

Acknowledgments

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Chapter One

Mutants. Since the discovery of their existence, they have been regarded with fear, suspicion, and often hatred. Across the planet, debate rages: Are mutants the next link in the evolutionary chain

...

... or simply a new species of humanity fighting for their share of the world? Either way, one fact has been historically proven: Sharing the world has never been humanity's defining attribute

...

—Charles Xavier

" 'We are not enemies, but friends,' "the tour guide said as she led the group through the East Wing entrance of the White House. " 'We must not be enemies,' " she continued, pausing to let them gather inside the foyer beneath one of the presidential portraits that lined the wall. " 'Though passion may have strained, it must not break the bonds of our affection.' Abraham Lincoln."

Alicia Vargas had made this speech hundreds of times, yet she had a knack of making it sound as though she'd just thought it up. She was a short young woman who looked barely out of college, with big, wide-spaced eyes, an open face, a ready smile. That way, you'd miss the fact that those lustrous eyes never stopped moving from person to person among the group she was shepherding along, or that the

drape of her blazer masked the Sig-Sauer pistol resting in its snap-draw holster at the small of her back.

Alicia Vargas was Secret Service, just like the tall, broad-shouldered, stone-faced men in business suits who stood at intervals along the walls. At the reception desk and at the doorways leading to the interior of the White House were their equally imposing uniformed counterparts in the Executive Protection Service. When the decision was made to continue public tours, in spite of the ever-present threat of global terrorism, the Secret Service had insisted that its people take over the job of guides. They understood the political and public relations realities of the office, but their job was to protect the man who held that office, and from that perspective, they argued, you could never be too careful.

Offering up another smile, Alicia indicated the portrait that hung behind her, the sixteenth in the line of chief executives that began with George Washington and culminated today in George McKenna.

“President Lincoln said that in his first inaugural address. It’s one of my favorites. I like to think, especially with all that’s happening in the world, that those words are more important than ever.”

With an apologetic gesture, intended to put the tourists at ease, she led them toward the security desk.

“I just want to repeat what you were told at the Main Gate. Obviously, with the President in residence today, we want to be especially careful. One at a time, please approach the desk, present a photoID , place your bags and purses on the conveyor belt, and pass through the metal detector. Your possessions and all cameras will be returned to you when you leave. I know that sounds harsh, but I hope you understand.”

One man in the back caught her eye. He was wearing a Red Sox baseball hat, pulled low. He wasn’t doing anything wrong; far from it. His body language was totally relaxed and easy. Maybe that was it. Most people visiting the White House came through the door excited, upbeat, impatient, and impressed. Then, seeing the airport-style X-ray console and the metal detector, even the best of them got nervous, wondering if they’d inadvertently brought something that would sound an alarm and get them into trouble.

Red Sox didn’t seem to have a care in the world.

Quickly, as she ushered the first woman in line through the cage, Alicia recalled the scene at the Pennsylvania Avenue gate, where the tour had been admitted to the grounds. She’d watched them come through on the surveillance screens and now that she replayed the scene in her mind’s eye, there had been no Red Sox hat in the group.

Turning back to look for him, she registered a faint sound, the *bamf* of imploding air, like when a balloon pops.

Red Sox was gone.

From the East Wing entrance, a broad hallway—called the Cross Hall—runs lengthwise through the heart of the building. Originally, this had been the area where the everyday work of the household was done—the rooms housed butler’s pantries, closets, and the like—but successive renovations and the growing need for space had transformed them into formal receiving rooms: the Roosevelt Room, the Vermeil Room, the China Room. At the moment, none of them was in use, which is what caught Special Agent Donald Karp’s attention when his peripheral vision registered some kind of movement in one of the doorways.

When he turned to peer down the corridor, all he saw was shadow inside the deep alcove—that was one of the problems caused by the comparatively low, vaulted ceiling, it made the hallway hell to light properly. He knew it was probably nothing, but he was bored and in the mood for even a minor break in routine. Once before he'd opened an office door and found a couple of midlevel staffers behaving far too friskily for their own good. They'd been lucky they weren't fired on the spot, but they really should have known better.

To his surprise, as he stepped closer to take a proper look, someone *was* there—though for some reason he wasn't sure until the figure stepped clear of the shadow, a lean-bodied man whose stoop-shouldered stance belied the fact that he was roughly Karp's height, wearing nondescript clothes and a Red Sox baseball cap. Boyoboy, would he have fun roasting Alicia's ass for being so careless as to let a tourist stray from the group.

He reached for the man's shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir, are you lost? I'm afraid you can't leave the group—"

The man rounded on him—and Karp gasped, goggle-eyed, to find himself face-to-face with a demon. Skin so dark a blue-black it was as if the man were cloaked in his own personal shadow, the only points of color his gleaming yellow eyes. The ears were pointed, the teeth had fangs, and the hand that grabbed Karp's wrist possessed two fingers instead of the normal four.

Training took over. Without a conscious thought, Karp went for his gun—and a forked tail wrapped tight around his throat, cutting off his cry of alarm. The tail spun him like a top into the alcove, and he felt a blinding pain as the side of his head cracked hard into the arched stone. After that he never felt the blow to the side, chop to the neck that finished the job of knocking him unconscious.

It was all over in a matter of seconds, but those seconds made the difference.

From the East Entrance came Alicia Vargas' shout—she was already through the hallway doors, coming at a dead run with sidearm in hand, ahead of the other agents and uniformed officers.

Karp's partner was closer. He lunged for the intruder, who tripped him up with a sideways sweep of the legs—ditching his shoes in the process to reveal elongated, weirdly articulated feet with a two-toed configuration that matched his hands. The intruder leaped across the hall for the opposite wall, somehow grabbing hold of the falling agent's gun and pitching it clear. His leap landed him up by the ceiling. To Alicia's astonishment he stuck there, three-quarters upside down, as though fingers and toes were tipped with Velcro.

Above the chandeliers, he was suddenly hard to see, and Alicia realized with a shock that he was blending with the ceiling shadows. Against a dark background, the intruder's indigo skin made him functionally invisible.

With a snarl, he was gone, scampering faster than her eye could swallow, around the corner toward the executive offices of the West Wing.

Alicia had a mini-mike clipped to her sleeve; she used it now.

"Code Red," she cried. "*Code Red*. Perimeter breach at visitors' checkpoint! Agent Vargas in the Cross Hall, ten meters in from the East Entrance. Intruder is hostile, two agents are down. Threat to Braveheart!"

At the rear of the mansion, in the opposite wing, President George McKenna was working the phones, applying a measure of charm—with just the faintest edge of threat—to a senator hoping to make some political ink by throwing a monkey wrench into the latest administration initiative. The President was a rancher by temperament and wished, as he found he often did since assuming the Oval Office, that he could solve the problem by simply hog-tying the man and planting his brand indelibly on that arrogant posterior. He liked cows better than legislators. At least they knew their place.

He looked up with irritation as the door to the outer office burst open and Sid Walters, the head of his protection detail, strode inside. He was about to lose his temper—which was legendary—when he realized that Walters had his gun in hand and, from the look on his face, he wasn't going to be interested in any comment the President had to make.

“Say again,” Walters snapped into the mini-microphone clipped to the cuff of his shirtsleeve, “how many are there?”

“What the hell—” the President began, but all questions and any thoughts of protest evaporated as a halfdozen more agents rushed into the room to form a living shield around his desk. The two biggest stood on either side of him. Four of the team were in suits, with pistols in hand, but these last two were in full combat gear, helmets and flak jackets, with MP5 submachine guns in their hands. McKenna had been to war, he'd been shot; he knew at a glance that this was no drill. These men believed he was in deadly danger, and they were prepared to give their lives to save him.

McKenna heard a tinny voice demanding attention, belatedly realized he was still holding the phone.

With a calmness that astounded him, that he never dreamed he possessed, the President raised the receiver to his ear.

“Trent, I'm sorry, I can't talk right now, something's come up. I'll call you back, soon as I can, all right?”

Without waiting for an acknowledgment, McKenna hung up. He sounded so normal, not scared at all. The analytical part of him knew that fear would come later and that it would be very rough indeed. *If* there was a later.

He looked at the pictures on his desk, thankful now the first lady was in San Francisco and the kids were at school. Nobody home but him.

“Sid?” he said.

“You'll be fine, sir. You have our word.”

The West Wing was a madhouse, agents trying to evacuate the presidential staff at the same time they were hunting down the intruder. There was no pretense of order; that had vanished with the first gunshot. The guards weren't polite and they weren't gentle. Their goal was to get everyone clear as fast as possible. Thing was, they were just as scared as the civilians.

Internal surveillance cameras were proving worse than useless; their quarry moved too fast, with an agility that put monkeys to shame. By the time the guys watching the monitors could yell a warning, it was

already too late.

Toby Vanscoy found that out the hard way. He was clearing a suite of offices, herding people toward the Press Room because it had a clear route to the outside, when a scream right next to his ear alerted him to the danger.

He reacted as he'd been trained: He took a split second to confirm the target, then opened fire. His weapon was a Sig-Sauer P226, one of the finest handguns in the world, and like every agent in the President's detail, he was rated expert. As fast as he could pull the trigger, he emptied his fifteen-round magazine, and impossible as it was for him to admit—in the heartbeats he had to do so—not one of his rounds came close.

The intruder bounced off the walls, he leaped from floor to ceiling, he ran as easily upside down as he did on the floor, he almost seemed to dance around Vanscoy's shots until, so smoothly that it seemed choreographed, he hurled himself through the air in a somersault that ended with both feet hammering Vanscoy full in the chest.

It was like being hit by a battering ram. Vanscoy flew backward through the air, holding on to his gun but losing the replacement magazine he'd been trying to load, to crash through the set of double doors that led to the main suite of offices.

The intruder followed, straddling Vanscoy's body only to find a half-dozen agents blocking his way. He glanced over his shoulder to see a half dozen more taking position behind him. Scarlet dots flared all over his torso as he was illuminated by their laser sights. The agents all had good cover; he was wide open. They could fire at will with minimal risk to their colleagues. They pinned him with pistols, with automatic weapons, with a sniper rifle centered right on his head. It was a drop-ceiling overhead; if he tried to stick to it, the removable panels would simply collapse. They figured they had him.

The intruder looked down, almost in surprise, at the grating sound of Toby Vanscoy's voice. Battered and broken as he was, the agent had his own weapon in a two-handed grip, aimed right up at him.

"Hands behind your head," Vanscoy ordered. "Get down on your knees! Right now!"

"*Right now!*" repeated the lead agent from the group ahead of them. "No tricks, or we'll fire."

The intruder snarled, baring fangs. Vanscoy pulled the trigger, hammer falling uselessly on an empty chamber . . .

. . . and the intruder vanished.

"Mr. President," snapped Sid Walters, one hand pressing against his earbug in a vain attempt to make sense of all the chatter jamming his radio, "we've gotta go!"

Hank Cartwright, his deputy, grabbed Walters' arm. "We don't know the sitch, Sid. We don't know how many there are. We've got a solid defensive position, we've got the firepower. We're better off staying put!"

Walters turned on the other man in a fury. He was boss, he called the plays, there wasn't time for debate—but before he could say a word, both entrances to the Oval Office crashed open to admit the agents who'd been stationed outside. They were coughing and choking, shrouded in gouts of thick, oily

smoke.

That same instant, the intruder appeared in midair, right in front of Cartwright. Without missing a beat, the assassin lashed out with a powerful kick to the chest. Even with Cartwright's flak jacket and equipment blunting the force of the jackhammer blow, it was enough to throw him off his feet and into the agents behind him.

Walters managed to snap off a shot, but his target disappeared. Before he could react, he felt the intruder's tail around his neck, and then he was flying himself, tumbling over one of the couches and in among the agents who'd fallen in the doorway. As he struggled up, searching desperately for a weapon, one part of his mind kept repeating over and over, like a mantra: *He's got a tail! He's got a tail!* Even with the creature right in front of him, real as life, he still couldn't believe it. *He's got a tail!*

Again and again and again, the intruder disappeared, to materialize somewhere else in the office, turning the confined space of the room to his advantage as he made mincemeat of the President's bodyguard. It all happened so fast Walters would have to register the events in retrospect. At the moment, sick at heart, he simply realized he was too slow. There was nothing he could do to save his President.

Alone now, with no one to protect him, George McKenna sat in his seat of power and stared into the inhuman eyes of his assassin. The eyes were strangely drained of color, and it struck him that they were dead. What little hue they possessed was an afterthought, lacking anything resembling humanity.

The intruder had a knife, big and gleaming. Wrapped around its hilt was a brilliant red ribbon marked with flashes of gold. Poised on the edge of the desk, he rose above McKenna. The President had never been more scared, and yet never more calm. A line from somewhere or other popped from memory: "When the end is all there is, *it matters* ." If this was his end, he'd do the office proud.

The gunshot made him jump in his chair.

The intruder cried out, dropping the knife as he clutched at a shoulder suddenly turned scarlet from the impact of a 9mm shell. Instantly, his expression changed. He looked suddenly shaken, confused, and as McKenna watched, the creature's eyes changed, gaining color and vibrancy and . . . awareness.

Absurdly the thought came to McKenna: *He doesn't know where he is. He doesn't know what's happening!*

The intruder looked around and saw Alicia Vargas standing in the doorway, pistol leveled.

Before she could take a second shot, he was gone—with the same characteristic *bamf* that came from air imploding inward to fill the empty space left by his body when it disappeared. And also, the President realized, the faintest scent, reminiscent of sulfur and brimstone.

"Sir?" Alicia asked as she hurried over to him, avoiding the bodies of her fellow agents, her eyes never at rest as they swept the scene for the assassin or any like him, her gun cocked and ready. "Are you all right, Mr. President? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Alicia, I'm fine." It was a lie and both of them knew it, but he was the President and this was the time for lies like that.

"What the hell *was* that?" he wondered aloud.

“Damned if I know, sir. But I sure hope he doesn’t come back.”

“Amen.” The knife, superbly balanced, had landed point first, its weight stabbing deep into the wooden desktop. As he touched the ribbon, McKenna realized that the black flecks were writing.

“What the hell is *this* ?” he asked aloud.

On the ribbon, printed in black, was a demand—or perhaps, he thought, suddenly heartsick, a declaration of war: **MUTANTFREEDOMNOW!**

Interlude

He came in to Alkali Lake the back way, over the mountains from the north. He cut through a saddleback notch and made his way down to the glacier by a trail so poor even a bighorn sheep would think twice about trying it.

Before reaching the base of the escarpment he went to ground, taking cover in a jumbled pile of scree and rocks that gave him a superb view of the glacier and minimal chance of being seen himself. The last stretch was open country; he’d have to wait for the right moment to make his approach. He didn’t mind. When he had to, he could be inhumanly patient.

There was a road up to the complex from the south, as miserable in its own way as the path he’d followed. Blacktop asphalt, barely two lines wide, beat to shit by the pounding of too many heavily laden trucks over too many years with hardly a thought given to maintenance. It wound its way better than seventy miles through the snowy mountains, with a decent-sized town at the far end that catered mainly to the hunting and camping crowd who wanted something wilder than Lake Louise or even Jasper. There was a hamlet some fifty miles farther that consisted of a saloon, some gas pumps, and a batch of cabins that rented by the hour.

Trouble was, if he took the road, they’d know he was coming.

He was a short man, with a stocky, powerful physique, as though the frame of an athletic six-footer had been squashed down to five and change. To look at his face, you’d think him a young man, his features weathered by a life spent mainly outdoors. His dress—jeans as worn as his boots—marked him as an itinerant wrangler or cycle bum, blue collar for sure. This was a man who worked with his hands, not his mind.

His hair was dark, sweeping back from his forehead in a wave that looked natural on him but somehow . . . wrong for a human being. He wore his sideburns long, right down to the line of his jaw, in a fashion more in keeping with the nineteenth century than the twenty-first.

His eyes were the giveaway. Like his hair, they were right for his face, yet at the same time they had no right belonging to one so apparently youthful. These eyes missed nothing and had seen too much. They were the eyes of a hunter. A predator.

His name was Logan, but the only reason he knew it was that it was printed on his dog tags. A name, a serial number, a blood type. No indication of nationality or branch of service. The only clue, if you could call it that, was that the information was printed in Roman letters. Not Arabic, not Cyrillic, not Chinese or Japanese kanji. He had no past worth the name, only a present filled to bursting with questions. Here was where he hoped to find some answers.

But first he needed a storm.

He got a beaut.

It came in during the night, boiling off the Continental Divide with winds and snow to spare, a howling monster that seemed bent on scouring the landscape down to bare rock. The rocks afforded a fair measure of protection from the wind, but there was nothing he could do about the cold. The temperature was close to freezing before the storm. Once the blizzard started, it quickly dropped past zero. His jacket was fleece lined, but against this kind of elemental fury, that was no help at all. Hypothermia set in almost immediately. It was a pain, but he'd endured far worse. As often as he froze during the night, his healing factor kicked into gear and brought him back to life.

The weather system proved to be as fast-moving as it was intense. Toward morning, a shift in wind velocity told him it was time to get moving. Timing was perfect. The fury of the storm had probably nailed any of the installation's remote sensors positioned to watch the "back door." And any living sentries were just as likely to be hunkered down in their bunkers, dreaming dreams of "Baywatch."

He was in place by dawn, a spectacular sunrise that went hand in hand with the equally impressive—although far more bleak—vista that spread out below him. Dominating the scene was the dam, a thousand feet high, three times that across, holding back a lake that stretched for miles. A huge generating station at its base told the reason for its existence, to provide an inexhaustible source of hydroelectric power. Thing is, there were no towering pylons marching away downriver to carry all this energy to a hungry populace. What was generated here stayed here, to be used by the Alkali Lake Industrial Complex.

There was a fence blocking access to the crest of the dam, but it was no obstacle. The poles and links were so rusted and twisted by the fierce mountain weather that he simply stepped over. He found an older sign than the first, barely held to the fence by a scrap of wire, informing intruders that this was a government installation, a military base, and top secret besides, and warning of the most dire consequences if anyone was of a mind to trespass.

Below the dam, the forest had been cleared for the better part of a mile to allow for the construction of the base. The layout of the complex was circular, like a defensive laager, and the scale was as impressive as the dam itself. This place had been built to last.

So why had it been abandoned?

The whole base was covered with snow, drifts piled over doors and windows. What roads he saw were cracked and blistered, with weeds and flowers and the occasional small tree sprouting to reclaim the land that was rightfully theirs. Windows were mostly broken. No vehicles. No tracks in the snow save his own.

Once he made his way inside, it wasn't any different. Long hallways and empty offices. They'd packed up the incidentals but left a fair amount of furniture, all of which had suffered from the assault of the elements, summer and winter. But the basic structure of the buildings—thick metal walls—was surprisingly sound. It was composed of a succession of strong points, compartments that could become individual fortresses all their own, almost as if the builders were as worried about an assault from within as from without.

He wandered without obvious direction, trusting his feet and his instincts to lead him. Most of the time he trusted them far more than his intellect. To him, thinking was a liability—took too long, led down too many wrong paths. His body was a much more dependable instrument.

He caught a strange scent but wasn't worried. It was only a wolf, which seemed as curious about him as he was about the buildings. They stood watching each other from opposite ends of the room for a few moments before the wolf calmly turned tail and padded down a nearby flight of stairs.

Intrigued, Logan followed, into a darkness so complete even his extraordinarily sharp eyes weren't of much use. He pulled a mini-Maglite out of his jacket pocket, which revealed a large, circular room, as bare and nondescript as everywhere else in the base.

Suddenly the wolf howled, the noise amplified and echoed by the cavernous space. It was a primal sound that went straight to Logan's back brain, as it was intended to, as it had since men and wolves first shared this wilderness, and he reacted accordingly. He spun into a crouch, ready for a fight, and bared his teeth in a flash of familiar pain as three gleaming metal claws, each as long as his forearm, punched out of the body of his clenched right hand. They made a distinctive snikt sound as they emerged, like a rifle bolt being engaged. They were forged of a metal called adamantium, and they could cut steel as easily as air. The claws had bionic housings built into each forearm; his healing factor handled the wounds they made each time they were used. That same metal was laced through his skeleton, creating an amalgam with his bones that made them virtually unbreakable.

He hadn't been born this way. Someone had done this to him. His whole life since, the parts he remembered, anyway, had been devoted to finding out who, and why.

The wolf was sitting in another doorway, but as Logan swung his light around he lost all interest in the animal. He crossed to the wall and raised his right hand to chest height. There were three marks in the metal, deep, parallel gashes, as though someone had slashed at the steel.

He placed his fist by the doorjamb. His claws were a perfect fit.

He had an answer. Once upon a time—a very long time ago—he had been here.

He looked down, but the wolf was gone, with a fast-paced click of claws on concrete to mark its hurried exit to the surface.

With an equally distinctivesnakt sound, his claws went away. Reflexively he wiped the little bit of bloody residue from between his knuckles and took one last look around the empty room.

He wasn't done searching, but he was done here. Time to go home.

Chapter Two

Against a backdrop of barren, snow-swept rock, a mother wolf faced off against a hunter. She had young to protect and the blood on her muzzle spoke eloquently of her determination and ferocity. The hunter was short by modern standards but powerfully built, wrapped snugly in layers of fur that afforded protection both from the elements and the wolf's fangs. His low forehead and prominent brow marked him as Neanderthal man. He had a spear in one hand, a club in the other. The sharply pointed stone tip of the spear was likewise flecked with blood. Each combatant had taken the measure of his foe; neither would back down until the other was dead.

It was a typical weekday afternoon at New York's famed American Museum of Natural History; the bulk of the visitors were schoolchildren on a variety of class trips. A clutch of them were gathered before the diorama, only half-listening to their teacher as they made whispered comments and comparisons between themselves, choosing sides as to who would win this reconstructed fight.

The teacher herself was, in her own way, as striking as the display. It wasn't just her height, six feet even, or, surprisingly, the dramatic shock of hair that fell straight as a waterfall to the middle of her back, colored so pure an arctic white that it gleamed like silver, providing a stark contrast to her coffee-colored skin. What marked her most was her carriage, a bearing and manner so naturally graceful you couldn't help but think of her as royalty. She had a beauty that was breathtaking, but remarkably, she didn't seem to notice. There was no posing to her presentation, no posturing, no flaunting of the gifts nature had so amply bestowed; she was a woman totally at one with herself. She had a ready smile, and although her voice seemed soft, you had the immediate sense that when she spoke every child in her charge would hear her and, more importantly, would listen. And lastly, there were her eyes, which were a rich, cobalt blue, the same as the sky just before it goes purple at sunset. She was a mass of contradictions whose individual elements should all have been at odds with one another; yet, when combined, the end result was the closest thing to perfection that could be imagined.

"Contrary to popular belief," she said to the children, "Neanderthals are not the direct ancestor of modern-day humans, but rather distant cousins who died out some thirty thousand years ago. . . ."

With a sweep of her hand, which seemed to leave a distinctive puff of breeze in its wake, she ushered her class along to the next diorama, presenting a scene of Cro-Magnon hunters ganging up on a towering woolly mammoth. They'd backed the mammoth into a corner, where it couldn't easily maneuver. Already a couple of stone-tipped spears were stuck in its flanks; all the men looked poised to hurl more. The mammoth had put up a powerful fight—a couple of hunters lay broken on the snow—but barring a miracle, the giant creature was doomed.

"They were replaced," the teacher continued, "by a more advanced race called Cro-Magnon man, also known as *Homo sapiens*, also known as human beings. In other words, children, they were replaced by all of us.

"It was once theorized that Neanderthals were wiped out by years of conflict with these successors, but new evidence found in our own DNA suggests that these two species may have interbred, eventually evolving into modern humanity. In effect, they *became* us."

One of her kids, a twelve-year-old named Artie, flashed a smile at a little girl standing nearby. She was with her parents and she didn't look at all happy. Her dress was stained with ice cream and Kool-Aid, and she was far more interested in getting some more snacks than in looking at boring old statues and such. When Artie smiled, she responded by sticking out her tongue.

He did the same, only his tongue was black and forked like a snake.

The girl stared goggle-eyed for what seemed like forever before jumping back against her mother and, to that woman's surprise, burying her head against her leg and whining in fright.

"Artie," the teacher said quietly, looming over him. He tried his best smile; she wasn't interested. "Not here."

"I didn't mean any harm."

"You scared her."

"She started it!"

"She's a little girl, you're almost a teenager. I expect you to know better."

"That is so bogus, Miss Munroe."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Hiding what we are."

"Yes, in a way. But also necessary. That girl doesn't know you, Artie, or any of the other students in the class. She didn't react to who you are, but to what she saw. And it was different and it was scary. It's very easy, almost natural, for people to react to the surface presentation of things; it's a survival instinct that some believe is hardwired into our genes. It's why people have problems with different cultures and different faiths and different skin colors and different ways of behavior. What's 'same' is comfortable. What's different could be a threat."

"Are we a threat, because we're mutants?"

"Am I a threat because I'm black? Or that little girl because she's Hispanic?"

Artie shrugged. "Of course not."

"Exactly. As Martin Luther King said, we want to be judged, not by the color of our skins—or, in our case, the makeup of our genes—but by the content of our characters. Artie, mutants are only people with some extra, unique genes. We're still human."

While she was talking with Artie, the bulk of the class had moved on to the next diorama, and as Ororo Munroe, known to the other teachers as Storm, strode after them she sighed inside that she'd allowed herself to be distracted. This was a presentation she'd wanted to avoid.

Although the museum had been assiduously upgrading its collections over the years, to stay current with advances in the evolutionary and archaeological sciences, this was one of the exhibits that had been left over from the old days. Against a panoramic background of what was meant to be the Great Rift Valley of eastern Africa were a succession of mannequins and visual presentations, tracking the development of mankind from the apelike *Homo habilis* all the way up the evolutionary line to the present day. Along the way, however, there was a diversion to a second grouping of figures, labeled *Homo mutantis*? Some were based on informed speculation, while others were clearly purest fantasy. But they were all awful to look at.

A few of the younger students, grouped around Jubilation Lee, exchanged some gently rude banter about ancestry and the obvious resemblance between the display figures before them and some of their classmates. Their way of coping was to hurl wisecracks, but a couple of others just stood and stared, making the obvious connection between past and present, the one perhaps being prologue to the other. Mutant powers tended to catalyze at puberty, and while all of them had been cataloged as carriers of the active gene, not all of them had manifested their powers. They were clearly wondering now if they'd end up looking anything like these nightmares.

“The tribe where I used to live called this part of Africa ‘the forge of Heaven,’ ” Storm told them all, standing right before the diorama but staring past the figures, ignoring them in favor of the vista that lay beyond. In her mind’s eye there was no painted backdrop but a stark, sere landscape that stretched far beyond the visible horizon. It was mostly grassland, when there was rain, not much in the way of anything larger like trees. Those were found in the higher elevations, toward Mount Kilimanjaro. “It’s a harsh and unforgiving country where anthropologists believe that life on Earth was born,” she continued. “Only the strongest, the most intelligent, the most *worthy* of creatures can survive here. That’s nature’s way. She tries all sorts of possibilities—dinosaurs great and small, mammals much the same—until she finds a species that works. At the same time, we have to accept that some things . . . don’t.”

“Old news,” Artie said flatly, end of story.

“Precisely,” Storm responded cheerily. “What you see here is our snapshot of the world tens of thousands of years ago. What they were has no more relevance to what you are than that Neanderthal does. What matters is who you *choose* to be. The kind of person, the kind of life you want to live.

“Come on, class,” she finished, shuffling them along, “let’s go rejoin the others.”

Around the corner, down on the main floor, some older students from Professor Charles Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters were checking out a reconstructed skeleton labeled SABER-TOOTHEDTIGER. Their comments were mostly about a notorious mutant who’d adopted the same name and was currently the object of a hugely unsuccessful worldwide manhunt.

The teacher responsible for watching them was only partly paying attention. His eyes and the bulk of his focus were on a slim, striking redhead who stood across the hall. She was a head shorter than he was, which made her about five-foot-seven to his six-plus, with legs that went on forever, a figure to die for, and a face to match. Her eyes were the green of a spring forest and had a sparkle that would put the finest emerald to shame.

His own eyes, she had never seen. He kept them hidden behind specially designed glasses whose lenses were made of a ruby quartz so dense the crystal seemed almost opaque. Sometimes he wasn’t even sure there were proper eyes at all within their sockets anymore, although he had perfect twenty-twenty vision. Instead, there were beams of pure force that Xavier had labeled “optic blasts,” powerful enough to knock a tank end over end or punch holes through mountains. Unlike the others with their powers, Scott Summers had no control over his. He couldn’t shut off his beams; they blasted away 24/7, as they’d done since he was a teenager. Even closing his eyes didn’t help. For some perverse reason, his eyelids—or his hands—were able to block the beams; he couldn’t do damage to himself. But the beams themselves were so powerful they’d take advantage of the slightest gap. A twitch of the eye, the slightest relaxation, meant instant disaster. So, to keep from devastating his surroundings, he had to wear these glasses—or a visor that even allowed him to manipulate the strength of the blasts—constantly.

The eyes, so the saying goes, are the window to the soul. He didn’t like to think how that might apply to

him.

Aside from that, Scott Summers was a fair package. Good lines to his face, the kind of clean-shaven, handsome features that may have started out slightly pretty but which improved markedly with age. His hair was brown, with a hint of auburn, and when he spoke there was a faint echo of Nebraska in his voice. He was a natural leader, the sort of young man who would seem at home taming a frontier, although he himself would scoff at the description.

He was hopelessly in love with the redhead, Jean Grey, and had been since the moment they'd first met.

She saw him watching and flashed him a smile that made his heart sing and ache all at the same time, and wish they were alone. Then her eyes slipped past him and the students they were minding to a clutch of tourists just down the gallery, and her lips tightened, her smile quickly becoming a work of fiction and artifice. Scott immediately intuited what was happening. Once more her mental barriers had turned porous and Jean was finding herself caught in a rapidly rising tide of thoughts and emotions. That was how she described it to him, late at night, usually with wine, on the increasingly rare occasions when he could get her to relax. The hardest part about being a telepath, she explained, wasn't "reading" other peoples' thoughts, it was keeping them out of your own head. If your control slipped, if the shields failed, it was so easy to be overwhelmed, like standing in a puddle one second and being lost in the middle of a raging ocean the next.

But Jean had another problem. She wasn't simply a telepath, but a telekine. She could manipulate physical objects with the power of her thoughts and will. And when she was stressed, like now, that second aspect of her abilities as a mutant gave the conflict within her a tangible, material dimension.

Just like now.

The glass wall of the display behind her was trembling, displaying visible ripples like the surface of a pond being stirred by an autumn breeze. As Scott stepped forward, he could see the window warp in its frame, the metal creaking quietly in futile protest. In another moment it was sure to shatter—and Jean hadn't noticed. The interactive display TV monitors flashed with static.

"Hey," he said gently, slipping his arm in hers.

"Hey," she said, visibly relaxing as she reacted to his presence, before her eyes widened, her mouth pursing in tired frustration, as she realized the reason. The glass behind her was still once more, and solid. The voices had silenced in her head. For a while.

Scott didn't need telepathy of his own to sense what she was thinking, although her face masked that fury superbly. She had an impressive temper and, from God knows where, a wealth of profanity that beat anything he'd ever heard. She was a doctor, and she was proud. She didn't like being weak or vulnerable.

"You okay?" he asked.

Her eyes were half-closed, which undercut what she told him in answer: "Yeah," she said, giving him a reassuring squeeze. "I'm fine. It's just a headache."

Scott felt a tug on his other sleeve and turned to see one of the students holding up a sketch she'd made of an iguanodon.

“Scott,” she reminded him, “you were talking about the extinction of the dinosaurs. . . .”

He nodded and indicated the tiger display. “I need to talk to Dr. Grey real quick. Can you draw me a picture of that big cat?”

She sniffed, hugely uninterested. “It’s a saber-toothed tiger.”

“Right.”

She took his cue and scampered off to join the other kids. Scott looked back to Jean, who chose to look anywhere but at him.

“It’s not just a headache, is it?” he challenged.

She didn’t want to talk about it, but this time he found he didn’t want to hold back.

“I wasn’t sure how to say this,” he began, and then he paused, concern vying for dominance with his prairie rectitude. He understood her desire for privacy. In the orphanage, growing up, you played every emotion, every thought, tighter to your chest than a winning poker hand. But she was in pain and it wasn’t getting any better and that was more than he could bear.

“Look, Jean,” he began again, “ever since Liberty Island you’ve been—”

“Scott,” she tried to interrupt. He didn’t let her.

“—*different*.”

“My telepathy’s been off lately,” she confessed. “I can’t seem to focus. I can hear . . . everything.”

He shook his head, ruthlessly exploiting the opening she’d given him, hoping she’d understand, praying it would pay off. “A month ago you had to concentrate just to levitate a book across the room. Now when you have nightmares the entire bedroom shakes. It’s not just your telepathy.”

She left her arm in his, her grip tightening around his fingers, while she splayed her other hand against the glass in front of her, as if to reassure herself that she hadn’t done it any lasting damage. At the same time, as she watched the room behind them both in the window’s reflection, he was reminded of how science teachers used to warn about looking at a solar eclipse. The only safe way to gaze at the sun was through a reflection; do it directly, you’ll go blind. Jean had that same apprehension about people. And it was growing.

“The dreams are getting worse,” she told him. “I keep feeling that something terrible is about to happen.”

She leaned her forehead against the glass and spoke so softly Scott couldn’t tell if the words came from her lips or from her thoughts.

“I don’t want to lose you,” she said.

He wrapped his free hand around her and pulled her close against him.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he told her.

She relaxed against him, but only a little bit, leaning her head into the junction of his neck and shoulder but keeping her eyes open and on the glass, with a stare that seemed to go on forever, as though she was searching for something.

He wondered, and hoped she had grace enough not to pry, if what she was searching for had a face. Handsome and hairy and Canadian, Logan had rolled into their lives like an avalanche and wreaked just about as much havoc. It drove Scott a little crazy to think that, only a few months ago, there'd been no Logan to complicate their lives—and yet, without Logan, he and Jean and Storm wouldn't have stood a chance when Xavier's former colleague and friend, who now called himself Magneto, had tried to reshape the face of the world. All as part of a misguided attempt to guarantee the future safety and prosperity of mutantkind.

He believed as an article of absolute faith that Jean loved him. It was the keystone of his world, as he hoped his own love served for hers. But he could also see what happened when Jean and Logan came near each other. That kind of primal attraction was impossible to hide, and trust Logan not to even try.

They hadn't heard from him since he left the school, to follow some leads Professor Xavier had provided about his mysterious past. And Scott knew there hadn't been a day since when Jean hadn't thought of him. The questions he had were, *how* did she think of him? And what was she going to do about it?

And when that moment came, what would Scott do?

“Are we interrupting again?” Storm said softly as she came around the corner and into view.

Because the two women were best friends, Jean didn't react to her arrival as any sort of intrusion. She took a moment to gather wits and self-possession, gradually disengaging from Scott—her hand staying closed around his right to the last—using her telepathy to partially cloud the perceptions of the kids so they wouldn't easily recall how vulnerable she looked.

“So,” Storm continued cheerily, “how was the giant squid?”

“The children liked it,” Jean replied. “Scott was bored.”

“It was boring,” he agreed wholeheartedly. And then, taking refuge in responsibility, “Guys, if we don't want to get stuck in rush-hour traffic—”

“We should get moving,” Jean finished.

Storm absently acknowledged their decision. She wasn't quite paying attention, though, as she finished a quick headcount of their charges. She didn't look happy.

“Wait,” she said in a tone that made clear she wasn't really surprised, just disappointed. “We're short.”

Jean concentrated, and Scott knew she was casting a mental net across the whole of the museum.

“We should find the professor,” she said.

In the museum's basement was the food court, with seats galore and offering a surprisingly eclectic collection of items, ranging from burgers to sushi. Off in a corner all their own, polishing off the remains of

a modest feast, were Xavier's three missing students. Two boys and a girl, all in their midteens.

One of the boys was slightly taller than the other, both their bodies built pretty much the same, both of them slightly taller than the girls. The taller boy had pleasant, regular features, with curly blondish hair that looked like he generally used his fingers in place of a comb, in a vain attempt to establish some kind of order. His companion's face was sharper, a little more technically handsome, thick brown hair swept straight back from his face. He had a Zippo lighter in hand, and the way he kept snapping it open, igniting a flame, snapping it closed, to the beat of a doo-wop song only he could hear, went with the hair and manner to present him as a reincarnated fifties rebel.

The girl was southern; that was obvious the minute she said a word. She was pretty, on her way to beautiful, with eyes green enough to put Jean Grey's to shame. Her shoulder-length dark hair had a dramatic streak as purely white as Storm's that rose from the peak of her forehead, in absolute contrast to the rich auburn that covered the rest of her skull. Unlike the others, she wore gloves at the table, and long sleeves and a high collar, and the coat that was slung back on her shoulders had a hood so that when it was pulled up the only part of her body that showed any skin was her face. She also sat a little apart from the others, as if she was wary of touching or being touched.

"So I'm asking," said the dark-haired boy with the lighter, John Allardyce, "what would be worse, to be burned to death or frozen?"

The girl made an appropriately dismissive face, this was *sonot* why they had snuck away from the crowd, but John could be worse than a mastiff with some topics. Try as you might, there was no way to get him to back off.

In any event, Bobby Drake wasn't in the mood. He looked intensely perplexed, facing a problem that taxed his obviously meager mental resources, while Marie fidgeted under John's stare, and Kitty wondered how big a fight she'd start if she just snatched that damn lighter away. The boy loved that Zippo more than she did her stuffed snugglies! Too totally creepy for words.

"Gosh," Bobby began, which made John chuckle because only a lamoid straight would use a word like "gosh," "I dunno, John. Seems like being burned would be awfully painful. . . ."

John flicked the lighter again, his eyes momentarily caressing the flame before returning to Marie, who tried to look bored to tears as she met that gaze but knew she wasn't quite pulling it off.

"It is," John said.

Marie turned her eyes away and knew the moment she did that she'd made a mistake. There was another crowd of teens sitting at the next table, a little bit older, taking advantage of this out-of-the-way alcove to sneak some smokes. One of them looked up at exactly the same moment, and for that moment their gazes locked. He smiled, Marie let the edges of her mouth quirk in response, then she turned back to her friends in time to hear Bobby start to turn the verbal tables on John.

"But you know," Bobby said, "there's something pretty agonizing about freezing to death. You don't just drift off to sleep like most people think."

"Damn," Marie muttered, "I was *so* hoping for a nap!"

"Enlighten us, snowman," John instructed.

“It all starts with shivering. Just a little at first as the body struggles to keep warm. Your skin turns a pale blue.”

“Guys, not again,” Marie pleaded. “Change of topic, okay?”

Being guys, they ignored her.

“Then,” Bobby continued, “the moisture in your lungs starts to freeze, so that even breathing is painful.”

“This conversation,” she tried again, “is painful!”

Marie snuck another sidelong glance at the other table, to find two pairs of eyes staring back. They looked nice, they looked interesting, they were a pleasant change to this pissing match she had heard too many times before. So when they smiled, she didn’t try to hide her response.

Neither of the boys at her table even noticed.

“Those shivers,” Bobby said, “turn into violent convulsions as your blood begins to crystallize.”

The other boys got up from their table.

“Wouldn’t you be, like,*so* dead by then, Bobby?” asked Marie in a tone that broadcast boredom.

“Worse,” he replied. “Your brain starts to scream for oxygen and you can’t stop yourself slowly, inexorably sinking into complete and utter . . . *insanity* !”

John looked wholly unimpressed. Marie actually yawned.

“Insanity, huh? I s’pose that might be considered an improvement over this little colloquy.”

“Hey,” said one of the boys from the next table.

All three of Xavier’s students looked up. Marie turned around in her chair to find the boys standing over her. This was *so* not what she wanted. It had never occurred to her that they’d take a little bit of flirting as an outright invitation.

“He said, ‘Hey,’ ” said one of the others, after an uncomfortable silence.

“Hey,” Bobby replied with a grin, hoping to defuse the situation.

But it didn’t work. The others had responded to what they thought were a set of definite cues. When Marie didn’t greet them enthusiastically, they weren’t happy to discover they’d perhaps made a mistake, and adolescent pride wouldn’t let them back down.

The second boy spoke again, jabbing a thumb toward his friend, who took a drag on his cigarette—ostensibly to show how cool he was, but more likely to hide a sudden attack of nerves. “He was talking *to her* ,” the boy said, meaning his friend and meaning Marie.

“What’s your name?” the first boy asked.

She had more than one, but the situation was making her a little bit nervous as well, and the boys were crowding her awfully close. So she answered with the name she'd chosen for herself, rather than the one with which she'd been born.

"Rogue," she said.

That prompted a snort from the third newcomer.

"Cool," he said, meaning exactly the opposite, as in "look at these prep school jag-offs throwing off street names, figuring we'll be impressed." "This is Slash," boy number one, "And I'm Bobcat! Nice ta meetcha!"

He finished by reaching for Marie's arm.

Bobby intercepted him, placing his hand on the older teen's wrist and speaking as easily as could be. "You really don't want to touch her."

"Excuse me," said Bobcat.

"Or what?" echoed Slash, "you gonna hurt him?"

Bobby shook his head. "Nope. But *she* might."

The two teens looked at him, looked at Marie, looked at each other—and burst out laughing. To them, it was such an outrageous idea, there was no other response, which was precisely what Bobby had in mind. It made the Xavier's students look a little silly and gave these guys a way out without losing face. Crisis averted, no harm done.

But John Allardyce wouldn't let it go.

"You know," he said, his voice dripping unmistakably acid contempt, "there's no smoking in here."

That was a challenge. No way would the others back down now.

"No shit?" Slash sounded incredulous, returning an equal measure of insult. "Really? You got a problem with that?"

John flicked his lighter—open, closed, open, closed—while never taking his eyes off Slash.

Slash gestured toward John's lighter with his cigarette. "Got a light?" Challenge, served and returned. Another opportunity for all concerned to back off.

John wasn't interested. He was enjoying himself.

"It's a simple question," Slash said, finishing with the silent but unmistakable comment "asshole."

John shrugged, so bored. "And I'll give you a simple answer." Suggesting, just as plainly, that these mooks were too damn dumb for anything better.

Slash let his temper show, spacing his words for emphasis: "Do . . . you . . . have . . . a . . . light?"

John kept flicking the cap of his lighter. “Sorry, pal,” he said, “can’t help ya.”

Marie sighed.

“Knock it off, John,” Marie hissed at him.

“Please,” Bobby echoed in frustration, figuring that before this was through he was going to have to grab his friend and hustle him bodily out of here.

“Yeah, John,” Shadow chimed in, “listen to your girlfriends.”

John, not about to yield center stage, winked at Marie.

“I’m sorry, guys,” he told them all. “Besides the fact that this is clearly marked as a nonsmoking environment”—he pointed to a sign—“I couldn’t bear knowing that I contributed to your collective slow, tumor-ridden deaths.”

For final emphasis, he flicked his lighter shut. But he’d miscalculated as Slash snatched it away.

“What’s this?” he demanded, spinning it between his own fingers. “A fashion accessory?”

His pals laughed and smirked, enjoying how the tables had suddenly turned in their favor. John, all humor gone from his face, lunged for the lighter, only to be shoved hard by Bobcat back into his chair.

Slash struck a flame and lit his cigarette, making an exaggerated show of blowing a lungful of smoke into John’s face.

Later, much later, they all told themselves they should have seen this moment coming, they should have been prepared, they should have stopped him. Truth was, though, they never imagined *it could* happen. John, of all people, knew the nature of his mutant power and how important—how *essential*—it was to use it properly. They didn’t think he was serious, and once it started, there was simply no time.

John was a pyrotic. His mutant ability was to control flame. Before any of them could stop him, before they realized the danger, he amplified the tip of the burning cigarette to white-hot incandescence and sent it flashing all the way to the boy’s fingers and beyond. Instantly what was left of the cigarette was reduced to ash. Slash opened his hand, even as the tips of his fingers blistered from the sudden, scorching heat, but it was far too late as raw flame raced up his sleeve to ignite his jacket and hair and set him aflame from head to toe.

Slash screamed—mostly in terror, there hadn’t been time yet for any pain to register—and reeled away from the corner, slapping at himself in a doomed attempt to extinguish the flames. A succession of other screams were heard as patrons of the food court reacted to what was happening, scrambling to get clear of the young man or pull their own children to safety, calling for fire extinguishers, starting a stampede for the sole exit.

John stayed where he was, watching with a smile.

With a curse, Bobby leaped to his feet, reaching out to Slash with his right hand, which suddenly turned transparent, as if the skin had turned to crystal-clear ice. The temperature in the corner dropped so low, so fast, that every breath around their table left clouds in the air, but more importantly a stream of frost embraced Slash like a blanket to smother his flames.

Marie stood, but before she could get clear of the corner the second boy—Bobcat—made a grab for her. In her hurry, her coat had slipped off her shoulder, baring a stretch of bicep. Bare hand closed on bare arm, flesh made direct contact with flesh, and all of a sudden Bobcat looked like he'd just been hit in the belly by a battering ram.

His mouth opened wide, but he couldn't find the air—or even the will—to shriek his heart out as veins distended on his head and throat and Marie bared her own teeth in a grimace of sympathetic pain, giving voice herself to the raw terror the young man felt. In midscream, she wrenched free of him, breaking contact with such force that Bobcat collapsed forward onto the table, and Marie stumble-spun into John's arms, which made his day.

Bobcat pulled himself up and cocked a fist to deliver a blind-side punch to John's head.

The punch was never thrown.

The three Xavier students looked around in amazement to discover that every person in the food court was frozen in place. They looked accusingly at Bobby, but he only shrugged in helpless demurrals: This wasn't his doing.

Then the penny dropped, and four sets of eyes turned as one to the doorway, where Charles Xavier sat grim-faced in his chair. Clustered close behind him were Jean, Scott, and Storm, and, farther back, the rest of the tour group. One look at the faces of their teachers told the students how badly they'd just screwed up. "The next time you feel like showing off, don't!" the professor said curtly.

Standing, Charles Xavier would have matched Scott Summer's height, but he was in a wheelchair and had been for as long as the young man had known him. He was twice Scott's age and more, but he carried those years easily, and the wiry strength of his body made no concession to his disability. He spoke with a rich English accent he'd acquired as a student at Cambridge and although he possessed a smile as generous as his nature, he generally presented himself in a manner as formal as his attire. When he looked you in the eye, he gave the impression that your whole being had suddenly gone transparent. Scott was one of the few who knew that wasn't hyperbole. Xavier was a telepath, perhaps the foremost on Earth. He could read minds as easily as anyone else might read a book. Jean was his prize pupil.

He had founded his school to provide a venue where young mutants could learn not simply to use their powers properly and safely, but also responsibly. The core curriculum was as much about the ethics of being a mutant as the practicalities. At the moment it was plain that he was wondering why he even bothered.

As the students gathered their gear and trudged across the court, a look suddenly swept across Jean's face, as if she'd heard something from outside the building. Xavier's concentration was occupied keeping the patrons of the food court "off-line"; he hadn't noticed what she had.

There was a television set suspended from the ceiling, turned off. A faint flicker of energy appeared around Jean's eyes, and the set came on. The channel quickly changed to Fox News as a title banner at the bottom of the screen announced the news that the midday anchor was breathlessly repeating aloud: MUTANTASSASSINATIONATTEMPT. Behind the anchor there was a secondary window showing a live shot of the White House, surrounded by Secret Service and a detachment of Marines in full combat gear.

“ . . . we repeat,” the anchor was saying, relief as palpable on her face and in her voice as terror, “the President is unharmed. We are awaiting confirmation from the White House, but informed sources have told Fox News that an attempt was made on the President’s life less than an hour ago by an assailant who has been tentatively identified as *amutant* !”

No one said a word for what seemed like the longest time. Scott finally broke the silence.

“Professor, “ he said quietly, “people, I think it’s time to go.”

Xavier drew a deep breath and nodded his head.

“I think you’re right,” he agreed.

A moment later, the food court came back to life—with a startled yelp from over by the soft ice cream machine as the attendant found his hand covered with chocolate/vanilla twist. Slash couldn’t recall why he was on his hands and knees—or why he smelled like he’d just walked through a smoke factory—as he sucked on a set of scorched fingertips, but right then and there he made a silent vow that he and cigarettes were done. As for the rest, they had no idea that a minute was missing from their lives, or that the table in the corner had been occupied by a pair of boys and a girl. Or that those three teens had ever even existed.

Outside, Scott pushed Xavier’s chair while Jean and Storm kept the children in line as they hurried past a succession of momentarily “frozen” patrons on their way to the parking lot.

Marie had her coat wrapped close around her, her hood pulled up to hide her face, and while she kept pace with the group, she kept a definite distance between herself and everybody else. Bobby tried to walk beside her, but she made it clear she wasn’t interested, and he had sense enough to back off.

Chapter Three

A straight line from Xavier’s School on Graymalkin Lane in the town of Salem Center to the Empire State Building runs forty-five miles. An hour by Metro North from Grand Central Station, generally two by car at rush hour.

Scott made better time than that. There wasn’t much traffic on the roads, everyone seemed to be glued to the nearest TV, waiting for word from Washington on the President’s condition and what might happen next. Lacking definitive hard news—beyond the initial announcement of the attack and the fact that the President was alive and unharmed—talking heads filled the airwaves with blather and speculation, almost all of it fixated on the as-yet unconfirmed report that the assailant was some kind of mutant, and almost all of it hostile. Was this a follow-up, people wondered, to the recent mutant terrorist attack on the World Unity Conference on Ellis Island? Had any other nations been attacked? Was the President the only target? Was this a conspiracy? Was it a declaration of war?

The questions fed on one another like a brushfire. Even the President’s hurried appearance and brief

statement from the White House Press Room didn't make much difference. It was as if there was this incredible reservoir of anxiety where it came to mutants, held back by a dam of faith and hope that the government had a handle on the situation, that maybe mutants weren't so bad. With this one terrible blow, the dam had cracked and people across the country, across the world, were venting their fears about what would come next.

As more details about the attack were revealed, this proved a far more damaging blow to the national psyche than the Ellis Island incident. That had involved some incredible machine whose fantastic energies had lit up the New York skyline more vividly than any fireworks display. No one had really understood what was going on, save that official spokesmen said it was really dangerous.

This, though, was a man with a knife, who'd penetrated one of the most secure locations in existence. If mutants could get that close to the President, where only a miracle had saved him, nobody was safe.

The irony was, the mutants—young and old, students and teachers—driving through the wrought-iron gates that marked the entrance to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters felt just the same. Fearful that a suddenly uncertain present was giving way to an ominous and threatening future.

Xavier's ancestors had settled this part of Westchester County when Salem Center itself was little more than a tavern and trading post. They'd laid claim to a five-mile stretch of land along the north shore of Breakstone Lake and held on to it ever since. Some generations prospered, others struggled, as what began as the wilderness frontier gradually evolved into one of the wealthiest counties on the globe, home now to billionaires and ex-presidents. But the enduring constant for the family was that they never let go of their land.

The original mansion had been Georgian in style, two stories high with pillared porticos offering a magnificent view down the sweeping lawn to the lake. A century or so later, it was replaced by the current structure, a late Victorian stronghold of dark, gray stone, meant to look as solid and eternal as the lake itself. They built big in those days, so what was entirely excessive for a family residence became ideal for a school. There were wings and battlements and turrets galore and a layout so eccentric every new arrival was told suitably spooky stories about kids who'd gotten lost, never to be seen again. The newbies scoffed, of course—until one of them actually did get lost. Then they paid more attention to the maps and the rules.

Classes had already been canceled for the day because of the field trip, which left the students free to find their own ways of coping with the news.

Theresa Roarke angrily stormed out of the common room, snarling to everyone within earshot how fed up she was with the doom and gloom that filled every channel and radio frequency. She'd grown up in Northern Ireland; terrorism was a fact of life for her. She learned early to cope with the moment but not to obsess. Feel angry, fine. Feel scared, fine. Wallow in it, not on a bet. Especially on so beautiful an afternoon. Especially if that afternoon could be shared with a certain boy.

Tracy was everything her name and antecedents implied: sandy red hair and aquamarine eyes, pert features, a dusting of freckles across a classic peaches-and-cream complexion, a face and figure that nicely mixed cute and pretty. She was a girl of big gestures and big emotions. She had a voice like an angel, if that angel liked to hang out in honky-tonks and sing Motown, and she could dance everyone else in the school, teachers included, into the ground.

On the surface, Jamie Madrox was her polar opposite, matching her fierce passion with an almost infuriating calm, still water where she was a roiling cataract. He was Canadian, from Saskatchewan,

where the land is flat and covered with wheat. He was a farm boy and proud of it, he liked growing things, and soon after arriving at Xavier's he took over the care and feeding of the estate's formal garden. He was the only kid in school who could keep up with Tracy; that came from running mile after mile across the prairie, and from winters pounding up and down the community rink playing ice hockey. But what she really adored about him was his mouth. She tended to slash and burn anyone who crossed. She had a temper and a tendency to scorch those who ignited it. Jamie, though, had that trademark Canadian knack for irony. He'd smile at the person making fun, as though he was too dumb to realize what was being said, and then respond with such outward politesse that it took the other person a minute to realize how deftly the insult had been turned back. By then, of course, everyone else was in stitches laughing. There was always the possibility of a fight, but then again, Jamie was a farm boy and he had a farm boy's physique.

He and Bobby Drake were roommates. Jamie didn't mind that Bobby had adopted his style.

Tracy was waiting for him by the fountain that some Xavier ancestor had decided would be the perfect design element for the patio. The fact that it was a monstrosity, totally at odds with all the architectural elements around it, evidently hadn't been a consideration. At one time or other, just about every student in the school had fantasized about using his or her mutant powers to make the fountain go away, but until somebody acted on those impulses, it was the ideal place to meet.

She'd been picking flowers, and as Jamie approached she held them out for him to take a sniff. Too much pollen, or dust or something; he knew right away he was in trouble. He started to back away, but the sneeze caught him in midstep. The way he reacted, it might as well have been a rocket engine firing. Off balance, he went straight down on his butt, landing hard at the very moment the force of the sneeze doubled him over . . .

. . . and, just like that, thirty identical copies of him filled the patio.

He took a great breath, desperate to calm himself before another such outburst triggered a second attack of doubling. That was his power, to take the kinetic energy of any physical blow and use it to manifest duplicates of himself.

Tracy's power was the embodiment of her code name: Siryn.

She was startled enough when Jamie fell. Seeing him megadouble for the first time spooked her completely.

She screamed.

Jamie covered his ears, but that didn't do much good as the sonic waves lanced right through the bones of his skull. The air around him shimmered with the raw force of her outburst, flowers and shrubs bent as if they'd been hit by a sudden gust of wind, and every lightbulb within eyesight instantly shattered.

Tracy stopped, covering her mouth with both hands in shock and shame as the echo of her shriek hung between them a few moments longer. She looked around at the shattered bulbs, the cracked and crazed windows, and she bolted.

Jamie knew better than to follow. He wiped his upper lip and took a big sniff to stop his nose from bleeding. Tracy hated losing control, and whenever she did she demanded to be left alone until she worked through it enough to come back and apologize.

He looked up, saw Scott Summers looking down from an upper-floor turret window, where Jamie knew the staff had their lounge, and shrugged. The course of true love—yada yada yada.

Scott offered a small smile he knew the boy down below couldn't see and traced his fingers lightly over the hairline cracks that Siryn's scream had caused in the windowpane. If Jamie's doubles lasted long enough, he'd put them to work replacing the glass. Afterward, when he had the time, Scott would have to see if he could make the panes more resistant to sonic attack.

Everything all right?

His smile broadened inside at the sound of Jean's thoughts mixing with his. It was the strangest and most wonderful sensation, to know that they were standing on opposite sides of the room yet to feel her inside himself, as real and tangible as could be. When she spoke to him telepathically, he processed it the same as verbal speech, but it came with so much more besides. He had a sense of her emotions, as well, layer upon layer of subtle textures that made the most innocent exchanges incredibly intimate. For someone as private, as guarded, as he, the miracle wasn't that she could share herself so with him, but that he didn't mind.

I think young Jamie's going to need your services, Doctor, he thought.

Siryn? she asked, and her silent laughter thrilled him to the core. *The poor boy must have such a headache!* Then her manner turned serious and professional. *Oh, dear, this actually could be serious. If he integrates his doubles before taking any medication, he'll have to cope with a headache times thirty. But if all those doubles take a dose and then they integrate he'll be processing thirty times the medication his body can safely absorb.*

Can you help him? Scott asked.

Hush, she cautioned, and he knew she was multitasking as only she could, listening to the ongoing conversation with part of her brain while reaching out to Jamie Madrox with another, using her telepathy to effect a homeopathic remedy for his pain. The image that came to him, from Jean no doubt, was of a form of psychic acupuncture.

Satisfied that Jamie was in the best of hands, Scott turned back to the room, to behold a holographic image of a man's head hovering at eye level above the portable projector that had been placed on the coffee table. It was a handsome face, almost that of a fallen archangel, tempered and textured by a lifetime of struggle, which had borne witness to horrors beyond imagination. Where Charles Xavier was bald, Eric Lehnsherr possessed a thick shock of white hair, swept back from the face in a leonine mane. Where Xavier's smiles were generous and offered without reservation, Lehnsherr's had an edge. Xavier looked at the world and saw its possibilities. Lehnsherr's gaze was more guarded and wary. He had no trust in him, and when you looked into his eyes you felt as if he had no mercy, either. He was a man who'd long ago drawn his line in the sand: You stood beside him, or against him.

He was a mutant, as powerful in his own way as Xavier himself. When they were both younger, they had worked together. They'd been friends. Perhaps in some ways they still were. He held dominion over all the forces of magnetism; hence his code name, Magneto. Scott had seen the projections that Xavier had extrapolated of his power; given the right circumstances, it was conceivable that Eric Lehnsherr could manipulate the magnetic field of the Earth itself.

Months before, Lehnsherr had used Rogue and a metal called adamantium to power a generator that

was designed to reconfigure the human genetic structure in such a way that everyone exposed to its energy field would be transformed into a mutant. His intent was to unleash this weapon on the world leaders gathered on nearby Ellis Island for the ceremonial opening of a United Nations conference. He believed that, by transforming all of them into mutants, he would force them to become more sympathetic to the fate of what was now their own kind.

Unfortunately, he'd underestimated the power of his device, and the awful consequences. The metamorphosis had proved unstable, resulting in the death of the subject within forty-eight hours. Worse, the effective radius of the energy wave would have encompassed almost the entire city, involving a population of millions.

Scott was leader of the team that had stopped him.

Xavier's School had been founded with a dual purpose, both clandestine. On the one hand, he used a device he called Cerebro to identify those children on the cusp of adolescence whose mutant abilities had the greatest potential of going active with puberty. He sought them out and recruited them to his school. Here, they received a first-rate academic education; they also learned how to use their powers and the ethics of doing so responsibly.

At the same time, Xavier knew there were mutants—some, like Lehnsherr, already well established—who had no regard for the constraints of society. To oppose such mutants, Xavier had established a strike force, which he code-named X-Men. The founding members were Scott, Jean Grey, and Storm. One other mutant had been involved in the confrontation with Magneto on Liberty Island, but Scott wasn't sure if he qualified as a recruit. He didn't seem interested in joining the team; it was more a marriage of necessity. His name was Logan; code name, Wolverine.

He'd left right afterward, and Scott hadn't shed any tears, metaphorical or otherwise, to see him go, because it was becoming more and more apparent that the man had taken a bit of Jean's heart with him.

Scott blinked, belatedly realizing that Xavier had spoken to him. He blinked again while he shifted mental gears to let the part of his consciousness that was paying attention move to the forefront. He had his own talents when it came to multitasking.

"My opinion," Scott said, taking another moment to shrug his shoulders even though he'd actually made up his mind the moment he first heard the news reports. "Magneto's behind this."

Surprisingly, instead of the professor himself, it was Jean who disagreed.

"No, Scott," she said. "I don't think so." Mentally she provided an update on Jamie: *He's fine and back together.*

Xavier spoke now, thoughtfully: "While Eric is certainly capable of organizing something like this from prison—for him, such an act, such a gesture, is too . . . irrational. It does nothing to further his goal of mutant prosperity."

"You mean superiority."

"You're right." Xavier nodded. "If Eric had his way."

"Think of the repercussions, Professor," Scott said. "It pushes us into a corner, it forces everyone to choose sides. Mutants, good or evil, no more middle ground, no more equivocating."

“You know how the government will respond,” Storm said. “They’ll reintroduce the Mutant Registration Act.”

“Or worse,” Xavier agreed.

“He’s a survivor of Auschwitz, Professor,” Scott said, returning the topic to Magneto. “Maybe this is his own little version of the Reichstag Fire. Maybe he figures, by provoking an extreme response against mutants, we’ll have no choice but to embrace his cause. Mutant superiority, mutant hegemony, guarantees mutant survival.”

“Do you really believe that, Scott?”

“He does, Professor. That’s what matters. I know he’s your friend. I know this school is as much his creation as yours, but he’s seen—he’s survived—the worst we can do to one another. I think that’s made him willing to do anything, *anything*, to prevent it from happening again. If that means destroying the village in order to save it, he’s there, locked and loaded.”

“The White House assassin’s the key,” Jean said.

Scott nodded agreement. “If the Feds had him, they’d have announced it. That means he’s on the run.”

“Could he have been working alone?”

“The only way to determine that,” Xavier decided, “is to find him before the authorities do. Using Cerebro, I’ve identified his signature and have been able to track it to the vicinity of Boston. Jean, Storm, I’d like you to take the *Blackbird* and make contact. Hopefully, through him, we can defuse this nightmare before it gets any further out of hand.”

Normally, the President’s “body man”—his personal aide—ushered visitors into the Oval Office. Today, it was a Secret Service agent, hard-bodied and hard-faced, chosen for his intimidating size and strength to match.

“Mr. President,” he said, stepping aside to allow the guest to enter as the President crossed the carpet with hands outstretched.

“William,” he said. “A helluva day!”

“I came as soon as I heard, sir,” the older man replied.

William Stryker stood a little shorter than the chief executive, but broader in the shoulders and the body. Looking at the pair of them, eyes instinctively went to Stryker as the more commanding presence. He had a full head of close-cropped hair that was still more pepper than salt, marking a distinct widow’s peak on a broad forehead above deep-set eyes that missed nothing and gave away even less. This was not a man to face at poker, nor at chess. His cheeks were clean-shaven, but he favored a neatly trimmed mustache and beard around his mouth. He was a rugged man and utterly direct, so much so that people’s first impressions cataloged him as having no subtlety or grace whatsoever, akin to plastering the shell of a Rolls-Royce over the body and soul of a Mack truck. It was a facade Stryker cultivated deliberately, and well. He made his career on the backs of adversaries who’d underestimated him. It was a mistake they rarely made twice, because he just as rarely allowed them to survive.

Without preamble, he leaned over the President's desk and idly rubbed a finger across the gash made by the mutant's knife.

"It was close, wasn't it?" he said, in a voice as accustomed to being heard on a battlefield as in the halls of Congress. "Far closer than anyone's admitted."

George McKenna didn't reply at once. He waited for the door to close, for the two men to be alone—that is, if he didn't count the two Secret Service agents flanking the fireplace and a young woman standing over in the corner. Obviously a secretary, so unassuming and inconspicuous it was easy to forget she was even there. Which made Stryker smile to himself as he turned toward the President. From where she sat, she had a better view of the room than the two men, which meant in any combat situation she'd be the key player. The report he'd read mentioned that a female agent had shot the mutant and probably saved the President's life. No doubt this was her.

McKenna finished pouring brandy and handed one of the cut crystal snifters to Stryker, indicating a seat on the couch. McKenna, being President, took the chair beside it.

"What do you need, William?" the President asked, meaning "What do you want?"

Stryker flicked his glance to the watching agents, which provoked a humorless chuckle from the President.

"They're here for the duration, I'm afraid," McKenna said, making a fair attempt to keep the comment light and casual. He was handling this better than Stryker had expected. "In fact, I had the devil's own time keeping them from posting agents in my own damn bedroom."

"I can imagine the first lady's reaction, sir."

"So could they. I think that's why they caved." The President took a small sip of brandy, letting the prompting expression on his face repeat the question he'd asked.

"Your authority, sir," Stryker replied, "for a special operation."

McKenna took another swallow of brandy and leaned back in his chair.

"And somehow I thought you'd come to talk about school reform."

Stryker uttered a short, barklike laugh. "That was top of your schedule for today, as I recall. Funny you should mention it, though."

He looked up, irritated, at the sound of a discreet knock. This time it was the President's aide who stuck his head in. McKenna himself, Stryker noted, wasn't surprised. The meeting wasn't to be as private as he'd first assumed.

The new arrival was a face as well known on the nation's airwaves as the President's himself, as befit someone who'd made his own run for the White House in years past. Robert Kelly, senator from Massachusetts, was ambitious enough to try again, young enough to wait, smart enough to bide his time. In the meanwhile, he continued to build a strong activist record in Congress, reaching out to conservative and liberal constituencies alike with a success that hadn't been seen since the campaign of RFK.

Stryker, who was good with details, noticed that the senator was in much better shape than he recalled. The man had a tendency to indulge himself in just about everything and used to have a knack for making a custom-tailored wardrobe look rumpled and off the rack. Not anymore. There was a crispness to his appearance and manner that echoed Stryker's own.

"I'm not sure if the two of you have ever officially met," the President said. "Senator Robert Kelly of Massachusetts, William Stryker—"

"Of No-Name, Nevada," Stryker finished.

"Mr. Stryker," Kelly said, smiling at the small joke as the two men shook hands.

"Call me William . . . Bobby," Stryker replied, intentionally using the diminutive. Kelly didn't appear to notice. His grip had improved, too. Used to be he'd close his hand around the other person's fingers in what Stryker thought of as a sissy shake. This one was palm to palm, man to man, strong and secure.

"Mr. President," Kelly said as he sat on the couch opposite, in a way that allowed him to relate to both McKenna and Stryker without moving. The President, in his chair, was able to do the same. Stryker, though, oriented as he was toward the President, was forced to turn right around to face Kelly, partially turning his back to McKenna. It was a superb tactical move, immediately putting Stryker in an awkward position. Stryker, who was far more used to doing this to others, wasn't happy, but he'd be damned if he'd allow either man to see.

"I appreciate your allowing me to sit in on this meeting," Kelly said.

"I value your input, Robert, as I do William's. He's with the . . . intelligence community . . ."

"Which element?" Kelly asked.

"It's not important," the President said.

"It's just that I'm ranking member of the Joint Intelligence Committee—"

"Robert," the President said, allowing the faintest edge to his voice, "it's not important."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"As I was saying, his task force has been studying the mutant phenomenon for us since . . . well, before my time in office."

"So I've heard, albeit only as rumors. For a man as influential as you, William, you leave damn small footprints."

"I must be slipping," Stryker said with a smile. "The idea is to leave no footprints at all."

"You definitely have some interesting ideas . . . and methods."

"I get the job done, that's true. I've followed your career with interest for years, Bobby. As I recall, you were a staunch supporter of the registration act. I must confess though, your ideas on the mutant problem appear to have . . . changed recently."

“For the best, I trust.”

“Myself, I trust in God.”

“Since Senator Kelly has been at the forefront of *both* sides of this issue,” the President interjected, “I thought his perspective would be worthwhile.”

“You’re the commander in chief, sir,” Stryker said.

“So, what are you proposing, Mr. Stryker?” Kelly asked directly.

Stryker didn’t answer at first. His pause, and the look he gave the President, made plain that he considered this a need-to-know matter and that Robert Kelly wasn’t on his personal list. The President frankly didn’t care.

“You spoke about a special operation, William,” prompted McKenna.

With a curt nod, acknowledging and accepting the President’s authority even when he bitterly disagreed with it, Stryker opened his case and spread a set of glossy surveillance photos on the table, right at the end where the President could see them but Kelly could not.

“Working with the National Reconnaissance Office, my people have gathered these surveillance photos of a mutant training facility near the town of Salem Center, in Westchester County, right by the Connecticut border.”

“How did you develop the information?”

“Discover the installation’s existence, you mean? Primarily through interrogation of one of the terrorist prisoners captured after the Liberty Island incident.”

“Eric?” Kelly asked sharply. “Eric Lehnsherr?”

“Code-named Magneto, yes,” Stryker replied.

“You have access to him?”

Intrigued by Kelly’s surge of interest, Stryker nodded. “My group developed the technology that built his plastic prison when, I might add, Mr. President, your defense department couldn’t find room for the allocation in their own budget.”

“At the time,” the President said slowly, “the need didn’t seem pressing.”

“Priorities, sir, I do understand. Threats are easily identifiable in hindsight. The challenge for a prudent and responsible leader is identifying clear and present dangers to the nation and dealing with them *before* there’s a disaster.”

He indicated another set of photographs.

“It appears,” he said, “I’m not the only one with access to the prisoner. This man”—he pointed to a bald-headed figure in a wheelchair—“we’ve identified as Charles Xavier. The leader of this training facility and a longtime associate of Mr. Lehnsherr. Apparently Xavier has . . . friends in the Justice

Department. Since Lehnsherr's incarceration, he's paid several visits."

Kelly leaned forward for a closer look at the pictures. His tone and manner were discreetly skeptical.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"Ostensibly, a school," responded Stryker with a humorless chuckle. "For 'gifted' youngsters."

He tossed a fresh set of photos on the table, for both men to see.

"We retasked a keyhole spy satellite to get these," he said. "I believe you'll agree the results are worth the expense."

For pictures taken from two hundred fifty miles above Manhattan, with camera lenses powerful enough to read the lettering on a pack of cigarettes and enhancement technology that allowed them to work as effectively at night as during the day, the results were extraordinary, and devastating.

"What's that?" asked McKenna.

"A jet."

McKenna gave him a sour look. "What kind of jet?"

"We don't know—but as you can see, it comes up out of the basketball court."

In a sequence of images, as the President passed the eight by ten sheets across to Kelly, they saw a court behind the main house slide apart to allow an elevator platform to rise to the surface from what had to be an underground hangar. The plane that was revealed was unlike anything the President had ever seen, twin engined and twin tailed with forward-swept wings. It rose into the air on vertical thrusters, shifted to horizontal flight, and was quickly gone from sight, as its flight path and the satellite's orbital track took the vehicles in opposite directions.

"I've talked to the Air Force," Stryker said. "I've talked to DARPA"—the Defense Advanced Research and Planning Agency. "They don't even have aircraft with capabilities like this on their drawing boards. And it clearly represents the ultimate in stealth technology as well. We examined every radar record we could find, civil and military, for the time and course indicated. Not a trace."

Stryker waved his arm to encompass the Oval Office, with a pointed look at one wall where the bullet holes from the attack hadn't yet been patched.

"You gentlemen ask yourselves: How could this have happened?" he snorted in disgust. "How could it *not* have?"

Kelly held up another photo. "These are *children*."

"Being trained, being indoctrinated, for what purpose, Senator?" retorted Stryker. "How many miles of news footage are there from the Middle East, showing children dressed up as terrorists?"

"These are American citizens, none of whom—that I'm aware of—have committed any crime."

Stryker turned to the President: "Sir, if we had been allowed to do our jobs before this attack—"

“What would you need?” McKenna asked.

“Just your authorization.”

“To *dowhat* precisely?” Kelly demanded, because he knew the President would not.

Again Stryker ignored him, concentrating solely on McKenna. “Don’t misunderstand my goals, Mr. President. I just want to go in there—to see precisely what they’re up to. If they have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear.”

“It’s illegal,” snapped Kelly.

“Not if they’re terrorists,” replied Stryker calmly. “For over a year now, we’ve been tracking this mutant in particular. His origins are European, but we believe there is a possible affiliation with this institution.”

He pulled a last photo from his case and held it out to the President.

“This was taken three months ago,” Stryker finished, but there was no more need for him to make his case. The moment McKenna saw the picture, his decision was made.

The figure in the picture was humanoid—that is, two arms, two legs, central trunk, bilateral symmetry. Two big digits on hands and feet, skin of indigo blue, hair a slight shade darker. Gleaming yellow eyes, fangs, pointed ears, and a long, pointed tail all combined to give him the look of a modish gargoyle come to life. He was snarling.

He was the assassin who’d almost killed this President.

“Listen to me, William,” said McKenna, in the same still tone of absolute command he used with the joint chiefs. “You enter. You detain. You question.” His voice took on a faint but unmistakable edge. “But the last thing I want to hear is that we’ve spilled the blood of an innocent child, mutant or otherwise. You understand?”

“Absolutely, Mr. President,” Stryker replied.

The meeting over, Stryker had already reached the hallway outside the President’s suite of offices by the time Kelly caught up with him. Repairs were much more evident here, as were armed guards.

“You made a powerful argument, William,” he said.

“The evidence made the case, Bobby.” Stryker indicated a lovely Asian woman who’d obviously been waiting for him. She wore a discreet but attractive business suit and carried herself in a way that made Kelly think *Bodyguard*. She wore light sunglasses that allowed a view of her eyes but not of their color. “Please allow me to introduce Yuriko Oyama. She’s my director of . . . special projects.”

They shook hands. But when Kelly relaxed his grip, she tightened hers, just for a moment, enough to mean business.

Kelly obliged her with a wince, and once his hand was free he shook it a few times, wriggling his fingers to make sure they still worked.

“That’s quite a handshake,” he told her.

As Stryker and his assistant started for the exit, Kelly matched their pace. After a couple of steps, Stryker—eager and determined to be rid of him—stopped and confronted the younger man.

“What can I do for you, Senator?” he asked.

“Eric Lehnsherr’s prison” was Kelly’s quick reply. “If possible, I’d like to arrange a visit.”

Stryker snorted. “It isn’t a petting zoo, Senator. In this conflict, he’s the enemy. You’re just a spectator. Do us both a favor, and sit this one out, all right?”

“Are you trying to turn this into some kind of war?”

Outside the Oval Office, Stryker didn’t bother to hide his deep contempt. “Senator”—and the way he said it turned that title into a profound insult—“I was piloting black-ops missions into the jungles of North Vietnam while you were suckling your momma’s titties at Woodstock.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed? We lost that one—*Billy*.”

Contempt turned instantly and completely to fury, but Stryker kept it confined to his eyes and his voice. He moved in close to Kelly, speaking in a clipped, parade-ground cadence that no one else would hear, jabbing his thumb right to the base of the other man’s breastbone hard enough to hurt. If looks could kill, the man facing him would have been burned to ash. Kelly, though, paid no attention to either.

“Don’t you *dare* presume to lecture me about war, Senator. You don’t want this to turn into a war? Sonny boy, we’re already there. The trouble is bleeding hearts like you who are too damn dumb to realize it!”

“I appreciate your concerns. I’m simply suggesting that perhaps your operation deserves a second thought.”

“And I’m saying that you have no idea at all what’s going on around you. I really do hate to break this off, but I’m afraid you’re making me late for a rather pressing appointment. Good day, Senator.”

He and Yuriko strode quickly away. As Kelly watched them go, his expression darkening with every step, a cloud seemed to pass across his eyes. Iris and pupil disappeared as the whole substance of his eyes suddenly, and momentarily, turned chrome yellow, the same shade as the assassin’s.

Then, with a blink, they were back to normal. No one around him had noticed.

His own steps were hurried and purposeful as the senator took his leave. He had some pretty urgent appointments himself.

Chapter

Four

In the 1950s, with the world perpetually poised on the brink of Armageddon, strategic planners had to devise a means for the government of the nation to survive a global thermonuclear war. The presumption was that Washington and its environs, which included the Pentagon and a whole host of major military installations, would be prime targets. What was required, therefore, was a location sufficiently far away to escape the brutal impact of multimegaton hydrogen bombs, yet convenient enough for the President and senior members of the civilian and military hierarchy to get there before the region was destroyed.

The choice was the Appalachian Mountains, due west of the capital, along a stretch of peaks that formed one wall of the Shenandoah Valley and also demarcated the border between Virginia and its neighbor West Virginia. The installation was built using the same principals employed in the construction of the headquarters of the North American Air Defense Command, inside the heart of Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado. A couple of mountains were hollowed out at the base, so that the ancient stone itself would provide the bulk of the protection for the people sheltering within. The compartments that filled this newly emptied space rested on gigantic shock absorbers. It was guaranteed by the designers and builders that only a direct hit would do any substantial damage. It was outfitted with state-of-the-art technology and hardware, together with resources to sustain the survivors for years if necessary.

Thankfully, it was never used.

With the ongoing collapse of the Soviet Union, and the consequent lessening of the traditional nuclear threat, this secret haven became gradually less important in the strategic scheme of things. It was considered an icon of a bygone age, like the battleship. Most in government simply forgot about it.

Not William Stryker.

As it became increasingly clear in recent years that the mutant situation, which he'd been addressing with increasing passion and vehemence, was something that had to be taken seriously, the question then arose: What to do with the mutants if things went bad? Where could the government possibly incarcerate a mutant criminal?

Mount Haven was Stryker's answer.

And Eric Lehnsherr became its first inmate.

As befit a man who styled himself the "master of magnetism," his cell was plastic, suspended by pliable plastic cables and beams in one of the chambers of the mountain that had been hollowed out but never fully converted. What had been left was a monumental box of a space, easily a thousand feet square, buried more than a thousand beneath the surface. The stone of the mountain itself was nonferrous, and the chamber's walls had been lined with molded plastic that was as strong as steel. The cell was transparent, as was all the furniture. The only opaque items were the inmate's clothes and the sheets and blankets on his bed, as well as the few items of reading material allowed him.

He was under constant surveillance, scanned by a vast array of cameras and electronic sensors and a full complement of guards. Their orders were strict and absolute. No metal of any kind was to be permitted into the stone chamber, much less the cell itself. No significant amount of metal—whether furniture or vehicles or even weapons—was to be permitted within a half mile of his cell. One positive surprise effect of his incarceration was a quantum leap in the practical design and technology applications of plastics.

The prisoner's clothes were a form of wearable paper, fastened with Velcro. As a condition of

employment, guards had to have their metal fillings replaced by porcelain. You violated the rules, you got fired. No exceptions.

No one knew the true extent of Lehnsherr's power. No one wanted to find out the hard way. Better to conceive of the worst-case scenario and take all precautions from there.

Thing was, the man himself didn't look so fearsome. In person, the face possessed a dignity and a humanity that the holographic image Scott beheld at Xavier's lacked. His intelligence and his commitment were immediately clear. He was a man whose soul had been tempered by the most inhuman furnace, the great kilns of Auschwitz that had claimed his parents, his family, the life he knew and the one he'd dreamed of. He had survived there. He would survive here. Of that, plainly he had no doubt.

Access to his cell came through an umbilical walkway, a plastic tube that extended like an airport's jetway from the nearer wall. He didn't set down the book he was reading, T. H. White's masterwork about the life of King Arthur, *The Once and Future King*, until he heard the bolts cycle and the docking port at his end slide open.

Close up, the bruises on Lehnsherr's face were evident. The look on the face of the man entering the cell made it plain that he was the one who had inflicted them and was looking forward to delivering more. Mitchell Laurio had been chosen specifically to look after the prisoner at a time when it appeared certain his next visit to a prison would be as an inmate rather than a guard. Two felony indictments had been quashed to bring him here—for brutality, of course—and the day he started he was told the recorders would be turned off whenever he was in Lehnsherr's cell. He wasn't allowed to break any bones, he couldn't kill the old man.

Outside of that, he was told, anything goes.

This was nothing new to the prisoner. He wasn't yet even a teenager when he received his first beating from an SS guard. He also remembered what he'd done to that guard, years later, to repay him.

He met Laurio with a level gaze, eyes as deep and unreadable as an ocean abyss.

"Mr. Laurio," he said almost pleasantly, in his rounded, cultured voice that had its own distinct touch of England. "How long can we keep this up?"

Laurio cracked his knuckles. "How long you in for?"

"Forever."

"Not necessarily forever," Stryker said pleasantly from the walkway as he followed Laurio into the cell. "Just until I have what I need."

"Mr. Stryker," Lehnsherr said, his tone giving no sense of how he felt, his body language almost relaxed. "How kind of you to visit. Have you come back to make sure the taxpayer's dollars are keeping me . . . comfortable?"

"Simply a case of the punishment fitting the crime. Heads of state don't take kindly to being attacked. Quite a few of them wanted you killed. Without, I might add, benefit of a trial."

"How fortunate for you that, merely by labeling me a terrorist combatant, the government removed all need for such legal niceties."

“The ACLU is still filing briefs on your behalf. You never know, they may find the right judge, he may accept their writ of habeas corpus.”

Both men knew that day would never come. Lehnsherr was here until he died, or found another way. The same rules as Auschwitz.

“In the meantime . . .”

Lehnsherr’s eyes narrowed fractionally as Stryker withdrew a plastic case from an inside pocket of his suit jacket, and from that a small pipette of glowing yellow liquid. The prisoner started up from his chair, a reflexive gesture of resistance, which was just what Laurio was waiting for.

A swift, sharp application of his billy club to the back of the legs collapsed Lehnsherr’s knees out from under him; an equally cruel jab to the side made the prisoner gasp. Laurio grabbed Lehnsherr’s right arm in a brutal hammerlock, forcing the trapped hand almost all the way up to the other man’s neck, clearly disappointed not to hear even a whimper of pain as he did. With his free hand he forced Lehnsherr’s face flat against the table and held it there as if gripped in a vise, turned so that the base of his skull was exposed to reveal a scar right at the brain stem, in the shape of a perfect circle.

Lehnsherr bared his teeth, ever so slightly, his sole gesture of defiance as Stryker leaned forward and delicately, carefully, placed two drops directly on the scar. They bubbled, like hydrogen peroxide foaming away bacteria on a wound, and were absorbed.

Lehnsherr’s face relaxed, his eyes wide, pupils dilating to their limit. Stryker nodded approvingly: After the initial exposure, results were virtually instantaneous.

Laurio yanked Lehnsherr up by the collar and deposited him back in his chair. There was no readable expression whatsoever on the prisoner’s face; but for the metronomic rise and fall of his chest he might have been a mannequin.

Stryker put away the pipette and its case and perched himself on the corner of the table, reaching down to catch Lehnsherr by the chin and tilt the other man’s face up to his. Lehnsherr didn’t react to him at all. Perfect.

“Now, Eric—may I call you Eric? Course I can, ’cause thanks to my little serum here, we’re the best of friends. And friends have no secrets from one another, am I right? So while we have this special time together, I’d like to have one final talk about the school that you and Charles Xavier built. And especially that wonderful machine you both call Cerebro.”

Back at the school, Bobby Drake was flirting. He’d started with a shared Dr Pepper, to go with popcorn and a mix of Skittles and M&M’s in Marie’s favorite colors, while they gathered with a clutch of other kids in a corner of the common room to watch some DVDs. They tried broadcast, but most of the networks were still showcasing their in-house talking heads with more pointless blather about the attempted assassination.

She wasn’t in the mood for talking, she never was after one of those encounters she called “imprinting,” so he handled most of the conversation himself. He was a Boston boy and proud of it and didn’t mind sharing. He talked of baseball at Fenway and how like every true believer he dreamed of the day the Red Sox would reclaim the World Series for their own, or at least stomp the hated Yankees on the way to a

pennant. He talked about rowing on the Charles and sailing out of Marblehead and giant dunes that filled the shores of Cape Cod. Every now and then he'd pause, offering her an opening to talk about her home in return, but she wasn't interested.

She didn't seem bored, either, which he took as a good sign.

Somewhere along the way, their fingers brushed. Marie flinched, even though she was wearing gloves and there was no danger, but Bobby was ready for that. He covered the gesture by challenging her to a bout of thumb wrestling. She didn't believe her ears at first, who the hell thumb wrestles anymore? When Bobby assured her it was the done thing in Beantown, she muttered, "That 'splains a lot." But when he waggled his hand at her, cocking his thumb in challenge, she responded with a grin, shifted herself on the couch to face him, and held out her own hand.

She trapped him in a heartbeat. She was faster than she acted and way stronger, easily able to wiggle free whenever he tried to pin her and then turn the tables. He kept coming back for more, though, and she continued to let him, stifling the occasional giggle.

Neither of them realized they were being watched or, worse, recorded. Catching a nuance of expression, Peter Rasputin applied his eraser to paper and then tweaked a couple of pencil lines to make art more like life. He was sketching, which is what he did every chance he got, which was a strange sight to see in a young man the size and build of a small mountain. He stood six-foot-eight, with a physique and the natural athletic talent that would make any NFL head coach weep for joy. He played passable sports—not because he wasn't any good, but because he wasn't interested. His great and abiding love was the images that flowed down his arm from eye to pencil and from there to paper. He'd started drawing almost as soon as he could hold a pencil. It was what defined his life.

Right now he was having some fun with the lovebirds.

"Is that them?" asked a much smaller figure craning over his shoulder. Flea was on the short side to begin with, so when the two of them were together it was like parking a toy airplane beside a working 747.

Peter grunted. He was usually nonverbal when he was working, which was pretty much all the time. The other kids were used to it.

The picture was recognizably Bobby and Marie, even though Peter was intentionally erring on the side of caricature. They were in the early stages of a kiss. From the expression on Marie's face, she looked embarked on a course of major league passion. Bobby may have had that idea at the start. Right now, he was being electrocuted. Arms and legs akimbo, hair extended to full length, eyes bugging from their sockets in a classic Tex Avery pose, his body surrounded by a corona of shock waves and speed lines and appropriate other pyrotechnics.

"This," Flea chortled, "I would pay to see."

Peter blinked, shifting mental gears to reengage himself with his surroundings, and shook his head.

"No," he said, origins immediately revealed by his Russian-accented English, "because it would be wrong."

"Then you better say something, big guy," Flea said with irrepressible glee, "'cause they're goin' for the gold!"

No more thumb wrestling. The couple were just holding hands now. Neither was initiating the move; they were moving together of their own accord as fascination overcame common sense.

Peter opened his mouth, aware they'd likely hate him for it, but never got the chance to do any more as the roar of an unmuffled Harley rumbled over the house. The sound rose in a steady crescendo as the bike raced up the long drive toward the house and just as suddenly went silent, right outside.

By then, Marie was on her feet, the bowl of popcorn and treats flying off her lap, Bobby completely forgotten as she charged the front door with a cry of "Logan!"

"Miss me, kid?" the Canadian growled as he sauntered inside.

She answered by hurling herself into his arms, and for that first minute, they just held each other, before she pushed against him just enough to clear some room between them, assumed what she hoped was a languid and uninvolved expression, and drawled, "Not really."

Logan laughed, and her expression immediately changed as she intuited that he hadn't done that in quite a while. Before she could ask about him, though, and perhaps as a way of deflecting those questions, Logan jutted his chin toward the boy standing just inside the foyer.

"Who's this?" Logan asked.

"This is Bobby," she told him, with just enough of a hitch to her voice to make his eyes crinkle with amusement. Along with his healing factor, Logan possessed exceptionally acute physical senses, and they told him volumes about Rogue's feelings for the boy, probably more than she admitted to herself. A faint flush to the skin, a change in pulse and respiration, the faintest of goose bumps at the hollow of her throat said there was something serious at work here.

The cues radiating off the boy were even less subtle.

"Her boyfriend," Bobby said flatly, looking the older man in the eye.

Logan held out a hand, Bobby took it, and immediately there was the faint crackle of ice and a burst of frozen vapor into the air between them. Rogue muttered under her breath, but Logan sensed she was also pleased. The two men in her life were fighting over her. *Cool!*

"They call me Iceman," Bobby said, unnecessarily.

Logan looked totally unimpressed. He flexed his hand to shake free the last bits of ice clinging to his skin hair and looked toward Rogue.

"Boyfriend?" he inquired innocently. "So, ah, how do you two—"

Rogue blushed crimson and turned away, and Bobby colored a little bit himself.

"We're working on that."

"Ohhh-kay," Logan said. "Lemme know how it turns out. Meantime, I need the prof—"

"Well, well, well," called a throaty contralto from the stairs. "Look who's come back."

Logan returned Storm's smile, hers unrestrained, his much more guarded.

"Isn't that what the prodigal son does?"

"We certainly won't fault your timing."

"Eh?" Logan wondered.

"We need a baby-sitter."

"I'm outta here, darlin'."

"No, you aren't, my friend." She gave him a proper hug and a kiss on the cheek. "It's good to see you, Logan."

"Likewise," he replied, but he no longer had eyes for her. She didn't need to be told who'd followed her down the stairs.

"Hey," he said to Jean.

"Hi," she told him. "Welcome home."

Storm picked up the cue that neither of the others were aware they were broadcasting and flicked her fingers in the general direction of Bobby and Rogue. A puff of breeze whirled across the foyer to give them a gentle push back toward the common room. They took the hint, with all manner of semisecret giggles at how the tables had suddenly been reversed.

"I'll go preflight the *Blackbird*," Storm said, but she might as well have been speaking to herself.

"Bye, Logan," Rogue called out as Bobby pulled her through the double doorway.

"Later," Logan replied absently.

"Nice to meet you, sir," said Bobby.

"You, too, kid." Then, at last, once they were alone, to Jean: "You look good."

"You, too," she said, descending the last few steps to the foyer. They kept a distance between them because the signals their bodies were giving were pushing hard to bring them together. She took refuge in business. "You heard about what's happened in Washington?"

"Haven't stopped except for gas since morning," he answered with a nod. He'd pushed the bike to its limits, on back roads and interstates, covering better than a thousand miles over the course of the day.

"Storm and I are heading for Boston," she continued. "Cerebro has tagged the mutant who attacked the President. Professor Xavier wants us to try and make contact. We won't be gone long."

"I just got here."

"And you'll be here when we get back—unless you plan on running off again."

“If this hitter’s the real deal, you could use some muscle taking him down.”

That made her laugh. “We can handle ourselves, thank you very much.”

He shrugged, posing nonchalance. “Then I guess I can probably think of a few reasons to stick around.”

“That’s my guy.”

“Find what you were looking for, Logan?” called Scott, entering the foyer and catching sight of them both.

Logan didn’t spare him a glance. “More or less,” he said.

Jean broke their eye contact and strode across the floor to Scott, hating the moment and hating her reactions even more. She didn’t like being out of control, of herself, of situations. She was a doctor, with a doctor’s abhorrence of surprises and chaos. Logan was the personification of chaos. Sometimes she couldn’t stand the little runt, he couldn’t hold a candle to Scott in any respect—or so she told herself. Yet she couldn’t get him out of her thoughts. And the thoughts she had of him made her nervous.

“I’ll see you later,” she said to Scott.

“Be safe, okay?”

“Always,” she said, and gave him a powerful, passionate kiss that was undercut a moment later as she couldn’t help looking back at Logan. “You, too,” she said, telling herself she was talking to them both, while both men knew that wasn’t quite true.

Logan tossed Scott the keys to the bike.

“Good wheels,” he said. “Needs gas.”

Without missing a beat, Scott grabbed the keys out of the air and tossed them right back.

“Fill her up, then.”

“If you say so, bub,” Logan muttered under his breath. He watched the taller man walk away and permitted himself a grin while jumping the keys up and down in his palm. He liked surprises, and Scott was proving more full of them than he’d ever imagined.

I’m downstairs, Logan, came a familiar voice in his head.

He didn’t move at first. He stood in the foyer, breathing in a slow, deep cadence, filtering out the myriad scents filling the air around him until just one remained. She favored Folavril, Annick Goutal. He’d know her anywhere and, more importantly for him, find her anywhere.

He knew he was keeping Xavier waiting. Didn’t bother him a bit.

He found the professor in what was literally the heart of the underground complex, buried deep beneath the mansion proper and extending for hundreds of yards under the estate. He’d wondered from the start how something this big could have been built in complete secrecy, but when he considered the

capabilities of the man responsible, it no longer seemed like such a mystery.

At the end of a main hallway stood a circular door that would have done justice to a Federal Reserve bank vault. Its diameter was twice Logan's height, and it was easily a couple of feet thick. Through that portal, a gallery walkway led out to a circular platform in what he assumed was the center of the room, but there was no way of knowing if that was really true. The curvature of the interior walls near the doorway suggested that the room was a great globe, but a wicked trick of design and lighting made it impossible for anyone, even Logan with his enhanced senses, to perceive its true dimensions. He couldn't see the far wall, or the summit, or the base, and the anechoic properties of the tiling deadened sound to such an extent that there wasn't even a ghost of an echo. He thought of pitching a penny but suspected he wouldn't hear it make contact.

Psychically, this was a "clean room." The only thoughts that entered were the ones Charles Xavier permitted or sought out himself.

Xavier was seated in his wheelchair on the central dais, adjusting the controls of the main console. There was a skeletal helmet on the panel, connected to it by a pair of umbilical cables that ran from either ear flap. That, Logan knew, was the receiver. The room itself was a focusing chamber for Cerebro, a titanic array of sensors, daisy-chained multiprocessors, and resonance amplifiers all intended to magnify Xavier's already considerable telepathic abilities to a quantum level.

Without looking up from his work, Xavier said aloud: "Logan, my repeated requests about smoking in the mansion notwithstanding, continue smoking *that inhere . . .*"

Idly Logan took the cigar from his mouth and looked at it. He hadn't indulged during the entire last leg on the cycle; he'd lit it up on the walk downstairs without a second thought to the propriety—or the consequences. A man with a built-in healing factor doesn't have to worry about lung cancer.

Xavier finished silently, mind to mind: . . . *and you will spend the rest of your days under the belief that you are a six-year-old girl.*

With the thought came an image: Logan in a frilly party dress, something out of the Barbie collection, with layer upon layer of silk and crinoline petticoats, bows galore, ankle socks, and patent-leather shoes.

Both men registered the *snikt* of his claws extending, from the hand that held the cigar, but Logan made no move.

"I'll have Jean braid your hair," Xavier said aloud, and mentally tweaked the image to match, in a way that was so ridiculous and over the top that Logan couldn't help snorting in rough, rude humor.

They'd each had their moment and taken the measure of each other. Xavier probably could impose his psychic will on Logan, but he also now knew that, either right at the start or some inevitable time down the line, the berserker in Logan's soul would square accounts—and he would likely die for it.

Logan thought then of the kids upstairs as he put his claws away and crushed the burning embers against the palm of his left hand. The students didn't have a healing factor.

"Please, Logan," Xavier said, "come in."

"What's the phrase? 'Enter freely and of your own will'?"

“Dracula to Jonathan Harker, welcoming him to his castle. Is that how you see me?”

“You’re the telepath, you tell me.”

“I don’t go into other people’s minds on a casual basis.”

“You don’t like to pry?” Logan didn’t believe him.

“It’s not as easy as you think, or as pleasant. The danger is, it could be: *easy and* pleasant. To play the voyeur, to play the puppet master.”

“Power corrupts.”

“Power should breed responsibility. That’s why I built this school.”

Xavier rolled his chair into place at the console and set the helmet on his head. At once the chamber itself began to hum.

“You sure I should be here, Prof?” Logan asked. From the way the others talked, Xavier didn’t allow visitors when he used his toy, but the door had closed behind him.

“Just don’t move, all right?”

He did, though, the couple of steps remaining to take him to the platform just behind and beside Xavier, following the push of an instinct that had never played him false. He gasped as the fabric of the platform seemed to dissolve beneath him. There was a sensation of falling, like going over the top of the first riser at the ultimate roller coaster to start the plunge straight down to oblivion—or something even wilder.

Then, just as suddenly, he was at rest again, in the same position with Xavier as before, in the center of a giant three-dimensional representation of the world. Dotted across the land masses, lightly dusted here and there over the oceans, were uncountable numbers of white and scarlet lights that reminded Logan of fireflies or stars blazing in the heavens. There were a fair number of red, but they were no comparison to their counterparts.

“These lights,” Xavier said with the same hushed reverence reserved for speaking inside a cathedral, “represent the whole of humanity. Every living soul on Earth.”

“Lemme guess,” Logan said. “The red ones are us.”

Obligingly the white lights faded away. Only scarlet remained.

“These are the mutants,” Xavier acknowledged, impressed by Logan’s quick insight. “Many of them don’t even realize yet who they are, what they will become. We’re not quite as alone as some of us might think.”

“I found the base at Alkali Lake.” He thought of the slash marks on the wall, and decided to keep the thought to himself, partly to see if Xavier was peeking. “There was nothing there.”

Surprisingly, as far as he could tell, the other man didn’t even try.

Around them, the globe appeared to rush toward them, giving them a vastly expanded bird’s-eye view

of the northeastern seaboard of the United States, the fabled BosNYWash megalopolis. Then Xavier blanked all the extraneous signals as well, leaving just a small scattering, which Logan deduced, from their placement and intensity, were himself, the professor, and the others who qualified as X-Men. There was also a jagged scarlet line running from Washington all the way to Boston.

“That trail,” Xavier pointed out, “represents the path of the mutant who attacked the President.”

“Jean said you were sending her and Storm after him.”

Xavier nodded. The scene above them resolved even more tightly on the Boston metropolitan area. Here, though, the trail, the contact waypoints, became more scattered and indistinct.

“I’m finding it hard to lock in on him,” he confessed.

“Can’t you just . . . I dunno, concentrate harder?”

“If I wanted to kill him, certainly.”

“You can do that?”

Xavier spared him a long and measured glance. “Easily.”

“Guys I know would pay a fortune for a skill like that.”

The scene changed again, zooming in again to a neighborhood in the South End.

The single scarlet light was blinking. After a moment, latitude and longitude points were displayed and, a moment after that, the appropriate cross streets.

“There,” Xavier said. “It appears our quarry has finally stopped running and gone to ground.”

He closed his eyes, and—presto!—the illusion vanished, and Logan found himself once more on the central platform with Xavier. An eddy of fresh air told him without looking that the door had cycled open. He wasn’t interested.

“I need you to read my mind again.”

Xavier took his time before replying, and Logan ignored the fatigue that caused it.

“And I told you it isn’t that easy,” he said at last. “I’m afraid the results will be no different than before.”

“We had a deal.”

“Logan.” Xavier spoke more sharply than he’d intended, and he took a pause to dial his irritation back a notch. “The mind is not a box to be simply unlocked and opened, its contents parceled out willy-nilly for the world to see. On one level, it’s a beehive, with a million separate compartments. Yet on another, all those compartments are bound together, interconnected in a multidimensional holographic maze that would put the Gordian knot to shame. One moment of your life, one image of your memory, doesn’t lead in sequential, linear fashion to the next. It splinters off into a thousand different directions, each valid, each needing to be investigated. That takes time, that takes care.

“And that’s just a normal mind.

“The problem with yours is, someone’s already taken the Alexander the Great approach to untangling the mysteries—or perhaps to tangle them beyond all recovery.”

“I’m messed up. So what else is new?”

“Logan, sometimes there are things the mind needs to discover for itself.” As Xavier placed the helmet back on its pedestal, Logan felt a faint tap on the inside of his consciousness, akin to someone rapping a knuckle on his forehead. *You have a healing factor, he “heard” Xavier say without speaking aloud, a most remarkable ability. Trust it to do the same with your psyche as it does so well with your physical body.*

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” Xavier finished aloud. “You might make things worse.”

There was a fresh scent in the doorway: Ivory Soap and Old Spice, with a faint Armani chaser that had to come from Jean. Scott was standing there expectantly, dressed for the road. He wasn’t pleased to see Logan in here, any more than he had been to see him with Jean. As if Logan gave a tinker’s damn.

“I promise you, Logan,” Xavier said as he wheeled himself from the chamber, “we’ll talk more when I return. In the meanwhile . . .”

“You need a baby-sitter, Storm mentioned.”

“If you would be so kind as to chaperone the children tonight, Scott and I are going to pay a visit to an old friend.”

“Yo, Charley,” Logan called as Scott pushed the chair down the hall. He knew Xavier hated such familiarity, but he figured, since he’d backed down over the smoking, he was entitled. “When you see Magneto, give him my regards. Tell him to rot in hell. For what he did to Rogue, he got off easy.”

Chapter

Five

As she strode a bit too briskly into the hangar, almost fleeing the exchange that had just taken place in the foyer, Jean Grey couldn’t help but take a moment to admire the magnificent aircraft waiting for her.

It was black as deep space, a paint scheme perfected by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to make a plane visually undetectable once the sun went down. The lines of the great jet were so sleek she seemed to be cutting through the air even while standing still, the slightly canted nose flowing aft past where the fuselage flared naturally into the main body of the hull above air intakes for the tremendously powerful ramjets. These engines were so powerful that Jean could stand upright in the intakes with room to spare. The wings themselves were swept sharply forward, in defiance of traditional design philosophy, creating an airframe that compensated for its inherent instability with the ability to perform combat aerobatics over a breadth of speeds and altitudes that its nearest rivals couldn’t hope to match. If it had any rivals worth the name.

They called her the *Blackbird*, as a tribute to the greatest achievement of one of the premier designers in aviation history, the justly famed Kelly Johnson, head of the equally renowned Skunk Works aeronautics team of Lockheed Aircraft. In the early 1960s the Skunk Works built an aircraft that was a generational leap ahead of anything else in the air. Only in retrospect, as years turned into decades, did the flying community realize just how spectacular an achievement that was. For the whole of its operational life, which extended right to the dawn of the twenty-first century, the SR-71 regularly flew higher, faster, and farther than pilots had ever gone before.

This vehicle was what came next, the product of a bunch of geniuses with a crazy idea and a man with the wherewithal to bankroll it to fruition. The geniuses were aeronautical engineers, downsized with their industry as the Cold War gradually came to an end. The money, of course, came from Xavier, who required something quick and stealthy, with a host of revolutionary capabilities, to transport his prospective team of heroes.

As before, the gearheads built far better than they realized. This *Blackbird* could take off like a helicopter and punch her way into a suborbital trajectory at velocities that would take her from one side of the globe to the other in barely an hour. Even better, the same structural integrity that allowed her to traverse the atmosphere to near-Earth space and back again also permitted a moderate immersion in shallow water. She couldn't move well beneath the surface, but you could definitely hide her there.

Jean was a competent pilot, but Scott and Storm were the ones who loved to fly. It was a toss-up which of them could handle the plane best. Scott had the knack for teasing the best out of the machine, but Storm's elemental powers gave her an awareness of the atmosphere the others could only imagine, allowing her to instinctively find the ideal path through the air.

She was in the left-hand pilot's seat as Jean climbed aboard, pulling the hatch closed behind her.

"Where we at?" Jean asked, taking the copilot's seat and locking her four-point harness closed. They'd both changed for the flight, into their X-Men uniforms, snug-fitting suits of what looked and felt like designer leather but which also served as highly effective body armor. For some reason, Storm had chosen to accessorize hers with a cloak that Jean had to concede looked pretty damn good on her and didn't seem to hinder her movements in the slightest. Jean had left her own outfit as is. It made her smile to recall that Logan had hated his on sight, though he didn't look half bad in it, either.

She caught Storm staring and blushed, realizing she hadn't heard a word the other woman had just said to her, or sensed a thought.

"Checklist," Storm repeated, shaking her head in amusement. In all the years they'd known each other, Jean had never let herself become so flustered.

They were a well-practiced team, and their work was quickly done. After making sure there were no planes in their vicinity, they damped the interior lights and cracked the surface hatch. Overhead, the basketball court in the athletic yard split in two and slid apart, allowing the great aircraft to rise almost silently into the night sky. Both women gave a wave to the kids they knew would be watching from their upstairs bedrooms, and then, as they cleared the surrounding trees and the roof of the mansion, Storm turned the nose toward Breakstone Lake and shifted to horizontal flight mode.

In less than a minute they were a mile high and miles removed from the school, slipping into the stratosphere at a speed that would carry them to Boston in a quarter hour, tops. The shape of the *Blackbird* made her as impossible for a radar to detect as the paint scheme foiled visual sighting. This

meant plane and crew had to be extra vigilant for any other aircraft sharing the increasingly crowded Northeast sky. Occasionally that meant taking a more circuitous route, to avoid even the risk of contact.

Immediately after takeoff, both women felt the familiar presence of Xavier's thoughts among their own.

I'm sending you the coordinates of your target's current location, he told them telepathically. Scott and I are en route to Mount Haven Prison. We'll be incommunicado until we leave the facility. Once you land, you have to rely on your own skills to track him.

"We'll be fine, sir," Storm assured him aloud.

"Let's hope he cooperates," Jean muttered, thankful for the refuge of potential action as she struggled to keep her conflicted thoughts to herself.

Storm engaged the autopilot, but Jean paid no attention as she stared out the canopy window. For all she actually noticed, a blank wall would have served just as well.

Storm's eyes narrowed as the tempo of the great ramjets increased, the surge of power making itself felt as vibration through the body of the aircraft as well as through sound. She checked the throttles and the flight dynamics liquid crystal display for a status update on the engines.

The airframe shuddered slightly as they passed the sound barrier, and miles below, amid the hills that crowded the Connecticut and Massachusetts border, she knew people would be looking around in surprise at the distant thunder of their sonic boom.

Storm disengaged the autopilot, shifting to manual flight mode, and retarded the throttles, but that did no good; their speed continued to increase, and at the rate they were gaining altitude, the *Blackbird* would be suborbital in mere minutes. Great for a hop over the pond to London and the professor's Scots associate Moira MacTaggart; utterly useless for a short-haul trip of a couple of hundred miles to Beantown.

The problem, she realized, wasn't with the controls. Someone was bypassing them to manipulate the airframe and mechanical systems directly.

"Jean," she said, and when her friend didn't reply, she repeated herself, a little more loudly, accompanying her call with a touch of Jean's arm that carried with it just the gentlest shock of lightning.

Jean jolted awake like a student who'd been caught napping in class, denial vying visibly on her face with embarrassment for prominence.

"Sorry," she said quickly, "I'm sorry," shaking the cobwebs from her brain and releasing every hold her teke powers had placed on the aircraft.

This time, when Storm slowed down the engines, they complied, and she turned the *Blackbird* into a sweeping descent out over the Atlantic that would quickly bring them to their destination.

"You okay?" Storm asked Jean, who at first didn't seem quite sure how to answer.

"All of a sudden," Jean replied, trying to make what had just happened a joke, "damned if I know."

"Something wrong?"

“It’s nothing.” Jean shook her head, wriggled in her sheepskin-covered seat to make herself more comfortable, even though both of them knew it was anything but. “I was thinking, y’know, if only we could make the flight go faster. I guess my wish fulfillment kinda got . . . carried away.”

“Ah” was Storm’s only comment. It spoke volumes.

“What?” Jean demanded.

“Nothing. I asked, you answered, end of story.”

“*What*, Ororo, for God’s sake!”

The other woman shrugged. “Maybe it’s just that Logan’s back in town.”

Jean slumped in her chair, as much as her harness would allow. “Oh, God, it shows.”

“Jean,” Storm said flatly, “the sun ‘shows’ every morning when it rises. It has nothing on you.”

“Why me?” Jean muttered, covering her eyes with her hands. “Why him? It isn’t fair.”

“You annoyed or tempted?”

“Truth, both.”

“Ouch!”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“He has the look,” Storm agreed with a throaty chuckle.

“Then take him off my hands, please, before there’s a disaster.” To illustrate her point, she waved her hands to encompass the flight deck and remind Storm what had nearly happened mere minutes before.

“Grown woman like you, grown man like him, you saying you can’t set a proper example for the children?”

“You’re gonna bust my butt forever about this, aren’t you?”

Storm turned serious. “I like him, Jean. But what I feel, it’s minor league. You two, you’re the show.”

“It’s pure chemistry,” Jean told herself as much as Storm. “I’ve never experienced anything like it. I see him, and the brain disengages completely. It’s”—she searched for the right word—“primal. And I can’t hide it from him, I can’t bluff that nothing’s happening—or that nothing’s going to happen. And then there’s Scott . . .”

Her voice trailed off. Storm reached across the center console and gave her friend’s hand a squeeze, but she knew that was scant comfort.

“Have faith, Jean. You’ll find a way to work things out.”

“I hope so, Ororo. Really I do. For all our sakes.”

The radio crackled with Xavier’s voice. Storm answered.

Washington is a company town, that “company” being the federal government. And despite the promises and strenuous efforts of both political parties and numerous national administrations over the past few decades, the sheer size of that government has grown well beyond the physical capacity of the District of Columbia. Nowadays, working Washington is considered anything inside the Capital Beltway, with associated office parks springing up even farther out from the city itself, in such bedroom communities as Rockville and Gaithersburg and Reston.

In Rockville, Maryland, there was a new clutch of moderate high-rise buildings, ostensibly associated with the National Institute of Standards and Technologies, a couple of miles and one town over. Impersonally modern, they looked just like a score of similar structures scattered across the nation. Midlist government glass boxes.

This time of night, the only staff on duty were the security officers and the cleaning crew. Even in an age of terrorist threats and heightened awareness, these weren’t considered viable targets. The bulk of the surveillance was handled remotely, at a central office keeping watch through a phalanx of cameras slaved to a computer monitor system. There was a manned reception desk in every ground-floor lobby, another couple of uniformed security guards to patrol the floors, but that was it. Big Brother was responsible for the bulk of the work.

The officer at the desk didn’t think twice when Yuriko Oyama strode through the doors. Her group were the odd ducks among the building’s federal tenants, working all hours of the day, all days of the week; something to do with auditing, they explained. The guard didn’t figure he was paid enough to be more curious, especially since all their credentials were in order. He did figure this was his lucky day, a treat for the eyes just before his shift changed.

Yuriko flashed her ID and strode to the waiting elevator, totally aware of how intently the desk guard was staring at her backside. She was a fine-looking lady, and the guards had eagerly added the many sequences of her coming and going to their pirate surveillance disk of local hotties. The guard paid her the compliment of never taking his eyes off her, waiting till the elevator doors were closed to pack up his station and prepare to hand it off to his replacement.

On the top floor, Yuriko passed the cleaning crew without a second glance. At the end of the hallway there was a single door as nondescript as the building itself. No lock, only a hand scanner. She pressed her right hand against the plate and the door obligingly unlocked.

Inside was a suite of offices that could have belonged to any midlevel bureaucrat working for any midlevel agency. The only personality to the rooms was that there was no personality whatsoever.

As she proceeded to her destination, she passed behind an opaque glass wall divider, and a remarkable transformation occurred. With each step, Yuriko’s features began to ripple and flow like wax exposed to direct heat. Black hair took on the color of flame, amber skin darkened to a blue that was almost midnight. Features that were pleasantly Asian became haughty and aristocratic and altogether Caucasian, a face as predatory as a hunting eagle yet possessing beauty enough to launch the thousand ships of fabled Ilium. The clothes seemed to flow into the body until what was left seemed mostly naked, save for an arrangement of ridges and scales that afforded a measure of protection and the illusion of propriety.

Her eyes were chrome yellow. Her name was Mystique.

In William Stryker's office, she sat in Stryker's chair and activated Stryker's computer monitor. On its screen appeared the legend >VOICEPRINTIDENTIFICATIONPLEASE.

In Stryker's gravelly voice, Mystique replied, "Stryker, William."

Obligingly and instantly, the monitor flashed >ACCESSGRANTED.

Working fast, because that was her nature and because she was on a clock, Mystique called up the directories, selecting RECENTITEMS from the main menu and then a folder labeled simply 143. That in turn led to a series of files: FLOORPLANS, LEHNSHERR, INTERROGATIONSUMMARIES, AUGMENTATION. . .

She read quickly, printing everything on screen. As she proceeded through the documents, the set of her mouth tightened and her eyes narrowed. This was worse than she'd ever suspected.

Downstairs, a second Yuriko strolled into the lobby, barely acknowledging the man at the desk. Since he'd just come on duty, he had no idea there were two of her loose in the building.

In the office, a few minutes later, Mystique looked up suddenly at the faint *klik* of the door locks disengaging. Her time was up, right on schedule.

The real Yuriko walked to her desk and began to hunt through the main drawer for something, seemingly unaware of the other presence in the room. Then, without warning and with a speed that defied description, she whirled around to level a Glock 19 at the intruder.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you doing here?"

A uniformed janitor stirred into view, hands waving before his body, fear plain on his face. He wanted no trouble.

"Lo siento, a puerta fui abierto!" he said.

Yuriko reached out for the man's SID, hanging from a lanyard around his neck, comparing face to photo. Then she used her own terminal to access the night's crew roster to make sure both were legitimate.

With a wave of the hand, she dismissed the janitor and returned to her desk without giving the man another thought. It never occurred to her to wonder what a janitor was doing in her office without his cart of supplies.

Mystique considered that as she strode quickly down the outer hallway, right past the man whose face she was using. The real janitor stared at her in disbelief—it was like watching your mirror image pass you by—and reflexively crossed himself. Mystique was thinking about Yuriko. This caper had gone down far more easily than she'd anticipated. That gave her hope, an emotion she hadn't allowed herself since Magneto's capture. Before long, if all went well, maybe it would be Stryker who was on the run. And the society he championed that lay in ruins.

The *Blackbird* approached Boston low and late, literally skimming the surface of the harbor at an hour when they had sea and sky all to themselves. Their objective was a stretch of waterfront near the Marine

Industrial Park that was in the nascent stages of urban renewal and gentrification, a city planner's attempt to upgrade this part of the South End into a reasonable facsimile of the more respectable neighborhoods across I-93.

They found a derelict slip with more than sufficient underwater clearance for their needs and gentled the *Blackbird* to a landing. They disembarked first, then signaled the autopilot to submerge the jet to its resting place on the bottom. There was a good ten-foot clearance to the top of the vertical stabilizers, the aircraft's tallest point. Even at low tide, there was little chance of contact with the kind of small surface craft that cruised these waters, and even less of being seen.

Hopefully, the women wouldn't be around here long enough for either to become a problem. They both put on trench coats to cover their uniforms.

As they made their way through the deserted and randomly derelict streets, Storm played with the atmospheric balance around them to roll a dusting of mist over this part of the city. She didn't want a real fog, that would be too blatant, cause too much disruption to the local community; her goal was just enough to make it easy for them to slip out of sight if they had to.

The coordinates Xavier had provided led them to a church.

In better times, this had been a house of worship worthy of its parish. Constructed to last by stonemasons and old-world artisans who were building more for their children's children than for themselves, it still presented a proud and dignified front to the desolation that surrounded it. The spire towered over the scattered clumps of row houses that remained and the long-abandoned factories that gave their owners and tenants work. Much of the stained glass, produced by contemporaries of Louis Comfort Tiffany, still remained, although it was probably only a matter of time before it was looted or destroyed.

The wall of one of the buildings opposite had been tagged with some fresh graffiti: CLEAN THE GENE POOL! KILL MUTANT SCUM!

Storm didn't appreciate the sentiments.

"They'll never let us lead our lives," she said, and this time she let her anger show. She clenched her fist, and from off in the distance, out to sea beyond the entrance to Boston Harbor, came the kettledrum beat of thunder.

They circled the church without approaching it, and Jean used her teke to try every doorway they passed. To their surprise, all of them appeared to be stoutly locked.

"Somebody taking care of this old place?" Storm wondered aloud.

"I caught a couple of thought flashes from that bar up the street."

"From the guys we saw through the window?" Storm made a face. "You're a braver woman than I am."

"Tell me about it," Jean agreed, matching her tone to her friend's disgust. "Thing is, this church has a rep. It's supposed to be haunted. By its very own demon."

"Get out."

“No lie. They believe it. Even the local tough guys steer clear of St. Anselm’s.”

“I’ve never met a demon.”

“After you, then.”

An artful combination of telekinesis and a push of wind popped the bolts on the main doors, which swung wide to their stops, creating an echoing *boom* throughout the body of the church. From the rafters, coveys of pigeons exploded into view, startled from their nighttime slumber.

The women said nothing as they made their way down the nave. Most of the pews had either been taken or were trashed in various corners, leaving a large open space leading to the transept and the altar. Up in the shadows below the vaulted ceiling, a pair of chrome yellow eyes watched their progress. And then, in a faint *bamf* of imploding air, they disappeared.

Just as suddenly, Storm stopped, looking steeply upward and to her right.

“What?” Jean prompted.

“A shift in the air,” she replied quietly, matter-of-factly.

“Movement?”

“More than that. A sudden vacuum there.” She pointed to where the lurking figure had been. “And an outrush of air from something popping into being.” She turned her arm to the altar. “There.”

“*Gehen sie raus,*” came a whisper from the deepest darkness ahead of them, in a voice calculated to chill the soul. They saw a lit candle set beside an open Bible. As they watched, the flame flickered from a sudden breeze and the topmost pages stirred.

“He’s gone again,” Storm said, and Jean nodded as they both heard from a balcony high overhead: “*Ich bin ein Bote des Teufels!*”

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Storm called out. “We just want to talk!”

Even as she spoke, she turned in response to another faint and distant shift in the air patterns, so that she started facing one way and finished having turned right around toward the entrance.

“*Ich bin die ausgeburt des Bösen,*” the lurker cried in something close to a primal howl.

Storm had a sudden, awkward thought. “You know,” she told Jean, “we’re assuming he speaks English.”

“Not a problem,” Jean assured her. “He’s a teleporter.”

“I noticed.”

“That must be why the professor had so much trouble locking on to him with Cerebro.”

“Will it be any easier for us to catch him?”

“Not a problem.”

Another howl, much closer, although try as they might neither Storm nor Jean could see him in the gloom of the church.

“*Ich bin ein dämon,*” he called.

Jean rolled her eyes and shifted her stance into a picture-perfect ValGal Barbie.

“Are you bored yet?” she asked Storm.

“Totally,” was the reply.

“You want to bring him down, or shall I?”

Storm narrowed her eyes in momentary concentration and snapped her fingers. Obediently, a bolt of lightning erupted from her hand, sizzling up one of the support columns and into the rafters of the church’s single spire, where it struck with an explosion of light and sound, a clap of thunder that pounded the air and stone around them like a hammer.

They had a momentary glimpse of a vaguely human shape before it vanished. But when it reappeared almost instantaneously, at the far end of the nave, right above the altar, Jean was ready. As soon as she had a sense of his mental signature, she reached out with telepathy and telekinesis together, freezing his thoughts at the same time she locked him in place a dozen feet above the rubble-strewn floor. Trapped, he still fought her, defiant to the core.

“Got him?”

“He’s not going anywhere.” Jean brought him closer. Then, to the prisoner’s surprise, she smiled—genuine, winning, friendly—and held out her hand. “Are you?”

“Please don’t kill me,” he pleaded in English, with a soft German accent that marked him as an educated man. It had a mellow timbre, the kind more suited to cabaret songs than playing the matinee-movie monster. “I never intended to harm anyone!”

“I wonder how people ever got that impression,” Storm remarked wryly. “What’s your name?”

“Kurt. Kurt Wagner.”

“I’m Ororo. Call me Storm,” she told him. She flashed a sideways look to Jean to complement her thought. *This is our assassin?*

Appearances are deceiving, Jean projected back at her. *But—which way?*

Your call.

With that thought from Storm, Jean cut loose the prisoner. He dropped lightly to the floor, landing on the balls and toes of his outsized feet. He looked poised to bolt, but Jean took it as a positive sign that he hadn’t immediately teleported. She kept her hand held out to him.

“I’m Jean Grey. We’re here to help.”

Kurt Wagner followed Quasimodo's lead and lived up in the spire, on the level below the belfry. The walls were solid there, and he'd replaced the panes of broken stained glass with the precision and craftsmanship used for the originals. By day, when the sun was shining, both women recognized, the room would be ablaze with color. He used candles for illumination instead of electricity; their light was less likely to be spotted from the street. The height of the steeple gave him a panoramic view of the neighborhood. He had privacy and a decent chance of spotting any intruders. For a teleporting acrobat like him, whose natural coloration made him invisible in shadows, this was an ideal hideout.

The furnishings were spartan, a function more of choice and aesthetics than of poverty. True, the pieces were mainly scavenged from the derelict and abandoned homes nearby, but they'd been restored with the same painstaking care and attention to detail as the windows. A bed, a table, some chairs, a pantry, a bookshelf. Dried food mostly in the pantry, chosen for ease in storage and in preparation. The books were an unexpected mix. Religious works mainly, a well-thumbed Bible sharing space with a copy of Rafael Sabatini's *Captain Blood* and George MacDonald Fraser's classic pastiche, *The Pyrates*.

Above the headboard, a Catholic crucifix. On the table, a set of rosary beads, polished from handling. Icons and images galore, of Christ himself, of the Blessed Virgin. The beads were lying on a pile of newspapers, all headlining the attack on the President and showing an artist's sketch of the assassin that was a devastatingly faithful likeness.

On the wall, though, something completely different—a series of circus posters, from venues all over Europe: Paris, Florence, Barcelona, Munich, Prague, Krakow. They all were pictures of Kurt, showing him on the trapeze, celebrating the performances of the INCREDIBLENIGHTCRAWLER! As well, a couple of movie one-sheets: Burt Lancaster in *The Crimson Pirate*, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., in *Sinbad the Sailor*, and almost in a place of honor, Errol Flynn's film adaptation of *Captain Blood*, the role that made his swashbuckling career.

Jean shook her head. A man of obviously deep religious faith who loved classic pirate stories. Didn't fit any profile she'd ever read of your basic assassin. He picked up the rosary as she asked if she could examine his wound, but even though she knew she was hurting him—she couldn't help it—the only sound she heard from him was a cadencelike muttering that she soon realized was a prayer: “Our Father, Who art in Heaven, blessed be Thy Name . . .”

The 9mm shell had missed the bone as it passed through his shoulder, but it had still done its share of damage. Kurt had administered some decent first aid; he'd stopped the bleeding and applied sufficient antiseptic to prevent any major infection. Without proper treatment, however, his athletic ability would be crippled, and she told him so in a way that also told him she was willing and able to provide it.

“You'll be fine,” Jean told him as she finished suturing the wound and began wrapping it in the necessary bandages. “The worst you'll have is a small scar.”

“You are not the authorities,” he said with a hint of a question.

Storm snorted, “Not hardly.”

“You wear uniforms.”

“We like to look cool,” Jean told him. “I'm sorry if I'm hurting you.”

“I know it cannot be helped.” He shook his head, a little bit of misery, a lot of confusion. “I just don’t understand—any of this. I could . . .” He paused, glancing at the papers on his table, trying to come to terms with images and memories that made no sense to him, yet could not be denied. “I couldn’t stop myself,” he said desperately. “It was all happening to someone else, like a bad dream. That would be nice. But then—I move my arm and realize that is a lie. *It was real. It was me !*”

He twisted and rolled the rosary beads in his two-fingered hands until he held the crucifix that anchored the strands together. On his face was a terrible and haunting desolation.

“I fear He has left me,” he said with a grief, a sense of loss, that was palpable. “I even found a mark, perhaps like the mark of Cain. See? Look here!”

He tilted his head, sweeping aside the thick indigo curls to reveal a mark at the base of his skull. It was a scar, Jean recognized, that reminded her of kinds of insect bites or the welt left by some topical irritant akin to what was found on poison ivy or oak. It was placed right above the brain stem, and it formed the shape of a perfect circle.

“What do you think?” Storm asked Jean.

“Let’s get him back to the professor,” she replied, her concern and worry as plain for Storm to see as the intricate markings that covered Kurt Wagner’s body.

Interlude

Normally he sleeps without dreams. A quiet time, restful, a relief from the cacophony of input assaulting his physical senses every waking moment. So much to process just to determine the appropriate levels of threat. Every person he meets, a potential enemy, to be sorted into its appropriate box in that split second of initial contact.

Lately, no peace, anything but, no chance to recharge his batteries, psychic or physical, forcing him to stay awake to the point of absolute exhaustion, when he doesn’t have any choice about it anymore. Yet that carries its own price, because it leaves him with fewer defenses against the nightmares that invariably come.

He hears himself scream with rage, giving himself completely to the berserker in his soul.

He’s fighting fighting fighting, against what he never knows. People? Things? Demons? Monsters? Fate itself? All of that? None?

He has no clothes, the better to see the marks drawn on skin that’s been stripped of hair, the better to see the livid scars that follow the marks as he’s opened from crown to crotch, shoulders to fingertips, hips to toes.

He sees himself in the reflector overhead, lying on a table, dissected like a frog, skin peeled back, organs laid bare, watching his heart beat, his lungs pulse. He hears voices, dissecting him as clinically as their scalpels, hears a voice, his voice, asking over and over what was happening, why were they doing this? Hears laughter, they aren’t interested, they don’t care, they think this is funny. Hears threats of bloody vengeance give way, impossibly, to words he never imagined saying, begging, pleading for mercy.

He can't wake up. He has to watch.

Knowing that he was conscious through whatever was being done to him. They didn't use anesthetic, they wanted him to experience every bloody moment.

They took lots of notes.

Someone holds up a set of claws.

He pops the claws from his hand—snikt!

He slashes the claws into the wall, making an indelible mark on the armored plating too thick for him to cut all the way through.

He's in a tank, lights are flashing red and green, the lights resolving into what's supposed to be a pair of eyes in a face too terrible to be remembered except as repeating images of pain and horror. The tank is filled with liquid, covering him, drowning him, turning bright yellow as the face spits venom at him like a cobra, burning him inside and out.

Rage now, beyond comprehension, beyond control.

He's fighting fighting fighting

No more yellow anymore, but lots of red

He's alone

No more floors beneath his feet, only earth, then rock, then nothing but air as he tumbles from a precipice

Then water as a cataract sweeps him away

Then earth and rock again as he grabs for salvation and pulls himself ashore

Then, miraculously, mercifully, snow, falling fast and hard, burying the world, burying him, allowing him to sleep, to heal, to

forget

Snikt!

Snakt!

Chapter

Six

Logan woke up on the floor, amid the ruins of yet another bed.

Reflexively, he started to raise his hands to rub his face, smooth his hair. Then he paused in midgesture and opened his eyes to see if his claws were still extended. No fun to accidentally slice open your own scalp, even if the wounds healed in next to no time.

His hands looked normal, with only the damage that surrounded him and the dull and familiar, and fading, ache between his knuckles.

He spit some feathers from his mouth, plucked scraps of pillow off his chest.

The bed was basically splinters, the mattress and linens shredded. The floor was badly scored as well. His flailing hands had cut through the parquet to expose the joists beneath. He moved carefully as he shifted his weight to sit up and determined which sections of the floor were still capable of supporting him. He wondered a moment why no one had come to investigate, then remembered that he was the only adult left in the mansion. Considering the looks he'd gotten from the students, and the stories Rogue had no doubt been telling, any kids close enough to hear what had happened in here more than likely had sense enough to make themselves scarce.

That made him grin, although there was little humor in it.

He'd left his clothes on the far side of the room. They were untouched by his unconscious berserker outburst, but as he approached to get dressed he had to admit they didn't look much better than the room. He made it a point to travel light. Anything that couldn't be carried was expendable, and he wore his clothes to their limit before replacing them. The boots and the leather jacket had some mileage left; the jeans were near the end. That didn't used to matter to him, because he never used to care what others thought when they saw him.

He took his time under the shower, muttering darkly that the spray wasn't as powerful as he liked. Truth was, what he liked was a fire hose at full pressure, enough to scour his flesh the way it could be used to flay paint off a wall. He started as hot as he could bear, which wasn't quite hot enough to burn, then went for cold. That wasn't satisfactory, either, for a man used to mountain rivers and lakes where the water was usually a degree or two shy of turning to ice. The immersion left him tingling all over, totally raw and feeling better.

He'd known the moment he awoke what time it was. Another instinct, an uncannily accurate awareness of time and space and of his self. It was almost impossible for him to get lost, and he always knew immediately if something had changed around him while he was unconscious.

Past 3:00A.M.

Silently despite the boots, he prowled the empty halls of the mansion, registering the photographs and paintings and antiques displayed along the walls even if his mind took no active notice of them. Quizzed, he could have described his environs perfectly, but the objects themselves meant virtually nothing to him. Tools he understood, but he had no use for ornamental artifacts.

The sound of a television led him to an upstairs common room. He'd assumed at first that somebody had left it on, but as he approached he registered an active presence, early adolescent and male, and wide awake.

Before going to bed, Logan had used Jean's terminal to review the files of every student in the school. He told himself he was simply being responsible, but he acknowledged that it was also another way of getting close to her, which made him shake his head in dismay. This wasn't like him, yet the impulses and the emotions were too primal, too powerful to be ignored. Or denied. Guaranteed trouble, no doubt about that. No hope of a happy ending. He didn't care.

Anyway, if Jean was going to entrust him with the kids here, he'd do his best to be worthy of it. That meant putting names to faces, and powers to names.

This one was Jones. He had a first name but nobody used it, Jones included.

He was sprawled on the couch, picking at a full bowl of popcorn. He'd watch the big plasma screen until he got bored, then he'd blink his eyes. The channel would obligingly change. Watch a while, repeat the process. It happened often. Jones had a low threshold of boredom.

He noticed Logan's reflection in the screen but didn't look around. He didn't much like what he was watching, but he wasn't about to miss a moment of it.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"How can you tell?" Logan retorted.

" 'Cause you're awake."

No arguing with that ironclad logic, that's for sure. Kid had a mind like a steel trap.

"What's your excuse?" Logan asked.

"I don't sleep."

"Your loss. You guys got any beer?"

"Try the kitchen."

He did, and found one of the professional Sub-Zero fridges filled with all manner of healthy food: yogurt and greens, fruits and eggs and meats. Primarily organic, the produce of local farms and green markets. Minimal snack food. He grimaced, recognizing the influence of both Jean and Storm, and wondered how often the students made a break for the local Mickey Dee's.

The other one held fruit juice, mostly fresh squeezed, bottled water, and dozens of cartons of chocolate milk.

Grumpy now, Logan shut the door,

He wasn't alone in the kitchen anymore. Bobby Drake sat at the table, methodically excavating a quart container of ice cream.

"Hey," the youngster said, making an effort to keep his voice steady. Logan had sensed him coming, but clearly Bobby hadn't realized it was Logan in the room until the man had closed the refrigerator door,

and by then pride wouldn't allow for even the thought of flight.

"Hey," Logan replied offhandedly, poking through cabinets and the walk-in pantry. "Got any beer?"

Drake's laconic response brought an amused twist to Logan's lips. "This is a school," Bobby said.

"So that's a no?"

Bobby smiled broadly and pointed to the fridge. "We have chocolate milk."

Logan growled and emerged from the pantry carrying a six-pack of Dr Pepper bottles. He pulled two from the cardboard holder and took a chair opposite Bobby. He made a small gesture with one bottle.

"Want one?" he asked. When Bobby nodded, he added, "They're warm."

Without a word, Bobby reached across to take the proffered bottle in hand. Air crackled and frost formed on his fingers and the fluted glass. He gently blew on the neck.

"Not anymore," Bobby said as he handed back the ice-cold Dr Pepper.

Logan popped the cap and took a long swallow. Just the way he liked it.

"Handy," he conceded.

Bobby gave a nod of acknowledgment as he repeated the process with his own bottle.

"So," Logan asked bluntly, with a sidelong look to the boy from beneath lowered brows, as he held up his right hand and, for show, popped the middle claw out, *snikt*, and in, *snakt*. Bobby's response was a choked spit-take that sent soda bursting from his mouth and nose, followed by a desperate grab for paper towels as he struggled to regain his self-possession. Through it all, Logan hardly moved, apparently engrossed in an examination of his knuckles for any sign of the blade's extension.

When Bobby had settled back into his own chair, Logan gave him his most dangerous smile and administered the coup de grâce: "What's with you and Rogue, eh?"

Xavier didn't like Mount Haven. It gave him a headache.

He knew the reason: ultralow frequency harmonics whose pitch was specifically calibrated to inhibit any form of extrasensory perception, including his own telepathy. He could overcome it, of course; that was no problem. It just took a little more effort and exacted a more than equivalent cost. Far easier, while he was here, to keep his thoughts and his powers to himself.

What disturbed him was the notion that the designers knew what they were doing. It suggested a far greater familiarity with mutants than most people realized. Over the past months since Magneto's incarceration Xavier had made discreet inquiries to learn as much as possible about the government department responsible for the establishment of the prison, but painfully few of those questions had been answered. Perhaps the time had come to dig deeper.

Following the security protocols, his wheelchair had been exchanged for a plastic counterpart back at the main entrance. Under escort, he and Scott had proceeded to the cell block for the final series of

identity and security checks, this time under the supervision of Magneto's warder, Mitchell Laurio.

With the peremptory manner of a man used to instant obedience, Laurio waved Scott back from Xavier's chair.

"I'll take it from here," he said.

Scott didn't like the tone, didn't like the man, and for a moment the two men bristled with challenges.

"Scott," Xavier said quietly, forcefully, to defuse the tension, "it's all right. I won't be long."

"Nice coat," Laurio said to Scott over his shoulder as he wheeled the chair toward the hatchway leading to the umbilical tunnel.

"Thanks." There was a little more of a flat, prairie Nebraska twang to Scott's voice, the kind you expect to hear from a gunfighter marshall whose job was to bring order to a lawless frontier.

"Nice shades." Meaning "I'd like to take them away from you, pretty boy."

"Thanks." Meaning "You're welcome to try."

The hatch opened onto a small platform where both men had to wait while the tunnel unfolded toward the cell itself, suspended in the middle of the room. Even through the translucent walls of the tube, it was possible to get a sense of the chamber's immensity, and especially the tunnel's height above the floor. It was designed to make visitors uncomfortable as they realized their lives depended on the strength and integrity of the network of rings and cables that held the tunnel aloft. Most quickened their pace. Laurio slowed his down, his own way of emphasizing that *he* was in charge here. He was *theman* ! He left Xavier alone with the prisoner.

Lehnherr had his back to Xavier and didn't turn around when he spoke.

"Have you come to rescue me, Charles?"

"Not today, Eric. I'm sorry." There was a quality of genuine regret to Xavier's voice, as though someday that circumstance might change and there would be a rescue.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Lehnherr asked, and he sounded genuinely amused.

"The assassination attempt on the President. What do you know about it?"

"Just what I read in the newspapers." He turned to face his friend. "You shouldn't even have to ask."

Xavier couldn't hide his revulsion, he didn't try, as he beheld the bruises on Lehnherr's face. The way the other man held his body revealed more eloquently than words that the damage wasn't simply confined to his face.

"What happened to you?" Xavier asked, aghast.

"I . . . fell," Lehnherr said without irony. "In the shower."

"This isn't funny!"

“No.” For emphasis, a shake of that leonine head.

“This is unconscionable.”

“I’m a terrorist, Charles. An enemy of humanity. Given that status, and the circumstances of my capture, it’s been made repeatedly clear to me that I should be . . . grateful for my treatment.”

“Told by whom?” Xavier demanded, already formulating his protests to the authorities. “Who is responsible for this outrage?”

“You remember William Stryker?”

“I haven’t heard that name in years.”

“I’ve had frequent visits from him lately. His son, Jason, was once a student of yours, wasn’t he?”

“More a patient than a student. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to help him. At least not the way his father wanted me to.”

At the mansion, Jones donned a set of Bose headphones and cranked the volume, his flickering eyes changing channels faster than ever.

The assault force closed on the mansion from three directions, two by silenced helicopters flying a map-of-the-earth profile that had the wheels of their Sikorsky *Blackhawks* literally brushing the treetops while the third unit used SCUBA sleds to approach from the lake. The teams had been handpicked by Stryker himself, culled from the finest special operations cadres on Earth—American SEALs and Army Rangers, Great Britain’s Special Air Service, Russian *Spetznatz*, German GSG-9, Israeli Pathfinders, and some Vietnamese. They’d trained for this op for months, not only familiarizing themselves with the layout of the mansion but also exhaustively learning how to protect themselves from the myriad of powers and abilities they might encounter. Now, with all the adult staff of Xavier’s School absent from the estate, the time had come to put that preparation to the test.

In quick and practiced succession, as the first units rappelled to the ground from their hovering aircraft, all the mansion’s power and communications lines were interdicted and the security network neutralized. On command, the school would be completely isolated. Even cellular and radio communication would be off-line. From high overhead, an orbiting C-130 Hercules kept the entire estate under constant electronic surveillance, using thermal imagery to mark the position of the students. Only a couple of signatures indicated contacts who were awake. For the rest, it was already too late.

In the observation booth at Mount Haven, Scott leaned closer to the phalanx of monitor screens. He’d seen the bruises, too, and Xavier’s reaction to them, but there was no sound.

The guard at the console shrugged apologetically.

“It happens,” he said, by way of explanation, not for Magneto’s condition but for the lack of audio.

“Here?” Scott asked pointedly. “With *this* prisoner?”

“We got backups on backups,” Laurio growled. “You got nothin’ to worry about. Joey, put in a call for a techie. Let’s get this fixed before Movie Star here makes a federal case.”

Both guards laughed, and Scott felt the hair prickle on the back of his neck. This was wrong, and he called out to Xavier with his thoughts as loudly as he could. He yelled inside his head, but the figure he could see plainly on the screen gave not the slightest indication that he heard any of it.

Lehnscherr picked up a pawn from the plastic chessboard on his cupboard, then exchanged it for a knight.

“And now you think that taking in the Wolverine will make up for your failure with Stryker’s son?”

He placed the pieces back on the board and turned slowly to look at his friend.

“You haven’t told him about his past, have you?”

Reluctantly Xavier shook his head. “I’ve put him on the right path, but Logan’s mind is still fragile.”

“Is it?” Lehnscherr obviously thought differently. “Or are you afraid you’ll lose one of your precious X-Men?”

Xavier didn’t reply at once. He looked distracted, brow furrowing, head cocked slightly to the side in concentration as though trying to make sense of some noise or other right at the edge of his awareness. He blinked, marshaling his telepathic resources against the low-frequency harmonics and the realization that the headache that was merely infernal now would be brutal by the time he was done. But this increased psychic sensitivity didn’t give him the answer he sought. Instead it gave him insight into something far more serious.

“Eric,” he cried, shocked at the scraps of memory he was perceiving and all their terrible implications, “what have you done?”

“I’m sorry, Charles,” Lehnscherr replied, swinging his hand across the chessboard to knock down both kings at once. He was a proud man who had sworn long ago never again to become a victim. That he had failed, utterly, was a hard admission to make. “I . . . couldn’t help myself.”

“What have you told Stryker?” *About my school*, Xavier thought desperately, *about my X-Men?* He recognized the source of that burr in his awareness that had been bothering him, and called out a warning to Scott in turn, with all his own considerable strength.

“Everything,” Lehnscherr said with the simple finality of a death sentence.

Both men reacted to a faint hiss from all around them. From apertures on every wall a cloud of mist could be seen flooding into the cell.

Xavier had time for one last, desperate outcry—“*Scott!*”—before oblivion claimed him.

On the monitors, Scott saw Xavier lunge forward in his chair, heard a faint echo of that call in his thoughts, watched his mentor collapse. It was over in seconds.

“What the hell?” he cried.

He looked up, heard an almost inaudible *pop*, and reacted to the impact of something small striking the middle of his chest. He didn't know what it was, but that didn't matter as his body reacted of its own accord to this sudden and unexpected ambush.

He quickly registered a new presence in the room. A young woman, Asian, beautiful, wearing a guard uniform and carrying a dart pistol. That told him they wanted him alive. In that same instant, he also assumed that the dart hadn't done its job, working on the presumption they'd want to neutralize him as quickly and efficiently as they did Xavier. It probably hadn't been strong enough to penetrate his leather coat and his uniform beneath. He knew they wouldn't make that mistake twice. He had to act first.

All these thought processes occurred in the split instant it took him to complete his turn. He identified the woman as the primary threat, and he wasn't overly gentle with his response. He tapped a control on the wing of his visor, the ruby quartz depolarized, and a beam of scarlet force exploded through the lens.

For the woman, it was like being hit by a battering ram. He caught her full in the belly, doubling her over and hurling her into the wall behind her. The whiplash of the impact cracked her skull against a projection and she dropped to the floor, bloody and unconscious from a nasty scalp wound. The same beam shattered the pistol and knocked off her lightly tinted sunglasses.

The guard at the console made a grab from behind, but Scott elbowed him in the face, used the same fist to deliver a sharp jab that dropped this adversary from the fight. That left Laurio and his partner.

A snap shot of optic blasts took care of the partner, but Laurio proved a lot faster than Scott expected from a man of his bulk. He tackled Scott before the young man could bring his eyes to bear. Laurio had seen how Scott manipulated the beams, and he was doing everything he could to keep the mutant's hands away from his visor. Without the power, Laurio likely figured this to be an easy fight.

Now, though, it was his turn to be surprised. Scott's slim and rangy figure was as deceptive in its own way as Laurio's. There was a wiry strength to him that matched the guard's, and a willing ability to take punishment. Laurio delivered a couple of hard shots to the body that were usually good enough to take the fight out of anyone, but all Scott did was wince with the shock and hit back just as hard.

Unnoticed in the struggle, the woman—Yuriko Oyama—stirred. Her wound had stopped bleeding and, covered now with fresh skin, was healing with a speed reminiscent of Wolverine.

Scott used a knee to lever Laurio aside, quickly rolling the other way to yank a nightstick from the belt of the guard. Both men came to their feet together, but Scott had the advantage as he hammered the handle of the stick into the pit of Laurio's gut. The bigger man staggered, gasping for breath, and Scott followed up with a roundhouse swing to the jaw that drew blood from mouth and nose as it threw the guard against the wall.

Instinct warned of another attack, a fresh threat; training prompted an instantaneous response. But quick as Scott was, Yuriko was quicker as she slapped the nightstick from his grasp. Scott gasped in pain as if he'd just been hit by a bar of steel. In blinding succession, she struck him in the hands and forearms and body, leaving him unable to defend himself actively with his own martial skills or his optic blasts. He wasn't sure how this had happened; he knew how hard he'd hit her, was certain when she fell that she was out for the duration. Yet here she was, attacking him, seemingly in better shape than ever.

Without pause, she set herself and launched a sweeping, flying kick for his head. He saw it coming, tried to avoid it, watched her compensate impossibly in midair, felt a murderous shock to the side of his skull as her boot connected. On the way down, she gave him another kick for good measure.

She reached down to check his throat pulse, satisfying herself that it remained strong, then turned to the monitors to check on Xavier. With a smile of triumph, she threaded her fingers together and cracked her knuckles. Mission accomplished.

Inside the cell, Eric Lehnsherr watched his old friend fall. The gas had been specially mixed for Xavier's genetic structure. It was effective against Lehnsherr, too, but it just took a little longer.

He coughed, thinking as he did about every time he had seen the white cloud pour from the vents of the "showers" that claimed so many at Auschwitz, remembering the feel of lifeless flesh still warm beneath his fingers as he and the other *Sonderkommando* dragged the dead from gas chamber to crematoria. The hair was cut from their heads, the gold was pried from their teeth. Everything that was perceived to be of value was taken from them, before their wholesale murder and afterward. Especially their dignity.

Never again, he had sworn then.

He knew his captors thought that the most hollow of boasts.

He also knew he would live to make them regret it.

"I'm sorry, Charles," he said with his last conscious breaths. "You should have killed me when you had the chance." Then he looked toward the distant observation booth, but the face that marched into his mind's eye was Stryker's. "So should you," he finished, and then he let his own consciousness go.

* * *

At the mansion, the cavalcade of images cascading before Jones' eyes suddenly and unexpectedly paused. Something else had caught his attention, an image on the screen but having nothing whatsoever to do with it. Jones peered closely at the screen, then clambered up the back of the couch to see who'd entered the room behind him.

It was a man dressed just like the commandos Jones watched on TV. Black from head to toe, face decorated with camouflage paint and a knit wool balaclava. Battle fatigues, combat boots, weapons and equipment harness, night-vision goggles. His name, though Jones didn't know it, was Lyman. He was in command of the assault force.

Finding himself facing a boy who was barely a teenager, Lyman wavered.

Wondering if this was some prank, or test, or maybe a new teacher, Jones swung his legs over the couch and padded, barefoot and in pajamas, toward the stranger.

"Hi," he said. He wasn't afraid. In this mansion, he truly believed he had nothing to be afraid of.

His eyes widened slightly in disbelief as, without a word in response, Lyman pulled a pistol from its holster and fired.

Jones felt a sting in his neck, grabbing at it reflexively in time to pull free the tranquilizer dart but not

before the drugs took effect. He collapsed to the floor, his eyes fluttering, the TV changing channels so fast behind him that the flickering images registered more like static.

Lyman used hand signals to motion the rest of his team forward. Silently, weapons leveled, they spread throughout the mansion.

* * *

In the kitchen, Logan sat slumped deep in his chair. Until tonight, he hadn't slept since leaving Alkali Lake, and the nightmare that had sent him wandering through the mansion had been worse than a knockdown, drag-out bar fight. As a consequence, his healing factor was so busy fixing the damage that, even though he looked awake and was carrying on a decent conversation, he was mostly in a kind of hibernation. Whatever enhanced awareness he possessed right now was limited to this room and the boy across the table. Even that was pretty piss poor.

They quickly polished off one six-pack of soda, Logan chugging four while Bobby was still nursing his second, at the same time picking at the mostly melted remnants of his container of ice cream.

"My parents think this is a prep school."

"Hey," Logan said pleasantly, amused that he was coherent since he was speaking through a mental haze that put a pea-soup fog to shame, "lots of prep schools have their own campus, dorms, kitchens."

"Harrier jets? *The Blackbird*?"

"It's a free country."

Logan leaned back in his chair, establishing a balance so precarious that Bobby was sure he would fall. He thought of saying something, thought better of it. Logan struck him as the kind of guy who always knew precisely what he was doing.

"So," Logan growled, "you and Rogue, eh?"

"Marie," Bobby corrected.

"Whatever."

"It's not what you think." Logan quirked an eyebrow, making Bobby wonder with a suddenly racing heart just what the man thought. "I mean," he stammered, closing his eyes in misery, "I'd like it to be. . ."

Which, from the look he got now, could not have been more totally the wrong thing to say if he'd tried.

"It's just," he explained hurriedly, sure that he was making things worse with every word, but having no idea how to stop or make things right, "that it's not easy—when you *want* to be closer to someone, but . . . you *can't* be. Y' know?" He paused, utterly miserable as Logan's expression changed and sharpened before his eyes. He'd screwed up, big time, no doubt of that at all. "You probably don't understand."

Logan wasn't listening to the boy anymore, and he wasn't in hibernation, either. He knew exactly what was happening and he was furious at himself for allowing it.

There was a green dot right in the center of Bobby's forehead. The boy hadn't noticed.

Bobby yelped in terror and sprang back from the table as one set of Logan's claws extended and slashed through the air right in front of where he sat. They both heard a small *clink*, and a dart, sliced perfectly in two, dropped into the ice cream.

The targeting laser shifted at once from Bobby to Logan as Logan erupted from his chair. Too late the intruder realized his fatal mistake. He'd been thrown off by Logan's size, especially slouched so deeply in the kitchen chair. He assumed he was dealing with a pair of students.

He had a submachine gun, a Heckler & Koch MP5, and managed to squeeze off a round before Logan reached him. Good shot, too; the bullet grazed Logan's shoulder. He barely noticed as he grabbed the weapon's barrel, forcing it upward as the intruder squeezed the trigger on full auto. Bullets peppered the ceiling and walls. Bobby sensibly dived for cover beneath the table, and the temperature of the room turned Arctic.

Without realizing what he'd done, Bobby generated a cold so intense that it overwhelmed all the heat signatures in the room. Aboard the circling Hercules, the remote observers suddenly couldn't tell what was happening there.

Logan wrenched the gun from the other man's hands and flung it aside. They traded punches, to no effect, but the man was able to grab a combat knife from its scabbard on his vest. He was bigger than Logan and possibly stronger. Their struggle had given him the advantage of height and leverage, and he used both to push the gleaming blade straight for Logan's eye. The man's gaze flickered slightly, to acknowledge the sight of the gash across Logan's shoulder—which was healing rapidly. But mainly he concentrated on the task at hand: Kill the enemy.

Then he realized he could see that same flat, utterly merciless expression in Logan's eyes, and he knew in that awful moment that it was over, that he'd never had a chance, that up till now, Logan had been trying to take him alive.

He heard *asnikt* from the hand he couldn't see and felt an awful, stabbing pain in his chest that reached all the way to his heart . . .

. . . and felt no more.

Chapter Seven

In Kitty Pryde's dreams, the Cubs were sweeping the Yankees for the World Series in straight shutouts, Sammy Sosa was making people forget that Babe Ruth had ever existed, and she and her mom and her dad had front-row field-level seats for every game, right behind the Cubs dugout. Her folks were together again, they were a family, and her life was back the way she wanted it. She watched Derek Jeter whiff a fastball straight up into the air. She knew from that moment of contact it was coming for her, and she leaped to her feet, eyes on the ball, glove poised to grab it.

But she started to lose it in the sun. She squinted her eyes as she'd been taught, but she couldn't filter out that wicked glare. She also couldn't understand why the sun was turning green. Then, to make matters worse, somebody grabbed her across the face, a gloved hand covering mouth and nose, choking off her cries of excitement as they turned to protests, choking off her air.

She lashed out at him, still determined to catch the ball, but the emerald radiance was brighter, unbearably so, and next to it in the sky, bigger than anything she'd ever seen up there, she saw a gun.

Her dream popped like a soap bubble and she came instantly, totally awake, one part of her mind automatically cataloging everything around her while her active consciousness came up to speed.

She was in her dorm room at Xavier's, which she shared with Tracy Cassidy. It was night. The lights were out, except for right around the two girls, and they were no longer alone. Two men, one looming over her, the other over Tracy. Both wearing combat gear, full commando rig with night-vision goggles and laser sights on their weapons. The laser was what she'd reacted to.

Both men were bringing their pistols up to shoot.

Tracy screamed.

In terms of raw decibels, a military jet on full afterburners would have been quieter. The cry covered the full range of the ultra-high-frequency spectrum, and it went through the surrounding ears like a shower of white hot needles. Glass shattered throughout the room—not only lightbulbs and mirrors but the focusing lenses of the soldiers' lasers and their goggles as well. Siryn was living up to her name and then some, generating a sound so powerful it overwhelmed the anechoic baffles built into the walls of her room to protect the rest of the school and students from just such an incident.

Down the hall, where the boys lived, Peter Rasputin and Jamie Madrox found themselves jolted awake. Alone in the room he shared with Bobby Drake, John Allardyce flailed so wildly against unseen enemies that he pitched himself out of bed. The same went for Marie and every other student in the school.

Nobody yet understood the reason for Tracy's outcry, so in these first moments of alarm and confusion, the general reaction wasn't charitable. Yes, Tracy sounded terrified. So what else was new? That was why her room was sound proofed. That was also why Kitty was her roommate; her own phasing power gave her a measure of protection against Siryn's sonic powers.

As for the assault force, they knew then they'd lost the element of surprise. No more time for subtlety. Time to shift into overdrive and apply brute force, to take down the kids before they could muster sufficient wits to resist. The problem for them was, even with ear protectors, they found themselves almost as incapacitated by Siryn's outburst as their targets.

The difference was only a matter of moments here, moments there. But that difference proved critical.

As suddenly as the sound began, it stopped—Siryn had run out of breath.

Before she could draw another, one of the commandos snap-fired his dart gun. The drug's effect was instantaneous; she was out cold before her body even began its collapse back onto her bed.

Both men turned as one to Kitty, who pitched herself right through her bed in a clumsy dive that sent her

staggering toward and then through the floor and nearest wall. They had no shot against a target who'd turned intangible, and then, just like that, it didn't matter, as the door to the room burst open to reveal the bare-chested Peter Rasputin.

Peter's big brother was Russian Air Force, part of the Federation space program, and more than a few neighbors' sons had served their tour in Afghanistan; he knew soldiers, and he knew how to handle himself when there was trouble.

The moment he registered the armed intruders in Tracy's room, even as the two commandos raised and fired their weapons, he triggered his own power. In the doorway, before their shocked and disbelieving eyes, he grew, quickly becoming too big for the opening. His pajama shorts, which he wore loose and extrasized for this very reason, stretched to the breaking point. Beneath his feet, the floorboards groaned as his mass increased to match his new size. His skin changed in color and texture, acquiring the sheen of polished chrome. More importantly, however, his flesh took on the actual density of metal, until it was transformed completely into a kind of organic armor that possessed the tensile strength of steel.

For all the good they did, the darts that struck his chest might have been spitballs.

With gleaming gunmetal eyes he looked to where Siryn lay sprawled on her bed. He looked back at the two commandos as they grabbed for their submachine guns.

No one heard the sound of firing, and thanks as well to the soundproofing and thickened walls, none of the bullets left the confines of the room. That couldn't be said for the commandos themselves. Peter's code name was Colossus, and with strength to rival his classical namesake, he put both men right through the wall and into the hallway outside.

A moment later Colossus himself emerged, Siryn cradled protectively in his arms so that they formed a steel shell around her. He heard voices and commotion, registered bare feet instead of boots, and turned a corner to find a couple of the younger students huddled in an alcove. A brilliant light speared through the windows just beyond them, and the glass panes shuddered under the force of the downdraft from the rotors of a Sikorsky AH-64 Apache attack helicopter as it muscled into position right outside.

For a moment, Colossus and the kids just stood there, striking a classic deer-in-the-headlights pose, none of them sure whether the spotlight would be followed by gunfire, all of them fearing the worst. Colossus reacted first, leaping forward to put his body between the gunship and the youngsters, wondering as he did so if even his armored form could withstand the impact of depleted-uranium "tank buster" shells from the Apache's fearsome 30mm chain gun. That cannon could shoot right through the mansion, punching holes as big as he was as easily as through rice paper.

"*This way!*" he bellowed, cursing himself royally as the kids looked at him, uncomprehending. In all the excitement, he'd spoken in Russian. "This way," he repeated in English, gesturing for the nearest set of stairs. "Go, go, go!"

The light behind him didn't move, but that provided little solace. He'd already marked at least three more from directions that told him the mansion was surrounded. Common sense told him there had to be more troops. There was no safety above ground. And, he feared, precious little chance of reaching the escape tunnels below. But he had to try.

In the kitchen, Bobby Drake refused to move, refused to breathe, refused to think. If he didn't do the

first, maybe Logan wouldn't remember he was here. If he didn't do the last, he wouldn't have to face what he'd just seen.

He heard the *snakt* of claws being retracted, watched Logan lower the man's body to the floor. The claws had left their bloody mark on the refrigerator door, and the body left a trail before forming a puddle on the floor.

He'd never seen this in real life, only in movies or on the tube. Even when he was watching the news, it didn't seem real. They were just images, without any tangible impact.

But he'd heard the *huff* of the man's breath as Logan struck and knew with awful finality that the man would never draw another. He'd watch the tension flow out of the man's body until he had no more substance than a rag doll and, worse, had watched Logan's face while it happened. He saw no mercy there at all, and suddenly what he wanted more than anything was to be in his bed at home, cradled in the eternal security of his mother's arms while she sang him to sleep with a tune she'd made up for him alone.

He was crying, ashamed to show such weakness, yet strangely thankful that this was his body's only instinctive reaction. The tears blurred his vision, and when he wiped his eyes, crumbling the frozen water off his cheeks as they formed an icicle mustache, he saw only the body of the soldier. Logan had gone.

He didn't jump when Logan placed his hand on his shoulder, but the face he turned to the older man had lost any pretense of adulthood. It was a child's face, desperately scared.

"We've gotta go," Logan said simply.

Again without a thought, never knowing how high his stock was rising in Logan's opinion, Bobby pulled himself out from under the table and fell into step behind his companion.

Without running, they moved quickly through the ground floor. Bobby had no idea whether they were simply trying to escape or rescue the others. Logan didn't offer any enlightenment, and Bobby understood that his job right now was to follow Logan's lead and do as he was told. End of story. He heard the sounds of booted feet all around them, men shouting orders counterpointed by the higher-pitched cries of kids in a panic. He thought he heard shooting, he knew he heard a crash that sounded to him like a wrecking ball making contact. Then suddenly, at the short hallway leading to the servants' back stairs, Logan slapped him to a dead stop with an arm like steel rebar across his chest.

"Stay here," Logan snapped, and then he charged.

Bobby couldn't resist a peek, and yielding to that temptation made him more scared than ever.

Two troopers were carrying Jones down the stairway. Another few waited below in the hallway.

Logan turned the scene into a demolition derby. A fist backed by adamantium bones smashed one man's face and hurled the man aside, blinded and broken and bloody. Momentum carried him into the main body of the group, and a piercing shriek of surprise and pain told Bobby that Logan was using his claws.

There was nothing he could do to help Logan, not here, not in this kind of scrap, short of maybe freezing everybody in place. But then what would he do if more bad guys showed up, with Logan occupied?

At the same time, he wasn't prepared to hide anymore, the way he had before in the kitchen. One of the

school's rules—written and unwritten—was that the older kids looked out for the youngsters.

He didn't think about what he was going to do; that would have iced him in place more effectively than his power. He lunged across the hallway, straight for the servants' elevator, expecting with every one of the three steps it took him to feel the shock of a bullet to the back. He was so totally out of breath when he made it, and squeezed so deeply into the recessed alcove, that when the door slid open behind him he tumbled flat on the floor and almost couldn't get up.

At the other end of the hall, Logan was peppered with anesthetic darts. They didn't even slow him down. From above on the stairs, one of the men carrying Jones opened up with his sidearm, a 10mm automatic, but only managed to fire a couple of rounds before Logan took off the barrel and his forearm with a single sweep of his claws.

Logan never stopped moving, shifting from one adversary to the next with quick and deadly efficiency. He was a born scrapper, and in a crowd like this the advantage was all his. Everyone he faced was an enemy, whereas the soldiers had to be careful lest they cut down some of their own. The smart play for them would have been to withdraw and try to cut him down with automatic weapons or explosives, but they were boxed in by the tight confines of the hallway and there was no time for them to do more than react purely on reflex and training.

His reflexes were better by far, and their training didn't begin to prepare them for what they faced tonight.

He didn't care if they cut him, if they shot him; he'd bleed a while and then get better. By contrast, the blades that were part of his hands cut body armor and flesh and bone with equal facility, and if he chose not to use the blades, his unbreakable bones would do almost as much damage.

The fight didn't last a minute longer. When it was done, Logan was the only one left standing, one of a precious few left breathing.

He saw a dart sticking from his arm and pulled it out, flexing his fist and clenching it to make sure there were no ill effects. He found another in Jones and plucked it free as well. He pressed his fingertips to the boy's neck to confirm what his other enhanced senses had already told him. The pulse was slow, but strong and regular. The boy was asleep, otherwise unharmed.

He didn't bother looking back to where he'd left Bobby; he knew the older boy was gone. Hearing told him the elevator was engaged, scent told him which floor he'd gone to.

Logan hauled Jones off the stairs by an arm and pitched him across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. Before the boy was settled in place, Logan was moving up the stairs, two and three at a time. His senses had also given him a pretty decent picture of the opposition's numbers and general location. There was no time to waste, no margin for mistakes.

On the third floor, Bobby stepped out into chaos. The youngest kids, and some of the older ones, were panicking as wind pounded the roof and windows around them. Someone was screaming that the glass was going to shatter; another collapsed to his knees on the floor, face upraised and howling, certain a plane was going to crash right through the wall and bring the building down on their heads. The helicopters were perched outside the windows, using their million-plus candlepower spot lamps to light up the interior of the house in absolutes of black and white. The glare was so intensely bright that everyone was forced to close their eyes, just to keep from being permanently blinded.

Bobby grabbed for the first figure within reach. It turned out to be John Allardyce.

“What the hell’s happening?” John demanded between racking coughs that doubled him over. Somewhere he’d swallowed a lot of smoke, and he didn’t much like it. Smoke was useless to John without a flame.

“Guys with guns,” Bobby said, because that was all he knew for sure and trusted himself to say.

“No shit, Sherlock. We got a war here, we’re being invaded!”

“We’re *aschool* !” Bobby protested.

“Try telling them!”

“We’ve got to help the kids!”

“Peter’s up ahead. They’re gathering around him.”

“John, where’s Rogue? Have you seen her?”

“I don’t know. Man, I didn’t see *you* till you grabbed me!”

“I’m going to find her.”

John opened his mouth to protest, but Bobby was already two rooms down the hall. He didn’t want to follow. He saw no percentage in being *astupid* hero, especially under these circumstances, but he liked even less the idea that Bobby might think him a coward. The fact that Bobby would never conceive of such a thing didn’t enter John’s head.

Muttering and grumbling, he set out after his roommate, bulling his way against the tide of frightened schoolchildren.

The floor was trembling under the approach outside of a Sikorsky Blackhawk. It took station a dozen feet above the roof, and another assault team rappelled to the target. They weren’t playing nice anymore. They used shotguns and shaped-charge grenades to blast skylight windows from their frames, and shock-wave charges to stun everyone in the rooms below.

The troopers burst into the hall like sharks attacking a school of baitfish. One triggered a taser at the closest student, a young Asian girl, and sent a burst of electricity down the double wires into her back. To his surprise, Jubilation Lee didn’t fall. She pivoted on one foot, dropping into a shooting crouch of her own with her right arm outstretched, and shot that jolt of electricity through the air right back at him. The blast hit the trooper like the impact of a semi, throwing him back against the wall so hard he left an indent of his body deep enough to hold him upright. Out of the darkness nearby came the sound of a dart gun as another trooper returned fire from cover, and Jubilee dropped, unconscious.

In the neighboring wing, Peter Rasputin opened a hidden panel in the hallway wainscoting, revealing a passage and stairwell lit at intervals by emergency glow globes. Handing off Siryn to one of the older students, he began ushering his charges inside. Speed was the essence here. He had to clear the corridor before they were discovered by any of the intruders.

“Hey, shorty!” he heard from behind him. He thought at first it was one of the enemy and turned, ready to fight, only to find himself facing a figure barely half his size. Without another word, Logan handed over Jones.

“I can help you,” Colossus called after him.

“Help them!” came the reply. “You got your responsibilities, bub.”

Logan paused at a junction of the hallway. The beams of two flashlights and a set of green targeting lasers splayed across the wall. He waited a moment, then stepped out of sight around the corner. The lasers went out, and Peter heard a couple of grunts, plus the sound of falling bodies. One flashlight beam vanished as well, and the other skewed wildly sideways before rolling into view along the floor.

“I have mine,” Logan finished quietly, stepping briefly into view. “Get going.”

Peter didn’t need to be told twice. There were no other students in sight. He’d been running a head count of the kids he was shepherding into the escape passage, and he knew he was well short of the total. Who was just missing, who’d been captured, he had no idea. He also knew, although this left him sick and angry at heart, that he couldn’t go looking for them. As Logan said, he had his responsibilities, and he would not abandon them.

He stepped through the doorway and locked it closed behind him.

Kitty Pryde didn’t bother with doors. She didn’t need them. Intangible as a ghost, she raced through the mansion, down to the main floor, where she found soldiers . . .

. . . through one of the classrooms, more soldiers . . .

. . . through the arboretum, more soldiers . . .

. . . through the billiard room where Cyclops would shoot nine ball using his optic blasts instead of a pool cue, more soldiers . . .

. . . through the hallway beyond, and right through the body of one of the invaders before either of them knew quite what was happening.

Kitty’s power allowed her to slip the molecules of her own body through the valences of other physical objects. The process was so quick that it had virtually no effect on the molecular cohesion of those nonorganic solids, any more than the passage of baseline human bodies would affect the air through which they travel. Or, more accurately in her case, the vast emptiness of open space.

That wasn’t the case with electrical fields. Any transit by Kitty created a momentary skitz in a power circuit, causing a blink when it came to household wiring, leading to the occasional disaster when she interfaced with higher-order electronics. She was death to hard drives.

There was one other by-product, which her studies with Xavier had only recently begun to explore, and that related to the fact that the human body’s central nervous system is one huge electrical network, linked to a supremely powerful biological computer. Whenever she ghosted through a person, she caused much the same shock with them that she did to a power circuit. The consequences depended on how

quickly she was moving and where the contact took place.

For the trooper, it was like being momentarily jammed into a light socket. His world went white, just the way he'd read about folks who'd survived lightning strikes, and for an instant after it was over he thought that was what had happened. As a matter of fact, he wasn't altogether sure *whathad* just happened. He had a vague sense of a girl popping out of a wall, then diving right through him.

His own reaction was automatic. Even as shock threw him into a vertiginous spin toward the floor, he managed to snap off a taser round after the girl. It was a spectacular shot, especially considering the circumstances. He caught her dead center between the shoulder blades—only the prongs at the end of the taser wires didn't strike living flesh at all. Instead they buried themselves in the wall of the house, at the very instant the girl herself vanished inside.

Upstairs, Rogue had found another girl to add to her collection. Terrified, of course, huddled in a heap, face gleaming with silent tears in the random splashes of brilliance thrown by the circling helicopters and their damn spot lamps. Marie found herself wishing, fervently, for some powers more appropriate to the name she'd chosen for herself, Rogue—something akin to Cyclops' eye beams, or Jean's telekinesis, or Storm's command of the weather. She wasn't feeling picky; she just wanted something to even the odds and maybe tear those gunships from the sky.

"Come on, honey," she said instead, in her best baby-sitter voice, projecting a strength and calm she didn't have as she gathered the girl to her breast, taking care to always keep a layer of clothes between her own skin and the girl's.

She was glad now that one of the first things she had done on arrival at Xavier's School was memorize the network of hidden passages that honeycombed both the mansion itself and the grounds. At the time she was just staying in character; after all, a girl has to know how to slip away unnoticed for a night of private fun, even if she never found the opportunity to try. Now that work was paying off with interest, the passages enabling her to elude pursuit and scoot her share of students to safety.

"In you go, girls," she told them, "just like Storm taught us, 'kay?"

The girl in her arms was clinging like a limpet, whimpering now along with her tears. Rogue was her lifeline, and she couldn't bear to be parted. Rogue didn't have time for this. They were too close to one of the upper floor's big bay windows. The longer they stayed, the greater the chance of being spotted when one of the helicopters did a flyby and trained its million-candlepower lamp into the house.

"Aren't you coming?" the other girl asked. She was a Scots redhead of barely thirteen named Rahne Sinclair.

"I have to find someone first," Rogue told her. With a winning Highlander grin, Rahne pried the other girl's hands loose from Rogue's neck, offering reassurances of her own as she led the way into the passage.

"When you come out of the tunnels," Rogue told them both, "run straight to the first house you find. Tell them there was a fire. Tell them to contact your folks. Whatever you do, though, you don't tell anyone you're a mutant. Okay?"

The girl nodded uncomprehendingly, but Rahne knew the score. She'd take care of her classmate just fine. Rogue leaned forward to brush a wisp of hair from the younger girl's face. In return, she got a brave

attempt at a smile.

“Okay,” the girl said.

“You’ll be fine,” Rogue told her, and closed the secret panel behind them.

Quickly she scooted the length of the hallway. The walls and floor, the very air, were trembling again as the helicopters made another run on the mansion. She had to find cover before she was nailed herself.

Through the infernal din, suddenly, unexpectedly, she heard a familiar voice, someone she thought would be long gone from the mansion by now.

“Rogue,” called John Allardyce.

“Rogue!” bellowed Bobby Drake, determined to make himself heard.

“Bobby,” she cried, startled to realize how out-and-out delighted she sounded to see him safe and free. John had to make do with just a nod of greeting.

“There anyone else?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Bobby replied.

“Petey Pureheart was looking after a crowd of kids,” John said. “Outside of them, nada. Bad guys galore.”

“Where’s Logan?” Rogue demanded. “He was s’posed to be looking after us!”

Bobby’s face twisted. She knew the look. It echoed her own reaction to some of the things she’d seen Logan do in a fight.

“What’s happened?” she said, grabbing Bobby by the shirtfront. To save her life, Logan had let her imprint him and his healing factor. Most of the memories that came with his powers had thankfully faded over time, but under stress she still manifested occasional residual flashes of his personality. “Where is he?”

Bobby didn’t need to be asked twice. “He was downstairs,” he told her.

“This way,” she told them, intending to lead them back toward the secret passage.

Before she could move, an exterior lamp turned the hall brighter than noonday. They saw two shapes vaguely outlined in the glare, hanging outside the window. Immediately Rogue grabbed John, Bobby grabbed Rogue, and they all tumbled around the corner in a heap as an explosion shattered the leaded glass to bits, spraying the corridor with splinters and debris. Right behind the blast came the soldiers, targeting lasers tracing lines through the smoke, fingers ready on the triggers. Each door they passed got the same treatment: shotgun blasts to the hinges followed by a shot from a battering ram to punch it open, a couple of stun grenades to incapacitate anyone inside, sustained bursts from submachine guns to finish the job. Each room took only seconds to clear, and they did the job with murderous, methodical precision.

Without a word, the three young mutants decided that they didn’t want to find out what would happen if

they were found. When the soldiers reached the corner, the kids were long gone.

Up aboard the Hercules, the technicians staffing the sensor consoles were not happy. At the start of the incursion, they'd had a clear picture of the mansion's interior. They knew precisely where the kids were.

Now, after a span of too few minutes, nothing was certain anymore.

They had troopers down all across the board, with varying degrees of injury, and more than a few deaths. Worse for them, they had gradually lost contact with a significant number of potential targets. It didn't take a rocket scientist to determine the reason: the mansion must possess a number of sections that were comprehensively shielded against remote sensing and imagery. The only way to be sure of cleaning out the place would mean finding the access points and sending teams into the tunnels. Trouble was, given mission parameters, that wasn't an option.

The only alternative would be to widen the search parameters and try to pick the mutants up when they emerged onto the surface. But that would mean significantly degrading the resources available to monitor the prime target, Xavier's mansion. Again, given mission parameters, not an option.

Barring a miracle, any kids who'd escaped into the tunnels were pretty much free and clear.

Unaware of this, Peter Rasputin led his party into one of the long tunnels burrowed deep beneath the estate. Its terminus was a thick stand of woods outside Xavier's holdings, a nature preserve. He had no idea what would happen after that, or what would become of a score of terrified, bedraggled children in their nightclothes, with no money between them and no one close at hand they could trust.

Right now, though, for Peter, that didn't seem so important. He just wanted to get them, and himself, out of danger, to a place where no one would chase them or threaten them with guns. He wanted a breather, time enough to gather his wits and take stock of both the situation and his resources. Of the ultimate outcome, though, he had no doubt.

Awful as things seemed now, in the end he was sure they'd work out all right.

In that regard, Bobby and John would give him the argument of a lifetime. For them, as they hurried with Rogue down the nearest flight of stairs, the order of the evening was that things that were bad were constantly getting worse.

The mansion was crawling with troops, and from the sounds they heard all around, they quickly realized that nobody was using tranquilizer guns anymore. The bad guys were shooting bullets now, and they weren't being stingy with their ammunition.

Abruptly, Rogue stopped in her tracks, so suddenly the others slammed into her from behind. Harsh words were formed, but none were spoken. The sight before them wouldn't allow it.

Rogue was standing amid a pile of bodies, all soldiers.

"Logan was here," John commented unnecessarily, but even he felt small and vulnerable in the face of this carnage.

“This is old news,” Bobby said, reaching for Rogue’s gloved hand. “We can’t stay here, Rogue, we’re sitting ducks. We keep running after him like this, we’ll just get ourselves in trouble.”

She didn’t reply, she didn’t move a muscle, so Bobby edged forward to look her in the face.

She was staring down at her chest. It was covered in green dots. He looked up, following the beams of light to their source, and found a team of soldiers in the far doorway, weapons leveled.

They never got a chance to fire. Logan saw to that.

He was on the gallery above them, and with a primal scream that was so much more animal than human, he dropped on them like the wrath of God unleashed, arms held wide, claws extended.

The soldiers didn’t stand a chance. Bobby couldn’t watch this time any more than the last. Rogue wouldn’t turn away. Logan was a part of her now, and would be forever, the same as with everyone else she imprinted. She felt her own fists flex just a little and felt an echo of the wild and untamable creature she saw before her.

Something tweaked her attention. Her eyes flicked to the side, and she caught a glimpse of a smile on John’s face and a look to his eye that made her sad and scared all at the same time. John was enjoying this. He wanted a piece of it for himself. It would be fun.

A brace of lights hit the entrance from outside and above, pinning Logan in their beams as the helicopters responded to frantic calls for help down below. They didn’t wait for orders, they wouldn’t have cared anyway; the moment their guns came to bear, they opened fire, pockmarking the lawn with craters and shattering the stone entrance to the mansion to powder. But their target wasn’t there anymore.

“Go,” Logan told the kids, pushing them deep into the house. “*Go, go, go!*”

John found the nearest escape passage, opened the door, then he and Bobby went leaping through at once. Rogue held back. Imprinting Logan had left her own senses with a faint residue of what Logan himself possessed, and she could hear soldiers closing on their position from every side.

She called his name.

“Keep going,” he told her, and shunted her none too gently over the threshold.

“Logan,” she pleaded.

He shut the door in her face. And she was glad.

He figured at least twenty close at hand as he put his back to the wall, but only a dozen of them lit him up with their lasers. They didn’t fire right away, he didn’t care.

He popped both sets of claws, but their fire discipline held. Nobody pulled a trigger.

“You want a piece of me,” Logan raged, his face twisted with a wild, untamable grin. “C’mon, boys, take your best shot. You know you want to. Shoot me! And see who gets to walk out of here alive!”

“No,” said someone new, with quiet authority.

“Not yet,” the figure finished, approaching through the darkness. The voice was familiar, Logan recognized that at the start, but he couldn’t find a name or face to match it.

“Wolverine? Is that you?” the man said, closer still, the soldiers reluctantly moving apart to allow him past. He was important to them, but also, and just as obviously, the man in charge. They couldn’t refuse. Kill him, Logan sensed instinctively, and this fight could well be won. “How long has it been?”

The man paused, as if expecting an answer to his greeting, his voice showing some good humor as he continued: “Fifteen years? And you haven’t changed a bit. Me, on the other hand . . .”

With that, William Stryker stepped into view. He wore combat gear, just like his men, and in that attire his true calling was more than plain.

“Nature.” He made a deprecating gesture. “It takes its toll.”

The scent rang bells, far more so than the face, yet try as he might Logan couldn’t find the labels that would give these random flashes of remembrance proper meaning.

The claws withdrew into their housings.

“What do you want?” Logan asked of him.

Stryker replied with a smile that would have done the Cheshire cat proud.

On the other side of the wall, Rogue stood unmoving in the entrance to the secret passage, bitterly ashamed of the surge of emotion that had swept through her as Logan closed the door. He’d been a stand-up guy for her from the start, and this was how she repaid him, by being happy that he stayed behind—because she felt an echo in her own soul of the berserker rage and madness that possessed his. It made her want to run away from him, more powerfully than any impulse she’d ever felt. But being his friend, being true to her name, she defied those expectations. She spit in their eye. Logan would have done the same, but this response was purely hers, and that, too, was why she chose to stay. They were alike, but they weren’t the same.

Hands grabbed her arms. She shook them off.

“Wait,” she told the boys, who couldn’t believe their ears. “You’ve got to do something.”

“Damn straight,” John said hurriedly. “Run like hell while we’ve got the chance!”

“They’re going to kill him!”

That argument fell on totally deaf ears. Both boys had seen Logan in action. Neither believed such an outcome remotely possible.

“Yeah, right.” John scoffed for emphasis. “He can handle himself, Rogue. Let’s book!”

“Bobby,” she pleaded, “*please!*” She was desperate now, determined, because when she said, “They’re going to kill him,” the part of her that resonated with him suggested that was something he desired.

All Bobby knew was that Logan was the scariest creature he'd ever encountered. He was every nightmare that had ever had come to life, and if he never met Logan again, he'd be haunted by these memories for as long as he drew breath. In a way, he blamed Logan for all that was happening tonight. The first time he came to the mansion was when they were attacked by Magneto; now, the night of his return, the Army. He was a walking invitation to disaster, and nothing good would come of hanging with him. He also saw the way Rogue looked at him, spoke of him, cared for him, and he hated him for holding the place in her heart he wanted for himself.

Leave him. Let him find his own fate. That was the smart play. It was what he'd told them to do.

Stryker took a step closer to Logan, the men behind him making adjustments to their stance and position so that he didn't block any shooter's line of sight. One twitch from him, that would be their cue to cut loose on full auto, with enough firepower to turn anyone alive into hamburger. Another man, whose manner and bearing marked him as an officer, put aside his rifle and set himself to make a grab for Stryker and try to yank him clear if things went sour. Given all Lyman had seen tonight of Logan's handiwork, he suspected that was a forlorn hope. He'd try regardless. That was his job, to look after Stryker, and most likely die with him.

Logan saw the action. Loyalty like that couldn't be bought, he knew. His estimation of the other man went up a serious notch.

If Stryker was a fraction of the man Logan judged him to be, he had to know the danger, but he made no acknowledgment of it. He played the scene as if they were two old companions, possibly even friends, reuniting after a long and enforced separation. No denying his courage, that was sure, and Logan's assessment of him went up another notch as well.

"I must admit," Stryker continued, carrying on this eerily incongruous conversation, "this is the last place I thought I'd ever see you, Wolverine. I didn't realize Xavier was taking in animals." A pause to let the barb sink in. Logan didn't react. "Even animals as . . . unique as you."

"Who are you?"

"Don't you remember?"

Logan blinked, wondering what was wrong with the air. A mist was forming between him and Stryker, the temperature plunging so rapidly that one breath was normal, the next gusting a cloud of icy condensation.

On the other side of the mist, Stryker reached out a hand to encounter a wall of gleaming ice that divided the hallway from floor to ceiling, wall to wall, forming a protective bulwark between the mutant and Stryker. The men around him stirred, suddenly anxious that they might become entrapped in ice themselves. But nobody broke ranks.

Logan considered using his claws. No matter how thick the wall, he could speedily turn it into ice cubes. But first he had to deal with the damn kids.

The look on his face caused John to take a reflexive, cautionary step backward and made Bobby thankful he was inside the passage, his hands held flat against the wall to generate and sustain his ice field. Rogue didn't flinch, didn't fade. She met him eye to eye with a will as stubborn as his own.

“Logan,” she said. “Come on.”

“Do as you’re told, girl. Get outta here. I’ll be fine.” He used a tone and manner that had always gotten instant results. She returned both in equal measure.

“But we won’t.” Then, more quietly, “Please!”

Stryker wasn’t sure what was happening. The wall was translucent enough to suggest to him that Logan was no longer alone, but it didn’t allow him to see how many others had joined him or who they were. With swift, decisive movements, he plucked a penetrator grenade from Lyman’s harness and jammed it into the ice. Lyman immediately pulled him back and around, to shield his commander’s body with his own. The other troopers shielded themselves and scrambled for cover as best they could in the seven seconds that passed between Stryker pulling the pin and the bomb detonating. The shock resounded through the confined space, leaving those closest to the blast partially deafened, their bodies feeling like they’d just been pummeled by jackhammers. The force of the shaped charge went straight into the ice, filling the air with frozen splinters as it punched through the wall like a spear.

When the mist cleared, the wall lay in broken chunks, filling the hallway and partially covering some of the men.

On the other side, though, was empty floor. Of Wolverine, and the others Stryker had seen, there was no sign.

John led the way, even though Logan could see a lot better in the dark. The boys wouldn’t admit it aloud, but both of them preferred having him between them and the bad guys.

At the first junction, John went left.

“John, no,” Bobby called after him.

“This is where Petey and the others went.”

“I’ve got a better idea. This way.”

The other direction ended at the garage. Like everything else about the mansion, there was a public space and a private one. Upstairs, in a carriage house set a little apart from the main buildings, was the usual group of SUVs and vans, plus the professor’s vintage Rolls-Royce. The basement held a far more eclectic and personal assortment of vehicles, including Scott’s collection of bikes. Some looked normal, others were as wildly modified and revolutionary in conception and design as the *Blackbird*.

The choice for tonight was a sports car, blindingly quick but so well crafted and balanced that it could handle the local roads—which were narrow and wickedly winding—as though it were traveling on rails. The confines would be cramped, but it would carry them all.

John dropped into the driver’s seat with the announcement, “I’m driving.”

Logan yanked him clear as though he weighed nothing. “In your dreams, smart-ass,” he growled. “Boys in the back.”

Rogue rode shotgun, Bobby making sure to sit behind her.

“This is Scott’s car,” he said.

“Oh, yeah?” Logan didn’t sound impressed, but actually he was.

“We’ll need keys.”

Logan’s reply was the *snikt* of a single claw extending. He stabbed it through the ignition, twisted some wires together, got a spark, got a start, and they were on their way.

There was an evacuation tunnel for vehicles as well, giving them access directly to Graymalkin Lane, the road that ran along the estate’s border. A left turn would take them to the neighboring town of Purdy’s Station and the interstate, 684, that linked New York City with the main east-west highway—I-84—that bisected Connecticut and the southern tier of New York State. Turning right put them into the heart of Fairfield County, lots of woodland roads so gnarly and poorly signed that even the locals got lost occasionally. It was hilly country, constantly dropping into little ravines and hollows, which made it difficult to establish sustained radio or cellular communication.

Logan went for it like a shot, taking the turns at speeds that made the three passengers grab for their seat belts and then hold them tight. He drove without lights.

“Uhh,” Bobby tried, swallowed, tried again. “You could maybe slow down, you know.”

“Like hell,” John retorted. “Go faster, dude, get us the hell away from here, *please!*” He finished in savage mimicry of Rogue’s plea, both to Bobby and to Logan himself. “Jesus wept,” he said, more to himself than anyone else, “what the hell *was* that back there?”

Rogue caught a flicker from Logan’s eyes, his fingers working the leather-wrapped steering wheel and making it creak with tension.

“Stryker,” he said after a while, as at least one penny dropped in memory. “His name is Stryker.”

“Who’s he?” Rogue asked.

His mouth stretched ever so slightly into a wry grimace, his head shook the smallest fraction.

“I don’t know,” he confessed, to her alone. “I don’t remember.”

She huddled deep in her seat, and he noticed that she was playing with something on her wrist: his old dog tags. He’d given them to her as a keepsake before leaving for Alkali Lake.

Seeing his look, following it to her hand, she unwrapped them from her wrist and held them out to him.

He took them, rubbing his thumb over the embossed letters like Aladdin did his lamp, hoping for his own kind of genie and three wishes to unlock all the secrets of his life, never considering—now or ever—that perhaps those secrets weren’t something he should see.

He shifted gears and heard a yelp of shock and protest from John as his elbow clipped the boy in the cheek.

“What’s your problem, kid?” he growled as John wriggled his head and an arm between the front seats,

reaching for the center console.

“What are you doing, John?” Rogue demanded in that clippy voice that meant she’d been pushed too far and was ready to do some real damage.

“Too much silence, dudes. Majorly uncomfortable. Don’t like it.”

He pressed a button and the speakers erupted with what passed for music from a techno band that none of them had ever heard of and, after the first few seconds, didn’t want to. The car’s sound system was as superb as its engine and handling, the choice of cds was truly deranged, inspiring impassioned and derogatory comments galore from the kids. Logan didn’t say a word. His own tastes ran mainly toward roadhouse R&B and classic jazz, with one exception that he’d never been able to figure out, an affinity that went back as far as his memory for the Japanese *koto* .

Of course, being the ultimate gearhead, Scott had built himself a system only he could understand. The damn controls weren’t even marked. Probably had an operator’s manual the size of the Manhattan phone book. The more John tried to kill the music, the louder it became. Finally, when Logan was on the verge of ending their torment with a swipe of his claws, the boy managed to find the eject button. Only this switch had nothing whatsoever to do with the music. Instead, a tray popped into view, revealing an oval-shaped disk about as small as your basic computer mouse.

With a grumble of righteous exasperation Rogue pressed another switch on the console . . .

. . . and they heard only road noise once more, and the wind rushing past.

She and Logan exchanged looks, he offering silent thanks for her saving the day, while she thanked him in return for his forbearance. Her fist, the arm that had worn Logan’s dog tags, was tightly clenched, the same way he held it when he popped his claws. If she’d had claws to go with the residue of Logan’s personality and powers she still possessed, John would have been shish kebab ages ago.

John noticed none of this. He was too engrossed in his new toy. He found another button and when he pressed it found himself holding a two-way communication device.

“Guys,” he announced, “I don’t think this has anything to do with the CD player.”

Logan plucked it from the boy’s hand. John’s survival instincts were working overtime. For once he didn’t protest as Logan examined the device. Whatever the infuriating idiosyncrasies of the car’s sound system, this at least made some sense to him.

“Where are we going?” John asked after awhile, totally lost.

“Storm and Jean are in Boston” was Logan’s terse reply. “We’ll head that way.”

“My folks live in Boston,” Bobby said.

“Good,” said Logan.

Rogue heard him, but she wasn’t really paying attention. She was looking at Logan’s hands, skin covered past both wrists with what could easily be mistaken for dried paint, caked a layer or two more thickly between the knuckles, where the claws went into their housings. Her eyes saw more than she wanted, her sense of smell revealed more than she could bear, and she looked down at her own hands,

wondering suddenly how her sleeping gloves had gotten so badly shredded. *Too much skin showing*, she thought, *I have to be really careful about touching anyone*. Her hands were trembling with the memory of what she'd seen him do.

“Don’t worry, darlin’,” she heard him say, again in that quiet, private voice that was for her alone, “it’s not mine.”

When their eyes met, she gave a start of surprise, her mouth forming a tiny O of amazement. She was so used to feeling residues of his own ferocious—and murderous—passions, she found it hard to believe when she saw reflected in his eyes an echo of the pain and misery she felt. And strangely, she found that reassuring. It made her feel better—to know that he wasn’t a monster after all. That man Stryker had called him an animal, had called him Wolverine instead of by name, but Rogue knew different.

His name was Logan. And he was human to the core.

Chapter Eight

The mansion itself was the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The bulk of Xavier’s School was hidden below ground, in a complex that stretched deep into the earth and sprawled every which way beneath the estate, employing technology as revolutionary as the design of the *Blackbird*. The schematics of the power source alone made the physicists on Stryker’s analysis team weep with frustration. More than anything, they wanted to get their hands on this equipment, and none of them was happy to discover that their employer had other priorities.

A significant amount of space directly beneath the mansion was devoted to something Magneto referred to as the Danger Room. It was here that Xavier conducted the bulk of his explorations into the practical dynamics and limitations of the powers possessed by his students. Of equal significance, it was also where he trained his personal assault force, the X-Men.

Technicians began swarming through the building as soon as Lyman’s troops reported it secure, but they quickly found themselves frustrated by command protocols keyed to retinal and voice prints they didn’t possess and computer codes so deviously encrypted they couldn’t begin to make sense of them.

Stryker didn’t much care. To him, all that was of peripheral interest. As far as he was concerned, once his plan reached fruition, they could deconstruct the school and all of its tech at their leisure.

Under escort, he made his way down the main elevator to the uppermost level of the underground complex. Troopers with digital cameras recorded everything, to be downloaded into the main database once they returned to headquarters—more grist for the analysts’ mill. Chances were, this would leave them in pig heaven for years to come.

They passed a locker room, and Stryker paused a moment to finger one of the uniforms hanging there. Another marvel of structural engineering. The material looked and felt like leather; it fit like a biker’s speed suit, almost a second skin. But it was extraordinarily resilient, protecting the wearer from extremes of temperature and environment—snug in winter, cool in summer, dry in a monsoon—and, most practical

of all in Stryker's opinion, better than Kevlar as body armor. Projections suggested it could survive a point-blank round from a Barrett .50-caliber sniper gun, the most powerful rifle made, one small step below an actual cannon.

He turned away from the uniform as Lyman hurried up to join him, calling his name.

"Tunnels," he reported to Stryker, standing briefly to attention and giving the older man a salute. "That's where all the kids went. And damn well shielded, too, better than this!" He indicated the circular corridor around them, with its ergonomically cool colors and lighting, the epitome of sensible industrial engineering. "From the way targets kept popping off our scopes, the house must be riddled with them, the entire compound, too! We used a sonic imager to find some of the entrances, but there were deadfalls right inside, sealing the escape routes tight. From the way they booked out of here, they had to have practiced escape and evasion techniques. I don't know if we can catch them at the exit points."

"Very prudent of them. How many did you get, then?"

"Six, sir. What should we do with them?"

"Pack them up. We'll decide later."

As the two men spoke, they approached Stryker's true destination, right at the end of this main hallway. It was a circular door that intentionally resembled the entrance to a bank vault, or to NORAD's command center deep inside Cheyenne Mountain, built to protect the chamber within against any form of hostile incursion. Stryker doubted he had any tools in his arsenal, short of perhaps a baby nuke, capable of breaching this barrier. Fortunately, none were needed.

At his command, a pair of troopers stepped forward and set up the device they were carrying, placing it on a tripod in front of the doorway. To the right side of the door itself was a scanning plate, in which was embedded a multifaceted blue crystal, as pure a sapphire as any had ever seen. They set the lasing crosshairs dead center on the crystal, at the height of a tall man seated in a wheelchair.

The device was activated, the laser immediately refracting into a score of lesser beams that struck the crystal, replicating the retinal pattern they had recorded from Xavier's own eye.

It only took a moment.

"Welcome, Professor," said a gentle feminine voice with a hint of a highland Scots brogue. Stryker recognized it from Xavier's primary dossier; it was his collaborator, fellow geneticist and onetime lover, Moira MacTaggart of Edinburgh University.

Without hesitation Stryker strode along the platform to Xavier's console in the center of the great globe of a room. The others held back, just a little. To them, this was the heart of the darkness that was their enemy, the place where Xavier supposedly honed and worked his incredible powers. From here, so Magneto said, he could reach out to every mind on the planet. Stryker hoped that was true, hoped the old mutant wasn't exaggerating. Because that made this room the key to his ultimate victory.

He reached out to the gleaming chrome helmet on its stand but couldn't quite bring himself to touch it. This was Xavier's toy; let the mutant mental play with it. Stryker would watch. "Take what you need, gentlemen," he said as the soldiers entered Cerebro.

Saturday night. And Mitchell Laurio, creature of habit, was where he could be found every Saturday night he wasn't working. Fourth stool from the end at the Dew Drop Inn. It wasn't a great bar, but then he wasn't a picky guy. It had televisions to spare and, if the cash was right, a fella could persuade one of the waitresses to join him in a booth and provide a semiprivate show. Most nights, the video choice was sports or sex, but for some reason the bartender had switched the TVs over to some damn news show where two mooks were blathering on about mutants, as if anyone in the world actually gave a rat's ass about their opinion.

Laurio wasn't aware he was speaking those sentiments aloud but wouldn't have cared if he had realized it.

“. . . the Mutant Registration Act provides a sense of security similar to Megan's Law,” said a middle-aged guy whose title card identified him as Sebastian Shaw, the latest tycoon turned politico. “A list of potentially dangerous mutants living in our communities.”

His counterpart was half his age and twice his size, and Laurio remembered him from college ball. An All-American who passed on a pro contract to go to Stanford for a doctorate, the first of a whole bunch, it turned out. His name was Henry McCoy. *People* magazine said he preferred Hank.

“Megan's Law is a database of known felons, Mr. Shaw,” he responded heatedly, “not innocent people who haven't committed any crime and may not even be likely to. It's akin to registering every member of a religious or ethnic group in the nation, on the presumption that *some* of them may be terrorists.”

“Some might not consider that so bad an idea, McCoy.”

“*Some*, Sebastian,” McCoy shot back, “might consider America a better place than that.”

“A damn mutant almost killed the President!”

“*A person*, who happened to be a mutant, made the attempt, yes. If he was a Lutheran, would you automatically condemn every Lutheran in the land?”

“If the knife had said ‘Lutheran Rights Now,’ I'd damn sure consider it.”

“What people seem to forget is that mutation is evolution in action. In a sense, we're *all* mutants. If not for past mutations, for past evolution, chances are we'd all be sitting in trees, picking bugs from one another's hair!”

“Goddamn it, Lou,” Laurio snarled, “turn that shit off. Bad enough I got the godfather of muties in my face the whole damn day long without I got this raining on my head after!”

“I'm sorry,” he heard a woman say behind him, in a voice that went down his spine like a shock, “it's my fault. I asked Lou to turn the channel.”

He rolled his stool around and found himself facing a woman who put the dogs who usually haunted this place to shame. She was no stick-figure woman, he had no taste for that, she had curves on her and then some, big rack, cute butt, and a waist that made his hands ache to enfold her. She had some mileage to her, but she had a look to the eye, a quirk to the mouth, and a way of looking him up and down that told him she knew how to use it. Her lips were liquid scarlet, sassy, her eyes so deeply shadowed that all he could see were some glints reflecting the neon behind the bar, which gave them a weird yellow cast. She was blond, and taller than he usually liked, but he figured that was due to her stilt stilettos, and as she

strode closer he had to admit he loved what those shoes did for her walk.

“You sound like a man with a lot on his mind”—she paused to sneak a peek at his badge—“Mr. Laurio.”

He smelled scotch on her breath and noted the half-full tumbler in her hand.

“I’m Grace,” she said.

He didn’t know what to say. Really, all he wanted to do was sit and stare. She let him. It was obvious that she enjoyed the attention.

“Want another beer, Mr. Laurio?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “Course you do.”

“Mitch,” he said. “My name’s Mitch.”

She gave him that dazzling smile again, shifting position beside him so that her skirt rode high enough on her thigh to flash some skin above the top of her stocking and her breasts brushed against his chest. She seemed to lose her balance just a little, forcing him to catch her with his arm suddenly tight around her waist, and she giggled like it was all a big joke and he laughed, too, because this was the kind of moment he only dreamed about.

He didn’t see what her free hand was doing behind him as she gathered the beer mug close, dropping a pair of white pills into the foam, where they quickly dissolved.

After a couple more beers, it took only the vaguest hint to propel him off his stool and into the ladies’ room. It wasn’t much different from the men’s room in layout and wasn’t much cleaner besides. As they stumbled over the threshold, Laurio tried to take a swallow of beer and grab a kiss on her lips all at the same time and failed in both. That made them both laugh, especially since most of the beer had landed on him. He was stinko, a lot more than was usual after a few beers, but he didn’t give it any thought.

“I never hooked up with anyone like you before,” he told her, making like the guys on TV .

“I know,” she said. “Your lucky night.”

She gave a little push, and he dropped onto a toilet seat.

“Kinda dirty, ain’t it,” he said.

“That’s the idea,” she replied, leaning forward to tease him with a glimpse of her breasts before squatting down in front of him. Her legs were splayed wide apart, but there were too many shadows, his eyes wouldn’t focus right, he couldn’t see enough to make it worthwhile. Then, as she unbuckled his belt, he gave up trying to look. Tonight was getting better and better.

“Velcro,” Grace muttered as she opened his pants. “Nice.”

“Bottoms up,” he toasted her, raising his beer high.

“I certainly hope so.”

She smiled one last time, and the last of his beer cascaded out of the mug and across his face and chest.

His mouth was open, but he made no attempt to drink. He was way beyond that. As his head lolled back against the tile behind him, his pupils dilating to their limits, his suddenly nerveless arm dropped, the mug falling from useless fingers to shatter on the floor.

Grace pressed two fingers to his carotid pulse, satisfying herself it was firm and regular, then used the tips of her fingers to close his mouth and stop the beginnings of a snore. There was no sloppiness any longer to either manner or movement as she snapped the lock shut on the door behind her, then reached down to grab Laurio around the waist and flip the big man over so that his head was somewhere behind the bowl and his butt poked up in the air.

She opened her purse and removed a syringe, tapping the barrel with a lacquered forefinger to clear any air bubbles. It wouldn't do to give the slug an embolism. She pulled down his boxers and pressed the plunger. As she did, the skin on her hand darkened to the same indigo shade as her nail polish. The transformation raced up her arm, across her body, which became longer and leaner, much less the kind of blowsy Reubens woman that Mitchell Laurio dreamed of in favor of someone much stronger and more sleekly muscular. Her hair became a dark autumnal russet shot through with midnight. Mystique bared teeth that were startlingly white against her blue-black skin and patted Laurio where she'd made the injection.

"Bottoms up, darling." And then she was gone.

Lyman met Stryker en route from the landing pad.

"The men are nearly finished, sir," he reported.

Stryker nodded approvingly. "Ahead of schedule," he noted approvingly. "Strip down at source, transport, and reconstruction. I am very impressed, Mr. Lyman. The crews are to be commended."

"You trained 'em, sir. They're just following your lead."

Stryker continued to nod. This was going better than he'd hoped. A good omen for what was to come, perhaps.

"How does it look?" he wondered.

"Flawless."

They passed a reception cubicle where Lyman saw one of the troopers tending to the prisoner Cyclops, fastening a metal band over the mutant's eyes.

"Good," Stryker said, meaning both what Lyman had just told him and what he saw in the cubicle. "Now for the main event."

When he woke, groggy and pummeled, as though every cell in his brain had been given its own personal, enthusiastic beating, Charles Xavier had no idea where he was. Far worse, he had no sense whatsoever of the thoughts around him. He couldn't help a moment's panic, finding himself imprisoned for the first time within the walls of his own skull. As a clinician he'd often used the term "headblind" to describe nontelepaths and had even fantasized about the sensation. Unfortunately it was like trying to imagine being dead; the act of imagination itself effectively invalidated the concept.

This was so much worse. He felt hollow and . . . alone. The background noise, the susurrus of other thoughts that was a constant presence and an occasional annoyance, was gone. His inner cries couldn't even provoke an echo. He could only perceive the world from a single perspective, his own, and it was unbearable.

He was bound into his chair, his wrists tied with duct tape to the armrests. He felt a dull burning pressure around his head and thought of the torture instruments of the Inquisition. One—particularly nasty—was strapped around the skull and gradually tightened until the bone shattered. From how he felt, Xavier assumed that had long since happened. If he let his head loll forward, perhaps he'd see his brain flop out onto the floor. At least that final oblivion would be better—*anything* would be better—than the gnawing emptiness that was consuming him.

He tried to take refuge from his misery by taking inventory of the purely physical. He wasn't in Mount Haven, that was a sure bet. The room was dark, as were some in the prison, but the walls were dank and pockmarked with age. The prison environment was strictly maintained; this was so chilly he was already starting to shiver, a damp cold that ate into his bones. This place had been abandoned long ago, and even though he could hear faint sounds of activity, it was clear to him that no one was planning a lengthy stay.

Reflexively, he stretched his thoughts toward the sounds outside. Big mistake. The Inquisition analogy suddenly took on an agonizing relevance as he felt as if barbed spikes were being driven into him. The sleet storm of pain doubled him over, pulling a hoarse grunt from the pit of his belly. Worse had happened; he could smell and feel the consequences as his body lost all control, and the beginnings of tears burned his eyes at the loss of his dignity.

"I just had to see that work for myself," said Stryker as he entered the room.

Xavier didn't bother to respond at first. Better to take as much time as possible, to gather what few resources remained to him before facing his adversary. He worked his tongue around his mouth, tasting the familiar gunmetal taste of adrenaline, remembering another time and place where his telepathy had been no use to him. A wayward step on a jungle trail, the shock of a land mine that, fortunately, was on the other side of a tree. The encounter had won him a Purple Heart and taught him a valuable lesson: Just because it doesn't have a brain doesn't mean it can't kill you.

Stryker was a patient man, especially when he was winning. He waited until Xavier was ready before continuing.

He hadn't come alone. Standing in the doorway, obviously a bodyguard, was a lovely young woman of Asian extraction. Something about her gaze caught Xavier's attention; there was animation in her eyes, but no sense of real life. She seemed awake, yet totally asleep.

"I call it the neural inhibitor," Stryker continued. "The more you think, the more you hurt. And"—he tapped his own forehead—"it keeps you out of *here*."

"William," Xavier said, and he wasn't surprised to how hard it was to speak even that single word. The inhibitor not only crippled his psychic functions but a degree of his basic cognitive ones as well.

"I'm sorry we couldn't find you more . . . comfortable quarters," Stryker said. "My old home here is about to undergo some rather major renovations. Much like yours."

Xavier felt stupid, which made him feel angry. He couldn't make the connections, couldn't see the implications of what Stryker was saying, even though the other man was acting like they were blindingly obvious. He fastened on to the only one that came to mind.

"What have you done with Scott?"

"Don't worry, you'll be seeing him soon. I'm just giving the boy a little reeducation." He paused. "But you know all about that, don't you? Altering thoughts and perceptions must be as easy for you as rewriting codes of software."

"There's no need to involve anyone else!" Xavier protested desperately, with more vehemence than Stryker expected.

"No need to involve anyone else?" Stryker sounded genuinely incredulous. "You run a *school for mutants*, Professor! What on Earth do you teach those creatures?"

A question requiring a conceptual answer. That took effort, which brought him pain, but Xavier persevered nonetheless, calling on the same focus and discipline that had enabled him, self-taught, to master his burgeoning telepathy.

"To survive," he hissed through gritted teeth. "To coexist peacefully in a world that fears them."

"I've seen what's buried beneath your house, Xavier. It doesn't look very peaceful to me. I also know—firsthand—the kind of creatures you've gathered to live there. Some species can never coexist. I learned that from you," he finished offhandedly, turning away.

"You wanted me to *ecure* your son. But, William, mutation is not a disease."

"Liar," he snapped. When Stryker looked around, his mask of affability was gone. The pain was real, the grief, the rage, and he used his words on his prisoner like a lash.

"You're lying, Xavier," Stryker said more slowly, more forcefully. "You were more afraid of him than I was! He was too powerful, and you couldn't control him."

The Asian woman laced her fingers together, cracked her knuckles. Stryker noticed more than Xavier did. The gesture amused him, but only for a moment that quickly passed, the feeling subsumed as always by his relentless fury.

"You know, just a year after Jason returned from your school, my wife . . ." Stryker's voice trailed off, and he stood up. His own right hand was clenched into so tight a fist the knuckles were white, and Xavier guessed from his posture that he wanted to use that fist, on Xavier himself. "He resented us, you see, he blamed us for his . . . condition. He was my *son*. I loved him more than my own life, we both did. How could he feel such things about us? How could he . . . *do* . . . such things?"

"He would . . . toy with our minds, you see. He would project images and scenarios into our brains."

As he spoke, the woman's breathing became erratic. Her hands began to tremble enough to finally catch Xavier's notice. There was a gradual but growing look of confusion to her features, a distinct change to the quality of the animation he'd seen in her gaze. She was no longer placid; she was waking up.

Stryker paid her no attention. His focus remained entirely on Xavier.

“Unfortunately,” he said, making an effort to hammer the emotion from his voice and thereby revealing the terrible, haunting depth of those feelings, “I had my work. I was overseas, serving my country.” His subtext was plain. He hadn’t been there to share his wife’s ordeal; he couldn’t do for her what he felt his job required him to do for the nation—save the day. He had survived and was glad and guilty of it.

“My wife couldn’t escape. She was around him all the time. We had to keep him at home, you see. After you sent him away, we didn’t dare risk allowing him to attend a school. Can you imagine what he’d have done to all those impressionable minds?”

“I . . . didn’t know.”

“How convenient for you. My wife, over time, she became easily influenced . . . unable to tell the difference between what was real and what was a part of his warped imagination. In the end . . .” he paused, confronting the memory like a warrior facing down an adversary. “She took a power drill to her left temple, in an attempt to bore the images out of her mind.”

The woman swayed, shaking her head once or twice to clear it, reaching up with one hand to steady herself. Absently, Stryker stopped the gesture and lowered the arm back to her side. He was aware of what was happening to her and wasn’t bothered in the slightest. Everything was under control.

“My . . . boy,” and in that one word were all the dreams and heartbreak of a father’s life. “The great illusionist.”

“For someone who hates mutants, William, you certainly keep strange company.”

“It has its uses,” Stryker replied. “It serves a purpose. As do you.”

In his hand he held an ampoule of yellow liquid. With the same gentle gesture, which reminded Xavier of the way a trainer might move a horse, he bent the woman forward from the waist until her head was on the same level as Xavier’s. He swept her hair aside to bare the back of her neck, revealing a scar identical to the one Xavier had seen on Magneto.

With practiced ease, Stryker applied two drops. The effect was instantaneous. Her breathing returned to normal, she stopped trembling, and when she straightened once more to her full height, Xavier saw no more sign in her eyes of an independent personality.

Stryker whispered something in her ear. She nodded and left the room.

“It was you,” Xavier said suddenly, in a burst of intuition that left him shocked. “You arranged the attack on the President!”

Stryker actually laughed out loud. “And you didn’t even have to read my mind,” he said approvingly.

“You know,” he continued, “I believe I’ve been working with mutants almost as long as you have, but the final solution to the problem continued to evade me. So I guess I’m in your debt. I have to thank *you*, Xavier, because you gave me Magneto. And Magneto gave me the answer.”

“You can’t eradicate us, William. New mutants are born every day.”

“And once I’m finished, they’ll be born into a very different world. What are you thinking, that I’ll end

up like Rameses or Herod or poor old Heydrich? Nice try at genocide, but no cigar?

“Guess again. You see, in all my years of . . . research, the most frustrating thing I learned is that nobody really knows how many mutants exist in the world, or how to find them.”

He leaned close, putting his face directly in front of Xavier’s. “Except you.”

He held up the vial of yellow liquid and waggled it before Xavier’s eyes.

“Sadly, this little potion won’t work on you, will it?”

He straightened himself, backed up a step, and returned the drug to his jacket pocket.

“Nope, you’re *far* too powerful for that. Instead, we’ll go right to the source.”

With crisp, military moves that were almost a flourish in themselves, Stryker opened the door.

“Allow me to introduce Mutant 143.”

Beyond was a chair, and in that chair sat something that could only charitably be called human. At first glance, because the body was so shriveled and emaciated, the presumption was that it was someone extremely old. The limbs were arranged so neatly that Xavier knew at once they couldn’t move of their own volition; the way the head lolled to the side was further evidence of the lack of any effective musculature. There was a water tube close by his mouth, which he constantly licked, but that was just so he could keep tongue and lips from going dry. Fluids and nutrients flowed into him intravenously, through permanent junctions in the major blood vessels of the leg up close to his groin. The site was mercifully hidden beneath a blanket, but Xavier assumed that permanent catheters were likewise employed to deal with all his waste products.

The man’s head itself was macrocephalic, swollen to half again normal dimensions, and marked with a cruel scar across the temple as though the skull itself had cracked apart under the pressure of the growing mass within. A grotesque array of tubes and connections sprouted from implants in the back and base of the skull, draining a continuous volume of what had to be cerebrospinal fluid into clear containers mounted on the back of the chair. The fluid was an electric chrome yellow, and Xavier knew at once it was the substance Stryker used to control the woman, and Magneto, and Lord knows who else.

The man in the chair had one eye of a brilliant robin’s-egg blue, the other an equally rich shade of green, Xavier noted, as the Asian woman and another trooper wheeled the chair directly in front of him. It was what Xavier saw *in* those eyes that struck him like a body blow: a look of cruel and feral cunning, representing an intelligence worthy of respect. The man knew exactly what he was, and he hated it beyond all levels of sane comprehension.

Xavier, who thanks to his own gifts forgot nothing, knew the man at once, from the shape of the jaw and especially those unique eyes.

“Jason . . .” he breathed in a voice that barely registered as a whisper. And then, in that same hushed, horror-struck tone, to the father: “My God, William—what have you done to him? This is your *son* !”

“No, Charles. My son is dead.”

The look Xavier received from Stryker’s blue eyes was a match for the emotions that emanated from the

young man.

“Just like the rest of you.”

Chapter Nine

Past Hartford, Logan abandoned the back roads for the interstate, figuring a sports car in the middle of nowhere would draw a lot more curiosity than one more amid the many that cruised between Boston and New York. For him, the perfect place to hide now was in plain sight. He timed it perfectly, joining the morning rush-hour crowd as it crawled through Connecticut’s capital, thankful that Scott hadn’t indulged in a stand-out color like canary yellow or Ferrari scarlet. To the casual eye, this seemed like just another generic speedster. Stay with the flow of traffic, stay close to the speed limit, there shouldn’t be any trouble.

They made decent time and rolled into the Boston suburb of Quincy just past noon. Nice streets, respectable houses, the sidewalks shaded by trees that had been here since before the Revolution.

They’d left the mansion with a full tank of gas, and Logan hadn’t made a stop anywhere along the way. He was too much of a mess and the kids were all in pajamas, it was asking for trouble. The downside was, they were all pretty hungry and in desperate need of a bathroom and, being teenagers, weren’t at all shy about letting him know how cranky they were becoming

Bobby gave directions, and Logan eased the car up the drive of a lovely two-story home. The garage was locked, so they had to leave the car exposed in the driveway.

Same went for the house itself. They were on the porch only a moment before Bobby found the key and let them inside.

“Mom?” he called. “Dad? Ronny? Anybody home?”

Logan could have told him the house was empty, his senses had reported that while they were all still outside, but he decided it was better to let the boy establish it for himself. He was itching to move on, instinct telling him that staying put anywhere guaranteed trouble, but he shoved those feelings aside. By nature he was a loner, but also by nature he understood the concept of responsibility and obligation—although for the life of him he couldn’t have told anyone where he’d learned them. These kids had been placed in his care, and he wouldn’t abandon them.

“We’ve got the place to ourselves,” Bobby said. He looked to the phone and started to reach for it. “Maybe I should call—”

Logan covered the phone with his hand and shook his head.

“Leave it for now,” he said. “You never know who might be listening.”

“What, you saying those guys tapped my parents’ phones?”

“I’m saying we need to be careful. This isn’t a game, Bobby.” Logan swung his head around to allow his gaze to encompass them all. “Those troops were serious, and they were good. If we want to have a chance of coming out of this clean, we have to deal with ’em on that level, clear?”

Bobby nodded, his lower lip between his teeth a sure sign of how worried he was. Still, when he turned to the others, his voice was under control.

“I’ll try to find you some clothes,” he said to Rogue, and then, to John: “And you, don’t burn anything.”

Being guys, they immediately traded gestures—a finger from John, a retorting smirk from Bobby.

Upstairs, Bobby gave Rogue use of his own room and first crack at the shower. She turned the water as hot as she could bear and let the spray pound her like a monsoon, standing with her eyes closed in the vain hope that when she opened them once more this would all turn out to be some dream or another bogus training scenario.

Wrapped in a bath towel, she swept her hair back from her face and tied it in a loose ponytail. The decor here echoed his room at school—emphasis on snowboarding posters and the obligatory Red Sox pennant. One surprise, an autographed football that made her eyes widen when she realized that it was from the 2001 Super Bowl that the New England Patriots had won.

She was flipping through his CD s, singularly unimpressed by his choice in music—was she the only person in the school with any taste?—when he backed in carrying some clothes. He must have thought she was still in the shower, because he went as pale as the blouse in his arms when he saw her. Suddenly she was conscious of how small the towel felt, of how much skin was showing. At the same time, though, she found herself wondering what he thought: Did he like her legs? Her figure wasn’t much compared to some of the other girls, especially Siryn, but his eyes kept coming back to her, so there had to be something in the package that he liked.

Was his mouth as dry as hers? Was his heart pounding the same fandango? Usually he was easy to read. Now he looked as cool as the ice he generated.

“Hey,” he said in greeting.

“Hey,” she responded in kind.

“I hope these fit.”

“Thanks.”

“They’re my mom’s. From before I was born. But I think they’ll fit.”

“Groovy,” she replied lightly, grabbing at a similarly ancient word.

He handed her the clothes but made no other move until she motioned for him to do a U-turn and scoot. All at once, his composure vanished, so much so that he collided twice with the door trying to make his exit. He didn’t close it all the way, though, and took up station just outside while she got dressed.

Downside was, the blouse he found was short-sleeved. He had a solution.

“These were my grandmother’s,” he explained, holding out a pair of pristine opera gloves. The cloth would cover her almost all the way to the sleeves. Not a perfect answer, but one that touched her.

But when she reached for them, he tried to catch her hand, almost making contact before she snatched hers back as though she’d been scalded. She stepped back, a gasp rising in her throat, her other hand held defensively, palm toward him.

“You know I’d never hurt you,” he said, inching closer.

“I know,” so quietly she was just mouthing the words. She ached to take him in her arms, it had been so long since she’d felt anything as simple, as basic, as the stroke of someone else’s skin on hers. She’d told him about her power right from the start—everyone knew the prohibition about touching her, that came from Xavier himself—but she suspected nobody really believed it.

Right now, she didn’t want to.

He moved his hand close to her face, and tears sprang from her eyes as static electricity made the fine hairs of her cheek stir. She clenched her fists, feeling her body tighten from head to toe as though she were being stretched on a medieval rack. His breath touched her mouth—first warm and tempting, then chill enough for her own breath to leave a cloud of condensation in the air between them, then warm again, so inviting that she couldn’t hold back any longer.

She pressed her lips to his, arms around his neck as his went around her body, and felt a sweet spark of contact as their tongues touched, and she giggled as a burst of frost rolled across her.

For a moment, it was bliss.

Then she imprinted.

The warmth between them became fire, a torrent of raw lava coursing along her nervous system, agony for him, ecstasy for her. The shock of contact made the veins bulge and pulse on his forehead, across his chest, eyes going cloudy and rolling up in their sockets. He spasmed once, twice, pinned on the verge of a grand mal seizure as she pushed against him with all her might to separate them before it got any worse. The initial stage of imprinting was physical, the equivalent of giving a car a jump-start or throwing a jet engine into afterburners. It delivered a jolt of energy to her system that would keep her going at peak levels for days. Break contact then, that was it.

Hold longer, the second stage kicked in, where she absorbed the parahuman abilities of the person she was touching. Months earlier, on Liberty Island, Magneto had used her as the power source for his great machine, even though he’d known the process would kill her. He’d considered it a necessary sacrifice. Logan had destroyed the machine, but not before its infernal energies had inflicted mortal injuries on her. He’d initiated contact himself, trusting her power to kick in automatically and do the rest. She’d imprinted him completely, and his healing factor had literally brought her back from the dead. That was where she’d gotten the skunk-stripe forelock on her hair. That was also why she never tried to hide it. It was her personal badge of honor—acknowledging what he’d done for her and reminding her of what she’d done to him in turn.

Because there was a third component to her power, one that wasn’t temporary. The energy boost faded with time, and so did the powers she absorbed—but if contact lasted long enough, she took into herself the mind and memories of her imprintee. A residue of the other’s personality moved into her own psyche

and, she thought, she feared, maybe she gave up a portion of herself to the other as well.

They'd made jokes about it after the fact, about how she'd taken on some of the more salty aspects of Logan's personality while she was healing. In time, as she got a handle on this new part of herself, it seemingly went away. She returned to what passed for her as normal. Only she knew the truth, that Logan would be a part of her forever.

And if she held on to Bobby for much longer, so would he.

With a cry, she pushed him away, collapsing onto the bed as he reeled back into the corner formed between the open door and the wall. She couldn't bear to look at him. The glimpse of pain and terror on his face while he was in her grasp was haunting enough.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, feeling a different kind of ache through her body at how inadequate her words sounded.

"It's—okay," he said.

She heard him shuffle around the door with the moves of an old man. She stared at her hands, hating what she could do, hating how glorious it made her feel, hating most of all the fact that she couldn't control it, that she couldn't put back what she'd stolen. She sat there with the gloves on her lap, smoothing her palms across the sleek fabric over and over and over again, like she was ironing, desperately seeking something she could put right.

John heard Bobby stumble downstairs but didn't bother to see if he needed any help. He was in the family room, flicking the lid on his lighter, staring at the crowd of pictures on the wall, on shelves, on the big TV. A happy family, just what you'd expect to find in any part of America.

He hated it.

In the kitchen, Logan knew everything that had transpired upstairs. Too late, he'd sensed what was about to happen, had been on his way to the stairs when he heard Rogue's faint outcry and the thump of Bobby's body against the wall. He held position for the few moments necessary to reassure himself they'd done each other no lasting physical damage, then turned away. He hadn't a clue how to help either of them, and the only advice his own instincts and experience could offer was to give them space. Let them lick their wounds and regain their inner equilibrium in private, as he would.

What he needed, he knew, was a trained professional. What they needed was a real teacher.

He slid open the communicator he'd taken from John Allardyce in the car.

"Hello," he said into its tiny grille, feeling like twelve kinds of idiot. "Hello? C'mon, Jean, pick up the damn phone! Where the hell are you, woman? You're s'posed to be a telepath—if you can't hear my call, what about my thoughts? Where *are* you?"

Nothing but static from the radio, silence within the confines of his head.

He found a beer in the fridge, that was good. Miller Genuine Draft, which was acceptable. He drained half the bottle in one extended swallow that brought forth a comforting burp.

He crossed to the sink and turned on the water, hot and hard, using dishwashing liquid to clean the blood off his arms and hands. He flexed his right hand and popped the claws to see if they needed any cleaning. At the same time, a house cat leaped up on the counter to see if he was offering any food. A big marmalade tabby, whose relaxed manner told him she ruled this roost. He held his hand still while she approached to give him an assessing sniff. She must have liked what she found, because she started licking up across his knuckles, cleaning him the way she would herself after a scrap. Her ridged tongue rubbed across his skin like a rasp, with the same kind of sound. This was why he liked animals, preferred the wild to civilization. Life was a lot less complicated; the animals either trusted you or they didn't. If they didn't, they either attacked or ran away. People could come at you every which way, whenever they pleased, for no reason whatsoever. They created entanglements, which wrapped you up so tight you couldn't think straight or found yourself thinking about the wrong thing.

Case in point, as he realized with a start that another car had pulled into the driveway and three scents that carried common elements with Bobby Drake's were approaching the front door.

He retracted the claws, which made the cat yowl in surprise and hiss as she sprang clear. A moment later, William Drake stormed over the threshold, followed by his wife, Madeline, and Bobby's younger brother, Ronny.

"Who the hell are you?" Drake demanded.

Logan had no answer right away that would improve the situation. so he bought himself a moment by finishing his beer. Clattering feet from upstairs and the other rooms diverted Drake's attention before any more angry words could be said, and Bobby led the three Xavier kids into the kitchen.

"Dad!" he said brightly. "Mom! You guys are home!"

His father looked from Bobby to Logan, and Logan knew at once the situation was more serious than ever. Drake had seen the circles under his son's eyes and assumed that Logan was responsible.

"Honey," said Madeline, "aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"Bobby, who is this guy?" Drake demanded of the boy, indicating Logan.

"Professor Logan" was the reply. His dad didn't believe a word.

Madeline wasn't interested in Logan. She was glaring at Rogue, and especially at the white opera gloves that covered almost the whole of her arms.

"What is that girl doing wearing my clothes?" she asked. "And—are those *Nana's* gloves?"

Bobby stammered a reply: "Mom, uh, guys, can I talk to you about something?"

Mitchell Laurio was whistling as he came on shift. He couldn't remember many of the details of what had happened in the ladies' can, but he'd never felt better in his life than he had after it was done. Just the memory of Grace's farewell kisses was enough to stir his blood and put a spring in his step, and the fact that she'd left a whispered promise to meet him again tonight made him wish as he never had before for the day to end.

The guard at the final checkpoint was the latest to offer comment: “Mitchell Laurio, what’s that on your face, man?”

“*Sa-tis-fac-tion!*”

He’d heard the story and didn’t believe it any more than had the man who’d told it to him. Lard-ass Laurio actually scoring on a dame with a pulse? His trysts were few and far between—the man was such a piece of work the pros charged double for a quickie. He wanted more, they got a headache. And by all accounts, the broad had halfway decent looks, which made the whole thing even more incredible. Had to be drugs, was the general consensus, or somebody with a major twist to her psyche.

The only thing that couldn’t be denied was that it had actually happened. The bartender was a witness, his oath to God.

Now of course Laurio had to provide his own chapter and verse of the evening. It wasn’t a bad story, even the way he told it, which was why neither man noticed a blip on the scanner that indicated the presence of metal. It wasn’t a significant glitch; it barely lasted a fraction of a second before the system registered clear. If the guard had been paying attention, he probably wouldn’t have noticed. But he wasn’t, and from that moment Mitchell Laurio’s fate was sealed.

“You’re clear,” the guard said, and cycled the umbilical out to the cell in the center of the room.

Eric Lehnsherr was asleep until Laurio stepped over the threshold. Then, just like that, he came completely awake with a rush he hadn’t felt since his capture.

“Sweet dreams, Lehnsherr?” asked Laurio, his mockery plain. Just because he’d had the best night of his life didn’t mean he was going to pass on the morning beating. The one gave him just as much pleasure as the other.

Laurio set the tray on the table. Lehnsherr hadn’t moved, beyond sitting up on the bed. There was something different about his expression, though, like there was a big joke being played here that only he was privy to. But at the same time, there was a predatory cast to his eyes that made Laurio suddenly wish the internal monitors were active and that he were somewhere else.

As was usual for him when he felt ill at ease or threatened, Laurio got aggressive. This time, he decided, he wasn’t going to stop until the old man begged him.

“There’s something different about you, Mr. Laurio,” Lehnsherr said with a slight question to his voice, as if he couldn’t quite credit what he saw.

There was something different about the old man, too. They’d done variations on this dance before; Lehnsherr had to know what was coming. Before, he’d faced it with a stoic resignation. Today, though, he was alert, watchful—almost amused. Where his strength had presented itself in his passive endurance of Laurio’s beatings, now it was active, a coiled spring tensing inside his body. It occurred to Laurio that maybe this time the old man intended to fight back. That would give Laurio sanction to do pretty near anything in retaliation, which would make his day.

He said as much in reply: “Yeah, I think I’m havin’ a pretty damn good day.”

Lehnsherr came to his feet with a grace and ease he hadn’t shown in months, that belied the age apparent on his face.

“No,” he said, “no, it’s not that.”

“Sit down,” Laurio told him. He didn’t like the way this was going, that he and his prisoner seemed to be reading from two different scripts. He made a show of putting his hand on his billy club. Lehnsherr knew firsthand how quick he was with it and how formidable. One snap of the wrist to the gut would have a prisoner doubled over, gasping desperately for breath; after that, it would be Laurio’s choice, his pleasure, where to administer the follow-up hits for maximum impact. Every word, every gesture from Lehnsherr would only make matters worse, yet the old man clearly didn’t care. He wasn’t afraid of Laurio. He’d never been afraid of Laurio.

They’d put the tiger in a cage, but they hadn’t broken him. They hadn’t even come close.

“No,” Lehnsherr said.

Laurio started to move. . . .

“Sit your ass down, or I’ll—”

And then he couldn’t.

“Well, well, well,” Lehnsherr said in a tone of detached bemusement, a professor considering a problem.

He flicked his fingers, and the billy club dropped from a numb and nerveless hand.

“What could it be?”

Laurio wanted to call for help, but his jaw wouldn’t work, either. His whole body had become frozen. And with the monitors disengaged, nobody outside had the slightest clue anything was wrong. The guard in the monitor room at the far end of the umbilical wouldn’t have a clue; from his perspective, he’d just see the two of them standing across the cell from each other, and he’d be looking at Laurio from the back.

Laurio wanted to beg for mercy. Lehnsherr knew that.

Instead he made another slight upward motion with his fingers, and Laurio rose six inches off the floor.

“Ah.” Lehnsherr had found what he was looking for. “There it is.”

Like a conductor summoning his orchestra to play, Lehnsherr made a sharp, slashing gesture toward his body, and Laurio arched as much as was possible against his invisible constraints as a fine scarlet mist exploded from every pore of his body.

“Too much iron in your blood.”

For Mitchell Laurio, it was as if barbed hooks had been sunk into every square inch of his skin to flay him naked, then salt scattered on the raw and exposed nerves of his body to sear him as fiercely as acid. He wanted to die right then and there, anything to stop the pain, but Lehnsherr wasn’t in a forgiving mood.

The mist fell away to form a glittering film on the floor of the cell, leaving a cloud of metallic silver behind

in the air.

Lehnscherr made a fist and the particles of iron coalesced into three perfect spheres, each the size of a marble. The Nazis had taught him to make ball bearings; it seemed only fitting to adopt them as the talisman for his power.

Their size was deceptive as the last few droplets of Laurio's blood were squeezed out of them by pressure. Lehnscherr used his power to bond the atoms together far more tightly than nature would have, so that they massed as much as depleted uranium. Unaided, he doubted a champion weight lifter could pick up even one.

The balls began to move, forming small orbits over his upheld palm.

"A word of advice, Mr. Laurio," Lehnscherr said with a smile, as though their relationship had been a genuine pleasure, "a little something . . . else to remember me by. Never trust a beautiful woman. Especially one who's interested in you."

He cut the ties of power that held Laurio aloft and the big man collapsed, a limp and bloody heap in the corner.

Lehnscherr flung the balls at the plaster wall of his cell and watched it shatter under the impact.

He heard alarms, he knew they'd be trying to track him with the defensive remote-controlled miniguns mounted in the cavern walls, knew they'd be flooding the space with nerve gas. But it was a huge space, and the guards had grown lax over time. They assumed he was no longer a threat. That gave him more than enough time.

The umbilical retracted immediately. He paid it no notice.

He concentrated on one of his spheres, and it obediently flattened itself into a paper-thin silver disk that was easily wide enough for a man to stand on, which he did. Under his direction, it rushed him across the chasm to the main exit. He could see the guard in the monitor room calling for help. One sphere for him, the other for the door itself.

They struck with the force of armor-piercing cannon shells. He stepped over the guard's ruined body into the monitor room and found the hardwire link that led from his computer into the prison's central network. He bared the cable and set his spheres to spinning until they produced an electrical field worthy of a mainline generator, and then, backing it with all the passion and rage and hatred he'd kept ruthlessly in check all these wretched months, he pushed that power into the cable. Sparks galore exploded all around him, and every monitor screen in the room dissolved into static, then went dark. The lights went out as well, although they were replaced at once by the emergency spot lamps.

This place was controlled by computers, and with this surge of energy Lehnscherr had just killed them all. The electronic doors wouldn't work; neither would the electronic sensors, or the defenses. They wouldn't know where he was until he revealed himself, and then they'd have precious few resources to try to stop him.

They liked to mock him with the name he'd chosen for himself. Now he would remind them why Magneto was a force to be reckoned with and an adversary to be respected, and especially feared.

Chapter Ten

Jean Grey wasn't a happy woman.

"Professor Xavier, come in, please?" she spoke aloud, repeating the same call, far more loudly, with her thoughts. "Scott, are you there, are you receiving, over?"

Static.

She tapped a new number on the speed dial, switching functions on her headset from radio to cellular phone, and tried all the lines at the mansion.

Static.

She tried Scott's cell and the phone in Xavier's Rolls-Royce.

Static.

For the hell of it, she ran a full-spectrum diagnostic on the *Blackbird*'s communications array, wondering if a day's immersion in the water of Boston Harbor had somehow degraded the antennae. The computer told her everything was fine, just as it had the previous two times she'd executed the program.

She changed channels and listened a minute to WBUR, changed them again and eavesdropped on local and federal law enforcement frequencies.

End result, they were sending and receiving perfectly. The problems lay at the other end. Nobody was picking up, not even voice mail.

She covered her face with her hands, then swept them up and over her head, smoothing her thick, occasionally unruly hair into momentary submission before clasping her fingers together behind her neck and bending her head forward to rest her chin on her collarbone. She flexed her shoulders outward and stretched as long as she could up the full length of her spine to ease the aches that tension and worry had planted there.

She caught a wisp of a thought, a sense of movement, that told her Storm had stepped up to the flight deck, and then felt her friend's hand cover hers from behind. Without opening her eyes, Jean clasped Storm's hand in both of hers and held it, smiling as a cool breeze insinuated itself through the collar of her uniform and washed all over her.

"Ohhhh." She groaned in delight. "If you could package that in a bottle!"

"It wouldn't be anywhere near as much fun."

Storm was just as concerned.

"How long has it been?" she asked.

“Too long. No land lines, no cell, no radio, no indication from the news of any disaster in the area.”

“Send an e-mail?”

“Too risky. Anyone capable of knocking the mansion so completely off-line could back-trace a computer link. I’m pushing our luck with the com devices.”

“No telepathy, either? From the professor?”

“Nope.”

“So?”

“I was going to wait till dark before heading home. I’m starting to reconsider.”

“This may be the ultimate in stealth aircraft, Jean, but we can still be seen.”

“That, Ororo, is where I figure *you* come in.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks. Whatever it is, make it quick, okay?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“By the way, how’s our passenger?”

Nightcrawler was praying.

He’d tucked himself into one of the highback chairs in the passenger compartment, legs folded into lotus position, hands clasped in his lap, eyes closed. Storm half expected to find him hanging from the ceiling. He stood six feet tall, but you never noticed because he spent most of the time in a crouch, rarely straightening to his full height. He seemed just as comfortable upside down as not, using his big toes or his tail, or both, to anchor himself in place.

He had a good face, especially now that Storm could see it relaxed, in repose. Much younger than she’d first suspected. Now that she could get a closer look at him, she saw that his indigo skin was covered with a series of tattoos.

“It’s an angelic alphabet,” he told her, and she raised her blue eyes to meet his yellow ones, “passed on to mankind by the Archangel Gabriel.”

“They’re beautiful,” she told him truthfully, even though the black etchings on blue-black skin were almost invisible, like the man himself when he stepped into shadows.

“How many are there?”

“One for every sin. So”—a quirk of his full lips that might have been a smile—“quite a few.”

“That, I don’t believe.”

He looked at her with a disconcertingly level gaze. “You know, outside of the circus, most people are afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

He swallowed and looked away, and she could tell by the minute shift in the heat gradient of his cheeks that he was blushing. He took refuge from the moment in an examination of the cabin, his eyes taking in the sleek configuration of the interior hull and furniture while he ran his hands over the material of the chair itself.

“You and Miss Grey—*Doktor*Grey—you’re both . . . schoolteachers?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

He actually chuckled.

“Yes,” she told him, “we are. At a school for people . . . like us. Where we can be safe.”

“Safe from what?”

“Everyone else.”

“You know, outside the circus, most people I met were afraid of me. But I never hated them. I actually felt sorry for them, do you know why?”

Storm shook her head.

“Because most people never know anything beyond what they can see with their own two eyes.”

“I gave up on pity a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He reached up and placed his fingers against her cheek with a gentle caress that sent a burst of heat rippling beneath her skin, together with the surprised thought: *He’s flirting with me*. She didn’t move away, because along with that realization came the discovery that she liked it. She liked him. There was a serenity to his soul that was totally at odds with his outward features, as though a demon incarnate might have in him the makings of a saint.

“Someone as beautiful as you shouldn’t be so . . . angry,” he said, simply as an article of faith.

“Sometimes anger can help you survive.”

“So can faith.”

“What did you do in the circus?” she asked, remembering the posters from the church. Before leaving, he’d carefully taken them down and packed them away in his single case.

“I was—” he began, and then both of them reacted to a shout from up front.

“Storm!” Jean called. “I think I’ve found an active com unit!”

Logan would have played things differently, but this was Bobby’s house, Bobby’s family; he let the kid take point.

The kid then proceeded to tell his parents what he was.

Now they were all gathered in the living room, and the general atmosphere would have put a session of the Spanish Inquisition to shame. The layout of the room put a couch on either side of a coffee table. Mom, Dad, and Ronny Drake sat on one, Bobby and Rogue on the other. John Allardyce hung out behind Rogue, his butt perched on the edge of an antique side table in conscious oblivion to the sharp glances that occasionally came his way from Mom. He had his lighter out and was, as usual, playing with the lid, as if the sound of the ticking clock weren’t intrusion enough.

Logan stood in the doorway to the kitchen, nursing a new beer. His casual attitude was a deception. He was covering the room, ready to act if there was trouble of any kind. He’d expected Dad to be the flashpoint, but the man had proved to have a lot more in common with his eldest son than first impressions had suggested.

“So, uh, Bobby,” Madeline said, utterly lost, “when did you first know . . . that you were a . . . um . . .”

“A mutant?” John finished for her, flicking his lighter open, then closed, open, then closed, open—

“Could you please stop that?” said Madeline with some asperity. This was her house, and she’d had enough of his insolent behavior.

“You have to understand,” William said slowly, “we thought Bobby was going to a school for the gifted.”

“He’s gifted,” Rogue interjected, prompting a small smile of gratitude from the boy sitting beside her, who otherwise looked like someone en route to the guillotine.

“We know that,” William conceded. “We just didn’t realize that he was—” Then, without warning, a flare of anger toward his son that was compounded in equal measures of confusion and a very real pain that bordered on grief. “Why the hell didn’t you *tell* us? What were you thinking, Bobby? We’re your parents, for God’s sake! How could you keep this to yourself, how could you not trust us—how could you *lie*?”

“Dad.” Bobby sounded helpless, strangling on his own guilt and shame. “You don’t understand!”

“Obviously.”

“Dad!”

“You lied, Bobby. Xavier lied. To my face. He kept your secret. What am I supposed to believe about him now, or this precious school of his? Or you? How many other secrets are there?” He turned to Logan. “Just what is it you teach my son, ‘Professor’?”

“Art,” he said sarcastically. “And it’s just Logan.”

“You show up without a word of warning or explanation. Apparently without even clothes of your own to wear. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We still love you, Bobby,” Madeline said, starting to reach out to him but holding back right at the last, the same way people did around Rogue. She looked at her hand, at her son, at her hand again, as though it had suddenly become some alien part of her. The thought behind the hesitation was plain to the room. *Am I suddenly afraid of my own baby?* She tried to find some explanation, some rationale, in words: “It’s just that the mutant problem is very . . .”

“What mutant *problem* ?” Logan asked. She didn’t pay attention, she hadn’t heard him.

“ . . . complicated.”

Rogue tried to lighten the mood.

“You should see what Bobby can do.”

Everyone looked. He stretched out his hand to his mother’s teacup, ignoring how quickly she snatched her own hand clear, and touched it with a fingertip. Instantly a layer of ice crystals formed around the rim and down the sides.

He turned the cup over and the tea within, frozen completely solid, dropped onto the saucer with a quiet *clink* . The marmalade tabby wound its way around Rogue and him and used his thigh as a springboard to the table, where she proceeded to lick the tea.

“I can do a lot more,” he said.

There was a light in William’s eyes, a dad’s classic and instinctive *My boy did that !* What hurt him about all this was being cut out of the loop.

Mom wasn’t anywhere near as amused, and she wasn’t proud in the slightest. As for Ronny, he got up from the couch and bulled his way out of the room, deliberately giving John a shoulder check as he passed.

He made a lot of noise pounding up the stairs, and he shut his door with a slam that resounded through the house.

Ronny Drake had a teenager’s obsession with privacy and personal space. He’d marked his territory accordingly, with a huge sign on the door that said **RONNY’S ROOM. STAY THE F**K OUT!** Mom had wanted to tear it down, but Bobby had defused the situation by hijacking a pair of anime panda stickers—so cute they made Powerpuff Girls look hardcore—and using them to cover the middle two letters. Ronny hated him for doing that, Bobby got to play the damn hero as always, but at least he got to keep his sign.

All he could see, though, in the center of his room was a torn and bloody T-shirt. Not his. Not Bobby’s, ’cause he had his own room. That meant a stranger had been in here.

The TV monitor caught his attention, turned to Fox News Channel—more proof that his privacy had been violated. This was a channel he had *never* watched, until now. It wasn’t the reporter, doing his

stand-up from the White House lawn, that caught his attention, but what the man was saying.

“. . . in the wake of the assassination attempt on President McKenna, there are unconfirmed reports of a raid on what is believed to be an underground terrorist mutant organization based in Westchester County, New York . . .

“Authorities refuse to comment, but it’s believed that a national manhunt for several fugitives from the facility is now under way . . .”

Watching, listening, looking from the screen to the sodden shirt on the floor, Ronny’s expression changed. Bobby was his big brother, but he didn’t know anything about the people who were with him, except that they creeped Ronny out, big-time.

He picked up the phone, hoping he was doing the right thing, terrified of what might happen if those other mutants found out. Half expecting his brain to be incinerated at any moment, he pressed 911.

Downstairs, Madeline Drake put her head in her hands.

“Oh, God, this is all my fault.”

Before Bobby could even try to make things better, John Allardyce jumped in to make them worse.

“Actually,” he said, “they’ve discovered that males are the ones who carry mutant genes and pass them on to the next generation, so I guess that makes it”—he jutted his thumb toward Bobby’s dad—“his fault.”

William Drake ignored the comment, although his son looked ready to make the other boy eat the words.

Madeline tried again to be the gracious hostess: “And you,” she said to Rogue, “you’re all gifted?”

Rogue shot daggers at John, who returned them as a grin. “Some of us more than others,” she replied tightly. “Others who shouldn’t ever be allowed out in public.”

“What’s that?” William said, reacting to *abeep* .

Logan had the little com unit in his hand. “That’s mine,” he said. “ ‘Scuse me.” And he slipped through the kitchen to the backyard porch, with Madeline’s next line to her son to speed him on his way.

“Bobby,” she said, “dearest, have you tried . . . *not* being a mutant?”

Bobby sighed. John laughed out loud.

“Charley,” Logan said, and his face lit up at the voice that replied.

“Logan,” cried Jean, “thank God it’s you! We couldn’t reach anyone at the mansion.”

“No one’s left,” he told her bluntly. “Soldiers came.”

Aboard the *Blackbird*, Jean sank into her chair. They'd speculated about the possibility of some kind of hostile action, they'd made what they hoped were adequate preparations, but none of them really took it seriously. In a way, they believed too much in their own press: Xavier's was *aschool*. How could anyone perceive that as a threat?

But then again, she considered, Islamic *madrastas* were schools as well, and many in the intelligence community believed them to be the spawning ground for terrorists.

"What about the children?" she asked.

"Some escaped," he reported, "but I'm not sure about the rest."

Jean created sparks as she shifted position, and she shot a warning glare at Storm, whose anger was supercharging the air inside the plane with electricity. Not a good thing, generating a bolt of lightning inside a plane loaded with jet fuel and other combustibles.

"We haven't been able to reach the professor or Scott, either," she said. The conclusion was obvious to both of them: In all likelihood, they were lost, too.

Storm spoke into her own headset: "Logan, where are you?"

"Quincy," he said. "Outside Beantown, with Bobby Drake's family."

"Do they—" Jean started to ask, provoking a snort of amusement from the other end.

"Oh, yeah!"

"All right," she said, leaning across to the center console to initiate the engine start-up sequence, "we're on our way."

"Storm?"

"Yes, Logan?"

"Make it fast."

The two women looked at each other, both recognizing the subtle change in Logan's voice.

"Five minutes," Jean told him as she locked her harness closed and mentally told Nightcrawler to grab his chair and do the same.

"Make it fast," he repeated, and signed off active audio, leaving only the carrier signal for them to home in on.

The picture of nonchalance, he patted his pockets for a smoke, sighed loudly when he didn't find one, and reentered the house in two quick steps. Without turning his body, he snapped the lock closed on the door and took the next two steps into the living room.

"We have to go," he said without preamble. "Now." The kids took their cue from him and leaped to their feet.

“What?” William asked.

“Why?” Rogue echoed.

“Now,” he said simply, as sound and scent told him they’d run out of time. One assault team at the back, another out front, boxing the house. Bobby’s parents jumped, William grabbing his wife into his arms, as Logan extended his right-hand claws.

“Logan,” Rogue demanded, “what’s going on?”

John mouthed an answer: “What d’ you think?”

“Follow my lead,” Logan told them.

There were two cops waiting on the front porch, flanking the door with guns drawn. They locked on Logan as the primary threat. A police cruiser was parked on the lawn, another partially blocking the street, its patrol officers taking aim from behind the cover of their car. Sirens closing in from the near distance told them all that more were on the way.

Bobby’s face tightened with anger. He knew what had brought them here.

“Ronny!” he fumed under his breath.

Directly upstairs, Ronny watched the officers take position, anxiety quickly giving way to excitement. This was cool, better than TV .

“You,” barked the cop to Logan’s right, “get down on the ground.”

“What’s going on here?” Logan inquired calmly.

The kids were scared, and rightly so. This was the second time in a day they’d been threatened by guns, only these didn’t fire stun darts. This was the real deal, 9mm, Glocks with fifteen-round magazines, and one of the cops in the street had unlimbered his shotgun. Logan heard the frantic *click, click, click* of John’s lighter. The cops heard it, too. They didn’t know what to make of it, and that made them even more jumpy.

“Put the knives down slowly,” the same cop said. “Slowly. Then down on your knees, cross your ankles, and raise your hands in the air. You kids do the same. *Right now!*”

“Hey, bub, this is just a misunderstanding,” Logan replied.

Inside, Bobby’s parents were only just starting to comprehend what was happening on the porch when the glass of the kitchen door shattered under the impact of a nightstick. They barely had time to turn their heads before a trio of uniformed officers rushed into the room, guns leveled, all of them yelling at the top of their lungs: “Police!” “Nobody move!” “On the floor, on your knees, keep your hands where I can see ’em!”

Madeline screamed, William tried to protest, Bobby reacted like any son. He turned to help. The cop on the left shifted aim. His partner screamed louder: “Put down the goddamn blades!”

“I can’t,” said Logan, and raised his hands to show they were a part of him.

The gunshot took them all by surprise.

The left-hand cop had fired, straight to the temple. The point-blank impact blew Logan off his feet, twisting him as he fell so that he landed on his face, partially sprawled down the steps.

Rogue screamed and the three kids all dropped, Bobby trying to shield Rogue’s body with his own, yelling as loud as he could for the cops to stop firing. “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!”

A crowd had begun to gather on the sidewalk across the street, drawn by the flashing dome lights and the commotion. The sharp report of the officer’s gun startled those close enough to see what had happened. They ducked as well. But mostly, folks kept milling about, confused, intrigued, like rubberneckers passing an accident, blissfully oblivious to the danger.

The cops were just as startled, just as scared. The one who’d fired had made himself a statue, his weapon centered on Wolverine like he expected the man to leap up and charge him. Or maybe he was praying for him to do precisely that, to take back the action of the last half minute.

“Easy,” his partner yelled, in a voice meant to be heard inside the house as well as out to the street. “Everybody take it easy. Get a grip!” That last was directed mainly at the shooter. His partner knew this was bad, every shooting is for the officer involved, but under his breath he thanked God and all the saints they hadn’t popped the kids as well. After that kind of mess, there’d be hell to pay.

“Okay, kids,” he told them, “same as before. Stay cool, we’ll get out of this just fine.”

“We didn’t *do* anything!” Rogue shrieked at him.

“On your knees, girl!”

She yelled at him some more, partly to purge her own terror, but most of all to keep attention away from Logan. She knew the adamantium interlaced with his skeletal structure meant that his bones couldn’t be broken. All that bullet had likely done, aside from breaking the skin—which was decidedly messy—was give him a royal headache. More importantly, though, his healing factor would be speedily dealing with both the wound and the headache. She didn’t know what he could do once he recovered, but it would be one more asset than the kids had right now.

Bobby gave her a hand as they both did as they were told. John had other ideas. He stood up.

“Don’t be stupid, kid,” the left-hand cop said. “This is no time to flash attitude. We don’t want to hurt you!”

John’s attitude was plain: *Like I care*, he seemed to be saying. *Like, you could?*

“Hey,” he said, “you know all those dangerous mutants you hear about on the news?” He paused a moment to let the implications sink in.

“I’m the worst one.”

He popped the lid on his Zippo, but this time, he ignited a flame.

From the wick grew three distinct streamers of flame, which whirled sinuously around him like the fearsome salamanders of medieval tales. One shot right, the other left, the third burned its way through the door to scorch across the main floor of the house.

The cops on the porch dove desperately for cover as flame roared past, close enough to leave their uniform shirts smoldering. Those inside weren't quite so quick, or so lucky. One was struck head-on, with force enough to hurl him into his companions, who had to scramble to save him as his clothes caught fire.

John turned his focus to the cars. It all happened so fast, the attack was so savage and shocking, that the cops on the street didn't know how to react. Those news reports notwithstanding, none of them really believed in mutants; they couldn't believe a kid was doing this.

They'd get over it real quick, John knew, if he gave them the chance.

He had a better idea.

While the two main streamers he'd manifested kept them occupied, he snaked a pair of much thinner strands along the surface of the lawn and underneath the cars to their tailpipes. This would be fun.

He ignited both gas tanks at once, pitching the cars up into the air and flipping them over like they were sandbox toys. A third car had just then rolled onto the scene, and John grinned as he surrounded it with a cataract of fire. The driver threw the gearshift into reverse, but John melted the tires to the street. The cops tried to bail from the unit, only to reel back inside as he turned the flames around them into a wall so thick and hot they'd be crispy critters before they took a decent step. He saw one of them calling frantically for help on the radio.

This would be the best. He'd let 'em cook slowly until the fire department arrived. He'd allow them the illusion of hope. Then—*kaboom!* Instant inspector's funeral, film at eleven.

Logan's eyes fluttered as the shattered remains of the officer's bullet fell from the healing wound. Rogue was right; his head was murder. This was a great power, no argument there. But the downside was that all the sensations of the process of natural healing were compressed into a fraction of the time and, as a consequence, hugely intensified. Yes, he had long ago learned to endure the pain; yes, it passed relatively quickly; but it always remained a brutal experience, to be avoided whenever possible.

Some of the other cops, the mutants on the porch forgotten, tried to save the two who were trapped. John played with them a little, letting them almost break through before generating a flash furnace to force them back.

He never felt Rogue's hand on his shin as she grabbed him from behind. She wasn't holding back this time, as she had with Bobby, trying to control a power that seemed as untamably rebellious as her name. She couldn't have done better if she'd clipped him with an iron bar. Without any warning or preamble, John's eyes simply rolled up in their sockets, and he dropped to the porch. The lighter skittered from his grasp.

Rogue's mouth twisted with disgust as his psyche rolled over hers like an oily tide. She wanted no part of it, so she called up a burst of flame within her own head to torch the images as they appeared.

At the same time, now that she'd successfully imprinted his power, she held up a hand in a summoning gesture. She was breathing very hard, almost panting, in and out to the same metronomic pattern John

established with his lighter. Her visual perceptions skewed far away from normal to embrace the infrared. Her world became defined by the heat it generated; she could actually see the primary states of being on a molecular level, she understood instinctively how to sustain and manipulate fire itself.

The raw passion of it left her breathless, because by playing with this elemental force, she *became* it as well, tasting an insatiable hunger that made her want to ignite the whole world. It would be so easy—so much energy to torch a tree, so much for a vehicle, so much for a person. To her, they were all becoming mere objects, without any value or purpose other than as fuel. It was a temptation, a glory, she'd never known, nor imagined could even exist.

But she had picked her name for a reason. Rogues don't play by anybody's rules unless they choose to, and they never ever do what's expected of them.

She called the fire home—not merely the streamers that John had initially created but all the conflagrations they'd ignited. On the street, the trapped car whose metal surfaces had been glowing red hot became amazingly cool to the touch. The other cars were likewise smoldering wrecks.

For that instant, Rogue herself burned, shrouded in flames from head to foot, so hot—hotter than a blast furnace—that Bobby quickly pushed himself clear in a frenzied crab scuttle, dragging John with him, to keep from being blistered. The fire faded at once, without leaving a mark on the girl, although the porch wasn't as fortunate. The planks beneath her feet were deeply charred, as was the roof overhead.

She swayed a little with fatigue, and Bobby leaped at once to her side. John stirred as well, the shock of her imprinting wearing off. As he shook off the effects, he grabbed reflexively for his lighter and looked sour to find his flames all gone. No doubt he would have said something, done something, very foolish—except that Logan also got to his feet.

The boys had never seen him shot before. They didn't believe it any more than the watching cops did. They were so caught up in the aftermath of the moment they didn't realize their danger.

The cops knew now what they were up against. They were shaken to the bone. As far as they were now concerned, it was their lives or the lives of these . . . monsters. They were ready to shoot and keep shooting until the threat was over.

That's when Jean landed the *Blackbird*, maybe a minute ahead of schedule.

Storm announced their arrival with a clap of thunder that shook the very air and a gust of gale-force wind that forced both cops and onlookers to flee from the scene. Jean made a combat approach, a vertical descent straight down to the street in front of the house. Between the wild weather and the sleek, dangerous-looking aircraft, the cops didn't know what to think. Maybe the military, come to the rescue?

As soon as the wheels touched down, Storm dropped the boarding ramp and beckoned Logan and the kids inside. Nobody needed to be told twice. The kids went with a rush, Logan more slowly.

A flicker of movement revealed one of the cops from the porch, the one who hadn't fired, who'd tried to keep the situation calm. He looked a mess, uniform scorched and torn, some hair burned off, soot all over his face, but he held his Glock in an unshaking grip, determined to do his duty.

Logan looked at him, held his hands open at his sides to show they were empty, no claws. He didn't want a fight, never had. But the implication was clear: You know now what'll happen if one starts. Is that what you really want?

They held the pose for a few seconds, but to those watching it seemed an eternity.

Then, with a tremble, the cop shifted his gun barrel upward.

Logan nodded and made his way up the ramp. Jean gave him a smile he'd never tire of; he gave her back a wink. Then, while he was giving the kids a quick once-over to make sure their harnesses were secure and that Rogue had come through her ordeal okay, Nightcrawler popped up from the row behind. Rogue and John yelled—too many shocks, too little time, they were way over their limit.

“*Guten Morgen*,” Kurt said.

“*Guten Abend*,” Logan corrected. “Who the hell—”

Nightcrawler bowed, with a circus performer's flamboyance. “Kurt Wagner, *mein herr*. But in the Munich Circus I was billed as ‘The Incredible Nightcraw—’ ”

“Whatever. Storm?” he called.

“Ready to roll, Logan,” came back from the flight deck.

“Not yet! We're one short!”

Bobby stood in the hatchway. He hadn't boarded yet; he was looking back at his house, thinking of the life he'd lived there, realizing that perhaps he could never go home again, not to the way it was. He'd never considered being a mutant in those terms, never imagined the consequences of possessing these fantastic powers might cost him his family.

He knew at that moment that every memory of this house and his life here would be defined by this scene, the stink of burned rubber and metal and plastic, the groans of the wounded and the cries of the terrified, the sight of scorched wood on the porch where he'd played, the burn hole where the front door had been.

He saw his parents and his brother in the upstairs window and knew their faces would remain to haunt him always. His father, shocked and hurt—not just by what had happened, but by his own sense of responsibility; if his son had come to this, then he had failed as a father. His mother, sobbing, like he wasn't her son anymore but had become, now and forever, a stranger.

He wondered if he could forestall all that by going back. Like that old Cher song said, “If I Could Turn Back Time”! He had to laugh a little at the yearning: Where was a mutant with a truly useful power when you really needed one?

He gave his family a final wave, and closed both ramp and hatch behind him.

Descent to dust-off, maybe a minute. Engines shrieking, the *Blackbird* hovered above the rooftops for a few seconds, then oriented itself and shot up and away at an incredibly steep angle and a speed those watching couldn't believe.

The cop on the lawn holstered his weapon, then thumbed the call button on the walkie-talkie handset clipped to his shoulder to make sure the unit was working.

“Dispatch,” he reported when he got them to calm down enough to hear him speak, more than a little amazed himself to discover that he *could* speak, “all units are down. We have casualties. We need fire and rescue units onsite, ASAP. Perps positively identified as mutants and hostile. They’re mobile, escaping aboard some kind of high-performance aircraft, heading west and climbing fast. You’d better notify Hanscom Air Force Base. If we want these guys, they’d better scramble some interceptors right now! An’ you tell ’em from us, good hunting.”

But he had to wonder, as he picked his way across the lawn toward his ruined squad car, against adversaries like this, if the Air Force would have any better chance of success.

Chapter Eleven

Charles Xavier never tired of the view from his office.

The main floor of the mansion was built up a level from the ground, creating a distinct separation between the reception areas of the house and those rooms and areas where the household staff actually did their work. He could turn from his desk and look out through the big bay window, across the tiled expanse of the terrace to the lawn and formal gardens beyond. In summer, the garden caught the eye, with its cavalcade of flowers and shrubs. In autumn, once the flowers faded and the leaves began to turn, the trees beyond took over, painting the distance in a riot of fiery orange, scarlet, and gold. In winter, if he arose early enough after a snow, he was usually assured of about an hour to look on the yard in an unmarked, pristine state, as nature intended. Then, of course, his students—regardless of age—erupted from the house to embark on an endless succession of sled races down the far slopes, the construction of various animals, and the obligatory snowball fights. By sunset of that first day, the snow had become so trampled it resembled a beach under the onslaught of midsummer bathers.

The moments he cherished best, though, came in spring. The air, still crisp with the bite of a winter reluctantly passing, was filled with the promise of new life and new hope. The garden was scattered with dots of brightness and color, teasing the onlooker with hints of the coming glory.

A breeze riffled the treetops, creating that *shushhhing* sound he loved, and stirred his senses as it brought a sharp and heady mix of smells through the open window. The pleasure was acute, but for some reason it brought to his face not a smile, but tears. In the midst of this natural wonder that was so familiar and usually so comforting, he felt an inexplicable and aching sense of loss.

On the windowsill, he saw a chess set, arranged to suggest he was playing someone outside, although the terrace and grounds beyond—indeed, the entire school—were empty. No sound of voice, of movement, when usually the challenge was to create some small semblance of peace amid the constant clatter. Not even a hint of a stray thought.

He’d never known such silence, nor felt so utterly alone. For as long as he could remember, there had always been someone or other’s thoughts to reach out to. He rarely did, he liked to be as respectful of the privacy of others as he was protective of his own, yet it was always reassuring to know they were there.

Now, nothing.

He looked again at the chess set. He was white, and he'd lost almost all his pawns. His king was in jeopardy, virtually checkmate, and while his queen remained on the board, she was sufficiently threatened to prevent her coming to his aid. His only effective ally was a knight.

Thinking about the game made his head ache. Rubbing his temple didn't help. Perhaps a walk . . .

That made him pause.

He was standing.

He looked over his shoulder at his office, unwilling yet to make a move that trusted these newly functional limbs. He saw only normal furniture and a desk that made no provision for the presence of a wheelchair.

Xavier closed his eyes, reaching deep into memory for the exercises he'd first learned to help him focus his abilities, the way he'd taught himself to stay afloat against the riptides of outside thoughts crashing against the shores of his own conscious awareness. Gradually, as he gained an increasing measure of control, he had crafted a series of psychic levees to guarantee the integrity of his own personality, no matter how many minds he interfaced with.

Evidently, all those meticulously constructed defenses had been subverted. He didn't like that and liked even less the struggle he went through to keep that anger from showing. Instinctively, he knew the source of his troubles.

"Jason." He spoke aloud, severely. "Stop it."

Jason had other ideas, so Xavier returned once more to his most basic mantras, building upward from that essential psychic foundation. The first thing to change was his own personal perspective. The view out the window lowered somewhat, dropping by more than one-third to the level of a tall man sitting in a chair. Carved stone morphed into Sheetrock, painted in institutional greens and beige and looking very much the worse for wear. Natural sunlight gave way to the passionless radiance of overhead fluorescents. His favorite things went away, to be replaced by his prison cell . . .

. . . and the demented monstrosity that Stryker called Mutant 143 and who Xavier remembered as a quietly frightened little boy.

There'd been only the one consultation. The boy's DNA contained markers for the mutator gene, and Stryker's contacts within the American intelligence community had led him to Xavier. He had no idea then that Xavier was himself a mutant, only an acknowledged expert in the field. And while Xavier could confirm that the boy possessed the requisite gene matrix and that in all likelihood he would be active, there was no way to determine the type and extent of abilities the boy would manifest. Xavier suggested admitting the boy to the school, but Stryker would hear none of that. He wanted the mutantcy removed. When Xavier told him that wasn't possible, the other man lost his temper. He took away his son, and that was the last Xavier had heard of Jason, even though, in the years following, he made a number of his own discreet inquiries to try to determine what had happened. Finally word came that the boy had died.

Sitting across from him, Xavier couldn't help thinking, *Would that he had.*

The buzzing in Xavier's ears, radiating through his skull with the annoying fury of a bone saw, was

murder, leaving his teeth bared and clenched in a perpetual grimace of pain. Stryker's neural inhibitor, doing its job.

The hell with that man, the hell with his toys.

"Jason," he said, speaking with care to avoid triggering further retaliation from the inhibitor, "you must help me."

No response, so he tried again. And again, his eyes meeting the mismatched gaze of the poor creature in the other wheelchair, ignoring the seething cauldron of emotions that were so nakedly displayed.

"You must help me," Xavier repeated, ruthlessly crushing the surge of elation he felt when the boy's mouth began to move in concert to his words. No distractions, not till the job was done.

"You must help me," he said once more, and this time he could hear the words from Jason, a beat behind.

Gradually, with each repetition, Jason caught up with Xavier until their speech was totally in sync.

But at the same time, Jason's withered arms were struggling upward from his lap, his face contorting with effort and with rage as he extended them toward Xavier. His chair moved forward as well, bringing him within reach. Jason's hands came to rest on Xavier's shoulders, those burning eyes, pulsing with inner light, filling his vision. He felt them on his neck, so little strength in them it was more like being grasped by a toddler. Tears burned at the corners of Jason's eyes, sympathetic counterparts squeezing from Xavier's, but he couldn't read the emotions behind them, save that they were powerful and primal.

"Stand," Xavier said simply, putting the full force of his will behind that single injunction.

"Stand," Jason repeated, same tone, same inflection. And they said it again until they were one.

His mouth forming a great O of astonishment and protest, Jason levered his body forward and pushed himself erect. With disturbingly liquid popping sounds, the junctions on all his connectors pulled free of their housings, allowing cerebrospinal fluid to leak from the port in his skull. His legs were as spindly and apparently useless as his arms, but he gained his feet with far more ease. His hands rose with him, up from Xavier's throat, to catch hold of the circlet of sophisticated electronics that rested on his head.

A quick tug, followed by a clatter as the circlet slipped from Jason's fingers to the floor below, and the buzzing was gone, the pain as well.

Xavier exhaled in relief. "Thank you, Jason."

"Thank you, Jason" was the boy's mumbled response.

For Xavier, it was like staring down at the world from some Olympian height and watching all the lights come on. First one thought came to him, and then a multitude, the same way the first few drops of rain in spring herald the approaching monsoon. Most would drown in such an onslaught.

For Charles Xavier, it was a rebirth. Of self, of purpose.

He felt Jason touch him once more, gently, on the cheek, and used that momentary contact as the physical link to release the controls he'd established over the boy. He might as well have thrown a

switch. All expression immediately faded from Jason's features. As the boy lowered himself to his own chair, Xavier assumed that the passion he'd seen earlier was merely a reflection of his own.

"This should not have happened," he told Jason. "I don't know what can be done, my boy, but you have my word, I'll find some way to help you."

His mind was on other things, flush with the excitement of his reawakened telepathy. He didn't see the flash in the boy's eyes that belied the quietude of his behavior.

Xavier wheeled himself toward the locked door, making sure to roll across the inhibitor, taking a rude pleasure in the sound of its delicate workings crushing under his wheels.

"Mr. Smith," he called, aloud and with his thoughts, "are you there?"

Of course he was; his mind was as plain to Xavier as the sunrise on a clear day. In short order, the door was unlocked, and Xavier's arms were released from their restraints. His companion guard simply stood where he was, as Xavier told him to, watching disinterestedly.

"I arrived here with a friend," Xavier ordered. "Take me to him."

Scott Summers had a cell all to himself, his optic blasts restrained by a high-tech inhibitor of their own. He was also shackled to the bed, to keep him from getting ideas about unleashing his beams himself.

"Remove his restraints," Xavier told the guards.

While Smith did as he was told, his partner hurried forward with Cyclops' visor. Taking great care to keep his eyes tightly closed and his face turned away from any living targets, Scott donned the visor.

"Thank you," Xavier said to the soldiers, and then to Corporal Smith: "What is the quickest way out of here?"

"The helicopter, sir" was Smith's reply, at attention, as if to a general.

"Take us there, now."

Two-thirds of the way eastward across the continent, in the passenger cabin of the *Blackbird*, on its way to the mansion, Bobby Drake wasn't happy with his roommate. John Allardyce, cheerfully flicking his lighter cap open and shut, open and shut, couldn't care less.

"You think it's funny," Bobby fumed, refusing to let up even though he'd been speaking to deaf ears since they went airborne. "Let's go set fire to *your* house next time!"

"Too late," John said cheerily.

"You almost killed those cops, John," Rogue told him.

"So?" John turned toward her. He spoke with exaggerated patience, as though explaining the most obvious facts of life to the terminally dim-witted. "Logan would have"—he gave a pointed look at the man across the aisle—"if he hadn't gotten shot in the head."

Logan ignored the boy. He wanted no part of this argument, because in this one instance, both sides were right. John was right. Given the circumstances, he would have charged those cops and likely used lethal force. But he also sided foursquare with Rogue. Just because he was prepared to shoulder that karmic burden didn't mean it was right for these kids to do the same. Hell, it probably meant precisely the opposite.

Mercifully, Jean gave him a high sign from the flight deck, and he clambered up the aisle to join her and Storm.

"They'll be all right," she assured him. Unconvinced, he growled, crouching down behind the cockpit seats and occupying himself with an examination of the dials and display screens. Jean was staring at him, first at his reflection in the windscreen, then straight on as she swung around in her chair to look him full in the face. He thought he'd welcome such attention, but her direct gaze made him distinctly uncomfortable.

She must have picked up the cue, from body language or his thoughts, because she reached out and used her thumb to wipe a smudge of blood off his forehead, from where the bullet had struck back in Boston. She didn't move her hand away, though, but stroked him again with her thumb, a quick caress right over the now-healed wound.

More than anything right then, he wanted to take that hand. He wanted to kiss those lips, he wanted to lose himself in the scent of her hair. He wanted—

Too many things.

"So," he said, taking refuge in the proprieties, "any word from the professor?" Seeing a faint quirk at the edge of her mouth when she shook her head, he remembered to add, "Or Scott?"

"Nothing," she told him.

"How far are we?" he asked.

"We're coming up on the mansion now. Once Storm whistles up some cover—"

"I've got two signals," Storm interrupted, "coming in fast."

Accompanying her announcement, a proximity alarm sounded. Warning lights flashed on the main console, and the main display shifted channels to a radar field. Two blips, rising and approaching from behind, identified by the plane's onboard computer as F-16s. They were armed and trying to paint the *Blackbird* with their target acquisition systems.

The *Blackbird* shuddered in wake turbulence as the Falcons shot past to announce their presence, then throttled back to pace the bigger aircraft, taking up flanking positions on either side. Each of the pilots was making a downward gesture, telling them to land at once.

They made the same point over the radio: "Unidentified aircraft, this is Air Force two-one-zero on guard. You are ordered to descend to twenty thousand feet and return with our escort to Hanscom Air Force Base. Failure to comply at once will result in the use of extreme force. Do you acknowledge?"

When there was no reply, the fighter pilot repeated his instructions.

"Somebody's angry," Storm commented.

“I wonder why” was Logan’s pointed response, with a glare over his shoulder at John Allardyce.

Logan hung back in the shadows so that the fighter jocks could only see the two women at the controls. Nightcrawler had started mumbling prayers again, and the kids aft were demanding to know what was happening; they weren’t shy about sounding scared, either.

Jean looked at Storm, then at Nightcrawler. She’d already come to her decision.

Logan was about to ask, “What now?” when the lead fighter told them.

“We’re marked!” Storm cried as the *Blackbird*’s systems confirmed the worst. “They’re going to fire! Seat belts!”

She slapped the throttles to their firewalls and pointed the big black aircraft toward the stars. The *Blackbird* surged forward as though it had been launched from a catapult, and Logan had his hands full grabbing hold of the back of Jean’s chair with one hand and catching Nightcrawler with the other. Strangest damn feeling for Logan, and then some, to find some guy better than a head taller wrapping himself like a monkey around his arm and using it to climb up to his torso.

They felt another minor shudder as the *Blackbird* broke the sound barrier. In their wake, the F-16s went immediately to afterburner and rocketed after them. Alarms and displays on the main panel revealed two minor blips separating themselves from the pursuing fighters and beginning to close the gap at a significantly greater speed.

“Who are these guys?” Bobby yelled from the back. “What the hell is happening? Why won’t they leave us alone?”

Nobody up front paid him any attention. They had enough to worry about.

“What’s the threat?” Logan demanded.

Jean pointed at the display: “Sidewinders. They’re heat seekers. We give them minimal profile with our exhaust, we can lose ’em.”

“Everybody hang on!” Storm yelled, and she and Jean together swung the wheel hard over.

The *Blackbird* peeled off to the left, pitching up and over into a barrel roll that allowed them to reverse direction without needing a wide turn. The missiles, closing on where the plane had been, triggered their own proximity sensors and detonated, creating a minor fireball too far behind the *Blackbird* to do any damage. In response, both pursuing fighters split in opposite directions to come in on them from either side.

Storm jinked them the other direction, turning headlong in the direction of one of the fighters and forcing both of them to maneuver to prevent a collision. Nightcrawler wedged himself into a corner, holding on with hands and feet and tail while praying for all he was worth. Aft, John Allardyce had no smart comments, just a lot of sweat as he grabbed for a barf bag.

“They’re not backing off,” Storm said. “And they’re not giving me a decent opening to outrun them.”

“Don’t we have any damn weapons in this heap?” Logan demanded as the fighters struggled for position. The women were good, but these guys were trained professionals at the top of their game. No way would they lose a dogfight.

Jean shot a glance at Storm, who released hold of her controls. Jean had the aircraft now.

Storm’s eyes burned white, occluding iris and pupil. The air around her became supercharged with electricity, and Jean flicked a line of switches to disengage the systems on her side of the panel. Even so, performance on the main displays began degrading markedly, the screens becoming more and more crowded with static.

Through the canopy, Logan saw clouds darkening the sky ahead as puffy cumulus crashed together and built themselves before his eyes into a towering series of thunderheads. Lightning announced the storm, and he knew down on the ground people would be picking up the pace, cursing the weatherman for getting the forecast wrong yet again, as they hurried toward shelter.

On the radar, despite the electronic interference Storm was creating, he could see the shape of the storm up ahead. To his uneducated eye, it looked nasty. Without hesitation, Jean sent the *Blackbird* rocketing into its heart.

The Falcon drivers couldn’t know what to make of the freak weather. They didn’t care. They followed.

On radar and to the naked eye, wisps of cloud began to swirl, faster and faster as Storm manipulated pressure gradients and temperature to create air effects within these clouds more common to the great plains than the northeast. Great rams of high-pressure cold bludgeoned hot low-pressure air, generating maelstroms of tremendous force that found expression as airborne tornados.

Aboard the *Blackbird*, despite the best efforts of both Jean and Storm, it was a rough and rocky ride, akin to thundering over potholes the size of New Jersey. Wind smashed at the hull; one minute they were in clear air, the next the canopy was covered with sheets of rain, the next, completely occluded by ice. The only constant was that visibility sucked and maneuverability was worse.

Hard as it was for them, though, Logan didn’t want to imagine what it was like for their pursuers. He counted over a dozen whirlwinds, writhing impossibly across the sky both vertically and horizontally, creating an atmospheric gauntlet no aircraft could possibly survive.

Still, they tried, using every ounce of courage and skill to close to the point where they could establish a solid lock.

“We’re marked,” Jean cried out . . .

. . . and Storm responded by sandwiching the nearer fighter between a pair of tornados.

They literally tore the plane to bits, scattering wreckage across the sky in pieces no larger than a Zip disk. In the blink of an eye, the pilot found himself cast out of his vehicle and into the teeth of weather more ferocious than he could imagine, much less recall. He’d never had a plane disintegrate around him before, prayed never to endure the experience again. But most amazing of all to him was what happened afterward.

He thought for those first awful moments only of his wife and kids, but then it was as if the hand of God

had reached out to enfold him. Yes, he was falling from miles in the air, but from the moment he separated from his aircraft, it was as if the storm had lost all interest in him. He might as well have been falling through a clear summer sky on some training exercise. Not a breath of wind touched him, nor rain, either, even though he fell for miles through the darkest and most terrifying pile of cumulo-nimbus thunderheads he'd ever seen. His parachute opened without a hitch, and he descended to a smooth landing somewhere close to Syracuse.

His wingman knew none of this. He only saw his fellow plane disintegrate, heard a final, frantic squawk of shock and terror over the radio before contact was lost. He made the logical assumption, and just like that the fight became personal.

The tornados came looking for him, and he skated around them with a daring and skill that pushed his interceptor well beyond the envelope of its flight and combat dynamics in his determination to nail them. He wouldn't give up, he wouldn't back off, and as the increasingly desperate maneuvers progressed, he gained height on them.

All Jean wanted was to break off the engagement, to use the *Blackbird*'s far superior power plant to put so much distance between them that he couldn't follow. But if she ducked to the side, if she turned tail, the Falcon would have a shot. If she bulled down his throat, he had a shot.

Storm let her temper get the better of her. Logan jumped as small flickers of lightning crackled from her eyes and the interior of the flight deck resounded to the kettledrum riff of thunder. Outside, all the subordinate funnels coalesced into one, that megatornado expanding until its cone engulfed first the *Blackbird*, and then the Falcon on its tail.

Quick as she was, the pilot got tone before she could grab him. This time, before his plane went the way of his wingman, he popped a pair of slammers: AIM-120 AMRAAM "fire-and-forget" air-to-air missiles. Even as he bailed, even as the storm around him abated to give him an equally smooth and safe descent to the ground, he knew he had the target nailed.

Explosions high in the atmosphere confirmed it. When he was picked up, over the Canadian border in the woods above Lake Huron, that's what he reported.

Jean kicked the *Blackbird* through the whole regime of missile avoidance maneuvers. She pulled a vertical rolling scissors, snapping back and forth across her base course violently enough and often enough to break the radar lock the slammers had on them. She tried a high-speed, high-G barrel roll to flip up and over the missiles and come in behind them. For all the good she did, the damn missiles might as well have been tied to the *Blackbird* with wire.

Without a word, using a slap to the arm to get the other woman's attention, she handed the controls back to Storm. They were leaving her storm well behind, although the air, and the ride, remained bumpy. The missiles were too small, too close, too fast for Storm's power to do any good. Their survival was Jean's to decide.

One small blessing: As Storm scaled back her power, the radar cleared up. Jean had a clear electronic view of their tormentors. All she had to do now was slide her consciousness down that invisible line connecting the *Blackbird* to the missiles . . .

Storm cleaned up the *Blackbird*'s flight profile, exchanging maneuverability for raw speed as the variable-geometry wings folded close to the hull, creating an airfoil ideal for high-mach hypersonic flight. Given a small fraction of a minute, they could outrun the damn missiles, stretching out the pursuit until the missiles ran out of fuel. But the missiles were already going hell for leather, far faster than the planes that launched them, and the time the *Blackbird* needed to accelerate was time they didn't have.

As the missiles struck the unseen barrier that she threw up in their flight path, Jean's body reacted to an invisible impact and she gritted her teeth, hurling another telekinetic boulder at them. Again and again they plowed through her obstacles, the impacts psychically translating themselves into physical terms so that each one felt like a heavyweight punch. But this succession of hammer blows only made Jean that much more determined to prevail. She wasn't trying to finesse the intercept by manipulating the missiles' flight-control surfaces or even just grabbing hold of them and throwing them away; there was too much risk of losing her telekinetic grip, and no time to recover if she did.

She vaguely registered a cry of elation from the seat beside her and felt a sudden, pronounced wobble on the trajectory of the nearest missile. She hit it again, and again, and again, cursing it in terms that would impress Logan, furious with herself for not having the raw power necessary to do the job in a single shot.

She felt her body flush with a heat unlike any she'd ever known, not a physical sensation at all so much as a . . . spiritual one. She heard something faint in the distance, like a carillon fanfare, a call to glory that made her ache to answer, a sense of a window opening onto possibilities beyond number. It registered to her as music, but she knew it was so much more. It spoke to her as fulfillment, but of what she did not know.

"Jean," she heard Storm call, from as great a distance one way as the fanfare was the other, and for that moment was torn between which one to answer. "How are you—"

The last shot did the trick, sending the missile straight up so that its proximity fuse, mistaking its fellow missile for the target, detonated. She was aiming for a twofer, a double kill.

Aft, at the rear of the passenger cabin, John Allardyce had long since run out of barf bags, long since ruined his borrowed clothes. Bobby Drake didn't feel much better, although—since his uncle was a Gloucester man who made his living fishing the Grand Banks and enjoyed taking his favorite nephew for the occasional jaunt—he'd acquired a cast-iron stomach long ago.

Rogue, unfortunately, was in real trouble. The *Blackbird* didn't use standard seat belts; all the seats were fitted with four-point military-style restraints. Procedure mandated that passengers lock themselves in at takeoff, but she'd been talking with Bobby, who was really rocked by how wrong things had gone back at his house. He wasn't even sure anymore whether or not he could even go home again. In addition, she'd been so upset—still and probably for a while to come—with John for the stunts he'd pulled during the fight that she never got around to buckling herself in. Once the dogfight started, she found to her increasing dismay that she couldn't.

All the *Blackbird*'s wild and unpredictable moves forced her to spend most of the time just hanging on, to keep from making like a hockey puck against the walls and ceiling. Every time she got hold of a damn buckle, it wouldn't lock into the mechanism. She'd think one was anchored, but then when she tried to close another, the first would pop out. It happened so often—making her so frustrated she was ready to cry—that she believed the plane was doing this to her on purpose.

She knew she was getting upset, so she followed Jean's training. She forced herself to take big, slow, calming breaths. She was still scared but tried not to let that matter so much as, one by one, she gathered the buckles and slugged them into place.

This was going to work. She was going to be okay.

Up front, three pairs of eyes—green, brown, and blue—stared transfixed at the radar screen and the big blotch way less than a mile behind the *Blackbird* that represented the exploding missile. Things were looking good. They were going to be okay.

The panel *beeped* an alarm, and the second missile raced free of the debris field, locked and closing.

They had seconds to save themselves.

Jean threw everything she had into its path, focusing her concentration so tightly that the shape and fabric of the world around her began to fade. She didn't perceive herself anymore as being surrounded by the solid structure of the *Blackbird*; instead, she beheld the glittering atomic and molecular matrices that composed it. The world for her became a panoply of brilliant pinpoint lights and colors, shot through with vistas of unfathomable emptiness, almost as though reality was no more than an illusion, with all the tangible substance of a dream.

She closed her eyes, tasting the harsh gunmetal of blood from her nose.

The proximity *beeps* of the radar were coming closer together as the missile closed the range. She took a final roundhouse swing—and missed.

The missile's course never wavered.

"Oh, God," she breathed.

Inside the hull, it felt as though the *Blackbird* had just had its back broken by a baseball bat. The big plane bucked downward under the impact of the pressure wave. Shrieking metal matched shrieking voices as shrapnel punched a score of holes in the roof.

Decompression did the rest, blowing out a major section, the plane's own velocity wrenching the piece away. Instantly the cabin was swept by winds far greater than any hurricane. Rogue's harness held for all of a heartbeat, and then, to her absolute horror and disbelief, her buckles disengaged and she was swept screaming up and out the hole, into the sky.

Everyone saw what happened, only one was able to act on it.

Nightcrawler vanished in his distinctive *bamf* of imploding air and the faint stench of sulfur.

Rogue didn't know what to do or think. She'd never fallen out of a plane before; this was the kind of thing that only happened in movies. She remembered what she'd seen about skydiving and spread her arms and legs to try to stabilize herself. At the same time, she was laughing hysterically inside, demanding to know what the hell good that would do because she didn't have a parachute and sooner rather than later gravity was going to reintroduce her to the ground, the hard way. She doubted after that happy

moment if even Logan's healing power would make much difference.

It was really cold, too. She'd hardly begun falling and already she couldn't breathe and she'd likely pass out and freeze to death before anything serious happened. It was so unfair.

That's when the demon caught her, indigo skin making him hard to see against the darkening sky that was left over from the storm. He rocketed out of nowhere with a grace and skill that told her he knew all about skydiving and wrapped himself around her, arms, legs, and tail. And teleported.

She didn't know where they went for the split instant they were in transit, and for as long as she planned to live she never wanted to find out. There was a cold that chilled her to the marrow, more completely than Bobby could. There was a silence that had nothing to do with the absence of sound. There was a raging disorientation that made her wonder if her insides and outsides had been transposed. There was an awful sense of *nothing* .

And then she was whole once more. And the pair of them were dropping the last couple of feet to the wind-ripped deck of the *Blackbird's* main cabin. Which, in Rogue's estimation, was *not* an improvement, because the plane was falling just as out of control as she had been.

Storm yelled their altitude, diminishing rapidly, as she and Jean fought to pull the plane out of a flat spin. The explosion had crippled the flight controls, they had minimal hydraulics, which made the act of turning the wheel or pulling on the yoke or pressing the rudder pedals akin to bench-pressing a fully loaded semitrailer. They had a flameout on one engine, possible shrapnel damage and a fire-warning light from the other, which they ignored as they rammed its throttle past the firewall in an attempt to stabilize their descent.

Logan braced himself in position and laid his hand beside Jean's on her yoke, using his strength to buttress hers. They were into the breathable atmosphere, that was good. But they were fast running out of sky, that was way bad.

Storm's eyes went white again as she fought to bring a wind into their path, to use it to check their headlong fall. But for all the passion of her indomitable will, she was still constrained by natural forces. She could generate a wind to cushion their landing, but not in the space they had left.

"You can fly," Jean told her. "Grab the kids, get them clear!"

As she spoke, Jean once more turned to her own teke, but that well was too dry to be of use. She had will to spare, but no strength to match the terrible momentum of their descent.

Without thinking, responding solely to a surge of emotion that caught them both by surprise, she placed a hand over Logan's. The look he saw when he met her eyes was a revelation that he knew would break both their hearts. And yet, it was a moment and a memory he'd carry with him to the grave.

Storm cleared her harness and shoved herself past Logan, calling to the kids.

Strangely, it was Nightcrawler, holding tight to Rogue, who responded.

"Uh . . . Storm?" He was pointing to the roof.

She followed his upraised finger and didn't bother hiding her astonishment as the fabric of the hull came alive before her eyes. Dark threads of metal alloy polymer laced their way across the hull spars as though

they were being spun from a loom. The spars themselves that had been twisted and broken politely straightened themselves. The roar of wind through the hull gradually lessened to a whisper, then to silence.

Around them, the hull righted itself, returning to level flight.

Logan looked questioningly at Jean, wondering if this was her doing. As mystified as he, she shook her head, but she also didn't move her hand. Indeed, she tightened her grip, interlacing her fingers with his.

They were a couple of hundred feet in the air, but their velocity had dropped to less than a hundred knots. With each ten feet or so they lost another ten knots until, ten feet off the ground, they stopped.

They sat there, floating just above the ground, for maybe a minute before anyone had the presence of mind to mention the landing gear. That provoked more than a fair share of nervous chuckles as Jean broke contact with Logan to slap the big landing lever from the top to the bottom of its cradle. A quiet whine and a dull *thunk* told them what the status lights confirmed: gear down and locked.

The next sensation was an equally understated *thump* that told them they were once more on the ground.

The kids in the back, being kids, let out a cheer.

On the flight deck, the first flush of relief had been cast aside by the sight of what was waiting for them. They had descended into a forest clearing not much bigger than the *Blackbird* itself. On the edge of the clearing, parked under the sheltering evergreens, was a black limousine, not the sort of wheels normally used for a camping trip. But then, the couple using it wasn't the sort you'd expect to find out here roughing it, either.

Mystique gave Jean and Logan a wave from where they stood midway between the nose of the *Blackbird* and their car. Magneto, once again properly clothed in his signature black and gray, held out his hand in welcome. Mystique stood at his side.

"If I set you down gently," he offered in a pleasantly companionable voice, the kind you'd want in a favorite old-country uncle, "will you hear me out?"

Chapter Twelve

It was a good place to hide, even without the stealth netting that Storm and Logan quickly spread across the hull. Jean wanted to help, but her psychic exertions in the air had taken a physical toll—which she'd discovered when she tried to climb out of her pilot's chair. The spirit was willing, the flesh had other ideas. She didn't have strength to move, and Logan had to carry her out.

Magneto had set the *Blackbird* down hard against a nice-sized escarpment, part of a line of large hills—baby mountains, really—that formed a valley with a mainly north-south orientation. It had been carved out of the landscape by the great ice ages, when the advancing glaciers had plowed troughs in the earth like a plow. This was still technically wilderness, with no roads to speak of for fifty miles in any

direction, pretty rough going on foot through the forest. Magneto had brought his limo in the same way he saved the *Blackbird*, with his power.

For Storm and Jean, that had proved a daunting revelation. The plane had been designed with Magneto's abilities in mind, to make it as impervious to him as possible, and yet he'd grabbed hold of it and repaired it with frightening ease.

The cliff formed a wall at their back. Every other direction, they saw only trees. Old-growth forest, timber that had never been cut, thick stands of fir that towered thirty meters and more in height. This was rugged country that made no concession to modern man or the amenities of modern society, as the kids learned when they decided to go exploring and almost immediately got themselves lost. Logan found them without any trouble but wasn't happy about it, and he made it clear to them that next time they were on their own.

"Think they listened?" Jean asked him.

He snorted derisively. "That'll be the damn day. Especially John. He'll do it again just to spit in my eye." His expression sobered. "How you doin'?" he asked her.

"Pretty much fine, thank you," she replied, interlacing her fingers and stretching her arms till the joints cracked. "Just being lazy."

"You're entitled."

"Absent the circumstances, and the company," she added, with a pointed flick of the eyes toward the limo, "I'd agree with you. I've been monitoring GUARD." She meant the military command frequencies. "Both pilots are okay." Logan made a face. He understood her impulse to save the two men, but frankly he couldn't have cared less. Guy tries to kill him, the guy takes his chances. No bitching, no tears.

"The second pilot's reporting us as a probable kill," Jean finished.

"They buying it, the brass?"

"Well, Ororo didn't entirely disperse her storm. It's raining pretty hard over the probable crash site, zero-zero visibility, no hope of flight operations until it clears, which she assures me"—ghost of a grin—"won't be for a while. System seems to have stalled. Meteorologists are baffled."

"I'd keep looking if it was me, till I knew for sure."

"Hence our precautions," and she indicated the netting, shrouding the plane and the car. "Even enhanced imagery won't spot the plane, and our heat and electronic emissions are close to zero. By the time we finish setting up, we'll look like a camping party, nothing more. There should be nothing here to merit a second glance."

"Except for him," Logan noted, jutting his jaw in the general direction of Nightcrawler, who was carrying a tent pack over to where Mystique had begun to lay out their campsite.

"Whatever happens, Logan, we'll deal."

"So tell me, Jean, just how many people *are* there in the world with that color skin and those color eyes?"

She shrugged. “How many are blond and blue, or redheaded with green eyes?”

“I don’t believe in coincidence.”

Her tone sharpened. “And I don’t believe in judging someone without giving them a fair chance. You of all people might appreciate that.”

With a grunt of effort, deliberately ignoring, then waving away, his offer of help, Jean pushed herself to her feet and strode toward the open hatch of the *Blackbird*. Logan fumed as he watched her go, but he was mostly angry at himself. He had nothing against the German, couldn’t help liking him in some ways. But the attack on the mansion, and now finding himself in close proximity with a man he’d cheerfully slaughter, had put all his combat instincts on high alert. Jean was too much like Xavier, always determined to see the brighter angles of human nature. Logan had walked too long, too far, with killers. Trust came hard for him because he knew, deep down to his soul, the cost of betrayal.

He felt as if he’d already failed once, by being caught by surprise at the mansion. He wasn’t going to let that happen again.

Mystique was supervising the layout of the camp, and Logan had to admit the woman knew her stuff. She knew he was watching and if that bothered her, she didn’t let it show. Quite the opposite, in fact; she seemed amused by his attention.

Logan smelled a faint acrid wisp on the wind, the detritus of a striker generating a spark, over and over, in an unsuccessful attempt to ignite a flame.

That made him grin. The kids were going all Boy Scout. How cute.

Bobby Drake didn’t share that amusement as repeated attempts to use John’s lighter to torch some kindling led to a huge amount of frustration. He tried paper, he tried twigs, he tried dry leaves, but nothing would catch. All the time he was conscious of John, sitting behind him with his back to a tree trunk, silently laughing at his failure.

“You could help, you know,” Rogue snapped to John. There was no expression on the boy’s face as he looked up at her. His eyes were cold and unreadable.

Forcing himself to ignore everything but the need to generate some fire, Bobby followed a couple of sparks as they landed on a leaf, pursing his lips and giving them a gentle puff of air to excite them into a true flame as they burned through the leaf and left a glowing boundary that quickly expanded outward in their wake. The more Bobby breathed, the brighter the embers glowed, until he saw the ghost of a flame. Stifling a cheer, he grabbed for some more tinder to feed the baby fire.

Then, with a speed that surprised and saved him, Rogue’s hand caught him by the scruff of the neck and yanked him clear, his own muscles engaging that very same moment in kinetic response to a threat his conscious mind wasn’t yet even aware of. In that selfsame instant, the tiny flicker of flame exploded into a pillar of raw fire, hot as a blast furnace, that reared up better than ten meters before fading to a happy little campfire.

Bobby scrambled around to confront the boy behind him, but he lost his balance as he did so and sprawled awkwardly on the grass, which kept John from being on the receiving end of a roundhouse

punch to the face. He glared at John, so did Rogue, but all they got in return was the most innocent of smiles.

John held out his hand, gesturing for the borrowed lighter. Bobby wanted to throw it away or, better yet, encase it in a block of ice that would last as long as a glacier. Instead, remembering all he'd been taught at home and at Xavier's, he mastered his rage and dropped the lighter into John's open palm. Then he and Rogue turned their backs on him and walked away. Once they were back at the school, assuming there was a school to go back to, Bobby determined to insist on a new roommate. John had crossed too many lines. Bobby wanted no more to do with him.

After the fire came dinner. Nothing fancy, nothing that needed cooking. The campfire was mainly for psychological comfort, to give the scene an air of companionability that was lacking on the faces of most everyone present.

It was an adversarial setting, Magneto and Mystique on one side of the fire, Jean, Storm, and Logan on the other. Everyone but Logan was seated. He stood behind the women and a little to their side, with a clear shot at Magneto. His stance appeared casual, but nobody was fooled. The question that lingered unspoken between them all was whether or not he could reach the older man and deal with him before Magneto could bring his own powers to bear.

Magneto sat in a camp chair, with a presence that made it seem more like a throne. Mystique hunkered down beside him in a crouch, her movements so fluid it was hard to believe she had a skeleton beneath her indigo skin. There was a snap to the air, a harbinger of the fast-approaching winter, that made the heat of the fire welcome. Magneto had hated the cold since Auschwitz and had bundled himself inside an open greatcoat to keep it at bay. Mystique, by contrast, didn't seem to mind a bit. She walked naked, using a decorative scattering of bony ridges across the chest and hips as a minimal acknowledgment of propriety, and dared the world to make a comment.

Jean sat on knees and heels, a very Japanese stance that amply demonstrated her natural grace. She, too, was playing a role, presenting herself in an apparently submissive posture that was in fact anything but. Like a samurai, she could stay this way for hours, yet remain constantly ready to spring to her feet faster than anyone might have guessed. She rarely looked at Magneto, yet Logan knew her focus on the man was as intent as his own.

Of them all, Storm looked the most natural as she tended the fire, feeding it the occasional length of wood while using her control of the winds to channel a constant breeze through the base of the blaze, keeping it hot. She sat cross-legged, in a position she'd learned as a child out on the Great Rift Valley, wandering with the Masai.

The kids, showing more sense than Logan expected, were keeping their distance, as was Nightcrawler.

Logan told the story of what had happened at the mansion. Magneto told them of Xavier's and Scott's capture.

"Our adversary," Magneto said at the end, "his name is William Stryker. He is very highly placed in the national intelligence community. Specializing in clandestine operations. Ostensibly accountable to the President, but it's clear now he has an agenda all his own."

"What does he want?" Jean asked.

The look Magneto gave her made his feeling plain: *Shouldn't that be obvious, child?* But Logan spoke before he could repeat those sentiments aloud.

“That’s the question we should be asking Magneto,” Logan challenged.

Magneto inclined his head, very much the monarch holding court, the civilized man confronting a band of barbarians. Or worse, children.

Storm had as little tolerance for being patronized as Logan did. “So,” she demanded curtly of the older man. “What is it, Eric? What do *you* want?”

Magneto’s expression tightened so fractionally only Logan caught the change. He wasn’t used to being spoken to like this, and he didn’t like it. He knew his priorities, though. He’d leave any response for later.

“When Stryker invaded your mansion, he stole an essential piece of its hardware.”

“Cerebro?” Jean asked, shaking her head in denial. She didn’t want to believe that that was what had happened. “Stryker would need the professor to operate the system,” she said.

“Precisely,” Magneto agreed. “Which is the only reason I believe Charles is still alive.”

“What’s the deal?” Logan asked sharply. “Why are you all so scared?”

Magneto answered him. “While Cerebro is working, Charles’ mind—amplified by its power—has the potential to connect with every living person on the planet. If he were to concentrate hard enough on a particular group of people—let’s say mutants, for example—he could kill us all.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding,” Logan said.

“Charles and I built Cerebro as a tool,” Magneto continued, “one I believed, we both believed, would unite the world.”

Flatly, a statement of fact, like announcing there are stars in the sky, Storm said, “*Liar!*”

Magneto met her gaze and saw in her eyes the character of a woman who had faced down lions bare-handed.

“You wanted to use Cerebro as a weapon against nonmutants,” she continued in that same calm, devastating reportorial tone. “Only the professor wouldn’t let you.”

He didn’t try to defend himself. “Now, I fear, he has no more choice in the matter.”

“Can you hear anything?” Bobby asked Rogue from the opposite end of the campsite.

“Excuse me?” she asked him back, with a look that said she thought he was nuts.

“I dunno, I thought, y’know, since you imprinted Wolverine—”

“His name’s *Logan*,” she retorted in a fierce whisper. Even though she couldn’t hear what the adults were saying, she knew Logan could hear the kids just fine if he wanted, and suspected Jean could pick

up their thoughts just as easily. “And I can’t, okay?”

“Okay,” he said hurriedly in a placating tone. “Sorry I asked.”

John, busy staring at their campfire, snorted.

“I beg your pardon,” said Nightcrawler, his yellow eyes the only part of him that could readily be seen against the background shadows, “but I can get a closer look.”

Bobby and Rogue nodded in tandem, and the yellow eyes vanished, leaving behind a faint *bamf* of imploding air and his distinctive scent of smoke and brimstone.

“Nice,” Bobby said in admiration.

John waved his hand in front of his face. “Oh, yeah. Mutant teleport farts. Real nice.”

Nightcrawler didn’t catch the last remark, but if he had, he wouldn’t have thought anything of it. There wasn’t a joke or comment that could be made about the by-products of his power that he hadn’t heard already. Some of them actually made him laugh. Regardless, he always made it a point to smile. Grace in adversity was an article of faith with him.

His destination was a fir tree just beyond the adults’ campfire. The challenge was getting close enough to reach a branch—without materializing impaled on one—and to avoid making so much noise when he grabbed hold that it would draw the attention of anyone down below.

Using hands and feet and tail, he clambered silently down the trunk until he found a vantage point that kept him hidden but afforded a decent view of the others. Then he simply wrapped his tail around a branch, hung upside down, and listened.

Storm was speaking to Magneto with an almost prosecutorial manner: “How would Stryker know what Cerebro is—or where to find it?”

Magneto didn’t answer right away. He laid his right hand for a moment on the inside of his left forearm, where he’d received his identification tattoo from the SS guards at Auschwitz, rubbing his thumb absently back and forth across his sleeve as though he could feel the marks left in his skin through the thick, heavy cloth. Then, his expression strangely unreadable, he lifted his hand to the back of his neck, to the scar left by Stryker’s injections. He’d now been branded twice in his life. As a boy, there had been no way he could fight back. As a man, he’d thought there was no way he would allow such a thing to happen again.

Vanity, he thought, remembering the ancient Roman injunction to their Caesars: *All is Vanity*.

“Itold him,” he said at last, an admission dragged from the depths of his soul.

He looked from Storm to Jean, both women in the eyes, not bothering to hide the rage and shame that roiled within him like magma beneath the caldera of a dormant volcano, and was impressed that neither flinched. “I helped design the system, remember? I helped Charles build it.

“Stryker has undeniable methods of . . . persuasion. Effective against me. Effective even against a mutant as strong as Charles. Believe this, if Stryker has Charles, he will find a way to break him. And suborn him to his purposes. If he weren’t absolutely certain of that fact, he wouldn’t have acted.”

“Who the hell is this Stryker?” Jean asked.

“He’s a military scientist with considerable ties to the clandestine intelligence community. He has spent his professional life looking for a solution to what he considers the mutant problem. But if you require a more . . . intimate perspective, why don’t you ask the Wolverine?”

“His name is Logan,” Jean said, coming too quickly, too sharply to Logan’s defense, in a way that made Magneto smile very thoughtfully as he turned his attention back and forth between them.

“Of course it is,” he said. “But what’s in a name?”

“William Stryker,” he continued, “is the only other man I know who can manipulate adamantium. The metal laced through the Wolverine’s bones, it bears *his* signature.

“Are you sure you don’t remember—Logan?” In return, he got a blank look. “What a pity.”

“The professor—”

“The professor trusted you were smart enough to discover this on your own. He gives you more credit than I do.” Logan’s eyes flashed, but beyond a subvocalized growl, he offered no other reaction to Magneto’s insult.

“So Charley knew,” he said.

“ ‘Charley’ has always known.”

Jean looked sharply at Logan, but his face was as still as his thoughts.

Logan didn’t react.

“Charles has always known.”

“Please understand,” Storm spoke calmly from the fireside, “if we don’t take this all purely on good faith. You went to some trouble to save us—for which we’re all quite appropriately grateful. The question is, why? What do you want, Magneto? Why do you need us?”

“Mystique discovered plans of a base where Stryker’s had his operations for decades. Unfortunately,” he shrugged, “we don’t know where it is.

“However, I suspect one of *you* might.”

“The professor already tried,” said Logan.

Magneto sighed. “Once again, you think it’s all about *you* .”

Then his eyes lifted to the branches above.

Nightcrawler’s first impulse was to flee, but he took strength and comfort from the smile of greeting that Storm gave him, the wave of invitation that followed to join her at her side. He came down as a circus acrobat, swinging lithely from branch to branch, ending with a triple somersault that landed him right

where Storm had indicated. He held the pose for a moment, out of habit, before reminding himself that this wasn't an occasion, nor this an audience, for applause, and he squatted close beside her.

Her hand across his shoulders was reassuring.

"I didn't mean to snoop," he apologized.

Storm gave him a squeeze that told him it was all right, and Jean said, "Relax."

She rose to her feet, with a smooth grace that almost matched Mystique, and took position in front of Nightcrawler.

Jean spoke aloud again, but also with her thoughts, telling him again, "Relax." He heard far more than the simple word, however. She used telepathy to enfold him in a great psychic quilt that left him all warm and snuggly and safe in ways he should be able to recall from childhood, if he had the happy memories for it. She gave him a window into her own soul to reassure him that these sensations were true, that she meant him no harm, that she genuinely liked him and cared for him. In turn, she found a soul that had weathered the tempests of life with remarkable success.

Her mouth made a small O of astonishment. Strangely, Nightcrawler represented something she'd never considered, a purely physical mutation that manifested at birth. Herself, Scott, Storm, virtually all the mutants who'd been gathered at the mansion, they were outwardly indistinguishable from their nonpowered brethren. Their powers had manifested at puberty, that's when their lives had changed; but before then everything had been wonderfully normal.

Not so with Kurt. He'd never been able to hide. That was why he'd ultimately taken refuge in the circus, even though he'd spent his earliest days there as part of the freak show. Soon, though, with the natural exuberance of childhood, he'd discovered that he could climb faster and better than anyone else he knew, and that his tail provided opportunities for performance that left the others gasping. He was more at home in the air than on the ground, and he quickly became one of the arena's chief attractions. Despite the evident skill, despite the tumultuous cheers from every audience that ever saw him, he was never invited to join the great world-class circuses. A scout from Ringling Bros. came once and quickly conceded that he'd never seen anything like Nightcrawler. He brought Kurt to the States for an audition. The bosses reacted the same as their scout: Nightcrawler was unique. Unfortunately, that was the point. No one at their level had ever knowingly hired a mutant, no one was willing to take the risk of a backlash. Better he should stay in a regional show.

Truthfully, Kurt himself didn't mind. He liked the smaller scale of his own shows, the more intimate relationship with his audience. In the far brighter lights of the big cities where the big shows toured, he wouldn't be able to continue his own personal quest for meaning, for enlightenment. He found a measure of release, and comfort, on the trapeze, but no answers to the questions that had haunted him since he was old enough, aware enough, to frame them: Who am I? What am I? *Why* am I? What kind of God would create a creature like me? What purpose would it serve?

Jean expected to find a person bludgeoned and tormented by his appearance. In stark contrast, she embraced one of the most gentle and secure and stable beings she had ever encountered, who was surprisingly at peace with himself—even if he was still working on his place in the scheme of things.

He trusted her, wholly and unreservedly, and in the face of that innate nobility she felt humble. It was a faith she would cherish, and it made her absolutely determined to keep him safe as she stepped into the vaults of his memory.

The images were broken and scattered: flashes from every direction, strobes without number as every camera in the circus tried to take his picture. He was used to it.

The scout and his bosses gave him a ticket home, but he decided to stay a while, to visit in person this country he knew only from the movies.

He found himself the abandoned church in Boston to use as his home. He did most of his sightseeing at night. He had no thought of danger. What would anyone want with a circus aerialist?

Ambush. Bodies slamming into him from every direction, men in uniform, hitting him first with a shot of pepper spray, then mace, screwing with his concentration so he couldn't teleport, covering his mouth so he couldn't yell for help. . . .

A spray hypo . . .

Oblivion . . .

Vague recollections of soaring high above the ground, wind in his face, *awhuppawhuppa* noise that he belatedly identified as a helicopter . . .

He saw trees and a wall of gray concrete that filled his vision to the horizon on either side and up to the very top of the sky, which vanished as he was rolled on a gurney into a long tunnel, plunging as deep into the bowels of the earth as he'd been carried above it in the aircraft flying here. . . .

An annoying itch on his neck, where he wore a sedative patch to keep him tractable, no energy to do anything about it, a room, a man holding a syringe . . .

Soldiers held him down, and he felt acid fire at the base of his skull. He wanted to scream, to curse, to plead, to die, but he'd forgotten how. He was empty, and only the man's voice could fill him. . . .

He remembered the White House, the Oval Office, the gunshot, running for his life, teleporting until he couldn't go any farther. . . .

He found his church, claimed it now as his sanctuary. . . .

And Jean found him. . . .

She broke contact, cradling his upturned face in both her palms, wishing she could borrow some of the peace and tranquillity she saw within him for herself. She gave him a kiss of thanks. She'd never felt so drained, not even after the aerial dogfight aboard the *Blackbird* .

"Stryker's at Alkali Lake," she told the others without looking at any of them.

"I've been there," Logan said. "That's where Charley sent me. Nothing's left."

"There's nothing left on the surface, Logan. The base is underground."

They talked a while longer, with Magneto leading the debriefing, delicately mining Jean's memory for every possible nugget of information before turning his attention to Logan. He proved a surprisingly

skilled and patient interrogator, turning the smallest nuance of dialogue or gesture into a means of extracting even more data than the subject, more often than not, was even aware he (or she) knew. Watching him, listening, Jean beheld the man that Charles Xavier had befriended, a vision of what might have been had Magneto not embraced the inner demons of his childhood. He was just as inspiring a leader, just as intuitive a teacher. He recognized her interest and her nascent insights and for a moment between them there were no barriers.

The tragedy she saw then was that he knew it, too. All that could have been, perhaps even should have been. All that might yet be. Knew it, and rejected it. Charles Xavier was a man energized by humanity's potential; his life, his purpose, had always been defined by hope. Magneto refused hope. His heart had been broken too many times. Long ago, his spirit had been pared down to its essence, brought to white heat in the most awful of crucibles and then pounded by adversity into the shape of a weapon. The metal of his being had been folded a thousand thousand times, as the classical sword smiths of ancient Japan forged their samurai blades. Thanks to that cruel tempering, he could bend without breaking. But regardless of what happened, he would never lose his edge, would never be anything other than what he was. There was a greatness in him, that was undeniable. He was the living embodiment of the primal forces that formed the foundation of the universe. And as a consequence, he was just as terrible as he was glorious.

She found she couldn't bear to be near him anymore. The bleak hollow at the center of his soul was like a whirlpool; to wander closer was to be dragged to a similar oblivion.

She broke from the campfire and took refuge in the *Blackbird*, returning to the purely mechanical tasks that had filled the afternoon and evening,

Watching her leave, Logan decided he was done with Magneto's Q&A. Brusquely excusing himself, he strode after her through the campsite to find her standing underneath the wing of the *Blackbird*, with her head and shoulders hidden inside an open belly hatch. She was muttering to herself, in a tone and using words he didn't expect from her. It made him suspect she'd been hanging around him too much; Xavier and Scott would accuse him of being a bad influence. *Outstanding!*

"How bad is it?" he asked her.

"I'm running fluid through the hydraulics. If the test passes, it'll still take four to five hours to get off the ground. Like it or not, we're stuck here for the night. Fortunately," she continued in a rush, "our stealth netting should hide the *Blackbird* pretty well from any casual reconnaissance. As for the rest, the passive scanning array says we've got clean sky to the horizon, and according to the infodump on the main computer, there shouldn't be any surveillance satellites overhead, either. That means minimal risk of detection."

"That isn't what I meant."

"I know what you meant, Logan. This is how I choose to answer. Okay?"

He said nothing. He had a hankering for a beer, but he knew there was none aboard the *Blackbird*, and Magneto struck him as more of a wine guy. A case of five-star *premier cru*, not a problem; God forbid the man even consider a can of Molson's.

From Mystique he expected nothing less than poison. It didn't matter to her that his healing factor made him immune. Quite the contrary. It struck him that the fun for her would be in seeing how much it would

hurt him to recover and how long it would take.

After a while, conceding to herself that Logan wasn't going to go away, Jean allowed herself a sigh.

"I'm worried," she confessed. "About the professor. About . . . Scott."

"I know," he said.

He stepped under the shadow of the aircraft and reached out his arm to her. In flats, she was his height, but her uniform heels gave her an edge. It amused him to have to look a little bit up to her. At his touch, she folded against him to rest her head on his shoulder, allowing him to take the full weight of her body, which he did without any effort. There was no separation between them, physical or emotional, and his nostrils flared as he realized the implications.

"I'm worried about *you*," he told her softly. "That was some display of power up there."

She snorted dismissively. "It obviously wasn't enough."

He turned his head to look her in the eyes. She kept hers downcast, using her lids to shroud them, to keep him at a distance. But he didn't need eyes to see what was so obvious, or to sense the depth of the attraction between them. He'd known it from the start, that first moment when he'd awakened in the mansion infirmary to find himself staring up at a face that would haunt him forever.

He was barely breathing; he didn't want to do anything to break the moment. She felt the faint touch of air across her face, and her mouth opened in response, as if it were life itself to her, her head tilting just so against him to give him freer access.

The kiss was there for the taking.

Any other time, he wouldn't have hesitated. Any other time, he wouldn't have cared about the consequences. Now, consequences were everything.

"I love him," Jean said, mostly to herself, because she still wouldn't look at Logan. He knew she believed that with all her heart, so why didn't she sound convinced?

"Do you?"

She looked confused, as if she didn't understand the question. For those few seconds it took to answer, he saw her throw off replies the way a pitcher would reject signs he didn't like from the catcher. The one she settled on satisfied nobody, least of all her.

Now she looked at him. "People flirt with the bad guy, Logan. But they don't take him home." She pulled her hand away. "They marry the good guy."

"Is that enough?" he asked quietly. And then, in response to her silence: "I could be the good guy, Jean."

"Logan, the good guy sticks around."

He threw caution to the winds.

He laid a palm lightly against the slim column of her throat, fingertips tucked behind the knob of her jaw

while his thumb caressed her chin. Her skin was the softest, smoothest surface he could remember touching, and the contact between them was electric. He felt a flush of heat against his hand, saw color rise beneath her skin to give it a roseate glow that was a pale echo of the fire of her hair. Her breathing quickened in concert with her pulse, her heart pounding so strongly he could feel it against his own chest, even through the armored fabric of her uniform.

She trembled as if her body were being swept by a succession of microquakes. And he held back a smile at realization that her skin was puckering all over with goose bumps.

They were balancing on edges of passion and emotion that put the keenness of his adamantium claws to shame. And yet, because both of them recognized the seriousness of the moment, they both felt perfectly in control. They were poised on the crest of the perfect wave—for him, one of snow, part of an avalanche; for her, one of surf. No effort at all would be required to bring it to an end, to call this quits before they went too far. She didn't need to say a word, to make a gesture; he'd take his cue from the primal signals that weren't under her volitive control.

She caught him by surprise, covering his hand with hers, reaching out at the same time with her telekinetic power to close the miniscule gap that remained between them.

Now it was his breath that was caught up by a sudden gasp, his own heart that skipped a beat amid its own increasing trip-hammer riff, as her lips brushed his.

That first contact was fleeting, tantalizing with possibilities, but he didn't give her a chance to pull away as he opened to her, meeting her mental strength with that of his body. He heard a small noise that mingled desire and satisfaction, but couldn't tell whether it came from him or her as they pulled each other closer, and he came to understand the incredible strength that lay hidden within this lean, whipcord figure.

He lifted her off her feet, shifting his own stance just enough so that he supported her against the whole hard length of him, and now there was no question. *He* was the one who moaned as barriers collapsed between them and Jean gave him access to her own mind, her own sensations, her own emotions.

His nostrils filled with a rich woodland scent, and he knew this was how he presented himself to her.

The world blurred around them, took on a new shape as her desire caught up both of them, laying them bare to their souls. As their thoughts merged, it struck him that he should be afraid. There were memories here that he fought to keep hidden from Xavier, two volumes to the book of his life. The first, which he believed had been stolen from him, which Magneto now suggested was intimately involved with William Stryker, and which Xavier apparently had known about from the start. But the second, everything that had happened to him since, had more than a few moments that weren't pretty.

Yet he didn't even try to hide any of them; she was too important. He wanted her to see the whole of him; he wanted to give her every excuse to run away, because if she chose to stay, if she accepted what he was, then this was real. It would last.

What surprised him was the discovery that she was just as scared, just as determined.

He saw her playing in a yard, a fragment of her thoughts providing the date and setting: her parents' home at Bard College, an hour upstate from Xavier's, where her dad taught. Jean was eight and hanging with her best friend, Annie Malcolm. Annie tossed a Frisbee for her dog, but a wayward puff of breeze

hooked the plastic saucer off over the fence. The dog bolted through the gate, Annie chasing after, heedless of the danger posed by this stretch of River Road.

Jean saw what Annie hadn't, a car speeding around the blind curve. There wasn't even a screech of brakes, before or after, just a sickening *thud* and the sound of tires skidding on asphalt as the driver struggled to regain control before he sped away.

She found Annie against the stone wall by the gate, her body folded at impossible angles, blood—so much blood, too much blood—splashed everywhere. Jean wanted to scream, to shriek, to howl, but some part of her that refused to relinquish control forced her lips to form proper words, forced her lungs to provide air for sufficient volume to make this a proper shout as she called for her mother.

Annie couldn't speak, the only thing moving about her was her chest, desperately striving—broken as it was—to draw another breath. As well there were her eyes, bright with confusion as her brain struggled to make sense of what had just happened. Jean couldn't stop her own tears. They poured silently from her eyes as she knelt beside Annie and wrapped her arms around her friend.

She found herself in a vast space of light, filled with sparkling clusters of energy. She touched the closest and was filled with an awareness of a specific time and place, together with a torrent of associated emotions, and in a sudden burst of insight realized that each of these clusters represented one of Annie's memories. With a directness only a child can muster, she concluded at once that she was inside Annie's head.

But her delight at this new adventure was short-lived. Even as she watched, she became aware that the brilliance of the individual clusters was fading, along with their background radiance, which suffused this apparently infinite space. It was like looking at the daylight sky, only in this case it was chockablock with stars of every conceivable color and magnitude, and realizing the gradually encroaching presence of night.

To her horror, Jean saw that the clusters closest to the darkness exploded apart in a fireworks shower of sparkles, and just like fireworks, these flaring embers vanished before they reached what she thought of as the ground. But unlike sunset, where the night came from a single horizon, this darkness closed on her from every side, not simply along a horizontal plane but lowering from above and rising from below. She tried to catch hold of the memory clusters, to carry them to some place of safety, but couldn't find one. With each that vanished, she found that less and less of a cohesive sense of Annie herself remained.

She called her friend's name, but the word echoed through a space where it had no more meaning. Annie was going, and there was no way Jean could call her back.

Jean embraced the final cluster, her own heart so full of grief she thought it would explode while her noncorporeal cheeks burned with tears. She thought if she could push her own strength, the essence of her own will and soul, into this last fleeting scrap of her friend, she'd still be able to save her.

The last of the light went out. All around her, save this last scrap of Annie's self, was darkness.

But paradoxically, as this final night fell, the cluster that Jean embraced blazed more brightly than before, more brightly than any radiance Jean had ever seen, so bright it put the sun to shame. She beheld colors she had no name for, that reached out to all her senses, manifesting themselves as tastes and scents and textures. It was a warm and welcoming light, pure in a way that poets strive for and only lovers attain, and that, rarely.

The last cluster, the last scraps of Annie, broke apart in Jean's grasp and slipped through her fingers,

rushing away into the core of this new light. There was such peace and such beauty that Jean's first impulse was to follow so that her friend would not face this new place by herself.

That would be so easy. No more pain, no more fear. She could avoid the crushing weight of grief that awaited her the moment she opened her eyes for real, the memory of her friend, the awareness of the bloody rag doll she'd become.

Someone was yelling, in a voice raw with horror and with fear, and Jean was a little bit shocked to realize that she wasn't simply hearing the words her mother spoke as she cradle-crushed Jean in her own arms as Jean had done Annie, as heedlessly as her daughter had been of the blood that soaked them both. She could feel her mother's emotions as well, and her thoughts, relief that it was Annie lying there and not Jean, shame at that acknowledgment, fury that either girl had been so careless, a terrible and welling rage at the driver for not stopping.

It's okay, Mommy, she remembered saying, sure for years afterward that she'd spoken aloud, which was why she was so startled when her mother fell backward in stark and visible shock. *There's no need to cry, I'm okay*. Only much later did the understanding come that she hadn't said a word with her voice but had spoken directly, mind to mind.

And much later after that, the comprehension that she'd been quite wrong in what she'd told her mom: Nothing for Jean after that fateful moment when her psi catalyzed into being, years before it was supposed to, would ever be truly "okay" again.

"It's okay, darlin'," Logan said softly, brushing tears from her cheek. "There's no need to cry. You're okay."

She shuddered again, as though the surface tremblers had given way to a deep and lasting tectonic shift, from the kind of quakes that level buildings to the ones that reshape the face of continents and raise mountains to the heavens.

She kissed him on the lips, on the cheeks, and he stifled a smile at the realization that he was crying, too.

She took a deep, calming breath but said not a word. Logan followed her lead. There was nothing that needed saying between them, not now, perhaps never again. It would be easy if her heart told her one thing and her head another; scientist though she was, empiricist to the core, she knew she'd follow her heart.

But her heart felt equally, passionately torn between them, and she couldn't see any way yet to heal the rift.

It made her head hurt and her soul ache, and she knew she wasn't likely to feel better anytime soon. Logan wanted to kiss her again, so much and so hard it was an ache within him. He wanted her more than his life, more than his past.

But she shook her head and pulled away.

"Logan, please—don't."

Against every instinct and every desire, he nodded assent and did nothing but watch as she strode away. That wasn't like him at all. His solution to every problem was direct and invariably physical. No hesitation, less regrets.

Until now. Until her. Somehow she brought out the best in him. Even more, she fanned in him a desire to be better, to transcend the person and life he was accustomed to. That would be a lot easier if he knew that at the end he'd have a shot, a chance to gain her as the prize. What made him smile at the wicked joke fate was playing was the realization that winning her *wasn't* guaranteed. It might not even be possible, no matter how he proved himself. Whatever they felt for each other, her love for Scott was just as strong and could not be denied.

Knowing that, why make the effort?

Knowing that, he found himself wanting to try anyway. Because, even though it made him crazy, he liked the way it made him feel.

Nightcrawler couldn't take his eyes off her, but how she reacted to his interest Logan couldn't tell.

"They say you can imitate anybody," Nightcrawler said to Mystique as the shape-shifter's gaze followed Logan across the campsite. "Even their voice?"

She looked over her shoulder at him and replied, in perfect mimicry, "Even their voice."

Nightcrawler couldn't help a grin of delight that stretched from ear to ear, and he clapped his hands together in one performer's appreciation of another.

"In your case," she told him, speaking as herself now, "the voice is easy. The tail, now, that might take some work."

"It would be like mine—*ach*, what is the word—"

"Prehensile," Logan said.

"*Ja, ja, ja*, that's it, like a monkey!"

Mystique searched once more for Logan and thought back briefly to their battle on Liberty Island. Her morphing ability had allowed her to generate a set of facsimile claws that were almost as good as the real thing. As well, it had enabled her to survive three of his own adamantium blades that had gone right to her heart.

"It isn't polite to ask a woman's secrets, *mein herr*," she said gently. "Or expect the woman to give them up, just for the asking."

"Forgive me," Nightcrawler said hurriedly, recognizing the undercurrent of emotion flossing through the other mutant without knowing quite what it represented, "I did not mean to offend."

"Not even close," she assured him.

"I was wondering, though," he continued, "with such an ability, why not stay disguised all the time? You know . . . look like . . . everyone else." What he meant, and it was heartbreakingly plain to see, was "like *normal* people."

Her answer was direct: "Because we shouldn't have to."

His expression showed that he liked that. He just as obviously liked her, for reasons that had nothing to do with her appearance.

Logan should have been sleeping, but he didn't even try. From the moment he crawled into his tent, he'd been fingering and staring at his dog tags, as though physical contact—or glaring at them—might inspire some miraculous revelation. Charley had told him to be patient about his past, that his mind demanded the same opportunity and time to heal as his body would. Clear implication: This was a journey they'd take together. Now Magneto comes along to imply that Charley knows more—a lot more—than he's let on. Truth? Or was the bad guy just screwing with Logan's head?

The faint scent of Folavril—her perfume—announced her presence a moment before Jean opened the tent flap and crouched inside. Suddenly, his heart rate kicked into high gear, and he could see from the pulse on her throat, the faint flush to her skin, that the attraction was as undeniably mutual.

He started to speak, without the slightest idea of what he wanted to say, but she stopped him with a finger against his lips. Her eyes were laughing with anticipation and delight as she crawled closer across his sleeping bag. His own eyes couldn't help but follow the line of her shirt, more open than she usually wore it, to the shadows between her breasts. She straddled him and settled her weight on his hips. The touch of her was electric, the scent intoxicating, as she slid her hands across his chest, up the thick column of his throat to take hold of him along the line of his jaw and bring his lips to hers.

There was no hesitation this time. The kiss was dynamite, fulfilling all the promise of the first, and he returned better than he got, moving his left hand up to cup her neck and his right beneath her shirt to caress her across the ribs and belly. She trembled against him, catching her breath with the sparkling overload of physical sensation.

That's when he popped his claws. The outsiders from his left hand, to bracket her throat right beneath her chin, forcing her to hold her head erect and at attention, or risk slicing skin—and likely bone—on the razor-keen adamantium blades. The middle claw was the kicker, the final incentive to behave: One false move, she'd be done.

At the same time, he tore open her shirt to reveal three scars right below her left breast, the indelible legacy of his claws stabbing through her rib cage to her heart.

“Busted,” Mystique said, sounding not at all dismayed. If anything, her smile was broader and livelier than ever, as was the light in her eyes. She danced with danger, it gave life spice and meaning. As he watched, green eyes turned chrome yellow, that color expanding to subsume the entire eyeball. Then, in the kind of dissolve animators love to use, the transformation spread outward from her eyes. Her hair shortened and turned a darker, more angry shade of red; her clothes faded into her skin, which in turn morphed from pale to indigo blue.

As an acrobat, she was in Nightcrawler's league. Logan knew from experience she could give and take a serious punch. Whatever her appearance, her strength demanded respect. Now she used that strength to gently but firmly push his blades clear of her neck. She did a good job; with barely a millimeter to spare, the edges never touched her skin.

At the same time, she melted against him, as Jean had beneath the *Blackbird*, kissing her way from mouth to ear.

“No one ever left a scar quite like you,” she said.

“You want an apology?”

She chuckled, much as he might. “You know what *I* want.”

She bit him, on the lobe, hard and sexy, and when she sat straight up before him she shifted position just that little bit needed to make her intentions and desires unmistakable.

“But what is it,” she continued, her voice going as sultry as her manner, “*you* want?”

She changed in his arms, skin turning brown, hair turning silver, eyes turning blue, gaining height and majesty until it was Storm sitting there, spectacularly naked. She lifted her arms to spread her hair wide across her shoulders, allowing him an unobstructed view . . .

. . . and then she changed again—shrinking in size and stature, skin paling, eyes turning green, hair going brown with its distinctive skunk stripe down front, covering her nakedness demurely with crossed hands as she presented herself as Rogue . . .

. . . and then she was Jean again.

He’d had enough. He hit her, palm of the hand, flat to her chest, with force enough to pop her off his lap and almost to the opposite wall of the tent. He’d caught her off guard, and there wasn’t time for her to recover. She landed in an inelegant sprawl, which only made her more amused than ever as she rolled over onto her belly and levered herself up on her hands.

By the time her arms were at full extension, Logan was staring at William Stryker.

“What do you *really* want?” Mystique asked him in Stryker’s voice.

Face and body carved from stone, claws held in a defensive fist between him and the shape-shifter, Logan replied, “Get out.”

She shook her head with a sneer and did as she was told.

Only when he was alone did Logan withdraw his claws. He hadn’t been fooled from the very start—there was more to Jean’s scent than her perfume, and elements of Mystique’s that couldn’t be hidden, more differences between them now than the other woman could possibly suspect. He told himself there were all manner of sensible reasons for indulging in the fantasy, but he knew they were lies. It was a glimpse of what might have been, if life were more fair.

Problem was, he’d already made a commitment and he would be true to it, no matter what, to the end. He’d been betrayed many times in his life. He swore he’d never be party to betraying another.

He rubbed his left hand with his right, over the space between the knuckles where the claws extended, while the pain of their use faded away. There was never any visible scar, his healing factor saw to that, but each time the claws came out the pain was as fresh, as shocking, as the first. On one level they were as much a part of him as his natural senses. He accepted their presence wholeheartedly. But on another, they were close to the ultimate violation. Someone had put them inside his body, someone had stripped him of even the pretense of humanity by making him a hybrid cyborg construct. A literal machine.

From a man like Stryker, if he was indeed responsible, it was no less than Logan expected. But if what Magneto said was true, if Xavier knew the truth and kept it from him, how could Logan trust the man ever again? Because the answer to that question begged an even darker one—was Xavier somehow involved in the process? Was he somehow responsible?

What then, he wondered. And with a thought, triggered his claws once more.

Snikt!

What then, indeed?

Chapter Thirteen

The ladies worked straight through the night, and by morning the *Blackbird* was ready to go. As Logan finished zipping his uniform closed, he caught Rogue and Bobby eyeing him discreetly. They'd spent the night together, tangled up with each other in a pose that managed to be incredibly intimate while remaining wholly innocent. Rogue had taken great care to make sure no stray skin showed, other than her face, and she pulled her hood close around her head to minimize the risk of contact. Bobby wore his own gloves. Nightcrawler hung batlike from a branch above, as though he were the kids' very own swashbuckler gargoye saint.

Only John Allardyce remained awake the whole night, sitting opposite Bobby and Rogue, staring at them across the campfire, continually flicking his lighter open and closed, open and closed.

The kids weren't interested in their classmate, though, which Logan knew was part of John's problem. It was the uniforms they wanted.

"Where're ours?" Bobby demanded.

Logan responded with a gruff snort that was echoed (in his ears or in his thoughts, he couldn't tell) from up front by Jean.

"On order," he told them. "Should arrive in a few years."

Logan supervised the breakdown of the campsite, mainly to keep tabs on Magneto and Mystique. Magneto boarded the plane as if he owned it, but Mystique paused just a moment in passing and flashed Logan a secret little smile to remind him of what had happened during the night. As Logan closed the hatch, she made sure he caught her flashing the same smile at Jean, most likely to make him wonder if she'd pulled the same trick with her. And, of course, to imply that Jean had fallen for the masquerade.

Even as their allies, she and Magneto were always trying to play the X-Men, to find the edge that would give them a tactical advantage. You could never let down your guard with them, on any level, because every encounter had to be some kind of challenge—and they always had to win.

That's what Rogue discovered right after takeoff, as she made her way back to her seat from the bathroom. Magneto was sitting across from John Allardyce, and he smiled at her as she passed. It was a genial smile, the kind you'd expect from family.

"Rogue," he said, by way of greeting, but when she didn't respond, when she tried totally to ignore him, he continued without missing a beat, "we love what you've done with your hair."

Her lips, her whole body, went tight as a drawn bow, but she kept walking. She wouldn't look back, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction. The device he'd intended to use months ago on the United Nations delegates had required his specific power to activate it. But doing so would have killed him, so he came up with what he felt was a far better idea: Allow Rogue to imprint his abilities, thereby enabling her to wield magnetism and take his place as the catalyst. Regrettably, she would have to die in the process. A tragic but necessary sacrifice for a noble cause.

She didn't see it that way. He didn't care.

Logan had saved her, first by destroying Magneto's device and then by allowing her to imprint his healing factor. But the energies that had burned so fiercely through her system had left a lasting mark, her skunk stripe, the distinctive widow's peak of silver hair springing from her forehead.

John watched her strap herself into her chair, realized that Logan was glaring back at Magneto from the flight deck, and turned to observe that Magneto wasn't bothered in the slightest by Logan's fury. Indeed, he seemed to enjoy it.

John was impressed, though he made sure not to show it. He sounded almost bored as he noted, "They say you're the bad guy."

That amused Magneto, who kept his gaze on Logan.

"Is that what they say?"

John started flicking his lighter, the reassuring *click* going almost unheard against the sound of the *Blackbird*'s swift passage through the morning sky.

"That's a dorky-looking helmet," he said. "What's it for?"

At last he'd caught Magneto's attention—an interest, though John didn't know it, that he'd had from the start—and as that noble head turned toward him, he suddenly wished he hadn't.

"This helmet," Magneto informed him quietly, "is the only thing that's going to protect me from the *real* bad guys."

He snapped his fingers, and the lighter flew from John's hands to his. With a practiced flip, Magneto ignited a flame.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"John."

"What's your *name*, John?" he asked again. John almost made the mistake of thinking the old git was

deaf or senile, or stupid, asking the same question twice, until a flash of intuition told him it was some kind of test.

John reached across the aisle, extending the tip of his forefinger to touch the small flame and lift it from its cradle. Fire never burned him; the most he ever felt from the flames he manipulated was a warmth that reached deep inside his body. In his imagination he'd tell himself that it was the same kind of glow the sun felt high in the heavens. It was his secret, his special pleasure, and he'd always resented the fact that Charles Xavier's telepathy might have pried it from him without his knowing.

"Pyro," he said, absently rolling the flame between his fingers like a coin.

"That's quite a talent you have, Pyro," Magneto said. The way he said John's code name gave the boy a thrill of pleasure, like it was a title of some kind. But outwardly, his mouth twisted downward in irritation.

"I can only manipulate the fire," he confessed. "I can't make it."

He closed his hand around the flame, and it was gone.

"You are a god among insects," Magneto said. "Don't let anyone tell you different."

With that, he opened his own hand and used his magnetic power to float the lighter back to its owner.

John didn't flick the cap anymore, he just held the lighter and stared at his blurred reflection in the stainless-steel surface. Xavier had never said such things to him. At the school, the endless official mantras were "responsibility" and "control." He was almost a grown man, yet when it came to his mutant powers it was just like being in kindergarten. The teachers weren't impressed with the things he could already do with fire, they were more concerned with ethics and behavior. They were afraid of what they were, they wanted to hide.

He snorted—helluva lot of good that did. Maybe, if the soldiers had known what he could do, what Bobby could do if he weren't such a terminal wuss, what any of the kids could do, they'd have backed off and left them alone.

Magneto wasn't scared. That was obvious. He was ready to fight for what he believed in. Even though Charles Xavier was responsible for his capture and imprisonment, he was flying with the X-Men to the rescue. How, John wondered, *Pyro* wondered, could that possibly make him one of the "bad guys"?

And if Xavier were wrong about him, maybe the kids were wrong in their assessment of Xavier.

At Alkali Lake, William Stryker reviewed the security procedures from the control room. He wanted nothing left to chance. Electronic sensors were on line, video surveillance active and tracking, sentries posted, fast-reaction combat teams armed and ready.

He couldn't employ an AWACS here as he had over Westchester, but he had sufficient ground radar capability in place to create a secure airspace better than a hundred miles in diameter, backed up by Doppler imaging systems that would detect the heat signatures of any jet engine or the ripples in the air caused by its wake. He was confident nothing could approach them undetected, even so advanced a stealth airframe as Xavier's.

He didn't acknowledge it as the door opened behind him. He didn't have to. As Lyman and his escort

entered the room, Yuriko Oyama stepped out of the background shadows to put herself between them and Stryker, poised on the balls of her feet, her fists clenched.

“Sir?” Lyman called to announce himself. Stryker shook his head ever so slightly at the faint tremolo to the man’s voice. Yuriko had that effect on people when she was at ready to fight. They didn’t know what to make of her, only that she was supremely dangerous.

Stryker spared a glance at their reflections in the inactive display screens mounted on the wall before him. He didn’t reply at once, while he and Wilkins, the duty officer, continued through the checklist, and when he did his tone was curt and dismissive.

“Your men can wait outside, Mr. Lyman.”

“Sir,” Lyman acknowledged, and the others took up station outside. At a cue from Stryker, Yuriko stood down as well.

“The machine has been completed to your specifications,” Lyman reported.

“Good.”

“If I may ask, sir . . .” Lyman paused as though he’d come to a kind of inner crossroads. “Why are we keeping the children?”

In quick succession, Stryker activated the monitors. Six screens, six holding cells, six mutants, none of them very happy to be where they were. By contrast, Stryker was almost jubilant.

“I’m a scientist, Mr. Lyman,” he replied. “When I build a machine, I want to know that it’s working.”

Lyman didn’t understand.

“Consider them a . . . control group. Our living benchmarks. What happens to them shows us what’s happening outside. If necessary we can adapt settings and protocols according to their reactions, for greater efficiency, greater potency.”

“Sir, they’re children,” Lyman blurted out, a reflex that was more surprise than actual protest, and the instant Stryker met his eyes he regretted every word.

“They’re mutants, Mr. Lyman,” said the older man. “And this is war.”

At that moment, the plane Stryker was so concerned about was sitting within a few miles of where he stood, in a patch of snowy woods. Yes, he’d modified his systems to compensate for the *Blackbird*’s stealth capabilities, but he hadn’t taken into account the fact that Magneto’s power deflected the radar pulses long before they reached the aircraft. Or Storm’s control over the weather, which allowed her to smooth the air behind them and counteract the heat of the jet’s exhaust.

They’d come in low and slow, taking the notion of nap-of-the-Earth flying to its extremes as they skimmed treetops when they had to and dropped beneath their branches when they could. Helicopter pilots would have thought twice about some of the maneuvers they employed. Jean spent most of their approach with her teeth gritted with determination—and her fair share of delight—because they were in violation of so many fundamental flight safety protocols that the computers refused to handle the

approach. She was forced to fly the plane manually. At the same time, she'd cast her telepathy ahead of them, much like her own personal form of radar, to prevent them from stumbling over some stray sentry or other.

Once they were down, the stealth netting was once again deployed to cover the plane, to hide them from both visual and electronic detection. Internal systems were kept to a minimum to guard against any stray emissions. Given the terrain, the likelihood of them being spotted was minimal, but recent experience had inspired them all to be prudent.

Aboard, they integrated the data stolen from Stryker's offices by Mystique with the information Logan had brought back from his visit to construct a three-dimensional map of the installation, then projected it as a hologram for all to see.

There was nothing aesthetic about the dam, no attempt at the grandeur of Grand Coulee or Glen Canyon or Hoover. Engineers had thrown a massive wall across the valley, and that was that, although they'd constructed the dam in the shape of a shallow L. There were two active spillways along the long face of the dam, and another on the short leg, pouring a continual flow of water downriver. As well, two huge concrete trenches had been dug on each bank. One was dedicated to the hydroelectric generators that had originally provided power to the base; the other, which began where the short leg of the dam ended, was for safety, to allow for a controlled release in the event of a significant snowmelt.

The X-Men turned some of the government's technology to their own purposes by tapping into one of the same keyhole surveillance satellites that had spied on the mansion and downloading current pictures of Alkali Lake. Presumably, when the complex had been abandoned, the emergency spillway had been intended to bleed off the excess capacity of the lake behind the dam. However, over time, it had become blocked by an accretion of broken timber and boulders from a succession of rock falls. Water hadn't flowed down that trench in a long time, and as a consequence, Alkali Lake itself had risen to dangerous levels.

The power trench looked clear, but the depth of snow that was visible made it plain that nobody had opened those gates in quite a while, either. Beyond, in an oval of land that had been stripped bare of trees, lay the surface structures of the Alkali base that Logan had explored only days before. As with every other aspect of the valley, there was an obvious air of abandonment.

"Surface scans are cold," Storm reported. "No electronics emissions, no power, no heat signatures. As far as the keyhole is concerned, this place is dead. Apparently for years."

"We're shielded," Jean pointed out.

Storm shrugged, tapped the control keypad, and the scene before them changed, presenting a different perspective of the base.

"The first image was a topographic representation of the area. This one"—she indicated various points on the display—"shows the density changes in the terrain. The lighter the coloration, the heavier the repetitive activity." To the naked eye, the right-hand spillway, the power trench, was covered with virgin snow. Under the enhanced imagery of the spy satellite, however, a vastly different picture emerged. The trench was covered with literally hundreds of colored lines, running the length of the spillway and up a ramp to the single road that terminated at the Alkali base. It didn't need a glance at the legend for everyone to realize that this was extraordinarily heavy activity, not simply in terms of raw numbers of vehicles but of their weight as well.

“Somebody’s been very busy,” murmured Jean.

“And it’s fresh,” Storm echoed.

“That’s the entrance,” Logan told them. When both women looked at him in curiosity, he shook his head. “I remember, okay? Sue me.” Instead, they chuckled along with him.

Once more, Storm switched perspectives and focused on the spillway. Below the dam, the trench was displayed in varying shades of blue, whereas the surrounding landscape appeared in those of white.

“The legend tells us the depth of snow and ice that cover the ground,” she said. “There’s been recent water activity.”

Jean sounded worried as she leaned close to the image. “If we go in there, Stryker could flood the spillway.”

Storm looked to Nightcrawler. “Kurt, could you teleport inside?”

He shook his head. “I have to be able to see where I’m going. Otherwise, I might materialize inside a wall.”

Logan stretched, cracking his joints in sequence. “I’ll go,” he said as casually as anyone else might announce they were going out for a carton of milk. “I have a hunch Billy will want me alive.”

At last Magneto strolled into the cone of light thrown out by Storm’s holograms.

“Logan,” he said with so natural an air of command that all present automatically gave him their full attention, “whoever goes inside that dam needs to be able to operate the spillway mechanism and neutralize any other defenses. What do you intend to do, even if you knew what to look for and where to find it? Scratch the box with your claws?”

Logan almost told him—he almost gave the man a practical demonstration—but decided against both, contenting himself instead with hunching his shoulders and glowering, precisely the wounded response Magneto would expect from him. Magneto’s game, he knew, was chess. Logan preferred poker, and he’d yet to meet anyone he considered his equal. He knew when to play a hand and when to keep his cards well hidden and needed no thought at all to decide which choice fit this moment best.

He glared defiant fury and growled, “I’ll take my chances.”

“But I,” Magneto told him in a tone that brooked no argument, “won’t.”

This time Logan didn’t try to hide as he made his approach to the base. He took a leaf from Magneto’s book and walked up to the ruined and broken gates like he was monarch of all he surveyed, without a care in the world and with even less fear. He followed the ramp down to the base of the spillway and headed for the mouth of the tunnel they’d seen on Storm’s hologram. The spillway followed the same brutally practical design scheme as the dam itself. There was no consideration of the surrounding environment: this was man imposing his rule on nature without regard for any consequences, only for the fulfillment of his desires. The spillway itself was as wide as a four-lane highway; you could drive a quartet of semis side by side with room to spare. The walls themselves rose as high as a small skyscraper, better than thirty meters, a hundred feet, and their appearance was more in keeping with a fortress than any

dam Logan had ever seen. He'd never seen a more perfect killing ground.

He saw no sign of any cameras.

"Stryker," he called at the huge entrance to one of the tunnels. It reminded him of the Jersey entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel as his voice echoed and reechoed into the darkness.

He called Stryker's name again and added, "It's me, *Wolverine!*"

In the control room, Wilkins dialed up the speaker volume in time to catch the name and played with the controls on the panel in front of him to bring the intruder into focus. He turned two additional cameras to catch alternate views of the X-Man, and immediately started a diagnostic sweep of the external monitors to make sure he hadn't brought any friends.

"Look who's come home," Stryker murmured from above and behind Wilkins' chair. "The prodigal son returns—what is he doing?"

Apparently, from the evidence of the cameras, he was strolling down the entry tunnel.

"Is he alone?" Stryker demanded.

"Appears to be," Lyman replied. "All our scanners are clean, camera fields, too."

"Keep looking," Stryker told him, and then, "Send your team to collect him." He rounded on Lyman, poking him with a knuckle to the chest for emphasis. "Don't allow him inside until he's shackled—knuckles to chin! Once he's secure, bring him to me in the loading bay. Carefully, Mr. Lyman," he added, stopping his subordinate before Lyman had taken more than a step. "Very carefully."

Lyman nodded, remembering what had happened at the mansion. He'd do as he was told, he was too good, too well trained, a soldier to do otherwise, but if it was his call, he wouldn't have gone near the little man in the tunnel until his troops had shot him to pieces.

Ten meters ahead of Logan, a section of the tunnel wall suddenly opened and three troopers broke into view, leveling two HK MP5s with laser sights and a Smith & Wesson automatic assault shotgun with the big thirty-round box. He heard more movement behind him as another fire team took position, the troopers setting themselves in a triangular formation, with him in the center, allowing them clear fields of fire. Less danger of shooting their own guys. The shotguns were there to knock him off his feet, with a rate of fire comparable to a low-end submachine gun. Once he was down, their tactics told him, the others could finish him at their convenience.

He smiled. These guys were good, they'd learned from their last encounter with him.

"Don't move," yelled one of the troopers in front of him. "Stand where you are, hands in the air!"

Logan was impressed by their fire discipline and what that told him about their commander. Tone and body language made clear to Logan these troopers did indeed remember the fight at the mansion, the comrades and buddies they'd lost to his claws. They were itching to pull the trigger. All they lacked was the slightest excuse to justify it.

Instead, to their surprise—and disappointment—he did as he was told.

The troopers weren't gentle with him. Even though he offered no resistance, he collected a share of surreptitious punches and kicks as his hands were shackled together with his knuckles pressed up tight to both sides of his neck. The idea here was that any use of his claws would essentially cause him to decapitate himself. Stryker's curiosity was leavened by his malicious sense of humor—could Logan's claws, forged of pure adamantium, cut through his own skeleton, which was an amalgam of adamantium and bone? Could they slice through his vertebrae? He actually found that amusing, the tradition that worked for vampires possibly doing the same for this otherwise unkillable mutant.

The vehicular entrance to the loading bay was blocked by a set of sliding blast doors more appropriate to a bank vault, armored steel better than a foot thick. That's what Logan had noted during his initial reconnaissance, that the base had been designed as the ultimate prison. And that whatever had been incarcerated here during its heyday represented a serious threat. Couldn't have been Magneto, though, way too much metal. Or anyone like Cyclops, who could project beams of force. This place dealt with purely physical strength or—and here Logan's eyes flicked sideways to his imprisoned hands—weapons. That was the constant with these doors, they were all thicker than the length of his claws. He might be able to cut them, but not easily *cutthrough* them.

Custom built, perhaps, for one specific class of mutant—and then abandoned when the manifestation of other kinds of powers had rendered it obsolete?

The floor of the loading bay continued the same oversized scale of the rest of the installation, with room to spare for a convoy of full-sized semitrailers. A dock ran across the length of the wall opposite the entrance, allowing access to the interior corridors of the base. A couple of military-painted Humvees were parked flanking Logan and his escort. Both vehicles carried powered miniguns, whose six-barrel Gatling configuration allowed them to unleash five thousand rounds per minute. They were manned, and the tension on the gunners was obvious. One false move, they'd fire until the barrels melted.

Their laser sights were aimed right at him.

Waiting on the dock were Stryker, Yuriko, and Lyman, whose hand rested on the butt of his holstered Beretta. He wasn't taking any chances, either.

Stryker was grinning broadly as he approached the prisoner, but with each stride his expression changed, triumph gradually giving way to confusion. His eyes narrowed as he began to examine Logan more and more intently.

He nodded, then asked, "Who do you think you're looking at?"

The troopers had no idea what he meant. The answer was obvious to them.

"Sir?" asked Lyman.

Stryker shook his head. "The one thing I know better than anyone else . . . is my own work."

He turned his back and said, "Shoot it."

By rights, the troopers with the miniguns should have opened fire—but their buddies were in the kill zone! Logan's escort started to respond, backing up to give themselves a better shot. In each case,

though, there was a moment's hesitation, born of surprise, as the soldiers processed the unexpected order.

By the time they reacted, Logan was way ahead of them. Before their disbelieving eyes, the prisoner's features blurred like watercolors in the rain. He grew taller, slimmer, changed color, changed gender. With blinding speed, the prisoner—a woman—*Mystique*—lashed out to either side, kick to the chest, kick to the head, to deal with the flanking guards. Hands slipped free of shackles configured to wrists twice their size, and while she was still in midair from the second kick, she hurled the cuffs into the face of the guard behind her with force enough to turn his features bloody and smash him to the ground. As he fell, his finger spasmed on the trigger of his automatic shotgun, spraying the ceiling with round after round of magnum buckshot. His shells hit some lights as he fell, and apparently some power cables, too, because the remaining lights started flickering like strobes.

Mystique was far faster than the troopers expected, and incredibly agile—the gunners couldn't keep up with her. With Stryker in the room, they dared not open indiscriminate fire. She knew that, she used it, landing in a spider crouch before leaping for the dock. Take him prisoner, the whole game changes. Kill him, it might even be over.

She never even came close. Yuriko intercepted her in midair with a speed and agility to match, and a strength that left Mystique breathless. She caught Mystique by the arm, twisted, and the moment her feet touched the floor she hurled the blue-skinned invader all the way to one of the parked Humvees.

Mystique heard yelling behind her, Stryker ordering everyone present to start shooting. The gunner on the Humvee, realizing his own danger, abandoned his post and dove frantically for cover. Yuriko's intention had been to bounce Mystique off the vehicle hard enough to leave her stunned. Even if it was just for a moment, that would be enough to give the others a target.

But just as Mystique had underestimated Yuriko, so, too, had Stryker's bodyguard made the same mistake.

Mystique pivoted in midflight so that she landed on her feet, touching down just long enough to use the hood of the Humvee as a launch point to hurl herself back onto the dock. Before a single trigger could be pulled, she disappeared down the adjoining tunnel.

Throughout the complex, alarms sounded; the halls and tunnels resounded with running feet and shouted commands as Stryker's men rushed to their stations. The airwaves filled with queries and orders, everyone demanding a fix on the intruder's position.

In the control room, Wilkins was trying his best to comply, using the computer to handle the search through one set of monitors while he controlled the second set manually along the tunnel Mystique had used to escape from the loading bay.

He caught sight of a familiar—and now very welcome—figure coming down the corridor and spun his chair around to face Stryker as the commander entered with an escort.

“Sir,” Wilkins asked anxiously, “what's happening?”

Stryker glared hawklike at the monitors. “We have a metamorph loose,” he said with a growl of barely suppressed rage. “She could be anybody.”

“Anybody?” Wilkins found that hard to accept. And then his eyes widened as a second Stryker appeared on screen, accompanied by Lyman and Yuriko and a trio of troopers.

The Stryker standing beside him elbowed his escort in the belly. A second shot—a palm thrust to the face—put him down hard even as Stryker wrenched his MP5 off his shoulder. Wilkins was just starting to react, rising from his chair, grabbing for his sidearm, when the butt of the submachine gun snapped toward him at the full extension of “Stryker’s” arm, connecting like a baseball bat with force enough to upend the chair. Like the guard, Wilkins was unconscious before he hit the floor.

Approaching the control room from outside, the real William Stryker watched in futility as his double blew him a kiss. Then the doors slammed shut in his face.

Inside, Mystique reverted to her baseline physiognomy and took a seat at the main console. Above her on the wall display were images of the captured children from Xavier’s.

She paused a moment, looking at them one by one, as if to imprint their faces on her memory. That done, all business once more, she donned a communications headset and tapped a set of commands into the keyboard. The children vanished from view, replaced by a three-dimensional schematic of the base.

Then she made a call.

Ever since she’d left the *Blackbird*, all the others had heard over her com channel was a carrier wave of static, telling them she was off-line. Ever since she’d left, Logan had paced the length of the aisle, back and forth like a caged tiger. No one said a word to him, no one got in his way. He was convinced from the start this was a mistake, and each additional minute of silence made him that much more certain.

Until Mystique’s cheery voice stopped him in his tracks.

“I’m in,” she reported.

Magneto smiled proudly, and even Logan had to admit he had reason.

“She’s good,” he conceded.

“You have no idea,” Magneto replied.

While the three X-Men finished their preparations, John Allardyce stood up.

“Let us help,” he said. Behind him, Bobby and Rogue nodded assent.

Storm put a stop to that notion.

“You’re not helping with anything,” she told them.

John started to protest but said nothing as Storm held up her hand.

“If something . . . happens to us,” she continued, speaking to them all, “activate the escape-and-evade flight sequence that’s programmed into the autopilot, just the way we briefed you. Don’t touch any of the controls, on the ground or in the air. The *Blackbird* will take care of you just fine. The autopilot will fly you home.”

“Then what?” Bobby demanded. He didn’t hide his thoughts. Like any of us have a home to go to anymore. Or a school!

“You’ve all got superpowers,” Logan told him. “Figure it out.”

Chapter Fourteen

Outside the control room, Stryker wasn’t a happy man. He tried his key card on the electronic lock; no joy. Same for the manual combination, punched into the keypad. Same for the override. He tried the backdoor codes that only he knew, that were hardwired into the system and guaranteed unbreakable.

The door didn’t budge, and as he pounded his fist on its steel face in righteous frustration, he swore he could hear that blue-skinned shape-shifting mutant bitch laughing at him with every failed try.

“It’s . . . a very thick door, sir,” Lyman said, and Stryker stared at him incredulously, wondering if this was some lame attempt at humor or if the man was a total idiot.

“Yes,” Stryker told him, giving vent to his rage with such vehemence that his men backed off a step. Even Yuriko looked anxious. “But she’s in there—and *I’m out here!*”

He took a breath, then another, forcing himself to calm down.

“Isolate the systems and transfer operations to the backup command center,” he ordered. “Chances are she’s locked you out, same as she did with the door, but you never know. We might get lucky. Meanwhile, she’s locked in. Get some charges, and blow the damn doors! Do it quickly, Mr. Lyman, and kill whoever’s inside. No questions, no hesitation, no mercy. I want them dead, I don’t care who they look like.”

Inside, Mystique had indeed locked out all the secondary command nodes. For what it was worth, the computers and systems controlling the physical plant of the base were hers to control. Pity the intruder net wasn’t operational anymore; life would have been so much simpler if she could just flood the tunnels with knockout gas. As well, time and neglect had taken their toll. There were entire sections of the complex she couldn’t access.

Fortunately, that didn’t apply to the external doors. She called up the loading bay on the menu and pressed the appropriate button. Obliging, the monitor flashed the legend SPILLWAYDOOROPEN.

There were still a handful of troops in the loading bay, and they reacted with surprise as the double doors separated and slid apart. Seeing who was standing on the other side, they went for their weapons. Mystique, watching on the monitor, shook her head: They had a lot more courage than brains.

Any one of the intruders could have dealt with the situation. Between Logan, Jean Grey, Storm, Nightcrawler, and Magneto, the troopers didn’t have a chance. Not one got more than a step, did more

than begin to move, before he was rendered unconscious.

In passing, Magneto looked up at the ceiling-mounted camera—his awareness of magnetic fields allowed him to sense the location of any power conduit or video link—and smiled. Mystique smiled back. This was going to be fun.

Payback was a bitch, and so was she.

She had no view of the hallway outside her door. One of Stryker's first orders must have been to disable all the external cameras covering the approaches to the control room. She could guess what was happening now.

A team of demolition experts were in the process of attaching C4 plastic explosives to the doorway, spiraling them outward from the central locking mechanism.

There was a crackle from one of the walkie-talkies, the faint sound of gunfire, and screams.

Lyman raised his own radio and said, "Post five, report."

He looked at Stryker, who nodded. They both knew what this meant.

Guns were leveled at the sound of running feet, forcing the two troopers racing around the closest corner to come to a quick stop, their hands raised clear of their weapons. Everyone was jumpy, but Stryker had trained them well. Discipline held.

"Sir," one of them reported, "someone's opened the loading bay doors. More mutants have entered the base."

"How many?" Stryker demanded.

"We don't know."

"Who are they?"

Both soldiers shook their heads. Anyone close enough to discover that crucial information hadn't been allowed to escape to report it.

"Should we engage them, sir?" Lyman asked

Stryker looked thoughtful.

"No," he said. "Have the rest of your troops meet us outside the machine, with all the heavy ordnance they can carry."

"Keep working on the doorway," he told the demo team, and then, to the new arrivals, "You two are with me." He motioned for Lyman and Yuriko to accompany him as well as he strode briskly down the hall. "They can't stop anything," he said as an absolute statement of fact. "In fifteen minutes, they'll all be on their knees."

It was a morning to write home about, the sun still hidden below the horizon as the helicopter skated along the crest of the fog layer that shrouded the hills and hollows of the Hudson Valley. To anyone watching, this was just another corporate helo, taking care of one of the many moguls and high-ranking politicians who made their home in this part of Westchester County and neighboring Connecticut.

They'd made a quick and uneventful flight from Alkali Lake to the coast, but the closer they came to their destination, the harder it was for Charles Xavier to mask his impatience. Or keep tight rein on the niggling sense of dread that wandered the outermost regions of his awareness, where he rarely went.

At Xavier's mental direction, the pilot made a combat approach to the back lawn, swift and certain, popping over the surrounding trees and down to a safe landing in a matter of heartbeats.

Just as quickly, Cyclops helped Xavier from his seat and into his wheelchair. As Scott pushed him up the ramp to the terrace, Xavier had the pilot shut down the engines and then fall asleep.

Using telepathy, he'd been calling out to his students since they departed Alkali Lake, expanding his mental awareness as widely as possible in hopes of hearing an answer, no matter how faint. From Jean, at the very least, he should have received some response.

Now, at the mansion, he again felt that disquieting absence of contact.

"I don't like this, Professor," Scott said as they entered the foyer. He called out as loudly as he could, but all either man heard was the fading echo of their voices through the empty rooms and hallways. "Where is everyone?"

"See if you can locate the *Blackbird*, Scott," Xavier told him. "Use the transponder, try to raise the onboard computer. Find some way to contact Jean and Storm. I'll use Cerebro."

With a nod, Scott took off down the corridor, while Xavier turned his chair toward the elevators that gave access to the mansion's underground complex. It never occurred to him that Scott was violating protocol, not to mention common sense, by leaving him alone in a potentially hostile environment. And since he was resolutely ignoring that pernicious sense of dread that just wouldn't quit, he never turned his head to see Scott vanish behind him into thin air.

The hallways underground were as empty as those above as the elevator doors opened and he rolled out onto the polished floor. Until his ears caught the sound of crying.

He did a slow pivot at the main junction, where the two sets of corridors came together in front of the elevator to form yet another of the ubiquitous Xs that popped up throughout the complex.

"It's all right," he called, wondering why he couldn't pinpoint her location, either by sound or thought. "You can come out now."

He found her hiding in a corner of the computer room on the main floor of the mansion. She was far younger than any mutant of his experience, not yet of middle-school age, with blond hair and blue eyes and a classic peaches-and-cream complexion. Her eyes were very large and wounded and brimming with tears, and she wore a nightgown.

"Are they gone?" she asked tremulously, and Xavier knew she meant Stryker's invasion force. It didn't bother him in the slightest that a violent invasion of his school had left it in pristine condition. That wasn't important. Only this girl mattered, and his lost students.

“Yes,” he replied. “Where are all the others?”

She shrugged.

“Then I guess we’ll have to find them, won’t we?”

He held out his hand. She took it. Together, they moved down the hallway toward the vaultlike door that was the entrance to Cerebro.

Xavier stopped in front of the retinal scanner, and once it had confirmed his identity, Cerebro greeted him politely. “Welcome, Professor.”

The door cycled open, revealing the great spherical chamber beyond.

He smiled at the girl, she smiled back, but when he turned to wheel himself inside, she called out in a panic.

“Please don’t leave me!”

Her cry went through him like a knife! How could he be so unthinking, uncaring? What sort of teacher was he, to abandon a child—especially after the traumas she must have suffered?

“Don’t leave me,” she begged. “Please!”

“All right,” he said, projecting comfort and reassurance with his thoughts to complement the smile on his face, the gentle tone of his voice. “You can come inside.”

With a grateful smile of her own, so radiant it made Xavier’s heart sing, she followed close behind him.

He never looked back. He never saw the polished floor of home fade to cracked and filthy concrete, never saw the twisted nightmare shape of Mutant 143 keeping pace with the girl whose image he was projecting into Xavier’s mind or the pair of armed troopers standing with guns ready at the doorway, just in case.

Xavier thought he was free, but in truth he’d never left Alkali Lake. He was more a prisoner than ever, and for Jason Stryker, he was the best toy he’d ever have to play with. A mind of sublime grace, of infinite possibilities, that when he was done with it would be a wasteland.

This would be such fun.

Stryker had just reached Xavier’s location when he got a call from the demo team. They were ready. He was curt with them—they had their orders, what were they waiting for? Blow the door and slaughter that shape-changing bitch before she caused any more trouble.

The hallway was crowded with Lyman’s fire team, a reinforced squad of a dozen men, carrying automatic and heavy weapons. Given their equipment and position, they were a match for ten times their number and more.

“Mr. Lyman,” Stryker told his subordinate, “position your men.”

Leaving Lyman to do that job, trusting him to do it right, Stryker followed Xavier’s path into the hollow chamber, along the gantry extension to the circular platform at the end, which was a makeshift replica of the original back at Xavier’s.

The control console wasn’t pretty to look at, none of this was, but what mattered was that the stolen components all worked here precisely as they did in the true Cerebro chamber. Xavier sat in his proper place before the console, with 143 behind him and a little to the side. Neither mutant responded to Stryker’s presence, and that made the older man smile. The greatest mutant mind on earth was aware of nothing beyond what Stryker allowed. Charles Xavier, reduced to the level of a performing seal. It almost made Stryker laugh.

That would wait till later. He was here on business.

He leaned close to his son’s ear and whispered his instructions.

Xavier thought he heard something—*damn* that buzz in the back of his head, why wouldn’t it go away?—but thought nothing more of it as the girl touched his arm and whispered in his ear.

“Is it time to find our friends?”

Xavier’s heart leaped as though he had been empty and now had purpose. He’d never felt such glory, it was almost rhapsodic.

“Yes,” he said, and meant it with all his heart.

Stryker whispered to his son . . .

. . . and Mutant 143, through the image of the girl . . .

. . . whispered to Xavier.

“All of the mutants,” she asked. “Everywhere?”

“Oh, *yes*,” Xavier replied. Before him the path to fulfillment was laid out, as straight and clear as a highway. And yet . . .

Always “and yet.” Try as he might to embrace this wonderful moment, something kept holding him back, trying with ferocious persistence to pull him away. It refused to be ignored, it wouldn’t be denied.

Fortunately, the girl’s voice was stronger.

“Good,” she said.

“Good,” said Stryker, all to himself. He started to lay his hand on 143’s shoulder, came so close they almost touched—then pulled himself away and curled his fingers into a protective fist. For that moment, he had seen 143 not as a tool, a weapon in the fight to defend humanity, but as his son.

That was uncharacteristic of him. It was weak. Now, more than ever, that was an emotion he could not afford and would not countenance.

With military bearing and precision, Stryker turned on his heel and strode from the chamber. He didn't look back. He would never have to see Mutant 143 again. The images of his son that he would keep with him would be from before, the mahogany-haired boy with round cheeks and a ready giggle who loved to ride on Daddy's shoulders and who Stryker loved more than his own life.

The world that was, the world that should have been, but for Xavier and those like him. The world he would pay any price to restore.

If Jason knew any of this, he didn't seem to care. What fascinated him was his new toy, and his mismatched eyes began to dilate and glow as he began to play.

Xavier finished his preparations and smiled at his companion.

"Just don't move," he warned the girl, speaking gently so as not to frighten her.

He donned the helmet, settling it comfortably on his head and himself comfortably in his chair.

The walls around him fell away, and just for a moment, as his perspective and perceptions expanded outward to encompass the chamber, he jumped. Because on the platform with him wasn't a girl at all but the twisted horror that was Jason Stryker.

No, he was wrong. It was only the girl. Strange how he never noticed her eyes before. One green, the other blue. Almost hypnotic in their brilliance.

Around him appeared a holographic representation of the globe, just as he'd manifested for Logan only days before. He and the girl floated in its center, at the heart and core of the world.

He exhaled, and as his breath rushed from his body it was as if he'd separated into a million million versions of himself, racing through fire and stone and steel and concrete, through earth and water and air, to every point on the planet where a mutant could be found. And not just the active ones, the comparative few who had manifested their unique abilities or were on the cusp of doing so, but the latents as well. Every person who possessed the mutator pairings in their genome, even if it was only potential and unlikely to be activated for one or two generations yet to come, was revealed to him. He'd never dreamed there could be so many.

He found one sitting in a poker game in New Orleans, another wandering the Scots highlands picking heather to serve as a decoration at Moira MacTaggart's dinner table; he found a spectacularly beautiful woman serving as a lifeguard on Bondi Beach and an ancient aborigine sitting cross-legged at the summit of Uluru, the sacred rock of his people. He found a young boy who looked like a bird and a quintet of ash-blond psychics who were perfect copies of one another yet wholly unrelated. He found telepaths and telekines, he found energy casters and others who absorbed energy as sustenance. He found mutants with strength, and mutants with skill, some who could fly or run like the wind or who made their home in the ocean. He found one who could fold herself flat as paper and another who could transform into any substance in the periodic table simply by tearing off her skin. He found some born to be predators, others who were prey, and a vast majority who hadn't yet come to that crossroads.

He saw a world ready to tear itself apart, poised on the cusp of what was and what might yet be—and knew in that blinding flash of insight that in his hands lay the responsibility to manage that change, to help determine whether the future was one of bright and infinite possibilities or one where the planet was covered pole to pole with graves.

Each mutant was a scarlet candle against the darkness of forever—yet beside them glowed the golden candle of those who weren't mutants, equally bright, equally to be cherished. They were inextricably bound, these children of Mother Earth, and Xavier found here the proof of what he'd always known in his heart, what he'd always been unable to present to Eric Lehnsherr, that you could not safeguard the one without protecting the other.

At his direction, Cerebro came fully on-line and up to speed, making its presence known with a deep and resonant hum that gradually increased in intensity.

Hearing that hum, Stryker allowed himself a smile. He laid his hand on Lyman's shoulder.

“Guard this post, Mr. Lyman. That's the order.”

“Yes, sir.”

“From this point on, kill anyone who approaches. Even if it's me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“God bless you, men. God give us this day!”

Stryker returned Lyman's salute as though they were on a parade ground at West Point, trooping the colors before the massed corps of cadets, did an about-face, and strode away, Yuriko marching alongside in cadence.

Lyman watched them until they were both swallowed in darkness, then turned back to his men, to review their positions and their ammo loads. This would be a bear fight, he knew, but this was also what he and his men had trained for. They'd be ready, come what may, and they would prevail.

The explosion caught Mystique by surprise: the demo team was quicker than she'd anticipated. The door buckled inward as if it had been punched by some monstrous fist, and her ears rang with the shock wave of the blast. She dove for the MP5 she'd set on the console. She had few illusions about her chances for survival, but she also had three full magazines and a couple of grenades. At the very least, she'd give Stryker's bully boys a fight. She couldn't help wishing to be a little more like Rogue, though, so that when she manifested another's form and features, she also assumed their skills as well. Namely Wolverine's. Now would be a nice time to possess the runt's healing factor.

The first detonation didn't do the trick, it just warped the door in its frame and slightly popped one of the hinges. Mystique wondered what would come next and assumed it wouldn't be pretty. Any explosive strong enough to breach this door would create a blast effect capable of squishing every living thing inside the room to jelly. Cheerful.

Unexpectedly, the door started groaning as it was subjected to stresses well beyond its design tolerances. Like a cork from a bottle of heavily shaken champagne, it popped from its frame, outward into the corridor, to land against the opposite wall with a crash so resounding it shook this whole section of the complex.

She didn't need to be told who was responsible, and when Magneto stepped over the threshold, she greeted him with a round of heartfelt and appreciative applause.

The demo team and the guards, Mystique saw when she peered outside, were safely in Jean Grey's custody, squirming upside down in midair where her telekinesis was holding them. Their weapons, the young woman had separated into component parts and scattered. As Mystique watched, Jean tossed her prisoners against the wall. She didn't do it so very hard, they couldn't have been much hurt, but from the way they collapsed to the floor Mystique assumed she'd used her mental powers to render them unconscious.

She reentered the room to find Magneto staring at the console.

"Eric," she said to greet him as she joined him by his side.

The look he gave her in return told her how glad he was to see her alive and unharmed.

"Have you found it?"

She called up the power grid on the main display.

"The hydroelectric net is still functional and has been reestablished by Stryker, with a large portion of it being diverted"—she pointed to one of the sectors of the complex, an area where she had no video capability—"to this chamber. It's new construction."

"My fault, I'm afraid," Magneto conceded as the X-Men joined them. "Can you shut it down from here?" he asked Mystique.

"No."

Logan held back, his attention caught by familiar figures on one of the active security screens: Stryker and Yuriko, both in a hurry. He opened his mouth to report the sighting, then reconsidered and tapped a location query into the system. He looked toward Jean, then back to the monitor, and his dilemma was obvious: Should he go for Stryker or stay with the X-Men? He owed Jean the world, but Xavier?

"Come," Magneto said to Mystique. "We have little time."

Jean blocked him. "Not without us."

Mystique tapped the keyboard, and the kidnapped students appeared once more on their respective monitors.

"My God," Storm exclaimed, "the children! Kurt?" She didn't need to ask any more than that; he knew what she wanted, and he answered with a nod.

"Will you be all right?" Storm asked Jean, who was staring straight at Mystique. Jean knew exactly what was happening here, that Magneto had a private agenda, that Mystique had acted to divide the X-Men's forces and limit their ability to forestall his plan, whatever it was.

"Yeah," she told her best friend. "I'll be fine." Because she had Wolverine as backup. "Logan?"

No answer.

"Where's Logan?" Storm demanded when a look around the room and the hallway outside revealed no

sign of him.

Jean had to confess to herself she wasn't surprised, but there was disappointment in her voice as she replied, "He's gone. We'll have to manage without him."

For Xavier, thanks to Cerebro, the psychic links he'd established with the world's mutants were solid, had been from the first moment of contact. He'd never run Cerebro at such a level, nor stretched his power to such a degree, as much because of the risk to those he contacted as to himself. He knew already that the cost to himself when this session was over would be considerable, he already could feel the initial stages of what would be a killer of a migraine.

He'd done what had been asked of him, what he knew was necessary, yet he couldn't bring himself to tell the little girl.

"That's odd," he temporized. "I can't seem to focus on anyone." That was true. With all the contacts he'd made, none had been with any of his missing X-Men or with his students. He knew they were out there, he just couldn't see them—which bothered him, considering how clearly he could interface with all the others.

"Maybe you have to concentrate harder," the girl suggested.

Xavier increased the gain, and the hum from Cerebro grew deeper and more intense.

"Wait," Jean told her companions, holding out her hand to bring them to a stop. She, Magneto, and Mystique were deep inside the complex, a section that had been hollowed out of the rock right beneath the dam, which accounted for the dank air and never-ending seepage down the seams in the walls. She shut her eyes and concentrated a moment.

"I feel something," she said. And then brightened with a smile. "I think it's—*Scott!*"

Her call was answered with fire, a beam of glittering scarlet that erupted out of the darkness ahead to shatter a chunk of wall between Jean and the others with force enough to scatter shards of stone like shrapnel. As she dived clear of the beam's path, Jean threw a telekinetic cloak over her companions, to deflect the brunt of the debris clear of them, trusting the body armor components of her own uniform to protect her.

"My dear," she heard Magneto call from behind, "this is the kind of lovers' quarrel we cannot afford right now."

"Go!" she snapped over her shoulder. "I'll take care of him."

She had sight of him now. His face showed no expression, no reaction whatsoever to the sound of her voice calling his name. She tried reaching him with her thoughts but encountered a void whose only awareness was of an icy oblivion that radiated outward from a point at the base of his skull. She didn't need to see the circular scar on his neck to know that what had been done to Nightcrawler and to Magneto had now been done to Scott. Until the drug wore off, or she somehow broke its hold on him, he would keep fighting, without remorse or mercy.

Magneto and Mystique started to back away, and their movement caused Cyclops to fire again. This

time Jean was ready, deflecting the optic blast to one side so that it gouged a shallow trench along the far wall. At the same time, she gestured with her own hand, radiating her telekinesis outward to slap him invisibly in the chest, hard enough to throw him off his feet.

She started running toward him, pushing him up and back through the air, increasing his speed as she did her own, gritting her teeth with the effort as he struggled—harder and with a lot more purpose than the soldiers earlier—to break her hold on him. Whatever control Stryker established allowed him to access all his victims' skills and training. Scott and she had often practiced how best to use her powers in combat, in part by figuring out how to compensate for them. Now he was turning that knowledge against her.

The corridor ended in a wall. She slammed him into it as hard as she could. Trouble was, he was wearing his uniform, and it protected him from the impact same as it had her from the shrapnel.

He fired again, forcing her to duck, and he hit a Humvee parked in an alcove, flipping the four-ton vehicle over onto the one parked next to it. As she scrambled up, she lost her hold on him, and Scott flipped himself over the balcony railing.

She rushed after him and found herself overlooking darkness, a room whose dimensions were totally hidden in shadow. Muttering a string of passionate curses that would have impressed Logan, she started to contact the others, to warn Magneto that she'd lost Cyclops. Only then did she realize that in the chaos of the moment, she'd lost her com set.

She stepped back from the railing and hunkered down to reduce her target profile while she considered her next move. She still had a sense of Scott's thoughts, enough to know he was unhurt and mobile, but she couldn't pinpoint his position. Worse, she still couldn't reach him, and the sound of gears and motors grinding from below would make the hunt downstairs even more difficult.

"Oh, Scott," she sighed. He was the strategist, the natural combat leader. It was more than training; it was something he excelled at, that he was born to do. She was the doctor, her role had never been more than backup. Every time they'd ever sparred, loser buys the beer, she was the one who ended up buying.

Slowly she got to her feet. It wasn't as if she had any real choice.

The kids were scared. The kids were bored. The kids were angry—at being left behind, at hearing no word, at not knowing when (not if, but *when*) some mook of Stryker's was going to find them. The grown-ups had promised to keep them in the loop, but all they heard from the radio was static.

John decided he'd had enough.

"That's it," he announced, and pressed the switch that extended the main ramp.

"Where d'you think you're going, John?" Bobby challenged.

"Where d'you think, moron? I'm tired of this kid's table shit."

Bobby started to his feet: "You'll freeze," he said, "before you make it to the spillway."

"I don't think so," John retorted.

“John, they told us to stay here,” Rogue protested.

For a moment the two boys glared, ready to take out their tensions and frustrations on each other. Rogue wondered if Bobby really would use his ice power to stop John, and how hard John would use his flames to fight back.

“John!” she called, pleading, deliberately stepping between them.

That broke the moment. The look John gave Bobby was ugly and filled with warning, but what he offered Rogue was a grin, just like the Johnny of old, complete with a wink.

Then he was gone, at a trot across the hard-packed snow, defying the arctic temperatures. Rogue stepped past Bobby to the controls, but she made no move to raise the ramp. She knew how John felt, and a large part of her wanted to follow.

Jean descended the staircase at a run, hitting the floor in a roll that took her to cover amid the ranks of hulking, spinning generators, each the size of a modest one-story house.

She knew he’d be waiting and had an idea where he’d be. Most of all, she was fairly certain what he’d do.

He didn’t disappoint.

There were two ways down to his level: either pitch herself over the balcony, as he’d done, or use the stairs. He’d want a position that gave him a ready line of sight of both options. Taking her on the fly was risky. Better to wait until she landed and was trying to get her bearings.

As she came up into a crouch, he fired, from off to her right. For anyone else, the time you saw his beam—moving at the speed of light—was the time it hit you. In Jean’s case, her parry occurred at the speed of thought. Concept and execution happened instantaneously, so that Cyclops’ optic blast crashed against the invisible barrier of her telekinesis.

The problem was, since his beam was trying its best to make like an irresistible force, she needed a way to brace the wall that protected her, to make herself the next best thing to an immovable object.

Didn’t work. The telekinesis held, her feet didn’t, and she felt herself slide backward along the floor.

Cyclops advanced on her, implacable as an automaton, adjusting his visor to hone his beam to maximum intensity.

The point of intersection where his energies met hers began to glow, like steel in a furnace, generating a radiance so bright Jean had to cover her eyes.

She was screaming, not in fear but in defiance, calling his name over and over again, trying every way she could imagine, with voice and thought, to reach him.

“Scott,” she bellowed, as into the teeth of a hurricane, “please! Remember who you are! Who I am! Don’t do this!”

She could feel his optic blast gnawing away at her shield, shattering the bonds of energy that kept her

safe. There was a way to beat him, by splitting her teke and hurling it into him like worms, to burrow into the vulnerable places of his body. She was a doctor, she knew precisely where and how to do the most damage—to incapacitate or worse. She could block his airway or one of the valves of his heart or possibly interdict the smooth flow of neural transmissions along his central nervous system. But the initial attack had been too quick and too wild for her to make the attempt. She had had a chance when he came at her here on the floor, but she held back a fatal moment, afraid of her control—or lack of it. One thing to try this maneuver in the controlled conditions of the danger room, with sensors monitoring every conceivable aspect of the subjects' physiological condition and a full-spectrum medical facility only steps down the hall. Another to do it in the field, in a fight, where a single mistake could prove fatal.

She knew now how right that last was, only she was the proof, not Scott.

He'd upped the power ante faster and farther than she'd expected. She couldn't spare even one iota of teke to strike back at him, he'd break through her shields for sure. Yet doing nothing would have the same result.

She couldn't kill him.

She refused to be beaten.

And something awakened within her. A chord of celestial music that she'd always been aware of on the outermost edges of her being, from the moment she first used her powers, only now it wasn't a faint trill of notes but a full-throated symphony, a crescendo that rolled through her like a tsunami. She thought at first it would overwhelm her, but instead, with a joy so pure it could never be described or even remembered in full measure, she found herself riding the crest of this impossible wave, surfing creation the way she always yearned to do on water.

The air rippled around her as though it were a pool she'd just fallen into, and it began to glow, a roseate corona that flowed swiftly to her outstretched hand and beyond, to crash against the pinpoint needle of energy that was Cyclops' optic blast.

Jean bared her teeth and pushed herself to her knees, bracing one foot under her as she struggled upright, the raw emotion on her face in stark contrast to the total absence of any on Scott's.

The nimbus around her changed aspect as she fought, creating a suggestion more of fire than light and the sense of wings flaring outward from her back—not so much like an angel, although that would be an easy and understandable mistake. This was more akin to some predatory bird, a raptor, rising to the attack.

Between them though, the very fabric of reality twisted under their combined onslaught. Cyclops' power was considerable, but ultimately it was tangible. He actually had limits. So did Jean, but where his were physical, hers were solely of her imagination and of her will.

She took a halting step forward, pushing with her thoughts as well as her body, and cheered to herself as she moved Scott's optic blasts back toward him.

Her triumph was short-lived. These two combatants weren't the only elements in this battle with limits. The same applied to the physical world that lay between them. They were battling each other on levels from the paranuclear to the subatomic, and as Jean's resistance surged to new and unexpected levels, as the energies employed increased exponentially, the heat and pressures they unleashed triggered an equal and opposite reaction.

In effect, they created a molecular protostar, a localized version of the Big Bang.

For a fraction of a nanosecond, a time so small it was virtually immeasurable, they had a taste of creation. Luckily for them and for their world, the fabric of reality—already weakened by their struggle—tore wide open under this incredible onslaught, allowing the bulk of the energies to vent into some other, wholly unfortunate plane of existence. All the two combatants were aware of was an impossible radiance that reduced the brightness of the noonday sun to the level of a very dim bulb, and an explosion more impressive in every respect than one of Storm's pet thunderclaps.

The concussion sent both of them flying. Scott, dazed and shaken, went skidding and tumbling along the floor for pretty much the length of the room. Jean wasn't so fortunate. Her flight was shorter, her landing harder, and she cried out as her leg caught on a corner of pipe and snapped like a dry branch.

The effects of the explosion radiated outward from the source, making themselves felt in every corner of the complex. The generator room itself shook like it was in the middle of an earthquake, the big machines rattling and groaning as they tried to cope with stresses that pushed the limits of their design specs. Dust and more fell from the ceiling, and off in the distance there was a resounding *clang* as a stretch of iron railing gave way.

High up in the shadows, unnoticed, a seam opened in the wall . . .

. . . and water began to leak through.

The shock knocked Stryker off his feet and would have left him bloody had Yuriko not been there to catch him. He muttered darkly as he brushed the dust from his clothes, then stopped cold as a drop of water splashed onto one lens of his glasses. He looked up to behold a spidery network of cracks in the ceiling, from which water was now falling in a steady drip. He actually shuddered at the sight.

A quick walk brought him and Yuriko to the one of the dam's monitor stations. A glance at the rusted, decaying, but still functional dials on the wall told him all he needed to know.

Early in his career, before Jason, before marriage, he'd been a field agent. Black ops. He'd attended a course in sabotage, a seminar on how to blow a dam. There were basically two ways to do it. You either dropped a really big bomb, or succession of bombs, in just the right place—as the British did to the Germans in World War II—or you set off a much smaller bomb, also in just the right place, and let the dam itself do the rest. The key to a dam is its structural integrity, because the pressure of the water it's restraining is relentless. That's why public safety mandates that all such structures be scrupulously maintained. The slightest flaw, if unchecked, could lead to disastrous consequences.

This dam had essentially been left to rot. No one was interested in dismantling it, so the secondary spillway had been left open to drain the lake. Over the subsequent years, in part to hide what had happened here, the dam had been filed and forgotten. No one came to check on its condition, no one realized—until Stryker arrived to reopen the facility—that the open spillway had become hopelessly clogged and Alkali Lake itself had gradually filled almost to overflowing.

Now this explosion, whatever its cause, had provided the final, fatal catalyst. Because of the weight of water pressing on the dam, these cracks that now appeared miniscule would quickly grow and spread until the entire structure collapsed.

The complex was doomed. The only question was how long they had. He did some fast calculations, couldn't quite make them fit. Too many unknowns. So he decided then, as an act of will, that it would last until his work was done. He'd come too far, worked too hard, to accept even the possibility of failure. Or of defeat. His cause was just, therefore he would prevail.

"Time to go," Stryker told Yuriko, and they did, quickly.

* * *

Jean heard him coming, boot heels striking the floor in a steady, robotic cadence that was totally unlike him, and she wailed silently to herself. He wasn't unconscious and he wasn't free and he was on his way to finish her off.

She tried to shift position, but her broken leg was agony. She couldn't muster concentration enough to neutralize the pain or to stop her lover.

Screw that, she thought, and tried again, marshaling her strength of body and will, first dampening the pain in her leg to a dull but manageable ache and then calling out to Scott, not with her voice, but with her mind.

She said his name, but what reached out to him was so much more. It was the sense of her, the emotions he stirred in her heart and those she sensed in turn from him. She took the world as it was when they were apart and then what it felt like when they were together, and it was the difference between a wasteland and a paradise. There was passion and comfort and need and joy, there was a strength that knew no boundaries, a sense of kindred souls made one, and that whole being far, far greater than the sum of its parts.

She opened her soul to him, holding back only that part of her that even now thought only of Logan, and realized as she did so that this was the part she would call upon if worst came to worst and she found herself with no other option but to kill.

Through the impenetrable fog of his mind she sensed him reaching for his visor and remembered absurdly the night they'd spent watching one of Scott's favorite movies, Robert Wise's classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. She remembered the climactic moment when Patricia Neal had been cornered by the robot Gort and how his visor glowed like Scott's as it opened to reveal the deadly beams within.

Scott, she called with her thoughts, *please—*

Scott!

His hand trembled, his mouth working as he struggled to speak. His breathing quickened, his hands clenched to fists, and there were flashes of light within his mind as he fought his way through the fog, calling out himself in answer to her cries.

Then, suddenly, he was crying aloud, desperate incoherent sounds like a man might utter clawing his way up from some abyss of the spirit, culminating in a great and awful scream that made her own pain insignificant by comparison.

He collapsed to his knees and sobbed, taking in breaths of air in huge, noisy gulps, a drowning man who'd finally reached the surface long after he thought all was lost.

He flinched when she touched him, curling in on himself, startled and terrified, too much like a dog who expected nothing but beatings. That made her angry, because this was her man and he was none of those things.

She touched him lightly once more on the face, but with her thoughts she enfolded him in warmth, in strength, in passion. She let him see reflected in her vision of him the man she knew he was, who made her complete.

It's okay, Scott, she told him telepathically and said the same aloud: "It's okay, it's me. It's *me*!"

And as he looked up in relief, she took him in her arms, burying her face in the hollow between neck and shoulder so he couldn't see her. That made her smile inside, although there was no humor in it. It was easy to be strong for others but when it came to herself—well, that was a different chapter entirely. But she didn't want him to know what had happened, not yet. Let him heal just a little more, let him come a bit more wholly back to himself, then he could handle it.

"You're hurt," he said.

"You're right," she grimaced. "Help me up, please."

"I'll carry you."

"Like hell. I'm a telekinetic, remember? I can make myself a splint and crutches all in one."

"Really?"

"If I'm wrong, sweetie, you'll be the first to know."

"Jean," he said, and then, haltingly, "I—I'm sorry."

She kissed him on the edge of his mouth, glad that the difference in height between them allowed her to keep her face shadowed.

"It's okay. It's okay. I . . . I was so afraid I'd lost you."

"Thanks" was all he said, but she could see the emotions that went into that single word, and she hugged him for it.

A moment later, her expression changed and she looked around the room in alarm.

"Scott," she said urgently, frustrated that she couldn't tell him why, "something's wrong!"

Mystique had printed out a map, showing the route to where the children were imprisoned. Storm and Nightcrawler covered the distance in record time. Nightcrawler was right at home, racing as easily along the walls and ceiling as the floor, as limber crouched on all fours as standing erect on both legs. Storm wasn't anywhere near as confident, physically or emotionally. She didn't like being underground or in confined spaces. She thought she'd put those childhood fears behind her long ago and didn't appreciate discovering she might have been wrong.

At last they came to a room that was essentially the lip of a broad and deep pit. Surveillance cameras were mounted at intervals around the circular ceiling, allowing an unrestricted view of the hole. She'd seen on the control room monitors that deep parallel slashes had been gouged in the walls, at a height that suggested a man Logan's size. Such a person couldn't climb out, he couldn't jump out, there were no doors to be seen; the only possible mean of ingress or egress to the pit was a hoist on a sliding boom set in the ceiling. The room itself had a single doorway, and it was ringed by the ruins of a rubber gasket, which meant that in better days the entrance could have been sealed airtight. Alternating with the camera mounts around the ceiling were ventilation grilles. It didn't take much imagination to realize that gas could be introduced to the room instead of air, to deal with any prisoners who decided to get rowdy.

If this was a holding pen, it was designed by people who took no chances.

Damn them, she thought with unusual vehemence. *What did they want from him? What did they do to him?*

And then, more ominously, *What does Stryker intend with us?*

"Who's down there?" she called.

"Jubilation Lee," came the immediate reply. "Is that you, Ororo? Can you help us?"

"Hey, would I have come all this way if I couldn't?" She looked sideways at Nightcrawler. "Kurt, could you—" She didn't have to finish, he was already gone.

The kids, of course, had no idea who he was. Two girls took one look at him and shrieked in terror, backing all the way across the pit while Jubilee and Artie, one of the boys, took station between them. The boy was ready to fight—he even stuck out his forked tongue to try to scare Nightcrawler, which he actually found quite amusing—but Jubilee looked more curious than defiant. She assumed that if Storm was up top, then this had to be one of the good guys. If it wasn't, since Stryker had given them some kind of drug to inhibit their powers temporarily, they were all pretty much screwed anyway.

Nightcrawler gently motioned her aside and spoke to the frightened pair of girls.

"My name's Kurt Wagner," he told them. "Although in the circus ring I'm better known as Nightcrawler. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

Blank looks all around.

"Ah, well. Some other time, perhaps. Come to me, please," and he waved his fingers to urge them closer. "It's all right. You've nothing to fear from me, I'm just going to take you for a little jaunt."

"Can't Storm do this?" one of the boys asked.

"Don't be an ass," Jubilee told him. "There isn't enough volume of air in here for her to generate sufficient wind. What're you going to do," she asked Nightcrawler, "climb the walls?"

"Not exactly," he replied. He wrapped arms and tails around one of the frightened girls, who'd responded to his call and stepped up close to him. "Now," he told her, "close your eyes."

Bamf.

He was gone.

And a moment later, with the girl's excited cries echoing down from the floor above, he was back.

Logan didn't need a map, he just followed his nose. He had Stryker's scent, and since she was the only woman in the place, aside from Mystique and his fellow X-Men, he had no problem isolating Yuriko's scent as well. He could follow and find them anywhere now, no matter how cold the trail.

Suddenly he stopped. Another scent, one he never thought anything about, because it was a part of him.

He turned and thought about his first visit and the wolf he'd followed downstairs. This was a whole different section of the base, and a lot deeper. Nothing about the surroundings was familiar, and yet . . .

Snikt!

There were three slash marks in the wall, at the top of a flight of stairs. They reminded him of a book he'd read wintering up North of Sixty, waiting out a storm in a trapper's cabin. Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. The explorers there had followed a trail left by their predecessor, a man named Arne Saknussemm, who'd blazed the way by leaving three parallel slashes in the rock.

He held up his claws. They fit as perfectly here as they had in the marks he'd found up top. He heard screams, but only in memory, and smelled blood that strangely seemed as fresh as if it had just been spilled. He'd fought his way out of here, of that he was certain.

Why hadn't they ever tried to find him? Why had he been brought here in the first place?

He clenched his fist, keyed the trigger in his nervous system, and put the claws away.

Snakt!

Only one man with the answers.

Moving fast, Logan descended the stairs.

Artie was the last. He looked a little wobbly as Nightcrawler let him go, but then so did the indigo-skinned mutant himself, and Storm caught him by the arm as he swayed on his feet.

"It's harder with a passenger," he confessed. "And when I transport six—"

"I'm proud of you," she said. "Consider this a good deed to counterbalance all those sins."

He smiled in gratitude, but only for a moment as Artie protested, "I think I have to throw up."

"It's hardfor my passengers, too, I'm afraid," he confessed further. "But the nausea will quickly pass."

Not soon enough for Artie, who bent double and promptly expelled all the food he'd ever gworfed in his life. Storm held his head until he was done, then manifested a tiny cloud of rain to wash his face clean. That's when the room shook around them, and when she decided the quicker they were quits of this awful place, the better for all concerned.

The stairs led Logan to a lab that, like the rest of the base, had seen better days. It was circular, with massive cylindrical columns supporting a large ring in the center. Unlike most of the other sections of the base, however, this one hadn't been stripped to the walls. It looked almost . . . operational.

In his mind's eye, the room wasn't empty. He counted at least a dozen ghouls on hand for every session, wearing a freakish kind of armored surgical moon suit that was designed to protect the wearer not only from biological contamination but from physical attack as well. By sight, he couldn't tell men from women, young from old. They all had the same face, and that was the visor of their helmets. Scents were how he told them apart, except for Stryker. He remembered now that Stryker was the only one unafraid to show his face. It was important to him to be seen, and Logan wondered now if that was why Stryker had seemed so disappointed when Logan didn't recognize him at the mansion.

This was a surgical suite, and as he circled the room, unconsciously keeping well clear at first of the tank in its center, he noted the carts on which the nurses had piled the necessary medical instruments. The usual collection of scalpels and hemostats, scissors and retractors and clamps, but that wasn't all, it wasn't even close. There were tools he couldn't name, whose purpose he didn't know, but the mere thought of them sent an unaccustomed thrill of horror up his spine.

Along the wall there was a bank of light boxes, where they would clip the X rays before going to work on him. They always let him see what was there, they always told him what they planned to do, they wanted him to know . . . they wanted him to know . . . they wanted him to know . . .

All that care and effort and . . . *consideration*—for nothing.

One of the X rays had been him. Some of them looked like monsters, all of them were of mutants. Maybe all of them were him? *Maybe* he was the monster? He didn't know.

He remembered what Xavier had told him—maybe he didn't *want* to know? Right now, that didn't seem like so bad an idea.

Finally he forced himself to the tank. He'd thought it was empty, hoped it would be empty, but he was wrong. It was filled with an oily amber liquid and above it, suspended from the ring, a battery of instruments more appropriate to a slaughterhouse than a hospital. On pedestals beside the tank were what appeared to be molds: one with a set of three channels, needing no explanation, another with five, longer and slimmer and altogether quite elegant.

Next to the tank, at its head, was a large cylinder whose shape reminded him of a home hot-water heater, only this was made of a thick, transparent polymer that had the same transparent qualities as glass, but clearly much stronger. It had to be, since it was designed to hold molten adamantium, which came into the vat as hot as the core of the Earth. Attached to the cylinder were a number of long, snakelike tubes that ended in wicked-looking syringes built to punch through bone. The tank was half full of a silvery liquid.

He looked at that tank, at the cylinder, at the tubes, at the instruments—and knew at last where his nightmares came from.

"You know," Stryker said from across the room, though his presence came as no surprise to Logan. He'd scented the man's approach minutes ago. "The tricky thing about adamantium is that if you ever manage to process its raw, liquid form, you have to keep it that way. Keep it hot, keep it molten.

Because, you see, once it cools, it's *indestructible* .”

He paused a moment to let the implications of his words sink in, but Logan wasn't bothered. He'd already figured out that part. That had to be why they needed someone with a healing factor.

“But,” Stryker continued, “I can see you already know that.”

He was being very careful, keeping the full width of the lab, and as much equipment as possible, between himself and Logan.

“I used to think you were one of a kind, Wolverine. I truly did.” He shook his head. “I was wrong.”

Logan charged him and ran straight into Yuriko, who caught him by the arm and—using his own momentum as impetus—slammed him as hard as she could into one of the support columns. Stone cracked and powdered with the impact, but Logan wasn't even staggered.

Stryker caught Yuriko's eye, looked deliberately from her to Logan, and when she nodded, he took his leave, out a different doorway from the one he'd entered, taking time to lock it behind him.

Logan rose to his feet and extended both sets of claws. He had no interest in her, only her boss, but if she wanted trouble, he'd make it short and final.

In return, her own face looking bored, as though this sort of confrontation happened every day, she spread her fingers wide.

Logan was used to the reaction he got from other people when they saw his claws for the first time. Now, surprisingly, he learned how that felt as Yuriko's fingers elongated into eight-inch spikes. He didn't need to be told what they were made of, and he wondered how they'd managed the implantation. If she had a healing factor as well, this could be trouble.

“Holy shit,” he said in amazement. She smiled, but it wasn't a human expression. In fact, nothing about her seemed human or connected; it was like she was some different species entirely, forever gazing at the world from the outside. She was predator, all others were prey. That was the natural order of things.

Her hand flicked out, faster than he could follow, and he felt a hiss of pain along his jaw, felt blood where she'd cut a shallow gash across his cheek.

He retaliated with a roundhouse swing that missed her by a mile as she ducked beneath it and came up like a jack-in-the-box, unleashing a powerful side kick to the belly that pitched him backward through trays of equipment, upending them on top of him as he tumbled to the floor.

With a banshee screech, she leaped after him, slashing at him with both hands, only to find her attack blocked by his own claws. Adamantium struck adamantium, creating its own unique brand of sparks as each of them fought to break through the other's guard and instead only managed to wreck the lab.

Stryker heard the sounds of battle and permitted himself a smile as he quickened his pace. Time, now more than ever, was of the essence.

Yuriko swung hard, but Logan slapped her aside. Before he could take advantage, she hurled herself

clear of him, running straight at the wall and using it as a springboard to flip herself up and over. However, she made a slight miscalculation in her maneuver: As she twisted in midair, her finger claws ripped through a cluster of power cables fastened to the ceiling. They exploded with sparks, they were live and carrying a significant amount of juice, and they dangled and twisted in the air like manic snakes. That contact threw her fractionally off balance; she didn't quite land where she wanted to, or as smoothly.

It was the opening Logan had been waiting for.

Logan tackled her, and together they crashed through a glass wall into some kind of lounge. X-ray light boxes, equipment, computers galore crashed and shattered around them as they struggled. Logan had strength and a fair share of agility, but Yuriko possessed speed he couldn't hope to match. For every blow he landed, he took a dozen, and his uniform proved as effective at stopping her claws as a suit of air. Worse, her own healing factor seemed every bit as effective as his, only he was giving it a lot less work to do.

As they'd tangled on the floor, he'd caught a glimpse of the back of her neck, saw there the scar that marked both Nightcrawler and Magneto, and realized in that instant there could be no reasoning with her. In her own way, she was as berserk as he, and he knew she wouldn't stop until she killed him.

She hit him again, and again, using feet this time more than claws, choosing her blows with care so that she connected with soft tissue instead of bone. She wanted to wear him down, to strip him of the ability to defend himself, to remove all hope before she came in for the kill. That was what Stryker had asked of her, and she could deny him nothing.

She sent Logan crashing backward into the tank, and he tumbled into it, rearing up immediately only to collapse against the opposite end, eyes wide as his nightmares rioted up around him. He was clumsy and dazed, he had to be at the end of his rope.

With a ballerina's grace, Yuriko sprang onto the lip of the tank, striking a Kali-like pose, the fingers of both hands spread out before her like a pair of bloody fans.

Logan showed fear in his eyes, which was exactly what she wanted to see.

She struck, and as she made her move . . .

. . . so did he.

She slashed empty air, registering surprise and disbelief as Logan leaped straight up from the tank. Using all his formidable strength to defy gravity, he grabbed for the rack suspended above the tank and slashed through the wire tether that anchored it to the ceiling.

It dropped like a guillotine. He rode it down to crash on top of Yuriko and pin her to the bottom of the tank. She struggled and screeched, using her claws on the steel and concrete members that imprisoned her. It would only be moments before she was free.

They were moments Logan wouldn't let her have. On impact, he pitched himself clear of the rack and grabbed the syringes attached to the cylinder of adamantium, using the same movement to open the access valves. He spared her a quick and final thought—*I'm sorry*—and plunged the barbed needles between her unbreakable ribs and into her heart.

She screamed as the molten metal flowed into her body. She raged and struggled in a last desperate bid to escape, but she was doomed the moment Logan stabbed her. Adamantium oozed out her eyes and out her mouth, it burned through the very pores of her skin until she was coated from head to toe. Unable to maintain even a semblance of balance, she fell backward into the tank, creating a splash that emptied the vessel of half its volume of amber liquid. Her fingers twitched spasmodically as she sank to the bottom.

And then she was still.

Logan watched her, half expecting her to crack the shell and emerge more powerful and deadly than before. By rights she should be dead, from internal burns if nothing else, as the raw, fiery metal cascaded straight into her heart. God knows what kind of damage had been done to allow the adamantium to emerge from her eyes and mouth. Covered as she was, she couldn't breathe. Perhaps that would do the trick?

He hoped so, prayed so. She was as much a victim as he, and more. At least—and here he touched his fingers to the back of his neck to make sure—he wore no scar to brand him as Stryker's slave.

If he hadn't escaped, would that be him lying there? Or taking Yuriko's place by Stryker's side, as his pet assassin?

One thing more that Stryker owed him.

Time to collect.

He turned his back on this unholy place, and all it represented for his life, and started after Stryker's trail.

Nothing would stop him now.

Chapter Fifteen

"You think they'll come?" one of the troopers, Grierson, asked Lyman.

Lyman nodded, automatically checking the other man's disposition. Grierson was hunkered down behind a concrete abutment, spare magazines at hand, spare weapons as well. He was on the young side for one of Stryker's men, but he had a superb personnel jacket, topped by a year spent as a platoon sergeant in the 82nd Airborne, humping the boonies in Afghanistan.

"They'll come," Lyman said.

"Can we stop 'em?"

"Those are the orders."

“No offense, but from what I saw on the video—”

“Those are the orders.”

Grierson shrugged. “First time for everything, I guess.” He hefted his long gun, a Barrett .50-cal sniper rifle, whose depleted uranium shells could punch through tank armor a mile away. “I get a decent shot with this!”

Lyman nodded again, aching for a cigarette. He never smoked at home, only in the field and only before a fight. Had to be nerves. Thirty years in the service, combat tours all over the world, and he still got nervous. He figured that was the difference between him and Stryker; the commander had no nerves, or at least none that he ever showed his men.

One more time, for reassurance, and to give himself something to do, he made the rounds of his fire team, checked their sight lines and kill zones, made sure everyone had an abundance of weapons and ammo. In a fair fight, against an adversary like themselves, no matter how well trained and disciplined, he would have called the outcome no contest. His guys had ideal ground, anyone advancing up this corridor wouldn’t even come close.

As it was . . .

He’d broken the cardinal rule of clandestine ops: He’d brought along some personal items. Only pictures—the wife, the kids, the grandchild-to-be. His dogs. He’d raised them from pups, a pair of mixed-breed shepherds that kept his wife good company when he was away. With the kids building households of their own, his own home was too empty too often. He knew she was lonely; he hoped the dogs made it easier to bear.

He wondered what they’d say, his kids, seeing him here? He thought of the children they’d taken from the mansion and how cavalierly Stryker had condemned them. Funny, even though he understood the broad outlines of Stryker’s ambition, he always assumed—no, he always *chose* to assume—that the targets would be adults. Full-grown mutants.

He did a dangerous thing for a soldier. He put himself for a moment in the other man’s boots and considered how he might react if they were *his* children who’d been stolen.

He took a breath and then another, even deeper, because the first was way too shuddery and he needed his men to see him completely in control. He had to take a third, because this time the fear wouldn’t be banished so readily; it had its hooks deep in him, and he had to pry them loose one at a time. Lyman wasn’t a brilliant man; he wasn’t into concepts. His skill was execution. Give him a mission, and you were guaranteed to see it accomplished.

“I gotta go, sweetheart,” he whispered to the pictures in his hand, and he kissed each one in turn. One daughter, and her baby he knew he’d never see, three sons, his two dogs, and the woman who was the center of his life. He clasped his hands in prayer, bracing his wife’s picture between thumbs and fingers, staring at it with such intensity that by force of will alone he could almost make it real.

That’s when they heard the *hum* from inside the Cerebro chamber, a deep pulsing groan as if the world itself were stretching sore joints. It wasn’t so much heard as felt, a frequency so low it made your insides quiver. At the same time, the floor beneath them, the rock around them, trembled, and every man in the fire team looked around nervously, half expecting some monster to come burning through the walls or the

walls themselves to come tumbling down.

“Remember the briefing,” Lyman told them. “This is part of the process. You guys may think this feels bad, but I guarantee you it’ll be worse for the muties. Stay chill, people, stay alert.”

“Five bucks says the gizmo nails ’em before we fire a shot!”

“Save your money, Manfredi,” Lyman shot back. “I’d rather take it from you over poker.”

He didn’t get much of a laugh from his men, but it was enough. Lyman tucked away his photos and checked his own weapons. If the muties had half a brain between them, that first pulse should bring them on the run. They’d know the stakes now.

It wouldn’t be long.

“I have a valid target,” Grierson announced, leveling his sniper rifle.

Lyman whipped his binoculars to his eyes and brought the approaching figures into focus. Magneto and Mystique, at a range of one hundred meters. The old man was a half step in the lead, marching up the hallway like he was leading a whole army into battle. He didn’t seem to mind Grierson’s laser sight resting right over his heart.

“You’re cleared to fire,” Lyman said, and immediately a resounding boom filled the hallway around him, so loud he couldn’t help flinching.

The shell didn’t hit its target; it never came close. Without lifting a finger, without a gesture of any kind, Magneto simply stopped it in midair.

The rest of the team opened up, and the air around Lyman filled with the stink of cordite and the sound of spent casings rattling off the walls and floor. Every man here was a crack marksman, and this was point-blank range. The only pause in the murderous volleys was when someone had to replace an empty magazine. In the space of a few frantic minutes, they expended better than half their munitions . . .

. . . and found themselves with absolutely nothing to show for it.

Not one of the bullets came closer to their targets than an arm’s length. It didn’t matter that they were forged of nonferrous materials, that some were super-dense plastic. If Magneto couldn’t manipulate the shells directly, he warped the magnetic fields around them, and him, using force and pressure to accomplish his goal.

Too astonished to be scared, the troopers gradually stopped firing. A couple looked to Lyman, hoping for a Plan B.

He couldn’t think of one; he was transfixed by the scene down the hall. They’d thrown literally thousands of rounds at the two mutants, and now Magneto was reshaping them to his own requirements, pressing them so tightly together they formed a wall that completely obscured him and Mystique from view.

Why would they need a shield, Lyman thought. *He knows there’s nothing we can do to him—*

He heard a faint *click*, followed the noise, and had his answer.

The bastard had just pulled the pin on his grenade.

Lyman grabbed for the bomb and pitched it clear, thankful for the seven-second delay on the fuse, but even as he did he knew it was a useless gesture—because those same fateful *clicks* could be heard all around him. They had a whole case of grenades, each man carried his standard allotment, and every one of them had just been triggered.

He saw his wife in his mind's eye and reached for her . . .

. . . and he was done.

Of course the explosion of the grenades ignited what remained of the rifle ammunition, which created quite a fireworks display outside the chamber. Mystique tucked her body close around itself at Magneto's feet, placing her back right against his metal shield as strays ricocheted all around them.

When the *ping*s and whistles and pops and crackles and booms had all faded, leaving Mystique coughing from the smoke and the stench of ruined flesh, her ears ringing from the shock waves, Magneto set aside his shield, and they proceeded on their way.

There wasn't anything left of the defenders worth looking at. Magneto paused a moment at the entrance, standing by a bloody mess that was unrecognizable as a man. Oddly, a photo had survived the slaughter, a little singed at the edges, a handsome woman of middle age and two bright-eyed dogs. Mystique kneeled for a closer look, but Magneto shook his head. He opened his hand, which was filled with the pins he'd pulled from the grenades, and let them fall, burying the photograph in steel.

Then his head jerked up and he staggered as if he'd just been physically struck, Mystique hissing in agony as a phantom ice pick went straight through her brain, as the *hum* radiating from inside the room got louder, grew deeper and more intense.

In front of Charles Xavier, a light appeared. In terms of the holographic globe being displayed by Cerebro, it was located at the core of the world. From that point, radiant spears stabbed outward to connect with each and every one of the scarlet dots that represented an active or potential mutant.

"Oh," Jean cried suddenly, and then she cried out in real pain as her concentration slipped and the teke splints vanished from around her broken leg. Psychically damping the pain didn't make it go away, it just made things feel worse every time she had to notice. But her injury was the least of her concern as her hand tightened on Scott's shoulder so tightly he winced, half wondering if she was going to crush his bones.

"Jean," he demanded, placing an arm around her waist, pulling one of her arms across his shoulder so he could better handle her weight, "what's wrong?"

"Voices," she gasped, "so many voices, can't you hear them, of course you can't what am I saying oh Charles oh *Charles* what have you *done*?"

"Jean!"

“Scott, it’s Cerebro,” she cried, and for the first time since he’d known her, Scott heard genuine terror in her voice. “We’re too late!”

She screamed. He’d only heard its like once before, when he was young and hunting. It was one of the few memories that he knew dated from before the orphanage where he’d grown up. He was in mountains, so many they filled the horizon on every side, and though his dad carried a gun for protection, they were there to shoot pictures. Some poor fool in another hunting party had stumbled into a bear trap, and the metal jaws had nearly taken off his leg.

Jean collapsed to the floor, clutching at her head and howling. Scott knelt beside her, struck through the heart to see her in such pain, yet utterly helpless to alleviate it.

He heard a deep, basso profundothrumthat sounded to him like tectonic plates grinding, and then, just like that, he lost all ability for rational thought as his own head was overwhelmed by a sleet storm of pain. His eyes were burning and his brain with it, the fire coursing down his spine and along every path and linkage of his nervous system.

His last, desperate, marginally conscious act was to throw himself clear of Jean, to wrap his arms around his head and tuck his body in as tight upon itself as he could manage. His beams couldn’t punch through his own flesh; this way, he hoped, he prayed, he wouldn’t unleash them on anyone else. He wouldn’t hurt Jean—any more than he already had.

Storm and the children were making good time through the bowels of the complex. For once, even Artie was behaving. No smart remarks, no haring off on his own, he held her hand tight and kept pace, even though her legs were twice the length of his and she was walking fast. Nightcrawler was on point and so far, thankfully, the way ahead was clear.

She sensed the psi wave before actually hearing it, in the same way she sensed changes in the weather. The shape of the air, the energies coursing through it, bulged and rippled as though they were being shunted aside by the approach of a power far more massive than themselves.

Nightcrawler felt it, too. He dropped from the ceiling, bracing a hand against the wall to steady himself. He looked dizzy and felt far worse. In his whole life he’d never suffered from vertigo and now, suddenly, he was glad for what he’d been spared all these years. He tried to focus his eyesight, and when that failed, he realized it was getting harder to form coherent thoughts as well. It was as though every cell in his body had acquired the ability to teleport independently of one another, and they’d all decided to go their separate ways.

He started to turn, to warn Storm, to cry out to her for help, but that simple action proved beyond his capability as he stumbled over his own feet and flailed desperately for a handhold to stop himself from falling.

“Storm!” he cried with the frantic desperation of a drowning man, but she was in no position to help.

She was already on her knees, hands clutched to her head, caught in her own whirlwind and shot through with lightning that exploded from her eyes and circled right around to strike her back. Always before she’d been immune to the elements she wielded, but that was no longer the case as wicked arcs of electricity exploded over andthrough her. She writhed with every impact, and while the winds

attacking her swept away the smoke raised by these repeated attacks, they couldn't dispel the quickly rising stench of burned uniform. Or the certain knowledge that in very little time, her flesh would be burning, too.

The children were screaming now, howling like souls being tormented by demons, Nightcrawler's eyes going wide with horror, his mouth forming the words—part demand, part prayer—“Stop it! Please, *stop it!* For the love of God—*stop!*” But no sound emerged. He was beyond the ability to speak.

He knew, as Storm did, that this was just the leading edge of the nightmare coming for them, the merest prelude to what lay ahead. He prayed for mercy, not only for himself and his companions, but for the souls of those responsible.

He forced one hand in front of the other, climbing along the floor as he would up a vertical rock face, determined to reach Storm, to give her what shelter and comfort he could so that together they could try to protect the children. There'd been no one to protect him growing up. He'd learned early how to fight and, far more importantly, how to defuse a fight, and he'd sworn afterward he would never allow anyone to be without a protector.

He stretched his right arm forward, a distance that seemed to his disoriented eyes to be miles. It was so hard to move, to think, there was a tremendous numbing pressure right behind his eyes that threatened to pop them from their sockets and he was sure his brain was swelling from the onslaught of the energy pulse.

Then the *hum* enveloped them, and all that came before faded to insignificance.

Nightcrawler's last conscious thought was of wonderment. He'd always believed you had to be dead before you went to Hell.

Logan tried to snarl, but it came out more like a scream. Claws emerged from both his hands, but they extended no more than an inch before retracting. This time, though, Logan's healing factor didn't close the wounds behind them, and blood sprayed from the open cuts. Indeed, it appeared that all the wounds he'd ever endured were coming back to haunt him as a score of gashes opened across his flesh, splashing the floor around him scarlet. Some were random and messy, the legacy of knives or bullets or the cruel vagaries of nature, but many were neat and purposeful, the incisions of careful men who'd abandoned all allegiance to the Hippocratic oath they'd taken as medical students to do no harm. They'd laid Logan open to the bone and now, in the place Stryker implied he had been born, it was happening all over again.

* * *

Magneto staggered under the onslaught of the psychic pressure wave, standing against it as he would against the full force of a hurricane's winds. Step by determined step, he advanced on the doorway to Stryker's version of the Cerebro chamber.

“Eric,” he heard from behind and to the side, Mystique's voice, shattering between one syllable of his name and the next, between that word and the one which followed. “*Hurry!*” Feminine for one, masculine for another, plunging from soprano to bass and back again.

He didn't look back, he couldn't spare the effort—and besides, he could imagine what was happening.

Somehow Cerebro was attacking them through their very powers, turning what made them unique against them and consuming them with it. Mystique was a metamorph, a shape-shifter, able to mimic any conceivable human form perfectly. Size, age, gender, none of these were obstacles.

Now, as with Logan, her past came back to torment her. Cerebro made her flesh pliable, like soft wax, and then like mercury, as she underwent change after involuntary change, revisiting every face and form she'd ever copied. Even though she made it seem easy, it really wasn't. Her apparent speed came with years of training, of practice, of preparation. Each transformation was an effort, and the more she executed, the faster she did them, the greater the toll. If she needed to grow taller, she had to bulk up to provide the raw material. Shorter required burning off mass. Flesh was comparatively easy to sculpt, bones less so, and internal organs the most demanding of all. That's why most gender shifts were cosmetic.

None of that applied now. The shifts came so fast that she presented herself as multiples. Her own coloring, Jean Grey's face, Robert Kelly's torso, Rogue's legs, Xavier's face, Rogue's hair, Jean's torso, Wolverine's hands, claws sprouting from fingers, from between her toes, Magneto's face rising from her belly, someone else's from each breast, arms becoming legs and feet growing fingers, all these mad alterations accompanied by a rising chorus of howls from mouths that popped into view all over her body, each capable of independent speech and all of them shrieking in agony under the relentless and crushing pressure of the wave.

Soon, terribly soon, the transformations would come so quickly, the pain would grow so great, that Mystique's consciousness—her sense of fundamental self—would shatter. In effect, on both a cerebral and a cellular level, she would forget who and what she was. Most likely, she would genetically disincorporate into a muddle of mindless cells, and that would be the end of her.

Magneto knew all that, knew she was but one victim of far too many, knew something similar lay in store for him—unless he stopped it.

He lifted a hand and a new sound rose to challenge the *hum* of the Cerebro wave: the basso groan of metal finding itself subjected to stresses well beyond design tolerances. He couldn't do this at Mount Haven; the part of the complex where he'd been incarcerated had been constructed of nonferrous materials and revolutionary plastics. But Alkali was much older, built in a day when the likes of him hadn't been a factor. There was a lot of metal for him to play with, and even though the Cerebro wave presented a significant—for some, insurmountable—obstacle, he was determined to prevail.

He had survived Auschwitz. He had lived to see his captors in their graves, had helped deliver more than a few of them to that end by himself. This would be the same.

He flashed teeth with the effort, almost a snarl, and metal started to warp and tear around him. The timbre of the *hum* emanating from inside faded ever so slightly, and the pulse of the Cerebro wave . . . slowed.

Charles Xavier was aware of none of this. He stared up at the globe circling around him, transfixed by the firefly display of scarlet dots, paying not the slightest attention to the trickles of blood from nostrils and ears and the corners of his eyes as stress ruptured the pinpoint capillaries that fed his brain. These were the most minor manifestations of being at the wave's source, of being the focal point of the power being unleashed, and at this moment they represented no lasting physical trauma.

That wouldn't last, of course. Mutant 143 knew that, somewhere in the deepest recesses of his own twisted psyche. In short order, as the pulse built to its peak, the greater vessels would burst, and he would be consumed by a massive and all-encompassing cerebral hemorrhage. He would die from the ultimate stroke—but not before bearing witness to the brutal and merciless slaughter of every person on earth who Cerebro considered a mutant. This was Stryker's revenge—not only would Xavier himself die, and all his precious students, but the future they represented. The murder of his dream would be the death of him, and before his own end Mutant 143 would make sure that Xavier realized the full import of what he had done.

And then, of course, 143 would die. Stryker appreciated the neatness and elegance of this resolution; it was ideal for a covert operation, one of his hallmarks. He didn't like loose ends. In one stroke, this eliminated not only the threat to the world but the weapon used to deal with it. As for 143 himself, the realization of his fate didn't bother him. Partly, he didn't really believe it would happen to him. He still retained a child's absolute faith in his own immortality. He couldn't conceive of coming to an end. What mattered for him now, as always since the manifestation of his mutant powers, was playing with his toys. They were mortal, they were fragile. He was God. And He had work to do.

So 143's eyes pulsed, casting their demented light into the core of Xavier's being. Around them, what was normally heard as whispers, the background susurrus of all the myriad thoughts Cerebro allowed Xavier to perceive, rose to a chorus of screams.

Cyclops wrapped his hands as tight as he could across his eyes, but he was sick at heart at the realization that he couldn't hold back his optic blasts much longer. Already they were reaching the containment capacity of his ruby quartz visor and little flashes of energy were beginning to pop through the spaces between his fingers, too small to do much damage but serving as eloquent harbingers for the devastation soon to follow.

Jean wasn't doing any better as she clutched her hands to her ears in a vain attempt to block the same threnody of desolation that enveloped her teacher. She swung her broken leg against a stanchion, not caring about any lasting damage she might be doing, praying instead that the pain she caused herself might serve as a bulwark against the assault from outside.

And she succeeded, although not quite in the way she had planned. Her teke slugged into high gear, stealing a page from Logan's book as her body remembered on a cellular level what it was like to be whole and set her power to work bringing that about. All the shards of bones, large or small, visible or microscopic, were plucked from where they'd landed in her leg and pressed back into their proper position.

She thought she'd experienced pain in her life, either directly or vicariously as an aspect of her power, when she synced into the minds of patients to ease their suffering, but she realized now that she'd never even come close as all those pieces of bone tore their way through her flesh to set themselves. She howled, thankful for the respite from Cerebro, struggling to find a way to reach Charles through this nigh-unbearable sleet storm of acid, to join her own strength to his and together find a way to neutralize the wave.

There was a fire within her, and she assumed that it had to do with her leg, that her power was somehow finding a way to fuse the bone back together, but as it grew, as her thoughts splintered and the fear blossomed that she wouldn't be equal to the task before her, it became a radiance too astounding to be described, too powerful to be measured, as though she were witnessing within herself the primal moment of creation, the lighting of the first spark within the infinite firmament.

With a cry of joy and longing, Jean Grey spread wide the arms of imagination and reached out to embrace the stars.

She knew then she was mad, but she refused to yield, to the pain or the madness. If this fire represented power, then she would find a way to harness it, to use it to save those she loved. If she was truly dying, she would find a way back from the ashes. She would never go quietly into the dark night of eternity.

Aboard the *Blackbird*, Rogue was struggling to reach the controls, to do as Storm had told her, but she couldn't make it. She couldn't even rise from the deck where she'd collapsed. Tears on her face, she couldn't stop Bobby from grasping her by the hand—in a grip that froze her to the shoulder, as he'd coated every visible surface on the plane with a sheet of glittering hoarfrost. His skin was transparent, she could see right through him, with him looking like a three-dimensional X ray—only this one was made entirely of ice. She could see his skeleton, and faint hints of what must be his heart and lungs and other organs. No sense of blood, no visible nerves, and he crackled faintly with every move, with every breath. His voice was arctic, biting and cold and nothing like he usually sounded.

Ice shattered as he wrenched her glove off her arm, she begged him to stop—at least in her mind—but nothing emerged from her mouth, there was this huge crowd crushing in around her, all the people she'd ever imprinted rising up inside her skull in rage at what she'd done, ignoring her apologies, her attempted explanations, demanding instead that she yield control to them. She knew he was trying to save her, offering his strength to give her a better chance of surviving, no matter the cost to himself. She didn't want that, she couldn't bear her own survival at the cost of his, and she knew as well that he didn't care.

He held her bare hand in his, deliberately initiating contact—and imprinting—and her eyes bugged wide as it turned to ice the same as his, while his started to look more and more normally human.

“Bobby, stop it!” she shrieked, and from lips that tasted chill as the pole came a voice that was a match for his, cold and remote and unhuman as space itself.

And from her eyes, as she saw from his, fell tears that froze to both their cheeks.

Thunder rocked the tunnel around Storm, wind howled, rain fell, and lightning continued to strike. She wasn't moving, sprawled on her face as bolt after bolt crashed against her body. Nightcrawler, by contrast, couldn't stop as he teleported in place again and again and again, faster and faster and faster, until he flickered like a strobe image.

John Allardyce hadn't made it to the entrance of the complex, hadn't even come close, before the wave dropped him. He hadn't moved from where he fell as breath kept coming in an ever-greater rush. He was hyperventilating, gulping huge amounts of air to fuel the raging conflagration within him, so much so that his skin was glowing—and the snow around him quickly melting away.

Henry McCoy was in his lab, measuring coffee grounds into a beaker while a nearby Bunsen burner had the water merrily boiling. Using gloves, he added the water to the grounds and savored the heady smell. This was what made every morning worthwhile, because a superb cup of coffee was for him the precursor to a successful day of research.

Without warning, his hand twitched so violently that the beaker went flying, shattering glass and steaming hot water across the worktable. McCoy convulsively threw himself back from the table with such force that his stool upended and he crashed head over heels against the wall. His body spasmed as though he'd plugged himself directly into an electrical outlet, and he cried out in horror and disbelief, and no little pain, as nails bulged from the tips of his fingers into cruelly hooked claws. His arms doubled in width, splitting the seams of shirt and lab coat, the pigmentation of his skin turning a deep blue as he sprouted hairs of the same color all over his body.

He tried to call for help, but what emerged from his mouth was a roar, like a lion's.

What he saw reflected in the polished steel of his refrigerator was no longer anything that resembled a man. Hank McCoy was now a beast.

Kitty and Siryn were shopping for food, as much as two kids could buy with the handful of bucks they had between them. In the blink of an eye, Kitty found herself at the far end of the aisle from her friend. Another blink, she was through a wall and across the street. Another blink, she was inside a tree and partially sunk into the ground. She tried to move, but hands and feet could find no purchase, and with a wail of horror she realized that she wasn't the one who was moving. She'd suddenly become so intangible that gravity itself had no more effect on her. The Earth was spinning on its axis and leaving her behind. Worse, it was also revolving in its orbit around the Sun. How long before she found herself floating in space, while the world that was her home went on its merry celestial way?

Siryn didn't know quite what had happened to her friend. She heard a yelp of surprise, caught a glimpse of Kitty disappearing ghostlike through the back wall of the store, and then she was shrieking across the full range of her accessible frequencies, calling forth a lunatic choir of howls from every dog within earshot as, at the same time, she managed to shatter every piece of glass in the store.

In a back room at Delamain's on the Rue Rogue in New Orleans' Vieux Carre—the French Quarter—the usual high-stakes game of poker was well under way, in defiance of the paddle-wheel casinos moored along the Riverwalk at the foot of Canal Street. The casinos had the flash, this game had substance, not so much because of the size of the bets but because of the quality of the players.

Remy LeBeau was a regular and one of the best. The cards, it was said, loved him the way he loved the women who invariably went out of their way to mix with his life, which could be a wild and risky thing. He was a thief by trade, and better at it than at cards, which was saying quite a lot. Stealing hearts was for him far more interesting and a whole lot more fun than stealing jewels or whatever, especially since the trick was always to make sure the stolen heart was never broken. In that regard, he had no equal. When the affair was over, his ladies loved him more than when they met.

This had been a fair night thus far in terms of winnings, but only because he'd been taking his measure of his fellow players. Now was the time to get down to business and make a killing.

Alas, this time, no joy. It was not to be.

He was dealer and from the deck came the joker, the jack of hearts, to complete his full house. But as he flicked it from his hands a spark popped between his fingertips, igniting the card not with fire but with some kind of energy that made it blaze brighter than a maritime searchlight and strike the table with force enough to split the thick wood right across the middle. At the same time, as the other players reeled back in shock and alarm, the other cards he held likewise ignited.

He had a split second to look at the others, his face marked with confusion, his free hand reaching out for help—but all they saw were his eyes blazing red as fresh blood, and so none of them reached back. Then his cards exploded, shattering the remains of the table to kindling and scattering everyone to the walls.

Mystique wasn't moving anymore. That wasn't a good thing. Like the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* after Dorothy splashed her with water, she was melting. Flesh was liquefying, puddling beneath her, the shape of her skeleton starting to stand out in sharp relief. Soon, very soon, the bones would be exposed. Would she be aware of that? Would she be conscious to the end? She didn't believe that Stryker had an ounce of mercy in him, only that he was thorough. Whatever it felt like, the process would be final.

Magneto was still on his feet, glaring hawklike at the sealed door before him. He wasn't interested in the door any longer; he could breach it at his pleasure, with hardly any effort. His focus was on the configuration of the energy patterns that made up the Cerebro wave. Manipulating energy was what he did best. All he had to do was nail down the frequencies and signal characteristics of the wave. . . .

He set up a countervailing pulse and watched the two collide. Close, but not quite there.

He made the necessary modifications and repeated the process, creating in effect a wall of white noise around the entire chamber, a resonance field that utterly neutralized the Cerebro wave at its source.

Just like that, all around him, there was silence.

Blessed silence.

Chapter Sixteen

Inside Stryker's Cerebro chamber, Charles Xavier sat straighter in his wheelchair as the globe around him stopped spinning and the entire system progressed through its shutdown cycle.

"That's strange," he muttered, and paused a moment to consider why that simple phrase seemed to have two meanings for him. The obvious related to what was happening around him and to why Cerebro suddenly seemed to acquire a mind of its own. The other, disturbingly, also seemed to relate to that nagging, persistent sense of *wrongness* that had plagued him ever since his escape from Alkali Lake.

He looked suddenly and sharply at the little girl, as though to catch her by surprise. She looked apprehensive, indicating that the shutdown wasn't what she'd expected, either. Xavier made a comforting gesture, spoke some comforting words, to reassure her that he was still in control, that everything would be all right. That appeared to help, although her mismatched eyes of green and blue still glowed disconcertingly bright.

To work, he decided. Identify the problem and resolve it, that was the ticket.

Still, as he reached for Cerebro's controls, he found himself hesitating, he found his eyes returning to the girl, his thoughts reaching out to her through the veil that surrounded him. Something about her . . . felt . . .

He shook his head, dazzled by the afterimage of her eyes like blinkers in his mind. He knew what had to be done, and his hands moved with practiced skill over the controls. Someone was jamming the scanning wave. He had his suspicions who was responsible and, from there, what was necessary to break free.

Seeing him hard at work, the girl looked away, toward the massive door at the end of the gallery. This wasn't part of the program, and she didn't like it.

Magneto needed a little time to gather his strength. The battle against the Cerebro wave had been as hard for him as for the others and, in its way, had taken as great a toll.

At last he turned, and because she couldn't see him, wasn't aware of anything beyond herself, he allowed his face to show the sorrow Mystique's pitiful condition brought forth in him. Over their time together, he'd grown used to having her by his side, strong and utterly fearless, indomitable in will and surprisingly indestructible in form. He hated to think of her being vulnerable, and hurt.

He knelt beside her, unsure of what he'd find. Her eyes were opaque, as blank and lifeless as a doll's. She looked like a wax figure who'd been exposed to raw flame, so much of her lay in congealed folds beneath her body.

Then an aspect of her eyes changed. Still opaque, but no longer blank or lifeless, they took on the otherworldly depths of a shark's eyes.

She blinked, and color returned to those eyes, as it did to the whole of her body.

She flexed her muscles and stretched, to remind herself of how the parts of her all properly fit together, and flowed upward to a sitting position to look her companion in the eye.

He didn't say a word, nor did she. There was no need.

He stepped over the threshold and along the gallery to the scanning platform, roving his gaze until he'd taken stock of every part of the huge, circular space, impressed at the degree of accuracy that Stryker had achieved.

Xavier sat on his dais, facing a creature that made Magneto's lip curl in reflexive disgust. It had nothing to do with outward appearance. In his time, Magneto had seen more than his share of mutants who did not conform to baseline norms of human physiognomy. In his time, Magneto had also come face-to-face with living embodiments of what he chose to call evil, and that was what he was responding to here. The creature in the other chair, whatever his origins or upbringing, would have been right at home working by the side of Josef Mengele.

Under the circumstances, given what he had in mind, Magneto thought that quite appropriate.

"Hello, Charles," he said companionably.

The celestial song had ended. Jean was herself once more. She was whole, she was alive, more fulfilled than she could ever remember, and yet hollow and aching with a need more keen and primal than she had ever known, without the slightest clue how to answer it.

Instead, she woke up.

She looked toward Cyclops, who was lying nearby, telepathy revealing instantly that he was fine—battered but fundamentally unbroken—and she welcomed him awake with a radiant smile. As he gathered himself, she continued taking stock. The substance of the walls within the complex had been designed to inhibit telepathic communication, so she found herself pretty much isolated, with only a vague sense that the others were all right and a growing disquiet whenever her thoughts turned to Xavier. Whatever had happened, they weren't out of the woods yet, not by a long shot.

She shifted her broken leg and winced, the lance of pain up the length of that limb making her breath hiss through her teeth. Her subconscious had done a superb job, every piece had been placed precisely where it was supposed to be—but the task wasn't quite finished. The bone bits still had to knit themselves together, and with a doctor's inherent caution, she didn't want to rush the process, even though she suspected she could.

That automatic realization gave her pause. She hadn't magically acquired Logan's healing factor, but somehow she'd tapped into a part of his psyche that allowed her to mimic it on her own terms. She had done consciously what he did as an autonomic function of his own body, and that—disturbingly—implied a measure of rapport between them she didn't care to think about.

She shook her head in dismay. If she'd wanted complications, she'd have gone into psychiatry. Oddly, but understandably for some whose powers were wholly invisible to the naked eye, she preferred tangible solutions to tangible problems. Like fixing a broken leg.

Push the process now and she risked messing up all her good work, leaving herself functionally lame.

Thank Heaven, she thought of Scott, for having you to lean on, baby.

And immediately felt a rush of shame, as though she'd been caught cheating on a commitment that wasn't even formal!

Worry about that later . . . if there *was* a later.

Nightcrawler was praying, curled into a ball of indigo, borderline invisible where the dim light from the corridor bulbs ran out of energy, hands curled protectively around his head, which, in turn, lay against his knees in a pose of abject supplication.

“What's he saying?” Artie asked.

“Our Father,” Storm replied, “Who art in Heaven . . .”

“That's not what it sounds like.”

“He's praying in German, and French, and in Latin.”

Storm winced as she rose to her feet, trying to ignore the rude smells rising from the back of her uniform where the lightning had struck. Her nerves were a mess, as though a legion of fire ants were roaming beneath her skin, leaving a trail of itches the size of a superhighway that she couldn't scratch. She moved gingerly, like an old woman, taking care with every step and gesture—especially any that required turning her head—lest she lose a precariously maintained balance. She envied the children their resilience and used that as a goad to maintain a confident and solid facade.

She knelt beside Nightcrawler and stroked her hand down his back from neck to the middle of his shoulders, enjoying the richly delicious sensation of his luxurious skin. She'd never felt anything so smooth or plush, even the fur of newborn lion cubs.

He caught her with his tail, taking a couple of wraps around her palm and giving her a gentle squeeze of thanks and reassurance that he was all right.

She turned to look at Artie and past him to the others.

"Everyone else okay?" she asked. Whether they were or not, they'd be moving in a minute, faster than before. The sooner they were quit of this place, and far away, the happier she'd be. Unless, in departing, she could scourge the landscape with her lightning right down to the bare rock, wiping away all trace that the Alkali Lake installation had ever existed. That would be a real pleasure.

And if William Stryker happened to be inside at the time, so much the better.

Stryker's escape tunnel ended at a small clearing on the periphery of the main complex, about a mile downriver from the dam. A helicopter was waiting, gassed and ready to go.

Quickly, because he was never a man to waste time, Stryker released the chains that anchored the vehicle to the landing stage. He pulled the safety flags free of all the flight control surfaces, cleared the air intake of the twin jet engines, and at the last, removed the wooden chocks from the landing gear.

In a matter of minutes, he would be safely away, and not long after, if his mental estimates were correct, the dam itself would eliminate all evidence of what had happened here.

Perfect.

Magneto spared Mutant 143 a momentary glance and smiled humorlessly at the creature's evident frustration.

He tapped his helmet and said, "You can't come in here."

Then, drawing a magnetic field close about him, he rose into the air to the core of the holographic globe, doing a slow pirouette and letting his excitement show as he beheld all the mutants revealed on the display. He'd never dared dream there were so many, and he remembered how people felt in the internment camps after the war—on the one hand, cut to the soul by the realization that so many had perished in the camps, and yet at the same time restored by the discovery that, despite the Nazis' best efforts, there were survivors. Enough to form the bedrock of a nation. He thought then of Moses, standing on the shores of the River Jordan, gazing across a promised land that he would never reach.

How would posterity judge him, he wondered.

If that posterity was mutant, he didn't mind. That he had succeeded, that they survived and prospered, was satisfaction enough. If it wasn't, he didn't care, because that meant he had failed. Either way, he would do today what needed doing.

Xavier paid no notice of him, so entranced was he by the glamour cast by Stryker's pet mutant.

Magneto shook his head in sorrow. "How does it look from there, Charles?" he wondered aloud, and while there was pity in his voice for his old friend, there was also an edge to his words, a contempt for the weakness that had brought Xavier to such a state. Here was a rich irony. If not for Xavier, Magneto would not have been captured and used by Stryker to crack open the secrets of Xavier's School—and most especially, of Cerebro. Yet, that selfsame act had in turn presented Magneto with the means to deliver his people forever from the threat of annihilation. Each act required the sacrifice of the same man. To Magneto, that was a more than fair exchange.

"Still fighting the good fight?" he mocked, turning away from Xavier to examine the device around him. His assessment completed, he used his power to begin a global reconfiguration. At his direction, Cerebro began to deconstruct and rebuild itself, the air filling with ceiling panels, metal braces, conduits, cabling, every key component that went into the construction of the machine, all moving swiftly and purposefully to their new destinations.

"From here, old friend, it doesn't look like they're playing by your rules."

The work finished to his satisfaction, he descended to the platform.

"Perhaps it's time to play by theirs."

On the far side of the doorway, Mystique smiled and strode briskly into the chamber. By the third step, when she emerged from the shadows, she was a perfect match for William Stryker.

She paused for a cruel and dismissive glance at Xavier, still oblivious to everything other than what 143 was feeding him. Then, she crouched beside 143, taking care not to touch him as she whispered into his ear: "There's been a change of plans. . . ."

As she spoke with Stryker's face, in Stryker's voice, 143's eyes bulged and a measure of saliva drooled from the corner of his mouth. He actually looked excited by the prospect.

Still presenting her masquerade, Mystique returned the way she came, reverting to her true form only after she was clear of the chamber.

Magneto stood before his friend one final time and tried to think of something to say. At Ellis Island, he'd been willing to sacrifice a child—Rogue—to achieve his goals. Now it was a friend. Nothing he could say, precious little he could imagine doing, would ever make that right. Some scales simply could not be balanced.

"Good-bye, Charles," he said.

Mutant 143, eager to begin, cocked his head to one side and glared once more into Xavier's skull.

Around them both the great globe flared once more brightly to life—only now, where its surface had been decorated by a random scattering of scarlet icons, representing the mutant population, now there

was a multitude of pristine white ones, which stood for everyone else. Magneto had given them both access to every nonmutant sentient mind on the planet.

The better to destroy them all.

True to his nature, recovery for Logan was quick and complete. He was a little unsteady on his feet, but that was due to blood loss, as he could plainly see from the Jackson Pollock mess he'd made all around him on the concrete. He popped his claws and retracted them to make sure they were in good working order, and flexed his limbs and back to smooth out any kinks.

He had one clue to Stryker's trail: the man's scent, heavy in the air. That was all he needed. Without any specific memory to back it up, he instinctively understood that a man like Stryker would cover every contingency, including failure. He wouldn't want to be stuck here amid a whole passel of superpowered mutants who hated his guts. He'd have a convenient backdoor and waiting transportation. All he needed was time to make his getaway. All Logan had to do to stop him was catch up.

Silent and purposeful as a hunting cat, only far more ferocious, Logan picked up the pace.

* * *

"*Was ist?*" Nightcrawler wondered as they rounded another corner in what was turning into an endless series of identical corridors—to find themselves confronting a slaughterhouse of a battlefield. Quickly the two adults blocked the children's path and shunted them back the way they had come.

After stern injunctions to the kids—especially Artie—to stay clear and, above all, not peek, Storm took another look, taking stock of the circular vault door that had obviously been ripped from its hinges, then just as obviously put back in place, much like a cork into a wine bottle.

"What is this place, Storm?" Nightcrawler asked again.

"Cerebro," she replied, and she didn't bother to hide her fear. Whoever had been here—and she needed no hints to come up with that identity—clearly didn't want anyone else going inside. And if the ultra-low-frequency hum she could feel as much as hear emanating from within was any indication, the system was still very much operational.

Of Xavier there was no sign, and she knew then that Magneto had remained true to his nature where the X-Men were concerned; he had found a way to betray their trust. No doubt for the most "noble" of reasons.

She sensed movement in the air that warned her of others approaching well before they actually came into view, so that when Scott helped Jean around the corner, Storm was there to greet them and shoulder part of the burden herself.

"Jean, what's going on?" she demanded.

Jean narrowed her eyes, holding her head for Storm as she had for Scott, so that her eyes were mainly masked in shadow.

"The professor is still inside," she told them, using both their shoulders for support as she hopped toward the doorway on her good leg and tried not to relate to the gore that surrounded them. "With . . . another

mutant. Another psi, very powerful, very twisted. Very dangerous. I've got to steer clear of him, too much chance of being snared like Charles. There's some kind of illusion, Charles is trapped, he thinks he's home, at the school!" She focused some more, and when she spoke, the words came in a rush. "Magneto's reversed Cerebro, it isn't targeting mutants anymore."

"Thank goodness for small favors," Cyclops muttered.

"So who's it targeting now?" Storm demanded at the same time.

Who do you think, Jean thought, and said aloud, "Everyone else."

Of course Artie had ignored everything Storm told him, and as a consequence had just heard what the others said. He had his own instant solution.

"You've got your optic blasts, Cyclops," he piped up. "So blast the door open!"

"I can't," was the reply.

To the other adults, as much as Artie, Jean explained, "Once the professor's mind is connected to Cerebro, opening the door could kill him." There was a moment's pause as all of them considered that as suddenly a very real possibility.

"We'll have to take that chance," Scott told them, even though he loved Xavier as a son does his father.

Abruptly, once more, Jean took charge: "Kurt, you have to take me in there. Now."

Cyclops, true to form, protested: "Jean!"

Nightcrawler shook his head. "I told you, it's too dangerous. I cannot teleport blind. If I can't see where I'm going, I—"

"Who is this guy?" Scott demanded.

In part because he felt flustered and pressed and wanted to defuse the growing tension of the moment, Kurt launched into his spiel: "I'm Kurt Wagner, but in the Munich Circus—"

"He's a teleporter," Storm said simply, holding up her hand to forestall Nightcrawler's introduction.

"We don't have time for this," Jean cried urgently.

"Wait," Storm said in a tone that wouldn't permit argument, backed by a will that was a match and more for anyone present.

Something in what Kurt had said, in the way Jean carried herself, caught Storm's attention. She reached forward to take her friend's chin in hand and turn her head up and around to meet her own eyes.

What she saw there broke her heart. "Oh, Goddess," she breathed, and didn't know who needed comfort more right then, Jean or herself.

"What's wrong?" asked Nightcrawler.

“Jean’s blind,” Scott said.

“I’m a telepath, damn it! I don’t need eyes to see—” she began.

“Great,” Scott snapped back at her. “So long as there are conscious minds around, you can tap into their visual receptors as surrogate eyes. But you’ve got a bum leg as well, remember?”

“I’ll go,” Storm said simply, and when the others looked at her, she repeated it, an unassailable statement of purpose. “I’ll go.” And then, with a look straight at Nightcrawler, “*We’ll go.*”

“Storm,” he pleaded, “I can’t!”

“Kurt, I have faith in you.”

“Kurt,” Jean said, “if Stryker’s replicated the Cerebro chamber, then where you’re going is essentially a huge, empty room. I’m projecting a mental image of the space into your head. Use that for your benchmarks. Stay clear of the walls, stay clear of the platform, you’ve got room to spare. Do you see it?”

Nightcrawler nodded and gathered Storm into his embrace, arms around her shoulders, tail wrapped snugly around her waist.

“One last thing,” Jean said, “don’t believe what you see in there. Remember, Charles’ adversary traffics in illusions.”

“This just keeps getting better and better,” Nightcrawler grumbled in Storm’s ear.

“If you’re not clear in five minutes,” Cyclops said warningly, “I’m coming in after you.”

Storm nodded, and so—reluctantly—did Jean.

“Are you ready, Kurt?” Storm asked him. He wouldn’t meet her eyes, but not because he was avoiding her. For the moment, his mind—and prayers—were elsewhere.

“Our Father,” she heard him whisper, “Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth—”

And just like that, they were gone.

“—as it is in Heaven!”

Just like that, they were somewhere else.

Storm had never jaunted, and after this ride never wanted to again. She didn’t know how Nightcrawler could stand it. She felt like she’d been turned inside out and left a trail of body parts all the way back to where they started. It was like she’d thrown up, horribly, but only inside herself, and was left feeling all twisted and out of sync.

They’d materialized right where Jean had suggested, in the air about half a body length above the gallery. Storm was in no condition right then to notice, or do anything, so Nightcrawler continued to hold her as

they dropped to a landing.

They expected to find two figures: Xavier himself and the mutant who was controlling him. But—surprise—no Xavier, no command console, no command helmet.

The only other presence in the vast and empty room was a young girl, standing right at the edge of the platform. She was all peaches and cream, her hair a glorious gold blond, pretty as a picture, sweet as can be, a dream made flesh. Her eyes, though, were an eerily mismatched blue and green that seemed to glow with some intense inner light, and her face was that of someone whose will was absolute.

Having no idea what to expect, but taking his cue from Storm that something was wrong, Nightcrawler looked around, eyes narrowing at the way the curvature and coloring of the sphere made the room seem like a limitless space.

“Hello,” said the little girl brightly, as though she was welcoming guests to her house.

“Storm,” Nightcrawler wondered aloud, “have we come to the right place? Is this Cerebro?”

She nodded, her attention focused, not on the girl, but on the space a little beyond her where normally Xavier would be sitting.

“Is it broken?”

“No.”

“What are you looking for?” asked the girl.

“Professor!” Storm called. “*Charles!*”

The girl smiled sweetly, but there was a hollowness to her eyes, an edge to her stance, and the whole shape of her face around that smile, that made that sweetness a lie.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “he’s busy.”

For Charles Xavier, every time he synced Cerebro was as marvelous and exciting as the first. It was the ultimate roller-coaster ride against a backdrop as varied and spectacular as the clearest of night skies, if only the naked eye came with the range and sensitivity of the Hubble telescope.

His eyes and mouth opened in amazement and delight as he beheld the globe of the world from the inside; it circled serenely around them, its surface covered with a multitude of white lights, creating a display more crowded and, in its way, more beautiful than the stars. There were more than he could count, so he didn’t even try.

He heard a great pulse from the heart of the machine, and the lights on the globe grew brighter, in tandem with the deepening pitch and increasing frequency of the pulses.

“Professor,” he heard from the greatest distance imaginable, “*Charles!*”

He heard her as a whisper among the multitude, just as he had years ago during a trial run of the Cerebro prototype when his questing consciousness discovered a long, lean whip of a girl sitting on the

summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, taking a break from herding cattle by tossing snowballs and seeing how far her winds could take them. (She'd already reached the Indian Ocean, now she was throwing the other way and trying for the Atlantic.)

"Did you hear that?" he asked excitedly.

"No," said the girl, shaking her head for emphasis.

It made Xavier's heart sing to know Storm was alive, but that awareness only increased his frustration when he couldn't lock in on her position. There was too much interference from these other voices. He had to find a way to screen them out.

Storm stepped toward the little girl.

"Professor, do you hear me?" she called, more loudly than before. "*Listento* me, Charles! Whatever you're seeing, whatever you're experiencing, it's an illusion! You're in *anillusion*!" She heard no reply, and when she spoke again, there was a faint roll of thunder to her voice. "You have to stop this—you have to shut down Cerebro—*now!*"

The girl actually laughed.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked, in all innocence and rich amusement.

Xavier shook his head, as the word "now" echoed and reechoed through the spherical vault of the Cerebro chamber. For a moment he was sure Storm was right in front of him, close enough to touch—but all he could see was empty air. Save for the little girl, he was alone. His X-Men were lost, they were in deadly peril, he had to find them, save them.

And yet . . .

Always, his thoughts circled like vultures back to this same persistent, nagging question.

And yet . . .

Suppose *he* was the one who was lost?

"I hear them," he repeated, before voicing his own frustration. "But—I can't find them."

"Then concentrate harder," the little girl replied in a firm and commanding voice, in that special way that girls have that makes them sound as if they're merely stating an irrevocable natural law.

How could he be lost? He was in the heart of his mansion, of his school. He knew what had to be done.

Storm thought for a moment that she'd gotten through to him, but then the breath gusted out of her in a huff as she met the girl's gaze.

She wondered for a moment why the girl wasn't doing something more serious to stop them and answered her own question just as quickly. She probably needed most of her energies to maintain her

hold on Xavier. As far as the girl was concerned, they posed no significant threat. All she needed to do to win was delay them long enough for Xavier to finish his work. After that, it wouldn't matter.

Nightcrawler started forward, intending to confront the girl physically—perhaps considering teleporting her out of the chamber—but Storm stopped him.

“Kurt, don't move,” she told him. There were better ways to tempt the Gorgon.

“She's just a little girl,” he said.

“No,” she said flatly, “she's not.” Because any entity capable of suborning Charles Xavier had to be considered as supremely dangerous as Magneto.

“Oh.”

“Good advice,” said the girl.

She breathed a small prayer of thanks that her own elemental powers—mainly her ability to wield lightning—created a level of background “static” in her own head that made it virtually impossible for a telepath to pick her thoughts. The first times that Xavier tried he came away with a devil of a headache.

With any luck, her adversary would have no idea of what was happening until it was too late. But this would be an all-or-nothing play. Once she acted, and revealed herself as a legitimate threat, the girl would have to strike back just as ruthlessly.

The girl smiled. “I've got my eyes on you!”

Stryker had his hand on the door handle when Logan's fist caught him upside his face. It was worse than being hit by an iron bat. Stryker dropped, stunned, his thoughts reeling before a fresh avalanche of incredible shock and pain, blood thick in his mouth from a broken lip, and he thanked whatever fates there were that Logan's punch hadn't shattered teeth and jaw as well.

He didn't wonder why the mutant hadn't used his claws. That reason was made plain when Logan rolled him over on his back and dropped beside him in a duck squat, almost daring Stryker to make a move to defend himself.

“Now,” Logan said, with an edge of threat to his voice, “you were about to tell me something about my past?”

Looking up at him, William Stryker began to laugh.

“Why did you come back?” he asked, spitting blood.

“You cut me open! You took my life!”

“Please,” Stryker said, and for the first time he looked actually disappointed. “You make it sound as though I stole something from you.” He smiled suddenly, acknowledging a sudden surprise memory, or perhaps inspiration. “As I recall, it was you who volunteered for the procedure.”

“Who am I?”

“Just an experiment,” Stryker told him, playing every card in his hand, “that failed. If you really knew about your past, what kind of person you were, the work we did together—” He took a breath, wondering if he’d pushed Logan too far, if this would be his last. “People don’t change, Wolverine. You were an animal then, and you’re an animal now. I just gave you claws.”

Throughout the control room, there wasn’t a green light to be seen. The telltales on every console were flashing red, with alarm chirps and honks and sirens to add to the din. A set of displays showed the inside of the vast generator room, and a secondary phalanx of monitors presented data to show how dire the situation was.

The initial cracks had grown exponentially, in perfect concert with the original computer stress model. The jammed spillway had caused Alkali Lake to fill to the danger level, placing the dam under tremendous stress to begin with. Given the circumstances, it was already only a matter of time before it failed. The blast in the generator room had served to accelerate the process. Now, thanks to the relentless and incredible pressure of all that water, the worst-case scenario was about to reach fulfillment.

The complex shuddered—not very much, hardly enough to notice, just enough to stir some dust into the air—as blocks of stone the size of sofas crumbled from the ceiling. Then, as water jetted across the room with the force of a high-pressure fire hose, masonry fell in chunks the size of cars. Pipes, wrenched from their mountings, ruptured. Gas lines failed, filling the air with a heady mix of steam and other elements. Severed electrical conduits showered the room with sparks. Hydrogen ignited, setting off thunderclap blasts that only added to the chaos and destruction.

A torrent of water and stone and reinforced rebar cascaded onto one of the generators, jamming the turbine blades, which not only shattered but tore the whole assembly loose from its axis. Those blades flew every which way like scythes, and in their wake came a chain reaction of explosions that nobody in the complex failed to notice.

There it was again.

“Professor!”

Storm.

He still couldn’t find her. Hardly surprising, considering the din. Voices in his head, the hum of Cerebro deafening in his ears, this was proving far more challenging and arduous than he’d ever imagined.

“Professor!”

Strange that the voices he was hearing seemed to be in pain. That couldn’t be right. Cerebro was never intended to cause anyone harm. That was where he and Eric Lehnsherr had had their final falling out: What Charles Xavier saw as a tool, a means of bringing the human family together, Magneto wanted to use as a weapon, to cleanse the planetary genome once and for all. Having lived through one Shoah, he had vowed never to allow another, by whatever means were necessary. He understood the irony full well, this child of the Holocaust using the same methods as his own oppressors, the murderers of his family.

But somewhere along the way, he’d decided not to care.

He wasn't right, then.

This . . . wasn't right now.

Could anything be done about it?

“*Professor!*”

The chamber that housed Dark Cerebro shuddered from the tremendous shock wave. Overhead, the smooth curve of the dome came to an abrupt end as the vicious torque sheared through a line of retaining bolts and rivets. With a shriek of tortured metal, whole sections of ceiling plating collapsed, some falling straight past the gallery platform to and on the floor below with a resounding crash, while others tumbled lazily through the air as potentially deadly chunks of flying debris, especially dangerous for those like Nightcrawler and Storm who were essentially oblivious to them.

For that fateful moment, though, all of 143's illusions slipped—the setting reverted to its normal dimensions while the integrity of the holographic globe spasmed with static. Xavier coughed and started to raise his hands to remove his helmet.

But the moment was all the time he had, and it wasn't enough. The creature in the other wheelchair once more became the girl. The globe once more grew to the size of the planet itself. The room remained whole and intact, with none of those present allowed to have the slightest inkling of their danger while Charles Xavier unwittingly continued to bring about the annihilation of the human race.

The lights on the globe burned far brighter than before; Cerebro's *shum* was louder and more pervasive. Mutant 143 had accelerated the process.

Logan felt the explosion before he heard it, as a seismic transmission through the earth and a pressure wave a fraction of an instant ahead of the sound.

“What the hell was that?”

Stryker didn't answer at once, mainly out of defiance.

“Damn you, Stryker,” Logan roared, grabbing the man up by the shirtfront, “what's happening? What is it?”

“The foundation of the dam has been compromised,” he told Logan. “Some kind of rupture. Started in the turbines, and now it's spreading to the intake towers. The dam is releasing water into the spillway, trying to relieve the pressure . . . trying to stop the process . . . but it's *stoo late* ! In a matter of minutes, we'll *all* be under water.”

Logan looked back at the escape tunnel.

Stryker grabbed him, a drowning man to a life preserver: “Still want answers, Wolverine? Like how old you really are? If Logan is even your real name? If you have a family?” He knew the words were having an effect, and he glared at the mutant, willing him to listen, and to obey.

“Or,” he said forcefully, putting all his strength into this final ploy, “*is she* still alive?” That one, that implication, hit the mark, dead center. “Then why don’t we just get in the helicopter and fly away. I give you my word, Wolverine, come with me and I’ll tell you *everything* . You owe these people nothing. You’re a survivor, you always have been!”

Stryker gasped in pain as Logan delivered a wicked punch to the kidneys, one that was meant to hurt. He yanked Stryker close and tucked a fist under his chin, making his threat plain.

“I thought I was just an animal, Billy,” he said.

Stryker flinched at the *snikt* of the claws extending from their housings and thought right then that he was dead. When he realized a second later that he wasn’t, he had to face the shame of tears staining his cheeks, and far worse staining his trousers back and front. The outside claws bracketed his cheeks, close enough to dent the skin but not yet break it. The middle claw remained retracted.

Logan was smiling.

“With claws.”

In the hallway outside Stryker’s Cerebro chamber, with the kids stirring nervously as the floors and walls trembled enough to send a scattering of dust and some random splashes of water falling from the ceiling, Jean found her right hand closing into a fist. She felt a tension up her forearm, like a spring-loaded mechanism about to release, and her teeth bared fractionally in delight.

“Logan,” she said, almost exclusively to herself, but mentally it was a full-throated shout.

He heard her, as if she were standing right beside him.

“Jean,” he said, speaking as quietly as she and just as sure of being heard.

“Just tell me what you need, Wolverine. Tell me what you *need* . Tell me what you *want* !”

It was a simple choice: his past, or—and here Logan looked up toward the dam, which still showed no outward effects of the series of explosions deep underground; to the naked, untutored eye, it looked like it would stand forever—his future. To Stryker, the two had to be mutually exclusive. Maybe that was true?

Logan raised his fist, forcing the other man to rise to his feet, to tiptoes, both of them knowing that what he wanted more than anything was to pop that third claw and use Stryker’s severed head as a soccer ball.

Stryker winced again at the distinctive sound of metal on metal, but this time the claws weren’t extending. They had been retracted.

“I have what I need,” Logan told him.

Before he could fall, Logan pitched him up against a nearby anchor post, where chains were used to hold the helicopters secure against the worst of the local winter storms. In a matter of seconds he had Stryker wrapped tight.

“If we die, you die.”

As Logan raced back to the tunnel, Stryker pulled angrily on the chains and shouted after him: “There are no answers that way, Wolverine!”

A sudden rattle of metal caught his attention, and his eyes dropped to the chains. He thought at first it was some ground trembler related to the explosions that were shaking the dam, but he was wrong. His hands were trembling.

No big deal, he told himself, residual effect of his confrontation with Wolverine. He was scared, now he could afford to show it.

He sneezed, and the surprise outburst sent starbursts of pain through his skull that were worse than when Wolverine had punched him. He saw blood on the chains and snow in front of him. He wiped his face on a sleeve and left a scarlet trail that looked as though he’d used a decent and well-saturated paintbrush. But when he stuck out his tongue, he tasted a steady flow of it from his nose.

His face went pale as the snow, and a chill colder than the absolute of space closed around his heart.

“*Impossible*,” he breathed, and found himself wishing the mutant had used his claws.

That end at least would have been quick.

Alicia Vargas sat trembling on the floor of the Oval Office, her back against one of the two sofas that bracketed the presidential seal that was worked into the carpet. Ten minutes ago she’d been fine, and then it was as if she’d been knifed and gutted like a fish. She’d never felt such pain and thought, in that first rush of agony and terror, that all the nuns’ stories of Hell had reared up to claim her. She was dimly aware of the President calling for help, of other agents and staffers laying her on the couch, making way for the medics and doctors . . .

. . . and then, as suddenly as it had struck, the pain went away. She felt fine. She was making apologies all around, her boss insisting on a full debriefing, someone mentioning what they all feared, that this was some new kind of mutant attack . . .

. . . and then, everyone around her dropped, pretty much the same way she had. She felt fine, but they were dying, and that staffer’s offhand remark about mutants took on a whole new coloration that made her want to flee the building, that made her wish she *had* died moments ago. She was dying, they were fine. Now they were dying and she felt great. Did that mean, God forbid, she was a mutant?

She decided then and there it didn’t matter. She was an agent of the United States Secret Service, assigned to the protective detail of the President. That made him her sole concern.

She drew her weapon from its holster and levered herself across the floor, collecting a couple more guns along the way. She couldn’t quite muster enough strength yet to stand. The President had collapsed behind his desk and lay partially covered by his chair. With a convulsive heave, Alicia shoved it clear and, bracing her back against the wall, moved it to where she had a clean line of sight of both entrances. As gently as she could, she gathered the President’s head into her lap, keeping her own Glock in hand while laying the other ones aside—but keeping them in quick and easy reach—to use a handkerchief to wipe his face of the blood that was now leaking from nose and eyes.

“Alicia,” he choked. “My God, what’s happening?”

“Sir, I don’t know,” she told him. “But I’m here, I’m okay, I’ll keep you safe.”

George McKenna didn’t care about himself in that instant, because he knew Alicia’s words were a lie. He didn’t matter anymore, not as President, not even as a man; the only roles that had any substance were husband and father, and the bitterness he felt at this terrible moment was at being so far from those he loved. And even though he had no real hope of a miracle, he prayed for his wife, he prayed with all his heart and those coherent thoughts that remained to him for his children, that they be spared this awful end. He asked for mercy. . . .

Below the pontiff’s balcony, three Vatican and CitiRoma ambulances stood on the periphery of St. Peter’s Square. Some among the crowd gathered below had apparently been taken ill just before the pope’s appearance. He’d signaled a secretary to make the proper inquiries, then proceeded with the day’s events.

Now that handful of people were the only ones left standing, on the plaza and inside the Vatican itself. Elisabeth Braddock, who was taking a free day before driving to Milan to showcase Giorgio Armani’s couture line for the fall show, picked herself up off the gurney and carefully stepped off the back of the ambulance. There was blood on her face and on her new dress—linen, expensive, designed exclusively for her by Kay Cera and now utterly ruined—and her shapely lips curled as she saw more pouring from the noses and eyes and ears of everyone in sight.

Bracing herself for what she knew was out there, Betsy opened the gates to her own mind and cast a telepathic net out across the plaza, hoping to find some clue to the cause of this mass affliction. She staggered as if she’d been physically struck and grabbed desperately for the handrail on the back of the ambulance to keep from falling. It was worse, so much worse, than she had imagined.

This wasn’t just happening here in Vatican City. People were dropping throughout Rome itself.

She thanked her stars her mutant power had limits, sensing that no matter how far she cast her perceptions she’d just find more of the same.

Only the people in the ambulances appeared unaffected. Yet initially, they’d been the ones who were struck down by what was essentially the same effect. She knew one of the others was a mutant. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to put the rest of the pieces together. Someone had tried to take out mutants, possibly the world over. And now those tables had been turned.

“No,” she breathed. “*No*, please no! Don’t let this be happening. For God’s sake, for mercy’s sake—*stop!*”

Her pleas fell on deaf ears, or perhaps they had just been drowned out by the screams of the multitude as extinction reached out to claim them.

This was Bobby’s fault, Ronny Drake knew that for a fact. His brother must have figured out that Ronny had called the cops and this was some kind of mutie revenge, only he never dreamed his brother could be so cruel as to actually kill him. Brothers were supposed to look out for each other, that’s what Mom

and Dad always said, that's the way Bobby used to act before he went away to that damn school. Ronny was sobbing through the pain, clutching at his bedspread, calling weakly for his parents, why couldn't they hear, why didn't they answer? He'd never been so scared, he'd never understood before this moment how awful and all-encompassing a thing real fear could be. He grabbed for every breath, counted every heartbeat, cherished every thought, weighing them all against scenes from the movies and TV shows he'd seen, the video games he'd played. He knew this wasn't make believe, he knew there was no reboot, he didn't want to die, he said that over and over and over again, hoping repetition would guarantee his supplication being heard by the Almighty.

He was sobbing, and wailing, making hard, racking noises that tore at his throat and gut as hard as the energy waves that caused them. His face was streaked with blood, and it had splashed all across his pillow and sheets and the wall beyond. His vision was smeared and he expected to go blind before the end, he wished the end would come quickly, anything to take away the pain.

He told his brother he was sorry.

He wished he was a mutant, too, so at least they'd be together. And, with his life reducing fast to flickering embers, he found the capacity to hate Charles Xavier with all his young and passionate heart, blaming Xavier for stealing Bobby away from the home that had raised him, the parents who loved him, the brother who so desperately needed him.

On the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, hundreds of traders lay screaming. . . .

A thousand feet below the Pacific, the crew of the fleet ballistic missile submarine *Montana* lay screaming. . . .

A hundred fifty miles above the continental United States, the seven astronauts comprising the crew of the space shuttle *Endeavor* stood in silence as their commander tried to reestablish contact with the ground. They'd been in the middle of routine housekeeping traffic with Mission Control at Houston's Johnson Space Center when they'd heard a succession of increasingly garbled outcries and what sounded like screams.

After that, nothing.

"I say again, Houston, do you read? *Endeavor* to Houston, do you read?" The mission commander switched channels on the selector. "CapCom, do you read?" Switched again. "Edwards flight control, do you read?" One more time. "Cheyenne Base, do you read? NORAD ops, this is *Endeavor*, please respond." And finally, switching to 121.5, the international distress frequency: "Any station, any station, please respond. For God's sake," Peter Corbeau said, "is anybody there?"

The only answer was the static of an open carrier wave.

As far as they knew, they were all alone. And possibly the only human beings left alive.

Stryker wanted to scream, to shriek, to howl, but he couldn't. His mind, his body, his soul felt like they had all been snagged by monstrous barbed fishhooks that were now pulling away in every direction, determined to tear him apart. Something had gone terribly wrong. The only answer that made sense to

him was that somehow the Cerebro wave had been reprogrammed to affect not mutants, but baseline humans.

All his work, all his planning, all his sacrifice—all for nothing.

With the whole world in his grasp, no power on earth could persuade Jason to stop. Strange that, after all this time referring to the boy as Mutant 143, Stryker could only think of him now by the name he'd given him. His father's name. It didn't seem . . . proper to call him anything else. As if this moment, with Stryker himself facing death, compelled him to accord his son the dignity, the identity, the . . . *humanity* that had been denied through the whole of his adult life. And Stryker felt a pang of grief, of misery, at the memory of the first time he'd held the boy, less than five minutes old, and marveled at how small and precious a gift he was. That had been Stryker's moment of sublime hope, when he had sworn to keep his boy safe, to stand by him no matter what. There'd been no hint then of what was to come, just this small and achingly vulnerable miracle who was the recipient of all the love that William and Karen Stryker had to give.

Ironically, humanity's only hope was now the dam. The shocks that set the ground to trembling were coming faster and stronger as water punched through the lowest levels of the complex like a pile driver, each collapsing section further undermining the foundation of the dam itself. Its collapse would destroy the complex and bury Jason. Stryker was no structural engineer—he couldn't build things worth a damn—but he'd spent a professional lifetime perfecting the art of destruction. Regardless, he was doomed, but survival for the world could now be measured in minutes.

Then a new but terribly familiar voice turned even that small hope to ashes.

“William,” Magneto said, greeting him as an old friend, his rich and cultured English accent rolling the syllables of his name like a tiger savoring its prey.

Stryker glared up at him.

“How . . . good to see you again,” Magneto continued as if he genuinely meant it.

Wolverine hadn't searched him, hadn't noticed the backup gun Stryker wore in an ankle holster. Molded plastic with plastic bullets that could kill a man as effectively as metal, designed to be totally impervious to Magneto's power.

Stryker grabbed for it, faster than he'd ever moved in his life.

Magneto let him clear the gun from its holster and almost—but not quite—bring it to bear before he used his power to wrap a length of chain around Stryker's gun hand like a whip, yanking it aside just as Stryker pulled the trigger. There was a flat report, and the bullet went way wide, into the trees. Mystique quickly stepped forward and wrenched it from Stryker's grasp, twirling it around her finger like a cowboy as she sauntered over to the helicopter and climbed aboard, leaving Magneto and Stryker to make their final farewells in private.

Magneto smiled.

“It seems that we keep running into each other,” he said. “Mark my words, it will never happen again.”

Another length of chain wrapped itself around Stryker's throat as Magneto pronounced his final sentence: “Survival of the fittest, Mr. Stryker.”

Storm and Nightcrawler stood within Cerebro, and as far as they were concerned nothing whatsoever was happening. The great machine was silent.

But then Storm knew different. As the shock wave thundered past, the girl had lost control of her illusion, allowing them to see things as they truly were. Around them was a vast holographic construct of the globe, festooned with an uncountable number of blinding lights that Storm intuited at once represented the nonmutant population of the Earth. Remembering what she had endured when the Cerebro had been calibrated for mutants, she closed her eyes in empathy. Even if they found a way to save everyone, what could they do about the traumatic scars left on their memories? In some ways, that would be far worse than death because with it would be the constant terror that it could happen again.

That couldn't be her concern right now. First and foremost, she had to save them.

The momentary disruption of the illusion had revealed one thing more: the true identity of their adversary, not a little girl at all but a misshapen creature in a wheelchair, whose mind had latched onto Xavier like a lamprey.

Her initial, her main, reaction was sorrow that something so damaged could come into the world and never find the help needed to make it whole, in spirit if not in flesh. Much like Magneto, she dealt with the primal energies of the world. It gave her perceptions far beyond those of normal vision, and those in turn gave her an insight into people that was almost as effective as Logan's physical senses. She had seen cruelty in her life and once, when she was very young, had encountered a being that became for her the living embodiment of *evil*. She had known that at first glance, the same way that her first awareness of Xavier told her that he was a man to be trusted.

The man in the other wheelchair was *not* to be trusted. There was *awrongness* to his spirit that made the patterns of energy cast off by his body as twisted as his body itself.

And for the second time in her life, staring at the false face of the little girl, Ororo Munroe knew that she was face-to-face with evil.

"He'll be finished soon," she said in a voice rich with satisfaction, a glutton enjoying the feast of a lifetime. The agonies—the ones she remembered, the ones she imagined—that tore at Storm's heart only filled his with delight. "It's almost over."

"This is not good," Nightcrawler muttered, looking up and around them nervously in the vain hope he might find a way to pierce the veil that the girl had cast around them. It bothered him to know that the place was collapsing about their ears and yet be unable to see any part of it.

Storm nodded agreement. They were out of time. "Kurt," she told him, "it's going to get very cold."

He nodded back to her, understanding that she was talking about more than the usual winter chill.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"When the times comes, we'll likely have to hurry—and there won't be any margin for error."

"In my whole life on the trapeze, I've never missed a catch. Do what you have to . . . Ororo. Trust me for the rest."

She spared him a glance and a smile that had nothing to do with business. “I like the way you say my name.”

She couldn't see him blush, not with his indigo skin, and for that he was supremely grateful. “I like saying it.”

As he spoke, he saw mist on his breath and realized she'd started what she had planned. Her warning was no joke; the room's ambient temperature had already dropped enough to make him shiver.

Her eyes were silver, highlighted in a crystalline blue, the rich color of the Earth's sky as seen from space, standing out dramatically against her chocolate skin. Her hair stirred in a breeze of her own creation, and Nightcrawler knew that this represented the calm center of an increasingly powerful whirlwind.

“There are winds you find in the wastelands of both poles,” he heard her say, as though she were conducting a seminar. “Gravity grabs hold of cold, dense air and pulls it down the slopes of mountains and plateaus. In a volcanic eruption, the same thing happens with a pyroclastic flow. The air picks up an incredible amount of speed and that speed makes it colder. It's a dry wind, there's no precipitation. You can consider it a sandstorm of ice and snow. This wind cuts. It can freeze you in a heartbeat, not by coating you in ice but by turning the marrow of your bones to crystal. You don't fight this wind, you go to ground, you endure. You find a way to survive.”

“What are you doing?” the girl wailed.

Nightcrawler, already shivering violently because Ororo couldn't spare the concentration or the effort to shield him, clutched at her arm.

“Storm,” he cried, “she's a child.”

“She's an illusion.”

“Does that give you the right to condemn the being who created her?”

“Do we have a choice, Kurt? That mutant's life for the professor's, and likely the world!”

“That's a decision Magneto would not hesitate to make, I know. Nor have the slightest regret over it,” he replied.

Storm said nothing, but her eyes blazed like silver beacons against the darkness.

“I'm *freezing*,” the girl shrieked, her voice breaking, turning masculine and adult, then back to a girl once more. “You're hurting me. Make it stop!”

“Stop it,” the girl cried. And then, in 143's own voice, “*Stop it!*”

Just like that, the illusion flickered, faster and faster, like a manic strobe. The girl vanished, as did the illusion of the silent room and the deactivated Cerebro. They found themselves in chaos, with chunks of scaffolding and shielding plate tumbling all around.

Feeling frozen solid, Nightcrawler ducked as a piece the size of a limo took out a portion of the gallery

back by the doorway. Storm ignored it all and stood her ground, her eyes fixed on her adversary.

Mutant 143 sat hunkered deep in his chair, eyes radiant with fury as he tried to grab hold of Storm's thoughts, only to discover what Xavier had learned years before—and just as painfully. That when she was fully in tune with her powers, when they were active on this level, it became virtually impossible to access her mind. The energies she manifested created too much psychic interference. To the unwary telepath, it was much the same as trying to grab hold of a bolt of lightning.

Mutant 143 cried out, so staggered by the backlash that his leash on Xavier also slipped.

Xavier felt the chill and knew it at once for what it was. He sensed the ripples of static on the fringes of his awareness and understood at once what Storm was doing. He beheld the hologram of the globe at life-size and the lights that blazed across its surface, bright, so bright, like candles on the brink of going out forever.

And he knew, with a realization that would haunt him to the end of his days, what he was doing here.

His first instinct was to shut down the Cerebro wave at once, but he held back. The process of disengagement had to be gradual, to allow the afflicted bodies and psyches to decompress, lest the shock of instant recovery do as much damage as the attacking wave itself.

To do that, though, he had to deal once and for all with—

“Jason,” he said quietly as he turned. He didn't ask Storm to temper her winds. The young man who sat across from him knew too many pathways into his mind, he dared not allow him another opportunity to reassert control.

“No,” the girl pouted defiantly, narrowing her eyes, shaking her head, fiercely trying to compel obedience.

“No,” she repeated.

There was no inhibitor on Xavier's thoughts now; with it in place he couldn't operate Cerebro. That was why he had to be completely under 143's influence before he was allowed into the chamber. The pathways that 143 had used to worm his way into the core of Xavier's being now provided equal access to their source. The young man was gifted, and powerful, but Xavier acknowledged no equals, especially with the survival of humanity at stake.

“No,” she cried again, with tears. “Stop! You're hurting me!”

The air rippled outward from her, looking much like the heat flow from a jet-engine exhaust, and in its wake the substance of the room's reality once again changed. It reminded Xavier of some of the classic cartoons, where the animator would swipe his brush across the screen, unleashing a cascade of color like a waterfall, which in turn would transform the scene into something altogether different from what had come before.

They found themselves on a battlefield, an image Xavier recognized from his own past, before the X-Men, before he lost the use of his legs, when he'd found himself cut off from his unit and caught in the middle of a firefight that was rapidly turning into a major pitched battle. Death came from all sides: It claimed men with stakes buried in the grass, with bullets, with cannon shells, with splinters blasted every

which way by exploding trees, by a carpet of bombs tumbling from planes that flew so high no one knew they were in danger until the world erupted around them. They died from fire, they died broken, they died in agony, they died weeping and screaming and cursing and lost and lonely.

There were more images, none, thankfully, from Xavier's life, all of them skewed toward the cruel and the painful. As Xavier had sensed during that first interview, there was no empathy in Jason, no acknowledgment of the people around him as living, sentient beings worthy of even the slightest respect. To him, they were a different order of interactive toy. He took his pleasure from "mounting" them as the practitioners of voodoo believed their gods did when possessing their worshipers. He created scenarios that literally put his victims through Hell and gloried in the agonies that resulted.

There was nothing in him that responded to joy or that even recognized its existence. He considered his life a misery, and by sublimating those feelings through the torment of others, he made himself feel not so much better as less awful.

Had Xavier worked with him from the start, perhaps things might have been different. But Stryker had closed that door. Perhaps he had been right. Perhaps Xavier had been afraid of Jason. Had he only wanted those students at his school who could be saved?

"Get out of my head!"

"No," Xavier said. All those years ago, when he wasn't so sure of his vocation, or his own abilities, he'd made a terrible mistake. Could that be explained, could it be excused? That didn't matter to him now. Those options didn't exist today. He could no more abandon Jason now than one of his own. Succeed or fail, he had to try now, as he'd refused to then.

The ripples bounced off the wall, shunting all the images they carried with them into an incredible collision that made it impossible for a moment to tell which pieces of wreckage and shattering realities were illusion, and which were actual pieces of the room that was collapsing about their heads.

Through all the chaos, the only constant that remained was the facsimile globe, but at long last even that seemed to lose form and substance. Its outlines smeared, as transmitted images do when overtaken by static. Unnoticed in the ancillary din, the hum put forth by Cerebro gradually faded, as did the lights on the globe.

Xavier took a deep breath, mustering his strength for a last effort, and sent a thought pulse of his own along all the linkages that had been established between his mind and the rest of the world. Deep down inside there was a part of him that was tempted to try a global rewrite, something on the order of "love thy mutant neighbor as thyself," but it was an enticement easily resisted. Storm was fond of telling him that nature moved at its own pace, that some things had to be taught—and learned—in their own time. Short-circuit the process, shortchange the result, little good would come of it.

Having just endured firsthand what that meant, he had no desire to compound the resulting mess, just to try as best he could to set things right.

What he sent was a little bit of energy, or personal grace. A psychic aspirin. He couldn't banish the physical effects of the Cerebro wave, but at least he could ameliorate the residual pain. The victims might remember that pain, but they would no longer feel it. Quite the contrary. They'd actively feel better, like waking at the dawn of a fresh and beautiful day, whose sunrise contained the promise that anything was possible. And that those possibilities were good ones.

He reached up and removed his helmet, and with that severed his direct contact with Cerebro, which obligingly completed the full shutdown process. The globe vanished as if it had never been.

With it went Storm's winds, her eyes reverting to normal as Nightcrawler took her by the hand. Because the air was so dry, there was no evidence of the terrible cold she'd created beyond the residual chill itself.

Jean must have been monitoring the situation with her own telepathy, because the moment the helmet cleared Xavier's head, the vault door blocking the entrance was blown wide open, taking with it a fair chunk of surrounding wall.

Hot on its heels, Cyclops plunged into the chamber, only to backpedal frantically as a new series of explosions deep within the complex dropped another length of ceiling on the entrance, hopelessly blocking it.

The room shook as if it were a ball being worried by a playful puppy, and this latest assault proved far more than its structure could bear. As the platform and gallery began to twist alarmingly, Xavier chose to ignore the risk as he pivoted his chair and pushed toward Jason. The young man, grotesque as he was, had taken on the aspect of a waxworks mannequin. There was no expression on his face, no emotion in his eyes. Xavier sent thought after thought to him, but the harder he reached, the more defiantly Jason pushed him away.

He wanted no part of what Xavier had to offer.

A massive plate clipped the edge of the platform, and Xavier looked up to see most of the upper hemisphere crashing down on them. He knew what had to be done and lunged forward in his chair, attempting to grab Jason by the body or the chair—by some part of him—in hopes of creating a daisy chain of physical contact that would allow Nightcrawler—whose capabilities he could see clearly in Jean's mind—to teleport them all out of harm's way.

Jason would have none of it. Using the motor controls of his own chair, he backed out of reach just as the huge pieces of wreckage smashed into the gallery.

Then they were all falling as the platform gave way. Xavier felt Storm's arms, and something else that he belatedly realized was Nightcrawler's tail, but he didn't really register their touch. He had eyes only for the tortured, and now broken, semblance of a man whom he prayed had finally found his measure of peace.

The next thing he knew, after a moment of altogether sublime misery—which Jean's thoughts had*not* warned him about—he was in her arms, with Storm, Cyclops, Nightcrawler, and the stolen children crowded close around.

Chapter Seventeen

While Magneto climbed aboard and settled into the copilot's seat, Mystique finished the start-up

sequence. A rapid press of three buttons in sequence was rewarded by the rising whine of the twin jet engines coming on-line and spooling up to speed. She checked the gauges, satisfying herself that performance was nominal across the panel, and then engaged the rotors. Above their heads, through the clear canopy, the big blades began to spin.

One hand on the control yoke, the other on the secondary, Mystique was about to lift off when she nudged Magneto with an elbow and thrust her chin off to the left. He followed her direction and quickly found the figure of a boy standing on the tree line, face expressionless as he watched the helicopter prepare to leave. The only part of him that moved was his right hand, flicking open the lid of his Zippo lighter and snapping it closed, over and over, steady as a metronome.

Mystique looked at Magneto, wondering which way he'd jump.

He watched the boy for perhaps a minute, until Mystique found herself about to remind him that it was past time to go. The longer they stayed, the greater the risk of being caught by the dam when it collapsed. Not a good thing.

As if intuiting her thoughts, Magneto nodded once and beckoned once.

The boy just stood there.

John was thinking back to Boston, to how Bobby Drake had looked on the *Blackbird*'s ramp, staring up at his parents and his home as if he were saying good-bye to them forever. He'd ditched his own family ages back, and forgotten them, so for him the guy's hesitation had no meaning. Totally bogus moment. Now he found his cynicism and contempt thrown back in his face as he came face-to-face with the exact same choice. Walk away from Xavier's now, he knew, there'd be no turning back. Things would never be the same. The friendships he'd made would probably come to an end. Rogue . . .

What did he care about Rogue, really? The girl had the hairy wow-wows for *Bobbeeee*, for God's sake, talk about your total lack of taste! That pair of lames were made for each other, and both of them made perfectly for Xavier's. No way would John Allardyce turn out like them.

Pyro was made for better things.

He dropped the lighter into his pocket and headed for the open door of the helicopter.

The smile he saw from Magneto when he came aboard made it all worthwhile. He'd made the right choice.

As the helicopter lifted over the trees and Mystique accelerated toward the nearest line of mountains, Pyro had no regrets. And no worries, either, about the X-Men. He didn't believe they were in any danger. After all, they had their *Blackbird*—and here he uncorked a wicked nasty grin—that is, assuming Rogue or Bobby found enough gumption to fly that puppy to their rescue. Of course, that would mean breaking the rules, disobeying Storm's order. Fact is, Pyro didn't think they had it in them.

That thought didn't bother Pyro at all.

Storm led the way, wishing there was sufficient volume of air within the tunnels to generate a wind capable of carrying them all. The complex hadn't seemed so huge going in, but now the tunnels seemed

endless. Fast as they hurried, she knew this was taking too long.

Nightcrawler was closest behind her, carrying Xavier in his arms as if the X-Men's mentor weighed next to nothing. Poor Kurt didn't look happy, either, probably because he wasn't altogether comfortable moving on two legs. He could make much better time galloping upside down along the ceiling on all fours.

Next came the children, with Scott and Jean bringing up the rear. She had one arm across his shoulders to take the burden off her broken leg.

After what Storm decided was just shy of forever, they reached the loading bay. They'd felt no more big explosive shocks the past few minutes, but it was clear that something just as bad was taking their place. Dust and small bits of debris were falling from every surface.

Their plan was to leave the way they had come, out the massive double doors at the far end of the loading bay and then along the spillway to the forest and, ultimately, the *Blackbird*. It wouldn't take long, because the moment they were outside Storm planned to take to the air and rocket her way back to the X-Men's hidden aircraft. She'd be there and back in a matter of minutes, and they'd be free of this terrible place.

Ten minutes, she prayed to any deity who cared to listen, that's all they needed. Fifteen, max. Not so hard a thing to ask for, was it? Hey, they'd just saved the world, that ought to be worth a tiny break from the fates.

The doors were wide open, and as they crossed the broad expanse of the loading bay, the kids commenting excitedly on the smashed and burned-out wrecks they passed along the way, Artie and Jubilation Lee raced ahead, ignoring Storm's cross "*Stop!*"

There was a taste to the air she didn't like, plus a low-frequency rumble that reminded her of one of the great herds of wildebeest on the African savanna suddenly going stampede. She could see a violence to the eddies and currents around the entrance and beyond that raised the hackles on her neck and made her break into a dead run of her own, filling the room with a bellow that grabbed everyone's notice. This seemed like a voice that could very well call down thunder.

"I—said—stop!"

And they did, right at the bottom of the approach ramp to the doors. As Storm caught up with them, snatching them off their feet and into her arms, her conscious mind caught up with the clues her subconscious had been processing, and she felt almost overwhelmed by an avalanche of despair. The air outside these doors was being assaulted by the leading edge of an air ram, a pressure wave compressed to the point of being an almost solid mass, by the force that was pushing it down this channel. It wasn't a stampede she was witnessing. The gates to the dam had been opened. The spillway was flooding.

She saw Jean separate herself from Scott and take a stance at the foot of the ramp, gritting her teeth as the air before her started to shimmer. Her red hair stirred without the slightest breeze and Storm knew that her friend was going to pit the whole of her telekinetic ability against the unimaginable force of the water coming down that huge funnel. Even if she could buy them time to escape the loading bay, almost certainly with the sacrifice of her own life, they'd still have to find some escape route from the complex itself. And if the spillway was flooding, then the dam itself had to have been compromised. Once it collapsed, dumping the whole of Alkali Lake into this valley, no power on Earth—certainly none available right now to the X-Men—would save them.

A great grinding noise filled the room, and everyone first assumed it had something to do with the onrushing flood, building its own runaway train crescendo outside.

Then the kids, and Storm, and even Jean, jumped as the double doors slammed shut.

“Trust me, darlin’,” she heard Logan say, “you don’t want to go out there.” And she turned to find him a short way along the wall, with one fist jammed up tight against a sparking junction box that looked as big as his own chest.

Then an even more resounding *BOOM* shook the space, knocking most of the mutants present off their feet as it made the room shudder so hard it felt like a real earthquake. The doors bowed slightly from the impact shock, and water spurted from the central seam with the force of a high-pressure fire hose.

Snakt!

Logan retracted his claws, and the kids, who’d never seen him use them, who’d only heard—and mostly mocked—the stories they’d heard from Rogue, stared in silent awe.

“Everybody here?” he asked. “Everybody okay?”

His eyes told him the answer to the first, his senses cataloged the rest, and he zeroed in on Jean.

She didn’t give him a chance to say a word but turned her face to him, to show him her ruined eyes, and said, “We’re fine, Logan.” The fingers of one hand were interlaced with Scott’s. It wasn’t just that she was leaning against Cyclops for support, it was the body language of the way their bodies melted seamlessly together. Even in these dire circumstances, it suggested a relaxed intimacy that spoke volumes about their relationship and the true depth of their feelings.

“Please,” she told Logan, with a gentle empathy and a plea for understanding that had nothing to do with the words she was actually speaking, “help the professor.”

He nodded, and let Cyclops half carry her away. She’d made her choice.

Storm watched him, with full understanding of what had just happened and how he might be feeling. He didn’t try to put a brave face on the moment, or anything like that. His emotions were as plain and primal as Jean’s; he’d never be ashamed of them. Just because she’d chosen Scott as her go-to guy didn’t mean Logan would care for her any less. Or that the decision was final.

“Come on,” he told everyone, maybe a little more gruffly than he’d intended. The adults chose not to notice. “There’s another way out.”

The spillway wasn’t enough to save the day or even slow the process of collapse. Quite the contrary. The sudden and tremendous rush of water had the same effect on the underground complex as the earlier explosions. Wherever there was a weak bulkhead, wherever access portals had been left open, wherever doorways failed, water crashed into Stryker’s base, further undermining the foundation of the dam itself.

The first spiderweb series of cracks began to splinter the face of the dam itself, minute fissures that extended up from the initial breach underground in the generator room. They didn’t look like much, nothing very impressive at all, until it became evident that the only way water could be leaking through

them was if they extended clear through to the lake. That meant a crack right through better than ten meters of reinforced concrete.

Once more, the inexorable laws of physics and hydrodynamics came into play. Water burst through the holes at tremendous pressure, backed by the full weight of a lake miles long, a mile wide just behind the dam, and hundreds of feet deep. This water ground away at the concrete as it poured through the cracks. With every passing second, as the very structure of the dam eroded, those cracks widened. More water escaped. More of the dam was washed away. The force of the water increased, thereby accelerating the process.

For all intents and purposes, though the X-Men didn't know it yet, they were out of time.

Well clear of the complex, but still below the dam, the team emerged from Stryker's escape tunnel. Logan pointed them over the crest of the hill to the helipad, and Storm hurried ahead to prep the vehicle for takeoff.

They found her on the edge of the trees, staring at the empty platform.

"Logan?"

"Son of a bitch," he growled, and charged across the clearing.

They caught up with him where he'd left Stryker. Logan was kneeling by the body, tapping one extended claw against the chains that had wrapped themselves so tightly around the man's throat he'd been virtually decapitated.

They didn't need an explanation, but he provided one anyway. "Magneto."

And again, with dark and deadly feeling, "That son of *abitch* !"

"After what he'd done, Logan," Xavier said quietly, "small wonder he wouldn't face me, or any X-Man."

"Charley," Logan growled, "you don't understand—"

"If you say so."

Logan looked up and around, back in the direction of the dam, reacting to cues only his enhanced senses could perceive. Well, not quite his alone, because Storm was looking, too.

They started up the slope together, intent on reaching the top of the hill and having their eyes confirm the disaster that had befallen them. What they would do next was anybody's guess.

At last a chunk of facing larger than a freight car bulged outward from the body of the dam. Girders and rebar held it somewhat in place for a span of seconds as the stream of escaping water erupted into a raging torrent, but the stresses it endured went far beyond the limits imagined by any of the design team. Steel snapped like breaking strings, and these countless tons of concrete went spinning along the crest of a brand-new waterfall as lightly as a flat stone skimming the surface of a tranquil lake. It flew through the air at a slight angle and shattered against one of the pump houses with the force of a good-sized bomb.

In its wake, cracks as wide as roadways exploded across the face of the dam, rapidly reaching all the way up to the summit so that the next section to go involved a significant area of the wall. All pretense of integrity was gone. One collapse triggered the next as inexorably as a falling line of dominos, so that by the time Storm and Logan, with the irrepressible Artie close behind, reached the crest of the hill with its unobstructed view, there was virtually no dam left to see.

Just countless billions of gallons of water, thundering down the valley straight toward them.

“What is it?” Artie asked in breathless disbelief.

“Alkali Lake,” Logan told him. “All of it.”

He turned to Storm. “How many can you carry?” he demanded. She wasn’t sure, and said so. “How about the damn elf, what’s-his-name? How many can he carry, how far can he jump? And Jean, her mind thing, the teke, can she use it to make some kind of boat?” He was speaking in a rush, hand on her arm, Artie—who for once kept his mouth shut—tucked under his other arm as he propelled her down the slope. They had maybe a minute to act, and he wasn’t about to waste any of it.

“What about you?” Storm demanded of him.

He snorted with derisive laughter. He could take care of himself, even in a flash flood of such immensity.

The rescue was doable—it had to be; they all knew that any other outcome was utterly unacceptable. They didn’t have to go far, just clear of the wave front.

Just then, a tremendous wind blasted the clearing from above. It was too soon for the pressure ram leading the flood to reach them, and this downdraft was accompanied by the shriek of high-performance jet engines that sounded definitely *not* in a good mood.

* * *

Skimming the surface of the treetops, when it wasn’t actually plowing through them, the *Blackbird* sideslipped through the air toward them with a pale and terrified Rogue doing her best at the controls. All around her in the cockpit, displays flashed red and presented ominous messages in both text and voice, telling her in unmistakable terms that she was not flying the big jet at all properly or well. She couldn’t help herself, she yelled right back at the telltales, agitation bringing her lower Mississippi accent to the fore with a vengeance. “I’m doing the best I can, damn it! Leave me the hell alone!”

They didn’t listen. They kept right on yammering—about airspeed, flight profile, engine temperatures, hydraulic pressure, ground proximity, the landing gear. At least the last warning was something that made sense. She slapped the big lever on the front panel, the same way she’d seen Storm and Jean do it, and was rewarded by the hollow *thunk* of the struts lowering from their wheel wells. Unfortunately, that also screwed up the plane’s balance and performance, creating additional drag that she wasn’t expecting and didn’t know how to cope with.

One of the main bogies snagged the crown of a fir, creating drag enough to pivot the plane right around and tip it to one side. Rogue tried to compensate, twisting the control wheel and applying power to the throttles, but she overdid both elements so that when the plane wrenched itself loose it slipped immediately into a flat spin that overwhelmed the ability of the vertical thrusters to compensate.

Fortunately, the plane only had about twenty meters to fall, not a lot of distance for a vehicle whose length was close to double that.

As everyone below scrambled for cover, the *Blackbird* made about half a revolution—Rogue sensibly chopped the throttles to zero—before the impact. It was a hard landing, and the only saving grace was that it landed in deep snow instead of on frozen earth. Even better, while the leading edge of the port wing buried itself in a patch of ground that was fully exposed, that ground was nowhere near solid. For this was where Pyro had collapsed when the initial Cerebro wave had struck. His wildly out-of-control power had melted all the snow for three meters and more around him. All that water had soaked straight into the ground, resulting in a boggy quagmire of mud.

The good news: The wing hit without substantial damage.

The bad news: Like any vehicle lodged in deep mud, it was likely stuck fast.

As heads all around the clearing cautiously poked up to make sure all was well, the *Blackbird*'s main hatch cycled open, and Bobby Drake emerged.

“What’re you waiting for?” he yelled. “The dam’s collapsed, we’ve got to go! *Hurry!*”

Storm was first in with Jubilee and the children. While the others came aboard behind her, she scrambled to the flight deck.

Rogue hadn’t let go of the yoke, she was sitting stock-still, teeth chattering, pale as Storm’s own hair, convinced that she’d doomed them all.

Storm took a moment she couldn’t really afford to ruffle the young girl’s hair. “You did great, Rogue. I am so proud of you.”

* * *

Aft, Cyclops helped Jean into one of the passenger seats, but as he reached over to fasten her harness, she waved him away.

“I’ve got it,” she told him, and proceeded to buckle herself in without any hesitation or difficulty. Cyclops spared a quick glance to make sure the others were doing the same, then followed Storm to the flight deck. Rogue hadn’t moved.

He crouched down and took her by both shoulders.

“It’s okay, kiddo,” he told her. “Storm and I, we’ll handle things. Grab yourself a seat and strap in.”

Convulsively, she released her harness and popped out of the chair, making sure not to touch either Cyclops or Storm as she sidled past them and rushed to where Bobby Drake was waiting.

Cyclops took her place, fidgeting a moment as he discovered that the sheepskin-covered seat back was so ice cold he could feel it even through his insulated uniform. There was the thinnest sheen of hoarfrost on the yoke as well, something he was used to finding wherever Bobby Drake hung out.

“What the hell—” he muttered, then relegated the concern to the back burner of his mind as something to worry about and deal with later.

He didn't waste time with preliminaries but initiated an emergency hot start. The engines obligingly spooled up to speed . . .

. . . and then went silent.

He started again, Storm gently manipulating the throttles, both of them watching the displays like hungry hawks to make sure that this time there'd be no loss of power.

"Thrusters four and six are out," she reported. It wasn't anything Rogue had done; this was left over from the Air Force missile that had knocked them from the sky.

"We should still be able to fly," Cyclops told her.

"If we were level, absolutely. But we're stuck fast, and the thrusters we need to punch us loose are the ones we're missing. There's not enough power available to pull us out of the ground!"

"You got a better idea?"

She advanced the throttles, and the great aircraft began to tremble violently. Seeing a clutch of tree trunks flipping toward them through the air, Storm reflexively ducked her head into her shoulders, whistling as they bounced harmlessly past. They'd been torn loose by the flood and pitched on ahead. The mutants had only a few moments before the water was on them. It was now or never.

Xavier sensed the children's agitation and used his telepathy to ease their fear. If this was indeed the end, he would make sure that, for them, it would be peaceful and without pain.

Nightcrawler clutched his rosary and offered up the most heartfelt prayers he knew.

Jean closed her broken eyes and went to that place within her where the celestial song could be heard. Now, more than ever before, that strength was needed. In her mind's eye she rose once more from the ashes of creation and spread wide her arms, turning them to wings of fire and glory, that the *Blackbird* might fly, that these friends—who she loved more than her own life—would live.

In the base's loading bay, the closed doors finally gave way under the onslaught of this latest and most terrible fall of water, together with a major stretch of ceiling as well. Like starving hounds after a deer, floods poured down every corridor.

Far below, Yuriko Oyama lay unmoving in her cocoon of adamantium at the bottom of the augmentation tank. The room was mostly in ruins, but there were redundancy systems galore, and that meant some of the monitors were still active. The bionics that replaced much of Yuriko's purely organic components came with their own dedicated suite of sensors, and even though the images on the screens were wobbly and shot through with static, it was evident that she was still alive.

Not that it mattered. Encased in an adamantium shell, she was wholly incapable of movement. She wasn't going anywhere of her own volition or under her own steam.

A few moments later, as the flood waves reached this section of the complex, the whole question became moot. Walls shattered from the torrential impact, and that, in turn, collapsed the entire ceiling. In a heartbeat, the lab was filled with water, and the augmentation chamber itself, together with the Weapon

X tank, was buried under hundreds of tons of steel and rock and earth.

Elsewhere, the same happened in the Cerebro chamber.

Outside, an avalanche of water hundreds of feet high cut a remorseless swath through the valley below Alkali Lake, annihilating every trace of the complex that had been constructed beneath the dam. The pressure wave of air that preceded it made trees that were meters thick bend almost double for the few seconds it took the water to reach them and snap them like kindling. Mist and foam rose from that leading edge of the wave, partially obscuring the awful fury of the event and the devastation it was causing.

Directly in its path, mere seconds from destruction, lay the *Blackbird*.

No, Jean thought to herself. More than an article of faith, this denial became for her its own irresistible, indomitable force of nature.

On the flight deck, both Storm and Cyclops reacted with surprise as switches and controls began to operate by themselves. Before their eyes the plane once more set itself for vertical takeoff.

Realizing who had to be responsible for this, Cyclops turned in his chair to call out, concern evident in his voice, "Jean?"

He reached for the release on his harness, but Storm laid her hand on his arm to stop him. It was the only card left to play.

Jean raised both hands, her face eerily serene, revealing none of the murderous concentration of will and effort this had to be demanding of her. Xavier's eyes narrowed. He couldn't gain access to Jean's mind, to determine precisely what was happening or assist in any way. The power she was manifesting created a scrambling field around her thoughts unlike anything he'd ever encountered, which he found himself unable to penetrate.

At Jean's bidding, the vertical thrusters fired. Mentally reviewing the plane's schematics, she cast forth a piece of her awareness to take a look directly at the problem, smiling to herself at how much simpler it was to do the work this way than it would have been with her hands. No more squeezing through impossibly small spaces and getting cut and scraped by wayward outcrops of metal. She identified the problem and, using telekinesis, fixed it.

Obligingly, the engines roared to full power.

"The thrusters are back on-line," Storm told Cyclops, grabbing her controls and pulling back on the yoke. He took care of the throttles, advancing them to full emergency power, while keeping a wary eye on their appropriate telltales.

Of course, it wasn't quite that easy. Jean walked the psychic image of herself underneath the hull, where the wing was still stuck fast. Reminding herself to apologize later, she slipped the throttles out of Cyclops' grasp and eased back on the power to minimize the risk of structural damage. Another asset of working this way, she discovered to her delight, was that she could multitask at the speed of thought, accomplishing a number of objectives in no time at all, so that for her the onrushing wave appeared to be frozen in place, like one of Bobby's ice sculptures.

She set her phantom shoulders against the wing root, planted her phantom feet firmly enough on the ground to leave an actual imprint, and applied power in much the same way as Cyclops did by advancing the throttle. She called it from this magical place within herself, and reveled in the celestial song that enveloped her as she mated imagination to will and found the place where there are no limits.

The smile she gave, on her real face as on her phantom one, as the wing slipped free of the ground, was as radiant as if she were witnessing the birth of the very first star in the heavens.

The engines roared, gravity pressing everyone aboard into their seats as Storm grabbed for altitude, racing ahead of the flood wave at a steep upward angle that bought them the time they needed to rise above the crest of the water. At the same time, she brought a wind right into their face, to create an even greater amount of lift for the wings.

At the back of the plane, Logan stood by the open ramp as the valley fell farther and farther behind. A light *wasping* insistently beside his head, Storm on the flight deck pointedly telling him to close the damn door. He ignored it, for the moment.

He looked around suddenly, sharply, as if someone were standing right beside him, and more slowly his gaze swept the passenger section of the jet until his eyes came to rest on Jean. She didn't respond, but he knew she was aware he was looking at her. He suspected she was aware of a lot of things, and capable of far more than any of them even imagined. She'd need someone strong to walk beside her, and he flicked a quick glare to the right-hand seat on the flight deck. Cyclops better be equal to the task. Jean deserved the best, and if she figured Logan didn't fit that bill, he'd make damn sure whoever she chose was worthy of her.

That made him chuckle, and he looked back toward what had been Alkali Lake. The water was down by more than half, though with any luck the flood would slacken over time and distance, and the towns downriver would survive. Probably worth suggesting to Charley that the X-Men help out, though.

Then his mood darkened. No more Stryker, thanks to Magneto. Whatever secrets he possessed were lost to Logan now. Same went for the base. If the past was indeed prologue, like Shakespeare said, then all Logan was left with right now was a book full of blank pages.

Stryker had called him an animal.

He looked at his dog tags and knew that wasn't entirely a lie, or even an exaggeration. But man was an animal. Did that make what Stryker said true, the way that Stryker meant it?

Logan turned once more into the body of the plane until his eyes came to rest again on Jean.

Animals didn't feel the way she made him feel, or inspire the feelings he knew he did in her. Animals didn't give a damn about feeling . . . worthy.

A new movement caught his eye; Rogue had turned in her seat to look from Jean to him. He gave her a smile, acknowledging that his epiphany cut both ways, that much of what drove Rogue was the desire to feel worthy of him. That had never happened before, either.

There was more to this new world he'd found than Jean, no matter how signal a part of it she was. And some other parts were just as precious.

He didn't look back as he pressed the control that raised the ramp and sealed the hatch. He didn't look down as he dropped the dog tags into his pocket.

He made his way forward, shaking his head in amusement as he saw Jones curled up around Nightcrawler's tail, playing with it the way a kitten might a ball of string. Rogue and Bobby were looking after the kids, most of whom had crashed the moment the *Blackbird* was airborne. No one said a word about John.

Logan had marked the boy's scent on the tree line, followed its trail to the helicopter pad where it mingled with Magneto's and Mystique's. As best his senses could report, they'd taken off together. The boy had joined up of his own free will.

Then there was Charley.

They met each other's eyes, but only for a moment. They had a lot to talk about, and it had to be talk. Logan wasn't sure when he'd allow the other man inside his head, only that it would be a while. And Xavier knew better than to visit uninvited. They were both wary, they were both wounded; it made sense under the circumstances to put things off until they'd had time to heal.

Not as if Logan was planning on going anywhere. Not solo, anyway. Not anymore.

He climbed up to the cockpit and slipped into the seat that Scott had vacated, watching him tenderly begin to apply bandages to Jean's eyes, while Xavier leaned close, probably using his own mental powers in concert with hers to determine the full extent of the damage.

Storm was looking at him, and he was surprised to see there was no sign of concern on her face. Made him grin to realize that it wasn't because she didn't care, but rather because he didn't need it.

The book of his past was closed. Didn't matter to the X-Men who or what he was; he'd proven by character and actions that he belonged. They accepted him wholeheartedly and without question. Now that ball was in his court.

The book of his future was waiting to be written, and wherever it might lead in days to come, Logan knew that for the present his life was bound to theirs.

He reached out his left hand, and with a smile full of promise and delight, Storm took it, indicating that he place his right hand on the yoke.

Together they pulled back on the sticks and sent the *Blackbird* soaring toward the stars.

Epilogue

Ten minutes before, the news anchors of all the major networks had solemnly introduced the President, live from the White House in Washington, D.C. The graphic of the presidential seal was displayed, and the image dissolved to George McKenna sitting at his desk. The housekeeping staff had been busy in the week since the attempt on his life, and the office looked good as new. The desk itself, carved from the

timbers of a British frigate captured during the war of 1812, had been swept of its usual clutter. The only items in view were a stack of files, in leather loose-leaf binders adorned with the seal, and the knife with its scarlet banner: MUTANTFREEDOMNOW. And of course, the speech.

The copy he held was just for show. He was actually reading from the TelePrompTer right in front of him, speaking to the nation as he would to his own children. It was a good quality he had, this ability to convey the most complex of issues in terms that everyone not only understood but which also made them relevant to their own lives.

He just wished—with all his heart—he had a different topic.

The office was crowded—broadcast technicians, staffers, military, Secret Service. There was a palpable air of anxiety to the room, and McKenna prayed that didn't show on his own face. He was asking a lot of his country, to in effect declare war on some of its own children.

He had a bust of Lincoln on his desk, out of camera shot, and a photo of John Kennedy. The one, because he led the Union in and out of a Civil War; the other, because he had stood with the world on the brink of nuclear Armageddon and brought it safely home. He thought he knew now some of what they had felt during those fateful days and weeks and, for Lincoln, years. He looked at the knife and wondered as well if the road of his life would come to the same end.

Dying wasn't such a horror; he accepted it as a natural part of life. Being killed, though, especially having survived a combat tour in a serious shooting war, that was something he'd hoped he'd never have to worry about again.

There'd been no word from Stryker since their meeting in this very office. No contact, in fact, with any of the man's senior staff. That was worrisome to McKenna, especially in light of the reports that filtered out of Westchester, about military helicopters and kidnapped and terrorized children. They represented everything McKenna feared most about Stryker's operation and his methods, and he'd been on the brink of ordering him to stand down when the whole of the human race had apparently come within a heartbeat of extinction.

He couldn't really recall much of what had happened, beyond collapsing, and then finding himself cradled in the lap of one of his female Secret Service detail, while she leveled her pistol at the doorway. Today she was standing off in the corner, to his left, back to the wall, where she had a clear view of everyone present and an equally clear run at McKenna himself. If anything happened, he knew that Alicia Vargas would give her life to save him, without hesitation.

She hadn't seen the speech, almost no one had, although its substance had been the focus of scores of rumors ever since he had asked for airtime. He'd worked on it with his wife—who'd been with him most of his political career and who actually served as his de facto chief speechwriter—and ended up writing most of the text himself. There were no copies, other than the one scrolling through the camera mount in front of him, and no advance material had been released to the press. Whatever he would say tonight would come to the nation as a surprise.

He thought of his children as he spoke, and of how he'd feel if he were to discover one of them was a mutant. Could he stand by and see them condemned? How fiercely would he resist? And yet, it was only by the smallest yet most profound of miracles that the world had survived at all. Did not the needs, the very survival, of the many justify the sacrifice of a few?

Stryker's indictment of mutantkind was damning, but that's what indictments were supposed to do,

make the case for conviction. McKenna would have felt better, though, if someone had been able to mount a defense.

Maybe he needed one more bust on his desk, of Pontius Pilate. Or would old Ramses be better, condemning the Hebrew firstborn?

Movement caught his eye, but it was only his chief of staff pouring a glass of water.

“. . . in this time of adversity,” McKenna read, “we are being offered a unique opportunity—a moment to recognize a growing threat within our own population, and take a unique role in the shaping of human events.”

He took a deliberate look at the pile of folders Stryker had given him.

“I have in my possession . . . evidence . . . of a threat born in our own schools, and possibly even in our own homes. . . .”

He jumped, just a little, as a surprise burst of thunder rattled the room. Staffers moved quickly to the door and windows out of camera view, to close the curtains. Unfortunately, the broadcast was live; there was nothing to be done about the windows right behind him as a sky that the Weather Channel had guaranteed would be clear suddenly darkened with angry clouds from horizon to horizon. Lightning flashed spectacularly and often, and the glass was pelted by a torrential downpour of cold and driving rain. Nothing would be flying today, not in the vicinity of Washington. If people had half a brain, they wouldn't even try driving.

“. . . a threat we must learn to recognize, in order to combat it . . .”

A display monitor was mounted to one side of the camera, allowing him to see how he looked. But with another, even more daunting burst of lightning and thunder like the wrath of God, that screen abruptly dissolved into static.

“What *thehell*?” McKenna demanded, as much a reaction to the atmospheric display outside as to what was happening here. The lights had flickered as well. Just perfect, just dandy, the most important speech of his administration gets skunked by wild weather that just whistled up out of nowhere.

“What *thehell*?” he repeated, rising slightly from his chair, because he'd just then noticed that the red light atop the camera was no longer glowing. The camera was off, he wasn't broadcasting. He was about to call to the cameraman, only to realize that the man was standing stock-still, as if he'd been flash frozen.

He looked around the room and saw that the same applied to every person present. They weren't moving, not a one. And yet it wasn't time that had stopped, only the people—water was still pouring from the pitcher Larry Abrahms was holding, overflowing the cup and pouring over his leg to the floor.

McKenna grabbed for his phone but couldn't find a dial tone on any of the lines, not even the direct, secure, untappable link to the National Military Command and Control Center in the Pentagon. He pressed the crash button, to indicate an imminent threat inside the Oval Office. By rights that should have set off alarms throughout the building and brought armed agents at a dead run.

Nothing happened. In a room crowded with people, he was suddenly quite alone.

Something stirred over by the fireplace, but because of the bright TV lights right in his face he couldn't

quite make out what he was seeing until they stepped forward.

Six in all. Three men, three woman. One man in a wheelchair, everyone but him clad in form-fitting leather that bore the look of a uniform. He wore a suit, as conservatively respectable as McKenna's own.

"You," he said to the man in the wheelchair, immediately recognizing the familiar face from various news programs, the networks' go-to talking head when it came to the subject of mutants. Stryker's file had made the reason plain.

"Good afternoon, Mr. President," said Charles Xavier.

"What are you doing here?" McKenna demanded, rising to his feet.

"We're mutants," Xavier said, "but we aren't here to harm you. Quite the contrary. My name is Charles Xavier. These are the X-Men. Please sit down."

"I'd rather stand."

He had names for all of them, mainly from Stryker's files: the redhead, whom he'd met when she testified before Congress, was Xavier's associate, Dr. Jean Grey. The silver-haired woman was one of the teachers at Xavier's School, Ororo Munroe. The younger girl had been referred to in Stryker's files only by a code name: Rogue. One of the men was also a mainstay of the School, Scott Summers; the other, surprisingly, as McKenna remembered from some particularly nasty CIA files, shared ops with, of all organizations, the Canadian Special Intelligence Operations Executive. He was Logan. He hung a little back and apart from the others, his eyes never resting as they ceaselessly swept the room for any signs of trouble. He was the team's cover, just as Alicia Vargas was for her President. If there was a problem, McKenna understood that he'd be the one to deal with it.

Dr. Grey's eyes were strangely milky, lacking iris and pupil, and McKenna realized with a start that she must be blind. She made a small gesture with a hand, and an imposing stack of files floated through the air to McKenna's desk, landing right beside the folders already there.

"These are files from the private offices of William Stryker."

"How did you get them?"

"Let's just say I know a little girl who can walk through walls."

"Where is Stryker?"

"Regrettably," and Xavier sounded like he actually meant it, "no longer with us."

"You killed him!"

"He was killed, yes. While trying to annihilate every person on this globe who possessed the mutator gene."

McKenna's eyes flashed to his left, to Alicia Vargas, as he remembered how shockingly she'd collapsed, writhing on the floor as if in the throes of a grand mal epileptic seizure, blood gushing horribly from her mouth and nose and eyes and ears and the pads of finger- and toe-nails, as though her whole

body had suddenly become obscenely porous. She hadn't moved from her post, but he could see that, unlike everyone else in the room, she was aware of what was happening. She could hear Xavier and see him. She had her hand on her gun, but she hadn't yet drawn it. To his credit, McKenna didn't once doubt her loyalties. Mutant or no, she would be true to her oath.

"I didn't know," he said. "My God." He shook his head, vainly trying to grasp the enormity of Stryker's ambition. "Do you think I would—do you think *I could*—sanction such a thing?"

"If I did, sir," Xavier told him, "we wouldn't be here talking."

McKenna flipped through the dossiers, speed-reading enough to make him sag atop the desk, resting his full weight, plus that of the office, plus that of the world, on hands and shoulders. Atlas had nothing on him when it came to bearing burdens.

"I've never . . . I've never seen this information."

"I know," Xavier said quietly.

McKenna glared up at him from lowered brows.

"But I don't respond well to threats."

"This is not a threat, Mr. President, of any kind. This is an offer." He rolled forward in his chair and indicated the bust of John Kennedy. "I remember those days, as you do, and the fear that came with them, that through no fault or action of our own, the world would end. It wouldn't even be a matter of someone's choice. It could just as easily happen as a mistake."

McKenna nodded, thinking of how he'd helped his father dig a bomb shelter in the backyard and how utterly futile that shelter would have been if the worst came about.

"You and I, Mr. President," Xavier continued, "and the people we represent have had a taste of our own version of doomsday. How close did we all come to the abyss? And what have we learned from that terrible experience? John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev found a way to lay the foundation for a lasting peace between their two nations—or at least a way to lessen the possibility of outright war. Can we not try to do the same?"

"I realize"—he indicated the files Stryker had provided—"you may have information about me. About my school. About our people. Grown mutants like me, like the X-Men, like . . . Magneto, are but a comparative handful. Most mutants are children, and what are children but the promise of the future made flesh? What shall we promise our posterity, sir? A world based on hate and fear, whose ultimate outcome is a genetic Civil War that will likely be the death of us all? Or can we find a better way?"

"I'm willing to trust you, Mr. President, if you're willing to return the favor."

"As we both have seen firsthand, there are forces in this world, mutant and nonmutant alike, who believe that a war is coming. That it is inevitable. You'll see from these files how diligently some have worked over the years to start one."

"If we wish to preserve the peace, to guarantee our posterity, we must work together. Do you understand?"

McKenna looked at his chief of staff. The pitcher was empty, the flow of water reduced to a trickle of drops. Larry was such a fashion plate, he was sure to go totally berserk when he discovered his sodden trousers and ruined shoes.

Then he looked back at Alicia Vargas. There was such a look of longing, and apprehension, in her eyes that—as father and grandfather both—he wanted to take her in his arms and reassure her that there really was no bogeyman in the world, nothing she need ever fear, save as Franklin Roosevelt warned, fear itself.

“Yes,” the President said, after a long pause for thought. “I think I do.”

He held out his hand across the desk, and from his chair, Xavier took it. He had a strong grip with calluses that told McKenna that, like himself, here was a man who liked to work with his hands. Clearly the man was a good teacher, and George McKenna hoped he wasn't too old and too set in his ways to learn.

“I'm glad,” Xavier told him. “We are here to stay, Mr. President. The next move is yours.”

McKenna nodded—and wasn't surprised to see, when he looked up a moment later, that Xavier and his X-Men were gone.

He turned to the window and saw that the storm was passing. Just as in the “Pastoral” sequence of Disney's original *Fantasia*, the gods of thunder and lightning, having had their fun, were moving on, leaving a bright and beautiful day in their wake. He wondered which of Xavier's—what had he called them?—X-Men was responsible, and for no reason he could articulate, fixed on the image of the black woman, Ororo Munroe, tall as he was, with the most incredible blue eyes and hair of burnished silver.

Alicia coughed, ever so gently.

Larry Abrahms yowled with fury, just as McKenna expected, which made the President smile.

Immediately in the room, there was a ripple of surprise and agitation. As far as anyone else was concerned, the President had been making his speech and then—presto!—suddenly he was standing where he'd been sitting, and everything was in a small kind of chaos.

McKenna took his seat and waited for a semblance of order to be restored, a matter of some hurried and small-voiced exchanges between the camera crew and whoever was handling the network feeds. The commentators and anchors had evidently been vamping like crazy since the signal was lost.

Nobody noticed the new pile of folders on the desk, and as McKenna took his chair, awaiting his cue to continue, he looked from one to the other.

The stage manager held up five fingers, then quickly folded them one by one into a fist. At the last, the red light above the camera blinked on again, and the Oval Office was once more live and broadcasting.

At first George McKenna didn't say a word, a silence that began to make those watching start to feel distinctly nervous, unaware that he was marshaling thoughts and arguments and rewriting frantically in his head. Nobody understood the quirky, self-deprecating smile he made, or the look that accompanied it toward the bust of Lincoln. Nobody, save perhaps Charles Xavier, caught the wayward thought that came to him then: *At least you had a train ride and the back of an envelope handy when you wrote the Gettysburg Address; me, I've got to wing this! Extempore and live to the whole damn country*

!

But he had no doubts. He knew now what he wanted to say, and as with all such moments, this was something best said from the heart and from the soul.

Taking the files Xavier had given him, McKenna placed them on top of Stryker's and, looking straight into the camera, and into the homes and offices of the American people and, he prayed, especially into their hearts, the President of the United States began to speak.

Along Pennsylvania Avenue, tourists and locals began hesitantly to venture once more out of doors, commenting to one another about the downpour and collectively grumping about the miserable state of weather forecasting.

A family from Utah gathered on the grass of Lafayette Square for what they figured was a spectacular Kodak moment, with the White House as a backdrop and not another pedestrian in sight to mar the photo. Dad gave everyone their cue, they all said, "Cheeeese," with grins galore, he clicked the shutter .

..

... and nobody moved. Not here, not anywhere within a radius of blocks. Flags flapped in the crisp autumn breeze, fountains burred, birds fluttered through the air. All the mechanical elements of life in the nation's capital functioned as they were supposed to. But none of the people noticed.

Then, apparently out of nowhere, a sleek ebony aircraft rose into the sky from the helicopter landing stage on the South Lawn of the White House. The *Blackbird* held position for a moment above the executive mansion, then rocketed silently away.

In its wake, Washington woke up and continued with the normal course of what had started as a normal day. Only a few would ever know the truth, of how a handful of heroes had stood between the world and those who would leave it a wasteland, of how their struggle would inspire a leader to achieve greatness and an immortality all his own, to rival those of the predecessors he so admired.

Decent people, striving to do the right thing. That's all it takes to save the world.

Some call themselves human, others mutant.

And some of those mutants are the X-Men.

Thanks to them, their world has a future.

With their help, that future may be glorious indeed.

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X-MEN 2

CHRIS CLAREMONT



BALLANTINE BOOKS

to Beth

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X-MEN 2

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Prolog

Poland—1944

The hard, cold rain pounded out of the sky, soaking clothes, changing the dirt to slippery mud, beating the life out of everyone it touched.

Eric Lehnsherr stood in the mud beside his parents, his coat wet clear through to his shirt, his small hand grasping the back of his father's wool pants just above the knee. His child's eyes were wide at what was happening around him. His mother and father, both strong and sturdy people, held him close, tried to comfort him, shelter him, but the events of that hour were like the rain: impossible to avoid.

The mass of people scared him, making him want to run away. The guards made him want to cry. But he did neither. Instead he focused on the twisting spirals of barbed wire that covered the tops of the fences in front of and around them. Through the rain the points of the wire seemed to sparkle, calling to him.

Suddenly the German guards shoved everyone forward, making them walk between two tall wire fences with more twisting barbed wire lining the top. Eric didn't want to stare at all the faces watching them from the other side of the fences. Those people were all terribly sad and tired, and many were crying as they watched. Some clutched their arms, as if trying to cover the numbers that had been tattooed there.

Instead he traced the curved barbed wire and its shining points as he and his parents continued, slowly moving forward. It was as if that wire were his only friend.

At one point he slipped in the mud, but his father held him up. His mother clutched both him and his father. Together they moved almost as one, following the wet rows of people in front of them, trying to not look at the guards.

Eric told himself he would be strong, for his parents. Strong like the wire.

Ahead of them people were screaming now, and Eric didn't want to get any closer, but his father and the guards moved them along, without saying a word. The people behind them crowded in tight, sometimes bumping him.

A woman behind Eric was crying softly.

The barbed wire on the top of the fence seemed to spin along with them, twisting and sparkling in the hard rain. There had always been something about metal that he loved. The fence and the sharp points of the wire didn't seem dangerous to him. He wished instead that he could climb up there and touch them.

Suddenly, ahead of them, the people moved out of the way, and from where he stood Eric could see that the path turned into two paths, both of which were lined with tall weaved-wire fences. The guards were opening and closing the gates as people went through.

A big guard in a German uniform shoved into them, poking at Eric's mother with a rifle, speaking much too fast for Eric to understand.

His father understood, though, and shook his head. "No." His mother held on to Eric even tighter. So tight it hurt.

The guard poked at them with the rifle and began shouting.

Eric clung to his father, not knowing what was happening.

Then his mother screamed.

“No!” his father said again.

Suddenly two more German guards appeared and yanked Eric away from his parents. With a quick turn they shoved him along after the other children who were being pushed and carried down one of the paths between rows of fences. Many of the children were screaming and shouting and crying. Others were strangely quiet.

The guards then turned their attention to Eric’s parents and shoved them down the other path.

Eric started back to them, crying now. He wasn’t going to leave them.

He wasn’t!

They couldn’t make him!

But the two guards picked him up and carried him back along the fenced path. Their hands were rough and hurt his skin through his wet coat.

He kicked at them, screamed at them, but they ignored him. They took him through the weaved barbed-wire gate and closed it.

He could still see his parents through the gate, his mother reaching out for him despite the restraint of a guard, screaming his name. His father just stood there, a guard’s rifle pointed squarely at his chest.

Eric tried to fight his way back to them, but the guards wouldn’t let him down.

He glanced at the fence. A thought flashed across his mind. He needed to be like metal, heavier. He needed to be much heavier, so the guards couldn’t carry him anymore!

His feet touched the ground, and he planted them hard in the mud, focused on stopping. He wasn’t going anywhere without his parents.

He was going to rip down the fence between them, so they could go with him.

He focused all his anger and fear on the wire gate—and it started to shake.

The guards pulled at him, but now they couldn’t move him. He was like the heaviest of metals, too heavy for the guards to budge. They yanked on his arms, hurting him even more, but he didn’t care. He wouldn’t go with them, not without his mother and father.

He took a step back toward his parents, dragging the guards in the mud with him.

The metal gate twisted and bent in front of him. Some of the strands of barbed wire began breaking, like weak string. Eric knew that gate couldn’t stop him.

One guard tried to pick him up and failed, swearing so fast that Eric didn’t understand.

All Eric wanted was to tear down the fence and let his parents come with him. If the Germans wanted

him, then his parents would have to come too.

Another guard came up, swearing angrily at the other two.

Eric just focused on the fence, ripping it apart, making it go away. The coiled strands of sparkling barbed wire along the top started to uncurl, whipping about in the air like angry serpents.

The entire compound suddenly got very silent. Only the sound of the rain remained, pounding down in the mud, accented by the snaps of the breaking wire.

More strands broke, and the entire weaved-wire gate bowed toward Eric. It was as if something massive pushed from the other side.

Suddenly the rain stopped hitting Eric as the third guard loomed over him. The other two still were pulling on Eric's arms, futilely, hurting him, making him madder and madder.

And the angrier Eric got, the more the gate and the fences shook and broke apart.

The new guard swore again, then raised his rifle.

Eric could hear his mother's scream cut through the silence and the rain.

His father took a step toward him, wide eyed, only to be stopped.

Then the butt of the guard's rifle came down hard.

For an instant—just an instant—the wonderful feeling of metal closed in around him as he slumped into the mud.

The last thing he saw was the gate falling, his parents on the other side, trying to get to him, held back by guards.

It was an image he took down into blackness.

It was the last time he would ever see them.

Southern California—1986

The rough, water-colored mural of the blue sky, white clouds, and distant horizons hung on hooks from the ceiling of the gym, just behind the basketball backboard, vibrating to the loud music. The bottom third of the large painting was a crude drawing of a city skyline, with silhouettes of buildings in gray paint and black outline. The most recognizable shape was of the Statue of Liberty. Someone had even cut a hole where her torch would be and had put a light bulb there.

In front of the painting, high school kids danced, ate at tables, and shouted over the music at the annual "Rhapsody in Blue" prom. The tablecloths were blue, the napkins were blue, and most of the girls had on far too much blue eye shadow. Over half the boys' tuxes were powder blue, though under the blue lights that filled the air and lit the background of the gym, the tuxes looked dark and faded.

Scott Summers stood facing Selena Ki, his date, just to the right of the dance floor. He was thin and lanky, with thick brown hair. His smile and friendly personality made him popular among most of the

kids. So far, in all the years of high school, he'd made every official dance. At seventeen, this was his second "Rhapsody in Blue" prom.

Selena was considered one of the best-looking girls in the school. One of the school's cheerleaders, she pretty much could have gone out with anyone she wanted. Scott felt lucky she had said yes when he asked her the first time.

He and Selena had been going out for at least a month. Scott liked her, but he was having trouble with her jealousy. Two of his friends had warned him about that problem, but he hadn't listened. Now he wished he had. If he even looked at another girl she got angry. And right now she was really, really mad.

"I don't ever want to talk to you again!" Selena shouted at Scott over the music.

"But—" Scott tried to say. Too late. She had already turned and stormed away through the crowd, her full, blue-and-white dress skirt brushing dancers out of the way.

He went after her, ignoring a few friends who stood to the side, shaking their heads.

Scott couldn't believe this was happening, not during the prom. So what if he'd talked to Bonnie yesterday after class? He was here with Selena, wasn't he? He didn't even like Bonnie. She'd just come up to him, said "Hi." But then, worst of all, she had given him a hug, right in front of Selena.

Was it his fault that Bonnie was a hugging kind of person?

It seemed Selena thought it was. She wasn't even allowing him the opportunity to explain. Or talk to her at all. And the night was still young. They still had dancing to do, plus two other parties.

This was so stupid. And it was beginning to make him mad.

She stormed out into the hall and stopped, with Scott right behind her. At least out here the music level was almost bearable. Maybe out here she would let him explain that nothing was going to come between them.

He had almost reached her when she spun off and slipped into the girls' room.

He stared after her and set his jaw grimly. That wasn't going to stop him. Not this time.

He started for the door.

"Scott?" a voice said, bringing him up just before he was about to enter.

He glanced around and found Mr. Daniels, his math teacher from third period.

Daniels pointed to the men's room, just a few steps away. "Don't you think you'd be more comfortable in there?"

"Yeah," Scott said. "But I have to talk to her."

Daniels nodded. "I understand that. But just not in there. Trust me, eventually they all come out."

Despite the logic of what Daniels was saying, Scott was so mad he didn't know what to do.

And he was frustrated. Why was she doing this to him? What had he done to deserve having his night ruined, all because of her irrational fit of jealousy?

Suddenly, a jabbing pain shot through the back of his head and into his eyes.

“Ahhhh,” he said, bending over, covering his eyes as they started to water.

“You all right, Summers?” Daniels asked.

Scott managed to nod, then quickly headed for the men’s room. The pain was intense. So intense that his eyes felt as if they were trying to explode out of his head.

Inside the men’s room about half a dozen others were smoking and laughing. The room was filled with the gray smoke. Scott bumped against a wall near the sink. The agony seemed to echo around inside his head.

Stan Hensey moved over and stood beside him as Scott pressed his eyes, trying to will the pain away. Stan and Scott had been friends for years, even though Stan hung out most of the time with the druggies.

“Selena, huh?” Stan asked. “You need to lighten up, dude. She’s just a girl.”

Scott shook his head. “Not her. My head. My eyes!”

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” Stan asked, putting a hand on Scott’s shoulder. “I got some contact lotion. Might help.”

“Thanks.” Scott stood and carefully opened his eyes.

“Holy—” Stan said, stumbling back. The look on his face was one of complete terror.

Scott wiped the tears away as the pain got worse and worse. “What’s wrong?” He could still see Stan, but everything seemed strange, as if he were peering through a red haze.

“Your eyes, man,” Stan said, still backing away. “They’re red. *Really* red. Pupils and all.”

Two other guys in the room glanced over at Scott, then jerked back.

Suddenly Scott could feel the pain come together at a point above the bridge of his nose. And then it vanished, as if it hadn’t been there at all. Instead there was energy, flowing in his head. Energy he could feel like water running through his fingers.

Energy that wanted out.

For an instant it felt as if the entire inside of his head was flowing out his eyes. The energy burst out through them, smashing into the wall in front of him in a bright red beam of light.

The wall exploded.

And then a massive hole appeared. Scott could see inside the girls’ rest room. Selena and three other girls screamed and jumped away from the mirror.

The wall on the other side of the girls' rest room exploded outward.

At that moment Scott realized he was the one who was doing the damage. His eyes were.

He closed them, jamming his hands over them, and dropped to the ground.

Once again the energy seemed to flow around and around inside his head, calm now, but waiting to be released again when he opened his eyes.

Well, he wasn't going to open them.

Around him the screams and shouts and yelling started. Shortly after that there were sirens. He never did get the chance to tell Selena he was sorry.

Kenya—1988

The deep blue of the sky made the sun look almost white. The heat came off the ground in waves, so even the scant shade under the thin trees seemed useless as shelter.

The tribal village filled an open area along the edge of the sparse forest; the dirt around the tents was baked dry and hard. A dozen children of different ages played a game of tag, touching each other with sticks, then running to avoid the one who was "it."

Orooro, a young girl of twelve with a white streak running through her dark hair, played with them. Orooro was proud of herself because so far she had been able to keep from getting tagged. Sweat was streaming off her head and arms, but she didn't care. She was having fun.

And Orooro loved the warm air, the slight breeze that dried her sweat, the bright sun. She just loved being outside and had for as long as she could remember. To her the sun, the rain, the winds had always been things of joy and pleasure. This game with the other children just provided another chance to play in the sun.

The game continued until suddenly she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The tap of the stick on her arm was like an insect sting, and the laughter of the others told her she was it.

Orooro could feel fear grabbing at her stomach. The last time she had been tapped when they played this game, she hadn't been able to tag anyone else and had ended up being laughed at for days. She was used to being laughed at. She was different from the others, and they all knew it somehow. Though except for the white streak in her hair, she didn't know how she was different. But she too knew it.

Usually she didn't mind not playing with the others, staying apart and alone. But this time, since she was playing, she was going to make sure the laughing didn't happen again. She would tag someone else.

Two younger boys and a girl her age were standing a short distance away, taunting her to get them. She knew that all three of them were faster, far faster than she was. It would be a waste of time to chase them.

So she turned and headed the other way, running around one tent as fast as she could go, hoping to surprise someone.

The idea didn't work. The other kids there saw her coming and ran, faster than her.

All the kids in the village were faster than her, and they all knew it.

But she could still tag one of them if she got lucky.

For the longest time she kept trying, chasing, not giving up. The heat was making her pant. She knew she should stop and drink, but if she did the game would end and she would be laughed at again.

They were already starting to laugh, and to call her names. And the more they laughed, the harder she tried.

Then things got worse. As she lunged to try to catch one younger boy, she tripped.

Ororo put her hands under her to catch herself. The sound of her stick snapping was like a slap from a tribal elder against her cheek.

Ororo pushed herself back to her feet, the brown dirt sticking to her sweating arms and legs. Her stick was broken in half. Now there was no way she could win. No way at all.

One of the kids saw what had happened, and in a moment, before she could even look up from her broken stick, they had all surrounded her, laughing, poking at her with their sticks.

"Stop!" she shouted, but that just made them laugh even harder, taunting her that she was too slow to make them stop, that she had broken her stick. And with her stick broken, how could she tag them?

Ororo was getting angrier and angrier as the others kept poking at her. Then one of them hit her.

The hit stung like a bee.

It sounded like someone had snapped their fingers. She could feel the pain of it coming off her shoulder.

She tried to move away, but they wouldn't let her, keeping her surrounded, hitting her more and more.

Snap! Snap!

Each hit hurt really bad. "Stop!" she shouted. "Stop it now!"

They laughed and hit her again and again.

And each hit hurt her more and more, until it became one big stinging pain on her back and shoulders and arms.

They were all hitting her with their sticks, telling her to run. They wanted to see her run.

But Ororo knew she couldn't outrun them, so she just stood there, turning to avoid the hits as best she could, as she would avoid the stings of swarming insects.

They laughed and yelled at her to run. It had become a new game of sorts, and she had become the object of the game.

*Snap! Snap! Snap!*The sticks whipped at her skin, drawing blood in places, raising welts in others.

Her voice was getting louder and louder. “Stop it! Stop it!”

But that, too, just made them hit her harder and harder.

Why were they doing this to her?

All Ororo wanted them to do was stop.

Why couldn't they just leave her alone? She could feel her face getting hot from the anger.

All she wanted to do was hit them all back, show them how it felt.

How it hurt.

But they kept on, and it seemed to go on forever.

As Ororo got angrier and angrier, she could feel the air around her clutching at her, pulling her.

*Snap! Snap-snap-snap!*The hits were coming even faster now, the laughter less and less.

She spun and moved, trying to get out of the way of each hit, usually failing.

She cried, and the nightmare continued.

Between sobs, she yelled at them to stop.

They kept going.

She wished for something to stop them.

Then everything changed. The hitting slowed, then stopped, as the other children looked up in awe at what was happening around them. The sky was falling, in big white flakes.

White, cold flakes in the heat of the afternoon, out of the blue, cloudless sky.

They fell slowly at first. Then faster, harder.

But none of the snow was falling on her. She was so angry, so racked with sobs, that she didn't notice, didn't care what was happening. Her shoulders and arms still stung where the other kids had hit her, and she wanted the sky to keep falling on them all, to hurt them all.

Gradually the white flakes falling from the clear, blue, cloudless heavens turned heavier, then became small chunks of ice.

The kids picked up the ice, looked at it. They laughed, staring upward as it pounded down.

It was still fun for them.

She dropped to the dry ground, sobbing as around her the falling ice got larger, still not touching her.

Just them.

She stared at the other kids, the force of her anger more overwhelming than any she had ever felt. It had built up in her for years, like water behind a dam. And now the dam had burst, and she was letting all the anger flow. She had wanted, more than anything, for the sky to fall on them. It was doing just that, but she wanted more.

She wanted them to hurt as she hurt.

The ice chunks coming from the cloudless heavens got larger and larger. Soon the other children began shouting in pain. They scattered, trying to run for the tents.

But now the chunks of ice were so large that they began knocking the kids down, smashing into the tents, breaking off limbs from the trees.

She cried even harder as the kids shouted and screamed for it to stop.

Now they knew how she felt.

Maybe next time they wouldn't torment her again.

Ororo looked around, and it dawned upon her that the flakes of sky and ice hadn't hit her.

She put her head down in the dirt, feeling the ground and the comfort of the solidness. Every part of her back and arms hurt, yet the anger was ebbing. In its place was a deep feeling of knowing the winds and rains, of understanding the clouds and the sky. She could feel the water in the earth and the energy of the sun. All felt comforting. Deep inside she understood them, knew them all, as if they were her friends.

And as if she were theirs.

It wasn't until much later that she learned that, at that moment, her hair had turned as white as the falling sky.

Mississippi—The Not-Too-Distant Future

Marie traced the line on the map while pointing with her other hand to the picture of the Statue of Liberty on her bedroom wall. She had spent hours staring at that statue, and at the map, dreaming of traveling there, seeing the sights. Now she was sharing her dream with David.

David was from her school, and at sixteen, the same age. They had just started to date.

"I want to spend time in New York City," Marie said, smiling at David. He was sitting on the edge of her bed. Her parents were downstairs watching television and the door was open, but it still felt odd to have him in her room. Exciting, too. Only a few of her girlfriends had ever seen the inside of her bedroom.

"You going to live there?" David asked.

"No," she said, tracing the map farther north. "Niagara Falls, then into Canada. Toronto, west to Calgary, then on to Anchorage."

“Wow,” David said, clearly impressed. He stood and moved over beside her, staring at the map.
“Won’t it be kinda cold?”

“Of course it will,” she said, laughing. “Otherwise it wouldn’t be an adventure.”

She could feel his closeness, his shoulder rubbing against her shoulder.

“When are you gonna do this?”

Marie shrugged. “I don’t know. After school, but before college.”

He reached over and rested his hand on her shoulder. She could feel it, almost like a hot iron touching her, yet it didn’t burn. It excited her, made her stomach twist like it had never twisted before. She had never been this close to a boy before. Not like this.

Not in her bedroom with her parents downstairs.

“So,” she said, turning to face him a little, “what do you want to do now?”

He looked right into her eyes. Then he smiled, sending shivers down her back.

“I don’t know,” he said. “What do you want to do?”

He moved closer to her, and she could smell him. She was having trouble breathing, yet there was no way in the world she wanted him to move away.

“I don’t know,” she managed.

He turned her slightly so they were facing each other, then slowly he moved forward until he was kissing her.

It was as if a surge of electricity shot through every nerve cell in her body.

A thousand thoughts flashed through her mind.

He tastes good.

My parents are downstairs.

What will my friends think?

His lips feel wonderful.

I can’t breathe.

I want to kiss him harder.

Then suddenly it all changed.

As she put her arms around him, kissing him back, suddenly his mind opened up to her.

She knew what he was thinking, knew what he liked, what he hated, what he liked to do with the guys, what he wanted them to do.

David's eyes snapped open.

His hands locked around her in a terrifying grip.

She tried to pull away, but it felt as if he were pouring his every thought, his every wish, his every dream into her head.

Energy crackled around them, until finally she managed to pull away.

He dropped to the floor, his eyes open wide.

The next thing she knew she was screaming. The images of David's life were still tumbling in her head, filling her mind, mixing with her own until she almost couldn't tell which were hers and which were his.

He lay on the floor, twitching. It didn't look like he was breathing.

Had she killed him?

She hadn't done anything!

Her parents slammed into the room behind her as she realized she was still screaming, backed against the wall, staring at his body. She tried to push his memories away without success.

Her father immediately dropped to the floor and checked David, then started CPR.

Her mother came to her, but Marie didn't want her mother to touch her.

"I didn't mean to," she said softly.

Inside her head, his memories fought with hers. His images of her fought with how she saw herself. What he had wanted to do shocked her.

"Honey, what happened?" her mother asked desperately.

"Call a damned ambulance!" her father shouted.

Her mother jumped, then ran for the door as her father gave David mouth-to-mouth, then pumped his chest.

Marie pushed herself against the wall. She so wanted David to be all right. So wanted his memories and thoughts to leave her mind.

"I didn't do anything," she said, softly. But inside, she knew that she had.

She just didn't know what.

Chapter One

Washington, DC—One Year Later

The cold of the winter day was long forgotten inside the Senate Hearing Room, as the packed bodies in the gallery and the heat from the television lights forced the temperature in the room up far above normal. Several of the senators, despite the intense media scrutiny of these hearings, had taken off their jackets. Many viewers in the balcony were fanning themselves with notebooks or loose paper.

Professor Charles Xavier sat in his wheelchair near the center of the room, watching patiently. He could tell that the crowd was a very hostile one. He didn't need to read their minds to sense that. Their hostility clearly emerged with every action of the hearings' chairman, the flamboyant senator Robert Kelly.

Kelly was a white-faced, white-haired man who was clearly using the hearings on mutant registration to propel his own career closer to the White House. And it seemed as though he had other demons that were driving him, though it wasn't quite clear to Professor Xavier what those demons were. At least not yet.

In front of the hot room, at the witness table, sat Dr. Jean Grey. Even alone at the long wooden table, she had a commanding presence. A strong, good-looking woman in her early thirties, she had been called upon to explain to the Senate Hearing the basic science behind the emergence of mutants.

Professor Xavier had helped her extensively with the drafting of her presentation. They had gone over it time and again so that it would be clear not only to the senators, but to the audience on the other side of the television cameras.

And considering the hot-button interest the public had taken in the mutant registration law, there was no doubt her presentation would make the news. To many, mutants had proved ripe for persecution based on the long-standing tradition of fearing anything unknown. So the best defense, Jean and the professor had determined, was to help the regular people from middle America understand mutants and what they really were. The bigots like Senator Kelly would fold like wet tissue if public opinion shifted against them.

But for the moment, the public was squarely against mutants. And the public was scared to death. Senator Kelly was a master of playing that to the hilt.

"Lights, please?" Jean said.

A few people murmured something about that helping the heat, at least.

As the lights dimmed around him, the professor didn't need to shift in his wheelchair to watch the show. Instead he focused his gaze straight ahead and opened his mind, to let the feelings of those around him flow in, but only a little. Not enough to read their thoughts—just enough to gauge how reaction to the presentation was going.

He could feel boredom and hostility. Jean had a very deep hole to climb out of, it seemed. They all did, if they were ever going to be accepted by society and defeat this registration law.

"DNA," Jean said, spacing each letter as she started her presentation. "It is the basic building block of

evolution. Changes in our DNA are the reason we have evolved from single-celled organisms to *Homo sapiens* .”

Figures on the screen showed the various stages of evolution, along with a graph displaying a diagonal line that indicated the ascent of the human animal: the evolution of man.

One image took over the screen, focusing attention on the lowest order of humanoid: *Homo habilis*, a primitive apelike humanoid covered in thick hair.

Around him, Professor Xavier could feel the crowd’s interest increase, ever so slightly. And some revulsion emerged, as men and women confronted images of what they were descended from.

“Within our DNA,” Jean said, explaining what was happening on the screen, “are the genes that decide our physical characteristics. When these active genes mutate, we see changes in the body.”

The image on the screen began to mutate, and the apelike humanoid slowly started looking more and more human.

The professor could tell many of the people around him were becoming fascinated. Perfect. It was just what he and Jean had hoped would be their reaction at this point.

“These evolutionary changes are subtle, and normally take thousands of years.”

The image of the now-human man on the screen froze, and his body went transparent. Twenty percent of it was marked in blue, representing moving, active genes. The remainder of the image of the man was marked in red, showing static, dormant genes.

Now the people around the professor were really caught up. The room fell silent, except for a few whispers coming from a couple of the senators who clearly were not paying any attention and didn’t want to.

One of them was the chairman, Senator Kelly.

“Within each of us,” Jean said, “lie not only the millions of genes which dictate our physical makeup, but millions upon millions more whose purpose has been completely unknown to us.”

She paused for a breath, then went on. “These unused genes have traditionally been referred to as ‘junk DNA.’ In fact, over eighty percent of our genetic structure is made up of this so-called junk DNA.”

The words **PRESENT DAY** appeared on the screen, as a number of the red, dormant genes began to move, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

“In recent years,” Jean said, “and for reasons which are still a mystery, we have seen this latent DNA in our bodies mutating. These mutations manifest at puberty, and are often triggered by periods of heightened emotional stress.”

With a glow of pride, the professor knew that—at this moment—with the exception of a few of the closed-minded senators, Jean had her audience. Despite the heat, they were paying rapt attention.

“The new DNA strands caused by the mutations are producing some admittedly startling results. In other words, this previously unused DNA is not ‘junk’ DNA at all, but rather a vast storehouse which contains

the almost limitless potential for human advancement.”

Suddenly the graphic on the screen showed the man performing amazing feats. First he grew in size; then he moved an object with his mind; then he changed the color of his skin.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are now seeing the beginnings of another stage of human evolution. Not a new race of creatures to be feared, but rather the opportunity to find advancement within us all.”

The lights slowly brightened.

Scanning the room once again, the professor could tell that Jean and the presentation had accomplished what they had hoped. With understanding, the perception of mutants seemed to have begun to shift ever so subtly. The professor began to pick up feelings of uncertainty, of people rethinking their positions. And the level of hostility was clearly lower. But now came the hard part. Jean had to hold this hard-won ground against Senator Kelly.

Kelly turned from the man he'd been talking to and smiled at Jean, like a father might smile at a small child who had just done something cute. “Thank you for the wonderful cartoon, Ms. Grey,” he said in a vaguely patronizing tone. “It was quite—how should I say it?—educational.”

Some of the crowd snickered.

“However,” Kelly went on, “it failed to address the larger issue which, I might add, is the focus of this hearing. Three words: Are mutants dangerous?”

There was a low rumbling among the crowd, and the professor could feel new and increased uncertainty flowing among the people.

“Well, Senator Kelly,” Jean responded, “don't you think that's an unfair question? The wrong person behind the wheel of a car can be dangerous.”

“Well,” Kelly countered, “we do license people to drive.”

The professor listened carefully to the murmurs of the crowd as Senator Kelly's aide, Henry Guyrich, moved behind the panel and handed Kelly a black folder filled with documents.

“But we don't license people to live, Senator,” Jean said.

Kelly said nothing.

“It is fact, Senator,” Jean said, pressing her point, “that mutants who have revealed themselves publicly have been met with fear, hostility, and even violence.”

The professor could feel that things were again turning against Jean. This time, though, as he scanned the crowd with his mind, he felt a new presence, a powerful and familiar one. He turned around in his wheelchair and studied the back of the room, which rose above him.

There, by the door, in the shadows where he couldn't be seen, stood a dark figure wearing a very expensive suit.

It was his old friend Eric. What was he doing here?

The professor nodded, and Eric did the same. The professor turned back to face the front, his attention again on the crowd.

“It is because of that ever-present hostility,” Jean said, “that I am urging the Senate to vote against mutant registration. To force mutants to expose themselves will only further subject them to unnecessary prejudice.”

Senator Kelly smiled and wiped a drop of sweat from the side of his head. The professor could tell he was going to attack Jean, and attack her hard—as they had expected.

“Expose themselves?” Kelly asked, his voice calm and strong over the silent crowd as he played to the television cameras. “What is it that the mutant community has to hide?”

“I didn’t say they had anything to hide,” Jean said. “What I did say—”

“Let me show you what’s being hidden,” Senator Kelly said, talking over Jean without hesitation. He raised a blown-up photo of a car on a freeway. The car appeared to have been melted. “This was taken by a state police officer in Secaucus, New Jersey. A man in a minor altercation literally melted the car in front of him.”

Professor Xavier set his jaw. The crowd was again turning fearful, and hostile. More and more fans were back at work trying to cool the heat.

“May I see that photo, Senator?” Jean asked calmly.

He ignored her question and spoke to the cameras and crowd. “This is not an isolated incident, Ms. Grey.”

Kelly picked up the folder filled with documents and held it up for the crowd to see. “I have a list of names here. Identified mutants, living right here in the United States.”

“Senator Kelly!” Jean said, her voice becoming more forceful.

But he just ignored her. “A girl in Illinois who can walk through walls. What is to stop her from walking into a bank vault? Or even the White House?”

Senator Kelly, an intense look of concern pasted on his face, pointed out at the crowd and the cameras. “Or your house?”

Professor Xavier knew, right at that moment, that they had lost. The crowd’s anger and hostility were back in full force. Heated discussions and scattered debates erupted throughout the chamber. Senator Kelly was getting them to ignore the facts and focus on their own fears of the unknown.

Jean tried to shout over the noise, to engage the senator. “You are not being—”

“And there are even rumors, Ms. Grey,” Kelly said, turning to stare directly at her, “of mutants so powerful that they can enter our minds and control our thoughts, taking away our God-given free will.”

A number of people actually gasped at that statement.

“Ms. Grey, Americans deserve the right to decide whether they want their children to be in school with mutants. To be taught by mutants.” Kelly leaned forward. “You’re a schoolteacher. I would think that the rights of parents and students alike should be of paramount importance to you.”

“They are,” Jean said firmly. “But this is not the way to help them. I would like to see that folder.”

“Why?” Kelly asked, pounding the folder, then waving it in front of the crowd. “All I’m saying is that parents have the right to know the dangers to their children. That’s the purpose of registration.”

“It is not the purpose,” Jean shouted, clearly angry now. “Your purpose is to discriminate and torture a group of citizens, just because you are afraid of them. Now I would like to see your so-called list and evidence.”

She held her hand out.

Suddenly the folder flew from Kelly’s grasp toward Jean’s open hand.

Realization swept across her face, and Jean instantly closed her hand and let her arm fall to her side. But the professor knew the damage had been done. The folder dropped to the floor, photos and papers spilling out.

Around him, the professor could tell that everyone was uncertain what had happened. And they were very afraid at the same time. It was clear to all of them that something unseen had come into play in this hearing, though none of them knew what it might be.

The professor sighed and closed down his mind, shutting out the sensations of the people around him. They had lost this battle, that much was clear.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Senator Kelly said, now more than ever playing for the cameras. “The truth is that mutants are very real and that they are among us. We must know who they are, and above all, we must know what they can do.”

The crowd broke into cheering around the professor as he turned and moved his wheelchair up the ramp toward the exit. It had been a long shot, and he knew it.

From the almost-empty hallway outside the Hearing Room, the professor could hear the debate continuing as a few friendly senators tried to jump in to help Jean. But they were quickly overwhelmed. It was clear that this bill would leave this hearing and make its way to the main floor of the Senate. That would be the next point at which it might be stopped. But he was going to have to do better, if that was to happen.

In front of the professor, a man walked toward the main entrance. Eric Lehnsherr.

“What are you doing here?” the professor asked, just loud enough for Eric to hear.

Lehnsherr stopped and half turned, smiling.

“Why do you ask questions when you already know the answer?” Lehnsherr asked.

The professor moved up closer, until they faced each other there in the high-ceilinged, tiled hallway. “Don’t give up on them, Eric.”

“What would you have me do, Charles?” he asked. “I’ve heard all these arguments before. Used very well, if I remember.”

“That was a long time ago,” the professor said. “Mankind has evolved since then.”

“Yes,” Eric said. “Into us.”

The professor paused a moment, musing, then decided to seek out what he wanted to know. Slowly and carefully, he reached out.

Eric put a palm against the side of his head, then smiled. “Are you sneaking around in here, Charles?”

Eric clenched his fist, and the professor’s chair pressed inward, as if it had suddenly been gripped by a giant hand. Then the chair seemed to lift ever so slightly off the ground, as if in a subtle warning.

“Whatever are you looking for?” Eric asked, still smiling, but adding an edge to his words.

“Hope, Eric,” the professor said calmly. “I’m looking for hope.”

The chair settled back to the tile floor, as if the hand had released it.

“I will bring you hope,” Eric said. “And I only ask one thing in return: Don’t get in my way.”

Eric Lehnsherr turned and walked away. Without looking back, he said, “We are the future, Charles. Not them. They no longer matter.”

Behind him the professor could hear the debate continuing as his former ally pushed open the door and left. He hadn’t responded to that last comment, because there was nothing left to be said. He didn’t agree, and Eric knew it.

Regular people did matter. Now more than ever.

Chapter Two

Alberta, Canada

The snow was falling steadily, a light powder—the only kind that could fall in such extreme temperatures. Even though it was still daylight, the spotlight over the front door of the Lion’s Den Bar and Grill was on. It cut through the snow but did little to illuminate the few cars in the lot, the four eighteen-wheelers that had been parked along the road, or the beat-up camper that was sitting axle-deep in a small drift. Attached to the back of the camper was an old trailer full of cord wood and a rusted motorcycle. A small hand-lettered sign on the trailer read, “Firewood for Sale.”

The inside of the Lion’s Den was as anyone might expect from the outside: low lighting, smoke filled, far too many calendars decorating the walls beside old signs, and animal heads covered in dust and grease.

This place was divided between a cafe on one side and a bar on the other, with dirty bathrooms through doors in the back.

Logan had been in a hundred places just like this one. They all had decent food that the locals liked, served in large portions. The drinks were strong, and the regulars didn't much like strangers. In every one of the places, Logan had been a stranger, stopping to eat and have a few drinks, then moving on. He couldn't imagine ever settling down long enough to become a regular anywhere.

He had just finished eating on the cafe side of the joint, sitting in a booth, downing three cups of coffee with his steak. Now he was at the bar, two stools down from an old, very unused jukebox. A few drinks and he would be headed down the road again. There was still plenty of time left in the day to make some miles. He had nowhere in particular he was going; he just liked to keep moving. It felt better that way.

Unlike the cafe side, with its smell of French fries and chicken-fried steak, the bar stank of stale beer and too many cigarettes. The floor was a dirty tile, and the tables were all scarred with carved-in initials and epithets. At the moment there were four patrons sitting at two tables, staring at him. They were clearly regulars.

Drunk regulars.

He had ignored them when he came in, and he did the same now, sitting with his back to the main room and the main door. He knew he looked weird to most people: too much hair, an animal-like face. He got a lot of stares and had long since given up caring.

The bartender, a man with a round, scarred face, moved in behind the bar. Logan was just about to motion him over when some loud, foot-stomping truck drivers came in. There was a grimy mirror set in the wall behind the bottles of booze at the bar, and Logan could see that there were four truckers, big gutted and no doubt smelling of too many miles on the road. Logan was glad he wasn't close enough to catch that odor.

The four were escorting a girl. Clearly she had been riding with them. They were all laughing, paying no attention, but Logan watched as her eyes quickly sized up the place. No smile ever crossed her face. He guessed that she was a runaway, and she was dressed in rags, head to toe, with almost every inch of her skin covered. Only her face and hands showed any exposed skin. He wondered what she was hiding—then reminded himself to mind his own business.

For Logan, minding his own business was what kept him going.

He tapped his after-dinner cigar in the ashtray, then motioned for the bartender.

"Yeah?" the scarred man asked. He moved toward Logan, while nodding to the truck drivers over Logan's shoulder. "What can I get you?"

"Something on tap," Logan said.

"What kind?"

"Surprise me," Logan said wryly.

The bartender turned away without so much as a blink. He was a big guy who nonetheless moved smoothly, which gave the impression he was moving slowly instead. Logan had no doubt the bartender

had taken care of himself in more than one fight in this place.

The truck drivers crowded into a booth, with the young girl sitting on a chair facing them. Logan could hear them laughing again, but he paid no attention at all to what they were saying.

In front of him, a TV was bolted to the wall in the corner above the back bar. The news was on.

“Preparations are nearly completed for the upcoming United Nations World Summit,” the announcer said. “With nearly every invitation confirmed, the event promises to be the largest single gathering of world leaders in history.”

Logan watched as the image on the screen changed from the announcer’s bland face to an aerial shot of Ellis Island, with the Statue of Liberty and Liberty Island close by in the background.

“The leaders of over two hundred nations will discuss issues ranging from the world’s economic climate and weapons treaties, to the mutant phenomenon and its impact on our world stage.”

Logan snorted, then shook his head. This mutant thing really had people spooked if it was coming down to discussing it at a world conference. And scared people had a habit of becoming dangerous.

The bartender put Logan’s beer down in front of him, then turned to move away.

“There anything else on?”

The bartender shrugged and headed for the television. “Satellite’s busted. Only got two channels.”

He changed it from the news to a fuzzy image of a rerun of some stupid sitcom.

“That all right?”

“Perfect,” Logan said, taking a swig of his beer. It was cold and tasted fresh. At least places like this usually had good local brews. Good food, good beer—what more could a guy ask for?

“Hey, Joe,” one of the drunk-sounding regulars shouted.

The bartender looked up and frowned.

“You ever seen a mutant, Joe?” the regular asked, pointing at the television and slurring his words.

Joe casually tossed the towel over his shoulder as he moved to take the truck drivers’ order. “There’s no mutant dumb enough to walk in here.”

“Got that right,” the drunk agreed.

Logan watched in the mirror, sipping his beer and smoking his cigar, as the bartender talked with the drivers. He asked the young girl if she wanted something. She shook her head, then stood and came toward Logan and the bar.

He masked his curiosity as she moved in close to him. He could smell her unwashed odor. Clearly she had been on the road for some time and hadn’t been out of the clothes long enough to clean them.

He could also sense the fear in her. Deep fear.

“Listen, can you help me?” she asked quietly. “Please? I was hitchhiking and these guys won’t let me go. I think they’re gonna try to—”

“Hey!” one of the truck drivers said loudly.

Logan watched him in the mirror. He was a big guy, and he stood and moved toward the bar. This guy moved like a lumbering elephant, though. Logan sized him up and decided that even the girl could take him.

“I thought you were just going to the bathroom,” the trucker said to the girl. The tone of his voice clearly indicated that he had decided the girl was his property.

The girl looked at Logan, panic showing clearly in her eyes, the smell of fear spreading from her like a wave of sickness, choking the air.

Logan just sipped his beer, trying to ignore her. Minding his own business was how he managed to get along, and minding his own business right now was exactly what he was planning to do. He had his own troubles, and she had hers.

Life was just tough that way.

“Come on, honey,” the truck driver said. He reached out and grabbed her arm.

She pulled back, hard. Freaked. “Don’t touch me! I told you, don’t touch me!”

He grabbed at her again, catching her hand. “I said come on. Do as I say!”

The instant he touched her hand, there was a flash. Not much of one, but enough to surprise Logan.

Then the trucker’s eyes went wide, as if he was in shock. An instant later, he collapsed with a thud into a heap on the floor.

Logan glanced down at where the trucker lay twitching. His mouth and eyes were open, but his expression was blank. Then Logan turned his attention back to the girl, who was shaking in fear and anger. “Nice job,” he murmured.

“I told him not to touch me,” she said softly.

The other three truckers had realized what had happened, and they moved fast for an overweight bunch of middle-aged rednecks.

“Hank?” one of them said tentatively, kneeling beside the twitching body on the floor.

The girl instinctively stepped closer to Logan, standing between the bar stools. Her stink was putting him right off his beer.

“Get his head up,” one of the other truckers ordered anxiously.

Logan laughed inwardly. That was always good advice if a person might have a broken neck. It would

kill them instantly.

“I’ll call an ambulance,” Joe the bartender said in an almost bored fashion, then he turned to the phone on the back bar. Logan was starting to like good old Joe more and more.

While two of the big guys tried to get their friend breathing regularly again, the third stood and moved up to Logan. “You wanna tell me what happened?”

Logan shrugged, tapping his cigar in the ashtray and glancing down at the still-twitching trucker without turning fully around. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” the guy demanded.

Logan watched the guy’s hands clench up into fists. Clearly the man wanted a fight. This just might turn out to be a good day after all.

“Maybe he’s sleepy,” Logan said sarcastically. “How would I know?”

The trucker grabbed the back of Logan’s shirt and spun him around on the stool. “What? Are you trying to be funny? Come on, just give me an excuse to stomp your ass.”

Logan put his cigar down in the ashtray. It still had half way to burn, and he didn’t want to waste it. Then with a quick spin, he drove his elbow directly into the trucker’s face. The feeling of smashing flesh and the sound of the guy’s nose breaking were beautiful. Pure poetry.

The trucker dropped to the tiled floor faster than his friend had. Logan shook his head. These guys were big, which meant they had more weight pulling them down. And clearly they had no threshold for pain.

“That excuse enough for you?” Logan asked the driver as he lay there, clutching at his nose.

The other two were on Logan quick, considering their size. He let them pin his arms, let them think they had him, as they held him one on each side. If they really wanted a fight, he might as well enjoy himself a little. Might not get this chance again for a while.

The guy with the busted nose slowly climbed to his feet and faced Logan, who was now pinioned between the trucker’s two friends. Blood streamed down the guy’s chin and dripped on his fat gut, turning his already stained shirt dark.

Logan just smiled.

That infuriated the guy even more, and he reared back. He put his anger behind his fist and hit Logan square in the face.

Logan moved his head slightly, timing the turn with the punch. The blow hit him solidly across the chin. He’d felt worse before. Not only was this guy fat, he was weak on top of it.

The guy looked surprised, and held his hand as if he had hurt it. More than likely the idiot had.

The two who thought they were holding Logan clutched tighter.

Logan shook his head from side to side. “That was pathetic,” he said.

The broken-nosed trucker took another full swing, this time hitting Logan in the gut.

Logan doubled over, pretending the guy had actually hurt him. As he was bent over, he clenched his fists and pushed the knuckles of each hand against a leg of one of his captors.

Then he popped his claws.

Twelve-inch metal claws shot from behind his knuckles.

Six razor-sharp claws stabbed through cloth, skin, and muscle as if it weren't there.

The sound of metal echoed across the room.

Logan pulled his claws back in quickly. Both truckers suddenly shouted in pain and let go, each grabbing his leg.

The bloody-nosed trucker stared at his two friends as they collapsed to the floor and screamed in pain, blood flowing from their legs.

“What did you do?” he demanded, panic beginning to edge into his voice.

Logan stepped toward the man. He was no longer grinning. “You always ask the same stupid question?”

The guy backed away, slowly, grabbing glasses off of tables and throwing them on the ground between them. Then he picked up a metal bar tray, holding it between himself and Logan.

Logan's fist shot out. His claws extended again and skewered the tray. He yanked it out of the trucker's hand and tossed it away.

Then Logan grabbed the man's bloodied shirt, shoving the guy's head hard against the rough wooden wall. He was going to scare this guy, and scare him good.

While holding his opponent against the wall, he held up his fist, claws extended. Then he reared back and made a forward motion, as if to punch the guy, claws and all.

Behind him, the girl screamed as his claws sank into the wall on both sides of the guy's neck. His middle claw had withdrawn just enough so that it only pricked the surface of the guy's neck.

The trucker looked as if he might faint, or be sick. Either way, this just wasn't fun any longer. What Logan really wanted to do was fight. So he withdrew his claws.

“Run,” he said into the trucker's face.

The man tripped over himself as he scrambled for the door, clearly not caring about his friends, who were still writhing in pain on the floor.

Logan took the moment to glance around. The girl also was gone, and the bartender looked terrified now. The other drunk customers were still sitting at their tables, petrified with shock.

Logan moved back up to the bar. “Sorry about the mess, but they started it,” he said, nodding at the

men on the floor. “Add the repairs to their check.”

He picked up his half-finished cigar, put enough money on the bar to pay for his beer, and headed out into the snow. There was still time to make some miles.

Outside, he stopped and looked around. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

Too bad for her. He might have offered her a ride if she’d waited around long enough for him to get finished with his fun.

He shrugged and climbed into his camper, turning the key and gunning it to life. Then he drove hard and fast through the snow to get it out onto the road. He was a half mile down the highway when the odor reached him.

He took his cigar out of his mouth and sniffed again, just to be sure. Then he sighed and hit the brakes. No one was going to hitch a ride without his permission. He didn’t care how young she was.

Or how much trouble she was in.

Chapter Three

Alberta, Canada

Marie huddled under the tarp, shivering next to the cold metal of a motorcycle, as the camper slid to a stop on the slick road. For an instant she thought about making a run for it as fast as she could. But where would she go? Back to the truckers? The bar? It was snowing—she’d freeze to death before she got very far.

Maybe the guy was stopping for another reason. If she could just stay in here until they reached a town, then she would get out.

She still had the memories of the trucker swirling around in her head. She had a clear picture of what he had planned on doing to her. It disgusted her.

But the realization that he was planning on killing her, just as he had done to two other girls, scared her even more. She hadn’t been this terrified since she had run away from home.

She knew what he had done to those girls, where their bodies were buried. Now she wished she had held the bastard longer, drained everything from him, so there would be no chance of him ever recovering. Just as his victims had not been given a chance.

Just as he hadn’t been planning on giving her a chance.

There truly were some animals in this world, human animals, and she knew she was going to have to learn to deal with that if she stayed on the run.

She held her breath, trying not to move at all as the intense quiet of the Canadian wilderness closed in around the camper.

She sat there, scared and cold, waiting.

Ever since what happened to David in her bedroom, her life had been a waking nightmare. She had been scared more than not. And very lonely.

At first she had tried to pretend that nothing had really happened. She had pretended she hadn't been cursed with his every thought and memory. She had tried to convince herself that it had all been her scared mind, making things up.

And after a month or so, she had succeeded. David's memories and thoughts had faded from her consciousness, and David had recovered. Since everyone thought it was something wrong with David, no one said much, and the incident was kept quiet around school.

She had even come to think the same thing, fooling herself that it was something wrong with David.

Then, a few months later, she had ended up with Sean at the dance, caught in the moment, forgetting David and her first kiss altogether. For an instant the kiss with Sean had been wonderful, exciting. Like nothing else she had ever felt. Her heart had been pounding, her every nerve wound tight.

Then, just as with David, everything about Sean had seemed to flow into her, as if she were draining him, like drawing water from a sink.

The next thing she knew, Sean was on the floor, his eyes wide. He was hardly breathing.

And she knew everything about him: his strengths, his habits, his loves.

She had stood over him saying over and over, "I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything."

The rest was a nightmare. People scrambled around her, trying to help Sean, get him to the hospital. She had tried to go back to school a few days later, but Sean's friends hadn't let her. They blamed her. Then, in defending herself, she had touched another person, and she had stolen more thoughts and memories.

And she'd left that person with eyes wide open, almost not breathing, lying on the floor.

She had hurt someone else.

Again.

At that moment she had realized, with terrifying clarity, that when she touched a person, she actually absorbed that person's thoughts, their memories, their life, even their abilities—everything about them. She hurt them, even though she didn't want to hurt them.

From that moment on, she couldn't stand the looks she was getting from people, even from her parents. The word "mutant" was starting to be whispered loudly when she passed. So the night after she had tried to go back to school, she had packed a few things, covered her body completely so no one could accidentally touch her bare skin, left her parents a good-bye note, and run away.

Now here she was, hiding in the stinking bathroom of a man who clearly had strange abilities, just like

she did. She didn't know why she had gone to him for help in the bar. Something about him, even though he was the hairiest person she had ever seen, had seemed to draw her. He looked almost more animal than human, and when those claws had popped out of his fist, it had scared her.

So why was she here?

How he had easily dealt with the three truckers—that had scared her even more. While he finished the fight, she had run.

Outside in the snow she had seen the camper, supposing it must be his, figuring he would be leaving right behind her. She had thought it would be her best choice to get away from there. She could hide until he stopped in a town, then jump and run away.

But now, with the camper stopped on the side of the road, a good distance from anywhere, it didn't seem like such a good choice after all.

The door to the camper opened, and the trailer rocked as the hairy man climbed out. She could smell the biting odor of his cigar. Maybe he was just getting something, then would go back to driving.

She held her breath, not daring to make a sound.

“Get out!”

His voice seemed to come down on her like a sledgehammer. Her heart pounded. He knew she was here.

She eased back the tarp slowly and climbed out. The man with the black hair and claws stood there, facing her across the small space. The door to the camper was still open, and all around she could see dimly the white road and the shapes of trees through the falling snow.

“Where am I supposed to go?” she demanded with faint defiance.

“I don't know,” the man said. “Get out.”

She moved past him, the cold air biting at her face. “You don't know, or you don't care?”

“Pick one,” he said. “Get out.”

She stepped down into the snow and walked a few steps away, stopping behind the trailer.

The hairy man turned on his heels, got back into the camper, and slammed the door. A moment later the truck's tires were spinning as the camper pulled away.

She watched it for a moment, then glanced around. There was nothing out here. And the cold was already starting to bite at her. She was going to be lucky if she could even make it back to the bar.

At least they would blame him for the fight.

The camper's taillights were almost invisible in the snow when suddenly the brake lights flared. After a moment, a voice came though the snow.

“I can’t wait forever.”

She smiled. She had known there was something about this guy. For all his gruff exterior, he couldn’t leave her to die out here.

She walked to where he was parked on the road and climbed into the passenger seat. “Thanks.”

He didn’t say anything as he shoved the camper back into gear and spun back into motion.

The silence in the cab was tense.

She sat, pushed against the door, grasping her seat belt, as he smoked his cigar and drove. The windshield wipers barely cleared the blowing snow, and she doubted he could see more than a car’s length in front of them. Considering that the two-lane road was tree lined and had sudden curves, he was driving far too fast. But at this point, she certainly wasn’t going to say anything.

“So, what’s your name?” she asked tentatively.

The man chewed on his cigar for a moment, focusing all his attention on the road. Then he finally answered. “Logan. What’s yours?”

She almost said Marie, then decided to stick with the name she had been trying to use since she left home.

“Rogue.”

They sat in silence again for a long few moments. The snow seemed to be coming down even harder, and the *slap, slap, slap* of the windshield wipers counted the time as it passed like the blurry outlines of the trees.

Finally he said, “What kind of name is Rogue?”

She liked the name Rogue. She felt it suited her perfectly at the moment. “What kind of name is Logan?”

He nodded, chewing on the now-short stump of his cigar. “Good point.”

Slap, slap, slap. The silence continued. Rogue wasn’t sure if she should even be trying to talk to the man.

After a moment he tossed his old cigar butt into a full ashtray, then pulled a new smoke from under the seat and, while driving with his leg pressed against the steering wheel, lit the tip. The cab filled with clouds of fresh smoke, and he sighed. She wanted to open the window, get some fresh air blowing in here before she got sick to her stomach, but didn’t know if she should even do that.

Finally she decided that trying to talk was better than sitting in frustrating silence.

“How long have you known?” she asked.

“Known what?” he asked back, glancing at her.

“That you were, you know, like me?” Rogue had heard that there were others with special powers like

hers. Mutants. She just hadn't believed it.

"I'm not like you," the guy said, blowing a large cloud of smoke between his face and the windshield. She had no idea how he could see the road, but he seemed to be managing just fine.

"Right," Rogue said, laughing, "you're just a normal, everyday claw guy."

"Listen, kid," Logan said, "right now the only thing you've done to endear yourself to me is to get three big truckers to attack me. Now granted, that was kind of fun, so I'm cutting you some slack. Any more chatter and the slack runs out."

She smiled, staring through the snow at the faint outline of the mountain road. Then she said, "You know, you should wear your seat belt."

"What did I tell you?" he asked.

But she could tell he was almost smiling. Almost.

The next instant the world seemed to end.

Something big toppled in front of them from Logan's side, falling directly across the road.

He reacted, but he had no chance of success. The camper came to an almost-instant stop.

Rogue was smashed against her seat belt. Her head snapped forward, then backward, banging on the panel behind her.

Logan was tossed hard through the windshield, bouncing and tumbling down the road like a rag doll.

Out her side window the trailer full of wood and the motorcycle shot past, tumbling end over end, the trailer's contents scattering like leaves in the wind.

To Rogue it seemed as if everything in the camper suddenly piled around her, shoving her forward. She could see Logan's body through the broken-out windshield. Snow swirled in and around her face as everything finally came to a stop.

They had hit a massive falling tree. The force of the impact had shoved it forward and to one side. From where she sat, it was clear that this truck wasn't going to be going anywhere again anytime soon. The hood and front end were wrapped around the log.

The silence now seemed almost heavy. She sat there, trying to catch her breath, trying to stop her heart from pounding out of her chest. It was the first time she had ever been in an automobile accident. It had happened so fast.

Then through the snow she saw movement.

Logan was alive. How was that possible?

In the road ahead, he climbed to his feet, brushing himself off. "Damn it!" he said.

She sat there, staring at him in shock. No one could live through being tossed through a truck

windshield, then bouncing down the concrete like he had done. He had to be dead, or at least seriously injured. Yet here he was, walking toward her, swearing under his breath.

As he got closer, she could see that there were gashes in his cheek and forehead. Deep, bleeding cuts that were going to need treatment quickly.

Then, as she watched, the gashes stopped bleeding and began to heal up.

That wasn't possible.

Logan didn't even seem to notice, or think anything was out of the ordinary. Then she realized that her ability—to take someone's thoughts, abilities, everything—also wasn't possible. Yet she did it.

"You all right?" Logan asked, stopping in front of the truck and staring at her through the windshield.

"I'm fine," she said, still not really wanting to move to check that claim out completely.

Logan nodded and studied the tree they had hit, walking along it toward the shattered trunk, shaking his head. From what Rogue could tell, the tree had come off the side of the cliff, probably brought down by the heavy snow.

She was still shaking so much that she didn't even want to try to move. Instead she just sat, trying to get herself to relax.

As Logan climbed up to check the base of the shattered tree, a hand punched out of a large snowdrift right beside him: a huge, clawed hand that grabbed him by the back of the jacket.

Rogue screamed as a snow-covered monster rose up, towering over Logan. It picked him up and swung him around, tossing him into the cliff side with enough force that Rogue could feel the ground shake even from where she was.

The creature stood there, staring at where it had thrown Logan. Rogue saw that it wasn't actually an animal, but a large man with long yellow hair, wearing animal hides. He had sharp teeth and cat's eyes, and he was the ugliest thing Rogue had ever seen.

As the creature stepped toward Logan, Rogue tried to move. The seat had been shoved forward and was jammed behind her by the camper. Her legs were trapped under the dashboard. The more she fought to get them free, the more it hurt.

She tried shoving the passenger door open, but it, too, was stuck, so she went back to feeling around her legs with her hands, trying to find anything she could move to get free.

Then behind her she heard a slight crackling sound.

She twisted around, expecting to see another creature, but what she saw through the cracked camper was something far worse.

Fire.

The camper was on fire.

She went back to fighting to free her legs.

Through the windshield she could see Logan emerge from the snow, clearly angry. With one backhand slap, the fur-covered man smashed Logan into a tree. How strong was this thing?

Logan came up rolling, his claws extended. “You want a fight? You’re going to get a fight!”

Logan slashed at the man.

Missed.

Slashed again.

Missed again, as the man-creature moved quickly out of the way. The thing grabbed Logan’s wrist and, using Logan’s own forward momentum, picked him up and swung him 360 degrees, smashing him into the log.

The log shattered.

Rogue fought even harder now. She had to get away from the fire, from this mockery of a man.

Logan was stunned, but he still tried to stagger to his feet.

The huge man-creature picked Logan up like a pillow, held him in the air, then tossed him twenty feet back through the remains of the truck’s windshield.

Rogue managed to cover her face and turn slightly in the seat as Logan smashed into her, unconscious.

Behind her the fire spread, smoke pouring through the cab and up into the falling snow.

The man-creature stood, staring at her with its cat’s eyes. They almost seemed to be glowing.

“Mister,” Rogue said, shaking Logan. “Mister, wake up, okay?”

She shook him harder, making sure to touch only his clothes, while still trying to pull her legs free.

“Come on, come on,” she said as the man-creature stepped toward the burning camper. “Please wake up.”

Chapter Four

Alberta, Canada

Storm shifted awkwardly in the X-Men jet’s seat, trying to get comfortable. Beside her in the pilot’s seat, Cyclops dozed lightly, his visor strapped firmly to his face. The last two hours had dragged inexorably past, the white snow around them falling hard, covering everything. On the tracking monitor,

their subject, Sabretooth, was still a half mile away, stopped.

Waiting. They had no idea for what, but he was clearly waiting. And so were they.

Sabretooth was a mutant whose abilities had manifested themselves as animal strength, speed, sight, and smell. From what Storm had learned in their premission briefing, Sabretooth had been helping Magneto. Why the professor had wanted them to track Sabretooth out here into the Canadian wilderness was anyone's guess. He certainly hadn't bothered to tell them, if he even knew.

But Storm didn't know a lot about the relationship between the professor and Magneto. All she had gleaned was that they seemed to be old friends, fighting in different ways for the same cause.

She and Cyclops had just been told to trail Sabretooth until something happened. They would know when it did, the professor had said.

She certainly hoped so.

Storm glanced around at the raging blizzard falling around the jet. She could see the nearby outline of a highway and the snow-covered trees and rocks. She could stop the snow around them if she wanted. But at the moment she didn't mind it at all. It was soothing, almost relaxing. She had a feeling about weather, could touch it, and almost any type of weather was good as far as she was concerned.

This snowstorm was certainly a far cry from the arid heat of her native Kenya. The first time she'd ever seen snow there was the day she had caused it.

The day the other kids of her village had tortured her.

The day she had come into her powers.

Thank heavens Professor Xavier had found her, or there would have been no telling what her people would have done to her after she had destroyed their village. She certainly had had no idea what to do with herself at that point.

No mutant did, when first coming into his or her powers. There was no way any of them could. It was something completely unexpected, and in this world that feared mutants, certainly none of them had been trained to cope.

Until now. She had been lucky. The professor had found her, and had offered her the training and education she had needed. She knew there were thousands of others out there who weren't getting the breaks she had received. She was determined to help them, at least as much as she could.

The sound of a hard crash echoed through the trees, waking Cyclops from his light sleep. He glanced at her, his powerful energy gaze contained and controlled by the visor covering his eyes.

"What was that?"

"Darned if I know," Storm replied.

They both studied the scope. Two other blips were now stopped where their subject was located, just down the highway. "Seems Sabretooth found a way to stop traffic."

Cyclops laughed. “What traffic? We haven’t seen a car in hours.”

“Let’s go,” Storm said.

As they climbed out of the jet, she created a warm breeze around them that held most of the snow back. Better they face whatever was going on fresh and dry and ready to fight.

Within a few seconds they were headed at a fast walk up the road, her breeze and their form-fitting X-Men uniforms keeping them warm and comfortable, despite the subzero temperatures of the Canadian forest.

It wasn’t long until they saw exactly what was happening.

As they moved around a slight curve in the road, they could see where a camper had hit a downed tree, smashing the camper and scattering the contents of a trailer it had been pulling. The camper was on fire, with one person trapped inside, on the passenger side of the cab.

Sabretooth was fighting with another man, and as Storm watched, Sabretooth picked the man up and smashed him through the windshield. Judging from the force of the throw, that person was going to be lucky to be alive.

But it was clear the woman in the camper was still alive, and she was struggling to get out—clearly trapped. And now she had a dead weight on top of her.

Side by side, Storm and Cyclops moved up and stood twenty paces behind Sabretooth. The hulking mutant started toward the camper; then he must have sensed them.

He turned, then growled with a low, mean rumble, like an angry animal. He even looked like one, with the skins and long yellow hair.

“Seems we aren’t welcome company,” Cyclops said.

Sabretooth charged at them, moving quickly on the snow-covered road.

Storm stepped aside as Cyclops fired a hot red beam from his eyes. The beam hit Sabretooth square in the chest.

Hard.

Sabretooth roared as the beam picked him up and flipped him through the air, end over end, smashing through the high branches of the trees and disappearing in a snapping of limbs and brush.

Storm nodded. Their foe wasn’t going to be coming back anytime soon.

The only sound now was the crackling of the fire in the camper. Storm ran over to the passenger side, seeing instantly that the intense flames were almost to the camper’s propane tank. She kicked up a swirling wind filled with snow and rain to douse the fire, but it wasn’t going to work quickly enough. The flames were just too close to the tank and too hot to be put out easily.

Cyclops had also run to the passenger side and yanked open the door.

“Don’t touch me!” the girl shouted. “Just help me get the seat loose. I can’t move my legs.”

Storm focused on the fire, but the propane tank was going to explode, and soon. There wasn’t a thing she could do to stop it.

“Cyclops!” Storm said. “Hurry!”

Cyclops focused carefully and used his optic beam to dislodge the seat behind the trapped girl. The seat snapped and came loose.

The girl quickly climbed out and over the hood of the camper, dropping to the ground. At the same time, Storm pulled the unconscious man free.

Suddenly she heard the valve on the propane tank blow off.

It was now or never.

She brought up a massive wind behind them, forcing it in low and hard along the passenger side of the camper. The wind caught her, Cyclops, the girl, and the unconscious man and slid them all down the road on the slick surface, as if they were sliding down a ski slope. All of them were knocked from their feet, and the unconscious guy was rolled like a limp doll. If he wasn’t already dead, that hadn’t done him any good at all. But Storm hadn’t had a choice.

She was just climbing back to her feet when the camper exploded, sending flames and debris into the air, lighting the falling snow with bright orange and yellow colors.

Beside her, the girl and Cyclops stood and stared at the flames. Then the girl said softly, “Thanks.”

Chapter Five

Magneto’s Headquarters

Mortimer Toynbee laughed when Sabretooth came through the tunnel in the rock and into the laboratory. He was alone.

The lab was a massive space, with towering cliffs of rock, trees, and a giant meadow filled with the machine. Magneto’s machine. It sat like a modern statue in the middle of the clearing, its polished metal thrusting toward the invisible roof above. Toynbee had been painting the bottom of the machine, carefully, so as not to miss even the slightest spot.

“Weren’t you supposed to bring somebody back with you?” he asked sarcastically. Toynbee was more often called Toad, due largely to his agility, his ability to leap great distances, and his superhuman strength.

Sabretooth paused and turned to face Toad, who only sneered and went back to work. With a growl Sabretooth moved on into Magneto’s personal office, through another tunnel in the rock.

Magneto watched him come, shaking his head. Around him the walls of his large office were stark, made of cold, polished stone and metal, just the way he liked it. The space at one time had been a cave, but he'd changed it for his own purposes, placing a massive desk under a single light source, covering the floor with polished tiles.

"My instructions were simple," Magneto said, keeping his voice low and level, not letting his anger seep into the words. "In fact, I made them that way especially for you. And yet you were unable to retrieve our friend."

Sabretooth moved across the room through the shadows and stopped in front of Magneto's desk. The smell of the hides he wore carried over to Magneto, but he ignored it.

"So what happened, brother?"

"Xavier's people," Sabretooth said, his voice low and almost a growl. "They knew."

Magneto nodded and sat back in his chair, musing. Charles was going to be a little harder to beat than he had at first thought.

"Good for you, Charles," Magneto said to himself. "Good for you."

Then Magneto caught a glimpse of the metal dog tags hanging around Sabretooth's neck. He held out his hand, summoning the tags to him.

They snapped off Sabretooth's neck and flew through the air, dropping into his hand. He inspected the tags, staring at the one word at the bottom that didn't seem to belong: *Wolverine*.

"Strange," Magneto said to himself. Then he looked up at Sabretooth. "Where is the mutant now?"

"With Xavier's people," Sabretooth said.

Magneto nodded, tossing the tags across the desk back to Sabretooth.

Then he pushed himself away from the desk, stood, and headed around the desk. "I have made the first move. That is all they know, because that is all you know."

He headed for the door. "Come. We only have three days."

Sabretooth shrugged, grabbed the tags off the desk, and turned to follow.

X-Men Mansion—Westchester County, NY

Logan slowly came back to consciousness, like a swimmer twenty feet down, stroking for the surface of a lake. The light got slowly brighter; then his hearing returned. Then his sense of smell.

He kept his eyes closed, kept his breathing paced, letting his mind clear, giving himself some time. The last thing he could remember was the ugly beast picking him up and tossing him through the window of his truck. The guy had been strong. Very strong. But in a rematch, Logan knew he would get the best of him.

Logan could tell that he was lying on his back on some sort of padded bed in a very sterile place. Some sort of hospital or lab, more than likely. And a very fresh-smelling woman was working nearby.

He let his eyes slit open just a fraction as the woman moved toward him. The room was white and was filled with modern-looking equipment. A box behind her floated off a shelf and came to rest gently in front of her on a tray.

For a moment he was puzzled; then he realized that she was a mutant also.

The woman opened the box and pulled out an IV needle, then turned to him. He kept his eyes in the same position, his breathing consistent, even though her wonderful scent was almost overpowering.

With a gentle touch she picked up his arm, then a moment later he felt the slight prick of the needle. At least she was good at what she did.

Instantly he reacted, sitting up and grabbing her around the throat. The needle broke in his arm, and the box was knocked to the white floor.

For an instant he was unable even to think as he stared into her beautiful face. He couldn't remember ever having this reaction to a woman before. But now was clearly not the time. The way he was holding her, she wouldn't be able to talk, that much was for sure.

She just stared at him, calm and collected, as if his threat meant nothing really. Or as if she was convinced he wasn't going to carry it out.

Disgusted, he let her go, shoving her backward and to the floor. He jumped off the table, realizing he was dressed only in his underwear. And there was something besides his clothes missing: His dog tags were no longer around his neck.

Logan pulled the broken needle from his arm and tossed it at the woman sitting on the floor. She just rubbed her neck and said nothing.

He turned and ran for the nearest door. The sooner he found some clothes and got out of here, the happier he was going to be.

The hallway on the other side of the door was much like the lab he'd just left—sterile, white tiled, and very quiet.

Deathly quiet.

Where the hell was he?

He ran down the hall, away from the lab, letting his full senses bring him information.

The walls were soundproof beyond anything normally done. He couldn't hear anything at all—no sounds of people, machinery, distant traffic, nothing.

The first door he came to was open, so he went through.

It was a fairly large room, also very clean. One side of the room contained lockers, with a padded bench sitting in front of them. The other wall was full of black uniforms hanging side by side, each tagged with a

strange “X” insignia.

He quickly rummaged through the lockers, coming up fairly quickly with a pair of pants and a shirt that almost fit.

Behind him in the hallway he could hear the sounds of someone’s footsteps. Quickly he finished dressing and headed out another door on the far side. He had no idea how to get out of this place, but if he kept going through doors, eventually he would find the exit.

This door led to another hallway, almost exactly like the first. Logan stopped for an instant, trying to decide which way to go. But then his decision was made for him. A door slid open with the faint *ding* of an elevator. With the footsteps coming across the locker room he’d just left, he dashed into the elevator and let the doors close. The elevator started upward instantly, clearly running automatically.

He got ready to attack whoever might greet him when the elevator door opened, but as it turned out, he didn’t need to. The door slid open on a very empty, very plush hallway, exactly the opposite of what he had found below.

He sniffed, taking in the sights and smells. He was clearly in an older mansion, with a large number of people living in it. This hallway was wide and stately, with a high ceiling and expensive furniture along the walls. Plush carpet softened his footsteps, and the smell of furniture polish seemed to dominate.

From down the hall to his right he could hear a voice, so he headed that way, staying to one side and moving silently.

In a moment he could hear exactly what the voice was saying.

“The Roman Empire, for centuries, persecuted and ostracized the Christians, to the extent that they were fed to lions for sport. Then, almost overnight, their religion rose to become the dominant faith in the empire.”

“What the hell?” he said softly.

He moved to where the door was slightly ajar and looked through. Inside he could see a strikingly beautiful black woman with pure white hair standing in front of a dozen or so fourteen- to seventeen-year-old children.

Logan studied them, noting that even though they all looked basically normal, it was clear they were all mutants.

An entire class of mutants.

Where was he?

“Does anyone know what caused the Christians to suddenly become accepted?” the woman with the white hair asked her students.

“Yes,” one of them said.

The woman nodded for the student to go ahead.

“The emperor suddenly became one,” the kid continued.

“That’s right,” the teacher said. “Which made for some very relieved Christians, I can tell you.”

The children all laughed.

Then the woman turned to face the door where Logan was watching through the narrow crack. “Can I help you?”

All the students turned to stare at him.

Logan just shook his head and moved away quickly, heading down the hallway toward a brighter area.

The hallway expanded into a sort of foyer, with a high ceiling and massive antique chandelier. Beside the hall, which led off in both directions, the main way in and out of the foyer was a double oaken door.

Down the hall the elevator he had used *ding* ed faintly again, warning him that someone was coming up—most likely after him.

And from the other direction he could hear the sounds of two people’s footsteps on the carpet. He clearly had no choice.

He sprang for the oaken door, opened it silently, and stepped inside, closing it just as silently behind himself.

“Good morning, Logan,” a voice said.

Logan spun around and came face-to-face with a middle-aged bald man sitting behind a large mahogany desk. There was a blackboard set up beside the massive desk, and four students were sitting in front of the blackboard, clearly in some sort of class. They all now turned and stared at him.

“Give me a moment, please,” the man said to Logan. Then he turned back to his students. “I think that’s enough for today, don’t you? Off you go.”

The four kids all stood and filed past Logan, out the door, looking at him curiously.

Logan didn’t know what to do. He knew there were people after him outside that door. Yet this man knew who he was and didn’t seem surprised at all that he was here.

Suddenly one of the girls turned back around and ran to the desk. “Forgot my book,” she explained.

She grabbed it off the man’s desk, then ran for the door.

“Bye, Professor,” she said. But the oaken door beside Logan already had been pulled closed. The girl didn’t even slow down. Instead she simply ran through the door as if it weren’t there.

Logan stared at the hard wood where she had disappeared, then back at the man she had called “Professor.”

The man held up a textbook as if it explained everything. “Physics,” he said. Then, “Would you like some breakfast?”

Logan just stared at him. He had been prepared to fight his way out, not to be offered something to eat. What the hell was going on here? He needed some answers, and he needed them fast.

“Where am I?” he demanded.

“Westchester, New York,” the man said. “You were attacked. My people brought you here for medical attention.”

“I don’t need medical attention,” Logan said. He was still hurting slightly in a half dozen places, but he certainly wasn’t going to admit it to this guy.

The man smiled. “Yes, of course.”

The man turned and wheeled himself out from behind his desk. For the first time Logan realized the man was confined to a wheelchair.

The bald-headed guy moved toward Logan, extending his hand. “I’m sorry. Let me introduce myself. I’m Professor Charles Xavier. You’re at my school for gifted children. Actually, mutants, as the press calls us. You’ll be safe here from Magneto.”

Logan shook the man’s hand, then, puzzled, he asked, “What’s a magneto?”

The professor chuckled. “A very powerful mutant who believes that there is a war brewing between us and the rest of humanity.”

“So?” Logan asked, glaring at the professor. “What does that have to do with me?”

“I don’t know yet,” the professor admitted. “I wish I did. But I believe Magneto is planning some kind of preemptive strike. I’ve been following his actions for some time. The mutant that attacked you is an associate of Magneto’s called Sabretooth.”

“You knew he was going to attack me?”

The professor shook his head. “No, I just tracked Sabretooth, and he led my people to you. We need to keep you out of Magneto’s reach until we know what his interest is.”

At that, Logan decided he had had enough. “Sorry, pal. I’ve got to get back to my—” Suddenly he realized he didn’t have any idea where his camper and belongings were.

“Sorry,” the professor said. “It’s gone.”

Logan stared at him. The guy couldn’t mean his camper. Granted he had smashed it up pretty badly, but it still had to be somewhere.

“Your truck was destroyed,” the professor said. “A fire started in the collision and ignited the propane tank. We barely got you out in time. There was nothing left.”

Logan said nothing.

“Logan, it’s been almost fifteen years, hasn’t it? Since you woke up?”

Logan wanted to turn and run, but he didn't.

"Woke up?"

"Woke up," the professor said, "with no knowledge of who you really are. Living day to day, trying to piece together what happened to you. You know how to fight, though. You always have known, haven't you? And your nightmares are vague clues to a past that isn't completely erased from your mind. But now that everything has been destroyed, where will you go?"

"How—?" Logan asked. "How did you know all that?"

You're not the only one with gifts, the professor said. It took Logan a moment to realize that the professor's lips hadn't moved at all.

Behind him the door opened, and three others came in, with Rogue, the girl who had been in his truck with him. One was the black woman who had been teaching the kids, the other was a guy with strange-looking sunglasses, and the third was the beautiful woman from the lab.

"Ah, thank you," the professor said aloud. "Dr. Grey, allow me to introduce Logan."

The beautiful woman from the lab, the one he had choked in his escape, smiled pleasantly and stepped forward, her hand extended. "Yes, we've met. Call me Jean."

Logan looked into her eyes as he took her hand. In all his life he had never seen a woman so beautiful. Or one to whom he had been so attracted. Her hand was soft, yet strong in his. Her grip was firm. And he didn't want to let go.

Professor Xavier continued with the introductions. "This is Scott Summers, also called Cyclops. Ororo Munroe, also called Storm. They are the ones who saved your life."

Logan glanced at them, but he turned his attention to the young Rogue and said nothing.

"Don't mention it," Cyclops said.

Logan noticed that Dr. Grey put her hand on the Cyclops guy's arm. It was clearly the action of a girlfriend. Subtle, but not something Logan would miss. He wasn't going to like this Cyclops, he knew right away.

"What are you going to do with her?" Logan asked, moving closer to Rogue, but careful not to touch her.

The professor smiled at Rogue with real warmth. And in that smile Logan saw a clear expression of understanding. "Rogue's been on her own now for some time, searching for a home. A place to belong."

Rogue nodded, clearly happy to be here. And that was all fine and good, as far as Logan was concerned.

Xavier turned back to face Logan. "We're going to give her that."

Rogue nodded, confirming what was clear to Logan.

“So,” Logan said, glancing at the others, “this place is sort of a dog pound for unwanted mutants, is that it?”

“It’s a school,” the professor said calmly.

Logan shrugged. “I don’t really believe what you’re doing here, but, lucky for me, I don’t care.” He started for the door. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Hold on,” the Cyclops guy said, stepping toward him.

That was when the anger Logan felt, toward the guy they called Sabretooth, about losing his camper, all came boiling up at once. He felt as though he just had to take it out on someone, and the guy with the sunglasses seemed like the perfect target.

Without hesitation, Logan slugged the guy, knocking him back into the wall.

Cyclops hit hard, one hand blocking his fall while the other shot up as he checked to make sure his sunglasses were still in place. *Vain dude*, Logan thought contemptuously.

Cyclops scrambled to his feet, clearly angry.

Logan was impressed. This guy could take a punch.

Cyclops started back toward Logan, but Logan stood his ground, just hoping the guy would charge. He really needed to pound on someone right now.

“Cyclops!” Jean said in a crisp, loud voice.

Logan’s claws came out as the kid kept coming.

“Logan, stop!” Jean said. “Please?”

She stepped between Cyclops and Logan, moving toward Logan, right at his extended claws.

“Jean!” Cyclops said.

Storm stepped forward and stopped the sunglass kid before he could move any farther. Smart of her, as far as Logan was concerned.

Logan kept his claws extended, and Jean, her beautiful eyes staring straight into his, stopped right as their tips nudged her throat. He had to admit, she was brave.

“I know you think none of this is your concern,” Jean said. “But Magneto will find you. And a lot of lives could be in danger, including your own.”

He slowly retracted his claws, but he didn’t turn away from her calm, deep gaze. He could stare into her eyes forever, as far as he was concerned.

Then Xavier stepped in.

“Logan, I’ll make you a deal,” he said. “You give me forty-eight hours to figure out what Magneto wants with you, and I will give you my word that, no matter what happens, I’ll use all my power to help you piece together what you’ve lost. And what you’re looking for.”

Logan, still staring at Jean, nodded. His claws finished retracting, his fists opened, and his shoulders relaxed. “Forty-eight hours, old man,” he said. “Cross me, and I won’t feel any guilt about what I do.”

Jean smiled. “Thank you, Logan.”

At that he could say nothing.

Chapter Six

Washington, DC

Senator Kelly smiled and clapped his heavy hands together as the limousine pulled onto the tarmac of the airport. “Looks like we have some supporters.”

Henry Guyrich, his aide, nodded, but he wasn’t really looking at the supporters, or at Kelly. Kelly didn’t really care what Guyrich thought. Or, for that matter, what anyone thought—except for the pollsters. And right now, the polls showed that his antimutant stance was getting him a lot of attention, perhaps even votes. And he was going to keep riding the issue until it no longer yielded those benefits.

The limo came to a stop beside a large government helicopter, the pilot already waiting in his seat. The path between the limo and the helicopter was lined by a cheering crowd, barely restrained by a short rope.

Senator Kelly stepped out into the cold and pulled his overcoat tighter around his stomach, then turned toward the crowd, waving and smiling. He could see there were at least two hundred people there, many brandishing antimutant signs. One even had a stuffed mutant hanging from a pole. A few reporters had cameras set up and were doing a live remote.

He moved along the crowd, shaking hands, smiling, giving the thumbs-up signal that was becoming his trademark. Around him the crowd cheered even more enthusiastically, encouraging him to keep going, to stop those mutants. He loved this attention. He could feel it fueling him, giving him the extra strength he needed to keep going.

He finally reached the bottom of the stairs that led up into the helicopter. He climbed three steps, then again paused and waved, making sure the cameras had time to catch him fully. Then, with one last quick thumbs-up, he moved inside.

Behind him his aide, Guyrich, followed carrying the senator’s briefcase. As he climbed aboard, he glanced toward the pilot, who nodded in acknowledgment.

No one noticed anything out of the ordinary. Not even the senator.

X-Men Mansion

The bright winter sun flooded the large solarium, warming the air around the students and Storm. Rogue sat near the back, a pile of books on the floor beside her, watching as Storm lectured.

This was all so new to her. She had never expected to be included in a class again after what had happened in her old school. Yet here she was, with people who knew what she could do and didn't care. It was going to take her some time to get used to that.

She also had new clothes that fit over a very light body stocking that had been provided to keep anyone from accidentally touching her. It was wonderfully soft and comfortable.

Storm stood in front of them, her skin almost radiant in the sunlight, her white hair flowing like a waterfall around her head. She and Dr. Grey were the most beautiful women Rogue had ever seen. Someday, she wanted to be like them. She had already decided that.

"So, the barometric pressure begins to drop," Storm was saying. "Precipitation begins, and the air starts to move more rapidly. Now lightning strikes occur when strong thermal updrafts cause water droplets and ice crystals to collide, creating positively and negatively charged particles."

A student named Frederick, who sat in front, raised his hand.

"Yes?" Storm said.

"Are you sure about this?" Frederick asked, smiling.

"Don't tempt me to demonstrate," she said, shaking her head with a hint of amusement. Then she turned back to the board.

Rogue smiled at another boy who sat in front of her. His name was John. He was the cutest boy she had seen in a long, long time.

Kitty, who was sitting beside Rogue, whispered. "So, that guy you came in with? He's really got steel claws that come out of his hands?"

Jubilee, who was sitting on the other side of Rogue, whispered back. "No way. What kind of mutation is that?"

Rogue just shrugged, watching John as he pulled out a lighter and clicked it. Then he held his hand under the flame and pulled the lighter away, keeping the flame in place, hovering over his hand.

Despite all that she had experienced, Rogue was astonished.

He just smiled, and the flame grew into a ball the size of an orange.

"Showing off again," Jubilee said, shaking her head, but John ignored her.

Now the fireball over John's hand was even bigger, almost the size of a grapefruit. Then suddenly the flame was engulfed in a ball of ice. Glancing around, Rogue found another student—Bobby—holding out a crystal rose for her. Though beautiful, it was already beginning to melt.

Then Rogue glanced at Storm. She didn't look happy.

"John, what did I tell you?" Storm asked, frowning.

"Sorry," John said.

Storm shook her head, then turned to finish what she was writing on the board.

John glanced back and smiled at Rogue. Right then and there, she knew she was really going to like this place.

Twenty minutes later the class ended. Rogue picked up her books, watching as the other students left, some stopping to talk to Storm about some topic.

Bobby took his time, until Jubilee and Kitty had moved off, then smiled again at Rogue. "You want to meet me for dinner?" he asked. "I'll show you around."

Rogue could feel her heart jump. She was flattered and scared at the same time. "Okay, sure."

"Great!" he said. He headed for the door with a happy, "See ya."

Rogue finished picking up her books as Storm moved toward her. "So, how are you doing?"

Rogue looked around in wonder, at the glass-walled room and winter gardens beyond. "This place is so beautiful. And everyone is so nice. I just—"

She didn't know what to say, so she just stopped.

Storm nodded. "How long have you been on your own?"

Rogue stared into the eyes of the beautiful teacher. "Eight months. I've just been hitchhiking, trying to get as far away from home as possible. Get away from anyone who would know what I was."

Storm nodded. "That I understand."

"I didn't know there was anyplace for us to go," Rogue said. "But this is wonderful. I've felt kind of alone, you know."

"Well," Storm said, "you're not alone anymore."

"And the professor?" Rogue said, looking into Storm's eyes. "He can actually cure me?"

Rogue watched with surprise as the smile suddenly drained from her teacher's face. After a few seconds, Storm sat down in a chair and motioned for Rogue to sit across from her.

There, over the next hour, Rogue learned things she didn't want to know. And understood that maybe she would never, ever be able to touch another person again, as long as she lived.

And that no one would ever touch or kiss her in return.

Suddenly she felt even more alone than she had on the road.

Chapter Seven

X-Men Mansion

Logan was getting the official tour from Professor Xavier himself. He wasn't sure why the old guy was spending the time with him, but whatever the reason, Logan figured to be gone in less than forty-eight hours, so it didn't matter in the slightest.

Logan walked slowly, pacing the professor's wheelchair as it moved silently along the floor. They were in a wing of the mansion that Logan hadn't seen before. The place was massive. He had already been shown a huge solarium and more rooms than he could count. And everything was distinctly first-class. Clearly there was some money behind all this.

Of course, if the professor could read minds—as it seemed he could—there certainly wouldn't be a problem getting money.

“The dining rooms, kitchen, and parlor are found in the other wing,” the professor said, going on with the tour. “As you can see, everything on this floor and above has been designed to be viewed by the general public. As far as they know, this is merely a school for ‘gifted’ students.”

The professor led Logan to a panel in the wall and stopped. A hidden elevator door opened with *aping*, and they got inside.

“The subbasements however, are an entirely different matter.”

“So how'd I get in here?” Logan asked. “You didn't bring me in through the front door.”

The door of the elevator opened, revealing the lab corridor that Logan had run down during his attempted escape.

“Come on,” the professor said. “I'll show you.”

They moved down the corridor, turning twice before reaching wide doors that opened automatically onto a massive hangar. It was bigger than anything Logan would have imagined. More than likely it could hold an airliner or two. But at the moment, it seemed to be primarily dedicated to a modernistic, shiny black jet like none that Logan had ever seen.

“Vertical takeoff and landings,” the professor said, motioning toward the jet. “Instruments that allow it to fly in any weather.”

“Amazing,” Logan said, moving out into the hangar and looking around curiously. He pointed to the large doors at the end. “Hidden entrance?”

The professor nodded. “Perfectly hidden.”

“So why all this?” Logan asked, motioning at the equipment and the jet.

“Everyone here has abilities,” Xavier said. “Powers. Curses, until they can be controlled. All of us have hurt and been hurt. And none of us asked to be the way we are.”

“I hear you there,” Logan said.

“When I was fifteen years old,” the professor said, “I began to hear people’s thoughts. At first I thought I was going mad. One day I read the mind of one of my teachers and saw that he was going to fail me, simply because he didn’t like me.”

“I bet that pissed you off,” Logan said.

“It did at that,” the professor commented. “I was so mad I put a suggestion in his mind that he was having a heart attack. He nearly died.”

Logan looked down at the old man with a little more respect. It hadn’t dawned on him that reading someone’s mind could have other uses. Dangerous uses, it seemed. “So what’d you do?”

“I was terrified,” the professor said, “as most everyone here was when something first happened to them. I withdrew from everything, fearful that I might hurt someone else. I thought I was alone.”

“But you weren’t.”

The professor nodded slightly. “That was when I met Eric Lehnsherr. Eric, too, had a power. He could create magnetic fields, enabling him to manipulate metal. He helped me understand what I was. And to find ways of controlling my power. Eric also showed me that there were others like us.”

“How long ago was this?” Logan asked.

The professor smiled. “More years ago than I care to think about. As the years went by and our numbers increased, so did the prejudice and fear of ordinary humans. Our world changed, and Eric changed with it. He believed that humanity would never accept us, that a war between mutants and humans was inevitable. He was angry, vengeful. That’s when he became Magneto.”

“And you could no longer stay with him?” Logan asked.

“Exactly,” the professor said, clearly still sad about it despite all the years. He moved on, toward the stables and the garage. “I opened this school, a place where mutants could be safe from persecution. This is a place where they could not only learn to focus their powers, but also learn that mankind is not evil. Just uninformed.”

“You still didn’t answer my question,” Logan said. “Why all this hardware?”

The professor continued. “There are mutants out there with incredible power, Logan. I knew that a day would come when some of them might use that power against the rest of humanity. And that if there was no one to challenge them, humanity’s days would end.”

“So you are the challenge,” Logan said, nodding.

“Evil men succeed when good men do nothing,” the professor said. “A famous quote that Eric taught me once.”

Logan nodded again. This was a much, much bigger operation than he had first thought. It was going to be great to get out of here and let them fight all their good fights for as long as they wanted.

“Now,” Professor Xavier said, turning his chair back toward the hallway. “If you wouldn’t mind, Dr. Grey would like to examine you.”

Logan laughed. Having Dr. Grey do anything to him was just about his idea of heaven.

The East Coast—Above Washington, DC

Senator Kelly hung up the phone and sat back in the soft chair of the helicopter, staring out the window at the ground flashing past. The drone of the motors faded to background noise in the extraordinarily luxurious interior. Kelly loved traveling like this. He considered it one of the God-given rights of his job. And he used his rights as often as he felt he needed, which was often.

He stared at the phone. That call with the president had gone almost exactly as he had expected. Sometimes things went well, sometimes they went poorly, and other times they just didn’t go at all.

“Well,” Guyrich said, “what was his opinion?”

Kelly shrugged and leaned forward to pour himself another glass of scotch. “He’s the president of the United States. He doesn’t have an opinion. He smiles, he waves, he shakes hands.”

“Isn’t that what you do, sir?” Guyrich asked.

Kelly shot his aide a sharp look across the table, then put the scotch bottle back between them. Guyrich had been acting strange lately. If he didn’t shape up, Kelly would have to have a talk with him about his attitude. The last thing Kelly needed right now was a problem with his staff.

“Well,” Kelly said, leaning back and sipping, enjoying the smooth taste of the expensive scotch, “this time it’s not up to him. It’s up to me and Congress.”

“Have you thought about a demonstration of some kind?” Guyrich asked. “Maybe use the UN Summit to our advantage. The whole world will be watching.”

“I’m only interested in Americans,” Kelly said, his voice harsher than he intended. He caught himself. “Let the rest of the world deal with mutants in any damn way they please. Besides, only Americans can vote for me.”

He laughed and took another sip, then decided to go on. “This is the sort of problem that liberals just beg you to ignore, until it crawls up and bites them in the ass. And guys like us are left to clean it up.”

He stared into the eyes of his aide. “You know, this situation, these mutants, are the reason people like me exist.”

Kelly glanced out the window as the helicopter crossed out over the cold, dark gray waters of the Atlantic. They weren’t supposed to be over water on this flight, especially not the ocean.

“Hey, where the hell are we?”

Kelly glanced back at his aide, waiting for an answer. Instead he witnessed a horror story. Right before his eyes, Guyrich was changing. His face was shifting, his clothes seeming to draw inward, until finally, where Guyrich had been sitting, Kelly found a beautiful woman covered completely in iridescent blue scales. She had solid yellow eyes that made her look more like a cat than a human.

She just smiled, and said nothing.

It took a moment for Senator Kelly’s mind to register what he had just seen. Then he realized that he was facing a mutant. A mutant who had been posing as his aide.

Instantly he jumped for the cockpit door.

But the blue woman was faster. *A lot* faster. As he moved past her, she planted a solid kick to his stomach.

The air rushed out and he doubled over, sliding toward the door. As quick as he could, he climbed back to his feet and yanked open the cockpit door.

“Pilot! Help!”

The pilot leered at him through grotesque features. A long tongue flicked briefly at him.

The copilot seat was empty.

It shouldn’t be empty, he thought frantically. *There are always two pilots on these flights.*

Kelly turned back to the blue woman, who was standing behind him.

She took a step toward him, and he swung at her. He wasn’t going to let any damned mutant take him without a fight.

It was as if he were moving in slow motion. She caught his hand and hit him five or six times with kicks and punches before he could even fall down.

He coughed, trying to catch his breath as he lay face-down on the carpet-covered floor. Suddenly strong hands grabbed him and flipped him over on his back. The blue face and yellow eyes came right down over him like a nightmare that he couldn’t seem to wake up from.

“You know,” the blue woman said, “people like you are the reason I was afraid to go to school as a child.”

She stood and kicked him solidly in his stomach, forcing what little was left of his breath out of him.

He worked to breathe, choking and coughing as he stared up at her through water-filled eyes.

She started to turn away, then, almost as an afterthought, she raised a foot and brought it down solidly on the side of his head.

Merciful blackness took him almost instantly.

It would be hours before he awoke. And then he would be very sorry he did.

Chapter Eight

X-Men Mansion

Jean leaned against the edge of the doorway of Logan's room and watched, smiling, as he took down the pictures from the walls and put them in drawers. The two of them had talked off and on, through his medical examination and then through the entire dinner. She had then offered to show him his room, and he had gladly accepted. Any excuse to spend more time with Dr. Jean Grey was just fine with him.

"So why do so many mutants end up coming through here?" Logan asked as he slammed a drawer shut.

"Most mutants leave pretty ugly situations behind them," Jean said. "People find out what you are, so a lot of mutants have to start out with a new identity. We not only help them with their control of their powers, we help them with the new identities and starting new lives, as well."

Logan nodded, sorting through the clothes someone had put on his bed. They all looked as if they would fit, but some he just wouldn't be caught dead in.

"So," Logan said, turning to face her. "You move things with your mind?"

"It's called telekinesis," she said.

"Right," Logan said. "You move stuff with your mind. Anything else?"

"I also have some telepathic abilities."

Logan stared at her suspiciously. "You mean like the professor?"

She shook her head. "My telepathy is nowhere near as powerful as Professor Xavier's. But sometimes, if I make a strong connection."

"So," Logan said, noting her obvious discomfort as she revealed things about herself. "Why are you just plain old Jean Grey?"

"What do you mean?"

"You couldn't think of some cute mutant nickname? Seems that just about everyone else has one."

She laughed. "Honestly, I haven't chosen one yet."

He pushed the pile of clothes he liked into the middle of the bed and sat down, feeling the unaccustomed softness under him. "How about Mrs. Cyclops. You guys are a couple, right?"

Again, she laughed and nodded.

“He seems kinda tense,” Logan commented, “for a woman like you.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling, “is that so?”

“Seems that way to me,” Logan said.

“When Professor Xavier found Scott, he hadn’t opened his eyes in two months. Awake, asleep, not at all in two months.”

“Why?” Logan asked. “Didn’t like what he was seeing?”

“No,” Jean said. “Even with his visor, it’s very hard for him to control the energy that comes from his eyes. Without the visor, if he opened his eyes, he could easily punch through a mountain as simply as you could crush a beer can. He has to be in control every minute of every day.”

Logan nodded. She and the professor had been right. Everyone here had a curse of one sort or another. He stared at her as the silence between them grew slightly uncomfortable. On the perfect skin of her neck he could see the bruises left from where he had grabbed her earlier.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“Sorry about what?”

He shrugged. “If I hurt you. Earlier. Sorry.”

She paused, smiling, and reached out to touch him. As she did, her head jerked back, her face pale. There had been a clear connection between them for a moment there, albeit an unexpected one. Clearly she had gotten something from his mind.

“What did you see?” He fought to keep from reacting to the unexpected intrusion.

She took a deep breath and let it slowly out. What she had seen had shocked her in some fashion or another. He waited until she gathered herself.

Finally she said, “Just images. And pain. Lots of pain. What happened to you?”

“Bad things, darlin’,” he said. “Bad things.”

“Don’t you think it’s past your bedtime, Logan?” Cyclops said as he stepped into the doorway and stood beside Jean. “Or do you want Jean to tell you a story?”

Logan snorted. “I bet she’s got a few you haven’t heard.”

Jean sighed and shot Cyclops a look of frustration. “Let me know when you two start butting antlers. I’ll get my camera.”

She turned and left, clearly flustered by what she had seen in Logan’s mind. And, Logan guessed, because Cyclops had stuck his nose in where it didn’t belong.

Logan stared at Cyclops and, despite the visor, it was plain he was staring back.

“You gonna tell me to stay away from your girl?” Logan asked, sneering at Cyclops.

“If I had to do that,” Cyclops said, “she wouldn’t be my girl.”

Cyclops stepped into the room. Logan stayed on the bed, not moving, but ready to if something warranted it.

“Rogue said you were like an animal in that bar,” Cyclops said. “I think she meant it as a compliment. She was very impressed. But fighting humans is very different from taking on mutants. Especially Magneto.”

“You’ve fought him, have you?” Logan asked.

“We haven’t had to resort to that,” Cyclops said. “Yet.”

Logan laughed. “You’re prepping for a war, and I’m not convinced you could handle yourself in a heated discussion. I’m guessing I’m the only one here who’s seen any real combat.”

“And when was that?” Cyclops asked.

Logan just stared. He wasn’t about to go over what little he remembered with this wet-nosed kid. “Previously.”

“Don’t like to talk about your past, huh?”

“Got it in one,” Logan said. “Especially to you.”

“It just must kill you that I saved your life,” Cyclops said.

Logan only snorted. He actually hadn’t given it much thought, but he wasn’t going to bait the kid with that.

Cyclops laughed. “Don’t worry. It won’t happen again.”

Logan only shrugged.

Cyclops turned and headed for the door. There he stopped and looked back. “And Logan,” Cyclops said, his face hard and very intense. “Stay away from my girl.”

With that Cyclops moved off down the hall, leaving Logan to sit on his bed and smile.

Jean Grey stood in the laboratory in front of the light board, staring at the X rays posted there. To one side sat Professor Xavier, and behind him stood Cyclops and Storm. All of them were in their comfortable clothes. Storm had even had to get dressed to come down, because this gathering was later than normal.

But when Jean had left Logan, she had still been too wired to sleep, so she’d gone back to her lab to finish reviewing his physical exam results. What she had found had caused her to call the others

immediately.

While they were on the way, she had taken the time to gather herself, calm herself. She didn't want to admit—or show—how much that flash of mental contact had bothered her. Especially to Scott. He was having enough trouble with her even talking to Logan.

The X rays on the light board showed different angles of Logan's skeleton, from the skull down to his fingers and toes. It looked more like a creation of a Deco architect than something natural, that was for sure. Much of the skeleton was streamlined, refined in many strange ways. Clearly manufactured.

And the claws running from the back of his arms down to his knuckles looked downright mean. The design was brilliant, allowing them to work based purely on muscle control.

Even after an hour of studying the X rays, she still couldn't believe what she was seeing. When the others arrived, she started by pointing out the bones, bright white on the X ray, then glanced at the professor. "The metal is an alloy called adamantium."

"You're kidding," Cyclops said.

"I didn't think that was possible," the professor said, staring at the X rays, his features calm as always.

"I didn't either," Jean said. "Until today, I thought adamantium to be a myth. Impenetrable, unbreakable. Supposedly indestructible." She pointed at the white on the X rays. "But all that is adamantium."

"How in the world did anyone even work it into shapes?" Storm asked.

Jean just shook her head. "I've no idea. But it's been surgically grafted to his entire skeleton. Even around his joints and over his skull."

"Amazing," Cyclops said.

"How could he have survived a procedure like that?" Storm asked.

"His mutation," Jean said, glancing at the professor to make sure she was on the right track. "Logan has uncharted regenerative capability, which enables him to heal rapidly. This also makes his age impossible to determine. For all we know, he could very well be older than you, Professor."

Xavier smiled.

Cyclops laughed, then asked, "Any idea who did this to him? Or why?"

The professor was about to answer, but Jean jumped in ahead of him, basing her answer on her last conversation with Logan, and the mental connection they had shared. "He doesn't know. Nor does he remember anything about his life before the operation happened. But he remembers the pain."

Professor Xavier stared at her for a moment, clearly surprised that she knew what she did. Then he sighed. "This is something I've feared all along: experimentation on mutants. It's not entirely unheard-of, but I've never seen anything like this before."

The idea that Logan had been the subject of someone's inhuman experiment upset Jean more than she wanted to admit.

“So,” Cyclops said, staring at Jean for an instant before glancing at the professor, “what do you think Magneto wants with him?”

The professor pointed at the X rays on the wall. “I’m not entirely sure it’s *him* that Magneto wants.”

“The adamantium?” Storm asked.

The professor didn’t answer.

Jean knew he didn’t have to.

Chapter Nine

X-Men Mansion

Jean slowly, and as quietly as she could, went about her normal bedtime routine. As always this late at night, the mansion around her was quiet.

Scott was already in bed, lying on his back as he always did, his visor secured to the back of his head so that it wouldn’t accidentally come off in his sleep.

She couldn’t tell if he was sleeping or not, so she simply slipped into bed beside him and turned off the lights. It had been a very strange day. Much had changed. And she was still unsettled with her glimpse into Logan’s mind, and worried about Scott’s jealousy of him. That wasn’t like Scott at all.

In the dark, Scott’s visor was glowing softly. It dimmed slightly once when he blinked. He was awake.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I hate him,” Scott said.

“Why?” Jean asked, startled at Scott’s blunt reply.

“The way he looks at you,” Scott said. “His eyes. I just don’t trust him.”

She smiled and curled up against him, putting her head on his chest. “You know I love you, Scott,” she said. “And you should trust me.”

She kissed him, and after that, there just wasn’t much to be said.

Outside, in the hallway, Rogue walked quietly, trying not to wake anyone. She had on her nightgown and the body stocking that protected others from her.

She had tossed and turned for the past hour, thinking about the day, worrying about the future and what Storm had told her.

There was no cure for being a mutant. Her only options were acceptance and control.

She had so wanted a cure.

She had held out hope since leaving home that she someday might find one.

That dream had been shattered, and she was more afraid than she had ever been, even when on the road with the truckers. But now she was afraid of the future, of what it held for her.

Rogue reached Logan's door and slowly opened it, peeking inside.

"Logan?" she said softly.

No response.

She moved inside and closed the door behind her, staring at him. He was sleeping fitfully, grunting and talking some in his sleep. She couldn't understand what he was saying.

She watched him for a moment, then moved over to the big round chair near his bed. There, in the chair, she curled up and closed her eyes.

Just being close to him made her feel safe.

After a few moments, she too was asleep.

Magneto's Headquarters

Senator Kelly slowly came to, the pain in his head a pounding drum, throbbing with each beat of his heart. At first he couldn't remember what had happened. Nothing around him, from the trees to the clearing floor and rock cliffs, looked familiar.

When he tried to touch his head, he discovered his hands were tied behind his back. He was bound to a metal chair.

He looked down slowly, so as not to increase his headache, trying to focus his eyes. He could tell that he was still dressed in his suit and tie. Maybe he was being robbed? No, that didn't make sense, since he could still feel his wallet in his back pocket.

Slowly but surely, the memory came back, like a bad dream drifting in over the pain: Guyrich turning into a blue mutant. The blue woman had beat him, kicked him in the head.

The memory sent a sharp stab shooting through his skull.

Had it really happened?

His vision slowly cleared a little more, so that he could focus over the throbbing ache. He let himself move his pounding head slowly, looking for anything around him that just might seem familiar.

Most of the space that surrounded him was shaded in darkness. It was a clearing of some sort, inside a covered place. There were trees and rocks and massive stone walls with arching metal entrances. The

sound of running water was a continuous background noise. The air was warm, and there was almost no breeze. He could smell a faint aroma of pine and ocean salt.

He had never seen anyplace like this before. Fantastic architecture blended right in with the forest and rocks, as if the two belonged together, yet it was clear that the man-made features were dominant.

Then Kelly noticed a heavy man standing on one side of the clearing, just in the shadows, staring up into a tree. A bird was chirping there, jumping from limb to limb. The man watched intently until something shot out of his mouth and grabbed the bird, pulling it right out of the tree.

Kelly stared, not believing what he was seeing. It was the man's tongue stuck to the bird.

One *verylong* tongue.

The bird struggled but couldn't get loose. The guy's mouth opened extra wide, as if his jaws had come unhinged, and he took in the entire bird. Then, with his eyes closed as if savoring a special treat, the man chewed up the bird, eating it alive, bones and all. Senator Kelly could hear the smacking and cracking sounds even from where he sat.

He wanted to be sick. He turned away as much as he could, closed his eyes, working to keep his empty stomach from pushing up through his throat. Never in all of his life had he seen such a perverted act.

He struggled with his bindings, fighting to get loose. He had to get out of here, wherever here was.

Slowly another man—a powerful-looking, stately man—emerged from one of the tubelike entrances in the cliff wall and moved into the light. He smiled at Kelly.

“Who are you?” the senator demanded. “Where is my aide? Why have you taken me?”

“My name is Magneto, Senator Kelly,” the man said, his voice rich and deep and in control, with just a hint of an accent. “Your aide, Mr. Guyrich, has been dead for some time. But I've had Mystique here keep you company.”

The blue woman stepped out of the shadows and wrapped her arms around Magneto, as a lover might, claiming territory.

Kelly pushed back, wanting to get as far away from her as he could. But his bonds wouldn't allow him to move at all, and the chair was far, far too heavy to push. So instead he decided to confront this Magneto.

“You know, don't you,” Kelly said, “that whatever you do to me will just prove me right? Every word I've spoken will be confirmed.”

Magneto laughed, letting Mystique slip off and step back. “Gosh, I sure hope so.”

That wasn't the answer Kelly had expected. He watched as the man stepped closer. He didn't look dangerous. Not like the blue woman. But with mutants there was no way of telling. And with a name like Magneto, he had to be a mutant.

“Are you a God-fearing man, Senator?”

Kelly pushed back, trying everything he could to get away from the man who just kept getting closer and closer.

Magneto laughed. “Seems you are certainly afraid of something at the moment. But God-fearing man? Such a strange phrase, don’t you think?”

Kelly said nothing, trying to catch his breath as Magneto went on. The throbbing in his head increased.

“I’ve always thought of God as a teacher. As a bringer of light, wisdom, and understanding.”

To his own surprise, Kelly found it was everything he could do to keep from screaming. The man had moved even closer and was almost leaning down in front of him. In the background, the man who ate birds and the blue woman stood, watching, smiling. They were clearly enjoying what Magneto was doing to him.

“You see,” Magneto said, coming right up into Kelly’s face, “I think what you really are afraid of is me. Me and my kind, the brotherhood of mutants.”

Kelly’s head felt as if it were going to explode. His entire body was shaking with fear.

Magneto smiled, looking Kelly right in the eyes for the longest time. Then, without blinking, he stood, turned, and walked away.

Suddenly Kelly’s chair moved, clearly being dragged along the ground behind Magneto by some unseen force.

“Oh, fearing mutants is not surprising, really,” Magneto said as he walked, talking as if he and Kelly were just engaging in a normal conversation while they strolled in a forest. Only Kelly wasn’t walking.

“As a friend has pointed out to me often,” Magneto continued, “humans have always feared what they don’t understand. True?”

Magneto glanced back at Kelly, but Kelly stubbornly refused to give the mutant the pleasure of an answer. So Magneto went on, talking and walking, with Kelly’s chair bumping along the ground behind him.

“And mankind has always made laws to protect itself from what it doesn’t understand. Laws like your mutant registration law.”

“The intention of the Mutant Registration Act—”

Magneto stopped and turned on Kelly, cutting him off in midsentence. Kelly’s chair slammed to a stop.

“Intention?” Magneto’s eyes flashed with some sort of inner pain, and his voice rose almost to a shout. He calmed quickly. “Senator, you and I both know all about the road to hell and what it is paved with.”

Kelly said nothing, but he didn’t look away.

“We are not talking about intentions, Senator. We are talking about mankind. Human fear. And trust me when I tell you, it is only a matter of time before mutants will be herded into camps, studied for weaknesses, and eventually wiped off the face of the Earth.”

Magneto pointed to the faint blue numbers tattooed into the inside of his arm. Nazi prison camp tattoos. Despite himself, Kelly was shocked.

“Trust me, Senator. I know,” Magneto said. “I’ve seen it happen in my lifetime.”

Kelly shook his head. There was nothing he could say. Nothing he dared say at this point.

Magneto shrugged and turned. “Well, I’m much more giving than that. I simply want to show you, to help you understand.”

Magneto waved his hand, and the entire area lit up. It became clear that Kelly was in a forest clearing, with towering cliff walls all around. Something stretched overhead, from cliff wall to cliff wall, enclosing the clearing, but Kelly couldn’t see what it was.

Stonework and metal structures blended into the cliff walls, almost as if they had been formed there. Tunnel openings disappeared into the cliffs in a number of different places. Every line was flowing, yet everything seemed stark and oversized.

The center of the clearing drew Kelly’s attention.

A machine?

A sculpture?

Kelly wasn’t sure. The metal seemed to flow upward from a round base supporting three pillars that held up a platform forty feet in the air. On the platform sat two curved, almost tusk-shaped metal spires, arcing into the air twenty feet above, pointing at each other but not touching. It all appeared to be made of metal, and it seemed to shine under its own power.

It was the most fantastic thing, sculpture or machine, that Kelly had ever seen.

Magneto walked toward it, still talking. “Don’t fear God, Senator. And certainly, most certainly, don’t fear me.” Magneto laughed. Then he added, “At least not anymore.”

“What is it you intend to do to me?” Kelly shouted at Magneto’s back.

“Let’s just say that God works too slowly,” Magneto said as he stepped up onto the base of the sculpture.

Suddenly Kelly realized that his first impression had been right. It wasn’t a sculpture, but instead some incredible machine.

Magneto stood facing Kelly, his feet apart. He placed his hands on two upright posts.

Magneto jerked as his hands seemed to be yanked solidly against the posts; then he was whisked up the center to the top of the machine, where he was locked into place under the two curving metal shapes.

A set of metal rings rose up around Magneto, spinning slowly at first, then faster and faster.

The air around Kelly seemed to be charged with energy; the light seemed brighter. A slight wind started

to blow, swirling around Kelly.

Everything gained in intensity as the rings moved faster and faster, forming a blur around the mutant.

Then the air started to ripple off the machine, like waves on clear water.

Kelly wanted to look away, but he couldn't. Energy seemed to pour from Magneto's hands, through the post and into the rings swirling around him.

The rings were now moving so fast that they weren't even a blur, but instead formed a ball. The air around the machine was rippling away harder and harder. Magneto had his eyes closed. He was straining with all his might to do what he was doing.

Then the rings began to glow.

Dull red at first, then brighter and brighter, until they became almost a white ball around the mutant. Kelly wanted to shade his eyes, but his hands were tied. He turned his head, the headache growing again from the intense light.

Magneto was barely visible behind the light. Nonetheless, the strain was very evident on his face.

Where before it had been silent, now a whine came from the machine. It started to grow. The light coming off the rings vanished. Yet Kelly could still see the faint outline of the ball that showed the incredibly fast rings.

Louder and louder the whine cut through the vast chamber.

The sound filled the space, bounced off the cliff walls, echoed back even louder.

The ground under Kelly's chair was shaking.

Then, suddenly, everything seemed to just . . . stop.

Silence.

Dead, heavy silence.

Kelly was afraid to even breathe.

Then the entire top of the machine, Magneto and all, appeared to vanish, leaving in its place a light that seemed to ooze rather than radiate, a light that filled everything around it, expanding outward.

Liquid light, creeping and unstoppable.

There was nothing like it in all of Kelly's experience.

And it was coming right at him.

He tried to shove back as the white light reached him, then washed up and over him, crawling into his eyes, his mouth, his ears, and flooding his mind.

He tried to scream, but the light muffled everything, filling his every pore, touching his every nerve with hot tips of agony combined with ecstasy. His senses ran through the range of everything he had ever experienced.

First every scent he had ever smelled, from baking bread to an overused latrine. From a woman's perfume to the smell of fear when someone faced him in the Senate.

Then images started flashing through his mind, faster and faster, like a movie on fast forward. He was able to see everything he had ever done in his life. And then things others had done around him.

He saw it all.

Understood it all.

Then he heard over again what he had said. Everything, clear and distinct, all at once. And then what people had said around him. And about him.

He took it all in.

The touch of old girlfriends, of soft shirts, of burning plates.

He could feel every detail one moment, then nothing the next.

And then, far, far quicker than it had started, it was over.

The light just seemed to crawl back out of every pore, then vanish.

Inside the machine, Magneto slumped, clearly exhausted by what he had done. He looked drained. Mystique ran to him and supported him as he came down and slowly walked toward Kelly.

Kelly looked down at himself. His entire body seemed to be glowing under his clothes. His skin was glistening, almost luminescent.

"Oh, God," he said, crying now. "What have you done to me?"

He wanted to push back the memory of all the sensations, all the understanding, but they wouldn't be ignored. He knew the last few minutes could never be ignored.

Magneto stumbled over to a place in front of Kelly and weakly smiled. "Welcome to the future, brother."

Chapter Ten

X-Men Mansion

As Rogue slept soundly nearby, the dream returned to Logan. The nightmare.

The dream Logan knew was real. Had been real. But he could only remember the dream. And the nightmare.

And, of course, the pain.

Flash!

The military lab loomed over him, crazy instruments, older-looking stuff. Bottles, machines, tanks of fluid.

Bright lights filled the ceiling over him.

Belts held him down, secure to the bed.

The images were there, but never anything that could tell him where he was. What was outside the walls.

Flash!

He was naked. Someone in a mask had drawn on his body with blue pen, showing every branch of his skeleton. The person was a man, but Logan could see only the eyes. Cold eyes.

Others came in as Logan fought against the belts that held him. Rubber gloves.

Masks.

White gowns and hats.

Cold eyes.

One rubber-gloved hand shoved a mask over his mouth and nose. He struggled but lost the fight.

The air from the mask tasted metallic.

The images swam before him.

He could no longer fight. His body wouldn't respond to his thoughts.

They picked up the bed and lowered it, with him still strapped to it, into a tank of liquid.

It sloshed around him.

Scalpels flashed over him.

A black figure loomed in his vision.

The scalpels cut.

Pain!

And cut.

Pain!

And cut.

Unbearable pain!

Flash!

He screamed.

Beside him a figure loomed out of the shadows.

He reacted. Instantly. Instinctively.

His hands weren't belted down as they had been in the dream. Yet he still thought he was in the nightmare.

Snikt. His claws cut through his attacker.

Silence.

His scream was long gone into the walls and hallways of the mansion around him.

He didn't move.

His attacker didn't move. Logan could feel the weight of whoever it was on his claws. And he heard the gasp of pain.

A familiar gasp.

His nightmare-fogged mind tried to wake up, remind himself where he was.

Suddenly his door burst open. Cyclops stood frozen there for an instant until Storm and Jean shoved past him, flipping on the light.

Logan was sitting upright in his bed. The claws from his right hand were still extended through Rogue's shoulder and out her back.

She was frozen on the end of his fist, standing beside his bed. He held her there, staring into her shocked eyes, not knowing if he should move or not.

What had he done?

Cyclops jumped to help, but Storm grabbed his arm.

"Don't touch her."

Rogue nodded, then smiled at Logan. "You were having a nightmare," she said, her voice raspy.

"I know," Logan said.

Rogue eased one arm up slowly and gently touched his face, as if he were a long-lost lover and this would be the last time she would ever see him.

For a short moment her touch was light. Wonderful.

Then what felt like a blast of electric current shot through his body.

His claws instantly retracted, pulling through Rogue like a knife through butter.

Rogue staggered back, mouth open in a silent scream. Her eyes were wide with fear, with shock, with horror.

The electric charge stopped as suddenly as it had started, the moment her hand left the side of his face. Blackness threatened to swarm in from the sides of his mind and take him, but he shoved it back.

Rogue stood staring at him, with Cyclops, Storm, and Jean gathered around her but not touching her. And as they all watched, her wounds healed, leaving not even the slightest scar. She stood for a moment, a stunned look on her face. Then she bolted from the room.

His fuzzy mind wouldn't let him understand what had just happened. He was just glad that she was okay.

Then he couldn't hold the blackness back any longer.

This time he didn't dream.

Twenty minutes later, Storm stood in the hall as Scott came out, leaving Jean and Professor Xavier to deal with Logan. She didn't need to be a telepath to see that Scott was angry. Deeply angry.

He nodded to her and stalked past.

"Scott, wait!" Storm said, moving to catch up with him.

He stopped, hands on his hips, daring her to say something. She had never seen him like this before. His visor was almost a bright red. Luckily he knew perfectly how to contain his power, especially during times like this. The alternative would be disastrous.

"You want to talk about it?" she asked, keeping her voice low so they wouldn't awake anyone in the rooms nearby.

"Not really," he said.

"Jealous of Logan, huh?" she asked, taking a chance.

Her words seemed to snap his head back as if she'd hit him.

"So," she said, pushing, "someone in your past had a problem with jealousy, huh?"

"None of your damn business," Scott said, keeping his voice low, but very cold and forceful. "And I'm

not jealous. I just hate how Logan puts everything we've worked for at risk."

"So," Storm said, "what would you do? Throw him out on the street like—"

"Yes," Scott said, adjusting his visor. "I would. He's hurt Jean, and now Rogue."

"He didn't mean to," Storm countered.

"You tell yourself whatever you want," Cyclops said, "but the truth is this: We have a school here, filled with children. We're not ready to deal with this sort of—"

Now he had gotten her angry. And he wasn't going to get away with it. "Scott, this has nothing to do with the children, and you know it."

Cyclops shook his head, the strength in her words surprising him.

"Frankly," Storm said, pressing on and giving him no chance to say anything, "I am amazed that you would even put the children between yourself and the truth."

"You really think this is about Jean?" Cyclops said.

"Yes, I do," Storm said.

Cyclops took a deep breath and stared at her. His voice was still low and cold, and downright mean. "Jean can do whatever she wants. I am not in charge of her and have no desire to be in charge of her. How dare you even imply that I am."

At that, he turned and walked toward his and Jean's room.

"Scott, for God's sake . . ."

He stopped and looked back at her. "You saw what happened, Storm. Whatever else I may feel personally doesn't matter. Magneto is coming. And people are going to die."

With that, he stepped into his room. His door closed with a solid *thump* .

Storm forced herself to take a few deep breaths. That hadn't been productive. She and Scott had had discussions in the past, and disagreements, but never an argument like this one.

She glanced back at Logan's door. Maybe Scott was right. Logan was hurting them in many, many ways. And this argument was just a small example.

What would be next? Who would be next?

Jean stood behind Professor Xavier, a good number of feet back from Logan's bed. The professor had said he was going to try to wake Logan up, to check if he was all right. He had told Scott to leave and had asked her to stay as backup. Clearly Scott hadn't liked that.

She would deal with one problem at a time.

“Ready?” the professor asked.

“When you are,” she said.

You are perfectly safe now.

The professor was allowing her to hear what he was thinking.

Logan stirred and moaned, twisting on his bed like a child in the throes of a bad dream.

I want you to stay calm, and tell me if you understand what I’m saying.

Logan opened his eyes slowly and again moaned, reaching up and touching his head.

Do you understand me?

“Would you get the hell out of my head, cue ball!” Logan snarled.

Jean laughed, relieved. She could tell that the professor was also very pleased.

“Well,” Professor Xavier said out loud, “I’d say you are recovering nicely.”

The professor moved up closer to the bed, and Jean moved over and sat at the foot.

“How’s Rogue? Is she okay? And what did she do to me?” Logan asked, holding his head. “I feel as if I’ve been on a ten-day bender.”

“She borrowed your power,” Jean said.

“Pardon me?” Logan responded, blinking at her. It was as if he was trying to focus his eyes.

“Rogue is like a conductor,” the professor explained. “Any physical contact can cause unconsciousness, seizures, and even death to the one she touches.”

“Not a fun mutation,” Logan said. “And I’ve seen it at work before.”

“It is not,” the professor agreed. “With mutants, she’s able to take on their gifts for a short time.”

“In this case,” Jean said, “your ability to heal.”

“Well,” Logan said, still holding his head with one hand, as if it might just fall apart if he let go. “It felt like she almost killed me.”

“If she had held on any longer,” the professor said, “she might have.”

The professor glanced over at Jean, then back at Logan. “You should get some sleep now.”

The professor turned and wheeled his chair out into the hallway. Jean stood and moved to stand beside Logan where he lay on the bed. “You need something, you shout.”

Logan took her hand. His own hand was rough, hard, yet part of her didn’t want him to let go.

“You know,” he said, “I’d sleep better if you stayed with me.”

She laughed and pulled away. “Somehow I doubt that, Logan.”

“Yeah, so do I,” Logan admitted.

“Good night, Logan,” she said as she pulled his door closed.

She took a deep breath to settle her nerves, then headed for her room. Now all she had to do was get Scott calmed down and just maybe she could get some sleep. Maybe.

Chapter Eleven

Magneto’s Headquarters

Senator Kelly sat on the floor against the cold stone, wondering what to do, where to go, what was going to happen to him next.

He couldn’t believe how much had changed in the last twelve hours. It almost seemed like a lifetime ago that he had climbed into the government helicopter, enjoying the fruits of his position. His public image had been rising in the polls, and the Mutant Registration Act was going to garner him a lot more free air time before it was finished.

Now this mutant—this Magneto—had done something to him. Something horrible that Kelly couldn’t quite figure out yet. But he knew his body had changed. He could feel it. He seemed to be sweating all the time, even though he wasn’t hot at all.

He stood and moved over to the cell’s only window. The entire cell, including the window, had been cut out of the rock cliff face. Thick bars were implanted in the stone. The bars were just set close enough that when he leaned forward to stare at the ocean pounding on the rocks far below, he couldn’t get his head through.

The door to the cell was set in the opposite wall, and it was also barred. The path to his cell wound around a far cliff wall, to a long walkway that was now retracted, leaving the cell without an exit.

He tried to think, make himself understand that he was being held hostage. He had to be thinking all the time; he had to stay on his toes, keep Magneto and his other mutant friends always wary of him. And he also had to find out what the machine had done to him.

He glanced down at his pants, and the shirt under his jacket. They were wet. His skin was wet. Yet he felt all right. Just tired. What was Magneto doing to him?

Why?

He tugged on one of the window’s bars, then another, hoping that one of them might be loose. They

weren't, and he knew he could never chip the base of one of them out of the stone—certainly not in time to help.

And even if he did somehow manage it, where would he go?

He pushed his face between two bars in frustration, desperately trying to look out and down, to see what lay below.

Suddenly it felt as if his skull cracked and got smaller. His head went a little farther between the bars.

He yanked back, shocked. He grabbed his head on both sides, feeling to see if something was wrong. If he had hurt himself.

What in the hell had just happened?

He could feel his head slowly expand back out in his hands, until it was a normal shape again.

“Okay,” Kelly said aloud, his heart pounding, his breath coming in pants as he fought to keep himself under control. “There has to be a perfectly logical explanation.”

He couldn't think of one.

He stepped back up to the bars and once again carefully leaned his head between two of them, letting the cold steel rub his forehead just outside his eyes.

Nothing.

Water dripped off his head. His hands. Everywhere. He leaned a little harder against the bars.

This time he could feel his head sort of scrunch up.

He pushed harder and harder, expecting it to hurt at any moment, until his head was halfway through the bars, with the steel rubbing both his ears. The process had made a loud crunching sound in his ears, and he could feel the motion, but it didn't seem painful at all.

He yanked back again, leaving wet marks on the bars.

Quickly his head returned to its normal size like a balloon filling with air.

He was losing his mind!

This couldn't be happening to him!

He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his soaked socks. Both shoes had standing water in them. Without the shoes he walked around the cell, trying to think, his bare feet leaving wet footprints on the rock floor.

Nothing made sense. Magneto had kidnapped him and had done something to him.

That much was clear.

But how could his head scrunch down enough to get between those bars, yet not hurt him?

Suddenly, across the gap outside the main door, Kelly heard footsteps on the stone. Someone was coming up the path to his cell.

He moved back over to the window. Then, out of pure desperation, he leaned forward and pressed his head between the bars.

It went more easily this time, and before he knew it, his head was through. Below he could see the water pounding the rocks. The fall would kill him, he was sure. But he had to get out of the cell, give himself some more time before Magneto took him.

Kelly turned his shoulder and, with both hands on the stone ledge, tried to pull his body through.

For an instant it wouldn't fit, then he heard the crunching as his shoulders and his rib cage collapsed, and he pulled himself through the small opening between the bars. He was halfway there.

Far, far below, the crashing waves shoved water into the air. There was a slight ledge just under the windowsill that seemed to go around the cliff for a short distance.

He pulled his hips through the small opening, feeling the bones smash down, then feeling them expand back to normal size as soon as the pressure was off.

This wasn't really happening to him.

From the pathway, he heard the extension ramp start across toward his cell door. He didn't have any more time. With speed born of desperation, he turned around on the rock windowsill and lowered himself down to the thin ledge. He'd never done anything like this before. His heart was pounding so hard he thought it was going to burst out of his chest.

He had read where people in stressful situations often did things they would never dream of doing under normal conditions. Well, this certainly qualified.

As the ramp stopped, the sound rang through the cell so loudly it made Kelly freeze. Then, as the lock clicked, Kelly tried to move to his right along the thin rock ledge, grasping for any handhold to get himself away from the window. But with his fingers and hands so wet, it felt as if he were holding on to a wall of ice.

"How are we feeling, Senator?" Magneto asked as the cell door swung open with a clank. "Advanced, I hope? Senator?"

There was a very long pause. Kelly tried to hold his breath, hoping they wouldn't look out here.

Suddenly, over his head, the steel bars of the window were ripped inward, pulled out of the stone as if it were putty.

A moment later Magneto stuck his head out and smiled. "Senator, did you actually squeeze through these bars? That is very impressive."

Kelly was barely holding on. His hands were wet, his feet slick on the stone. "What have you done to me?" he croaked.

“Senator,” Magneto said, “this is pointless. Where would you go? Who would take you in now that you are one of us?”

Kelly couldn't believe what he had just heard. Magneto had referred to him as one of them.

A mutant!

Then, in a flash, he understood.

“You changed me into a mutant?” Kelly asked in horror.

Magneto smiled. “Of course. What did you think I was doing to you?”

Then Magneto moved back out of the window and Kelly heard him say, as if in a faraway dream, “Sabretooth, get the senator off that ledge.”

A moment later an ugly face thrust out the window, and a clawlike hand reached for him.

Kelly, at that moment, no longer cared. He had become his worst nightmare. He had become the very thing that he hated most.

He pushed back away from the stone even as Sabretooth grabbed his hand and coat.

But Kelly felt his hand crunch down into something so small and slick that Sabretooth couldn't hold on.

And then, looking back into the face of the monster with yellow hair, Kelly fell toward the water below.

It was a very, very long fall.

Chapter Twelve

X-Men Mansion

This time the nightmare didn't carry Logan all the way down into the pain and the cutting. He came awake, almost wide awake, staring at the ceiling. He had been sweating, and the sheets were soaking wet. It took him a moment to remember exactly where he was.

Then he remembered.

Remembered what had happened last night with Rogue.

Remembered the feeling of death.

A noise snapped his head toward the door. A strange-looking kid was peeking inside. His eyes grew wide when he saw Logan turn. The kid made a little squeaking noise that sounded like “Sorry,” and then

ducked out, pulling the door shut behind him.

Logan laughed. Then he rubbed his face and head, hard, trying to shake the sensations, the memory of what had happened with Rogue. And what he had felt when she touched him.

Then he realized he didn't want to lose that memory. In fact, it just might be one of the more important things that had ever happened to him.

For the next thirty minutes he lay there, thinking.

Remembering.

Even though she wasn't hungry, Rogue had a small tray of food: a sandwich, a banana, and some milk. The day had turned beautiful, almost springlike in its warmth. Four of the other kids, including Kitty, were sitting on a stone wall above the garden, eating and talking. She knew, after how all the kids had treated her this morning, that she didn't dare try to go sit with them.

Or with anyone else for that matter. She was back to being alone. As alone as she had been hitchhiking. And for the same reason. Her curse.

Her problem.

Or as they called it here, her power.

She walked past the group on the wall, looking for a place to sit in the garden. But no space was open. Behind her she could hear a few of the kids whispering loudly. She knew they were whispering about her.

She moved out of the garden and toward the basketball court. Some of the older kids were playing a pickup game. Jubilee stood to one side with four others. She looked up and saw Rogue, then turned away, making it very clear that Rogue couldn't join them.

Yesterday they had all been so friendly. Today they hated her. Feared her. Just as her friends and family at home had feared her.

Rogue moved away from the game, down a path leading into the woods. There she found a small stone bench and sat, putting the tray beside her. She could feel the tears trying to come up, but she wouldn't let them.

"Get a grip!" she said firmly to herself. She had been alone before; she could be alone again. She knew she wasn't going to be cured. She had better get used to this, and do it now.

"Rogue?"

She spun around to see Bobby moving up the path through the trees toward her. She turned back to her food, pretending to be interested in it.

"Rogue," Bobby said, "what did you do?"

He had stopped and was actually talking to her. The first one all day.

“I didn’t mean to touch him,” Rogue said. Her resolve slipped, and the tears started to come. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“They’re saying you steal other mutants’ powers,” Bobby said, standing a few feet away, as if she had some terrible disease.

“That’s not true,” Rogue said. “I mean, not really—”

“You don’t ever use your power against another mutant,” Bobby said forcefully. Accusingly.

“But I had no choice,” she said weakly. She knew she had had a choice. She could have died. And at the moment, she knew that that would have been the better choice.

“If I were you,” Bobby said, stepping away even farther, “I’d get myself out of here.”

She looked up at the fear in his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean the students are all freaked,” he said. “So am I. And Professor Xavier is furious. I don’t know what he’ll do with you. I just think it would be easier for you on your own.”

Rogue just couldn’t stop the tears now. She sat there sobbing as Bobby slowly backed away.

“Rogue,” Bobby said before he turned. “You really should go.”

He turned his back on her and walked toward the sounds of the basketball game. The kids there were laughing and shouting and having fun.

She knew that that wasn’t going to be something she would ever be allowed to do again. Just as she had done at home, she had to leave. For her own best interests, and for everyone around her.

She forced herself to stop crying. She couldn’t afford to cry anymore.

She picked up the banana and put it in her pocket. Then she took a large bite out of the sandwich, even though she still wasn’t hungry. No telling when she would get anything to eat again.

Then she stood, and without a look back, headed down the path into the woods, drinking the milk as she walked.

Behind her the sounds of the laughter slowly faded. And with it, all her hope for a better life.

Somewhere along the Atlantic Coast

Twenty-seven-year-old Bonnie Risk had decided it was just too nice a day to stay indoors. She and her seven-year-old son Neal needed to get out, especially since it was Saturday and Neal’s father had gone in to work. They lived a short fifteen minutes away from their favorite beach, and Bonnie had figured there wouldn’t be many people there this time of the year, even on a weekend.

She had been right. Maybe only a dozen others strolled the beach or sat watching the waves. The sun was just warm enough for her to spread a towel and sit comfortably while Neal played nearby. This was better than the summer, since there weren’t many people and it wasn’t hot and humid.

“Mom!” Neal shouted. “Look!”

Something was coming up out of the water. A very strange something. First there was a head, then shoulders, then arms—with flippers.

Bonnie quickly scrambled over to Neal and stood, grasping his shoulders so he wouldn't move.

The thing looked half fish, half human. It also had flipperlike feet, and a human face. A very familiar human face, actually.

She watched as the creature came up out of the water. By the time it reached dry sand, its flippers had turned back into feet and arms.

It was a man. A very naked man now, who walked forward, clearly disgusted, clearly angry, dripping water. He veered toward where she had been sitting, grabbed her towel off the sand, and wrapped it around himself. She almost shouted for him to stop, but at that instant he turned and looked at her and she realized who it was.

Senator Robert Kelly!

Just a few days before, she had spent most of a day watching his Senate hearings on television. Senate hearings investigating mutants. But if he was a mutant himself, why did he hate the other mutants so much? More than ever, nothing in politics made sense to her.

He glared at her as she clutched Neal close to her side.

“Mom?” Neal said, loud enough for Kelly to hear. “Is that a mutant?”

Kelly sneered contemptuously, then turned and started toward the street and parking lot. Halfway there, he suddenly bent over, clutching his stomach as if in extreme pain. Then she heard him moan as he dropped to one knee, his head down.

“Stay here!” she ordered Neal.

She started toward Kelly to see what she could do to help him. Mutant or not, senator or not, he was still human, and it looked like he needed help. But before she could take two steps, he had straightened up, stood, and started walking again.

She stopped, dumbfounded, as he moved away. Then, with a shrug, she moved back to Neal, murmuring under her breath. “Hypocritical politicians.”

There was no doubt about it—this was one trip to the beach they were both going to remember for a very long time.

Chapter Thirteen

X-Men Mansion

Professor Xavier held up the X rays and studied them again, looking for anything that might give him a clue as to why Magneto was after Logan. Clearly there must be a reason, and that reason was somehow important to what Magneto was planning.

The door to the medical lab clicked and opened as the professor put down one X ray and held up another. Without turning, he knew it was Scott who had just come in. He could sense the anger in his young team leader.

“What are you looking for, Scott?” he asked, still without turning around.

The young X-Man slipped up on top of a lab bed and shook his head. “Nothing, really. Any luck finding Magneto with the Cerebro?”

“No. And it’s strange,” Xavier said. The fact that he couldn’t find Magneto bothered Xavier a lot. Somehow Magneto was shielding himself against the Cerebro, which might mean that others in the brotherhood could do so as well, if Magneto wanted them to.

Xavier put down another X ray and picked up a third, continuing to study.

“There are far more powerful mutants than Logan,” Scott said. “Why is this one so important to him?”

Xavier turned and glanced at Scott. It was clear, even without reading the young man’s mind, that he was very troubled. “You don’t like him, do you?”

Scott almost snorted. “How can you tell?” he asked sarcastically.

Xavier smiled. “Well, I’m psychic, you know.”

Scott laughed.

“Logan could be a valuable addition here,” Xavier said, staring at the young leader.

“He’s not one of us,” Scott replied.

“But he is,” Xavier said, as forcefully as he dared. “Don’t ever forget that.”

“Fine,” Scott said. “But you put a guy like that in a combat situation, there’s no way he’s going to take orders.”

Xavier stared at Scott. “Give him an order worth following, and he’ll take it.”

Scott nodded, adjusted his glasses, still not happy. “He’s not a team player.”

Xavier laughed softly. “Neither were you, Scott, when you first arrived. Remember?”

Scott was about to respond when the door slammed open. Logan stood there, clearly upset. Professor Xavier could tell exactly what he was thinking, and it wasn’t good.

“She’s gone!” Logan said.

“Who?” Scott asked, dropping down off the table.

“Rogue,” Xavier said.

Logan nodded.

The professor stretched out his mind until he found who he was looking for. *Storm. Jean. Meet us at Cerebro. Rogue has disappeared.*

“Come with me,” Xavier said out loud to Cyclops and Logan, moving his chair past Cyclops and toward the door. Logan quickly stepped aside.

Xavier turned his chair to the right and headed for the thick steel door at the end of the hallway. Beyond it was a room in which he had spent much time over the past week, looking for Magneto without success.

From the elevator, Storm and Jean burst into the hall.

“What are we doing?” Logan demanded, staring at the others as they all approached Cerebro’s polished steel door. “Why aren’t we looking for her?”

“We are,” Cyclops said.

Xavier moved his chair up to a panel positioned at his eye level beside the door. The screen lit up, registering his presence, and he let it scan his eyes and forehead. A measure to keep out those who shouldn’t have access to Cerebro, including any of the school’s inquisitive students.

A moment later the security computer recognized him and the massive steel door clicked loudly, then started to open.

“The brain waves of mutants are different than average human beings,” Xavier said, explaining to Logan as they moved along. “Cerebro is a device which amplifies my power, allowing me to locate mutants over great distances.”

“That’s how you followed the Sabretooth guy,” Logan said, nodding. “And found me and Rogue.”

“It is.”

“Welcome, Professor,” the computer voice said as they all moved inside.

Xavier nodded as he caught a wave of amazement from Logan, who was impressed at the size of the room in which they stood. It was big, completely round, and had only one entrance and exit. It was, the professor explained, simply described, a radio antenna for brain waves.

The entrance had led them to a small platform at the center of one wall. The platform was engineered to extend out so that the operator was dropped directly in the center of the sphere.

“Well,” Logan said, looking around, “this certainly is a big, round room. Why don’t you just use this to find Magneto?”

“I’ve been trying,” Xavier said as he moved into position. “But he seems to have found a way to shield himself from it.”

Logan stared at him. “Just how would he know how to do that?”

“Because he helped me build it.”

Logan’s face registered shock that would have been almost amusing at any other time. But right now they had to find Rogue. And fast, before something happened to her.

“Would you excuse me?” Xavier said to the rest.

Jean quickly set a few controls on the main board; then all of them moved back to the hallway. Slowly the door closed, blocking them out—and blocking out all other thoughts from the mutants in the building.

Xavier tapped a button on his chair, and a headset lowered quickly from the ceiling. As it did, the room seemed to come to life. The walls seemed to move away, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until their movement was no longer visible.

The ramp and headset slowly extended into the center of the large room, coming to a stop at the exact point where his head was located—the exact center of Cerebro.

Suddenly, all around him, the wall seemed to move outward, away from him.

Exploding.

Until he was simply alone, sitting in a black void.

Then he let his mind climb, up out of the basement, out of the mansion. The light above seemed bright, but he knew he wasn’t seeing it with his eyes. Just with his brain.

Soon he could feel Rogue.

Jean had set the Cerebro to focus on Rogue’s brain waves, and it was taking him to her.

He felt like a bird, free of the wheelchair and of his body, flashing over the trees, the roads, the houses. He let himself go. Everything seemed like a blur of color, yet he knew he could stop at any moment, to seek out any detail. The surroundings were more like a movie in fast forward.

He could sense Rogue’s brain waves, the power of her personality, pulling him toward her.

Down he went—over a building, over other people—until he finally saw her, sitting on a bench alone. He eased into her mind, without letting her know he was there, until he saw what she saw. He felt her fear, her sadness, and what had made her run away.

He would take care of the other students after he knew exactly where she was. Once she was safe and sound.

As he carefully searched her mind for her location, she helped him without knowing it. She looked up at an Arrivals/Departures board, and he knew exactly where she was.

A moment later he was back in Cerebro, the ramp withdrawing, the door swinging open.

Logan stared for a moment at the closed door, then at Jean. For the last minute or so no one had said a word. He had simply paced. Storm and Cyclops had sat on the floor. Jean had stood near Cerebro's control panel, watching it intently.

"What's it like?" Logan asked, finally unable to stand the silence anymore. "This Cerebro thing he's using."

"I've never used Cerebro," Jean said. "It takes a certain degree of control."

"And I'm not prepared to see your memory erased," Cyclops said.

Logan looked at her sharply, and she nodded. Then she glanced at the panel. "He's coming out."

They all gathered around as the massive steel door opened, like an ultramodern bank vault. Professor Xavier wheeled out and looked up at Cyclops. "She's a few miles up the road. At the train station."

"I'll go," Logan said, starting to turn away.

"You can't leave the mansion, Logan," Xavier said. "It's just the opportunity that Magneto needs."

Logan turned and faced the professor straight on. "Yeah, but I'm the reason she took off."

The hard eyes of the professor looked back at him without blinking. "We had a deal, Logan. Forty-eight hours."

Logan nodded. He had made that deal. But he felt responsible for Rogue.

"She's all right, Logan," Jean said. "She's just upset."

"Storm, Cyclops," Xavier said, turning toward them. "Go see if you can talk to her."

Cyclops nodded, and they both headed off at a run to the ready room, to change into the black uniforms.

"Jean, we have to talk to the rest of the students," the professor said.

Jean nodded, and the two of them moved to the elevator, leaving Logan standing there, fuming.

A deal was a deal. He knew that.

He started to follow the professor and Jean, then stopped. This was Rogue. And she could be in danger. He wouldn't allow that to happen. Besides, while Cyclops and Storm changed clothes, Rogue might get away. Or worse.

To hell with the deal. Sometimes responsibility had to take precedence.

To hell with this Magneto character, too. What had happened last night to Rogue was more important to

him.

He turned and moved quickly down the hallway to the door that led into the mansion's underground garage. Unlike the hangar, with its one special plane, this garage was filled with all sorts of vehicles, all painted black.

A black motorcycle sat to one side, a black helmet sitting on the seat. He knocked the helmet aside and climbed on, kicking the bike into life. He could feel the power of the machine, clearly souped up and well tuned. Nothing like a powerful bike to give a guy a sense of confidence.

He popped it into gear; then, with the back tire spinning, he headed out into the deepening night.

Behind him he heard faint shouting. And ignored it.

Chapter Fourteen

Westchester Train Station

Rogue moved down the aisle of the train until she found two empty seats. She hoped the car wasn't going to be crowded. She didn't want anyone sitting next to her. Across the aisle, a young woman and child were playing together, laughing lightly. She couldn't imagine ever being that happy again.

Outside the window, people stood on the old wooden platform, talking, saying good-bye to friends, or just waiting. They all looked normal. More than likely they all led normal lives. She wondered how she looked to them.

"Hey, kid," a voice said.

She glanced up as Logan dropped into the spot beside her, smiling.

She turned back to face the window without saying a word. There was nothing she could say to him. She had almost killed him last night. She had no idea what he was even doing here.

"You runnin' again?" Logan asked.

"How did you know I was here?" Rogue asked without turning her face away from the window.

"Well," Logan said, "the professor put on this metal head thing, and—" He waved his hand in disgust. "Don't ask."

"Sorry I did," she said.

"You even have a ticket?"

"No," Rogue said. She had figured she would deal with that problem once the train started moving. Even if they kicked her off, she would still be farther from the mansion than she had been.

“Then let me give you some free advice,” Logan said. “When the ticket guy comes, hide in the bathroom. You won’t have to pay that way.”

She nodded. She had no idea why he was helping her. Or if he was even going to ride along with her. Finally she just had to know what he knew. She turned from the window to face him. “I hear the professor was mad at me.”

Logan half snorted. “Why would he be mad at you?”

“Because I used my power on another mutant,” Rogue said. “And I’m never supposed to.”

Logan looked at her, clearly puzzled. “Who told you that?”

“Bobby,” Rogue said softly.

“One of the other students?” Logan asked.

“Yes,” Rogue said.

“And you didn’t go ask the professor or Storm or Jean? Or even Scott?”

Rogue shook her head. It just hadn’t occurred to her. Bobby seemed as if he knew what he was talking about.

Logan sighed and said nothing.

X-Men Mansion

Bobby stood in front of the heavy steel door that led to Cerebro, just staring at it as if it might open of its own accord. Of course, it wouldn’t. He glanced around, making sure no one was coming in either direction. Then he started to shift.

Quickly Mystique moved back into the shape of her own body. She took a moment to draw a breath, then focused on what she needed to do next. She had to remember the exact patterns, the exact details. Everything needed to be perfect. Especially the eyes. Being young Bobby had been easy. She had fooled the girl Rogue, just as they had planned. But this shift had to be exact. And that was something she hadn’t done often.

With her most intense focus, she started to shift again. This time just changing part of herself.

She focused on every detail in her mind, as she shifted from the shoulders up into a replica of Professor Xavier.

When she was finished, she keyed in a sequence that opened the panel near the door, then knelt down slightly in front of the retinal scanner. It lit up, scanning her forehead and eyes.

For a moment she thought it might not work.

Then, with a satisfying clanking sound, the door unlocked and slowly swung open.

She quickly shifted back to her natural form and stepped inside. She turned and pulled the door almost closed behind her, making sure it didn't latch. She hoped anyone passing by would not notice the slightly open door, but she also didn't want to be trapped inside this machine. That was for sure.

"Welcome, Professor," the machine said.

She didn't answer. Magneto had told her to be very careful about that. He had no idea what safety features Charles Xavier had added lately.

Mystique quickly moved to the console near the edge of the platform. The massive round room remained completely dark around her, but she had practiced hundreds of times what she was going to do next. She didn't need light.

She swung in under the console and with a small screwdriver opened the panel she found there.

A bright white light covered her. It came from a beautiful, intricate, fiber-optic core that was suspended under the panel. It seemed almost like a ball of energy.

Or a brain. More like a glowing white brain.

She studied it for a moment, then quickly jammed the screwdriver into it, again and again.

After a couple dozen hits, the light faded, leaving only gray tubes, broken wires, and dripping fluid.

She had killed it.

Ten minutes later, again in the shape of the student named Bobby, she headed out one of the mansion's side doors and into the garden.

The real Bobby sat in his room, studying, wondering why Rogue had left. Feeling vaguely guilty for not defending her, and hoping she was all right.

Westchester Train Station

Cyclops glanced over at Storm as he brought the black SUV to a halt in front of the train station. The black motorcycle Logan had taken was parked there.

"Let's hope he's talking some sense into her," Storm said.

"I'm more concerned about keeping Logan out of Magneto's hands."

"Yes, that too," Storm agreed.

They headed inside the classic station house. It boasted high, beamed ceilings; massive decorative windows; and a clock tower that could be seen from the tracks and parklike grounds. At least a hundred people were milling about, sitting on the high-backed wooden benches or standing in groups, talking. Cyclops could see a train sitting on the tracks just beyond the building.

"Split up," Cyclops said. "You check the ticket counter. I'll see if I can spot her in the benches, or on the platform outside."

Storm nodded as Cyclops turned and headed into the crowd of people.

Logan leaned back in the train seat and let out a deep breath. Things had changed so fast for him, and for Rogue, it was no wonder she had believed the other student. She had nothing else to believe, no one to trust. Neither did he, really. But there was something about this professor and his people that Logan liked.

Now he had to get Rogue back there, for her own good.

“You know,” Logan said, staring up at the ceiling as he talked, “I woke up one day in the woods, in the middle of nowhere. I had no memories, no life.”

He turned and looked straight at her. She was watching him, listening. He held up his fist, showing her the marks on his hands where his claws were, just below the skin. “I didn’t know where these had come from. All I had was the dreams of pain that wouldn’t let me sleep.”

She nodded, so he went on.

“At first I couldn’t live with it. I can’t even show you all the scars from all the times I tried to kill myself, cause they just disappeared. I looked at this power of mine as a curse.”

Again she nodded, agreeing with him there.

“When you touched me last night,” he said, going slow and not looking at her, “I felt, for one brief second, death. And right then I realized I didn’t like it. I realized I didn’t want it anymore.”

A tear was slowly making its way down Rogue’s cheek.

“I just came to thank you for that.”

She nodded, saying nothing.

And there was nothing more he could say.

Around them a few other people came onto the car and took seats, getting ready for the trip. Logan had no idea where this train was even headed. He doubted Rogue did, either.

“You think I should go back?” Rogue asked softly.

“I think you should follow your instincts,” Logan said.

Slowly, sitting there, arms folded around herself, she began to cry. Soft sobs shook her small frame without making any noise.

He took his jacket off and carefully wrapped it around her shoulders. She tried to pull away from his touch, even through the leather, but he held her firmly. Finally she gave in and sobbed into his shoulder as he held her.

After a moment the sobs slowed.

“There are not many people who will understand what you’re going through, Rogue,” Logan said with uncharacteristic softness. “But I think this guy Xavier is one of them. And he seems to genuinely want to help you. That’s a rare thing for people like us.”

The train whistle echoed down the platform, and the train slowly jerked into motion. “What do you say?” Logan asked. “We can still get off at the next station, hop a cab, give these geeks one more shot.”

Rogue was clearly thinking about it, but not yet convinced.

“Come on,” Logan said. “I’ll take care of you.”

The words were out of his mouth before he’d even realized he said them.

Rogue looked up at him, her big eyes full of hope. “You promise?”

Logan took a deep breath. He actually did feel like taking care of this girl. He wasn’t sure why. Partially, he felt as if he owed her. But mostly it just felt right to care about someone else besides himself for a change.

“Yeah, I promise,” he said.

Then he frowned at her.

“What?”

“No more heart-to-hearts, though, okay?” Logan said. “I can’t tell you how much I hate this.”

Rogue laughed, smiling. “Deal.”

Around them, people were talking and the car was rattling as the train slowly began to gain speed.

Suddenly everything lurched violently, and the train came to an almost instant stop, as if it had hit something very, very large.

Logan tried to catch himself, but it happened too fast. He went flying head over heels into the aisle, ending up flat on his back with a man in a business suit sprawled across his legs.

What the hell had they hit?

People were screaming and moaning and trying frantically to get to their feet.

He got out from under the guy and stood up. At a glance he could see that Rogue was all right. She looked as if she’d bumped her head, but she was moving fine.

The car around them creaked and rocked again, sending more shouts and screams echoing through the air.

Then the train started backward down the tracks.

Chapter Fifteen

Westchester Train Station

Storm moved through the crowd, ignoring the looks her black X-Men uniform elicited from the people. She was proud to be wearing it, and she hoped that someday everyone would recognize it as a sign of their goodwill and noble intentions.

For the moment, though, she moved up past three people who were standing in line at the ticket counter. “Excuse me,” she said to them. “Emergency.”

Then she turned to the ticket agent. “I was wondering if you could help me? I’m looking for a young girl, about seventeen. She’s my height and has brown hair. She may have been upset.”

The guy in the cage hadn’t looked up at her until she was finished. “Nope, haven’t noticed anyone like that—”

Suddenly the guy’s eyes went wide with fear, and he quickly stepped back.

It took Storm an instant to realize that he was looking over her shoulder, not at her. She spun around just in time to come face-to-face with Sabretooth.

He was wearing a long trench coat to cover his furs, but he still smelled like he’d come right out of a graveyard. Before she could even move, he knocked a young boy aside, then grabbed her around the neck and lifted her off the ground, choking her.

She couldn’t yell.

She couldn’t even breathe.

Around them people backed away.

“Scream for me,” Sabretooth said. Then he laughed. It was a vicious laugh.

Suddenly she could feel the professor inside her head.

Hold on, Storm. Fight! I’m with you.

She kicked at Sabretooth, smashing her foot right into his midsection.

One woman screamed, and people started to run as he took Storm and smashed her backward into the glass of the ticket counter. The impact knocked some of the wind out of her, and shattered the glass, but it also loosened Sabretooth’s grip on her neck.

She took a quick breath before he tightened his grip again.

This time he held her far enough away that she couldn’t kick him.

Behind him she saw Cyclops fighting his way through scrambling people. Then she saw Toad jump up on a pillar behind him.

Try as she might, she couldn't shout out a warning.

Toad's tongue whipped out and snatched away Cyclops' visor, yanking his head up and back.

A massive red beam of energy shot out of Cyclops' eyes, before he could get them closed. Luckily it streaked upward. The beam ripped a hole in the roof of the building.

"Everyone get back!" he shouted, his voice carrying with authority over all the shouting and yelling. "Storm!"

Bits of stone and concrete and wood rained down on the crowd, sending people screaming and turning the panic up to a higher pitch. Now people were fighting and climbing over one another to get out of the building.

Sabretooth just laughed and choked her harder. If he held her like this too much longer he would break her neck.

Cyclops dropped to the floor, his eyes tight, completely blind. She was, for the moment, going to have to fight alone.

She reached out for the feeling of the weather around her. A moment later she could feel it bending to her control.

Lightning.

She needed lightning.

She could feel the professor in her mind, helping her, boosting her power.

Suddenly the lightning was there, and it was in her control.

She smashed the bolt down between them, bringing it in as close as she could to Sabretooth without touching either him or her.

The impact of the lightning and the resulting explosion ripped her from his grip and smashed her backward over the ticket counter. She rolled as she had trained to do, time and again in the danger room, and came up hard against a wall.

Sabretooth flew through the air in the other direction, smashing through the Arrivals/Departures board, shattering it, sending clouds of dust and debris raining down over the remainder of the crowds.

Storm managed to pull herself to her feet, trying to catch her breath, just in time to watch Toad pick up the stunned Sabretooth and stagger away toward the train platform.

Cyclops was still on the ground, his eyes closed tight, his face pointed downward to make sure he would injure no one should any stray energy slip free.

She had no idea what had happened to Logan or Rogue. And the professor was no longer in her mind to tell her.

The lights had gone out inside the train, and the sound of metal buckling and folding surrounded Rogue. It was so loud it hurt her ears. It was as if a giant was tearing apart the train car.

People were screaming and trying to shove their way through the doors. She had braced herself between seats, and Logan had done the same in front of her. The smell of burning wires and smoke was starting to choke the car, as well.

She couldn't imagine how the train was moving backward. The ground was flat. Clearly something had to be pulling or pushing them.

Suddenly, with a massive tearing sound, the entire back of the car seemed to rip away. Everyone in the car except Rogue and Logan scrambled to get out the front door.

As Rogue watched, the figure of a man floated up and stood in the ripped-out area of the car. Rogue knew instantly it must be Magneto. If the professor was right, he was here to take Logan.

Magneto floated toward them, the car's metal walls and ceiling rippling like water as he moved.

Logan stepped into the aisle, his claws out.

"You must be Wolverine," Magneto said. "I saw your tags."

Before Logan could even say a word, Magneto held up a fist, and Logan just froze.

Magneto smiled, looking Logan over. "The remarkable metal doesn't run through your entire body, does it?"

Magneto opened his hand.

Logan's arms and legs spread out like a starfish. The pain was excruciating.

"I guess it does after all," Magneto said, laughing.

"Cute trick," Logan said.

Suddenly Logan started to sweat as Magneto pulled his claws out, more and more.

"Stop it!" Rogue shouted, and started toward Magneto. "Stop it now!"

"What the hell do you want with me?" Logan demanded.

"My dear boy," Magneto said, laughing still, "Whoever said I wanted you?"

Magneto glanced over at Rogue. His eyes were cold and dark.

She couldn't believe it. He was after her! Why? What did she have? What had she done to him?

“No!” Logan shouted, struggling futilely against the force that held him in its grip.

Magneto just shook his head and closed his fist.

Logan flew backward, smashing into the front wall of the train car. He slumped to the ground, unconscious.

“What did you do?” Rogue shouted, jumping out into the aisle and running toward Logan.

Suddenly she felt a sharp stabbing in the back of her neck. Before she could even reach up and touch the syringe that had jabbed her, the blackness swept over her.

She staggered two more steps and fell short of Logan, facedown on the train floor.

The last thing she remembered was hearing Magneto laughing, as if from a long, long distance away.

Chapter Sixteen

Westchester County, NY

Jean Grey faded the black Bentley Turbo into the corner, half watching the road, half watching Professor Xavier. The tires screamed and held as she accelerated out of the corner, pushing the car as fast as it and the roads would allow.

The professor was belted securely into the passenger seat, and his attention clearly wasn't on her or her driving. She knew it was at the train station, with Cyclops and Storm and Rogue and Logan. She could sense enough to know that the four of them were locked in the fight of their lives.

She took the next corner just a little too fast, and the rear end swung around, but she recovered without losing any speed. They were still a good ten miles away.

At this speed that would take them ten minutes.

Ten minutes too long.

Westchester Train Station

Magneto watched as Sabretooth and Toad quickly loaded the unconscious Rogue into the cloth bag and pulled the top closed. That would keep her from touching anyone if she woke up a little sooner than he had planned.

Logan was still out cold.

“What shall I do with this piece of garbage?” Sabretooth asked, kicking him.

“Leave him,” Magneto said. “Bring the girl.”

Sabretooth growled, kicked Logan once more, then turned to follow.

They moved as a group across the platform, through the edge of the train station, and out one of the doors that led to the front area. He half expected to see Charles' two flunkies appear and try again to stop them. Instead what greeted them were at least ten police cars, fanned out in front of them. Their flashers were lighting the shadowy trees and train station with strobes of blue and red.

At least twenty police officers had their guns drawn and were facing Magneto. Onlookers and the people who had been in the station had been shoved back a good hundred yards, clearing the parklike area in front of the station. *Good*, Magneto thought, because that was where he had planned to have Mystique land the helicopter.

"Seems they wanted to say good-bye to us," he said wryly.

One cop raised a megaphone. "Put your hands over your heads."

Magneto, Toad, and Sabretooth kept walking, with Rogue secure in the bag slung over Sabretooth's shoulder. Toad still carried Cyclops' visor, as if it were a trophy. Magneto hadn't expected this resistance, but it didn't really matter.

"I said raise your goddamned hands, asshole!" the cop ordered again.

Magneto shook his head. It seemed it was time again to teach the poor humans a lesson in manners. And also show them just how powerful mutantkind could be.

So he did raise his hands, but with them came two of the police cars. The two vehicles flew into the air and smashed back to earth with an impact that shook the ground.

The cops scattered, all guns still drawn and pointed at Magneto. With his mind Magneto felt the guns, and with a smooth downward snap of his hand he yanked all the guns out of every cop's hand. They flew toward him, and stopped.

He then turned the weapons around, still hovering in midair, and held them there, each aimed at a cop's face. A couple of the cops tried to dodge, but each gun remained with its owner. Pointed right between the eyes.

"You *Homo sapiens* and your guns," Magneto said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. "When will you ever learn?"

He was about to start the lesson when a hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. With his mind he maintained control over the floating firearms.

It was Sabretooth.

The savage mutant grabbed him by the throat and lifted him into the air. From his new vantage point, Magneto could see Toad moving to help his clawed companion. The grip hurt and he was having trouble breathing, but he knew it wasn't as tight as it could be.

"That's enough, Eric," Sabretooth said, almost as a growl.

“Let the cops go!” Toad demanded.

Magneto knew instantly who his real enemy was. He glanced around, trying to spot Charles, but without any luck.

“Why not come out where I can see you, Charles?” he said hoarsely.

Sabretooth gripped his throat even tighter, cutting off his wind for a moment, then relaxing just enough so that he could talk.

“What do you want her for?” Sabretooth asked, his voice an even lower growl, as if he was trying to fight Xavier’s control.

Magneto reached up and tapped the side of his helmet. “What’s the matter, Charles? Can’t read my mind? So what now?”

“The girl?” Xavier asked through Sabretooth. “What do you want her for?”

“To save the girl,” Magneto said, “you’ll have to kill me. And what will that accomplish, Charles? You’ll let these humans have their way, and they’ll have you in chains with a number burned into your forehead.”

“It’s not going to be that way,” Xavier responded through his unwilling proxy.

“Then kill me and find out,” Magneto challenged. He knew Charles wouldn’t do that. It wasn’t who Charles was.

The seconds ticked past. Sabretooth’s hand didn’t move.

As Magneto had gambled, Charles would not kill an old friend.

“Release me,” Magneto demanded.

Still, Sabretooth’s hand didn’t lighten its grip. It was starting to bite into Magneto’s throat and skin. And his breathing was coming harder and harder.

“No?” Magneto said. “Then fine.”

The gunshot echoed over the silent park in front of the old train station.

A number of screams sounded in the crowd down the block.

Without letting go of Magneto’s throat, Sabretooth, under Xavier’s directions, turned to see where the shot had come from.

Magneto laughed throatily. He had fired at point-blank range into the face of one cop, then had stopped the bullet just as it touched the man’s skin. The bullet was still hanging there, the heat from it burning the man’s forehead. The cop’s eyes were huge, and Magneto had no doubt the poor fool had wet his pants from the fear.

The sound of the shot echoed off into the distance, and again the area was deadly quiet.

Charles, through Sabretooth, still hadn't let go of Magneto's neck.

"You want more?" Magneto asked.

Every gun floating in front of every cop cocked.

Two or three of the policemen dropped to their knees. The guns followed.

Two others dove and rolled, trying to get away. The guns followed, pointing in their faces when they stopped.

"Care to press your luck, Charles?" Magneto asked. "I can fire them all at once, but I don't think I can stop all the bullets."

The man with the bullet pressed against his forehead looked as if he was about to faint.

Sabretooth let go of Magneto and staggered back.

Toad looked around, half stunned.

"Still unwilling to make sacrifices, eh, Charles," Magneto said. "That's what makes you weak."

Sabretooth stiffened. "No, Eric," Sabretooth said, directed once again by Xavier. "That's what makes me strong."

Then Sabretooth slumped as the professor let him go again.

"Feeling a little used?" Magneto asked Sabretooth.

Sabretooth only growled.

Magneto looked around him at all the cops. Their guns were cocked, ready to fire.

Over the trees on the other side of the train station his helicopter flashed into sight. Mystique took it in a wide arc, then set it down expertly in the open area beside where they stood.

Magneto kept all the guns pointed at the cops as Toad loaded the sack containing their prize into the helicopter. Then he and Sabretooth climbed in.

Magneto waved to the cops, smiling. Then he climbed in and took the copilot's seat, still maintaining his hold on the guns. "Good-bye, Charles," he said.

He had no doubt that Charles could hear him.

Then, as they lifted off, he waved again, letting the guns drop to the ground.

Half the cops slumped. Two started throwing up.

All Magneto could do was laugh.

Jean pulled the Bentley onto a short side road and turned off the engine. The professor knew that his three people were just coming out of the trees. He had directed them away from the station and the authorities. They weren't in any shape to deal with the police, and the police weren't in any mood to deal with any more mutants at this point. Better to just let them think that Magneto and his people were the ones who did the damage.

"You better help them," he said to Jean as three figures stepped out from among the trees.

Cyclops was in the center, eyes still shut, with an arm around Storm on one side and Logan on the other. Though he supported them, Storm was directing him, acting as his eyes. He looked as if he was barely keeping them all walking. The professor knew that was exactly the case. Storm was very bruised, and Logan was barely alive. Any other person would have been dead after the beating Magneto had given him.

Jean climbed out and took Storm from Cyclops, helping her into the backseat of the car. Cyclops supported Logan as he got in beside her, then with Jean's guidance he crawled in the other door. Finally Jean got behind the wheel.

In silence they turned and headed for the mansion. There was nothing any of them could say. They had faced the first battle with Magneto and had come up wanting. They were lucky to be alive.

And they had lost Rogue.

Chapter Seventeen

X-Men Mansion

Logan's quarters felt more like a tomb. The school's students were still all asleep, but Storm, Jean, Cyclops, Logan, and the professor were all very much awake.

And Logan was mad. Maddier than he had been in a long, long time. He had promised Rogue he would take care of her, then moments later he had been helpless. That ate at him, right in the core of his stomach. He wasn't going to rest until she was back, safe and sound.

Logan stood near the door while Jean and Storm dropped into chairs. Cyclops paced. Logan was becoming more and more disgusted with this Scott Summers kid. And he wasn't real happy with the professor, either.

"You said he wanted me," Logan said, sneering at Xavier, letting the contempt show in his voice.

"I've made a terrible mistake," Xavier admitted, nodding.

"I'd say," Logan said, showing no mercy.

"Magneto's helmet," Xavier said, going on. "It is somehow designed to block my telepathy. I couldn't see what he was after until it was too late."

“It’s not your fault,” Cyclops said.

“No?” Logan challenged. “Why blame the biggest brain on the planet?”

“Hey,” Cyclops said, turning to face him. “I sure didn’t see you stop him.”

“How could you, blind man?”

The hotshot’s face got red around his visor, and he charged like a bull elephant.

“Scott!” Jean shouted. But it was too late.

Logan laughed and ducked easily under Scott’s fist, grabbed his arm, twisted it up behind his back, and slammed the kid into the wall, face first. Then, holding him there, Logan extended a claw right up to the back of Cyclops’ head.

“Logan!” Xavier said firmly.

A lock of Cyclops’ hair fell to the ground.

Logan flipped Cyclops around and sent him stumbling back. Then he faced the professor, angry and disgusted. “See, it’s this kind of thing that makes me wonder how you’re gonna outwit Magneto.”

With that he turned and slammed open the door. He stormed out into the hall and turned toward the front entrance. As far as he was concerned, he would get Rogue back on his own, or die trying. It was finally something worth dying for.

He started off down the hall.

“What are you doing?”

He stopped and turned to face Storm. Her neck was still bleeding slightly where Sabretooth had held her. And her white hair was streaked with black from the lightning strike she had brought down, very nearly on herself.

“I’m going to find Rogue,” Logan said. “What’s it look like?”

“You can’t just leave,” Storm said.

“Why not?” Logan asked. “Should I wait for good old Xavier and his fanatics—you included—to make everything all right?”

“We’re not fanatics, Logan,” Storm said, her voice low and even and controlled.

“No?” Logan asked, glaring at her. “Then just what are you? Why are you doing all this?”

“Because humanity needs us,” Storm said.

Logan took a step back toward her. “Oh, humanity needs you? How have they lived all this time without you?”

“It’s a different world now,” Storm said, standing face-to-face with him. “As a new species, we have a responsibility to protect them, to teach human beings to accept our presence here.”

Logan snorted and turned, then headed into the foyer. Behind him he could hear Storm following. She wasn’t going to give up, so in the foyer, near the front door, he turned on her.

“This is what pisses me off about you hypocrites,” he said, moving back a step to be right in her face again. “All your high-minded ideals, and you still hate them just as much as they hate you.”

She started to object, but he held his hand up for her to stop.

“Look,” he said, going on. “I dislike everyone equally, but you . . .” He shook his head in disgust. “You talk about human beings like they’re children, waiting for you to punish them for their ignorance.”

He stepped even closer to her, looking her directly in the eye. “They did hate you, didn’t they? Hey, it’s not like I don’t understand.” He raised his fist and extended a claw. “They cut open my body and turned me into this. What did they do to you?”

Storm looked flustered, but Logan wouldn’t let her turn away. “I’ve overcome the trials of my past,” she finally said.

Logan just sneered at her, retracted his claws, and turned toward the front door.

At the door he glanced back at her. “Good for you.”

He started to open the door, then stopped. “You know, I think your professor’s right. I think there is a war coming. You sure you’re on the right side?”

She looked at him, stiffly refusing to drop her gaze as the silence in the foyer seemed to stretch.

“At least I’ve chosen a side,” she said then.

Again they stared at each other, then, with a shake of his head, he turned and opened the door. Rogue was out there somewhere, and he had to find her. He was wasting his time here.

As he opened the door, Storm gasped.

Standing there in front of him was a man wearing clothes that clearly didn’t fit, looking just about as pale and sickly as a man could look and still stand. His clothes were soaked, and a puddle had formed around his feet.

“What the hell happened to you?” Logan asked.

Storm stepped up beside Logan. “Senator Kelly?”

“The Senator Kelly?” Logan asked, actually shocked. “The guy who hates mutants?”

The man nodded, then, very weakly, he said, “I’m looking for Dr. Jean Grey.” At that the man’s eyes rolled up into his head, showing only whites, and he pitched forward, right into Logan’s arms.

It was like holding onto the slime covering a Jell-O mold. Logan barely got him to the ground without dropping him.

“Professor! Jean!” Storm shouted.

Logan stood up. *Well, he thought, it looks as if I'm not going anywhere just yet.*

Professor Xavier glanced at the figure lying on the bed as he entered the medical lab. It was clearly the same man who had chaired that hearing just a short time before, yet it wasn't the same man. The man in that hearing had been healthy, cocky, sure in his beliefs. This man looked as if he was burning up with a fever and melting at the same time.

Logan and Storm were standing against a counter on the other side of the bed. Cyclops was sitting on a second medical bed. Jean was standing over the senator.

“So what has happened to him?” Xavier asked her.

Jean shrugged. “I can't explain it, but he's a mutant. Or better put, he's become one.”

“What's his mutation?”

“He's extremely adaptable,” Jean said. “He can effectively change the shape of his body.”

“So why does he look like this?” Logan asked.

“Something's wrong with his mutation,” Jean said. “His cells are losing their integrity. They're liquefying. He's literally falling apart.”

“Any way to reverse the problem?” Xavier asked.

Jean shook her head.

At that moment the senator moaned and opened his eyes.

Xavier caught fleeting feelings of fear, panic, and extreme anger. He moved his chair up to a position head-high with Senator Kelly as Jean lowered the bed.

“Senator Kelly, my name is Professor Charles Xavier. This is my school.”

Kelly nodded. “For mutants?”

Xavier glanced at Jean, then back at Kelly. “Yes.”

Kelly half-nodded. “I was afraid that if I went to a hospital, they would—”

“Treat you like a mutant?” Xavier said. “We are not what you think. Not all of us.”

“Tell that to the ones that did this to me,” Kelly said.

Xavier nodded. Then he moved closer and looked directly into the senator's eyes. “I need you to try

and relax. I'm not going to hurt you. But I need to find out as best I can what happened to you, to see if we can help you."

Kelly nodded and took as deep a breath as he could.

Xavier looked into the man's eyes, then put a hand on Kelly's wet forehead, letting Kelly's thoughts pour out and into his own mind.

The memories were jumbled, like flashes of light. Xavier was used to it. It was the same with most people. Memories weren't clear, streamlike movies depicting logical sequences of events, but were more like flashbulb images of scenes hooked together, often not even in the right order. And they were always colored heavily with perceptions and feelings.

Flash:

His aide turning into Mystique, her blue face and yellow eyes clear, like the image of a monster. The pain from when she kicked him colored the memory in red.

Thus Magneto had captured the senator. Mystique had done it.

Flash:

Vision fading in and out of pained awakening as Magneto moved into the circle of light, illuminating what looked to be a clearing in a type of cliff-surrounded forest.

Kelly clearly had no idea where he was. And Xavier didn't recognize it either, from anywhere in Magneto's past.

Flash:

Kelly sitting on the chair near a massive machine, fighting to get loose.

Flash:

Magneto rising up inside the machine. He is laughing down at Kelly, toying with him.

Xavier could feel the hatred for Magneto flowing from Kelly. Hatred like nothing he had ever felt before.

Flash:

The light, alive, is crawling over him, through him, inside him.

Flash:

Flash:

Flash:

Extreme bright light and pain, then nothing.

Flash:

Kelly dropping through the air into the ocean.

Xavier pulled back out of the senator's mind as the images began to repeat. He really didn't want or need to see them again.

Or feel that kind of hate again. Once was more than enough to disgust him completely.

Xavier wiped his hands and took a deep breath. It was clear that his old friend was no longer the person he had known.

"Well?" Logan asked as Xavier opened his eyes and wiped his hands again, as if doing that was going to clean away any of the filth he got from the senator's mind. He felt as if he'd touched something really dirty.

He had. The senator was a walking, talking ball of hate and self-loathing, with more disgusting habits and deeds buried in his mind than would be found in a war zone. Losing this man would be no great loss to the world in general.

Xavier was surprised to feel that way.

"Professor?" Jean asked, stepping toward him. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. He was going to be all right as soon as some of the memories went away. "Not here. In my office."

The senator's head lolled to one side, and his eyes closed.

Jean quickly checked him. "He's just sleeping, at least for the moment."

Xavier nodded, then turned his chair toward the door. "Someone needs to stay with him."

"I will," Storm said.

Xavier could hear Logan, Cyclops, and Jean following him.

"Call me if something changes," Jean said.

"I don't think anything will," Xavier said, "at least not for the better."

He meant that in more ways than one.

Chapter Eighteen

Professor Charles Xavier's Office

The mood was different, more focused than it had been, only an hour before. It had been a long night, but Logan was far from tired. All he wanted to do was get Rogue back, and this Senator Kelly had given them their best clue. He was going to stick around until they worked it out. And since the professor had been tap dancing around inside the senator's brain, Logan hoped there would be all sorts of help forthcoming.

"So?" Logan asked as Jean closed the door and the professor moved in behind his desk. "What does Magneto want with Rogue? You get that much?"

"The senator doesn't know," Xavier said.

Logan waited, watching. The professor clearly looked upset by what he had seen and felt in the guy's head. But Logan figured, you go dancing inside any politician's head and you're not going to like what you find.

"It seems that Magneto has built a machine that emits radiation that triggers mutations in normal human beings," Xavier continued. "And it seems to draw its power from Magneto."

"But the mutation is unnatural," Jean said. "Kelly's body is rejecting it. His cells began to break down almost immediately."

"I don't think Magneto knows that," Xavier said. "Kelly escaped before Magneto ran any tests."

"What kind of effect does the radiation have on mutants?" Cyclops asked.

The professor thought for a moment, then said, "None, from what I can tell."

"But it will most likely kill any normal person exposed to it," Jean said, "if Senator Kelly is any indication."

Logan sat, listening, thinking. None of this made any sense. If this Magneto had such a machine, why would he need Rogue? Unless it was to store his own powers.

"Hey, Chuck?" Logan said.

The professor glanced up, and he almost looked annoyed. Logan guessed that no one had called him Chuck in a very long time—if ever.

"You said this machine draws its power from Magneto?"

"Yes," Xavier said.

"What exactly did it do to him?" Logan asked. "Did you get that much from the senator's brain?"

"It clearly weakened him," Xavier said, then paused for what seemed like a very long time. Then he went on. "In fact, it nearly killed him." Sudden awareness swept across his face. "Oh, my God. He's going to transfer his power to Rogue, so next time, the machine kills her—not him."

"And his power will return to him naturally after a short time," Jean said.

Logan froze there, stunned along with the rest. Now that they knew why Magneto wanted Rogue, the

situation seemed even worse. Much worse, actually.

Storm stared in the mirror, dabbing some antiseptic on the scratches on her neck. She was going to be bruised, that was for sure. She was lucky to have come out of that fight with only a few scratches and bruises, and she knew it.

“Is somebody there?” Senator Kelly’s voice came weakly from behind her.

She quickly moved over to his bed and smiled down at him, trying to reassure. He was completely covered in viscous fluid, and apparently he could hardly see her. As he moved, water seemed to run from his skin and onto the bed in rivulets.

“Is somebody there?” Kelly asked again.

She picked up his wet, slick hand. “Right here, Senator.”

“Are you one of them?” he asked.

“Who is ‘them’?” she asked.

“I guess I don’t know anymore,” he said, and then he actually smiled. Water ran from his face and around his eyes. He didn’t even seem to notice.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” he added. “Please don’t leave.”

“All right,” Storm said, giving his hand a very gentle squeeze.

“I just don’t want to be alone.”

“I understand,” Storm said. “Very much, actually.”

The silence seemed to stretch endlessly, and for a moment Storm thought he had dozed off again.

Then he blinked and focused a little bit, and looked directly at her. “Do you hate normal people?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” she said, being honest with him.

“Why?”

She paused for a moment, then decided to give him the straight answer. He deserved that much at least. “I suppose I’m afraid of them.”

Kelly laughed, then coughed uncontrollably. She calmed him as best she could.

After a moment he looked up at her again. “Well, I think you’ve got one less person to be afraid of.”

With that he closed his eyes, and his hand tightened around hers. His breathing became shallower and shallower as his hand seemed to be getting smaller and smaller.

So much water was running off of him now that it was dripping in streams onto the floor around the table. The senator was literally melting.

He coughed again, then seemed to settle into the table. His hand continued to shrink in hers, melting away.

She wanted to let go, to go wash, but she stayed. She had promised him she wouldn't leave him alone. She didn't like the man or his beliefs, but no one deserved to die alone.

As she watched, he just got smaller and smaller.

Finally he didn't take another breath.

She was just about to put his hand down when it melted completely, slipping through her fingers.

Logan was getting more and more fed up. It seemed that all they did was talk in circles, and talking wasn't going to get Rogue back. Only action was going to accomplish anything.

"So," Jean said, glancing at Logan, clearly sensing his impatience, "if Magneto wanted to turn a group of people into mutants, where would he do it?"

The question was met with silence. Logan had no idea. Neither, it seemed, did any of them. The target could be any city.

"I'll use Cerebro to try to find Rogue," Xavier said, breaking the silence. "That might help us figure out where they are heading. Cyclops, would you and Storm ready the jet?"

Logan pushed himself away from where he'd been leaning against the wall.

Finally some action.

"Jean," Xavier said, "find Logan a uniform."

"No," Cyclops said. "He's not coming."

Logan turned. His temper flared. "You little—"

"I'm sorry, Professor," Cyclops said, ignoring Logan. "It's not going to happen. He'll endanger the mission and my team."

"Hey," Logan countered, "I wasn't the one who gave the train station a new sunroof. So you can take your mission and stick it. I'll do this on my own."

"Stop acting like children!" Xavier said firmly, looking first at Cyclops, then at Logan. "Both of you! People's lives are at stake. Rogue's life is at stake!"

Logan couldn't even decide how to respond to that.

At that instant the door opened and Storm came in, looking shaken. More shaken than Logan had yet seen her look. She was wiping her hands on a towel, over and over.

“Senator Kelly’s dead,” Storm said. “He melted. It was not a pleasant thing to watch.”

She wiped her hands again.

Silence filled the room again like a thick cloud, holding everything still. Finally Xavier nodded, and moved his chair out from behind his desk and toward the door.

With a quick glance at Cyclops, then Logan, he said, “Settle this.”

Then he wheeled himself out of the room.

Professor Xavier wheeled himself into position on the extension ramp leading to Cerebro and let the heavy steel door close behind him. He was angry at both Cyclops and Logan for continuing their petty bickering. And he was worried. Deeply. The images from Senator Kelly kept flashing through his mind. There was no doubt that Magneto thought his device worked, and that he was going to use it on a large number of people, forcing Rogue to act as his stand-in.

The question was where? And when?

Xavier keyed in the commands for Cerebro to track Rogue’s brain waves, then wheeled himself into position and put the helmet on his head. They didn’t have much time, that he was sure of. He had to find her and find her fast.

As Cerebro started up, he focused on Rogue.

Almost instantly he knew something was wrong.

Horribly wrong.

Sharp pain stabbed through his head, spinning him around and around inside, twisting his thinking, assaulting his mind like a bad nightmare.

He screamed out in pain.

Fighting against losing consciousness, he hit the emergency shut-off switch. Jean had insisted that it be installed on the arm of his chair.

The shut-off switch also triggered alarms and opened the door.

He knew, with a tiny part of what was left of his consciousness, that those things were happening.

But the rest of him was overwhelmed by the pain.

And then the blackness arrived. Creeping, thick blackness, like none he had ever experienced before, slowly filling his awareness.

He wanted to get away from it, but it was inside his head.

He jerked as one more massive jolt of pain shot through his mind. Like a distant object, he could see the

light coming in the now-open door. But the light wasn't enough to hold back the darkness.

He pitched forward, out of his chair, out of the helmet.

And the blackness had completely taken him before he hit the floor.

Chapter Nineteen

X-Men Mansion

Cyclops stood over Professor Xavier's body, watching his friend and mentor breathe shallowly. At least he was still breathing. His wheelchair sat next to the bed. Electrodes were taped to his temples and forehead. The monitors showed erratic brain wave activity. Even Cyclops could tell that much.

"What can we do now?" Storm asked.

Jean stood on the other side of the table, and Logan was leaning against the wall behind her. Jean shook her head. "We just have to wait."

Logan looked up. It was clear that Logan was upset, almost as much as the rest of them.

"I think we should get some rest," Jean said. "We're not going to be making very good decisions this tired. We'll take turns watching over the professor."

"And we're going to need to take care of the students," Storm said. "I'll do that."

"Rest," Jean said.

Storm nodded as she headed for the door.

Logan pushed himself away from the wall and moved over to stand by the professor. Then, as he passed by Cyclops, he put a hand on Cyclops' shoulder. "I'm sorry, Scott."

All Cyclops could do was nod his thanks.

After Storm and Logan had both left, Jean looked at him. "Go rest, then come back and relieve me later in the morning."

"Are you going to be all right here?" Cyclops asked. "You haven't had any rest, either."

Jean looked at the professor. "I'll be fine for four or five hours. I'll wake you if there's any change."

Cyclops kissed her, then headed for the door. Rest didn't seem like it was going to be possible.

And over the next four hours it didn't come easy. But he did manage some sleep, and after a shower and some food he returned to the lab to give Jean a much-needed break. He actually felt better.

After she had left, he moved over and stood above the professor. “You can still hear me, can’t you?” he asked.

Of course the professor didn’t move. But over the last few hours the monitor had shown some slight stabilizing of his brain waves. Jean had said that that was a good sign.

“I just want to thank you for taking me in,” Cyclops said. “Actually, taking us all in.”

He stepped back, walked around the table, then continued. “You’ve taught me everything in my life that is worth knowing. And I want you to know that I’ll take care of them.”

With that he moved back over to a chair near the monitor and sat down. There was nothing more to say.

And for the moment, nothing more to do.

After what seemed like an instant nap, but had actually been three hours, Jean showered and returned to the medical lab. Storm and Logan were both there, sitting quietly, waiting. She did a quick check of the professor’s vital signs and reported that not only were his brain waves slowly stabilizing, but his vital signs were getting stronger. It was going to take some time, and he wasn’t out of the woods yet, but at least he was going in the right direction.

“So what do we do now to save Rogue?” Logan asked. “If it’s not too late already.”

Jean glanced at the professor. “Well, Cyclops is scanning all news and online reports as we speak, looking for any unusual activity that might give us a clue that something is happening somewhere.”

Logan nodded, clearly as satisfied as he could be.

“If one of you would stay with the professor, shift off, and let me know if there are any changes, it would be really helpful.”

“You got it,” Logan said.

“Gladly,” Storm said.

“I’ll be in back. I have another idea,” Jean said.

She had no idea if she could even fix whatever was wrong with Cerebro. But over the last year she and the professor had worked on the machine a great deal, and she felt she knew it—knew how it worked, and why it worked. If anyone besides the professor could fix it, she could.

It turned out that the main brain had been punctured and broken. Someone had clearly sabotaged it. The questions as to why and how someone could do this would have to wait until later. First she needed to fix it.

Every hour she checked on the professor, then went back to work. Luckily, whoever had sabotaged Cerebro had not known quite what they were doing. The most vital sections had been missed.

Carefully, she replaced wires, tubing, and optic fibers, checking and rechecking every connection to make sure it was not only secure, but correct.

Suddenly, as she connected what seemed to be one of the last optic fibers, Cerebro's brain began to light back up.

Two more optic fibers connected, and the brain's light was as bright as always.

She climbed up out of the harness, moved to the main control board, and ran diagnostic check after diagnostic check. Two hours later, after a few tweaks and one more replaced fiber, everything read completely green.

Cerebro was back and ready, as soon as the professor was well enough to use it.

She started toward the door to tell the others, then realized the full implications of the thoughts that had just run through her mind. It was going to be some time before the professor would be well enough, strong enough, to use Cerebro again. And by that time, Magneto would most certainly have carried out what he was planning.

And Rogue would, from the professor's account of what had happened to Kelly, be only one of the dead. One of hundreds, thousands, perhaps more.

She moved out into the hallway and glanced toward the medical lab. Cyclops and Storm were both leaning against a wall, just outside the lab, waiting. Logan must be inside.

She had to give it a try. There were far too many lives on the line for her to wait.

She turned to the control board as Cyclops looked up and saw her. He started toward her just as she punched the button to close the door.

The last thing she heard from him, as the door locked shut behind her, was, "Jean! No!"

She moved over to the position on the ramp where the professor normally sat and knelt to put her head at the same height. Then she fit Cerebro's helmet over her head and punched in the code on the control panel to search for Rogue's brain waves. She also set the power levels lower than the professor normally used. She had nowhere near the ability he had. Frying her own brain wasn't what she had in mind here.

Faintly through the massive door she could hear Cyclops pounding. She just hoped he didn't do anything stupid like trying to blast through that door. He might be able to do it.

She punched the start switch and then kept her head still as the ramp extended and the walls of the massive round room began to spin.

Suddenly the machine seemed to reach inside her head and grab her brain, clamping down on it like a fist, squeezing harder and harder as the walls around her vanished and her vision floated up and out of the mansion.

She heard herself scream at the pain as the ground sped by under her, until finally she was there, hovering above the tied and gagged Rogue. And instantly, she knew where Magneto was taking her.

The minute that realization was fixed in her mind, Cerebro let her go.

The ramp retracted, the walls slowed and stopped, and the door clicked open to reveal the worried faces of Cyclops, Storm, and Logan. As they came running in, she tried to stand and pitched forward into Cyclops' arms.

"Jean?" Cyclops said, holding her tight. "What have you done?"

She managed to open her eyes and smile up at him with what seemed like her strongest smile, but she wasn't even sure if she'd have the energy to move her lips. Then she managed to choke out, "I've found out where they're going."

Then she closed her eyes again. It was just too much work to keep them open.

Chapter Twenty

Liberty Island—New York City

The entire harbor around Ellis and Liberty Islands crawled with security as the leaders of every major nation gathered for the opening ceremonies of the international peace conference to be held on Ellis Island.

The night was lit with spotlights, and the water was dotted with police boats. Underwater sensors guarded the islands, and three different security satellites provided constant surveillance of the entire area. The U.S. Secret Service and the FBI were responsible for all the world leaders' security, working with each government's security agency. As far as they were all concerned, not even a fly could get near these leaders without them knowing about it.

Liberty Island ground security had been given over to almost fifty of New York's finest, patrolling on a constant basis. Both the FBI and the Secret Service had command posts set up on the side of Liberty Island that faced Ellis Island, where the opening ceremonies would take place.

The line of limos jammed the one road to Ellis Island like a traffic jam at rush hour. The backup, of course, was exacerbated by the intense security check each car had to go through just to get to the island.

On the dock side of Liberty Island, away from Ellis Island, a New York cop named Mike walked a set path. He was in his thirties, and was pretty much disgusted at the night duty he'd been forced to pull because of all the big shots in limos. He would much rather have been home watching a game on television, or sitting at Henry's tavern, downing a few beers. Instead he walked a very short, very monotonous beat of less than a hundred paces on Liberty Island.

Mike was so focused on his cold hands that he didn't see the mutant on the stone ledge above him, didn't hear Toad jump, didn't even know what hit him when Toad crushed him flat, killing him instantly.

Another cop named Stan, on the next beat over, thought he might have heard a crunch at the time Mike's bones were being smashed, but he couldn't see anything.

Two minutes later, Stan met the same fate.

In the water just beyond the dock, a New York City police boat slowly moved toward the Liberty Island dock. The pilot was a man in his forties, standing behind the open wheel, taking the boat carefully in.

On the dock another cop named Hank waved.

The pilot waved back.

Then Hank waved again, this time with his entire body, his mouth open in a silent scream of shock as Sabretooth ran him through, then picked him up. A moment later Sabretooth tossed Hank's body over the side of the dock and moved back into the shadows, to take care of any other police who might come near the dock at any point in the near future.

On the boat the pilot started to shift, changing quickly into Mystique. At her feet the original pilot lay dead, his open eyes staring up at her. On the back deck of the boat, under a heavy tarp, rested the machine that would shortly change the world forever.

The boat bumped gently into the dock, and Mystique moved to quickly tie it off. Then she turned and said, "Clear."

Magneto came up from below, followed a safe distance behind by Rogue. She was wrapped in a tight-fitting jacket, her hands tied together, a metal collar around her neck so Magneto could control her completely.

He stepped up on the deck and took a deep breath of the cold bay air, then looked up at the Statue of Liberty towering above them. "Isn't it magnificent?"

"I've seen it," Rogue said.

Magneto took off his helmet and held it under his arm, then looked back up at the statue. "I first saw her in 1949. America was going to be the land of tolerance. Of peace."

Sabretooth jumped down onto the deck and helped Mystique uncover the machine.

"Are you going to kill me?" Rogue asked.

Magneto looked from the statue to her, then nodded. "Yes."

"Why?" Rogue asked.

"Because there is no land of tolerance," Magneto replied. "There is no land of peace." He pointed up at the Liberty statue. "Not here, not anywhere."

"I'm sure the professor doesn't agree with you on that," Rogue said.

"True," Magneto said. "But Charles has not seen what I've seen. Women and children, whole families, destroyed simply because they were born different from those in power. Well, after tonight, the world's powerful will be just like us. They will return home as brothers, as mutants. And our cause will be theirs."

Your sacrifice will mean our survival.”

“I’m thrilled,” she said.

“Granted, I understand that is a small consolation to the likes of you,” Magneto said. Then he turned. “Put her in the machine.”

He stepped off the boat and looked up at the statue. “Tell me when she’s ready, and I’ll raise the machine up into the torch.”

X-Men Mansion

Logan packed the clothes Xavier had given him into a duffel bag. They were the only clothes he had at the moment, since his camper had been destroyed. And now that he knew where Magneto was going to attack, he was headed there, to save Rogue if he could.

More than likely he was going to die trying, but he had faced death so many times already that it made very little difference to him. He had promised her, and he was going to do his best to keep that promise.

Storm knocked lightly and stepped into the room.

“What?” Logan asked, not looking up at her.

“Cyclops said he would like to see everyone down in the map room.”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Everyone,” she said.

He nodded. So the kid was finally starting to do what Xavier seemed to think he could do. Take charge.

Storm turned and headed down the hall. Logan tossed the bag on the bed and followed. Might as well see what Sunglasses Boy was planning. That way they wouldn’t get in each other’s way.

The map room was something Logan hadn’t seen in action before. It, too, was a round room, with a large, round table in the center. Control panels lined the sides.

At the moment, the table was covered with a very detailed holographic image of the New York City area, focusing on the bay with Liberty and Ellis Islands. The three-dimensional Statue of Liberty was startling to look at. Logan was impressed. They never seemed to be lacking the latest gadget.

On the board he saw dots of different colors. Jean nodded to him, then pointed at one of the dots. “Red shows New York cop foot patrols. Blue shows the current location of police and other security boats.”

He nodded. This was one very, very sophisticated map. Clearly it was being fed by a direct link to a satellite of some sort. The professor spared no expense for his team.

When Storm and Logan stepped up to the map, Cyclops was studying it with intense care. Finally, without looking up he said, “All right, we can go in here, at the George Washington Bridge.”

Cyclops moved a control ball on the control panel in front of him, and the map shifted, following the

motion of a jet coming in low under the bridge.

“We come around the bank just off of Manhattan,” Cyclops went on, giving commentary that followed the motion on the map. “We land on the far side of Liberty Island. Here.”

The map showed the point where they would hit the island. Patrols were light on that side. Actually, they seemed too light. But Logan didn’t mention that.

For a moment they all stood there in silence. It was clear to him that he was going to have a much better shot getting to Rogue if he went with this group. And just maybe they could all get out of it alive.

“So what about radar?” he asked.

Cyclops glanced up and actually smiled. “If they have anything that can pick up our jet, they deserve to catch us.”

Logan nodded. “Good enough.” Then he pointed at the place where they intended to land. “Doesn’t that look a little light on the guard numbers?”

Cyclops studied the area again, nodding slowly. As he watched, another red dot showing a New York cop winked out.

“It seems,” Cyclops said, “that Magneto is ahead of us. We leave in ten minutes, people.” At that he turned and headed for the door, without looking back.

Logan moved with Storm into the ready room off the hangar. He glanced at the uniforms, then shook his head and started for the jet.

“Hold on a second,” Cyclops said, strolling into the room and stepping right up to Logan. “We do this, we do it as a team. Are you going to have a problem taking orders?”

Logan stared into the visor of the man facing him. The guy knew Logan could cut him down in an instant, yet he had the guts to stand up to him like this. Challenge him. The guy had courage, Logan had to hand him that.

“I don’t know,” Logan said. “Give me an order.”

They continued to stare at each other for a moment, then Cyclops turned and moved to his locker. He grabbed a uniform and tossed it at him. “Put it on.”

Logan caught the black uniform and nodded, following Cyclops’ order, trying not to smile.

Chapter Twenty-one

New York Harbor

The night was cold, star filled, and moonless. The lights of Manhattan and the surrounding cities and towns shone like bright, twinkling stars that framed the blackness of the bay and rivers.

Cyclops surveyed the jet's instruments, making sure everything was in perfect working order. Ahead he could see the George Washington Bridge, and beyond it Liberty Island was lit up, the statue dominating the bay. The line of cars stretching out to Ellis Island seemed to have stopped. Or if it was moving, it was so slow that Cyclops couldn't see it from their current height of three thousand feet, even with the monitors.

Beside him, Storm studied other screens. And in the next two seats back, Jean and Logan waited. Shortly after they had taken off, Logan had extended his claws—to customize the gloves of his new costume. Otherwise the short flight had been tensely silent.

“All right,” Cyclops said, “there's the bridge. I'm taking us in. Storm, some cover please.”

“You got it,” Storm said. Her eyes went milky white.

As if to mirror those eyes, below, around, and under the G.W. Bridge a cloud of fog began to form over the calm, cold water. Cyclops watched as it began rolling down the Hudson River, past midtown Manhattan, then out toward Liberty Island.

He took the jet down quickly, almost in a straight dive, dropping to just forty feet over the water and skimming along in silent mode.

“You could warn a fella you're going to make a move like that,” Logan said.

Cyclops glanced back and smiled wryly at the strained expression Logan wore. He was gripping the armrest tightly. “Not a good flyer, huh?” Scott asked.

“I can't remember,” Logan said.

“Got me, too,” Storm admitted.

“Sorry,” Cyclops said, still smiling. “I'll warn you both next time.”

“Thanks,” Logan said.

And somehow, Cyclops knew he was sincere.

“Going to tactical,” Storm announced as they entered the fog right under the bridge.

The windows seemed to darken slightly, then, as if it had turned to daylight, the view of the surrounding area shifted to startling clarity.

“Amazing stuff,” Logan said.

“Highly advanced version of infrared night vision,” Storm said. “Makes darkness a thing of the past.”

“I'll say,” Logan said.

They reached the bay, and Cyclops slowed the jet down, almost into hover mode, moving slowly

toward the far side of Liberty Island. There was no point in trying to save a few seconds at this point, or in drawing attention to themselves. It was far better they got there without being seen at all.

Ellis Island

Craig Downer, a seven-year veteran of the Secret Service, stood on a tower overlooking the events unfolding below. He was in charge of a small squad of six agents, and each squad commander reported to a superior. It wasn't often that the Secret Service broke down into squads like this, but given the size of this particular event, it was the best way to keep track of everything and everyone.

At the moment the U.S. Navy band was playing a selection of different music from various countries. The bandstand was set up to the west of the main stage area. The music seemed to echo over the water, and to Craig it seemed out of tune more than anything else.

A bank of translators filled large booths that had been set up just below his tower. They were constantly speaking into a bank of microphones as the main public address system announced each head of state, each dignitary, as he or she arrived.

Out over the water, the lights of the patrol boats moved in a constant pattern that over the last few hours had become familiar. Then suddenly, as he was just about to turn away, he thought he caught a glimpse of something large and black blocking a portion of the distant shore lights, moving about forty feet above the water.

He keyed his mike. "Can I get confirmation that harbor airspace has been cleared?"

"Roger that," a voice responded. "Nothing moving over three feet above that water. Airline flights have been shifted to the north approaches, as well."

"Thanks," Craig said, staring intently at the area where he thought he'd seen the black form.

Nothing.

He scanned the horizon along the lit shoreline, all the way to the Statue of Liberty.

Nothing.

Maybe he was just getting too paranoid for his own good. He was starting to imagine things. And in his job, that wasn't a good thing to do.

He went back to scanning the road that led onto Ellis Island, and all the stretch limos still waiting to be cleared. This was going to be a long night before it was over. A very long night.

Liberty Island

Magneto stared out of one of the observation windows set in the head of the Statue of Liberty, watching the lights on the distant Ellis Island. Behind him Sabretooth paced, back and forth, his footsteps echoing in the metal space. Except for the pacing, the silent statue felt like a tomb.

The two cops stationed in the torch above were dead, as was every person who had had the misfortune of being stationed inside the statue. Magneto deeply regretted having needed to take innocent lives like that, but he had had no alternative. The survival of an entire race came first.

After a moment, he keyed in the radio mike that connected him to Mystique, who was located in the main area in the statue's base. She was stationed at a police monitor that showed all the activities on Ellis Island. "How long?"

Her voice came back clear. "Ten minutes until curtain."

Outside, a dense fog was rolling in over Liberty Island. That was odd. It took him a moment before he realized why it was odd.

He keyed his mike again, this time to everyone on his team. "Stay sharp, people. We're not alone." He smiled, then thought, *You're too late, Charles.*

He got no response.

Sabretooth stepped up beside Magneto and looked out the window. Then he growled like a dog at an intruder, and turned to leave.

"Stay here," Magneto ordered.

"But—"

"I need you with me," Magneto said. "Once I've given my powers to the girl, I'll be temporarily weakened. You will be my only defense."

Sabretooth nodded and moved back to the other side of the statue's head, where the stairs curved up. He was following orders, but Magneto could tell he wasn't happy about it.

Ellis Island

Craig Downer got the message clearly through his earpiece. "John Henry has arrived."

John Henry was the code name assigned to the president and his party. Craig and the rest of his people were here to protect everyone, but as always, their first priority was the president.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the public address system announced. "The president and first lady of the United States of America."

On the red carpet leading into the main area, Craig could see the president and his wife walking, smiling, waving to the cheering crowds. They were surrounded by a full contingent of Secret Service. And a dozen more were scattered up through the crowd ahead of them.

Craig scanned along the road, scanned the crowds in front of the president, and then, as the president and first lady got to their seats, he looked out over the black water where he had seen the shape. The Statue of Liberty stood out there, brightly lit and standing guard over the bay.

There was something odd about old lady Liberty. He couldn't put his finger on it.

Craig shook his head. Why was he having such a bad feeling about all of this?

So far everything had gone smoothly.

Maybe that was worrying him. Maybe it had gone too smoothly.

Chapter Twenty-two

Liberty Island

Logan breathed an inward sigh of relief as Cyclops brought the jet down smoothly into the water and cut the engines. The sensation shifted to the gentle rocking action of water as the engine ports closed up to function like pontoons.

Cyclops climbed out onto the wing and jumped to a nearby rock, using special cords to secure the jet in place. Inflatable black buffers protected it from striking the rocks. With luck, they were going to need the jet to get away. And more than likely, it was going to have to be a fast exit.

Logan followed Cyclops out, then helped Jean and Storm reach dry land while Cyclops finished securing the jet. Logan couldn't sense any motion or detect the scent of anyone in the immediate vicinity, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Their enemies had shown remarkable ability when it came to masking their presence.

He and Storm took up positions on the hill, waiting there until Cyclops and Jean joined them. Storm's fog was thick and heavy, and the air had turned cold and biting. Above them Logan could see the Statue of Liberty towering against a backdrop of the night's blackness, all lit up with spotlights that cut through the fog. Across the bay he could see the gathering on Ellis Island, and he could hear the faint sounds of the music drifting out over the waves.

"Take a look at this," Storm said from her position to his right as Jean and Cyclops joined them. She was indicating a huge, green, rounded object composed entirely of metal.

At first Logan couldn't tell what it was exactly.

"The base of the torch," Jean said, looking up. There was a hint of awe in her voice. "Can you believe that?"

It finally dawned on Logan just what she was talking about. Above them, he could see that the base of Liberty's torch had been removed—replaced, more than likely, with the base of the machine that Senator Kelly had described to the professor.

"Spread out and head for the main entrance," Cyclops said. "Logan, take point."

"Got it," Logan acknowledged.

Twenty feet farther up the rocks, under a stone wall, he came across the first body. The cop had practically been gutted, and from the look on his face, he hadn't died easily or quickly. Logan could smell the scent of Sabretooth on the guy.

Two more policemen's bodies had been tossed behind the bushes near the main entrance. Logan waited there, in the shadows, as Jean, Storm, and then Cyclops came up out of the darkness, appearing like ghosts, moving silently and quickly. Logan had to admit the professor had trained them well. They were functioning like commandos.

"Two bodies," Logan said, pointing into the bush behind him.

Cyclops nodded. "Jean, keep scanning ahead. You and I are now on point. Logan, stay close to Storm. Watch her back."

"Copy that," Logan said.

So far the kid was acting like a real commander. And so far his orders all made sense. He was going to owe Scott an apology if they both got out of this alive.

Cyclops went in the right double door and continued right.

Jean took the left door and went left.

A moment later Cyclops' voice said, "Clear."

Storm and Logan moved toward the front doors the same way as Cyclops and Jean. As they entered, Storm clipped her cape to her wrists, keeping it closer to her body.

Passing through the doorway, Logan set off a metal detector. With a look of disgust, he popped his claws and plunged them into the machine, putting a stop to the strident alarm.

The inside of the statue's main foyer boasted a girdered ceiling, then a long hallway heading toward the center of the structure. There was an empty security desk to one side and a metal detector blocking much of the entrance.

Logan went around it on the right.

Storm on the left.

The two cops who had been manning this area were bleeding behind the desk, their throats cut cleanly, their blood so fresh it wasn't yet drawing flies.

A six-foot replica of the statue stood guard on one side of the hallway about halfway down. As Logan went past it, he paused. A few feet farther on, he whispered to Cyclops. "There's someone here."

"Where?" Cyclops asked.

"I don't know," Logan said. "Keep your eyes open."

They continued down the long hallway—slowly, carefully—to where it opened into a two-tiered museum.

The sense was becoming even stronger. Logan glanced around. Still nothing. They reached the center area that stretched upward into the body of the statue. There they stopped, surrounded by displays and side rooms, with a railing curving above them, concealing a dark balcony.

Cyclops gestured, and they spread out, keeping under the overhang of the balcony.

Finally, Logan couldn't stand it any longer—the sense that someone was just behind them. “Hang on,” he said to Cyclops, who nodded.

Logan headed toward the front entrance, moving quickly and silently.

Nothing.

He was about to turn back when he heard Cyclops' voice down the hallway.

“Anything?” Cyclops asked.

“I know there's someone here,” a voice responded. A voice that sounded exactly like his own. “But I can't see them.”

At that he broke into a sprint, as fast as he could move, back down the hall toward the others.

Someone, or something, who looked, dressed, and sounded exactly as he did, was standing in front of Cyclops. Then the imposter extended his claws and went to swipe at the unsuspecting X-Man.

Logan leaped and tackled the doppelganger, square in the back, sending them both tumbling head over heels into the steel wall, then into a side room cluttered with exhibits.

Recovering from his surprise, Cyclops focused on both of them as they came up, facing each other. Logan glanced at Scott. “Wait.”

The imposter did the same thing.

Said the same thing.

Suddenly a massive metal door slammed down into place, cutting off Logan and the imposter from the others.

Logan spun for an instant, then turned back. But the imposter was gone.

Mystique. The blue woman was a fighting expert and could change her form at will.

Then the lights cut out.

“Ah, crap,” Logan said. He was certain he knew what was going to happen next.

And he was right. A boot slammed into his face, sending him crashing over backward.

He came up ready to fight, his claws fully extended, using all his heightened senses to figure out where his opponent might be lurking.

The blackness seemed almost too black.

A whisper of movement caused him to turn, just in time to roll with another blow to the head. This time

the impact sent him crashing into a glass display case.

He rolled again and came up, moving toward the far wall. There he found a switch and turned it on, bringing the lights back up. He was in a gift shop.

Mystique was nowhere to be seen. Yet he still could sense her presence. He moved slowly, with animal grace, turning, employing every sense. She had to breathe, so he listened. She had a faint smell, so he let his nose guide him.

He glided toward one side of the small gift shop.

Suddenly a mirror behind him seemed to move, and he slashed at it with his claws, smashing the glass.

But it had been a reflection.

Then the steel door flew open, and a shadow darted out into the main area.

“Damn, damn, damn,” he said, following her.

Jean stood beside Cyclops as he prepared to blast down the door that separated them from Logan and Mystique. Suddenly there was a sickening thud as Toad dropped from the balcony, bounced once, and kicked Cyclops hard in the side, sending him crashing head over heels into another side room.

Instantly the metal door to that room slammed down, cutting her off from Cyclops.

“Jean, watch out!” Storm shouted.

Jean twisted around to discover Toad, facing her head-on. His tongue shot out and struck her face, coating her with a slimy substance that congealed almost instantly.

He laughed. “Hate to kiss and run.”

It took Jean only a moment to realize that she couldn't breathe. The stuff was blocking her nose and mouth. She clawed at it, fighting to free herself of it.

An instant later the metal door that had slammed down on Cyclops melted under the heat of his energy beam. Scott came tearing out, firing at Toad, who dodged out of the way, ricocheting off two walls, gaining the momentum he needed to kick Cyclops back into the room he'd just escaped from.

Then Storm attacked him, and he rolled over, finding the leverage to knock her up and over the railing into the balcony area.

Then Cyclops was back, and Toad leaped up and out of sight, also on the balcony.

Jean was starting to black out. She dropped to her knees, then to her back, fighting the stuff that clung to her face, her throat, and her nose. It had hardened until it felt like bone, completely blocking her air.

“Jean!” Cyclops said, bending over her. “Hold still!”

He desperately tried to pry it off, but it would not yield.

She could feel the blackness coming in around her. She desperately needed air. She fought to keep her eyes open.

Finally Cyclops stood. “Jean! Stop moving!”

She didn’t understand.

“Stop moving!” he shouted.

She did as he ordered.

He fired an incredibly thin, extraordinarily focused beam of energy from his visor. It struck the slime that had crusted over her face. The energy smashed it to pieces.

Jean gulped in a sweet breath of wonderful air as Cyclops bent over her, holding her.

She held him back as hard as she could.

That had been just too damn close.

Storm moved quietly along the exhibits, searching for Toad. He was up here somewhere, and she was going to find him.

And kick his ass right out to sea.

As she came out from behind a display case, she heard the elevator doors open. She glanced that way, only to find the doors were standing open on an empty shaft.

What was going on?

Suddenly, something dripped on her from above.

She tried to duck but wasn’t in time. Toad swung down and kicked her squarely, sending her careening across the floor. An instant later he was on top of her, his scaly hands touching her face, his legs pinning her arms.

“Such pretty skin,” he sneered, caressing her cheek. She fought a wave of revulsion. “So perfect. I guess some mutants were just born lucky.”

Storm kicked him in the back of the head. Then, as he moved, she wrenched an arm free and drove a fist squarely into his ugly face.

It was like punching a marshmallow covered with scales.

Instantly he leaped back up into the rafters.

“Nice try,” he said mockingly, “but you’re going to have to do better than that.”

She scrambled to her feet, ready to fight, as he swung through the rafters like a gymnast on a high bar,

using the force of one such swing to kick her hard, right in the chest.

The blow knocked the air out of her.

She flew backward through the air and smashed directly into the back of the open elevator shaft.

Her head connected with the wall with a resounding *crack* .

The impact hurt worse than almost anything she'd ever experienced.

An instant later, she dropped into the darkness.

Chapter Twenty-three

Liberty Island

Toad perched on the railing, watching the two mutants below. The one he had slimed was still alive, thanks to the mutant with the visor. But that wouldn't be the case for long.

He lined up, ready to drop on both of them at once. Sort of a two-birds-with-one-drop kind of thing. The sound of their bones crunching under the impact was going to be wonderful. With luck some of their brains and guts would squirt out—like someone stepping on a tube of toothpaste.

He loved it when that happened.

Behind him the elevator doors opened.

He twisted around just as wind blew up through the elevator shaft, increasing in intensity, rattling the doors, then knocking over tourist displays.

Slowly floating upward on the wind, the mutant with the white hair and the smooth skin rose into view.

“Don't you people ever die?” he complained, jumping down from the railing to face her.

At that the wind around him picked up violently. Displays and merchandise began flying toward him, striking him.

The woman had cuts on her forehead, and her arms were bleeding. Her eyes were solid white, shining like lasers, staring at him. Her expression spoke volumes, and Toad began to wonder if he should find a convenient escape route.

“Don't like being dropped down an elevator shaft, huh?” he asked, shouting bravado into the wind as he used his webbed feet to hold himself to the floor. Slowly, even as the wind increased, he inched closer to her, never letting the smile slip from his face. When he reached her she was going to be sorry she had even tried to mess with him.

His opponent's white eyes opened even wider, and the winds increased, pushing beyond hurricane force. Now he found himself slipping, moving backward, no matter how firmly he tried to hold on with his sticky feet.

Suddenly, a counter appeared and knocked against his leg, and his feet went out from under him.

He grabbed the carpet with his hands, but it ripped, sending him tumbling into the air and out a large window that opened onto an observation deck.

Beyond that, only the dark, open ocean waited for him.

But this white-haired witch wasn't going to get the best of him yet.

He lashed out with his tongue, grabbing the railing of the observation deck, holding on, flapping in the hard wind like a flag in a breeze. His strength could outlast hers, he was sure of that. She had to tire soon, then he would kill her. And take pleasure in doing it.

The glass on the doors exploded outward as the white-haired mutant walked out onto the observation deck, rising off the ground, buoyed by the winds she summoned around her.

She didn't look tired.

Then she raised her arms.

The air around Toad began to crackle and pop. He could feel the hairs on his head standing up even in the wind.

"Do you know what happens to a toad when it gets hit by lightning?" she shouted.

The pain in his tongue was intense as a massive bolt of lightning struck the railing. The jolt of electricity moved up his tongue and tore through his body.

The last thing he remembered was flying on the wind far, far above the dark ocean, his now-worthless tongue trailing behind him like the tail of a kite.

Then he blacked out. Luckily, this occurred before he hit the very hard surface of the water.

Back on the balcony, the wind died down and Storm smiled. "Same thing that happens to everything else," she said, answering her own question.

"Same damn thing."

Logan moved quickly down the hallway, keeping all his senses alert. He knew Mystique was close by, but where? And how was she going to attack?

Suddenly Storm burst through the doors just in front of him. "Is that you?" she asked, looking him over carefully.

Logan moved up close to her. "Shh, the other one ain't far away."

His nose caught the now-familiar odor.

Storm nodded. "Come on. We need to regroup."

"I know," Logan said, "but there's a problem."

As fast as he could move, he grabbed Storm's wrist and yanked it up. There were three claws protruding from her wrist. Claws she had planned on using to run him through.

The claws reverted back as Mystique's blue hand returned to its natural shape. Logan spun and struck out with his elbow, smashing her square in the nose as hard as he could.

She went down like a sack of flour. She wasn't going to be moving again for a long, long time.

And it was going to take all her changing ability to fix what was left of her nose.

"Always remember," he said, standing over her limp, blue body, "no two women smell alike."

He turned and headed back to the main area of the museum.

As he entered the center room, Cyclops and Jean spun and took up defensive positions.

"It's me," Logan said, striding toward them.

"Prove it," Cyclops said.

"You're a dick," Logan said, smiling at their visor-eyed leader.

Cyclops paused for a moment, then nodded and smiled. "Okay. Let's find Storm."

"Right here," she said.

Logan glanced at where she stood on the balcony, clearly tired, and bleeding in a number of places.

"You all right?" Jean asked.

"Better than Toad," Storm said, and smiled.

"And you're much better looking, too," Logan said.

"You sure know how to make a beat-up woman feel better," Storm said wryly.

"Okay then," Cyclops said. "Two down and two to go."

"Why do I think the next two are going to be the hardest?" Logan said.

"Because you're right," Cyclops replied.

Chapter Twenty-four

Liberty Island

The statue's interior was lit with a few strategically placed spotlights; the stairs had lights directly over them. It was a long climb, but it didn't take much time for Logan, with Cyclops directly behind him, to reach the upper platform. Stairs led off in two directions: one into the arm, and the other up into the head. The door that led into the arm was closed and locked tight. Looking down, Logan could see all the latticework of the statue's body. Above, the opening stretched into the head.

"Looks like Magneto's got the arm blocked," Storm said, pointing at the door on one side of the platform.

"Can you blast through it?" Logan asked Cyclops.

"Not without tearing the whole arm off," Cyclops said.

Above them, Logan could hear the sound of wind coming from the head of the statue. Maybe there was a way to the arm from there. He glanced up, then at Cyclops, who caught the meaning and nodded.

"Follow me," Cyclops said, heading up.

They all came up onto the platform inside the head and scattered, ready for anything. The inside walls of the head and face were covered with metal support beams and more latticework. Stairs continued up to observation platforms in the statue's crown.

Suddenly, Logan found that he couldn't move. It was as if his legs were glued to the floor, his arms frozen in the air.

Magneto!

"Get out of here," he said to the others. "Quick!"

"What's wrong?" Cyclops asked.

"I can't move," Logan said.

In the next instant, he was shoved hard, back against a wall. His fists were brought up and pushed into his chest, so that if he extended his claws he would stab himself.

A band of metal curled up and wrapped around him, pinning his fists to his chest. He tried to shove against the band, but it held him tight.

Then the room erupted into something from a bad cartoon nightmare as the metal bracing from the wall tore loose and flew everywhere, dancing, attacking, as if each piece had a life of its own.

Cyclops managed to blast a few of the braces, but there were just too many. One came up from behind and wrapped around his neck, forcing his head back and pulling him to the wall.

Storm and Jean were both caught as well and yanked to the wall.

The metal shoved Jean face-to-face with Cyclops. Then two metal spikes came in and locked Cyclops' head in place.

Storm looked more angry than Logan had ever seen her as four bands bent and pinned her to a wall near him.

Then, from the hole in the top of the statue's head, Magneto floated down, using the magnetic pull to support himself, landing gently in the middle of the room. He was wearing a smile that spoke of arrogant confidence.

"Welcome, my friends," he said.

Sabretooth thumped down behind him. Logan noticed that his dog tags were hanging around Sabretooth's neck. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to get those back.

Sabretooth moved over to where Jean and Cyclops were locked against the wall.

"You'd better close your eyes," Magneto warned the young team leader.

At that, Sabretooth ripped Cyclops' visor off his head and put it in his pocket. Fortunately, Cyclops had heeded the warning, though Logan knew that if he opened his eyes in the slightest, he would destroy everything that lay in front of him—including Jean.

Magneto laughed, then turned to Logan. "And I'm so glad you could make it."

Logan's only response was a growl.

"Storm, fry him," Cyclops shouted.

Magneto laughed. "By all means. A bolt of lightning into a huge copper conductor. I thought you lived at a school."

With that, Magneto stepped to the center of the platform and spoke into a radio. "Mystique? Mystique, where are you?"

Logan knew Magneto wasn't going to be getting an answer anytime soon, but said nothing. Magneto lowered the radio and tossed it to Sabretooth. "Find one of the security bands, and then find out if the ceremonies have started yet."

"You can't do this," Jean said. "I've seen Senator Kelly."

"Ah," Magneto said, nodding, "so the good senator survived his fall? And the swim to shore? He's more powerful than I could have possibly imagined."

"Kelly's dead," Jean said. "His body rejected the mutation and he simply melted. His cells fell apart."

"No, that's not possible," Magneto said, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. He glared at her.

“It happened,” Jean said flatly.

Magneto began to pace back and forth, saying nothing.

Logan could see that the news had shaken the man. Then, suddenly, Magneto stopped and turned on Jean. “Can’t you see what I’m trying to do? Why do you stand in my way?”

“Because you’re going to kill thousands of people,” Jean said simply.

But Magneto shook it off. Clearly, he refused to accept her claims about Senator Kelly. Instead he said, “I’m doing this for you. I’m doing this to put an end to the persecution of my people.”

“Bullshit!” Logan spat.

Magneto turned and pinned him with a stare. But Logan refused to give in.

“One of your people is about to get fried in your little flawed machine. I bet she’s feeling pretty persecuted, pal. If you were so righteous, it’d be you in that thing.”

“Oh, yes?” Magneto asked, looking at Logan. “Who would lead them then? You? Charles?”

He turned and faced Jean again. “This is not the time for politics and debate. It is time for strength. Our people will need leadership.”

“Sure,” Logan said, planting as much disgust in his voice as he could. “All hail Magneto, king of the new race and all-around genocidal maniac.” He laughed. “You know, I remember my history, and that sounds awfully familiar, don’t you think?”

Magneto glared at Logan as the radio in Sabretooth’s hand crackled.

“Boss?” Sabretooth said.

Magneto turned as Sabretooth held up the radio. “Tapped in on one of their bands.”

Magneto nodded as the radio came to life. Even from a distance, Logan could hear what the Secret Service guy was saying, unaware that his security had been compromised. “The house is full. Repeat, the house is full. Proceed to phase two.”

Magneto nodded. “It seems the party next door is under way. It’s time.”

He glanced around at Jean and Cyclops, then back at Logan. “Good-bye, brothers.”

With that, he floated up through the hole in the head of the statue.

Logan twisted, trying to fight his way out of the steel belt that held him, without luck.

Sabretooth just sneered at him.

More than anything else in the world, Logan wanted to wipe that sneer right off his ugly face.

Chapter Twenty-five

Ellis Island

Secret Service agent Craig Downer scanned the crowds milling about below his tower, then he looked out over the water toward Liberty Island again. He'd just been informed that they were having radio trouble, and communications were down for the entire city police contingent on the island. Nonetheless, he'd been assured that it would be fixed shortly. *It had better be*, he mused pessimistically. Four Secret Service agents were headed there now by boat to check the situation out. He didn't dare take any chances.

Down at ground level, the UN secretary general was finishing his speech.

"We must never forget," the secretary general said, "that the welfare of the smallest person, in the remotest corner of the world, is connected by infinite links to that of the world's leaders, gathered here today. The alliance of the world is coming, and tonight we have taken the first steps."

Polite applause filled the air.

At that moment the fireworks started. Red and green streamers shot into the air, the explosions echoing over the water. The display was scheduled to last for six minutes—six very long minutes as far as Downer was concerned.

He continued to scan the crowd and the distant Statue of Liberty, now illuminated even more with the blues and reds and greens of the fireworks.

Something was wrong. He could sense it.

He just didn't know what it was, and calling an emergency based only on his gut wasn't something he could do—not on a night as important as this one.

So he stood, watched, and stayed very alert.

Liberty Island

Logan watched carefully as Sabretooth moved to one of the observation windows in the statue's head to watch the fireworks exploding out over the water. It was going to be now or never.

He took a deep breath. This was going to hurt. But pain was something he had experienced a lot of in the past. He would survive this.

As hard and as fast as he could, he extended the claw of his right index finger.

It shot through his chest with a stabbing pain and made him suck in his breath. The claw went out his back and into the steel band holding him.

Quickly, using his entire body for leverage, he twisted, cutting the band. As he fell forward, he withdrew

the claw, growling as pain again waded through his body, twisting him, bending him over for a moment.

But he was free.

And as always, his wound was healing quickly.

Sabretooth spun around and roared when he saw what Logan had done.

“Glad to see me, huh?” Logan said, and before Sabretooth could react, he charged. With a flying kick, Logan planted one foot in his opponent’s stomach, the other on his shoulder, and sprang upward, using Sabretooth as a springboard that allowed him to get up and out, to the observation area on the statue’s crown.

With one clean motion, he landed and rolled, then braced himself and looked around. The arm was too far away for him to reach. And he couldn’t see anything going on up there yet.

“What the hell do I do now?” he asked himself.

At that instant, Sabretooth shot up through the hole in the statue and smashed into Logan at full tilt, sending him over the crown of the statue and onto the spikes of the headpiece.

It seemed his question had been answered for him.

Logan rolled and came up fast as Sabretooth charged.

“Here kitty, kitty, kitty,” Logan mocked, crouched and waiting. “Come and get what you deserve.”

Rogue, for the past half hour, had been struggling to loosen the cuffs that bound her to Magneto’s machine. Her wrists were raw and bleeding, and the panel near her feet had been dented by her kicks, but she had made no real progress at all.

Now fireworks had started out over the water. She knew time must be short. Very short.

Magneto stepped in through the door that led from the observation area into the torch, where Rogue was being held. He was smiling.

“No,” Rogue said. “Please don’t do this.”

“I’m sorry, my dear,” Magneto said.

He didn’t look sorry at all. He actually looked excited, like a child on his birthday. She watched as he removed his gloves, then took a few deep breaths, as if he were getting ready to jump into a deep pool.

Then he moved up to her, his cold eyes locking with hers. She tried to turn away, tried to pull her hands loose, but she couldn’t.

With his bare hands, he touched her face.

Suddenly she felt the incredible energy flowing into her.

She could see everything that he had seen.

She knew what he knew.

She saw all the death, all the horror.

Abruptly, he let go and staggered backward, his face white with shock. The machine around her came to life, shifting, yanking her hands down onto the handles. The rings began to spin, slowly at first, then faster.

She fought hard to let go, trying to use his power, his energy, to her advantage. And she failed.

Though she possessed his power, the machine was in control. She knew, from the images that had coursed through his mind, that he had thought of everything. He had planned it all—down to the last detail.

And she knew she was going to die.

She also knew that, from this point forward, the process could not be stopped. She knew that if Magneto had been standing here, in her place, he wouldn't have been able to stop it, either.

A moment later, something shifted. The energy he had given her began to flow away, draining into the machine. Along with it went her own life force.

It pulled at her, painfully taking everything she had and pouring it into the spinning rings.

In the distance fireworks lit the sky.

She used to love fireworks.

She could see the beautiful colors, hear the distant explosions, as the machine pulled the blackness around her, covering her in deep and intense pain.

She fought, with one last desperate burst of energy.

But the machine took that also.

And the blackness forced her eyes closed as the pain cut at her every cell.

Then she knew she would see no more.

Magneto watched as the young girl passed out in the machine, and the rings sped up to the point where they disappeared. He had never felt so tired, so drained. Another few seconds and her touch would have killed him.

He moved out onto the observation platform facing Ellis Island, and the firework display going on there. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," he said. Then he laughed bitterly and turned, waving at the door, willing it to close.

It didn't move.

This time he laughed at himself. Of course—it was going to take some time for his powers to return.

As his machine gained speed around Rogue, he moved to the door and closed it by hand, latching it.

A moment later the flame of the torch above him was shattered, bursting outward in an explosion that was timed to mix with the fireworks.

Perfect.

The white light started to fill the sky, joining the greens and blues and reds of the celebration.

Magneto watched in wonderment. It was almost time for the world to change.

Almost time for his world to begin.

Chapter Twenty-six

Liberty Island

Logan crouched on one spine of the statue's crown and watched as Sabretooth charged him again. Logan's claws were extended; his every sense was on full alert. He could feel his own blood pounding through his veins. It was payback time.

All he had to do was get the big guy into the air and over the edge. Gravity and the rocks below would do the rest.

But Sabretooth was too smart for that. Or he had the same damn idea.

The big mutant smashed directly into Logan, smothering him, and the two of them tumbled backward, pounding and slashing at each other as they rolled toward the tip of the metal spine.

As they came to their feet, Logan shoved himself away and slashed at his foul-smelling enemy, narrowly missing his face. But as Logan's arm came around, he realized he had snagged his own dog tags and ripped the chain off Sabretooth's neck.

"This is mine," he said, grabbing the tags and holding them up. He stuffed them into a pocket as Sabretooth came at him again.

"You're not getting them back," Logan said.

"We'll see about that," Sabretooth said, his voice a low growl—as if that was going to rattle Logan.

The force of the attack shoved Logan back, and pinned him to the metal surface of the statue. He kicked upward, hard, catching a soft spot.

Locked again, they rolled over twice, and Sabretooth pinned Logan's arms before he could get them free. He kicked upward again, burying his knee in Sabretooth's stomach, but that didn't break the hold this time. Sabretooth lifted Logan up until he was staring directly into Sabretooth's face, held there like a small child.

Logan's hands were pinned against Sabretooth's side. He could feel Cyclops' visor tucked in a pocket. With one hand he slipped it out and shoved it up the sleeve of his new uniform.

Sabretooth was incredibly strong, and there was no way Logan could yank free. So he did the next best thing. He spit in the mutant's face.

It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

Sabretooth laughed viciously. "That all you got?"

Logan smiled. "Nope. How about a metal skull?"

With that he smashed his forehead directly into Sabretooth's face. He could feel Sabretooth's nose break.

The grip weakened, and Logan kicked free, tumbling away.

But he wasn't fast enough.

And he was headed in slightly the wrong direction.

Sabretooth grabbed his wrist, and using Logan's momentum, he swung him around and off the crown, into the air.

Logan spun around as he began to plummet toward the rocks below, extending his claws. Before he'd dropped more than twenty feet, he snagged one ear of the statue.

His claws dug into the metal.

One of them held.

Barely.

Yanked to a stop, he smashed into the cold metal surface.

The pain threatened to cause him to black out. He had torn his right arm out of the socket, but he didn't let go, hanging there from one claw like a bad earring.

More fireworks exploded over the water in reds and greens. Logan focused on them for a moment, letting the pain subside slightly.

The slightest wrong move and his arm would give way, or the one claw would slip from the metal. And thanks to the angle, there was nothing below him but rocks. He might live through the fall, but he wouldn't be any good for a long, long time.

Slowly, he turned his body.

The claw held.

Carefully he raised his other hand. Then, gauging exactly how much force he dared use, he stuck all three claws from his left hand into the metal of the ear, then pulled himself up a little, using the last of his strength to ease the pressure on his injured arm.

He pulled the one claw out and let the ripped-up arm drop into a natural position. He could feel the pain subside as his healing ability kicked in.

Over his head, the statue's torch exploded outward, spewing an intense white light in all directions.

Rogue!

The thought sent another burst of energy flowing into him and he climbed, hand over hand, ignoring the pain.

Ignoring the shoulder.

He had to get up there, and get up there fast.

While the fight between Logan and Sabretooth raged above, Jean had been trying to ease her way out of the metal trap, but she'd had no success at all. She was pressed tightly against a metal beam that rested between her and Cyclops, held against the metal wall of the inside of the statue's head so securely that it was hard to breathe.

"Can you see Storm?" Cyclops asked.

"Yes," she said.

Storm had been trying to slip upward, with just about as much success.

"Try mentally bending the metal away from her. Give her an inch to move."

"Ready, Storm?" Jean asked.

"The one around my chest is the tightest," Storm said. "Try it first."

Jean concentrated, using all her training to focus her attention down on the one beam. In her mind, she pictured it stretching away from Storm.

"I can feel it moving," Storm said, wiggling to move up.

Jean pushed, harder and harder.

The beam across Storm's chest was shaking, but not bending.

Finally Jean could push no farther.

"No luck," she said softly.

Cyclops nodded slightly, as much as the spikes against his temples would allow.

Overhead, the sounds of the fight stopped. Only the sounds of the distant fireworks remained. Jean held her breath, trying to sense Logan or Rogue.

She couldn't find either of them.

Suddenly Sabretooth dropped into the middle of the room with a heavy *thud*. He was bleeding in a number of places, including his nose, and his coat and furs were ripped.

There was no Logan.

That meant he had lost.

"Time to end it all," Sabretooth said. "I'll make it quick, I promise."

He walked toward Storm. Standing in front of her he raised his hand, claws out.

"No!" Jean said, focusing on his hand, freezing it in midair.

Sabretooth stared at his claws as if they were betraying him.

He stepped back, and Jean released his hand.

He turned and grinned at her. "Nice trick."

Then he stepped toward her, his hand outstretched, reaching for her neck.

"No!" she said again, even more vehemently, focusing on his hand.

Willing it to stop.

And again it froze, just a foot in front of her.

He grinned even more viciously, and pushed. He seemed to be enjoying this.

She focused with all her strength, but she knew there was no chance she could hold him back for long.

Slowly he moved forward, never losing the sick smile on his face, until finally his claws were about to touch her neck.

"Hey!" Logan said.

Sabretooth jerked around.

Jean let his hand go and gasped for breath.

She had never been so happy to see anyone in her entire life. Logan was standing there, cut in a dozen places, but healing. His new uniform looked as if it had been put through a shredder. And he was holding one shoulder a little lower than the other.

But he was alive.

He glanced at her and smiled. “What do you see?” he asked, then winked.

Suddenly she was in his mind, and she knew instantly what he wanted her to do.

“Scott,” she whispered, “when I tell you, open your eyes.”

“What?” Cyclops said.

“I know. Just do it and trust me.”

“You’ll be killed.”

“No, I won’t,” she whispered as Sabretooth took a step toward Logan. “Now trust me.”

“You know, you really smell,” Logan said to Sabretooth. “And I think someone needs to change your kitty box.”

Sabretooth growled a low, guttural growl, and took another step.

Logan reached into his sleeve and yanked out Cyclops’ visor, then tossed it into the air.

Jean focused all her attention on the visor, snatching it out of the air and bringing it to her.

Sabretooth reacted quickly, diving for it as it shot past.

But he missed.

Jean brought the visor into position in front of Cyclops’ face, snapped it open with her mind, and adjusted the control that focused the lenses.

“Now!” she said.

Cyclops opened his eyes.

The intense energy rushed into the visor. She could feel its heat, but none of it touched her.

The narrow red beam shot from the visor, went past her head and hit Sabretooth squarely in the chest, smashing him backward through the metal wall and out into the dark night sky.

“Eyes shut!” she ordered Scott. He closed his eyes, and the visor dropped to the ground as she slumped against the metal that still held her in its grip. Logan jumped to the Sabretooth-sized hole in the wall and looked down.

“Bull’s-eye,” he said. “Right through the roof of a boat.” He turned and smiled at her. “Nice shooting.”

Jean was too tired even to smile back.

“We still haven’t won.”

“Rogue,” Logan said, moving quickly to cut them free.

“Rogue,” Jean said.

As Logan cut the metal away from her and Cyclops, she could see the white light starting to spread. They had to stop Magneto, and stop him fast, or thousands were going to die just as Senator Kelly had died.

Maybe even millions, if that white energy reached Manhattan.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Ellis Island

Agent Downer couldn't even begin to identify what he was seeing coming from the torch of the Statue of Liberty. White light.

A cloud of white light.

Or a cloud of something very bright that seemed to have no substance.

Just light.

It fascinated him and scared him to death in the same instant.

He keyed his microphone. “Any contact at all with Liberty Island?”

“None.”

“Damn,” he said softly, glancing down at the crowds below. He had no choice.

He flipped a switch and gave the order. “Code One. Evacuate.”

Below him Secret Service agents moved as a tight unit, and not far behind them the rest of the security forces jumped into action, each group taking charge of their heads of state. The president was instantly surrounded and moved quickly with the first lady toward one of the waiting cars.

Along the road that led back from Ellis Island and all the way into the city, Craig knew all traffic was being cleared. The cars were going to pour off this island far, far faster than they had come onto it. The evacuation procedures had been worked out to the last detail, practiced again and again. He just hoped it was going to be fast enough.

Across the water, the cloud of white light continued to spread.

Liberty Island

Logan finished cutting Storm loose and moved quickly to stand beside Cyclops and Jean. They were at the window, where they could see the torch above them. The white light was just as the professor had described it from the images in Senator Kelly's mind. It was pouring out of the torch and spreading toward both Ellis Island and Manhattan.

"I've got to blast it," Cyclops said.

"Not with Rogue still up there," Logan responded. He turned to Storm. "I need you to lift me up there."

"I can't control wind like that," she replied. "You could fly right over the torch."

"If I don't make it," Logan said, "then Cyclops can blast the whole damn thing." He turned to Cyclops. "You see another choice?"

Cyclops glanced up, then shook his head. "Try it."

"In the opening," Storm said, pointing to the hole Sabretooth had punched in the wall on his way out. "Keep your body flat until you're ready to land. Then curl into a ball."

"Gotcha," Logan said.

Logan jumped up to where she had indicated, then turned. Storm's eyes had gone pure white, and the wind was starting to come up around him. Jean and Cyclops moved back against the wall and hung on while Logan stood in the opening, gripping the edge, leaning into the wind.

Suddenly he felt himself being lifted by the air, so he let go. It was like floating on a fast river of water. One moment he was in the opening; the next he was out over the bay and heading upward.

Like a parachutist, he spread his arms and legs, trying to stay flat, trying to give some surface for Storm's wind to work against.

And he was trying his best not to panic. He knew now that he really hated flying.

Above him, the torch and the white cloud of light were coming on fast.

He focused on his target. He was going to have to time this perfectly.

Just as he passed above the balcony that curved around the torch, he tucked into a tight ball, right over Magneto's head.

The look on the old mutant's face was priceless.

The wind stopped, and Logan's speed and momentum sent him shooting directly at the machine.

There was Rogue. And there were the rings, spinning.

"Oh, shit!" he said.

Reacting instinctively, he extended his claws, and using them like a diver uses his hands to break the surface of the water, he went in.

The claws sheared through one of the rings, sending it careening off into the night air. He was moving fast enough that one of the other rings only took a nick out of one of his boots.

He hit the base of the machine and came up quickly, wrapping himself over Rogue, careful not to touch any of her bare skin, trying to protect her from any flying shards of metal.

Around him the machine continued to operate, but now it was off balance and one ring short. The entire thing started to shake as it built to full power, ripping itself apart at the same time.

Under him, Rogue jerked and twitched as the machine drained the life from her.

The white cloud of light had extended halfway to Ellis Island and was still spreading toward the city. He had to do something to stop it.

And to save Rogue.

Keeping her sheltered as best he could, he reached out with his claws and thrust them into the blur of rings that spun around him.

It was like sticking a finger into a high-speed fan.

Snap! His hand was smashed sideways as his claws sliced through another ring. Once again, his shoulder was wrenched out of its socket. New pain coursed through him, making him shout out in agony.

Now the machine around him was really tearing itself apart. The sound had changed from a humming into a massive roar, like a jet engine straining to shove a plane into the air.

Only this was one very sick engine.

The shaking was like being inside a giant blender. It was everything he could do just to hold on.

The remaining rings had lost all semblance of balance. Logan hoped fervently that the entire arm of the statue didn't fall off. It hadn't been designed to take anything like this, he was sure.

Then everything exploded around him.

The remaining rings on the massive machine tangled with a shriek of ripping and tearing metal. Then they blew outward, sending deadly fragments flashing across the bay. The air was filled with massive explosions, far louder than the fireworks had been.

The white light stalled, then just seemed to vanish. Soon it was as if it had never been there.

Logan's ears were ringing, and his arms and hands hurt from holding on so tightly. He was cut in a dozen more places, and he doubted his shoulder was ever going to be the same.

But he was alive.

And the light had been stopped.

He climbed out of the wreckage and stepped to the balcony level. Nothing much was left of the torch of

Lady Liberty.

Magneto stood there, his face crimson with anger and bleeding from a gash along his forehead. He stormed toward Logan. "You have ruined it!"

"That was the plan," Logan said, bracing himself. "Just not yours."

Magneto waved his arm, and a few small pieces of wreckage went flying at Logan. But nothing big.

"Feeling a little weak, huh?" Logan asked. He batted the small hunks of metal aside like annoying flies and stepped right up into the face of the old mutant.

"You just disgust me."

Magneto's eyes went round, as if he were suddenly very afraid for his own life. And that disgusted Logan even more.

With one hand he gripped the old man's vest and lifted him in the air. Then he extended the claws on the other hand and reared back, holding his fist up in front of Magneto's face, clearly ready to swing.

"Say good-bye," Logan growled, his voice low and mean.

Then, just as he was about to run the man through, he retracted his claws and just decked the guy with the hardest punch he could throw.

Magneto's head jerked around, his helmet flying off into space. The old mutant slumped to the surface of the statue, out cold.

Logan stood over him for a second, then shook his head. "That's a lot less than you deserve."

With a hard kick to Magneto's side for good measure, Logan turned and moved back toward Rogue.

"Come on, kid," Logan said as he dug her out of the wreckage. "Time to go home."

Suddenly he realized that she wasn't moving.

She wasn't breathing.

She was gone, still strapped into the remains of Magneto's machine.

"Oh, God, no," he said.

He cut off the metal straps and let her slump into his lap.

She didn't move.

How could this have happened?

How could he have failed?

He stared at her, then down at his own body. He was bleeding in a dozen places, and even with his

regenerative powers, it was going to take him some time to heal. But that didn't matter.

He looked out at the police boats streaming toward him from Ellis Island and from the city. And at the ring of helicopters hovering close around the island, waiting for the ground forces to get into position. There wasn't much time.

Then he looked back into the face of young Rogue. She didn't deserve to die like this. He had promised her he'd take care of her. And he had failed.

He took a deep breath. Storm floated up on a wind and landed on the platform next to Magneto's body.

Maybe, just maybe, he hadn't failed yet. Maybe there was enough left for one of them.

He pulled off his gloves, reached down, and took Rogue's face in his hands.

The shock jolted him, and he could feel his energy flowing into her.

On his chest, his wounds reopened, and his bleeding started to get much worse.

With his hands still holding the soft skin of her face, the blackness took him.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Liberty Island

Agent Downer climbed the last few stairs into the torn head of the Statue of Liberty. The evacuation of Ellis Island had gone fairly smoothly, all things considered, and now Liberty Island was also secure. What had happened here was going to take some time to figure out, if anyone would ever really know.

He had almost forty of New York's finest dead, and a national treasure had been trashed. The only clue at all as to what had happened was a machine that lay in ruins where the statue's torch used to be.

And an unconscious man.

Craig moved to the center of the room and stared down at the man. No one had touched him. Not until he got there. Those had been his orders.

He knelt down, being careful to not touch anything.

A hypo lay on the floor beside him.

Craig straightened up and took a deep breath, looking around. Hunks of metal lay everywhere. Some had been bent like noodles; others were sliced like cheese.

It would take a lot of talking to pin all this death and destruction on one man. He shook his head. It was a strange new world they were all living in, that was for sure. And things like this wouldn't make his job

any easier.

“Get him into a holding cell,” Craig ordered the men standing nearby. “And for God’s sake, don’t let him wake up until we get him into the right kind of place.”

Craig moved over to the window and looked across at Ellis Island. They had come very close tonight to a disaster, that much he did not doubt. That white cloud would have reached most of the world’s leaders before the evacuation could have been completed.

What the white cloud would have done to them was unknown, but Craig doubted it would have been anything good.

But who had saved them?

Who had saved the world tonight?

Someday, he hoped to know the answer to that question.

X-Men Mansion

The blackness seemed to swim, then it began taking on form, taking on shapes.

He organized the shapes, pushed the blackness into patterns, then searched for the light.

“This way, Professor,” a familiar voice said.

So he moved that way, organizing, shaping as he went.

“This way,” the voice said again.

He followed.

And after what seemed like a short time, in a place where time didn’t seem relevant at all, Professor Xavier saw a dot of light in the far distance.

“That’s right,” the voice said. “Go to the light.”

The light grew as he focused on it, until finally it surrounded him, flooding into his mind, his conscious thoughts. So he opened his eyes.

“Welcome back,” Jean said, smiling down at him.

Xavier let himself smile. He felt surprisingly refreshed, almost as if waking from a long nap.

“I knew you could make it,” Jean said.

“I had a good guide,” he answered, taking her hand and squeezing it. Then he remembered what had been going on when he went into Cerebro.

He looked up at her. “What happened?”

“We stopped Magneto,” Jean said, smiling. She stepped aside and looked over her shoulder. The professor could see Logan on the table across the lab, tubes running from his arms. “He’s not healing,” Jean said softly.

The professor nodded, then took a deep breath. “I think I have some catching up to do.”

“And resting,” Jean said.

“That, I’ve been doing,” he said. “I think I have enough energy for a story before my next nap.”

She laughed softly, wistfully, and pulled up a chair.

An hour later he knew it all.

An hour later he was prouder of his students than he ever could have imagined being.

Logan’s nightmare kept him, held him, like the straps holding him to the table.

The same events, over and over.

Strapped down, his skeleton drawn on his skin.

Lowered into the vat of fluid.

Scalpels cutting at him, over and over.

The pain.

Intense pain.

And then it would start again.

Until finally it changed.

As they lowered him into the vat, he tried to fight back, just as he always did, to attack those around him, even though he was tied down.

But a strong voice said, “Logan.”

A friendly voice.

A firm voice.

Logan looked up into the face of Professor Xavier.

“Logan, tell me what happened to you.”

So instead of being cut on this time, he broke the cycle.

Logan told the professor as much as he could, walking him through the nightmare like a guide.

And for the first time, he didn't feel the pain.

Jean sat with Cyclops, Storm, and about two dozen of the older students in the large recreational room, staring at the large-screen television. Outside the weather was beautiful, the sun shining in the big windows, warming the space. Yet all of them, Jean included, were ignoring the weather for the moment. Instead they were watching the news. She knew that their entire future, maybe the world's future, rested in no small part on what was happening today in the Senate.

"Quiet now," Storm said to the kids as the anchorman came back on.

"Even after last week's terrorist attack on the Statue of Liberty by suspected mutants, the outcome of the Senate vote just moments ago was fifty against, forty-nine in favor of the Mutant Registration Act. It has been defeated."

Jean felt as if her heart were about to explode out of her chest.

Around her the children shouted and cheered and stamped their feet, hugging and even crying.

She thought she might cry, too, the relief was so great. She couldn't believe the bill had been defeated. After what had happened at the Statue of Liberty, she had just assumed it would pass.

"Quiet!" Cyclops ordered. "Everybody quiet!"

The anchorman continued with his report. "Many feel that this narrow defeat was due, in large part, to the disappearance of Senator Robert Kelly, who until this last week, provided the loudest voice in the cry for mutant registration. No sign of Senator Kelly has yet been found. Police fear foul play."

Jean stood, wiping her hands on her pants as if that would finally clean off the entire distasteful subject of mutant registration. She wished it would, but she knew, as did everyone in the room, that the attempt to control mutants was far from over.

With a glance at Rogue, standing near the window, Jean left the talking and cheering group and headed down to the medical lab. Rogue had come through everything just fine; the only outward sign of her ordeal was a streak of white hair.

But Logan wasn't faring as well.

A minute later she was beside Logan's bed in the medical lab. Having had a few sessions with the professor, he seemed to be resting easier.

She uncapped a new IV and started to put it into Logan's arm.

Suddenly, just as had happened the first time she had treated him, Logan raised his hand up and grabbed her. But this time his touch was gentle, and he grasped her arm instead of her neck.

"Hey," he said, opening his eyes to look at her.

"Hey, yourself," she said, smiling down at him. "How are you feeling?"

“Fantastic,” he lied.

She laughed. Clearly he was in deep pain. But it was just like him to say he was fine.

She checked under one bandage on his arm. His wound was healing now, and healing quickly. It looked as if he was coming back.

“That was a brave thing you did for Rogue,” she said as she replaced his bandage.

“Did it work?” he asked.

“She’s fine,” Jean said, holding his hand. “She took on a few of your more charming personality traits for a few days, but we lived through it.”

Jean leaned in close and whispered. “I think she’s a little taken with you.”

“Well,” he said, smiling, “you can tell her my heart belongs to someone else.”

Jean stared at him. There was no doubt the two of them shared a unique connection. And she admired him a great deal. But her love was with Scott.

“You know,” she said, “you and I—”

Logan smiled. “How’s Xavier doing?”

She laughed. He had let her off the hook.

“He’s good.”

“Good,” Logan said, and Jean could tell he actually meant it. Then he closed his eyes.

A moment later he was snoring.

Chapter Twenty-nine

X-Men Mansion

Professor Xavier rolled his chair up and activated the holographic map table as Logan watched, still amazed at the gadget. The images of rugged, tree-covered mountain ranges appeared. Logan could see the roads, the streams, the old fire burns. Every damned detail of the area.

Flatout amazing.

The two of them were alone in the big room, so Logan moved over to a position beside the professor, standing over the display.

Using the controls on the side of the machine, Xavier focused down on a high pass, and Logan followed the focus, feeling as if he knew the area, yet not remembering it at all.

“There is an abandoned military compound at Alkali Lake, in the Canadian Rocky Mountains,” Xavier said, pointing at the pass and a small lake that sat a distance off the main road. “It’s not far from where we found you. There’s not much left of it, but you may find some answers.”

Logan studied it for a moment, logging it all in his memory. Then he looked over at the professor. “Thank you.”

It seemed like such a small thing to say for what the professor had done for him. But at the moment it was just going to have to be enough.

“You’re welcome,” Xavier said, flicking the map off and rolling away from the now-empty table. “You know there’s always a place for you here.”

“I know,” Logan said.

Jean and Scott and Storm had also made that very clear. And for the first time since he had woken up in that meadow, his only memories being nightmares of pain, he felt as if he had a place to go—a place he almost belonged. This mansion was now his home. It was a wonderful feeling.

“Are you going to say good-bye to the rest?” Xavier asked.

“No,” Logan said. Then he smiled. “I suspect they already know I’m going for a little trip.”

Xavier laughed, a twinkle in his eye. “I suspect you may be right about that.”

Logan moved to stand in front of the professor and extended his hand. “I’ll be seeing you.”

Xavier shook the hand, holding it tightly, then nodded. “Good luck.”

Ten minutes later Logan was headed down the front steps of the mansion, toward the driveway. The professor had said there would be transportation waiting there for him to use. What he found was Cyclops’ wonderful black motorcycle, the same one Logan had stolen to get to the train station.

The keys were in the ignition, and there was a note taped to the gas tank. *Good luck. Scott.*

He laughed and kicked the motorcycle to life. If he couldn’t say anything else for old Visor Boy, he had good taste in women and motorcycles. And he was a pretty fine leader to boot.

Logan sat on the bike, letting the smooth rumble of the engine surround him for a moment. The day was gorgeous—not too hot, not too cold. Perfect weather to start a trip.

Without even a look back, he headed down the driveway. He knew he’d be seeing the place again.

On the big front lawn a bunch of the students were playing soccer, Rogue among them. He pulled over and stopped, letting the engine idle as he watched her run and play and laugh, being what seemed like a normal kid.

She deserved that much at least, while she still had some childhood left.

After a moment she looked up and saw him. With a wave she ran his way, smiling, looking happy and flushed from the exercise. He put out a gloved hand and took hers.

She nodded, seemed about to say something, then let go of his hand and looked down into her palm. He'd given her his dog tags.

She stared at them for a moment, then looked up at him, tears appearing in her eyes. "Thank you."

"No," he said, smiling. "Thank you."

She had no idea what she had done for him. Maybe, ten years from now, she would understand. They'd talk about it. Maybe.

With that, he straightened his back, clicked the engine into gear, and with a smile for Rogue, headed down the driveway. He had some of his past to find, some answers to dig out of some ruins in the Canadian Rocky Mountains.

Then he could come home.

Now he had a future.

Epilog

Xavier smiled across the chess table at his old friend, Eric. They hadn't played chess in years, and Xavier hadn't realized how much he'd missed it until now. Maybe they would have to make this a regular occurrence. Maybe.

Xavier moved a pawn.

Eric nodded. "Doesn't it ever wake you in the middle of the night, the feeling that someday, someday very soon, they will pass that foolish law?"

He also moved a pawn to counter Charles' move, then kept talking. "Or maybe a law like it. And they will come for you and your children, and take you all away."

"It bothers me very much indeed, Eric," Xavier said, moving a knight.

"And what will you do when you wake up to that happening?" Eric asked. He moved a rook two spaces forward.

"I will feel a great swell of pity," Xavier said, "for the poor soul who comes to that school looking for trouble."

He made a pawn move; Eric countered with another rook.

“You know this is war, don’t you, Charles?”

Xavier nodded. The board was beginning to look like a one-sided war, as well. He had all his pieces in position, and it didn’t even seem as if Eric had noticed.

“And I intend to fight this war by any means necessary,” Eric continued. He aggressively moved a knight, again ignoring what Xavier was doing.

“And I will always be there, old friend,” Xavier said.

With that he moved his queen two spaces, taking away one of Eric’s knights.

“Check,” he said. He didn’t add the word “mate.” There was no need.

He pushed his plastic wheelchair back from the board and smiled at his old friend. “Thanks for the game, Eric.”

Then he turned to the clear plastic door. Beyond that were nothing but plastic walls. There wasn’t an ounce of metal within a half mile of this cell. It was a very special jail, designed for one very special occupant.

“Why do you come here, Charles?” Eric asked as Xavier reached the door and the guard on the other side opened it.

Xavier looked back. “Why do you ask me questions to which you already know the answers?”

“Ah, yes,” Eric said, smiling. “I forgot about your continuing search for hope.”

The two looked at each other for a moment. Then Eric said, “It could be our world, Charles.”

“It’s always been our world, Eric. It’s only when we lose sight of that that we imprison ourselves.”

He wheeled out, and the plastic door slid shut behind him. His old friend was left studying the board. And wondering what he had done wrong.

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For Keith DeCandido

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