



This first volume of X-Force collects the first 50 issues, plus #x and two annuals, all written by various authors. Unfortunately, several issues were lost in a site crash years ago.

Enjoy!

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Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable. However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny...

Issue #1

by [Jay Corafa](#) (plot) and [Dino Pollard](#) (script)

Editorial Note: This issue takes place before *Uncanny X-Men* #5

Westchester County in Salem Center. Not much happens in this sleepy town. At least, not much that the general public is aware of.

Cannonball

Not too long ago, there was an event which shocked the residents. Professor Charles Xavier, the owner of the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning, was shot while holding a press conference, addressing the allegations that he was a mutant. It was an event which shocked the nation, especially after discovering that Xavier was, in fact, a mutant. His funeral had a huge turnout, not only his current students, but his former students, and much of the superhero community. In addition to being a mutant, Professor Xavier was also the founder of the X-Men, a team of mutants dedicated to Xavier's dream that man and mutant can live in harmony.

Moonstar

Wolfsbane

However, Xavier also founded another group of mutants. This team was only to be trained in the use of their powers. It was a team composed of teenagers, called the New Mutants. In addition to being trained by Xavier, the New Mutants were also trained by Magneto, and most-recently, the time-lost mutant, Cable. Cable changed them from the New Mutants into a militant outlaw group known as X-Force. Until recently, they had followed Cable before striking out on their own.

Warlock

Once Xavier was assassinated though, they rushed to the Xavier Institute, otherwise known as the X-Mansion.

Sunspot

They are Samuel Guthrie, Cannonball; Roberto DaCosta, Sunspot; Xi'an Coy Manh, Karma; Rahne Sinclair, Wolfsbane; Danielle Moonstar, formerly Mirage, now Moonstar; and Dr. Stevie Hunter, a

former ballet teacher of Kitty Pryde (the former X-Man Shadowcat), and a former physician of the X-Men. Aside from Dr. Hunter, they are the original New Mutants.

Karma

"Ach, I still cannae believe he's gone..." Rahne said, as she looked through the picture album. Until recently, she was a member of the British team, Excalibur. She was living on Muir Island with Dr. Moira MacTaggert, her foster mother.

"Ah can still remember when we first came here," Sam said, sitting back in his chair. "Ya'll remember our first time in th' Danger Room?"

"Don't even remind me, Sam..." Bobby said, slapping his forehead. "That was embarrassing..."

"We couldn't even make it from one side of the room to the other without getting trashed," Dani laughed.

"Things are different now, though," Shan said. "After everything we've seen and done, we're not the same people everyone wants us to be. We're not the New Mutants anymore, despite what anyone might think."

"Despite what's happened, I think that Charles would've been proud of what you've all become," Stevie said. "True, you're not the same kids you used to be, but that's how life is. Especially in your line of work."

"Aye... in our line o' work..." Rahne repeated. Her words became short as her eyes fell upon a picture of Douglas Ramsey, who was once known as Cypher. Doug understood any language, no matter what it was. He was brought into the New Mutants when they met up with the Techno-Organic alien called Warlock. The team desperately needed someone to talk to Warlock, so that's how Doug came into the picture. The two instantly bonded, becoming the best of friends. Doug also meant something to Rahne, and his death really threw her, and Warlock, for a loop. She had thought him to be resurrected when she found him in the form of a Techno-Organic being called Douglock, who was part of the Phalanx.

"Rahne? What's wro--"

Sam stopped himself once he saw the picture.

"Nothin' Sam," Rahne replied.

"How is Douglock, anyway?" Bobby asked.

"Why not ask him yourself?"

The young mutants immediately stood from their seats, prepared for battle.

"Man, you guys sure have changed..."

The voice came from a techno-organic being coming from the wall.

"Whatever happened to the laid-back, fun-lovin' bunch I used to know?"

"DOUGLOCK!!!" Rahne exclaimed, throwing her arms around him.

"Whoa... nice t' see you again, too, Rahne," he said. "But, it's just Warlock now."

"What happened t' ya?" Sam asked. "Ya've really changed since last ah saw ya."

"Well, that's a long story, 'selfriend'," Warlock replied. "But, I'm back to normal. No more Douglock, no more Phalanx, just Warlock."

"No matter what the circumstances, it's good to see you again," Shan said.

"Well, now that we're all settled in..." Bobby began. "What does everyone say to a little exercise in the Danger Room?"

Fully equipped with holographic, Shi'ar technology, the Danger Room is where the inhabitants of the X-Mansion hone their mutant abilities.

For now, the former New Mutants choose not to utilize the holographic technology, instead opting to run a simple, "capture the flag" scenario. Complete with robots armed to the teeth.

Using his mutant ability to propel himself through the air at

incredible speeds, Cannonball rocketed through one of the robots.

"Shan!! Over here!!"

Karma nodded to her teammate, hurling the orb-shaped "flag" at him.

"Behind you, Dani!!" Sunspot exclaimed, letting loose with an energy blast at the robot towering over Moonstar.

"Much obliged, Bobby," Moonstar replied. "Lock!! Rahne!! Cover our tails!!"

"Aye," Wolfsbane replied, using her mutant ability to transform into a wolf-like being. "Y' ready, 'Locke?"

"When haven't I been?" Warlock asked, moment before a robot released an energy blast at him. He was thrown at the far wall. Immediately, he countered the attack by forming two, large spikes with his arms, and extending them through the robot. "Don't answer that."

Wolfsbane allowed herself a slight chuckle at Warlock's response. However, neither she nor Warlock fully realized what had just happen.

Somethin's wrong... Sam thought. These robots shouldn't be firing energy blasts. Their skill level isn't high enough, at least not for this exercise.

In response, the Danger Room's gun turrets exploded with laser fire.

"SCATTER!!!" Cannonball ordered, immediately falling into the position of leader.

"Sam, what's going on?" Karma asked. "Is this supposed to be a part of the exercise?"

"It's not what ah programmed!!" Cannonball replied.

"Look!! Up in the control room!!" Moonstar exclaimed, pointing to the booth. Someone was at the controls, but none of them could make the person out.

Could it be Cyclops? Cannonball thought. Or maybe Bishop? Ah know both o' them would be willing to train us hard. But, without

any warnin'?

"Want me to check it out?" Warlock asked.

"No," Cannonball replied. "It's probably just a test..."

He looked back up at the control booth. Empty.

"What in the...?"

He was cut off as the entire room began to go wild!! Pieces of metal flew all over the place. And at the center of it, a man dressed in crimson armor with a purple cape hovered.

"I apologize for the dramatic entrance," he said. "But I had to be sure that you were still skilled."

"Magneto!!"

"Precisely, Danielle," Erik Magnus Lensherr calmly stated, landing. The room grew calm again.

"What're ya doin' here?" Sam asked. "Ah saw you at th' funeral, but ah had no idea ya'd have enough guts ta invade th' Danger Room. Ya paid yer respects, so what're ya doin' here?"

"The answer to that question, Samuel, is quite simple," Magneto said, removing his crimson helmet. "I have come to recruit."

"No chance in hell we're going to join your Acolytes!!" Moonstar exclaimed.

"There is no need for you to," Magneto replied. "Don't you children see? Xavier's way was the wrong way. Despite his highly-respectable reputation, once the truth of his genetic heritage was revealed, he was killed. What does that say to you about his dream? Even a highly-respected mutant was killed because he was just that-- a mutant. What do you think they would do to you? To me? To any of us? You mustn't let your past connection to Charles cloud your vision. Don't you see? Charles had a dream, yes. But, in these times, it won't work. Mankind cannot even be at peace with themselves. How then, can they be at peace with us? You have all seen firsthand the result of mankind's genetic intolerance. The Sentinels, Genosha, Project: Wideawake, Operation: ZERO Tolerance. These are all examples of what can happen if we allow the human race to continue to oppress us. You have seen the future where Ahab and

his hounds hunted down mutants, when the Sentinels took over North America. After all this, can you truly tell me that you believe you are safe? That you believe Charles Xavier's dream has any hope of becoming a reality? The dream is just that, a dream. It would be wonderful if it could come to be. But it's time you all woke up to the cold, harsh reality. You are all angels who have fallen from grace. What do you say? Come with me back to Genosha. Join me in my cause."

"That's a pretty speech, sir," Sam said. "But ah think ah speak for all of us when ah say that ya've got exactly five minutes ta vacate th' premises peacefully, an' we won't let th' X-Men know ya'll were even here."

"Yuir right, Magneto," Rahne said. "We have seen what kin happen if'n mankind is allowed to oppress us. But, we've also seen what kin happen if we take yuir path. None o' us wanna see another holocaust."

"If that's your decision, then so be it," Magneto said, placing his helmet back on. "If you change your mind, you know where you can find me."

With that, he walked out of the Danger Room.

"Well, chalk that up for one of my most interesting afternoons..." Shan said. "I'd love to stay with you guys in X-Force, but it's not for me. I've got some other matters to work through."

"That's perfectly fine, Shan," Dani said. "What about you, Rahne?"

"Moirra doesn't need me help on Muir, I'd just be gettin' in her way," she replied. "So y'kin count me in."

"Yeah, I'm down wit' dat," Warlock said.

"That's enough TV for you, 'Locke," Dani said with a grin.

"Aww..." Warlock said, a pouting grin on his face. Dani couldn't help but laugh.

"What do you think, Sam?" she asked.

"Well, t'tell ya th' truth, ah'm not gonna be a part o' X-Force

anymore," Sam replied.

"What?" Rahne asked. "Why?"

"Ah've decided t' stay with the X-Men," Sam replied. "After th' funeral, ah talked t' Cyclops about it. He says that he's got no problem with me joinin' the team."

"It won't be the same without you, Sammy," Warlock said.

"What about you, Bobby?" Rahne asked. "Yuir gonna join us, aye?"

"I--uh..." Bobby began. "I--I'm gonna take a walk... Clear my head a bit..."

Bobby still couldn't fully understand what he was doing. In a way, he felt this was best. But, he was also a bit reluctant to continue with it.

He found himself standing before the statue erected of Professor Xavier. Beneath the ground it stood over was the body of their fallen leader. Magneto's words still rang through his head:

"Mankind cannot even be at peace with themselves. How then, can they be at peace with us?"

"You are all angels who have fallen from grace."

Fallen angels... Throughout his life, Roberto DaCoasta had often questioned many things. But this, this was different. This was a lot bigger than anything he knew.

"Out for a moonlight stroll?"

He didn't bother to turn around. He knew who the voice belonged to.

"I've considered your offer, sir," Bobby said, his head hanging. "And, I think you're right. That's why I've decided to join your Fallen Angels."

"Come," Magneto said. "There is much to be done."

Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable.
However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny...

Issue #2

by [Jay Corafa](#) (plot) and [Dino Pollard](#) (script)

Siryn

"I dun know what t' say..." Theresa Rourke stated in her Irish bourge. "I'm flattered that ye'd consider me t' be the leader o' X-Force. But Dani, wouldn't ye be a better choice? Or Sam?"

"Sam's decided to join up with X-Men Alpha,"* Danielle Moonstar replied. "And leading is not something I'm too keen on right now. Besides, you have experience with leading X-Force, you're the best choice. Far better than I am at this point."

(* In M2K's Uncanny X-Men #5 - Dino)

"What about Bobby?" Theresa asked.

Moonstar

"Well...." Rahne Sinclaire began. "Nae too long ago, Magneto interrupted a trainin' session me, Sam, Bobby, Dani, Shan, an' 'Lock were engaged in. He gave us an offer ta join him, an' we refused. Later that night, Bobby left th' Mansion, an' we discovered that he joined Magneto."*

(* Last issue - Dino)

Wolfsbane

"Right now, the only remnants of X-Force are the four of us," Dani said. "I was able to contact Jim, who said that he was done with fighting for now. I tried to get in touch with Tabitha and Ric, but couldn't find them anywhere."

Warlock

"So now it's just you, me, Rahne, an' 'Lock..." Theresa muttered. "I think we first need'ta talk with Bobby, see if we kin get him t' change his mind 'bout joining Magneto."

"'Lock's already workin' on that," Rahne said. "He's tapped into Cerebro right now."

So much information.... so many mutants.... They all must be eliminated for the threat they pose to the Collecti-- No! What am I saying? The Phalanx are gone, kaput!! I'm not like them, I broke free!! I'm my own man... err, being. I'm not part of the Phalanx Collective anymore! Wait!! That signature!! It's gotta be him!!

"I FOUND 'IM!!!" Warlock exclaimed.

Roberto DaCosta looked down at the prominent X on his costume. Was it still right for him to wear it? He wasn't a member of X-Force anymore, or of any team related with Xavier. Now, he was one of Magneto's Fallen Angels.

He had to give it one last shot... He had to try and convince the others that the Professor's dream failed... that Magneto had been right all these years.

"You're thinking about your former friends, aren't you, Roberto?"

"Can't be helped, sir..." Bobby replied, turning to the man who stood behind him. His demeanor was prominent, and demanded respect. Standing there, dressed in red armor with a purple cape and crimson helmet, he was one of the most feared men in the world. But, when the helmet was gone, Roberto DaCosta had noticed a compassion and kindness in the eyes of Erik Lehnsher.

"You mustn't let your past connection to them get in your way," Magneto stated. "If they do not wish to join us, conflict will arise from it. And you must be prepared."

"I--I know..." Bobby replied, hanging his head low. "That's why you didn't mask me from Cerebro, isn't it? So that they would come here?"

Magneto slowly nodded. He was a man of ideals, and he believed in his dream as strongly as Charles Xavier believed in his own. Magneto wished to create a haven for mutantkind, to save them from the oppression of man. After all the Apocalypses, all the Stryfes, all the Sinisters, all the MLFs, all the Gene Nations, all the Brotherhoods, Roberto realized that the chance of any peace between man and mutant was gone. It wouldn't do any good to try

and continue fighting for a dream that died with the dreamer...

Theresa Rourke, known as Siryn in battle, propelled herself through the air by using the sonic scream which she inherited from her father, Sean Cassidy (Banshee). At her side was the techno-organic being called Warlock, who had transformed himself into a miniature plane.

She looked down to see Dani Moonstar, formerly called Mirage, now simply Moonstar, keeping up on foot. Rahne Sinclair, already in her wolf form (which gave her the name Wolfsbane), was way ahead of the team. Warlock had discovered that Bobby was currently on a pier in New York Harbor. The team then quickly assembled to head down there and locate their missing teammate. Somehow, they needed to convince him that Magneto's way was the wrong way. How could he want to ally himself with a man like Magneto, who's the anti-thesis to everything they've been taught?

"Where is he?" Moonstar asked, looking around the pier.

"Cerebro said this is where he was..." Warlock replied, landing to the ground and shifting back into his normal state.

"But where is the boyo now?" Siryn asked.

"I'm right here, Terry..." Sunspot said, stepping into the light. "And we need to talk."

"BOBBY!!" Wolfsbane exclaimed. "What on Earth were ye thinkin'?! Joinin' Magneto?! Have ye forgotten everything the Professor's taught us?!"

"You guys need to realize something about Magneto," Sunspot replied. "Ever since we were kids, we've been taught that there's a chance for a better world, a world where man and mutant can live together in harmony. It was easy to believe that back then... we were young and full of promise. The entire world was filled with promise. But, times changed. The Professor's dream was a nice thought, but it can't be helped. Magneto wants to establish a place where mutants don't need to live in fear. Genosha is now a country where mutants can live in peace. The Professor's gone, we can't keep living in his shadow, or the shadow of his dream. There are other people who agree with me as well."

"Who?" Moonstar asked. "Magneto's insane followers, the Acolytes? The madmen who think that he's some sort of Messiah?"

"No..." Sunspot stated. "Them."

There was a sudden burst of light and smoke, signaling the arrival of Amelia Voght, the most-trusted of Magneto's Acolytes. Four mutants were with her. The members of X-Force recognized them. Tabitha Smith, Meltdown. Benjamin Russell, Shatterstar. Julio-Estaban Richter, Rictor. Maria Callasantos, Feral.

"We're the Fallen Angels," Sunspot stated. "I'm not the only one who agrees with Magneto, other former X-Force members do as well."

"Ye're all mad!!" Siryn exclaimed.

"Terry's right," Moonstar stated, pulling back her psionic bow. "No question about it, we have to save you from yourselves!!"

The psionic arrow flew through the air, before being obliterated in an explosion.

"Sorry 'bout that, Dani," Meltdown stated, another plasma time bomb forming in her hand. "But I've seen what those arrows of your can do, an' I'm not interested in frying my mind today!!"

Shatterstar leapt in the air, bringing his sword down on Warlock.

"Oops, silly me..." Warlock said as the blade sliced through air. "I forgot to reform myself."

"Coward!!" Shatterstar exclaimed. "I'll kill you where you stand!!"

Warlock's arms morphed into two swords as well.

"Them's fightin' words!!" he stated, swinging his blade at Shatterstar's. It completely sliced in half as it went through Shatterstar's sword. "Oh, that's not good..."

Shatterstar sliced through Warlock once again.

"STAY TOGETHER, YOU COWARD!!!"

"Why?" Warlock asked. "It's so much fun to watch you make a fool

of yourself!!"

Feral pounced on Wolfsbane, her claws and fangs bared. Rahne quickly countered by flipping her over, and slashing at her chest. The ground suddenly began to shake.

"Wha--?!" Wolfsbane exclaimed as she was thrown off her feet.

"Sorry about this, Rahne," Rictor stated, building up a seismic wave in his fingers. "But you have to realize that Magneto's way is the only way!!"

"Ric, I dunno what's gotten into the lot o' ye!!" she exclaimed.

"Face it, kiddo!!" Feral shouted, slashing her across the face.
"WE'RE THE FUTURE!!!"

"I don't wanna do this, Bobby!!" Siryn exclaimed, as she unleashed her sonic scream on her opponent.

"Neither do I!!" Sunspot replied, unleashing a plasma blast, which knocked Siryn out of the sky.

"Terry!!" Moonstar cried. "Bobby, d--ARGH!!!"

"Sorry about that, girl," Meltdown said, blowing smoke off of her fingers.

"Oh crud..." Warlock stated, looking around to see his teammates felled.

"This isn't good..."

"YOU'RE THE NEXT TO BE CANCELLED, ALIEN!!!"
Shatterstar warned, lifting his sword up.

"No."

'Star found that his arm was stuck in that position, and he couldn't move it.

"Magneto!! Let me finish him off!!"

"That's not our intent, Shatterstar," Magneto replied, hovering above them, as the members of X-Force began to come to. "You children must realize I'm not the monster Xavier made me and my dream out to be. It's time you came to realize the truth of the situation."

"No dice, Magneto," Moonstar stated, slowly getting to her feet. "We're not interested in joining you or your team, no matter if our former allies stand with you."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Danielle," Magneto stated. "Amelia, you can now take us away from this place."

"Gladly, Magneto," Amelia replied. With a gesture of her hand, the Fallen Angels and Magneto vanished, whisked away by Voght's teleportational powers. She turned towards X-Force. "You do realize that you've lost this day, don't you?"

"Ye may think that if ye wish, Amelia," Siryn stated. "But ye, among everyone else, should know that what Magneto attempts is lunacy. Ye cannae hope to fit every single mutant in Genosha."

"That was never our intent, Ms. Rourke," Amelia retorted.

"Why do ye serve him?" Rahne asked. "Ye used ta believe in the Professor..."

"What happened between Charles and I ended a long time ago," Amelia replied. "There is much you don't know about Magneto if you think he's only about destruction."

A flash of light and smoke was what next appeared, signaling Voght's exit.

NEXT ISSUE: X-Force goes off in search of a young girl who allegedly killed her father and is now on the run. Also, check out X-Force: Fallen Angels hitting the site next month for more on the Fallen Angels.

Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable.
However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny:

Issue #3

by [Jay Corafa](#) (plot) and [Dino Pollard](#) (script)

Siryn

The alien being known only as Warlock sat rigid in his chair, his techno-organic arms fused with the control panel of Cerebro. Rather than use Cerebro like most people do, by scouring the planet for mutant brainwaves, Warlock's techno-organic nature allows him to directly interface with the system, so he can process the data than anyone else currently inhabiting the X-Mansion.

Moonstar

Currently, he was searching for a possible murderer with mutant powers. According to the latest news broadcast, a man was found dead in an alleyway, killed by a mutant energy signature. With Cerebro, he was searching for any mutants around that area, though due to the fact that he wasn't telepathic, he couldn't scan the thoughts as well as the mutagenic signatures.

"How're ye holdin' up, 'Lock?" a young woman with an Irish accent asked. "Any luck yet?"

Wolfsbane

Warlock's mind instinctively processed the voice signature. Designate: Theresa Rourke/Sub-Designate: Siryn. Daughter of Banshee. Current leader of X-Force.

Warlock

"I've got a few targets," Warlock replied. "But, without an available telepath to scan the thoughts of those targets, it's almost like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Unfortunately, Phoenix is our only available telepath," Dani Moonstar stated. "But the X-Men aren't available right now."

"Then how are we gunna find this murderer?" Rahne Sinclair, called Wolfsbane interjected. Right now, these four were the only inhabitants of the X-Mansion, since the X-Men were off somewhere else.* They are all that remains of the mutant strike team called X-Force.

(* See current issues of M2K's *X-Men Alpha* - Dino)

"That's where I come in, Rahne," Dani replied. "With my mutant ability to form psionic projects of a person's hopes and fears, perhaps I can be of some assistance. I won't be as effective as Jean, but--"

"But it's our only chance," Terry noted. "Are ye sure yuir t' this, Dani?"

"Honestly, I'm not so sure..." she said. "That's not the point, though. It needs to be done, and I'm not about to back down when I'm needed."

Slowly, she lowered the Cerebro helmet onto her head. With a nod to Warlock, the machine was activated, and Dani suddenly felt a rush of images and thoughts. It was extremely painful for her to leaf through them all to try and locate the right one. She clenched her teeth as her powers began to pull 3-D images from the minds of the mutants Warlock had narrowed it down to. Is this how a telepath feels? Thoughts constantly forcing their way into your mind? With an extreme amount of control to block them out? She silently prayed for it to end. The ordeal was an incredible strain on the young woman's mind.

X-Force stood back as they watched their friend in obvious pain. Rahne instinctively moved closer, ready to separate Dani from Cerebro. When in her wolf-state, Rahne shared a telepathic link with Dani. Even though she was now in her human form, she could experience a fraction of the pain that Dani was being put through.

The images flashed by, one by one. Until, finally, a single image caught Terry's attention. It was a girl on her knees with a man lying on the ground in front of her. Her eyes were glowing brightly.

"STOP!!" Terry ordered. "Dani, hold that image!! 'Lock, try'n get a location!! Now let's get Dani out of that machine!!"

Rahne instantly went to her friend's aid, removing the Cerebro helmet from her.

"Dani...?"

"Just... gimme a... minute to... regain my s-strength..."

"Rahne, is she all right?"

"Aye," Rahne replied. "She's just exhausted, Terry. But, she'll be fine. If'n there's one thing I know 'bout Dani Moonstar, it's that she's a

fighter."

"Got it!!" Warlock exclaimed. "She's in Niagra!!"

"Then... let's get going..." Dani said, slowly standing up. "The Hummingbird's... prepped..."

"Sorry Dani, but ye're sittin' this one out," Siryn retorted. "Ye've not yet regained yuir full strength back."

"No offense Terry..." Dani stated. "But I don't care for your assessment at this moment. You're short on members, and, like it or not, you're going to need my help. I'm coming with."

"...fine."

"Point: Dani," Warlock muttered.

Niagra Falls. It's a natural wonder, separating New York and Canada. People from all over the world come to witness this awe-inspiring work of nature.

However, this young woman isn't here for sight-seeing. Her name is Emily, and she is on the run. A few nights ago, her latent mutant powers to fire optic blasts emerged, taking the life of her father.

Behind her is the classic angry mob. Obvious supporters of the Neo-Humanist Party and Jonathan Lancaster. They know Emily killed her father, they know she's a mutant, and they want her dead for that.

She considered using her optic blasts on them, but decided against it. She never wanted to use her powers against another human again, even if they were prepared to kill her. Her father, the only person who had ever cared about her, who had ever shown her love and compassion, was gone. Dead by her own hand. She looked out over the falls, and realized she had two choices. She could either be beaten to death by the mob, or she could leap into Niagra Falls, plummeting to a death much quicker than the one these bigots would have chosen. Yet, perhaps they would simply badly beat her and leave her here to survive? She could either risk a beating and live, or die a quick, merciful death.

Not much of a choice, really, she thought as she leapt out into the falls. The fierce water was growing much closer, and she knew that soon, it would be over. She faintly heard a loud noise over the sound of rushing

water, coming closer, perhaps police sirens?

Actually, this sound is a Siryn, the leader of X-Force. Using her mutant ability to emit a high frequency noise, Theresa Rourke is able to propel herself through the air, just the tactic she needs to rescue Emily before she falls to her death.

"Wolfsbane, Moonstar, keep the mob at bay!!" she shouted into a headset. "Warlock, bring the Hummingbird closer!!"

Emily was about to ask who Wolfsbane and Moonstar are, but she stopped herself when she saw a Native American woman and a wolf-girl fighting off the Neo-Humanists. Before her, she saw a jet of some kind hovering there. The hatch opened, and Siryn flew inside it, placing the young woman down.

"Are ye all right, lass?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so..." Emily replied. "But who are you people?"

"Me name is Siryn, the leader o' X-Force. That's Warlock up there pilotin' our ship, an' down there fightin' of yuir friends is Moonstar an' Wolfsbane."

"Y'know, this may be sort of a crazy question to ask, then again, I've been called pretty crazy myself... But shouldn't we be helping Rahne an' Dani?"

"Aye, 'Lock," Siryn stated. "Take us in, closer, an' leave 'em ta me."

The Hummingbird maneuvered just near the edge of the falls, and Siryn leapt out, using her sonic scream to assist her teammates.

I've got to help them out... Emily thought. They're risking their lives to save me, it's time I returned the favor, regardless of my powers.

She saw Warlock still sitting at the controls, his arms merged with the control panel. If she was to get out of here, she would have to do it quickly.

She looked out of the hatch, over the water. Briefly, she wondered if she would be able to make the jump, or if she would simply fall. She watched as Siryn, Moonstar, and Wolfsbane fought off the mob. Then, she made a decision--summoning up all her courage and the need to help her newfound friends, her eyes began to glow. Then, dual blasts fired forth from her retinas. As they shot out, she took notice of something--the beams were blue. When she accidentally killed her father, they were

red.

A sudden shift in the plane's trajectory caused Emily to fall back, her blast misdirected, striking Siryn. The Irish woman seemed unaffected though. And Emily felt something instinctive. She moved back and broke into a sprint towards the hatch, leaping out in the air. As she began to fall, she emitted a scream from deep within her throat, allowing her to levitate herself in the air. As she continued to fly upwards, she used her sonic scream to assault the mob, aiding Siryn.

The assault of the four women caused the mob to back down, running off. Screams of, "damn muties" and "burn in hell" were shouted as they retreated.

Once they departed, Warlock landed the Hummingbird and rejoined the group.

"Thank ye fr th' assist," Siryn said.

"It's the least I could do after you saved me," Emily replied. "But, I have no idea HOW I got your powers."

"I think that what happened might be your powers," Dani said. "You can probably take on another mutant's abilities when you strike them with your energy blasts. But we can't be sure until we return to the Mansion and have Dr. McCoy run some tests on her."

"But, the beams were red the first time I used them," Emily interjected. "That's how my father died... When they first emerged, that's when he was struck with them... But now, he's gone, and I've got no place to go."

"Nae," Wolfsbane retorted. "Ye're a mutant, like the lot o' us, an' that means that there's a home for ye with X-Force."

"I'm... honored..." Emily said.

"Welcome to X-Force, Emily," Moonstar stated.

"Call me Siphon."

"Now, let's get back ho--"

Before Moonstar could finish her sentence, she noticed a strange object fell from the sky, landing in the Canadian wilderness across the falls.

"Query: are we--"

"Do ye even have tae ask, 'Lock?'" Wolfsbane stated, as she broke into a sprint.

NEXT ISSUE: *X-Force crosses the Canadian border to find themselves hunted by a masked killer!!*

Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable. However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny...

Issue #4

by [Jay Corafa](#) (plot) and [Dino Pollard](#) (script)

Siryn

Her name is Emily, and the past few days have been hell for her. Her latent mutant powers to emit optic blasts finally emerged, and when they did, her father paid the ultimate price. She vowed to never use her powers again, and ever since then, she has been on the run, hunted by a mob of bigots.

Moonstar

In order to get away from them, she tried jumping into Niagra Falls, but was rescued by the team of mutants called X-Force. They then fought off the mob, and in order to pay them back, Emily broke her vow. It was then that she discovered a new aspect to her powers--the ability to siphon another mutant's powers for a short time. After this, she agreed to join X-Force, using the code-name Siphon. Now, it was time for her baptism of fire. Soon after the mob was gone, the team witnessed an object fall into the Canadian wilderness across the border.*

(* It all happened last issue - Dino)

Wolfsbane

"Do you guys do stuff like this every day?" she asked.

"Not exactly," Dani Moonstar replied.

Warlock

"Yeah, we look forward to days like today," Warlock joked.

"Pay 'im no mind, Em," Rahne Sinclair, called Wolfsbane interjected. "Th' walkin' circuit board likes tae make a lot o' jokes, an' that's about all he's good f'r."

Siphon

"If it wasn't for me, you'd never be able to use alla that complex Shi'ar stuff!!" Warlock exclaimed.

"And ye still cannae figure out how tae program th' blasted VCR..."

Rahne muttered.

"So... where'd that thing land?" Emily asked.

"Good question," Theresa Rourke, Siryn, replied. "'Lock, are ye pickin' up anythin'?"

"Nada," he said.

"I can feel a presence here..." Dani said. "But I can't seem to make out any projections..."

"We'll have tae split up, then," Siryn said. "Dani an' Em, look around to th' north. 'Lock, Rahne, come with me."

"This.... doesn't make any sense..." Dani stated as the pair began searching around.

"What doesn't?" Emily asked.

"All I sense is death..." Dani replied. "But, that's it. No hopes, no dreams, not even fear. Nothing. It's almost as if we're looking for a ghost..."

"Ghosts?" Emily said with a grin. "You can't be serious."

"After you've seen what I've seen, the concept of ghosts isn't too hard to grasp," she said.

"So you mean by being with you guys, I'm stuck in a science fiction movie?"

"Something like that..." Dani noted. "But worse."

Suddenly, Dani stopped short.

"What's wrong?" Em whispered.

"The presence of death is very strong..." Dani replied. "Whoever we're looking for is very close..."

The strange masked man watched the two young women with

interest. However, this interest wasn't lust, nor love. It was the hunt.
He gave his prey a silent stare, prepared to leap out at any moment...

"Rahne...?"

"My senses are nae pickin' up anythin'..." Rahne replied, fully-transformed into her wolf-state. "We may be goin' th' wrong way..."

"Ye pickin' anythin' up from Dani?" Terry asked.

"She senses somethin'..." Rahne answered. "Th' link is nae as strong as it usually is. There's some interference..."

"What could be causin' that?" Terry asked once again.

"Broadcast towers...?" Warlock suggested. The two women simply glared at him. "What?"

"A telepath!" Rahne stated, stifling a chuckle.

"I've got something!!" Dani exclaimed.

"What?" Emily asked. "What happened?"

"The resonance of death is extremely strong..." Dani replied.
"Hopefully... I might be able to..."

She says no more words. Instead, Dani Moonstar concentrates on making that tangible. An image begins to form before them. That of a man in a tube of some sort, surrounded by others. Then.... pain... The death of one man... and the birth of another...

It is at this time that the hunter reveals himself. Clad from head to toe in a black bodysuit, he leaps from his hiding spot, prepared to attack the two members of X-Force!!

"Em, quickly!!" Dani shouted, a psionic bow and arrow forming in her hands.

Emily, or Siphon as she is now called, nodded, concentrating on the

man, then letting loose with red energy beams from her eyes.

An aura formed around the hunter, blocking the beams.

"What?!" Emily exclaimed. "What just..."

She was cut off mid-sentence as the hunter landed on her. He was then struck with one of Moonstar's psionic arrows.

"Get back!!" she ordered, pulling back to fire another.

The hunter simply looked at her, then extended his arm. The forcefield around it shot outward, forming into a spike of some sort. Dani quickly dodged away, firing another arrow.

"Rahne!!" she "shouted" through her telepathic link with Wolfsbane. "I think we found what we're looking for!! I need you guys to get over here right---ARGH!!"

"DANI!!!" Rahne shouted.

"What happened?" Siryn asked, running to Rahne's side.

"Dani an' Em..." Rahne replied. "They were attacked by someone... Tried t' contact me telepathically, before she... she... We've got tae help 'em!!"

Without waiting for her teammates, Rahne Sinclair broke out into a sprint to locate her friends.

"W-wait!!" Warlock shouted, his techno-organic body shifting into a motorcycle while Siryn flew through the air.

"Stay right where you are!!" Siphon ordered, her eyes glowing blue. The hunter turned away from Moonstar and began to approach his next victim.

Siphon let loose with a blue optic blast, attempting to absorb his powers. Instead of gaining the forcefield which surrounded him, she instead felt the thoughts of other people forcing their way into her head!!

"Wh--what's happening...?!" she shouted, clutching her head in pain.

"LEAVE 'ER ALONE, YE BLOODY MONSTER!!!!" Wolfsbane shouted, leaping on the hunter's back. The forcefield exploded into hundreds of spikes, forcing Rahne off.

"St-stop..." Siphon pleaded. "You can't fight him... he's not what you think..."

"Those are some nice spikes ya got there," Warlock began, thousands of spikes forming in his body. "Now lemme show ya mine!!"

The spikes shot out from his body, all harmlessly deflecting off the forcefield.

"Dani, are ye all right?" Siryn asked, helping Moonstar up.

"Wh--Terry...?" Dani asked. "Y--yeah... I think so..."

"Don't fight him!"

"What was that?!" Dani asked.

"Ye heard it too?" Siryn said. "It 'sounded' like... Em? I didnae know she had telepathic powers."

"Neither did any of us..." Moonstar stated. "That can only mean that she siphoned them off of our opponent."

"We cannae even touch him..." Siryn noted.

"At least not physically," Moonstar replied. "And it's obvious Em doesn't have as much control over those telepathic abilities she absorbed. That's why this is up to me..."

Concentrating hard, another psionic bow and arrow began forming in her hands, larger than the ones she usually fired. Her brow furrowed in concentration, she pulled back, and sent the arrow flying towards her target. The hunter felt this arrow. His entire body became rigid. Dani pulled back and fired another arrow, followed by another, and another. It was almost too much for her, or the hunter, to bear. And soon, his forcefield began to flicker off, giving Wolfsbane the opportunity she needed to take him down.

"That was... too close..." Dani stated, struggling to stay up.

"Ye shouldnae o' done that, Dani," Siryn said. "Ye've still nae fully recovered from usin' Cerebro."*

(* Last issue - Dino)

"I'll be fine, Terry," Dani replied. "Let's just see who our new friend is."

"When I siphoned his power, I picked something up," Em began. "His memory is muddled, and all I could get from him was that he's called Weapon-X."

The rest of the team looked at her with shock.

"What?" Em asked. "It's true. He attacked us because killing is all he knows. Almost as if it's been implanted inside of him..."

"That's why I sensed no hopes or fears from him," Dani replied. "Only death. All this man knows is death."

"But if he's really th' new Weapon-X, then what do we do with him?" Rahne asked.

"We should get 'im back tae th' Mansion," Siryn stated. "But first, we need tae find whatever fell from th' sky."

NEXT ISSUE: *The team finds what they were looking for, and ends up regretting it!!*

Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable. However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny...

Issue #5

by [Jay Corafa](#) (plot) and [Dino Pollard](#) (script)

"How is the subject responding?"

"Adamantium bonding would be too dangerous, he would die instantly."

Siryn

"Scans show that he possesses an x-factor gene."

"Yes, he has the potential for powerful, telepathic abilities. However, it may take years before he can fully develop them."

Moonstar

"Let's try to see if we can speed it up, then."

His eyes snapped open. The sun was blinding him. He couldn't remember when he had last been out during the day.

Wolfsbane

His name is unknown to him. However, he has the alias of Weapon-X. He wears a skintight costume which emits a forcefield around his body. He is able to warp this forcefield to his will, creating nearly anything out of it.

Warlock

Recently, he attacked the mutant heroes known as X-Force. He saw them, and thought they might be after him, to try and take him back. He couldn't allow that.

"Hey, looks like our guest is awake," Warlock stated. "Hiya!"

Siphon

Weapon-X said nothing, just glared at the alien being.

Weapon X

"Ooooookay...." Warlock said, turning away. "Gonna leave silent, morbid guy alone."

"Just as well, 'Lock," Siryn said. "We need tae get moving. We've got tae find where this object landed. For all we know, it could be dangerous. Rahne--"

"Dani's fine, Ter," Wolfsbane replied. "Just a bit weak. I'm not too sure that she should come with us, though."

"I'm fine, Rahne," Moonstar stated.

"Ye're pushing yourself to yuir limits," Siryn noted. "Ye cannae keep up like this."

"Umm... guys?" Warlock stated.

"I know my limits, Terry," Moonstar replied. "And I'm still in good enough shape to help out."

"If ye keep pushin' yourself, who knows what might happen!" Siryn exclaimed.

"Guys...?" Warlock said again.

"Look, you need me," Moonstar said. "Em hasn't gone through any training, and we're not sure if Weapon-X is friend or foe."

"GUYS!!!" Warlock exclaimed.

"What is it?" they asked in unison.

"My sensors have located something."

"Hmm... interesting..."

He ran a gloved hand over the object. It had a series of odd symbols on it.

"Alien in nature... I wonder..."

He stopped. There was something coming closer. In an instant, he vanished in a flash of light.

Warlock was the first to arrive, a horn extending from the side of his head.

"It's over yonder!" he stated.

"Ach..." Wolfsbane muttered as she moved closer. She was crouched down, transformed into her wolf-girl state. "Honestly 'Lock, can ye be serious for at least a bit?"

"Now where would be the fun in that?" Warlock asked.

"Look..." Moonstar broke in. She moved closer to the object. "That must be it."

"What is it?" Siphon asked.

"Some sort of space pod," Moonstar replied. "There's some odd writing on it. It's definitely alien in nature. Possibly Shi'ar."

"Hold on a sec..." Siphon stated. "You DID just say alien, right? As in from space?"

She nodded.

"I think I have a headache..."

"That's a side effect of wearin' an X on yuir uniform," Siryn noted with a slight chuckle.

"So... now you're telling me that aliens exist?" Siphon asked.

"Well... yeah," Warlock replied. "I'm an alien."

"You are...?" Siphon asked.

"What'd you think I was?" Warlock asked.

"Well... I dunno..." Siphon replied. "I thought maybe you were just a mutant who could shape-shift."

"Mmmmmm nope," Warlock stated. "I'm full, 100% alien. Well, maybe not full, but... that's a long story."

Weapon-X leapt through the air, landing in front of the team. Wolfsbane instantly got into a defensive position.

"Hold on a minute, Rahne," Moonstar stated telepathically. "Look, his back is to us."

He slowly stood, a hand pointing towards the woods.

"What's going on?" Siphon asked.

"I think he senses something..." Siryn replied. "We-"

He put up a hand to silence her. That same hand closed into a fist as his forcefield began to materialize around it. He shot the arm forward, and the forcefield extended out, forming into a spike as it slammed through several trees.

"What are ye doin'?" Siryn asked.

"I believe he's looking for me, Ms. Rourke."

He appeared behind them, the straps which composed his cape flowing about his body. Once, he was Nathaniel Essex, a Victorian scientist. Now, he was the mad geneticist known as...

"Sinister!" Siryn exclaimed.

"So, you six comprise the new X-Force, I understand," he stated. "Siryn, Moonstar, Wolfsbane, Warlock, Weapon-X, and..."

He looked at Siphon.

"...You, my dear, are a mystery," he continued.

"How is it you know about Weapon-X?" Moonstar asked.

"Do you honestly think that I'd be oblivious to what goes on in a place like Department H?" Sinister asked with a chuckle. "Now, if you don't mind, I will be taking this pod, as well as its occupant. And your teammate shall be joining me as well."

"The name's Siphon, pal!!" she exclaimed, unleashing an optic blast. "And there's no chance in hell I'll be going anywhere with you!!"

"Impressive, child," Sinister stated. "But not impressive enough."

He lifted his arm, sending out a powerful blast at Siphon.

"Hit 'em hard!!" Siryn ordered, unleashing her sonic scream.

"Children, children," Sinister calmly said as he took down Siryn and Wolfsbane with relative ease. "Don't you realize how pointless this is?"

"Yeah..." Warlock said, his arm forming into a battering ram as it slammed into their enemy. "But what can I say? Kids these days are stubborn."

"We'll never bow down to you!!" Moonstar shouted, unleashing several psionic arrows in unison. In her weakened state, that was about all she could muster. And against Sinister, she wasn't sure how well it would fare.

Weapon-X watched on as this happened. He could pick up thoughts from X-Force. They were good people, they could help him. With Sinister, all he saw was the same evil that was responsible for what he has become. He knew who the enemy was, and he wouldn't stand for it.

Leaping into the air, his forcefield became extremely jagged, covered with spikes. Then, those same spikes shot off from it, flying through the mad geneticist.

"I see that suit of yours works well," Sinister noted. "It's so nice to see Department H using technology to their advantage."

His eyes began to glow, and an energy blast emitted from them, engulfing Weapon-X. Moving over to the fallen Siphon, he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Then, he looked down at the rest of X-Force, his hand beginning to crackle with energy.

"So much potential wasted..." he stated, shaking his head. "It's sad, really."

Before he could fire, Weapon-X noticed the space pod opening. And then, a massive discharge of energy exploded from it, striking Sinister hard.

NEXT ISSUE: *Who's inside the pod? And is he friend or foe?*

Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable. However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny...

Issue #6

by [Jay Corafa](#) (plot) and [Dino Pollard](#) (script)

Nathanial Essex thought himself to be immune to pain. As the mad geneticist called Sinister, he thought he was immortal.

He thought wrong.

Siryn

Sinister came here for one purpose--to discover what secrets this space pod carried. He was confronted by the team of young mutants called X-Force, and defeated them easily in battle. Then, before he could destroy X-Force and take their teammate, Siphon, with him, he was attacked.

Moonstar

The masked assassin called Weapon-X, who aided X-Force in their battle with Sinister, saw the blast come from something inside the pod. Now, he watched on, curious as to what was actually happening.

Wolfsbane

A man stepped out from the pod, one hand crackling with white energy, the other with black.

"The power..." Sinister muttered. "If he is strong enough to harm me with a single blast, imagine what he could do..."

Warlock

The man glared at Sinister, his fists clenched. He slammed the two glowing fists together, and the resulting blast was enormous. When the dust cleared, Sinister was gone.

"My God..." Siphon muttered. "How could he... uh-oh..."

Siphon

"Who... who are ye?" Siryn asked, slowly getting to her feet.

"Radian," he replied. He observed the group before him, and the X symbol on Wolfsbane's uniform caught his eye. "You... are the X-Men?"

Weapon X

"Try X-Force," Moonstar stated. "Why?"

"I spent all my life in Shi'ar slave pens," Radian replied. "But, as far as I know, I'm a Terran. Recently, I escaped. And I'm going to find out the truth about my origins. And nothing will stand in my way. Not even you."

Somewhere in Canada...

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?!" a man in a labcoat exclaimed.

"I'm going to have to ask you to lower your voice, sir," an officer stated.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"Commander William Ryerson, sir," he replied.

"Well, Commander Ryerson, the name's Dr. Franklin, and I'm the one in charge of this operation!!"

"Not anymore, sir," Ryerson replied.

"Excuse me?" Franklin asked. "Could you run that by me again?"

"Your latest Weapon-X subject has escaped," Ryerson began. "I've been ordered by Department H to take over this operation."

"He's... escaped?"

"Yes," Ryerson continued. "And I have my orders. Shoot to kill."

"No, you don't understand!!" Franklin exclaimed. "This Weapon-X isn't like the others!!"

"How so?"

"We noticed that in the past, using full-grown individuals resulted in disaster," Franklin explained. "So, we attempted to use a more..."

submissive subject."

"What do you mean?" Ryerson asked.

"This Weapon-X isn't full-grown..." Franklin replied. "He's 17 years old. And, he has a latent telepathic ability."

Ryerson grabbed Dr. Franklin by the collar, and pulled him up to his face.

"You bastards make me sick, you know that, right?" he stated. "Experimenting on CHILDREN for god's sakes!! And now that you've screwed up, it's my job to clean up YOUR mess!!"

He threw Franklin to the ground, and turned to his troops.

"Fan out!!" he ordered. "This assassin is armed and extremely dangerous!!"*

(* For more on this, check out the *Weapon-X* limited series, coming soon!-Dino)

"Come again...?" Warlock asked.

"I was raised in the Shi'ar slave pens," Radian replied. "Since I was a child, I was living there. Recently, I found out that I am possibly a Terran. Using these new powers which recently surfaced, I escaped from the pens and commandeered an escape pod."

"Why did you do that to Sinister, though?" Siphon asked. "Just to help me, or..."

"My instincts told me that it was the best plan of action," Radian answered.

"Well, thank ye for yuir help," Siryn stated. "We couldnae have done this without ye. Is there anything we cou--"

"Just stay out of my way," Radian warned, walking off in the distance.

"I dun like 'im," Rahne noted.

"That makes two of us," Dani stated.

"What about you?" Siryn asked, turning to Weapon-X. "Ye tried tae kill us not too long ago, an' now, ye helped us against Sinister. What is yuir plan?"

Weapon-X looked over all of them, then extended his hand.

"Does this mean ye wanna join us?"

He nodded.

From a hidden location, Sinister watched these events unfold. Radian had evaded him for now, and he had teleported away just before the blast struck.

But, Radian would be his eventually.

NEXT ISSUE: *Weapon-X and Siphon--who are they and why are they with X-Force?*

*Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable.
However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny...*

Issue #7

by Jay Corafa (plot) and Dino Pollard (script)

"Emily, are you okay?"

"Dad... no..." she replied. "No, Dad... stay back, I--"

Siryn

"ARGH!!!"

"DAD!!!!"

She bent down beside him, her eyes glowing red.

Moonstar

"No.... Dad I'm so sorry... I tried to warn you... I..."

"Get away from him, kid."

"Who are you?"

Wolfsbane

"He's dead!! That damn mutie killed him!!"

"No... I didn't mean to... it was an accident!!"

"Well, it's time for another accident!!"

Warlock

"No... please no.... DON'T!!!"

"KILL THE MUTIES!!!"

"DEATH TO ALL MUTANTS!!!"

Siphon

Weapon X

"NOOOOO!!!!!!!"

"Em... Em wake up!!" Dani shouted. "EM!!!"

"Get away from me!!" Emily exclaimed, knocking her teammate, Dani Moonstar to the ground.

"Em, it's me, it's Dani."

"D-Dani...?" Em asked. She slowly got to her feet, looking around. "Oh God... Dani, I'm sorry... I..."

"Don't worry about it," Dani replied. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I think so..." Em stated. She looked around the hotel room the team was lodged in for the night. On their way back to Canada, they spotted this town and decided to get some much-needed rest. Emily was in her street clothes when she met up with the team, and Dani had an image inducer stored in an emergency pack she carried with her. Warlock was able to configure the range so that it would expand to the entire team. The rates were good enough for them to rent out three rooms. Warlock and Weapon-X shared one, with Terry and Rahne in another, and Dani and Em sharing the last one.

"Was it a nightmare?" Dani asked.

"You might say that..." Em replied. "But it felt so real..."

"It happens sometimes," Dani said. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

"My bologna has a first name, it's O-S-C-A-R! My bologna has a second name, it's M-A-Y-E-URK"

Warlock looked down to see a glowing blade sticking through his abdomen. He looked to his roommate as the source. Weapon-X, the newest member of X-Force was sitting there, the forcefield surrounding him and his hand extended.

"Okay... so I take it you don't like Oscar-Mayer?" 'Lock asked. "What about Kid Rock? I'm a pimp, you can check my stat--"

The blade grew in size.

"All right... what about Will Smith? Gettin' jiggy wit' i--"

The blade continued to grow.

"Not a rap fan, I see. How about the Backstreet Bo--"

The blade nearly grew larger than Warlock.

"Okay... maybe I'll just shut up..."

The blade retracted, and Weapon-X's forcefield dissipated. He laid back on his bed.

"Sooooo...." Warlock stated, his head extending over to his new teammate. "What's your story?"

The silent assassin simply looked at the alien, and extended his hands out, putting them beside Warlock's head. Then, he began to concentrate.

"...*Show you...*" his telepathic voice rang out.

Warlock's mind became flooded with memories as he saw men experimenting on Weapon-X in a tube. They flashed by extremely quickly, and they were all brief. Warlock saw scientists screwing around with Weapon-X's mind... altering his perceptions, implanting thoughts and memories. Then, Warlock saw his teammate's first time out. His first experience using the battlesuit given to him by the Weapon-X program. He saw a massacre. He saw Weapon-X standing in a pool of blood and bodies.

Then, the memories stopped as Weapon-X removed his hands. Warlock simply stared at him in disbelief. Not only because of the memories he saw, but because Weapon-X was able to so easily project them into his alien mind.

The silent young man laid back down, and a smile appeared beneath his mask.

"...I wonder how Terry and Rahne are..." Warlock stated, exiting the room via the phone lines.

"Why me?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why me?" Em repeated. "I mean, why did you decide to share a room with me. I was under the impression that you and Rahne were really close."

"We are," Dani replied. "And under normal circumstances, I probably would have. But, with everything that's been happening lately, I didn't need her to fuss over me. Besides, I thought it'd be nice to get to know you a bit more."

"There's not much to know," Em said. "I'm just a girl with bad luck..."

"Why do you say that?" Dani asked.

"My mom died when I was real young," Em began. "My dad tried his best to support me financially as well as emotionally. I always understood why he couldn't be there for me at times. And then... my powers surfaced..."

"Oh..."

"You already know what happened then. Things just went from bad to worse..."

"I know what you're going through," Dani stated. "When my mutant power to create images of people's greatest fears first emerged, I couldn't control it. I created a symbolic vision of my parent's deaths. Shortly after, they disappeared while on a trip in the mountains, and my visions were haunted by a demonic bear. The bear transformed my parents, and he would have done the same to me if not for the actions of my grandfather, a shaman. He raised me in the mountains, and sent a letter to Professor Xavier, a friend of my father's. Before the Professor could arrive, my grandfather was killed by a cyborg named Pierce. I was hunted by Pierce's men, until I was rescued by the Professor and Karma, another mutant like me. I joined up with the New Mutants to defeat Pierce, and remained with them to learn how to use my powers. On a trip to Asgard, I became a Valkyrie, one of Odin's warrior wome--"

Dani noticed Em's puzzled look and simply chuckled.

"Well... let's just say it's a long story," she continued. "But, you're not alone. Everyone in X-Force has been through tough times."

Warlock was actually dead for a period of time."

"Then how..." Em began.

"I don't think there's enough time in the day for that story," Dani said. "You migh--"

She was cut off, as the ground began to shake.

"What's going on?" Em asked.

"It's an earthquake..." Dani replied. "Oh no... the town!!"

"I'm telling ya, the guy's a regular nutcase!!" Warlock exclaimed.

"Lock, will ye just calm down?" Rahne pleaded.

"He tried to kill me!!"

"Can ye blame 'im, boyo?" Terry asked with a grin. "Ye said it yuirself, ye were singing the Oscar-Mayer song."

"But EVERYONE loves Oscar-Mayer!!" Warlock stated. "Seriously though, why is he here? Why don't we just ask other people who've tried to kill us if they wanna join? Think maybe Ahab's looking for a team?"

"Lock, th' Weapon-X Project messes with a peron's head," Terry explained. "Try t'understand, he's been engineered tae do this. And ye saw how he helped us against Sinister.* He was actin' on instinct at th' time. An' also, if we keep him on the team, we can also keep an eye on him if he does go rogue."

"I STILL don't like it..."

"Ach, ye're impossible..." Rahne stated, throwing her hands into the air. Suddenly, the building began to shake, and the three teammates were thrown off their feet.

"An earthquake...?" Terry asked, struggling to get to her feet.

The door smashed open, and Weapon-X was standing there. He motioned for them to leave.

"We have tae help th' townspeople!!" Rahne exclaimed, transforming into her wolf-form.

Weapon-X simply looked over at Terry, his head tilted to the side as if he was confused.

"Ye cannae use yuir forcefield tae hurt anyone," Terry ordered. "We hafta help these people, understand?"

He slowly nodded, and watched as Terry took off into the air, her sonic scream propelling her. Warlock began to move as well, gathering as many people as he could.

Weapon-X felt a familiar psychic presence, and glanced over to see Dani and Em doing their part as well.

Now he understood. They were saving lives. This is what they did. Their whole purpose was to help people. They weren't working for someone else. They weren't forced to do any of this. They were doing this because it's the right thing to do.

The whole concept still seemed alien to him. He had never used his suit for anything but battle. He had never used his powers except to cause pain and suffering. And now, he was being called on to do it.

How can you erase something which has been programmed into your brain?

Wolfsbane moved quickly into houses, gathering people and taking them to safety. But there was only so much she could do.

While carrying a child in her arms, a piece of rubble blocked her path. She turned to go the opposite way, but she looked up to see one of the buildings beginning to topple. There was no time to get away, so instead, she covered the child, using her own body to shield him.

Then, she heard the rubble crashing around them. She opened her eyes to see a shimmering dome surrounding her. She turned to see Weapon-X standing there, his forcefield extended to a dome, protecting her from the falling rubble.

Once it passed, he deactivated his forcefield, and she simply stared

at him.

The rest of X-Force gathered around the two. The other townspeople began to stare at them in disbelief.

"We should get going..." Dani said. "We don't want to draw anymore attention."

"Aye..." Terry agreed, turning away. The team headed back across the Canadian border, where their plane was left.

NEXT ISSUE: *The team heads home--just in time for the Apocalypse cross-over!!*

Formerly known as the New Mutants, X-Force has been trained by Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Cable.
However, now they're striking out on their own, seeking to forge their own destiny...

Issue #8

"TO ALL THINGS—AN ENDING"

by [Dino Pollard](#)

BEEP

BEEP

Siryn

BEEP

BEEP

Moonstar

The only sound that filled the room was that of the heart monitor connected to Scott Summers. Once known as Cyclops, he was the leader of X-Men Alpha. Now, after a battle with an old enemy of Wolverine's called Payne,* he was left in a coma.

(* Back in M2K's *X-Men Alpha* #3 -- Dino)

Wolfsbane

At a desk not far from the bed lay one of Scott's closest friends-- Hank McCoy, the Beast. The door slid open, and a tall, black woman entered, wearing a robe. She placed a hand on Hank's shoulder, gently shaking him.

"Mmmm?" he asked, looking up.

Warlock

"It's late, Henry," the woman replied.

"I know, Ororo..." Hank replied, stretching his arms out and yawning. He looked at Ororo Munroe, his teammate known as Storm.

Siphon

"This whole thing must be seriously affecting you," Storm stated.
"First the team breaks up.* Then Scott's coma. And now, Jean is

missing, a captive of Apocalypse."**

(* M2K's *The Uncanny X-Men* #5 -- Dino)

** M2K's *Apocalypse: Ageless Fury* #11-12 -- Dino again)

Weapon X

"I have to stay here..." Hank stated. "I can't just leave him like this."

"Come on," Storm said. "There will be plenty of time to perform more tests on him in the morning."

Hank looked at his friend before standing up.

"I suppose you're right..."

The plane skidded to a stop inside the hangar. Sam Guthrie stood near it, a smile on his face. The people inside the jet were friends of his, and former teammates before he became the leader of X-Men Alpha.

The hatch opened, and Rahne Sinclair was the first to step out.

"Sam!" she exclaimed.

Sam simply smiled.

"Hey Rahne," he stated.

Theresa Rourke, Dani Moonstar, and Warlock were next, with the two latest additions to X-Force following--Weapon-X and Siphon.

"It's good to be back," Dani said, looking around the hangar. "How are the rest of the X-Men doing, Sam?"

"Not really much of an X-Men anymore," Sam replied as they walked out of the hangar. "Some psycho calling himself Payne started trouble with Logan. We came t' help out, an' the guy put Scott in a coma. And after that mess with Apocalypse, Jean went missin', as you guys already know. So now, it's just me, Storm, Beast, an' Wolverine."

"Ye still didn't find anything concernin' Jean I take it," Terry noted. Sam nodded.

"Ah was hopin' you guys would have more luck tryin' t' track down

X-Man."

"Nope," Warlock said. "Trail went cold..."

"Don't ever think I've seen you this serious, 'Lock."

"Yeah, I know," Warlock continued. "It scares me, too, Rahne."

Two Days Later.

"WOLFSBANE! WOLVERINE! COVER THE GROUND DEFENSES! SIRYN! STORM! AH WANT YOU TWO IN THE AIR! SIPHON AN' MOONSTAR, YOU TWO HANG TOWARDS THE BACK! WEAPON-X, STICK CLOSE T' ME!!"

The eight mutants began Cannonball's attack plan, striking at the Sentinels from all different directions. They utilized every skill they had learned, and contributed as a team. Wolverine and Wolfsbane combined their savagery and stealth to strike from below. Storm and Siryn unleashed a two-pronged air assault, the likes of which was able to take down the robots, while Cannonball and Weapon-X combined their forcefields to try and create a bigger attack. Siphon and Moonstar handled back-up, striking at any Sentinels that got through the initial defense. The goal of the session was to protect the box which was behind them. If the Sentinels got it, game over. If they stopped the Sentinels first, they won.

Above the Danger Room in the control booth, Warlock sat plugged in to the system, while Beast looked over the read-outs.

"Keep 'em coming, 'Lock," Beast stated.

"Consider it done," Warlock replied. "But don't y' think we should be down there with them?"

"Right now, we're trying to evaluate them as a whole. Someone needs to run these adapting simulations, and while I'm concentrating on evaluating the teamwork, I can't control the simulation. That task is left up to you."

"All right, then I'm executing maneuver 14-B."

"Here I thought yours was a peaceful existence," Hank stated with a

grin across his face. Warlock simply winked.

Hank turned his attention back to the readouts. Then, something unusual happened.

"Hmmm..." he muttered. "There's an odd energy signature coming from the Danger Room..."

"Maybe it's Em," Warlock noted. "We don't really know much about her powers. Or maybe it's that Weapon-X guy. We know NOTHING about him."

"No..." Beast stated. "I've performed bio-scans on them, and it doesn't match up... Whatever it is, it's growing larger..."

"Umm... Beast... I think I know what it is..."

Beast looked over Warlock's shoulder. In the center of the Danger Room, a glowing blue oval appeared. Two women and one man emerged from it. One had long, blonde hair and a blue and yellow costume. She also held a large sword in her hands. The other young woman had long, brown hair pulled into a ponytail. She was dressed in a blue and white SHIELD uniform. The man wore a red and yellow costume, and his skin was composed of metal.

"Cancel the simulation!" Beast ordered. "NOW!!!"

"One step ahead o' ya..." Warlock muttered as the Sentinels began to vanish.

On the floor, X-Force and the X-Men prepared to strike.

"Don't make any sudden moves, Illyana..." Sam warned. "We may've been friends once, but that don't mean Ah'm gonna let you do whatever y' please..."

The young woman known as Magik looked at Sam, then at her Soul Sword. She dropped the weapon on the ground.

"I'm not here to fight, Sam," she stated. "Katya and Piotr need help-- fast."

"Then that's our first order of business," Storm stated. She looked up to see Beast and Warlock running towards them. "Warlock, take Peter and Kitty to the infirmary. Henry, go see what you can do for

them. The rest of us will go to the war room and sort this all out."

"X-Man came to us," Illyana stated. "He freed myself and the rest of the Pale Riders. But Katya and Piotr needed help, so Jean told me to teleport them here."

"Waitasec, did you just say Jean?" Logan asked. "Where the hell is she?!"

"In Apocalypse's citadel, I imagine," Illyana continued. "She also sent me with a message. She said she has some things to take care of, and that she has to do it on her own, so don't bother trying to search for her."

"So now what do we do?" Siphon asked.

One Week Later.

"Are you all right?" Colossus asked.

"Yeah..." Kitty replied. "I'll be fine..."

"I'm glad..." he stated.

An uncomfortable silence filled the air.

"So... what're you gonna do now?" she asked.

"I'm going back to the Exiles," he replied. "I made a promise to Exodus, and I plan to honor it."

"Oh..."

"What about you?"

"I think I might hang around here for a bit," she stated. "Just to take some time off from SHIELD."

"I've already spoken to my sister... I'll be leaving soon..."

"So..."

"So..."

"Maybe we'll run into each other sometime in the future?" Kitty asked.

"I hope so," Colossus replied. He stood up from the bed and walked towards the door.

"Don't go..."

"What?"

"Don't go, Peter," Kitty stated, standing to face him, moving closer. "Stay here with me. I'll leave SHIELD, you leave the Exiles."

"And what, Katya?" Peter asked. "Move into an apartment? Try and have a normal life?"

"Is that really such a bad thing?" Kitty asked.

"For us, yes..." Peter replied. "My time as one of Magneto's Acolytes made me learn something. And that is that I do have a responsibility. As an Exile, I can fulfill that responsibility, just as you can as a SHIELD operative."

"But Exodus of all people!!" Kitty exclaimed. "For the love of God, Peter, he's one of the X-Men's deadliest enemies!! He tried to kill Quicksilver, Crystal, Jean, Rogue, and even little Luna!! And you're following him--this **madman**?!"

"Things have changed, Katya," Peter replied. "I had hoped that you, of all people, would be willing to grant a second chance. It seems I was wrong about you."

Illyana stepped inside the room, avoiding eye contact with Kitty.

"Are you ready?" she asked Peter, avoiding his eyes as well.

"Yes," he replied, looking back at Kitty as the portal opened. "There's nothing left for me here."

He stepped inside the portal and it shrunk down to nothing, taking him with it. As it did, he watched Kitty Pryde staring at him, tears beginning to stream down his face. He felt his own eyes begin to water as well.

Once he was gone, Illyana finally looked up to face her friend.

"Kitty... I--"

"Oh God!" Kitty stated, throwing her arms around Illyana. Magik patted her on the back.

"It's okay, Kitty... Everything's going to be... okay..."

"I think that's about it, then," Siryn stated. "It does nae seem like X-Force has much of a purpose anymore. Weapon-X ran off earlier this week, an' Dani followed him.* Plus, many of our former teammates have joined up with Magneto. Because of this, Rahne, Em, 'Lock, and meself have decided t' disband X-Force."

(* M2K's *Weapon-X* #1-2 -- Dino)

"What?" Sam asked, a bit confused. "What're ya'll gonna do then?"

"I plan on stayin' here f'r a bit," Terry replied. "Though I may head up t' Boston t' see me father."

"I'm gonna be hanging around," Warlock said. "Can't get rid of me."

"I've got some relatives I need to visit," Siphon noted. "But other than that, it looks like I'm going to stay here, too."

"What about you, Rahne?" Storm asked.

"T' be honest, I probably won't be stayin'," Rahne replied. "I wanna pay a visit t' Muir Island. An' I hear Jamie an' Guido are spendin' some time t'gether, so maybe I'll drop them a line as well."

"Ah guess... that's it, then..."

Terry nodded.

"That's it..."

"Many of the children of the atom are destined for greatness."

"What do you want from me?"

"In order to survive, one must leave a legacy. And to do that I needed you."

"You now harbor the devil's child."

"The devil's child."

"The devil's child."

"The devil's child."

"JEAN!!"

Scott Summers looked around the infirmary and found nothing. He placed his hands on his head.

"Jean... no... it can't be true..."

AUTHOR'S NOTES: *Well, it had to happen. The new X-Force only lasted eight issues, but I speak for Jay and myself when I say that we had a blast doing it. There are some questions left unanswered, so lemme get to those right now.*

First off is the time factor. Chronologically, this takes place after Apocalypse: Ageless Fury, which takes place after X-Force #7. I know it's a bit confusing, but there were problems with the plots, so that's why it appeared later than it should have.

For more on Colossus, check out Exiles, a new series written by Ryan Hawk.

For Weapon-X and Moonstar, check out the Weapon-X limited series, written by yours truly.

For the future of the X-Men, make sure you keep on reading X-Men Alpha by Gwyna.

For more on Wolfsbane, read an upcoming issue of X-Men Unlimited by Kari Retzlaff.

And finally, for more on Cyclops and Phoenix, make sure you read the upcoming Team-X, plotted by Jay and scripted by myself.

Also, Jay and I have finished our collaboration on X-Force: Fallen Angels. However, that book won't be canceled. Magneto and his merry band of mutants will still be around, and the title will now be written by Iron Man scribe and EiC-Extroadinaire Russ Anderson.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #9

"BEGIN THE BEGUINE" Part I: The Next Stage

by [David Wheatley](#)

Pete Wisdom

Colonel Nicholas Fury, Executive Director of SHIELD* and veteran of three wars, looked at the display panel in front of him. He didn't like what he saw. In the past week, since the events in Madripoor, Hydra's activities had increased. With the Shadow King in charge, it seemed that Hydra had a new lease on life and it worried him.

(* Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistic Directorate - David)

Nick Fury

Before Hydra had just been a Nazi revivalist terrorist group, now they were acting much more like a global terrorist organization. They'd started operating smoother, being more effective in what they were doing and they were one step ahead of everything. However, Hydra were just the tip of the iceberg as far as Fury was concerned.

Cannonball

Global crime was on the increase in scales unimaginable. Names like Deus and Deathglare kept coming up, the Hand were making moves against Tony Stark, Captain America wasn't exactly the man he'd once been, according to the reports he'd gotten about the last favour he'd done for SHIELD, and the Avengers as a whole were doing other things.*

(* As seen in the various titles across the Marvel 2000 universe - David)

The X-Men were also in a sorrier state than they had been for a while, as they were still cleaning up after the mess caused by

Apocalypse, plus there was the other point that Magneto was in charge of Genosha and that was a powder keg just waiting to go up. Nick sighed, thinking how much things had changed since the Second World War.

"Gotten quicker too in the last few years," said Nick, thinking how much had changed recently. Heroes were called in for crisis management these days and of late it was one crisis after the other. At some point something was going to give and someone was going to have to pay. Then there was something Logan had said to him.

"Don't see you bendin' over backwards to help mutants," he'd said* and Fury knew he was right. Yes, he'd given information and such to the X-Men before, and certainly SHIELD had helped contain the Operation: Zero Tolerance yahoos, but Fury knew that SHIELD hadn't exactly done much to help the racial disturbances. It all came down to politics and Fury hated that. He wasn't a politician, he was a soldier and as a soldier he knew there was something to fight for. The freedom of all people from oppression was something he'd fought for all his life.

(* In M2K's Wolverine #12 - David)

If mutants were normal, the UN would have done something about this long ago, but they hadn't. SHIELD was answerable to the United States and through them to the United Nations, and Fury knew what he was going to do and placed a conference call to a certain mansion in Westchester, New York. He needed to borrow something and the current leader of the X-Men was just the person to ask.

Pete Wisdom was more or less unemployed.

He'd left Excalibur just before the team had broken up, and he certainly wasn't going back to Black Air. They wouldn't take him anyway. That didn't leave many places left. There were no jobs for him in the Weird Happenings Organisation and his connection to Black Air meant it was virtually impossible for him to find work in the rest of the intelligence community.

It wasn't exactly a desperate situation, as he had plenty of cash, but it wasn't going to last forever. He'd been able to get a couple of jobs as a bodyguard and such, but there weren't that many to be found these days. He did other bits and pieces here and there but that wasn't

exactly a challenge anymore.

Wisdom had contemplated heading over to the States to see what jobs there were over there. He had quite a few contacts from his old intel days. Plus he'd be able to go visiting some other old friends and perhaps find some old enemies as well. There wasn't anyone trying to kill him or anything these days. It was as if they felt that leaving him alone was the best revenge they could think of and they'd let him fade away in to oblivion.

Yes, the UK wasn't the place it had once been and to be honest he was bored. His bottle of scotch was almost empty anyway and he lit up another cigarette as he watched another repeat of an old show on the TV set. Then there was a knock on the door and Pete looked at his watch. He wasn't expecting anyone, Romany* was out of the country, and unless his watch had stopped he hadn't missed a date or anything. He sighed. Maybe he hadn't renewed the TV licence or something. It was going to break up the day anyway.

(* Pete's sister - David)

"What?" he said as he opened the door of the flat. There were a man and a woman in front of him, dressed in black suits. He almost smiled, as their dress sense was remarkably similar to his own.

"Peter Wisdom?" asked the man, who seemed to be your standard man in black type, with broad shoulders, dimpled chin and immaculate hair, cropped short at the back. His partner was not the standard, however. Her jet-black hair was shoulder length, and hung loosely around her shoulders. Her eyes were a deep green and she was quite pretty, and although she was a tad petite in stature, she was nicely rounded in his opinion.

"Who wants to know?" he said blowing smoke at them. Neither of the people at his door reacted to the smoke but produced badges.

"Agent Cooper and Agent Del Ruiz. SHIELD." No doubt about it, thought Pete as he looked at the badges. They were the genuine articles, and he'd seen enough of the SHIELD badges in his time to know the real deal from the fake.

"SHIELD? What do you want with me?"

"Director Fury would like to speak with you on a matter of some urgency," said the woman.

"Director Fury?" repeated Pete, almost disbelieving. The last time he'd met with SHIELD agents was when they'd borrowed Kitty from Muir and GW Bridge was in charge. Bridge had come across as an uneducated bigot and had nearly gotten a slap from Colossus. Wisdom hadn't exactly been courteous in his description of them either.* Now their real boss was asking for him? He sighed, wondering what the hell was going on. He'd soon know.

"I'll get my coat."

(* As seen in *Marvel's Kitty Pryde: Agent of SHIELD #1* - David)

Half an hour later they were aboard the Helicarrier, which was floating just over the Irish Sea. Wisdom was issued a security pass and escorted through the corridors of the vessel until they got to a door with Fury's name on it. Wisdom had kept his eyes open as he moved through the vessel, wondering if he'd run in to Pryde at all. It had been a long time since he'd spoken with her, and he wasn't sure how to react.

He'd gotten over her a while back, but things like that were never easy. The agent who was escorting him pressed the door chime and a voice came through on the intercom.

"Come in." The agent nodded to Pete who did as he was instructed. "So you're Wisdom?" said Fury as he entered the room. "Welcome to SHIELD."

"And you're Nick Fury. What do you want?"

"I see your attitude hasn't improved since your last meeting with SHIELD, and yes I do know about that. How was it you described us?" and he pressed a button on the console before him and a holographic image of Pete's head appeared.

"An international ring of over-armed control freaks who are suffering from a deficiency in childhood toilet training."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," said Wisdom non-apologetically. "Are you here to chew me out or what, because I do have things to do."

"No, you don't," said Fury, lighting up a cigar. "Been doin' some checkin' on ya. Yer unemployed, ya ain't got many friends left and

the jobs yer takin' lately ain't exactly somethin' fer a man of yer talents."

"I actually meant Eastenders," said Pete. "Watch it with half a bottle of whiskey in yer guts it becomes much more interesting, so cut to the chase."

"I'm offerin' ya a job. At SHIELD." It was all Pete could do not to snort at the suggestion.

"Doing what?"

"Ya've heard of X-Factor?"

"American government's pet mutant project."

"Yeah, well I'm creating one fer SHIELD. I want you ta head up the team."

"Let me get this straight," said Pete, taking out a cigarette and lighting it up. "You want me to head up your mutant division at SHIELD?"

"Yup. Not exactly a division, though."

"How many?"

"So far? You and Agent Del Ruiz."

"The skirt that came to my place?" Pete definitely remembered her.

"The same. Ya get to choose a few other mutants fer yer strike force. Each of 'em has to be approved by me."

"Who do I answer to, and what kind of autonomy do I have?"

"Ya answer direct to me or anyone I tell you in my absence, and yer autonomy will be on operations only. When yer onboard the Helicarrier, you'll fall in like everyone else. As for ranks and such, you'll have an operatin' rank o' Commander."

"What about the other details? My official status isn't exactly great."

"Don't worry about it. You agree and all your other problems'll disappear."

"I get to name my choices?"

"Yup. However you're only going to get three choices... don't start, that was the best I could do for now. Remember this'll be a highly experimental thing, an' high profile to boot. Your team will be codenamed X-Force."

"You asked Xavier's lot if you could have their name?"

"Yeah, first thing I did when I had the idea. Spoke to Sam Guthrie at their mansion an' he agreed in principle, but he was gonna check it with the other X-Men. X-Force was his old team and according to Wolverine they disbanded the team earlier this year, around the same time Katherine Pryde took a leave of absence from SHIELD."

"Really?" said Pete. There was relief in his voice and Fury noted it. He knew the situation between the two of them, and that Pryde's feeling's for the former X-Man Colossus had resurfaced. Romantic complications were something he didn't want on his Helicarrier.

"Yeah, she went to Egypt on a SHIELD mission during that Apocalypse business that was on the news. It was bad and she ain't been back since. I think she's hooked up with the X-Men again, ta be honest. At some point I'll find out, but they need her more'n I do. So what do you say?"

"Yeah," said Wisdom after a moment. "Why not? Where do I sign up?"

"I'll sort the details out. Ya'll need to get yerself a battle suit from the quartermaster's store on Deck 13 and then I'll brief ya on what exactly SHIELD does these days."

"Fair enough," said Pete. "And I want access to your files as well. I got a few ideas as to who I want on the team."

"Subject to approval," reminded Fury and extended his arm, offering Wisdom his hand, which Pete accepted. "Welcome to SHIELD."

"Guthrie," said Fury as he answered the call he'd just been informed of. The X-Men had gotten back to him over use of the name X-Force. While it wasn't copyrighted, he doubted the X-Men would like just anyone to claim it. "What can I do ya for?"

"Ah've spoken with the rest of the team," said Cannonball, his country accent coming through, "an' they're happy for you to use the name of X-Force, on one condition."

"Go on," said Fury, not best pleased about this but he could always say no and name the team something else.

"We want one of the X-Men on your team."

"Okay, I'll recall Pryde..."

"Kitty's busy, Colonel Fury, sir," said Cannonball. "However we do have someone for you. Siryn."

"Cassidy's daughter?" said Fury, thinking back to how Sean Cassidy had been one of Interpol's top agents, something that may or may not have been down to his sonic abilities. Including his daughter Teresa had possibilities.

"One an' the same, sir. She was on the old X-Force team, an' she'll be the connection to the new."

"Okay, I'll agree to your terms. Guess she'll be reporting back to ya at regular intervals."

"Only if there's somethin' she thinks we need to hear," said Sam, honestly. "An', to be fair, sir, it ain't like she'd be the first SHIELD agent to pass the X-Men information."

"Point taken, kid. Send her ta the Citicorp building in Manhattan. Get her ta pick out a pair of stonewashed jeans and take them in ta fitting room twelve."

"Yes, sir," said Sam and Fury cut the link. They'd be in America soon enough and now he had to go and break the news to Wisdom that his choices for the strike force were down to two.

"Great," said Pete as he looked at Fury, having heard about his new addition to the team. "That's just fan-bloody-tastic."

"It's just tough," said Fury. "Live with it."

"Not a lot of choice n the matter," muttered Pete, though he had to admit the battlesuit was quite comfortable. It was similar in feel to

the stuff the X-Men had their uniforms made of, the unstable molecule stuff. It seemed to simply mould itself to his body and he was able to fire his hot knives through the gauntlets without damaging them, which was fair enough.

"So who ya got then?" asked Fury.

"Couple of people," said Wisdom. "We need someone with military experience, for the covert stuff. Playin' it sly and sneaky, as they say. Got this bloke. David North, AKA Maverick. Absorbs and rechannels kinetic impact. Mostly as force through his fists for strength, but there's energy to them as well. Produces heat too, and there've been a couple of occasions when he's actually channeled it as a concussive blast." Pete blew a smoke ring, then continued. "He had the Legacy Virus, but that was resolved when they found the cure. However, he is missing an eye."

"No problem with that," said Fury, with a half smile. "Seems a good choice. Think ya can get him to join?"

"Oh yeah," said Pete. "Bits and pieces in the file. He'll come on board."

"Who's yer second?"

"Chap named Marcus Raven. Quite a powerful psion whose powers include telepathy, telekinesis and the ability to psionically charge the air, which causes his eye. The psionic powers he has somehow decelerate his ageing." He looked at Fury and gave a sardonic smile. "Almost as old as you, and in the same kind of condition. Has worked for the FBI for a few years now on their anti-terrorism squad. It's not widely known he's a mutant, but he was asked to join the X-Men a few years back. Just before the Magneto thing where you lot engaged the Magneto Protocols. I only know of him because MacTaggart had a file on him on Muir Isle."

"Why didn't he join the X-Men?"

"World fears and hates mutants anyway. Wasn't interested in becoming a high profile one."

"He's a good choice fer the team, but what makes ya think he'll change his mind?"

"Because I'm going to out him."

"That ain't nice."

"Not supposed to be. I want him to work with me not be my bosom buddy. He in?"

"Yeah, if you can get him in," said Fury. He wasn't happy about the way Wisdom was going to go about it, but he'd done some questionable things like that before so he wasn't about to query someone else. "Now I hope ya've been readin' up on yer other team member?"

"Special Agent Lydia Del Ruiz? Oh, yeah," said Pete. "And more than her vital statistics as well."

"Captain," warned Fury, "we're still subject to the same sexual discrimination suits in SHIELD that there are elsewhere. You might want to consider that."

"Fair enough," said Pete. "Anyhow, she's got an intriguing bio. Also known as the Shadow, for her detective skills and she worked for Interpol for several years. Her power to absorb solar energy, which builds up the strength of her muscles, is a nice little tool. Makes her fast, strong, clever which are all neat attributes in any line of work, not just this one. Her father is, known only as Del Ruiz, is currently in Genosha, and it conveniently doesn't say what he's doing there. Is he for or against Magneto?"

"We don't know. All we know is he shipped his daughter out of Genosha when Magnus took over. He was however a spiritual man, and we don't know if Magneto has room for them in his new regime."

"Either way, it provides us with a nice little 'in' for Genosha should it come to that."

"Maybe," said Fury. "Orders are to leave them to their own devices, though. Except now they've cured Legacy, Magneto doesn't have half the problems he had when they gave him the place. Orders can change."

"Great," said Pete. "Everyone of us has our own little talents. How Siryn is going to fit into this is another matter."

"Make her fit. She's played with the X-Men for long enough, so she's adaptable. Who was your third choice anyway?"

"Doesn't matter," said Wisdom.

"Pryde, by chance?" asked Fury and Wisdom didn't answer. "Would have said no anyway, Wisdom. There's too much of a history between the two of yer."

"Fair enough," said Pete. "When are we picking up Cassidy?"

"About an hour or so," replied Fury. "You an' Agent Del Ruiz oughta get acquainted, so ya can both welcome her aboard."

"Fury, the X-Men know about me?" Fury shook his head. "Oh, good. Should be interesting to see their faces."

"I don't doubt it," said Fury and made his exit, as Pete made a call to the FBI and then went to find Lydia Del Ruiz. This was going to be an interesting team.

Next Issue: The final three members of X-Force come aboard

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #10

"BEGIN THE BEGUINE" Part II: The 'I' in Team

by [David Wheatley](#)

"Stick yer damn job. Ah quit!"

Pete Wisdom

"Mutant scum," whispered Michael Gow, the slamming of the door covering his words. He was the deputy director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations, as well as a supporter of the Friends of Humanity and he had just learnt that one of his members of staff was a mutant. In the same way as the communists were hounded out thirty years ago, he had made it his job to remove the threat mutants posed to his way of life.

Sirvn

After all, they were only mutants and public opinion was never in their favor. Too many people had made sure of that in recent years. Special Agent Marcus Raven had been outed not 24 hours ago and it offended Gow. Raven had been with them for several years on their anti-terrorism unit and he was one of their best agents and it had to be because of his powers. Gow didn't like that.

Maverick

He didn't know who'd emailed him the information or how his informant had gotten it, but Raven had failed to put it on his application and failure to disclose all information was subject to suspension pending a review. It was a tenuous thing, but still possible, especially if you were the Deputy Director. By the time the affair was done, everyone would know he was a mutant and his career would have been over. However, seeing as how Raven just quit, the point was moot.

Nick Fury

He'd be lucky if he got assigned to background checks.

Gow smiled at the thought of how the other Friends would react to this one at the next rally.

12 hours earlier...

"Welcome to SHIELD, Miss Cassidy," said Nick Fury, flanked by two other agents. Siryn stepped out of the transport vehicle as Fury escorted her in to the Helicarrier.

"Thanks for havin' me," she said, her Irish brogue coming through, reminding Fury of her father.

"Wasn't exactly given a choice," said one of the agents waiting for the two of them. "As I recall."

"Peter Wisdom?"

"Hello, Terry. How's your dad these days?"

"What the hell are ye doin' here?"

"Meet yer field leader, Agent Cassidy," said Fury, wondering what possible history there could be between the two of them, and how Banshee fit in to it. He'd have to do some digging of his own. There was a mild anger in her eyes, that was certain, and there was mild amusement in Wisdom's.

"And this," said Pete, "is Lydia Del Ruiz. She's... perfect company for you. She'll show you the ropes, show you around, yada, yada, yada."

"Thank you, sir," answered Del Ruiz, tightly and Fury could tell that the two of them had either gotten on very well or very badly. He knew Wisdom could be a jerk, but he also knew that Del Ruiz had a rep as an ice queen. Wisdom had already expressed an attraction to her, but so had several of the other SHIELD agents aboard. "We'll get you kitted out with a uniform, quarters, and then I'll show you around. If you'd like to follow me, Theresa?"

"Terry, please," said Siryn, casting a glance at Wisdom, who winked and she turned her head.

"Oh, Terry?" he said and she looked back at him. "Welcome to X-Force."

"Thanks," she said and then Del Ruiz led her to the quartermaster's stores on Deck 13.

"Wisdom..." growled Fury. "What the hell was that about?"

"Oh, just some ancient history," said Wisdom, with a grin. "Not a problem."

"Better not be," said Fury. "There's a lot ridin' on this."

"Hey, she was given to us, remember. I did not choose her."

"Still better not be a problem, Wisdom. We're headin' out in an hour or so."

"Oh, good," said Wisdom, knowing where they were headed next. "Better get my patter sorted out."

"You're worried about getting' North on side?"

"Nope," said Wisdom. "This guy'll be the practice run for when we head over to the FBI. Now that one, I am worried about."

"Don't blame ya," said Fury. "I see from the outgoin' mail, ya sent the parcel. Why to Gow?"

"Because he's a bigoted, desk bound prick, who needs a slapping in the worst possible way. He's very insecure about mutants and joined the Friends of Humanity a while back after the assassination of Creed. He did the FBI agents who were investigated for that and they were tossed out of the Bureau, and he got promoted on the strength of it. His wife had an abortion a while before that though, because the kid was a mutant. It wasn't until Creed became a legitimate political force that he could declare his allegiance to the cause."

"That ain't on any record I've seen."

"You won't find it either," said Wisdom. "Black Air found it very nice to have an FBI Assistant Director on the payroll. That he became Deputy Director was an nice bonus."

"Ya mean they deleted the records an' kept a copy to blackmail

him?"

"Yup. Thing is, he was sold out by his wife. She gave 'em the info."

"Why'd she do that? Other than bein' a woman scorned?"

"She might have been seeing a Black Air agent when he was in the States from time to time."

"Anyone we know?" said Fury, shaking his head as he knew the answer to his question.

"Quite possibly," said Pete, with a tone of noncommittal. "Better get ready to go."

David North, AKA Christoph Nord, but better known by his codename of Maverick, was hunting for a missing friend. Chris Bradley was his friend and like Maverick he was a mutant. A powerful mutant, trained in the use of his powers by the X-Men and then through his own self-discovery when he left them due to the Legacy Virus. The virus itself was now cured but that wasn't the problem.

Chris had been abducted by Apocalypse and made in to one of his Pale Riders, something he'd only found out about by a glimpse of him on a news report of the activities, and even then it had been difficult to confirm the villain as Chris. There were many beings with electricity powers and Maverick had at first refused to believe that it was his friend, in a cause against everything that he had believed in.

Now, he would find Chris, he would find Apocalypse, he would find the Horsemen and the Riders and he would get his friend back or die in the attempt - he owed him that much. Several months on he was no better in finding either of them. The X-Men weren't able to tell him too much, save that some of their own were on the same hunt, and the other hero teams were less than forthcoming, which meant that he had to do this himself.

The key to it all was Apocalypse. If he found him, he'd find the others. However with Apocalypse being brain dead and everything after the psychics erased his mind, it made it difficult, but then again he'd been thought dead before and come back to haunt the world. Plus Magneto had come back from having his mind erased as well,

so why would this time be any different? Maverick didn't like the idea that he had been defeated that easily, either. It hadn't been exactly easy, but it was just too neat. He'd been in the covert ops business too long to like nice, neat pictures, especially as this one left no body in its wake.

Apocalypse had to still be out there, Maverick's instincts told him so and to find him he had to know him and he'd been working his way across America getting together as much information as he could on the seemingly immortal mutant. There were monuments to his history across the board, and it was just a case of putting the pieces back together.

He sat at home, watching the screens in front of him, his lover Elena Ivanova by his side and his friend, weapons supplier and information guru, Isabel Ferguson.

"You're sure nobody in Egypt has anything?" he asked Isabel.

"Nothing," she answered. "There's been no reports of anything over there related to Chris or to Apocalypse. I've been asking but nobody seems to have anything."

"Or they're too frightened to say," said Elena, her husky Russian accent coming through.

"Possibly," said North, as he sat back in his chair, resting a half-clenched fist just under his nose, thinking about what limited resources they had. It wasn't the days of the Weapon X project, or working with Barrington. He didn't have the information to hand at the touch of a button. He needed access, and he had to figure out a way to get it, because so far all they were doing was drawing blanks.

Then Elena sat up, her psychic abilities kicking in.

"We have guests," she said, and as she spoke Maverick pulled his gun from under the chair, as Isabel tossed him his mask.

"Get clear," he said, as he readied himself, but the knock on the door took him by surprise. "Huh?" he asked, lowering the weapon slightly. The knock came again.

"David North," came the call. "My name's Wisdom. Pete Wisdom. I want to talk to you." Maverick's first instinct was to wonder what Black Air wanted him for. He knew that Wisdom was a mutant, then he remembered something about Excalibur. Pete Wisdom had

defected from Black Air to be an X-Man, or something.

"Why?" he called.

"I want you to join SHIELD." Maverick almost dropped his gun. He looked at Elena and mouthed 'Is this on the level?' and she nodded.

"Okay," he said, stashing his gun. Then he opened the door. "So you're Pete Wisdom. Funny, I always had the impression you were taller."

"I get that a lot," said Pete. "As I said, I want you to join SHIELD. Interested?"

"I'm not sure," said Maverick. "Why would they need me?"

"Because I say they do. Fury's got me in to make up a mutant taskforce for him, to help the cause. Personally, I think it's crap but it's a job and it pays well. Besides there are people who think it will make a difference. The X-Men for one."

"The X-Men?" said Elena, stiffening as she knew Sabretooth was one of their number these days. "Are they involved in this project?"

"Not directly," said Pete. "We've borrowed their team name, X-Force, because they aren't using it. Couldn't hack it without Cable or something, I dunno. The only member of the X-Men on the team is Siryn, Sean Cassidy's lass. She's not exactly the golden girl of the team. Criminal, hung out with Black Tom and the Juggernaut, X-Force were considered terrorists at one point and she's also a recovering alcoholic. Other than her looks, she's not exactly the poster child of mutant relations."

"So why me?" asked Maverick.

"Because it's going to get down and dirty. You're a player in Black Ops, same as I was, except you were more militaristic than I was. You've got a perspective on things I could use and your mutant powers are kind of cool as well. Plus you've got Ivanova over there, and she might come in handy from time to time as well."

"What's in it for me?"

"Money, resources, the ability to do what your friend Chris dreamed of. Yes, I know about your search for him and how you're at a dead end. Fancy trying it with the backing of the SHIELD resources?"

They might even give you a hand getting him back."

There was the hook, thought Maverick. What would he do to get Chris back, what did he have to do. He could see the cocky grin in Wisdom's eyes. Wisdom had him, and they both knew it. To get Chris back, he'd sell his soul to the devil.

"Alright," said Maverick. "I'm in."

"David..." started Isabel.

"I know what I'm doing," he said. "Plus I might be able to solve some of our other problems while I'm there. Elena, I..."

"I know," she said. "It's the right thing to do. I'll see you when you get back."

"I love you," he said and they kissed. After they'd finished he turned to Wisdom. "Let's go."

"Certainly," said Pete. "If you'd follow me to the flying car, we'll head for the Helicarrier, and on the way I'll explain about the team."

Pete Wisdom sat across the road from FBI Headquarters, waiting for Marcus Raven to emerge from the building. If everything had gone according to plan, Deputy Director Gow would have suspended him and Raven would have quit in disgust.

It was a dirty thing to do to someone, he had to admit, but he needed him and outing him was the best course of action. Not that he was going to let Gow get away with such a shabby treatment of mutants. Pete didn't much like bigots, especially American ones. It was something to do with the freedom of speech thing, that they thought it was their God-given right to abuse people they thought were lesser than themselves and they did it every way they could.

Politeness, courtesy, tolerance - meant nothing to them. Pete wondered if it came from their European descendancy, but then again maybe it was just them. He shrugged at the thoughts, as his cigarette burnt down slowly as he waited and his fingers toyed at the keys of the laptop in front of him. Then he saw Raven leave the building and he started the car.

"Mr Raven," he said, as he pulled up alongside him. "Marcus

Raven."

"Do Ah know you?" asked Marcus, stopping and staring at the stranger.

"Not yet," said Pete. "Wisdom. Pete Wisdom. SHIELD." He produced his badge.

"SHIELD, huh? What do you fellas want with me?"

"We're recruiting mutants," said Pete, making a hot knife manifest from his right index finger. "Word is you're a mutant. Word is you're being persecuted out of the FBI."

"You guys are quick off the mark," said Raven, suspiciously.

"Let's just say that Mr Gow has been under a watchful eye for a while. We're getting together a task force, some people who can deal with troubles and make a positive image for mutant kind, that kind of thing. Your work in anti-terrorism gives you experience we could use."

"Not interested, but thanks anyway."

"Hear me out," said Wisdom. "This isn't the X-Men. We're not fighting to save the world, we're just trying to make it a safer place. Yes, we'll be mutant poster boys and girls, but if it does the trick, then who gives a damn? The world may hate and fear us but we've got badges, we got the backing of the law and the job needs doing."

"Looks like you've been doin' some research," said Raven. "Ah said no to Xavier, Ah'm saying no to you. Why should Ah say yes?"

"Because you've nothing to lose by not saying yes. At the moment, you're out of work, and the FBI won't give you references if they're on a mutant witch-hunt. You'll be lucky if you can get a job at McDonalds. With us, you get work, protection, a chance to do your job on a global playing field, and nobody gives a damn you're a mutant because we're all mutants. And we can make Deputy Director Gow's life hell, as well."

Raven stood there, weighing the man up, gently probing his mind with his telepathy. He was hiding something, certainly, and without doing a deeper probe he wouldn't find out what. However he believed in this, and he knew he wasn't a hero. He was a bastard doing a job that needed doing the only way he knew how. He wasn't

like Xavier, with his idyllic stance on how mutants should live with humans and everything would be sweetness and light.

Wisdom was a realist. If attitudes changed, so much the better, but he wasn't going to preach to the converted. Raven shook his head.

"Ah don't have much of a choice, do Ah?"

"Nope," said Wisdom. "You don't. Join my X-Force. It's the smart thing to do."

"Guess Ah'm in," he said.

"Good," said Pete, as he flicked his burnt down cigarette out of the window. "Oh and watch this." He opened the door and showed him the laptop, and Raven could clearly see a picture of Michael Gow.

"What is that file?"

"A security dossier on your former boss. All sorts of nasty secrets." Pete then hit a key. "Oops, I just mailed it to J. Jonah Jameson at the Daily Bugle. Guess that won't do his career any good. Bad me. Bad, bad, bad me."

"That wasn't nice," said Raven, as he looked up toward Gow's office and wondered if he was looking down at them, pondering what the mutant he'd just forced to quit was talking about and whom he was talking to.

"Neither's firing someone because they're a mutant," said Pete, his eyes narrowing and his tone deadly serious. "People want to play dirty fine, but they'd better be prepared to get the same back." Pete slung the laptop on the back seat and opened the other door. "Get in. I'll take you to the Helicarrier."

"A'right," said Raven and moved around the back and got in to the car. Pete smiled and put out his hand, which Rave accepted.

"Welcome to SHIELD."

Several hours later, Nick Fury looked down on the latest strike team in the SHIELD arsenal from the privacy of the watch room. Below was the training facility of the Helicarrier, a fully functional holographic battle room, based on the Danger Room of the X-Men.

Designed by Forge and using technology from Stark, it wasn't as advanced as the X-Men's facility but it was ultra high tech.

The five members of the team were all waiting for the training session to start, all of them dressed in SHIELD combat uniform. Cassidy and Del Ruiz looked as if they'd be in them all their lives and it was no skin off their nose as to whether or not they wore them. Wisdom, he mused didn't really look right in it, but then again the 'man in black' look had seemingly been his trademark and while he looked comfortable wearing it, Fury suspected it would be a while before people got used to it.

Marcus Raven seemed a little uncomfortable wearing it, but this was a man who didn't want to be a target, and now he was on the front lines. Yes, he'd been an active agent for counter terrorism, but that had an element of stealth and secrecy to it. You were either undercover or doing research work, with actual raids and such at the end of the sting. Fury wondered if he'd actually stick with the group and then his thoughts turned to Agent North.

He looked the most wary of the five, being separated from the armour that he had used to wear. He'd worn variations of the body armour since being a member of Team X, and now for him to go in to the field without it - you could see the psychological discomfort from here. However he was keeping the mask and Fury suspected it was to cover up his missing eye. Some people seemed to be less powerful if they were distinctly wounded, though Fury had never thought like that.

It gave him the edge if people underestimated him because of a missing eye, and in this game you needed every edge you could get. He nodded, thinking that this would either be a huge success or a major league mistake.

X-Force.

It would be some time before they had an actual mission to go on, because he wanted the team to get to know each other as a fighting unit first.

"Okay, people," he said in to the speaker. "Time to see how good you yahoos are."

The simulation began, and so did X-Force.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #11

"THE MADRIPOOR INSURRECTION" Part I: Start at the Beginning

by [David Wheatley](#)

Pete Wisdom

"Okay, boys an' girls," said Fury, "lissen up an' lissen up good." X-Force had undergone several weeks of intense training and Fury was now satisfied they would work well as a team in the field, which was good because he had an operation for them. He pressed a button on the console and it produced a three dimensional image above a central panel in front of the group, showing them a small island.

Sirvn

"Madripoor," said Fury. "Casablanca o' the modern world by all accounts." The group knew about the small island, located just off the coast of Malaysia in Indonesia. A small pearl in the crown of the Orient, where people could go and hide away taking whatever secrets they had with them.

Maverick

"A while back it was ruled by a monarchical dictator, name o' Baran, with support provided by General Nguyen Ngoc Coy until they both met with an unfortunate end a few years ago. Place was in chaos, controlled only by the criminal elements, on Jessan Hoan, also known as Tyger Tiger. In all fairness she kept the currency of the place in mostly gambling an' the other crime, not touching the murkier stuff, like slavery an' drugs. Until Viper came along."

Nick Fury

The image changed and the face of the former Madame Hydra appeared in place of the island.

"Wanna cut to the chase, Colonel?" asked Wisdom, slouched in his chair waiting for the mission brief, his cigarette in his hand and the smoke being caught in the projected light of the image. Fury didn't

mind as he had his cigar in his mouth.

"Then eyes back on the center panel, Wisdom," said his superior officer. Most people treated Fury one of two ways - as a revered mentor or as an old has-been. Pete Wisdom did neither, he treated him like a regular person, or as much as Wisdom treated any regular person. It was a breath of fresh air, which was why Fury let him get away with it.

"She took control o' the island an' of Hoan an' usin' her Hydra connections ta build the island inta arguably the crime capital of Asia. Even the Triads were lookin' over their shoulders. About a month or so ago, Viper and Hydra left the island, leaving the criminal empire there for the takin'. We don't know why they up an' left but we do know it had something to do with the X-Man Wolverine an' the creature known as the Shadow King."

"I thought the X-Men had killed him off," said Siryn. "In their last battle, he was obliterated by Jean."*

(* See M2K's *Uncanny X-Men* #3 - Russ)

"Yeah, and they also thought they took down Apocalypse too and look how right they were there," pointed out Wisdom. "The recent business with Wolverine aside, didn't I read a bulletin that we'd nabbed Hoan and she was in custody in the Vault?"

"Ya did," confirmed Fury. "Snatched her from the island's infirmary. Yeah, it wasn't a nice thing to do, but we all got our orders."

"So whose in charge now?" asked Maverick.

"This is why yer here," said Fury. "Seems like there's been an uprising an' there's a new man in charge. A new man with his own little army o' enforcers."

"You want us to go in there and enforce military law?" said Wisdom, perking up. Sounded like a job where they got to go and flex a bit of SHIELD muscle.

"Somethin' along those lines," confirmed Fury. "We hoped by taking away Hoan we'd put a serious dent in the operations. However it didn't work out. The crime is stronger than ever and even more people are afraid of the new guys. We didn't even know they were there. The new main charge calls himself the Dragon Lord."

"The Dragon Lord," sighed Pete. "Why don't they ever have normal names? Power's supposed to corrupt, not addle."

"Whoever he is, we do know he has several superhuman underlings working for him. The Children of the Pact is all we managed to find out but we do have some details on that in the SHIELD files, and we might have a possible match."

"Who?" asked Del Ruiz, wondering what the opposition was like.

"We haven't confirmed it is them, Lydia, but the last reference we had to the Children of the Pact is a criminal team known as the Folding Circle."

"Really?" asked Siryn, her grin evident.

"Yes, the ones that stole the Quinjet from the New Warriors."

"Are we scraping the bottom of the barrel here or what?" she said, shaking her head.

"Perhaps, but they were part of a small crime war a while back," said Raven. "A bloke called Aardwolf, if I remember it right."

"Yeah, you seem to know a lot about this," said Fury. "The FBI were keeping an eye on them, as part of the whole Quinjet deal. When the Taylor Foundation got involved and headed over to Madriport to sort things out from their end, the FBI got in touch with Interpol and kept an eye on things. With Madriport you generally leave it alone, because someone'll sort it out."

"Hmm," said Fury. "Now it's our turn."

"Question - how did that lot avoid the attention of Wolverine when they were in Madriport?" Siryn was still sceptical about this information.

"Oh come on, they got their heads handed to them by the New Warriors, so what kind of chance would they have against Logan?" chuckled Pete.

"It would have been an interesting fight," agreed Maverick with a smile. "So, we go in, we take them out?"

"Yup," said Fury. "Set it up so we can set up some kind of presence there. Should have done it as soon as we got Tyger out, but things

came up and resources are needed elsewhere."

"Then let's go to work," said Pete. "Give it a day or so, tops."

The team ditched the blues they wore as their SHIELD uniforms and got up in their civilian gear. It was only right to be as inconspicuous as possible for the moment, especially on a public ferry like this one. Theresa was looking out towards the town when Pete appeared on deck beside her.

"Are those the only clothes ye have?" asked Siryn as she saw him in his trademark black suit and white shirt.

"I like them," said Pete. "As did you, if I recall right."

"Screw ye," said Terry and Pete grinned as he watched her storm off, his head tilted to one side as he kept his eyes on her posterior and then he shook his head and lit up a cigarette.

"What was that about?" asked Maverick as he came up and stood beside him.

"History lesson," said Pete. "How you holding up, Davey?"

"Okay. Last time I was here, though..."

"You were feeling sorry for yourself havin' Legacy and tried to get Logan to kill you," said Pete blowing a smoke ring. "I heard. Actually I was in town that night."

"What for?" asked North.

"Oh, this and that," said Pete. "Just following up on summat."

"Ah," said Maverick, wondering if Pete had still been with Black Air at the time.

"Yup," said Pete. "Should be getting in to town in five minutes or so. Better get the team together." He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed the number, the special SHIELD prefix codes then 9372. That would send the signal to the members of X-Force that they were required.

Maverick's pager went off and Pete knew it had worked and that the

others would be here in a moment and soon the other three members of the team gathered. Pete turned and leaned back on the rail fence of the ferry.

"Okay, people, one more time. Lydia, you first."

"We check out the city, do some investigating, see what's what."

"Terry?" asked Pete.

"We find somethin', call it in. No heroics."

"Marc?"

"If something does happen, we contain the situation."

"Dave?"

"And try not to kill anyone."

"And we'll meet at the bar of the Hilton up in Hightown at six if we find nothing. Good, you guys have the game plan down. And remember who we are. We're not in uniform but we've got our badges. We've about an hour and a half so let's rock and roll."

The palace of Madripoor was as foreboding as it had always been and the presence inside made it all the more so. There was a stench of death about the place now and the plant life that had grown once had started to wither and die.

The Children of the Pact had rounded up four of the major crime lords of the city and brought them before the Dragon Lord. They had all known this was coming but it was still a shock to them all the same. He sat upon the throne, and where there had once been a computer system belonging to Hydra there was now a giant pit.

"Bring me your tributes," commanded the Dragon Lord, his arms resting on the arms of the chair as he stared down at them over his joined hands.

"That would be your turn, Alvarez," said one of the guards and shoved the man forward. Miguel Alvarez, steadied himself before he fell into the pit and walked towards the throne.

"My Lord," he said, genuflecting for his master, "the drug cartels which you have allowed to negotiate and run are not being as forthcoming as we would wish and our revenues are not being altered. They believe that they are now in the position to call the shots, with Tiger Tyger removed from the playing field. I cannot bring tribute to you, for there is no funding left after the levies you have already placed upon us."

"Your answer is unacceptable, Alvarez," said the Dragon Lord. "When I gave you the role you promised me you would be able to make the cartels listen to you, that you would call in your markers and ensure that we make as much profit as possible. You assured me that nothing would change. I was obviously mistaken in my judgement."

"But, my Lord..."

"Tiger," commanded the Dragon Lord and the man at the side of him flashed by quickly with a feral roar and Alvarez felt something graze his neck. Then he realised he couldn't breathe and his hand went to his throat in panic and he felt the warm liquid pouring from his neck. The realization that he was almost dead and in a few moments life would depart from him stunned him, and he sagged and fell back, down in to the pit behind him.

Smiling Tiger had slashed through his neck with such savagery he couldn't even scream as he fell down to whichever form of death claimed him first.

"Next," said the Dragon Lord and the others were glad they had been able to make their quota.

David North had never liked Madriport. In all the years he'd traveled to this city, to the island itself, he'd never found any of the so-called charms that attracted so many others. In his mind, the place was a cesspit and ought to have been leveled long ago. It had gotten worse since the lease that the United Kingdom had had on it expired in 2000.

And now he was part of the clean up crew. Five of them against a city. It was scarcely credible to think of but then again if one man could make a difference, just think what five could do. The first, best place he knew of to get information was the Princess Bar but that had been trashed and Logan had never had it really rebuilt. It

hadn't been worth his time or effort to do so.

In that case the second best place to go was Dionysus', named after the Greek god of poetry, song, drama, and drink. The small building stood in a shanty-like hovel on the border between Hightown and Lowtown, but inside it was a virtual palace compared to some of the dives. The rules here were simple - no fighting. The owner, Chi Xan, was an expert fighter and anything that started he would end, permanently on the counts of all involved. It was a challenge that had been ignored at first and was now a reputation.

North entered the building and walked down the small staircase and through the steel door at the end. Inside the place was jumping, there was entertainment on the center stage and the bar was busy as always. North watched and admired the exotic dancers before going back to work. He went down and ordered a beer, luckily they had a nice collection and there was a good German brand.

"Not seen you about before," said the man sitting next to him.

"Nope," said North. "Business trip."

"Buying or selling?"

"Selling." He reached flashed his coat and showed him a gun. "I know the rules."

"Serious piece of hardware," said the man as North covered it up. "Might know a buyer."

"Really," said North, noncommittally. "I hear the town's under new management though. Was hopin' to score a deal with the Tyger."

"You don't need a tiger when you've got a dragon."

"What d'you mean?"

"You're serious about selling, then meet me at Pier 17 at 7 tonight, Mr?"

"Decker, Ernst Decker. I didn't catch your name though."

"No, Mr Decker, you didn't. Until tonight."

"Sure," said North, and watched as the man put his drink down and walked out. Before the bar steward came to take it away, North

pocketed the glass. He'd be doing some checking of his own, as he was certain he was being checked on. It was a definite start in the right direction

"English nancy boy," taunted the group that had surrounded Pete Wisdom. They were Asian youths ranging from what he guessed was 18 to early twenties. He had been wandering the streets and back alleys trying to get a feel of the place. Madripoor was one of the places he'd always meant to visit but had never gotten around to it. He'd gone looking for the streets and the streets had now found him.

"I'll tell you this once, fellas," he said, as he lit up a cigarette. "Fuck off. Now." He took a breath then exhaled the smoke on to their faces.

"Or you'll what?" taunted one of them, coming closer and Pete grabbed him by the arm and pulled him forward, raising his knee so it caught the bloke in the gut. As the attacker crumpled under the blow, Pete released him and slammed his fist into his jaw, sending him down to the ground, where Pete then dropped ash from the cigarette on him.

"I'd say kick the crap out of you but it seems redundant," he said. One of the others pulled a knife, so Pete pulled one of his own. "Let's not make this messy," he said as the hot knife danced eagerly in front of them. "Now what did I just tell you?" They looked at each other, turned, and ran.

"Expertly done," came a voice and Pete turned, sending the hot knife flying into the wall, millimeters from the man's face. "I'm not sure if that was a good shot or a poor one," said the Asian woman who stood there. If she was concerned about the shot it didn't show.

"Take a wild guess," said Wisdom, wondering if she'd set the thugs on him and what she wanted.

"I always wondered what you were like, Mr Wisdom." Pete smiled, she was familiar with him and it gave her an advantage, however he could play that game too.

"And you're Min Li Ng." The SHIELD files had been cross-referenced with the Avengers files and he'd learnt a fair bit about the so-called Folding Circle.

"Oh, you're good. I can see why the Dragon Lord wants to talk to you."

"The who?"

"Or maybe not as good as he thought. Pier 17, 7pm."

"What's in it for me?"

"You get to leave the city alive," she said as she converted to her energy form and took off in to the night sky. Pete took another drag on the cigarette. He ought to call this in. He wasn't going to though.

Terry and Lydia were checking out the city, seeming for all intents and purposes to be two tourists in Hightown. Lydia was a detective by nature and she was keeping an eye on everyone, watching and waiting while Siryn acted as a distraction. It was a perfect cover as most people looked at the redhead anyway, not really giving Lydia a second look.

What surprised Lydia most was how Madripoor was similar in design to Genosha, or at least how it used to be. She hadn't been back since Magneto took over, since her father made her leave, and though she could hazard a guess as to why, there was no actual proof to confirm her suspicions. Back to the matter at hand though.

"Wanna get a coffee?" she asked Terry.

"Sure," said her partner and they headed for the nearest café-bar. "We are being followed, aren't we?"

"Yes," replied Lydia. "Three of them."

"I only made two," commented Terry, thinking if Cable were still about she'd have gotten a lecture.

"The third is good, it took me a while to spot her."

"We're not goin' to find anything out with them on our tail, are we?"

"Not even going to try," said Lydia as she ordered a couple of coffees. "However, we've learnt something invaluable here. They know who we are, otherwise they'd have done something. They haven't because they we could break them in half. We blow our

cover, then we've very little left to lose."

"Great," said Terry. "So we've got a bit of time to kill before we go to the hotel."

"True enough," said Lydia, watching the young woman across the table. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," said Terry.

"What is between you and Pete Wisdom. There's something between the two of you at times that's so intense."

"It's a long story," said Terry. "An' not the kind o' thing that I'd discuss in public. Why ask?"

"Wisdom. I've been working with him and you all for weeks now, and I still don't get him in the least. Everyone else, I've figured out but him... He's infuriating and egotistical, he's surly and downright rude at times, he only respects the rules which he thinks will work for him, as well as being a sexist." Siryn looked at her, her head tilted to one side slightly

"Ye fancy him?"

"Yeah," sighed Lydia, shaking her head in disgust and disappointment at herself. "I think so, and it's not exactly something I'm proud of."

"Dinnae worry," she said. "When he turns on the charm, it's magnetic. It's hard to imagine him as a lady-killer but..." She trailed off as the drinks were delivered. "It ain't worth it."

"Experience?"

"Men like him."

"Ah. But it doesn't go away, does it?"

"Not fer a while," she said as she took a drink. "Not fer a while. Come on, let's enjoy ourselves a bit then lose those clowns."

Marcus Raven was having a little better luck than the others. As soon as he started on his way, he knew he was being followed,

thanks to his telepathy. He wasn't going to actively go into the man's mind, but he knew enough to keep a few steps ahead of him and eventually lost him.

It all meant that someone knew who they were, and if that were so then they had a problem. Raven was an ex-cop and now he was with SHIELD he was a whole new kind of law enforcement official. Madripoor was home to a vast amount of organizations -- the Hand, Hydra, the Yakuza, all of which were constantly being surveyed. That meant that if he went to the local police station he'd find out what he needed. Granted, they had nobody there as good a Chief Inspector Tai had been, but that didn't mean they didn't keep an eye on things. In this city information was worth a lot.

As Pete had said, they didn't have their uniforms but they did have their badges and so that was what he went for. He knew the face of the man who had been following him, so he wanted to find out as much as he could on him. He was obviously a thug for hire, but someone would know how to get in touch with him and who he worked for. It was conceivable that he worked for the Dragon Lord, but Raven needed something a little more substantial. Then he had a better idea, because if there were people who knew they were in town, the police would as well. A slight tweak of people's perceptions with his telepathy meant he was virtually invisible and he made his way inside and looked over the files and one place kept coming up time and again.

Pier 17.

He didn't know much more than that yet, but he sent a text message to Wisdom letting him know he was going to go and keep an eye on the place. It was a shot to nothing, but it was still a shot.

Pete heard the beep in his pocket and he set down his whiskey so he could retrieve his message. He was in the bar of the Hilton and it would be another few minutes or so before six, when the team was to meet.

"Oh, bloody hell," said Pete as he read his message. Raven wasn't stupid but if Wisdom's own meeting at Pier 17 was a set-up then, he could be in trouble.

"Wisdom," said North as he pulled up a chair. "I think I've got

something, someone who can get us some information."

"Good work, but we don't have much time, Marc could be in trouble."

"Why?" asked Terry as she arrived with Lydia.

"They know we're here," said Pete, noting the lack of surprise on the faces of the two women.

"They do?" asked North.

"Try and keep up, Davey," said Pete. "What did you get?"

"I'm meeting with a weapons dealer at 7pm."

"Pier 17 by any chance?" asked Pete.

"How the hell did you know that?"

"Because I've got an appointment myself, and guess where Raven's headed?"

"What I don't understand is how they knew we were coming?" said Terry. "We've taken every precaution."

"Someone ratted us out," said Pete.

"It couldn't be someone in SHIELD," said Lydia.

"Don't count on that," said North. "You never know what people are capable of and the stuff that's gone down of late with Sharon Carter should show that."*

(* See recent issues of M2K's *Captain America* for details on Sharon -- Russ)

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," said Pete as he downed his whiskey. "Right now we suit up and head for Pier 17. May as well spring the trap, after all the trouble they've gone to."

"Is this a good idea?" asked Siryn.

"Probably not," said Pete. "But we're being played at the moment and I'm not having that. They wanna meet, we'll meet them on our

terms. Any objections?"

The rest stayed silent.

"Good, because this isn't a democracy. Now, let's go kick butt and take names."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #12

"THE MADRIPOOR INSURRECTION" Part II: Go On Until You Come To The End

by [David Wheatley](#)

Marcus Raven, former agent of the FBI and now Agent of SHIELD, watched, as the pier became quite active.

Pete Wisdom

Pier 17 was a name that had come up time and again during his own investigation in to the Dragon Lord and his grip on the underworld of Madriport. Well, it's wasn't exactly an underworld as it was rather obvious as to what was going on. That was why SHIELD had sent them in, to sort it out.*

Siryn

* (You missed last issue? For shame... - David)

When Tyger Tiger had been in charge, the small island's crime had been of a more respectable nature. Now it was a true cesspool of greed, corruption and perversity. Tiger had never touched things like drugs or slavery, but under the influence of Viper and later the Shadow King, she had thrown those cares to the wind and anything had gone and it did.*

Maverick

* (See Wolverine #9 - #12 for details! - David)

Nick Fury

Raven closed his eyes a moment. Tyger had been a criminal but she did have her honour and those that had stripped it from her were without it. He didn't like what she did, but he did respect her moral

code. There were those in the world who would have thrown that to the wing and done it anyway. She hadn't and had been very successful.

Bloodstrike

Now that she was gone, and HYDRA as well, the maggots had crawled from the woodwork and were now devouring the corpse that was Madripor. If X-Force could do some permanent damage, it would be more than worth it, but first they had to see what was happening and here he was, keeping an eye on this place, waiting for the others to turn up. He wished he'd been able to put on his uniform but he hadn't had the time and it was in the hotel room anyway.

Midnight's Fire

The activity from and to the building had stopped, and Raven decided to get closer so he could find out a bit more, and he cautiously drew closer. The docks were a good place to hide but he had to be a little more careful as he crossed over. He got closer to the building at the end of the pier, using his psionic powers to mask himself, but that was one of the reasons he was going closer anyway. Rendering himself invisible was one thing, getting details from people's minds was something else.

Silk Fever

His psionic abilities were powerful, but he needed to get closer so that they would be in the range of his psionics and would allow him to make contact with those in there, so he knew what kind of odds they were up against. He focused his telepathy and tried to see who and what was inside the building at the end of the pier, but there was something wrong. His scan was being reflected back at him.

Smiling Tiger

"That can't be right," he muttered. He could just see through one of the windows and there were no actual signs of technology that would enable a psi-restrictor or something, though they could be small and out of sight. The question was why would they need one? It could be they were very protective, or that he was expected. Either way, he needed the others and quickly. He checked his coat and felt his sidearm there, and it made him feel better. Not much, but then he also had his telekinetic abilities. Though the psi-restrictor was an unwanted variable and he was unsure of how they would work with that active.

He had to wait for the others, there was no real choice here and his hand went to his cell phone. He wanted to call them, but he knew they'd send him a text message and that it was set to vibrate so it didn't give him away. Then he heard something and he turned to see a man standing behind him. A very large man, tall, wide and muscular, whom he recognised from Fury's briefing as Bloodstrike.

He wondered how fast the man was, and then realised he couldn't get a feel for him in his mind. Bloodstrike looked at him over the upper rim of the lower pair of sunglasses and Rave looked back at him, and he decided to risk it, pulling on his gun with his telekinesis so it flew from the holster to his hand without his hand moving. Before he could get a shot off, a giant fist slammed in to him and Raven figured he now knew how fast the man was as he slipped out of consciousness

"Well, that was interesting," said Wisdom, his unlit cigarette hanging from his bottom lip as he spoke. He pulled the small oval device away from his eyes, and slid it in to the lower leg pocket of his battle suit. The rest of X-Force were with him, on top of one of the buildings a short way back from the pier, but high enough to see what was going on.

"What did ye see? What's happenin'?" asked Siryn, wanting to know what he'd seen through his binoculars.

"Marcus just got taken out by Bloodstrike, and taken out rather easily," replied Maverick, his mask coming with it's own in-built telescopic visual scanner, so he didn't need the standard issue binoculars like everyone else.

"Yup," said Pete, as he ignited the small, white stick. "Interesting though, wasn't it? That guy came out of nowhere, obviously invisible to Raven's psi-scan. Definitely interesting."

"Why interesting?" asked Lydia Del Ruiz, her curiosity raised. Wisdom could see the wheels turning in her head as she worked out the possibilities. She knew what were the more likely possibilities and she was just missing that one clue, which he could provide her. He smiled inwardly at the tantalisation of his team-mate.

"Because it's could be a psi-damper. He was able to make his gun leap to his hand, which meant he had his powers. Which means they don't have an inhibitor field, so our gifts will work just fine."

"So they either countered his powers specifically and they're ready for all of us, or they were just very lucky," said Lydia. "My money's on the former."

"Oh yeah," said Pete. "Mine too. So if they're ready for us, we're ready for them. They'll probably have specific counters so the best

bet is to swap players when there's a problem. If there's a problem."

"So what's the plan?" asked Terry.

"Simple, love," said Pete, as he spat the cigarette to the floor, then crushed it under foot, putting it out. "First off, we get their attention." He looked back toward the direction of Pier 17, and made a quick calculation as to how far away it was. "What kind of range do you have on your sonic scream, these days?"

Inside the warehouse, the rest of the Circle was waiting with their small cadre of people as Bloodstrike brought in Raven's inert body and dumped it unceremoniously on the floor.

"Good work, Eric," said Midnight's Fire. "One down, several more to go."

"Wisdom will be here soon," said Min Li Ng, hovering in the air. "I say we kill Raven now, and display his body for the rest of SHIELD to see." Smiling Tiger hissed in agreement.

"No," said Fire. "We keep them alive for the moment. The Dragon Lord wants them taken that way. We all know the drill. But let's go over it one more..." Then there was a high pitched cry and all the windows shattered in the place

"Everyone out!" shouted Fire, struggling to make his voice heard over the sonic attack and the people started to evacuate through the trapdoor and down to a waiting boat. The Circle knew this was coming and each fitted in an ear-piece that enabled them to hear while cancelling out Siryn's song. "Looks like we have company," said Fire.

"Right on schedule," said Bloodstrike, cracking his knuckles. "Said they'd be watching us." Midnight's Fire gestured and the team exited the building, only to be met by a salvo of hot knives and energy blasts, coming from the small group of SHIELD agents coming at them.

Bloodstrike threw himself in the path of Maverick's kinetic bursts and Silk Fever intercepted Wisdom's shots.

"Get them!" said Midnight's Fire and they all raced forward to meet their designated targets. Bloodstrike went for Maverick, Silk Fever

went for Wisdom, Smiling Tiger went for Siryn and that left Midnight's Fire to deal with Del Ruiz.

Silk Fever managed to get to her quarry first, by the virtue of her flight and let loose her own powers, igniting the oxygen molecules in the air and directing it as an energy blast towards Pete.

"Bloody hell," said Wisdom, who ducked, rolled and met the blast with his own hot knives, hitting her blast dead centre, and though his were hotter than hers, she was pushing forward with her powers, while Pete was barely holding his ground. "I could really do with a hand," but the others were busy on their own. "Never mind," said Pete, thinking he'd better think of something fast.

Siryn was avoiding Smiling Tiger for two reasons. The first was that her powers seemed to have very little effect on him or on anyone else for some reason and the second was that the man's moves and the armour he wore were bringing back some dark and painful memories.

She had never got on with Feral, and when they had taken on King Bedlam and his Hellions, Feral had torn out Terry's throat with her claws. The damage that had been done was vast, ripping through her larynx and taking away her ability to speak and the use of her powers.* She had almost died, but she hadn't and the healing process had taken longer than she had liked, which was why she had gained some help in getting her powers back, help that nobody would understand, properly. Not her father, the X-Men, or SHIELD.

*** (It all happen just prior to the Magneto War in X-Force #90 - David)**

They had simply assumed it was some kind of special surgical technique, but if they learnt the truth, it would all be over and that was something she didn't want to happen. With her being in SHIELD there was less chance of the X-Men finding out and that suited her, because one day the question would be raised and she knew she wouldn't be able to look them in the eye.

However this kind of thing brought back memories she didn't need right now and reminded her that she couldn't always rely on her powers to see her through and she faced her fear head on. Using the anger of her shame to keep going, she flew out of Smiling Tiger's reach as he leapt at her, and she pulled her gun from the holster and

fired at him. The bullets knocked him back but bounced off the armour so he wasn't injured in any serious way, and it was only a matter of time before one of them faltered.

The question was who would it be?

Lydia was fighting Midnight's Fire in a clash of skill, ingenuity and power. She knew about him from the file, that he was an extraordinary fighter, with his enhanced senses, speed, agility and strength all working for him as well as a body that was highly resistant in nature to toxic elements. He also had a deadly array of weaponry at his disposal.

However, Lydia was an agent of SHIELD and not a bad combatant herself and she could match him move for move. His enhanced abilities were useful against normal people, but she was a mutant form Genosha, and she had needed her powers to survive there, before the reign of Magneto from which she had fled the country. Her power to absorb solar energy which increased the strength of her muscles meant that his enhanced abilities were matched by hers, which made the odds even. She was also a detective by nature, observing, calculating and finding a pattern to the clues and events so to make an educated deduction as to what the solution was. The fact the solar energy affected her every muscle meant that her brain had power to spare as well so she was very good at what she did, if not the best.

However Midnight's Fire wasn't allowing her the time to find a flaw in his style, so fast were their moves against each other. Duck, connect, parry, block with the fists and sometimes he would extend one of the two blades attached to his forearm. They were good blades, but the SHIELD uniform took off their edge and it was only if she allowed him to get to her exposed skin that he would connect.

Then at one point she had an idea as she noticed a slight pause when Fire was about to unleash a blade. It was the opening she needed and as he made his move, she grabbed his arm as the blade popped out, the mechanism stinging her fingers, but she threw him, holding the blade and it snapped under her strength and the momentum. Now they both had a blade as Fire turned the throw in to a roll and was back on his feet again.

"A good move," he said, giving her a slight bow.

"You'll find I'm full of them," she said. He smiled and then they went at it, his blade extended against the one she held in her hand. At close quarters all it needed now was one mistake.

Maverick was not best pleased at having to take on the bruiser, but then again he was the best placed of them to do so. The giant blows that pounded at him hurt like hell, but his power to absorb kinetic energy combined with the armour meant he could take it. Better than that, he could dish it out as well.

As they traded blows, North realised he could do with a gun or some of his other toys to help him out, but that wasn't going to happen. The SHIELD battle-suit was many things, but it wasn't his old combat armour and he had tried to get Fury to authorise some changes but it hadn't happened.

That said, he did have his side-arm, so he did something special and instead of trying to avoid the oncoming left hook, he caught it in both hands. He felt the impact of the blow lift him off his feet, and he was balanced precariously on the man's hand. Except he still had him, and there was a build up of power he wanted to get rid of.

"Uh oh," said Bloodstrike and tried to shake North loose, but Maverick fired his energy blast down the man's arm, knocking him through the timber panels of the pier. He could get out of there, given time but Maverick wasn't going to give him that, and a swift boot to the jaw snapped the man's head to the left with a crack.

"That was for Marcus," said Maverick, and turned to see who needed his help the most. There was an idea forming and Maverick fired a kinetic bolt at Silk Fever, nailing her from behind and she slammed in to a wall, then hit the floor and dropped in to the water, leaving a trail of fire behind her.

"Thank you," shouted Pete, and Maverick gave a thumbs up, as Pete turned his attention to Smiling Tiger and fired off a hot knife or two, sliding in to the armour and doing some rather nasty damage in the process. As Tiger howled in pain, Terry flew down and grabbed him, lifting him high in the air, knowing that his wounds made it hard for him to struggle effectively then she dropped him in the water as well.

That just left Midnight's Fire.

"Need a hand, Lyd?" asked Pete, as he lit up a cigarette, gesturing to Maverick and Siryn to go and check on Marcus.

"I got it," she said.

"Oh, yeah, you do," Pete said in a low tone and gave a sigh as he watched her svelte figure dance in the darkness, admiring the way her hair never seemed to get in her way. It had been a few months since he'd broken up with Samantha, and he'd never called her in the meantime and he pretty much figured that ship had sailed and the less said about Katherine Pryde the better. He blew a smoke ring in to the sky, watching his colleague battle the man. "Sod it," he muttered, raised his thumb and pointed his finger at Midnight's fire and winged his knee.

Midnight's Fire screamed in pain as his enhanced sense of touch amplified the effect, and his eyes watered as the stench of roasted skin hit his enhanced sense of smell. Lydia then belted him with a mean left hook, catching him in the jaw and sending Midnight's Fire to the floor with a hefty thud, sending splinters and dust up from the woodwork of the pier.

"What the hell was that for? I had him," she demanded, annoyed at the getting help she didn't need, but grateful for it at the same time.

"And you're welcome," said Pete, as he took another drag on his cigarette. "I said this'd be a day an' half tops. Don't want you making me wrong because you like fighting. You're good, Agent Del Ruiz. Very good."

"That's... that's..." Lydia was almost speechless at his arrogance, and annoyed at herself for liking the charm of the man.

"Yeah, I know," smirked Pete, then his smile died. "Where are the others? They should have been back by now."

"Notice how quiet it's become," said Lydia looking about, and Pete drew his gun.

"I don't like this," he said as he spat his cigarette to the floor. He looked down to see not one speck of red-hot ash, or the slow sparkle of the fag end burning down. "Oh, bloody hell."

"Welcome, Mr Wisdom," said a voice and they turned to see a man directly behind them. Before Pete had a chance to pull the trigger a swift roundhouse kick knocked it from his hand, where it caught

Lydia on the head, stunning her. The blow also snapped his wrist back and sheer power behind the blow knocked him to the floor.

"Bollocks," he gasped, feeling the twisting of his hand, and with his other hand he fired off a barrage of hot knives at his assailant, who fired a blot of pure blackness at the hot knives, swallowing them and feeding back to the source, where the darkness enveloped his hands.

"You have no hope of stopping my darkforce powers," smiled the man. "You took on my dragons and won, though that was always to be expected."

"Where are the others?" he demanded.

"They - and you - are my prisoners." The darkforce energies crept up Wisdom's body, holding him fast and preventing him from moving as the man who had defeated them towered over him. "I am the Dragon Lord, and you have failed."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #13

"THE MADRIPOOR INSURRECTION" Part III: Then Stop

by [David Wheatley](#)

Pete Wisdom

Pete Wisdom watched as they lowered the coffin in to the ground, as the chill of the October air got to him. He stood apart from the other mourners watching their reactions. Members of the X-Men, members of SHIELD, family and friends all gathered at this solemn time. All the while he stood there thinking how the mission could have gone so badly wrong, how he could have failed to see this coming, how he could have prevented it.

Siryn

Except his ego had gotten in the way and he was angry with himself, angry with those who had killed her. He watched her father's face and wondered how long it had been since they had spoken, what their last words were and what he was feeling now. It shouldn't have happened, they all knew that, and he wondered if they blamed him for it. He knew he did and that at the end of the day this was his fault.

Maverick

The clergyman, or whatever he was titled, was speaking but Wisdom couldn't hear the words, all he could see was the dirt being thrown on the mahogany finish, scattering in little pebbles across the lid, the thud of the earth resounding in his ears as if it were a shot from a gun. A shot from the gun. For all the super powers and for all the villains they had thought who would have supposed a simple piece of lead would end the life of one so young?

Nick Fury

Her SHIELD uniform had been powerless to stop the specially crafted bullet and it had shredded flesh, entering her chest and exploding between her shoulder blades, leaving a large exit wound

Bloodstrike

and they had all known she was finished. She had been his team mate, and long ago she had been his lover. He had been her first and the enmity between them at the break up had poisoned any friendship they might have had later. They had been professionals, but they had let personal feelings get in the way and it had cost them her life.

Midnight's Fire

The service ended and the people left, but Pete stood there watching the grave as the box was covered with the earth. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

Silk Fever

"Pete," said the voice the tone unmistakable, even though they had only known each other a relatively short time. "We're leaving now, heading back to the manor. Do you need a lift anywhere?" Pete shook his head and Brian Braddock turned to his wife Meggan, who was standing waiting for her husband. "Okay. You've got our number, if you want to talk." Pete nodded, his eyes not moving from what was the hole in the ground, and now her final resting place. The hand left his shoulder, and Wisdom stood there a while longer, until it started to get dark.

Smiling Tiger

He sighed and walked over to the earth. There was no headstone, for that would arrive later, but he knew what he needed to know. He knelt by the grave, his head bowed, in shame, in defeat, in loss.

"Oh, Kitty," he said. "What have I done?"

Theresa Rourke awoke and felt the bonds around her. She could not move her arms, she could barely stand but she didn't mind. Her life had been that way for so long now. She had failed in her role and her mind had snapped when she had lost her voice and her powers for the second time. She remembered the flash of the claws, streaking through the darkness, tearing open her throat. She could still feel the telekinetic pressure around her exposed larynx, holding in the blood, forcing the air in to her lungs as her friends went after the creature that had done this.

In that moment, the darkness had given way to light and the world had taken on a whole new meaning. God didn't want her to have her powers, to have abused the voice He had given her in such a way that caused harm to others and He had taken it away. In the great scheme of things she was a penguin, a creature with no purpose but to look pretty and to be admired. Yes, she was a penguin. Yet penguins were creatures of evil and had to be exterminated, wiped

off the face of the planet. From her hospital bed she had walked to the window and thrown herself out of it as all penguins must and she fell, floated, fell, floated, fell, floated and then she was back in on the ceiling again.

The thoughts disturbed her and she began to hit her head against the wall, again and again and again and again and again and again and again...

"She's no better," sighed Sean as he turned away from the monitor. He couldn't bear to see his daughter like this.

"Her mind shattered under the strain of her injuries and her guilt," explained Jean.

"What about Logan?" he asked, feeling a small shred of pity for the man, but not too much.

"Still comatose. His healing factor is only just keeping him alive. Jubilee has hope, but..." she trailed off not wanting to face that. At the end of the day she loved Logan and to think of him dead and gone... She couldn't do that.

"Best place for him."

"He was under the thrall of the Shadow King," she said, trying to rationalise it, but she knew Sean wasn't listening. To him, Logan would be the man who almost killed his daughter a second time, and if not for X-Force he would have succeeded as well. Now X-Force had taken the fight to HYDRA, with the full resources of SHIELD and the X-Men behind them.

It would be a long battle. He was here looking after the Massachusetts Academy and Jean was here because she was heavily pregnant and could not be involved in the battle.

"I'll buy you a coffee. It may be an asylum, but it does have great food," she said with a weak smile and they turned away from the screen. Inside the padded cell, Terry just kept hitting her head against the wall.

"Incredible," said Bloodstrike as he looked at the various members of the X-Force striketeam, fastened to the walls of the palace, their SHIELD uniforms illuminated in a green glow, while the darkforce

energies of the Dragon Lord covered their skins, entering their bodies and invaded their minds.

"I say we just kill them and be done with it," said Silk Fever, the heat radiating from her body as she hovered before them. "We don't need them."

"Really?" said Midnight's Fire. "Or is it you're just annoyed at how efficiently they took us down?"*

* (Last issue - David)

"Why don't you..." snarled Fever but before she could react, the room visibly darkened as the Dragon Lord appeared, angered at the scene before him..

"Silence," he commanded. "Breaking them is an arduous enough task without you're infighting. Fever, go out there and patrol, make sure that there are none of their allies out there. And see if you can find Smiling Tiger, I believe he's gone hunting."

"My Lord," she said, visibly cowed at his presence and made her leave.

"My Lord," said Midnight's Fire, who was doubtful to the honour of this action, "I must agree with Min. Why do we need them?"

"What better way to defeat our enemies than to convert them? Our ally in SHIELD informed me that the fabled Magneto once did the same thing to the X-Men until they broke the conditioning.* A failed process but mine is a little more... invasive."

* (In X-Men #3 - David)

"I see," said Fire, though not totally.

"Don't sweat it," said Bloodstrike, his wounds recovering though still visible after his bout with Maverick. "Besides, I want to see this for myself." The Dragon Lord smiled.

"Then enjoy," he said and faded away in to the background once more focusing himself for one of these agents was causing him a problem.

David North lay on his bed, waiting to die. The cure developed for the Legacy Virus during the Apocalypse crisis had failed, for it was not a cure but a repressor and it seemed that excessive use of the mutant ability caused the dormant virus to become active once more. He had been with SHIELD for eighteen months now and the virus had caught him bad. He was dying, and this time there was nothing that could be done.

"Damn," said Wisdom, outside the containment zone. It was sealed, so that the virus could not get out and ensure that the X-Force division did not become infected. He and his X-Force Alpha team had already been screened to determine if they had been infected or not and were routinely checked once a month. It was the only way for them to ensure the division survived, now that they were a vital part of the SHIELD operation.

"You can't smoke in here," said the nurse as she wandered by.

"Yeah, alright," said Pete and put the cigarettes back in his pocket and when she was gone he took it right back out again. "Ah, Davey, you look like hell."

"Good to see you too, Wisdom" muttered Maverick, though he was glad of the company and Wisdom wasn't one for telling people how well they looked which was a change from the usual crowd. "How's Lydia?"

"She's good, we're fine, thanks for askin'," he answered with a half scowl.

"You too haven't been fighting again," said North with a slow smile.

"Wasn't a fight, it was more of a 'I see you again I'll throw you off the Helicarrier', kind of thing," said Pete pulling up a chair. "We miss you though. The just isn't the same without you. I know, you're on my list."

"Gonna have to get used to it though," said Maverick. "Christ, Pete, even through the damned morphine it hurts." There was a tear rolling down the left cheek of his deformed face, the blisters and boils altering his looks even more dramatically than the first time he had the virus.

"I figured that. I hear you're still crying out in your sleep."

"That's the dreams. The Weapon X project large as life. I keep thinking if they'd done their jobs a little better I'd be fine."

"If they'd done it any better you wouldn't have been the man you are. We're grateful for that. All of us, and though goes double for the Bradley kid."*

* (Chris Bradely, better known as Bolt of the New Warriors. Go check it out after you've read this - David)

"Not seen Chris in ages," muttered Maverick, his eyes closing.

"Still in Paraguay, sorting out the Xavier LMD problem. Why they chose to go to Paraguay I don't know. The X-Men are still pissed at us for that."

"Miss... him..." said Maverick as he fell asleep.

Lydia Del Ruiz was being held in a detention block in Genosha, awaiting sentencing for her crimes against mutantkind. She was the last survivor of the X-Force team who had been inserted in to Genosha to stop Magneto's so called Fallen Angels, the last of the original X-Force. Their methods had become brutal, almost terroristic in nature and they had been striking out over the border, making strikes with in Wakandan territory.

X-Force had gone in after them, to sort them out and it had been a long and bloody battle between the two sides. They had bested the Fallen Angels but at a great cost. Her team mates were dead, Siryn had died first, drowning in her own blood and that had enraged Maverick and Wisdom who started firing everything they had, taking out half the team in moments, before Sunspot nailed Wisdom with a blast of energy. Wisdom's final act was to fire a hot knife through the young warrior's mouth and through the back of his head, searing a hole through his teeth, the heat melting the enamel and sealing the teeth shut, ensuring that the grin he died with would be hideously deformed.

The rest of the battle went just as badly and by sheer chance it was that Lydia survived when the others did not. She was the last person standing on the battlefield, in shock at the loss of her friends and the wounds she had taken, when Magneto himself arrived. His fury was unbridled and he vowed that she would be punished to the highest extent he was capable of. She was Genoshan and she was tried for

treason against her people and if found guilty her family would pay the price as well. Such was the law, the justice of Magneto.

Her trial had been long, her wounds untreated and she had lost her left leg in the process. Telepaths stole the secrets from her mind, taking her darkest and most private thoughts and giving them to the world, building a case that she had been like this from the moment she was born.

The first time she had wet her panties in public, the times she had injured herself, the first time she had been kissed, her first sexual experiences with a man, her fantasies about being with a woman, the feelings she had about her mutant birthright, the times she had been raped by magistrates who wanted to boast to their friends about being with a mutie and how they were no better than their wives or girlfriends and the whole genetically superior deal was a crock. By the end of it she did not know which memories were real and which of them had been planted and she no longer cared. She just wanted it to be over.

But it would not be at the hands of Magneto. From her cell she could just about see to the outside world, where a special guillotine was being prepared. She could imagine her fate as the blades came down, first removing her legs, then her arms, then her lower torso and finally her head. The Death of the Dark Knives it had been called, created as the ultimate punishment to those who would betray the Lord Magneto, for he could control the speeds at which the blades fell.

So far it had never been used, however she knew she would be the second, after her father. She could not allow that. There was another way.

"How long are you going to keep trying this?" asked Marcus Raven, ignoring the images that flashed by him. "Ah may be a novice to this heroes thing but Ah'm still a telepath and Ah know what you're doing."

"Who are you talking to?" asked the mission commander. The conference room at the FBI was packed with details on how to prevent a terrorist coup in a small place called Madripoor. Apparently the United Kingdom had asked for specialist help in taking the militant activists out before the place was handed over the

to Japanese.

"Not you," said Raven, who'd felt that there were things that were wrong when he'd woken up from his dream about working for SHIELD. As the day had gone on, he'd noticed small incongruities with the scenario and by now he'd realised exactly what was going on. He'd been using his psionic abilities for a long time now and he'd obviously been taken out hard for him not to have noticed it earlier. "So shut up, an' siddown." A telekinetic shove pushed the man back in to the wall, arousing the ire of the other agents standing in the room.

"Mutie bastard," whispered some, other mentioned the word 'freak' but Raven wasn't interested in them. They weren't real and didn't matter. However they weren't psionic constructs, because when a telepath entered his mind he was usually hit with a sledgehammer of a feedback from his psionic defences. It kept people from prying even when he had no actual access to his higher brain functions.

Which meant these things were something else entirely.

"Ah don't have time for this," muttered Marcus and gave them all a telekinetic push and slammed them all together and they collapsed in a heap on the floor. Marcus shook his head. "Come on out, because if you want my mind, then you'll have to meet me one on one."

"Very well," said the agents he had just slammed began to merge together, forming one being.

"Unless Ah miss my guess you are the Dragon Lord."

"Well met, Agent Raven. I'm afraid my attempts to subvert you are not going as well as my attempts to subvert the others but that won't be a problem too much longer."

"They ain't stupid, they'll figure it out."

"Possibly, but their psyche screening at SHIELD gave me an insight in to the darkest fears in their mind and I've got them on the ropes."

"This is Darkforce, isn't it?" said Marcus, looking at the way his reality appeared now that he knew what he could sense was wrong with it all. "Not the usual uses of the stuff."

"The potential of the energy has never been truly tapped. None can say what it even is. I have barely scratched the surface of my powers

and yet I stopped your colleagues with ease. Submit now, join with me, and I won't make them kill you."

"They could try," said Marcus, with more confidence than he felt, but he knew he had to keep strong or the Dragon Lord would break his defences. He could feel a buzz in the back of his head that meant his powers were being tested in some way. "You'd lose them and me, if they try to fight me."

"Oh they won't have to. Watch, and learn." The argon ord motioned and the information boards of the FBI showed four different scenes.

Pete Wisdom sat in the small apartment, a more or less empty bottle of whiskey at his side, the cigarette ash dripping into the glass and floating on the remains of the drink contained within. He was due to report to back to Fury tomorrow, but he wasn't going to go. He'd a better idea and he picked up his pistol and placed the barrel under his chin.

"Sod it."

Theresa cried and cried and she knew that she was an evil penguin and needed to die. The walls were not strong enough to hurt her, the padding meant they would only protect her... Something inside her, some aspect of the person she used to be, knew what to do and she crawled in to a corner of the room and placed her head against the wall. It would look like she was crying, instead of using the walls to block her mouth and nose, to shut off her air ways. Soon she would be dead and the evil penguin within her would be gone...

Maverick slept, the pain that coursed through his body had one on long enough, and he knew there was one release for him now. He would surrender, he would stop fighting, there was nothing left for him now, and the pain was just too much. One day he hoped he would see his friends again, but he wasn't sure as the only thing that seemed to be engulfing him was the darkness.

Lydia knew that she could save her father, for if her trial was

abandoned Magnus would be forced to drop the charges. With her powers neutralised they id not consider her a threat, but Lydia had been well trained. She managed to cobble together enough of her clothing in to a makeshift noose and had tied it to the grill in the ceiling. She knew it was strong and sturdy for she had tried to open it and failed. Now she would save herself in a different way. She stood on her bed and the clothing was still tight around her larynx. She wondered how much it would hurt and then she kicked out with her good leg and pushed the bed away from her, out of the way should she change her mind in her fright. She fell about half an inch as the clothing drew tight and she could not breathe anymore. She had hoped the jerk would snap her neck but it was not to be, so she closed her eyes and waited for the moments of life to tick away.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" cried Marcus as he watched as Pete pulled the trigger and blow off the back of his head; as he watched the medics try and make Siryn live without success; as he watched the monitors at Maverick's side become straight lines; as he watched Lydia's body go limp and gently sway from the momentum of her body relaxing.

His psionic resistance failed and the Dragon Lord seized the moment and engulfed the very core of Marcus Raven, and he restored his consciousness to the real world.

"Five blank canvasses," he chuckled as he examined the vacant looks in the eyes of X-Force, "ready for the repainting!"

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #14

"THE MADRIPOOR INSURRECTION" Part IV: Double Back

by [David Wheatley](#)

Pete Wisdom

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Siryn

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Maverick

"Five blank canvasses," he chuckled as he examined the vacant looks in the eyes of X-Force, "ready for the repainting!"

Nick Fury

"You'd think," said Pete and kicked the man squarely in the jaw, sending him sprawling to the floor. As he lay there his facial features shifted and altered as the darkforce dissipated without his control over the energy, and his real face was revealed. Pete didn't smile at this though. The element of surprise had been with him as he placed his shot and the Dragon Lord was down, at least for the moment.

However it was only a moment they needed though to get themselves free from the wall. The bonds that held them broke easily under the pressure from Pete's hot knives, launched and directed from his fingertips in the locks of the manacles.

Bloodstrike

"Go, go, go, go, go!" he said to the others, and Siryn flew over, taking hold of Marcus and they headed out of the dungeon area. Not a word was spoken until they reached the throne room, where Pete quickly did a check of the area, thinking back to the layout of the place they had reviewed during the briefing. "Secret passage," he said as he started to head for the stairs, leading up to the throne. He knew that there was a button on the left arm that would open the door to the passageway.

Midnight's Fire

"We're not leaving?" asked Maverick.

Silk Fever

"Not a chance," said Pete, flipping the catch and the door opened. "We're finishing this. We regroup, we come down we kick the crap out of anyone who gets in the way. Trust me, I've a plan." He turned and started moving again, knowing the Dragon Lord wouldn't be down for long.

Smiling Tiger

"Boss?" asked Bloodstrike, as he helped his leader to stand. "Sorry, I turned away for a moment."

"Imbecile," cursed the Dragon Lord as his face regained its shape and Bloodstrike was unsure to whom he was referring - himself or his employee and decided not to press the issue. He'd learnt after years of employment in the organised crime scene in America. Instead he simply bowed his head.

The Dragon Lord was angry.

"Get the others! Bring me their heads!"

"Yes, sir," said Bloodstrike and went to get the other members of the Circle. The Dragon Lord mused on what had gone wrong. X-Force had been captured, they were helpless and at his mercy. His powers had altered their perceptions; his darkforce constructs had eaten in to their minds, pervaded their souls and used their thoughts and memories against them. If he had made it up, they would have seen through the deception and it had worked, and then it had all collapsed around him.

"How?" he whispered. How had they gotten past his powers like that? He had broken them all, his powers overwhelming even the mighty telepath in the end, cutting through his psionic defences like they weren't even there. Then the Dragon lord laughed. He had overestimated his powers, the psionic resistance to him hadn't failed

- it had simply stopped.

The psionic cry of 'No' was not a cry of anguish it was a psychic command to his colleagues. Marcus Raven had sacrificed himself in an all or nothing play, and his gamble had paid off. He stopped laughing and shook his head. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

"I should have just killed you outright," he murmured and turned and walked back towards the throne room. X-Force wouldn't have gotten far, he had seen that much in their minds. They had a mission to fulfil and they wouldn't leave until it was over.

The secret passage led to a small chamber where the team holed up.

"He awake?" Wisdom asked Siryn, who was looking after Marcus. She nodded. She hadn't said a word yet, and Pete hoped there was no permanent mental scars after this was done. He walked over to Raven. "Bloody good work, mate."

"Thanks," said Raven, his voice weak. "Bastard's touch... like death. Felt like someone was dying in my mind when he took me. Except the someone was me."

"You came through, though, and that's what counts." Pete was glad he'd knocked the Dragon Lord out, so that his hold on Raven had been broken. It had been one hell of a move and if it hadn't been for Raven's psionic warning they'd have been pawns of the Dragon Lord.

"We got lucky," said Maverick.

"Don't I know it," said Pete. "He took us apart, inside out. He used stuff so personal that it annoys me to think someone gave him that info."

"The traitor?" asked Lydia, knowing that someone in SHIELD had set them up earlier.

"Yeah, and that's my first priority when we get back to SHIELD," frowned Pete. He looked at Terry, walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Love, it's over. It wasn't real, not matter what happened, no matter what he showed you."

"But it's there, inside me," she whispered.

"It's inside all of us," said Pete. "Believe me, I'm not happy with what I saw either, but I am not going to let him beat me with who I am. We need you, Terry. Get a grip." Theresa turned and looked at him.

"A'right," she said, her voice strong. "What do ye want us to do?"

"First up, let's see what we learnt. I saw his real face, anyone else catch it?"

"I did," said Lydia and Pete smiled knowing it would be her. "I knew him, even though I only caught a glimpse."

"Yup," said Pete, "He came up at the briefing."

"Casseas," said Maverick. "Diego Casseas."

"The Left Hand," said Pete.

"Who's dead," reminded Lydia.

"I've worked with teleporters," said Pete. "If falling down a hole wouldn't kill Nightcrawler, it sure as hell wouldn't kill another teleporter."

"Doesn't explain his powers though," said Siryn. "The briefing said he only had the ability to teleport and fire energy blasts. Elaborate constructs, darkforce manipulation and control, they weren't on the list."

"Best guess," said Lydia, "would be that Well of All Things gave him much better powers, enhancing him to incredible levels. It was an inter-dimensional breach and there are forces at work there that defy conventional notions."

"Best guess?" said North, shaking his head. "Great, so he's got godlike powers. So how do we stop him?"

"Davey," said Pete with a grin, "when we looked over the layout of this place, what did we not see mentioned?"

"There wasn't a damned great pit in the throne room," he said. "You don't think that's the Well of All Things, do you?"

"It's an extreme possibility," said Lydia, with scepticism. "It may be a replica."

"I don't think so," said Pete. "He's too damned powerful and too damned feared. I've money says it comes from that."

"Say yuir right, what do we do?" asked Siryn.

"Pour everything we've got down the hole. Kinetic blasts, psionic assaults, sonic screams, hot knives. Pour it on, see if we can do some damage."

"Assuming that works, there's going to be one hell of a mess," said Lydia.

"Should be a bloody great explosion," said Pete as he lit a cigarette. "And that'll be your cue, Davey. Out of all of us, you'll be the one who's most likely to be standing afterwards. We'll find out how good these SHIELD uniforms are."

"There's just one flaw to the plan I see," said North. "The Folding Circle won't just sit back and let us. Neither will the Dragon Lord. To stop them we have to destroy the Well, but to do that we have to stop them."

"Davey," said Pete. "We go out there, we hit people and then Lydia goes one on one with the Dragon Lord. With her enhanced musculature she's got the best chance of us all."

"I don't fancy my chances," said Lydia.

"You're the Shadow," grinned Pete. "He uses darkforce. Makes it even in my book."

"Wisdom," said Raven, sitting up, his eyes glinting with traces of power as he used his psionics. "The Folding Circle are coming. Must not have thought they'd be needing their blockers again, because I can feel them very easily."

"Nah, the Dragon Lord probably switched them off to go after you. You have to love it when they overestimate their powers." Pete shook his head as he took another drag on the cigarette. "We don't really have five minutes to kick their heads in," he sighed. "Marcus, what are you like with revenge?"

"How so?" Marcus looked at him curiously.

"They took you out with ease, seems only fair..."

The four members of the Folding Circle were scouring the building, looking for X-Force, and they all knew the price of failure.

Midnight's Fire was holding them back slightly, his leg injury courtesy of Peter Wisdom hot knife, meant he couldn't hurry along too much, though the others were making up for it. Silk Fever flew through the corridors, opening rooms with energy blasts. Bloodstrike was a little more regular in his search style, but it was Smiling Tiger who seemed to pick them up.

He unleashed a feral shriek that alerted the others to the secret passage in the throne room. Or at least that's what it had to be, if they could figure out how it opened.

"How do we get it open?" asked Bloodstrike.

"Eric," said Silk Fever, "with ease!" She smiled as unleashed her powers on the wall, melting away the stones, turning them in to molten rock that fell in a pile on the floor.

"Min," he said, "life sure is easy with you about." She chuckled and turned to her large comrade.

"Good idea. I'll unleash a blast down here and leave nothing but ash and debris to mark their passing."

"Works for me," he answered, rubbing his jaw, where Maverick has smacked him.

"As dishonourable as it is," said Midnight's Fire agreeing with Bloodstrike, "their leader is more so. I doubt many will shed tears." Silk Fever nodded as they spoke and fired but as she did so, red discs appeared above their heads, and she stopped the blast as she looked up.

"What the hell?" she asked and then they all grabbed their heads in pain, blood streaming from their ears and noses as the psionic barrage hit them, sending them to the floor. The discs faded, leaving four inert forms in the throne room.

"Got 'em," said Marcus, breathing hard. "Not used my powers like that before. Bit of a strain."

"As long as you've got strength left for the Well," said Pete, a feeling of satisfaction at what Marcus had just done for them. They'd felt the heat from Silk Fever's blast from here and they'd been lucky to strike when they did. "Okay, let's go and finish this."

The team got themselves together and headed out to the throne room, wading through the fallen forms of the Folding Circle.

"Cuff 'em," said Pete. "Don't want them to cause any more trouble." The specially designed cuffs had a mutant power inhibitor built in, so that it would create a low level energy field that would nullify their powers. Or that's what they'd been told. It was the mystic part of their nature that gave cause for concern in Pete's opinion. There was one of them who was dangerous and that was Silk Fever. Her long-range attacks could get them before they knew what was happening. "North, bring that bitch over to the edge Well," he said.

"Why?" asked Maverick, doing as his team leader asked.

"She gives us trouble," answered Wisdom, "I'll push her in."

"You're kidding?" said Maverick. "Right?" Wisdom just smiled as he looked down at the woman before them. "Jesus..."

"Right," said Pete, then noticed it getting dark, as it had done when they were at the docks. "LYDIA!" he called, letting her know she was on and that the Dragon Lord was here.

The rest of the team didn't need telling what to do next as they stood at the pit and fired their various energies in to the hole - kinetic, psionic, sonic and heat combining as one and flowing down.

"How long do you think we have to do this?" asked Maverick, knowing he had a fair amount of energy stored, but he knew it wouldn't last forever.

"Until it blows up or we're dead," said Pete, who had the same concern, and he also knew how tired Marcus was, and that Siryn could last forever either, but they had no choice and the job needed doing. "So keep firing..."

"LYDIA!" came the cry and Agent Del Ruiz went in to action, focusing on the area. The darkness was spreading that was certain, but it had to be coming from somewhere and she looked about the area. It was as intense at the edges as it was elsewhere, but she noticed that it was heading towards the team. She looked at the darkness, thinking on what they knew - that he had almost absolute control over the darkforce, but not in total. Otherwise he would have been able to defeat Marcus and not lost it when Pete smacked him in the head. Then she saw the ripple effect, the figure coming towards them, not just the darkness, but the master of it.

She pushed herself, using the strength of her leg muscles to run, pushing herself at a breakneck speed, far faster than the Dragon Lord could have anticipated, because she collided with him in a shoulder barrage. She knew she had connected with his body, as there was a gasp from the darkness and at the edge of the pit, the darkforce that had been slithering across the chamber recoiled.

"Your friends can wait," he said, as two eyes appeared in the darkness, looking right at her.

"Diego Casseas, by the authority granted me as an Agent of SHIELD, you're under arrest for violations of international law."

"I do not recognise your authority here," said the Dragon Lord, pulling himself up, the darkness around him lifting him up. There was also a waver in his voice, which hadn't been there when he'd first confronted Wisdom and herself for the first time. The second was that he was using the power to lift himself, not standing himself. That might not have meant anything in itself, but he had been knocked out earlier and just taken a rather nasty shot to the upper torso.

"Tough," she said, with a bravado that wasn't entirely false. Lydia knew she wouldn't last forever against him and that he would get the upper hand but she knew she could make it last a bit longer than she had originally thought.

Then she felt the tendrils of darkforce slithering up her leg, and she pushed herself upwards, attempting to tear away from the grasp of the energy, but the energies stretched up with her, and she grabbed hold of a chandelier and swung away, pulling the energies, making them follow her movements. Then, just before the light fitting could swing back, she let go and flew over the head of the Dragon Lord,

his own energies getting in his way. She landed on the floor and rolled, pulling Casseas over as he tried to adjust the energy flow. She was on her feet, and pinned him to the floor before he could react.

"Gotcha," she said, her hand closing around his neck, cutting his oxygen supply to a minimum.

"No," whispered the Dragon Lord, as his energies enveloped her and propelled her up towards the roof. "I have you." Lydia tried to break free but at this proximity there was no way she could break the hold from the energy. She slammed in to the roof, once, twice, three times, each blow harder than the last and then he let her fall to the floor. She tasted blood in her mouth as she hit the floor and she couldn't actually get her body to move. Her enhanced muscles had protected her as much as they could but the punishment was intense as he barraged her again and again with solid blocks of darkforce.

She could feel the bones snapping under the pressure they were being put under, her uniform clinging to her as blood escaped from open wounds and then he turned her over, looking directly in to her eyes.

"I haven't killed anyone with a pure darkforce blast in months," he said, and she was unable to answer, to push through the pain. "But after what you have done, it will be a pleasure." From his left hand an energy blast flashed towards her and she closed her eyes, but felt nothing. She opened them to see the Dragon Lord being pushed back by four different energy types, using his darkforce to shield himself, but it was still pushing him backwards.

"Changed the plan," said Pete, as the team pressed forward. He broke off his assault, and looked down to her. "Damn, you're a mess," he said. "Sorry, love." He looked back up at the Dragon Lord, who was gaining a second wind against the onslaught. Pete focused and around him dozens of hot knives formed around his body and fired straight at the enemy. This method gave him no directional control other than straight ahead, but that was all he needed and he launched them all and the Dragon Lord staggered once again. Then Maverick's charge gave out.

"Uh oh," said Pete, as North shook his head. He knew Raven was pushing himself too hard as well, and Siryn... Siryn had been using her scream one hell of a long time. It was curious, thought Pete, but the two of them alone weren't going to be enough, and the Dragon Lord was already recovering, though he seemed to be a lot slower

and his control not as complete as it had been.

"Marcus?" he said, and Marcus scanned the thought in his head to break of the attack and find out the problem.

"He's not sure," he shouted, giving up his psionic assault as per Wisdom's mental instruction. Pete looked down to Lydia.

"Lyd?" he asked, not sure if she was aware of anything or if she was just too badly hurt. Then he could hear the roar behind him. "GET DOWN!" he shouted, throwing himself over Lydia to shield her as the Well of All Things exploded in a barrage of energy taking much of the palace of Madripor with it.

After the dust cleared, Pete found himself pinned down. He could feel the blood trickling down his face and when he tried to move he couldn't. Lydia was unconscious and he didn't know if anyone else was still alive or not. He looked up, his vision limited.

"Guys?" he shouted hoarsely. "Anyone?"

"Do you know," said a pain-ravaged voice, "what you cost me? What you did?" Pete lifted his head up, the movement causing an intense pain and he saw Casseas standing there. He was as battered as the rest of them, but even with his powers at their usual level, he could teleport.

"Got a good idea," coughed Pete, spitting blood. "Fucked you up pretty bad."

"Not as bad as I'm about to fuck you up. And your woman." The darkforce crackled at his left hand and he fired at Pete's head only for the shot to be met by another energy blast.

"Today just isn't your day," said Maverick, who managed to pull himself up. The powers of the energy hitting him as well as the building falling on them had recharged his kinetic reserves, and the Left Hand met North's blast with his own darkforce, in a battle to see who would fall first. It was a battle Pete wouldn't have liked to wager on and he looked at Casseas, trying to free his arm from under Lydia's chest.

"Damn it, Lyd, not now," he muttered and pulled. She gave a moan and shifted and he was able to free himself. He pointed a finger at Casseas who was focusing on North and whispered. "Bang, you're dead." A hot knife fired from his fingertip, arcing across the distance

and ploughed it to the man's upper arm, shearing through muscles and cleaving through bone. The powers failed and the arm flopped as Casseas gave a cry of anguish at not only the damage done, but at the impact of the kinetic blast that smashed in to him, sending him flying back and leaving him inert on the rubble of what was the Royal Palace of Madriport.

"Good work, Davey," said Wisdom as his eyes rolled to the back of his head and he slipped in to the darkness.

Maverick sighed as he looked about and wondered if he could find a working telephone to call in the rest of SHIELD.

NEXT ISSUE: The aftermath, as Nick Fury arrives in Madriport to establish a permanent SHIELD presence.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #15

"SECRETS AND LIES" Part I: Taking Stock

by [David Wheatley](#)

The Helicarrier moved across the skies, coming over the harbour area of Madripoor's Lowtown and came to a full stop hovering majestically over the city, higher in the air than the tower blocks of Hightown, and Nick Fury looked out and down from the bridge.

Pete Wisdom

"The transport is on its way down now, sir," said one of his agents and Fury nodded.

Sirvn

"When North arrives, send him up. Our ground agents can do the mopping up and I want to know how this mission turned in to such a goddamn mess." The agent nodded and sent the signal down to the transport carrier. X-Force had stopped the Dragon Lord and now the criminal element of the country was concerned with SHIELD. They had taken out the last two crime bosses of the island and now they were here proper. To ensure they wasn't a problem in the future, the team had been given medical attention while SHIELD arrived and now they were ready to given a debriefing.

Maverick

Nick Fury

"God, I hate this place," Fury murmured, speaking through his teeth which were clamped down on the cigar he had in his mouth. What Logan saw in the place he would never understand and that was that, but SHIELD were here now and the lawlessness of the country would come to an end and maybe, just maybe, this place could become somewhere likeable.

"Colonel?" came a voice. "We're getting a report from one of our

agents in Middle East. It's a Priority One Alpha transmission, sir."

"I'll take it in my office," said Fury and went to take the report. Priority One Alpha meant it was for the senior officer on duty as it was of the utmost importance and he was only away for a moment when the bridge access doors opened at Maverick stepped on the command centre of SHIELD.

"Colonel Fury about?" he asked. "I was told he was up here and wanted to see me as soon as I arrived.

"He's in his office. There's a Priority call from the Middle East, so you might want to wait," said the agent and Maverick nodded. He turned and walked toward the door and knocked. That would let Fury know he was here and after a few moments the door opened.

"North! Get in here!" barked Fury and Maverick shook his head and went in.

"Take the call from the Middle East wasn't good?"

"What?" asked Fury, wanting to know how he knew.

"Agent Fargo told me," said North. "Stopped me from barging in."

"Oh," said Fury. "Just something going down about a mutant killing. Nothing that important. Someone gettin' overexcited."

"Fair enough, sir," said North. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yup," said Fury, stubbing the remains of the cigar out on the metal block on his desk. "The others are gettin' checked out, specially Agent Del Ruiz. Seein' as you're the only one fully with it, you get the job of explainin' what the Sam Hill happened down there?"

North sighed. Pete Wisdom would owe him for this and he began to tell Fury what had happened, taking care to leave out the information about the traitor. Wisdom had told him not to, because Pete was adamant they couldn't trust anyone.

"I'm fine?" said Pete as the medic signed his sheet. He'd been checked out thoroughly since his return to the mobile headquarters, but it was for a very good reason. If he failed the medical, he was off the active duty list and that meant he'd have restricted access to

things until he passed.

"A matter of opinion, Commander Wisdom," said the doctor with good humour, "but physically you're okay. The bruises will fade, though the scar from the iron rod that pierced your side probably won't. You were fortunate it didn't go too far in, Commander. The collapse of the building will go down as one of the luckiest escapes in SHIELD history and your powers also seem to be recharging fine. I'll submit my report to the Colonel and you'll be back on the active duty roster soon enough."

"What of the rest of the team?" asked Wisdom as he got off the bed and walked with the doctor to the corridor.

"Agent Raven is seriously exhausted. He strained his powers in his telepathic work and his telekinetics saved him from serious hurt when the palace collapsed. He's been resting for a few days, but it will be a few days more before he's fully fit again. I can sign him off on active duty, but he's not to overdo it, Commander." Pete got the message from the doctor's tone.

"Fair enough. North, I know about. What about Terry?"

"Miss Rourke is fine," said the doctor. "She seems to have a very capable healing capacity. The on site medical team said her ribs were broken and that her one of her lungs had been punctured, however there seems to be now only mild bruising, and there's only a vague indication of scar tissue on her lung. Perhaps it was a misdiagnosis, or perhaps she has some special healing ability."

"Not that I know of," said Pete, thoughtfully. Siryn had been hurt quite badly when the palace fell down, a pillar falling across her chest. He knew that from Maverick's field report to him when he was in the hospital after they'd stitched him up. It was there that he'd told North to keep quiet about the traitor when he made his report to Fury. Theresa Rourke's rapid recovery, as well as her extended use of her powers during the battle, was a mystery that Wisdom wanted to check out. Something was going on with her and he needed to know what, so they avoided any surprises in the future. But first there was something else. "And Lydia?"

"Is still in intensive care, sir," said the doctor. "The broken bones have been cast, her wounds treated and the internal bleeding was stopped, but she's still in a great deal of pain." The doctor was still concerned though, Pete could read it in his voice.

"What else?" he said, daring himself to get the answer.

"She still hasn't woken up. We're not sure why."

"Damn," said Pete, closing his eyes. He could feel her slipping away and it hurt. Losing someone was painful enough, but at the end of the day it had been his call to send her up against Casseas. The blame for this was on him. "Doc?"

"Yes?"

"Let me know if there's any change."

"I will, Commander. You brought back four out of five in good health. It could have been worse." Wisdom nodded and the doctor went to see his other patients.

Four out of five, mused Pete as he wandered off to find Teresa. So why did it feel as if they'd scored much, much lower?

"So there you have it, Colonel," said Maverick, finishing off his briefing. Fury had made him go over every part of it twice, just to make sure he had the full picture, or as much of it as Wisdom wanted him to see.

"Right," said Fury, knowing that there was something missing but also sure he'd not be able to get any more information from him. It was as good a cover story as he'd heard in a while, and North was good at keeping secrets and mixing the truth with lies, but it wasn't ringing totally true in Fury's ears. "Fair enough," he said, deciding he'd deal with Wisdom later. "You and your team risked your lives down there, and despite the mess you've created, you got the job done. We've almost all the Folding Circle in custody."

"Still no sign of Silk Fever?" said Maverick.

"Nope. We're assuming she fell in the pit, which has now closed and moved somewhere else. Who knows if it, or she, 'll ever turn up again?"

"Colonel, may I ask what's going to happen down there now?"

"Madripor? Well, this could have waited until a proper debrief with the rest of X-Force, but until I get the go ahead from the docs, you're

the only one on active duty. We'll install a peace-keeping force down there. An actual SHIELD presence to maintain the place. They've no ruler, no government and I'm invoking the UN sanctions that we can keep law and order in there."

"So, we basically just went out on a military coup?" asked Maverick, not liking the way this was starting to sound.

"Nope," said Fury. "We went in and arrested several terrorists. That's what we do. We stop terrorists, and these days we're nippin' them in the bud early."

"How many agents will be down there?" asked Maverick.

"25 in total," said Fury. "It's going to be a lot quieter than it used to be down there."

"Thanks, Colonel." Maverick stood.

"North," said Fury as he was about to leave. "X-Force did okay down there. Aside from the mass destruction and total chaos you left down there, you did the job. You stuck in there and didn't give up. Far as I'm concerned yer all everythin' we want in SHIELD agents. Let yer team know and send up Wisdom when he's done."

"Yes sir, thank you, sir," said North and went to see how his friends were doing. Then he realised that was how he thought of them and he smiled. Perhaps X-Force would be a better team than he'd originally thought. However what they'd done bothered him. They needed a team conference, to figure out just what was going on.

Marcus stood outside the small medical chamber, looking through the window at Lydia. Monitors beeped, liquids flowed through tubes, giving her what she needed to live as well as morphine to keep her calm. She was healing in a physical state but there was something wrong in her mind, something that kept her for cognisant thought. As if her mind didn't want her to wake up.

"What do you think?" asked Maverick as he came across Raven watching her.

"Ah don't know," said Marcus, with a heavy sigh. "It could be that she withdrew in to herself to block out the pain from her attack, but

with the morphine she should come back out of it."

"Unless it's blocking her thought process," said David.

"Who knows?" said Marcus. "I wish I could go in and help her, but Ah don't have the strength t'do it. Ah ain't exactly proficient in using my powers as an offensive weapon."

"Believe me," said North, "I know that. My powers didn't used to be like this. They absorbed impacts and that was it. Channelling that power as an energy blast only came on with the Legacy Virus somehow unleashing a hidden aspect of it, and even then I didn't use it much because it drained the hell out of me."

"How did you do it then?" asked Raven.

"I practised with my powers, target practice, more complicated stuff, controlling the beams and things. Making the energy tighter, more compact in it's blast. Things like that."

"So how do you train someone in the mental usage of powers like that? I can't use target practice with mind blasts. Targets don't have mind's to hit."

"Good point," said David. "To be honest I don't know. Except we know a girl who knows people."

"Terry," said Raven. "I know, it's just that if I ask the X-Men for help in training my powers, honing them, then the reasons I said no to them the first time have been wiped away. I could have helped them long ago."

"We do what's right at the time," said David, placing his hand on the man's shoulder, his gaze going towards Lydia. "No matter what the consequences are."

"Heard from Chris?"

"Nope, I checked my email but nothing. Still, the New Warriors should be an interesting influence on him.* Strange coincidence that the person I wanted to find joins the first real enemies of the team I end up fighting on my new team. He needs my help I'm here."

*** (Chris is Bolt in the New Warriors series by Russ Anderson and Mike Exner III! - David)**

"It's interesting you found him so quickly," said Marcus.

"I've thought that as well. Seems to me the right cards were played at the right time."

"Yeah," said Raven. "Must be my detective nature. Looking at all the possibilities."

"Oh come on, how low would they have gone to get us on the team?" asked Maverick. "Some things just fall in to place. We call it luck."

"I know," said Marcus. "Guess I'm just tired. Let's go find Terry, see if she can get me some help on my powers. Xavier must have left some kind of lesson plans somewhere."

"So you want to tell me what's going on?" asked Pete, standing in Terry's doorway.

"I dinnae know what ye mean," she said, without looking up from her computer console. "I'm kind o' busy now, Wisdom." Pete took another step in to the room and the door closed behind him, ensuring their privacy. "That was a hint t'leave."

"Love, I'm not going anywhere, and I certainly don't buy that you don't know. Healing factor been with you long has it?"

"What d'ye mean?" she asked, looking up now.

"I mean, you were hurt. A big stone column fell down on you, slamming in to your chest and knocking the air from your lungs, leaving you unable to call for help. At the same time, the impact also smashed your rib cage, breaking six of your ribs, one of which pierced your left lung and would have caused some rather nasty damage. Torn muscle, shattered bone, blood entering your body without a release. I read the medical reports, Terry."

"Ye aren't supposed to do that," she snapped, leaping up from her chair and walking over to him, her finger waving in accusation. "Ye've no right..." Pete slapped her.

"I have every right when I'm looking for a traitor in my team. I know you girl, from way back when. You've not always been the child of sweetness and light, one of Xavier's role models for humanity. I

remember a rainy night in Paris when you broke in to a Black Air facility for your Uncle Tom, looking for something valuable for his new employer Eric the Red..."

"Don't go there," she warned. "It was a lifetime ago, I wasn't the same person."

"A drunken, thieving wildcat with loyalty to only her Uncle, as I remember. Who says you've changed?"

"I have!"

"Your loyalties, perhaps?" he scoffed.

"No, the person I was is dead," she shouted back at him.

"Then stop bloody well lying to me, love. I'm not stupid. I've been around secrets and lies for a lot longer than you have and I know when people are keeping things from me. Lydia is lying in a coma because of what I decided and if I was set up, then I want to know why, and right now you're my prime suspect."

"Ye... ye..." the anger started to drain from her voice, as she heard what he was saying. "Ye dinnae understand..." Her voice was small, almost a whisper.

"Then tell me," said Pete, grabbing her by the shoulders. "So we're not friends, I can live with that, but if we're going to work together, I need to know I can trust you with my life and more than that, the lives of others. For God's sake, Terry..." He looked in her to her eyes, and she looked in to his. He could see the fear in her eyes, and she was trembling. It reminded him of the first time they met and he let go of her. He could feel her warm breath on his cheek and he couldn't deny there was a spark between them, and neither could she.

"Ye..." she started to say.

"No," he said, quietly yet firmly. "It was over a long time ago between us. Just tell me what's going on with you. Despite everything, you can trust me."

"It's something terrible," she whispered. "I'm not yuir traitor, but I've betrayed everyone all the same."

"Oh," said Pete. He'd been using the traitor thing to get her to talk to

him, never expecting anything like this. "Go on."

"At the time Magneto was makin' his latest big comeback play, X-Force were fightin' against King Bedlam an' his New Hellions, who had unleashed a mutant codenamed the Armageddon Man."* She took a deep breath. "During the fight, Feral, one o' our former X-Force members, attacked me an'... an' she tore out my throat."

* (In X-Force #90 - David)

"I'd heard that," admitted Pete as they sat down on her bed. "But next I knew you were back on active duty with X-Force during the latest Weapon X fiasco, so I thought it wasn't that bad."

"It was. She damaged me throat irreparably by normal methods. The scar tissue meant I'd never talk again. Or fly. Or anything. I almost hit the bottle again, an' I quit the team, to find myself."

"And you were approached, or did you find someone?"

"I was approached. By Sinister."

"Bloody hell," said Pete, his hand automatically going for his cigarettes. "What happened?"

"He said he'd been watchin' the Armageddon Man for a long time, because of his potential an'..." she hesitated a moment, "and Bedlam had interfered in his plans. However as X-Force had been instrumental in stoppin' him, he felt he 'owed' us. I was trapped by him an' I had no real choice. I was either powerless or in his debt."

"I've heard the story," said Wisdom. "Kitty told me about the time she was badly injured and the only person who could save her was Victor Von Doom. The X-Men sold their souls to save her life. He hasn't claimed it yet, at least not from them. From Kitty, yes, but the X-Men no. You could have told them."

"I wanted to," she said, "but thing started to happen. Xavier was killed, we lost half of X-Force to Magneto, then came Weapon X, then Apocalypse and then the team was disbanded. There was never a right moment to say 'I got healed by Mr Sinister'. When I met him with the team at the Weapon X project, he spoke to me first. He called me by name, and I knew that he was toyin' with me. He could have told them everythin' and it was only Weapon X that stopped him."*

*** (In M2K's X-Force #6 - David)**

"What did he do?" asked Pete gently, stroking her arm.

"He analysed the damage done, and once he finished he injected me wi'a serum he created from me blood. I dinnae know what it did, or how or why, but it repaired the damage to me throat in days. The scars simply shrank back."

"A healing factor?"

"Nae," she said. "A trauma inhibitor. It repairs major damage t'me body, somehow cloning missing parts o' my body. I should have burnt me throat out fighting the Dragon Lord, but I could feel it rebuildin' the strained vocal chords."

"I'd noticed that," said Pete, as he inhaled the smoke from the cigarette. "That's what made me curious. So how did you explain it to the X-Men, your miraculous recovery."

"I faked it. I came back just after Xavier was killed an' said me voice was healing but spoke in low tones and did nae use me powers. Day by day I grew stronger until eventually my powers worked again. By the time they were 'back' we'd lost half the team to Magneto. I had to pull my plays when we fought them an' pretend..."*

*** (In our own X-Force #2 - David)**

"So you not only blame yourself for that, but for losing the others?"

"Aye," she said, in a low whisper. "If I'd been honest, I could have done something, stopped them somehow..."

"Don't be so bloody stupid," said Pete, a hint of anger in his voice. "You at full or not, with Magneto there, you were finished anyway. He's creamed the X-Men without breaking a sweat, X-Force would have been nothing to him."

"Does nae make it feel better," she said.

"It won't." Pete's answer was cold, but honest. "Now, what do we do now? Do we tell the others or..."

Before he could finish, the klaxons began to sound across the Helicarrier and red lights began to flash, with the words 'Code One'

echoing from the communications points.

"Code One?" he said, knowing that was the highest state of alert they had and wondering what the hell was happening, then the place shook. "And now we're moving."

"We're heading back to the States," said Siryn as she checked the computers. "That's all I can get."

"Better get to our posts," said Wisdom, stubbing out his cigarette, and heading for the door, making sure his ID badge was properly displayed, for security was going to be tight and he had a feeling that questions wouldn't be asked before they took you out.

Something was going down, something big.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #16

"SECRETS AND LIES" Part II: Requiem

by [David Wheatley](#)

"Bloody hell," said Pete Wisdom for what would be about the fiftieth time that day. They'd been here several days now, watching, waiting, hoping, praying.

Pete Wisdom

SHIELD had been split in to three working sections to see what they could do in assisting the other law enforcement agencies that were working on things. X-Force had been assigned to the team in New York. Pete watched the tapes over and over again, the amateur footage and the other details that were not so amateur that weren't going to be released to the general public. They could see enough from what they had and this was real life - not an entertainment show. He turned the monitors off and rubbed his eyes.

Sirvn

"Bloody hell," he said again as he looked at the blank screens. He'd seen a lot of nasty crap over the years, he'd killed a lot of people and there had been times when he'd enjoyed it, but never had he seen anything like this. It staggered him beyond anything he'd ever known or seen. For some reason, Fury had given X-Force a broad remit on this - they were an investigative unit, co-ordinating SHIELD efforts on the ground and on the Helicarrier.

Maverick

Nick Fury

Raven was helping the FBI in Washington to piece things together. Marcus wasn't overly happy since they had fired him, but neither were the FBI as he was an autonomous consultant and they had to accept his help one way or another. They didn't get much choice in it.

Maverick was working with the CIA, using his old clearances to assist them in their hunt. David North - as a former member of Team X - still had certain privileges and such, and he was working with his old comrade, John Wraith - expediter for the CIA and that gave them some leeway.

Terry was on site below, ensuring that Pete was kept informed of what was going on and keeping up to date with developments, via INTERPOL and their special taskforce which they had set up. Her father, Sean, was still highly thought of in certain areas of the agency, and as she was a SHIELD agent it meant that she too had some pull, and where her father's name didn't get help, her badge did. However that was something she hadn't yet had to do, and for that Pete was grateful. Whatever small mercies they could get about now were welcomed.

That left himself to co-ordinate things and to try and make some kind of sense out of it and it was proving to be hard.

"Sod it," said Pete and lit up a cigarette. This wasn't what he should be doing. This was what Lydia should be doing instead of simply lying there, slowly healing. Too slowly for his liking. He decided to take a wander over, and see what she thought, if she could somehow reach across the void and get some kind of inspiration or theory in to his mind. There was something he was missing - something that had happened on that fateful day.

Three days earlier

"What's going on?" asked Pete as he and Terry met North and Raven in the corridor outside Terry's quarters.

"Damned if I know," said North, the sirens blaring. "Whatever it is, it's big. X-Force command station?"

"Yup," said Pete, "and hurry." The team set off at a run, as were the other agents on the Helicarrier as it departed from Madripoor to wherever it was going. The vehicle was moving quite fast, as if it were being pushed to its limits from the way it groaned and shook and X-Force arrived at their action room, which was where they had the tools necessary to train and prepare for their missions. All Pete knew was they were heading for the United States. The Helicarrier was faster than commercial flights, but it would still take them a

while to get there.

It was just after 11 p.m. according to his watch, but that was set at local time and he quickly did a reckoning that it would be just after 9 a.m. in Washington, which meant that they would be flying back in to Tuesday morning, which meant that they were going to have to live this day twice over. He shook his head, and wondered at what time they would get there. He put a guess on the flight time of being about 5 or 6 hours, which meant they'd be there mid-afternoon. He felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned.

"Pete?" said David.

"Sorry, lost it for a moment. What's up?"

"The mark on Terry's face, she says she fell."

"No, I hit her, and we'll talk later." The holo-emitters kicked in and Nick Fury's face appeared on the screen. His eyes were tired, his expression that of a man in shock.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I'm sure by now you've heard the rumours of what's been happening back home." Pete looked at the other two and shrugged. They'd been busy doing other things apparently. "Let me confirm some of the things you've heard. A hijacked passenger jet has crashed in to the north tower of the World Trade Center. The impact has torn a gaping hole in the building and the building is on fire."

"Fucking hell," breathed Pete as Fury gave his people time for this to sink in.

"We have also received another report that moments ago a second hijacked airliner crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center and has also exploded and that building too is on fire. I repeat, The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York have been seriously damaged and both buildings are burning."

The whole of the Helicarrier was silent as Fury stopped, save for the machinery which also seemed muted despite the pressure on them.

"We are on our way back to the United States to do what we can, however I suspect that the FAA will be closing the airports soon enough and all flights may be cancelled across the country. We will have to fly up and around Canada to get towards the East Coast. Until we are allowed in to US airspace, we will not be able to assist

our people on the ground. The emergency services are doing what they can, however there are major concerns about what has happened."

"No kidding," said Terry.

"I'll keep you informed, but at the moment we are on our highest state of alert. I will be speaking with the United Nations to see what role we will be playing in this, seeing as how the World Trade Center is exactly that, and not just America will be affected by this tragedy. Be prepared for the worst - this may have been the first shot in a war that nobody was expecting. New duty rosters will be sent out. Grab some sleep while you can, we're all going to need it."

Fury's face disappeared, leaving the whole of SHIELD shell-shocked. Over the next few hours things got worse, with another plane hitting the Pentagon, and reports of a fourth plane crashing in Pennsylvania and despite Fury's words, sleep just would not come for anybody who had heard.

Two days earlier.

Tuesday finally became Wednesday for SHIELD and after a long wait the Helicarrier was allowed at last in to US airspace, from where it had been hovering, standing and waiting just off the east coast. By now the pictures that had been on the televisions of the world had found their way to the eyes of every SHIELD agent and all had seen what the rest of the world had seen and fingers were being pointed. As far as Pete could tell there were three voices of opinion - that the Arabs had done this, that mutants had done this, or mutant Arabs had done this. He shook his head at the so-called Friends of Humanity when they suggested that they mutants directed by Magneto had done this.

"If Magnus wanted to make a statement like that, they'd have levelled the bloody state," muttered Pete, watching from the X-Force command station. "Pillock," he added.

"Tell me about it," said Fury and pulled up a chair. "Yer team?"

"Terry's speaking with the X-Men, Raven's trying to find out about some friends - like everyone else on this crate - and North's getting some sleep. I'm on duty, as it were."

"So what do ya reckon, Commander?" asked Nick. "How the hell did we drop the ball on this one?"

"Well," said Pete. "There's a number of flaws in the system. Airport security sucks. There were too many people who thought the US invulnerable to terrorists. They saw the superhuman menace as the prevalent threat and that there'd always be heroes like the Avengers to protect them. Except the heroes ain't always there, though there were some good people risking themselves alongside the real heroes."

"Not that, us."

"What do you mean?"

"The feds, the spooks, us, we didn't have a whisper of this. We're the most powerful nation on the planet and what did it get us? Our information was failed, or ignored, and they hit us good and hard. It's all my fault."

"Fury, the SHIELD resources have been stretched that damn thin by the UN that you didn't have much of a chance of spotting it. The deal with Logan, the whole Excalibur mess..."

"Not what I mean, Peter" said Fury as he stood up. "I shoulda stopped this, I should never have let it happen." He turned and walked out of the room, leaving Wisdom to wonder what the hell he was on about. Pete had worked in the spy game long enough to know that sometimes your information failed you. It was a hard fact, but that was the truth of it and the odds were that for every success you had, you had a failure in the making because your ears were listening at one door and not another.

The real problem, as far as Pete saw it was what would happen when America reacted. And what if the truly powerful beings reacted first? That thought terrified him more than anything else. He had seen the news when SHIELD had been told to hold the Avengers when Genosha was in flames, before the rule of Magneto. They had tried and failed, so what would happen if they were asked to do it again?

One day earlier

Wisdom's fears for the future where echoed while he slept the next

day, with North on monitor duty. Pete had a meeting with Fury later in the day, and he knew he had to get some sleep at some point. Coffee, cigarettes and cold showers were not enough for something as important as SHIELD's role in the investigations. The FBI, CIA and Interpol had been playing catch up since the event and were making progress but they didn't have the resources and finally the UN had released SHIELD to act.

The report North was watching was the one thing that Pete would have wanted to see, their leader confiding in them as to what his fears were. North wasn't too worried, the Avengers and such had never played an active role in earthbound warfare, leaving the wars they joined in with to be fought out on a galactic scale, or against threats to the Earth that conventional means would never be able to battle.

The picture showed Mayor Rudolf Giuliani addressing the people of New York, his latest press call amidst the many that he had made in the last few days.

**** (The Mayor made the following announcement in Marvel Fanfare #15. Thanks to Russ to supplying some excellent material from a fitting tribute - David)**

"Thank you. I don't have much time, and I will not be taking questions afterward, but it's important that this announcement get disseminated as widely and quickly as possible." The mayor shuffled some papers at his podium and North wondered if he was simply gathering his thoughts before making the announcement or whether his aides had his speech in the wrong order.

"This is a message to the superhuman populace of New York, the United States, and the world. You have always stood by the city of New York in its need, and this current crisis is no exception. Many with superhuman abilities have assisted rescue crews with the ongoing work in the vicinity of the World Trade Center, and for this you have my most heartfelt thanks, and that of the entire city of New York."

"There'll be a but to this," said Terry from the doorway. "Ye can see it on his face."

"That and he gave a compliment out to them. You don't often see that." Then the mayor continued.

"However, I now ask you to keep your distance from the disaster

area, to leave the job to the men and women trained specifically for this sort of task. Your efforts are appreciated, your desire to help readily apparent. However, there is too much danger of unleashed superhuman abilities hampering rather than helping the brave rescue workers who continue to labour tirelessly at the scene of the destruction. There have been several near incidents involving superhuman help over the last two days, and myself and the fire marshal are in agreement on this matter."

"Some superhumans with specific training or particularly useful abilities have been asked to continue helping under the supervision of rescue workers. Those superhumans know who they are, and I ask that the rest of you please stay away. Your abilities can be put to better use protecting us from other potential tragedies."

"Thank you, that is all."

"Bold move," said Terry.

"Yes, but what stops them from going in mufti to help out?"

"As long as they don't use their powers an' such," she replied.

"How's your cheek?" asked North, changing tack. Wisdom still hadn't explained himself over it. "Wisdom said he hit you."

"Yes," she said, cautiously. "He did."

"You said you fell."

"I say a lot of things, Maverick."

"Fine," said North. "Sorry for being concerned." He wasn't sure about Wisdom's leadership style, but he was definite that he didn't like people hitting women for no reason. He'd speak to Wisdom later on.

Marcus Raven was in the small chapel area of the Helicarrier. The denominations of the crew were varied and each had their own little section within the carrier. He was not alone, but he closed his eyes and prayed. He prayed that his God was real, that his beliefs were justified and that the Lord had a reason for doing what he had done. Some of God's tests of the faith of his followers had been cruel in their attempt, yet justified in the end, even through what he did to

his own son.

A being that could do that to his own son was capable of doing anything to those that followed him and to those that did not. Testing God's wrath was one thing that had always been foolish and often fatal. Was the fate of the soul worth the cost to the people who believed? Were the tests that had been designed by a creator whose thinking worked on its own logic simply punishments to those who had wronged and literally to Hell with anyone who got in the way or had God simply forsaken them?

"Can I help you, my son?" asked the minister, who had been approaching everyone in the crowded chapel.

"Can you answer why?" asked Raven.

"No," answered the minister. "However, I don't believe the answer would make anyone feel better, even if we knew. I feel... I believe that no matter what the darkness that befalls the world, whatever acts of terror and barbarism plague the children of God - for in the end we are all the children of one God - will endure. We will survive, adapt and grow stronger. If idle hands are the devil's playground, what does that say about complacency?"

Raven nodded as the minister gave him a small smile, and moved on to the next person. The words needed some thought.

"Well," said Pete as Fury ended his briefing and the majority of agents had left. Fury had asked Wisdom to stay behind. "We're getting involved at last."

"Yup," said Fury. "I want X-Force to co-ordinate things from the Helicarrier. I'll be in Washington, making sure that things are fine, but you're going to be my eyes and ears over here."

"Why us?" asked Pete. "You've higher agents, better agents than us to do this."

"Firstly, you need a quiet assignment after the Madripoor thing. Second, yer team has a diverse amount of connections to other teams. Oh, an' I want Raven with me. His FBI connections will help."

"Fair enough, but we're spread pretty damn thin," he said.

"I know, but it can't be helped, and third, your team answer only to me. I set that in stone. Every other team an' strike force has a chain of command to go through to make things happen. You guys don't and that's what I need here. You rank maybe a Commander, but I've nobody else here with yer... autonomy."

"Okay. So, North helps the CIA, Terry the ground plods, I'm up here. What are we looking for?"

"Evidence. There's a lot of speculation but we need hard facts. You an' your team can find it. You an' yours can co-ordinate things. There's a good deal of work being done by some of the best people about, but as we've shown we make mistakes. There's obviously been an inside job somewhere an' I want SHIELDS resources to go in to finding whoever's responsible."

"Then what?"

"We leave it to the military types. We're law enforcement, not active armed forces."

"Okay," said Wisdom. "I'll brief my people, and we'll get these bastards."

Present

"And that's the story so far," said Pete as he looked at Lydia, the machines beeping at her bedside. "The pieces are there I know it, but I can't put them together." He sighed as Lydia didn't respond, other than breathing in and out.

"What the hell are we doing, Lyd?" he asked, not expecting a reply. "Where do we start to look. Which thread do we pull first?" Then his cell phone rang. "Wisdom," he answered.

"Pete, it's Terry," came the Irish brogue of Siryn.

"What's up, Teresa?"

"You'll want to see this."

"Right," said Pete and left the medical bays and stepped in to the

corridor outside. There was a viewing port at the end of the corridor and he quickly jogged to it. "Still there?" he said.

"Aye," she answered and Pete then plugged the phone in to the socket on the wall. SHIELD global positioning satellites locked on to Siryn and gave her location.

"What am I looking at?" he said.

"4 o'clock," she replied. "A fire chief pointed it out to us." Glued to the side of a building, and nearly two stories tall, was an enormous red, white, and blue flag, rendered in webbing. "Spider-Man did this."*

* (Marvel Fanfare #15 again - David)

"He was on scene at the time," said Pete, remembering the field reports and films he seen in the last few days. He read the caption below - **WE WILL REMEMBER** and he began to mutter to himself.

"With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free.

"Solemn the drums thrill: Death August and royal
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres.
There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears.

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

"They mingle not with laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England's foam.

"But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the Night;
As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,

Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain."

"Binyon," said Siryn. "I remember hearing it when I was at the Massachusetts Academy visitin' me da'. But didn't you miss a verse?"

"It doesn't fit with the event," said Pete, thinking of the missing third verse.

*They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.*

The verse recounted of war, which is what the poem had been written in commemoration of. Then Pete thought of something.

"I'll call you back," he said and closed the call. Something about those words made him think, something told him something that he'd missed. The thread that eluded him had been found and he glanced back towards where Lydia slept. "Thanks, babe."

There was work to do, and a lot of it.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Annual 2001

"SECRETS AND LIES" Part III: Timeline

by [David Wheatley](#)

October

Pete Wisdom

Pete Wisdom rubbed the stubble on his face. Since his suspicions were aroused, he'd been working around the clock for several weeks on this. He was going to find the traitor within SHIELD and he didn't care how long it took. It was now almost a month since the disaster in America and things had progressed with the war, but hunting down the terrorists behind this was not enough. They needed the proof to put the bastard away once and for all. Pete knew that once they'd done with Bin Laden, then there would be other strikes elsewhere, but for the moment there was a need for intelligence to provide the justification that was needed to attack another country, to overthrow a government and do what they were currently planning on doing and some point soon.

Sirvn

Maverick

As he typed in the data that was being found out by the rest of the team and cross referenced it with his own findings he began to realise that what he had was more damning than what they'd found out. It was going to be soon that everyone else returned to the Helicarrier and then Pete would no longer have the resources he needed to keep searching, if he was right. The traitor had covered their tracks well, but not well enough. He was on the verge of finding the identity but he didn't know if he'd have time. He needed to find a way of keeping them out of action for the moment. Lydia was still healing, but she had woken up which was good, though he had kept a lot of what he was doing out of her sight. She was nowhere near fit for duty yet, and the rest of the team where

Nick Fury

scattered.

Pete looked at his watch and knew it was time for him to do a final check in with the rest of his team. He pressed save on the console and then pressed another button to get a communications line and he dialled the number and ensured it was a secure line.

"North," came a voice at the other end of the line.

"Davey, it's Pete," he said. "You and your people almost done at the CIA?"

"Just crossing the T's and dotting the I's," said Maverick, his voice containing more than a little tiredness in it. "What about you, what have you found out? Anything new since we last spoke?"

"Not enough," said Wisdom, echoing the tiredness. "Longshot time. Have you got anything else that will help us on this?"

"Nothing. We know that there have been a lot of operatives in the field," said North, "but after sifting the reports it seems clear that the CIA simply missed what was going on this one. Despite the field presence this is one that got away." However his tone told Wisdom that he wasn't convinced. Both of the two agents had worked in the intelligence community and there was something about it that didn't quite ring true.

"You still don't buy it do you?"

"Not a chance. There were rumours and other aspects that were being investigated but to miss an operation of this size and scale - not a chance. The only way they missed it was if they wanted it to be missed. My gut instinct says inside job and the only way that everyone in the agencies could miss out on it is if they were being intercepted. SHIELD's the only agency with that kind of pull, which works with the traitor routine." Pete sighed. It was either one person or a massive conspiracy and he knew which one he was hoping for.

"And you found nothing?"

"After a month, nothing, which means that either the stuff was never here or our target's covered their tracks. In all honesty Pete, I've done all I can here." There was a determined resignation in what he said and Wisdom knew he'd done all he could.

"You made copies?"

"Natch," replied North. "Maybe if we pool our resources we can find something as a group."

"Hope so," said Pete, thinking that the data that he had to work with was more working against the terrorists not the traitor. Looking for something that wasn't there and then working out what wasn't there and why was taking it's time. "When are you and your team due back?"

"Sometime tomorrow," said North. "How's Lydia doing?"

"She's healing, but it's slow. They've still got her in the solar bays, hoping that if they boost her powers it'll push the healing process. I've still not told her."

"Why not?" asked North. "She's the detective of the team. I'll bet she's going stir-crazy."

"Yes she is, but the sooner she gets better the... better. I'm not getting her hurt again."

"It wasn't your fault Pete."

"Never said it was," said Pete, realising his error. "I meant getting her involved will open her wounds and I need her at one hundred per cent before I let her help."

"Sure," said North. "Whatever you say, Pete."

"See you tomorrow, Davey." He hung up and lit a cigarette. He was getting tired, he could feel it but he'd be able to rest in a moment or so. He had another call to make and called the Interpol office in New York. Terry had slipped when she was at ground zero and her cell had been dropped and smashed. She'd twisted her ankle, but with her fast healing abilities thanks to Sinister's little gift it had healed, but SHIELD's resources in terms of manpower were spread thin and he'd not gotten her a replacement yet.

"Pete Wisdom for Teresa Rourke," he said to the operator.

"Switching to secure channel P," said the voice at the other end and Pete adjusted the equipment in the office accordingly.

"Hey, Pete," she answered. "What's up?"

"Just checking in," said Pete, flicking the ash in to the tray next to him. "See you and your team managed to get some of their support network." He'd seen the news reports of the capture of more of the people who had helped to set this operation up. "How much have we learnt from them?"

"Nothing that we didn't really know already," said Siryn. "In all honesty, we're not learning a great deal new now. We're getting the bits and pieces from the other agencies now, but there's a lot of stuff that we can't do now. America is closed down and things have been a lot tighter than they were. Though they could be better."

"Any more sign of outside interference?" asked Wisdom. He knew that Terry had found some of the boons of their investigation. Several warrants had been cancelled, files removed from their locations and databases amended. There had been hell to pay and as yet there had been no sign of finding the perpetrator. Interpol had been very angry at this discovery, especially by someone from outside the agency but now they were conducting their own investigation as to what was going on.

"Nothing," said Siryn. "All clearances were reviewed and tested and we're still waiting for Interpol to give me details of what they found. What fightens me is the extent of the conspiracy were looking at here, as it's not just US intelligence agencies who seem to have been affected. Has anyone come back to you from the UK yet?"

"A couple of people," admitted Pete. "They're looking in to it at the moment, but they're not exactly co-operative with me so I'm going the long way around. I've got Brian looking in to things with Dai Thomas, and Alistaire Stuart at WHO is doing some stuff for me. If Black Air are still around I can't find them and the other subversive elements just aren't returning my calls."

"Who are you using?" asked Siryn.

"Just a small little club in London."

"Hellfire?" "Maybe," said Pete, supressing a chuckle. "Shaw's death has thrown the whole organisation in to disarray and I'm hoping that's the reason they're reluctant to talk. If they don't though, I'll go home and kick the door in myself then see what I find."

"Pete, I took a run over to Massachusetts, and me Da' at the

Academy. He's of the opinion that you are - that whoever did this had some reach. He doubts anyone at Interpol would have done this without an outside force behind him or her and he doubts that any terrorist could get in. They have strict policies these days and the background checks..."

"Can be altered, but that's too extreme. That can be easily traced," said Pete, speaking from experience. "Yeah, it's more likely that someone came in and altered the files, or used the remote link."

"No," said Siryn. "They can't use the remote link. Some of these things require a special sequence of access that needs for people to be actually there in person for it to go ahead. The main files are centrally stored and need to be physically maintained."

"When did you find that out? When you spoke to Sean?"

"Aye."

"Interpol aren't exactly playing ball here," muttered Pete, finishing the cigarette and getting out another. "Damn it. We're close, Terry, I can feel it."

"I'll be back later tonight," she said. "We'll see what we can find then."

"Okay," agreed Pete. "Later, and Terry?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't fall over again, hmm?"

His reply was the dial tone and he grinned. There was one more call left to make and he contacted Marcus Raven at the Federal Bureau of Investigations.

"Wisdom," said Raven as he answered. "Been expectin' the call."

"Marcus, you got anything else?"

"Nope, the Bureau's clean as a whistle. I ain't been able to find anything at all. Nothing's missing, there's been no data that wasn't accounted for in fact everything here suggests the Bureau missed everything, but seeing as we found a load out afterwards, it may be everything we got is all there is."

"Figures. You almost done in DC?"

"Yeah, there's not a great deal for us to do now, other than getting out of here and putting together details on the other terrorists out there, the ones that didn't attack the US, but have and that we haven't done anything about."

"I take it you refer to 'we' as in SHIELD?"

"Yup, plus there's other whispering's here about the super heroes and how if they weren't busy duking it out on Maine Street with Doctor Doom then maybe this kind of thing wouldn't happen."

"It's crap. This kind of thing would have happened whether or not the Avengers existed, if the X-gene was just junk DNA or technological genius was the kind of thing that made computers run faster, unless you're the military. Still this kind of reaction was always going to happen."

"Yeah, just wonderin' at what point are mutants going to become targets of retaliation the next time Magneto gets off his backside and attacks us all."

"Yeah, well just think if that happens, guess who the first line of official defence will be."

"Huh, won't that be a cheery thought to take to bed," sighed Raven.
"Ah never wanted to be an X-Man."

"You're not now," said Wisdom. "We see any of Magneto's people, we kick the crap out of 'em and take 'em in. We don't let them go and have them come back to beat on the world again. All terrorists are going to have to behave themselves from now on. What about Fury?"

"He headed back to the Helicarrier this morning. He finished his business at the Pentagon, and left me to clear up. Ah wasn't happy at his using me as an empathy to find out what his bosses were ordering him to really do."

"He do anything else?"

"He met with Bridge to discuss the Excalibur mission, but other than that he was in a lot of meetings and such. You can ask him yourself, he'll be with you soon."

"He ought to be back by now," said Pete. "I'll see if I can find him. We have things to discuss."

"You're bringing him in to the loop about the traitor?" asked Raven, his voice sceptical at what he was hearing. Pete had not wanted to broaden the range of people who knew before.

"Yeah," said Pete. "I think it's time to let him know what we've found. I'd prefer a bit more proof though. I guess you'll be back later tonight?"

"Ah reckon. I'll let you know if we turn anything else up."

"Good work, Marcus. I know it's not been an easy assignment for you. For any of us. See you when you get back." He ended the call and stubbed out the end of the cigarette. He wanted to head down to the medical bay and check in on Lydia. She wasn't discharged yet, because there were still things the doctors needed machines for but she was comfortable and he arrived there quickly.

"Hey," she said as he entered. "You look like hell."

"So do you, and I've been working. What's your excuse?"

"Bite me," she said, having become a lot more appreciative of him since he was one of the few people who visited everyday. She had a few friends in SHIELD but Wisdom didn't have to do it. She could tell he still blamed himself for what had happened and he was being a bit more civilised towards her. Every now and then he went in to his surly routine, but she'd gotten past that. "So what's going on?"

"SHIELD's liaison deal's coming to an end. The evidence and other bits and pieces everyone's pulled together seems to be enough and it's up to everyone else to do their parts now. Once we've sifted the data and made our own conclusions, I guess it's going after the others. AIM, Hydra, whichever name gets pulled out of the hat first." He looked at he, suspended by wires in places. "Pain getting too much again?"

"Just tired to sleep on the bones. The internal stuff has been fixed and the doctors say the CAT scans say I'm clear. Guess I just needed to sleep."

"Yeah, well they can do miracles when they want. When's the next operation scheduled?"

"Tomorrow. My left leg isn't healing quite right so they're going to have to put in a steel rod, like they did with my arm."

"Great so when we go after Magneto you're going to be such an asset."

"X-Force is going to Genosha?" Pete shook his head, seeing the hope and fear in her eyes.

"God, I hope not," he said. "No way do I want to go there just yet. It was just something Raven was saying; about the backlash the next time someone mutant-like does this kind of deal. We're the front line, now."

"That's comforting," said Lydia. "First time out we almost got ourselves killed and trashed a lot of real estate."

"Shit, we are X-Men," said Pete and kissed her on the forehead. "Anyway, I need my rest as well as you, so I'll head off. The guys will be coming back later and I know they'll pop in."

"Pete," she said as he stood up. "What else is there? I can tell you're not telling me everything that's going on. Is it about the set up in Madripoor? You've avoided talking to me about it since I woke up."

"Yeah," said Pete. "I'm not getting anywhere findin' out who did this to us, to you. I've been looking a lot at this terrorist thing and I feel... I think I've let you down by not getting the bastard and if I let you down then I'm also letting down the thousands of people who died in New York as well."

"How do you work that out?" asked Lydia.

"Because if I can't help a team mate, how can I help perfect strangers?" he said, shaking his head. "I'll be back before your op." She nodded and let him go.

Pete wandered through the corridors of the Helicarrier, heading for his own quarters. He held his cheeks in his hands as he walked by, feeling the stubble on his face and knowing he needed a shave. He also needed a shower and some food before he looked over the stuff that X-Force had brought in and made his official report. Things were going back to normal and he wouldn't have the freedom he'd come to enjoy in this position.

He'd enjoyed it, other than the reports of people dying and what had

actually happened. The people who'd been on the ground that day were braver and cleverer men than he'd ever be. At the end of the day he was a ex-spy playing special agent games these days. His hot knives were of no real use in a disaster zone and he was more specialised in causing destruction, rather than repairing it.

"Every time you get tired," he said, chiding himself for getting this melancholy when he was close to exhaustion. He sighed and fumbled for the key card that would allow him access to the room. For half a second he wondered what Nick was back so early for and why he hadn't checked in with him. He shrugged knowing the Director had a lot on his mind and swiped the door. Then he turned the handle, only to be met by a massive electric charge that engulfed his body. As he stood there shaking as his muscles contracted, his skin burning as the voltage passed through him he tried to focus, and the smell of his skin cooking and the steam rising from his body made him panic. On a purely instinctive level he fired his hot knives blindly, not using his hands for guidance but forming them around his body and they flew away from him. Somehow they managed to hit the door and the connection broke and he fell to floor, barely aware of the fire alarms ringing set off by the burning of his body.

What he was aware of was the fact that this was no accident. Either he or the others had found something they didn't know about yet, or they had tipped of the traitor. Whatever it meant, they were close and he let himself drift in to unconsciousness.

November

"Well, Mr Wisdom," said the doctor. "I am certifying you as fit for active duty."

"Thanks," said Pete. It was late November now, almost 7 weeks since the attack and he was now able to go back on active duty, after training and getting himself back in shape. He was not unhappy about it, as it had given him a lot of time to catch up on his reading, and reviewing the data the team had gathered and what he had found out interested him.

"The Director would like to see you at your earliest convenience," added the doctor and Pete nodded. He looked at his scarred hand, where the most serious burn had occurred, from the handle on the door. The official story was that there had been a fault with the system and sent an almost lethal charge of electricity at him and if

he hadn't fired his hot knives at the door, he would almost certainly have been killed.

It was also a considered opinion that if he hadn't fired his hot knives and burnt off the excessive heat in his body he'd have been out of action a lot longer. Fury had found him on the floor moments after, and apparently Pete hadn't been breathing and his pulse had stopped. Fury was quick off the mark and had given him cardiopulmonary resuscitation and that had brought him back long enough to be taken to the medical bay where the doctors had gone to work. Pete remembered none of this, though he didn't expect to. He'd been in a pretty bad shape for a few days until he regained proper consciousness.

The team had been waiting for him to wake up and they'd put him in a room with Lydia so he wouldn't feel out of place. They had talked about what had happened and got the idea that this had been no accident and the team had agreed to keep their suspicions amongst themselves. It had been then that Fury had called the active team members and sent them on a mission, making Maverick the field team leader until the return of Wisdom. He also supplied the team with a couple of other agents.

After the briefing, North had told Wisdom that they were being sent on a fact finding mission to Russia, where it was rumored that a new mob boss was in fact a mutant terrorist and they were to go in and stop him before he became a larger force in the world criminal organization. It was also suspected that the mutant had been a part of the recent operation against Tony Stark, where the Russian Mafia for reasons unknown had attacked Stark. Stark was a major player in the SHIELD set up, so it had to be seen that SHIELD were doing something. Pete shrugged, and commented that it should be a walk in the park for the team. North had smiled and left Pete to recover, telling him he'd call in to say goodbye before the team left in a week or so as they had to integrate the two temporary members of the team.

It had been a slow process of recovery, as his muscles ached and it was a strain to do anything for a week or so, and they'd not allowed him his cigarettes. His breathing was hoarse and he had a nasty cough as well, plus his heart had taken a bit of strain in the weeks that had followed he had been trained from scratch, as if he were a raw recruit and soon he was fit again, but he still ached every so often and he was hellish tired. What gave him the drive to go on was that someone in SHIELD had tried to kill him and they'd underestimated their target. He suspected they'd not make the same

mistake again, but under such close supervision whoever it was didn't have the opportunity to get close. Until now, and he was back on duty.

"Hey, roomie," he said as he called in to say bye to Lydia. "I'm back on the active list, so you're on your own again."

"Pete," she said. "If we're right then whoever did this is still out there, and they'll be waiting for you."

"I know," he said. "That's not the point. I was careless and they got me. They'll have to work hard to do that again. I'm taking this a lot more personally now. They hurt you, they tried to kill me. Now I'm pissed off."

"Be careful," she said. "I don't really need you back, unless you're a visitor."

"I feel the same way," he said, as he put on his SHIELD flight jacket. "You've seen the same stuff I have, what do you think?"

"It's a senior person within SHIELD. I'm guessing that you are taking in to account the other oddities of recent months."

"Yup. The deals with Wolverine especially. The transport was ambushed when he was going back to Canada, Logan's file was leaked before that and there's been a few other bits and pieces I'm not happy with."

"Connecting everything together will make you look paranoid."

"I know," said Pete. "But as long as my team believes me, then I'm fine."

"Where are the others?"

"Dunno. The Russian mission should have ended weeks ago, but I've not seen anyone yet."

"Me neither. I'm concerned."

"So am I, but Fury wants to see me so maybe he knows something." Lydia nodded. "Besides, I'm going to tell him what we know - what I was going to do before I got sidetracked."

"Good luck," said Lydia. "If I think of something else, I'll let you

know." He nodded and made his exit and walked up to the command deck, so he could get to Fury's office. Then he stopped in his tracks and headed for the X-Force office. He was going to find his team and he entered the office to find it deserted and he sat down in his chair and checked on the recent history of the team.

The first thing he read was the mission brief as noted by Fury.

'There have been reports of a mutant crime boss within Russia that is using his power and position to cement himself in place within the global hierarchy of criminal elements. It is further believed that if he establishes himself as a power within Russia this will allow Magneto and his people to establish a foothold within the country, spreading his influence to other countries outside of Genosha. In light of the recent terrorist atrocities, it is inadvisable to allow this to continue. X-Force will be sent in to oust the player, whom our intelligence sources have named as Micah Abanovitch, also known as the Tsar, and bring him to justice. In light of recent events within SHIELD, X-Force are down two key members of staff. I am therefore assigning two regular agents to the team as replacements. These agents are not mutants, however they have been enhanced with bionic exoskeletons for the duration of this mission, and as a field test of this new technology, based on the Armory suit currently being used by Excalibur.'

That was about as much as Pete knew however he started to read the various field reports that had been submitted by the agents on site and he smiled as he digested what he read and he closed his eyes, a proper picture of what had gone down appearing in his mind.

"Okay," said Maverick. "We've done as much as we can here. We have the evidence and the local authorities have been informed, so on my mark, we go in."

"Agreed," said the others and Maverick, Raven and agents Aerella and Dionny ran towards the warehouse, with Siryn flying from above. Maverick fired a blast taking out the door as they approached.

"SHIELD! Nobody move!" he shouted as they entered and Siryn crashed through the skylight, as people reached for their guns in reaction to the raid. However X-Force had their own guns drawn and their powers primed. "Lower your weapons, you've got no chance at taking us down." X-Force had been making sure they knew what

was going on, what the capabilities of the targets were and what the success rate of the mission was. They'd had their own methods of intelligence work at finding the location of the base of operations and several days of covert operations had led to this simple mission.

"Do as he says," said a voice and the men complied with what they were doing, and a pathway was cleared so that the speaker could be seen. "So you are X-Force," he said, his Russian accent coming through strongly.

"Our reputation proceeds us," said Maverick. "And you must be Abanovitch."

"Yes, Mr North, I am. And these two gentlemen are people you've known for some time, Mr North." From behind him stood out two old foes of Maverick's. Hammer and Sickle.

"These two are mine," said Maverick as he cracked his knuckles. Obviously they weren't working for Pushkin these days and Maverick owed them both. Hammer for the death of Barrington and Sickle for his eye. "You take Abanovitch and his people."

The X-Force went to work, going through the normal humans with relative ease while Maverick went to work on his old foes. Alone they were a handful, but together they were even more deadly, but Maverick seemed to fight like a devil possessed.

"What happened to Pushkin?"

"His views are... limited," said Hammer, as he swung at Maverick, who dodged out of the way, using his powers on Sickle as he did so and sending the villain in to the wall with a full force kinetic blast. "Abanovitch knows better what and where the future lies."

"Really and what is that?" said Maverick, as he elbowed the man in the face and he heard the crack of a broken nose. He looked at Hammer, his jaw covered in the blood leaking from his damaged face. "More crime and death?"

"No," said Abanovitch's voice and Maverick turned to see his team held in the very air itself. "I want Russia to be as Genosha should be, a haven where mutants and their kind are safe."

"Ruled by you?" said Maverick, thinking that this wasn't good and wondering what powers the man had, and how similar it was to fighting the Dragon Lord. The hard part of the mission seemed to b

figuring out what the hard part of the mission was.

"Exactly. America has it's Magneto. I am the Russian Magnus."

"Yeah," said North. "Pretty sure that they already count the real Magnus as their own." He felt the air grab hold of him and suspend him up.

"Magneto has nothing over me," said Abanovitch. "My powers are to control the very natural environment, of which magnetism is only a part. The very atmosphere of the planet is mine to command!"

"Ah reckon you've work to do," said Raven and hit him with multiple telekinetic blasts. "My powers ain't exactly based on the natural elements, and from what I here, the real Magnus wouldn't let me do that to him." The shots stunned Abanovitch and freed X-Force from his grasp and Maverick took the opportunity to shoot Hammer and Sickle with his pistol, taking the legs from under them as they tried to flee.

"Not done with you two yet," he said as X-Force went on the attack as Abanovitch anchored himself in the natural environment, sending the rocks and air itself after the team but he was not prepared for assault after assault and after a while X-Force simply wore him down, and it was Siryn's song that brought him down in the end but he was not done yet and he sent the area in to chaos with his abilities, causing natural disasters and damage to the area in the scores, leaving a messy and bloody wake. By the time they'd forced him to bring it under control and stop the madness he had wrought it was too late.

The damage to the local area, and that section of the world's biosphere was done and all that was left was the clear up, for which the team had said they would participate in. The Russia affair had been handled on time, with the player being deposed from his position, but there had been a scuffle that had caused a lot of destruction. That was where they were in an effort to show that not all mutants were bad, because although the country still remembered the Soviet Super Soldiers, it remembered the actions of Magneto more and what he had done to the country in times past. If they could show that mutants were also capable of healing not just destroying then they would do a job in itself. That was where they had been all this time and they would be back soon enough.

"Typical, one week to trash the place, then another three to rebuild it," Pete said. Then he made a couple of other checks on the computers and shook his head, thinking he knew that this had been coming and there was the special email that he'd received that confirmed his suspicions at least in what he'd been looking for abroad. Pete sighed, knowing he owed them a favour down the line and now had a proper picture of what was happening and that he was right to tell Fury what was going on. He made a check on the location of the Director. He was in his office and Pete made his way there now he knew what was going on.

"The Director's expecting you, Commander," said the watch commander and Pete nodded and made his way to the office. He knocked on the door.

"Come in," shouted Fury and Pete came in. "Good to see you up and about," he said gesturing to the empty chair and Pete sat down. "I expect you want a progress report on yer team?"

"No, I checked in at the X-Force office before I came up, just to make sure what was going on. They did a good job in Russia, from all accounts it could have gotten a lot nastier over there."

"I agree," said Fury. "That's another good job for you and your team. The X-Force project is going well. Better than we'd hoped."

"Actually, it's better than it could be," said Pete.

"Oh?" asked Fury, raising an eyebrow. "Explain."

"It's simple enough," said Pete. "There's a traitor in SHIELD, someone who's been trying to ruin us, or at least hinder the operations."

"Do ya have proof of this?" said Fury, standing from his seat and walking over to the window.

"I'll get to that," said Wisdom. "First off I'll tell you what we know. The first instance that we know about something being wrong, or at least suspicious is in Madripoor."

"Yer mission?"

"No, the arrest of Tyger Tiger. I can't figure out how SHIELD knew

that Hydra had left the island and that we were free to arrest her."

"It was part of the whole deal with Wolverine," said Fury, looking at him. "When we were given details of his treachery, we knew that the island was ready to be looked at for our operational purposes."

"That's what it says in the files," said Wisdom, "but it doesn't quite track. The orders to take Logan came from above you, but the details that were sent to the Pentagon were actually taken from the files on Logan. There are three agencies that have them - the X-Men, the National Security Agency, and SHIELD. The NSA were as shocked as we all were, the X-Men didn't know about it because that was the reason Logan went to Madripoor, so that leaves us. Someone with access to the files used it to screw Logan over. There are no details about Tyger, or Hydra. I had Marcus check when he was in Washington."

"Huh," answered Fury. "I never checked, I just assumed..."

"Yeah, I think that's what the traitor was counting on," said Pete. "Then there was our mission to the island. We were expected, the Dragon Lord knew who we were, our capabilities and when we would arrive. He almost knew everything about us, and it was that which got Lydia hurt. Each of us were approached or followed as soon as we arrived in Madripoor, given clues as to where the Folding Circle would be found and ultimately it was our own fears that were used against us when the Dragon Lord tried to break us. It was from our own psyche files that they were drawn. I know, I remember my own experience." "My God," said Fury. "How bad is this?" "Oh it get's worse," said Pete. "There's the matter of Logan's battle with the Sons of the Shield. The jet was one of ours on a flight plan known only to us and Department H in Canada. We did think it was one of those Department H things, because they have a habit of screwing up, but I looked in to it. Turns out the jet deviated from it's flight plan. Our pilot altered course and yet we were still intercepted." "Where's the Agent now?" asked Fury. "On duty in Madripoor," said Wisdom. "Pretty interesting stuff. As was the door to my quarters. Whoever I'm on to, they know I'm on to them. No way was it an accident - they tried to kill me."

"What else do you have to prove that?" said Fury. "This is getting a little far fetched."

"My files at the X-Force office have been compromised. Someone's been in there and hidden or deleted the files on this. Shame they

didn't know about the back ups."

"You kept copies?"

"Yes," said Pete. "Call me paranoid, but I expected something to happen at some point. Didn't think it'd be that close, and thanks again for the save."

"Think nothin' of it," said Fury. "Got yer files to hand?"

"Not that accessible," said Pete. "Besides, I'm not done. I believe that the traitor allowed the tragedy in New York to occur."

"That's one hell of an accusation, Commander," said Fury, his face turning dark. "Ya realise that whoever the traitor is - if yer right - is responsible for thousands of deaths."

"Lot more than that if you take in to account the war going on. No way the intel communities dropped the ball on something this big. As part of the investigations, I had the team check on things to make sure. The things that are missing are the kinds of things you'd expect not to be there if there'd be no intelligence reports, but things are too good. They didn't get everywhere. There's been a few slips on the part of the traitor. In fact, I'm almost certain I know who he is."

"Slips?" said Fury coming over to him at sitting on the desk, almost face to face with Pete.

"Yeah," said Pete. "He's made some very basic mistakes, but I never really put the pieces together until now - because now I know. The first slip the traitor made was when they first met me. Got my rank wrong calling me 'Captain' instead of 'Commander'. It was a basic slip, but very uncharacteristic. Second, they got Siryn's name wrong when they met her as well, which considering they knew exactly who she was. 'Cassidy' not 'Rourke' an' even I know that difference."

"That's all you've got?"

"No, one other thing. A slip that was made and I wasn't even here. At the end of our mission in Madripoor, Maverick was called in to see you. The watch commander told him that you were taking a call from the Middle East. You said it was about a mutant killing and we accepted that, except I had Maverick do some checking. It wasn't that, was it, sir? It was a call telling you that the attack was going ahead on the World Trade Center."

"That's preposterous," said Fury. "You can't think..."

"Oh yes, I can," said Wisdom. "I know who the traitor in SHIELD is, Nick. It's you."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #19

"SECRETS AND LIES" Part VI: What Was, What Is, What Will Be

by [David Wheatley](#)

"Well," said Maverick as the team sat down in the X-Force office with their newest member, Katherine Pryde. "This is a surprise."

Pete Wisdom

"Yuir not kiddin'," said Siryn. "Sam dinnae mention this when I spoke to him earlier."

Shadowcat

"Sam didn't know," said Kitty, sitting back and looking over the room of strange faces, who were now her latest set of team mates. "It was a decision by the X-Men after you spoke to him that I return to SHIELD. I've been off long enough anyway, and the atmosphere in the mansion isn't that great." She looked pointedly at Maverick who nodded.

Siryn

"We're cool in here," said North. "There's no devices for listening in to what we say. I've checked and so has Lydia."

Maverick

"Good," said Kitty. "What's going on here?" She looked about the team. "Is it anything to do with the emails I've been getting from Pete?" The other four looked at each other. Could this be the link they were missing in nailing the traitor?

"What did it say?" asked Lydia. Kitty went a little red, before regaining her composure.

"They were rather personal," she said. "I'm not sure I can tell you."

Nick Fury

"Fury brief you at all?" asked Raven. Katherine shook her head.

"He said he was glad I was back, though obviously he'd have preferred it were under better circumstances. He thinks I've come back because of Pete, though I didn't mention the files you asked about. Pete sent me emails, but they weren't files or anything. Guys, what is going on here?"

Shadow King

"Okay," said Maverick. "This is what we know so far, or rather what we've been able to piece together. Our first mission was a set up, whether it was to fail or succeed we don't know, because succeed we did, but it was obvious that somebody had sold us out. Our targets knew we were coming, knew who we were and a lot more as well. It was someone in SHIELD, but before we could do anything the tragedy in New York hit."

"Yeah, we found out when we got back from space," said Kitty. "We couldn't believe it had happened. As if things weren't volatile enough..."

"Get's better," said Lydia. "You know there was a bit in the media about how it was a surprise and nobody had seen it coming? Pete didn't buy that, and to be fair neither did we, so we used our contacts to do some searching. There was nothing, they were right."

"Except that there was too much nothing," said Raven. "Someone's covered things up, allowed this to happen. It's what, a fair few months now since it all happened and the focus is now on the war. The cause is still being looked at, but not like we wanted. We started to put a case together, and when we had enough for Pete to make a guess at what was going on, they took him out. Attempted it, anyway and he was out of action for quite a bit."

"Huh," said Kitty, sitting back. "And then they killed him?"

"No," said Lydia. "Pete used the time to think and get his head in order, putting the pieces together. He reasoned that the traitor was someone high level and looked further a field to see what else was wrong. He figured the traitor was Fury and confronted him."

"The Colonel?" said Pryde, with scepticism in her voice. "No way."

"Way," said Lydia. "But this is where things get sketchy, as I'm still recovering from my own injuries and the team were in Russia."

"It seems that Fury convinced Pete he was wrong and then someone killed Pete, or had him killed," said North. "We didn't believe it until they found the body and the tests confirmed it was Pete."

"It is Pete," said Kitty. "I identified the body. There's a mark..."

"Yeah," said Raven. "The tests and everything are great, but we saw the body as well, don't forget. Ah did a scan. From what I've gathered from the lessons and such that the X-Men sent me, that a dead person has no mind that can be scanned, but there's a residual trace in mutants that makes up their bio-signature."

"Which is how Cerebro is able to detect mutants," said Kitty. "Yes. I mean we've never scanned for dead mutants, because they're dead. Though maybe we should have done, the amount of times Magneto's come back."

"Yeah, well Ah've been using my powers to act as a Cerebro, because with the way my defences react to a psionic intrusion, there has to be more to it. Xavier thought so, Ah've seen it in the files. Anyway, that maybe a perfect replica of Pete Wisdom, but it is a replica, because there's nothing about him that screams mutant at me."

"It's not him?" said Kitty. "But..."

"We're being lied to again," said Maverick. "I'm getting a might sick of this. Pete may be dead, he may not. He sure as hell isn't here."

"The emails," said Lydia. "How long has he been sending them?"

"Since September," replied Shadowcat. "Something about how the New York event got him thinking about us. I deleted them, but I know my way around a computer and got them back when Sam mentioned it."

"Right," said Maverick. "I think we ought to take a look at the email. If that's okay?"

"Yes," she replied. "It makes it a little better if he didn't mean what he said and was using me... Actually, he better be dead, otherwise

I'm going to give a good slapping."

The team smiled. That was exactly like Pete to do that.

"So you used to work for these jokers?" said Pete. "I can't believe you were a Hydra agent."* He and Jessica were discussing their lives again, and she was telling him about her time as Spider-Woman, and this had been an interesting revelation.

*** (That would have been in Marvel Spotlight #32 and Marvel Two in One #30-32 - David)**

"Yes," Jessica admitted. "It get's worse though. I've tried to kill Nick Fury, and you know before when I told you I crossed Viper in Madripoor?"

"Uh huh," said Pete.

"There was a time when Viper believed she was my mother, and she hates me because she thinks I brainwashed her to think that. Or she used to. She once cared about me like a mother, but once she found out otherwise..."*

*** (Spider-Woman #42-44 and Captain America #281 - David)**

"Oh, good," said Pete. "Glad you've told me all this now. So what happened to you, that caused to lose all your powers? Well, the cool ones, anyway."

"My venom blast and pheromones were lost after I kind of died..."

"Is that a requirement when you wear spandex? Every so-called hero I've ever met is supposed to have died at least once."

"It's the nature of the work," she replied.

"I know that," said Pete. "But dead people really ought to stay that way. It seems kind of cheap to just come back. I mean, the funeral, the crying, all of that. What makes the people like us so special and not everyone else?"

"Dunno," admitted Jessica. "I was lucky. Doctor Strange helped me, because my body died while I was on the astral plane and he brought me back. It just cost me my powers. I still have the strength and the

ability to stick to walls though. I think I'm still resistant to radiation and some poisons too, but I've not tested it."*

*** (Spider-Woman #50 - David)**

"Yeah, well, what are the odds that's what Zola's trying to restore," said Pete. "I'll put money the genetic potential's still there. I..." He paused a moment. "Oh, my."

"What is it?" asked Jessica.

"If I'm right, we've got a chance to get the hell out of here. Or at least you do."

"Why not us both?"

"Because," said Pete. "I can't stick to walls like you do. The gravity's knackered my legs being hung here like this. You can rest up. I don't have that advantage."

"What's your plan?" Jessica said, wondering what he'd picked up that she hadn't.

"I can't fire my hot knives, but you still have your strength, right? Well, so far you've tried to break your bonds. My idea is don't bother - pull the bastards right off the wall. Press back with your legs for the leverage."

"Why haven't you suggested this before?" demanded Jessica.

"Because," Pete snapped back, "I've only just thought of it. The Shadow King seems to be occupied somewhere else, and his focus isn't on us right now. You've got one chance, love. We've got one chance - you." Jessica took a deep breath and tried.*

*** (Where's Farouk? See Scarlet Spider #7 and find out- David)**

She hadn't realised she was resting her legs from the strain they would have been placed under, and because she was exercising them they were more or less fine. Her teeth were gritted and her eyes closed as she pushed and heaved at the walls that were keeping her chains in place and they started to creak. Sweat dripped from her face as she strained and struggled and the perspiration started to cover her body, soaking her already dirty and ragged clothing. Pete took a deep breath and swallowed the comment he was going to

make, not wanting to ruin her concentration.

Then the wall gave under the pressure, and rock and stone came down around them and the room was filled with dust, but she was free and soon she broke the rock from the ends of the chains that held her, leaving her arms free properly.

"Get the fuck out of here," said Pete, coughing as he breathed in the dust filled air.

"I'll be back," she said to him, looking at him and feeling helpless that she couldn't do a thing to get him out of here. Then she jumped up, grabbed him around the neck and pulled him towards her and kissed him, her tongue tickling his teeth, perversely enjoying the faint taste of tobacco in his breath, and he answered her back with the same. Then she let go. "So you don't forget," she said and went back to getting out of the cell. Pete stayed silent, stunned in a pleased silence and he watched as she kicked down the door and made her break.

"Not bloody likely now," he said after a moment, to the sounds of surprised guards being clobbered by chains, wielded by someone with the proportionate strength of a spider...

"My God," said Maverick as he read through the letters. "Pete actually wrote this?"

"It's not exactly in his character," muttered Siryn as she read what had to be some of the soppiest, sugar sweet stuff she'd ever read in her life.

"He had his moments," said Kitty. "But not like this." Her initial embarrassment at these people going through her personal effects had subsided. She was a professional, and these people needed her. She'd used her own skill and expertise in computer systems to ensure that nobody could access the computers without physically being in the room.

"Agreed," said Siryn as she looked at Kitty, who failed to catch the glance. They were the two people in the room who knew Pete Wisdom best, with several years of distance between them. Terry wondered if Kitty knew about her past with Pete, but decided this was not the time to press the issue.

"I have to admit I look back on those times quite fondly," said Kitty. "But it wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done in my life. I thought I loved him. I was wrong."

"Did the two of you ever get together and sort things out?" asked Lydia, studying the text.

"No," said Kitty. "There just never seemed to be time. I half expected to see him when Brian and Meggan got married, but he never showed."

"He never stopped caring," said Raven, softly. "He just took it very hard."

"How do you know, has he talked about me?" asked Kitty, wondering where this insight came from.

"When we were in Madripoor," started Marcus, taking her to one side to tell her what it was that Pete had experienced when they had been captured, thanks to the dark force spawned powers of the Dragon Lord.

"Okay," said Maverick, looking at the other two. "Impressions?"

"If these things are the files," said Siryn, "then they have to be buried within the code of the mails or something, because they're not obvious."

"I'll check," said Maverick as he tapped a few codes in to the computer. "Lydia?"

"There's something about these messages," she said, placing printouts of the messages on her desk, scouring over the words. "If you read them, it somehow says something. I just can't quite grasp what's being shown to me here."

"Well, there's nothing in the code. No attachments, no encrypted data, no secret messages," said North, frustration edging in to his voice. "Maybe Pete was just feeling... I don't know... lovesick?"

"It's possible," said Lydia. "There were no signs of it when I saw him though."

Kitty and Raven came back across to the main group. "Maybe it was something triggered by his visions in Madripoor," she suggested.

"From what Marcus tells me you were twisted inside out."

"Ah," said Lydia. "That could be it." She sat back, then grabbed a highlighter and began to mark words on the sheets. Then she grabbed another colour and did the same again. "Ye-es," she said. "That's it."

"What's it?" asked Maverick.

"The code. Now this is very clever. Very sneaky," said Lydia, a sense of awe in her tone. "Give me a moment." She did some work on the computer and brought up the letter and the computer began to reorder the words and brought up an entirely new document.

"What the hell?" asked North. "How did it get that?"

"Each of the messages has a separate word of text on it, in a specific sequence, working from the bottom of each message, starting at the third message. Doesn't have to be encrypted because you set the messages to send later on from when they were written and nobody would be any the wiser." Lydia sat back, pleased with herself.

"Now that is good," said North. "I mean that's very clever."

"Black Air training, I'd guess," said Kitty. "The art of hiding things in plain sight is something they were good at. I guess he used me."

"You sound a little disappointed," said Marcus. "I thought you said you weren't too proud of yourself back then."

"Yes, but he was still special to me. I'm not interested anymore, but... It's hard to describe. Maybe, just maybe, there could have been something special that I missed, or that I forgot, or something. What might have been, y'know?"

"Yeah," said Terry. "We know. So what does the message say?"

"It's not the files," said Lydia. "That would have been too easy. But it is details of how to find them. There's also something personal for you, Kitty. I'll segment it and send it across to your console."

"Oh," said Kitty, shocked at it. She should have guessed that Pete wouldn't just dump all this on her, but it seemed easier to paint him in a different light. "I'll read it later."

"Okay," said Maverick. "We've got a starting point at long last."

Where do we go from here?" He looked pointedly at Lydia.

"I..."

"X-Force report to the Director's office," came the announcement over the commsystem. The team looked at each other and Maverick nodded at Kitty who checked the computer systems.

"We're secure," she said. "There's no way anyone could have gotten past the additional security protocols I've added."

"Guess we've a mission then," said Maverick. "Lousy timing."

"I'm still not cleared for active duty," said Lydia. "I can get to work on this, and report to you later."

"Okay," said Maverick. "Sounds like a plan, and seeing as you're the only one who's read the file, it keeps the security limited. Marcus, keep in contact with Lydia at all times. Anything happens, I want to know as soon as possible." The team nodded and then went to see Nick Fury wanted them for, leaving Lydia to make some calls of her own. The proof they needed was finally within their grasp.

Jessica Drew made her way to the surface levels of the base they were being held in. She didn't know exactly where she was, but she was surprised at the resistance she had encountered. It had been quite minimal, especially for the headquarters of Hydra and it wasn't what she had expected at all. Not that she was complaining and she took out another couple of guards, enjoying the finally cut loose and get some payback.

Then she barrelled through the main doors, running across the carpeted foyer of the place and breathed fresh air for the first time in ages. She was virtually free and she began to run down the path that she could see led to a gateway at the bottom of the drive. Alarms were sounding across the place and she knew if she escaped she would be luckier than she deserved, but it had been a valiant effort. The chains that were still attached to her arms were beginning to feel heavy now, and she knew she was out of shape. Yes, she still had strength, but she'd not done anything like this in a long time and she leapt up over the gate, landing, rolling, standing and on her way again. She was starting to tire and she could see that the world outside was an island. They were on an island, but she wasn't sure

which it was or where she could possibly be.

The cliffs the house was situated on were unfamiliar to her, but it certainly wasn't Madripoor anymore. But what if they were close to Madripoor? The possibility intrigued her, but she didn't know of anywhere quite like this near that island. The sun was beating down on her and she could hear a lot of noise. She took a moment to look about, and noticed there were lots of other islands about as well. It was somewhere quite warm, lots of islands, and if she was right close to Madripoor and America, which where Pete was from. It wouldn't be hard to work out, assuming she got the chance.

Then there was an amount of weapons fire and she heard someone cry that they wanted her alive. She looked over the edge of the cliff at the waters below and took a gamble. She was tired and these chains would weigh her down, but there was little to no choice and she leapt as far forward as she could, past the barrier, and hoped she wouldn't hit the rocks of the cliff as she dropped down to the sea below.

All she knew was she wasn't going to be captured again, and she waited for the waters to hit her.

"Damnation," muttered the Shadow King as he tried to sense her presence. She had escaped somehow and he had only been gone a few hours. There was much for him to do, old scores that needed to be settled and other situations that needed to be monitored, as other powerful forces played their own games. The loss of the Spider-Woman annoyed him. Annoyed him greatly, and he could not tell if she were alive or dead. He simply could not detect her presence.

"She won't get far," said Viper, speaking to the presence that inhabited her body as Arnim Zola examined her swollen belly, making sure that both mother and child were healthy.

"It's not that," said Farouk. "It's how long it takes for us to get to her. Alive, she has chance to raise the alarm, dead... well the longer she's dead, the less chance there is I can place someone else's mind in to her corpse. She would have been perfect for you, Viper. Perfect for us all."

The Shadow King sighed, then he had an idea. "I think I know the perfect way of finding her." Viper looked at Zola, who cowered back, but there was no escaping what would happen next. Farouk

departed her body and entered Zola and went down to see Pete Wisdom.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #20

"DEATH IN GREECE" Part I: Opening Gambit

by [David Wheatley](#)

"You wanted to see us, Colonel?" asked Maverick, as he, Raven, Siryn and Shadowcat came in to the director's office, after being summoned moments ago.

Pete Wisdom

"Yeah," said Nick. "One of our people in Greece sent in some rumours of something we need to get involved with, or more specifically X-Force is gonna get involved with." He passed them some folders, and the team opened them up to look through them. "The group you're lookin' at are called the Death's Head Guard."

Shadowcat

"They're aliens?" asked Shadowcat, who of all the team was the one with the most experience of extra-terrestrial encounters.

Siryn

"Yup. Originally part of a peaceful and curious race that established an observation post on Earth, the Gnobians had the unbelievably bad luck to do so in the midst of fascist Germany during World War II. Coming into contact with Baron Von Strucker, the Gnobian Mother merged with him, becoming so tainted by the experience that her subsequent offspring were born with an intense hatred of yours truly, and a determination to set up the 4th Reich despite their intense revulsion for the principles behind fascism."

Maverick

"Poor bastards," muttered North. "That's manipulation on a grand scale."

"Get's better," stated Fury. "Taking their title from Baron Von

Nick Fury

Strucker's slain personal SS troops, the Death's Head Guard targeted the planet's governments for take over, but were side-tracked by their involuntary and compulsive hatred of me, and it brought them in to conflict with SHIELD."

Shadow King

"So why us?" asked Raven. "Why not any usual SHIELD types, if you've faced them before?"

"Because of their metahuman similarities. Being Gnobians, the Death's Head Guard were all extremely empathic, and formed a collective intelligence. They could also float, teleport, and could even withstand bullets and laser blasts up to a point far beyond human endurance. What is inherent ability and what they owed to their advanced technology is hard to pinpoint. The Gnobian technology has been rumoured to be the basis for the advanced weaponry of both Hydra and A.I.M., but to be honest we've never proved that."

"So why are they back now?" asked Siryn. "It's been some time since anyone's heard of them."

"Yup," said Nick. "They killed themselves years ago, because they could see the error of their ways and knew they were genetically incapable of changing them. Death before dishonour."

"So what's the gig?" asked Shadowcat. "If they're all dead..."

"There's a group forming in Greece, from what intel's tellin' us. They're not happy about the resurgence of fortunes of Hydra, that they're not truly following the group's original ideas and purpose of Von Strucker. So they've resurrected the group, this time as the Death's Head Commandos - and they seem to have the same kind of powers as the old Gnobian version. Whether they're aliens or not is up for debate, but either way somethin's brewin' in Greece. We're over Europe for a UN gathering thing anyway, so you're a go in two hours, get ready."

"Yes sir," they all said.

"Dismissed." The team left the room and Nick sat back in his chair watching them go, then turned his attention to a letter that had come in the mail, marked United Nations.

Jessica Drew opened her eyes to find herself on a beach, the surf washing around her and she stood up. Her arms ached from the effort she had made in swimming with the chains around her, and

she hadn't known if she was going to drown or not, but she just kept swimming until she couldn't swim any more. She gotten lucky, for she must have been close to the shore when she stopped, otherwise she'd be dead for sure.

She was still shaky from her escape and she staggered a little as she walked on the sand, not seeing anyone about. There were no signs of civilisation as far as she could see, but there were trees and grass, which meant there would be food and fresh water, and that told her she could survive here for a while. She also knew that the Shadow King would be searching for her, and he'd be sending Hydra to recapture her. Evading them wasn't going to be easy, and she thought back to the man she had been forced to leave behind.

She gave a shiver at what they'd be doing to Pete as punishments for helping her escape, probing him for what he knew, hurting him. It wasn't something that anyone deserved, and the problem was if they let him, he could fight back, and if he used his powers as well as he kissed... She shook her head in amazement at the thought, but she couldn't help it. The man was good, and if they got out of this alive, she wondered if he'd be up for a date.

"Getting' ahead of yourself, Jess," she said as she went in to the trees, knowing full well there was a long way to go before that happened. There was the sound of machinery in the distance, and she turned back to see a helicopter in the sky and she somehow knew it was her they were after, and that Farouk must have found her while she was sleeping. "Damn," she said and started to run, wrapping the chains around her arms as she moved. Hopefully that would give her some protection later on, but she wasn't sure if they would or not. The island was large and she knew that the Shadow King was stretching himself these days, controlling many people and not having a proper host body to provide his true being and play host to his psionic energy.

Touch wood, she could keep the enemy at bay for some time, and it was a large island after all. A plan started to form in her mind and she smiled as she went further in to the tropical forest.

The team has set off sometime ago and Lydia was looking through the data that had been supplied by Pete through Kitty in regards to the traitor. It was down to her to get the information they had been looking for and she wondered if it would be easy enough to do. She was still not fully fit, which was why she wasn't with the team. Her

active duty assessment was due in a few days and she needed the exercise to get up to speed.

To get the files she needed she would have to go the United Kingdom, which wasn't too far away. If the team could get to Greece from their current locale in a about thirty minutes, then her going to England wouldn't be that difficult. She filed a report to the medical section, requesting leave on health grounds and she knew they wouldn't refuse and she started to get ready to go. By the time she had packed and changed she had the authorisation she needed and she was on her way.

As she travelled she made a telephone call, as she knew that she wouldn't be able to go where she wanted without some help. Even her SHIELD credentials wouldn't open the doors she wanted, but a member of the club would. She made the appointment and would be seen by Brian Braddock, Member of Parliament for Critchley East.

"Welcome to Greece," said Maverick as the carrier landed on a small airstrip just outside of Saint Andalucia. "Let's go." The team gathered their gear and exited the aircraft to the tarmac below.

"So what do you want us to do, boss?" asked Raven, and Maverick shivered at that. He still wasn't used to the role of leader, except this was their second mission with him in charge.

"First thing we have to do is make sure the rumours are correct," said North. "Not that I'm doubting it, but how much force we use will be justified by the enemy we're fighting."

"Do any of you know anyone in Greece?" asked Kitty. "I don't but I figured it might be helpful."

"Not me," said Raven.

"Nope," said Terry.

"Same here," said David. "So we're on our own here. Did you get anything from your net searches?"

"Pulled a few references to the group," said Kitty, "but not a great deal. If we had a lot, we'd have been after them a while ago."

"Figures, the kind of luck we've been having with searches of late,"

sighed North.

"Maverick," said Terry, "over there." The team looked across the runway to see a man in a SHIELD uniform coming over. This was a UN airstrip, so it wasn't like he was conspicuous by the blue suit as if he were in the middle of Athens. "That must be Taggart." Taggart was their contact in Greece, the man whose section had called in the rumour, and more to the point the man who'd found out about it.

"Captain Taggart," said Maverick.

"Commander North," said Taggart, taking his hand. "And this must be the rest of X-Force."

"Lieutenants Pryde, North and Rourke," introduced Maverick.

"I read the reports of the work you did in Madripoor and coordinating the work in September. Very good work."

"We do what we can, Captain. That's why we're here. So the Death's Head Commandos?"

"Of course," said Taggart. "Please follow me across to our war room. It's not quite the Helicarrier, but it's good enough for our needs." Soon they were sitting in a small amphitheatre, with Captain Taggart in the middle of the room.

"As you'll have read in your files, there have been an amount of thefts of specialist equipment in the last few weeks, and SHIELD were called in to investigate. What we found scared the hell out of me, and my team." He pressed a button on a small keypad and a mountain range came on the screen, with one of them highlighted in red. "This is Mount Flaska, in the Kalymnos mountain range. Nothing very spectacular about it, other than the cave of the bottom of it, called by the locals the Cavern of the Nymphs."

In the backs of their minds, everyone heard Pete's voice chiming in about how he liked the sound of it already, but they repressed their smiles.

"Isn't there a set of springs that have low level radiation nearby?" asked Kitty. "I did a paper on it when I was at the Xavier Institute, though it wasn't that then."

"Yes," said Taggart. "There are."

"Could be a source of their powers, or a factor in the cause then," said Kitty.

"The waters are supposedly healing ones," said Taggart.

"I was taught to never discount the affects of radiation," said Kitty. "Even small doses alter genetic structures in ways that are too subtle to comprehend. I theorised that the healing effects of the water were in fact some small way of mutating the body and imbue it with a healing factor of some kind, but the doses of the water that were applied were not enough to sustain the effect for the long term, but it was also potential enough to mean that the x-factor gene was active now and there'd be a greater possibility of mutant children from people exposed to the water."

"Sound like one heck of a paper," said Taggart. "I wouldn't mind reading it."

"Did it work?" asked Terry.

"No," said Kitty.

"Did what work?" asked North, missing the point and beginning to wonder if having two Xavier affiliates was as good a thing as he'd once thought.

"A free trip to Greece, courtesy of Professor Xavier," the girls said.

"Ah," said North. "Figures."

"It was worth a try," replied Kitty. "And I got a B for it, so I was pleased with that."

"Okay," said Taggart, with a smile. "Back to the Cave." He pressed a button and the cave was brought up. "Myself and my partner James Tsang went to investigate as there had been a lead there and we found the cave was closed. This is a major tourist attraction on the island, and to have it closed was very strange. What we found was that the cave had been altered and it was now the entrance to a tunnel network that led down to series of caverns, and that it was the preparation area army being formed down there."

"How many were there in there?" Raven said.

"Ten," said Taggart. "Not much, but still too many. Normally two SHIELD agents can get away from ten people easily enough but

these were special. They seemed to know what we were doing and did not have the limitations we did, as if they were flying. I only just got away. James did not, and they found his body floating in the Med a few hours ago. I was hoping he was alive, but..."

"I understand," said Maverick. "We've just lost one of our own as well, so we do know."

"Thank you," said Taggart. "I sent my report to the Colonel at the Helicarrier, and he put the pieces together from what I'd seen."

"Any connection you know of to Hydra?" asked Siryn.

"Not that we're aware of, except in the historical sense," said Taggart. "Why?"

"Just thinkin' out loud," said Terry.

"I see," said Taggart. "However, whoever they're affiliated with, the last time the Death's Head Commando's appeared, a lot of good men were killed before they were stopped. Our mission is to prevent that from happening again."

"Kalymnos, here we come," said Maverick. With luck this would be a simple search and destroy mission, however the team knew very well exactly who they were doing this for - and it wasn't SHIELD.

Jessica was hidden in the forest, waiting for whomever was after her. There was a distinct lack of noise out there, and she knew the helicopter had flown over head and not landed. That could have meant they parachuted down to the island, but the craft had been too low for that and so she was unsure of what was going on. Perhaps it hadn't been a Hydra ship anyway, just a tourist thing. The island they'd been held on seemed to be populated enough, and if the islands were like this, then it was a safe bet there were tourists about.

She had to admire the brass of it from Hydra's viewpoint, for who would have looked for a set of terrorists in a place populated by holiday makers, on the islands for sun, sea and sand. It played well in to public perceptions that terrorists lived in caves or backwater places, hidden from the world by their desolate natures. It was the same as if they were mutants - that they could be living next door to you, but whereas most mutants were not interested in anything other

than living, terrorists were interested in the cause.

It gave her a shiver, as coming from London, she was no stranger to terrorist activities. The Irish Republican Army and the ilk had been terrorising the UK for a long time, and though that had stopped for the most part, there were elements that did not want peace, and those people had lived next door to her friends and family. Yes she had spent a long time away from the UK, living in America and Madripoor, but it still affected her.

"Jessica!" shouted a voice, shaking her from her thoughts on terrorists. She stayed silent, just in case. "JESSICA!" the voice shouted again.

"Pete?" she muttered. "What the hell?" His legs were numb, he'd said so himself and he hadn't been able to free himself from the chains, except he'd had a plan for her escape, so what if he a plan for his own? Was it a trap? She couldn't be sure and the voice called her name again. "Damn," she said. There wasn't a great deal she could do to determine whether or not he was on his own, if he was being forced to do this. If it was a trap it was clever, because there was an attraction between the two of them, she had felt it. He was handsome in a rugged kind of way, and from what he said he smoked and drank one hell of a lot, which she could get behind herself, living in Madripoor for that amount of time. She sighed, and made the choice.

"Over here!" she called, standing up. If push came to shove, she could take him out and he'd never know what had hit him.

"Jessica!" he said, his voice distant, but closer than it had been before.

"Pete," she said, standing her ground and soon he came in sight. She could see he was limping a little, as his legs were still not as well as they had been. He was beaten and bruised as well, and he looked as if he'd been in the fight of his life. "What happened?" she said hurrying over to him, her concern for him over-riding her better judgement.

"The guards weren't too happy with me over your escape the other day."

"Other day?" she said, wondering how long she'd been unconscious.

"Yeah, and the Shadow King took over three of them to beat the truth out of me. I've been beaten by experts before and these pillocks

weren't even close."

"How'd you escape?" she said, looking at him.

"Helicopter," he said. "The guards thought it'd be easier to beat me if I wasn't hung in the air and they could kick me a bit, and cut me down. I guess their boss wasn't in charge at that point. After a while and the feeling was back in my legs enough. I made a break for it, and there was one leaving. I grabbed hold of it and I knew they were looking for you."

"Seems a little easy," she said.

"Easier to say than do," he answered. "I used my hot knives to get down to the island from the chopper. Guess they don't train them as well as they used to." At that point he fell towards her and she caught him. "Though I could do with the rest right now."

"God, look at you," she said, as she helped him to the floor. "You've taken worse than this."

"I'll tell you about my fight with Colossus another time," he said, closing his eyes. "Oh, bloody hell, this hurts. Guess I've no adrenaline left."

"Oh, Pete," she said, and looked at him. "Thank God, you've no idea how bad I felt about leaving you."

"Even after the kiss?" he said, and she flushed a little.

"It seemed the right thing to do, in the circumstances."

"Like this?" he said, and pulled her down towards him, their lips meeting again.

"I thought you were tired," she said after they broke the clinch.

"I suddenly feel better," he said, pulling her closer, and they kissed again, rolling on the floor in their passion.

"We should... be looking for... shelter," she panted between kisses.

"Later," said Pete and Jessica suddenly realised she was underneath him and he was pressing down on her.

"Pete, no," she said. "We need to get out of here."

"Don't know that concept," he said, pinning her down, and Jessica realised she was in trouble.

"Get off me," she said.

"After I'm done," said Pete, his hot knives flaring and melting the chains around her arms and she shouted out as the molten metal seared her flesh. With that amount of pain she knew she couldn't fight him off, and he knew it as well as he let go off her arms, reaching down and tearing off the shreds of clothes she had, ripping her panties from her body.

"Please," she said, pleading with him, as she felt him pressing against her thigh. She'd been abused many times before, but she'd never been physically raped.

"If it's any consolation," said Farouk, "he doesn't want to do this and he's fighting me like a demon."

"Oh, God," she said, realising it wasn't really Pete. She should have remembered he didn't have access to his powers and the error had cost her dearly.

"See, you're getting in to this already," said The Shadow King, kissing her neck, as he parted her legs. "Time for baby to take her medicine."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #21

"DEATH IN GREECE" Part II: Developing Your Position

by [David Wheatley](#)

"Please," Jessica said, pleading with Peter Wisdom, as she felt him pressing against her thigh. She'd been abused many times before, but she'd never been physically raped.

Pete Wisdom

"If it's any consolation," said Farouk, "he doesn't want to do this and he's fighting me like a demon."

"Oh, God," she said, realising it wasn't really Pete. She should have remembered he didn't have access to his powers and the error had cost her dearly.

Shadowcat

"See, you're getting in to this already," said The Shadow King, kissing her neck, as he parted her legs. "Time for baby to take her medicine." She could feel his head pressing in to her, and panic and fear flooded her at the intrusion in to her body and she knew she only had a moment before he was inside her fully. Her adrenaline surged and she felt a tingling in her body that was nothing to do with what Wisdom was doing to her.

Siryn

Maverick

"Get the hell off me," said Jessica, and she felt a build up in her that was suddenly released as a concussive force, sending Pete Wisdom flying back away from her. The sudden freedom she had won enabled her to breathe a sigh of relief, tears streaming down her face as she realised what sort of narrow escape she had just had. He'd almost raped her and for a moment she thought he had. She'd felt

Nick Fury

him pushing against her, she'd felt him in her...

Shadow King

"Oh God," she said. While it had not been sex, he had still entered her, tearing at her flesh, forcing it... "Stop it," she said, feeling herself start to shake. She was starting to go in to shock. She had to get out of there before Wisdom came after her again. She had to run but she couldn't feel her legs and her arms hurt from the burns. That had to affect her as well.

"That hurt," said Wisdom, suddenly bearing over her and she could feel the humiliation of what had happened overwhelming her.

"Please," she said, knowing that what she had done before wouldn't happen again, as she didn't know what it was. It had felt like her old bio blasts, but it had been different.

"Don't," he said, looking at her. "I'm not proud either, and for what it's worth I am so, so sorry, Jess."

"Pete?" she said, thinking she had fallen for this before.

"Yes," he said. "It's me. He's gone. Not here."

"How do I know that?" she said, backing away from him.

"Tie my hands up if you want," he said. "Beat the crap out of me, if you need to. God knows, I've got it coming."

"I can't, she said. "My arms..." He could see the burns from the metal he had melted with his hot knives and he looked at her.

"I'm going fucking have him," said Pete, the silent menace in his tone evident, as well as the fire in his eyes. "I'm gonna find a way, and I'm gonna tear him a new one." He would kill Farouk if it were the last thing he did in this lifetime. "Let's get the hell out of here. I'll lead."

"I can't walk," she said.

"Oh, we're so in trouble," said Pete. He knew he could never make this up to her. She would never trust him. "Fine, then you can rest and I'll... tie myself up." He ripped off some of his shirt and bound one of his arms using his free hand and his teeth. Then he looped the free end, slipped his arm in and pulled it tight like a noose with his teeth and his arms were bound in front of him. He could still see her wary of him and he did some acrobatics to manoeuvre the binds

under his legs, over his feet and up his back. It twisted his arms to do it, but he got there.

"How's that?" he said, sweat coming from his brow she nodded her acceptance and sat down. He looked at his bare chest and he could see the red welt on his chest where her blast had hit him. Since it had, the Shadow King had been silent in his head. "Zola," he said, figuring it was the only possible explanation, and smiled. "Looks like the midget scored one on his master."

For now at any rate.

"Lydia Del Ruiz of SHIELD to see Brian Braddock," said Lydia, showing her ID badge to the elfin albino at the reception desk. "I have an appointment." He nodded.

"Please take a seat," he said and picked up the telephone and pressed a button. "Brian, Agent Del Ruiz of SHIELD has arrived." He waited for an answer then he hung up the telephone. A few moments later the door to the office opened and the former Captain Britain, now a Member of Parliament in Her Majesty's British Government, greeted her.

"Miss Del Ruiz, please come in."

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, sir," she said as she entered the office.

"Not at all," he replied. "Could I offer you a cup of tea?" he asked as he gestured to a chair.

"That would be fine," she said taking a seat on the plush leather sofa. "Milk, no sugar."

"Of course," said Brian, as he poured a cup and took it to her.

"Thank you," she said as Brian picked up his own drink from his desk.

"No problem," he said. "So how can I help SHIELD?"

"It's... tricky," she said. "As you're aware I work with Peter Wisdom on the X-Force project, Nick Fury's mutant task force within SHIELD."

"Yes, I had heard about that. I also remember reading of your adventure in Madripoor. How are your injuries?"

"Healing, thank you, however I'm not on active field duty at the moment."

"Oh," said Brian, puzzled. "I thought this was a SHIELD assignment."

"Which is where it gets tricky," she said. "Allow me to explain." Lydia then regaled the story of the traitor within SHIELD, and how Pete had gathered evidence against it when he was attacked and, as far as the world was concerned, killed for what he knew.

"My God," said Brian, visibly shocked. "Pete's dead?"

"We don't believe so," said Lydia. "But it is still a possibility."

"I've not spoken with him in some time," said Brian, taking a sip of tea. "Not since he joined SHIELD certainly. I know he was having problems adjusting to life outside the spy game, but... We all drifted apart after the end of Excalibur. It's a shame, really. I'm an MP, Meggan's working on some of the environmental projects, Kurt's working to be a priest, Rachel's back, Kitty's working with SHIELD and the others are doing their thing as well. Where's the time gone..."

"I know," said Lydia. "My family all live in Genosha and I've not seen them since Magneto took over, and the time apart grows."

"So what do you need of me?" asked Brian. "It's the least I can do to assist you, seeing as it got Pete killed."

"I need you to get me in to the Hellfire Club." Brian whistled.

"That's a tall order," he said. "The HFC have undergone changes. The London branch fell out of favour during Pete's time with Excalibur, and the deaths of the Inner Circle some months ago has left the place almost empty. It certainly is cautious about who gets in and out."

"Can you do it?" asked Lydia. "I need to get in there to a specific email account, where Pete sent the evidence."

"In that case, yes," said Brian. "Tonight?"

"That would be fine," she replied. "I appreciate the help. I know how busy you are."

"If I can fight the good fight one more time, it's worth it," he said and he shook her hand. Lydia noticed it was firm but not strong which indicated that the reports of him losing his powers were true.

"If the reports I read were accurate," she said, "you've already done more than enough in your time."

"Thank you," said Brian, smiling. "Tonight then." She nodded and Brian escorted her out. "Feron, clear my calendar tonight, and page Meggan. Tell her we're going out for dinner."

"Yes, Brian," he replied then the telephone rang. "Brian Braddock's office... Yes, I'll let him know. Thank you." He hung up.

"Who was it?" asked Brian.

"That was Rock," said Feron. "The Excalibur Project has just been reactivated, and the members recalled to SHIELD."

"Interesting," said Brian, thinking it would have helped to have Rock with them tonight as back up. "Thank you, Feron." He went back in to the office, thinking that they were living in very interesting times.

"Cloak is working fine," said Shadowcat as the SHIELD transport carrier arrived in the mountains of Kalymnos. "We're undetected, Mav."

"Good," said Maverick, as the team checked their gear. The mission plan was simple - they went in and stopped the Death's Head Commando's. The Cavern of the Nymphs was a short walk away, and according to Captain Taggart, that was where he and his partner had found them. Raven would keep them shielded from any of the tele-empathic powers of the Commando's and hopefully that would level the playing field. "You ready?" he asked Raven.

"Yeah," said Marcus. "Ah'll keep them busy, and with a bit of luck if they attack me with their powers, my defences will kick in and knock 'em for a loop."

"Right," said Maverick. That meant there'd be three of them as a strike force - Siryn, Shadowcat and himself. A nice tactical unit if

ever there was one. His energy blasts, Terry's sonics and Kitty's phasing would give them a good edge over the teleporters and floaters of the Commando's. Hopefully their fabled technology wouldn't help them, but that was a wild card in what they were planning. "Okay, ladies, let's book."

They nodded and made their way out of the transport carrier and towards Mount Flaska. The cave had been closed down so there were no tourists about and from a ledge not far away Maverick used the telescopic visual scanner of his mask to check the guards. They were well armed and it would be difficult to get by without creating a disturbance.

"As we figured," he said. "Can't get in that way."

"Plan B?" asked Terry and North nodded. Her father Banshee had taught her to use her powers as a sonar and gauge how thick the walls of the mountain were and how far it was to the caverns. This would tell them how far they had to go and for how long they'd need to hold their breath as Shadowcat phased them all through the rock and in to the base. They made their way to the back of the mountain, where there were no guards because there was no way in to the caves. At least, no conventional way in.

With the other two acting as lookouts, Siryn looked towards the mountain and she used her powers to figure out what was needed. The pitch of her cry was at a level nobody would hear, however any dogs in the area would be howling at the noise. Then she stopped and rested a moment, gaining her breath back after her efforts.

"Twenty five meters of solid rock," she said. "Then it's clear."

"It's difficult," said Kitty, "but not impossible. Hold on tight and keep walking with me." She held out her hands and the others grabbed hold and she shifted herself and the others to a state of intangibility and they took a deep breath and entered the walls. It was pitch black and if it wasn't for the fact they were holding hands, they would have sworn they'd lost each other. It was quite easy to give in to panic while they were doing something like this, but all three knew that to do so would mean instant death.

Kitty had done this so many times since she had discovered her powers that it was as natural to her as writing her name, and while she wasn't exactly oblivious to the dangers, she had stopped worrying about them a long time ago. However it didn't stop her

worrying for her friends who were with her on this

Kitty's injuries in her time as an X-Man meant that her intangible state was her natural state so there was no problems with her losing concentration and trapping them all in solid rock, but it was still pretty unnerving, Maverick thought.

Terry just keep walking, wondering if they'd make it in time. There was no air in there because it was a solid object and if they needed to breathe they couldn't. There were so many ways to die doing this, if they made a mistake. However they were all professionals and panicking was not in their nature, so they would endure.

Then they emerged on the other side and all three gasped for air. It had taken almost two minutes to get through the rock.

"Let's use the front door to leave," said Maverick, prodding himself to see that he was still there.

"Works for me," said Terry and Kitty just smiled.

"Right, let's take these people out," said North, and he pulled his side arm free of its holster, as did the women. There was work to do.

"Very clever," said Viper as she examined the work that had been done by Arnim Zola. "He altered the bio blasts of Drew so that they would indeed create a mental static on her victim and herself."

"Your work with poisons and such is very useful," said the Shadow King from the recesses of her mind. "However, I am concerned that I did not see this coming, or what he was doing."

"You have been taxing yourself of late," said Viper. "Your powers have limits, you know that."

"Yes," snarled the Shadow King. His powers were great, but in order to accomplish everything he wanted to do, he had indeed spread himself thinly, and the defeats time and again at the hands of Xavier and his brood had cost him. Absorbing emotions and altering perceptions was one thing, controlling vast amounts of people and creating order was another.

On the one hand he was able to work freely due to the bodiless nature of his current state, being a creature of pure mental energy, but without a proper host body to work from on a permanent basis

he did not have the reserves of supremacy that he had once had. That would soon change, though, but first he would deal with the treacherous Zola.

"Have him brought before me," said Farouk. "I have a punishment in mind that he will appreciate..." Viper smiled as she knew that the Shadow King had ways of dealing with traitors that were most imaginative.

"Hi," said Kitty to one of the guards she came across. "I'm lost."

"What the?" said the guard in surprise and Kitty wasted no time in a roundhouse kick that knocked the Commando cold. Then she removed his mask.

"He's no alien," she said. "I know that much."

"Portable scanner," said Maverick as he knelt down by their victim and she passed it to him. "DNA scan says he's not a mutant, but he does have radioactive particles in his blood."

"Guess we've the source of their powers then," said Terry. "Doesn't explain why..." Then alarms started to sound. "Guess they noticed they're a man down."

"It was always going to be too good to last," said Maverick. "Let's do this." They started to fight and take out as many of the guards that came close. Since they were masked by Raven, the Commando's were teleporting in blind and being taken out by the three SHIELD agents quite quickly, as they moved throughout the complex.

"This is a little too easy," said Kitty, as she slammed her elbow in to the face on an unsuspecting Commando who just appeared.

"Yeah," said Maverick. "You don't suppose..."

"It's a trap?" said a voice and the three of them realised there was nobody else to fight.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Maverick. The man had a confidence to him, that was certain and from his demeanour it looked as if he were in charge.

"Let's just say that while we are all equal, some are more equal than

others."

"I hate villains who quote literature," muttered Kitty. "That's what put me off Star Trek 2."

"Surrender now, and you won't get hurt," said Maverick.

"No, and never a possibility," said the man. "For example..." He pointed at them and there was a flash of white light. "That should take care of those rather annoying mutant abilities of yours."

"I cannae make a sound," said Terry.

"Uh oh," said Maverick as suddenly they were surrounded by guards.

"Did you think we would be unprepared for you and your ilk?" said their captor. "We knew someone would come at some point, and rest assured we are more than capable of taking out any of the so-called heroes of this world."

"Like hell," said Maverick and fired his gun, but the leader teleported out of the way before the bullet could hit him and the Commando's surged at them. X-Force held their own for a few moments but it wasn't enough against the numbers that were fighting them and they were soon captured. Maverick was the only one of them that managed to stay conscious, but he knew it was a losing battle and that he would collapse soon enough.

"The Doctor is waiting," said the leader who had reappeared. "Take them there now."

"We obey," said the Commandos and the place shifted. Maverick's perceptions were reeling from the effect of the teleport, but he could see a man dressed in white who was doing medical tests on another man.

"Ah," he said. "More test subjects." He looked at the monitors. "Mutants. How very interesting. Hopefully they will tell me more than this serum filled creation." Maverick could have sworn he recognised the other man, but before he could remember who it was, he felt a thud at the back of his head and he felt no more.

"This isn't good," said Raven, outside the complex. He couldn't feel the rest of the team and he knew they'd been overwhelmed.

Something was horribly wrong here, and he knew he had to contact SHIELD, and he pulled out his mobile.

"No," said a voice. "I don't think we'll allow that to happen." Raven looked to see a commando in front of him. He hadn't felt him appear at all.

"Bring it on," he said and he engaged him in a psychic battle - his psionic powers against the alien tele-empathic skills. He smiled as he felt the commando meet the resistance that his powers created.

"No," said the Commando. "You are but one person - we are a race!" He surged forward and Raven felt the power of thousands of thoughts combine against him. Even his defences couldn't hold against that so he closed his mind down to let the alien think he'd won, and maybe he'd find a way to beat him back. His thoughts stopped and he fell to the floor. "Excellent," said his opponent and Raven felt himself be teleported away.

His time would come.

Captain Taggart looked at his watch. X-Force were overdue to report in.

"I don't like this," he said to himself. "Something's wrong," and he reached for the telephone, which rang before he could pick it up. He jumped, but recovered. "Taggart."

"Sir, you must see the STAR TV signal." Taggart switched the television on, and gasped. STAR's signal had been hijacked and the Commando's had control of the television station.

"People's of the world - hear me," said a masked man. "The Death's Head Commando's have returned. There are many terrorist groups in the world today, however they do nothing for fear of the ire of the Western nations. We do not fear these people - we defy them. Here are five of their champions."

The picture changed to show X-Force and the Greek hero Hellios being subjugated to various medical tests and in one case it looked as if surgery was being performed on Siryn.

"Dear God," said Taggart, picking up the telephone and calling the Helicarrier direct.

"We have beaten these super powered beings, taken them and now we are ensuring they will pose no threat to ourselves or our comrades across the planet. We have seized the island of Kalymnos, and soon we will control the Greek mainland as well. Prepare yourselves for war." The signal ended with the familiar STAR ident replaced by the Death's Head Commando insignia.

Aboard the Helicarrier, Fury received the call.

"I've seen it, Taggart. Half the damn planet's seen it by now," he said. "This has been a cluster foul up of gigantic proportions."

"They were better prepared than any of us could have predicted," said Taggart. "I'm going to need help."

"I know," said Fury. "These goons made a mistake by draggin' Hellios in ta this mess. I just mobilised Project Excalibur - they'll be with you as soon as possible, an' if we're lucky we can save Greece."

"And if we're not, sir?" asked Taggart.

"Then God help us all."

[To be continued in Excalibur #7](#)

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #23

"DEATH IN GREECE" Part VI: Don't Yield, Back SHIELD

by [David Wheatley](#)

Authors Note: This story is continued from Excalibur #8

Pete Wisdom

Marcus Raven plummeted to the ground with no way of stopping his descent.

Shadowcat

Whatever had happened on the Helicarrier had damaged the Armory unit somehow and now it was about as technologically capable as rock. His head pounded with the neural surge that had filled his head and his passengers were still screaming as they dropped down ever faster. This was no way for someone to die, he thought as he contemplates his options in the moments he had left. Then he felt something else.

Siryn

A voice in his head, speaking to him, panicked yet reverent and he realised that he could hear Tsunami's voice, praying to the gods. Except she was still screaming and it was then he realised what it was. His psionic powers were back. Which meant these two would have their powers if they'd stop screaming. He didn't like to tell them, but he didn't like what he had to do to save their lives either.

Maverick

He psionically invaded their minds and using Savitar's powers to generate heat and slow their descent as well as pounding a hole in the floor beneath them, at the same he used Leyu's abilities to manifest a pool of water in the hole and they hit the makeshift lake

Nick Fury

with an intense splash, the impact jarring through him as the armour shook.

However the pain said they were alive and that they all knew the Commando's had made a mistake.

Shadow King

"How dare you?" blazed Leyu as she climbed out of the water, soaked and dripping but her temper was as fierce as anything Savitar could create.

"Save your life?" muttered Raven as Savitar pulled the armour from the water.

"You used me," she continued. "I have never been so..." Raven was tired, he hurt and he was not in the mood for this. Above his head a circle of psionic energy flared and Leyu was silenced. Her mouth kept opening but no words came.

"What did you do?" asked Savitar.

"Ah shut off her connection to her vocal chords," said Raven. "Can you get me out of this thing? Systems are dead."

"Sure," said Neal and focused his flame around the armour being very careful to burn a hole in it without going through to hurt Raven. It stung and he would have some minor burns but he'd be able to move freely. The suit was ruined as a tool for this operation, but they could always rebuild it.

"So what do we do now?" asked Neal, noticing Leyu was still trying to talk but couldn't.

"Me?" asked Raven.

"You're the SHIELD agent," reminded Neal. "You're the man."

"Great," said Marcus. "The plan was to level the mountain complex. That's what we're going to do." Then he pause a moment, thinking he felt something out there, as if the very atmosphere itself had a personality, or at least it was trying to tell him something. "That's odd," he said, and the other two looked at him. "I read in your heads that Darkstar was shielding this place."

"Right," said Neal, and then he noticed the rays of light around them. "Something's wrong."

"Tsunami, go and help them and then I'll give you your voice back," said Raven, thinking how Wisdom or even Maverick would handle this. She nodded and was gone on the crest of a wave. She couldn't really argue, and Marcus looked at Neal. "Wanna help me make a molehill out of a mountain?"

"LIVE, DAMN YOU!" said Siryn as she stopped the compressions on Shadowcat's chest and then filled the young woman's lungs with air and then she felt the trace of air being returned to her and broke off, as Kitty coughed and spluttered, her eyes fluttering as she awoke. "Yes," said Terry.

"Thanks," said Kitty as she helped herself up from the floor. Every part of her body hurt from the explosion and she felt light-headed. She looked at her uniform and she could see the burn mark around the heart she knew that had been a close one. "I think I'm out of this fight."

"You might not get a choice," said Terry. "Hellios went out there to fight off the oncoming Commando's, and that was a few minutes ago."

"Great," said Kitty. "Got a gun?"

"No," said Terry.

"I do," said Maverick as he entered the room, dragging Hellios behind him. The Greek was unconscious, bruised and battered and just about clinging to life from what the women could tell. He was followed by Hauptmann, USAgent and Union Jack.

"What happened?" asked Kitty when the others didn't appear.

"Things went from bad to worse," said Maverick. "Marcus and the two Excalibur members went outside, then the Commando's got their edge back and started attacking us. They ones fighting our friend didn't expect us and we hit them hard, but right now we're it."

"We're dead, aren't we?" said USAgent.

"Not without giving them one hell of a headache," said Maverick, then he noticed the state Kitty was in. "You okay?"

"No," she admitted. "But I don't think that matters now, do you?"

A continent away, Pete Wisdom lay in the forest glade, and he knew he was dying. Jessica had really done a number on him, but she wasn't to blame for that. Now she was gone and he was alone. He'd always thought he was going to die alone, but he never figured it'd be like this. A sniper bullet, or killed in battle yes. To lie on the ground while your lungs slowly filled with blood.

He'd taken a lot of bad hits in his time, but there'd always been someone to back him up and take care of it. Not this time and he began to reflect on his life. How he missed his sister Romany, how annoyed he was that he couldn't have died after his dad and how Harold would never let him live it down. Pete smiled at that thought, and then his thoughts turned to the women in his life.

He thought of Kitty, allowing himself to remember properly abandoning the rose tinted glasses of how badly she'd done him by and focusing on the good times and his own actions which had been less than spectacular in that respect. However, if he knew his people right, X-Force would have spoken to her and they'd have decrypted the files and she'd know how bad he'd felt about it all. Then his thoughts turned to Lydia.

He was attracted to her, and she'd become someone he could rely on after they'd been pushed together thanks to a long hospital stay. He knew she was attracted to him as well, but of late they'd never had the right time to talk about it and now they never would. That was aggravating. He had wanted to arrange a mission with Fury to go in to Genosha and find her father, as well as scope out Magneto's people and give Terry a chance to talk with the former members of the old X-Force. That and the prospect of getting in to a rumble with them was also enticing. Of course, Fury was a traitor being controlled by the Shadow King, so that was also out of the question.

He gave a little cough and could taste the blood in the back of his throat. He shook his head, and closed his eyes.

"Well it's all right, riding around in the breeze. Well it's all right, if you live the life you please. Well it's all right, doing the best you can. Well it's all right, as long as you lend a hand," he whispered and wondered how long he had left.

"Longer than you think," said a voice and Pete opened his eyes.

"Hello Farouk," he said. "Bloody took you long enough."

"Where is she, Wisdom?"

"Can't find her?" replied the SHIELD agent with a cough. "Too bad. Hope you didn't hurt Zola too much."

"Enough to ensure he won't betray me again," said the Shadow King. "You don't know, do you?"

"Reading my mind?"

"Such as it is."

"Touché."

"You think you've won," said Farouk. "Nothing as simple. I condemn, you Peter Wisdom. I condemn you to live. Take him away!" Several Hydra operative picked Wisdom up, causing some pain to the man and he looked up at the mass of psionic energy above him.

"No host body?" said Wisdom.

"I'm marshalling my power," said Farouk. "There has been a rather... unexpected development." Then the Shadow King was gone, leaving Pete to wonder what the hell he meant by that and if he'd keep enough of his mind to ever find out.

Aboard the SHIELD Helicarrier, George Washington Bridge surveyed the wreckage of the Armory command station. The fires had been put out quickly and Horton's blackened corpse had been removed, but the place was a mess and he was outside of the loop as far as his people went. With Horton dead he wasn't sure if the Armory unit could be rebuilt here and he had to wonder what condition the suit was in.

What was worse was the fact that the battle in Greece had also seemed to turn, and against the forces of SHIELD. They were losing the war.

"Bridge!" said a voice and he turned to see Nick Fury standing there.

"Colonel," he said.

"What the hell happened here? This is a cluster foul-up of gigantic proportions! This place is wrecked, there's a great big hole in my Helicarrier and half the systems are on the fritz!"

"We underestimated them and overestimated ourselves," said Bridge. "We blew it, Nick. I'm sorry."

"You ain't the only one," said Fury. "However there's one thing we can do."

"What?" asked Bridge.

"Lock an' load," replied the SHIELD director. "We use HERMES to get down to Kalymnos."

"The darkforce barrier?" said Bridge, wondering what the hell he'd missed in the chaos of the explosion.

"Is in flux," said Fury. "No clue why, but there are gaps in the barrier, which is how the Commando's are suddenly so better organised."

"We're the rescue squad?"

"Nope," said Nick. "We're the finale. Our people there are either dead or dying. We can't hope to rescue them so it's no longer a plan. We destroy the mountain and bury everyone in it."

"Oh," said Bridge. It was disheartening to hear, but he knew that in the end every one of the agents were expendable in relation to saving the world.

"If they can get out, they will," said Fury. "If not, then we've already lost them. Let's go get some heavy equipment and get to work."

Lydia del Ruiz was waiting for the information promised to her by the Hellfire Club and she wondered what the price would be for this. Pete Wisdom had been willing to pay it, but he was dead and the debt was now hers. Even if he weren't dead then there would still be

a price for her to pay.

"Damn it, Pete, why couldn't it have been easier?"

"Because Pete Wisdom was always his own man," said Meggan Braddock, who was behind her. "He did what he had to do, whatever the cost."

"Yeah," said Lydia. "I just miss him."

"So do we," said Meggan. "He hasn't visited in a long time. I hope you can find him alive."

"Yes," said Lydia, and looked at the news reports on the screens. BBC News 24 had scenes from Greece showing the conflict between SHIELD and the Death's Head Commandos. The scenes horrified her, but seeing as how she was technically inactive, then there was nothing she could have done anyway but sit aboard the Helicarrier in the X-Force office.

"Ahem." Lydia turned to see Joseph Chapman behind her holding a very large file of notes as well as a briefcase. "The information," he said. "The file contains a brief summary, addressed to either yourself or on of the X-Force team and the case contains DVD-Roms of evidence. It makes for intriguing reading."

"You looked at it?" said Lydia.

"I admit the encryption was quite difficult to break," said Chapman, "however the Inner Circle is not without resources. However, how you will utilise this information remains to be seen. It is quite damning and you and your people are to be commended on such outstanding work."

"Where's Brian?" asked Meggan.

"Lord Braddock is on a conference call with the Home Office," said Chapman. "Apparently there has been some developments he needed to hear about."

"Thank you," said Lydia as she accepted the file and the case.

"I wouldn't," said Chapman. "You owe the Hellfire Club a great deal for this, Miss del Ruiz, and we will collect the debt. Not now, but at some point. Enjoy the rest of the party, Miss del Ruiz. Lady Braddock." Chapman turned and walked away, and Lydia wondered

however someone who was supposed to be a hero like Union Jack had become such a cold and arrogant bastard. One man would know the answers - if they could find him.

"I'll go find Brian," said Meggan and Lydia nodded and opened the front cover of the file. There were a good few hundred pages to this and she knew she held in her hands the biggest piece of history since the Watergate tapes. She started to skim read sections as she turned the pages and she got the gist of it all. The evidence was conclusive. The traitor in SHIELD was Nick Fury. There was no mention of the Shadow King from what she read, and that was something they would never be able to prove.

After all that didn't help Wolverine much.

She closed the file and sighed. Her mouth was dry and she couldn't believe that after all their work, after all the searching and actions by the team and what they'd lost and gained in the process, that they had the Grail. She needed to get it to SHIELD and right away and prevent anything else from happening.

Then Brian entered the room.

"Lydia," he said and she looked at him. "We need to talk."

The Shadow King was surprised at himself.

In theory he should have been aware of this from the start, but then again he had been stretching himself hard over the last few months, turning Hydra in to a force to be reckoned with, manipulating the forces of SHIELD, as well as various other works across the world to ensure his plans gathered pace.

He also suspected that his enemy had been drawing energy from him in the process and because he was spread so thinly in his many host bodies he had not noticed. How else had Arnim Zola managed to perform his act of sabotage under his nose? However he knew that soon he would have what he needed to gain a full measure of power and that once in place his control would be absolute.

And yet this lack of awareness concerned him, which was why he was pulling his control of many of his subordinates. Hydra would be under the control of Viper for the time being, for if he endured this battle he would need to rest for the next trial. It galled him that the

other global forces would be able to enact their plans without his prevention and he had to place his faith in the fact that the heroes of the world would often win.

If only they knew what he knew, they would strike now but there was no way he could tell them without compromising himself and so he would leave it. Right now he only needed one host body to get in close to the Supreme Commando and engage in a psionic war. Fury and Bridge would be the perfect decoys, as they were dressed in psionic blockers, which prevented their detection by telepathy and empathy. It was a variation of the ones created for the Muir Isle event. How well he remembered that one and how much it had taken to recover from that. He would have killed Xavier if it were not for the destruction of the Nexus and his power source.

Much had changed since then. He had regained his powers, and now both Xavier and Legion were gone. The enemy, in a way that had damaged the X-Men more than he could have imagined, had taken Jean Grey and Psylocke was not the woman she had been. He smiled thinking how much of his taint lingered in her soul after she had shut him down and trapped him within her mind. All his psionic foes but one were gone and now this one would be next. He had learnt much and gained a great deal of power from the psionic hatred that fuelled the world.

There was an increase in villainous activity, which had increased global violence, and his actions for the World Trade Center tragedy had increased the pain of the world. He had gathered that power and was ready to use it in this fight. It seemed unfortunate to use it all now, but he did not have a choice and his enemy was playing in to his hands.

He watched through Fury's eyes as both he and Bridge arrived on Kalymnos and before them were Raven and Savitar. Raven was keeping the Commando's distracted with his psionic powers, which he could tell was helping the heroes in the complex below and Savitar was blasting the mountain with his powers, increasing the heat within the place and making life uncomfortable for all inside.

None of the people suspected what was truly going on.

"Change of plan," he said through Fury. "We're goin' to get our people out."

"But you said..." started Bridge.

"I know, I know, but I've an idea. Raven's keeping the Commando's disorientated to help our people and if Savitar can get the heat up in there the lights should shatter, giving our people their powers back."

"What do we do?" asked Bridge and the Shadow king could tell this made him happy and therefore he wouldn't argue.

"I'm bettin' that the Supreme Commando's got too much to deal with directin' the battle in Greece. You get the injured out, I'll find him and deal with him."

"You guys do this?" asked Bridge of the two mutants.

"Sure," said Raven, "but don't take too long over it. I ain't 100%."

"Excellent," said the Shadow King. "Let's go."

The Supreme Commando was ready for SHIELD to level the mountain. They were doing well and the framework of the complex would not take much more of this punishment, however he was ready for what was coming. His people were on the verge of routing the SHIELD forces in Greece, the mutants below were soon to be overwhelmed for their weapons were finite and their enemy was not and all the pieces were in place.

He had failed in his previous attempts and he had taken time to marshal his strength. He had used his vast knowledge of genetics and the ideas of his former student to gift the Commando armies with psionic powers and the experiments he had gotten the scientists to perform had given him the data he needed to splice the psionic warriors with physical gifts and he would create a force of Infinites - based on mutant and alien DNA patterns.

He had thought to rule the world, then destroy it. Instead he would control it, he would subjugate the population and take to the stars.

"Finally," said a voice in his mind, "we meet."

"What?" he said and turned to see a flatscan standing before him. A flatscan he knew as Nick Fury. "Foolish human, you do not know my power."

"Really?" said the Shadow King; amused that his foe could not defeat the technological barrier, seeing as it was based on a device

he had created. "You're pathetic attempts at deception have been apparent. A war against Hydra, the easy manipulation of the genetics of homo-superior, a way of counteracting their abilities using alien technologies, and finally your thoughts."

"You are not Fury."

"You always were a fool. You took my ideas and used them. You were a pale copy of me, always were and always will be."

"Farouk." The Commando at last recognised his enemy. "You are ahead of schedule."

"I decided not to wait." The psionic blocker suddenly ceased to work but the Shadow King had been ready for this and fired his guns at the Supreme Commando and removing the host body. In to the air floated a being of psionic energy, glowing with power.

"I will defeat you once and for all Farouk. This will be our final battle."

"I have fought you as both Xavier and Magnus and you have never truly bested me." The Shadow King left his host body and Fury collapsed to the floor.

"The combined might of the heroes of this planet could not stop me, you will prove no trouble."

"Really?" said Farouk. "You have been forced to act through technology, through armies. I don't believe you have fully recovered from your last manifestation."

"You are wrong."

"Then we will soon find out enough, Onslaught."

To be continued in Excalibur #9

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #24

"TRIAL & RETRIBUTION" Part I: Taking Care of Business

by [David Wheatley](#)

Authors Note: This story takes place after Excalibur #9

Pete Wisdom

"Don't make me do this, Colonel."

Shadowcat

Maverick's voice was harsh, but his gun was pointed directly at Nick Fury, who was backing away from the various SHIELD agents. His eyes were hidden behind his mask, but if they weren't, Fury would have seen that Maverick was torn here. Fury was a legend, a hero, a decorated war veteran and if he did this, then they would never be able to clear his name of the charges against him.

Siryn

"I don't have a choice," said Fury, his voice pleading for lenience. "I can't stop him."

Maverick

"He's weak, Fury, fight him."

"I'm tryin'..." He started to back away to the main ignition chamber of the HERMES system, where he would be able to escape. The trigger device was in his hand and he started to cross the threshold

"Please, Colonel..." said Maverick, but Fury couldn't stop himself and Maverick pulled the trigger.

Nick Fury

12 Hours Earlier

"You scum sucking piece of shit," said Lydia Del Ruiz as she kicked in the door of the Inner Circle of the London branch of the Hellfire Club. She may not have been on active duty, but there was nothing wrong with her at the moment, her eyes were fixed on Joseph Chapman as she walked forward.

Forge

"My dear Miss Del Ruiz..." he started but Lydia smashed him in the face, causing the other members of the Inner Circle to stand in defence of their colleague. Samantha Hasard created blades of metal, Vortigern Walker stood impassively, while Lady Fugue helped her King up.

Shadow King

"You sold him out," said Lydia as Brian and Meggan came in to restrain her, as well as protect her from any retaliation by the other three. The three of them stood there staring down the other four.

"That wasn't exactly tactful," said Meggan, looking at the mess she'd made of Chapman's chair.

"Neither was screwing me over," said Lydia, still furious.

"I did what I thought best," said Chapman as he got up, blood pouring from his nose and mouth. He'd lost a couple of teeth. "However, if you touch me again, I will have you killed."

"What is she talking about, Joseph?" asked Walker, looking at the Red and White King.

"The file that we received from Peter Wisdom," said Lady Fugue. "We sent it to the United Nations."

"You had no right," snarled Lydia. "It wasn't your call to make."

"As a concerned citizen of the world, I felt it was my duty," said Chapman. "I believe they have taken appropriate action. Now, as I am reliably informed you are not on active duty so if you are not out of here in the next five minutes, I will have you forcibly removed." Chapman's eyes were cold and Lydia could not believe this man had once been a hero.

"I'm going, but you and I are going to meet again," her eyes blazed in anger.

"Perhaps," said Chapman. "Oh, and Brian, we will be reconsidering our position on your membership here. Be advised you don't want us for enemies."

"If I were you, Joseph," said Brian, his cold stare matching that of the Red and White King, "I'd heed your own advice. You don't want me for an enemy either."

"Brian," said Walker, "I will resolve this."

"Good luck," said Brian, and then the three of them walked out. As they waited for their car outside the club, Brian looked at Lydia. "I'm sorry."

"No, you were right to tell me, and I was right to do this," sighed Lydia, letting her anger drain away. "It's just this was not the way we were supposed to do this."

"Brian's friend said they were looking for a reason to get rid of Fury," said Meggan. "They only needed a reason."

"Yes, but not like this," said Lydia and she looked up at the window of the club. "They just ruined a man."

"Yes," said Brian. "They did."

The HERMES system flared to life and the batter and bruised heroes were met by a medical team, who tended straightaway to Hellios, Fury and Shadowcat. Maverick took off his mask and let it fall to the floor, shaking his head. The Greece mission had been a disaster. Then he looked about

"They didn't get her?" Union Jack was saying.

"No," replied Bridge, softly. "She's gone."

"Damn," said the Brit and Maverick felt a twang of sorrow. They'd lost at least one of their own in the fight and it looked as if there may be more to follow. The medics were working mostly on Hellios, who was not responding and Maverick checked up on his team.

"Terry?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "Tired, but fine."

"Marcus?" checked Maverick, because he had taken a bad hit from the fallout of a powerful psionic fight.

"Ah'll be fine, nothin' a couple of paracetamol won't fix. That an' some rest."

"Agreed," said North and closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and he saw a face that wasn't supposed to be there. "Forge?" The former X-Man and X-Factor agent was standing there, dressed in a SHIELD uniform.

"Been a while, North," said Forge. "And I wish we could do this at some other time." He looked at the medics attending to Fury. "Is he awake?"

"Yes, sir," said one of them and Forge walked over.

"Colonel Nicholas Fury, I am placing you under arrest. The charges are treason, conspiring to pervert the course of justice, co-operating in a terrorist plot and attempted murder." Fury's jaw dropped and he had no reply such was his horror at what had just happened.

"What?" demanded both Bridge and Maverick at the same time, but for different reasons.

"We have evidence to support these charges," said Forge, "though I wish to God I didn't. As of 2200 hours, Fury's directorship was terminated. I am now in command of SHIELD."

"This is preposterous!" said Bridge. "I demand..."

"Leave it," said Maverick, standing in front of Bridge. "Like it or not we can't help him, not like this. Not yet." Out of the corner of his eye he could see Lydia standing, watching and waiting. "There's going to be questions asked of all of us."

"Agent North," said Forge, before Bridge could answer. "You and your team are to be checked out in medical bay 2, Excalibur are to report to bay 3. We've a lot of wounded, but your teams need to be treated for exposure to whatever they hit you with to suppress your mutant powers." He looked at the agents in the area. "Escort them please."

X-Force was led away, leaving them to wonder what kind of

showdown there was going to be between Forge and Bridge, and Lydia joined her team.

"What happened?" asked Maverick.

"The Hellfire Club," she said and she could see that both Siryn and Maverick understood. Marcus would need it explaining a little more. "What about Kitty?"

"She took a nasty electrical surge to her upper chest," said Siryn. "I got her heart started again, but she's still ill."

"She'll be fine," said the medic who was checking on her. "She just needs to take it easy."

"Don't we all?" said Maverick. "Don't we all."

Jessica Drew awoke to find herself on a boat. She was up with a start.

"Easy missy," said a voice and she looked to see a coloured man in a white uniform at the wheel. "Coast Guard. You do speak English?" His accent was almost lyrical, and his voice was deep with it. Yet there was a calm in the way he spoke and it was quite soothing. It didn't make sense, though.

"Y... yes..." she said, not understanding what was going on here. She remembered running, and running and she wondered if she'd passed out or something.

"You're in a bad way," he said. "Nasty burns, and scrapes and such. I've radioed to the port and an ambulance is going to meet us there."

"What... where?"

"You were seen lying on a beach head by a passing boat. There was some activity there earlier and they were taking a look and found you. They radioed in and I came to find you. Lucky I did, I'm not sure you'd have survived a night."

"Where?"

"You are in a bad way," he said. "You're in the Seychelles. Maria, our guest is awake." A woman appeared behind Jessica, who turned

in surprise.

"Easy," she said. "I'm with him. You're going to be fine."

"Must... contact... SHIELD," stammered Jessica.

"You an agent?" asked Maria.

"Not quite," said Jessica and she felt faint and passed out.

"What do we do, Simon?" asked Maria.

"We wait until we get to Mahe and then we call SHIELD, see if they know her." Simon sighed. It was normally so peaceful...

Pete Wisdom sat up. There was no pain in his chest and he was breathing. That meant he was alive, and if he was alive, that meant he was dead.

"Damn it," he said. He wasn't strapped to the table but he couldn't fire his hot knives either. The Shadow King was coming for him and he would take Wisdom's life and make it his own. Wisdom had wished he had died on the island, before this had happened, but he had to admit whatever they had done to him was bloody wonderful.

"Wish we could market it," he said, standing gingerly as he found his feet. The door was locked and there was very little left in the place that he could use and he tapped his fingers on the table as he looked about and considered his options.

"I could kill myself," he mused. "Yeah, like that'll happen quick enough. I could wait and jump whoever comes in... Not a bad plan and they won't kill me. Maybe. Either way. Or I could wait and see what happens."

He decided his best course of action was to wait and see what happened next, though he didn't quite fancy that plan if the Shadow King came for him now, but then again, he didn't feel his presence in his head.

"Farouk you're a twat," he said. Nothing came back, and that was odd. It was as if the Shadow King had stopped listening. "Unless he can't..." pondered Wisdom. Zola had altered Jessica Drew so that her powers would block the Shadow King, maybe he had done

something as well. "No, that won't work because I can't fire my hot knives."

The door started to open and Pete stood ready, waiting to take advantage of any opportunity that came by, but there was a burst of electricity instead of a person and he was immobilised on the spot.

"Bloody hell," he said through gritted teeth. That had hurt.

"Peter Wisdom," said Viper as she walked in to the room, though perhaps waddled would have more of an apt description in Pete's mind. "Nice to see you up and about."

"Shouldn't you be lying down or summat?" said Pete.

"Perhaps," said Viper as she stroked her enlarged belly. "However, the Shadow King will speak to you first." Her visual demeanour changed and Pete watched in intrigue. Something was definitely not right here.

"So you live," said Farouk, through Viper.

"Yes, my compliments to your butcher," said Pete.

"Laugh while you can," said Farouk. "But it will not be for long."

"Really?" said Pete. "Then what's with the sudden change? Someone kick your psychic ass from one side of the astral plane to the other."

"Quite the opposite," said Farouk, "however, I will admit that my powers need time to become whole again."

"Don't hurry on my account," said Wisdom, with a smile.

"You are the least of my worries," said the Shadow King. "I was just letting you know we have not forgotten about you." Three Hydra thugs entered the room. "Now, this will be your punishment."

"For what?"

"Insulting your master a moment ago." The voice of Farouk was cold and the three men started to kick at Wisdom while he lay there recovering from the shock of earlier. "Enjoy." Wisdom took his beating well, but he promised he would find a way out of this and then there would be hell to pay.

"Are they clear for duty?" asked Forge. It had been ten hours since X-Force had arrived back and they had been briefed on what was going on by Lydia, who had been recertified herself for duty.

"Yes," said the doctor looking after them. "We've given them a burst of the compound serum we created and it seems to have done the trick. There won't be a problem with their powers under those kind of lights again. The data from the Armory system was very helpful."

"Good," said Forge.

"However," continued the doctor, "it will be a couple of hours before they can use their powers again. An after-effect of the serum, I'm afraid. Miss Pryde is fit as well, she just needs to rest and take it easy for a while. We've given her some powerful antibiotics and she'll recover."

"Okay," said Forge, and looked at the X-Force team, thinking for a moment of how X-Factor used to be. "I'll meet you in the X-Force office in ten minutes, ladies and gentlemen. I'm going to check on Bridge and his people."

"Yes sir," said Maverick and the team filed out.

"I can't believe that Forge is in charge now," said Kitty as they walked through the corridors.

"I'm pretty sure that he can't either," said Maverick. "He's not relaxed once."

"Do you blame him?" asked Siryn. "To be called in to take out the man who is SHIELD?"

"We have to convince him about the Shadow King," said Marcus. "Fury's important and this isn't they way it should end."

"Agreed," said Maverick. "And we'll deal with the Hellfire Club."

"Damn right," said Lydia, still angry with the way they'd handled it. They discussed it more as they walked down to the office and shortly afterwards Forge came in.

"Okay," he said. "First things first - there was no way you could have known what would happen in Greece. All in all it was a good

job to get out of there as you did. On the plus side of it all, the Commando's have been defeated and it looks like the Supreme Commando died in the mountain. It's over, so put aside what happened and be glad you're all here. Excalibur is a different story."

"About the traitor," started Maverick and Forge held up his hand.

"That's why we're here," he said. "You've done excellent work since you discovered this and there's a great deal of effort gone in to the evidence. It's clear cut against Fury, but I don't like it and I don't know why. Would someone like to tell me?"

"The Shadow King," said Siryn and Forge nodded slowly.

"I wondered what he'd been up to of late," said the mutant maker and he sighed. "Except that telepathic coercion is a hard defence to mount."

"You believe us?" asked Marcus, because he knew how foolish it sounded. It was almost like a madman's defence that the devil made him do it.

"I've seen the Shadow King in action, first hand," said Forge, closing his eyes. "I know what kind of power he had over people. Terry was one of them, and the X-Men got lucky that time. I also know that the Shadow King ruined Wolverine's reputation as well and the X-Men, well let's just say there's a lot of problems at Xavier's at the moment."

"So what do we do, Forge?" asked Kitty, a pang of guilt that she wasn't with the X-Men to help them flitting through her.

"We try and prove what we can, however I do have a surprise for you all."

"What?" asked Maverick, not sure he wanted any surprises.

"Her name is Jessica Drew," said Forge as he pressed a button on the panel. "Also known as Spider-Woman."

"I thought she was in Madriport," said Kitty.

"Guess again, Kitty," said Forge.

"A hospital?"

"Yes, where she has been recovering after her escape from the Seychelles fortress of Hydra."

"We know where they are?" said Maverick, in surprise.

"It gets better," said Forge. "She was sharing a cell with Pete Wisdom."

"He's alive?" said Lydia and Kitty at once and then they looked at each other.

"Yes, we think so," said Forge and he told them of what they had learnt from Jessica who was recovering from her injuries. "The proof we need to clear Nick is there. I don't think we can get him his Directorship back, because he's made a few enemies, but we can keep his reputation in tact."

"Works for me," said Maverick. "When do we go?"

"As soon as possible," answered Forge. "It started as an X-Force operation, it ends as an X-Force operation. Now..." Whatever Forge was going to say was forgotten as the alarms sounded and Forge pressed the comm button. "This is Forge, what's going on?"

"Colonel Fury's escaped. He's making a run for it, sir."

"Stop him!"

"On it, sir," came the answer and X-Force went as well. They split up to try and find him then Maverick thought of something, collected some of the agents and went to the Hermes system.

Fury was there.

"FURY!" he shouted as he pulled his gun from it's holster. Everyone of them had their weapons pointed at Fury in an instant but nobody wanted to fire.

"North," he said, and Maverick could see that he wasn't in control here. "It's him..."

"Damn," cursed North. Raven had explained what had happened, how the Shadow King had battled Onslaught and that was the cause of the fallout on the psions of the world. The Shadow King was obviously not at his best because Fury knew he was there, but he was strong enough to control him. "Don't make me do this,

Colonel."

"I don't have a choice," said Fury, his voice pleading for lenience. "I can't stop him."

"He's weak, Fury, fight him."

"I'm tryin'..." He started to back away to the main ignition chamber of the HERMES system, where he would be able to escape. The trigger device was in his hand and he started to cross the threshold

"Please, Colonel..." said Maverick, but Fury couldn't stop himself and Maverick pulled the trigger.

The shot fired and hit Fury square in the chest, the bullet entering his body and throwing him back in to the room.

"NO!" called North but he could see the finger press the button and the firing sequence started. "STOP HIM!" he shouted and the agents started to fire in to the room in an attempt to stop the teleport but all they did was wreck the system and when the sparks stopped flying, Fury was gone. If he survived.

"SHIT!" cursed Maverick and slammed his hand in to the wall. That was not what they needed, and no matter what happened now, Fury had no future in SHIELD. "Shit." He let his anger drain away. They'd learnt much today and he walked back to the X-Force office, wondering how to explain it to Forge.

"What happened?" asked the Director who was waiting, in the chair near the computer screen.

"I shot him," said North. "But he teleported out anyway."

"Used his master codes and undid the override system," said Forge and sighed. "It changes nothing about the case, North."

"If he made it, he's finished," said Maverick.

"Depends on the tapes," said Forge. "The mission parameters now have something extra, though." Maverick looked up as the others came in one by one.

"What's the mission now, sir?" he asked and Forge stood up.

"You are to go to the Seychelles. You are to infiltrate and extract

both Peter Wisdom and Nicholas Fury from Hydra, by whatever means you deem necessary."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Annual 2002

"Day Off"

by [David Wheatley](#)

"Ladies an' gennelmen," said the masked thug as he brandished his shot gun in the air. "Hit the decks!"

[Pete Wisdom](#)

The people standing inside the Manhattan Moneybranch Bank all got to the floor, including two people who didn't have to, but decided to play along anyway.

[Shadowcat](#)

"I can take him anytime," muttered Pete Wisdom to Lydia Del Ruiz as his eyes remained locked on the thug. There were three of them in here but only one with a gun as far as they could tell, which was why they were holding off. Yes, they could take them and they both had their SHIELD ID badges and had cause, there were a lot of people in here and they could get hurt, if the other two were armed.

[Siryn](#)

"I know," said Lydia, but they waited anyway.

"Hold it," said a guard, who'd managed to go unseen by the thugs. His gun in his hand, he pointed it at the lead man. "Put your weapon down, son."

[Maverick](#)

"Okay," said the thug and he dropped his gun and put his hands in the air.

"I don't like this," whispered Pete. "What the hell is he doing?"

[Nick Fury](#)

"And you two," said the guard, his gun wavering a little. He'd been trained for this but never had to put it in to practice.

"Nah," said the thug.

"I'll shoot."

Forge

"Go on then." The guard took a breath and fired his gun once, his bullet aiming true towards the man's leg, and then it stopped and fell to the floor as if it were drained ounce of energy it possessed. The thug's eyes flashed a second then he laughed and one of his colleagues hit the guard before anyone could react properly and knocked him to the floor. The guard lay on the floor, blood coming from his ear, and Lydia had to hold Pete back from reacting.

Shadow King

"Money, now," said the lead thug and the tellers started to put money in to the bags, then came the sound of sirens. "Let's book," he said and the three of them took off outside. Pete and Lydia gave it a moment and then they followed to see the three of them in a black Ford Mustang, speeding down the street.

"I'm bloody having them," said Peter. "There was no need to shoot him."

"How exactly?" said Lydia. "They're in a car. A rather nice car."

"Like this," said Pete, as he pulled his SHIELD ID from his pocket and stepped in front of a black Corvette that screeched to a halt to avoid hitting him.

"What the fuck is your problem?" said the irate driver, looking over the windscreen, fury in his eyes.

"I'm commandeering your vehicle," said Pete, showing him the badge.

"You're fucking what?"

"Taking your car, wanker," said Pete and fired up a hot knife in to the air to show he meant business. "Now get the fuck off."

"This is fucking bullshit," said the driver, getting out. He was pissed off, but he knew he wasn't going to win this "Fucking pigs."

"Bite me, dick," said Pete as he got in the vehicle. "If I feel like it you'll get your car back, now piss off." He set off to the amazement of Lydia who was watching open mouthed. "Jump in, they're getting away."

"Asshole!" shouted the driver as Pete zoomed in to the distance and hoped he was going in the right direction.

"Fuck you," he called back, giving him the finger and then he set off. It was good to be back in action - he'd missed it. All he'd wanted to do was spend his day off in peace, but no, somebody had to go out and make something out of it.

"You do know we aren't entitled to do that," said Lydia as the car shot off down the street.

"Yeah, but he didn't," said Pete, with a grin. "Besides, I've always wanted to drive a Corvette. I just hope I remember to drive on the wrong side of the road. Call the base, see if they can get a make on these assholes."

The car sped through the streets, nipping in and out of traffic, as he looked for the car the others were driving, while Lydia put the call in. In the distance he thought he could make them out and he put his foot down, slamming his hand on the horn as he did.

"Red light!" said Lydia.

"Cross your fingers then," said Pete as he pushed the car harder and shot through the traffic, causing drivers to sound their horns and causing a collision or two at the same time. "You need to lighten up, Lydia."

"Remind me why we rescued you," she said, and then her cell rang. "Del Ruiz. Thanks." She hung up and the LCD display of the phone showed them where they were and where the thieves were. "Got them. GPS is tracking us both now."

"Excellent," said Pete. "They ahead of us?"

"Yeah," she said. "It's getting quite busy down that way, so we could catch them easily enough."

"What about him?"

"Mutant, for sure. Force field of some kind," said Lydia. "I'd not recommend shooting him."

"Wonder if beating the crap out of him will work," he replied as the Mustang got closer. "My turn." He leant his arm over the door and fired a hot knife at the car, which was illuminated in the same colour

energy that had appeared in the thief's eyes before. The Mustang as unharmed and then it did a sharp turn.

"That didn't work," said Lydia.

"Noticed," said Pete as he swung around the corner, making the turn where the Mustang had done, leaving tire marks on the road as the rubber burnt itself on the street. "Where are they headed?"

"Out of town. The back roads, from all accounts"

"Good," said Pete. "Gives me a chance to push the 'Vette. How I've not caught them yet, God knows... Find me a shortcut."

"Take the next right," she said after a moment. "It leads down some back alleyways and to the freeway. We can catch them from there, but we might have to take a risk."

"Works for me," said Pete. "Hang on." He turned again, mounting the kerb and nearly hitting a street theatre display.

"Careful," said Lydia.

"I am, plus nobody will miss a mime or three," said Pete as they came upon the back roads and Pete screeched to a halt. "It's not wide enough."

"You asked for a quick route. I don't know how big the car is compared to the alley."

"Ah, the hell with it," said Pete and started off again, going between the walls. The wing mirrors at either side came off straight away and there was a hellish screeching as the car pushed it's way down the alley, sparks flying everywhere until they broke away to the main road and headed on to the freeway. "It just fit."

"Yeah, tell the owner."

"Not sure if he's getting it back yet," said Pete. "Where now?"

"Dead ahead until we get to the flyover then take a left."

"After the flyover?"

"At the flyover."

"Oh, I see," said Pete and smiled. "Buckle up." The Corvette swished down the street and below them, they could see the Mustang. "You ever see a show called Dangermouse?" asked Pete.

"I grew up in Genosha. They weren't big on television over there."

"Well, he had a car that could fly. Always wanted one of them, but Black Air wouldn't approve the research. They figure they'd let someone else do it and steal it from them later. Wonder if this car can fly..." He took the left turn, firing his hot knives at the barrier as he did so, weakening it so that the car simply ploughed through it and they took off, to the amazement of everyone else watching.

Then Pete fired his hot knives ground-ward, taking out the windscreen and attempting to slow their descent a little. The car landed with a bone jarring thud and kept on going.

"I love bending the laws of physics," said Pete as the car shot off after their prey and this time, Pete pushed the Corvette hard, taking each corner at incredible speeds as they weaved and turned along the back roads.

"I think you've wrecked this car," said Lydia.

"That'd be 'we've' wrecked this car, kemosabe," said Pete as the Mustang realised the Corvette was following them and pushed itself forward as well. "Take over."

"What?" said Lydia as Pete took his hands off the wheel and she grabbed the wheel and her foot replaced Pete's on the accelerator as they swapped sides. "You're crazy!"

"Need a better angle to shoot from," he said and looked at the Mustang. He needed to stop the bastard because nobody was winning here and if he couldn't shoot the car, then maybe he could shoot the ground on which the car travelled on.

He lined up his shot then ducked as soon as he heard the firing of a shot at him and there was the sound of bullet twanging off the front of the car.

"Son of a bitch," muttered Pete and fired his hot knives back at the Mustang, where the force field caught them and absorbed them and another round of shots were fired back.

"Interesting," said Lydia. "The force field seems to only be one

way."

"And since he can see it doesn't block light," said Pete. "Who the fuck cares?" Then the cell phone gave a high pitched beep. "Battery?"

"No," said Lydia, looking away from the road to get the phone. "Collision detection..."

"A bit bloody late," said Pete, then he saw the problem. "Oh, shit..."

A tanker truck was in the road, parked at in a gas station at the side of the road, and it was coming towards them as it took up most of the road. The Mustang swerved to avoid it and Pete looked at Lydia.

"You might want to tur.." The Corvette spun as Lydia pushed the wheel to it's limit and it smashed in to the tanker, causing it to move, which caused a spark, which set the fuel alight and created a fireball, which created a shockwave that caused the Mustang to stall and the thieves got out.

"Shit," said one of them, as they watched the place burn

"Who the fuck were they anyway?" asked the second.

"X-Men, perhaps?" said the leader. "Who cares. Nobody gets out of that alive."

"You'd think," said a voice as Pete and Lydia came out of the frineg of the blaze from the side of the road, slightly scorched on their faces, and their day clothes ruined, showing their SHIELD uniforms still in tact underneath. "And now you are so much trouble." Pete fired his hot knives and blew the Mustang's tank and the car exploded, throwing two of them to the floor and the third protected by his force field.

"My money..." he said as he watched the wreck of the car.

"No, my money," said Lydia. "There goes my pay cheque, Pete."

"It'll be insured," said Pete. "Okay, shit head, you're under arrest."

"Try and take me in," said the thief. "You'll never get past my force field."

"Won't have to," said Pete, looking in the distance at a vehicle

getting closer and closer. "That would be a SHIELD transport carrier. They'll bring you up in that pneumatic thing they have. Now you can run, or we can fight - either way, you're going down." He fired up his hot knives. "Give me an excuse and we'll find out who's powers are better."

"SHIELD..." the man's face fell.

"Yeah, SHIELD," said Pete. "You lose." The transport carrier loomed overhead.

"STAY WHERE YOU ARE!" boomed the voice and Pete shrugged.

"Maybe next time."

"You realise the paperwork we're going to get because of this?" said Lydia, as she looked back at the explosion.

"Which is why I have an in tray and why I ignore it," said Pete, as he looked for his ID as several agents came down and the thief was lifted in to the sky. "Soon as we've done here, I'll buy you that drink I promised."

"So this is Xavier's," said Marcus Raven as Teresa led him inside.

"Yeah," she said. "Home of the X-Men, where we train and hone our abilities to defend ourselves against a world that fears and hates us."

"Tell me again why you bother?" said Raven, with a smile.

"That's the reason we're here, isn't it? To bury some ghosts?"

"Yeah," said Raven. "Is the system here that good?"

"It's the best," said Siryn. "Things are a little tense around here at the moment though, which is why I figured it'd be smart to come when the X-Men are out. They're not at their best. Losing Rouge, the business in New York at Smile Bright, the whole deal with Scott and Jean which we're not supposed to talk about... it's not been easy."

"How are they handling the deal with you and Sinister?" asked Marcus as they walked the corridors.

"They're dealing it with it like they always do - they simply don't

mention it and hope it'll go away. Suits me, but there are times when I speak to them, I see in their eyes the disappointment in me. Me Da'... I've not spoken to him in a while."

"Maybe you should," said Marcus.

"Aye," sighed Siryn. "Right, I'll go to the control room, you go in here." She pointed to the doorway and she held on to the handle and she felt the scan on her hand and the door clicked as it unlocked. The security protocols on the Danger Room were tight to stop uninvited guests and she opened the door and let Marcus inside.

"Ah'm still not sure about this..."

"Trust me," said Siryn. "If anyone can teach you about psionic powers, and the Shadow King, it's Charles Xavier. Sam told me he used to use this programme all the time, when he was leader, before Cyclops returned."

"Okay," said Raven and stood in the middle of the room and waited, as the door closed behind him.

Teresa walked through the halls of the Xavier Mansion, thinking of the memories she had gained in here, where she had been reunited with her father, where she had had been imprisoned with the first X-Force after Stryfe had shot Xavier, where she had confronted her feelings for Jamie Madrox,, where Xavier had convinced her to infiltrate the Weissman Mental Institute for him and where she had met Sinister for the first time and had saved her friends from the grip of Onslaught.

That was before the death of Xavier, something she still wished she could have stopped, as did all the X-Men. All their power, all their skill and they were unable to save the man who founded them, who brought them together. She paused and looked at one of the pictures of him. She wanted to do this as much for herself as she did for Marcus. She entered the control room and saw a letter on the panels with her name on it.

"Marcus," she said, sitting in the main chair and her voice echoed through the tannoy. "Meet Professor Charles Xavier. Computer, activate Xavier avatar Alpha 1."

"Command acknowledged." The Danger Room shifted from being a stark white room to being a replica of the study of Charles Xavier, with the man himself sitting behind his desk, in his favourite chair,

looking out of the window.

"Professor Xavier..." said Marcus and Xavier turned around. "I was expecting Sam."

"Ah realise that, I'm not sure if you remember me..."

"Yes," said Charles. "You're Marcus Raven. You work at the FBI."

"Worked," said Raven. "Ah'm with SHIELD now." His mind went back to the first time he met Charles Xavier.

"I'd like you to leave the FBI, to become one of my X-Men. Or at least be a contact for us, Mr Raven."

"Ah'm sorry, my answer's no," said Marcus to Xavier as they sat in a small café in Dallas. The two men who accompanied him looked taken aback, but Professor Xavier just looked at him and nodded.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, in all sincerity. "A man with your talents and experience would be useful."

"Ah can see that," he said. "But look at it from my point of view. Ah'm almost 50. I've been involved in two wars, Ah've kept my powers as secret as Ah can. Ah'm not interested in fighting anymore. Mr Summers is a good tactician and Mr Bishop knows more about fighting than Ah could ever."

"You're reading their minds?" frowned Xavier. It was obvious he did not approve of such things.

"It's a prudent move these days," said Marcus. "You don't know who you can trust."

"Hmm," said Xavier, crossing his fingers. "I could stop you."

"Ah know. Ah gathered as much when Ah mindlinked to you when you first arrived," said Marcus. "However doing it would be bad. My psionics have a feedback defence thing on them. Don't matter if it's hostile or not."

"You don't want to control it?" asked Mr Summers.

"No, Ah reckon that unless Ah mindlink people, then Ah've no need

to stop a natural defence." Summers eyes narrowed slightly, whilst the man Xavier had named as Bishop stood there impassively.

"Way Ah see it, people have cause to hate and fear me by just being a mutant. Becoming a high profile one isn't a good idea, not at my age. This super-hero thing, it's a game for the young."

"Fair enough," said Xavier. "I don't want to force anyone to fight my cause who doesn't want to. We've lost too many. Doug, John." * His eyes closed as he named those two, and Marcus got the impression that they had been coerced in to it. They might have given their all as X-Men but had to be pushed to join."

"Look," he said, trying to make amends. "It's just this isn't the life for me. Ah'm tired of fighting. Ah just want to be left alone to make a life for myself whilst Ah still have time. If Ah thought Ah'd be of use, Ah would help. But..." He trailed off, unsure what to say, knowing it looked like the man before him felt let down. There was nothing he could do. Xavier looked up at him, looked him straight in the eye and knew the truth.

"Thank you for your honesty," he said, with a coldness that had not been present before. "I'm sorry to have wasted your time." And ours, he had the courtesy not to add. Marcus gave a watery smile as Summers pushed Xavier's wheelchair away from him and out of the park. Bishop stayed a moment and looked him in the eye.

"You can't hide from fear. You face it." Marcus felt a chill as the man who sounded a lot like Laurence Fishburne spoke to him and he wondered how to reply. Then Bishop turned away, saving the decision from being made, and walked away, his long strides catching up to Summers and Xavier with ease, then he slowed the pace as they made it to the car. His words, and Xavier's, rang in his ears.

"Ah need your help, Professor."

"I thought you had decided against training."

"Ah'm no longer in the same position ah was when we met several years ago. Ah was outed, and it cost me my job at the FBI. Ah joined SHIELD as part of their X-Force task force."

"I remember Sam mentioning this to me. I'm not sure I approve of it,

but if Nick Fury is doing more then it is a plus."

"Colonel Fury... is no longer in charge of SHIELD, he doesn't even work for us anymore. He joined Hydra under the influence of the Shadow King."

"I see," said Xavier, his forehead tightening a little at the mention of his oldest adversary and he steepled his fingers. "I believe you had better explain. One of the disadvantages of being a hologram is that I do not have the psionic abilities I once had, however as I recall if I did it may not serve me well."

Marcus smiled and began to explain what had happened, and bring Xavier up to date.

Terry watched and smiled and then she turned her attention to the letter. It looked a lot like Sam Guthrie's handwriting and she opened the envelope to see what it was that he wanted to say to her, what he couldn't say in person.

'Dear Terry

I hate to do this like this, but I don't have a great deal of choice anymore. There are changes happening here, changes that we've no real influence over. You know that the X-Men are having a lot of problems at the moment, and one of them is who we can trust, who we can have faith in.

It's taken a lot of talking, and debate, but the final point is this - we don't know what Sinister did to you, what deal you cut with him. Cyclops knows Sinister, he knows the schemer and manipulator he is and he believes that he'll use you as a weapon against the X-Men.

Beast has looked over the data you've sent us on the nanotechnology devices he's implanted in you, and he's off the opinion that they can't be removed without invasive procedures on you, and there's no guarantee that they won't harm you on removal.

After you've finished here, your security clearance will be restricted. I managed to convince Scott that letting you use the Danger Room was in everyone's interest and not to alienate you completely as we still want ties to X-Force and SHIELD, but after today, you won't be allowed to use X-Men systems and you've been blocked from the files and systems that you won't need today. You also won't be allowed in the mansion or at the Massachusetts Academy without an actual X-

Man present.

We need to be able to trust everyone completely before we fix the problems we have. I'm very, very sorry. I'll see you soon.

Sam.'

Terry sat back, numb with shock, tears stinging at her eyes. She knew things had changed at Xavier's but this wasn't something she had ever expected. How could they do this? She had given them so much, surely one mistake didn't ruin it all. How many of the X-Men before her had made errors, either by circumstance or choice?

She looked at the letter, at the fact they'd not even been able to tell her in person and tears fell to the paper. She closed her eyes and fled the control room and ran to her old room in the mansion.

"That is an intriguing story," said Xavier, the concern on his face about recent events. "I fear that what is happening may be only the beginning of a long crusade, and I also fear that if what Sam has told me is still continuing, then my X-Men may not be able to stand against him."

"You know your X-Men better than me," said Marcus. "They've had slumps before, and pulled out, as far Ah know."

"Yes," said Xavier. "I just hope that this time they can. Why are you here to see me?"

"My powers. I need your advice on using them. Ah've used the lesson plans provided by the X-Men but Ah keep thinking there's more Ah should be doing, could have done."

"And I'm the best person to talk to."

"You literally wrote the book," said Marcus and then he caught a flash of Teresa. "Terry?" he said.

"Terry?" asked Xavier. "As in Siryn?"

"Yeah," said Marcus. "She's upset. Ah need to go see what's wrong, Professor."

"I understand," said Xavier. "I will be here when you return."

"Thank you," said Marcus and left the room, going to find his friend.

Xavier looked about the study and sighed. He was a literal ghost in his own home. However, he and an old friend had installed a security procedure to the Danger Room after so many years of accidents with the systems.

"Computer, this is Professor Charles Xavier. End Danger Room simulation."

"Voiceprint recognised. Ending program, Professor." The system shut down and as Xavier faded away he thanked Forge for his technological brilliance and hoped the new Director of SHIELD did as well there as he had here. Then he was gone, until the next time.

"Kitty?"

"Yeah?" said Katherine Pryde as she turned to see Maverick standing in the doorway. "David? What are you doing here?"

"Could ask you the same question," he said as he looked around the X-Force office. Papers were sprawled everywhere and Kitty had her glasses on so he knew she was working on the computers a great deal as well. "It's your day off."

"I know, which is why I'm not in uniform" she said. "I'm catching up on all the things I left outstanding when I was back with the X-Men. My leave of absence... let's just say I took a bit longer than I ought to have."

"Fair enough, but it's your day off. Stop working, that's an order."

"You can't order me now that Pete's back. Besides I thought you were visiting Chris?"

"Been there, done that, let's not go there," said Maverick, a little sharply. "Sorry," he said, seeing the look in her eyes. "It didn't go like I thought it would."

"These things never do," she said. "I'm actually doing something for Forge as well. The Helicarrier systems got a bit beat up after the whole Godzilla deal, and before he took off with Excalibur, he asked me to do some work on the computer systems, the programming and such, to see what I can do to improve manoeuvrability."

"He's the maker," said David. "Surely he can do that?"

"He can build the computers, he can't programme them that well. He makes the stuff, I breathe life in to it."

"Almost biblical."

"Yeah," she said, with a laugh.

"Come one, I'll buy you a coffee," said Maverick. "You're going to have a break, and you're going to like it."

"That I'll not argue with," she said and saved the work and turned off the monitors. "Keep an eye on things for me, Lockheed," she said to her pet dragon, as she got up and walked over to the doorway. The dragon nodded and she looked at David. "So, where are we going?"

"A small place a few blocks away. Logan took me there once. He knows some places."

"One of Logan's haunts?" said Kitty. "Do I need to suit up?"

"No," laughed North. "It's not one of those places. He said he goes there for calm, a bit of peace and quiet when he can't get to Canada."

"Wow," said Kitty. "Sometimes I wonder if I know him at all."

"You've weren't with him for a long time," said Maverick as they walked down the corridors to the exit, past the areas where the reconstruction work was taking place to the Helicarrier after the damage it had taken from the Destroyah. "And when you were it was going from one crisis to the next."

"No, we never really had a chance to catch up. I mean, I know I'm an X-Man until I die, can't get away from that, none of us can, but I wonder if it's home anymore. So much has changed."

"Life is change. The moment it stops changing is the moment we die."

"Sounds like something Logan would say."

"He might have said it to me, I don't remember." They walked down the loading ramp to the top of the SHIELD headquarters and to the lift area where they went down to the ground floor. "There's a lot I

still don't remember about the old days."

"I thought you got the whole implants thing sorted?"

"I got most of my memories back from Weapon X thanks to Major Barrington, but there was a cost to it."

"I don't understand."

"Guess I've a story to tell over coffee then," said David as they reached the ground floor and walked through the lobby to the city outside. It was a bit colder than it had been when he'd been out earlier. The year was getting on. "How are you not cold?" he said, looking at her. She was in jeans and a short sleeved blouse and no jacket.

"Ninja training," said Kitty. "You get used to the cold. Lead on."

"Thanks," said Maverick and they walked a couple of blocks over to the coffee shop. The sign in the window said simply 'Tom's' and Maverick opened the door and there was the tinkling of a bell as they entered. The place was half full but as soon as Kitty entered she felt a sense of peace and tranquillity to the place.

"Oh," she said, feeling the tensions drain from her as her whole body relaxed.

"Yeah," said David. "Sit over there," he pointed to a booth. "I'll get the coffee."

"Lots of cream, lots of sugar."

"How that doesn't show on you, I have no idea," said Maverick and winked. Kitty flushed slightly and retreated to the booth while David stood at the counter as a man appeared at the other side. "Hey, Tom."

"Davey!" said Tom and the two men shook hands. "Long time no see."

"Working, my friend," he replied. "But you know I'll never stop coming here."

"Thank you. Usual?"

"Please, and the same for again - just double the cream and sugar."

"Date?"

"No, colleague. Friend."

"Ah," said Tom. "I'll bring them over."

"Thanks, Tom," said North and went over to the booth and sat down.
"Coffee'll be here in a little while."

"What is this place?" asked Kitty. "I've never felt anything like it."

"It's Tom's. Logan explained it to me. Look at the lettering on the window." Kitty looked over. The letters weren't solid letters, more like single brush strokes that resembled letters.

"Japanese?"

"Tibetan, I think. They're the same strokes that mean serenity. Apparently if you paint them with the blood of a virgin it radiates peace."

"What?" said Kitty, in horror.

"Yeah, that was my reaction when Logan told me. Then he said he was kidding."

"That's not very funny."

"He chuckled. I can kind of see why." Kitty shook her head

"Men."

"It's painted using the sap from the triennium tree in Malaysia," said Tom as he brought the coffees. "Logan has been telling people that story of the virgins for years. The look on his face when he was told was also quite priceless."

"What about his enhanced senses?" asked Kitty, with a hint of scepticism.

"In here, he was powerless. When everyone is content, whatever they tell you can be perceived as the truth. Enjoy your drinks." He walked away.

"Logan never told me that," said North, with a grin.

"I want to mention it to him," said Kitty.

"Your choice," said Maverick.

"So the memory implants?" said Kitty, as she took a sip of the coffee.

"Yeah, the implants," said David. "Project X was a failure. Logan had escaped, Silver Fox had betrayed us, Creed was uncontrollable, Mastodon... the enhancements were creating problems for him, which the techs thought they had cured. They just delayed the inevitable. That left myself and John Wraith. Wraith went deeper in to the security agencies, and that left me - a solider, running out of time. Until Barrington came along."

"Who was he?"

"I never really knew. He had some influence over Project X, but only after everything was bottoming out and the people in charge were in disgrace. He wasn't pleased at what had been done and said he would fix it."

"So he gave you back your memories?"

"No quite. What Weapon X did was use technology and psionics to alter our thoughts, to rearrange memories and such and bond them to us with the enhancements. Without the enhancements, we would remember and Barrington arranged it so that I would know who I was, who I had been."

"How?"

"An experimental bombardment of ionic and gamma radiation."

"Ouch."

"Oh no, that's not the worst part. I had to be sealed up in a metal box, with a thin lead mesh to block out most of the radiation, and they figured that the enhancements I'd been given would protect me. As I say it was experimental."

"It worked?"

"Yeah, it worked. Three hours for three days until the enhancements

were gone. My memories came back, but there was a side effect - I lost my mutant powers in the process. The enhancements were tied to the x-gene, apparently."

"But they came back?"

"The X-gene was dormant, but still there, but the Legacy Virus didn't care and attacked my body, somehow reactivating the x-gene, bridging the gaps that the radiation had created and filling them in."

"That's incredible," said Kitty, thinking back to Illyana and how she had died from the Legacy Virus. Her death had been relatively painless, compared to how some people had died. "And then they found the cure."

"Yeah," said Maverick. "Elena did something to me that inhibited the virus in my body. Nobody ever figured out how."

"Was she with Chris?"

"Yeah," said North. "She was. That's what caused the problems, but that's for another time. What about you? How does it feel working with Pete again?"

"It's not easy," she admitted. "It's been a fair amount of time since we split up, and I know he took it hard. He's older than I am, and I needed to live a little first - but I did love him. It just wasn't enough."

"What about now?"

"Now?"

"Do you still love him?"

"I don't know. A part of me always will, I know that, but do I feel it now? I'm not sure. If something is meant to be it will happen, regardless. I still have feelings for Peter Rasputin on the X-Men. There was a time when I'd have married him gladly. If he asked me, I might even say yes now."

"How is he doing?"

"I don't know. I lost touch with him a while ago and I've not been able to find him again."

"Can SHIELD...?"

"Not sure, I've not had time to ask."

"Good point. So you're going to be okay with Pete?"

"You don't drop something do you?" Maverick smiled. "I think so. I'm a professional and so's he. We've gotten over whatever issues we had, and we're friends now. I'm glad we are, because I'd have regretted never seeing him again. I just don't think he's right for me."

"Good, because I'd hate to see you leave the team. You're one hell of a SHIELD agent."

"Thanks," she said. "It's funny, I never dreamed of being one, but it just seems so natural. As if it was meant to be."

"If something is meant to be it will happen, regardless," said David and finished his drink. "Another or you want to go back to work?"

"I'd like another, but I do need to get on. You're a good man, David." She squeezed his hand. "I'm glad I know you."

"Thanks," said North, and they stood up. "I'll pay the tab."

"I'll just freshen up." He nodded and watched her walk away to the bathroom and then he walked over to the counter and gave Tom the money to pay for the drinks.

"A highly intelligent young lady," said Tom, as he got Maverick his change.

"Yeah," said North. "She is." He put a hand to his head.

"David?" asked Tom. "Are you okay?"

"Just a bit dizzy," said Maverick. "Nothing serious. Been too long since I had one of your coffees."

"Come back when you have time," said Tom. "We will talk."

"I'd like that." He turned and Kitty was coming towards him. "Ready?"

"Yeah," she said.

"May I?" he said offering his arm.

"I'd love to," she said, accepting his arm and they walked out of the coffee shop and back towards the SHIELD building.

"So you and Banshee stopped Justin Hammer and his Sentinel programme?"

"Yeah," answered Pete, downing his whiskey,

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #X

"Siege"

by [Russ Anderson](#)

La Libertad, El Salvador.

Pete Wisdom

The two mestizo men standing on the sidewalk with rifles slung over their shoulders had been eyeing the stranger ever since he'd appeared at the end of the street. They'd watched him sway rather than walk, and had shared small smiles at one point when he stumbled. It was late, and most people were smart enough to be off the streets. Particularly drunk white men.

<"American, you think?"> one of the mestizos asked.

Siryn

<"Of course. He probably thinks he's at Club Med.">

The men continued to watch as the white man drew closer, finally passing them with a friendly, if slightly green, nod in their direction. They let him get nearly to the opposite side of the building they were guarding before one of them spoke.

Shadowcat

<"Excuse me.">

Maverick

The white man stopped and looked back. His features were angular and sharp beneath a mop of movie star's black hair, and his eyes seemed more suited to suspicion than the relaxed curiosity that filled them now.

<"Yes?"> he answered. <"Can I help you?">

The gunmen glanced at one another. Not a completely stupid *gringo* then. At least he spoke the language. They'd nailed his nationality,

however. That accent could only belong to an American.

<"Do you know where you are?"> one of the men asked.

The white man looked around, as if this was a damn good question and he hadn't given it much thought before now. <"The lovely city of La Libertad,"> he said finally.

<"It is late, sir,"> one of the men said. <"You should go home now.">

<"On my way,"> the white man said with a jaunty little salute.

<"Where are you coming from?"> the other one said. This man was a little less amused and a lot more suspicious. His right hand hung straight down, resting on the butt of the rifle slung over his shoulder.

The white man started to move back toward them, still swaying a little as he pointed in the direction he'd come. <"The Black Pearl. You've heard of it?">

The second gunman relaxed at that. He and his comrade shared another grin. The Black Pearl was a gentleman's club, notorious for scalping unwary white men with money to spend. Usually the club's clients didn't wander away before dawn...but maybe this one had been scalped a little too effectively.

<"Hey,"> the drunk said, reaching into his coat and pulling out a bottle, <"do you like American booze? I got some Jim Beam here...">

This got the attention of one of the mestizos. He reached for the bottle without comment, but his more serious friend put a hand on his shoulder. <"We are on duty...">

<"No, it's good. Here, look."> The white man took a swallow from the small bottle, scrunched his face up, then exhaled and wiped his mouth. He nodded and handed it to the first gunman, who accepted it despite his comrade's sour look. <" Don't ever let anybody tell you that shit Jack Daniels makes is a real American whiskey. This is the good stuff here.">

<"That's enough,"> the more serious gunman said, putting his hand back on his gun. <"Be on your way.">

His friend took a drink from the bottle, capped it, and handed it back

to the American with an amiable nod. Barely half a swallow remained in the bottom of the glass. The American took it, touched it to his eyebrow in farewell--<"Good evening to you gentlemen">-- then wheeled about and started moving down the street again.

Neither gunman replied, but both of them kept their eyes glued to the British man as he moved away. When he was out of sight, they looked at each other.

<"That was probably the most exciting thing that will happen tonight,"> groused the one who'd taken a drink. His partner merely grunted and resumed his post.

The American man crossed the narrow street, then turned the corner at the end of the block, and once he was out of sight of the guards, his gait changed. The sway he'd been walking with narrowed itself to a relaxed but narrow strut, his shoulders squared and his head lifted. He took the bottle of Jim Beam out of his coat, looked at it with distaste, then tossed it into a convenient pile of garbage lying against the building he was passing. He paused for a moment, lit a cigarette, then ducked into this building and began working his way up the filthy, ancient stairway to the roof.

The city looked no better from above. Certainly he'd seen worse than these derelict tenements, bracketed in by broken streets and garbage barricades, but he had no love for La Libertad--like most wartorn cities in the world, he had bad memories of the place.

He hopped the three feet to the next roof and made his way quickly back to the street he'd met his two mestizos on. They were still there, only they looked more bored now. Making sure to cover the light from the coal of his cigarette with one hand, the man had a seat where he could keep an eye on them.

He pulled a tiny foam earplug from the pocket of his coat, inserted it into his ear, and tapped on it.

"Lyd," he said, and his accent was now more Whitechapel than Middle America. "How we doing, love?"

"As well as can be expected," Lydia Del Ruiz replied. She was peeking through the heavy drapes of a dark bedroom at the two large

men who waited on the street outside. They hadn't moved in the last ten minutes, but it didn't look like they'd heard anything unusual from her room. If they had, they would have been up here already.

The room was utterly black, but she'd been in it long enough for her eyes to adjust. She looked around at the fat, dark-skinned man lying across the room's single bed, and wrinkled her nose. His mouth was taped shut, but he was staring daggers at her.

"I managed to drag Lourdes away from the Blackjack table for some fun. He's indisposed at the moment."

"You tied him up before he got too friendly, didn't you?"

Lydia smirked as she pulled a black jacket over the revealing red dress she was wearing. "I didn't know you cared, Wisdom."

"I don't. Just making conversation."

"Well, he managed to cop a feel before I got his hands tied--and I'll be washing for days to get that out, thank you very much--but no. I wasn't required to go beyond the call of duty." She gave the bloated, bound man another look. "I couldn't find anything in his wallet."

"Shit!" Peter Wisdom hissed. "Well, that would've been too easy, wouldn't it? Fine, then. You know what to do next?"

"Yeah. Wish me luck."

"Always. Go get 'em, Shadow."

There was a click, and the line was silent. Lydia moved across the room to the fat man's side and had a seat on the side of the bed.

<"You've probably realized that I'm not actually a call girl, *Senor Lourdes*,"> she said. <"What I am is a representative of certain parties who fear you may be trying to extend your power beyond the simple trafficking of street drugs.">

Lourdes glared at her, sweat glistening on his thinly-haired scalp despite the fact this was one of the few buildings in this city with air conditioning. His large nostrils flared over the silver-gray swatch of duct tape covering his mouth.

She reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out a thin strip of dull-black. She pressed a stud on the side and five inches of

honed steel sprang out of the end.

<"Mr. Lourdes, we're not leaving until you tell me what I want to know. And personally, I don't care how much of yourself you leave behind when we do."

<"So let's get started shall we?">

Wisdom tapped the earplug again, still watching his friends down on the street. "Everybody get that?"

"Loud 'n clear," came back four times, from four different voices.

"Looks like we're gonna have t'do this the hard way, then. Mav, how close're you?"

"Circling at 10,000 feet. We can be at the dropoff two and a half minutes from 'go'. Just waiting for the word."

"Terry?"

"I'm three blocks away. At 10 o'clock from your position."

Wisdom turned and looked. There was no chance of spotting Terry at that distance, not as dark as it was, but he found her general position across the rooftops.

"You all know the drill. Terry, all they've got up front is two guys with older model M-16s. Any other defenses are gonna be deeper in the building, so Mav's team: you take note."

"Roger that."

"You start headin' our way now. Terry, count to 100, then you do the same."

Terry gave an "Aye", and then the line went silent again. Pete Wisdom stubbed his cigarette out, considered lighting another one, and decided against it. He considered checking in on Lydia, and decided against that too. The next two minutes stretched out interminably. It was all he could do to keep from looking at his watch. He knew this feeling, knew how time could dilate in the middle of what was about to become a nasty situation, but he'd never

gotten used to it.

Then he heard it. A high-pitched, high-volume cry approaching over the rooftops, climbing until it was almost unbearable. A Siryn's scream.

Terry was on her way.

Theresa O'Rourke rocketed across the city of La Libertad, held aloft by the wavelengths created by her mutant sonic scream. She was clad all in black, her fire-red hair bundled up beneath the mask that covered her pale Anglican face, and so she was nearly invisible to those on the ground as she shot above them at barely 600 feet.

But if they couldn't see her, they could damn well *hear* her.

She spotted the two friends Pete had made out front of the target building as she soared overhead. Both of them had moved out into the empty street, craning their necks to see what was making all the noise, and both of them had unslung their rifles, holding them close to their chests, ready to shoot at anything that moved, probably. They never even saw her. She shot by, soared three blocks away, then turned and headed back for another pass, angling slightly away from the building this time and hopefully dragging the attention of the gunmen and anybody else on the street away for just a moment.

Right on cue, a sleek black aircraft dropped out of the clouds directly above the target building.

"Everybody check your straps," Katherine Pryde said. "We're only gonna get one chance at this, and it's not like any of us are packing 'chutes."

"This is the most uncomfortable goddamn thing Ah've been asked to do since Ah joined this outfit," Marcus Raven said. "No offense, Maverick."

David North, codenamed Maverick, looked back over his shoulder at his teammate. The three of them were all strapped together with tandem skydiving gear. Maverick was in front, then there was Marcus, and Kitty was bringing up the rear.

"None taken," David said with a grin. "Just don't get any funny ideas, strapped in behind me like that. I've seen you checking out my ass in the shower."

Marcus gaped. "That is--Ah am straight as an arrow, mister!"

"Sure, Marc, keep living in denial."

"Ah think you're livin' in wishful thinking..."

"Guys, can we focus here?" Kitty asked from the back. "I've got a great view of both your butts, and they're not all that."

"This from the woman who dated bony-ass Pete Wisdom..." David said, but fell silent. Marcus muttered something about, "He started it..." and then he quieted as well.

The cargo door to their left trundled open of its own accord, and a new voice--the voice of the pilot--sounded in their earplugs.

"Infil team, you are a go."

Below them, a landscape of rooftops and narrow streets appeared, familiar to each of them after endless study of satellite maps. They could hear Theresa distracting the locals somewhere nearby, and once they'd fixed on the building they were headed towards, each of them took a moment to try to spot Pete on one of the adjacent rooftops. Only David, up front as he was, managed to spot him.

"We're a go," David confirmed to the pilot, and then he and his two teammates leaned simultaneously to their left, toppling out of the cargo door together and falling into space.

They plummeted toward the building, stacked together, all their arms and legs flared out to slow their fall. On top, Kitty Pryde activated her mutant gift, allowing herself to go intangible. The power spread consciously through her contact with Marcus, and through him to David, and suddenly all three of them were as solid as smoke on the breeze. The drastic change in distribution of mass slowed their descent, but they already had a great deal of momentum, and they continued to plunge toward the building at bone-crushing speed.

"How many floors did this thing have again?" David called back. When the question was met with stunned silence, he laughed. "Just

kidding!"

They hit the roof, and their phased molecules slid right through the solid matter. A series of snapshot images flashed by as they plunged rapidly through the building. An empty dirty room on the top level, a young-ish man reclining in a bathtub and smoking a cigar on the level below that, a pair of toughs watching *Nick at Nite* on a beat-up television on the level below that, and on and on. They flashed through the floors so quickly, most of the people they passed didn't even see them, but some did. Enough, anyway, that this mission could no longer be considered 'covert'.

All the while, David--whose position placed him on bottom--counted down the floors. "Eleven...ten...nine...eight..."

A man and a woman having sex against a wall. Three armed men having an argument that looked like it may soon escalate into a gunfight. A dirty but fully functional and fully-manned chemistry laboratory.

"...five...four...three...two..."

An empty foyer with stairwell. A longer-than-usual pause as they passed through the thick layer of earth and concrete separating the ground floor from the basement.

"Now, Kitty!" David cried.

They slipped through into the basement, and as soon as they were clear, Kitty released Marcus' arms, willing herself solid at the same time. David, who'd tucked his legs up beneath him as they'd plummeted through the building, took the impact of all three of them hitting the basement floor. His mutant physiology converted the kinetic energy into stored bio-energy, completely negating the force of the landing.

Someone was screaming in Spanish. Several someones in fact. Kitty phased out of the harness the moment David had negated their fall, and in the next eyeblink, she'd crossed the floor and disarmed one of the room's five occupants. The man hadn't even had a chance to raise his weapon before she was breaking his wrist with a snap-kick.

"Go to sleep boys," Marcus said, and everyone in the room who wasn't an X-Forcer--including the man crying out in pain from his shattered wrist--did just as he said.

"Nice," David said, nodding.

"Y're welcome," Marcus replied, wiping at the thin line of blood that had erupted from his left nostril. He and David worked to disconnect their harness.

"What about the codes, Marcus? Did any of them know the deactivation sequence?"

"Nope, sorry, Kitty. I scanned 'em as soon as we were in. They know how to maintain the system, but not how to shut it down."

The three of them were in a tall-ceilinged basement room with plain concrete walls and dirt floor. There were several tables lined up against one of the walls, each of them with a PC sitting atop it. Three of the men Marcus had just sent to dreamland were slumped over these tables. As Marcus and David were taking this in, Kitty was pulling one of the unconscious men away from his keyboard and dumping him on the floor.

"What's the word, Kitty?" David said, drawing a sidearm while Marcus gathered up the harness and stowed it in a small pack on his back.

"This is definitely the control center. These computers are older than I am, though. I'll do my best."

"Marcus?"

"We got maybe two minutes before every able-bodied man in the building comes down on us." He paused, his eyes closed. "That's a whole lot of able-bodied men, by the way. More than we expected."

"How many?"

He shook his head, his brow knit.

"How many, Marcus?"

"Sorry...there's interference, probably from our target. Making it hard to concentrate..."

"We need numbers, man!"

"Around three hundred. Give or take."

David didn't bother to reply, he just tapped his earplug and linked up with his team leader. "Pete, this building is *packed* with enemy personnel. We're in the command center, but I don't think we're going to be able to accomplish anything before they're on us. We need some interference."

"And we need Lydia to get us those codes!" Kitty added.

"Right," Pete replied. "One round of interference coming up. I'll see what I can do about the codes. Cover your ears, children."

Ten white-hot knives of burning plasma arrowed down from the sky, blasting holes into the pavement around the two door guards. One knife hit a shallowly-buried gas line, and a wall of flame erupted along the pavement.

<"We're under attack!"> one of the guards squealed into a radio while his partner indiscriminately strafed the opposite roofline with bullets. <"We need assistance out front! Out front, damn y--">

A hot knife slashed through the radio set, nearly taking the guard's hand with it. He cried out more in surprise than pain and dropped the useless glob of melted plastic. At that moment, another knife went through the clip of his partner's rifle. Most of the rounds in it were slagged instantly and rendered useless, but the rest exploded, washing the gunman in flame and slamming him backwards into the wall of the building. He was unconscious by the time his smoldering body slid down to the pavement.

The other gunman, the one with the ruined radio, turned and caught sight of Pete Wisdom descending from the opposite roof, lines of fire extending from his fingertips to slow his fall. The guard recognized him instantly as the 'drunk' American and, snarling, raised his gun and drew a careful bead on the man.

And that was when the siren call returned. His eyes flicked upward at the noise, just as he was about to pull the trigger, and a solid wave of sound hammered him flat into the street. His finger pulled convulsively on the trigger, but the round flew well off target.

"Thank you, luv," Pete said. He'd reached the ground and was now lighting another cigarette. The black overcoat he'd been wearing earlier had been doffed and now he was in his preferred fighting togs--black slacks, a rumpled white shirt with the sleeves rolled up,

and a loosened black tie.

"Ye could've given me some warnin' ye were jumpin' off the flippin' roof, Pete!" Terry said, landing beside him. She tore off her mask, and her lovely face was twisted in exasperation and rising temper.

"Where's the fun in that?" He pointed toward the building. There were some lights on inside, and they could see silhouettes moving quickly in the windows. "Ready to do our rendition of Pulleine and Durnford?"

"Who?"

"Blokes in charge of her majesty's forces at Isandhlwana when 20,000 Zulus fell on 'em and wiped 'em off the face of the earth. Kinda the English versions of General Custer."

"Ah, right. I remember. Uncle Tom loved all that auld war business, especially the battles where England lost. I think he had the movie."

"So, you ready?"

"Sure I am. Long as these boys know we're playin' the Zulus."

You're surrounded by liquid. Immersed in it. Something thick and green, and you suppose it's meant to preserve you, but it feels a whole lot more like you're pickling in it instead. Just a big mutant pickle with withering delusions of humanity.

And you're not alone with the bubble-bubble of the oxygen pumps and the squish-squash of the fluid in your cavities. Not alone. You're in here with another, and even as you realize this other is sleeping, it abruptly wakes. Wakes and speaks to you.

"Marcus..."

"Marcus, you okay?"

Marcus Raven looked up at his teammate and friend, David North. Marcus knew that it was cool in this room, well within his comfort zone, but he was sweating badly. He felt light-headed too, and

wondered if he was going into shock.

"It's the target," he said. "Broadcastin'..."

David's jaw set, and he turned toward their other teammate. "Kitty, how we comin'?"

"I'm trying to teach myself a dead language here, Mav! I'm going to need time."

Time they didn't have. He could hear the feet roaring by above their heads. Some of those would be headed off by Terry and Pete. But all of them? As attractive as the idea was, David didn't find it very likely.

"Marc, listen to me. I need you to pull it together man. You hearing me?" Marcus nodded. "Can you operate your weapon?" David pointed to his slung rifle, and Marcus nodded again. "We need to draw these guys away from Kitty, and that means we gotta go out there..."

"Unacceptable!" Kitty cried from the other side of the room, but her fingers didn't slow down in their dance across the keyboards.

"He's right," Marcus said. "This is the backup plan, remember? If Lyd couldn't get the codes, we were gonna have to run interference for you."

"Marcus, you're sick!"

"No he's not," David insisted, helping Marcus to his feet and locking eyes with the man. "He's right as rain. Aren't you, Marc?"

Marcus gritted his teeth. "As rain. You know it."

"Think you can track the objective and fight at the same time?"

"I think I'd better."

"Good man." David patted Marcus' shoulder and turned toward the door. "Kitty, we're going to start heading for the target. Hopefully we'll be able to draw all of the fire away from you, but just in case..."

"I can take care of myself, Maverick."

"Don't I know it. Let's go, Marc. I'm in front, but remember--no checking out my ass."

"You wish," Marcus said, and then the door was open and they were moving quickly out into the hall and the melee that awaited them there.

Jorge Fuentes had worked for his third cousin, Domingo Lourdes, since he was six years old. At the time, that had involved taking messages and, occasionally, small shipments from one side of town to the other. When other children were learning how to read, Jorge was pedaling several thousand dollars worth of narcotics across town on his tiny bicycle.

He'd moved up in the organization over the years, though never in the direction he'd wanted. He wanted to be one of Lourdes' gunmen. His enforcers. Perhaps one day he could work as the great man's bodyguard--*Dios*, he owed his cousin so much, he almost longed for the chance to take a bullet for him--but Lourdes had seen the boy's potential in other areas, and had instead trained him in the labs, processing and cutting the drugs that were the lifeblood of their operation and, to a lesser extent, their city. It was not precisely what Jorge wanted, but at least he was allowed to continue serving *Jefe* Lourdes.

Jorge often brooded on this, and he was doing so on this night, when one of *el Jefe's* enforcers came bursting into the lab, his gun raised, crying that they were under attack, that they needed all able men to arm themselves and meet the enemy on the ground floor.

The other chemists began to object, but Jorge didn't hesitate for a moment. He set down his equipment and moved to pick up a rifle. He moved past the enforcer, ignoring his imprecations and his cries of "Coward!" toward the men who hesitated, and darted out into the hall, joining the tidal wave storming toward the stairwell and the bottom of the building.

He reached the ground floor, and turned with his fellows to move toward the front door, ready to follow those that had preceded them out onto the street, to meet this enemy with all appropriate violence and bloodshed.

And that was when the front wall exploded inward.

Jorge was thrown backwards, felt his skull creased by the butt of one of his fellows' rifles. Blood flowed into his eyes, and it took him a moment to clear them. When he could see again, he witnessed a stunning red-haired woman and a hard-eyed man--both of them white--striding through the hole in the wall. The man fired lines of fire from his fingertips, and the woman's very voice battered through the opposing ranks of men.

Neither of them were firing bullets, but Jorge didn't think the method of his sacrifice mattered too much in the greater scheme of things.

He raised his rifle, and rushed to join the fray.

Maverick and Marcus hit resistance almost as soon as they entered the hallway. Fortunately, Maverick had a lot of kinetic energy stored after their landing, and he unleashed it at the surprised horde streaming down the narrow corridor. The line of dark-skinned men fell back under the onslaught, and Mav and Marcus bolted down the corridor in the opposite direction.

"Think they'll leave Kitty alone?" Marcus asked.

"We have to make sure they do," Maverick replied, popping a few shots from his sidearm off over one shoulder. "Are we heading in the right direction?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Watch where we're going for me."

Maverick whirled and began firing back into the enemy lines, running backward while Marcus called out turns in the hallway. Finally, the corridor ended in a door, and Raven called a halt.

"Stairs?" Maverick asked.

"Yup. Down."

"Go, I'm right behind you."

Marcus pushed the door open, ignoring the bullet that whizzed by his ear as he ducked inside. The stairway was black, and suddenly he was in the water again, amid the burbling oxygen pumps and the

achingly-familiar voice saying his name.

No. Stop. Shake it off. You're gonna get David killed.

"Marc?"

"Down," Marcus repeated, and managed a grin. "Follow me. And no checkin' out my ass."

"Oh, you dinosaur piece of *shit!*" Kitty Pryde slammed her hands down on either side of the keyboard. The operating system was simple to the extreme, which meant there was very little chance of finding a back door into the controls. Which further meant they were screwed unless Lydia could get the codes.

Someone was pounding on the door, shouting in Spanish. Kitty didn't even look in that direction. She'd moved one of the heavy oak tables against the door after Marcus and Maverick had left.

She tapped her earplug. "Pete. I've done all I can. I need those codes, or we might as well just pack up and go home."

"Can't talk right now, luv," Pete Wisdom said. A couple of gun-toting natives managed to slip past the wall of sound Terry had put up, and he zipped them both in the legs with his hot knives. "Trying not to kill too many people up here. I'll let you know if Lyd calls back. Until then, just hold the fort. We're working our way down to you."

Marcus led the way down the stairs, careful not to stumble in the dim light. Maverick popped a glowstick to help light their way, but it didn't help very much. Somehow, they managed to make it to the very bottom of the stairwell without breaking any ankles.

They were standing in front of a rusted metal door. Water pooled on the concrete at their feet, and warm hungry things chattered in the walls. The temperature had dropped to somewhere around fifty-five degrees.

"Christ, it's like a dungeon," Maverick said. He raised the glowstick

toward a hole high in the wall, and frowned in distaste when he saw the interior was lined with squirming cockroaches.

"That's just what it is," Marcus said. "Target's inside."

Maverick nodded and looked back up the stairwell. "Hey. Where did our friends go?"

Marcus looked around. They'd descended maybe two more levels to get here--he wouldn't be surprised to find out they were at the absolute lowest point in urban La Libertad--and sometime during the descent, all sound of pursuit had ceased. This surprised Marcus Raven not at all.

"Think they're afraid of what's down here?"

"No," Marcus said. "In fact, I know they're not afraid. Though after today, maybe they will be."

"Then why aren't they chasing us anymore?"

Instead of answering, Marcus reached out a hand and clasped David on the shoulder. David began to turn, but before he could complete the movement, his eyes rolled up into his skull, he muttered "Marc...", and he collapsed backward onto the filthy stone stairwell.

Marcus snorted a line of blood back up into his sinuses, then crouched down, seized Maverick by the arms, and hefted the smaller man onto his shoulders. He kicked the metal door open--he knew it wouldn't be locked--and strode into the room beyond.

The concrete cube he found himself in was suffused with an emerald light. If anything, it was even colder in here, and Marcus saw vermin moving into the shadows at his explosive entrance--moving, but not too quickly, as if they weren't *too* frightened of the new arrival. This place was theirs, after all.

Theirs. And hers.

Standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by a wall of neglected monitoring equipment, was a tank full of bubbling green liquid. And suspended in the center of that tank was a dead woman. At least she looked dead. There was no hint of respiration. Her skin was smooth as polished marble save for an ugly black hole on her left breast, right over her heart.

Marcus set Maverick down, being careful to put him somewhere he could keep the man in sight--he didn't want the rats to start getting any funny ideas--and when he straightened, he found the dead woman's eyes were open. And she was staring at him through the glass.

"Hello Bonita," Marcus Raven said. "Been a while."

<"She was my cousin,"> Domingo Lourdes said, the switchblade hovering in front of his right eye.

Lydia Del Ruiz cocked her head to one side. <"I know that, *Senor* Lourdes. And I don't care. All you have to do is give me the codes to deactivate the equipment you've got her hooked up to.">

Lourdes licked his bare lips to wet them--he'd lost some skin from his mouth when Lydia had ripped the duct tape away. He was nervous and sweating, and he stank badly. Lydia wondered briefly if the man was stalling. Already they'd been in here for nearly half an hour. If his men were used to him finishing with his whores quickly, it probably wouldn't be much longer before they grew suspicious and came up here to check on him. Lydia was confident she could take the bodyguards, but she didn't want the complications a fight would create.

She also had no desire to start cutting this man, but he was turning out to be a harder nut to crack than she'd anticipated. She lowered the knife toward his face, pressing the point into the soft flesh below his eye. He tried to twist away, but his arms were tied above his head, pinning it in place.

<"She was my cousin, and I kept her alive after that boyfriend of hers shot her. She would be dead if not for me. I have a right to--">

<"To use her mutant abilities to traffic your poisons, as well as to hook her up to machines that will kill her if they're deactivated improperly. Yes, I'm sure you believe that. So...the codes, *senor*.">

<"You--you think you are battling the evil of the drug trade, but if you remove her, you will destroy the sole source of income for half the families in this city! I--">

<"The codes!"> Lydia hissed, and a bead of dark red appeared where the tip of her knife met the man's face. Then, to get her point

across further, she reached over his head with her free hand, grasped the edge of the headboard, and crunched it in her grip. Lourdes' eyes widened.

<"The--the codes..."> he agreed, and started talking.

Marcus...

"You look like hell, Bonita. I ain't gonna lie."

Help...

"That's what I'm here for. I need you to--"

Before Marcus could say another word, he felt a peculiar rushing sensation, as if his body was shrunken down to a pinpoint, squeezed through a very tiny hole, and whisked back up to full-size on the other side, all in the immeasurable moment his eyes were closed in a blink. He gasped and took a step backward.

"Can I help you, *senor*?"

He was no longer in the dungeon below La Libertad, and he was no longer wearing his black SHIELD-issue gear. Instead, he was dressed in a natty sports coat and slacks. In front of him, Bonita stood in a red evening gown that played hypnotically off the dark copper of her skin. Similarly well-dressed bodies moved all about them, chatting in low tones while a band played soft jazz in the background.

Marcus' line was in his throat before he'd even realized what was happening. "Yeah, maybe you can. I'm looking for a fella name of Gutierrez."

"Armando, you mean?"

"You know him?"

"He is my fiancée." She laughed softly, not unkindly, and Marcus wondered with embarrassment if she'd seen the wave of disappointment sweep across his face at this news. "He is speaking with a very important visitor at the moment. Perhaps I could give him a message?"

"Yeah, you tell him Marcus Raven's here to see him. Tell him I ain't gonna wait long either. And tell him..." He paused. In the heat of the moment, he'd been about to say, 'And tell him he's the luckiest man in El Salvador', but that kind of line only worked in Bond movies. And lord knew he was no James Bond. He was just a counterterrorism agent for the FBI, a low man on the totem pole.

"Yes?" Bonita asked.

"Tell him he has a lovely home," Marcus finished lamely, and the background swirled around him, supporting characters spiraling into incoherence before being replaced by filthy walls in a filthy apartment in downtown San Salvador. The place he'd lived for the three weeks he'd acted as Armando Gutierrez's field liaison. He was opening the door, his hand on the pistol concealed beneath his untucked shirt. And standing outside was Bonita, looking much the same as she had that first night. Even the simple jeans and the dark sunglasses couldn't make her look common.

"Armando sent me," she said, "to tell you he can't make your meeting today. He said...he said he has a dentist appointment."

Marcus nodded calmly, though inside his guts were boiling. Gutierrez was his mole inside the Atlacatl Battalion death squad, under a particularly ferocious commander named Ramon Fuentes. "Dentist appointment" was a code that told Marcus that his mole thought Fuentes might suspect something.

Bonita had not turned to leave yet. She was frowning, holding a handkerchief in one hand. She seemed to have been crying.

"Would you--would you like to come in?" Marcus asked.

"Who are you? What is your business with Armando?"

Marcus was stunned. She seemed furious, on the edge of tears again.

"I ask him about you, and he loses his temper always! Tells me to butt out, to stop being such a woman, and we used to...used to--"

Marcus couldn't say later what made him do it, but as she railed against him, he reached out and very gently plucked the sunglasses off of her face. Her left eye was swollen and black.

"Did he do this to you?" Marcus asked.

"Who are you?" she asked again, her voice breaking with emotion.

Somebody who's about to do something very stupid, he thought, and then he pulled her into his apartment and embraced her. The embrace dissolved into a kiss, and that would dissolve into something more minutes later.

Marcus stumbled back from her. "That's...that's enough, Bonita. Cut it out."

Happy, she said in his mind, reaching out to him. The apartment was gone again, replaced by a long, bleak landscape with a great purple bruise of sky overhead. Strange shapes took form and vanished in the distance, and uncertain forms glided out there on the edge of vision. Marcus knew this place well, though he'd never visited it in quite this manner. They were on the psi-plane. And those confused, indistinct shapes walking around out there were the men who had been following him and David down the stairwell back in La Libertad.

"I'm here to get you out, Bonita. But we don't have time to relive our greatest hits. Do you understand? I need you to tell me how to get you out of that tube."

No...dead...

"You ain't dead yet. I don't buy it. Fuentes got you into that machine in time to keep you alive, and you've got enough psyche left to use your mutant gift."

Marcus...

He was talking more quickly now, an unpleasant feeling of desperation forming at her unexpected resistance. "I work for people who can help you. But...I think they just want to turn you into a lab rat, Bonita. It'll be a better life than this, but not by much. I think I can get you away from here though, away from your cousin and away from SHIELD, and still get you the help you need. But that's a big 'I think'. You gotta tell me what you want, girl."

I want...

She had turned away from him, looking out over the psi-plane. She wasn't really there, Marcus knew. Not like he was. She was still back in the lab, naked in that tank. But she had used her abilities to suck him physically onto the psi-plane. An amazing talent, one that

Bonita hadn't suspected years ago during the three weeks she and Marcus had known each other. With this ability, she could move literally anything anywhere, simply by putting it on the psi-plane and pulling it out again anywhere in the physical world. Possibly one of the greatest mutations in homo superior history...and her shortsighted cousin was using it to traffic his drugs.

She was looking at him again, those dark eyes of hers trying to swallow him, and he knew her answer before she said anything.

I want you to kill me, she said.

The woodpecker *tac-tac-tac* of Kitty's fingers racing over the keyboard--the damn computer was so old it didn't even have a mouse!--was accompanied by an almost-constant stream of profanity from the young woman. She could curse almost as well as she could fight when the proper inspiration struck (after all, she'd learned both skills from one of the best) and inspiration was striking like a jackhammer at the moment.

The enforcers and gunmen were pounding at the door. She hoped Marcus and David were alright, because both had stopped communicating via the earplugs minutes ago.

"Kitty, are you receiving?"

She paused. "Lydia? I hope you've got good news..."

"The best. I've got the codes. Are you ready?"

Kitty hit ESC a couple of times, then repositioned her fingers over the keyboard. "Let's hear it."

A roar of gunfire ripped through her concentration, and Kitty spun in her seat. The handle and latch on the room's door had been blown to splinters, and half a dozen men were throwing their shoulders into pushing the portal open, shoving aside the heavy table Kitty had moved against it.

"Hold on, Lydia." She leapt from her seat, ready to engage the men as they streamed into the room. But the man in the lead--a handsome boy who looked even younger than Kitty--lunged in with his machine gun roaring.

"NO!" Kitty went intangible, feeling the bullets pass harmlessly through her just before they reached the computers at her back, chewing them--and all their lifesaving potential--to pieces.

"Have you listened to a word I've said?" Marcus demanded. "You don't have to die!"

The Bonita standing in front of him on the psi-plane shimmered, and a black hole appeared on the upper left portion of her chest. Through her blouse he could see that it was tinged blue around the edges. It did not dribble blood. It was the killing wound on a dead body. She smiled sadly and put a hand to his face. Her touch felt like cold electricity.

Can't live...with no...heart...

Marcus felt tears sting his eyes, and the psi-plane whisked them away from his physical face, gave them dove's wings, and sent them capering toward the vast horizon. "Bonita..."

She shuddered suddenly, her eyes going wide. She took two stumbling steps away from him, and put the hand that had lately been on Marcus' face to the hole in her chest.

When she lifted the hand, her palm came away bloody.

"Bonita?"

Can't...live...

The psi-plane split down the middle, sending Marcus and Bonita and all those wandering gunmen careening into an unknowable void beneath. Marcus reached out for Bonita as he fell, but she slipped through his fingers like quicksilver, and he was left to fall alone.

"Stupid!"

Elbow to one goon's head while the opposite foot goes into his friend's groin. Phase in time to avoid an incoming fist.

"Trigger-happy!"

Go solid long enough to grab another guy's rifle. Phase it out of his hands, then solidify and swing the butt into his head.

"Idiots!"

Phase again as a hail of gunfire rips past, tearing into some of the gunman's friends who are standing behind you. Resume focus as an incoming crackle of static on the earplug almost distracts you.

"Kitty, we're in the basement, working our way toward you. How
you

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #27

"A PAUSE IN THE ACTION"

by [David Wheatley](#)

"I spy with my little eye..."

"Get stuffed, Pete."

Pete Wisdom

Pete Wisdom sighed as he sat back in his cell. To his left was David North and across the room were Lydia Del Ruiz and Kitty Pryde, Lydia opposite him, Kitty opposite David. None of them were talking, to each other despite the best efforts of Pete, though he didn't quite blame them.

Shadowcat

This was not the way he wanted to spend the rest of the day, but then again things were never quite that easy.

Siryn

"We have to talk about this at some point," said Pete, seeing sixteen different ways of breaking out of here with ease as he looked about the cell.

"The part where busted open my nose?" said Maverick. "Or the part where you shot me in the leg?"

Maverick

"How about the part where you said I was easy?" said Kitty, and Pete could hear the anger and hurt in her voice.

"And what about the order you gave to Maverick to shoot me?" said Lydia. "I was defending you and you turned on me. Or the part where you were fighting over your ex after being with me."

"I said talk not everyone dump on Wisdom," said Pete wishing he had a cigarette . For a start - Davey - what the hell were you

thinking? Kitty's old enough to be to be your daughter."

"Don't you mean..."

"I know what I mean, Lyd. Mav, not only is there me to consider, but what about her father?"

"My Dad won't know."

"Not the balding bloke, you daft tart," said Pete. "I mean Logan. You're one of his best friends and you're doing the closest thing he has to a daughter."

"He'll understand..." muttered Maverick.

"Great, where would you like the flowers sent?"

"Pete," started Kitty.

"Oh yeah, here we go. I am really sorry for what I said, Kit, but damn it all, where was your head."

"It seemed a good idea at the time," she said. "You want details?" Pete looked down, feeling his fist clench a little.

"No," he said. "It's just... he's not your type. And don't you dare take that out of context."

"I..." Pete looked up as she spoke, hearing the uncertainty in her voice. He wasn't doing Maverick down, she really wasn't his type. Doug Ramsey, Peter Rasputin, that Fallon bloke - Maverick didn't fit the profile. Then again, neither did he. "It's none of your business."

"Good comeback," said Pete and looked over at Lydia. "As for you... I had Maverick shoot you so that he could separate you both. As much fun as it was to watch, it's not good to have you at each other's throats."

"Like you and Maverick?"

"Yeah, as I said before I'm really sorry about that, Davey. I'm going with the mind control theory. Everyone seems to suffer it of late."

"Actually it's more chemical based," said Siryn, standing in the doorway. "Guess you guys had fun while we were gone."

"Tell me you've got something that'll spring us?" said Pete, standing up and pleased to see her.

"Aye," she said. "Marcus is at the office getting' it together. Seems we were given something by Viper to increase attractiveness to each other and make us... amorous."

"You and Marcus?" said Pete, which he assumed what everyone else was thinking.

"No," said Terry. "But almost. He has incredible self control."

"He can teach it to us," said Maverick.

"That wasn't your fault either," said Terry. "Seems this stuff once it's been absorbed in to the blood makes people angry. Violent angry."

"Who'd you hit?" asked Kitty.

"Cyclops," admitted Siryn, going red. "I've kind of been kicked off the X-Men roster. They don't trust me, and I had to hack the systems to get the medical info and Cyclops came in..."

"Got pissy about it so you gave him a sonic KO?" said Pete, not trying to hide his smirk. "I bet that was fun to watch."

"Yeah, but it won't do the case for trusting me any good," said Siryn. "X-Force have been cut off from the X-Men, I'm afraid."

"No great loss," said Pete and Maverick at the same time.

"We can prove this and get us out?" asked Lydia. "I'd love to see a breakdown of the chemical."

"I'm on my way to the medlabs," said Terry. "With luck they can compare the bloodwork from when they treated your injuries with the readings we took at the Institute."

"So we have to sit tight," said Maverick and Terry shook her head.

"Longer than you think. Forge is out on a mission with Excalibur, and he's the only one who can get you out, seeing as how X-Force reports directly to the Director."

"Knew that would bite me in the arse at some point," said Pete.

"Thanks, Terry."

"No problem. Don't blame yourselves for what happened - it wasn't your fault."

"Yeah," said Pete as she walked away. "We just have to convince ourselves now."

Val Cooper sat in her office at the Commission on Superhuman Activities, wondering how long they could get away with this. Something was bound to go wrong and then they'd be in trouble. Emil Warton was the Director of the CSA and as such it was his call, but she was the Chairman of the Commission, as well Special Assistant to the National Security Advisor of the President of the United States, and they were lying to both men.

She had lied to them before, but this was one moment where she believed that they would be caught in the act and end up discrediting the CSA. After what had happened at SHIELD of late, that was the last thing they needed to happen. She picked up the telephone and put in a call to Warton.

"Emil. Val. About the situation. I want to put in a call to SHIELD. They're the only ones capable of taking down our rogue agent." She deliberately didn't use names because the lines might be being monitored. "We can trust Forge to get the job done and it'd look good in the interests of co-operation." She chewed the end of her pen as she listened to her boss tell her why they shouldn't involve an outside organisation for an internal matter.

"Yes, I understand that," said Val. "However the very remit of SHIELD means they do covert operations and this is a covert operation. I'll personally vet any agents Forge sends to help, because it's getting to be a problem. I've been reading the latest reports and sooner or later someone's going to figure out what we've done." Their rogue agent had been getting bolder and more brazen in every endeavour and he was beginning to look untouchable and the CSA name was being put in to disrepute.

"Yes I read that too. Emil, he's out of control and we don't have the resources to stop him. He's going great guns against the amateurs and such, we're going to have to use experts to take him down, once and for all." She had worked hard to try and get the mainstream superhuman forces to co-operate and on some level trust the

Commission on Superhuman Activities, but if he was left to continue with his actions... "Do I make the call?"

"Thank, Emil," She put the telephone down and surfed the contacts list and pulled up the SHIELD contacts, and looked under Forge, but his name wasn't there and then she looked under Fury. His name was still there and Forge's hadn't been replaced yet and she sighed and punched the number.

"Yes, this is Val Cooper at Commission on Superhuman Activities. I'd like to speak with Director Forge."

"I have a question," said Pete as he laid down on the bunk provided, breaking the silence they had settled in to once more.

"What?" asked Maverick, his voice irritable.

"Dunno if you can help, to be honest," said Pete. "Kitty might. Terry possibly. Cyclops' eye blasts."

"Optic blasts."

"Yeah, them. They're blocked by ruby quartz and that's what his visor and glasses are made of, right?"

"Yeah. This better not be a where do we get ruby quartz from question," sighed Kitty, thinking back to the dumb questions he used to ask when they were dating, as if thoughts occurred to him so he figured he'd voice them anyway.

"Nah," said Pete. "You wear glasses, right?"

"Yeah," said Kitty, unsure of where this was going.

"Well, your gigs..."

"Gigs?" asked Lydia.

"British slang." Maverick's answer was less irritable than his earlier 'what?' Pete noticed. It must be just him, then.

"Figures," said Lydia.

"Anyway," said Pete, ignoring the other two. "Your glasses rest on

your nose and ears and sort of hang on your face."

"Yeah, you wear shades, so you're not unfamiliar with the concept," said Kitty.

"So there's a gap between your lenses - the glass - and your eyes."

"So what?" said Kitty.

"Well, it stands to reason Cyclops glasses and visor are the same - so how come his optic blasts are always on when he opens his eyes? Surely his eyes are open and the blasts come out and are blocked by the ruby quartz but the gap means he should always be firing his optic blasts."

"What are you on about?" asked Lydia.

"I'm just saying Cyclops might have been faking it for years, all this 'I can't control my powers' malarkey. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to keep his eyes open. He opens his eyes, the blasts fire, there's a gap. QED."

"We so need to get out of here," said Maverick.

"What about when he sleeps?" said Pete, following his own train of thought.

"He wears special goggles," said Kitty. "I've seen him at breakfast wearing them."

"He wear them all the time?" asked Pete.

"Here we go again," said Lydia.

"Only when he's asleep," said Kitty.

"So when's doing Jean Grey, he wear his normal glasses? Because that'd be weird..." Lydia bit back a chuckle as Kitty looked at the ceiling.

"To think I might have married you," she said. "Jean probably keeps his optic blasts in check with her powers."

"Must be a lousy lover then," said Pete.

"Why say that?" asked Maverick, trying hard to figure out where

Pete was going with this one as well.

"Well telekinesis takes concentration and half the job with sex is the excitement. She gets excited, loses concentration, he pulverises her head with an optic blast. So he mustn't be very good at it."

"Scott has a son," said Kitty, incredulously.

"And I can conduct an orchestra at a concert, and while they'll play the tune it doesn't mean I'm any good at it."

"He probably wears the goggles then."

"How much like Machine Man does he look then?" Maverick bit his lip, trying not to laugh. It wasn't that funny, it was just... He looked at Lydia who was also trying to keep from laughing as well, and they both lost it.

"Oh come one, guys, it's not funny," said Kitty.

"No it's not," giggled Lydia.

"I agree with her," said Maverick, chuckling as he spoke. Pete said nothing, just looked up at the ceiling and smiled. He was getting there slowly.

Colonel Nicholas Fury, Praetor of Hydra, was preparing the next Hydra onslaught against the planet, making it ready for the dominant rise of the forces of Hydra and the rule of Jacob Logan, the child who was now the Shadow King. Already the child was showing the signs of being the son of the father. He had a hirsute resistance to the cold, even though he was only a few days old.

He also showed his fathers recuperative possibilities as the marks from the injections and inoculations that the doctors had given the babe had faded to nothing. They had not conceived that he would already have a healing factor this early in age, but he did and they wondered what else the child would be capable of as he developed, other than speed, strength, heightened senses and unlimited psionic potential.

However that was not Fury's arena. He was a warrior, a fighter and if some people called his activities terrorism then so be it. He did not care, he was fighting for the greater good and he knew that he had

once embraced the other side as wholeheartedly as he had embraced Hydra. For years he had been fighting the wrong enemy and he'd never realised it, and he'd built the symbol of their fight against terror in something mythical.

SHIELD.

It had not been his creation and it was not the original incarnation of what it had once been, but he was the one man on the planet who knew the organisation best. Nobody else had served it as he had, nobody else knew the secrets of the Helicarrier. He was old but he had learnt much and he knew that he could turn their own systems against them whenever he so chose. He knew from their agent within SHIELD that the people were shaken by his defection, but that worked in the favour of Hydra and there was a greater symbol of potency that he could use to further demoralise the agents of SHIELD, the one secret that had been denied even to him.

The name of the first director of SHIELD, killed by Hydra at the conception of SHIELD. So swift and brutal had been the retaliation of SHIELD that all the records Hydra possessed on the mission had been lost and years of work had been unable to recover the data, and Fury had never seen the need to use the SHIELD records to try and find out. He would now, and then Hydra would steal the body of the first Director of SHIELD and then hunt down anyone who had been Director of SHIELD and convert them or kill them.

Fury had built SHIELD, he would destroy it.

"Forge!" said Terry as she waited outside the Director's office as Forge came down the corridor.

"Not now, Teresa," he said. She could see that he was tired and that whatever had happened in the Darkness Dimension had taken a toll on him.

"I'm sorry, Director," said Marcus as he appeared behind her. "This can't wait." Forge sighed.

"You'd better come in then," he said and they walked past Forge's secretary and he shook his head. "I'll take my messages later, Nancy." They went in and Forge sat down behind his desk as his two agents stood. "What's the problem?"

"X-Force are in the brig of the Helicarrier under the instruction of Pete Wisdom." Terry looked directly at him.

"Where's Wisdom?" said Forge, his shoulders sagging.

"He's with them," said Marcus. "He told security to take them all in."

"And you were over at Xavier's?" said Forge and Terry nodded.

"That's a story for later," she said. "However it appears that Viper has had a hand in the current predicament."

"Explain," said Forge and gestured to them to sit down, which they did.

"As you know, we were found by SHIELD in a trance state, brought about by the Shadow King," said Marcus. "It seems we were given a derivative of phenylethylamine"

"The love molecule," said Forge. "Oh I can see this is going to end badly already. Delayed action drug, undetectable by our medical people because it's already in the body. How did you find out about it?"

"We were at Xavier's when it affected us," said Marcus. "Ah managed to psionically knock Terry in to unconsciousness before we did anything, and Ah brought her round and we used the X-Men systems to find out what was wrong with us."

"Thank God," said Forge. "I know Sean would have had something to say on the matter." Terry bit back a comment that it wasn't really her father's business but Marcus was older than he was and it would have hurt him. "What happened here?"

"Well," said Terry, "Pete and Lydia were back on the Helicarrier after the incident at the bank..." Forge closed his eyes at the words incident because it usually meant insurance payouts would be required. "And Kitty and Dave were here as well. The respective couples got together and as they were leaving, Pete saw Kitty coming from David's quarters..."

"Oh no," said Forge.

"It get's worse, Ah'm afraid," said Marcus. "A side-effect of the drug is to make people angry. Violent angry and Wisdom and Maverick got in to a fight, which Kitty got involved with and so did Lydia and

it turned in to a brawl until Wisdom regained his sense and ended it, having them all locked up."

"No wonder Nancy wanted to give me my messages," said Forge. "This is as bad as anything I saw with X-Factor. You have the proof of this?"

"Right here," said Marcus, holding out a file, which Forge took.

"I'll spring them later," said Forge. "After I catch up a bit. While I know it wasn't their fault, some time to cool off will help them. Thank you." They turned and were walking out when Forge looked up. "What happened with your violent tendencies?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Let's just say we won't be welcome at the Xavier Institute anytime soon," said Terry and Forge sighed.

"You've been back two days if that," said Forge as he looked at the X-Force members but his comments were directed at Pete Wisdom. "Two days in which you've run riot."

"To be fair, I wouldn't say run. I kind of found it waiting for me."

"Damn it, Wisdom," said Forge waving pieces of paper in the air. "These are the bills for the damage you caused in the chase of the bank thieves."

"We caught the guy," said Pete. "Job well done."

"Espionage is usually done with a low profile, Wisdom. As a member of Black Air, I'm surprised you forgot that."

"If it wasn't for the petrol station it'd have been fine," said Pete.

"That's debatable, however your actions later to quell the brawl you started are commendable. I realise the fight wasn't entirely your fault, but you don't get a fire without a spark. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Pete. He regretted the comments he'd made, but then again he'd thought about them before. They were the arguments he'd had with himself when he'd broken up with Kitty all that time ago.

"Okay," said Forge. "Be more careful in the future. All of you." The

team stayed silent as the Director told them what was going on.

"First thing is, I've spoken with the X-Men. Cyclops is upset but I think he understands. However there is bad news. Rogue is dead, killed in a battle with the Apocalypse Dawn and there is a service tomorrow."

"They never said," said Terry.

"We've been asked not to attend," said Forge. "They feel our presence would make it something it isn't. I don't understand it and Storm and I spoke for a while, but it's done and decided."

"They can't do this," said Kitty. "We're part of the family."

"Not anymore," said Forge. "They don't see us as an official extension of the X family of teams."

"Would crashing a funeral be in bad taste?" asked Pete.

"Just a little," said Maverick. "We can send condolences and flowers and such?"

"Yes," said Forge. "That would be fine. However you'll be needed elsewhere, so attending won't be an issue."

"What do you need from us?" asked Pete.

"A two tier operation," said Forge. "Wisdom, you and Maverick and Kitty will report to the Commission on Superhuman Activities and meet with Val Cooper. They have a rogue agent on their hands, and would like our help catching him."

"Oh, the irony of that," said Lydia.

"Let's not go there," said Forge. "Lydia, yourself and Marcus and Terry will be involved in another quest. The first director of SHIELD was assassinated at the conception of the SHIELD program back in the day, killed by Hydra. Last night SHIELD files were hacked and documentation stolen as to find out where the body of this hero is."

"Hacked?" asked Kitty. "We need to sort out computer security."

"Get's better. We were hacked by Nick Fury. He used his codes to

get the information."

"Hydra going after the first Director," said Pete. "That's a cheery thought. We got to get there first?"

"Use the same documents Fury used and work out what you can. These papers have the highest clearance on them, and even I've only been allowed to glance at them. Your security rating for this mission will be on a par with the CIA director and the National Security Advisor, and the President wants this taking care of. He's already looking foolish over the loss of Fury, so..."

"Shame he doesn't feel foolish about the economy and stuff," said Lydia, taking the papers.

"There's terrorism afoot, agents, and it's up to you six to nip it in the bud," said Forge. "Godspeed, X-Force, and good luck."

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Issue #29

"THE SLEEPING GIANT"

by [David Wheatley](#)

[Pete Wisdom](#)

The man in the tuxedo stood on the landing and looked over the balcony to the party below. It was a birthday party of some kind and he enjoyed watching the people greet each other with their usual falseness, as it also gave him a chance to catch up with the so-called society people and he picked up a glass of champagne from one of the passing waiters. He'd much prefer a scotch to drink, but appearances were everything. He glanced at his watch, wondering how much time left he had before he met his date. About twenty minutes if he remembered the time right.

[Shadowcat](#)

He'd had to pull a favour or two to get the location and setting right, as he had a lot to make up for. The things that had happened of late gave him cause for concern. He could feel himself falling for her, very slowly but he knew it was happening and he shook his head. Then he went to looking a mirror and he adjusted the bow tie before surreptitiously checking the area and making his way upstairs, taking more or less the same route he'd used to get in as he wasn't exactly invited, but there was something in the building that needed seeing to, and it was kind of personal. Actually, it was very personal.

[Siryn](#)

[Maverick](#)

A score needed to be settled, and he'd make sure that they knew it was him who'd settled it.

"Excuse me," said a voice and he shook his head slightly. So much for being careful and sneaky.

"Yes?" he said turning on the attendant. Rule number one of a situation like this was that if you acted like you owned the place you

could usually blag your way out of it. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry, sir," said the attendant, chagrined and slightly taken aback by the tone and he knew that it had worked. "It's just that this is a restricted area. I'll have to ask you to make your way back down to the party." Or maybe not, he mused.

"What do you mean a restricted area. I was under the impression that it was an open house. Or is the invitation wrong?"

"I don't know," admitted the attendant. "Could I see the invite, Mr..."

"Wisdom. Peter Wisdom." Then he slugged the man, his fist connecting squarely with his unsuspecting opponent's jaw and the attendant spun and fell to the floor, knocking over a table as he fell. "So much for subtle," muttered Pete, thinking this had suddenly gone to hell. The next time he did this he was just going to kick in the front door and call the bastards out. "That's actually a good plan..." he said and he could see the attendant starting to get up and he knew that he was going to have to work hard to get to the person he wanted to speak to. The problem was his powers. Ever since the fight with the Katan, they'd been... wrong.

"Just like the old days," he muttered to himself, and booted the attendant in the gut, felling him again and went to work.

"You had be better be damn well joking."

"I'm not. If it wasn't for the crystal wave effect, I'd have been captured by X-Force."

"We are funding your little escapades to ensure that the super-hero community and the Commission for Superhuman Activities remain at odds with each other. If you cannot handle one group of mutants, then maybe we're backing the wrong man for the job. We can always replace you."

"I'm the only one who knows how the CSA works. I know their ins and outs, their rules, procedures and such. It's because we've been too successful that they've set SHIELD's per mutants on to us."

"Yes, but do not forget that we are part of the so-called super-human community as well."

"You were part of the community. Now, you're hell bent on..."

"Watch your mouth. You CAN always be replaced. Since the very beginning you and yours have been funded and supported by people like us. The name 'Sebastian Shaw' springs immediately to mind."

"Yes, and he ended up very dead. At the hand of one mutant, and I'm facing between three and six. They're not the usual foes. They've been trained and trained well. Wisdom by Black Air, Shadowcat and Siryn by Charles Xavier, Maverick by the Weapon X project. The others I'm not as familiar with, but they are formidable in their own right."

"Perhaps you have a point. Wisdom himself is vindictive and highly effective killing machine. I'll discuss it with my colleagues and, perhaps we shall send some... specialist equipment in to assist you. However if they get in your way again - eliminate them."

"Thank you."

"Thank me by doing what we're paying you to do." He closed down the channel and sighed. Perhaps taking on the rogue CSA man had been a mistake, but they needed to do what they could to keep the American's on the back foot and also ensure that Shinobi and his new Inner Circle could be clamped down on, should they wish it.

Joseph Chapman, Red and White King of the British Inner Circle, put down his glass of wine and prepared to go back to his party. His niece was 21 and the Hellfire Club was the best place to hold an exclusive event such as this one. He walked out of his office and in to the main meeting area of the Inner Circle and glanced at the monitors.

"What in heaven?" he said as he saw someone on the cameras, walking through the halls. The figure in the tux took out attendants, waiters, servants and anyone else who got in his way. Kicks, head butts, punches and back-punches were all being used to great effect as he causally walked through the building. "Enough of this," said Chapman and pressed the silent alarm to alert his men.

Whoever the fool was, he'd soon be taught a lesson about breaking in to the Hellfire Club. Then there was a thoom on the door. "How..." He looked back at the monitors and realised that the intruder was inside the outer chamber. There were very few people outside the HFC who even knew that there was another area behind a wall in that conference room, and whoever it was knew that the

wall was really are door as the kicks continued. The door splintered open. "You?" said Chapman.

"Hiya, Joey," said Pete. "Long time no see."

"You're a dead man, Wisdom." Chapman was furious.

"So you keep saying to me, and you've not killed me yet. Move and I'll put a hot knife through your nuts."

"Your debt..."

"Is so fucking paid," said Wisdom. "There's no debt. Not to SHIELD, not to Lydia, not to me."

"The files you sent to us..."

"You should have left it alone, Joe," said Wisdom, walking over the Red and White King. "When you grassed up Fury, you took away my good nature. Yeah, I owe you and yours for what we did to you back in the day, but you did what you did to get one over on me, even though I was dead."

"At least I'll still have the satisfaction of killing you."

"Yeah, well, you can try. You come after me or mine again, you threaten them or do anything that pisses me off, I'll be back and I'll exterminate you and your rat pack once and for all."

"You work for SHIELD, surely they won't sanction that."

"You see me in a uniform, Joe? This. Is. Personal."

The two men stood facing each other, their eyes locked on to each other, the hatred between the two men evident. Then Pete heard the sound of footsteps.

"Yes, it is," said Chapman, hearing it as well. "Checkmate, Wisdom, or will you kill everyone in the building?" Wisdom adjusted his tie.

"Let's find out," he said and brought his knee up to Chapman's crotch and Chapman fell to the floor clutching his injured groin. "Oh, that's for being rude to my bird. Diss her again and, well, use your imagination." Then he kicked him in the head and turned to see the guards coming for him.

Chapman was right, he couldn't use his hot knives because they were different to the type he'd used before, stronger somehow and he knew that he would kill anyone if he used them. Which meant he had to run instead. He knew that they wouldn't be able to use missile weapons, but they would have batons and other blunt objects so they could only use them if they caught him so off he went, followed by the mob and he knew they'd cut him off from the stairs and the way out.

"Oh hell," he said as he put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the little patch that Forge had issued to all SHIELD agents. It was some kind of communicator that apparently bonded itself to the skin and he put it on the back of his hand and pressed it. "Wisdom to Del Ruiz!" It was keyed to only certain members of the Directorate so he knew she'd get it.

"Pete! Where the hell are you!"

"Whitehall. I'm in trouble..."

"You said..."

"Can we do this later, babe, I need help."

"We're on our way," she said and killed the link as Peter raced up the stairs to find he was at a dead end.

"Oh, hell," he said again and he focused his hot knives on the door and the thing simply flew back under the attack. "I really have to get this seen to," he muttered as he went on the roof. He ran to the ledge and he paused a moment to catch his breath as he looked down. "No fire-escape? Damn, I've been in the States too long..." He looked up to the skies. Assuming that the guys got a jet they'd still be a couple of minutes before picking him up and there were a lot of very large blokes suddenly on the roof. "This isn't good..."

"How astute," said Chapman, appearing in front of them as they parted to let their master through, his voice a little ragged and one side of his face bruised to hell. "You've a choice - beaten to death or become a smear on the ground below. Either way, it's over."

Pete looked at them and then looked down below. He could use his hot knives to slow his descent, but that was before they punched through things instead of usually generating heat. The building over the road was too far to leap to, but it did have a flagpole sticking out. Maybe he could make that and hold on until the rest of X-Force

arrived.

"See you round, Joe," he said took a run and leapt from the roof and Chapman hurried over to see Wisdom reach for the flagpole, and just get his fingers to it before he began to fall.

"See you, Pete," the Red and White King said and the watched in amazement as Wisdom fired a hot knife, which shot from his finger, looped and hooked on to the flagpole, allowing Pete to somehow swing and retract the hot knife back in, pulling him up to the flagpole level. "That's... that's..."

"Yo, Joe, close your mouth, your jaw's hanging a bit," Pete taunted as he gave him the finger as a transport flew overhead and a ladder cam down to him.

"You're a dead man, Wisdom! A dead man!" Chapman shouted at the SHIELD agent as he climbed in to the craft.

"Making friends?" asked Terry as she helped him aboard.

"Nah, just renewing an acquaintance," said Pete, as he dusted himself down and then he looked over to the black haired woman who was standing there in a dark blue evening dress, hands on her hips, waiting for an explanation. "Hey, Lyd. You ready?"

"You're an asshole," she said. "I asked you not to do go there, to not start anything. I mean, is that the whole reason you tagged along with us to the UK to find Citizen V?"

"Course not," said Pete. "Wanted to show you my capital city. Granted, while I was here..."

"No, you damn well didn't have to," she said. "They messed us about, true, but there's no point, no need to antagonise the Hellfire Club..."

"Yes, there is," interrupted Pete. "I don't care what side Fury's on now, as far as I'm concerned they pushed him there. Our debts to them is cleared. I told them as much."

"What the hell was that thing with your powers though?" asked Marcus, calling from the pilot's chair to stop the debate before it got heated. "Your hot knives..."

"Not a clue," said Pete, whimsically. "Something's changed though."

I've more control and they're stronger, more solid. It's interesting, isn't it?" Then he looked out the window. "Set her down just here, thanks, Marcus. The lady and I have a date..." He offered his arm and Lydia shook her head.

"Why do I even like you?" she said, taking it as the craft set down just outside the National Theatre and the door opened.

"Must be my personality," he said as they walked down the ramp and in the direction of the London Eye, which was waiting for them to start a romantic trip around the wheel.

There was a knock at the door and Maverick opened it to see Kate standing there.

"Hi, Ki... Kate," he said. They'd not really spoken to each

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #32

"PARTIAL EXPLANATIONS"

by [David Wheatley](#)

X-Force.

Pete Wisdom

How that named goaded him, goaded him for many years since it was first created by the freedom fighter Cable, and he knew well enough that one man's freedom fighter was another man's terrorist. The Commission for Superhuman Activities had been formed with people like him in mind, specially appointed to operate under the direct command of the President of the United States and that has been charged with the task of supervising America's so-called "superhuman resources," or, in other words, American citizens possessing superhuman powers. Mutants were a high priority.

Shadowcat

X-Force were one of many groups who took on their role with a zealous disregard for anyone, and had done more to alert him to how ineffective the CSA had become than anyone else, because they could not stop them. From the battle with the Juggernaut, to the assassination attempt on Charles Xavier, to breaking Cyclops out of the SHIELD Helicarrier, they did what they did without a care for the consequences and other groups had followed suit, taking them as an example of what needed to be done.

Siryn

Maverick

The original X-Force was dead and gone, but this new one was more of a danger than it had ever been. It was sanctioned, it operated with the blessing of the law and it got away with murder. The destruction in Madripoor, the havoc created a few months back, the sheer lawlessness with which they operated as law enforcement agents... they were in essence everything he hated and what made it worse was they were state sponsored mutants. SHIELD was using them, in a vain effort to bring them good publicity. Even the new Director

was a mutant, though a well connected one.

He had never liked Forge. The arrogance of the man was masked by his humility, but he knew he was smarter than any of them in the room, and he could see it when he saw Forge's eyes. However his cleverness would be his undoing as now they had SHIELD technology to work with. The motorcycles that X-Force had brought with them would give him access to SHIELD in a way he had not gotten before. X-Force had made it possible and it gave him a measure of satisfaction. X-Force was as doomed to fail as the initiatives the CSA had put in place.

There had been many such projects - Freedom Force, Project Wideawake, X-Factor, but none of them had ever truly worked because they had never been allowed to use the full extent of their powers due to the lack of leadership from the Commander in Chief. The Mutant Registration Act had been a significant win, but that had been all it was. They were to take direct action against any super-human that was a threat to national security, but it had become limited, full of bureaucracy, and he had had enough. Operation Zero: Tolerance had done more damage to the CSA than any other organisation - formed to do what the CSA had been unable to do, it had gone too far and Senator Robert Kelly had shut them down, and so the CSA's operational procedures had been curbed so that it never happened again.

America needed clearing of these attitudes and those who supported them, and then an actual state they could make the system work.. The Avengers were useless, their rota and politics changed as often as the wind and the Fantastic Four were more a nuisance than a help. However there was a long way to go and he had done more in the last few months than the CSA had done in the years since Zero: Tolerance, but they'd been too good and they'd attracted attention. They were too good at what they did and the CSA were starting to look bad forcing them to go to SHIELD and they'd sent in Pete Wisdom and his strike-force and Wisdom was like a dog with a bone - he just wouldn't leave it alone. When the CSA had been first set up, he had met him, and the encounter had left everyone involved with a bad taste in their mouths. X-Force was what Wisdom had made them and he had created a monster.

He had watched as Wisdom had crashed the building and killed anyone he saw standing, swiftly followed by Shadowcat and Maverick of X-Force. His disregard for life was astonishing but that was nothing new. His body count numbered in to the hundreds. Wisdom was nothing more than a murderer with a badge, but his

sledgehammer techniques were effective against those who were unprepared. The last time they'd met, they'd almost taken him out because he'd under-estimated them, but this time he knew what to expect and he was ready, though how they found him he would have to find out. That surprise had cost him lives but he had reacted instantly and watched as X-Force were attacked by the reinforcements and they almost had them, but then they vanished from the monitors and he slammed his fist down on the console. Wisdom had momentarily eluded him, but he would not get far.

"We have them, sir," said a voice as he watched the monitors. "They're in sector eight, in one of the storage rooms."

"Take them out," he said. "Ensure that this time they don't escape."

"Yes sir," said the voice.

Wisdom had been the rookie agent they had sent over to assist in setting up Project Wideawake, with his senior partner Scratch.. Shaw Industries had been involved in the construction of the sentinels, but Black Air had provided invaluable data at the start up, however they had an ulterior motive - they didn't want the American's to go too far in what they did and there were flaws that had allowed a security breach. Someone had hacked in and caused the sentinels to malfunction and the CSA had been forced to use the auto-destruct and the project was set back. It had been restated, but their were doubts in the minds of people and Robert Kelly had ensured that the mistakes that had been made before were not made again. Politics had meant that it had never lived to it's potential, but that was the story of the CSA all over.

Wisdom had ensured that the CSA had become limited and now he was free of their limits he had returned to haunt him. Even the threat on his sister's life didn't deter him, and he knew that Joseph Chapman had made a mistake in doing that. His pride had gotten injured when Wisdom had threatened him in the British Hellfire Club and Chapman had ordered him to deal with Wisdom in whatever way they could. If Wisdom ever found out, there would be real hellfire at the club, but that was his problem now. X-Force was trapped in their lair, three against three hundred and this time X-Force would not defeat him. He would look Wisdom in the eye before he gained a measure of revenge that had been years in the making. It galled him that they had ever met in the first place, but the National Security Advisors had needed help in creating an organisation like the CSA and the British had experience in that. Black Air were the only group that they could deal with and they

had given them documents, information and other things culled from the other official groups that the British used.

First there was STRIKE, which was supposedly like SHIELD, but it had been destroyed by the crime lord Vixen, infiltrated from within and broken as an example to what could happen if an organisation became complacent, but it had been a lesson that had never been learnt as from the ashes of that organisation had come Black Air, a more sinister organisation whose exact origins were unknown, but it had been formed in a time when the United Kingdom had been under siege and there were no organisations to deal with it. The reasons behind the siege were classified, and those who knew the full story were few and far between, as somehow a mass amnesia had been placed across the country as a side-effect of what had happened. Even his current sponsors could not tell him what had happened and they had been there at the time.

There were two groups formed by the UK government- the Resources Control Executive and Weird Happenings Organisation, in an effort to deal with the issue of super-humans and mysterious goings on. While WHO was the public agency seen to be dealing with superhuman forces, RCX was a far more secretive agency but Black Air had been formed first and outside of any political concerns, backed by a mystery sponsor, and were as beyond secret as the RCX were beyond public. In fact Black Air had operatives in both organisations and contributed to the downfall of both.

With the fall of Alys Dane Stuart, the Weird Happenings Organisation was discredited - thanks to the machinations of Black Air, and the RCX had absorbed them in to itself, and they had grown too big, too quickly and they saw an empire where there was none. The RCX had fallen because it went too far. They had taken on Excalibur before they were ready to do so, and they had been destroyed. WHO had returned, but they were never in control as Black Air had started to emerge in to the public domain, showing that they were the only credible alternative and they had the evidence to prove it. They had the backing of the Hellfire Club, they had helped the United States set up the CSA and they had enough power to become have global influence. But Black Air too had been undone. The Hellfire Club that had set them up failed them when they went too far, and it had brought them down.

Wisdom had been in that as well, starting to become a team-player in Xavier's ever expanding army. He had turned on Black Air and along with the other members of Excalibur they had taken down the Hellfire Club and Black Air. Ironically it had been that act that had

made all this possible, because the new Hellfire Club made sure that they were players in the great conflict as they had seen what rogue super-powers could do. Each of them had lost something to it and they wanted to make sure that it did not happen again, but even now they were all cursed through Wisdom. He was a plague on all their houses and he watched as the strike team surrounded the room they had trapped the SHIELD agents in and they opened the door, only to be met by three of their own. It caused them all to pause a moment and then he realised that it was a weapons locker and that they were X-Force.

"TAKE THEM DOWN!" he ordered, but before they could do anything X-Force attacked, one of them wielding a chainsaw and hacking away at the agents in the room, as the others fired energy weapons. The moment's pause gave them an advantage and they were taking it and he could see anger reflected in the image of his face in the camera. It meant he was going to have to make some hard choices but these were the things he was not afraid to do, things that his former superiors had been. He looked at the men in the corridor and pressed the armour commands, freezing them all in place. Wisdom and Maverick were also frozen, but Shadowcat phased herself free as Maverick used his powers to break free. However he was ready for that and gas filled the corridor and in moments they were down. That just left Wisdom, frozen and trapped in place. He could see the armour rocking as he tried to get free and he allowed himself a smile as he ordered the Mandroids in to take care of them. They operated on a different frequency to the guardsmen suits - just in case. He put his own suit on and went up to ensure that X-Force were taken in to custody.

He walked out of the main office and looked at the holding cells, where they had many captured meta-humans and room for many more. Far beneath the streets of New York, where nobody would ever consider looking - that was where they were. The complex proper extended for several miles and he walked out where his people were working on the rehabilitation of the prisoners. Mind control techniques, shock therapy and in extreme cases experimentation and surgery to ensure they did not use their abilities to a detrimental effect. The bleeding hearts had never allowed such things to happen before, but it needed to happen in progress was to be made. They would save the world one way or another and he took the elevator to the fourth level where X-Force had been subjected to a neutralisation shot, taking their powers down. Wisdom had already been shot with a bullet designed to do that and he looked at him, seeing his eyes through the armour.

"Take the mask off," he ordered and one of his people did so, releasing him, to see a sweat filled brow, and eyes of anger. "We meet again, Mr Wisdom. I said you were shoddy in your work."

"Don't count on it," said Wisdom. "I have you right where I want you."

"Of course you do," he answered with a chuckle. "Your friends are out, the rest of your team is 3,000 miles away, you're trapped in a suit of armour and you have no powers."

"Exactly as planned. Where's Romany?"

"Safe, for now," he said. "While such practises are distasteful, they were necessary. A shame you did not take the hint."

"You cut her finger off," said Wisdom. "When I get out of here, you're a dead man. You and everyone in this complex."

"Take him away for processing," he replied, shaking his head. "Let him rant his delusions in a cell. He might make an excellent porter."

"Yer mine, asshole!" cried Wisdom as a Mandroid took him away. "I'll fucking have you!" He watched as Wisdom was taken away and then he looked at the other two. At least he had some respect for these two - they were professionals.

"Their powers?"

"Neutralised, sir."

"Good," he answered. "I think they need to see exactly what the cause they're fighting is. I think that given a reason they'll join us, as our cause is fundamentally theirs. They just lack control."

"Is that wise, sir?" asked one of the lieutenants. "I know of them, they're loyal to a cause."

"So were you, Mr Jones," he said. "It didn't stop Forge from firing you."

"There'll be payback for that," said Gabe Jones, making sure they were bound properly before the medics administered something to wake them up.

"Mr North, Miss Pryde," said the leader as he looked at them as they

opened their eyes. "I'm sorry it has to be this way, but you've left me with very little choice."

"Where's Pete?" Pryde demanded.

"He's no concern," he answered. "Not now, not ever again. However you two are very important and I want to offer you a deal."

"Not a chance," said North. "Take your offer and stick it."

"Follow me," he said and two Mandroids pushed them forward and he escorted them down to the lower levels, where they went across the walkways. "As you can see, this facility is prepared to deal with any rebellious nature that you may have."

"This is barbaric," said North, fighting to restrain himself, remembering things like this from his days at Weapon X. "You cannot seriously think you'll get away with this?"

"We have for months," he replied. "Nobody's missed these people, and it's a lot more effective than the Vault. Anyone can just waltz in there..."

"What's the deal then?" asked Pryde. "We join you, or become test-subjects?"

"Something like that," he replied. "You see, with your help I would have access not only to SHIELD, but to the greatest single threat to the security of the planet - the X-Men."

"You want the X-Men?" said North.

"I want all mutants," he replied. "Tagged, numbered, whatever. I want to ensure that the clear and present danger they pose is nullified. Once the X-Men are taken and conditioned, then the rest of the mutant population of this country will follow suit. "

"You're mad," said Pryde. "You'll never get away with this."

"That is as it may be," he said, "however you'll forgive me if I try anyway. As I understand it, the X-Men are fragmented, and the only active team are those in Australia. Since the death of Xavier, they have fallen apart and the activities have become more violent, more protracted and I will see it end."

"It never ends," said North. "You'll not stop the tide, you can only

put measures in place to control the damage."

"Impossible is not a word I believe in," he said. "The situation will be contained. A decision?"

"You'll have to break us before we work for you," said North, defiantly.

"And I'll die before I betray my family," said Pryde.

"I see," he said. "In that case..." But before he could finish speaking Maverick shoulder charged the Mandroid covering Pryde, who moved towards him. He took a step back as she leapt up and kicked him sending him sprawling to the floor and his mask went hurtling away, but before she could do anything else the other Mandroid subdued her.

"Damn you," he said, picking himself up and he could see the shock on the SHIELD agent's faces as they saw him. "I don't know what's going on out there but you've seen too much. Kill them." North shook his head, as he heard the hum of the energy weapons powering up.

"I'll see you in Hell," but the rest of his comment was drowned out as alarms blared across the complex...

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #32

"PARTIAL EXPLANATIONS"

by [David Wheatley](#)

SHIELD.

[Pete Wisdom](#)

For most of his life he'd been a part of that organisation, it's Director, it's guiding light, it's most recognised son and now he knew that the once great organisation was nothing more than a sham, a puppet of the United Nations, in turn a puppet of America. The SHIELD of old stood for something, meant something special - the modern SHIELD had been too tied up with politics and protocol and had lost sight of what it used to be.

[Shadowcat](#)

There was an active force out there, an active force he supported because it was not the Nazi machine it had once been. It was a group dedicated to the preservation of order and control. It was Hydra and Ahmal Farouk was the man who had had revitalised it, made the organisation in to a world class power once more and he was glad to be associated with it. The Shadow King had been a villain, a man of unparalleled psionic might but time and numerous defeats had changed him. He knew that the ways of making a difference were not going to work. The Muir Isle event, the Psi-War, all of these things had been achieved by turning people against each other - now Farouk had realised there was a different way, that by turning man against man you created chaos and not order.

[Siryn](#)

[Maverick](#)

It was true that Hydra instilled fear and it's main goal was the deposition of the current democratic governments, but that was because these people were not acting in the best interests of the world. They had ceased to do that long ago and while the methodology was questionable, the means justified the ends. He was Nick Fury, and he would save the world by any means necessary

and to do that he would bring down SHIELD. He had built it up, he would destroy it and he knew he was the man to do it.

He'd accessed their files, he'd beat them to the punch each time they'd come in to conflict. Now he'd struck a significant blow in his mind by taking down the X-Force strike team, even though it was only half of them. However it was still a very powerful half, and he was feeling grateful that their leader Wisdom was not there as that would have made the fight a little more interesting as Wisdom was not a man who took prisoners. However he would deal with that the next time they met, right now he was after the one piece of unfinished business he had left at SHIELD - the identity of their first director, his predecessor. To find that body and claim it in the name of Hydra would be a huge psychological blow to the enemy and they would realise that nothing they had was safe.

Thanks to their inside man, Hydra had gained access to the systems and stolen all the SHIELD data on the man anyway. They had gone for more but Forge was a clever man and Fury and his accomplice had not been able to avoid him forever but he had gained enough to lead him to the United Kingdom, to track down Citizen V, sole survivor of the V Battalion and repository of the knowledge of the Penance Council and he had snatched her from under the noses of X-Force after giving them an overdue beating.

Her raiments had been stripped, leaving on her underwear so she could maintain a modicum of decency, yet be sufficiently embarrassed to be disturbed by his eyes on her semi-naked body. He made it a point not to look at her eyes, and to look at her exposed cleavage. There was nothing sexual in his observance of the cleft between her breasts - she was certainly an attractive young woman, but he wasn't affected by a pretty face.

Yet, she didn't know that and with her hands tied behind her back as they were her breasts were slightly pushed forwards, giving them a fuller look than they actually had. He smiled, as he watched her subtly shift uncomfortably, desperately wanting to say something but knowing that if she did it would be a sign that he had gotten to her and it was a battle of wills.

However he knew he had succeeded in doing what he wanted as sweat formed on her and her eyes moved ever so often in desperation at being trapped in here, bound and powerless against a man who had abducted her simply because he could. It filled her with memories of the past, and got to her even more. His gaze was something as well because she had been watched intently during her

trial because of her past associations. After five minutes or so of her squirming at his gaze he turned his eyes to the file before him.

"Dallas Riordan," he read from the notes. "Formerly the assistant to the Mayor of New York and liaison to the super-team the Thunderbolts. When they were revealed to be the former Masters of Evil, you were publicly pilloried and then invited by the V-Battalion to be the new Citizen V."

"And your point?" Riordan said, but Fury ignored her and continued.

"You were instructed to hunt the Thunderbolts down, but following a talk with Hawkeye you decided to give them the benefit of the doubt and see if they had truly reformed, but as you did so, the Crimson Cowl teleported you in to that armour and you were arrested and convicted of terrorism charges. You were broken out of by the V-Battalion and sent to hunt down Henry Gyrich, but quit and were on the run from the Battalion until recently, when they got involved in a battle with the Man-Beast which resulted in their demise."

"You know a lot about me," she said and Fury looked up, taking a moment to repeat his earlier mental torture then looked at her properly. SHIELD stood for Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage and Logistics Directorate, and before that it had been Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-enforcement Division. They were spies and they knew more about what was going on than the very public persona they had. It had been something he had been most proud of during his tenure that he had gathered all this intelligence.

"We know a lot about everyone, Miss Riordan. It'd surprise you how much information SHIELD actually has on everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest man. There are limits to the freedom of information principles, Citizen V." Everyone had secrets and it was SHIELD's job to find out what they were and he reminded her that she thought that way by having a secret identity of her own. She said nothing but looked down and Fury knew he'd scored a hit.

"Now about you. Your father is James Riordan, but you're the granddaughter of the original Citizen V, whose son was also Citizen V. The first was a man named John Watkins and his son was the product of his union with Paulette Brazee, who was smuggled to England during the war where the child was born. John Watkins Junior was the child and we think that Brazee was also Citizen V until he took over. The third John Watkins is in a coma in a private

hospital in Manchester, because he was Citizen V for a while but he got the hell beaten out of him during the whole fiasco with STRIKE some time ago." He got up and walked over to her, pacing around her. "So. That. Leaves. You. Dallas." He stressed her name as almost a whisper in to her left ear and smiled as she gave an involuntary shudder. "We've got a lot on you, but nothing that explains what's going on with ya. Care ta fill in the gaps?"

"You'll get nothing from me," she said, and Fury couldn't tell if it was defiance or she wasn't sure herself and he crossed his arms and looked at her, as she defiantly hissed "I fought off the V-Battalion, I'll fight of you as well."

"Not me," he said, retaking his seat and looking past her. "The young lady behind you though is a different matter." He watched as Dallas strained but nodded at the person who was waiting for their cue. "This is Tanya Gerine or, as she likes ta call herself, Tangerine. She's a telepath, pretty skilled in invasive techniques even at her age."

She wasn't too much older than thirteen, but she was powerful. The Shadow King had spotted her potential when he had amalgamated the ranks of the Apocalypse Dawn in to Hydra and he had sent her along at Fury's request. He knew that the information in her head would be planted deep so he needed a telepath and the Shadow King himself was busy elsewhere. Tangerine was from the United Kingdom so it wasn't too hard to put the pieces together.

"You'll get nothing from me," Riordan said.

"You'd think," said Fury and he watched as Tangerine placed her hand on her head and frowned as he watched. Dallas struggled against her bonds, trying to fight against the invasion of her mind and the raping of her memories. It was painful to observe, but some things were necessary. If co-operation was not easily forthcoming, then hard choices had to be made in order to get it, but Riordan was a fighter and he could see the blood start to trickle from her nose and ears as the psionic assault ravaged her and she suddenly spasmed, her body becoming as taut as it possibly could and then she relaxed and spoke in Tangerine's voice.

"I'm in."

"Good," said Fury, finding that a very distasteful process. "Is she subservient to you?"

"Yes. Her programming was strong, very strong but there's not a mental barrier I've met I cannot break through."

"Good," he said again and came over to look in Citizen V's eyes. He could see a light in there, and he got the sense that her real voice, her real mind was locked away, banging on the insides of her skull trying to get free. "Let's start with something easy - what is her connection to the Watkins' family?"

"There is no real connection between her and the Watkins' family. It is something that the V-Battalion planted in her head during the training programme to delude a brief telepathic scan."

"Very clever," said Fury, appreciating it as a fine piece of deception had been crafted and it had worked well until now, so well that not even Dallas Riordan was aware that she was not the grandchild of the original. She'd even come to the UK to live up to the reputation her alleged grandfather had laid down. "An in depth scan would be time consuming and not easy to pull off in a combat situation, plus it meant that she had credibility with the Thunderbolts. Very good. Now what does she know about the first director of SHIELD and Jeff Mace?"

"She knows nothing of Jeff Mace, other than he was formerly Captain America and he died of cancer. However her mind is blocking heavily. How... undamaged do you want her?"

"She's expendable," said Fury, considering it for a moment and making a decision. "Get what information you need from her. If she's left a mindless vegetable it saves us a job of disposing of her later." She was a loose end that he neither wanted or needed and while he didn't want to kill her, locking her away for the rest of her life and leaving her to starve was an option that did not sit with him. It would be a mercy to simply snap her neck and have done with it.

They'd find her body and chalk it up to another of those random killings the Brit's always had trouble solving. One of these days they'd set up some kind of FBI-esque agency. However if she was had her mind destroyed by the breaking of the final barrier, that would work as well. He saw Tangerine grip both sides of her head and watched as the young telepath ripped in to her mind with the subtly and finesse of a sledgehammer and Citizen V screamed in her own voice as the assault took place and then it suddenly stopped and her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

"Well?" said Fury, impatiently, but Tangerine didn't answer. "What's

goin' on?"

"She's a little tied up right now," said a voice in an Irish brogue and Fury shook his head, thinking that he'd made a very amateurish mistake. They must have put something on Citizen V before he took her and they'd used it to find the Hyrda cell and now X-Force were here and he turned to see Lydia Del Ruiz and Siryn standing there, with Marcus Raven in the background, a halo of red light around his head and he knew he was engaged with Tangerine in a psionic battle. Riordan was fine, just freed from the thrall of his agent and that was why she passed out. That just left the two X-Women.

"Round two, girls?" he asked.

"You're trapped in here, Nick," said Lydia. "You're not fast enough to alert your people before we take Dallas and you out of here." Fury weighed up the options in his mind, thinking that they were right that he couldn't take them this time because they weren't ready for him and he wasn't prepared, and he was pretty sure that Tangerine wasn't going to take Marcus on the best day of her life. He was powerful himself, having held Farouk at bay, and he'd been working on how to use his powers more effectively. He could see the gleam in Siryn's eye as she was itching for a bit of payback on her former boss, because she wasn't as loyal to him as Lydia had once been.

However there were some things that he knew were in his favour. First was that Lydia wasn't on top of her game because of the injury he'd given her earlier. He could see her eyes were slightly glazed and he knew that was something he could use. Plus he knew that if needed to call for help, Farouk would come to his aid, but he wanted to show that he still had what it took to get out of this situation. It wasn't going to be easy and then it came to him.

"I understand," he said and he looked at them. "Give up now, the Shadow King is aware of you and he will stop you." It was a moment's uncertainty on their part and that was all he needed. He couldn't raise the alarm, but he moved quickly, grabbing a gun from his arm holster and fired. They moved but he managed to strike Siryn, sending her to the floor from the impact, and that left Lydia but she already had her gun drawn and she fired, sending his gun from his hand. "Nice shot."

"I wasn't aiming for the gun," she said. "I wanted a shoulder wound."

"Either way," said Fury, sending out a mental distress call but he

found he couldn't and he saw Raven looking at him and smiling. Tangerine was obviously out of action and that meant he was in trouble now. Siryn was also on her feet now and he was at a loss as to how to get out of this, but he did have one last ace, something he had come across while he was watching the Hellfire Club after Wisdom's little party-piece the other day.

"I'll check V," said Siryn, going over to the young woman.

"Okay, Fury," said Lydia, and he had to admire the confidence in her voice, that she had taken charge of the situation. He'd liked her and seen the potential for her to be a future SHIELD Director and it was a shame they were now on opposite sides, but she was not one of the selected few, because she had limitations that were not needed as yet. "This is how it's going to go down. You'll cuff yourself and then HERMES will take us out of here to the Helicarrier, where you'll be treated."

"Treated? There's nothing wrong with me."

"You're not the man you used to be, Fury," she said. "We'll have you fixed."

"I'm not the man I was? I remember when you a cadet, Del Ruiz, fresh out of Interpol, joining SHIELD to make a bigger difference. I saw how much you played by the rules and how efficient and how much you had to prove. Remember how you asked me to transfer you to the Magneto Project that monitors the situation in Genosha so you could keep an eye on your father? I told you no, because you were too personally involved. I remember the anger and hatred in your eyes."

"I got over it," said Lydia. "I don't know what they did to you, Nick, but you'll get better."

"Lydia," said Marcus, "we've got company." Fury smiled realising that Farouk must have realised he'd lost contact with his agents and had deduced there was trouble and sent people in. It was a minor win and he knew that the SHIELD agents would never achieve their objectives in time. Then he saw Lydai raise her weapon again.

"Don't know how you did it, but you're not staying with them, Nick. I'll shoot you if I have to."

"Then shoot me, but you'll never find out who's behind the capture of Wisdom's sister." He played his ace card, and he knew that

Wisdom would be too focused on getting his sister back to bother with him and Hydra, which suited him fine as it met with the Shadow King's plans as well. "I'll let you know what's going on, once you've left. I can get a message to you. There are ways and means that you've no idea of." He could tell there was a psionic discussion going on and then Lydia put the gun down and Fury smiled.

"This isn't over," she said and she nodded to Siryn who had Citizen V, and in a moment they were all gone, just as his people came in. He sighed, not happy with the way things had gone, but satisfied. Tangerine would have the answer he wanted, when she recovered and they had Citizen V's suit and weapons, which could be used and adapted to their purposes later. However he always honoured his debts and he soon found a terminal to send a message to SHIELD that the people who were behind the abduction of Wisdom's sister could be found at the London branch of the Hellfire Club.

He watched the screen clear and he looked at himself in the reflection on the screen and lit up a cigar. Lydia was right - it wasn't over yet.

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Issue #33

"CRASHING DOWN"

by [David Wheatley](#)

Pete Wisdom

"Yer mine, asshole!" cried Wisdom as a Mandroid took him away.
"I'll fucking have you!"

"Shut ya mouth, mutie," said the Mandroid as it shoved him onwards towards where the processing room was. Fire was in Pete's eyes as they marched onwards. He wanted to comment something, he really did, but there was no point and he needed to figure a way out of this mess. His powers were gone, which meant there was little he could do and there was no way out of this armour, making him a virtual prisoner. The wheels they'd put under him to move him around were also annoying.

Shadowcat

"Jim," asked the guard as the Mandroid approached.

Siryn

"Tobe," said the man inside the Mandroid.

"What you got?" Tobe asked as he looked at Wisdom who glared back.

Maverick

"Wisdom, Peter. SHIELD Commander. Mutant. Boss wants him processed."

"Fine," said Tobe. "Rehab or reprogramming?"

"Reprogramming," said Jim. "He's too much of a threat."

"He needs to come lout of the armour," said Tobe. "You handle him if he gets antsy?"

"Fucking show you antsy, asshole," sneered Pete and Tobe slapped him and Pete felt blood in his mouth.

"Watch your mouth, mutie." Tobe wiped the blood on a towel and watched as the Mandroid armour charged its laser cutter and sliced the armour off of Wisdom, who flinched as the torch burnt in to him. He was fortunate that his SHIELD uniform took the brunt of the damage. Pete's eyes narrowed, wondering if he could do something to get out of this, but without his powers he was ineffective against a Mandroid's weapons, so he knew he had to bide his time.

"Cell 17 is ready," said Tobe as he fixed a binder around Pete's hands, keeping them behind his back and leaving him helpless. Jim shoved him and he walked forward, following Tobe who was waiting a shirt way away. Above them, Pete could see the Leader walking with Kate and David and he wondered what he was saying. They were walking on some kind of hardened glass, and it kept the sound to a bare minimum. Then he felt something, a voice in the back of his mind. Tobe was saying something, but Wisdom ignored that and listened.

Courtesy of the Shadow King, the voice said and Pete gave an involuntary shudder, not just at the voice and he stepped in to the cell.

"You get that, mutie?" asked Tobe.

"Oh yeah," said Wisdom. "I got that. Hey I get a cigarette? I'd hate to do this without nicotine. There's a pack in my pocket."

Jim and Tobe looked at each other. "Sure," Tobe said and took the packet and gave Pete one before he put the pack in to his own pocket.

"Hey!" said Pete, keeping the cigarette in his mouth as he spoke. "I want those back."

"Or you'll what?" laughed Jim and walked away, his footsteps thudding around as Tobe made the preparations for Wisdom's conditioning. Then he looked at Wisdom.

"Need a light?" he said with a sneer and Pete smiled.

"Nope," he said and the cigarette lit itself. His hands fired five hot knives slicing through his bonds and suddenly he was free.

"Shit!" said Tobe and hit the alarms, but it was too late and Pete kicked him in the back, the guard's spine breaking under the impact, and he fell to the floor.

"Tobe!" shouted Jim as he hurried back. "You hurt?"

"It's worse than that," said Pete, standing there. "He's dead, Jim."

"Oh fuck," said the Mandroid but there was nothing he could do and Pete struck hard and fast with his hot knives and the man fell dead at his feet, and Pete walked out of the cell as alarms blared. "Now, it's my turn." He looked up and he could see his friends and the guy he really wanted a chat with.

"I'll see you in Hell," Maverick said, as the two Mandroids powered up their weapons for an execution but the rest of his comment was drowned out as alarms blared across the complex. It was the distraction he needed and in one fluid motion he ducked, rolled and tangled his legs with the Mandroid's sending it careening in to the other Mandroid and the immediate threat was dealt with.

Face down he could see Pete, freed and dealing with a Mandroid of his own and he smiled, not knowing how the Brit had done it, but he'd done it anyway and Pete nodded, firing a hot knife put and through the glass walkway and Maverick was up and he could see that Shadowcat hadn't wasted anytime either.

She was free of her bonds, and Maverick could only watch as she fought, using the techniques taught to her by Logan to put the Mandroids out of commission. The X-Men trained their people well, he remembered and she'd managed to convince one of them to blast the other, and as that one re-aimed, he went in, charging at it. Kate went down, and it toppled over her and as Pete came up through the glass it went down through it.

"Three Mandroids in a minute," said Pete. "That was fun."

"We're not out of this yet," said Maverick. "We've no powers - yet."

"Great," said Pete. "And you let the leader go."

"Gyrich's not going far," said Maverick.

"Henry Peter Gyrich?" said Pete, the disbelief hanging in his words

and Maverick nodded. "Oh there is a God after all..."

"We're still stuck," said Shadowcat. "Without powers..."

"Be careful then," said Pete. "You're trained in stealth, so find a way out of here, get help and I'll meet up with you later."

"What are you going to do?" said Kate, looking at him.

"Create a diversion so you can get out," he said. He was going to find Gyrich and make good on his promise. "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"Just be careful," she said as the two of them started to move as Pete saw many other guards coming down to see what was going on. Gyrich could wait, Pete thought. The other two needed to get away first and he was the only one here who could sort that out for them. He was a trained killer - it was time to put the training to use.

"How is she doing?" Forge asked as he looked on the video communications screen at Lydia Del Ruiz, who was on the other side. It hadn't been too long since they'd been retrieved from the Hydra base with Citizen V, but Forge has been too busy to check in right away. There was a lot happening in the world that demanded the attention of the Director of SHIELD.

"Miss Riordan is doing fine," she said. "Her injuries were more mental scarring than actual physical harm, and Marcus has worked hard to repair the damage that was done." She looked away from the screen a moment. "I'm sorry we couldn't retrieve Colonel Fury, sir. The odds..."

"Don't worry," said Forge, with a slight nod to reassure her. "We'll find Nick again, I've no doubt, though I am having his claim about the Hellfire Club checked in to. As I understand it, Joseph Chapman used to date Romany Wisdom."

"Have we heard back from Pete or the others yet?" It was more than a concern for her colleagues in her voice when she mentioned the ubiquitous Mr Wisdom, or so it seemed to Forge

"No," he answered, shaking his head. "With all the commotion at the EU, I've not had a chance to deal with that yet."

"You don't need us to scramble over and assist?" asked Lydia. "With HERMES back online..."

"No," said Forge, shaking his head. "Excalibur are dealing with it, I want you to keep an eye on the Hellfire Club. They messed us up over Fury and if they're plaguing us again with the rogue CSA squad, I want their heads."

"Understood," said Lydia and Forge signed off, leaving the three X-Force members standing around.

"You think the others are in trouble?" asked Siryn as she looked at the concern on Lydia's face. Lydia considered it. The three of them were experienced field operatives. Shadowcat was one of Xavier's finest, Maverick was a veteran of black ops, and Wisdom was a survivor. Yet they were going against how highly defended opposition and the fact they'd heard nothing wasn't good.

"I think someone is," she said, finally. "I just have a feeling... a feeling we're being played somehow, and I'm not sure I like it that much. Marcus, how's Dallas?"

"She's tired, but she's also ready to talk. The telepath Tangerine did some serious damage to the mental blocks in her head and she knows what it is we're after. She knows who the First Director was." Lydia and Siryn looked at each other. This was what they had been after, and finally it had paid off. "We're going to have to play it slowly though," he said. "What we're about to learn about the formation of SHIELD... Ah'd say there's not more than twenty people on the planet who know."

"Then we're going to join a very elite club," said Lydia. "After you, my friend." Marcus nodded and led the way.

"The XSE," he said as he read the newspaper in front of him. "Brian Braddock, and SHIELD." He had gone to great lengths to obtain and publish the proposal that he had found in Braddock's office, and yet Braddock had managed to pull a rabbit out of a hat and show it was his idea and not SHIELD's. Or more specifically the idea of Forge.

Plus there were many things going on out there. SHIELD were active in the UK through X-Force, there was a battle at the European Commission Headquarters in Brussels and by all account Braddock was there, and the Hellfire Club were at work, plotting and

scheming to be more than they could. It was interesting that the Inner Circle were actually people they had destroyed before now. Black Air was alive and well, and though it appeared to the world as though they had been destroyed, they were waiting for the chance to strike.

Sir James Jaspers put his newspaper down.

"This will not do," he said as he turned to his associate. "I think it's time we made our influence felt once more." His associate nodded, not wanting to get on the wrong side of Sir James. They had once thought that they could control him. They had been wrong.

In truth, they should never have brought him back to life...

"Hi," said Dallas as the SHIELD agents arrived. "Thank you."

"Just doing our job, Miss Riordan," said Lydia, as she sat down. "How are you feeling?"

"Lousy," she said. "I... I'm not comfortable talking about it, just yet."

"I understand," said Lydia.

"There's a Leonard Samson being brought in by SHIELD for you," said Siryn. "He's a psychologist."

"The one who treated Bruce Banner," said Dallas. "I didn't realise I was that bad." She gave a thin smile and they could see she was joking.

"He's very discreet," said Siryn, thinking that was a contradiction in terms seeing as how Samson was more or less a muscle bound giant with green hair. "He's treated a number of super-humans, the Hulk being his most prolific case."

"Dallas," said Marcus. "We need to know what you've remembered. Ah know we're askin' a lot of you, but it's important."

"I know," she said, turning away slightly. "We know that in it's current incarnation the SHIELD Director has absolute authority and reports to the United Nations? In the old days, SHIELD's Level One Public Director reported to the Executive Board of Directors, who in

turn reported to the founders."

"We know this," said Siryn, gently. "We even know who they are, thanks to the documentation from the Deltite Affair and the United Nations paperwork from when they disbanded SHIELD and reformed it a little later."

"What you don't know," said Dallas, "is that the first Director of SHIELD was not Jim but John Watkins II. The third Citizen V."

"Citizen V?" said Siryn. "That's... that's..."

"Incredible," said Lydia. "The records seem to indicate that it was Jeff Mac, who as the Patriot was part of the All-Star Squadron, who formed the Penance Council of the V-Battalion."

"The Vanguard, the V-Battalion headquarters was built during his life time and it was that which brought him to the attention of the Executive Board. They figured a man like that could be the person to combat Hydra, seeing as how Citizen V was renowned for fighting Nazi's such as Zemo and Strucker."

"They used Mace's name, though?" asked Marcus.

"Yes," she said. "He was dying of cancer, and after the death of Watkins, the Council knew that he was the one they could use to protect the name of Citizen V, with the permission of the Executive Directors, and as they knew who the first Director was..."

"They had no choice," said Siryn. "Classy."

"Where is his body now?" asked Marcus.

"His ashes were scattered at his home town of Harlow in Kent," Dallas said. "I believe there is a park there with a lake he used to visit as a child with his mother."

"There is no body," said Lydia. "Nothing for Hydra to take and display."

"Stalemate," said Marcus. "We can't protect anything and neither can they steal what isn't there."

"They'll come after me again though," said Dallas. "They want to know what I know." Lydia nodded.

"We'll think of something," she said, already getting an idea in mind. "I promise." The other two looked at each other, seeing her thoughts through the mind-link set up by Marcus. It would work, but it just depended on how far Forge was prepared to go.

Maverick and Shadowcat moved through the complex, trying not to be seen or caught. Kate was a ninja, trained by Ogun and Logan to hide in plain sight and she was using everything they had taught her to good effect. North was a trained espionage agent, taking on operations that few would know of or even hear about because they were that covert and he too knew how to be careful when he had to be.

Neither of them had their powers just yet, which meant that they had to work twice as hard as normal, because they had no super-human edge to aid them this time, but from all accounts they might not need it because when Pete Wisdom said he was going to cause a distraction, he caused a distraction and after ten minutes or so they had managed to get to where their motorcycles were.

"I'll keep an eye out," said David as he did a quick sweep. "You get on to SHIELD, get the troops down here."

"On it," said Kate as she went to work. The bikes weren't too badly damaged and the rogue CSA technicians hadn't done anything she couldn't fix, given time. It was just uncertain as to how much they had and she knew that though it wouldn't take long for the cavalry to arrive, it still could be too late.

"Agent Pryde to SHIELD, come in SHIELD," she said as she flipped the comm switch. "Agent Pryde to SHIELD, come in SHIELD," she said a little more urgently but was met only with a static reply. "I'm getting nothing, Mav," she said.

"Keep trying," he said, then a moment later he muttered 'uh oh'.

"What?" Kate asked.

He looked at her. "Company," he replied. "I'm guessing someone heard the message. We could really do with a distress beacon..."

"Of course," said Kate, slapping her forehead. "Gimme a sec." She took the front panel of the computerised dash and started to play

with wires.

"Hurry!" hissed Maverick, with some urgency, as he could see the guardsmen checking each door before they moved to the next and they were getting closer.

"Almost there," she murmured and she made the final connections of two wires and a high pitched squeal went out.

"What the hell?" asked Maverick, looking at her. So much for subtlety.

"It's being broadcast on all main SHIELD frequencies," she said. "They'll find us now."

"So will they," said North. "Here come the Guardsmen!"

"Hold them off," she said, looking at the tech devices. "I've an idea..."

Pete Wisdom was having fun.

Mandroids, guardsmen and others were coming at him and he was dispatching them all with hot knives, fighting techniques and other things, as the prisoners cheered him on, watching as he battled his way through. He couldn't hear them but he knew what he saw and it drove him on.

The hot knives were being used at a frightening intensity and if it wasn't for the fact they were more or less solid now, he wouldn't have been having as much luck as he was. However because they were solid and he had control over them, he was doing things with his powers he'd never imagined before.

"GYRICH! I'M COMING FOR YOU GYRICH!"

People were dying and all he wanted to do was get his hands on Gyrich and find out where his sister was and if he had to beat that pencil-necked geek to a bloody pulp to get his answers he would do. He knew a lot of ways to get information from people without killing them, and he generally didn't get much use to put those talents in to operation. That would change very soon.

"YOU'RE NEXT, GYRICH!"

Explosions rocked the place as he put hot knives in to canisters and power packs and other vital systems and it became very clear that the mutant was doing whatever he could to destroy the place. He generally fired them from his hands but they were manifesting from all over his body and being hurled in many directions to cause as much damage as humanly possible and soon there were very few coming after him, all afraid of what he would do.

Wisdom was bloodied, scorched and bruised by the time he was done. His SHIELD uniform was in tatters and he simply walked on with a grim determination, still calling out Gyrich's name. Wherever the bespectacled traitor was, he would soon be... then a sonic burst hit, him sending him flying back and Wisdom shook his head, trying to clear his vision.

"This is mine!" Gyrich shouted as he advanced, a sound blaster in his hand. "I built this place and I will not see some freak tear it apart." He blasted Pete again, and Wisdom cried out in pain. "This thing was capable of taking down Venom or any of those blasted symbiotes that Spider-Man unleashed, so just imagine what it's doing to you right now!" Pete struggled, not hearing what was being said and trying to make his eyes focus on Gyrich as pain coursed through him and he could see Gyrich was suddenly having difficulties. He seemed to be shaking the gun as if some unknown force was interfering in what he wanted it to do. Pete pulled himself together and shakily got to his feet.

"Gonna... fuck... you up," he said firing hot knives wildly, but they didn't connect, and Gyrich threw the gun to the floor.

"That piercing sound!" he said, covering his ears.

"Good God," cried Maverick, covering his ears. "What did you do?"

"Patched the base's communications in to the SHIELD ones," shouted Kate, as they made their way to the surface. "And amplified it."

It took them a few minutes, but they managed to make their way unmolested and outside they managed to hear properly again.

"I think it might have been too much," she said as she lay on the

floor and closed her eyes, thinking she needed an icepack after that.

"You think?" gasped Maverick. "I feel so dizzy..."

"Just imagine what it's like down there," said Kate with a smile.

"What about Pete?" said Maverick, fighting the urge to vomit. "He's still down there..."

"Oh hell," she said. "I forgot..."

Gyrich was on his knees and Pete dropped to the floor.

"Where's... my... sister..." he said, but Gyrich couldn't hear anything above the sound that was piercing his very soul and even with his hands over his ears he wasn't able to block it out, so whatever the SHIELD agent was saying it was over.

Inside the cells, the prisoners just looked, unable to hear the full effect of the sound thanks to the sound proofing of the cells. Pete could see that the rogue agents were all down, all in pain and he knew that he needed to get safe before it got to him too. In truth he was beginning to feel something ringing in his ears and he'd thought it was an effect of the sonic weapon but it was something else and he knew he couldn't take much more of this. He fired his hot-knives down and fell through the floor which broke easily enough and he landed quite hard, and he had to crawl to an empty cell and he closed the door.

The pounding in his head stopped, but he knew that he wasn't going to get what he wanted now. He guessed that the noise was something to do with Maverick and Shadowcat, which meant help was on the way and once Gyrich and his buddies were in custody, they'd be out of his reach. He'd lost the chance of finding his sister, and the masterminds behind this.

He'd failed, he'd tried so hard, but he'd failed and he let go of his emotions and began to weep at the lost chance, and waited for the rescue squads to arrive.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #34

"WAR OF THE ELEMENTS" Part 1: Collision Course

by [David Wheatley](#)

Pete Wisdom

"Hey, babe," said Pete as he walked down the ramp of the SHIELD transport and Lydia smiled, as the two of them kissed. He'd spent the last few days with the rest of the team recovering, after their adventure with the rogue CSA. The British contingent of the team had done what they could to ensure that Dallas Riordan was safe and now the team was reunited at last.

"You still look like hell," she said, looking at him.

Shadowcat

"I've had better weeks," the X-Force commander said with a shrug, as he took off his shades, and she could see the tiredness in his eyes. "Hear you had fun without me."

"Fury took us down with ease," said Marcus as he looked at him. "It wasn't one of our finest moments."

Siryn

"Have we got anything from Gyrich?" asked Siryn.

Maverick

"No," said Maverick. "Bastard's keeping his mouth shut, and the CSA whisked him away pretty damn quick after SHIELD took him and his people away." Which was probably a good thing in the long run, because Pete wanted a piece of him so very badly.

"Good job Fury told you about the Hellfire Club," said Kate as she came down behind the others. "We'd have been left with nothing otherwise."

"Yeah," said Pete, thinking that it had been a weight off his mind

when they'd found out. He'd thought he'd lost her and it had almost destroyed him inside. Now he was angry that they had put him through that and he was in a serious mood to hit things. "Son of a bitch."

"Chapman?" said Lydia, and Pete nodded. "What's the history between you and the Hellfire Club? You mentioned it before and Brian said it was something to do with Black Air."

"Black Air did more than you know as an organisation. They took the most righteous of heroes and broke them," said Pete as he led them from the sun drenched roof of SHIELD-UK to a conference room a few floors down. "That was why they did what they did with Excalibur. They had plans for the UK."

"Plans?" said Kate as they entered the room and sat down. "What kind of plans?"

"A while back, some stuff went down," said Pete, ignoring the question. "A man called James Jaspers became Prime Minister, and gave orders that all super-heroes were to be rounded up and put in to concentration camps. STRIKE, the British version of SHIELD, did this and quite effectively. Jaspers was quite mad, but he also had the power to warp reality."

"Why didn't we hear about this?" asked Maverick. "This is all new. There was some kind of terrorist thing..."

"No," said Pete. "That was Jaspers. When reality is yours to control, you can do whatever you like, make people see whatever you like. Jaspers was defeated by a combination of Captain Britain, Captain UK and the Fury, and it was because they got lucky. Reality has a way of healing and it fixed itself up. The terrorist story stuck, and there's not many who know the truth. Few even remember the name Sir James Jaspers."

"I do," said Kate. "He was the lead prosecutor in the Magneto trials. But if he was dead..."

"Oh he was dead, alright," said Pete. "That wasn't the original Jaspers. He's a clone, created by Black Air, but they kind of made a mistake."

"They cloned someone who could alter reality," said Siryn. "No 'kind of' about it."

"Oh, he doesn't have his powers," said Pete. "Or at least, he doesn't have the ability to access them, but he did have something and he became the head of Black Air and his original ideal stuck."

"To contain super-humans," said Marcus and Pete nodded.

"The Magneto trials were a test of their creation," said Pete. "To see how many people noticed it was actually him. Nobody did. Not Brian, not Betsy, not anyone involved in those days and they knew that there was something about him, a blind spot. They simply couldn't see him as the man they had known."

"So what does this have to do with the plans for the UK and the Hellfire Club?" asked Kate.

"The Black Air remit was to control the heroes, to ensure they worked for them and if they couldn't to take them down," said Brian. "I was assigned to Excalibur to ensure their co-operation, after they had taken out a family of super-humans."

"Who?"

"A family called Destine," said Pete.

"They met the X-Men," said Kate. "How long after that?"

"Quite soon. That was another reason I was assigned to Excalibur. To make sure you didn't get involved. Course by that time, I was already having my doubts, but it was too late to save them. They didn't get them all, and a few escaped. One of which was Samantha Hasard."

"What else did you stop us doing?" Shadowcat said as she looked at him and Pete shook his head.

"That was it, Kit. After that came Dream Nails, and that was that. "

"What about the other members of the Hellfire Club?" asked Lydia. "That's the Blue and White Queen."

"Let's see the Fugue, the Red and White Queen. Formerly of Gena-Sys, she was one of the last members of the Tektos strike team, before Black Air went in and shut Gena-Sys down. That was something I was in on and that I enjoyed. They put up one hell of a fight, but in the end it was futile. When Black Air do something, they don't do half-measures, and what Gena-Sys were doing was

plain wrong, even by Black Air standards."

"What about the former Union Jack, Joseph Chapman?" said Marcus. "Lydia has a distaste for him, and he seems to hate you as well."

"He will," said Pete with a sigh. "He used to date Romany and he never did like me that much. Liked me even less when I kicked the crap out of him and Scratch smashed his hands with a sledgehammer. Took him months to recover, but even with his stamina and strength he was never going to be Union Jack again. He should have joined Black Air."

"You seem almost proud," said Siryn.

"I was at the time. He was faster and stronger than he and I took him down. He's never forgiven me for it. Plus I always figured he had it coming. Never liked him."

"Which leaves Vortigen Walker."

"Just Vortigen, really," said Pete. "He was one of the Proud Walkers, one of Merlyn's agents from Otherworld, one of the beings that was able to create the pathways between Earth and Otherworld. He fought alongside Brian and the Black Knight against Necromon and the Evil Walkers, but it shattered the pathways between Otherworld and Earth, and Vortigen became the last of the Walkers, the last druid. He was supposed to be in New Camelot, but I remember that he became bored of not having a kingdom of his own and went to see if he could help the world of man."

"What happened to him?" asked Maverick.

"They killed his wolf, broke his staff of power and basically hounded him until he was a broken shell of a man," said Pete. "It was... an intense campaign and they outnumbered him."

"That's sadistic," said Kate.

"Don't I know it," admitted Pete. "There are things Black Air have done, things you should never learn of."

"So how did they come to be the Hellfire Club?" asked Lydia. "As I understood it, Excalibur crushed the British version."

"Black Air was soundly thrashed, but they weren't defeated," said

Pete. "Chapman approached Shinobi Shaw to build the Hellfire Club and Shinobi agreed, thinking he could control this lot, but then Sebastian returned and the UK lot were left to their own devices. Chapman took advantage and gathered the Inner Circle as a direct counter to the remnant of Black Air, and to get the upper hand by whatever means possible."

"How do you know that?" asked Marcus.

"I worked for them for a little while, while I was dating Samantha." He looked at Kate who was in shock at all the revelations. "After I left Excalibur."

"So what now?" she asked.

"It seems they've become as big a threat as Black Air," said Lydia. "They are dangerous, manipulative and what they were backing the rogue CSA."

"They've got my sister, and they've screwed SHIELD over," said Pete. "What happens now? We take down the Hellfire Club and get Romany back."

"Cordelia, always a pleasure to my American counterparts." Joseph Chapman looked at the woman on the other end of the videophone.

"Shinobi's dead."

"Of course he is," said Chapman, shaking his head. "I won't believe it until I see his body burned to ash."

"We have it on camera," the White Queen said.

"Like we have the death of his father the first few times," said Chapman. "This is a terrible ruse on the part of the US Inner Circle."

"It's no ruse," snapped Cordelia Frost. "Bishop..."

"Ah," said Chapman. "Now if you'd said that in the first place. I warned Shinobi that messing with him would have consequences."

"As did your little escapade with the Commission. They have Gyrich."

"I know," said Chapman, his face darkening. "I should never have let the fool take charge. I knew he couldn't handle SHIELD."

"So we all make mistakes, Joseph. Will you be attending the funeral?"

"No," said Chapman. "I've better things to do than that."

"Well, I just thought I'd let you know," said Frost and signed off. Chapman closed his eyes. Shinobi, dead? Their little game of one-upmanship over? It was all so dull, however he knew that it would not stay that way for long. His spies had heard that there were rumblings of trouble in the distance. He knew X-Force had gathered in the UK after taking on both Hydra and the rogue CSA and he knew that Wisdom would be looking for his sister. Sooner or later they would be coming here and he stepped outside to brief the rest of the Inner Circle.

Trouble was on it's way and they needed to be ready.

The knock at the door roused Worcester and he hurried to the main entrance.

"May I help you?" he asked as he looked at the two people standing there. He knew them; they had been here before and while he would like nothing better than to slam the door on them, that was not the correct way of doing things.

"Nope," said Wisdom. "Get out of my way. Official SHIELD business."

"Do you have a warrant?" asked Worcester. He knew that SHIELD had protocols to follow as well as other law agencies. Wisdom looked at Agent Del Ruiz and then turned back to Worcester.

"Warrant? Just here." He grabbed Worcester and slammed his head against the door post. "Here's... my... warrant." Worcester staggered and slumped to the floor in a heap.

"Wait for Forge to give us the go, I said," Lydia muttered.

"They know we're coming," said Wisdom as he stepped over Worcester. "Why wait?" Lydia shook her head as they stepped

through.

"This is too easy," she said as they looked around the empty hallway.

"Yeah it is," said Pete. "Come out, come out wherever you are." Four Hellfire Club agents came out. "Four of you? That's it?"

"I'm insulted," said Lydia looking at him.

"Terminate mutant intruders," said one of them and the two of them shed their normal forms.

"Prime Sentinels," said Pete, looking at Lydia as they did so. "Now that's more like it." Then they dived out of the way as the four sentinels went to work. Pete fired a hot knife at one and then the other and though the first was struck through its head, the other seemed to absorb the energy.

"Energy signature registered and adapted," it said.

"I hate these guys," said Pete, knowing he couldn't take a sentinel without his powers. "Lyd..."

"On it," said Lydia and the Shadow leapt at the other Prime Sentinel and started exchanging blows with it. Her powers were at their peak thanks to the sunshine of earlier and that left Pete with the Hellfire goons, who had been content to let the Sentinels deal with it. Now they were in the mood, and they produced electrostatic shock batons and they came forward.

Pete wasn't a trained martial artist, he wasn't skilled with weapons but he was good at fighting. He knew how to hurt people and he did it well and the first one came to him and Pete moved past the baton, grabbed the guy and raised his knee on to the arm which gave a satisfying crack, and at the same time the second came in, but Pete twisted the second goon in to him and the baton struck home, leaving it one on one.

The man cracked his knuckles and threw a punch which Pete dodged, but he didn't miss the uppercut that followed it and knocked him to the floor, but Pete had taken harder shots than that in his time and he kicked out at the other guy's legs and knocked him to the floor. Then Pete aimed a shot at the guys crotch and the guy was out of the fight. Then there was a satisfying crack as Lydia snapped the

neck of the Prime Sentinel and it went limp.

"Think there's anymore?" asked Lydia.

"Yup," said Pete. "This was just the beginning. I wonder how the others are doing?"

"I said two sentinels wouldn't be enough," said Fugue as they watched the monitors.

"Yes," said Chapman. "I know you did, and I said it was just phase one. The real question is where the other SHIELD agents are. Two against six was never going to be enough, I just wanted to get their powers neutralised, though Miss Del Ruiz does have style."

"She's mine," said Hasard. "I want her."

"You're still hung up on Wisdom," said Fugue with disdain and Samantha gave her a dark glare.

"And you're still annoyed he told you to sod off. And don't you dare try to manipulate my emotions again."

"What is it with him and women?" asked Chapman, softly. "He smokes, he drinks, he eats fried food like nothing else, he's arrogant, distant, crude..."

"What can I say, we go for the bad boy types," said Shadowcat.

"Aye," said Siryn. Maverick and Raven were also there and the Hellfire Club Inner Circle were trapped.

"Oh very good," said Chapman, impressed. "Phased through the building using Raven's telepathy to screen yourselves and your phasing disrupted the detection systems."

"Something like that," said Maverick. "Pete figured you'd be interested in the fight downstairs."

"Yes," said Chapman. "And I figured he'd pull something like this. He's very... predictable."

"Stand down," said a voice and Vortigen Walker stood behind them,

having entered with three Prime Sentinels.

~Pete, we're in trouble~ sent Raven.

~Be right with you~ came the reply.

"Telepathic signature detected. Neural lockdown in effect..." the Prime Sentinel spoke and it locked on to Raven in an attempt to shut down his psionics and Raven's eye's flashed red as the natural defences kicked in and a red halo appeared around the Prime Sentinel. The Sentinel tried to disengage but the kick it got from Marcus overloaded the neural networks in it's brain but he knew he had to keep the lock on them, or the Prime would recover and this trick would not work again, nor would any of the others that had been used.

"I can't hold him forever!" Marcus cried as soon as the halo appeared and X-Force exploded in to action. Shadowcat did a double back flip, phasing as she did so and passing through the Prime Sentinel, causing it to spark as it's electrical systems burnt out. The major weakness of the Primes was their size compared to the originals that had towered over them before. Now they were more of a personable size they could combated that little bit easier.

Maverick was also pretty good as his hands flared with bio-kinetic energy and he grabbed a hold of the sentinel, pushing his hand through it's chest and grabbing circuitry and ripping it out of the Prime which fell to the floor.

"They really don't make these like they used to," he said as he looked at Chapman who clapped his hands.

"Three Prime's in under sixty seconds," he said. "Very good."

"When SHIELD rounded them up, we did a little work no them," said Lydia standing in the doorway. "It's easier when you know what you're doing." Her gun was pointed at the back of Walker's head. "Marcus, go help Pete find Romany." Raven nodded and headed out to help their commander.

Chapman took a moment. So Wisdom had gone after Romany, and he knew this place almost as well as anyone else. There were four of them and four SHIELD agents, so the odds were even. Except they were not the Inner Circle for nothing and without a word being said, the Lords Cardinal fought back.

Vortigen may have been taken down and diminished but was not without his powers. Though they were not what they were he was still a druid and he cast a simple illusion to alter the gun for a moment. It was only a solution, but it was enough to make Lydia gasp in surprise and that moment's distraction allowed him to plough his elbow in to her and sending her winded to the floor, and for the moment out of the fight as she grabbed her chest.

A stream of metal formed from Hasard and fired towards Siryn, who hadn't expected it and it speared her through the shoulder and pinned her to the wall, another stream of metal coming at her breast and Siryn looked at her, wondering if she was fast enough to take the Queen down before she was speared through the heart. At the same moment Chapman leapt the distance between himself and Maverick and wrestled the man to the floor and Maverick was surprised at the strength of the man as well as his grip.

"MAVERICK!" called Shadowcat as it happened then noticed Siryn and realised she was alone. Very alone. Her friends had been defeated and suddenly Kate felt as if she were 13, being hunted once more by the Hellfire Club as they sought to add her to their ranks, and this time there were no X-Men to save her. "NO!" she cried and dived through the floor.

"Damn," said Fugue as she looked at the space where she had been. "Her mental defences are very strong. Luckily the distraction of the others let me break through."

"Find Wisdom!" Chapman said as he pinned Maverick down and North couldn't get free. Fugue nodded and vanished through a trapdoor.

"Hell with this," said Maverick and fired a concentrated burst of kinetic fire at Chapman. It washed over him, burning away the clothing and flesh. Chapman let go of Maverick to protect himself and yet still managed to hold North in place, but the flesh burnt away around his hand, to reveal robotics. "Bionics," gasped Maverick.

"Have you any idea how much it costs to get these repaired?" said Chapman, bringing his hand down across Maverick's face.

"Like this?" said Maverick and grabbed the hand and twisted it, using his the strength given him from the blow to fend Chapman off and he pushed the hand up hearing the slight tear of metal and knowing he'd damaged it. Chapman pushed back, but the damage

left him weakened and North forced Chapman back, allowing him to get back on his feet. Chapman reached for the other hand of Maverick and the two of them stood there grappling, wondering which of them would give first.

"Let him go!" said the Blue and White Queen, "or your colleague dies." Walker stood over Lydia and Maverick wondered what the hell to do. This Hellfire Club, while not as experienced as the other incarnations, had them pretty much sown up. Then there was a click.

"I was just thinking the same about your King," gasped Lydia, and a second gun was pointed up at Walker. It was small enough to fit in her palm, but it would make a very nice hole. "And if I see this as anything other than a gun, I'll pull the trigger that isn't there and see how real it is."

"Stalemate," said Maverick.

"Perhaps, not," a voice said, and they released each other, not sure who had spoken or who they were with, but both could see that Lydia was standing, as was Walker, both of them covered by several guards. "Consider yourselves all under arrest."

"Ro!" Wisdom called out as he headed for the lower levels of the Hellfire Club, to the catacombs where Margali Sarдоз had unleashed the Demon on to London. It was the best place to be. "ROMANY!"

"Stop!" called one of the goons who soon joined his comrades in arms as an unconscious body on the floor.

"Dammit, Ro, where are you?" he called.

~Pete~ he heard in his head.

~Marcus? Can you sense my sister down here?~

~No, but there's a lot of people entering the building. I can't get a distinct impression on any of them~

~I don't like the sound of this~ said Pete. ~Marcus...~ Suddenly pain went through his head and he knew that Marcus had just been taken out. "Oh, shit..." he said. People entering wasn't good.

"Hello, Peter," said a voice and Pete turned to see a familiar face and

he shook his head.

"Fugue..." he said. "Long time no see."

"I ought to kill you," she said, "but I've a much better idea," she said and Pete felt himself drawn to her. Her powers, she had to be tweaking his emotions, making him attracted to her.

"Are you kidding?" he said, trying to fight it as she came closer to him. "We don't have time for this..."

"I've wanted you for so long," she said, pulling down the zip of her dress and letting the material fall to the floor. "And I know you want me."

"I know this isn't real," he said, but he couldn't help it. He wanted her so badly. "I'll kill you for this," he said and he grabbed her in a passionate embrace and she pulled him down to the floor.

Outside, Kate gasped for air and shook her head. She'd panicked, panicked like she hadn't done in years and she was ashamed of herself. She'd been trained by Xavier, by Logan, by SHIELD, trained not to give in to panic and fear but she'd done so in a moment.

"Idiot," she said as she shook it off. Whatever had got to her had passed now, so it had to be Fugue who had done that to her. Then the side street was flooded with light and she ducked inside a wall to cover herself.

"They're not here," she heard a voice say.

"We got the rest though," said another. "Wisdom, Pryde and Fugue won't get far. SHIELD-UK's covered, WHO is covered and there's nowhere else for them to turn. Take the others to Wonderland." The voices faded away and Kate risked looking outside to see that both X-Force and the Inner Circle were being taken away and she gasped as she saw the insignias.

They'd been captured by Black Air.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #35

"WAR OF THE ELEMENTS" Part 2: Echoes and Shadows

by [David Wheatley](#)

"Well, well, well," said a voice and Fugue and Wisdom looked up from their lovemaking.

Pete Wisdom

"Damn it," growled the naked Red and White Queen. She'd been so close to getting what she wanted

"Oh, thank Christ," said Wisdom, who couldn't free himself from what was happening to him. Then he realised he knew the voice. "Oh, hell..."

Shadowcat

"Between a rock and... a hard place?" chuckled the Black Air agent named Darcy, who stood there, his gun pointed at them. "Do your trousers up, Petey." Pete made as if to do as Darcy told him, but he fired a hot knife instead and Darcy simply waved and it dissipated. "Not quick enough, Pete." He looked at Fugue who looked decidedly dissatisfied. "Which is unusual for you."

Siryn

"Get stuffed, Darce," said Pete. "It always a toss up between you and Scratch as to who I hated most. Still you always were second best."

Maverick

"So what happens now?" said Lady Fugue as she grabbed her dress from the floor. "I take it you are Black Air."

"Yeah, he is," said Pete. "And this happens now." A hot knife manifested itself and plunged through her head and out the other side. Lady Fugue didn't have time to make a sound before she hit the floor dead.

"Now that was stupid," said Darcy, amazed at what he'd just seen.
"You'll pay for that."

"I always do," muttered Pete. "Lead the way."

"Anything else?" said Darcy, his tone dripping sarcasm.

"Yeah," said Pete looking at his crotch and a shiver went up his spine at how he'd been used. "Can you get me some bleach? I have the need to disinfect something..."

Shadowcat was on her own in the UK. It had been a very long time since she'd been here and so much had changed.

She, Kurt and Peter had left Excalibur after Brian and Meggan's wedding to rejoin the X-Men and soon after that it had all gone so wrong. Kurt now worked for the Vatican, Colossus had died in battle as part of Exodus' team of Exiles and she had joined SHIELD. Xavier was gone, the X-Men were a shade of their former selves and it all seemed so wrong. London had once had a homely feel to it and now there was nowhere that truly felt like home to her.

X-Force and the Hellfire Club had been taken by Black Air, and she was the only one of them to escape. Now she needed help and there was nowhere to go. She had seen the reports of the battle in Brussels and she knew Brian and Meggan were in no shape to help her. She had no means of contacting either SHIELD or the Weird Happenings Organisation and without them she couldn't get help from Muir. Any lesser agent would balk under this kind of pressure, but Kate Pryde was different.

She had done and seen things that most SHIELD agents never would. She'd been trained to survive by the best there was and she had used those skills time and again and she would do so again. The trouble was where to go. She knew where was being watched and she also knew that Black Air had a long reach. Who could she turn to, what one person was there in London that Black Air would never think of her to contact. She smiled as the answer came to her and she hoped he hadn't changed his number...

David North struggled against the chains that held him suspended in the air. His clothing had been removed, his technology stripped and

he only had one good eye for the moment which irritated him because he had forgotten how much of a bind it was. He also knew his powers had been inhibited because otherwise he would have been out of here. His arms ached as well, as he'd been hanging here a while and he knew it was all part of the system.

He had been captured before and he'd been in similar situations to this but each time he'd known what he'd been taken for. This time he wasn't so sure. It seemed Black Air had a grudge against X-Force for a reason of some sort and they'd just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time, and then a door opened.

"Ah, Mr North. Or do you prefer Mr Nord?" Maverick didn't answer, thinking he was giving this person nothing. "Yes, we rather thought that this might be your answer." Maverick couldn't see the person talking to him in the gloom but he could tell it was a man and he was now sitting down. "No matter, I'm not really here for the conversational aspect of your company."

Maverick shook his head, thinking this was what he had expected. Torture him for information.

"Despite what you may think, Mr North, we have no desire to learn the secret of SHIELD, Weapon X or any other organisation you might have an association with. Rest assured we have agents all over the globe, agents who provide us with details as to all sorts of events. For example, we have this."

Maverick heard a click and a thin beam of light came from behind him, projecting an image. Isabel Ferguson, his friend and supplier of his armour, weapons and information before he joined SHIELD was being held with a gun to her head.

"God, no," Maverick whispered, knowing what this was.

"Yes, a very unfortunate incident," the man said. "We were lucky to get this footage from the Illuminati after Wolverine had finished with the agents on site."

"Please don't hurt her," she was saying, and Maverick knew it was in reference to Maddie, her little girl. He knew what was coming as he and Elena had spoken before he'd come to the UK, after the mission for the CSA. He steeled himself.

"You'll never know," said the gunman and shot her in the head.

Maverick flinched as he watched her head simply explode. Seeing was not the same as knowing.

"There it is," the man said and Maverick felt pain.

"This is an interesting thing," said the voice. "A alien virus that reacts to stress by destroying flesh. It's called the Blood Eagle. We used it some time ago on your colleagues Mr Wisdom, and he showed us what it could do. Not quite what we expected however we have refined it since, and now we have an opening."

"So you are here to kill me," Maverick muttered.

"Yes, and I'm guessing you really want to know why but telling you would be no fun... Now, what else do we have? The break up of you and Elena..."

Lydia Del Ruiz opened her eyes. She barely remembered what had happened to her, but she knew the rest of X-Force should be about somewhere and then it came back to her. They had been captured by Black Air and she looked about. She had been taken out of her SHIELD uniform and she was in an orange jumpsuit and she was shackled to a bench. The hum of engine motors told her she was flying, but where was she headed.

"At last," said a woman's voice and Lydia looked up. "You're awake. Didn't think the jab would keep you out this long."

"Do I know you?" Lydia asked, trying to break free.

"No," she replied, "and that'll do you no good. Inhibitor jab at the same time we tranquilized you. Your powers are gone, so straining at the shackles will just break your wrists. I'm Sari St Hubbins, I work for Black Air, which has an irony to it, but I failed 'em, now I'm stuck here."

"What do you want with me?"

"Me? Nothing, luv," she said and Lydia could tell she was one of the more degenerate members of Black Air. "We're taking you home."

"Home," said Lydia and she felt her blood run cold. "You mean..."

"Genosha, yeah. Seems there's one or two people who'd like to speak

to you about your dad." Lydia could still remember the images in her head when the Dragon Lord had tried to break them, the things they had done to her in Genosha while she had been on trial for crimes against mutancy. It still had an effect even after all this time. "Guess you're remembering Diego Casseas. Yeah, we know all about Madriport."

"How?"

"There's precious little they don't know," St Hubbins said. "That's why they sent me with you. Your Pete's current tart. I'm his ex." Lydia shook her head.

"How many's he been with?"

"Oh, he puts himself about a bit," said St Hubbins. "Always has. No loyalty, none at all... oh, look this should be interesting." She turned the television up

"Jose Del Ruiz," the announcer said, "styled the spiritual soul of Genosha has been arrested by mutants loyal to Magneto. Del Ruiz has for some time been opposed to the actions of Magneto, and is seen by many observers as the best and only alternative to Magneto's reign of the island. However his actions and words have been viewed as treasonous and warrants were placed for his arrest after the Magistrate Riots..."

"Guess they won't be needing you to help find him after all," said St Hubbins with a smile. "But you'll be able to keep him company in his prison cell. Assuming he lives that long..."

Lydia glared at the woman, but her thoughts were on her father. She had wanted to hear about him for so long and with so little information from Genosha it had been hard to find out. This was not what she wanted to hear, but she would not show tears, not in front of this bitch.

Marcus Raven's head rolled with the punch, but that was more through luck than judgement.

For the last few hours they had simply come in and started striking him with fists, beating him with sticks, sending electricity through his body and then leaving him to recover for a few moments before it began again. They said nothing, asking no questions, and without

his powers he couldn't tell why they were doing it other than to cause him pain and distress.

They were masters of inflicting pain and his body was wracked from the latest assault and he knew it was almost over and that eventually he would have a chance to rest. It was the not knowing that got to him. For years he had always had a sense of what people wanted, what was being said behind his back, the lies that were being told to him.

It had made him good at his job at the FBI, and he had one of the best records on the force, until the bastards had got rid of him. He had always kept his gifts a secret, but he had known, his boss had known. Marcus shook his head.

Why was he thinking of his days at the FBI now? After all this time, why was the image of Michael Gow, former Deputy Director entering his head. It had to be something Black Air were doing, something they could do without his powers to protect him against any mental assaults and the beatings were keeping him disorientated enough to not focus on the things being put in his head.

That made sense, and so did the idea they had underestimated his natural mental strength. He'd lived a lot longer than most other people, seen things and lived through wars. He had stared down Charles Xavier and turned him down. He maybe a novice in the use of his powers but he was not a novice in life and they would not break him. He was aware of what they were doing, he was just unsure of why they were doing it. What were they trying to do? Had Black Air been responsible for his outing as a mutant, for putting him in a situation where he had been forced to quit his job?

Did Gow have a connection to Black Air. Was Gow behind all this? What was the motivation? He would find out and stop whatever Black Air meant to do. He would figure it out.

Teresa Cassidy screamed in pain as the lasers sliced in to her. There was no use in being brave about this, there were thin beams of light burning in to her skin, dissecting pieces of her body and all the while she could hear the doctors talking about how marvellous these nanites in her body were, and they had damaged her to see what the limits of Sinister's experiments were.

She remembered being brought in, gagged, bound and her powers

shut down so there was nothing she could do to escape from her bonds. They had stripped her of her clothing and fastened her to the table with cords so tight they almost cut off her circulation. Then they had shaved her head, and drawn diagrams over her body to prepare for the procedures they were going to do. She could hear them talking about as if they were choosing which type of syrup to have in their latte and it terrified her all the more because she was nothing more a lab experiment.

No, she was less than that, having no more value outside of what her body could tell them than a piece of meat and once they had learnt all they could they would dispose of her like any other piece of biological waste. In between experiments she could hear them discussing whether or not the nanites would prolong her death in the furnace, at what speed could they regenerate tissues that were being turned to ash. The sound dampening field around her muted her screams so that they could not hear her cries, but she could hear every word they were saying and she knew there was no rescue for her, because they spoke of the other members of X-Force and what had happened to them.

They had bored holes in her teeth with the lasers, intensified the light so she had been blinded, extracted tissues from her ovaries and other painful and intense operations. Now they were giving her a mastectomy to see how long it would take her to regrow her right breast. She could feel the hands touching her removing the now defunct tissues and but no tears came from her eyes.

They were waiting to see if her tear ducts would regrow before her breast did.

"LEAVE THEM ALONE!" Pete shouted as he watched his friends being tortured, abused and experimented on. "THIS IS NOTHING TO DO WITH THEM!"

"On the contrary," said Sir James Jaspers as he looked at Wisdom. "It has everything to do with them. They're your family, your friends. After your betrayal of Black Air, again and again, we put out a contract on you and Excalibur, or as they were at the time. However the assassins were thwarted and by the time we were ready to strike again, you had left the group and then Excalibur disbanded shortly afterwards. It seemed a much better idea to let you simply fade away, another old super hero who'd had his day and his time

was over."

"I warned you then that if you came after my mates, I'd take you down," said Wisdom.

"An idle threat, and we both know it," Jaspers said. "We've been developing ways and methods to contain you and your kind for years. Dream Nails was only the start, as well you know."

"This from Mad Jim?" sneered Pete. "Mad Jim Jaspers, reality warping freak of nature who was killed by the Fury and resurrected by the idiots of Black Air?"

"Mad Jim is gone," Jaspers said, fury in his eyes. "While I may not be the original Jaspers, everything he was is abhorrent to me. His methods were crude and pathetic and he allowed himself to be defeated. I may not have his powers, but rest assured, I do have power enough..." Pete could see the sparkle in his eyes and he knew that in there somewhere, Mad Jim Jaspers was trying to get out again.

"Gone, yeah, right."

"You try and goad me, Wisdom, and this will not do," Jaspers said, pressing a button on his hand held device. "I had thought that your viewing of what will be the slow and painful deaths of X-Force would break you, but I see we'll have to try something else."

"The Hellfire Tossers? I've no love for them."

"Oh, they were a loose end, and you know how I hate loose ends," Jaspers said and Romany was brought in to the room.

"RO!" said Pete

"Pete!" she said, but the two of them were separated from each other.

"Touch my sister, I will FUCKING have you!" Pete shouted at Jaspers

"How touching," Jaspers said and looked to one of his men. "Turn up the heat in here. Make it about 40 Celsius. That should be enough."

"What are you doing, you twisted freak?" said Wisdom, as Jaspers

walked over to Romany. "I told you what I'd do if you touched her..."

"And I believe you," said Jaspers. "Without powers, I truly believe you would escape your handcuffs, come over here and strangle me if I so much as laid a hand on her. However, I don't have to touch her..." His eyes crackled with energy as he looked at Pete and Romany cried out as if in pain.

"LEAVE HER ALONE!" Pete shouted but his words fell on deaf ears.

"Pete?" he heard her say, her voice sounding wrong, all tinny and distorted and Jaspers stepped aside back. "It hurts, Pete."

"I may not have my original powers, but I do have power enough," he said and he revealed that Romany Wisdom was now a living statue of ice.

"No," said Pete.

"I will break your spirit, Wisdom," Jaspers said as he walked towards the door. "She'll melt away to nothing before your eyes, she'll die screaming your name and you'll do nothing but watch her become a pool of water and eventually evaporate to nothing."

"This is nothing to do with them," Pete said, imploring Jaspers to stop this.

"They're involved with you in this, now they pay the price." Then Jaspers was gone and all Pete could hear was his sister.

"Peter? I can't see you? Are you still there? Peter? Pete? Please, Peter?"

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #36

"WAR OF THE ELEMENTS" Epilogue: Final Betrayal

by [David Wheatley](#)

"I can't believe it," said Forge as he got in to the car outside Braddock Manor. "After everything that's happened, that they're gone."

Pete Wisdom

"I know," said Maverick, shaking his head. "I mean, even after we found them, I always felt that they were alive."

Shadowcat

"Tell me about it," said Forge. "I looked at them and... but the doctors confirmed it, the scans confirmed it and we're sure they were the real ones, especially after the last time. There were no other bodies in there, and there was no way out of Wonderland any other way." Forge sighed. "I hate this part of the job."

Siry

"We're almost ready," said Teresa, coming down the stairs towards the car and the two of them looked at her. She was dressed in black, just as they were but there was a way she was walking that showed she wasn't properly recovered from her ordeal at the hands of Black Air.

Maverick

Forge shook his head. Her hands were still shaking slightly and he knew that what had happened to her had scarred her in ways they'd not been able to touch yet. They had Doc Samson in the UK, working with Dallas Riordan. Maybe they should get him to speak with Siryn as well. The main thing they wanted to do was make sure she didn't start drinking as a way to deal with the stress. Brian has been speaking with her, keeping an eye on things and for that Forge was grateful.

This was the hardest knock X-Force had taken, and it was going to be all he could do to stop the team from falling apart..

"Have we heard from Xavier's?" Forge asked.

"No," she said, "but Brian's been speaking with Betsy. Seems things have been going on in Australia, and she's gone blonde again with her powers what they used to be, and Angel's got his feather back."

"Did they mention the whole thing with the Church of Humanity?" asked Forge, thinking of the paperwork that had come through.

"No," said Teresa and Forge nodded. He didn't think it would come up, but he had hoped. He'd have to put a call in to Angel Inc. later on, but first there was a funeral to attend. "We're picking up Lydia from Pete's place?" Siryn asked.

"Yes," said Maverick. "She feels... comfortable there. I can relate." She slipped her hand in to his.

"How are you holding up?" she said.

"I've lost people I've cared about before," said Maverick. "I killed my wife, years ago, before Team X. She was a Russian spy and she betrayed me, and we argued, she came at me with a knife and I shot her, killing her and our unborn child as well."

"My God," said Teresa. Forge stayed silent. He knew this story from the SHIELD files.

"It broke me, and I became a freedom fighter. I was branded a traitor, and the CIA pulled me in to be part of Team X," North continued. "I survived that, I'll survive this."

"Did you love her?" Siryn asked.

"My wife? Yes"

"No," said Teresa. "I meant Kate."

"I think I did, yes." He looked out of the window. "I really think I did."

"Kurt just phoned," said Marcus as he came down to them car. "He's ready."

"He's got the dispensation to officiate at the ceremony," Forge said, thinking that he must have called in a favour of some kind.

Kurt Wagner, the former X-Man Nightcrawler and now special agent for the Vatican. He had been a minister in New Jersey before heading to Rome, and while he was not a full priest he still had the ability to conduct services and he has spoken with the Church to see if he could perform this one. He would have liked to have done the ceremony for Kate as well in the States, but she was Jewish and as such her ceremony was something he was not quite familiar with.

Her body was being shipped to the States during this ceremony and this would be just for Pete Wisdom and his sister Romany. Pete's father would be there as well, and as Brian and Meggan came down the stairs, Forge nodded to them and Brian came over as Meggan got in to the second car.

"Omega send their regards," he said. "They'll do what they can to be there for Kitty, but they're still sorting things out from the battle with the Church to get here for Pete. That and they didn't really know him, so..."

"Understood," said Forge. "Let's head over to Pete's place and get Lydia." Brian nodded and he and Marcus headed over to join Meggan and then the cars headed off from Braddock Manor to the outskirts of London where the last member of X-Force was waiting.

"They are gathering," she said and the man smiled, as he checked the weapons, especially the gun that had been crafted especially for this mission. "With the media presence that is surrounding Braddock since his identity was revealed, it should be quite public."

He nodded at her, hearing what was being said. "How's it supposed to go again? This weapon will do it?"

"The weapon you've been given is powerful enough to light a whole city if needed." He smiled, being no stranger to super weapons such as this.

"Just like the Scorpio Key," he said.

"More or less. A hefty jolt of electricity will work."

"It won't kill them?" he asked and a dark cloud descended around

them as the familiar presence of the Shadow King entered.

"Everything has been planned down to the last detail, Colonel. We have been assured that it will not. After all, we do need them alive."

"Since they thwarted us with the details of John Watkin's death, this will make the payback perfect."

"I want Grey for this," he replied. "Back up in case of resistance. His first proper mission, shall we say?"

"You are in charge of our forces," the Shadow King said, as Viper nodded. "Take the boy, Colonel. Take the boy and humiliate SHIELD as much as possible."

Nick Fury smiled.

"It'll be a pleasure."

Lydia Del Ruiz looked at herself in the mirror and took a deep breath. Yes, the room had the taste of stale smoke and liquor, but it was fairly obvious that Pete hadn't lived here in a very long time, and she looked back on the past, thinking of the first time she had come here, at the request of Nick Fury to bring him in. She and Agent Cooper had arrived thinking what kind of a man lived in a hole like this.

When he'd answered the door, they'd gotten their answer. He was not unattractive and his rugged looks stirred her, but the smoke and the liquor on his breath, not to mention his attitude, told them that he was a bum. Lydia had been less than impressed and Agent Cooper had done the introduction piece and she'd looked at the man to see what exactly the Director wanted with him, and had been unable to decipher it.

As a detective, it concerned her that she couldn't figure it out and it annoyed her that she was distracted from the considerations by the way he had checked her out as they had travelled to the Helicarrier. It offended her, but at the same time she had also felt pleased that he had noticed her, however it confirmed her opinion that he was not SHIELD material. Over time she had learnt exactly what Fury had seen in him, why he wanted him in SHIELD and why he was needed to lead X-Force.

At first Lydia had considered him boorish, arrogant and with no respect, but she had seen past the visage he had portrayed when he had been in hospital with her. He had lacked the strength to play the role he had set up and the attractiveness she had felt at the moment of their first meeting had intensified as she realised the kind of man he truly was. He did what he had to do, regardless of the cost to himself, and he had paid many a price in his life, but still he came back.

She had come to realise she loved him, and he loved her - even if it had taken a potion from Viper to get them to admit to it. Their feelings had been brought to the fore, and though the moments they had spent together were special, they had come close to sex, but had never made love. It wasn't that they didn't want to, but Pete couldn't, his experiences with the Shadow King rendering him impotent. He had gotten over it, but they had agreed to get to know each other better first and they had been on several dates and there was no doubt how much they loved each other and now...

Now he was gone, killed trying to save his sister. Trying and failing and this time it wasn't faked. They had his body properly, the doctors and the machines had confirmed it was him and there was nothing to contradict it this time. Pete Wisdom was dead and this was the day they would bury him.

She wiped a tear from her cheek and then she smoothed down her dress and shook her head sadly. Then she looked at the picture of the man she had loved and nodded with a sad smile.

"Rest easy," she whispered and then went to the door. The others would be here soon enough and she would meet the cars and then they would say their last goodbyes.

SHIELD Agents Arturo and Tyler were the detail assigned to ensure that the body of Katherine Pryde made it back to New York. This was the one mission they hated, because it made them feel uneasy. Yes, SHIELD agents often died, but it was rare that the bodies came back. Most were classed as missing in action, which always gave hope of return, but with a body then there was no hope and it reminded them of their own mortality.

"I've been thinking," Arturo said as they waited for the clearance to depart.

"Oh, God," muttered Tyler, thinking it was always dangerous for that to happen. "What've you come up with now?"

"Well, Pryde's natural state is to be intangible, right?"

"Right," said Tyler.

"Well how come she was hurt in the explosion. How come when she sleeps she doesn't fall through the earth. How..."

"You have way too much time on your hands," Tyler answered his partner. "First things is, she was probably solid when she was injured which caused her conscious mind to shut down. It's like breathing is a reflex action. When her mind shuts down, it sends a signal to say to her genes stop phasing. I guess the same goes for when she's asleep."

Arturo looked at him with incredulation. "You just made that up." Tyler shot him a look. "Well you did," Arturo stated and then he was cut off by the radio.

"SHIELD Transport 8-9er Alpha, you are cleared for take off."

"Let's do it," Tyler said and Arturo nodded as the aircraft set off down the runway. As soon as they were airborne, Tyler would take the first watch over the body and Arturo would take over a short while later. They were faster than any commercial flight, but it would still take a little while to get to the States. As they got towards the end of the runway Tyler looked at Arturo, who was looking pale. "You want to take off any time soon? Before we hit the grass?"

"I can't," he said. "She won't lift." Then the plane stopped altogether as the engines hummed loudly. "What the?"

"This isn't right," said Tyler and checked the scope. "Oh hell. Major psionic power spike."

"We're being held," said Arturo realising what was going on and then the door of the plane flew open and the two agents were on their feet in moments, weapons drawn as alarms sounded, but then they two were held in place as two figures came on board.

"Good work," Fury said as he looked at two of his former agents and smiled. "Gents."

"Should I kill them?" asked X-Man as he walked over to them. "I

could just turn off their minds, leave them alive, yet dead."

"No," Fury said. "Word's out anyway, and I want them to tell the world who did this. Though you can knock them out."

"With pleasure," Grey said and then the SHIELD agents fell to the floor as a psychic blast felled them.

"Let's see if this works," said Fury as he opened the coffin and pointed the weapon at Kate Pryde and fired, sending a massive jolt of electricity through her body. She awoke with a gasp, fighting for air as life returned. "Damn me," Fury said, in almost disbelief. "It worked."

"Of course," she said. "It was my plan. We must thank Stryker if we happen to run in to him." Fury nodded thinking that it had been her idea for the Shadow King to hit them with a psionic attack so powerful that it rendered them dead to everyone and everything, unless they had heightened senses. Shadowcat had seen it happen to Cyclops and Storm when Charles Xavier had been under the influence of Reverend William Stryker.

"Welcome back," said Fury and the two of them shook hands.

"Now, let's go get Wisdom and get the hell out of here," Kate said. "We've work to do."

"Peter Wisdom was a man of complexity," said Brian as he stood there, speaking to the small gathering. He looked over at the people and faces. Forge, Lydia, Siryn, Maverick and Raven sat on the front row with Pete's father Harold. In the next row were Meggan, Alistaire Stuart, Sapphire Steel, Percival Rockford and Dai Thomas. Then there were some other people he didn't know, but he carried on.

"Many, if not all of us, were sceptical about him, but we saw past that in the end to realise how much of a decent man he truly was. He had your back, whether you wanted it or not, and he always came through in the end. Yes, he was at times, awkward, sometimes boorish and he never did things the right way, but he always meant for the best."

Brian paused a moment, looking past the assemblage, to the small line of SHIELD agents who were keeping the press from getting too

close. Now that his identity as Captain Britain had been realised and was public knowledge the media, considering him as a celebrity politician, was hounding him. If they found out he had his powers again... He shook that thought off before going back to his notes and continuing his eulogy.

"Pete may have done some questionable things in his lifetime, but he more than made up for those things later in his life. The man was a hero, he was my friend and I will miss him." There was no applause, but silent appreciation as Nightcrawler placed his hand on Brian's shoulder as he stepped down to take his seat next to Meggan.

"Thank you, Brian," Kurt said. "Now then we will..." His gaze wandered past the crowd and on to the young woman walking towards them. "Mein Gott..." They couldn't fail to see the shock in his eyes as he spoke and they turned to see Kate Pryde coming towards them and a raft of muttering went through them.

"What's going on?" asked Forge and Marcus shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "Ah can't get a read on her..."

"LADIES AN' GENTLEMEN!" said a voice and they all looked at the podium, where Kurt was lying unconscious on the floor and Nick Fury was standing there, gun in his hand. "Did you yahoo's think I'd let this event pass?"

"Fury!" said Forge standing and then he felt himself held in place.

"Don't bother trying to do anything about this," Fury said. "Telekinetic grip's got you all, and Marcus? Ya ain't got the power to take on X-Man. He's holding you all in place and keeping the SHIELD guard over there from noticing what's happening."

"Why are you doing this, Nick?" Lydia asked. "Pete's dead."

"Not dead yet," said Fury and fired his weapon at the coffin before them, to the horror of them all and then it happened. Hot knives flew up and out of the wood splintering it as they did so and Pete's fist soon followed as he climbed out.

"Cut that bloody fine," he said as he shook his head. "Thought the bastards were gonna bury me."

"Ye of little faith," Shadowcat said as she came over and the two of

them kissed.

"NO!" shouted Lydia at the same time as North called out Kate's name.

"It was you," said Forge, looking at her. "You were the mole." Kate smiled. "You were the one who reactivated Fury's master codes, letting him escape the Helicarrier. You were the one who let Fury in to the SHIELD files. You're the traitor."

"Took you long enough," she said. "I've been working with Fury from the moment he brought me in to X-Force."

"When you were alone with him, examining Pete's body," said Lydia, the pieces starting to fit.

"You didn't forget him, either," said Maverick. "When you did the thing to alert SHIELD at the CSA."

"Needed him thinking of other things," she said. "It let Farouk have a little chat with him."

"Got me to reconsider a few things," said Pete. "Besides, she played you better than anyone else." He chuckled. "Heh, she's done a real number on you, Davey."

"What?" said North.

"What ever made you think I could be attracted to you?" Kate said. "I used you, it put a dent in the X-Force camaraderie. You and Pete were at each other's throats, and I seduced you. You're old enough to be my father? How much of a slut did you think I was?"

"I thought you loved me," said North, barely understanding it. He cared for her so much.

"You were meant to," said Pete. "You've fallen for her and it's going to eat you up inside that you were played again. Just like your wife did all them years ago. But look on the bright side, Mav. You got a shag out of it." Maverick closed his eyes, his heart breaking. The fears he'd had that it was too good to be true, the ones he had pushed aside were coming up again.

"So I win after all, Forge," Fury said. "I get two of your top agents, X-Force is in a shambles and we've just humbled some of the UK's best heroes, all on live TV. Hail Hydra!" He laughed and then he,

Pryde, Wisdom and Grey were gone, leaving an emotionally broken group in their wake.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #37

OPERATION: SWORD STROKE 4: Crossing Over

by [David Wheatley](#)

Author's Note: This story is continued from [Excalibur #22](#), [Captain America #19](#) and [Iron Man #25](#). If you've not read them, you might want to go and check them out first!

Pete Wisdom

"Iron Man!" Maverick shouted as he saw the armoured Avenger in the grip of a sentinel. This was beginning to become a problem, he thought, as he fired his biokinetic blasts at the robotic hand.

Shadowcat

"That didn't quite work..." Stark muttered from inside the armour. "They seem to be shielded against massive attacks." He could hear alarms flaring as systems began to short as the armour began to constrict around him and there was nothing he could do. The unibeam was lessening the grip certainly, but the sentinel still had him.

Siryn

"Then let's take a clue from an old friend," North said and he rolled out of the way of a sentinel blast, but his hands together and fired a blast of scalpel precision and poured it on, severing the sentinel's hand and Iron Man was finally able to use the unibeam to free himself.

Maverick

"Nice work," he said, landing next to the X-Force leader.

"We're not done yet," said Maverick. "I hate these things..." There were three wrecked sentinels and nine left, though one was without a hand. Captain America's shield was keeping him safe from the

sentinels, as well as being a highly effective weapon, when he had chance to throw it. Lydia and Raven were doing what they could to keep them disorientated, Lydia's super strength allowing her to smash through them and keep one step ahead of their lasers, while Marcus used his psionic powers to do whatever damage he could, but they were well shielded.

"Forge is working on a way of shutting them down. We know they all work off the same frequency to be activated, and Doom has control of them that way," said Iron Man as he fired an energy blast, as Maverick also did so, standing back to back with the Avenger.

"That's it," said Maverick, suddenly. "Onslaught controlled these things with his mind, right?"

"Not sure," said Iron Man. "It could have been magnetics to reprogramme them as well, though his mind is probably the best idea."

"Forge was there when the sentinels were being stolen, and they operate of the same frequency. What if Marcus can duplicate it, his mind against Doom's mechanics?"

"Forge agrees," said Iron Man. The uplink to SHIELD was still in place. "It's a case of getting the frequency blocked."

"We need Siryn," Maverick said, inwardly cursing. "She could do that."

"Where is she?" asked Iron Man, but a blast threw them apart and drowned out North's reply.

"She's on a leave of absence, after her mutilation at the hands of Black Air," Forge said, on the internal link. "I can get her there."

"Okay," said Iron Man. "And hurry, we're running out of time." His armour wasn't responding too well after the crushing and the others were tiring. The sentinels were good and in this cramped environment they were managing to evade things, but it wasn't going to last.

"Here we are again," said Wisdom, as he looked from the roof across the street at the building opposite.

The Hellfire Club.

Last time he'd been here, he'd been taken by Black Air, who'd eventually paid after being hunted down by SHIELD, which was probably the only decent thing the group had ever done. Some of them had probably escaped, but that was natural and he would find them later, however the Hellfire Club had ensured that Romany had died. They had captured her, they had led her to Black Air, and they had ensured he couldn't save her. She was dead, he was alive and now it was payback time.

"Logan's in position," said Nate as he looked at the others. "Followed your scent, and got through the sewers to the upper levels. He's a little disappointed he didn't have to kill anyone though."

"Jessica's on the roof," said Shadowcat, giving Spider-Woman a thumbs up sign, to let her know they'd seen her. "Nate..."

"I know, I'm back up," said X-Man, shaking his head. He knew that he could go in there and take them all down without breaking a sweat, but Logan was the boss - the Shadow King said so, but he had also said he wouldn't be around for long, and then he would be in charge. Wolverine would be around long enough to ensure that Xavier's people were defeated fully, but today was a chance for payback.

"Okay," said Wisdom, "let's go." He fired a hot knife across the street, attaching it to one of the gargoyles on the roof and he kept the line there. The solid nature of the hot knives was something he liked and he looked at Shadowcat. "C'mon, Katie, let's do this." She put her arms around his neck, and he jumped from the roof, swinging down at the wall of the Hellfire Club, as Shadowcat bit his ear. "Mind on the work," he muttered and she phased them just as they were about to hit the wall and they passed through the stone as if it weren't there.

Kate let go and the two of them rolled forward, ending up facing forward, Shadowcat coiled, and ready to strike with her martial arts skills, and Pete's hot knives ready for action, but there wasn't anyone about.

"They're not here, are they?" said Pete, looking annoyed. ~GREY!~ he shouted.

~I don't know~ said Grey. ~I...~

~Nate?~ said Pete, no longer feeling X-Man in his head.
"Something's wrong."

"So what do we do?" Kate asked

"Simple," said Wisdom. "Blow things up."

"I don't think so," said a voice and they turned to see Vortigen Walker and Samantha Destine."

"Oh goody," said Pete, cracking his knuckles. "Now things get interesting..."

"Payne!" Logan said, wondering how the man was here. Last he'd heard of him, he'd been killed when the Sentinels attacked the Brotherhood and pretty much wiped them out.

"Been a while Logan. Ready for round two?"

Joseph Chapman smiled and looked at Molly Fitzgerald. "I knew you'd come in handy..."

"Yeah," said Spider-Woman as she came through and fired a venom blast at her. "Excellent target practice." Chapman shook his head. The former heroine known as Shamrock could alter probability fields with ease, but she hadn't counted on Spider-Woman coming in through the window and shooting her.

"You'll need to do better against me," said Chapman, standing up to her and Spider-Woman smiled.

"Time to die, 'Union Jack'."

Meanwhile Payne and Logan were squaring off against each other. The last time they'd fought, Logan had come off worst. This time Wolverine promised it'd be different.

"Remembered me yet?" Payne was saying.

"Oh yeah," said Wolverine. "I know you, now. Rupert."

"So you do remember. Always said I'd make you take responsibility

for yer actions."

"That was when we both worked at the L's," Wolverine said, slashing at Payne, who ducked out of the way, while trying to touch Logan and send the pain coursing through him as he had done before. "And I did what was needed."

"You were reckless, I never could get you trained properly," said Payne.

"That's because you saw me as an animal, Rupert," Wolverine said. "An animal you wanted to make in to a man. Thing is, I always was a man."

"You were vermin, Logan. I argued against them letting you loose after the Destroyer affair, but no, you were a hero. You've blazed a trail of pain and suffering wherever you go."

"The hell with this," Wolverine said. "Eat adamantium and die!" and he went for Payne, thinking to end it but then Payne fired a blast of energy, which glanced Logan's arm and it was all he could do not cry out in agony.

"Look's like we've both had an upgrade," Payne said as Logan cradled his arm. "The sentinels thought they'd killed me, but it was more than that. They overloaded my pain and I released it explosively. They thought I was dead, but I just hid under the bodies of my colleagues, but my mutation advanced."

"Yer a coward," Logan said. "And there ain't no pain I can't take. Not now."

"Bring it on, runt," Payne said and Logan went to work, avoiding blasts, his claws lashing out, and Payne realised this wasn't the same man he had faced months ago. This was more like the man he had known at Landau, Luckman, Lake and LeQuare and Payne suddenly realised the man was darker, wilder and Payne wasn't too sure he could win this one, unless he was lucky.

It would all depend on whether Shamrock would wake up in time.

"Darlin'," he said as he approached his daughter. "Sorry I'm late, I had a meeting that over-ran."

"It's okay, Da," said Theresa, as Sean Cassidy came over. "You okay, you look like you've got something on yuir mind." Her accent was stronger when she was talking with her father, because it was more natural. She usually made a more conscious effort when she was with the others who might not get what she was saying with the Irish brogue.

"Been to see Cyclops," he said. "He wants Emma Frost for the new X-Men line up he's puttin' together. We've got her imprisoned at the moment. I ain't sure what t'do."

"She killed people, she killed Paige, right?" said Siryn. "Mebee she should stand trial and then see what happens."

"It was a good job I had people in place if things went bad," Sean said. "Otherwise she might have gotten away. I was in no condition t'stop her."

"I know," Theresa said. "How y'feelin'?"

"I've been shot before," he said. "You kinda get used to it." He looked at his daughter, who'd visited him in the hospital after it'd happened, and he'd not been in any condition to say anything to her, but he knew she wasn't in a good way herself. He could still see her hands shaking. "Ah, luv," he said. "Enough about work. What about you?"

"I can't do it," she said, softly. "I can't go back. I've healed up, but I just can't put the uniform on, and go out there again. I'm scared, an' I can't stop my hands shakin'."

"Terry," he said, putting his hands on to hers. "What happened t'you was evil, an evil beyond anything I've ever heard of. Black Air an' I have crossed paths before. I've been down, when your mother died, when I lost my powers, I bounced back, because I knew what needed doing."

"I just don't know how to go on," Siryn whispered, a tear trickling down her cheek. "When Feral ripped my throat out I nearly killed myself, and I got over my injuries by going to Sinister."

"I know, céadsearc, but this time there are no quick fixes." Sean looked in to her eyes, and he could see she was afraid. He had failed his students, not done enough to help them, and he had done that as a way to make up for his failings as a father. He had to do something

about it, before it was too late. "One step at a time."

"How do you go on?" she said, looking at him. "After everything you've done, everything you've been through, everything that's been lost?"

"Now that's an interestin' question," he said. "I'm almost fifty, an' I look back and see it all, I despair. I just think of those I've lost and I make a promise t'do better. It's all I can do. I can't just stop, because people have lived and died for me, an' I won't give up on them. I can't."

"I understand," Siryn said and then Sean's cell phone rang.

"Damn thing," he cursed as he pulled it from his pocket. "Work," he said, resignation in his voice at the most inopportune moment they'd called him. "Cassidy... yes..." Terry looked as he passed her the phone. "It's for you."

"Hello?" she said, taking it. "Forge?!"

"Sorry to call you," said the SHIELD director. "I know I said I wouldn't but I need you back at work. X-Force needs you."

"I..." Siryn said, a stammer in her voice.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. Will you do it?" She looked at her father, who nodded.

"Yes," she said. "I'll do it."

"Could you pass me back to Banshee?" Forge said and she gave the phone to her father.

"Sean," he said.

"Yes," said Sean. "I'll go too."

"How did you know I was going to ask?" Forge asked his old friend.

"A feelin'," he said. "I'm guessin' you've cleared it with the Agency?"

"Something like that," Forge replied. It was hard for any agency to say no when the Director of SHIELD said something. "HERMES

transport in two minutes. We'll catch up later."

"Aye, we will," he said and hung up, wondering how much Forge actually knew. "Two minutes," he said to Terry.

"One step at a time," she said, with a determined sigh.

"An' you're not alone," he said. "I'm comin' too. Moral support."

"But you don't do this anymore," Terry said.

"So Forge owes me one," he said, with a grin. "Unless you don't want me there?"

"I'd love it," she said, and smiled at him.

Her hands weren't shaking anymore.

Joseph Chapman smiled. Ever since his fight with Maverick he'd had his hands upgraded, using a design that had been acquired with some degree of trouble. The modifications had been made using robotics designs that had been used in Canda, as part of the so-called Weapon X programme. It had not been as secretive as the original programme and had been funded with Hellfire Club money and he had the enhancements used on a man named Garrison Kane.

His hands flew across the room, chasing Spider-Woman, who was trying to avoid the hands and the electrostatic shock that would come with them. At the same time Payne and Wolverine were fighting. Payne's body was a mass of cuts and wounds and his energy blasts were as strong as ever, but Wolverine had spent too many years with the X-Men and had been trained in avoiding such attacks from people like Cyclops and Havok and if he connected, it was a glancing blow and Wolverine was pushing past the pain.

How Logan was doing that was beyond Payne, but he also knew if he got his hands on the little animal he would not get away that easily. He'd already proven that he could take Logan that way and his touch was more potent than the blasts as it was a more concentrate thing, whereas his energy blasts were not. Then one of the robotic hands grabbed Spider-Woman and Jessica cried out in pain, as did Logan who was managed to be grabbed by Payne and both of them were down.

"Sorry it took so long, gentlemen," said Fitzgerald. She had stood up, knocking in to Drew, allowing her to be tagged by Chapman, which distracted Wolverine, allowing Payne to get in there. It was all down to luck, which Shamrock seemed to have in spades.

"When will the X-Men ever learn?" said Chapman. "What about the others?"

"I took out the telepath with a pain burst," said Payne. "He dropped easily enough, and that just leaves Wisdom and Pryde."

"You really need to get better members though," said Wisdom, standing there. His clothes were torn and he was bruised and beaten. "They were good for a fight, but not much more."

"Are they dead?" asked Chapman, holding his people back. Pryde and Wisdom would not be much of a fight.

"Not really," said Pete. "But they won't be of any use anytime soon." He smiled as he thought to the enhancements that had been made to Shadowcat. All of them had been given a bit more power. Grey was more stable than he'd ever been in his life, Drew had her venom blasts again, he had solid hot knives, Logan had his adamantium and Shadowcat had more control of her phasing, a more lasting effect than a local one.

She'd phased the King and Queen in to each other, causing intense amounts of pain and while it would normally destroy two objects, she'd left them in a state that was partially phased. They were trapped together until someone unphased them.

"And how do you propose to stop us?" said Payne. "Wolverine's down, Spider-Woman's down, the telepath's down. Where does that leave you and... where is she?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Pete. "Maybe doing something very bad with the gas mains. She can hold her breath a very long time. Kiss this place goodbye, pillocks."

SNICKT!

Payne fell to the floor, his eyes open.

"Guess you didn't feel that either, did ya Rupert?" Logan said, his claws tainted with blood and hovering over the severed ankles of

Payne.

"Molly!" said Chapman, wondering what was going on.

"Molly can't come to the phone right now," she said, "but I'll pass a message on when I get around to it."

"Nate's feeling better," said Wisdom. "He's got her working for us, for now."

"Damn you," said Chapman, knowing he was in trouble.

"You already did that when you killed Romany," then he smiled. "Now it's my turn to damn you." Chapman stepped back but tripped over Spider-Woman who was on the floor. "What were the odds of that?" Chapman tried to get to his feet, but Jessica held him in her grip, and he was trapped like a fly in a web and Pete placed his hand on Chapman's chest.

"This is gonna hurt," he said and his hot knives flared to life from his finger tips.

Lydia caught the brunt of one of the blasts from the sentinels. She was tiring, and there wasn't a great deal she could do against these metallic monstrosities. X-Force was a great team at full strength, but with half of them out of action, they no longer had the strength in depth that she was used to working with.

Iron Man, Captain America and Agent 13 were excellent, but they weren't people she was used to working with.

"How are we doing?" Maverick asked as he rolled out of the way of a giant fist.

"We're not winning," she replied. "What's Cap got?"

"He's thinking of a strategy, but he's not worked with us before so it's taking him some time," he said. The Star Spangled Avenger was their best hope against them as Captain America always seemed to find a way to win. "With luck he'll think of something..." He paused. "You hear that?"

"Yeah," said Lydia. "It sounds like Siryn, but stronger..."

"Hey!" said Marcus. "We've got reinforcements. Siryn and Banshee!"

"Not Banshee, not any more," said Sean as he and Terry flew inside. "We heard you needed a hand."

"Oh yeah," said Maverick. "Good to see you, Sean."

"Just doin' my bit," he said, and turned to the sentinels. It was almost like being back in the X-Men and he couldn't help but smile. "Now let's finish this..."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #38

VENGEANCE IS SERVED

by [David Wheatley](#)

[Pete Wisdom](#)

"Let's do this," Logan said as he looked at the others. There they were outside Penvensey Castle, a place looked after and maintained by the British Heritage group the National Trust, but it was also a secret safehouse for the Weird Happenings Organisation, and inside was their target, Dallas Riordan, the heroine known as Citizen V.

"How do you want this played?" asked Pete.

[Shadowcat](#)

"Minimal casualties," Logan said. "These people are in the wrong place at the wrong time, no need to kill them because of it. Doesn't mean we can't bust them up a bit though."

[Siryn](#)

"Just like the old days," Pete said, as he thought back to his time with Black Air. "We used to just go in and rough them up because we could then as well."

"The rougher the better, huh lover?" asked Kate and Pete gave her a wink.

[Maverick](#)

"Knock it off," said Jessica. "We've work to do."

"I've got them," said Nate. "I know where they are."

"You lead the way," said Logan. "We'll be right behind you." X-Man nodded and he floated through the grounds of the castle towards where they needed to go.

"Hey!" said one of the commandos that guarded the entrance but a venom blast from Spider-Woman made sure that he didn't say

anything else and he lost consciousness as he hit the wall. WHO were prepared for a great many things, but they weren't prepared for an assault by an X-Men unit...

In the background, some way from the action, he watched them. He had his instructions, and more than that he had a few scores to settle himself. He had tracked them from the Hellfire Club to where they had been based, and he knew that very few people would have found them, but he was one of the best hunters around, and that was why people hired him. There was also the added bonus of being pretty much invisible to simple psionic detection. He'd hung around the X-Men Omega base before they became X-Corp and he'd surprised both incarnations when he told them that he'd been around a while.

They'd thought he was dead, but he'd lived. His healing factor was greater than anyone could have guessed. The only thing he knew was that although he didn't have the adamantium anymore, he didn't need it. He never really had - he was faster, stronger and deadlier than any of them and though he'd been beaten by Logan the last time they fought, he knew that this time would be different.

He hadn't been prepared for Logan then; he'd thought him to be the same prissy runt he'd been for a long time, but not any more. This was the Logan he had known when they were in Team X, before he got a conscience. This was a Logan who fought hard and dirty and was capable of being as cold and vicious as he'd ever been. Yes, Logan was a darker, more malevolent man than he had faced, one not bothered with honour and decency but armed with a supreme confidence in himself and what he was capable of.

He looked at him smiling thinking that this is how it should always have been between them, watching as they made their way inside and he could hear the voice inside his head, the one that had repeated itself over and over.

"You know you've always thought you were Logan's father? How's this for irony - he's yours. I'm yours."

That was the thing that had kept him alive after Joseph had ripped the adamantium from him, that was the thing that had given him the will to survive. The taunt of Wolverine and Victor Creed was determined that things would end and that he would stop his father and put paid to the voice in his head. When they'd got their transport to Sussex from London, he tagged along to make sure he got his

chance. Yes, he'd become a better person, thanks to the rehab of the X-Men, but there were some things that were primal, that needed doing.

This was one of them and he followed them in.

"So what's the deal, doc?" Dallas Riordan asked as she looked at Leonard Samson.

"We've made good progress," the gamma enhanced psychiatrist said. "You're coping with the trauma well enough, and I think you'll be able to be amongst other people soon enough."

"You mean other men?" she said, knowing she had been hostile towards the doctor and any other man who had come near her, Fury's interrogation techniques still haunting her.

"Your hostility to me has been overcome," said Samson, gently as he looked at her. "That was a good start and we've made progress, as I said."

"Shame it's gotta come to an end," said a feral voice and they turned to see the Shadow X-Men.

"What's going on here?" asked Samson, knowing that things had not been right and he had seen the news where Wisdom and Shadowcat had joined Hyrda and he assumed that the others were with them as well.

"Unfinished business, Doc," said Wolverine. "Lady's gotta be taught a lesson, and anyone who gets in the way'll get it too."

"Do you have any idea who I am?" Samson said.

"Yup," said Logan, "an' I ain't impressed."

"Then give it your best shot," said Samson and Logan smiled.

"Five on one, bub..."

"Four on two, daddy."

Logan turned and saw that X-Man was on the floor, a massive gash in his back where Sabretooth's claws had cut him open and Creed

licked his claws.

"Taste's almost as good as Cable..."

"You take Samson and the bitch," Logan told the others. "Creed's mine..."

"Works for me," Wisdom said and he threw several hot knives forth at the giant before them, but Samson was fast and he dodged the attacks easily enough, only to be met by a venom blast from Spider-Woman, which staggered him slightly allowing Shadowcat to kick out, hitting him with a nerve strike. Samson winced as he went down on one knee, but he had been in a great many fights, before and after his encounters with gamma rays and it would take him a moment to shake this off.

His body was highly resistant to attacks from projectiles and other things and if the girl hadn't been as precise as she had been there'd have been no effect to her blow and now they came at him, the bio blasts irritating him, the hot knives hurting him, managing to pierce his gamma enhanced hide due to the intense heat and Samson slammed his hands together creating a shockwave that threw them to the floor and he made himself stand up.

His priority was making sure they didn't get to Dallas, because he wasn't sure she was ready for a combat situation. Ever since her capture by Hydra she hadn't worn the costume of Citizen V, but they had made sure it was about, because that was going to be the final test - to see if she could put the uniform on and once more adopt the identity of Citizen V.

"Okay," said Samson as he looked at the mutants. "Now we get serious."

"Yeah, because a bloke with green hair says that with such authority," said Pete as he fired his hot knives but Samson moved, pivoting his massive bulk on one hand and slamming his feet in to the Englishman and sending him across the room and slamming him in to the wall. "You'll have to try better than that," said Pete standing up, but then he fell over as the impact caught up with him.

"How's that?" Samson replied and then he protected himself from the attacks from the women.

"Damn it," said Maverick as X-Force waited in their office aboard the Helicarrier. "This waiting is getting on my nerves." His fingers wrapped on the table.

"We're waiting for the results of the meeting with Doom," said Siryn. "Until then, we don't know what we're going to get assigned."

"If he is Victor Von Doom," said Raven. "Ah dunno, there's something about him Ah just don't trust."

"From all accounts he saved Excalibur when they were in Latveria, so who cares," said Lydia, who was watching the news reports of what was happening in Genosha. It was her home and now, thanks to the announcement by Justin Hammer that he was gunning for Magneto and in effect all of her country, she was worried, just as she was worried for Pete and Kate. "I just hope that what he says enables us to save the world."

"Or reality itself," said Maverick. "It's the waiting around though..."

"Well, you're not one of the big brains," said Teresa. "None of us are, and it's they who'll figure out what we need to do."

"It's not that though, is it?" said Marcus.

"No," said Maverick. "Ever since we lost Pete and Kate, we've been less than we should be. We had one active mission and we needed Captain America and Iron Man and we still almost lost. Black Air took us apart, the Hellfire Club almost did... I don't know what's wrong with us. Maybe X-Force isn't working..."

"You really think that?" asked Lydia. "When we thought Pete had died, we did well enough. When I was injured and Pete was out of action, you guys did well enough, and then you didn't have Shadowcat."

"I know," said Maverick. "I'm just not sure what the point is anymore? Why do we do what we're doing? What does it get us? Are we anything more than an X team sponsored by SHIELD, because we're not having much effect."

"And you want to get out there and prove we're still capable of fighting the good fight?" said Lydia.

"Something like that," Maverick said. "I've lost so much of late."

Elena's missing, Isabel's dead, Chris isn't speaking to me these days. Kate's gone to the dark side, Logan too. I've got very little left, and..."

"You're feeling old?" said Siryn.

"Age suppression factor aside, I am old," said North, looking at her. "It's catching up with me. I've escaped death so many times, survived the Legacy Virus. Maybe it's time I called it quits."

"You really think that?" asked Marcus and David North nodded.

"Maybe David North should die and Christoph Nord goes home and lives the life he should have lived..."

"Been waiting for this a long time," Creed said as his claws flashed against Logan. "No more hidin', no more pretending, just you an' me like it's always supposed to have been."

Logan said nothing, avoiding the strikes of his oldest, deadliest of foes and thrusting his own claws shining towards him. Creed's body wasn't in the best of shapes, the extraction of the adamantium had taken its toll on him, but he was still strong, fast and powerful. Logan had fought people like that before and he was still here, after everything that had happened, and he could feel in the back of his mind that this is what the Shadow King wanted, that he wanted his 'brother' to suffer.

"Say something, runt," Sabretooth said, wondering why his father was silent. He wasn't usually at a loss for words in these battles. "Cat got yer tounge?" Then Logan exploded in to action, fighting like a madman, as if the beserker rages he had claimed to put behind him were released in one mad moment and the inner darkness reigned free and Creed was being pushed back by the savagery of the assault. His attacks came as one and Creed tired to fight back, but Logan's attacks were methodical, clinical and Creed's blows were nothing to him and Logan stopped, his claws retracting back in to their housings in his arms.

Sabretooth tried to stand but his injuries were severe but that had never stopped him before and he went to work, attacking hard and fast but Logan always seemed to be out his reach and then suddenly Wolverine grabbed him and turned his strength against him and Creed was on his back and he felt something snap on the landing as

his body fell hard against the broken door and he couldn't move.

"I loved your mother," Logan said, looking down on his son. "If I'd known about you, then maybe things could have been different."

"Too late to get all fatherly now, Pops," Creed said. "Too much history."

"Damn right," said Logan and he placed his clenched fist against Creed's forehead, feeling the hot breath on his face as he looked down. "You survived one claw through your brain, let's see if three makes a difference."

~SNICKT~

"You people are beginning to annoy me," said Samson as he struck back. Spider-Woman was the main annoyance because of her strength, which meant she was more resilient than the other one, who seemed to stay as intangible as possible to avoid the blows and as she became solid to strike he attacked, and it meant that she changed her state again which let the Spider-Woman attack. They weren't hurting him any, but they were causing him a problem, and he was glad that he wasn't fighting their other member, because he knew how deadly Wolverine could be. He had spoken with Bruce Banner about him, and he had heard the stories of the X-Man.

However he'd also heard of the other guy he was fighting and the long enmity between them and even though Warren had told him how he'd tried to reform, he'd also turned on the X-Men, and whether it was due to Psylocke or not, there was still the idea that Sabretooth was an animal at heart and perhaps he would revert to type after all. It was something he would have liked to study, if he had been given the chance, and with no disrespect to Xavier who had tried, perhaps he had been the wrong man for the job.

Leonard Samson on the other hand may have been the one who could have helped, but now they'd never really know, but Samson heard the claws come out and he knew that there was only one winner and now he needed to divert his attention and so as the Spider-Woman struck he was ready and he grabbed hold of her, not trying to swat her away and as she fired her venom blast at point blank range, as he guessed she would, he moved with incredible speed and the blast struck Shadowcat, who for a moment seemed disorientated as if whatever was wrong with her was momentarily

shaken, but before anything happened Samson could feel the change as the atmosphere around him felt different and he looked across to see that the one who had been taken down by Creed earlier was back on his feet.

And he looked very upset.

"Enough!" he said and Samson could feel his mind slipping away and there was very little he could do against the psionic assault and he began to try and remember all the theories he had been taught when he had become a psychiatrist but there was nothing he could do and then he felt his mother calling him down for breakfast.

"Coming Mom!" he shouted and he leapt out of bed, thinking he had to get ready for school soon.

"Are we done yet?" Nate said, looking around.

"Think so, kid," said Wolverine as he retracted his claws. "How you feelin'?"

"I hurt, but I've hurt before," he said. "Now let's do what we came here to do and get the hell out."

"Couldn't agree more," said Pete, as he staggered woozily to his feet. "Glad you took him out," he said. "I'm tempted to kill him..."

"Leave him," said Nate. "At the moment he thinks he's six years old and there's not going to be many shrinks who can help him..." He gave a smirk. "Physician heal thyself."

"Which just leaves you," said Pete, looking at Dallas who had fear in her eyes. She'd been petrified since the attack started and now the fear was crippling her. "Time to send the message, eh boss?"

"Oh yeah," said Logan. "Nothing personal, darlin', but the boss doesn't like leaving anything undone." Dallas didn't say a word and as they went to work on her, she didn't even scream...

"Welcome back," said the Shadow King as his people returned, teleported in by one of the mutants from the former Apocalypse

Dawn. "I trust the battle went well?"

"Even better," said Pete. "Logan did for Sabretooth, the Hellfire Club's been trashed, Doc Samson's not going to be bothering anyone for a while and Citizen V... Well, she's not going to be in the hero biz for a very long time."

"Good work, my X-Men," the Shadow King said. "We must be ready."

"For what?" asked Shadowcat.

"For the last challenge. Xavier's people..."

"At last," said Logan. "When?"

"Soon," said Farouk. "The time is not right, but I can sense things are going to change very soon. Yes, very soon indeed."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the voice of Forge over the SHIELD communications systems. "We have a situation developing across the world. We are expecting the imminent arrival of seven demi-gods, intent on the enslavement of humanity. Their only weakness is that they are half human and with luck the heroes of the world will be able to defeat them. Our role will be to ensure that the rest of the world is protected from the battle that is sure to follow. Good luck and Godspeed."

"Okay," said Maverick, "that's it. The call to action."

"You sure you're okay?" said Terry.

"I'll have to be," Maverick said. "We've people to save and at the end of the day that's what we're about. Let's go..." The others looked at each other, wondering if what Maverick was doing was simply a brave face or if he'd picked himself up? They fervently hoped it was the latter...

"Oh good God," said Alistaire Stuart as he entered the room. Sabretooth was lying there, not moving. Doc Samson was drawing on his notepad and Dallas Riordan... "Oh God."

"What is it?" Sapphire asked as she entered and she gasped. "Oh no..." Dallas's eyes had been burnt out, her limbs slashed and wounded and on her forehead a V had been gouged, the legacy she'd adopted branded on her forever.

"Tell SHIELD we blew it," said Alistaire as he looked at her. "We blew it big."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #39

A Brief Respite

by [David Wheatley](#)

Author's Note: This issue is continued from SON RISE: X-MEN

Pete Wisdom

"I think his heart's stopped!" said Lydia, as she started to work on the fallen Radius.

Shadowcat

"Cyclops is getting the medical bay ready," said M as she looked back to where the X-Men Prime team was looking on anxiously, while Siryn and Marcus piloted the aircraft towards the Xavier Institute. Maverick had elected to stay behind and do some crowd control with the other SHIELD agents that turned up, after the battle had ended. It had been a smart play on their part, as they'd been ill equipped to deal with the snake, but crowd control was something they were good at, and they provided stability in the chaos.

Siryn

"Tell him to get ready, we're coming in hot," said Siryn as the Omnijet banked over the compound, the perimeter defences deactivated by Cerebro and Siryn held her breath and Marcus put his hand on hers, reassuring her. The last time they'd been here, Cyclops had pretty much ordered them out of the Institute. The X-Men had considered her a traitor for turning to Sinister in order to get her throat repaired and because of the drug she was under at the time she'd resented what Cyclops had been saying and decked him with a sonic blast. She'd not seen him since.

Maverick

"On it," said Cerebro as Lydia started chest compressions with Jubilee giving Radius air. The venom inside Jared's body was eating him alive and only the advanced technology in the X-Mansion had a

hope of saving him from certain death. "Hangar's open, Teresa," the sentient computer said and Siryn banked the craft on a sharp angle and the jet landed in the hangar bay, the inertial dampners kicking in as the jet stopped.

"Cyclops," said Emma, "we're on our way."

"I'm ready," Scott answered. M picked Radius up in a telekinetic hold and carried him out of the craft and to the medical wing, with Lydia and Jubilee still working on him. Emma looked at the other members of X-Force.

"I'm not sure what Scott will say," she replied, "but Magma will show you to the guest quarters, right Allison?"

"Sure," said Magma. "Follow me, we could do with the break." Marcus and Teresa looked at each other. It was better than nothing.

"Y'know if you don't stop being a bad girl, I'll have to spank you."

"Again?" said Kate as she grabbed Wisdom's crotch. "That a promise?"

"Maybe later, Kit," he said, lightly pushing her away. "And your hands are cold."

"Maybe I need warming up," she purred, nuzzling her forehead in to his chest.

Wisdom shook his head. "That's my Shadowcat, always in heat," Pete said as he lit a cigarette and he gave a smirk. "Randy little bitch."

"I had a sheltered life before I met you," she said. "You brought it out in me."

"Get stuffed," he said and she gave him a malicious grin. "I said later. And enough of the sheltered life crap. You were fighting aliens when you were thirteen, so you're not exactly that innocent, are you Pryde? And then there was Rasputin. You had a crush on him for God knows how long and you were thirteen and just figuring out what your body could do. How many times when you were in your room did you touch yourself and imagine it was him doing that?"

"Fuck you, Pete," she said and rolled over, annoyed with him. He still had the ability to push her buttons, no matter what the button was.

"You do, almost hourly," he replied, as his fingers caressed the nape of her neck and she giggled at the tickling in spite of herself which made her more annoyed.

"I said fuck off asshole."

"Hey, you started it, Kitty-cat."

"All I asked was about your ex-girlfriends. I know about Teresa, I know about Sam, who else is there in your past?"

"It's a long past, and I've told you most of what you need to know." He blew smoke in to the air and waited for her to say something, but she didn't, which was fine by him. She still had that annoying way of bitching about stuff when she should just lie on her back and spread her legs. He shook his head and lit another cigarette and after a moment, she turned to him.

"I never asked, what did Logan say?" she asked, thinking to the arrival of Cable, and how she and Pete hadn't been around for the fight. The Shadow King had dismissed them, though Wolverine and X-Man had stuck around.

Pete shrugged, glad of the change in the type of pillow talk. "He was angry, but I think that's because Cable slapped him about a bit. Nate got lucky from all accounts, but Logan's taken it personal. Though having a chair rammed through your guts is going to nark you in that special way."

"So he wasn't angry at us?"

"Oh, he's always pissed at me. That's what happens when you're screwing his daughter."

"I'm not his daughter," said Kate. "Though..."

"You wish he was and he thinks that way anyhow." Pete took another drag on the cigarette before passing it over to Kate. "Anyway, he gave me a kicking about how I should be more responsible, how I've a duty and how Cable could have done some serious damage."

"What did you say?" said Kate, knowing that Logan and Pete didn't exactly get on that well.

"I told him that I was too busy fucking you to really give a toss what Nathan Summers wanted and if Farouk couldn't take him then what hope did he have of getting control of the world. At which point he pinned me to the wall with his claws, the middle one just proddin' my neck."

"Pete!" she said, thinking he should have mentioned it earlier, but then again she should have known it would end up like that. "One day you're going to push him too far."

"That's what he said and the only reasons he didn't skewer me was that Farouk needed me and that you'd be upset."

"Not that upset," she said with an evil smile. "I've ditched you before, I could do it again."

Pete closed his eyes and met her with an equally evil smile. "An' I could make it so you were like male Jews. I've watched girls get circumcised before and it's ain't pretty - before, during or after."

"You wouldn't," she said worried, because he used the tone he reserved for when he was being at his most cruel and Pete just looked at her before taking back the cigarette and he closed his eyes.

"Don't try me then," he said. It was only a matter of time before the inner council of the Shadow King decided what was going to happen and he needed a rest.

"There are days and there are days," Maverick said as he directed the various agents to the areas he was looking after. He was the senior SHIELD agent on site so he was in charge. There was quite a bit of looting going on as the local hoods took advantage of the chaos so there were agents dealing with that, as well as people ensuring that those who had been under the thrall of Talyn were free of the creature's influence.

It seemed to be that way, but then again there were also times when he looked in to their eyes and he did not know what he saw there, but he knew it wasn't human. There was going to be trouble from this down the line, he could feel it, but that was a problem for another day. Or at least he hoped so and he heard someone calling

his name and he looked up.

"Yes, Michaels?" he said, hoping he had the man's name right.

"Sir," said the agents, a concerned look on his face, "I think you need to come see this."

"Okay," said Maverick and he nodded to some of the agents around him to carry on and he went over to the agent and followed the man to a small alleyway.

"We found this," Agent Michaels said and another agent stepped aside to reveal a carving on the ground, a skull with six trails in the centre of a circle. "It's a mark for Hydra."

"I know that," Maverick answered, getting worried. If they were in the middle of a Hydra cell, then something big could happen, especially with Hydra becoming much more of a threat than they had been in recent years.

"Sorry, sir," Michaels said.

"What else is in the area?" Maverick asked, hoping that there was intelligence that they'd just not got yet. It was pretty confusing with everything that was going on. However, it was going to be unlikely

"Nothing," the other agent answered. "As far as we know there's no Hydra presence in Greenwich, but..."

"With all that's been going on with them lately our intel regarding Hydra is suspect," Maverick replied with a sigh. "Damn, we're going to have to investigate. Building to building."

"Yes, sir," said the agents and they went to get a small team together. This was obviously the place to start but why? If it wasn't for the fact that they were sweeping the alleyways in case of anything the serpent had done, they'd never have found this mark and North wondered how long it had been here. He had to contact Forge and let him know what they'd found.

"There are days and there are days," he said again and made the call.

"C'mon kid," said Cyclops as he looked at Jared, watching as the computers assessed the venom and tried to come up with an

antidote, as the machine kept his body going. Emma had brought the piece of tongue that had been severed when X-Men Prime had arrived and they were analysing the tongue to see if there was something that could help.

Emma was brilliant in her own way, Lydia was a detective by nature and M seemed to simply know what was going on, but this was something that they were unprepared for.

"Where were you?" asked Jubilee as she looked at Cyclops. "We needed you."

"I was trying to get help," Scott answered. "I couldn't reach Cable, Rachel or anyone. Whatever was going on out there was disrupting communications. If Cerebro wasn't a direct extension of the mansion's computers I don't know if I'd have been in touch with you."

"Rachel's in the hospital," said Lydia, looking over. "Her Askani students were killed a little while ago, and she was seemingly injured at the same time. I'm surprised you didn't know..."

"What?" said Scott, sharply turning to look at her. "How do you know?"

"Because of Cable we keep an eye on her," Lydia answered. "We as in SHIELD. After what's gone on with him over the last couple of years, we figured it was best to do that. He attracts trouble."

"He's his father's son," Emma said.

"I don't understand how nobody's told me," said Scott, angry. "Though Rachel was from a different future, she was still flesh and blood and the idea of losing another child... "What happened? I mean, who did it?"

"Nobody seems to know. Cable dealt with it in house," Lydia said. "And you've not exactly been reachable." Scott paused and wondered how much he had missed, what he had let slip by him while he was full of self-pity.

"Why didn't you tell me, Nate?" Cyclops whispered as he looked on at Jared Corbo and hoped the Canadian recovered quickly.

"I think we've got it," said Emma. "Cerebro..."

"Confirmed," said Cerebro. "We've a counter and I'm uploading the details to the medical computers. With luck he'll stop degenerating and his body will start to recover."

"He's taken significant internal damage," said Monet. "I think we may be too late."

"Then maybe I can help," said Siryn, who had entered the room with Magma. "Scott."

"Teresa," he replied, a tad coldly. "What are you thinking?"

"A transfusion," she said. "Monitored and controlled by the Shi'ar systems, they can filter my blood and extract the nanites and put them in to Jared's body. They'll start to fix him up."

"It may be the only way to keep him alive," said Monet.

"However what do we know about these nanites? What has Sinister engineered them to do exactly? Do they monitor you, send him information on what's going on? I don't think he's ever been the benevolent type, so the question is what's in it for him?"

"I cannae answer," said Siryn. "However if he is monitoring it, then he's done nothing about it."

"But you're not an X-Man," Scott countered. "It's a security risk..."

"Is it worth Jared's life?" asked Emma. "Are you ready to condemn him because of Sinister?"

Scott paused. "No," he said. "I'm not." His fists were clenched. "Do it." Siryn nodded and Emma started to fit her up to the systems.

"I'm going to try and contact SHIELD," said Lydia. "See what they know about your daughter." Cyclops nodded and Lydia looked at him. If she didn't know better she'd say there was something wrong with him, but that was only a gut impression.

"I'll take you," said Jubilee and Magma smiled. She'd babysat the guests long enough and she had a curiosity about Radius. He was annoying, certainly not her type but his trying amused her and though she had only known him a short while, she knew she would miss it.

Lydia smiled as she looked at her and followed Jubilee outside.

"FX?" she said.

"Yeah, I hate it too," Jubilee said, "but Cyclops is the boss and he gave the name out."

"There's definitely something wrong with him," said Lydia, softly.

"We've been saying it for ages. I mean, why let Emma Frost here... she killed my friend and she's manipulated us and..." as Jubilee continued her tirade against Cyclops decisions, Lydia pondered what was going on and then she realised something. She didn't know where Marcus was...

"And that's what's been happening, Professor," said Marcus as he sat inside the Danger Room, the Xavier program running.

"Mr Raven," said the image of Xavier. The room was comprised of a replica of the man's study of with the man himself sitting behind his desk, in his favourite chair, looking out of the window. "May I call you Marcus?"

"Yes, of course," said Marcus.

"It seems to me that there has been a lot of changes since my death and indeed since our last conversation. These Sons of Set were indeed powerful entities, but it shows how much power you have at your disposal. I knew when I first met you how much power you had. Your psionic defences are aggressive and that is because of the pure power they possess."

"That's the thing Ah want to talk to you about," said Marcus. "Ah know how much power Ah have, but Ah don't know how to actualise it. Ah've not the skill and Ah'm getting in to situations where I need it."

"And you think it's this that's cost you your friends to the Shadow King?" said Xavier. "Don't Farouk is a powerful foe, and a wily opponent. I have often suspected that he has been playing selected cards from a much larger deck. His defeat on Muir was almost too easy and if David returned, then he certainly could as well. I should have prepared but by the time it crossed my mind I was involved in other things."

"Onslaught."

"Yes," said Xavier. "My only advice is this, trust in yourself. You have been through enough and come out the other side alive. You have had a baptism of fire. I knew you would have made an excellent member of the X-Men."

"Thank you, sir."

"And forgive Pete Wisdom. I never knew him, but from what Katherine told me of him, he was a good man. His heart was in the right place, no matter what he did."

Marcus nodded, thinking it was a shame that Xavier had died. They needed a man with his wisdom and he was glad they had this chance to talk.

"Understood," said Forge, his voice crackling over the radio as the interference got in the way of the transmission. "I'm monitoring it from headquarters. Forge out."

"That was odd," North said to himself. Forge didn't sound quite himself, but then with all that was going on perhaps it was a lot to expect of him. The man was organising the world's safety almost single-handed and he was only a man. However Forge had given him clearance to act and that was all that was needed and he went over to Michaels. "Anything?"

"No, sir," Michaels answered. "If there is a secret door around here then there's no way we can detect it."

"Figures," said Maverick. "It's never going to be easy. Are your team..."

"Working the buildings? Yes, sir. I've agents in each of the buildings the alley borders, and I've also got a camera in the sewer just to see what's down there."

"Found any Turtles?" Maverick said.

"No, sir, but I believe they were seen at Madison Square Garden."

"Great," said North and he looked up at the sky. "Wait a minute..."

he said. "That's odd."

"What?" said Michaels. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't understand."

"The air... it's shimmering," said Maverick and he changed the view from the eyepieces on his faceplate, magnifying the view. There was a definite disturbance. He pulled his pistol from the holster pointed up and fired and the bullet ricocheted back to the ground. "Uh oh," he muttered.

"It's a holographic image," said Michaels. "Hiding..."

"Hydra," said Maverick and he fired up his bio kinetic energies and blasted the seal of Hydra and there was a hum as the energy was redirected upwards, dispersing the image and revealing a new structure. "I think we've found what we're looking for," he said and then the structure opened and Hydra agents started to pour out and Maverick knew they had a problem.

"And then there are days..."

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...

Issue #40

Pete Wisdom

"I'm what?" said Katherine Pryde as she looked at the SHIELD doctor and at Genesis who had manifested himself, after asking permission to join them. Genesis believed it wasn't right that she was alone, and even though he was a computer programme that looked like Forge, he still had a piece of Forge's soul, and he knew she needed someone there, a familiar face.

Shadowcat

"Kate, you're pregnant," the doctor said. "Genesis asked us to examine you to confirm it, but he found out from Cerebro who scanned you while you were at Xavier's. He also asked to make sure there was no injury to the baby after the fight with Iceman. From what we can tell, you're about two months down."

Siryn

"I'm having a baby," Kate, muttered not really hearing the doctor as the enormity of what was going on sank in. Under the influence of the Shadow King she had seduced David North and later been with Pete Wisdom and in neither case had they used protection. The question now was who was the father and how could she tell them?

Maverick

"Yes, you're having a baby," the doctor said with a smile. "This is a usual reaction. Sometimes they ask how and then I draw diagrams." He chuckled at his own joke. "I'll give you a moment for the news to sink in, then I'll come back and give you some more details of what to expect." Genesis nodded to the doctor who left.

"Kate," he said and she looked up. "Are you okay?"

"It's just a shock," she answered. "I mean, I never thought I'd be pregnant until I was much older. There's so much to do, to be done." She looked at Genesis. "It's strange. You look like Forge which is comforting, but I know you're a computer programme which is also

reassuring."

"Thank you," Genesis replied. "However, in light of your condition, I am tempted to take you off active duty. There has already been one near miss with your child and the part of me that is Forge knows how he would have felt if anything were to happen."

"Not yet," said Kate. "There's a lot of decisions to make. What about the father? Who is it?" She paused a moment. "That sounded so much better in my head."

"They don't know," said Genesis, checking with the doctors at the same time as he spoke with her. "The manipulation of your DNA by Arnim Zola did something the medical team cannot identify as yet who her father of your child is - it could be either Maverick or Wisdom."

"Oh, God," said Kate and she sat down, her hand resting over her belly.

"I think the best way to handle this is a mission that is not strenuous. I have just the thing for you and X-Force. An undercover operation in China will ensure the safety of the baby and give you time to consider your options." Kate looked at Genesis who was looking at her. She knew what he meant, because it had been what she had meant.

"It'll also give Lydia a chance to heal as well," she said and Genesis nodded. Lydia had been in surgery ever since she had got back to the Helicarrier and though it had been a serious injury she was doing recovering and given time she would be back to herself. Pete hadn't left her side since he'd got back from Washington,

"X-Force will be there to co-ordinate and act if necessary," Genesis continued. "That means no risk taking by you, and that is an order from the SHIELD Director." Shadowcat nodded - it should be easy enough.

HUNTING SEASON

Part 2: Timing

by [David Wheatley](#)

Author's Note: This issue is continued from Soldier X #6

"Never believe a computer you've not programmed yourself," Kate muttered, as she stood there in a former strong hold of the villain the Yellow Claw. X-Force had been in China a month, had gained valuable inroads to the Illuminati and then an NSA team had come in and screwed it up. They'd taken the NSA mutant squad down, but it was too late and now they had been confronted by the Mandarin and the Illuminati forces.

"Isn't that Fu Manchu?" Pete shouted. "Are we his prisoners or yours?"

"It does not matter," Fu Manchu hissed. "You are our prisoners and for your attempts at subverting our organisation, you will die. Kill them!" he commanded his people and the Illuminati came forward and X-Force went to work as Maverick got to his feet and stood before the Mandarin.

"Taking you down will be a pleasure," North said and the Mandarin shook his head.

"I do not think so," he said and he fired his impact beam at Maverick who countered it with a bio-kinetic blast. Mutant powers met alien technology, throwing both Maverick and the Mandarin back, but where as Maverick only had the one energy attack, the Mandarin had another nine and North figure they could really do with William Bourne getting up.

The Hurricane of Potential's powers would be really useful about now, but Bourne hadn't got up yet. Maverick was still standing because of his ability to absorb impacts. The rest of the Soldier X unit hadn't woken up yet after being taken down by X-Force, and while they didn't really need them just yet, they would have been handy. It didn't make sense to Maverick that there wasn't more co-operation between the various teams out there, and this whole thing could have been avoided.

He hated politics and he dodged another blast from the Mandarin, rolled drew his gun and fired at him but the bullets were met by a burst of intense heat and they melted away to nothing and the

Mandarin gave a low laugh.

"There are ten rings and you cannot dodge them all!" and the disintegrator ring flared as did the ice blast

"Probably not," Maverick said dodging the blasts, which hit some of the Illuminati, killing them and he fired his own bio-kinetic blast and the Mandarin staggered. "I just have to survive the ones I don't!"

X-Force and Soldier X united as one to fight the Illuminati, because in effect they were on the same mission and their objectives had combined, even if their sponsors and methods were different. Lydia and Galatea who had been sparring moments earlier were fighting side by side. Both had different moves, but what Galatea lacked in finesse she made up for in brute force. Lydia knew she had been fortunate before that her combat training had been designed by people like Captain America who had fought many people like her before, and that had been the edge she'd needed.

Lydia winced as she stretched a little too far, the effects of her injury still not 100% gone, but she had wanted to come on this mission. Neither she nor Kate had wanted to be left behind due to their respective conditions. That was something that was getting to her as well. She knew that it wasn't her Pete that had been intimate with her, but a Pete according to the Shadow King, but it was still possible he was the father of her child. It was something that was hanging over her relationship with Wisdom, even though they weren't talking about it.

Not yet.

That frustration, that niggling feeling that the man she loved had fathered a child with someone else... it got to her and she fought with a little more tenacity than normal, letting her negativity free and in to the faces of those around her. The SHIELD uniforms protected them from bullets, and the others seemed to be taking things well too as it was and Lydia took a moment to rest and see what the others were doing

Whisper was still out, unable to stand on his leg, as was Vector, but they had been telekinetically moved somewhere safe, and though Vector was starting to stir, Whisper had it together enough to keep them covered with his gravity powers and soon they'd be in on the fight. Velocity was hurtling around the place and taking people out

before they knew he was there, as Siryn unleashed her sonic attack on people. Marcus, Enigma and Madelyne Pryor were keeping people off guard telepathically and the Illuminati were being beaten back. It was a team effort and Lydia wondered if the battle would have been easier if either team had been missing, though if Soldier X hadn't been there then this wouldn't have been happening in the first place.

Then there was Pete who was using a combination of hot knives and punches to inflict as much damage as he could, because he could see that Shadowcat was staring down Fu Manchu. The so-called Celestial One was a master of the mystic arts, technologically gifted and Master of the Si-Fan martial arts and he could see why she was going after him. Fu Manchu was more of a planner than a doer, but Shadowcat was going to appeal to his sense of honour and challenge him - thus keeping him occupied in the same way Maverick was keeping the Mandarin busy.

The two of them bowed to each other and then the fight began. Manchu was a master of the art, older than he looked by a long way but for his age he was still spry and vicious. He struck out at her and Kate almost bent back double to avoid the shot, turning it in to a handstand and bringing up her feet to kick Fu Manchu in the jaw but he twisted out of the way avoiding the kick and as she landed on to her feet, he swept at her, to knock the supports from under her and bringing his elbow down to where her midsection should have been.

However Kate was ready and she rolled as she landed so that the shot struck the floor of the room, but if Manchu felt the pain of the connection then he didn't show it and the battle continued as Shadowcat leapt to her feet as Manchu leapt up and both of them faced each other. Manchu reacted the quicker of the pair and he struck out his hand out flat and his fingers pointed at Kate's throat, the strike moving with the precision and speed of a cobra, but Shadowcat saw it and she drew her arms up and together, catching the hand in-between her forearms, then raising her elbows up, slamming Manchu in the jaw. As he fell back he kicked out with his legs, kicking towards her gut.

Pete was watching and he gasped and a bolt of fear went through him. "KATE PHASE!" he shouted and just as the kick was about to connect, Manchu's legs passed through her and Pete could breathe again. The baby growing inside her had already taken a shot like that and survived, but this was an attack by someone that meant to do her serious harm and would have no qualms about killing the baby to do so. Kate then moved, taking the advantage her phase had caused and

she moved as quickly as Manchu, who wasn't expecting her to be standing when he got up and the double kick connected in a one-two, hitting him in the jaw and crotch. Manchu was reeling from that attack and Shadowcat pressed the attack with a hand-chop against the old man's neck and Fu Manchu hit the floor

"Yes!" said Wisdom, but as his attention was on Fu Manchu, it wasn't on the Mandarin who lashed out with his electro-beam, covering Maverick in black light so he couldn't interfere and Shadowcat was dropped and Fu Manchu stood, shakily but with a focus and he raised his foot above Shadowcat, his obvious intent to stamp on her head and Pete threw five hot knives towards the old man which he twisted, shifted and dodged without losing his balance, then he suddenly toppled over as Whisper focused and used his gravity powers to give him a slight nudge and Fu Manchu found himself held in place unable to fight the increased gravity about him.

The tide was turning but then Madelyne screamed, and the two telepaths that were linked with her also cried out and the Mandarin put his hand to his head, feedback hitting him from the mento-intensifier.

"What the hell?" asked Pete, clicking his fingers at Terry, who hit the Mandarin with a sonic assault to keep up the punishment. The telepaths were not well and Madelyne seemed to be disincorporating.

"Nate," she moaned. "Please, it's killing me..."

"Our Nate?" said Pete, clearing a Path and coming over. "Nate 'shouldn't exist but I do' Nate?"

"I think so," said Lydia, keeping enemies off them.

"He and Cable are doing something..." Marcus said. "It's having an effect on the astral plane and it's hitting us all."

"My son, my lover... NOOOOOO!," Madelyne cried and there was a flash and she faded away to nothing, leaving not even a trace.

"And again - what the hell?" Pete said.

"Something went down," said Raven. "Cable and X-Man did something and in doing it, it caused Madelyne to cease to exist. Whatever's happened... Ah don't think it's good news..."

"Why am I not surprised?" said Pete with a sigh..

"LOOK OUT!" shouted Enigma and she pushed Wisdom out of the way as the Mandarin fired his matter rearranger ring. It was a wild shot, but it would have hit Pete in the back and instead it just caught Maria, her arm turning to an almost liquid state, flesh and bone simply dripping to the floor. She cried out in pain and Marcus turned off her pain receptors but she was in a severe state of emotional shock and it was going to take as much as he could to keep her from slipping away from them.

"Terry!" Pete said, but she was on the floor, shielding her eyes. The flash had obviously been from the White Light ring and she'd been blinded. "Oh this isn't good," he said as he fired as many hot knives as he could at the Mandarin who met them with his own heat blast and everyone dived out of the way as the air itself ignited under the attack and then it died and the Mandarin suddenly looked horrified.

"This cannot be!" he said, holding up his hands and staring at the rings. "Why have they ceased to function?!"

"That'd be me," said the Hurricane of Potential, his teeth gritted as he used everything he had to dampen the Mandarin's powers. "I manipulate energy sources and guess what your rings are..."

"You pit your will against mine?" the Mandarin sneered. "You will not win."

"Unless he's given a hand," said Pete. "Mav, wide burst on the rest of the Illuminati. Lydia, you're with me!" The two SHIELD agents ran forward and attacked the Mandarin, who was an incredible martial artist in his own right, but without his rings, and having to fight a battle on three fronts, he was being taxed quite badly. He swiped a shot at Wisdom who ducked, knowing that the Mandarin was quite capable of killing him with a single blow if it came to it, but he was the distraction and Lydia slammed her fist in to the Mandarin's face, and the Asian crime lord fell to the floor as Pete started booting him as hard as he could in the chest, but then Bourne lost his focus and the Mandarin summoned his last reserves of mental energy and cast the heroes away from him with the vortex beam and he flew up in to the air, but his ascent was slow and his breathing was ragged. The British man had wounded him and that was not something he would forget soon.

"Twice X-Force and SHIELD have interfered in the operations of

the Illuminati - there will not be a third!"

"So swears the Mandarin?" asked Maverick as he hit him with a bio blast and the villain was thrown through the hole in the wall he had made earlier and the team went after him but the Mandarin was gone.

"Damn it," said Pete, slamming his fist against the rock. "He got away..."

"Hey, we weren't geared up for a fight with the Mandarin," said Maverick. "We got away with it, learnt a lot about Illuminati operations in China and at home and we captured Fu Manchu. That's a good day's work." Then he went to check on Kate.

"I wanted him," said Pete, mostly to himself. "Next time, I'll have him." He turned to look at the rest of the room. The Illuminati troops had been subdued and the people in Soldier X had worked well. They'd taken their hits, and lost their boss for a reason that Pete didn't quite understand, but they'd worked well. It was a shame he had to do this.

"Sorry, people, but consider yourselves in SHIELD custody," he said to the Hurricane of Potential.

"You can't, we work for the NSA," said Bourne.

Pete shook his head. "Well, you did."

Director H was interrupted from his reading of reports by a telephone call. He was expecting contact from his NSA agents with Solider X and he picked up the line quickly.

"About time," he said.

"I was thinking that myself," said a voice he didn't know and on the computer screen on his desk appeared the face of Forge.

"Genesis," said Director H.

"And you are Director H, or do you prefer to be called Mr Denti?"

"Very good," said Carl Denti. "You've managed to get through some

very tough firewalls to get that."

"Actually I have connections to a lot of places," said Genesis. "It was not that hard."

"What do you want? The NSA doesn't fall under the jurisdiction of SHIELD."

"No, it does not, but it does fall under the jurisdiction of the President of the United States and he has ordered you to be shut down, after advice from SHIELD."

"You can't do this!" said Denti, standing.

"I can, and I have," said Genesis. "The Soldier X project has been cancelled and is being superceded by a SHIELD agency, that the President is very favourable towards."

"President's change," Denti said. "So do Directors, and I understand that the UN are looking for ways to replace you."

"And my lawyers are also looking at a defence."

"How can a computer have lawyers?"

"Any one or thing can have a lawyer, if you pay them enough," Genesis answered, "and SHIELD has extensive legal connections."

"You've not heard the last of this!" Denti swore.

"Maybe not, but by then it will be done and dusted," Genesis said. "Consider this and execution..." The image faded and the phone line went dead and Denti sat back in his chair, the blood draining from his face. Nobody knew that he was the X-Cutioner; there was nothing to connect him other than a tenuous connection to Fred Duncan. Could Genesis know the truth? Was an overly ambitious computer programme actually threatening him? And what could he do if he were?

Suddenly Carl Denti felt a little less safer than he had done a few minutes ago.

It was a day or so later when the team were back aboard the Helicarrier. Soldier X had been taken away to somewhere else and

nobody really cared where. There were rumours, but then there'd always been rumours, and then Genesis called them all down to the X-Force office

"Wonder what he has to tell us?" said Pete as he and Lydia met with the others on the way to the office.

"Well, I'm intrigued," said Maverick. "We've had a debrief over China, he told us to take it easy for a little while. I wonder where we're heading now?"

"I need to tell you two something as well," said Kate, her voice soft but her tone firm and she looked at them. It could only be about one thing.

Lydia looked uncomfortable and Pete held her hand. "No," she said. "Catch me up," he nodded and the three of them went in to an empty room. They knew she had seen the doctors after the China incident and she'd spoken with them about the baby at length and both men figured that they were going to get an answer to the question that was hanging over them as to who the father was.

"So," Pete said. "What is it?" Kate looked at both of them, thinking they had no idea and she muttered a prayer for strength.

"There's no easy way to say this, so I'll just come out with it." Her voice trembled as she spoke. "I'm not keeping the baby. It's not been easy, in fact I..." Her voice broke and she composed herself and started again.

"This isn't easy for me, believe me it isn't, but I'm not ready to be a mother yet. There's so much for me to do, and... It's the right thing to do. I've made an appointment and the termination is scheduled for next week. One of you is the father, and so you've a right to know, but please don't try and change my mind. You won't."

"Oh, Kate," said David, looking at her. "Are you okay? I mean... I don't know what to say. It's... oh, Kate." She could see that the decision moved him, and she knew that he cared about her a lot, maybe even loved her, but he was supportive of her. He understood the reasons and she looked at Pete, who so far had said nothing, but she knew him well enough to know he wasn't happy.

"Thanks for telling us, Kit," he said, finally, shaking his head. "Real good of you. Now, let's go see what Genesis wants." He stood up

and walked out of the door.

"Oh shit," Kate muttered and she went after him, followed by Maverick. "Pete..."

"Don't," he said, turning on his heel, his tone dark and menacing and his finger raised and pointed it in the air. "Just don't. In fact, don't talk to me at all. Not for a while." He turned away from them and continued walking.

"Pete," North started to go after him but Kate put her hand on his shoulder and Wisdom kept on walking, as if he hadn't even heard his name called.

"Leave it," she said. "He's hurting."

"So am I," said Maverick. "So are you. It's no excuse to behave like that."

"I know him better than you do, and he'll get over it, but it will take him time." Pete had lost so much in his life and she had hoped he'd take it better than this and she knew she should have known better. "Last time I hurt him that badly it was years before we saw each other again." Her words were spoken as if she were talking to someone else and then she looked at David. "You know I didn't want it to be like this, right?"

"None of us did," said North, putting his arms around her and he kissed her forehead. "Life never quite works the way you think it will." He brushed away a tear that was rolling down her cheek and he hoped he wasn't crying himself. "Come on, let's go to the briefing."

They entered the X-Force office and as they did so, Pete moved to the other side of the room. It was a casual move, but Kate knew it was a slight to her and she closed her eyes. The rest of the team were here and Genesis appeared.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "As you know. X-Force was SHIELD's way of promoting peace between humans and mutants, to show the world that mutant-kind was not a terrifying menace, but with the potential for good and evil as everyone else. The team has, since the formation, done a great many things, worked hard at this and given a lot for the team." He paused a moment. "That is why I am disbanding X-Force."

"What the hell?" said Pete, on his feet in a moment, a shade faster than the others. "You just said..."

"I know what I said," Genesis replied. "If you will allow me to finish. I am disbanding X-Force and putting in to place a new Agency - the XSE, based on the principles established by the X-Force project. The XSE will be a means of making sure that incidents like those with Apocalypse, with the Shadow King, with any rogue mutants, do not happen again. You will have full legal powers for detention, interrogation and incarceration. There is a base of operations already in place, that SHIELD use as a training facility in the Pacific Rim."

"You mean SF Island?" said Lydia. It was where she had been trained.

"Yes," Genesis said. "San Fiorentino Island will be the XSE headquarters and is almost operational. While you have been away for the last month I have had people working on this project and we are almost at completion. You will be much more than mutants with badges - you will be the law."

"You mention 'you' a lot," Maverick commented. "Define 'you'."

"X-Force will be the main command unit for the XSE. I am working on getting more members to work with us on this, more mutants should I say, but as the most experienced members of the XSE you will be responsible for setting up missions, going on them if necessary. You know the boundaries in which we can operate - the XSE will be a branch of SHIELD and SHIELD is still subject to the same laws as it always has been. The details of your command will be worked out, should you accept."

"What about the legal challenge the UN are putting up?" asked Teresa. "They think you cheated them. Will the project be threatened if they win?"

"They've been working on the legality of my role for a month or so now," Genesis admitted. "The basis of the argument is that as a computer programme I do not have any legal rights. My lawyers are quoting the roles of those like Machine Man, Vision, and other cybernetic life forms. It is a complex issue, and with something as subjective as this issue I cannot predict what will happen but we will know in due course. The XSE project has been in place for some time, though if I am removed from my post, the new Director may abandon it, though we have invested a great deal of time and effort

thus far in to making it happen. Which leaves one question - are you willing to be a part of the project?"

Pete looked at his team, reading their reactions, staying a little longer on Shadowcat than he probably should have done.

"If we decide not to, what happens?" he asked.

"I am making the XSE happen," said Genesis. "If you choose not to be reassigned, there are other roles within SHIELD that you could play, or you can resign your commission. The choice is yours. In either event, X-Force is over."

The room was silent as they thought over it, going through their personal feelings on it, digesting what was going on and Genesis looked at them, knowing it was a lot to ask of them, but time was of the essence.

"What do you say? Are you in or are you out?"

Author's Notes

As people will know this is my last issue of X-Force, and what I intend to be the last of the series. Whether that happens or not it up for debate. Perhaps X-Force will continue as X-Force, though I'd like to see it continue as the XSE as that has much more potential as a series. It all depends if you can get writers and what people want to do and of course it depends on how the new EiC's of Chris Munn and Mike Shirley go with M2K as a whole. I know what I'd like, but it's out of my hands now though I will be interested to see what happens.

Now, with it being my last issue, there's a custom of saying a few things and it's not going to change now as there's a few things I'd like to say.

First off - much respect to Russ Anderson for taking a chance on the series a few years ago. 33 issues, three annuals and a special later, I hope I repaid the trust. He told me I had to blow him away - I like to think it happened.

Second - the series has been one of the most fun to write. James Bond, Mission Impossible, the action adventure flicks you see, that's what I wanted this to be. Pure fun. It's had it's

serious moments, but it's always been fun.

Third - the series made M2K's SHIELD come to life and people worked with it. Thank you to all of those who did. Shared continuity is great isn't it?

Finally - thank you, the reader. I've had a lot of positive feedback on the series, which I appreciated a lot. I've also had some constructive comments which I've taken on board and in some cases used. Not always, but there have been times. It's been a blast to do this and whatever the future is (because it is an open ended cliffhanger...) I did exactly what I set out to do, from start to finish and if the future writer(s) have half as much fun as I did, they're in for a good time.

David Wheatley
12/18/03

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...



Issue # 43

Infiltration, Part 2 "Information is Key" Written by Troy Bengal

Pete Wisdom

Maverick and his team came to the end of a hall to find themselves faced with four separate choices. Before them were four halls that all looked identical and none even gave the slightest hint of where they could find the captured XSE agents. X-Force so far had managed to get through a floor and two basement levels of practically barely any kind of security. David had a major suspicion they were being allowed to get this far. He didn't voice it though since everyone had turned to him as the de facto leader of this mission and he needed to keep everyone focused.

Shadowcat

"I don't like this one bit. They're letting us get this far," Shard said voicing what Maverick had just been thinking to himself.

Siryn

"I know. We barely encountered any type of resistance. I was expecting more from the organization Genesis described," Shadowcat commented.

Maverick

"It doesn't matter now. We got four choices ahead of us here and to be quite honest splitting up is the last thing I want to do," Maverick said.

Marcus clicked his teeth together and gave a slight huff before he said, "Guess that means we gotta play Duck Duck Goose."

Maverick nodded, "But first tell me if you can pick any mental signatures anywhere. It might give us some hint on what to do."

Marcus placed his hand to his forehead and began to concentrate.

Seconds later he came out of his trance and reported, “ I'm picking up faint signals down every hall y'all. I'm guessin' they have some damn good shieldin'. We're shit out of luck.”

“I'm use to being out of that. So lets just pick already,” Shard exclaimed. The XSE officer was use to making decisions as a high-ranking officer in her time, but it seemed all of the X-Groups took forever to make a decision. Sometimes going off your gut was better than psychoanalyzing a situation to death.

“The third hall. I don't why, but I'm going with my intuition here. If I'm wrong we'll find another way. It's what X-Force does,” Maverick said as he reloaded one of his gun with the titanium tipped bullets Genesis had issued to him recently.

“I'll go in first. My powers should keep me out of harm's way. The rest of you follow behind me,” Shadowcat ordered as she took off in a sprint down the dark hallway.

“I'll go next. My powers can provide some illumination,” Shard said her wrists lighting up with photonic energy and becoming a beacon for everyone to follow.

“Ya gotta like the lady's style,” Marcus smiled as he and Maverick followed behind Bishop's younger sister.

“Lets hope her style matches her fighting skills,” Maverick remarked as he continued his sprint down the hallway. He could make out computer chips that were engraved into the wall. He couldn't be sure as to why those chips were there, but in his mind they spoke of advanced technology. Did Genesis *really* know what he was dealing with here ?

“You're kiddin' right? Tha gal is from the XSE. And I mean the real deal here. Your ol' buddy Creed ain't even a big timer where she came from. I don't know about you, but that damn sho says a lot to me,” Marcus replied.

“Show me some proof and then I might believe it,” Maverick said suddenly throwing himself up against a wall as they neared the end of the hallway. Shard had already taken the position and Marcus quickly followed suit. Kitty obviously had decided she was going to jump into the situation.

Damn it Kitty! You're going to get yourself hurt, Maverick thought

to himself.

“Don't worry she's fine. And yes I did pick up on your thought before you ask,” Marcus forewarned as they continued to slide down their respective sides of the wall to the end of the hall.

“C'mon guys! The coast is clear!” Kitty shouted.

“Alright lets move!” Maverick exclaimed as he got off the wall and ran out of the hallway. Shard and Marcus had made it out before he had and he saw just how clear the coast wasn't.

“You made a mistake coming here X-Force,” a slim Puerto Rican woman said as she threw Kitty on the floor before Maverick's feet. With a slick smile she added, “Don't even think about moving there buddy. I'll have all these hundred something robots gun you down.”

All David could do was keep his eyes on the woman. Her long black hair and curvy body made her quite attractive, but something about her green eyes and tight red dress made one suspect something was sinister in her. It was as if she was wearing a skin and something terrible was just waiting to come out underneath.

“So you guys use stolen Manbots it seems,” Marcus commented as he stared up at the golden robots that had taken all of them hostage. They had X-Force surrounded in almost every direction except from the hall they had come through. If only Kitty was conscious they could try and make a run for it, but they couldn't just leave her here. No member of X-Force got left behind.

“Not stolen. Just borrowed,” the woman smiled as moved closer to Marcus her heels clicking loudly every step along the way. Her body moved with such fluidity and grace that one would swear she was meant for the runaways of Milan .

It's a damn shame she works for Damocles, Marcus thought to himself.

“So I see that Genesis just hasn't gotten the hint yet. None of his bastards are getting into my base!” the woman yelled spit spewing all over Marcus' face.

{ {Do you want us to detain these infiltrators Eve?} } one of the Manbots asked.

“Yes. Detain them and lock them up with the others. I'm sure Dr.

Kyker will like some new test subjects,” Eve smiled as she leaned over and kissed Marcus on the cheek.

“Before you go. How did you get her to lie like that?” Maverick asked both angered at what Eve might have done to Kitty and out of genuine curiosity.

“Boy please. She was out the moment she stepped into this room. I can simply imitate voices just by looking at the person among other things. It makes for some nice role play in the sack,” Eve laughed as she blew a kiss to Maverick before leaving the large circular roofed room.

As she left the room a large light green android that was blowing off yellow smoke entered into the room and he stood nearly about nine feet tall. A fog covered the glass that hid his face and he had three massive fingers on each hand. The monstrosity looked around at all of the Manbots and finally set his sights on Maverick.

“I think I remember you. Your name is Maverick. Do you remember me?” the android asked.

“Oh I remember you. You're the Acidroid. You were a reject Soviet project. I thought Cable had gotten rid of you,” Maverick replied. He recalled that mission quite well. He had been sent in to dismantle a genetics experiment of some sort that the Soviets had been working on. It was after Omega Red had been put on ice. Acidroid had been one result they put to the side and Maverick had been forced to face him. He barely survived the encounter and he thought Acidroid had been destroyed only to show up fighting Cable and then the Fantastic Four.

“Cable failed, but that doesn't matter. I'm going to have fun with you,” Acidroid said with a voice that would make Darth Vader proud.

Adjusting his eye patch and laying his brown coat to the side Fury entered the office of Genesis half expecting to be mowed down by lasers. That wasn't the case though. The living computer program had already been waiting there for him to show or at least it looked like that to Nick. You could never be sure with Genesis. The thing was a computer program after all and he probably was doing a hundred things at once.

{{Hello Fury. I was beginning to wonder if you would show. I'm glad to see you're well and out of the hospital. Shadow King's influence hurt far too many people. I'm sorry you had to be one of them.}}

“Life can be a bitch. I think you and me know that Genesis. The part of you that's Forge had to pay too high a price,” Fury said.

{{Sacrifices have to be made in the name of safeguarding this world. So what was it you wanted to talk to me about?}}

Nick pulled out a cigar and lit it before getting to the point; “I know I can never have the same position in this organization I once had. Too many politicians won't let it happen and circumstances are against me. I would like to still nonetheless be a part of this organization.”

{{So what are you proposing?}}

“I would like to work as an independent agent under you. Not anything special. I just want to get out into the field and work again. Being cooped up in a hospital just ain't my idea of fun. I need to get my knuckles dirty again,” Fury explained.

{{Fine. Your request is granted Nick. I'll get the paperwork through quickly. Consider yourself a part of S.H.I.E.L.D. again.}}

“Thank you Genesis,” Fury said walking out of the room. He puffed out a bit of smoke and smiled to himself. Forge's plan was going smoothly so far.

Bishop dodged the punch of Venom and slammed his elbow into the back of the black symbiote's head. The energy construct flew into a nearby wall and made a dent in it. Turning around quickly Bishop fired two shots into the back of Venom's neck. Black muck and entrails flew all over the former X-Men Omega leader's uniform.

“Damn. These constructs are extremely realistic,” Bishop said as he turned his attention to Wisdom who was in combat with Carnage.

“This bugger doesn't seem to like my heat blades,” Pete laughed as he ducked the hand of Carnage that was now in the shape of an axe. Wisdom moved in close and shot off five heat blades into the

construct's abdomen.

Carnage didn't even have time to roar out in pain before Bishop literally blew the back of his head off with a plasma blast. Smoking still pluming from his gun Bishop said, "Figured you needed a hand Wisdom."

"I had the bloke fine, but Lydia might need some help with Spider-Man. The guy is putting the moves on her. She's a strong gal, but she ain't got the kind of agility to handle him," Pete said as he moved quickly to where Lydia was being entrapped in webbing by the construct Spider-Man.

"I think you two should worry about yourselves," Devious said as four Thing constructs headed towards Peter and Bishop.

"I've had just about all I can bloody stand of you!" Pete yelled holding out his palm as bright orange energy poured out of it and enveloped the Thing constructs entirely obliterating them and knocking Devious down the length of the hallway until he collided with the door at the end of it.

Devious' body slumped to the ground, but while sliding down his shoulder pressed an emergency red button. Alarms and sirens began to go off at a rapid rate. The whole hallway became illuminated with red lights and you could hear the armada of footsteps above and below.

"Would someone mind getting me out of this webbing?" Lydia asked. The Spider-Man construct disappeared once Devious was taken out, but the webbing he had trapped her in was still there. She had been entirely covered from the shoulders down.

"Sorry babe. Got a little caught up there," Pete replied.

"And since when could you do that?" Lydia asked. She knew that Peter had experienced a power increase since his fight against Alastair and the testing that the Shadow King had done on him. The Genoshan woman just hadn't seen him execute those powers yet. At least until now.

"I've been practicing luv," Peter smiled his body language visibly showing fatigue.

A swarm of white lab coats and middle-aged men ran down the hall towards the nearest exit. The alarms going meant there was a major

intruder in the building and it wasn't something the various scientists didn't want to stick around for. They moved at such a frantic pace that some of them left the doors to their offices wide open.

One of the fatter scientists knelt down next to one door taking deep breaths trying to regain his strength. When most of the crowd had passed him he stood upright and walked into the wide-open lab. Smiling his chubby white face changed into a dark blue and his eyes went yellow. As he continued to walk the lab coat disappeared and was replaced by slim blue arms and a tight black skirt and ankle high boots.

"Bingo," Mystique said as she moved towards one of the computers and slipped in the disc that Genesis had given them to extract the information with. Sitting down in the rolling leather chair Raven began to type frantically.

"Come on baby. Give me what I need," Mystique said moving past dozens of encryptions and codes. Her years as a terrorist had made her evolve her skills in hacking. In today's world information was power beyond measure and most of it was locked behind the doors of computers.

Hearing a sudden rustle of equipment behind her Mystique quickly shifted back into her shape of the fat, bald scientist.

"What are you still doing in the building?" a guard asked nearly pointing his gun at Mystique before realizing that she (or he in this case) was one of the "staff".

"I have important information on this computer that cannot be allowed to fall into the wrong hands. No matter what the threat is this information must be extracted. It's highly classified," Mystique, replied with a voice geeky enough to make Richard Simmons look like the class bully.

"Understood. We don't need the Senior Executives getting pissed. I'll stay with you until you get out the information that you need," the guard said.

Holding back the urge to cuss Mystique grinned and adjusted her glasses, "That would be wonderful. No telling what's in the building."

BEEP! BEEP!

“Ahh the extraction is complete. Excellent device this computer is. I don't know what I would do without it,” Mystique laughed in the sick Porky Pig kind of way as she pulled the disk from the hard drive. Getting up out of her seat she smiled towards the guard, tucked the disk in her shirt and charged shoulder first into the Zeneo Tech. employee.

“Wha the fuck!” the guard yelled as he fell flat on his back from the blow. He saw the scientist flipping through the air and quickly changing into a woman they had been briefed on. It was Mystique. The guard reached out for his gun, but the blow of the woman had knocked his weapon too far away from him. By the time he got to his feet the woman had already took off.

Grabbing his radio the guard said with extreme urgency, “We have a shape shifter in the building. It's Mystique! She's armed and dangerous! Use extreme force in taking her down! We got a Code 12 here people!”

Meanwhile Raven was making her to an open window, but before she leapt out of it she tapped her ear to activate the communication device and said, “I got the information. I'm leaving the building as we speak. The rest of you get the hell out of here!”

Leaping out of the window Mystique began to fall towards the ground and she was enjoying it. Having the wind blow against her body and being in freefall was something she knew she could do and get away with it because just before she reached the end of her fall her body changed into the form of a raven. Moving through the sky she made her way to the rendezvous point where she was suppose to meet up with Bishop and the rest.

Genesis moved with the aid of his android body to the screen where his face would normally be, but instead the lovely face of a recently gained associate of his greeted him.

{ { I assume that you contacting me means you have fulfilled your part of the deal? } } Genesis presumed nonchalantly.

“Your assumption would be right, Genesis,” the woman known as Eve said with what seemed to be a sadistic curtsy. “Maverick and his group are being held in my custody,” she continued. “Acidroid is even having a bit of fun with Maverick. Seems they have some... unfinished business... to resolve,” Eve said, and she smiled at the

thought of what Acidroid was probably doing to Maverick.

{{ I said for you to capture my team, *not* kill them, Eve, }} Genesis said, though more in reiteration of his point than in anger. {{ Remember the deal. You capture the two teams I send in and you allow my third one to rescue the others. In return I'll-- }} he began to say before being cut off.

“You'll keep the authorities off the Damocles Foundation's back for a year,” Eve completed his sentence in what seemed to be a half-hearted, sing song of a voice. “You don't have to remind me of the deal here,” Eve said crossing her legs together in the white leather chair she was sitting in. “You sure are going through a lot to make your XSE look like the superior force, though. One has to wonder why...”

{{ My reasons are my reasons, }} Genesis said, trailing off for a moment. Eve thought she detected a bit of contemplation and reflection in his tone. Genesis continued, {{ Just make sure my people just stay alive before I send in the third team. Understood? }}

“Of course, Genesis,” Eve confirmed before cracking a faint smile. “Nice doing business with you,” she said before her image faded away with a fizzle of gray.

{{ Mastodon, }} Genesis finally said. {{ You can make yourself known now. }}

The large brute of a man walked through the sliding door and asked, “Do you want me to get the team together?”

Genesis turned around and nodded to Mastodon. He still was getting use to this android body of his. Being inside the computer gave him an omniscience of sorts that was lacking in his robotic form, but he would be able to fix that in time.

{{ Remember whom I want you get to for the team, }} Genesis said confidently. {{ Kamal, Marvel Guy, Enigma, Velocity, and Whisper. }}

“Yes, sir,” Mastodan said with a confirming nod. “I'll get the five of them together immediately.”

{{ Good. Now everything is in motion. The pieces are set and the game has begun. }}

Next Issue: Siryn meets someone she never saw coming while Genesis analyzes the information on Mystique's disc!!!

Forcing the Issue

Hopefully this issue delivered another plot twist to thicken the plots of Genesis and Forge. I'm definitely having fun developing that conflict. I also had fun working with Devious. He's an old original character at M2K. He appeared in like issue 7 or 8 of Fantastic Four I believe. This is his first appearance since. So he's definitely been on the shelves a while. Anyway look for some more character interaction, more on Pete's powers, and of course more on the XSE. Once again if you have any comments, questions, or just stuff in general hit me up at jangofett2004@yahoo.com

-Troy Bengal

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...



Issue # 44

Infiltration, Part 3

"Surprises Abound!"

Written by Troy Bengal

Pete Wisdom

Theresa walked up the hill cradling a batch of roses in her arms. She held the roses close because she didn't want the strong wind to snatch them away from her. Siryn had put her hair back in a bun to keep it out of her eyes and wore a long black jacket to hold the wind at bay. Rourke was used to hills and wind this week. Ireland was abundant in both. Honestly, she didn't mind the weather because she felt at peace here. This place was the home of her fathers (literally and figuratively). Her father's days here had made Theresa relaxed and calm. After going through all the mess she had, the time she endured this time off was a blessing.

Shadowcat

The last thing Theresa had done was visiting the grave of the man she once thought was Black Tom Cassidy. He was far from the ideal, upstanding citizen, but he had cared about her enough for Siryn. She had asked him to talk to her mother for her, but Theresa decided she would visit her mother herself. Maeve Rourke deserved that at least. She never got to see her daughter as she grew up and Theresa rarely ever visited.

Siryn

"Besides I probably won't be back in Ireland for a while Mom. Figured I'd bring you some roses," Siryn said laying down the batch of roses next to the grave marked for her mother.

Maverick

Looking up at the clear sky Siryn could have sworn she saw a cloud that looked like a hand reaching down and fell down her eye. Turning her attention back to the tombstone she smiled and said, "It's a good sign. I wasn't sure if being here was the right thing to do. I've wanted to come here for a long time but I've been scared to. Wasn't sure if I could face you after all the bad things I've done."

"Like sell yourself out to Sinister. I'm sure Mommy isn't too happy about that," a voice called out from behind Siryn.

Theresa immediately swung her head back to see who would so blatantly insult her in front of her mother's grave. The sight that ran across her eyes made her gasp. Standing before her was one of the most evil men down pieces of shit this world has ever produced. It was Fabian Cortez and from the

was Sinister's little bitch.

"What do you want here? Don't think I won't kick your ass in front of my Mom," Siryn pulled her jacket off into the grass and sliding up the sleeves on her shirt.

Holding up his hands in a show of innocence Fabian said, "Hold up! I'm only here to offer."

"And what kind of offer would that be?" Rourke asked with a scowl.

"To join my little team of boy scouts here," Fabian replied as he folded his hands across his chest.

Suddenly a gust of sand blew around Siryn blinding her for a moment. Shaking her head she caught sight of the sand forming into a pile next to Fabian. The pile of sand grains began to shape itself into a woman clothed in a burqa. In her hand she held an Arabian sword that glowed in the bright sunlight.

"This would be Dust," Fabian said giving the woman a soft clap for her extravagant costume.

"Looks more like girl scouts to me," Siryn laughed preparing herself the entire time. She knew just how devious Cortez could be and she wasn't going to let herself fall to another trap. She pulled.

"If I get one more joke about my ponytail I swear some bones are going to get broken," Siryn grabbed and tugging on his long ponytail which had become a trademark of sorts for Cortez.

"Get to the point Fabian. You know I'm already going to tell you flat out no," Siryn said.

"Fine, but I'd figured I'd let you know that Sinister has fallen to a pretty low point. I know what he's after people he once considered commodities. I got myself some protection. Now you're all alone and wide open. Good ol Essex won't mind trying to swoop you up," Fabian said.

"Are you done Cortez? I was trying to talk to my Mom here."

"We'll let you get back to your John Edwards moment. Just remember what I said," Siryn said. He turned his back to Siryn and began to walk away with Dust at his side.

When Siryn was satisfied that he was really gone she turned back to the grave and knelt. Releasing a sigh of relief she said, "That there is one of my biggest mistakes Mom. I thought my powers were my life and gave into a very dark man."

Turning her head up to the sky Siryn could almost feel her mother all around her. It was as if she was telling her that she forgave Theresa. That feeling was worth more than a thousand dollars. The largest mansion money could buy. One of the things Theresa had regretted the most was that she never had the chance to grow up around. Maybe her mother was trying to tell her that.

that to her.

Pete Wisdom felt like a piece of crap at the moment. Overloading his powers the way Devious had put a cramp in his style. He barely managed to get out of the Zeneo HQ as the destruct systems went off. Now here he was back at the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier waiting to pay a visit to Dr. Vesso. More than likely the guy was probably busy dealing with downed and injured agents at the moment. He'd be better off paying a visit to McTaggart anyway, but he'd tell him what was wrong with his powers.

Bishop was holding Pete on his shoulders and as he did the time lost man completely understood the situation that seemed to be facing Wisdom. He knew what it was like not to trust his powers. From the moment he absorbed all that energy from Savitar to the point he completely lost control against Deus he knew what it felt like. Even when he regained his powers working with the Exiles as Genesis as an ally of the Exiles, Bishop couldn't be sure if his powers were completely under control. The display he did against Devious in the Zeneo Tech. Building was definitely admirable and he should be commended for it. If it weren't for him they would more than likely have been in the building long into the self-destruct sequence countdown. Something that would have been a disaster from the building all the more perilous.

Lydia watched Bishop haul Pete on his shoulders down the hallway to the nearest infirmary. She couldn't help but to naturally worry about the state that her lover was in. His powers were not themselves to be potent indeed on this mission and Peter had been the saving grace for the team, though it seemed that brave act had cost him because he didn't look anywhere near good. He was very close to being slate gray and the poor man was hardly moving.

"Move faster Bishop. Stop playing around with that man's life," Mystique scolded a moment later in the hall in front of Bishop carrying a disc in her hand.

"About time you showed up! We weren't sure if you made it out of the building or not," Lydia exclaimed keeping pace with Raven.

"You know I always deliver the goods. Just make sure your lover boy is alright," Mystique said, veering down a corridor to the right of the rest of her teammates.

"C'mon Bishop! We gotta hurry."

An Hour Later...

Peter lay in the hospital bed and had more wires running through him than Lydia could count. Dr. Vesso and his other medical assistants had hooked Peter up to a bunch of instrumented machines that del Ruiz didn't have the first clue about. As long as they kept Peter alive, that was what they were called.

"He'll be alright Lydia. Your boy Peter is a fighter. That much I can tell," Mystique said.

a wall.

“How did you get in here?” Lydia asked upset at Raven’s intrusion of her privacy. She was alone with Peter right now and having this snoop around was not only pissing her off but also making her feel like dealing out some physical harm.

“You’d be surprised all the places worms can get into unnoticed,” Mystique replied.

“Any particular reason you’re here?” Lydia inquired squeezing Peter’s hand to keep him steady. She looked out at Mystique and reminding herself what she really needed to focus on.

“Genesis wants to talk to all of us. He’s finished analyzing the information that he received from Zeneo Technologies and there is something he wants to share with us,” Mystique answered.

“Never thought I’d see Genesis share anything. The man makes King Tut look like a child,” Lydia said as she moved her hand across Peter’s face and rose up from her seat.

“Trusting Genesis doesn’t seem to be anybody on this team’s strong suit. I know from experience that it is hard to deal out and I’m far from one to give a lecture on the matter, but I’ve run into situations where you can’t trust your leader you’re bound to fall apart,” Mystique warned.

“I’ve never thought of that computer as my leader. He is,” Lydia said pointing to the screen. Peter looked at Peter. All Mystique could do was smile at Lydia’s passion for the man she loved. It was a good sign for Rogue.

Bishop, Lydia, and Mystique all sat down in leather plush chairs in front of the large screen. As always Genesis’ face was staring down at them. Various high-ranking SHIELD agents were seated around the three X-Forcers as they listened to Genesis present segments of information extracted from the stolen Zeneo Tech files.

{{Zeneo Technologies seems to have been monitoring mutant activity for some time and has recently compiled a list of mutants that they consider to be very viable threats. I think it’s a little concerning to see because some of the people they consider threats are also people we should be especially watching closely.}}

The image of Genesis quickly faded away to reveal a computer file. Each person in the room began to read the file slowly.

Brief Summary of Considerable Threats in Mutant Community

Magneto-
Despite
having
suffered some
blows
recently from

the likes of
Magistrates
and Justin
Hammer this
man is still
one of the
most powerful
mutants on
the face of the
planet. The
simple fact of
the matter is
that Erik
Magnus
Lensherr
controls an
entire country
of mutants.
He has the
ultimate army
at the palm of
his hand.

Cyclops- This
man controls
the X-Men
which is a
strike force
that could
give anything
S.W.A.T. or
S.H.I.E.L.D.
could ever
hope to
muster a
sound defeat.
Extremely
powerful
mutants that
have literally
unlimited
potential are
at this man's
helm. We
have spotted
numerous

Omega level mutants under his thumb and we have a strong suspicion that he caused the human/mutant riots in Washington D.C.

Archangel-Warren Worthington Jr. controls a multi-billion dollar business and has a very strong sway on public opinion with this X-Corp. His threat lies in how he can affect public perception of mutants. Not to mention he also commands quite a powerful force of mutants. He only falls below Cyclops because of the lack of leadership experience he has in comparison to

Summers.

Dani
Moonstar- A
perfect
combination
of Cyclops
and
Archangel.
She's a deadly
leader with a
knack for
handling
public affairs.
Her Force
Works has
been in many
situations
faced with
appeasing the
public and has
done so with a
surgical
precision.
Nothing ever
seems to
phase this
woman and at
her command
are people
who have
gone toe to
toe with
Heralds of
Galactus. The
potential
power in her
team is
staggering.

Abyss- A
complete and
total unknown
in the mutant
world.
Nothing has

been able to
be procured
about his
resources,
who works for
him, and what
his goals are.
His name is
only
whispered in
the mutant
underworld as
someone not
to be played
around with.
If it weren't
for the fact he
was such an
intangible
force he'd be
at the top of
this list.

Sunfire- Shiro
controls one
of Japan's
most powerful
families and
as such has
immense
influence
throughout
the Asian
world. Not to
mention his
many
connections in
the world of
X-Men and
his inclusion
into the
Avengers
ranks he's
quickly
becoming an
international

mutant figure.
The young
man has also
reached a new
height in his
powers and
the potential
within those
abilities is
terrifying.

Grey King-
As the leader
of a new
incarnation of
the
Brotherhood,
Addison Falk
commands a
ruthless force
that could
easily throw
every effort at
mutant/human
cooperation
down the
drain. He has
already leaded
a brutal attack
on a high
school killing
dozens of
innocents
without any
remorse. He
in fact
presents a
rising threat to
humankind
that may
begin to dwarf
all others.

Jean Grey-
The single
most powerful

telepath on
the planet.
Omega level
potential is
written all
over her.
Xavier
finding her
first was
probably the
best thing that
could have
happened for
the world.
Imagining this
woman in the
hands of
Magneto,
Sinister, or
Mystique is a
frightful
thought.

Mikhail
Rasputin-
Though this
mutant has
fallen from
glory for
some time and
has hidden
himself under
the radar there
are whispers
of this former
cosmonaut
seeking to
gain a place
of power
amongst the
mutants once
again are
circulating. If
nothing else
this should be
reason enough

to keep an eye
on this
mutant.

Scarlet Witch-
Another Jean
Grey in the
making. At
least in terms
of power and
potential. This
Avenger has
shown on
numerous
occasions just
how deadly
and potent her
power can be.
And like Grey
she has had
her moments
of darkness
which leads
one to wonder
how much can
be mutants be
trusted. Do all
mutants
possess such a
powerful dark
side as this
woman has
demonstrated?

“I assume that only about four on that list concern us?” Mystique asked having grown bored reading over the short summaries that Zeneo Technologies had compiled. She was finally relieved that her name had been mentioned, but it did make her think. What if she had gotten the job before he did? How different would things be and what if she had never taken Raven's place? Maybe that poor girl wouldn't be as tortured as she was today.

Bishop saw the smug look on Raven's face quickly turn into something that seemed almost angry. What could have altered her expression so quickly? He would have figured a person who had been included would have been thrilled by the fact she had been included alongside the likes of Magneto. Instead it looked like her reaction had been the complete opposite. She would get no sympathy from Bishop. You couldn't go around wrecking the lives of hundreds and then expect to be forgiven when you decided to turn around. Life didn't work that way. Where Bishop came from

mistakes you made. Second chances were rare and when you found them you took a

{{There is one person in particular on this list in question that I feel the need to add the fact that there are enemies out there who are complete enigmas. Abyss is a person that I have investigated. I can't have shadow threats in my midst.}}

“But there are other matters to be addressed first,” one of the senior SHIELD officers

{{Indeed. In fact I intend to address something crucial now. Everyone is dismissed except the Force.}}

Genesis didn't have to repeat himself. Within moments all the senior officials were scuttling into the hallway like a panicked crowd. Bishop looked at the sight with disapproval under Genesis, but he would never act in such a subservient manner as those officers were degrading to watch. Men and women of their status were meant to act with a degree of dignity they ran from Genesis' presence spoke of bureaucracy and cowardice.

“Pathetic. Do you have this effect on all humans Genesis?” Mystique asked as she watched the officers march out of Genesis' little sanctuary he liked to call his office.

{{Perhaps you would do well to follow their example Raven. A bit more obedience might be entirely out of the question.}}

“Not my style,” Mystique replied with a devilish smile.

{{You might want to consider making it your style. Especially after today's failure. The information you all failed miserably.}}

“I believe an explanation is in order Genesis. You can't throw out accusations like that without something solid to back them up,” Bishop said masking the resentment that he was feeling there risking his life at Zeneo Tech. HQ and one of his teammates suffered because of a mechanical bastard was telling them that they had failed when it was clear as day that they had accomplished their mission.

{{You'll get your explanation Bishop.}}

The image of Genesis dissipated off his computer screen and was replaced by a new image. A young Japanese man in his late 20s was at the podium surrounded by flashing lights and reporters. At the bottom of the screen ran one line that pissed everyone in the room off.

ZENEO TECHNOLOGIES HEADQUARTERS IS ATTACKED AND DESTROYED BY TERRORISTS

Mystique only eyed Bishop for a moment and in that brief eye contact both of them knew what was heading. Raven and Bishop were both experienced in how events could be twisted and something that never was out of a situation. Raven had done it many times herself and

somewhat a master of the art form.

Lydia vocalized what everyone in the room was feeling, “I can’t believe this shit!”

{ {Our company suffered a terrible blow today. Ruthless mutant terrorists attacked our HQ for no reason. Zeneo Technologies was working to help mutants and we are repaid with ten times the money we won’t stop our efforts though and I’ve just been informed we’ve been given a grant of 10 million from the Damocles Foundation to rebuild our HQ better than ever. We will survive and be stronger. } }

“And that right there is Miles Durashi,” a strangely cold and mechanical voice said to the other members. All eyes quickly turned in shock to see the new cybernetic body of Genesis.

“When did this happen?” Mystique asked.

“A few days ago my cybersuit was completed. Now back to the news coverage. Miles Durashi is the CEO of Zeneo Tech. With this turn of events the company is more than likely to get outpaid in money and grants. By taking their information all we’ve managed to do is strengthen their position. Be discreet. Instead you allowed yourselves to be discovered.”

“We couldn’t prevent that. Devious was already there waiting for us. It was like someone had tipped him off we were coming,” Lydia tried to explain to no avail.

“You’re supposed to be professionals. As senior officers to XSE you should be giving orders. Instead I’ve had to send down an XSE unit to extract Maverick’s team, which managed to escape. As we speak they’re being bought back to the Helicarrier. If you all can’t prove your worth I’ll forcibly integrate X-Force into XSE.”

“Don’t act like it’s something you don’t want to do. You can’t have regrets. You’re a mutant. Remember?”

Genesis glared at Mystique and replied, “You might want to remember that I am your superior. Challenging me will earn you some time in the Vault. I’m sure you’ll like it there.”

“Please. I’ve been in more brutal brothels,” Mystique mocked.

“I see the new blood is starting to fit in already.”

Everyone, Genesis included, looked to the door to see Siryn with one hand on her hip and the other on her side in a pose that would give Tyra a run for her money. She had a large smile on her face and had just been given a week’s prescription of codeine.

“Welcome back Ms. Rourke. Just in time to hear me complain,” Genesis said pulling out a chair. Despite not truly having emotions his cybersuit was fitted so that he could display the same emotions.

“Great so how did you fuck up this time? Must have been by making that awful cybernetic body.”

Really! Forge wasn't that damn skinny," Siryn laughed trying to lighten up the atmosphere. She had heard the whole exchange while standing outside the door and while being the humorist in her role she'd figured it was time for her to play it. Especially, since things were about to get more serious around here.

Philippines

Abyss looked like he had just stepped out of a manga movie. His hair was up and spiky, and his facial features were sharp. All was black except for his crossed yellow eyes. His black robe was wrapped around his body, billowed though no wind was in the damp room. One band was visible around his waist, a cloak around his body and the other remained hidden.

"Charon come to me," Abyss ordered. Suddenly, a few feet in front of him there was a man. The man stepped out of it, an ample sized Indian man carrying a staff with a skull atop it. The man was tall and hardly seemed to fit this downtrodden building. He wore a name brand suit that more than made up for the more than the warehouse he was standing in.

"You know I was in the middle of a business meeting. Couldn't you have summoned someone else, even Vortigen?" Charon asked a little annoyed at having been snatched away.

The ground beneath the short man began to rumble wildly and he nearly lost his footing. His eyes locked on Charon and said, "Don't question me little man. Just do as I ask and you'll live."

"Fine. What do you want from me this time? Who do I have to kill?" Charon asked, his voice more than the normal person should be at the prospect of killing someone.

"No killing Charon. Just acquire an item from me. The Black Tarantula has the mysterious Omens, which is an ancient Mayan script. I want it. Bring it to me and I'll grant you anything from your already formidable arsenal," Abyss promised.

A Day Later

"I don't understand how the hell they managed to get through all the security," Maverick said as he took a sip from the cup of straight black coffee he always enjoyed. It was actually a relief, an embarrassment for North to have a bunch of kids save his ass. Especially on a mission that was supposed to be as cut and dry as this one was. Needless to say, Maverick was feeling pretty shrewd.

"It was as if the systems just decided to lapse for an hour to let XSE get through," Shard said as she ate down a chocolate donut. The woman was trying not to say what she really thought of the recent Missions like the one she just came from were what trainees did and so it shouldn't be a surprise. A system breaker for Shard. Eve knew they were coming. There was no other way X-Force could have gotten through as hard as they did. How Eve knew she couldn't be sure, but Shard was sure as hell going to find out.

bought the point up to Genesis.

“Either way something fishy is going on around here and I don’t like it,” Shadowcat looked intensely out the window into the blue sky.

“At least you guys are alright. That’s all that counts,” Lydia sighed. Just thinking about what happened down in a bed made her sick to her stomach. Wisdom was always so strong and defiant, but his powers had taken its toll. If he hadn’t battled Alastair would he even have been able to pull off that stunt? Would they all have died when that building exploded?

Just then Mystique bust through the door of the lounge and said nearly out of breath, “Peter’s health has taken a turn!”

Forcing the Issue

And so my first arc comes to a close. All I can say is that the fun is just starting to get to see Black Tarantula in all his glory. Last time he appeared at M2K he got taken down by Wolverine. This time though he won’t be going down so easily. He will for sure with one member of X-Force. There’ll be more on Petey next issue as well.

-Troy Bengal

X-Force

By Troy Bengal

Info for Info (1 Of 2)

“He’ll be alright for now,” Dr. Vesso said to everyone in the room, namely X-Force, as he pulled the covers up to Wisdom’s shoulders.

“What’s wrong with him Doctor?” Shadowcat asked.

Taking a deep breath Dr. Vesso rubbed at his eyes for a moment and then said, “Peter’s immune system is under heavy attack by a number of engineered viruses. I’m assuming that during the time while he was under Shadow King’s thrall that these viruses were implanted in his body. Perhaps as Farouk getting his revenge on Wisdom if all else failed. The viruses were apparently activated when Peter’s powers surged.”

“So what are you going to do for him?” Siryn questioned.

“We’re using a number of experimental drugs on him to help fight off these viruses. And we’re also about to call in Moira McTaggart and see if she can offer us any help. Other than that we just have to wait...and pray,” Dr. Vesso replied.

Tears began to stream down Lydia’s eyes as she knelt down next to Peter and held his hand as she softly said, “Baby wake up. Please be alright. Don’t leave me.”

“I think we should go,” Maverick said as he turned and walked out of the room. Bishop, Shard and Marcus followed quickly behind him.

“You think the poor bastard will make it through the night,” Mystique joked getting her two very sharp stares from Shadowcat and Siryn. Throwing up her hands in mock defeat the shape shifter said, “Fine. I know when its time for me to go.”

As Raven walked out of the room Kitty nearly wanted to scream, “The nerve of that woman!”

“Don’t get yourself worked up Kate. That’s just the way that Mystique operates. Now I’m going to go and get myself a thing of Pringles from my room. Feel free to join me,” Siryn offered as she too left the room, leaving Kitty standing alone.

Katherine watched Lydia hold Peter and she couldn’t help but to feel that it should be her next to Wisdom and not Lydia. It was strange because Kitty was hardly head over heels for Wisdom anymore, but they would always have a bond. Though she knew it would be against her better judgment to stay here. Blowing a kiss to Wisdom she left the two lovers alone hoping in the tiniest way that maybe Peter had felt that kiss.

Hearing the door close Lydia knew that she was now alone with Peter. The Genoshan woman hardly resented Kate, but she did have uneasy feelings towards her. After all, the woman had slept with Wisdom on many occasions during which Lydia and Peter had still been officially together. During Apocalypse's rule and while under the influence of Shadow King they had relations time on top of time. She didn't blame either one of them for their actions in either situation, but it was hard for her to just pretend that Kitty had been sleeping with her man. And Lydia had almost convinced herself that Katherine had no feelings left for the old Brit, but the fact that she was the last to leave suggested something to Lydia. Maybe there was something more there than either woman wanted to admit to.

"Three of the five women on this team have been with you Peter. I wonder if you ever even stopped and realized that. Maybe you did. That might be why you always had that damn smirk on your face. I want to see that smirk again baby so wake up. Alright? Do it for me if nothing else," Lydia pleaded as she began to cry uncontrollably.

Mystique made sure she got a corner of the Helicarrier where not too many roamed and no one would see her. Leaning back against the cool metallic wall Raven let her body slide down it until she was sitting flat on her butt with her legs bent in front of her. Taking a deep breath she buried her face into her hands.

What's wrong with you girl? Why are you getting all worked up over Wisdom? He isn't that charming! Or maybe you're just that desperate to connect with someone.

As of late Mystique felt more and more like she was truly all alone in the world. Destiny, Avalanche, and Blob were all dead. Pyro had betrayed her and joined the X-Men. Now, he was flashing around the world as a mutant celebrity with X-Corp. If she ever saw John again she'd give him a good slap to remind him just how cruel the humans had once been to him. Her two children, Rogue and Nightcrawler, both wanted not a damn thing to do with her. And her she was on a team full of people who regarded her as nothing less than a heartless piece of slime. All except for Wisdom, who actually treated her with a degree of dignity.

Hopefully Xavier's bitch can help him. Otherwise, I'm going to have quite a few visits with Viper and HYDRA.

"You're worried about him aren't you?" Shard asked coming around the corner with her arms folded.

"No, I was thinking about my siblings. How Sinister could have them attached to a bunch of wires like Wisdom somewhere right now," Mystique lied. She didn't want anyone, especially one of the XSE asses, knowing that she held any semblance of emotion for anyone on this team. Her being cold and heartless to everyone on this ship was her only trump card at the moment. It made her unpredictable and that gave her a distinct advantage.

"You know Siryn says she met up with Cortez while in Ireland. It seems he's betrayed Essex and the geneticist has taken quite a blow since he last fought the Exiles. You might want to talk to Genesis about a possible rescue mission. I know Sinister is still pretty high up there in terms of priority for most organizations that know about him," Shard suggested.

Mystique laughed, "Like Genesis would ever help me. You must be joking Shard. Quite the twisted sense of humor on you there gal."

"I'm not joking. I only suggest it to you because I have a stake in Sinister too," Shard replied.

Raven's eyes perked up at that and she looked at Shard with a great deal of curiosity, "What could you possibly want with Sinister?"

"I think he had something to do with the return of my brother's powers. I need to know if its true or not because if it is he could easily manipulate Bishop into doing something against his will. Sinister is desperate right now. Desperate men do desperate things," Shard explained.

"You have no idea," Mystique laughed weakly thinking back to the night when she had discarded her son as if he were a piece of trash. She had been desperate then and she did the only thing she could think of. It had been one of the most tragic mistakes of her life. Raven had only wished that she had kept her son with her. Kurt would have been a valuable asset to have in the war against humanity she was waging. Perhaps with him on her side things might have gone differently with Kelly.

"I'm going to leave you alone now, but think about what I said Mystique. We're going to eventually have to confront Sinister. Too many people on this ship now have ties to him," Shard warned turning away from the shapeshifter and departing around the corner.

"I hope Genesis' somewhat ties with Ms. McTaggart is able to get Wisdom moved up to the top of Muir Island's priority list," Marcus said as played Solitaire on the computer that was in the lounge for everyone to use. He had two rows complete and just needed to find a red 2 before he could finish off the third column.

Seating behind him reading a Cosmopolitan magazine was Siryn, "I'm sure he will be. Moira isn't one to play with somebody's life. Business for her has been a bit more slack lately too with the Legacy Virus having vanished away and more mutants becoming comfortable with their mutations."

"You seem pretty calm and collected about this. I'd figured you'd be a wreck like Kitty and Lydia are," Marcus replied.

"My trip to Ireland invigorated me in a way that I've needed for a long time. I'm more focused and energized now Marcus. My emotions and past mistakes don't rule me anymore. Besides Wisdom is a fighter. I'm sure he'll make it," Siryn assured not once her voice faltering in its confidence and poise. Marcus could hear the difference in Theresa's persona. He was happy for her because she was on the near brink of a nervous breakdown after Black Air and the Sons of Set incidents.

"Perhaps Wisdom wouldn't be having to fight for his life if you hadn't been selfish and returned from your vacation as requested," Bishop said bluntly as he walked into the room in complete uniform unlike Marcus and Siryn who were both casually dressed.

“I think you’re out of line here Bishop. Theresa had every right to complete her vacation and Zeneo Tech. hurt Peter. Not Theresa,” Marcus reminded sternly.

“Shadow King hurt Peter if you want to get technical. The fact of the matter is if Siryn had been here she could have provided extra firepower against Devious. Instead, she was off getting drunk at some pub and acting completely unprofessional. We represent S.H.I.E.L.D. and as such we should hold ourselves to the utmost standard,” Bishop replied. He didn’t intend to waver on his stance and he had prepared himself for the verbal barrage he was going to get. The point had to be made though if this team was to continue being effective. Nothing could be held back.

“If anyone deserved a vacation it was me Bishop. I was literally ripped open and dissected like some high school kids would do a dead frog. Black Air did that to me and they enjoyed every second of doing it. And before I can even truly recover from that we have to go off and fight a giant snake god who by the way tries to rape me! And then there was…” Siryn stopped letting her voice trail off not wanting to say what was going to come out of her mouth next.

“Your guilt over making a deal with Sinister? Am I getting warm? Let me tell you something. You make your own bed Siryn. Because of your mistake you became sloppy in the field and everything that happened to you afterward was a consequence of that. And because of your mistakes you decide to take a vacation. A decision that now has a teammate fighting for his life!”

“How the hell are you connecting of all this Bishop? None of this is connected to me and Sinister’s history!” Siryn exclaimed near the point of breaking into tears but keeping her emotional poise.

“Then let me tell you something that is connected. Sinister always gets your soul as payment for favors. Just ask a friend of mine. And because of you we’re one day going to have Fabian and his crew come barreling down on our heads. You’ll learn that the day you shook Sinister’s hand was the day you threw away your soul,” Bishop replied his voice shaking with anger that only years of military training could instill in you.

“You know that’s funny Bishop. I never thought playing the hypocrite was your role. What about you and Witness? What you did for him wasn’t exactly what’d I call noble. Would you?” Marcus asked having won his Solitaire game during the conflict and finally deciding to add in his comments.

“How would you—why are you in my head?” Bishop asked both of his fists balling up tightly.

“I didn’t have to dig very far Bish. All of those nasty thoughts were on the surface of your head the whole time you were going off. You don’t like to see people repeat the same mistakes you’ve made. I’m fine with that. But next time be more careful of how you do it. Cuz what Siryn has done doesn’t even match up to what you did for Witness during that year. And I’ve only caught glimpses my friend,” Marcus said tapping on his head lightly.

Suddenly feeling very uncomfortable Bishop pulled at the collar of his uniform, gave both of his team members a hard long stare, and walked out of the room.

“That was intense,” Siryn said letting out a deep sigh. Looking at Marcus she smiled, “You sure know how to put people in their place.”

“Perhaps. But he is right about one thing Theresa. Fabian is going to come after you one day. If for no other reason than that you’re a commodity to Sinister.”

“I know Marcus. And I’m sure turning him down isn’t going to make him like me that much either,” Siryn replied.

“Perhaps we should tell Genesis about making Fabian a priority.”

Siryn laughed, “Haven’t you learned by now? Genesis operates on his own system. What missions he and only he thinks are important are the ones we’ll go on.”

The Next Day...

“Anybody have an idea what Genesis decided to get us all up early in the morning for?” Maverick asked while shining his gun.

“You think any of us actually know North? Genesis is the mystery man of the hour around here,” Shard replied twirling her plasma gun around her index finger simply to pass the time.

“I wouldn’t exactly call him a man. He’s lacking a few key parts. Like a body for instance,” Mystique joked sitting on a chair with her legs spread wide open in a very unladylike manner.

“Glad to see all of you could make it,” Genesis said coming around the corner in his robotic form. He moved flawlessly as if he was human, but the facial expressions were still a bit awkward. They either came off too exaggerated or not exaggerated enough. In this case the smile of the S.H.I.E.L.D. commander was extremely exaggerated.

“Lets cut the pleasantries and get to the point here Genesis. My man is on a flight to Muir Island right now and I want to call Dr. McTaggart as soon as he gets there.”

“You’re all going to be working with some of my XSE today. Since all of you have ample experience in combat situations you’re going to dealing with ways to help my XSE use their abilities in more creative ways,” Genesis explained as an diagram popped up on the large computer screen where his head would normally be detailing who was working with who.

“Great me and loud mouth get to work together,” Mystique moaned seeing that her partner was Siryn. The two of them were going to be training with Whisper. She had heard that the

boy had potential in loads. Too bad she still wasn't running the Brotherhood. She would have picked up the Soldier X remnants in a heartbeat.

"I don't think I'll be of much help to you Marcus," Shard said seeing that they were both going to be working with Enigma who was a potentially powerful telekinetic and telepath.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm sure there is something you'll be able to offer," Marcus assured.

"I hear Velocity can be a hard head Bishop. I'll let you take up the reigns of discipline," Kitty smiled knowing that she herself had been quite the rebellious teenager while with the X-Men and the streak carried over into adulthood.

"There's no way he can be as bad as Pietro. I'll personally vouch for that," Bishop replied.

"So you and me have Red Moon. You know anything about this guy Lydia?" Maverick asked scratching the back of his head trying to think of somewhere he might have heard the name before.

"I hear he's got potential to be a damn good XSE agent and maybe even an officer given time. I know zilch about his powers though," Lydia replied.

"Great we get stuck with mystery mutant," Maverick grumbled.

"Glad to see you're all so anxious about your assignments. I want my XSE trained rigorously. They're going to be tackling more and more field missions. I need them to be top notch. Dismissed," Genesis commanded every getting out of the room as fast as they could.

"Lets get started Enigma. I'm going to hold up an object and I want to see if you can crush it with your telekinesis. The objects will vary from difficult to easy, but the point of this exercise is to show you that you will be thrown into a variety of situations and conflicts," Marcus said holding up a glass plate in his hands.

"Remember Enigma. Don't exhaust yourself. Use your telekinesis as needed. No need to overexert here," Shard reminded as the lesson began.

Enigma easily shattered the plate, crushed the aluminum can, and crunched the old rusty steel without looking like she had broken a sweat. Needless to say Marcus and Shard were both impressed with the young woman.

"You're almost making my job too easy here Enigma. See I'm going to have to up the game with you a bit," Marcus smiled clapping his hands. Large yellow balls all tied to tether cord came down from the ceiling.

"Let me guess. Pin the tail on the balloon," Enigma joked dryly.

"Hardly. This is an agility exercise. I want you to send a telekinetic bolt around all of these balls without hitting them once or making them bounce. If they bounce you gain penalty

points. The object is to keep from getting penalties and to finish the course in under two minutes,” Shard explained.

“Oh come on! Do you really think I can do that yet?” Enigma asked a little shocked at Shard’s confidence in her abilities.

“I’m sure you can. Just put some effort and concentration into it darling. If you don’t succeed at first we’ll keep trying. You can’t go into dangerous situations like we face without having a wide range of control over your powers,” Marcus explained hoping he was appealing to the young Enigma.

“You might be right Marcus, but how come all Siryn ever does is scream?”

“So you’re from Germany?” Maverick asked as he prepared the obstacle course that Red Moon was about to run through.

“Yes sir I’m from Frankfurt. Born and raised,” the young XSE cadet replied as he adjusted his red gloves. Sharon Carter had prepared his costume for him personally. He wore a black body suit with red gloves, red boots, and a red moon in the center of his chest. His abilities granted him the power to create red colored vortexes in the shape of crescent moons.

“So Red Moon are you ready to get tested?” Lydia asked cracking her knuckles.

“Yes of course,” Red Moon said pulling out two red sais from his thick belt.

Maverick smiled, “Good because we’re not cutting you any slack.”

Ten rows of steel pillars rose up from the ground and steel spikes ripped forth from each metal cylinder. The pillars began to move around the room in random directions and at random speeds. In the center of the rectangular room was a white table with a red globe on top of it.

“Your objective is to get that red globe without getting smacked around by any of those pillars. Powers are not allowed in this exercise so go at it,” Maverick explained.

“And if you get in a tight squeeze I’ll come in there and save you,” Lydia added.

“Not a chance. I’ve been wanting to do this for quite some time,” Red Moon grinned twirling the sais in his hands rapidly.

“Malik you have the potential to be quite the great warrior in a short amount of time,” Bishop said through a microphone. He was sitting in a booth above the training area.

Velocity smiled, “Thanks, but being the curious guy I am I gotta ask why you think that.”

“Because of your incredible learning capability,” Kitty said phasing up from the ground only a few feet in front of Kevin.

“Yea I learn fast. Crap I do everything fast, but what makes me any different from that Pietro guy?” Velocity asked.

Katherine laughed, “Well, for one you can control your density. You can manipulate your increased speed capabilities to have a variety of effectiveness. Your powers are a bit more creative though not that’s not to cut any skin off Pietro’s back. If you ever encounter him as an opponent don’t blink.”

“I’ll remember that. So what’s the training you guys are going to have me do?” Velocity asked.

“We’re going to push your density powers a bit since that is an area I’m somewhat seasoned in,” Kitty replied. Bishop slapped a few buttons on from the booth and laser guns mounted on six-foot metal poles rose forth from the ground like mines.

“You’re going to go maximum density for this exercise. Each laser gun has a red flag atop it. Your objective is to get all the red flags and place them in the brown picnic box at the end of this obstacle course in under three minutes. Anyone of normal speed can’t complete this mission in less than five minutes without the guns. You have the guns to knock you back, but you have your speed,” Bishop explained. He knew what Malik’s response was about to be and by the smile on Kitty’s face he knew she knew too. More and more lately she was beginning to remind him of Logan. Her time during the Apocalypse and with Shadow King had made her gruffer. She would take more risks and wasn’t afraid of doing the tough thing. Maybe part of that was because of her relationship with Wisdom.

“I can only move at normal speeds when I’m at max density,” Velocity exclaimed. He wasn’t sure why he had been stuck with Shadowcat and Bishop if they hadn’t even read up on his powers. He was here to be trained properly and not just have some random exercise thrown at him. Being a part of the XSE was supposed to help him get a better grip on his powers. Now all he felt like was some piece in a board game that the players (X-Force) were annoyed with.

“We know that you can only have normal speed at max density. That’s the point. You’re going to keep doing this course until you can manage to keep up at least some degree of super speed while in max density. I’ve got all night and I’m sure Bishop has all night too. Lets get to work,” Shadowcat commanded slipping once more into the ground.

“Great. I get stuck with the damn drill sergeants of the team,” Kevin groaned.

Lance wasn’t a stranger to combat. He had seen his fair share of it while being a member of the now defunct, Soldier X. So he strongly resented the fact that he was having to train under Siryn and Shadowcat. What the hell could they possibly teach him about his powers that he already doesn’t know?

“I can tell by the look on your face that you don’t want anything to do with us at the moment. That’s fine, cuz honestly I have no desire to be here with you either,” Mystique said bluntly as she twirled a plasma gun on her finger.

“Forgive Raven. She sometimes lets her mouth overload her ass. Lance, I know you might not be too happy about having to train with us, but I think we can all learn from each other,” Siryn said.

“Fine. Lets get this started then so I can go and eat already,” Lance exclaimed.

“Oh boy I can tell we’re going to have fun with this one,” Mystique groaned.

Nick Fury stepped into Genesis’ office and not a single light or computer was on. Fury knew better than they think that didn’t mean his presence wasn’t noted. Holding a disc in his hand Fury slid it into one of the nearby computers.

“Wake up Genesis. I got the information you wanted,” Nick said lighting up a cigar.

Suddenly every computer in the room flashed on and Genesis’ mug was on every one of them.

{{Perfect timing Fury. I was getting to be a bit bored. Humm....this information is rather disturbing.}}

Nick laughed, “You’re telling me. Black Tarantula has a stranglehold over the principal drug lords in Miami, Atlanta, and Dallas. And not only that. He’s transporting nerve gas to terrorist cells through his drug shipments. Every major gang along the East Coast along with any hidden terrorist cells now have their hands on some nerve gas. All we need is a gang war to break out and we’ll have nerve gas in wide circulation. Thousands could die.”

{{This is something I’m going to have X-Force and XSE deal with.}}

“Genesis those two squads have more important things to worry about. We regular humans can handle the situation just fine,” Fury replied not feeling the need to be very formal with the talking computer program.

{{With all due respect Colonel I’m in charge of this organization now and I feel this situation would be best left to X-Force and the XSE.}}

“Super powers don’t mean super efficiency,” Nick warned walking out of the door.

An Hour Later....

“You got us all here. I assume we’ve got ourselves a mission,” Mystique said leaning back against a wall.

{{You would be assuming correctly. I’ll sum this up quickly. Black Tarantula is creating major potential problems for the United States. He’s distributing nerve gas along with his drugs. I

need you to go in there and put a major dent in his operations. I'm not looking for a total shutdown, but I want some results.}}

"So when do we head out?" Siryn asked.

{{You won't be going in there Siryn. You and Mystique are going to be trying to capture as much of the nerve gas already in the US as possible. You two will lead teams of XSE into areas where we suspect the nerve gas is located. Siryn will lead Enigma, Red Moon, Frost Pack, and Bryson Bale into Dallas. Mystique will lead Kamal, Mastodon, Marvel Guy, and Whisper into Dallas.}}

"Great I get to lead a bunch of testosterone filled young boys," Mystique sighed.

"What's the deal Genesis? Can't the XSE handle themselves?" Siryn asked irritated.

{{Senior officers leading the operations will increase the success rate. And only a minimum number of officers are required to infiltrate the two main bases. Bishop, Maverick, and Lydia will take the Northern Base. Shadowcat, Marcus, and Shard will take the Southern Base. You have twelve hours until this mission is initiated. Be prepared.}}

"Oh don't worry. We will be," Bishop said cocking his gun.

Later that Night...

"Guys we need to talk," Siryn said pulling up a chair to sit in. At the small table across from her Mystique and Marcus were seated each having their own feelings about Siryn getting them up so late. Mystique's legs were crossed and she tapped her finger on the table repeatedly and with a quick pace. Marcus seemed to be a bit more calm having his hands clamped together and his elbows resting on his knees.

"I'm listening, but it had better be good for this time in the morning," Mystique groaned.

"Not like you have beauty sleep to worry about. All you gotta do is look in the mirror and all them bags go away," Marcus joked. He knew what it was like to feel like you were getting old and he had to admit he resented Raven for never having to feel like that.

"This is serious you two. So listen up. While I was in Ireland I got a very unexpected visit and no I'm not talking about Cortez," Siryn said barely talking above a whisper.

"Then who paid you a visit darling? The Grim Reaper?" Mystique asked playfully.

"Forge. The real Forge," Siryn replied making the room become uncomfortably silent.

In a few minutes Siryn covered all that Forge had told her to a shocked Mystique and Marcus. They barely seemed able to comprehend what Theresa was telling them, but they were professionals and they coped with it.

“Do you think Genesis might be on to you in any way?” Marcus asked wanting to make sure that Siryn wasn’t putting herself in unnecessary danger.

“No. I don’t think he does. He’s smart, but not a mind reader,” Siryn replied.

“Do we really know that? How do we know what abilities Mjnari was able to keep a hold of?” Mystique asked.

“Mjnari was the son of Storm. His powers are primarily focused with the elements. I don’t think we have to worry about telepathy. Though the simple fact is we have to sit on this until either Forge or Genesis make a definite move,” Marcus declared.

Siryn sighed, “Unfortunately you’re right.”

“So we’re just frogs in a pot of water waiting for it to start boiling?” Mystique queried.

“Basically,” Marcus stated.

“Great. I can feel the temperature rising already.”

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...



Issue # 47

Info for Info, Part 2 of 2

Written by Troy Bengal

Pete Wisdom

Bishop looked out through the bushes to see what kind of defenses the compound they had been assigned to penetrate had. After taking a brief look he turned back to his teammates, Maverick and Lydia del Ruiz. Holding his permanent icy stare he went over the bases' defenses, "We have five armored cars each holding four people. One person in every car has a rocket launcher. Surrounding the cars in a perimeter are heavily armored men carrying a large amount of grenades. Over the roof of the compound are seven helicopters all with double machine gun mounts. Two tanks are on each side of the building and they look to be in pretty good condition."

Shadowcat

"So basically there is no way we're getting into that compound," Lydia summed up.

Siryn

"Never say never," Bishop replied as he pointed upwards. Three unidentified jets zoomed overhead raining down experimental scatter missiles on the compound's defenses. Bishop had put in the call about an hour ago and was hoping that things could have been easily resolved. Black Tarantula didn't seem up for an easy resolution.

Maverick

"You called in air support. Nice," Maverick complimented as carnage rained down on Tarantula's base.

Bishop nodded, "We work for SHIELD. We should use the resources available to us."

"Yea, but muscle works just as well sometimes!" Lydia exclaimed

rolling up her sleeves and running headlong into the congregation of confused thugs. Four of them turned and fired their weapons at her. She didn't give a damn as she simply dodged them and moved towards one of the burning cars.

"I do believe she's lost her mind," Maverick commented staring at how fast Lydia ran under the gunfire and made her way to whatever her target was.

"She might have. Doesn't mean we don't help her!" Bishop proclaimed as he ran from the bushes and began to suppress what thugs that weren't firing at Lydia with heavy plasma blasts.

"That's all fine and dandy, but I don't care to expose myself," Maverick replied staying behind the bushes and becoming sniper protection for both Bishop and Lydia. Whenever someone got close to them Maverick took them out with a quick shot to the head.

Observing del Ruiz, North saw that she was running full sprint towards the direction of a burning car. It didn't make one lick of sense and Maverick became mesmerized by the nonsensical actions of Lydia. She threw one arm into the searing flames and gripped the bumper tightly. Hoisting the burning object into the air she hurled it into the perimeter electric fence surrounding the base. A large explosion tore through the air and killed whatever thugs were unfortunate enough to be in the way.

Shooting down the last of the Tarantula's enforcers, Maverick stepped from the bushes, "Damn Lydia! What the hell were you thinking?"

"I'd like to know the same thing," Bishop added.

Lydia found it hard to give a reasonable explanation. It was just some rage that overcame her. She was thinking about Peter and the condition he was in. The words of Maverick and Bishop along with the jets dropping their bombs were all a mumbling blur to Lydia. She remembered saying something and then taking off in a fit. Had Wisdom's current condition really messed her up that much? Looking down at her hand Lydia didn't even notice the slight burns she had. She was quite fortunate her hand hadn't been charred.

"I don't know what came over me. I just went for it I guess," Lydia murmured.

Bishop was about to lecture her about the lives that were needlessly

lost, but stopped before a word eeked out of his mouth. He had killed far too many in his time to criticize Lydia and besides he had already created enough tension between Siryn and Marcus. He didn't need any more people gunning out for him. Maverick was of the same mind as Bishop. He had killed too many to criticize Lydia's act of rage.

"Lets just get in this base and take care of business before any backup shows up for these guys," Maverick groaned as he walked to the hole that Lydia had created when she threw a car like a discus.

"Indeed. We need no more vehicles being hurled," Bishop commented as he put his plasma guns into black holsters at his waist.

"Lets not make an issue of it. Alright?" Lydia said as she stomped off ahead of the two men towards whatever possible dangers lied in the base.

"You just love rubbing it in don't you?" Maverick accused harshly.

"I only state the facts. Now lets go before she gets herself into more trouble."

Katherine Pryde moved Marcus through the thick steel wall like it was a thin piece of paper. She had already phased in Shard who was standing guard for the two of them. Kitty sincerely hoped that Shard hadn't encountered any resistance while she was snatching Marcus into the base. She would have taken them both in at the same time, but Marcus was keeping all the base's guards distracted with his telepathy. It gave her and Shard time to make a small assessment of the interior of the base.

"You and Wisdom must have skipped out on restaurant checks all the time with your abilities," Marcus joked a little louder than he probably should have as they stepped through the steel wall.

"I'm sure we owe this one place enough to help them build a new facility," Kitty replied with a wink.

Shard was constantly scanning the hallway looking for any sign of trouble. She was holding two hand sized laser cannons and had heat beams attached to her wrist that activated at mental command. Once upon a time she wouldn't have used any weapons since she was a photon based being. Now since having been flesh and blood once more the stakes were higher and she couldn't afford to walk around

without any equipment. Marcus and herself were both wearing black Kevlar armor padded underneath with a thin steel mesh.

Ignoring the jesting of Kitty and Marcus, the former XSE reported, "I have yet to see any sign of trouble yet though I'm starting to think someone knows we're here. It's way too quiet and even if we did get the drop on them we should have encountered some resistance by now. Unless Black Tarantula is dumb enough to leave his bases this poorly secured."

"Agreed. Marcus try and scan for any nearby brain wave patterns," Shadowcat ordered.

Placing one hand to his temple Marcus went silent for a few seconds and shook his head, "I'm not getting anything at all. Only the guards outside. Shard's right. Something isn't right here."

A light applause could be heard from the end of the barely lit hallway. All three X-Forcers heads turned to see a deathly pale man wearing an expensive black suit and sunglasses to match. His long white hair was pulled back into a ponytail and his gangly frame betrayed the true power he had underneath. His name was Bloodscream and life for him stretched back to the 16th century.

Only recently had he returned to the employ of Black Tarantula. For a time he was working under the Tan Crime Family in Hong Kong until the Exiles crashed the party and Exodus wiped the entire family out save the patriarch of the bunch who was locked up in prison. It was during that period of time when the woman known as Onset snatched Bloodscream up. She used him as a piece in something called The Dark Zodiac. Once again the Exiles interfered and his life was saved. After that experience he decided to take some time off. It wasn't long though before the criminal life called out to him again. This time around he would have to fly solo under Tarantula as his long time partner, Roughhouse, had been killed fighting against the Shadow King. For a while the necromancer blamed his absence for his partner's death, but now he blamed Logan and there would be a reckoning. For now though he would entertain X-Force.

"So you three aren't as dumb as the rest of SHIELD. I'm impressed though I should have expected that from Xavier's bunch. Or perhaps I should refer to you as Genesis' bunch now?" Bloodscream smiled showing teeth too white for a man of his pale color.

"No!" Marcus exclaimed earning him an awkward stare from Shard

and Shadowcat. The two of them didn't know the truth about the leader of SHIELD and Raven had only helped to plant seeds of curiosity in their minds. He wanted to kick himself.

"I see someone is a bit touchy. Guess the wound of the old man's death is still raw," Bloodscream laughed.

"Okay you're so getting an ass whuppin now," Shadowcat replied preparing to put some of her ninja skills into action.

"Don't make a move," Bloodscream warned as gun mounts appeared from the roof and armored guards appeared beside the necromancer. More men came up behind X-Force and kept their guns aimed at lethal portions of the mutants' bodies. Waving a finger of disapproval Bloodscream said, "You might be able to phase Shadowcat, but your other teammates would get ripped to pieces by my weapons. So don't even try."

"Fine. We'll play this your way," Shadowcat said dropping her battle stance.

"Of course we will," the eerie looking necromancer smiled.

"What the hell?!" Marcus exclaimed as blood began to trickle down from three spots across his head.

Shard was experiencing the same phenomena as blood flowed from her eyelids blocking her vision. Kitty was unaffected, but knew what was happening. Bloodscream was using his ability to make blood spontaneously flow. If she didn't act soon the two of them would bleed to death. Being with the Shadow King had bought her power enhancements that hadn't all entirely faded away whether by Katherine's strength of will or otherwise. She had a great deal more control over the effect, localization, and proximity of her powers. It was time that she stopped being afraid to use them.

Concentrating the ground beneath her became intangible and as the effect spread so did her teammates. Holding her concentration on the localized phasing Kitty flipped forward phasing straight through Bloodscream. She sent a phased foot through the heads of the all the guards behind the necromancer.

Marcus smiled as he caught on to what Kitty was doing. She wasn't trying to physically hurt Bloodscream and the guards behind him. She was just taking out their telepathic blockers. Raven reached out with his telepathy and had Bloodscream turn his powers on the

guards that were shooting a hail of worthless bullets at himself and Shard. Then he proceeded to take control of the guards behind Bloodscream and had the guards at war with each other.

Shadowcat stopped by a mesmerized Bloodscream and whispered in his ear, "I laid Iron Man flat on his back. You really thought your tech was safe from me?"

Jogging back to a phased Marcus and Shard the young woman was grinning from ear to ear at what she had just accomplished, "Lets keep moving. See if we can find some information that'll be useful."

Northern Base

Bishop carefully opened the door to the third floor of the compound. They had encountered little resistance on the first two floors and the three-person team hoped to make it to the top without having to take on too many guns. Waving a hand for everything being clear Lydia and Maverick moved out into the hallway with Bishop.

"Think there are any more noses for us to break?" Lydia asked cracking her knuckles.

"Yep," Maverick replied simply.

"And you know this how?" Lydia asked rolling her eyes jokingly.

"Because I can't move," Maverick said through gritted teeth.

"Ahh shit," Lydia groaned as she realized she had been rendered immobile as well.

Bishop whipped out his guns and had one pointing at each end of the hallway. He was still able to move and would take full advantage of it. He fired off his weapons hoping that he would hit something out of luck.

"Guns are so trite!" a shadow exclaimed as he moved along the side of the wall, avoiding Bishop's blasts, and slamming his feet straight into the former Omega team leader's chest. Bishop went flying through the door and went tumbling down the concrete stairs.

As Bishop rolled and skidded across the stairs he saw his shadow had a form and it was that of the man they had been sent to find. The

Black Tarantula had taken first blood and it would be the last strike he had. Bishop finally came to a stop on the midway point between the second floor and third floor. He had landed on his so he had no idea if Tarantula was heading for him. Quickly flipping his body over Bishop saw that indeed Black Tarantula was in mid-air planning to stomp on the future soldier's head.

"Try again," a bruised and bloody Bishop said firing off his plasma guns. The blasts struck the drug lord in the chest and sent him into the concrete wall creating an indent in it. Getting up to his feet Bishop continued the barrage of blasts burying the concrete wall on top of Tarantula.

Relief washed over Bishop as he slid his guns into their holsters. His confidence was short lived as a sudden crash and a heel to the chin sent Bishop bouncing off the wall and straight through the door that led to the second floor. Pain was searing all throughout Bishop's body. He was an XSE though and putting aside pain was as simple as holding one's breath. Getting up to his feet Bishop looked right into the eyes of his foe.

There didn't seem to be a scratch anywhere on Black Tarantula. The pounds of concrete that fell on him might as well have been freshly picked cotton. He couldn't tell, but Bishop could swear that the criminal was smiling underneath his black mask.

"What did you do to the others?" Bishop asked ignoring the fact that he had a concussion and broken ankle. He had been in worse injuries while working for Witness so the pain he was feeling now while agonizing could be put aside.

"I have a few mutants on my staff. I just had one of them put your friends on the fritz. Don't worry I won't hurt them. I just wanted the two of us to have some quality time."

"You have my attention. Make use of it," Bishop remarked.

Black Tarantula charged forward and as Bishop was preparing to fire his guns the drug lord leaped into the air doing a split allowing both of his feet to kick the guns out of Bishop's hands. The metallic weapons went scraping along the ground and out of the reach of their owner.

"Wrong move," Bishop exclaimed as he sent his elbow straight into the genitalia of Black Tarantula, which had been left completely

exposed from the mid-air split.

The masked man fell to the ground in a fetal position and struggled to get his breath back. Bishop ran to the fallen body and delivered a kick to the head. Black Tarantula's body snapped back, but as it did the drug lord swiftly kicked Bishop in the back of his knees sending the former XSE falling to the ground headfirst. A loud thump could be heard as Bishop slipped into unconsciousness.

"I'll admit. You were good. Just not on my level yet," Black Tarantula said as he got to his feet and lifted Bishop's body into the air by the hard plastic collar of his suit.

"This fight isn't over!" Bishop yelled as he unleashed a kinetic blast from his hands powerful enough to propel Black Tarantula down the hall and out of the window at the end of it. Following the flying body Bishop jumped out of the window as well and went into freefall. Aiming right at the disoriented body of Black Tarantula the M branded mutant let loose all that remained of his energy.

The blast was large enough to engulf Black Tarantula's body and create a crater for him to land in. Bishop landed on the ground a few feet away from the crater with the grace of a cat despite his broken ankle. Any other normal person would have passed out from the pain, but Bishop was far from normal. Even so, he had hoped that his combined energy reserves would have been enough to put down the drug lord. He was wrong.

"Persistent little brat!" Black Tarantula screamed as he rose from the crater. His mask was ripped in various places and one of his gloves had been incinerated. Smoke billowed off of his body and yet none of this seemed to affect him in the slightest.

"You bought this on yourself. You really thought selling nerve gas wouldn't get SHIELD's attention?" Bishop asked hoping that Black Tarantula's steel resolve would soon fade and save him a world of hurt.

Black Tarantula began to laugh hysterically, "You act like I wouldn't mind sticking to drugs? Go talk to Force Works and tell them that they're blows against the drug trade have forced people like myself to seek other revenue sources. They've paved the way for people like Abyss to step in."

Bishop remembered that name from the confiscated Zeneo Tech.

Files, "Who the hell is Abyss?"

"You're asking me like I know. All I know is that he's a monster. He's going to revitalize the drug industry very soon and he's going about it so cleverly. That's why I picked you to fight. I'd know you'd listen to what I have to say. You're a scrapper sure, but your curiosity will always overwhelm that."

"And you know all this about me how?" Bishop asked feeling a bit of anger rise up in his throat.

"Doesn't matter," Black Tarantula said charging at Bishop again. He punched his opponent in the stomach and latching onto the back of his shirt flung him into the overly green grass.

Bishop kicked out his leg and brought Tarantula to the ground. Then with his other leg he slammed his calf into the drug lord's throat, "What is this Abyss up to?"

Gripping Bishop's thigh with one hand Black Tarantula lifted the X-Forcer into the air and slung him into a nearby tree. Having accumulated some energy Bishop blasted the tree into scrap. Soaring through the air Bishop landed on his broken ankle and let out a cry of pain and fell flat on his back.

Finally having the ability to speak again Tarantula gripped his throat and moved towards Bishop, "Abyss is genetically creating drug addicted humans to push the demand for drugs to a point that there will be a drug boom unseen since the 80s."

Getting up to his feet Bishop snarled at Tarantula, "You're lying!"

"Think what you want," Tarantula laughed holding a handful of miniature black spiders in his hand. Flinging the spiders outward they flew directly towards Bishop.

Bishop knew that the spiders were probably explosives of some type. There was no way he'd be able to dodge them so desperate times called for desperate measures. He was about to try something he had never done before. Unleashing his energy he shaped it into the form of a shield that protected him from the exploding spiders. While the shield had protected him from the spiders it had blocked his vision. Upon dropping the shield Black Tarantula was on Bishop like a vulture to dead meat.

A right hook to the face. Punch to the gut. Elbow to the temple. A

knee to the ribs. Black Tarantula was punishing Bishop and he simply wasn't able to get in a good block or blow with his broken ankle. Finally, Bishop was able to stop a punch to the solar plexus and gave Tarantula a jab to the throat. Quickly throwing back the blocking arm the former XSE unsheathed a knife and stabbed the drug lord in the gut with the weapon.

"I was trying to avoid lethal force, but like I said before. You bought this on yourself," Bishop spat as an electrical surge flew from the knife electrifying Tarantula's innards.

The body of his foe crumpled to the ground and once again smoke was billowing from it. Bishop stepped over the body carefully and began to make his way back to the compound hoping that Maverick and Lydia really were unharmed.

"You're a bastard!" a voice yelled. Bishop turned around in complete shock to see Black Tarantula holding the knife he had been stabbed with in one hand and the other clutching his stomach. Before Bishop could even react Black Tarantula threw the knife and struck Bishop slightly above his heart. Black Tarantula had intended for that to be his mark. He wasn't out to kill Bishop. Besides he knew that his throw had done the trick.

Despite Bishop's better wishes his body gave into complete exhaustion and fell backward. He had simply taken too much punishment and not even XSE training could completely deny the body's wishes.

Dusting his shoulder off Black Tarantula made his way for a helicopter that was suppose to be picking him up. Keeping a firm hand over his stomach Tarantula was not only sure of his victory, but that the fear of Abyss was now in X-Force. He knew that he had lost two of his compounds, but they were hardly important in the long run. Tarantula had been in this game too long to not know to keep his deck stacked.

And as he made his way to the jungle path that would lead to his escape the drug lord left Bishop to wallow in his defeat.

Helicarrier (Two Days Later)

"Our operations in Dallas went smoothly. The XSE operatives proved themselves to be quite effective. I'm impressed," Mystique

said though her facial expression hardly showed it.

{ {I knew they would impress. I have high hopes for them.} }

"We wired both compounds to explode so Black Tarantula has two less facilities to work with," Shadowcat reported.

"It seems though that we've found a culprit for why Black Tarantula turned to selling nerve gas," Lydia added leaning back in her chair a bit trying to keep from smiling at Bishop.

Siryn was seated at the other end of the table and wasn't smiling only because she had run out of laughter the night before. Bishop had gotten his ass handed to him and all he had been doing since was pouting. Even his sister couldn't approach him without getting her head bit off. Of course she bit his off right back.

Bishop ignored the two women and growled the name of the suspects under his breath, "Force Works."

"Someone needs to give those kids a lesson good ol mutant style," Maverick said. Force Works had overstepped their bounds on more than one occasion and were slaves to the media. No more so than the Avengers or Fantastic Four, but you could trust those teams not to make matters worse.

"Before you get all gung ho remember these guys held their own against the Avengers West Coast team. They're nothing close to pushovers," Lydia reminded.

{ {Besides Force Works is another matter for another day. We have more pressing issues.} }

"Like..." Siryn asked letting her voice trail off.

"My home coming isn't good enough news?" Pete Wisdom asked as he stepped through the door in a black leather jacket and a yellow collar around his neck.

"Nice piece of jewelry you got on you Wisdom," Katherine joked as she stood up and Peter gave her a hug. It did not go unnoticed by Lydia that Kitty was the first one that Peter had really greeted.

"This bloody thing is a power dampener that keeps my damn abilities in check until the sods on Muir Island can figure out how to help me," Peter said tugging at the device. The all around specifics

were that Moira wasn't sure if she had eliminated all of Shadow King's "boobie" traps so the power dampeners were a precaution at the moment.

{{ Good to have you back Wisdom. I'll let your team update you. }}

Later that Night...

{{ This is Trish Tibly. A group calling themselves the Avatars of Mandarin has conducted a massive terrorist attack against France today. The UN immediately dispatched Excalibur to neutralize the group. No word yet on the success of the team or the extent of the damage. One thing is certain. This country has been devastated. }}

All of X-Force had heard that report only an hour ago and each had taken it their own way. Lydia at the moment was packing her bags. She was off to check on her Aunt Petunia and as such resigning from X-Force.

"You're really leaving huh?" Maverick asked as he walked into the room where Lydia was furiously packing the essentials.

"Yea. I got to David. My Aunt is out there and I don't know what shape she's in. I gotta go there and if it means leaving X-Force that's what I gotta do."

Maverick, "Fine. I'm coming with you."

Lydia smiled. She knew better than argue with David. She couldn't guess at his reasons for wanting to come, but she was sure it had something to do with Kitty. That was part of the reason she was leaving as well. Wisdom and her had been over with a long time ago. She needed to get away from him.

"Fine lets blow this place. The Eiffel Tower awaits!" Lydia exclaimed.

"I've seen it, but I'm sure seeing it one more time couldn't hurt," Maverick grinned.

The two of them hated leaving so suddenly, but it had to be done. Too many goodbyes and they would end up staying. They needed a clean break and this was the only way they were ever going to get it.

Elsewhere on the Helicarrier... (Interlude 1)

Genesis had summoned Bryson Bale, Mastodon, and Kamal and he had one message to give them.

{{The full realization of the XSE program is at hand.}}

Monaco

"I should have known you would be here eventually," Black Tarantula said turning his wine cup that was half filled, "Though honestly I was expecting Vortigen Walker."

"He's busy with other affairs for Abyss at the moment. Where is the Book of Omens?" Charon asked waddling to the furnished seat that the drug lord had seated himself in.

"I'll have Bloodscream bring it to you. He should be down momentarily. Now what would you need this book for?" Black Tarantula asked.

"Its not my place to ask questions. Though I have something to deliver to you," Charon said pulling out a letter and handing it to the skilled warrior.

My Dear Tarantula,
I trust everything went according to plan. I have confidence in your abilities. Now I need something of you. The Book of Omens is in your possession and I desire the ancient Mayan text. In exchange for this book you will be freed from my service and I'll give you a parting gift. A powerful new synthetic drug I've devised called Abysmal. This letter has the instructions on how to create this drug hidden in invisible ink. If you wish to follow through with this deal simply give Charon the Book of Omens.

Dearest wishes,
Abyss

Black Tarantula read the letter and smiled. Sliding it into the pocket of his shirt the crime lord turned his chair and said, "I think we've

come to an understanding Charon."

Next Issue: The XSE program begins its true agenda! Be here for it.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...



Issue # 48

Breaking Point, Part 1 Label Me Stupid

Written by Troy Bengal

Pete Wisdom

Shadowcat's black evening dress wrapped and formed around her frame like melted ice cream making its way down a cone. It had been quite some time since she had dressed up like this, but she was meeting two of her oldest friends for dinner tonight. As she made her way to the reserved table she caught the eye of many men with the seductive split on the right side of her dress. Logan would probably kill her for showing as much cleavage as she was.

Shadowcat

"You look dazzling Katya," Colossus said as he stood up from his chair and took Katherine's hand. Gently kissing it he pushed back Shadowcat's seat for her.

Siryn

"I doubt Nereel would appreciate you kissing other women's hands," Nightcrawler laughed as he opened up his menu. No longer did he wear the image inducer that had helped him blend in. Those days had been long gone for Kurt and he was completely comfortable with who he was. He was given a few stares and upturned noses, but that was a common plight for even Latinos and Blacks. Kurt was just thankful no food had been tossed his way yet.

Maverick

"Nereel?" Katherine asked a bit confused at the mention of the Savage Lander.

"Mein gott! You haven't told her Piotr?" Nightcrawler exclaimed.

Colossus sighed, "I was going to tell her later tonight, but since

you've already made it the opening topic..."

"So you're in a relationship with her? I'm glad to hear it Peter. A nice man like you deserves someone special in his life," Kate smiled hiding the fact that was full of jealousy. Peter was having success with an ex-lover and Katherine had failed miserably in that regard.

Sitting down Colossus immediately shook his head, "No. It's not like that at all. It's a long story Katya, but I am a father now. Nereel still has feelings for me, but I have none for her. Nonetheless, we share a son and I refuse to let them down."

"Would this be part of the reason you joined up with Warren at X-Corp?" Shadowcat asked. She admired the work that Warren and the others were doing, but she wasn't entirely sure if she trusted all of his Board of Directors. Pyro and Maggott being on the top of her list. Diode looked like she had the potential to be a loose cannon as well, but Katherine figured she was letting her vast experience make her judgmental. So she would keep her opinions to herself...for now.

"That's part of it, but I was growing tired of the Exiles' lifestyle. Exodus seemed to be slipping closer and closer to the edge of darkness again. Not to mention the constant struggles we faced. Every day was like being at war," Colossus replied thinking back to some of his Exiles' memories. He had walked away from that team with heightened strength and a newfound respect for torture victims.

"Speaking of wars. I'm glad to see you made it through the Washington riots okay Kurt," Shadowcat said. She didn't want this dinner date to just be her and Peter talking the whole time. Even though that just seemed to be the way it was naturally heading.

"It pains my heart to know so many others didn't though. Apollyon had us all fooled and I think many of the X-Men under him are still reeling from the whole affair. If nothing else though at least God felt it right to give Storm back to us," Nightcrawler replied with a slight tremble in his voice. The images and nightmares he had seen still made him lose his composure at times.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to her. None of us X-Force people have really. I know Bishop wants to see her, but you know how he pulls his Stonewall Jackson routine. He's been under a lot of stress lately. First that whole little talk with Force Works not going too well and then getting the shit beat out of him by Black Tarantula."

"Humm...Warren seemed to be real disturbed when he came back from that meeting with Force Works as well. I do think there was a good bit of misunderstanding between both parties from what Warren recounted to me. Danielle knocking out Havok wasn't a good way to start things off," Colossus sighed hating the tension that seemed to be between all the students of Xavier lately. The world had indeed changed since Charles' passing.

Nightcrawler giggled, "He wasn't knocked out."

"Huh?" Colossus asked giving Kurt a puzzled look.

"Alex called Cyclops after that whole little fiasco laughing his head off. He had been pretending to be knocked out the whole time simply because as he put it *'I really didn't feel like hearing Dani's bullshit'*. Our friend Alex is still the character," Nightcrawler laughed.

"You mean still the jerk," Shadowcat interjected. She didn't blame Dani a damn bit for wanting to knock Summers on his back. The guy had a chip on his shoulder the size of Eiffel Tower and she really didn't even deal with him that much.

"So you should give Storm a call," Colossus interrupted trying to keep any conflict from arising.

"I would, but I don't want to be the one to tell her about Forge," Katherine said somberly.

"Kitty...Storm does watch T.V. She already knows about Forge. Wolverine let her know everything. She's taken it pretty well thus far, but I can tell she's hurting. Hearing from you might brighten up her day a bit. Seeing old friends is always uplifting," Kurt replied.

"We'll say cheers to that when we get our drinks," Colossus laughed.

Shard hating seeing her brother in such bad shape. After his battle with Black Tarantula he was both wounded and exhausted. Putting him in the hospital, despite his complaints, was the only option. Shard didn't worry too much though because this was her brother after all and he'd be up and about within a few weeks.

Taking a seat next to his bed she sighed, "Boy you just couldn't wait

for Maverick and Lydia to back you up could you?"

"And miss the chance to tango with Tarantula. You know me better than that," Bishop weakly smiled. Smiling too much and too hard made his face hurt and he didn't want to do anything that slowed down his healing process.

"Why don't you trust them Bishop? All of X-Force has had plenty of combat experience and they know the game. I could see your reasoning behind Mystique, but the rest...don't you think you're being a tad hard?" Shard asked her previously playful tone becoming a stern one.

"I trust them Shard. I just have this feeling that something terrible is coming. It's a combat instinct I guess, but something is wrong around here. And to be completely truthful I don't trust myself. After suddenly getting my powers back I'm just not sure how to handle myself. They could be gone again any minute," Bishop replied. Ever since he lost his powers in the battle against Deus and regained them in the battle against Onset he felt like he was walking in some gray area. If he relied on his powers too much and lost them where would he be?

"Bishop you've got to stop doing this to yourself. You can't be the hero to everybody. You gotta live your own life and learn to start trusting others. Sometimes Bishop I don't even think you trust me," Shard sighed as she got up and walked out of the room.

The soldier wanted to say something to his sibling. Let her know he trusted her more than anything, but he couldn't find the words. They were echoes lost down the tunnel that was his throat. He could only curse himself for hurting his sister. Witness had sent him to hell and back and Bishop had done it all for his sister. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her and letting his insecurity hurt his sister made Bishop hate himself entirely for those few brief seconds she got up and walked out of the door.

"Okay I just got back so what did you blokes screw up?" Pete Wisdom asked as he puffed away on a cigar walking into Genesis' office.

"Beats me. I thought the Tarantula mission had went over fine," Siryn replied.

"Except for the fact that Bishop got the tar beat out of him," Marcus added.

Siryng grinned, "Again I repeat. The Tarantula mission went over fine."

Peter could probably guess at the reasons for tension between Siryng and Bishop, but he wasn't going to vocalize any of them. He had plenty of skill handling the wiles of women, but he had neither the energy nor the desire to deal with Theresa. The woman's bite was far worse than her bark and her bark could shatter glass easily.

"Seriously. Why were we called out here?" Marcus asked waiting for Genesis' face to appear on the screen.

<To bear witness to the newest agents of the XSE> Genesis proclaimed as he walked into the light with his android body. Behind him were 20 women who all looked exactly the same. They all had the standard SHIELD uniform, long blonde hair, pale skin, and hazel eyes.

"So we're going to fight off our enemies with big knockers?" Siryng joked.

<These are the Gene Droids first model. The next three models are already in production. Soon enough there will be 20,000 of these wonders of engineering in the XSE program. The Gene Droids will change everything>

Peter always had a nose for trouble and he could smell it coming a mile away. Wisdom had never really cared for Genesis as he saw him as a mockery of Forge. That dislike was rapidly turning into distrust. 20,000 pumped up androids under the command of SHIELD just didn't sound good no matter how you twisted it. It would take an idiot not to see that.

Siryng could feel an abyss forming in her stomach. Forge had warned her that Geneiss would try something. Theresa just hadn't expected the move to come so soon. She should have seen it thought. The way Geneiss had been treating X-Force lately was plenty indicator of future ruthless intentions. Forge needed to make his move.

"20,000? Is that really necessary? Especially all at once," Marcus exclaimed. He was one of the three who knew the truth about Genesis. Mystique and Siryng were the others. Raven could only wonder if they had waited too long to make their move against

Mjnari. Now he was about to have an army of loyal androids under him along with all the other resources of SHIELD. Fighting against Genesis was going to be an uphill battle. Marcus' brow furrowed at the thought of the coming conflict.

<The integration of the Gene Droids will be a slow one. You need not worry Marcus. I know the limits of this organization. I will not overtax its resources if at all possible>

Looking at the androids Marcus felt the lies of Mjnari grow in strength.

"So is that all Genie?" Peter asked.

<No. I've just gotten word that a hospital in Philadelphia is under attack. We believe that one of the attackers is the missing Dallas Riordan>

Peter had to fight to keep his jaw from smacking the ground. He had wanted to reach out to Dallas for quite some time and try to make some amends for the horrific things he had done to her while under the control of Shadow King. She had been made to pay far too dearly for her involvement in the Shadow King's affairs.

"Do you want us to assemble X-Force and take care of this problem?" Marcus asked.

<This is going to be a joint XSE/X-Force mission. Wisdom, Shadowcat, Siryn, Kamal, Mastodon, Blind Faith, and Frost Pack will take care of this situation. Everyone else hang back. I want you to spread the word Raven. XSE's enforcement powers are about to go to the next level>

Marcus had to choke back a venomous threat that was simmering on his throat.

Philadelphia

"How much do you careless doctors charge people for a simple check-up these days? Would it kill you to do something purely out of kindness?" Fatal asked as she crouched to the ground and flung two shurikens into the ankles of two doctors trying to escape her wrath. Both middle-aged men fell to the ground hard clutching at

their bleeding feet.

Fatal despised the greed of the world. Its seeming never-ending lust for power had cost her dearly in her past life. Before she was healed and molded into something better. Something that could combat the hate, lust, and greed of an unforgiving world. Attacking those doctors would be seen as malicious to some, but for Fatal it was justice to the highest degree. Those mongrels had swindled people time and time again only to line their pockets and buy themselves a new water jet.

In fact it was kindness that kept Fatal from slicing down both men with her katana. She had many more lethal and serious ways to injure someone if she so desired. Too many innocent eyes were looking upon her though and she had probably frightened them enough. There was no need to scar them for life in her pursuit of justice.

"Dallas luv you're under arrest," Peter said his fingers itching to unleash the heat blades he had become infamous for.

Fatal turned back and shocked those who knew her with her new look. Dallas wore a black ninja suit with three red slashes going across her chest. Red circles surrounded her white pupils. In those blank eyes none could find emotion, "Dallas Riordan died the day that Shadow King's X-Men ripped her to pieces. I've waited long for the chance to take my revenge."

"Do we have company Fatal dear?" Vortigen Walker asked walking on his elegant snake cane. Right behind him was another henchman of Abyss, the man known as Charon.

"Walker I don't know how you've manipulated her, but you're going to pay for it," Shadowcat exclaimed clenching her fists. She hated being pulled away from her dinner date, but orders were orders. Besides this had a personal tinge to it. The Hellfire Club had screwed up X-Force's missions many times over and Vortigen was a crucial part of that.

"You insult me once again! I need no one to manipulate. I'm plenty capable to taking responsibility for my own actions. Unlike the two of you! I've chosen to join Abyss and his soldiers. We are going to change this globe, but a few acts of vengeance wouldn't be unjustified."

"My beef isn't with you luv. It's with ol Walker," Pete said as he

grabbed the hand of Kate Pryde and ran through Fatal. Turning solid Shadowcat leaped into the air and kicked Vortigen in the face. Peter followed the flying man and delivered two sharp blows to his stomach.

Fatal turned back and was about to assist her partner when a sonic voice slammed her into the nearest wall. Darts struck her clothing and pinned her to the wall before she had a chance to respond to the attack. Within a matter of moments her feet were in ice blocks and only served to immobilize her further. Needless to say Dallas Riordan was ticked at the fact she had been effectively made useless in seconds.

"SHIELD doesn't play around with their prey," Blind Faith explained putting his arms to his side. His smile was concealed underneath his gray jumpsuit.

"Better words were never spoken," Siryn added folding her arms across her chest and putting a little lean in her hips.

"C'mon now. Three on one. You really thought you could take us?" Frostpack laughed arrogantly. Even while he was on the high school football team he constantly and consistently talked trash on the field. Things in XSE would be no different.

"You underestimate my resources," Fatal laughed as her body seemed to fizzle like television static. The snow melted away and the darts that had her pinned to the wall crumpled away like burnt paper. Confidently crouching to the ground Dallas pulled out her katana and licked her lips, "Want to go for round two?"

"I thought you would have learnt your lesson the last time you tangoed with us?" Wisdom asked as he leaped into the air and planted his feet in Vortigen's chest. Peter simply passed through the magician and went crashing through a window.

Solidifying himself Vortigen turned his eyes back to Wisdom and they turned an amber color. The pieces of glass flew up and restructured itself back into the window that Peter had flown through. The glass turned red and began to glow brightly. The doorknob to the room melted away like candle wax sealing Peter Wisdom into the room completely. Despite Peter's banging on the window the glass would not crack. Vortigen grinned crookedly as he

enjoyed the sight of seeing Wisdom squirm around like a worm.

Shadowcat came running towards him with both fists balled up. Within only a few feet of Vortigen, hundreds of neon green tendrils rose up from the ground and wrapped themselves around Pryde. Kitty was flung into the roof by the tendrils and insulation barreled down on her getting stuck in her hair and behind her ears. The feeling was hardly a comfortable one and despite her best efforts her phasing abilities were not working in her favor.

Holding out another hand the two XSE agents battling Charon were frozen in place. With a snap of his fingers the two bodies were lifted up into the air and went flying out the window careening towards another nearby skyscraper. Vortigen had no intentions of killing the two. His spell would preserve their life, but wound their pride.

"Thank you Vortigen. I didn't want those two brutes ruining my new suit," Charon groaned.

"Help Fatal. I need to talk to these two," Vortigen ordered. The ample sized man nodded and waddled his way to Dallas.

"You better really hope that Abyss is protecting your ass because once I get out of here..."

Holding up a hand Vortigen cut Shadowcat short, "I'm here for charity work Pryde. I'm after medical supplies for children in Africa that have suffered from attacks caused by the Apocalypse Dawn. I'm sure you remember that organization."

"Don't even go that route with me Vortigen!"

Walker laughed, "That route? Please Pryde. Don't lie to me. You enjoyed every second of your time in Shadow King's service. A deep part of you and Wisdom enjoyed all of it. Honestly, what on Earth have you done to try and make amends for your part in King's dealings?"

Shadowcat had no answer to Vortigen's questions. She knew that he was telling the truth. Shadow King had mind controlled her, but he had also tapped into her dark side. He made her love it and never want to stop. She had nearly killed Iceman and Kitty found herself looking upon the fight fondly despite herself. Had all of her evil acts really just been the source of Shadow King?

"Release," Vortigen murmured. The tendrils holding Shadowcat

disappeared and the red glow of the glass all disappeared. Peter came crashing through the window and held a gun at the former Hellfire Club of London member.

"I'll let you two make the choice. Let me leave with these supplies and make amends or take me in. Either way I'll leave the choice up to you," Vortigen said.

"Let him go!" Shadowcat exclaimed instinctively.

"Wha?" Peter asked dumbfounded as he lowered his gun.

"We owe him that much. But if you aren't on the level Vortigen I swear..."

"You don't have to worry about that Shadowcat. Being stuck in another person has a way of changing you," Vortigen sneered reminding the two of their devastating attack on the Hellfire Club of London.

Looking to the ongoing fight with Fatal and Charon the former Proudwalker held his right hand in the air. Sparkles of blue energy began to fly around his hand, "Time to go fellows."

Shadowcat sighed after Walker and the others left, "That did not go over well."

"No it didn't. X-Force you are under arrest for conspiring with Abyss," Whisper said sternly as he walked up to Wisdom and Shadowcat with Enigma and Velocity at his back.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Shadowcat asked not believing what was unfolding before her eyes.

"You just let agents of Abyss escape without any resistance. I've seen all I need to see. Now either come peacefully or we'll put a hurting to Siryn," Whisper warned as he pointed back to Theresa who was being held down by Blind Faith and Frost Pack.

"This isn't over yet," Wisdom replied as he dropped the gun.

The Helicarrier

Mystique looked around the corner and could only hear what was

unfolding. Raven wanted nothing more than come out guns barreling and rescue her X-Force teammates. That wasn't going to stop Genesis though. She would have to find Forge somehow, but first she had to get off this hulking metal airship. Looking back the shapeshifter smiled as she thought of what was hidden in the mop closet.

Stepping around the corner Darkholme took on the form of the SHIELD agent, Dr. Brian Vesso. Looking at the XSE agents surrounding Marcus and Shard she asked, "What's going on here?"

"Dealing with some traitors," Bryson Bale said coldly as he kept his gun pointed at Shard's face. Marcus had a collar around his neck that probably inhibited his telepathy. Raven had to fight the urge to punch the snooty XSE agent in the throat. In her older days she had been much cooler than she was now. What was making her so emotional? Had she actually grown some attachment to these people?

"I'll be damned. If my brother wasn't hurt I swear you'd be chewing that gun!" Shard yelled.

"Keep up the good work fellows. I need to take a transport and deal with some of our injured ground agents," Mystique said.

"You're always dependable Dr. Vesso," Marvel Guy said his thoughts preoccupied with the possibility of interrogating these fools.

"Thank you," Mystique replied as her eyes came in contact with Marcus. For just a moment she turned them to her original hue and the realization on the telepath's face was enough to accomplish what she wanted. X-Force needed hope right now and Darkholme hoped that Forge could deliver it.

It was long before anyone realized that an unconscious Brian Vesso had been in the mop closet.

"You want me to take her down. Fine, but to what length can I go?" X-Cutioner asked.

<Kill her if you have to. I just don't want her making anymore trouble.>

"So be it. Give me a few hours. She'll be easy pickings," X-Cutioner replied as he walked out of the office.

"Thank you sir! Thank you so much!" the nurse exclaimed fighting to hold back tears at the sight of all the supplies that had been offered to her children's injury camp so freely.

"No, thank you. You've helped remind me why I do what I do," Vortigen smiled as he handed a box of gauze to the nurse as a gesture of all the supplies that he really had to offer to her.

"And what is that my gracious friend?"

"Now that's a secret," Vortigen said as he gently leaned over and kissed the nurse on the head.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...



Issue # 49

Breaking Point, Part 2 You Took it Too Far

Written by Troy Bengal

Pete Wisdom

Mikhel Fury and Mieko Ko didn't mind being across the table from Putin and Cheney, but the two of them seemed to mind a great deal. Cheney probably more than Putin as his capital had just been attacked by the organization Fury and Ko represented. The engaged couple was the new heads of HYDRA and they were doing their best to restructure the organization after Shadow King greatly exhausted its resources. Coming to this meeting was just one way they would continue in the rebuilding of their organization.

Shadowcat

Mikhel ran his hand through his slick jet-black hair and grabbed the gloved hand of Mieko Ko. Leaning over he whispered in her ear, "I see Maggia, AIM, Department H, Lichtenbad, WHO, the Damocles Foundation, and Wakanda have all sent high ranking officials to this meeting."

Siryn

Mieko Ko wore the traditional garb of Viper, but kept the green hair and lipstick out of the look. Upon hearing her future husband's comment she hissed, "Yes the information here must be important! We cannot fail in getting it!"

Maverick

Squeezing his lover's hand the son of Nick Fury reassured his wife that they would not fail. Whatever was being offered here at this secret meeting was big enough to gather all these organizations together under one roof. A stray thought passed through Mikhel's head as he sat at the large obsidian made gathering table.

What if all these organizations worked together for a common goal?

Just then an android walked in and said with a cold mechanical tone, "Welcome. Today you will be bidding on the Mutant Extermination Protocols."

"What are these Protocols?" Dick Cheney, Vice President of the United States, asked.

The android moved more into the limelight and now it was clearly visible. A gasp came from some of the members seated at the table. Mieko Ko and Mikhel both immediately recognized who the android was and they turned to look at each other with pale faces. The android was none other than Genesis of SHIELD. The leader of the world's biggest peacekeeping organization was offering them weapons of mass destruction.

"The Protocols are a list of hundreds of ways to kill mutants. In fact I'll demonstrate one of these weapons to you today," Genesis said.

"This should be interesting," Mieko Ko gulped as she saw SHIELD agents bring out a young mutant girl who could be no more than ten. The green horns coming from her forehead were a clear sign of her mutation.

Genesis looked at the squirming girl apathetically and said, "This is test subject Number 2008. We're going to use the Mutant Flesh Melting Gas on her today."

Pulling out a blue spray bottle Genesis bent over in front of the young girl and sprayed some of the green gas in her face. The mutant girl let out an anguished cry and fell to the floor writhing in pain. Disgustingly chunks of her flesh began to slide off her and hit the floor with a sickening splat. The screaming never ceased. Then organs began to sizzle within the now visible skeletal cage, but by now the screaming was long over.

Mikhel Fury gripped the edge of his chair trying to hold back the vomit that was begging to be released. With horror filled eyes he watched as Genesis incinerated what was left of the girl and asked, "Where shall we begin the bidding?"

Mystique tossed the hefty FBI agent from the computer console and into the hard floor. Raven had far from superhuman strength, but she

had been in the game long enough that her physical condition was not one to laugh at. Throwing a fat computer desk agent to the floor wasn't too much of a task for her at all. There was always the adrenaline from the thrill of possibly getting caught that added to physical power. Over time, that rush had lost some of its punch for Raven as she had a very high getaway percentage. She was the rich kid who never heard no in respect to her criminal activities. Mystique would do whatever she had to do to get what she wanted and what she wanted right now was a way to get to Genesis and her X-Force teammates.

Coming to this FBI building was one of many avenues Raven intended to explore in the hopes that she could find her gateway into Genesis' plans. She knew that no intelligence agency trusted each other and they were more likely to keep tabs on each other than on terrorists. Mystique had hoped that she could find some information the FBI had regarding SHIELD. Honestly, she would have tried the CIA first, but she figured the FBI might have a higher stake in things. After all, one of their ex-agents was a prominent member of SHIELD's superhuman task force.

Sitting down in the chair Raven pulled herself up to the computer console where lights were flashing and buttons were clicking. Mystique found the sounds and sights annoying, but she kept typing relentlessly in the hopes of coming across some sign of hope. She was reading with more speed and intensity than she had in quite some time. A somewhat sad thought crossed her mind as she was analyzing the various files. She hadn't read for anything outside espionage purposes in years.

"After this it's time to pick up a book Raven," Mystique sighed as she continued to ravage the computer console.

"How about a few Sherlock Holmes books? I'm sure he's someone you admire," a familiar voice said.

"Oh Forge you're a darling for coming to pay me a visit," Mystique smiled as she spun in her chair to see Forge looking at her with happy eyes.

Even after all this time Forge's collar still got sweaty in front of Mystique. He thought he would have been able to put his feelings for Raven to the side. Forge struggled to keep his mind objective and not let it wander to his almost romantic moments with Mystique. Admittedly, Raven had been on his mind a great deal while building

his resistance to Genesis.

Despite the dim lighting of the room Mystique could see the optimism in Forge's eyes. It was an optimism that she desperately wanted to share, but was having a hard time doing. Memories of her teammate's captivity were still fresh in her mind. Imagining their present ordeal was enough to make Raven give Pyro, Blob, and the gang a call. Of course the only one that was even living, to her knowledge, was Pyro. Her opinion of Allerdyce was pretty low at the moment. Not like he could do much to stop Genesis's plans for global corruption.

"So you find anything interesting in that contraption?" Forge inquired leaning against the doorway with a boyish smirk. The Maker was happy to see Raven fighting on the side of the angels. He never thought the day would come in which Mystique would willingly fight alongside him. Nothing else she could do would have made him want her more.

"I haven't seen anything worth reading about. Your computer program seems to be okay with the FBI," Mystique replied a bit disappointed in herself. She had gone through all that trouble to get into the building and didn't have a damn thing to show for it.

"Genesis just knows how to cover his tracks well. Mjnari is cunning and my program packs plenty of processing power."

"So why are you here? I know that you're not trying to come to my rescue are you?" Mystique laughed mischievously.

Forge shook his head, "Nothing of the sort really. I've just come to point you in the right direction. I know you play your own game Raven and I'm going to play mines. Nothing wrong with helping a friend out though."

"Friend? So is that what you consider me now?"

The tension in the room quickly rose to extra high with that comment and Forge swallowed spit, "Unless you think I should be trying to call you something more."

Rising up from the chair Mystique seductively walked to Forge and got only inches from his face. It took everything Forge had to keep from reaching out to her at that moment. Raven could feel the energy between the two of them, but instead asked, "So what's the

information?”

“Go to Tartarus. You’ll find all you need to know there, but you gotta move quick. Already the XSE are making their move across the globe.”

The Canadian Wilderness

The rotting log cabins were spread across the massive forest in such a way that when viewed from the high air it formed the shape of the letter M. Each log cabin served as an entryway into the underground facility that housed all of the gambling activities being conducted by mutants. From recon reports the facility was said to have mutant gladiator style fights, mutant power exhaustion bets, and a whole assortment of ordinary gambling activities that were usually performed in the casinos of Vegas.

Whisper didn’t mind being the leader of the XSE squadron sent in to handle the gambling issue. In fact, Lance had been hoping that he would be put into a leadership role within the XSE organization. He wanted the chance to perfect and fine-tune his powers, which he felt were more than capable of being highly respectable. At the moment though his powers were very close to being unstable and his potential outweighed his experience.

“Not nervous huh Lancelot?” Engima asked playfully as she looked over his shoulder scanning the area for potential security problems with her telepathy.

“Nervous? Nah. Just hoping the rest of you rookies can keep up,” Whisper smiled.

“If you’re talking about the Stepford Wives back there then I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Kevin Malik, aka Velocity, said as he sped his way past his two teammates.

“Someone’s eager to get to work,” Mastodon said as he clutched the large titanium club that had been designed for him by Genesis. It felt as light as a feather, but could knock cars out of the way, if someone had the sufficient strength. The golden haired Mastodon had that strength and more.

“Yea, but who could blame him traitor,” Whisper said coldly as his eyes turned a deep cobalt color and Mastodon suddenly felt himself

and his weapon get very heavy.

“What are you doing?” Mastodon exclaimed as he could hear bones beginning to snap under the pressure.

Lance smiled, “Not killing you if that’s what you think. I’m just making sure you don’t stop me from bashing these Gene-droids heads in.”

Turning back Whisper gave a wink to Enigma and she floated up into the air surrounding the Gene-Droids with her pink telekinetic field. At that point Kevin Malik came running back to Whisper pleased to see that the eerie androids were being taken care of. Pointing to one of the rotting cabins Velocity cried out, “We got enemies headed up the hill and our way.”

“Finish off the robots Maria. We’ll leave Mastodon here to explain his presence. Denti is going to need us,” Whisper reminded as he reached out with his gravitational power and flattened enough trees to hold off whoever was coming to start some trouble with them. At least long enough for them to get away.

Tartarus

The halls of this prison held the criminally insane of a different variety. The super powered freaks that couldn’t be contained in the normal federal penitentiaries were placed here in Tartarus which was an underwater facility designed to deter any form of escape. Much like the Vault had been broken into only a short while ago this high tech prison was being infiltrated by one of the sneakiest women this planet had ever produced.

Mystique snuck up behind one of the guards and wrapped her hands around his neck. She made hundreds of tiny metal spies pop forth from her palms and fingers. The numerous puncture wounds were more than enough to kill the guard. Raven hadn’t killed anyone in a while so it felt good getting back to her roots. Being an official agent of SHIELD had forced her to restrict herself in combat. It bothered her to no end.

Stepping over the dead body Mystique peered down the hallway to see if any more of the bonehead Tartarus guards were around to get in her way. Honestly, she wouldn’t have mind seeing a few more guards if only so she could get a bit more cheap entertainment in a

completely stressful day.

Unfortunately, the former terrorist had no idea what she was supposed to find in Tartarus. She had just been directed this way by Forge and she trusted in the man enough to listen. Raven only hoped that he knew just what the hell he was talking about. Otherwise, she would give him a damn decent punch.

“You’ve walked into the wrong place sweetheart,” a voice said from behind Mystique. Raven ducked the weapon that the voice had intended to strike her with. Rolling forward so she could get away from her attacker Mystique transformed herself into a panther and leaped in the dark hoping to strike whoever was coming after her.

An energy blast knocked Mystique right into the prison cell of the villain Khimera who hissed wildly at her and said, “Get up woman and face your executioner!”

Raven growled at the freakish man and quickly rose to her four feet. Before she could take another chance at leaping in the dark her attacker was revealed. He was garbed in orange, green and black. The hood that he wore was all black except for the center of it, which contained a mouth-less white face. A cross between the Grim Reaper and Robin Hood was an accurate description of his garments. Alien technologies were strapped to his back and in his right hand he carried a golden staff etched with an alien language.

Quickly the panther shifted back into its human form and Mystique began to laugh, “X-Cutioner? Genesis really pulled out his F-List of recruitments didn’t he? I was hoping for more fair game.”

Admittedly, Mystique knew just how much trouble she had coming her way. Of course letting X-Cutioner in on that would be sure suicide. As much technology as the man was carrying his ability in battle was all about how confident he was. Raven knew his type easy. He carried plenty of big sticks, but they weren’t worth anything if he didn’t have confidence. The hunter needed his prey to willingly acknowledge fear of him. Otherwise, he just wasn’t going to do as good a job.

“You’re under arrest Raven Darkholme. I suggest you come quietly or things will get very ugly here,” X-Cutioner warned twirling his weapon anxiously awaiting the coming fight. Back in his old days Mystique was a prime target on his hit list as were all the other members of her Brotherhood team. Under different circumstances he would have shot her in the back and that would have been the end of

it. Times had changed drastically though and he had to play things a little differently. As much as it sickened him it was the better of the globe.

The Tartarus guards watched from afar like WWF was on live and in the best color cable could buy. Just like when Force Works had clashed with Factor 3 they were not going to get involved in any super fights. Unlike the guards working at The Vault they all had the common sense to stay out of fights involving people who threw hammers and grew metal teeth. All they did anyway was complicate things. In the end it was better to let the fools fight and clean up the aftermath. That way they lived another day and gave them a few more chances to sodomize the inmates with nightsticks. So with morbid interest the watched the continued fight between Mystique and X-Cutioner.

Mystique did a back flip as X-Cutioner swung his weapon towards her abdomen. Those who fought often forgot just how agile and controlled Raven really was. Her powers had a great deal to do with that as she had such great control over her body and muscle structure. All it took was a slight shift and she could take blows in places that would fell a normal human. Landing on her feet with a catlike stance she flattened her body and hit the floor hard as Denti swung his staff over her head.

Raven kicked her legs backwards into the air and wrapped her knees around X-Cutioner's throat. As her upper rose to meet its other half she delivered two steel fisted punches to Denti's face. The blows knocked X-Cutioner to the ground and sent his staff flying wildly in the air. Without effort she snatched the weapon from out of the air and spun it around her body. A cocky grin crept across her face, "Care to try another weapon?"

"Since you asked so nicely," X-Cutioner replied as blue beams shot out from the black dots that were meant to be eyes on his mask. The beams struck Mystique and sent her flying back into Khimera's cell again causing her to drop the weapon along the way. Raven was covered in thick blue ooze that kept her immobile.

Getting to his feet Denti picked up his weapon and walked over to Raven. He pushed the staff up against her throat and whispered slowly, "I'm here to help you Mystique. I work with Forge. You were meant to find me."

"Is that right?" Mystique asked sarcastically as she was able to push herself off the wall and head butted Denti. The smack was actually a

lot louder than Raven had thought and when she caught her bearing she saw that X-Cutioner's faceplate had been shattered.

"How the hell?" Denti asked seeing that Mystique had clearly added on muscle mass. Still it would have taken an almost superhuman level strength to break through the metals that made up his facemask. The cracks were big enough to be visible, but not enough to make the mask fall to pieces. So at least his identity was still safe.

Raven heard Denti's expression of shock and she was right along with him. She shouldn't be able to do what she just did. It wasn't within the parameters of her powers. What was happening to her? She'd just have to trust this man and believe that he was with Forge regardless of his past.

Leaping into the air Mystique changed into a tiger midway and pounced on the mutant hunter. X-Cutioner gripped his staff with both hands and tumbled around so that he was now on top of Mystique. He had hoped things wouldn't be this difficult, but there was nothing easy about fighting a mad shapeshifter. Surprisingly, the tiger was once again Mystique and she leaned up to his ear to whisper, "Take me to Forge."

Denti smiled underneath his mask, "This might sting a little."

A neuro-blast erupted from the staff and knocked Mystique out cold. He lifted the woman onto his shoulders to find that the Tartarus guards were still watching. Those sick bastards were enjoying the fight like it was WWF. Whoever hired sick sons of bitches like these needed to get their head examined pronto. Denti didn't have time to worry about teaching some punks what it meant to be a guard. He needed to get Mystique to Forge soon. They all had work to do. Fury was more than likely implementing his part of the plan now.

The SHIELD Helicarrier

Fury smoked his cigar slowly and let the smoke escape from his mouth with great patience. Normally, smoking wasn't permitted in any SHIELD facility, but no man in his right mind would tell the great Nick Fury not to smoke. He'd get two busted kneecaps and a major demotion for even trying. Smoking a big fat cigar was Fury's signature anyway so most people didn't even notice it as they passed by him at the corner of the hallway. He was only a few doors down from the cells they were keeping X-Force in. Genesis was pretty

bold for keeping them on the Helicarrier where they could do some major damage if they somehow escaped. He was taking chances because he thought had already gotten his checkmate.

Guess you hunkin slab of metal!

Fury moved little by little to the cells where the members of X-Force were being held. If he had been any other agent someone might have grown a bit suspicious as he pressed open the key code to the cells, but no one seemed to care. He was Nick Fury after all and that whole mess with HYDRA had only been a mind control incident. Hell, Fury got more empathy from his fellow agents rather than distrust. So his opening of the cells was barely even noticed.

“Was wondering when you’d decide to show up Fury?” Marcus said as he got to his feet and shook Nick’s hand.

“We don’t have much time people. Katherine I’m going to need you to take down Genesis once and for all. Forge and his people are already headed to their destination,” Fury explained. If Genesis could get taken out here and Forge succeeded in his part of the game then everything would work out in the end. SHIELD would be back in non-insane robot hands.

Cracking her knuckles Kate smiled, “Oh there isn’t a computer program yet I haven’t been able to bust.”

“Lock the cell behind you Fury. I gotta stay here with my brother,” Shard said.

“Not a chance. You help them fight,” Bishop said with a slight cough, “That’s an order.”

“You’re injured and you need someone to look after you,” Shard replied.

“Then I’ll stay. You’ll be more help to X-Force than I can be,” Fury said stomping out his cigar.

Shard looked painfully at Bishop and relented, “Just take care of him.”

“Trust me kid. I got this,” Fury said with a half-smirk.

“I’ll be back,” Shard said as she closed the cell door on Bishop and

Fury.

“Wish I could be there to kick his ass,” Bishop grumbled.

Fury shrugged his shoulders, “Join the club. I missed out on delivering Shadow King a nice kick to the ass.”

Mystique shook her head and woke up to find herself strapped into the seat of a jet. Seated next to her was Forge who hadn't kept his eyes off of her. Raven jumped back a little at the sight if only because she wasn't expecting to wake up to the dotting eyes of Forge. As her memory slowly came back to her she yelled, “I'm kicking your ass X-Cutioner!”

“Sorry Raven I had to make the fight look believable and for that to happen I needed a nice conclusion,” Denti apologized as she piloted the jet to their destination.

“It's okay now Raven. You're safe. We just needed the word to get around that you had been captured. Tartarus guards are notorious for running their mouths,” Forge explained.

“So where the hell are we headed?” Raven asked.

The man seated next to X-Cutioner turned around and Mystique was surprised at the face she saw, “Long time no see Raven. Wish it would have been longer.”

“Likewise Alex. How'd you manage to get this idiot onboard with you?” Mystique asked Forge.

“Now is not the time for animosity. We're about to head into the main production facility of the Gene-Droids. It's not going to be an easy task to take that facility down,” Forge said.

Raven damn near wanted to slap Forge for what he was proposing, “The four of us? Are you insane?”

“Actually seven. I have three of my allies meeting up with us at the facility,” X-Cutioner added.

Leaning back in her seat Mystique sighed, “That just makes it so much better.”

“And it was your bright idea to bring that pessimist along,” Havok said as he looked back at Forge.

“I’m just speaking reality. Genesis has a better chance of getting shut down than us destroying that facility,” Mystique replied.

“I have managed to isolate his entire program and network to one location. He should go through a data overload in exactly two minutes,” Shadowcat reported to Wisdom under heavy fire from opposing SHIELD agents.

“That’s great luv, but it won’t do us much good if we can’t take care of our friends over there,” Wisdom said directing a finger to the numerous SHIELD agents who were blocking to the exit. All of them were firing their photon-powered guns, but fortunately for X-Force their aim was far from spectacular.

“If you would shut up and start helping us then this wouldn’t be so much of a problem,” Shard complained as she fired off a volley of her bio energy blasts. Right now she wished she were able to channel the energy from other places besides her hands. Maybe these guys would be easier to take down that way.

Marcus grabbed one of Shard’s guns and began firing on the attacking SHIELD agents. He had been rendered useless power-wise as the agents had decided to come packing with telepathic blockers. Refusing to be a complete bystander though had made Marcus grab Shard’s weapon and he would put it to good use.

Shadowcat looked to Wisdom and smiled, “This will be a piece of cake.”

Getting up on the wooden desk she jumped up and went straight through the roof and into the ventilation system. Wisdom knew his gal could handle herself and turned his attention to helping Shard, Marcus, and Siryn fight off their foes. He had fought alongside many of these agents, but now so much more was at stake. It’d be a cold day in hell before he allowed Genesis to carry out his diabolical plan.

“Alright kids lets show these wankers what we’re all about!” Wisdom exclaimed as he unleashed his hot knives. They traveled through the air and struck various agents with searing heat. Yells that were mixed with rage and pain could be heard once Peter’s

attack had made impact.

“This would be so much better if we had everyone here. I keep expecting them to show up anytime now,” Marcus revealed.

“What are you doing?” Mystique questioned as she felt X-Cutioner begin to send the plane into descent.

“The Gene Droid Production facility is below us. We’re going to make ourselves known with a bang,” X-Cutioner replied.

Forge handed Mystique a yellow wrist band and then he gave two to Havok who passed one off to X-Cutioner, “Put these on and they’ll serve as teleporters to get us to the ground safely.”

Realization hit Mystique like a sledgehammer, “You mean to tell me we’re crashing this jet?!”

“Wha? You ain’t too scared huh?” Havok taunted.

Raven smiled, “No, I just didn’t think you boys knew how to pull off an entrance.”

“We might not have your zeal, but we got you on explosive ability,” X-Cutioner laughed.

“Ten seconds to teleport!”

9....

8....

7....

“Lets kick some ass!” Havok shouted.

5....

4....

“Don’t hurl or anything Raven,” Havok requested.

“Fuck you ever so kindly,” Mystique replied.

2...

1...

KABOOM!!!

Mystique and the rest of her companions were far away from the explosion when it hit. Havok cheered like a cowboy at the sound and said, "Now we get to handle the Stepford Wives times 200!"

"You give them too much credit. They're not that pretty," Velocity said as he landed on the ground alongside Enigma and Whisper. Maria had shuttled them to the location with a telekinetic bubble. X-Cutioner was growing more and more impressed with his former team's handling for their abilities.

"Take his word for it. We've seen the things in person," Enigma added.

"What matters now is that we take care of whatever survived the explosion," Forge reminded. He didn't mind the chatter and the taunting, but now was a time to act as a team and get a job done. Genesis was too dangerous of a threat to fool around with. He had set up his pieces and he had played his hand. Now it was time for the proper and immediate response.

"And lets hope that Fury is keeping up his part of the plan," X-Cutioner added.

"What if he failed?" Havok asked not exactly having a great deal of trust in Fury after his time as HYDRA leader. There was no telling what that experience might have done to his mind or ability as a fighter. He was a wildcard that Havok didn't really have any say about.

"Then we get ready to invade a Helicarrier," Forge responded.

"You ever thought you'd be back on this thing after what happened in D.C.?" Bishop asked as he laid stretched out on a shabby cell bed.

Fury took a breath before answering, "Honestly, no. Hell, I figured by now I'd be on my way to Gautanamo Bay getting the shit shocked out of me on a daily basis. I thought I'd be considered lower than Osama. I had attacked the capital of the United States

and I tried to kill President Bush. Honestly, I thought I'd be back on this ship in a body bag."

"Shadow King used a lot of people. A whole lot," Bishop said softly.

"But the way he used me...he wanted to destroy any and all reputation I had. He wanted to break me so low that there was no way I could back to being who I was."

Bishop laughed, "Then he didn't do a very good job now did he. Not a good job at all."

"You should be resting and not talking," Fury reminded.

"We're soldiers Nick. Lets treat each other as such."

Fury nodded, "Fine. I can respect that. "

2 Hours Later...

Mystique walked away from the building and wiped the sweat off of her forehead. She was bleeding in a few places, but it wasn't anything that she wasn't use to. Honestly, the battle had been relatively easy. Enigma's telekinetically shut down most of the Gene-Droids and X-Cutioner had a few EMP bombs that took care of another large chunk. Even as much as she disliked Alex he did a good job as well.

"Are you okay Raven?" Forge asked as he tenderly and surprisingly grabbed Mystique's hand. Raven didn't know how to react. She had commanded terrorists, attempted assassinations, fought the world's most powerful mutants, and a simple signal of affection had thrown her off in a way she hadn't been in years.

Mystique instinctively snatched her hand back and sighed, "Sorry Forge. I'm still a bit edgy, but I'll live."

"Uggh you got cooties Forge!" Havok joked.

"Seems we have company. It's a SHIELD plane," Whisper reported as he pointed up at the sky.

“Friend or foe?” Velocity asked.

“Lets wait and see. No need to fire weapons prematurely,” X-Cutioner advised his former agent.

As the plane grew closer to the ground the hatch opened and Fury stuck his head out. At that point everyone relaxed. Things had been settled in regards to Genesis and they could breathe easy. At least they all hoped so....

Epilogue 1

“Did you inject her with the serum?”

Brian Vesso nodded his head, “Before she supposedly knocked me out I nicked her with the needle. She probably didn’t even feel it honestly.”

“Good. Magneto will need her powers boosted.”

“I could care less what Magneto needs. I just want my money.”

“It’ll be wired to you shortly. Take care doctor.”

Epilogue 2

“These Mutant Extermination Protocols seem to have been distributed everywhere it seems. SHIELD is actually working alongside Genosha on this one. The MEPs are just too big of a problem for our organization to handle. Especially when we’re going to be concerned with other problems such as HYDRA and this Abyss fellow,” Fury explained. It had been a week since Genesis’ downfall and he had been moved up to once again be the Director of SHIELD.

“I will be SHIELD’s official liaison to Genosha and Forge will be accompanying me,” Mystique said to the assembly of X-Force, X-Cutioner, and his former students.

“So you get to head back with your ol den buddy. The world gets just a lil bit more dangerous,” Havok groaned.

Fury ignored the comment, “In the meanwhile we’ll do our best to handle the various problems facing us. There’s another major one that is going to stay strictly between us. Kitty.”

Shadowcat nodded and began her reveal, “Genesis is still alive. His programming escaped to an unknown location. I haven’t been able to track him down yet. More than likely he’s using the money he got from those who bought the Mutant Extermination Protocols. This could get ugly.”

“Ugly is what X-Force does,” Wisdom proclaimed.

A motley band of mutant 'heroes' led by the chain-smoking former member of Excalibur, Pete Wisdom, X-Force was brought together by Colonel Nick Fury to act as SHIELD's strong right arm in matters of importance to the world's mutant population. Answerable only to Fury himself, X-Force is determined to make the evil mutants and mutant-haters of the world see the light... even if they have to bust a few heads to do it...



Issue # 50

Abysmal Behavior

Written by Troy Bengal

Pete Wisdom

"Just what is the significance of this meeting?" Charon asked as he waddled his way alongside his lord and master, Abyss. He hated having to walk long distances and having to play bodyguard to Abyss. He knew the man was more than capable of protecting himself, but Abyss liked to have a show of power when dealing with the seedy types.

Shadowcat

"We are meeting with the leaders of HYDRA. I'm going to offer them something that'll prove very beneficial to our needs," Abyss replied with his resonating voice that shook Charon to his core. Every time he heard it he swore that he felt his entire body shiver.

Siryn

"Forgive me sir, but HYDRA has proved only to be an incompetent organization over the years," Charon said.

Maverick

Abyss laughed and Charon nearly passed out from fear, "That is the entire point. I know HYDRA has failed time and time again. Even now they are already set up for a brutal fall."

Instead of asking a question Charon just kept silent and continued to walk with his master until they reached the gates of the facility where Mieko Ko and her fiancée, Mikhel Fury, were waiting for them. Mieko Ko spread open her arms as if she were Vanna White and said, "Welcome to my abode Abyss. I'm sure your stay here will prove to be profitable for the both of us."

Abyss walked by the two leaders and looked out into the mostly empty courtyard. He nodded his head, "Yes it shall be an interesting

visit."

"Damn, I wish I could have been in that fight," Bishop complained as he chugged down another glass of beer.

Shard laughed, "Bro for the sixth time you really weren't missing anything special. It was as boring as the Philadelphia mission. Just a bunch of rookies shooting guns they didn't know how to handle."

Bishop smiled as nostalgia overtook him, "You're right. That mission was trash, but still you know I don't like being put on the sidelines."

"And I'm sure Fury didn't either. You two must have talked each other's heads off. I'm surprised the two of you didn't try to see who had the bigger..." Shard trailed off as she looked down at Bishop's pants.

"Well, according to this century I would have automatically won that contest," Bishop replied.

"Hey big boy! Ya looking for a lil fun tonight," a chunky white woman said as she seductively tried to walk over to Bishop. She was too drunk to be sexy and her face was too drugged out to be even remotely attractive. Walking behind her was a skinny white woman with a buzz cut and a dingy wife-beater on. Her jeans were full of holes and she was missing her two front teeth.

"You looking pretty fine yourself hun," the almost bald woman said to Shard as she poked out her tongue between the gap in her teeth.

As the two women got closer the stench of alcohol and cigarettes was overwhelming. Bishop maintained his cool despite his sister's disgusted expression and said gently, "We're just trying to have some brother/sister time here. So we're not exactly looking for anything."

"Oh so you get down like that huh? That's a major turn-on," the chunky woman slurred as she reached out to touch Bishop's shoulder. A snap kick from Shard knocked the woman's hand to the side.

"I think my brother said we weren't looking for anything," Shard

glared at the woman.

"Damn gal. You too aggressive for me," the skinny woman said as she backed away from the siblings and sat down at her table.

The chunky woman gripped her wrist, but laughed, "Whenever you get rid of your uptight sister I wouldn't mind letting you lay down some of that black pipe."

"I wish I had my gun," Shard said under gritted teeth.

It was Bishop's turn to laugh, "The other one had a thing for you. Maybe you should give her your number."

"Bamf that! I wouldn't let her touch me if I was getting paid for it. Uggh the thought of it makes me want to puke," Shard exclaimed.

The memory of what happened to that mutant girl during Genesis' little test trial still made Mikhel puke at night and he could only hope that Abyss wasn't bringing something that brutal to the table. Miekeo Ko could care less how the power of HYDRDA grew. She only cared that it did indeed grow. Abyss was a name that was being talked about in various circles and it seemed he was amassing resources quickly. Miekeo wanted to cash in on this man's success and use it to help HYDRDA.

"So do you remember our deal?" Abyss asked as he knelt down to the ground and grabbed a handful of dirt.

Mikhel Fury nearly pissed his pants at hearing that voice. Freddy, Jason, and Pinhead had nothing on this guy. You couldn't see his face except for those piercing yellow eyes. All of his skin looked like one big shadow. There was no texture, no scars, or anything that would distinguish him. What could be his hair was pointed up like a character from a Japanese anime and he had a tattered blue cloak wrapped around his body. White bandages were wrapped across his hands and wrists.

Miekeo Ko stood fearless with her hands on her hips. She had the green lipstick and eyeliner like Viper, but she simply refused to dye her black hair. Ko was wearing a sleeveless white shirt with the HYDRDA insignia at the front. The image was colored red to match her red thigh-high boots.

"Of course I remember our deal Abyss. I tell who you bought those damn Protocols and you provide me with a better soldier."

"At least your memory is good. My master hates forgetfulness," Charon warned as he folded his arms across his chest. His entire body seemed to shake as he did so. It was almost comical, but one had to remember just whom he served.

Abyss, still crouched on the ground, looked back to the leaders of HYDRA, "Then let this deal begin."

Mieko Ko had never really been able to solidify her position within the HYDRA organization. She had hoped run-ins with Iron Man and Captain America would have helped in boosting her up, but in truth it was utterly pointless. All she had done was make enemies of two of the world's most well-known heroes and created a bitter hatred with Sharon Carter. Tricking someone into doing things that were against their principles wasn't exactly a way to make allies.

With those setbacks in mind she decided to take a hiatus and re-think things. Fortunately, Viper and Shadow King didn't feel like she needed dealing with when they assumed control of HYDRA. Mieko took advantage of that downtime to improve herself physically and mentally. She learned the arts of Tai Chi and Hapkido while studying the philosophies of the great Eastern thinkers. During that time she could only hope that Viper and her telepathic master fell and fell hard. Luck worked in her favor and the two were soundly defeated.

Quickly, she worked her way back into the organization and met Mikhel Fury. The two hit it off quickly and were soon engaged. She decided that together they could control HYDRA and rebuild the broken powerhouse. They had went about that rebuilding by first buying the Mutant Extermination Protocols from Genesis. Mieko knew they would need weapons in case another Shadow King decided they deserved control of HYDRA. Now she was meeting with Abyss to garner new troops to help bolster her lacking numbers. Ko had heard of Abyss and how he was quickly snatching up power. Perhaps she would deal with him later, but right now she needed to take what she could from him.

"I'm still not sure if I like this character," Mikhel Fury whispered to his wife-to-be. In truth Mikhel was a spy for SHIELD and fooling Mieko Ko into falling for him was all part of the plan. His father wanted to smack down HYDRA before it even had a decent chance to stand up again. The more Mikhel listened and talked to Mieko the

more he just wanted to burst her over inflated balloon, but he couldn't blow his cover just yet.

Dr. Eve Sando strolled down the prison block of the SHIELD detainment facility looking over the inmates held within very carefully. Recently, a few additions had been added after a major battle within the borders of Canada. Sando had seen the news reports and saw a few mutants involved in the fight that captured her attention. She subsequently reported those mutants of interest to President Magneto and he made a deal with SHIELD. He would allow SHIELD to send aid to make sure the search of those who held the Mutant Extermination Protocols was "lawful". In exchange he could get the mutants into his custody that he wanted.

Sando walked alongside a few SHIELD agents and pointed to each mutant that she had been sent to bring back to Genosha. The first mutant was a pink-skinned male who had a disgusted look on his face. He hated the thought he was stuck in this prison and he had a failed leader to blame for it. The second mutant was a blonde-haired, hazel eye individual who seemed to have a slight glow coming from his person. The two mutants were known as Glance and Babylon respectively.

"Are you sure these are the two you want? Fury says they're extremely dangerous," one of the SHIELD agents said.

Eve laughed, "Few mutants aren't my dear. Yes I'm sure. These are the ones I want."

Abyss held out his hand and began to chant a spell under his lips. Green light flew forth from his palm and began to circle his body in a spiral pattern. His chanting grew more rapid as the ground in front of him began to rumble and shake. Suddenly, four identical figures exploded from the ground. They were cloaked in black like ninjas, had large red eyes, and two white dragons on their chest. Gold metal trimmings wrapped around the top of their arms and each one held a shadow sword in their hands.

Looking to Miekko Ko the dark figure said, "You have your soldiers. They will multiply to our agreed 3,000 in about two hours."

"I wish to test these soldiers before our deal is finally sealed," Miekko

Ko replied.

Charon looked wearily at his master. He was growing entirely bored with this whole deal. Mieko Ko actually possessed the gall to ask more of Abyss. He was helping rebuild HYDRA quicker than she could ever hope to. Now she wanted him to prove the worth of the soldiers he was creating for her. He could just imagine the anger of Abyss.

"You shall have your test then Miekeo Ko. I don't mind pleasing a splendid woman such as yourself."

Mikhel shivered once again at hearing Abyss. Only he could make a cordial compliment feel like hearing a blood curdling scream. Damn, if that voice didn't make him want to hide in a corner.

"Good Abyss. I'm glad to see you're such a gentlemen," Miekeo Ko smiled.

2 Hours Later...

"I'm sorry to have called all of you back so soon, but you know how business goes. Right now we have two unidentified enemies attacking one of our detainment facilities. They're superhuman so we need you all to handle them," Fury explained to the assembled X-Force team in front of him.

"Ahh its not a problem. Bishop and I were getting assaulted by lesbians anyway," Shard laughed.

"That's a story I'd love to hear," Siryn smirked.

"Hopefully Raven can just mindwipe them and we can be done with it," Shadowcat said.

"I hope things are that simple. Good hunting team," Fury ended.

The SHIELD agents tried to batter the attacking warriors with bullets, but they never were able to make their mark. One of the warriors landed behind a group of agents and slashed through all of them with his shadow sword. Each and everyone of the agents dropped to the ground and began to convulse violently. Foam

formed at their mouths and spilled onto the bullet shell covered floor.

"I think that'll be quite enough blokes," Wisdom said as he flung a hot knife at the center of one of the warrior's chest. The blade formed of pure heat was simply absorbed into his body and came back out again, but as three blades of blue energy.

The blades were moving Wisdom's way, but Shard stepped in front of him and deflected them with her photonic blasts. The blades shot off in different directions, but like heat seeking missiles they turned back around. One hit Bishop head on and he crumbled to the ground and another struck down Siryn. The last one came at Shadowcat and she tried to phase herself, but the weapon still struck her despite that.

"Kitty!" Wisdom yelled as Katherine fell to the floor unconscious.

"Look out Wisdom!" Marcus yelled as the other warrior leaped through the air and landed behind Peter. Before the leader of X-Force had a chance to turn around the warrior struck him down with his shadow sword.

Seeing that his teammates were quickly dropping around him he used his telepathy to invade the minds of the two warriors. He planned to rip through their minds like a hand through a wet paper towel. Unfortunately, it didn't quite go as planned. The minds of the mysterious soldiers were like jumping into a pool of hot tar. It was too thick from him to pull himself out quickly and the heat was searing.

"AHHH!!!" Marcus yelled as he fell to the ground leaving Shard as the last member of X-Force standing.

Finally one of the warriors spoke, "Telepaths are not permitted."

Shard was strategizing some way to combat the obviously superior warriors, but they weren't making any kind of move on her. The two warriors bowed to Shard as they said, "The test is complete. Abyss will now have what he wants."

With that proclamation the bodies of Wisdom and Pryde both faded away and the warriors along with them. Shard looked around at the many disabled bodies and sighed, "Damn it."

"So what do we know about these new figures?" Fury asked.

"They're strong, super fast, can teleport, have those sword things, and seem to be able to redirect and change energy," Shard summed up.

"Don't forget they're telepath resistant," Marcus said rubbing his head.

"And they work for Abyss," Shard added.

Fury shook his head, "Nope. A tape was just sent to the White House and various other governments from Mieko Ko."

"Mieko who?" Siryn asked.

"She's the heir apparent to SHIELD. Mieko claims the warriors are hers and my son affirmed it for me. Abyss and Mieko made a deal it seems and those busters you just faced are her brand spankin new foot soldiers."

Bishop's visage was one of prideful anger. He should have been able to absorb the blades yet he couldn't. Something was different about the energy and trying to absorb it had damn near killed him, "Just when you think you get rid of a problem."

"Two of those guys were able to manhandle us. I can only imagine what an army of them might do," Siryn said shuddering at the possibilities.

"HYRDA just got a lot more dangerous. That much is obvious, but we need to find Wisdom and Pryde. I don't know what this Abyss could want with them, but it can't possibly be anything good," Fury remarked.

"Wake up you monsters!" Fatal said as she kicked both Wisdom and Pryde in the side to stir them to life.

"Where the hell are we?"

Fatal laughed, "You're in hell Wisdom. The hell you have long deserved to go to."

"Dallas is that you?" Shadowcat asked.

Grabbing Kitty by the throat she lifted her off the ground and slammed Shadowcat into the wall, "You have no right to call me that name EVER!! I am Fatal to you and I always shall be."

"Leave her alone!" Wisdom exclaimed.

A resonating dark laugh came from atop the stairs that were a few feet away from the two members of X-Force, "I think Fatal is more than entitled to her sense of justice after all you've done to her."

Looking up Wisdom saw the blue-cloaked man with Vortigen Walker and the chubby Charon on both sides of him. Rising to his feet Peter said, "Let me guess. You must be Abyss."

"Correct. Long have I waited for this moment," Abyss said as he lifted up a hand and Wisdom suddenly found himself stuck to the nearest wall and held there like a fly to fly paper. Fatal backed away from Shadowcat and she was then entrapped in much the same manner.

"We did what we did under the control of Shadow King," Shadowcat mumbled.

"You were coerced yes, but you loved every minute of it," Vortigen said coolly.

Abyss nodded, "All of you leave. Except for Vortigen. I need you for this."

Charon nodded and Fatal stared daggers at the captives, but they both left quickly so as not to anger Abyss.

Once they were gone Abyss came close to Wisdom's face, "You don't like being caught do you? You hate feeling helpless? Well, you both made me feel that way. I despise the two of you. I despise her most of all."

"Why? What the hell have we ever done to you?"

Abyss laughed, "I think it's time you learned the truth. Vortigen please."

Vortigen Walker nodded his head and his body shattered like a million pieces of glass leaving just Abyss alone. Slowly the nearly

blank face of Abyss gave form to the face of Vortigen.

"I am Vortigen Walker. You let me intertwined with another person you bitch! Do you have any idea how long it took me to get out!! Do you!!" Abyss yelled spit splattering across Shadowcat's face.

"Walker you wanker. Too damn pathetic to own up to the fact that you just couldn't cut it. We did you a favor you stupid bloke," Wisdom mocked.

Vortigen stepped back from Wisdom and laughed, "Yes you did do me a favor. You helped me to realize that I needed to be like the man who took control of you. So I did so. I've been working quite hard to build up my power base as I'm sure you know. I had hoped to capture you sooner so I could show you some of it, but Black Tarantula probably wasn't up to that."

"You were behind that?" Shadowcat asked shocked.

"Yes, I had no idea he would make such work of Bishop. I was impressed, but Tarantula was needed to help in the spread of my new drug, Abyssmal. I helped myself in making quite a market. Genetically engineering humans that were already addicted to the drug and throwing him out across the various streets of the world. It helped in making my Abyssmal an overnight success and providing me plenty of money."

"How could you? Your drug has caused crime rates to drastically spike all across the globe!"

"You must have great chaos in order to create great order."

Wisdom licked his teeth, "You insane bastard..."

"You mistake my power for insanity fool. Let me show you just how powerful I am," Abyss said as he backed away from the two SHIELD agents. A column rose up from the ground in front of him and inside of the column was someone Wisdom never thought he would see again.

"Romany!" Wisdom yelled.

"Yes, with my magic I was able to bring her back despite what Jaspers did to her. Once I'm done with her she'll be working for me. I've also managed to bring back all my former Proudwalkers and she

will lead them," Abyss explained.

As Abyss said this five ghostly figures appeared behind him and took shape. The first of the Proudwalkers was Herne the Hunter. He had an Adonis physique, but antlers grew from his head. Next to Herne was Gwent who looked like a Viking king with a glistening crown. Besides Gwent was Gameal who could have been Robin Hood if he just had the hat. Gameal was standing next to Bran who was garbed like an ancient druid and the last of the Proudwalkers was Gael who looked like ancient Irish fury given form.

"Like hell she will. Let her go now!" Wisdom exclaimed at the thought of his sister leading such a pack.

"You should be thanking me you ungrateful bastard. I bought your sister back from death!"

Then a thought suddenly snapped into Wisdom's mind, "Do you really think Merlyn will let you get away with this you sod! He'll be down on your header so fast..."

Abyss laughed, "Merlyn didn't care to save me or the Proudwalkers from the hands of Black Air. What makes you think he'll care now? Hell, what makes you think this isn't even part of his plan? You presume to know so much Wisdom."

"You're a manipulator. You brainwashed poor Dallas..."

Abyss cut off Shadowcat, "Dallas is perfectly fine now! She was poor after you and Wisdom came along. Did you two even take the time to visit her while she was in the hospital? Did you apologize for what you had done? You deserved to lose your child you selfish bitch!"

"Shut up!" Shadowcat said as she began to sob.

"Leave her alone!"

Abyss smiled, "Oh I will leave the both of you alone for now. I just wanted to let you know that I was out there and I could play with you at anytime I please. My power continues to grow Wisdom and do you know the irony of it? You shall never be able to utter my identity to a single soul. It shall be entrapped in your mind and torture you endlessly. And why? Because with the curse I have placed upon you anyone who hears you utter my true name will die."

"Give me Romany! Give me her!"

Laughter erupted from Abyss. It was sinister laughter that was born from hatred, "You will never have her you fool. She is still dead. The Romany you see before you is simply part of your sister. I brought back all her darkness and hate. The darkness and hate that is in every human. She'll never be the woman you once knew."

"I will kill you," Wisdom snarled.

"Never Peter. You can't ever hope to reach me. I'll always be the one to find you," Vortigen smiled as he took on his Abyss visage once more.

"Wake up Peter. Wake up," a gentle voice said.

Looking up Wisdom saw the image of Shadowcat, "Hey babe. Where are we?"

"Back on the Helicarrier. I'm not sure how, but I'm assuming Abyss sent us back here."

"That's our guess too. We just found you in your rooms. What happened to the both of you?" Marcus asked as he entered the room with Siryn next to him.

"We met Abyss. He's terrible," Shadowcat said wanting to tell the two of them that Vortigen Walker was the villain. The words refused to come forth from her mouth. She wanted to tell it so bad, but she just couldn't. She wouldn't risk the deaths of her friends.

"He has Romany," Wisdom mumbled.

"What? How?" Marcus asked shocked. He knew how much Peter loved his sister.

"Magic. It seems he's way more powerful than any of us thought and he's only growing more powerful as the days go on," Shadowcat answered.

"First HYRDA's souped up soldiers and now this," Siryn sighed.

"I know one thing," Peter said as he rose up from the bed, "I will get

my sister back one day."

Shadowcat hugged Peter, "But first we got to make sure we're capable of handling Abyss. He's powerful. We can't jump in blindly."

Peter nodded, "Normally I wouldn't agree with you, but you're right. Abyss is too much of a threat."

Shadowcat and Peter shared a glance that said it all. Neither of them could say Abyss' true identity and it was killing them.

"Well I think we need to talk to Fury. It seems he has a new mission for us if the two of you are up to it."

Shadowcat pushed her lip to the side, "I don't know, but I guess..."

"Anything to take my mind off of Romany right now."

"Alright then. I think he said it involves a few renegade Gene Droids being spotted in Iran."

Peter smiled, "Some easy butt kickin then."

"Done in the way only X-Force can," Marcus replied.

Author's Notes

This is the end of my X-Force run (almost cuz I got a What If annual left) and it's kinda sad, but I think I had a good run on this title. I got a lot of things accomplished and I had the chance to introduce a major new villain for M2K and other new characters to play with. Some of my ideas from this title will carry on to Fallen Angels and you will see Abyss pop up in a bunch of other places. His influence is spreading and the M2K universe doesn't see it coming! Anyway I had a blast on this title and I can only hope that the next author builds on some of the things I introduced in my run. Here's to another fifty issues.

-Troy Bengal

P.S. CHECK OUT FALLEN ANGELS!!!
