floor, his hold over her broken, the connection severed.

"What—?" the Skull said. "What is going on?"

Jean snapped her head up, and sent the syringe hurtling across the room. Xavier lurched back in his chair as the needle penetrated his neck, and the plunger was rammed home. He groaned loudly and toppled forward, dropping in a heap to the floor.

"Commander Viper, what is happening?" the Skull demanded. "Where are you? Answer me, damn you!"

Even as the professor was falling, Jean turned to see Danvers rushing at her, blackjack at the ready. Using her mind, Jean *shoved*, and sent her crashing into a wall. Danvers slipped to the carpet, unconscious.

Jean now turned her attention to the straps binding her. A few seconds of telekinetic manipulation, and the clasps popped open. Jean blew out a sharp breath, and began rubbing the circulation back into her tired limbs.

"You! Mutant!"

Startled, Jean looked up. The Skull glared at her through the view-screen, his blood-red features filling the frame.

"Where are you going, X-Man?" he asked.

"Then you *do* know who I am," she replied.

"I recognized your ridiculous codename," he admitted. "But without your gaudy costume, you are just another faceless drone—less than a drone, given your genetic impurities."

"Ow. I'm so insulted," she said dryly. *Careful, Jeanie*, she warned herself. *Remember, he's got the Cosmic Cube in his possession. He could turn you into a statue, or inside out, if he wanted to. All he has to do is think about it . . .*

"Have you come to destroy my empire? To put an end to my 'villainy' once and for all?" The Skull huffed loudly, and waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Bah! You costumed cretins are disgustingly predictable!"

"So are super-villains." Jean raised herself from the seat of the wheelchair, wincing slightly at the pins-and-needles sensation that ran through her legs. "But, no, we haven't come here to destroy your precious empire, as much as I'd like to see happen the 'mutant revolution' everybody kept talking about. We're more concerned with the *source* of your empire."

His eyes sparkled with dark mirth. "Ah. You're here for the Cube, then. And how did you propose to take it from me, you and your little band of subhumans?"

Jean paused. She was on deadly ground here—one wrong word, one insult that pushed him too far, and she'd be praying that killing her would be the *worst* he'd do to her. "I . . . was hoping you would hand it over."

The Skull stared at her for several long moments. And then he burst out laughing. "I retract my earlier comment. Unlike your heroic associates, you, woman, are *not* predictable. How refreshing." The laugh faded, and he eyed her closely. "You do not fear me, do you?"

"What I fear," Jean replied, "is what will happen to the universe if you *don't* surrender the Cube."

"Indeed." The Skull sat back in his chair, and rested his chin between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "Then this 'threat' Viper kept mentioning—"

"Is all too real. And it's only going to get worse."

"Would it have anything to do with the flaw I detected in the Cube?" Her look of surprise was confirmation enough for him. "Then you should cease your worrying, mutant, for I have already addressed that problem—and corrected it."

"No . . ." Jean whispered. "How could you . . . ?"

"Because only the Red Skull has touched the face of Eternity! Only the Red Skull has journeyed to the depths of the Cosmic Cube, and seen the power that is his for the taking!" he crowed. "Only I—who have been as one with the cosmos—could do what those bunglers von Doom and Magneto failed to do: master the Cube, and thereby master the universe!"

A lump formed in Jean's throat, and she swallowed, hard. *Well, this is certainly an unexpected turn of events. I don't know if I should be happy that he's managed to halt the reality-cancer—or terrified that he's achieved total control over the Cube . . .*

"So, you come from a parallel world, do you?"

The change of topic caught Jean by surprise. "What—?"

"How did you get here?"

"I . . . I'm not sure," she replied, just a little too quickly. "Some big machine we had to step through—looked like a circular gateway. I'm not very technical . . ."

"You lie poorly, mutant," the Skull snapped, "and I have no patience for word games—*or* for conversing with you any longer through a television screen."

The change was startling. One moment, Jean was in Viper's New York office; the next, she was standing before the Red Skull. Teleported across an ocean in less than a heartbeat, by the power of the Cube.

Oh, Jeannie, she thought, stepping back from his desk, *you are in so much trouble . . .*

“Now, then, X-Man,” the Emperor growled as he rose from his chair, “the choice is simple: Tell me what I want to know—or prepare to die. . . .”

I'M NOT dead.

Not exactly the most original thought one could have upon first awakening, Betsy considered, but given the fact she hadn't expected to *ever* wake up again, it seemed the most appropriate.

She opened her eyes, and found herself staring at the floor. She couldn't remember how she'd gotten into that position—had the lightning bolt struck close to her and tossed her a few feet, or did she roll out of the way and come to a halt this way? Probably the latter, since she didn't *feel* like she'd been electrocuted.

Groaning slightly, she rolled onto her back and sat up, tossing back her head to get the hair out of her eyes. Maybe she should consider a shorter hairstyle, she thought. It would certainly be more practical in combat situations . . .

She surveyed the area. Von Doom and his lab coat-wearing lackey were nowhere to be seen—much to her surprise, but not to her regret. Nearby, the other Betsy was still unconscious, which was all right with her—the last thing she needed right now was coming to terms with the fact that she had been living in another woman's body—and mind—for the past month. Across the way, Warren was beginning to revive, and Roma . . .

"Roma!" Betsy shouted. She leapt to her feet and ran to the Supreme Guardian. The goddess was slumped forward on the medical table, the restraints digging into her body.

Betsy released the braces supporting the table, and lowered it to a horizontal position. Then she set about undoing the straps.

"Roma? Roma, can you hear me?" Betsy asked. She grabbed the Guardian by the shoulders and roughly shook her. "Roma!"

"I... live... Elisabeth..." came the weak response. The dark-haired goddess slowly opened her eyes and looked at her. "But not for... much longer... if you continue to... assault me..."

"Oh. Sorry." Betsy immediately released her and took a step back. "I didn't mean to get so physical—"

Roma waved off her apology. "Nonsense. Your concern for... my well-being... is greatly appreciated."

Apparently nursing a major headache—judging by the way he was rubbing his temples and moaning—Warren staggered over to join them. He looked around in confusion. "Hey... where's Doom?"

"He... and Stanton... have departed..." Roma whispered.

"They left? Just like that?" Warren asked. "What happened to him getting ready to kill us?" He paused. "Uh, not that I'm complaining, of course."

Roma shook her head. "At times... the powers of... a celestial being... elevate its bearer... above such... petty considerations."

"You mean he just didn't think we were worth the effort of killing." Betsy grunted. "Typical super-villain. He steals the powers of a goddess, but not her wisdom. I'm surprised he didn't hang around to tell us all about his grand scheme for ruling the omniverse." She shrugged. "Well, his oversight will be our advantage... hopefully."

Roma struggled to sit up; Betsy lent her a much-needed hand. "We must... return to the... citadel... immediately."

"You shouldn't try to move around just yet," Betsy cautioned her.

"I... am weakened, Elisabeth," Roma said, her voice sounding just a bit stronger, "but I am not infirm. It is true that the human, von Doom, has caused me considerable pain—but what he has stolen from me is only a small portion of the power I possess." She swung her legs off the table and, using it for support, stood on her feet. "Though I may not be whole until all the aspects of myself that were torn away have been returned, still am I Roma, daughter of Merlyn." She tilted her head back proudly, a determined expression now set on her face. "Still am I Supreme Guardian."

A soft moan from the floor caught their attention, and all three looked to its source.

Betsy's alternate was starting to revive.

"She must not know of this place," Roma said gravely.

Betsy looked at her in shock. "You're not going to *kill* her, are you?"

Roma gently placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled weakly. "No, but it would be best if she did not see a duplicate Elisabeth Braddock standing before her when she awoke, or that she ever learn of the

existence of the Starlight Citadel—if anything still exists by the time this day is through.” The hand on Betsy’s shoulder tightened as the Guardian began leaning on her for support. “Please . . . help me over to her . . .”

Both X-Men supported her as she walked the short distance to Elisabeth, then aided her in kneeling beside the groggy woman. Roma lightly touched her on the forehead; a warm light played over Elisabeth’s features, and she settled back. Warren picked her up and carried her to the medical table.

“She will sleep now,” Roma explained as Betsy helped her to her feet. “With luck, she will remember nothing of these wretched events when she awakes.”

“Except that she’s lost the only man she ever loved . . . the one who died in my—her—arms . . .” She turned to Warren. “What about your other counterpart? The one from Magneto’s world . . . ?”

Warren shook his head as he walked back to join her. “He’s . . . gone, Betts.”

“Oh,” was all she could say. She couldn’t think of anything else.

“The strain of division, no doubt,” Roma said. “His body could not handle the effects of the multiphasic crystal accelerator. It is a wonder that both of *you* managed to survive the process.”

“Cold comfort in that,” Betsy said quietly. “*We’re* still here, but we’ve lost *two* lives already.”

“And an even greater number may soon be lost, Elisabeth,” Roma said gently, “if the chaos unleashed upon the omniverse is not put to an end.”

Betsy nodded. “You’re right, of course. It’s just . . . I wish I could have done more for them. For everyone.”

“Hey.” Smiling warmly, Warren wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and drew her close. She placed her hands on his and leaned back, feeling comfort in the warmth of his body. “We’ve *all* felt that way at some point, Betts—wanting to do better, cursing ourselves when we can’t. Thinking what we could have done differently, replaying it over and over again in our heads until it all becomes a blur . . . No one ever said being an X-Man would be an easy job, and it’s not—take it from a founding member. Every day we put our lives on the line, without a second thought for our own safety, because we know that we’re doing something *good*. Because people count on us. But we can *only* do the best we can.”

“But sometimes that’s not good enough,” Betsy said.

“True,” Warren agreed. “But we’re not gods, Betts. We’re not perfect; we have our limitations, just like any other person. And we can’t

expect to save *everyone* in a crisis, no matter how hard we might wish otherwise." He gave her a small squeeze. "You can't save the universe all on your own, Betts; Lord knows other people have tried before you, and failed. It's just too big a job." She felt him kiss the top of her head. "But if you want to try—okay. But you don't have to shoulder the burden alone. Not as long as you have *me*."

Betsy tilted her head up to look at him; at the caring eyes and the warm smile. She reached up to touch his face and gently stroked his cheek, her fingers gliding over the sandpapery, day-old stubble growing there. He was right, she knew.

"Thank you," she said softly, and kissed him.

"The reward makes it all worth the effort," he said, nuzzling her cheek with the tip of his nose. Then, with a smile, he turned to the celestial being standing before them. "Umm . . . About that 'gods' comment, Roma . . . no offense meant."

"None taken," she replied pleasantly. "Just be grateful my *father* was not present to hear it." Her smile faded. "But now, my friends, we must go. Time grows short, and only Order and Chaos know what madness the human von Doom will unleash upon the cosmos, now that he possesses the power of a Supreme Guardian."

Warren snorted. "Between that Knights of the Round Table reject and the Cosmic Cube, it's a wonder the cosmos is still *around*." He frowned. "Just wish I knew who had their hands on the damn thing *now* . . ."

From a corner of the room, Leonard watched quietly as the Red Skull advanced on the redheaded woman who had just materialized a moment before. Obviously, his master had tapped into the power of the Cosmic Cube, and used it to transport her across the Atlantic Ocean, bringing her from New York to Wewelsburg Castle in less than a heartbeat. Knowing that the Skull was able to do so without having to hold the device—a feat he had seen him do on other occasions—reminded the young Nazi of just how in control of everything the villain was . . . although the revelation that one of the Reich's outstanding officers was, in actuality, a mutant showed that even the all-mighty Emperor was capable of overlooking the smaller details in his creation. Not that Leonard was ever going to bring it to his attention—he might be a weak man, in the Skull's opinion, but he certainly wasn't a *stupid* one.

"Now, then, X-Man," the Skull growled, "the choice is simple: Tell me what I want to know—or prepare to die . . ."

Leonard started. *She* was one of the X-Men? He'd heard about them—renegade mutants who were always causing some bit of trouble

somewhere in the world—but he'd always thought of them as freaks and grotesqueries, like the ones who were always being shipped off to Arnim Zola's labs on Genosha. He never thought any of them could look so . . . well, so *hot*.

But if she really *was* a mutant, maybe he was looking at an illusion—a mental picture she was generating around herself—and her good looks were just in his head. Or maybe she was in some kind of transitional phase, like a butterfly, only in reverse, and at any moment, she might degenerate from a beautiful woman into some gnarled hag, or a boneless lump of flesh writhing on the carpet.

Still, until that happened, he didn't mind scoping her out. It certainly beat looking at the Skull's face.

"You already know everything you need to," she replied. "The Cube is a danger to the universe—"

"Yes, but *how* do you know this?" the Skull asked. He snarled. "This nonsense of you traveling from another dimension to bring dire warnings—I do not believe it! You are of *this* world, are you not?"

She hesitated for a moment. "Yes."

"Then, why were *you* not affected by the Cube?" She fell silent, and he eyed her warily. "Because you were not *on* Earth when von Doom first activated it," he concluded, and nodded, agreeing with himself when she didn't answer. "Yeeesss . . . That would explain a great deal . . ." He stepped back and began walking around her in a slow circle, arms folded across his chest. "But where *were* you, then, when the transformation occurred? Another dimension, as Viper mentioned? Perhaps. And yet . . ." He halted in front of her again. "And yet you *knew* that the Cube was involved. You *sought* the Cube—to reverse the process, yes?"

"Yes," she replied, glaring defiantly at him.

"But, how was that possible?" He stepped closer. "Who told you of it? What prompted you to go offworld?"

"*No one* told us about *anything*," the woman replied. "And as for why the X-Men weren't on Earth when everything changed . . ." She paused. "It has nothing to do with this situation."

"*No*," he said, and thrust a finger in her face. "*No*. You are lying, mutant!" His eyes began to glow with a golden light, and the woman flinched.

"W-what are you . . . doing . . . ?" she gasped, placing a hand to her forehead. "Stop it . . ."

"Tell the truth, and I shall consider it," the Skull replied. "You hurt only yourself by feigning ignorance." The glow brightened, just a bit, and she gnashed her teeth. It was clear to Leonard that the Skull was

increasing the pressure—using the Cube to squeeze her head, or something like that. He wondered just how much she'd be able to take before it exploded.

"Now, then," the Skull continued, "who told you to leave the planet before the Cube was activated?"

"N-no one. We were asked to . . . help a . . . friend." The woman compressed her lips together and moaned sharply. "Leaving when . . . we did . . . it was just . . . a coincidence . . ."

"And the universe runs on such whims of fate, does it not? But *where* did you go, hmmm? *Who* was this 'friend' who could transport you across dimensions? *What* was so important that it took you away from Earth?"

She gasped and suddenly stiffened, the glow from the Skull's eyes now enveloping her body. Even from where he was standing, Leonard could see her eyes roll back in her head.

"What are you hiding from me, mutant?" the Skull purred. "What is it that prevents me from—Ah. Now, I see . . ." The light in his eyes flashed brightly—

And then two other versions of the woman suddenly peeled away from her, and dropped, unconscious, to the floor.

"Interesting . . ." the Skull said.

"*Daaaamn* . . ." Leonard muttered.

One was dressed in the clothes she had been wearing just a moment ago—white blouse and black leather skirt. The other was attired in some kind of maroon and purple bodysuit, with matching gloves and boots. But it was the third woman—the one still conscious—who captivated his attention.

She wore a bright green bodysuit, with golden thigh-high boots and long gloves. A golden sash encircled her waist, resting low on her hips. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders in a fiery mane, framing the bird-like design emblazoned on her chest.

"Welcome, Phoenix," the Skull said.

Slowly, the woman regained her feet, then looked down at herself in amazement. "I'm . . . free," she said, and turned to the Skull. "But . . . why did you do that?"

"Because your mind was cluttered with useless thoughts," he snapped. "Yours, and those of your duplicates, which I detected as I made my way into your subconscious. The information I seek is buried in the depths of your mind; obtaining it simply required removing the blockage. And now that I have cleared the way—I *shall have it!*"

His eyes suddenly blazed again. Phoenix cried out and clutched her head.

"Get . . . get out . . ." she moaned through gritted teeth. "*Get out, damn you!*"

"Stop fighting me, mutant!" the Skull ordered. "Your mental powers are considerable, but they are as *nothing* compared to those of the Cosmic Cube—or the one who commands it!" The light intensified. "*Open your thoughts to me! Give me that information!*"

The woman screamed, and dropped to her hands and knees. Seeing the sadistic grin on the face of his master as he strengthened his assault on her mind, Leonard pressed against the wall behind him, as though he could conceal himself within the paint.

"Yeesss . . ." the Skull hissed, eyes closed as though in ecstasy. "I see it now . . . a gleaming palace at the center of reality . . . one to which all dimensions are joined . . ." He grinned his death's-head smile. "*That is the next prize to be won—a challenge worthy of the Red Skull! To rule not just one, but countless dimensions! To reach my hand across Eternity, and know that billions upon billions of subjects tremble in its shadow! To be master over all of time and space!*"

His brow suddenly furrowed; the smile faded. "But how to *reach* this wondrous edifice? Why do I not see *that*? I sense the power that sent you hurtling across infinity, but not a way to return to its source . . ."

He opened his eyes, and the light faded. Groaning loudly, Phoenix collapsed at his feet, breathing hard. He'd released her, Leonard realized, and eased forward from the wall.

The Skull frowned as he gazed at Phoenix. "The information is incomplete. You only possess a small part of the puzzle. I need the rest of the pieces—the ones that must lay hidden in the minds of your team members." His lipless mouth pulled back in a disturbing smile. "And I know *exactly* how to go about acquiring them. . . ."

Interlude(s) VIII

SO, YOU got a plan fer gettin' t'the Skull?" Wolverine asked. "Not at the moment, Logan," Lensherr admitted. He glanced at his traveling companion as they tramped through the moonlit woods, saw the frown that creased his weathered features. "Really, Logan—I only just escaped from a concentration camp last evening. I have been beaten, bloodied, and bruised, shot at and mutilated. My body is weak, my powers still recharging. What would you have me do?"

"Droppin' dead right in front'a me would do fer a start."

"Beyond that."

Wolverine snarled at him. "I think you've done enough already, ya piece o' slime. We had a deal, back when Doom had the Cube—"

"Yes, yes," Lensherr interjected. "I'm well aware of the terms of the agreement I reached with your leader, Cyclops. In exchange for my cooperation, you would have the chance to try and reverse what von Doom had done to the planet."

"An' ya went back on yer word, bub," Wolverine said.

Lensherr shook his head. "Not true. You imbeciles *had* your chance, as we'd agreed, and you failed. Therefore, it was necessary for me to step in."

"By orderin' yer acolytes t'attack us, an' then snatchin' up the Cube fer yerself."

"Oh, come now, Logan! Did you actually think I would simply stand around and allow the means of achieving ultimate power to slip from my grasp?" Lensherr snorted. "You, almost as well as Charles Xavier, should know my motivations clearly enough by now."

"I know ya all right, Magnus," Wolverine countered. "I just expected *better*'a ya."

The comment took him by surprise. "You insolent little thug! How *dare* you!" he bellowed.

"How dare *I*?" Wolverine snapped, rounding on him. "*I* ain't the one who went screwin' around with the flamin' Cube, bub! *I* ain't the one who stabbed the X-Men in the back, when we was tryin' t'fix what yer old buddy Doom messed up! An' *I* ain't the one who allowed the Red Skull t'get his scummy hands on the Cube so he could turn the whole flamin' planet into a stinkin' Nazi slaughterhouse!" His lips drew back in a feral snarl, and he pointed an accusatory finger at Lensherr. "There were billions o' people across I-don't-know how many dimensions who were countin' on us t'get the job done, an' because o' *you*, an' *Doom*, an' the *Skull*, all'a them—an' *us*, too—got a good chance'a never seein' another day!" He looked at his long-time enemy in disgust. "How dare *I*? Where the hell did *you* ever get the idea you could play God? All ya know how t'do is cause misery an' destruction—oh, yer *real* good at *that*, ain't ya? An' fer what? So ya can rule the world, like you've always dreamed?" He spat on the ground, near Lensherr's feet. "*That's* what I think'a yer dream, ya piece o' filth, *an'* yer high-an'-mighty attitude."

He stomped forward, getting right in Magnus's face. "You wanna go on thinkin' yer better'n me? Fine. But when I'm done with the Skull—if the world hasn't totally gone t'hell by then—you an' me, we're gonna *finish* this, once an' fer all. An' *then* we'll see who the better man is."

"Oh, indeed we shall, Logan," Lensherr murmured with a snarl. "I look forward to the outcome . . ."

And then, without any warning, they disappeared in a flash of light.

Hundreds of miles away, high above the streets of New York, in an office belonging to the commander of the city's security forces, a heavily sedated man groaned in his sleep and rolled over.

Slowly, the eyes of Professor Charles Xavier began to open. His body felt stiff, his thoughts still cloudy from the powerful drug. But there was something different about him, now: a determined set to his jaw that hadn't existed before; a fire that burned hotly in his eyes; a hard-won triumphant smile that came to his lips.

"At last . . ." he whispered. "I'm . . . *free* . . ."

And then he vanished in a burst of light.

The last person Nightcrawler literally expected to run into—or wanted to see—as he tore through the corridors of Ministry of Health head-

quarters was Ororo Munroe. He was certain the feeling was more than mutual.

Getting to the landing area had turned out to be more difficult than he'd expected—mainly because someone had obviously figured out where he was heading, and dispatched the majority of the security forces to keep him from climbing any higher in the building. He'd tried making his way through the ventilation system, but the airflow tunnels had apparently been designed to prevent such a situation; no doubt other mutants in the past had tried escaping in just such a fashion. That left him with two choices: the elevators, and the stairwells. The former had a certain appeal, because he could climb through the roof hatch in one of the cars and climb up the shaft. The latter meant another chase in a tightly enclosed area, with bullets whizzing all around him.

He had some success with the elevator shaft, until he must have tripped a hidden sensor somewhere along the way. Then the door on the floor above him had been wrenched open, and some fool with a flamethrower had tried to burn him. Wagner teleported behind the man and gave him a shove, catapulting him into the shaft. When he struck the top of the car a few moments later, his screams of agony over his broken leg were all the proof Nightcrawler needed to hear to know he hadn't killed him. But any sense of relief had been quickly replaced by thoughts of self-preservation as more doors slid open on higher floors, and soldiers started rappelling down the shaft.

Well, at least someone had turned off the damnable klaxon. It was bad enough being chased through a building by an army without having to deal with a splitting headache.

Another mad dash through an adjacent stairwell later, and he had tumbled out onto the sixtieth floor to catch his breath, knowing his pursuers weren't too far behind him. Not for the first time, he wished that the designers of this facility had had the foresight to have maps placed on each floor; a small sign stenciled with *YOU ARE HERE* in bright red letters on a grid would have done wonders for his sense of direction.

It was as he whipped around a corner at the end of the hall that he collided with another fugitive. The impact sent his stylish sunglasses flying through the air, to smash against a framed blow-up of the Emperor.

"Bright Lady preserve me," said a familiar voice. "You!"

Picking his dazed head up off the floor, Wagner looked at the feminine obstruction that had brought him to a halt. "Fräulein Munroe!" He sneered. "What an unexpected surprise. It's so rare that one bumps into an alleged co-conspirator these days."

"So, *you* are the cause for the alarm!" she said, using the wall

behind her for support as she regained her feet. A sly grin crept across her exquisite features. "What happened, Nightcrawler? No longer a valued member of the Reich?"

"Thanks to you and your cohorts," he replied. "I hope you're pleased with the results of your slanderous remarks."

"To a degree," she admitted, "though it was no fault of mine. This woman they kept mentioning—"

"Frau Sommers."

"Yes. Apparently, she is under the impression that she knows us."

"That seems to be happening more often these days," he remarked sarcastically. He grabbed her by the wrist. "But now is not the time for sorting through our memories for previous encounters. We must go—now."

They turned toward a door leading to another set of stairs. But before they could move, the corridor filled with a dazzling light.

And when it at last faded, they were gone.

"You sure this is such a good idea, Remy?" Rogue asked, her voice heavy with uncertainty. "I mean, breakin' into the main headquarters of the city's security forces? It's crazy—an' suicidal, if ya don't mind me sayin' so."

"Well, dat's de place dey was takin' you to," Gambit explained, "so it makes sense dat dat's where we'll find Cyclops. All we gotta do is sneak in an' break 'im out—but quiet."

"'Quiet.' Right," Rogue said. "Quiet like the way you got me outta that armored car on the highway?"

Remy smiled. "Dat was an accident. But I didn' hear you complainin' 'bout it after I did it."

"Well, I . . ." She paused, then smiled, too. "I wasn't *myself* then, sugah. Otherwise, you woulda gotten an earful."

"Den I should be grateful for small favors, *non*?" he said, and grinned.

Not waiting for a reply, he quickly stepped past her and flung open the door of the storage chamber.

Rogue tossed him the oversized trenchcoat he'd loaned her. He caught it in one hand, then held it out to her. She shook her head. "You keep it; it'd just wrap 'round my legs while we're flyin'." She smiled wryly. "'Sides, y'all look down right underdressed without a big coat on."

Remy nodded in appreciation and slipped it on. He paused as something in the pockets thumped against his legs. He reached in, and came out with four packs of cards: two of playing cards, one of a collector's

edition commemorating "Great Moments in Reich History," and one of a child's well-thumbed "Go Fish" set.

"I found 'em in one'a the cartons, when I was rootin' 'round 'em before," Rogue explained. "Thought y'all might need some ammunition, for when ya get an urge to blow somethin' up." She grinned broadly. "An' I *know* how y'all get some mighty *powerful* urges when it comes t' that kinda stuff."

"Among *other* t'ings, *chere*," he said slyly. He extended his hand toward her, and she stepped forward to take it—

—and they both suddenly vanished in a burst of light.

The armored transport containing *former* Reichsmajor Sommers pulled into an underground parking garage just off Forty-fourth Street and Lexington Avenue. The trip through Queens, and across the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge into Manhattan, had passed without incident—no fear of a rescue attempt by mutant revolutionaries this time, not with a Sentinel hovering overhead.

The vehicle continued south for two blocks, down a side passage, to come to a halt beneath what was once known as the Chrysler Building, but had since been designated the New York headquarters of the Ministry of Defense. As the vehicle parked, the doors to a bank of elevators opened, and a squad of heavily armed soldiers poured out to meet it.

One of the soldiers moved to the back of the transport to open the rear doors, as the others took up firing positions. Their orders were simple: If Sommers had broken free, kill him before he could use his powers; if he were still shackled, escort him up to Lady Viper's office, where he would join his wife.

The doors swung wide. To the disappointment of most of those assembled in the subterranean space, the prisoner was *still* a prisoner, chains clanking as he struggled to his feet. Sommers paused at the edge of the top step, and stared at all the guns pointed at him.

"An honor guard? For me?" he asked sarcastically. "And here I thought I'd fallen out of favor with the Empire."

The youngest guard riding with him—Zumwald—gave him a savage push from behind. "Out, freak!" he barked.

Sommers tumbled from the vehicle and landed awkwardly, as the chain between his ankles made it difficult to keep his balance. Nevertheless, he was able to right himself before he fell flat on his face. Snarling, he turned back to the young soldier.

"You should be more careful about whom you touch, private," he said. Zumwald gazed at him blankly. "Don't you pay attention to the

notices from the Ministry of Health?" Sommers flashed an icy smile. "You never know what sort of unpleasant diseases we filthy mutants might be carrying."

Zumwald started, and stared at his hand. He'd removed his padded gloves during the ride from the spaceport, complaining they made his hands too sweaty. Now it was clear he wished he'd never taken them off.

"I should have that examined immediately, private—you wouldn't want to grow a third arm, or an extra mouth, would you?" He laughed at the look of horror that transfixed Zumwald's face, then turned to the soldiers clustered around the area. "I believe I have an appointment with your commander." He drew himself to his full height, chin tilted upward in a defiant gesture. "Inform her that Reichsmajor Sommers is here to see her, and—"

He never got to finish his pronouncement. There was a sudden flash of blinding light in the dimly lit garage; when it faded, he had disappeared.

The chains he'd been wearing clattered noisily to the asphalt.

Cautiously, one of the soldiers stepped forward, waving a hand out in front of him, as though expecting to come into contact with a mutant suddenly gone invisible. When nothing happened, he slowly reached down and picked up the chains, then looked at his fellow warriors.

"All right," he said. "Who wants to explain this to Commander Viper . . . ?"

THE FIRST indication Linda McQuillan—Captain U.K. of Earth 794—had that something was *very* wrong aboard the Starlight Citadel was when the very man she and the rest of the Captain Britain Corps had been hunting for hours came strutting down the main promenade, as though he owned the place.

Of all the bloody cheek . . . she thought.

The second indication was that he was accompanied by that annoying, self-important Dr. Stanton from the medical wing. He didn't appear to be a hostage, though; in fact, he seemed to be acting as an escort.

"Not good . . ." Linda muttered. "Not good at all . . ." She tapped the comm-link button on her helmet. "Central, this is Seven-Nine-Four U.K. You're not going to believe this. . . ."

Stanton glanced around nervously as he and von Doom walked along the promenade. He saw the startled expressions on the faces of the people they passed—he was certain they matched his own.

Von Doom obviously noticed. "Is there a problem, physician?"

"Umm . . . well . . ." Stanton fumbled, looking for the right words. "Do you really think it's . . . wise to be doing this . . . er, Lord Doom? I mean, walking around so openly when you're being sought by security?"

"Stop your quivering, worm," von Doom snapped. "This day, you walk with a god."

Stanton nodded, head bobbing up and down as though attached to a loose hinge. "Oh, yes," he mumbled. "The powers of the Guardian, and all. I forgot about that . . ."

"For too long has Doom remained in the shadows." He waved a

hand at the hundreds of representatives of humanoid and totally alien-looking races milling around them, yet giving both dictator and physician a wide berth. "Now it is time for these rabble to meet their new lord and master—and learn to fear him . . ."

"*HALT!*" ordered a loud feminine voice.

Striding purposefully down the walkway toward them was an attractive young woman dressed in a bright, Union Jack-decorated uniform. A shock of white hair stuck up from the open top of her helmet/mask. The distinctive outfit identified her as a member of the Captain Britain Corps, and Stanton recognized her as Captain U.K., who had been one of the warriors who originally brought von Doom to the medical wing for observation when he arrived on the citadel.

Not bothering to acknowledge Stanton, she walked right up to von Doom and seized his arm in a powerful grip. "Victor von Doom, I am placing you under arrest for the cold-blooded murders of Captains Wales and Commonwealth," she stated in an authoritative tone. "If you resist, I shall have no choice but to use force."

"You *dare* lay a hand upon your god?" von Doom growled.

"Oh, so now you're a god, are you?" Captain U.K. sneered at him. "I hate to tell you this, 'Your Almightyness,' but the position was filled a long time a—"

And then she was suddenly airborne, careening wildly across the promenade, to crash against a wall. There were cries and shouts from the bystanders around her, and they began running in all directions.

"Well, I can't say that *that* was unexpected . . ." Stanton muttered.

"You *will* respect me, woman!" von Doom bellowed. "You will *worship* me—or you will *die!*"

She lurched to her feet, and glared at him. "If I choose the latter, does that mean I won't have to listen to your rubbish any more?"

Standing behind von Doom, Stanton sighed, and shook his head. "Now, *that* wasn't a very wise thing to say . . ."

As if in response, the armored tyrant roared, and raised a gauntleted hand at his costumed enemy.

Leaning against the wall, Linda tensed, waiting to be thrown around again like a doll. But that didn't happen. Instead, a circular opening appeared in the palm of von Doom's glove—and it began to glow with the build-up of an energy charge.

"*Oh, bloody hell!*" she cried.

The first beam passed over her head as she ducked low, and then she was diving for cover. More blasts quickly followed, and the windows of shops around and behind her exploded as the accelerator energy

violently separated their atoms. Patrons, visitors, and workers were sent flying, and debris rained down on the promenade as fire alarms began sounding.

Crouched behind a sweets cart, she stabbed at her comm-link. "Central, the subject is armed—I repeat, *armed*—with an energy weapon! I need backup! What—?" She paused, and sneered. "No, I *don't* know how he obtained one, you idiot, and I'm not about to bloody well ask him! Now, stop talking and—*Damn!*"

The beam detonated the spot on the floor where she was—or just had been, if she hadn't seen von Doom targeting her again. She took to the air, this time under her own power, and sped straight at him, hoping to knock him off his feet before he got off another shot.

But she never reached her objective. Because with a simple flick of von Doom's wrist, she suddenly found herself outside the citadel—and hurtling through the swirling, destructive currents of the space/time vortex.

"Oh, my God . . ." she whispered—and then she was swept away.

"At last, all the players have been gathered together, and our drama nears its final act."

The Red Skull looked about the room, obviously quite pleased with what he saw. Enveloped in a golden glow, suspended a few inches above the carpeted floor of his office, was a group of costumed men and women, most of whom Leonard did not recognize—not counting the redheaded Phoenix, of course. The rest, he figured, must be other members of the X-Men, although he found it hard to believe that its roster would include a middle-aged bald guy and someone who looked old enough to be his grandfather.

But it was not just the X-Men who were gathered in this office. Scattered across the floor, like discarded rag dolls, were a collection of unconscious variants of the mutants—including one that could only be Reichsmajor Summers himself—that joined the two alternates that had been torn away from Phoenix. Did *every* mutant have an extra body or two they carried around inside them?

The only group member who apparently didn't have a duplicate was somebody named "Gambit," although, according to the identification found on him, the uniform he wore belonged to a worker named Remy Lebeau, who was a clerk at Kaltenbrunner Spaceport in New York. The Skull had mentioned something about being unable to separate the X-Man from the lowly clerk, but had then moved on.

There were two more costumed women, both as attractive as Phoenix. (Was *every* female mutant as good-looking as these three? If so,

Leonard reflected, he might have to change his opinion of them as a whole.) One was white, with a skunk-like streak through her brown hair, wearing a green-and-yellow bodysuit decorated with an "X" on the left breast, yellow boots and gloves, and a beaten-up leather bomber jacket. The other was African, with a mane of white hair that fell to her waist, and who possessed no discernable pupils in her eyes—the sockets were filled with a disturbing, overall whiteness. She wore a shoulderless black leather outfit, with a pair of immense pieces of material joined loosely to the sleeves; they almost looked like wings. "Rogue" and "Storm," respectively, the Skull had called the women.

Beside the black woman was something that looked like an honest-to-God blue-skinned demon, complete with fangs and pointed tail and ears. Leonard recognized him as "Nightcrawler," one of the members of Lightning Force. But since no one else from the team was present, he assumed it meant that, in the "real" world, the German-born mutant lived among others of his kind. It made sense—a lot more than the notion that a subhuman like Kurt Wagner would be trusted to work alongside his genetic superiors.

Next to Nightcrawler was a short, thuggish-looking guy in his forties, wearing a yellow-and-blue costume with a ridiculously large set of points jutting up from the sides of his mask. "Wolverine," the Skull had called him, and Leonard could understand the reference: the guy certainly looked hairy enough—and mean enough—to be mistaken for a wild animal.

Then there was "Cyclops." His dark Nazi uniform replaced by more colorful blue and yellow spandex, it was difficult for Leonard to see just how anyone could have overlooked the man's mutant nature—the visor covering his eyes should have been a clue, considering he never took it off. From the worried glance Phoenix had given him when he materialized beside her, Leonard imagined they must be a couple, maybe even married. The thought of intimacy between freaks—even ones as handsome as these two—made the young Nazi a little queasy.

Or was that *jealous*, because he could see just how deeply in love they were?

On the other side of Rogue was Gambit. Except for Rogue, the other mutants had acted like they'd seen a ghost when he'd first appeared, teleported to the castle like the rest of them via the Cosmic Cube. Why they should have had that reaction was unclear, and the Skull hadn't seemed particularly interested in pursuing the subject.

The baldheaded man in the dark business suit was Professor Xavier—Leonard had seen him on the viewscreen during the Skull's video teleconference with Lady Viper. He also remembered him as the idiot

who'd tried to stop the Skull from stealing the Cube, back when the white-haired septuagenarian next to him—Magneto—had possessed it.

Magneto. Shouldn't he be dead by now? Leonard wondered. He'd seen with his own eyes how deeply the Skull had rammed his obsidian blade into the mutant overlord's chest when he made his play for the Cube. Had seen how much blood had poured from the wound; had heard him take his last breaths. And yet, there he floated, healthy once more, looking quite formidable in his maroon-and-purple outfit, light playing off the gleaming metal of his gladiator-style helmet.

But *why* should he be so healthy? Did the Skull *always* let his enemies go on living, even when they were at death's door? Wouldn't it just be easier to let them die, so they wouldn't have a chance to strike back at him later?

Perhaps, Leonard reflected, that was why the Skull had always been defeated in the past. That overriding sense of vanity the man possessed; that illogical need to crow of his triumphs to his enemies, to let them know he could kill them *if he wanted to*—it had always been the cause of his downfall. Perhaps it would be again.

And would that be such a *bad* thing if it did? Leonard had to admit it: he'd had his fill of death and misery. He had seen what a world controlled by the followers of Adolf Hitler would be like, and it was nothing like the fanciful visions he'd created in his mind of all-powerful Master Race leading mankind into a new Golden Age. No, this was a miserable, dark, horrifying place, filled with suffering and torture, despair and anguish, human monsters and madmen who imagined themselves the saviors of their race, and—

And now, he just wanted things to go back to the way they'd been . . .

"All right, Skull," Cyclops said. "You've brought us all together—now what?"

"Now, mutant," the Skull replied, "you give to me the knowledge of this 'Starlight Citadel' your lovely wife was good enough to provide." He reached out a gloved hand and caressed Jean's cheek. Her lips drew back in disgust. "Each of you has retained a tiny portion of the power used to transport you back to Earth. By wresting them from your minds, I will be able to retrace the route you traveled, and lay the foundation for a new empire—one that will stretch from the dawn of Creation, to the end of time itself, and across infinity!"

"And humans say *I* have delusions of grandeur," Magneto commented drolly.

"Silence, Jew!" the Skull barked. He stomped over to his longtime

rival for world domination. "I know not why you arrived here with the others—perhaps the Cube recognized your taint from when you held it, and summoned you—but, in a way, I am pleased. For now you shall bear witness to the moment when the Red Skull threw off his Earthly bonds, and began his ascendancy to godhood!"

With a triumphant grin, he put out his hand—and the Cosmic Cube suddenly appeared.

"The Cube . . ." Magneto said in hushed tones. His eyes glittered with desire.

"This cannot be good . . ." Storm commented.

"Uh-huh. I t'ink we in for a world o' hurtin' now, *mon braves*," Gambit said.

"Oh, yes," the Skull replied. He placed both hands around it, coveting his hard-won prize. His eyes began to glow with a harsh light. "Yes, you are. . . ."

THIS IS ridiculous.”

It hadn't taken Sat-yr-nin long to realize she was never going to locate von Doom in this . . . whatever it was—wasteland, limbo, cosmic storage facility that lay beyond Roma's bed chamber. It might look like a flat, unbroken plain, but she could swear she'd been cresting hills and descending into valleys during her journey—either she was imaging things, or the true design of the landscape was undetectable by the naked eye.

Eventually, she gave up the search, and started looking for an exit. She'd noticed how her skin began to tingle when she walked in a particular direction; it grew stronger the farther she advanced. The sensation was akin to the one she'd experienced when she passed through the door leading from the Guardian's chambers—therefore, it stood to reason that the pins-and-needles effect was an indication that she was getting closer to her point of entry.

The journey back went a great deal faster and easier than the one going out, now that she had a guide of sorts to direct her. In not time at all—or what felt like it as she walked through this blank-featured neverland—she had located the doorway.

As she gripped the knob and turned it, an idea came to mind. Perhaps chasing after her errant ally had been the wrong way to approach confronting him about the Cube. She *was* the Mastrex of an empire, after all—armored imbeciles like the self-proclaimed “Doctor” Doom should be seeking *her* counsel, not the other way around. Let him come to her when he had finished doing whatever it was he was doing back there in limbo. She would wait for him in the throne room—to test out

the fit of the high-backed chair, and maybe even think of a truly inventive way to kill him . . . before he had a chance to kill her.

Sat-yr-nin grinned wickedly and opened the door. Alliances were such fleeting things, she thought—especially when neither party could be trusted . . .

So focused was she on her plans for revenge that she never realized someone was standing just to one side of the door in the Guardian's apartment—until something cracked against her skull, plunging her into darkness.

For Betsy and Warren, finding their way from Merlyn's pocket dimension back to the Roma's apartment was a simple task. All it required was another trip through the shadow realm, with a small power boost from Roma to allow them passage through the transduction barrier that kept the featureless landscape from coming into direct contact with the citadel—for safety reasons, she had explained.

Before they'd departed, Betsy gave a brief account of her encounter with the mind-controlled Alecto, and the damage that had been done to Roma's belongings. She'd just wanted to prepare the Guardian for what she was going to see when they got there, and Roma said that she understood. But when they stepped from the portal Betsy had created, they were greeted by a sight none of them could have prepared for.

There were two Saturnynes in the room.

Both were attired in the same flowing white robes; both possessed a fine mane of snow-white hair. The sole difference between them came from the fact that one was wide awake and free to witness the arrival of the X-Men and their celestial charge, while the other was unconscious, bound and gagged with strips of torn bed sheets, and tossed onto a pile of large throw pillows on the floor.

Roma looked stunned. "*What is the meaning of this?*" she asked angrily.

The version of the Majestrix still standing looked equally surprised by the sudden appearance of the trio. She dropped to one knee, and inclined her head. "Forgive me, m'lady. I wouldn't have normally barged in, unannounced, like this, but knowing that your life was in danger—"

The Guardian's stern expression faded, replaced by a gentle smile. "Saturnyne? Is it really *you*, my friend?"

The Majestrix raised her head. "Yes, m'lady. I apologize for not getting here sooner, but I was unavoidably detained by . . ." She gestured toward her restrained surrogate. "Well, you can see for yourself."

"Indeed," the Guardian said, and gestured for Her Whyness to stand

up. Roma walked over to her lieutenant and gently placed her hands on the woman's shoulders. "I am pleased to know you are well, my friend."

Saturnyne seemed genuinely touched by the Guardian's sentiment. "Thank you, m'lady," she said. It was one of the few times Betsy could ever recall seeing the woman smile.

"Come," Roma said to them all. "We must away to the throne room."

Warren pointed to Sat-yr-nin, who moaned softly through the folds of her thick gag. "What about her?"

"She'll keep—until she can be placed back in stasis," Her Whyness replied with a malicious smile. She turned to Roma, and the smile immediately evaporated. "Umm . . . about the torn sheets, m'lady—"

"There *are* greater concerns this day, Saturnyne," the Guardian replied.

"Indeed," the Majestrix said, nodding in agreement.

With a final glance at the prisoner, and a quick check of Alecto—who was still sleeping off his rather violent encounter with Betsy's psi-blade—they hurried to the throne room . . . in time to meet von Doom and Stanton as they entered from the hallway.

Warren sighed. "Is this guy like a bad penny, or what?"

"You are too late, woman!" the tyrant shouted triumphantly to Roma as he ascended the throne. "Doom has won! And there is nothing that you, or anyone else, can do to stop him from laying claim to his destiny—to rule infinity!"

And that was the moment, as fate would have it, when what could only be described as a multi-dimensional missile streaked into the east wing of the citadel, and exploded.

The structure tilted crazily as the projectile continued through level after level, room after room. Artificial gravity cut off, and the vacuum rushed in to fill the hole created by the impact. Hundreds of residents and visitors were sucked into the vortex, never to be seen again.

And matters were only going to become worse.

In the throne room, everyone but Roma and von Doom were thrown to the floor by the explosion. Alarms sounded, and the shadow creatures that lived in the depths of the chamber began screaming in agony.

"A reality breach!" Saturnyne cried. "M'lady—"

"Yes, Saturnyne—I know," Roma said.

"I don't," Warren commented. "What does it mean?"

"It means the citadel has been opened to the vortex," Saturnyne explained curtly. "It means the transduction barriers protecting us from

the forces of time and space have fallen, and the temporal energies now threaten to rip us all apart, if the damage is not repaired."

Warren blew out a sharp breath. "Man, things just keep going from bad to worse around here, don't they . . . ?"

"*What is this?*" von Doom roared as the citadel continued to shudder. He pointed an accusatory finger at Roma. "What have you done, woman?"

"I have done nothing," the Guardian answered. "But I fear we may learn the cause of this disaster soon enough."

And then, as if on cue, the floor of the throne room erupted, and the projectile finally came to rest. The chamber filled with smoke, and the burnt, ozone-tinged stench of spent energies. Betsy coughed violently: her eyes watered, her lungs were burning. But through the choking haze she could see a figure moving about—one clad in gleaming armor.

But it wasn't von Doom.

"*I have arrived!*" the figure proclaimed, stepping from the smoke. And as he moved into the light of the chamber, his identity became clear to all.

"The Red Skull . . ." Warren said hoarsely.

Staring in wide-eyed horror at the scarlet-hued death's-head that cackled madly before her, and the Cosmic Cube that he clutched tightly in one hand, only one thought came to Betsy's mind: "This is very bad. . . ."

D IS IS bad, people—*real bad!*”

No truer words could have spoken, Jean thought, even if they *did* come with a heavy Cajun accent.

The ground bucked and heaved, like a bull released from its pen at a rodeo, and all the X-Men could do was lie flat on the office floor and try to ride it out. Anything not bolted down—which meant just about every piece of furniture and decoration—tumbled and twisted, bounced and bumped around and against the group, eliciting a variety of groans, gasps, and colorful expletives from the heroes as each object made contact.

Well, Jean thought as she dodged a marble statue of Winged Victory that ricocheted past her head, *in a strange way, as bad as things may be, it certainly beats having someone digging around inside your brain . . .*

The Skull had squeezed the last bits of information about the citadel from his prisoners, leaving them too weak to do anything more than hang limply in the Cube-generated field that suspended them in the air. The process had been especially hard on Xavier, who, like Jean, had initially struggled to keep the Skull from invading his mind. But the grotesque villain would not be denied; in time, the professor, too, surrendered his piece of the puzzle.

And then, with the parts of the location finally collected within the Cube, the Skull simply vanished in a burst of light.

A moment later, the X-Men came crashing down onto the carpet, the hold over them released.

"Some host *he* is," Rogue said sarcastically as she sat up. "Didn't even say 'good night' before runnin' out on us."

"Let us just hope, *mein freund*," Nightcrawler said, helping Ororo to her feet, "that he has not—what is the expression?—'stuck us with the bill'?"

That was about the point where the first tremors began.

"I *hate* it when ya say stuff like that, elf," Wolverine muttered. "It just puts a jinx on the whole flamin' thing."

"There are times when I am in complete agreement with you, Logan," Kurt replied with a sigh. "Especially in this case, since I appear to have left my wallet in my other costume . . ."

The floor lurched again, and this time the quake created a fissure along one wall. It started at the base, then began working its way up. Chunks of stone fell as it reached the ceiling.

"We have to evacuate!" Scott yelled. Using the Skull's executive desk for support, he raised himself up, then pointed to the group's unconscious doppelgangers. "Let's get these people out of here! Move!"

Rogue, Ororo, and Jean were the first to respond, because their powers allowed them to fly over the shaking floor. Jean telekinetically grabbed hold of her alternates; Rogue did likewise. Ororo, however, was momentarily brought up short when she saw that one of her duplicates was wearing a wedding band. Jean didn't have the heart to tell her the poor woman was married to Doctor Doom—the thought that, in another lifetime, she might have willingly devoted herself to that tyrant would only haunt Ororo for the rest of her days. Her surprise lasted only a moment, though, before she focused on the task at hand.

"Hey! What about me?" asked a panicked voice.

A man in his early twenties stumbled toward them. He wore a dark gray uniform and black leather jackboots, his blond hair cut short, in the style worn by most young Nazis.

"You're the Skull's assistant!" Jean said. "I saw you skulking in the back of the room when he brought me here."

"Er . . . yes ma'am," he said sheepishly. Another rumble shook the building, and now pieces of the ceiling began raining down. He looked up, wide-eyed, then turned back to Jean. "But, could we talk about this when we get outside, though . . .?"

Amazingly, Magneto—*Magneto*, of all people!—used his powers to shatter the room's outer wall, then gathered together the Skull's assistant, as well as the rest of the X-Men and their counterparts, in a protective magnetic bubble, and floated them away from the castle. The

three women quickly joined them, and set their charges on the grass, just as the ground finally settled.

"Hey!" Gambit said, and pointed to the stronghold. "Does everybody see dat, too?"

As one, the heroes and villain turned to look.

There were three versions of the castle standing before them—but not separately. They overlapped in a phantom-like state, changing size and design from one moment to the next, becoming solid, then fading. It was difficult to look at the effect for long without feeling a dull headache.

"I believe we are seeing what happens when the Cosmic Cube has been removed from Earth," Magneto said. "Without its energies to sustain the illusion, the world is returning to normal."

"'Normal'?" Jean said. She pointed to their alternates. "You think three versions of the same thing is normal? Don't you understand what's going on here?" She waved a hand around; the effect the castle was experiencing had spread across the countryside. The landscape looked like a picture taken out of focus. "This isn't an illusion—this is all real! All these worlds, all these people, are real! I learned as much from communing with my . . . other selves. And from what I could piece together, I think I've finally figured out what the flaw in the Cube is: It's not changing the world, it's finding other versions from the multitude of choices in the omniverse—and laying one on top of the other!"

Lensherr started. "But that would mean there are—"

"Yes! Three different Earths, all trying to occupy the same space!" Jean concluded.

"An' us caught right in the middle of 'em," Rogue said. "As usual."

"And without the Skull to control the situation," Jean continued, "the reality-cancer created by the Cube is going to start spreading again."

Scott nodded grimly. "Which puts us right back where we started from . . . only in an even worse situation."

Lensherr suddenly turned to the professor. "Charles, where is my daughter? Where is Anya?"

Xavier paused, then shook his head. "I . . . don't know, Eric. When the Red Skull transformed the world—"

"You *swore* to me, Charles!" Lensherr roared. "You *swore* you would protect her! You *swore* you would keep her safe from the monsters running this planet!" He grabbed Xavier by the lapels of his jacket and hauled him to his feet. "You *lied* to me, Charles. You kept telling me that, in order for reality to be stabilized, *nothing* I created with the Cube had to remain—friends, family, the very world itself. But that

wasn't true, was it? If Phoenix is correct, that world has always existed—one where my daughter never died!" The hardness in his eyes subsided. "Don't you realize what that means, Charles? I could have had her back! I could have held onto the piece of my soul that was torn from my breast long ago, when the fire consumed her." The steel suddenly returned to his gaze, and his lips curled back in a snarl. "**BUT YOU LOST HER, DAMN YOU!**"

"Let 'im go, Magnus," Wolverine growled, and clasped a hand on his shoulder. "I ain't gonna say it twice."

Lensherr turned his head to glare at him. Dark eyes flashed within the depths of the battle helmet, and the feral mutant was sent hurtling across the lawn. Wolverine bounced once, then rolled to his feet—and triggered his claws.

"That one ya get fer free," he said, holding his lethal bio-weapons at the ready. "Now, *I* get one."

The mutant overlord relaxed his grip on Xavier, and let him slide to the grass. Then he turned to face his adversary.

"What of all your bluster about dealing with the Red Skull first, Logan?" Lensherr asked.

"Skull ain't here, bub," Wolverine replied. He smiled coldly. "Means *you* get t'move t'the front'a the line . . ."

"**STOP IT! BOTH OF YOU!**" Cyclops shouted. The two men came to a halt, and looked at him. "We don't have *time* for this nonsense, damn it! We have to do something about this!"

"And what would you have us do, Summers?" Lensherr asked. "Create a new Cube before the world comes to an end? I don't believe we have the luxury of time to work out the specifics."

"So, you'd rather spend your last moments engaged in some senseless brawl?" Scott replied. "What happened to the great man of peace, who fought so hard to unite humanity and mutantkind?" Lensherr started to reply. "And don't say it's one of your other selves I'm talking about. *You* were the one who held the Cube, Magnus; *yours* was the will that directed the dream."

The mutant overlord halted. "You . . . are right," he finally said, then turned back to Xavier. "I . . . am sorry, Charles. I should have realized the Cube would affect you as well. Like the rest of us, you were trapped within your alternate. There would have been no way for you to learn of where Anya was placed in this hellish world." He looked past the professor, toward the uniformed man standing a few feet behind him. "But there *is* someone, I believe, who might know . . ."

Lensherr raised a hand, seized him in a magnetic grip, and yanked him across the short distance. Eyes glowing with rage, the mutant over-

lord seized him by the throat. “*You* are the Skull’s lackey. You would know where the location of prisoners is recorded. Tell me where I might find my daughter—or your master will have to find a new whipping boy.”

“Erik—don’t,” Xavier said.

The X-Men leapt forward to intervene, but Magneto formed a magnetic bubble around himself and his prey. The heroes’ strongest blows simply bounced off.

The Nazi’s eyes bulged from his head as Lensherr tightened his grip. “I . . . don’t know what . . . you’re talking about . . .” he gasped. “The Controller . . . didn’t tell me . . . anything . . .”

“How unfortunate—for you,” Lensherr replied. “To die so young, and so ignorant . . .”

“Wait. *Wait!*” the man screamed. “What . . . what’s her name?”

“Anya Lensherr, you miserable worm. Her name is Anya Lensherr.”

His victim started gazing from side to side, then up and down, as though searching his memories. “I know that name . . . I . . . I’ve heard it somewhere . . .” Then a nervous smile lit his features, and he looked to his costumed assailant. “*I know!* I know where she is!” He waved a hand toward the valley below—and a collection of military-style buildings there. “She’s at the camp! I saw her!”

“Are you certain?” Lensherr asked through gritted teeth. He closed his hand again.

“Yes! *YES!*” the Nazi cried, his face turning an unhealthy shade of red. “She—she’s in the band!” He whimpered. “Please . . . please don’t kill me,” he whispered.

Lensherr sneered in disgust. “You are not even worth the effort.” And with that, he lowered the magnetic bubble and tossed the man to the heroes. “Here, X-Men—do what you wish with him. I have more important concerns.”

He took to the air, then, and sped toward the concentration camp.

The ground began to tremble—another earthquake created by the trio of worlds shifting positions.

“What do you want us to do, Professor?” Scott asked.

“There is not a great deal we *can* do, given the circumstances,” Xavier replied. “And yet, we must do *something*, if only to help ease the suffering of those few we can aid—before the end comes.” He gazed at the distant figure of Magneto as he swooped toward the valley, purple cape flapping behind him like great wings. “Perhaps Erik has the right idea . . .”

“Now yer talkin’, Charlie,” Wolverine agreed.

Xavier nodded. “Come, X-Men—let us do some good.”

And with that, they hurried to join Magneto in liberating the camp. No, they couldn't save the world—not this time. But then no one ever said being an X-Man would be an easy job.

They could only do their best.

And sometimes that was enough.

The throne room had been transformed into a war zone, in just a matter of seconds. Having realized who it was that invaded “his” sanctum, von Doom roared in anger, and lost no time in attacking his hated rival.

The sides were evenly matched, however. Von Doom might possess the powers of a Supreme Guardian, but the Skull had those of the Cosmic Cube to call upon. The result was that a lot of destructive energy was being unleashed, but it was the Starlight Citadel—and those trapped aboard it—that would end up being torn apart, not the two combatants.

Grabbing hold of Roma, Betsy and Warren retreated from the battle to a safer position, outside the throne room. “Safer,” though, was a relative term, since there was really nowhere to go to escape from this cosmic Armageddon.

The main doors flew open, and the Captain Britain Corps came charging past them, only to come to an abrupt halt as they saw what was happening. It was clear they had no idea how to respond to this bizarre crisis, but it didn't stop them from launching themselves into the fray, if only to protect the Guardian as she withdrew.

“I'm not sure they're going to be enough, Roma!” Betsy shouted over the din.

“Nor do I, Elisabeth,” Roma admitted. “Yet, I am not strong enough to intercede, despite my powers.”

“Well, is there someone else you can bring in?” Warren asked. “Some other security team you can call on that's in the citadel?”

Roma shook her head.

“What about their associates, m'lady?” Saturnyne suggested. “The X-Men?” She paused. “If they weren't destroyed by the Skull already, that is.”

Roma gazed at her lieutenant for a few moments, then: “Yes . . .” she replied. “Yes, there may be a way . . .” She turned to Betsy and Warren. “. . . but it will require your assistance.”

“Just tell us what to do,” Betsy said.

Roma nodded. “Both of you have experienced the effects of the Cosmic Cube, and both of you have journeyed to and from the infected Earth. It is possible, therefore, that your contact with the Cube's energies will allow me to penetrate the barrier that has prevented me from seeing events on your world, and reach your teammates.” Gently, she placed

the tips of her fingers against their foreheads. "I need you to concentrate on your friends. Picture them in your thoughts, feel them within your hearts. Focus on all they are, all they mean to you—and summon them."

Betsy stared at the Guardian standing before her, then beyond. She could see the swirling energies of the vortex in her mind, hear the song of the Cube as the Skull drew upon its vast cosmic power. She closed her eyes and thought of the X-Men—the people who were always there for her, who stood by her in some of her darkest hours. The people who had saved her soul when she'd almost made a fatal decision on von Doom's world. She loved them all, cherished their friendships, wished more than anything that they could be with her right now, when she and the universe needed their help so badly.

And when she opened her eyes, the X-Men were there.

They glanced at their surroundings, obviously surprised to find themselves suddenly back at the citadel. Wolverine noted the war raging between the Skull and von Doom, and turned to the Guardian and her entourage.

"Somebody call fer backup?" he asked.

"Wow . . ." Warren whispered.

Betsy glanced at him, and smiled. "That, luv, is truly an understatement . . ."

THERE WAS no time for a proper reunion. Once the situation became clear to the X-Men, they immediately moved to assist the remaining members of the Captain Britain Corps who were still standing. There weren't many—most hadn't lasted long against the kind of energies being cast about by the two villains.

The Skull charged the throne, apparently outraged that he'd already been beaten to the seat of power. The dictator responded by hurling bolts of black energy at the invader, but the Cube's power was more than a match for them; under the Skull's control, it absorbed the discharges, then fired them back at von Doom. The tyrant deflected the bolts, and they exploded against a wall—one extremely close to a certain pulpit-like stand... and the delicate slivers of quartz contained there.

"The crystals!" Roam shouted. "If they destroy the crystals, all is lost!"

That was all the X-Men needed to hear before they attacked, Betsy and Warren at their side. They had literally gone through hell to protect the omniverse from the taint of the flawed Cube; they weren't about to let two of the villains who had so selfishly abused its power destroy the remaining dimensions in some cosmic territorial firefight.

The chamber shook as Storm created a miniature weather system high above, then summoned down bolts of lightning that struck their enemies time and again, without success. Rogue, and Wolverine tried a more physical approach, but their strongest blows only bounced off the protective barriers that had formed around the combatants. Cyclops's eye beams, likewise, were ineffective, as were the kinetically-charged playing cards thrown by Gambit. And yet, despite the intensity of the

attack, neither villain turned their attention toward the costumed men and women who kept trying to reach them.

"It is as if they do not even know we are here," Nightcrawler observed.

"They don't," Jean said. "Their thoughts . . . They're so far removed from what's going on around them, so focused on their hatred for one another, that nothing else exists for them."

"Well, at the rate things are going around here," Warren said, "that might not be too far off the mark. If this place comes down around our ears, the *only* ones who'll still exist will be those two."

"Then we'd better do something to get their attention, people!" Cyclops ordered.

They launched another attack, pooling their resources with those of the recovering Captain Britains—and slowly, they began to crack the barriers.

Von Doom's, surprisingly, was the first to give, and Betsy couldn't help but wonder if perhaps Roma had something to do with it. Maybe the power he'd stolen was finite, and would have needed recharging. Whatever the reason, the armored dictator suddenly found himself cast down from the metaphorical heavens he had sought to claim, reduced once more to the lowly status of just another human being—one who was quickly swarmed over by an army of Union Jack-clad warriors.

The X-Men, meanwhile, focused their attention on the Red Skull. He stumbled back under the attack, the heel of his boot catching on the lip of the very pit he'd created when he'd made his entrance. Unfortunately for him, his startled reflex to regain his balance instinctively caused his clenched hands to open—and the Cube to fall out of his grasp.

"NO!" he cried.

Without thinking, he twisted around and made a desperate jump to retrieve it, apparently too surprised to simply call it back to him.

But it was Betsy who caught it, leaping over him to wrap her hands around the device. Warren swooped in and caught her around the waist before she could fall, then deposited her on the far side of the pit.

The Skull, however, was not as fortunate. He plummeted into the pit, and continued falling. All the way to the bottom of the tunnel—and into the void that swirled beyond the walls of the citadel.

"Roma—I have the Cube!" Betsy called out.

"Then make use of it, Elisabeth!" the Guardian replied. "Return to Earth and undo the damage that has been wrought! Put matters to right, before it is too late!"

Betsy stared at her, then the Cube. "But the flaw . . ."

"There is no time, Elisabeth!" Roma shouted. "You must go—now!"

She was right. There was no more time. No time to think of an alternative solution; no time to contemplate what calling upon the Cube's powers would do to her.

There was only time for a brief glance at Warren. She wanted to say so much to him, but all she could do was mouth "I love you" as she listened to the song of the Cube, tapped into its energies—

And then she was hurtling across infinity.

Leonard Jackson sat on the grass, watching the world come to an end.

In the space of only a few hours, he'd lost everything, including his beliefs—and, soon enough, his planet. He'd been abandoned by his master without a second thought, left behind so the death's-headed Controller could chase after some fairy tale castle in the sky. And with him had gone the Cosmic Cube—the only glue that had been holding together the pieces of his mad dreams. As for the others who'd fled the castle with him, Magneto was down in the valley, tearing apart the concentration camp in search of his daughter, and the X-Men had simply vanished.

He was alone now, more alone than he'd ever been in his entire life, with no one to mourn him when he'd gone. No one to ever know he'd existed at all, actually. He'd never make his mark on history now, he reflected—he'd just be another nameless statistic, lost among the billions of people who were going to die as the overlapping Earths vied for the position of dominant reality.

He'd been such a fool, thinking he was helping to change the world for the better when he'd only been making it worse. And as he sat there, watching the worlds tear themselves apart, he wished there was only something he could do to fix all this—better yet, to have prevented it from ever happening . . .

And that was when, as if on cue, the attractive Asian woman in the blue latex outfit suddenly appeared beside him.

This was it, then. The moment she had been dreading ever since von Doom had offered her the Cube, what seemed like a million years ago now. The moment when she would have to make the ultimate sacrifice, if she were to stabilize the realities.

Betsy looked around. She had no idea where she'd landed, but it was more than likely someplace close to where the Cube had last been stored. And since the Red Skull had been the last person carrying it around, she figured it could only be the German countryside.

She experienced a severe bout of vertigo as the ground rumbled, and she came to the startling realization she was looking at three different Earths. They were layered one on top of the other, like some mad three-dimensional picture seen without the special glasses.

"All right," she muttered, trying to psyche herself up for the task. "Let's get this over with . . ."

She closed her eyes, and opened her psychic senses to the Cube. It sang to her, as it had on von Doom's world, promising power beyond imagining. Why save the world, it seemed to whisper to her, when she could make one of her own? Why settle for a hero's sacrifice when she could be worshipped as a goddess?

She fought the temptation. There was too much at stake; too many people counting on her to do what was right. The Cube wanted her to draw upon its cosmic energies? Then so be it.

She concentrated, and made a wish—for worlds to return to their rightful places, for the fabric of time and space to be repaired, for the chaos to end.

And then it felt like her soul had been ripped from her body.

The Cube seized her in an iron grip, reached deep inside her, and began drawing out every ounce of energy she possessed. It became hard to breathe, and now the feeling of vertigo she'd experienced before became constant. She was growing weaker, even as a powerful light began to surround her. She could feel something happening, but it was taking so long . . .

"Let me do it."

Betsy started, and turned to face the young man in the Nazi uniform who was suddenly standing beside her. For a moment, she wondered how he'd been able to get so close without her being aware of his presence, but then she focused on the fact that he was holding out his hand. He wanted her to give him the Cube.

"No," she said. "You're one of . . . the Skull's men . . . I'd sooner . . . give it to . . . Magneto . . ."

"You don't understand," he insisted. "I want to do this. I *have* to do this. I allowed all this to happen. I should have done something about it sooner, but . . . but I thought . . . I thought I was doing something *good*. I didn't know it would be like this! I didn't know about the deaths, or the experiments, or what the camps were really like—it was all just stuff in history books, y'know? It wasn't *real*. But this . . ." He ran a trembling hand through his hair, and shivered. "I just didn't know . . ."

"And what is . . . *your* wish, if I gave you . . . the Cube?" she asked.

"My . . . ?" He paused. "To fix what I helped to break. To put an end to the hate and the pain and the suffering that went on, while I

stood by and watched, and did nothing. To make things right again." He held out his hand again. "Please . . . let me take it."

She thought about saying no, thought about refusing him. But then she looked into his eyes, telepathically touched his mind, and saw the goodness in the heart of this scared, confused, misguided young man. A nobility of character that the Red Skull had refused to see, equating compassion and understanding with signs of weakness.

"You'll . . . die," she gasped. "It will only work . . . if it . . . absorbs your life . . ."

His hand never wavered. "That's okay. I always wondered what'd it be like to die a hero."

Gently, she placed the Cube in his hand, and immediately her legs began to wobble. The Cube had put a considerable drain on her own life. He helped her sit on the grass, then stepped back.

"Thank you . . ." she began.

"Leonard," he replied. "Leonard Jackson."

"Thank you, Leonard," she said, and smiled. "Thank you."

He smiled, too, and clasped the device to his chest, fingers laced around its sides. The light grew brighter, and waves of energy began to flow from the Cube, some spreading across the land, others rising high into the night skies, until they shone from horizon to horizon like an aurora borealis. The wind intensified, whipping to near-hurricane like speeds, and Betsy had to flatten herself on the ground to keep from being blown away.

And still the light grew stronger. It was difficult to look right at it, and Betsy was forced to shade her eyes with her hand to see what was going on around her.

The ground was shaking, and she had trouble focusing her vision—it still appeared as though there were three versions of the same castle wavering in front of her. But then, slowly, the structure began to stabilize, shifting from three images, to two, then to one.

"It's working," she whispered. "He's doing it . . ."

She turned toward Leonard. The light had taken on a ball-like shape around him—a cocoon of cosmic energy. And somewhere within its depths, a good man was dying, allowing the Cube to drain away his life so that three worlds—and a multitude of interlocked dimensions—would have a chance to survive.

Remember me, she suddenly heard him say in her thoughts.

I will, Leonard, she promised. *I will. Always.*

The ball of light rose high into the air. It hovered miles above the land; then, without warning, it exploded, filling the night sky with the brightness of a miniature sun. Betsy gasped and turned away—

And when it faded, both Leonard Jackson and the Cosmic Cube were gone.

The winds subsided; the ground turned on its side for the last time before drifting back to sleep. And as the Earth returned to normal, Betsy rolled onto her back and looked up. The night was ablaze with stars—so many it was almost hard to believe the sky could hold them all.

And somewhere beyond them, she knew, waited a man she'd gone to hell and back to be with, whose love for her was as powerful as the cosmic forces that had threatened to tear them apart. A man she so desperately wanted to be with right now—and soon would be, thanks to a selfless young man . . . and the simple wish he'd made.

THE TRIP back to the Starlight Citadel went much smoother this time, now that the reality-cancer was in remission, and the crystal containing the life-force of Dimension 616 had been recovered from beneath the grillwork in the throne room, where Sat-yr-nin had dropped it. Betsy materialized in one of the debarkation suites—possibly the same one she kept popping into, although they all looked alike to her—a short time after the crisis was averted, and wasted no time in falling into Warren’s welcoming arms.

But a proper welcome would have to wait, he explained. Roma had wasted no time in assembling a hearing in the throne room, judgment to be immediately passed on the two remaining parties responsible for almost destroying an infinitude of realities: Doctor Doom and Magneto.

Taking Warren’s hand, Betsy set off at a quick sprint for the sanctum. She wanted a front row seat for this . . .

“Victor von Doom,” Roma said.

Alecto and one of his men stepped forward, pushing the boisterous dictator before them. Without his stolen powers, or the makeshift weapons that had been stripped from his armor, he didn’t present as much of a problem to the security staff.

Von Doom came to a halt before the Supreme Guardian. There was still quite a bit of damage left to be repaired in the throne room, but Roma had been adamant about dealing with the cause of the multidimensional tragedy in her sanctum. Betsy imagined it had a great deal to do with Roma proving to herself that no one was just going to barge into her home and expect her to accept the situation.

“Victor von Doom,” Roma stated, “you are accused of the disrupt-

tion of the space/time continuum, the near-destruction of three planetary systems, and the loss of countless lives, across a dozen or more dimensional planes. You have expressed no remorse for your actions. As Supreme Guardian, I therefore consider you a danger to all life." Her eyes began glowing brightly. "In conclusion, for your crimes against the omniverse, as well as your heinous assault on a celestial being, I sentence you to—"

"Your Majesty?"

The light dimmed, and Roma turned in surprise to look at the X-Men, who were standing quietly off to one side. Her gaze fell on their leader. "You wish to speak, Charles Xavier?"

"If I may."

Roma fell silent for a few moments. She rested her chin between thumb and forefinger and frowned, obviously taking some time to contemplate the request.

"This is highly irregular, m'lady . . ." Saturnyne cautioned.

"These are highly irregular circumstances, Saturnyne," the Guardian replied. "Very well, Professor."

Xavier nudged his hovering wheelchair forward. "Your Majesty, as unusual a request as this may be, I ask that you not execute the prisoner."

The throne room was filled with startled cries, and loud gasps of surprise. Even von Doom seemed surprised. Roma gestured for silence, then nodded for Xavier to continue.

"I realize the chaos he unleashed with his device, and the agony he has caused you personally, Your Majesty, but surely an enlightened being such as yourself is above the need for revenge?"

A wisp of a smile played at the corners of Roma's mouth. "You have never met my father, Charles Xavier."

"Mitras wept!" Saturnyne exclaimed angrily. "M'lady, we shouldn't be standing here discussing the fate of this tin-plated egomaniac! He should be executed immediately, his atoms scattered across the vortex, and the matter brought to a swift end!"

"Someone feels the need for revenge . . ." Ororo commented.

"Yes," Betsy replied. "But can anyone really blame her? I'd be enraged too, if somebody attacked me in my own bedroom, drugged me, and stuffed me in a freezer."

"Speakin' of human popsicles," Rogue said, "did they put Sat-yrnin back on ice?"

Warren nodded. "Yeah. And Stanton, too. Roma's leaving it to Saturnyne to come up with a suitable punishment for him."

"I could almost feel sorry for the poor man," Nightcrawler said. He paused, then shook his head. "Well, no—not really."

Betsy turned her attention back to the proceedings.

"Saturnyne *does* have a point, Charles Xavier," Roma conceded. "While he lives, Von Doom will remain a constant threat to the omniverse. His kind never learn from their mistakes; they only create new ones."

"You *dare* speak of Doom that way?" the tyrant shouted. "Alien witch! I should have destroyed you from the outset—"

"*Silence!*" Roma ordered, her voice rumbling like thunder across the chamber. Much to everyone's surprise, von Doom actually did as he was told, and ceased his protestations. A wise move, Betsy thought. The Guardian turned back to the professor, and gestured toward the dictator. "You see that of which I speak, Charles Xavier."

"Then grant me a boon, Your Majesty, for all my students and I have accomplished this day. If von Doom's knowledge of the Cube, and the citadel, put the omniverse at risk, then simply remove that knowledge from his mind. Render him incapable of creating another such device."

"The best way of doing that would just be to kill him . . ." Saturnyne mumbled.

"It *could* be done . . ." Roma considered. "But he will only return to creating havoc on your world if he is sent back."

Xavier nodded. "A necessary evil, Your Majesty, if it means sparing his life. Von Doom may indeed continue his insufferable attempts at world domination, but there have been and always will be noble men and women to stand in opposition to him. To counter his evil acts with those of great good. To balance the darkness with the light."

Roma sat back on her throne, deep in thought.

"Very well, Charles Xavier, it shall be done as you have requested. Knowledge of the Cosmic Cube and the Starlight Citadel will be erased from the prisoner's mind, and he will be returned to your Earth. What becomes of him beyond that point will be entirely up to you—and your X-Men."

"No!" von Doom roared. "You cannot do this! You *will not* do this!"

"Remove the prisoner!" Saturnyne ordered. She didn't bother to hide the icy smile that lit her as von Doom was led away.

"Mark this day well, Guardian!" the tyrant shouted. "The day you made an eternal enemy of Victor von Doom! Let your minions do their worst—Doom will yet prevail! And then he will return—and destroy you all!"

His vows for revenge were still ringing in the air when he and his handlers exited the throne room and turned a corner.

"Nice li'l speech he had there on the way out," Rogue said with a smile.

"I'm glad t'see he's takin' de verdict so well," Gambit commented.

Roma turned to the next cause for concern. "Erik Magnus Lensherr."

Magneto stepped forward, carrying his helmet in his hand. He walked ahead of his guards, and bowed sharply when he stopped before the Guardian. Then he held his head up—proudly, almost defiantly, Betsy thought. Ready to face his punishment.

"You, also, have caused serious injury to the fabric of space/time through your selfish actions." Roma paused. "However, Professor Xavier has already told me of your intention to surrender the Cube, and how you were prevented from doing so through the intervention of the Red Skull."

Standing near Betsy, Wolverine grunted. "There he goes again, with that bleedin' heart routine. First Doom gets off 'cause o' him, now Magnus?" He snarled. "We're gonna have t'have a little talk, me an' him, when we get back home."

"What's wrong, Logan?" Cyclops asked. "Disappointed you didn't get another chance to lock horns with Magneto?"

"This ain't the time or place fer grudge matches, Summers," Wolverine replied. His eyes narrowed. "But it's like I told that dirtbag: I *know* him. It ain't gonna take 'im long t'start makin' trouble fer us again—you can bet on it. An' when that happens, I'll be comin' fer him . . ."

Across the aisle, Lensherr raised an eyebrow, and looked with surprise at his one-time friend. "Charles?"

"Your reasons for possessing the Cube were noble ones, Erik—although dangerously misguided in their execution," Xavier said. "No one is fit to be trusted with power. Any man who has lived at all knows the follies and wickedness he's capable of. If he does not know it, he is not fit to govern others. And if he does know it, he knows also that neither he nor any man ought to be allowed to decide a single human fate." He smiled when he realized Magnus couldn't place the source of the quote. "Sir Charles Percy Snow."

Lensherr chuckled. "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

"Robert Browning," Betsy whispered to Warren.

"I knew that," he said. She glanced at him, and raised an eyebrow. "Classical education, remember?"

Xavier sighed and shook his head. "Erik, we really should talk about this . . ."

"Another time, Charles," Lensherr said. "We will always have time to sit and discuss our dreams. And what to do about them." He looked back to Roma, and bowed courteously. "Your Majesty." And then, turning on his heel, he strode from the room, followed closely by his guards.

"And what of the Red Skull, m'lady?" Saturnyne asked.

"For now, I am content to leave him where he is," Roma said.

Betsy was surprised. "In the vortex? But isn't that . . . well, dangerous?"

"Have no fear, Elisabeth. Contact with the Cube, and others like it, has charged his body with just enough cosmic energy that no harm will come to him. He will simply drift wherever the temporal currents take him."

"Actually," Betsy said, "I was concerned more for the vortex . . ."

"Excuse me . . ."

The voice was deep and sonorous, reaching all parts of the throne room so that everyone heard it. The assemblage turned to gaze at the main doorway, the portal still swaying on broken hinges, from when von Doom had forced his way in. Standing there was a man well over six feet tall, with an enormous bush of brown curls that looked more like a party wig than natural hair. He was dressed in a baggy gray suit and matching overcoat, and a wide-brimmed brown hat rested at a rakish angle on the back of his head.

"I just wanted to stop by for a moment," he explained, matter-of-factly, "and return one of your errant patrol officers before I inspected the medical facilities for any damage."

He stepped aside, to make room for a Union Jack-garbed woman with a shock of white hair poking out from the top of her helmet.

"Captain U.K.!" Betsy said.

Linda McQuillan walked up the main aisle, removing her helmet as she addressed Roma. "I apologize for not reporting sooner, Your Majesty, but I was . . . unavoidably detained." She cast a heated glare at von Doom's back as he was led from the chamber.

"You see," the man said as he strolled up behind her, the dark-brown tones of his voice echoing in the vast space, "I was just on my way here, when I found your charming captain adrift in the vortex. So, naturally, I had to stop and see if I could provide any assistance and—well, here we are." He turned to the costumed warrior. "Well, I really must be getting on to the infirmary." He shook her hand and grinned. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Captain. We should do this again, under

better circumstances. Feel free to drop by the medical wing any time—I make an exquisite cup of Darjeeling.” And with that, he turned on his heel and proceeded toward the door.

“Just a moment! Come forward!” Saturnyne snapped. “Who the devil are you?”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” he said, and began walking up to the Majestrix. He snatched the hat from the mass of curls and jammed it into one of his pockets. “Didn’t I introduce myself?”

“No, you did not,” Saturnyne replied

“Ahh,” he said, nodding sagely. “Well, I’m the Chief Physician.” He smiled, revealing an oversized set of gleamingly-white teeth, and grabbed the Majestrix’s hand. He began pumping it furiously. “It’s an honor to meet you—again . . . ‘Your Whyness,’ isn’t it?”

“Let *go* of me, you fool!” Saturnyne said, and snatched back her hand. “*You’re* not the Chief Physician! You look *nothing* like him!”

The man’s large eyes bugged out even further, and his mouth fell open in astonishment. “What? Are you absolutely certain?”

“Of course I am! He’s—” she held up a hand level with her collarbone “—about this high—”

The man pointed to her hand. “That high?”

“Yes.” She gestured toward her head. “And he has less hair . . .”

“Less hair? *Less hair?*” He frowned, and pulled at his lower lip in agitation. “Dear me. Dear me . . .”

“And he talks with a Scottish accent.”

His expression suddenly brightened. “Really? Highland or Lowland?”

“What difference does it make?” Saturnyne replied. “The bottom line, you grinning imbecile, is that you *are* not—*cannot* be—the Chief Physician!”

He smiled, then spread his arms wide and simply shrugged. “Well, what can I tell you, Majestrix? I’m just not the man I used to be . . . or will be . . .”

It took a bit of explaining, but the situation was eventually made clear to one and all—much to Saturnyne’s consternation, and Roma’s amusement. A bio-scan of the new arrival revealed that he was, indeed, the man he claimed to be, although the Supreme Guardian appeared to be the only one not surprised by the news; why that might be, she wouldn’t say.

Still, she went on to say, his appearance on the citadel was a timely

one, for she had need of a doctor—not for herself, but for a very special patient.

The omniverse might have been restored to something of its former self, but there was still one bit of business left to attend to. . . .

NOW, YOU sure dis won' hurt none, right?"

Roma gently smiled as she looked at Gambit. "I can make no promises, Remy Lebeau. What I must do is a difficult task, performed only once before, to my knowledge—and then only by my father."

"Well . . . dere's a first time for ev'ryt'ing, I s'pose," he mumbled. "Jus' wish it wasn't de first time for *you*, too . . ."

She patted him consolingly on the arm, then gestured for him to lie on the table before them. Remy paused, and looked across the chamber. On the other side of a protective wall, watching him through two-inch-thick glass, stood his teammates and Saturnyne. Led by Roma, the group had descended into the depths of the Starlight Citadel, to a darkened chamber that not even the Majestrix knew existed. The Guardian had ominously commented that this was where her father, Merlyn, used to conduct some of his more . . . exotic experiments.

"Don't you worry none, sugah," Rogue said to Gambit through an intercom speaker mounted on a wall, her voice sounding strained. "I'll be right here when y'all wake up."

"We *all* will be, Remy," Scott added.

"Dat's good t'know," Remy replied with a nervous smile. "'Cause ol' Gambit, he ain't never been too crazy 'bout operations."

He climbed onto the table and lay down on his back, lacing his fingers together on his stomach. He fidgeted for a few moments, obviously trying to make himself comfortable, then turned to look at his friends one more time. Betsy saw his eyes lock with Rogue's, and the look they shared. Then he flashed a warm smile, and turned back to Roma.

"Let's get dis over wit' Your Guardianship," he said. "Dere's a certain *fille* I promised t'take to a Harry Connick, Jr. concert, an' Remy Lebeau *never* goes back on his promises to a lady."

Betsy heard Rogue's tiny gasp. And then the Southern belle softly chuckled.

"He remembered . . ." she whispered.

"Very well," Roma said. "Then, close your eyes, and we shall begin."

Remy did as he was instructed, and Roma placed a hand to his forehead. There was a brief flash of light, and his body suddenly relaxed.

"He sleeps," she explained to the X-Men. "I would not want him conscious for this procedure." She looked at the team as she spoke, but her eyes fixed on Rogue. "Perhaps you should wait in one of the suites that has been prepared for you until this is finished. The next stage may be . . . difficult to observe."

"With all due respect, Yer Grace," Rogue said huskily, "I told Remy I was gonna wait right here fer him—an' I *never* go back on a promise."

Roma nodded. "Very well."

She turned to the shadows of the vast chamber, and gestured. The Chief Physician stepped forward, carrying a circular object that looked like an oversized glass ashtray. It was actually the projection unit for a powerful, sterilized stasis field—a large, glowing ball of energy that contained a collection of relics that brought audible gasps from the mutant adventurers. Even the battle-hardened Wolverine, Betsy noted, was taken aback by what he saw.

There were scraps of cloth—black and maroon material, brown leather—floating in the field, along with bits of skin and hair and brain. A finger, severed from a hand. Pieces of bone, including part of a spinal column. And a single eyeball, still attached to its stalk.

This, then, was all that remained of Remy Lebeau—the true Lebeau, not an alternate version who lived on a world under fascist rule. The X-Man, the thief, the rogue, known as Gambit. All that remained of the man who had selflessly given his life so that his friends could escape from captivity.

All that remained of the man Rogue loved as deeply, Betsy knew, as she herself loved Warren, or Jean loved Scott.

Rogue shuddered as she watched Roma take possession of the field projector and its precious contents, and Jean gently placed her hands on her friend's shoulders—to give comfort, to give strength.

"I . . . I'm okay," Rogue said hoarsely. It was clear to all, however, that she was anything but.

Gambit's remains had been obtained by members of the Dimen-

sional Development Court, under Saturnyne's watchful eye. The recovery team had journeyed to the world once ruled by von Doom's elderly counterpart—Earth 892, to be precise—and sifted through the rubble of Psi Division Headquarters until they located the few elements now in Roma's possession. There had been other, larger parts, but, as the Majestrix had explained to the X-Men, they were unusable—tainted with the techno-organic virus that had been killing Remy before his heroic sacrifice. Still, she had said encouragingly, what they gathered should be more than enough for the Supreme Guardian to work with.

Roma moved over to an immense machine, the top of which was lost in the shadows of the ceiling. She placed the field projector on a flat, table-like surface, just beneath a collection of what looked like small broadcast dishes.

"The first stage will be to reconstruct his body, using these elements as the basis." She punched a code into a small keypad beside the machine, then stepped back. "While the bio-fog begins the process, I must retrieve the part of your friend that *cannot* be regenerated—the part that resides within this body he borrowed."

"Are you talking about his soul?" Scott asked.

Roma said nothing. Instead, she walked back to Lebeau and placed her hands inches above his chest. She closed her eyes, and her palms began to glow.

"The machine," Ororo said. "Something is happening . . ."

As one, the group stared at the stasis field. It was hard to see, but something was moving in the bio-fog—the pieces of Remy Lebeau had begun to swirl around, slowly at first, then faster, until they became just a blur.

And then something began to form—a skeleton. Bits of bone grew larger, became skull and vertebrae, femurs and sternum, ribs and ilium. Then the rest took shape, joining together as the stasis energy guided them to their proper places. The field expanded to fit the structure growing within it.

"Amazing," Xavier said.

"A miracle," Nightcrawler breathed. Betsy was surprised by the reverent tone in his voice.

Across the chamber, the Chief Physician walked over to the machine to check the readings. "The skeleton is complete, Your Majesty."

"Initiate the second stage," Roma commanded. Her hands continued to hover over the alternate Lebeau's body, but now a silvery glow surrounded him.

The doctor entered a new code. The fog thickened, obscuring the

skeleton from view. When it cleared after a number of minutes, organs and nerves had appeared.

"Begin stage three," Roma said. The glow around Lebeau intensified and centered around his chest. Slowly, a ball of light began to rise, and Roma cupped her hands around it, as though to hold it together.

"Oh, my God . . ." Jean gasped. "Is that . . . is that Remy's soul?"

A tear rolled down Rogue's cheek, to splash against the collar of her jacket. "It's . . . it's beautiful," she whispered.

The fog billowed again, and now skin and muscle and hair were regenerated. A familiar face took form. And then the swatches of material that floated above the body settled onto it—and began to spin into clothing. A costume, boots, gloves, an ankle-length coat—all were restored, in the space of seconds.

The machine suddenly powered down, and an ominous silence filled the chamber. The doctor stepped over to inspect the final readings.

"The process is complete," he reported.

"Then, open the field and stand aside," Roma replied.

The physician did as ordered, and the Guardian grasped the ball of light—the soul of Gambit—that floated above Lebeau. Moving quickly, she crossed the short distance to the costumed body, and raised the soul above her head.

"*Let there be a joining!*" Roma shouted. "**LET THERE BE LIFE!**" And she plunged the silvery ball deep into the chest of the reconstructed body.

And then it—he—screamed.

It was a cry of pain and despair, of great loss and even greater gain, of life and love and hope and joy.

It was the cry of rebirth.

And when the last echoes had faded in the great chamber, Remy Lebeau opened his eyes and took his first breath—and smiled.

Roma did, as well, and glanced toward the observation room. "The reclamation was successful," she said. "He is whole again."

There were sighs of relief, then, mixed with tears of joy; even Saturnyne was affected. Rogue was the first through the door, half running, half floating, to join Remy, and throwing her arms around him as he sat up.

"He will be weak for a short time, so he should rest," Roma told the group.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Rogue turned to face her. "I'll make sure he *stays* in bed," she said, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her bomber jacket, "even if I have ta strap 'im down t'make 'im stay put." She smiled, and started crying again. "Thank you."

Roma placed a hand on hers, and gave a gentle squeeze. "For all the X-Men have done for the omniverse this day, friend Rogue, I could do no less, in turn, for you."

As Rogue turned her attention back to Gambit, Saturnyne approached the Guardian. "I'll see to it that the X-Man's counterpart is returned to his proper Earth, m'lady."

"Thank you, Saturnyne," the Guardian replied. "Right now, though . . ."

They stepped back, then, and allowed the X-Men to cluster around their comrade.

As Betsy watched Rogue and Gambit, and felt tears well up in her eyes, she felt a hand slip around her waist, and smiled. She turned to look at Warren. Then she put an arm around his waist and drew him into a kiss that would never last long enough.

He was right, she realized. She couldn't save the universe all by herself—none of them could. But they didn't have to. Not as long as they had each another; not as long as there was a shoulder to lean on when the burden became too great.

They'd put their lives on the line to save countless billions this time—billions of sentient beings who would never know them, never know of the sacrifices they'd made, the agonies they'd suffered along the way. And she knew that tomorrow they would go back and do it again. Because they were doing something good. Because people counted on them. Because they were committed to doing the best they could.

Because that's what being an X-Man was all about.

And sometimes—*sometimes*—that was good enough.

ROMA EXITED the Life Chamber, feeling—well, she didn't know exactly *how* to describe how she felt. Satisfied? Elated? Emotional states were such an alien concept to beings like her father and herself—so many to sift through, so many she didn't understand—it was difficult to pick the one that best suited a given situation.

Physical sensations, however—now, *that* was something she had come to understand quite well. Her head and body ached, even more so after undergoing a painful process of her own: the restoration of the aspects of herself that had been separated by von Doom. Being subjected to the rays of a multiphasic crystal accelerator, even one handled by an expert, rather than a power-hungry tyrant, had been no less agonizing with her alternates going in, than they had coming out. If she never came near another such machine again for the rest of her immortality, she decided, it would be too soon.

"Well done, Your Majesty," the Chief Physician said, suddenly beside her. He grasped her hand and shook it vigorously. "Merlyn himself couldn't have handled the reclamation process any better."

She raised an eyebrow, amused by the notion of a cosmic entity being congratulated by a lower life-form for performing what amounted to a difficult, yet altogether minor, task. "You are pleased with my efforts, then, doctor?"

"Yes. Oh, very much so." He nodded sagely, and tapped the side of his nose with an index finger. "In my humble—yet extremely expert—opinion, Your Majesty, I would say you possess the makings of a fine surgeon."

The eyebrow climbed higher. "You do."

"Indeed, I do," he insisted good-naturedly. "And I think such fine work as yours should be rewarded." He smiled broadly, all teeth and curls, and reached into the pocket of his surgical scrubs for a small paper bag. "Would you care for a jelly baby . . . ?"

Interlude IX

THE WALK through the desert had been an arduous one, but it gave him time to be alone with his thoughts.

Now, as he crested a dune in the first light of day, Erik Magnus Lensherr stopped to look at the village before him. Once it had been a thriving oasis, but over time the sands had begun washing over it, stripping it of color, of life. And yet, there was still life to be found here.

A door opened in one of the mud-brick buildings, and a dark-skinned woman emerged. From where he stood, Lensherr could not make out her features, but he knew who she was by the colorful blanket she wore—and the large bowl she carried in one hand.

“Good morrow, Abena Metou,” he said pleasantly to himself, testing his use of the language. The pronunciation still sounded a little too stiff for his liking—still too phonetic, as though he were reading it directly from the portable Berlitz guide on his Palm Pilot. But he had learned the meaning of patience here—a lifetime ago, it seemed—on another world; he could do so again. The words would come with time.

She would not recognize him, of that he was certain; in this world, the “real” world, they had never met. But that would change.

Behind her walked a child—a girl no more than three or four years old. Her daughter, Jnanbarka. Watching her, an image suddenly popped into his head, and he reached into the back pocket of the tan cargo pants he was wearing. He pulled out a thin metal case and opened it. Inside was a faded, worn black-and-white photograph of an eight-year-old girl. Her dark hair was cut into bangs that framed wide, joy-filled eyes and a big, gap-toothed smile. Even now, decades later, he could still remember how excited she had been when the Tooth Fairy generously rewarded her, the night before the picture was taken.

It was one of the few truly happy moments in his life that he could recall, for there had never been another after the night she died in the fire. The night when Magneto vowed to the heavens that he would punish the world for the death it had caused—a punishment that he had never tired of administering.

Until now . . .

He smiled gently. “Any . . .” he whispered.

With a sigh, he closed the case and put it back in his pocket. The sun was a little higher in the morning sky now, its light blending the purple of night with shades of pink and lavender, gold and orange. A new day was starting, and with it the struggle between humanity and mutantkind would begin again, picking up where it had left off before the Cosmic Cube had turned the world upside down. A new day of misery and intolerance for his kind. A new day of pain and suffering and blinding hatred.

Would his efforts to change that situation—however misguided or villainous they might seem to the world at large—ever make a difference? he wondered.

He had to believe that they would—that they did. He had only to look into his mind’s eye for the proof: To see the world his alternate had built. To know of the peace that had finally been established between races. To know that a man could put hatred behind him and build a family, and in doing so regain his soul.

To put hatred behind him . . . Now, *there* was a challenge for Magneto, he reflected. A challenge like none he had ever faced before. One that relied more on strength of character than strength of will. One, perhaps, that would make him the man he always thought he had been.

The notion appealed to him.

It would be interesting, he thought, to go forward in time a hundred years or so, and see what became of his life’s work, of the paths he chose to walk down. Would he be idolized as a great peacemaker, or vilified as one of mankind’s greatest enemies? Would he, too, have found a way to bring man and mutant together, like his counterpart, or would he have returned to his old ways, and once more sought to make *Homo superior* the dominant species on the planet? So many questions to be answered; so many choices to make . . .

“‘Had I but worlds enough, and time . . .’” he said, and shook his head with a knowing grin.

He would never find out, however, unless he started down the first path, made the first choice. After all, he considered, a journey of a thousand miles begins with but a single step . . .

And with that thought comforting him, he took that step.

The first step on the path to salvation.

Epilogue

A NEW DAY dawned.

The sun rose high and warm above the Yucatan Peninsula, that South American landmass that separates the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean Sea. It would be another hot and humid day, as it had been yesterday, and would be again tomorrow. But the breeze that blew in from the East was a welcome change from the soaring temperatures, and the water was cool and inviting.

Sixty-five million years ago, it's believed, a comet or asteroid struck the Earth here, near what is now the village of Chicxulub. The effects of the impact—firestorms, tidal waves, skies choked with dust and dirt for years—were probably responsible for wiping out every dinosaur in existence, as well as quite a other animal and plant species, and bringing to a close the Cretaceous Period.

Mankind thought it impossible that a disaster of such magnitude would ever happen again; if it did, however, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the human race would never survive.

But the means of creating global destruction did not have to come from space, as anyone who lived in a world of superpowered men and women could tell you. Not when not a day went by, it seemed, without someone threatening to unleash nuclear Armageddon, or open a mystical portal that allowed murderous Elder Gods to stalk the land, or detonate the planet's molten core. Why worry about comets and meteors and asteroids, when there were *people* more than capable of destroying the world, with just the push of a button, or the flick of a lever—

Or by making a simple wish.

No, the means of creating global destruction did not have to come

from space—not if one looked long and hard to find alternatives. Not if one knew *where* to look for them.

And yet, on this beach where the hand of fate had struck the fatal blow against the world's great thunder lizards, there were no pieces of space debris to be found, nor a button or lever in sight. There were only golden sands and colorful rocks, glistening seaweed and faded driftwood—

And a tiny shard of a wish box that had tumbled from the sky the night before.

A shard that sparkled with the promise of dreams yet to be realized. . . .