



Volume One

Written by D. Golightly



Table of Contents

Part One	3
Part Two	12
Part Three	22
Part Four	32
Part Five	43

PRIME DIVISION

PART ONE

A secluded landscape at the center of New Wavos, North Dakota, where a slice of nature has been carved into the otherwise constantly evolving city. A lush field of green, self-hydrating grass provides the foundation, with select coves of interspecies foliage populating areas between scoot paths and jump marks. A tranquil repository where organizations have ensured that despite the technology that New Wavos has brought to the world, there will always be a place for Mother Nature.

ZzzAPPP!

A burning ball of blue energy suddenly condensed into reality, one moment hurtling through a secondary dimension, and the next moment bursting to fruition within one of the coves.

Just as fast as it had appeared, it was gone, leaving behind a human form that dropped to the ground in a very unfashionable way. The muscle-toned man with shaggy brown hair covering his eyes tried to breath, but found it difficult. Finally, after a mental shove, his lungs started to work again.

He fell into a coughing fit and after a moment spat up a glob of green plasma. Breathing became much easier at that point, but was still labored.

“Gross,” he muttered, looking at the spittle he had expelled. “That’s what I get for chronoporting with Doop.”

He sat up and viewed his surroundings, seeing the pathways twisting between the shrubs and trees, but still unfamiliar. “Doop?” he said, straightening and trying to get a kink out of his neck. “Doop, where are you?”

“Excuse me,” someone behind him said.

He turned to see a woman in her twenties, wearing what to him looked like a skintight mesh laid over top of another skintight bodysuit. As the woman turned and spoke, her body moved and it was obvious that they were separate articles of clothing, almost as if she was wearing two things purposely juxtaposing one another. She had only one distinguishing feature: her eyes were enormous. They looked at least three times larger than average.

“Look, I’m not judging,” she continued, “but if you don’t enter the park on a jump mark they’ll fine you for sure.”

“What?” he replied. “Oh, right. Sorry.”

She raised her hands defensively. “Hey, like I said, I’m not judging. I just happen to know the Constable for this sector and he gets really uptight when people skip their mark.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

“He’s cool about the nudity, though. Have a nice day!”

The woman jogged off along the pathway, tossing one more glance over her shoulder. The man looked down and saw that he actually was a naked as the day he was born. Suddenly embarrassed, he slipped behind a bush to conceal himself.

“Stupid Doop,” he muttered. “Where the hell are you? And why did you take my clothes, you psycho?”

He watched the female jogger make her way around the bend in the pathway, pause on top of what looked like a silver plaque embedded in the ground, and tap a wristband. A flash of light consumed her and she was gone.

“Ah, jump marks,” he said under his breath. He realized that it made perfect sense that in the future, or now his present, that teleportation would be a casual means of transportation. He was probably lucky that the jogger thought he was a streaking jaywalker of sorts instead of what he really was.

Kneeling between several fragrant bushes, he closed his eyes and began to concentrate. Within moments his consciousness slipped out of the confines of his body, appearing as an astral form. Through his astral perception, he glanced down at himself, kneeling and naked, and shook his head.

Embarrassing, he thought. Like those sci-fi robot movies. First I need to find some clothes. Doop said something about jumping off a few centuries before me, so he’s probably hidden my clothes in the past. Little jerk.

The astral projection rose into the sky, ascending several hundred feet above the park. From his new vantage point he could see the surrounding city of New Wavos, a sprawling metropolis that was easily twenty-square miles, possibly more. The architecture alone wowed him; several of the skyscrapers became wider as they got taller, and others were twisted amongst one another like huge knots were buildings took the place of ropes.

It was a spectacle he never thought he would live to see, but thanks to his premonition and his friend Doop's combined power, here he was. A thousand years from home.

And he was the only person alive that could save the mutant race.

"Go slam yourself!"

Rupert Slokhaven, Ru for short, grabbed the gravity ball out of midair as it sailed overhead. Despite the rest of his teammates being open to pass off to, Ru chose instead to hang onto the ball and drive it home himself. The offense, however, was slamming into him as hard as they could to dislodge the ball from his grasp.

It was a three-on-three pick-up game after school, and Ru wouldn't typically join in, but when he saw that Cassandra Morn'r was sitting in the hovering bleachers, how could he say no? She was hot and he had been trying to catch her attention since she transferred to New Wavos High School at the beginning of the semester.

The gravity ball was hard to hold onto. Ru found himself having trouble just carrying it around the other players, his own included. G-Ball had been designed to mimic the extremely outdated basketball, but with added elements of difficulty. With the saturation of extracurricular abilities, normal sports just didn't hold any interest for today's youth.

Ru was a senior and couldn't wait for graduation the following week. He was looking even more forward to the prom, and this might be his chance to ask Cassandra, provided that he could impress her first.

He finally escaped the long arms of the player immediately in front of him. The goal ring was in sight. He just needed to get by the other two, and he doubted that he could count on his teammates, whose names he didn't bother remembering.

Ru ran in low, gripping the gravity ball to his chest. The repulsors on the ball were firing, as if the ball was trying to pull itself away from him. The closer he got to the ring, the harder the repulsors fired.

One of the opposing players charged him, a smile on his face. He was so sure that he was going to tackle Ru, grab the ball, and have a clean run at the ring on the other side of the court. Ru had other ideas.

With a wink, Ru shifted into his beastly form, cutting his height in half. He kept one red, clawed hand on the ball, holding it tightly to his chest, and ran on his other three appendages right other the tackle the other player threw at him, which was now way too high. Ru's newly sprouted tail helped him keep balance as he sprinted.

“Fair play!” the last remaining player shouted. His arms unleashed themselves from his body, unraveling and extending to snap like whips around Ru. The lashing tendrils that had once been average arms slapped down onto Ru.

Except that he had dashed ahead faster than the other player had anticipated. In his beast form, which looked like a red-skinned demon from an old horror movie, Ru was faster, more agile, and stronger than the other players. He slipped under the arms easily and leapt into the air, guiding the gravity ball into the ring.

CHONG!

The ball punched through the hollow ring with a deafening noise, signaling the point and the end of the game. Ru stood on his hind legs, brushing off imaginary dust from his shoulder. With a quick mental command, his body morphed back into a teenager again, his charm and good looks all back in place again.

“This wasn’t a powers pick-up,” one of his pseudo-teammates said as he came over to pick up his gravity ball, which had switched off after going through the ring.

“No one told me,” Ru shot back, but he wasn’t paying attention to the players any longer. He was searching the stands for Cassandra. “Bro called fair play anyway.”

“Yeah, only because you would have scored if he hadn’t kicked on his own powers.”

“Uh, I *still* scored, even with his lame powers.”

The other teenager spouted off something at Ru, but he stopped listening. Where was Cassandra? She had to have seen his awesome moves. She had to be around here somewhere.

“Rupert Slokhaven?” someone said.

Ru casually waved the newcomer away without looking. Did Cassandra leave?

“No autographs,” Ru said absentmindedly. “I’m busy.”

“Mister Slokhaven, I need to have a word with you.”

“Slam off. I said I was—”

Ru’s entire body froze. He was paralyzed from head to toe and suddenly little bells were going off in the back of his head. He was in danger. Whoever this guy was that was bothering him he was bad news. He needed to shift and get out of here, quickly.

But his body wouldn't adjust to the mental command. He had shifted into his beastly form a million times before, but for some reason he couldn't. Something just wouldn't click in his brain.

"If you're wondering what's going on," the voice told him, "I'm blocking your neural pathway that lets you access your mutant ability. Sorry about the paralysis; a small side effect that I'm sure will wear off in a second. Please, I don't mean to hurt you, I just need to talk to you for a minute."

After a long moment, Ru could finally turn his head. He twisted and saw a good looking man, probably in his early thirties, wearing a standard-issue, gold bonding suit. Ru was seriously not in the mood to deal with the homeless today.

"Let me go," Ru muttered. "This is embarrassing."

"Cassandra left as soon as you started showboating," the stranger said. "Just hear me out for a second. It's really important that we talk."

"How did you...oh, you're a telepath, right? That figures. Or maybe psychometry. You obviously have some kind of rudimentary telekinesis down, too, holding me in place like this. Not freezy. And reading my mind? Illegal. Let me go."

"It's that obvious that I'm a mutant?" he asked.

"Obvious? Bro, two-thirds of the population are mutants. Did being homeless make you crazy, too?"

The stranger looked a little surprised. "Why do you think I'm homeless?"

"Duh, you're wearing a standard Richards. You obviously got it from one of the automated shelters. It's not like we can have homeless people walking around naked, despite the Live/Walk/Nude movement you enlightened crazies seem to think is a religion or something. Oh, is this how you recruit to your cause? I'm not buying today, bro. Let me go!"

The stranger glanced at the material of his suit. It had popped out of the kiosk at the self-help shelter his astral form had come across that morning and served its purpose, but apparently he would need to upgrade if he was planning on fitting in with society here.

"A standard Richards?" the stranger said. "Because it's made of unstable molecules? Reed invented that, right? Wow, I forgot all about him. It makes sense, though. Tough and durable clothing for the homeless, free of charge."

“Uh huh.” Ru was gaining more and more of his motor function back. “Look, just leave me alone and we’ll forget the whole thing, okay? Go convert someone else today. I’m not interested.”

“You’re in danger.”

“Yeah. From you. Right now.”

“No, no. You’ve been singled out by some seriously bad guys. You need to come with me.”

“Are you some kind of weird fanboy or something?” Ru shouted. “Look, it was just a movie, okay? I’m not really Jor the Boy Wizard, and that was like ten years ago. I don’t even act anymore.”

The stranger sighed. “I really didn’t want to have to do this.”

Ru grew tense again, but was unable to shift or even run away. His legs hadn’t come back around to his control yet, but they were almost there. He could feel his toes wiggling, desperate to spirit him away from this lunatic.

The stranger placed the palm of his hand against Ru’s forehead and everything went white.

Surrounded by the essence of time itself, flowing like a river.

Going back, back, back...

Years. Decades. Centuries.

Back to the beginning.

A mansion filled with kids trying to live peacefully, but always forced to confront terrible people doing terrible things.

Their way of life founded upon by one man’s dream.

Ru gasped in a breath, filling his lungs. He was sitting on the hovering bleachers, and the court was totally devoid of life except for the stranger beside him. No, not a stranger. Not anymore.

“Nathaniel Grey,” Ru blurted out when he locked gazes with the man. “That’s your name, right? Did you download your memories into my brain or something?”

Nate shook his head, tossing his locks over his eyes. He ran fingers through his hair, collecting the loose bangs. “Not exactly,” he replied. “More like I imported a portion of ideaspaces into your own memories. I sent your perceptions back in time, back to when the struggle for mutant rights was a very real thing.”

“On the mansion. I saw the name ‘Xavier.’ I remember that from history class. That was the actual Charles Xavier I saw with all those kids?”

“Yep.”

“Wow.” Ru looked blankly out at the court for a long moment. “And all that other stuff you showed me? About the mutant experiments that have been going on for hundreds of years? That was real?”

“Yep.”

“Wow.”

Ru took in a deep breath and felt very foolish. He had no idea that mutants, people like himself, were still in danger in today’s society. From what he had learned in school, mutants had become fully integrated with humanity generations ago. Xavier’s dream had come to fruition way before Ru had ever been born.

He had heard stories, of course. Read about things in history books. Things like the X-Men, the Mutant Registration Front, and the Worthington Accords. But it all seemed distant to him. He never had that kind of struggle.

Or any struggle really. He had been a child star. Led a privileged life. Never had to want for anything. Racism was so far removed from his life that it never even crossed his mind that he would be targeted because he was a mutant.

And now some secret society was going to try and use his own biology to create some kind of ultimate weapon.

“So,” Ru said quietly. “What do we do next?”

Nate smiled. “Now you trust me.”

“Sir, Subject BEAST has gone off the grid.”

A bulky figure twisted around to eye the low-level agent in his employ. The other dozen agents hooked into their altered-reality terminals went silent, knowing that this news would bring immediate rage to the man who not only paid them handsomely for their skills, but also had been known to dispose of those who failed him.

“Impossible,” he lashed out.

His massive frame was barely concealed by the white apron/coat he wore. His graying skin was only visible around his neck and face since he purposely chose to cover himself as much as possible; a downfall of his powers. His flesh, what little of it could be seen, was riddled with pock marks.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the agent replied. “I’ve adjusted for—”

“Genetic markers do not simply vanish. Expand the radius and compensate for viral infections. Perhaps our Mister Slokhaven has simply picked up a cold.”

The agent hesitated. He had already expanded the radius within his altered-reality womb, compensated for both viral and bacterial infections, and even reinitiated the genetic scanning process. The subject was simply no longer in New Wavos, or anywhere else in North Dakota for that matter.

Not wishing to update his employer further, the agent dutifully redid all of his efforts, this time as the bulky figure looked on. After a moment, the results were what he expected: negative.

“Impossible,” the man blurted out again.

“Mister Prosper, if I could—”

The behemoth of a man, Prosper, stepped down off of the central altar to the level of the agent and the other altered-reality technicians. He reached into the hard-light womb that comprised the agent’s workspace, ignoring the searing pain that he must be experiencing from such an act. Pain was fleeting for him; his powers made sure of that.

Snatching the hard-light control dial, Prosper adjusted the settings within the womb. As a result, information began to feed into the agent’s cerebral cortex at an alarming rate. The mind is a powerful processing tool, but even it has its limits.

Within seconds the agent suffered a hemorrhage in his frontal lobe and fell to the floor, dead. Prosper ignored the carcass at his feet, instead transfixed on the images that swam in front of him.

Replaying the captured reality segment of the subject in question from mere moments ago, Prosper saw something that actually surprised him. It was rare that he could be surprised, given his longevity. He thought he had seen it all.

“Nathaniel Grey,” he growled. “Interesting. I haven’t seen you for...how many centuries?”

Prosper scoffed and leapt back up to the central altar, watching Nate Grey approach his subject, scuffle with him, and somehow blink out of existence. He should have anticipated this, should have realized that Nate Grey would come back into his life at some point. Despite his efforts to be proactive, he was still succumbing to his natural reactive state.

Such was his fate, it seemed, burdened with incredible mutant abilities that allowed him to grow, adapt, and change in reaction to his surroundings and immediate needs. But as a reaction. Always after the fact.

Now he would have to react again.

He raised his voice, addressing all of his agents at once, saying, "Continue primary monitoring of your subjects, but adjust to real-time reality and include the profile markers that the now...*inactive* Agent 7 has in his womb. The added subject is Nathaniel Grey and is a threat to our efforts. Find him."

The dozen others contained within their own altered-reality wombs did as they were told, and a flurry of conversation again filled the room. Agents hollered active commands to their wombs, guiding their settings, as well as coordinating monitoring between shared wombs.

Mister Prosper regained his composure and crossed his arms behind his back. He was so close to his goal. It only made sense that someone would rise to oppose him. That was how the universe worked. He was actively bending the genetic future of an entire race.

It was only right that the universe would react to him, wasn't it?

But Nate Grey's presence was a reaction. Not a final ultimatum that would end his work. Just a reaction. An opposing force that needed to be overcome, and now that Mister Prosper knew that Grey was somehow snatching up his subjects he could react in his own way.

TO BE CONTINUED...

PRIME DIVISION

PART TWO

“For our honor!”

The gathered warriors behind the bellowing giant mimicked his battle cry, waving their stone weapons in the air. Their tribe had elected them as the strongest, the most cunning, and the most worthy to engage the monstrous enemies that lined their borders. Without them as a stalwart line of defense, the village just a few miles back would certainly perish.

They had braved the remarks of their relatives, braved the harsh travels to come here, and continued to brave the unforgiving environment of the Arctic Circle. They had given up pampered lifestyles and chosen to discover their roots as barbarian warriors, undergoing a pilgrimage and joining the few able to survive the journey in one of the deadliest locations on the planet.

Living in a frozen wasteland, battling the horrid monsters that sought to devour them, and fighting every moment for survival brought them closer to nature. The elements themselves would become their gods, and the universe their kin.

There was one among them that was whispered to be the next chieftain. He led their battle now, hefting his own self-made battleax with one hand, swinging it overhead with enough force to cleave a grown man.

Some were jealous, saying that his mutant heritage gave him an unfair advantage, and that the pilgrimage was nothing but a joke to him. After all, subzero temperatures were nothing to a man made of ice. How could he commune with nature, with the universe, when his mutant abilities kept him safe in situations that others had perished?

To his detractors he would simply show them the pelts of the beasts he had slain during his pilgrimage. While he could not help being born a mutant, and therefore protected from the cold elements, there was no denying that he had a warrior's spirit.

This lumbering giant of a man, whose body was composed entirely of ice, with a chiseled appearance like he had been carved by a true master artisan, charged forward in the name of his tribe to enjoy yet another ferocious battle.

His ax, a thing of beauty and generated solely from his mutant ice powers, swung deftly downward onto the head of the first monster. Red and green blood splashed across the

unforgiving white snow, the heat of which began melting the packed snow wherever it was spilled.

With a wordless roar, he cleaved straight through his quarry and then on to another, and another. His battle prowess was incredible and even those that rebuked him had to admit he was a natural born warrior.

The beasts, hybrid creatures that were truly mindless and sought for nothing more than the death of anything in their path, also rushed into the fray. Their black fur made them easy targets amongst the dunes of snow, and despite the two kids of blood pumping through their veins, they were base creatures that could be goaded into making mistakes easily. Seeing the giant warrior only enraged them more, as he was becoming known to them. The sight of an eight-foot tall man of ice was transcending from rumor to legend.

After almost an hour the fight was finally finished. The last monster fell with a final swoop of the huge ice ax, its head being liberated from its body. The behemoth held his battleax aloft and a cheer from the other warriors rose with it, congratulating themselves on another hunt well done.

When the heat of battle had cooled, another of the warriors dared approach the giant, saying, "Honor, Napl."

The ice giant, Napl, brought a massive fist to his chest, nodded at his comrade in arms, and replied, "Honor, Jorrod."

"A good hunt today. The skins we will bring back will surely be enough to keep any newcomers warm when they finish their pilgrimage."

"The monsters grow more daring," Napl replied. "This is the closest they have ventured to our village since I arrived. We need to expand our perimeter or risk being closed off from the world."

The warrior scoffed. "Would that be so bad, great Napl? The outside world has already forgotten us. They are too consumed by commercialism, altered-reality wombs, propaganda, and colonizing the Outer Rim planets. Here we are free." He spread his arms and turned slightly to face the open expanse of hectic, snow-covered terrain. "Here we are part of the very cosmos that chaotically birthed us."

Napl followed his fellow tribesman's gesture and agreed. While it was true that he had never felt like an outcast because of his mutant heritage, he had never felt at peace with society. When he learned of the Order of the Icebound as a teenager he knew instantly that was where he belonged.

He had undertaken the Great Pilgrimage alone, despite several offers from pilgrim organizations to pay his way, accompany him, guide him, and journey alongside him.

Some so-called prophets claimed that he was destined to lead the Icebound, that he had been born out of a need for the Icebound to become more than just a nomadic tribe.

He didn't feel like any kind of messiah. He just felt at home.

"Come," the warrior said. "Lend us your great strength in carrying these beasts back to the village. They make fine trophies, but even finer stew!"

Napl couldn't help but laugh, but the moment of brevity was short-lived. A flash of intense light brought his warrior's instincts to fruition once more and he found himself poised to leap at whatever danger had been mounted against him and his fellow Icebound.

Before them hovered a man with short brown hair, a glistening beacon of power emanating from his one eye. His presence marked him as a warrior, a leader, and someone in control. He floated a few feet off of the icy ground and there was a certain aura of importance surrounding him, as well as a physical one.

Beside him crouched a teenage boy, not yet quite a man, but so much more than a child. He was poised, ready to spring, and he looked far less confident than his companion.

His battleax at the ready, Napl faced the newcomers. "Hold!" he ordered, fearful this his fellow Icebound would assume that these people were a threat to them.

The floating man nodded. "Thanks," he said. He lowered himself down and extended his hand. "I'm Nate. I can assure you that we're not here for a fight."

"Then what are you here for?" Jorrod demanded. "This is a sacred place. You defile it, defile the Great Pilgrimage, by coming here. We removed all jump marks for a reason, intruder."

"Told you," the teen muttered.

Nate winced. "My apologies. Please, we just need to talk to him." He pointed at Napl.

Jorrod started to object again, but he was shocked to see Napl lower his ax. The great warrior and rumored leader of their tribe was doing the unimaginable: he was lowering his defenses. For what reason could he possibly allow these total strangers to have the upper hand? What made them so special?

"I have meditated on top of the True North," Napl finally said. "This day was foretold. I will hear what they have to say."

“He means the North Pole,” the teen whispered to Nate. “These guys are fanatics, like I told you. They think that the Earth’s axis, where the magnetic pull is strongest, is sort of like holy ground or something.”

“Nap!” Jorrod exclaimed. “You...you journeyed to the True North? How dare you—”

“Silence,” Napl said calmly, but with his broad chest and booming voice it came out as a command. “It is not for you to deny me the sanctity of communion with the True North. I have seen a vision there, a vision of this man coming to me.”

“This is sacrilege!”

“This is destiny,” Napl responded.

The ice giant stepped forward, his almost brick-like façade calm and emotionless. He stood before the pair, looking Nate directly in the eye. A long moment passed between them, with just a shrill wind separating them.

Finally, Nate said, “Ru tells me that you’re completely devoted to the Order of the Icebound.”

Napl glanced at the teen beside them. “This is true.”

“Would this devotion keep you from helping us, and in turn and all mutants around the world?”

“The Icebound seek communion with our base selves, what society would be without technology, procrastination, and self-indulgence. Only here, in the Arctic Circle, is there still a place on Earth secluded from these things. The Great Pilgrimage teaches those who survive it that we can still live without desire. Without demand.”

“Can you leave this place?” Nate asked. “Your people’s name suggests not.”

Napl grunted. “I have undertaken the Pilgrimage, communed with the True North, and sought my place in the world. These were but steps in my journey. If my vision holds true, you are to show me the next path to take.”

Nate maintained his gaze with Napl, allowing an unspoken bond to form between them. This trust kept the warrior-born mutant from a normal hostile reaction to Nate placing his palm upon his forehead. The smooth icy surface of Napl’s head chilled Nate’s hand, but he kept in place while he showed Napl the next path.

*A plan generations in the making.
Five figures from around the globe coming together.
The achievement of something catastrophic.*

After a moment, they broke contact and Napl took a step back, surprised. Jorrod leapt forward.

“You have assaulted our brother!” Jorrod shouted. Cries of protest from the other hunters came up behind him.

Napl raised a hand to steady them. “No! I have seen this man’s soul, and he poses no threat to us. He only wants to correct a horrible mistake that he wasn’t even responsible for. I...I will go with him to aid in his quest.”

“Napl, you must not—”

“Jorrod,” the ice giant said. “The Icebound cannot place their hopes for leadership on me. It does not fall into place with my destiny. You of all people, who left an empire to undertake the Great Pilgrimage because you believed it to be your calling, can appreciate my choice.”

Jorrod was dumbstruck, shocked that his fellow warrior, his friend, would betray him like this. But was it betrayal? Jorrod Stark had walked away from his family’s corporations to find himself with the Icebound. There were protests when he stepped down from the Board of Directors, but his brothers and sisters were more than capable, and he had felt that his destiny lay in the Arctic Circle.

He would be a hypocrite to tell Napl, a warrior he had trusted time and again, that he was wrong.

Jorrod smiled. “It pains me to see you leave,” he said.

Napl brought his fist to his chest, saying, “Honor.”

The ice giant turned back to Nate and the teenager, who was bouncing up and down in the low temperature in a failing attempt to stay warm. “Can we get back on the ship, please?” Ru asked. “I’m freezing my claws off down here.”

Nate smirked. “Are you ready?” he asked Napl.

The ice giant nodded once, and in another flash, they were gone.

“Subject BEAST resurfaced, sir, but only briefly.”

Mister Proposer sneered as he looked over the shoulder of his agent, taking in the information from the altered-reality womb. His eyes went wide when he realized where his subject had appeared again, however momentarily.

“The Arctic Circle?” Prosper exclaimed. He whirled around on his altar, grabbing the shoulder of another agent. “Did you—”

“Ah...yes! Yes, sir! I’m sorry; I missed it before, but I see it now. The magnetic fields that close to the North Pole...I’m sorry, I didn’t recognize the genetic marker right away. Subjects BEAST and ICEMAN were in the same vicinity, sir.”

With a roar of aggravation, Prosper ripped the agent from his altered-reality scenario, instantly disengaging his senses and lower brain functions from the womb. The agent was instantly braindead, his body flapping in Prosper’s powerful grasp.

With disgust, Prosper let the agent drop to his feet on the altar. He rubbed his hand on his robe, as if to cleanse himself of the worthless lackey. Two of his underlings removed the corpse, taking it to the recycling incinerator where they had placed the last agent that had failed their master, the one who had lost Rupert Slokhaven in the first place.

Prosper could sense his agents’ timid apprehensiveness. They had cause to be scared. When he had first grown these agents he had initially programmed them without emotion, thinking it would cloud their loyalty. However, he quickly realized that fear was a powerful motivator. Therefore, while these agents were little more than lab-grown cannon fodder they still feared failing him.

And failure was not an option. Not now that he was so close to the culmination of generations of work. What started as an innocent project to map the mutant genome had now resulted in the next evolutionary phase. The genetic keys were hidden within several dozen candidates, two of which had now been taken from him.

Taken by Nathaniel Grey.

As much as it despised him, it was time. He couldn’t afford for any more of his subjects to be removed from their central environments, and it was key that they remained in their chosen environments. The research of nature versus nurture in regards to genetic development was indisputable. Just one more generation of breeding and the realization of mutant potential would be upon him.

It was time to call his Brotherhood.

He pressed a hard-light toggle on his altar and an instant connection was established with his two cohorts. Their torsos were simulated in real-time, hovering above the altar. A man and a woman, two powerful beings he pretended to trust, looked down on him with pleasant surprise.

“Prosper!” the woman exclaimed. “I have anticipated this call.”

“What have you to report?” the man demanded.

The woman, a blonde and extremely thin mutant who called herself Parish Black, looked as ghastly as always. Her stretched, paper-thin lips made her smile look like it took all of her strength just to feign interest in him. She took pleasure in making herself seem superior to others.

The man, a chiseled specimen of human perfection, was very much her opposite. He had a dark beard and called himself Crown, but Mister Prosper knew who he really was. Crown was pompous and often seemed to rival Prosper's position within their little triad to try and gain control. Crown had no idea that Prosper had discovered what a weak, pathetic fool he had been before his mutant abilities reshaped his body, making him look like a god amongst men.

Both Parish Black and Crown had their own organizations and their own agendas running. However, a few years ago they had realized that their interests crossed paths more often than not, hence the formation of their loose Brotherhood. Prosper did not trust them, but he could use them.

"Two of my subjects have been taken," Prosper said. "I wish for you to find them."

Crown laughed. "Oh, this is magnificent," he said. "Your little project is so close to complete and you go and lose two prospects. I told you that you should have folded your operations into mine. This never would have happened had my teams been overseeing things."

"Our help comes at a price," Parish Black added. "Using our resources to help you means our own endeavors will be stalled."

"I don't want your people," Prosper said. "I want you. Personally."

Crown's laughter deepened. "Insanity! I wouldn't sully my hands with—"

"You will when you hear the name of the man who abducted my subjects," Prosper shot back. "Nathaniel Grey."

The laughter stopped. Parish Black's eyes went wide the way a hungry predator looks upon its weak prey, anticipating the taste of its upcoming kill. "My dear Mister Prosper," she finally whispered. "You should have led with that. Send me the data and I will personally locate that pitiful mutant shaman."

"What a mess you've caused," Crown said. "Grey surfacing now means all of our operations are at risk. What did you do to bring him back?"

"I did nothing!" Prosper blurt out. "How dare you accuse me of causing this disruption in our plans. Grey and that ridiculous companion of his, Doop, haven't been seen for centuries. He obviously chronoported here and now he's taken two of my subjects."

“Indeed.” Crown’s torso turned to face that of Parish Black. “My dear, I will join you shortly so that we can fix the problem this fool has dropped at our feet. Please make the necessary preparations.”

“I’ll send you the data I have,” Prosper said. “When you have located Grey, I will—”

“You’ll do nothing,” Crown scolded. “It’s what you’re good at after all. Black and I will handle this. Do what you can to secure your other subjects.”

The projections of their torsos vanished, but not before Parish Black shot Prosper one last condescending glance. It took all of Prosper’s control not to smash his own altar.

A flash of light deposited three people firmly in orbit around the Earth. Nate Grey, now used to the teleportation, took a few steps forward into familiar surroundings. Ru Slokhaven, still trying to keep his stomach from upheaving his lunch, crouched down and tried not to fall over completely.

Napl didn’t have much of a reaction to the teleportation, perhaps because his physical body didn’t have organic components like Ru’s did. He took everything in, appraising his new location.

The large open space was filled with a nearly silent hum, caused by a combination of the air compressors shifting breathable atmosphere through the facility and the older technology keeping them aloft. Monitors and terminals, centuries old by current standards, lined most of the walls. The center of the room had a rotating support pillar that likely ran the length of the structure and provided the gravity on board the ship.

“Where have you brought me?” Napl asked.

“Welcome to the *Xavier*,” Nate replied. “We’re about forty miles above the Earth’s surface, compressed between dimensional spectrums. My friend and I launched this satellite station around, oh, I guess 2760.”

“Between dimensions?”

“Dimensional spectrums, yes.” Nate made his way to the closest terminal and called up a hologram display, showing what Napl assumed was a schematic of the facility they currently occupied. Surrounding it were two holographic planes, which then pressed against one another to coat the facility between them. “Easier to hide from prying eyes that way. I placed the *Xavier* in orbit for us, then went back a little more than 700 years, picked up supplies and ran an errand, and then came here for the both of you.”

“2760,” Napl commented. “That was almost 300 years ago. How could you have anticipated a need for this place? Or that you would need to find me?”

"In much the same way that I shared my own visions with you. I'm not a time traveler by nature. It was a necessity for this particular mission. Combining my abilities with my friend, who calls himself Doop, I was able to get a lot of this set up for us. And we're going to need it."

"I forgot to ask," Ru cut in. "Where is this Doop guy?"

"Probably living it up a few hundred years ago. He said once we got the *Xavier* up and running that I was on my own. I'll catch up with him eventually, I'm sure. He's not the kind of guy that can stay hidden for long." Nate closed up the hologram hovering between them and went to the closest viewport. "We can see Earth and the surrounding space, but no one else can see us. I think. I needed a sanctuary to gather all of you."

"Because of this catastrophe you showed my mind's eye?" Napl inquired.

Nate nodded. "In my travels in the 21st century I uncovered a project to map the mutant genome. It was actually completed by the time I heard about it and was too late to stop what happened next. The knowledge was out there and people, lots of them, were racing toward unlocking the hidden potential of the mutant genome. Some of the pursuits were noble, like stopping mutant plaques before they could strike or curing cancer. But the nobility stops there."

"Figures," Ru said as he reclined in a floating chair.

"I learned that some of the people that got ahold of this knowledge planned to use it to create a mutant more powerful than even the Omega class. A mutant so powerful that its very existence was a danger to humanity. This single evolved mutant powerhouse, known as *homo maxima*, would be unlike anything seen before."

"A mutant messiah," Napl said.

"Some thought so. Others just saw a potential weapon. In your time, mutants have been accepted worldwide. Long ago, a team of mutants served as watchdogs for this kind of thing, but a paramilitary group of mutants was seen as counter-intuitive to gaining acceptance."

"Like they told us in history class," Ru said. "For the last couple hundred years mutants have honed their skills through government programs to great success. In vitro testing anticipates the mutant needs and families are given everything they need to have a healthy, natural birth. Half the world population has mutant genes."

"Exactly. The war for inclusion was won a long time ago. But with the realization of that dream, the need for certain oversight went away, too. Now we have a mutant crisis already underway and no one to stop it."

"That is why you need us," Napl stated.

“That’s why I need you, plus a few more. Both of you were being targeted because of your genetic code. Somewhere inside your chromosomes lies the keys to realizing the birth of *homo maxima*. Maybe not any time soon, but you’re definitely part of the plan that’s been going for a thousand years.”

Napl asked, “And you learned this from a vision?”

“Some of it. The rest I learned a few hundred years ago when I encountered this man in the course of my investigation.”

With another terminal command, a hologram displaying a muscular man wearing a white apron/coat condensed into view. His graying skin and pock-marked face looked ancient, despite the fact that his body was obviously in excellent shape.

“Holograms,” Ru said with a snicker. “Too cute. It’s like a baby’s toy.”

“This,” Nate said with a quick look at Ru, “is Mister Prosper. He’s a mutant with the ability to reactively evolve his body. Punch him in the jaw and his skin will harden, he’ll grow spikes where he was hit, and he’ll counter with equal strength of the blow. He’s headlining this thing, but he has partners, too. He’s the one that’s been monitoring your genetic code from afar.”

Napl nodded. His bulky body, which sublimated a cool, white fog around his feet, looked out of place in the large space station. He was obviously out of his element, but he did not let his warrior’s spirit become fatigued. He took the information from Nate and digested it, looking at Ru with curiosity.

“I recognize you. A film star.” Ru winked and shot Napl with finger guns. Napl continued, “You have joined this cause?”

Ru shrugged. “Look, if Nate here showed you the same thing he showed me, then you know that there’s no way I can go back to the way life was. Not with some creep monitoring me, hoping I father the mutant messiah.”

“Then I am joined to the cause as well,” Napl said. He hefted his battleax. “Tell us, Grey. What is the next step we are to take on this path?”

“We have a few more recruits to pick up,” Nate answered. “Three, to be precise. But you can be sure that if we weren’t on Prosper’s radar before, we certainly are now. This is going to get hard. And dangerous. Any questions?”

Ru raised his hand. “Yeah. What’s radar?”

TO BE CONTINUED...

PRIME DIVISION

PART THREE

“Prosper is an imbecile.”

Parish Black looked up from her tentacle-inspired throne. Styled after the great sea serpents of old, which had been recreated on Neptune in recent years as a tourist attraction, the luscious chair served as both her altered-reality womb and her sanctuary. The confines of her office remained ever dark, as she preferred, with the only light emanating from the throne itself.

She had built her corporation on keen insight and ruthless action. Her first hostile takeover had resulted in a landmark case that helped usher economic development into new territory. One hundred and seventy floors above street level, in the upper echelon of New York City’s prestigious Nu Market, Parish Black ruled an empire.

“Is that jealousy, Crown?” she replied with a smirk of her paper-thin lips. “I would have thought by now that you such things were beneath you. You know as well as I do that Mister Prosper has his uses to us.”

“And his detriments,” Crown countered. “His inability to retain control over his own lab rats has left us in the lurch.”

Parish Black rose from her throne, tracing her fingers over Crown’s immaculate dark beard, feeling a hint of his chiseled chin beneath. “His folly will entitle us to more control of his projects, don’t you think?”

“How so?”

“We bail him out in exchange for greater access to his research. We reverse engineer his progress, take over monitoring of the subjects, and soon enough Prosper will be gone from our little Brotherhood.”

“Surely he will anticipate that. The little snake can adapt to any situation, metaphorically as well as literally.”

She slithered on two rail-thin legs to the shadowed confines of her spacious office. As she approached, the darkness seemed to part, revealing a maelstrom of activity. The privacy that the cloud offered her office kept the loud work happening just a dozen feet away totally silent. It allowed her to be near the action without actually being a part of it, which she typically hated.

To fix Prosper's mistake, however, she would gladly become directly involved.

"Robex!" she hollered, commanding the attention not only of the busy floor packed with technicians, but one in particular. She had no idea what the technician's actual name was, choosing to instead call him by his role.

Several dozen employees were meticulously searching for Nathaniel Grey, a man who had plagued Parish Black and her comrades more than once in the past. Now that he had resurfaced, all corporate development had stopped in an effort to find him. The cloud had served to separate the maelstrom of research from Black, but a common misconception about her power was that she controlled the darkness.

There had been many mutants with either influence over shades or access to the Darkforce Dimension. Parish Black's particular power set stemmed from the singularity in her brain. She could easily manipulate all light and sound in her immediate area, causing a dead zone to surround her, which she often preferred. In addition, she had limited gravitational abilities.

The technician, a machine-hybrid Robex, approached his mistress. "I can report a dimensional fold detected approximately forty-two miles above the Earth's surface," he said.

Her rake-like fingers touched the Robex's metallic cheek. "Excellent," she replied. "Send the data to my office and then close the line. I want no disturbances."

The Robex bowed and then retreated back into the organized chaos alongside his fellow technicians. Crown remained in place as the cloud closed up again, once more casting them into total darkness, although he looked ready to burst.

As she slid back into her throne, the data came across her display. "Prosper may be able to adapt easily enough," she said. "But despite his proclamations, he is not a futurist. He has tunnel vision. He will never see our betrayal coming."

She watched as the data revealed a possible location for Grey: between dimensional spectrums in the stratosphere there appeared to be some kind of vessel. She smiled, knowing that by the time Grey realized that he had been found it would be too late.

"I'm telling mom!"

Danni Jan slammed against the front door of her home in the suburbs of Victor Hills, which pushed the borders of Latveria. She was furious; even for her brother, this was low. Having only run from the jump mark at the end of their front yard to the door, Danni wasn't even winded, but it was her brother's threat that was making her breath hard.

Why couldn't he have just gotten detection after school like he normally did? Why did he have to torture her?

From the other side of the freshly slammed door, her brother said, "I'll have this all over the Web before mom even jumps home."

Danni smashed her fist against the door, but it was no use. Her brother, Jace, had locked it and was leaning against it from the other side. She debated about blasting the door off with her ocular powers, but knew that mom would scream at her until it was fixed.

So, she settled for another aspect of her mutant abilities: x-ray vision. Danni's eyes were able to emit a wide spectrum of radiation, allowing her to not only unleash blasts of deadly force, but also view the astral plane, watch radio waves, and even see through solid objects.

By concentrating, an arc of red energy connected her pupils and the solid door became translucent, enabling her to see her brother Jace on the other side. She watched him busily uploading a vid of her kissing Maxum Wendigo to the Web, which was instant of course. But now he was taking it a step further by loading it to her personal page and the school's portal.

Hectic, her eyes darted back and forth, hoping to find some semblance of hope. Then she saw his lower back and smiled.

"Pull it down now, or I'm telling mom that you activated another implant without her permission!"

She saw Jace freeze, his finger hovering over his wristband. "What?" he mumbled.

"Your lower back, just under your wings," Danni quickly said. "You installed something. It looks like an inhibitor or maybe a capacitor. Mom's going to go thermal when she finds out. You know you aren't allowed to mess with your powers like that. She's going to kill you."

Jace unconsciousness reached around to his back, feeling where the metal met flesh near the base of his spine. He had just installed the component last night and hadn't told anyone, which meant that his sister must be—

"Ew!" he shouted. "Don't use your x-ray vision on me, you pervert!"

"Pull it down, Jace! I'm serious!"

With a sigh, he said, "Fine." He quickly entered the commands to remove it from the Web, although he noted with a sneer that it already had seventy-three hits. He pushed off of the door and unlocked it, allowing his sister access to their home.

The first thing she did when she got it was slap him on the back of the head. “You jerk!” she shouted. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Why Maxum?” he responded. “That guy is terrible. You know he picked on my when we were kids.”

“You *still* act like a kid. At least Maxum grew up. Get over it.”

“Uh huh.” Jace turned away, but paused, looking over his shoulder. “Hey, don’t tell mom, okay?”

“Fine.” She was busy looking at the school portal to make sure that Jace hadn’t left the vid up. When Jace stomped off she looked at him again, this time without activating her powers.

Her fraternal twin brother was a little taller than she was and built like an athlete, but she had no idea if that was because he had put in the work or just augmented his body. Like her, Jace was a mutant, but his power was a lot more compelling.

Jace loved to tinker with machines. They were both history fanatics, but while Danni focused on specific eras and the historical importance of politics and world events, Jace was heavily influenced by bygone and theoretical technology. His favorite was steampunk-inspired devices and perpetual motion machines.

The beauty was in the simplicity he would tell her. Their modern society was based on such high-concept science that it might as well have been magic, despite the fact that most school districts had quantum physics in their pre-high school curriculum. Sure, they understood why their modern technology worked, but not really how it functioned. It was like the way you understand that wood burns if you light it on fire, but not in the same way if you understand the principle of combustion.

So, it shouldn’t have been too much of a surprise when Jace’s mutant ability kicked in when he was thirteen years-old. He was designing a pair of metal wings as a Halloween costume, but when he put them on, they merged with his nervous system.

At first terrified, Jace wanted to go to the nearest UrgiSurgeon and have them removed. Running to the jump mark at the end of the yard, however, something amazing happened: he flew.

Jace took off into the clouds, rising quickly and at an unimaginable speed. After the initial panic wore off, Danni and their mother were stunned to see him swoop back down from them, laughing and smiling like he rarely did. He never even thought about surgery after that and they still remained fixed to his back.

His power allowed him to merge technology with his nervous system, making the technology an extension of himself. He still preferred to use outdated technology, saying that simple machines integrated better. Anything with its own power source caused a feedback loop and gave him unbearable migraines, so no teleporters or laser arms for Jace. Instead he had his wings, which he tinkered with still, as well as a variety of gadgets installed along his appendages.

Their mother had forbade him to make any more installations until he graduated, though. She didn't want her son's body covered in tech, making him unrecognizable.

She knew that he always felt like an outsider. Not because he was a mutant; acceptance had been accomplished centuries before they were born. His personality never really seemed to fit in with her friends or their classmates. He preferred to work alone, hang out by himself, and only interact with her and their mother when it was necessary.

She sighed, thinking once again that she would just never understand her brother.

The hallmark sound of the jump mark activating outside caught her attention. She glanced at a clock; it was a little early for her to come home. Maybe something happened at the office today. She recalled their mother mentioning something about shifts in the Nu Market Exchange having a ripple effect in Latveria.

She pulled the front door open again and took a step forward, shocked by what she saw. Not only was this strange man not her mother, but she recognized him. This had to be some kind of weird joke.

Using her mutant abilities, she scanned him. Aside from an astral aura, there was no sign of a cloaking unit or other disguising holograms that would cover up who this person really was. For all intents and purposes, he looked like the genuine article.

When he came closer, he reached out his hand. "Hi, I'm—"

"Nate Grey," Danni blurted, and then words started to tumble out of her open mouth. "You're Nate Grey. Your codename was X-Man, Shaman of the Mutant Tribe. Your parents were, holy crap, Scott Summers and Jean Grey! You were last seen in the 28th century...I think. Wow. WOW! What are you doing here?"

"You...uh, you know who I am?"

Danni grabbed his hand and pulled him into her home, shutting the door behind him so that he couldn't escape. If he was actually Nate Grey then this was a once in a lifetime experience.

“Of *course* I know who you are! I’m completely obsessed with the Mutant Age. You know, the late 20th century? I plan on writing my dissertation on the socioeconomic impact of mutants in that era. WOW!”

“You’re Danni Jan, right?” She nodded at him eagerly. “Good. Uh...good! I’m sorry about coming here like this, but...you don’t seem very surprised.”

“Are you? Don’t you have precognitive abilities?”

Nate smirked. “Yes, but on more of a grand scale kind of thing than simple interactions.”

Danni faux-smacked her forehead, but her widening smile never faltered. “Right, of course. Obv.”

“Right...so, I was hoping to talk to you and your brother about something.”

“WOW! Are you here to recruit us? This is just like in the history vids. Is this an X-Men thing? Are you on a secret mission to save the world? Do you need me and my brother to beat on the bad guys?”

“Uh...yes?”

Danni’s jaw dropped open even further. “Shut up!” She leaned in closer to Nate. “I learned that from my research. Didn’t you people used to tell each other to ‘shut up’ all the time? And you had some kind of obsession with the word ‘like’ I think. Is that right? WOW! I have the perfect outfit for this. Hold on!”

Before Nate could gather his wits and understand what Danni was shouting at him, she had turned and slid up a ramp to the upper part of the house. He could hear her rummaging through something, boxes or drawers perhaps, and within another few moments she had appeared at the top of the slide again.

Still standing, she slid down casually and waved a blue and yellow suit at him. “See?” she shouted. “I replicated the design, only for me. I mean, for a girl. I am such a huge fan of your dad!”

Nate took half a step back so that he could see what she was holding, and his eyes went wide. It was an exact copy of the X-Men uniform his father from this dimension had been wearing when they had first met. The majority of the suit was blue, but highlighted by a yellow visor, a yellow web belt, and yellow gloves.

“Isn’t it perfect!” Danni said. “I have so much in common with your dad. With Cyclops, I mean. But you probably know that. Why else would you be here?”

“...and for your brother, too. I need his help.”

“Right. Jace. You need his help, too. But are you sure? He’s not exactly cut out to be an X-Man. Not like me. OH! I used the word ‘like’ in a sentence! Was that okay? Did I use it right?”

Before Nate could catch his breath and try to explain the situation any further, a shadow crossed over the hallway that led to the back of the residence. Sprawling metal wings had been folded up as much as possible, which caught Nate’s attention first. He traced the wings to their owner, Jace, who stood watching him with one eyebrow raised.

“I heard my name,” Jace said as he took a bite out of a purple apple. “You need something?”

It had taken nearly an hour for Nate to get through his explanation back on board the *Xavier*. Jace had argued with him about his valid concerns over their safety just as much as Danni had been curious about the overall mission. For as enthusiastic as Danni was, Jace was equally sceptic.

But, Nate knew that was appropriate. Even after he had shared his vision with the twins, it had taken some time for them to accept what he was showing them as the truth. With the support of Ru and Napl, he had them convinced that they were safest on board the space station, hidden between the folds of reality.

He had one more mutant to focus on, and it would arguably be the hardest. Since coming to this time period, Nate had ventured to the Midwest of the United States, the frozen Arctic Circle, and back around the world to a prosperous Latveria. For his last stop, he and he only could try and make the connection with the wayward mutant.

Faith Brannon had been born with fantastic telekinetic powers. In a rare case when mutant abilities manifested prior to puberty, several times while still in her mother’s womb Faith had telekinetically shoved objects across the room.

Startled that their unborn child could be dangerous, her parents sought professional help. Turning to the Association of Divination for Medicine, a collection of hedge mages with board-certified medical practices, they hoped to commune with their unborn child and help teach her to control her abilities subconsciously.

The séance failed and they lost the baby in the process.

However, Faith, as they named her, had only lost her physical form. While the fetus did indeed miscarry, the spirit of their mutant daughter lived on as part of the astral plane. Unable to communicate with her parents, or anyone else, Faith wandered along the astral territory for nearly eighteen years, condemned to observe a skewed version of the world for eternity.

Hovering over Northern Ireland, the place of her conception, Nate Grey closed his eyes and concentrated. He allowed his body to rest while his mental powers projected his astral form out into the world. Liberated from the physical form, Nate began his search for Faith.

He had felt her presence immediately upon arriving in this time period, but knew that reaching her would be the most difficult of the five mutants he had planned to recruit. Faith had never known the physical world and would undoubtedly be fearful of anything from it. He wondered what his life would have evolved into had his perceptions only been limited to the nightmarish and ever-changing landscape of the astral plane.

As soon as he crossed over he felt her. She had remained close to this part of the world, or at least the part that intersected with her version of the world. Swirling colors replaced the skyline and beneath him the island looked blackened, as if scorched.

“Faith!” he called out, pushing with his words his very essence. Communication on the astral plane was more a facsimile than anything else.

The air rippled in front of him and there she stood. Long flowing hair cascaded down her naked shoulders and Nate nearly wept. Never before had he seen such beauty. Her presence was more than physical; in this place it was a concept. Faith wasn’t so much a person as she was an ideal, or the embodiment of emotion.

He felt her communicate back to him, but not with words. She bombarded him with images and he felt himself fill with curiosity, but not his curiosity. It was hers. She was forcing her own concern, in a sense a portion of herself, into his aura. She was actually mingling her perceptions with his astral form...and it felt incredible.

He had planned for this and was ready. Instead of allowing her perceptions to freely mingle with his essence, he instead shut her out. A mental door snapped shut and she backed away, offended and perhaps even hurt. This was a new experience for her.

But he was prepared. He began to expel his own knowledge base for her, leaving it float freely between them. She perceived what it was that he offered, but was hesitant. He knew she would be. This would be the hardest part. He would have to rely on her trust in a total stranger, her own *faith* as it were, to accept the cloud of knowledge he had expunged for her to absorb.

He could see the distress in her eyes. She reached out to the cloud, touching it, allowing a smidgeon of ideas access to her conceptual core, and then yanked her hand back. He wondered if it had hurt her, but when she eagerly reached back for more he relaxed.

Her body arched back as the cloud melded with her form and for the first time in her non-life, Faith screamed. Her mouth opened and garbled words spilled out, twisting and turning until they began to form sounds, and then actual meaning accompanied them.

After what seemed like an eternity, the cloud was gone, consumed by the hungry mutant. She smiled and Nate and said, "Is this real?"

He smiled back, saying, "It is. And it's going to get a whole lot better. Just take my hand."

The issue of trust was now forever gone. Haven't saturated herself in Nate's knowledge, she knew who he was, what his intentions were, why he was here with her, and even what his favorite foods were. She anxiously took his hand and was shocked for the second time that time at what happened next.

Back in the real world, the astral plane left behind them, Nate Grey opened his eyes once more. Beside him was a glowing corporeal body of beauty, that of Faith Brannon.

She brought her hands to her face and felt tears on her newly formed cheeks. It wasn't flesh that she felt, only a psionic representation. Nate had succeeded in generating a psionic form for Faith to inhabit, which was now under her total control. She looked glorious and Nate felt like he might weep again.

"I...I am alive!" Faith shouted as she soared above Nate. With her arms outspread, she relished in the new physical feeling of the air rushing over her. In her eighteen years of existence, never before had she felt the warm sun on her face.

Nate rose through the sky to join her. "You were always alive, Faith," he said. "I just helped you out a bit. Feeling good?"

"Oh, yes! I feel incredible!" She suddenly stopped short, halting her flight and bringing her hand to her mouth. "Nate! We have your mission to undertake. We must leave at once."

Nate smiled and shook his head. "It's okay. We have a little time to do something more important first."

Taking her by the hand, Nate guided Faith back down toward Northern Ireland, no longer the blackened astral version, but the real physical one. They slowed their speed as they approached a small village and began to see roads and hillsides in their intricacy.

With Faith, he now had everyone he needed to ensure that his upcoming mission was a successful one. These five new mutants, these soon to be ordained X-Men, were going to change the world.

"Where are you taking me?" Faith inquired.

“The mission can wait for now,” Nate replied. “First, before you do anything else, it’s long past time for you to meet your parents.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

PRIME DIVISION

PART FOUR

“Are you sure about this?”

Nate Grey glowed dimly as he hovered over his new charges. This new era of X-Men, this first class of hopeful mutants, looked up to him for the guidance that he had promised them. They were in danger and until he had found them were also under the watchful eye of a power-hungry organization.

He cleared his throat, thinking this through carefully. It was his first time leading a group like this and he didn't want to get them all killed.

“Yes, Faith,” he replied. The young woman, herself an astral projection squeezed into a psionic body, smiled at him. “According to what I learned a few centuries ago, this is where the main repository is housed for the organization that's been working toward *homo maxima*.”

“Can't we call the authorities on them?” Ru asked. He was huddled behind an antenna array along with the rest of the team.

“With what evidence?” Nate responded. “Even in this advanced society I doubt that anyone would believe I'm a time-hopping mutant shaman that stumbled across a shadow cabinet of bad guys trying to manipulate the genetic futures of a select group of mutants.”

“We believe you,” the mountainous Napl stated. He towered over the others, but didn't care that he could be seen from multiple angles on the rooftop. “Simply share with them the vision you shared with us.”

Crouched beside Ru, but barely able to keep his wings hidden from view, Jace said, “They would just accuse him of telepathic tinkering. Something I still think is possible.”

“No WAY!” his sister, Danni, said. “Nate here is the real deal.”

“Says you,” Jace shot back.

“Everyone,” Nate said as he raised his hand to try and calm them. “I appreciate that you have all trusted me even this far. I've asked a lot, like leaving your friends and family behind. Over the last week we've avoided detection from the group that wants to control your futures. Now we're ready to strike back and reclaim your own destinies. Let's not kill our chances of success by arguing, okay?”

Napl, if it was possible, stood a little taller at Nate's interjection. The others all either nodded silently or mumbled their approval.

"Good," Nate continued. "Our first mission is simple: break in, destroy the data center, and break out. The information will undoubtedly be backed up somewhere, but this is where the active research is stored. It won't really hamper them, but it will draw them out into the open. This is the first step. You each have your assignments. Ready? Okay – let's go!"

The mutants paired off as they had planned. One hundred and ten floors above street level, on top of the Fujikawa International building in New Wavos, North Dakota, the all-new and all-different X-Men were poised to undertake their first mission.

The city itself was known as a technological center for the entire world, with huge tech companies basing the majority of their operations there. Stark's familial conglomeration of companies even had manufacturing plants there. Amongst the towers of commerce, the team burst off into the night, keeping their primary target in sight.

The target, a sphere-shaped building on the east side of the city, was a nexus of information. The company that owned it, Allied World Access, was a shell company according to Nate. His past experiences had shown him that the company specialized in data mining and cross-referral business development. Basically, two other companies would house select data with Allied World Access, who would then cross-reference and sort the data to allow the two companies to better integrate their business networks.

That was how they sold their services anyway. The truth was that the Brotherhood had long ago established the data mining operation as a way to further extract sensitive data for their own purposes and continue to monitor the mutants targeted for their genetic plan. With the data harvested here, the Brotherhood could keep close tabs on their subjects.

There were six X-Men total, half of which were fliers. Nate had arranged their approach so that each flier would be able to carry in one non-flier to complete their assigned task, reasonably making it easier for extraction.

Nate aligned himself with Ru, who had already shifted into his beastly state. Gone was the arrogant teenager that was recognizable through his childhood star days, replaced by a red-skinned, ferocious, agile creature. With his telekinesis, Nate simply levitated Ru and rocketed down toward the structure.

Likewise, Faith used her telekinetic abilities to raise the massive Napl off of the rooftop. Despite his size, the icy giant seemed to be an easy challenge for the newly corporeal astral woman. They gave pursuit to Nate and Ru, easily keeping pace.

"Don't drop me," Danni said to her brother.

Jace stood up and extended his metal wings, revealing an impressive wingspan. The rudimentary tech was melded to his nervous system, making the wings literal extensions of himself. He would have total mastery over his trajectory in the air, but this was his first time carting a passenger.

“Don’t worry,” he said, although he looked deadly serious when he spoke. “I installed that motivator yesterday, remember? You’ll be fine.”

Danni stood up and held out her arms. “Seriously. If you kill me mom will kill you.”

Jace bent at the knees and then sprung up in the air, flipping retractable claws off of his forearms. The metal constructs covered his real hands like an exoskeleton, and thanks to his mutant ability, were also now tied to his nervous system. He clasped them safely around Danni’s wrists and lifted them off into the night.

The building was a massive data center, updating in real-time via the Web to back-up nebulas. Nate knew that trying to take out their repository in one night was insanity, but disrupting their data flow would be a step in the right direction. To do that, they needed to take out the three interlinking nodes at the exact same time.

Three nodes. Three teams about to be in perfect sync with each other.

Nate concentrated a moment as he telekinetically carried Ru toward their sector of the building. He felt his mind open, his powers extending to each member of their team. When he was sure that he had a firm grasp on each of their consciousness, he snapped a telepathic link into place.

Mental communications up and running, Nate thought to the group. Like we planned, I’ll keep us all linked. Just get into position and I’ll coordinate the rest.

Why am I seeing myself from behind? Danni inquired. And why do I really like the way my butt looks in this uniform?

Sorry, Ru replied.

Danni rolled her eyes and Jace fought the urge to protest over Ru eyeing his sister that way. Nate had instructed them that the mental communication link would allow some of their thoughts to drift between them if they weren’t careful.

Try to stay focused, Nate thought. We’ll be back on board the Xavier in no time. Danni, you’re up first.

Danni did her best to ignore the teenage emotions now fighting to get into her thoughts, instead concentrating on her mutant abilities. A thin red beam arced between her pupils as she shifted her perceptions to view different wavelengths of radiation.

Within a few moments she saw a dome of green energy blanketing the spherical building; a gamma-based security net that would undoubtedly have to come down.

Got it, she thought.

Nate picked up her perceptions and funneled them through the mental link, allowing each of them to see what she saw, to a degree. The dome was being broadcast from three micro-relays positioned a few hundred feet above building, one protecting each node. These tiny satellites were nearly impossible to see, but thanks to Danni, they were highlighted for the team to see.

Take out the relays, then take out the nodes, Nate thought. *As soon as we breach expect company, but remember what we talked about. Allow me to guide you so that we can take out the nodes at the exact same time. Don't rush anything.*

Faith and Napl were the closest to a relay. They positioned themselves as planned and waited for the others to do likewise. Nate and Faith would be able to hover in preparation, but Jace's wings didn't function the same way; he would be tasked with taking out the relay without being able to drop his momentum.

Luckily, his sister could take out everything from a distance.

Through his mental link, Nate Grey goaded their natural synapses to fire at the same time. They were already poised to strike. His mental command would be like pulling the trigger.

Now! Nate's mental command urged.

Faith used her telekinesis to swing Napl and his battleax made of ice into the relay. At the exact same moment, Nate blasted his relay with a concentrated burst of psionic energy. Similarly, Danni unleashed an optic blast of force that completely shattered her relay, all the while being carried by her brother, who swung them both down at an alarming speed toward their node.

Each node, a bulbous construct on the outside of the building, was linked to dozens of satellites, altered-reality libraries, and other broadcast locations. They took in information constantly, feeding it down into the massive servers within the building while simultaneously pushing the data onto the back-up nebulas in cyberspace.

Jace angled his wings to dive at the node, planning to bring Danni into a closer position to blast it to pieces just like the relay. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the others doing the same, but his concentration was shattered the moment tesseract bays opened on the top of their sphere-like target.

From the apex of the building, an energy field slid open, spilling out security drones to deal with the intruders. There was no doubt that real life personnel would be coming to stop them soon enough, if there was anything left after the automated defenses did their job anyway.

The drones, which resembled cigars with a burning red lens on one end, burst out of the tesseract portal and split up between the three groups. They were only about two feet in length each, but they were fast, propelled by anti-gravity engines of StarkTech design.

Evade, Nate ordered, but keep your node in sight. Trust in me. Let me guide you.

A bellowing roar filled the night as Napl smashed his ax through three of the drones in one swing, grabbed a fourth with his free hand, and coated it in thick ice. The drone dropped like a rock, now useless. His warrior spirit would make short work of these inanimate threats, although he was careful to keep his battle rage in check. When he was younger he might have been in danger, but since communing with the True North he had greater control over himself.

Ready? Nate asked his partner for the evening.

Like I was born for this, Ru shot back.

With his telekinetic abilities, Nate swirled Ru once around and then launched the little red devil at a pack of the drones. His claws spread wide, Ru's sliced into the circuitry of the flying drones like they were made of paper. Pouncing between them, showing amazing agility, Ru sprung back and forth through the air, leaving eviscerated robotics in his wake.

I'm scoping multiple security tanks rolling out at street level, Danni thought to the group. Her optical powers gave her a variety of abilities, such as telescoping and trajectory tracking. *We need to move fast – whoa!*

Jace deftly barrel-rolled around a conglomerate of the black drones, pulling his sister with him out of harm's way. With an unintelligible roar, he dove down and sliced the edges of his metal wings straight through one of the drones, effectively chopping it in half.

"Hang on!" he called to his sister.

Keep heading toward the nodes, Nate ordered. *We can't lose focus now!*

Nate concentrated harder on keeping the team in sync. He didn't want to just blindly overtake their minds; didn't want to simply control them. This entire operation was about getting out from under the control of the Brotherhood. He needed to just persuade their synapses as opposed to ruling over them.

Photons exploded around them as the tanks below began to send volley after volley of defensive fire at them. If any of them were struck they would instantly be incapacitated and left for the authorities, or worse, to contain.

I can distract them, Faith thought. I can deposit Napl at—

*No! Nate shot back. We need to stick to the plan! Keep together! This will all be over in a minute if we just **stay together!***

He sent a pulse of imploring determination through their minds, emphasizing his words. As he telekinetically seized Ru after his last pounce, he saw the rest of the group fall into position as planned, still being cautious of the barrage of fire peppering the sky around them.

Flanking the spherical building, Nate saw his own assigned node coming closer and closer on approach. A wave of drones filtered out of the tesseract bays, flooding the space immediately surrounding the building with dozens upon dozens of new targets. Concentrated flashes of red beams erupted from the drones, turning the night into an angled maze of danger.

He saw Faith and Jace fly into position, mere feet from the nodes. Below him, Ru was shouting and he felt his mental connection with the young mutant spark. He saw that Ru's left arm was scorched, having been hit by the drone fire.

The others were in position. It was now or never. Risking the mental feedback, Nate pushed the team into a coordinated strike. Faith flung Napl at the exact same moment that Jace dropped altitude for Danni to have a clear shot, with Nate likewise unleashing a psionic blast at his node.

In three bursts of raw power, be it physical or otherwise, the nodes each ruptured. A trio of plumes expelled from the building, signaling the destruction of the triangulating nerve center on which the nexus of information functioned.

"Yes!" Nate hollered. He was careful not to let the success go to his head. There was still immediate danger swirling around all six of them. They needed to get out of there before someone got hurt.

Re-establishing his psychic link with the *Xavier*, which was awaiting their arrival some 40 miles above the Earth's surface, Nate initiated a six-person bodyslide. The facility, hidden between dimensional spectrums, temporarily warped back in this prime reality just long enough to teleport the team to safety.

She heard them return.

In one moment, the facility went from a blanket of quietness to a plethora of activity. The machines built into the structure of the orbiting base, ancient by today's standards, began humming. She suspected that the nefarious shaman had a mental link with the systems, and her suspicions were confirmed when six pillars of white light materialized in the central area.

The pillars widened, opening like doorways to another room, and an instant later the mutants she sought had been delivered. She recalled this "bodyslide" technology and reasoned it was especially useful now. Today's security nets, which were meant to detect and stop modern teleportation, wouldn't necessarily be attuned to this type of transport. It was an easy way to get around the law and gain access to virtually anywhere on the planet.

"Ahh!" one of them said through clenched teeth. He was clutching his left arm, which looked burned. She recognized him as Rupert Slokhaven, the first to be abducted.

The others, after gaining their bearings, rushed to his side. They were an eclectic collection, no doubt. She marveled at their appearance, knowing that locked within their genetic makeup was the key to achieving the next level in evolution. She licked her thin lips in anticipation of regaining control over them once more.

"Are you okay?" the girl in the ghastly blue and yellow uniform asked. She rushed to Rupert's side, helping him stand up. What did Prosper call her? Subject CYCLOPS, she believed. "You changed back. That's good. Easier to get you into the med-chamber."

"I'm fine!" Rupert shouted. He pushed the girl away, who looked hurt by his inflection.

"Ru, listen—"

"Back off!" he screamed. Who was he talking...ah, yes. The pesky traveler. Nathaniel Grey. Of course. "I could have died. *We* could have died!"

"Such is the way of the warrior," the ice behemoth bellowed, his own massive chest causing his words to reverberate.

"You're safe now," Nathaniel said. "You're all safe. Ru, I'm sorry. I was...distracted."

"Yeah, we know," the winged one said. "You were distracted alright. By controlling our minds."

"Jace," the gaudy girl began.

"No, sis. It's not okay. I felt him in my head. He was in there, forcing me to act." He turned back to Nathaniel. "You said you wouldn't do that. You *said* you weren't going to do that!"

She smirked and nearly laughed aloud when she saw the distress on Nathaniel's face. How she had longed for him to suffer. She was aware of their planetside operation just now, of course, and had allowed it to happen. With his team away, and apparently getting wounded, she was able to sweep in undetected and await their return.

As Nathaniel tried to explain himself, she only felt pity for the mutant shaman. It seemed like events were repeating themselves. His last collection of students had ultimately opposed him when they came against the Brotherhood previously. It seemed like this time would be no different.

Finally, she could no longer contain herself. The entertainment of this charade was too much. She stepped forward and began to clap at their display of ineptness.

The team paused, shocked at her sudden arrival, even though to them her appearance was anything but explosive. Her mastery over the singularity in her brain gave her amazing control over gravitational forces. Her control was so precise that she could even bend light to her will, and had hidden herself behind a myriad of darkness prior to their return. To her it was nothing more than stepping forward out of a corner.

To them, it would look a demon had come to claim them. And maybe it had.

"I do have to say," Parish Black began, "that your little upstarts are impressive, Nathaniel. However, I think ultimately you will find them lacking."

"Who is—" the glowing woman, Faith, had said, but a wave of Parish Black's hand silenced her. Once more displaying her mastery, she commanded her singularity to absorb all sound from Faith. The mutant woman talked, but no one could hear her.

If Nathaniel had been a beastly creature, she was sure he would have growled at her. With a laugh, she detained him in a gravitational field, even after he had leapt at her with his aura all aglow. She pulled him closer, keeping his limbs in check, admiring the spark of power emitting from his left eye.

"Nathaniel," Parish Black purred. She traced his chin with the tip of her index finger. "So good to see you again."

"Do not play with your food," a deep voice behind her said. Crown emerged from the same corner, similarly hidden by her abilities. "You don't know where it's been."

His devilish smile penetrated the group, somehow snapping them back to attention. They had no idea who these two individuals were in their newfound home, but they knew two things: they were intruders and they were hostile.

Ru burst forward, shifting back into his scarlet beast form. He obviously favored his other appendages as he ran, leaving the scorched one to just hang as he prepared to

attack. His animalistic roar would have shaken fear into a normal man, but Crown merely looked at him with disdain.

When Ru leapt, at the apex of his jump Crown simply stepped forward and caught him by the throat. He drew the red mutant close, saying, "Pitiful. I am the sum of my entire bloodline, mutant. Know who your betters are."

Crown tossed Ru aside like he was nothing more than an insect. The force of the toss was immense, knocking Ru unconscious as he slammed into the wall.

"For my honor!" Napl roared. He stomped forward, brandishing his battleax, ready to cut down this interloper. He never made it more than three steps.

Crown rocketed forward in a blur of motion, his perfect physical form proving to be capable of so much more than it appeared. With blinding speed his fists battered into the frost behemoth again and again, pounding against his joints. Napl tried to swing and parry the attacks, but Crown was simply too capable. It was as if Crown had already done this particular fight a thousand times before and knew exactly how to take his opponent down.

Napl fell to his knees. A series of chops against the base of his neck finally broke the warrior, who fell flat against the durasteel floor. His eyes rolled back and the warrior was tamed.

"I am the superior mutant here," Crown said, pulling his gaze up from his quarry to the three X-Men left standing. "Superior to all of you. My abilities grant me access to an entire fountain of ancestral knowledge and skills. My muscles channel the power of those before me, and my mind accumulates the tactics and stratagems of a thousand generations of leaders. You are each singular while I am the crowning achievement of a race."

"Jerk!" Danni shouted. She unleashed a wave of force from her eyes the red beam searing the spot where Crown had stood, but his agility proved to be faster than her reflexes. "Stand still!"

Faith rose a few more inches in the air and readied herself to help her friends, but movement from the corner of her eye halted her. She spun and floated closer to Danni and Jace while unleashing a psionic blast through her hands, hopeful that her quick action would stop whatever third threat now came forward.

The blast washed over another figure, and while the newcomer staggered for a moment, it seemed to right itself nearly instantly. It was like the psionic power was nothing more than a simply beam of sunlight.

When the energy dissipated, they saw the third intruder step forward. His graying skin was tight over his facial features. A bulky, toned body was wrapped in a tight, white

overcoat. His mouth was stretched to abnormal proportions and Faith was shocked to realize that he had actually been *eating* her psionic energy.

“Admirable,” Mister Prosper said. “But ultimately futile. You may stun me for a second, my dear, but when my powers of reactive evolution compensate, you will no longer be a threat to me.”

His mouth returned to a normal size as the last traces of psionic energy fell from his lips. He smirked and was obviously pleased to see Nathaniel captured, Ru incapacitated, Napl floored, and the remaining three huddled in fear.

“Are you sure these are the ones you were tracking, Prosper?” Parish Black inquired. She flicked Nathaniel’s nose while he was still immobile and then walked by him like he was just a fly on the wall. “They looked impressive but haven’t exactly lived up to your hype.”

“You’re the ones that were monitoring us?” Jace asked. He was in a partial crouch and ready to fight for his life, alongside Faith and Danni. His wings were expanded to cover their flanks, like twin shields. “Nate warned us about you. He said—”

Crown waved his hand dismissively, saying, “Yes, child, I’m sure he told you a great many things. Listening to such things got his last team of students *killed*. You should be careful who you trust.”

“We are a Brotherhood,” Prosper added. “The three of us, as you can plainly see, are Omega-level mutants of the highest order. Do not bother attacking us again. You *will* fail.”

“We need not brawl like some archaic fools,” Parish Black stated. She crept closer to the huddling trio, like a venomous snake poisoning itself to strike. “It was Nathaniel who positioned you against us. We can still be civilized. Just come with us.”

“What?” Jace asked. “You mean...just go with you? Instead of fighting for our lives?”

“Don’t listen to her!” Danni muttered. “She’s obviously a black widow. She’ll kill you the moment you turn your back on her.”

“Why would we want you dead?” Crown inquired. He had also moved closer to the three of them as he almost casually dusted off his immaculate tailored clothing. “Your biology is very important to us.”

“Indeed,” Prosper said. “Your genetic makeup is vital to our plans. If we kill you then we’ve ruined our own machinations. No, you simpleton, we want you very much *alive*.”

Stunned, Faith looked to her companions before saying, “But...why?”

This time Parish Black did laugh aloud. How could these mutants be so naïve? Had Nathaniel only told them part of the truth about their importance? That would certainly fit with his way of operating. She recalled sitting peaceable with him one afternoon, discussing his own plans for the future of mutant society. He had appointed himself as the mutant race's caretaker, no longer seeing his role as a shaman of sorts as enough.

No, he wanted to fill the shoes of that long-lost philanthropist, Professor Charles Xavier. He wanted to guide the course of mutant humanity the same way that Charles had once upon a time.

Her chuckle filled the facility. Finally, she said, "Precious creature. We want to control your progeny."

TO BE CONTINUED...

PRIME DIVISION

PART FIVE

“Don’t panic.”

Jace knew that he could have chanted that mantra over and over again, but no matter how many times he said it things wouldn’t change, and he definitely would still feel like his stomach was going to explode.

“I’m not panicking,” his sister, Danni, shot back through gritted teeth. “You’re panicking. I’m totally not panicking.”

“Shut it,” Jace harshly whispered, even though whispering was silly at this point. They were surrounded by three beings of extreme power who could obviously hear everything they said.

To make matters worse, with Napl and Ru both down for the count, and Nate looking like he was in a constant full-body spasm, they really needed to come up with a plan quickly. But how could they? This was the point of no return, the moment in time when a decision *had* to be made, with no further way to prolong the inevitable.

Fight...or flight?

The ancient lizard part of their brains would tell them to flee. Prosper’s so-called reactive evolution ability meant he could counter anything they threw at him. Crown claimed to be the pinnacle of both human and mutant achievement. Parish Black hadn’t even lifted a finger to paralyze their most powerful member.

“Join us,” Parish Black said, her paper-thin lips curling into a smile. Jace assumed she pictured herself looking nice, when in actuality she looked like the embodiment of death. “Willingly be a part of our own trial. I promise you that you will be well taken care of.”

“We know everything about you already,” Prosper pointed out. “I, personally, have watched the both of you grow up. Jacen and Daniella; don’t you want to finally get out of that Latverian suburb and attend an international school? The finest astro-engineering school for Jacen and the most profound archeological digs for Daniella. We can make that happen.”

“And me?” Faith inquired. Her hair glowed like the rest of her psionic body as it flowed around her like someone had switched off the gravity.

“You,” Crown said. “Why, you are the most intriguing subject to date. We had no idea of your existence until Nathaniel found you. A mutant born on the astral plane? Incredible.” He took a few steps closer to the huddled trio, steadying his gaze on them. “My dear, you hold the key to an entire new line of research. Think of how you could better humanity by joining us?”

“I think you mean better yourselves,” Danni shot back. “We know about your little Brotherhood. How you’ve been keeping tabs on us, manipulating our families for years, just so you can track the birth of *homo maxima*.”

Parish Black noticeably winced at the term, but Crown laughed. His perfect jaw bounced as the baritone guffaw ruptured from within. With a sigh he said, “And what if we were? If it was possible that the next phase of mutant evolution were to spring forth from your loins, a being of such potential power that he or she could slice the fabric of reality in half...wouldn’t you feel more secure knowing that someone was prepared for it?”

“Prepared,” Danni countered, “or ready to take control?”

Prosper said, “I don’t see a difference. You assume we’re some kind of Brotherhood of *evil* mutants, but you’re resting that assumption on what *he* fed you.” Prosper pointed to the struggling Nate. “*Homo maxima* is coming and we’re the only ones standing ready.”

The three Omega-level mutants had them cornered. Mister Prosper stood behind them, his hands clutched behind his back, but noticeably ready to pounce. Crown had moved close enough while he was talking to keep them from getting better positioned. Parish Black had slunk forward, her sinister sneer never wavering.

Jace could feel his sister trembling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Faith’s nervous fingers open and close, open and close.

It was an integral part of their being to run away from something bigger and stronger than them. It was a gut reaction. Pure instinct. A primal thought planted in their genetics thousands of generations ago that would keep them alive in times of unadulterated crises. Who were they to go against something as rudimentary as that?

“Your answer, little mutant?” Parish Black asked.

Luckily for Jace, he had experience with fighting *while* flying.

“You want my answer?” he responded. “How about this for an answer?”

Through the mental link that Faith had established between them, he thought, *Now!*

With coordination that betrayed their time as a group, and precision that was unfounded for fledgling adventurers, the trio each simultaneously leapt into action.

Faith telekinetically shoved them apart, forcing them to burst away from one another like oil and water. Then she turned her attention to Prosper, who had been prepared for their lashing out and was now charging them. He looked more irritated than shocked or angered, as if his little pets were acting out and needed to be put right again.

Rising to his expectations, she angled a psionic pulse to knock him down. Knowing that he wouldn't be down for long, she unleashed a torrent of power against him, praying that she was strong enough to keep him at bay. Their plan was to buy as much time as possible until they could figure out how to get the upper hand.

Jace pounced off the floor and went airborne, aided by the telekinetic push from Faith. His wings outspread, he rose to the ceiling like a bullet, drawing the attention of the impeccably dressed Crown.

"Land before I force you down," Crown stated, sounding almost bored, also sounding like he was talking to an out of line child.

The winged mutant replied with a barrage of shrapnel. The talons that were wrapped around his hands were bonded to his nervous system, constructed of repurposed metal from his workshop, and housed a number of little tricks. While Jace's mutant ability allowed him to graft simple machines to himself, effectively making them extensions of his body, he had trouble installing things with power sources. He knew that if he ever needed a ranged weapon that it would have to be kept simplistic.

With the press of a thumb trigger, the compressed carbon dioxide cartridges mounted in the talons expelled their highly pressured gas, forcing chambered flechettes to rocket out. Crown was pummeled by buckshot in the shape of razors, catching him by surprise.

"Yeah!" Jace shouted as he banked around the inside of the facility.

Crown swatted the flechettes away and ground his teeth. A few had torn apart his expensive overcoat, but he remained otherwise unscathed. With hatred in his burning eyes, he tracked the flying mutant in a semi-circle around the room, looking for his chance to strike back.

Prosper was pressed to the ground by Faith's attack. Energy washed over him, blanketing the cold floor. Her concentrated telekinetic energy was expelling forth from her at an alarming rate. At first she just thought that she was unleashing her frustration and terror at being cornered by three powerful beings, but then she realized the truth.

Rising to one knee, and then to a full stance again, Prosper began to chuckle. "Your psionic power is impressive," Prosper said as he stepped forward. "But it relies on your ability to concentrate. It is a psychically based, which means by evolving a simple neural net pheromone emission to counteract against your telekinesis I will render you useless."

Faith wasn't pushing herself anymore. On the contrary, she was desperately trying to pull her powers back in. The neural net that Prosper had hyper-evolved was draining her psychic powers, acting like a vacuum. Within moments she would be powerless, and if the neural net sucked in her psionic body as well, she could be lost on the astral plane again.

Meanwhile, Danni unleashed a torrential storm of optic power upon Parish Black. The red beam grew wider and wider, and the center of her blast started shifting in color. First orange, then yellow, and then white while the outskirts retained its crimson hue.

Black was suddenly at a disadvantage, traversing unsure ground. Her singularity could normally absorb anything she commanded it to gobble up, and her mastery over gravity allowed for sufficient offense. She quickly found herself brought to one knee as she mustered her determination to steady her singularity field directly in front of her. For some reason, this upstart mutant girl was giving her trouble. When she saw the shifting colors, she realized what was happening.

Danni wasn't just pelting her with beams of force; she was hitting her with an entire spectrum of radiation. Various wavelengths were pushing her to her limits, fracturing her control. She wasn't used to taking in so much power, especially not when it was so scattered and uncontrollable itself.

Shards of the optic field blast were escaping her singularity, smashing into her immediate surroundings. She heard Danni screaming as she unleashed her onslaught, but then realized it wasn't the puny upstart. It was her.

As a last ditch effort, Black swept out a lower gravity wave at floor level. The wave swept over Danni's feet, uprooting her footing and tossing her on her side. The optic assault finally stopped, but Parish Black felt depleted. Her hands were shaking and she wasn't sure that she could stand.

The wave bowled under Danni and caught Crown as well, which upset his footing, but he remained upright. Jace took advantage of the misstep to swoop in and deliver a killing blow, extending his talons. The razor-sharp claws extended and sliced down into Crown's torso.

And shattered.

Now within arm's reach, Crown growled, grabbed hold of Jace by the forearm, crushed both his radius and ulna, and whipped him like a plaything across the room. Dazed and in pain, Jace smashed into the psionic body of Faith. The pair tumbled together and Faith, already weakened by the draining effect of Prosper's newfound neural net ability, exploded in a hazy and scattered torrent of psychic energy.

She was gone. Jace collapsed, his heavy wings now acting more like a prison than an extension of his own body. Danni managed to roll to one side and face Jace, but she when she tried to sit up, a blackened sphere engulfed her head.

She screamed in silence as this black hole in space enshrouded her. No longer able to see, no longer able to hear, she started to panic. But she couldn't move either. The pressure of the increasing gravity was threatened to rupture her ear drums, and she started to vomit.

Parish Black stood up, saying, "Insignificant little bug." She hobbled forward and kicked Danni in the gut, forcing her to double over.

"You're pathetic," Crown said as he stood over Jace. "Did you really think you could beat me? *Me?* My body has been honed to perfection over the course of generations! All the best parts of the past live within me. I am walking perfection."

"The girl!" Prosper shouted. "Damn you, Crown! You dispersed her body."

"Mind your tone, Prosper," Crown growled. "I doubt that you—"

Crown suddenly found his feet pulled out from under him. A gargantuan icy fist had wrapped itself around both of his ankles, yanked back, and flung him across the facility. Napl, roaring with the might of a cornered animal, rolled back onto his feet and slammed a powerful fist directly into Prosper's chest.

The hyper-evolving mutant didn't react quickly enough to avoid being struck. So surprised was he from the icy behemoth's sudden resurgence into the fray that he was completely sucker punched. The moment Napl's fist connected with his torso his skin thickened and his ribcage doubled in size, puffing out his chest, but inertia had taken over at that point. Prosper's head struck the corner of a storage tank and he went limp.

Parish Black released her power over Danni, instead focusing it on the more immediate threat. Danni gratefully gulped in air again as Black sent a spiraling cone of force toward Napl. The twisting gravitational forces, invisible they may be, still acted like a drill as they smashed into Napl's abdomen.

Shards of ice broke away and the giant was on his knees again. Parish Black's mouth contorted into a sneer as she pressed forward, driving needle-thin opposing force into Napl like an ice pick. She pulled it back and drove it in again and again, stabbing away at the mutant's frozen body.

Lying on back, and trying her best not to cough up blood, Danni arched herself and locked her gaze onto Parish Black's face. With a surge of willpower, she bombarded Black with ultraviolet light, focused and amplified by her mutant abilities. Smoke began to slowly waft off of Black's features as the radiation burned her skin and she was finally

forced to relent in her punishment of Napl. Claspings her hands to her red and scarred face, Black stumbled backward.

“Insolent whelp!” Crown shouted as he bounded forward, cocking his fist back to strike Napl where Black had been chipping into him.

But there was a red blur of motion and something had latched itself to Crown’s arm, throwing him off balance. Ru, also finally recovered but still shaken, shifted his weight and used his own momentum to upset Crown’s center of gravity, pulling his arm downward. Crown’s chin smashed into the floor and Ru quickly leapt onto his back, drawing his captured arm back into a perfectly executed arm-bar hold.

“My stunt double is tougher than you,” Ru spat out. “And he’s not even a mutant.”

Crown chuckled. “Did you not learn the last time, boy?”

Jutting his head upward, Crown’s skull slammed into Ru’s nose, breaking it instantly. Blood gushed out and Ru instinctively released Crown to try and attend to his new injury, but before he could even get a hand up Crown had broken free, twisted his arm back, and driven his the broad side of his fist into Ru’s jaw.

The red-skinned mutant fell over in a heap and Crown was up once more, standing over his quarry. “My bloodline has mastered various fighting arts,” he said. “I have unheard of experience that can be brandished against any technique. You are a poor imitation of a warrior, boy.”

With his broken arm drawn close to his chest, Jace stood up and prepared to fire off another salvo of shrapnel, but something that felt like a block of granite rammed into the back of his head and he went down for the count.

Still on the floor and weakened, Danni screamed, “Jace!” as she saw a disfigured Prosper standing over her brother. His chest had expanded in reaction to Napl’s strike, and his skull had elongated, stretching his face, likely as a result of his head striking the corner of the storage tank. He looked grotesque and Danni felt like she was looking at something that had crawled from the depths of Hell.

Prosper locked eyes with Danni. “Stand down!” he commanded her. “Look at your comrades. You cannot hope to defeat us.”

Napl was on one knee, gasping for breath, and clutching his side where Black had wounded him. An intensity still smoldered in his eyes, but he was in bad condition. Jace couldn’t even get his head off the floor. Ru was moving, but Crown had placed his foot between Ru’s shoulder blades to keep him in place. Faith was nowhere to be seen.

“Do you see them?” Prosper continued. “Do you see how easily we broke apart your little collective? You would be better suited joining us.”

Where was Faith? What had they done to her?

“The offer still stands,” Crown said. He pressed down and Ru went flat with a yelp. He extended his hand toward Danni. “Come with us and your pain will end.”

“No!” Parish Black shouted. Danni turned to see just how badly she had been burned; her skin had started to boil. “I want this one to suffer.”

“Easy, Black,” Crown said.

“No!” Black stepped in front of Danni and bent over slightly, her charred lips curling back. “She’ll suffer. Like she hurt me. I’ll peel back the layers of her epidermis.”

With a quick motion, Parish Black forced Danni off the floor and forced her to look up into her reddened features. Only inches away, Danni could still feel the heat coming off of Black’s burns.

“Don’t let your vanity taint our victory,” Crown scolded.

Ignoring him, Black said, “Or should I make you watch as I do the same to your friends? How would that make you feel, to watch your little pals beg for death?”

Danni was desperately trying to breath. The hold that Black had over her was intense, much too strong for her to break away from. But that didn’t stop her from shifting her perceptions through various filters. To her, the room was glossed over with various colors as she adjusted her optic abilities.

Where was Faith?

She knew that even if Faith had been dispersed that she couldn’t be destroyed like that. Energy can be transferred or transformed, but never destroyed. Her psionic body was gone, but what about the rest of her? She had to be here somewhere.

The emission spectrum – nothing.

Microwaves – nothing.

Gamma rays – nothing.

But there...buried down in the absorption spectrum. There was *something*. She saw a cloud make its way through the room, passing through objects and people like they weren’t there. Danni tracked it until it stopped just a few feet shy of her, off to the left.

“What’s the matter?” Black whispered into her ear. “Too scared to give me a witty comeback?”

Danni tried to choke a response, but Black's gravity hold over her made it impossible. Relenting, Black leaned in close and said, "Ready to beg?"

Danni muttered something that made Black's face turn white. She suddenly stepped back, releasing her hold on the girl, and looking back and forth desperately. She nearly stumbled over when her heel hit Ru's shoulder, but Crown steadied her.

"What?" Prosper demanded. "What did she say?"

"She said..." Black whispered. "*You forgot about someone.*"

A blinding flash of golden light filled the facility, with a single person in the eye of explosive maelstrom of power. The visage of a floating man quickly formed, his left eye brimming with psychic energy.

During the scuffle, Parish Black had relaxed her grip on Nate Grey, allowing him to regain his composure and concentration. Without Black's singularity to draw off his psychic energy any longer, he could instead repurpose his power into accessing the astral plane.

It was there that he conjoined with the cloud, Faith's dispersed essence, and it was there that together they fueled Nate's body with their combined powers. With an outburst of power Nate ripped a hole in the satellite station, puncturing the hull of the *Xavier* and relinquishing their frail bodies to the unforgiving vacuum of space.

Quickly forming psionic bubbles of captured atmosphere around his team, Nate secured his X-Men. Drawing their four prone bodies toward him, he also reformed Faith's psionic body and deposited her essence back into the waiting vessel. They were massed together, broken, but safe once more.

Parish Black screamed, but the roar of the escaping air consumed her. The sudden jarring pull of space yanked her clean out of the *Xavier*, and even though she quickly righted herself with her powers, she was still without a way to breath.

Likewise, Crown was drawn into the coldness of space, and his hardened body and lungs were now at the mercy of the vacuum. He flailed, his ancestral abilities now useless as he tumbled head over heels into blackness.

Only Mister Prosper possessed a semblance of dignity. At first he struggled, naturally gripping his throat as he failed to pull in sweet oxygen. Then his mutant power manifested a set of gills on his neck that converted light into breathable air and he calmed down. Another quick adaptation between his fingers caused spectral webbing to form, which allowed him to ride radio currents, and he found himself a mode of slow-going transport.

He motioned for Parish Black to come to him, and while her burned face looked panicked, she did as he bade. He breathed air into her and did the same for a pacified Crown once she gravitationally pulled their trio together.

The Brotherhood hovered there in space, staring at Nate Grey and his damaged X-Men through the hole in the facility. Nate's left eye flashed brightly, and he sent a psychic pulse to each of them saying, *Do not engage. Go lick your wounds. Don't come back.*

With intense focus, Nate psionically resealed the hull. The facility's compressors returned the pressure to normal and the atmosphere was restored. He broke the psionic bubbles the team was held in and they all fell to the floor, sucking in fresh air.

They were battered and bruised. They were shaking. They were coughing and crying and bleeding.

But they were alive.

"How can we trust you?"

Nate noticeably winced at the statement from Ru. He hated that their group seemed standoffish now, even broken, but how could he blame them? After a week of pseudo-training their first mission had ended with all of them nearly getting killed. That had been two days ago, and the physical wounds had healed, thanks to modern medical technology, but the mental ones still felt fresh.

They had agreed to meet once more in New Wavos, in the same park where Nate had first arrived to come collect them. In the heart of North Dakota, amongst the bristling advancements of society all around them, the grove was fairly serene.

"You can't," Nate finally said.

He turned to see his charges, his X-Men, staring back at him. Jace's wings were folded around his shoulders like armor and stood close to his sister, Danni, who had her arms crossed over her chest. Beside them stood Napl, towering over the others, looking uncomfortable in this climate. Behind him was Faith, her feet not touching the ground, and her hair casually fluttering in the wind.

Between them and Nate stood Ru, his hands on his hips, obviously ready to trade verbal punches. He had protested the most about meeting up again, saying that had enough adventure and wanted out of the spotlight for once in his life.

It had taken Nate more than a little pleading to get them all to come here to see him again.

“Exactly,” Ru agreed. “We can’t trust you. You can’t keep us safe, yet you ask us to come back here to keep fighting by your side. The Brotherhood is still out there and you’ve proven that you can’t hide us from them. They found your base super easy!”

“We could—” Nate started to say.

“We could have died!” Ru shouted.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Danni asked. “We can’t go home. We’d be sitting quail.”

“Ducks,” Jace said. “You mean sitting ducks. But you’re still right. We can’t go home and we aren’t safe on the *Xavier*. We were better off just ignorant of the Brotherhood. At least then we could be with our families.”

“But they were manipulating you,” Nate responded. “Subtly monitoring you and keeping tabs on your offspring, should you have any. You were living your lives under a microscope and you had no idea.”

“Ignorance is bliss,” Jace shot back.

“Fate brought us together,” Napl said, his deep voice booming over them. He brought his battleax of ice to bear in front of him, then placed the blade down and leaned against the bottom of the handle. “I do not presume to know what could have happened if you had not become entwined in our affairs, but it does not matter. We are linked now. I choose to stand by your side.”

“Me, too,” Faith said. She smiled at Nate, sympathizing with his plight. “Without Nate I would never have been able to meet my own parents. That’s a gift I can never repay.”

Ru looked back over his shoulder at Faith, saying, “If it wasn’t for him the Brotherhood wouldn’t even know you existed.”

“What good is a life of seclusion?” Faith inquired.

“A safe one,” Ru countered.

“Look, I’m not asking for you to give up your lives,” Nate finally said. “I’m asking for your help. We’ve proven that we can stand against the Brotherhood, but they aren’t the only threats out there to mutantkind.”

“When you showed me your vision,” Napl said. “When you first came to me in the Arctic Circle...I witnessed something catastrophic. Was this the coming of *homo maxima*?”

Nate’s left eye flashed. “Yes.”

“Then the danger is not passed. We must stay together.”

“Even though we gave the Brotherhood a black eye, they are still out there. And there are others. The premonition I had...I’m afraid that it’s still going to happen. We need to stay together, because if we don’t—”

“We’ll run the risk of selfishly staying alive?” Ru blurt out.

“...if we don’t, the entire fabric of reality is at stake.”

Silence blared between the six mutants. The unspoken truth lay at their collective feet. Either they found the courage to work together, or the fate of all life, both on Earth and everywhere else, was in peril.

“Your base has already been compromised,” Jace finally said.

Nate smiled. “I have another place we can camp out for now. It would even be sort of a homecoming.”

“We should say bye to our families properly this time,” Danni said. “Now that we know the magnitude of this thing, we really can’t just let them worry about us needlessly.”

Jace snorted. “You think mom is going to be okay with us taking off to go save humanity?”

Danni punched him in the shoulder. “I’m serious. Plus, mom should be happy for us. We’re going to be superheroes! How many people can say that about their kids?”

“Two-thirds of the population are born with powers,” Jace replied. “It’s not like we’re anything special.”

“I believe the opposite,” Napl said.

Nate smiled. He didn’t know if he should thank them, shake their hands, hug them, or just stand there looking like a placated dope. Whatever his expression gave away, he hope it was what he was feeling the most: pride.

“Looks like the four of them are in,” Nate said. “What about you, Rupert?”

Ru blinked a few times, cracked his neck, and took in a deep breath before finally letting out a sigh and saying, “My agent is going to kill me for this.”

Nate’s smile broadened as Faith cheered her new teammate’s decision. They were far from what he remembered of Charles Xavier’s pupils, and they had a long road ahead of them, but there was no doubt in his mind that these were a whole new generation of X-Men.

